

Tracking Methods and Retention for a Longitudinal Sample of Alcohol and Drug-Involved Women on Probation and Parole

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This mixed-methods study of women on probation and parole examines strategies used to retain participants in research studies. Quantitative methods are used to examine the existence of sampling bias whereas qualitative methods are employed to gather information surrounding the difficulties in maintaining contact with these individuals. The women in this study were characterized by several predictors of attrition, including low income status, alcohol and substance misuse, and high residential mobility. The study utilized data collected from a series of six interviews that were carried out over a period of approximately 60 months and were broken into three-waves that focused on women's relationships with the officers in charge of their supervision and a three-wave follow up study that focused on life-course identity development, including periods in substance abuse treatment and criminal justice settings. The initial sample size was 402 women who were recruited from the caseloads of 73 community corrections officers in Michigan.

Sample Characteristics

Type of Supervision

Probation	n = 305
Parole	n = 93
Probation & Parole	n = 4

Employment and Income

Income < \$10,000 per year	81.3%
Unemployed	54.7%

Substance Use

Recent Violations for Substance Use	40.1%
Recent Positive Drug Screen	27%

Residential Mobility and Neighborhood Characteristics

Average Moves in 18 Months	2
Moving in Foreseeable Future	18%
Living in high-crime neighborhood	73%

Methods Employed to Increase Retention	
Soliciting multiple contact methods	Collected women’s names, mailing addresses, email addresses, social network account names, aliases, and phone numbers. Michigan Department of Corrections identifying number was also useful to collect.
Soliciting contact information for collaterals	Collected multiple contact methods for collaterals such as family and friends who would know how to contact them if other means failed.
Soliciting permission to contact supervision officers	Participants were asked to provide consent to contact their probation or parole officer or a community worker to schedule follow-up interviews.
Eliminating barriers to participants contacting project staff	Participants were given ink pens stamped with the university name and phone number as well as business cards that listed the project website, the project cell phone number, toll-free number, email address, and the PI’s email address.
Incentives and cash assistance	Participants received a \$30 gift card or money order for the first interview, \$50 for the second, \$75 for the third, \$40 for the fourth, \$75 for the fifth, and \$50 for the sixth.
Ensuring confidentiality	A certificate of confidentiality from the National Institute of Health that protected women’s information and project data from being subpoenaed.
Building research-participant partnerships and trust	Researchers took steps to include study participants as co-researchers. Interviewers went through extensive training on how to build rapport with interviewees by emphasizing the choice, power, and control the interviewees have during the interview and engaging in some mutual disclosure/dialogue.

Results

Contact Attempts

- The average number of unsuccessful contact attempts per woman was approximately 8
- Only 57.9% of participants were contacted directly on a contact attempt

Contact Method Which Resulted in Interview

- Phone call (73%)
- Text message (20.1%)
- Facebook (2.3%)
- Home visit (1.6%)
- E-mail (0.7%)

Characteristics of Women

- To better understand factors that may affect retention, the researchers categorized women into two groups: retained (completed T4) and not retained (did not complete T4). Researchers ran analyses along several dimensions that prior research has identified as related to retention (i.e. recent substance abuse, unstable or unsafe housing, low income level, age, race, employment status, probation v. parole status, and mental health status) but no statistically significant differences between the two groups of women in the sample emerged as significant.
- The most pronounced effect of the attrition is that statistical power was reduced because the study experienced 24% attrition between T1 and T4 (98 or 402) - which is lower than average for this type of study- which shows that the researchers' efforts to increase retention were successful.

Qualitative Findings

- 75% of women reported they were difficult to reach due to "transiency-related" barriers (i.e. prepaid or minute phones)
 - ✓48% had changed phone numbers
 - ✓29% had moved
 - ✓14% reported experiencing financial difficulty in maintaining their phone
- 20% women reported they were had to reach because they were very busy
 - ✓"Being busy" was associated with working, attending school, or caring for family members

Overcoming Contact Barriers

- 61% provided suggestions to overcome contact barriers and recommended the use of:
 - ✓Facebook (15%)
 - ✓Mailed letter (14%)
 - ✓Being persistent in time or effort (14%)
 - ✓Contacting Collaterals (11%)
 - ✓Email (9%)
 - ✓New phone numbers (8%)
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