

South Africa's Child Support Grant

Overall findings from an integrated qualitative-quantitative evaluation

Introduction

Over the past 14 years, South Africa has evolved one of the most comprehensive social protection systems in the developing world. The Child Support Grant (CSG), introduced into this system in 1998, provides an exemplary model of a social cash transfer programme. Policy reforms have progressively expanded the reach and impact of the CSG, increasing the age limit for eligibility from seven to eighteen years, raising the income threshold to more effectively reach all poor children, and adjusting benefit levels for inflation and to improve both social equity and economic impacts. The CSG now reaches over ten million children each month.

Evaluation approach

In 2009, the Department of Social Development (DSD), the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and UNICEF South Africa commissioned the Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) to undertake an assessment of the Child Support Grant, the first rigorous impact evaluation of the programme to date. The evaluation was based on a mixed-method (quantitative plus qualitative) quasi-experimental research design, addressing both process (or 'practice') questions and impact (or 'policy') issues. The resulting work yielded two main reports—the qualitative evaluation and a quantitative impact assessment.

The 'theory of change' underpinning this evaluation is that access to the Child Support Grant improves the wellbeing of recipients and beneficiaries through a number of key transmission mechanisms. Specifically, the following propositions are tested in this evaluation:

- Cash grants targeted at children directly reduce poverty and vulnerability.
- The CSG both increases consumption and enables poor households and carers to participate in productive economic activity (e.g. to look for work).
- The CSG addresses the underlying causes of poverty, by enabling poor households to invest in physical, social and human capital assets (education, health, nutrition), that can generate future streams of income.
- Receipt of the CSG reduces risky behaviour by adolescents, such as transactional sex, alcohol consumption and substance abuse.
- The appropriate design (unconditional, targeting caregivers) and effective implementation (regular delivery, low costs to participants) work to maximise the programme's social and economic impacts.

The qualitative research involved focus group discussions with primary care-givers and adolescent recipients and non-recipients, and key informant interviews with local SASSA staff, education and health workers and community leaders, in three randomly selected localities in each of four provinces: Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. The quantitative research fielded three separate young child, adolescents, and household questionnaires along with a confidential, self-administered survey of the adolescents themselves about their receipt of the CSG, school and work participation, and their engagement in risky behaviours. The two-stage sampling process involved a random sample of locations, defined as the catchment areas for specific pay-points, drawn from SASSA's administrative database and covering five provinces: Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Western Cape. The second stage involved a random selection within each identified location of several groups: 10-year olds who enrolled in the CSG programme shortly after birth, those who enrolled later—at age 4 or older, and adolescents near the 2010 age threshold for eligibility, including those receiving and not receiving the grant. The research team compared the results of the survey to other national household surveys, including the 2008 National Income Dynamics Survey and the 2010 General Household Survey, and found the sample to be largely representative of the corresponding national populations.

The quantitative evaluation methodology measured causal programme impacts as the difference between observed outcomes for the beneficiaries and what would have been the outcomes if this group had not received the Child Support Grant, or received it later versus earlier.

Access to and receipt of the Child Support Grant

The qualitative research found that challenges to Child Support Grant access, especially those linked to problems with application procedures, have improved significantly in recent years, particularly since: i) fewer

documents are required now; ii) information about registration procedures and documentation requirements is widely publicised; iii) the application process is much faster (it takes days rather than months); iv) there is greater flexibility and choice about collecting grant benefits. Nevertheless, receipt of the CSG varies over different age groups. Take-up rates peak for children 7 to 10 years in age, while infants have relatively low take-up rates. Furthermore, youth in newly-eligible age groups have relatively low take-up rates, so adolescents are relatively less likely to receive the CSG when compared to younger children.

Use of the Child Support Grant

The qualitative research found that the Child Support Grant is used primarily to buy food and serve the consumption needs of the whole household, due to widespread poverty and lack of employment. As a result, the grant is somewhat diluted across household members. The caregiver who receives the grant is usually the person who has most control of the cash in terms of decision making on its use and distribution within the household. The quantitative analysis identified the top five reported uses of the grant to include food, education, clothing and household durables, health and transportation—which represent more than 95% of reported uses.

The impact of the Child Support Grant on outcomes in early life

The qualitative research found that Early Childhood Development (ECD) services – crèches, pre-schools and day-care centres – are highly valued by parents and caregivers in South Africa. ECD services are seen as important for several reasons: pre-school learning gives children a head start when they start at primary school; children need to interact with others to acquire social skills; crèches and day-care centres provide a secure environment for children; and ECD services provide child care during the day, which is especially important for working mothers. Many respondents reported that the CSG is used to pay for ECD services, that the CSG is specifically intended to contribute to these costs, and that without the CSG they might struggle to send their children to pre-school. It is clear from this evidence that the Child Support Grant plays a vital role in securing access to ECD services for young children from low-income households.

The quantitative research found that early receipt of the CSG (in the first two years of life) increases the likelihood that a child's growth is monitored through clinic visits and reduces stunting among for children whose mothers have more than eight grades of schooling. Since children's cognitive development depends on receiving appropriate nutrition in the first few years of life, this result provides important evidence of the Child Support Grant's role as an investment in human capabilities—a critical determinant of multi-dimensional poverty reduction. This also suggests that a mother's education complements the Child Support Grant in strengthening important impacts.

