

Surviving on the margins: The impact of COVID-19 on food security among internal migrants in slum communities of Accra

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated vulnerabilities among marginalised populations worldwide, particularly in urban settings. Grounded in crisis and vulnerability theories and frameworks, the paper explores how systemic inequalities and public health shocks heightened food insecurity and induced diverse coping strategies among internal migrants in Accra. Using a survey of 100 migrants from Old Fadama and Agbogbloshie as well as interviews with four migrants and an assemblyman, this paper analyses food security trends across three time periods: pre-COVID, during COVID and post-COVID, allowing for a comparative analysis of food security across these phases. The study finds that the economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 disproportionately affected these migrants, leading to a range of coping strategies including reducing meal portions, purchasing food on credit, and relying on less expensive foods. While food security showed slight improvement post-pandemic, it remained below pre-COVID-19 levels. The study underscores the inadequacy of formal social protection programmes and, in some cases, the structural exclusion of migrants from these interventions, further deepening their vulnerability. By combining a three-period application of the USDA 18-item scale with qualitative interviews among internal migrants in two slum communities in Accra, the study advances understanding of food security among this group in urban Ghana. It reveals how changes in food security are linked to coping strategies and barriers to formal support, thereby informing the design of crisis-responsive social protection programmes that target migrants' specific needs in the city.

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Introduction

Food security remains a critical challenge in many developing countries, particularly in urban informal settlements where internal migrants face economic and social vulnerabilities. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines food security as a condition in which all individuals 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 et al., 2022). However, for internal migrants in slum communities, achieving food security is hindered by precarious employment, low wages, and limited access to social protection programmes (Codjoe et al., 2016; Blekking et al., 2020). These challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global and local food supply chains, intensified unemployment, and reduced household purchasing power (Smith & Wesselbaum 2020; Laborde et al., 2021). In Ghana, the pandemic's restrictions - such as lockdowns, curfews, and market closures - had a significant impact on urban informal economies, worsening food insecurity among slum dwellers, particularly those without stable sources of income (Asante & Mills, 2020; Onyango et al., 2023).

Studies on low-income urban households and residents of informal settlements document heightened food insecurity during COVID-19 and related shocks (Bukari et al., 2022; Dasgupta & Robinson, 2022). Internal migrants face precarious conditions and partial exclusion from formal protection systems (Dauda & Jaha Imoro, 2022; Devereux, 2021). Rather than an unexplored domain, the literature indicates a developing evidence base on the migration-food security nexus in urban Ghana. This study advances that literature by focusing on internal migrants in two of Accra's largest informal settlements, tracking food security across three distinct periods using the validated USDA 18-item household food security scale (Rabbitt et al., 2023). This approach enabled intra-household change detection, and integrated concurrent mixed methods to connect measured shifts in food security with migrants' narrated experiences to strengthen interpretation through triangulation.

Supported by the Migration and Food Security in the Global South (MiFOOD) Project, which aims to design and implement a new and innovative high-impact global research and knowledge mobilisation agenda focused on neglected interactions between migration and food security, this paper aims to assess the extent of food insecurity among internal migrants in Accra's slum communities during the pre-, during and post-COVID-19 pandemic to understand the impact of the pandemic on these vulnerable migrants. It further explores the coping mechanisms adopted by internal migrants to mitigate food shortages and economic hardships. By focusing on these dimensions, the study provides insights into how vulnerable urban populations manage food insecurity in the wake of external shocks.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both academic discourse and policy formulation by providing time-sequenced evidence on internal migrants' food

security in Accra's slums, linking measured status changes to coping behaviours and exclusion mechanisms in social protection. Understanding the intersection of internal migration, urban food security, and pandemic-induced economic shocks is essential for designing more inclusive policies that enhance urban resilience.

