



Society for Research in Child Development  
1909 K Street, NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20006 USA  
Tel: 202-800-0677 • Web: [www.srcd.org](http://www.srcd.org) • X: @SRCDtweets

National Institutes of Health (NIH),  
The *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of  
Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)  
Notice Number: NOT-HD-24-028

October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### **RE: NICHD Strategic Plan 2025-2029**

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) is pleased to respond and submit comments on behalf of our membership on the proposed NICHD's Strategic Plan, 2025-2029.

SRCD is a nonpartisan, multidisciplinary professional membership association representing thousands of developmental scientists. Our members come from a broad set of backgrounds, including psychology, biology, sociology, education, anthropology, economics, public health and more. Their work seeks to improve the lives of children and families. Our members ask questions about how individual differences and complex systems can impact human behavior, and we look to apply what we learn in homes, childcare settings, classrooms, schools, pediatric settings, public policy, and more.

As NICHD looks to define its research themes and goals for the next five years, we provide our assessment on the proposed strategic plan, in addition to our thoughts on gaps in the proposed key research areas that are critical in the study of child health and human development.

### **SRCD's Overall Thoughts**

We appreciate NICHD's comprehensive and integrated approach to research, with a specific focus on health disparities and a better understanding of the care and interventions for a culturally diverse population and for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, including "global health" as a cross-cutting theme helps to address health inequities wherever they arise.

We also generally agree with the embrace of new and emerging technologies that offer great potential and opportunities for scientific breakthroughs and innovation. Taking advantage of this will advance the health and well-being of our communities.

Nonetheless, there are some key components that are missing from this proposal. Within the workforce goals, the initiatives and the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion are not

sufficiently specified. Additionally, the proposed research goals do not prioritize the study of older children, caregivers and children’s relationships, or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s mental health and development. We discuss each of these points in detail below.

### **Improving Scientific Workforce Provisions**

The proposed strategic plan adds a “cross-cutting theme” to enhance research training and career development for the next generation of the scientific workforce. However, it does not explain or propose a plan to achieve these goals. Although there is an overall theme in the proposed strategic plan to improve diversity and inclusion practices, that theme focuses on treatments and intervention methods for culturally diverse communities. While this is an extremely important point, we also urge NICHD to incorporate language and initiatives that stress the value of recruiting, retaining, and supporting diverse researchers in the scientific community at NICHD.

The most innovative research regarding race, ethnicity, racism, racial disparities and related pressing issues is disproportionately conducted by scholars from diverse backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Scholars from diverse backgrounds possess extensive training which is often complemented by years of lived experience in their topic areas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, studies have shown that scholars from under-served communities are more likely to focus on socioeconomic variables in their research, which is vital to our understanding of human behavior.<sup>3</sup> Not having these scholars at the helm of research among diverse populations compromises the nature of research questions and the overall quality of research.<sup>4</sup> We strongly believe that the NICHD would benefit from having a diverse pool of scholars. We also know that scholars from minoritized backgrounds often have unique needs, barriers, and contexts which require a dedicated organizational strategy to address. This may include programs that not only support the recruitment and mentorship of diverse scholars but also look at how peer review panels are formed, and grant awards are made. As the proposed strategic plan looks to develop interventions and treatment methods for

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<sup>1</sup> Lett E, Asabor E, Beltrán S, Cannon AM, Arah OA. Conceptualizing, Contextualizing, and Operationalizing Race in Quantitative Health Sciences Research. *Ann Fam Med*. 2022 Mar-Apr;20(2):157-163. doi: 10.1370/afm.2792. Epub 2022 Jan 19. PMID: 35045967; PMCID: PMC8959750.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hoppe, Travis A., et al. “Topic Choice Contributes to the Lower Rate of NIH Awards to African-American/Black Scientists.” *Science Advances*, vol. 5, no. 10, 1 Oct. 2019, p. eaaw7238, [advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/10/eaaw7238](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238>.  
de Dios, Marcel A, et al. “The Development of a Diversity Mentoring Program for Faculty and Trainees: A Program at the Brown Clinical Psychology Training Consortium.” *The Behavior Therapist*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2013, pp. 121–126, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4207083/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4207083/).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

culturally diverse communities, failure to leverage the training and expertise of scientists from minoritized backgrounds would stall the prospects of the NICHD to conduct science of the highest quality and to comply with the research goals of the proposed strategic plan.

