Provide $48.9 million in FY22 for NIH’s Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR)

OBSSR funding has remained stagnant over the last five years despite the significant increases provided to NIH.

A budget of $48.9 million in FY22 would permit OBSSR to:

- Coordinate and co-fund, in partnership with National Institutes of Health (NIH) Institutes and Centers (ICs), highly rated grants that the ICs cannot fund alone, including research on violence and social connectedness
- Co-fund with ICs meritorious applications in community and population-level research proposed by underrepresented racial/ethnic investigators that align well with institutes and centers’ strategic priorities
- Plan for, continue to support, and co-fund research examining the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated mitigation efforts surrounding it efficiently and effectively. OBSSR would continue to investigate what COVID-related actions and interventions were successful and discern which were not effective despite our current knowledge. Additional resources are needed to support the necessary level of research to optimize mitigation strategies and demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions to blunt the public health crisis.

Background and Purpose

Created by Congress in 1993, the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) is responsible for coordinating and promoting basic, clinical, and translational research in the behavioral and social sciences in support of the NIH mission. OBSSR’s activities are aimed at strengthening these sciences by enhancing trans-NIH investments in longitudinal datasets, technology in support of behavior change, innovative research methodologies, and promoting the inclusion of behavioral and social sciences in initiatives at the NIH institutes and centers (ICs).

In partnership with the ICs, OBSSR co-funds highly rated grants that the ICs cannot fund alone, including NIH’s high-priority program on gun violence prevention research. OBSSR funding remained stagnant over the last five years despite the significant increases provided to NIH.
OBSSR Priorities

- **Promote Collaboration to Increase Basic Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (bBSSR):** The Office collaborates with NIH ICs “to identify promising and emerging lines of bBSSR relevant to the health research mission of the NIH, stimulate new areas of bBSSR that address important research questions, and facilitate the translation of bBSSR findings to applied research.”

- **Enhance Research Infrastructure, Methods, and Measures:** OBSSR develops and promotes the research infrastructure, methods, and measures needed to support a more cumulative and integrated approach to behavioral and social sciences research.

- **Facilitate Adoption of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research:** OBSSR enables the adoption of behavioral and social sciences research findings in health research and in practice. The Office works to narrow the substantial gap between the research findings in the behavioral and social sciences and the implementation of this research in practice. OBSSR encourages behavioral intervention research in the context in which these interventions are intended to be delivered through dissemination of research findings, encouragement of dissemination and implementation research, and partnering with other agencies and entities to reduce barriers to adoption of effective interventions.

Addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic

The U.S. has minimal experience with a pandemic the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mitigations applied to address the crisis have impacted society in both known and unknown ways. Understanding these impacts and the mechanisms that convey risk and resilience, particularly in health disparity and other vulnerable populations, will help policymakers improve its long-term response to the pandemic and prepare more effectively for the country’s next public health emergency. Specifically, addressing the social, behavioral, and economic impacts on vulnerable and health disparities populations is integral to understanding the impact of COVID and the accompanying mitigation efforts.

OBSSR has provided critical leadership in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. In FY 2021, early in the pandemic, the Office used a significant percentage of its small budget to respond. For example, OBSSR:

- Led the development of a COVID survey repository (NIH Public Health Emergency and Disaster Research Response and PhenX Toolkit) that allows researchers to share COVID-related survey items as they are developed for others to use. The repository facilitates data comparisons, data sharing, and data integration across survey studies.

- Led the development of recommendations to RADx-Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) for common data elements to facilitate data sharing across the consortium. OBSSR is a member of the governance committee of RADx-UP. The overarching goal of the RADx-UP initiative is to understand the factors associated with disparities in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality and to lay the foundation to reduce disparities for those underserved and vulnerable populations who are disproportionately affected by, have the highest infection rates of, and/or are most at risk for complications or poor outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Proposed FY22 Labor, HHS, Education Appropriations Subcommittee Report Language

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR).—The Committee commends the OBSSR efforts to coordinate and promote basic, clinical, and translational research in the behavioral and social sciences to support the NIH mission. The Committee encourages OBSSR activities aimed at strengthening these sciences by enhancing trans NIH investments in longitudinal datasets, technology in support of behavior change, innovative research methodologies, and integration of behavioral and social sciences in initiatives across the NIH. In partnership with other Institutes and Centers, OBSSR co-funds highly rated grants that these Institutions and Centers cannot fund alone. The Committee includes no less than $48,958,816, an increase of $20,000,000 above the estimated fiscal year 2021 funding level, for OBSSR to expand its work in fiscal year 2022. This funding should enable the Office’s ability to expand, for example, its work addressing the social, behavioral, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, measuring the effects of mitigation strategies on vulnerable individuals and communities in preparation for future pandemics.

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https://dr2.nlm.nih.gov/radx-up
https://www.nih.gov/research-training/medical-research-initiatives/radx/radx-programs