

Factors associated with follow-up difficulty in longitudinal studies involving community-dwelling older adults

Hisashi Kawai (✉ hkawai@tmig.or.jp)

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3015-6041>

Manami Ejiri

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Harukazu Tsuruta

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Yukie Masui

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Yutaka Watanabe

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Hirohiko Hirano

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Yoshinori Fujiwara

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Kazushige Ihara

Faculty of Medicine, Hirosaki University

Masashi Tanaka

National Institute of Biomedical Innovation, Health and Nutrition

Shuichi Obuchi

Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology

Research article

Keywords: Drop-out; Attrition; Social participation; Social isolation; Older adults

Posted Date: June 8th, 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.2.10136/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at PLOS ONE on August 3rd, 2020. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237166>.

Abstract

Background To clarify the factors associated with the gradual drop-out from society in older adults, we defined the stages of follow-up difficulty based on four follow-up surveys on non-respondents of longitudinal mail surveys in community-dwelling older adults. This study aimed to examine the main factors associated with the stages of follow-up difficulty. **Methods** We conducted a follow-up mail survey (FL1) aimed at the baseline respondents and conducted follow-up surveys on non-respondents of each survey as follows; simplified mail (FL2), post card (FL3), and home visit surveys (FL4). The respondents of each follow-up survey were defined as a stage of follow-up difficulty and their characteristics concerning social participation and interaction at the baseline in each stage were analyzed. **Results** The respondent numbers of the FL1, FL2, FL3, and FL4 and NR (non-respondents) stages were 2,361; 462; 234; 84; and 101 respectively. Participation in hobby groups for FL2 and FL3, in sports groups in FL4, and for the neighborhood association and social isolation in NR were significantly associated with the stage of follow-up difficulty. **Conclusions** Based on these results, we conclude that the factors associated with each stage of follow-up difficulty are: 1) their activities start to be restricted by a decline in IADL in the FL2 and FL3 stages, 2) they dislike taking part in physical activity such as sports in the FL4 stage, and 3) they are more socially isolated, not belong to even a neighborhood association owing to be low social interaction in the NR group.

Background

Many studies have been conducted on the characteristics of those who drop out of a longitudinal study to assess the representativeness of the participants in follow-up surveys (1-7). These studies reported that individuals who dropped out of a longitudinal study often have characteristics such as poor health status, low Socio-Economic Status (SES)—for example poor education and economic status—and low social participation. These studies also pointed out that if baseline participants with these characteristics dropped out of a longitudinal survey, there will be a significant impact on the findings of the study, meaning that those who are likely to require assistance cannot be effectively assessed (6, 7).

However, it is possible to conduct follow-up surveys by using various methods—such as a simplified mail survey or a home visit survey—to examine the main findings of a longitudinal study concerning those who did not respond to the survey. The results suggest that there are people who participate in a survey without dropping out if researchers follow up carefully or if they change the survey method, such as presenting an easy-to-answer survey or a home visit survey. Therefore, we consider that the previous non-responders who responded to the follow-up surveys of the longitudinal study would not have dropped out from the survey if they had received the appropriate support from researchers and if researchers used various methods to improve the response rate. It follows that respondents who did respond could be in somewhat better health and have higher SES than those that dropped out of the longitudinal study completely.

Identifying the factors associated with respondents dropping out of a study if they do not receive appropriate support or if they find responding too difficult can be useful for investigating the factors that restrict social participation in older adults. Identifying these factors is crucial to prevent frailty and to maintain living function, thereby realizing a healthy life expectancy (8). The Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) defines living function as a combination of “body functions and structures,” “activities,” and “participation.” This means that not only physical and mental function but also daily life activities and social participation are essential to maintain living function (9).

Previous studies have identified various factors that are associated with social participation in older adults, including physical, psychological, social, and environmental factors (10-12). Restricted social participation in older adults may be related to not only physical dysfunction but also to the amount of social support that the older adults receives (12). Therefore, restricted social participation in older adults may be associated with changes to their conditions—their physical condition as well as their psychological and social conditions—which can be improved with the appropriate support and changes in their conditions. The characteristics of these conditions can be understood by analyzing the responses to the follow-up surveys conducted on non-respondents of a longitudinal study.

