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DEVELOPING A CHILD-FOCUSED AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF CHILD POVERTY FOR SOUTH AFRICA

Michael Noble, Gemma Wright and **Lucie Cluver**

This paper presents a new method of measuring child poverty in South Africa, based on a theoretically sound distinction between the conceptualization, definition, measurement, and enumeration of poverty. Conceptual frameworks, definitions, and measurements of poverty are briefly reviewed in the international and South African contexts. This paper presents a child-centered, multidimensional model of child poverty with both absolute and relative poverty components. The absolute core of this model follows the Copenhagen Declaration and includes basic needs such as food and shelter. This is complemented by a relative component, using a multidimensional conceptualization of poverty, and based on a child's ability to participate fully in South African society. The dimensions, or domains of deprivation, for both absolute core and relative aspects can be the same; eight exemplar domains are presented here. Located between the model's relative and absolute components and equally relevant to both components is found a ring of indicators relating to access to good-quality services. We argue that relative poverty can be defined both by consensually agreed upon necessities for societal inclusion and by research-delineated child needs. This approach, while presenting challenges for measurement, will provide policy makers with a better evidence base for combating child poverty.

Introduction

Since 1994, democratic South Africa has made a number of commitments that relate to the well-being of children. The Constitution's Bill of Rights, for example, identifies children's rights of "basic nutrition, shelter, basic healthcare services and social services" (Republic of South Africa 1996, Sec. 28. 1. c.), and the right "to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse" (1996, Sec. 28. 1. d.) or "exploitative labour" (1996, Sec. 28. 1. e.). South Africa has also ratified the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (The Organisation of African Unity 1990).

But analysis of the 10 percent sample of the South African 2001 Census reveals that high levels of childhood deprivation still prevail (Statistics South Africa 2001). For example, of those under the age of 18, 11.8 percent live in informal dwellings or shacks, 37.7 percent do not have piped water in their homes or within 200 meters of where they live, 49.3 percent do not have a refrigerator in their homes, and 60.8 percent do not have a flush toilet in their homes.[1]

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These data highlight the need to consider aspects of child poverty beyond an examination of children living in low-income households. The conventional income and expenditure measures fail to fully reflect the nuanced experience of poverty for South African children. This paper explores a possible child-centered model of child poverty that is relevant to the particular social, political, and economic context of the new South Africa.

Childhood, and the impact of child poverty, has both an intrinsic and instrumental importance (Bradshaw and Mayhew 2005). A child's experience of poverty is intrinsically important, irrespective of its effect on the future (Ridge 2002). Nevertheless, children are also the adults of the future (Klasen 2001); their choices, opportunities, and development as children will impact their functioning as adult citizens. Moreover, children are a link in intergenerational poverty (Machin 1998). Poor adults are likely to have socially excluded children, who are at a high risk of becoming poor adults themselves (Bradshaw 2001).

The concept of poverty is used in many different ways in social policy debates. This paper aims to set out clear distinctions between the conceptualization, definition, measurement, and enumeration of poverty as experienced by children. We argue for a relative conceptualization of poverty that incorporates many of the aspects commonly associated with social exclusion. Within this is a need for an absolute core of poverty. We further argue that a multidimensional approach is essential. In the context of defining child poverty, we present the case that there is a role for both normative judgements (i.e., researcher decisions based on rigorous evaluation of evidence) and consensual approaches.

We seek to distinguish between a focus on children living in poor households and the more child-centric approach of children who are poor by developing a model of child poverty based on a child-focused approach.

Concepts, Definitions, Measurements, and Enumeration of Poverty

Debates around poverty, in both the developed and developing worlds, frequently lack clear distinctions between the concept, definition, measurement, and enumeration of poverty. Lister (2004) stresses the importance of making such distinctions. In this paper, "concepts" means the general parameters from which definitions are developed. A "definition" distinguishes the poor from the non-poor, within the framework of the concept in question. We use the term "measurement" to mean the way in which the poverty line is measured, i.e., the way in which the definition is operationalized. Having selected and operationalized the definition, the poor are counted, or "enumerated."

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between concepts, definitions, and measurements of poverty. It is illustrative rather than comprehensive. The boundaries between concepts are not necessarily as clear-cut as we imply. Thus, the concept of absolute poverty refers to impoverishment that is defined independently of any reference group, and does not change according to prevailing living standards of a society, nor over time. However, many commentators argue that, in practice, all absolute concepts incorporate relative elements (Alcock 1997).