Theoretical conceptualisation and literature review

Structural vulnerability and crises theories and frameworks (Caplan, 1964; Hobbs, 1975; Moser, 1998; Wisner et al., 2004; Fineman, 2017) provide critical insights into the precarious conditions of internal migrants in urban slums, highlighting their susceptibility to food insecurity during global shocks as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand how systemic shocks map onto marginalised spaces, structural crisis models examine how sudden, disruptive macro-events overwhelm localised socio-economic coping mechanisms, leading to institutional instability, deep-seated household distress and increased vulnerability. Within this dynamic, a macro-crisis may be temporary, but its structural consequences can become intergenerationally entrenched if marginalised populations fail to receive adequate external support or lack the structural capacity to adapt effectively (Caplan, 1964). Governmental and non-governmental responses - such as food aid programmes and social protection policies - play a crucial role in mitigating crises' long-term consequences (Hobbs, 1975). However, studies have shown that in Ghana, internal migrants often fall through the cracks of formal social protection programmes, further deepening their vulnerability during crises (Dauda & Jaha Imoro, 2022).

The Vulnerability Theory, developed by Fineman (2017), asserts that all individuals are inherently vulnerable, but some populations experience heightened vulnerability due to structural inequalities, systemic disadvantages, and inadequate support systems. Unlike traditional economic models that focus on individual agency and resilience, this theory emphasises the role of institutions and policies in either mitigating or exacerbating vulnerability. The theory challenges neoliberal narratives of self-sufficiency, arguing that reliance on social networks or informal coping mechanisms is insufficient in addressing deep-rooted inequalities. This aligns with findings from earlier studies that observed that despite informal support systems in Ghanaian urban slums, food insecurity persisted due to the lack of institutionalised social protection for informal workers (Corburn et al., 2020; Aberese-Ako et al., 2022; Ilori et al., 2024).

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework, illustrating how the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures worsened food insecurity among internal migrants in Accra's slum communities. Based on the Vulnerability Theory, the framework views COVID-19 as a public health emergency that triggers economic disruptions — job and income losses, supply chain interruptions, and price inflation — limiting food affordability, availability and access. This, in turn, affects household food security. Institutional and social support systems such as public transfers, NGO and faith-based assistance, employer relief,

community networks and remittances play a crucial role in enhancing households' coping capacity and food security outcomes. We argue that migration status influences access to these support systems due to factors such as eligibility, documentation requirements and weaker local ties, indirectly shaping coping strategies and food security. Consequently, differences in food security between indigenes and migrants are determined by access to support and context, rather than inherent group characteristics.

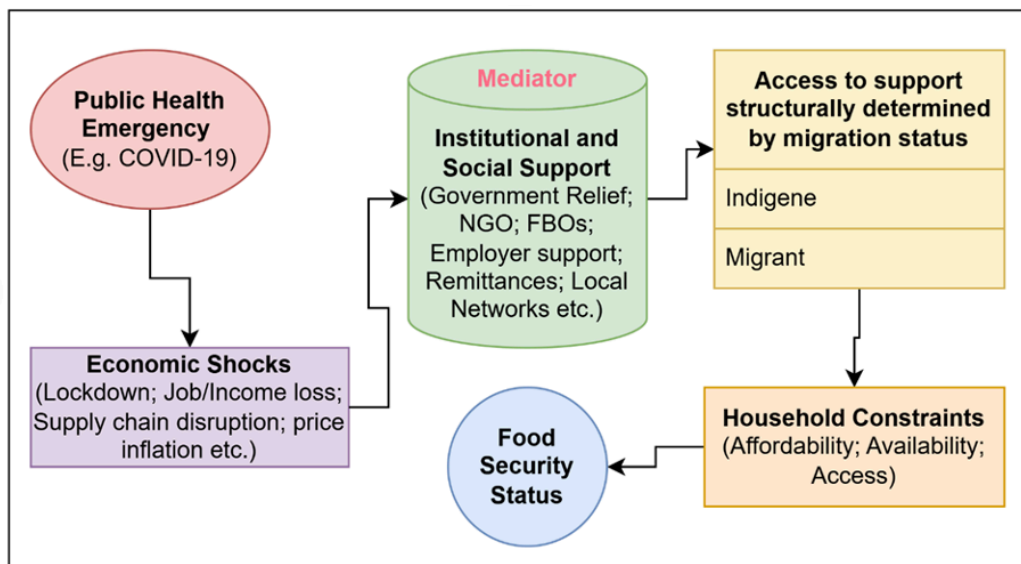


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study

Food security and migration have been widely studied across various regions, with many scholars drawing on crisis and vulnerability theories to explain how different groups cope with shocks. Globally, research has shown that economic crises, pandemics and natural disasters disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including migrants (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2023). Ahmed et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review on food insecurity among international migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that financial hardships resulting from lockdown measures significantly reduced migrants' ability to access food, exacerbating their vulnerability. Similarly, a study by Payán et al. (2022) in the United States demonstrated that low-income migrant households were among the hardest hit by pandemic-induced job losses, with food bank reliance increasing substantially among this group. These findings align with the Vulnerability Theory (Fineman, 2017), which posits that certain populations, due to structural inequalities, are inherently more susceptible to crises.

