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National Poverty Lines

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KEY FINDINGS

Changes in the cost of living (i.e. price changes for goods and services) requires that Stats SA make regular adjustments to the national poverty lines (NPLs) to maintain their integrity and relevance over time. The most common change we make is to annually adjust the NPLs using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) series. Table 1 below shows the results of these inflation adjustments and provides the 2026 line values for the three national poverty lines (linked to May 2026 prices).

Table 1: Inflation-adjusted national poverty lines for 2026 (per person per month in rands)

Poverty line	2026 line values
Food poverty line (FPL)	868
Lower-bound poverty line (LBPL)	1 457
Upper-bound poverty line (UBPL)	2 962

The national poverty lines were constructed using the Cost of Basic Needs (CoBN) approach which links welfare to the consumption of goods and services. The lines contain both food and non-food components of household consumption expenditure.

- *Food poverty line* – **R868** (in May 2026 prices) per person per month. This refers to the amount of money that an individual will need to afford the minimum required daily energy intake. This is also commonly referred to as the “extreme” poverty line;
- *Lower-bound poverty line* – **R1 457** (in May 2026 prices) per person per month. This refers to the food poverty line plus the average amount derived from non-food items of households whose total expenditure is equal (or near) to the food poverty line; and
- *Upper-bound poverty line* – **R2 962** (in May 2026 prices) per person per month. This refers to the food poverty line plus the average amount derived from non-food items of households whose food expenditure is equal (or near) to the food poverty line.

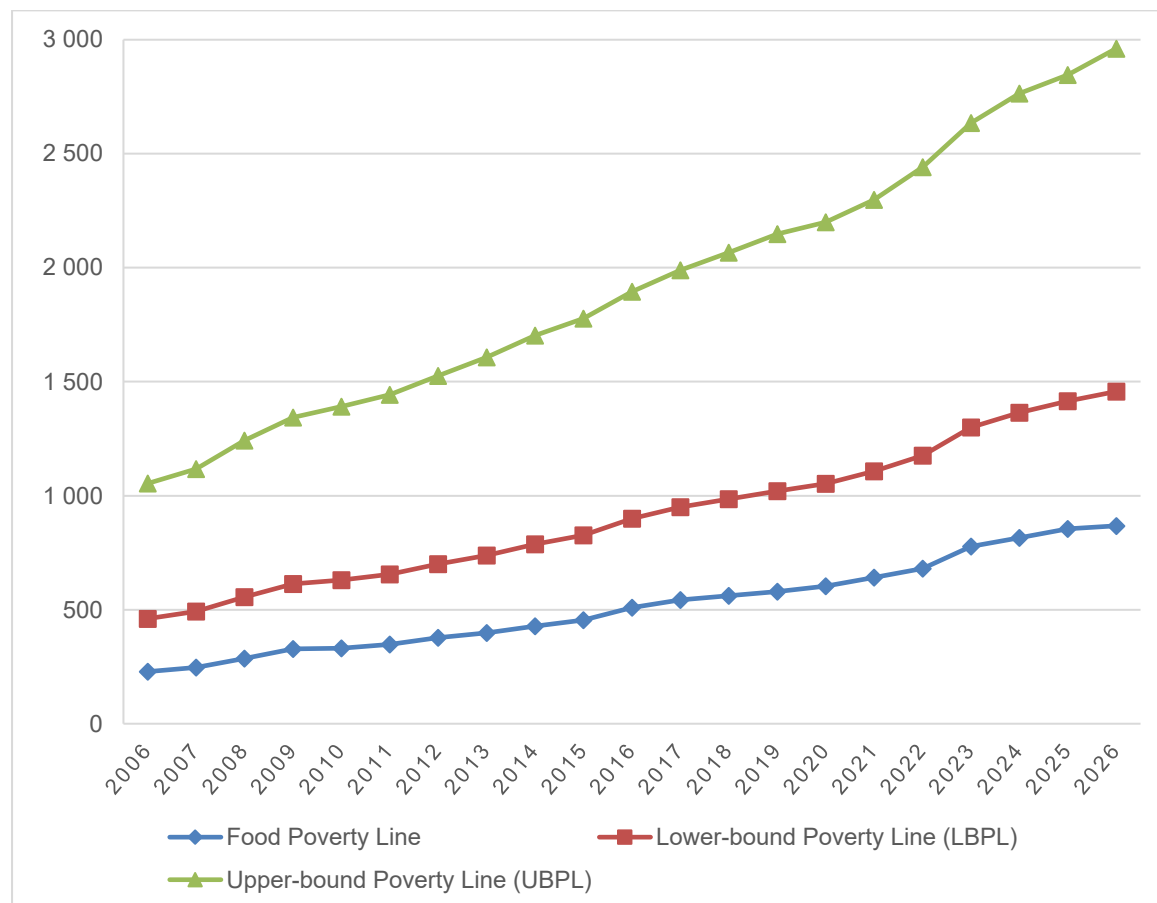
Table 2 and Figure 1 show the inflation-adjusted NPL series for the period 2006 to 2026. The poverty line series was rebased in 2025 using new household expenditure data sourced from the Income & Expenditure Survey (IES) 2022/23.

