

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Improving the Lives of Children is Complicated

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For empirical researchers in the social and behavioral sciences who focus on children, adolescents, and young adults, high-quality survey data are an essential ingredient for studying important scientific and policy research questions. Such data are a public good and foundational infrastructure for the social and behavioral sciences. They are the equivalent of the Hubble Telescope for researchers across all career stages—but especially for new and early-stage investigators. Survey data are typically offered to the research community as a free and shared resource that can answer an untold number of questions. Recent budget cutbacks, however, threaten the future of these essential data.

I direct the [Child Development Supplement](#) (CDS) to the [Panel Study of Income Dynamics](#) (PSID) which provides unique and important social and behavioral data on children in the United States. CDS is funded primarily by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. It builds on the rich longitudinal and intergenerational data collected in PSID, which is an ongoing survey of a nationally representative sample of US families that began in 1968 and has collected data on the same families and their descendants for 43 waves over 57 years. Since 1997, CDS has collected data on children in PSID families, through interviews with primary caregivers, who are typically a parent, and with adolescents. CDS has also included assessments of reading and math skills, data on time use, and saliva samples for genetic analysis.

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Poverty’s Impacts on Children

Researchers have used CDS to show how strong the replication of poverty is across generations and its negative effects on [child outcomes](#), such as behavior problems and achievement in reading and math. Further, with detailed CDS measures of current home, neighborhood, and school environments, researchers have examined the [pathways](#) through which poverty operates to affect child outcomes. A prominent recent article by [Christina Cross](#) used CDS data to show that access to resources matters more than family structure for black children’s educational attainment; a companion op-ed based on the article appeared in the [New York Times](#).

Neighborhoods Matter

Recent human ecological research using CDS has examined how children’s immediate and long-term well-being is affected by social, economic, and spatial characteristics of schools and [neighborhoods](#), such as social cohesion, collective action, segregation, and public investment, that operate [directly](#) and through [family processes](#). A recent article in [Pediatrics](#), showed that school segregation was associated with worse well-being outcomes among black children, including behavioral problems and alcohol use, with long-term deleterious consequences for health disparities across the life course.

Generational Affects on Children

Because CDS is embedded within a panel study of US families that began in 1968, it provides researchers an opportunity to study how parents and grandparents affect children's health, development, and well-being. Recent studies using CDS provide unique insights about how children's health status, such as [obesity](#), and health behaviors, such as [smoking](#), are related not only to parents' but also to grandparents' own health behaviors, wealth, and exposure to poverty prior to a child's birth.

Technology's Impacts and the Digital Divide

CDS is a unique source of national longitudinal data on children's time use and digital technology use. Research based on CDS suggests that electronic media use and video games generally have [benign or positive effects on academic outcomes](#), but found a digital divide with poor and minority children having lower access to these resources. Research using recent CDS data has continued to find [little evidence](#) for a negative association between digital-screen use and children's well-being. As technology becomes even [more pervasive](#) at home and in school, data from CDS are providing important insights into the digital divide and the effects of technology use on children's [behavior and health](#).

COVID and Child Wellbeing

CDS provides an unparalleled new resource for studying effects of the COVID pandemic on children and families. The last full CDS wave, in 2019, was largely complete when the pandemic began, providing invaluable baseline data: we know of no other nationally representative all-age sample of children with recent pre-Covid benchmark data. With the next CDS wave, currently underway, we will obtain a comprehensive assessment of the effects of Covid on children's schooling, behavior, health, well-being, and other child and family outcomes. These data will be available to the research community in the next year to support research on these and other topics.

CDS data have been the source for 672 known publications: 480 journal articles, 59 books or book chapters, and 133 doctoral dissertations, as of July 2024. For PSID as a whole, there were 7,557 publications, including 1,284 dissertations. The data are freely available to researchers and students and widely used for research and training nationwide. There are over 40,000 registered PSID data users, many of whom also use CDS data, at academic institutions, in government, and in the private sector, and in essentially every state in the country.

Support from the U.S. federal government has been vital for creating and continuing CDS, but has recently [been reduced and is in jeopardy for the future](#). By making these data widely available to the research community, CDS has helped us better understand what shapes children's outcomes—and how to improve outcomes for children over time and across generations. This is why we need social science data and research.



Narayan Sastry is a Research Professor in the Population Studies Center and Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. He is also an Adjunct Senior Social Scientist at the RAND Corporation. Sastry's research interests center on survey research and on studying the social and spatial dimensions of health, development, and well-being of children and adolescents, both in the United States and in less developed countries. Sastry is part of leadership team of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and he directs the PSID Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS) and the PSID Transition into Adulthood Supplement (PSID-TAS) and co-directs the new Puerto Rico PSID (PR-PSID). Sastry received his Ph.D. in Demography and Public Affairs from Princeton University in 1995.

