

Young Lives in India: An international study of childhood poverty

Young Lives is a unique long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. It has been tracking the same 12,000 children in four countries - Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam - since 2000, using a combination of different research methods, including asking children and their carers for their own perceptions of well-being.

Young Lives in India is being carried out in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where it has been following two groups of children: 2,000 children who were born in 2001/2 and 1,000 children who were born in 1994/95. The children were selected from 20 sites. Between the two rounds, the attrition rate across the whole sample was only 0.9%, which is very low for a study of this size.

The findings below come from the country report of the second round of quantitative research. At present the research results are still preliminary, but the analysis will be added to over the coming months. This will help to build a detailed picture of what is actually happening to children growing up in different households, communities and localities. Young Lives research has been able to provide new insights into major government schemes such as the Midday Meals Scheme and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Country context

India has a population of over a billion people. It is a country of huge inequalities, with the second largest number of billionaires in the world but also home to 25 per cent of the world's poor. It ranks 128 out of 177 countries in the 2007/8 United Nations Human Development Report. The poverty debate in India has been rarely extended to child poverty, which makes the Young Lives Project of particular interest. Andhra Pradesh is a state in South India that has been the role model for several new government initiatives during the 1990s to eliminate poverty. Poverty estimates for rural Andhra Pradesh are low (11.2% compared to the national average of 28%), although per capita expenditure in rural areas is only about 5% more than the national average.

Findings

Poverty and wealth: Our data reveals stark inequalities in wealth and consumption. Average urban consumption is over 20% higher than rural consumption. Per capita expenditure for disadvantaged groups is considerable lower than for 'other castes' (predominantly upper castes). Scheduled Tribes (the government name for India's indigenous peoples), for example, have expenditure levels 1.5 times lower than non-tribal households.

In both cohorts, the proportion of households below the poverty line is much higher in urban than rural areas, in keeping with national trends. 12.67% of children in the younger cohort and 7.95% of children in the older cohort live in households below the absolute poverty line. Again, children from Scheduled Tribes are severely disadvantaged: 29.2% of the younger children and 18% of the older children live in absolute poverty. The urban-rural gap is not so stark in terms of relative poverty, where it is 11.2% in rural areas and 10.55% in urban areas, but again it is strongly linked to caste and geography.

We found that household and community characteristics greatly influence children's outcomes, particularly ethnicity, the rural-urban divide (which affects access to services among other things) and parents' levels of education. Household wealth is an important determinant of child outcomes. Interestingly, maternal education has a stronger impact on nutrition, while the father's education is a more important determinant of enrolment.

Lower material wealth in rural areas is compounded by poorer access to electricity, safe water and sanitation. The urban-rural gap in access to services has narrowed between rounds but is still stark, with 86% of urban households having access to sanitation compared to 14% of rural households. Only 9.3%

of children in the poorest quarter of our sample had access to sanitation, compared to 81.3% in the richest.

Malnutrition and health: Stunting, or low height-for-age, is a measure of chronic malnutrition. Stunting in the younger cohort increased from 31% in 2002 to 35% in 2006, but remained level between 33 and 34% for the older children. The incidence of stunting is once again strongly related to household resources, residential location and ethnicity.

A finding of particular importance is that short-term 'shocks', such as natural disasters, can have a devastating effect on child outcomes in the long term. Over a third of households in rural areas report having experienced drought in the four years between 2002 and 2006, in the younger cohort, children were found to have significantly lower height-for-age scores (an indicator of chronic malnutrition), indicating long-term deprivation. Drought also had an impact on the older children, making it much more likely that they would seek paid work.

Education and child work: Although almost 99% of the 12-year-olds report having attended school, only 88.3% were still in school in 2006, with about 10% having dropped out. Drop-out rates are higher in rural areas (10%) than in urban areas (3%), among the poorest quartile (16%), among Scheduled Tribes children (possibly because of distance to school), and among girls (11%). Interestingly, there are no significant differences in enrolment between boys and girls, although initial analysis of data gathered by the Young Lives qualitative team shows possible gender discrimination in spending, with boys more likely to be sent to private schools. An interesting finding was that over 86% of the younger children are reported to have attended a pre-school and 44% also claim to be already enrolled in primary school, despite being under the official starting age. Almost 50% of children from the poorest households are already in school, while 40% of children are sent well below the formal starting age. It is likely that the free midday meal provided by the state explains this.

In the older cohort, paid child work emerges as an important issue, despite recent legislation banning child labour. Over a fifth of the children in our sample reportedly engage in paid work; most of these children are in rural areas where the incidence of child labour (25.76%) is much higher than in urban areas (3.73%). Child labour is highest among the Scheduled Tribes (30.84%) and lowest among the 'Other Castes', at 9.3%. Children from households which had been affected by drought are much more likely to work.

Subjective well being and children's perceptions of poverty: Young Lives is one of the few studies of childhood poverty that assesses children's subjective perceptions of well-being. In Andhra Pradesh, urban children, who are better off in terms of material goods, have lower subjective well-being than rural children. Parental education, even when household resources are controlled for, has a positive impact on child subjective well-being. Children from Scheduled Castes, from large families or from households where casual labour is the primary occupation, report lower aspirations for their future. However, the findings demonstrate that household material resources are not the only, and perhaps not even the most important, determinant of subjective well-being.

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