

**AHMR** is an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal created to encourage and facilitate the study of all aspects of human mobility in Africa, including socio-economic, political, legal, developmental, educational and cultural aspects. Through the publication of original research, policy discussions and evidence-based research papers, AHMR provides a comprehensive forum devoted exclusively to the analysis of current migration trends, migration patterns and some of the most important migration-related issues.

AHMR is jointly owned by the **Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa** (SIHMA) and the **University of the Western Cape** (UWC).

The Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA) is a member of the **Network of the Scalabrinian Centers for Migration Studies**, with institutions in New York, Paris, Rome, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, and Manila.

AHMR is accredited by the **Department of Higher Education and Training** (DHET) in South Africa.

Articles and reviews in AHMR reflect the opinions of the contributors. AHMR allows the author/s to retain full copyright in their articles. ISSN 2410-7972 (online) ISSN 2411-6955 (print).

Editing services provided by On Point Language Solutions

**AHMR © 2024 Creative Commons License CC-BY-4.0**

SIHMA Physical address  
47, Commercial St, 8001 Cape Town – South Africa  
Tel. +27 82 555 2066  
Email: [ahmr@sihma.org.za](mailto:ahmr@sihma.org.za)  
Webpage: [www.sihma.org.za](http://www.sihma.org.za)

# Pandemic Mobilities, Livelihood Disruptions, and Food Insecurities among Eastern Cape Migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg during COVID-19

*Jonathan Crush,<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Tawodzera,<sup>2</sup> Maria Salamone,<sup>3</sup> and Zack Ahmed<sup>4</sup>*

Received 23 September 2024 / Accepted 22 November 2024 / Published 10 January 2025

[DOI: 10.14426/ahmr.v10i3.2437](https://doi.org/10.14426/ahmr.v10i3.2437)


## Abstract

This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on internal migrants from the Eastern Cape in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on mobility restrictions, livelihood disruptions, and food insecurity. Methodologically, the paper draws on a survey of 1,733 migrant households in the two cities conducted in 2023 and identifies significant economic hardships and increased food insecurity among internal migrants during the pandemic. Findings reveal that the pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities, with many migrants experiencing job losses, reduced remittances, and heightened food insecurity. The paper underscores the need to differentiate between internal and international migrants in policy responses in times of crisis to ensure targeted support for the most affected populations.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, internal migration, food insecurity, South Africa, migrant households

<sup>1</sup> Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada and University of the Western Cape, Cape Town South Africa. Corresponding author ✉ [jcrush@balsillieschool.ca](mailto:jcrush@balsillieschool.ca)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3342-3192>

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Social Development, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0367-453X>

<sup>3</sup> Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> School of International Policy and Governance, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada.

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a crisis of (im)mobility, since public health restrictions on personal movement disrupted long-standing patterns and periodicities of migration (Rajan et al., 2020; Martin and Bergmann, 2021). At the country level, the (im)mobility crisis has been most extensively documented in India, where there was a mass exodus of internal migrants from the cities during the early weeks of COVID-19 to escape pandemic lockdowns. Studies of this reverse human tide have focused on the desperation and misery of around 10 million migrants who headed for their rural homes (Rajan et al., 2020; Jesline et al., 2021; Carswell et al., 2022; Rajan and Bhagat, 2022). However, many more migrants were stranded in the cities where they struggled to survive as their income streams dried up (Rahaman et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022). As Sengupta and Jha (2020: 152) note, “migrant informal workers were mired in a survival crisis, through income loss, hunger, destitution and persecution from authorities policing containment.”

In South Africa, there have been several studies on the implications of pandemic restrictions for international migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Odunitan-Wayas et al., 2021; Angu et al., 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Unlike in India, less attention has been focused on the impact of the pandemic on internal migrants. The South African government’s own 700-page self-evaluation of its COVID-19 policy response applies the term “migrant” to non-South Africans only (Presidency of South Africa, 2021). Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2020c) also defines a migrant as “someone who is born outside South Africa, while anyone born in South Africa is classified as a ‘non-migrant.’” Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of internal migrants have received only limited attention (Ginsburg et al., 2022). Internal migrants also remain largely invisible in the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations in the country. Some studies have shown that pandemic vulnerability and impacts differed between urban and rural areas, but they do not address the consequences for rural–urban migrants themselves directly (Visagie and Turok, 2021; Shifa et al., 2022). Recent surveys of the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa also do not identify the specific experiences and challenges of internal migrants during successive waves of the pandemic (Espinoza et al., 2021; Ranchhod and Daniels, 2021; Köhler et al., 2023). Therefore, there remains a significant knowledge gap surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of the large internal migrant population of the country.

Where Indian and South African pandemic studies are similar is that neither pays attention to the impact of the pandemic on the food security of internal migrants. In India, there have been several assessments of the impact of the pandemic on household food security in general (Mishra and Rampal, 2020; Ravula et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022). However, the food security experience of returning and immobilized migrants is limited to a small number of case studies (Jolad and Shah, 2022; Luthra et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, there is a growing literature

on the general implications of the pandemic for household food security (Arndt et al., 2020; Van der Berg et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2022; Ngavara, 2022). However, few studies explicitly examine the relationship between internal migration, livelihood disruption, and food insecurity during the pandemic. There is thus a significant knowledge gap surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on the large internal migrant population of the country.

