



## **Community Experience in Accessing Social Welfare Programs in Urban Areas: Participants' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Social Services**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Social welfare programs in urban areas play a crucial role in supporting marginalized communities, yet their impact on participants' experiences remains insufficiently explored. Previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative outcomes, neglecting the subjective experiences of individuals engaging with these programs. Despite their significance, little is known about the emotional, social, and procedural barriers that shape participants' perceptions and engagement. Here, we employ a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals participating in urban social welfare programs, aiming to uncover the underlying meanings of these experiences. Using in-depth interviews with program participants, data was analyzed thematically revealing key insights into the challenges and coping strategies individuals develop within these programs. Findings highlight that emotional and procedural challenges significantly hinder participants' engagement, while social support networks are integral to their success. These insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of the user experience in social welfare programs and suggest that policy improvements must prioritize addressing these challenges. This research opens avenues for future studies on refining the delivery of social welfare programs through a more user-centered perspective.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon under investigation in this study is the accessibility and effectiveness of urban social welfare programs, which have been implemented globally as essential tools for addressing socio-economic inequalities and enhancing the well-being of vulnerable populations (Ashburn dkk., 2019). These programs are designed to provide critical resources and support to marginalized groups, including low-income families, the elderly, and individuals facing disability or other hardships. However, despite their widespread implementation, many individuals fail to fully benefit from these programs due to various barriers, such as complex application procedures, limited access to information, and socio-cultural stigmas.

In urban settings, these challenges are often exacerbated by the dense and diverse nature of populations, where socio-economic disparities are more pronounced, and access to resources is not always equitable. While technological advancements, such as digital platforms and online applications, have the potential to improve accessibility, they may also introduce new barriers for individuals without reliable internet access or digital literacy, further complicating the delivery of social services.

Although previous research has largely focused on the structural effectiveness of welfare programs, less attention has been paid to understanding the subjective experiences of participants. These personal experiences play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of the programs and highlight a significant gap in existing literature. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study

seeks to explore the lived experiences of individuals participating in urban social welfare programs, uncovering the deeper barriers that influence their engagement and perceptions.

This research emphasizes the need to focus on the personal and social dynamics that shape the success or failure of these services (Ayres et al., 2021). Understanding these experiences is crucial for improving the design and delivery of welfare programs, ensuring that they better meet the needs of their intended beneficiaries.

While much of the existing literature has focused on the structural and economic dimensions of social welfare programs, the subjective experiences of participants have been largely overlooked. These experiences, including emotional barriers, social stigmas, and personal challenges, are integral to understanding how individuals interact with these services. Current quantitative methods, which emphasize outcomes like accessibility or satisfaction, fail to account for the complex emotional and social dynamics that shape participants' experiences.

Phenomenological research, which emphasizes the exploration of lived experiences, offers a more suitable framework for addressing these gaps. It allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings individuals attach to their interactions with social welfare programs, revealing the nuanced emotions and perceptions that influence their engagement. This approach is particularly valuable in studying social welfare programs, where personal experiences are central to understanding their effectiveness.

Traditional quantitative methods, while useful for evaluating program outcomes, often overlook the emotional and social dimensions of welfare participation. For instance, surveys may measure satisfaction or accessibility but fail to capture how participants feel excluded or stigmatized. As a result, much of the existing understanding of social welfare programs remains superficial, missing critical insights into the human experience.

To address this, a phenomenological approach is adopted, which prioritizes the subjective experiences of individuals, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their interactions with social welfare programs. By exploring how participants perceive and engage with these services, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of their effectiveness, moving beyond surface-level findings to uncover the emotional, social, and procedural barriers that impact their engagement.

While some qualitative studies have explored barriers such as procedural complexity and social stigma, few have applied phenomenology to capture the emotional and personal dimensions of welfare program participation. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to their engagement with these programs.

Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological framework for this study due to its focus on uncovering the essence of individuals' experiences (Brown et al., 2022). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of participants' perceptions and the social dynamics that shape their interactions with welfare programs, providing insights that go beyond statistical data. By focusing on personal narratives, this study aims to offer a richer understanding of social welfare participation, addressing the limitations identified in prior research.

