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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

## Bedouin Children in the Negev: Characteristics, Needs and Patterns of Service Use

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Cohen-Navot, M.; Awadyeh, I.; Konstantinov, V. 2006, **Identifying the Needs of Druze Youth: Executive Summary**. ES-25-06 (Hebrew).

Cohen-Navot, M.; Abu-Asbah, K. (eds.) 2005. *Utilizing Research to Promote Opportunities for Arab Children and Youth in Israel*. Conference Proceedings. M-58-05 (Hebrew).

Korazim, Y.; Dolev, T.; Abu-Asbah, K. *Arab Children and Youth at Risk in the Northern District*. RR-387-02 (Hebrew).

Strosberg, N.; Naon, D.; Ziv, A. 2008. *Special-needs Children in the Bedouin Population of the Negev: Characteristics, Patterns of Service Use, and the Impact of Caring for the Children on the Mothers*. RR-503-08 (Hebrew).

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## **Steering Committee**

The steering committee for this study was larger than usual. In addition to overseeing the study, it was designed to promote a process of planning to improve and develop services for Bedouin children and youth in the wake of the findings. The committee members included representatives of all the relevant organizations and agencies, for example, representatives of government ministries, local representatives of health, education, and social services, representatives of nonprofit organizations working with the Bedouin population in the Negev, representatives of the residents, and representatives of the research team. The committee was involved in determining the study goals, study questions, and study design, in constructing the questionnaires, in monitoring the data collection and in studying the results. Due to the large number of members, the committee was divided into sub-committees for certain tasks, according to areas of professional specialization – welfare, health, and education – and the age of the children who were the target for the task in question.

## Executive Summary

The Bedouin population of the Negev is undergoing a very significant transition from a nomadic to urban lifestyle. The Bedouin constitute one of the poorest communities in Israel, which has broad implications for the economic and social well-being of their children. The services for this population are very under-developed and problems are particularly severe among residents of the widely scattered, small communities that are not recognized by the state. About half of the Bedouin in the Negev live in these "unrecognized" villages, which lack basic utilities such as running water and electricity. Government ministries do not allocate budgets for the villages and there is no official information about them.

The present study is a unique attempt to examine the situation of Bedouin children and youth in the Negev from their mothers' perspective. Moreover, for the first time ever, information has been collected about children living in unrecognized villages, about whom little was known previously. The study aimed to map their main characteristics, needs and preferences regarding services as a basis to contribute to the development of services that address their needs. The study also pays special attention to Bedouin children with disabilities. A report about Bedouin children with disabilities has been published separately (Strosberg, Naon, Ziv, 2008). The study was conducted in partnership with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and with the assistance of SHATIL and the Council for Unrecognized Villages.

### Main Goals

- ◆ To examine the needs of Bedouin children and youth in the Negev, with a special focus on educational risk situations, health problems and disabilities
- ◆ To learn about the existing services designed to address these risk situations, service utilization and the extent to which the existing services meet the needs of the children and youth
- ◆ To learn about the population's perceptions about the needs of the children and youth and the responses they would like to see from the service system
- ◆ To learn about the barriers hindering the use of the existing services, difficulties in developing services and the factors that impede service development.

### Study Method

The study population consists of Bedouin children living with their families, from birth through age 17. For the purposes of this study, we examined two samples: (1) Children with no special needs and (2) Children with special needs.

Both samples were taken from a two-stage sampling:

**Stage 1 – Sample of mothers:** A sample was created of 1,020 mothers of children aged 0–17. This included 606 mothers from recognized localities (who were sampled in a random sampling in all seven established localities) and 414 mothers from unrecognized villages in the Negev. The mothers were sampled in a random sampling in 10 unrecognized villages, which had been

sampled out of the 45 unrecognized villages in the Negev, according to size, location, and level of services. The mothers were asked a series of screening questions to identify whether their children had special needs. Out of the 4,855 children of these 1,020 mothers, we identified 4,414 children without special needs and 441 children with special needs.

