مركز أدفا מרכז אדוה
Adva Center
Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel

ארגון סיוע לפליטים
ולמבקשי מקלט בישראל
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The Poor Who Don't Count:

Poverty, Food Security and Economic Well-being among Asylum Seekers in Israel

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May 2025

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Our thanks to Dr. Yuval Livnat, Etty Konor-Attias and Dr. Yael Hasson from the Adva Center, and Tali Ehrenthal (MSW), Hadar Aviel, Zameret Hershco (MSW), Adv. Orly Levinson Sela and Mika Foux from ASSAF, for their helpful comments and support.

Special thanks to the team of the 'Mesila' - Aid and Information Centre for Migrant Workers and Refugees at the Tel Aviv–Yafo Municipality, for their partnership in the data collection for this research.

Co-Funded by the European Union

This publication was co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Adva Center and ASSAF, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

MAZON A Jewish Response To Hunger

This report was also made possible thanks to the support of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger.

Translated to English by: Lea Dovrat

Abstract

This research report presents findings on the socio-economic situation of undocumented refugees in Israel who interact with aid organizations. This study, the first of its kind, is based on a survey conducted with questionnaires completed by 250 respondents, primarily refugees from Eritrea, Ukraine and other countries.

The survey illustrates and validates what was already known to aid organizations: over half of the respondents reported feeling financial distress "often", a rate that is comparable to poverty when applying the official approach in Israel. The level of food insecurity among this population is disturbingly high: approximately 85% experience food insecurity, and 55% experience severe food insecurity. A substantial proportion of their monthly income is spent on housing, while many report poor health conditions due to limited access to health insurance coverage.

The reviewed findings highlight the state's need to improve the situation of the refugee and asylum seeker population and, indirectly, to improve the situation of Israeli society as a whole. Among the policy proposals mentioned in this document, we note a proposal to implement a mechanism for regularly collecting data on this population to monitor their situation and its improvement according to the desired policy measures; action must be taken to alleviate the suffering of refugees in Israel by providing essential assistance, even if partial, in the areas of social security, housing, a basic package of welfare and health services, and more – until the desired realization of their official refugee status.

Introduction

This research report focuses on the socio-economic situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. Presently, approximately 73,000 refugees reside in Israel. Because this target population is pushed to the socio-economic margins in Israel, many turn to the few existing aid organizations in the country (ASSAF, MESILA, etc.) to utilize their services.

As part of the current project, about 250 questionnaires were distributed in the second half of 2024, aiming to map the circumstances and hardships of this population as much as possible. Since the questionnaires were distributed only among those who reached the aid organizations, the research results are likely biased toward the more vulnerable population within this marginalized group.

The findings relate to the refugees' situation in various aspects of life: subjective and objective poverty, the level of food insecurity, housing conditions, health, employment, and general life satisfaction. We first present the relevant scientific background, followed by the research methodology, the main tool of which was the questionnaire, and then the findings. We conclude with conclusions and policy recommendations that are consistent with the findings.

This report also includes two appendices. Appendix A details the findings that emerged from the survey, and Appendix B presents the questionnaire on the basis of which the data were collected.

Literature Review

Refugees and asylum seekers in Israel – General background

About 73,000 refugees and asylum seekers protected from deportation currently reside in Israel, of which 60,000 live under "group protection" extended by the state due to the danger they would face if returned to their countries of origin. Among these, there are approximately 24,000 adults and children from Eritrea, about 23,000 from Ukraine, about 7,000 from Sudan, about 8,000 from Ethiopia, and about 400 from Congo.[1] Many of those belonging to these groups have submitted individual asylum requests to obtain refugee status, with the exception of Ukrainian refugees, who are prevented by the state from submitting such requests. In addition, there are approximately 12,000 asylum seekers in Israel from other countries, who are not protected under a group framework but only individually, because their asylum requests have not been processed yet.[2]

The asylum system in Israel suffers from severe deficiencies.[3] So far, a very small number of asylum seekers have been recognized, and the road to refugee status is blocked for many of the "group protection" individuals. The group protection itself includes almost no rights and, consequently, tens of thousands of refugees, some of whom have been living in Israel for almost three decades, have no national health insurance, official work permit or social safety net – social security benefits, most welfare services, various rehabilitation programs, and help with housing. That is to say, they have no access to basic services. In view of the difficult circumstances that brought them to Israel in the first place and the nearly complete lack of assistance from the state, the refugee population is

1 "A Land Made of Paper": A Status Report on Refugees in Israel, November 2024, Forum of Refugee and Asylum Seeker Organizations in Israel. [Hebrew]
https://assaf.org.il/en/a-land-made-of-paper-a-status-report-on-refugees-in-israel/

2 "Trapped in Limbo: Israel's Policy of Avoiding Making Decisions on Well-Founded Asylum Claims", September 2020, Report of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants. [Hebrew]
https://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/trapped-in-limbo-pdf-final-021220-1.pdf

3 "Falling on deaf ears" – Asylum procedures in Israel, October 2018, Hotline for Refugees and Migrants about the asylum system in Israel [Hebrew]

one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in Israel,[4] exacerbating the already inherent difficulties of integrating into the local society and economy. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that an individual becomes a refugee when they must flee their country under circumstances that fall under the convention's definitions.[5] As mentioned, whereas all refugees from Eritrea and Sudan are group-protected based on the policy of non-refoulment to their countries of origin, Israel has (almost) not recognized any of them as refugees due to bureaucratic and fundamental barriers in the recognition system. In comparison to refugee absorption mechanisms in other Western countries, it can definitely be said that most asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan would be recognized as refugees if Israel had completed processing their asylum requests. Therefore, we refer to them as refugees in this document.

Lacking any social safety net, any crisis – from a personal crisis such as dismissal from work to a national crisis such as the COVID pandemic[6] or the current war – leads many refugees to decline and puts them in immediate danger of losing their livelihood and, with it, their ability to support themselves and their children, to pay for housing and other basic necessities.[7] Among the refugees in Israel, the situation of at-risk families – single-parent families, victims of abuse, people engaged in survival prostitution, the chronically ill, people with mental health challenges, and people with physical disabilities – is particularly difficult.

Refugees from Africa living in Israel under group protection are not eligible for health services under the National Health Insurance (NHI) Law. Their dedicated insurance arrangement leaves many of them, including children and the elderly, without any health insurance. Namely, many of the refugees have no access to health services except in life-threatening situations when they are entitled to emergency care by virtue of the Patient's Bill of Rights. If and when their condition stabilizes, they are discharged without continued treatment, follow-up or medication, and with a debt

4 On the effects of the vague employment policy and years of exclusion, see the annual trade report of the U.S. State Department: 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report by the U.S. Department of State.

