



The Framing of Food Poverty/Insecurity and Rhetorics of Social Inclusion/Exclusion in the German Newspaper Discourse (2018–2024)

Tina Bartelmeß¹ · Anna Beirle¹

Received: 25 July 2025 / Accepted: 22 December 2025
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Abstract

This article examines how food poverty and insecurity have been framed in German newspaper discourse from 2018 to 2024, and how these representations construct notions of social inclusion and exclusion within public discourse. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates deductive and inductive qualitative analysis, Foucauldian discourse theory, and hierarchical cluster analysis, the study identifies three dominant media frames: Structural Injustice and Market Failure, which emphasizes systemic inequality; Political Failure and Social Neglect, which foregrounds state inaction while sometimes perpetuating stigmatization; and Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility, which mobilizes moral concern but often depoliticizes the issue. The analysis reveals that individuals affected by food poverty are largely absent from or passively portrayed within these narratives, including during periods of heightened media attention such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that prevailing media framings constrain the discursive space for recognizing structural causes of poverty and inhibit inclusive policymaking. The article argues for a shift toward participatory, rights-based communication strategies that foreground lived experiences and challenge exclusionary rhetorical norms, contributing to broader discussions on media responsibility and social justice in public discourse.

Keywords Food poverty · Food insecurity · Framing · Germany · Media discourse · Rhetorics · Social inclusion · Social exclusion

✉ Tina Bartelmeß
tina.bartelmess@uni-bayreuth.de

Anna Beirle
anna.beirle@web.de

¹ Faculty of Life Sciences: Food, Nutrition and Health, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

Introduction

The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and rising inflation has intensified food poverty in high-income countries, including Germany. Food poverty – characterized by restricted access to adequate nutrition and significant health disparities – has become a pressing public health issue, exacerbating social inequalities and highlighting the urgent need for political intervention (Grabka and Schupp 2022; Bartelmeß et al. 2024; Simmet et al. 2024).

Defined as “insufficient economic access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet” (O’Connor et al. 2016), food poverty encompasses multiple dimensions: economic access, food quantity and quality, duration, and social factors. A closely related concept, food insecurity, refers to a situation in which people “lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2025a). While food insecurity is traditionally framed within the domains of availability, access, utilization, and stability (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition 2020), food poverty extends beyond these measures, incorporating social aspects as fundamental components. The boundaries between these two concepts often blur, reflecting the intertwined economic and relational dimensions of poverty (Carter et al. 2014; Moncada et al. 2022).

Recent data underscore the severity of food poverty/insecurity in Germany. In 2022, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 4.0% of Germany’s population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2025b). However, this figure, which is based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), probably underestimates the problem, as it does not fully take into account the sociocultural disadvantages caused by inadequate nutritional opportunities (Sumsion et al. 2023). The European Union Survey on Living and Income Conditions (EU-SILC) further illustrates the growing risk of poverty and social exclusion, with 21.3% of Germany’s population – over 17.7 million people – facing these conditions in 2023 (Eurostat 2025b). Among vulnerable groups, children (23.9%) and young adults aged 18–25 (25.0%) were at the highest risk. Additionally, 13.3% of the population could not afford a protein-rich meal every other day, and 9.8% were unable to share meals with family or friends at least once a month (Eurostat 2025a). These figures suggest that food poverty is not only a matter of economic hardship but also one of social marginalization, yet it remains an underexplored and inadequately measured phenomenon in Germany.

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and political responses to food poverty. As Gruber (2011) argues, the framing of social issues directly influences how they are understood and addressed. Research on media narratives in Italy has shown that reductionist portrayals of food poverty can lead to inadequate policy solutions (Arcuri 2019). Similarly, media coverage can either amplify the urgency of food poverty – prompting public awareness and policy action – or contribute to its marginalization through stigmatizing and dehumanizing narratives (Mahmood et al. 2023; Do Nascimento et al. 2024). Stereotypes that depict individuals experiencing food poverty as solely responsible for their circumstances reinforce social exclusion and reduce empathy, thereby diminishing support for systemic interventions (Gracia-Arnaiz et al. 2021, 2022; Mejia et al. 2022).

Conversely, inclusive and empathetic media narratives can humanize those affected and foster more compassionate policy responses (Kerins et al. 2023; Kerrigan et al. 2024; Miller et al. 2021).

Critical and cultural media studies emphasize that media power is diffuse, relational, and embedded in wider socio-political and institutional contexts. Rather than directly determining public opinion, media shape the discursive conditions under which certain interpretations become thinkable or legitimate (Couldry and Hepp 2017). From a Foucauldian perspective, media power operates through the production of knowledge, categories, and visibility regimes that structure how poverty can be spoken about and acted upon (Foucault 2002). At the same time, the rise of digital and social media complicates traditional hierarchies by creating new arenas for contestation and voice (Christensen 2024), even as legacy news media continue to hold agenda-setting authority in hybrid media systems (Langer and Gruber 2021). Acknowledging these dynamics highlights why newspaper discourses remain influential and why examining their framing practices is vital.

Given the media's influence, it is essential to examine how food poverty and food insecurity are framed in public discourse. This study investigates the frames constructed in German media to portray food poverty, with a particular focus on how social inclusion and exclusion are rhetorically expressed. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How is food poverty framed in German newspaper articles?
- (2) How are social inclusion and exclusion rhetorically expressed within these frames?

