



MRS Guidance

Essential Safeguards series:

6. Face to face data collection:
Personal safety

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MRS guidance – Essential Safeguards series

Face to face data collection: Personal safety

There are several dimensions to the risks that practitioners may face when involved in close social interaction:

- risk of physical threat or abuse
- risk of psychological trauma, as a result of actual or threatened violence or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction
- risk of being in a compromising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour
- increased exposure to risks of everyday life and social interaction, such as road accidents and infectious illness
- risk of causing psychological or physical harm to others.

Scope of guidance

The guidance aims to help practitioners identify areas where they can increase the personal safety of those engaged in face-to-face data collection.

Legal and regulatory obligations for staff safety

Assess risks

Employers have duties under health and safety law to assess risks in the workplace. This means identifying work activities that could cause injury or illness and taking action to eliminate the hazard, or if this isn't possible, control the risk.

Provide information about risks

Employers must give workers information about the risks in their workplace and how they are protected, also instruct and train them on how to deal with the risks.

Consult employees/workers

Employers must consult employees/workers on health and safety issues. Consultation must be either direct or through a safety representative that is either elected by the workforce or appointed by a trade union.

Provide health and safety information

The Health and Safety Information for Employees Regulations 1989, requires employers to either display the HSE-approved law poster or to provide each of their workers with the equivalent leaflet.

Employees/workers - reporting a health and safety issue

If employees/workers think their employer is exposing them to risks or is not carrying out their legal duties with regards to health and safety, and if this has been pointed out to them but no satisfactory response has been received, employees/workers can report this to the [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#)

Budgeting for safety

It is important to consider the financial costs of ensuring personal safety.

Infrastructure costs might cover training on risk assessment, communication aids, personal or vehicle insurance cover, a named member of staff responsible for fieldwork safety, staffing a fieldwork contact point.

Project costs might include extra fieldwork time (working in pairs, providing a 'shadow' or reporting back to base), taxis or hired cars, appropriate overnight accommodation, special training and counselling for staff researching sensitive topics.

These extra costs elements may need to be discussed with clients when proposals are being drafted.

Planning for safety in research design

Practitioner safety can be built into the design of proposals.

- Choice of methods - include safety in the assessment when weighing up which methods to deploy to answer the research issues.
- Choice of data collection site - consider whether home interviews are necessary for the research. This also applies to in-store, in-street, and in-transit interviews.
- Staffing - consider designs where it is possible to use pairs of practitioners to undertake data collection, or if that is not possible for a sole practitioner to interview two members of a household simultaneously.
- Choice of practitioners - consider whether the research topic requires the recruitment of practitioners with particular attributes or experience.

- Recruitment methods - where possible, design methods of recruitment to allow for prior telephone contact to make initial contact.
- Time-tabling - take account of the tiring effects of spells of intensive fieldwork. A more relaxed schedule may mean that practitioners are more alert to risk and better able to handle incidents.

Assessing risk in the fieldwork site

Once a data collection site has been selected try to reconnoitre the area before data collection starts. Questions to ask include:

- Is there reliable local public transport?
- Are reputable taxis firms easy to access?
- Is it safe to use private cars and leave them in the area?
- Is there a local rendezvous or contact point for practitioners?
- Are there appropriately priced and comfortable hotels within easy reach?
- Are there areas which are open without hidden corners, etc?
- Are there any signs of social disorder or criminal activity e.g., burnt out cars, high levels of graffiti?

Risk and research participants

It is important to assess the risk regarding participants and the subject matter being discussed.

The topics for discussion in many social research interviews - for example, poverty, unemployment, relationship breakdown, social exclusion, bereavement and ill-health - may provoke strong feelings in participants and prompt angry reactions.

Some participants may present a greater possibility of risk than others. Some research involves people who have a history of psychological disturbance or violent behaviour.

If such characteristics are known in advance, practitioners and supervisors should be as fully briefed as possible on the risks involved and understand the precautions they need to undertake.

Setting up fieldwork

Consideration should be given to the type of area where the data collection will take place.

Study a map of the area for clues as to its character. Look for schools, post offices, railway stations and other hubs of activity. Think about escape routes from dense housing areas.

- If doubts about safety are indicated, assess the need for accompanied interviews, shadowing, and prearranged pick-ups.
- If the design allows telephone in advance to assess participants and enquire whether any other members of households will be at home.
- Arrange alternative venues, already assessed for safety, if security is in doubt.

Interview precautions

Assess the situation before beginning of any data collection and if in doubt re-arrange the data collection for when a colleague can be present.

- Carry an alarm or other device to attract attention in an emergency.
- Let participants know that you have a schedule and that others know where you are.
- Always carry identification, a badge or a card, such as the MRS IID card or a card authenticated by the head of the research organisation and giving the researcher's work address and telephone number.
- Always carry a mobile phone and ensure that it is charged.

Maintaining contact

Maintaining contact is key for personal safety.

Details of practitioner's itinerary and appointment times – including names, addresses or a temporary fieldwork base (taking care about participant confidentiality).

Where more than one practitioner is working at a site they should meet or communicate by mobile phone at pre-arranged times. If such an arrangement is not kept, practitioners should inform the responsible person at base with responsibility for the data collection.

Conduct of interview

Practitioners should be briefed on how to conduct an interview appropriately considering the audience being researched.

To avoid engaging in inappropriate behaviour practitioners should:

- Be briefed on cultural norms
- Appreciate the use of body language and the acceptability or not of physical contact
- Establish the right social distance - neither over-familiar nor too detached.

Strategies for handling risk situations

Practitioners should be trained in techniques for handling threats, abuse or compromising situations, and research managers should consider ways of refreshing their knowledge. External trainers may be useful, both for initial training and in keeping the issue live.

Practitioners should also be prepared to deal with the effects of data collection on participants and be ready to spot signs that the participant is becoming upset or angry. Often, the practitioners' training means that strong feelings of this kind can be acknowledged and contained, but there may be occasions when it is more sensible to end the discussion and leave.

Debriefing and support after the event

When data collection is complete, it is helpful for practitioners and those responsible for their activities e.g., interviewers and supervisors and their supervisors to reflect on their adherence to these guidelines and raise any difficulties encountered in meeting them.

If incidents have occurred, these should be recorded. Serious incidents should be discussed with safety officers or professional associations such as MRS.

If incidents arise during the course of the fieldwork, these need to be dealt with straight away for the well-being of the practitioner and/or participant.

Appropriate debriefing - which should also protect the confidentiality of participants- may also help the practitioners come to terms in a healthy way with any incident and enable them to continue to work, as well as providing further material to inform the development of safety codes.

Making guidelines stick

Guidelines on personal safety should form part of standard staff training.

Ways of making guidelines stick will include awareness raising among both new and experienced staff.

- Safety issues should feature in the training of all new research staff, and guidelines should be included in induction packs and staff handbooks. There is a need for continual reminders and reinforcement throughout a researcher's career.
- Supervisors and research managers may need to take staff through procedures with each new fieldwork period.

- Support staff responsible for setting up fieldwork arrangements should be trained in the procedures.

Useful information sources

[Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#)

[Crimestoppers](#)

[Victim Support](#)