

AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

1,363 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2021

Since the beginning of large-scale repatriation in 2002, UNHCR has facilitated the return of nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees, mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

During 2021, **1,363** Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan from Iran (**868**), Pakistan (**437**), and other countries (**58**) including India, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Federation. In comparison to the previous year (2020) with **2,147** returnees, returns in 2021 were **37%** lower, and **83%** lower than the year of 2019 with **8,079** returnees.

The decrease in return trends in 2021 could be attributed to the political developments in Afghanistan and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, despite the end of widespread conflict in the country following the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, the return trend from Pakistan and Iran further declined. Between 15 August and 31 December 2021, only 103 refugees from Iran, and 32 refugees from Pakistan voluntarily returned, based on an informed decision which consists of 10% of returns in 2021. This figure is very low compared to the 1,076 refugees who returned from Pakistan and 447 refugees from Iran during the same period in 2020 and this decline could be attributed to a number of factors, including the temporary closure of border crossing points linked to COVID-19 and the Taliban takeover, the overall political context, as well as the deterioration of the economic situation in Afghanistan.

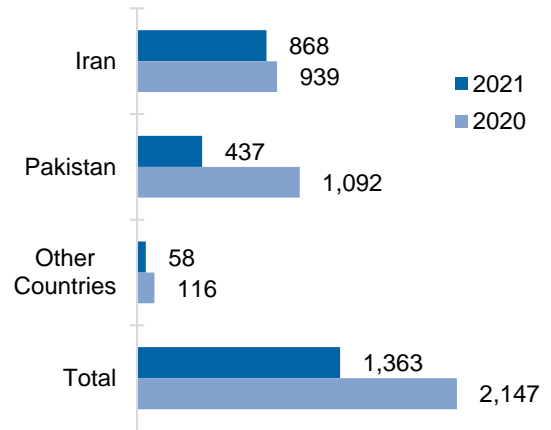
Furthermore, VolRep through the Torkham crossing point has remained suspended as a result of restrictive customs formalities imposed by the Pakistani authorities (on the Pakistan side) since November 2020. VolRep movements, therefore, took place through Islam Qala, Spin Boldak, and Sher Khan Bander crossing points as well as by air.

UNHCR will continue to facilitate the voluntary return of Afghan refugees in 2022 with a planning figure of 60,000 Afghan refugee returnees from Pakistan, Iran and other countries. In view of the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Afghanistan, UNHCR will closely monitor the situation and maintain adequate coordination with UNHCR offices in the region to ensure to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees, who are intending to voluntarily return to Afghanistan, in safety and dignity, in line with the SSAR and the tripartite and quadripartite framework.

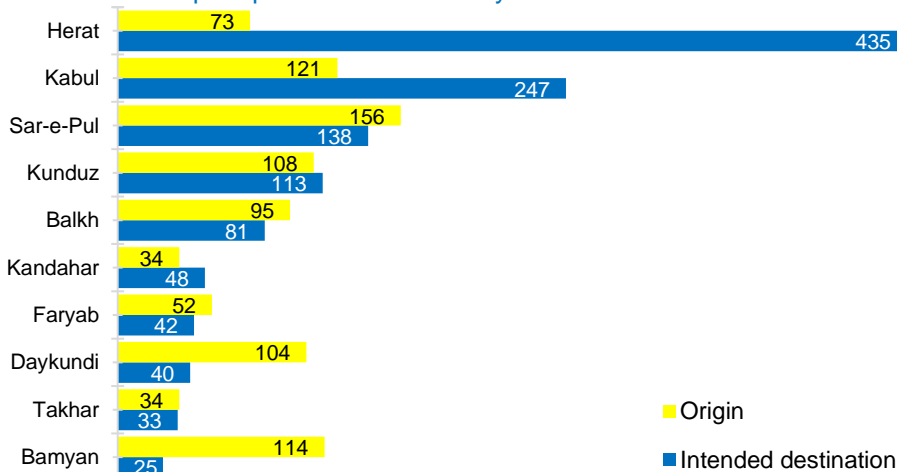
Return Trends

Some **74% (1,014)** of refugee returnees in 2021 have returned to Herat (32%), Kabul (18%), Sar-e-Pul (10%), Kunduz (8%), and Balkh (6%) provinces.

