



POLICY BRIEF

National Income Dynamics
Study (NIDS) – Coronavirus
Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM)

Early Childhood Development and Lockdown in South Africa: 2021 quarter 1 update on attendance trends

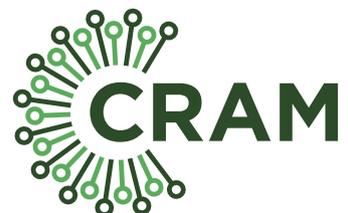
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N.i.D.S.
NATIONAL INCOME DYNAMICS STUDY



CORONAVIRUS RAPID MOBILE SURVEY 2020

Early Childhood Development and Lockdown in South Africa: 2021 quarter 1 update on attendance trends

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This policy brief updates trends on ECD attendance in South Africa with wave 4 of the National Income Dynamics – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM).³ In addition to updating trends on ECD attendance, we explore the reasons for non-attendance of children at ECD programmes and provide self-reported responses on who is looking after children that are currently not attending ECD programmes.

Before schools opened in 2021, ECD attendance was highly depressed relative to quarter 4 of 2020

Of NIDS-CRAM respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 interviewed from 2 to 14 February 2021, just 7% indicated that at least one child in their household had attended an ECD programme in the past 7 days. By comparison, this estimate was 28% between early November and mid-December 2020 (quarter 4 2020) as seen in *Figure 1*. The large dip in reported attendance in the first half of February 2021 resembles that observed in mid-July to mid-August 2020.

Box: NIDS-CRAM wave 4 sample and ECD questions

From 2 February to 10 March 2021, 2 952 NIDS-CRAM adult respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 at the time of the interview were asked the following questions:

“In February last year (before the lockdown), were any children in your household attending an early childhood development (ECD) programme such as a pre-school, creche, playgroup or day-mother? (Interviewer: Note ECD centres do NOT include Grade R in primary schools.)”

“Did any children in your household attend an Early Childhood Development Centre in the past 7 days?”

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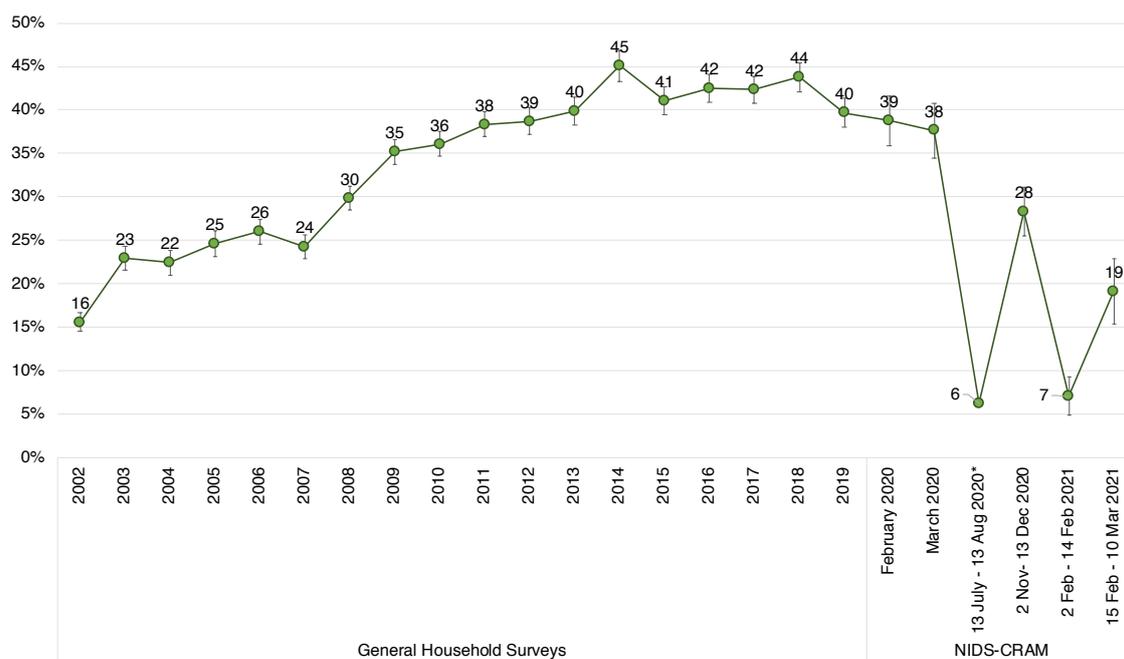
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³ See Wills, Kotze and Kika-Mistry (2020) A Sector Hanging in the Balance: Early Childhood Development and Lockdown in South Africa, NIDS-CRAM wave 2 policy paper No. 15 and Wills, Kika-Mistry and Kotze (2021) Early Childhood Development and Lockdown in South Africa: An update using NIDS-CRAM wave 3, NIDS-CRAM wave 3 policy paper No. 12. Available at cramsurvey.org.

