University of Kentucky Center on Drug and Alcohol Research

KTOS In-Focus

Following Substance Abuse Treatment Clients Over Time: Tips From the Front Lines

In-Focus Highlights

- Evaluation of substance abuse treatment outcomes is vital to continually improving and strengthening substance abuse treatment programs in Kentucky.
- Doing follow-up interviews with a large number of clients allows us to make reasonable and accurate conclusions about client outcomes after substance abuse treatment; however, it requires significant creativity, resources, and time.
- High quality contact information must be collected at the time clients enroll in the Kentucky Treatment Outcome Study to ensure high follow-up rates.
- The follow-up rate in this study is very good because clinicians are working as part of the research team by collecting intake data and accurate contact information.

Why Conduct Follow-Up Studies with Substance Abuse Treatment Clients?

Does substance abuse treatment work? Does it work for some people better than for others? What kinds of treatment services are the most beneficial? Which treatment services are most cost-effective? These are just some of the most pressing questions that policymakers want answered about substance abuse treatment. The professionals who provide treatment also want to know the results of their efforts. There are many ways to evaluate treatment services including getting clinician feedback, talking to clients about their satisfaction with treatment, and tracking relapse rates for those who have been through a treatment program.

Kentucky has been leading the effort to understand substance abuse treatment outcomes by annually interviewing a large number of clients 12 months after they enter a treatment program. These interviews give us valuable information about the impact of treatment on multiple dimensions of clients' lives, in part, by allowing us to compare their life situation before they began treatment with life after treatment. However, as many clinicians already know, it is challenging to locate and contact former clients. Some clients are not living in the same place as when they entered treatment, perhaps not even in the same county or state. They may have changed jobs or cut off ties with people who are not supportive of their recovery. Consequently, the contact information clients gave during treatment may no longer be useful when it is time to reach them for the follow-up interview, which is why it is important that clinicians, when possible, collect contact information for persons who will know how to contact the client.

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The ability to follow-up with all kinds of clients, whether they are easy or difficult to reach, is important in answering questions about treatment outcomes. For example, if a research team contacts only the easiest to reach (or more stable) clients at follow-up, then what can those results tell us about the more difficult to find (or less stable) clients? The answer is likely "not much." In fact, clients who are more difficult to locate are different in important ways from clients who are relatively easy to locate; they are more likely to relapse. To avoid this pitfall, extensive efforts are required to conduct follow-up studies with high follow-up rates to give us confidence that the research findings are an accurate picture of what happens to all kinds of clients after they leave treatment.

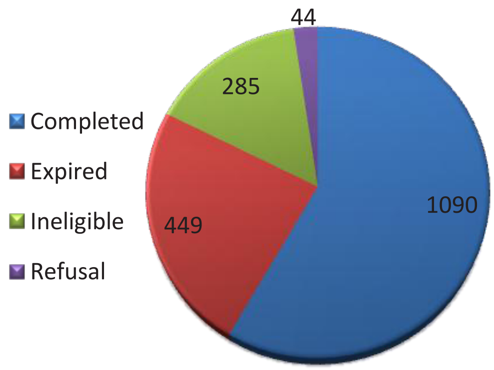
The Kentucky Treatment Outcome Study (KTOS)

In Kentucky, state law calls for follow-up research on substance abuse treatment. As a result, this state is one of the few that can defend state dollars being spent on treatment. KTOS uses a pre-and post-test research design, which means that clients are asked to do an interview as they enter treatment and again about 12 months later. After clinical staff members gather information from clients as part of intake, clients are given the opportunity to volunteer to participate in the follow-up study. A client who chooses to participate gives permission (by signing the consent form) for the University of Kentucky Center on Drug and Alcohol Research (UK CDAR) research staff to call them for a follow-up interview about 12 months later. Clinicians ask clients who agree to be in the follow-up study to give their address, phone number, and the addresses and phone numbers of two persons who would know how to contact them (i.e., contact persons), if they were to move or change their phone number.

You are helping Kentucky lead the nation in understanding substance abuse treatment outcomes.

