



**Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute**  
Center for Research on Aging



**State of Israel**  
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Research, Planning and Training Division

## **Social Clubs for the Elderly – National Distribution, Patterns of Activity and Characteristics of Visitors**

Assaf Sharon ♦ Jenny Brodsky ♦ Shmuel Be'er

The study was funded with the assistance of the Research, Planning and Training Division Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Services

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Hebrew editor: Raya Cohen

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Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute

P.O.B. 3886

Jerusalem 91037, Israel

Tel: (02) 655-7400

Fax: (02) 561-2391

Website: [www.jdc.org.il/brookdale](http://www.jdc.org.il/brookdale)



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# Executive Summary

## Background and Goals

Numerous studies in Israel and abroad have indicated a positive relationship between social networking among the elderly and their wellbeing. Social clubs are an important service enabling elders social contact to relieve loneliness and offering recreational activities. In the 1990s, the Myers-JDC-Brookdale (MJB) Institute conducted a national survey of social clubs for the elderly (Korazim et al., 1995). Since then, the characteristics of Israel's elderly population and of community services have changed considerably. In 2010-11 the MJB conducted a study to obtain an up-to-date picture of active social clubs for the elderly in Israel.

The study examined, among other things, the extent of social clubs and utilization of their services, the characteristics of the population utilizing them, and the range of services they offer. It also examined issues related to the operation of the clubs, including the agencies involved in their implementation (the implementers), club functioning hours, manpower, physical adaptation of the buildings to the target population, and budgetary aspects. Beyond these, the study also examined needs for which responses are inadequate.

## Research Method

To provide a comprehensive picture of the social clubs, the study comprised the following components:

### 1. Review of the Literature

The purpose of the literature review was to provide information on social clubs for the elderly from an international perspective. The articles included in the review were mostly from the U.S. and dealt directly or indirectly with the following topics: the characteristics of club participants, the range of activities, programs to promote the physical or psychological wellbeing of participants, and the integration of people with special needs into recreational frameworks.

### 2. National Mapping of Social Clubs for the Elderly in Israel

The social clubs for the elderly were mapped countrywide. The mapping was based on several sources of information: the reports of Local Authorities on specific clubs functioning within their jurisdictions; the file on social clubs from the Eshel-Info database for 2010 (879 clubs); the list of social clubs (1,160 clubs) for 2003 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services (MOLSA), and the file of localities for 2009 (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS]). The mapping of clubs for the elderly included social frameworks operated by Local Authorities with the help of MOLSA, clubs of the Israel Association of Community Centers, of WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization) and of Naamat (Movement of Working Women & Volunteers), clubs designed for Holocaust survivors, for new immigrants, for the blind, and for the deaf and hard of hearing, which also serve the elderly. Excluded from the mapping were clubs for pensioners of a specific workplace, such as banks, because of their special nature.

### **3. Survey of a Sample of Social Clubs**

To learn about the characteristics of participants, the package of activities and services offered at the social clubs, and the aspects related to club operation and management, a sample survey was conducted in which the information was provided by club coordinators. The sample was based on a national list of social clubs composed during the mapping and numbered 300 clubs (with a response rate of 78%).

### **4. In-Depth Interviews with Key Figures at MOLSA and Local Authorities**

As part of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with key figures at MOLSA and the Local Authorities to learn about policy guidelines for the operation and development of social clubs, and to identify both unmet needs and the changes required to improve the service and adapt it to the target population.

### **5. Focus Groups of Club Participants**

Focus groups of participants from three clubs were held to learn of the attitudes of club participants to the service and jointly discuss issues that had come to light from other sources of information.

### **6. Survey of Master Plans for the Elderly Population**

To provide a picture of the activities of Local Authorities regarding social clubs for the elderly, three master plans recently developed for this population were reviewed: at the Haifa municipality, the Herzliya municipality and the Misgav Regional Council.

## **Findings**

### **Geographic Distribution of Social Clubs for the Elderly in Israel and their Coverage of the Target Population**

The national file of social clubs, prepared as part of the overall study and updated to 2011, contains data on 1,420 clubs in 218 Local Authorities. Another 26 Local Authorities have no social clubs. The analysis of the database on Israel's social clubs for the elderly yielded the following information:

- ◆ Some 80% of the clubs are concentrated in urban localities.
- ◆ Some 50% function in medium-sized to large localities (more than 50,000 people).
- ◆ 8% of the clubs function in Arab localities.
- ◆ Considered nationally, there are 2 clubs per/1,000 elders. Regional Councils (rural localities) have three times as many clubs per/1,000 elders as urban localities (5 clubs vs. 1.5 clubs per/1,000 elders aged 65+).

