

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?

Response

Ricardo should not disclose the names and addresses. He still holds some degree of responsibility as participants have not provided permission to have their details disclosed. Furthermore, enforcement action could be taken if Ricardo were found to failing to comply with GDPR (Information Commissioner's Office, 2023).

- 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?

Response

Ricardo should evaluate if the intended use of data aligns with the purpose for which it was originally collected. Ricardo should protect the privacy and confidentiality 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?

Response

Based on the purpose of the information collected, Ricardo could instead reach out to the participants on behalf of Beth. The informed consent ethical guideline is what needs to be considered by the records department.

- 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?

Response

Beth can follow up and contact the non-respondents again to see if they will provide permission. If no further respondents provide permission, then Beth will have to conduct the study with the one third of participants that responded and potentially change the design of the study.