

Economic and Business Horizon

ISSN: 2963-2765

Economic and Business
Horizon

Volume: 05

Issue: 01

Year: 2026

Page: 1-12

Citation:

Roup, R. P. (2026).

Evaluation of social assistance in reducing income inequality: Analysis of poor households in Indonesia. *Economic and Business Horizon*, 5(1), 1-12.

Evaluation of Social Assistance in Reducing Income Inequality: Analysis of Poor Households in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of social assistance programs in reducing income inequality among poor households in Indonesia by shifting the focus from aggregate indicators to a micro-level household analysis. Using secondary data from the 2023–2025 National Socioeconomic Survey (Susenas) and the 2025 Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS), this study compares economic conditions between recipient and non-recipient households. The analysis employs descriptive statistics, Propensity Score Matching, and regression techniques to assess differences in consumption patterns, education participation, and access to health services. The results indicate that social assistance plays a significant role in stabilizing food consumption and improving access to basic education and healthcare among poor households. However, its impact remains largely short-term and consumptive, with limited effects on non-food consumption, productive investment, and long-term income improvement. Persistent issues such as mistargeting, limited benefit size, and weak integration with productive programs reduce the redistributive potential of social assistance in addressing income inequality. The study concludes that social assistance functions primarily as a social safety net rather than an instrument of economic mobility, highlighting the need for more integrated and household-based policy designs to achieve sustainable inequality reduction.

Keywords

Household Welfare, Income Inequality, Poor Households, Social Assistance, Targeting Efficiency.

1. Introduction

Income inequality is a persistent issue in the discourse on Indonesian economic development. Relatively stable economic growth is not always accompanied by equitable income distribution. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (*Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS*) shows that the decline in the Gini Ratio has been slow, even tending to stagnate in certain periods (BPS, 2025a). This condition indicates that the benefits of development have not been fully enjoyed by low-income groups. The government has responded to this issue through various social assistance programs, such as the Family Hope Program (*Program Keluarga Harapan/PKH*), Non-Cash Food Assistance (*Bantuan Pangan Non Tunai/BPNT*), and Cash Social Assistance (*Bantuan Sosial Tunai/BST*). These programs are designed to maintain the purchasing power of poor households and reduce economic vulnerability to external shocks (Azisan et al., 2024). In practice, social assistance is often positioned as a quick solution to reduce poverty and inequality. However, evaluations of social assistance are still dominated by a macro approach, where policy success is often measured by a reduction in the national poverty rate or an increase in aggregate consumption.

Most previous studies have focused on aggregate indicators such as Waluyo and Khoirunurrofik (2021) and Sinaga et al. (2021), while micro-analysis at the household level is still rare. This approach has the potential to overlook important aspects, such as variations in assistance utilization, access costs, and the sustainability of policy impacts. Field experience documented in various studies reveals that many recipient households remain vulnerable despite receiving regular assistance.

Based on this situation, this study emphasizes the importance of assessing the effectiveness of social assistance at the poor household level. To date, evaluations of social assistance policies have tended to focus on aggregate indicators, such as reductions in the national poverty rate or changes in general consumption patterns. This macro approach has the potential to obscure the diverse impacts of policies at the micro level, particularly on beneficiary households. Yet, each household has different characteristics, needs, and strategies for utilizing assistance.

Furthermore, the aggregate approach often fails to capture the tangible, medium- and long-term sustainability of social assistance's impact on the welfare of poor households (Croon et al., 2024; Aladejare & Dimnwobi, 2025). Focusing on the micro level provides a more comprehensive picture of the limitations of social assistance policies in reducing income inequality. By directly examining household economic conditions, this study seeks to identify the extent to which social assistance functions not only as a short-term consumption buffer but also as an instrument with the potential to support long-term well-being. This study uses secondary data from the 2023–2025 Susenas (National Survey) and the 2025 DTKS (National Statistics) to analyze the effectiveness of social assistance at the household level in Indonesia (BPS, 2023; BPS, 2024; BPS 2025b; Kementerian Sosial Republik Indonesia, 2025). This study aims to analyze the impact of social assistance on the economic conditions of poor households, identify the limitations of existing policies, and formulate more targeted policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Assistance and Income Inequality