Table 2: Inflation-adjusted national poverty lines, 2006 to 2026 (per person per month in rands)

Year	Food Poverty Line (FPL)	Lower-bound Poverty Line (LBPL)	Upper-bound Poverty Line (UBPL)
2006	228	461	1 054
2007	247	492	1 118
2008	286	555	1 242
2009	328	614	1 344
2010	331	629	1 391
2011	348	656	1 443
2012	377	701	1 526
2013	398	739	1 608
2014	429	787	1 703
2015	454	827	1 777
2016	510	900	1 896
2017	544	951	1 989
2018	562	985	2 066
2019	579	1 021	2 148
2020	603	1 053	2 199
2021	641	1 108	2 299
2022	680	1 176	2 441
2023	777	1 300	2 635
2024	816	1 364	2 764
2025	855	1 415	2 846
2026	868	1 457	2 962

Note: Due to varying survey midpoints, the reference month used for the lines will also vary. Poverty lines between 2006 and 2014 are linked to March prices of those respective years, while lines between 2015 and 2022 are linked to April prices. The lines between 2023 and 2026 are linked to May prices.

Figure 1: Inflation-adjusted national poverty lines, 2006 to 2026 (per person per month in rands)




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EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. Background

Poverty lines are important tools that allow for the statistical reporting of poverty levels and patterns, as well as the planning, monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction programmes and policies. In 2007, Stats SA was officially tasked by government to establish a threshold that could be used in standardising the money-metric measurement of poverty for the country. After extensive stakeholder consultations, expert engagements, and several discussion documents on the appropriate approach for poverty measurement in South Africa, Stats SA published the country's first official national poverty lines in 2012. Three poverty lines were produced, namely the food poverty line (FPL), lower-bound poverty line (LBPL), and upper-bound poverty line (UBPL). Stats SA adopted the internationally recognised Cost of Basic Needs (CoBN) approach to construct these lines which links welfare to the consumption of goods and services.

The first set of national poverty lines were developed in 2008 based on the results of the Income & Expenditure Survey (IES) 2000. These lines became known as the NPL 2000 Series given that they were benchmarked to the expenditure profile sourced from the IES 2000. The construction of these lines was documented in a technical report entitled "Measuring poverty in South Africa: Methodological report on the development of the poverty lines for statistical reporting" (D0300) that was completed in 2008; however, this technical report and subsequent lines were only officially published by the organisation in 2012 in preparation for the first Poverty Trends Report (PTR) that was released in 2014.

In line with international standards to rebase national poverty lines at least once every ten years, Stats SA published rebased poverty lines – the NPL 2011 Series – in 2015. These new lines were benchmarked to the expenditure profile of the IES 2010/11 and their construction was documented in a technical report entitled "Methodological report on rebasing of national poverty lines and development of pilot provincial poverty lines" (Report No. 03-10-11). In 2025, Stats SA again rebased the country's poverty lines using the latest household expenditure data available from the IES 2022/23. This new NPL 2023 Series was developed in preparation for the PTR 2025 which was published in December 2025. This rebasing was done in partnership with the World Bank and a joint technical report entitled "Methodological report on the rebasing of the national poverty lines using the Income & Expenditure Survey 2022/23" (Report No. 03-10-30) documents the methodological processes followed, as well as all the improvements and changes adopted.

