

Counting the 'poor' having nutritional deficiency

The National Sample Survey Office recently released a detailed report based on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES): 2022-23. Along with the report, the unit-level data on household consumption expenditure (HCE) is available in the public domain. The HCES collected data on the quantities of various food items consumed by households during specified reference periods and the total value of consumption of different food and non-food items. This analysis uses this information to convert the quantities of consumed food items into their total calorific value, and then compares the estimated per capita per day calorie intake of household members in the lower expenditure classes with the average per capita daily calorie requirement for a healthy life.

Approach of measurement

This analysis addresses two key issues: one, how one defines the 'poor' and two, the measurement aspect of the nutritional level.

In the Indian context, the various committees constituted earlier by the government, including the Lakdawala, the Tendulkar, and the Rangarajan Committees, have defined the poor as the persons below the 'poverty line' (PL). The PL is a monetary equivalence based on household monthly per capita consumer expenditure (MPCE) that should be sufficient for the household to purchase the food and non-food items included in the poverty line basket (PLB).

The Lakdawala Committee anchored the PL and the PLB, which included food and non-food items, to calorie norms of 2,400 kcal per capita per day for rural areas and 2,100 kcal per capita per day for urban areas. In contrast, the Tendulkar Committee did not anchor the PL to a calorie norm. The PL according to Rangarajan Committee is based on 'certain normative levels of adequate nourishment, clothing, house rent,



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conveyance and education, and a behaviorally determined level of other non-food expenses'.

The methodology of this analysis first derives the average daily per capita calorie requirement (PCCR) for a healthy life based on the recommended energy requirements for Indians of different age-sex-activity categories as per the latest (2020) report of ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition.

The PCCR has been worked out as a weighted average of the calorie requirements of persons in different age-sex-activity categories with corresponding weights as the proportion of estimated persons in these categories as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2022-23.

In the second step, estimated persons are arranged into 20 fractile classes of MPCE (poorest to richest), each comprising five per cent population, with the estimates of average per capita per day calorie intake (PCCI) and average MPCE (food and non-food) derived for each class based on the data of HCES 2022-23. From this all-India distribution, the average MPCE on food linked to the normative level of the PCCR is derived.

In a common man's language, this average per capita expenditure on food can be considered the minimum amount a household must spend on food items for its members to maintain a healthy life. This average per capita expenditure on food, combined with the average MPCE on non-food items for the poorest five per cent is added to derive the total MPCE threshold (at average all-India prices) that is necessary for spending on food items (ensuring adequate nourishment) and on the non-food items with a bare minimum expenditure on the latter. This all-India total MPCE threshold is adjusted for price differentials across States/UTs in terms of general Consumer Price Index numbers to derive the corresponding State/UT-specific total MPCE thresholds.

State/UT-wise proportion of 'poor'/deprived, strictly for this

analysis, is derived as the proportion of persons below such total MPCE thresholds. Finally, the proportion of 'poor'/deprived for the country is derived as the weighted average of the State/UT-wise proportions of deprived with respective weights as the projected populations of the States/UTs as of March 1, 2023, based on July 2020 report of the National Commission on Population. The analysis involves certain approximations in deriving the calorie intake figures at the household level in quite a few cases where the HCES data reports the aggregate quantity figures for certain items grouped.

The PCCR is estimated to be 2,172 kcal for rural India and 2,135 kcal for urban India. At 2022-23 prices, the all-India threshold total MPCE is ₹2,197 (food: ₹1,569 and non-food: ₹628) for rural India and ₹3,077 (food: ₹2,098 and non-food: ₹979) for urban India. The corresponding proportion of 'poor' i.e. deprived is estimated at 17.1% for rural areas and 14% for urban areas.

If the non-food expenditure of the poorest 10% is considered instead of the poorest five per cent, the threshold total MPCE increases to ₹2,395 for rural areas and ₹3,416 for urban areas, with the consequent increase in the corresponding proportion of deprived to 23.2% for rural India and 19.4% for urban India. Regarding nutritional deficiency, the average PCCI of the poorest five per cent and the immediately above five per cent in rural India is 1,564 kcal and 1,764 kcal, respectively. For urban India, it is estimated to be 1,607 kcal and 1,773 kcal, respectively, which fall far short of the PCCR. The government has several welfare programmes, aimed at uplifting the poor, including improving their health conditions. It will go a long way if some nutritional schemes targeted towards the poorest of the poor are put in place to raise their level of nourishment to have a healthy life.