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Variations in Public Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (PMBG) Based on Income Level

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze differences in public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (PMBG) based on income level in Karang Indah Village, Mandastana Subdistrict, Barito Kuala Regency. The study employed a quantitative approach using a comparative method. Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to 122 respondents selected using purposive sampling. Respondents' income levels were classified into four groups based on the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) categories: low, medium, high, and very high. Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test. The results of the study indicate that the majority of the public holds a positive perception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Although there were variations in the average perceptions across each income group, these differences were not statistically significant. These findings indicate that income level is not a factor that differentiates the public's perceptions of the PMBG. Therefore, the government needs to maintain the quality of the program's implementation by strengthening public outreach, increasing transparency, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits so that the public's positive perceptions can be sustained and support the continued implementation of the PMBG.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food security and meeting the nutritional needs of the population are two intertwined dimensions of human development. Indonesia, with a population of more than 270 million and a national stunting prevalence that still reached 21.5% in 2023 (Indonesian Ministry of Health, 2023), faces a structural urgency to strengthen community-based nutrition interventions. In

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response to this situation, the government launched the Free Nutritious Meals Program (PMBG) as a national priority program that began to be implemented in phases starting in early 2025, with target beneficiaries including schoolchildren, pregnant women, and low-income families. The Free Nutritious Meals Program (PMBG) is positioned as a long-term investment in human capital aimed at improving the quality of Indonesia's future generations through early nutritional support. This policy is expected to foster a generation that is healthy, intelligent, productive, and competitive serving as the foundation for achieving the "Golden Indonesia 2045" vision (National Nutrition Agency, 2026).

The success of PMBG implementation is determined not only by funding and governance but is also influenced by the level of public acceptance and support for the policy (Rahman et al., 2026). From a public policy perspective, public perception is a critical indicator because it shapes trust in the government, increases participation, and strengthens the policy's legitimacy. Conversely, less positive perceptions can lead to resistance and hinder the effectiveness of implementation (Sugiharto et al., 2025). Therefore, evaluating public perceptions is a crucial part of assessing the success of the PMBG and serves as a foundation for future policy improvements.

Perception is defined as the individual process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information to generate meaning regarding an object or event (Robbins & Judge, 2019). In the context of public policy, perceptions are influenced by various factors such as experience, socioeconomic characteristics, educational level, access to information, and trust in the government. These differences in characteristics allow individuals to form different assessments of the same policy even when they are in relatively similar social environments.

International studies on government-sponsored school meal programs indicate that public acceptance of such programs is influenced by sociodemographic characteristics, including household income levels (Santana et al., 2023). Hawkins and Rundle (2024) also found that parents' perceptions of the quality and benefits of school meals influence student participation rates. In Indonesia, research on the Free Nutritious Meal Program (PMBG) remains dominated by studies on policy implementation, governance, financing, and institutional readiness (Hastuti et al., 2026; Silaban et al., 2026), with only a small portion focusing on teachers' perceptions and public sentiment analysis (Leobisa et al., 2026). Although various studies have examined the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program from the perspectives of governance, effectiveness, and institutional readiness, attention to public perceptions as an indicator of policy acceptance remains relatively limited. Furthermore, few studies have examined whether income level is indeed a factor that distinguishes public perceptions of the PMBG at the community level. Although socioeconomic conditions are often assumed to influence public acceptance of public policies, empirical evidence in the context of the PMBG in Indonesia remains very limited.

Based on this literature review, there are two research gaps that need to be addressed. First, studies on public perception as an indicator of acceptance of the PMBG policy remain very limited compared to studies on implementation. Second, there has been little empirical research examining whether income level is a distinguishing factor in public perception of the PMBG program, particularly at the village level.

The novelty of this study lies in its empirical testing of the assumption that income level is a factor that differentiates public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. Unlike most previous studies that focused on policy implementation, this study provides empirical evidence that public acceptance of the PMBG is not always determined by economic conditions, thereby broadening our understanding of the determinants of public perceptions regarding nutrition-related policies.