This paper examines the effects of the pandemic on interprovincial migrants from the Eastern Cape who resided in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 2020 and 2021. It addresses three questions: first, did migrants respond to pandemic restrictions on mobility by returning to the Eastern Cape, and, if so, what reasons did they give for return and how long did they remain there? Second, what was the extent of the disruption of livelihoods caused by the government's response to COVID-19? Third, what impact did the pandemic have on the food security of urban-based migrant households? In this paper we examine how the literature treats each of these questions and then focus on the implications of findings from our household survey of migrants in the two cities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section focuses on the impact of the national pandemic lockdown on internal mobility in South Africa. In late March 2020, the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a national state of disaster under the Disaster Management Act of 2002, which remained in effect for the next two years (Fourie and Lamb, 2023). On 26 March, a sweeping national lockdown and stay-at-home order came into effect and remained in force for over a month. Subsequently, it gradually relaxed, although many of the prohibitions on individual and group activity remained or were reimposed during successive waves of the pandemic from late 2020 to 2021. In addition to the stay-at-home order, there was a complete mobility ban on all non-essential international, cross-border, and interprovincial travel during the initial lockdown. More than 24,000 members of the South African Police Services were mobilized to enforce the lockdown, supplemented by municipal police and the army. Roadblocks were set up on all major routes into and out of both cities, and within the cities on the main roads.

The effectiveness of the enforcement of the nation-wide lockdown and mobility restrictions is illustrated by cellphone mobility big data. Carlitz and Makhura (2021) draw on Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports and Mobility Trends Reports published by Apple Maps to chart the impact of the lockdown on population mobility, which they regard as a proxy for compliance. They show that there was a dramatic decline in inter-provincial and intra-city mobility in the first three months of the pandemic in response to the government's lockdown orders. The Western Cape registered the greatest decline in mobility to work (down by 71%), to retail and recreation (by 78%), to transit stations (by 84%) and to grocery/pharmacy outlets (by 50%).

Stats SA conducted two online surveys between April and July in 2020 that suggest that there was limited mobility during the pandemic lockdown (Stats SA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In April, only 3% of respondents had changed their province of residence and 3% had moved within the province. More than 90% had not moved at all. By July, the proportion who had changed their provincial place of residence had increased from 3% to 6%. Furthermore, 13% had engaged in interprovincial travel since the start of the lockdown, of whom 26% had traveled to attend funerals and 15% to provide essential services, both deemed legitimate reasons for travel. This data therefore suggests that most respondents did not move out of or within their province during the first half of 2020.

In contrast, Posel and Casale (2021) argue that widespread internal population movement was to be expected for three main reasons. First, they suggest that 3.3 million households had members who were migrants working in other parts of the country and that workplace closures and layoffs meant that they would return home for livelihood support (as millions did in India). Second, because kin networks play an important role in providing support to family members during times of crisis and insecurity, migrants who lost their jobs would be forced to move to stay with family or friends. Third, the closure of all educational institutions would force many students to return to their parents' homes. The authors analyze NIDS-CRAM survey data from the University of Cape Town and conclude that there was substantial movement during the first phases of South Africa's lockdown (Posel and Casale, 2021). The proportion of respondents who moved to a different household in March 2020 was 8% while 16% moved in March and/or May 2020. Of these moves, half were interprovincial (see Table 1). The other relevant finding is that 27% of all adult movers reported being part of a household that had experienced hunger during the previous week (compared to 21% of non-movers) (ibid.). The authors conclude that, in general, moving was associated with economic shock and hardship.

**Table 1: Extent of mobility in South Africa – March and May 2020**

| <b>Timing of move</b>                          | <b>% of adult population</b> |
|--|------------------------------|
| Moved in March only                            | 7.8                          |
| Moved in May only                              | 4.9                          |
| Moved in both March and May                    | 2.9                          |
| All moves                                      | 15.5                         |
| Did not move                                   | 84.5                         |
| Share of March moves that were interprovincial | 51.3                         |

Source: Posel and Casale (2021)

Ginsburg et al. (2022) argue that the pandemic increased vulnerability among South Africa's internal migrants and their households of origin as the result of

their potentially less stable employment arrangements. Their data on impact of the pandemic on migration to and from one rural migrant-sending community comes from Agincourt district in Mpumalanga Province, collected between September 2020 and March 2021. Their main finding was that the pandemic affected migration patterns in several ways. First, the proportion of rural residents initiating a migration move decreased by 11% between 2019 and 2020. Second, the share of temporary migrants returning to the community increased from 8% in 2019 to 13% in 2020. Third, three-quarters of these return migrants who were employed in 2019 were no longer employed in 2020. Of the return migrants, 49% had lost their jobs, 25% were on unpaid leave, and 18% experienced reduced pay.