Refugee Returns (Individuals) by Country of Asylum 2021 & 2020

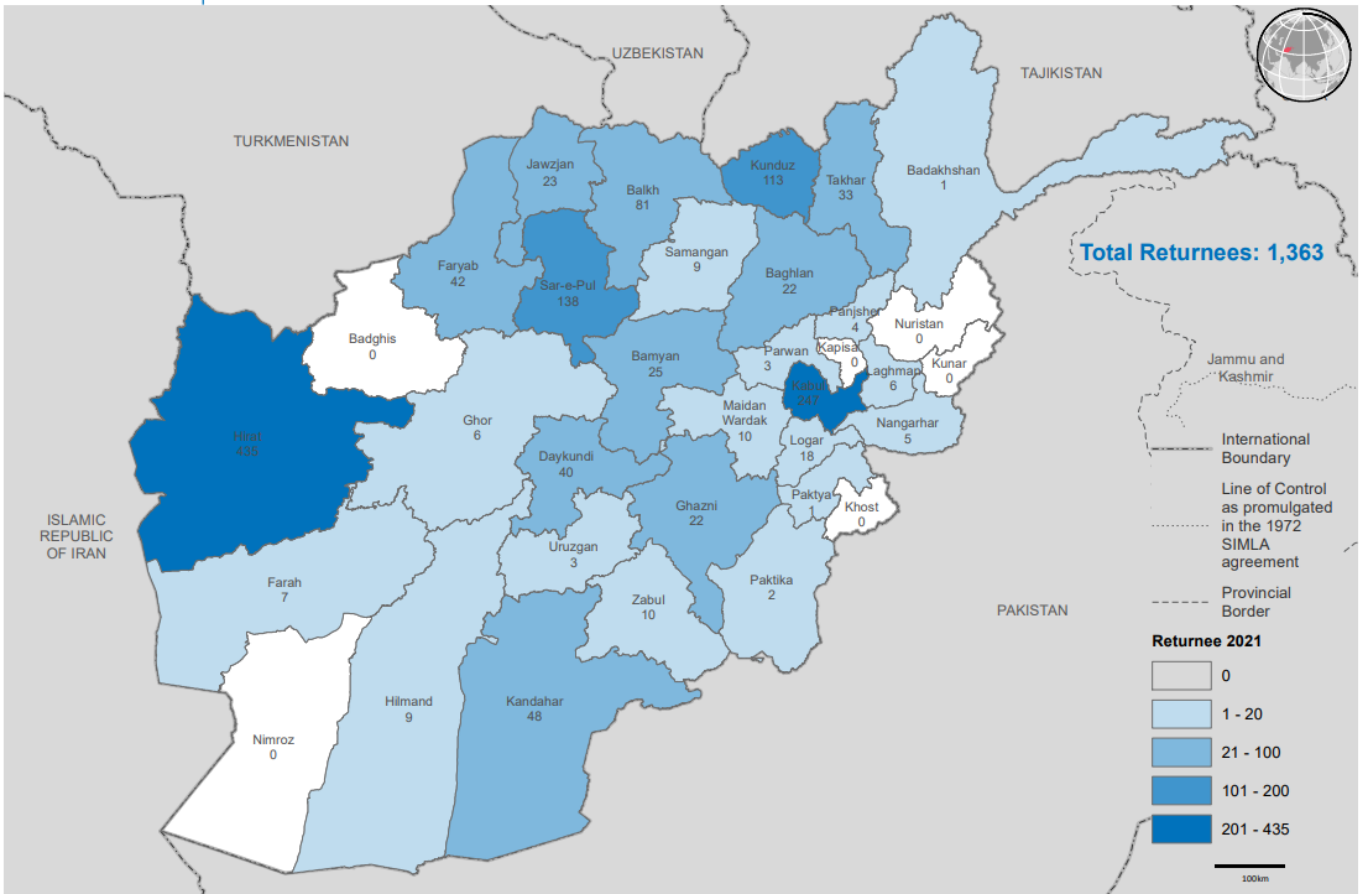


Comparison of recorded province of destination with province of origin
Top 10 province - 01 January - 31 December 2021

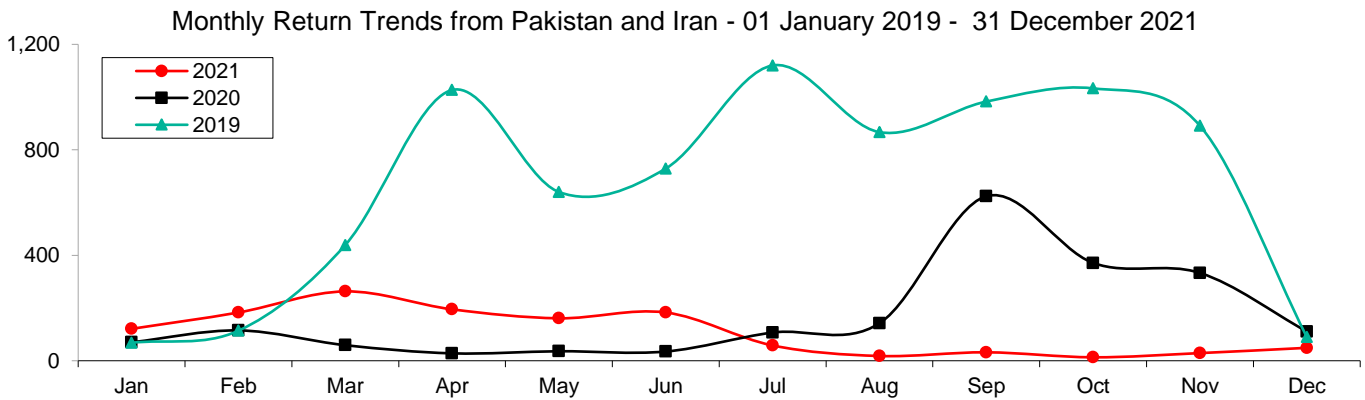


This chart illustrates the areas of origin of refugees versus their actual intended destination.