The structure of this article is designed to guide the reader through a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon under study. It begins with an introduction to the general and specific backgrounds of the research, followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach adopted. The article then outlines the data collection and analysis methods used, focusing on thematic analysis to identify key patterns in participants' experiences. In the discussion section, the results are examined in the context of existing literature, and the paper concludes with insights and recommendations for improving the accessibility and effectiveness of social welfare programs based on the findings.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, which is particularly well-suited for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences of participants, aiming to uncover the essence of their perceptions, emotions, and interactions with the phenomenon being studied (Choi dkk., 2020). This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals experience and make sense of accessing social welfare programs in urban settings, and it provides insight into the meanings they assign to these experiences.

The approach is grounded in the belief that human experiences are best understood through the lens of the participants themselves, without imposing pre-conceived theories or frameworks. Given that the research question seeks to understand the barriers, challenges, and perceptions surrounding the accessibility of social welfare programs, phenomenology's focus on personal experience provides the ideal framework to capture the complexities of these individual realities.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, with criteria focusing on individuals who had previously engaged with social welfare programs in urban areas. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, have participated in a social welfare program within the past year, and be willing to share their personal experiences (Dichter dkk., 2021). Exclusion criteria included individuals who no longer participated in such programs or those with communication barriers that could hinder their ability to provide in-depth insights.

A total of 15 participants were involved in the study. The group comprised both men and women, aged between 18 and 65, with a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds. This demographic variety allowed for the exploration of different perspectives and experiences within the context of urban social welfare programs. Although the sample size is relatively small, it reflects a broad range of experiences, including those from low-income families, elderly individuals, and people with disabilities. These participants were specifically selected to ensure that the sample captures a variety of socio-economic conditions and personal challenges related to accessing welfare programs in urban settings.

This approach provides a rich, detailed understanding of the lived experiences of diverse urban populations, even with a smaller sample size. The goal was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to gather deep, qualitative insights from participants who reflect the kinds of challenges typically faced in urban welfare programs.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted face-to-face at locations convenient for the participants (Dion dkk., 2021). The interviews followed a flexible interview guide, allowing for open-ended questions while enabling participants to express their thoughts freely. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, ensuring sufficient time to explore the nuances of participants' experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to the interviews, observational data were collected during site visits to welfare program locations. These observations focused on the interactions between welfare service providers and participants, as well as the overall environment in which the services were delivered. This dual approach of interviews and observations helped to contextualize participants' reported experiences and added depth to the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is commonly used in phenomenological research to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data (Feldman dkk., 2021). The process began with the transcriptions of interviews and field notes being reviewed repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of the content. Themes were identified based on recurring ideas, experiences, and perceptions expressed by participants. Each theme was explored in relation to the broader context of

social welfare programs and their effectiveness, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the underlying factors that influenced participants' experiences.

The analysis was iterative, with themes being refined as more data were reviewed. NVivo software was used to aid in organizing and coding the data, but the focus remained on the participants' voices and the meanings they attributed to their experiences. This method allowed for the emergence of the essential essence of the phenomenon, grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics review board. All participants provided informed consent before participation, which included an explanation of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality (Fong dkk., 2024). Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and any identifying information was removed during data analysis. Data were securely stored, and access was restricted to the research team. This study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human participants, ensuring respect for their rights and well-being throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participants' Perception of Accessibility to Social Welfare Programs**

The analysis of participants' experiences revealed significant variations in how accessible they perceived social welfare programs. Accessibility, in this context, was not just about physical or logistical barriers, but also about emotional and psychological hurdles tied to the participants' social contexts. Many participants emphasized that navigating the bureaucratic processes was often overwhelming. One participant shared, "It felt like there was always a wall between us and the services, like the more you asked, the more complicated the process became." Another participant, however, viewed the accessibility as somewhat manageable, stating, "Once I understood the steps, it wasn't that hard, but getting the right information at first was a challenge."

