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# The SHARE Project: Maximizing Participant Retention in a Longitudinal Study with Victims of Intimate Partner Violence

**Amber Clough<sup>1</sup>, Jennifer Wagman<sup>2</sup>,  
Chiquita Rollins<sup>1</sup>, Jamie Barnes<sup>1</sup>,  
Jennifer Connor-Smith<sup>3</sup>, Phyllis  
Holditch-Niolon<sup>4</sup>, Sarah McDowell<sup>5</sup>,  
Erminia Martinez-Bell<sup>1</sup>, Tina  
Bloom<sup>6</sup>, Charlene Baker<sup>7</sup>, and  
Nancy Glass<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Multnomah County Domestic Violence Coordinators Office, Portland, OR, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA

<sup>4</sup> Prevention Development and Evaluation Branch, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA, USA

<sup>5</sup> United Way, Portland, OR, USA

<sup>6</sup> S326 Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri School of Nursing, Columbia, MO, USA

<sup>7</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI, USA

## **Corresponding Author:**

Nancy Glass, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, 525 North Wolfe Street, Rm 439, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA

Email: [nglass1@son.jhmi.edu](mailto:nglass1@son.jhmi.edu)

**Abstract**

Retaining victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in longitudinal research is challenging, as abused women often face safety concerns, housing and employment instability, poverty, and major life transitions, making it difficult to locate and retain participants at follow-up time points. This article builds on past research to describe individualized, technology-based retention strategies for hard-to-reach populations, which minimize participant loss while maintaining participant safety. These techniques have resulted in retention rates of 94% at 6-, 12-, and 18-month follow-up interviews in a sample of 278 women experiencing both IPV and housing instability. The authors discuss the ethical use of appropriate technology for maximizing retention of participants as well as the importance of adjusting retention activities to meet the individual safety needs of each participant.

**Keywords**

retention, intimate partner violence, research methods, safety needs, longitudinal studies

**Introduction**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is now recognized as a crime, a human rights violation, and an urgent public health problem (Krug et al. 2002). Effective programs and policies are needed to help women protect themselves and their children from further victimization, increase their quality of life, reduce negative health outcomes of violence, and optimally use health care resources and community-based services. Longitudinal research is essential to better understand causes and effects, identify at risk populations, and evaluate programs and policies. Retaining participants who are often trying to hide from or escape a violent partner is one of the largest obstacles to conducting longitudinal research with IPV survivors (Sullivan et al. 1996; Dutton et al. 2003; McFarlane 2007). It is difficult to estimate retention rates for longitudinal studies of IPV, as many studies do not provide this information (O'Farrell et al. 1999; Letourneau et al. 2007). Although some longitudinal studies of IPV show high retention rates (Sullivan et al. 1996; McFarlane 2007; Logan et al. 2008), it is common for published studies to have attrition rates near 25% at the 6-month time point (Davis and Taylor 1997; McHugo et al. 2005) and 41% at a 12-month follow-up (Mertin and Mohr 2001). Retention of a high proportion of the study population over time and across multiple data collection points is essential to study validity.

Methods developed in non-IPV studies for locating hard-to-find (or missing) research participants (Grant and DePew 1999; Dilworth-Anderson and Williams 2004; Lyons et al. 2004) can be extremely useful tools for IPV researchers. IPV investigators, however, are challenged by the fact that these generalized methods do not always address the unique circumstances and safety needs of participants. In response, safe and ethical methods for telephone contacts, follow-up letters or e-mails, and home visits have been developed and successfully used by IPV researchers (Sullivan et al. 1996; Campbell et al. 2003; Dutton et al. 2003; Sullivan and Cain 2004; McFarlane 2007; Logan et al. 2008). This article expands on general retention methods and basic safety-focused methods designed for studies involving abused women by reporting on the individualized strategies developed and implemented in a community-academic collaboration to evaluate the effectiveness of a permanent housing intervention for abused women (the SHARE project). In writing this article, we are aware that there is a potential for an abusive partner to read the strategies and use them to locate a former partner. The details for some strategies are limited to minimize this possibility. Researchers may contact us directly, if additional information is needed.