ECD attendance increased after primary/secondary schools officially reopened

A clear upturn in reported ECD attendance is evident from when schools officially returned on 15 February 2021 after a delayed return to school due to the COVID-19 second wave in South Africa.⁴ For those NIDS-CRAM respondents living with children aged 0 to 6, interviewed from 15 February to 10 March 2021, about 19% indicated that at least one child in their household had attended an ECD programme in the past 7 days.⁵

Figure 1: Percentage of adults living with children aged 0 to 6 that report at least one child attending an ECD programme (that is not grade R or in school)



Source: General Household Surveys and NIDS-CRAM waves 2, 3 and 4. Own calculations. Notes: All estimates account for weighting, clustering and stratification. NIDS-CRAM estimates for February 2020 are from a retrospective wave 3 question. March 2020 NIDS-CRAM estimates are from a retrospective wave 2 question. *Estimates on ECD attendance for 13 July – 13 August 2020 are from a wave 2 question on ECD attendance in the past 7 days, increased by a raising factor. Estimates for 2 November – 13 December 2020 are from a wave 3 question on ECD attendance in the past 7 days. Estimates for 2 February – 14 February 2021 and 15 February – 10 March 2021 are both from a wave 4 question on ECD attendance in the past 7 days. We treat the NIDS-CRAM waves as cross-sections in these calculations. Relative to ECD attendance in waves 2 and 3 related papers, this figure updates the calculations of the GHS estimates of attendance for the period 2013 to 2019.

⁴ If we disaggregate the survey responses by interview weeks, there is no upturn in ECD attendance from week 1 to 2 of the interviews. The large increase in attendance occurs from week 3 of the wave 4 interviews corresponding to when schools reopened. This pattern holds after accounting for the respondents' background characteristics.

⁵ A concern in disaggregating ECD attendance estimates across a discrete date, is that respondents interviewed earlier in wave 4 may be systematically different from those interviewed later. We compared the sample characteristics of respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 at two points: before and after 15 February 2021. There are no statistically significant differences across the two groups with respect to their own education, employment status, age, social grant receipt, whether any children attended school or ECD before COVID and household size. However, the sample responding after 15 February 2021 are more likely to be female, African, and in households slightly more likely to report hunger. But even after controlling for any variation in characteristics in a regression, the ECD attendance estimate is 10% higher for those responding after 15 February 2021 compared to those responding before 15 February 2021. Additionally, the patterns are robust to sensitivity checks that proxy for grade R learners in the household indicating that the upturn is not an artefact of grade Rs being erroneously coded as attending ECD.

Increased ECD attendance after schools reopened in 2021 falls short of pre-pandemic and 2020 quarter 4 ECD attendance levels

In wave 3 of NIDS-CRAM, the following retrospective question on ECD attendance was asked: “In February, were any children in your household attending an early childhood development (ECD) programme such as a pre-school, creche, playgroup or day-mother? (Note ECD centres do NOT include Grade R in primary schools.)” In response, 39% of respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 at the time of the interview responded positively. The comparative ECD attendance figure of 19% after schools had reopened in 2021 indicates that ECD attendance had not recovered to levels anywhere close to a pre-pandemic situation or even the recovery levels seen in quarter 4 of 2020 (see *Figure 1*).

What explains the association between ECD attendance and school reopening?

The strong link between school reopening and ECD attendance is interesting and somewhat unexpected because ECD programmes were allowed to operate even when schools were closed. What may explain the apparent association between ECD attendance and official school reopening? There are four possible explanations:

- i. There may have been a lack of awareness among ECD operators that they could operate even when schools were closed.
- ii. ECD operators may only open their programmes when they think that demand will be high enough to warrant the costs of being open. If demand is suppressed when schools are closed, they are unlikely to open.
- iii. Parents may take comfort in the safety of the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) communications about when it is deemed safe to return to school, using these guidelines for determining when to send their children back to ECD programmes.
- iv. Older school-going siblings could play a role in looking after younger children.