In sum, all three studies indicate that there was an increase in return migration during the pandemic, but that most internal migrants (over 85%) remained in situ and did not return home from the towns and cities where they worked. This raises several additional questions that are not addressed in the literature and still need to be researched to obtain a fuller picture of pandemic livelihood disruption. First, how did migrants in the cities survive in the face of unemployment, income loss, and mobility restrictions? Second, did this situation of pandemic precarity have an impact their ability to send remittances to family members in other parts of the country? Third, were the minority who did return to their rural homes able to engage in activities that boosted their livelihoods and compensated for pandemic economic disruptions? Finally, and most relevant to this study, what were the consequences of the pandemic for the food security of internal migrants in the city? In the remainder of this paper, we address these questions drawing on data from our survey of migrants from the Eastern Cape in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Although migrants from all ethnic and language groups in the country are found in both Cape Town and Johannesburg, the survey focused on migrants from the Eastern Cape Province, which is a major migration source for both cities. The survey breakdown of households by sample area in each city is shown in Table 2. The research team loaded surveys onto tablets supplied by the MiFOOD project at the University of the Western Cape. They then administered the surveys to a migrant head of household or their representative (usually a spouse or adult child). The final sample comprised 1,733 households (Johannesburg N = 898; Cape Town N = 818).

**Table 2: Spatial distribution of sample in Cape Town and Johannesburg**

|                     | <b>N</b> | <b>%</b> |
|---------------------|----------|----------|
| <b>Cape Town</b>    |          |          |
| Langa               | 143      | 8.3      |
| Dunoon              | 122      | 7.0      |
| Nyanga              | 96       | 5.5      |
| Joe Slovo           | 96       | 5.5      |
| Gugulethu           | 88       | 5.1      |
| Imizamo Yethu       | 81       | 4.7      |
| Khayelitsha         | 75       | 4.3      |
| Delft               | 60       | 3.5      |
| Philippi            | 55       | 3.2      |
| Other               | 2        | 0.1      |
|                     | 818      | 100.0    |
| <b>Johannesburg</b> |          |          |
| Thembisa            | 191      | 11.0     |
| Alexandra Park      | 151      | 8.7      |
| Orange Farm         | 121      | 7.0      |
| Tshepisoong         | 93       | 5.4      |
| Soweto              | 84       | 4.8      |
| Cosmo City          | 82       | 4.7      |
| Randburg            | 65       | 3.7      |
| Benoni              | 56       | 3.2      |
| Edenvale            | 48       | 2.8      |
| Other               | 24       | 1.5      |
|                     | 898      | 100.0    |

Source: Authors' own work

The survey captured data on household characteristics, income and expenditure, migration actions, remittances, pandemic impacts, and food security. Following the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, we define food security as existing when “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2006) This definition includes four essential dimensions of food security: (a) Availability: Sufficient quantities of food must be consistently available to individuals or households, either through production, trade, or assistance. (b) Access: People must have the means and resources to obtain appropriate food for a nutritious diet, which can be impacted by income levels, food prices, and distribution systems. (c) Utilization: Food must be properly utilized to meet dietary needs, which requires adequate sanitation, clean water, healthcare, and knowledge about nutrition and food safety. (d) Stability: There

must be a stable supply of and access to food over time, not threatened by sudden shocks (e.g., economic crises or natural disasters) or cyclical events (e.g., seasonal food shortages). In this paper, we focus on the impact of the pandemic on food access and use among internal migrants.

The research captured these dimensions of food insecurity using the following international cross-cultural scales: (a) the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), which includes a five-point Likert scale question on the frequency of going without several basic necessities, including food and fuel to cook food; (b) the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence Indicator (HFIAP) that categorizes households on the basis of their responses to nine frequency of occurrence questions and uses an algorithm to assign them to one of four groups: food secure, mild food insecurity, moderate food insecurity, and severe food insecurity (Coates et al., 2007); and (c) the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), which is a proxy for the nutritional quality of the diet by capturing how many food groups (from 0 to 12) were consumed within the household in the previous 24 hours (Swindale and Bilinsky, 2006).

## RESULTS

The survey respondents from the Eastern Cape in Cape Town and Johannesburg were equally split between men and women, indicating that migration flows from the region are now significantly feminized compared to the apartheid period (Hall and Posel, 2019) (see Table 3). The sample was dominated by people of working age between 30 and 50 years of age (62% of the total). Another 28% were youth under the age of 30 years. Despite the relatively mature age profile of the sample, two-thirds were unmarried, with only 17% married and another 8% cohabiting. Only 17% of the migrant households comprised nuclear families with a wife/female partner and a husband/male partner living in the same household. Another 10% were extended family households with other relatives and non-relatives present. Almost 40% of the households were female centered (a household headed by a woman without male spouse or partner present), which is consistent with the general increase in female headship in South Africa (Rogan, 2016; Posel et al. 2023). Another 35% were male centered (with a male head without a female spouse or partner present). One-third were single-person households, which was more common among females than among males.

According to Posel and Hunter (2022: 1), “solo dwelling remains associated with persistent rural–urban spatial divisions, increased migration and urbanization, continued declining marriage rates and the nature of employment.” Just over 60% of the households had 2–6 members, and a smaller number (8%) was larger. Almost all the migrants had some level of schooling: 70% had attended and 41% had completed high school. Post-secondary education was rarer, although 8% had some tertiary education. The relatively low levels of educational achievement were reflected in the occupational profile of the sample. Nearly a third (30%) were manual workers before migrating, while another 18% were domestic workers and 10% were employed in the



hospitality industry. Another 19% were unemployed immediately prior to migrating from the Eastern Cape.

