

Qualia

Racial gap in NIH grant awards

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A troubling report in *Science* indicates that black researchers are less likely to win grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) than white researchers.

The study focused on the awarding of NIH RO1 grants, which are the type of grant typically held by independent investigators, and are often essential for launching a career in biomedical research.

About sixty percent of NIH grant proposals are judged good enough to warrant scores, and the rest are dismissed with no score. Although proposals with high scores were equally likely to be funded regardless of race, black applicants were 13 percentage points less likely to receive funding compared to whites. Even when the effects of possible confounding factors (including the applicants' educational background and training, country of origin, previous research awards, publication record, and type of institution) were controlled for, black applicants lagged whites by ten percentage points. Proposals from black researchers were more likely to receive low scores or to not be scored at all.

The result is that 29 percent of applications from whites were funded compared to only 16 percent of those from blacks. The raw numbers are startling: Only 185 of nearly 23,400 funded R01 grants went to black scientists—less than one percent.

The authors of this report suggest that the funding gap could reflect a series of slight advantages white scientists accumulate over their careers. For example, through better access to mentors and research collaborations. Another possibility is that some reviewers infer the race of applicants from clues like their name or the college they attended. This knowledge could influence scoring, either through intentional racism or, more likely, through more subtle biases.

NIH Director Francis Collins and NIH Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak provided a response to the report (which was funded by NIH) in the same issue of Science. They cite efforts already under way to address the RO1 success gap, such as including more minorities in study sections to learn about the grant awarding process. NIH is committed to discovering what's responsible for the funding discrepancy, setting up two committees (one internal and one external) to brainstorm solutions. Some suggestions so far include conducting reviews with no identifying information about the applicant and educating reviewers and staff about implicit racial biases.

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