**Coventry University Group**

**Guidelines for Research in the Community Setting**

# Introduction

These guidelines focus on safety issues when interviewing or working in private settings but are of relevance to working in unfamiliar environments in general. They are intended to highlight safety issues which should be considered in the design and conduct of work in the field to reduce the risk. The intention is not to be alarmist about potential dangers but to raise awareness of potential hazards and precautions.

We accept some of this advice might seem obvious, especially to the more experienced researcher and thankfully, incidents are extremely rare. Nonetheless familiarity with what to do if a problem does occur is essential.

These guidelines should be used to inform risk assessments but can also be issued as good advice for researchers working in the field.

# Risk assessment approach

The level of risk from community based research varies a lot. Determining factors include the type of area visited, if work is in remote or isolated places, if the researcher is working alone, the nature of persons being visited, availability of information about subject (temperament etc) and the subjects being discussed (i.e. sensitive subjects). It should be unusual for a risk assessment to conclude a project is too risky to be conducted, but it should ensure that precautions are in place to manage the risk to a tolerable level.

Appropriate precautions should be taken commensurate with the level of risk. For example, in lower risk situations like visiting employers in the workplace it may be adequate for someone to know where the researcher was going that day and the researcher to carry a mobile phone. When determining risk levels the type of environment the work will take place in, the activity being carried out and how likely that is to trigger a problem and also the people involved, such as participants and other people who might be present.

Whereas high risk work such as visiting people in their home will involve more involved precautions, such as background checks, carrying a phone &/or personal alarm, and either working in pairs or a formal contact arrangement (see below).

Safety should be considered whilst planning research, as it is often possible to design out more risky circumstances. All research proposals and funding agreements should include the costs of ensuring the safety of researchers working on the project.

The following should be considered at the design stage:

* Avoid risk locations if possible, for example meeting in a public place (i.e. café) is preferable to home interviews.
* Avoid researchers working alone if possible, especially in higher risk situations. Can research designs use pairs of researchers to conduct an interview. If the interview must be conducted by only one researcher, could someone accompany them and wait outside (colleague/friend/taxi driver).
* The choice of researcher may need to be considered if the topic requires researchers with particular attributes or experience. Research designers may have to decide against using existing staff if the content of the interview will arouse strong feelings or cause distress.
* Research timetables should account for the tiring effects of spells of intensive fieldwork. A more relaxed schedule may mean that researchers are more alert to risk and better able to handle incidents.
* Methods of recruiting participants should (as a minimum) try to include prior telephone contact. It gives opportunity to assess the respondent and their circumstances.
* Gather all available background information about the participant(s), particularly for higher risk visits. Other persons likely to be in the property should also be considered. If colleagues have met with the participant, check with them about the safety of a home visit. In some cases other agencies may be able to share information i.e. NHS.
* Consider if researchers should receive training, such as dealing with aggression and difficult situations, using de‐escalation techniques or home visit safety awareness training. The SRM team runs a ‘personal safety’ workshop which staff can book on the [Organisation Development Portal](https://professionaldevelopment.coventry.ac.uk/default.aspx). Students can book by contacting the [Safety & Risk Management team](mailto:safetyoffice.est@coventry.ac.uk?subject=Personal%20Safety%20Course). As a minimum all researchers should be aware of what actions they need to take in an emergency (see section 3).
* Consider if a mobile phone that is used solely for the project is required for researchers. Researchers should never give participants their own phone number. If a mobile (or SIM card) cannot be provided they should use a University number. Low cost or temporary mobile phones can be obtained from [ITS](https://staff.coventry.ac.uk/ps/its/Pages/MobileDevicesHomePage.aspx).

It may also be appropriate to supply personal alarms for researchers to take on visits. Staff who are given an alarm should know what to do with them and be aware of the need to regularly test them, and the alarm should be appropriate for the situation it will be used in. There is advice on considerations when selecting an alarm on the [Suzy Lamplugh Trust website.](https://www.suzylamplugh.org/faqs/personal-alarms)

* There should be a formal contact arrangement (sometimes referred to as a ‘buddy’ system). This involves a nominated contact person for the period when researchers are alone. The nominated contact will:
* Be fully aware of the planned movements of the researcher
* Have all necessary contact details for the researcher, including personal contact details such as next of kin;
* The researcher should check in with the contact. The frequency and timing of this should be agreed in advance. For lower risk visits this may be at the start and end of the day, whereas for higher risk visits the researcher should make contact at the start and end of each visit.
* If the researcher cannot be contacted, or if they fail to make contact as agreed the contact will attempt to contact the researcher. If they cannot make contact they then take pre-agreed local escalation actions, such as alerting senior managers, their next of kin and/or the police.
* It is essential that the contact is aware they have been nominated and know what the procedures and requirement for this role are, and are available at the designated times for contact.
* Contingency arrangements should be in place for someone else to take over the role of the contact in case the nominated person is not available, or after normal working hours.

It is recommended that the contact be found within the Department/Team the researcher works within (i.e. manager, research partner, Director of Studies etc) but if this is not other persons may be considered.

# Advice for researchers going into the field

You should always discuss any personal safety concerns you have with your manager.

**Gut feelings should never be ignored**

## Preparation for the visit

Check the address & know exactly where you’re going. Check weather conditions and be prepared appropria**t**ely. If driving be familiar with route and make sure the vehicle is in good working order before setting off (and that it is insured for business use).

Make sure your mobile phone is charged and that you know how to use it. Mobile phones should also be programmed for emergency numbers such as the local police number, the Protection Service (024 76 888 555), nominated contact’s number etc. Remember the limitations of mobile phones; they are unlikely to work properly in basements, lifts and high rise buildings.

