

Research topic contributes to persistent gap in NIH research grants to black scientists

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Research topic preference accounts for more than 20% of a persistent funding gap for black scientists applying for National Institutes of Health research project (R01) grants compared to white scientists, according to a new study by NIH scientists. Researchers examined each step in the application submission and review process for R01 applications submitted between 2011-2015. The study confirms previous

findings that career stage and institutional resources influence the gap in the number of submissions by black and white researchers. However, the finding that black applicants as a group are more likely to propose research topics that are less likely to be funded was new. The study published today in the journal *Science Advances*.

"These results were a surprise—research topics that were less funded are vitally important," said NIH Director Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D. "We need to understand whether there is an intrinsic bias against such topics by reviewers, or whether the methodologies used in those fields of research need an upgrade."

The study identified disparate outcomes between black and white scientists at three decision points: selection for discussion, impact score assigned by the review panel and research topic choice, a previously unstudied factor. Reviewers in study sections, which are composed of subject matter experts recruited from the [scientific community](#), showed a preference for research topics that tend to have methodologies that are highly controlled with very precise outcomes.

Black applicants were more likely than white applicants to propose research topics that receive awards at a lower rate, such as community or population-level research. Research topics with the lowest success rates included health disparities research and patient-focused interventions. Importantly, white researchers also experienced lower award rates in these topic areas, although less so than black researchers.

Despite significant efforts by NIH to close this funding gap first identified in 2011, it continues to persist. This new research identifies opportunities for interventions that could bolster NIH's scientific workforce diversity efforts underway, such as the Diversity Program Consortium and the MOSAIC program.

"The underlying explanation for the phenomenon observed in this paper is complex and requires further study to determine how best to intervene," said Hannah A. Valentine, M.D., NIH's Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity. "We will continue to explore the causal factors behind the R01 funding gap to add to NIH's broader scientific workforce diversity program."

More information: T.A. Hoppe et al., "Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists," *Science Advances* (2019). advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/10/eaaw7238

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