

# SHUTTING THE DOOR ON YOU



**Situation Report regarding  
Children of Refugees  
and Asylum seekers in Israel**

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## Section 1 Introduction

### General background | initial introduction to the community and the children, from the refugees' journey to Israel until today

For almost two decades refugees from Africa, most of them from Eritrea and Sudan, have been living in Israel. They fled brutal dictatorships, wars, genocide, and other atrocities, which forced them to leave their homes and homelands. Many of them are survivors of the torture camps in Sinai and bear on their bodies, and in their souls, the scars of captivity and brutal torture.

Most of the refugees from Africa arrived in Israel in the years 2007-2012 from Eritrea and Sudan, however thousands of asylum applications they submitted over the years have not been examined, and some have been waiting for a decision for many years. Moreover, compared to the high rates of recognition worldwide of asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan as refugees (Eritreans approximately 90% and Sudanese about 60%), the percentages of recognition of refugees in Israel are extremely low and

stand at less than half a percent.<sup>1</sup> It can be safely said that if their asylum requests were examined and processed according to criteria accepted in other Western countries, most of them would be recognized as refugees. In any case, their continued presence in Israel is legal and regulated under a government policy of group protection against deportation, since even though the State of Israel does not resolve their status, it does recognize the danger to their lives that they would face if they were to return to their countries of origin.<sup>2</sup>

The long-standing government policy regarding refugees has left them in a state of limbo - on the one hand Israel recognizes that it cannot deport them, but on the other hand it denies them economic and social rights, such as social security benefits, State health insurance, and most social services. Many years

<sup>1</sup> HIAS Israel, [0.06% - the numbers speak: the handling of asylum applications in Israel](#) (2020) [HEB]

<sup>2</sup> The refugees from Africa "earned" many names in Israel, starting with the derogatory term "infiltrators", to "foreigners who cannot be exiled", and ending with refugees and asylum seekers. In view of what has been said about the rates of recognition of them as refugees in other Western countries and the judicial criticism leveled at the dysfunctional asylum system in Israel, we will use the term refugees in the report.

without an envelope of socio-economic rights have resulted in the deterioration of the economic and health conditions of many of the refugees and increased their vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, exploitation, and trafficking. Under these circumstances, those of them who manage to find a country that will allow them to live with dignity, a recognized civil status and rights, find refuge there. Today, according to data from the Population and Immigration Authority, only about 24,000 refugees from Eritrea and Sudan, and approximately 8,200 of their children, remain in Israel.<sup>3</sup> The children are especially vulnerable.

The memory of the escape from their countries of origin, and the difficult and traumatic journey that the refugees' families went through, have left their mark on those children who came here at a young age, as well as those who were born in Israel. **"Even when the memory is not engraved in the children's memory, there are many cases in which parents went through difficult experiences on the way to Israel that affect their functioning, and are transmitted in one way or another as trauma to the generation of children growing up in Israel. The children were exposed to difficult scenes at a young age, a fact that accompanies them every day of their lives."**<sup>4</sup>

Like their parents, the children are also statusless, and many of their basic rights are violated every day. Their families face post-immigration difficulties and policies that push them to the social and economic margins in Israel. The exclusion of most parents from health and welfare services pushes many families into severe economic and social distress and puts their children in risk situations.

Furthermore, even though the vast majority of refugee children\* who were born in Israel, have a normal developmental potential, and participate in the State educational system from the age of 3, they suffer from serious developmental, academic and language disparities. These disparities, of 2-3 years, compared to their peers who are citizens of Israel, accompany them throughout their school years in the educational system and harm their ability to acquire essential skills, especially verbal skills.

These severe disparities arise from a variety of reasons that will be detailed in this report, but it is now clear that one of the main reasons for this is their participation in unregulated frameworks for preschoolers ("babysitters") between birth and age 3. These facilities are run by immigrant women who have, for the most part, not been trained to take care of toddlers. The physical, safety and educational conditions of these settings are often inappropriate and the ratio between the number of children and the number of nannies does not meet required standards. However, living without status, without rights, in poverty, and on the margins of society, leaves parents no choice but to work long hours and leave their young children in these frameworks in a state of risk. It is the "babysitters" who enable the parents to go to work, as the officially recognized day care centers, which are supervised and subsidized, are closed to them and they cannot afford the tuition fees required for private day care centers. The effects of being in the care of the "babysitters" in the first years of life are disastrous:

**"Many babies ... develop developmental and emotional delays to the point of irreversible mental, physical and developmental damage ..."**<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the first years of life in these unregulated frameworks and growing up in poverty and exclusion, there are municipal authorities that segregate the children of the refugees from the children of Israeli citizens. The segregation causes great damage - humiliation, social labeling, educational and cognitive damage, and continuous impairment to the normal development of the children. Furthermore, the segregation encourages intolerance and racism, which already exist towards the refugee population in Israel. As the report will show, the children experience hostility and racism in the public space from a young age in the playgrounds, the schools, on the bus and on the street.

The cultural differences, the undermining of the family unit, the post-immigration difficulties, and the lack of status as well as the hostile governmental policy, affect the emotional state of the refugee children even when they reach adulthood. Young men and women find it difficult to consolidate their identity or make plans for the future, and are left with feelings of loneliness, detachment and lack of belonging.

3 As of June 30, 2023; Population and Immigration Authority, data pertaining to foreigners, quarter 2, year 2023.

4 **"This is no place for children", Situation report:** the lives of the children of asylum seekers in Southern Tel Aviv, November 2017, Gan Levinsky Library, page 6. [Hebrew]

5 **Research report:** Mapping the developmental conditions in the "children's warehouses", the unregulated kindergartens where the children of migrant workers and asylum seekers stay in Israel, 2016, Tel Aviv University. Page 5.

## The present report

In December 2019, ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel and the Gan Levinsky Library published a report that mapped and described the situation of refugee children in pre-school and elementary school.<sup>6</sup> About a year later, in October 2020, the two organizations published a supplementary report, which described the segregation practiced in the educational system in Tel Aviv between children of Israeli citizens and refugee children, and provided principles and recommendations for the proper integration and advancement of refugee children in the educational system.<sup>7</sup> This report seeks to complete and update what is known about these children, both in light of the time that has passed since the previous reports, the COVID pandemic and the lockdowns related to it that have had a severe impact on the refugee community, and in light of the increasing dispersion of the community in different localities in the country.

The data and information presented in the report are based on "freedom of information" requests submitted to 17 cities (where most of the refugees live); questionnaires distributed among the parents of the community in and outside of Tel Aviv (to which 68 parents responded);<sup>8</sup> and a qualitative analysis of 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews, in which the interviewees were parents of the community and the educational teams that work with the children of the community - in Tel Aviv and around the country. The interviews with the staff lasted approximately one to two hours, while the interviews with the parents lasted between one and three hours. The interviews with the educational teams took place in the educational framework in which they work, whereas the interviews with the parents took place at or near their place of work, or by way of Zoom. The selection of the interviewees was done on a voluntary basis, in accordance with the response of the parents or the educational teams to the invitation to participate in the mapping.

The interviews and questionnaires covered many aspects of the children's lives, from infancy to the age of 18 and the transition to adult life. Among other things, the parents and the educational teams were asked about the type of educational frameworks in which the children are enrolled at each age (supervised/unsupervised, integrated/segregated, mainstream education/special education); the language spoken in the educational framework; existing frameworks for afternoon and holiday activities; the nature of the children's relationship with their teachers; the existence or absence of cultural-linguistic mediation within the framework; food security in the educational institutions and in general; and more. As part of the interviews with the educational teams, additional emphasis was placed on their impressions and challenges in working with the children and parents of the community. As part of the interviews with the parents, special emphasis was placed on their impressions regarding integrated education versus segregated education, the nature of the integration (if any), as well as everyday difficulties and challenges concerning their children and the educational system, which as statusless parents, they encounter on a regular basis.

The body of the report is structured in three parts and develops from infancy and kindergarten, through the transition to elementary school to middle school and high school. Several aspects of the stages of education are examined: from issues related to studies to issues related to health insurance. In the chapter on early childhood and kindergarten (from birth to age 3 and from 3-6), the existing frameworks for the community's children are examined, including the types of frameworks, the language spoken by the kindergarten teacher, the conditions in the frameworks, and more. The chapter concerning elementary school (ages 6-12), includes an overview of the placing of children in different types of settings (integrated/segregated), (special education/mainstream) in different cities, and issues such as food security, welfare, life at risk, and more. The middle school and high school chapter (ages 13-18) reviews the changes and disillusionment that occur in the children's lives as they approach the age of 18, and the way in which the lack of status affects their identity, being and future.

6 ASSAF and Levinsky Garden Library, Children of asylum seekers in Israel - key issues and challenges in the field of education (2019). <https://assaf.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Children-of-asylum-seekers-in-Israel-Dec-2019.pdf> [Hebrew]

7 ASSAF and Levinsky Garden Library, Children of asylum seekers in Israel: key educational issues and recommendations (2020). [HEB] [https://assaf.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/kids\\_integration\\_final.pdf](https://assaf.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/kids_integration_final.pdf)

8 The answers to the questionnaires are not necessarily a representative sample but they, at the very least, serve as an indication of the serious phenomenon described in the report and necessitate a comprehensive examination by the authorities regarding the state of the children.

## The findings of the report

The picture emerging from the report is troublesome:

1. **Absence of data** - The State of Israel does not have accurate data on the number of children, their place of residence, and apparently not even on the educational framework in which they are placed. Refugee children do not receive an identification number at birth, and each authority provides its own identification number. This opens the door for the children to "fall through the cracks".
2. **"Babysitters"** - at least half of the babies and toddlers still attend the "babysitters in their first 3 years of life," even though, already a decade ago, Israel's State Comptroller warned of the dangers and dramatic consequences for the safety, proper development and well-being of the toddlers staying in these unregulated frameworks.<sup>9</sup>
3. **Severe developmental delays** - Already upon entering the State educational system, at the age of 3, the children have developmental disparities (sometimes of about two years), including verbal difficulties, emotional difficulties, and sometimes even difficulties with basic motor skills. Failure to address the reduction of the disparities perpetuates both the disparities and exclusion already at this early stage, and they continue even at school age.
4. **Tracking** - with significant developmental disparities, many of the children are tracked to special education even though they do not suffer from organic disabilities and their development potential is completely normal. From the questionnaires distributed among refugee parents, it emerged that the percentage of the community's children studying in special education is higher than the percentage of those studying in special education in the general population. Although it is not a representative sample, the disparity between the two groups that emerges from the questionnaires - 167% - stands as a warning requiring the Ministry of Education to conduct an in-depth mapping and investigation as to the exact extent of the phenomenon and its causes. Many times, refugee children study segregated from Israeli children in these frameworks as well.
5. **Segregation** - In several cities, and especially in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo, the children are segregated from Israeli children in the educational system from the age of 3 until the 12th grade.
6. **Food insecurity** - questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that approximately 40% to 50% of the children do not receive a meal at school or kindergarten. The figure is worrying. Bearing in mind that the State does not have data on the rate of food insecurity among the refugee population, and the severe data obtained from previous surveys - there is a serious fear that thousands of children are food insecure and without any solution within the educational system.
7. **Living at risk and in an environment saturated with racism** - refugee children are an extremely vulnerable population growing up in an unbearably difficult reality in every aspect of their lives. Living without a defined status, in economic distress, in the shadow of the trauma of immigration and in a survival situation affects the mental state of the children. Their living environment - exposed to severe racism in the public sphere as well as to delinquency, violence, drug consumption, prostitution consumers, pimping and survival prostitution - is another risk factor.
8. **Failure to receive health services** - questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that in Tel Aviv, approximately 40% of the refugee children do not have health insurance, and in the rest of the country, about 25% of the refugee children do not have health insurance. They also indicate that most of the parents who were unable to meet the health insurance payments encountered problems in receiving medical care for their children when they needed it. These data cause concern in view of the picture that emerges from them, in which many of the most vulnerable children in society are left without health insurance and without health services.
9. **Painful disillusionment upon reaching adulthood** - upon reaching the age of 18, the few rights that were provided in childhood are taken away from the children at once. When their peers with citizenship begin their adult lives by examining the options open to them - military and national service, higher education, acquiring a profession - the doors are shut to the refugee children. This, even if they succeeded, through hard work, to overcome the multitude of obstacles that stood in their way and graduate from high school with honors. Whether it is academic studies, acquiring a profession and employment options, or national or military service - building a future in Israel is very limited for them.

<sup>9</sup> State Comptroller, opinion: the treatment of minors without status

## 4. Recommendations

The State of Israel must come to its senses and give the refugee children growing up in Israel - approximately 8,200 in total - a resident status that will afford them basic rights and a future. They are here. They are part of Israeli society, and they yearn to belong and contribute to it, if only they are given the opportunity. The path to realize the good for society and the good of the children, is one: give the children an equal and real opportunity to realize their potential and build a future for themselves.