5 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention

6 Staring into the Abyss – Asylum Seekers in Israel During COVID-19, 2022, ASSAF. [Hebrew] https://assaf.org.il/en/what-we-do/welfare-and-health/corona-report/

7 In Free Fall: Towards a Third Decade Without Social Security – Refugees and asylum seekers in Israel without rights, recognition, and basic services (2024 situation report)", August 2024, ASSAF. https://assaf.org.il/en/in-free-fall-towards-a-third-decade-without-social-security/

they cannot pay to the hospital. On June 1, 2024, new NHI regulations came into effect but were applied to only some of the refugee population (minors and those over 60), which obligate those eligible with insurance payments that, according to refugee aid organizations, most of them will not be able to bear.[8] Lack of access to adequate health insurance includes lack of access to preventive medicine, regular pregnancy checkups, and structured monitoring of child development. The damage to the refugees' children's health does not stop there. On 11/11/2024, the Ha'aretz newspaper published that the Ministry of Health had issued a new guideline that prevents autistic children of statusless parents from receiving promotive health care, so that these children would stop receiving the essential treatments that they had been receiving.[9]

War refugees from Ukraine have been experiencing the exclusion policy from social services for almost three years. The effects of this exclusion worsen their situation as time passes and become similar to the challenges African refugees have been facing for the past two decades. Since their arrival, instead of regulating their employment and providing work permits, a policy of "non-refoulement" and "non-enforcement" was implemented – just like the "temporary" policy that was announced regarding the refugees from Africa in January 2011 and is valid to this day.[10] This means that as long as the war in Ukraine continues and they are in danger in their home country, the Ukrainian refugees have no work permits, but no enforcement steps will be taken for unlawful work or employment against them or their employers, respectively. The obscure non-enforcement policy increases the difficulty of finding work and the risk of abusive employment and exploitation. Data collected by ASSAF in January 2024 indicated that 39% of the Ukrainian women applicants did not work, and 26.2% are employed "illegally" (without a pay slip or social benefits – although their employment is legally allowed under the Ministry of the Interior's non-enforcement policy). Over time, the amassed damages of this

8 Arrangements regarding registration with an HMO and the provision of healthcare services to individuals in Israel who are uninsured, 2024. [Hebrew]

9 Gabai, Gal (2024). "The state will stop providing treatment to autistic refugee children; the Israelis will continue receiving it". Haaretz, November 11, 2024. [Hebrew]

10 Information about the employment of foreign workers and infiltrators. Ministry of the Interior, 2015. [Hebrew]

vague policy have pushed this population to the margins of society, deepened their economic poverty, and increased the mental distress of the refugees and their children.[11]

Poverty and food insecurity in Israel, and what we know about refugees and asylum seekers

According to the Poverty Report issued by the National Insurance Institute (NII), in 2022, there were 1.98 million people below the poverty line, of them 873.3 thousand children and 152.5 thousand senior citizens, which reflect poverty rates of 20.9%, 28.2% and 12.7%, respectively. Poverty in Israel is characterized by significant gaps between various population groups. In Arab society, the incidence of poverty is 39%, and in the ultra-orthodox society – 33.7%. The poverty rate amongst the Arab and ultra-orthodox communities out of the general poor population was 64.3% (41.96% Arabs and 22.4% Orthodox) – twice their weight in the population. An international comparison reveals that Israel is placed second (after Costa Rica) in poverty rates and in a high place in poverty rates among senior citizens (after countries like Japan, Australia, and the U.S.).[12]

Food security is defined as a situation where a household has regular access to food that meets its basic and active needs. The measurement of food security in Israel is usually carried out using a subjective questionnaire, which provides a complementary perspective to the objective measurement of poverty. According to NII data, in 2021, 16.2% of families in Israel lived in food insecurity, with about half of them in severe food insecurity.[13]

The population of asylum seekers living in Israel is not surveyed within the framework of official surveys on poverty and food insecurity in the country (a few asylum seekers who received status may be surveyed within the surveys but are

11 Ukrainian Refugees in Israel: "Between One War and Another" – Status report, February 2024, ASSAF. [Hebrew]
https://assaf.org.il/en/ukrainian-refugees-in-israel-between-one-war-and-another-status-report/

12 Kasir, N., Pinas, R., & Flam, N., Report of poverty and inequal income measures – 2022, December 2023, National Insurance Institute. [Hebrew]

13 Endeweld, M., & Karadi, L., "Food Security Survey 2021 – Survey procedure and main findings", January 2023, National Insurance Institute. [Hebrew]

not distinguished from the rest of the population, so data on them as a group is not collected). Furthermore, to date, no comprehensive and official mapping of the level of poverty and food insecurity among the refugee and asylum seeker population in Israel has been conducted, and the information on this issue is based primarily on the accumulated experience of civil society organizations assisting them. The assessment of the organizations is that the rates of refugees living in poverty and food insecurity are significantly higher than the rate of these indicators among the general population.[14]

A survey conducted among the statusless community in Tel Aviv by the Nutrition Division of the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the municipal welfare bureau MESILA in the Tel Aviv municipality and the "Be'teavon" program, which took place between May and December 2020 (the period of the COVID-19 lockdowns), estimated that approximately 54% of the statusless population suffered from severe food insecurity, and an additional 32% of respondents suffered from moderate food insecurity. According to another survey conducted by civil society organizations in early 2021, 35.5% of respondents reported for that year that they had given up food due to financial hardship. In a report on food insecurity in Israel published by the Brookdale Institute in 2022, it was written: "The asylum seeker and undocumented communities suffer from a lack of services and rights, and most of their members live in poverty; and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most households in this population were left without income and most live in moderate or severe food insecurity.[15]

Two studies by the Adva Center, the Negev Coexistence Forum and the 'Mazon' organization, published in September 2023 and November 2024, focused on the issue of food insecurity in the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev.[16] These documents demonstrate the difficulty of the lack of information on population

14 "Survey findings: Welfare and health among asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan", 2021. Forum of mental health among asylum seekers (established during the COVID pandemic and includes the following organizations: ASSAF, Doctors for Human Rights, MESILA, and Cuchinta).

15 Food Insecurity in Israel – Review of Characteristics, Interventions and Challenges, March 2022, Brookdale Institute. https://brookdale.jdc.org.il/en/publication/food-insecurity-in-israel/

16 Bar-on Maman, S., & Hasan Abu-Kef, S., Food insecurity in the unrecognized villages in the Negev, September 2023, Adva Center, Negev Coexistence Forum, and the 'Mazon' program; Shavchenko, Y., & Bar-on Maman, S., "We are Bedouins, we eat olive oil, we don't say we have no food": Findings of a qualitative study of food insecurity among unrecognized villages in the Negev, November 2024, Adva Center, Negev Coexistence Forum, and the 'Mazon' program. https://adva.org/he/foodinsecurity-negev-qualitative/

groups that are not surveyed in official reports about poverty and food insecurity in Israel. The documents focus on the unrecognized villages in the Negev, a population of 83,928 (as of January 2022), which is not included in the official reports published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and the NII. The research findings indicate high rates of food insecurity in this population, which is rooted in a combination of factors: lack of basic infrastructures (water, electricity, roads, and public transportation), difficulty accessing food sources, high prices, and inability to properly preserve food.

