

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:

Pandemic Im/mobilities of Children and Seniors

Working Group Description:

This Working Group will support research into the experiences and the social and spatial im/mobilities of children and seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The group will consider (1) methodologies for studying these groups; (2) concerns unique to these groups; and (3) research deliverables within and beyond academia aimed at better supporting potentially vulnerable populations in the future. The Working Group also aims to serve as a forum for disaster researchers who study children and older adults in the context of COVID-19 to share and obtain feedback on their encountered research dilemmas, outstanding questions, and preliminary findings.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Children and seniors have been found to be especially vulnerable to the effects of disasters as compared to the general population (Anderson, 2005; Bodstein, Lima, & Barros, 2014; Fothergill, 1996; Fothergill & Peek, 2006; Greenberg, 2014; Kwan & Walsh, 2017; Muzenda-Mudavanhu, 2016; Peek, 2013; Powell, Plouffe, & Gorr, 2009). Their vulnerability can be psychological, physical, social, economic, and educational (Barusch, 2011; Fernandez, Byard, Lin, Benson, & Barbera, 2002; Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Malik et al., 2018; Muzenda-Mudavanhu, 2016; Peek, 2008; Peek et al., 2018; Staley, Alemagno, & Shaffer-King, 2011). The particular needs of children, for example, may necessitate forms of physical, social, mental, and emotional support distinct from those required by adults to cope with and recover from disasters (Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Peek, 2008; Peek & Richardson, 2010). While seniors may have greater or particular mental and physical health needs (Barusch, 2011; Fernandez et al., 2002; Greenberg, 2014; Kwan & Walsh, 2017; Malik et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2009; Staley et al., 2011), their post-disaster activities such as volunteering may facilitate both their own recovery and that of their communities (Campbell, 2016). While children also benefit from volunteering in a disaster, it is often more difficult for them to find opportunities to do so.

As potentially vulnerable populations, children and seniors are often targeted for interventions during disasters. Yet, these interventions are frequently based on talking about these groups rather than with them (Campbell, 2019; Muzenda-Mudavanhu, 2016; Pfefferbaum, Pfefferbaum, & Van Horn, 2018). The reticence to working directly with these groups can largely be attributed to ethical and methodological

challenges stemming from vulnerability, undue risks and burdens, risk management, and decision-making capacity of participants (Ferreira, Buttell, & Cannon, 2018; McGuire, 2009).

The current COVID-19 crisis from the pandemic spread of the novel coronavirus is no exception to these trends, as children and seniors' vulnerability is attributed to greater health risks from exposure to the virus (seniors) and lapses in education due to school closures (children). However, this narrow framing is problematic because (1) it dismisses the vulnerability of these groups beyond coronavirus-related medical issues and educational concerns, (2) it defines these groups as passive recipients of interventions, thereby ignoring their important contributions to their own and others' recovery, (3) it suggests an innate, rather than socially-produced, vulnerability, and (4) it wrongly homogenizes all children and all seniors as vulnerable. The tendency to dismiss the agency of presumed vulnerable groups in disasters needs to be rectified by better understanding COVID-19 related concerns particular to these groups as voiced by children and seniors themselves—as called for in other disaster contexts (Campbell, 2019; Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Kwan & Walsh, 2017; Peek et al, 2018).

The Working Group's simultaneous focus on the two age groups is important, novel, and timely. It will highlight commonalities in each group's feelings and experiences, as well as differences in how each group navigates them. It will also draw attention to possible intergenerational connections and concerns. The potential for digital communication and connection between generations during the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented; not only have communications infrastructures remained largely intact during this disaster, but there is also a plethora of digital communication options such as online video conferencing programs.

The Working Group has identified the following priority research topics and questions.

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. The experiences of children and seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the major concerns of children and seniors during the pandemic? • How do these concerns change throughout the pandemic? • How do children and seniors cope during the pandemic? • How do children and seniors express agency and resilience during a pandemic? • What are the consequences of the pandemic on children and seniors, and what intervening factors influence these outcomes?
2. Ethical issues: meaningfully engaging children and seniors during and after the pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the particular ethical considerations of working with potentially vulnerable populations during a pandemic? • How should researchers navigate ongoing consent in a multi-step research project? • What are the ethical considerations for each research tool, and the overall research strategy?
3. Methodological innovations: meaningfully engaging children and seniors during and after the pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What research tools meaningfully engage children and seniors in real-time during shelter-in-place restrictions? • What research strategies and tools can be used to capture and convey children's and seniors' experiences in their own words? • How can, or should, various technologies and platforms be used or adapted for research with children and seniors? • How can researchers and participants sustain research momentum during a pandemic with a yet-undetermined end date?
4. Communicating research findings to diverse audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which organizations, businesses, agencies, networks, and other groups impact the lives of seniors and children during the pandemic? • What are the most effective ways to communicate research results to these stakeholders? What are the most appropriate deliverables for each one?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Working with these populations requires child-centric and senior-centric approaches (Campbell, 2019; Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Peek & Richardson, 2010). Given children's and seniors' potential vulnerability, research methodologies require targeted ethical considerations and innovations that can be effectively used both during the pandemic and once social distancing measures have been relaxed.

To better capture the heterogeneity of children and seniors, research on these groups should use an intersectional approach to better understand how other facets of identity affect their experiences (Mullings & Schulz, 2006). As in previous disasters, it is expected that existing inequalities linked to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, disability, religion, and other social determinants of health will be exacerbated during the pandemic (Cutter, 2006; Cutter & Finch, 2008; Enarson, 2000; Fernandez et al., 2002; Fothergill & Peek, 2004; Gibb, 2018; McLeman, 2013; Powell et al., 2009). Therefore, special attention should be dedicated to these groups and their intersectional identities.

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

This Working Group has launched a research project that responds to several of the priority research topics and research questions. It utilizes journaling as a tool through which children and seniors are invited to express their everyday experiences and geographies during the pandemic in their own words, drawings, photographs, audio and video recordings, and maps. The journaling will be complemented by a survey, interviews, focus groups and research workshops – methods that have previously been used effectively to study the disaster experiences of children and of seniors (Fothergill & Peek, 2006, 2015; Peek & Fothergill, 2009).

The research results will be shared via diverse deliverables with stakeholders who interact with children and seniors in a variety of arenas. For the scientific community, these deliverables will include journal articles on the methodologies and ethical considerations of conducting mixed-methods research with children and seniors in the pandemic context. For members of the policy community, nonprofits, and other organizations that serve these populations, deliverables will include sample policy briefs and an online hub of individual research project outputs that can be incorporated into institutional guidelines to improve pandemic-related outcomes.

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