

## Telephone contact of existing participants in longitudinal surveys

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Telephone interviews have practical advantages, but with specific participation criteria one cannot know whether respondents phoned at random will be eligible. The more specific the criteria, the lower the recruitment rate; eligibility rates may be as low as 2% if several conditions must be met, making 'cold calling' expensive and time-consuming.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative telephone-based recruitment strategy involves selecting, from an existing database, individuals who meet criteria. A US study was able to contact 83% of older people from a hospital database, and recruited 45% of them for a nutrition education program, requiring a mean of 5.97 phone calls per recruitment.<sup>2</sup> We examined the response rate obtained when calling young participants in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH), who had responded to two main surveys four years apart, agreed to be contacted for additional substudies, and met specific criteria (never-smokers, recent adopters, continuing smokers, and ex-smokers).

The ALSWH surveys a representative sample of Australian women in three age groups. Surveys collect information on physical and emotional health, use of services, health behaviours, demographics, and major life events.<sup>3</sup> Young women pose particular difficulties for longitudinal research. They have high levels of mobility, are likely to live in shared accommodation, may not have telephone listings, and are likely to rely on mobile

phones.<sup>4</sup> A significant proportion of young women change their surnames when they marry.

In August 2002, a letter was sent to 180 young participants, inviting them to participate in a 20-minute telephone interview about smoking. Recruitment phone calls were made at varying times of day and days of the week, over a period of four months; if the target person was not known to the person answering the phone, tracking procedures<sup>4</sup> were used to locate new contact details and repeat the procedure.

Of 180 letters, six were returned to sender. From these, five women were re-located and three interviewed. During phoning, active tracking became necessary for another 45 women (25%), of whom 21 were re-located. Another 42 (23%) provided new contact details when contacted. Thus, 93 women (51.7%) had changed contact details over the year since previous contact. In this analysis, calls required for locating new details are not included.

Eight-four interviews were completed (46.7%). Another 29 (16.1%) refused to participate. Of the remaining 67 women, 22 have not yet been re-located. For 17 women (9.4%), we spoke to someone who confirmed that she lived at that address, but was not then available (despite up to nine calls). For another 15 (8.3%), we spoke to the target person (up to three times in the course of up to 11 phone calls) but were asked to call back because the respondent was "too busy" to make an appointment, but were unable to arrange an appointment time on callback. For another eight (4.4%), an interview time was arranged but the participant was not available at that time; in three cases, the phone had been disconnected or the participant had moved away. Of the remaining five, there were two phone disconnections, two never-answers, and one in which we spoke to someone who did not know the participant, although tracking confirmed these as her current details.

The data were also analysed by call. We made 660 calls, of which 374 (56.7%) were answered. Only 84 (12.7%) were interviews, thus mean number of calls per completed interview was 7.9. On 228 occasions (34.5%), we spoke directly to the participant, but only 84 of these were interviews; on other occasions, the woman either refused to participate or was too busy at that time and suggested a time to call back.

On 113 calls (17.1%), the person answering the phone knew the participant and informed us that she was not available at the time. On 33 (5.0%) occasions, the call was answered by a person who did not know the participant. A total of 139 calls (21.1%) reached answering machines; 95 (14.4%) were unanswered; 15 (2.3%) were engaged; and 37 (5.6%) were disconnected.

Number of calls per woman ranged from 0 to 11 (n=2). One of these, involving five answering machines, one engaged, one disconnected, two conversations with a 'known person', and two with the participant, resulted in an interview. The other involved seven answering machines, one no-answer, and three conversations with the participant, on each of which we were asked to call back at a more convenient time, and no interview resulted.

This brief analysis demonstrates the difficulty of recruiting

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young women, even from an existing database of consenters, to telephone interviews. Over half had changed at least part of their contact details (name, address, or telephone number) and a quarter required active tracking. Almost half were finally interviewed, and only 16% actively refused consent. One phone call in eight involved an interview.

Telephone calling, even of known individuals who have consented to contact, has a low success rate. When using existing databases of consenters and priming them with a letter in advance, researchers should plan for around 10 times as many telephone calls as the target number of completed interviews.

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