**Table 3: Characteristics of individual migrants and migrant households**

|  | <b>N</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|----------|----------|
| <b>Sex of respondents</b>                |          |          |
| Male                                     | 866      | 50.0     |
| Female                                   | 865      | 50.0     |
| <b>Age</b>                               |          |          |
| <20                                      | 2        | 0.1      |
| 20–29                                    | 424      | 38.7     |
| 30–39                                    | 574      | 38.9     |
| 40–49                                    | 308      | 20.9     |
| 50–59                                    | 137      | 9.3      |
| 60+                                      | 30       | 2.0      |
| <b>Marital status</b>                    |          |          |
| Unmarried                                | 1,107    | 63.9     |
| Married                                  | 323      | 18.6     |
| Living together/cohabiting               | 150      | 8.7      |
| Divorced/widowed/separated               | 145      | 8.3      |
| <b>Highest level of education</b>        |          |          |
| No formal schooling                      | 23       | 1.3      |
| Primary school                           | 121      | 7.0      |
| Some high school                         | 410      | 23.7     |
| High school completed                    | 762      | 44.0     |
| Post-secondary qualification             | 205      | 11.8     |
| Some/completed university                | 130      | 7.5      |
| Postgraduate                             | 6        | 0.3      |
| <b>Household structure</b>               |          |          |
| Female centered                          | 663      | 38.3     |
| Male centered                            | 600      | 34.6     |
| Nuclear                                  | 299      | 17.3     |
| Extended                                 | 168      | 9.7      |
| <b>Household size (number of adults)</b> |          |          |
| 1 person                                 | 551      | 32.0     |

|             |     |      |
|-------------|-----|------|
| 2–3 persons | 605 | 35.1 |
| 4–5 persons | 344 | 20.0 |
| 6+ persons  | 221 | 12.8 |

Source: Authors' own work

Just over one in four migrants lost their jobs in 2020 (see Table 4). The reasons included that their employers retrenched workers (39%) or closed their businesses altogether (36%). Another 17% were banned from running their informal businesses. The length of time before finding another job was significant, with one-third remaining unemployed for more than six months, another third for four to six months, and the rest for between one and three months.

**Table 4: Migrant unemployment during 2020**

| <b>Unemployment experience</b>                   | <b>N</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|----------|----------|
| <b>Loss of employment in 2020</b>                |          |          |
| Yes  | 468      | 27.0     |
| No   | 1,265    | 73.0     |
| <b>Main reason for losing job</b>                |          |          |
| Employer retrenched employees                    | 182      | 38.9     |
| Employer closed their business                   | 170      | 36.3     |
| Not permitted to operate their informal business | 77       | 16.5     |
| Became ill with COVID-19                         | 16       | 3.4      |
| Household members became ill with COVID-19       | 7        | 1.5      |
| Because they returned home                       | 4        | 0.9      |
| Other  | 12       | 2.6      |
| <b>Length of unemployment</b>                    |          |          |
| More than 6 months                               | 158      | 34.3     |
| 4–6 months                                       | 150      | 32.5     |
| 1–3 months                                       | 153      | 33.2     |

Source: Authors' own work

The disruptive impact of the pandemic on migrant life and livelihoods is clear from the responses to a series of impact statements in the survey (see Table 5). As many as 94% of respondents said that the lockdown had caused great hardship for the city's residents and 91% indicated that the pandemic had caused significant economic hardship for them and their families. Approximately 80% said that the economic conditions of their

household were worse than before the pandemic. This change of fortune meant that almost 70% remitted less to the Eastern Cape than before COVID-19.

**Table 5: Perceptions of impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg**

|  | <b>Agree %</b> | <b>Disagree %</b> | <b>Neither %</b> |
|--|----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| The lockdown and stay-at-home order caused great hardship to people        | 94.1           | 3.9               | 2.0              |
| The pandemic caused great economic hardship for me and my family           | 90.7           | 5.2               | 4.1              |
| COVID-19 has had a very negative effect on my life                         | 85.9           | 8.3               | 5.9              |
| The economic conditions of my household are worse now than before COVID-19 | 80.8           | 12.6              | 6.5              |
| I sent less money home to the Eastern Cape because of the pandemic         | 69.5           | 11.0              | 19.5             |
| COVID-19 has had a very negative effect on my life                         | 85.9           | 8.3               | 5.9              |
| The economic conditions of my household are worse now than before COVID-19 | 80.8           | 12.6              | 6.5              |
| I sent less money home to the Eastern Cape because of the pandemic         | 69.5           | 11.0              | 19.5             |

Source: Authors' own work

One potential response to pandemic restrictions and livelihood disruptions might have been a mass exodus from the cities to the countryside, as in India. However, only 14% of the respondents had returned to the Eastern Cape, a finding consistent with earlier surveys about the level of return migration (Posel and Casale, 2021; Ginsburg et al., 2022). Being with family was easily the most important reason (mentioned by 69%) for return, followed by fear of contracting COVID-19 (20%) (see Table 6). One exception to pandemic travel restrictions was to attend a funeral, although only 6% cited this as the reason for returning. Just 16% of returnees were driven by economic necessity (loss of employment and income). A small number of returnees (7%) engaged in income-generating activity while at home, but most either did not engage in gainful economic activity (72%) or helped on the family farm (20%). Around 70% stayed at home for a month or less, which suggests that they returned as soon as the initial lockdown was relaxed or, in the case of 20%, even sooner.

