



## POLICY BRIEF

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

# A Sector Hanging in the Balance: ECD and Lockdown in South Africa

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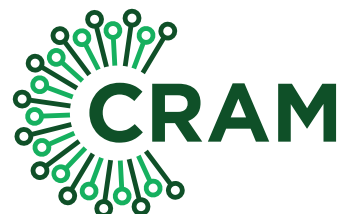
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This policy brief draws from the full paper:

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



CORONAVIRUS RAPID MOBILE SURVEY 2020

# A Sector Hanging in the Balance: ECD and Lockdown in South Africa

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- **A month after programmes could reopen, the Early Child Development (ECD) sector was operating at just a fraction of its pre-crisis levels.** New evidence<sup>1</sup> estimates that fewer than 5% of children aged 0-6 were attending ECD programmes by mid-July to mid-August compared to 38% in 2018.
  - **Currently, supply-side barriers to programmes reopening are the primary reason for low levels of ECD attendance.** Over half (55%) of the respondents<sup>2</sup> residing with children that had not returned to ECD programmes, identified 'the temporary closure of ECD programmes' as the main reason for non-return.
  - **Where ECD attendance has not resumed, the burden of child-care is primarily borne within the household and particularly by mothers.** Among those who live in a household with their own children, two-thirds of mothers compared to a quarter of fathers, reported looking after their own children who had not returned to ECD programmes.
  - **The significant decline in ECD attendance has far-reaching societal implications and dire long-term cost implications for government,** should these closures become permanent. Government should prioritise getting financial support directly to ECD operators urgently to ensure their survival. But relief strategies must extend beyond the need for immediate financial assistance to the equally important need to build an information system.
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The short and medium-term survival of the ECD sector is in a highly precarious position as it moves into the last quarter of 2020, with a real threat of permanent closures and large declines in ECD enrolment in the coming year. This threat reaches beyond ECD operators to the lives of millions of children, millions of households and millions of adults who rely on these ECD services. Four months after the closure of ECD programmes, the sector is likely operating at just a fraction of its pre-lockdown levels. It is not clear how many of the typically privately run ECD programmes across the nation will survive without a well-targeted financial stimulus.

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis draws on quantitative analysis of a new telephonic National Income Dynamics Study: Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) conducted between mid-July and mid-August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The survey is made up of adults broadly representative of persons 15 years or older in South Africa in 2017. See Ingle, Kim, T. Brophy, and R. Daniels. 2020. NIDS-CRAM Panel user manual. NIDS-CRAM Technical Document C. (Online). Cape Town: SALDRU. Retrieved from: <https://cramsurvey.org/reports/>.

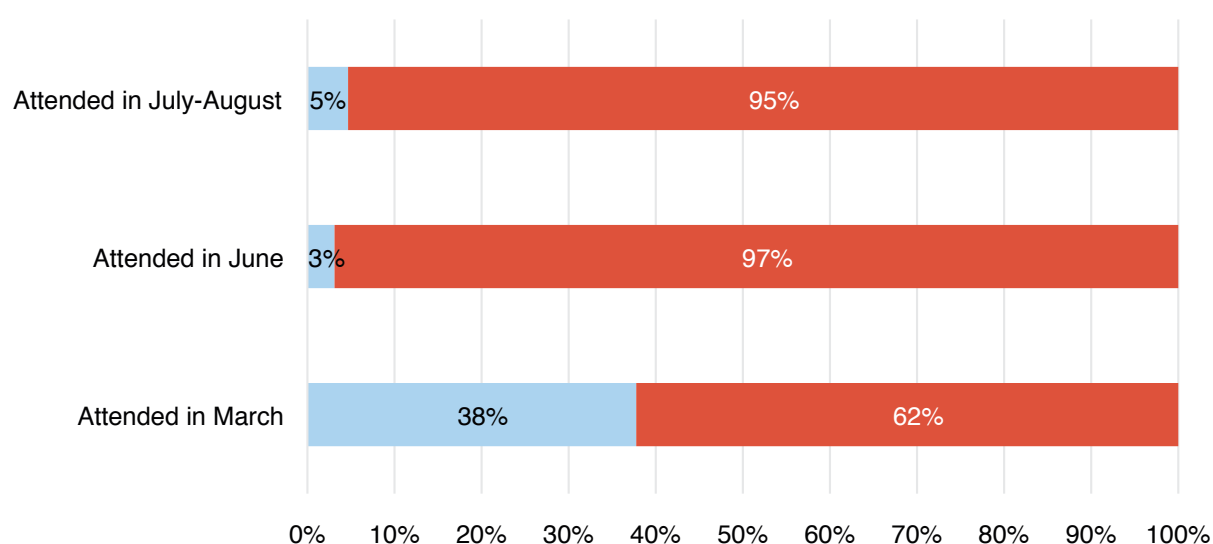
## 1. Introduction

Following the declaration of a state of national disaster to contain the spread of COVID-19, operators of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes across South Africa were instructed to close on 18 March 2020. The closure of ECD programmes at the time was probably well understood. But the reopening of the sector - which has been delayed relative to the phased reopening of the economy from 1 June 2020 - has been both confusing and contentious. We highlight that the constraints imposed by the regulatory environment, coupled with shocks to the demand side for ECD (both in terms of reduced household incomes and parent fears of children contracting COVID-19), has dire implications for ECD operators and for multiple layers of society.