**Stage 2 – Sample of children:** Out of the 4,855 children, we extracted a sample of 926 children with no special needs and 388 children with special needs. Up to two children per family were sampled. The data in the first part of the report, which looks at family characteristics and utilization of health and welfare services, relate to all children in the sample (with and without special needs). The data in the second part, which looks at educational and recreational aspects, concern the 926 children with no special needs (566 live in recognized localities and 360 in unrecognized villages).

The interviews with the mothers were face-to-face and were conducted by Bedouin women students in the mothers' homes using a structured questionnaire in Arabic. During the interview, data were collected on family characteristics, patterns of utilization of the health, educational, and social services, and needs that the services failed to meet. Data were also collected about the children included in the sample, with regard to health, education and recreational activities. Interviews on these issues were also conducted with adolescents in the sample (aged 12–17 – in recognized localities only). The survey was conducted from July 2003 to July 2005, while steps were being taken to establish the Abu-Basma Regional Council, which re-defined the municipal borders of the unrecognized villages.

The fieldwork took longer than usual due to the special challenges posed by the nature of this study. The fact that the interviewers were women meant that special arrangements had to be made for them to work in groups and at appropriate times of day. Bedouin society is closed and traditional. The residents were sensitive and suspicious of strangers coming into their villages, particularly the unrecognized villages, so extensive preparatory work was necessary. The research team had to identify members of the local leadership in every village and elicit the leaders' cooperation in notifying the residents about the study and encouraging them to cooperate with the interviewers. In many cases, it was necessary to obtain the approval of the respondents' husbands.

Traveling around the Negev posed special challenges since there is no public transport system within or between the Bedouin villages and the unrecognized villages do not even have proper roads. The problems of accessibility meant that the interviewers had to travel in groups in a special vehicle suited to the terrain, driven by a local driver familiar with the routes and conditions. The situation was compounded by the weather conditions – extremely hot in the summer, rainy and muddy in the winter – which made it particularly difficult to drive or walk around. Locating the homes in the sample was often difficult and time-consuming. It was hard to achieve privacy while the interviews were being conducted, with family members and children of the respondents milling around, and interviews were often interrupted when the mothers being

interviewed had to perform household chores. Moreover, the interviews lasted longer than usual since Bedouin etiquette required the interviewers to participate in the local customs of hospitality, such as tea, coffee and refreshment rituals.

The study also included interviews with service providers in order to examine characteristics of the services available to Bedouin families and children, methods of operation, and the service directors' assessment of the difficulties of providing service and of the most important steps to be taken in order to develop appropriate services.

### **Main Findings and Directions for Action**

The sociodemographic characteristics of Bedouin families (large families, polygamy, parents' health, low education, etc.) pose special challenges for parents in raising their children (on average, Bedouin families have 6.8 children; 38% of Bedouin children live in polygamous families; parents have a low level of education; they also have health problems, etc.). This is compounded by poor economic conditions in the areas where they live, especially in the unrecognized villages. The fathers of 44% of the children in recognized localities and 52% of the children in unrecognized villages do not have a paid job. The average period of unemployment among fathers wishing to work is 3.9 years. Furthermore, the fathers of most children, if they are employed, are skilled industrial or construction workers or are unskilled. The unemployment rate among the women is also very high – the mothers of 93% of the children do not have a paid job. The main reason that they cannot work is that they have to raise the children since "there is no one else to look after them." Only a few of the mothers said that the reason they were not looking for work was that it was unacceptable for a woman to work outside the home.

The combination of low socioeconomic status and harsh living conditions affects all aspects of the children's lives, from nutrition through schooling and skill acquisition, from health through personal wellbeing. Possible directions for improving the families' economic status include:

- ♦ Developing an economic infrastructure in the villages by creating industrial zones and setting up a local market
- ♦ Training women in work that can be done at home
- ♦ Developing services for children (home-based childcare services, afternoon enrichment programs and after-school programs) so mothers can go out to work.

The mothers were asked about the physical conditions in residential areas. The problems reported most frequently were waste, refuse and foul smells along with rodents, snakes, and other reptiles. The following steps are therefore recommended:

- ♦ Expanding existing programs to increase parents' awareness of infectious diseases and the ways they are contracted and prevented
- ♦ Increasing sanitation control in Bedouin localities.