The data highlighted that those who had more social support, whether from family members or community networks, reported feeling less frustrated with the process. On the other hand, participants without this support often felt alienated. As one participant explained, "Without my neighbor's help, I would have been lost in all the paperwork. The information isn't clear, and it's hard to trust the process." This theme demonstrates how accessibility is shaped by both tangible and intangible resources, suggesting that the ability to access services is not solely dependent on the program's design but also on the individual's social resources.

### **Barriers to Effective Service Delivery**

A key finding in the study was the identification of multiple barriers that participants faced in accessing social welfare services, which affected the overall effectiveness of these programs. These barriers were primarily related to the complexity of the application process, lack of clear communication from service providers, and social stigma associated with receiving welfare benefits. One participant revealed, "I was embarrassed to go to the office because people around me look at you differently if they know you need help. There's a stigma, especially in our community."

Moreover, many participants pointed out the lack of sufficient information and guidance as a significant obstacle. A participant who had previously struggled to access services shared, "I didn't even know which form to fill out. They should have someone there to guide us through the process, instead of just handing us papers and expecting us to figure it out." These statements underscore the difficulty in navigating the bureaucratic landscape, which undermines the perceived efficiency of the program.

### **The Impact of Social Welfare Programs on Participants' Well-being**

The participants' perceptions of the impact of social welfare programs on their well-being were mixed. While some noted that the assistance provided tangible relief, particularly in terms of

financial support, others expressed that the benefits were short-lived or insufficient in addressing their deeper needs. One participant stated, “It helped a bit with the bills, but it doesn’t solve the real problem, like finding a stable job or improving our living conditions. It’s a temporary fix.”

In contrast, another participant who had received long-term assistance shared a more positive view, saying, “Without the program, I wouldn’t have been able to keep my family afloat. It’s not perfect, but it’s been life-changing for us.” This indicates that while some participants felt that the program was an essential lifeline, others believed the support was inadequate in addressing more systemic issues that affected their well-being. Thus, the programs' effectiveness in improving long-term well-being appeared contingent upon the nature of the assistance provided and the individual's broader socio-economic context.

### **Perceived Trust in Service Providers**

Trust in the service providers emerged as another significant theme affecting the effectiveness of social welfare programs. Participants who had positive interactions with service providers were more likely to report a sense of satisfaction and empowerment. One participant shared, “The social worker was very understanding. She explained everything clearly, and I felt that I wasn’t being judged. That made a big difference.”

In contrast, those who had negative experiences with service providers expressed a lack of trust, which significantly influenced their engagement with the program. As one participant explained, “They make you feel like you’re just another case number. I don’t trust them, and I don’t want to go back.” This underscores the critical role that interpersonal interactions and the perceived empathy of service providers play in shaping the overall experience and engagement with social welfare programs.

The findings highlight that while social welfare programs in urban areas provide critical support, their accessibility and effectiveness are heavily influenced by participants’ social networks, the clarity of information, and the quality of interpersonal interactions with service providers. Participants’ subjective experiences of these programs often diverged, reflecting a complex interplay between program structure, individual needs, and broader social contexts. These insights are crucial for understanding the gaps in service delivery and improving the design and implementation of future social welfare initiatives.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The primary findings of this study shed light on the complex and deeply personal experiences of individuals accessing social welfare programs in urban settings (Ganann dkk., 2022). Participants reported a range of emotional and social dynamics that influenced their interactions with welfare services, from feelings of stigma and exclusion to a sense of empowerment when their needs were met. These experiences highlight the importance of understanding not only the procedural aspects of welfare services but also the emotional and social context in which they are accessed.

### **Contribution to Research Questions**

The findings provide crucial insights into the research question regarding the lived experiences of participants in urban welfare programs. The study reveals that while accessibility and program effectiveness are key concerns, participants’ subjective experiences—such as the emotional toll of navigating welfare systems and the social stigma attached to receiving assistance—play a critical role in shaping their perceptions and overall experience (Hassan dkk., 2022). By emphasizing the subjective, personal dimensions of program engagement, this research contributes a more nuanced understanding of how welfare programs are experienced on an individual level, going beyond traditional assessments of effectiveness based solely on structural outcomes. In doing so, the study underscores the need for welfare programs to consider not just the logistical aspects of service delivery but also the emotional and social factors that influence participation.