In view of the severe disparities that already exist, following years of social marginalization, exclusion, neglect, and separation, the State of Israel must, in addition, immediately take the following steps:

1. **Issuance of a 9-digit single-valued ID number to the refugee children:** The refugee children must be issued a single-valued ID number that will allow all the authorities that care for them to identify, map, and coordinate the care they are provided. The number must include 9 digits, similar to the identification numbers of Israeli citizens, so that it can be entered into the computerized systems of the authorities and facilitate their inclusion in services and functions offered by those authorities.
2. **Immediate opening of supervised and subsidized day care centers in a number and distribution that will allow the registration of refugee children of preschool age in supervised settings and the closing of the unregulated frameworks:** The protection of toddlers living in Israel must be ensured first and foremost regardless of their civil status. Additional preschool settings should be provided and the overseeing of unregulated day cares that endanger the children staying in them should be increased. It is imperative to continue to train the kindergarten teachers and nannies in the supervised day care centers which are attended by refugee children and expand the community work with the parents of the toddlers, in cooperation with the care staff.
3. **Annulment of segregation in educational institutions:** The unacceptable segregation in educational frameworks must be completely abolished and the refugee children integrated into the educational settings where the children of Israeli citizens study, while providing a response to their unique needs.
4. **In-depth investigation of the phenomenon of over-referral of refugee children to special education (tracking):** From the questionnaires distributed among refugee parents it emerged that the percentage of community children studying in special education is 167% higher than in the general population. This high rate stands as a warning requiring the attention, examination, and treatment of the Ministry of Education.
5. **Mapping refugee children who suffer from food insecurity and providing nutritional solutions for every boy and girl:** The level of poverty and food insecurity among the refugee population and their children must be mapped immediately, especially in view of the results of previous surveys concerning this subject, the extremely problematic socio-economic situation of the refugee community in general, and in view of the results of the questionnaires circulated among the parents for the purpose of this report, according to which approximately 40% - 50% of the children do not receive a meal at school or in kindergarten.
6. **Reducing the developmental and educational disparities in the educational institutions:** Action must be taken to reduce the developmental and educational disparities by way of:
  - Reinforcement sessions, especially in subjects centered on the Hebrew language.
  - Establishing a regulated system of linguistic and cultural mediation between the students' parents and the educational staff.
  - Bolstering the support and accompaniment of the educational teams, including training courses aimed at getting to know the refugee and asylum seeker communities living in Israel; pedagogical, methodological, and didactic ways to lessen disparities, especially language disparities; pedagogy of children at risk, and more.
7. **Augmentation of resources and solutions for locating and treating refugee children who are at risk** - the severe risk situations which the children are exposed to demand increased attention and special preparation by the Ministry of Welfare and the social services departments where the children live, including allocation of appropriate resources, intensifying the training adapted to the social work-

ers in the field, and expanding the solutions available to them. In addition, welfare services must be made fully accessible to children, including providing refugee parents with child allowances and disabled child allowances.

8. **Mapping the health status of the refugee children and providing full access to health services for all children** - the problematic finding that many of the refugee children grow up without access to health services requires that the Ministry of Health immediately map the health status of the children and work to provide full access to health services for all children. The Ministry must ensure that children of refugee parents who are unable to meet medical insurance payments will not be harmed by this, with an emphasis on single-parent families and families with children that have special needs.
9. **Providing horizons to the youth and youngsters:** The State of Israel must grant the youth and youngsters who grew up here A/5 visas that will allow them to build their future, including all the economic and social rights associated with this status. The barriers that exist today in the field of professional training, professional licensing, obtaining a driver's license, and higher education must be razed, and youth and youngsters must be given a real opportunity to realize their potential and contribute the most to Israeli society - where they grew up and in which they live.



## Section 2 The existing data and the disparities in the existing data

Refugee children do not receive an identification number at birth, even though the vast majority of them were born in Israel. This fact impairs the authorities' ability to fully guarantee even the few rights that are granted to them until the age of 18 - for education, health, and welfare. In the absence of a unique identification number, each authority provides the child with an identification number that is relevant only for that particular authority, thus opening the door for refugee children to "fall through the cracks" when inter-authority care is required for the child, or even when he moves from one educational, welfare or health setting to another. A careful examination of all the sources of information that gather data on the children of the refugees reveals that the State of Israel does not have accurate data regarding their numbers or place of residence, nor information concerning the educational frameworks in which they are placed.

Hereinafter, examples of disparities between the data held by the various authorities regarding the numbers of refugee children, that came to light during the preparation of the report, will be presented. Sometimes there are large numerical differences, which are irreconcilable, and which indicate that the Israeli authorities do not have reliable and clear information about this population of children.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that since the Compulsory Education Law only applies from the age of 3 and the responsibility for early childhood was only recently transferred to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry does not have data regarding this age group. A "freedom of information" request submitted by ASSAF to the Ministry of Health for data on the number of babies and toddlers whose parents are refugees or asylum seekers, and who receive treatment in the Family health centers ("Tipot Halav" clinics) in local municipalities, was not answered.

<sup>10</sup> See also the data displayed on the website of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in the table: [Foreign students \[students without Israeli ID numbers\] as per selected characteristics 2017](#). [Hebrew]

The first table shows the number of refugee children aged 3 - 6 as per local municipality. The data is based on answers we received in 2022 - 2023 from some of the local authorities we contacted<sup>11</sup> and from the Ministry of Education:

### Kindergartens

Municipality	Data from local authorities 2022-3 School year	Data from the Ministry of Education As of February 1, 2023	Disparity (differences regarding the number of children)
Eilat	183	70	113
Lod	109	40	69
Holon	30	28	2
Beer Sheva	41	4	37
Kiryat Malachi	33	11	22
Gedera	25	6	19
Ashdod	91	30	61
Rishon LeZion	62	18	44
Hadera	2	9	7
Raanana	29	14	15
Haifa	35	12	23
Tel Aviv- Yafo	1448	382	1066
<b>Total</b>	<b>2088</b>	<b>624</b>	<b>1464</b>

The second table shows the number of refugee children aged 6 - 12 according to local authorities in the year 2022-2023. Here, too, the data is based on answers we received from the local authorities and the Ministry of Education:

### Grade schools

Municipality	Data from local authorities 2022-3 School year	Data from the Ministry of Education As of February 1, 2023	Disparity (differences regarding the number of children)
Eilat	322	341	19
Lod	152	149	3
Holon	171	155	16
Beer Sheva	65	44	21
Kiryat Malachi	47	48	1
Gedera	33	38	5
Ashdod	166	156	10
Rishon LeZion	21	71	50
Hadera	6	51	45
Raanana	65	53	12
Haifa	68	82	14
Tel Aviv-Yafo	3022	2166	1066
<b>Total</b>	<b>4138</b>	<b>3354</b>	<b>784</b>

The disparity between the data received from the Ministry of Education and the data received from the authorities themselves, about children aged 3 - 6 who were in 12 local municipalities in the school year

11 The municipalities of Netanya, Bnei Brak, Petah Tikva, Ashkelon and Rehovot did not respond to the freedom of information requests we submitted to them (as of the date of publication of the report), despite their legal obligation to do so.

2022-2023, is 1,317 children. The disparity regarding elementary age children in the same municipalities and in the same year is 944 children. All told, there is a disparity of 2,261 children aged 3 - 12, an unimaginable number of children that are unseen by the authorities who are entrusted with their care.

The third table shows data we received from the Population and Immigration Authority about the number of refugee children between the ages of 0 - 17 as per division by local authorities, as of January 4, 2022:

Municipality	Children aged 0 -17	Municipality	Children aged 0 -17
Tel Aviv-Yafo	3774	Gedera	67
Eilat	605	Yavne	59
Netanya	402	Holon	39
Jerusalem	383	Or Yehuda	31
Bnai Brak	377	Sderot	30
Ashdod	270	Herzliya	26
Petach Tikva	185	Arad	25
Ashkelon	180	Netanya	24
Lod	144	Kiryat Gat	23
Beer Sheva	127	Bat Yam	22
Rehovot	126	Ramat Gan	22
Haifa	107	Kfar Saba	12
Rishon LeZion	96	Beit Shemesh	10
Raanana	75	All others	87
Hadera	68	Not listed	734
<b>Total</b>	<b>8252</b>		

Despite the dates of receipt of the various data, and despite the wider age range appearing in the Population and Immigration Authority table (0 - 17), there are still unreasonable disparities between the data received from the Ministry of Education and from the local municipalities themselves. This is particularly disturbing, as today, most of the community's children are in the elementary and kindergarten age range (so that the disparities in the data resulting from the variation in the age range are relatively negligible). In no case is there any identity or even similarity between the data.

Furthermore, a report of the Knesset's Research and Information Center relating to this subject (in regard to previous years) states the following: "When we examined the data regarding foreign students who are registered as being born in Eritrea and Sudan, according to their place of residence, we found that in the Ministry of Education's data on these students there are approximately 1,550 students in 2021 (compared to about 1,150 in 2020) for which no local municipality is listed as their place of residence. This amounts to approximately one quarter of all foreign students originating from Eritrea and Sudan who cannot be assigned to a local authority, and hence, any inquiry concerning the distribution of students from these countries in local municipalities based on this data is necessarily extremely lacking, and does not reflect the full picture of the situation."<sup>12</sup>

**As such, it is clear that there is no complete correspondence between the data known to the various authorities concerning the refugee children from Eritrea and Sudan, and in fact no source has complete data regarding their number. The lack of complete data increases the risk that these children, who they and their families are already particularly vulnerable and marginalized, are "unseen" by the bodies entrusted with their care and treatment as well as their development - the welfare, health, and educational authorities, as well as the civil society organizations operating in the field. There is an important and urgent need to establish a unified and central registry of "foreign children," by providing a single identification number that will accompany the child from birth. The lack of one identification number alongside the existence of several "fictitious" identification numbers for each child, make it difficult to coordinate his treatment by the various agencies and increases the risk that he/she will "fall through the cracks".**

12 [Knesset Research and Information Center report](#) from January 2021 on "Foreign students originating from Eritrea and Sudan in the educational system". [Hebrew]



## Section 3 Early childhood

### 1. Early childhood educational frameworks (ages birth to 3)

Most refugee children spend their first years in unregulated daycare facilities for preschoolers, known as “babysitters”. These frameworks are characterized by physical conditions that endanger the children’s well-being, low standards, lack of communication with the children, low stimulus environments, poor nutrition, many safety deficiencies, and unprofessional staff.

As mentioned, already in 2013, a State Comptroller’s report stated that “children in the ‘babysitters’ are in conditions of continuous neglect. The children stay in playpens for most of the day, without stimulation and enrichment activities. The physical conditions are difficult - inadequacy, overcrowding, abandonment, and neglect. The care, supervision and satisfaction of the children’s developmental needs are deficient and hinder the cognitive and motor development of the children.”<sup>13</sup> And yet, ten years later (2023), in most cases and cities, the children of the community between the ages of birth and 3 years are left in a “babysitter” from early morning until late evening.

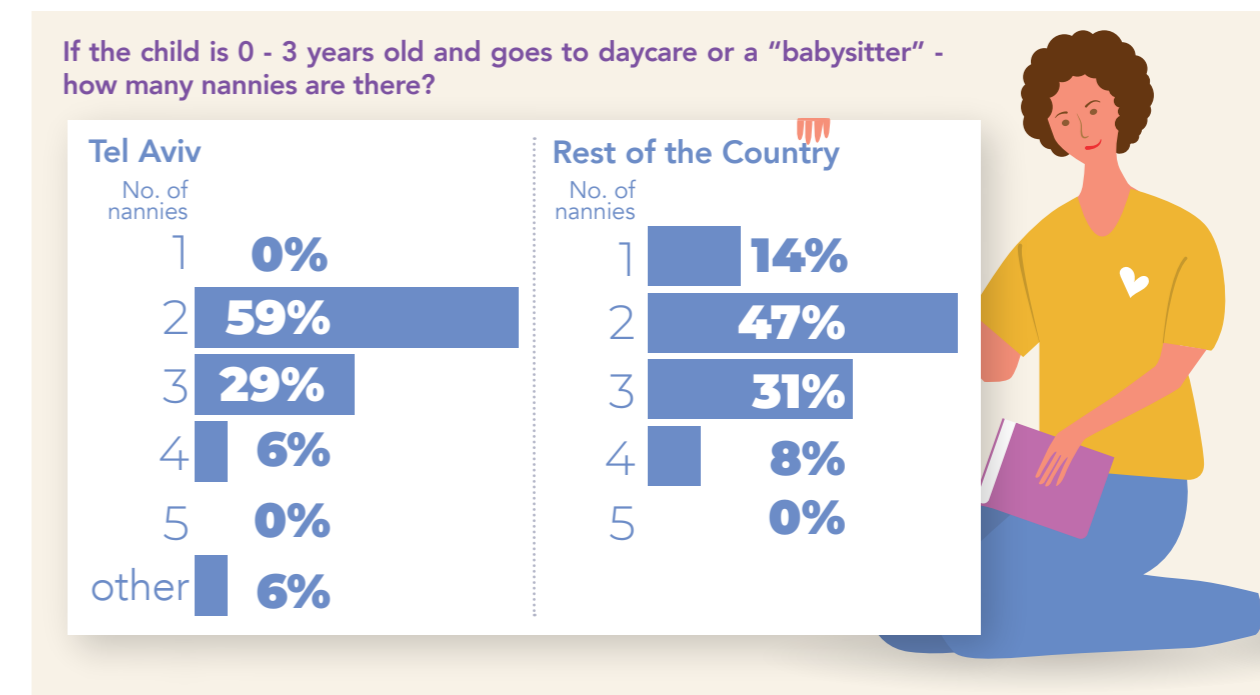
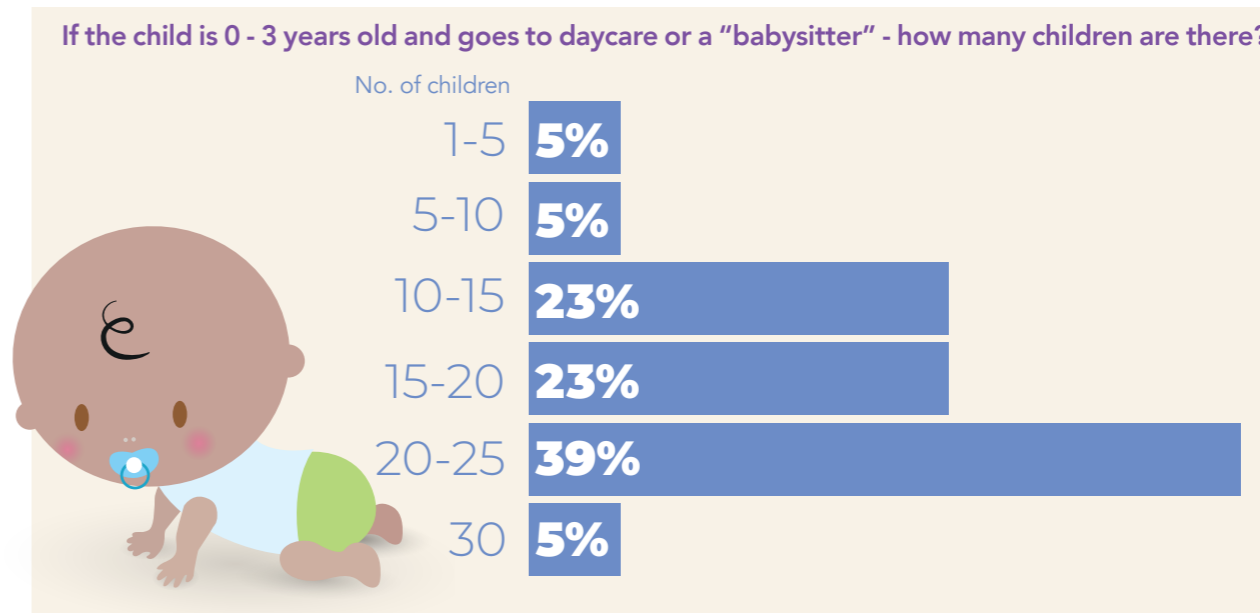
This is what Rava (pseudonym), one of the mothers interviewed for this report, said about her daughter who was at a “babysitter” in Jerusalem:

