

# Case Study on Privacy

Please read the case below and answer the questions. You need to determine the ethical issues involved with this case.

## 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.

Now consider, what are the ethical issues involved in deciding which of these options to pursue?

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

If Ricardo is not responsible for determining allowable access then he should certainly not release the names and addresses. To do so would violate ethical standards and potentially privacy laws.

**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?**

If Ricardo was responsible for determining allowable access, it doesn't necessarily mean that he should. Names and addresses are personal information and should not be used for any purpose other than what they were supplied for (in this case to record the payment of property tax) without prior consent of the individuals.

**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?**

Unless the individuals have already given their consent to be contacted for research purposes, Ricardo should not release their personal details. It might seem paradoxical that without the personal details, the individuals cannot be contacted to give their consent, but that is not Ricardo's problem. If consent wasn't given, they should not be released.

**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?**

Beth can only use the records of those who have given their express permission. So she can only use one third of the data. If that means that the study is potentially invalid her options would be:

1. Cancel the study
2. Change the study to an alternative where the number of respondents can be lower and still be valid.
3. Continue with the study, using only the one third of respondents who gave permission, and clearly declare the response rate in the results to highlight that the findings might lack validity.