

# **In Cell commentary, NIH outlines commitment to addressing structural racism in biomedicine**

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Earlier this year, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) acknowledged the impact of structural racism on biomedical science and

committed to doing more to dismantle it. Now, in a commentary appearing June 10 in the journal *Cell*, NIH Director Francis Collins and colleagues describe the NIH's UNITE initiative and how it differs from the agency's previous diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

The UNITE initiative was launched on February 26, 2021 and, for the first time, brings together all 27 NIH institutes to focus on structural [racism](#). It is made up of five committees with members from across the agency and aims to accelerate efforts to address racism and discrimination in science—both in the [biomedical science](#) community and in the [health research](#) the NIH supports.

"Through UNITE and other efforts, we at NIH are committed to taking on structural racism directly," Collins said. "We are in a position to effect significant changes to create an inclusive, equitable, and diverse environment—not only at our agency but throughout the biomedical research enterprise. Our commitment should be measured not just by our words but by our actions."

In the commentary, Collins and his colleagues on the UNITE leadership team describe the murder of George Floyd and other racially motivated violence in 2020 and the health inequities highlighted by COVID-19 as "a tipping point for NIH"; outline previous efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion; and lay out the long-term goals of and first steps taken by the UNITE committees. They acknowledge specific issues that the NIH now seeks to tackle, including:

- A failure to acknowledge first-hand accounts of racism in the workplace reported by people of color throughout the biomedical research enterprise
- Longstanding failure to attract, retain, and promote to the highest levels scientists from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in the biomedical research workforce

- Persistent disparities in the success rates for grants supporting Black scientists
- Lack of transparent race-based [demographic data](#) linked to grant success and funding rates
- "Siloing" of NIH diversity initiatives rather than including them as a fundamental element across NIH
- Significant underfunding of research on minority health, health disparities, and health inequities

"The time for NIH to take an active stance against structural racism is long overdue. NIH can no longer look the other way," write Collins and the NIH UNITE leadership team in the commentary. "We are reinvigorating our efforts to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion and using every tool at our disposal to remediate the chronic problem of structural racism."

Early action taken as part of the UNITE initiative outlined in the commentary includes a request for input from the public and stakeholder organizations, new funding opportunities aimed at understanding and addressing the impact of structural racism and discrimination on minority health and [health](#) disparities, the first funding opportunity announcement that will use a Plan for Enhancing Diverse Perspectives as a consideration for scoring, and the release of an updated NIH Databook that reports, for the first time, grantee demographics by race/ethnicity.

**More information:** *Cell*, Collins et al.: "Affirming NIH's commitment to addressing structural racism in the biomedical research enterprise" [www.cell.com/cell/fulltext/S0092-8674\(21\)00631-0](http://www.cell.com/cell/fulltext/S0092-8674(21)00631-0) , DOI: [10.1016/j.cell.2021.05.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2021.05.014)

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