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The Relationship between Parental Income Level and Public Perception of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between parental income level and public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program. A quantitative approach with a survey method was employed involving 140 respondents. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Chi-Square tests, Symmetric Measures, and One-Way ANOVA. The results showed that most respondents belonged to low- and middle-income groups and had positive perceptions of the MBG Program. The Chi-Square test indicated no significant relationship between income level and public perceptions of the MBG Program. This finding was supported by the Cramer's V value, which showed a very weak association, and the One-Way ANOVA results, which revealed no significant differences in perceptions across income groups.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of human resources is a fundamental foundation for a nation's economic growth and competitiveness, and adequate nutritional fulfillment from an early age is a basic prerequisite for shaping a healthy, intelligent, and productive generation. Studies in health economics show that nutritional conditions in the early period of life have a long-term influence on cognitive capacity, health status, and productivity in adulthood, a phenomenon known as the fetal origins hypothesis (Almond & Currie, 2011). The implication is that malnutrition in early childhood and school age is not merely a short-term health issue, but a lost investment in human capital that affects long-term national economic productivity (Becker, 2002). Unfortunately, nutrition and food security issues remain a structural challenge faced by Indonesia, marked by

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a high prevalence of stunting among children under five, low dietary diversity among low-income groups, and unequal access to nutritious food across regions.

Food security and nutritional adequacy are closely linked to long-term human resource development. From the capability perspective developed by Sen (1999), access to nutritious food is an important instrument for expanding individuals' substantive freedom to live a meaningful life, including the freedom to grow and develop optimally. When part of society, particularly low-income groups, experiences limited access to nutritious food, their capability to participate fully in development is likewise reduced. This condition ultimately implies a lower aggregate quality of human resources, which can hinder the achievement of long-term national development targets. Public-policy-based nutrition intervention is therefore a strategic step that cannot be delayed, particularly for the school-age group, which is at a critical phase of growth and development.

In response to this issue, the Indonesian government under President Prabowo Subianto launched the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program as one of the national priority programs to improve the quality of human resources. The school feeding program itself is not a new policy globally; such programs have been widely implemented in various countries and have been shown to contribute to increased participation and improved student nutrition indicators (Sugiharto et al., 2025; World Food Programme, 2022). The MBG Program is designed to provide free nutritious food to school-age children, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and other vulnerable groups, with the aim of addressing stunting, malnutrition, and unequal access to nutritious food, which remain serious challenges in national development. As a form of food-based social assistance, the MBG Program represents the state's commitment to guaranteeing the fulfillment of the right to adequate food and nutrition for all citizens, as mandated by Law Number 18 of 2012 on Food.

From the perspective of social welfare policy, the presence of the MBG Program can be understood as a concrete manifestation of the welfare state's commitment to protecting its citizens from the risk of being unable to meet basic needs (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Several recent studies show that the MBG Program has complex social, economic, and political dimensions, ranging from its potential to foster social welfare and reduce hunger among students (Kiftiyah et al., 2025), to its implications for local economic and political dynamics (Beruh & Lusiana, 2026). As a program still in its early implementation phase, the MBG Program faces various operational challenges, from limited facilities and infrastructure to uneven distribution across regions (Agustini, 2025). This condition makes the evaluation of public acceptance and perception a crucial aspect to examine empirically.

The success of a public policy's implementation is determined not only by the quality of the program's design, but also by the extent to which the program obtains acceptance and legitimacy from the community as the policy's target. Public perception of a government program is a cognitive and evaluative process that includes an assessment of perceived benefits, the quality of implementation, the relevance of the target, and the overall effectiveness of the program (Luthans, 2011). A positive public perception of a program is an important prerequisite for the success of its implementation and sustainability, because high public support will encourage active participation, compliance with program mechanisms, and continued political support for the policy (Gilens, 1999).

Furthermore, the quality of service and the transparency of program information also shape public perception and the level of public trust in the government as the policy implementer. Sugiharto et al. (2025) developed a conceptual model showing that responsive service quality and clear program information can strengthen perceptions of fairness and public trust in the MBG Program, which in turn drives satisfaction, participation, and continued support for the program. Conversely, public distrust of a social assistance policy can trigger

social conflict, as shown by Mahfudhoh and Kinseng (2023) in their study of social assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which inaccurate targeting and limited assistance quotas triggered social jealousy at the community level. These findings confirm that the study of public perception is a strategic policy evaluation instrument, not merely an administrative complement.