Consider the geographic area and know as much about is as you can. If the location is considered high‐risk for violence or substance abuse, consider taking a colleague with you, or have a driver (colleague / taxi) wait outside during the visit.

Check ahead whether there are any dogs in the house and whether these will be tethered or not during the visit; if concerned about an animal you should not enter. It is reasonable to ask the owner if they can put the dog in another room during the visit.

Make an appointment with the participant, and inform them of the visit so that they know what to expect.

Be prepared to show some form of identity if asked.

Dress appropriately in a way that does not make you stand out. Try avoiding being too obvious about carrying equipment, such as lap top computers.

Be prepared to give up equipment/bags without a fight; things can be replaced, you can't.

Look as confident as you can and try to blend in as much as you can. Remember localities can be very different places at night than they are during the day.

## Travelling to the visit

When on public transport or walking from your car, carry your keys and mobile phone in your pocket, so that if your bag is snatched you can still drive home / get into your house. (Keys can also be used in defence if necessary).

*Driving*

Do not leave valuables visible in the car, even when you are in it, and keep bags out of reach of open windows.

When parking in daylight, consider what the area will be like after dark. If there is a chance that it will be dark when you return to your car, park near a street light if possible.

When returning to the vehicle, quickly look around to make sure there is no‐one waiting.

If you are forced to stop, stay in the car, lock the doors and speak through a slightly open window.

Make sure you know what to do if the car breaks down (i.e. who to phone etc).

*Public Transport*

Before setting off, have a timetable of the route. Google maps allows you to plan trips and street view function allows you to look at locations in advance.

If possible, wait for your transport at a busy, well‐lit stop or station.

On buses, sit downstairs near the bus driver, in an aisle seat if possible. On trains sit near the emergency alarm and familiarise yourself with the emergency procedures.

Avoid upper decks on buses, or empty compartments on trains and also avoid these if there is only one other passenger.

If threatened by another passenger, alert the guard/driver as soon as possible.

Always carry the numbers of local taxi companies, as a backup.

*High rise flats*

Always use the door entry system so that the participant knows you are on your way up.

Be confident and know what floor you want before you get in the lift.

Do not get into a lift if you feel unsure about its condition, e.g. doors not closing properly or the lift or lights aren't working correctly.

Trust your instincts; do not get into a lift with a person you feel unsure about.

If someone gets into a lift and you do not feel safe get out even if it's the wrong floor.

## During the visit

Researchers should carry out a 10 second risk assessment when they first arrive at the house and the front door is opened.

If they feel there is a risk of harm to themselves, they should have an excuse ready not to enter the house and to arrange another appointment.

**If in doubt, don’t go in.**

Follow the participant in, noting locks and access and try to dissuade participants from locking you in.

Note the layout of the house, in particular the way out and always try to sit between the participant and the exit. When offered a seat try to sit in a position that gives you access to the door. Keep your eye on potential escape routes.

Before asking questions, explain why you need to know certain things and ensure people know who you are and what you are doing. Be aware of any delicate issues involved with discussions or interviews.

Do not show interest in people’s property or whatever else is inside the house / surrounding area.

Remember the dynamics of the visit can change; such as if someone else comes into the house or room. Do any of the family members give cause for concern?

Remember your own behaviour can trigger or prevent aggression, treat participants courteously and allow them to retain control and dignity; you are a guest in their home.

Do not underestimate the importance of body language. Avoid an aggressive stance. Crossed arms, hands on hips or raised hands will challenge and confront. Keep your distance.

If violence is threatened, bring the interview to a halt, give an appropriate excuse (pre-planned – e.g. I’ve left paperwork in the car) and leave immediately.

Talk yourself out of problems; placate rather than provoke. Do not turn your back on someone who is behaving aggressively. Stay calm, speak gently and slowly. Do not be enticed into an argument. Never try to touch someone who is angry – this will not calm the situation.

If the situation escalates try to get away as quickly as possible. Move towards a place where there will be other people. Be prepared to use your personal alarm. Set it off as close to the aggressor’s ear as possible and then throw it out of reach. Shout and scream – shout something practical like ‘call the Police!’ or ‘Fire!’ People rarely react to cries of ‘Help!’ or ‘Rape!’ If grabbed and unable to break free – pretend to vomit. This will often have the desired effect.

## After any incidents

As soon as you can, try to document as much as you can about the incident.

Contact the police, if appropriate. Seek proper medical attention for any physical injuries.

Report all incidents to your manager/supervisor so that appropriate action can be taken, and if necessary working practices/risk assessments be reviewed. If the incident was serious, or potentially serious report to the SRM team using [accident reporting procedure](https://share.coventry.ac.uk/staff/ps/estates/Pages/Accidentincidentreporting.aspx)s.

Share information with others who work in the area or who are likely to visit that particular address.

Even after very minor incidents, feelings may be difficult to control and may affect your ability to deal with any further problems that arise. This is a perfectly natural reaction; if in doubt, take time out and seek assistance.

Allow yourself time to recover; seek practical support from your colleagues and manager. Ask for a de‐briefing and further counselling if necessary. Counselling is available for staff through People Team (via the People Partners) and for students through Student Services Welfare Office.

Try to identify where control was lost and how, so that practice and training can be improved accordingly.

# Further information

Safety & Risk Management team  
Staff: <https://staff.coventry.ac.uk/ps/estates/Pages/PersonalSafety.aspx>

Students: <https://share.coventry.ac.uk/students/SafetyOffice/Pages/Placements.aspx>

Suzy Lamplugh Trust: [www.suzylamplugh.org](http://www.suzylamplugh.org)

Social Researchers Association: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU29.html>