

A COMPARISON OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AND EMERGENCY HOTLINE CALLS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19: BRIEF REPORT FOR ST.PETERSBURG, FL

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Background

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been significant discussion regarding the impact of stay-at-home orders on the prevalence of domestic violence (DV). The pandemic fostered increases in a range of stressors including unemployment, financial instability, and parental stress, all of which are associated with DV.¹ In addition, with non-essential businesses shut down, schools and churches closed, and citizens' movement limited, victims and their children were separated from support systems and confined with their abusers. Taken together, scholars and practitioners suggested that DV incidents would increase significantly in both frequency and severity, while the United Nations recognized DV as a “shadow pandemic” across the globe.²

Months into the pandemic, a limited but rapidly growing body of research provided empirical evidence that DV-related calls for service to *law enforcement* in the US did increase directly after stay-at-home orders,³ but longer-term studies also showed that trends in calls often normalized quickly after these rapid escalations.⁴ Taken together, a meta-analysis of 12 U.S. studies estimated an 8% increase nationally in DV during the pandemic.⁵ But importantly, at least one study demonstrated localized differences in trends for DV calls for service across different jurisdictions.⁶ Further, evidence showed that increases in calls for DV service were concentrated among households who had not previously called law enforcement for DV service, suggesting potential pandemic-related changes in DV victimization, DV reporting, or both, which requires further examination.

Prior research has consistently demonstrated that the majority of victims of DV *do not* call law enforcement after incidents of partner violence.⁷ Victims of DV describe a range of barriers to reporting to law enforcement including concerns that they will not be believed or that nothing will be done, fears of retaliation by the perpetrator, and a reliance on the perpetrator for material resources (e.g., housing, financial support), among others.⁸ Victims may instead seek out help from victim service organizations,⁹ and a common pathway to victim service organizations is through an emergency DV hotline. As such, victim reports to emergency DV hotlines provides an important source of data regarding incidents of DV during COVID-19.

Current Study

Data and Methodology

We examined DV calls for service to law enforcement and emergency DV hotlines in seven U.S. jurisdictions from January 1, 2018 to October 31, 2020. We focus on changes in daily trends after March 9, 2020 – the date that individuals in the US began drastically limiting their movement outside of their

¹ Anderberg, Rainer, Wadworth, & Wilson (2015); Azier (2010); Moore, Probst, Tompkins, Cuffe, & Martin (2007)

² UN Women (2020)

³ Piquero et al. (2020)

⁴ Leslie & Wilson (2020); Sanga & McCray (2020)

⁵ Piquero, Jennings, Jemison, Kaukinen, & Knaul (2021)

⁶ Nix & Richards (2021)

⁷ Morgan & Truman (2020)

⁸ Robinson, Ravi, & Voth Schrag (2020)

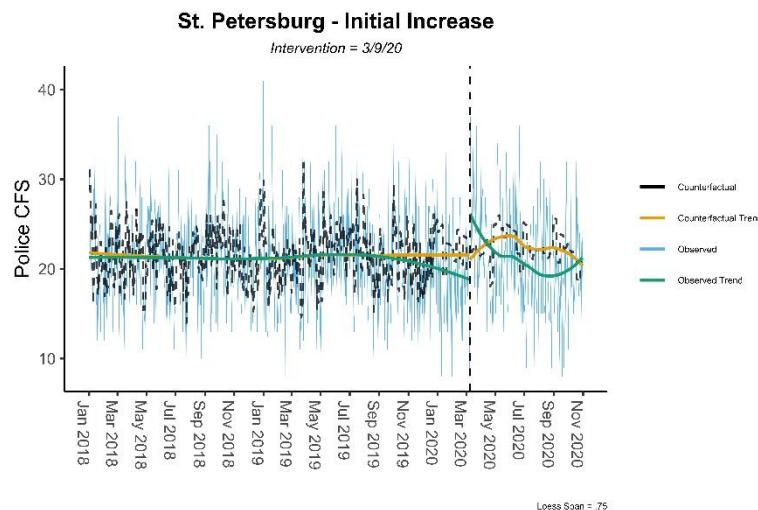
⁹ Logan & Valente (2015)

homes.¹⁰ Data on law enforcement calls were obtained from the Police Data Initiative; data on emergency hotline calls were obtained directly from the victim service agencies. First, we plot the (1) **observed trend** in DV calls for service to law enforcement and emergency hotlines over this roughly 3-year period. Then, using the call data from January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2019, we estimate the (2) **expected trend** (i.e., the “counterfactual”) in DV calls for service to law enforcement and emergency hotlines from March 9, 2020 to October 31, 2020 given the call history from the previous two years of data. In other words, this is the pattern we estimate *would have* occurred in the absence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we (3) compare **the differences** in the observed and expected trends for DV calls for service to law enforcement and emergency hotlines for each jurisdiction.

