



Food insecurity and coping strategies

Food insecurity and coping strategies, and their association with anxiety and depression: a nationally representative South African survey

Scope of the problem

According to section 27 (1)(b) of the South African constitution, everyone has a right to have access to sufficient food. However, high prevalence of food insecurity has long been South Africa's biggest problem. With the country being the most unequal in the world, it remains unclear how South African households deal with food insecurity from a national perspective. There is a variety of coping strategies that households often use to deal with food insecurity, and examples include eating less, borrowing or using credit, and even begging for food on the streets. However, the impact of such coping strategies on mental health is less documented.

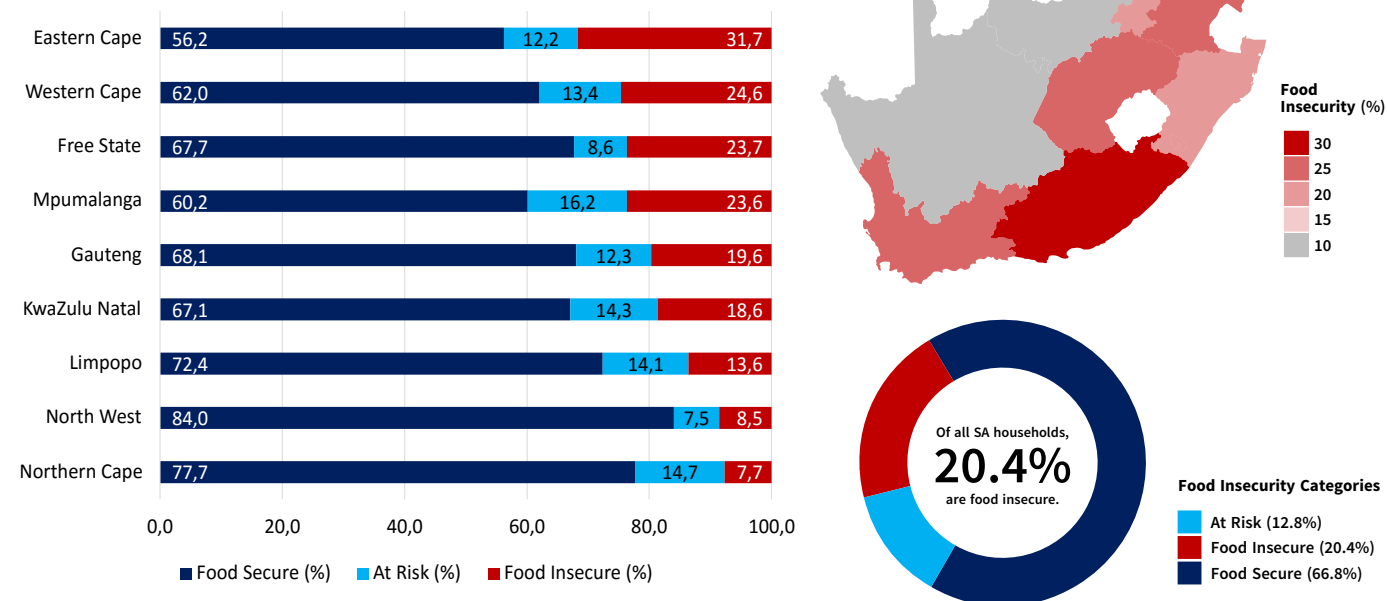
A recent study funded by the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, recently investigated the national

prevalence of food insecurity and related coping strategies, and their possible impact on the risk of anxiety and depression among South African adults. Using standard questionnaires, face-to-face interviews were conducted in October 2021 (during a low-level COVID-19 lockdown) in a nationally representative sample of 3 402 adults, which was statistically weighted to represent over 39 million South African households.

