

Innocence Network Research Review Committee
Frequently Asked Questions

- **What type of research do you review?**

The research proposals we review involve the experiences of people who have been wrongfully convicted, including experiences before conviction, through the post-conviction exoneration process, and after exoneration. These experiences can cover a wide range of topics, for example, questions relating to the legal system, employment and education, and social and family relationships. We also review proposals examining the work of Innocence Network organizations, for example questions relating to staffing and to wrongful conviction litigation.

- **What do you look for in your review?**

Our focus is on the potential burden and risk to participants, and the potential insights to be gained from the research. The primary questions we consider are: 1) Does the proposal describe a focused research question addressing a new or understudied area? 2) Are the methods and sample size appropriate for the proposed research question? 3) What information are participants asked to provide? 4) What are the risks to the participants posed by this research?

- **How do you evaluate risk? What do you want to see in a consent form?**

We would like to see an acknowledgement of some degree of risk in studies that seek insights into the experiences of people who had been wrongfully convicted. That is, we generally would not agree with the characterization of risk as “minimal” or “no risk,” but rather prefer wording that reflects risk of potential unease or disturbing feelings that may be brought up by thinking and talking about experiences relating to conviction, exoneration, and experiences after exoneration. Following are examples of statements of risk that capture this perspective:

- “We do not anticipate physical risks from participating in this study. You may experience some emotional or psychological discomfort during or after the interview.”
- “The study has [limited] risks for participants. You may be asked to recall or discuss experiences that may cause [mild] mental and/or emotional distress regarding your experiences related to work and incarceration.”

We also suggest that researchers be able to provide resources if distress does occur, for example with information about crisis help lines.

- **How do you evaluate benefits?**

Generally, we do not anticipate any direct benefits to participants from these studies. However, others *may* benefit from findings now or in the future.

- **My study has already been approved by my institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Why do I need to go through a separate review by you?**

Many IRBs cover a wide range of research, from surgical and medical procedures to anonymous surveys of the general public. They may not have the background needed to adequately evaluate the potential risks that could be experienced by what may be a vulnerable population, specifically people who have experienced the trauma of wrongful conviction and often prolonged periods of incarceration. That is the perspective that we bring to our review. We also are able to identify methodological issues and changes to the content of the proposed data collection (e.g., questionnaires, interviews) that may improve the analysis and interpretation of the study results.

- **How long does it take to review a proposal?**

Our committee generally meets in the third week of each month, during which we review proposals received at least one week prior to the meeting. We aim to provide a response within two weeks of our meeting. Some proposals will need to undergo an additional review after a requested revision.

- **Do you prohibit researchers from providing compensation for participating in a study? Do you require researchers to provide compensation for participating in a study?**

We do not prohibit or require compensation. Our general perspective is that any compensation should not be so large that it would be an undue influence on the decision to participate. We also recognize that compensation is a way to recognize the value of a participant's time and expertise.

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- **What does it mean to be an "exoneree"?**

There are many different paths through which someone's conviction is ultimately overturned. Not everyone is "exonerated" or receives a writ of innocence; procedures and requirements vary by state. In some cases, someone may be released from prison but is continuing the legal fight to prove their actual innocence. This may have implications for inclusion-exclusion criteria and recruitment, and may influence choice of language in various study materials, i.e., "when your conviction was overturned" would be more accurate and inclusive than "when you were exonerated."

- **What happens when the Innocence Network Research Review Committee approves a study?**

- We notify directors of Innocence Network organizations that the study has been approved.
- The research study and researcher contact information are listed on the [Innocence Network Resources – Research Request](#) website.
- A statement may be included in participant recruitment and consent materials noting the research was reviewed and approved by the Innocence Network Research Review Committee.
- Please note, the approval of the Innocence Network Research Review Committee does not confer a means to obtaining direct access to exonerees – it will be necessary to work with individual innocence organizations or other channels. Some innocence organizations do not provide researchers with contact information of their clients, or even agree to serve as an intermediary between researchers and clients.

- **Do you have any other suggestions?**

- **Maintaining data for future research:** We also would like to encourage you to think about ways to make quantitative data sets, as well as notes from in-depth interviews available for future research, for example, through anonymized transcripts. This may require language in the consent form that allows for this use.
- **Participant recruitment materials:** In general, materials we have reviewed have been clear and comprehensive. However, we have noticed that sometimes researchers have not carefully considered the subject heading used for emails, which may determine whether someone opens, or even receives, a message.

- **Can you recommend resources for researchers or others interested in learning more about wrongful convictions?**

Researchers, students, practitioners, and any others who are interested in wrongful convictions and related issues are referred to the following resources:

- Innocence Research website for databases of scholarly publications and other relevant resources: <https://innocenceresearch.org/>
- The National Registry of Exonerations: <https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx>
- Innocence Project Research Resources: <https://www.innocenceproject.org/research-resources/>