

Seminar 3: Case Study - 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?

No, he should not release the names and addresses.

- 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?

In effect, Ricardo is divulging personal data to Beth if he gives her access to the records that contain names and addresses and other personally identifying information. This is specifically prohibited by GDPR. Ricardo can also put his customer's privacy at risk because he has no control over how Beth, the third party, will protect or process the personal information that has been released

- 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?

The ethical argument described in the response to the previous question must be taken into account by the records department. The only circumstance in which the records department may do this is in cases when the subject of the communication has given their explicit approval to participate.

- 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?

The best course of action in this situation would be for Beth to get in touch with those who did not reply to her initial communication and attempt to secure their consent to be a part of the study. Otherwise, she might need to reconsider the research proposal and setting.