We conducted follow-up surveys on the non-responders of a longitudinal mail survey by means of a simplified mail survey, a postcard survey, and a home visit survey. Furthermore, we identified participants who did not drop out from the survey because the survey had been simplified and was easier to answer. We then defined the stages of follow-up difficulty in a longitudinal study. To determine the baseline status of social participation and interaction—which are associated with the stages of follow-up difficulty—it is necessary to understand the characteristics of the participants whose social participation is gradually being restricted and to invent effective

initiatives to improve social participation. To the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have been done on this subject. Therefore, we aimed to clarify the factors associated with the stages of follow-up difficulty in longitudinal surveys on community-dwelling older adults.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were the respondents of a mail survey for a cohort study which was conducted among community-dwelling older Japanese. Details of this cohort are also described in our previous study (13). We conducted a mail survey that included all 7,015 residents who lived in nine areas in Itabashi-ku, Tokyo, Japan and who were aged between 65 and 85. We excluded institutionalized residents and participants of our previous studies. The study period was from August to October 2012 (baseline survey: BL). A follow-up mail survey was conducted from August to October 2014 to 3,696 BL respondents, of which 2,361 answered (follow-up 1: FL1). Next, follow-up surveys were conducted that included non-respondents (Figure 1).

For those who did not respond to FL1, a simplified mail survey with a reduced number of question items (from 24 to 10 items), was conducted from September to October 2015, and 462 responded (follow-up 2: FL2). Concerning those who did not respond to FL2, a postcard survey with an even smaller number of question items (5 items) was conducted from February to April 2016, and 234 people responded (follow-up 3: FL3). Lastly, for those who did not respond to FL3, a home visit survey was conducted by examiners visiting the residents in June 2016, and 84 responded (follow-up 4: FL4). The number of those who did not respond to any of the follow-up surveys were 101 (non-respondents: NR). Those who refused the offer of a home visit to conduct the survey in advance were not included in the NR. The stages of follow-up difficulty were defined according to the follow-up surveys, with the lowest difficulty allocated to FL1 respondents and the highest difficulty allocated to FL4 respondents.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee of our institute (Acceptance no. 61, 2013). The purpose of this study and the information privacy statement were provided in a briefing document that was included in the questionnaire or that was provided at the home visit, and all participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

Social Participation and Social Interaction

We examined social participation of older adults in five activity groups: neighborhood associations, senior citizen clubs, hobby groups, sports groups, and volunteer groups (14). Respondents were asked whether they were currently participating in any of these groups.

Concerning social interaction, respondents were asked about the frequency of face-to-face contact and non-face-to-face contact (talking on the phone or communication via e-mail or letter) with non-resident family and friends. Respondents who answered that they had contact with relatives and friends "less than once a week" were defined as socially isolated (15).

Covariates

In previous studies, age, sex, instrumental activities of daily living (IADL), self-rated health, and perceived financial status were indicated as factors associated with drop-out from a longitudinal study (1, 3-5, 16, 17). For the current study, these factors were used as covariates for the analyses.

The question on self-rated health provided four choices; very healthy, healthy enough, not very healthy, and not healthy. IADL was assessed with a five-item score from Instrumental Self-Maintenance in the TMIG Index of Competence (18). The question on perceived financial status was assessed with five options: very comfortable, a little comfortable, neither comfortable nor hard, a little hard, very hard.

Statistical Analysis

Participants with complete data for social participation, social interaction, and all the covariates at BL were included in the statistical analyses. Differences concerning social participation, social interaction, and the covariates between FL1, FL2, FL3, FL4 and NR at BL were examined by a chi-square test for categorical variables, a one-way analysis of variance, and a post-hoc Bonferroni test for continuous variables. Linear trends among the stages of follow-up difficulty were assessed by the Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test or chi-square test for trends. To examine the factors associated with the stage of follow-up difficulty from participants' characteristics at

BL, multinomial logistic regression analyses were conducted using the stage of follow-up difficulty as the dependent variable and the social participation and social interaction at BL as the explanatory variables. Two logistic regression models were calculated; one with the sex and age covariates adjusted (Model 1) and one with all the covariates adjusted (Model 2).

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 25 (IBM Japan, Ltd., Tokyo, Japan). Statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results

The participants' characteristics are shown in Table 1. The FL4 respondents were significantly older than the FL1 and FL2 respondents. The IADL scores for the FL2, FL3, and FL4 respondents were significantly lower than that of the FL1 respondents. There were no significant differences of proportion between men and women among the follow-up difficulty stages.

The percentage of participants that belonged to hobby groups were significantly higher in the FL1 group than that in the FL3 group. The percentage of participants that took part in sports groups were significantly higher in the FL1 and FL2 groups than in the FL4 group. The percentage of respondents that were categorized as isolated was significantly higher in the NR group than in the FL1 group.

