

# Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps

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## Poor education, socio-economic restrictions threaten Palestinian youth in Lebanon: the case of Bourj el Barajneh camp

If the quality of education offered to Palestinian refugees, and employment and ownership restrictions remain as they are, adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 will resort to coping mechanisms such as drug abuse that young men in the camp suffer from today, says a research study conducted by Jihad Makhoul, DrPH, and Yara Jarallah, MS, in the Bourj el Barajneh refugee camp. The study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with adolescents and young men in the camp, in preparation for an intervention study with other AUB researchers.

The restrictions imposed on the Palestinians by the Lebanese state limit young men's economic opportunities, making it harder to earn a living and plan a future. According to the study, these men suffer from feelings of hopelessness and despair which lead to psychological problems that often are dealt with through drug abuse. The lack of access to education outside UNRWA schools may lead the adolescent groups down a path similar to that taken by the young men in the camp.

### Policy Recommendations

- Interventions are needed to improve the quality of education offered by UNRWA schools.
- Lebanese public schools and universities should accommodate more Palestinian refugees.
- Labor and ownership restrictions on refugees should be eased.
- The Lebanese labor market should be regulated to reduce competition for semi- and unskilled labor.

### Coping with Stress

Young Palestinian men compete with Egyptians and Syrians for semi- and unskilled work opportunities, which have declined due to post-war economic conditions in Lebanon. The restrictions imposed on them by the Lebanese state further worsen their financial conditions by prohibiting them from practicing professional jobs, and from enjoying ownership and inheritance rights because of their refugee status. Therefore, an education does not guarantee a career and a better life.

With the legal restrictions imposed on the Palestinians, the pressure to find employment and the effect of not finding work are greater on men than on women. There is also an absence of services that cater for young men's needs at many levels. Most health services and health education sessions do not target males because of the notion that they are less vulnerable than women and children. This may be due to the patriarchal view of men as the stronger sex capable of supporting themselves, as well as the funding agencies' donor-driven agendas which influence the choice of support for services provided.

Many young men have developed a series of coping strategies to deal with these situations, given their stressful life conditions, limited opportunities and the lack of available social support systems. Going out to Raouche, Manara, and the camp vicinity is a

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**The Program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Middle East** is run jointly by IFI and the Center for Behavioral Research at AUB. It brings together academic and policy-related research on Palestinian refugee camps from around the world. The program aims to be an open and non-partisan coordinating mechanism for researchers, civil society, government officials, and international organizations, in order to generate accurate analysis and policy recommendations on Palestinian refugee camps throughout the Middle East.

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common practice. There they often get intoxicated and consequently are detained for interrogation. They are frequently physically and verbally abused by the local authorities, says the study. Other ways of escaping their realities include taking tranquilizer pills, cough syrup and other over-the-counter drugs which are potentially hazardous to their physical and mental health.

## Reading into the Future: The Adolescents' Experience

Palestinian children in the camp are not encouraged to complete their schooling or to seek higher education because of restricted work opportunities. Therefore, it is not surprising to find children and adolescents discontinuing their education and starting work at a young age.

Schools run by UNRWA are the only schools available to the Palestinians living in the camp. Located on the outskirts of the camp, the school buildings are poorly built and have overcrowded classes consisting of more than 50 students in each section. Due to large numbers of students and the lack of facilities, UNRWA runs two shifts, each four hours long. Teaching quality has been significantly affected as a consequence. College level education is a privilege for the few who do not have family responsibilities and can meet educational expenses.

Similar to the coping mechanisms that the men have cited in the study to escape these harsh conditions, adolescents speak of how their peers are turning to tobacco and drugs. Both are available and readily accessible within the camp.

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## Conclusions and Implications

There are serious threats to the health of the youth in the camp and the entire community, given the difficult economic, social and educational circumstances. These threats may not diminish in the future as a result of the stressful realities and the lack of foreseeable change in the economic, educational, and other living conditions of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Adolescents may face the same challenges confronting the older generation today.

This study has implications for public health professionals and policy-makers. To avoid repercussions for the younger generation, interventions to improve the quality of education and reduce structural restrictions are required. Only when employment and ownership restrictions are lifted in Lebanon and the market is regulated and guarded against competition for semi-skilled work with other non-Lebanese, will a better future for young Palestinians in Lebanon see the light. ■



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**Sari Hanafi**, Program Research Director and Associate Professor of Sociology, AUB

**Fateh Azzam**, Regional Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Nadim Shehadi**, Associate Fellow at Chatham House, Middle East Programme

**Khalil Makkawi**, President of the Lebanese government's Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee

**Samir El Khoury**, Chair of the Follow Up Committee for Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon