



Protocols for Conducting Safe Fieldwork

Washington, DC

Data collection that occurs “in the field” can be challenging, and at times unpredictable, particularly when the topic of the study is highly sensitive. Because we are conducting our study in neighborhoods with high rates of community violence and we will be asking participants about sensitive topics (e.g., gun carrying, criminally active group involvement, and experiences with community violence) various precautions should be taken to protect our team, participants, and the larger community.

This safety protocol is intended to provide data collectors with safety precautions while out in the field. This guide begins with an overview of the composition of the data collection teams, planning and preparation that needs to happen prior to each data collection activity, and information regarding safety protocols that will need to be followed during data collection.

Data Collection Teams

For each data collection activity, a minimum of three research team members must be involved:

- **Interviewer:** Interviews and focus groups will be led by youth researchers.
- **Fieldwork assistant:** A Child Trends (CT) or Sasha Bruce Youthwork (SBY) adult staff member will accompany the youth researcher to each in-person data collection event. This individual will be charged with checking-in participants, assisting in the consent/assent processes, minding any belongings/technology that is not actively being used by the youth researcher. Following the completion of the check-in and consent process, the fieldwork assistant will give the youth-researcher and participant space for privacy but will remain close enough that the youth researcher and participant are within eyesight and ear sight, enabling them to intervene or call for help should an unanticipated event occur.
- **Non-present staff member:** A CT staff member who is not accompanying the interviewer and fieldwork assistant should be “on call” during each data collection activity. This individual should ensure that the field staff check-in during their anticipated arrival and departure times, and be reachable during data collection to help field staff navigate any unanticipated events.
- **Violence interrupter:** SBY and CT will coordinate to ensure that a violence interrupter will be present at each data collection event.

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Learn more about Safety 7 at <https://www.childtrends.org/project/centering-youth-experiences-youth-participatory-action>.

Planning and Preparation

Safety Plan Development

Each data collection activity should include an individualized Safety Plan that includes the following information:

- **Itinerary:** Locations, expected arrival and departure times, names, and phone numbers of all staff who will be present. The itinerary should also include a schedule for the data collection activities, though no personally identifiable information (PII) of participants should be included in this document. The non-present staff member will have access to a list of the expected participants that is stored on a secure drive and can assist in contacting them, as needed.
- **Contact information for non-present staff member:** Name and phone number of a person to contact in case of an unanticipated event.
- **Local contacts:** Names and contact information of people or non-profit organizations (i.e., members or affiliates of the project's community partner network) at or near the data collection site who can be reached out to if necessary. This should also include the contact information of crisis interventionists, such as violence interrupters, which can be called in the event of an emergency.
- **Activities:** Description of the data collection activities being conducted.
- **Materials log:** Log of any equipment (e.g., recorders, computers) and incentives (i.e., amount, type, and number) that will be taken to the site.
- **Codewords:** Any codewords or phrases that will be used to indicate that the field staff are in danger and need to make an emergency exit/need emergency intervention.
- **Exit strategies:** Information that can assist in making a quick exit in the event of an emergency. This includes information such as location of emergency exits in a building, location of and directions to the closest transit stations, a secondary location for field staff to reconvene if they must leave separately.

A template for a Safety Plan is appended to the end of this document.

Prevention of Stolen Goods

Equipment and technology

Research team members should only bring necessary belongings to the site and make sure that all project equipment/materials and their own personal belongings are always secure. Before heading out to the site, research team members will catalog the number and types of equipment (e.g., recorders) or other materials that will be brought to the site in the Safety Plan. To ensure that no items are stolen on the way to the site, researchers will be asked to keep all equipment inside of their backpacks/bags. To ensure that no items are stolen at the site, researchers will not leave items unattended.

Incentives

Carrying large amounts of cash or gift cards can put research team members and participants at risk for being robbed. To address this issue, the interviewer or fieldwork assistant will not carry incentives. Instead, the non-present staff member will email incentives to participants when the interviewer or fieldwork assistant informs the staff member that a participant attended a data collection session, and the data collection session was completed.

Style and Demeanor

Ethnographic researchers who conduct research in locations with high rates of violent crime and with populations who are engaged in criminal activities have found that researchers' attire and demeanor are central to their safety. For more information regarding these points, staff will be encouraged to review articles that outline best practices regarding *Personal Safety in Dangerous Places* and *Qualitative Research in Dangerous Places: Becoming an "Ethnographer" of Violence and Personal Safety*.

