



Public Health Researchers Study Effects of COVID-19's Social Restrictions on Loneliness and Mental Health

Public health researchers at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine are conducting a cross-sectional study to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic's social restrictions on loneliness and mental health among young adults. People age 18 to 35 in the U.S. are the target group.



The study will explore the psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 on young adults.

The study is led by Renae Schmidt, a second-year Master of Public Health candidate at the Miller School, and Viviana E. Horigian, M.D., M.H.A., associate professor in the Department



of Public Health Sciences.

The objective of the study, which is supported by a rapid-response grant from UM's Office of the Vice Provost for Research, is to gain an understanding of the psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 on young adults. The study includes measures of loneliness, anxiety, depression, social connectedness, and substance use behaviors.

Dr. Horigian and Schmidt disseminated a survey to gather responses from participants. The survey focused on the following questions:

- How is loneliness related to other problems such as alcohol use, drug use, anxiety and depression?
- How is the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated social distancing implications attributing to the ongoing "loneliness epidemic" in the United States? This will involve determining how behaviors and mental health have changed since COVID-19 recommendations/restrictions have been implemented.

In the wake of COVID-19 in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended social restrictions, which led to growing concerns about its implications on mental health and substance use.

Existing research has shown that loneliness is growing as an ominous public health concern and can be deadly. Evidence has shown that it increases inflammation, heart disease, dementia and a wide range of mental health disorders. Similarly, social isolation, whether objective or perceived, has significant adverse effects and behavioral health implications.



The study builds on Schmidt and Dr. Horigian's previous work on the association between loneliness, social connectedness, and its counterpart, social isolation, and drug overdose deaths. The idea came about during one advising session where together they reflected on overdose deaths and Dr. Horigian's interest in its relationship with suicidality and isolation.

"Dr. Horigian and I used a geographic information system software to map drug overdose deaths and variables which are associated with social isolation across the U.S. and across Florida counties," Schmidt said. "Research measuring loneliness and perceived social isolation and their implications on mental and physical health is not being widely investigated. Not many studies have tried to really capture these important interplays, leaving a gap in the research, and many unanswered questions."

The study is one of 24 University of Miami COVID-19 related projects that received rapid response grants for areas of research that will provide information about the effects of the pandemic.

"The surge in attention brought to mental health and isolation during COVID-19 has laid the groundwork for taking a closer look at these symptoms, feelings, and behaviors," Schmidt added. "I saw the grant as an opportunity to pursue a deeper analysis of these associations, and Dr. Horigian supported the idea 100 percent."

"From an educator's perspective, this is a fulfilling story of the importance of creating the supportive environment for the development of capacities in our students," Dr. Horigian said. "I have fresh in my mind the day we were reflecting on the opioid epidemic in my office. As we exchanged reflections,



Renaë asked if she could pursue an independent study to answer some of the questions that emerged during our conversation. Well into the analyses of results of her independent study, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and social restrictions were imposed. The rapid response grant supported by the Office of the Vice Provost of Research was a perfect opportunity to capitalize on the research underway and to expand beyond it.”

Results will provide pilot data for future grant opportunities recently released by the presidential stimulus package supporting National Institute of Health research.