

New UNICEF-Led Data Undermines Claims of Gaza Famine



A Palestinian child carries a little girl on his back as he walks past the rubble of destroyed buildings in the Jabalia camp for Palestinian refugees in the northern Gaza Strip on August 2, 2026. (Omar al-Qattaa/AFP via Getty Images)

A year ago, Gaza was officially declared famine-stricken. New, more rigorous data paints a dramatically different picture—and has triggered a debate over whether the original declaration was correct.

By [Olivia Reingold](#) Date: 08.24.26 — Israel

On July 22, a UNICEF-led team measuring hunger in Gaza uploaded a presentation containing its most comprehensive analysis since war broke out nearly three years ago.

The report, titled “Gaza Nutrition SMART Survey Result,” revealed a stark reversal from the declarations made almost exactly a year ago that a dire famine was ravaging the war-torn territory.

“Wasting,” the report said, using a term for extreme thinness, “is low across all domains, suggesting no widespread acute malnutrition at population level.”

At the rate of [0.5 percent](#), Gaza has one of the lowest rates of acute child malnutrition in the region, according to an analysis by *The Free Press* of data from the World Bank and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a UN-affiliated hunger-monitoring system. The researchers also concluded that about 12 percent of children in Gaza had stunting, or impaired growth and development that is the result of poor nutrition. That is less than half of the region’s 26 percent stunting rate, according to [the latest report](#) on child malnutrition by UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank.

“I thought it would be much higher, to be honest,” said Elena Naumova, a Tufts University professor of nutrition epidemiology and data science, about the stunting rate in Gaza.

The UNICEF-led team’s presentation also revealed that Gaza now faces a new challenge: [obesity and excess weight](#), which affect a combined 4 percent of children under the age of 5.

A researcher who has overseen teams collecting malnutrition data in the Horn of Africa remarked that she had “never seen” the emergence of obesity and excess weight in a place that was declared only a year earlier to be suffering from famine.

“We have people in Africa eating wild grasses just to stay alive,” she said. “There’s no obesity problem.”

The July analysis was even more valuable because for the first time since October 7, 2023, researchers relied on the gold standard for measuring malnutrition: weight-for-height z-scores, which compares a child’s weight and height with the norm for their peer group. Researchers said they had “[repeatedly failed](#)” to gather similar data in the past due to “escalating conflict,” forcing them to use a different type of measurement.

A year ago, the picture could hardly have looked more different. On August 22, 2025, the IPC declared a famine in one section of Gaza. More than half a million Palestinians were “facing [catastrophic conditions](#) characterized by starvation, destitution, and death,” the IPC said. It also warned that Gaza was in “a race against time,” and that the only way to prevent famine from spreading further was for an immediate ceasefire to take hold.

How did Gaza go from being officially classified as famine-stricken to having—in less than a year—one of the region’s lowest levels of severe child malnutrition? Humanitarian agencies have failed so far to answer that fundamental question, and one major organization is still fundraising on the claim that starvation rages on in Gaza.

The latest findings do not conclude that no one in Gaza went hungry, nor do they diminish the suffering endured by Palestinians in Gaza or ongoing health concerns. But the stark reversal documented in the July report demands a closer examination of how a famine was declared in the first place.

Mike Huckabee, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, told me that the reversal amounts to a “revelation” and “presents a different story than what had been told—outrageously—for the past almost three years.”

“It just shows what Israel has to confront every single day, which is utterly fake news that they are committing a genocide and trying to starve people,” he added.

Alex de Waal, a British anthropologist and one of the world’s foremost experts on famine, told me that none of the new data were “cause to question the accuracy” of the IPC’s previous famine declaration.

“Children can rebound very quickly from acute malnutrition,” he wrote in an email, “so with the food going into Gaza since the onset of the quasi-ceasefire, the low levels are unsurprising.” The low stunting rates were the “single most encouraging finding” from

the survey, he added, since they suggest that “among surviving children, the longer-term impact of the food crisis [is] not as severe as was feared.”

