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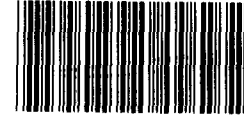


United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Human Resources Division

B-251377

January 15, 1993



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The Honorable John Conyers, Jr.
Chairman, Committee on Government
Operations
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On October 20, 1992, you requested that we examine the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS's) portfolio of research grants dealing with violence prevention to determine whether research efforts are seeking biological and medical markers in an attempt to link race and/or socioeconomic class with violence and aggression. This letter contains the information we provided your office in briefings conducted on November 17, 1992 and January 7, 1993.

Your concerns stemmed in part from remarks made by an HHS official at a February 11, 1992, meeting of the HHS Mental Health Advisory Panel that you and other Members of Congress considered inappropriate and insensitive. You also expressed concern that HHS had not been forthcoming in answering your questions about its violence initiative and the nature of its research portfolio on violence prevention.

To address your concerns, we analyzed 205 abstracts of HHS-supported research on violence prevention and reviewed the Centers for Disease Control draft plan on Youth Violence Prevention: A Proposed Initiative and Status Report of PHS Activities. We also reviewed selected HHS documents and materials from nongovernmental sources relating to HHS-sponsored violence research that your office provided to us. In addition, we interviewed the HHS Assistant Secretary for Health, Dr. James Mason; other HHS officials; local professionals identified by your office; and the principal investigators on selected HHS-sponsored research projects.

In providing the research abstracts for our review, HHS officials stated that the 205 abstracts represented all the basic and applied violence research being conducted in fiscal year 1992 under the auspices of and with funds from the

GAO/HRD-93-11R, HHS-Supported Research on Violence Prevention

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Public Health Service. The same abstracts were provided to the Secretary's Blue Ribbon Panel on Violence Prevention for review before their first meeting on November 10, 1992. Grants supporting demonstration projects were not included in our review. Of these 205 abstracts, 26 (or 13 percent) were founded primarily on biological bases (e.g., biochemical or hormonal reactions, genetics, neurological damage). Eleven of these projects used hospitalized patients with diagnosed psychiatric disorders as subjects. Nine used laboratory animals, two used twins, two used alcoholic families, one used violent offenders in Finland, and one involved a large sample of residents of the island of Mauritius.

We also conducted follow-up interviews with the principal investigators on three projects that were selected because of specific questions raised during discussions with your office concerning the projects' focus and subjects. We found that none of these projects were attempting to identify biological or genetic markers that caused violent or other antisocial behavior. In our opinion, these projects were following accepted social science research procedures, and the subjects under investigation were not related to your areas of concern.

Our review and interviews have revealed no indication that HHS is conducting research that attempts to identify biological or genetic factors of a specific race or socioeconomic class that might predispose a member of that group to commit violent or aggressive acts. Further, senior HHS officials have assured us that the Public Health Service was not supporting research that sought to identify biological or genetic markers that would link violent or aggressive behavior to race or class. We therefore believe that further investigation of this matter at this time is not warranted.

As we have reviewed the abstracts on violence research and talked with researchers and other nongovernmental representatives, it has become clear that the concerns you have raised are serious and significant ones that HHS needs to be constantly aware of as it plans its future work on violence prevention and considers future applications for research funding. Accordingly, you may wish to discuss the ongoing oversight of HHS research with the incoming Secretary.

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We trust this letter and the briefings provided to your office satisfactorily responds to your request. If you have any additional questions or wish to discuss this matter further, please contact me on (202) 512-7225.

Sincerely yours,



Gregory J. McDonald
Director, Human Services Policy and
Management Issues

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