Income, in the context of this study, is understood as the flow of money or goods received by a person or household within a certain period as compensation for the contribution of the factors of production they own (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010; Nafarin, 2015). From the standpoint of perception formation, social psychology explains that an individual's perception of an object or program is influenced by the interaction between personal characteristics, direct experience, information received, and expectations of the benefits to be obtained (Luthans, 2011). Within the framework of expectancy theory, individuals tend to form a positive perception of a program if the program is believed to have high perceived value (valence) and is likely to be directly felt, regardless of the individual's economic position (Vroom, 1964). Likewise, attribution theory explains that people tend to give a positive assessment to government policies that have clear objectives and easily confirmable benefits, such as the provision of nutritious food for children, without needing to be mediated by personal economic cost-benefit calculations (Weiner, 1985).

Theoretically, income level is often assumed to be an important determinant shaping public perception of social assistance programs, with low-income families expected to have a more positive perception because they directly feel the economic benefit of the program. Nonetheless, a number of theoretical frameworks offer more complex alternative explanations. Esping-Andersen (1990), through the concept of universalism in social services, argues that social programs that reach all levels of society universally tend to gain broader and more even support from various socio-economic groups. The theory of public trust developed by Levi and Stoker (2000) explains that in the early stage of policy implementation, public perception tends to be diffuse and cross-class, shaped more by social norms and collective expectations than by individual economic calculations. At the community level, strong social solidarity bonds can also produce a homogeneous collective assessment of a collective policy (Durkheim, 1893). This phenomenon is further reinforced by the democratization of information access in the digital era, which allows information about a government program to be accessed relatively evenly by people across income levels, thereby reducing the potential perception gap between socio-economic groups (Castells, 2012).

Empirical studies on public perception of social assistance and food programs have been widely conducted. Mahfudhoh and Kinseng (2023), in their study of COVID-19 social assistance recipients, found that individual characteristics, including income, education, and number of dependents, were not significantly correlated with public perception of the social assistance received. In the context of school-based food programs, Zuercher et al. (2024) found that parents' perceptions of the quality of the school lunch program significantly influenced students' participation in the program, confirming the importance of the perception dimension as a predictor of the sustainability of school-based food programs. From the perspective of economic education, a study by Amalia and Pratiwi (2022) showed that a family's socio-economic condition also shapes an individual's understanding of and attitude toward various economic policies, including government assistance programs.

In the specific context of the MBG Program, a number of preliminary studies have been conducted from various points of view. Bactiara Putri et al. (2026) found that the MBG Program had a positive effect on elementary school students' interest in learning, while Anggriyani and Fakhriza (2024), through a social media sentiment analysis, showed that the majority of public opinion toward the free meal program tended to be positive. Beruh and Lusiana (2026)

identified the multidimensional social, economic, and political implications of this program at the local community level. Nevertheless, most previous studies have focused more on effectiveness, general public sentiment, or the program's impact on educational aspects, and have not specifically examined the quantitative relationship between household income level and public perception of the MBG Program using an inferential approach such as the Chi-Square and ANOVA tests.

Based on this review, a fairly fundamental research gap can be identified. Previous studies on the MBG Program have focused more on program effectiveness, public sentiment on social media, or its impact on educational and health aspects, while research specifically examining the relationship between parental income level and public perception of the MBG Program using a correlational quantitative design with inferential statistical tests such as Chi-Square, Symmetric Measures, and One-Way ANOVA remains very limited. Yet understanding whether perception of this program is homogeneous or stratified by economic class has important implications for communication strategy and policy sustainability.

This study seeks to fill that gap by presenting one of the early studies that specifically analyzes the relationship between parental income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program during the early period of its implementation. The novelty of this study lies in its use of a comprehensive inferential quantitative approach, comprising the Chi-Square test, the Phi and Cramer's V association measures, a test of homogeneity of variance, and a One-Way ANOVA test, to empirically examine whether perception of the MBG Program is stratified by economic class or is in fact cross-class — a question that has rarely been answered statistically in the still relatively new MBG Program literature.

