Ethics

While the world of implementing poverty programs in resource poor settings is messy and complex and full of difficult tradeoffs that have ethical implications, the fact that researchers are now engaging with these issues, often quite directly, is in our view a very positive development... if we think research is a valuable endeavor and generates important lessons, then researcher involvement in these questions should be encouraged.


Institutions and scientific norms within the academic community are designed to help researchers regulate themselves, and to pursue research ethically. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) regulate research that could potentially harm people or other living beings. Resources in this section cover the following topics:

1. Ethics and research on human subjects
2. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)
3. Training and certification on human subjects research

Ethics and Research on Human Subjects

Most impact evaluations in the social sciences look at the effect of programs and policies on people. And in most cases, these evaluations require the collection of personal
information from individuals, and are therefore considered “research on Human Subjects”. Many countries and international bodies follow some ethical regulatory guidelines for conducting research. In the US, most institutions follow the Belmont Principles, outlined in the Belmont Report, “1) Respect for Persons: people’s right to make their own decisions must be respected; 2) Beneficence: researchers should seek to increase wellbeing, and avoid knowingly doing harm; 3) Justice: there should be fairness in the allocation of risks and benefits between different groups of people.

- For a more in-depth treatment of these topics, see Balancing Risk and Benefits: Ethical Tradeoffs in Running Randomized Evaluations by Rachel Glennerster and Shawn Powers.
- For a discussion of the practical issues involved with conducting data collection and ethical implications of implementing randomized evaluations, see Conducting Ethical Economic Research: Complications from the Field by Harold Alderman, Jishnu Das, and Vijayendra Rao.

Institutional Review Boards

Most academics have institutional review boards (IRBs) at their host university that can review any research involving human subjects. Some IRBs only review medical research while others can review social science as well. For research teams that would like ethical review of their research, but do not have IRBs at any of their host institutions, independent IRBs that review this research for a fee provide one option. Some examples of host institution IRBs used by J-PAL researchers include:

- Committee on the Use of Human Subjects (CUHS) at Harvard University
Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES) at MIT
Automating University-wide Research Administration (AURA) IRB at the University of Chicago
Private IRBs such as WIRB.

Training and Certification on Human Subjects Research

Within the J-PAL network there are two primary organizations that offer courses and certification for responsible Human Subjects Research. IRBs typically require researchers and field staff involved in studies to obtain, and periodically renew, this certification:

- Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)

It is worth noting that some IRBs may only accept NIH certification while others may only accept the CITI certification. To ensure that your certification is valid, check with the relevant IRB prior to completing a training course.

*Please note that the practical research resources referenced here were curated for specific research and training needs and are made available for informational purposes only. Please email us for more information.*

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