By analysing news media articles from March 2018 to 2024, this study aims to uncover the discursive strategies shaping public attitudes and policy responses to food poverty in Germany before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As agenda-setting research shows, news media play a key role in defining which issues are perceived as socially urgent and in shaping the interpretive frameworks available to policymakers. Frames circulating in mainstream media often inform parliamentary debates, influence problem definitions in policy documents, and structure the legitimacy of proposed interventions (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Langer and Gruber 2021). Understanding these representations is crucial for developing more effective and inclusive policy interventions that address both the economic and social dimensions of food poverty. Clarifying this link strengthens the relevance of analysing media content as a site where policy challenges are symbolically constructed and contested.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Framing theory explains how media influence public understanding of social issues by emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying others, shaping how problems are defined, interpreted, and addressed (van Hulst and Yanow 2016; Entman 1993). In the context of food poverty/insecurity, media narratives can either highlight systemic causes or reinforce individual responsibility, which influences both public discourse and policy approaches. Understanding these framing mechanisms is crucial for media advocacy, as reframing has

been key to driving policy changes, as shown in areas like tobacco control or HIV/AIDS prevention (Rushton 2012; Dorfman and Krasnow 2014; Krishnan 2025).

A growing body of research examines how food insecurity and poverty are framed in different national contexts. Gruber (2011) analysed U.S. media, showing that while food insecurity was linked to community action, it was rarely connected to the broader food system. Wakefield et al. (2015) explored Canadian policy documents and media reports, finding that while the government acknowledges food security issues, it frames them within the context of agricultural abundance, which excludes marginalized groups, especially Indigenous populations. Tikka (2019) studied Finnish media and noted a shift in framing food aid as part of environmental sustainability, potentially depoliticizing poverty. Arcuri (2019) found that framing charitable food redistribution in Italy obscures alternative policy solutions. Balanuta (2022) identified the economic risk frames dominant in European media, particularly in response to the Ukraine conflict, while Champagne et al. (2023) showed how UK media frame food and fuel poverty as an ethical dilemma with limited focus on public health. Similarly, Do Nascimento et al. (2024) found U.S. media coverage of food assistance programs during COVID-19 largely ignored racial and health equity, limiting understanding of systemic inequities. Kerins et al. (2023) and Kerrigan et al. (2024) emphasized the need for a more nuanced media discourse on food poverty, as current frames often focus on charitable and short-term food aid, neglecting structural causes. These findings highlight the importance of framing in shaping public understanding of food poverty. At the same time, studies on media representations of poverty more broadly show that coverage of the 'poor' has long relied on individualized and moralizing narratives that obscure class relations and structural inequalities (Schifferes and Knowles 2022). Embedding food poverty within this wider literature underscores how media framings often reproduce classed assumptions, reinforcing the social boundary between the respectable majority and those constructed as 'failed' or 'undeserving' (Grisold and Theine 2017). This connection highlights the broader societal relevance of food poverty discourse as part of a persistent class-based politics of representation (Kurtuluş and Kandiyali 2024).

Foucault's discourse theory provides a framework for understanding how power dynamics shape societal perceptions of food poverty/insecurity and contribute to the stigmatization of those affected. Media representations and public discourse frequently construct narratives that 'other' individuals experiencing poverty by ascribing negative traits such as helplessness, laziness, and moral deficiencies (Chauhan and Foster 2014; Bullock et al. 2001). This discursive process reinforces a circular logic in which these traits are framed as both the cause and consequence of poverty, further entrenching marginalization and restricting access to resources and opportunities (Lott 2002).

Empirical studies by Pineau et al. (2021), Cohen (2017), and Garthwaite (2016) have demonstrated how such stigmatization is perpetuated across different contexts, particularly in Canada and the UK, through media portrayals, 'poverty porn' television, and political rhetoric. The construction of categories such as the 'deserving' versus the 'undeserving' poor reinforces social exclusion and discourages those affected from seeking support. By linking food poverty research to these broader debates on classed media representations, the analysis draws attention to how discursive framings of food insecurity are embedded in long-standing cultural narratives about poverty and social hierarchy (Schifferes and Knowles 2022). These findings underscore the pivotal influence of discursive framing and linguistic choices in constructing public understandings of food poverty/insecurity. They

further emphasize the imperative for inclusive and participatory forms of representation that centre the lived experiences and voices of those directly affected, as a means of fostering more equitable and responsive policy interventions.

Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002) further elucidates how discursive practices establish and maintain social hierarchies by defining normative concepts, value-laden categories, and speaker positions. His framework identifies discursive rules that determine which perspectives and explanations regarding food poverty are legitimized within public discourse, how affected individuals are categorized, and which solutions and behavioural expectations are deemed appropriate. Additionally, Foucault's concept of '*problematization*' explains how food poverty is constructed as a social 'problem' through discourse, shaping societal responses to those experiencing it.

Building upon existing research and the outlined theoretical framework, this study investigates how framing and discursive practices shape processes of social inclusion and exclusion in the context of food poverty/insecurity in Germany. Through a critical analysis of the constructive and rhetorical dimensions of the frames used to represent food poverty/insecurity and the individuals affected by it, the study seeks to elucidate the broader societal implications of these discourses. In doing so, it aims to inform the development of more inclusive and socially responsive policy approaches.

Methods

Data Collection

In March 2024, a systematic search was conducted using NexisUni, a news database, to identify German news articles published between January 2018 and March 2024 that focused on food poverty or food insecurity within the German context. This timeframe was selected to encompass media coverage before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The search query included the terms '*food poverty*' OR '*food insecurity*' AND '*Germany*', retrieving both print and online-exclusive articles. Following the removal of duplicate entries, 406 articles remained. These articles were subsequently screened for relevance based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only articles published by German news sources that explicitly discussed food poverty or food insecurity within Germany were included. Articles that addressed general poverty without specific reference to food or nutrition were excluded. Two independent researchers conducted a double screening process, and any discrepancies in inclusion decisions were resolved through consensus. Ultimately, 84 articles (20% of the initial dataset) met the inclusion criteria and were retrieved for analysis. The final dataset was imported into MaxQDA Analytics Pro 2024 for data extraction, qualitative frame analysis, and linguistic analysis. Extracted metadata included the article title, publisher, author, publication date, publication format (print or online), section/resort, article type (e.g., commentary, interview), and URL. The media sample analysed in this study consists of articles published in a range of national and regional newspapers. A detailed overview of the media outlets included, along with the number of articles retrieved from each outlet, is provided in the Supplementary Material (Table S1).