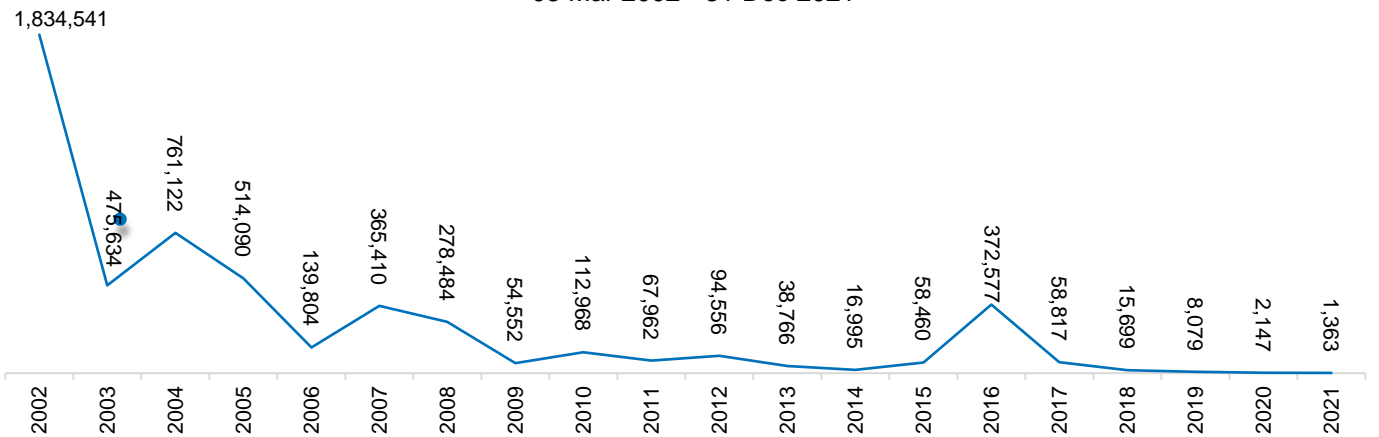
For instance, while 73 refugees declared Herat as their place of origin, 435 refugees declared Herat as their province of destination which means 362 refugees who are originally from other provinces made the decision to return to Herat province. Likewise, 156 refugees stated that they are originally from Sar-e-Pul province, but 138 returned to Sar-e-Pul and the remaining 18 went to other provinces.



sources: UNHCR - Afghanistan Kabul Feedback: AFGKAIMU@unhcr.org file Name : returnee 2021



Annual volrep trend from Pakistan, Iran and other countries to Afghanistan
03 Mar 2002 - 31 Dec 2021



Process of return

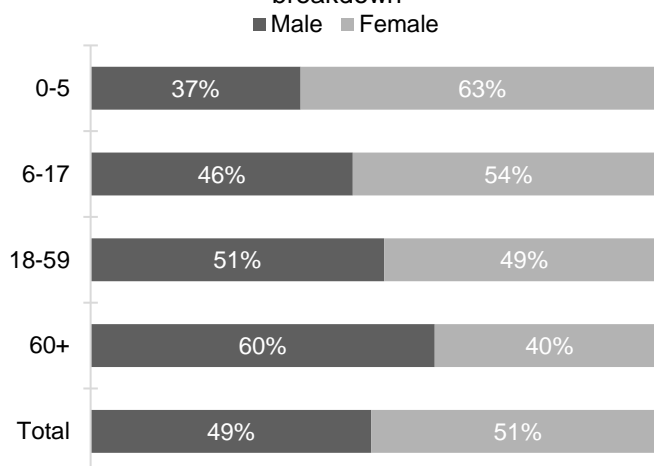
➤ UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Iran and Pakistan process refugees willing to return to Afghanistan and issue them a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF). Two VRCs are located in Pakistan: one in Azakhel in Peshawar (KPK) and another in Baleli in Quetta (Baluchistan). Repatriation from Iran is facilitated through all UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Soleimankhani.

➤ Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at four Encashment Centers (ECs) located in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar for returnees from Pakistan and other countries, and in Herat for returnees from Iran.

➤ At the ECs, all returnees with a valid VRF receive a one-off multisectoral assistance package, consisting of a cash grant amounting USD 250 per person (based on their area of origin) to prevent, mitigate, and respond to immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities upon return to Afghanistan and to cover their transportation costs. Most of interviewed returnees state that they intended to spend the cash grant to pay transportation costs to their places of origin/intended destination and buy food and other basic commodities.

➤ In addition to cash grants, a range of multi-sectoral services are provided to returning refugees at the ECs with inter-agency approach, including basic health and malnutrition screening and vaccination (by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) supported by WHO and UNICEF), mine risk awareness (by the Danish Demining Group supported by UNMAS), information on school enrolment (by the Ministry of Education supported by UNICEF), and overnight accommodation when needed.

