



Guidance: Snowball Sampling

Overview

Snowball sampling (or chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, referral sampling) is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit or refer future subjects from among their acquaintances.

This recruitment approach may be approved by the IRB with justification to its use and how it relates to the study and subject population. The protocol should address how the risk of violating an individual's privacy will be minimized and how snowball sampling may impact other study risks. Investigators are to provide this justification in the recruitment section of the protocol application form.

Examples of acceptable approaches

- ❖ A research team member provides information to subjects and encourage them to pass it on to others who may be interested or eligible. The information provided to enrolled subjects (fliers, letters of explanation, etc.) must be approved by the IRB. Interested prospective participants could then contact the project for more information and possible inclusion.
- ❖ A research team member may ask subjects to obtain permission from others prior to disclosing their contact information. In this scenario, the researcher would not directly contact the referred/potential subject without permission from the potential subject and would not have access to any information about a potential subject without permission from that individual.

Note: Current participants cannot receive incentives or compensation for referrals.

Examples of unacceptable approaches

There are times when the IRB will not approve snowball recruitment approaches regardless of the justification provided. Some examples include:

- ❖ Snowball simply for convenience.
- ❖ Vulnerable population that can put an individual at risk if privacy is violated, e.g., U.S. documentation status.
- ❖ Sensitive data being collected and sharing names "outs" a person; e.g., HIV status, married individual having an extramarital affair, individuals who have terminated a pregnancy, etc.
- ❖ Data that includes engaging in illegal activities, e.g., underage drinking, drug use/abuse, etc.
- ❖ The person providing the name has authority (power) over others. In these cases, there may be a perception of coercion, e.g., employers providing employee names.