

The Case

Ricardo works for the records department of his local government as a computer records clerk, where he has access to files of property tax records. For a scientific study, a researcher, Beth, has been granted access to the numerical portion “but not the corresponding names” of some records.

Beth finds some information that she would like to use, but she needs the names and addresses corresponding with certain properties. Beth asks Ricardo to retrieve these names and addresses, so she can contact these people for more information and for permission to do further study.

Answers

This scenario raises several ethical concerns related to data privacy, professional responsibility, and research ethics. At its core, the case centres around whether it is acceptable to disclose identifiable information held in public records for research purposes, and under what conditions such disclosure is ethically and legally justifiable.

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

No, he should not. Ricardo has a professional obligation to follow the policies of his organisation. If he is not authorised to grant access to personally identifiable information, doing so would breach internal regulations and potentially violate data protection laws.

By releasing personal details without formal approval:

- Ricardo risks violating confidentiality,
- He may undermine public trust in the records department,
- He could face disciplinary or legal consequences under data protection frameworks such as the UK GDPR.

Even if Beth's request appears innocuous, Ricardo's role does not entitle him to override data governance protocols

2. If Ricardo were responsible for determining access, what ethical issues would he face in deciding whether to grant it?

In such a case, Ricardo would need to balance the potential value of the research against individuals' rights to privacy and consent.

Key considerations include:

- Whether Beth's study has been ethically approved by a recognised research body,
- If the individuals in question have previously consented to their data being used for secondary purposes,
- Whether the use of data is proportionate and necessary, in line with principles such as data minimisation and purpose limitation.

The ethical framework demands that Ricardo does not simply consider the research aim but ensures that any data sharing adheres to transparent and lawful processing standards.

3. Should Beth be allowed to contact the individuals involved?

Only under clearly defined and approved conditions. Personal data, even when held by public institutions, must not be disclosed for unsolicited contact without sufficient safeguards.

For the records department to release names to Beth:

- There must be legal and ethical justification,
- A data sharing agreement should be in place,
- Individuals must be made aware of how their data is being used and given the chance to opt in.

Contacting individuals without prior consent may cause distress or infringe on their right to privacy, especially if they were unaware their data might be used for research purposes.

4. If Beth receives mixed responses to her request for participation, what should she do?

Beth must respect the principle of informed consent. If only one-third of individuals provide permission, she may only use data from that group. She cannot infer consent from non-responses, and doing so would be ethically indefensible.

Beth has several ethical options:

- Proceed with only the data from individuals who have consented,
- Send a follow-up communication to non-respondents, clarifying the purpose of the study and reiterating their voluntary participation,
- Reconsider the scope or methodology of the study to accommodate a smaller dataset,
- Postpone or redesign the study if insufficient data is available.

While Beth may be concerned about the validity of her study, this cannot override ethical requirements.

Conclusion

This case illustrates the importance of maintaining ethical integrity in research involving personal data. Both Ricardo and Beth must ensure that their actions align with legal requirements, institutional policies, and principles of respect, consent, and transparency. The pursuit of research cannot justify violating individuals' privacy or undermining public trust. Clear ethical boundaries must guide all decisions related to data access and participant contact.