Based on the background described above, this study aims to analyze the relationship between parental income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The hypotheses proposed are: H_0 , there is no significant relationship between parental income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program; and H_1 , there is a significant relationship between parental income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The results of this study are expected to provide an empirical contribution to the development of food and nutrition policy that is more responsive to socio-economic dynamics, while also enriching the field of economic education regarding the relationship between family economic conditions and public attitudes toward public policy.

2. METHOD

Research Design. This study used a quantitative approach with a descriptive-correlational survey design. This design was chosen to describe the characteristics of income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program, while also testing whether a relationship exists between the two variables. The quantitative approach allows for objective measurement of social phenomena through statistical analysis, thereby producing conclusions that are more measurable and empirically testable (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study was conducted in 2026 in Karang Indah Village, Mandastana Subdistrict, Barito Kuala Regency, South Kalimantan.

Participants. The study population consisted of residents of Karang Indah Village, Mandastana Subdistrict, Barito Kuala Regency, South Kalimantan. The research sample comprised 140 respondents obtained using a purposive sampling technique based on the criteria of: (a) residing in Karang Indah Village, (b) being at least 17 years old, (c) knowing or having previously received information about the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program, and (d) being willing to serve as a research respondent. Based on the data collected, the majority of respondents came from low- and middle-income groups, reflecting the socio-economic characteristics of the community in the study area. All respondents provided voluntary consent prior to completing the questionnaire.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedure. Research data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part measured respondents' income level as the independent variable. Income level was categorized into four groups — low, moderate, high, and very high — based on a household income classification adapted from the standards of the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2024).

The second part measured public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program as the dependent variable. The perception instrument was developed based on indicators of public policy perception covering the aspects of program benefit, program relevance, implementation effectiveness, and public acceptance of the program. Measurement was conducted using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from a score of 1 (strongly disagree) to a score of 5 (strongly agree). The higher the score obtained, the more positive the respondent's perception of the MBG Program.

Data collection was carried out by directly distributing questionnaires to respondents who met the research criteria. In addition, a documentation technique was used to obtain supporting data related to the Free Nutritious Meals Program, the characteristics of the research area, and literature relevant to the research topic.

Data Analysis Technique. Data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The first stage was descriptive statistical analysis to describe the distribution of income level and public perception of the MBG Program through frequencies, percentages, mean values, and score categorization (Field, 2024).

A crosstabulation analysis was then carried out to observe the pattern of perception distribution within each income group. The relationship between income level and public perception was tested using the Chi-Square Test of Independence, since both variables are categorical. The strength of the relationship was measured using the Phi and Cramer's V coefficients through Symmetric Measures analysis.

In addition, a test of homogeneity of variance was carried out using Levene's Test to ensure that the assumption of equality of variance across income groups was met. Once the assumption was satisfied, the analysis proceeded with a One-Way ANOVA to test whether there was a difference in the average public perception score toward the MBG Program among the income groups. All statistical tests were conducted at a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To facilitate understanding, the research results are described first, followed by the discussion (Drnovšek et al., 2010). The results and discussion subsections are presented separately.

3.1 Results

Sample Description and Variable Distribution. Of the 140 respondents who participated in this study, 21 respondents were recorded as missing on the income variable because they were unwilling to disclose their financial information, so the inferential analysis was carried out on 119 respondents with valid data. The frequency distribution of respondents' income level is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Income Level

Income Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Low	15	10.7	12.6	12.6
Moderate	25	17.9	21.0	33.6

High	39	27.9	32.8	66.4
Very High	40	28.6	33.6	100.0
Total	119	85.0	100.0	
Missing 1	2	1.4		
4	2	1.4		
9	18	12.9		
Total (missing)	21	15.0		
Total (overall)	140	100.0		

Note. Valid N = 119; missing = 21. Valid Percent is calculated from the valid N. Missing codes 1, 4, and 9 refer to SPSS non-response codes. Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Based on Table 5, the distribution of respondents' income level shows that the low-income group dominated the valid sample with a proportion of 33.6% (n = 40), followed by the moderate group at 32.8% (n = 39), the high group at 21.0% (n = 25), and the very-high group at 12.6% (n = 15). The low and moderate groups together accounted for 66.4% of all valid respondents, reflecting the characteristics of the community studied, where most residents depend for their livelihood on the informal sector, small-scale agriculture, and limited trade, which generate relatively low and fluctuating income. This socio-economic condition represents the structural reality of the community that is the primary target of the government's food-based social assistance programs, including the Free Nutritious Meals Program.

