

Qualia

NIH retiring most research chimps

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Two young chimpanzees play together at the Jane Goodall sanctuary of Tchimpounga (Congo Brazzaville). Goodall has long campaigned for the end of chimp research around the globe. (Image: Delphine Bruyere, Wikipedia Commons)

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) working group is recommending immediate retirement for nearly all of the agency's 451 chimpanzees.

In a [report released January 22](#), the group urges the NIH to end half of 22 current experiments involving chimps and begin planning the transfer of the animals to federal sanctuaries. The report says keeping a colony of about 50 chimps is sufficient for the possibility of future research, which would have to be approved by an independent committee.

This report is the most recent development in a process that began more than two years ago when the NIH asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to review the use of chimpanzees in research. In December 2011, the IOM concluded that most chimp research was unnecessary and provided recommendations for the use of the great apes in research.

The working group — a subgroup of the NIH's Council of Councils, an interagency advisory body — was chartered by NIH director Francis Collins following the IOM report. Collins tasked the working group with evaluating all NIH research involving chimps, determining which studies met the IOM report's criteria for justifying chimp research, and advising the agency on how to implement the IOM's recommendations.

The working group recommends ending six of nine current invasive biomedical experiments, which involve immunology and infectious agents, because they do not meet the IOM criteria. These require a study to be necessary for human health, that no alternative animal model exists, that performing the study on humans would be unethical, and that the animals be housed in socially and physically appropriate habitats.

The group also approved several current noninvasive behavioral and genomic studies, but they must be modified to create better environments for the chimps. The new report defines standards

for the social and physical health of chimps in research, including requirements that they live in groups, have a minimum of 1,000 square feet per chimp, have access to the outdoors, and be able to partake in natural behaviors like climbing and foraging for food.

The working group recommendations will be [open to public comment](#) for 60 days, after which Collins will make a decision about the chimps' future. But the tide seems to be turning in favor of phasing chimps out of medical research. Last month, NIH announced its plan [to retire 113 chimps to the Chimp Haven](#) sanctuary in Keithville, Louisiana, rather than move them to an NIH-supported research center in San Antonio, TX, as was originally planned.

At the website ['The Last 1000.'](#) Wesleyan University professor [Lori Gruen](#) is trying to track the movement of individual chimpanzees from laboratory to sanctuary as a way to honor their service and recognize each one as an individual. The chimps are listed by their names, if they are known, and by the facility where they currently live. The long list, from Abby to Zorro, is a sobering reminder that those affected by NIH's decision are not anonymous lab subjects but individual creatures.

Related Links:

- [Report from the Working Group on the Use of Chimpanzees in NIH-Supported Research](#)
- [AAAS MC Blog Post: New limits on chimp research](#)