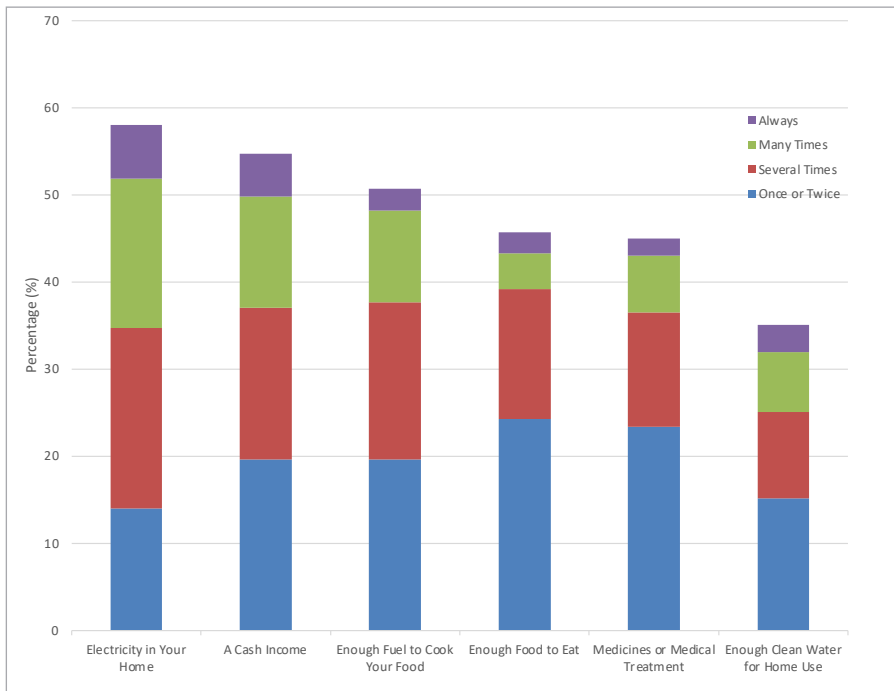
**Table 6: Return migration to the Eastern Cape**

|                                       | N    | %    |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| <b>Returned to Eastern Cape</b>       |      |      |
| Yes                                   | 233  | 14.3 |
| No                                    | 1396 | 85.7 |
| <b>Reasons for return</b>             |      |      |
| To be with family                     | 163  | 69.4 |
| Scared of catching COVID              | 47   | 20.0 |
| Look after sick relatives             | 27   | 11.5 |
| Unemployment/lost their job           | 18   | 7.7  |
| No income                             | 18   | 7.7  |
| Attend funeral                        | 15   | 6.4  |
| Attend traditional ceremony           | 6    | 2.6  |
| No food to eat                        | 3    | 1.3  |
| No housing/shelter                    | 2    | 0.9  |
| <b>Mode of transportation</b>         |      |      |
| Bus                                   | 112  | 42.9 |
| Taxi                                  | 93   | 35.6 |
| Car                                   | 43   | 16.5 |
| Other                                 | 13   | 5.0  |
| <b>Length of time away</b>            |      |      |
| 3–4 weeks                             | 108  | 46.0 |
| 1–2 weeks                             | 60   | 25.5 |
| 1–6 months                            | 50   | 21.3 |
| >6 months                             | 16   | 6.8  |
| <b>Economic activities while home</b> |      |      |
| None                                  | 169  | 71.9 |
| Farming                               | 47   | 20.0 |
| Looked for work                       | 22   | 9.4  |
| Employed full-time                    | 8    | 3.4  |
| Bought and sold goods                 | 7    | 3.0  |
| Employed part-time                    | 2    | 0.9  |

Source: Authors' own work

Most migrants therefore opted to remain in the cities, and pandemic economic shocks did not prompt a significant return to the Eastern Cape. Further evidence of pandemic hardships for those who stayed in Cape Town and Johannesburg is reflected in the results of the LPI, which show the frequency of the household going without six basic needs in the year prior to the survey (see Figure 1). Electricity was the most important item of deprivation experienced by almost 60% of households, likely reflecting the impact of load shedding. A cash income was forfeited by 55% of households, with 5% stating that this had always been the case and 30% reported that it happened several times. More than 45% of households had experienced the two food-related deficits. As many as 46% had gone without enough food to eat, with 3% stating that this had always been the case and 19% said that it was a frequent occurrence. Similarly, 51% of households had gone without enough fuel to cook their food, 3% always experienced it, and for 28% it was a frequent occurrence.

