CRIME AMID PANDEMIC: A STUDY IN SMART CITIES OF EASTERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 impacted every aspect of public and professional life. The repercussions of limited human contact, anxiety, unemployment, financial instability, and increased domestic conflict and discord have led to the reflux of many criminal activities. The current study aimed to explore the scenario and the circumstances which the citizens living in Smart Cities of Eastern India have undergone during the pandemic concerning the occurrence of criminal activities in their respective cities. The study also tries to find out the reasons for the rise in criminal activities amidst such stringent situations as the pandemic saw a rise, especially of the first-time criminals. The study was conducted in December 2020 via a comprehensive questionnaire that was sent to the respondents living in the smart cities of Eastern India through the electronic platform for their response. The collected data were analyzed using the conventional analysis approach. According to the results, though crimes like murder, rape, and eve-teasing have drastically decreased but crimes like cyber fraud, domestic violence, elder and children abuse, even snatching have escalated.

Keywords: Children Abuse, Cyber Crime, Domestic Violence, Elder Abuse, Pandemic, Smart Cities, Snatching.

INTRODUCTION

India is a nation in distress, grappling with the deadly wave of COVID-19. The outbreak of the disease has disrupted the entire functioning of the country bringing about unprecedented economic blow; dramatic loss to human life; food systems, public health, and workforce facing an unprecedented challenge. The outbreak has also led to an increase in the rate of pandemic-related crimes, adding to the country's misery. Globally, the economic recession caused by the pandemic has pushed approximately 85-115 million people into unemployment and extreme poverty resulting in poor financial conditions and has become one of the leading factors of stress-induced crimes in contemporary societies. The pandemic has pushed people, especially youngsters to resort to unlawful criminal activities. Cases have also been reported where educated people having no criminal history have been found guilty of committing the crimes. There are instances where unemployment and extreme poverty has pushed individuals to criminal activities. Ever since this unprecedented outbreak, the rate of street crimes has spiked. The impact of this catastrophic event on society is multifaceted and multifarious. The current situation has also led to the surge in invisible crimes like hacking, the influx of counterfeit apps, usage of the internet for the sale of drugs, stealing of private and sensitive data, etc., collectively referred to as cyber-attacks. The humanitarian crisis has turned the world upside down, where the country is battling the public health crisis as well as struggling with the rising crime rates. The ongoing situation is giving more opportunities to the dark elements existing in society. Research suggests that in the domestic sphere, the stress, anxiety, fear, isolation, confinement brought about by the outbreak of the disease is strongly linked to the increase in the rates of domestic violence; elder mistreatment; and child abuse, etc., worldwide. The risks include physical, psychological, or sexual abuse as well as neglect by caretakers, elder financial exploitation, etc.

In the sociological aspect, the normative definition of crime is that it is deviant behavior that transgresses and infringes the existing social norms or cultural standards that prescribe how human beings ought to act and conduct themselves normally. It is practical and effective to differentiate the perspective of crime i.e., short-term and long-term. In short term, the lockdown restrictions combined with the prevailing and pre-existing factors like the prevalence of organized crimes, gang violence, etc varying across nations affect crime. During the pandemic, in certain cases, the restrictive measures adopted by the country, reduced the opportunities of

the commission of street crimes and limited the possibility of criminals to break into private homes and at the same time the measures of social distancing significantly impacted the interpersonal violence. In the long-term, the economic disruption affected crime particularly the profit-oriented and acquisitive crimes, where the socio-economic safety nets were not sufficient to guarantee a livelihood to the people. places where the government's response to the crisis was not satisfactory, the population being economically impacted were at a high risk of rioting and looting. The impact on crime i.e., both short-term and long-term can be perceived in the context of "opportunity theory" and "strain theory"- the criminological theories. On one hand, the "opportunity theory" postulates that the lockdown orders potentially lower the possibility of commission of crimes due to restricted mobility and minimal social interaction. On the other hand, the "strain theory" posits that the social and economic strains influence a larger stratum of the community, mainly the vulnerable group, and creates an atmosphere of pressure pushing the people to commit crimes.