In Europe and Asia, research further confirms that food insecurity among migrants is not solely a result of income loss but also of restrictive policies. For example, a study by Petetin (2020) in the UK highlighted that COVID-19 lockdowns disproportionately affected undocumented migrants who lacked access to formal food assistance programmes. Likewise, work by Fang et al. (2022) in China showed that rural-to-urban migrants faced significant food insecurity due to disruptions in supply chains and

limited government assistance. These studies reinforce Caplan's (1964) Crisis Theory, which suggests that the sudden onset of crises - such as a public health emergency - can create situations where individuals and households struggle to adapt, particularly when institutional support is lacking.

Within the African region, similar patterns emerge. Ayuba et al. (2023) examined internal migration and food security in Nigerian cities, finding that internal migrants, particularly those in informal employment, struggled to maintain food security during the pandemic due to rising food prices and unstable incomes. The study emphasised that migrants' informal status often excluded them from government relief programmes. Additionally, research by Tawodzera and Crush (2022) on urban food security in South Africa found that migrant households were more food insecure than native-born households, as they lacked the social and economic networks that could cushion them from economic shocks. These findings highlight the role of social capital in shaping food security outcomes, an aspect that is particularly relevant in the Ghanaian context. Further studies emphasise the severity of the COVID-19 lockdowns on city dwellers particularly for slum dwellers and informal workers, whose food access depended on daily market activity and casual labour income (Asante et al., 2020; Resnick, 2020). Multi-country evidence across sub-Saharan Africa shows that lockdown-induced income losses significantly increased food insecurity, with cash safety nets proving more effective than food aid in mitigating the effects (Dasgupta et al., 2021; Egger et al., 2021; Maredia et al., 2022).

In Ghana, several studies have investigated the intersection of migration, food security, and vulnerability. Dauda & Jaha Imoro (2022) found that urban migrants in Ghana's informal settlements faced higher levels of food insecurity due to precarious employment and exclusion from social protection mechanisms. Similarly, Onyango et al. (2023) demonstrated that low-income urban households in Ghana experienced heightened food insecurity due to market closures and reduced household incomes, forcing them to rely on informal credit and food-sharing networks. They further showed that economic factors particularly, the impact of the pandemic on wage income, were far more important predictors of food insecurity than household demographic characteristics. A report by FAO et al. (2022) confirmed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, food security in urban Ghana deteriorated, with internal migrants being disproportionately affected due to their exclusion from government assistance programmes. These studies reinforce the idea that internal migrants in Ghana's slums faced systemic vulnerabilities that were exacerbated by the crisis, making food insecurity a key survival challenge.

Asante et al. (2020) documented the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 measures in Ghanaian marketplaces, including increased food prices, economic hardships associated with lockdowns, and the forceful relocation of traders, all of which compounded food insecurity among informal market workers. Boadi and Billah (2024) further confirmed that the pandemic had a severe and disproportionate impact on informal urban settlers in Ghana, reinforcing existing social inequalities. Regarding migration dynamics in Accra, studies document how rural-to-urban migration, particularly from Northern Ghana,

is driven by livelihood aspirations and economic push factors (Yeboah, 2021; Turolla & Hoffmann 2023). Migrants engage in a wide range of informal activities, including working as head porters (*kayayei*), petty traders, and market workers and they also rely heavily on social networks for settlement support (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008). These structural features, informality, precarious incomes and weak institutional ties constitute the vulnerability context within which COVID-19 impacts on food security must be understood.

This paper builds on the existing body of work by focusing specifically on internal migrants in Accra's slum communities, an underexplored group in food security research. By examining their coping strategies and the role of social networks in mitigating economic shocks, this paper contributes new empirical evidence to the broader discourse on migration and food security.