In the German media landscape, legacy news outlets – especially national broadsheets and regionally influential newspapers – continue to shape public debate due to their strong

professional norms, high levels of trust, and close integration with political institutions (Newman et al. 2025). German newspapers exhibit distinct political orientations (e.g., conservative, liberal, centre-left), which can influence their framing of social issues (Langer and Gruber 2021). Moreover, previous research shows that German news media tend to emphasize institutional actors and expert voices, often providing limited space for marginalized groups to articulate their own experiences of exclusion (Kalbhenn 2025). These characteristics make the analysis of news media particularly relevant for understanding how food poverty enters public and political discourse.

Frame Analysis

Frame analysis examines how media messages are constructed and conveyed. In this study, a mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating a qualitative, interpretive analysis with a subsequent quantitative, statistical assessment of frames. This methodological framework was applied to investigate representations of food poverty and insecurity in German news media. Initially, a deductive coding process was conducted by mapping data fragments of media representations onto Entman's framing theory, which conceptualizes framing as the selection and emphasis of specific aspects of reality to shape public perception (Entman 1993). Entman's framework identifies four key framing elements: defining the problem, identifying causes, proposing solutions, and providing a moral evaluation, which served as the basis for the deductive codes (see Table S2 in the Supplementary Material). Subsequently, an inductive thematic analysis was performed to refine and expand these codes based on the material, identifying recurring themes within the framing elements and coding them as subcodes. The use of data fragment coding in framing analysis has been recommended to capture more nuanced frame constructions that might be lost when coding entire articles (Foley et al. 2019). This combined deductive-inductive approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the diverse representations of food poverty/insecurity in media discourse. To ensure coding reliability, 25% of the articles ($n=20$) were analysed independently by both researchers, while the remaining articles were coded by one researcher (AB).

For quantitative analysis, the coded frame elements were exported in Excel format and prepared as dichotomized data for analysis using SPSS Statistics (2023–2024). A hierarchical cluster analysis was performed following the methodologies of Essary et al. (2022) and Matthes and Kohring (2004). Subcodes derived from the framing analysis, linked to text segments, were used as variables in the cluster analysis. Ward's method was selected as the clustering algorithm due to its ability to minimize the increase in the sum of squared errors within clusters at each step. The standard squared Euclidean distance measure was retained for the analysis. SPSS Statistics identified three optimal clusters. A lower number of clusters would have resulted in excessive fragmentation, while a higher number would have led to overly generalized clusters with substantial overlap. A criterion was established that each cluster must contain at least two frame elements to be considered valid. As a result, three distinct frames were identified, named, and interpreted. A detailed overview of the identified framing elements along with their mean frequencies across the clusters derived via Ward's method is provided in the Supplementary Material (Table S3).

Rhetoric Analysis

To analyse the discursive strategies through which social inclusion and exclusion were rhetorically constructed within the identified frames, the qualitative analysis data from the MaxQDA project were re-coded. First, document groups were established for each identified frame based on the results of the hierarchical cluster analysis, and articles were assigned accordingly.

A coding scheme was developed deductively to analyse discursive strategies, drawing on existing literature and incorporating linguistic markers of rhetorical social inclusion and exclusion identified in relevant studies (Kemmler et al. 2014; van Dijk 2008; Fairclough 2013; Hall 1997; Wodak 2011; Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Jameson 1976; van Dijk 1991) (see Table 1 and Table S4 in the Supplementary Material for code definitions).

Phrases, words, and shorter text segments within the articles assigned to a specific frame were systematically coded according to these deductive categories.

Subsequently, a graphical analysis was conducted using the Code-Matrix Browser, structuring the analysis by representing the three identified frame clusters as columns and the deductive rhetoric codes as rows (see Table 3). To allow for quantitative comparisons between frame clusters relative to the total number of documents, occurrences of rhetorical markers were counted only once per document. Additionally, the calculation of frequency and corresponding colour intensity in the visualization was column-based, meaning it reflected the distribution of rhetorical markers within each identified frame. The co-occurrence of rhetorical codes within document groups per frame was examined to assess the frequency and distribution of specific linguistic markers across frames.

To clarify how the analytical components connect: framing analysis identifies the overarching interpretive structures; rhetorical analysis examines the linguistic strategies through which these structures are discursively enacted; and Foucauldian discourse theory provides the conceptual tools to analyse how such discursive patterns produce subject positions, power relations, and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Using mixed methods therefore allows us to move from mapping dominant frames (via qualitative and quantitative procedures) to analysing how these frames operate rhetorically and what kinds of discursive effects they generate. The combination enhances analytical depth: clustering strengthens the

Table 1 Deductive codes for rhetoric expressions of social Inclusion/exclusion

Social Inclusion		Social Exclusion	
Codes	Subcodes	Codes	Subcodes
<i>Recognition</i>	Appreciation	<i>Dehumanization</i>	Lack of empathy
	Representation		Objectification
<i>Empowerment</i>	Competencies	<i>Marginalization</i>	Othering
	Access to resources		Ignoring
	Participation		Exclusion
<i>Solidarity</i>	Collective responsibility	<i>Stigmatization</i>	Normative statements
	Systemic causes		Stereotypes
	Community		Individual blame

empirical grounding of frame categories, while discourse and rhetoric analysis reveal the social and political work these frames perform.

