

Maximizing participation within a 13-wave cohort study (CATS) spanning multiple life transitions from childhood to young adulthood

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Background/Purpose:

Longitudinal studies face numerous challenges retaining participation; study fatigue typically contributes to growing attrition, particularly amongst older adolescents and young adults. As studies progress the likelihood of losing contact with participants also rises, which can reduce sample diversity, bias results, and diminish statistical power. Targeted efforts to boost participant engagement are crucial to maintaining the robustness of longitudinal studies.

Approach:

The Child to Adolescent Transition Study (CATS)⁴ commenced in 2012 with 1,239 Australian children aged 8-9 years. Participants have been surveyed annually about their health, emotional wellbeing and education, with 13 waves of data collection between 2012 - 2024. Very high response rates were obtained for the first three waves (>90%) followed by three waves of moderate responses (>80%). Participation during latter secondary school declined further; 67% by wave 10. Given the gradual yet steady decline over 11 waves, a comprehensive review of protocols, sample characteristics, and study documentation was conducted in 2022 to inform wave 12. This coincided with participants themselves providing informed consent, rather than parents, with uncertain impact. A series of strategies to improve data collection and participant retention were implemented in the subsequent two waves (wave 12 in 2023, wave 13 in 2024), with the goal of improving participation.

⁴ Subsequently renamed the Child to Adult Transition study, after funding was secured to continue annual surveys into adulthood

Outcomes/Impact:

These processes resulted in the highest participation rates since 2017; participation rose from 67% in 2022 to 71% in 2023 and 73% in 2024. Some participants rejoined the study after prolonged absence and 67 participants who had been lost to the study were relocated and reengaged as a result of tracing efforts.

Innovation and Significance:

Retention in longitudinal studies requires ongoing attention. Although strategies to reduce attrition can be resource-intensive, they represent a worthwhile investment, particularly in maintaining the engagement of individuals from marginalized groups, who are at greater risk of disengaging from longitudinal studies.

Disclosure of Interest Statement (example):

Nil