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Children’s well-being: the research and policy challenges

Growing up in the panel:

Towards longitudinal measurement of child poverty dynamics

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Children are often overlooked in poverty research and in policy formation. Yet the development challenges facing South African society are perhaps most clearly evident in the child population, where children are disproportionately represented amongst the poor, and over-represented in households affected by unemployment, low levels of education, and lack of access to basic services and social infrastructure. Poverty and policy discourses emphasize the importance of human capital investments for shifting historic inequality and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and many such programmes are already in place.

Intergenerational and persistent poverty are inherently longitudinal. In order to inform policy and monitor the effects of interventions, we need a longitudinal data set that enables us to investigate poverty dynamics and make causal inferences. The National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS) was launched in South Africa in 2008, and is the first national panel survey in the country. It resolves a number of previous data gaps and challenges:

* It uses a broad definition of the household (including non-resident members) – important in a country where families are historically fragmented due to labour market strategies and temporary or circular migration patterns.
* It records *de facto* relationships of care for children
* It is the only regular national survey that includes children under 15 in the roster while also providing good data on household income, expenditure and consumption
* It is the only national survey that yields plausible results on the take-up of social grants (when compared with administrative data)
* Through geo-coding, it tracks the panel over space and time, and even in wave 1 provides retrospective data on spatial mobility.

This paper introduces NIDS as a new resource for monitoring child poverty dynamics and provides a baseline overview of the situation of children from Wave 1, using a multiple deprivation model. It then presents a draft analysis plan for longitudinal analysis, which will initially be tested with Wave 2, due for release later in 2011.

Ultimately, child-centred longitudinal analysis of the panel survey will be used as an evidence base to assist policy-makers and practitioners to create policies, programmes and institutions that support the well-being of children.