The percentage of respondents that rated themselves as "not very healthy" in the self-rated health question was significantly higher in the FL3 group than in the FL1 group. Additionally, the percentage of respondents that rated themselves as "not healthy" was significantly higher in the FL4 group than in the FL1 group. Lastly, the percentage of respondents that answered "a little comfortable" in the perceived financial status question was significantly higher in the FL1 group than in the FL3 group.

The multinomial logistic regression analysis in Model 1 with the adjusted sex and age covariates showed that non-participation in hobby groups was increased for the FL2 and FL3 respondents, the non-participation in sports groups was increased for the FL4 respondents, and the non-participation in neighborhood associations as well as isolation were increased in the NR group (Table 2). In Model 2—with all covariates adjusted—social participation and isolation were not significantly associated with the FL2 and FL3 respondents. However, a marginally significant association was shown between the non-participation in hobby groups and the FL3 respondents, which is similar to the results from Model 1 ($P = 0.091$). Concerning the FL4 respondents and NR, a similar tendency as in Model 1 was observed.

Discussion

To clarify the factors that contribute toward the gradual drop-out from society in older adults, this study defined stages of follow-up difficulty in a longitudinal study and examined the characteristics of the individuals in each stage of follow-up difficulty. Since there are no existing studies that defined follow-up difficulty for non-respondents of a longitudinal survey, the present study is novel and offers a valuable contribution to the theory. Many previous studies have suggested that respondents' tendency to drop out from a longitudinal study may be affected by poor health and SES at the baseline survey (1, 3-5, 16, 17). Therefore, to compare the findings obtained in this study with those of previous studies, we first examined whether the FL1 respondents—those who did not dropout from the longitudinal survey in this study—had similar results to those of previous studies. The FL1 respondents showed statistically significant differences in age, IADL score, participation in hobby and sports groups, self-rated health, and perceived financial status compared to the other stages of follow-up difficulty. This suggests that the health condition and SES, physical function, and social activity levels were high in those who did not drop out.

These results are concordant with several previous studies that examined attrition in longitudinal studies (1, 3-5, 17). Therefore, although this study was conducted in a cohort of community-dwelling older adults in Japan, the results are generalizable to some extent.

Follow-up surveys—which were gradually made easier to answer—were conducted on those who dropped out of this study's longitudinal survey and we investigated each response rate at the different stages. As a note, these gradually changing follow-up surveys have not been conducted in the previous studies and no previous studies have focused on follow-up surveys from this perspective. The response rates of each follow-up survey were 47.5% (462/971) for the simplified mail survey (FL2), 46.9% (234/499) for the postcard survey (FL3), and 32.2% (84/261) for the home visit survey (FL4) respectively. This indicates that even if people

dropped out from the survey once, approximately 30–50% of these individuals responded to the follow-up surveys that were altered to make them easier to answer. These results can be utilized to conduct follow-up surveys on non-responders of a longitudinal mail survey by changing the survey methods.

Contrary to our assumption that answering the follow-up questions of the surveys would be progressively easier when changing the survey method by implementing simplified mail, postcards, and home visit surveys, the response rate gradually declined. This indicates that the more difficult the follow-up is, the more problematic it is to obtain responses, even if the surveys themselves become easy to answer. Therefore, to explore the reasons for this decline, we examined the characteristics associated with the stage of follow-up difficulty.

It was observed that the IADL gradually decreased along with the stage of follow-up difficulty. Although the results concerning some social activities were not consistent, it can be suggested that the participation rate in activities would also decrease along with the follow-up difficulty. The results further showed that the percentage of isolation increased with the increase in follow-up difficulty. A similar tendency was observed concerning health and economic status. Therefore, the stage of follow-up difficulty defined in this study can be regarded to reflect the decline in physical function and social activity that are related to restricted social participation.

Next, we examined the baseline factors that determined the stage of follow-up difficulty. The factors involved in each stage were participation in hobby groups for the FL2 and FL3 respondents, participation in sports groups for the FL4 respondents, and participation in neighborhood associations and isolation for the NR. Similar results were obtained concerning the FL4 and NR groups after the covariates adjustment. These results were considered to be more robust than those of FL2 and FL3. A relatively small percentage of people (4.8%) participated in sports groups in FL4, which could indicate that many people who dislike participating in sports were included in this stage. Physical activity may also be low in this stage, making it difficult for the respondents to answer even the postcard survey because of poor physical function. This may be the reason they responded only to the home visit survey. Moreover, a decline in cognitive function makes it difficult to respond to mail. Therefore, it is possible that the group who could not respond to the postcard survey and responded to the home visit survey instead may include persons with cognitive decline. Several studies have reported cognitive function as a factor of attrition in longitudinal studies (1).