Results

Corpus Characteristics

Of the 406 articles retrieved, 84 (20.00%) met the inclusion criteria. The number of articles addressing food poverty/insecurity varied by year, with 3 articles in 2018, 0 in 2019, 2 in 2020, 9 in 2021, 29 in 2022, 25 in 2023, and 16 in 2024 (see Fig. 1).

The majority were published in 2022 (29 articles) and 2023 (25 articles), accounting for 64% of the dataset. However, by the first two months of 2024, 16 new articles had been published, suggesting a potential peak. This fluctuation aligns with societal and political events. Prior to the pandemic, food poverty was not a significant topic, with only five articles published between 2018 and early 2020. In December 2021, rising food prices, particularly inflation affecting essential healthy foods, prompted a spike in coverage. In March 2023, the Scientific Advisory Board for Agricultural Policy, Food and Consumer Health Protection (WBAE) and Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Home Affairs (BMLEH) released a statement on 'Food Poverty Under Pandemic Conditions', leading to articles on the impact of school closures and income losses on household diets. In January 2024, the introduction of the 'Good Food for Germany' strategy by Federal Minister Özdemir prompted further media attention on the topic of nutrition and social inequality in Germany.

Of the 84 articles, 62 were reports (73.00%), typically neutral, objective, and contextualised in terms of wider public affairs, often featuring expert opinions (see Table S5 in the Supplementary Material). A total of 33 articles were categorized under Economy and National Affairs, framing food poverty as a political issue. Only four articles appeared under Health and Society, suggesting the issue was not often framed as a health or societal concern (see Table S6 in the Supplementary Material). Most articles were published by *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *KNA Basisdienst*, *Sächsische Zeitung Regionalausgabe*, *taz die Tageszeitung*,

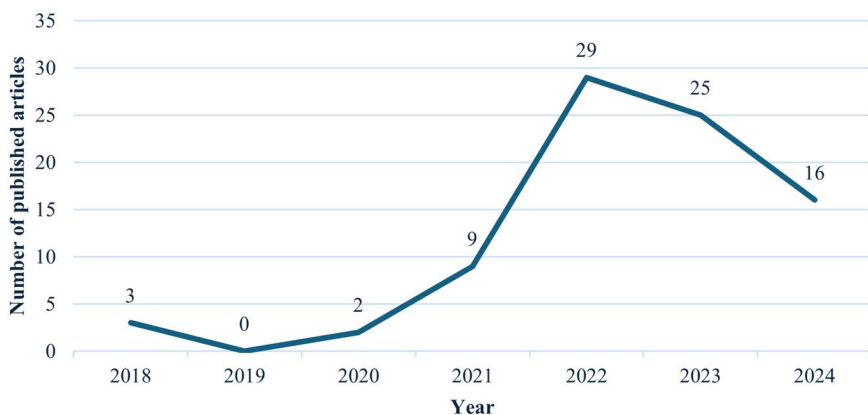


Fig. 1 Overview of number of articles published per year

and *dpa-AFX ProFeed*, each publishing five articles during the study period (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material).

Framing of Food Poverty/Insecurity

Food poverty is framed in the German public discourse through three dominant perspectives, each emphasizing different structural, political, and humanitarian dimensions of the issue. Table 2 provides an overview of the characteristic frame elements of the three identified frames.

Frame 1: Structural Injustice and Market Failure

This was the most prominent frame identified, appearing in 57 of the 84 analysed articles, and was consistently present throughout the study period. It conceptualizes food poverty as a manifestation of systemic economic and political failures. The frame centres on the interplay of market power and inadequate political regulation, attributing high food prices, unhealthy diets, and widespread food waste to structural imbalances that prioritise corporate profit over public welfare. The root causes are understood to lie in inflation, low wages, deregulated markets, and power asymmetries within the food industry. Proposed solutions include stricter market regulation, tax relief on healthy food, increased social benefits, and comprehensive structural reforms aimed at redressing inequalities in the food system. This framing positions both the state and the economy as morally responsible for the persistence of food poverty/insecurity. Morally, the frame rejects the commodification of food, advocating instead for policies that uphold food as a public good and a fundamental human right.

Table 2 Overview of identified frames and frame elements

	Frame 1: 'Structural Injustice and Market Failure'	Frame 2: 'Political Failure and Social Neglect'	Frame 3: 'Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility'
Focus	Systemic economic and political failures; market power & deregulation	Political inaction, flawed social policies, distributional injustice	Immediate suffering and ethical urgency of food poverty/insecurity
Problems	High food prices, unhealthy diets, food waste	Rising poverty, food bank reliance, malnutrition	Hunger, malnutrition, especially among children
Causes	Inflation, low wages, deregulated markets, power asymmetries in the food industry	Welfare cutbacks, income inequality, neoliberal policies, corporate lobbying	Low household income, economic instability, lack of nutrition education, poor data
Solutions	Market regulation, tax relief on healthy food, increased social benefits, structural reforms	Universal basic income, expanded welfare, tax reductions on healthy food	Emergency aid, VAT exemptions on healthy food, nutrition education, targeted relief
Moral Judgements	State and market are morally responsible; rejects commodification; food is a public good and human right	Government has a duty to ensure fair distribution and access to nutrition; food as a fundamental human right	Food poverty/insecurity is a scandal in wealthy societies; moral imperative to act urgently; breach of human dignity
#	57	19	8

Frame 2: Political Failure and Social Neglect

This frame, identified in 19 of the analysed articles – most prominently in 2022 – portrays food poverty/insecurity as the outcome of political inaction and flawed social policy, with a focus on distributional injustice and inadequate welfare systems. It highlights rising poverty levels, increased reliance on food banks, and malnutrition as symptoms of income inequality, welfare cutbacks, and the influence of neoliberal policy agendas. The underlying causes are linked to diminished social protections and growing corporate lobbying power, which have contributed to the erosion of state responsibility in safeguarding basic needs. Proposed solutions include comprehensive social reforms, such as a universal basic income, expanded welfare provisions, and tax reductions on healthy food, aimed at addressing structural inequality. From a moral standpoint, this frame asserts that governments have a duty to ensure fair distribution and protect access to adequate nutrition, treating food as a fundamental human right.

