UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

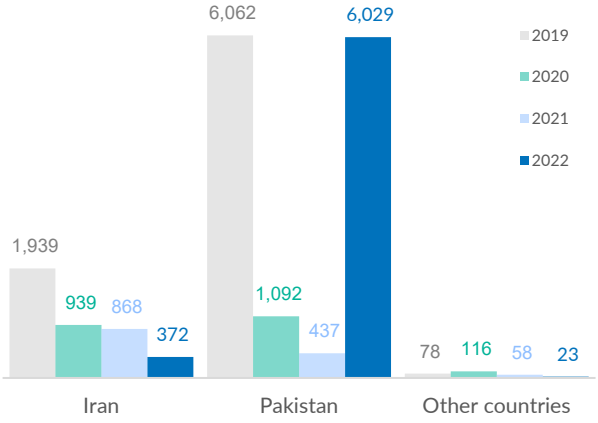
UNHCR AFGHANISTAN
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE
JANUARY – DECEMBER 2022

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

6,424 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2022

Since the start of large-scale repatriation to Afghanistan in 2002, UNHCR has facilitated the return of nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees, mainly from neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. In 2022, 6,424 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan – 6,029 from Pakistan, 372 Iran and 23 from other countries, including Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. This is 371 per cent higher than the number of recorded returns in 2021 (1,363) and 2020 (2,147). Since 2018, the number of returns to Afghanistan has remained relatively low and this is largely due to the fragile political context, limited and overstretched absorption capacity, lack of access to shelter, essential services and livelihood opportunities in return areas, and more recently, COVID-19 restrictions.

Refugee Returns (Individuals)
by Country of Asylum (2019 - 2022)



In August 2022, UNHCR adjusted the cash grant from $250 to $375 per person to better respond to the skyrocketing living and transportation costs and deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. However, this did not trigger any drastic uptick in returns as witnessed in 2016 with most returnees interviewed following this adjustment indicating their decision to return was mainly due to rising living costs in their country of asylum.

In 2023, UNHCR will continue to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees in safety and dignity and ensure the exercise is in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and the Tripartite and Quadripartite frameworks. In view of the fluid and uncertain socio-economic and political context in Afghanistan, UNHCR will closely monitor the situation and maintain robust coordination with offices in the region so that returns are fully voluntary and based on well-informed decisions.

Muhammad and his family of ten are getting ready to go home after decades living in Pakistan as Afghan refugees. ©UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

Return Trends and Returnee Profiles

Gender: **53 per cent** (3,397) were women (22 per cent or 1,401 individuals) and girls (31 per cent or 1,996 individuals) while **47 per cent** (3,027) were men (19 per cent or 1,231 individuals) and boys (28 per cent or 1,796 individuals).

Places of Return: **55 per cent (3,527)** returned to Sar-e-Pul (914), Kabul (815), Kunduz (622), Kandahar (611) and Jawzjan (565) provinces.

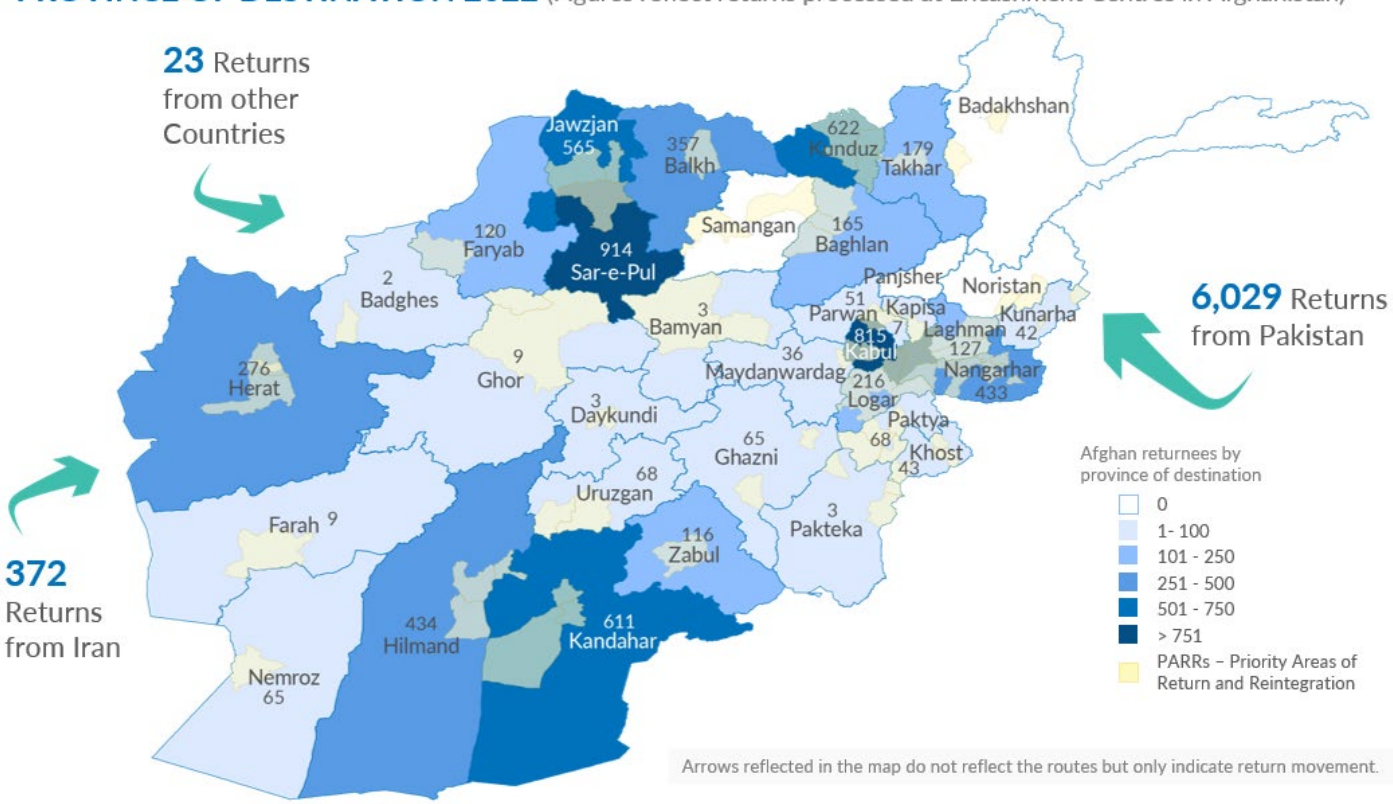
Family Composition: Most returnees from Pakistan came in family groups (with an average composition of 5 – 6 people) while around **60 per cent** (approximately 220 individuals) of returnees from Iran were single students. This is because most were students who returned to Afghanistan for a temporary period to obtain an Afghan passport and Iranian visa before going back to Iran (as ordinary Afghans) to continue their higher education.

