

Tips for Anonymizing Community Engagement Session Data

Sometimes community members share personal information about themselves during community engagement sessions or when responding to open-ended survey questions. One important step for protecting participants' personal information is through anonymization, removing information that could be used to identify someone. Below are steps you can take to anonymize your data.

Step 1: Find and redact direct identifiers in your data

Direct identifiers are ones like the participant's name, address, or telephone numbers that specifically identify them. These should always be redacted from the data.



Step 2: Find, highlight, and consider the indirect identifiers in your data

Indirect identifiers are ones that, if placed with other information, could reveal an individual (e.g., by cross-referencing occupation, salary, age, and location). Consider which indirect identifiers are essential for understanding the data and which ones to leave out.

Step 3: Create and consistently use an anonymization log

An anonymization log is a table of original name, pseudonyms, and relevant demographics. This table should be stored separately from the anonymized data files. Ensure that the coding team use pseudonyms or replacements consistently.

Step 4: Avoid over- or under-anonymizing your data

Avoid over- or under-anonymization to mitigate disclosure while maintaining data utility and value. As an example, see how the following passage was anonymized to avoid over or under anonymization, while still providing enough context for analysis.

Original response

I first started teaching at Lincoln Middle School, which is about 10 minutes from my apartment in downtown Springfield. My closest colleagues were Ms. Carter and Ms. Nguyen, and I still work with Ms. Nguyen on the district's literacy committee. She lives in Oakwood neighborhood with her partner David and their daughter Isabelle.

Anonymized response

I first started teaching at [a local middle school], which is about 10 minutes from my apartment in [a city in the Midwest]. My closest colleagues were [Colleague 1] and [Colleague 2], and I still work with [Colleague 2] on the district's literacy committee. She lives in [a nearby neighborhood] with her partner and their daughter.

This handout was prepared under Contract ED-IES-22-C-0009 by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, administered by WestEd. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.