The citizen-friendly and sustainable smart cities of India despite technology adoption are facing the challenges brought about by the ongoing global pandemic, a humanitarian crisis. Even during the complete lockdown, crimes against women like domestic violence, dowry deaths, rapes, molestation were recorded in Bihar, making it the crime capital of the country. Similarly, Odisha witnessed a spike in rapes and murders and reported a surge in cybercrimes. In Rourkela, there was a spurt in criminal activities with the law and order spiraling out of control. Thus, Steel City witnessed a steady rise in the crime graph, leaving the residents in a state of shock and panic. Guwahati experienced a spike in the number of cybercrime cases and domestic violence cases. But cities like Kolkata have witnessed a fall in the crime rate by 50 percent as the cases of pick-pocketing and snatching reduced considerably due to the COVID-19 induced lockdowns. But the city saw a rise in the abuse of social media, used for the circulation of fake videos, the spread of misinformation, and rumor-mongering.

Thus, different dynamics can be triggered by the lockdown measures but the predominant trend depends on multiple factors like the social and economic support supplied by the government and the nature of the restrictions to subdue the pre-existing conditions and challenges concerning crime and governance. Moreover, the police department is facing unprecedented and unforeseen challenges created by the pandemic.

CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

The World Health Organisation (WHO) taking into consideration the health crisis and the serious impacts of the novel coronavirus on almost every nation across the globe, has declared the COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, which is said to have originated in Wuhan, a city in China. The COVID-19 is an infectious disease that is triggered by a newly discovered coronavirus. These viruses are zoonotic, affecting both people and animals, and cause illness that ranges from the common cold to more severe and complicated diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) and Middle-east Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV). But this novel coronavirus is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. COVID-19, the official name given by WHO to the new coronavirus strain, is a serious global infectious disease that causes symptoms like dry cough, fever, chills, fatigue, nasal congestions, shortness of breath, body aches and pains, loss of taste or smell. Several cases were also reported where people infected with the deadly virus showed no symptoms. The severe cases have led to pneumonia and other serious respiratory diseases. This virus is transmitted through close contact, direct or indirect, with infected people through infected discharges like saliva and respiratory discharges or through the respiratory droplets of infected COVID-19 victims which are expelled when the person coughs, sneezes, or even talks. People with underlying medical ailments and the elderly people are most at risk. But the younger people also acquired the virus and required immediate hospitalization. As the pandemic shifted, the situation worldwide worsened and became more severe leading to the deaths of millions.

Since liberalization and globalization, the cities of our country have witnessed accelerated social and economic development, which has attracted millions from all parts of the country. Hence, urban India is now combating certain issues like overpopulation, lower sanitation and hygiene standard, poor healthcare system, strained infrastructure, loopholes in the education system, defects in the judicial system, urgent police reforms, which have disturbed the quality of life. The ability to face matters related to urbanization and its associated economic, social, and environmental issues by holistic methods whilst capitalizing on future opportunities. The smart cities mission can be regarded as a foundation for implementing the vision of modern, progressive, and advanced as well as contemporary urbanization. To accommodate the massive urbanization, the country needs to look for smarter ways to deal with complexities, manage expenses, augment efficiency and ameliorate the quality of life. Taking into context the massive

urbanization, the Government of India has visioned "Digital India" that has set up a challenging plan of building 100 smart cities across India. To enhance governance and improve infrastructural deficiencies plaguing Indian cities, the Government of India inaugurated the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), an urban regeneration program in 2015. This mission provides no particular definition of a 'smart city' but implies fathomless liberty for the cities to self-define their perception of 'smartness'. Smart cities tap a variety of approaches like policy change, digital technologies, information technologies, public-private partnerships, and urban planning practices to make a difference. The main focus is on inclusive, long-lasting, and sustainable development and the goal is to observe compact areas and design a replicable model which will in turn act as a lighthouse to guide other aspiring cities. In chosen cities in India, the mission could skew urban inequality. It focuses on urban renewal schemes to generate revenue. The mission recentralizes power to state government from local bodies. The mission endeavors citizen participation which may offer urban elites a greater voice in the process. In this paper, the authors have specifically dealt with the Smart Cities of Eastern India viz Kolkata, Jamshedpur, Ranchi, Guwahati, Patna, Agartala, and Bhubaneswar.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The lockdown and the resultant change in the mobility of people have many ripple effects on the psychological system of the people and the society at large. The shift in the crime rates in the country is an evident consequence. While numerous visible crimes like dacoity, robbery, dacoity, homicide, street molestation of girls, etc have gone down to a certain extent as people have confined themselves in their houses, various complex crimes like cyber-crimes, domestic violence, gender-based violence, child pornography, suicides, illegal trafficking, etc have increased unexpectedly, thereby causing a surge in social crimes (Som et al., 2020)

