Uncovering COVID's hidden tolls

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In two separate research paths, Antwan Jones, associate professor of sociology and epidemiology in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, is charting COVID-19's deadly sweep across the world by delving into the virus' often overlooked impact on people's lives.

Looking behind the pandemic's stark mortality statistics—more than 100 million infections worldwide and 2 million deaths—Dr. Jones' current studies are measuring COVID's psychological toll on healthy behaviors as well as the mounting pressure the virus is imposing on housing stability.

"COVID-19 has infiltrated all of our lives, and in many ways we do not have a firm grasp of the effect that it truly has had on how we think, how we behave and how we relate to one another and our environments," said Dr. Jones, who also has a courtesy appointment in the Department of Africana Studies. "A lot of my research has centered on these hidden areas and how COVID has changed us."

As part of a global, interdisciplinary research team, Dr. Jones is looking at the influence of specific stressors—perceived risk of infection and fears of COVID-induced economic burdens—on health-promoting activities, like quality sleep and nutritious diets. Additionally, in his independent research, Dr. Jones is examining how the virus has worsened housing and residential challenges, particularly among low-income communities.

An urban sociologist, Dr. Jones' scholarship often focuses on the relationship between where people live and their health outcomes—from studying diabetes in Appalachia to obesity among immigrant children in U.S. cities. For his latest COVID studies, Dr. Jones joined PsyCorona, a collaboration of more than 100 researchers across five continents investigating the psychological implications of the crisis.

Since March 2020, the PsyCorona scientists have conducted ongoing 20-minute interviews with more than 60,000 people in 115 countries. The survey topics range from hand-washing and mask-wearing to dissatisfaction with government messaging. The project is jointly funded by the New York University Abu Dhabi, the University of Groningen in

the Netherlands and the Instituto de Salud Carlos III in Madrid.

In his role with PsyCorona, Dr. Jones and 10 social scientists surveyed 7,000 participants from 86 countries, all of whom believed that they were at high risk of infection and that the virus imposed heightened economic burdens on their lives. The team is testing whether those two perceived risk factors correlate to a decline in healthy behavioral habits.

"We are asking: If you perceive that you will get infected, and if you think that in the next few months your personal situation will be worse due to the economic consequences of COVID, will you sleep less and will you eat more and eat unhealthy food?" Dr. Jones explained.

Dr. Jones' team expects to release their findings in a series of upcoming papers. While their results aren't final, he noted that his participants showed consistently poor diets and sleep quality, even when allowing for variations in gender, age and economic status. The data was also virtually identical across countries—from impoverished nations to more developed European countries and the United States. "That's a really powerful finding and shows the global impact of this pandemic," he said.

Dr. Jones also noted that the two stressors work hand-in-hand to produce cumulatively worse outcomes. Similarly, if only one of the stressors is removed—if, for example, a vaccine relieved infection fears or a cash stimulus lightened economic woes—healthy behaviors didn't improve unless the remaining stressor was also addressed. "They don't operate in isolation," he said.

In addition to his work with PsyCorona, Dr. Jones has applied one of his own research specialties to the COVID crisis—the link between housing and health.

With the pandemic disproportionately assailing low-income groups, Dr.

Jones and his research colleagues are collecting data from 500 U.S. cities to understand how the virus is shaping residential mobility. The pandemic has forced some people to leave their homes because of rising costs and evictions, Dr. Jones noted, while trapping others in unhealthy living conditions, such as densely populated areas where social distancing is impossible.

"In this manner, pandemics such as COVID-19 become another layer that further isolates and disadvantages low-resource neighborhoods," he explained in a commentary for the journal Cities & Health. Indeed, Dr. Jones said, the virus has highlighted long-term housing inequalities and accelerated the need for rent and mortgage relief, waivers on late fees for municipal services and more investment in social services for vulnerable populations.

"There has been less attention on…how socially and economically vulnerable populations will be affected by the changing spatial landscape brought on by the consequences of the pandemic," he said. "Global pandemics are notorious for inciting short- and long-term economic challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception."

More information: Antwan Jones et al. Housing stability and the residential context of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Cities & Health* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/23748834.2020.1785164

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