Based on the above, this study aims to analyze differences in public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program based on income levels in Karang Indah Village, Barito Kuala Regency. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on public policy evaluation, particularly regarding public perceptions of nutrition programs, while also serving as a basis for the government to formulate more effective, inclusive, and targeted policy implementation and communication strategies.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants and Research Procedures

This study employs a quantitative approach with a comparative design to analyze differences in public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (PMBG) based on income level. The study was conducted on April 25, 2026, in Karang Indah Village, Barito Kuala Regency, South Kalimantan. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for the objective measurement of phenomena through numerical data, which is then analyzed using inferential statistical techniques (Hair et al., 2019).

The study involved 140 respondents selected using purposive sampling—a technique based on specific characteristics aligned with the research objectives. The criteria for respondents in this study were community members who had a source of income and were willing to participate in the research. Purposive sampling was chosen because the study focused on comparing perceptions based on income level, so respondents needed to have information about their income.

Data collection was conducted through structured interviews using a questionnaire. The researcher visited respondents in person, explained the study's objectives, then read each question aloud and recorded the respondents' answers on the questionnaire form. This approach was chosen to minimize misunderstandings by respondents regarding each statement and to ensure the completeness of the data collected. After all data were collected, the following processes were carried out: checking the completeness of responses (editing), coding, data entry into IBM SPSS Statistics version 27, and a final review before statistical analysis was performed.

2.2 Research Instrument

The research instrument was designed to measure public perception of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (PMBG) based on respondents' income levels. This study involved two variables: income level as the independent variable (X) and public perception of the PMBG as the dependent variable (Y). Income level was determined through a single question regarding the respondent's income, which was then grouped into four categories low, moderate, high, and very high based on classifications aligned with the standards of the Central Statistics Agency (BPS). This categorization aimed to facilitate comparative analysis across income groups to determine whether there were differences in perceptions of the PMBG.

The perception variable was measured using 12 statements on a seven-point semantic differential scale (1–7). The semantic differential scale was chosen because it can measure respondents' evaluative tendencies toward an object more sensitively through pairs of bipolar words, making it suitable for measuring public perceptions of a program or policy (Dolnicar et al., 2016).

Before being used as a data collection tool, the research instrument was first assessed for quality through validity and reliability tests. The validity test was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation to determine each item's ability to measure the construct under study. An item was deemed valid if its calculated *r* value was greater than the table *r* value at a

5% significance level. The test results showed that all items had calculated r values ranging from 0.547 to 0.800, which were greater than the table r value of 0.166 at a 5% significance level; therefore, all items were deemed valid and suitable for use as a research instrument.

Next, a reliability test was conducted using Cronbach’s Alpha to assess the instrument’s internal consistency. Based on the analysis results using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27, a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.902 was obtained for the 12 items, indicating that the instrument has excellent internal consistency and is suitable for use as a data collection tool (Hair et al., 2019).

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the characteristics of respondents based on income level and to describe the public’s perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program through frequency, percentage, mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. In addition, cross-tabulation was performed to provide an overview of the distribution of perception categories across each income group.

Prior to hypothesis testing, a test of homogeneity of variances was conducted using Levene’s Test as one of the assumptions in comparative analysis. Hypothesis testing was performed using One-Way Analysis of Variance (One-Way ANOVA) to determine whether there were differences in public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program based on income level. Testing decisions were based on a 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), where a p-value less than 0.05 indicates a significant difference between groups, while a p-value greater than 0.05 indicates no significant difference (Field, 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Respondent characteristics based on income level are presented in Table 1. Of the 140 respondents involved in the study, there were 21 missing data points; therefore, a valid analysis was conducted on 119 respondents. The income distribution shows that the majority of respondents were in the low-income group, totaling 40 people (33.6%), followed by the middle-income group with 39 people (32.8%), the high-income group with 25 people (21.0%), and the very high-income group with 15 people (12.6%). These findings indicate that the majority of respondents come from lower-middle-income groups.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Respondents’ Income Levels