Frame 3: Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility

This frame, identified in 8 of the 84 analysed articles, peaked in 2023, indicating a short-term but intense emphasis on the humanitarian dimensions of food poverty. It focuses on the immediate and severe consequences of food poverty/insecurity – most notably hunger and malnutrition – with a particular concern for vulnerable populations such as children. The framing draws attention to the visible, everyday suffering caused by food poverty, portraying it as a failure of ethical and social responsibility in wealthy societies. The identified causes include low household income, economic instability, a lack of nutritional education, and insufficient data to adequately inform policy responses. In line with its crisis-oriented perspective, the frame proposes emergency relief measures, including VAT exemptions for healthy food, targeted aid programs, and enhanced nutrition education initiatives aimed at both prevention and immediate alleviation. From a moral standpoint, this frame views food poverty not only as a policy failure but as a scandalous breach of human dignity, especially in affluent nations. It issues a moral imperative for urgent action, framing food poverty/insecurity as a humanitarian crisis that demands swift, targeted, and ethically grounded interventions.

Frame Distribution over Time (2018–2024)

The identified three frames highlight the complex nature of food poverty/insecurity discourses in Germany, revealing its structural, political, and humanitarian references. As shown in Fig. 2, the dominance of each frame varied during the analysed period from 2018 to 2024.

Frame 1, ‘Structural Injustice and Market Failure’, has dominated since 2020, driven by rising inflation, food prices, and public awareness of systemic inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic and widening wealth gap intensified critiques of an economic system favouring corporate profit over public welfare. Calls for structural reforms, like tax cuts on healthy food and fairer distribution, further reinforced this frame’s prominence. Frame 2, ‘Political Failure and Social Neglect’, peaked in 2022 amid growing criticism of neoliberal policies and inadequate welfare systems. Public frustration over inflation, weak social protections,

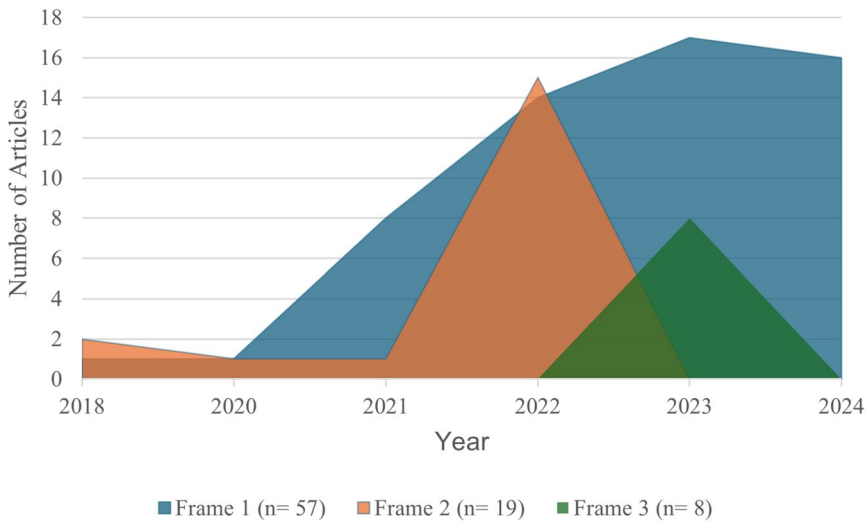


Fig. 2 Frame coverage from 2018 to 2024

and corporate influence fuelled calls for reforms like universal basic income and expanded welfare, highlighting political accountability for rising food insecurity. Frame 3, ‘Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility’, surged briefly in 2023 as the immediate impacts of food poverty – especially on children – gained visibility. Driven by global crises, economic instability, and the WBAE report’s findings, this frame portrayed food poverty as a moral failure in affluent societies, prompting calls for urgent action, including targeted aid and VAT exemptions on healthy food. Each frame’s prominence reflected its historical moment: structural injustice dominated amid pandemic fallout and inflation; political failure rose with social unrest in 2022; and humanitarian urgency peaked in 2023 as food poverty’s ethical stakes came to the forefront.

Rhetoric Strategies Reinforcing Social Inclusion/Exclusion

Table 3 provides an overview of the distribution of rhetorical strategies related to social inclusion and exclusion across the three identified frames. The table displays both the absolute number of articles in which the strategies were identified and the column percentages. The dominant strategies (bolded) within each of the three frames are described below.

Use of Socially Inclusive and Exclusive Representations in Frame 1

Frame 1, present in 67.86% ($n=57$) of the analysed articles, conceptualizes food poverty/insecurity as a systemic consequence of structural economic and political failure –emphasizing deregulated markets, inflation, and low wages. This macro-level framing centres on systemic causes (89.47%, $n=51$), shifting responsibility from individuals to institutions.

Inclusive discourse is dominant. Representation appears in 68.42% ($n=39$) of articles, making the lived experiences of affected individuals visible and preventing abstraction.

