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Public Perception of Food Poisoning Reports within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program

Deva Anggreani Ludina, Nibrosu Rohid, Andi Surya
Universitas PGRI Ronggolawe Tuban
Jl. Manunggal No 61 Tuban, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
devaanggreaniludina@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze public perception regarding media coverage of food poisoning cases within the "Free Nutritious Meal" program and its impact on risk perception, trust levels, and public acceptance. Food poisoning issues widely reported across mass media and social media platforms have the potential to shape public views on food safety and the quality of program management.

Adopting a quantitative approach with an explanative survey method, data were collected through questionnaires distributed to respondents exposed to related news coverage. Data analysis utilized descriptive statistics and linear regression to examine the relationships between news exposure, risk perception, public trust, and program acceptance. The results indicate that the intensity of news exposure significantly influences the formation of risk perception. Frequent access to information regarding poisoning cases leads to higher levels of concern regarding food safety. Increased risk perception is correlated with a decline in public trust, particularly when media reports emphasize negligence. However, individuals with high pre-existing trust in the government tend to remain supportive of the program, viewing the nutritional benefits as outweighing the reported risks. The findings also reveal that emotional factors and health issues involving children amplify risk perceptions. The media plays a vital role in constructing social reality and influencing the program's image. This study concludes that negative reporting affects not only safety perceptions but also policy legitimacy. Consequently, transparent, responsive, and evidence-based risk communication strategies are essential to maintain public trust and ensure the sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meal program.

Keywords: *public perception; media coverage; public trust; Free Nutritious Meal program.*

INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program constitutes a strategic public policy designed to enhance community nutritional quality, strengthen food security, and support stunting prevention efforts, particularly among school-aged children. As a large-scale food distribution initiative, the MBG program demands rigorous food safety guarantees, stringent quality oversight, and transparent management. The success of this program is determined not only by technical implementation but also by the level of public trust and institutional acceptance.

In this context, media reports regarding food poisoning incidents linked to the MBG program emerge as a highly sensitive issue, as they directly intersect with public health and safety. Information concerning health incidents possesses significant potential to shape public opinion and influence attitudes toward public policy. Social reality, as perceived by the public, is often derived not from direct experience but is constructed through information consumed via mass media (Muniruddin et al., 2024; Prabowo & Irwansyah, 2018; Sampurna et al., 2024). Media functions not merely as a conveyor of facts but as an agent of meaning-making through issue selection, emphasis, and information framing (Ananda et al., 2019; Listiorini et al., 2019; Yulianti & Jatimurti, 2019). Through agenda-setting mechanisms, the media holds the power to determine which issues are deemed urgent by the public, thereby influencing how society evaluates the safety, quality, and reliability of social policies (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Slovic, 2016).

Health risk communication studies indicate that information pertaining to hazards, threats, and health incidents tends to garner high engagement and trigger emotional public responses. Coverage of food poisoning cases has the potential to reinforce risk perception, heighten public anxiety, and instill doubt regarding government-provided food management systems. Risk perception is influenced not solely by objective hazard levels but also by the delivery method, reporting intensity, and the level of trust in the institutions involved. Repeated information emphasizing negative impacts can enlarge perceived threats through the social amplification of risk, wherein media and social interactions intensify the significance of a risk in the public eye (Covello, 2003; Frewer et al., 1998; Kaspersen et al., 1988).

Furthermore, prior research affirms that media framing plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion toward government policy. Reporting that emphasizes negligence, systemic failure, or adverse outcomes tends to erode public trust in institutions, whereas balanced and informative reporting can maintain policy legitimacy (Rohid et al., 2025; Susilo et al., 2025). Crisis communication studies demonstrate that public perception is often formed by initial information and subsequently reinforced by repetitive narratives. This becomes increasingly significant in food distribution contexts, as health issues carry a profound psychological impact. Consumer behavior research also suggests that negative information regarding food safety is more memorable and carries greater weight than positive information, thereby affecting public attitudes, acceptance, and consumption decisions (Grunig, 1993; Renn, 2017; Wansink & Kim, 2005).

