



Population Council
Knowledge Commons

Essays: Covid-19 and the Global Demographic
Research Agenda

Academic Journal: Population and
Development Review

2-1-2021

Introduction

Landis MacKellar
Population Council

Rachel Friedman
Population Council

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/series_pdr_essays-covid

Recommended Citation

MacKellar, Landis and Rachel Friedman. "Introduction." In *Covid-19 and the Global Demographic Research Agenda*, edited by Landis MacKellar and Rachel Friedman, 1–2. New York: Population Council, 2021.

This Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Population Council.

Introduction

LANDIS MACKELLAR

RACHEL FRIEDMAN

THE FIELD OF POPULATION STUDIES that *Population and Development Review* serves has responded briskly to Covid-19, with webinars, virtual conferences, special issues, and more. Our attitude at PDR was to take a deep breath and a look around to see which way the wind blew.

Now, of course, there has been ample time to know with confidence which way it blows: the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath will be with us all around the world for many years to come. Implications for geopolitics, macroeconomies, labor, financial, and commodity markets, the environment, technology and innovation, health care systems, gender, racial and ethnic inequality, and more will be profound and durable. As will effects on the core interests of demography: mortality, fertility, migration, urbanization, family and social structure, and the resulting implications for socioeconomic, environmental, and technological regimes.

Much peer-reviewed research on Covid-19 published in journals like *PDR* will take months or years to complete. Yet, it became increasingly clear to us in the weeks following the onset of the pandemic that we could offer an alternate kind of scholarly space to explore current and potential impacts of the virus, an essay space. So, we invited a group of recent *PDR* authors and Population Council researchers to respond to the following question: How do you see Covid-19 shaping global demographic research needs over the next five to ten years? We were rewarded with 16 wide-ranging essays covering much ground in few words. These thoughtful reflections offer a time capsule of sorts on current thinking in the field.

Some common themes emerged: calls for more interdisciplinary collaboration and investment in high-quality data, for example, and reflections on demography's role when it comes to issues of inequality and governance. Researchers' interests are naturally revealed. While some focus on needs and opportunities in terms of data and analysis, others are concerned with future generations of demographers and their research priorities. There is some broad scope overlap, but each essay offers a distinct vantage point from which to view the future of demographic research.

Moving to specifics, a number of contributors call for better data, including data from innovative sources and approaches. A particular impact cited is that Covid-19 has disrupted plans for the 2020 census round. There is a sentiment that demographers should see themselves not merely as producers of data consumed by researchers in related disciplines such as economics, sociology, and public health. Enhanced collaboration is a theme that runs throughout the contributions. Since Covid-19 is similar in certain ways to other adverse life events (illness, divorce, job loss) studied by family demographers, the pandemic might also push the interdisciplinary life-course approach more firmly to the center of demography. Since the pandemic may undo decades of progress in advancing gender equality, its impact on reproductive health, even the structural shift toward lower fertility in many developing countries, deserves attention.

The issue of research transparency as a strategy for combating the growing mistrust and politicization of science is raised. So, too, is the importance of comparative research, especially at the international level, to disentangle the effects of the disease itself from underlying social conditions and responses, not only in public health narrowly speaking, but in governance more broadly. There are issues of how statistics in our data-driven world are being interpreted through cognitive and moral frameworks, population-wide and at individual and personal levels. Demographers have a responsibility not only to help the public better understand and interpret the statistics being disseminated at a frantic pace, but also to reflect on how they themselves are affected by these data.

While some contributors look outward—data needs, new methods of dealing with them—some look inward to reflect on the field itself. Who will be producing the needed demographic research? Gender gaps are likely emerging as the pandemic disproportionately affects women at the peak of their research productivity, and their students, with long-term impacts. International graduate study, heavily concentrated in the United States and Europe, is being disrupted. The global scope of research may narrow due to increased difficulty of fieldwork. As the need for field-based research grows, there is risk that it becomes more difficult and hence less attractive for researchers starting out.

We look forward to revisiting the issues raised in these essays in the years to come, and to reevaluating their global impact on demography and demographers. Even more, we look forward to the day when the most acute and painful phase of this pandemic is behind us—when we can finally, fully exhale that deep breath.