**Figure 1: Frequency of going without basic necessities**



Source: Authors' own work

The LPI results confirm that one of the main livelihood impacts felt by migrants was related to high levels of food insecurity. This was confirmed by responses to the impact statements with 88% agreeing that food had become more expensive and 86% indicated that it was more difficult to access food during the pandemic (see Table

7). Over one-third reported that they had been forced to disobey the government lockdown to obtain food to eat.

**Table 7: Food-related impacts of COVID-19 on migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg**

|   | Agree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neither (%) |
|---|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| Food became much more expensive during the pandemic                       | 88.4      | 8.8          | 2.8         |
| It was more difficult for my household to access food during the pandemic | 85.9      | 8.7          | 5.4         |
| My family and I were forced to disobey the lockdown to get food to eat    | 35.4      | 54.8         | 9.8         |

Source: Authors' own work

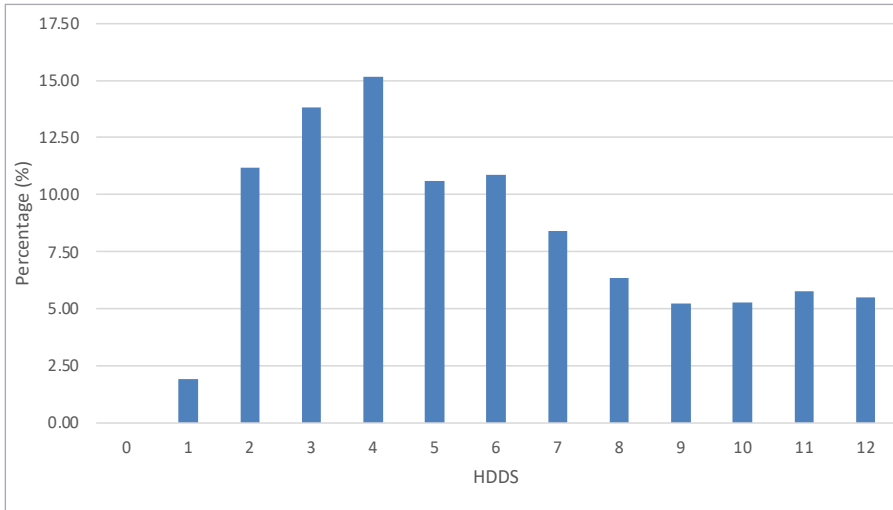
The HFIAP calculations indicate that many migrant households were still experiencing high levels of food insecurity at the time of the survey. For example, 44% of the households were food insecure and of these, more than half were severely food insecure (see Table 8). The HDDS scores of migrant households show that most were consuming a limited variety of foods (see Figure 2). More than half had a low HDDS of five or less, which generally represents a significant lack of nutritional diversity and nutritional adequacy with a heavy dependence on cereals (such as maize) and processed foods (Leroy et al., 2015). A combination of low dietary diversity and food insecurity was characteristic of more than 35% of migrant households.

**Table 8: Levels of food insecurity among migrant households**

| Level                    | N   | %    |
|--------------------------|-----|------|
| Food secure              | 963 | 55.6 |
| Food insecure            | 761 | 44.4 |
| Moderately food insecure | 178 | 10.3 |
| Severely food insecure   | 456 | 26.8 |

Source: Authors' own work

**Figure 2: Distribution of HDDS scores**



Source: Authors' own work

COVID-19 relief measures for South African households had the potential to mitigate pandemic hardship and food insecurity for migrant households. However, according to Moses and Woolard (2023: 170), these programs were poorly targeted and were “beleaguered by both errors of inclusion and errors of exclusion.” Skinner et al. (2021: 12) conclude that “the vast majority of informal wage workers who lost their jobs in 2020 have been left without any income or only the minimal support offered through the COVID-19 [Social Relief of Distress Grant] SRD Grant.” More than half (55%) of the migrant respondents reported that they had received no assistance from the government or civil society (see Table 9). Only 14% received an SRD grant. Government food packages reached fewer than 4% and only 7% saw an increase in their Child Support Grant (CSG) in 2020. The proportion of migrant households receiving cash and food assistance from nongovernmental sources was also small.

**Table 9: Access to pandemic relief measures\***

|                                     | <b>N</b> | <b>%</b> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| No assistance                       | 964      | 55.6     |
| COVID-19 SRD Grant                  | 248      | 14.3     |
| Increase in CSG                     | 119      | 6.9      |
| Cash from a savings club            | 67       | 3.9      |
| Government food package             | 61       | 3.5      |
| Cash or food from a church          | 21       | 1.2      |
| Cash or food from an NGO or charity | 14       | 0.8      |
| Cash or food from a political party | 4        | 0.2      |

\*Multiple responses

Source: Authors' own work

## CONCLUSION

Previous work by migration researchers on the food security impact of the pandemic has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of international migrants in South Africa. Work on the impact of the pandemic on South Africans tends to lump migrants and non-migrants together. There are several possible reasons for these oversights. First, there is a mantra that South African urbanization is driven by permanent migration to the cities. This misleading refrain is enhanced by the argument that the perpetuation of internal migration was an apartheid-era phenomenon that would phase out with the lifting of internal controls on mobility. However, Posel (2004: 277) found that,

... in post-apartheid South Africa, it may have been expected that circular or temporary internal labour migration would have been replaced by the permanent settlement of Africans at places of employment. However, the evidence suggests that temporary internal labour migration in the country has not declined; rather it appears to have increased, particularly because of the rise in female labour migration.