The presence of 21 missing respondents (15.0%) who were unwilling to disclose their income level is a common phenomenon in socio-economic surveys. Tourangeau and Yan (2007) state that questions touching on an individual's financial and private matters often produce incomplete responses due to concerns about data confidentiality. Nevertheless, this percentage of missing values still falls within a tolerance range that is generally accepted in survey research and does not compromise the overall validity of the analysis. This socio-economic profile, dominated by lower-middle-income groups, provides an important context for understanding the relevance and public acceptance of the government's food assistance program. Descriptive statistics for the perception variable toward the Free Nutritious Meals Program are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program Variable

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Free Nutritious Meals Program	140	72	12	84

Note. Mean = 59.88; theoretical maximum score = 84. The mean is equivalent to 71.3% of the maximum score. Valid N (listwise) = 140. Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 6 shows that the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program variable had a score range of 72, with a minimum value of 12 and a maximum value of 84. The mean value obtained was 59.88 out of a theoretical maximum score of 84, equivalent to approximately 71.3% of the maximum achievable score. This value indicates that, in general, respondents held a fairly positive perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program, although there remains significant room for improvement. The relatively wide score range of 72 points indicates substantial variation in perception among respondents, reflecting the diversity of experiences, expectations, and

assessments of the program. The categorization of public perception of the MBG Program is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Frequency Distribution of Perception Categories toward the MBG Program

Perception Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Low	10	7.1	7.1
Moderate	54	38.6	45.7
High	76	54.3	100.0
Total	140	100.0	

Note. Categorization uses an empirical distribution norm based on the mean and standard deviation (Azwar, 2022). *Source:* SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 7 shows that the majority of respondents, 76 people (54.3%), fell into the High perception category toward the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The Moderate category was represented by 54 respondents (38.6%), while the Low category comprised only 10 respondents (7.1%). When the High and Moderate categories are combined, a total of 92.9% of respondents held a positive perception of the MBG Program, a figure that represents fairly broad acceptance from the community across economic strata. This distribution, skewed toward the positive end, illustrates that the MBG Program is, in the public's perception, viewed as a relevant government policy with real perceived benefit.

The dominance of the High and Moderate categories in this perception distribution can be understood through several theoretical perspectives. Within the expectancy theory framework developed by Vroom (1964), the public tends to give a positive evaluation of a program if they believe the program has high perceived value (valence) and that its benefit can be directly felt (instrumentality). The MBG Program, which tangibly provides nutritious food for children and vulnerable groups, has benefits that are tangible and easily confirmed, thereby encouraging the formation of a positive perception. The presence of a small proportion of respondents with a Low perception (7.1%) indicates that a segment of the community still holds critical views on certain aspects of the program's implementation, which warrants attention for future improvement. The distribution of perception across income groups is presented further in Table 8.

Table 8. Crosstabulation of Income Level × Perception of the MBG Program

Income Level	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Low	1	8	6	15
Moderate	2	8	15	25
High	3	12	24	39
Very High	4	17	19	40
Total	10	45	64	119

Note. Column headings refer to perception categories toward the MBG Program (Low/Moderate/High). Valid N = 119. *Source:* SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 8 shows the distribution of perception toward the MBG Program within each income group. In the Moderate income group (n = 15), 6 respondents (40.0%) fell into the High perception category, 8 respondents (53.3%) into Moderate, and 1 respondent (6.7%) into Low.

In the High income group ($n = 25$), 15 respondents (60.0%) fell into the High perception category, 8 respondents (32.0%) into Moderate, and 2 respondents (8.0%) into Low. In the Very High income group ($n = 40$), 19 respondents (47.5%) fell into High, 17 respondents (42.5%) into Moderate, and 4 respondents (10.0%) into Low. Meanwhile, in the Low income group ($n = 39$), 24 respondents (61.5%) fell into the High perception category, 12 respondents (30.8%) into Moderate, and 3 respondents (7.7%) into Low.

