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March 31, 2021

The National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

[Sent via NIH submission site](#)

To whom it may concern:

On behalf of the [Population Association of America](#) (PAA) and Association of Population Centers, we are pleased to submit comments in response to National Institutes of Health (NIH) Request for Information (RFI) (NOT-OD-21-066), “Inviting Comments and Suggestions to Advance and Strengthen Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Biomedical Research Workforce and Advance Health Disparities and Health Equity Research.”

PAA and APC are two affiliated scientific societies that together represent over 3,000 social and behavioral scientists, including demographers, sociologists, and economists who conduct research on the causes and consequences of population change, and the over 40 federally supported population research centers nationwide. Population scientists, working in applied and academic sectors, conduct research on a wide range of topics, such as mortality, morbidity, fertility, adolescent health, aging, population forecasting, immigration, and family dynamics. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is the largest source of discretionary, competitive grant funding supporting population research and research training activities.

Given the significant role the NIH plays in supporting our field, PAA and APC have an intrinsic interest in the NIH UNITE initiative and are pleased to share our comments. Our comments largely focus on two areas: 1) encouraging the NIH to promote more research on health disparities and, 2) expanding support for training mechanisms and infrastructure grants, such as center awards, which support the careers of URM early-stage investigators by making resources and mentoring opportunities more widely available. The former cannot be well accomplished without the required investments in the latter.

We applaud the NIH for proactively addressing the structural racism that permeates the scientific research community. Recognizing the challenges within our own field, in 2019, the PAA established a task force to develop and support opportunities for BIPOC demographers to gather and interact with senior scholars; provide mentoring opportunities; ensure diversity in PAA’s governance and programming; and to incorporate issues of interest into the PAA Annual Meeting. The task force, which has since been formalized within the PAA governance structure as the PAA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

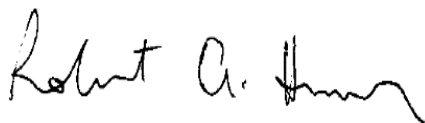
Committee, has provided an ongoing forum for educating our members and developing initiatives to ensure greater opportunities for population scientists regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, socioeconomic status, nationality, ability, and sexual orientation.

The PAA and APC urges NIH to take a similar approach by looking introspectively at what steps the agency can take within its scope and mission to address structural racism. The current public health crisis has illuminated the role that structural racism plays in health and developmental outcomes. As the nation's leading biomedical, behavioral, and social science research agency, we urge NIH to prioritize funding for research on health disparities and to advance research on the influence of social determinants on health and wellbeing. Our organizations urge the NIH to encourage all Institutes and Centers to invest in a broad spectrum of research to further understanding of how factors, such as socioeconomic status, social environments, gender, race, ethnicity, and education, affect human health and development. It is also critical to focus on the intersections of these statuses, rather than assuming that these are distinct dimensions that each play an independent role on health and wellbeing.

In addition, PAA and APC urge NIH, as part of the UNITE initiative, to expand research training opportunities. We believe strongly that progress on long-standing inequalities in health by race will only occur if the agency expands programs dedicated to training diverse cohorts of scientists who work on issues of racism, discrimination, and health. Increasing resources for training of researchers from diverse backgrounds not only increases equity and representation among the scientific community, but it also increases the rigor, creativity and diversity of research programs and findings. Further, these scientists should be grounded in social and health policy rather than medical research, exclusively, because health outcomes are produced by the interaction of social and biological processes. Some concrete mechanisms that NIH currently supports, and could be expanded to achieve this goal, include the NIA [Resource Centers on Minority Aging Research](#) and R15 Research Enhancement Awards.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. Please do not hesitate to contact us if our organizations can be of further assistance as the NIH implements the UNITE initiative and seeks to strengthen equity, diversity, and inclusion in the scientific research workforce.

Sincerely,



Dr. Robert A. Hummer
President
Population Association of America



Dr. Sara R. Curran
President
Association of Population Centers