


After Return

DOCUMENTING
THE EXPERIENCES
OF YOUNG PEOPLE
FORCIBLY REMOVED
TO AFGHANISTAN

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Refugee Support Network is a London-based charity working towards a world where all young people who have to flee their homes because of war are able to build more hopeful futures through education.

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Abbreviations

ANA	Afghan National Army
AGE	Anti-Government Entity
ARE	Appeal Rights Exhausted
AOG	Armed Opposition Groups
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
BAAG	British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
DLR	Discretionary Leave to Remain
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GP	General Practitioner
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
GER	Gross Enrolment Rates
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IT	Information Technology
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
MP	Member of Parliament
NUG	National Unity Government
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RSN	Refugee Support Network
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Executive summary

In 2015, 3,043 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children claimed asylum in the UK, 656 of whom were from Afghanistan.

The majority of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are granted a temporary form of leave, which allows them to remain in the UK until they reach the age of 18. Many of those who apply for further leave to remain in the UK are refused, and risk being forced to return to Afghanistan after spending formative years as looked after children in the UK care system. Since 2007, 2,018 care leavers have been forcibly removed to Afghanistan, yet no rigorous monitoring of their experiences or wellbeing after return has been carried out.

This report monitors 25 care leavers returned to Afghanistan, through a series of 153 interviews carried out in Kabul over a period of 18 months.

Without exception the young people monitored reported experiencing a range of interconnected difficulties on return. Some 17 returnees have made **contact with their families**, but only 12 have been able to live with them, and whilst some young returnees have been shown significant generosity and hospitality by friends and family, for the majority, these networks have disappeared, weakened or become fractured. A fear of stigma or discrimination has, in many cases, created a barrier to building open and honest friendships, leaving young people internally isolated and disconnected. Institutional support, particularly from IOM, has been helpful to a minority of young people, but the majority have faced substantial barriers to accessing help and remained either without support or dependent on unsustainable and ad-hoc assistance from individuals in the UK.

Insecurity has been found to be a very real part of life for young returnees, and coping with this is particularly difficult because of the contrast with the more peaceful life they had become accustomed to in the UK. Some 12 young people have had first-hand experiences of security incidents since return, in particular being caught up in bomb blasts or suicide attacks. In three cases, young people have been threatened or targeted as a result of issues connected to their original asylum claims, and seven young people have been targeted simply because of their status as a returnee.

For the vast majority of young returnees, **continuing their education** in Afghanistan has proved impossible. Only two of the 25 young returnees monitored have been in education at any time since return. Education, work and finance are inextricably linked for almost all young people. For those without family, the need to work (or search for work) in order to meet their basic needs has left them without time for study. For those with family, the pressure to contribute to the family unit after years of absence has also prevented them from studying. Education completed in the UK has rarely led to further education options in Afghanistan, with young people unable to evidence or gain recognition for studies completed in the UK.

Without strong personal networks and connections, finding **sustainable work** has been almost impossible for the young returnees monitored. Ten have not worked at all since returning, and only five have been in employment for more than three months since returning. The remaining 10 had found occasional day labour or temporary manual work that left them unemployed for long periods of time. Setting up a business was only a potentially viable option for the small minority with access to money and resources. Lack of work has hindered the majority of young returnees' ability to survive in Kabul, and 19 of the 25 young people monitored said that their work situation was so desperate they would have to leave Afghanistan again.

Mental health difficulties and a protracted deterioration in emotional wellbeing are clear and significant outcomes for former unaccompanied minors returned to Afghanistan. Seventeen young people reported experiencing mental health difficulties since return, whilst 22 described or exhibited symptoms of poor emotional wellbeing. Interruption in access to specialised care, especially where young people were receiving counselling or medication for mental health issues whilst living in the UK, was a recorded key challenge, with increased physical symptoms experienced in the absence of regular and appropriate treatment for mental health conditions. Fifteen of the young returnees reported physical health problems following return. Health care services, where sought out either for physical illness or mental health difficulties, varied in their effectiveness.

Unaffordable costs often prevented the young returnees from accessing or continuing essential support, or, on other occasions, insufficient resources or expertise prevented adequate health care provision.

Young returnees struggle to imagine or create a **future for themselves in Afghanistan**, with happy memories of their formative years in the UK making their current reality feel even more difficult. Fifteen young people reported that their plan for the future was to leave Afghanistan again, with only six describing a willingness to consider staying if they were able to secure employment and live in a safe place. At the close of the research process, six young people had already left Afghanistan, and the whereabouts of 11 more were unknown.

Young people's circumstances on return contrast starkly with the UK government's ambition to "give care leavers the same level of care and support that other young people receive from their parents"¹ and how distant they are from UK initiatives which have been created "to support [care leavers] into and through their early adult lives and into more secure and settled futures".² Seeking more settled futures for themselves, young returnees articulated their desire to leave Afghanistan again, in spite of the risks of the journey.