Given the media focus on the famine declaration, you might think that the latest data would be front-page news. Not so. The fact that Gaza has experienced a dramatic improvement has been hard to find in the mainstream press. Other than a few write-ups by Fox News and Israel-based news organizations, there has been hardly a peep. The headline of an Al Jazeera article warned recently: “Gaza’s children still struggling with hunger as [another famine](#) threatens.”

Columbia University marketing professor Ran Kivetz, who tracked shipments of food into Gaza for about 16 months starting in late October 2023, using data from the UN and the Israeli government, called the IPC’s declaration of famine a “complete politicization of science.”

“No matter your politics, at some point, facts need to matter,” he said.

Last year’s famine declaration by the IPC was only the fifth such declaration it had ever made—and the first outside Africa. And it caused an explosion of rage against Israel that had been building for more than a year, including accusations that Israel was using starvation as a weapon of war.

In April 2024, Samantha Power, director of the United States Agency for International Development for the Joe Biden administration, became the [first U.S. official](#) to declare that famine in Gaza had begun, even though the report she cited to Congress was a projection of possible outcomes, not a conclusive finding.

On the day of the famine declaration, UN Secretary-General António Guterres wrote on X: “Just when it seems there are no words left to describe [the living hell](#) in Gaza, a new one has been added: ‘famine.’ ” Blaming Israel, he added, “We cannot allow this situation to continue with impunity.” A week later, UK prime minister Keir Starmer said the country would recognize a Palestinian state unless Israel took “substantive steps to end the [appalling situation](#) in Gaza.” A UN commission concluded in September that Israel had “[committed genocide](#) against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip,” citing the imposition of “a total siege, including blocking humanitarian aid leading to starvation.”

In August 2025, [The Free Press reported](#) that more than a dozen of the most viral images of starvation in Gaza lacked the important context that the subjects of those photos had significant health problems, including cystic fibrosis and rickets.

The famine declaration also was controversial. Some [academic experts](#) and pro-Israel [advocacy groups](#) criticized the IPC’s methodology. Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [issued a report](#) accusing the UN-affiliated group of “shaping both their data and methodology to support” the conclusion of famine at all costs.

The criticisms focused on the IPC’s reliance on measuring mid-upper-arm circumference, rather than weight-for-height z-scores. IPC training materials described the arm circumference measurement as [an emergency method](#) that should “only be used in the absence” of weight-for-height measurements.

By the time of the famine declaration, the IPC had also updated a “[famine fact sheet](#)” to say that its criteria for malnourishment could be met if 15 percent of children had arm

measurements below a certain threshold, instead of 30 percent based on weight and height. The reason for the difference is because weight-for-height measurements “generally” identify [twice as many cases](#) of acute malnutrition as arm circumference measurements do, the IPC said in an October 2025 report.

But the presentation published this July said that the UNICEF-led team came to the opposite conclusion: Its latest survey said that 0.5 percent of children were considered acutely malnourished based on weight-for-height measurements—and 1.3 percent were based on arm circumference. In other words, the arm measurements identified more than twice as many cases, not half as many.

Yannay Spitzer, an economist in Boston and former professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told me the survey results show that the IPC’s famine declaration rested on an erroneous assumption that undermines its validity. “It’s just another example of how flawed the methodology was to begin with,” Spitzer said. “It was the last nail in the coffin.”

The IPC has [defended its use](#) of the arm circumference measurement as a “standard method” dating back to 2019, saying that it also was used to measure hunger and malnutrition in South Sudan in 2020 and Sudan in 2024. The IPC also said that the numbers likely underestimated the “[severity of the nutritional situation](#)” in Gaza, since the children enrolled in these programs were receiving nutritional support. In a [later defense](#) of its findings, the IPC said that other data had come from hospital settings.

Spitzer said that neither of the situations in South Sudan and Sudan is an exact precedent for Gaza. The IPC’s famine declaration in Sudan was based on [23 percent](#) of children having arm measurements below a certain threshold, far higher than the 15 percent trigger used in Gaza. In South Sudan, the [IPC said](#) that famine was “likely” but did not declare one.