Each year a sample is chosen from those clients who agreed to participate in the follow up study. In 2007, a total of 1,868 clients were sampled from clients who agreed to be included in the follow-up sample. *Figure 1* shows what happened with the 1,868 selected clients. Individuals who were deceased, or in a controlled environment (i.e., jail, residential treatment, military) at the time of follow-up were ineligible for participation (n = 285), making the final sample available for follow-up equal to 1,583 clients.

Figure 1. Final Outcome for Clients in the Follow-Up Sample (n = 1,868)



Of this group, 1,090 clients completed a follow-up interview, with a follow-up response rate of 69%. In 2007, only 3% of the clients refused to do the follow-up interview when contacted by UK CDAR. Just over a quarter (28%) of the clients did not complete a follow-up interview, either because they could not be reached or they were not able to complete the interview within the period allowed for follow-up (about 4 months).

Over time, the follow-up rate for the study has increased from 67% (2004) to 69% (2007). These follow up rates are excellent when compared to other states across the nation that have tried to do follow-up studies with substance abuse treatment clients. This is in no small part due to the great participation and effort on the part of the clinicians who initially help to collect the information about clients.

Conducting Follow-Up Interviews

Clinicians, with their daily experiences scheduling

[1] Spotts et al., 1996; Walton et al., 1998
[2] Walton et al., 1998

appointments with clients and trying to find out what happens to clients who disengage from treatment, will be able to relate to the creativity and persistence that research interviewers must have to locate and contact clients for the follow-up interview.

The follow-up research team uses a wide range of strategies to locate and contact consenting individuals. First, interviewers mail cards to clients' addresses.

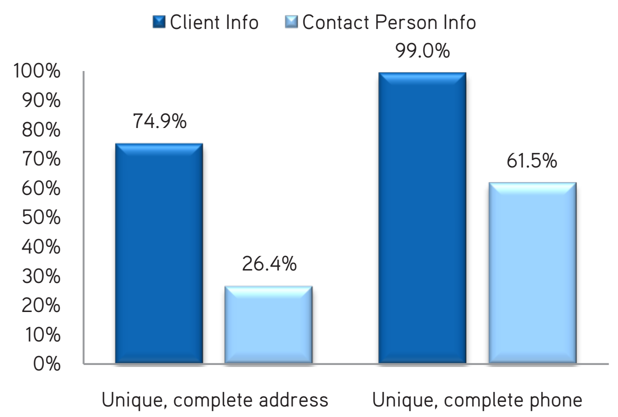
Second, they try all contact information the client gave at the end of the first interview, beginning with the client's phone numbers, then moving on to other contact persons' phone numbers, trying various days of the week and times of day. Third, interviewers use directory and web-based searches to find alternate phone numbers and addresses for clients and their listed contact persons. Fourth, searches for contact information using more specialized databases, such as correctional databases, are used if none of the prior efforts have resulted in locating the client. All efforts to locate and contact clients are carried out with careful consideration of confidentiality issues. One key precaution taken by interviewers is to never reveal the nature of the study (i.e., substance use treatment-related) to any contact person.

Interviewers write down all their efforts to contact clients to help the team estimate the effort required for the follow-up interviews[3]. A sample of contact logs from each category of clients (e.g., completed, ineligible, expired, and refused) is examined to estimate the overall level of effort for the follow-up interviews.

QUALITY OF CONTACT INFORMATION

One of the most important building blocks for a successful follow-up study is collection of complete and accurate client contact information at treatment intake. In addition, information for another contact person who may know how to contact the client is extraordinarily helpful, but is often left incomplete at intake (See *Figure 2*). Follow up rates could be improved by gathering information for at least one additional contact person who is likely to be in touch with the client in a year.

Figure 2 Contact Information Provided at Treatment



LOCATING EFFORTS IN THE KTOS FOLLOW-UP SAMPLE IN 2007

Figure 3 shows the estimated number of phone calls and mailings interviewers made in 2007 (based on close study of a sample of client contact logs). Interviewers made an estimated 12,419 phone calls and sent an estimated 4,170 mailings to the 1,868 adult participants in the follow-up sample. This translates into about 240 phone calls and 80 pieces of mail per week.