Assisted refugee returnees age and gender breakdown



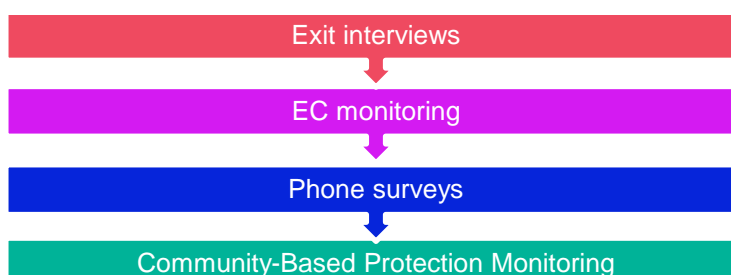
➤ Mine risk awareness is an important protection intervention to raise awareness of the threats associated with landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and unexploded ordnances to prevent injury and loss of life, particularly for children and those returning to rural areas.

➤ UNHCR, in line with the measures recommended by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and WHO, adopted a new operating procedure at all ECs in 2020, which aimed to prevent the spread and transmission of COVID-19. This includes awareness-raising sessions for all returnees using materials provided by MoPH and WHO, health screening, referral of suspected cases to health facilities, additional handwashing facilities, distribution of face masks for returnees and provision of PPE for staff including partner staff working in the ECs.

Returnee Monitoring

Returnee monitoring is an inherent part of the **protection monitoring** carried out by UNHCR in Afghanistan. UNHCR monitors refugee returnees through the entire process of voluntary repatriation.

UNHCR interviews refugees willing to return at the VRCs in the countries of asylum, monitors the return condition at the ECs in Afghanistan and follows up on the returnee's situation in the areas of return one to six months later through phone surveys. UNHCR is planning to launch the phone survey during the first quarter of 2022. UNHCR also monitors the situation of refugee returnees through its community-based protection monitoring, which allows UNHCR to assesses the protection environment, identify human rights violations and potential protection concerns returnees may face with after their return in Afghanistan to inform timely protection interventions, support and advocacy by UNHCR and other stakeholders.



ENCASHMENT CENTRE (EC) MONITORING

Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon their arrival in Afghanistan. It aims at identifying return trends through an assessment of the voluntariness of return, reasons for return, the level of information that returnees received in countries of asylum to allow them to make a well-informed decision whether to return, identify persons with specific needs to be referred for appropriate response, the conditions of return and respect for basic rights, as well as human rights violations experienced during return to be reported for appropriate response, and returnees' intentions for the future.

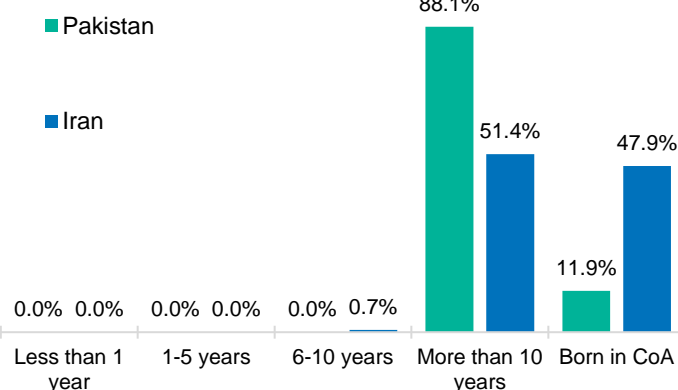
Between 01 January and 31 December 2021, a total of 232 refugee returnee households (1,276 individuals representing over 90% of total returnees) were interviewed, including 117 male and 115 female respondents. Interviewees are selected randomly among returning families from Iran (146 respondents), Pakistan (84 respondents), and other countries (2 respondents) at the ECs, which is the first point of contact between refugee returnees and UNHCR in Afghanistan.

Encashment Center Returnee Monitoring Findings

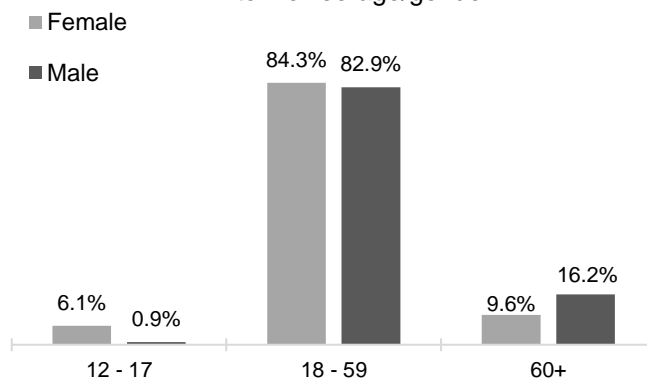
IN BRIEF

- 59% of Afghan refugee returnees interviewed at the ECs stated that they intend to return to their province of origin, while 41% stated that they would return to other provinces to reunify with relatives, seek income opportunities, due to perceived insecurity and lack of basic services.
- 88% of interviewed returnees from Pakistan and 51% from Iran returned after spending more than 10 years as refugees.
- 48% of returnees from Iran and 12% from Pakistan were born in the country of asylum.
- 84% of returnees stated they had information about the overall situation in Afghanistan, including the security situation in their place of origin, before leaving the country of asylum. The majority of the interviewed returnees (74%) stated that they received information from Afghan communities in the country of asylum (CoA).