Similar to the refugee and asylum-seeker population, this is also a population that suffers from exclusion and structural barriers in accessing basic services, which directly affects its poverty rate and food security. The research demonstrates the importance of collecting data on marginalized populations that are not included in official surveys, and the need for tailored policy for them. As evidenced by both studies, the COVID-19 period, and the October 2023 war period exacerbated the situation and further highlighted the vulnerability of these populations in emergency situations.

The need to assess the rates of poverty and food insecurity among refugees and asylum seekers in Israel is even more pronounced against the backdrop of the fact that this is a population that, even in other countries, suffers from high rates of poverty and food insecurity due to its vulnerable status, even in countries that provide refugees and asylum seekers with significant recognition and social protection. According to EU data, in 2023, 45.5% of all EU residents who are immigrants from countries outside the EU were at risk of poverty, compared to 18.9% among native-born EU citizens.[17]

This study aims to fill the existing gap and present, for the first time, estimates based on poverty and food insecurity rates among the refugee and asylum-seeker population in Israel.

17 "Migrant integration statistics – At risk of poverty and social exclusion", September 2024, Eurostat.

Methodology

Data collection

As part of the research, a questionnaire on poverty and food insecurity was administered. In the first stage, after the questionnaire was formulated, it underwent cultural and linguistic adaptation with the guidance of social workers and community mediators from the ASSAF organization.

Following the formulation of the questionnaire and its adaptation to the research population, a pilot was conducted in April 2024 among 30 respondents from various refugee communities in Israel (refugees from Eritrea, Sudan, and Ukraine), who completed the questionnaire during their visits to ASSAF's public reception, with the assistance of social workers (for those from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan) and the project coordinator for ASSAF's Psychosocial Support for Ukrainian Refugees project. Based on the pilot responses and feedback received from the surveyors who had conducted it, a final questionnaire was formulated with minor changes to its wording, and several questions and possible answers were added based on the information received from the respondents. The final questionnaire was translated into four languages: Tigrinya, Arabic, English, and Ukrainian, and prepared in a format suitable for manual completion by a surveyor or for self-completion in a digital form. At this stage, ASSAF approached the Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality's welfare bureau, MESILA, which provides social assistance and care to the undocumented community residing in the city, and they expressed a willingness to participate in the project and assist in obtaining respondents for the questionnaire among the center's clientele.

In June 2024, Adva Center researchers conducted a training session for the surveyors from ASSAF and MESILA, during which information about how to present the questions and how to fill out the questionnaire was provided.

From July to September 2024, the option to complete the questionnaire was offered to all visitors during ASSAF's public reception hours, with the assistance of a surveyor and a volunteer mediator who provided support during the questionnaire

completion. During this period, proactive outreach was also conducted by the social workers and the project coordinator for ASSAF's Psychosocial Support for Ukrainian Refugees project, who asked visitors to complete the questionnaire. Simultaneously, the option to complete the questionnaire was also offered at MESILA during reception hours, with the assistance of representatives from the center's reception staff.

In total, by the end of September 2024, 249 questionnaires were collected: 132 of the questionnaires were completed by visitors during ASSAF's public reception hours, and 106 questionnaires were completed during MESILA's public reception hours. The additional 11 questionnaires were completed independently by respondents through a link shared with them by other community members.

Of the total questionnaires completed, 166 were completed in writing, and 83 were completed digitally. Approximately half of the digital questionnaires were also completed with the assistance of a surveyor at ASSAF or MESILA, and the rest independently by the respondents.

The data from the complete questionnaires were entered into a data collection table, based on which the statistical analyses presented in this study were performed.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix C) included questions about socio-demographic features, information on income, housing and health, and questions from which we could deduce their sense of subjective poverty, objective poverty (according to the relative approach in Israel and the Western world), and their food security situation. We also included a question about general life satisfaction.

Subjective and objective poverty

Subjective poverty was assessed in the questionnaire by questions concerning the ability to cover current expenses and a sense of financial distress.

Objective poverty was assessed by the respondents' replies as to their income and household structure, according to the official relative approach. Disposable income per person is usually calculated by income from wages and other sources

of income (which only about 10% of the sample had; a considerable number refused to answer this question) divided by the number of standard persons according to the equivalence scale (a mechanism that compares the level of life of various sizes of households)[18] as common in Israel. This income was compared to the latest poverty line published by the NII in 2022.

Food security

The respondents were given the short module of the USDA Food Security Survey (HFSS) – a short 6-item form asking about their status of food security. Among others, the respondents were asked to report whether they had to skip meals, whether they found it hard to buy food because of economic reasons, etc. The Food Security Survey was validated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (that formulated and activated the long 18-item questionnaire, which is the basis for the short version), and it could point to one of three statuses: food security, moderate food insecurity, and severe food insecurity, according to the scores of the answers given by the respondents.

Housing and health

The respondents were asked to report the form of their housing, who they lived with, how much they were paying for rent, whether they had health insurance for themselves and their children and more. The questions were adapted to the specific characteristics of the refugee and asylum-seeker population in Israel. For instance, under the issue of housing and housing expenses, we added options of unstable and temporary housing, rent payment for work, etc.

Life satisfaction

Finally, the participants were asked about their general satisfaction with their life, as a general measure and for comparison with the general population. This question is asked in social surveys in Israel and abroad.

18 See also: "Tables of Poverty and Inequality Appendix" in the annual NII reports for various years.

The respondents' demographic characteristics

The sample included 249 respondents. Most of the questions were answered by less, but in most cases, there were over 200 replies.[19] About 75% of the sample were women, and 25% were men. It should be noted that this is not the known gender distribution of refugees in Israel; the ratio of men is higher.[20] However, this study was conducted among those who seek assistance from aid services for refugees, and it is reasonable to assume that the percentage of women is higher compared to their share in the general refugee population – because of their vulnerability and, perhaps, their greater willingness to receive assistance from the organizations.

