

OCTOBER 2021

# VUSNAPS WAVE 1 UPDATE

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COMMUNITY RESEARCH SUMMARY



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# Thank you!

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Dear VUSNAPS Participants,

Thank you for trusting us with your information, experiences, and opinions. We are thrilled to let you know that Wave 1 was successfully fully enrolled by the end of September 2021!

It has not been the year and half many of us imagined, including here at VUSNAPS. We have had to be relentlessly creative to ensure that the study information was reaching people who might be eligible, including partnering with groups and organizations in our communities, having live events on social media, and safely attending Black Pride in Atlanta in 2021. We've also already learned so much! Of particular note, back in May 2020, we used the information that our first several hundred participants provided to help state and local governments and community organizations better serve the needs of people in the study during the COVID pandemic.

Since then, we've only expanded. We have two new associated studies - the VUSNAPS BioAge study and the VUSNAPS Tasso Biomarker Pilot Study. There are details about both of those studies in the sections below and on our website. We also have several researchers at Vanderbilt University, the University of Texas, Austin, the University of California, Los Angeles, and Dartmouth College now working with the data you have provided in Wave 1 of the study. Read more about some exciting new studies looking at how social networks shape people's experiences, how affirming medical care can shape health and health experiences for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and more!

We are so grateful for your participation. We look forward to finding out how you've been in Wave 2 soon.

Warmly,



Vanderbilt University

# About



The Vanderbilt University Social Networks, Aging, and Policy Study (VUSNAPS) is a longitudinal study of health, aging, and social networks among older LGBTQ+ adults who are 50 to 76 years old and reside in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The study includes three waves over four years. VUSNAPS is funded by the National Institute on Aging and led by Dr. Tara McKay at Vanderbilt University.

The VUSNAPS survey collects a variety of self-reported measures of health and aging including self-rated health, chronic disease diagnoses, activity and mobility limitations, mental health, recent hospitalizations, sleep quality, and health risk behaviors (i.e. smoking). Researchers hope to link these outcomes to social network characteristics and change over time to better identify sources of stress and resilience for LGBTQ+ populations. Unlike some other studies, VUSNAPS is comprised entirely of LGBTQ+ people to better understand our own communities and more fully represent differences in experience, health, and aging trajectories across our many identities and life trajectories.

## What to Expect in Wave 2

We are releasing the second survey for VUSNAPS participants on a timed schedule consistent with when participants completed the first survey beginning in November 2021. Please be on the look out for a VUSNAPS email to update your contact information! For wave 2, we'll be asking many of the same questions to see what kinds of things change for participants over time. We'll also have some new questions about medical care experiences, political engagement, and early life experiences. You can learn more about how researchers are using this information in the "New Studies" section below.

## COVID-19 Economic Impacts



From the beginning, researchers expected that COVID-19 had potential to disproportionately harm those who were already economically and socially vulnerable. Although many Americans had only minor job or wage impacts, LGBTQ Americans have reported higher rates of job loss and wage reduction across several national surveys.

We used the information provided in VUSNAPS to help policymakers and local organizations contextualize what was going on for LGBTQ+ adults in the South with quotes like these:

**"At 60+ years old, [I was] told I should stay home as much as possible. I am not working as a result. Other than taking long walks, I only go to the grocery once a week & pickup restaurant food twice a week."**

**"[The unemployment office] is just backed up getting everyone's payments processed. Any day [my partner] should be getting a direct deposit for one lump sum of three-months of payments. Meanwhile, we're behind on bills and getting some groceries from a local food pantry."**

## COVID-19 Family Impacts



VUSNAPS participants have also experienced new family stressors, as some are feeling isolated at home or are newly taking care of aging parents and others in their communities during the epidemic. Some participants explained:

**"I'm hunkered down, living with my mother. As it turns out, our points of view/politics are now diametrically opposed -- and she likes picking politically-based fights. Saying that I've been "brainwashed" by living in California. My sister has sided with my mother recently. This has been deeply distressing and has fundamentally changed the way I will look at my family moving forward."**

**"As retirees and 35 years together, [my spouse and I] do get on each other's nerves and in each other's way. Without the major "disruptions" and creation of new shared experiences that traveling gives us, we are both feeling stretched."**

## Social and Community Impacts

*"My busy social life went to zero. I no longer eat out, socialize away from home, attend church (it's closed), or go shopping."*

Many in our communities are experiencing high levels of stress, isolation, and disruption of their social support networks. Although this is true for nonLGBTQ folks as well, some LGBTQ adults were already more likely to be feeling this way before the pandemic began. VUSNAPS participants noted the many ways that the loss of particular sites of community and socialization were affecting them, and highlighted a few ways they were making it through.

