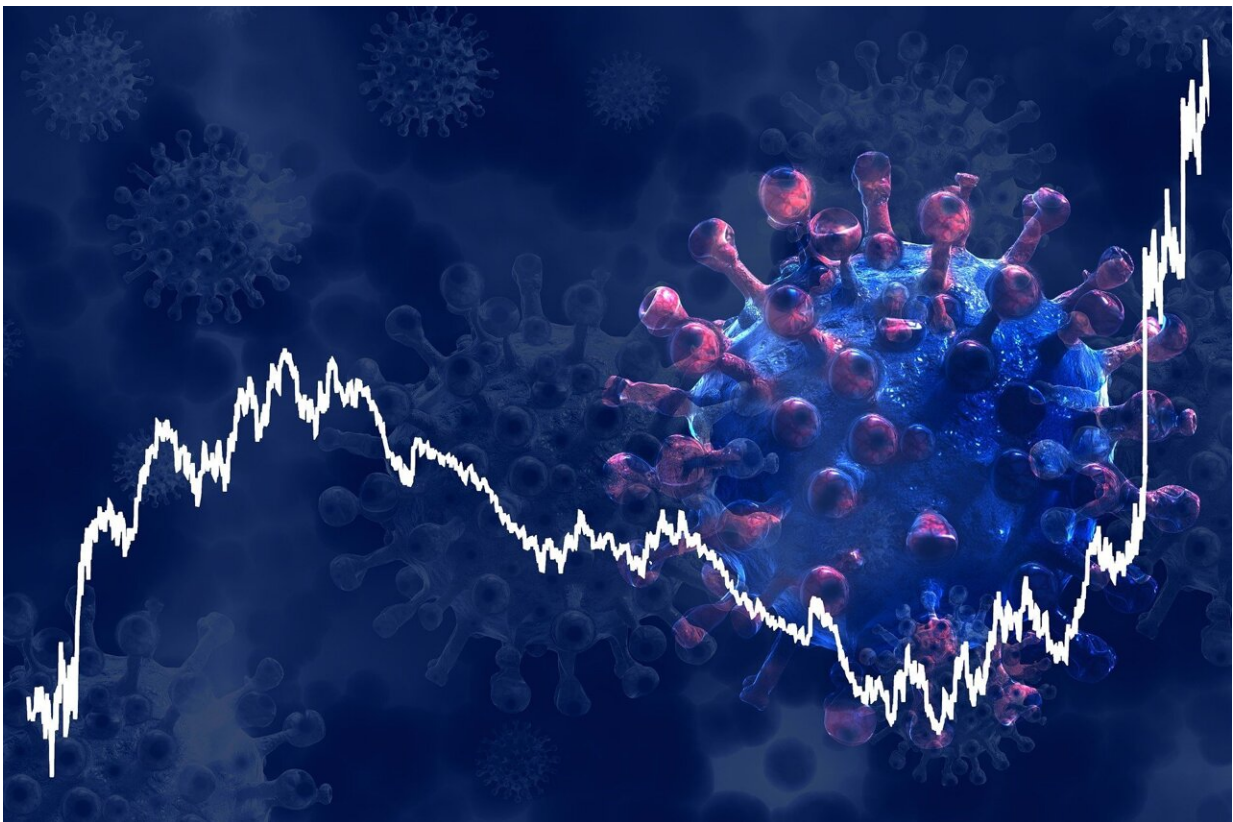


Unique survey tool closely tracked the pulse of the nation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

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In the early, hectic days of the COVID-19 pandemic, government officials, scientists, researchers and the world at large were scrambling to

understand (and contain) the virus. But some scholars were already turning their attention to how the crisis was affecting nearly every other facet of life, from young people's mental health to students' knowledge retention rates to the economic outlook for small business entrepreneurs.

One tool proved particularly useful for researchers to quickly gather and synthesize data on the pandemic: the [Understanding America Study](#) (UAS), based at the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

The study comprises numerous surveys assessing [public attitudes](#) on a wide variety of topics, including health, work and finances, cognitive ability, physical activity and dietary habits, personality, and religion.