Impact of the Child Support Grant on schooling and cognitive skills of children

The qualitative research found that children miss days of school, or drop out altogether, due to many economic and social drivers. The main reasons are economic: money for school fees, uniforms, shoes, transportation, the need to work for income, or lack of food at home so they can concentrate and lack of food that they can bring to school. The quantitative impact assessment found that analysis of grade attainment, scores on mathematical ability tests and scores on reading and vocabulary tests provides evidence of the impact of the CSG on schooling outcomes of 10 year old children. Children who were enrolled in the CSG at birth completed significantly more grades of schooling than children who were enrolled at age six, and achieved higher scores on a math test. Impacts for girls were particularly significant, with early receipt of the CSG increasing girls' grade attainment by one quarter grade compared to those receiving the grant only at age 6. In addition, receipt of the CSG by the household reduces adolescent absences from school, particularly for male adolescents, even when the household does not receive the grant specifically for the adolescent.

The impact of the Child Support Grant on children's health

The qualitative research found an important reciprocal relationship between the CSG and health care services: health services facilitate access to the CSG, and CSG cash is used to access health care. Birth certificates are now issued in hospitals upon birth with the support of nurses or Department of Home Affairs staff who visit these health facilities. This greatly facilitates CSG access, as applicants can now take their birth certificates directly to the SASSA office. CSG cash is spent on many basic needs, including health care. Since children are prone to childhood illnesses and injuries, the CSG plays an important role in protecting the health of poor children. The quantitative analysis found that early enrolment in the CSG reduced the likelihood of illness, with the effect particularly strong for boys.

The impact of the Child Support Grant on time allocation and work

The qualitative research investigated child labour and found that boys who work outside the home engage in a range of income-earning economic activities (including petty trading, gardening, and agricultural labour) while girls who work had fewer paid options and are more likely to provide personal services (domestic work, hairdressing, child care) or to work in the retail sector (as shop assistants). Children also perform household chores, which are usually not onerous, but sometimes include older girls dropping out of school to look after younger siblings while the parent or carer goes to (or looks for) work. The quantitative analysis found that child labour was not common for younger children (the 10 year olds in our sample), while nearly a fifth of reporting adolescents indicated that they worked outside the home. Significantly, early receipt of the Child Support Grant (in the first seven years of life) reduces the likelihood that they will grow up into adolescents who will work outside the home. Additionally, there appears to be a particularly important impact in terms of reduced work outside of the home for females who received the grant in early childhood.

The impact of the Child Support Grant on adolescent risky behaviours

The qualitative analysis found that adolescents in South Africa face a vast array of serious risks, the greatest of which involve transactional sexual relationships, where girls date older men in order to obtain cash, food, clothing, gifts and transport, but placing themselves at risk of dropping out of school, pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. Analysis of adolescent risky behaviours provides evidence of the Child Support Grant's impact in significantly reducing six main risky behaviours—sexual activity, pregnancy, alcohol use, drug use, criminal activity and gang membership. The quantitative evidence documents statistically significant associations between receipt of the Child Support Grant in adolescence and: (a) reduced sexual activity and a fewer number of sexual partners, particularly when the adolescent also received the grant in early childhood; (b) reduced pregnancy, again particularly when the adolescent also received the grant in early childhood; (c) reduced alcohol and drug use, particularly for females, and with the effect strengthened by early childhood receipt of the CSG.

Conclusions

The results of this study confirm the positive developmental impact of the Child Support Grant in promoting nutritional, educational and health outcomes for millions of children in South Africa. Early receipt significantly strengthens a number of these important impacts, providing an investment in people that reduces poverty measured along a number of important dimensions, promotes better gender outcomes and reduces vulnerability. The study also finds that adolescents receiving the Child Support Grant are more likely to have positive educational outcomes, are less likely to resort to child labour, and are significantly less likely to engage in behaviours that put their health and well-being at serious risk.

These results convey several key messages:

1. The Child Support Grant generates positive developmental impacts that multiplies its benefits in terms of directly and indirectly reducing poverty and vulnerability; and promoting long-term developmental changes, helping to break the inter-generational transmission of poverty.
2. Early enrolment in the Child Support Grant programme substantially strengthens its impacts. Early receipt (from birth) of the Grant generates particularly powerful impacts that strengthen human capabilities and enable children to grow up with a lower risk of being trapped by poverty.
3. Promoting continuous access to the CSG for eligible children through

adolescence, as opposed to interruptions in the benefits, reinforces the positive impacts. The evidence also strengthens the case for universal provision of the CSG.

4. Receipt of the grant by adolescents generates a range of positive impacts, not least being a reduction in risky behaviours, which in the context of high HIV prevalence, generates a particularly protective impact.
5. Supporting financial inclusion measures, particularly those that promote savings behaviour, and expanding and strengthening complementary linkages (such as social worker interventions supporting educational and other outcomes) will better enable households to cope with the eventual ageing out of grant eligibility (when the child reaches 18 years of age) and further deepen the Child Support Grant's long-term developmental impact, particularly by expanding economic opportunities.
6. Measures that promote early and continuous receipt of the Child Support Grant will more effectively protect children's rights and contribute to human capital development, helping to lift children on development pathways out of poverty. Such measures include:
 - (a) ensuring children and caregivers can access the identification documents required to access the Child Support Grant, or barring this access, alternative approaches are followed by SASSA offices to ensure that documents bottlenecks do not bar access to the benefit.
 - (b) information should be clearly disseminated to potential participants in the programme so that eligibility requirements are well understood.
 - (c) universal provision of the Child Support Grant will reduce many barriers to access and help include millions of poor children currently erroneously excluded from the programme.
7. Complementary programmes—such as those that promote financial inclusion or success in school—can reinforce the developmental impact of the Child Support Grant and contribute to more inclusive and pro-poor economic growth.



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