

How High Are Dropout Rates in India?

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This is a comment on the paper by Amit Choudhury published in *EPW* (December 23, 2006) titled 'Revisiting Dropouts: Old Issues, Fresh Perspectives'. How high is the dropout rate in India actually? The dropout rates estimated from official statistics are calculated as the ratio of enrolment in (say) class V to enrolment in class I. Such an estimate of dropout rates could be misleading given that official enrolment statistics are known to be highly unreliable. Further, there is some evidence that class I enrolment is often inflated, and this has the effect of magnifying the dropout rate estimates based on official enrolment data.¹

Dropout Rates

A more reliable way of calculating the dropout rate would be to look at the proportion of ever-enrolled children in the 15-19 age group who have not completed their primary level of education. This can be done using household level data from the 52nd round of the National Sample Survey, which provides data on participation in education. Dropout rates calculated in this manner turn out to be much lower than those based on ministry of human resource development (MHRD) statistics. For instance, while the official estimate of the all-India dropout rate in 1997-98 is as high as 26 per cent [MHRD 1997-98], our own calculations show it to be much lower at approximately 6.6 per cent for rural areas and 4.4 per cent for urban India (Table 1). Amongst the major states, only three (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and West Bengal) have dropout rates in excess of 10 per cent in rural areas. In urban areas, the dropout rates are even lower, below 5 per cent in a majority of cases. NSS-based estimates, therefore, suggest that the dropout rates in India are much lower than the common belief that most children do remain in schools at least

up to standard V once they have been enrolled.

Reasons for Dropout

NSS data from the 52nd round also provides information on the reasons for dropping out. Table 2 presents reasons given by parents for children in the 5-14 age group for dropping out of school.

"Child not interested in studies" accounts for the highest proportion of dropouts in rural (37 per cent) and urban (37 per cent) areas and for both male and female children. "Parents not interested in studies" affect the female child more in rural (17 per cent) and urban (11 per cent) areas. Inability to cope with the demands of schooling has a somewhat equal effect on boys and girls in rural (11 per cent) and urban (13 per cent) areas and is one of the important reasons for dropping out. A larger proportion of female children in urban areas (5.6 per cent) drop out because of the need to work for wages/salaries to supplement the family income. Similarly, a higher proportion of male children

Table 1 : Dropout Rates at the Primary Level
(Per cent)

State	Official Statistics of Dropout Rates			From NSS 52nd Round					
				Rural Dropout			Urban Dropout		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1 India	25.6	26	25.8	6.6	7.3	6.9	4.4	4.4	4.2
2 Andhra Pradesh	27.4	27.2	27.3	10.8	10.5	10.6	4.4	4.9	4.0
3 Arunachal Pradesh	23.4	23.3	23.4	7.5	8.9	8.2	3.1	2.5	4.0
4 Assam	23.6	24.7	24.1	6.2	6.6	6.4	5.5	5.6	5.3
5 Bihar	25.9	26	25.9	3.8	4.1	4.0	4.5	4.0	5.1
6 Goa	22.5	22.3	22.4	0.0	4.1	2.1	1.2	0.0	2.6
7 Gujarat	18.8	17.2	18.1	10.5	9.9	10.2	4.9	5.1	4.5
8 Haryana	22.1	19.1	20.7	5.4	4.1	5.8	6.2	5.8	6.5
9 Himachal Pradesh	28.1	22	25.2	3.8	3.2	3.5	2.8	3.1	2.4
10 Jammu and Kashmir	27	29.2	27.9	4.0	5.4	4.6	3.8	3.8	3.6
11 Karnataka	20.8	21.5	21.5	7.9	8.8	8.3	3.1	3.1	3.0
12 Kerala	18.5	19.7	19.1	1.3	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.0	1.3
13 Madhya Pradesh	19.3	18.1	18.8	6.9	9.4	7.9	4.0	4.4	3.6
14 Maharashtra	19.6	19.9	19.7	5.8	6.9	6.3	2.9	3.3	3.5
15 Manipur	19.6	20.2	19.9	4.6	11.2	7.7	0.5	0.0	1.3
16 Meghalaya	30.6	30.9	30.7	9.8	6.3	8.2	2.6	1.5	4.0
17 Mizoram	25.9	26.6	26.2	4.4	6.6	5.3	1.8	2.7	0.8
18 Nagaland	23.4	25.9	24.6	4.2	3.4	3.8	0.7	1.2	0.0
19 Orissa	22.8	25.7	24	7.8	12.7	10.1	8.2	6.5	10.0
20 Punjab	19.3	18.1	18.7	3.8	7.5	5.4	2.8	3.3	1.9
21 Rajasthan	32.7	34.8	33.5	5.2	6.9	5.9	4.7	4.8	4.5
22 Sikkim	25.1	27.5	26.3	15.2	8.6	11.8	6.3	2.7	9.5
23 Tamil Nadu	19.3	18	18.7	8.8	11.1	10.0	7.0	6.7	7.3
24 Tripura	22	22.1	22.1	9.5	13.4	11.3	2.1	1.1	3.2
25 Uttar Pradesh	38.8	42.9	40.4	5.1	4.0	4.6	4.0	4.1	3.9
26 West Bengal	35.8	41.3	38.4	11.5	11.1	11.3	7.6	8.0	7.1
31 Delhi	14	14.2	14.1	6.5	0.0	3.4	2.0	3.4	0.5

