

NCGR Distress Protocol for interviews involving youth engaged in Serious Youth Violence

Aim

This NCGR Protocol aims to safeguard participants and staff involved in any primary research which involves young people under 21 who are themselves engaged in serious youth violence. It aims to ensure that all actions are taken to minimise the risk of harm to individuals in the research process. It is also established to minimise and prevent ethical and legal challenges and potential complaints regarding the research process.

Introduction

This protocol summarises the key considerations of the National Centre for Gangs Research (NCGR) Principal Investigator (PI) and Research Team when:

- Preparing for an interview/focus group – including evidence collection and data analysis stages;
- Conducting the interview/focus group;
- Post interview/focus group – e.g., transcription or report preparation stage.

NCGR Distress Protocol for interviews involving youth engaged in Serious Preventing distress during research planning stage

Preparation for interviews/focus groups The

NCGR Principal Investigator will:

- Ensure that procedures are in place for obtaining informed consent from **potential participants** and for making them aware that data gathered will be anonymous and confidential (subject to caveats about possible need to

report); and that they have right to withdraw their involvement in the research at any time without consequence.

- Consider during the planning and timetabling stages, the potential emotional or psychological impact on individual members of the **Research Team** of the participants description of life experiences. This should include, but is not limited to, carefully considering the number and scheduling of interviews within a day/week where potentially sensitive/distressing interview content is revealed with a view to the potential for emotional exhaustion. Timetabling should include opportunities for supervision and debriefing with experienced team members. Staff contingency plans need to be in place where existing members need to withdraw.
- Consider the **participants/respondents** for the interviews/focus groups in relation to the nature of the topic and specific interview schedule, giving special consideration to issues likely to cause alarm, distress, emotional upset, recall, negative rumination, resurgent trauma, PTSD, anger, grief, and so forth.
- It is important to acknowledge that certain topics, discussions or lines of questioning/recall can trigger emotional responses especially when the origin of these issues has been repressed, remains latent or buried in memory by the participant.
- Consideration should also be given to the manner in which topic areas to be covered in interviews/focus groups can be shared with participants in advance.
- Strict oversight **must** be given to issues concerning participants' safety in relation to the interview/focus group and its timing. This might include the recruitment and construction of the focus group for example; issues such grouping potential rivals from different estates or backgrounds; or where participants have knowledge of each other; or have had a significant falling out. Any concerns here should be flagged immediately to the PI.

- Consider the role of the **Transcriber** when developing a research proposal, key planning stages and the ethical review and clearance process. This should include ensuring that the Transcriber is always informed of the nature of the research/data to be collected, identifying potentially challenging or difficult interviews before transcription takes place; and if necessary, scheduling regular one to one or group supervisions and debriefing sessions for the Transcriber with a named member of the research team. In terms of agency staff, the PI must ensure such issues are raised and negotiated with the agency manager before the agency is commissioned. The PI should confirm internal agency policies support and safeguard their transcription staff accordingly.
- Consider the use of self-care plans where appropriate – e.g. for transcribers and research team members – which should make reference to close liaison with other team members and the timing of debriefs.

Preventing distress during Evidence Collection Stage

If the research topic is potentially sensitive/distressing, the Lead Researcher or PI should ensure:

- Data collection is undertaken by two (or more) members of the research team;
- Consideration is given to the use of research staff for the project, particularly with regards to issues of gender, ethnicity and age, assessing where possible if these issues are relevant to, or have the potential of, triggering/reducing distress with a participant/respondent.
- That regular scheduled team debriefing sessions should take place with a named member of the research team (preferably one with considerable and relevant research experience) at appropriate intervals throughout the

research and not just during the fieldwork stage. A particular emphasis should be noted for Early Career research staff; those with limited experience in researching serious youth violence; those with previous negative experiences of such research.

- That members of the research team are encouraged to document their thoughts and feelings in a diary or journal. These can form the basis of discussion of future debrief discussions; may become part of fieldwork notes; may be used to review and strengthen this and other NCGR protocols.
- That members of the research team raise any concerns early on in the process with the Lead Researcher or PI.

Managing distress arising during, or subsequent to, an interview/ focus group

The following actions should be taken by members of the Research Team in the event that:

- i. A participant in an interview/focus group indicates they are experiencing a high level of anxiety or emotional distress (for example, uncontrolled crying, shaking, trembling, anger, displays of aggression, feeling faint, sudden loss of colour) or;
- ii. The researcher becomes aware of the participant experiencing acute emotional distress beyond what would be expected in an interview/focus group on a sensitive topic. Acute distress may be demonstrated by:
 - The participant making statements or demonstrating behaviours that suggest that the interview is too stressful;
 - The participant making statements that reveal they are considering hurting himself or herself;
 - The participant makes statements that reveal that a participant is considering hurting someone else, or;
 - The participant makes statements that reveal a participant might be in danger if another person found out about the interview. In this event, the Researcher should:

- Stop the discussion/interview immediately; if in a focus group, then separate the individual from other participants;
- Assess the interviewee's psychological welfare (using open questions – “*Tell me what you are feeling right now?*” or “*Do you feel safe?*”) and whether the participant is at risk of *imminent danger* (which should also be referred to in information sheets and consent forms used by the research team).
- Assess any perceived risk which the participant believes pertains to them. It should be noted that where gang-affiliated or gang-affected youth are known to be interacting with research teams that this can be misconstrued or even perceived to be a form of grassing/snitching by others, including by those who are trusted friends. This has a potential to trigger retaliation or targeted threat or attack, both physical and/or online. If necessary, or if the potential for such views to be realised or considered a possibility, then this should be actively discussed with the participant before the interview/focus group to ensure this possibility has been considered in full prior to the interview commencing.
- Offer immediate support;

If the participant is able to continue participation in the interview/focus group and is **deemed not at any risk**, (physical or mental) for doing so, then the Researcher can resume interview.