Table 3 Rhetoric strategies of social inclusion/exclusion per frame-cluster

	# of Frame 1 articles	% of Frame 1 articles (n= 57)	# of Frame 2 articles	% of Frame 2 articles (n= 19)	# of Frame 3 articles	% of Frame 3 articles (n= 8)	SUM	% of total articles (n= 84)
Social Inclusion								
Recognition								
<i>Appreciation</i>	15	26,32%	7	36,84%	4	50,00%	26	30,95%
<i>Representation</i>	39	68,42%	17	89,47%	8	100,00%	64	76,19%
Empowerment								
<i>Competencies</i>	9	15,79%	3	15,79%	0	0,00%	12	14,29%
<i>Access to Resources</i>	23	40,35%	6	31,58%	7	87,50%	36	42,86%
<i>Participation</i>	5	8,77%	3	15,79%	0	0,00%	8	9,52%
Solidarity								
<i>Collective responsibility</i>	34	59,65%	13	68,42%	5	62,50%	52	61,90%
<i>Systemic causes</i>	51	89,47%	19	100,00%	8	100,00%	78	92,86%
<i>Community</i>	15	26,32%	9	47,37%	6	75,00%	30	35,71%
Social Exclusion								
Dehumanization								
<i>Lack of empathy</i>	4	7,02%	4	21,05%	0	0,00%	8	9,52%
<i>Objectification</i>	6	10,53%	1	5,26%	0	0,00%	7	8,33%
Marginalization								
<i>Othering</i>	11	19,30%	6	31,58%	2	25,00%	19	22,62%
<i>Ignoring</i>	3	5,26%	4	21,05%	0	0,00%	7	8,33%
<i>Exclusion</i>	4	7,02%	4	21,05%	5	62,50%	13	15,48%
Stigmatization								
Normative statements	4	7,02%	5	26,32%	3	37,50%	12	14,29%
Stereotypes	4	7,02%	7	36,84%	4	50,00%	15	17,86%
Individual blame	7	12,28%	8	42,11%	6	75,00%	21	25,00%

These often include statistical or narrative elements that link food poverty/insecurity to specific social groups.

“Clearly, there is definitely [...] food poverty in Germany.” [Fast Food – 50 Jahre McDonald’s in Deutschland].

Appreciation, affirming the legitimacy of food poverty as a social issue, is found in 26.32% ($n=15$) of articles. Collective responsibility (59.65%, $n=34$) and community (26.32%, $n=15$) further reinforce solidarity. Articles frequently tie food poverty/insecurity to crises such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine:

“Since the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and inflation, about 50% more people have been coming to us.” [Kampagne mit Jörg Pilawa für die Tafeln].

Empowerment, however, is underdeveloped. Competencies appear in 15.79% ($n=9$), access to resources in 40.35% ($n=23$), and participation in only 8.77% ($n=5$). This indicates a limited portrayal of affected individuals as capable agents or policy participants.

Exclusive discourse is marginal but present. Objectification (10.53%, $n=6$) and lack of empathy (7.02%, $n=4$) manifest through abstract references such as “households in poverty” [Gesunde Kost mit Hartz IV], stripping agency. Marginalization through othering (19.30%, $n=11$), ignoring (5.26%, $n=3$), and exclusion (7.02%, $n=4$) occurs when affected voices are omitted. Stigmatization remains minimal, with individual blame appearing in 12.28% ($n=7$).

Overall, Frame 1 offers a predominantly inclusive rhetoric that prioritizes structural critique and social responsibility, but it falls short on fostering empowerment and participatory inclusion.

Use of Socially Inclusive and Exclusive Representations in Frame 2

Frame 2, found in 22.62% ($n=19$) of articles, attributes food poverty/insecurity primarily to policy failure – including welfare gaps, austerity, and inadequate social services. All articles (100%) emphasize systemic causes, underscoring institutional responsibility.

Furthermore, representation (89.47%, $n=17$) is a prominent inclusive element, followed by collective responsibility (68.42%, $n=13$), community (47.37%, $n=9$), and appreciation (36.84%, $n=7$), all contributing to a sense of shared moral concern.

“With the rising cost of food, the risk increases that especially people with low incomes can no longer afford healthy food and increasingly turn to convenience products and junk food.” [Teures Essen, kranke Kinder].

Empowerment dimensions are weak: competencies and participation appear in only 15.79% ($n=3$) each. Access to resources is noted in 31.58% ($n=6$), but often without highlighting recipient agency.

Despite structural awareness, exclusive rhetoric is more frequent than in Frame 1. Dehumanization appears in 21.05% ($n=4$), primarily through lack of empathy and, in one case, objectification (5.26%). Marginalization is significant: othering (31.58%, $n=6$), ignoring

(21.05%, $n=4$), and exclusion (21.05%, $n=4$) reflect a lack of affected voices in favour of institutional actors.

“If everyone takes care of themselves, everyone is taken care of.” [Spahn disqualifiziert sich selbst: Interview mit Armutsforscher Christoph Butterwege].

Stigmatization is particularly strong: individual blame is present in 42.11% ($n=8$), stereotypes in 36.84% ($n=7$), and normative statements in 26.32% ($n=5$). These suggest a tendency to revert to personal responsibility narratives despite structural framing.

“In addition to a lack of physical activity, habits are also important, as is knowledge about which foods are healthy and how best to prepare them. The social environment, which signals what is considered a ‘normal’ diet, also has an influence.” [Teures Essen, kranke Kinder].

Frame 2 reflects a dual discourse – structurally inclusive yet often exclusionary in practice – highlighting a need for more consistent empowerment and participatory representation.

