Irish Prison Service Research Ethics Guidance Document

Irish Prison Service Research Ethics Guidance Document

1.0 Research Officer

Applications to conduct research in the Irish Prison Service, should be submitted using the Irish Prison Service research application form (Form R1). Completed forms and relevant supporting information should be sent to:

Research Officer,
Irish Prison Service College,
Brian Stack House,
Dublin Road,
Portlaoise,
Co. Laois.

2.0 Role of Supervisor

Supervisors must assume overall ethical responsibility for the scientific and professional activities of those (students, trainees, assistants, supervisees) whose research work they supervise. This responsibility includes monitoring of researchers' activity and making them aware of the ethical principles involved. Because of the complexity of ethical issues that can be encountered in respect of prison-based research, researchers should consult their supervisors or colleagues about ethical issues in the planning stage and throughout the project, in particular if specific ethical problems present themselves.

3.0 Ethical Decision Making

The following principles apply when a specific problem presents itself in the course of a project:

3.1 Researchers should inform themselves of ethical issues relating to prison-based research. Supervisees should consult with a supervisor, the Research Officer of the Irish Prison Service and/or appropriate groups and committees if faced with a difficult choice or apparent conflict. They should seek consensus on the most ethical course of action and the most responsible, knowledgeable, effective and respectful way to carry it out. Researchers should refer to their discipline's Code of Ethics and Professional Practice Guidelines for guidance on these matters.

3.2 Prisoners are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by research because their freedom to give informed consent is easily undermined and because of learning
6.0 Deception

In general, research involving deception, concealment or covert observation is not considered ethical because voluntary and fully informed consent cannot be obtained. Exceptional circumstances in some fields of research, such as the study of human behaviour, may require deception, concealment and covert observation. The Research Officer may consider research involving deception, concealment or covert observation, if specific requirements are met, for example, if:

- The scientific validity of the outcome of the research would be jeopardised if participants were provided with information regarding the objectives, procedures and methods of the research.

- The extent of such activities is specifically defined.

- The desired information cannot be acquired through alternative methods.

- The participants do not experience increased risk due to such activities.

- The disclosure to the participants is adequate and prompt and de-briefing of each participant occurs as soon as possible after participation is completed.

- The participants are allowed to withdraw data which they provided without their knowledge or consent during the research process.

- Such activities will not have a negative effect on the relationship between researchers/research and the community.

In the event that deception is unavoidable a debriefing for research participants is necessary following such studies. The researcher should clarify for the participants the real nature of and rationale for the research and seek to remove any misconceptions.

7.0 Privacy

Individuals have a right to keep a part of their lives free from intrusion, and information privacy is an area of particular importance. A fundamental requirement of ethical research is that information disclosed within the context of a research relationship be kept confidential.

The researcher has a duty not to share confidential information with others, without the participant’s voluntary, informed consent. However, confidentiality is not absolute; sometimes research values and societal values conflict, in which case, the infringement of
The researcher should inform a responsible appropriate authority. In the prison setting this implies a designated responsible authority, for example, governor, Chief Officer, psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse manager or probation officer.

Information relevant to managing risk should be shared on a need-to-know basis. Unless doing so risks serious harm, the research participant should be informed about who has been told what and why.

Anonymity is the best protection of confidentiality in regard to personal information and records. However researchers should be aware that the public nature of focus group methodology means that neither anonymity nor confidentiality can be guaranteed as the actions of the group members are beyond the direct control of the researcher. Last part not clear - give example (divulging of what said by other group members?)

9.0 Personal Information

Personal information may be classified into one of three types of data: identified, potentially identifiable, and de-identified.

9.1 Identified data refers to information which has identifiers attached to it, meaning that specific individuals could be identified. Identifiers include factors such as the individual’s name, address, city, county, postal code, elements of dates directly related to an individual (such as dates of birth, death, admission, discharge, etc.), phone and fax numbers, electronic mail addresses, account numbers, certificate/license numbers, vehicle and/or device identifiers and serial numbers, web universal locators (URLs), internet protocol (IP) address numbers, biometric identifiers including finger and voice prints, full face photographic or comparable images, and unique identifying numbers (not codes assigned to data by researchers).

9.2 Potentially identifiable data is coded information that can be re-identified. Coded means that the identifiers have been removed and replaced by a symbol, such as a number, a series of letters or another name. This is a reversible process of de-identification in which it is possible to use the code to re-identify specific individuals related to the data. Within qualitative research it is important to remember that recordings of interviews or focus groups can be considered potentially identifiable, even if audio tapes or audio files have no identifiable markings on them. In addition, transcribed qualitative data which has not been thoroughly de-identified can also be considered potentially identifiable data.

9.3 De-identified data refers to information that is anonymous, thus not re-identifiable. The data has either never been identified or the identifiers have been permanently removed. De-identification is an irreversible process. It is important to note that data from which only the names are removed is not de-identified; an
Irish Prison Service Research Ethics Guidance Document

Restricting access to data should never be seen as the only way to protect confidentiality. Obtaining appropriate informed consent and anonymising data enable most data to be shared.

To ensure that consent is informed, consent must be freely given with sufficient information provided on all aspects of participation and data use. There must be active communication between the parties.

Failure to properly and fully address issues of informed consent will result in a delay or rejection of applications. Consent procedures must be tailored for the specific research context, methods and sample, the nature of the data (personal, sensitive, level of detail), the format of the data (surveys, written, recordings,) and the planned data uses and handling. This will influence the type of consent and consent process used.

The provisions of both European and Irish law, such as the Data Protection Acts 1988-2003, and guidelines of many professional research organisations recommend the following principles be followed to ensure that consent is informed:

- consent must be freely given with sufficient detail to indicate what participating in the study will involve
- there must be active communication between the parties - what is expected from participants and why their participation is required
- documentation outlining consent has to differentiate between consent to participate and consent to allow data to be published and shared
- consent cannot be inferred from a non-response to a communication such as a letter or invitation to participate.

10.0 Literacy ²

10.1 Participant information and consent form

Participants may have low literacy levels, so documents must be written in plain, concise language that participants will understand.

An informed consent form should explain to the participant what informed consent is, what the research is about and why the prisoner is involved. A sample form is attached at Appendix 1.

² Researchers are encouraged to read The Prison Adult Literacy Survey (2003) available on the IPS website. Researchers are also encouraged to use the Plain English website and NALA websites to assist in developing appropriate forms.
Appendix 1

Sample Consent Form

(Name) has explained to me what this research is about and why I was asked to be interviewed.

- I know what this research is about.
- I have had the chance to ask questions about the research.
- I know I don’t have to be interviewed if I don’t want to.
- I know that if I sign this form I agree to be asked questions and have my answers recorded/written down.
- If I change my mind during the interview and don’t want to be involved, I know I can stop and anything that was recorded or written down will be destroyed.
- I know my real name will not be used at all during this research and that I will not be able to be identified in any research report.
- I know that my answers are confidential unless there is reason to believe that either I or someone else may be in danger
- I know I can contact (Name) at a later date if I have any queries/concerns about the research or what I said, or if I decide I don’t want my answers to be used.

Signed

______________________________

Date ______

Name in block letters

______________________________

3 In line with Exception to Confidentiality set out in the Irish Prison Service Ethics Guidance Document.