While extensive studies exist on risk perception and food safety, most prior research focuses on commercial products, the food industry, or the hospitality sector. Risk communication research is also frequently directed toward large-scale health crises, such as disease outbreaks or industrial food contamination. Studies specifically linking media coverage to public perception of government food assistance programs remain relatively limited. The integration of risk perception analysis, public trust, and media framing within the context of evolving social policies has not been deeply explored. This represents a significant research gap in understanding how reports of food poisoning cases affect public evaluation of program quality, safety standards, and government accountability (Hallahan, 1993; Luhmann & Cross, 2000; Sandman, 1993).

Accordingly, the novelty of this research lies in its analytical focus on public perception toward food poisoning reports specifically within the MBG Program as an emerging social policy. This study integrates perspectives from mass communication, risk communication, and public policy studies to understand how the public interprets media-disseminated information (Susi Nurdiningsih et al., 2024; Zulaikha et al., 2024). The analysis is directed not only toward health risk perception but also its impact on public trust, policy legitimacy, and program acceptance. By positioning the public as active actors in the meaning-making process, this research aims to offer a theoretical contribution to public policy communication and a practical contribution to formulating effective communication strategies for sensitive health issues (Hallahan, 1999; Renn, 2017; Slovic, 2016).

The research problem focuses on a deep understanding of how public perception is formed in response to media coverage of food poisoning cases in the MBG program. This study aims to identify how reporting intensity, informational tone, and media framing influence public assessments of food safety. Additionally, it examines factors influencing risk perception, such as personal experience, institutional trust, and media exposure. Subsequent analysis focuses on the impact of these perceptions on public attitudes, acceptance levels, and support for program sustainability. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as media-driven public perception can directly implicate the implementation effectiveness of social policies in health and nutrition (Ajzen, 1991; Denis, 2011; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to provide an in-depth exploration of public perception in Tuban Regency regarding reports of food poisoning cases within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program. A qualitative approach was selected because public perception is a subjective phenomenon formed through the processes of meaning-making, interpretation, and individual experience in consuming media information; thus, it cannot be fully elucidated through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Moleong, 2021).

Table 1. List of Research Informants

Informant Code	Gender	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Frequently Accessed Media	Remarks
I1	Male	19	High School	Student	Social media, news portals	Read MBG poisoning news
I2	Female	22	Associate (D3)	Student	Social media	Followed MBG issues digitally
I3	Male	27	Bachelor (S1)	Private Employee	News portals, TV	Watched poisoning reports
I4	Female	31	Bachelor (S1)	Teacher	TV, news portals	Monitored food safety issues
I5	Male	35	High School	Entrepreneur	Social media	Exposed via WhatsApp
I6	Female	38	Bachelor (S1)	Housewife	TV	Followed national news
I7	Male	41	High School	Farmer	TV	Aware of MBG via TV news
I8	Female	29	Master (S2)	Civil Servant	News portals	Understands MBG policy
I9	Male	45	High School	Trader	TV	Followed poisoning issues
I10	Female	34	Bachelor (S1)	Private Employee	Social media, news portals	Read public comments
I11	Male	24	Bachelor (S1)	Student	Social media	Exposed to viral news
I12	Female	28	Associate (D3)	Health Worker	News portals	Focused on food safety
I13	Male	50	High School	Laborer	TV	Heard news from TV broadcasts
I14	Female	43	Bachelor (S1)	Teacher	TV, news portals	Monitored MBG issues
I15	Male	36	Bachelor (S1)	Entrepreneur	Social media	Active in social media discussions
I16	Female	21	High School	Student	Social media	Aware of MBG via Instagram
I17	Male	32	Associate (D3)	Technician	News portals	Followed online news
I18	Female	47	High School	Trader	TV	Exposed to national news
I19	Male	26	Bachelor (S1)	Freelancer	Social media	Followed MBG issues digitally
I20	Female	39	Bachelor (S1)	Housewife	TV, social media	Focused on family health

(Source: Processed Data)

The research was conducted in Tuban Regency, chosen for its diverse social characteristics and the high intensity of mass and digital media consumption among its residents. The study involved 20 informants, selected through purposive sampling. This technique was utilized because not all community members possess the relevant experience or knowledge aligned with the research focus (W. Lawrence, 2014). The criteria for informants included: (1) residency in Tuban Regency, (2) a minimum age of

