Food insecurity in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5

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Overview

The results of the fifth and final wave of the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile (NIDS-CRAM) survey reported in this paper provide an update and analysis of the trend in household food insecurity and hunger during the past year in South Africa. In a previous paper in May 2021, we noted that “indicators of hunger and a lack of money to buy food, or what we will refer to as ‘food insecurity’ for brevity, have remained stubbornly high, and do not appear to have changed substantially since June 2020.” Unfortunately, this statement remains true in wave 5.

The first wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey, collected in May and June 2020, provided strong evidence of drastic increases in household and child hunger during the initial period of the coronavirus pandemic. The second wave of NIDS-CRAM showed improvement in all three measures of food insecurity measured in the survey, although both adult and child hunger and running out of money for food remained disturbingly high. Waves 3 to 5, surveyed in November/December 2020, February/March 2021 and April/May 2021 respectively, showed a significant reduction in households running out of money for food since the first wave of data, but we have not seen any substantial further reduction in hunger levels. Overall, the results indicate that the situation in Wave 5 is similar to July/August 2020.

We conclude that given the protracted nature of the pandemic, slow recovery and its continuing social and economic impact, and the stabilisation of household and child hunger at higher levels, support for vulnerable households remains crucial, especially support targeted at households with children, given the tragic consequences of enduring hunger for stunting and children’s long-term development. The reduced availability of money from grants and the tight economic situation are reasons why levels of hunger are likely to remain stubbornly high or perhaps even increase, and stricter lockdown regulations may again further reduce employment and income from informal economic activities.

Hunger in South Africa: May 2020 to May 2021

All five waves of the NIDS-CRAM survey asked multiple questions about child and household hunger, as well as a question regarding household food insecurity (running out of money to buy food), as shown in Box A. Since the same questions were asked in all waves, it is possible to shed light on how reported hunger and food security have changed between May/June 2020 and April/May 2021. As Box A shows, if survey respondents indicated that someone in their household had gone hungry, they were then asked to indicate how often they had gone hungry or skipped a meal in the past 7 days. For those reporting hunger, the severity of hunger can be measured by answers to these questions.

BOX A: Questions on food insecurity in Wave 5 of NIDS-CRAM

In the month of March did your household run out of money to buy food?
In the last 7 days, has anyone in your household gone hungry because there wasn’t enough food?
How often did they go hungry?
(Options: Never; 1 or 2 days; 3 or 4 days; almost every day; every day)
In the past 7 days, has any child in your household gone hungry because there wasn’t enough food?
How often did they go hungry?
(Options: Never; 1 or 2 days; 3 or 4 days; almost every day; every day)
Note: the lack of money to buy food refers to March, and the questions on hunger to the last week before the interview, which was conducted in either April or May 2021.
Overall, the proportion of respondents who reported that their household had run out of money for food declined from 47% in Wave 1 to 38% in Wave 2. This measure increased and then remained consistent at 41% of respondents in Wave 3, and 39% of respondents in Wave 4. In Wave 5, there was a significant reduction in this measure: 35% of respondents reported running out of money for food in the past month, as seen in Figure 1 below.

While this is encouraging, this does not seem to have translated into a reduction in household hunger, nor child hunger. In Wave 1, household hunger was reported in 23% of respondents. This measure declined significantly in Wave 2 to 16%, but has since fluctuated between 18% and 17% in Waves 3, 4 and 5.

Furthermore, child hunger has also not declined. The proportion of respondents with children in their household who reported a child going hungry at least once in the past week saw a significant decline from 15% to 12% between Waves 1 and 2, before it rose to 16% in Wave 3 – a statistically significant increase and an alarming discovery. In Wave 4, this measure declined significantly to 14%, but remained steady in Wave 5 to 14%. Child hunger is once again at the same level as it was during the harshest period of lockdown in South Africa and before the new grants and top-ups had been put into place.

To give perspective to these numbers, during April/May 2021, respondents in about 2.3 million households reported child hunger in the week before they were interviewed. Of those 2.3 million households, around 620 000 reported that a child had experienced hunger almost every day or every day the week before they were interviewed in April/May 2021. Altogether 2% of respondents reported child hunger in their household consistently in every wave of the study, which means that respondents in households with just over 400 000 children reported that at least one child went hungry in their household in every wave between May 2020 and May 2021.
The severity of hunger

Figure 2 below shows the results from these questions on the severity of hunger for Wave 5, for April and May 2021. For both household and child hunger, about 8% of respondents reported that one or more child and also one or more adult had gone hungry once or twice in the previous week. About 4% of respondents indicated child and household hunger 3 or 4 days in the past week. A further 2% of respondents reported that a child had gone hungry every day or almost every day in the past week, and 3% reported this for household hunger in general.

