

Household hunger in SA hits highest level in 16 years

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HOUSEHOLD hunger in South Africa has reached its highest level since 2010, with 12% of households reporting hunger in 2025 despite food inflation easing, highlighting the widening gap between the cost of living and families' ability to afford nutritious food.

The South African Food Security Index 2026, commissioned by the Shoprite Group, found the country's overall food security score declined to 52.6 in 2025 from 56.5 in 2024. The findings point to deteriorating food security, with rising living costs continuing to place pressure on household budgets even as food price increases slow.

The report, compiled by a research team that included economists from Stellenbosch University, found that 14.7% of individuals experienced hunger in 2025, while the proportion of households reporting hunger increased slightly from 11.9% in 2024 to 12% last year.

The findings mark a reversal of earlier progress. Hunger declined during the early 2000s, helped by the expansion of social grants, with the proportion of households reporting hunger falling to 12% by 2007.

However, the trend has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the 2024 edition of the index. The latest figures show household hunger has now returned to its highest level since 2010.

Lower food inflation, not better food security

The latest index measures food security through the availability of food, households' ability to access it and the nutritional variety of their diets.

South Africa's score declined as food inflation ran ahead of general inflation in 2025, reducing food availability. Access to food and dietary diversity remained relatively stable, but the report warns that easing prices do not necessarily mean households can consistently afford nutritious meals.

Official food inflation had eased to 1% by June 2026. However, the report's analysis of purchasing behaviour across Shoprite Group supermarkets found that households were increasingly opt-



SOUTH Africa's household hunger rate reached its highest level since 2010 in 2025, with new research showing how rising living costs continue to limit access to nutritious food.

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ing for smaller pack sizes and cheaper products, sometimes at the expense of dietary diversity.

Non-food expenses are adding to the pressure. By March 2026, housing and utilities accounted for 39% of headline inflation, more than double food's 19% contribution.

Neil Roets, the CEO of Debt Rescue, said that when 12% of households are reporting highest level of hunger in 16 years, it is not only at a food-security problem.

"We are seeing the consequences of severe and sustained pressure on household finances. We at Debt Rescue have consistently warned that the real measure of financial pressure is not simply whether consumers can continue paying their accounts. It is what they are having to sacrifice in order to do so. Food is one of the clearest indicators," Roets said.

"When families move to smaller pack sizes, cheaper alternatives and less varied diets simply to make their monthly income stretch further, this tells us that household budgets have very little resilience left. Consumers can cut entertainment, postpone purchases and reduce discretionary spending, but there comes a point where there is simply nothing meaningful left to cut," Roets added.

Rural female-headed households

remain particularly vulnerable. The proportion of those living below the food poverty line rose from 38.4% in 2023 to 41.7% in 2025. The index also found differences between provinces, with Limpopo performing relatively well, while the Northern Cape and North West recorded weaker results as hunger increased and food variety declined.

Sanjeev Raghurir, the chief sustainability officer at the Shoprite Group, said lower food inflation was welcome but did not automatically make nutritious diets affordable.

"The Index shows that responses must reflect local realities because outcomes differ so sharply between provinces," Raghurir said.

He said the group had contained internal selling price inflation in its South African supermarket business to 0.8% in its 2026 financial year, compared with official food inflation of 3.9%.

"However, price is only one part of food security. Rising electricity, transport, and other essential costs are eroding household budgets, so support must reach beyond the food basket," he said.

FoodForward SA's research reinforced the severity of the situation.

Among the vulnerable food-aid households it surveyed, 70% experi-

enced moderate or severe food insecurity over a 12-month period, while approximately 75% experienced moderate or severe food insecurity over the preceding 30 days.

This suggests that for many affected households, food insecurity is not a temporary setback but a persistent condition.

"A household repeatedly struggling to afford sufficient nutritious food is displaying one of the clearest signs that income is no longer keeping pace with essential expenses. South Africa therefore needs to look beyond headline inflation and ask what is happening inside the household budget. When millions of people are regularly going hungry despite food being available within the broader economy, it tells us that affordability has become a fundamental part of the crisis. Hunger at this scale should be treated as a serious warning about the financial health and wellbeing of South African households," Roets said.

Minimum wage falls short on nutrition

The latest figures from the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) illustrated the pressure on low-income households.

In September 2026, the maximum National Minimum Wage for a general worker earning R30.23 an hour was R5 078.64 for a 21-day working month. The group said a single wage for a black South African worker typically supports 4.1 people, meaning the maximum monthly wage would amount to R1 269.66 per person in a family of four.

That is below both the national upper bound poverty line of R2 962 per person per month and the lower bound poverty line of R1 457, based on May 2026 prices.

The PMBEJD calculated that electricity and transport accounted for R3 279.45, or 64.6%, of the maximum monthly wage in September. This left R1 799.19 for food and other household expenses.

The cost of a basic nutritional food basket for a family of four was R3 807.11 in September, leaving a shortfall of R2 007.92, or 52.7%. Even if the entire remaining amount after electricity and transport went towards food, it would provide just R449.79 per person per

month, 48% below the national food poverty line of R868.

The pressure also extends to families relying on social grants.

The PMBEJD estimated that feeding a child a basic nutritious diet cost R970.27 a month in September, while the Child Support Grant stood at R580.

The grant was therefore 40% below the estimated cost of feeding a child a basic nutritious diet.

The figures underscore the distinction between food being available in shops and households being able to afford enough of it. When essential costs consume most of a worker's income, families may have to reduce food spending, buy cheaper products or compromise on dietary variety.

Shoprite boosts food aid

The Shoprite Group said it was supporting communities through a range of initiatives aimed at improving access to food and reducing waste.

The retailer said it supports more than 320 community food gardens and 148 early childhood development centres, and operates 35 mobile soup kitchens.

Over the past financial year, it donated surplus food and goods worth R341.6 million to beneficiary organisations.

Raghurir said the group recognised that no single organisation could resolve hunger on its own, but that better evidence and targeted action could contribute to progress.

"While no single organisation can solve hunger, our intention remains to build a clearer understanding of the challenge, keep it in the national conversation and act where we can make a meaningful difference," he said.

"Our hope is that this Index helps turn better evidence into practical action," Raghurir said.

The latest findings show that South Africa's food security challenge extends beyond food prices.

While easing inflation can provide some relief, the cost of housing, electricity and transport continues to restrict what households can spend on food. For millions of people, the ability to afford a nutritious diet remains a daily struggle.

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