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Abstract

We provide evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on racial hate crime in England and Wales. Using various data sources, including unique data collected through **Freedom of Information (FOI) requests** from UK police forces, a difference-in-difference and event study approaches, we find that racial hate crime against East Asians increased by 70-100%, beginning in early February and persisted until November 2020. This increase was greatest in the weeks leading up to the first national lockdown in the UK. The shock was then lower during lockdown, before increasing again in the summer 2020. We present evidence that hate crime increased as COVID-19 cases in China increased and following announcements from the government signalling that China or Chinese individuals posed a public health risk to the UK. This indicates that **protectionism** played an important role in the observed hate crime spike. The hate crime shock was also positively correlated with the salience of the national lockdown and government policies restricting certain freedoms. The effect was driven largely by changes in London. This suggests that **retaliation** for lockdown contributed to the rise in hate crime.

Motivation

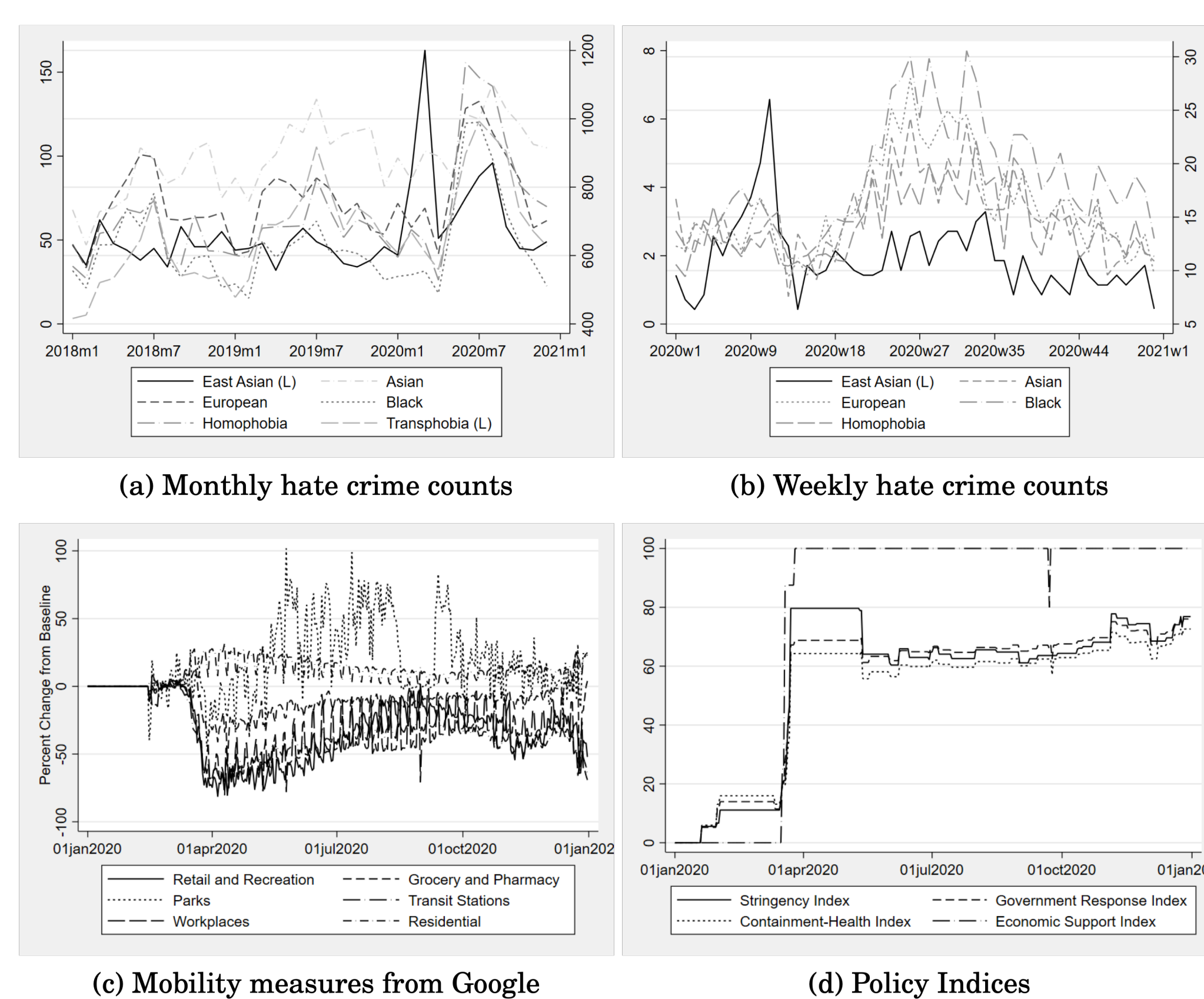
On December 31, 2019 the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced a novel coronavirus in the city of Wuhan, China. Within the next four months over 100 countries initiated lockdowns and halted international travel, and within 18 months there were nearly 4 million COVID-19 deaths registered. Slowing the spread of the virus was the primary concern of the pandemic management. However, its effects on the economy and society have been far reaching and include conspicuous increase in violence and xenophobia against racial minorities, especially those perceived to be ethnically Chinese. **In this paper we estimate the COVID-19-related increase in hate crime against racial minorities in England and Wales and investigate various mechanisms behind the hate crime contagion.**