Findings

St. Petersburg. The average number of DV-related calls for service to police in St. Petersburg, FL from January 1, 2018 to October 31, 2020 was 20.91 calls per day. Given the trajectory of DV-related calls for service to police in 2018 and 2019, we would have expected an average of 22.48 DV calls per day (see Figure 1). In other words, from March 9 (when people started staying home) to October 31, 2020, there were **1.57 fewer DV-related calls for service to police per day on average (or 372.09 fewer total calls) than would have been expected.** Figure 1 shows that there was an initial increase in calls in March 2020, but this increase was brief.

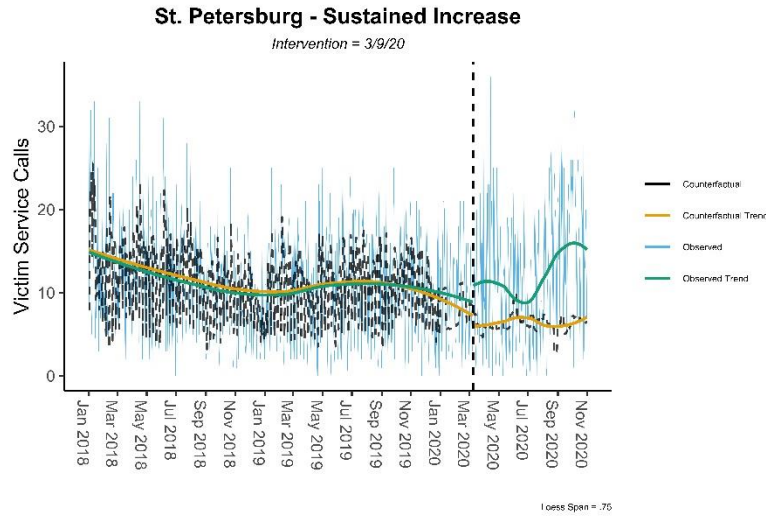
Figure 1 – Police Calls for Service, St. Petersburg



In comparison, the average number of DV emergency hotline calls in St. Petersburg, FL from January 1, 2018 to October 31, 2020 was 11.93 calls per day. Given the trajectory of emergency hotline calls in 2018 and 2019, we would have expected an average of 6.63 calls per day. Thus, from March 9 to October 31, 2020 there were **5.56 more DV emergency hotline calls per day on average (or 1317.72 more total calls) than expected.** Figure 2 shows that the pattern of increased calls was sustained from March 9 to October 31, 2020.

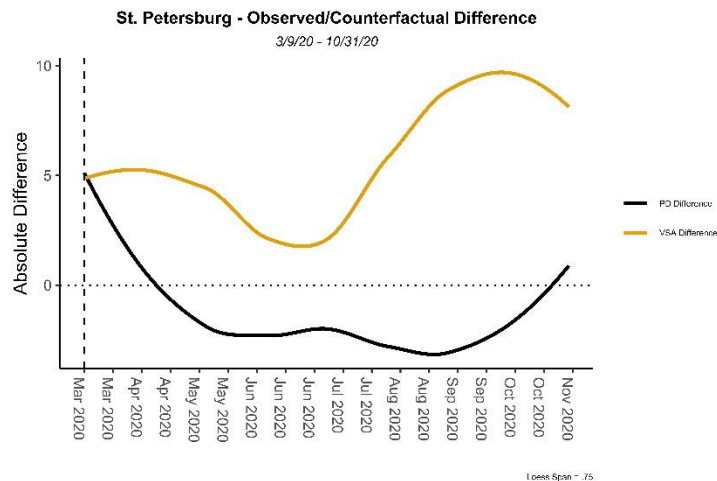
¹⁰ Leslie & Wilson (2020)

Figure 2 – Emergency Hotline Calls, St. Petersburg



Further, Figure 3 highlights how *patterns* for law enforcement and emergency hotline calls changed across the post-social distancing study period (March 9 to October 31, 2020).

