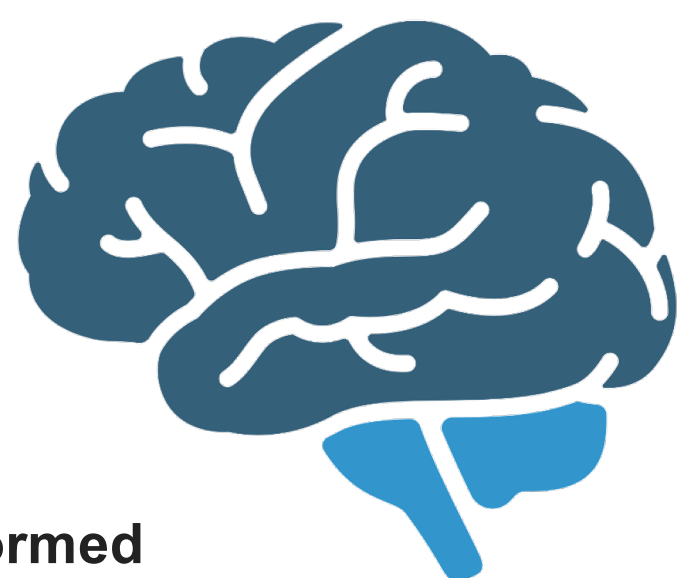# Prioritizing Participant Safety in Mental Health Research Involving Marginalized Groups: A Synthesis & Appraisal of Trauma- & Violence-Informed Methods & Procedures

Brianna Jackson MScN, RN, CPMHN(C) [1] & Lois S. Sadler PhD, RN, FAAN [1,2]

[1] Yale School of Nursing | [2] Yale Child Study Center

BACKGROUND

- Experiences of trauma & violence are linked to long-term **negative health outcomes**
- **Measurement & evaluation** of mental health & trauma-related constructs are necessary to:
  - **Predict & track** harmful effects of traumatic exposure
  - **Amplify voices** of hard-to-reach populations
  - Support development of trauma- & violence-informed **therapeutic interventions** (clinical & social)
- But recollection & introspection during study participation can be **re-traumatizing** & lead to **acute emotional distress**
- This increases **participant burden** & can pose a risk to physical & psychological safety in severe cases
- Higher rates of mental health-related adverse events in research with **marginalized populations**
- **Ethical dilemma**: How do we advance the science in this field while upholding our responsibility to **minimize harm**?
- Purpose: Synthesize **trauma- & violence-informed** research methods & identify best practices for participants belonging to high-risk groups
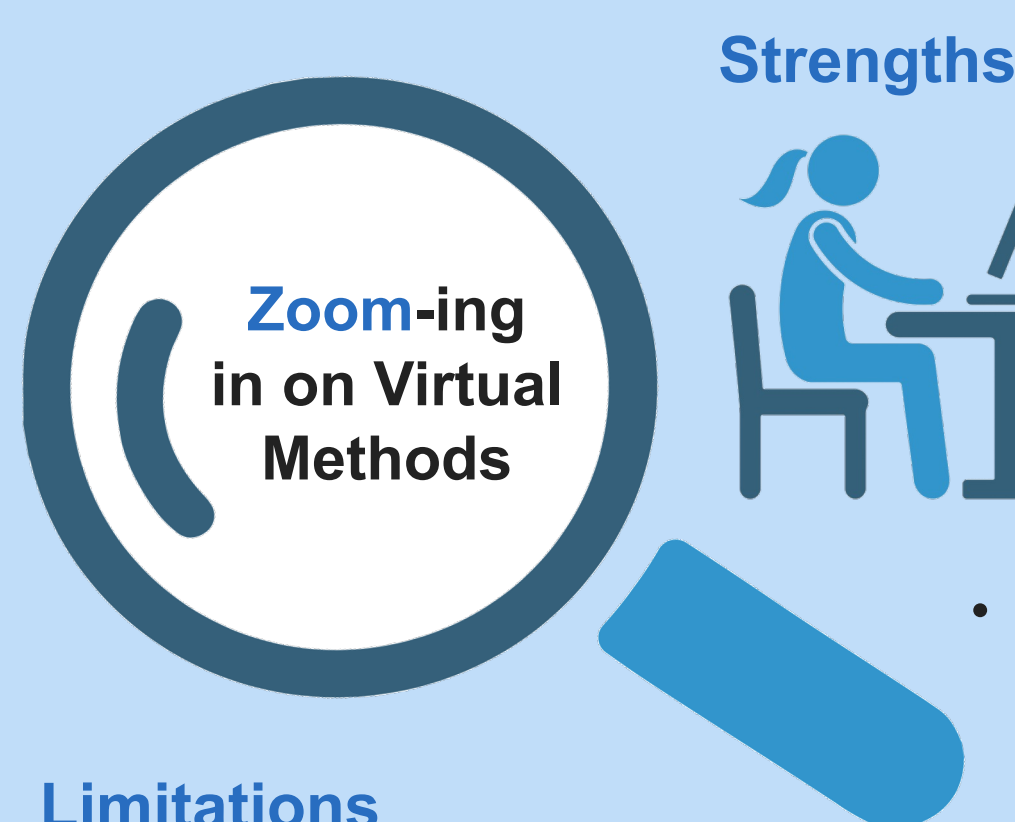
METHODS