Figure 2: Severity of hunger: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5

Source: Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data.

The continuing reality regarding food insecurity for many households in South Africa is perhaps not quite as dire in comparison to the period during the hard lockdown, but it remains a bleak picture. While fewer households report running out of money to buy food, household and child hunger have not decreased, and furthermore, the severity of hunger in households remains worrying. These results indicate that there is a new and higher equilibrium level of hunger and food insecurity in South Africa because of the coronavirus pandemic, and that the amelioration of child hunger should be a source of public concern.

The picture which emerges from these statistics indicates that while food security may have improved for some households, hunger has not been reduced. While some households have managed to recover from the initial devastating effects of the pandemic and hard lockdown, a large proportion of households remains economically extremely vulnerable, with the danger of longer term consequences such as child stunting that may affect not only children’s current situation but also their future development, human capital and labour market prospects. The results across waves show that reporting hunger in the household and running out of money for food do not mirror each other very closely. Hunger in the last week is reported less frequently than running out of food money in the month before the fieldwork, so a larger share of those running out of money for food indicated that anyone in their household or a child in their household had gone hungry in Wave 5 than in Wave 4.

As we had pointed out in a previous paper (Van der Berg et al., 2020), stunting has consistently been measured at higher levels than child hunger in South Africa. The expansion of the Child Support Grant (CSG) in the past quarter of a century has enabled many households to reduce the extent of hunger suffered by children, but that does not necessarily mean that it enabled them to offer adequate nutritious food. The wider food poverty issue and how it affects the ability of households to obtain adequate food is well placed in perspective by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) (2021:1):
“For a four-member household with a dual minimum wage income, benefiting from both child grants and a school feeding program, the share of household income allocated to basic healthy eating would have amounted to ±30% in April 2021 – effectively excluding approximately half of the SA population from affording a basic healthy diet.”

**Figure 3: The frequency of reporting household and child hunger: NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 to 5**

Source: Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data.

Figure 3 shows the number of times that respondents reported either household or child hunger. Each column below represents the percentage of respondents who reported experiencing hunger either once, twice, three times, four times or in all five waves of the NIDS-CRAM survey period. Almost 34% of respondents in households with children reported child hunger once between May/June 2020 and April/May 2021, and almost one-third reported household hunger. These figures suggest that 13.4 million respondents reported hunger in their household at least once in the NIDS-CRAM survey.

These figures are concerning for the impact that prolonged hunger can have on child stunting and add impetus to the call for action regarding the amelioration of hunger in South Africa. A further concern in these findings is that while fewer households ran out of money for food, for those households who did not have sufficient food money, the prevalence of hunger is higher than in previous waves. In the first wave of the study, for the households who ran out of money for food, 27% of respondents in those households also reported child hunger. In Wave 5, while there are fewer households running out of money for food in wave 5, for those households who do, 35% of them also report child hunger. It is clear that while some households have managed to garner enough finances to put food on the table, this is becoming increasingly difficult for the more vulnerable households in the country. That is to say, food insecurity and hunger may not mirror each other very strongly.

**Food insecurity and hunger by race, household size and location**

Examining trends of food insecurity and hunger by race group, it is clear that while household food insecurity has declined in each population group, household hunger and child hunger has not significantly declined for any race group. Overall, hunger has been most severe in the black African population in every wave of the NIDS-CRAM study.

Figures 4 and 5 below show food insecurity, household hunger and child hunger by household size and by location respectively. Bigger households, and households in traditional areas, are more likely to run out of money for food and are also more likely to experience hunger. In South Africa, households often form around income sources, including the old age pension (OAP) and CSG. This means that households eligible for such income support measures may simultaneously be larger and more vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger because those without income are often also found in such households. It is surprising, however, that there is not a larger difference in food insecurity between households in urban and traditional areas. One possible mechanism that may
account for this could be selective movement of food insecure urban households to rural areas.

