Recruitment and retention of child welfare workers in longitudinal research: Successful strategies from the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families

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A B S T R A C T

Longitudinal panel studies are effective strategies to assess the personal impact of child welfare work, as well as employment outcomes of workers over time. However, longitudinal studies encounter obstacles such as disproportionate attrition that threaten the validity of findings. This paper provides an overview of the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), a 5-year longitudinal panel study of newly hired workers into the child welfare workforce. The purpose of this paper is three-fold: 1) describe the study methodology and recruitment and retention techniques for the FSPSF; 2) illustrate Estrada and colleagues' Tailored Panel Management framework (2014) through FSPSF methodological decisions; and 3) provide guidance and time estimates of key tasks for those interested in undertaking similar projects, with a particular focus on electronic data collection and communication strategies. Initial results are excellent – 84% of all eligible workers completed baseline surveys ($n = 1,451$). At Wave 2 (6 months), 81% of those workers were retained, with preliminary findings of 84% retention of the original baseline respondents at Wave 3 (12 months).

1. Introduction

High turnover among frontline workers is a well-documented concern among child welfare professionals and researchers (e.g., DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2003). A longitudinal panel study that recruits workers at hire and follows them over time provides the opportunity to empirically examine the contributors of turnover and retention. However, longitudinal studies encounter several obstacles that threaten the validity of the findings. Foremost, high, disproportionate participant attrition rates can lead to differences between targeted populations and sampled populations and these differences may grow over time. Yet, longitudinal studies, particularly in light of multilevel modeling statistical techniques, remain the most effective strategy to observe and assess change over time, including career trajectories (Menard, 2002).

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. The FSPSF is funded by the Florida Institute for Child Welfare, a legislatively mandated research institute providing research and evaluation on best practices in child welfare. We describe study methodology and examine recruitment and retention techniques

in light of available technology including online surveys and other forms of electronic communication. Estrada, Woodcock, and Schultz (2014)'s Tailored Panel Management framework informed FSPSF methodological decisions, and key concepts of the framework will be illustrated.

1.1. Overview of the child welfare workforce in Florida

Child welfare services in Florida are a public/private partnership. Broadly speaking, public employees (those hired by either the state of Florida or county sheriff's offices) are responsible for intake and abuse/maltreatment investigations, while private, community-based care organizations (CBCs) are responsible for case management services. Across the state, there are 31 administrative units implementing child welfare policy and practice. This total includes 19 CBCs who provide case management services in-house or through contracts with local agencies. Each of the 19 CBCs is responsible for a designated number of counties and assumes responsibility for training all newly hired frontline workers. Child protective investigators, alternatively, are largely employed by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), which is divided into six regional offices. Workers are assigned to service centers, which typically serve a specific county. Regional

administrators are empowered to sub-contract with county sheriff's offices to provide investigations in lieu of DCF workers. In those cases, CPIs are employed as civilian members of the county sheriff's office. Overall, at the start of the project 61 of 67 counties utilized DCF employees as CPIs, while the remaining counties utilized sheriff's offices.

1.2. Theoretical framework

In order to facilitate high recruitment and retention, we expanded upon Estrada et al.' (2014) theory of Tailored Panel Management (TPM). TPM employs Dillman's (1978, 2007) idea that social exchange theory contributes to understanding survey participation by applying these ideas to longitudinal panel studies. TPM identifies that a one-time decision-making process differs from decisions to participate multiple times; potential study members consider trust, rewards, and costs when deciding whether or not to participate, and long-term involvement requires communal exchange and commitment.

TPM (Estrada et al., 2014) identifies four components that influence participant recruitment and retention: credibility, consistency, communication, and compensation. These different components build upon each other to increase study commitment and response rather than being mutually-exclusive entities. Importantly, a single task often addresses more than one component (e.g., branding provides both study credibility and consistency). In addition, we argue for a fifth component that captures the practical aspects of study design and data collection: convenience.

First, credibility, or legitimacy, begins before data collection during the relationship-building process and encompasses all study stages. Studies benefit from credible data collectors (e.g., PhD after name), credible requests (e.g., instrument appears important), and a credible study that warrants participants' time (Dillman, 2007; Estrada et al., 2014). For example, researchers' knowledge of participants' experience with the studied phenomenon (e.g., knowledge of the daily reality of frontline child welfare work) can provide study credibility (Killien & Newton, 1990).

