Minimizing Attrition in Longitudinal Studies with Adolescents: Traditional and Technology-Based Methods

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What We Do

• Computer-based, drug abuse prevention programs
• Tailored according to risk factors, gender, sexual orientation, and/or ethnicity
• Longitudinal with 3 to 5 data collection points
• Involve minors or minors and one parent
## Retention Rates Across Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th># of Surveys</th>
<th>Retention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SODAS City</td>
<td>Reduce alcohol use</td>
<td>10-12 yo Boys and Girls Urban youth</td>
<td>Pre, post, and 7 annual follow-ups</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHWYS</td>
<td>Reduce drug use</td>
<td>11-13 yo Girls and their moms Urban youth</td>
<td>Pre, post, and 3 annual follow-ups</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RealTeen</td>
<td>Reduce drug use</td>
<td>13 &amp; 14 yo Girls only Nationwide</td>
<td>Pre, post, and 2 annual follow-ups</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MADTalk</td>
<td>Reduce drug use, increase PA, and improve diet</td>
<td>10-12 yo Girls and their moms Public housing</td>
<td>Pre, post, and 5-month follow-up</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What’s Attrition Got To Do With It?

• Major threat to longitudinal studies
• Threatens interpretation of causal findings and generalizability (do those who stayed differ from those who left?)
• Smaller number of participants, less power, may be less diverse
• Unequal number of participants in the conditions (differential attrition)
Timeline

- When should you start thinking about ways to minimize attrition?

Before you begin the study
Minimize Attrition at Enrollment

• How easy is it to enroll?
• Desire for a big $N$ can motivate you to make it too easy to enroll
• Make sure youth are aware of study duration and procedures
• Consider including multiple steps to enroll
• What kind of tracking info do you need now to find them in 3 years?
The Key to Retention is...

to treat every participant like a precious gem.
Strategies to Maximize Retention

- Cultivate a sense of belonging; your goal is for them to look forward to hearing from you... or at least not dread it.
- Use tailored communications (i.e., their first name) to convey “you are important to us.”
- Attractive, high quality materials also convey participants’ value to the study.
Strategies to Maximize Retention

• Every 3 months, update contact information (cell phone, email, address, name of school, alternate contacts, preferred method)
  - You don’t want to find out at survey time that their number no longer works
  - Conveys that you have not forgotten about them

• Incentivize to update/confirm contact info

• Use Facebook to track cold cases
Strategies to Maximize Retention

- Use multiple and novel contact methods
  - For us, that is snail mail
- Use assigned staff for calls, texts, email (rotate when someone is unsuccessful)
- Look for patterns – same day, time, person
- Change up the number you call and text from
- Use parents or close adults when have trouble reaching adolescents
Communicate Clearly and Frequently

• Be clear about what you need from them and what they will receive (brief, punchy subject line, detailed, action-oriented)
• Don’t interpret lack of response as lack of interest; keep trying
• Send texts alerting them to emails
• Use extra communications (birthdays, holidays, religious holidays)
• But not so frequently that you annoy them
Final Thoughts

• Keep your word and be prompt with $
• Once in, always in
• Be flexible and creative – what can YOU do when they say they can’t do X, Y, or Z?
• Manage field staff: participants are doing us a favor, be accommodating and appreciative; eyes and ears on potential cold cases
• Spend too much time on communication materials - always think about how the participant will perceive what you put out