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# **Food Insecurity in Israel: Review of Characteristics, Interventions and Challenges**

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# Abstract

## Background

Food insecurity is one of the markers of poverty, defined by the lack of economic means and regular access to basic, healthy and balanced nutrition. Food insecurity affects the physical and mental health as well as the social relations of those afflicted by it. COVID-19 has exacerbated the condition of families who had lived in poverty prior to its outbreak, leading to an increase in food insecurity and consequently, to growing reliance on nutrition programs provided by NGOs.

## Objective

Help construct a knowledge base on food insecurity in Israel to assess its scope and identify its characteristics and challenges based on a review of the current literature.

## Method

Review of current articles and studies, official reports, websites of NGOs and other organizations active in the food security area. The study also analyzed data obtained from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (hereafter, Ministry of Welfare), and the National Insurance Institute (NII).

## Findings

A 2016 NII survey found 18% of the adults and 26% of the children in Israel were living with food insecurity, and that the groups with the highest rates of food insecurity, as compared with the general population, were, in a descending order, income support recipients, Arabs, the unemployed, single-parent (independent) families, disability allowance recipients, individuals with less than eight years of education, families with four or more children, children, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. According to the CBS Index IV of food insecurity in 2020,<sup>1</sup> the groups with the highest rates of food insecurity were, in descending order, individuals with less than eight years of

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<sup>1</sup> Index IV has been used in the CBS Social Survey since 2010. It is based on the participants' response to a single question regarding the skipping of a hot meal at least once every two days due to economic difficulties during the twelve months prior to the survey.

education, the unemployed, Arabs, people with health problems, large families, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. In addition, the review of the current literature indicates that the rate of food insecurity is higher among children than among 18-64 year-olds (adults). The general trend emerging from the existing data from the NII surveys (2011–2016), the Latet aid NGO surveys (2020–2021) and the CBS surveys (2018–2020) indicate a slight reduction in food insecurity rates.

Finally, despite the lack of data on Bedouins it appears that the scope of food insecurity among them is large. This also seems to be the situation among asylum seekers and migrants without permanent legal status.

Based on the results of a logistic regression for the probability of living in food insecurity in the 2016 NII survey, the main predictors of food insecurity (in descending order) were belonging to the Arab population, receiving income support, receiving disability allowance, and living in an independent family. Examining the correlations between the NII data of that year, food insecurity rates in various communities, and their CBS socioeconomic and geosocial peripherality indexes indicates that the lower a community's socioeconomic cluster, the higher its level of food insecurity, without, however, any significant relationship between peripherality and food insecurity.

In Israel, several ministries provide services and programs for food security. The Ministry of Welfare, for example, is responsible for the National Food Security Project and for supporting a variety of NGOs; the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing free lunches in schools; and the Ministry of the Interior is in charge of providing benefits during the COVID-19 lockdowns and supporting nutrition NGOs. These solutions are mainly directed at populations in care of social services or at children in preschools and elementary schools in communities ranked low in the socioeconomic index. Additional solutions are provided by NGOs, and are targeted at additional populations, such as youth and migrants without permanent status.

The review indicates gaps between population groups in the rates of families living in food insecurity that manage to secure assistance. For example, in the Arab population there is high frequency of families living in food insecurity, but a particularly low rate of reliance on NGOs. Conversely, in the ultra-Orthodox population the rate of food security is lower, but the frequency of reliance on NGOs is higher.

## **Recommendations**

- Increase efforts to identify all families and individuals living in food insecurity, particularly among populations with high rates of food insecurity;
- Map those in need of assistance, routinely and during crises, to detect redundant services or the lack thereof;

- Make services more accessible to clients;
- Examine changes and adjustments in the food baskets or meals provided;
- Appoint a project director for food insecurity in the Arab population;
- Determine support criteria based on the characteristics of population groups known to have less access to food NGOs;
- Strengthen the National Food Security Council as a coordinating body in order to promote policies, accumulate knowledge, monitor trends, synchronize help responses as well as continue developing and regulating them;
- Create a systematic, accessible and comprehensive database regarding food insecurity and government and NGO food programs.