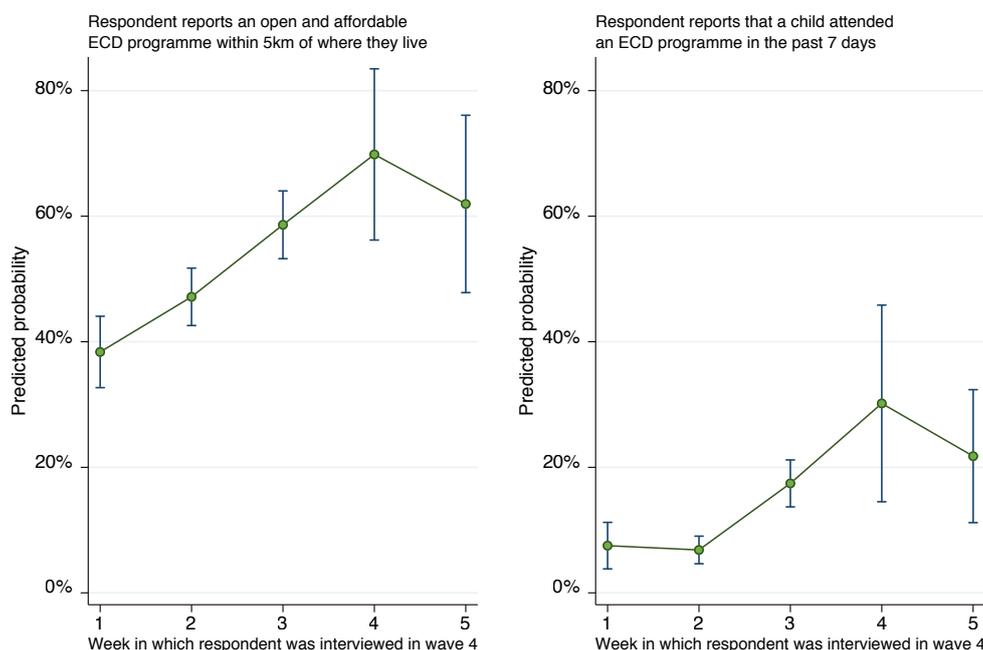
It is also possible that the roll-out of the Early Childhood Development Employment – Stimulus Relief Grant launched on 5 February 2021 may have supported some recovery, even though pay-outs were only scheduled for early March 2021.

While we can’t determine which of these explanations is most likely to explain the link, the following three findings help to shed light on some of these explanations.

1. Many ECD programmes were not operational until schools reopened

Temporary programme closure remains a primary reason for non-attendance at ECD programmes: There is evidence from the NIDS-CRAM data of temporary ECD programme closures over the February to early March 2021 interview period. Of respondents indicating that they lived with children aged 0 to 6 but no child was attending an ECD programme in the past 7 days, 26% indicated that the reason for non-attendance was that the programme was “temporarily closed due to lockdown”. If one further restricts the sample to those where children had attended an ECD programme in February 2020 (pre-pandemic) but not in the past 7 days, as many as 43% of respondents indicate that the Centre is temporarily closed (see *Table 1*).

Figure 2: Probability that a respondent reports there is an open and affordable ECD programme within 5km of where they live against the probability that they report a child attending ECD in the past 7 days by week of interview, NIDS-CRAM wave 4



Source: NIDS-CRAM wave 4, own calculations. Notes: Weighted, clustered and stratified. Sample includes individuals aged 0-6. Estimated marginal probabilities control for the respondents' race, age, gender, employment status, grant receipt, urban/rural location, province of residence and whether the household would be able to afford ECD fees. Week 3 corresponds to when schools reopened in 2021. Observations for week 5 and 6 are combined due to small sample sizes.

However, the availability of ECD programmes that were opened seemed to increase notably around the time schools reopened. NIDS-CRAM respondents were asked the following question, regardless of whether children were reported as attending ECD programmes: “Within 5km of where you live, do you know of an affordable ECD centre (such as a pre-school, creche, playgroup or day-mother) that is currently open?” With each progressive interview week in wave 4 of NIDS-CRAM, respondents are more and more likely to indicate that an open ECD programme exists within 5km of where they live (see *Figure 2*). This result holds after controlling for the respondents' background and household characteristics, whether anyone in the household can afford ECD fees and geographical location.

Figure 2 also shows that **the demand for ECD services is not responding fully to ECD supply.** While ECD attendance patterns appear to track the increased supply of affordable and open ECD programmes across interview weeks, the percentage of respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 that indicate an open and affordable ECD programme exists within 5km of where they live is much higher than the percentage of this sample reporting at least one child in the household attending an ECD programme in the past 7 days.