**Figure 4: Food insecurity and hunger by household size: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5**

![Figure 4: Food insecurity and hunger by household size: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5](image)

*Source: Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data.*

**Figure 5: Food insecurity and hunger by location: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5**

![Figure 5: Food insecurity and hunger by location: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5](image)

*Source: Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data.*

Many, particularly women, try to shield children from hunger

Since the first wave of NIDS-CRAM it has been noticeable that there are attempts to shield children from hunger, with adult hunger exceeding child hunger in households with children. The survey also consistently showed that food insecurity affects female respondents more than male respondents (Casale & Shepherd 2021: 27). Given what is known about the gendered effects of poverty and food insecurity, the fact that female respondents report higher levels of food insecurity than male respondents could be explained by other factors. First, female headed households usually contain more adult females and have more dependents, and tend to be poorer. Second, female respondents are likely to exert a lower level of control over the household’s financial resources. That is to say, wage recipients usually have more discretion than economically non-active or unemployed household members over how money is spent, and male earners generally earn more than women.¹

We investigate responses on child hunger by respondents who report that their households have run out of money for food in March and that someone in the household had gone hungry in the seven days before they were interviewed in April and May 2021. A negative response could be interpreted as a proxy for adults shielding children from hunger. In this analysis, running out of money for food

¹ Reporting differences cannot be completely ignored. Subjective measure such as these are likely to be answered relative to a reference situation that may differ across individuals. For instance, despite the black population generally being poorer than the coloured population, similar proportions of black and coloured respondents report running out of money for food.
can be taken as a measure of poverty; if in addition someone in the household has gone hungry, but not any child, this could be taken to indicate that children are being shielded from hunger. We find evidence of such shielding among 23% of men and 28% of women who were themselves food insecure. Even when controlling for other factors in regression analysis, whether the respondent is a woman remains a large and statistically significant factor associated with more shielding of children from hunger.

The results from previous waves of NIDS-CRAM have indicated that the CSG as well as the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) were fairly well targeted towards households who are more vulnerable to running out of money for food. Specifically, the roll-out of the CSG top-up was found to target the most food insecure households (Bridgman et al., 2020). For households that report running out of money for food, households who receive the CSG are most likely to also report child hunger. This indicates that the CSG continues to target the most vulnerable households. Furthermore, the likelihood that CSG-receiving, food insecure households also report child hunger was smallest in Waves 2 and 3 in which the roll-out of government support was the largest. While we cannot infer causality in our analysis, our results are consistent with the temporary top-up to the CSG and the roll-out of the SRD reducing child hunger.

To support this finding, Figure 6 compares the prevalence of child hunger between households who receive the CSG and those who do not among those households who reported running out of money for food (and can be thought of as food insecure households). In May/June 2020, child hunger was far more likely in CSG-receiving food insecure households. While child hunger was not reduced in non-CSG-receiving food insecure households in July/August 2020, there is a marked reduction in child hunger in CSG-receiving households in that period. This corresponds to the period when these households would have received CSG top-ups and potentially also an SRD grant. From November/December 2020 to April/May 2021, child hunger in CSG-receiving food insecure households has risen steadily, and is now significantly higher in such households in comparison to the start of the study period. This rise in child hunger has tracked with the reduction of the CSG top-up, as well as rising food prices in the country.

**Figure 6: Child hunger in food insecure households**

![Figure 6: Child hunger in food insecure households](image)

**Source:** Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM wave 5 data.

**Support to households**

In the initial hard lockdown studied in the first wave of NIDS-CRAM, job loss contributed to many households running out of money to buy food. Considering the difficult economic situation, NGOs, religious institutions, communities and neighbours have all in various ways tried to assist those affected by the economic devastation brought by the pandemic and associated lockdowns. The largest form of support remains the grant system, which has a wide reach and is well established. South African has long had one of the most extensive systems of social grants in low or middle-
income countries (World Bank, 2018). Yet the nature of the economic impact of the pandemic and lockdown has meant that existing grants could not reach all of those in serious need. This led to the introduction of two new grants, the Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) and the SRD. It also gave rise to the provision of top-ups to some existing grants to provide relief to existing grant recipients severely affected by loss of other income sources and the closing of schools that affected provision of school meals for children. These top-ups and the new grants have now been abolished in an attempt to limit fiscal costs for an already struggling fiscus, even though the negative impacts of the economic situation have not improved much, as information provided earlier in this paper illustrates.

**Social grants**

To mitigate the impact of the lockdown on employment, income and food poverty, the government introduced temporary emergency social support measures after the promulgation of the State of Emergency on 27 March 2020. These included (i) temporary ‘top-ups’ to existing social grants, (ii) establishment of a Covid-19 SRD grant, (iii) introduction of the TERS, and (iv) localised social relief (Republic of South Africa, 2020; for discussion in the context of NIDS-CRAM, see Bridgman, Van der Berg & Patel 2020).

