



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
National Institutes of Health

OBSSR FACT SHEET



About the Office Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

The History of OBSSR

By the early 1980s, it was obvious that behavioral and social factors not only play a major role in health and illness but also interact with biological factors to influence health outcomes. Progress in behavioral and social science research during the 1970s and 1980s increased our knowledge base and underscored the need for this kind of research. The growing appreciation of the importance of behavioral and social factors in health and disease has been furthered by several discouraging health and social trends, including rising rates of youth violence; increasing obesity, especially among children; high infant mortality rates; rising rates of homelessness; and persistent health disparities among segments of the population. In addition, as the population has grown older, many chronic diseases such as heart disease, arthritis, and cancer have become much more common. Behavioral and social factors play a central role not only in the development of these diseases and others but also in their prevention and treatment.

In response to the need for health-related behavioral and social sciences research, Congress established the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) at The National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1993. NIH already had a long history of supporting health-related behavioral and social sciences research, and the results of this work have contributed significantly to our understanding of the basic underlying mechanisms and treatment of mental and physical health and illness. Establishing an office focused specifically on the behavioral and social contributions to mental and physical health and well-being enables NIH to leverage existing efforts and develop synergy across multiple Institutes and disciplines.

OBSSR's Mission and Core Activities

Situated within the Office of the Director, OBSSR furthers the mission of NIH by emphasizing the critical role that behavioral and social factors play in health, health care, and well-being. With a budget of approximately 27 million, OBSSR serves as the focal point for the coordination and development of policies, goals, and objectives in the behavioral and social sciences at NIH. OBSSR's mission is to (1) integrate a behavioral and social sciences perspective across the NIH; (2) disseminate behavioral and social sciences research findings; and (3) provide advice to and communicate with the NIH Director, Congress, other government agencies, the research community and the general public on matters regarding behavioral and social sciences research. OBSSR's primary activities include:

- ▶ *Developing and Supporting a National Research Agenda:* OBSSR plays a leadership role in setting priorities for behavioral and social sciences research, in developing ideas for funding initiatives related to the behavioral and social sciences, and in gaining the support for them within NIH. OBSSR convenes the NIH Behavioral and Social Sciences Research Coordinating Committee (BSSR-CC) bi-monthly to enhance the integration and coordination of behavioral and social sciences research/training activities within NIH. With input from the BSSR-CC, OBSSR coordinates scientific activities in the behavioral and social sciences across NIH. OBSSR is also active in organizing cutting-edge funding initiatives supported by multiple institutes within NIH and multiple agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- ▶ *Improving Communication Among Scientists and with the Public:* OBSSR regularly convenes a series of guest lectures and symposia on selected topics in the behavioral and social sciences. These presentations by prominent behavioral and social scientists provide the NIH community and the general public with overviews of current research on topics of scientific and social interest.
- ▶ *Briefing the Director of NIH:* The visible presence of behavioral and social sciences research in the intellectual community on the NIH campus is of critical importance to increasing support for these sciences. The Office briefs the NIH Director on discoveries and developments in the field.
- ▶ *Training and Career Development of Behavioral and Social Scientists:* OBSSR staff provides substantive training for behavioral and social scientists through workshops, lecture series, summer institutes, and a variety of training activities.

1. *"Next-generation" basic science:* OBSSR will support and facilitate the next generation of basic behavioral and social science research informed by breakthroughs in complementary areas such as genetics, informatics, computer sciences, measurement, methods, and multilevel analyses.
2. *Interdisciplinary research:* OBSSR will facilitate collaborative research across the full range of disciplines and stakeholders necessary to elucidate the complex determinants of health and health systems challenges. Such collaborations will yield new conceptual frameworks, methods, measures, and technologies that will speed the improvement of population health.
3. *Systems-thinking approaches to health:* OBSSR will stimulate systems thinking and modeling approaches to research that integrates multiple levels of analysis—from cells to society—required to understand the ways in which individual, contextual, and organizational factors interact over time to determine health status.
4. *Population impact:* OBSSR will work with its NIH partners to identify key problems in population health where scientists, practitioners, and decisionmakers can work together to accelerate the translation, implementation, dissemination, and adoption of behavioral and social sciences research findings.

OBSSR's Vision and Strategic Priorities

OBSSR's leadership is crucial at a time when exciting scientific opportunities, persistent public health needs, and emergent public health challenges face our nation. The vision of the office is to bring together the biomedical, behavioral, and social science communities to work more collaboratively to solve complex pressing health challenges. Notable areas of research where OBSSR has led efforts include mind-body, behavior change, adherence, social and cultural dimensions of health, community-based participatory research, health literacy and systems science approaches to health. The four core elements of OBSSR's vision for the future are:

For more information, please visit:

<http://obssr.od.nih.gov>

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