



New Tool Provides Insight into the Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19 on Latino Gay and Bisexual Men

Miami-Dade County leads the U.S. in new HIV diagnoses. Latino gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men experience the majority of these new diagnoses. Now, in the era of COVID-19, University of Miami experts are using a newly developed tool to further study this population by exploring the behavioral and psychosocial impacts of the pandemic.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, UM health experts, public health scientists and mental health professionals were in the process of conducting a study titled *Determining Influences on MSM Engagement among Latinos* (DÍMELO), to understand how Latino gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men engage in HIV-prevention services and mental health/substance use services.



But researchers realized that social isolation and other social changes required to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus likely affected the sexual behaviors and mental health of this group.

“We developed and added this tool to our project to better understand COVID-19’s impacts and address them as our work continues,” said Audrey Harkness, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and research assistant professor at the Miller School’s Department of Public Health Sciences.

To help enhance their understanding, the researchers developed the Pandemic Stress Index, a three-item apparatus that assesses behavior changes and stressors that may have occurred in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The tool is publicly available, in English and Spanish, for other researchers’ use.

In a new paper published on April 15 in the journal *AIDS and Behavior*, the experts detail the new index and give perspective on how COVID-19 is impacting the lives and health of Latino MSM. Dr. Harkness and her team hope their work will help inform other HIV researchers studying this population and



highlight health disparities and potential intervention opportunities during these unprecedented times.

“This project will hopefully lead to a better understanding of what factors get in the way and help Latino sexual minority men obtain health services that may be beneficial,” said Dr. Harkness, who was first author of the paper.

To develop the index, Dr. Harkness collaborated with Victoria Behar-Zusman, Ph.D., professor and associate dean for research at the School of Nursing and Health Studies, and Steven Safren, Ph.D., director of the Center for HIV and Research in Mental Health and the Health Promotion and Care Research Program in the Department of Psychology. Those who contributed to the development of the tool have expertise in health disparities and underserved populations – including LGBTQ populations, Latino and Haitian populations, and people involved in the criminal justice system, as well as experts in HIV treatment and prevention, mental health, and substance use.

“Although we are still very early in data collection, we are already learning that Latino sexual minority men’s lives have been substantially disrupted by COVID-19, in terms of engaging in social distancing and experiencing increases in various psychosocial difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, substance use, and lack of social support,” Dr. Harkness said.

Once the DÍMELO study is complete, the results can help guide research, clinical, and advocacy efforts to ensure that needed resources – such as health care delivery, social support, and financial support – are delivered to these populations during and following the immediate impacts of COVID-19.



Content Type Article