If the participant is experiencing or displaying acute distress, is unable to carry on the interview but is not at risk of imminent danger, the Researcher should:

- End the discussion with the participant, leave the interview room and accompany them to a quiet area;
- Ascertain if they wish to continue after a short break, or to continue at another time;

- Consider discontinuing the interview or removing them from the focus group. The option should be discussed with the participant and other members of the Research Team (if possible);
- Offer a personal referral to Act for Change, (a charity which works to improves the lives and mental health of young people who have experiences of trauma, abuse and bereavement www.actforchange.org.uk/contact). Act for Change can be engaged upon referral by the Researcher or research team and will undertake a professional assessment of the individual. This assessment might determine if further or ongoing engagement is required or it may just be a one-off conversation.

For participants who are experiencing acute distress and potentially **are at risk** of imminent danger, the Researcher should:

- Encourage the participant to contact their team manager, supervisor, social worker, GP or mental health provider or offer for a member of the research team to do so (with the participant's consent) as soon as reasonably practicable;
- With the participant's consent, the Researcher should contact (as soon as reasonably practicable), a member of the participant's family (if appropriate to do so) who can support the participant to access their GP or any treating health or social care team who can offer monitoring, advice, support, and treatment.
- Make a direct referral to Act for Change (www.actforchange.org.uk/contact).

At close of interview/focus group

Researchers should close by checking on the status of participants and offer advice or signposting regardless of whether issues have come to light, been raised or have presented.

Post Interview/Focus Group follow up with distressed participants

Appropriate follow up should be given to participants who became distressed during an interview/focus group. This should include re-engaging with the participant, if necessary by re-contacting the manager, supervisor, or gatekeeper. The PI or research team member should make a courtesy call to the participant within 24 to 72 hours of the interview/focus group. In these circumstances, the participant should be asked for consent to that proposed contact at the original time they present/ raise/ display distress.

Once a follow up courtesy contact has been made the researcher should:-

- Enquire again to the current situation and presentation of the individual; has anything changed, improved or gotten worse?
- In all cases, signpost the participant to relevant support services.
- Encourage the participant to call the Researcher, or another agreed adult/manager, if they experience ongoing/increased distress, with a view to assessing their welfare.
- Discuss making a referral to Act for Change, (the charity which works to improve the lives and mental health of young people who have experiences of trauma, abuse and bereavement
www.actforchange.org.uk/contact)
- Agree if possible, to alerting the gatekeeper/ person in authority that the participant became distressed.

Post interview/focus group follow up with Research Team

The PI or Lead Researcher should encourage the researcher to access a Research Mentor if he/she experiences increased anxiety or distress following the event or if they are engaged in working on potentially sensitive and distressing interview

content. Again sensitivity should be given to issues relating to age, gender and ethnicity in this regard.

Managing Transcription and

Upon sharing the research recordings with the transcription staff or agency staff, the PI or Lead Research will

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Violence Ensure the Transcriber or agency is reminded of the nature of the research data;

- Ensure the Transcriber or agency has prompt access to an appropriate person for crisis counselling if appropriate or needed.
- Ensure the Transcriber has a clearly documented termination plan following the provision of transcription services where the subject matter may be distressing or highly sensitive. That plan should include reasonable steps to ensure resolution of any welfare issues which may have arisen as a consequence of the work;
- Ensure that the Transcriber is encouraged to document their thoughts and feelings in a journal for discussion at a debrief sessions or for inclusion in fieldwork notes; or if an agency worker are encouraged to raise these issues with their supervisor or manager;
- Ensure that a follow up courtesy call is made to the Transcriber within 24-72 hours of their last activity (or that the Transcriber is encouraged to call a member of the Research Team if he/she experiences increased distress in the 1-3 days following transcription).

Protocol Review

This protocol should be kept under regular 6 monthly review and updated for learning and improvement as required following key research projects.

Date of Adoption of this Protocol - Date
of next review of this Protocol -
Signature of the Director of the NCGR -

References

Draucker C.B, Martsof D S and Poole C (2009) Developing Distress Protocols for research on Sensitive Topics. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing 23 (5) pp 343-350

McCosker, H Barnard, A Gerber, R (2001). Undertaking Sensitive Research: Issues and Strategies for Meeting the Safety Needs of All. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 2(1)

Gregory, D Russell, C Phillips, L (1997). Beyond textual perfection: transcribers as vulnerable persons. Qualitative Health Research, 7(2), 294-300.