Social assistance is a crucial instrument in fiscal policy designed to protect vulnerable groups from various economic risks, such as poverty, unemployment, and income shocks (Li et al., 2024; Silaen et al., 2025). In the context of income inequality, which remains a structural issue, social assistance is expected to act as a redistribution mechanism that can narrow the gap between social groups. Through cash and non-cash transfers, the government strives to increase the purchasing

power of poor households and maintain minimum consumption levels. However, the impact of social assistance is not automatic and uniform. Its effectiveness depends heavily on appropriate program design, accurate targeting of recipients, and the magnitude and sustainability of the assistance provided (Cerf, 2023; Saputra, 2024). Furthermore, social assistance will have a greater long-term impact if integrated with productive programs, such as economic empowerment, skills development, and access to education and health services. Without such integration, social assistance risks being temporary and less able to reduce inequality sustainably.

Theory Income Inequality emphasizes the active role of the state in correcting inequalities generated by market mechanisms through income redistribution policies. Within this framework, social assistance is viewed as a corrective instrument aimed at reducing the welfare gap between social groups, particularly between high-income and vulnerable groups. Through income transfers, the state strives to ensure the fulfillment of basic needs and enhance social protection for the poor. However, the effectiveness of social assistance is inseparable from various structural limitations (Walker, 2025). The state's fiscal capacity is a key determinant, as budget constraints can limit the scope and extent of assistance disbursed. Furthermore, implementation efficiency also has a significant impact, particularly regarding the accuracy of recipient data, program governance, and distribution oversight (Adepoju et al., 2023). Inaccurate targeting and weak coordination between institutions have the potential to reduce the redistributive impact of social assistance. Therefore, the state's role lies not only in providing the budget, but also in strengthening institutions and improving the quality of policy implementation to optimally achieve the goal of reducing inequality.

2.2. Social Welfare and Targeting Efficiency

Welfare theory views welfare as a multidimensional condition, not limited solely to economic aspects, but also encompassing dimensions of health, education, and overall quality of life (Hu et al., 2025; Omri et al., 2025). From this perspective, the welfare of individuals and households is determined by their ability to meet basic needs, access adequate public services, and have the opportunity to increase their capacity and productivity. Social assistance is a policy instrument that plays a crucial role in improving welfare, especially in the short term, by helping poor and vulnerable households meet basic needs such as food, health, and education. However, social assistance is often temporary and consumptive, so its impact on increasing household economic independence is limited. Without programs for empowerment, skills development, and job creation, social assistance has the potential to create dependency and does not significantly promote the sustainability of welfare in the long term.

Targeting Efficiency Concept emphasizes the importance of accurate targeting in the implementation of social assistance programs to optimally achieve policy objectives. Accurate targeting means that assistance is provided to groups truly in need according to predetermined criteria. In practice, two main types of errors often occur: errors of inclusion and errors of exclusion. Inclusion errors occur when individuals or households who are not entitled to receive assistance actually receive assistance, thus reducing the allocation of resources to groups in greater need (Caravani et al., 2022). Meanwhile, exclusion errors arise when groups who should receive assistance are not reached by the program, thus preventing the achievement of social protection goals. Both of these errors can reduce the effectiveness of social assistance, weaken its impact on reducing income inequality, and create perceptions of injustice in society. Therefore, an accurate data collection system, transparent verification mechanisms, and regular evaluation are needed to ensure that social assistance programs are truly able to improve welfare and reduce inequality sustainably. Several studies have shown that social assistance in Indonesia is effective in reducing poverty levels, but its impact on inequality is relatively small. Sumarto

et al. (2019) emphasized that targeting issues remain a major obstacle. Meanwhile, a World Bank study (2020) stated that social assistance functions more as a safety net than an instrument of economic mobility. A research gap is evident in the lack of analysis focusing on the dynamics of recipient households.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

