

Purpose

This charter describes expectations for the Maternal and Child Health Life Course Research Network (LCRN). The LCRN is a virtual collaborative network of individuals uniting around a common cause of advancing life course health development research and improving the health of the MCH population. This is our inaugural charter, and is intended to guide the first phase of our collective network design and development process. Some of the goals specified are aspirational, and some of the methods have yet to be vetted, but this document will nevertheless serve as a useful guide for how the network might develop over time. This charter, and the network itself, will be continually updated and refined over time in response to member experience and input, as well as continuous evaluation of the network's productivity, impact and reach.

Background

A rapidly growing number of life course-focused research studies show that experiences in the early years influence how bio-behavioral pathways develop and influence health throughout life. This research also shows that suboptimal experiences and higher rates of early risk exposures can result in a cascading array of poor health outcomes with compounding effects across subsequent life stages. This new knowledge is having a profound influence on current thinking among thought leaders, researchers, policymakers and service providers about the essential role of maternal and child health, as a vehicle for improving health outcomes for mothers and children and, ultimately, for the population as a whole.

However, there are still many outstanding questions about the relationship between early experiences and lifelong health and well-being, and about how existing and emerging knowledge can be applied to the development of evidence-based practice and policy. Unfortunately, the lack of a strong research and data infrastructure and limits on funding currently available in the U.S. to support the development of new methodologies and collaborative approaches hampers the production of the transformative, transdisciplinary and translational research that is needed to advance the emerging field of life course health development. Moreover, the fact that researchers who are interested and engaged in life course health development research continue to work in discipline-specific silos has been a significant impediment to rapid progress.

The LCRN provides a virtual platform and set of activities that together serve as a new infrastructure for catalyzing progress and enhancing funding to support basic, theoretical, applied and translational life course health development research.

Mission

The LCRN seeks to improve health and reduce disparities in health and disease across the life span by advancing life course health development research. This will be accomplished by bringing together diverse expertise and perspectives to examine the origins and development of health, and inform meaningful and evidence-based changes in practice, systems and policies affecting children and families.

1: Engage a diverse, active and sustainable community of life course health development stakeholders

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2: Increase capacity for, engagement in, and production of life course health development research

The LCRN supports the development and implementation of life course-focused research studies by both increasing funding available to support such research, and improving the data and methodologies available to researchers. The network itself offers seed grants to individual members and affiliated institutions, while working to attract and leverage other funding to support additional research activities among network members and institutions. The LCRN engages relevant federal, state and local agencies, as well as private and philanthropic organizations, in understanding, supporting and funding its work and that of its members.

The LCRN offers training, education and mentoring to increase knowledge, skills and relationships among the next generation of life course health development researchers. LCRN members can use the network's wiki to obtain input on drafts of their publications, and engage in activities to advance the methods for studying life course health development (including the network's methodology workgroup that identifies, prioritizes and addresses methodology-related challenges and opportunities). Network members contribute to the development and eventual implementation of a national research agenda that reflects input from the full range of stakeholder groups. This agenda will be developed through a process that includes the creation of a series of background papers on the State of the Science of Life Course Health Development, and convening a strategic agenda-setting meeting. The agenda will then be advanced via strategic communication and dissemination that promotes an appreciation for the value of this work and attracts funding for new research.

3: Catalyze the translation and application of life course health development research

The LCRN seeks to accelerate the translation and application of life course health development research to MCH policy and practice, and to proactively support innovative approaches underway or emerging in localities, states, nationwide and internationally. The LCRN engages with those programs that have historically had and will continue to have a significant impact on the life course of individuals and populations, both to help such programs become more evidence based, and to enable them to collaborate with researchers who can help them demonstrate their impact. The LCRN develops and/or disseminates case studies that describe existing life course-focused programs and initiatives underway in states and localities around the country and world. The LCRN's social networking platform enables meaningful connections between researchers, practitioners and policymakers that can speed the application of new knowledge to MCH practice and policy.

Responsibilities and Benefits of Membership

The LCRN strives to engage the widest possible range of individuals, some of whom have not historically been engaged in the production, translation and application of life course health development research. Members will include junior and senior researchers, MCH professionals working in local and state agencies, policymakers at the federal, state and local levels, individuals who represent the families that will be affected by changes to policy and practice, and members of the practice community.

The LCRN will likely include three levels of participants:

- A core group of active, committed innovators who participate directly in the design of the network, the development of the research agenda, and the development and initiation of new research studies
 - A secondary group learners/appliers/adapters that participates in specific network-initiated activities based on other factors (e.g., the availability of funding to support their participation)
 - A tertiary education and information group that wants to be connected to and consume the information coming from the network, but that is not actively participating in producing or adapting that information
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All LCRN members commit to:

- Contribute time, expertise and resources in order to continually increase the capacity and capabilities of other individual members and the overall network
- Participate actively and regularly in the network, including the social networking platform and activities within functional nodes that correspond to their areas of interest and expertise leverage each other's investments in life course health development research
 - Focal issues for the functional nodes might include life stages (e.g., preconception, early childhood, adolescence), conditions (e.g., obesity, dental caries, coronary heart disease), and cross-cutting issues (e.g., life course theories, data, measures). Although some of these potential foci may appear to be relatively narrow in scope, they are examined from a life course standpoint that considers and situates these issues within the broader context of the lifelong health of individuals and/or populations
- Build new transdisciplinary relationships and share knowledge with experts nationally and internationally with backgrounds in disciplines ranging from applied psychology to women's studies. Connections that are likely to be particularly valuable include:
 - Researcher to Researcher - to enable sharing of knowledge and tools, mentoring of junior researchers by their more senior colleagues, and to make possible new transdisciplinary collaborations/research projects
 - Researcher to Program – to enable researchers to engage with state and local MCH programs that can partner with them in developing and implementing new translational research

Responsibilities and Benefits of Membership (cont.)

