



Writing in the *Washington Post* under the headline “[Covid-19 causes challenges for years-in-the-making study on babies and poverty](#),” Nick Keppler features our Baby’s First Years (BFY) study in his July 11, 2020 story on how Covid-19 is affecting research projects. The article suggests that our field work has been disrupted and that conclusions from our study about the effects on children’s outcomes of unconditional cash gifts to low-income mothers and infants will be compromised by the pandemic. We want to set the record straight.

BFY recruited 1,000 low-income mothers with infants in four U.S. cities between May 2018 and June 2019 and randomly assigned each of them to receive either \$333 or \$20 per month for a total of 40 months. The study’s goal is to understand the causal impact of unconditional cash gifts on the well-being of infants, toddlers and preschoolers, as well as the effects of these cash gifts on parenting and other aspects of family life that affect children.

Our original plans were to collect data from mothers and their infants in their homes at around the time of the infants’ first and second birthdays and then a third data collection at universities when the children turn 3 years of age. The pandemic struck when we were about two-thirds of the way through our age-1 home-based data collection.

Out of concerns for the safety of our participants and interviewers, we paused all in-home data collection on March 13, 2020. We quickly switched from collecting data in the participants’ homes to conducting the interviews by telephone, using the same interviewers and interviewing software as before. The first telephone interviews began on March 15 – only 2 days after we stopped visiting families in their homes.

The phone interviews continued apace through the end of June – which was when the age-1 data collection was originally scheduled to end. All told, our first data collection with mothers and infants was nothing less than a success given the uncertainties of the pandemic: we completed interviews with 931 of our 1,000 mothers – 606 in person and 325 by phone. Our response rate for the age-1 data collection was remarkably high – over 94%. Our age-2 data collection is scheduled to begin as planned in mid-July.

Although the switch from in-home to telephone interviews limited the amount of data we were able to collect, our 75-minute telephone interviews continued to provide information on 34 of the 42 family and child outcomes targeted in our age-1 interview. Our age-1 sample sizes will be one-third smaller than originally planned for measures that needed to be conducted in person – that is, EEG-based measures of child brain function, a recorded mother/child play task, a sample of hair for a biological measure of maternal stress and several sensitive questions about the quality of the mother’s relationship with her partner. Fortunately, our planned age-2 and age-3 data collection waves will include all of these measures.

One of the most important design features of our study was that we randomly assigned mothers to receive a high (\$333) or low monthly gift (\$20). This is important because the group receiving the latter is a comparison group of similar mothers who are experiencing the pandemic in the same communities. Thus, differences between these groups in outcomes can be attributed to the causal impact of cash gifts on the development of children in low-income families despite the social economic disruption of the pandemic.



How will the pandemic affect the interpretation of our study's results? Had conditions prior to the pandemic continued through the children's third birthdays, our study would have shown the impacts of unconditional cash gifts during a time of extremely low unemployment (3.2% in February) and steady wage growth. It is easy to imagine that cash gifts would be much less helpful in an environment of ready jobs and wage growth. In fact, "normal" economic conditions are more typically a mixture of periods of both growth and recession. The high unemployment that has resulted from Covid-19, as unfortunate as it is for those affected, provides an opportunity to assess the impacts of our study's cash gifts on child development during a period of extreme economic and social challenge.

Our hearts go out to the mothers and children in our study, whose already difficult circumstances have been exacerbated by the pandemic. All of them are continuing to receive our monthly cash gifts as planned. What's more, results from our study will provide policymakers with strong evidence on the difference cash transfers can make both during and beyond the current crisis.