## **Overview of the SHARE Project**

The SHARE project is a longitudinal (2005–2010), quasi-experimental study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to evaluate the effectiveness of a housing intervention for abused women and their children in Multnomah County, Oregon. The housing intervention is being implemented by the Volunteers of America (VOA) of Oregon Home Free Program. VOA Home Free is a domestic violence advocacy program designed to complement the existing emergency shelter system by providing rent assistance and advocacy services to help women and families obtain permanent housing.

SHARE participants are adult English- or Spanish-speaking women who report physical or sexual violence by an intimate or ex-intimate partner within the last 6 months and who have housing instability as a primary concern. Two hundred and seventy-eight women consented and completed a baseline interview. Follow-up interviews at 6, 12, and 18 months post-baseline are complete.

## **General Retention Methods for Longitudinal Studies**

The foundational work of previous research teams suggests five general methods for retaining populations (Grant and DePew 1999; Dilworth-Anderson

and Williams 2004; Lyons et al. 2004), including: (1) telephone calls to multiple safe contacts; (2) e-mail and postal mail; (3) site and home visits; (4) emergency and service provider contacts; and (5) record reviews. The SHARE project uses all of these general methods (see Table 1). With each method described below, it is critical to first discuss the safety issues involved with the participant while completing the initial interview and follow her guidance in what methods to use or not use to maintain contact. See Sullivan and Cain (2004) for a review of important safety considerations in recruiting and interviewing survivors of IPV.

In designing the retention protocols for the SHARE project, we sought to not only assure scientific rigor but to take into account the specific issues and needs of this population and to design the interview protocols to be convenient, comfortable, and safe for participants. Retention strategies for the SHARE project expand on existing retention methods in a number of ways, most importantly by tailoring retention methods to the specific needs of each participant. Specifically, we recognized that many of our research participants would be dealing with high levels of danger, housing instability, and financial insecurity, and would be providing sensitive and potentially traumatizing information about their victimization. A review of baseline data indicated that 67.6% of participants had incomes below the federal poverty level. The mean Danger Assessment score (Campbell 1996), a measure of risk for lethal violence in an intimate relationship, was 21.5 (SD = 7.27, range 0–38), indicating participants have been in “extreme danger” in the past year. Additionally, participants reported an average of almost 4 (SD = 3.5) moves in the 6 months prior to the baseline interview. Based on this information, we expected that participants’ contact information would change frequently over the course of the study.

The SHARE project retention protocol was developed in consultation with domestic violence advocates with the following values of the research team and community partners:

1. respect for individual participants and concern for their well-being; participant safety is a primary factor in setting the time and place for interviews;
2. participants are the experts on the dynamics of IPV in their relationship; and
3. acknowledgment of and willingness to work through the factors in the lives of study participants that may make ongoing contact difficult: for example, ongoing IPV and the need to keep identity and whereabouts secret.

**Table 1.** General Retention Strategies

Method 1: Telephone calls

- Strategy
- Make multiple attempts, call at different times of the day and on weekends.
  - Do not leave an excessive number of messages, as this may be irritating.
  - Always be courteous and pleasant, even if frustrated by a participant’s lack of response.
  - Remind her that she will be reimbursed for her time.
  - Mention that child care is available and that we can meet her whenever and wherever she wants.
  - Remind participant she is important to the study and about the confidential nature of study.
  - Make calls from a work phone number, not a personal phone.
  - Cell phones are often not in service; continue to call disconnected numbers in case they are reconnected.
  - Never use the phrase “domestic violence” in messages. In messages, we describe the SHARE project as women’s health study or housing study.