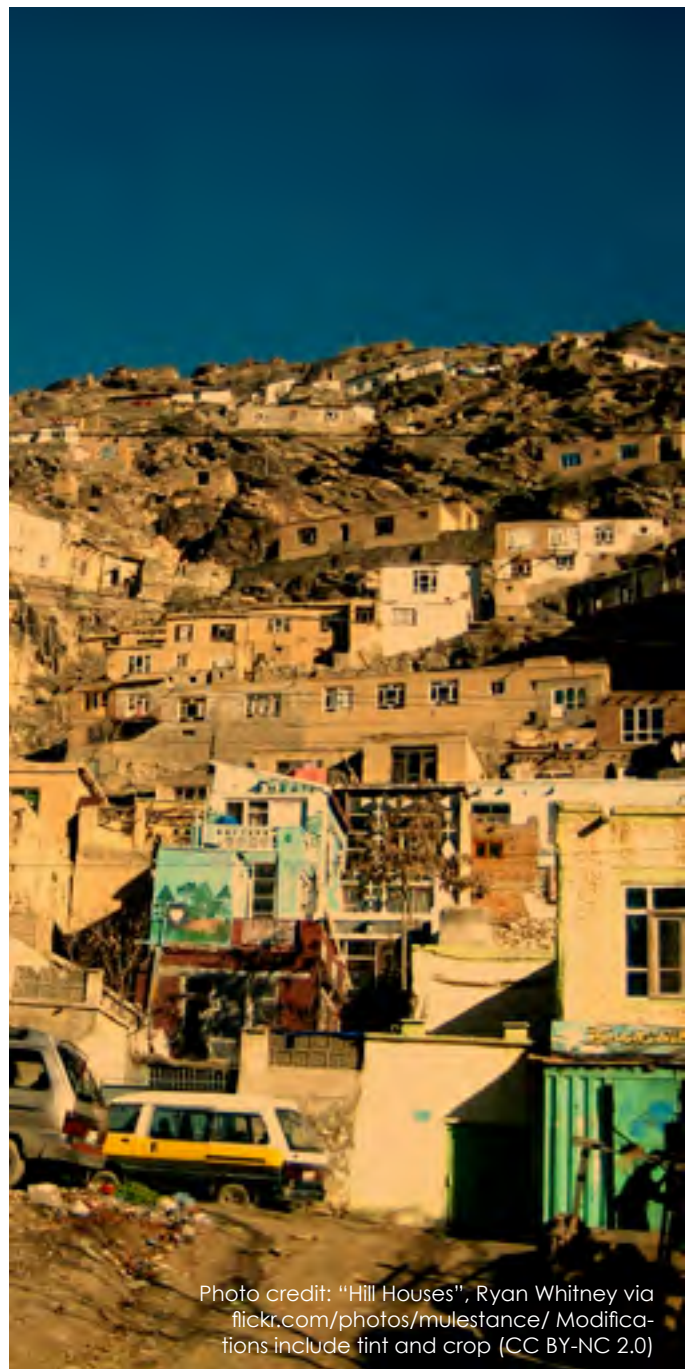


Photo credit: "Hill Houses", Ryan Whitney via flickr.com/photos/mulestance/ Modifications include tint and crop (CC BY-NC 2.0)

1 HM Government. 2014:3.
2 New Beginnings. 2016.

1. Introduction

In 2015, 3,043 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children claimed asylum in the UK, with Eritrea and Afghanistan being the two most common countries of origin (694 and 656 applications respectively), followed by Albania (456), Iran (208) and Syria (186).³

The Home Office defines unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as persons who are under 18 years of age when their asylum application is submitted; who are applying for asylum in their own right; and are separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.⁴ The vast majority of these young asylum seekers are temporary form of leave to remain in the UK until their 18th birthday (see Chapter 2 for more about the status granted to these young people).

Refugee Support Network provides education support for just under 400 unaccompanied minors and former unaccompanied minors across London, through its educational mentoring, specialist support work and access to higher education programmes. In 2012, RSN staff members began to receive telephone calls and text messages from young people they had worked with in London who had been forcibly returned to Afghanistan after reaching the age of 18.

It subsequently emerged that the majority of information available about life after return was anecdotal, or based on a very small number of cases - but that no rigorous monitoring of outcomes for young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan was taking place. RSN began this research, as a part of its Youth on the Move programme,⁵ in an attempt to contribute to this research gap.

This report builds on our previous report, Broken Futures,⁶ which explored young asylum seekers' experiences of turning 18 in the UK and becoming Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE), whilst also providing an initial overview of experiences post return. This report provides more detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of outcomes after return for a greater number of young Afghans over a longer period of time. The report is rooted in the conviction that we have a special duty of care to former unaccompanied minors as care leavers, regardless of their immigration status or geographical location. From an international perspective, former unaccompanied minors fall into the category of 'youth', defined by the United Nations (UN) as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The UN has called for the development of specific youth policies which address the needs of young people who are particularly vulnerable as a result of their current circumstances, political conditions, or long histories of social exclusion or discrimination.⁷ It seems clear to us that former unaccompanied minors constitute one of these groups.