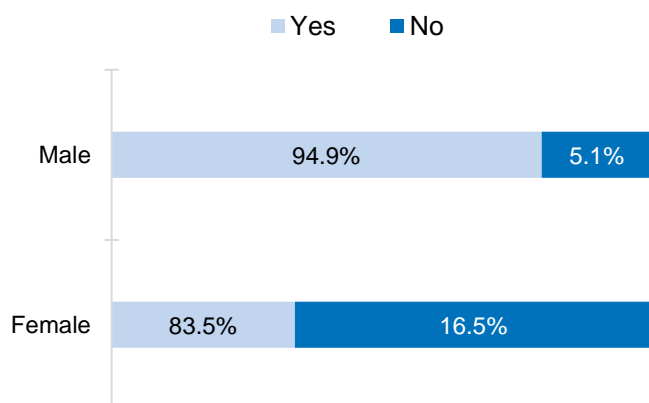
Displacement period



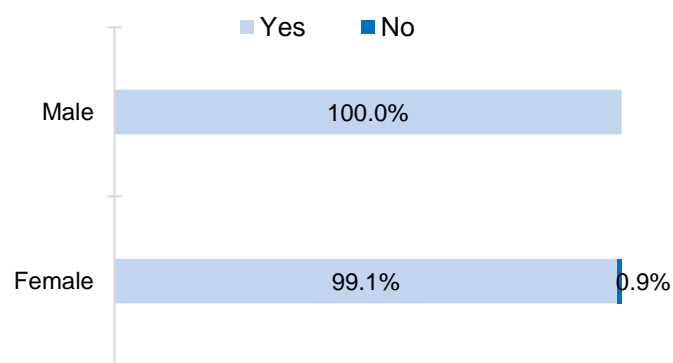
Interviewee age/gender



Awareness about cash grant

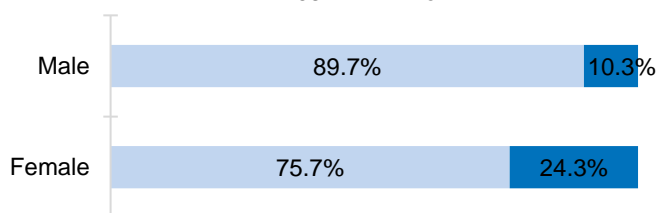


Did you receive any information about COVID-19 while you were in your CoA?

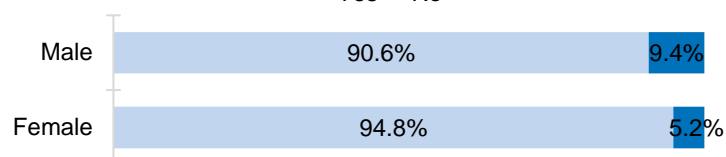
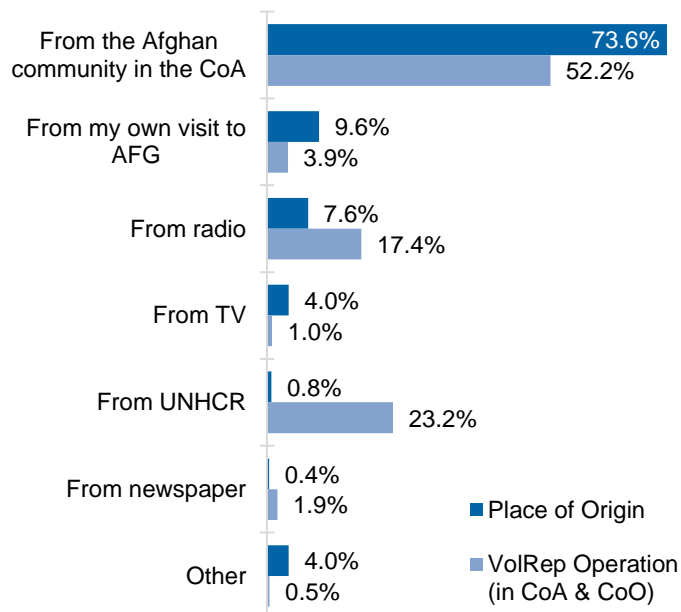
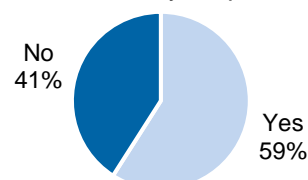
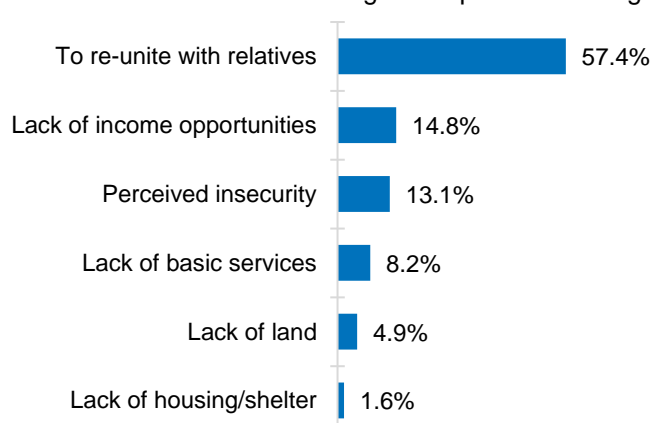


