September 2017

<center>**Advisory Note**

**Responsibilities for Preventing, Avoiding, and Mitigating
Harm to Researchers Undertaking Fieldwork in Risky Settings**</center>

Introduction

Researchers across many disciplines of science engage in fieldwork, sometimes in unfamiliar, remote, or risky settings, on sensitive topics, or in unstable social or political environments. This Advisory Note seeks to increase awareness that heightened risk is a feature of much field research, and that risk awareness, assessment and mitigation of risks in the field need to be strategic and integral parts of research design and implementation, at both institutional and individual levels. This supports freedom and responsibility in the conduct of research.

Fieldwork needs particular attention because researchers are less likely to be working within their familiar networks and support structures, often will have reduced control over the research setting, and may be unaware of local political issues and other potential risks not directly related to their research.

Undertaking fieldwork in unfamiliar and risky locations offers potential for both physical and psychological harm. Indeed, many recent reports of harm to researchers, including harassment, threats, imprisonment, and even death, while pursuing fieldwork have raised awareness of risks that must be considered. The research community has a responsibility to develop procedures, strategies and resources to assist researchers and their institutions in identifying and assessing risk, and in implementing procedures to minimize and mitigate possible harm to researchers undertaking fieldwork.

Raising awareness of responsibilities to prevent, avoid and mitigate fieldwork risk promotes safer and more secure environments for researchers, and thus more effective collaborations. It should not impair international cooperation; international and interdisciplinary collaborations will benefit from greater direct communication of, and an explicit approach to addressing, fieldwork risk. This is because the awareness of risk and the implementation of fieldwork risk-assessment and mitigation practices vary across research domains and research institutions and among researchers.

This Advisory Note provides basic awareness of the critical issues that need to be considered, and complements legal obligations, other existing guidance and accepted best practice. It provides guidance to institutions (e.g., academies, funding agencies, universities, research institutions), research supervisors and researchers, on their responsibilities and actions.

Institutions have a responsibility to raise issues of risk with their research community, to develop risk-avoidance strategies, to implement safety protocols, to train research teams and researchers in these protocols prior to undertaking fieldwork, to take a directive role in oversight of the settings in which their researchers work, and to ensure a duty of care to student researchers.

Description of Types of Risk[1] and Harm

This Advisory Note uses the following non-exhaustive taxonomies as a partial illustration of the kinds of factors important for risk assessment and mitigation strategies.

Taxonomy of risk

- ***Risks related to a research topic:***
  Examples include research on illegal activities; politically volatile activities; socially sensitive activities;

- ***Risks related to a setting:*** Examples include research in areas with high levels of violence (violent crime; random violence; organized crime; state violence; domestic violence; conflict zones); research in areas with high levels of personal violence or kidnapping; research in post-conflict areas (e.g., landmines); or research in areas with poor hygiene or infrastructure;

- ***Risks related to person:*** Examples include personal vulnerability because of the researcher's identity, including race, age, sexual orientation, gender, national origin, language, caste or religion;

- ***Risks related to perceptions of the research motivation***
  Examples include the suspicion or doubt among the local population or authorities concerning the researcher's primary motivation or political affiliation.

Taxonomy of harm

- ***Physical harm***
  Risks concerning physical harm faced by researchers engaged in "sensitive" research such as illegal or criminal contexts, in politically volatile or conflict contexts, or in remote locations have ranged from physical impairment to physical attacks to injury or even death.

- ***Psychological harm***
  Researchers also face risks of psychological harm from exposure to physical or personal threats or exposure to distress or trauma of others.

Guidance for Mitigation Resources and Procedures

The mitigation of physical risk includes training in prevention strategies and development of specific plans for protective or exit actions; regular "touch base" contacts; and Embassy support. An awareness of the "time critical" nature of planned responses is essential.

The mitigation of psychological risk includes training in strategies to address and cope with psychologically distressing situations. These might include training in conflict management and the development of resources to be used in response to traumatic encounters.

Risk mitigation requires good knowledge of available resources at the institutional, department and individual researcher level, and skills in implementing risk avoidance and mitigation strategies.