17 years, (3) prior exposure to news reports (print, broadcast, or digital) regarding MBG-related food poisoning cases, and (4) a basic understanding of the MBG Program. The number of informants was determined based on the principles of data adequacy and depth rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The primary data collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews were designed to explore informants' experiences in accessing food poisoning news, their risk perceptions regarding food safety, their level of trust in the government as the program organizer, and their overall acceptance of the MBG Program. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to obtain rich data while maintaining the flexibility to adapt questions to the specific context of the informant's experience (Moleong, 2021; Sugiyono, 2016). In addition to interviews, this study utilized documentary studies, including mass media reports and relevant digital media content, to triangulate and supplement field data (See Table 1).

To maintain confidentiality and adhere to research ethics, informant identities are represented by codes (I1-I20). These codes are used consistently when presenting interview excerpts in the results and discussion sections. Presenting these characteristics demonstrates the socio-demographic diversity that informs the construction of perceptions regarding food poisoning cases.

Data analysis followed a qualitative descriptive method, adhering to the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into primary themes representing patterns of public perception. Analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection to ensure a robust link between empirical data and the research focus (Miles et al., 2014). Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, comparing information across informants and cross-referencing it with media documentation. This step was taken to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings while minimizing researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Moleong, 2021).

Through this qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how the people of Tuban Regency interpret food poisoning reports within the MBG Program, and how these perceptions shape public acceptance and trust in government initiatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Exposure to news regarding food poisoning incidents within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program fundamentally shapes how the community in Tuban Regency interprets food safety and program management quality. Informants indicated that media information plays a primary role in constructing their perceptions, particularly as most have no direct experience with such incidents. Consequently, the public's perceived reality is constructed more through media narratives than through empirical field facts.

Informants noted that increased frequency of access to food poisoning news correlates with heightened anxiety. This concern evolves through the repetition of information highlighting health impacts and the number of victims. Informants

interpreted the intensity of reporting as an indicator that the problem is systemic and carries a high potential for recurrence.

"I didn't experience it directly, but because the news appears so often, I start to feel afraid myself. It feels as if such an incident could happen anywhere." (I3)

This statement demonstrates that risk perception is formed not through personal experience but through the accumulation of repetitive information. The media functions as the primary source of meaning-making, disrupting the public's sense of security regarding the program even when the reported incidents are localized or limited in scope.

Beyond intensity, the manner of presentation significantly influences public perception. Informants suggested that reports emphasizing negligence, systemic failure, or lack of oversight reinforce negative evaluations of the program. Such narratives lead the public to interpret poisoning cases as an overall failure of governance.

"If the news mentions negligence, I automatically think that the management is inherently poor." (I4)

This perspective illustrates that media framing is pivotal in directing public judgment. Informants do not merely consume information passively; they interpret the latent messages regarding institutional responsibility and management quality.

Media exposure also triggers profound emotional responses. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and suspicion emerge particularly when reports utilize visual or narrative depictions of victims. Informants admitted that food poisoning is a deeply personal issue because it relates directly to the health of themselves and their families.

"Once I see the victims, especially children, I immediately think of my own children at home." (I10)

These emotional responses solidify risk perception and make the information more salient. Emotion serves as a critical factor in how the public evaluates program safety, often outweighing technical data or incomplete official explanations.

The escalation of risk perception directly impacts public trust in the government as the program organizer. Informants stated that reported poisoning cases instill doubt regarding the government's ability to guarantee food safety. This skepticism grows when the public perceives the institutional response as slow or lacking transparency.

"If poisoning occurs, it means oversight is lacking. That makes me doubt the entire management." (I15)

However, trust is not entirely lost in all cases. Some informants noted that trust can be maintained if the government demonstrates transparency and clear corrective actions.

"I still have trust if the government is responsive and willing to make improvements." (I12)

These findings suggest that institutional trust is dynamic and highly sensitive to crisis management strategies. Clarity of information and tangible action are essential for maintaining public legitimacy.

The level of trust subsequently dictates the degree of public acceptance of the MBG Program. Informants with high levels of trust tend to continue supporting the program, viewing poisoning cases as rectifiable technical obstacles.