Category	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Very High	15	10.7	12.6	12.6
High	25	17.9	21.0	33.6
Medium	39	27.9	32.8	66.4
Low	40	28.6	33.6	100.0
Total Valid	119	85.0	100.0	
Missing	21	15.0		

Total	140	100.0
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Prior to categorization, respondents' perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program were analyzed descriptively, as shown in Table 2. The analysis results indicate that the MBG perception scores had a range of 72 points, with a minimum value of 12 and a maximum value of 84. This fairly wide score range indicates significant variation in perceptions among respondents, reflecting differences in public views regarding the program's implementation.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program

Variable	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program	140	72	12	84
Valid N (listwise)	140			

After being categorized based on score intervals, the distribution of respondents' perceptions of the MBG Program is presented in Table 3. The results show that more than half of the respondents (54.3%) had a high perception of the MBG Program, followed by 54 respondents (38.6%) in the moderate category, and 10 respondents (7.1%) in the low category. The predominance of perceptions in the high category indicates that, in general, the public responds positively to the Free Nutritious Meals Program.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of MBG Perception Categories

Category	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Low	10	7.1	7.1	7.1
Medium	54	38.6	38.6	45.7
High	76	54.3	54.3	100.0
Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 presents a cross-tabulation of MBG perceptions by income group. In general, high perceptions dominate across all income groups. The very high-income group has 40.0% high perceptions and 53.3% moderate perceptions. The high-income group shows the largest proportion of high perceptions (60.0%). The middle-income group has 53.8% high perceptions, while the low-income group has relatively balanced high and moderate perceptions (45.0%). This pattern indicates a tendency for higher-income groups to have a slightly larger proportion of positive perceptions, although the difference is not drastic.

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation of Income Level and MBG Perception Categories

Income Level		Low	Moderate	High	n (%)
Very High	Count	1	8	6	15
	% of Income Level	6.7%	53.3%	40.0%	100.0%
High	Count	2	8	15	25
	% of Income Level	8.0%	32.0%	60.0%	100.0%
Moderate	Count	3	15	21	39
	% of Income Level	7.7%	38.5%	53.8%	100.0%
Low	Count	4	18	18	40
	% of Income Level	10.0%	45.0%	45.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	10	49	60	119
	% of Income Level	8.4%	41.2%	50.4%	100.0%

Based on the results of the normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the significance values for each income group were above 0.05 (very high: Sig. = 0.200; high: Sig. = 0.058; moderate: Sig. = 0.200; low: Sig. = 0.200). Thus, it can be concluded that the PMBG perception data for each income group are normally distributed, thereby satisfying the assumptions required for a one-way ANOVA.

Table 5. Normality Test of MBG Perceptions Based on Income Level

Income	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic	df	Sig.
Very high	.162	15	.200
High	.171	25	.058
Medium	.100	39	.200
Low	.064	40	.200

Criteria: Sig. > 0.05 = data is normally distributed; Sig. < 0.05 = data is not normally distributed

The results of the homogeneity test based on the mean show a Levene's statistic of 0.303 with $df_1 = 3$, $df_2 = 115$, and a significance value of 0.823. Since the significance value of 0.823 is greater than 0.05, it can be concluded that the variances across groups are homogeneous. Thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variances is met, and the one-way ANOVA can proceed.

Table 6. Test of Homogeneity of Variances (Levene's Test)

Test Basis	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	.303	3	115	.823
Based on the Median	.304	3	115	.822
Based on the median and with adjusted degrees of freedom	.304	3	108.693	.822

Based on the trimmed mean	.305	3	115	.822
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The descriptive statistics in Table 7 show that the high-income group had the highest average perception score ($M = 62.36$; $SD = 16.992$), followed by the middle-income group ($M = 60.56$; $SD = 14.282$), the low-income group ($M = 57.28$; $SD = 15.899$), and very high ($M = 56.13$; $SD = 14.530$). The overall mean score was 59.28 ($SD = 15.433$). The differences between group means appeared relatively small, indicating that there was not a significant variation in perceptions across income groups.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the One-Way ANOVA of MBG Perception

