

# ***Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration*** **Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>**



privacy; and cost-benefit analysis. It is of relevance to anyone involved in gathering information—whether in an academic or community setting—and those who are asked to take part in research.

## **DEFINITIONS**

In this document, **research** is defined as any activity that involves data collection and knowledge creation with and by people in situations of displacement. This includes, but is not limited to, interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, experiments, observation, and access to case files and administrative data.<sup>3</sup>

**Researcher** is defined as anyone who conducts research, including students, academics, scholar-practitioners, and service providers collecting data for accreditation, reporting, or evaluation. While not all of these activities are subject to formal ethics approval, the ethical considerations presented here represent consensus on good practice for anyone involved in research-related activities with people in situations of forced migration.

**People in situations of forced migration** (also referred to as displaced people for brevity) includes a broad spectrum of displacement, including refugee claimants, those with refugee status, people whose refugee claims have been rejected, trafficked persons, and internally displaced persons. These principles apply to all groups who have been forced to leave their homes, not just those individuals who have refugee status.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research can contribute to better understanding of the forced migration experience to inform policy and programming, but it can also cause inconvenience and harm to research respondents.<sup>2</sup> In situations of forced migration, the stakes are particularly high because of precarious legal status, unequal power relations, far-reaching anti-terrorism legislation, and the criminalization of migration. In response, the Canadian Council for Refugees, York's Centre for Refugee Studies, and the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies collaborated to complement established ethical principles with specific ethical considerations for research with people in situations of forced migration. This executive summary highlights our guiding principles and applies the ethical concepts of voluntary, informed consent; respect for

<sup>1</sup>This document provides a plain language summary of Christina Clark-Kazak, with CCR, CARFMS and CRS, 2017. "Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration" *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 33(2): 11-17 <https://goo.gl/V9StRq>

<sup>2</sup>Recognizing power relations inherent in facilitating true participation, this document uses the term respondent to indicate those individuals who are providing information as part of the research. In some ethics documents, the term human subject is used.

<sup>3</sup>Not all of these research activities are necessarily subject to Research Ethics Board approval; however, this document sets out principles of good practice that should be considered whenever research is undertaken in contexts of forced migration.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ▶ **Equity:** We will strive to make our research relationships as equitable as possible, by being conscious of power dynamics and guarding against risks of abuse of power.
- ▶ **Right to self-determination:** We will respect and support the right of people in contexts of forced migration to make their own decisions about their lives and the degree of participation in research processes.
- ▶ **Competence:** We will use appropriate research methods and practices, recognize our own limits, and accept a duty of care.
- ▶ **Partnership:** We will include relevant partners in our research throughout the research process: from purpose of the research, design, data collection, analysis, and use of the findings, to dissemination of results.

## APPLICATION OF KEY ETHICAL PRINCIPLES TO RESEARCH IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED MIGRATION

### Voluntary, Informed Consent

All research respondents must voluntarily and formally consent to participate in research after having been informed of the potential risks and benefits of their participation. They must be able to withdraw from the research at any time with no discrimination, retaliation, or harm.

- ▶ Displaced people who have had negative interactions with authorities and/or from different cultural traditions may be suspicious of written consent forms. Oral consent should be provided as an option in these cases, with clear procedures on how to obtain and record such oral consent.
- ▶ Researchers may rely on service providers or refugee organizations to gain access to potential respondents. However, only research respondents themselves can consent to participate. Moreover, respondents should be clearly informed that their decision to participate—or not—will have no impact on their access to services.
- ▶ While financial compensation can be offered for people's time and/or child care and/or transportation costs in order to remove barriers to participation, this should be proportionate and reasonable. Displaced people in financial need should not feel pressured to participate for financial reasons. Compensation must not be tied to or depend upon completion of the research study.
- ▶ Research rarely directly benefits individual respondents. This needs to be clearly explained to people in situations of forced migration, so that they do not participate only in the hope that their participation will bring direct material, legal, or other benefits.

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## **Confidentiality and Privacy**

Researchers have a duty to protect respondents' personal information and not disclose any identifying characteristics that would compromise anonymity, especially if sample sizes are small.

- Data collected by researchers could be subject to subpoenas in criminal proceedings and civil litigation, including in relation to far-reaching anti-terrorism legislation. Research subjects should be made aware of these risks. Researchers should avoid collecting potentially incriminating data and only those directly relevant to the research topic. These data should be completely anonymized immediately upon collection so that no information can be directly linked to a particular individual. Wherever and whenever possible, researchers should avoid collecting data with personal identifiers.
- Researchers and respondents should also be aware that electronic survey tools with servers that are housed outside of Canada are subject to legislation in the country where the server is located, including, in some cases, access by government officials to all data collected. In these cases, the consent form should include information on access and storage and potential limits to confidentiality.
- Researchers should make clear the limits of confidentiality where respondents disclose abuse, exploitation, and self-harm. Researchers should have a strategy for referral to external resources in case of such incidents.
- Identification of research respondents may have serious consequences for their safety, well-being, migration status, and/or eligibility for services. Researchers should take extra care to encrypt and securely store data and to remove any characteristics that could identify research subjects, including by association.
- While audio-visual materials can be important data, they also pose particular challenges in confidentiality and anonymity. They should be used with caution, and only with the explicit permission of all people appearing in these materials. Research subjects should have the opportunity to request the destruction of such audio-visual materials in which they appear at any time.
- Interpreters, researchers, and others involved in the research must understand and sign a confidentiality agreement.
- Where research subjects wish to be named in the research, researchers must respect this desire for self-determination and find ways to do so that do not compromise the anonymity of others who do not wish to be identified.

## **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Minimize harm and maximize benefits of research.

- Researchers should collaborate to avoid over-researching some populations.
- Researchers should avoid sensitive and potentially re-traumatizing topics—such as sexual violence and torture—except when they are directly relevant to the research topic. In these cases, external resources and services must be identified and readily available in case a referral is necessary. All efforts should be made to minimize harm.
- All efforts should be made to include a diversity of perspectives in research studies, with specific recruitment strategies and methodology to include differential perspectives and research needs based on age, gender, sexuality, ability, class, race, education, literacy, and language.
- Researchers should ensure maximum dissemination of research results in relevant languages and in multiple media (oral, written, visual) and clearly indicate to research subjects where such research results will be available.

## Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration



### CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WORKING IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED MIGRATION WHO ARE APPROACHED TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

- If required, has the researcher obtained ethics clearance from the home institution? If so, has the researcher provided a copy of the ethics approval documents, as well as the contact information for the institution's Research Ethics Board? If there are no ethics clearance processes, how will the principles of consent, confidentiality, and cost-benefit analysis be assessed and applied?
- Does the researcher have an appropriate voluntary, informed consent process?
- How will we communicate with our clients and colleagues so that they understand that they do not have to participate in the research in order to continue to receive our services?
- How will the privacy and confidentiality of data be ensured?
- What are the processes in place in case research reveals criminality, exploitation, or self-harm?
- Who is not included in the research? What modifications and strategies could be made to facilitate the participation of these individuals?
- How will the researcher share the results of the research, including anonymized data?
- Has the researcher factored into the project budget compensation for the time and other resources non-academic partners invest in research, including as respondents, serving on advisory committees, recruiting other respondents, and facilitating the participation of other respondents?