



Research and “Right to Know”

In celebrating the significance of the public’s legal right of access to information, we often overlook the importance of access to information for research purposes. Media attention is largely on information obtained through *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* ("FIPPA") requests relating to significant political issues. Individuals are often concerned with finding out what information about them public bodies and private sector organizations hold. It is important to recognize, however, that public bodies have records that contain information useful to scientists, academics, and other researchers who investigate a wide variety of subjects, which researchers can access.

Public bodies make a large quantity of source material available to the public without a formal request under FIPPA. For example, the BC Archives house a large collection that is open to the public for academic and genealogical research and other purposes. Many public bodies publish statistical data, annual reports and other types of reports that they make available on-line or for purchase through Crown Publications and other publishers.

Public bodies also provide access to information valuable for research through formal requests under FIPPA. One example is the public archive of documents relating to sustainable development of Clayquot Sound that is available on-line through the University of Victoria and Clayquot Biosphere Trust. The researchers originally obtained these records through FIPPA requests to the BC Ministry of Forest and Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs.

FIPPA also makes provision for researchers to have access to records containing personal information that normally cannot be disclosed. Section 35 of FIPPA permits disclosure for research purposes in accordance with a research agreement that meets certain terms and conditions to protect the privacy of individuals identified in the records. This enables research projects that can provide information valuable for development of new medical treatments and social policy decision-making.

Population Data BC at the University of British Columbia has built a data base that facilitates valuable research through agreements with BC Vital Statistics, the Ministry of Health Services, WorkSafe BC and the Human Early Learning Partnership. Some examples of recent projects include the use of antidepressants by expectant mothers and their effects on newborn babies; the health costs of treating workplace asbestos-induced illnesses; the educational and social benefits of full-day kindergarten; and the social and economic benefits of reducing early childhood vulnerability. Edudata Canada is another research unit at the University of British Columbia that, through agreements with the BC Ministry of Education, hold Ministry data since 1991 and makes it available to scholars and policy makers. It also posts statistical reports of provincial exam results.

The BC Archives also makes information available through research agreements. Recent research projects that have taken advantage of this provision include a studies on the following topics: suicide and assisted suicide in Canada; incidence of tuberculosis among Japanese-Canadians in BC during the 1940s and 1950s; traditional governance of first nations people in BC; and experimentation with the alternative system of voting in BC in the 1950s.

This brief survey demonstrates the benefits of ensuring the availability of information held by public bodies for researchers. As we celebrate Right to Know Week in British Columbia and Canada, we can appreciate the broad range of political, economic, social and cultural benefits that access to information promotes and to remain vigilant to ensure that they continue.

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