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound (95% CI)	Upper Bound (95% CI)	Min	Max
Very High	15	56.13	14.530	3.752	48.09	64.18	25	84
High	25	62.36	16.992	3.398	55.35	69.37	12	84
Moderate	39	60.56	14.282	2.287	55.93	65.19	23	83
Low	40	57.28	15.899	2.514	52.19	62.36	24	84
Total	119	59.28	15.433	1.415	56.48	62.08	12	84

The results of the one-way ANOVA in Table 8 show that the calculated F-value is 0.852 with a significance value of 0.469. Since the significance value of 0.469 is greater than 0.05, H_0 is accepted, meaning there is no significant difference in perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program among the different income groups. In other words, income level does not significantly affect the public's perception of the MBG program.

Table 8. Results of the One-Way ANOVA Test on Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	610.791	3	203.597	.852	.469
Within Groups	27,495.058	115	239.087		
Total	28,105.849	118			

3.2 Discussion

The analysis results indicate that there is no difference in public perception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (PMBG) based on respondents' income levels. This finding is supported by the results of the One-Way ANOVA test, which yielded a significance value of 0.469 ($p > 0.05$). Furthermore, the relatively small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.018$) indicates that variations in income level account for only a small portion of the variation in public perceptions of the program. Thus, income level cannot be considered a factor that distinguishes how the public evaluates the implementation of the PMBG. These results suggest that people from

various economic groups tend to hold relatively similar views regarding the existence of this program.

Although the results of the one-way ANOVA test showed that there were no differences in overall public perceptions based on income level, a descriptive analysis of each perception indicator revealed variations in assessments regarding specific aspects. The greatest variation was observed in the program sustainability indicator, followed by trust in the program, the quality of PMBG management, distributional equity, and public support. Conversely, the indicators of understanding of the program, program benefits, reduction in household expenditures, accuracy of targeting, nutritional quality, and program information showed relatively uniform assessments across all income groups. These findings suggest that people from various income groups have nearly identical perceptions regarding the primary benefits of the PMBG, while variations in assessment are more prevalent regarding aspects of program implementation and sustainability. However, these variations are descriptive in nature and not yet substantial enough to yield statistically significant differences.

The absence of differences in perceptions across income groups indicates that the PMBG is viewed as a program that provides broad benefits and is not limited to specific economic groups. The public evaluates the program not only based on personally received benefits but also considers the social benefits that can be felt by the surrounding community. Programs aimed at improving nutritional status and the quality of human capital generally garner easier cross-group support because their benefits are viewed as collective and long-term (Bundy & Alderman, 2011; Gelli et al., 2019). Therefore, both low-income and high-income groups demonstrate relatively similar levels of acceptance toward the PMBG.

These research findings differ from the perspective of social redistribution theory, which posits that low-income individuals typically support government assistance programs more strongly because they have a greater chance of deriving direct benefits from such programs. Conversely, high-income groups tend to be more critical of redistributive policies because they involve the use of public resources (Busemeyer & Garritzmman, 2017; Rehm et al., 2012). No significant differences in attitudes toward the PMBG were observed. This suggests that the public views the PMBG not merely as a social assistance program but rather as a social investment aimed at sustainably improving the community's health and nutrition.

Regarding the theory of legitimacy, the results of this study indicate that the PMBG has gained fairly widespread acceptance at the community level. (Suchman, 1995) explains that legitimacy is established when a policy is perceived as aligning with the community's values, needs, and expectations. In this study, the PMBG's objectives—which focus on meeting nutritional needs and improving the quality of human resources—are viewed as aligned with the community's needs. Consequently, the level of support for the program is not influenced by differences in economic status. This finding is also consistent with the view (Tyler, 2021) that public acceptance of a policy is strongly influenced by the public's perceptions regarding the benefits and fairness of government programs.

