

Who Lives In Jenin Refugee Camp?

A Brief Statistical Profile

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The international media has begun to show some of the tragic human consequences of Israel's assault on Jenin refugee camp: from one BBC report alone images flash of an old woman in a wheelchair abandoned in a field, dislocated families streaming towards neighboring villages, a woman weeping by the roadside for her husband shot while tending sheep, an injured man huddling in bed surrounded by his family who has called repeatedly for an ambulance. Yet Israeli officials persist in a rhetoric that brands Jenin refugee camp as a "terrorist camp," with its all of its inhabitants, men, women and children of any age, thus also marked as terrorists and all actions taken against them thus justified.

Who are the people who live in Jenin Refugee Camp? Using data from the PCBS 1997 national census, UNRWA information and a 1999 community-based household survey by the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, in cooperation with the Institute of Community and Public Health, which included Jenin camp among the nineteen communities studied, we can glimpse a community of human beings living in want, and in very difficult circumstances, with particular vulnerabilities and with aspirations for a better future for their children.

The 1997 national census recorded a population of 9104 in Jenin refugee camp, living in 1614 households. UNRWA reports a larger population of registered refugees at 13,055, suggesting that some households live outside formal camp boundaries which are quite restricted. Jenin camp lies within the municipal boundaries of Jenin, and was established in 1953 on 373 dunums of land, roughly a square kilometer. The dense population of the camp and the crowding of houses and facilities contributes to the dangers to innocent civilians, mostly women and children and older people, as those constitute roughly 67% of the population living there. particularly when Israeli airpower (F-16s and Apache helicopter gunships) and tank fire were used against the camp.

Almost half of camp children or elderly

Using PCBS figures, average household size is thus 5.6, slightly larger than the adjoining city of Jenin but lower than the national average of 6.1. 42.3% of the population of Jenin refugee camp is under fifteen years of age and 4.3% over sixty-five years of age; about 47% of the population are thus children and the elderly and particularly vulnerable in times of armed conflict and war. There are roughly equal numbers of males and females.

Both Jenin camp and city are refugee populations

Over 95% of the residents of the camp are registered refugees according to the national census. UNRWA reports that " Most of the camp's residents came from villages which can be seen from the camp and which lie today inside the Green Line in Israel'. Many of the refugees still maintain close ties with their relatives in those villages. Als of interest is that haf (49.7%) of the population of Jenin city (population in 1997: 26,650) are also refugees. Israel's assault on Jenin is thus an attack on a largely refugee population.

One-third work as unskilled laborers; unemployment high even before intifada

In the 1997 national census, about 70% of Jenin refugee camp males 15 and over were economically active in the formal labor force and another 20% were students. About 14% of refugee camp women 15 years and over were economically active in the labor force, which is higher than the national average, while 21% were students and 53% were home-makers. For the male labor force, as UNRWA points out : " while many camp residents find employment in the agricultural sector, many are still dependent on work inside Israel".

Following the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the close proximity of Palestinian communities inside Israel to communities in the Jenin District, as well as social and cultural links, encouraged an increase in commercial activities across the borders. An increasing number of workers, formerly absorbed in local agriculture began working inside Israel and local agricultural activities declined with a consequential serious deterioration in agricultural productivity. More recently, conditions which emerged during the first and particularly the second uprising, the tightening of Israeli restrictions of movement, and the cutting off of relations between the town and even its villages led to serious economic strife. The inability of laborers to travel freely for employment led to very high levels of unemployment there, and a severe drop in family incomes.

Patterns of occupation and employment, as found in the IWS survey, also indicate chronic deprivation, with 48% of those living in the town being employers or self employed, in contrast to 25% in the camp. Almost a third of the camp labor force are unskilled workers, most of these are among the third of the labor force that works irregularly as day laborers. The IWS household survey revealed a relatively high unemployment rate in the camp, even before the beginning of this uprising. For those in the labor force, we found that only 64% of camp dwellers were working regularly, compared to a higher 81% in the town. We also found that the unemployment rate was around 10% in the camp, compared to 4% in the city. Looking at unemployment by household, we found that 94% of households in towns have at least one member working, compared to only 85% in the camp. Even before the invasion, one can assume that the quarter of the camp labor force that worked outside the Jenin District was largely unable to reach their work sites, and unemployment must have soared to at least half the work force.

