



December 5, 2019

Dear Colleagues:

Thank you for your letter to Dr. Francis Collins, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), regarding your request for a new focus on firearm injury and violence research at the NIH. I have been asked to reply on his behalf.

NIH's mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability. In the spirit of this mission, NIH is committed to understanding effective public health interventions to prevent violence, including firearm violence, and the trauma, injuries, and mortality resulting from violence. Firearm violence is a serious public health issue, and scientific research is critical to understanding and ultimately preventing firearm violence.

NIH-funded research on the causes and prevention of firearm violence have addressed a range of topics, such as research about parental roles in preventing injury—including injuries from guns—in the home and in other settings, the relationship between alcohol misuse and gun violence, risk factors for gun violence, appropriate containment measures to reduce risk of suicide or accidental deaths among children and adolescents, and determinants that put war veterans at higher risk for suicide with guns. In Fiscal Year 2018, NIH funded \$131 million towards violence research, a subset of which is firearm violence research [for more information, see the NIH Research, Condition, and Disease Categories (RCDC) funding [web page](#)]. As you may know, you can also find summaries of NIH-funded firearm violence research projects by conducting keyword searches using the [NIH RePORTER](#) web search tool.

As you noted in your letter, in 2013, NIH issued three program announcements (PAs) titled “Research on the Health Determinants and Consequences of Violence and its Prevention, Particularly Firearm Violence” ([PA-13-363](#), [PA-13-368](#), [PA-13-369](#)). These PAs were posted in September 2013 and expired on January 8, 2017. NIH funded [24 unique projects](#) under these PAs. These projects all support research on risk factors for violence or intervention methods for reducing violence; a subset of these projects focus specifically on firearm research.

Since the three PAs expired, there has been no lapse in funding for firearm violence research at NIH. NIH has supported research on firearm violence for many years—before these PAs were issued—and we will continue to support this area of research in the future. Let me take a moment to clarify the nature of program announcements.

First, it is important to note that program announcements are not “programs,” but are one way to draw attention to a particular programmatic area of research. NIH Institutes and Centers use a

variety of methods for communicating areas of programmatic interest, including PAs and other funding opportunity announcements, strategic plans, and research priorities posted on their websites. Second, PAs typically do not have funds set aside for them. The three PAs mentioned above did not have dedicated funding. Third, all NIH funding opportunity announcements, including PAs, have start and end dates. The expiration of a PA does not mean that the program or programs that supported the PA have been discontinued or that funding is no longer available.

While these specific PAs have expired, NIH continues to accept research applications about violence, including firearm violence, submitted to general funding opportunity announcements that are continually open and accept applications three times a year. In the time after expiration of the referenced PAs, NIH has funded new research projects related to firearm violence through other funding opportunity announcements and investigator-initiated research.

In addition to our general funding opportunity announcements, Institutes and Centers may issue [Notices of Special Interest](#) (NOSI) to alert the community of specific research topics of interest. NOSIs point to existing funding opportunity announcements (often [parent announcements](#)) for submission of the applications. Several current NIH NOSIs are relevant to firearm violence research. For example, in 2018, the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) issued [NOT-MD-18-006](#), “Notice of NIMHD's Interest in the Causes, Consequences, and Prevention of Violence.” This Notice highlights NIMHD's interest in applications studying the causes and consequences of violence in health disparity populations, as well as policy, health services, and intervention studies to understand how best to prevent or mitigate the impact of violence in these populations. Forms of violence include but are not limited to intimate partner violence, family violence, child and elder abuse, suicide, gang violence, hate crimes, bullying, school violence, and community violence.

In 2019, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) issued [NOT-MH-19-025](#), “Notice of Special Interest to Highlight High Priority Research Opportunities on Suicide Prevention Crisis Services.” This Notice highlights interest in applications focused on applied research that advances the [National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention's](#) Crisis Services Task Force efforts, summarized in the report, [Crisis Now: Transforming Services is Within Our Reach](#). The Notice encourages many types of studies, including those to determine the cumulative benefit of implementing multiple components of service delivery considered beneficial in suicide prevention (e.g., continuity of care; community collaboration for safe storage of lethal means; coordination with community crisis response).

Also in 2019, the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) released [NOT-HD-19-022](#), “Notice of Special Interest: Research on Emergency Medical Services for Children (EMSC).” Given that natural disasters, school shootings, drug overdoses, and suicide attempts add to the number of injured children and adolescents needing emergency care, this Notice highlights the need to identify new and

improved ways to diagnose and treat injured and acutely ill children; to evaluate current and evolving emergency medical practices; to devise better ways to deliver emergency medical care; and to learn where best to direct prevention activities.

Regarding your request to institute a new multidisciplinary Scientific Review Group (SRG) focused on firearm violence, the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) continually evaluates its chartered study sections and recurrent special emphasis panels to keep them aligned with the progress of science, and to capture emerging fields and topics. As scientific fields evolve, CSR realigns, disbands, and creates study sections as appropriate. This is an ongoing process. Every round of review sees new special emphasis panels. The scientific boundaries of standing panels are reviewed every year, and CSR has a systematic process for evaluating clusters of related panels (Evaluating Panel Quality in Review - ENQUIRE). In addition, CSR works closely with the funding Institutes, Centers, and Offices to define the best review arrangements for emerging topics and expanding topics. Whether those arrangements mean expanding the scope of existing study sections or creating special emphasis panels depends on the number of applications, the science they propose, and how those factors relate to existing study sections. It has been CSR's experience that broad topics--the opioid crisis, for example--attract grant applications that span such a wide range of science that multiple review homes are needed. If scientific interest increases in the study, prevention, and treatment of firearm injuries and violence as a public health and biomedical concern, and NIH receives substantially more grant applications in those areas, CSR would evaluate and consider what best serves the emerging field – a dedicated study section or adding expertise in that area on multiple existing panels. In every case, CSR is committed to providing expert, fair, and timely evaluation.

I hope that you find this information about NIH-funded firearm violence research to be helpful and thank you for your continued commitment to this important area of research.

Sincerely,

Michael Lauer, M.D.
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