Progress report: Predicting and preventing non-response in cohort studies

This project is funded as part of the Survey Design and Measurement Initiative and directed by Ian Plewis (University of Manchester) with Lisa Calderwood (Institute of Education) and Rebecca Taylor (NatCen) as co-investigators. It runs from 1/1/08 to 31/12/09. It is integrated with the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS).

The research addresses the attrition problem in longitudinal studies in two linked ways: by testing whether it is possible to reduce the level of non-co-operation in the field, and by examining the characteristics of the three types of non-responders (not located, not contacted and uncooperative) with a view to improving our ability to predict attrition and hence, in the future, to introduce measures to prevent it. We test two ways of increasing cooperation: by using a leaflet that addresses known concerns, and by increasing the numbers of refusals that are reissued by allocating them to a different, and usually a more experienced interviewer. By 'crossing' these two components, we can see whether they each have an effect independent of the other or whether it is the combination of the two parts of the intervention that is most effective. Our approach to the second research question - whether it is possible to learn more about the kinds of subjects that are lost from the survey - is based on sophisticated statistical modelling, supplemented by the collection of data from the interviewers and from the respondents after fieldwork is over.

The fieldwork period for wave 4 of MCS ends in England and Wales at the end of September 2008 and not until 2009 in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The entire issued sample was initially randomly allocated to one of the four experimental groups and the refusals treated accordingly. Provisional figures (mid-August 2008; GB only) show that just over 1100 cases were eligible for the experiment, that these cases were evenly spread across the four groups, and that very few cases were reissued by NatCen as 'standard'. The collection of data by the interviewers about the interview, and from a 10% sample of the respondents after the interview, has proceeded satisfactorily and data will become available for analysis during 2009. These data will be used in models for predicting non-response at wave 5 of MCS. This project will, however, be examining correlates of non-response at waves 3 and 4, building on work already carried out at wave 2.