

# News & Updates

from the Texas Research-to-Policy Collaboration Project



September 2020

## Resource Reminders

The TX RPC Project Team wants to remind you that all of our resources are available on our website. We hope these resources are valuable to your respective office.

- [Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living Webinars \(includes COVID-19 specific webinars\)](#)
- [Resources for Improving Measurable Impact](#)
- [TX RPC Newsletters Archive](#)
- [Texas Legislative Bill Tracker](#)
- [Texas Child Health Status Report and Toolkit](#)

## Highlights from TX RPC Members Conducting COVID-19 Research

### COVID-19 Impact of Working from Home on Mental Health

Scott D. Lane, PhD - UTHealth McGovern Medical School

Elizabeth Gershoff, PhD - The University of Texas at Austin

Following the March 13, 2020 U.S. national emergency declaration concerning COVID-19, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued stay-at-home orders to slow and contain the spread of the coronavirus on March 20, 2020. As a result of physical distancing, large numbers of non-essential employees have started working from home. Individuals working and sheltering at home for extended periods face challenges of social isolation and loneliness, which can result in increased risks of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance use.

#### Key Takeaways:

- In April 2020, nearly half of U.S. adults (45%) reported anxiety, fear, and stress compared to 33% in 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Severe economic uncertainty resulting from decreased work hours, furloughs, and unemployment has increased the risk of mental health issues and substance use disorders.
- An April 2020 poll about COVID-19 and mental health found that:
  - 52% of Americans feared job loss,
  - 45% worried about income loss due to workplace closure or reduced hours, and
  - 59% worried about long-term negative impacts on their investments.

[DOWNLOAD THE BRIEF](#)

### Considerations for Reopening K-12 Schools During COVID-19

Steven Kelder, PhD, MPH - UTHealth School of Public Health in Austin

Shreela Sharma, PhD, RD, LD - UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston

Deanna Hoelscher, PhD, RDN, LD, CNS, FISBNPA - UTHealth School of

In response to COVID-19, most K-12 schools cancelled in-person classes starting in mid-March. On March 19, 2020, Governor Abbott issued an executive order closing all Texas schools; schools completed the 2019-2020 school year through remote learning. In July, the Texas Education Agency released school reopening guidance that included flexibility at the local level to delay start dates and optional online-only delivery for the first several weeks of the 2020-2021 academic year.

### Key Takeaways:

- School administrators and staff, parents, policy makers, and public health professionals are concerned about the unknown health consequences of resuming in-person instruction at the start of 2020-21 school year.
- Distance learning creates practical and economic challenges for parents, as working parents, particularly essential workers, need to either miss work or find childcare alternatives when schools are closed for in-person instruction.
- The benefits of in-person instruction are significant, however, reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic may result in serious health consequences for school staff, students, and families.

[DOWNLOAD THE BRIEF](#)

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## Absent widespread testing, Texas schools have limited tools to prevent coronavirus spread

Diana Cervantes, DrPH, MPH - University of North Texas Health Science Center

Texas RPC Network Member, Dr. Cervantes, was quoted in a *Texas Tribune* article about the challenge for school administrators in preventing large-scale coronavirus outbreaks.

### Key Takeaways:

- Administrators will face the challenge of keeping coronavirus cases from growing into outbreaks that force school shutdowns and spark community hot spots.
- Mitigation measures is the best strategy: mask-wearing, hand-washing, keeping students in isolated cohorts, ensuring proper ventilation and holding class outside whenever possible.

[READ THE ARTICLE](#)

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## Determining Rates of COVID-19 Community Spread with Antigen & PCR Tests

Catherine Troisi, PhD, MS - UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston

Texas RPC Network Member, Dr. Troisi, was quoted in a *Houston Chronicle* article about the importance of using both antigen and PCR tests and data to determine the rate of COVID-19 spread within a community.

### Key Takeaways:

- The number of both kinds of tests should be reported publicly to give people a better idea of what is happening in the community.
- Data gaps worry lawmakers, hospital administrators and emergency responders who are on the front lines of the outbreak.
- Without better data, the state cannot communicate a clear picture of the pandemic's scope to the public.

READ THE ARTICLE

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## Decline of COVID-19 Testing in Texas and Reopening Schools

Catherine Troisi, PhD, MS - UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston

Texas RPC Network Member, Dr. Troisi, was quoted in a *Texas Tribune* article about a decline in COVID-19 testing in Texas and the reopening of schools.

### Key Takeaways:

- Opening schools is complicated and the best we can do is get the number of cases down in the community so children can go back to school safely.
- The biggest concern with children going back to school is that they might become infected and bring COVID-19 home, spreading the virus to their families, community, and teachers.
- The worst thing would be for schools to open, then close due to the unpredictability of COVID-19 spread. We need to consider cost and the feasibility closing and reopening schools.

READ THE ARTICLE

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## Non-Medical Masks in Reducing the Spread of COVID-19

Katelyn K. Jetelina, PhD, MPH - UTHealth School of Public Health in Dallas

Texas RPC Network Member, Dr. Jetelina was interviewed by KTRK-TV Channel 13 about which types of non-medical masks are best at reducing the spread of COVID-19 as students return to classrooms this fall.

### Key Takeaways:

- Make sure your mask is a tight fit and has 3 layers like a surgical mask or cloth mask.
- Bandanas, ski masks, and neck gaiters do not offer enough protective layers
- We're not going for comfort of the mask, we're going for preventing community spread of COVID-19.
- Keep mask on while talking, sneezing, or coughing.

WATCH THE SHORT CLIP

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## Understanding Risk Levels of School Activities

Katelyn K. Jetelina, PhD, MPH - UTHealth School of Public Health in Dallas

Texas RPC Network Member, Dr. Jetelina was also interviewed by [\*\*KHOU-TV Channel 11\*\*](#) about which school activities carry a higher risk of transmitting COVID-19. The story was also shared on [\*\*KHOU.com\*\*](#).

### Key Takeaways:

- Review the K-12 School Relative Risk Index that is designed by COVID-19 experts from COVID-19 RECoVERY Consulting
- The handout includes color coding low-to-high activities from transportation to and from school, routine classwork, lunchtime, arts & humanities and recess & athletics
- For helping children understand the categories, you can print out the handout and keep it in your child's backpack.

WATCH THE SHORT CLIP

DOWNLOAD THE K-12 SCHOOL RELATIVE RISK INDEX HANDOUT

## About the TX RPC Project

The Texas Research-to-Policy Collaboration (Texas RPC) project is a non-partisan network that aims to bridge research and policy by supporting partnerships between child health researchers and policymakers.

[Learn more online.](#)

The Texas Research-to-Policy Collaboration Project team and overall network are available to support Texas policymakers with informational requests or resources related to health topics, during the interim and throughout the 2021 Legislative Session.

## Contact Us

For more information, email [TXRPCNetwork@uth.tmc.edu](mailto:TXRPCNetwork@uth.tmc.edu).

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