Another aspect examined was the population's utilization of the health services. The rate of utilization was found to be high, but the services were perceived to be expensive (75% of the mothers responded thus). Other problems reported, particularly in the unrecognized villages, concerned the remoteness from the respondents' homes (67% in recognized localities, 80% in unrecognized villages), clinics situated in areas not easily accessed by public transportation (39% in recognized localities, 70% in unrecognized villages), and the medical staff's difficulty understanding Arabic (9% in recognized localities, 30% in unrecognized villages). Respondents were found to make very great use of the emergency rooms, apparently as an alternative to the regular health services. When planning health services, the following could be considered:

- ◆ Expanding the existing array of services (regular and mobile) and locating them in residential areas
- ◆ Reducing the cost of health services for residents
- ◆ Training local service providers and hiring liaisons to work with the Jewish service providers in order to overcome communication difficulties, particularly in the unrecognized villages, where the service providers do not speak Arabic. Thought should also be given to increasing incentives to professionals from the north of Israel to come and work with the population in the Negev.

Utilization of social services, in contrast, is low, relative to the abundant needs of families and youth: Mothers of about a third of the children reported that they wanted help from the social services, chiefly financial; the percentage of youths in recognized localities who are familiar with the social services ranges from 19% to 41%, depending on the type of service. The percentage of users of these services is far lower (1%–6%). Inadequate access and low awareness within the population of the options available make it hard to respond to the needs appropriately. It is important to take steps to

- ◆ Raise awareness among the families that the social services are not merely a "welfare office," but that they also offer psychosocial services. In this context, note the low percentage of mothers who reported that family members provide support with childcare, which may increase the need to strengthen family-support systems (formal and informal)
- ◆ Raise awareness among youth of the services provided
- ◆ Train professionals to provide comprehensive, quality, culturally sensitive social care.

There is a great need for information about studies and recreational activities for children and for counseling on personal and family matters among mothers (mothers of 79%–95% of the children need such information) and, about various subjects, among youth in recognized localities (66%–76%). It is important to develop intervention programs for the mothers in the areas of education, family matters, and child raising. It would also be fitting to bolster cooperation between education and social service agencies for the sake of the adolescents and to inform them of what they need to know by developing accessible and attractive means of communicating information.

With regard to education, the percentage of Bedouin children at preschool increases with age and is considerably higher among children living in recognized localities (chiefly because in the unrecognized villages there are no suitable preschools near the children's homes). The vast majority of 6–11-year-olds go to school. Children drop out of school at a later stage. Twenty-seven percent of adolescents aged 15–17 do not go to school. The dropout rate is particularly high among girls. By comparison, the rate among Arab youth in the total population is 14%, while 7% of Jewish youth in the population of this age do not go to school.

Accessibility of schools and preschools is a severe problem, particularly for children living in unrecognized villages. About a fifth of the preschoolers in unrecognized villages and 3% of those in recognized localities have to walk for over 30 minutes, sometimes across difficult terrain, to get to school.

The reports from mothers of schoolchildren aged 6–11 reveal high rates of failure in various school subjects, chiefly among children in recognized localities (30% failed at least one of all the subjects studied, compared with 17% of those in unrecognized villages). It is possible that the scholastic status of the children from unrecognized villages is better than that of their counterparts in recognized localities, but the mothers' perception may also stem from the fact that the parents in the two populations are not equally involved with what goes on at school. Parents living in recognized localities were found to be very much more involved and they are better informed as to whom they should contact about their children's scholastic or behavioral problems. We can assume that this involvement also makes them more critical of their children.

The scholastic status of the adolescents<sup>1</sup> shows that a significant proportion have difficulties with their studies (the percentage ranges from 19% to 48% of total students, depending on the subject) and about a third of them have failed at least one of all the subjects studied.

Students at elementary and high schools receive little scholastic assistance at school (only 6%) and a significant proportion of them do not have any scholastic assistance at all, even from their families. It can be assumed that the lack of help with studies is due to the parents' low level of education (some are not even literate), their lack of financial resources and the limited extent of educational assistance programs.