Method 2: E-mail and postal mail

- Strategy
- Many participants have e-mail. Do not assume participants have no access to computers—they may have access in the agency where they receive services, their child’s school, the workplace, or the public library.
  - Some participants prefer e-mail contact above phone and mail. Talk with participants at baseline interview about their preferences and safety issues with e-mail or postal mail.
  - For every participant not successfully reached by phone or e-mail, mail a letter to their last known address. Even if a participant has moved, mail is often forwarded to new addresses.
  - Design form letters identifying the project but not indicating it is about “domestic violence.” Handwrite the address or letter so it doesn’t look like junk mail.
  - If letters are returned, record information in the project database.

Method 3: Site and home visits

- Strategy
- When phone messages, e-mails, and letters have not been successful, go to the last known address. Interviewers should complete home visits in pairs, carry a cell phone, and let colleagues know where they are going and what time they will be back. Coworkers should know what to do if the interviewer does not check in on time.

*(continued)*

**Table 1 (continued)**


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Method 4: Emergency and service provider contacts Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If appropriate, go to neighbors and/or the landlord if participant is not at address. Letters and the project business card can be provided to individuals who are able to give them to the participant. Post notes on apartment bulletin boards or in the laundry area.</li> <li>● If appropriate, walk around neighborhood to a bar or café she may have gone to. Ask staff or patrons of nearby businesses if anybody knows her.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When attempts to reach a participant directly have not been successful, begin attempts to contact the safe emergency contacts the participant indicated at their last interview. Emergency contacts are the most important resource for locating participants but need to be handled delicately. Many emergency contacts are not going to be interested in helping to find the participant, so your job is to make people want to help you by trusting you.</li> <li>● Use same methods listed above (phone, e-mail, mail, site visit) for contacting emergency contacts.</li> <li>● Try not to sound like a telemarketer, probation officer, or other unfavorable contact.</li> <li>● Begin by mentioning “(participant) gave us your name and number and said it was ok for us to call you for assistance in contacting her” as a way to help signal to the contact that we are safe.</li> <li>● Ask contacts for advice: “What do you think I should do to try and get in touch with her?”</li> <li>● Be very careful to protect participant’s safety by refusing to give out information regarding the purpose of the study or revealing any confidential or location information about the participant.</li> <li>● Write down any information that might be useful such as a new employer, or a new friend.</li> <li>● Express gratitude for their help and acknowledge that this method of tracking may be bothersome to contacts: “I am sorry to bother you again, but you are the only person who can help us contact her.” Also ask “Would it be ok if I called you back in a couple weeks if I don’t hear from her?”</li> <li>● Go on site visits to emergency contacts addresses if you aren’t able to get a hold of them by phone. People are sometimes more helpful in person than on the phone.</li> </ul>

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*(continued)*

**Table 1 (continued)**

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes participant information can be found through service providers the participant accessed. Service providers are not likely to give out information but may forward messages to participants.</li> </ul>
Method 5: Public records	
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public records such as court and crime reports can be used to search for contact information for the participant and her emergency contacts.</li> </ul>

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Our retention strategies reflect these values and can be categorized in the following ways: (1) developing a study infrastructure that promotes retention and safety; (2) implementing individualized plan for participant contact; (3) building and maintaining a strong relationship with the participant; and (4) creatively using appropriate technology to maximize retention. The strategies for each category are interrelated and often build on one another. The four categories will be described below in the order in which they were developed for the study.

**Developing a Study Infrastructure that Promotes Retention and Safety**

*Building in Staff Time and Funding for Tracking and Retention Strategies*

We estimated 4 hours per quarter per study participant in time required for tracking and retention activities (midpoint contacts and scheduling) per staff, plus 1 hour for record-keeping and database updates, and included salary for these hours in the budget proposal. Midpoint contacts are used to stay in touch with participants between interviews (baseline and 6, 12, and 18 months post-baseline), to update contact information, and to identify any upcoming changes, such as a planned move or changing cell phone plan or e-mail address. For the 781 follow-up interviews completed, our project logged 1,663 planned midpoint contacts (many of which involved multiple attempts to make contact), as well as 2,002 participant tracking attempts, for an average of five contacts per follow-up interview completed.