Based on theoretical studies and previous research findings Figure 1 shows social assistance as a form of government intervention that impacts household welfare through a series of interrelated mechanisms. Social assistance acts as an initial stimulus that increases the ability of poor households to meet basic needs, particularly food consumption, education, and health care. This increased consumption then opens up opportunities for households to allocate resources more optimally, resulting in improved access to education and health care services. More adequate access to education and health care has the potential to improve the quality of human resources and household economic capacity in the long term, ultimately leading to more sustainable economic prosperity in the form of stable incomes and reduced poverty levels. However, these long-term impacts are not automatic and are highly dependent on the support of productive programs and integrated structural policies. Without long-term planning and strengthening of supporting interventions, the effectiveness of social assistance tends to be limited. Furthermore, the implementation of social assistance often faces various obstacles, such as incorrect targeting of recipients, relatively small aid amounts, and minimal integration with economic empowerment programs, resulting in less than optimal contributions to reducing inequality and improving long-term welfare

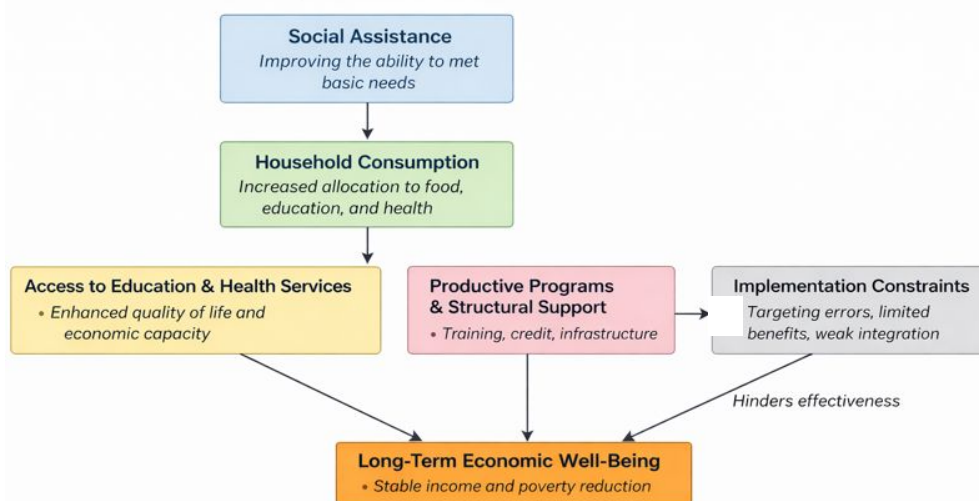


Figure 1. Linking Social Assistance, Household Consumption, and Economic Well-Being

3. Methods

This study uses a descriptive analytical approach based on secondary data to assess the effectiveness of social assistance in reducing household income inequality. This approach allows for the identification of income distribution patterns and comparisons between recipient and non-recipient households. Data used come from official sources, including the 2023–2025 National Socioeconomic Survey (Susenas), used to obtain data on household income, expenditure, poverty levels, and income inequality (Gini Ratio). The March 2025 Susenas was used as the primary sample for cross-sectional analysis, while 2023–2024 Susenas data was used to descriptively observe trends in household welfare changes. The 2025 Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS), updated as of June 30, 2025, was used to identify the status of social

assistance recipients and the types of assistance received by households, as well as to serve as the basis for matching recipient and non-recipient households. Statistics from the Indonesian People's Welfare Survey (BPS) for 2023–2025 were used as supporting data to validate the Susenas findings regarding poverty and income distribution. State Budget (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Negara/APBN*) data and the Social Assistance Fiscal Report (Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia, 2025) were used to analyze social assistance budget allocations and the fiscal policy context. World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2025) were used to compare Indonesia's macroeconomic indicators in an international context.

