

Study finds gender disparities on National Institutes of Health study sections

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Investigators at the University of Chicago Medicine have found that women are less likely to be represented as chairs and reviewers on study sections for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), based on data from one review cycle in 2019. The results, published on Feb. 15 in *JAMA Network Open*, have implications for the distribution of federal scientific funding.

The NIH is the top source of federal [funding](#) for biomedical research in the U.S., providing critical support and guidance on the nation's research programs. The study sought to understand the [gender](#) distribution on NIH study sections, where scientific experts meet several times per year to discuss grant applications and determine what research will receive NIH funding.

The investigators pulled the digital rosters for all study sections that met between May 15 and July 15 in 2019—a total of 367 study sections. Then, they used online searches to find photos and/or pronouns for all ~8800 individuals on the study section rosters to determine [gender identity](#). For the 23 individuals whose genders could not be ascertained, the researchers used the Genderize.io software to provide a best estimate on the person's gender.

The analysis determined that overall the balance of reviewers was tipped toward men (61.1% of reviewers, versus 38.9% women). Further, women were more likely to hold lower academic rank and were more likely to be temporary members and less likely to be on standing study sections.

"The results were not surprising," said first author Anna Volerman, MD,

an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at UChicago Medicine. "Men are more likely to serve on study sections, both as members of the section and as chairs; women were more likely to have a temporary affiliation. There was also a lower chance of having women participating on study sections for institutes that had greater funding resources and gave out more awards.

"The message is clear: there are disparities in gender representation on these study sections, which have the potential to impact the funding and advancement of [women](#) in research," Volerman continued. "This affects our whole country, because we know that the people conducting the research affect the scientific questions being asked and answered."

While this study only used data from one review cycle, the research team hopes to further investigate this trend, as well as examine data on other demographic information, such as race. They acknowledge that this study uses limited data, and restricts gender to a male/female binary.

"This is a snapshot," said senior author Valerie Press, MD, MPH, an associate professor of medicine and pediatrics at UChicago Medicine. "It is important to look backward in order to look forward. Diversity, inclusion and equity are a process, not a switch that gets flipped. It is likely that despite the disparities we see, there has been improvement over time. Establishing that will be helpful for motivating the actions needed to have a more representative cohort of members of these sections."

The researchers also plan to examine the relationship between gender representation on study sections and the gender breakdown in who receives NIH funding. They hope that this study, and others like it, will further clarify the existing disparities in gender representation in [biomedical research](#) and provide additional insights into how those disparities are best addressed.

"This is a first step," said Volerman. "This study provides a glimpse that will help us better understand this issue and then use deliberate efforts to work toward achieving equitable representation at all career levels."

More information: Anna Volerman et al, Representation of Women on National Institutes of Health Study Sections, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37346](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37346)

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