Methods

Study design

The study used primary data collected by the authors in 2023 under the MiFOOD Project supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and partially also by ISSER. The project adopted a concurrent mixed methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore food security challenges among internal migrants in Accra's slum communities. This design was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue, ensuring that statistical insights from structured surveys were complemented by in-depth narratives from qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2015). The quantitative component involved administering structured questionnaires to capture data on food security status, socioeconomic characteristics, and coping mechanisms before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the qualitative component focused on key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs), allowing for a deeper exploration of migrants' lived experiences and adaptive strategies.

The study was conducted in Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama, two densely-populated slum communities in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. These locations were selected due to their high concentration of internal migrants, informal labour dominance, and historical documentation as food insecurity hotspots. Agbogbloshie, a major food market hub, has a large number of low-income settlers, many of whom engage in informal trade. Old Fadama, on the other hand, is home to a diverse group of migrants, particularly from Northern Ghana, making it a relevant case for understanding food security among displaced urban populations.

In terms of participation, a two-stage sampling technique was utilised to ensure representation. First, purposive sampling was used to identify study areas based on high migrant density and documented food insecurity concerns. At the second stage, snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants, as internal migrants in informal settlements are often hard to reach through conventional sampling methods.

A total of 100 internal migrants were surveyed with a near balanced gender parity (51% male and 49% female migrants). The study sampled 100 migrants because it was initially undertaken as a pilot project to be upscaled at a later time. The qualitative component included one (1) key informant interview (KII) with an Assembly Member and four (4) in-depth interviews (IDIs) with migrants (2 males and 2 females) focusing on personal food security and coping experiences.

Data Collection and Analytical Methods

Given the study's focus on human subjects, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ghana's Ethics Committee for the College of Humanities before data collection commenced (ECH 003/23-24). The quantitative data was collected using a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) system, ensuring efficiency and accuracy. The survey employed a single cross-sectional design with retrospective questions, capturing data for three distinct periods: pre-COVID-19, during COVID-19, and post-COVID-19. This approach differs from a panel or repeated cross-sectional study. The questionnaire was structured around the three periods as follows: 1) Pre-COVID-19 – Baseline food security conditions, 2) During COVID-19 – The impact of pandemic restrictions on food access and 3) Post-COVID-19 – Migrants' recovery and resilience strategies.

The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interview guides, allowing for flexibility in capturing participants' perspectives while maintaining a standardised approach. All interviews were recorded (with participant's consent), transcribed and thematically analysed, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework, which involved coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and drawing insights into coping strategies and systemic food security challenges.

Measurement of key variables

This paper adopts the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Household Food Security measurement framework to assess the food insecurity of the internal migrants in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana during the pre- COVID-19, COVID-19, and post- COVID-19 eras, particularly also because it provides detailed questioning style comprising of specific questions for households with children (Rabbitt et al., 2023) which is not uncommon among migrant households. The framework consists of a set of 18 questions, 8 of which were specifically asked if the households included children aged zero to seventeen (0-17). Questions 1-3 and 11-13 are coded as food secure if the response is "never true" and insecure for the other response options. Questions 5, 10, and 17 are coded as food secure if the response is "only 1 or 2 months" and insecure for the other response options. The remaining questions are coded as food secure if the response is "no" and insecure if the response is "yes". Households without children are classified as having low food security if the responses to 3 or more of the first 10 questions suggest food insecurity. They are classified as having very low food security if they report 6 or more food-insecure conditions out of the first 10 questions.

Households with children aged 0-17 years are classified as having low food security if the responses to 3 to 7 of the entire 18-set questions indicate food-insecure conditions ; and they are further classified as having very low food security if they report food-insecure conditions in 8 or more of the entire set of 18 questions (Rabbitt et al., 2023). Continuous forms of food insecurity scores were also generated for the three periods by simply adding the occurrence questions. In cases where the occurrence question has a frequency follow-up question, they were multiplied before the resultant variable (frequency-of-occurrence) were added up to the other occurrence questions to generate the food insecurity score of the households. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used to analyse the quantitative data, identifying associations between food security levels and socio-economic characteristics and the results were presented using tables and charts to highlight key patterns.