### **Insufficient Research Focus on Older Children and Family Dynamics**

The strategic plan proposes themes that focus prominently on prenatal health, infancy, and maternal health, while research theme four focuses on the transition for adolescents into adulthood. Although we support continuation of these areas, we are concerned about potential gaps reflected by these research priorities. For example, the proposed strategic plan focuses on infants, toddlers, and caregivers to the exclusion of older children and adolescents. By de-emphasizing some developmental timepoints, we do not advance in our understanding of how to address children's well-being across those time periods. Relatedly, we are concerned that the research goal four – improving child and adolescent health and the transition to adulthood – cannot be fully realized without a broader focus on earlier developmental stages. At present, the proposed research goals have too large of a gap between early childhood and the transition to adulthood.

Additionally, there does not seem to be sufficient recognition of the importance of relationships and interactions between caregivers and children, or among individuals within families, in the plan as written. Understanding these interactions can help identify factors that influence a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. It can inform effective interventions for at-risk families, which would then improve and enhance family settings and the child's well-being and provide valuable insights into lifelong wellness. Insights into caregivers and child interactions may also answer questions about long-term outcomes, with informed intervention practices that would break negative behavioral cycles. Finally, it would help in our understanding of how cultural norms and values shape caregiver practices and beliefs, enhancing treatment methods and interventions for diverse populations.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Cross-Cutting Theme**

Since the last NICHD strategic plan, the world has experienced a major upheaval due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We find it notable that the pandemic is not mentioned in the proposed strategic plan and urge NICHD to include inquiry on the impacts of COVID-19 as a cross-cutting theme. The pandemic has impacted children and their families at all developmental stages, with acute impacts on children and adolescent mental health.<sup>5</sup> A better understanding of the effects that the pandemic has had on children's development

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<sup>5</sup> Gavin, A. R., et al. (2021). "Mental Health and Health Care Use Among Children in the United States During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Pediatrics*, 147(3), e2020021100.

and familial contexts is imperative. This would help to better understand how different children and infants cope with stress and trauma in critical and under emergency situations (such as a pandemic) while also addressing the potential barriers to mental health services during and after these emergency situations, among other lines of investigation. In addition, prioritizing research on COVID-19 is essential for enhancing mental health support, shaping effective policies, and promoting resilience in children and communities affected by the pandemic. Finally, it would provide evidence-based policies to address the effects of closure, specific and different education settings and overall strategies that would better serve children's well-being.

### **Children and Adolescent Mental Health as a Research Goal**

While the proposed plan addresses child and adolescent health broadly, we suggest an additional research goal focused on a deeper exploration of mental health challenges for children and adolescents. Studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant rise in mental health issues among children, including rises in anxiety and depression.<sup>6</sup> Other reports have shown that the prevalence of children and adolescents with severe depression increased from 10% to 27%, in addition to the increase of mental health related symptoms like self-injury, suicide ideation, planning and suicidal attempts.<sup>7</sup> Inquiry into the causes, prevalence, resilience factors, and opportunities to abate mental health challenges are crucial to help support children and adolescents, post-pandemic. While we recognize other institutes and centers have a focus on mental health, we nonetheless believe NICHD plays a vital role in these themes and can avoid wider NIH departmental silos by incorporating this topic as a research goal, with a specific focus on children and adolescents.

### **Conclusion**

We want to thank you for taking the time to read our suggestions for the proposed research goals and cross-cutting themes on the NICHD Strategic Plan, 2025-2029. We are hopeful the final plan will include greater emphasis on increasing and strengthening the pipeline of diverse researchers in the workforce, and will prioritize research themes on older children, family relationships, the developmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and child and adolescent mental health.

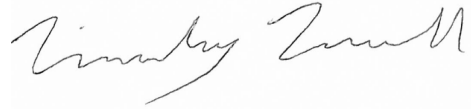
Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Panchal, U., Salazar de Pablo, G., Franco, M., Moreno, C., Parellada, M., Arango, C., & Fusar-Poli, P. (2023). The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on child and adolescent mental health: systematic review. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 32(7), 1151–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w>

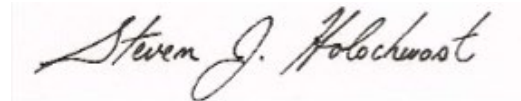
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lindsay Turner Trammell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light pink background behind it.

Lindsay Turner Trammell  
Director for Policy  
The Society for Research in Child Development  
[policy@srcd.org](mailto:policy@srcd.org)

*Caitlin Lombardi*

Caitlin Lombardi, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor, University of Connecticut  
Chair of the [SRCD Policy Committee](#)  
[policy@srcd.org](mailto:policy@srcd.org)

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Steven J. Holchowst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light pink background behind it.

Steven Holchowst, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor, Lehman College at CUNY  
Chair of the [SRCD Subcommittee on Science Policy](#)  
[policy@srcd.org](mailto:policy@srcd.org)