What We Do

We investigate whether the pandemic led to an increase in recorded hate crime against East Asians and other ethnic groups (Asians, Black people and Europeans) in England and Wales. We also analyse the dynamics of the relationship across stages of the pandemic. We utilise difference-in-differences and event study regressions using other hate crime biases – homophobic, transphobic, and disability – as control groups. This allows us to control for the effect of reduced mobility of individuals on hate crime and isolate the effect of other mechanisms such as retaliation and protectionism, which are likely to change at the same time. We distinguish between the effects of lockdowns and periods of less severe restrictions. We use a unique data set of tweets to explore the potential **mechanisms** affecting only racial hate crime, such as protectionism and retaliation:

1. Protectionism (+)
2. Scapegoating or retaliation (+)
3. Incapacitation (-)
4. Economic hardship (+)
5. Substitution(-)
6. Reporting (+)

Figure 1. Time Series Plots of Various Data



Contact

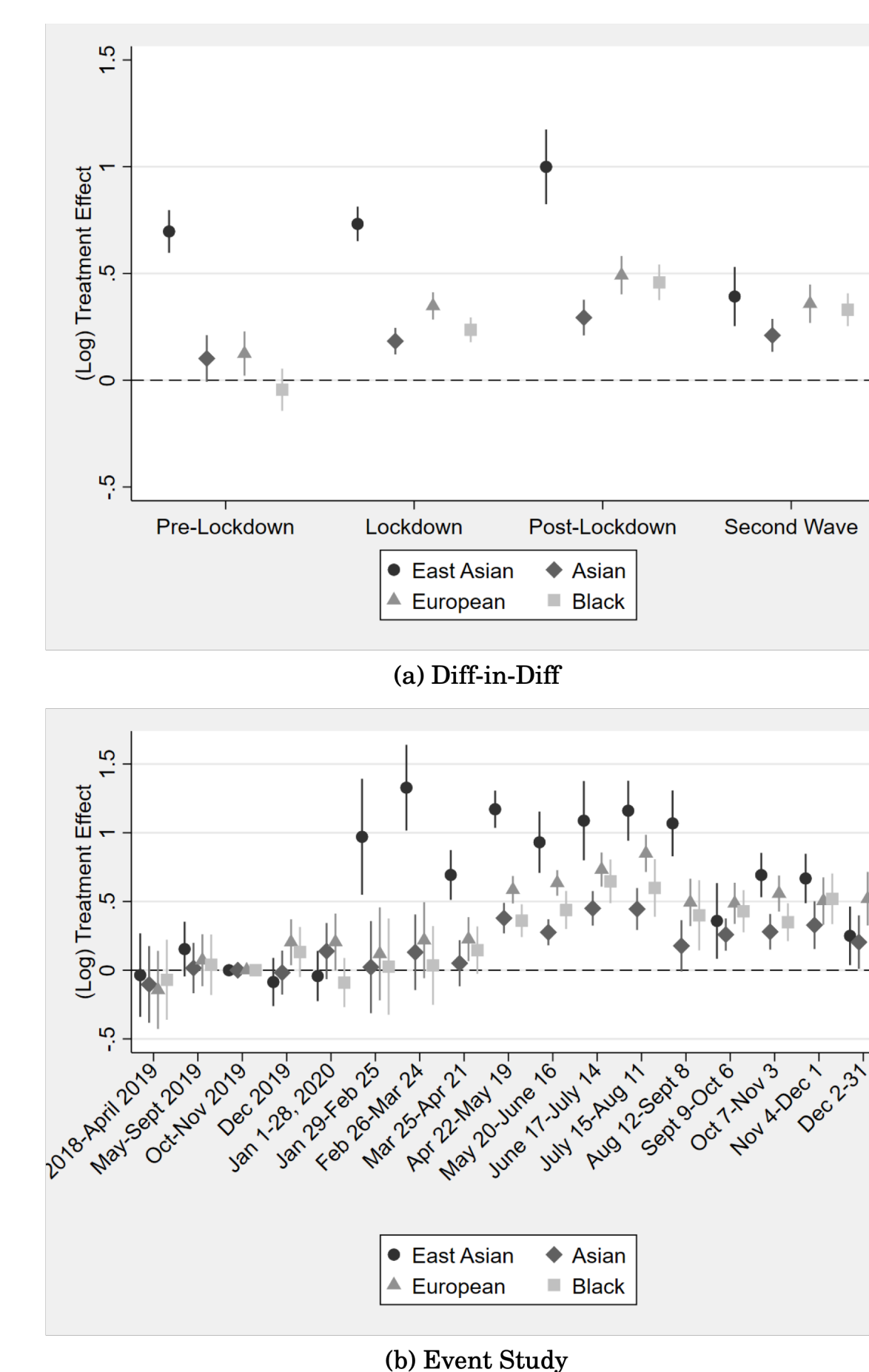
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Results