Similarly, in a study classifying participants as requiring minimal, moderate, or intensive effort to locate, even the minimal effort group required nearly four phone attempts, and the intensive effort group required more than 17, along with in-person searches, letters, and other attempts to

contact participants (Logan et al. 2008). The importance of allocating adequate time for locating participants cannot be overstated.

### *Hiring Criteria for Research Interviewers*

Recruiting and retaining interviewers who have experience working with women dealing with IPV and/or homelessness is one of the most significant steps in building and maintaining strong infrastructure. Essential skills are ability to quickly put people at ease, a nonjudgmental approach, the capacity to foster trust, awareness of safety concerns for study participants and the interviewer, strong motivation, and an understanding of the importance of retention to research validity. The SHARE project hiring criteria focused on recruiting staff with demonstrated: (1) experience working directly with survivors of IPV and familiarity with survivors' safety needs; (2) research experience including adherence to IRB, understanding the importance of confidentiality, and tracking of an underserved mobile population; (3) experience in working with racially and ethnically diverse populations; and (4) skills for building and maintaining rapport while eliciting sensitive information such as history of sexual violence, substance use, and involvement with child welfare. When hiring interviewers, it was helpful to have domestic violence advocates involved in the process (reviewing applications and participating on the hiring panels) and to specifically ask questions related to experience and comfort with retention strategies such as site or home visits.

### *Interviewer Training and Essential Skill-Building*

To support interviewers and enhance their existing skills, the project required all interviewers to complete a community-based domestic violence training (40 hours) or have equivalent experience (e.g., previous work with a domestic violence agency) before beginning recruitment or interviewing work. Interviewers also completed courses on responsible conduct of research, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and policies for managing and reporting emergency situations or adverse events. We augmented this training with additional training during the course of the study, including suicide prevention and intervention, vicarious trauma, and home visit field safety.

## *Record-Keeping and Data Management*

Record-keeping and data management are critical elements in retention. There is significant upfront time and cost in developing the record-keeping protocols and database, however, these costs are outweighed by the enormous benefits of organization, timeliness, and streamlining efforts by research team members—ultimately supporting successful retention of study participant.

An ACCESS tracking database was developed to (1) maintain all participant contact information; (2) document attempts to contact participants and safe contact strategies (e.g., only call cell phone after specific times, do not leave messages by phone, or use work e-mail for contact); and (3) create lists for each interviewer on which participants are due for follow-up interviews and midpoint contacts. Lists of past-due interviews are also generated for each interviewer to prioritize contact. The database is saved on a HIPAA-compliant network, is password-protected, and access is limited to designated staff to ensure confidentiality.

## *Team Support and Setting High Expectations*

Bimonthly interview team meetings are conducted to keep interviewers organized in tracking efforts and supported and motivated to retain study participants. At each meeting, the lists of upcoming and past due interviews are given to interviewers, strategies for contacting difficult to locate participants are discussed, and upcoming scheduling challenges are considered (such as vacations or work-related meetings). The interview team meetings provide an ideal forum to discuss study progress and challenges, brainstorm ideas for finding difficult to locate participants, plan site or home visits, and discuss safety concerns. All interviewers assist each other in finding “lost” study participants by offering to make calls and make site visits. Discussions, group strategizing, and mutual support create a shared commitment to high retention rates. These meetings also support interviewers in maintaining appropriate boundaries with participants, as it can be tempting to take an advocacy role, rather than a research role, with participants in need.

The bimonthly meetings are also a chance for interviewers to debrief about the difficult interview content. Interviewers in IPV studies often hear stories that involve death threats, attempted murder, rape, or other forms of extreme violence. They sometimes end an interview with concerns about the safety of the participant. The potential of vicarious trauma exposure requires ongoing support, and team meetings are an important part of that support.