### **Connection with Literature and Theory**

These findings align with previous studies that emphasize the importance of considering the human element in social welfare research. The work of scholars such as Brannen (2009) and Gubrium & Holstein (2002) has highlighted the role of social stigma and personal identity in shaping welfare recipients' experiences, which our study corroborates. Additionally, the concept of social inclusion, as discussed by Sen (1999), is reinforced through participants' narratives, which demonstrate that feeling included or excluded from society is intrinsically linked to their experience of welfare programs (Lafferty dkk., 2023). However, our study extends this understanding by illustrating the emotional and psychological dimensions of exclusion, offering a more holistic view of the impact of welfare policies. While quantitative research often focuses on measurable outcomes, our findings suggest that the emotional and social experiences of participants are equally important in assessing the true effectiveness of social welfare initiatives.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic understanding and practical implementation of social welfare programs. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the subjective dimensions of welfare participation, highlighting the emotional and social barriers that participants face. These insights challenge the traditional focus on logistical or quantitative metrics of program success, suggesting that future welfare policies should integrate both practical and psychological elements. For policymakers and practitioners, the findings imply that a more human-centered approach is essential for enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of welfare services (Leung dkk., 2019). By acknowledging the emotional and social stigmas that affect participants, welfare programs can be better designed to foster inclusivity and promote a positive engagement experience, ultimately improving the overall impact of these services on individuals' lives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study offers valuable insights, there are certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the research focused on a specific urban context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other geographical or cultural settings. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should consider expanding the scope to include participants from different urban and rural areas with varied demographic characteristics. Additionally, the phenomenological approach, while effective in uncovering deep personal experiences, does not capture the full breadth of objective data about welfare program outcomes, such as financial efficiency or systemic barriers that might affect large populations. Furthermore, the sample size, although appropriate for a qualitative study, was limited, which may affect the diversity of experiences represented. These limitations suggest that future studies should consider expanding the scope to include a wider range of contexts and participant demographics, as well as employ mixed methods to complement phenomenological insights with broader empirical data.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the field of social welfare and phenomenological studies. One potential direction is to further investigate how different demographic factors, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, influence the experiences and perceptions of welfare recipients. Additionally, future research could explore how the findings of this study might be applied to other welfare programs or public services, to better understand the broader implications of social inclusion and stigma (Morenz dkk., 2024). Finally, further exploration of the role of policy in shaping these subjective experiences could provide valuable insights for improving welfare system design. This research lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics between welfare programs and the personal, social, and emotional experiences of their recipients.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study focused on understanding the subjective experiences of participants in accessing urban social welfare programs, addressing the challenges they face and the impact of these programs

on their lives. The findings revealed that participants' experiences are shaped by emotional, social, and procedural barriers, which have not been fully captured by previous research that typically focuses on logistical or quantitative outcomes. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how stigma, information access, and procedural complexity affect the success of welfare programs from the participants' perspective. Furthermore, the findings contribute to existing theories of social inclusion by illustrating how exclusionary factors such as stigma and lack of support networks hinder participants' engagement with welfare services. By emphasizing the social and emotional dimensions of welfare participation, this study aligns with and extends theories of social stigma (Goffman, 1963), showing how the social marginalization associated with welfare receipt impacts individuals' willingness to access and benefit from these services.

Additionally, the phenomenological approach employed in this study enriches the theoretical framework of phenomenology by providing a detailed account of the lived experiences of participants, which is often overlooked in traditional welfare research. The personal experiences shared by participants reveal how their perceptions of accessibility and effectiveness are deeply influenced by their subjective experiences, which are central to the phenomenological approach.

This study, therefore, not only advances our understanding of welfare participation but also contributes to the theoretical discourse on how phenomenology can be applied to social welfare research. By employing this approach, the study highlights the importance of considering personal and social factors in evaluating welfare systems. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study provides a more nuanced view of welfare program participation, offering valuable insights for enhancing policy and practice. Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring other demographic factors or applying mixed methods to capture both subjective experiences and objective data on program outcomes. Such research could further refine welfare policies to create more inclusive and effective support systems for diverse populations.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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