### **Characteristics of Social Clubs, by Implementer and Target Population**

The national list of social clubs contains a range of social frameworks for the elderly, differing by their activities and target populations:

- ◆ The most common clubs are those operated by a Local Authority, which receive funding assistance from MOLSA (some two-thirds of the clubs, according to the Coordinators Survey. These clubs generally serve a relatively older population (75+).
- ◆ Clubs of the Israel Association of Community Centers – Activities in these clubs are suited mostly for a younger, independent population (participants include also 55-year-olds). The emphasis is on recreational activities, enrichment, and broadening of one’s horizons. In the same vein, colleges at different locations in the country allow adults to complete and/or broaden their education.
- ◆ Some cities have recreational frameworks for specific populations, for example: social clubs for new immigrants, for Holocaust survivors, for the blind or for the deaf and hard of hearing.

### **Utilization of Social Clubs and Estimated Number of Participants**

Respondents in the sample survey (Club Coordinators) were asked how many people regularly attend the social club. This information served a twofold purpose: to categorize the clubs by size (up to 50 participants – small; 51-100 – medium-sized; 101+ – large) and serve as the basis for the estimated total number of club participants in Israel. The survey showed that:

- ◆ Municipalities vs. regional councils are characterized by a higher rate of large clubs (27% vs. 18% respectively).
- ◆ The number of elderly attending social clubs was estimated at 110 to 140 thousand participants (14% to 18% of Israel’s entire 65+ age group). In the urban sector – the rate of participants was estimated at 14% to 17% of the 65+ age group living there. In the regional councils, the rate of attendees was higher, estimated at some 25% to 40% of the elderly living there.

### **Structure of Functioning – Days and Hours**

- ◆ Half of the clubs are open five days a week. This percentage is higher in the urban sector than in regional councils, where most clubs are open fewer days a week (54% vs. 30% respectively).
- ◆ On average, club activities total some 22 hours a week and five hours a day. In the urban sector, the extent of daily activities is broader than in rural localities: the rate of clubs functioning for more than four hours a day is over 70% at urban clubs vs. 30% at rural clubs.
- ◆ Elders on their own (widows and widowers) voiced a need to expand the extent of club activities to cover weekends and holidays.

### **Capacity and Occupancy**

According to the coordinators’ reports on the capacity/utilization ratio at the clubs, more than half are full or almost full; 20% of all the clubs are clearly overcrowded. On the whole, the larger clubs are fuller.

### **Characteristics of Social-Club Participants**

- ◆ At 75% of the clubs, most of the participants are women. This is also true of daycare centers for the elderly. However, the population attending social clubs is younger, less limited by disabilities, and more educated.
- ◆ In about half of the clubs, the majority of participants are aged 75+. The clubs functioning within Local Councils tend to serve a relatively younger population than those in cities or rural localities.
- ◆ In about half of the clubs, the majority of participants are elders who are on their own (i.e., widows and widowers).
- ◆ In most clubs, the education of the elders is low, but in a third of the clubs, it is high (secondary school or more). In the rural sector, the rate of clubs with a high prevalence of educated elders is higher than in the urban sector, reaching 50%.
- ◆ About 10% of the clubs serve mainly immigrants from the Former Soviet Union who arrived in Israel since 1990.
- ◆ Most participants walk to the club (this is true for nearly two-thirds of the clubs).
- ◆ More than 10% of the clubs are attended also by people who require help with walking or are wheelchair-bound.
- ◆ Compared with the survey of clubs conducted in the 1990s, clubs today appear to serve a slightly older and, on the whole, more educated population than in the past.

### **Barriers to Participating in Club Activity**

According to the various data sources, the main reasons that some elders do not attend social clubs even though they could benefit from their services are:

- ◆ State of health and mobility (this is the main reason according to the focus groups of elders)
- ◆ Lack of interest (almost two-thirds of the coordinators reported this)
- ◆ Lack of convenient public transportation (about a third of the coordinators reported this)
- ◆ The image of the clubs (one of the reasons according to the focus groups of elders)

### **Range of Activities and Services**

The character of a club is largely determined by the range of activities and services it offers. The survey findings show that the clubs offer a broad range of activities:

- ◆ The most common activity with the greatest demand at the clubs is physical exercise (at some 80% of the clubs).
- ◆ Other common activities are lectures on a variety of topics (at 70% of the clubs), art classes (at some 60%) and table games (at some 50%). Club participants voiced a need to expand the scope of activities designed to develop skills and learning.
- ◆ Some 75% of the clubs offered an average of three outings and fun days in the past year; members of some 50% of the clubs twice on average went on vacation through the club in the same period.



