

ETHICAL PRACTICE



Key finding from the Safe and Inclusive Cities Program

Researchers studying urban violence need to develop and promote an ethical practice tailored to the research context and responsive to changes that may affect that context during the research cycle.

Understanding ethical practice

Ethical practice is dynamic and complex, ensuring that participants are protected, that the research serves their interests, and that it maintains confidentiality, obtains informed consent, and manages risks. As no one approach fits all, researchers need to be sensitive to the power dynamics in their relationships, and of the environment in which they conduct research. Research questions and processes must be adapted to the circumstances, particularly when considering the wellbeing of and risks to researchers, participants, and others involved.

Challenge 1: Research on urban violence can be misinterpreted or the results misapplied if taken out of context. This can result in further marginalization, exclusion, or repression of participants. Participants can also be frustrated or disempowered if research findings do not lead to action.

Challenge 2: The anonymity of research participants can be difficult to ensure, risking exposure and backlash, particularly when the authority of donors or state/security systems are — or are perceived to be — challenged by the findings.

Risks or new ethical issues can emerge throughout the research cycle, reinforcing the need to ensure participants' anonymity. Researchers must consider this when communicating research findings.

Challenge 3: Researchers may need to make decisions about risk on behalf of others, including junior researchers and participants. Who is accountable for safety and security may not be explicit if these decisions are taken out of the research context.

Research design and methodology also pose ethical questions. In longitudinal research, for example, researchers may need to collect identifying information to maintain relationships with transient and marginalized communities in unstable environments. Similarly, who controls information poses ethical considerations in participatory research, as does obtaining informed consent in quantitative research.

QUESTIONS FOR LEARNING:

1. What strategies do you have in place to support reflection in your ethical practice? How does your ethical practice consider personal, organizational, and contextual issues?
2. What ethical considerations does your research include for building relationships?
3. What are the most difficult or unexpected ethical issues you have encountered?

Challenge 4: How researchers are perceived by participants can raise ethical questions, for example when gaining access to communities, as well as about accountability and legitimacy in research relationships. The power relationships in the research need to be understood and the beneficiaries clearly identified. Establishing solid relationships enables researchers to navigate the research environment, access gatekeepers, and understand the sensitivity of issues.

Challenge 5: Researchers may be ill-equipped or lack the necessary support to deal with the experiences and personal relationships that can arise from research on violence. Opportunities and time may be insufficient for reflection on their attitudes and how these influence research, or to address how privilege and power affect the researcher/participant relationship.

Implications

Research on urban violence requires flexibility toward ethical practice. Ethical principles that underpin the approach should be applied throughout the research cycle, including when communicating and disseminating findings. Researchers should be open and honest with participants when discussing the potential impacts of research, acknowledging that outcomes could differ from what is anticipated.

Researchers of urban violence need to reflect critically on their position, values, and assumptions, and how these could influence the research and their perception of risk. Creating opportunities for researchers to reflect on how the issues affect them is important: researchers need to be supported in raising issues of ethical practice and helped to navigate them collectively. ‘Study’ or ‘reflection’ groups to share and evolve ethical principles and strategies have been shown to help successfully negotiate complex issues. These peer forums can take place at the local, cross-regional, or global levels. In sharing knowledge and practice, researchers can also discuss challenges faced and how they addressed them.

Writing about ethical practice and methodologies is valuable: a journal issue — or comparable publication — on the ethical and methodological implications of research on urban violence can further affirm their importance for research integrity and excellence. Increased awareness among funders of the ethical complexities of research in violent contexts can help strengthen research on urban violence, and ensure that they are reflected in funding agreements and partnerships.

About the learning summary

This learning summary is based on the analysis of data gathered for a mid-term evaluation of the program. The data was compiled from a document review, observations, and discussions at the Safe and Inclusive Cities Mid-Term Workshop, as well as informant interviews with researchers, IDRC experts, and external stakeholders. The evaluation team used these sources to compile and code a qualitative analysis using the key evaluation questions. This process enabled evaluators to analyze experiences from across the program to find patterns and resonances pointing to important challenges for the entire group.

This learning summary presents some of SAIC’s challenges in ethical research practice and their implications for SAIC or other global knowledge networks. It does not, however, describe every challenge or include examples of these challenges across the program. The learning case encourages critical analysis of challenges within SAIC and identifies possibilities for peer learning and future exchange.

Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.



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