

Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board

Guidelines for Continuing Research Ethics Review during COVID-19 Pandemic

Form 2- Request for Changes to Cleared Research

COVID-19 has affected many aspects of our professional lives; for many of us, it has affected our current and future research.

If you have an active SMU REB file – you are gathering data from human participants – you may have changed some aspects of your research due to COVID-19. For example, working from home may have changed how you are collecting, storing and/or accessing data.

This document intends to clarify when you need to inform the REB of the change(s) to your REB cleared research and when you do not.

As a researcher, you have an obligation to honour your commitment to research participants, mitigate all foreseeable research-related risks to participants, and ensure the security of the data. The REB considers researchers to be the experts on their subject-matter and population of interest. As a researcher, you are ultimately responsible for the process and outcomes of your research and for any research-related problems.

The following questions will hopefully help you decide on the need for a Form 2- Request for Changes to Cleared Research.

1. Question: I told participants that my data would be stored at SMU, but now I am working from home. Do I need to submit a Form 2?

Answer: Only if this move has increased the risk to your participants.

Principles for Storing Data at Home

- Data should not be easily accessible by others in your home
- Data that includes identifiers should be stored securely and not left in shared spaces
- Data should not be stored on personal computers or in cloud-based storage unless previously approved in your REB application
- You should know and understand how your Research Assistants are dealing with data access/storage in their homes
- Storage and access procedures should align as closely as possible with what was approved by the REB. For example, if you said you would use password protected files, you should continue to do so.

Please take all reasonable and appropriate steps to ensure the security of your data and honour the commitments you have made to your research participants regarding the handling of their information.

2. Question: I planned to conduct in-person interviews but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I want to use Zoom, Skype, FaceTime or other telecommunication platforms to conduct the interviews. Do I need to submit Form 2?

Answer: Only if the change increases research-related risks to your participants.

Here are some questions to consider:

- a. Will you have identifying information for your participants (e.g., telephone number) that you did not have before? Are you now planning to record the session using the communication technology, when your previous plan excluded recording? How do you plan to record the research session and where do you plan to store these recordings? How do you plan to record the research session and where do you plan to store these recordings?

If you answer yes to either, then you should submit Form 2 with details about how you will inform participants about the collection and storage of identifying information and/or recordings.

Principles to Consider

- As the researcher, you are responsible for understanding your chosen platform and the privacy implications for your participants and for the integrity of your data
- Information about the platform and privacy implications needs to be explained to participants
- You should explore options in the platform to avoid privacy breaches such as “Zoombombing”.

NOTE: Zoom is one option that has some security features. However, there may be other platforms available, and we encourage interested researchers to explore the options available through their department or faculty.

3. Question: Given that COVID-19 has changed the context for my research, I would like to ask my research participants questions related to the pandemic. Can I just toss them in?

Answer: Adding questions related to the pandemic is fine, but you need to consider how you are informing participants of the (now expanded) nature of your research. Please complete a Form 2.

4. Question: My informed consent indicates that interviews will be collected remotely *or* in-person. Do I need to submit a Form 2 with modifications to my Informed Consent Form?

Answer: No, but as you are aware all in-person interactions with human participants have been suspended by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research until further notice. It is the responsibility of researchers to follow these university-wide research directives.

Information on the governing principles, priorities, the process and the application process can be located here:

<https://smu.ca/virtualuniversity/return-to-research.html>.

This link also provides details on how Saint Mary's University researchers can make requests to resume aspects of currently suspended research activities.

5. I want to do research related to COVID-19 so need a fast REB review. Is this possible?

Answer: If you are a researcher with a time-sensitive COVID-19 application, please contact Ms. Orshy Torok at ethics@smu.ca and indicate why your application merits expedited review.

We are reminded by the TCPS 2 that during emergencies those already vulnerable may become acutely so. The increased public risks and devastation that cause public emergencies to be declared can threaten autonomy and physical, emotional, institutional and social welfare or safety (Art. 6.23). Research ethics review during the COVID-19 pandemic demands greater attention and consideration because volunteers, researchers and even the members of the REB may be in a position of greater vulnerability.

We will endeavour to process time-sensitive COVID-19 applications within 10 business days. Although we cannot guarantee this turn around time, we will work hard to accomplish this goal. Please note that in some circumstances, the review process may exceed this time frame. For more details, see <https://smu.ca/research/research-ethics-board.html>.

Finally, please keep in mind that members of the REB, the REB Co-chairs, REB Vice Chair and the Research Ethics Officer are all working at home during a pandemic. Some of us are working in circumstances that are challenging.

If you are unsure whether your modifications require a Form 2- Request for Changes to Cleared Research during the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact the REB at reb.chair@smu.ca and/or ethics@smu.ca.