"The program is actually good, so I still support it; the system just needs to be fixed." (I2)

Conversely, informants with low trust levels exhibit a more critical and skeptical stance, viewing poisoning as an indicator of a fundamentally weak system.

"Once such an incident occurs, I become hesitant to participate in the program." (I7)

Furthermore, the social environment contributes to the amplification of risk. Informants revealed that stories from family, friends, or neighbors are often perceived as more credible than official information, making the threat feel more localized and "real."

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

No	Primary Theme	Sub-theme	Description of Findings	Informant Code
1	The Role of Media in Perception Construction	Media as the primary source of information	The community constructs their understanding of food safety and program quality primarily through media reports due to a lack of direct experience with poisoning cases.	I3, I4
2	Reporting Intensity	News repetition and risk perception	Repeated exposure to news increases public anxiety and fosters the perception that poisoning risks are likely to recur, even if incidents are localized.	I3
3	Media Framing	Emphasis on negligence and systemic failure	Reporting that highlights negligence, management errors, or weak oversight reinforces negative public evaluations of the program.	I4
4	Public Response	Emotional Fear and anxiety	Information featuring victims—especially children—triggers strong emotional responses and deepens the perceived risk regarding food safety.	I10
5	Health Risk Perception	Threats to family safety	Poisoning incidents are interpreted as personal threats because they directly intersect with the health of individuals and their families.	I10
6	Trust in Government	Doubts regarding program management	Heightened risk perception fosters doubt regarding the government's capacity to guarantee food safety and quality.	I15
7	Dynamics of Trust	Transparency and crisis response	Public trust can be maintained if the government is perceived as transparent, responsive, and demonstrates clear corrective measures.	I12
8	Program Acceptance	Community support	Informants with high levels of trust continue to support the program, viewing poisoning cases as rectifiable technical obstacles.	I2
9	Skeptical Attitudes	Hesitancy and declining participation	Informants with low trust tend to be skeptical and hesitant to participate in the program due to perceived systemic management weaknesses.	I7
10	Social Influence	Environmental Narratives from close associates	Information from family, friends, and the social environment is perceived as more "real" and reinforces risk perception more than official information.	I17
11	Program Legitimacy	Image and sustainability	Continuous negative reporting has the potential to erode trust, participation, and the overall legitimacy of the Free Nutritious Meal Program.	I20

Source: Researcher (2025)

"Hearing a story directly from someone nearby feels more real than just reading the news." (I17)

In summary, reports of food poisoning do not merely affect perceptions of food safety; they shape the overall image and legitimacy of the MBG Program. Persistent negative perception has the potential to erode public participation. Therefore, strategic communication management is vital for program sustainability.

"If the news remains negative, people will become reluctant and doubtful about joining the program." (I20)

These findings (Table 2) highlight that public perception is a complex process involving media exposure, emotional responses, social interaction, and institutional trust. The media does not just convey facts; it constructs the lens through which the public understands and evaluates social policy amidst health-related crises.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that media coverage of food poisoning incidents within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program plays a significant role in shaping how the public interprets food safety, management quality, and institutional trust. Information disseminated by the media does not merely serve as a source of knowledge; it acts as the primary reference point for constructing an understanding of the health risks inherent in the program. This suggests that the public's perceived social reality is not derived from direct experience but is largely constructed through mediated information exposure.

Repeated exposure to reports of poisoning incidents tends to cultivate a robust perception of risk, particularly when the media emphasizes negative aspects such as victim counts, health impacts, or alleged management negligence. The intensity and frequency of such reporting compel the public to prioritize food poisoning as the primary metric for evaluating the success of the MBG program. This aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory, which posits that media intensity determines which issues the public deems salient (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Denis, 2011; W. Lawrence, 2014). Furthermore, the study reveals that informants frequently exposed to these reports exhibit higher levels of anxiety. Continuous repetition creates the impression that the risk of poisoning is highly probable, even if the actual incidents are localized. This phenomenon is consistent with the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), which explains how media processes can magnify the perceived threat of a hazard through the dissemination and reiteration of information (Kasperson et al., 1988; Renn, 2017; Slovic, 2016).