Education Level: **60 per cent** (552) of returnees interviewed were without formal or informal education. **64 per cent** (490) of returnees from Pakistan,**41 per cent (61)** from Iran, and 1 returnee from other country:

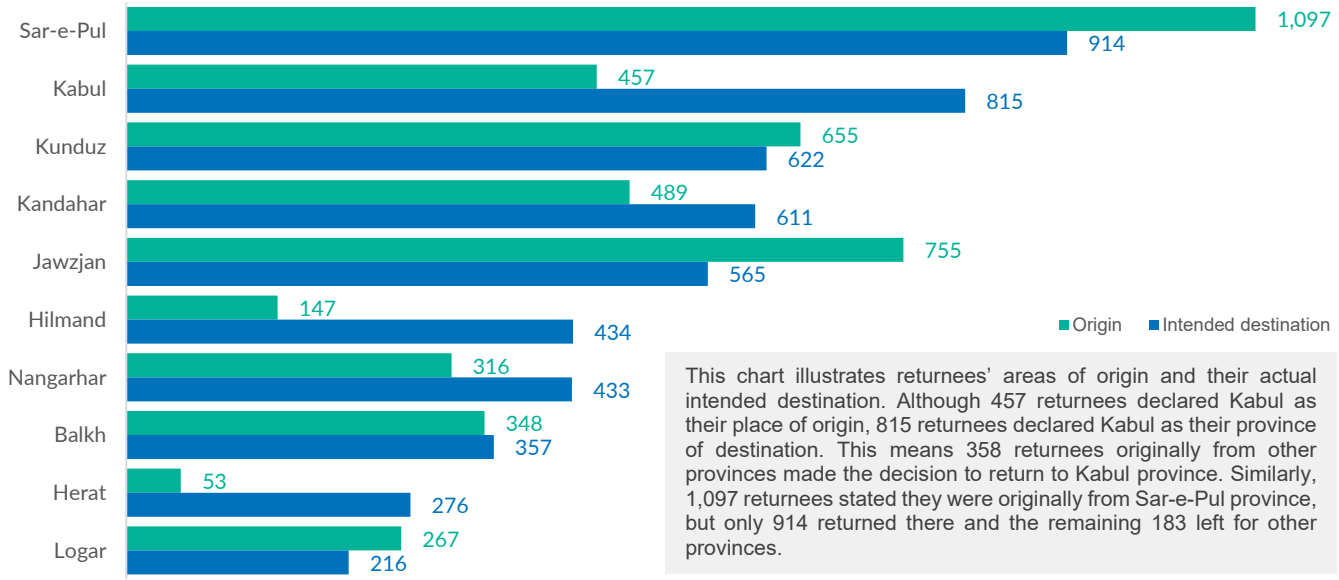
- Grade 1–12: **25 per cent** (233) in general, **19 per cent** (143) among returnees from Pakistan and **57 per cent** (85) of returnees from Iran.
- University Level: **2 per cent (17)** in general, **2 per cent** (15) are returnees from Pakistan and **1 per cent (2)** returnees from Iran.
- "*Madrasa*" Islamic School: **16 per cent** (123) are returnees from Pakistan.