- Broad search of inter-professional mental health literature since 2017, across 5 databases
- Lack of standardized terminology necessitated multi-level, structured search that retrieved 300+ unique records
- Search terms grouped into 6 categories:

Methods	Ethics	Safety	Mental Health	High Risk Group	Young Adults

- 25 articles purposively selected to maximize diversity (design, location, discipline, population)
- Inclusion also based on comprehensiveness of methods & ethics sections
- Narrative review revealed varied risk reduction strategies

FINDINGS

Procedural Safeguards

- Algorithms to determine risk level, based on mental health symptom severity & frequency
  - Implemented as a flow chart/decision tree or programmed into electronic surveys
  - Scoring cut-points for validated risk assessment instruments
  - Immediate scoring to ensure timely & tailored response
- Electronic push notifications prompting participants to take breaks or access relevant resources
- Continuous monitoring of survey progress & regular 'check-ins' by phone or email
- Safety planning & formal referrals as necessary

Educational Resources

- Informational guides with relevant facts & figures, references & self-care strategies
- 'Homework' activities exploring mood fluctuations, personal triggers, coping skills & social supports
- Contact information for local or online support services

Zoom-ing in on Virtual Methods

Strengths
- Enhanced flexibility, portability & accessibility
- Reduced functional demands (e.g. time & finances)
- Allows widespread recruitment & diverse sampling
- Sense of comfort, safety & control associated with home environment or private space

Limitations
- Requires HIPAA-compliant video & messaging platforms to prevent data security breach
- Assumes safe environment & access to technology
- Physical distance & asynchrony limit crisis response strategies & timeliness of support

CASE EXEMPLAR

Dissertation Study Protocol

Context: Virtual interview & online survey with emerging adults (18-25) who have aged out of foster care in Canada

- Past & present adversities (at least 1 ACE) necessitate many trauma- & violence-informed research approaches

Information Power Sampling		Virtual Data Collection	
	Self-Paced Questionnaire		Pilot-Testing Study Materials
Fair Financial Compensation		Location-Based Resource List	
	Respectful Recruitment Practices		Thoughtful Instrument Selection

DISCUSSION

- **Marginalized populations** more likely to have experienced trauma & violence
- Also disproportionately represented in psychiatric research due to high rates of **mental health challenges**
- **Young people** more prone to acute emotional distress in response to research participation
- Opportunities for more robust evidence-based **safety protocols** in mental health research
- Multi-pronged approach, featuring **risk prevention, mitigation & emergency response strategies**
- Develop protocols in **collaboration** with IRBs, the target population, community partners & clinical experts
- Prioritize **participant autonomy** throughout research process

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Scan QR code to view reference list & supplementary materials

For more information, please contact the author at 203-415-3898 or brianna.jackson@yale.edu

Yale SCHOOL OF NURSING