

## **Example – Roundtable**

### **Recruiting and Engaging Hard-to-Reach Populations in Qualitative Social Work Research: Challenges and Creative Approaches**

#### **Abstract**

Many social work researchers seek to make meaningful contributions to knowledge by gathering original data about and from hard-to-reach populations (e.g. subgroups of populations which may be reluctant to participate in research studies because of their precarious legal status; engagement in stigmatizing or illegal behaviors, and under researched groups). The methods literature outlines several appropriate techniques for original qualitative data collection, yet much of it assumes relatively easy access to the study population. Further, significant attention has been given to general sampling and recruitment standards in qualitative research, but there is a paucity of empirical information about hard-to-reach populations (Abrams, 2010). While gaining a deep understanding or thick description of individuals with particular experiences is often the expressed goal of qualitative research (Abrams, 2010), the literature tends to gloss over the challenges of sampling, recruitment, engagement, and retention of hard-to-reach respondents. Vulnerable groups in particular (e.g. incarcerated women, family members of men enrolled in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, refugees) may also represent additional ethical research-related dilemmas.

This roundtable takes up the practical question of how to recruit and engage hard-to-reach populations in qualitative social work research. The facilitators have conducted extensive research with hard-to-reach populations including: undocumented immigrants, refugees, women with incarceration and/or substance abuse histories, women who have engaged in sex acts in exchange for material resources, and racial and ethnic minorities who are not commonly part of research studies (i.e. middle/upper class communities). The facilitators will describe their experiences and offer strategies to improve recruiting, engaging, and retaining hard-to-reach populations. Even after successfully engaging individuals from hard-to-reach populations, there may be ongoing concerns that can affect the interview process and the information participants are willing to share. The facilitators will share examples of how this has affected the interview process and offer approaches to minimize/overcome these challenges. This roundtable addresses the conference theme of “Grand Challenge for Social Work: Setting a Research Agenda for the Future” by presenting recruitment, retention, and data collection solutions that save time, money, and result in richer, more meaningful studies.

Using illustrative examples, the group will address the following topics: 1) conducting successful outreach, engagement, and recruitment; 2) gaining access to institutional or other hard-to-reach settings; 3) facilitating trust; 4) acknowledging possible skepticism of the research process; and 5) emergent ethical issues. Roundtable participants will deliver short presentations on these topics followed by a 30-minute question and answer session. Session attendees will leave the

roundtable discussion with an understanding of: a) concrete strategies for recruiting hard-to-reach populations; b) innovative ways to build trust; and c) techniques for establishing rigor and quality in qualitative social work research with hard-to-reach populations.