



OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS
1436 Duke Street • Alexandria, VA 22314
www.populationassociation.org • www.popcenters.org • 301-565-6710 x 1006



POPULATION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

President

Dr. Sonalde Desai
University of Maryland

Vice President

Dr. Jennifer Van Hook
Pennsylvania State University

President-Elect

Dr. Lisa Berkman
Harvard University

Vice President-Elect

Dr. James Raymo
Princeton University

Secretary-Treasurer

Dr. Michelle Frisco
Pennsylvania State University

Past President

Dr. Robert Hummer
University of North Carolina-
Chapel Hill

Board of Directors

Dr. Jennifer Barber
Indiana University

Dr. Tyson Brown

Duke University

Dr. Deborah Carr

Boston University

Dr. Elizabeth Cooksey

Ohio State University

Dr. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks

University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Hedwig Lee

Washington University in St. Louis

Dr. M. Giovanna Merli

Duke University

Dr. Jennifer Karas Montez

Syracuse University

Dr. Emilio Parrado

University of Pennsylvania

Dr. Rogelio Saenz

University of Texas at San Antonio

Dr. Christine Schwartz

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dr. Florencia Torche

Stanford University

ASSOCIATION OF POPULATION CENTERS

President

Dr. Sara Curran

University of Washington

Vice President

Dr. William Dow

University of California, Berkeley

Treasurer

Dr. Jennifer Karas Montez

Syracuse University

Secretary

Dr. Jennifer Glick

Pennsylvania State University

November 10, 2022

National Institutes of Health
Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

To whom it may concern:

On behalf of the organizations we lead, the Population Association of America and Association of Population Centers, we are pleased to submit comments in response to “NIH Request for Information (RFI) on the Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research (OBSSR) Strategic Plan 2023-2028 (Notice # NOT-OD-22-211).

Our organizations jointly represent about 3,000 individual population scientists—including demographers, economists, sociologists, and epidemiologists—as well as approximately 40 federally funded interdisciplinary research centers. Population scientists study the individual, societal, and environmental implications of population change—and thus contribute key findings that help inform evidence-based policy making in the public and private sectors. Population research centers facilitate interdisciplinary research on a range of topics including mortality, morbidity, fertility, adolescent health, aging, population forecasting, immigration, labor and workforce policies, family dynamics, and human-environmental interactions. They also train emerging and early career scientists.

The National Institutes of Health is the primary source of competitive, discretionary grant funding supporting the population sciences. To that end, our organizations serve on NIH study sections, working groups, and advisory councils, and provide comments, both formal and informal, on a variety of NIH proposals.

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to this latest request for comments that NIH has issued to inform themes and priorities comprising the OBSSR 2023-2028 strategic plan. Below are our comments on targeted sections.

Scientific Priorities

Scientific Priority 1: Improve the synergy between basic behavioral and social sciences research and research testing approaches to improve health outcomes

Objective 1.1

We believe the use of the term “ecologically valid” requires clarification as to why it is necessary as a qualifier for basic social science research (BSSR). We agree that research should be externally validated. However, we do not believe there is a reason to qualify ‘basic BSSR’ with “ecologically valid,” since “basic BSSR relevant to health” should be valid and scientifically sound.

Within BSSR, what goes unsaid is that what is “ecologically valid” may vary over time and place. Further, understanding how mechanisms of action operate across time and place IS basic science. This means learning about the bidirectional relationships between processes at the individual level and those at the multiple levels of families, social networks, neighborhoods, communities, and geographic and political units, considering multiple dimensions within these places, including, but not limited to, social, economic, and cultural factors.

We suggest two solutions to address our concerns regarding this objective: 1) Re-word Objective 1.1 so it reads: Identify and Encourage Promising Basic Multi-Level BSSR Relevant to Health; and 2) Where appropriate, use the term “multi-level” research (including in the title) to reflect accurately the nature of basic social and behavioral research and its relationship to health research.

Objective 1.2

Given the broad potential impact of basic BSSR, we suggest adding the term “well-being” after “health.”

Scientific Priority 2: Enhance and promote research measures, methods, and infrastructure needed to support an integrated and more cumulative approach to behavioral and social sciences research

Objective 2.1

We encourage OBBSR to expand this objective by adding the word “representative” to help ensure that Office encourages the development of data collection and measurement approaches that are population representative.

Scientific Priority 3: Accelerate sustained adoption of behavioral and social sciences research findings in practice

Objective 3.1

It is important to take “context” into account in intervention and implementation research. However, there should be support for findings from implementation and intervention research to feedback to basic science and discovery to generate new insights. As noted above the effect of context on basic mechanisms is an inherent focus of basic social science research. We encourage OBBSR to recognize that integrating basic research with intervention and implementation science will facilitate two-way feedback and promote enhanced scientific advances.

Cross Cutting Themes

Training and Capacity-Building

We encourage OBSSR to reaffirm its commitment to supporting training in population health that produces scientists able to integrate methods and theory across multiple levels of analysis.

Science of Science

We believe this section could be strengthened by adding the word “integrity” after “quality” in the first sentence. Doing so reinforces this section’s commitment to ensuring NIH supported behavioral and social science research is conducted adhering to the highest standards of rigor, transparency, and veracity.

Thank you for considering our views as the Office works to finalize the themes and priorities in its 2023-2028 strategic plan.

Sincerely,



Dr. Sonalde Desai
President
Population Association of America



Dr. Sara R. Curran
President
Association of Population Centers