

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:

Operational, Ethical, and Situational Research Challenges in COVID-19

Working Group Description:

This Working Group is focused on the “doing” of research during COVID-19. It will examine the operational, ethical, and situational challenges faced by researchers in times of pandemic. Due to COVID-19, new takes on old challenges of quick-response disaster social science research are emerging. The group will identify novel unanticipated challenges related to working in a societal setting interrupted by COVID-19 and explore strategies to overcome such challenges.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
<p>1. Operational Challenges to Research</p> <p><i>Researchers depend on basic infrastructure to support research activities, as COVID-19 has disrupted society it has also disrupted the basic infrastructure researchers depend on.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has COVID-19 disrupted the infrastructure needed to support research work? • What adaptations have been made to accomplish research during COVID-19?
<p>2. Ethical Trade-Offs</p> <p><i>Researchers are often confronted with ethical dilemmas in the field, especially in the context of unfolding disasters. They may need to make decisions regarding the value of the knowledge gained by research vs. any risk of “doing harm” to participants or those in the study area.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do researchers coordinate and collaborate with each other in order to ensure ethical standards are met? • How can researchers access key “perishable” data in the field, without compromising the immediate needs of community members and partners? • What commonalities and differences exist when examining ethical trade-offs by discipline and/or research approach?
<p>3. Impacts on Academic Careers</p> <p><i>This topic is an exploration of how persons at different stages of their academic or research career (e.g. undergraduate, graduate student, early career researcher, tenure-track or tenured faculty, etc.) are impacted by COVID-19 interrupting academe.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the research challenges faced by university academics or other researchers at different stages of their careers? • How are academics coping with these challenges? • What can be done to better support academics/researchers at various stages?

<p>4. Shifting Research Foci & Priorities</p> <p><i>Given the shelter-in-place measures and restrictions on travel, researchers are creating / focusing on research projects that are 'local'. Conducting research from home has a definite influence on the location of and type of research being conducted.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the implications of COVID-19 related restrictions on research topics, locations, and resources? • What are the implications as researchers who usually conduct international research switch to conducting research in their home community? • What are the ethical implications of potentially diverting research resources away from the Global South to the Global North due to changes in research locations?
<p>5. Research Methods & Tools in a Pandemic</p> <p><i>The pandemic has caused researchers to adapt existing methods and develop new tools to engage in research. It is important to consider both the ethical and feasibility aspects of adaptations and new developments in research methods and tools due to COVID-19.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which research methods can ethically be used during and after a pandemic? • Which research methods can feasibly be used during and after a pandemic? • How must these methods be adapted?
<p>6. Emerging IRB / REB issues</p> <p><i>When researchers engage in research involving interactions with human subjects, clearance by an institutional or ethics review board (IRB/REB) is required prior to starting the research. During COVID-19, the process of this ethics review had taken on new dimensions.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What issues have emerged during COVID-19 in gaining university ethics review clearance from the both the perspectives of ethics review board personnel and researchers? • How can issues COVID-19 issues be resolved by either researchers or review board personnel? • What alternative strategies were developed by universities and researchers to move through the ethics review process while working remotely?
<p>7. Research Pauses & Restarts</p> <p><i>Due to COVID-19, research projects in many disciplines have been forced to pause. Such pauses need to be managed. Subsequently, decisions then need to be made as to how and when to restart the research.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has research in certain disciplines been impacted more than others (i.e. public health)? • What issues are present when research is forced to pause (e.g. impact on funding, etc.)? • What are the impacts of the pause? • What factors influence the decision as to how and when to restart research? • Are there any positive unintended impacts of COVID-19 on research?
<p>8. Impact on Researchers as Individuals</p> <p><i>In addition to acting as 'workers' researchers also simultaneously exist as persons in individual, household, and family settings. As nearly all dimensions of life been impacted, how do all the cumulative impacts of COVID-19 impact researchers as individuals?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What emotional and mental health challenges are emerging for researchers during COVID-19? • Is there an increased prevalence of burnout and/or fatigue for researchers during COVID-19? • Are barriers to research due to gender, race, and other power dynamics being reinforced during COVID-19? • What the issues related to the blurring of the lines between work and home for researchers?
<p>9. Digital Divide Research "Have Nots"</p> <p><i>The digital divide refers to the gaps in access to information and communication technology being experienced by researchers for reasons related to income, location, etc. As research adaptations during COVID-19 rely heavily on technology to support virtual research work, what happens to persons who are technology "have-nots"?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For information and communication technology "have nots" how do they lead research projects during COVID-19? • For information and communication technology "have nots" how do they interact as research participants during COVID-19? • Do COVID-19 research activities create opportunities to bridge the gaps for information and communication technology "have nots"?

10. Reflection

For persons engaged in research during crisis or disaster, events happen so quickly that the time, energy, or ability to reflect on what is happening is sometimes lost, resulting in lost insights.

- As the emergency is ongoing, at the time of writing, are researchers in 'response' phase?
- Can researchers begin to reflect on what has happened (or is happening) now, or is it too early in COVID-19 to begin to write the history?
- How can researchers carve out time, energy, or the ability to be able engage in reflection on the meanings of the emergency?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

In addition to the above priority research areas, members of the group would also like to bring attention to the following two points: (1) The diversity of the Working Group ranging from its international representation to the various career stages represented (students to senior professors) was seen as a strength; 2) While the university setting is one venue for research, it is not the only one. Persons at institutes, centers, and organizations, as well as independent researchers, also play important roles in the research community.

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