A notable pattern from this crosstabulation is that the High perception category is actually more dominant in the Low (61.5%) and High (60.0%) income groups than in the Moderate (47.5%) and Very High (40.0%) groups, while the Moderate perception category is most common in the Very High income group (53.3%). This pattern does not show a consistent linear trend between income level and perception category, indicating that positive perception of the MBG Program is not exclusively concentrated in a particular income group but is spread across all economic strata. This even distribution of positive perception provides an early indication that the relationship between income level and perception of MBG is likely neither linear nor statistically significant, which is further examined through the inferential tests below.

Chi-Square Test Results. To inferentially test whether the categorical distribution in the crosstabulation above reflects a significant association between income level and perception of the MBG Program, a Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. This analysis involved 119 valid respondents. The test results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.566 ^a	6	.735
Likelihood Ratio	3.531	6	.740
Linear-by-Linear Association	.028	1	.868
N of Valid Cases	119		

Note. a. 4 cells (33.3%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.26. Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

The Pearson Chi-Square test produced a value of $\chi^2 = 3.566$ with degrees of freedom (df) = 6 and a two-sided asymptotic significance of $p = .735$. Because the p-value (.735) far exceeds the established significance level ($\alpha = .05$), the statistical decision was to accept H_0 and reject H_1 . Thus, there is statistically no significant relationship between income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The Likelihood Ratio results ($LR = 3.531$; $p = .740$) and the Linear-by-Linear Association (value = .028; $p = .868$) consistently reinforce this conclusion, so all three test statistics point to a uniform conclusion.

Methodologically, it should be noted that the SPSS output shows that 4 cells (33.3%) of the total cells in the contingency table have an expected count of less than 5, with a minimum expected count of 1.26. This condition indicates a limitation in the basic assumption of the Chi-Square test, which requires a minimum expected frequency of 5 in each cell (Field, 2024). Nevertheless, the percentage of problematic cells, reaching 33.3%, is above the 20% threshold recommended by a number of methodologists, so this finding needs to be interpreted with reasonable methodological caution. This condition does not change the direction of the conclusion, given how far the p-value is from the significance threshold, but it remains an important note for further research to consider collapsing categories in order to improve the

robustness of the analysis. The strength of the association between the two variables is further quantified in the following section.

Symmetric Measures. The strength of the association between income level and perception of the MBG Program is quantified through Symmetric Measures, as presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Symmetric Measures (Strength of Association)

	Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal Phi	.173	.735
Cramer's V	.122	.735
N of Valid Cases	119	

Note. A Cramer's V value < .20 indicates a very weak association (Akoglu, 2018). Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 10 shows a Phi value of .173 and a Cramer's V value of .122, both with an Approximate Significance value of .735. Referring to the classification of association strength proposed by Akoglu (2018), Cramer's V values are categorized as follows: below .20 indicates a very weak association, .20–.40 a weak association, .40–.60 a moderate association, and above .60 a strong association. The Cramer's V value of .122 therefore falls into the very weak association category, indicating that variation in income level cannot substantially explain variation in perception of the MBG Program.

Furthermore, because the significance value of both association measures (.735) also exceeds $\alpha = .05$, the measured strength of the relationship is not statistically meaningful and cannot be generalized to the wider population. This finding consistently reinforces the conclusion of the Chi-Square test that income level and perception of the MBG Program are two variables that are not significantly associated within the context of this study. The difference in income level, as measured in this study, is not a meaningful distinguishing factor in shaping public perception of the government's food assistance program.

