

ASA Opposes Subpoena of 'Belfast Project' Data

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The Council of the American Sociological Association (ASA) is profoundly disturbed by the possibility that the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit will uphold Judge William G. Young's recent ruling that personally identifiable research data collected as part of Boston College's "Belfast Project" must be turned over to British law enforcement through the U.S. Department of Justice.

These personally identifiable data were collected as part of a recent oral history project on the political and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland decades ago. As part of the project, the researchers guaranteed their subjects that the information they provided would not be released with personal identifiers until after their deaths. Such guarantees are a core component of efforts by historians and social scientists to develop the research-based knowledge that is critical to an informed society and its well being.

This principle of protecting the confidentiality of information obtained from human research subjects is an important part of U.S. federal law and regulation governing research. It is intended to ensure that people who voluntarily participate in research may do so without the threat of harm while also maintaining their right to privacy. Additionally, it is intended to ensure that researchers may conduct studies involving human participants without threats to their ability to develop valuable scientific and humanistic knowledge. Such scholarly freedom is essential to both an informed and a free society.

The ASA, founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a scientific discipline and profession, and promoting the contributions and use of sociology to society. As the national organization for over 14,000 sociologists and related scholars and researchers, the ASA takes the responsibility of researchers to protect the confidentiality of research data extremely seriously—this principle is at the heart of the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics, which is enforced by the ASA Committee on Professional Ethics. Similarly, the ASA works vigorously on behalf of scholars and researchers whose efforts to protect confidential data obtained from research participants have been challenged.

The ASA Council calls upon the U.S. Court of Appeals to acknowledge the importance to a free society of protecting from subpoena confidential research information. The release of the "Belfast Project" interview data threatens the academic freedom to study difficult and controversial topics. It undercuts the willingness of potential participants in future research to share valuable information. In the short run, such intrusion in research seeking to understand past tragedies can harm the processes through which Northern Ireland now seeks political stability. And in the long run, we must weigh the potential damage to social science that can provide a firmer knowledge base for avoiding these types of conflicts in the future.

For these reasons, we hope the Court of Appeals will affirm the right of research confidentiality, which is fundamental to much social research.