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## PAA & APC Comments on the NSF Strategic Plan

On behalf of the Population Association of America (PAA) and the Association of Population Centers (APC) we are pleased to offer comments in response to the review of the NSF strategic plan for 2014-18.

PAA is the premier professional, scientific society for more than 3,000 behavioral and social scientists—including demographers, sociologists, economists, epidemiologists and statisticians—who study the implications of population change. Our members conduct research and train young scientists at U.S. universities and independent research organizations. The APC is composed of approximately 40 federally funded, interdisciplinary population research centers nationwide.

Population research is inherently interdisciplinary, and for this reason we appreciate and endorse the language in Strategic Goal 1: *Transform the Frontiers of Science and Engineering*, which states, “The special role of NSF is to encourage broadly creative efforts that may not fit within those fields that are the domain of specific mission agencies, e.g., energy, defense, health, or agriculture.” In the spirit of this objective we would like to offer two areas of inquiry that we believe merit further investment by the NSF going forward. This is not meant to be an exhaustive or definitive list, but rather brief suggestions on directions for promising areas of research.

### Social Mobility

Research on social and economic mobility in the United States has mushroomed in the social and behavioral sciences in the last five years and has become one of its most important emerging areas. The research is cross-disciplinary and has involved economists, sociologists, political scientists, and others. Among the newest findings in this research are, first, the surprising finding that the U.S. has one of the lowest rates of intergenerational mobility among developed countries—a finding that contradicts our cherished vision of the American Dream. Another finding is that



the rate of intergenerational mobility has not declined in the U.S.; however, this is much in dispute and depends on how mobility is measured. A third finding is that mobility varies tremendously across geographic areas in the U.S., for reasons that are not yet understood; it is thought that segregation and school quality may play a role, although this itself is in dispute. Another emerging hypothesis is that high levels of cross-sectional inequality in a specific area reduce rates of social and economic mobility. There are dozens of unresolved issues in this area of research and conflicting findings that need to be resolved. These questions have direct policy relevance and are of vital importance to American society. They require top scholars to conduct careful and high quality research, research that should be part of NSF's agenda.

**Population Processes/Migration**

We believe that the National Science Foundation should also continue its support for research on population processes, including fertility, mortality and migration, dynamics that shape the current and future characteristics of the U.S. society. For example, today roughly 78 million Americans, representing close to 25% of the U.S. population, are either immigrants or children of immigrants. Understanding the contribution of these immigrants and their descendants to the U.S. economy and society at large requires rigorous scientific research to inform public policy. Together, fertility, mortality and migration have important implications not only for the overall characteristics of the U.S. population, but also for specific sub-populations. These processes are at work in population aging, for example, and thus will determine the size and characteristics of the elderly with consequent implications for Medicare and Social Security.

We very much appreciate the opportunity to offer feedback on the current NSF strategic plan, and thank the NSF for seeking the input of the scientific community. We know that the scientific enterprise as a whole is best served when all scientific disciplines have a voice in setting the agenda, and we believe strongly that social and behavioral sciences hold greater promise than ever before in advancing the progress of interdisciplinary research and, ultimately, in addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing our nation and indeed the globe.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

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