Currently, the entire globe is witnessing one of the most massive unprecedented events which have altered the lifestyle and livelihood of the billions. COVID-19 is pronounced as a pandemic by the WHO is one of the biggest disease outbreak the world has ever come across. The pandemic has brought about the new normal in terms of the way people live and work and also in terms of societal norms. This current outbreak has generated circumstances relating to cyber-crimes, affecting businesses and society. The likelihood of cybercrimes has been heightened

by the pandemic posing a serious threat to the security, safety, and global economy of the population across the nation (Lallie et al., 2021). The usage of the internet to commit crimes such as stealing data, cyber extortion, identity theft, identity fraud, cyber espionage or cyber-spying, crypto-jacking, credit card fraud, software piracy, etc., through electronic devices as the object of the crime is termed as cyber-crime. Due to the lockdowns, people have switched to online platforms to work remotely from their homes as a result of which there has been a surge in the rate of cyber-attacks. Currently, during the phase of the pandemic, most people have faced a spike in the rate of hacker attacks and data-stealing (Kashif et al., 2020).

Due to the crisis, a lot of employees are relying on access to the internet, laptops, desktops to work remotely from their houses. Furthermore, most of the businesses, to avoid physical interaction and practice social distancing have switched to online modes of working. With regards to the health sector, there has been an increase in tele-management as well as teleconsultation. The majority of the schools in urban areas have adapted to the online mode of teaching to make sure that the process of learning and education is not impaired due to the ongoing situation. All these factors have led to the sudden increase in the usage of internet technologies thereby indirectly leading to the escalation of cyber-crimes and computer crimes. Cyber attackers and security hackers by perpetrating evil through the use of various techniques have seized the opportunity to attack institutions, business organizations, and individuals. To curtail the damages caused by cybercriminals, there is a requirement of techniques that will detect and avoid these threats (Verma & Prakash, 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the lives of individuals, where one has to simultaneously deal with the fatal infection as well as the precautionary measures adopted to curb the spread of the deadly virus like stay-at-home orders, lockdowns, isolation, social distancing, and human mobility restrictions. Domestic violence or domestic abuse is gender-based violence that usually occurs at homes, involving the partner or spouse and other family members within the domestic household. Currently, due to the pandemic and the resulting lockdown, domestic violence is posing serious challenges to frontline mental health workers. During the ongoing pandemic, increased rates of violence against children and women have been reported by the UN Women. Moreover, due to certain restrictions, women have faced difficulty to seek help while the professionals have faced difficulties regarding assessment, delivery of appropriate service, and linking the victims to convenient as well as

expedient services (Krishnan et al., 2020). The causation of domestic violence can be precipitated through interdependent and multifarious causes like depression, stress, and anxiety due to economic disruption, confinement, scarcity of basic resources, unemployment, limited access to social support, etc. The above conditions are multifaceted and lead to a surge in the cases of domestic abuse or domestic violence (Vora et al., 2020).

Various countries in the entire globe like the US, UK, France, China, and India have reported a rise in the rate of domestic violence. In India, the entire nation was taking about two pandemics namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disruption pandemic, but at the bottom of the iceberg lied another pandemic referred to as child abuse and domestic violence. Therefore, there is a dire need for greater awareness among the society, sensitive policing, provisions of safe shelters for the victims, hotlines, counseling centers to address this issue (Ravichandran et al., 2020).

The outbreak of pandemic followed by nationwide lockdown had put an adverse impact on the economy which resulted in a decline in the living standards of citizens, hearings of the cases being adjourned, the release of criminals from prisons to decongest the overcrowded prisons in India, and how COVID-19 policies and norms have affected criminal psychology is essential to understand to mitigate the crime during pandemic situation (Bhagtani et al., 2020). The high rates of coronavirus disease, health complications, and mortality among elder adults resulted in a sensitive and benevolent public response but at the same time faced neglect and evident display of ageism (Monahan et al., 2020). The social disconnectedness, feeling of isolation have undoubtedly led to short and long-term consequences for their physical and mental wellbeing (Radwan et al., 2020). The pandemic gave rise to serious intimidating remarks towards the well-being of family and children as many challenges came such as social disruption, financial instability, caregiving burden, and confinement-related stress (Prime et al., 2020).

