

Perceptions and Preferences of Individuals Facing Food Insecurity in Israel:

A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

Moran Accos Carmel^{1,2}, Sara Promislow¹, Moran Blaychfeld Magnazi^{3,4}, Aron M. Troen², Orly Tamir¹

1) The Pesach Segal Israeli Center for Diabetes Research and Policy, Sheba Medical Center

2) The Robert H. Smith Faculty of Agriculture Food and Environment, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

3) Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health

4) Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nutrition Sciences, Ariel University

Food insecurity (FI) is a persistent public health and social problem in high-income countries, including Israel. Although food assistance programs exist, little is known about how people facing FI perceive these services, preferred assistance types, and barriers to support.

To explore the perceptions and experiences of individuals facing FI in Israel regarding food policy, food assistance programs, complementary support services, and child feeding programs.



METHODS

Design: Phenomenological qualitative study based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Participants: 25 adults who received food assistance or previously received assistance.

Recruitment: Convenience and snowball sampling through NGO leaders and social activists.

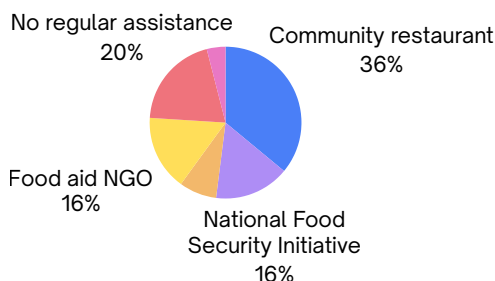
Data collection: Interviews were conducted between February and September 2023 in Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, or English; interviews lasted 15–75 minutes and were conducted by phone, video call, or in person.

Analysis: Inductive thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six-stage approach; investigator triangulation was used, with three researchers contributing to coding and theme development. (Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol. 2006 Jan;3(2):77–101.)

RESULTS

Study Population: Most participants were female (68%), aged 30–44 or 60–74 (32% each), divorced (40%), and Hebrew speakers (60%).

Primary source of food assistance



Domains, themes, and representative quotes

9 themes were identified and organized into three overarching domains:

Themes	Representative quotes
Domain 1: Responsibility for FI and assistance	
1.The state's responsibility for FI -The high cost of living as a central driver of FI -Eligibility criteria for receiving state food assistance 2.The municipality's responsibility for addressing FI 3.NGOs' role in addressing FI -NGOs as a lifeline -Assistance from NGOs is more than just food	-“The State of Israel. It is not prepared at all, it doesn't pay attention” -“The problem is that everything is expensive... so we cut back on food and don't buy what we need” -“They have forgotten their purpose... They don't see the person, only the category”
Domain 2: Preferences and satisfaction with assistance	
1.Preferences for types of food assistance 2.Healthy food in food assistance 3.Satisfaction with assistance -Perceived adequacy of food assistance -Guidance programs and workshops	-“At the supermarket, I can buy what is not included in a food package” -“I'm against restrictions... Chocolate brings happiness to the soul” -“Usually, what they bring doesn't really help... Maybe the assumption is that when someone is hungry, they'll eat anything, but that's not true”
Domain 3: Experiences with FI and assistance	
1.Barriers to accessing food assistance 2.Barriers to exercising rights beyond food assistance 3.Mothers' experiences of FI -Children nutritional support programs as a source of relief -The emotional toll of FI on mothers -Mothers' coping strategies	-“Shame prevents me from requesting aid on a regular basis” -“It feels disrespectful to have to prove every time that I deserve assistance” “There are times when they will only have plain pasta with nothing else” -“I will go without so they don't have to”



CONCLUSIONS FI was experienced as a structural rather than solely individual problem. No single type of assistance was universally preferred; rather, autonomy and freedom of choice were emphasized. **The findings highlight systemic gaps in the accessibility, adequacy, and appropriateness of food assistance in Israel, underscoring the need for a coordinated rights-based policy to ensure equitable and sustainable food security.**