The geographic distribution of the respondents' places of residence is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' places of residence

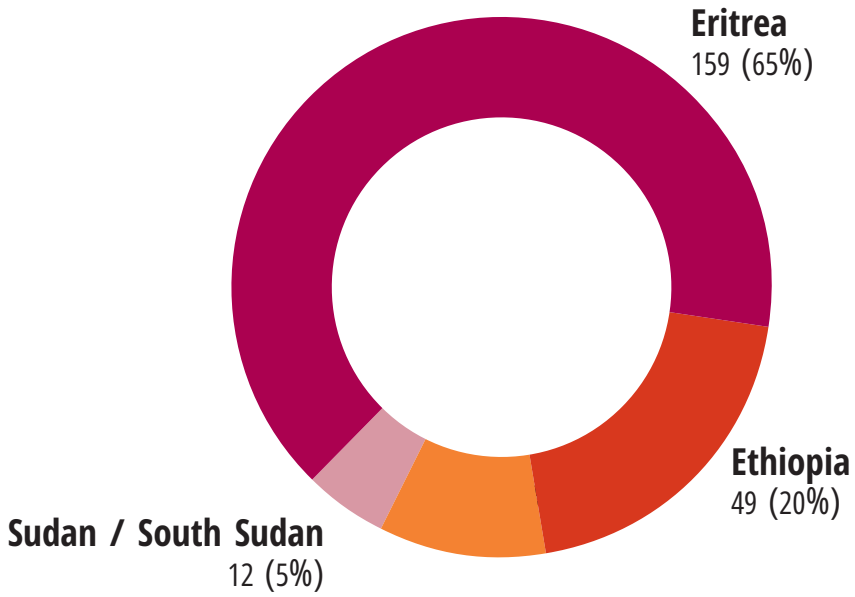
Place of residence	Number	Ratio
Tel Aviv-Yafo	131	61%
Bat Yam & Holon	24	11%
Center, other	29	13%
Be'er Sheva & South	15	7%
Sharon	4	2%
Haifa & North	7	3%
Jerusalem	6	3%
Total	**216**	**100%**

19 The number of respondents could differ from question to question according to the number of participants who answered each question.

20 The percentage of women in the Eritrean community today, not including girls and teenagers, is 22%. The data were taken from an answer (August 4, 2024) to a freedom of information request filed by the Forum of Refugee Organizations. In the past, women were 16-20% of the community. The increase in the number of women in recent years is probably because men, who are frequently free of responsibility for a family and children, manage to save money, go through the exhausting procedures, find a sponsor overseas, and fly to Canada, the U.S., or to any other country in Europe where they will find recognition, status and a life.

Among the respondents, a majority of two-thirds were from Eritrea. 20% were from Ethiopia, and about 5% were from Sudan/South Sudan. 10% were from Ukraine (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Respondents' countries of origin



It should be noted that the gender division in the sample is even more unbalanced for refugees from Ukraine – an absolute majority (25 out of 26) were women. However, this gender bias reflects actual reality[21] and does not indicate a downward bias in the representation of Ukrainian men in the sample. Among the Eritrean and other groups – the data are more balanced.

Most respondents (74%) live with their families. About 11% live alone and the rest live with roommates or in other living arrangements.

21 The data were taken from an answer (August 4, 2024) to a freedom of information request filed by the Forum of Refugee Organizations.

Findings

In this chapter, we present the socio-economic findings that emerged from the respondents' answers to the questionnaire at the heart of the current study. The findings, which shed light on the multidimensional situation of refugees without status (hereinafter: refugees), are divided into four main chapters: (1) Housing and health; (2) Work and wages; (3) Poverty and financial distress; and (4) Food security status. The last chapter of this section summarizes the findings.

Housing and health

"I have cancer, and the treatment I need costs 30,000 NIS per month. I must work in order to maintain my health insurance, because without it, I have no way to pay for the treatment. After chemotherapy, I feel my hands and feet go numb; sometimes I fall, and I don't always feel the floor, but I still have to clean stairs. I cannot stop working, because without work there is no insurance, and without insurance there is no treatment."

L., 33, refugee from Eritrea, supported by ASSAF

According to the survey results, the majority of respondents (approximately 77%) live in a rented apartment alone or with family members (Figure 2). Another fifth (21%) live with partners, and a very low percentage (3%) live in an "alternative living arrangement." About a fifth of the households are single-person households. A similar proportion live in households of 2 and 3 people, and almost 30% live in relatively large households of 5 or more people (see Figure 2 and Table 2).

Figure 2: Living arrangements

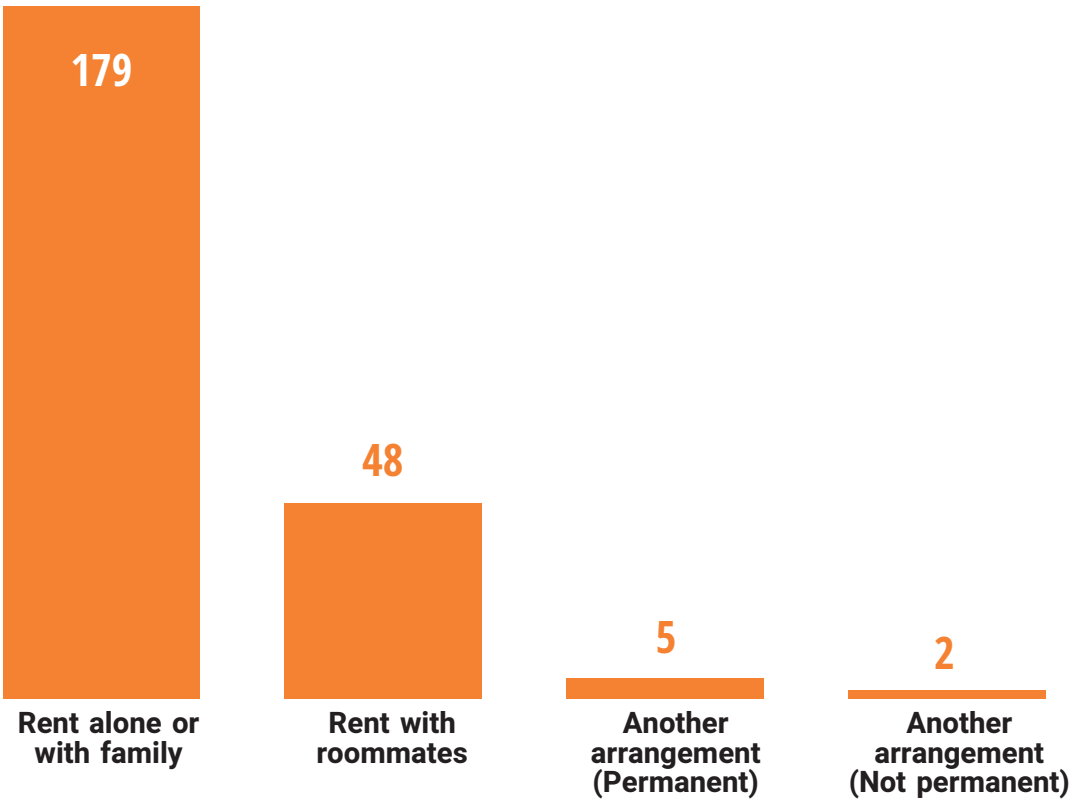
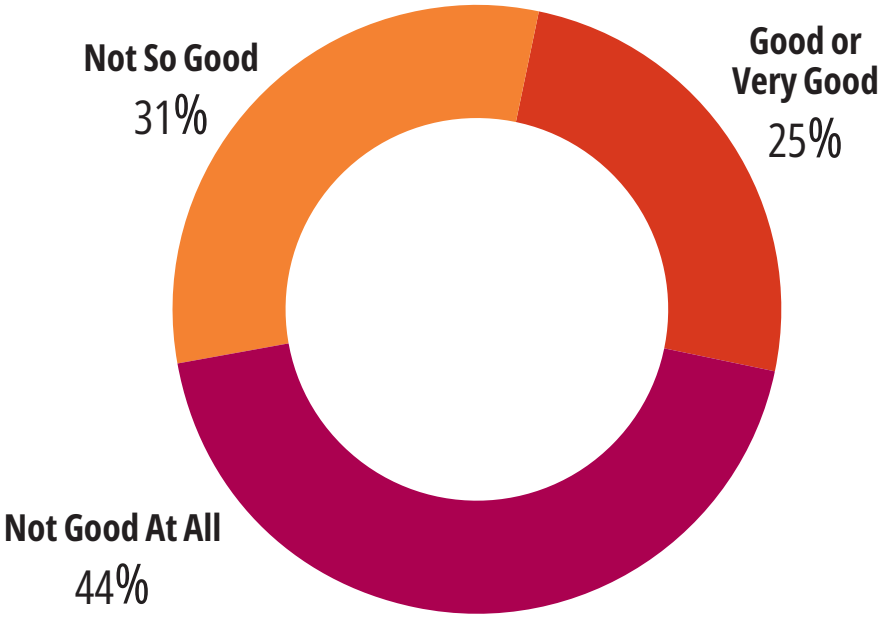


