

# Is Your Project Human Subjects Research?

## A Guide for Investigators



Santa Clarita Community College District

Office for Protection of Research Subjects

This booklet, prepared by the Santa Clarita Community College District Institutional Review Board (IRB), provides guidance to District investigators who may be uncertain if their study meets the definitions of human subjects research stated in federal regulations (45CFR46.102). The District's IRB recognized that the definition may not always provide a straightforward answer. Is Your Project Human Subjects? A Guide for Investigators offers investigators an explanation of the definitions as well as examples of studies that do or do not qualify as human subjects research. For further information, please refer to the Resources section in the back of this booklet.

## HUMAN RESEARCH

Research projects involving human subjects require review and approval by an Institutional Review Board. An IRB is an ethics committee composed of scientists and non-scientists who serve as advocates for human subjects involved in research. The IRB is charged with the responsibility of reviewing and overseeing human subjects research conducted under the aegis of the District. The first question a research should consider with respect to IRB review is whether the research project fits the definition of human subjects research. In light of the mission to protect human subjects, and the potential regulatory consequences of not obtaining IRB review and approval, **the investigator should choose to err on the side of caution and consult the IRB or the IRB Designee when he/she is uncertain whether the study is human subjects research or not.**

## DEFINING RESEARCH

Federal Regulations define **research** as “**a systematic investigation, including development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge**”<sup>1</sup> (45CFR46.102(d)). As described in the Belmont Report<sup>2</sup> ...the term ‘research’ designates an activity designed to test a hypotheses [and] permit conclusions to be drawn...Research is usually described in a formal protocol that sets forth an objective and a set of procedures to reach that objective.”

“Research generally does **not** include operational activities such as defined practice activities in public health, medicine, psychology, and social work e.g. routine outbreak investigations and disease monitoring) and studies for internal management purposes such as program evaluation, quality assurance, quality improvement, fiscal or program audits, marketing studies or contracted-for services. It generally does not include journalism or political polls. However, some of these activities may include or constitute research in circumstances where there is a clear intent to contribute to generalizable knowledge.

## DEFINING HUMAN SUBJECTS

A **human subject** is defined by Federal Regulations as “**a living individual about whom an investigator conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information.**” (45 CFR46.102(f)(1), (2))

**Living individual**– The specimen(s) / data / information must be collected from live subjects. Cadavers, autopsy specimens or specimens / information from subjects now deceased are not human subjects.

“**About whom**” - a human subject research project requires the data received from the living individual to be about the person.

**Intervention** includes physical procedures, manipulations of the subject, or manipulations of the subject's environment for research purposes. **Interaction** includes communication between the investigator and the subject. This includes face-to-face, mail, and phone interaction as well as other modes of communication.

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<sup>1</sup> “Generalizable knowledge” is information where the intended use of the research findings can be applied to populations or situations beyond that studied.

<sup>2</sup> The Belmont Report is a statement of ethical principles (including beneficence, justice, and autonomy) for human subjects research by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

**Identifiable private information**<sup>3</sup> “includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation is taking place,” (such as a public restroom)” and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a health care record).

Studies based on data that are individually identifiable but are also publicly available may **not** constitute human subjects research. However, the term “publicly available” is intended to refer to record sets that are truly readily available to the broad public, such as census data, or federal health, labor or educational statistics. An investigator should **not**

Assume information qualifies as “publicly available” merely because it has been posted on an electronic website and can be accessed without authorization.

## **IDENTIFYING HUMAN RESEARCH STUDIES**

Certain studies may have the characteristics of human subjects research but may not meet the regulatory definition. Studies which meet the definition require IRB review. There are three categories to be considered:

**Studies that are human subjects research**

**Studies that may be considered human subjects research (gray area)**

**Studies that do not qualify as human subjects research**

Any investigator who is unsure of whether his/her proposal constitutes “human subjects research” should contact the IRB office or submit an online “Request for Human Subjects Research Determination” through [Insert IRB Office Web address]. The IRB staff, Chair and / or designee will determine if the study is human subjects research. Federal regulations do not allow investigators to make this determination themselves.

If a study does not qualify as human subjects research, the IRB can issue a letter stating that the project does not require IRB review or approval. When a “Request for Human Subjects Determination” is submitted through the [Institutional Review Board website](#), a decision letter will be sent to the investigator via email. NOTE: Grants, faculty advisors, or publications may require a determination letter from the IRB / designee.

## **STUDIES THAT ARE NOT HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH**

Studies that fit any of the categories below do not need IRB review.

1. **Data collection** for internal departmental, school, or other District administrative purposes.  
Examples: teaching evaluations, customer service surveys.
2. **Service surveys** issued or completed by District personnel for the intent and purposes of improving services and programs of the District or for developing new services or programs for students, employees, or alumni, as long as the privacy of the subjects is protected, the confidentiality of individual responses are maintained, and survey participation is voluntary. This would include surveys by professional societies or the District. *Note: If at a future date, an opportunity arose to contribute previously collected identifiable or coded survey data to a new study producing generalizable knowledge, IRB review may be required before the data could be released to the new project.*
3. **Information-gathering interviews** where questions focus on things, products, or policies rather than people or their thought regarding themselves. Example: canvassing librarians about inter-library loan policies or rising journal costs.

