

## Exploring Statistics South Africa's national household surveys as sources of information about household-level food security

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### Abstract

*This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of household-level food security in South Africa using publicly available household survey data from Statistics South Africa. The two datasets that are used in particular are the General Household Survey, an annual household survey that began in 2002, and the Income and Expenditure Survey of 2005/06. Because these surveys are not designed for the analysis of household-level food security, it is not possible to do the kind of detailed analysis made possible by purpose-designed surveys. However these datasets have some value in respect of understanding food security, namely: large sample sizes; the depth of complementary types of information that assist in contextualising the experience of food insecurity and, in the case of the General Household Survey, regularity. Among the findings are a decline in the experience of hunger during the period 2002–2007, and significantly lower food expenditure per capita in rural areas, suggesting a greater extent of 'self-provisioning' than is commonly assumed.*

**Keywords:** Food security; household survey; hunger; food expenditure; Statistics South Africa

### 1. Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of household-level food security in South Africa using publicly available household survey data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). The two datasets that are used in particular are the General Household Survey (GHS), which is an annual household survey that began in 2002, and the Income and Expenditure Survey (IES), which is conducted every five years. Only data from the most recent IES (2005/06) is considered here. Because these instruments are not designed for the analysis of household-level food security, they do not allow for the detailed understanding and analysis possible from purpose-designed surveys such as the National Food Consumption Survey and the Demographic and Health Survey. However, Stats SA's household surveys do have some value

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with respect to understanding food security, namely: large sample sizes; the depth of complementary types of information (e.g. on employment status) that help place household-level food security in context; and, in the case of the GHS, regularity and a partial rotating panel design. The general premise of this exercise is that all pertinent information should be brought to bear to improve our collective understanding of an issue as critical as household-level food security.

Section 2 presents findings derived from the GHS, with the general focus being on depicting trends in the (subjective) experience of ‘hunger’, and probing what type of household is most likely to experience hunger. Section 3 then presents findings derived from the IES 2005/06, focusing on food expenditure shares, food expenditure per capita, and food basket composition.

## **2. The General Household Survey and hunger**

Stats SA’s GHS is the country’s main general-purpose annual national household survey. It resumes the function that was earlier fulfilled by Stats SA’s October Household Survey (OHS), which ran from 1994 to 1999. The GHS began in 2002 with a sample of 26 000 households. The sample size of the 2007 GHS was about 29 000.

The key questions in the GHS relevant to this discussion are:

- “In the past 12 months, did any child in this household go hungry because there wasn’t enough food?”
- “In the past 12 months, did any adult in this household go hungry because there wasn’t enough food?”

This analysis comprises the following: i) trends in the experience of hunger over time; ii) distinguishing features of households that experience hunger, with a focus on those who reported experiencing hunger in the 2007 GHS; and iii) a comparison of data from GHS 2006 and GHS 2007 to try to understand what might have accounted for transitions into and out of hunger between those years.

The OHS only asked this kind of question in respect of children (“In the past year, was there ever a time when you could not afford to feed the children in the household?”). Moreover, the GHS and OHS offered different sets of possible responses: for the OHS, the respondent was limited to saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, while in the GHS, the options were more numerous, i.e. ‘never’, ‘seldom’, ‘sometimes’, ‘often’ and ‘always’. (Both surveys also allowed for ‘not applicable’ in the case of households with no children.)

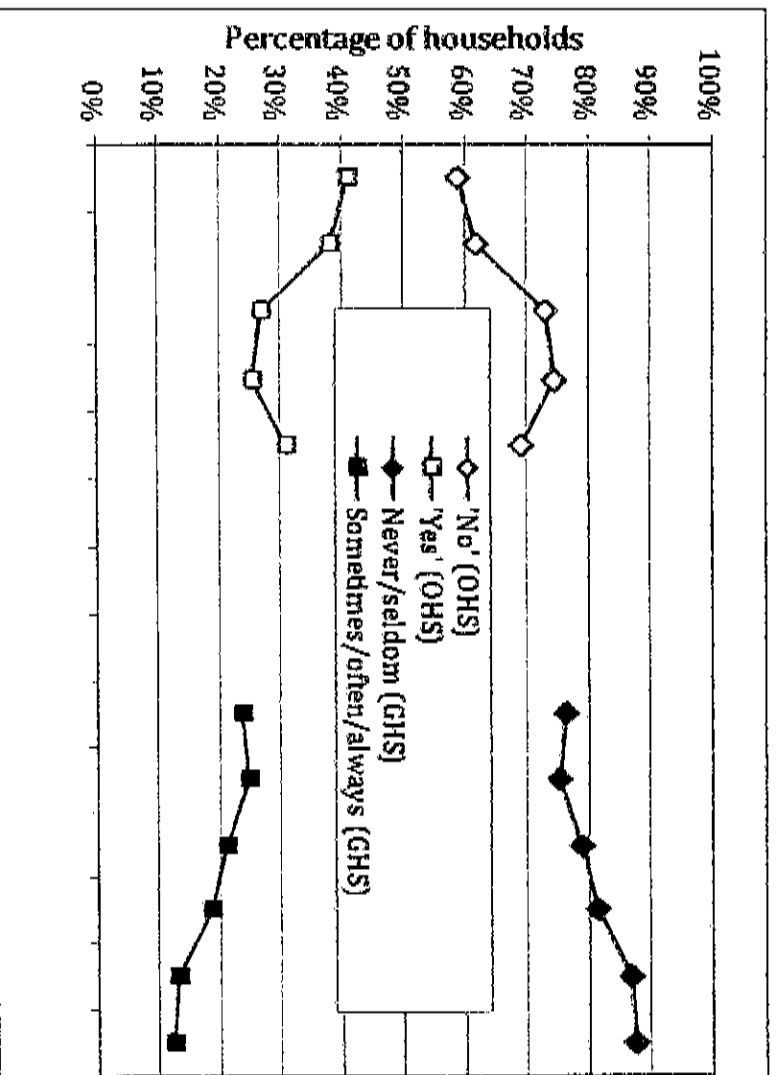
Although these subjective, vague questions have limitations in respect of understanding changes over time in the extent of hunger – and indeed of food insecurity – experienced by households, they provide a useful window into these topics. This is not to suggest that the absence of hunger equates to being food-secure. Rather the author considers this indication of hunger to be a rough proxy for food insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Trends in the experience of hunger