Results and Discussion

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

As already indicated, the number of female migrants sampled are almost the same as their male counterparts. This allows for variable comparison for the gender groups. There are slightly older youth aged 26-35 years (60%) than younger youth who are 40% of the total sample. More than half of the migrants have at least Junior High Education while 42% stated that they did not receive any formal education. Nearly 50% of the internal migrant samples have never been married while 42% and 5% are married and cohabiting respectively. According to the data, about 71% of the internal migrants have dependents. About 55% of the migrants have 1-4 children as part of the dependents while 11% have 5 or more children as part of their dependents (Table 1).

The data shows that the internal migrants sampled from the two locations hail from 14 different regions of Ghana. The Northern Region accounts for the largest share of migrant origins (39% by birth; 36% by most recent region of origin), followed by Oti (12%; 14%) and Ashanti (9%; 13%) regions. Other origins include Upper East, Eastern, Central, North-East, Volta, Savannah, Upper West, Western, Bono East, Bono and Western North. This pattern reflects the well-documented north-to-south internal migration stream in Ghana driven by livelihood aspirations (Yeboah, 2021; Rademacher-Schulz et al., 2014; Turolla et al., 2023).

Nearly 70% of the internal migrants received help from someone where they would eventually live in Accra, and this was predominantly from family or relatives already living in the city (86% of those who received help). Migrants predominantly depended on their own savings to finance their migration, with relatives in the hometown (19%) and Accra (15%) providing additional support. This reliance on social networks for settlement aligns with documented patterns in Accra's informal economy, where family ties and community networks play a critical role in migrants' integration and livelihood strategies (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008).

Table 1: Socio-demographic and economic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	51	51.0
Female	49	49.0
Age category of respondent		
Younger youth	40	40.0
Older youth	60	60.0
Highest educational qualification		
None	42	42.0
JHS	24	24.0
SHS	32	32.0
Islamic/Koranic Studies Cert.	2	2.0
Marital status		
Never married	49	49.0
Married	42	42.0
Cohabiting/Consensual	5	5.0
Divorced/Separated	3	3.0
Widowed	1	1.0
Does migrant have dependents?		
Yes	71	71.0
No	29	29.0
Migrant's dependents that are children		
0	24	33.8
1-4	39	54.9
5 and more	8	11.27
Markets that migrants' operations are based		
Agbogbloshie	89	89.0
Kantamanto	13	13.0
Makola	7	7.0
Madina	5	5.0
Other	8	8.0
Household income bracket of migrants (GHS)		
100 – 499	7	7.0
500 – 899	27	27.0
900 – 1500	35	35.0
Above 1500	31	31.0

Most of the internal migrants came to Accra to look for better economic opportunities. Nearly all the migrants (93%) indicated that they were pushed out of their origins to look for better jobs in Accra. Better living conditions were cited by 46%, education by 11%, and family reasons by 6%. A little over 10% (11) of them came for educational purposes while six percent also had family reasons for coming to Accra. These push-pull dynamics are consistent with those documented in other studies of internal migration in Ghana (Yeboah, 2020; Turolla et al., 2023).

As shown in Table 1, the sampled migrants operate their business mainly in Agbogbloshie market (89%), with some operating in Kantamanto (13%), Makola (7%), Madina (5%), and other markets (8%). Activities span a wide range of informal occupations including petty trading (20%), salesperson (13%), food vending (11%), trade or apprenticeship (11%), motorcycle riding (7%), scrap dealing (6%), kayayei head-loading (6%), and other activities (26%). This occupational diversity reflects the heterogeneous nature of Accra's informal economy as documented by Overå (2007). Regarding income, 35% of respondents fall within the GHS 900–1,500 monthly bracket, with 31% reportedly earning GHS 1,500 and above, 27% in the GHS 500–899 range, and only 7% earning below GHS 500 monthly. This observation underscores the extremely constrained economic circumstances of the most vulnerable in the sample.