**“My daughter was in a ‘babysitter’ - it’s really hard. They don’t even have beds if they want to sleep. There’s nowhere to play. They just keep the children in their living quarters, a room and a half. There’s a living room - a dining table and a living room, and all kinds of household stuff - it’s really crowded. My daughter would come home with bruises all over her face, her whole face was black, swollen. At this age they crawl and start walking and are not strong, and there was no open space - she (my daughter) would fall on the table, on things in the house, like - the area was not safe for children.”**

In most cases, the children in the “babysitter” are under the supervision of one female member of staff, crowded in, without leaving the apartment, and sometimes even without leaving the crib. Later in the afternoon, the toddlers are also joined by children from municipal kindergartens, who are not registered in the afternoon frameworks for financial reasons. This situation increases the crowding in the “babysitters” and increases the risk to the children.

13 State Comptroller, opinion: the treatment of minors without status, footnote 9

Answers to questionnaires that we distributed among the parents of the community present the following picture:



The questionnaires show that many toddlers are in a framework with 25 other toddlers, with the supervision of only two nannies. This means that the number of toddlers per kindergarten is more than the standard allowed by law, which is one caregiver for 6 babies up to the age of 15 months (and a maximum group size of 15 babies); one caregiver for 9 toddlers up to the age of 24 months (and a maximum group size of 22 toddlers), and one caregiver for 11 toddlers over the age of 36 months (and a maximum group size of 27 toddlers). Furthermore, even though it is known that screen time is not recommended at an early age (studies indicate that under the age of two it is best to avoid screen time completely) and that it causes developmental delays among toddlers,<sup>14</sup> it is evident that the main activity of toddlers for long days is staring at the television. This is how one of the team women who work with the community described the “babysitter”:

14 A study by the Child Development Unit at Ichilov Hospital, led by Prof. Yael Leitner, [see story](#) on Channel 12 News' first edition program, 08.23.23



▶ “The room is not big, full of playpens, some of them with 2 children. On the wall is a large, modern TV, and the children are sitting with their eyes on the TV. There is almost no room to move or for books / nutrition ... The woman took out a basket with candy.”

Prof. Yael Leitner's opinion concerning the situation:

“The significant developmental delay that many of the children suffer from is not due to genetic/inborn traits, but rather to a deep environmental-educational deficit that is not seen in other populations in Israel. Some of the children have no experience with games such as puzzles, assembly games, reading books, or even playing with dolls.”<sup>15</sup>

Also, in many unregulated frameworks the nannies do not speak the children's mother tongue and communicate with them in English, Arabic or Hebrew, even though it is not the children's native language and sometimes not even the nannies' mother tongue. From the nannies the children learn to speak a broken language, while at the same time they spend only a few hours with their parents during the day, so that their mother tongue is not ingrained. As a result, the language acquisition of the refugee children is inadequate, and their language development process is impaired. The questionnaires we sent to the parents of the community reveal:



Approximately half of the community parents who answered the questionnaires responded that the kindergarten teacher or babysitter speaks Hebrew. This means that about half of the children do not acquire the Hebrew language from infancy but rather encounter it for the first time in municipal kindergartens. Arabic is another language, which we did not inquire about, but is spoken in “babysitters,” in Jerusalem, for example.

The decision to place children in “babysitters” is a default for the parents, especially for the mothers, who must work overtime, often for minimal pay, to make a living and provide for their children. Certain mothers, those who receive assistance from the children's father, can choose not to send the children to a “babysitter,” and reduce the number of hours that they work and go through a more difficult financial period, but in most cases, this is not feasible for them. This is what one of the mothers in Jerusalem said:

“I had no other choice. I worked long hours, so we (my husband and I) agreed that we would both cut our work hours and we successfully coped for two years. It was difficult financially, but we managed. I didn't send the other two children to a “babysitter” either. There are many single mothers, there are many, almost all of them. We are the only ones in Jerusalem who watched over the children in shifts like this. Some are single parents, and some of the husbands do not agree to stay at home, for all sorts of reasons.”

As reported in a research paper published by Tel Aviv University concerning the developmental conditions in “babysitters”: “Many babies develop emotional and developmental delays to the point of

<sup>15</sup> Professor Yael Leitner's opinion, submitted in support of the petition against the Tel Aviv Municipality's segregation policy in educational settings in the city (AT 7240-08-21 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv Municipality et al.). <https://tinyurl.com/Opinion-TA-segregation> [Heb]

irreversible mental, physical and developmental damage. The result of prolonged attendance in settings where deprivation is so severe, is serious and ongoing developmental impairment in a wide cross section of preschool children.”<sup>16</sup> As previously stated, in addition to the serious developmental harm, attending “babysitters” also endangers the lives of toddlers: “The consequences of staying in “babysitters,” and their characteristics, point to a great chance of real damage to the normal development of toddlers and children, and sometimes a real danger to their lives.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in recent years several toddlers have died as a result of neglect and the harsh conditions in unregulated frameworks.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the serious situation in these frameworks, the government decided in 2015 to transfer NIS 56 million over 4 years (NIS 14 million per year) towards the establishment and operation of supervised frameworks based on the “Unitaf” model, which will serve as an alternative to the unregulated frameworks.<sup>19</sup> In this model, frameworks for babies and toddlers from refugee communities are operated by managers, kindergarten teachers, and female staff members from those and other immigrant communities, and all work under the supervision and training of educational teams of the associations that operate the frameworks (“Unitaf” and “Lasova”). At the end of 2021, another government resolution was made to transfer NIS 30 million over 4 years, beginning in January 2023 (NIS 7.5 million per year) for the continued operation of the supervised facilities.<sup>20</sup> As of August 2023, approximately four such facilities have been opened in Tel Aviv<sup>21</sup> which provide solutions to only about 600 of the toddlers in the city, another facility was opened in Rehovot and one more in Eilat, so that it is estimated that at least half of the toddlers are still attending unregulated facilities as of today.

The interviews with parents show that the condition of the children in the settings supervised by the Unitaf model is better compared to their condition in “babysitters.” One of the mothers whose children study in Tel Aviv said:

“Unitaf is better than the ‘babysitter.’ At least they have an air conditioner. At the ‘babysitter,’ the air conditioner is only turned on when the parents come. You can tell by the way the children sweat. There are also rules there (at Unitaf), but that depends on the kindergarten teacher.”

Conversations with female educators who work with refugee communities across the country show that the expansion of the Unitaf model has many advantages, but it also entails complexities. On the one hand, the Unitaf model includes increased supervision of the settings where the children stay, and the increased supervision is welcome, needed and desirable. On the other hand, the Unitaf model perpetuates the segregation in education between refugee children and Israeli children. This segregation in and of itself may harm the normal development of the children, as well as their social integration later in their lives, as will be described later in this report.

Although the Compulsory Education Law does not apply to children from their birth until the age of 3, and the State is not obliged to provide them with educational frameworks, it also cannot ignore the real danger to the safety of the lives of the children staying in unregulated frameworks. It also cannot ignore the considerable developmental damage caused to them, which has a severe impact during the years of kindergarten and school, both on the refugee children and on the urban educational system into which they integrate. Therefore, the State must establish alternatives to these frameworks to ensure the inclusion of babies and toddlers from the refugee communities in supervised and subsidized study frameworks. At the same time, the Ministry of Education must considerably tighten the supervision of the unregulated frameworks and ensure the closure of any framework that is found to endanger children's lives or their development and that does not meet the standards applicable to supervised daycare frameworks. The local authorities in which unregulated frameworks operate must act in cooperation with the government in this matter. Dr. Hagit Gur Ziv's remarks regarding this matter are much to the point:

<sup>16</sup> Tel Aviv University report, footnote 5

<sup>17</sup> State Comptroller's Report, footnote 9

<sup>18</sup> Haaretz, Orly Vilnai, 30.3.2015, “Another baby died in a “children's warehouse” in southern Tel Aviv, the fifth in two months.” [HEB]

<sup>19</sup> [Government Resolution of April 8, 2015 regarding the strengthening of support and care services for infants and toddlers of foreigners without civil status in Israel No. 2487](#) [HEB]

<sup>20</sup> [Government Resolution of 12.12.21 No. 796 regarding the continued strengthening of support and care services for infants and toddlers of foreigners without civil status in Israel](#) [HEB] Ha'aretz, Bar Peleg, 12.12.21, “Israel Approves Millions for Day Car for Asylum Seekers' Children.”

<sup>21</sup> Each framework may include several classes.

“It is important to note that if children with Israeli citizenship were held under these conditions, the local authorities would have closed these facilities immediately. Already in the seventies, when I was supervising private kindergartens in the southern district on behalf of the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the local authority, we issued closure orders for just such facilities that were better than those that exist today for children of refugees and migrant workers. The authorities do not enforce the law when it comes to “babysitters” for refugee children because they have no alternative frameworks to offer to parents who work in the lowest tier jobs of society. I remember only one such place that was closed by the Tel Aviv municipality, a place that operated on the third floor of an industrial building near the central bus station. The conditions there were terrible, even worse than the bad conditions in all the other places, so disgraceful that the municipality could not ignore the abuse of children that took place there.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Family health centers (Tipot Halav Centers)

According to a key official in the Family health center (Tipat Halav) in the Petah Tikva district and the surrounding area, the family health centers are not a political body and from the start it was clear that all newborns and babies would receive all the services regardless of their status or that of their parents. As previously mentioned, a freedom of information request submitted by the ASSAF organization to the Ministry of Health to receive data on the number of babies and toddlers receiving treatment in Tipot Halav whose parents are refugees and asylum seekers in various local authorities was not answered. However, nursing teams that work with the communities said in interviews that they are “relatively trusting and without suspicion towards the system,” suspicion which, according to them, was more present in the past, during the first years of the refugees in Israel. For example, in Petah Tikva, Ramla, Lod, Modi’in and the surrounding area, the women of the team reported that a large majority of the community is vaccinated, they make sure to get their vaccinations on time, they make sure to pay medical insurance and more. However, as is described later in this report, this is not the case when it comes to receiving regular health services at later ages.

## 3. Municipal kindergartens (ages 3-6)

“At the age of three, many of the children come to regular municipal kindergartens without any knowledge of the Hebrew language. At home they speak Tigrinya, in the daycare they speak Arabic, so they have nothing to do with Hebrew at this time” (interviewee from Jerusalem).

Upon reaching the age of 3, most refugee children are enrolled in municipal kindergartens. It is estimated that around 3,000 refugee children study in pre-primary education across the country. Many of them arrive at the municipal kindergartens when they are lagging two years behind compared to Israeli children their age, which is manifested in developmental disparities in various areas, including language development, motor development, sociability, emotional development and more. In fact, the vast majority of refugee children arrive at the municipal kindergartens with poor oral development, when they have hardly mastered any language, so that it is only at the age of three that they receive a structured oral acquisition.