- Researcher to Funder – to enable both junior and senior researchers to connect with public and private funding sources that can support their work
- Program to Program - to enable shared learning and promote efficiency by preventing programs with limited resources from having to reinvent the wheel
- Program to Researcher – to enable program managers and staff seeking to implement life course-focused approaches to do so in an evidence-based way
- Program to Funder - to enable programs to connect with agencies and institutions that can provide additional support for and help them to spread and scale their innovative/successful approaches
- Funder to Funder – to enable public and private funding sources to develop collaborations and leverage each other's investments in life course health development research
- Carry out/support other members in carrying out collaborative research projects that enable a paradigm shift in how we think about health promotion and disease prevention
- Complete periodic surveys that support the ongoing evaluation and improvement of the network's structure and function
- Demonstrate the highest regard for human subjects' protection when undertaking research funded or otherwise supported by the network, including adherence to both their own institutions' human subjects' regulations and the principles defined by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Protection of Human Subjects regulations
- Demonstrate the utmost respect for other members' original ideas, unique contributions and intellectual property

Depending on the expertise and resources they have to offer, some members may also be expected to:

- Participate in the development of the State-of-the-Science background papers
- Attend the agenda-setting meeting
- Apply for the small number of seed grants that will be available in years two and three of the project
- Participate in the development of/employ new research tools and methodologies
- Attract/contribute new funding to support life course health development-related research

Responsibilities and Benefits of Membership (cont.)

The benefits of membership in the LCRN, which is free, include:

- The chance to advance both your unique interests and the field as a whole
- Timely access to new tools and methodologies as they are developed
- Access to the LCRN Socialcast community website where members can exchange ideas and materials, and, if they wish, begin to develop transdisciplinary research projects
- Opportunities to provide input into the design and function of the network.
- Access to periodic e-newsletters from the LCRN team at UCLA to keep you informed about our activities and how you can get involved
- Eligibility for the small number of seed grants that will be awarded in years two and three of the project

Evaluation and Measures

Evaluation is a critical component of the LCRN design that will monitor and help ensure progress toward the three goals specified above. The evaluation plan, including the measures and corresponding data collection intervals relating to each of our stated goals, is presented below. The administrative core of the LCRN will be responsible for collecting and analyzing data on the identified measures. LCRN members will be surveyed at least once per year regarding the level and nature of their participation in the social networking platform and other network activities, as well as their satisfaction with the life course research agenda and other network products and deliverables.

Goal 1: Create a diverse, active and sustainable community of life course health development stakeholders

- # network members (monthly)
- Racial/ethnic diversity of members (annually)
- Range of professional expertise/research areas of members (annually)
- # of postings to social networking platform and/or website (monthly)
- # of members in each topical node (monthly)
- # website hits (monthly)
- # of collaborative innovation networks (COINs) developed within network (quarterly)
- # of members in each COIN (quarterly)
- # of grants applied for an obtained by COINs (annually)
- # of publications arising from the COINs (annually)

Goal 2: Increase capacity for and engagement in life course health development research

- # of documents, tools and other resources posted to social networking platform (monthly)
 - # of life course-themed talks presented by network members (annually)
 - # of life course-themed studies initiated by network members (annually)
 - # of life course-themed articles published by network members and the field generally (annually)
 - # of requests for proposals (RFPs), policy briefs, strategic plans for Title V programs, and other MCH research, practice, or policy documents which reference the LCRN background papers and/or background papers (annually)
 - # studies included in research agenda that get funded (quarterly)
 - # of efforts underway among network members to develop new life course measures (quarterly)
 - # of funders/potential funders who participate in the network (quarterly)
 - Total revenue of network (annually)
 - # of abstracts, invited presentations, peer-reviewed publications, grants applied for and grants obtained by network members as a result of the seed grants (annually)
 - Total funds leveraged by network members as a result of the seed grants (annually)
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Goal 3: Catalyze the translation and application of life course health development research

- # of presentations of findings by network members at national, regional, state and local meetings (annually)
- # of articles, papers and/or case studies related to the implications of life course research findings for MCH policy and practice that are published/disseminated through the network (quarterly)
- # of requests for proposals (RFPs), policy briefs, strategic plans for Title V programs, and other MCH research, practice, or policy documents which reference the LCRN background papers (annually)
- # of requests for proposals (RFPs), policy briefs, strategic plans for Title V programs, and other MCH research, practice, or policy documents which reference the Life Course Research Agenda (annually)