More recently, the essays in Bank et al. (2020) show that a large proportion of South Africa's population remain "double rooted" – living in urban areas, but with access to a rural homestead to which they periodically return.

Second, researchers and policymakers in South Africa typically reserve the term "migration" to describe the cross-border movement of individuals and families from other countries, a practice that minimizes and marginalizes the reality of internal migration where movements are less restricted and subject to government monitoring and regulation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the plight of internal migrants in other countries, as governments imposed new restrictions on



internal mobility. In South Africa, the pandemic lockdown had a dramatic impact on internal migrants, although the extent of pandemic-related return to the Eastern Cape from Cape Town and Johannesburg was relatively limited. Finally, studies of the impact of the pandemic on the food security of vulnerable South Africans also fail to distinguish between non-migrants and migrants. As a result, migration status is not considered an explanatory variable that deserves collecting data or considered in analyses of pandemic impacts.

This is one of the first studies to examine the livelihood disruptions and food insecurity experience of internal migrants in South African cities during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis in this article shows that the pandemic had a measurable negative impact on the livelihoods and food security of internal migrant households in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg. This finding can now be tested in other contexts, particularly with migrants from source regions outside the Eastern Cape and in smaller secondary city destinations. Further analysis of the data from this survey is also in progress. It is important to assess and model the relationship between dependent variables such as the HFIAP, HDDS, and LPI, and the various individual and household characteristics that emerged in the profile of the migrant population. The article shows that there was considerable variation in both the migrant profile and the outcomes of food security. By modeling the relationship between the two, we will be able to identify which types of households were most vulnerable to food insecurity. This will assist in advance planning for the next pandemic and avoid yet another food security catastrophe (Onyango et al., 2021).

## REFERENCES

- Angu, P., Masiya, T., Gustafsson, K. and Mulu, N. (eds.). 2022. *South African-based African migrants' responses to COVID-19: Strategies, opportunities, challenges and implications*. Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG.
- Arndt, C., Davies, R., Gabriel, S., Harris, L., Makrelov, K., Robinson, S., Levy, S., Simbanegavi, W., Van Seventer, D. and Anderson, L. 2020. COVID-19 lockdowns, income distribution, and food security: An analysis for South Africa. *Global Food Security*, 26: 100410.
- Bank, L., Posel, D. and Wilson, F. (eds.) 2020. *Migrant labour after apartheid: The inside story*. Pretoria: HSRC Press.
- Carlitz, R. and Makhura, N. 2021. Life under lockdown: Illustrating tradeoffs in South Africa's response to COVID-19. *World Development*, 137: 105168.
- Carswell, G., De Neve, G. and Subramanyam, N. 2022. Getting home during lockdown: Migration disruption, labour control and linked lives in India at the time of COVID-19. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(19): 4603–4621.
- Coates, J., Swindale, A. and Bilinsky, P. 2007. Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) for measurement of household food access: Indicator guide (v. 3). Washington, D.C.: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project.
- Espi, G., Leibbrandt, M. and Ranchhod, V. 2021. Age, employment and labour force participation outcomes in COVID-era South Africa. NIDS-CRAM Report, University of Cape Town.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2006). Food security. Policy Brief, Issue 2. FAO. Available at: [https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faitaly/documents/pdf/pdf\\_Food\\_Security\\_Concept\\_Note.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faitaly/documents/pdf/pdf_Food_Security_Concept_Note.pdf).
- Fourie, P. and Lamb, G. (eds.) 2023. *The South African response to COVID-19: The early years*. New York: Routledge.
- Ginsburg, C., Collinson, M. and Gómez-Olivé, F. 2022. The impact of COVID-19 on a cohort of origin residents and internal migrants from South Africa's rural northeast. *SSM Population Health*, 17: 101049.
- Hall, K. and Posel, D. 2019. Fragmenting the family? The complexity of household migration strategies in post-apartheid South Africa. *IZA Journal of Development and Migration*, 10(4): 1–20.
- Hart, T., David, Y., Rule, S., Titivanhu, P. and Mtyingizane, S. 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic reveals an unprecedented rise in hunger: The South African government was ill-prepared to meet the challenge. *Scientific African*, 16: e01169.
- Jesline, J., Romate, J., Rajkumar, E. and George, A. 2021. The plight of migrants during COVID-19 and the impact of circular migration in India: A systematic review. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8: 231.
- Jolad, S. and Shah, S. 2022. Food security and psychological distress of migrants during COVID-19 lockdown. In Rajan, S.I. (ed.), *India migration report*