Definitions that flow from absolute concepts of poverty are characteristically resource-based (i.e., based entirely on income and expenditure measures) and are restricted to the minimum required for subsistence or "the minimum necessaries for the

TABLE 1
Examples of concepts, definitions, and measurements of poverty

Concept	Definition	Measurement
Absolute. An approach characterized by the absence of a reference group. Sometimes thought of as scientific and unchanging over time. Applies equally to any society	(1) Rowntree Primary Poverty (Rowntree 1901) (2) Copenhagen Declaration Absolute Poverty (3) U.S. Poverty Line (Orshansky 1965) (4) South Africa Poverty Datum Line or Household Subsistence Level (see examples in Woolard 1997)	(1), (3), (4) Budget standards approach (i.e., costing out a basket of goods and services that meet basic needs, based on researcher judgement)
Relative. An approach characterized by considering poverty:		
(1) in relation to resources required to achieve the living standards of a reference group; or	(1) The Cost of a Child (Oldfield and Yu 1993)	(1) Budget standards approach (i.e., costing out a basket of goods and services that meet basic needs and take into account relative deprivation, based on researcher judgement and informed by focus groups and experts)
(2) in terms of participation in society; or	(2) Townsend Participation Index (Townsend 1979); lack of socially perceived (or consensually defined) necessities (Gordon et al. 2000; Mack and Lansley 1985; Pantazis, Townsend, and Gordon 1999); Proportional Deprivation Index (Hallerod 1994; Hallerod, Bradshaw, and Holmes 1997)	(2) Normative judgement (Townsend 1979); survey of socially perceived necessities (Gordon et al. 2000; Mack and Lansley 1985; Pantazis, Townsend, and Gordon 1999) Proportional Deprivation Index (Hallerod 1994; Hallerod, Bradshaw, and Holmes 1997)
(3) in terms of resource inequality within society (e.g., UNICEF 2005)	(3) Children living in households in the bottom deciles of the income and expenditure distribution; children living in households below 50 percent median equivalized household income (Bradbury and Jantti 1999)	(3) Income and expenditure surveys (e.g., Luxembourg Income Study by Rainwater and Smeeding 2003)

maintenance of purely physical efficiency" (Rowntree 1901, 117). Child poverty is typically defined as a head count of children living in households where the resources fall below the minimum subsistence level or an equivalent poverty depth measure.

The World Bank has adopted an absolute concept and subsistence definition of poverty in the context of the developing world. This poverty line of "a dollar a day" (World Bank 2000, 3) forms the basis for the Millennium Development Goal of "eradicating extreme poverty and hunger" (United Nations 2003, 1). However, it has been heavily criticized for its narrow approach (Townsend and Gordon 2002), particularly in measuring child poverty (Feeny and Boyden 2004). Furthermore, the use of a subsistence poverty line overlooks many important aspects of child poverty. Nevertheless, many of the definitions of poverty and child poverty in South Africa have been based on an absolute concept and a subsistence definition (Streak 2004).

Although absolute concepts of poverty are commonly defined solely by reference to financial resources, this need not be the case. An alternative, and multidimensional, definition of absolute poverty was given at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen:

> A condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to social services. (World Summit for Social Development 1995, 41)

However, multidimensionality is more often associated with concepts of relative poverty or deprivation (Townsend 1987). In addition, concepts of relative poverty specifically link poverty to the living standards of a reference group. Thus, Townsend identifies those who are poor as:

> Individuals, families and groups . . . [whose] resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average family or individual that they are in effect excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. (Townsend 1979, 32)

Alternatively, concepts of relative poverty are linked to inequality within national income and expenditure distributions (UNICEF 2005).

