

Unit 4 - Seminar preparation: Case study - Privacy
James Hines
RMPP

Background

Ricardo is a computer clerk at a government office, Beth is carrying out research within the same department. Beth has been given access to property tax files but anonymized. Beth would now like the names and addresses of those anonymized individuals so that she can contact them. Let's look at the ethical issues surrounding this case.

If Ricardo is not responsible for determining allowable access, should he release the names and addresses?

Legally and ethically, Ricardo should refrain from releasing the names and addresses and suggest that Beth approaches the management team/leader who granted her access to carry out the research. Beth may have to apply to the research body with a new ethical paper outlining the reasons. Depending on many factors such as where they are working, the legal citizenship of the owners of the properties where the property tax records, will determine which laws and how many laws are applicable. Ricardo could be violating the UK GDPR, EU GDPR, CCPA and more.

Suppose Ricardo were responsible for determining allowable access to the files. What ethical issues would be involved in his deciding whether to grant access to Beth?

The ethical issues would surround the privacy of the individuals in questions. As a trusted employee of a government office who has access to private information, it is highly likely that the office has policies and procedures in place to protect private data from being exposed.

Should Beth be allowed to contact the individuals involved? That is, should the Records department release individuals' names to a researcher? What are the ethical issues for the Records department to consider?

It is possible, that after legal advice, the department may be permitted to send a letter to the individuals to explain what the research is and why it is required for the researcher to go an extra step to interview the individuals. The individuals may need to send a permission letter back to the department if they grant permission to meet with the researcher.

Suppose Beth contacts the individuals to ask their permission, and one-third of them respond giving permission, one-third respond denying permission, and one-third do not respond. Beth claims that at least one-half of the individuals are needed to make a valid study. What options are available to Beth?

If Beth reached out to the individuals legally, following any and all rules associated with her ethics committee after receiving permission from the ethics board, then it may be possible for Beth to still interview the individuals who have given permission, but Beth should not apply any pressure to those who have not agreed.