Note: The NSS-based estimates in the second panel have been calculated by the author. In these calculations the dropout rate is simply the proportion of ever enrolled 15-19 year olds who have not completed their primary level of education.

Source: Official estimates (based on school enrolment data) are from *Selected Educational Statistics, 1997-98*, MHRD; *VI All-India Educational Survey*, NCERT, State Directorates of Education, 1997-98.

Table 2: Reasons for Dropout among Children Aged 5-14 Years
(Per cent)

	Rural			Urban		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1 Child not interested in studies	37.2	33.1	31.3	37.4	38.0	36.6
2 Parents not interested in studies	12.5	7.8	17.4	8.8	6.9	11.0
3 Unable to cope	16.4	1.7	8.1	13.7	13.0	14.5
4 To work for wage/salary	2.5	1.0	1.0	4.6	5.6	3.3
5 Participation in other economic activities	6.1	7.2	5.0	5.3	7.6	2.7
6 Attend to domestic duties	3.7	0.8	6.7	3.9	1.8	6.3
7 Financial constraints	11.2	12.0	10.4	15.8	15.7	16.0
8 Other reasons	7.9	0.9	9.8	7.4	8.7	6.0

Source: Author's calculations from NSS 52nd round data.

vis-à-vis female children drop out to participate in other economic activities in rural (7.2 per cent) and urban (7.6 per cent) areas. A higher proportion of female children dropout to tend to domestic duties as compared to male children in rural (6.7 per cent) and urban (6.3 per cent) areas. And finally, financial constraints are seen to affect dropout relatively more in urban areas (16 per cent) as compared to rural areas (11.2 per cent).

It is interesting to note from Table 2 that insofar as there is a problem of a lack of interest in education, it is mainly a lack of interest from the part of the child and not from their parents. Prior to the 52nd round, the NSS questionnaire did not distinguish between

Table 3: Percentage of Out-of-School Children (Currently Not Attending School) 5-14 Years
(Per cent)

Out-of-School Children (5-14 Years)	Dropout (Enrolled, but Currently Not Attending School)			Never Enrolled		
	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female
Rural	17.6	19.2	16.5	82.3	80.8	83.5
Urban	39.3	42.3	36.6	60.1	57.7	63.4

Source: Author's calculations from NSS 52nd round data.

the two, and both were combined as “not interested in studies” (without specifying) in the list of possible responses to the question on reasons for dropping out. The responses suggested that lack of interest in education was the major reason for dropping out, and this has often been interpreted as evidence of lack of parental interest in education [Pradhan and Subramanian 2000]. Data from the 52nd round suggests that the real problem is lack of interest on the part of the child. The latter is likely to reflect the dull or even hostile environment in the classroom, and points to a problem with the schooling system rather than with the parents, contrary to the earlier interpretation. Choudhary in his article also finds “interest in studies” as an important predictor for dropout.

Out-of-School Children

Finally, it is interesting to look at the composition of out-of-school children in the 5-14 age group, in terms of the proportions who are “never enrolled” and “enrolled but currently not attending school (dropouts)” respectively. If dropout rates are actually quite low, as argued above, the possibility arises that a substantial

proportion of out-of-school children are “never enrolled” rather than dropouts, contrary to what is often assumed. This possibility is corroborated by the 52nd round NSS data, as Table 3 indicates. The proportion of “never enrolled” children among out-of-school children (5-14 years) is as high as 82 per cent in rural areas and 60 per cent in urban areas. Thus, the main challenge of universal elementary education appears to be to ensure that every child is enrolled in school at an early age. “Retention” may be less of a problem than has been thought so far. **EW**

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Note

1 For further discussions see *Public Report on Basic Education in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p 91.

References

Pradhan, B K and A Subramanian (2000): ‘Education, Openness and the Poor’, Discussion Paper 14, NCAER, New Delhi.
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