



Research  
Ethics Board

# GUIDELINES FOR INCENTIVES, REIMBURSEMENTS, AND COMPENSATION

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## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this guideline is to provide researchers with information related to the ethical use of incentives, reimbursements and compensation as it pertains to research related activities.

## 2. Background

An **Incentive** is “anything offered to [research] participants, monetary or otherwise, to encourage participation in research” (p. 205\*<sup>i</sup>). For example, gift cards, cash, prizes, coupons, goods and services, etc., may all be used by researchers to incentivize potential research participants to participate in research related activities.

A **Reimbursement** is a “payment to [research] participants to ensure that they are not put at a direct, or indirect, financial disadvantage for the time and inconvenience of participation in research” (p. 208). Direct expenses are “costs incurred because of research participation (e.g., paying for transportation to, or parking at, the research site) while indirect expenses refer to losses that arise from participation; e.g., taking unpaid leave from work” (p. 31).

**Compensation** is a form of restitution offered to research participants for injuries that arise as a result of their participation in research related activities. For example, if a research project is likely to bring about emotional distress or trauma, researchers or research institutions may be required, ethically speaking, to pay for counselling fees in the event that someone is harmed as a result of participation.

## 3. Incorporating Incentives, Reimbursements, and Compensation

All incentives, reimbursements, and forms of compensation to individuals for their participation in research related activities must not undermine the voluntary nature of their consent. As the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2) notes, “the voluntariness of consent is important because it respects human dignity and means that individuals have chosen to participate in research according to their own values, preferences, and wishes” (p. 26).

In order to ensure that consent is given voluntary, it is imperative that (I) all incentives, reimbursements, and compensation are conducted in a transparent manner, and (II) that steps be taken to ensure that the use of incentives, reimbursements, and compensation do not create an undue influence on potential research participants to participate in research related activities.

## Transparency

It is important that researchers make known all incentives, reimbursements, and forms of compensation that individuals will receive as a result of their research participation. This information should be explicitly stated in Section 20 of the online ethics application form entitled “Incentives, Reimbursements and Compensation”, as well in the recruitment document(s) and on the consent form(s).

In cases where incentives, reimbursements, and compensation for a research project are being funded by someone other than the researcher, the funder and the relationship of the funder to the research project must clearly be stated in Section 4 in the online ethics application form entitled “Funding”, as well as in the recruitment document(s) and on the consent form(s).

In addition to making incentives, reimbursements, and forms of compensation known to research participants, it is important that clear and detailed information be provided regarding the type of the incentive/reimbursement/form of compensation being offered. This information should be provided in Section 20 of the online ethics application form entitled “Incentives, Reimbursements and Compensation”, as well as in the recruitment document(s) and on the consent form(s).

For example, if a lottery/raffle ticket is offered to individuals for participating in research related activities, the researcher should specify:

- What the lottery/raffle ticket is for (e.g., a gift card);
- The monetary value of the prize (e.g., 100 dollars);
- The research participant’s chance of winning (e.g., 1 in 100);
- When the lottery/raffle ticket will be given to the research participant, (e.g., at the start of the study); and
- When the draw will take place (e.g., once all data has been collected).

This information will enable potential research participants to have a clear understanding regarding the nature of the incentive, and allow for research participants to make a more fully informed decision as to whether they would like to participate in the research project.

## Preventing Undue Influence

Incentives, reimbursements, and compensation, if improperly used, can create an undue influence, and undermine individuals’ ability to freely decide to participate in research related activities. In order to ensure that incentives, reimbursements, and compensation do not create an undue influence, it is imperative that the type of incentive or reimbursement or type of compensation is proportional, contextual, and not so large as to provide a compelling reason for individuals to partake in research related activities.

A **compelling reason** is a reason that an individual cannot reasonably act contrary to because it puts a significant amount of pressure on an individual to act in a certain way. While incentives, reimbursements, and compensation typically do provide a reason for individuals to participate in research related activities, it is imperative that this type of reason is not a compelling one.

In order to prevent any undue influence, incentives and reimbursements should not be withheld in the event that research participants discontinue their participation in research related activities. Typically, incentives and reimbursements should be distributed to research participants at the beginning of a study. In cases where there are multiple phases in a research design, and where incentives are used, research participants should typically receive incentives for future phases of the research study, even if the participant chooses not to partake in latter phases. This will minimize the likelihood that research participants will feel that they must complete a research study in order to receive reimbursements and/or incentives. This strategy promotes research participants' autonomy and enables them to act in accordance with their own values, preferences, and wishes.

**N.B.** While the Research Ethics Board (REB) does not generally endorse or discourage the use of incentives, reimbursements, or forms of compensation, it does discourage using incentives for research projects where the research design collects online anonymous data. This is because it is very difficult to ensure that individuals do not participate more than once, simply to receive the incentive.

#### 4. Criteria for Assessing Incentives, Reimbursements, and Compensation

The onus is on researchers to demonstrate that their use of incentives, reimbursements, and compensation is appropriate, and does not undermine the voluntary nature of consent by research participants.

In addition to assessing the ways in which incentives, reimbursements, and compensation may affect the voluntary nature of a research participant's participation, the REB will also pay special attention to the following criteria:

- I. The socio-economic circumstances of potential research participants.
- II. The age and capacity of potential research participants.
- III. The customs and practices of the community.
- IV. The magnitude and the probability of harms.

In cases where the REB determines that an incentive, reimbursement, or compensation is inappropriate, it will request that either (a) specific modifications be made, or (b) request that researchers address the REB's concern(s) with respect to incentives, reimbursements, and compensation on their own terms; i.e., in a way that satisfies the REB, and meets the researchers' goals.

In cases where costs associated with research participation are high, but where the research design does not include any incentives, reimbursements, or compensation, the REB may request an explanation as to why the costs associated with research participation are not being minimized. The onus is on researchers to justify this feature of their research design.

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<sup>i</sup> \*All page number references refer to the online version of the TCPS 2 (2014).

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2014*.