

Secondary Use of Data in Human Research

What is Secondary Use of Data

The secondary use of data is any data usage beyond the purpose for which it was originally collected. This includes:

- the reuse of data by the original data collector for a different purpose from the original one
- the use of the data by another researcher

The exception is when the second use was specified in the original consent.

Secondary data may be data collected by other researchers or by yourself. The key point is that you want to use it for a **new** purpose. Secondary use of data has provided great opportunities but as with other types of research, the risk to participant privacy still needs to be balanced and protected.

Secondary data includes such things as:

- publications including books, journal articles, newspapers, websites, press releases and podcasts
- judicial proceedings and parliamentary transcripts
- historical documents held by libraries such as archives, personal papers, letters, or diaries
- information collected by government departments and agencies, for example the Census, epidemiological data, electoral records, or hospital admissions
- data collected by social media characteristics or app usage statistics
- stored biospecimen collections
- company financial reports
- datasets sold by commercial research companies.

When is ethical review needed for secondary data use research?

RMIT University recognises that while the secondary use of many datasets will be uncontroversial, researchers are expected to consider the ethical risks of such research and where it involves secondary data from human participants and seek advice if unsure.

Ethical review will not always be needed for the secondary use of data collected from human participants. Ethical review may not be needed where:

- data derived from publications, even if payment is required for release (such as newspapers) or are stored in a subscription-only database (such as journal articles). Published works are considered publicly available and therefore exempt from ethics review, however, you must ensure you respect copyright and intellectual property requirements
- data collected anonymously or has been anonymised by the original data collector and is publicly available, however, you need to adhere to any relevant guidelines the data owner has stipulated for its use. Robustly anonymised data should have all identifying information removed, so that it is not possible to identify the participant, directly or indirectly
- the re-use of datasets for which consent for reuse for research purposes beyond which the data was originally gathered was provided by the participants and for which all data have been robustly anonymised
- data that was collected anonymously or that has been anonymised by the original data collector and is not publicly available is exempt from review if you seek appropriate data custodian permission.

The use of website content may be exempt from review, provided it has been developed and published by the website owner. If the website data includes any content generated by external website users such as comments, opinions, or reviews then you will need to seek advice from legal staff about the applicable terms and conditions of use. If RMIT legal determines that external user data can be used, then you should consult with ethics staff to find whether ethics review is needed. Many people do not view their online activities as a form of self-publishing, so website users may not understand that what they express online could be used for research.

If your research data is outside these categories, or if you are simply unsure if you need to submit an ethics application, you should contact ethics staff for advice by email. Your email should briefly describe what the secondary data is, how you will obtain access to it and what you intend to do with it.

Key things to remember

Researchers handling personal data should be aware of their obligations under the [Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 \(Vic\)](#) and the [Victorian Data Sharing Act 2017](#).

Be wary of third-party assurances of data anonymity. While it may be safe to assume that anonymous data provided to you by government departments or agencies is genuinely anonymous, researchers have been caught out when data from sources who claim data is anonymous turns out not to be.

Researchers looking to use secondary data which they did not collect themselves, and which are not in the public domain, should always seek the permission of the data custodian for their use and comply with any research governance procedures and limits placed on the consent required by the data custodian prior to accessing the data.

Seek ethical advice where a proposed secondary use of data (even in an anonymised form) may lead to research outcomes affecting an identifiable community, group or category of people.

Be aware that it is necessary to obtain consent from the original participants for any research using personal data to support measures or decisions in respect of the research subjects to be taken without their consent, or in a manner that would be likely to cause substantial damage or distress to anyone.

If research participants did not provide informed consent for their data to be used in future projects – either for general research purposes or your specific research project – then you will be required to apply for ethics approval. Your application will need to demonstrate that you have addressed the requirement of informed consent (see NS Chapter 2.2).

There are many examples of scandals involving social media data turning out to be re-identifiable. If you are using interview data in which participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms, their identities might still be able to be discerned from their comments; in this situation the data is not anonymous. Likewise, focus group data can never be anonymous because there is always a possibility participant will recall who said what. If you are at all in doubt about data anonymity, seek guidance from ethics staff.

How to apply for ethics approval for secondary data use research

If you are required to submit an ethics application to use secondary data, make sure that:

- You are clear in your application about your intended use of the data
- You are clear about what participants have consented to (where applicable)
- You include a copy of any correspondence from the data owner granting you permission to access the (data where applicable)
- You include a description of the process for re-consenting participants (where applicable), along with copies of all relevant material (for example, emails introducing the new project to participants, the PICF).

Further information

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@rmit.edu.au. A Research Governance and Ethics Coordinator will assist you and may connect you to one of the CHEAN or HREC members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.