In the NR group, there were many people with low social interaction, which contributes greatly to isolation. The participation rate for even local activities like the neighborhood association was low. This means that the NR group included many people with low social interaction and with poor social participation.

On the other hand, social participation did not prove to be factors in the FL2 and FL3 groups after adjusting the covariates. It was in fact IADL that proved to be the factor more significantly associated with these stages. This suggests that the decline of daily living function made it difficult for people to respond in these stages. As Nemoto et al. (11) reported, social activity can be restricted by IADL disability and the decline in baseline IADL may restrict future social participation in persons of those stages.

Based on these results, we conclude that the factors associated with each stage of follow-up difficulty are: 1) their activities start to be restricted by a decline in IADL in the FL2 and FL3 stages, 2) they dislike taking part in physical activity such as sports in the FL4 stage, and 3) they are more socially isolated, not belong to even a neighborhood association owing to be low social interaction in the NR group. Older adults to which these factors apply are at the risk of restricted social participation in the future. The result of this study also showed that the appropriate support needed to enable older adults to respond to longitudinal surveys differed among the stages of follow-up difficulty. The findings obtained in this study will be useful for preventing not only drop-out from surveys in a longitudinal study but also to prevent gradually restricted social participation among older adults.

The limitations of this study are as follows: although the characteristics at the baseline of each stage of follow-up difficulty were examined, the characteristics at each follow-up survey were not compared to each other. However, we did determine that health outcomes—such as self-rated health and incidence of requirement of long-term care—differ for each of the follow-up surveys and between the stages of follow-up difficulty. These results will be reported in a future study. Another limitation of this study is that factors concerning non-respondents like moving away or death were accurately examined using resident cards only for the FL2 survey. As for the other follow-up surveys, we identified the moving away or death factors only by information from the participants or their family members. Therefore, non-responders for the FL3 group and later groups may include more moves and deaths. However, the surveys after the FL3 survey were conducted within one year and the impact on the results obtained in this study would be small. Since this study was a longitudinal mail survey, it was not possible to assess details concerning educational status, work, and

cognitive function, which have been indicated by prior studies to be associated with increased rates of attrition. In future studies, it is necessary to determine whether these factors are associated with follow-up difficulty.

Conclusions

This study identified the stages of follow-up difficulty based on four follow-up surveys on non-respondents of longitudinal mail surveys in community-dwelling older adults, thereby examining the factors associated with the drop-out from society in older adults. These findings would be useful to address the gradual drop-out from society in older adults.

Declarations

- **Ethics approval and consent to participate:**

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee of the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology (Acceptance no. 61, 2013). The purpose of this study and the information privacy statement were provided in a briefing document that was included in the questionnaire or that was provided at the home visit, and all participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

- **Consent for publication:**

Not applicable.

- **Availability of data and material:**

The authors do not have permission to share data.

- **Competing interests:**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

- **Funding:**

This work was supported by Health and Labor Sciences Research Grants (H23-Choju-Ippan-001 and 002, H24-Choju-Ippan-002, and H25-Choju-Ippan-005) from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, and the Promotion Project of Creating Industry Extending Healthy Life Expectancy from the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

- **Authors' contributions:**

H.K. planned the study, carried out the statistical analysis, and drafted the manuscript. M.E. did the literature research, collected data, and assisted with preparing the manuscript. H.T. supervised the data analysis and contributed toward revising the manuscript. Y.M. assisted with the data analysis. Y.W., H.H., Y.F., K.I., and M.T. assisted with data collection and revising the manuscript. S.O. helped to plan the study, supervised the entire study design, and revised the manuscript.

- **Acknowledgements:**

Not applicable.