Table 2. Number of persons in household

Number of persons	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	42	19%
2	45	21%
3	43	20%
4	24	11%
5+	63	29%
Total	**217**	**100%**

Half of the respondents, and a quarter of their children, do not have any kind of medical insurance. This, while the findings indicate self-reported poor health status among the majority of respondents, and a severe situation for about a third of them, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Self-reported health status (percentage)



Work and wages

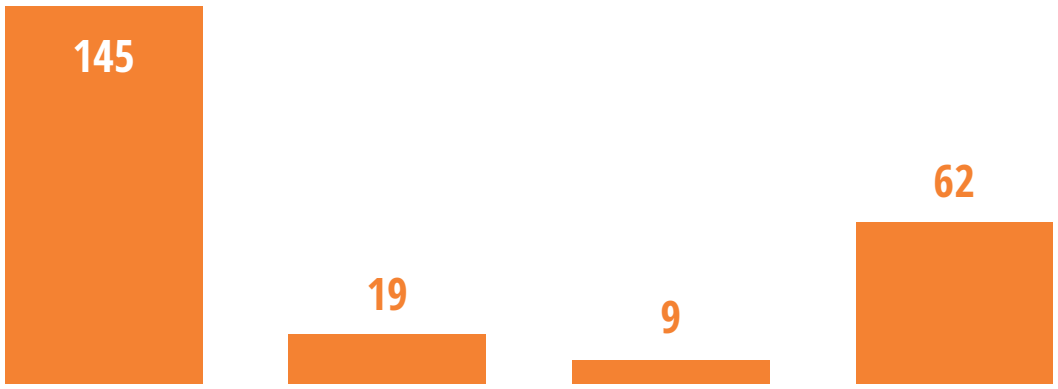
"B. came to Israel with her mother and child (almost 4 years old) in October 2022. She works without an employment contract, and her mother takes care of the child. B. works in a retirement home through a contractor company. The contractor promised her that she had to get a work permit from him, and charged her 1,600 NIS for it out of her wage. However, he did not provide an official document that confirms it.

B. does not know her rights, and is exposed to exploitation by her employer, and the fact that she does not have an official work permit because of the Ministry of the Interior's non-enforcement policy makes it hard to earn satisfactorily. She has to cope with big financial difficulties. She is unable to reach a place where she can feel safe and organized regarding work and rights.

Oleana Driuchkova, Coordinator of Ukrainian Refugees, ASSAF

The main employment sector for the respondents is cleaning, where 145 respondents (approximately 62%) are employed, the majority of whom are female. An additional 19 respondents (approximately 8%) reported being employed in the restaurant industry, very few in the construction industry, and the rest in other sectors or did not respond (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Distribution of employment sectors



The total income from wages varies according to the number of wage earners in the household, as shown in Figure 5. The chart shows that income from wages does indeed increase with the number of earners in the household; however, the income per individual earner, except in the case of a single earner, is usually lower than half the minimum wage in Israel. For example, in a household with three earners, the average income from work is only about 2,800 NIS per month.

Figure 5: Income from wages and wage per earner, by number of earners in household