Frequent absenteeism among 6–11-year-olds is more typical of children in the unrecognized villages according to the mothers' reports (21% vs. 6%, in the recognized localities). Among adolescents, the absenteeism rate among Bedouin students was twice as high as that of Arab students in the total population. However, the absenteeism rate among Jewish students in the total population was very much higher (which could be explained by the higher percentages of students in the Jewish population who are still officially enrolled at schools).

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<sup>1</sup> The data are based on interviews with the youth and are available only for those living in recognized localities.



The mothers' satisfaction with the schools scored relatively high percentages, which were similar for all age cohorts and showed no significant difference between types of locality (mothers of 81%–85% of the students are satisfied with the school and the attitude toward them and their children). In contrast, when we examined preschools, we found that the mothers living in unrecognized villages were less satisfied with the attitude of the preschool teacher or assistant and the service provided at preschool than were the mothers living in recognized localities. With regard to the development of education services, the following deserve consideration:

- ◆ Increasing the availability of preschool classes near the children's homes and enhancing the supervision of physical conditions and staff training, especially in unrecognized villages
- ◆ Increasing accessibility to elementary schools in unrecognized villages, either by building more facilities in these villages or by enhancing the transportation arrangements for the children
- ◆ Increasing scholastic assistance at the schools
- ◆ Expanding dropout prevention programs and adapting them for Bedouin students
- ◆ Augmenting parents' involvement at the school, particularly in unrecognized villages.

Participation in recreational activities is very low among all age cohorts: 2% at age 3–5; 11% at age 6–11. Among youth in recognized localities: about a fifth participated in extracurricular activities, 9% in activities organized by the Ministry of Education, and 10% in volunteer activities, in all of which the participation rates were very much lower than in the total Arab and Jewish populations. A significant percentage of the mothers of children aged 3 upwards expressed a wish to have their children participate in after-school and recreational activities. The main reason why children and youth do not participate in such activities is that none are available near their homes. The findings also revealed a need to develop additional or alternative places for recreational activities: playgrounds for younger children and community centers, study centers, clubs for girls, a public library, and sports halls for older age groups. Apart from being "fun" and an educational experience helping participants to develop skills, these places of entertainment would augment the sense of security in the area around home. The mothers of a third of the children and youth reported there was no safe place near home where they could play or pass the time (this was reported more frequently by mothers in the unrecognized villages).

The mothers are also worried by the behavior of youths near their homes, particularly loitering, violence, smoking and the consumption of alcohol.

In developing recreational services, the following should be considered:

- ◆ Increasing the number of after-school activities and organized recreational programs for children from age 3, near their homes
- ◆ Upgrading the physical conditions near their homes and developing recreational facilities that provide a pleasant and safe place where children can play

- ◆ Developing youth centers and clubs to prevent loitering and provide youth with a place where they can spend time, study and develop. These centers could even partially compensate for the difficult conditions at home and provide the youngsters with a comfortable place to do their homework and meet with friends
- ◆ Planning and developing culturally sensitive intervention programs to deal with at-risk behaviors among youth.

Given the difficult living conditions and the severe lack of services, there is an urgent need for action for these children.

The study was overseen by an extensive steering committee that included many members of the Bedouin population. Beyond serving as a professional, consultative and supervisory body, the committee also brought key persons at the national and local levels to meet together with service providers and representatives of the population in order to consolidate efforts to promote the system of services for Bedouin children in the Negev on the basis of findings from the study. The study findings have been presented to a wide range of forums of policymakers and professionals and they are serving as the basis for a number of new initiatives. The creation of the new Abu-Basma Regional Council, which incorporates 9 unrecognized villages, provides an opportunity to improve the provision of welfare, education and health services considerably. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services and the Mandel Leadership Institute have joined forces to develop welfare services in this Council and the Council leadership has studied the findings and shown interest in implementing recommendations. The Government of Israel recently approved a comprehensive program for the development of services for the Bedouin population.

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