



Statement by Sally T. Hillsman, Executive Officer
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On NIH-funded Research and the Independent Scientific Review

The American Sociological Association (ASA), together with social and health scientists and their professional organizations across the nation, defends the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) decision to fund important health research relating to human sexual behavior and alcohol and drug use that has been recommended through NIH's independent scientific review process. This research directly confronts social and behavioral as well as biomedical factors that significantly impact the health of Americans and their communities. Such research—the target of recent congressional action to rescind funding—deals with subject matter (human vectors of retroviral transmission) about which some may feel personally uncomfortable, but they are essential areas of scientific study if we are to ensure that publicly supported research yields the greatest benefit to our communities' and our citizens' health and well-being.

A hallmark of an advanced free society is ethical, politically unfettered scientific investigation that (1) yields trustworthy, valid, important, and responsible scientific results; (2) does not retreat from significant areas of scientific study because they may be considered by some as politically sensitive or socially distasteful; and (3) defends the independence and objectivity of scientifically legitimate topics that are challenged by a few as “objectionable.” America's respect for and expectation of rational discourse and decision making based on scientific findings is based on our common understanding that very serious personal and public health, economic, and social consequences are at stake.

Congressional oversight of NIH is an essential element of our democracy to ensure recipients of public funds are accountable to taxpayers, but Congress should not allow decisions about *specific* basic research projects made by NIH scientists and independent scientific reviewers to be undermined by constraints that are personally, politically, or ideologically based. This would seriously weaken our nation's investment in the health of our citizens and the public at large. Americans need intellectual and scientific honesty in health research to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. To fight disease and its spread, scientists must engage in a systematic, rigorous and thoughtful process to develop and conduct programs of research that will most effectively generate the health knowledge individuals and society needs. Sometimes this means fundamental and ethical study of topics that may seem obscure or raise reservations among some members of our community. This should not bar research that the nation needs.

The American Sociological Association strongly opposes any action by Congress that would restrict the ability of the NIH to fund high-quality, scientifically reviewed studies that address NIH research priorities. ASA affirms its support for the independence of NIH to fund research on sexual function and sexual behavior that is in the interests of the public's health and well being. The ASA considers congressional actions that restrict NIH by proscribing studies that have been determined by NIH to be of scientific merit and consistent with its research priorities to be inappropriate intrusion on NIH's scientific independence. Political, personal or ideological constraints on the integrity of scientific review is destructive to quality health science and not in the best interests of the American public, which depends on this process for the efficient and effective development of scientific knowledge for its health and well being.