

## 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:

Impacts to the Deep South

#### Working Group Description:

This Working Group addresses issues facing the Deep South (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia), where existing inequalities and prior disasters may exacerbate the toll of COVID-19. Researchers are focusing on a range of issues including physical and behavioral health outcomes and disparities; public perceptions of the pandemic and social distancing orders; healthcare availability and workforce retention; and economic vulnerability to COVID-19 based on geographic residence and individual, familial, and community reliance upon affected industries. Many of the research topics and considerations listed below will certainly apply to other geographic regions, but we argue that special attention should be paid to the Deep South because of its existing health and economic disparities and complicated socio-political and historical landscapes.

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

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Reception of public health guidelines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Research Question 1</u>: How are public health guidelines such as business closures and social distancing measures received in different areas?</li> <li><u>Research Question 2</u>: How do different social groups perceive and respond to public health guidelines?</li> <li><u>Research Question 3</u>: Did acceptance of such guidelines change over time?</li> </ul>
2. Effects of the pandemic on existing racial disparities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Research Question 1</u>: Where are racial disparities in COVID-19 outcomes most pronounced both across and within states in the Deep South?</li> <li><u>Research Question 2</u>: What are the drivers of racial disparities in COVID-19 outcomes?</li> </ul>
3. Issues facing rural healthcare providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Research Question 1</u>: How have rural healthcare providers been personally impacted by COVID-19?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How have rural healthcare providers adapted their practices amidst the pandemic?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 3</u>: Have outreach efforts such as community drive-through testing been successful in servicing hard-to-reach populations?</li> </ul>
4. Challenges with internet access and connectivity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: Where are the places without internet adequate for working from home, remote schooling, or telehealth services?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How do differences in internet connectivity influence the ability to adapt to the pandemic?</li> </ul>
5. Effects of COVID-19 on existing health issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: How are pre-existing risk factors associated with worse COVID-19 outcomes?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How has food insecurity and hunger been impacted by the pandemic?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 3</u>: How is air pollution related to COVID-19 outcomes?</li> </ul>
6. Roles of social institutions amidst the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: What role have churches played in providing resources to their communities?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How have different religious denominations responded to COVID-19?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 3</u>: How are community nonprofit social and health service organizations responding to needs amidst the pandemic?</li> </ul>
7. Economic impacts of COVID-19.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: What industries have been most sensitive to COVID-19 impacts?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How have informal economies been impacted by COVID-19?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are the characteristics of places facing higher numbers of jobless claims than before the pandemic?</li> </ul>
8. Effects of job loss and quarantine on social life and behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: How have drinking behaviors changed since the pandemic?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: Where have sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates increased after social distancing restrictions were lifted?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 3</u>: How have rates in depression changed since before the pandemic?</li> </ul>
9. COVID-19 and compound and cascading disasters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Research Question 1</u>: How has the pandemic affected preparations for the Atlantic hurricane season?</li> <li>• <u>Research Question 2</u>: How do social distancing guidelines impact people's decisions to shelter in place versus evacuate?</li> </ul>

### Methodological Considerations:

Research on the Deep South will need to attend to multiple units of analysis. While there is important work to be done on individual-level outcomes or cross-national comparisons, there is much work that should be conducted at other spatial scales (neighborhoods, counties, states, etc.). It is also important to recognize that these units of analysis are nested within each other. COVID-19 outcomes are not random, but rather, are a

function of environmental, socioeconomic, political, and individual-level factors. As such, we recommend formulating research plans with this nested approach in mind. That is, if researchers are interested in individual-level outcomes, they should not discount the role of place, acknowledging that individual-level experiences may be partially explained by the differences between places. This may be especially true in the Deep South, where there are stark differences across racial, ethnic, and class lines, as well as along the rural-urban continuum. Theoretical approaches that involve multiple methods and scales of analysis such as the sociology of spatial inequality<sup>1</sup> and the intersectional space framework<sup>2</sup> may be particularly useful.

Research on COVID-19 in the Deep South should be attentive to time. Time is important for two reasons: as a way to measure the progression of the pandemic and to provide additional context for the region. When thinking about the progression of the pandemic, researchers should be sensitive to the timelines of the pandemic in the South. Like any disaster, this pandemic has played out in stages, and social disruption will continue to unfold even when the hazard itself (in this case, contagion) has ceased.<sup>3</sup> The timelines will vary spatially. Researchers should acknowledge the timing of infection rates, social policies, and post-pandemic outcomes and be cautious in making comparisons between the South and other regions, or even within the South itself.

Relatedly, researchers focused on the South should think of historical legacies as cultural context.<sup>4</sup> The enduring effects of slavery and segregation, as evidenced by present-day black-white inequalities in the South, must be acknowledged, and it must be noted that these vary across the region as a whole, such as between states, sub-regions, and even individual communities. These historical legacies have both quantifiable and non-quantifiable impacts, and so it is important for scholars studying the Deep South to include qualitative analysis as a valid way of understanding the region.

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### **Ethical Considerations:**

Teams conducting research on the South should be sensitive and respectful toward Southern people and communities, as well as their issues of concern. The South is not a monolithic place; it is home to diverse and rich cultural traditions with histories of both challenges and innovative approaches to facing such challenges.

Regardless of region, it is important for scholars to be sensitive to how they engage with people and organizations, yet it is particularly important for places that are often portrayed in negative ways, such as the South. Furthermore, individuals, families, and communities should be treated with respect and in a manner that supports their autonomy, including the need to protect their health in the face of the pandemic and their socioeconomic security. Literature on community-based, participatory, and action-oriented approaches to research has numerous recommendations on these issues.<sup>5</sup>

Researchers not living in the South should consider partnering with researchers at Southern organizations and institutions. This involves deferring to Southern partners and acknowledging their regional and topical expertise. It also means partnering with them in equitable ways and using strategies to benefit knowledge production among their institutions. By extension, researchers should also be careful in the way they craft messages about the South and frame their findings. Above all, research about the Deep South should benefit those living there.

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