- ◆ At 40% of the clubs, the service of a social worker is offered; at 25% – there are periodic screening tests for the detection of problems of vision and hearing. A small percentage of the clubs (less than 20%) provide a range of other services from legal advice to pedicures.
- ◆ Most clubs (70%) provide light refreshments; 20% provide breakfast; and at 10%, participants receive lunch.
- ◆ Compared with the survey of social clubs in the 1990s, it appears that alongside the activities that characterized the clubs then (table games, art and exercise classes), today's clubs provide a wider range of enrichment activities, especially of the kind designed to broaden one's knowledge and horizons.

### **Management, Financing and Manpower**

- ◆ Some 80% of the clubs collect monthly members' dues. The average sum per club is NIS 60 (the range is from NIS 5 to NIS 600). At the rest of the clubs, there are no monthly dues; payment is based on the activities in which one participates.
- ◆ Some 50% of the clubs reported financial problems in the past two years. The areas of difficulty mentioned were a lack of budgeted funds to pay for lecturers, classes, equipment and art materials, and for outings and fun days. In the rural sector there was emphasis on the need to finance transportation to regional clubs.
- ◆ Some 60% of the club coordinators are women, mostly aged 56+, with high school education or higher. About half of them had training in the field of aging.
- ◆ Some 70% of the clubs employ salaried coordinators for some 23 weekly hours on average. The rest of the clubs, especially the smaller ones, are implemented by volunteer coordinators.

### **Physical Aspects, Buildings, Adapting Buildings to the Population**

The study examined several physical aspects of the clubs, including location, accessibility for the participating population and level of maintenance. According to the findings:

- ◆ 90% of the clubs are located on the ground floor of the building; some 40% have stairs leading to the building entrance.
- ◆ Some 25% of the coordinators think that the building is not suitable for the purposes of the participants due to overcrowding or problems of accessibility.
- ◆ Some 50% of the coordinators noted that the clubs they work at are in need of renovation.

### **Involvement of Members in Club Activities and Community Volunteering**

Among their other functions, clubs are considered a vital source for the empowerment of the elderly and the retention of their links to the community. The study examined the extent of involvement of members in their club and of their volunteering outside of it. The findings reveal that:

- ◆ At some 75% of the clubs, there are members who help prepare meals, serve refreshments or organize parties.

- ◆ At some 60% of the clubs, members volunteer independently outside of the club. The common areas of volunteering are for the National Insurance Institute, at military bases and at hospitals.

### **Satisfaction with Club Operations**

Club coordinators were asked about their satisfaction with the operation of the clubs. The picture emerging from their responses reflects high satisfaction with the psycho-social aspects of the clubs, including with the positive atmosphere and the club's great importance in the life of participants. The same picture emerges from the responses of the participants. As described in the previous sections, the main difficulties in the operation of the clubs stem from a lack of funds to pay for enrichment activities and raw materials, and from building defects and problems of accessibility in some.

### **Main Issues Arising from the Study**

The study findings reveal that the clubs play a key role in the life of the elderly and, in some cases, as documented in the study, even a vital role. According to most of the participants, the clubs primarily respond to a social need; they provide a framework to dispel loneliness and to enrich and broaden one's horizons. From the perspective of the social service system, the clubs are part of an array of services designed to enable elders to leave home and socialize with their own age group. Apart from their preventive role, clubs serve as an essential resource for social services in identifying elders at risk: were it not for their club attendance, such elders could not be identified.

As in the U.S., the club population in Israel is characterized by an overwhelming number of women, a large portion of them widows. Compared with the 1990s, today's clubs seem to offer a broader, richer range of lectures and enrichment activities, and serve a more educated population.

The study shows that the supply and utilization of clubs is related to, among other things, their geographic location, the availability of formal and informal leisure alternatives, the characteristics of the elderly population in a locality, and the nature of the physical and social barriers impeding the attendance of elders. Some of the variation in club activities relates to differences between the urban and rural sectors. Urban clubs are generally larger and have a wider range of activities. Nevertheless, the extent of utilization of the clubs in the urban sector, relative to the size of the elderly population, is lower than in the rural sector. In the rural sector, the club population is more educated.