Awareness about the situation in country of origin

■ Yes ■ No


Did you receive any information about COVID-19 in the ECs?

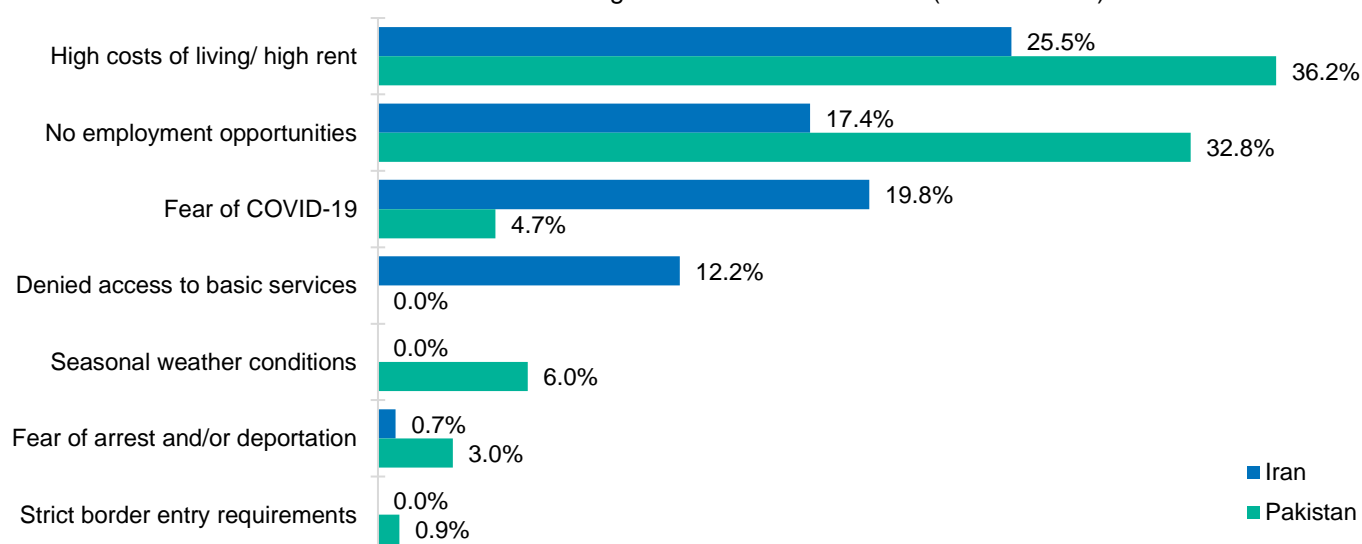
■ Yes ■ No

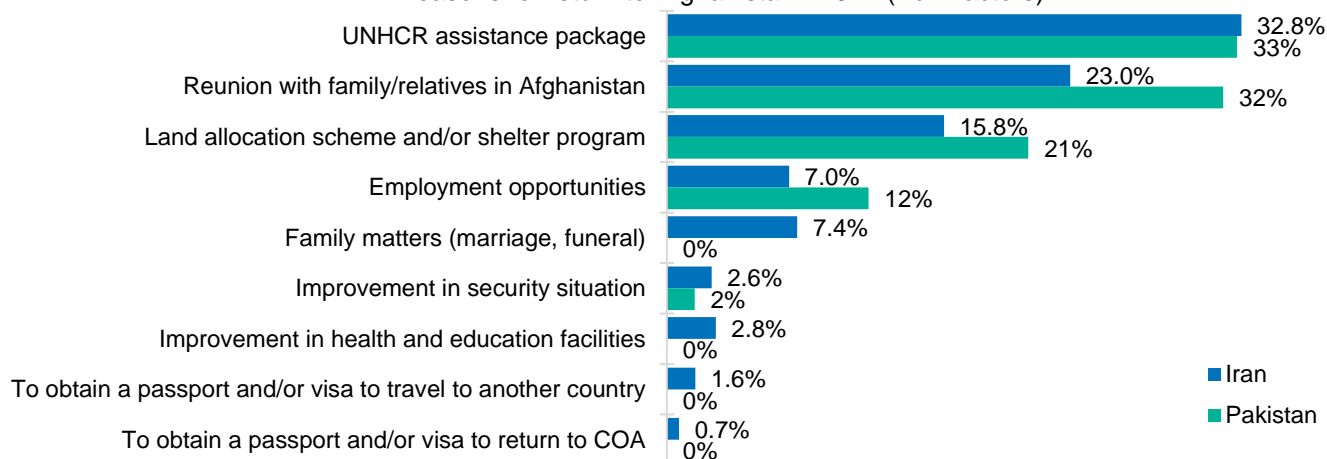

Sources of Information on Place of Origin and VolRep Program

Do you intend to return to your province of origin?

