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Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human
Development (NICHD)

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Sent via email: NICHDStrategicPlan@nih.gov

To whom it may concern:

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 provide input on the [proposed goals, opportunities, and cross-cutting themes](#) NICHD is considering as part of its draft 2025-2029 strategic plan. We appreciate the opportunity to share our views.

As you may know, PAA and APC are two affiliated organizations that receive federal funding and conduct research on the causes and consequences of population change. Our members, which include demographers, economists, sociologists, and epidemiologists, conduct scientific and applied research, analyze changing demographic, health, and socio-economic trends, and train undergraduate and graduate students. Their research expertise covers a wide range of issues integral to the NICHD mission, including fertility, infant and adolescent health and development, maternal health, health disparities, mortality, disability, and family dynamics.

Since the Institute's inception in 1962, NICHD has had a clear mandate to support a robust population research portfolio. In fact, no other Institute or Center at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has the clear legislative mandate to facilitate research on the implications of population change across the entire lifespan, from birth (indeed, pre-conception) to death. Accordingly, to meet its mandate, over the decades NICHD has supported innovative and influential initiatives, including: 1) large-scale longitudinal surveys, with population representative samples, such as the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement* and the *Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study*; 2) a nationwide network of population science research and training centers; 3) numerous scientific research initiatives that have advanced our understanding of specific diseases and conditions, including obesity, autism, and maternal mortality, and, further, how social, behavioral, and biological factors jointly influence human health; and, 4) research on the obstacles (economic, sociocultural, programmatic) to effective control of reproduction and the

attainment of childbearing goals. The field of population research is indebted to the NICHD for its support. In the final version of the 2025-2029 strategic plan, we hope the Institute will emphasize the significance, history, and role of contributions that the population sciences have made in helping to fulfill the NICHD mission.

In response to the latest RFI, our organizations have several comments on the strategic plan's proposed goals and themes.

Goals

Goal 2: Promoting Gynecologic, Andrologic, and Reproductive Health

We urge the Institute to prioritize linking puberty, and especially menopause, not just to reproductive outcomes and gynecologic conditions, but also to women's health and well-being outcomes more broadly. Recognition of the myriad consequences of perimenopause is growing, but the strategies for mitigating these outcomes are severely under resourced. Perimenopause can adversely affect mental health, physical pain, sleep, and cardiovascular health just to name a few. Women's widely varying experiences of perimenopause present a challenge to researchers studying its ramifications. Attention to perimenopause is overdue. We urge NICHD to recognize this issue by expanding the scope of Goal #2.

Goal 3: Setting the Foundation for Healthy Pregnancies and Lifelong Wellness

Although the Goal points to the importance of addressing health disparities, the salience of racial disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality is obscured. Also, in the current political environment in which the abortion landscape now varies dramatically across states, it would behoove researchers to investigate how this varied landscape shapes maternal (and child) health outcomes. We urge NICHD to embrace a broader vision of future research that will advance our understanding of the complex factors underlying maternal and child health outcomes, especially in at-risk populations.

Goal 4: Improving Child and Adolescent Health and the Transition to Adulthood

Apart from health care, other social institutions in Goal #4, such as the family, are diluted. The goal recognizes that social and environmental factors affect infant, child, and adolescent health and development and more knowledge is necessary to understand how social and environmental factors work. However, more details are needed to ensure the goal's ambitious objectives are achieved.

We believe the goal in the NICHD 2020 Strategic Plan on "understanding typical and atypical child development in contemporary cohorts" (p. 23) is laudable and should be continued in lieu of Goal #4 because it is important, scientifically robust, and directly tied to NICHD's mission. We note, however, there are few comprehensive, reliable, and population-representative data sets to track child development and to support research focused on this aim. Revisions and updates to NICHD's strategic plan should directly address data gaps and

shortcomings that may be hindering work towards this goal and related topics. Data that were promised or available previously, such as the *National Children's Study* and the *National Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health* ("Add Health") have ended and either have been replaced with studies with significant limitations, especially with respect to population representation (e.g., *Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes*), or have not been replaced at all (e.g., Add Health). New studies, such as *All of Us*, are not population-representative and hence may provide inaccurate findings and results that may not be generalizable. A related issue is the importance of focusing on disparities in child development in contemporary cohorts by race and ethnicity, social and economic factors, sexual and gender minority status, and other dimensions.

An underdeveloped topic in the current goals of the NICHD strategic plan is support for studies on levels, trends, and disparities in infant mortality—in the U.S. and globally as well. Much more could be said in the plan about the significance of this topic and its importance as a focus of scientific and policy research. It seems that Goal #4 represents the best opportunity for addressing this critical issue.

Finally, Goal #4 should be expanded to focus on key policy issues affecting child and adolescent health and the transition of adulthood—several of which have emerged since the last 5-year strategic plan was published. These issues include effects of the Dobbs decision; life course effects of growing up during the pandemic; gun violence; mental health and the impacts of technology, electronic devices, and digital media; consequences of climate change; and discrimination experiences and their effects.

Cross cutting themes

Nutrition—We encourage NICHD to consider widening this cross-cutting theme to encompass broader contexts (e.g., social contexts) that shape maternal and child health and well-being.

Infectious disease—While infectious disease is identified as a cross-cutting theme, the four goals focus on congenital anomalies and chronic disabilities. It is not clear what the Institute's priorities are within this theme. We urge NICHD to clarify this theme and its priorities in the final version of the strategic plan.

Climate Change—The disruptive nature of increased storms, extreme heat, flooding, and other climate events impacts population health, as demonstrated by a growing number of studies. However, this is an issue overlooked in the current list of proposed cross cutting themes. There are unique facets of climate change research that fall squarely within NICHD's mission. For example, more research is needed on the long-term and cumulative effects of experiencing climate-related events on children's learning, development, and well-being. Also, there is an absence of research on the impacts of mobility/migration

resulting from severe climate events on vulnerable populations, especially young children and people with disabilities. We urge NICHD to include climate change as a cross-cutting theme in the final version of its strategic plan.

Research training—We applaud NICHD for identifying research training as a cross-cutting theme. We agree strongly that the Institute’s commitment to “training and career development of the next generation of the scientific workforce” is imperative. In the final version of the strategic plan, we hope NICHD restates its support for mechanisms and resources, including large, public data sets, that will continue advancing the Institute’s training mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to review proposed elements of the Institute’s 2025-2029 strategic plan. We look forward to working with NICHD as it refines the goals and details of this consequential document that will guide future scientific advancement.

Sincerely,



Dr. Jennifer Glass
2024 PAA President



Dr. Jennie Brand
2023-2024 APC President