The study population consisted of all households covered by the 2023–2025 Susenas. The primary sample was drawn from the March 2025 Susenas (approximately 345,000 households) after data cleaning based on inclusion criteria, such as the head of the household being 18 years of age or older and the availability of income and assistance recipient status variables. The sampling design used provincial/district stratification with sampling weights. This study used household welfare indicators as the dependent variables, including per capita income, expenditure, and poverty status. The primary variables are social assistance recipient status and type of assistance, while control variables include household characteristics, location, and time period. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, Propensity Score Matching (PSM), multivariate regression, and Difference-in-Differences (DiD) if panel data were available, to obtain more causal impact estimates. Robustness tests were conducted to ensure the stability of the results. Missing data were handled using multiple imputation, while outliers were controlled through winsorizing, with the entire process recorded for transparency and replication.

4. Results

The analysis shows that social assistance plays a crucial role in maintaining stable food consumption among poor households. Households receiving social assistance tend to be better able to consistently meet basic needs than non-recipient households, particularly in the face of economic pressures and income fluctuations. This assistance helps reduce vulnerability to food shortages and increases feelings of security in meeting daily needs. However, the impact of this social assistance remains limited to the short term. The analysis also shows that social assistance has not been able to drive significant changes in non-food consumption patterns, such as education, health, or productive investment, resulting in relatively limited long-term improvements in well-being.

Table 1. Average Monthly Household Consumption (Rp)

Household Type	Food Consumption	Non-Food Consumption	Total Consumption
Social Assistance Recipients	1.500.000	800.000	2.300.000
Non-Recipients	1.200.000	900.000	2.100.000

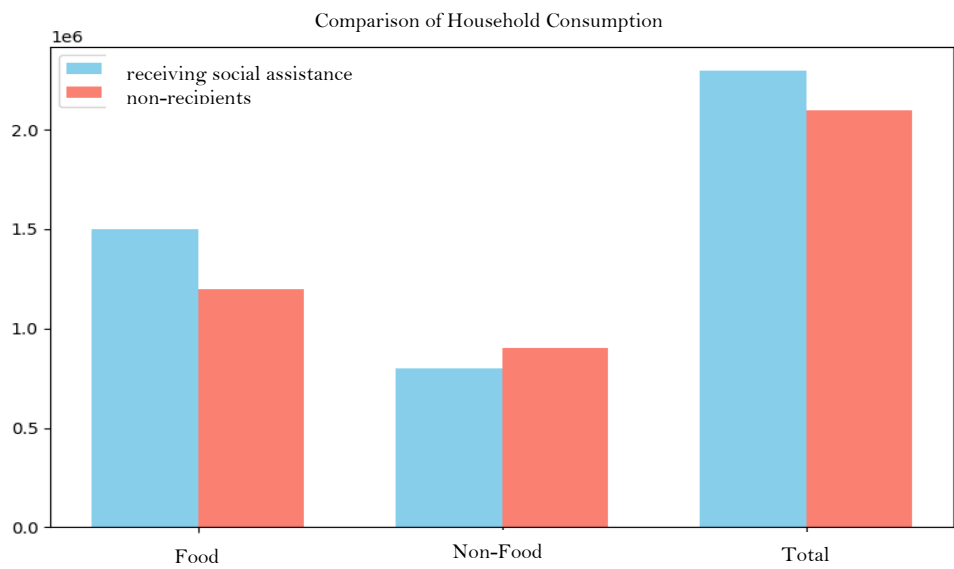


Figure 2. Comparison of Household Consumption of Recipients and Non-Recipients

Figure 2 shows the difference in average monthly food and non-food consumption between households receiving social assistance and non-recipients, as summarized in Table 1 dan Figure 2. The average food consumption of recipient households reached IDR 1,500,000 per month, higher than that of non-recipient households, which was IDR 1,200,000. This difference indicates that recipients' food consumption was approximately 25 percent higher, indicating that social assistance played a fairly effective role in maintaining the food security of poor households. With assistance, recipient households were relatively better able to meet basic food needs more stably. However, the difference in non-food consumption was not significant. In fact, non-recipient households recorded slightly higher non-food consumption than recipients. This finding suggests that social assistance remains consumptive and defensive, focusing on meeting basic needs, but not yet strongly enough to encourage changes in consumption allocation to more productive non-food sectors, such as further education, quality healthcare, or small business investment.

