



Statement by the
Friends of National Institutes of Health Behavioral and Social Sciences Research
FY 2018 Appropriations for the National Institutes of Health
Submitted for the record to the
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies,
Committee on Appropriations, United States House of Representatives
March 8, 2017

The Friends of NIH BSSR is a coalition of professional organizations, scientific societies, and research institutions concerned with the promotion of and funding for research in the social and behavioral sciences. **The coalition requests an increase of at least \$2 billion above FY 2017 for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), in addition to funds included in the 21st Century Cures Act for targeted initiatives, for fiscal year (FY) 2018.** Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the official committee record.

The Friends of NIH BSSR would like to express its appreciation to the Subcommittee and to the Congress for their continued support of the National Institutes of Health. Strong, sustained funding is essential to national priorities of better health and economic revitalization.

NIH Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

NIH supports behavioral and social science research throughout its 27 institutes and centers. As a result of the strong Congressional commitment to the NIH in years past, our knowledge of the social and behavioral factors surrounding chronic disease health outcomes is steadily increasing. The NIH's behavioral and social science research portfolio has emphasized the development of effective and sustainable interventions and prevention programs targeting those very illnesses that are the greatest threats to our health. But this work is just beginning.

The importance of social and behavioral determinants of health are often underestimated. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 900,000 Americans die prematurely from the five leading causes [heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, and unintentional injuries] of death each year – yet 20 to 40 percent of the deaths from each cause could be prevented. The CDC also reports that many of these deaths are due to avoidable risks and could be prevented by making changes in personal behaviors. Other deaths are the result of disparities due to the social, demographic, environmental, economic, and geographic attributes of the neighborhoods in which people live and work.¹

The behavioral and social sciences are integral to the NIH mission “to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability.” The NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR), authorized by Congress in 1993, serves a convening and coordinating role among the NIH institutes and centers. Accordingly, OBSSR develops, coordinates, and facilitates the social and behavioral science research agenda at NIH; advises the NIH director and directors of the 27 institutes and centers; informs NIH and the scientific and lay publics of social and behavioral science research findings and methods; and trains scientists in the social and behavioral sciences. OBSSR’s mission ensures that it is uniquely positioned to advance the behavioral and social sciences research required to improve the nation’s health.

In 2016, OBSSR released its third strategic plan to guide the office over the next five years. That plan reflects the “scientific paradigm shift” that is occurring in the behavioral and social sciences. It includes three “equally important” scientific priorities: (1) improve the synergy of basic and applied behavioral and social sciences research; (2) enhance and promote the research

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0501-preventable-deaths.html>

infrastructure, methods and measures needed to support a more cumulative and integrated approach to behavioral and social sciences research; and (3) facilitate the adoption of behavioral and social sciences research in findings in health research and in practice.² Coordinating offices in the NIH Office of the Director including OBSSR have seen their budgets eroded by inflation since 2008. For FY 2018, the Friends of NIH BSSR encourages the committee to award OBSSR an amount in proportion to the overall increase it provides for NIH.

Below are examples of NIH-supported research that has contributed to the U.S.' progress in health promotion, disease prevention, and treatment:

- **Saving Lives:** Researchers in economics at Harvard University, the University of Pittsburgh, and Boston College have applied economic matching theory to develop a system that dramatically improves the ability of doctors to find compatible kidneys for patients on transplant lists. Organ donation is an example of an exchange that relies on mutual convergence of need: in this case, a donor and a recipient. This system allows matches to take place in a string of exchanges, shortening the waiting time, and potentially saving thousands of lives.
- **Improving the Quality of Health Care:** Medical care is fundamental to a healthy life, but the medical care system is of mixed quality. Unnecessary or inappropriate care wastes hundreds of billions of dollars annually. NIH-funded econometric methods and economic models are being used by interdisciplinary teams to diagnose the valuable and less valuable parts of medical care and design interventions to improve the productivity of the system. These findings have led to a revolution in how medical care payers and providers carry out their mission, with early evidence of moderating cost growth – that is, achieving better

² <https://obssr.od.nih.gov/about-us/strategic-plan/>

outcomes at lower cost. One NIH-funded study led to a revolution in the pharmacy benefit system that eliminated \$100 million of costs (annually) without generating adverse health effects.

- **Moving from Basic Research to Lifesaving Interventions:** Scientists studying rats discovered that the behavior of rat mothers toward their newborn pups – how they nurse, lick and groom the pups – changes the lifelong responses of those offspring to stress. The mothers’ behaviors actually change the activity of genes in their offspring’s brains – specifically, genes that are involved in the response to stress hormones. This research was translated with interventions in neonatal nurseries, including infant massage, that enhance premature infants’ weight gain and save lives.
- **Understanding and Improving Ways that People Communicate about Health-Related Issues:** Effective communication between providers and patients and their families is a critical ingredient in making the health care system function effectively. Social scientists are studying the use of video technology to bring patients and family members into hospice team meetings. The study measures the effect of the participation on caregivers’ perception of pain management and patient pain. Studies such as this not only contribute to better patient outcomes but also lead to better management of our health resources.³
- **Understanding Adolescence Peer Pressure and Smoking:** Adolescents tend to be more powerful in influencing their friends to start smoking than in helping them to quit, according to Penn State sociologists. In a study of adolescent friendship networks and smoking over time, the researchers found that friends exert influence on their peers to both start and quit smoking, but the influence to start is stronger because of availability of tobacco. While most

³ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3586244/#!po=3.33333>

current adolescent smoking prevention programs are aimed at building resistance to peer pressure, the study shows that school nurses and other health professionals may be able to design programs that use peer pressure to positively to influence behavior. For example, they could design programs to help nonsmoking adolescents help their smoking friends.

- **Understanding How Loneliness Hurts Human Health:** Arbitrary distinctions between “mental health” and “health” are outdated. Mental health is health. So-called mental processes, for example, stress, can underlie many physical illnesses. NIH-funded research in the interdisciplinary subfield of social neuroscience has found that social isolation – loneliness – is toxic to human health with broad consequences to morbidity and mortality. Lonely people are sicker and die sooner than those who have even a few meaningful social relationships. This knowledge could be used to improve health for people at all age levels.

The Friends of NIH BSSR recognize the fiscal challenges facing our nation as well as the difficult decisions that have to be made. At the same time, we also recognize that ensuring the health of our nation through the research supported by NIH is critical to our economic revitalization and our nation’s health. Accordingly, we recommend that **NIH receive at least a \$2 billion increase over the FY 2017 funding level, in addition to the resources included in *21st Century Cures* for targeted initiatives.**

Again, we thank the Subcommittee for its generous support of NIH.

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