The descriptive results of the study show that the majority of respondents hold a positive perception of the PMBG. A total of 54.3% of respondents fell into the “high perception” category, and 38.6% fell into the “moderate perception” category. These findings indicate that the program has achieved a fairly broad level of acceptance among the public. This high level of positive perception is likely linked to the program's implementation, which is viewed as effectively addressing the public's nutritional needs. Public administration studies explain that public perception of a government program is heavily influenced by the quality of program implementation, transparency in management, and the public's direct experience in receiving the program's benefits (Van De Walle & Migchelbrink, 2022; Van Ryzin, 2013).

This aligns with the findings of Van Ryzin (2013), who stated that public perceptions of public services are shaped more by the perceived quality of service than by individual socioeconomic characteristics. Grimmelikhuijsen (2017) also found that the public's experiences in interacting with government programs contribute significantly to the formation of public trust and positive evaluations. Thus, positive perceptions of the PMBG are likely influenced more by the public's experience of the program's benefits than by differences in respondents' income levels. Another factor that may explain these research findings is the social characteristics of communities that still maintain strong social ties. In communities with high levels of social interaction, information regarding the program's objectives, benefits, and implementation tends to spread evenly.

According to the theory of innovation diffusion, intensive communication processes within a community can foster shared perceptions of a new program or innovation (Rogers, 2003). These conditions enable the community to obtain relatively consistent information about the PMBG, thereby fostering perceptions that tend to be homogeneous across various income groups.

Nevertheless, the results of this study do not fully align with some previous studies that found an influence of income level on public perceptions of social assistance programs. This discrepancy is likely due to the distinct characteristics of the PMBG program compared to cash assistance programs. Cash assistance programs are generally more prone to causing differences in perception because they involve issues of targeting accuracy, benefit distribution, and the potential for recipient dependency. In contrast, the PMBG is a service-based program whose benefits can be directly observed by the public, making it easier to gain support from various economic groups (Alderman et al., 2021; Gelli et al., 2019).

The findings of this study provide theoretical implications that economic variables are not always the primary factors in explaining public perceptions of a social program. In the context of the PMBG, factors such as collective benefits, program legitimacy, implementation quality, and public trust in the government appear to play a more dominant role in shaping public perceptions. These results enrich the literature on public acceptance of social policies, particularly nutrition intervention programs, which are currently a national development priority.

From a practical perspective, the research findings indicate that the PMBG has garnered relatively even support across various income groups. This situation constitutes important social capital for the program's sustainability in the future. Therefore, the government must continue to maintain the quality of program implementation by improving the quality of the food provided, ensuring transparency in budget management, accurately targeting beneficiaries, and strengthening program evaluation mechanisms. These efforts are essential to ensure that public trust in and support for the PMBG program can be sustained and enhanced.

3. CONCLUSION (12pt)

Conclusions are not just repeating data, but in the form of substance of meaning. It can be a statement of what is expected, as stated in the "Introduction" chapter which can eventually lead to the "Results and Discussion" section so that there is compatibility. Moreover, it can also be added prospects for the development of research results and prospects for further research applications in the future (based on the results and discussion).

This study concludes that income level is not a factor that differentiates public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (PMBG) in Karang Indah Village, Mandastana Subdistrict, Barito Kuala Regency. The majority of the community holds a positive perception of the PMBG, indicating that the program is well-received by the community regardless of differences in income level. These findings suggest that public perceptions of the

PMBG are influenced more by an understanding of the program's objectives and benefits than by household economic conditions.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view that the formation of perceptions toward a public policy is not always determined by socioeconomic characteristics, but also by the public's information, experiences, and understanding of the policy. Practically, the government needs to maintain the quality of implementation, strengthen public outreach, and enhance the transparency of the PMBG's implementation to ensure that the public's positive perceptions are sustained.

Future research is recommended to cover a broader study area using probability sampling techniques and to consider other variables, such as educational level, knowledge of the program, experience receiving benefits, and trust in the government, so as to provide a more

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