

Characteristics and experiences of non-respondents compared to those of respondents in a national postal survey of adults receiving outpatient psychiatric services

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Objective

To compare the characteristics and experiences of non-respondents to those of respondents in a national postal survey of adults receiving outpatient psychiatric services.

Methods

A random sample (N=33120) of patients, from age 18 and older, that received psychiatric outpatient care in Norwegian clinics from August 20st to November 10st 2007 was included in the survey. Contact information and background data were transferred from the clinics' administrative data. The response rate was 35.2 % after two mailed reminders.

The aim of this study was to explore potential non-response bias in the results from the national survey. We randomly sampled non-responding adults to be contacted by telephone and asked questions from the postal questionnaire. In addition to eleven questions regarding experiences in the clinic, we asked for sociodemographic background information. The questions were selected based on reliability and validity testing.

The scores regarding experiences in the clinic were given on a five-point response scale, and high scores indicating favourable experiences. The scores were analysed both as three separate dimensions as well as one main dimension including all of the eleven items. These scores were treated as continuous variables and differences were assessed by independent-samples t-test. For categorical variables we used chi-squared test.

Results

293 phone contacts to non-responding patients were attempted, 203 successfully. 38 were ineligible due to unknown phone number. In 110 of the contacts the patient was willing to answer the selected questions; hence, the response rate in the telephone interviews was 43%.

For the main dimension measuring experiences no statistical significant differences were found between the two groups. The score differences for one of the separate dimensions measuring outcome of the psychiatric outpatient care was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Compared to the respondents from the national postal survey, the scores of non-respondents' self reported mental health was higher ($p < 0.05$) and fewer among them were married ($p < 0.05$). There were no statistical significant differences in gender or age.

Conclusions

The results show that the low response rate in the postal survey did not cause serious bias, and the generalisation of the survey results to the population is justified. These results are also supported by our previous findings.