

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF CHILD WELFARE WORKERS IN LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

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ISSUE

A longitudinal panel study that recruits workers at hire and follows them over time provides an opportunity to empirically examine the contributors of turnover and retention. Longitudinal studies encounter several obstacles that threaten the validity of findings. Foremost, high, disproportionate participant attrition rates can lead to differences between targeted populations and sampled populations, and these differences may grow over time.

FINDINGS

This paper provides an overview of the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), a projected 5-year longitudinal panel study designed to follow newly-hired child welfare workers through their early careers. Based on published state turnover data, a 12-month recruitment period (September 2015–August 2016) was established to facilitate adequate sample sizes for data analysis at study completion, accounting for projected attrition. The total population of potential participants included 1725 eligible trainees with an average class size of 11 ($sd = 3.9$; range: 3–16). Ninety-two percent of trainees ($n = 1594$) signed a consent and completed a pre-survey. Additional findings include:

- 1. Relationship building and credibility:** Collaborative relationships with agency administrators and training providers were critical. Partnerships with leadership personnel provided access to the sample and informed survey protocol.
- 2. Consistency:** The project utilizes a logo and other branded materials for all communication with administrators, trainers, participants, and the public in order to present a consistent image for the study.
- 3. Communication strategy:** Communication protocols involve pre- and post-survey notifications, reminder messages, and incentive distributions via email and text. Moreover, study participants seem to appreciate contact with research staff outside of the survey distribution process.
- 4. Tailored Panel Management (TPM)¹:** Researchers follow TPM guidance regarding compensation structure and schedule, offering a robust series of incentives over the course of the study, and working intensely to ensure that participants find their gift certificates useful.
- 5. Convenience:** Researchers incorporated stakeholder feedback to minimize the impact of study recruitment on their work. In addition, the study was presented at a convenient time, allowing participants to take the electronic survey in multiple sittings, on multiple devices, and responding to any concerns through email, phone, or text within 48 hours.

IMPLICATIONS

The principles of TPM have been an effective tool for establishing guiding principles for the FSPSF. Researchers are confident that credibility (e.g., branding), consistency (e.g., study logo, consistent respondent expectations, predictable timing of surveys), communication (e.g., e-mail, text messages), compensation (e.g., choice of incentive, increasing incentive amount over time), and convenience (e.g., allowing survey completion over multiple sessions or on multiple devices) contributed to high response rates at Wave 1 (91.1%, $n = 1451$) and Wave 2 (81.2%, $n = 896$). As researchers complete Wave 3, one year after the initial recruitment, current high retention rates (83.9%, $n = 600$) provide additional evidence that, while labor intensive, TPM is an advantageous longitudinal strategy in conducting child welfare workforce research.

¹ Estrada, M., Woodcock, A., & Schultz, P.W. (2014). Tailored panel management: A theory-based approach to building and maintaining participant commitment to a longitudinal study. *Evaluation Review*, 38, 3-28.