Iraq
2021 Participatory Assessment of Internally Displaced Persons & Returnees
June – August 2021

Background & Methodology

While Iraq continues to steadily recover from years of conflict, thousands of vulnerable families across the country remain displaced and in acute need of protection and assistance. As of 31 August 2021, 1,191,470 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 4,884,612 IDP returnees resided across Iraq.
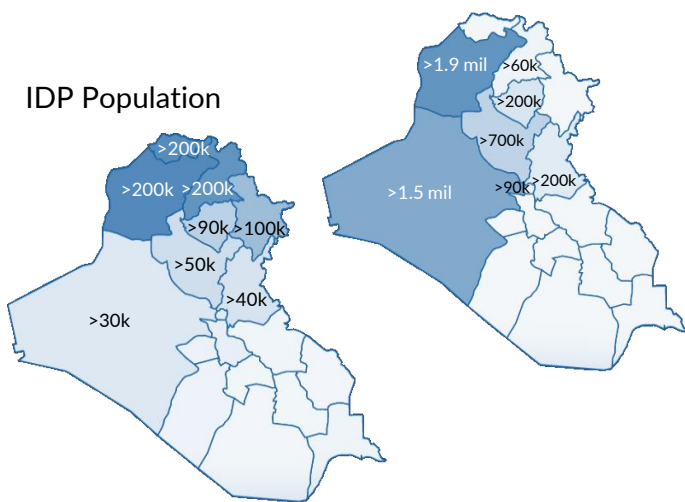
In line with UNHCR's *Age, Gender, and Diversity Policy* (2018) and *Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations* (2006), UNHCR undertook a Participatory Assessment (PA) across six offices/ten governorates (Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Ninewa, Baghdad, Basra, Anbar, Salahaldeen, Diyala, Kerbala) in July and August 2021 to ensure meaningful participation through structured dialogue. This PA represents the first in Iraq since 2017 and following COVID-19 disruptions. From 2017-2021, gaps in a countrywide PA were filled at field level by desk review and participatory inquiry (focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, household visits, and discussions with outreach volunteers and committees). In 2020, remote protection monitoring was conducted by the Protection Cluster.

The 2021 PA centers on five thematic areas: Documentation, Child Protection (including Education) & Gender-based Violence, Livelihoods, Self-Reliance, and Mental Health. Participants were asked to identify key protection risks and causes, capacities within the community, and possible solutions. 307 FGDs were held with IDPs and IDP returnees.

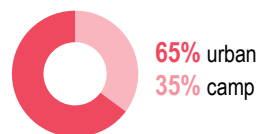## IDP & IDP Returnee Populations in Iraq
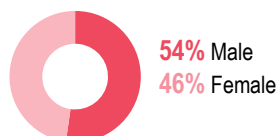
IDP Returnee Population

IDP Population

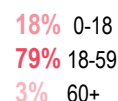As of 31 July 2021, IOM DTM data

Demographics of FGDs

Site Type

65% urban
35% camp

Gender

54% Male
46% Female

Age

18% 0-18
79% 18-59
3% 60+

Location of FGDs

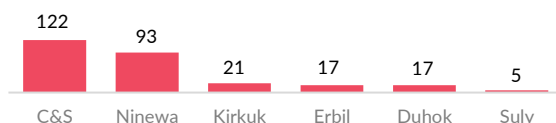| C&S	Ninewa	Kirkuk	Erbil	Duhok	Suly
122	93	21	17	17	5

Center & South (C&S) includes Baghdad, Anbar, Basra, Salahaldeen, Diyala, and Kerbala governorates
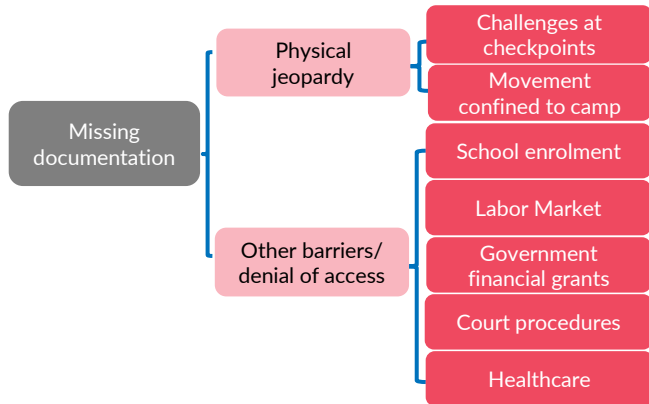
Documentation

Countrywide, IDPs/returnees stress logistical and financial barriers to obtain or renew their national identity document—the National Unified Card (NUC), key to accessing public services—from the Ministry of Interior, with heighted barriers for women (including women-headed households, widows). Similar challenges exist for registration of other civil documentation (marriage & birth certificates/other licenses), leading to risks of serious protection concerns.