What the study found

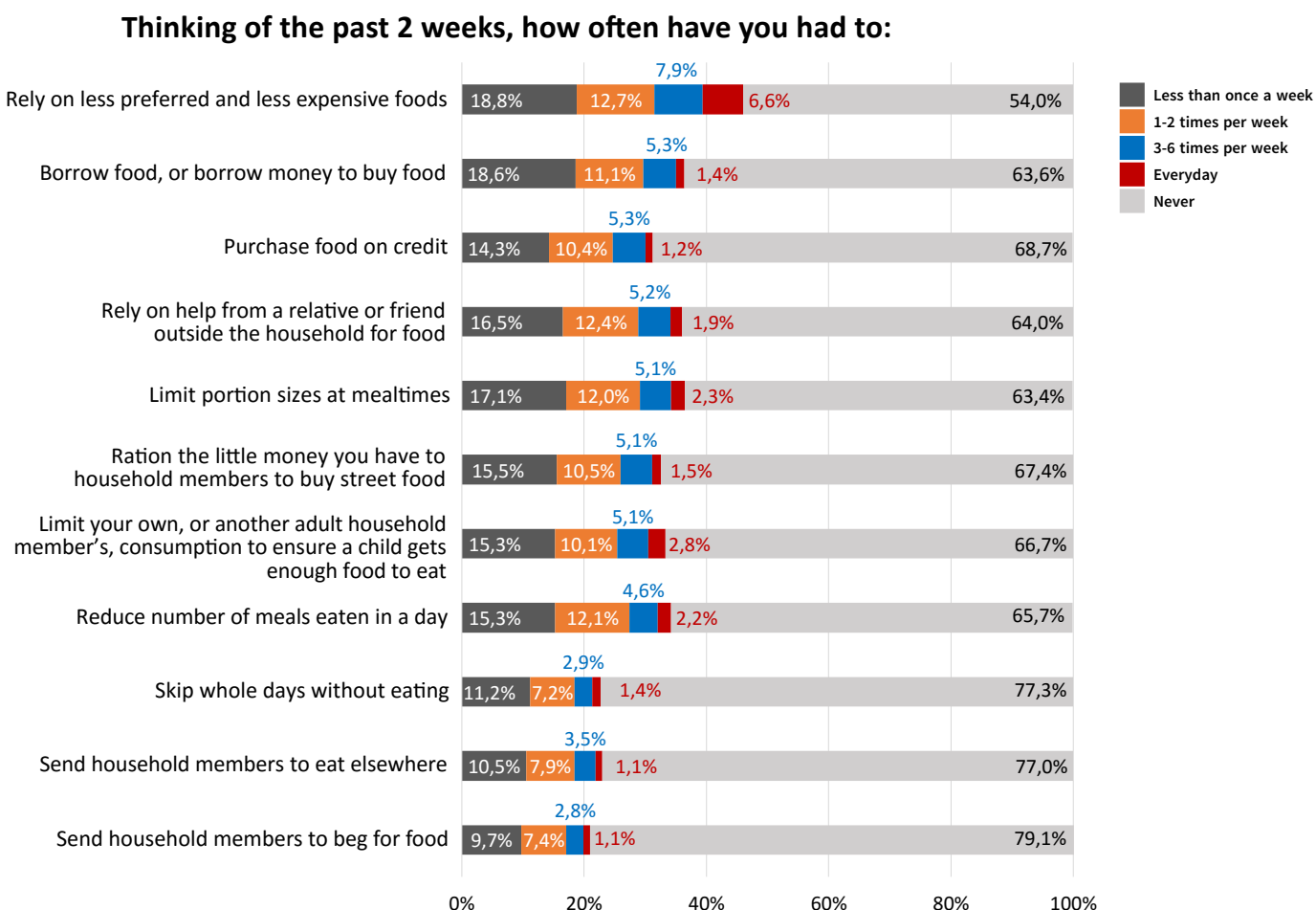
The study found that more than 20% (1 in 5) of South African households lack access to sufficient food, and that this prevalence varies widely across the nine provinces (**Figure 1**). Unsurprisingly, the poorest households were the most affected, and food insecurity was much more common among Coloured (24%) and Black (23%) South Africans, compared to their White (5%) and Asian counterparts (4%).

Figure 1: Prevalence of food insecurity among South African (SA) households



All investigated coping strategies were used to some extent within the households, with the most common being “relying on less preferred and less expensive foods” (used by 46%), and the least common being “sending household members to beg for food” (used by 21%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Coping strategies used by South African households to deal with food insecurity





The findings confirmed that living in a food insecure household in South Africa during COVID-19 was associated with a higher risk of anxiety and depression. The study also found that all coping strategies that are currently used by South Africans to deal with food insecurity differentially associate with the risk of anxiety and depression. Importantly, the findings suggested that begging for food may be the most harmful coping strategy.

Conclusion and implications

The authors concluded that food insecurity in South Africa remains a major health problem, and that poorer households are disproportionately affected. Living in food insecure household may be forcing poorer South Africans to use a variety coping strategies that ultimately lead to anxiety and depression.

In the 2022 State of the Nation Address, the president stated that there will be several fundamental reforms primarily aimed at reviving economic growth in South Africa, which would ultimately assist in combating the challenges of high employment and food insecurity rates. Given these new findings, food insecurity and related coping strategies

should be considered as risk factors for impaired mental health. Accordingly, the proposed public measures to reduce food insecurity are likely improve the mental health quality of South Africans.

Reference:

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Short title: Food insecurity, copying strategies, and mental health.