

## CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

### Research Agenda-Setting Paper

*This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.*

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#### Working Group Name:

Social Safety Net Organizations Serving Vulnerable Populations

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#### Working Group Description:

This Working Group examines how non-profit organizations that routinely serve socially vulnerable populations (referred to here as “Social Safety Net Organizations” or SSNOs) are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of such organizations include faith-based and secular, single-purpose organizations (e.g., food banks, soup kitchens, shelters, and free clinics), multipurpose organizations, and service clubs. The group seeks to understand these organizations’ common challenges, capacity to mobilize and innovate under rapidly-changing conditions, and inter-organizational collaborations and networks. It also asks how researchers can best support their work.

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#### Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Challenges & Capacities of Social Safety Net Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: What challenges do SSNOs face in responding to the COVID19 crisis?</li> <li>• RQ2: What are the existing strengths and capacities to address these challenges among SSNOs, and which issues require additional support?</li> <li>• RQ3: Among SSNOs that have been impacted by, responded to, or planned for hazards and disasters in the past, to what extent were those plans and/or experiences helpful in the response to the pandemic?</li> </ul>
2. Patterns of Social Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: What makes some communities more socially vulnerable in the context of COVID-19, and how might this compare to vulnerability to other disasters? What are the spatial patterns associated with social vulnerability to COVID-19?</li> <li>• RQ2: How should SSNOs prioritize resource allocation?</li> <li>• RQ3: Which socially vulnerable communities are currently not being served by SSNOs?</li> <li>• RQ4: How does COVID-19 change socially vulnerable people’s mobility, access to information, and access to resources?</li> </ul>

3. Responding to Co-Occurring Disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: How are SSNOs managing the risk of ongoing and future hazards (e.g., floods, wildfires, and tornadoes) while responding to COVID 19?</li> <li>• RQ2: What supports do SSNOs need to sustain service provision through both the pandemic and other potential disasters?</li> </ul>
4. Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: How do variations in public- and civil-sector resources affect service delivery during the pandemic?</li> <li>• RQ2: How, if at all, has COVID-19 warranted additional or different methods of care/considerations (e.g., cultural competencies) for serving socially vulnerable populations?</li> <li>• RQ3: What kinds of skills are needed to help clients manage government assistance programs? What are the training needs for SSNOs to help clients navigate these programs?</li> <li>• RQ4: How are SSNOs navigating competing criteria, expectations, and guidelines about social distancing, closing/suspending operations, and/or reopening during COVID-19?</li> </ul>
5. Social Safety Net Organizations and the Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: How has the pandemic changed the relationships between SSNOs and government agencies at various levels (e.g. local, county, state)?</li> <li>• RQ2: What gaps exist in public programs that support SSNOs and the populations they serve? For instance, which providers are left out of government assistance/funding programs? And by extension, which populations are routinely not covered by these public programs and support?</li> </ul>
6. Inter-Organizational Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: In what ways are SSNOs utilizing inter-organizational networks as part of the pandemic response, and how has interorganizational collaboration changed as a result of COVID-19?</li> <li>• RQ2: What are the factors or mechanisms that facilitate or hinder inter-organizational collaboration within and across sectors?</li> <li>• RQ3: To what extent are network participants sharing a common set of information, operating assumptions, and situational awareness?</li> </ul>
7. Organizational Changes and Innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: Broadly, how are SSNOs modifying their day-to-day operations in response to the COVID-19 crisis?</li> <li>• RQ2: To what extent are there changes in structures, tasks, and other aspects of organizational operations?</li> <li>• RQ3: How are SSNOs innovating to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, and what are the factors that contribute to organizational resilience?</li> </ul>
8. Informing Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: How are SSNOs producing information that guides disaster response and recovery?</li> <li>• RQ2: How are SSNOs consulting with socially vulnerable populations to gather input on their needs and to develop strategies for addressing these needs during the response and recovery period?</li> </ul>
9. Transitioning to Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: How are SSNOs and the clients they serve defining recovery from COVID-19?</li> <li>• RQ2: How are SSNOs preparing for and transitioning to recovery?</li> <li>• RQ3: What pandemic-initiated changes are likely to be maintained into or beyond the recovery period?</li> </ul>
10. Managing Staff and Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RQ1: What are the challenges SSNOs face in terms of staff/volunteer recruitment and management during COVID-19, and how are they addressing these challenges?</li> <li>• RQ2: How do requisite skills/competencies differ for virtual versus in-person staff and volunteers?</li> <li>• RQ3: How do organizational training, policies, and procedures differ for virtual and in-person staff and volunteers?</li> </ul>

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## **Ethical / Methodological Considerations:**

In conducting this research, we must consider various important questions, such as: How do we best communicate scientific information in ways that are clear and actionable? How do we ask people for their time to participate in research while they are actively responding to a disaster? How can researchers engage in participatory research virtually? What are the challenges in drawing boundaries with the special considerations involving socially vulnerable groups? In addition to these considerations, researchers must keep in mind that this information needs to be shared, not simply extracted.

As with any research, recording, sharing, and maintaining data must be done securely in order to protect confidentiality. COVID-19 also provides a new layer of challenges to the already challenging research process. It is difficult, yet essential, to build trust with organizations remotely.

Because this research studies vulnerable populations, cultural competence skill sets within the research team must be actively assessed as the research progresses.

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