Attire

Because interviews will be conducted in neighborhoods with high concentrations of community violence and poverty, research team members should be mindful of their clothing, shoes, jewelry, and accessories as items that appear expensive can call attention to someone as a person of means and put them at risk for being the focus of criminal intent. Therefore, research team members should dress casually during data collection and avoid wearing any items that could be interpreted as an overt display of wealth.

In addition, we ask that data collection teams wear created T-shirts (designed by the youth researchers and vetted by community partners) to indicate that the data collection team are members of a research team. This will help promote credibility that the data collection team is part of a legitimate group (i.e., Child Trends and SBY, a trusted community partner).

Demeanor

Ethnographic researchers recommend that researchers conducting data collection in communities with high crime rates "need a 'mind set' that assumes safety and does not lead to fearful behavior" as individuals who engage in criminal behavior are often experts in reading behavior and often act on their intuition. Importantly, this recommendation does not mean acting in ways that may put someone at higher risk for victimization (e.g., not paying attention), rather it means being alert, cautious, friendly, understanding, and open. When questioned about why they are at a location, staff will be encouraged to share information about the research study, including information about confidentiality. To help demonstrate the staff's credibility, staff will be encouraged to carry copies of study flyers and study information sheets.

Data Collection

Researcher Check-in

When possible, the interviewer and field assistant should travel to and from the site together. Upon arrival and departure, the interviewer and field assistant should text or call the non-present staff member to let them know that they are safe.

If the non-present staff member does not receive a check-in within a half hour of the expected arrival and departure times, they must call or text the two field researchers. If they do not hear back from them, they will be instructed to call the site where the data collection is taking place (e.g., community-based organization) to check on the field researchers.

If an hour has passed and the non-present staff member has not heard from the field research team nor has confirmed their safety with another individual at the site, they must call the project director. If they cannot be reached, research team members should contact the PI, or an IRB representative. The research team member will then be advised on how to proceed.

Crowd Management

To prevent groups of young people from different criminally active groups from congregating at the data collection location, participants will be told during the screening/scheduling process that there will be no place for friends to wait and that only their interview will be conducted. While friends might accompany them to/from the site, they will not be able to wait until data collection is completed.

Participant Check-In

The data collection team should put in place a check-in process for participants, particularly focus group participants, to ensure they feel safe arriving at the data collection location.

For interviews, the interviewer and/or field assistant should greet the participant at the data collection location and escort them to the private room. Once at the private room, the interviewer and/or field assistant will ask the participant the following questions:

- Did you feel safe traveling to the data collection location?
- Do you feel safe at the data collection location?

If the participant indicates that they feel safe, the interviewer and/or field assistant will continue with the interview. If the participant indicates that they feel unsafe, the interviewer and/or field assistant will work with the participant and the violence interrupter to ensure the participant gets home safe. The participant will still receive the incentive.

For focus groups, the interviewer and/or field assistant should greet each participant at the data collection location and escort them to the private room. Once in the private room, the interviewer and/or field assistant will ask the participant the following questions during a one-on-one conversation:

- Did you feel safe traveling to the data collection location?
- Do you feel safe at the data collection location?
- Do you feel safe participating in a discussion with the people in the room?

The interviewer and/or field assistant will also let the participant know that:

- As other participants enter the room, they may realize they know someone and are no longer comfortable engaging in the conversation and sharing their experiences. If this happens, they should let the interviewer and/or field assistant know.
- Let participants know they can leave the focus group at any time. If they would like to leave, they should let the interviewer and/or field assistant know.
- Share that violence interrupters are present.

If the participant indicates that they feel safe, the interviewer and/or field assistant will continue with the focus group. If the participant indicates that they feel unsafe at any point in time, the interviewer and/or field assistant will work with the participant and the violence interrupter to ensure the participant gets home safely. The participant will still receive the incentive.

Emergency Situations

Verbal threats

Should a research team member be verbally threatened by a participant, they are to immediately stop the data collection. They will then call the project director who will advise on how to proceed. If the project director is unavailable, they should contact the PI or an IRB representative.

