



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT

Harnessing Social and Behavioral Science Insights to Enhance Policymaking and Improve the Lives of the American People

Executive Office of the President
President's Council of Advisors on
Science and Technology

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EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL OF ADVISORS ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20502

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President,

You have always put the well-being of the American people at the center of your policy priorities. Your administration has asked and answered complex questions at the heart of policymaking, for example, questions about how Americans from all backgrounds can benefit from advances in [nutrition science](#), [artificial intelligence](#), and [cancer research](#). Your administration has also been at the forefront of efforts to identify and address new potential harms facing Americans, such as the effects of social media on the mental health of our children and young adults. The social sciences have provided the deep research and understanding for these and many other policy questions. And today, the social sciences are poised to address even more difficult and critical questions, such as how to reduce feelings of loneliness and societal disaffection that have increased in recent decades and that contribute to depression, substance abuse, and violence.

Social sciences offer insights into the cultural, societal, political, economic, and psychological processes that shape human behavior and decision-making. That understanding, when applied through policies and practices, dramatically influences Americans' health, wealth, and overall well-being. By understanding how social, cultural, and civic institutions affect well-being, government policies can leverage the opportunities known to be impactful and increase the quality of life enjoyed by a greater number of Americans, their families, and their communities. For instance, social science research showed us that the neighborhood a child grows up in significantly affects adult outcomes like income and educational attainment. With this information, municipalities are introducing new flexibilities in housing vouchers to allow families to choose neighborhoods that will provide their families with more opportunities.

Social science research helps us understand the roles of societal structures and the roles of individual behaviors in promoting the health, wealth, and security of Americans. Long-standing federal investments in social science research now allow us to obtain accurate assessments of the current state of Americans' health, educational attainment, and occupational status, among other important outcomes. It is because of the social and behavioral sciences that we have insights about which living conditions and opportunities make it easy or hard for Americans to engage in healthy behaviors, to succeed in school, to open small businesses, to change occupations, to comply with the law, to vote, and to be engaged civically. Importantly, research in the social and behavioral sciences helps to reveal often unexpected factors that promote well-being, such as experiences that engender feelings of awe and wonder. For example, we now know that time in nature promotes a sense of well-being, bolstering cities' investments to improve parks and add trails for walking, jogging, and biking.

Social science research told us that community health worker and patient navigator programs improve access to and quality of care while also reducing emergency room visits and hospital admissions for patients and families navigating the complexities of treatments for cancer and other chronic conditions. Based on this information, your administration’s Cancer Moonshot worked with Medicare and private insurers to facilitate coverage of patient navigation services which improve health outcomes and the patient experience by reducing times between diagnosis and treatment and increasing treatment completion.

In this report, we highlight and build upon the incredible progress that your administration has made to harness the insights of social and behavioral science research to benefit the American public. In addition, we identify barriers that currently limit the full implementation of the aims of the [Evidence Act](#), and we offer recommendations to reduce these barriers. We also offer recommendations to better position the federal government to be responsive to a rapidly changing social and behavioral science research ecosystem. Most importantly, we identify some of the key elements needed to significantly inform policies and advance our ability to implement effective actions to improve the lives of Americans.

PCAST is confident that harnessing the potential of the contemporary social and behavioral sciences will better enable the United States to respond to our current and future societal challenges by producing policies and delivering services in ways that are more impactful, equitable, and cost-effective.

Sincerely,

Your President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology

Executive Summary

Social and behavioral scientists work to understand the cultural, societal, political, economic, and psychological processes that shape human behavior and decision-making, leading to insights on the factors that most influence Americans' health, wealth, and educational attainment, among many other outcomes. For instance, social and behavioral science (SBS) research assesses how factors such as our neighborhoods, beliefs, concerns, and values shape how we treat one another, spend our time, engage in parenting, and use technology. The aim of SBS research, however, is not solely to deepen understanding of these complex dynamics influencing human behavior, but to translate these insights into policies and actionable strategies that improve the lives of Americans.

Research in the social and behavioral sciences often reveals unexpected factors that promote individual, community, and societal well-being and, thus, have a vital role to play in policy decisions and program development. The examples are numerous and varied. SBS research informs programs to address chronic conditions such as hypertension and diabetes that are key to Americans' health outcomes. The research on adolescent brain and cognitive development that showed the high degree of impulsivity in crimes committed by teens informed important Supreme Court decisions about criminal sentencing. Research to predict how people will respond to critical safety messages; understand the propagation of misinformation and disinformation; and engage affected communities to create safe, equitable, and effective responses has boosted emergency preparedness and responses to extreme weather events. Equally important, the tools of SBS research can rigorously test our beliefs and expectations regarding the likely effects of different programs and interventions. Ultimately, SBS research can help us develop evidence-based programs and policies that reflect individuals' different experiences to promote greater overall well-being for families, communities, and society at large.

This Report highlights the use of social science for the benefit of the American public and makes recommendations to continue to improve social science research and its use in policymaking. It builds on the work of the Biden-Harris Administration to harness the insights of SBS research through the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018](#) and the [Blueprint for the Use of Social and Behavioral Science to Advance Evidence-Based Policymaking](#). The Report identifies specific barriers to the effective integration of SBS research in policymaking and offers recommendations to reduce them. Last, we offer recommendations to position the federal government to be more responsive to, and increase its ability to leverage, the rapidly changing SBS research ecosystem, including the emergence of private technology companies that collect and own large swaths of data regarding human behavior that simultaneously wields significant impact on the quality of life for Americans.

To address the complex problems facing our nation, we must ensure that we have a robust, reproducible, and unbiased evidence base, and that we use it to develop effective policies. Experts in the social and behavioral sciences are ready to contribute to this work. Accordingly, this Report identifies steps that are essential to accomplishing these aims.

Summary of Recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Optimize the presence and integration of social and behavioral scientists at federal agencies to better harness social scientific expertise, insights and methods that support evidence-based policymaking, implementation, and evaluation

Recommendation 2. Expand secure access to federal data sets across agencies and with social scientists for approved research and policy evaluation needs, with appropriate protections and safeguards.

Recommendation 3. Agencies should review their funding priorities, models, budgets, and instruments to better support the contemporary social and behavioral science research ecosystem.

Recommendation 4. Facilitate engagement and partnerships between private industry, federal agencies, academic institutions, and not-for-profit foundations to harness social and behavioral science insights for greater policy impact on societal challenges.

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