

COVID-19 a 'transformative' moment for social science

April 3 2020, by Lisa Marshall



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What's driving violent anti-Chinese discrimination in Nairobi, Kenya, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and what can be done to quell it? How are part-time student workers in central Florida handling massive furloughs, and what could their employers be doing better? What kind of messaging is garnering trust vs. distrust in Canada? What unique challenges did people with disabilities face in Wuhan, China, during the lockdown?

These are among the countless questions social scientists around the globe are asking as they swiftly pivot to learn all they can from arguably the most socially disruptive event in modern history.

To provide leadership, catalog projects and create a vehicle for collaboration across disciplines and distances, the Natural Hazards Center this week launched the COVID-19 Global Research Registry for Public Health and Social Sciences. It also rolled out new grants to fund "quick-response" studies and working groups. And it will host its second virtual forum this Friday to bring social scientists studying the pandemic together. The Natural Hazards Center is part of the Institute of Behavioral Science at CU Boulder.

"This is a transformative moment for the social and behavioral sciences," said Center Director and sociology Professor Lori Peek. "We have decades of lessons learned from past disasters to apply. But this is the first global event in living memory that reveals so fully our need to understand human behavior. We are mobilizing to learn from it and use that knowledge for public good."

A different kind of natural disaster

The efforts grew out of the National Science Foundation-funded CONVERGE, a year-old initiative housed at the center and meant to serve as a "connective tissue" to help scientists and engineers from across the world collaborate in the study of natural hazards, including natural disasters.

On March 19, 2020, just as stay-at-home orders were beginning to kick in across the country, Peek convened a CONVERGE virtual forum to discuss a different kind of disaster.

Seventeen [social scientists](#) showcased COVID-19-related studies already in the works, exploring everything from the virus's implications for mental health among disenfranchised communities to the role of tech in helping young children stay connected.

Nearly 300 attended remotely from around the world—many with projects underway.

"The team here realized there is so much momentum, we have to do more," said Peek.

Creating a team of teams

The first-of-its-kind registry—analogue to clinicaltrials.gov for the medical sciences—went live March 27 and is available in English, French, Spanish and Chinese.

To sign up, one must be studying social, behavioral or public health aspects of the pandemic.

Soon, journalists, [funding agencies](#), philanthropists and other researchers will be able to peruse the site, looking for story ideas, benefactors and

collaborators.

Aaida Mamuji, an assistant professor at York University in Toronto, was among the first to sign up. Through her study, her team will survey children, women and elderly residents in the large Chinese communities of Toronto, Canada and Nairobi, Kenya, about the backlash they have experienced since the virus—originally referred to by some as the "Wuhan" or "Chinese" virus—first emerged.

"The long-term goal is to develop counter measures to reduce misinformation, combat stigma, and counteract fear associated with this [public health](#) disaster," Mamuji said. "We hope this research project will contribute to mitigating the targeting of specific ethnic groups in future infectious disease outbreaks."

Chelsea LeNoble, an assistant professor of industrial organization psychology at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida, has also signed on.

Through three different studies involving everyone from university faculty to employees at theme parks, restaurants, healthcare facilities and airlines, she and her colleagues hope to learn what employers are doing right, and could be doing better to bolster worker resilience.

"The biggest issues facing society today cannot be solved by one discipline alone," LeNoble said. "This is the time for people to work as a team of teams with the goal of understanding much more together than we can alone. The registry is a fantastic step in the right direction."

The Natural Hazards Center, through CONVERGE and the Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network, is also offering 30 \$1,000 seed grants to encourage other collaborative projects and facilitating \$3,000 to \$5,000 quick response grants with the support of

the National Science Foundation.

CONVERGE will hold its next virtual forum on Friday, April 3, from 3 to 4:30 p.m. MDT.

Researchers are invited to [register their COVID-19-related project here.](#)

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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