

Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling is a recruitment method in which an investigator enlists the help of a research subject in identifying, and possibly recruiting, additional subjects. It is useful when the investigator may not have access to a population of potential subjects who meet inclusion criteria, which may often be stigmatizing.

There are two different approaches to snowball recruitment. In the first method, the investigator asks a person to inform potential subjects about the research project and share the investigator's contact information. It is then up to the potential subjects to contact the investigator. The informed consent process should make it clear that agreeing to contact others is not a requisite for participating in the research. Also, the researcher should not offer a reward or a "bounty" for recruiting subjects. This method rarely presents ethical issues for the IRB.

The second method is more common but problematic. The investigator asks the first recruited subject for contact information about potential subjects and then contacts them directly. The major ethical issue is that the first subject may be divulging information about other people that they would prefer to be kept confidential. And it is especially problematic when the referring individual is a person of authority in the community. The IRB would evaluate very carefully the context in which this approach to recruitment is occurring.

The [Boise State University IRB](#) has a good discussion of snowball sampling.