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<sup>3</sup> Researchers must take caution since disclosure of private information may place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability and/or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

4. **Course-related activities** designed specifically for educational or teaching purposes, where data is collected from and about human subjects as part of a class exercise or assignment, but are **not** intended for use outside of the classroom. Example: instruction on research methods and techniques. *Note: The IRB is only required to review studies that meet the Federal definitions of research and human subject<sup>4</sup>, or “engaged in research.”<sup>5</sup>*
5. **Biography or oral history** research involving a living individual that is not generalizable beyond that individual.
6. **Independent contract for procedures** carried out for an external agency. Examples: personnel studies, cost-benefit analysis, customer satisfaction studies, biological sample processing (for a fee and not authorship or other credit), public park usage, IT usage, and software development.
7. **Research involving cadavers**, autopsy material or bio specimens from now deceased individuals. *Note: Some*
8. *Research in this category, such as genetic studies providing private or medical information about live relatives, may need IRB review. Please contact the IRB for further information.*
9. **Innovative therapies** except when they involve “research” as defined by the above criteria. (An innovative clinical practice is an intervention designed solely to enhance the well being of an individual patient or client. The purpose of an innovative clinical practice is to provide diagnosis, preventative treatment, or therapy to particular individuals.) *Note: When innovative therapies differ significantly from routine practice it should be viewed and treated as such with appropriate safeguards in place to protect the rights and welfare of the patients.*
10. **Quality improvement** projects are generally not considered research unless there is a clear intent to contribute to generalizable knowledge **and** use the data derived from the project to improve or alter the quality of care or the efficiency of an institutional practice. Any individual who is unsure whether or not a proposed quality improvement project should be classified as research should contact the IRB for guidance. If the data is re-examined or re-analyzed and new information surfaces that would contribute to generalizable knowledge, an application must be submitted to the IRB.
11. **Case histories** which are published and/or presented at national or regional meetings are **not** considered research if the case is limited to a description of the clinical features and/or outcome of a single patient and do not contribute to generalizable knowledge.
12. **Publicly available data** do **not** require IRB review. Examples: census data, labor statistics. *Note: Investigators should contact the IRB if they are uncertain as to whether the data qualifies as “publicly available.”*
13. **Coded private information or biological specimens** that were **not** collected for the currently proposed projects do not need IRB review as long as the investigator cannot link the coded data / specimens back to individual subjects. If the data / specimen provider has access to the identity of the subjects (e.g. subjects’ names,
14. Addresses, etc.), the investigator must enter into an agreement with the data / specimen provider that states under no circumstances will the identity of the subjects be released to the investigator. *Note: Investigators are not allowed to make this determination. These projects require verification for the IRB or the IRB liaison / designee.  
(<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/assurance/engage.htm>)*
15. Some examples of **Non-Engagement in Research** include: when an institution’s employees or agents act as consultants on research but at no time obtain, receive, or possess identifiable private

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/assurance/engage.htm>

information, perform commercial services for the investigators, or inform prospective subjects about the availability of research. *Note: the examples above are not an all inclusive listing.* (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/assurance/engage.htm>).

## STUDIES THAT ARE HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

1. Studies that utilize test subjects for new devices, products, drugs, or materials.
2. Studies that collect data through intervention or interaction with individuals. Examples of this type of research include drug trials, internet surveys about alcohol consumption, studies that involve deception, research involving risky behaviors or attitudes, and open-ended interviews with minors that contribute to generalizable knowledge.
3. Studies using private information that can be readily identified with individuals, even if the information was not collected specifically for the study in question.
4. Studies that use bodily materials such as cells, blood, urine, tissues, organs, hair, or nail clippings, even if one did not collect these materials for the study. However, such research may be considered exempt or not human subjects research if the materials/data are coded and the investigator does not have access to the coding systems. Guidance on research involving coded private information or biological specimens is available on the web at: (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/cdebiol.pdf>)
5. Studies that produce generalizable knowledge about categories or classes of subjects from individually identifiable information.
6. Studies that use human being to evaluate environmental alterations, for example, weatherization options or habitat modifications to their living or working space or test chamber.

## RESOURCES

- United States Department of Health and Human Services: [Office for Human Research Protections \(OHRP\)](#)
- US HHS Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) **decision chart to assist in determining whether a project is human subjects research.** select: [Chart 1: Is an Activity Research Involving Human Subjects?](#)
- US HHS Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) [Engagement of Institutions in Research](#)
- [United States Food and Drug Administration](#)
- [Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects \(Common Rule\)](#)
- [Guidance on Research Involving Coded Private Information or Biological Specimens](#)
- Prichard, Ivor A. [Searching for “Research Involving Human Subjects”: What is Examined? What is Exempt? What is Exasperating;](#) IRB: Ethics and Human Research 23, no.3 (2001), 5-12
- Santa Clarita Community College District: [Institutional Review Board website](#)

## **WHOM TO CONTACT**

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