The social grant system is now exceedingly large: more than two out of every three respondents in NIDS-CRAM indicate that someone in their households benefited from at least one grant. In April 2021, 18.4 million beneficiaries received a social grant; the three largest in terms of reach are the CSG with 13.4 million beneficiaries, the OAP with 2.7 million beneficiaries and the disability grant with 997,547 beneficiaries (data supplied by Department of Social Development 2021).

The SRD payments commenced in May 2020 with 4.4 million beneficiaries, peaking in October 2020 with 6.1 million beneficiaries and ending at 31 April 2021 with 5.9 million beneficiaries (data supplied by Department of Social Development 2021). Although the amount of R350 is small, Köhler and Bhorat (2021) note that the grant brought millions of people into the grants system and was well targeted at the unemployed. Without it, the authors estimate that poverty would have been 5% higher among the poorest households and household income inequality would have been 1.3% to 6.3% higher. They also find that receipt of an SRD increased the likelihood of job search by 25 percentage points.

The phasing out of the grant top-ups in October and below inflation increases of grant values in 2021 to contain the high budget deficit, further reduced the strength of the safety net for a large proportion of the poor. The CSG’s value was increased from R445 in 2020/21 to R460 in 2021/22, an increase of only 3.4% (National Treasury, Budget Review 2021: 62), not far below the Treasury estimate of 3.9% inflation in the new fiscal year, but considerably below the 5.2% year-on-year inflation actually experienced in May 2021, and even further below estimated urban food inflation of 6.7% for the same period (StatsSA 2021: 6). BFAP (2021:2) identifies two main drivers of higher food inflation, namely high global commodity prices and an increase in domestic manufacturing and distribution costs, neither of which they expect to abate soon. This re-emphasises the extent of vulnerability to food insecurity of large sections of the population.

**Other forms of support**

In addition to grants, government has also tried to provide food relief or support for accommodation and supported some wider efforts at providing such relief. Localised relief taking the form of emergency food assistance by government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, the private sector, philanthropic initiatives and informal giving were significant channels of social provision during the early stages of the pandemic, with substantial reach (Wills, Patel, Van der Berg and Mpeta, 2020).

To mitigate the impact of the phasing out of the grant top-ups, the Minister of Finance announced additional measures to reduce food insecurity and poverty (South Africa, October 2020). This included an additional allocation of R6.8 billion to the Department of Social Development (DSD) to extend the SRD grant and an additional R1 billion for food relief to vulnerable households. The
value of the food parcels ranged between R700 and R1 400 per month depending on the size of the household and were given once or more times depending on the availability of funds. Data supplied by the DSD indicate that 2 609 042 food parcels were distributed between April 2020 and April 2021 and these were estimated to reach 11.6 million people (assuming five people per household\(^2\)). The DSD further reports that an additional 384 912 food parcels were distributed to 1.9 million people by external partners such as the Solidarity Fund through non-profit organisations (NPOs) operating in provinces, Corporate Social Responsibility partners, Faith-Based Organisations, SASSA’s food relief programme and the Department of Environmental Affairs. The Solidarity Fund also disbursed R100 million for once-off food vouchers (R700) to 135 000 beneficiaries and a further R100 million for farming input vouchers to 47 000 subsistence farmers (Personal Communication with Wendy Tlou from the Solidarity Fund, 7 April 2021).

Despite efforts by government, NGOs and faith-based organisations, Figure 7 shows that only a small share of respondents in NIDS-CRAM indicated that they benefited from such efforts and that this share has declined after Wave 1. Figure 8 shows a proxy for the targeting of the grants and support that respondents received, expressing the share of such benefits that go to respondents that ran out of money for food.\(^3\) It is notable that with one exception, only between 39% and 44% of all grants and other forms of support shown went to the 35% of respondents whose households had run out of money for food in March. This is surprising, as one would have expected assistance to go overwhelmingly to such households. The exception is support from the community and neighbours – this appears quite well targeted at those most in need, with 64% of those receiving such support also indicating that they had run out of money for food. It is particularly surprising that only 43% of recipients of the CSG are in households that have run out of money for food.

*Figure 7: Respondents indicating that they received support for food or accommodation from government, NGOs/religious associations or neighbours/the community, NIDS-CRAM Wave 1, 3 and 5*

\[\text{Source: Authors’ calculations from NIDS-CRAM Waves 1, 3 and 5 data.}\]

\(^2\) The data supplied by DSD was compiled for the 2021 annual report. The monthly statistics are supplied by the provinces to the national Department of Social Development. It is verified by the Monitoring and Evaluation units in the provincial and national Departments and is being audited by the Auditor General.