Use of Socially Inclusive and Exclusive Representations in Frame 3

Frame 3, used in 8 articles (9.52%), frames food poverty/insecurity through a humanitarian lens, focusing on hunger and malnutrition. All articles reference systemic causes (100.00%) and include representation (100.00%), providing vivid depictions of affected individuals’ hardships.

“The line at the food bank in (...) is very long. 650 families were there last time, and 1,000 are registered for the next.” [Gesundes Essen können sich viele nicht leisten].

Access to resources is highlighted in 87.50% ($n=7$), emphasizing the role of food banks and aid programs. Appreciation (50.00%, $n=4$) supports recognition by portraying coping strategies as rational responses.

“We are witnessing hunger.” Büscher speaks of children who come to school without having had breakfast, and of mothers who skip lunch so that their children can go to bed full.” [Vielen Kindern mangelt es an gutem Essen].

Solidarity is expressed through collective responsibility (62.50%, $n=5$) and community (75.00%, $n=6$), framing food poverty/insecurity as a shared burden. However, competencies and participation are entirely absent (0.00%), indicating that affected individuals are portrayed as passive, not empowered.

Despite the inclusive framing, exclusive rhetoric is prominent. Individual blame appears in 75.00% ($n=6$) of articles – the highest across all frames – often reinforcing educational or behavioural deficits.

“It’s not only the wallet that determines whether people can eat healthily. Education level is more important than financial status.” [Ernährungsarmut – Die Familien kaufen ja schon das Billigste vom Billigen].

Stereotypes (50%, n=4) and normative statements (37.5%, n=3) contribute to stigmatization, portraying unhealthy diets as personal failings. Ignoring and exclusion (both 50%, n=4) arise from the predominance of expert voices and lack of direct testimony from affected individuals.

“When price is the decisive factor and stress is involved, experts believe more sugary, salty, and fatty products are likely to end up on the plates.” [Erst Corona, dann die Inflation].

Frame 3 balances systemic awareness and empathetic storytelling with persistent exclusionary tropes – especially individual blame and symbolic marginalization. While effective in evoking urgency, its lack of empowerment and participatory framing limits its transformative potential.

Comparative Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies across Frames

The analysis reveals limited use of rhetorical strategies – recognition (appreciation), empowerment (competencies, participation), and solidarity (community) – that promote socially inclusive discourse on food poverty/insecurity. Recognition of affected individuals and groups is fundamental for inclusive reporting, emphasizing their lived experiences and needs while avoiding portrayals that reduce them to passive victims. Media should acknowledge not only deficits but also the resilience and coping mechanisms employed by those experiencing food insecurity.

Discussion

This study examined how food poverty is discursively constructed in German newspaper coverage from 2018 to 2024, with a focus on how these representations rhetorically shape notions of social inclusion and exclusion. Through the lens of framing theory (Entman 1993; van Hulst and Yanow 2016) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault 2002), the findings highlight how media frames play a central role in shaping public understanding and political meaning-making around food poverty/insecurity, particularly across the evolving socio-economic landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that the issue of food poverty/insecurity appeared to receive little to no attention in the German media landscape prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was only with the emergence of visible and tangible problems that the topic gained newsworthiness and entered public discourse.

Media Framing and the Function of Frames

The identification of three dominant frames – ‘Structural Injustice and Market Failure’, ‘Political Failure and Social Neglect’, and ‘Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility’ – corroborates the central functions of media frames as described by Entman (1993): defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting solutions. Each frame foregrounds different causal narratives and solutions, shaping not only how food poverty/insecurity is understood but also who is deemed responsible for addressing it. At the same time, framing choices must be understood within the constraints of Germany’s media ownership structures, which – characterised by a mix of large private conglomerates, public service broadcasters, and regionally anchored publishers – shape editorial priorities and influence the range of perspectives that enter public discourse (Polińska-Nestmann et al. 2025). Such structural conditions can subtly delimit the discursive space within which issues like food poverty are framed.

The ‘Structural Injustice and Market Failure’ frame articulates food poverty/insecurity as a systemic issue linked to inadequate market regulation, economic inequality, and neoliberal policy failures. Consistent with Rushton (2012), this frame becomes more salient during socio-economic crises, reflecting heightened public awareness of structural vulnerability. The ‘Political Failure and Social Neglect’ frame focuses on the role of the state, holding political institutions accountable for welfare retrenchment and administrative inertia. This aligns with previous research (Wakefield et al. 2015; Arcuri 2019) showing that media discourses often expose institutional shortcomings while simultaneously perpetuating stigmatizing tropes. Finally, the ‘Humanitarian Crisis and Ethical Responsibility’ frame invokes compassion and urgency, emphasizing the moral imperative to act. While similar to patterns observed in UK media (Champagne et al. 2023), this frame rarely extends beyond charitable responses to offer systemic critique. Its evolution over time supports the framing literature’s view that frames are responsive to broader socio-political shifts.

Foucauldian Insights: Discursive Power and Problematization

Applying Foucauldian concepts such as problematization and discursive regularities further illuminates how food poverty is made intelligible in public discourse. Frame 1 reflects dominant knowledge regimes that privilege expert analysis, economic data, and policy critique, marginalizing experiential or community-based knowledge. This exclusion highlights the epistemic hierarchies embedded in media discourse. Frames 2 and 3, in contrast, illustrate how subject positions are constructed through discourse. While policy experts, NGOs, and institutional actors are routinely cited, individuals affected by food poverty are rarely given discursive agency. Although 76.00% of articles included representations of affected individuals, only 9.50% featured their direct participation, and just 14.00% framed them as competent or knowledgeable agents. These figures underscore Foucault’s insight that visibility does not equate to power. Representation, in the absence of voice and agency, can reinforce marginalization rather than disrupt it.