3 The Refugee Council. 2016.

4 Coram Children's Legal Centre. 2013.

5 RSN's Youth on the Move programme aims to help ensure young people facing forced removal to Afghanistan are able to exhaust all legal routes to remaining in the UK and stay in education for as long as possible. Where young people are returned to Afghanistan, they were given the option of meeting with RSN's Monitoring Officer in Kabul and participating in this research project.

6 Gladwell, C. and Elwyn, H. 2012.

7 UNDESA. 2012.



Photo credit: Emily Bowerman (RSN)

2. Forced return

Under international and domestic law, the UK is prohibited from returning children to their countries of origin unless there are adequate reception facilities to return them to.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that a child should not be returned to the country of origin where there is a 'reasonable' risk that return would result in a violation of the child's fundamental human rights.⁸

Until April 2013, the majority of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the UK were given Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR), which was granted outside of the Immigration Rules and lasted for three years or until the child reached 17 and a half years old, whichever was the shorter period. On 6th April 2013, new legislation incorporating the granting of limited leave for unaccompanied children into the Immigration Rules came into effect. Should an unaccompanied child seeking asylum in the UK meet the requirements,⁹ they will now be granted a status referred to as Limited Leave for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, which lasts for 30 months, or until the child turns 17 and a half years old, whichever is the shorter period.¹⁰

When their DLR or Limited Leave expires, unaccompanied minors, the majority of whom are in the care of a Local Authority, have the right to apply for an extension of their leave to remain. However, few such applications are successful, meaning that the overwhelming majority enter an often long and confusing appeals process,¹¹ and ultimately face the

8 Gladwell, C. 2013.

9 The requirements to be met in order for a grant of limited leave to remain to be made in relation to an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child under paragraph 352ZE of the Immigration Rules are: a) the applicant is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child under the age of 17 ½ years throughout the duration of leave to be granted in this capacity; b) the applicant must have applied for asylum and been refused Refugee Leave and Humanitarian Protection; c) there are no adequate reception arrangements in the country to which they would be returned if leave to remain was not granted; d) the applicant must not be excluded from a grant of asylum under Regulation 7 of the Refugee or Person in Need of International Protection (Qualification) Regulations 2006 or excluded from a grant of Humanitarian Protection under paragraph 339D or both; e) there are no reasonable grounds for regarding the applicant as a danger to the security of the United Kingdom; f) the applicant has not been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, and the applicant does not constitute a danger to the community of the United Kingdom; and g) the applicant is not, at the date of their application, the subject of a deportation order or a decision to make a deportation order.

10 Coram Children's Legal Centre. 2013. Limited Leave for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Migrant Children's Project Factsheet.

11 Between 2010 and 2014, some 2,094 unaccompanied children

possibility of detention and forced removal to their countries of origin when they reach 18 and are no longer considered children.

As noted above, this report is grounded in the belief that former unaccompanied minors, although no longer children, constitute a special group with particular needs and deserving of tailored support. Care leavers are not recognised as a special group with additional support needs within the asylum system – they are simply children in care when they are 17 years old, and adults subject to immigration control when they are 18 years old. Our 2013 report outlined the ample evidence that such a clear-cut dichotomy is in practice both unrealistic and unhelpful, arguing that lived experiences of severe conflict, psychosocial distress, exploitation and cultural dislocation impede and disrupt the transition to both cognitive and emotional maturity in large numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.¹²

For unaccompanied minors who have spent their teenage years in the care of the Local Authority, this experience of coming to the end of their leave to remain in the UK coincides with the experience of leaving care. For some this means having to move out of their foster family; for others, entering a stage of more precarious and lesser support from the Local Authority. Practitioners interviewed for our 2013 report had in fact experienced unaccompanied minors becoming more vulnerable at 18, not less, as a result of the large number of changes and uncertainty they face as they approach majority. Instead of becoming more able to cope with changes and transition as they reached 18, many became less able to do so. It is in this context that former unaccompanied minors who have reached the age of 18 face the possibility of detention and removal to their country of origin.

applied for further leave to remain in the UK. Nine hundred applications were refused, and 809 young people appealed against the decision. After appeal, 24 were allowed to stay; 630 appeals were dismissed, 146 were undecided, and fewer than 10 were withdrawn. Of the 630 young people whose appeals were dismissed, 79 have gone missing. (Home Office figures, cited in Smith, N. 2016.)

