

PRESS RELEASE

COVID-19 and Bengaluru's Urban Poor: Release of key findings from the Azim Premji University Bengaluru COVIDImpact survey

For release on Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Azim Premji University, in collaboration with nine Civil Society Organisations (CSO), conducted a survey of 3,000 households in 92 low-income settlements across 33 wards of Bengaluru. The survey was done to estimate the continuing impact of COVID-19 induced lockdowns and economic disruptions of employment and livelihoods. The survey also captured information on access to government support as well as coping mechanisms. Workers in a wide range of occupations such as drivers (cab, auto, and others), daily-wage earners (construction and others), domestic workers and factory workers (garment and others) were surveyed. The survey was conducted in November 2021 with the help of Action Aid, Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA), The Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR), Hasiru Dala, Gubbachi, Reaching Hand, Sangama, Swabhimaan Trust and Thamate.

Key findings of this survey were released in Kannada and English on Tuesday, 29 March at Gandhi Bhavan, Bengaluru. The presentation of key findings was followed by a panel discussion with civil servants, members of the CSOs involved in the survey and representatives of communities surveyed. A detailed report on the survey will be released later.

While launching the survey findings, Amit Basole, head of Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, and lead researcher of the survey team, pointed out that the ill-effects of the pandemic on livelihoods have persisted well beyond the lockdowns, particularly for vulnerable sections of society. There is a need for a focused and long-term policy response at the Centre and State level to help households emerge from the crisis.

Hyma Vadlamani, core member of the COVID response team, Azim Premji Foundation, said that the pandemic has shown how invisible the poor in the cities are and how weak the public systems are in reaching the neediest and the most vulnerable. There is an urgent need to use the understanding developed from this survey and revamp the city governance systems to address the inequities more systemically.

Key findings of the survey

1. Job and income losses persisted well past the 2020 lockdown. Forty-one percent of workers had no work, and another 21 percent had reduced earnings even in Jan/Feb 2021. Daily wage earners, domestic workers and retail sector employees were the worst affected.
2. Unemployment was long-term. A significant minority (10 percent men, 15 percent women) were out of work even as late as October 2021 (one-and-a-half years into the pandemic).

3. Earnings losses were also long-term. Monthly earnings, which were low even before the pandemic (INR 9,400 per month), fell even lower for many months (INR 8,450 per month as of Jan/Feb 2021). By October 2021, earnings had recovered in nominal terms but adjusted for inflation, they continued to be below pre-COVID levels. This means that surveyed households have endured almost 19 months of job losses and depressed earnings.
4. Poverty was already high and rose even further. The percentage of households with earnings less than the Anoop Satpathy Committee recommended National Minimum Wage (INR 119 per person per day) rose to almost 80 percent before falling back to pre-COVID levels (67 percent) by October 2021.
5. Food insecurity rose sharply. Forty percent of the households reported eating less than they were before the pandemic, even as late as October 2021.
6. Households coped by borrowing and selling assets. Eleven percent had to resort to borrowing (mainly from informal sources) to finance daily expenses or to repay old loans. An additional 15 percent of households had sold or pawned jewellery to meet expenses. Another 12 percent were unable to borrow despite the pressing need.
7. The PDS (ration) was the most important safety net. Fifty-five percent of households with Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards reported receiving more than their regular quantity of grains every month since the second lockdown. Another 32 percent got additional grains for at least a few months.
8. Cash transfers did not reach as many people. Seventy-eight percent of households did not have a woman-owned Jan Dhan account. Among those who had an account, 75 percent reported receiving some transfer, and 40 percent reported receiving the full INR 1,500.
9. Only three percent of households reported receiving anything under the cash transfer schemes announced by the Government of Karnataka.
10. There were some improvements in mid-day meals and ICDS during the pandemic. Thirty-eight percent (vs 24 percent in pre-COVID times) households reported getting supplementary nutrition or alternatives from anganwadis/ ICDS during COVID (only for households that had a child under age six or pregnant/ lactating mother).

The findings show that livelihood impacts of the pandemic have persisted far beyond the lockdowns. Without greater support, factors such as the long period of depressed earnings, lower food intake and debt/sale of assets will continue to hamper the ability of households to recover from the pandemic. Relief measures have had a mixed record of reaching the urban poor. While PDS had the widest reach, cash transfers reached few people and fell well short of what is needed. Going forward, immediate as well as medium- to long-term policy measures are needed to counter these effects and chart the path to inclusive economic recovery. In addition to continued extra rations from the PDS (recently extended for another six months), more cash transfers, as well as the implementation of an urban employment guarantee programme, are urgently needed. We hope that the survey findings will help in determining the extent and nature of policy interventions needed, especially at the state level.

Detailed findings and other information are available at: <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/cse-surveys-bengaluru-covid-impact-survey/>

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About Azim Premji University

Azim Premji University was established as a not-for-profit, private university under the Azim Premji University Act 2010. The University has a clear social purpose of working towards a just, equitable, humane and sustainable society. Azim Premji University plays a critical role in developing new talent, building capacity in existing functionaries and creating domain knowledge in the fields of education and in development. The Azim Premji Foundation is the sponsor of the University. The roots of Azim Premji University lie in the learning and experience of a decade of work in elementary education by Azim Premji Foundation. The University is one of the Foundation's key responses to the challenges confronting the education and development sectors in India.