One of the criticisms often levelled at concepts of relative poverty is that in any given society some people will always be poor compared to others, as there will never be total equality. Furthermore, in countries where those on a very low income make up the majority of the population, a relative concept of poverty that uses the low-income majority as the standard against which to compare others would be inappropriate (Sen 1983). For this reason, Sen argues for an absolute core:

> There is, I would argue, an irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty. One element of that absolutist core is obvious enough . . . If there is starvation and hunger, then—no matter what the relative picture looks like—there clearly is poverty. (Sen 1983, 159)

Distinguishing between poor and non-poor people is inevitably more complex for relative conceptualizations of poverty. Definitions broadly fall into two main groups: one

based on resources (income and expenditure) and one based on social indicators of full participation in society. In South Africa, the resource-based definition of relative poverty usually refers to the bottom 20 or 40 percent of the expenditure distribution (e.g., May 1998). This definition is very problematic because it sets up a situation whereby it is impossible for the country to eliminate poverty—the bottom 40 percent will always exist. Furthermore, because South Africa has such a skewed income and expenditure distribution, this approach can mask the extent of relative poverty. Indeed, Haarmann (1999) found that income per capita in the poorest 40 percent of South Africa's households is insufficient for household members to purchase the goods required to meet basic needs.

In member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the accepted resource definition references *average* national income. Currently, the poor are defined as those below 50 percent of the mean equivalized household income. Similarly, UNICEF defines relative childhood poverty in terms of children living in such households (UNICEF 2005). However, though this eliminates the problem of using the bottom 20 or 40 percent of the distribution, it is still an unhelpful definition in the South African context because of the skewed nature of the distribution. For example, people with incomes and expenditures above these cut-offs might still be poor, even if defined at a subsistence level.

The risk of child poverty has been found to be concentrated in certain types of households (Bradshaw and Mayhew 2005), but using household income to define the poverty levels of all individuals within that household is problematic. Haarmann (1999) and Bray (2002) challenge the assumption that household income is divided equally and altruistically between all household members. Evidence suggests that there may be intra-household inequalities for children according to gender, kin relationships, and conflict within the family (Kabeer 1994; Streak 2000).

Defining the inability to participate in customary activities and living conditions is no less complex. Townsend himself created an index of participation based on his own normative judgements (Townsend 1979). However, his selection of indicators was criticized (Piachaud 1981), leading to the development of the consensual or democratic approach to defining relative poverty.

Mack and Lansley (1985) pioneered the "consensual approach" through the Breadline Britain Survey in the United Kingdom. This method surveys the general population in order to determine what items, activities, and services people regard as being necessary for full participation in society. The consensual approach implicitly assumes a broad agreement (or at least a shared core) across groups within society, in both aspirations and perceived necessities. This was empirically supported in both the Breadline Britain Survey (Mack and Lansley 1985) and the U.K. Millennium Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Pantazis, Townsend, and Gordon 1999), across population groups, class, and economic groups.

A consensual definition of relative poverty based on socially perceived necessities has a number of advantages. First, although socially perceived necessities will change over time, eradicating poverty does not depend on achieving total equality. Second, consensual definitions can avoid some of the arbitrariness of other definitions of poverty because

there is a systematic way of deciding what constitutes a necessity (Richardson and Le Grand 2002). Third, consensual definitions are, in a sense, democratic in that poverty is defined by the views of the people as a whole (for a further discussion of the consensual approach to defining poverty in the South African context, see Noble, Ratcliffe, and Wright 2004).

A consensual definition of relative poverty can also encompass many elements of social exclusion. For example, lists of socially perceived necessities can include participation in social activities such as going on school trips and being able to have birthday parties, likely necessities for social inclusion for children.

Next, definitions need to be operationalized. For most definitions of absolute poverty and for some definitions of relative poverty, measurement of the poverty line is often achieved by a basket of goods approach (otherwise known as the "budget standards approach"). In this approach, an inventory of goods and activities is drawn up and costed where possible. In his study "The living conditions of South African children", Haarmann (1999) used an absolute concept of poverty, utilizing research on the subsistence level of income required for a person living in Cape Town (Potgieter 1997) to create a household subsistence poverty line of 319 South African Rands per month.[2]

Consensual definitions of relative poverty use a nationally representative sample survey or surveys, both to operationalize the definition (by determining the list of socially perceived necessities, activities, and access to services) and to enumerate the relatively poor group by determining the extent to which people do or do not have these necessities.

A Proposed Model of Child Poverty for South Africa[3]

Given the fact that a significant number of children do not have their basic needs of food, housing, education, safety, and health provision met, there is no doubt that an absolute and multidimensional measurement of child poverty is essential for South Africa. However, there is also a pressing need for a carefully thought out *relative* concept of poverty to address the extreme inequalities and exclusion experienced by children beyond the failure to meet their basic needs.