12 Gladwell, C and Elwyn, H. 2013.

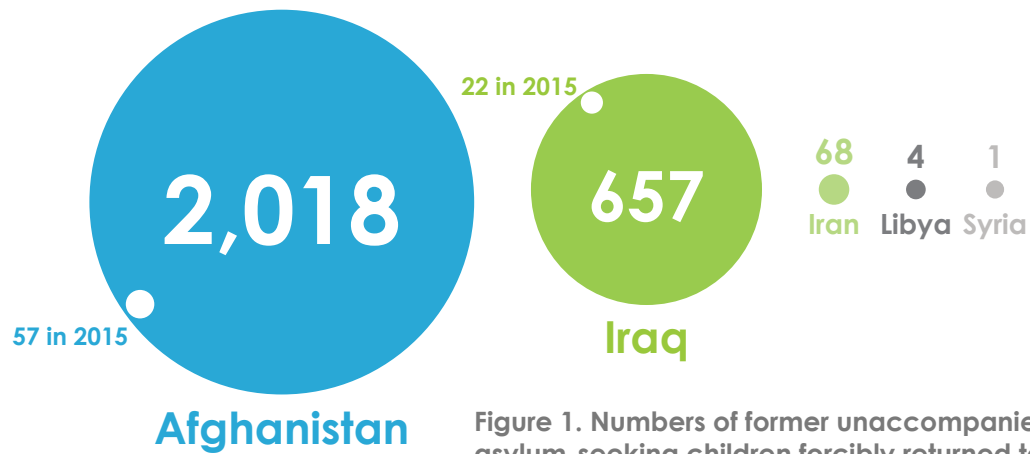


Figure 1. Numbers of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children forcibly returned to their country of origin after turning 18 since 2007.

In February 2016, the Home Office published new figures, revealing that the numbers of former unaccompanied minors forcibly removed to countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Libya and Syria had been significantly underestimated.¹³ Prior to February 2016, official Home Office data suggested that 1,040 former unaccompanied minors had been forcibly removed to their countries of origin since 2007. It is now known that 2,748 young people have been forced to return, the vast majority to Afghanistan.

¹³ New figures released as a result of Parliamentary Questions from the Labour MP Louise Haigh (see Bureau of Investigative Journalism. 2016.)

Despite these high numbers, there has been no official monitoring of the wellbeing and outcomes for young people forcibly removed to their country of origin.

The following sections of this report address this significant gap, documenting the post-return experiences of 25 young people forced to return to Kabul.



Photo credit: Sara Shinkfield

3. Afghanistan overview

Afghanistan continues to battle a number of complex and interrelated challenges, most notably growing insecurity, especially in urban centres, and the impact of a significantly weakened economy following the gradual withdrawal of international forces since 2014.

Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG), established after a contentious election in 2014 and led by President Ashraf Ghani, continues its attempts at constructive dialogue with representatives of the Taliban, the leading anti-government entity (AGE), but faces ongoing opposition from other fragmented parties, including groups aligning themselves with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Government officials, and police and security forces, are targeted in attacks, whilst a nationwide perception of government corruption reduces public trust and acceptance of the NUG's effectiveness. A rise in the numbers of people migrating from Afghanistan, especially to European nations, was observed in 2015 and the start of 2016, with Afghan asylum applications in Europe in the final quarter of 2015 forming 18% of total applications received for asylum.¹⁴

2015 saw the highest-recorded numbers of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, exceeding those recorded in 2014 by 4%, with 11,002 civilian casualties (3,545 deaths and 7,457 injured).¹⁵ Increased pressure on the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) and its security forces to counter-defend armed opposition groups (AOGs), as well as a heightened push from those groups to secure control of or to destabilise urban provincial centres (Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Mazar-e-Sharif) were observed. A change in the nature and seasonality of fighting was also evident, with increased numbers of complex attacks, indiscriminately facilitated by opposition groups in civilian-populated areas in the traditionally 'quieter' winter season, a trend that has continued into 2016.¹⁶ The push by opposition groups

to seize control of 24 individual district centres was met with an increase in ground fighting with GoA security forces, and heightened numbers of civilian casualties.¹⁷ The sharpest increase in numbers of civilian casualties was experienced in the northeast and central regions (collectively enduring 3,731 casualties), though the highest numbers of casualties remained concentrated in the southern regions, with 2,537 individual casualties recorded.¹⁸

AOGs or AGEs¹⁹ were responsible for 62% of individual casualties in 2015.²⁰ Of particular concern is the nature of these attacks, which show increasing disregard for human life with the employment of "targeted killings of civilians, complex and suicide attacks, as well as indiscriminate and illegal pressure-plate Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)", most observed.²¹ A worrying increase in persecution on the grounds of ethnicity or religious sectarianism was also observable, as evidenced with the targeted kidnap and execution of seven Hazaras in Zabul province on 10 November 2015.²²

Following the gradual withdrawal of approximately 150,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel from 2014 onwards, the GoA has come under increased pressure to independently manage security across Afghanistan and maintain control

Consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif in January 2016; an attack against Afghan news station, Tolo TV, which resulted in the fatalities of seven employees in Kabul, also in January 2016; an attack on a police base in Kabul in February 2016; an attack against the Afghan Ministry of Defence in Kabul in February 2016, and; an attack near the Indian Consulate in Jalalabad in March 2016.

