



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
TRAINING AND EDUCATION COMMAND
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USMC HRPP Fact Sheet Conducting Research with Marines Corps Personnel

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USMC HRPP Points of Contact

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Purpose: This fact sheet provides an overview of key policies governing research with Marine Corps personnel and other factors that extramural researchers need to consider as they develop a research protocol and timeline.

Research Design Considerations

Limits on participant compensation: Under DoD 3216.02, DoD-affiliated personnel, such as active duty and reserve service members and government employees, may not be compensated for participating in research while on duty. There are some limited exceptions to this for blood draws, etc., but in general, the prohibition holds. The USMC HRPP will accept research protocols that compensate USMC participants for off-duty participation provided that the compensation does not constitute undue influence to participate and that participation (or travel to and from participation sites) will not adversely affect their readiness for their next duty time period. NOTE: Some other reviewing bodies, such as the USMC Survey Control Office, may place further restrictions on compensation. Researchers should consult with them during the design process.

When you are determining an appropriate level of compensation for DoD-affiliated personnel, consider the significant income disparities among ranks or government civilian levels. As of the date of this fact sheet, the base pay for a Marine lance corporal is just over \$2000 per month, while base pay for a major may be closer to \$9000 per month. Similarly, the base pay for a government civilian at the first step of GS-9 level is around \$3750 per month, but base pay for a civilian at the top step of the GS-15 level is around \$12,700 per month. So, what might be appropriate for somebody at a higher rank or level may be excessive for somebody at a lower rank or level. We recognize that many researchers particularly want to provide compensation to participants who have lower incomes. However, we are required to ensure that compensation will not unduly influence people to volunteer. If you have questions about the appropriateness of your compensation plan, contact the USMC HRPP.

Mitigating command influence: Conducting research with military personnel means being attentive to how rank and chain of command may influence potential participants. For example, a seemingly casual comment or encouraging email from a commanding officer can be taken as direction to participate. (This sometimes is referred to as being “voluntold” to do something.) Your research design must address this by including steps to ensure that organizational leaders are not present during recruiting events or the consent process and do not send messages encouraging participation. When a leader is enthusiastic about your project, you also should be prepared to work with them or their staff to help them understand the requirement for voluntary participation.

Ensure your team is attentive to verbal or physical cues that a person believes they have been directed to participate. They may be uncomfortable declining and going back to their command earlier than their leadership expects. For in-person research, some researchers have found it helpful to reserve a second room where people who decline consent can wait during the research activity period. That way, nobody in their command can tell whether they participated.

Mixing ranks in research activities: In projects where there will be group activities, be attentive to the role of rank in influencing participation. Lower rank individuals or even people within the same rank, but with less seniority, may be uncomfortable speaking freely with higher rank individuals in the room. Additionally, if a higher rank person speaks first, later speakers may be hesitant to provide any information that is not aligned with the perspective offered by the higher rank individual. While mixed rank groups can provide valuable insights, some researchers have found it useful to balance them with groups of the same rank or individual interviews to mitigate the bias rank can introduce.

Planning for changes: Your research schedule and design may have to adapt based on changes to unit or individual schedules, assignments, missions, etc. For example, a unit may commit to allowing you to come do interviews during a certain week. However, if they have to get ready to deploy or perhaps have an unexpected training opportunity, the mission and readiness of the unit will take precedence over their commitment to you. To the maximum extent possible, build flexibility into your design. Also, consider how to reflect the requirement for flexibility in the protocol you submit to your IRB so that it is not necessary to amend the protocol each time something needs to change.

Approval Timeline Considerations

Flag officer-level letters of support: Under USMC policy, a researchers must obtain a letter of support from a flag officer, usually a general officer (GO) or member of the Senior Executive Service (SES). This letter must be from the first GO in the chain of command above all potential participants or from a flag officer or SES in the command with oversight of the topic. The letter must be signed by the GO, SES, or other flag officer, not “by direction.” Note that this letter may not be required if the research is funded by the USMC.

Commanding officer (CO) letters of support: Under DoDI 3216.02, researchers must gain approval from the COs of units that will be affected by the project (e.g., allowing researchers to recruit participants, providing facilities, etc.). These letters are not approving or disapproving your project. Rather they, indicate whether the unit is able and willing to support the research activities you propose and the logistical assistance you need. For the Marine Corps, these letters must be at the O-5 (LtCol) or O-6 (Col) level and signed by the actual CO, not “by direction.” It can take weeks to several months to get these letters, so budget ample time.

When requesting letters of support, write it to ensure you are providing the CO with a clear understanding of the impact on their unit if they agree to support. Any support provided to research, even if only letting personnel participate or having a staff member send an email with a link to a survey, takes time away from the core duties of unit personnel. Provide the CO (or their staff) with a succinct, clear description of your project and details of what you will be requesting. This should include both time for Marines in the unit to participate and any logistical support you need, such as rooms for the research, help with access to base, or circulating an email with a link to a survey. When describing the support required, keep your audience in mind. The CO will need to know how many participants you may recruit, what types of participants you need, how long and how often they will be away from their duties in order to participate, when the support will be needed, and other information that helps them understand the impact of the research on their mission. Similarly, when describing logistical support you will need, think ahead and be as complete as possible. Do not assume that the command will be able to make personnel available at the last minute to assist the research team with things like figuring out where to park, finding rooms, etc. If you will need a point of contact to assist you before and/or during your project, include that in your request. This is not the time to “pitch” your project. Information should be focused on what the command needs to know to determine the impact of the research on its personnel and main mission, which is how they determine if they can support it.

Note on letters of support: There is no specific format for letters of support. Each command has its own preferences for format and staffing. Letters must include the title of the research (the same title used on the IRB protocol), clearly state that the signatory is willing to support the project, including any required logistical support, and include a point of contact with name, email, and telephone number, in case the USMC HRPP needs to contact the command.

USMC HRPP review timeline: Once all required information is received, the USMC HRPP typically can complete its review within 5 business days and will complete it more quickly if workload allows. Review requirements and tips for ensuring a rapid review are available in the HRPO Review and Administrative Review Fact Sheets.

USMC Survey Control Office (SCO) review: All projects involving surveys, questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups with 10 or more USMC personnel must be reviewed by the USMC Survey Program. Projects that involve more than one command, address potentially controversial subjects, or address special topics identified by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (the topic list changes periodically and is not publicized) may be sent for various higher-level reviews. Therefore, this review timeline can vary from a few weeks to more than a year if OMB review is required. The USMC HRPP recommends that you coordinate with the SCO during design to determine if any aspects of your project will trigger requirements for higher-level reviews and to identify other requirements that may apply to your project.

More Information:

Additional information, primary references, and the documents listed below, are available on the [USMC HRPP website](#).

- USMC HRPP Administrative Review Fact Sheet
- USMC HRPP Human Research Protection Official (HRPO) Review Fact Sheet
- USMC HRPP Policy and Procedures