The stringent environment inflicted a complete change to the psychological environment that posed a risk on the mental health of children and the adolescent. Constant confinement, lack of peer contact, limited opportunities for stress regulation, parental sickness, domestic violence, children maltreatment, to name a few have put large negative implications on children and adolescents (Fegert et al., 2020). The pandemic saw a surge in cases related to interpersonal

violence and child abuse but the societal stigmas and norms have created a hesitance in subjecting the family and inter-personal relationships to public scrutiny (Ravichandran et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

Empirical research via questionnaire was adopted as a research methodology. It is a suitable method to reach a vast population, scattered in a wide geography sample. A total of 7 cities from 6 different states of Eastern India were surveyed in the research. The sample size of the research (n) is 100 that mainly consists the youth ranging between 18-25 years of age. The female respondents were more (56%) as compared to male respondents (42%). Collecting information via questionnaire made collecting real-time feedback and information. The data collected was quantified which allowed us to interpret and visualize the data and further give the results. The researchers have also sourced information from articles, media reports, and other publicly available documents to contextualize relevant information.
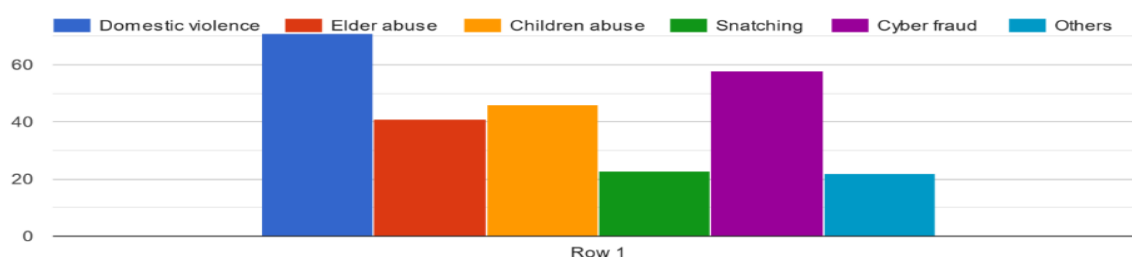
CRIMES THAT SURGED DURING PANDEMIC

Fig1.1. The bar graph represents the response of the participants concerning the rise in crimes during the pandemic

Findings

➤ The majority of the respondents were aware of the rise in certain categories of crimes during the pandemic

➢ Domestic violence followed by cyber-crimes was at its peak

➢ Street crimes have comparatively decreased because of lockdown/shutdown rules and regulations

➢ Many first time criminals have come out during the pandemic

A. Domestic Violence

During the four phases of the COVID-19 induced lockdown, it was noted that more domestic violence complaints were filed by the women of our country than registered in a similar period in the last decade. The lockdown as a result of the outbreak has forced many women to be trapped and confined with their abusers in their homes. Last year in 2020 when the country was hit by the deadly virus, resulting in complete lockdown, a total of over 23,722 complaints alleging domestic violence flooded the National Commission for Women (NCW). The victims have been distanced from their efficient support system which has resulted in difficulty with regards to assistance, access to friend circle, and calling for a helping hand. The resultant lockdowns have reduced the opportunities of reporting the alleged crime of domestic violence, incapacitating the victims by preventing them from shifting to secure and low-risk places in cases of abuse and cruelty and adding to it has reduced the contact of the victim of domestic violence with their natal family which is considered to be the foremost and paramount point of contact for the aggrieved party. In the wake of the outbreak, domestic violence and abuse have come to light as a shadow pandemic, when the NCW received numerous distress calls from women, alleging violence from their native families. During the period of economic hardships, there has been an elevation of abusive, compulsive, and violent behavior and hostility directed towards intimate partners. Victims being trapped with manipulative and abusive partners have led to increased intensity and elevated rates of abuse (physical, sexual, and psychological), controlling behavior, and humiliation, thus affecting their mental well-being. The epidemic of abuse and violence can be mitigated with the systematic establishment of support infrastructures and gender violence sensitization of the authorities and administration.