17 UNAMA. 2016.

18 UNAMA. 2016.

19 UNAMA defines Anti-Government Entities, AGEs, as encompassing: "all individuals and armed groups involved in armed conflict with or armed opposition against the Government of Afghanistan and/or international military forces. They include those who identify as 'Taliban' as well as individuals and non-State organised armed groups taking a direct part in hostilities and assuming a variety of labels including the Haqqani Network, Hezb-e-Islami, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union, Lashkari Tayyiba, Jaysh Muhammed, groups identified as 'Daesh' and other militia and armed groups pursuing ideological or economic objectives including armed criminal groups directly engaged in hostile acts on behalf of a party to the conflict." (UNAMA. 2016: 3).

20 UNAMA. 2016. Though this represents a decrease from 2014 of 10%, UNAMA emphasises that this can likely be attributed to the increased number of individual casualties for whom it was not possible to attribute responsibility to one specific AGE party, which were 84% higher figures recorded in 2014 (UNAMA. 2016).

21 UNAMA Press Release. 2016. 1.

22 Al Jazeera. 2015; Reuters. 2015; BBC World News. 2015a.

14 Eurostat Statistics Explained. 2016. Afghanistan was second only to Syria in terms of the numbers of asylum applications received in European states in the final quarter of 2015 (with 79,300 asylum applications received between October and December 2015).

15 UNAMA. 2016. Since UNAMA began monitoring the numbers of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, from 01 January 2009, they have recorded 58,736 civilian casualties in total, through to 31 December 2015 (21,323 deaths and 37,413 injured).

16 Significant attacks carried out in December 2015 included a complex attack at Kandahar international airport, killing at least 50 people; a siege attack against the Spanish Embassy in Kabul, resulting in 6 fatalities; and a suicide-bomber attack close to Kabul international airport, resulting in approximately 34 casualties (including one fatality). In 2016, this trend has continued, with further attacks in close proximity to Kabul international airport recorded in January 2016; an attack on the Indian

in individual provinces. Increased fragmentation of AGEs, including Taliban groups, as well as the rise of more extreme opposition groups aligning themselves with ISIL, known locally as 'Daesh', has meant that government forces must contend with more complex and multi-faceted conflicts.²³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) records that in 2015, AGEs pushed forward to challenge "Government control of territory, seizing more district administrative centres and holding them for longer than in previous years".²⁴ Perhaps the most significant example of this was the 'fall of Kunduz' to Taliban forces in September 2015. This challenge to GoA control, even after government security forces regained control of the area, resulted in nationwide pessimism at the GoA's ability to counteract Taliban insurgency, with 67.4% of Afghans reporting that they "always, often, or sometimes fear for their personal safety, the highest percentage in a decade".²⁵

The impact of the growing deterioration in security across Afghanistan has not just been felt in terms of numbers of civilian casualties. As UNAMA reports:

*"Throughout 2015, conflict-related violence destroyed homes, livelihoods and property, displaced thousands of families and restricted the freedom of civilians to access to education, health and other services. Moreover, the short and long-term effects of growing insecurity, weakened civilian protection and lack of respect for human rights and international humanitarian law will continue long beyond these immediate impacts. Generations of people in Afghanistan suffer the physical and mental effects of the conflict, receiving little or no support from Government institutions."*²⁶

Internal displacement of civilians has risen dramatically, with a spike in numbers of people moving to city centres leading to escalating urbanisation focused in specific regional centres. Collectively, Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad "are home to 69% of the [total] urban population" across Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals,²⁷ whilst the population of Kabul itself is estimated to have "grown at a rate of almost 10% per year during the last decade."²⁸ The number of attacks on these urban centres is also increasing.

23 Civilian casualties resulting from pro-government forces, most notably Afghan security forces, increased by 28% from 2014 (UNAMA. 2016:3-4). This might be explained by the heightened pressure that they are coming under from fragmented groups, as well as a lesser degree of training than international forces that have now withdrawn.

24 UNAMA. 2016: 6. UNAMA further records that "in 2015, Taliban forces captured 24 district centres, compared to four in 2014", of which four "remained under Taliban control at the end of 2015". (UNAMA. 2016. 7).

25 The Asia Foundation. 2015. 7.

26 UNAMA. 2016: 2.

27 Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2015: 11.

28 Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2015: 10.