Skills: **78 per cent** were skilled workers, **19 per cent** engaged in tailoring, **12 per cent** agriculture, **11 per cent** small businesses (shopkeeping), **8 per cent** unskilled daily wage labor, **7 per cent** cooking and **5 per cent** transportation.

PROVINCE OF DESTINATION 2022 (Figures reflect returns processed at Encashment Centres in Afghanistan)

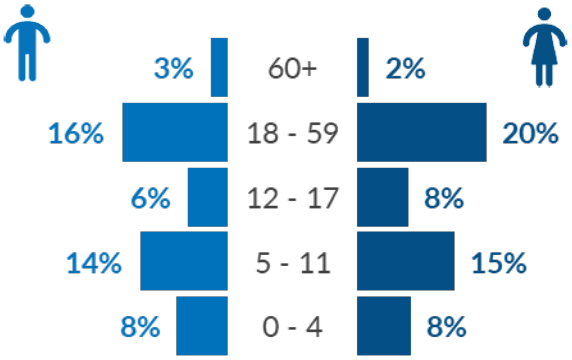


2022 Top 10 Recorded Province of Destination vs Origin

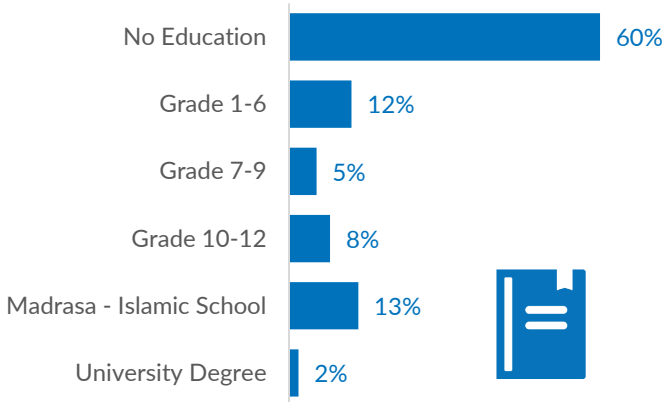


This chart illustrates returnees' areas of origin and their actual intended destination. Although 457 returnees declared Kabul as their place of origin, 815 returnees declared Kabul as their province of destination. This means 358 returnees originally from other provinces made the decision to return to Kabul province. Similarly, 1,097 returnees stated they were originally from Sar-e-Pul province, but only 914 returned there and the remaining 183 left for other provinces.