While the original NPL 2000 Series was linked to March prices of their respective years, this standard changed in 2015 to April prices to align with the midpoint of the Living Conditions Survey (LCS) 2014/15 (previous IES and LCS surveys had March as their midpoints). As household expenditure surveys like the IES and LCS collect detailed income and expenditure information over a two-year reference period, this data needs to be price adjusted (i.e. inflated/deflated using CPI) to the respective survey's midpoint to allow for proper comparison and analysis. The midpoint for the IES 2022/23 is May 2023, and thus, all income and expenditure data linked to the survey has been inflated/deflated to May 2023 prices accordingly. Therefore, as was done in 2015, the NPL series as from 2023 had to also be adjusted to a new reference month, namely May.

Stats SA is currently reviewing its household survey programme as part of the development of a new Continuous Population Survey (CPS) that will include the IES and LCS. Thus, future collection of detailed household income and expenditure data through the CPS programme could result in a new permanent midpoint being established, most likely June if the CPS is structured to run in annual cycles linked to the calendar year. If that does occur, June would become the default reference month for the NPL series moving forward. However, to allow for the application of the NPLs to generate poverty estimates from previous IES and LCS data points, those reference months would need to still be linked to their relevant midpoints in March, April, or May.

2. Purpose of the national poverty lines

The primary purpose of the national poverty lines is to provide a tool for the statistical measurement of money-metric poverty. More specifically, the NPLs were developed to:

- a) Provide a consistent and constant benchmark against which progress on a money-metric/expenditure-based dimension of poverty can be monitored;
- b) Improve the country's ability to target developmental policies and programmes, both towards specific groups and/or regions (through determining the poverty profile); and
- c) Increase knowledge production for policy development and reform around poverty reduction and eradication.

It is important to note that the national poverty lines were not designed to be used for:

- Determination of equitable share to provinces
- Setting the national minimum wage
- Determining eligibility thresholds
- Determining the amount to be paid for social grants

Nevertheless, the NPLs can help inform and serve as a data input into some of these processes in ways that could create pro-poor dimensions.

3. Adjustments to the national poverty lines

Changes in the cost of goods and services, as well as changes in household consumption patterns are both key elements that need to be accounted for during maintenance of the NPLs. Both are expected to change over time, although in different ways and at different rates (for example, the cost of goods and services tends to change more rapidly and frequently compared to household consumption patterns). As time goes on, changes in the cost of living affect the purchasing power or value implied by the poverty lines. Therefore, to maintain the integrity of the NPLs, two types of updates are required,

namely (1) adjustment by means of an inflation index and (2) construction of new poverty lines (i.e. rebasing).

The construction of new poverty lines is generally done once every 10 years or when there are notable changes observed in household consumption patterns. The latest rebasing of the NPLs was done using IES 2022/23 data to create the NPL 2023 Series. Since this rebasing, Stats SA has used the CPI series to make annual price adjustments to the NPL series to ensure they are reflective of current prices (Section 4 goes into further detail about the most recent rebasing).

Because food and non-food prices do not always move in tandem with each other (that is, in the same direction and by the same magnitude), each component of the poverty line is adjusted separately. Meaning that the food portion of the NPLs is adjusted using the CPI for food items and the non-food portion of the NPLs (which only applies to the LBPL and UBPL) are adjusted using a CPI of non-food items.

4. Development of the national poverty lines

Following the release of the IES 2022/23 results, Stats SA initiated a process in partnership with the World Bank to rebase the three national poverty lines (FPL, LBPL and UBPL) to bring them in line with the latest household expenditure data, as well as other methodological improvements based on recent literature. The need for rebasing the national poverty lines emanates from the fact that spending and consumption patterns change over time. This means the basket of goods and services on which the existing poverty lines were based may have changed, making it necessary to update estimates using recent consumption data in order to make sure that the lines remain relevant and accurate. In this way, the official poverty lines used in South Africa take account of changing needs, preferences, and social conditions. Rebasing also allows for the calculation of poverty lines based on improved sampling frames and data collection methods.

4.1 Construction of the food reference basket

To establish a poverty threshold in monetary terms to distinguish the poor from the non-poor, it is necessary to cost a basket of goods and services that represent the essential basic needs of individuals. Beginning with food, data from the IES 2022/23 revealed that food preferences vary widely across South African households, influenced by factors such as geographic location and income level. A total of 375 food items were recorded in the survey, demonstrating that the normative daily caloric requirement for an individual can be met through a broad variety of food bundles. This diversity necessitates the construction of a reference food basket that reflects food items consumed by a typical poor household in South Africa. Therefore, the process of constructing the reference food basket for this exercise involved three main steps.