Unemployment represents a significant and growing challenge, with 50% of Afghanistan's population unemployed at some time in 2015.²⁹ Seventy-four per cent of respondents in a survey conducted by The Asia Foundation cited unemployment as the biggest problem facing Afghan youth.³⁰ Under 25s now make up 67% of Afghanistan's total population, and 47% are aged 14 years and younger, suggesting that, without targeted intervention by the GoA and the international community, employment options for young people will continue to diminish for the foreseeable future.³²

Factors affecting employment include the reduction in international investment, especially following the staggered withdrawal of international forces in 2014 and the associated reduction in employment opportunities within international organisations. The protracted conflict's influence on internal displacement, as well as the rise in numbers of returnees being forcibly repatriated from Iran and Pakistan also add to these challenges.³³

The situation faced by the returnee population is in fact bleaker, with unemployment and difficulties securing a sustainable livelihood an especial challenge for returnees and IDPs, particularly those attempting to re-settle in Kabul and Herat.³⁴ Whilst there is funding available to support child returnees, there is almost no funding available for those aged 18 and over.³⁵ There are limited support structures in place for returnees, especially those returning from Europe, and a growing burden on families to provide assistance, where contact with them is possible. These factors are leading increasing numbers of returnees to consider, or attempt, leaving Afghanistan a second time, and to take similarly dangerous risks in doing so.³⁶

29 Alexander, L. 2015.

30 The Asia Foundation. 2015a: 6. This survey records that 25.4% of surveyed Afghans who feel that Afghanistan is not moving in the right direction cited "unemployment", whilst 12.4% cited "a weak economy", as their primary rationale for this statement.

31 Alexander, L. 2015.

32 Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2015.

33 Since 2002, 4.7 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan through UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme. There has been variance in the numbers that have returned year-by-year, with the lowest numbers of returnees recorded in 2014 (56% lower than those in the preceding year), but numbers have increased again in 2015 (with a further 50,503 returnees by August 2015). UNHCR records that "97% of the returnees are coming from Pakistan and give as reasons for their decision to return a deteriorating environment with decreasing tolerance of the presence of refugees". (UNHCR. 2015).

34 IOM. IOM Afghanistan Newsletter: Autumn 2015.

35 Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2015. See also Majidi, N. 2015.

36 The Asia Foundation. 2015.

4. Methodology

This research is based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of primary data collected with forced returnees in Afghanistan between March 2014 and December 2015.³⁷

In order to participate in the research, a returnee must have spent time in the UK as an unaccompanied minor in the care of the Local Authority. The majority of the participants were referred to RSN's Youth on the Move programme whilst still in the UK³⁸, and then referred to the RSN Monitoring Officer on return to Kabul.

Over the course of the research period, 29 young returnees were in contact with the RSN Monitoring Officer. However, three young people were able to be contacted only once, briefly, by telephone, and a fourth young person participated in face to face interviews but had arrived in the UK as an 18 year old and so never been in the care of the Local Authority. In order to ensure the rigour of the data, none of these young people have been included in the statistics or analysis of this report, and the final data refers to the 25 young people who fulfilled the eligibility criteria and were monitored on an ongoing basis.³⁹

Research participants were interviewed as soon as possible after their return to Afghanistan (IAR), and then at regular intervals one month after return (IM1); three months after return (IM3); 6 months after return (IM6); 9 months after return (IM9); and 12 months after return (IM12)). Those returnees who were only able to contact the RSN Monitoring Officer some months after their return completed a 'late discovery' interview (ILR), and then continued with the schedule from that point.⁴⁰

37 Interviews with returnees were conducted for an initial 12 months from March 2014 - March 2015. The research time-frame was then extended for nine months to allow for additional interviews and follow up on particular issues and with particular young people.

38 In order to be referred to RSN's Youth on the Move project, a young person must be a former unaccompanied minor who has spent formative years in the UK care system, has failed in their application for further leave following the expiration of their Discretionary Leave to Remain, and has become Appeal Rights Exhausted.

39 During the course of the research, it transpired that seven young returnees had taken a form of voluntary return to Afghanistan. However, without exception all viewed themselves to have had no other choice, and self-identified as forced returnees. The research team considered removing all data from these young people from this report, but, following robust analysis of the relevant transcripts, no differences in outcomes or nature of experience were able to be observed, and so their experiences have remained a part of this study. The one exception to this is in Chapter 6: Networks and Institutional Support, where the distinctions in the experiences at IOM are clearly noted.

40 So, for example, a young person contacting the RSN Monitoring Officer three months after return would complete a late discovery interview, followed by a six month, nine month and

At the end of the research process, all participants were contacted for a final interview (IFI). In addition all young returnees had at least one supplementary interview (SI) about specific issues they were facing. In total 153 interviews were facilitated. In total 153 interviews were facilitated. To protect the identity of the young people participating in the research, they have each been allocated a number between 1 and 25, and are referred to as Returnee (R) 1 etc. throughout.

Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and finalised following input from the project's Kabul-based advisory board.⁴¹ They were conducted in Kabul by RSN's Monitoring Officer, and by three UK RSN staff members who made field visits to support the research process.

Two key challenges were experienced during the research, namely initiating contact with certain young returnees, and then maintaining in contact with them throughout the research period. Forty-five young people⁴² were referred to the RSN Monitoring Officer in Kabul, yet it was not possible to establish contact with 16 after return (even where the young person had indicated that they wanted to be connected with Abdul). It is not known why these young people either chose or were not able to contact the Monitoring Officer, but it is of potential concern that it was impossible to establish contact with such a significant number of young returnees (36% of total number referred). In addition, it was challenging to remain in contact with returnees in order to facilitate the ongoing interviews. Six of the young people left Afghanistan during the research process, and an additional 12 relocated away from Kabul. Where possible, in-depth telephone or Skype interviews were conducted with young people no longer in Kabul. In the case of 11 young people, contact ceased before the end of the research process (without exception because contact details held no longer worked), with their eventual whereabouts or wellbeing currently unknown.

twelve month interview.