Home economy sustains families, but women under heavy burden

The home economy in Jenin camp seems to be an important means to sustain families, and indicative of under-development, deprivation and poverty. It appears to take up significant amounts of women's labor. In this day and age, a high of 52% of Jenin camp's women respondents reported baking bread on a daily basis, compared to 23% in Jenin town. Nine percent in the camp still process dairy products, 23% preserve foods, 15% raise poultry, 17% bake pastries and sweets always and 59% sometimes, and 4% sell poultry and livestock products for money. In contrast, these home production activities especially in the towns of the West Bank, are by now almost extinct. When asked about why they engage in these activities, 27% reported that this cuts down on family expenses.

Both in situations of chronic deprivation and vulnerability and in times of crisis, there are particularly heavy burdens on women. In the IWS survey, 14% of the married female population between 15-65 had married before the age of 15 and 28% under the age of sixteen. Drop-out rates in the Jenin district are also particularly high. Pressures for girls to leave school for marriage and boys for work arise from difficult economic circumstances in the family. These difficult circumstances also affect health: a large 48% of women in the 15-65 age group, for example, reported at least one miscarriage.

Chronic poverty in refugee camps

In available data for 1996-1998, residents of refugee camps are generally poorer than residents in villages and cities. In the West Bank, where camp residents make up about 6% of the population, 19% of refugee camp residents were under the poverty line in the relatively prosperous year of 1998, while 16.5% of villagers and 10.4% of urban residents were. Levels of deep poverty were also higher in camps. In addition, the Jenin and Hebron Districts are the poorest of the West Bank eight districts, with three times as many households under the poverty line in 1998 than households in the Ramallah/Bireh district, for example. Given PCBS's estimates of a 48% drop in median household income nationally after six months of closures and siege during the second Palestinian intifada, we can only assume that Jenin camp households were already struggling to survive even before the Israeli assault on their homes, and must now suffer serious want.

The poorest of the poor: Special concern for those who depend on social assistance

Of special concern are those households already surviving on special hardship assistance from UNRWA or the Ministry of Social Affairs – primarily female-headed households (mainly widows) or households whose head is elderly, disabled or chronically ill. In 1999, the Ministry of Social Affairs reported that 7.4% of households in Jenin camp (120 households) were receiving social assistance and UNRWA reports 307 households in Jenin camp receiving special hardship assistance, for a total of 877 beneficiaries. In the Jenin camp sample from the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS) 1999 survey, 20% reported receiving formal social assistance from MSA, UNRWA's or NGOs, compared to only about 2% in the city of Jenin, itself a relatively poor environment. Using the wealth index in this survey, 47% of Jenin camp residents were poor, while only 23% in Jenin city fell into this category (basically the lowest third of the population). Only 3% of camp residents owned any land. Tellingly, 70% of camp respondents in the IWS survey reported food as the biggest expense for their children, compared to only 24% in the city, an indication of lives where basic needs continue to be a struggle, even before the beginning of this Uprising. It is highly unlikely that the Ministry of Social Affairs is able to operate under current conditions and UNRWA also faces restrictions in reaching those poorest of the poor who are dependent on a monthly stipend for survival.

Jenin camp was also poorer than the adjoining city in census data, as measured by possession of durable goods. Only 36% of Jenin households had a phone line and 14% a private car, as opposed to 45% in Jenin city with a phone line and 33% with a private car. In times of war, these indicators of poverty are also indicators of increased vulnerability, blocking routes of escape and communication.

Education: Low Rates in Present; High Aspirations for Future

The national census reports that a third of women in Jenin camp over 12 (33.4%) are illiterate or have no formal schooling but some basic skills, while 20.9% of males are in the same category. As is true nationally, illiteracy is mostly among the older population. Still, only 22% of males and 18.9% of women have achieved secondary education or higher.

The Institute of Women's Studies household survey of 1999 also investigated aspirations for male and female children. Despite the relatively low educational rates of the adult population in Jenin refugee camp – or perhaps because of them – mothers and fathers have high educational aspirations for their children. Almost 70% (69%) wanted their sons to achieve post-secondary education at a bachelor's degree level and 67% wanted this same level of higher education for their daughters. The present times of war, dislocation and immiseration make these and other aspirations even harder to realize – and at the same time more important in order for the people of Jenin refugee camp to survive, develop and realize their hopes for the future.

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