

Title: Lessons Learned From Using Technology to Increase Study Participation Among Child Welfare Service Recipients

Abstract: The use of personal communication technologies (e.g., email, text messaging and cell phones) may facilitate recruitment and retention of persons who are often under-represented in evaluation studies, including recipients of services that are potentially stigmatizing, such as those delivered in child welfare settings. This presentation emphasizes lessons learned when alternatives to traditional telephone and mail data collection methods were offered in a multi-county study whose main purpose was to evaluate satisfaction with strength-based services received by families at risk of child abuse or neglect. In light of results that few people provided email or text contact information, and that the great majority of satisfaction surveys were completed through traditional methods, discussion will focus on multiple barriers to using technology (e.g., access, comfort, confidentiality concerns) and implications for improving the viability of technologies in evaluation research involving under-represented groups.

Relevance Statement:

Obtaining representative samples of service recipients in evaluation studies is critical for determining service effectiveness. The recruitment and retention challenges that exist in any evaluation study are exacerbated when respondents are from a vulnerable population (e.g., low income or racial-ethnic minorities), or when the services are potentially stigmatizing, such as those delivered in child welfare, substance abuse or mental health settings. For example, economic hardship may mean that potential study participants move frequently and/or their telephone service is disconnected. Additionally, the stressors associated with needing services in the first place may limit clients' motivation and ability to provide feedback on services received. Technologies such as e-mail, cell phones, and text messaging may be effective tools for addressing those challenges, especially given evidence that use of these technologies is increasing across demographic groups and the "digital divide" is decreasing (Kind, 2005).

This presentation reports on the use of technology as an enhancement to traditional recruitment and data collection methods in a study designed to evaluate satisfaction with services received by families in the child welfare system. Evaluators were interested in investigating anecdotal evidence that service recipients had access to texting and computers, and that they would choose to use those technologies if given the option. Data collection began in October 2009 and will continue through July 2010. The purposive sample consists of caregivers who received special services as a result of a child protective services allegation. At the end of service provision, the caregivers were asked to provide contact information (i.e., telephone, cell phone, home address, email address) and their preferred mode of contact so that an evaluator could invite them to complete a satisfaction survey. Families had the option of completing the survey over the telephone, by mail or online.

Data collected thus far demonstrates that very few (5%) families in the study (n=1095) provided an email address. Even fewer had cell phone text capability (2.5%). Only 11 respondents (1%) completed the survey online. Our overall response rate is similar to other studies for this population (Institute of Applied Research, 2004) at 31%. A significantly greater percentage of respondents (21%) chose to complete mail surveys compared to 6% who opted for an interviewer-administered land-line telephone survey, the 2% who opted for a cell phone interview, and the 1% who opted to complete it online.

This study is a barometer of the relevance of using technology in surveys of hard to reach populations. Very few participants provided new technologies as a ways to be contacted, and preliminary results suggest that new technologies did not substantially increase response rates. Implications for improving the viability of technologies in evaluation research involving under-represented groups will be discussed, including issues of confidentiality, privacy, and access to and comfort with using technology.

References

Kind, T., Huang, Z. J., Farr, D., & Pomerantz, K. L. (2005). Internet and computer access and use for health information in an underserved community. *Ambulatory Pediatrics*, 5, 117-121.