Table 2 outlines migrants' average expenditure on essential household items. The largest outlays are for food (GHS 282 per week), housing (GHS 175 per month) and health (GHS 67 per month). Migrants spend on average GHS 37 per week on water, GHS 23 on cooking fuel and GHS 54 per month on electricity. Other significant expenses include transportation (GHS 42 per week) and education (GHS 36 per week). These expenditure patterns highlight the precarious economic position of migrants for whom food competes with other non-negotiable household costs, a dynamic well documented in urban informal settlements across sub-Saharan Africa (Blekking et al., 2019; Ilori et al., 2024). Female migrant 2 explains as follows:

“We pay rent every week – from Sunday to Sunday. We pay individually, We contribute GHS10 each to get GHS50 rent weekly. In addition, monthly we pay GHS 20 for electricity bill. We do not pay for water. There is a private bathroom, we pay GHS1 to take our bath each time. All these affect the food we eat. On Saturday when you have no money, you visit your sister and request for GHS 10 for rent.”

Table 2: Average household expenditure on these items (Ghana Cedis)

Expenditure line	Statistics		
	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Avg. expenditure on water (per week)	36.92	5	184
Avg. expenditure on cooking fuel (per week)	22.59	0	210
Avg. expenditure on food (per week)	282.28	14	1000
Avg. expenditure on education (per week)	35.76	0	400
Avg. expenditure on transportation (per week)	42.30	0	470
Avg. expenditure on electricity (per month)	54.1	0	300
Avg. expenditure on health (per month)	66.53	0	500
Avg. expenditure on housing (per month)	175.1	0	700

Food Security and Coping Strategies adopted by the migrants

The findings of this study indicate that food insecurity was a persistent challenge among internal migrants in Accra’s slum communities both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. More than seven in 10 (73%) migrants reported being food insecure before COVID and this increased to almost nine in 10 during COVID (Table 3). Notably, more than half of those who were food secure before the pandemic became food insecure during the pandemic, a pattern consistent with multi-country evidence from sub-Saharan Africa showing sharp increases in food insecurity during the early months of the pandemic followed by a gradual but incomplete recovery (Dasgupta et al., 2022)..While there was a marginal improvement in food security levels in the post-pandemic era, these had not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, highlighting the prolonged effects of the crisis as documented by Hangoma et al. (2024) across nine low- and middle-income countries.

The study further assesses the remittance levels during the three periods of interest and reveals that remittances are in cash and in kind (food items) with more respondents providing support to family and friends than they receive from the family. These remittances are more cash than in kind remittances in the pre-COVID period. More than seven in 10 respondents (74%) sent remittances in cash to family/friends while 23 percent sent remittances in kind. The COVID period witnessed significant reductions in remittances respondents sent in cash (33%) and in kind (7%), reflecting the severe income disruptions experienced by these migrants. This mirrors multi-country evidence showing that pandemic-induced income shocks strained transnational and internal remittance flows (Jafri et al., 2021), with significant implications for migrant-sending households who depended on these transfers. The post-COVID period experienced an increase in remittance sent in cash and in kind but these are lower than the pre-COVID situation (Table 3). These findings align with that of Ayuba et al. (2023) which showed that informal networks, while critical, were often insufficient during widespread crises as Female Migrant 2 reiterates:

“Yes, I do sometimes send them money. Before COVID, I was sending them, but during COVID, I wasn’t and after COVID I sometimes send them. But I don’t have anyone supporting me.”

This was also echoed by Male Migrant 1 in response to family support during the COVID period. He intimates, *“There is nothing like that. I think if there is any help, we are going to talk about, I’m rather the one that they would come to and most of the time I’m not able to get for them, but nobody has...”*

Table 3: Migrants’ food security status and remittance type used before, during and after COVID-19

