

Guidance: Avoiding the Perception of “Drive-By Research”

Overview

Ethical research goes beyond regulatory compliance. Thoughtful engagement, transparency, and follow-through are essential to building trust and strengthening the impact of your research.

“Drive-by research” refers to studies that engage communities only for data collection, with little collaboration, transparency, or follow-up. This can damage trust that has been established and negatively impact both participants and the broader research environment.

The following practices are intended to support respectful, ethical, and community-centered research.

At What Point do I Engage with the Community?

- Engage with community partners early in the study design to ensure your research aims align with community needs
- Continue to seek input throughout the study on:
 - Research questions
 - Recruitment approaches
 - Data collection methods
- Determine whether additional approvals or letters of support are necessary
- Approach engagement with cultural awareness and sensitivity

This shifts the study from extraction → collaboration

How Do I Establish and Foster Authentic Relationships?

- Recognize that some communities may have prior experiences with research that influence trust
- Identify appropriate community contacts, organizations, or leaders
- Clarify roles: For example; advisor, collaborator, site partner
- Avoid treating access as purely transactional

If the relationship ends when data collection ends, it will feel like drive-by research

How Can I Achieve Transparency with the Community?

- Clearly communicate:
 - The purpose of the study
 - What participation involves
 - What the study can and cannot do or achieve
 - Who will benefit (and how)

Avoid overstating impact or implying direct benefit if there isn't one. Communities are highly attuned to overpromising

How do I Minimize Burden?

- Be mindful of time, effort, and potential risks to participants
- Ensure recruitment and data collection methods are appropriate and respectful

How do I Maximize Respect?

- Acknowledge history and context as some communities have longstanding reasons for mistrust
- Acknowledge prior research fatigue or harm when relevant

This builds credibility and shows awareness

How Can I Consider Benefits to the Community?

- When feasible, identify ways the research may:
 - Inform local practice or decision-making
 - Provide useful insights to participants or organizations

Be realistic and avoid implying direct benefit if none exists

Do I Have to Share Results with the Community?

- Develop a plan to return findings to the community, such as:
 - Plain-language summaries
 - Presentations or meetings
 - Brief reports or infographics
- Share results even if findings are inconclusive or not as expected

Lack of follow-up is one of the biggest drivers of “drive-by” perception

What do I Need to Include in the IRB Application?

Investigators are encouraged to address the following in their protocol:

- Community engagement plan (when applicable)
- Rationale for selecting the study population and research site
- Recruitment approach and participant protections
- Plans for sharing results beyond academic publication
- Steps to minimize burden and maximize respect