

Humanitarian crisis and social suffering in Gaza Strip: an initial analysis of aftermath of latest Israeli war

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Abstract

Background 1400 people were estimated to have died, and many were injured during the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip, occupied Palestinian territory, from Dec 27, 2008, to Jan 18, 2009; and the destruction of infrastructure, including homes, was unprecedented. This study was done to assess the extent of insecurity and social suffering of ordinary people who live in the ruined and unreconstructed Gaza Strip; their views of their quality of life in terms of health before and after the invasion, and factors associated with poor quality of life; and the most urgent needs of these people.

Methods A cross-sectional survey was done in the Gaza Strip 6 months after the Israeli attack. Households were selected by random cluster sampling that was derived in two stages. The first stage was the selection of a stratified random sample of 63 enumeration areas. Stratification was done by type of location (urban, rural, and camps) and region (North Gaza, Gaza City, Deir al-Balah, Khan Younis, and Rafah). The second stage was the selection of a random sample of 35, 50, or 80 households from each of the enumeration areas that were chosen in the first stage. 3030 of 8431 households were selected in this way. The form used to interview household members consisted of questions in three sections about demographic, socioeconomic, and health information about all members of the household; housing characteristics, amenities, access to basic services, and events taking place during and after the attacks; and quality of life, distress, insecurities, and threats (with focus on adults ≥ 18 years). Some questions were specifically about the periods 6 months before the invasion, during the invasion, and 6 months after the invasion. The prevalence of all injuries and disabilities irrespective of the cause were extracted from different questions.

Findings A representative sample of 3017 households (1% of total households within the Gaza Strip) were visited, a response rate of 97% of 3102. 5914 (31%) of 18838 individuals in the sample population, which represents about 471877 people in the total population living in the Gaza Strip, were displaced during the war. 1184 (39%) of 3017 homes were completely (1%) or partly (38%) destroyed, and 872 (74%) of 1184 damaged homes had not been repaired. 137 (0.7%) household members had injuries from various causes: 101 (74% [0.54% of total]) of these were caused by the war (from the start of the attack until the time of the survey [July 14 to Aug 29, 2009]); and 14 (4%) of 321 disabilities (2% of total) were caused by the attack. 2170 (72%) of 3017 households relied on food aid. Quality of life was rated as less than good (out of five categories from very good to very poor) by 1512 (50%) respondents at the time of the survey compared with 1166 (39%) during the period before the war; 797 (52%) of 1524 men versus 717 (48%) of 1493 women; 498 (69%) of 719 respondents with no one working at home versus 717 (41%) of 1761 with one or more household members working full-time; 724 (60%) of 1203 respondents with damaged homes versus 777 (43%) of 1792 with intact homes; and 1279 (57%) of 2245 respondents whose families received food aid versus 233 (30%) of 772 whose families did not. 2579 (85%) had moderate or high levels of insecurities, fears, and threats, whereas 1472 (49%) reported moderate or high levels of distress. Human suffering attributable to the siege at the time of the survey (2783 [92%] of 3017 individuals), Israeli occupation (2715 [90%]), latest war (2579 [85%]), and internal Palestinian fighting (2504 [83%]) was rated as 8 or more on a scale of 0–10. Crucial needs were identified: home repair by 689 (58%) households with homes damaged during the war; a source of livelihood by 2249 (75%); and utilities (water, electricity, cooking gas) by 1681 (56%).

Interpretation The Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip has had a negative effect on the quality of life of adults in the general population, and has resulted in high levels of reported distress, human insecurity, and social suffering. The siege on this region continues to be the main obstacle for improvement of the living conditions and quality of life of the population, and is a priority for action.

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Contributors

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Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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