

Best Practice Guidelines for Research on Drugs Issues: Summary and Recommendations

Research into the social and economic consequences of illegal drug use needs to integrate the different voices affected by drugs and drug policy. Conducting research with these populations can advance knowledge about what underlies participation in illegal drug markets and the impacts of drug policies on marginalised groups, while contributing to the development of interventions and policy that can minimise harm. The following advice is intended to help guide researchers and Research Ethics Committees to facilitate ethical research on drugs issues and destigmatise potential participants. This guidance has been drawn up as a result of a University of Bristol Brigstow Institute project in coordination with Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2023)¹:

Language

- Avoid using stigmatising and shaming language which could make participants feel uncomfortable, unsafe and unwelcome.
- Instead use humanising, personal language and emphasise the ‘person’ first - do not define people by their drug activity or diagnosis (e.g. person who uses drugs – not drug user).
- Always check how participants would prefer to be addressed and respect their views.

Consent

- If the goal of the research study involves people who use drugs, then the active participation of such people is to be recommended in order to improve the validity and legitimacy of the research. Researchers should assume that they have the capacity to make a decision regarding their participation, even if under the effects of drugs, rather than assume that they do not.
- Consent should be iterative: before each encounter, the researcher should ensure that the participant wants to contribute in that moment. Researchers should consider how to adapt methods to work with participants under the influence of drugs, and at what point research should be paused.

Illegality and vulnerability

- When studying populations involved with illegal drugs, researchers should take great care to build trusting relationships with participants to allay fears of legal jeopardy and other forms of stigma, violence and exploitation.
- Researchers should approach the study of the production, transportation, distribution and consumption of drugs as research into livelihoods, economies and experiences (among other factors) rather than centering criminality.
- There may be need for additional caution if generating audio-visual data. This should be discussed and decided upon with participants.
- Researchers should prioritise their responsibilities and moral obligations to protect participants wherever possible.

Paying participants

- All participants should receive cash remuneration or vouchers for their collaboration as good practice. People who produce, transport, sell and use drugs should be assumed to be autonomous individuals able to make their own decisions about taking part in research and should not be treated differently to any other participants in terms of payment for their participation.²

¹ For the complete document, visit: <https://transformdrugs.org/publications/best-practice-guidelines-for-research-around-drugs-issues>

² This recommendation draws on advice from the Health Research Authority ethics guidance on payments and incentives in research. NHS Health Research Authority, ‘HRA Ethics Guidance: Payments and Incentives in Research’, 2014, <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/www.hra.nhs.uk/media/documents/hra-guidance-payments-incentives-research.pdf>.