Figure 1 traces the incidence of child hunger from 1994 to 2007, with a gap for the years 1999 through 2001 owing to the absence of a comparable survey for 2000 and 2001, and of a comparable question in the 1999 OHS. In order to do the comparison, a way had to be found of mapping the yes/no answer options in the OHS onto the always/often/sometimes/seldom/never options in the GHS. The answers ‘never’ or ‘seldom’ in the GHS were taken to be the same as the answer ‘no’ in the OHS. The answers ‘always’, ‘often’, or ‘sometimes’ in the GHS were taken to mean the same as ‘yes’ in the OHS. The graph shows that for the period 1994 to 1998, there was an increase in the share of children-inclusive households whose children experienced hunger but, for the period 2002 to 2007, there was a striking decrease. Although it is not clear precisely what these subjective, vague indications of hunger mean, if we assume that the meaning reflects something consistent over time, then there has been a significant improvement. The trend echoes post-2001 trends in poverty reduction detected in the work of Van der Berg (2006).

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<sup>2</sup> From food consumption surveys and other sources, we know that the incidence of malnutrition is significantly higher than the self-reporting of hunger; see e.g. Jacobs, this volume. The percentage of those who describe themselves as hungry is probably of less significance than changes in this figure over time, or comparisons of such percentages between different sub-populations.



**Figure 1: Children experiencing/not experiencing hunger 1994-1998; 2002-2007**

Source: OHS 1994-1998 (Stats SA, 1995-1999) and GHS 2002-2007 (Stats SA, 2003-2008a)

Figures 2 and 3 provide more detail for the 2002 to 2007 period by tracing changes in respect of all of the response categories provided in the GHS. Figure 2 displays the results of the GHS question 'In the past 12 months, did any child (17 years or younger) in this household go hungry because there wasn't enough food?'

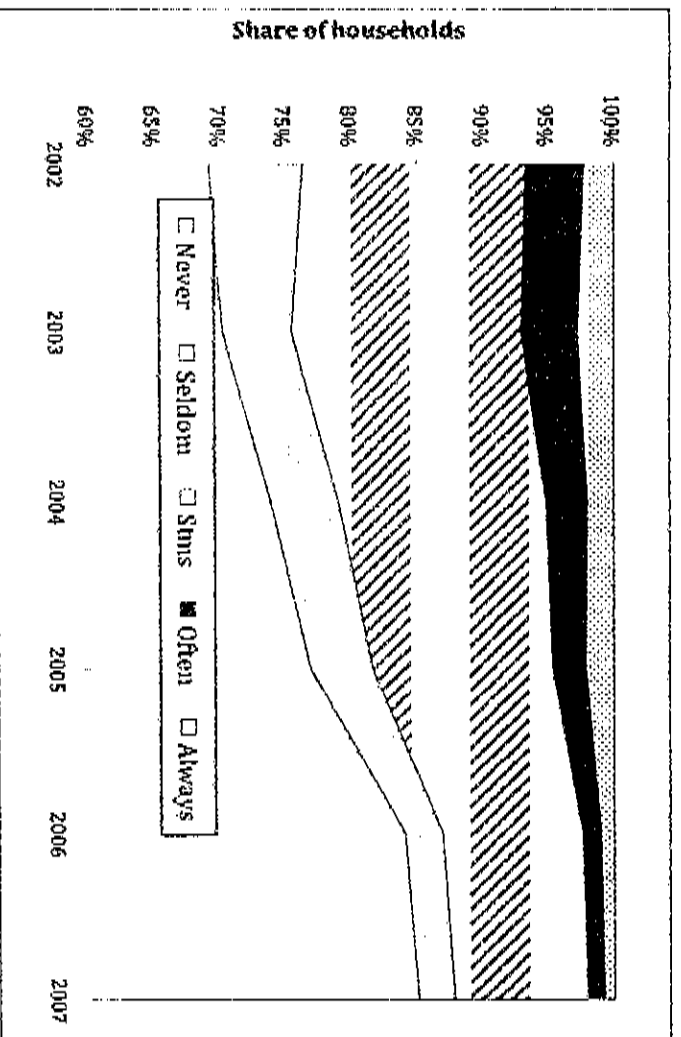


Figure 2: Children going hungry/not going hungry 2002-2007

Source: GHS 2007 (Stats SA, 2008d)

Figure 3 displays the results of the GHS question 'In the past 12 months, did any adult (18 years or older) go hungry because there wasn't enough food?'

