

# Addressing racial gaps in NIH grant funding

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In 2020, a commentary published in *Cell* urged the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to address long-standing funding disparities between Black and white researchers. According to a 2011 study, Black applicants were 10 percentage points less likely to receive NIH funding than white applicants. A feature article in *Chemical & Engineering News*, an independent news outlet of the American Chemical Society, explores why these racial disparities persist in NIH funding and outlines potential

solutions.

Special correspondent Melba Newsome writes that the crux of the problem lies in how the funding decisions are made: the subjective review process. Those familiar with the process say that funding decisions can be influenced by several factors other than scientific merit, including a lack of diversity among reviewers, the reviewers' perception of scientific merit, and their perception of the applicant and where they went to school. Lower scores for proposals from Black researchers often mean their proposals don't make the cut to be discussed by the reviewers at the same rate as proposals from white PIs. Additionally, research on Black communities and racial health disparities is funded at a lower rate among researchers of all racial backgrounds, but these are topics that Black scientists are more likely to request funding for. These and other factors all work against applicants from racial and ethnic backgrounds that are underrepresented in science.

In 2021, the NIH proposed some solutions to address the racial disparity between their grant recipients. An initiative called Unite promised to appoint diversity officers, publicize demographic data about staff and grant recipients, and allocate funding dedicated to research on health equity and health disparities. Another NIH initiative, the Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation, or the FIRST program, seeks to recruit early-career faculty committed to inclusive excellence, but critics question how inclusive excellence will be defined. And some scientists, including one of the *Cell* commentary authors, suggest other changes, such as broader evaluations of proposals and establishing programs to award additional grants to Black researchers. This idea would build on an existing NIH program for early-career researchers, which evaluates applications from beginning scientists separately from those submitted by established researchers, in the hopes of creating a more equitable funding process.

**More information:** Why racial disparities in NIH funding persist and what might fix the problem, *Chemical & Engineering News* (2022), [cen.acs.org/careers/diversity/ ... ding-persist/100/i18](https://cen.acs.org/careers/diversity/.../ding-persist/100/i18)

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