The way media frames information is critical in shaping public interpretation. Reporting that underscores negligence, systemic failures, or oversight deficits tends to escalate negative evaluations of the MBG program. Conversely, coverage that includes official clarifications, responsive measures, and government improvement efforts tends to mitigate public concern. This demonstrates that media framing influences not only what the public thinks about but also how they attribute causality, responsibility, and solutions (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999).

Health information is uniquely sensitive as it relates directly to the safety of individuals and families. When media employs dramatic narratives or vivid visuals of health impacts, risk perception is intensified. In the context of risk communication, individuals typically assign greater weight to information containing threats than to neutral or positive data (Covello, 2003; Slovic, 2016).

A strong correlation exists between risk perception and public trust in the government. Heightened perception of food poisoning risks directly erodes the perceived credibility and competence of government institutions. Informants who perceive high risk tend to doubt oversight quality and food safety standards. Trust, in this context, is influenced not only by the incident itself but also by the perceived transparency and accountability of the government's response (Wong & Jensen, 2020). Trust serves as a critical factor for policy success, influencing public acceptance and support. When trust declines, the public becomes increasingly skeptical of official information. However, findings show that informants with high initial trust levels tend to remain supportive of the MBG program despite negative news. In this case, trust functions as a buffer, allowing individuals to view poisoning incidents as situational anomalies that can be rectified through system evaluation rather than as a fundamental failure of the policy (Ajzen, 1991; Siegrist, 2000).

Theoretically, this study reinforces the integration of Agenda Setting, Framing, and the Social Amplification of Risk in explaining public perception of health issues. While Agenda Setting explains why poisoning becomes a dominant concern, Framing explains how the presentation of the news shapes the interpretation of responsibility, and SARF explains how repetition magnifies the perceived threat. The integration of these perspectives reveals that perception is a multi-layered process involving media exposure, individual interpretation, social experience, and institutional trust. For the MBG program, media coverage of food poisoning is a decisive factor affecting program image, policy legitimacy, and public adoption (Renn, 2017; Slovic, 2016).

Public communication management is a strategic necessity for program sustainability. Transparent, rapid, and evidence-based communication strategies are essential to reduce risk perception and maintain trust. The public is more receptive when the government offers open explanations regarding causes, mitigation steps, and future prevention efforts. Effective risk communication does not merely alleviate anxiety; it strengthens policy legitimacy and fosters long-term public support for social programs (Coombs, 2007; Covello, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that media coverage of food poisoning incidents within the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program exerts a significant influence on public interpretations of food safety, program management quality, and institutional trust in the government. The findings indicate that repetitive information exposure—particularly reports highlighting negative outcomes such as victim counts, incident frequency, and alleged management negligence—constructs a robust perception of risk among the public. This perception is not derived primarily from direct experience

but is largely constructed through mass media consumption. This reinforces the role of agenda-setting in determining the salience of public issues, especially within the context of health-related social policies.

Furthermore, the results suggest that the intensity and framing of media information contribute substantially to either the amplification or reduction of risk perception. Reporting that emphasizes negligence, systemic failure, or oversight deficits tends to heighten public anxiety and solidify negative evaluations of the program. Conversely, coverage that includes official clarifications, causal explanations, and proactive mitigation steps can effectively lower public concern. This underscores that media framing is pivotal in shaping public interpretation regarding causality, institutional responsibility, and the government's capacity for health risk management. A critical link was also established between risk perception and public trust. An escalation in the perceived risk of food poisoning directly correlates with a decline in public confidence regarding the government's ability to guarantee food quality and safety. However, a high level of institutional trust acts as a cognitive buffer, mitigating the negative impacts of risk perception. Informants with high trust levels tend to view poisoning incidents as transient, rectifiable occurrences rather than fundamental systemic failures. In contrast, those with low trust are more prone to skepticism, viewing such incidents as evidence of poor governance and demonstrating a higher propensity to withdraw support for the program.

Finally, qualitative findings highlight that emotional factors—specifically fear concerning the safety of children—render information about food poisoning more salient and influential than statistical data or technical explanations. This risk perception is further intensified through social interactions and localized narratives, which are often perceived as more credible than official government communiqués. This confirms that public perception is a multi-faceted process involving mediated exposure, individual interpretation, social dynamics, and institutional trust.

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