In some local authorities, kindergartens are segregated, and refugee children study in separate settings from Israeli children. This segregation is illegal, and it harms the children’s right to equal opportunities to develop and succeed, as it limits their ability to reduce the developmental, oral and academic disparities that hold them back. The result is further relegation of the refugees and their children to the fringes of Israeli society. In Tel Aviv-Yafo, most of the municipal kindergartens where refugee and immigrant children study, are segregated. Concurrently, in the 2019-20 school year, the Municipality of Tel Aviv transported preschool-age refugee and immigrant children to kindergarten clusters in the north of the city, due to a shortage of kindergarten classes in the south of the city, but was careful to maintain the separation between them and Israeli children studying in these clusters in the north of the city. Thus, there were kindergarten clusters in North Tel Aviv, where there are five kindergarten classes for Israeli children and another separate kindergarten class for refugee children.

<sup>22</sup> [Opinion](#), Dr. Hagit Gur Ziv, submitted in support of the petition against the Tel Aviv Municipality's segregation policy in educational settings in the city (AT 7240-08-21 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv Municipality et al.). [HEB]

Also in other cities, such as Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, there is segregation in preschool age education, but the reasons are different. This is what an interviewee from the community had to say about segregation in kindergartens in Jerusalem:

“There are separate kindergartens only for the community - five kindergartens. They are not only for the community, but there are simply no other Israeli children in the area. It is in the center of the city, where there are only religious families whose children learn in their own settings. On the one hand, they say it is good because they (the refugee children) already lag behind the Israeli children. But on the other hand, even after compulsory kindergarten, they go to regular schools and the effect continues and gets worse. The municipality does not force us, we can enroll the children wherever we want, but the municipality does not subsidize transportation to kindergartens, only to school.”

However, there are integrated municipal kindergartens throughout the country, where refugee children study together with Israeli children. For example, we found integrated kindergartens in Jerusalem and Eilat. On the one hand, the integration that exists in these kindergartens may help reduce the disparities between Israeli children and refugee children, but on the other hand, these kindergartens suffer from significant deficiencies in the guidance and accompaniment of the educational teams and in strengthening the refugee children, something that does not allow for reducing the disparities.

For most of the kindergarten teachers, this is the first time they meet the community and work with it, when the work includes exposure to new cultures and languages as well as exposure to issues of identity and lack of status, and familiarization with other unique needs that characterize refugee children. Kindergarten teachers do not receive sufficient training and guidance for working with the refugee community. In recent years, various training courses have been offered to the educational teams, but they do not provide a full response nor do they fulfill all of the needs, and the teams testify to emotional burden, frustration, distress and a severe sense of helplessness. Also, the integrated kindergartens suffer from the fact that linguistic and cultural mediation and translation services are not provided, and there are no faculty allocations for those needs. Kindergarten teachers are forced to do their work without organized mediation and therefore have difficulty communicating with the children’s parents, informing them about the children’s condition, signing forms and working together with them in order to give their children the best care.

Moreover, developmental diagnoses and paramedical treatments for children suffering from developmental delay are provided in the first years by the health insurance funds, therefore refugee children who are not insured under the “Meuhedet Arrangement”<sup>23</sup> are underdiagnosed and often do not receive the appropriate treatment for their needs and integration into a properly adapted kindergarten. However, even when the child receives a diagnosis, the kindergarten teachers are forced to aid the parents themselves in understanding the significance of the process and the required details, to assist them in translating the forms, in setting the appointments and in making more information available, most of which is entirely in Hebrew. This makes it difficult both for the child himself who does not receive the treatment he deserves, for the educational staff who are not qualified to work with children with special needs, and for the other children of the kindergarten.

Also, even in cases where the children receive paramedical treatments at child development centers, the parents sometimes find it difficult to take their children to treatments that are often not provided near where they live, and they do not receive the treatment they deserve. In view of the above, and despite the efforts of kindergarten teachers and dedicated educational teams, the children finish compulsory kindergarten without being ready for first grade. Kindergarten teachers spend most of their time developing skills that the children were normally supposed to develop in infancy and early childhood, and the children are not ready both on an emotional-behavioral and a pedagogical level for the transition to school.

<sup>23</sup> The “Meuhedet Arrangement” is an administrative arrangement that enables health insurance for minors whose parents are refugees and asylum seekers (as well as other groups of “statusless”) at a subsidized payment of 120 NIS per month per child and up to 240 NIS per month for all children in the family (2 or more). Insurance as part of the arrangement allows children to receive health services through a unified health insurance fund similar to the health basket provided to Israeli children according to the Health Insurance Law.



## Section 4 Elementary school age

Refugee children, who are placed, for the most part, in “babysitters” between the ages of birth to 3 and attend kindergartens between the ages of 3 to 6, which in many cases are segregated, arrive to first grade with environmental developmental disparities, both acquired and enduring. The disparities exist in the areas of language, cognition, fine and gross motor skills (e.g., the ability to hold a pencil), social and communication skills, the ability to work and play, and more. One major outcome of these acquired disparities is the tracking (over-referral) of refugee children to special education in their school years – as is presented in the next sub-chapter.

### 1. Mainstream education/ special education

Answers to questionnaires that were distributed to 68 parents from the community, indicate that approximately 32% of the children of the refugee community study in special education settings or classes, as compared to only about 12% among children in the general population.<sup>24</sup> Although this is not a representative sample, this high rate is cause for concern and requires further consideration and examination by the Ministry of Education. The large and unusual percentage of community children diagnosed as having special needs without an organic source - 167% more than the general population - raises questions about the possibility that these children are being over-referred to special education, this, especially in light of the remarks of Prof. Yael Leitner, director of the Institute for Child Development in the Ichilov Medical Center:

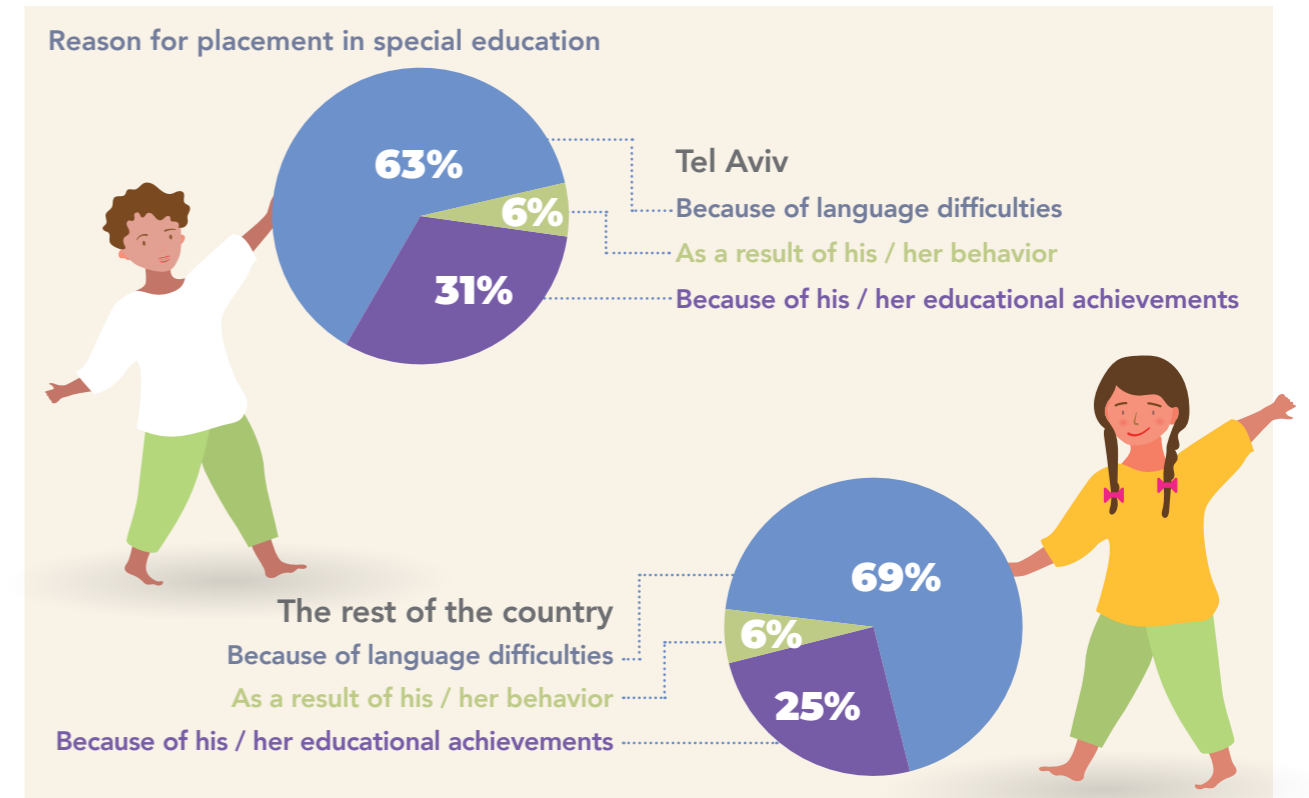
“The developmental delay and the continuous environmental deprivation, along with the lack of compatibility in the educational frameworks, lead to the referral of a considerable percentage of the children to the municipal special education system. In fact, as a result of the conditions that exist in the educational systems today, the significant environmental-developmental delay results in many more children meeting the eligibility conditions for special education, even though, as aforementioned, they do not have any organic problem and their development potential is completely normal. The environmental deprivation we encounter at the Child Development Institute significantly exceeds any environmental deprivation we have encountered over the years in other populations.”<sup>25</sup>

With this in mind, we asked the parents of the community as part of the questionnaires:

<sup>24</sup> Review of the Knesset's Research and Information Center: [The Special Education System](#) (January 2023) [HEB]

<sup>25</sup> Opinion, Professor Yael Leitner, footnote 15.

If your child goes to special education – why was he / she placed there?



The answers to the questionnaires indicate that a considerable majority of the children are diagnosed based on language difficulties, when, as previously mentioned, according to experts, the origins of these difficulties are environmental and not organic. As per Prof. Marcelo Wexler:

“The disparity that exists between the children of asylum seekers and Israelis regarding the ability to read and write, social interaction and more, in comparison to their age group, is not an inevitability but rather a product of ongoing exclusion.”<sup>26</sup>

Even though the children of the community have continuing lingual, developmental and emotional disparities, excessive referral to special education may have negative effects as described in the words of an educational staff member who works with youth from the community in extracurricular frameworks:

“It’s doubtful that the sweeping referral to special education is justified. S’ (one of the boys) knows that he was put in special education for no real reason. It lowers his self-esteem. He keeps saying: ‘I don’t understand why they just decided this about me,’ and he really is very smart, brilliant, and perceives the environment. In any case, he has emotional issues. He is clearly in a state of great restlessness.”

It therefore seems that there is an over-tracking of the children of the community to special education on the one hand, and on the other hand it seems that there is also an under-diagnosis of some children both because of the lack of health insurance and for other reasons:

“There are schools that are afraid to release those [students] who do not know even one single letter, so that in some cases they make very few referrals to special education. In addition, defining all of the children as having special needs will lead to the branding of the school as irrelevant, as they will all have left it... and then sometimes they reach a point of “lack of alternative”, when the need is so acute that it cannot be ignored, for example in cases of behavioral disorders” (from a conversation with an educational team at a special education school).

In addition, the procedure for diagnosing a child as having special needs is complex and difficult even for Israeli parents, and that is much harder for refugee parents for whom the procedure is not accessible

<sup>26</sup> [Opinion](#), Professor Marcelo Wexler, submitted in support of the petition against the Tel Aviv Municipality's policy of segregation in educational settings in the city (AT 7240-08-21 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv Municipality et al.). [HEB]

and the task of providing linguistic and cultural accessibility falls on the kindergarten and school staffs without them having been trained for it. Staff women who work with the community explained that the parents do not always know how to demand diagnosis and intervention, or alternatively oppose them, due to the lack of familiarity and information, or because of community stigma. In the meantime, the children find themselves in a normal classroom for another year, without being diagnosed.

The phenomenon of over-referring students from disadvantaged populations to special education is not new and is known in Israel.<sup>27</sup> It exists among immigrant children, including those of whom were born in Israel. It is not surprising then that the questionnaires distributed among refugee parents revealed that the percentage of the community's children studying in special education is higher than that of children in the general population. That being said, the disparity between the two groups that was revealed by the questionnaires - 167% - stands as a warning and requires, at the very least, that the Ministry of Education conduct a comprehensive mapping and investigation as to the exact extent of the phenomenon and its causes. As the responsibility for preschool care has been transferred to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry can handle the phenomenon holistically. It must act immediately to reduce the over-referral of refugee children to special education, first and foremost by effectively dealing with the phenomenon of "babysitters," which are a primary cause of severe developmental delays for those children that are placed in them. In addition, the Ministry must take the steps necessary to reduce the developmental disparities in the regular educational system and increase the accuracy of the process of referring the community's children to special education, as well as taking the necessary measures to make the process linguistically and culturally accessible to parents.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Segregation or integration

While in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo the absolute majority of refugee children study in segregated schools, without Israeli children, the parents' answers to the questionnaires show that in other cities, refugee children mostly study together with Israeli children.<sup>29</sup> The municipality of Tel Aviv has done a lot over the years to provide humanitarian, educational and welfare services to the refugee communities living within its boundaries, but in one area this municipality lags far behind other local authorities in Israel - the segregation of refugee children from Israeli children in State educational institutions.