Conditional social assistance programs such as the PKH have been shown to have a positive impact on improving access to education and healthcare for poor households. The program's conditions encourage recipient families to be more proactive in ensuring their children attend school regularly and utilize basic healthcare services. Children from PKH recipient households tend to have higher school attendance rates than non-recipient households, potentially improving long-term educational attainment. Furthermore, mandatory regular visits to health facilities improve maternal and child health monitoring and contribute to overall improvements in the family's health status.

Table 2. Level of Education Participation and Health Access (%)

Household Type	Children's School Participation	Health Facility Visits
Social Assistance Recipients	95	88
Non-Recipients	85	75

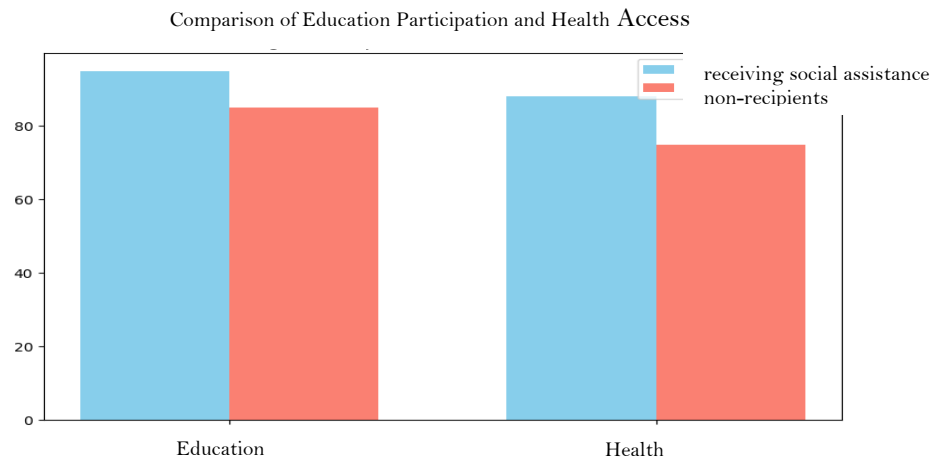


Figure 3. Education Participation and Health Access

Figure 3 compares the school enrollment rate and the frequency of visits to health facilities between households receiving and non-receiving social assistance. Table 2 and Figure 3 show that the school enrollment rate among households receiving social assistance reached 95 percent, approximately 10 percentage points higher than among non-receiving households. This finding indicates that conditional social assistance is able to encourage poor households to keep their children in school. Furthermore, access to health services also shows significant differences. The rate of visits to health facilities among recipient households was recorded at 88 percent, compared to only 75 percent among non-receiving households, a difference of approximately 13 percentage points. This difference indicates that social assistance plays a significant supporting role in increasing the utilization of basic health services. However, increased access to education and health does not necessarily automatically lead to improvements in the quality of educational outcomes and health status, or to increased household income in the long term. Therefore, the effectiveness of social assistance needs to be supported by complementary policies oriented towards improving service quality and economic independence.

The implementation of the social assistance program identified several obstacles that impact its effectiveness. First, mistargeting persists, with some aid actually being received by households that are not classified as poor, while eligible poor households are not fully reached. Second, the amount of aid provided is relatively limited, meaning it only covers basic needs in the short term and is insufficient to significantly improve welfare. Third, social assistance has not been optimally integrated with productive programs, thus failing to encourage increased income and long-term household economic independence. Social assistance is effective in alleviating short-term consumption, but is insufficient as an instrument to reduce long-term income inequality. Structural policy support, such as productive programs and improvements in the quality of education and health, is needed to strengthen its long-term impact.

5. Discussion

The study's findings indicate that social assistance plays a crucial role in maintaining consumption stability in poor households, particularly in meeting food needs. Households receiving social assistance tend to be more consistently able to meet basic needs than non-recipient households, particularly under conditions of economic stress and income uncertainty. This finding confirms the function of social assistance as a social protection instrument, acting as a buffer against the risks of

economic vulnerability and food security in poor households. This finding aligns with previous research by Li et al. (2024).