The first step involved identifying the reference population – households whose consumption behaviour will anchor the cost of basic needs. In the CoBN approach, this reference group is typically drawn from households around the lower part of the consumption distribution so as to reflect “typical poor”

consumption patterns rather than the overall average household. This is important because even when caloric intake remains constant, household food expenditure varies: higher-income households tend to spend more per calorie due to their preference for branded, convenient, and/or premium products. At the other end, using the poorest decile (i.e. decile 1) as part of the reference group can bias the poverty basket and line because their observed consumption often reflects acute deprivation, measurement noise, and atypical coping strategies rather than “typical poor” needs. As such, households within per capita expenditure deciles 2 to 6 were chosen as the reference population to derive a food basket that meets minimum caloric requirements based on actual diets of a typical poor household.

The second step involved selecting food items that are commonly consumed by the reference group of households identified above. The same criterion used in compiling the CPI basket of goods and services was applied. A food item qualified for inclusion if it (1) accounted for at least 0,5 percent of total food consumption expenditure and (2) was consumed by at least 10 percent of total households. Using this criterion, 34 food items were selected, representing approximately 77 percent of total food consumption expenditure for households in consumption per capita deciles 2 to 6.

In the third step, attention was given to ensuring that the reference food basket accurately represents consumption patterns across different settlement types, including urban areas, traditional areas, and farm areas. Using the same selection criteria applied in the second step, but now for each settlement type individually, five additional items – spaghetti/macaroni/pasta, instant noodles, cheese, sweet biscuits/cookies, and dried beans – were incorporated into the reference food basket due to their significant importance in specific locales. For example, spaghetti/macaroni/pasta, instant noodles, cheese and sweet biscuits/cookies were notably prevalent in urban areas, while dried beans were more commonly consumed in traditional and farm areas. The inclusion of these five additional items expanded the reference food basket to encompass 39 food items in total.

Moreover, to ensure nutritional diversity and to reflect widely consumed items, seven additional food products – samp, apples, bananas, instant/powdered coffee, Russian sausages, fruit juices, and powdered cream – were also incorporated into the reference food basket, despite not meeting the original expenditure threshold of 0,5%. However, each of these items did meet the second criteria of being consumed by over 10 percent of households. Ultimately, the final food reference basket comprised 46 items as shown in Table 3, representing roughly 90% of total food consumption for households in consumption per capita deciles 2 to 6.

The 2023 reference food basket shown in Table 3 contains a wide range of food groups, including cereals and grain products; meat, fish, poultry and their products; beverages; oils and fats; fruits and vegetables; milk, eggs and other dairy products; and other food items such as sugar, soup powders, and so forth. It is important to note that the basket presented below does not represent a recommended food plan for the South African population. It is simply an analytical tool based on the criteria specified above for selecting food items that are representative of food consumption patterns as reported in IES 2022/23.

Table 3: The 2023 reference food basket based on the IES 2022/23

Food Category	Food Item Description
Cereals and cereal products	Rice
	Cake wheat flour
	Mealie meal
	Samp
	Brown bread
	White bread
	Sweet biscuits / cookies
	Breakfast cereal
	Spaghetti / macaroni / pasta
	Instant noodles
Meat, fish, poultry and their products	Beef
	Poultry
	Poultry offal
	Chicken (heads and feet)
	Boerewors
	Polony
	Russian sausages
	Canned fish
Milk, eggs, and other dairy products	Fresh full cream milk
	Long life full cream milk
	Powdered cream
	Cheese
	Yoghurt
	Sour milk
	Eggs
Oils and fats	Cooking oil
	Margarine
Fruits and nuts	Bananas
	Apples
Vegetables, tubers, plantains, bananas, and pulses	Cabbage
	Tomatoes
	Onions and shallots
	Pumpkin
	Potatoes
	Dried beans
	Canned beans
	Potato crisps

Food Category	Food Item Description
Sugars, confectionery, and desserts	White sugar
	Brown sugar
Ready-made food and other food products n.e.c.	Mayonnaise
	Soup powder
Fruit and vegetable juices	Fruit juice
	Concentrated fruit / vegetable juices
Coffee and coffee substitutes	Instant coffee
	Ceylon / black tea
Soft drinks	Aerated / soft drinks

4.2 The food poverty line

While food is undeniably a fundamental necessity, establishing a consumption threshold is essential to determine whether an individual is experiencing food deprivation. A baseline of 2 100 kilocalories (kcal) per day recommended to meet the energy requirements of an average adult engaged in light physical activity was adopted. This threshold of 2 100 kcal mirrors the standard used in the 2015 rebasing exercise based on the IES 2010/11.