Top Documentation challenges

1. Procedural requirement to return to areas of origin for renewal of the NUC, with associated transport costs and fear of return

2. Opaque and complicated processing procedures, resulting in delays and expiry of documents

3. Fear of harassment, denial of documents, or detention for those with perceived ISIS affiliation

4. Denial of marriage and birth registration for mixed couples (refugee/Iraqi) and their children

5. Harassment, abuse, financial extortion of women by lawyers, authorities, & security forces during processes

Impacts of delays or missing documents

Missing documentation →
- Physical jeopardy →
  - Challenges at checkpoints
  - Movement confined to camp
- Other barriers/ denial of access →
  - School enrolment
  - Labor Market
  - Government financial grants
  - Court procedures
  - Healthcare

Recommendations from the Community

→ Advocate with authorities for simplified procedures

→ Advocate with authorities for more MoI mobile missions, online applications, and/or transport to reduce travel expenses linked to required renewal in areas of origin

→ Advocate for alternative procedures for proving marriage/birth, including DNA testing, support letters

Education

Even pre-COVID, barriers to formal schooling and limited non-formal options impacted children's access to learning. From February 2020, in-person learning closed due to COVID, resulting in rollout of e-learning. However, at-home learning added further pressure on families. IDPs/returnees repeatedly raised concern about out-of-school children and limited formal and non-formal learning opportunities.

Top Barriers: Access, Quality, & Competing Motivations

1. Financial constraints: transport costs and supplies
2. Lack of automatic transfer of school certificates from areas of origin, preventing enrolment in new schools
3. Limited available schools (particularly secondary)
4. Poor quality teachers and facilities
5. Age cut-offs for formal education, denying re-entry to those out of school due to conflict or missing documents

AGD-specific barriers

Children with Disabilities
Bullying (emotional, physical) and limited accessibility

Adolescent Girls
Family concerns of harassment, mixed-gender learning, cultural pressure

Adolescent Boys
Pressure to enter the labor market

Recommendations from the Community

→ Arrange free transportation for students and gender-separate options for formal and non-formal learning (including girls-only transport and classrooms)

→ Expand non-formal learning and spaces to encourage children & parents to reengage in education

→ Advocate with authorities for automatic transfer of documents from schools in areas of origin to areas of displacement and for leniency with age cut-offs

Child Protection

Closely linked with education concerns and COVID impacts, IDPs and returnees highlight a set of interlinked child protection issues, notably child labor and child marriage. In parallel, participants voice that traditional forms of child rearing coupled with COVID movement restrictions has led to increased violence and abuse against children. They further note a need for child-friendly/ recreational spaces. In areas with militia presence, there is also concern of recruitment of adolescent boys.

- Child Labor
- Child Marriage
- Lack of child-friendly space
- Violence against children

Key Drivers of Child Labor & Child Marriage

1. Family financial constraints
2. Caregiver neglect
3. Parents unable to support or encourage education
4. Traditional customs and clan systems

Recommendations from the Community

→ Expand livelihood opportunities and vocational training as alternatives to school withdrawal, child labor, and child marriage

→ Advocate with authorities to enforce child labor laws and prevent informal marriage contracts

→ Increase recreational/green spaces, including using existing municipal spaces in urban areas

→ Organize trainings on parenting skills and non-violent family conflict resolution

Gender-Based Violence & Identity

Despite reports of increasing GBV incidents, COVID restrictions impacted UNHCR and partner ability to provide GBV services to meet expanding needs. IDPs and returnees link the effects of COVID (financial strain, lack of livelihood opportunities) and a lack of social spaces to a deterioration in men's mental health, which they identify as a driver of increased GBV. Separately, an increase in reported sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) cases since Q3 2020 may be read as improved awareness and comfort with reporting.

