The Haredi Population in Israel: Characteristics, Needs, and Barriers to the Use of Welfare Services

A Research Report to Support the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs in Preparing for the Expected Growth of the Haredi Population

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Abstract

Background

The Haredi or Jewish ultra-Orthodox population is the fastest-growing in Israel. It is projected to account for approximately 17.9% of the total population by 2035, with a particularly high proportion of children and adolescents. Its demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics affect its welfare needs and patterns of service use, along with cultural barriers and distrust in state institutions. The rapid growth of this group underscores the need to adapt welfare services to its needs, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Main Findings

High Poverty Rates

According to data from the National Insurance Institute, in 2023, **33%** of Haredi families were below the poverty line, compared with **14%** of non-Haredi Jewish families.

- **Large families, low income, and low employment rates among men create a persistent financial strain. Poverty is not necessarily perceived as a source of hardship, but in practice it causes functional difficulties.**

Characteristics of Applicants to Welfare Services and Use Patterns

- In 2024, 14% of Haredi Jews were registered with social services departments, compared to approximately 10% of non-Haredi Jews. However, after excluding those registered without an identified individual need, the shares of service recipients as a proportion of the population were similar: 4.7% among Haredi Jews and 6.5% among non-Haredi Jews.
- A high proportion of Haredi Jews with an active case in the social services departments were children (57%), with a low proportion were older adults (4%), compared with 32% and 25%, respectively, among non-Haredi Jews.

- A higher proportion of Haredi Jews, compared with non-Haredi Jews, have identified social service needs reflecting physical or economic issues, such as developmental difficulties, disabilities, or financial hardship:
  - In 2024, 37% of Haredi Jews and 28% of non-Haredi Jews were registered as having a household-level need related to poverty and social exclusion.
  - The share of Haredi Jews registered with the household-level need "persistent multidimensional poverty" was more than 1.5 times that of non-Haredi Jews: 11% compared with 7%, respectively.
  - The most common type of individual registered need among Haredi Jews was child developmental difficulties: 14% compared with 7% among non-Haredi Jews in 2024. This pattern endured when focusing on children aged 0–17: 33% compared with 26%, respectively.

The proportion of Haredi Jews seeking welfare services is similar to that of non-Haredi Jews. However, the high proportion of children in the Haredi population, coupled with concerns about disclosing family difficulties, shapes the types of needs for which Haredi Jews seek assistance, compared with non-Haredi Jews – particularly child developmental difficulties, disabilities, and financial hardship.

Barriers to Seeking Social Services

These include concern about assimilation into general society and a desire to preserve the Haredi way of life, concern that exposure would harm the family's reputation and affect marriage prospects, and distrust of state institutions – all contribute to Haredi Jews seeking services only at an advanced stage of distress, making effective intervention more challenging.

Concern that the family's reputation and children's marriage prospects may be harmed

Preference for solutions within the community

Seeking services only in severe situations

> General secular society today knows that if a woman does not report violence, the chance she would eventually be murdered is high. But in Haredi society, there is lack of awareness of this, and women will not do it, because a woman will say: "I will take the beatings. I will suffer, but I will not harm my children's marriage prospects". (Haredi welfare professional)

The Role of Haredi Leadership and the Community Network

Rabbinic leadership serves as the highest authority, while community institutions mediate between the community and welfare services, and at times even replace them.

Decisions about seeking welfare services are often made by rabbis

Alternative welfare services exist within the community but often do not meet professional standards

> There are many cases in which people turn to welfare services. If there is a case of poverty, there is no problem with welfare services knowing about it, because the welfare services will usually not remove children from the home on that basis. But if the rabbi fears that the welfare services would remove the children from their home, he will not report it to the welfare services. And if the rabbi sees that the welfare services have little to offer, he will not refer the case to the welfare services, because there is no point.

Cultural Adaptation Is Essential

Cultural adaptation of social services is essential for the cooperation of the Haredi population.

Shortage of Haredi social workers (approximately 1%)

Need for familiarity with the language and behavioral norms unique to Haredi society

Importance of gender separation and sensitivity to different ideological currents within Haredi society

> A therapist asked a [male adolescent] patient whether he had watched the soccer game the previous day and largely lost the trust of that patient and his family because of this cultural insensitivity. (Social worker)

The rapid growth of the Haredi population requires systemic and cultural adaptation of both the scope and delivery of welfare services, in cooperation with the community and its leaders.

Action Items

1. Establish a dedicated unit in the Ministry of Welfare for Haredi society
2. Establish standardized cultural competence training for all staff
3. Increase the number of Haredi professionals and take steps to retain them
4. Formalize collaborations with rabbinic leadership and community actors
5. Adapt services to demographic characteristics, including large families and the small proportion of older adults