To determine the food poverty line, the cost of acquiring 2 100 kcal per person per day was estimated utilising the reference food basket. This estimation required three essential data inputs, namely (1) the quantity of each food item consumed, (2) the caloric value of each item (per 100 grams), and (3) its price (per 100 grams). Due to the absence of food quantity data in the IES 2022/23, Stats SA utilized monthly food price data at national level to derive consumption quantities. The price dataset includes detailed descriptions of each food item, its corresponding price, and the associated quantity in grams, kilograms, milliliters, or liters. Therefore, to estimate consumption quantities, reported household consumption expenditure for each food item was divided by the unit price (per 100g) as provided in the price data. This approach enabled the calculation of quantities consumed. Caloric information was obtained from the South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) food composition tables, while the price data was sourced from Stats SA's own collection efforts for CPI computation purposes.

Drawing upon these foundational data inputs, the analytical process determined that the reference food basket provides a total of 442 015 kcal per person per year. This equates to an average daily intake of 1 211 kilocalories per person, at a monthly expenditure of R457, or R14.72 per day. Given that the observed caloric intake of 1 211 kcal is significantly below the recommended threshold of 2 100 kcal per day, a proportional adjustment was applied. By scaling the expenditure in accordance with the required energy intake, the cost necessary to achieve nutritional adequacy was derived. Consequently, the food poverty line was established at R777 per person per month, reflecting a cost of R25.90 per kilocalorie per day.

4.3 The lower-bound and upper-bound poverty lines

It is important to recognize that basic needs extend beyond mere sustenance. Food alone does not define poverty. People also require access to basic non-food necessities such as shelter, healthcare, clothing, transportation, and education. To account for these, Stats SA estimates two broader poverty thresholds: the LBPL and the UBPL. Unlike food consumption, there are no universal benchmarks for non-food thresholds to classify individuals as poor. Therefore, using a methodology adapted from Ravallion (1998), two reference groups of households were identified. The averaged median non-food consumption expenditure of each reference group of households was added to the food line to produce the LBPL and the UBPL.

It is crucial to understand the rationale behind these poverty lines by recognizing the delicate balance between essential food and non-food expenditures. The LBPL reflects a very conservative assumption about essential non-food (i.e. very basic clothing, shelter, health, transport). These households are so resource-constrained that any non-food spending implies sacrificing some food intake. The UBPL reflects a more generous assumption about essential non-food spending. These households do achieve the food threshold and reveal the minimum non-food spending commonly needed alongside it.

The LBPL was therefore established by incorporating the averaged median non-food consumption expenditure of households whose total spending approximates the food poverty line. Following the methodology set forth by Ravallion, this averaged median is determined by considering households whose total consumption expenditure falls within a range of 10% above and below the food poverty line. The analysis was conducted by increasing the interval in successive 1% steps up to a maximum of 10%. The median non-food consumption expenditures of households within each incremental band were then averaged to derive the lower-bound figure. The underlying assumption is that these households must economize on basic food necessities, thereby subsisting on survival foods to be able to cover only essential non-food items; thus, their non-food expenditure is indicative of the minimum essential spending on non-food basic needs. Using this methodology, the average non-food expenditure at the midpoint of the IES 2022/23 survey period (May 2023) was R523 per capita per month which, when added to the food poverty line (R777), yields a LBPL of R1 300 per person per month.

The UBPL was derived similarly, albeit with a different reference group of households: those whose food (rather than total) consumption expenditures closely align with the food poverty line. The UBPL was established by averaging the non-food expenditures of households whose food expenditure falls within a range of 10% above and below the food poverty line. The analysis was conducted by increasing the interval in successive 1% steps up to a maximum of 10%. This threshold operates under the premise that these households can adequately sustain their daily energy intake, thus their non-food expenditures represent merely adequate survival costs. For these households, the averaged median non-food consumption expenditure was found to be R1 858 per person per month. Adding this to the food poverty line (R777) gives an UBPL of R2 635 per person per month in 2023.

For further information regarding the construction and rebasing of the national poverty lines, please refer to Report No. 03-10-30 entitled “Methodological report on the rebasing of the national poverty lines using the Income & Expenditure Survey 2022/23”.

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