Fights or unsafe behavior

While conducting data collection, if a fight happens to break out at the research site, the interviewer and/or field assistant should contact the violence interrupters on-site and the study will be halted for the day.

If the fight **did not** involve a study participant, an internal report will be developed documenting the incident, including the time, location, team members who were present, and any other relevant details concerning the incident. This information will be recorded so that the research team can ascertain whether and when research activities can resume at that site.

If the fight **did involve** a study participant, an internal report will be developed documenting the incident (as described above), and a second incident report will also be developed and filed with the IRB per IRB regulations.

Crime victimization

It is possible that people on the research team may witness or experience a crime. If a research team member experiences a crime or is physically hurt, and **the situation is NOT life threatening**, the study team member should immediately contact the violence interrupter on-site and the project director. If they cannot be reached, they should contact the PI, or the IRB representative. The research team member will be advised on how to proceed.

Crisis Intervention

The research team will have a list of non-law enforcement intervention specialists, such as violence interrupters, to call upon if needed. It will be up to all involved in the incident whether to involve the Metropolitan Police Department (or other relevant law enforcement agency); however, given that law enforcement can escalate situations, CT and SBY staff as well as violence interrupters will be requested to only involve law enforcement when serious physical harm or credible threat of serious physical harm is involved.

Disclosures of Illegal Activities

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has a confidentiality statute that protects the confidentiality of research study participants and ensures that the information shared by participants is immune from the legal process. This means that the research team cannot be forced to break confidentiality even if a participant disclosed that they have committed a crime.

Mandated Reporting

Many states and the federal government have mandated reporting laws requiring individuals to report any disclosures of child/elder abuse, reportable communicable diseases, or violence towards oneself or others. However, the DOJ confidentiality statute protects against the disclosure of this information, meaning that research team members cannot disclose this information even if a team member is considered a mandated reporter by their state/county because the DOJ confidentiality statute supersedes state law. This also means that law enforcement, the courts, or other institutions cannot force the research team to disclose this information.

Although the research team cannot disclose this information, the research team can encourage a participant to report these things themselves so that they can receive any needed support, resources, or intervention. Study team members who will participate in data collection will be trained in how to handle participant disclosures. The study team will also develop a resource sheet that will include organizations a participant can reach out to for support if they are experiencing things such as child abuse or engaging in self-harm. This resource sheet will be developed in collaboration with CT, SBY, and our community partners, such as the Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants. It will include both local and national resources, like the DC Victim Hotline, which is available 24/7 by phone, text, or online chat, that provides comprehensive information, resources, and referrals for victims of crime in DC.

Disclosure of Future Crime

Although the DOJ confidentiality statute protects against the disclosure of past crime, it **does not cover future criminal conduct**. Research team members will be instructed to make it clear to participants during the consent/assent process that any information shared regarding their intent to commit a future crime is not protected under DOJ's confidentiality statute and will have to be reported.

Centering Youth Experiences to Address Community Violence: A Youth Participatory Action Research Project Field Research Safety Plan		
Field Staff Present		
Interviewer	Field Assistant	Non-Present Staff
Name: _____	Name: _____	Name: _____
Number: _____	Number: _____	Number: _____
E-mail: _____	E-mail: _____	E-mail: _____
Date and Times		
Date of Travel: _____	Arrival Time: _____	Departure Time: _____
Location of Data Collection		
Neighborhood: _____		Site: _____ <i>(Name, address)</i>
Nearest community partner(s): _____ <i>(Name, phone number, address, distance from site)</i>		
Nearest transit station: _____ <i>(Name, address, distance from site)</i>		
Nearest hospital/urgent care: _____		

<i>(Name, phone number, address, distance from site)</i>
Description
Data Collection Activities: <i>(Please include a brief description of the activities that will occur that day)</i>
Project Material Log: <i>(List any equipment and all incentives that will be taken to the site)</i>
Emergency Procedures
Codewords: <i>(List any codewords or phrases to indicate there is an emergency and their actual meaning)</i>
Exit Strategies: <i>(List any notes that can assist field staff in making a quick exit in the event of an emergency)</i>
 Secondary Location: <hr/> <i>(Name, phone number, address, distance from site)</i>
Crisis Intervention Services: <i>(Names, location, phone numbers, and crisis services provided)</i>