B. Cyber Crimes

As the coronavirus wreaks havoc in the world's second-most populous country, India is facing another serious problem of cybercrime. Thousands of innocent citizens are falling prey to the various fraudsters. Rural growth is fueling the digital revolution leading to internet growth and connecting 550 million citizens to the internet. The escalating rates of cyberattacks and cybercrimes have predictably affected private citizens' private data, personal information as well as wallets. Thousands of "fraud portals" related to COVID-19 have been launched by cybercriminals, India's NCSC (National Cyber Security Coordinator) informed the Economic Times. Such phony sites have lured thousands of citizens eager to supply to the battle against the pandemic into making huge donations. These sites being virtually identical to their genuine counterparts appear to be relatively sophisticated. Cardinal among these is the coronavirus fund set up by the prime minister's office i.e 'PM CARES'. More than half a dozen phony, fake, and counterfeit versions of the sites have appeared and have profitably solicited a large amount of money from unsuspecting persons. Senior officials from the Home Ministry of India reported that at least 8000 complaints have been lodged by Indians residing within India and those living abroad who have been tricked to contribute thousands of dollars to the counterfeit versions of the flagship fund launched by the government. The acceleration of digital transformation coupled with fear, anxiety, and confinement generated from lockdown, has opened the gates for fraudsters to pry away information and data which are sensitive and leverage disorderliness. Over the past few months, the outbreak of the pandemic has significantly changed the ways of working, learning, shopping and banking. In this era of digitalization, cybercrime namely hacktivism, piracy. Fraud, identity theft, etc. have become big 'businesses' for threat actors, cybercriminals, and hackers. This practice can compromise anybody's sensitive data be it an individual, a business firm, or the government. During this outbreak, personal data has been one of the most attractive targets of the threat actors. The Indian officials disclosed that since the pandemic, the country has witnessed a steep rise in the phishing and malware schemes working under the guise of COVID-19 prevention efforts. The alleged "coronavirus malware" is designed to embezzle and snitch bank account particulars, passwords, and other

personal information from the users. The covid emergency is becoming advantageous for the state cyber actors to hurl attack on some of the key sectors of the country chiefly the national security and defense. In the year 2020, between March and April, our country spotted a staggering increase in the rate of cybercrimes by 86%. Therefore, there is an urgency for strong, comprehensive, and robust cybersecurity measures.

C. Elder & Children Abuse

In response to the pandemic, the scientific community has extensively been vocal and reported about elder and children's wellbeing. The measured impact of the pandemic on family wellbeing, especially to the elder and children wellbeing is unknown. However, it has been found and reported that the families have been put upon the heightening adverse impacts of the pandemic, including families experiencing economic hardship, social isolation, loneliness, financial dependency of the older people on caregivers, or the dependency of the caregivers on old people, etc. People in their old age got frustrated with the fear of contracting the COVID-19 disease as well as are mostly affected by the social distancing norms and quarantine period along with lockdown and shutdown. Age and ageism can act as a crucial factor during the pandemic, putting physical and psychological difficulty on elderly people. The WHO defines ageism as the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people based on their age. The phenomenon of ageism is not recent. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst to further normalize ageism. When it comes to loneliness and social isolation, the older adults are often isolated in their residence, social gatherings, and engagements which were one of the most important modes of social integration have remained suspended. Though virtual interaction has become an alternative form of social engagement, the lack of smartphone accessibility by older adults and the mindset concerning older people not being able to master new skills has declined their digital literacy. The incidence of elder abuse in developing countries such as India, during the pandemic, is yet to be evaluated systematically but may be considerable.

The emergence of COVID-19 has forced the school and educational institutions to shut down, enforcing a lockdown to curb the further spread of the virus. The adults can fathom the repercussions, whereas it is the children who have become the most

vulnerable population. In India, most of the child abuse cases go unreported, however, the pandemic saw a surge in the number of calls on the CHILDLINE number. The reasons for the exponential rise in child abuse cases that have been hypothesized were poor mental health of parents, unemployment, irritation for not stepping out of home, to name a few. People losing their jobs were bound to live inside the four walls of the house which further increased their frustration and depression. Intimate partners and children being the easiest target were hit by the violence from their partner or guardian. Moreover, the shutdown of schools and educational institutions that has enabled the children to be in the environment which they were habituated of has further made them psychologically more vulnerable. At the same time, the condition of the street children and the migrant laborers are exposed to significant challenges related to food security and health. There are many more issues that will surface as we live through the pandemic.