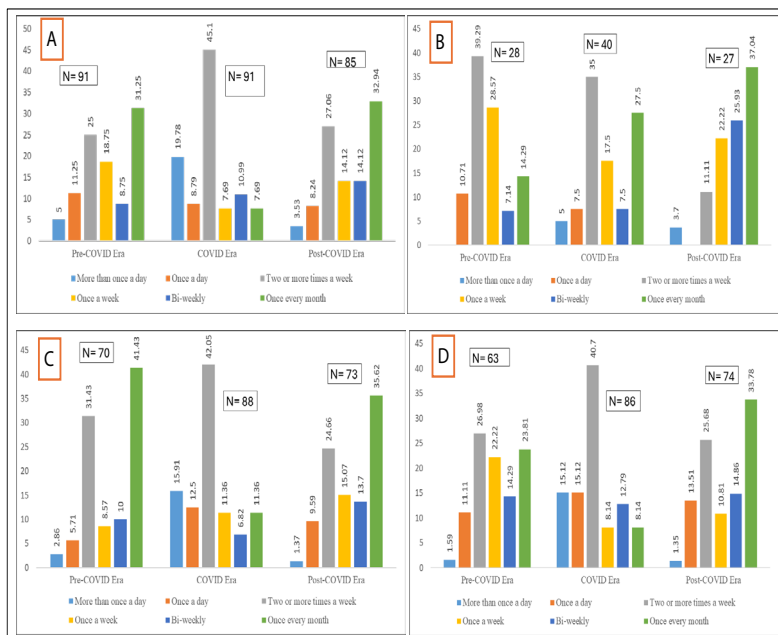
Variable	Pre-COVID	During COVID	Post-COVID
Food security status			
Food secure	26%	10%	16%
Low food security	73%	87%	83%
Very low food security	1%	3%	1%
Remittance type			
Sent Money to family/friends	74%	33%	66%
Received Money from family/friends	12%	16%	10%
Sent food items to family/friends	23%	7%	17%
Received food items from family/friends	10%	9%	10%

Figure 2 (Panels A – D) illustrates the frequency of dominant strategies adopted by migrants who reported food insecurity conditions in their responses to the 18-items across three time periods: pre-COVID-19, during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19. The dominant strategies include shifting consumption towards cheaper and less preferred foods, purchasing food on credit, limiting portion size at mealtime, skipping meals, rationing the household’s money and buying prepared food. Panel A shows that shifting consumption towards cheaper and less nutritious food options occurred two or more times per week during the pandemic, compared to approximately once per month in the pre- and post-COVID periods. This is consistent with evidence from Kenya and Uganda (Kansiime et al., 2020) and from multi-country surveys showing that relying on less preferred foods and reducing meal diversity were the most common COVID-19 coping strategies globally (Jafri et al., 2021; Tabe-Ojong et al., 2022). Panel B shows increased reliance on food credit during COVID-19 and this occurred 2 or more times a week during the pandemic and once every month in the pre-COVID and post-COVID periods. Similar patterns were observed in Nigerian urban areas, where migrants turned to credit purchases as a survival strategy (Ayuba et al., 2023).

Panels C and D document that limiting portion size at mealtime and skipping meals, respectively, intensified markedly during the pandemic, with skipping meals representing a food insecurity response of last resort documented in both West African and global

contexts (Dasgupta et al., 2021; Jafri et al., 2021). Portion rationing also occurred at least once monthly in the pre- and post-COVID periods, increasing to two or more times per week during the pandemic, a pattern mirrored in slum communities in Bangladesh (Das et al., 2020) and in Nepal (Singh et al., 2021).

These findings are corroborated by evidence from other urban informal settlements. In Ghana, Onyango et al. (2023) found that economic factors, particularly pandemic-induced wage and income losses were far more important predictors of food insecurity than demographic characteristics. The food insecurity experience of Accra’s internal migrants also mirrors findings from slum communities in Nigeria, where food-insecure households relied heavily on restrictive coping strategies such as limiting meal portions and reducing daily meal frequency (Ilori et al., 2024).



A - Reliance on less preferred and less expensive foods among internal migrants

B - Purchasing food on credit among internal migrants

C - Limiting portion size at mealtime among internal migrants

D - Reducing the number of meals eaten in a day among internal migrants

Figure 2. Dominant strategies adopted by migrants to cope with food insecurity in the pre-, during and post-COVID eras

The testimonies of respondents reinforce the quantitative findings as noted by the migrants:

“During COVID-19, it was hard to come by food because we had less money that we had to use to manage to pay our utilities and also take care of ourselves. We also had no one helping us, so we were suffering so much. After the lockdown, I moved out to rent, now I pay my utilities and that is why I am finding life difficult now. I can’t buy any quality food and even sometimes I don’t eat.” [Female migrant 1, 2023]