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Tables

Table 1: Characteristics of participants at the baseline survey among the follow-up difficulty stages

	FL1 (n = 2,000)		FL2 (n = 369)		FL3 (n = 193)		FL4 (n = 63)		NR (n = 68)		P for trend ^a	Significant Differences ^b
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Age (years)	72.5	5.3	72.3	5.5	72.7	5.7	74.6	5.9	72.7	5.6	0.727	FL4>FL1,FL2
IADL score	4.9	0.6	4.7	1.0	4.5	1.2	4.6	1.1	4.6	1.0	<.001***	FL1>FL2,FL3,FL4; FL2>F3
Sex	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	0.920	
Men	878	43.9	159	43.1	89	46.1	32	50.8	26	38.2		
Women	1122	56.1	210	56.9	104	53.9	31	49.2	42	61.8		
Social Participation												
Neighborhood associations	588	29.4	93	25.2	47	24.4	15	23.8	10	14.7	0.001**	
Senior citizen clubs	248	12.4	43	11.7	14	7.3	8	12.7	8	11.8	0.243	
Hobby groups	687	34.4	101	27.4	42	21.8	16	25.4	16	23.5	<.001***	FL1>FL3
Sports groups	473	23.6	73	19.8	31	16.1	3	4.8	11	16.2	<.001***	FL1>FL4, FL2>FL4
Volunteer groups	176	8.8	20	5.4	8	4.1	4	6.3	4	5.9	0.013*	
Social isolation												
Isolation	471	23.5	92	24.9	59	30.6	19	30.2	27	39.7	<.001***	NR>FL1
Self-rated Health												
Very healthy	242	12.1	30	8.1	15	7.8	3	4.8	3	4.4	<.001***	
Healthy enough	1396	69.8	245	66.4	119	61.7	37	58.7	41	60.3		
Not very healthy	288	14.4	72	19.5	46	23.8	15	23.8	17	25.0		FL3>FL1
Not healthy	74	3.7	22	6.0	13	6.7	8	12.7	7	10.3		FL4>FL1
Perceived financial status												
Very comfortable	64	3.2	8	2.2	6	3.1	4	6.3	1	1.5	<.001***	
A little comfortable	698	34.9	117	31.7	49	25.4	10	15.9	14	20.6		FL1>FL4
Neither comfortable nor hard	838	41.9	154	41.7	87	45.1	31	49.2	30	44.1		
A little hard	328	16.4	71	19.2	39	20.2	15	23.8	19	27.9		
Very hard	72	3.6	19	5.1	12	6.2	3	4.8	4	5.9		

Notes: SD = standard deviation; IADL = instrumental activities of daily living

^aJonckheere-Terpstra trend test or Chi-square test for trend

^bBonfferoni post-hoc test

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2: Age- and sex-adjusted and multivariate-adjusted odds ratios for the follow-up difficulty stages with social participation and isolation

Model 1 (Age- and sex-adjusted) Follow-up Difficulty (reference: FL1)							
	FL2		FL3		FL4		NR
	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)	(95% CI)
Social participation (reference: participation of each social group)							
Neighborhood associations	1.16	(0.89 - 1.52)	1.05	(0.73 - 1.50)	1.25	(0.66 - 2.35)	2.29 (1.12 - 4.70)
Senior citizen clubs	0.90	(0.62 - 1.31)	1.56	(0.87 - 2.81)	0.93	(0.41 - 2.09)	0.68 (0.30 - 1.52)
Hobby groups	1.30	(1.00 - 1.69)	1.57	(1.08 - 2.28)	1.14	(0.62 - 2.11)	1.38 (0.75 - 2.55)
Sports groups	1.16	(0.87 - 1.55)	1.33	(0.88 - 2.01)	5.29	(1.63 - 17.23)	1.27 (0.64 - 2.52)
Volunteer groups	1.49	(0.91 - 2.44)	1.69	(0.81 - 3.56)	0.93	(0.32 - 2.73)	0.98 (0.34 - 2.83)
Social isolation (reference: not isolation)							
Isolation	0.98	(0.75 - 1.29)	1.19	(0.85 - 1.67)	1.07	(0.60 - 1.91)	2.01 (1.18 - 3.41)

Model 2 (Multivariate-adjusted ^a) Follow-up Difficulty (reference: FL1)							
	FL2		FL3		FL4		NR
	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)	(95% CI)
Social participation (reference: participation of each social group)							
Neighborhood associations	1.12	(0.85 - 1.47)	0.96	(0.67 - 1.38)	1.16	(0.61 - 2.20)	2.11 (1.03 - 4.35)
Senior citizen clubs	0.91	(0.63 - 1.32)	1.61	(0.89 - 2.92)	1.00	(0.44 - 2.26)	0.71 (0.32 - 1.60)
Hobby groups	1.22	(0.93 - 1.59)	1.39	(0.95 - 2.04)	1.00	(0.54 - 1.87)	1.20 (0.64 - 2.24)
Sports groups	1.08	(0.80 - 1.44)	1.17	(0.77 - 1.79)	4.55	(1.39 - 14.91)	1.06 (0.53 - 2.12)
Volunteer groups	1.44	(0.88 - 2.36)	1.66	(0.78 - 3.51)	0.90	(0.30 - 2.68)	0.89 (0.30 - 2.60)
Social isolation (reference: not isolation)							
Isolation	0.93	(0.71 - 1.22)	1.09	(0.77 - 1.54)	0.94	(0.53 - 1.70)	1.79 (1.04 - 3.06)

