



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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Contributions of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research to Improving the Health of the Nation: A Prospectus for the Future

Background

Imagine living in a nation where one out of every two adults smoked cigarettes, and smoking was allowed on airplanes and in worksites and places of worship; where depression and substance abuse were mysterious and poorly-understood conditions, and individuals suffering from such disorders were not able to contribute to or participate in mainstream society; where children's developmental problems were automatically blamed on bad parenting. Everywhere we look, behavioral and social sciences research supported by the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) and other agencies has made significant contributions to improving our Nation's health and well-being.

Developing the Strategic Prospectus

Beginning in 2005, OBSSR began a process of reflecting on its original mission and strategic priorities. Exciting trends and daunting challenges provided the impetus for developing this prospectus. Among the issues are a rapidly changing world of science, technology, societal needs, and financial constraints at NIH. The altered landscape requires a serious look at the accomplishments, current status, and future role for the behavioral and social sciences. OBSSR sought input from its key partners and stakeholders to gather their perspectives on specific actions OBSSR should take to maximize the contributions of the behavioral and social sciences to the NIH mission. Input was obtained from leaders in the behavioral and social

Establishment of OBSSR:

The Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research first opened its doors in 1995. Established by the U.S. Congress as part of the Office of the Director at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), its mission is to stimulate behavioral and social sciences research throughout NIH and to integrate it more fully into the NIH research enterprise. Under the leadership of its first director, Dr. Norman Anderson, the Office made great strides in achieving the three main goals set forth in its initial 1997 strategic plan:

1. Enhance behavioral and social sciences research and training
2. Integrate a biobehavioral interdisciplinary perspective into all NIH research areas
3. Improve communication among scientists and with the public.

sciences, representatives from NIH, and other external key stakeholders representing the breadth of scientific disciplines with which the Office works. Each of these sources has informed the strategic directions and specific implementation steps described in OBSSR's Strategic Prospectus. The Prospectus describes OBSSR's vision for a new, integrated approach to science and population health, and delineates the specific strategies that the Office will pursue to achieve this vision.

OBSSR's New Vision:

OBSSR will bring together the biomedical, behavioral, and social science research communities to work towards solving the most pressing population health challenges faced by our society. By working together, we can change the landscape of health and disease by implementing the discoveries of the behavioral and social sciences, partnering with the biomedical sciences, and investing in more basic and policy research in the behavioral and social sciences. By working as a partner within the broader scientific community, OBSSR will help NIH achieve its mission. Looking strategically towards the future, OBSSR has identified four programmatic directions to achieve this vision:

1. ***"Next generation" basic science:*** Basic science elucidates behavioral and social phenomena that are involved in producing health and disease. OBSSR will support and facilitate the next generation of basic behavioral and

social science research that is stimulated by breakthroughs in complementary areas such as genetics, informatics, and neuroimaging. These investigations may focus on factors that are "under the skin" and examine, for example, how genetic traits and early life experiences are linked to physical and emotional health later in life. Or, these investigations may focus on factors that are "outside the skin" and examine, for example, how social movements related to health take shape and permit things like tobacco taxes and school lunch program changes to occur.

2. ***Interdisciplinary research:*** OBSSR will support and promote collaborative research across the full range of disciplines necessary to understand the complexity of human health and health care. It is anticipated that such collaborations will yield new conceptual frameworks, methods, measures, and technologies. Collaboration among a broad base of stakeholders – including policy makers, employers, practitioners, patients, and the general public – is also needed to ensure that scientific findings are implemented and adopted in ways that speed the improvement of population health.

3. ***Systems-thinking approaches to health:*** The term "systems" in this context refers to the multilevel, complex interrelationships among the many determinants of health. OBSSR will stimulate research that integrates multiple levels of analysis – from cells to behavior to society – required to understand the ways in which individual and

contextual factors interact to determine the health of individuals and populations. OBSSR intends to harness systems-thinking approaches to support very clear and specific objectives:

- (a) to better understand the complex biobehavioral bases of current population health issues
- (b) to create a research culture that works to find and implement solutions to these health problems by understanding how to organize networks of stakeholders at multiple levels
- (c) to develop more efficient systems that maximize existing resources
- (d) to effectively disseminate emergent knowledge.

4. *Problem-based research*: To maximize the population impact of scientific discovery, research products need to be translated into practical applications that are then implemented effectively and efficiently in real-world settings, disseminated broadly to all stakeholders, adopted by organizations and institutions, and maintained through policies. To realize this goal, health research must serve the needs of practitioners, decision makers and the populations they represent, and must reach the audiences it is intended to help. OBSSR will work with its NIH partners to identify key issues in population health where behavioral and social scientists, biomedical

researchers, practitioners, and health services decision makers can work together to develop prevention and treatment interventions and accelerate the translation and adoption of these interventions.

Strategies to Achieve The Vision:

Partnerships, education and training initiatives, communications, and program evaluation are core strategies that are central to OBSSR's ability to achieve its strategic aims. These areas cut across each of the four programmatic directions described above and represent core functions of how OBSSR will work with its NIH partners, the behavioral and social sciences communities, the broader research communities, and stakeholders such as practitioners and policymakers to support the NIH mission.

- ▶ **Partnership**: Strong collaborative relationships between OBSSR and its internal and external partners are crucial to realizing its vision of science and public health. Specifically, OBSSR will work with its internal partners to improve the investment in basic and applied research in behavioral and social sciences at NIH. OBSSR will also work with its external partners to build support among key stakeholders, decision makers, gatekeepers, and the general public for a stronger science of behavior.
- ▶ **Education and Training**: With regard to training initiatives, OBSSR will continue to initiate and support theoretical, substantive, and methodological

training activities to support the development of strong behavioral and social scientists. To increase awareness throughout NIH of the important contributions from behavioral and social science, OBSSR will continue to convene conferences and state-of-the-science panels and will also publicize examples of successful collaborative health research in which the behavioral and social sciences have played a role. Guest lectures and symposia by prominent behavioral and social scientists will continue to provide the NIH community with overviews of current research on topics of scientific and social interest.

► **Communications:** Concrete steps that OBSSR is pursuing with regard to communications include: promoting the development, maintenance, and widespread use of databases containing longitudinal social and behavioral data related to health; identifying or creating dissemination channels for sharing social and behavioral science perspectives, constructs, and measures in health

research; and developing interdisciplinary models for biopsychosocial research that successfully integrate the social and behavioral sciences into biomedical research.

► **Program Evaluation:** Development of OBSSR's Prospectus was, and will continue to be, a dynamic process. The programmatic directions and implementation priorities will necessarily evolve, and paths for future initiatives will depend upon systematic evaluation. The results of ongoing research will bring new knowledge to better inform future investments, and undoubtedly will lead to as-yet-unimagined new opportunities for the future.

For more information, please visit:

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

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