Reasons for not returning to the province of origin


Reasons for Return (Push and Pull Factors)

IN BRIEF

- The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran (push factors) stated by interviewed returnees were high cost of living, lack of employment opportunities and fear of COVID-19. While UNHCR's assistance package, reunifications with family/relatives, land allocation by the government of Afghanistan and perceived employment opportunities were mentioned as the reasons for return (pull factors) to Afghanistan.

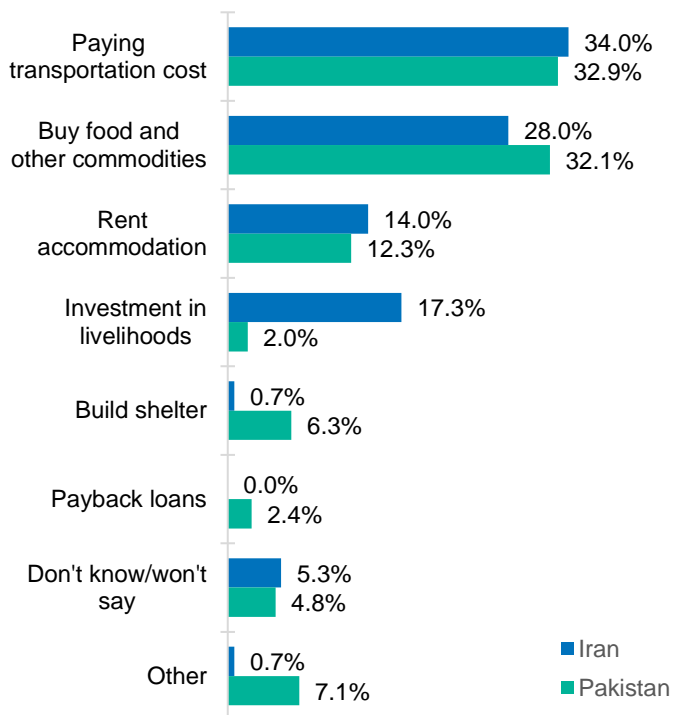
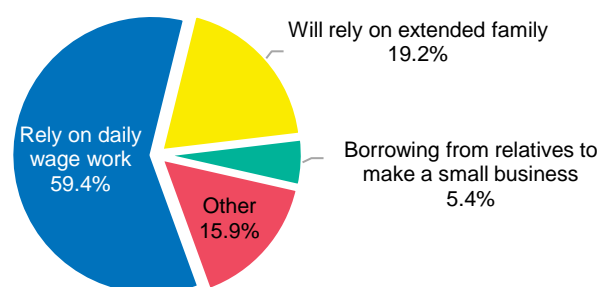
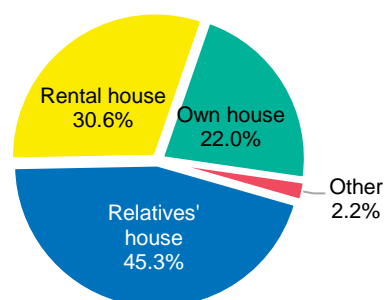
Reasons for Leaving Pakistan and Iran - 2021 (Push Factors)


Reasons for return to Afghanistan - 2021 (Pull Factors)


Note: except fear of COVID-19, the main reasons of return to Afghanistan (push and pull factors) in 2021 and 2020 for returnees from Pakistan and Iran are similar. Employment opportunities, improvement in health and education and improvement in security situation in Afghanistan were mainly mentioned by refugees prior to August 2021. Out of 232 interviews in 2021, a total of 42 interviews were carried out between 26 Aug – 31 Dec.

Intentions upon Return

These findings give an indication of returnees' intentions upon return, which may change after returnees settle in their communities. These findings also help compare dynamics among returnees during the return and reintegration phases.

Upon return, how do you plan to spend the cash grant?

Potential coping mechanisms after spending the cash grant

Stay arrangement after return


Skills/Education Mapping and Satisfaction Survey

To ensure a smooth VolRep procedure in the ECs, on 10 August 2020, UNHCR instituted a new assessment using Kobo. It is a short (5 min) survey conducted with all refugee returnee Heads of Household (HoHs) at ECs, aimed to assess returning refugees' satisfaction of the services provided at the ECs including the mitigating measures linked to COVID-19. In addition, this survey collects information on skills/qualifications and education level of returnee HoHs that enable ECs/field offices to provide possible information/referrals related to potential employment opportunities or ongoing training programs. This data also helps to design future livelihoods programmes in priority areas of return and reintegration in line with the skills of returnees.

