Comments in response to the Request for Information (RFI): Inviting comments to inform the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on the intersection of the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and the health of women (NOT-OD-22-092)

Submitted via CCRWHRFI@od.nih.gov

The American Psychological Association (APA) is pleased to provide comments on the Request for Information (RFI): Inviting comments to inform the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on the intersection of the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic and the health of women (NOT-OD-22-092).

APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States (U.S.), comprised of more than 133,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. Its mission is to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives.

When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, APA describes what the country, including the scientific research community, is facing as a “syndemic” fueled by worsening pre-existing socioeconomic inequality. Ample research shows that the pandemic caused more significant stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. Moreover, data shows that COVID-19 spreads rapidly because of social inequality and injustice, contributing to disease clustering among those at higher risk for poor health. According to APA’s latest Stress in America Survey, 84 percent of U.S. adults reported feeling at least one emotion—anxiety, sadness, and anger—associated with prolonged stress within the previous two weeks. The COVID-19 pandemic was among the top sources of this stress. These survey results track other research showing sharp increases in reported symptoms of mental disorders and damage to social determinants of health.

APA would like to share the following recommendations with the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health (ORWH) and the NIH Coordinating Committee on Research on Women’s Health (CCRWH):

Support a research focus on the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women and people of color, worsening longstanding disparities in health status and outcomes. In addition, psychological science indicates that when basic human needs such as safety, food, and shelter are threatened or not met, individuals will suffer severe mental and physical health consequences. Yet mental health is frequently an unaddressed matter in racial and ethnic minority communities.

COVID-19 data also shows that the essential workers at risk for COVID-19 are women. Women were more likely to be impacted as caregivers of children, elders, and individuals with disabilities. In addition, women experienced social isolation, especially during childbirth, postpartum periods, serious illness, end of life, and other critical transitional times. APA urges an examination of the additional SDOHs related to COVID, including the loss of employment, child mental health crisis, loss of connection to religious institutions, poverty, community violence (in addition to

domestic violence), and access to health care and these factors’ impact on women. APA recommends a research focus on the effects of social determinants of health (SDOH) in women during the COVID-19 pandemic and its residual and subsequent impact as the nation emerges from it.

**Increase attention to the mental health of pregnant people and those who gave birth during COVID-19.** As noted above, the COVID-19 pandemic caused high stress among individuals who were pregnant or gave birth during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in higher rates of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder symptoms. APA recommends that ORWH examine this stress as a top research priority. APA also urges NIH to investigate the "long haul" psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pregnant people. Specifically, prioritize research on how COVID-19 changed mental health and trajectories in areas such as perinatal stress and poor mental health for childbearing individuals and their infants and children. This investigation should include the longer-term implications of perinatal COVID exposure and infection for childbearing individuals and their infants.

**Explicitly acknowledge the intersectionality of risk factors associated with COVID and women.** We know from the evidence that people of color (women) faced a disproportionally higher risk of contracting COVID. Additionally, women, children, low-income individuals, and ethnic minorities also had to cope with the disruption caused by social distancing. As a result of social distancing, women are among the demographics that suffered the most, including more significant job losses. In addition, mothers were more likely to exit the labor force, especially those with young children. APA believes it is crucial to understand the impact of individual and community exposure related to the multiple inequities faced by women, including the economic consequences of social distancing, racism, LGBTQ status, older adult status, and emerging adults. There is also the need to investigate the consequences of government COVID-19 pandemic mitigation efforts. Accordingly, APA urges ORWH to develop and support an intersectional framework to allow an understanding of the complete medical and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Support a focus on the increased rates of suicide and overdose.** Although suicide rates appear to have fallen over the past year, survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in June 2020 found that Black and Hispanic respondents reported having considered suicide in the previous month at twice the rate of White respondents. This data point suggests the need to address not just the disease itself but also the associated social determinants of health. For example, we know that these populations are more likely to report stress and worry about providing for their families, the inability to pay rent, or housing instability. Similarly, the CDC projects that there were more than 88,000 drug overdose deaths over the previous 13 months ending in August 2020, a 26.8 percent increase above 2019. APA encourages ORWH to take a population approach to address mental health, and substance use treatment needs heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Examine COVID-19 effects on the mental health of transgender women.** People with HIV may be particularly vulnerable because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender identity is not reported; therefore, data are absent on the impact of COVID-19 on transgender people, including transgender people with HIV. APA encourages ORWH to prioritize examining COVID-19 implications for transgender women.