The segregation between refugee children and Israeli children is unacceptable discrimination and illegal. It violates the right to equality in education, and it is prohibited according to the Israeli Basic-Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992), court rulings, the Student Rights Law, the law prohibiting discrimination in products, services and entry to places of entertainment and public places, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Israel is a signatory. The segregation negatively affects the refugee children's ability to reduce the developmental and educational disparities. It contributes to the sense of alienation of the children and their parents and increases the risk of dropping out and adopting dangerous behaviors. The segregation also encourages manifestations of racism towards refugee children and leaves them exposed to these manifestations without adequate response on the part of the educational system. Segregation cannot be a sustainable model for the education and future of the children, most of whom were born in Israel and will likely live there all their lives.

The segregation in Tel Aviv between refugee children and Israeli children is almost total. It already starts in the municipal kindergartens and continues throughout the school years. The refugee children are mostly concentrated in separate kindergartens and schools, while the educational institutions that are closer to their residences are closed to them and are intended only, or almost exclusively, for Israeli chil-

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, ynet, Tamar Trabalsi Hadad, [Students from underprivileged classes are more often referred to special education: "It is convenient for schools to 'get rid of the problem'"](#) [HEB]; and the Knesset's Research and Information Center report: ["Olim students in special education - data and aspects of the actions of the placement and eligibility committees \(May 2019\)." \[HEB\]](#)

<sup>28</sup> See chapter 5 of the Knesset's Research and Information Center report (footnote 27 concerning the necessary linguistic and cultural accessibility in the diagnosis and placement process.

<sup>29</sup> According to the questionnaires: in Tel Aviv: 66% study only with refugee children, 34% study with Israeli children; Nationwide: 37% study only with refugee children, 63% study with Israeli children. According to the data presented by the petitioners in a separation petition (see footnote 15), the data in Tel Aviv are more severe: almost 100% of the refugee children of preschool age study in segregation, and about 90% of elementary school students study in segregation.

dren. Most of the children are placed in four elementary schools - Keshet, Gvanim, Yarden and Bialik<sup>30</sup> These schools accommodate students from five different neighborhoods in the south of the city - Neve Shaanan, Florentin, Hatikva, Shapira and Kiryat Shalom - and all of them are children of refugees and immigrants. Not a single Israeli child attends these schools. The children of the Israelis who live in these neighborhoods are placed in the regional schools in their residential neighborhoods (for example Nofim in Kiryat Shalom, Hatzome'ach in Shapira, Droyanov in Florentin, and HaGalil in the Hatikva neighborhood) where extremely few refugee children are placed. An absolute majority of the refugee children living in these neighborhoods are forced to go to the segregated schools which, for some of them, are further away from their places of residence. Thus, the clear policy of segregation of the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality in this matter is expressed in full force.

Even the institutions for special education in the city are characterized by segregation. Staff women who work with the children of the community in one of the upper divisions (ages 12-18) at a special education school in Tel Aviv, cautioned, in an interview with them, about a change made in the composition of the population in their school in which they accept more refugee children, and the Israeli children leave the school for other frameworks. They stated that this is a known phenomenon in two other special education schools in the city. One result of the change in the composition of the school's population is the removal of Israeli students with autism to other schools. According to them:

"The fact that there is a great number of students from Eritrea with developmental disparities, drove the parents of Israeli students with autism to leave the school and open another school for themselves."

The staff women argued that this does not necessarily stem from motives of racism, but from a real need for an adapted educational response, which stemmed from a change in the composition of the population at the school. And still, it is not clear why a way was not found to accommodate the Israeli children inside the school.

From the description above it appears that the policy of segregation of refugee and immigrant children in Tel Aviv-Yafo is obvious to all and cannot be explained by integration difficulties arising from the concentration of this population in certain neighborhoods in southern Tel Aviv. The concentration of asylum seekers and immigrants in certain neighborhoods does not justify an "educational ghetto," and what is right for Petah Tikva and Eilat, where segregation was abolished as a result of legal procedures, and the children were integrated - is also right for Tel Aviv-Yafo.

In addition, there is concern that what is considered abnormal in schools with Israeli children is "normalized" in segregated schools. For example, from the interviews we conducted, it appears that in the segregated schools, the teachers' cellphone cameras sometimes play a central role in documenting the children's behavior. Some teachers regularly take pictures of the children to prove to relevant officials in the municipality and/or the children's parents, that the children behaved violently.<sup>31</sup> This practice of shaming the children by the teachers raises serious ethical questions and seriously damages the trust and healthy relationship between the educational staff and the children, and between the staff and the parents. How can teachers who just a moment ago photographed their students represent pedagogical and emotional needs in school and city discussions concerning the future of those students. It is doubtful whether such a phenomenon would be accepted if Israeli children were photographed by their teachers and were subjected to such humiliation. It may be assumed that Israeli parents would take legal actions and present their case to the media if their children's teachers dared to act in this way.

From the interviews with parents, it is difficult to free oneself of the impression that the segregation contributes to the normalization of other offensive phenomena directed towards refugee children and their parents - phenomena that would not "pass" in a school where children of Israeli citizens also attend.

This is how, for example, one of the mothers described what happened in one of the segregated schools when a committee discussed the question of whether to transfer her son to another school:

<sup>30</sup> Bialik elementary school was located with the high school as the "Bialik-Rogozin" campus. At the end of 2022, the Tel Aviv Municipality decided to separate the schools so that the "Bialik" elementary school remained on Aliya Street, while the high school - "Rogozin" - moved to another location.

<sup>31</sup> On the phenomenon, see also Noa Limona, Haaretz, ["The teachers who 'decided to not remain silent' betrayed the trust of the children and parents"](#), March 15, 2022 [HEB]

"There was a meeting at the school concerning his transfer to a different school, a committee. I didn't meet with the committee, I wasn't there, while I was talking to the psychologist they finished the meeting, I was played [...] Once the principal came and hugged him (the son) tightly. My son told me he couldn't breathe. The principal did that to calm him down, the principal chased him and filmed my son climbing the fence. What do you expect him to do when you chase him? They documented my child all this time in pictures that were used against him. They showed these pictures to someone from the Ministry of Education."

Another mother whose children attend a segregated school said:

▶ "One time he was outside the school until 10:00, because there was a misunderstanding concerning suspension days. I brought him and they didn't let him in. During that time, none of the teachers were watching over him."

It is doubtful if an Israeli child of Israeli parents would have been left outside of the school fence, without adult supervision, for two hours, due to a misunderstanding concerning the suspension days, and it is doubtful that such a thing would have happened in integrated schools where mainly Israeli children study. In regard to another segregated school, one of the mothers says:

▶ "One day, I was in Ramat Gan, at 10:00 - 11:00 they called me from the school and told me that they couldn't find my son. They informed the police. I was working at someone's house cleaning. I left it open and I just left - without my purse, without anything - and then the wind blew the door closed. Then I shouted, the neighbor came out, I cried and shouted, the neighbor took the phone and shouted at the school, 'How did you lose her son?' - The school yelled back at me. When I was on the way to the school they found him. He was sitting under a chair, and they were looking for him. He was hiding because four people came and grabbed him by force."

The interviews with the educational staff show that the level of studies and the learning habits and routines are also negatively affected by the segregation. Most of the GEFEN funds (funds meant to give school principals pedagogical-administrative flexibility in managing their schools) in the segregated schools are invested in additional assistants and personnel to deal with the behavioral difficulties, so that at the very least the children and the staff "have the shape of a class". As such, the assistants are not there for the needs of studies or for educational reinforcement, but rather the educational goal they strive for in the segregated schools is "a form of a class".

The segregation also harms Israeli children. Getting to know children of different origins and including children with different needs makes their classmates more tolerant and responsible towards others, and leads to an improvement in their cognitive abilities, the development of critical thinking skills, and an improvement in their future ability to conduct themselves in a socially, culturally, and ethnically diverse environment.

The interviews with parents who live outside of Tel Aviv and whose children study in integrated frameworks revealed a different picture. In cities like Jerusalem or Eilat, where refugee children are integrated in schools with Israeli children, it is evident that the integration bears fruit; This is how one of the mothers described it:

"There is a birthday party for someone from the class, the (Israeli) friends invite them and they (the refugee children) go to their house - the Israelis'. My children, their three Israeli friends, they go to their house and sleep there. And it's not just me, the parents - almost all of us are without a car. Israeli parents volunteer to pick up and return the children from the birthday party. The teacher tries to connect children to friends, so they won't be alone."

And so we see that when there is integration between Israeli children and refugee children and when the teacher works towards integration, the walls collapse, there is solidarity between Israeli parents and the parents of the community, and the children simply become friends. The segregation, racism, discrimination, exclusion, and the feeling of foreignness are not fated but rather the result of policy.

The struggle against segregation in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo

In 2021, refugee parents, Israeli parents, human rights organizations (including ASSAF) and social activists

filed a petition against segregation in education in the city of Tel Aviv.<sup>32</sup> Following the rejection of the petition in July 2022, an appeal was filed to the Israeli Supreme Court which is currently pending (as of October 2023).<sup>33</sup> During the appeal, in August 2023, the Ministry of Education informed the court that during this school year (2023-2024) it is going to start a two-year pilot program, under which 96 refugee children will be integrated each year in schools in the north and in the center of the city where Israeli children study. Those who are integrated will receive transportation, after-school classes, and schools during the summer break. As for the other refugee children - the large majority - who will continue to attend the segregated educational institutions in the south of the city, the Ministry of Education announced that it will build an "adapted learning program" for them. As far as the first graders are concerned, this program "will suggest to the schools to integrate into the existing curriculum..., enrichment hours for English studies..., [and] in addition, additional instructors will be integrated into the schools in the subjects of mathematics, Hebrew and science in all age groups from first to sixth grade, this with the goal of strengthening the students' achievements."<sup>34</sup>

The Ministry of Education's announcement regarding the contents of the "adapted curriculum" is vague, but it indicates that part of the study hours in grades 2-6 will be devoted to "designated study hours that deal with topics that are relevant to the children of the foreign community, with all its unique cultural aspects. For example, study hours will be devoted to learning about the children's family history, in such a way that they can learn about the history of their families, their homeland, and so on."<sup>35</sup> In an article published concerning this subject in "Haaretz" it is stated that the plan will also include "adaptation of the hours designated for identity subjects (Bible, Jewish-Israeli culture, homeland, society and citizenship) to the population of asylum seekers, and to creating references within the curriculum to the countries of origin, communities and cultures from which the students come."<sup>36</sup> The article continues: "In an earlier version of the document of understanding signed between the Tel Aviv Municipality and the Ministry of Education, it was stated that a 'universal curriculum' would be formulated for the children. According to sources privy to the details, those who originally pushed for the formation of the plan were the Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Education, Avital Ben Shlomo, who until recently served as a researcher at the Kohelet Policy Forum, as well as the Chief of Staff of the Minister's Office, Asif Kazola. According to the sources, the two first tried to establish a pedagogical program for the children of asylum seekers, which would be separate from the study program for Israelis, within the framework of which the subjects of the Bible and the homeland would be eliminated and no holidays from the Hebrew calendar would be noted. According to the sources, the professionals in the Ministry opposed this plan in its entirety, and as of now another plan is being promoted, in which emphasis will be placed on the identity of the asylum-seeking students in relation to their country of origin and the community to which they belong, but without impairing the studies of Israeli identity."<sup>37</sup>

The Ministry of Education's pilot program raises serious concerns that its real goal is not the integration of the refugee children with the children of Israeli citizens in preparation for their integration into the Israeli society where they were born and where they are growing up, but rather the increasing of segregation and the raising of walls. First, it is not clear why a pilot program for the integration of children is required at all since segregation is wrong and harmful and there is no need to examine the benefits of integration.<sup>38</sup> Although the adoption of a gradual program of integration of refugee children in schools attended by Israeli children is not wrong in and of itself, there is a difference between gradual integration and a pilot program at the end of which "a renewed assessment of the situation will be conducted."<sup>39</sup> Secondly, why would the senior officials of the Ministry of Education strive to

32 Administrative petition 7240-08-21 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv-Yafo et al. The petition was led by attorney Haran Richman from the Law and Education Policy Clinic at the University of Haifa, and attorney Tal Hassin from the Civil Rights Association.

33 Administrative petition appeal 7906/22 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv-Yafo et al.

34 From the [notification of the Ministry of Education to the court dated 10.8.2023](#) in the Administrative petition appeal 7906/22. [HEB]

35 Ibid.

36 Haaretz, Bar Peleg, Shira Ovadia Kadri, "[The Ministry of Education formulated a draft curriculum for the children of asylum seekers](#)", 10.8.2023 [HEB]

37 Ibid.

38 ASSAF and Levinsky Garden Library, Children of asylum seekers in Israel: key educational issues and recommendations (2020). See footnote 7.

39 From the [notification of the Ministry of Education to the court dated 10.8.2023](#) in the Administrative petition appeal 7906/22. [HEB]

cancel the studies of Israeli culture, homeland, society and citizenship? Of course, it is not wrong, and even appropriate, to refer in the educational system to the culture of the country of origin of the students' parents, but not at the expense of canceling the curriculum designed to increase their sense of belonging and identity to Israel. The cancellation of these subjects, will leave the refugee children even more isolated than they are today, will seriously damage their resilience and increase their sense of alienation. Such a segregated curriculum is not legal, is not moral, and its real purpose is to "make it clear" to the children, their parents and Israeli society that their future is not in Israel, even though, as was previously noted, the children do not know another homeland other than Israel, and Israel recognizes that the parents cannot return to their countries of origin.

