



Dr. Richard J. Hodes
Director
National Institute on Aging
31 Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892

On behalf of the over 3,000 members of the Population Association of America (PAA) and more than 40 population research centers nationwide comprising the Association of Population Centers (APC), we are writing to comment on the National Institute on Aging (NIA) draft strategic plan, *Aging Well in the 21st Century: Strategic Directions for Research on Aging*. We appreciate the opportunity to share our views regarding this important document.

The population sciences are indebted to the NIA for supporting groundbreaking demographic research programs and surveys, including the Centers on the Demography and Economics of Aging, Roybal Centers for Translational Research, Health and Retirement Study, and National Health and Aging Trends Study. These resources have shaped contemporary research on the demographics and economics of aging, generating numerous basic and applied scientific findings and providing scientists with accessible data and research training tools. We are pleased that the draft strategic plan expresses the Institute's intention to continue investing in resources necessary to support and propel the population aging research field. Further, we are pleased that the plan expresses support for interdisciplinary research overall, recognizing that "aging is a not a single process, but rather an intricate web of interdependent genetic, biochemical, physiological, economic, social, and psychological factors, some of which are better understood than others."

While most of the plan's six goals mention areas and issues important to the population sciences, our comments address three specific goals.

Goal B: *Better understand the effects of behavioral, psychological, and social factors in aging, including the mechanisms and pathways through which these factors exert their effects at both the individual and societal levels.*

In particular, we support Goal B-2, *Illuminate the pathways by which social, psychological, economic, and behavioral factors affect health in middle-aged and older adults*. This section explicitly states the need for research on the "pathways through which genes, environments, and behavior interact." We recommend expanding the section to include a more explicit statement about the value of ongoing, NIA-funded, large-scale surveys, which are collecting data necessary to achieve this goal. We applaud the goal's commitment "to identify important biomarkers that are linked to aging-relevant social and behavioral phenomena, including the integration of neuroimaging data in large-scale surveys and laboratory-based studies with representative samples."

In addition, we support Goal B-5, *Identify, analyze, and track changing patterns of disability and mortality for older adults and better understand factors contributing to these patterns*. This goal appropriately states the value of longitudinal research, particularly to “understand the determinants of onset, severity, and recovery from disabling conditions.”

Goal E Improve our understanding of the consequences of an aging society to inform intervention development and policy decisions.

We are very pleased this section states the Institute’s intention to continue supporting “research on the social, economic, and demographic consequences of the aging population in the United States and other countries. We will support research to better understand the impact of the changing age composition of the population and economic factors across the lifespan that affect health and well-being.” Specifically, we enthusiastically endorse goals E-1 and E-2. Both of these goals address the rationale for continued investment in social, demographic, and economic research in order to understand how these factors affect health and well-being in older adults. Goal E-1 emphasizes the need for research on the “evolution of the American family structure” and the role that it plays in affecting the well-being of older people. We hope NIA will commit to working with other NIH Institutes and Centers and federal agencies to promote this research so that we may improve our understanding of the changing American family and its implications for individuals and society alike.

Goal F: Understand health differences and develop strategies to improve the health status of older adults in diverse populations.

Under Goal F-1, we commend NIA for committing to “support and expand surveys of health disparity populations in order to provide the data needed by researchers and public policy makers, including cross-national, comparative, and historic research. We will provide access to these and related data for use in health disparities research and to inform policy development.” We are pleased that this section articulates a comprehensive strategy that includes support for social, economic, and demographic research to further understanding of the underlying causes of health disparities.

Once again, thank you for providing us with the opportunity to comment on the Institute’s strategic plan. We look forward to our continued partnership, working with you to achieve the plan’s ambitious scientific objectives.

Sincerely,



Robert Moffitt
2014 PAA President



Lisa Berkman
2014-2016 APC President

Office of Government and Public Affairs | 1701 K Street, Suite 1150 | Washington, DC 20006 | www.populationassociation.org

Mary Jo Hoeksema, M.P.A., *Director Government and Public Affairs* | www.popcenters.org | paaapc@crosslink.net | 202.341.7283