Figure 3 – Observed Differences, St. Petersburg



Comparisons: Baltimore, Cincinnati, Hartford, Orlando, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, and St. Petersburg. As seen in Figures 4 and 5, trends were not consistent across jurisdictions. Increases in law enforcement calls were observed in Baltimore, Sacramento, and Salt Lake City. Increases ranged from 1.64 more calls per day on average to 7.16 more calls per day on average. In comparison, increases in the average number of calls to emergency hotlines were observed for Baltimore, Cincinnati, Hartford, Salt Lake City, and St. Petersburg. These increases ranged from 2.31 more calls per day on average to 4.64 more calls per day on average. Further, Baltimore and Salt Lake City experienced an increase in the average number of DV calls to both law enforcement and emergency hotlines, while Orlando experienced a decrease in DV calls to both law enforcement and emergency hotlines.

Figure 4 – Police Calls for Service Time Series

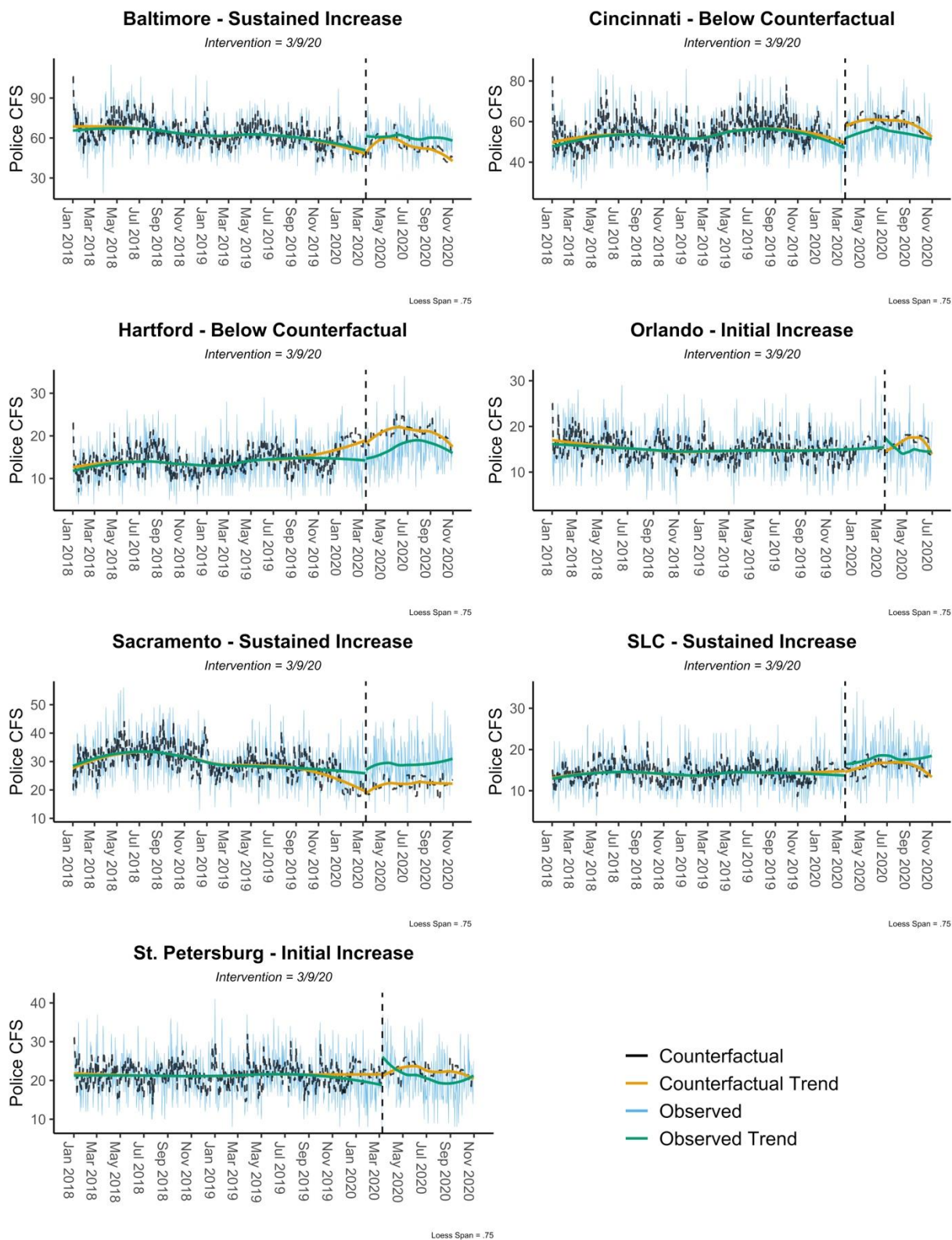
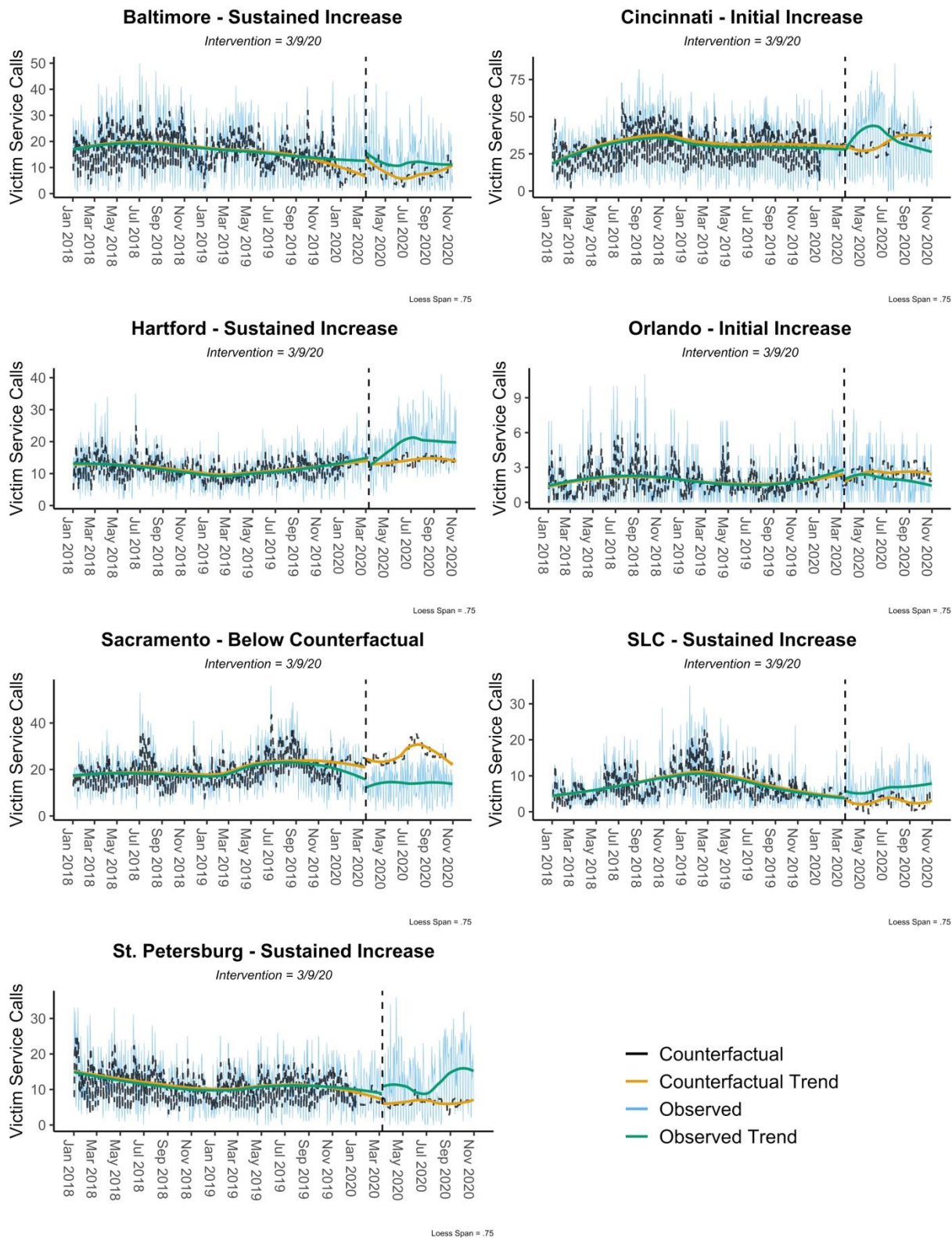


Figure 5 – Victim Services Calls Time Series



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