“Before COVID, I didn’t experience any food shortages because the prices of foodstuffs were low. During COVID I rented a place and I didn’t have enough money on me, so it got to a time where I wasn’t going to work, my goods and foodstuffs were finished even milo I had none, at times I had to drink water to sleep hoping that things will get better the next day, no money, no food, they were lots of hardships... .. It (the shortage of foodstuff) has greatly affected my health, because I wasn’t eating well, I developed a stomach ulcer, I developed it during COVID-19” [Female migrant 2, 2023]

Similarly, two male respondents observed:

“It [Economic situation after COVID-19] has affected me a lot. Right now, as I am talking because of the economic situation in the country, in terms of the increase in food prices and all of those things, it has made it so difficult that I can only feed myself. My mother who is in the village, I used to send some amount to her, but I can’t do that anymore.” [Male migrant 1, 2023]

“During the COVID period, I was affected seriously, I had food shortage. I was affected even after the COVID period. It was very difficult; you eat what you have and can afford and not what you want. Even if what you have is gari as supper, you will eat it.” [Male migrant_2, 2023]

These testimonies highlight the long-term impact of the pandemic on food security and economic stability, aligning with the Vulnerability Theory (Fineman, 2017), which emphasises how structural inequalities heighten food insecurity risks.

The study also explored the role of governmental and non-governmental support in mitigating food insecurity among migrants. The findings suggest that while some support was available, it was often inadequate or selectively distributed. The Assemblyman reported:

“During COVID-19, I had some organisations within my community that supported me with rice, oil, and other vegetables. So, I shared that with the migrant community.” [Assemblyman, 2023]

However, some migrants felt excluded from government aid as indicated by two of the migrants:

“The government food was allocated to only the head porters. Other people were not allowed to get any food. The one who helped me was my madam and my sister. My sister gave me a bag of rice and other things.” [Male migrant 2, 2023]

“They can bring the food, but it will not be sufficient so we will not get anything.” [Female migrant 1, 2023]

This pattern of inequitable distribution is well-documented: Devereux (2021) showed that in most African countries, shock-responsive social protection measures bypassed those made most vulnerable by COVID-19, notably informal workers, while Ubah et al. (2023) highlighted the challenges of identifying and reaching informal urban workers in social protection schemes due to their non-registration status. Again, these narratives indicate that while there were some local government and community-driven relief efforts, their effectiveness was limited due to perceived discrimination and inadequate targeting. This finding supports the Crisis Theory (Caplan, 1964; Hobbs, 1975), which emphasises that external interventions play a crucial role in mitigating crises, but their impact is contingent on equitable distribution.

Policy recommendations

The findings of this study carry several important policy implications. First, government agencies and development organisations should conduct periodic food security assessments among migrants to guide timely, evidence-based interventions. Second, targeted food distribution programmes specifically designed for migrants during crises are essential, incorporating direct food assistance, subsidies and voucher systems to prevent exclusion and discrimination. Third, migrants must be formally integrated into social protection schemes, including unemployment benefits, cash transfers, and food assistance initiatives tailored to marginalised urban populations, thereby reducing reliance on informal networks that, as this study shows, are insufficient during widespread crises. Fourth, economic empowerment programmes including vocational training, microcredit schemes, and small business development support should be introduced to improve migrants' financial stability and reduce their structural vulnerability to food insecurity. Finally, strengthening community-based food assistance through partnerships between community organisations and policymakers, including community kitchens, urban farming projects, and cooperative purchasing programmes, can offer sustainable long-term food security solutions. Together, these measures can help policymakers build a more inclusive and crisis-responsive urban food system in Ghana that meaningfully addresses the specific needs of internal migrants.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the persistent food insecurity faced by internal migrants in Accra's slum communities, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that while some migrants exhibited resilience through various coping mechanisms, these strategies often came at the cost of reduced dietary quality and quantity, potentially leading to long-term health consequences. Contextualised within the Crisis Theory and Vulnerability Theory, the study demonstrates how external shocks such as the pandemic disproportionately impact migrants who already face structural disadvantages. Crisis Theory suggests that migrants were unable to recover swiftly due

to inadequate institutional support, while Vulnerability Theory highlights how systemic exclusion intensified food insecurity.

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