LGBTIQ+ identity remains a highly sensitive topic. IDPs and IDP returnees generally expressed resentment or full denial of the specific needs of this vulnerable group.
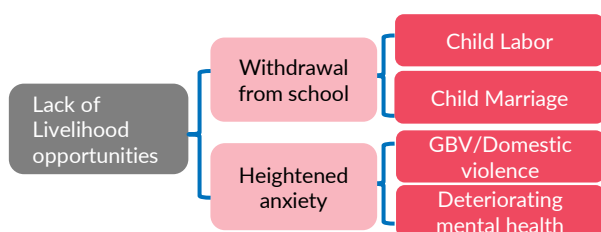
Top GBV Concerns and Perceptions

1. Increased domestic violence and denial of resources
2. Verbal harassment of women and girls in public places
3. Limited awareness of services
4. Lack of trust/fear of reaching out for services
5. Lack of safe shelter, or movement restrictions in government-run shelters

Recommendations from the Community

→ Organize trainings on dispute resolution and anger management for couples and individuals

→ Increase field-based female staff and availability of safe shelters to reduce hesitancy to seek support

→ Increase awareness raising on GBV, SEA, and public harassment for men and boys, and separately women and girls

Livelihood Opportunities

Prior to COVID, poverty levels were already high, with associated pressures of debt, rent, and access to food and basic items. Monitoring and PA findings indicate a continuing negative impact of COVID on financial and food security, access to services, and wellbeing. Lack of livelihood was a constant refrain and linked to critical protection risks.

Lack of Livelihood opportunities	Withdrawal from school	Child Labor
		Child Marriage
	Heightened anxiety	GBV/Domestic violence
		Deteriorating mental health

Top Livelihood Concerns and Perceptions

1. Limited opportunities (poor economy, COVID impact, missing documents, Kurdish language barriers in the Kurdistan Region, nepotism, lack of specialized skills)
2. Lack of clarity on eligibility criteria for cash assistance
3. Risks of exploitation, violence/harassment at work (particularly women and girls)
4. Isolation and movement restrictions in camps
5. Discrimination against those with perceived ISIS affiliation and persons with disabilities

Recommendations from the Community

→ Expand job search training, vocational trainings, and at-home projects, including for women and persons with disabilities

→ Revise cash assistance targeting to identify the most vulnerable

→ Broadcast vacancies, job portals, and job fairs via multiple platforms and centers

Self-Reliance

Negative impacts of reduced community-based activities due to COVID were reflected across discussions. The criticality of community spaces and community-based response was a common refrain, notably a need for safe spaces to gather for leisure, recreation, skills and vocational programming; to strengthen community self-management; and to support vulnerable or isolated community members.

Top Community-Based Concerns and Perceptions

1. Limited self-governance and representation structures in urban areas; lack of trust (concerns of abuse and corruption) against representation structures in camps
2. Need for community spaces with diverse services
3. Lack of social cohesion with host communities, spurred by influential personalities fomenting tension between communities and ethnic groups
4. Lack of confidence in the effectiveness/confidentiality of complaint and feedback mechanisms
5. Sense of neglect and discrimination among persons with disabilities, older persons, those with perceived ISIS affiliation (including widows)

Recommendations from the Community

→ Establish community spaces (camp/urban) with diverse activities & transportation for women, children/ adolescents, older persons, persons with disabilities

→ Support community cohesion in urban areas by establishing representation committees and expanding outreach structures, and improve oversight of existing committees/outreach structures

→ Raise awareness on the importance of complaint & feedback, available mechanisms, and confidentiality

Recommendations from the Community

→ Organize trainings on stress management and anxiety reduction techniques

→ Increase community and MHPSS services with female staff for women and persons with disabilities

→ Expand MHPSS services to areas with limited service, household outreach, and remote MHPSS support (tele-counseling)

→ Raise awareness on MHPSS to dispel myths

🤝 Mental Health & Psychosocial Support

While some UNHCR partners and service providers offer MHPSS programming, IDPs and returnees in both camp and non-camp areas across Iraq remain dependent on very limited government and humanitarian services. Participants link lack of access to services and the impacts of COVID— increased isolation, loss of livelihood, and poverty—to a set of negative mental health challenges. Those in camps cite poor living conditions as an additional factor.

Top MHPSS Associated Concerns and Perceptions

1. Perceived increase in self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempts

2. COVID-associated anxiety and fear among men linked to violence against family, and among women linked to increased isolation and exhaustion

3. Enduring trauma from conflict, displacement, and secondary displacement within Iraq

4. Ongoing discrimination/stigma about mental illness

5. Limited awareness of services/limited availability

Other Resources

2021 Multi Cluster Needs Assessment (dashboard)

https://reach-info.org/irq/mcna2021/

2021 Participatory Assessment (Refugees & Asylum-Seekers):

https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/89976

National Protection Cluster website and resources

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/protection-cluster

Adolescent girls play volleyball during a structured activity at the Sinuni Community Center run by TdH, August 2021. © UNHCR/M. Lesueur