



IS THIS HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH (HSR)?

Test your knowledge and learn best practices...

Example 1:

“Benchmarking Cybersecurity Preparedness in California Cities”

For her master’s thesis, a student investigator wants to evaluate how well prepared California cities are in being able to prevent cybersecurity breaches and whether or not they follow the standards for cybersecurity preparedness developed by the Department of Homeland Security. She will do this by contacting IT professionals (head of IT departments, lead programmers, etc.) of 30 California cities of varying sizes and ask them to fill out a survey and follow up with an interview. The survey measures city practices against the developed standards, while the interview questions solicit opinions on best practices and the challenges and strengths of their cybersecurity strategy.

Is this HSR? ...

Example 1 Answer...YES

The main question here is if the IT professionals are considered human subjects. Not only are they being asked for opinions about best practices but, because the researcher is comparing their responses to established standards, she is in a sense evaluating their work as city employees.

Concerns raised:

- It's not likely that an IT professional will reveal the workings of the system they maintain. This exposes a city's system to risk.
- Employees may be stigmatized if their work is found to be substandard to that of employees in other cities or if they reveal security vulnerabilities in their system.
- They are not anonymous if each city is named in the research.

Ways to mitigate risks:

- Make it about best practices only. Highlight cities that are doing a good job and demonstrate why.
- Keep cities that are not doing a good job anonymous and discuss the problems in a way that does not uniquely identify the city, the employee, or the specific vulnerability.

Example 2:

“The Effects of Cell Phone Use on Prospective Memory”

For his master’s thesis, a student investigator wants to examine if using cell phone reminders or calendar prompt functions have adverse effects on prospective memory (remembering to do something in the future). The study would build on previous research that shows prospective memory tends to decline with age and that also shows how technology can benefit those with prospective memory loss. But this study hypothesizes the opposite: that technology can also contribute to such memory loss. The study design includes a survey on cell phone use. At the end of the survey participants are asked to send an email to the investigator 3-4 hours after meeting in the lab under the pretense that the investigator needs to find an “information sheet” meant for them. Participants are not primed to know the purpose of the study, but are debriefed after the 4 hour timeframe. Participants are recruited by posting flyers around campus advertising the study as well as from the psychology department’s research subject pool.

Is this HSR? ...

Example 2 Answer...YES

The study is being done for a master's thesis that builds on previous research and tests a hypothesis. The work is both systematic and designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge. Human subjects are involved because the study is collecting behavioral information through an interaction.

Limitations in This Research

This protocol demonstrates the limitations of research, in this case, of behavioral studies. Subjects fit into a specific demographic (mostly undergraduate psychology students). The results of the study only demonstrate behaviors for this demographic, and if there is a small sample size even the specific demographic may not be adequately represented. It's ok to do research with a specific segment of the population, but the results should be clear about the limitations of the conclusions.

Example 3:

“Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers: Needs Assessment for the Center for Employment Training”

A student investigator conducting a class project wants to examine how the Center for Employment Training in her community can improve services they provide to migrant farmworkers in helping them to secure a new career path. She does this by conducting a survey and focus groups with migrant farmworkers designed to determine and prioritize their needs and to measure the effectiveness of the services that clients have utilized.

Is this HSR? ...

Example 3 Answer...NO

Though there is human subject involvement, the work does not meet the federal definition of research. This work can be characterized as a quality improvement project to improve services at this specific organization.

Example 4:

“Health Literacy Outreach: The Role of Libraries”

A faculty investigator wants to understand how libraries are providing health information outreach to the public that aims to raise health awareness literacy. She does this by sending out a nation-wide survey to librarians in consumer health libraries around the country. While the investigator compiles a list of contacts from online sources, the survey itself is anonymous and does not collect either the name of the libraries nor the name of the respondents. The questions on the survey focus on general library practices during health outreach activities.

Is this HSR? ...

Example 4 Answer...NO

Though the work may meet the federal definition of research, there is no human subjects involvement. The librarians are not being asked personal information but institutional information, and the conclusions will be made about libraries in general and not about the librarians.