2022 Returnees' Age and Gender Breakdown

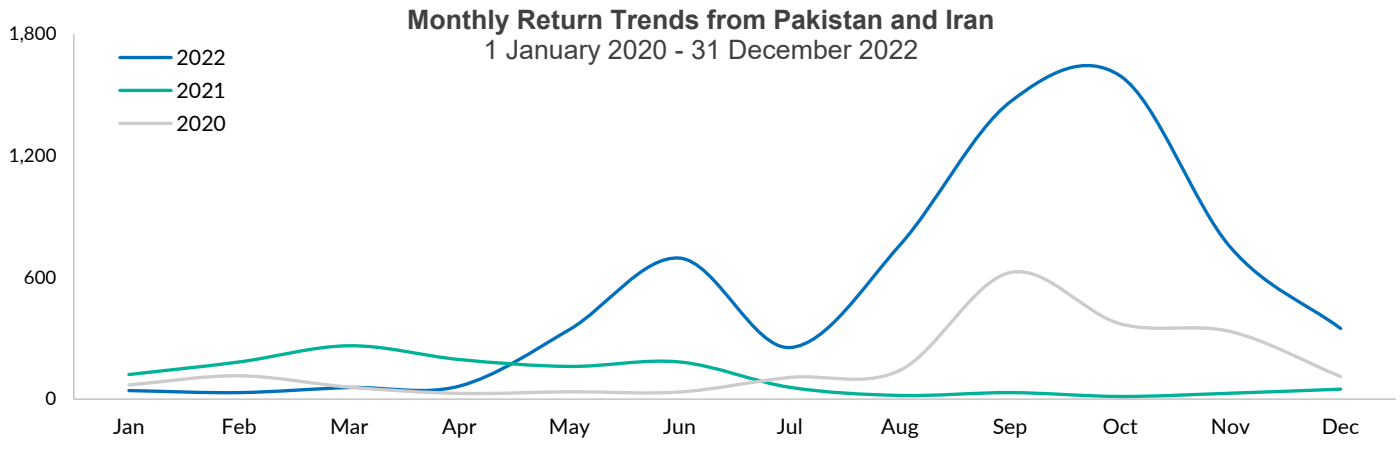


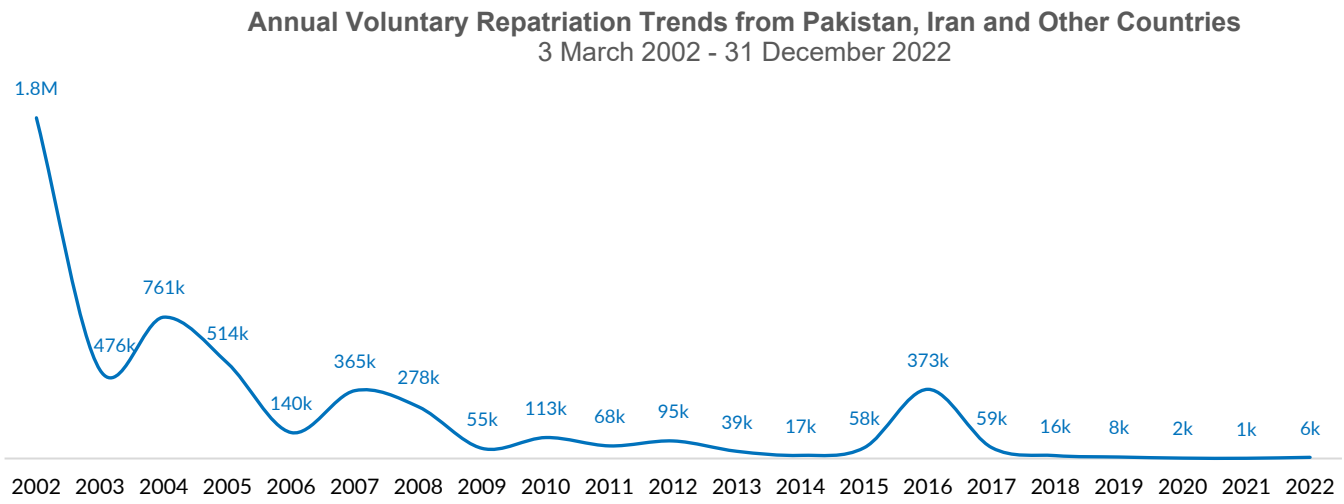
Interviewed Returnees Education Level



Process of Return

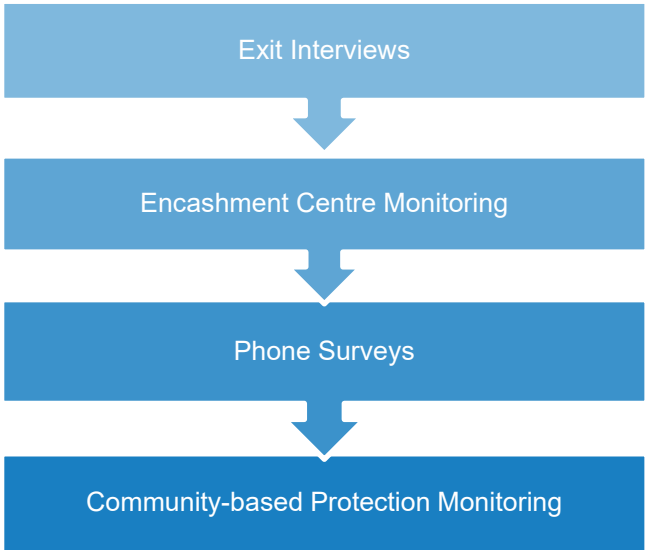
- UNHCR has Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRC) in Pakistan and Iran which support refugees willing to return to Afghanistan – two in Pakistan (Azakhel in Peshawar and Baleli in Quetta) while repatriation from Iran is facilitated via UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Dogharoun. UNHCR issues Voluntary Repatriation Forms (VRF) to returning refugees confirming their intent to return voluntarily to Afghanistan.
- Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at the four Encashment Centres (ECs) located in Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar for returnees from Pakistan and other countries and in Herat for returnees from Iran.
- All returnees with a valid VRF each receive a one-off $375 cash grant at VRCs. The cash grant is meant to cover transportation costs and prevent, mitigate and respond to the immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities they might face upon return. Most returnees indicated their intention to use the cash grant to cover transportation costs to their places of origin/intended destination and buy food and other basic commodities.
- In addition to cash grants, returning refugees are provided with basic health care and overnight accommodation at ECs where needed. They also receive additional services such as landmine risk awareness sessions, particularly for children and those returning to rural areas, drug awareness raising sessions, information on school enrolment and malnutrition screening.
- UNHCR has put in place several measures to prevent the spread and transmission of COVID-19. These include handwashing facilities, personal protective equipment for UNHCR staff and partners working in ECs and awareness raising sessions for all returnees using material provided by Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health and WHO.





Returnee Monitoring

Returnee monitoring is a critical component of UNHCR's protection monitoring in Afghanistan. This is done in several ways, including interviews with refugees willing to return at VRCs in countries of asylum, return monitoring at Encashment Centres as well as follow up on their situation in areas of return one to six months after return. In early September 2022, UNHCR launched a phone survey to assess returnees' socio-economic situation, coping mechanisms and potential protection risks facing them as well as the impact of the cash grants returnees receive. The findings of this survey are currently being reviewed. UNHCR also monitors refugee returnees through community-based protection monitoring to assess the protection environment, identify potential human rights violations and protection concerns returnees could experience upon return to inform timely protection interventions and advocacy by UNHCR and other key stakeholders.



