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Using population data for longitudinal research: Possibilities and problems

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Abstract

Census data routinely play the significant role of anchoring research samples against the total population. This role takes on added importance for longitudinal studies because the characteristics of the sample inevitably change throughout the life of the study, not only as the people age but also as some drop out. This needs to be taken into account and the implications dealt with, as the sample's relationship to the population may not remain static. Also there may be important changes in the population that must be taken into account: falling fertility rates, increased longevity or changed migration patterns immediately spring to mind. Because longitudinal studies have not been numerous to date many of the issues such studies raise are not well understood. These issues require further attention, especially if the current popularity of longitudinal studies continues and if the research is to inform policy development. These issues will be canvassed by drawing on the experiences of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH), a study planned to track for twenty years or more (1996-2016), the health and well-being of an initial sample of about 40,000 women (from 18 to 95 years).

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