

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore researchers' perspectives on the challenges and strategies associated with recruiting infants for non-invasive experiments. Nine researchers participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Access was cited as a major challenge to recruitment. Successful strategies involved forming positive relationships with participants, hospitals, and community partners. Those who agreed to participate were often of high socioeconomic status or had a connection to McMaster University. Interviewed researchers believed that collaborating with colleagues, communicating directly with new mothers, and establishing partnerships with individuals in related professional fields were all effective in facilitating infant recruitment. As recruiting infants for non-invasive studies remains challenging, this study aims to assist researchers in finding successful strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies exploring the early stages of life have facilitated greater understanding of typical psychological and physical development.<sup>1-3</sup> This enhanced understanding has improved newborn screening techniques and has been influential in developing better postnatal care practices.<sup>4,5</sup> Yet, despite the social and scientific benefits of infant research, recruiting newborns into research studies remains extremely difficult due to their status as a vulnerable population.<sup>6</sup>

Vulnerable populations are social groups who demonstrate a comparatively greater susceptibility to adverse health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> This definition includes groups such as ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged, the elderly, and individuals with serious physical and mental health conditions.<sup>8</sup> Infants are also considered a vulnerable population because they have developmental and cognitive limitations, and are incapable of giving informed consent.<sup>9</sup> Since their participation in research studies requires consent through a parent or another authorized substitute decision maker, recruiting infants into research studies is strategically and ethically complex.<sup>6,10</sup> Establishing a trusting relationship between the participant, any substitute decision makers, and the researcher is thus crucial.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the impersonal nature of conventional recruitment strategies, such as mass advertisement via flyers and media postings, are generally ineffective.<sup>6</sup>

Recruitment strategies targeting vulnerable populations typically emphasize direct communication between researchers and potential participants, which can occur through in-person presentations at relevant community outreach locations. These interactions are followed up with face-to-face discussions, phone calls, and written correspondence.<sup>12</sup> Partnering with community leaders and service providers has been shown to be effective in building rapport with members of vulnerable populations.<sup>13</sup> For example, church personnel, medical professionals, and organization managers are in positions of trust and can act as gatekeepers to recruitment.<sup>11</sup> Finally, "snowball recruitment" through referrals from previous participants also establishes a trusted point of contact between the researcher and other potential participants.<sup>14</sup>

Assessment of these approaches in vulnerable population recruitment has yielded mixed results, potentially due to major differences across the various vulnerable populations themselves.<sup>12</sup> For infant populations, the literature more consistently reports that interpersonal contact and relationship building are effective strategies.<sup>12</sup> However, obtaining permission from parents on behalf of very young infants can be particularly challenging, due to the overwhelming nature of childbirth and the unpredictable schedule of newborn children and their parents.<sup>9</sup> To date, most research on infant recruitment has concentrated on ethically complex procedures involving invasive methodology or randomized controlled trials; however, little is known about recruiting infants for non-invasive studies.<sup>15</sup>

The present study aimed to explore the perspectives of researchers involved with non-invasive and observational infant studies. The primary objectives were to identify perceived recruitment challenges, effective recruitment strategies, observations of demographic trends among participants, and how these factors compared to recruitment for more invasive infant studies.

## METHODS

Participants for the present study included researchers affiliated with McMaster University who conducted non-invasive behavioural studies involving infants. Study subjects were identified from research descriptions on their websites. Some participants also referred colleagues who met the inclusion criteria. An email was sent to all participants inviting them to participate in a brief 20- to 30-minute interview at a time and place of their choosing. This email also included information and consent forms. A total of nine researchers were recruited: one principal investigator, one graduate student, two research coordinators, and five recruitment coordinators.

Prior to the interview, the consent form was reviewed and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. A semi-structured interview guide was used in the interview. Participants were prompted to discuss personal experiences regarding infant recruitment challenges, effective and ineffective recruitment strategies, and demographic trends of consenting parents. All participants also consented to be recorded. Recordings were later