ENCASHMENT CENTRE MONITORING

Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon arrival in Afghanistan. This exercise seeks to ascertain return trends and the voluntariness of and reasons for return, assess the level of information returnees receive in countries of asylum, identify people with specific needs requiring referrals, gauge conditions of return and respect for basic rights and human rights violations experienced during returns to ensure an appropriate response, and determine returnees' intentions for the future.

Between 1 January and 31 December 2022, 925 refugee returnee households (some 5,500 individuals representing 86 per cent of the total number) were interviewed, including 499 men and 426 women. Interviewees were selected randomly at ECs – the first point of contact between refugee returnees and UNHCR – and included returning families from Pakistan (771), Iran (148), and other countries (6).

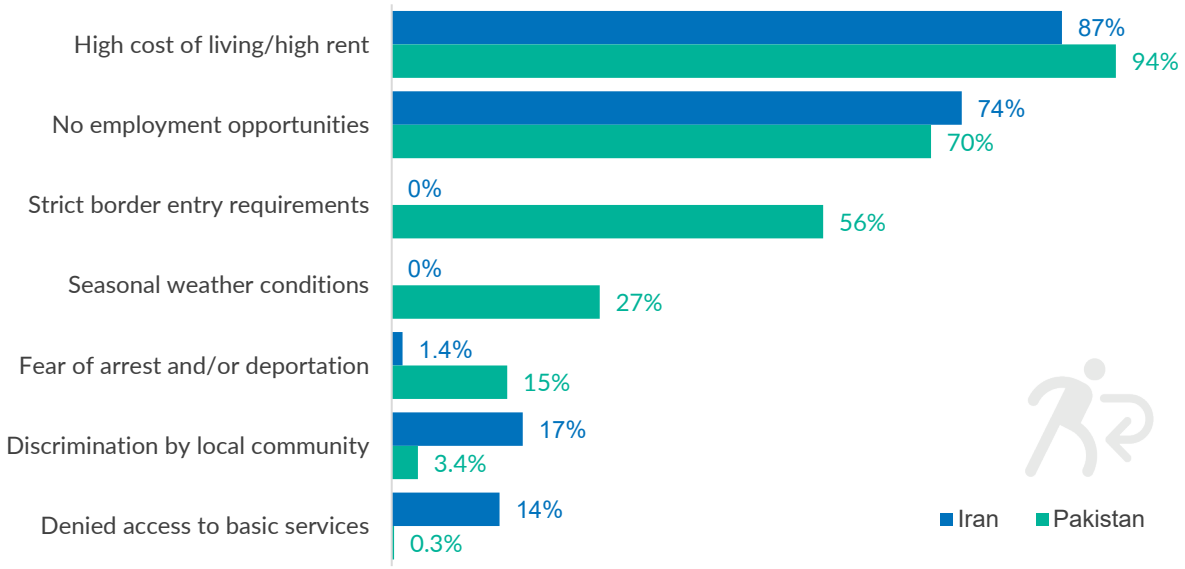
Muhammad and his family of ten are getting ready to go home after decades living in Pakistan as Afghan refugees. ©UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

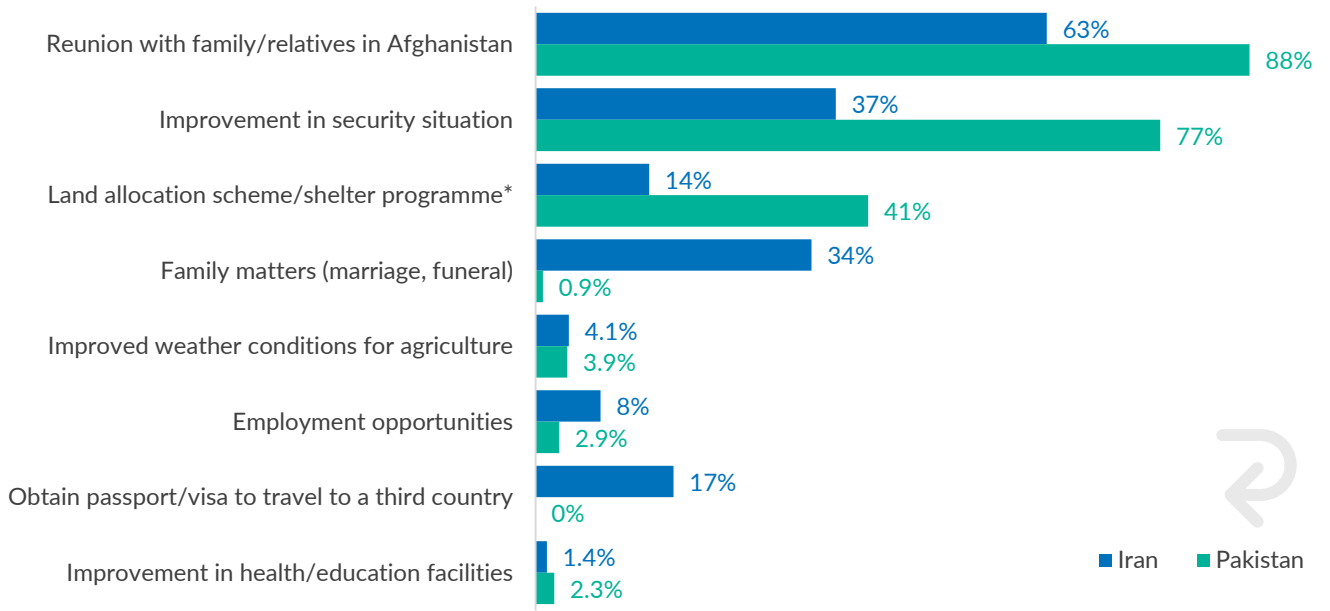
Encashment Centre Returnee Monitoring Findings

