The Social Science Research Institute initiates, develops, and supports applied and theoretical research in the social sciences and linguistics, with particular emphasis on the following areas: cognitive sciences, telecommunications, health and social sciences, and development studies. The research tends to focus on Hawaii, the Pacific Islands, and Asia.

In carrying out this mandate, the SSRI assists the faculty in the social sciences by:

- Providing part-time research appointments for limited terms;
- Assisting the researchers in determining sources of extramural support;
- Assisting in the preparation of research proposals;
- Administering extramurally funded research grants;
- Sponsoring a publications program for the dissemination of research findings;
- Providing consultation to researchers in survey techniques and design, and in the use of computers in social science research;
- Providing direction and support for several small research units housed within the SSRI (PEACESAT, Center for Oral History, Center for Youth Research, and Center for Futures Studies).

The SSRI also maintains links with federal and private funding agencies in the United States and foreign countries.
The Center for Youth Research of the Social Science Research Institute provides the following:

- Conducts research related to youth in collaboration with University researchers, organized research centers at other universities, and/or community organizations.
- Serves as an information center for youth-related research at the University.
- Disseminates information on youth research, programs, and issues through publications, consultation, workshops, conferences, and expert testimony.
- Provides research and practicum opportunities for graduate students.