The Persistence of Stigma and Moral Judgments

Despite the presence of structural critiques, stigmatizing narratives remain prevalent – particularly within Frame 2, where individual blame and moral judgment frequently accompany political critique. Stereotypical portrayals appeared in 37.00% of articles using this frame, reaffirming the findings of Chauhan and Foster (2014) and Garthwaite (2016) on the persistence of binary logics distinguishing the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

The ‘Humanitarian Crisis’ frame further complicates this dynamic. While it elicits moral concern, it often does so at the expense of political critique. As Tikka (2019) argues, such depoliticized narratives risk reinforcing paternalistic models of welfare and obscuring the structural roots of food poverty. Situating this within broader debates on compassion politics, the frame mobilizes emotions of empathy and charitable care that can substitute for rights-based claims and structural responsibility (Milbourne 2024). While compassion politics frequently centres on individualised acts of care and charity, Miller and Thomas (2020) contend that compassion within just food policies must be coupled with structural accountability and the systematic reduction of barriers in order to effectively address food insecurity. In this sense, compassion becomes not only a moral response but also a political technology that positions affected individuals as objects of aid rather than subjects of rights and justice. Moreover, by circulating primarily through what Papacharissi (2014) terms ‘affective publics’, humanitarian appeals gain visibility, yet this visibility often remains anchored in emotional resonance rather than in transformative political agency. Together, these dynamics highlight how the humanitarian frame can generate moral urgency while simultaneously narrowing the space for structural critique and participatory inclusion.

From Recognition to Participation: The Limits of Inclusion

Across all frames, gestures toward social inclusion – such as visibility and appeals to moral worth – are present. However, these forms of recognition frequently stop short of fostering meaningful participation or empowerment. Frame 3 is particularly illustrative of this disconnect: individuals experiencing food poverty are portrayed as passive beneficiaries of charity, lacking the space to assert their agency or political voice. This reflects a paternalistic logic in which the poor are cared for but not consulted (Chauhan and Foster 2014).

Even in Frame 1, which most robustly addresses structural inequality, the discourse seldom includes lived experience or grassroots perspectives. Recognition, in this context, is insufficient without redistribution and representation. As Fraser (1997) argues, justice requires not only visibility but participatory parity – something largely absent in the coverage analysed.

Implications for Policy and Media Advocacy

The findings point to significant opportunities and limitations in current media discourses around food poverty/insecurity. Of the three frames, the ‘Structural Injustice’ frame holds the most potential for media-based advocacy, offering a discursive space where state intervention and systemic reform can be legitimized. However, its impact is undermined by the limited presence of intersectoral connections. Only four articles explicitly linked food poverty/insecurity with public health, despite growing evidence of its intersection with broader

social determinants (Mahmood et al. 2023). This represents a missed opportunity to situate food poverty within a more holistic policy framework.

Conversely, while the ‘Humanitarian Crisis’ frame generates emotional resonance, its lack of structural depth may limit its effectiveness for long-term change. As Krishnan (2014) notes, impactful public health communication requires a balance of emotional appeal, systemic analysis, and practical solutions. Applying such a framework to food poverty/insecurity could enrich public discourse and support more transformative policy advocacy. In this context, alternative media models – such as community media or participatory journalism – may offer spaces that enhance empowerment and participatory parity. Likewise, social media can act as a voice giver, enabling affected groups to articulate their experiences and challenge dominant framings (Bartelmeß et al. 2024).

Conclusions

This analysis underscores the media’s significant role in constructing public and political imaginaries around food poverty/insecurity in Germany. The three identified frames reveal distinct discursive logics: a dominant structural critique, a politically charged attribution of blame, and an emergent humanitarian framing. Each carries different implications for social inclusion, subject positioning, and policy intervention.

While the media have taken steps to recognize the systemic nature of food insecurity – particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic – this recognition has not been consistently accompanied by inclusive, empowering narratives. Affected individuals remain largely represented rather than heard, reinforcing Foucauldian insights into the limits of visibility without voice or agency. This finding resonates with broader research on poverty representation, which shows that news media frequently reproduce classed assumptions and rely on moralizing depictions of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. Within this wider discursive tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that German media combine structural explanations with residual stigmatizing tropes; however, the coexistence of a strong structural frame and persistent exclusionary rhetoric is a notable and theoretically relevant pattern.

By linking these empirical findings back to framing theory, the study demonstrates how the German news media selectively foreground certain interpretive angles—particularly structural and political explanations—while simultaneously constraining the discursive space for participatory and rights-based narratives. This contributes to the literature by showing not only which frames are used, but how they articulate specific modes of inclusion and exclusion in line with Foucauldian processes of problematization, categorization, and subject formation.

For the media to contribute meaningfully to transformative policy change, they must go beyond exposing structural injustice. They must also reframe those experiencing food poverty not as passive recipients of charity or objects of pity, but as competent agents and stakeholders. In light of the persistent absence of lived experience identified across the corpus, the study highlights a key gap in current media practice and adds to existing scholarship by demonstrating how symbolic inclusion can coexist with discursive marginalization. This requires a discursive shift toward participatory, rights-based narratives that centre lived experience and challenge the boundaries of symbolic inclusion. Such a shift would align

with both critical media studies and emerging calls in the literature for more inclusive, non-stigmatizing representations of poverty.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41055-025-00199-5>.

Acknowledgements not applicable.

Author Contributions TB: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Supervision, AB: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. This research did not receive any funding.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are sourced from the NexisUni database. Due to licensing restrictions, these data are not publicly available. However, the analysed articles may be accessed from the authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical standards disclosure This manuscript does not describe research involving human participants.

Clinical trial number Not applicable.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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