- **63 per cent of Afghan refugee returnees intend to return to their province of origin** while 37 per cent would return to other provinces to join relatives due to a shortage of land, shelter, basic services and income opportunities.
- **82 per cent of returnees from Pakistan and 51 per cent from Iran returned after spending more than ten years as refugees**.
- **49 per cent of returnees from Iran** and **17 per cent from Pakistan were born in their country of asylum**.
- **90 per cent of returnees had information about the overall situation in Afghanistan**, including security in their place of origin before leaving their country of asylum. Most returnees (87 per cent) received information from Afghan communities in their country of asylum, 22 per cent received information via the radio and 13 per cent from visits to Afghanistan.
- **91 per cent of respondents from Pakistan said they received adequate information about the voluntary repatriation cash grant prior to leaving their country of asylum**. **78 per cent** received information from Afghan communities in countries of asylum, 36 per cent from UNHCR, and 21 per cent from the media.

Reasons for Return

The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran cited by returnees include high living costs, lack of employment opportunities, strict border entry requirements (in Pakistan side) reducing refugees ability to go to Afghanistan and return to Pakistan for temporary purposes i.e., family visit, and weather conditions e.g., recent flood in Pakistan. Reunification with family and relatives and the perceived improved security situation were some of the other reasons.

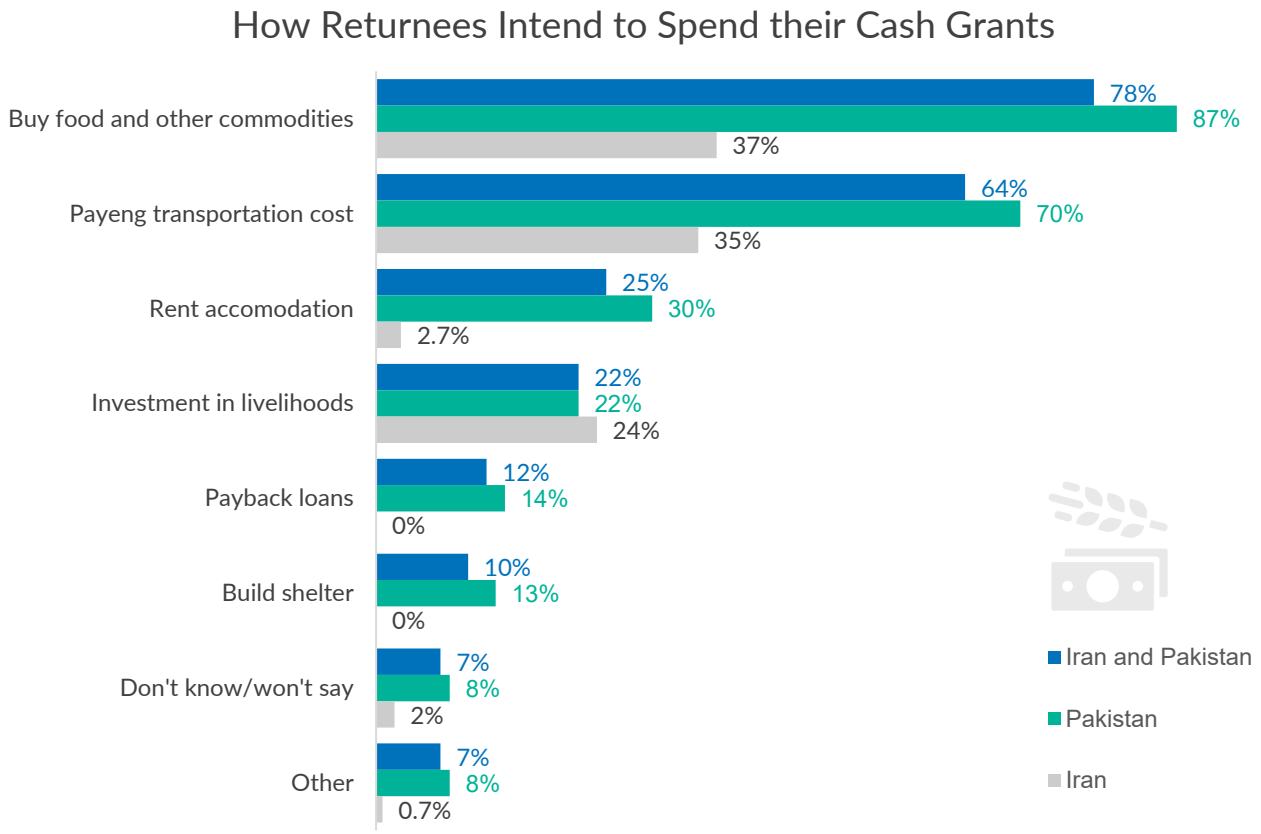


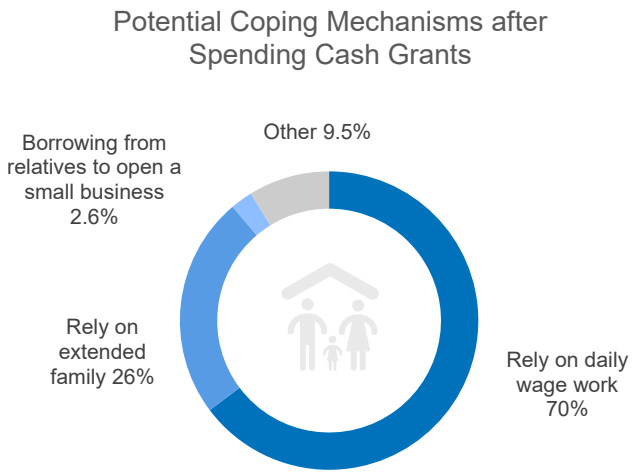


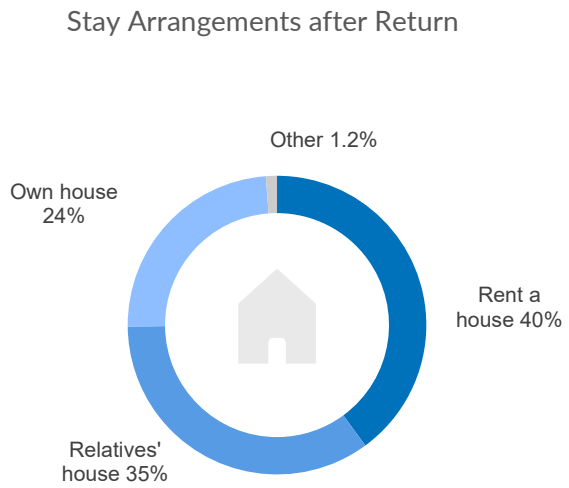
** Although land allocation is mentioned as a reason of return, UNHCR notes that the government land allocation programme has been paused since August 2021.*

Intentions upon Return

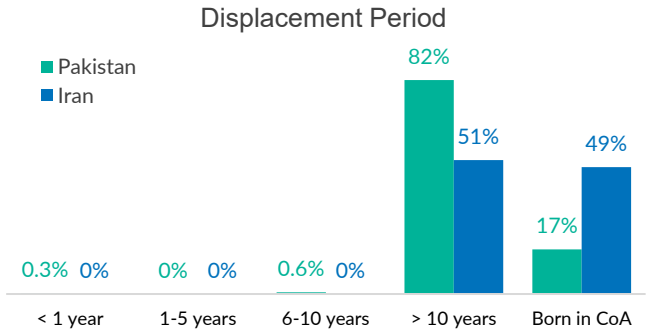
The findings give an indication of returnees' intentions after returning – which could change after returnees settle in their respective communities – and help compare dynamics among returnees during the return and reintegration phase.

