Conducting longitudinal research with homeless and formerly homeless people

Louise Joly and Maureen Crane

May 28 2015
This presentation will cover…

• Importance of longitudinal research involving people with experience of homelessness

• Challenges in undertaking longitudinal research with homeless / formerly homeless people

• Conclusions
The Rebuilding Lives study

• Funded by NIHR School for Social Care Research

• The views expressed in this presentation are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the NIHR School for Social Care Research, the Department of Health, NIHR or NHS
What is longitudinal research?

• A study that involve repeated measures on the same variables for the same group or groups on an extended series of occasions (Robson, 2002)

• **Example:** The 1970 British Cohort Study follows the lives of more than 17,000 people born in a single week in 1970 in England, Scotland and Wales
Importance of longitudinal research

- Allows us to better understand people’s progress and behaviour over time e.g. patterns of drug / alcohol use and how people deal with different problems in their lives

- Longitudinal studies are needed to examine change over several years - improvement or recovery may be slow and variable - especially for those with complex needs or very unsettled lives.

- Allows better understanding of the experiences of people before and after events, in particular where people are threatened with or experience homeless again

- Allows the study of the impact of implementation of welfare policies
CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING LONGITUDINAL STUDIES
Conducting a high quality longitudinal study is expensive

- **FOR-HOME study**
  - Baseline, 6 & 18 month interviews
  - $834,000 (£541,000)
  - Funded by ESRC

- **Rebuilding Lives study**
  - 5 year interviews
  - $333,000 (£216,000)
  - Funded by NIHR SSCR

- Need to ensure there is adequate time to recruit a hard to reach group
- Need to have appropriate intervals between data collection
- Attempts to obtain funding to continue the study not always successful
Access to potential participants and recruitment

• Need access to the population to be sampled

• Research partners from five homelessness organisations

• Each received funding for a link worker in the organisation to assist with recruitment and tracing people

• All five agencies currently involved in dissemination activities to ensure the study findings impact on policy and service development
The research team with TV News presenter Jon Snow at our first dissemination event March 2015
Addressing complex needs: improving services for vulnerable homeless people

2015

In this submission we provide evidence around the number of clients with complex needs and issues the issues they face in accessing services. We also discuss Housing First, payment by results and how services should be commissioned, coordinated and delivered.

Download

Back to policy documents
Methods to retain the sample

- Contact details of participants, and nominated relatives, friends and support workers updated at each interview.

- Gave contact slips at each interview and asked to return if details change, or to ring / text / email research team at any time. Postage paid envelopes provided.

- At 18 month interview gained permission to keep in touch although didn’t know if we could obtain funds to continue.

- Sent Christmas cards every year with request slip for change of contact details.
Challenges of tracing the participants

• High mobility among the group. Only 37% in original housing after 5 years.

• Participants frequently lost or changed mobile phones. Two people had changed their first & last names.

• Many nominated friends and relatives also changed address and other contact details.
Methods of tracing people 1

- Contacted participants through letter, phone, text or email
- Return address on envelopes meant invitation letters came back to us if person had moved – sometimes with handwritten notes by current tenant e.g. person has died
- Used electoral roll to find new address (cost implication)
- Internet searches: found 2 in prison & 1 who had left UK
- Messaging on social media sites e.g. Facebook, Badoo – found 14 people and were able to contact 9
- Searches of recent death index (microfiche in local library)
Methods of tracing people 2

• Contacting nominated friends, family for information

• Tracing family members and door knocking

• Door knocking at last known address, and talking to current occupiers and neighbours

• Contacting nominated support workers and partner homelessness organisations who searched databases
Strategies to encourage participation

- Use of same interviewer(s) on each occasion

- Flexibility in terms of arranging and conducting interviews to meet participants’ needs / preferences

- Financial incentives on completion of each interview as a recognition of time and effort:
  - Baseline: £10 ($15)
  - 6 and 18 months: £15 ($23)
  - 60 months: £20 ($31)

- Getting another team member to call the participant
## Time taken to trace participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Number of months</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;1 month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewed</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted but declined interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In prison</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to contact</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not safe to interview</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Number of months**:
- <1 month
- 1-2 months
- 3-4 months
- 5-6 months
- 7-13 months
Responding to participants' wishes or requirements before starting the interview:

- Finding a pub allowing dogs
- Participant changing the meeting point several times at short notice
- Completing welfare benefits form for distressed participant
- Fitting around personal circumstance such as work, drinking patterns and drug use/treatment
- Being prepared, and eating, a very large breakfast
The big breakfast…
Emotional aspect of interviews

• Remembering and reflecting on negative past events can be distressing

• If life unchanged interviews can be a reminder of difficulties e.g. long-term illness or unemployment

• Other significant events e.g. bereavement or relationship breakdown

• Interviews however can be positive if can recount that they got work, improved or renewed family relationships, abstained from substance use, or started a family
Safety of interviewing

- Risk information will be out of date
  - Need to make new assessment of risk and be cautious interviewing people with drug, alcohol or severe mental health problems
  - Have clear safety protocols for the team including telephone cover for interviewers; doubling up, or interviewing in public places

- Behaviour of co-habitants and visitors
  - Likewise – any knowledge had now out of date
  - Violent ex-partners may be out of prison
  - People may be helping homeless people with accommodation

- Need to be able to deal with the unexpected…
Interviewing in poor housing conditions

- Squalid conditions
- Hoarding
- Unsafe homes e.g. no lighting
- Infestations
Need to be able to cope with pets

Photo: [https://flic.kr/p/8nvcmL](https://flic.kr/p/8nvcmL) Rob Swatski
Conclusions

• It is possible to conduct longitudinal research involving hard to reach groups such as formerly homeless people and attain low attrition rates

• Need to establish a positive researcher-participant relationship from the start to keep them in the study

• Researchers need to be flexible, gently persistent, patient, and non-judgmental

• Financial incentives help