## 2. How has attendance at ECD programmes been affected by the lockdown?

- Before lockdown, 38% of our respondents stated that at least one child aged 0-6 in the household was attending an ECD programme.
- In June, reported attendance could have fallen to as low as 3%. With the lockdown regulations on ECD attendance having been lifted by 6 July, we would expect that attendance would increase significantly, however, between mid-July and mid-August attendance was reported at only 5%.
- This means that non-attendance of any children aged 0-6 in the household at ECD programmes could have increased from 62% before the lockdown to as much as 95%.

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who report attendance of any child in the household at an ECD programme**



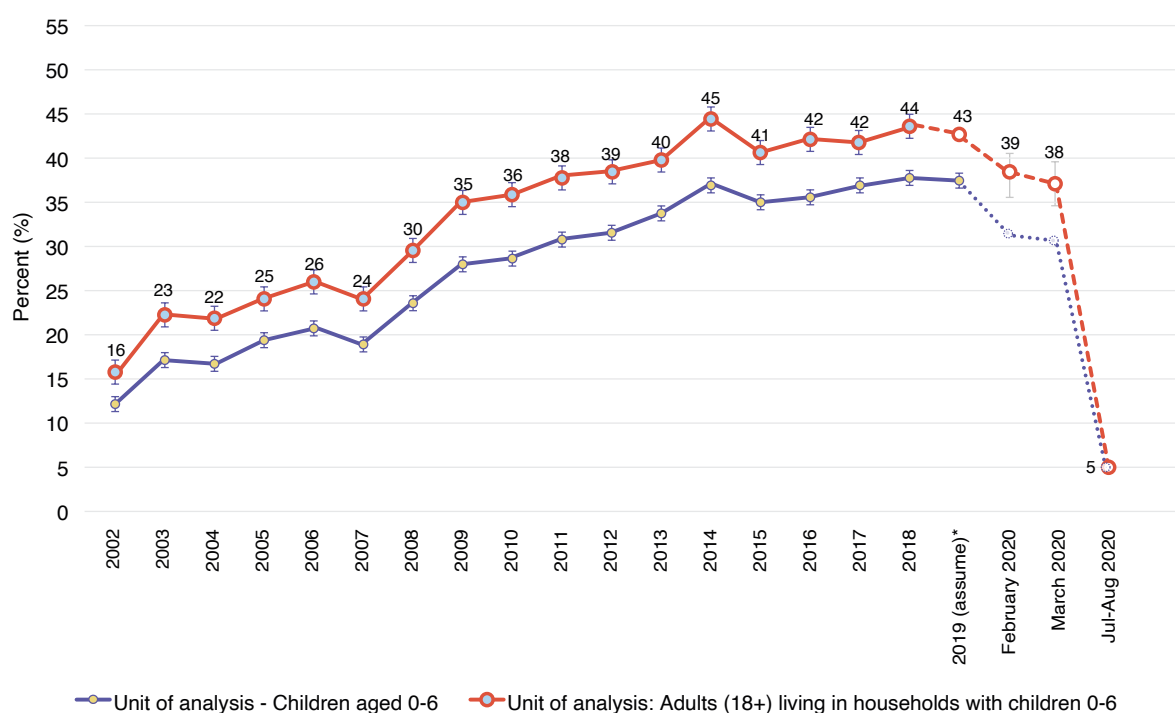
**Source:** NIDS-CRAM 2020, wave 2. Own calculations. **Notes:** Calculations restrict sample of analysis to respondents in households with children under 7.

### 3. Historically, what has access looked like and where are we now?

South Africa has seen a significant expansion in access to ECD programmes from 2002-2018. While less than 20% of children aged 0-6 were enrolled in ECD programmes pre-2003, about 38% were enrolled in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

We estimate that in mid-July to mid-August 2020, ECD attendance had dropped to less than 5% of children aged 0-6. This is lower than the General Household Survey (GHS) 2002 reported rates of attendance of children aged 0-6 at 12%. If action is not taken quickly to support this sector, significant progress over two decades in the provision of access to ECD services to young children may be significantly eroded.