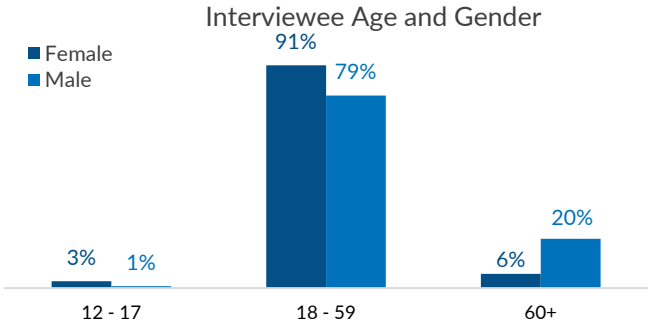


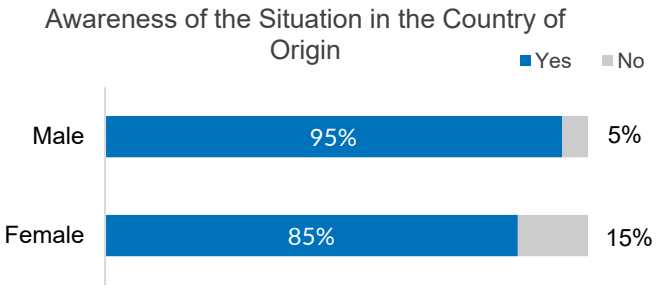


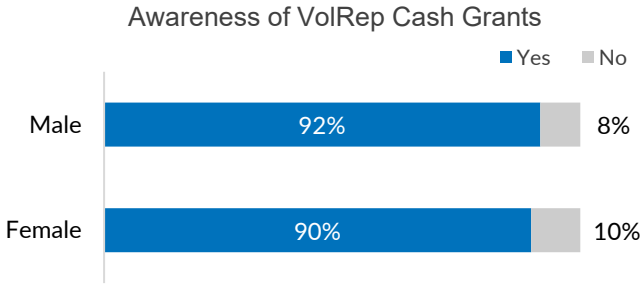


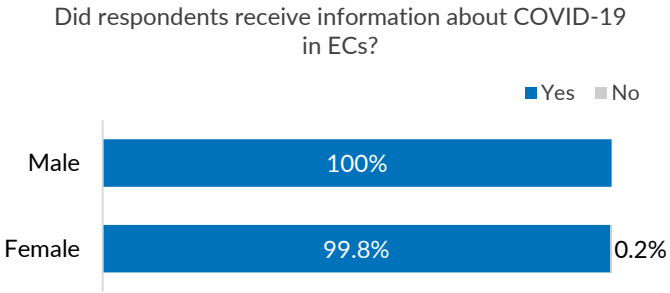
Other Findings

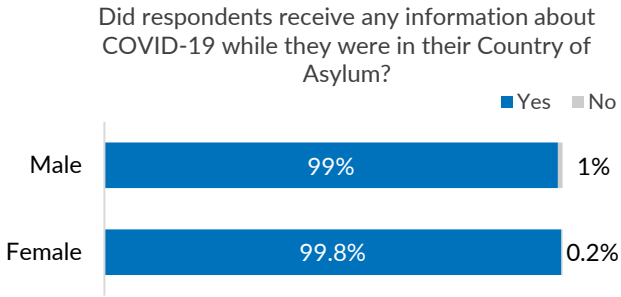


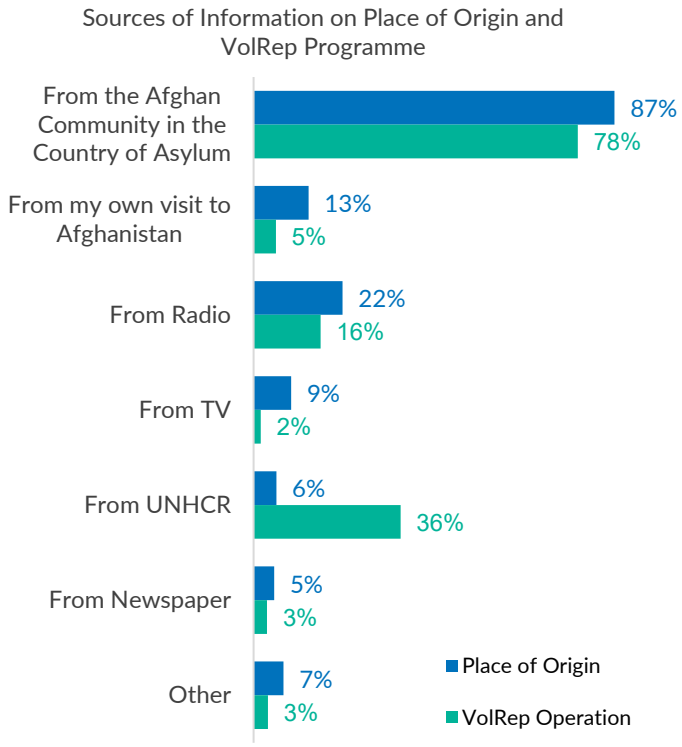


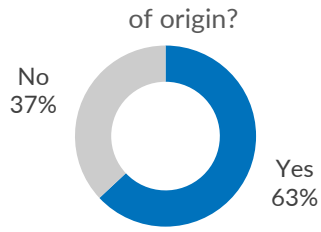


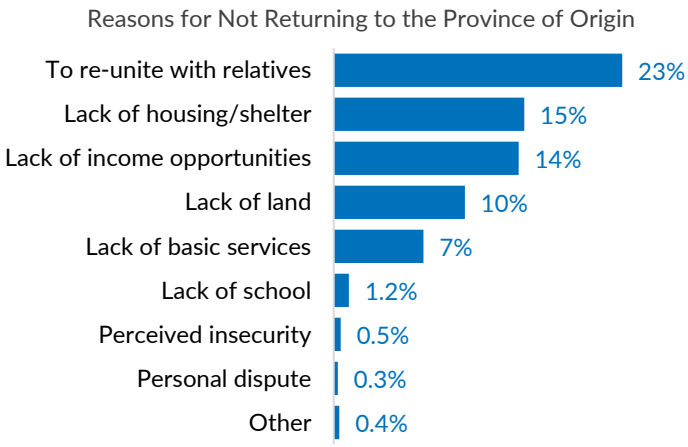












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