Table 1: Reported reasons for non-attendance at ECD programmes – two different samples

	Sample 1: Reports no children attending ECD in past 7 days. (Lives with children aged 0-6)			Sample 2: Reports no children attending ECD in past 7 days, but children attended ECD in February 2020. (Lives with children aged 0-6)		
	Mean	95% CI		Mean	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Supply-Side Reasons	48.6			70.4		
Centre is temporarily closed due to Lockdown	26.3	23.8	28.9	43.0	38.4	47.7
Child may get Coronavirus at centre	12.3	9.9	14.7	14.9	10.4	19.3
Centre not prepared for Coronavirus - no safety measures	4.2	2.8	5.5	3.9	2.2	5.7
Centre has closed down permanently	3.2	2.2	4.1	5.7	3.6	7.8
ECD not open yet*	2.0	1.2	2.7	2.8	1.6	4.0
No ECD in area*	0.6	0.1	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Demand-side Reasons	43.7			26.9		
Child is too young for ECD	14.7	12.5	16.8	1.2	0.2	2.2
Can't afford the centre fees	9.0	6.8	11.2	7.7	4.6	10.9
Child is too old for ECD	7.3	5.7	9.0	4.8	2.4	7.2
Child is attending grade R in school	6.5	5.1	7.9	10.0	7.3	12.8
Caregiver/ parent/ family member prefers to look after child	3.8	2.1	5.6	1.8	-0.3	3.9
Can't afford transport to centre	1.7	0.8	2.5	0.9	-0.1	1.8
Other transport problems	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.0	0.5
Child is sick	0.3	0.1	0.6	0.2	0.0	0.5
Other / Don't know / Refused	13.9			8.3		
No children attending ECD	9.2	7.5	11.0	4.5	2.5	6.5
Other, specify	3.2	2.0	4.3	2.3	1.0	3.5
Don't know / Refused	1.5	1.0	2.0	1.6	0.6	2.5
N observations		2583			925	

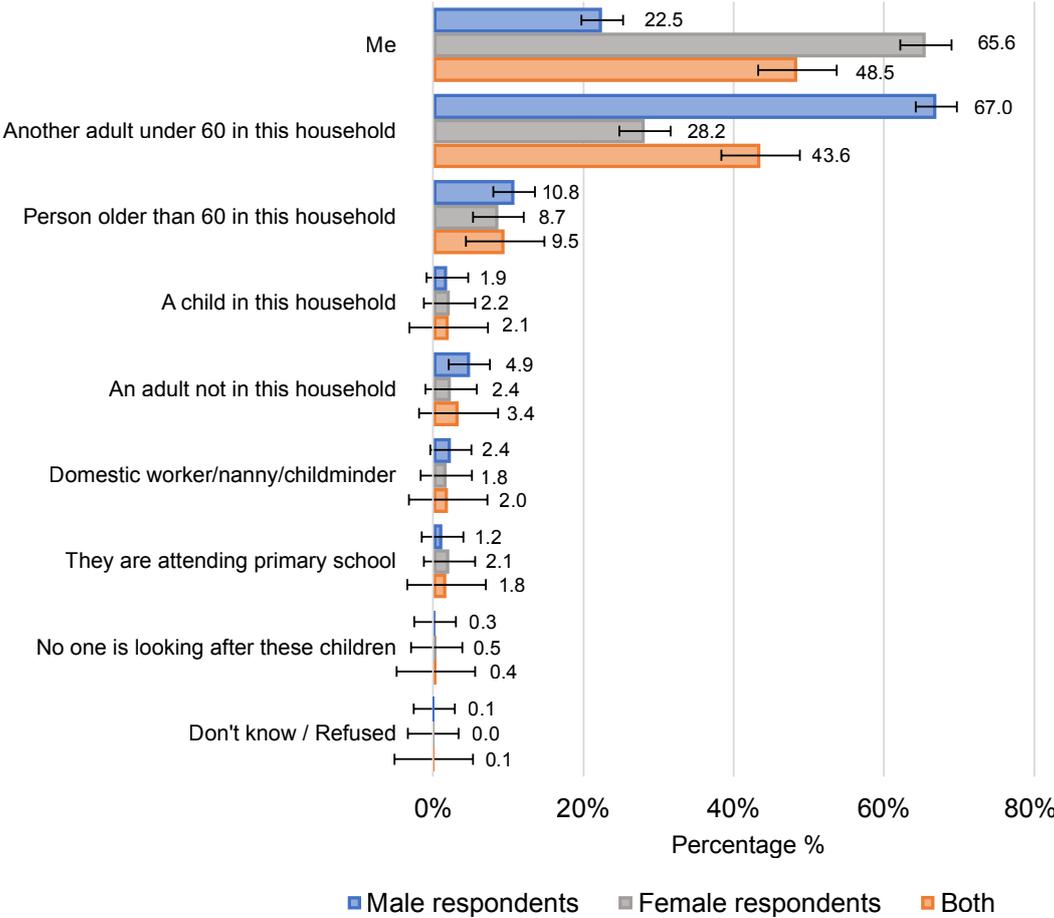
Source: NIDS-CRAM 4 data. Own calculations. Notes: Weighted, clustered, stratified. Caution should be taken if comparing these estimates on reasons for non-attendance to results in our wave 2 or 3 papers due to different samples used and the introduction of multiple-response options in wave 4. *Coded from "other" open-ended responses.