## **Individualized Plan for Participant Contact**

At each interview and midpoint contact, interviewers discuss with participants the importance of participation for the entire SHARE project. We also verify contact information, review the different strategies to stay in contact, ensure that these methods remain safe and appropriate, and collaboratively develop an individualized retention plan.

### *Individualized Retention Plan*

The individual retention plan builds on the general retention methods outlined above (see Table 1). The individualized retention plan begins with the SHARE project locator form, which was developed in partnership with domestic violence service agencies. The idea of a locator form is not unique to this study; however, when working with abused women where housing stability is a primary concern, individualized details and safety needs are critical. For example, at baseline and follow-up interviews, the interviewers collect phone numbers, e-mails, home, and work address for each safe contact. The participant is then asked to identify the order in which to contact safe emergency and service provider contacts, such as “Contact my mother first, but make sure you contact her at work rather than home.” We also encourage the participant to let her safe contacts know that the SHARE project may contact them during the course of the study and that it is safe to provide the project interviewer with contact information or to assist in locating the study participant. The locator form and this protocol are effective ways for collecting and organizing extensive information regarding how to keep in contact with the participant, including safe emergency and provider contacts.

Below are specific examples of the type of information our interviewer discusses with the participant at each interview related to retention and completing the locator form:

- who in the participant’s life will know how to get in touch with her or be able to give a message to her if she can not be reached at the safe contacts she has provided;
- where and when the interviewer might be able to find the participant if phone and e-mail does not work (e.g., work and café);
- the best contacts within agencies providing services to her and the limits to our permission to contact them; and
- how to stay in touch without jeopardizing their safety. For instance, participants are asked “What can I do to make sure I do not put you in danger?”

Study participants have multiple challenges in their lives at the time of interview; therefore, the participants may have difficulty remembering or providing the details needed for the locator form. The following strategies are used to help collect as much detail as the participant is comfortable sharing:

- If the participant does not know the complete information for a particular safe contact, the interviewers will ask whether she has an address book or numbers are programmed into her cell phone. If exact address cannot be found, the interviewer asks for details about the locations (e.g., brown apartment building on Powell and 20th).
- If the participant cannot think of a safe emergency or service provider contact in her community, we guide her through a thought process that helps her identify a family member, friend, former coworker, or advocate who she still stays in touch with.

### *Assuring Participants' Access to SHARE Project Interviewers*

Participants are given a personalized SHARE project business card that provides the name, cell phone number of the interviewer, the next interview date, and the project's toll-free number that women can use at anytime. Participants also receive a project keychain that displays the project's toll-free number. None of these materials indicate that the project is a study about domestic violence.

### *Incentives*

Participants receive monetary incentives at each completed interview, from \$20 at baseline interview to \$80 at the 18-month interview. The participants can choose between cash or gift cards. For some women, the incentive can affect their public assistance; therefore, the gift card is an alternative for payment. The incentive can be mailed or wired to a safe address or location for participants who complete follow-up interviews over the phone, such as women who have moved out of state. In addition, we pay for coffee or snacks when meeting women at café or restaurants. We provide coloring books, crayons, and age-appropriate toys for participant's children. When needed, skilled child care providers attend the interview or we reimburse the participant for child care costs, so women will not be concerned about their children's safety during the interviews.

## **Building and Maintaining a Strong Research Relationship with Participants**

### *Interview and Midpoint Contacts*

The establishment of strong interviewer–participant rapport is a key component to successful retention and is established from the first contact. A primary goal of the baseline interview is to create a safe and supportive experience. An essential component to retention with hard-to-reach populations is taking the interview to the participant. The interview is conducted at a place (i.e., home, workplace, or restaurant) and time of the participant’s preference, and safety is emphasized in determining the location.

