Tracking High Risk Families

By Sharron Paige Whitaker

Longitudinal studies provide us with very accurate information on development. They are done to measure and monitor risk factors and/or outcomes over time for a particular sample or population. Participants in the study are evaluated when the study begins and then followed, often for many years. High-risk families are especially difficult to follow. This task can be made easier by obtaining good contact information and by establishing good rapport at the recruitment stage. Tracking results vary by strategy and method. Each depends upon the staff responsible for retaining and/or locating and the relationship that they build with the individual and their contacts or other sources. Confidentiality is crucial. The participant needs to feel enough trust and comfort with the interviewer to give them contact information. While respecting rights of privacy, every effort is made to keep track of the baseline participants, for proper documentation of findings.

For follow-up, the first step is to collect information such as current address, and phone (home, cell and pagers) numbers and social security number. Current contact information changes frequently. Some of this information may be available from the participant’s first contact with the research project, but may not be up to date. It is good to also ask participants for at least three possible contacts, preferably parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and/or current employer. These are the people who may be able to at least give you a lead at a later date when you contact them. There is a need to stress confidentiality so they will be willing to give out information.
The main sources used in the Maternal Substance Abuse studies at Emory University where Dr. Claire Coles is the chief investigator are US Postal, home visits, contacts obtained at time of recruitment, neighbors, apartment managers, Equifax, caseworkers, local phone and Haynes criss-cross directories. According to Hunt & White, in *Retaining and Tracking Cohort Study Members*, other recommendations include police records, temporary job placement offices, county coroner, and drug treatment programs. Other research organizations that do longitudinal studies such as University of Chicago, Westat, and Research Triangle Institute employ many great tactics when those already mentioned do not work. They encourage contact of neighborhood stores and local fire stations. This really works in rural areas. If the individual is not known, usually the older relatives are. There are also windows-based software packages available that can be individualized for tracking and monitoring.

With stalking laws in effect, paranoia about police retribution, and Child Protective Services involvement, families find it hard to trust. Also, what works for one may not work for another. Here is an example of how using family contacts, neighborhood knowledge, and observational skills led to locating a participant with the Emory Teen Assessment Project. The only contact was a paternal grandmother who was not in touch with the family but knew the area of town they last lived. The area was drug and alcohol infested and high in crime. As we asked around, we found that the mother was incarcerated and there was no information on the teen. We also asked an Asian storeowner who knew nothing. A young man loitering in front of the store pointed out to me a block where the mother used to frequently be. As we approached the area, we saw a freshly painted apartment building. We noticed some black graffiti coming through the
paint. We looked closely and saw what was a shortened nickname of the subject’s last name. We began knocking on doors and located the participant.

In this example, the contact information collected at recruitment paid off. The rapport built with all of the contacts helped us to locate the subject. It is important to be kind and respectful to people that we contact. Even if it is not reciprocated, we are not offended because we understand that may not have been a good day or week for that person. We try again. As the older people say, "always build bridges and never destroy them because we never know when we may have to cross it again".

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