

How do investigators conduct ethical research with people who are homeless?



What you need to know

We may think we have a good idea about what *ethical* research is, but applying the usual standards to diverse populations such as people who are homeless, presents different types of challenges.

What is this research about?

It is accepted that research conducted with human beings must meet high ethical standards such as those described in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS: originally published in 1998 and revised in 2010). Even with guidance such as the TCPS, however, it can be difficult to know how to apply such ethical standards to particular populations. For example, it could be argued that people who are homeless should be treated as *vulnerable* in the sense that

some may be poorly educated, lack resources and live daily in uncertain situations that pose a high degree of risk and potential for harm. The TCPS directs researchers to treat vulnerable research participants with a greater degree of care in order to ensure that their decision to participate is voluntary and informed. Not only does this imply that researchers must make sure that individuals truly understand what their participation involves, but any incentives offered, such as money, must not be seen as coercive

by people who do not have easy access to resources such as shelter. In other words, even a small amount of money could convince someone who is poor to participate in research they might not otherwise agree to. Researchers are also faced with the challenge of *protecting* vulnerable participants while *respecting* their value as human beings. So, as with all research involving human participants, researchers must ensure that participants are treated with dignity and fairness.

ARTICLE SOURCE

The article *The Ethics of Conducting Community-Engaged Homelessness Research* was published by the *Journal of Academic Ethics* in 2009 (Vol. 7: pages 57–68).

KEYWORDS

Ethics, homeless, community-based, vulnerable populations, consent, interviews

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Summary Date: May 2012

What did the researchers do?

The authors shared their experiences and knowledge of the literature on homelessness in order to examine some of the ethics issues that need to be considered when working with this population. They focussed on research ethics issues from two types of studies of homelessness and a study of people who had died whilst homeless.

What did the researchers find?

Some of the things that the researchers learned include:

- **People who are homeless are not all the same.** Stereotyping people and the conditions in which they live can lead to inaccurate research results.
- People who are homeless must be **assured that their services will not be affected if they refuse to participate or mention their dissatisfaction with services.**
- Shelter workers and others who know the potential participants, as well as experienced interviewers, may be able to determine if a person can give informed consent to participate in the study. **Interviewers need to be sensitive to participants' potential difficulty in completing the surveys and consent forms,** and help should be provided in a simple and respectful manner.
- Researchers disagree on what is appropriate compensation for participating in an interview. The authors of this study think **it is unethical to place conditions on receiving compensation or to withhold compensation out of fear of the way it will be used.**
- **Researchers should consider any potential risks for both the interviewers and participants** e.g., in some locations interviewers should pair up for safety in numbers or leave a door open to allow interviewers and participants an exit whenever they feel they need to leave quickly
- The study design should include **steps to address possible harms or distress caused by the interview,** for both participants and interviewers.
- In order to get the necessary contact information for participants whose housing circumstances often change, **researchers must be careful when determining how much and what type of information can be shared with others.**
- **The voice of community members is important to research findings.** Community members who are workers and people who are homeless can provide valuable local knowledge. The authors of this study found community input to be essential in all their studies.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Longitudinal research on homelessness, or research that is conducted with the same group over an extended period of time, as well as studies of people who have died while homeless, require ethical consideration, such as informed consent, confidentiality, safety, anonymity, and privacy. The authors of this study encourage researchers to consider community knowledge as well as the experience and expertise of research staff when planning research studies.

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