About the Office
The Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

The History of the OBSSR

By the early 1980s, it was clear 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 sciences research during the 1970s and 1980s increased our knowledge base and underscored the need for this area of study. The growing appreciation of the importance of behavioral and social factors in health and disease has been furthered by several discouraging population trends, including high rates of obesity, especially among children; relatively high infant mortality rates in the U.S.; rising rates of family homelessness; and persistent health disparities among segments of the population. In addition, many chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, 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. The 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 well-being enables the NIH to leverage existing efforts and develop synergy across multiple Institutes, Centers, and scientific disciplines.

The OBSSR’s Mission and Core Activities

Situated within the Office of the Director, the OBSSR furthers the mission of the 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, the OBSSR serves as the focal point for the coordination and development of policies, goals, and objectives in the behavioral and social sciences at the NIH. The OBSSR’s mission is: (1) to integrate a behavioral and social sciences perspective across the NIH; (2) to disseminate behavioral and social sciences research findings; and (3) to 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. The OBSSR’s primary activities include:

- **Developing and Supporting a National Research Agenda:** The 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 the NIH. The OBSSR convenes the NIH Behavioral and Social Sciences Research Coordinating Committee (BSSR-CC) monthly to enhance the integration and coordination of behavioral and social sciences research/training activities within the NIH. With input from the BSSR-CC, the OBSSR coordinates scientific activities in the behavioral and social sciences across the NIH. The OBSSR is also active in organizing cutting-edge funding initiatives supported by multiple Institutes and Centers within the NIH and multiple agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Promoting Dialogue between Scientists and the Public: The 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 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: Activities organized or sponsored by the OBSSR provide substantive training on important behavioral and social scientific topics through workshops, lecture series, and summer institutes. Additional training resources can be accessed through webinars, videocasts, and the OBSSR’s e-learning opportunities.

The OBSSR’s Vision and Strategic Priorities

The 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 the OBSSR has led efforts include mind-body interactions, behavior change, adherence, social and cultural dimensions of health, community-based participatory research, health literacy, health disparities, methodology and measurement, and systems science approaches to health. Three core elements of the OBSSR vision for the future are:

- “Next-generation” measurement and data: The OBSSR will support and facilitate the next generation of behavioral and social sciences research by promoting methodologies that permit the collection and analysis of data to capture complex, real-world phenomena. These efforts include the development of applications for mobile devices and wireless technologies for data collection and intervention delivery and techniques for analysis and visualization of large and complicated datasets. Furthermore, the OBSSR will stimulate systems science approaches that integrate multiple levels of analysis — from cells to society — to understand better the ways in which individual, contextual, and organizational factors interact over time to determine health status.

- Influence on Population Health: The 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 to promote life-course well-being, address health care disparities, and employ novel methods, measures, and technologies to speed the improvement of population and public health.

- Training the next generation of behavioral and social scientists: In the years to come, behavioral and social scientists will find themselves in an increasingly complex work economy marked by interdisciplinary collaboration and discourse. The OBSSR will focus on encouraging the development of new training opportunities designed to enhance researchers’ facility with team science and multidisciplinary engagement. Other areas of interest include fostering the inclusion of behavioral and social sciences into K-12 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education and incorporating behavioral and social sciences into medical school curricula.

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