**Figure 2: ECD attendance rates of children aged 0-6 from 2002-2018 (GHS) against NIDS-CRAM estimates for 2020**



**Source:** Statistics South Africa GHSs 2002-2018; NIDS-CRAM 2020 wave 2. Own calculations on each dataset. Notes: The dotted lines reflect assumed trends using NIDS-CRAM data. At the time of writing, the GHS 2019 was not yet available, so we take the average of the 2017 and 2018 GHS estimates for 2019. Error bars are the 95% confidence intervals.

### 4. Why has attendance remained so low, despite programmes being allowed to open?

- **Two-thirds of the reasons for non-return to ECD programmes relate to supply-side barriers to programmes reopening:**
  - Over half of the respondents (55%) said that the main reason any child had not yet returned was that the ECD programme is still temporarily closed.

<sup>3</sup> Excluding Grade R or in-school enrolment

- A further 6% indicated that programmes were not ready to reopen ('not prepared for COVID') and 4% indicated that programmes had closed down permanently.
- Drawing from the Second Survey Assessing the Impact of COVID on ECD<sup>4</sup>, the two main reasons cited by ECD practitioners for not having reopened was "We cannot afford to buy the health and hygiene things we need to reopen" (42%) and "We don't have enough money to reopen" (35%). A further 15% of practitioners also mentioned that they were not able to meet the Department of Social Development (DSD) requirements to reopen.
- **Nearly a third of respondents (29%) cited fears of children being infected** by the coronavirus at ECD programmes as the main reason for not sending their children back.

## 5. Who returned to ECD programmes after lockdown?

- In **urban** contexts compared to rural contexts, respondents were more likely to report that young children had returned.
- **Sending older children** back to school also seems to be associated with younger children returning to ECD programmes.
- **Employment instability** appears to be associated with lower ECD attendance.
- **Worries of children contracting COVID-19** are associated with lower ECD attendance.

## 6. Who is looking after children that have not returned to ECD programmes?

Where ECD attendance has not resumed, the burden of child-care is primarily borne within the household and particularly by mothers:

- 88% of respondents residing with children aged 0-6 that had not returned to ECD programmes, indicated that either they themselves, or another adult in the household was looking after the child/children who had not returned to ECD programmes.
- Among those who live in a household with their own children, two-thirds of mothers but just a quarter of fathers, reported looking after children aged 0-6 that had not returned to ECD programmes.

## 7. Policy options: What can policy makers do to ensure sector survival and sustainability?

### Short-run policies for sector survival

- **Reaffirm the importance of the proposed financial relief package for ECD programmes in and structure it to align with the need for emergency support:** The new proposed relief package of R1.3 billion is a welcome move in recognition of the significant contraction of the

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<sup>4</sup> The First and Second Surveys Assessing the Impact of COVID on ECD was conducted by a collaboration of partners in the ECD sector namely: BRIDGE, Ilifa Labantwana, the National ECD Alliance, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Smart Start and the SA Congress for ECD.

sector. But this package must be structured to align with the need for immediate support. In the absence of a centralised database of programmes that require support, the proposed relief funding to the ECD workforce could build on the existing government platforms, such as the UIF system, to distribute funds to ECD practitioners.

- **Review regulations and standard operating procedures for ECD programmes to remove any unnecessary requirements that present a bottleneck to recommencing operations:** The list of compliance requirements for ECD programmes to reopen places a financial and administrative burden on operators. These should be reviewed to enable operations to continue safely.
- **Invest in platforms which strengthen the collaboration among the state and NPOs:** NPOs could assist government in providing oversight and operating as 'boots-on-the-ground' in implementing ECD sector relief packages. Harnessing the considerable capacity of NPOs will require building information systems in the welfare sector in general to strengthen collaboration.
- **Build clear and concise communication pathways for ECD operators and parents:** Strengthening media and communication channels would allow for the sharing of important information directly with operators and parents and would limit confusion and disinformation in the system. In the medium-term, communication channels would be supported through an information infrastructure.

### Medium-term strategy for sector survival

- **Establish an ECD management information system to facilitate targeted support and to strengthen monitoring and evaluation in the sector:** A major constraint to getting emergency relief to ECD programmes, and communicating rapidly to these programmes, is that no national management information system is in place with contact information for all ECD programmes.

### Long-run sustainability

- **Revise regulations and strengthen public-private partnerships to create an enabling environment to promote the long-run sustainability of ECD programmes:** There is a need to review and amend regulations to ensure that more programmes are registered and qualify for the ECD subsidy. Public-private partnerships with the NGO and private sector should also be strengthened. Initiatives such as tax-breaks for private companies adopting an ECD centre could further incentivise investment from the private sector.

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