However, the impact of social assistance remains short-term and primarily focused on meeting basic needs. Consumption patterns among recipient households indicate that expenditure allocation remains concentrated on food, while productive non-food consumption has not seen a significant increase. This suggests that social assistance is not yet strong enough to encourage changes in consumption behavior toward long-term investments, such as further education, improved health, or productive economic activities. This is in line with research by Kara and Min (2024) and Rodrik and Stiglitz (2025). In other words, social assistance still functions defensively and has not yet fully become an instrument for welfare transformation.

Furthermore, conditional social assistance has been shown to contribute to improving access to education and healthcare for poor households. Conditions attached to the assistance program encourage recipient families to ensure their children remain in school and utilize healthcare services more regularly. Increased school enrollment and utilization of healthcare facilities indicate positive behavioral changes triggered by the design of the social assistance program. This finding aligns with the objective of conditional assistance, which focuses not only on income transfers but also on human capital formation.

However, increased access to education and healthcare services does not necessarily translate into improved education quality, improved health status, or increased household income in the long term. High school attendance rates do not guarantee improved learning outcomes or skills relevant to labor market needs. Similarly, increased visits to healthcare facilities do not necessarily reflect improved health outcomes if the quality of available services remains limited. Therefore, the impact of social assistance on improving long-term welfare remains relatively limited (Wolf et al., 2024).

In addition to limited long-term impacts, this study also identified several barriers to the implementation of social assistance. Mistargeting, limited assistance amounts, and weak integration with economic empowerment programs are factors that hinder the effectiveness of social assistance. Social assistance is effective in maintaining consumption and increasing access to basic services, but it is not yet optimal as an instrument for reducing income inequality. Therefore, complementary policies are needed that emphasize improving the quality of education and health, strengthening skills, and integrating social assistance with productive programs to ensure a more sustainable impact on the well-being of poor households.

6. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, social assistance plays a crucial role in maintaining the livelihoods of poor households, particularly by meeting basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare. Social assistance has proven effective in mitigating the impact of short-term economic shocks and serves as a social protection instrument that helps maintain stable consumption among poor households. However, the relationship between social assistance and reduced income inequality remains limited and has not demonstrated a strong long-term structural impact. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted as an indication of an empirical relationship, rather than as pure causal evidence, given the limitations of the data design and analytical methods used. The relatively small amount of assistance, its temporary and consumptive nature, targeting issues, and minimal integration with productive programs limit the potential of social assistance to promote economic mobility and sustainable household independence. A phased and integrated social assistance policy is recommended to increase the program's effectiveness in reducing income inequality. The process begins with identifying aid recipients, which aims to reduce errors of inclusion and exclusion. The next stage is improving targeting, so

that aid truly reaches groups in need. Furthermore, assistance is integrated with productive programs, such as skills training, access to capital, and community empowerment, so that it is not solely consumptive. The fourth stage emphasizes increasing the value and flexibility of assistance, tailored to household needs and inflationary conditions. Household-based monitoring and evaluation are then conducted to assess the immediate impact and gather recipient feedback. All these stages culminate in a holistic policy approach, ensuring that social assistance is more effective, sustainable, and able to reduce income inequality.

Based on the research findings, policy recommendations focus on increasing the effectiveness of social assistance through improved recipient targeting, integration of assistance with productive programs, adjustments to the value and flexibility of assistance, and strengthening household-based monitoring. Policy implementation includes recipient audits, linkages to training and business capital, and regular evaluations. However, social assistance needs to be supported by structural policies to ensure its impact is not limited to the short-term. Further research is recommended using long-term panel data to assess the income mobility and economic independence of recipients. A qualitative approach is needed to understand the experiences and social context of recipients. Furthermore, Big Data-based targeting evaluation is crucial for improving the accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness of social assistance policies.

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