One-Way ANOVA Test. To strengthen the Chi-Square findings using a different, parametric approach, a One-Way ANOVA test was conducted to compare the mean perception scores toward the MBG Program across the four income groups. Prior to conducting the ANOVA, a test of homogeneity of variance (Levene's Test) was first carried out as a prerequisite for the analysis. The results of this prerequisite test are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Test of Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's Test)

	Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal Phi	.173	.735
Cramer's V	.122	.735
N of Valid Cases	119	

Note. Table reproduced as reported in the source manuscript. Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 11 presents the results of Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances using four different calculation approaches. Based on the mean, a Levene Statistic of 0.303 (df1 = 3; df2 = 115; $p = .823$) was obtained. The median-based approach produced a Levene Statistic of 0.304 ($p = .822$), the median-based approach with adjusted df produced a Levene Statistic of 0.304 (df2 = 108.693; $p = .822$), and the trimmed-mean-based approach produced a Levene

Statistic of 0.305 ($p = .822$). All approaches produced significance values far exceeding $\alpha = .05$, so the null hypothesis of homogeneity of variance was accepted. The consistency of results across all four calculation approaches further reinforces the conclusion that the assumption of equal variance among the income-level groups is fully satisfied, and the One-Way ANOVA test can proceed with assured methodological validity. The One-Way ANOVA test results are presented in Table 12.

Table 12. One-Way ANOVA Test Results

MBG Program	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	610.791	3	203.597	.852	.469
Within Groups	27495.058	115	239.087		
Total	28105.849	118			

Note. Dependent variable: perception score toward the Free Nutritious Meals Program. $N = 119$. Source: SPSS data processing results, 2025.

Table 12 shows that the Between Groups Sum of Squares of 610.791 with $df = 3$ produced a Between Groups Mean Square of 203.597. Meanwhile, the Within Groups Sum of Squares of 27,495.058 with $df = 115$ produced a Within Groups Mean Square of 239.087. The ratio between these two Mean Squares produced an F value of 0.852 with a significance value of $p = .469$.

Because the significance value of the F test (.469) far exceeds the established significance level ($\alpha = .05$), H_0 is accepted and H_1 is rejected. Thus, there is no statistically significant difference in mean perception scores toward the Free Nutritious Meals Program among the four income-level groups. The very small F value (0.852), well below the critical F value for the corresponding degrees of freedom, together with the Between Groups Sum of Squares (610.791), which is very small compared to the Within Groups Sum of Squares (27,495.058), jointly confirm that the difference in income level does not make a meaningful contribution to the variation in MBG perception scores. This ANOVA finding consistently reinforces and confirms the earlier Chi-Square conclusion, so H_0 is accepted in both tests.

3.2 Discussion

This study produced three interrelated key findings that require in-depth interpretive examination. These three findings are: first, the economic characteristics of respondents, dominated by lower-middle-income groups; second, public perception, which was generally at a positive level, dominated by the High category (54.3%) with a mean value of 59.88 out of a maximum score of 84; and third, the absence of any significant relationship or mean difference between income level and perception of the MBG Program, as evidenced by the Chi-Square test results ($\chi^2 = 3.566$; $p = .735$; Cramer's $V = .122$) and the One-Way ANOVA ($F = 0.852$; $p = .469$). Each finding is discussed comprehensively below.

The first finding concerns the dominance of lower-middle-income groups in the research sample. The combined Low (28.6%) and Moderate (27.9%) categories reached 56.5% of the total sample, equivalent to 66.4% of the 119 valid respondents. This distribution profile reflects the structural reality of the community in the study area, most of whom depend for their livelihood on subsistence agriculture, small-scale trade, and informal work that generates relatively limited income. The Central Statistics Agency (2024) notes that income inequality between social groups in Indonesia, particularly in regions still reliant on the primary sector,

remains at a level requiring serious attention from social and economic policy. The dominance of lower-middle-income groups in this sample is not merely a demographic fact but carries important normative implications for the distribution policy of food-based social assistance programs.

From the perspective of the capability approach developed by Sen (1999), income is not an end in itself but an instrument for expanding an individual's substantive capability, including the ability to access adequate nutritious food. Low-income families, who dominate this study's sample, structurally face limitations in meeting optimal nutritional needs without outside assistance, making government food-based assistance programs highly relevant to their daily lives. Samuelson and Nordhaus (2010), in their macroeconomic analysis, assert that the limited budgets of low-income households create scarcity of consumption choices, including in meeting family nutritional needs, so that government intervention through food assistance programs functions as a corrective mechanism for market failure in the distribution of access to nutritious food. The socio-economic profile of this study's sample thus provides strong context for why a program such as MBG holds significant policy relevance for the community studied.

