



## Because Social Scientists Help the Federal Government Address Problems Facing the Nation

September 30, 2026

By Alycia Chin (US Securities and Exchange Commission) and Baruch Fischhoff (Carnegie Mellon University)

Federal agencies address issues that affect American life in critical ways. Fulfilling those missions requires tools only social science can provide. Congress passes laws to respond to what Americans need and want. Those laws promise Americans programs, protections, and services. Federal agencies then translate those laws into practices: what information to request from companies, what forms families complete to receive benefits, and what evidence shows that a drug's benefits outweigh its risks. Implementing these practices well requires ensuring that people can access, understand, and act on the information that they need. Behavioral and social scientists have unique expertise for ensuring those conditions are met and evaluating whether they are.

The articles collected in a recent [special feature](#) of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* describe some of that work in five federal government agencies. That work reflects skills and knowledge that only specialized social science training can provide: nuanced sensitivity to the details of research design and interpretation and exposure to the cumulative wisdom of studies whose results are often surprising. The research described in these articles are drawn from years of experience helping federal agencies pursue their missions of improving Americans' lives by addressing challenges in health, finance, commerce, and security. Scientists working with agencies do not set the goals; policymakers do. Social and behavioral scientists can help reach those goals and provide evidence about whether they are being reached. Below are brief summaries of three articles that illustrate the work and its impact.

***“Given the stakes riding on government policies and implementation, adding a social and behavioral science perspective can have a large return on investment.”***

### Giving patients a seat at the table

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is charged with protecting public health, a mission that includes ensuring the safety and efficacy of pharmaceuticals. Determining whether a drug's benefits outweigh its risks requires evaluating the complex evidence submitted with requests for product approval, within a framework of laws, policies, and past decisions. To make decisions as consistently and transparently as possible, social and behavioral scientists at FDA coordinated the development of a [standard method for making those judgments](#) that is now used routinely by FDA for evaluating pharmaceuticals and biologics.

One part of the development process included continuing consultations with FDA staff, so that the new method could be applied consistently within their work. Another part was learning directly from patients about their concerns. To that end, FDA conducted thirty day-long “Voice of the Patient” sessions on conditions including chronic fatigue syndrome and sickle cell disease. These sessions helped FDA implement its commitment to Patient-Focused Drug Development. Inspired by this model, patient advocacy organizations have since held more than 100 such sessions on their own.

## Protecting Americans from fraud and scams

Americans reported 1.5 million cases of fraud and other complaints to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 2024. Because most victims never report, the FTC estimates that the actual number of victims is far higher. That underreporting hinders government's ability to detect scams quickly, bring criminals to justice, and protect potential future victims.

To address this problem, [social and behavioral science staff at the FTC](#) studied the usability of its website for reporting fraud. They then revised its design to reduce barriers that led people to give up before completing their reports. The FTC evaluation found that the volume of reports increased by more than 25% after the redesign and the reports provided more of the information that policymakers needed to improve consumer protection.

## Ensuring the integrity of government programs

The success of many government programs depends on matching the benefits that Americans receive to their eligibility, ensuring taxpayer money is sent to intended recipients while minimizing improper payments. Determining eligibility often depends on program participants reporting their status according to complex criteria. Misunderstanding what to report, or forgetting to report at all, can mean losing benefits that someone is entitled to, or facing penalties for receiving benefits that they weren't supposed to get.

Social and behavioral scientists at the [General Services Administration Office of Evaluation Services](#) supported the Social Security Administration in helping Americans report changes in earnings that could affect their eligibility for benefits under the Supplemental Security Income program. Their research found that people sometimes forget, or never realize, the need to report changes in their situations, such as increased wages. As a remedy, these scientists designed letters reminding participants to report such changes. These letters increased both the likelihood of reporting and the amounts reported. The intervention more than paid for itself, reducing improper overpayments by over \$5 for every dollar spent on implementation.

## Collaboration is key

Addressing these, and other national policies, requires collaboration with people from different professional specialties. Lawyers know what laws permit or require and program staff know how programs run day to day, just as social scientists know how people are likely to respond to questions and situations. Each perspective is incomplete by itself. Decisions about whether to approve a drug require a disclosure, or redesign, and application rest more securely when multiple perspectives inform them.

Given the stakes riding on government policies and implementation, adding a social and behavioral science perspective can have a large return on investment. Detecting and preventing fraud, by smoothing the path for victims to report, could save hardship and heartbreak when scaled across the millions of Americans who could fall victim. Behaviorally informed improvements to a single government form can benefit the millions of people who fill it out. Hearing patients' voices can reveal unexpected costs and benefits that clinical data could miss. These interventions demonstrate government's commitment to serving the public.

Passing a law reveals intentions. Making it work in practice ensures that the public receives what government has promised. Social and behavioral scientists can help fulfill that promise and demonstrate that it has been kept.



**Alycia Chin** is a senior financial economist in the Office of Investor Research, Office of the Investor Advocate, at the US Securities and Exchange Commission. **Baruch Fischhoff** is Howard Heinz University Professor in the Department of Engineering and Public Policy and the Carnegie Mellon Institute for Strategy and Technology, at Carnegie Mellon University. Together they edited the PNAS special feature [Science in Service: Behavioral Research Applications across Federal Agencies](#).

*This article is provided in Dr. Chin's official capacity as staff of the Office of the Investor Advocate of the US Securities and Exchange Commission but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission, the Commissioners, or other members of the staff.*