Figure 3. Estimated Number of Phone Calls and Mailings Made in 2007

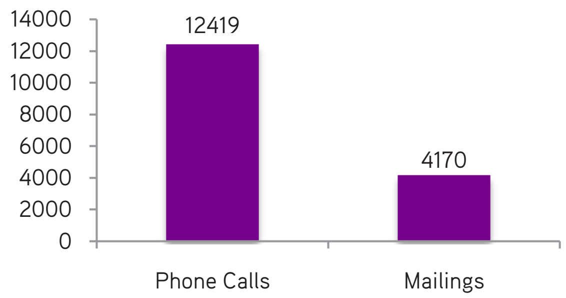
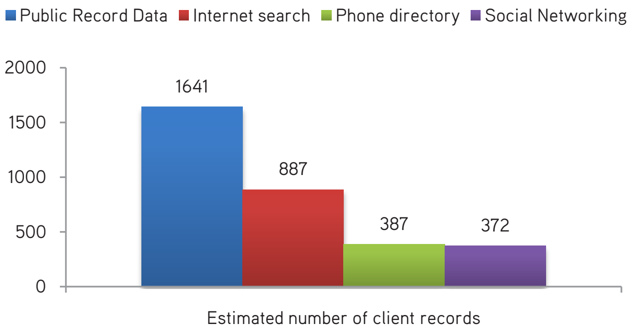


Figure 4 shows the estimated number of client records on which interviewers used the most common searches.

[3] To examine the effort that went into completing the follow-up interviews, a sample of 20% randomly selected contact files was used to examine locating efforts for individuals who completed the follow-up interview, never completed the survey, or who were determined to be ineligible for the follow-up interview. Because the refusal rate overall was low (n = 44, 2.8%), all of the refusal files were examined.

Figure 4. Estimated Number of Client Files on which Interviewers Used Searches



Note. Interviewers typically use some of these searches multiple times, such as phone directory and internet searches, so unlike in Figure 3 the estimates represent the number of client records for which these searches were conducted and not the total number of searches.

LOCATING EFFORTS FOR COMPLETED VERSUS NON-COMPLETED FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

Not surprisingly, more locating efforts were expended on clients who did not complete the follow up interview compared to clients who did complete the interview. For example, mailings were more likely to be returned because of invalid addresses for clients who did not complete the interview. In other words, having at least one good address and phone number, whether it is for the client or a contact person who knows the client well, is very important to completing the interviews. Also, much more time was devoted to trying to find an accurate address or phone number for clients who did not complete the survey . In general, clients who did not complete the survey within the follow-up period had significantly lower quality contact information compared to clients who did complete interviews.

• Nearly one out of five (19.3%) of the clients who completed a follow-up interview required minimal locating efforts. These clients called the study's toll-free phone number after receiving no more than a couple of mailings and no more than a couple of phone calls.

• Over half (55.5%) of clients who ultimately completed the follow-up interview required extensive efforts, meaning interviewers made more than the average number of phone calls, 6.5, or sent more than the average number of mailings, 2.2, to reach these clients.

Even so, the intensive effort that interviewers put into locating clients was worthwhile. A number of clients whose contact information was no longer valid when follow-up interviewers tried to reach them ultimately completed the interview because the research team was able to contact them using the locating strategies.

Two descriptions of what the follow up research team typically does to locate and contact clients are provided here. The first description is of the effort that went into getting one follow-up interview completed. The second description is for a client who was not successfully contacted.

Persistence Does Pay Off!

First, because this client appeared to have a valid address, the research team mailed the client a card in August to let her know that the research team was trying to get in touch with her. Within a week of sending the card, the interviewer attempted to contact the client by phone. Calls were made at all different times of the day and on different days. Each time the interviewer called her, the client's phone number was temporarily disconnected. The interviewer did not give up. The research team's experience has shown that just because a phone is disconnected one day does not mean that it will be disconnected the next day. After several attempts at reaching the client at her phone number and her mother's phone number (her listed contact person), the interviewer searched internet phone directories and 411 for alternate phone numbers for the client and her mother. After calling all the phone numbers found in the searches, the interviewer discovered they were all wrong numbers.

