

Population Association of America Association of Population Centers

Office of Government and Public Affairs

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July 7, 2016

Dr. William Riley
Director
Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences
National Institutes of Health
Building 31, Room B1C19
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

Sent via email: wiriley@mail.nih.gov

Dear Dr. Riley,

On behalf of the Population Association of America (www.populationassociation.org) and Association of Population Centers (www.popcenters.org), we are pleased to provide comments on *Healthier Lives Through Behavioral and Social Sciences Research: A Strategic Plan for the National Institutes of Health's Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research*. The plan is an ambitious document that will guide the Office, as well as the behavioral and social science research community, over the next five years. Therefore, we appreciate the opportunity to review the document and to consider the potential long-term ramifications of its recommendations and priorities.

As you know, the PAA and APC are two affiliated organizations that together represent over 3,000 behavioral and social scientists, including demographers, sociologists, and economists, and over 40 federally-funded population research centers nationwide. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is the primary source of discretionary federal funding, supporting research and research training activities across the population sciences. OBSSR is a key source of support for the population sciences, co-funding trans-Institute initiatives, centers, and surveys as well as stimulating and sustaining new interdisciplinary scientific research directions.

Given the research expertise and interests of PAA members, our comments focus on two of the plan's three major priorities.

Priority #1--Improve the synergy of basic and applied behavioral and social sciences research.

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We are pleased OBSSR makes explicit a focus on health at the population level in the plan, reinforcing that healthy development is central to this section. However, we believe this section of the plan could be strengthened by addressing more broadly "environmental" influences on health, including social, cultural, economic, policy, and physical environments. Broadening this section will clarify OBSSR support for a broader spectrum of research that is consistent with the NIH mission, "...to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability."

Priority #2--Enhance the methods, measures, and data infrastructure approaches that encourage a more cumulative and integrated approach to behavioral and social science.

NIH-funded, large-scale longitudinal surveys are accessible, invaluable resources that population scientists rely on to inform their own research and research training activities. Prime examples of such studies are the Health and Retirement Study, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, and Fragile Families and Child Well Being. Past OBSSR support of these and other large-scale, longitudinal surveys has been imperative. Thus, we urge OBSSR to clarify its ongoing commitment to large-scale longitudinal surveys as well as other novel data infrastructure approaches. We agree that is important for OBSSR to "facilitate data sharing, linkage, and integration across existing datasets." It is equally important for the office to invest in longitudinal surveys so that the field can continue to deliver data that can address the determinants of health over the life course.

Once again, thank you for this important opportunity to review and comment on the draft OBSSR strategic plan. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff to realize the plan's bold goals and objectives.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Judith A. Seltzer in black ink.

Judith A. Seltzer
President, Population Association of America

Handwritten signature of Lisa Berkman in black ink.

Lisa Berkman
President, Association of Population Centers