Here are some of the things participants mentioned:

**"The school library where I worked closed public operations due to the virus. That was the one place in my life I was fully out and fully accepted. These things have greatly reduced my joy in life."**

**"I also fear for my church. We are small in number, do not currently have a pastor (and cannot afford to hire a qualified one any time soon -- it might take us years to get to the point where we'd be able to afford it). I worry that we won't really survive this."**

**"I have mourned the loss of being able to rehearse and sing with my friends in my community chorus. I also mourn not being able to worship with my church family in person."**

## COVID-19 Vaccination

**Participants interviewed over the summer saw some of the burdens lifted with access to COVID-19 vaccines.**

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Nationally, 90% of LGB adults ages 50 to 76 have received at least 1 dose of the vaccine as of late October, according to the US Census Household Pulse Survey. Access to vaccines helped many people in VUSNAPS feel safer about reconnecting with family, friends, and others.

**“The year of isolation started to end in the past couple weeks. I touched relatives for the first time in more than a year.”**

**“In the last few months [my partner] and I have been vaccinated and we are gradually being able to get out and reconnect with our social network. The pandemic was hard on us so this has been a positive development.”**

**“I got vaccinated so I feel much safer getting out and away from my residence which has been extremely isolating!”**



# New VUSNAPS Studies



## We are thrilled to tell you about several new studies associated with VUSNAPS!

Over the last two years, we at VUSNAPS have been looking for ways to expand access to the most cutting edge research in health and aging. We have been awarded funding for two additional studies that VUSNAPS survey participants can chose to participate in.

We also have researchers actively putting together data from the first survey to study a range of different outcomes, including affirming care, U=U, political networks and health, and more.

In the next few pages, you can read about these studies and their implications.

# New VUSNAPS Studies

## VUSNAPS BioAge Study



About half of VUSNAPS participants have chosen to participate in the BioAge study! Thank you to those who have chosen to participate.

By sampling the DNA from cheek swabs, we will be able to compare a person's *biological* age to their *calendar* age. This is an important new area in aging research and will help us link life experiences and social supports to how people are aging at the cellular level.

## VUSNAPS Tasso Biomarker Pilot Study



Over the next few months, we will be providing a subset of VUSNAPS participants with additional information about our new Tasso Biomarker Pilot Study.

This is an exciting opportunity to get involved in cutting edge research to test the acceptability of a new, one-time, **needle-free**, self-administered blood sample using a device called a "Tasso button". The Tasso button passively collects a blood sample over about 15 minutes pain-free.

After wearing the Tasso button on your arm for 15 minutes, participants who chose to be a part of the Tasso Biomarker Pilot Study will return the samples in the pre-paid mailer included in the sample collection kit. The sample collection kit includes instructions for how to use the Tasso button as well as return mailing materials.

As a thank you for your participation, you will receive \$50 and the results of a COVID antibody test performed using the sample.



## Affirming Care and U=U



One of the most significant innovations in HIV prevention in the last two decades has been the use of HIV treatment to prevent HIV transmission. This information has been disseminated to affected communities and individuals as the “Undetectable = Untransmittable” (U=U) message.

Despite mounting scientific evidence of effectiveness, support for and understanding of the U=U message remains limited in many affected communities.

VUSNAPS researchers have found that having and LGBTQ affirming care provider improves understanding and support for U=U among both HIV-positive and HIV-negative older adult men in the US South.

## Aging and Behavior



Gender and sexuality affect how middle-age and older LGBTQ+ people evaluate their health as they age.

As an illustration, cisgender women and transgender/nonbinary participants in VUSNAPS report more negative predictions about their future health than cisgender men.

However, transgender and nonbinary participants in VUSNAPS report more positive views of their physical changes over the last five years than cisgender men.

Overall, sexual and gender minorities may have different evaluations of their own aging, and thus may experience different physical and mental health outcomes, compared with cisgender heterosexual adults.

## Social Networks and Politics



A previous version of VUSNAPS, called the UC Berkeley Social Networks Study, or UCNets, collected data from 2015 to 2018 in the San Francisco Bay Area from 660 randomly sampled older adults and an additional 310 LGBTQ+ older adults.

Interestingly, the timing of the UCNets study allows researchers to see how people's social networks changed before and after the 2016 Presidential Election.

Researchers are especially interested in whether people continued to talk to and spend time with people who didn't share their political views during this polarizing election.

They find that nonkin who hold different political views are more likely to not appear in people's networks after the 2016 election. We also found that LGBTQ+ older adults are more likely to no longer have social ties to people who don't share their political views after the election.

## Political Engagement among Older LGBTQ+ Adults in the US South



In this study, researchers are interested in better understanding how lifetime and recent exposure to violence and discrimination, as well as social connectedness, might affect political participation among older LGBTQ+ adults.

LGBTQ+ populations disproportionately experience violence and discrimination over the course of their lives compared with heterosexual populations in the US.

For some, engagement in politics and activism may lead to positive growth following these negative life experiences. Researchers are expanding measures in Wave 2 to look more closely at the life experiences of VUSNAPS participants and their political engagement over time and across multiple domains.