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Insecurity in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: a pilot study

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Background

With the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, about 700 000 Palestinians were dispossessed and dispersed, mostly to neighbouring countries. Roughly 100 000 Palestinians fled to Lebanon and now 400 000 are living there, most in refugee camps. Although tolerated by the Lebanese Government and population, with their basic needs supported by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Palestinian refugees are subjected to regulations that hinder their opportunities to seek employment and ownership of property, thereby restricting their integration into society and compromising their wellbeing. In a study of the quality of life and wellbeing of Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territory, a team from Birzeit University, Ramallah, West Bank, investigated classic and war-related indicators of insecurity in the Gaza Strip 6 months after the Israeli war during the winter of 2008–09, using locally developed scales for the measurement of insecurity and individual distress. We assessed the relevance and validity of the two scales as measures of wellbeing for Palestinian refugees living in camps in Lebanon.

Methods

Researchers from Lebanon undertook six focus group discussions to investigate notions of relevance to the quality of life and wellbeing of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and modified the questionnaire used in the Gaza Strip, without changing its psychometric properties and without modifying the questions in the scales to be studied. In this pilot study, households were selected from four Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to represent the different areas—north, south, Beirut, and Dbayeh (only functional refugee camp hosting Christian Palestinians, whereas the refugees in the others are Sunni Muslim). Every other household was selected in Beddawi and one in every three households in Burj el-Barajneh and Ein el-Helweh, and all households were approached in Dbayeh. In the camps of Beddawi, Burj el-Barajneh, and Ein el-Helweh, the fieldworkers stopped gathering data when the sample size of 100 individuals was attained, whereas in Dbayeh this number could not be

achieved. One adult respondent from every household was randomly selected according to Kish tables, with alternating of men and women—ie, the person answering the door was asked to list the male or female adult members of the household. Indicators of insecurity and individual distress were analysed after application of the cutoffs used in the Gaza Strip study. χ^2 and logistic regression analyses were done to identify the association between the dependent variable—reports of high insecurity—with demographic, socioeconomic, and health factors, and with objective and subjective factors related to the political and legal conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This study was approved by the Institute of Community and Public Health Ethical Review Committee, West Bank. Data gatherers obtained verbal informed consent from the household members selected before their participation in the study.

Findings

356 (94%) of 378 adults who were approached by the fieldworkers responded—101 in Beddawi, 100 in Burj el-Barajneh, 100 in Ein el-Helweh, and 55 in Dbayeh. All the indicators of insecurity and distress were the same as in the study undertaken in the Gaza Strip, with Chronbach's α showing good internal consistency for the insecurity scale (0.84) and for the individual distress scale (0.86). 134 (38%) respondents reported moderate to high amounts of individual distress and 121 (34%) reported high intensity of insecurity. A first logistic model, including demographic and socioeconomic variables, showed that insecurity was associated with living at Burj el-Barajneh refugee camp (49 [49%] of 100 vs 72 [28%] of 256 living in the other three camps surveyed), displacement of the family from another refugee camp (28 [55%] of 51 vs 92 [30%] of 303 whose families had not been displaced), and the respondents thinking that the camp was overcrowded (86 [43%] of 202 vs 35 [24%] of 148 who did not have a problem with the camp crowding). The results of a second model of all the variables that were significant in the bivariate analysis and adjusted for age, sex, and employment, showed that the odds of individuals reporting high insecurity were significantly higher in Palestinians living in the refugee camp at Burj el-Barajneh than in those living at Dbayeh (49 [49%] of 100 vs eight [15%] of 55, respectively; odds ratio 5.95, 95% CI 2.05–17.29); in individuals whose families had been displaced from another refugee camp than in those who had not been displaced (28 [55%] of 51 vs 92 [30%] of 303, respectively; 5.62, 2.67–11.85); in Palestinians who felt deprived than in those who did not (50 [43%] of 115 vs 69 [29%] of 237, respectively; 2.18, 1.22–3.89); and in individuals who felt estranged from their homeland than in those who did not (95 [41%] of 234 vs 23 [21%] of 109, respectively; 2.41, 1.28–4.53)

Interpretation

The security and distress measures developed in the Gaza Strip showed good internal consistency when applied to Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon. Furthermore, high intensities of insecurity and distress were noted in Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon, raising questions about the legal, political, and social conditions imposed on these individuals as determinants of their insecurity, life quality, and wellbeing. The results encourage testing and validation of the security and distress scales in Palestinian refugees in other Arab countries, and in other migrants, refugees, and people living in zones affected by war and conflict.

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Contributors

RY is the principal investigator and drafted the Abstract. SF did the data analysis. NMEAR and RG participated in the concept and design of the study and reviewed the data analysis and the drafts. DH reviewed the consecutive drafts of the Abstract. All authors have read and approved the final Abstract for publication.

Conflicts of interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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