Notes: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio

Number of bold are statistically significant

^aAdjusted for age, sex, instrumental activities of daily living, self-rated health, and perceived financial status

Figures

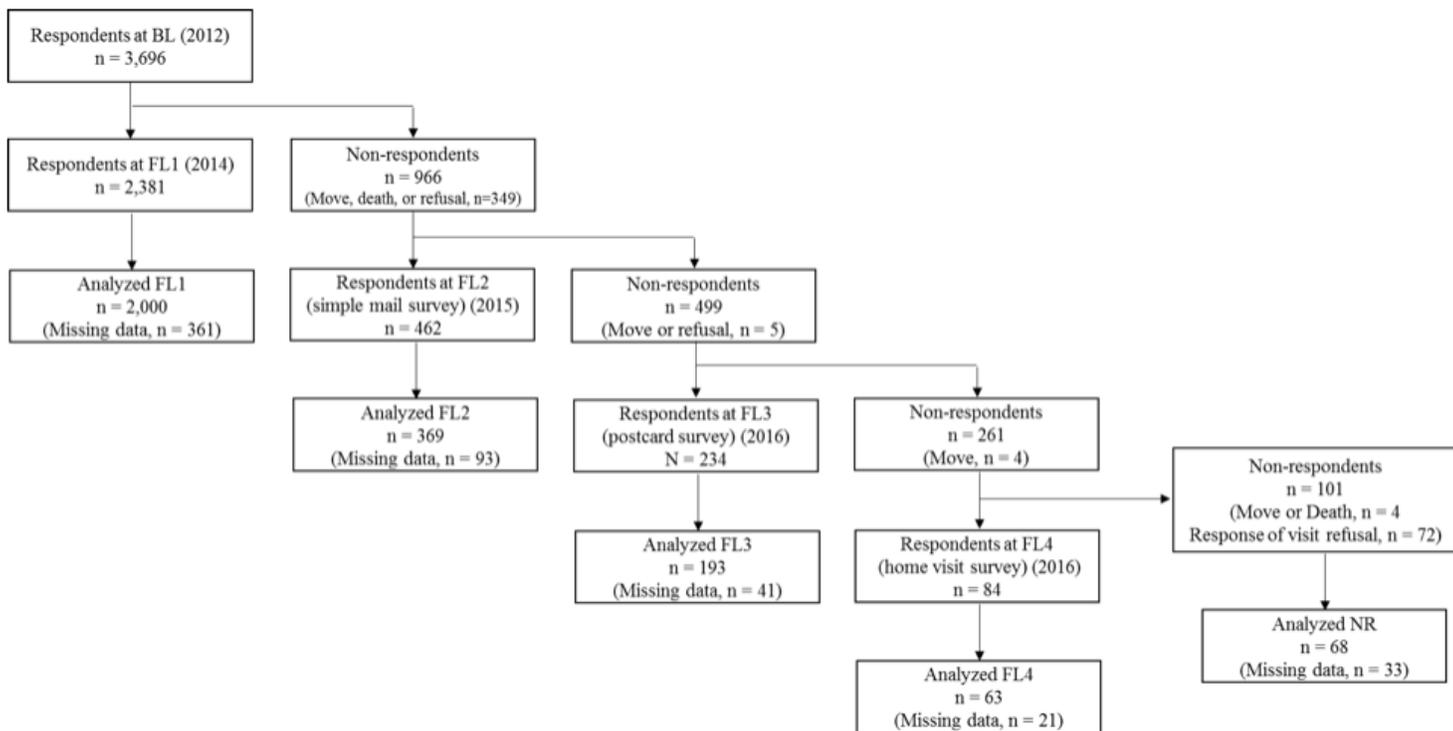


Figure 1

Flow diagram of study participants and the follow-up surveys. BL = Baseline survey, FL = Follow-up survey