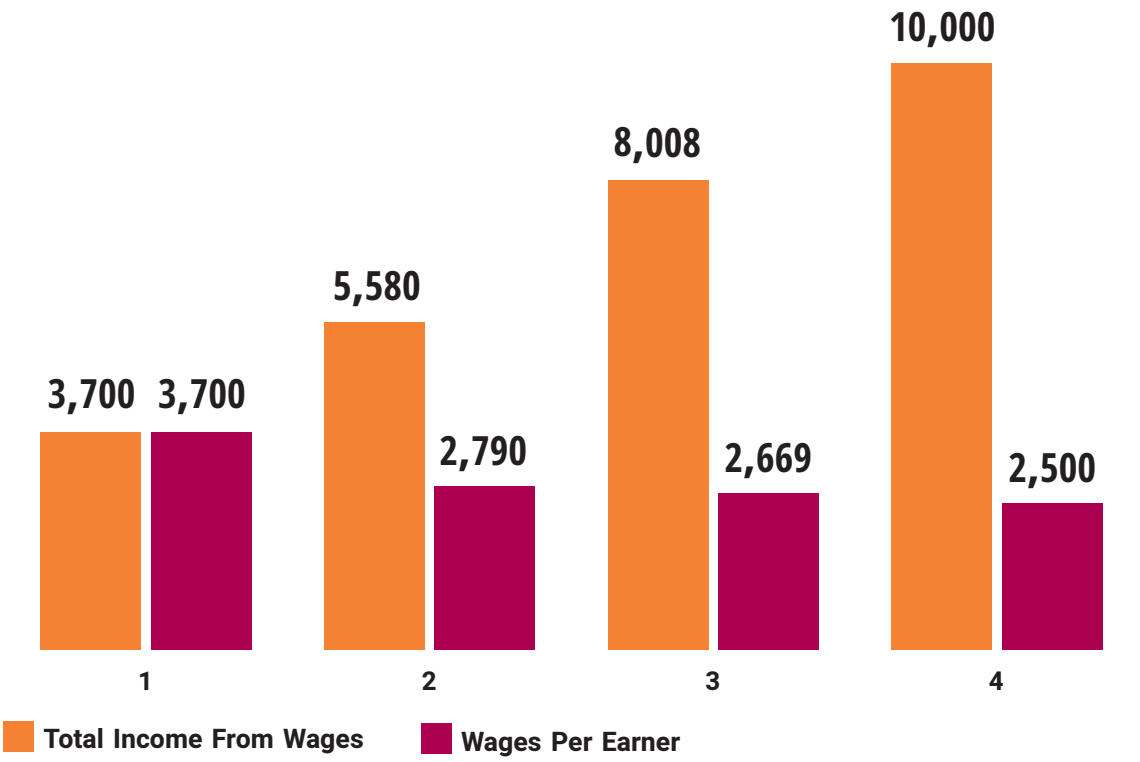


Table 3 presents the total wage income data, broken down by gender and country of origin, as well as the proportion of wage that is spent on rent. The data shows that there is no difference between the reports of women and men regarding the total wage (of all earners) in the household. However, when examining a single earner, it was found that the wages of single male earners averaged 4,500 NIS – about 1,000 NIS higher than the wages of single female earners.

Examining the proportion of rent relative to total wage income reveals a grim picture, where rent consumes half of the monthly income of all earners in the household – which often constitutes the entire income of refugees and, in many cases, even exceeds that. It should be noted that research literature in this field defines housing expenditures exceeding 30% of disposable income as 'unaffordable housing'. It appears that the issue of housing costs explains a significant part of the disturbing subjective findings that emerge from the respondents' statements.

Table 3: Rent, total income, and percentage of rent by gender and origin

	Rent	Wages	Percentage of rent
Women			
Eritrean	3,480	6,505	54%
Ukrainian	3,914	5,626	70%
Other	3,438	5,110	67%
Average	3,753	5,759	65%
Men			
Eritrean	3,116	5,941	52%
Other	3,575	5,167	69%
Average	3,254	5,750	57%

It should be noted that about a quarter of the Eritrean refugees (men and women) and about half of the Ukrainian women reported that they send money to their relatives abroad (often against their will for reasons such as ransoming a family member from traffickers, funding young children that had been left behind, or local poverty and hunger). There is no information on the amounts of money sent, but in these cases, the families' disposable income is lower than the sums mentioned above.

Poverty and food security

> I look after a woman who works very hard as a cleaner, but she has a disc herniation, which makes physical work hard. She provides for the entire family, and she has three children who go to school. Now she can barely work and it's hard for her to provide food for her children. The community brings her leftovers. It's not just a situation of food insecurity, it's almost hunger. She can't take care of her family's basic needs.
>
> **Yehudit Ilani, SW**

Regarding the question of whether respondents manage to cover their regular expenses, only 11% answered that they manage or manage without difficulty. The rest, approximately 89%, do not manage to cover their expenses, and about half reported that they do not manage at all and are in debt.

Concerning the question that examines the subjective feeling of poverty and assesses whether respondents feel financial distress, slightly more than half reported feeling such distress 'frequently'. Another 28% reported feeling this way 'sometimes'. Only about 15% feel this way 'rarely' or 'never', and approximately 6% declined to answer this question.

Table 4: Subjective poverty: Feelings of financial distress

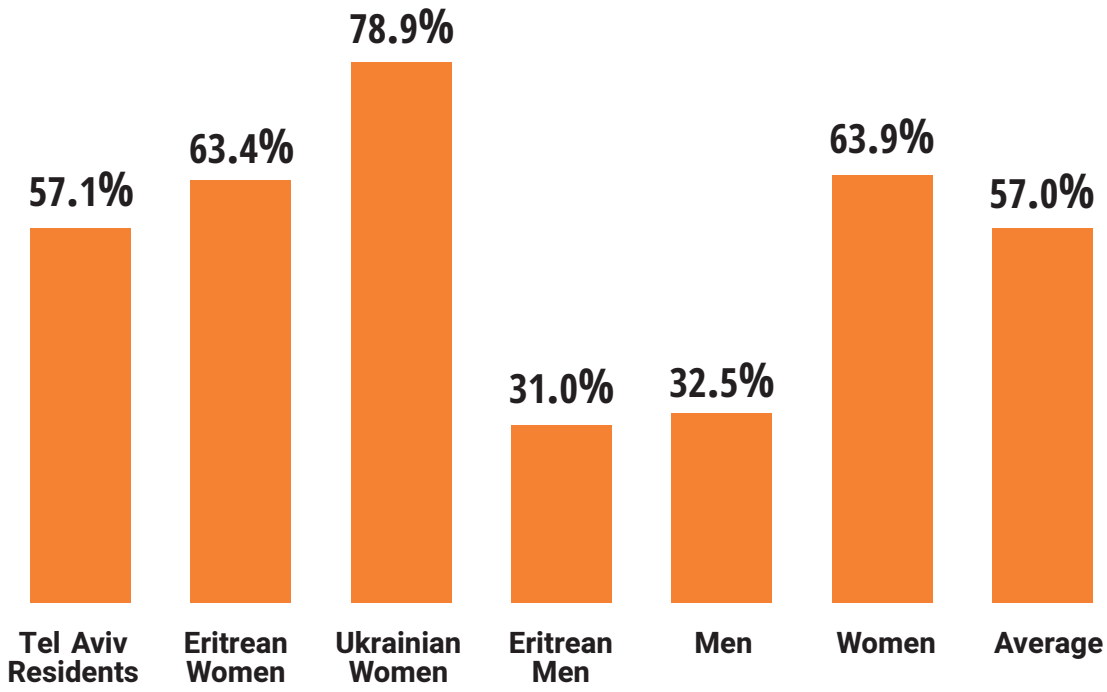
	Number	Percentage
Frequently	125	51.0
Sometimes	69	28.2
Rarely	21	8.6
Never	15	6.1
Refused to answer	15	6.1
Total	**245**	**100.0**

Examination of objective poverty rates was conducted according to the official relative method in Israel. The standardized disposable income per capita of the survey respondents was compared to the most up-to-date poverty lines, published

in 2022. Since the income findings refer to the year 2024, and because no information was received about other incomes of the survey respondents' population (although according to the results, only one-tenth of them have income other than income from work) – the estimates may be slightly biased upwards. According to this calculation, the poverty rate among the respondents was approximately 57% – similar to that of refugees residing in Tel Aviv (as mentioned, 60% of the sample).