“The fact that this standard was used before does not make it any more grounded in science,” Spitzer said. The IPC did not respond to requests for comment on how it reconciles the July report with its past famine declaration in Gaza.

Critics also took issue with where the arm measurements had been taken. In the August 2025 report declaring famine in Gaza, the IPC said that [much of the data](#) was gathered from children enrolled in a program to prevent malnutrition. The decision to make generalizations based on that data was “not best practice,” according to the malnutrition expert I spoke to.

“If they’re going to a health facility, it could be because they’re sick or already malnourished or something,” she said. “You wouldn’t choose that data to give you a representative sample of the population.”

The same August 2025 report said that famine “is projected to spread across the entire [Gaza] Strip in the coming weeks.” Any improvement in access to aid “should be recognized as [a success](#),” the IPC said, but it also warned that “small or short-lived gains” would not “alleviate the depth of suffering and may only increase the risk of a rapid collapse when conditions worsen again.”

The worst fears did not come true. In a report covering the period from October 16 to November 30, 2025—shortly after Israel and Hamas signed a [ceasefire agreement](#)—the IPC said parts of Gaza still faced [acute malnutrition](#) but that conditions had improved due to “both humanitarian and commercial food deliveries.”

So where does that leave the famine declaration?

When I asked Kurtis Cooper, head of media at UNICEF, to explain the sharply different conclusions reached by the IPC in the span of less than a year, he said that both findings were accurate. “Famine was confirmed then, and acute malnutrition among children has fallen since,” Cooper told me in an email.

He added that the new data showing low levels of malnutrition “reflects improvements in conditions rather than evidence that the assistance or the earlier famine classification was unwarranted.”

In comparison, nearly a decade after the IPC first declared a famine in South Sudan, more than [2.5 million people](#)—a number larger than the entire population of Gaza—are facing “large food gaps and very high levels of acute malnutrition,” according to the IPC’s [latest report](#). Parts of Sudan have stunting levels [close to 20 percent](#), according to another [UNICEF-led team](#).

But despite the improvements shown in the July report, Al Jazeera [warned two weeks ago](#) that the “population could be plunged into famine again,” citing high food prices and scarcity of healthy foods. And UNICEF USA published a [plea for donations](#) that said “children continue to face acute malnutrition” in Gaza. Cooper said the fundraising appeal doesn’t contradict IPC’s latest nutrition measurements because it doesn’t “claim that no child in Gaza is acutely malnourished.”

But there was one thing that Cooper couldn’t explain when I first contacted him. When I tried to click on the Google Drive link hosting the July 22 slide presentation, I received this response: “You need access.” And when I checked the IPC home page, I noticed that Google Drive links to folders containing recent presentations and meeting minutes were also gone. The files went offline last week, about five days after reports [began surfacing](#) about [how much had changed](#) in the latest IPC report from the one last August.

The access was restored about an hour after I asked Cooper, another top media official at UNICEF, and an IPC member about the files. According to the file history of the July 22 presentation, the files were deleted early Wednesday morning—and then restored about 11 hours later. The IPC website was also restored to show the links to folders with presentations and meeting minutes, including data leading to the conclusion that the rate of acute malnutrition in Gaza had fallen sharply. Cooper told me that the access problems and file removals were “an inadvertent error.”

Mark Zlochin, a data analyst who was a consultant to the Israeli government on how to respond to last year’s famine declaration by the IPC, said that the disappearing, then reappearing data was a new low—but no surprise.

“The whole system is built on nobody checking anything,” he said, adding that it sometimes felt like he was the only one reading the IPC’s reports.

To Zlochin, the temporary deletion of files seemed like an admission of sorts about the data showing a low rate of acute child malnutrition, even though no one would say so.

“It’s a very strong indication that they realize how much the whole thing is hurting them,” Zlochin said.



Additional reporting by Noah Bernstein.



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