D. Snatching

In the initial stage of the pandemic where strict lockdown and shutdown were being enforced, crimes like theft, chain snatching, eve-teasing, to name a few street crimes got declined as the people stayed inside their homes and criminals could not physically target them. Over time, like other things criminals also adapted to the changed circumstances and used the stringent situation as an opportunity to commit offenses. From the recent cases, it has been found that it is during the early hours of the morning, especially when women and senior citizens going out for morning walks or for purpose of doing daily chores like plucking flowers, keeping a tab on their movements the offenders are attacking them. With the face mask becoming the new normal, the police have been struggling to trace some snatchers, decamping with chains and mobile phones. As per the police officials, the use of a mask by criminals before the outbreak was rare, as earlier the people and the neighborhoods could easily suspect the movement of the people wearing masks, but now it has become tough for the community leaders even to keep an eye on suspicious people. The pandemic did not see a surge concerning street crimes, but the pandemic stimulated job loss has seen the rise of first-time criminals. With the rise in unemployment rates, drying up the sources and means of income, people are adopting incriminating ways to earn money. Another

reason that has been found is many offenders who were involved in cases of theft and snatching have been out on parole due to the outbreak of the pandemic to decongest the jails
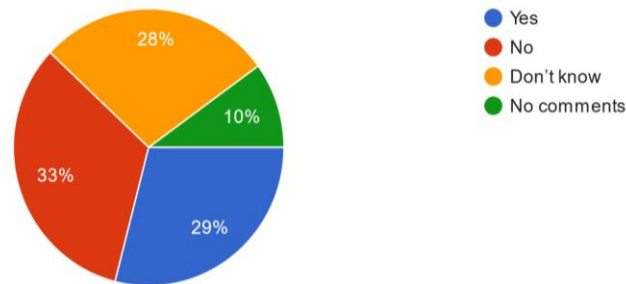
POLICING DURING PANDEMIC

Fig1.2. The pie charts represent the responses of the participants regarding the adequacy of police deployment to take cognizance of crimes apart from performing COVID-19 duties

Findings

- ➢ A majority of the police personnel were engaged in COVID-19 duties
- ➢ The COVID related staffing measures were adequate
- ➢ The police staffing was comparatively not adequate to take cognizance of other crimes apart from performing COVID-19 duties unless the case demands urgency

The unprecedented pandemic poses a major challenge for the police as they were overwhelmed by a wide range of arduous duties due to the pandemic. Enforcing public health laws and order including lockdown/shutdown, traveling restrictions, controlling crowds, to assisting in handling mass fatalities had added another layer to the complexity of the police response. The requirement of the police staff and the capacity of the organization have also changed during the pandemic. This stringent situation can be seen as a window of opportunities to assess the efficiency of the police system was handling an emergency and to introduce reforms like the digital transformation of police management, innovative ways of investigation, that can have a viable and effective impact on the development of police.

CONCLUSION & LAST THOUGHT

Criminal psychology knows no leaps and bound yet situations like lockdown increases the chances of being caught more easily as there are fewer people on the street and public spaces and even the social distancing measures keep the criminals from grabbing the victim easily as most of the time they remain out of the reach. This will create frustrations and may lead to an increase of sociopaths and can specifically lead to an increase in cyber-crimes and domestic violence. Criminals are very much adaptable to circumstantial change and adopt innovative ways to commit a crime. Since the identification of criminals is not an easy task, thus, it is important to make people aware and prepare them to deal with the situation and encourage the victims to report the crime without any hesitation so that the next target of the criminal can be saved.

During such a crucial period, it is pertinent to take and implement strict and swift actions to address the issue of violence in the home during the COVID-19 pandemic. As per WHO recommendations, strict measures of accountability should be enforced against perpetrators, residential comprising of older adults and children should be closely monitored by responsible authorities. There is an ardent need to increase awareness of the harmful effect of violence against older adults, children, and women through television, social media platform and extend helplines to reach out to the victims of home violence. Collaborations with different sectors like social and health sectors can be done to address violence against older adults. The current pandemic that has been nerve-racking and mentally stressful could be seen as an opportunity to introduce innovative approaches to delivering mental health services through telepsychiatry that can perhaps help in fostering more efficient use of available resources. The pandemic also the rise of first-time criminals who were badly hit due to the disruption in economic activities and unemployment that has induced many people to get involved in criminal activities for basic survival. Thus, there is also an ardent need to engage them in productive activities that can yield them income and protect them from the miseries of unemployment and financial instability.

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