Thirty years later: Locating and interviewing participants of the Chicago Longitudinal Study

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Historical and Current Context

The Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS) examines the short- and long-term effects of the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program. The CPC program is a center-based early intervention that provides comprehensive educational and family support services to low-income preschool children. The original CLS sample included 989 children who attended preschool at 20 CPC sites and who graduated from kindergarten in 1985-86, as well as 550 children who did not attend CPC preschool but attended kindergarten at 5 randomly selected Chicago Public Schools. The goals of CLS are to better understand how early childhood education affects the well-being of children and families, and to identify the most effective ways to improve schools and opportunities for young people.

The CLS is currently in its 33rd year of operation. Over the years, participants, parent, and teacher surveys have been collected, as well as administrative records. CLS findings have revealed significant benefits of CPC participation on multidimensional well-being. Cost-benefit analyses have also demonstrated returns of over $8 to society per dollar invested in the CPC program.

Age 35 follow-up:

In order to investigate the long-term effects of early childhood intervention, the CLS is currently conducting a follow-up survey with participants, who are now in their mid-30s. The Age 35 survey is the most comprehensive participant survey that has been administered to date. It includes measures of educational attainment, economic well-being, physical and mental health, criminal justice system involvement, adverse childhood experiences, community involvement, and more. A comprehensive tracking and interviewing strategy is being employed to locate and interview participants for this follow-up.

Timeline

Information available before Survey 35

Number of participants Percentage
Completed Age 22-24 Survey 1142 74.2%
Last known address 1490 96.8%
Contact info on other relatives or friends 1006 65.4%
Date of birth 1531 99.5%
SSN 1480 96.3%

Survey Completes After Adoption of New Tracking Protocol (Feb. 2015)

Demographics
- 59% of respondents were female; 41% were male.
- 94% were African Americans; 6% were Hispanics.
- 66% attended CPC preschool program; 34% did not attend CPC preschool program.

Family Life
- 55% of respondents were single; 23% were married; 12% lived with a partner; and 10% were in other situations.
- 19% had no children; 19% had 1 child; 25% had 2 children; and 31% had 3 or more children.

Employment and Health
- 55% of respondents were employed full-time.
- Average income during the last 12 months of respondents was $29,665. 18% of respondents were earning more than $50,000 during the last 12 months.
- 79% of respondents have a regular doctor or place for health care.
- 82% of respondents were covered by health insurance.

Others
- 78% of respondents voted in the 2012 presidential election.
- 75% of respondents filed a tax return during the last 12 months.

Summary and Future Directions

Participant retention is essential to the success of longitudinal studies. High follow-up rates are required to maintain statistical power; reduce bias, and enhance the generalizability of results.

The CLS is one of the largest, longest running studies examining the effects of early childhood intervention on lifelong well-being. During the ongoing Age 35 follow-up, it has been both challenging and rewarding to relocate and re-interview participants, most of whom grew up in contexts of urban poverty. The adoption of detailed, manualized tracking protocol and the utilization of multiple search platforms has greatly enhanced the success of this project.

Tracking for the Age 35 survey will continue through Fall 2016. New strategies for locating and reaching out to participants are constantly being explored. In the coming months, on-the-ground canvassing and efforts to collect referrals from participants who have already done the survey will be top priorities.

Collecting data from a large sample that is representative of the original sample will be critical for advancing knowledge on the longitudinal benefits of early childhood intervention.

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