In addition, poverty is significantly gendered – the poverty rate among women is twice as high as that of men (64% and 33%, respectively). According to the available data, among women, Ukrainian women are poorer – about 79% of them are poor, compared to about 64% of Eritrean women. The poverty rate among Eritrean men is close to the average for the male refugee population.

Figure 6: Poverty rates, segmentation by gender and country of origin



As mentioned, the participants responded to the short form of the USDA questionnaire (see Methodology section). The distribution of the respondents to the three statuses (food security, moderate food insecurity, and severe food insecurity) showed that a great majority (nearly 85%) suffered from some level of food insecurity, and over half of the respondents reported severe food insecurity. This finding indicates food insecurity at least twice as high as the Arab population

in Israel, whose food insecurity rates are the highest of the various population groups surveyed by the NII. In fact, as shown in Table 5, only about 15% of the sampled refugee population lives in food security.

Table 5: Respondents' food security

Food in/security status	Number of respondents	Rate
Food security	28	15.4%
Moderate food insecurity	55	30.2%
Severe food insecurity	99	54.4%
Total	**182**	**100.0%**

*Wrong answers or refusal to answer one of the questions disqualified the possibility of calculating this section.

It also emerges from the specific questions that approximately 60% reported skipping meals, most of them on a regular basis. When examining by origin, it becomes clear that the situation of Ukrainian refugee women is better in this aspect. About 30% of refugee women from Ukraine live in food security, about 50% of them live in moderate food insecurity, and about 20% in severe food insecurity. The findings are, therefore, less severe regarding refugee women from Ukraine. However, the situation of refugee women from Eritrea is even more severe than that of the overall surveyed population: only 10% live in food security, and about 60% in severe food insecurity. Refugees from Eritrea, men and women, live in severe food insecurity 2-3 times more than refugee women from Ukraine.

This data seemingly contradicts the higher poverty rates, according to the objective relative approach, among Ukrainian women compared to the rest of the refugee population. It is possible that this is related to additional financial assistance that refugee women from Ukraine receive and for which there is no information in the current survey, and it is possible that the findings reflect a different subjective perception of distress and food insecurity among groups of different origins. Also, we can see that in terms of housing – the situation of Ukrainian refugee women is worse, as they spend, on average, about 70% of their salary on rent.

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is a component in the assessment of personal well-being that reflects an individual's perception of their life as a whole, and a question on this topic is presented in most social surveys worldwide. In recent years in Israel, the rate of life satisfaction amongst this population has approached about 90% – a very high rate even in international comparison. The last question in the questionnaire referred to the respondents' level of life satisfaction on a scale of 1-10, and the findings emerging from it are completely different: the average life satisfaction was 39% – less than half that of the Israeli population. About 80% of the respondents rated their situation at 5 out of 10, and only about 3% marked 9 or 10.

The current findings provide support for the low level of life satisfaction among the refugee population, especially refugee women. The rate of health insurance coverage for refugees and asylum seekers is extremely low in Israel, a country where national health insurance is typical, compared to the self-reported poor health status among most respondents. Other factors that affect refugees' and asylum seekers' life satisfaction include their inability to cover regular expenses and a sense of financial distress among the vast majority; among refugee women, poverty rates are 3 times or more higher than the general population, and among refugee men – 1.5 times higher. In addition, soaring food insecurity rates impact nearly the entire population that responded to the questionnaire.

Study limitations

The target of this research is one of the most excluded populations in Israel and, therefore, has some limitations. First, our sample does not fully represent the refugee population in Israel. The questionnaire was mainly answered by refugees who had approached aid organizations, so one can assume that their situation is worse than that of most refugees. For this reason, we found a significant majority of women in the survey population, although there are more men than women in the general refugee population. Also, access to Sudanese refugees, for instance, was limited for a similar reason – most of them had been granted a temporary resident status following a court order and were, therefore, entitled to a 'services package'. Consequently, their representation in the aid organizations is limited.

In addition to the sampling problem, we assume that there were also problems with their answers, which stem from the respondents' unfamiliarity with the common research terminology, inaccurate translation of the questions, and more. We tried to reduce these problems by means of pre-testing (preliminary questionnaires) and revising the questionnaire that was eventually distributed, but it stands to reason that our amendments did not eliminate all linguistic and cultural accessibility problems.

Summary and Recommendations

This is a pioneer study that attempted to reach evidence-based estimates across various life domains of the population suffering from the highest level of exclusion in Israeli society – the refugee population without official status. We sought to examine the situation of this population according to several accepted indicators in the areas of poverty, food security, housing, and health conditions, as well as by examining the subjective perceptions of the refugees regarding their situation.

To this end, a questionnaire was distributed among the more accessible refugee population – those in need of the services of aid organizations – from which the data were processed. The questionnaire was distributed to 249 refugees, mostly through the mediation of workers from aid organizations, and after a pre-test of 30 questionnaires, following which the questionnaire was revised. Approximately 75% of the respondents are women, and the vast majority reside in the central region of the country, of whom about 60% are in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo. The majority of respondents – about two-thirds – came from Eritrea, and the rest from Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

The study raises a series of serious findings regarding the situation of the studied population. More than half of the respondents reported feeling financial distress "often," and an additional 28% feel this way "sometimes." These data largely correspond with the objective relative poverty data (that is officially calculated in Israel), according to which over half of the studied population is poor. While poverty calculations focus solely on income, we found that the rate of housing expenses among refugees indicates a very severe situation – over half of their disposable income is directed towards housing expenses, whereas the accepted opinion of experts in the field is that a rate of expenditure on housing exceeding 30% of disposable income is considered "unaffordable housing".

The level of food insecurity among this population also borders on a peak: approximately 85% of them live in food insecurity, including 55% (more than half) in severe food insecurity. The situation of female refugees from Eritrea is particularly difficult: only 10% of them live in food security, about 30% in "moderate" food insecurity, and about 60% in severe food insecurity. It should be noted that these

findings align with a survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which found that approximately 85% of refugees in Israel live in food insecurity.

Accordingly, it is no wonder that the refugees express a high level of dissatisfaction with their lives: on a scale of 1 to 10, the average is approximately 40% (compared to results close to 90% in national surveys in Israel), and very few feel life satisfaction.