The following are the main issues arising from the study. They are worthy of attention so that policymakers may promote the development of the service and its full utilization:

#### **1. Supply of Social Clubs and Patterns of Utilization**

- ◆ In the past decade, the percentage of educated elders has risen among the 65+ population. This study, too, found that the population attending social clubs is more educated than in the past. The change is evident in the patterns of club activities as well: there is greater emphasis

on enrichment activities, such as lectures. However, in view of the population's changing needs, there is a need to continue examining the extent to which the types of activities offered match the population of elders. More so than in the past, it is necessary to include elders in the thinking and planning of club activities, which may help meet this need.

- ◆ One of the main barriers to club attendance is the accessibility to the target population. In the rural sector, the regional clubs are the main leisure framework for the elderly population and emphasis was put on the need to augment transportation services. In the urban sector, while there is a broader range of clubs, their geographic distribution does not necessarily match the distribution of the urban elderly population. Some elders have to travel independently quite a distance to the clubs whereas others, who could benefit from the club service, forego it due to distance.
- ◆ There is a need to examine possibilities of inclusion in the clubs of elders with physical difficulties, especially those for whom daycare centers are not an option. For instance, thought should be given to having volunteers help elders with mobility difficulties to get to the clubs from home.
- ◆ Due to the low rates of male attendance at the clubs, consideration should be given to adapting the patterns of club activity to men (e.g., by adding activities that are more attractive to men).
- ◆ The public image of the clubs in the eyes of the elderly was cited as one reason that a certain percentage avoids social clubs. Perhaps, changing the name of the service to make it more attractive and current (e.g., as the Jerusalem Municipality or the Association of Community Centers did) could help improve the image of the service in the eyes of the target population.
- ◆ Attention should be paid to the need voiced by widows and widowers to have the clubs open on weekends and holidays.
- ◆ A small number of Local Authorities (some 30) have no clubs. Since these are small localities such as Netivot, Mazkeret Batya and Majdal Shams, it may be surmised that the range of leisure alternatives for the elderly is limited there. It is worth examining the needs of the local population and the need for a social club.

## **2. Financial Needs for Club Operations**

- ◆ Club coordinators and key figures at the Local Authorities reiterated that a large share of the clubs lack sufficient funds to finance the activities in demand, such as lectures and raw materials for classes.
- ◆ The two key aspects vital to the leisure activity of the elderly population – accessibility to a leisure framework and variegation and enrichment of the activities – are not always dealt with adequately. In other words, small clubs are generally more accessible than large ones but they are financially limited in their range of activities. In contrast, large clubs with larger budgets offer a wide range of activities but are not always accessible to the local population. One solution is to combine club attendance with other alternatives fostering social contact,

such as Batim Hamim (Warm Homes) on some days. This would permit elders to enjoy both a range of enrichment/leisure activities and more opportunities to socialize.

### **3. Maintenance of Social Club Buildings and their Adaptation to the Target Population**

- ◆ A large portion of the clubs (about half) require building repairs, including painting, new furniture, plumbing and electrical work. Physical improvements can positively affect the image of the clubs in the eyes of the elderly that do not participate today.
- ◆ As part of the building improvements, it is worth examining accessibility and suitability of the club to the specific characteristics of the target population.

### **4. The Social Club – an Agent of Empowering the Elderly and Reinforcing their Community Ties**

- ◆ Beyond responding to the social and leisure needs of the elderly, the clubs are a vital resource for the social service system: coordinators, because of their personal knowledge of the participants, can play a decisive role in helping to identify elders in situations of risk that demand attention, and mediate between them and the local social service department. It is important to invest resources in training coordinators to identify elders at risk or needy elders, whether through focused courses or information sheets and manuals. It is further suggested that an organizational tool be developed and disseminated to make it easier for coordinators to report to their superiors on elders at risk.
- ◆ Some of the elders attending clubs volunteer independently in various frameworks such as preschool, military bases and the National Insurance Institute. As a means of empowering elders and strengthening their ties to the community, volunteer work may be combined with club activities. Some clubs have intergenerational activity, which can also empower elders and make them feel that they are able to continue to play an important role.

The study findings were presented to the senior staff at MOLSA's Services for the Elderly and at the Research, Planning and Training Division, as well as to senior staff of local Social Service Departments. The findings will help policymakers develop the service and promote its utilization to capacity.

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