### 3. Language

▶ "Until you understand what he (the child) is trying to tell you - and it's a shame. A lot of work of deciphering what they're trying to say, which usually happens with tiny kindergarten children, here you have to do it with older children" (instructor who works with refugee children in Tel Aviv).

The absolute majority of elementary school-age refugee children speak poor Hebrew, and in fact do not speak any language in its entirety, but parts of different and mixed languages, especially if they learn separately. After all, they are spoken to in Tigrinya at home, they are spoken to in English, Arabic or another language in the "babysitter," and they are spoken to in Hebrew in the schools. Failure to acquire a mother tongue with all of its complexities may impair the children's ability to acquire any other language later on. Meanwhile, the children's vocabulary is limited and quite a few of the staff women must make an effort to understand what the child says or wants. This situation, according to them, sometimes leads to bouts of frustration and rage among the children who are put in situations, on a daily basis, where there is no adult who understands them. The language difficulty also negatively affects the poor level of studies and the children's ability to prepare homework, or even to receive and understand the homework (especially in segregated schools), because there is no parent who knows the language and can help.

In addition, in the interviews with the women of the educational staff who work with the community, they explained about their tendency to lower the level of language (register) when they talk to the children, even though they know that according to speech therapists the recommendation is the opposite (that is, to speak at a normal and even high register). They explained that the daily intensity of working with the children and the frequent transition from "case to case" (as they say), or from child to child, leads them to lower the register.

"There are staff who defer to the mannerisms of the children - you adopt the children's language instead of the other way around." (The original quote in Hebrew is paraphrased here as it could not be literally translated to English in a coherent way).

As can be understood from this quote, apart from lowering the register, the educational teams sometimes adopt the children's tendency to speak using parts of different and mixed languages. All the above reinforces the need for language augmentation for all refugee children from the moment they enter the educational system.

### 4. Welfare: lives at risk

Refugee children are an extremely vulnerable population growing up in an unbearably difficult reality in every aspect of their lives.<sup>40</sup> Living without a defined status, in economic distress, in the shadow of the trauma of immigration and in a survival situation affects the mental state of the children and their families. Parents often find it difficult to devote themselves emotionally to caring for their children, which increases the distress of the children. According to the definition of the "360" program - the national program of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security for children and youth at risk: "Children of statusless parents, redefine

<sup>40</sup> See the district information sheet of the inter-ministerial forum on '[Children of statusless parents who cannot be expelled](#)' - [Ministry of Welfare 360 platform](#) - the national program for children and youth at risk - Tel Aviv district and the center. [HEB]

the concept of 'children at risk' in light of the fact that their parents themselves have often gone through shocking experiences, such as human trafficking, abuse and slavery. Life experiences that left them with post-traumatic scars, which directly affect the children and are a daily survival challenge for the families."<sup>41</sup>

Prof. Marcelo Wexler adds:

"The continuum of risk is defined by the Ministries of Education and Welfare in different ways. A child at risk who is still in the educational system is usually defined using the following key characteristics: latent dropout (does not regularly come to school; does not regularly participate in learning); visible dropout (leaving school; we usually find this at the ages of 12 to 18); disparities in the core subjects (language; mathematics; subjects affected by language, etc.); lack of trust towards the educational system (a sense of discrimination; inability to communicate with the teachers; a sense of alienation and exclusion from the system). Accumulated experience teaches us that at least three of these four characteristics characterize the vast majority of asylum seeker children".<sup>42</sup>

The children's living environment is another risk factor. Many of the refugees live in southern Tel Aviv neighborhoods that have suffered from institutional neglect for many years. The young children who live in these neighborhoods are exposed every day to crime, violence, drug consumption, prostitution consumption, pimping and survival prostitution. This reality is detrimental to the sense of security of the children and turns the public spaces into places that carry within dangers of sexual abuse, harassment, and other risk situations. While the streets of Neve Shaanan are the playground of many children, it is not unusual for a child to play with a used syringe, or for a girl to know the names of the street dwellers or the pimps in the area.

From the interviews conducted with the educational teams in Tel Aviv, it appears that there are many children who hang out outside, on the streets, at late hours, mainly due to the survival need of the parents - many of them single parents - who work during these hours to provide for the children. And what is going on during these hours in southern Tel Aviv? An interview with the director of the ASSAF Youth Club, presents a showcase view from the week in which the interview was held:

▶ "A female volunteer and a 15-year-old boy are playing ball in one of the playgrounds in Neve Shaanan. The ball is thrown across the road, the boy goes to pick up the ball, and sees a 3-year-old girl crying hysterically on the opposite sidewalk, where there is a prostitution station and a drug station, but also residential houses. The boy approaches the girl and asks her 'what's going on?' And she doesn't speak. After several attempts, the boy and the volunteer found the mother, who works in the bar next door. The mother brought the toddler home (her two older brothers were there) and returned to the bar. Mothers from the community who work in bars in the evening sometimes also work in survival prostitution. This type of survival prostitution is different from the "prostitution" that we know. It's about a single waitress, in a men's bar, who at the end of the evening will 'give favors', and in return she might get money, or she might get beaten. This is the reality that the kids at the youth club see beyond the fence, this is the reality they come from, and this is the reality they go to."

The factors that increase the risk in children's lives are in fact an inherent part of their routine and living environment: poverty, immigration background, traumatic background, risk-prone environment, erosion of parental authority, segregation in education, racism, over-policing, mental distress, lack of identification documents, lack of information from the authorities concerning the children, instability, and concerns about the future. This routine in turn normalizes the risks, which include, among others, dropping out, vagrancy, drug and alcohol consumption, and more.

A critical junction in the children's lives is sometimes the meeting between life at risk and language difficulties. Interviews with one of the educational teams in Tel Aviv indicate that there are few cases of reports to the police about violence against children who receive adequate, optimal and complete care. For the most part, as the women of the team explained, lack of command of the Hebrew language on the part of the children (against whom a crime was committed), makes it difficult to compile a case:

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> [Opinion](#), Professor Marcelo Wexler, submitted in support of the petition against the Tel Aviv Municipality's policy of segregation in educational settings in the city (AT 7240-08-21 Brown et al. v. Tel Aviv Municipality et al.). [HEB]

▶ "The children investigators know that most of the time almost nothing comes out of the reports from schools where the community's children study [about the offenses committed against the children] - because the children are unable to speak and explain."

If it weren't for the children's difficulty in communicating, it might have been possible to expand their protection. Therefore, a worrying and disturbing picture emerges, in which the children who are victims of a crime, do not receive the protection they are entitled to and need.

Refugee children experience alienation and exclusion in the public space from a young age - in the playgrounds, in the schools, on the bus and on the street. They are exposed to a host of difficult behaviors from passers-by, neighbors, other children, "deportation activists", and more. These behaviors include comments, swearing, spitting, and graffiti on walls in areas around the schools and clubs they attend, among others. Thus, the youngsters who came to an activity at the ASSAF youth club were "greeted" with printed pages with skulls and the racist inscription "Caution – an infiltrator is standing before you." Extremist activists arrived at the gates of the club and for a long hour shouted derogatory exclamations and insults at the youngsters. Sometimes the hostile behavior is manifested "only" in avoiding or moving away, for example - avoiding sitting next to a child traveling on the bus. This "avoidance" is no less offensive and racist, as is evident from the words of the children themselves:

▶ "I'm already used to it. It doesn't bother me. Since the third grade I've been traveling on the bus, no one sits next to me, or people move when I sit down."

▶ "Just last week someone spat on me on the bus, yelled that I smelled bad."

As mentioned previously, segregation preserves the social alienation as well as the exposure of the children to manifestations of racism without systemic backing to help them deal with them.

## 5. Nutrition and food security

As indicated in surveys that were conducted among the refugee community during the first year of the Corona virus and in view of their difficult socio-economic situation, it is estimated that the rate of food insecurity among the refugee community is significantly higher than the rate of food insecurity in the general population - approximately 80% as compared to about 21%.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, these are only estimates because there is no government mapping of the level of poverty and food insecurity among this population and the information on this is mainly based on the accumulated experience of the civil society organizations that help them.<sup>44</sup> The State of Israel must immediately map the level of poverty and food insecurity among the refugee population and their children, especially in view of the results of the surveys conducted among its members during the first year of the Corona virus and its difficult socio-economic situation.

Food insecurity is defined as a serious indicator of poverty, which manifests in the lack of economic ability and regular access to basic nutrition required for a balanced and normal existence. There are two levels of reference to food insecurity: moderate food insecurity, which refers to households in which there is concern about the food supply and the management of the food budget. In these households there is a trend of reducing the quality of food, and a moderate trend of reducing the scope of food consumption; severe food insecurity, refers to households in which there is great concern about the food supply and the management of the food budget. In these households there is a considerable reduction in the quality of food and the amount of its consumption, which leads to adults experiencing hunger for a day

<sup>43</sup> As for the known data on the rate of food insecurity among the refugee community and their children, see below in this chapter. As for the data on food insecurity among the general population, see: [the publication of the National Insurance Institute from 17.1.2023](#) [HEB] and [the alternative poverty report of the Latet \[To Give\] Association](#) [HEB], which includes more stringent data, for the year 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Brookdale Institute (Sharvit, Brendel), "Food Insecurity in Israel: Review of Characteristics, Interventions and Challenges" (2022) [HEB]: "The conventional surveys for measuring food security (the National Insurance Institute surveys, the National Insurance Institute and the Latat) do not deal with the rates of insecurity Nutrition among this group in the population" (pg. 18)

or more, and in more serious situations, to children experiencing hunger for a day or more.<sup>45</sup>

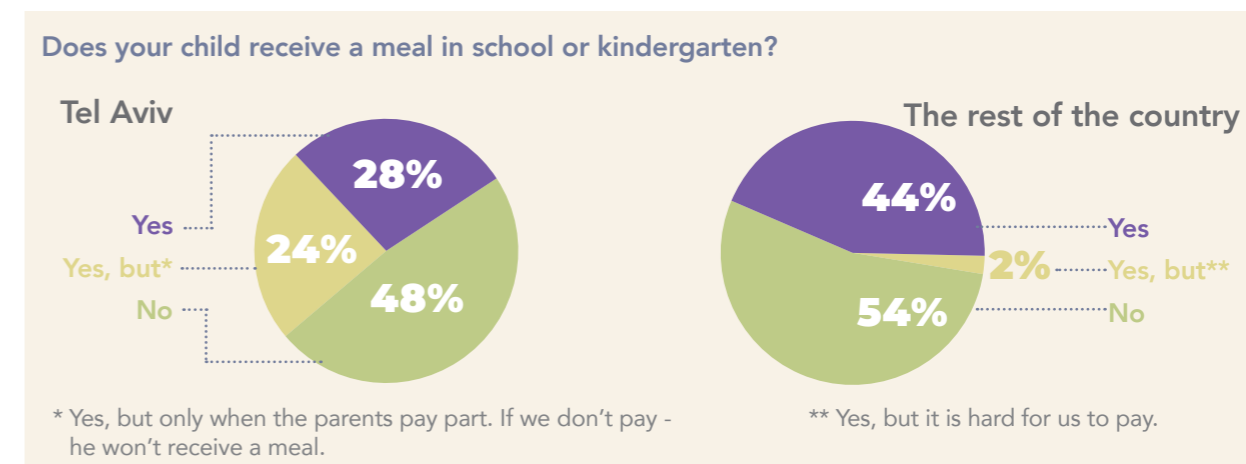
Food security is defined as having a sufficient quantity, sufficient quality and sufficient variety of food, and hence food insecurity does not necessarily appear in the form of hunger. Because it is not hunger, it is sometimes more difficult to identify and recognize it.

Although food insecurity and hunger in a society of abundance do not pose an immediate threat to life like the malnutrition problems typical of third world countries, they lead to difficulties in the ability of the individual and his family to function on a daily level. Vulnerabilities include poor psychological functioning of the household members, with an emphasis on babies and children, increased crime and violence, family breakdown, stress, depression, drop in studies and more. Among adults - overweight, thinness, blood pressure diseases, heart problems, cholesterol, diabetes, anemia. Among children - restlessness, abnormal development, and problems relating to attention and concentration.<sup>46</sup>

As for the refugee community, according to a survey conducted by the Nutrition Division of the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Municipality of Tel Aviv - Mesilah and the "Bete'avon" program between May and December 2020 among statusless persons in southern Tel Aviv, 85% of the respondents suffered from food insecurity during the Corona crisis (32% of the respondents were found to be moderately food insecure and approximately 54% were found to be severely insecure), according to criteria of the Ministry of Health.<sup>47</sup> According to another survey conducted on behalf of the Mental Health Forum among asylum seekers in February-March 2021, 35.5% of the respondents reported that during that year they gave up food due to economic distress.<sup>48</sup> It is assumed that after the closures that characterized the first year of the Corona virus and the return of the economy to full activity, the rate of food insecurity among the refugees also decreased. However, given the severe economic distress that many of them are still in and the particularly high rate of food insecurity that characterized the community during the Corona period, the assumption is that the disparity between the rate of nutritional insecurity among this population and the rate in the general population is still large.