A couple months after the first card was sent, the interviewer searched for the client on MySpace, found a match, and sent the client a message, asking her to call the study's toll-free phone number. A couple of weeks later the client called the toll-free phone number, and left a voicemail message, giving her current phone number. The interviewer called the new phone number several times over the next couple of days. One of these calls was answered by someone other than the client. During this call the interviewer overheard the client tell the other person to hang up on the interviewer, which she then did. A few hours later, the interviewer called the same phone number and spoke to the client who agreed to do the follow-up interview at that time. The research team has learned that interviewers may catch a client at a time that is inconvenient to do the follow-up interview, like when the client is with other people or distracted by other activities, and clients may communicate whether it is a bad time in different ways.

This case illustrates that creative problem-solving, patience, and persistence are key to successfully completing follow-up interviews, especially with the clients who are more difficult to reach.

Persistence Does Pay Off! Well, Not Always...

The following scenario is typical of the lengths to which interviewers may go in trying to locate a client for the follow-up interview that do not end in a completed follow-up interview.

First, the research team mailed a card letting the client know the research team was trying to contact him. The card was returned as undeliverable. About 12% of the files in 2007 had returned mail due to invalid addresses. Next, an interviewer called the client's phone number and the phone number of the client's second contact person, his daughter. The client's phone number was disconnected all six times the interviewer called. His daughter's phone number had only a generic voicemail so the interviewer was not sure the phone number was the client's daughter until the 6th call, when the client's daughter, after confirming her identity, hung up on the interviewer. The interviewer continued to try the daughter's phone number several times over the next month. When the interviewer finally got the client's daughter on the phone, the daughter told the interviewer she had not spoken to her father in years and did not have any idea how to contact him.

In between attempts to reach the client by phone, the interviewer searched phone directories, internet directories, and several other public record databases to try to find a current address or phone number for the client. After four months of searching and making over 20 phone calls, the time frame in which to complete this client's follow-up interview had expired.

These examples illustrate the necessity of creative problem-solving, patience, and persistence in successfully completing follow-up interviews. Even with all of the effort that the research team puts into locating clients, some clients will never have the opportunity to complete the interview because the research team could not locate or reach them. Having high quality contact information is a foundation for completing the follow-up interviews. We know that many clients go through major life transitions after they are in substance abuse treatment, which is why it is so important that clinicians try to get phone numbers and addresses for contact persons. Clinicians should explain to clients that the best contact persons are those who will very likely be in touch with and know how to contact them in a year.

Conclusion

- Evaluation of substance abuse treatment outcomes is vital to continually improving and strengthening substance abuse treatment programs in Kentucky. While conducting rigorous research to allow us to make valid conclusions about the effectiveness of treatment is not the only way, it is an important means of informing clinicians, administrators, and policymakers.

- Doing follow-up interviews with a large number of clients allows us to make reasonable and accurate conclusions about client outcomes after substance abuse treatment; however, it requires significant creativity, resources, and time. For example, the follow-up research team made about 240 phone calls and mailed about 80 pieces of mail per week in 2007. Also, in keeping up with technology, a couple of years ago the follow-up research team began using internet social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace), and as these first attempts resulted in completed interviews, interviewers used this strategy more often. The research team members must continually evaluate and rethink strategies to locate and contact former clients.

- High quality contact information must be collected at the time clients enroll in the Kentucky Treatment Outcome Study to ensure high follow-up rates. It is recommended that clinicians enter into the PDA the contact information the client gives at the end of the treatment intake, because they are more familiar with the PDA and the particular program than clients, and are less likely to make errors when entering the information.

- The follow-up rate in this study is very good because clinicians are working as part of the research team by collecting intake data and accurate contact information. The research team continually strives to increase the number of follow-up interviews that are completed so that more clients have a voice in telling us about their treatment experience and how it has impacted their lives.

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Access the latest KTOS reports at:
http://cdar.uky.edu/ktos/KTOSFollow.html

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