



CONSORTIUM *of* SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS

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April 13, 2020

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Chair, Committee on Science, Space, and  
Technology  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2321 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Lucas  
Ranking Member, Committee on Science, Space,  
and Technology  
U.S. House of Representatives  
394 Ford House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Lucas:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to inform the Committee's development of legislative proposals to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. COSSA is a nonprofit organization representing the shared research and policy interests of the entire social and behavioral science research community. Across our broad and diverse membership—which includes, but is not limited to anthropology, communication, demography, economics, geography, history, law, linguistics, political science, psychology, sociology, and statistics—social and behavioral scientists engage in the rigorous study of why and how humans behave as they do as individuals, groups, and within institutions, organizations, and society.

We thank the Committee for its recognition of the role the social and behavioral sciences play in helping to solve pressing, often global challenges. The current crisis is no different—the social and behavioral sciences have much to offer as we recover from the devastating social and economic impacts of the coronavirus epidemic. On behalf of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), I offer the enclosed recommendations for your consideration and welcome additional opportunities to discuss these and other ideas with the Committee. They are organized into two general categories: research investments and research infrastructure.

### **I. Investment in Social and Behavioral Science Research**

Understanding the full magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath will rely on social and behavioral science. From the logistics and psychology behind encouraging mass, voluntary social distancing, to the economics underlying the availability of lifesaving medical equipment and PPE, to how the economy and labor markets can recover from the shocks of the pandemic, and ensuring those most vulnerable receive the assistance they need to begin recovering, findings from the social and behavioral sciences have been and will continue to be invaluable in helping us weather this crisis and, hopefully, mitigate the impacts of future crises through improvements in preparedness, planning, response, and recovery.

In addition to the specific research infrastructure recommendations below, we would like to emphasize the importance of supporting research in the social and behavioral sciences during this turbulent time. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect every aspect of our lives, it is important to invest in the research that examines the changes currently underway in our social, cultural, and economic systems. Perishable data about decisions, judgments, risk communications, and public responses can be most valuable in understanding what we have done right and where there are opportunities for improvement.

As with most emerging infectious diseases and pandemics, rarely is there a medical cure or intervention that can be deployed quickly enough to immediately alter the course of the outbreak. Instead, as we saw with the Ebola crisis and now COVID-19, it is behavior change that can help gain control in an otherwise seemingly uncontrollable situation. Both fundamental research into the nature of individuals, groups, and cultures; and applied research into the effectiveness of policymaking and the impact of changes to our national security, education, and healthcare systems, are important for understanding how this pandemic has affected, and will continue to affect, the way we live. The National Science Foundation's Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate (SBE) may represent less than 5 percent of the entire NSF research budget, but it provides about two-thirds of the total federal funding for academic basic research in the social and behavioral sciences (excluding psychology) in "normal" times. Crises like coronavirus further expose the disconnect between the knowledge and expertise that is needed and the resources available.

## **II. Social Science Research Infrastructure: Federal Statistics and Data**

While funding for social science research is essential, the evidence generated from such research is only as good as the data on which it is based. The federal government produces data on all facets of American life that, with sufficient resources and stewardship, will allow social scientists to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across sectors and the efficacy of our response. The Science Committee can ensure that the agencies under its jurisdiction utilize the scientific expertise at their disposal to improve the generation and use of data and statistics across the federal government. We include recommendations below within the framework of the federal statistical system as well as within the *Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018* (P.L. 115-435).

### **Federal Statistical Agencies**

The federal statistical system is made up of 13 principal statistical agencies<sup>1</sup> whose sole mission is to produce accurate, relevant, timely, and objective statistical information about all aspects of American life, as well as dozens of other data-producing entities within larger agencies that also contribute vital information. The system has long been in need of sustained investment to develop the next generation of data collection tools (e.g. linking administrative data sources, integrating AI/machine learning, modernizing computing systems/expanding capacity, investing in strong disclosure avoidance) while continuing to produce the data that communities across the country rely on to make important decisions without interruption. Investment in statistical agencies is needed to ensure that social scientists have the necessary data to research the impacts of COVID-19 across sectors and inform policies to best prevent and mitigate outbreaks going forward. Investments in statistical agencies will create better data to facilitate research on topics such as:

- Actual mortality for COVID-19/incidence of comorbidities by age, race/ethnicity, and gender.
- Impact of educational disruption on student achievement, educational disparities, STEM learning.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24810/principles-and-practices-for-a-federal-statistical-agency-sixth-edition>

- Relationship between COVID-19 and jobs in the gig economy.
- Impact of COVID-19 on economic mobility.

Near-term opportunities for investment in the federal statistical system include:

- Increase funding for statistical agencies that produce data on key topics related to COVID-19 to study the impact of the epidemic. While we recognize not all fall under the jurisdiction of the Science Committee, this should include the National Center for Health Statistics within the CDC, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the statistical offices within the IRS and Social Security Administration.
- Establish a statistical innovation fund for the principal statistical agencies to support modernization activities such as research on linking data from multiple sources, supporting improved data collection, and evaluating the impact of survey redesigns. Many of our statistical data collection efforts rely on compiling state and local data to form a national picture, and the process for doing so in a timely and consistent fashion has significant room for innovation and improvement.

### Evidence Act Implementation

The *Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018* (“Evidence Act”) was intended to enact the “low-hanging fruit” recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking<sup>2</sup>, a bipartisan group of experts that convened for one year to determine how best to incorporate the generation and use of evidence into the everyday work of government, while still safeguarding the privacy of Americans’ personal information. The law created senior leadership roles to support evidence-building, data, and statistics within federal agencies, set an “open data” standard for the federal government, required agencies to create plans to build and use evidence, and codified the principles and practices that guide principal statistical agencies, among other things. Much of the work of implementing the Evidence Act has been in concert with the development of the Federal Data Strategy<sup>3</sup>, which complements the legislation.

While many provisions of the Evidence Act have already been implemented, because it was passed without additional funding, agencies have had to fit the costs of these new evidence-building activities within their existing budgets. **Opportunities remain for additional funding and support that would transform the federal government’s capacity to generate and use evidence in the long term, while providing essential information to monitor the efficacy of agencies’ responses to the COVID-19 epidemic and its aftermath in the short term.**

Near-term opportunities within the Evidence Act framework include:

- Provide funding for agencies to develop and launch pilot and demonstrations projects to generate evidence that can be used by scientists to evaluate the federal response to COVID-19.
- Provide funding for agencies to expand their data governance, analysis, and management capacity to protect the privacy of Americans’ information and modernize agencies’ abilities to use their data to answer policy-relevant questions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cep.gov/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://strategy.data.gov/>

- Accelerate the creation of an entity to facilitate access to data from multiple federal sources (a National Secure Data Service or analogous entity) by providing funding to support the work of the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence-Building, allowing researchers from within and outside government the ability to conduct cutting-edge analyses using data from multiple domains.
- Provide additional resources (funding and staffing) to the Chief Statistician (currently vacant) to support coordination of evidence-building activities among agencies and to accelerate the production of Evidence Act guidance, enhancing the capacity across the government of agencies to produce and use scientific evidence in decision making.

Thank you again for your leadership in ensuring the needs of the scientific enterprise are not forgotten as we weather the COVID-19 crisis. I would be happy to discuss any of these topics in greater detail. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Wendy A. Naus  
Executive Director