A preliminary consideration for any such model of child poverty is the unit of analysis. We could describe child poverty through an analysis of poor households that contain children. Alternatively, we could attempt to construct a model of child poverty that is more child-centric, having the child as the unit of analysis, and focusing as much as possible on children who are defined as poor (Saporiti 1994). While poverty and exclusion among children are linked to the exclusion of their parents (Machin 1998), Micklewright (2002) identifies child-specific dimensions of exclusion, such as child development and education. He criticizes the lack of specific indicators intended to capture exclusion among children: "What is needed to assess child exclusion in the area of current living standards is systematic measurement of what children actually consume or do" (2002, 23).

Recent studies on child poverty in South Africa (e.g., Coetzee and Streak 2004; Guthrie et al. 2003) recognize the need for wider, child-focused, and child-participatory definitions of poverty. However, these studies, lacking available alternative indicators, use the bottom 40 percent of the expenditure distribution, alongside an absolute poverty line

of food instability (Woolard 2001). The approach adopted in this paper is to outline a model of child poverty that is fundamentally child-focused.

The core component of the proposed model is an absolute, multidimensional conceptualization of poverty, defined normatively using the best available research evidence and with reference to the Copenhagen Declaration (World Summit for Social Development 1995). It should be measured using appropriate indicators and—with respect to those indicators that can be "costed out"—by applying a budget standards approach.

This is complemented by a *relative component* using a relative, multidimensional conceptualization of poverty and social exclusion that is based on a child's ability to participate fully in South African society. The dimensions, or domains, for both the absolute core and the relative aspects will be the same, while the indicators in the absolute core will represent a narrower, inevitably more basic, set that will not be determined by reference to an inclusion agenda. The relative component of the model will be defined by two methods; first, by a consensual or democratic definition of relative poverty (that is, indicators defined by children themselves and, where appropriate, by their parents or primary caregivers); and second, by normative judgements by professionals (recognizing that there are some issues on which neither children nor their caregivers should be required to be experts.)

Figure 1 portrays this model and introduces *eight exemplar domains*. Located between the relative and absolute components of the model, and equally relevant to both components, can be found a ring of indicators relating to access to good-quality services. This reflects the fact that in order to address poverty and social exclusion, services need to

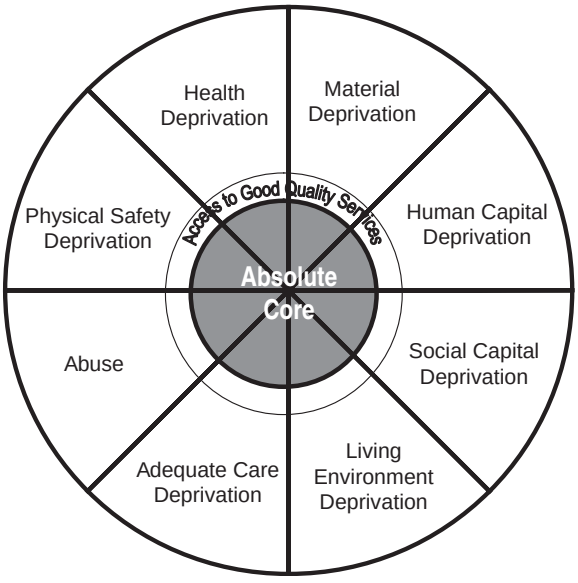

FIGURE 1
A child-focused and multidimensional model of child poverty for South Africa.

be both accessible and of good quality. For example, within the Human Capital Domain young children should have access to good-quality early childhood development services. Though there is a single definition of "access to good-quality services," there must inevitably be a two-step measurement process to take into account first presence and then the quality of a service.

White, Leavy, and Masters' (2002) review of comparative perspectives on child poverty concludes that a multidimensional approach (here articulated as domains) is both necessary and achievable in the developing world. An example of the multidimensional approach can be seen in the U.K. Department for Education and Skills' outcomes framework published in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (2004).

Many of the indicators of poverty among the general population will be equally relevant to children within poor households and communities. But it is also important to identify those indicators that may be different or unique for children (Ridge 2002). For example, recent participatory research with South African children has identified issues such as exclusion from and within school, including financial concerns about school fees, uniforms, and books. The research also highlights spatial exclusion due to distance from school and lack of transport, and lack of time for schoolwork due to household tasks or paid work (Giese, Meintjies, and Proudlock 2001; May 1998). It is clear that children themselves are identifying a need for the development of child-specific indicators of deprivation (Coetzee and Streak 2004).

