

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.

Working Group Name:

COVID-19 Impacts on Commercial Anchors of Majority-Minority Communities

Working Group Description:

This Working Group assesses how acute crises impact chronically at-risk places and populations. Minority-owned small businesses operating in places populated largely by racial and ethnic minorities often disproportionately serve and employ Black, Latinx, Asian, MENA and Native Americans. The group's policy-oriented, place-based research on these assets evaluates long-term community resilience and vulnerability, moving beyond assessments of short-term business distress and recovery.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. In Baltimore, Minneapolis, New Orleans, and elsewhere, cities are reorienting their storefront renovation grant and loan programs towards essential businesses, buildings vacated by COVID-impacted businesses, and Main Street organizations trying to make their blocks more attractive to post-COVID consumers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What places and properties were prioritized by planners of business relief and building renovation programs before COVID? • How if at all, has the programmatic priorities of these programs changed? Are the same business types and building tenures supported? • Which spatial issues of the pandemic have these programs addressed (or not)? • Can local grant programs be targeted to produce improvements to indoor air quality that benefit small business tenants, their workers and customers? • Are there opportunities in pandemic recovery to push for energy retrofits, indoor air quality improvements, and other public health and climate friendly interventions that result in expansion of jobs?
2. Several high-profile stimulus programs have been created by Congress since March 2020 to aid small businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Has	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What demographic and socioeconomic factors predict whether an individual applied for or received funds from the various governmental stimulus programs that were ostensibly designed to support business activity?

<p>stimulus money been distributed equitably within cities and metropolitan areas?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has funding been distributed geographically within a city/metro, with relation to the share of funds going to urban and suburban locations as well as the racial distributions of neighborhoods where funds went?
<p>3. Traditionally, the informal economy becomes more salient when the traditional economy fails. In what ways has COVID-impacted informal businesses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the closure of formal nonessential businesses impacted informal businesses in disinvested neighborhoods (i.e., Have informal businesses thrived during this time? Have they suffered, as well, in the name of social distancing?) • To what extent is there a link between informal economic activity within a given community and the prevalence of COVID 19 diagnoses?
<p>4. Crises often spark new entrepreneurial opportunities. How have the changes COVID-19 caused created new ventures?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are COVID-19 related ventures (masks, hand sanitizer) being sold by pre-existing companies adding a new product or new entrepreneurs changing their direction, for example? • Has COVID-19 made people less willing to take the risk of starting their own business? • What kind of opportunities and resources are there for ‘community-build’ projects that combine community-driven construction (preservation, rehabilitation, retrofitting) and place-making that benefit and bring together Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities within commercial spaces and corridors? • How has the pandemic shaped asset-based, place-based community development? • Are there opportunities for entrepreneurial activities as well as mutual aid efforts that address food security along the available public spaces and storefronts?
<p>5. The COVID-19 pandemic has intersected with an anti-racist uprising against police brutality, oppression, injustice, and systemic racism. These protests were sparked by the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, among others, in 2020.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have the dual crises of the pandemic and protests impacted minority-owned small businesses? • How have the dual crises of the pandemic and protests impacted public funding priorities in different cities (e.g. police divestment/defunding and community-based investment)?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

What’s at stake in the work of this Working Group is the survival and collapse of businesses, but also the vitality and depression of communities dependent on that commerce as well as families dependent on the income it generates. Unlike anchor institutions such as universities, commercial anchors rarely reflect on their role in community resilience or commercial revitalization. Furthermore, the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on communities of color heightens the risks of research in places where community spread of COVID-19 has gone under-reported and often untreated.

The pandemic raises ethical issues not just logistic challenges: to seek knowledge of disaster aid or mutual aid, common topics of research, is to interrupt ‘first aid’ that these businesses are providing other “essential” members of their community. With these ethical issues at the forefront, all research will be carried out with the mental and physical health of our subject communities first in mind. In addition, we must ensure that our research is done to the benefit of those communities we study. Ultimately, the Working Group has committed to gathering as much information about commercial activity in majority-minority communities from sources other than the anchors of that community and through methods other than survey so as to

strategize research engagements that bring resources to the communities and commercial enterprises from which we seek new insights, while not overburdening already stressed social institutions.

We plan to partner with three types of organizations with established social infrastructure for business support: (1) national business bureaus, e.g., chambers of commerce and main street member organizations; (2) local entrepreneurship support organizations (ESOs); and (3) community foundations. The individuals or individual businesses in which these institutions invest are not publicly available, however. Trust with these organizations must be built informally through relationship building or formally through data sharing agreements and memoranda of understanding (which members of the Working Group have already established in select places). The research relies, consequently, on ‘convenience sampling’ in terms of case study selection—what our Working Group prefers to call ‘sampling trust.’ If secured, interviews and surveys of business within these support networks can be conducted remotely and confidentially. We recognize, however, that there is the potential of sample bias towards the healthiest individuals and businesses and research fatigue amongst those respondents able to disrupt their lives.

Albeit proprietary and costly, location, transactional, and social media data can offer new understandings of hot spots during COVID-19—insights driven by researchers of racial equity and economic justice that counter map the pandemic’s impact on the experiences and exigencies of minority-owned businesses. Data indicating businesses co-locate, concentrate, disaggregate, or convene in public spaces or privatized places present agility and/or precarity in this pandemic and associated recession. Ultimately, this research can illustrate gaps in public datasets that claim to show social and spatial determinants of public health and business viability.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

This Working Group aims to inform the meaning and measure of majority-minority communities closed and ‘open for business’ due to this and future pandemics. The group plans to collect, analyze, and report on both new and available data regarding small businesses sustaining or ceasing operations in places defined by the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey as majority-minority communities. Members will rectify the communities’ underrepresentation in locational data and local documentation of businesses and buildings through community-engaged research of where, how, and with what resources business resilience and community vulnerability unfold. Via mixed-methods research of hazardous and helpful business climates, we lay the groundwork for cooperative research endeavors with front-line communities that account for displacement and distress of their business owners, operators, landlords, and patrons without discounting their time-tested resilience strategies and inventive recovery solutions.

With Working Group members’ research partners in COVID-19 hotspots, we are designing research protocols to deploy in public, private, and participatory forums—from online interviews and windshield surveys to social media ‘street views.’ The assistance and aid programs of entrepreneurship and business support organizations, in particular, provide unique opportunities to advance research of small businesses owned and/or operated by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. In many places, their nongovernmental programs rectify state policies governing registration of a minority-owned business, which mirror the U.S. Census Bureau’s undercount of ethnic minorities, particularly people of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent and origin, and the U.S. Small Business Administration’s underrepresentation of racial minorities as owners. Given the documented entrepreneurship of MENA residents of the U.S. and other BIPOC, these (and other) oversights are significant—and detrimental—to studies of economic resilience. These disclosures—the most recent of which pertained to the Payroll Protection Program (PPP), reflect a feature not a bug of governmental support for COVID-impacted businesses: “race-neutral” and “race-blind” epistemologies of risk.

How governmental aid to COVID-impacted businesses reproduce systemic racism and racial bias are not the focus of the Working Group. However, we recognize that entrepreneurship and business support organizations play a part in racial capitalism, making them neither neutral nor blind agents of resistance to closure and collapse.

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