- 2021: *Migrants and health*. New York: Routledge.
- Köhler, T., Bhorat, H., Hill, R. and Stanwix, B. 2023. Lockdown stringency and employment formality: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. *Journal for Labour Market Research*, 57: 3.
- Kumar, N., Udah, H., Francis, A., Singh, S. and Wilson, A. 2022. Indian migrant workers' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic nationwide lockdown. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 51(5): 911–931.
- Leroy, J., Ruel, M., Frongillo, E., Harris, J. and Ballard, T. 2015. Measuring the food access dimension of food security: A critical review and mapping of indicators. *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 36(2): 167–195.
- Luthra, A., Chaturvedi, B. and Kvilauth, J. 2024. Poverty, provisioning and the pandemic: Income and food insecurity among waste picker households during the 2020 lockdown in Delhi. *Urbanisation*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/24557471241226749>.
- Martin, S. and Bergmann, J. 2021. (Im)mobility in the age of COVID-19. *International Migration Review*, 55(3): 660–687.
- Mishra, K. and Rampal, J. 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic and food insecurity: A viewpoint on India. *World Development*, 135: 105068.
- Moses, M. and Woolard, I. 2023. The role of temporary social grants in mitigating the poverty impact of COVID-19 in South Africa. In Fourie, P. and Lamb, G. (eds.), *The South African response to COVID-19: The early years*. New York: Routledge, pp. 156–177.
- Mukumbang, F., Ambe, A. and Adebeyi, B. 2020. Unspoken inequality: How COVID-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 19: 141.
- Ngavara, S. 2022. Empirical analysis on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity in South Africa. *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*, 127: 103180.
- Odunitan-Wayas, F., Alaba, O. and Lambert, E. 2021. Food insecurity and social injustice: The plight of urban poor African immigrants in South Africa during the COVID-19 crisis. *Global Public Health*, 16: 149–152.
- Onyango, E., Crush, J. and Owuor, S. 2021. Preparing for COVID-19: Household food insecurity and vulnerability to shocks in Nairobi, Kenya. *PLoS ONE*, 16(11): e0259139.
- Posel, D. 2004. Have migration patterns in post-apartheid South Africa changed? *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 15(3–4): 277–292.
- Posel, D. and Casale, D. 2021. Moving during times of crisis: Migration, living arrangements and COVID-19 in South Africa. *Scientific African*, 13: e00926.
- Posel, D. and Hunter, M. 2022. Living alone in the age of freedom: The paradox of solo households in post-apartheid South Africa. *Population, Space and Place*, 28: e2593.
- Posel, D., Hall, K. and Goagoses, L. 2023. Going beyond female-headed households:

- Household composition and gender differences in poverty. *Development Southern Africa*, 40: 1117–1134.
- Presidency of South Africa. 2021. Development of a country report on the measures implemented to combat the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Pretoria: Presidency.
- Rahaman, M., Roy, A., Chouhan, P., Das, K. and Rana, M. 2021. Risk of COVID-9 transmission and livelihood challenges of stranded migrant labourers during lockdown in India. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 64: 787–802.
- Rajan, S.I. and Bhagat, R. 2022. Internal migration and the COVID-19 pandemic in India. In Triandafyllidou, A. (ed.), *Migration and pandemics: Spaces of solidarity and spaces of exception*. Cham: Springer, pp. 227–248.
- Rajan, S.I., Sivakumar, P. and Srinivasan, A. 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and internal migration in India: A “crisis of mobility.” *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 63: 1021–1039.
- Ramachandran, S., Crush, J., Tawodzera, G. and Onyango, E. 2024. Pandemic precarity, crisis-living and food insecurity of female Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. In McAuliffe, M. and Bauloz, C. (eds.), *Research handbook on migration, gender and COVID-19*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 180–195.
- Ranchhod, V. and Daniels, R. 2021. Labour market dynamics in South Africa at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. *South African Journal of Economics*, 89: 44–62.
- Ravula, P., Kasala, K. and Tay, S. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on food security: Insights from Telangana, India. *Agricultural Economics Research Review*, 33(167): 167–168.
- Rogan, M. 2016. Qualitative perceptions of the meaning of “headship” and female-headed households in post-apartheid South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 42(1): 175–195.
- Sengupta, S. and Jha, M. 2020. Social policy, COVID-19 and impoverished migrants: Challenges and prospects in locked down India. *International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2): 152–172.
- Shifa, M., Gordon, D., Leibbrandt, M. and Zhang, M. 2022. Socioeconomic-related inequalities in COVID-19 vulnerability in South Africa. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19: 10480.
- Skinner, C., Barrett, J., Alfors, L. and Rogan, M. 2021. [Informal work in South Africa and COVID-19: Gendered impacts and priority interventions](#). WIEGO Policy Brief No. 22, Cape Town.
- Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). 2020a. Behavioural and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria.
- Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). 2020b. Results from Wave 2 survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and income in South Africa. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria.
- Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). 2020c. Social impact of COVID-19 (Wave 3): Mobility, migration, and education. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria.

- Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). 2023. Assessing food inadequacy and hunger in South Africa in 2021 using the general household survey. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria.
- Swindale, A. and Bilinsky, P. 2006. *Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) for measurement of household food access: Indicator Guide (v.2)*. Washington, DC.
- Van der Berg, S., Patel, L. and Bridgman, G. 2021. Food insecurity in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5. *Development Southern Africa*, 39: 722–737.
- Visagie, J. and Turok, I. 2021. Rural-urban inequalities amplified by COVID-19: Evidence from South Africa. *Area Development and Policy*, 6: 50–62.