There can be complex causal relationships between domains. For example, overcrowding in the living environment domain increases the likelihood of sexual abuse in the physical safety domain (Dawes 2002), which in turn increases the likelihood of HIV infection and poor mental health in the health domain. This is not problematic for the proposed model because the purpose of a multidimensional model of child poverty and social exclusion is not to explain causal relationships between indicators or domains. If a child is sexually abused and thus is infected with HIV, then *both* the abuse and the infection will be picked up as two aspects of multiple deprivation.

In addition, some themes can be found in more than one domain. For example, HIV/AIDS is a key issue in all of the domains. Research highlights the multiple effects on children of living in a family affected by AIDS (Berry and Guthrie 2003; Giese, Meintjies, and Proudlock 2001), ranging from stigma at school to increased economic instability and higher risk of contracting opportunistic infections from unwell family members.

Within the domains of poverty, the location of the boundary between the absolute core and the relative component differs. In some domains—Health, Human Capital, and Physical Safety—almost all indicators fall within the absolute core. In other domains—Material Deprivation, Living Environment, Access to Good-Quality Services, and Social Capital—this is not the case.

Although we have defined a child as a person aged under 18 (in line with the South African Constitution), the varying needs of children at different ages should be taken into account. The proposed model could be seen as having a stratified series of indicators for different age brackets, while having a constant set of domains. For example, suicide and self-harm are not appropriate measures for children under 5 years of age.

The domains of poverty shown in Figure 1 are not intended to be comprehensive, but merely indicative. Indeed, the very nature of a consensual approach for relative components means that some issues will only emerge following appropriate consultative research.

Though a detailed treatment of each of the domains is beyond the scope of this paper, the domains are now briefly presented.

In the Living Environment Deprivation domain, inadequate shelter extends beyond street homelessness to include insecure informal dwellings, overcrowding, and the absence of basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. For the Adequate Care Deprivation domain, extensive research into child development highlights the importance of supervision and care in all caregiving settings. Due to the high prevalence of abuse in South Africa, an Abuse domain has been created, with all indicators of physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect (Dawes 2002) falling within the core component. Like abuse, all indicators in the Physical Safety Deprivation domain (such as firearm injuries, trauma, poisoning and burns) fall within the core component (Matzopoulos, Norman, and Bradshaw 2004). The Human Capital Deprivation domain contains core indicators such as school enrollment, attendance, and attainment. Other domains include related indicators, such as access to school uniforms, the capacity to pay school fees (Material Deprivation), and space at home to do homework (Living Environment).

The absolute core indicators of the Material Deprivation domain, such as adequate food, clothing, and warmth, exemplify more clearly the potential relationship between core and relative indicators, and between consensual and research-based definitions. Food has particular relevance for young children in terms of developmental milestones. High levels of food insecurity in South Africa (30 percent of households) (Mivulane and Proudlock 2002) are reflected in childhood stunting due to malnourishment. The relative component of material deprivation is defined consensually, and might have indicators such as a television in the household, fashionable clothing and footwear, and the ability to have a birthday party.

In contrast, the Health Deprivation domain (incorporating both physical and mental health) is based mostly on medical and research evidence. Indicators would mostly fall within the absolute core and might include infant and child mortality, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases, mental health issues such as severe depression, chronic illnesses, and disabilities such as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.

The relative component of the proposed model depends in part upon a consensually defined set of indicators that must emerge from research with children themselves. The importance of giving children a voice is based on a framework of rights, relevance and ability. The right of children to freely express views in matters affecting them is established in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is reflected in the South African Constitution. The relevance of child-centered participation is outlined by Johnson et al. (1998, 299): ''If we are unaware of the problems and issues that concern children and young people we cannot hope to devise strategies or solutions that will address their concerns.''

