

Institutional Review Boards

IRBs are tasked with ensuring that the rights and welfare of human research subjects will be protected at all institutions, including universities, hospitals, nonprofit research institutions, and other organizations, that receive federal support for research. IRBs typically consist of members from a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, economics, education, social work, and communications (to name a few). Most IRBs also include representatives from the community in which they reside. For example, representatives from nearby prisons, hospitals, or treatment centers might sit on the IRBs of university campuses near them. The diversity of membership helps to ensure that the many and complex ethical issues that may arise from human subjects research will be considered fully and by a knowledgeable and experienced panel. Investigators conducting research on human subjects are required to submit proposals outlining their research plans to IRBs for review and approval prior to beginning their research. Even students who conduct research on human subjects must have their proposed work reviewed and approved by the IRB before beginning any research (though, on some campuses, some exceptions are made for classroom projects that will not be shared outside of the classroom).

It may surprise you to hear that IRBs are not always popular or appreciated by researchers. Who *wouldn't* want to conduct ethical research, you ask? In some cases, the concern is that IRBs are most well versed in reviewing biomedical and experimental research, neither of which is particularly common within sociology. Much sociological research, especially qualitative research, is open ended in nature, a fact that can be problematic for IRBs. The members of IRBs often want to know in advance exactly who will be observed, where, when, and for how long, whether and how they will be approached, exactly what questions they will be asked, and what predictions the researcher has for her or his findings. Providing this level of detail for a yearlong participant observation within an activist group of 200-plus members, for example, would be extraordinarily frustrating for the researcher in the best case and most likely would prove to be impossible. Of course, IRBs do not intend to have researchers avoid studying controversial topics or avoid using certain methodologically sound data-collection techniques, but unfortunately, that is sometimes the result. The solution is not to do away with review boards, which serve a necessary and important function, but instead to help educate IRB members about the variety of social scientific research methods and topics covered by sociologists and other social scientists.