development of severe pneumonia, which may make them more susceptible to COVID-19 infection or its consequences than the general population, especially if they have chronic diseases or pregnancy-related complications. Trans and nonbinary (TNB) gestational parents face minority stress, prejudice, microaggressions, and uninformed medical providers. In addition, TNB people often face employment and housing discrimination; as a result, additional psychosocial issues may impact individuals' stability during pregnancy. These stressors burden the immune system. APA urges support of research addressing the unique needs of trans and non-binary people during pregnancy, necessary for competent care within a COVID context.

**Identify barriers that may be disrupting high-quality healthcare access and equity.** For example, women, people of color, LGBT people, people with disabilities, those who do not speak English as a first language, those with mental health conditions and substance use disorders, and other people affected by systemic marginalization already deal with unconscious bias of medical providers that affect being believed and taken seriously when patients describe pain, areas of dysfunction, and symptoms. Given that too little is currently known about long-COVID, it is probable that without deliberate research into how long-COVID affects these communities, long COVID will be missed, minimized, and dismissed within medical settings when reported by minoritized people. Accordingly, APA encourages the research to include sex and gender differences in the impact and expression of long-COVID and the development of a more inclusive and trauma-informed assessment of long-COVID systems.

**Support research to examine the health of the workforce.** Given the limited protections in place for the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of which have expired (COVID leave, COVID testing, etc.), understanding the impact of long-COVID and the development of recommendations for policymakers about caring for the workforce long-term is vital. Particularly in sections of the workforce where women are a more significant percentage of those employed (healthcare, education, childcare settings), it is essential to use research and science to understand better the functional impact of long-COVID. Information about mobility, cognitive, or endurance issues resulting from the long-COVID is also crucial, given that women are often the primary caregivers for spouses, children, relatives, and elderly parents. These questions undoubtedly impact the roles of women as employees and caregivers.

**Examine domestic and intimate-partner violence (IPV) and its impact on women's health.** Data have shown that violence against women and girls, including domestic and intimate partner violence, intensified by 25 – 33 percent globally during the pandemic. According to the CDC, approximately 1 in 4 women report experiencing some form of IPV each year. A consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is women were more likely to have remained at home and in the confines of abusive relationships due to stay-at-home directives or changes in employment. Research is needed to understand better the web of factors underlying the rise in domestic violence.

**Increase the research focus on misinformation and vaccine safety.** Widespread misinformation regarding the safety of vaccines during pregnancy & postpartum has resulted in high rates of hesitancy and under-vaccination in pregnant people. As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes endemic, it remains increasingly important to understand how misinformation affects people's understanding of the public health crisis and their decision-making, especially

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pregnant people. Therefore, APA recommends that ORWH support additional research to understand the complex demographic factors surrounding vaccine hesitancy, including such factors as gender, age, and misinformation.

Support career development to promote research. The pandemic threatens the gender equity gains made over the past few decades. Women, including women researchers, have experienced most pandemic-related job losses. Data also show that women are underrepresented in COVID-19 research for varied reasons. For example, only a third of the authors who published COVID-related papers are women.

APA appreciates that ORWH, in partnership with CCRWH, has recognized the need for career development and assessment of the disruption caused by COVID-19 on the careers of those that study these critical topics. Re-engaging and growing developing researchers generally, specifically those who can focus on sex and gender differences in health, resilience, and pathobiology in response to the current pandemic and future pandemics, should be a top priority of NIH and ORWH. That includes committing to mentorship programs that can help foster these career trajectories. Additionally, research focused on understanding barriers before the pandemic and how those barriers were amplified or changed during the pandemic is required. Finally, NIH needs to understand burnout among healthcare clinicians and investigators and how that has affected career trajectories, focus, and influence on patient care and outcomes.

Again, APA thanks ORWH and CCRWH for the opportunity to respond to this request for information. If APA can be of further assistance, don't hesitate to contact Angela Sharpe, Senior Director, Congressional & Federal Relations, at asharpe@apa.org.

Sincerely,

Mitch Prinstein
Chief Advocacy Officer
American Psychological Association

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