The second significant finding is that the majority of the public holds a positive perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program, with 54.3% of respondents in the High perception category and a total of 92.9% of respondents holding a positive perception (Moderate to High). The mean value of 59.88 out of a maximum score of 84, equivalent to 71.3% of the maximum score, indicates a good, though not yet maximal, level of acceptance. This finding can be comprehensively explained through a number of complementary theoretical frameworks.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory developed by Becker (2002), investment in nutritional fulfillment from an early age is the most fundamental form of investment in human productive capacity, yielding long-term returns in the form of improved health, cognitive development, and future workforce productivity. Communities that understand this logic of human resource investment tend to give support and positive perception to programs focused on children's nutritional fulfillment, because the benefits are felt not only by direct recipients but by society as a whole in the long term. The MBG Program, whose targets include school-age children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, directly touches the critical stages of human capital formation identified by Becker as the most influential investment window.

From the perspective of Welfare State Theory developed by Esping-Andersen (1990), food-based assistance programs are a concrete manifestation of the welfare state's commitment to protecting citizens from the risk of being unable to meet basic needs due to economic limitations. An effective welfare state, according to Esping-Andersen, not only guarantees protection for the most vulnerable groups but also builds a universal social security system that gains broader and longer-lasting support. The MBG Program, designed to reach school-age children broadly regardless of family economic status, possesses this universalist characteristic, which theoretically explains why the program receives a positive perception from various levels of society, including groups that are not direct beneficiaries.

Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory framework provides an additional explanation that reinforces this finding. Vroom argues that an individual's motivation and positive evaluation of a program or policy are determined by three main components: expectancy (the belief that a certain effort will produce a certain result), instrumentality (the belief that the result will bring the desired benefit), and valence (the value the individual places on that benefit). In the context of the MBG Program, the program has high valence because it directly relates to the basic need for food and nutrition, which is universally valued; its instrumentality is also relatively high

because its benefit, in the form of the provision of nutritious food, can be directly and tangibly confirmed. This condition creates a strong basis for the formation of widespread positive perception among the public.

The third finding, theoretically the most interesting yet also the most challenging, is the absence of a significant relationship between income level and public perception of the MBG Program. Intuitively, one might hypothesize that low-income groups, as the direct beneficiaries most in need, should hold a more positive perception than high-income groups, who relatively do not need government food subsidies. However, this study's empirical data instead show a different and more complex pattern, which calls for a more nuanced theoretical explanation.

Gilens (1999), in his comprehensive study of public support for social assistance programs, found that public attitudes and perceptions toward welfare programs are not determined solely by an individual's direct economic interest, but also by deeper social values, trust in government effectiveness, and perceptions of the eligibility and legitimacy of beneficiaries. In the Indonesian context, where the MBG Program has only just been launched and remains in its early implementation phase, public perception of the program is likely more influenced by initial optimism, normative expectations about the government's role in guaranteeing citizens' welfare, and positive narratives communicated through various media channels, rather than by differentiated empirical experience based on economic class. In the newness of such a program, differences in economic interest between income groups have not yet been sufficiently manifested into statistically measurable differences in perception.

A deeper theoretical explanation can be drawn from the political trust theory developed by Levi and Stoker (2000). This theory asserts that public trust in government policy tends to be diffuse and cross-class, especially in the early stage of policy implementation when empirical information about the program's effectiveness is still very limited. Under such information uncertainty, public perception is shaped more by community social capital, norms of trust in public institutions, and collective expectations that generally do not differ significantly across income groups within a community that still maintains strong social ties. This diffuse trust functions as a cognitive bridge that equalizes evaluations of government programs across different levels of society, regardless of each individual's economic position.

Durkheim (1893), in his theory of social solidarity, provides a relevant sociological foundation for understanding this finding. In communities whose solidarity bonds remain strong — whether mechanical solidarity based on shared values and identity, or organic solidarity based on functional interdependence — assessments of collective policies tend to be more homogeneous and not sharply stratified by economic class. A policy such as the MBG Program, which touches universal values regarding the fulfillment of food needs for children and the younger generation, resonates with the norms of social solidarity that operate across economic strata within that community. Shared values of solidarity and concern for the nutrition of the next generation transcend socio-economic class distinctions, thereby forming a relatively homogeneous basis of perception across income groups.