\(^3\) There is of course a problem in this measure of targeting, in that here may be some reverse causality (endogeneity), where some households may not lack money for food because of the grants or other support. This reverse causality should not be a large factor for the benefits considered here, as their magnitude is generally too small to pull recipient households out of poverty, unless they have additional incomes.
Conclusion: Policy to protect households from hunger

Earlier research papers based on Wave 1 suggested that the social grant system offered important protection from the worst economic effects of the lockdown and pandemic. The top-ups to the CSG and the OAP improved the financial situation of households with no other income sources. The results from Waves 3, 4 and 5 however, point to the fact that hunger and food insecurity in South Africa has settled at a permanently higher equilibrium level in comparison to pre-2020 levels. Whereas TERS and the SRD grant had not been fully operational during Wave 1, Wave 2 results showed that TERS had lifted many out of food insecurity. The CSG and SRD have been valuable, as have been the grant top-ups. Although the smaller grants, even with top-ups, were inadequate to keep households above the food poverty line, they do ameliorate poverty.

Removal of grant top-ups in 2020, and of the COVID SRD grant of R350, is likely to contribute to rising hunger in South Africa. Given that the R350 SRD grant expired at the end of April 2021, approximately 70% of the Wave 5 data was collected while these grants were still being paid (i.e. in April). Some respondents in May still indicated that they were receiving it. The reduced availability of money from grants and the tight economic situation are reasons why levels of hunger are likely to remain stubbornly high, or may even increase, and stricter lockdown regulations may again further reduce employment and income from informal economic activities. Previous NIDS-CRAM research (Jain et al., 2020) showed that for 10% of South African households the only government grant received by the household was the R350 SRD grant. With the removal of the SRD grant, households largely dependent on this grant will now fall out of the social protection system, with consequences for household hunger and child hunger.

Policy makers need to place hunger and food security at the centre of social development strategies. Failure to do so will deepen food poverty and inequality gaps and will further compromise the country’s human development situation and economic recovery. The findings provide some pointers for policy makers to consider: First, poverty relief measures should continue to be a priority in fiscal policy decisions despite budgetary constraints. Second, ongoing monitoring of household food security and household and child hunger are needed as these are important proxy indicators to track progress and assess the effectiveness of government and non-governmental responses to the crisis.
Third, the adjustment to the grant values following the phasing out of the top-ups coupled with the ending of the SRD at the end of April 2021, and the rising cost of living, are likely to impact negatively on household food security and household and child hunger. Additional measures are needed to strengthen the safety net through the mobilisation of government resources, but non-governmental sources including corporate social investment and private philanthropy should also be bolstered. There is much to learn from the targeting of informal relief by community and neighbourhood systems of support which have proven to be consistently effective.

Fourth, households most vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger, such as larger households with more than 4 people and households in traditional and rural areas, need to be prioritised with supplementary interventions tailored to their needs. Closer monitoring of food insecurity on households with women is also indicated. Fifth, special measures are needed to address child hunger and stunting, especially among black African children and increasingly also among coloured children who are more likely to experience severe hunger. This is largely due to the low monetary level of the CSG money for food. While school meals are well targeted, uptake levels are not what they were prior to the pandemic due to rotational time tabling and the late start to the school year. This points to the importance of getting the NSNP back to full scale, and of children returning to school with no rotational schedule. This has now been complicated by renewed restrictions due to the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic which could lead to economic setbacks, school closures which in turn could deepen food insecurity and hunger. These are important factors that need to be considered by policy makers and programme implementers in the current socio-economic context.

Finally, social protection strategies are first line interventions to mitigate food poverty and hunger in a health emergency such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Protecting livelihoods could prevent people from falling deeper into poverty and can have an important stabilising effect on families and communities. Temporary relief measures are social investments in human capital and can have other multiplier effects such as the increased job search behaviours among SRD beneficiaries that could aid labour market recovery (Köhler and Bhorat 2021), prevent child stunting and improve psychosocial well-being among others. Experimentation and innovation during this period could lay the basis for new and more transformative social policies.
REFERENCES:


Personal Communication with Wendy Tlou from the Solidarity Fund, 7 April 2021.


### Table 1: Covid 19 SRD applications and payments as at 9 June 2021

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Table 2: Covid SRD applications by age group as at 9 June 2021

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Table 3: Total paid as at 9 June 2021 (excluding Reconsideration payments)

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For further information please see cramsurvey.org and nids.uct.ac.za