Second, consistency promotes communal norms in which study investigators and participants each fulfill their responsibilities. Investigators begin by presenting study rules (e.g., long-term commitment), participant roles (e.g., part of a panel), and study value to participants and others (e.g., agency, clients, community, society). Accordingly, respondents are more likely to comply with these predictable expectations. Branding, or providing a consistent study image, promotes familiarity (Ribisl et al., 1996), while predictability in timing and process can increase trust and commitment (Ross & LaCroix, 1996). Through familiarizing themselves with the study and their contribution to it, participants identify with the panel, identify with the study, and prioritize participation (Estrada et al., 2014).

Third, communication is essential for recruitment (Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000), retention (Dillman, 2007; Estrada et al., 2014), and enthusiasm for the study (Given, Keilman, Collins, & Given, 1990). Effective communication includes accessible, multimodal, and individualized communication. It enables participants to trust study personnel and easily contact them through their preferred type of communication (e.g., email, phone, text). Effective communication also enables participants to feel communication is tailored to them (e.g., using their names) rather than generic messages (Dillman, 2007).

Fourth, compensation is a direct reward for study participation. Study response rates increase when compensation is appropriate to the study sample in terms of form (e.g., cash, gift card, drawing entry) and amount. The form of compensation should be tailored to align with participants' values (i.e., be useful to participants) and systematic increases in compensation throughout study waves can enhance commitment and participation (James & Bolstein, 1992).

Fifth, convenience, or practicality, recognizes the real-world context of survey research. Emphasizing participant convenience over that of

the project staff is an effective way to strengthen recruitment and retention across populations (Nicholson et al., 2011; Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). Depending on the particular data collection methods, convenience can include allowing a participant to choose the circumstances of participation (e.g., day, time, location); offering alternative ways of participation (e.g., completing a phone interview if one cannot meet in person); and use of reminders (Nicholson et al., 2011).

2. Project development

Principles of the TPM framework were used to make methodological and implementation decisions to facilitate FSPSF recruitment and retention. The following sections illustrate TPM principles in each phase of the study's design and present relevant findings.

2.1. Literature review

To facilitate effective recruitment of a sample representative of the target population, researchers benefit from partnering with key stakeholders that have access to the population from the project's inception (Nicholson et al., 2011). Stakeholders, or in this case, child welfare and community-based care administrators, may distrust researchers, dislike the research design or consent process, deprioritize participation due to time demands, or devalue the study's potential contribution (Aitken, Gallagher, & Madronio, 2003; Nicholson et al., 2011). Therefore, meetings with key personnel in contact with participants can increase recruitment and inform data collection efforts to minimize stakeholder burden while increasing understanding of the study's value. If study participation requires little disruption to stakeholders' schedules and potentially provides valuable benefits (e.g., suggestions to reduce frontline worker turnover), stakeholders may support the study and provide access to participants more readily. Additionally, stakeholder endorsement may increase participant enrollment through increasing the study's legitimacy (Ejiogu et al., 2011).

The project development stage also provides an opportunity to brand the study, or develop a custom, consistent appearance to the study (Buttle & Westoby, 2006). The consistent look to a study aligns with survey design and communication principles (Buttle & Westoby, 2006; Dillman, 2007). A study logo, for example, may help participants remember the study and its meaningful purpose each wave. Branding may be particularly important with email surveys because participants likely receive large amounts of mass emails; branding can help participants to recognize the study before deleting the message.

2.2. FSPSF relationship building

Securing endorsement for the study by state child welfare leaders was a key developmental task for the project team. The first author, principal investigator (PI) for the study, conducted a series of meetings with state and local administrators. State-level executive administrators publicly endorsed the study through emails to their constituents, and identified a primary point of contact from their agency for the study, most often directors of training or intervention services. The PI met with each administrative unit in order to describe and create buy-in for the study. They provided opportunities to discuss proposed recruitment and data collection strategies and to learn more about the agency's computer and Wi-Fi capabilities, important for data collection. Further, these meetings also provided a platform to discuss the confidentiality protections for study participants. Agencies were not asked to provide financial support, but were asked for feedback on the study's conceptual model. The tone of the meetings emphasized a collaborative partnership and commitment to provide research findings specific to each administrative unit. Through this process, 100% of the administrative units across Florida agreed to participate and provided access to newly hired front-line workers. In addition, to strengthen and support these