Total Interviews: 753 (397 M and 356 F)
Education

- **64%** went to university (all from Iran). This figure is high because over **70%** of the total refugee returnees from Iran are university students who returned to Afghanistan to obtain/extend their passport validity and obtain an Iranian visa. On the other hand, education at university level among returnees from Pakistan was zero.
- **17%** of the interviewed returnee HoHs stated that they have no education (**18% F & 15% M**)
- **8 %** stated that they have minimal education (up to grade 6);
- **3%** up to grade 9;
- **7%** up to grade 12;
- **2%** went to madrasa

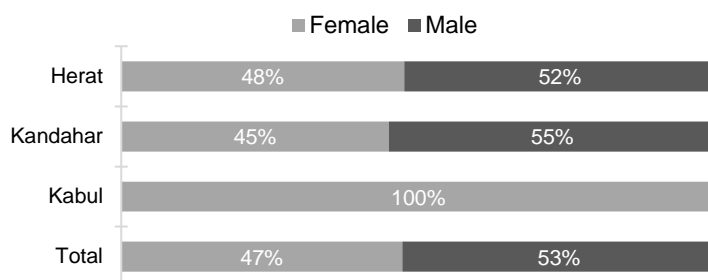
Skills

- **46%** stated that they have no skills
- Tailoring: 17%;
- Shopkeeper: 5%;
- Agriculture (farming): 4%;
- Teaching: 2%;
- Electrician: 2%;
- Stone carving: 2%;
- Electrician: 1%;
- Embroidery: 1%;
- Health worker: 1%;
- Carpet weaving: 1%;
- Computer repair: 1%
- Other skill: 19%;

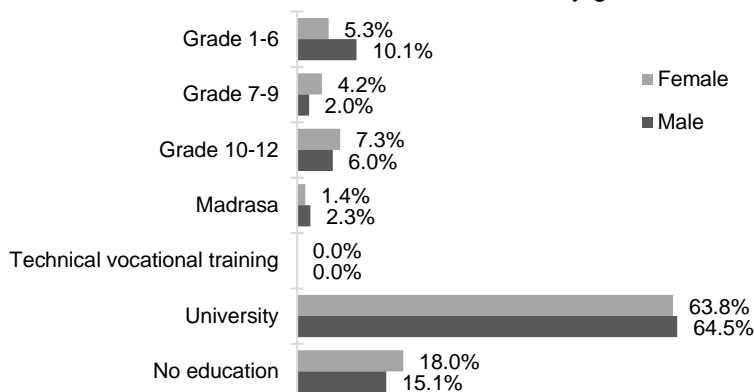
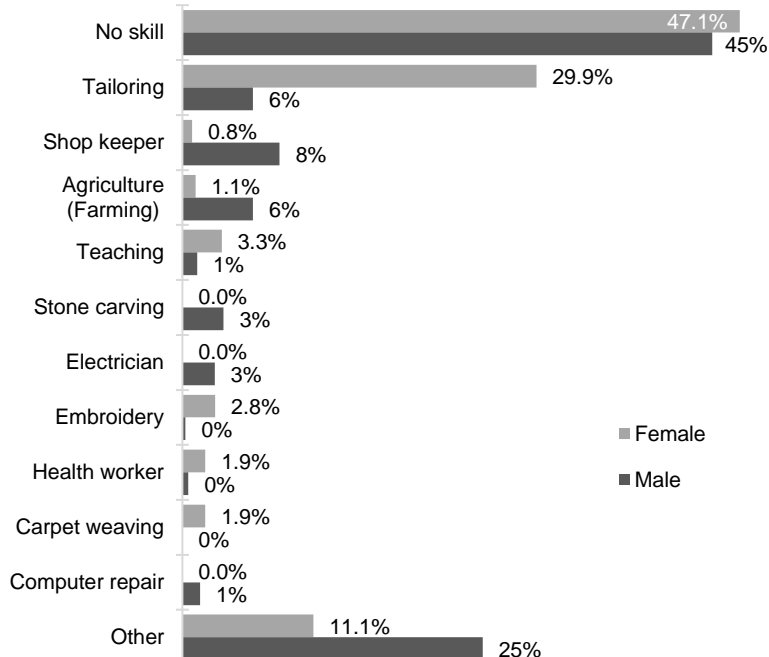
Note: The list of skills, which consist of 37 skills, is also used by other partners including the authorities. UNHCR also collects data on returnees' skills and qualifications at the village level.

Satisfaction regarding services at the ECs

- All interviewed returnees expressed their satisfaction with the services provided by UNHCR and other partners at all encashment centers.

Interviewed returnees with gender by EC


Note: No refugee returns through Jalalabad EC due to customs formalities imposed, since November 2020, by the authorities (Pakistan side) in Torkham. Interviews at Kabul EC are only conducted with female returnees; hence the sample size is 100%

Interviewed returnees education level by gender

Interviewed returnees skills/qualifications by gender


UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is grateful for the support of:

