



GUIDANCE NOTES FOR INVESTIGATORS

Conducting Interviews and Working Alone Off-Campus

These guidelines are primarily intended to help assure the safety of investigators who conduct research activities or interviews with participants when such work is undertaken off campus. Compliance with this guidance should assist in:

- protecting investigators by reducing the risk of exposure to physical threat or abuse.
- preventing investigators from being placed in a situation in which they might be vulnerable to accusations of improper behaviour.
- protecting participants by providing investigators with advice on best practice in this area.

1. Design of Research and Risk Assessment

Before undertaking research activities or interviews off-campus, a risk assessment should be conducted taking into account the factors below. It may be necessary to amend or redesign a proposal following such an assessment.

- **Method:** Is it necessary to conduct one-to-one interviews, or would an alternative methodology be more appropriate. Is it possible for investigators to work in pairs?
- **Interview location:** Where should interviews/activities take place? A public place may be a safer option than the participant's home.
- **Investigators:** Who should conduct the interviews/activities? Which investigator has the appropriate skills/experience?
- **Interviewees/Participants:** Who are they? Are they drawn from a vulnerable or potentially dangerous group?

2. Preparation for Conducting Interviews/Activities Off-Campus

2.1 Understanding the Environment

- Wherever possible, investigator's should study a map of the area, or visit the location in advance.
- Knowing in advance the location of hubs of activity such as shops, pubs, schools or the local police station may provide investigators with a possible escape route should this be necessary.
- Investigators should be aware of any social or cultural tensions in the area.
- If travelling by car, investigators should consider the safest place to park, e.g. a well-lit area after dark.
- If using public transport, investigators should check its reliability and also carry the telephone number of a reputable local taxi firm.

2.2 Understanding Participants

- Investigators should take time to investigate and understand the individual circumstances of participants before conducting an off-campus interview. If appropriate, investigators should be aware of the psychological/behavioural history of participants. Being aware of potentially volatile individuals and/or circumstances in advance can help investigators to plan accordingly.

2.3 Training

- New staff should have general training on conducting off-campus interviews, and basic interview skills during their induction period. This may include accompanying a more experienced colleague on an off-campus visit.
- Investigators conducting off-campus interviews/activities should be trained in techniques for handling threats, abuse or compromising situations.
- Some research may require additional specific training such as understanding cultural/religious norms.

3. Precautions When Conducting Off-Campus Interviews/Activities

3.1 Personal Safety

The personal safety of investigators working off-campus is paramount and should be considered more important than the successful completion of the interviews/activities.

Investigators **SHOULD NOT**:

- Enter someone's home if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Enter a house if the person they have arranged to see is not there.
- Undertake an interview or assessment in a bedroom.
- Give a personal telephone number or address to a participant.

Investigators **SHOULD**:

- Ask a colleague to accompany them if they feel uncomfortable.
- Upon arrival (or if requested for observations), explain their research role and the conditions of confidentiality to the participant and offer them the opportunity to ask questions.
- Consider an appropriate exit strategy (what to say etc) should they wish to terminate an interview/activity early.
- Take steps to leave a situation immediately if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Adopt a friendly and professional manner when conducting interviews/activities but be careful not to be over-familiar.
- Ask for household pets to be shut in another room if their presence during the interview/activity is a cause of concern.

3.2 Maintaining Contact

It is essential that investigators conducting off-campus interviews/activities maintain contact with a nominated colleague. The investigator should ensure the nominated colleague knows the following:



- Name, address and telephone contact of participant/destination.
- Investigator's mobile telephone number.
- Time of leaving the office/starting the activity.
- Method of transport to location (car registration if appropriate).
- Time of interview/activity and expected duration.

Investigators should contact their nominated colleague when they arrive at the location. When undertaking one-to-one interviews, in the presence of the participant, the investigator should inform their nominated colleague where they are and who they are with.

If at any point during the interview or activity the investigator feels unsafe; they should excuse themselves, go to another room or location, and call for assistance using their mobile phone. Departments may wish to consider introducing codes in case of a threatening situation. For example, phoning to ask a colleague to check if you have left a ring-binder on the desk could be a code for "I do not feel safe, please send someone to the house."

Once the interview/activity has been completed, the investigator should contact their nominated colleague at an agreed time to let them know they have left safely. If the interview/activity is still in progress when the deadline for contacting their nominated colleague approaches, the researcher should contact their nominated colleague to inform them. If the deadline passes and the investigator has not been in contact, their nominated colleague should ring the mobile phone of the investigator. If there is no answer, the nominated colleague should ring again 10 minutes later. If there is still no reply, the Dean of School/Head of Department must be informed. With the agreement of the Dean of School/Head of Department, two members of staff from the department may proceed to the location to check on the investigator's safety.

3.3 Mobile Telephones

All investigators who conduct off-campus interviews/activities should be in possession of a mobile telephone. Investigators should ensure that mobile telephones are fully charged and should be left switched on throughout the interview/activity. Investigators should bear in mind that mobile telephones are sometimes out of range and cannot be depended upon entirely. Over reliance on mobile telephones must not substitute for proper training in interpersonal skills and personal safety techniques.

3.4 Personal Alarms

All researchers who conduct off-campus interviews/activities should be provided with a personal alarm. Investigators should carry the alarm in their pocket or hand (not in their bag or briefcase) so that it is easily accessible.

3.5 Identification Card

All investigators who conduct off-campus visits should carry an official identity card with photograph. It is good practice to invite participants to check the card.

3.6 Money

Investigators should always carry enough money for expected and unexpected expenses, including the use of taxis. However, it is sensible not to appear to be carrying a lot of money.

3.7 Miscellaneous

In addition to mobile phone, personal alarm, identity card and money, investigators should always have access to a comprehensive map of the area and a source of light.

4. Debriefing and Support Following Off-Campus Interviews/Activities

When off-campus interviews/activities are complete, it is likely to be helpful for investigators to reflect on their adherence to safety guidelines and raise any difficulties encountered during the project. Where necessary, individual experiences should be used to inform the design of future projects/interview protocols.

Any incidents that occur during the interviews/activities should be formally recorded and dealt with immediately. Serious incidents should be discussed with safety officers or professional associations. If violent or traumatic incidents have occurred which may have some impact on the physical and/or psychological well-being of investigators, these should be reported to the appropriate authorities (e.g. health and safety officer, occupational health, counsellors, police).

Formal arrangements should be in place for investigators to be accompanied by a colleague for subsequent interviews/activities if there have been any incidents giving cause for concern on the first occasion.

5. Further Information

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of considerations when planning research involving working alone off-campus. However, it is hoped that these guidelines will encourage researchers to adopt best practice and familiarise themselves with the relevant safety issues.

The following websites may also be of interest:

[Social Research Association Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers](#)

[The Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#)

[Social Care Institute for Excellence](#)

[Lone Working - HSE Leaflet](#)

[British Sociological Association](#)