In the case of the children of the community, one of the main advantages of their being in the educational system is the nutrition system that operates in it, as per the Daily Meal for Students Law and the administrative orders concerning implementation of long school day and enrichment programs. However, the nutrition system does not apply to all kindergartens and schools, and is not operating when the educational system is closed for vacation.

Answers to the questionnaires we distributed (including among families living outside of Tel Aviv) show that about 40% to 50% of the children do not receive a meal at school or in kindergarten. Although, as previously stated, this is not necessarily a representative sample, the figure is cause for concern. Noting that the country has no data on the rate of food insecurity among the refugee population, and bearing in mind the hard data from the survey conducted during the Corona period - there is a serious concern that thousands of children are food insecure and find no response within the educational system:



<sup>45</sup> Brookdale Institute (Sharvit, Brendel), see footnote 44, pp. 1-3.

<sup>46</sup> Brookdale Institute (Sharvit, Brendel), see footnote 44, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> The Ministry of Health and Tel Aviv Municipality, "Food insecurity among the statusless in southern Tel Aviv" (January 2021)

<sup>48</sup> Mental health forum among asylum seekers, "Survey findings - well-being and health among asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea"

Between 40%-50% of refugee children do not receive a hot meal at school or in kindergarten. If they visit a club at lunchtime they may receive a hot meal there. If we assume that these data reflect, even roughly, the situation in the population, we are talking about 4,000 children who may be living in Israel in food insecurity and are not receiving nourishment in the educational system.

This situation poses special challenges for the educational teams, as can be seen from the following descriptions of the staff:

*"Teachers are not allowed to give food if the child does not pay. In practice, there are children who do not eat from morning until evening. You stand in front of the children, and there is food, and you must tell them: you can't have any, but you can."*

One of the staff members at a Welfare Club in Tel Aviv talked about a boy who studied in northern Tel Aviv and used to come to the Welfare Club in Bialik after school hours: one day, during the Corona crisis, the same staff member picked him up just before the end of the school day, and he started crying in the car. When she asked him what happened, he explained:

*"I haven't eaten since the four o'clock meal at the club yesterday, and I want lunch, but you picked me up before the meal was served."*

In conclusion, the State of Israel must act immediately to locate all the refugee children suffering from poverty and food insecurity and provide them with adequate nutrition. A child is a child, and it should not be accepted that in Israel children will live in severe poverty and food insecurity just because of the civil status of their parents, their origin, their religion, or the color of their skin.

## 6. Health insurance

According to the special health insurance arrangement for statusless children (the "Meuhedet Arrangement"), refugees from Eritrea and Sudan can insure their children with health insurance that provides the children with health services similar in scope to those provided to children of Israeli citizens under the State Health Insurance Law. According to this arrangement, the cost of health insurance for one child is NIS 120, and for all children in the family – NIS 240. Despite the relatively high responsiveness of the community's parents to get to the family health centers ("Tipot Halav"), as mentioned in the early childhood chapter, it is evident that when it comes to health insurance, some parents have difficulty paying their children's health insurance every month, and often accumulate debts that after just six months may be cause to block the provision of health services for their children, a reality that parents in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv witnessed to in interviews.

The educational counselors we met said that they hear more and more about children who "receive nothing" in terms of medical treatments and therefore the parents take them for medical treatment in the West Bank. One of the counselors even said that she had heard of a parent who, in the absence of accessible medical care, tried to treat his daughter by himself at home:

*"A girl fell twice, and her father sewed her up at home with thread and a needle in her leg. A terrible infection could have developed."*

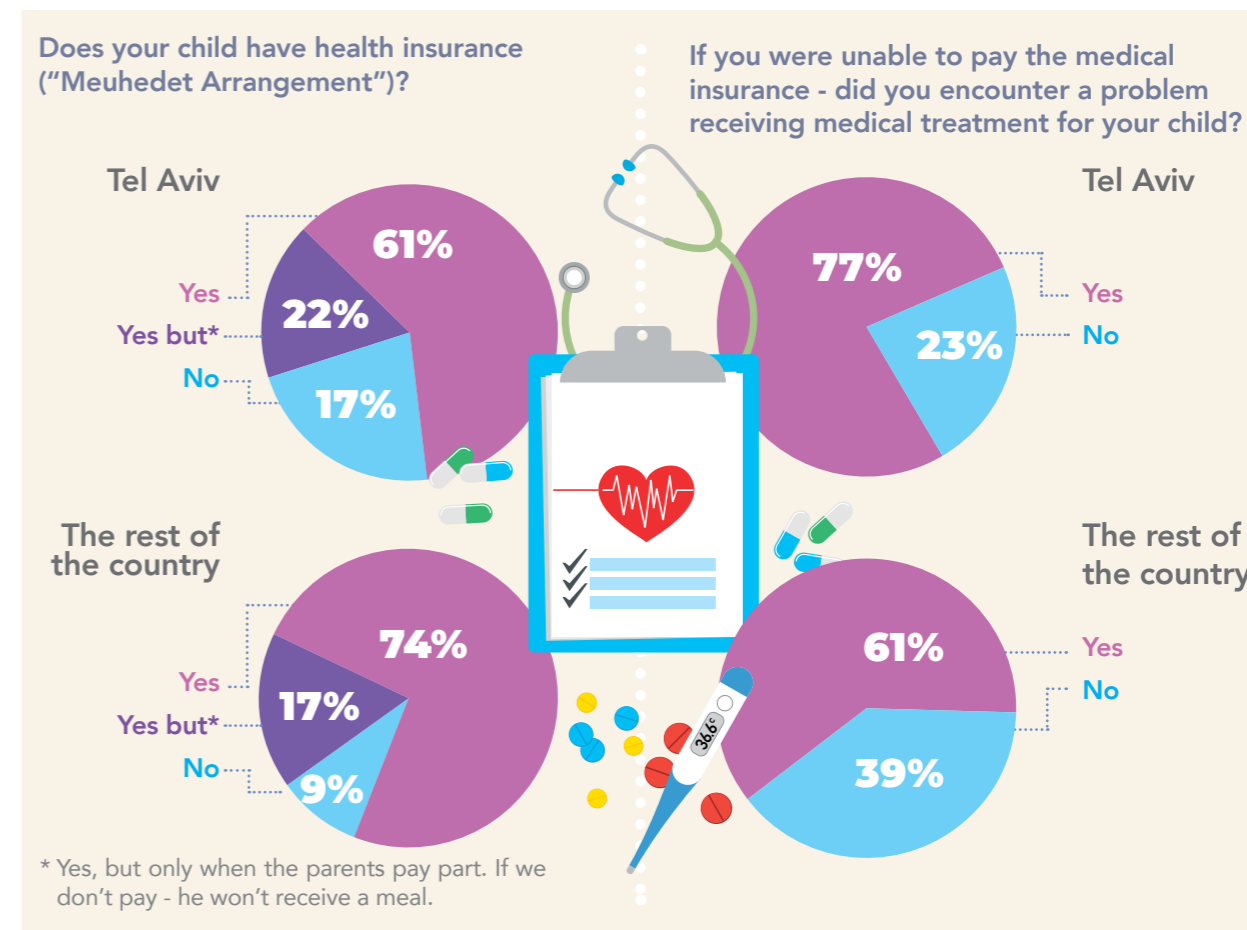
In another case that happened at the ASSAF youth club, there was a girl who stepped on a nail. The girl was without health insurance, and her mother was engaged in survival prostitution. After much effort, the girl was convinced to go to the Terem clinic, where they refused to treat her until she received confirmation from Meuhedet health insurance that she was not insured. By the time she returned to the clinic with the confirmation that she was not insured, the clinic was already closed. She did this whole laborious process by herself. Her mother could not accompany her due to her long working hours. The bureaucracy, along with the lack of a parental authority to insist that the girl be treated (or at least a parental authority to help deal with the bureaucracy), can be difficult and even discouraging. As a result of this reality, the manager of the youth club explained, the children's attitude regarding injuries is that they will "work it out".

However, even when the refugee children have paid health insurance, they sometimes encounter additional barriers such as dismissive attitudes and expressions of racism from the representatives of the system. This is what one of the mothers told about her and her child's meeting with his doctor:

*"The doctor insisted on not speaking English and claimed that "he only speaks Hebrew". The boy defended me and said to the doctor: 'Do you know Tigrinya? No? Great. So, my mother does not know Hebrew. I will translate for her.'"*

In other words, the child reluctantly stands in the position of taking responsibility for the communication between the mother and the doctor and stands as the responsible adult in front of two adults who were supposed to look after him.

As to the health insurance payments, this is what the questionnaires revealed:



The answers that we received from the questionnaires reveal a bleak and worrying picture showing that in Tel Aviv approximately 40% of the refugee children do not have health insurance, and in the rest of the country, about 25% of the refugee children do not have health insurance. In addition, up to 40% of refugee children throughout the country who do not have health insurance, encountered problems in receiving medical care when they needed it. This reality, in which many of the most vulnerable children are left without health insurance and without health services is unimaginable. There is an urgent need to ensure that these children receive health insurance and full health services.





## Section 5 Approaching the age of 18

### 1. Painful disillusionment - A future wrapped in fog

Most of the refugee children in Israel are of primary and pre-primary school age and a minority are of post-primary age. But this situation will change. In the coming years, the number of youngsters whose parents are refugees will increase. As they approach the age of 16, and even more so towards the age of 18, the children of the refugees experience a painful disillusionment - the only identification document available to them is a sheet of paper called a "Temporary Visitation Permit" (Visa 2/A/5) which does not allow them to obtain a driver's license, to serve in the military or in national service, or study any profession that requires licensing from the State. Even those who aspire to academic studies encounter barriers: the tuition they are required to pay is 125% compared to the tuition of their peers who are residents or citizens, and as mentioned - professions that require licensing, such as medicine, nursing, social work and more, are closed to them. Prof. Shlomo Mor-Yosef, who was the head of the Population and Immigration Authority, warned at the time:

*"These children, under these conditions, are pushed to the margins of society ... so instead of being adolescent children in a society in which they can be helpful, they are entering into a society in which they will be on the fringes by definition."<sup>49</sup>*

Young refugees who grew up here dream of starting their adult lives, taking part in and contributing to society, the economy and the State of Israel where they were educated. But instead of the State allowing them the certainty needed to build a future, they experience painful disillusionment while the State turns them from children into "infiltrators" when they turn 18. In the meantime, the meager rights that were given to them as children are suddenly taken away from them and they become as disenfranchised as their parents. This situation adversely affects both their internal and external motivation, sometimes even in relation to obtaining a matriculation certificate. This is the testimony of B., an 18-year-old girl, the daughter of refugee parents from Eritrea:

▶ "It's as if you open a door - and they keep shutting the door on you"  
(B., 18 years old, daughter of refugee parents from Eritrea)

<sup>49</sup> See quote in: Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, Report: [The Status of Children of Asylum Seekers in Israel and Worldwide](#), June 2022, p. 7. This report is a comparative review of the status of children of asylum seekers in Israel compared to the status of children of asylum seekers around the world.

This is reflected also in interviews with the educational teams, that reveal that they share the feeling of helplessness and uncertainty, as well as the challenging experience of supporting youth in their search for a future. According to them, there are students who choose to drop out of school and go to work, because to their way of thinking they will in any case leave Israel and immigrate to Canada in the next two years. The educational staffs related how they emphasize to the students, perhaps with the aim of instilling hope in them, that the matriculation certificate is also important in Canada. Otherwise, during these two years, the youth remain on hold, waiting for the move to Canada (which may or may not come) and they cannot develop, personally or professionally during that time. Instead of progressing and developing, they work in casual jobs such as errands in Wolt (a company for food and meal deliveries), while at the same time the teachers try to convince them that "the matriculation doesn't go to waste, it is translated into English." However, the youngsters often answer the teachers with:

*"Why even finish school? My options are so few - so why?"*

The educational teams claim that the value of the school lies in the fact that it prepares the youth not to run away when it is difficult, but to deal with difficulty in relationships and with the daily challenges of life, this, unlike the lifestyle that the youth adapt to themselves if they drop out and work in companies like Wolt - where they seemingly become 'Masters unto themselves'. Thus, one of the teachers:

*"I feel that as soon as they enter Wolt's track, and the life that accompanies this track, there is something that becomes terribly limited, and it is terribly difficult to do this investigation, this examination, of what I want to do. Working at Wolt, the children have a sense of complete freedom: 'I work when I want, as much as I want, how I want, I don't have a routine/waking hours/daily schedule.' Many times the work itself is very lonely. It doesn't create any interaction with people, doesn't facilitate social relationships, you don't develop, you are always with your own thoughts, alone all the time. In addition, it seems like you quickly make money from it, but in practice you must finance a motorcycle. We did the math with one of the boys - it turns out that he works for free. They do not have health insurance, which costs around NIS 400. The work is very tempting. You get used to being master of your own time, so that it becomes more difficult to work in shifts, and to gain experience in very basic elements of a reasonable labor market: employee - employer, schedules, shifts."*

Moreover, at high school age, the children are exposed to the additional consequences of being a refugee and statusless. For example, in high schools in Jerusalem, lockers for storing belongings are operated by an external company, through which you can pay for a locker only on the condition that you have an ID card. The students of the community, who attend integrated schools, also learn about their differences through the fact that they are not allowed to rent a locker and cannot pay for it without an ID card. In the interviews we were told that when the community itself tried to find solutions for this, the school shrugged off the problem and passed it on to the external locker companies. In the same way, until recently, the children of the community couldn't receive subsidized prices on public transportation, as children of Israeli citizens receive.