From the perspective of bounded rationality theory developed by Simon (1955), the public, in evaluating government programs, does not always use a purely rational economic calculation based on their class position. Instead, they use cognitive heuristics, social norms, and cultural values prevailing within the community as shortcuts in evaluative decision-making. The MBG Program, aimed at improving the nutrition of children and the younger generation, resonates with universal values regarding the importance of investing in the next generation, values shared by people from diverse economic backgrounds. Given the limited cognitive capacity and information available to the general public, evaluation of government programs is more often based on the program's normative values and goals than on a detailed cost-benefit calculation grounded in class position.

An additional factor that likely contributes to the absence of a significant perception difference across income groups is the phenomenon that Esping-Andersen (1990) calls the universalism of social provision. Social programs that are universal in nature — reaching all levels of society, not only the poor — tend to receive broader and more even support from various socio-economic groups because they do not create stigmatization of beneficiaries and do not position a particular group as exclusively dependent on the state. The MBG Program, designed to broadly reach school-age children without economic-status discrimination, has this universalist character, which logically explains why positive perception of it is not concentrated in a particular income group but is spread evenly across all levels of society. Even high-income groups may perceive indirect benefits of this program, for example through improved social environment quality and reduced nutritional inequality within the community, which ultimately benefits everyone.

Another dimension worth considering in understanding this finding is the role of information democratization in the digital era in equalizing the public's knowledge base about government programs. Castells (2012), in his theory of the network society, asserts that the increasingly widespread penetration of smartphones and social media across levels of society creates conditions in which information about the MBG Program can be accessed relatively evenly by people of various income levels. This democratization of information produces a more homogeneous knowledge base as the foundation for perception formation, which ultimately reduces the perception differences that might theoretically arise from differences in access to information that were previously strongly correlated with income level. In this context, social media platforms function as an information equalizer that levels the cognitive basis for evaluating government programs across economic strata.

Overall, this study provides an important empirical contribution showing that public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program is a cross-class phenomenon not significantly determined by income level. This finding has substantial policy implications for program designers and implementers: first, the MBG Program appears to have successfully built evenly distributed legitimacy across levels of society, a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of a government program; second, program communication efforts should maintain a narrative of universal benefit in order to preserve the cross-class support that has been established; and third, given that this study measures early-stage perception rather than experience-based satisfaction over the long term, continued monitoring of how public perception develops as the community gains more experience with the program is critically important, particularly because a significant income-based perception gap could potentially emerge over time if implementation quality is not maintained evenly across regions and socio-economic groups.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the relationship between income level and public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program. Based on the inferential tests conducted, the alternative hypothesis stating that there is a significant relationship or difference in perception between income groups is statistically rejected. The main finding shows that public perception of this program is generally positive and evenly distributed across all economic strata, with no systematic tendency distinguishing low-income groups from high-income groups. This indicates that assessment of the program is not based solely on respondents' economic position, but is also influenced by social values, trust in public institutions, and a narrative of program universalism that has succeeded in garnering acceptance from various strata of society.

Practically, this finding indicates that the MBG Program has succeeded in building fairly strong social legitimacy in the early period of its implementation. The government is

advised to maintain a universalist approach in its public communication strategy in order to preserve the cross-class support that has been established. In addition, continuous monitoring of implementation quality needs to be carried out to ensure that program benefits are felt evenly, given the potential for perception differences based on economic group to emerge as the community's experience with the program increases over the long term.

This study has a number of limitations that should be noted. First, approximately 15% of respondents were unwilling to disclose their income information, so the inferential analysis was conducted on only part of the sample. Second, the statistical test results need to be interpreted with methodological caution given the presence of contingency table cells with low expected frequencies. Third, this study measured perception at the early stage of program implementation, so it has not been able to capture the dynamics of experience-based satisfaction over the long term. Further research using a longitudinal approach is therefore strongly recommended to trace changes in public perception as the program's implementation matures in the future.

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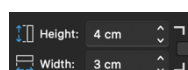
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