Beyond the severe impact on the lives of the studied population, there are, of course, negative cross-cutting effects on their surroundings too. This situation, which involves a high rate of crime, at-risk youth, poor sanitation conditions, health problems, and more, increases the expenditures on policing, rehabilitation, and healthcare for both the refugee population and those living in their vicinity.

The reviewed findings raise the need for the state to prepare for the improvement of the situation of this population and, indirectly, also for the improvement of the situation of society in Israel.

First, a mechanism for gathering ongoing information on this population should be implemented to monitor their situation and its progress, in accordance with the anticipated policy measures.

The refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in Israel came here while experiencing one of the lowest points in their lives and under forced circumstances. The state must provide them, in accordance with its international obligations, with a social and health safety net that will allow them to live with dignity. The government policy towards refugees in Israel, which leaves them here without status, without rights, and in effect without any safety net, is what leads, among other things, to the severe data on poverty and food insecurity that arise from this report.

The State of Israel must act to prevent and reduce the difficult situation arising from the findings presented in this report and its consequences. We recommend considering providing essential assistance to refugees, even if partial, in the areas of social security (NII allowances), financial housing assistance in extreme situations – which this study shows are common – welfare services, and, of course, a basic health insurance service package, to which half of the adults and about a quarter of the children in the survey population do not have access.

However, expanding the scope of welfare and health services alone cannot provide the support and security network to which refugees are entitled – this will only come when the State of Israel fairly examines the individual asylum requests of community members and recognizes them as refugees, as it committed to when it signed the Refugee Convention.

Appendix A: Additional data

Origin:	Eritrea			Ukraine		Other countries of origin		
Gender:	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**	**Women**	**Total**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**
Expenditure on rent	3,116	3,941	**3,703**	3,438	**3,420**	3,575	3,480	**3,511**
Income from work	5,941	5,626	**5,704**	5,110	**5,221**	5,167	6,505	**6,140**
Persons in household	2.74	3.65	**3.39**	3.52	**3.46**	2.47	2.98	**2.84**
Average number of children	1.18	2055	**2.20**	1.54	**1.48**	0.80	1.66	**1.43**
Wage earners in household	2.02	2.02	**2.02**	2.00	**1.04**	1.85	2.05	**1.98**
Health insurance	34%	43%	**40%**	56%	**54%**	40%	27%	**31%**
Children's health insurance	30%	63%	**53%**	80%	**77%**	25%	50%	**42%**
Waive health insurance	68%	64%	**65%**	40%	**39%**	60%	71%	**67%**
Cannot cover their expenses	87%	92%	**91%**	80%	**77%**	85%	89%	**88%**
Subjective poverty	55%	52%	**53%**	16%	**15%**	50%	61%	**58%**
Objective poverty	31%	63%	**56%**	79%	**79%**	36%	56%	**51%**
Severe food insecurity	51%	38%	**42%**	16%	**15%**	45%	43%	**44%**
General life satisfaction (scale of 1-10)	2.96	3.40	**3.27**	6.16	**6.15**	3.35	5.15	**4.56**

Notes: (1) Ukraine – the majority are women; (2) Rent and income in NIS per month

Appendix B: The questionnaire

The following survey aims to learn and better understand your situation.

All of your personal data will be kept completely confidential by ASSAF, and will not be transferred in any form to the various authorities.

The data will be used solely for statistical and research purposes.

Your participation will be very helpful to understanding the needs of refugees in Israel and, in time, to finding solutions.

Background questions:

ID number: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

City of residence in Israel: _____

Country of origin:

☐ Eritrea
☐ South Sudan
☐ Ethiopia
☐ Ukraine
☐ Other: _____

How long have you been in Israel? _____

Family status:

☐ Single
☐ Married and living with partner
☐ Married and not living with partner
☐ Widow/er
☐ Divorced
☐ Separated
☐ Other: _____

In your home, do you live with:

☐ Alone

☐ My family

☐ Roommates

☐ Other: _____

How many people live with you in the same apartment and have a financial partnership with you?

Note to surveyor: This question measures the size of the household. Financial partnership means shared use of income and shared food budget. Important: Children dependent on their parents' income are considered part of the household.

How many of them are children under the age of 18? _____

From now on, the term 'household' refers to the people you have a financial partnership with.

1. How many people in the household work?

☐ No one works

☐ One worker

☐ Two workers

☐ More than three workers – How many? _____

If you have a job, where do you work?

☐ Cleaning

☐ Restaurants

☐ Construction

☐ Other _____

2. What is the total income (monthly average) from work of all the people in your household **(that you are in a financial partnership with)** in a regular month? _____ NIS (the amount that goes into your bank account or in cash)

Do you send some of your income to your family in your country of origin? If you do, what is the average sum per month? _____

3. **Do you have additional income from various support systems (donations, allowances, help with rent, etc.)?**

☐ No.

☐ Yes. what is the average sum per month in the last year?

☐ Prefer not to answer.

4. **Where do you live?**

☐ Rented apartment alone or with family

☐ Rented apartment with roommates

☐ Other permanent living arrangement: _____

☐ Other non-permanent living arrangement: _____

5. **If you pay for housing, how much rent do you pay?**

☐ Sum in NIS: _____

☐ Rent in exchange for work

☐ Do not pay for housing

Note to surveyor: If the apartment is shared with roommates who are not part of the household – meaning that they do not have a financial partnership and shared expenses for food – you should note the relative share of the rent.

6. **Do you manage to cover all of the household's monthly expenses on food, electricity, telephone, etc.?**

☐ I manage with no difficulty

☐ I manage

☐ I do not manage very well

☐ I do not manage at all / I'm in debt

Now we would like you to answer how true the following statements concerning food consumption in your home during the last year are.

7. The food I/we bought simply did not last, and I/we did not have money to get more (in the last 12 months)

☐ Frequently true.

☐ Sometimes true.

☐ Never true.

☐ [0] Don't know or refuse to answer.

8. We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (in the last 12 months).

☐ Frequently true.

☐ Sometimes true.

☐ Never true.

☐ [0] Don't know or refuse to answer.

9. In the last 12 months, did you or anyone in your household reduce the size of meals or skip meals because there was not enough money for food?

☐ Yes

☐ No [skip I2]

☐ [0] Don't know [skip I2]

9a. How often has this happened in the last year?

☐ Almost every month

☐ Several months but not every month

☐ Only 1-2 months

☐ [0] Don't know

Additional questions

10. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you needed because there was not enough money for food?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ [0] Don't know

11. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ [0] Don't know

12. How is your health in general?

- ☐ Very good
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Not so good
- ☐ Not good at all

13. Have you ever forgone medical treatment because of financial difficulties?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. Do you feel that you are in financial distress?

- ☐ Frequently
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

15. In general, are you satisfied with your life?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not satisfied at all									Very satisfied

We thank you for your cooperation!!