We document the following; **First**, hate crimes against East Asians increased from as soon as early February 2020 and the higher levels of hate crimes against this group persisted until November 2020. **Second**, racial hate crimes against other groups did not increase until the end of the first national lockdown in June 2020 and remained elevated until autumn 2020. On the other hand the control crimes decreased during the first national lockdown due to reduced mobility. **Third**, we find evidence that hate crimes against East Asians increased with the increase of COVID-19 cases in mainland China and as discussion of a UK lockdown increased on Twitter. The results suggest that significant protectionist and retaliatory mechanisms drove the increases in hate crimes against East Asians, while a combination of a substitution and incapacitation effects reduced racial hate crimes against other groups during lockdowns. **Fourth**, the observed increase in East Asian hate crime is primarily driven by London which we attribute to the particular negative psychological effect of a strict lockdown in a large urban area such as London. **Finally**, greater international spread of the virus – particularly in Europe – eventually led to an increase in racial hate crimes against all groups in the summer of 2020.

Figure 2. Racial Hate Crimes by Ethnic Group – DD and ES Baseline Results



Contribution to Literature

We join complementary literature analysing how racial animus against East Asians increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dipoppa et al., 2021; Gray and Hansen, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Lu and Sheng, 2022). We contribute to this topic by using high-frequency data to analyse changes over the pandemic and to measure the effect of policy changes and government signals, both in the short and long run. Another contribution is the consideration of other ethnic groups to verify whether racial animus spilled over to others. We also contribute to the literature looking at the effect of the pandemic on criminal activity (Boman and Gallupe, 2020; Langton et al., 2021; Leslie and Wilson, 2020; Abrams, 2021; Campedelli et al., 2021). Furthermore, we are the first to estimate the effect of **protectionism**—the desire to protect in-group society from those perceived to be foreign or outsiders—on racial hate crimes as previous research concentrates on the retaliatory effect. We do not argue a causal effect of our proposed mechanism measures due to simultaneity between the severity of the pandemic, policy response to the pandemic, reallocation of resources, slowdown of judicial system in lockdowns, etc. However, our results provide policymakers with information on how different sentiments were correlated with the observed hate crime shock and what effect announcements and policy changes may have on racial hate crime.

Discussion & Conclusions

Based on our empirical findings, changes in racial hate crimes during the pandemic were driven by xenophobic protectionist and retaliatory motives. Moreover, lockdowns and (self-)incapacitation of would-be victims and offenders may have prevented an even greater increase in victimisation of East Asians and, to a lesser extent, Europeans. The results suggest that the threat of lockdown and the experience of having been in lockdown increase hate crime victimisation. Hate crimes increased first due to protectionism and concerns of a national lockdown. They then continued to increase against East Asians during lockdown or the first wave; this was due to retaliation. Therefore, on one hand lockdown may have incapacitated individuals and prevented a larger increase from occurring. On the other hand, the effect of lockdown tweets which we find suggests that fear and experience of lockdown have the opposite effect prior to and following the lockdown, respectively.

In comparison to other literature, we find that COVID-19 had greater and longer relative impact on hate crime than did terrorist events (Ivandić et al., 2019) or political shocks (Carr et al., 2020). This has a few plausible explanations. First, the impact of COVID-19 was more personal, with personal freedoms being restricted to reduce the public health consequences of the virus. Second, the COVID-19 event was far longer lasting with more media salience. It also had a greater death toll than any terrorist attack.