2. Clear communication about the safety of returning to ECD programmes during a surge in COVID infections may be important for parents

Fears of children contracting COVID-19 at ECD programmes remain a concern for caregivers:

Of respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 but no child attended ECD programmes in the past 7 days, 12% indicate that the “Child may get Coronavirus at centre” as a reason for non-attendance (see Table 1).

Figure 3: Who is looking after this child/ these children during the day now that they are not attending the ECD centre?



Source: NIDS-CRAM wave 4 data. Own calculations. Notes: Weighted, clustered, stratified. Percentages add up to more than 100% as wave 4 allowed for multiple response options. It is noted that in waves 2 and 3, only single response options were allowed. Category responses “No one is looking after these children” and “Don't know/Refused” are excluded from the figure as they are virtually zero. Sample of male or female respondents is restricted to those with living with children aged 0-6 and they report that no child had attended an ECD programme in the past 7 days.

3. Little evidence from self-reported responses that children in the household are caring for younger children that are not attending ECD programmes

It is very uncommon for respondents to report that children in the household were looking after younger children that were currently not attending ECD programmes (see *Figure 3*). Of respondents living with children aged 0 to 6 and none currently attends ECD, just 2% said other children were looking after children not attending ECD programmes. Typically, the adult respondent themselves or another adult in the household (under 60 years old) is looking after younger children. Females are considerably more likely than men to be looking after younger children. About two thirds of female NIDS-CRAM respondents said that they themselves were looking after the children that were not currently attending ECD programmes. By contrast 23% of male respondents indicated that they were looking after these children. The closure of ECD programmes, which is linked to school openings, will have more significant implications for women than men.

Policy recommendations

The findings provided here have the following implications for policy:

1) Reaffirms the importance of the ECD Stimulus Relief Grant

Despite some recovery in the fourth quarter of 2020, the ECD sector and children's access to ECD has been impacted very negatively by the pandemic. Support for the sector remains imperative. Fortunately, there has been a significant response to the ECD Stimulus Relief Grant. By 11 March 2021, the Department of Social Development (DSD) had received over 25 000 applications representing over 116 000 staff members (after accounting for duplicate applications).⁶

2) In addition to supply-side stimulus packages, consideration should be given to how to encourage demand-side responses for ECD services

NIDS-CRAM data suggests that the demand for ECD services is currently lagging the supply of affordable ECD programmes. The sustainability of the ECD sector requires that suppliers of ECD services enrol enough children in their programmes as their financial sustainability depends on the collection of fees. Modelling exercises are required to determine for example if raising per child subsidy allocations may lead to ECD fee reductions and thus attracting more households to ECD services.

3) Clearer communication from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to ECD operators about when programmes can operate during lockdown and school closures

There is seemingly a strong link between school openings and ECD attendance patterns in South Africa, even though ECD operators could operate when schools were still closed in early 2021. When the Department of Basic Education announces decisions about school closures and openings, it is necessary for the Department of Social Development to make equally clear their decisions around ECD programme operations.

4) Clear communication will in turn require developing a cohesive ECD management information system

Without a cohesive management information system with up-to-date contact details of ECD operators, it would be very challenging to communicate timeously information on key developments in the sector, including when ECD programmes are allowed to operate.

⁶ <https://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php/latest-news/21-latest-news/334-media-statement-social-development-in-the-process-of-finalising-ecd-stimulus-employment-relief-fund-payments>

For further information please see [cramsurvey.org](https://www.cramsurvey.org)