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[1] In writing this note, CFRS recognizes that research also involves potential risk to research participants (in the case of behavioral or social science or medical research), to communities, to the biosphere, or to ecological stability. This note, however, is focused on harm to the researcher, not the objects of research.

Risk mitigation procedures can be developed at the level of the institution, research team, and individual researcher.

On an Institutional Level:

Institutions must play a leading role in promoting a climate of attention to risk and ensuring that safe practices prevail for their researchers and affiliates, such as interns and visitors. This might include:

- Clear specification of the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and researchers in attending to safety issues;
- Standardized provision of information about, and adherence, to safety protocols;
- Ensuring institutional legal obligations are known and met;
- Development of a code of practice for risk avoidance;
- Recognition that risk mitigation procedures are a legitimate cost in the research budgeting process;
- Promotion and facilitation of the development of local partnerships and networks for risk mitigation in international collaborations;
- Requiring that appropriate risk avoidance and mitigation be included in research curricula.

On the Research Supervisor/ Departmental Level

Research supervisors and disciplinary faculties need to ensure that research teams follow institutional standards of best practice. In addition, supervisors need to encourage a research ethos that values appropriate risk assessment and prevention. This includes:

- Making attention to risk a part of undergraduate and graduate training in research design and methodology;
- Ensuring that each research proposal is based on reflection and peer feedback on project risks and strategies for addressing them if relevant; and that any specific field work designs or manuals include a section on risk reflecting on specific issues;
- Ensuring that field researchers understand, and are aware of their legal and non-legal obligations in order to avoid risk wherever possible and mitigate it where necessary.

On the individual Researcher Level

Every researcher should increase their sensitivity and awareness for risk and understand that it is often context and situation specific. In planning research projects in potentially risky settings or contexts, researchers need to address the following:

- Planning for safety in the research design, including resources and strategies for risk mitigation;
- Establishing clear protocols and guidance for diverse risk situations, including plans for maintaining communication (for instance a daily timed defined call-in, because time is often crucial in risk situations); for securing exit strategies; for establishing support/collaboration for not working alone where possible; and for assessing risk in specific situations in advance;
- Establishing in advance secure reliable local contacts who are well informed on local situations, both political and cultural, and who can identify potential areas and types of risk;
- Including risk assessment and precautions as part of the research implementation protocol and budget.

References

Goldstein, Daniel M. (2014). Qualitative research in dangerous places: Becoming an "Ethnographer" of violence and personal safety. DSD Working Papers on Research Security No. 1 (Drugs, Security and Democracy Program), Social Sciences Research Council.

Bloor, M., Fincham, B. & Sampson, H. (2008). *Qualiti (NCRM) Commissioned Inquiry into the Risks to Well-Being of Researchers in Qualitative Research.* Cardiff: Economic and Social Research Council, 22.

Dickson, Swift, James, E. L., Kippen, S. & Liamputtong, P. (2008). Risk to Researchers in Qualitative Research on Sensitive Topics: Issues and Strategies. *Qualitative Health Research* 18, no. 1: 133–44.

Craig, G., Corden, A., & Thornton, P. (2000). Safety in Social Research. Social Research Update, Issue 20, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, England.

Leming, J. (2016). Preparing researchers to manage traumatic research. ***NATUREJOBS | NATUREJOBS BLOG,*** 23 Sep 2016 | 12:00 BST

Sample Listing of Guidelines and Risk Assessment Protocols

Social Sciences Research Association Codes of Safety: http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/safety-code/; http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/safety_code_of_practice.pdf

NERC guidance note on safe system of fieldwork (UK specific) - http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/policy/safety/procedures/guidance-fieldwork/ (part of a larger set of documents relating to health and safety issues, http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/policy/safety/procedures/)

Social Science tools: http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Risks-to-researchers-68

Code of Conduct for Fieldworkers (Biology): https://www.york.ac.uk/biology/intranet/health-safety/fieldwork/conduct/

Royal Geographical Society / Field Studies Council Risk Assessment: http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Fieldwork+and+local+learning/Fieldwork+safety/Risk+assessments.htm