

## Reaching and retaining research participants in a vulnerable position

### Introduction

In many studies, people in a vulnerable position are underrepresented. Think of people who are illiterate, homeless people or people with problematic debts. As a result of this, an important voice in research results is missing and research results are less valid for the entire population. At IVO Research Institute, we have a lot of experience with reaching and retaining research participants in a vulnerable position. In this factsheet, we will give our tips, hoping that researchers will more often succeed in including people in their research who are in a vulnerable position.

### Preconditions



Often, it takes more time to reach and retain participants in a vulnerable position. Keep this in mind in your planning and budget.



Make sure that you have budget to compensate participants. It is better to give cash or a grocery-voucher than a gift voucher.



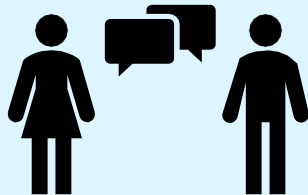
### Reaching research participants

- Don't use one recruitment method, but use multiple ways to reach your target group from the start.
- Recruit participants through intermediaries or key figures who are already in contact with the target group you want to reach. Ideally, this is a person they already know and trust.
- Involve someone from your target group in the recruitment process. This person can help design suitable materials and can also assist with approaching potential participants.
- Use snowball-sampling: ask participants to suggest another participant.
- Get out there to reach participants. Use a personal, active and verbal approach. Find out where to find your target group and try to talk to people in that place.
- Be genuinely interested, do not act distant and adapt yourself towards your target audience (for example in terms of clothing). Emphasize how important it is that people make their voices heard through your research.



## Recruitment materials

- Handing out flyers or hanging up posters is not the way to reach research participants who are in a vulnerable position. However, a flyer or poster can help if you combine this with a personal, active and verbal approach.
- Avoid putting too much text on a flyer or poster. Provide the necessary information: What is it about? Who is it for? How long will it take? Where is it? How much compensation will you receive?
- Put a name, photo and contact information of the person conducting the research on the flyer or poster.
- Present your recruitment materials to someone from your target audience and check whether the materials are understood and how they can be improved if necessary.
- You can also distribute digital recruitment materials online, but do not expect too much from this. Think about online channels on which your target group can be found (for example, specific Facebook groups or use Instagram or TikTok if you want to reach young people).



## Participate

- Clearly explain what the research is for and what will be done with their data. Reassure people if they are hesitant to fill out a consent form, for example, when people are concerned that an investigation will have consequences for their social welfare benefits (income).
- Make hay while the sun shines. Have people complete your questionnaire right away (if possible) or immediately plan something and exchange contact details.
- Make participating in the research as easy as possible for the participant. As a researcher, be flexible in regard of time and place.



## Retaining research participants

In longitudinal research, it is important that you maintain contact and a good relationship with your participants. Below are a few recommendations on how to do this properly:

- ✓ Do not rely on just a phone number or e-mail address to contact someone, but make sure you have several types of contact information. For participants without a permanent residence, ask whether you can also write down the contact details of an acquaintance or a family member (with their permission).
- ✓ Maintain contact with participants in between the measurements of a long-term study. Provide updates on the research (in plain language), send a birthday or Christmas card, and ask how someone is doing.
- ✓ Make sure that research participants have contact with the same researcher as much as possible. This will become a trusted person for them, which means they will be willing to share more information with this person and will be more likely to participate in a questionnaire or interview.
- ✓ For a follow-up interview, read back what the interviewee said the last time. You can use this to refer to it in the next interview, so that someone feels heard and seen.
- ✓ For long-term research it may help to use an incremental fee (for example, 15 euros for the first measurement, 20 euros for the second measurement and 25 euros for the third measurement).

## Examples of IVO studies with participants in a vulnerable position

- Using experiential expertise among **young people with criminal behavior** [\[link\]](#)
- Participation in recovery groups for **people with drug addiction** [\[link\]](#)
- Research into reaching **smokers who are in a vulnerable position** [\[link\]](#)
- Changes in the living situation of **homeless people** during 5.5 years [\[link\]](#)

## In conclusion

- In addition to including research participants in a vulnerable position, you can of course do much more to make your research more inclusive. [Check out](#) our video and factsheet that we made on this subject in collaboration with Maastricht University.
- After the research, provide the participants with feedback about the results and about what happens to these results. Do this in comprehensive language and, for example, with a short video or infographic.

## Colophon

Would you like to work with us?  
Contact IVO Research Institute via  
[secretariaat@ivo.nl](mailto:secretariaat@ivo.nl).

*Reference:*  
*Onderzoeksinstituut IVO (2022).*  
*Reaching and retaining research*  
*participants in a vulnerable*  
*position. The Hague: IVO*