

Who Is Missing From the Result?

How to see the people who disappear between eligibility, participation, and follow-up

FOR

program teams, evaluators, data staff, boards, funders, and anyone interpreting a reported rate or outcome

USE WHEN

a positive percentage may describe only respondents, completers, or people whose later outcomes could be found

INCLUDES

a population pathway, denominator check, missingness test, claim rewrite, and a 15-minute team exercise

A report says that 72 percent of participants reached the intended outcome. The number is precise. The chart is clean. Yet the report does not say whether “participants” means everyone eligible, everyone enrolled, everyone who started, everyone who completed, or only the people who answered a follow-up call.

Those can be very different groups. The result may be accurate for the people behind its denominator and still create a misleading picture of the program as a whole.

The short answer

Reconstruct the path from the intended population to the people in the reported result. Name how many people were eligible, offered access, enrolled, started, completed, and had an outcome observed. Then ask whether the people who disappeared could plausibly have different experiences.

A percentage can only describe the people included in its denominator. The missing people are not a technical footnote when their absence could change the interpretation.

The population pathway

Most program results pass through several gates.

Eligible

People met the stated conditions for access. Eligibility rules may already exclude people with different needs or circumstances.

Offered or referred

Some eligible people may never receive an offer, may not be reached, or may be filtered by referral practices.

Enrolled

People accepted the offer and completed whatever process counted as enrollment. Those who decline may face different constraints from those who join.

Started

Some enrolled people never receive a meaningful amount of service.

Completed

Completion often requires time, stability, transportation, trust, or administrative persistence. Completers can therefore differ systematically from people who leave.

Observed later

An outcome exists in the reporting system. People may be missing because they cannot be reached, decline, move, use another system, or experience an outcome that is recorded elsewhere.

At every gate, write both the count and the reason people move out of view.

Start with the denominator

The numerator tells you how many people met the outcome. The denominator tells you which population the percentage describes.

If 54 of 75 respondents were employed, the reported rate is 72 percent among respondents. If 120 people started the program, the same 54 outcomes equal 45 percent of starters. Neither calculation automatically tells the whole story, but they

answer different questions.

Always put counts beside percentages. “72 percent (54 of 75 respondents; 120 people started)” gives the reader a more honest basis for interpretation.

Why people are missing matters

Missingness is not one problem. The reason affects what can be inferred.

Some outcomes are missing because of routine administrative delays. Some people cannot be contacted. Some decline because questions feel intrusive. Some leave because the service was a poor fit. Some do well and no longer want contact. Some have unstable housing, phone access, work schedules, immigration concerns, or distrust of institutions.

The safest default is not to assume missing people did poorly. It is also not to assume they look like the observed group. Investigate the pattern and preserve the uncertainty.

A worked example

A job-training program enrolled 200 people. Of those, 160 started, 110 completed, and 80 responded to a six-month follow-up. Fifty-six respondents were employed, producing a reported rate of 70 percent.

The team compares available baseline information. Respondents were more likely to have completed the program and less likely to have reported unstable housing at enrollment. The 70 percent result therefore describes a group with different starting conditions from many people who disappeared from follow-up.

A responsible report might say:

At six months, 56 of 80 respondents were employed. Outcomes were available for half of the 160 people who started. Respondents were more likely to have completed the program and had more stable housing at enrollment, so the result should not be treated as the employment rate for everyone who started.

This does not erase the favorable outcome. It places it inside the population actually observed.

A practical missingness check

For the people with and without outcomes, compare only information that existed before the result:

- Referral source.
- Age or other relevant demographic characteristics.
- Starting level of need.
- Location.
- Program dose or completion status.
- Timing of enrollment.
- Known barriers to contact.

Large differences do not automatically tell you what the missing outcomes were. They show why treating the observed group as representative may be unsafe.

Do not turn the exercise into a hunt for personal details that have no decision use. Use the minimum information needed to understand coverage and improve follow-up fairly.

What you can say

- “Seventy percent of respondents were employed at six months.”
- “Outcome records were available for 80 of the 160 people who started.”
- “People with follow-up differed from those without it on these starting characteristics.”
- “The observed result is encouraging, but it may not represent everyone served.”

What you cannot say yet

- “Seventy percent of participants were employed,” when only respondents are represented.
- “People lost to follow-up probably had the same outcomes,” without support.

- “Completers prove the program works,” when completion selected a more stable or engaged group.
- “More follow-up will solve the issue,” if the collection approach itself discourages honest participation.

What to do next

Minimum useful step: Put the numerator and denominator beside every headline percentage. Replace broad population labels with the exact observed group.

Stronger step: Reconstruct counts at each population gate and compare known characteristics of people with and without outcomes.

Prospective step: Improve consent, contact options, timing, participant trust, and data-sharing arrangements before the next cohort. Decide which level of coverage is needed for the actual decision.

A 15-minute team exercise

Choose one important rate in a current report.

1. Write the numerator and denominator.
2. Draw the population pathway from eligible to observed later.
3. Add the count available at each gate.
4. Name the main reason people disappear at each transition.
5. Ask whether those reasons could be related to the outcome.
6. Rewrite the headline so it names the exact observed group.
7. Choose one feasible change that could improve coverage or candor next time.

If the team cannot reconstruct the pathway, state that openly. Finding the denominator may be the first useful evidence task.

A note on trust and burden

People may disappear from a record because the measurement relationship does not feel safe or useful. Repeated contact, sensitive questions, unclear data use, and fear that answers could affect services can reduce both participation and candor.

Better follow-up is not only a technical system. Explain why the information is requested, make refusal safe, offer accessible ways to respond, and avoid asking for details that do not serve the stated use. The quality of the relationship can affect the quality of the evidence.

When to bring in help

Outside support is useful when missing outcomes are extensive, linked records are needed, the result will support a consequential claim, or the pattern of missingness requires methods the team cannot assess confidently. It may also be warranted when data collection creates privacy, legal, or safeguarding concerns.

The goal is not to manufacture a complete-looking rate. It is to determine which population the evidence can fairly describe and what uncertainty must remain.

Questions to carry forward

- Who is included in the denominator?
- Who disappeared before the outcome was observed?
- Could their experience change the interpretation?
- What would make follow-up more trustworthy and less burdensome?