The high school students also learn about their differences and the dim future that awaits them through not being drafted into the army. One of the mothers from the community told about a girl who lives outside of Tel Aviv:

*"She felt Israeli in every way. She was the only girl in her class from the community, and the other students in the class felt that she belonged. She was like them in everything, she deserved everything they deserved, and then suddenly they had a trip to visit the army, to see the place, and they told her that she can't go, because she is statusless. The girl was really hurt, she realized she didn't have any status, something that she didn't realize before. The girl spent three days in bed while they were on their trip."*

Difficult feelings about the lack of status were also expressed by a girl living in Tel Aviv:

▶ *"Since I've been here in Israel, I feel transparent ... my girlfriends are enlisting and I can't enlist, and if not the army then I want to go to academic studies. I dream of studying, of having an education and being able to contribute to my society, but I found out that I can't enter the academy... I turned 18 and my life was stuck. I feel like I wasted 12 years of schooling."*

There are youth who manage to finish high school, get a matriculation certificate and also, sometimes, save money, and there are those who are on the edge - they tend to get dragged into and join social groups that use drugs, behave dangerously, wander around the neighborhood, and more. Prof. Wexler explains:

“In the absence of treatment for this at a young age, with absorption in the compulsory education system, the continuum of risk will increase - from children on the continuum of risk they will become youth at the end of the continuum of risk. The verbal and educational disparities will increase, and these, along with an alienating attitude from society, will make it difficult for them to regulate behavior and find their place in the educational frameworks. As a result, the risk of them dropping out will increase, as well as the development of non-normative behaviors, including a high risk of addictions, juvenile delinquency, and an inability to integrate into society, which is seen as having given up on them.”<sup>50</sup>

Wexler's conclusions about society, which is perceived in the eyes of the youngsters whose parents are refugees, as having given up on them - is consistent with the youth's own statements - that doors are constantly being closed on them, even when they really try and make an effort to open them, or want to contribute to a society that they thought was theirs too. For youth and young men and women from the refugee community growing up in Israel, it is difficult to imagine a future picture of their lives, and difficult feelings of alienation and despair become a constant element.

## 2. Forming an identity

Naturally, the exclusion, the neglect and the shutting of the doors - a result of many years of government policy - affect the identity formation process of youth that is typical of the teenage years. The difficulty that accompanies the youngsters in this process is also evidenced by a phenomenon that emerged from two interviews that took place with the women of the educational staff, one from Ra'anana and the other from Jerusalem. In both interviews, the interviewees told about children who chose to renounce their identity as refugee children from Eritrea, and instead presented themselves as children of Jewish-Ethiopian origin, both at school and in the public sphere:

▶ “Their teachers in the classroom do not know that they are not going to the army, and do not know that they do not have Israeli citizenship. Some of the children prefer to define themselves as Ethiopians. Even the residents themselves do not know how to differentiate between Ethiopians and Eritreans.”

“Today in Jerusalem people don't know who they are. If they are asylum seekers or Israeli [Jews] of Ethiopian origin. In Jerusalem, the JACC organization<sup>51</sup>, along with welfare workers and the community, try to explain about asylum seekers. There are schools that come to visit with the children themselves, and we also go to other schools and explain about asylum seekers, the status of the children, what we are and more, so that they can get to know them, so that they will have a good relationship with the children. So today the educational teams in the various schools already know.”

The “Ethiopian identity” that these youth adopt allows them to feel they have civil status, are more equal to their fellow Israelis, and less transparent and disenfranchised. For a moment they can dream of a future similar to that of their Israeli peers instead of their difficult future without status and rights. In three interviews it emerged that the parents cooperated with the child's choice to identify as “Ethiopian” and did not rush to tell him what his true identity was. It is also possible that this choice of the parents, in their view, was intended to make it easier for the child and obscure an unbearably difficult reality and an even more difficult future. This is what an education team member explained, in one of the meetings held with educational teams, regarding the attitude of the youth towards the future:

“The future is explosive, so let's not touch it, or we can deny the situation, because it is not easy. There is a great deal of pain and fear, because they [the youngsters] are alone a lot. In many cases, the eldest child is responsible for the parents and younger siblings.”

This state of confusion and uncertainty in which many of the youth find themselves led the educational teams to emphasize in the interviews the need to provide them with additional support - even after they finish high school - a kind of follow-up support for the young graduates. At these ages, they explained, “on the one hand, it is important to give the time for investigation and self-examination, but on the other hand not to allow a downward spiral into a state of dysfunction.” In the meantime, the teams are busy with the question of how to allow them the time and not stress the youngsters, but still maintain a framework. According to them, this involves counselling them, even after the school stage, and they even offered with dedication, to be part of the process while smoothly “passing on the baton” to the new counsellor and the youngster himself/herself.

<sup>50</sup> [Opinion](#), Professor Marcelo Wexler. See footnote 26.

<sup>51</sup> [Jerusalem African Community Center - JACC](#) - Center for the African Community in Jerusalem is an organization that works with the refugee community living in Jerusalem.

## Section 6 Summary and recommendations

Several thousand children are growing up in Israel. The vast majority of them were born here. Even those who were not born in Israel arrived in infancy or at a very young age and do not remember any other reality except the reality of life in Israel. They grow up here with almost no rights, on the fringes of society, with endless obstacles on their way to realizing their potential and building a future for themselves. The "solution to the problem" is very simple and is within the reach of the Israeli government: they must be given resident status that will afford them basic rights and a future. Giving such recognition to children does not threaten the future of Israeli society. The children of refugees from Africa constitute approximately 0.27% of the child population in Israel.<sup>52</sup> Giving such recognition is not only for the benefit of the children. It will benefit the entire Israeli society and strengthen it as an inclusive, pluralistic, and egalitarian society.

This report reviews many aspects of the lives of refugee children and raises extremely worrying findings:

- 1. Absence of data** The State of Israel does not have accurate data on the number of children, their place of residence, and apparently not even on the educational framework in which they are placed. Refugee children do not receive an identification number at birth, and each authority provides its own identification number. This opens the door for the children to "fall through the cracks".
- 2. "Babysitters" at least half of the babies and toddlers still attend the "babysitters in their first 3 years of life,"** even though, already a decade ago, Israel's State Comptroller warned of the dangers and dramatic consequences for the safety, proper development and well-being of the toddlers staying in these unregulated frameworks.<sup>53</sup>
- 3. Severe developmental delays** Already upon entering the State educational system, at the age of 3, the children have developmental disparities (sometimes of about two years), including verbal difficulties, emotional difficulties, and sometimes even difficulties with basic motor skills. Failure to address the reduction of the disparities perpetuates both the disparities and exclusion already at this early stage, and they continue even at school age.
- 4. Tracking with significant developmental disparities,** many of the children are tracked to special education even though they do not suffer from organic disabilities and their development potential is completely normal. From the questionnaires distributed among refugee parents, it emerged that the percentage of the community's children studying in special education is higher than the percentage of those studying in special education in the general population. Although it is not a representative sample, the disparity between the two groups that emerges from the questionnaires - 167% - stands as a warning requiring the Ministry of Education to conduct an in-depth mapping and investigation as to the exact extent of the phenomenon and its causes. Many times, refugee children study segregated from Israeli children in these frameworks as well.
- 5. Segregation** In several cities, and especially in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo, the children are segregated from Israeli children in the educational system from the age of 3 until the 12th grade.
- 6. Food insecurity** questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that approximately 40% to 50% of the children do not receive a meal at school or kindergarten. The figure is worrying. Bearing in mind that the State does not have data on the rate of food insecurity among the refugee population, and the severe data obtained from previous surveys - there is a serious fear that thousands of children are food insecure and without any solution within the educational system.
- 7. Living at risk and in an environment saturated with racism** refugee children are an extremely vulnerable population growing up in an unbearably difficult reality in every aspect of their lives. Living without a defined status, in economic distress, in the shadow of the trauma of immigration and in a survival situation affects the mental state of the children. Their living environment - exposed to severe racism in the public sphere as well as to delinquency, violence, drug consumption, prostitution consumers, pimping and survival prostitution - is another risk factor.

**8. Failure to receive health services** questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that in Tel Aviv, approximately 40% of the refugee children do not have health insurance, and in the rest of the country, about 25% of the refugee children do not have health insurance. They also indicate that most of the parents who were unable to meet the health insurance payments encountered problems in receiving medical care for their children when they needed it. These data cause concern in view of the picture that emerges from them, in which many of the most vulnerable children in society are left without health insurance and without health services.

**9. Painful disillusionment upon reaching adulthood upon reaching the age of 18, the few rights that were provided in childhood are taken away from the children at once.** When their peers with citizenship begin their adult lives by examining the options open to them - military and national service, higher education, acquiring a profession - the doors are shut to the refugee children. This, even if they succeeded, through hard work, to overcome the multitude of obstacles that stood in their way and graduate from high school with honors. Whether it is academic studies, acquiring a profession and employment options, or national or military service - building a future in Israel is very limited for them.

As mentioned, the solutions to the difficult problems arising from the report are within the reach of the relevant government ministries and local authorities, and we call on them to join hands and do the right thing - for the children and for Israeli society - to give them resident status that will afford them basic rights and a future.

However, in view of the severe disparities that already exist following years of social marginalization, exclusion, neglect and separation, the State of Israel must, in addition, immediately take the following steps:

- 1. Issuance of a 9-digit single-valued ID number to the refugee children:** The refugee children must be issued a single-valued ID number that will allow all the authorities that care for them to identify, map, and coordinate the care they are provided. The number must include 9 digits, similar to the identification numbers of Israeli citizens, so that it can be entered into the computerized systems of the authorities and facilitate their inclusion in services and functions offered by those authorities.
- 2. Immediate opening of supervised and subsidized day care centers in a number and distribution that will allow the registration of refugee children of preschool age in supervised settings and the closing of the unregulated frameworks:** The protection of toddlers living in Israel must be ensured first and foremost regardless of their civil status. Additional preschool settings should be provided and the overseeing of unregulated day cares that endanger the children staying in them should be increased. It is imperative to continue to train the kindergarten teachers and nannies in the supervised day care centers which are attended by refugee children and expand the community work with the parents of the toddlers, in cooperation with the care staff.
- 3. Annulment of segregation in educational institutions:** The unacceptable segregation in educational frameworks must be completely abolished and the refugee children integrated into the educational settings where the children of Israeli citizens study, while providing a response to their unique needs.
- 4. In-depth investigation of the phenomenon of over-referral of refugee children to special education (tracking):** From the questionnaires distributed among refugee parents it emerged that the percentage of community children studying in special education is 167% higher than in the general population. This high rate stands as a warning requiring the attention, examination, and treatment of the Ministry of Education.
- 5. Mapping refugee children who suffer from food insecurity and providing nutritional solutions for every boy and girl:** The level of poverty and food insecurity among the refugee population and their children must be mapped immediately, especially in view of the results of previous surveys concerning this subject, the extremely problematic socio-economic situation of the refugee community in general, and in view of the results of the questionnaires circulated among the parents for the purpose of this report, according to which approximately 40% - 50% of the children do not receive a meal at school or in kindergarten.
- 6. Reducing the developmental and educational disparities in the educational institutions: Action must be taken to reduce the developmental and educational disparities by way of:**
  - Reinforcement sessions, especially in subjects centered on the Hebrew language.
  - Establishing a regulated system of linguistic and cultural mediation between the students' parents and the educational staff.

<sup>52</sup> The National Council for the Child, the statistical yearbook, "[Children in Israel 2022](#)" various data [HEB]

<sup>53</sup> State Comptroller, opinion: the treatment of minors without status

- Bolstering the support and accompaniment of the educational teams, including training courses aimed at getting to know the refugee and asylum seeker communities living in Israel; pedagogical, methodological, and didactic ways to lessen disparities, especially language disparities; pedagogy of children at risk, and more.

#### 7. Augmentation of resources and solutions for locating and treating refugee children who are at risk

the severe risk situations which the children are exposed to demand increased attention and special preparation by the Ministry of Welfare and the social services departments where the children live, including allocation of appropriate resources, intensifying the training adapted to the social workers in the field, and expanding the solutions available to them. In addition, welfare services must be made fully accessible to children, including providing refugee parents with child allowances and disabled child allowances.

#### 8. Mapping the health status of the refugee children and providing full access to health services for all children

the problematic finding that many of the refugee children grow up without access to health services requires that the Ministry of Health immediately map the health status of the children and work to provide full access to health services for all children. The Ministry must ensure that children of refugee parents who are unable to meet medical insurance payments will not be harmed by this, with an emphasis on single-parent families and families with children that have special needs.

#### 9. Providing horizons to the youth and youngsters:

The State of Israel must grant the youth and youngsters who grew up here A/5 visas that will allow them to build their future, including all the economic and social rights associated with this status. The barriers that exist today in the field of professional training, professional licensing, obtaining a driver's license, and higher education must be razed, and youth and youngsters must be given a real opportunity to realize their potential and contribute the most to Israeli society - where they grew up and in which they live.

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**"Shutting the door on you"** – Situation Report regarding Children of Refugees and Asylum seekers in Israel  
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