The interviews contain personal questions regarding violence, trauma, and depression that can be difficult for participants to talk about. It is critical that interviewers have the skills to ask these questions and the ability to demonstrate sensitivity to participants’ needs during the interview and a nonjudgmental response to the answers provided. Interviewers stress to participants that they can stop whenever they want and do not have to talk about things that make them too uncomfortable. This can mean being flexible, such as a willingness to accompany a participant outside to take a smoke break or stopping the interview while a participant takes a break to care for their pet or have a cup of coffee.

It is ideal to have one interviewer complete all interviews and midpoint contacts with a study participant; this allows for the development of a strong interviewer–participant relationship and protects the participant from retelling her story. Of course, this ideal may not always be possible, as interviewers may change employment or take sick or maternity leave. Therefore, it is important to have several well-trained and skilled interviewers who are comfortable contacting any participant and are able to acknowledge the challenges of the interviewer change.

### *Creativity in Using Appropriate Technology to Maximize Retention*

The participants have multiple and complex factors in their lives that make retention in a longitudinal research study challenging. Therefore, the team has made use of available and appropriate technology to maintain contact with participants.

### *Use of Technology*

The team has made use of MySpace, Facebook, and other online social networking sites for the study. A SHARE project profile on MySpace.com and Facebook.com was created by obtaining a gmail.com address so that our institutional relationship would not be identifiable. We also worked closely with our information technology department to assure that HIPAA and other security considerations were taken into account. MySpace and Facebook accounts allow the research team to search to see whether a participant has an account and to contact those with accounts by sending an e-mail message to set up an interview or confirm contact information.

### *Record Reviews*

Using public records is a valuable resource in locating difficult to find participants. Free and paid online search and directory assistance sites are available for locating addresses and phone numbers. Online directory assistance has many limitations, including the lack of up-to-date information and failure to list cell phone numbers, which are used more often than landlines by our participants. In addition, because of the mobility of our study population, the online search is generally more likely to produce updated contact information for a participant's safe contact, than for a participant.

VINELink, the online version of Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE), a service that allows people to search by state for the custody status of offenders, is useful in locating incarcerated participants. Once located, we can send a letter to an incarcerated participant at the correctional facility asking her to contact the interviewer. Other public record searches that are less successful in locating people directly but are used as last resorts to provide leads include a county courthouse public records search, a social security death index search, and a simple google.com search of a person's name.

### **SHARE Project Retention Rates**

The SHARE project has been able to maintain a high level of retention in the study over the 18 months. We enrolled 278 women in the study; 94% of 6-, 12-, and 18-month follow-up interviews have been completed within 90 days of the follow-up due date (see Table 2 for details).

**Table 2.** Follow-up of 6, 12, and 18 Months Combined

Follow-Up Window	% Added	% of 781 Completed	% of 834 (Total Sample) Completed
30 days		92	88
60 days	5	97	90
90 days	3	100	94 (final retention rate)

**Table 3.** Twenty-Eight Participants Missed One, Two, or All Three Interviews

Reason Interview Not Completed	# of Participants
Unable to locate	16
Located, but did not respond to study staff	5
Refused	4
Death	1
Incarcerated	1
Witness Protection Program	1

We have lost 28 participants to follow-up at the 6-, 12-, and/or 18-month interviews. The primary reason for missed follow-up interviews was that the participant could not be located (57.1%). Fifteen percent ( $n = 4$ ) of participants were located for follow-up interviews but decided they no longer wanted to participate in the study and therefore refused to complete the interview. Table 3 provides a summary of the number and reasons the follow-up interviews were not completed.

## Conclusion

Retaining participants in longitudinal studies is challenging for all research teams. The SHARE project, a longitudinal study with abused women who have housing instability as a primary concern, demonstrates successful strategies for retention. These are categorized as (1) developing a study infrastructure that promotes retention and safety; (2) having an individualized plan for retention over the course of the study; (3) building/maintaining a strong relationship with the participant; and (4) being creative in using appropriate technology to maximize retention.

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