UAS comprises an internet panel of households created and managed by CESR to provide a flexible resource for researchers to quickly field timely surveys to the public. The panel totals about 10,000 people and provides a representative sample of adults in the nation. Statistical adjustments are provided to align the sample with the country's population in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, education and geographic region.

"Respondents are invited by sending them letters through the U.S. mail and providing them with a computer tablet and free internet access if needed," says Arie Kapteyn, CESR director and professor (research) of economics at USC Dornsife. "This avoids the biases of most popular internet surveys, which systematically miss the part of the population that has no internet access."

Surveys gather data on the COVID-19 pandemic's effects

Shortly after the nation's pandemic lockdown began, CESR researchers began using UAS to assess the effects of the crisis in real time.

"We started administering surveys to parents asking about their children's educational experiences by the end of March 2020. We were very fast but always careful about what we were asking and how we were asking it from the very beginning, which gave us high-quality data," says Anna Saavedra, a research scientist at CESR.

Saavedra says that the longevity and scope of the UAS—the study was first launched in 2014, and dozens of surveys are ongoing at any given point in time—and its robust relationships with participating households are two key elements that made it a good tool for quickly gathering COVID-related data.

Marco Angrisani, assistant professor (research) of economics and one of the original developers of the UAS, adds that the survey was also designed to be "flexible" to allow for the rapid development and dissemination of new questions and topics, and has always worked to incorporate new technologies, such as apps, Fitbits and air pollution devices, that allow data to be gathered quickly.

"We aimed to make the surveys kind of fun and easy to administer, and to allow people to respond at their own pace—things that were really different from what other national studies were doing," Angrisani says.

Program provides 'warp speed' studies

UAS surveys are developed not only by USC faculty but also by researchers at other institutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many turned to the UAS to gather near real-time data on how the virus was affecting various facets of life.

[One study](#), conducted by scholars in Florida, Michigan and France, and cited last fall in a [New York Times article](#), assessed the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of people younger than 30. [Another](#), by a Spanish researcher, looked at gender differences in the risk perception of COVID-19. And The Wall Street Journal [recently cited](#) UAS data in an opinion piece.

Felix Kabo, formerly a member of the research faculty at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and now the research director at CannonDesign, helped design a UAS survey on how pandemic-related government aid was distributed to Black-owned versus non-Black-owned businesses. He says he had been designing research on entrepreneurship before the pandemic, but the structure of the UAS allowed him to quickly pivot to looking at how the crisis was affecting businesses in real time.

"We realized very quickly that COVID was doing a number on small businesses and entrepreneurs, and we wanted to collect data on how it was affecting them in 2020; we didn't want to wait until 2021 or later," he says. "This is where the flexibility of the UAS really came into play for us because we were able to design an instrument in a month or two, and they were able to code it within a matter of a week or two. And by May or June 2020, we had our COVID-specific survey out in the field, gathering data. This may not sound like much, but it's like warp speed in study years."

Understanding America Study is made to make a difference

Because UAS data are publicly available, they are often consulted by researchers, [government officials](#), private businesses and others. Saavedra says that one of her studies, about children's academic

achievement during the 2020–21 school year, was cited in correspondence between several U.S. Senators and former Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Another, regarding the effect of COVID on classroom learning, was cited by Orange County officials when they were trying to figure out an education plan for local students.

Now that the initial shock of the pandemic has passed, Saavedra adds, UAS studies are following long-term trends to gauge the crisis' more lasting effects on mental health, learning and other educational aspects.

"We have asked a number of times about children's participation in interventions designed to help mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, like tutoring, summer school, mental health supports. And that work has gotten a lot of attention because it's policy relevant—there's \$122 billion in American rescue plan spending, and a lot of it's being spent on these interventions," Saavedra says.

Angrisani adds that one of the core strengths of UAS is how accessible it is to a diversity of users. "Being able to connect with different spheres is important to what we want to do," he says, and it enables the [survey](#) to make a difference in the larger world beyond academia.

Provided by University of Southern California

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