Do children and young people have the ability to express pertinent views on complex issues? While this may present methodological challenges, research has found that children do provide insight into issues of poverty and exclusion (Ridge 2002; Save the

Children UK 2001). Recent research in the United Kingdom on participatory citizenship found "a remarkable degree of consensus in the concerns expressed by young people" (Warburg et al. 2002, 3). This parallels the consensus found in adult surveys such as the U.K. Millennium Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Pantazis, Townsend, and Gordon 1999), and suggests that consensual definitions of poverty may be as achievable for children as for adults. It remains to be seen whether such a consensus exists among children in South Africa. In particular, further research is necessary to explore whether the legacy of apartheid, which cultivated deep divisions within society between population groups and between rural and urban areas, has prevented today's children from growing up with a common view of the essentials for full participation in society.

We have argued for the value of child-centered consensual definitions of poverty and social exclusion. However, there are clearly some areas of deprivation that children themselves cannot, and should not, be expected to define. These include indicators (such as exposure to pollutants, malnutrition, etc.) that only experts can define. Other indicators are also not appropriate to expect children to identify. A complex example is that of child sexual abuse, where abusers often intimidate children into keeping it a secret or bribe children so that they have conflicting feelings about the abuse.

The question then remains of who should identify these additional indicators. Ridge (2002) questions the utility of using adult proxies such as parents or the wider society in identifying multidimensional child poverty. However, some indicators of relative poverty can be usefully derived from surveys of caregivers (Pettifor et al. n.d.). There is a strong argument for the necessity of including indicators with a base in good-quality international research, such as Cochrane systematic reviews on risk factors in child health. South Africa-specific research on child well-being is also crucial, as is consultation with experts such as pediatricians, environmental health experts, social workers, mental health professionals, child welfare non-governmental organizations, and the child rights movement. It is also important to consider cultural applicability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has aimed to develop a model of child poverty that has a clear conceptual framework, with appropriate definitions flowing from it. It is important to note that the model is not one that should be set in stone. First, the domains are only examples; and second, the essence of relative poverty is such that it is constantly changing as the general prosperity of the country changes.

We have argued that measurements of child poverty need to be based on clear and child-relevant concepts and definitions, and for a model with absolute and relative components which are both multidimensional. We suggested domains of poverty that might be relevant for children in South Africa, and presented examples of possible indicators. We argued for the use of both consensual definitions of indicators that must be established through direct research with children, as well as for definitions based on good-quality research evidence. A strong advantage of the proposed model is that it has the potential to be produced at the national and provincial levels, as well as at small-area levels.

Indicators can be produced as single indicators in their own right (e.g., ''mortality rates for children under 5 years of age''). Alternatively, the indicators within a domain can be combined to produce a composite domain measure that summarizes all of the indicators that fall within it (e.g., ''health for children under 5 years of age''.) This approach is useful for policy purposes, as it gives thematic area-level summaries for each domain—enabling one to identify, for example, the country's 10 percent most deprived areas in terms of health. In addition, it is possible to combine the various domains to create a composite measure of poverty at an area level. There are many examples of such approaches (e.g., Noble et al. 2004), as well as ongoing work in South Africa to produce a small area-level Index of Multiple Deprivation (Noble et al. 2005).

The model can be further disaggregated by the demographic characteristics of different children. For example, it is important to be able to disaggregate the findings by age, gender, population group, disability, and health status (in particular, HIV status).

The indicators that emerge from this model allow cross-sectional snapshots of child poverty to be created and monitored over time. However, in order to measure chronic poverty the indicators need to be derived from a panel survey or cohort study. The indicators also permit the analysis of inter-domain relationships (Plewis et al. 2001). And, where spatially referenced data is available, the indicators allow comparisons between areas within the country to be quantified (Noble et al. 2004).

It is our hope that such data would allow an annual or biennial report on child poverty and social exclusion to be produced, in the vein of the U.K. government's *Opportunity for All* series (U.K. Department for Work and Pensions 2004) or the *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* series sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Palmer et al. 2003). Such a report would provide an evidence base for South African policy makers to draw from in the fight against child poverty.

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NOTES

1. Analysis undertaken by the authors on the weighted 10 percent sample of the South African 2001 Census available from www.statssa.gov.za.
2. The rate of exchange in October 2005 was approximately $1 = 6.55 South African Rands.
3. The model was developed for and presented at a conference on indicators of child well-being held on 25 and 26 October 2004 in Cape Town, South Africa and organized by Professor Andy Dawes, Director, Child, Youth and Family Development, Human Sciences Research Council. Please see Dawes, Bray, and van der Merwe (forthcoming).

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