41 The Kabul-based advisory board comprises a mixture of specialists in forced migration and return, with representatives from UNHCR, IOM, Samuel Hall, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, The Liaison Office, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxford University and City University London.

42 This total includes the four young people mentioned above who have not been included in the report statistics (as a result of brevity of contact or age on arrival in the UK).

Interview transcripts and quantitative data were then coded and analysed by researchers in RSN's London office, using NVIVO software.

It is of paramount importance that no harm should come to any participants as a result of this study. For this reason all quotes from former unaccompanied minors are identified by codings only. Where more detailed case-studies have been provided, the names used are pseudonyms. No young returnees were asked to risk travel to Kabul in order to participate in an interview - where possible interviews were scheduled to coincide with trips to

Kabul young people already had planned, and, where this was not possible, telephone or Skype interviews were conducted. 'Harm' also includes feelings of discomfort, which may be caused as some questions lead former unaccompanied minors to reflect on difficult experiences or circumstances. In order to minimise such discomfort, young people were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time, and were not obliged to answer any question they did not wish to. Efforts to create a young person-friendly interview environment were also undertaken at all times.

About the young returnees monitored

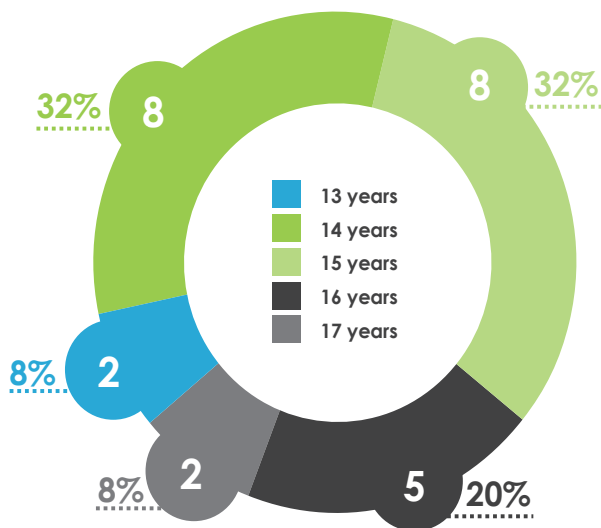


Figure 2. Age upon arrival in the UK

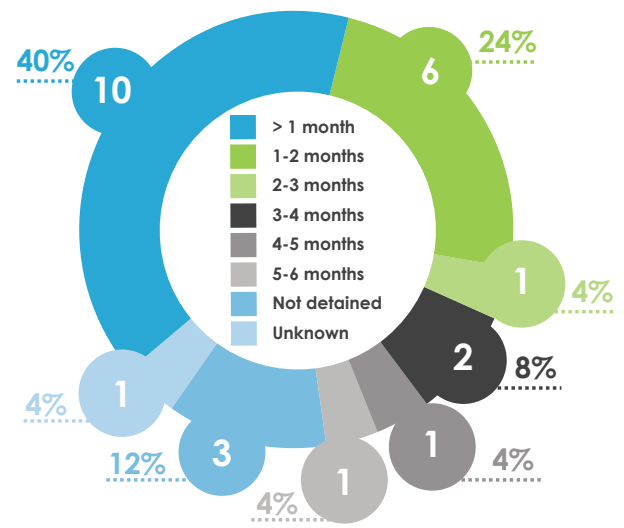


Figure 4. Number of months the young person was detained prior to forced return

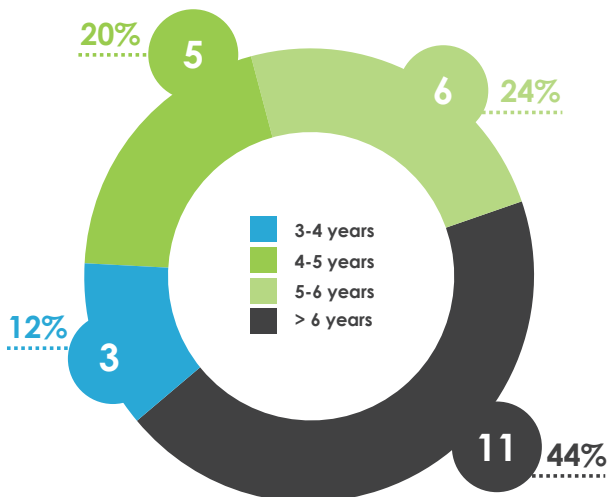


Figure 3. Number of years spent living in the UK

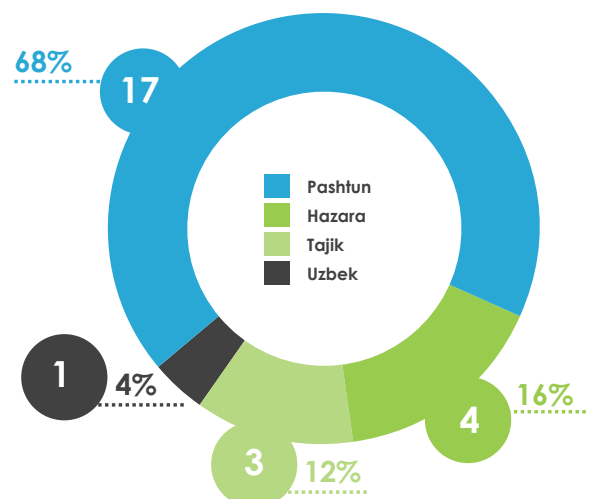


Figure 5. Ethnicity

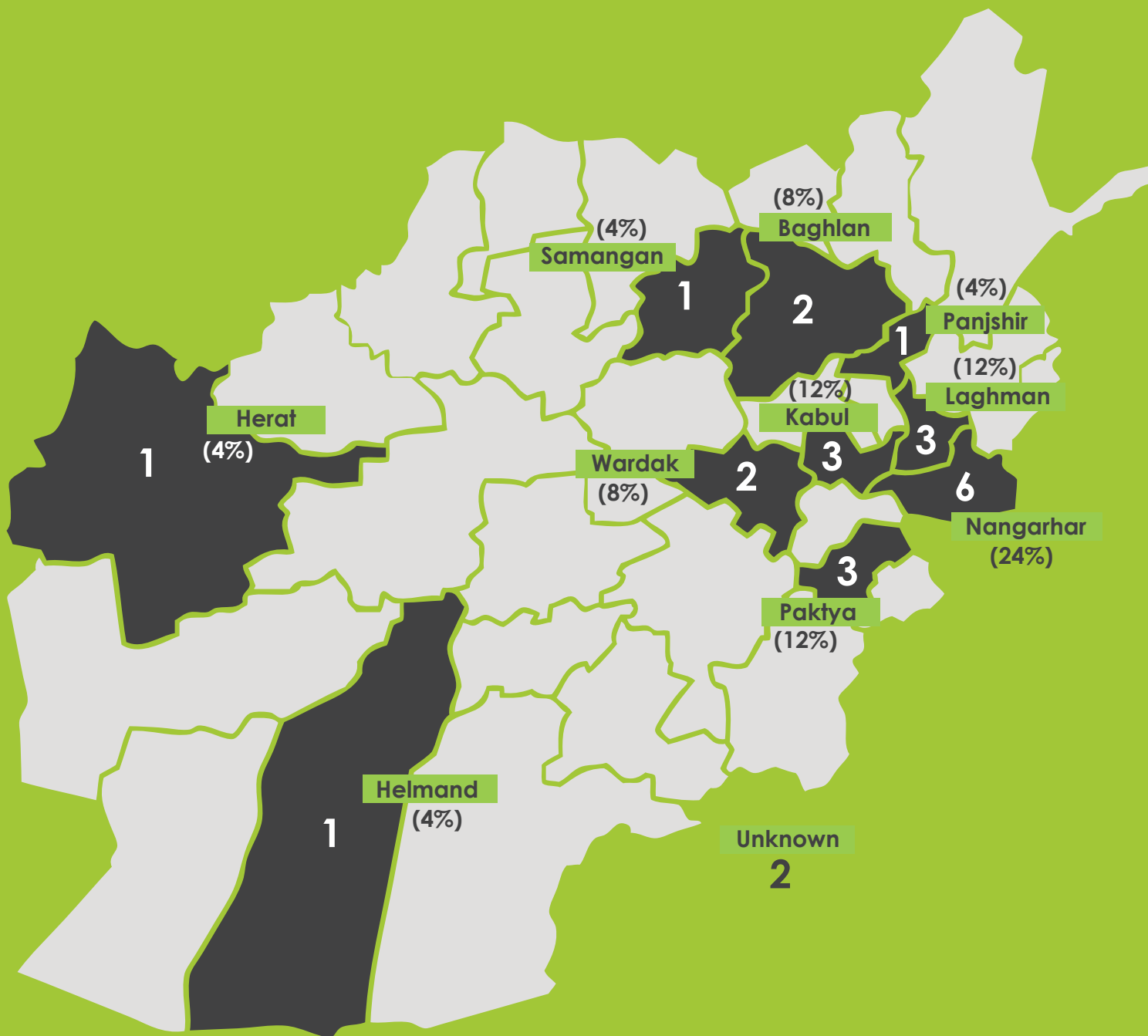


Figure 6. Province of origin



Photo credit: Emily Bowerman (RSN)

5. Reintegration

Overview

The young returnees monitored for this report spent their formative years in the UK care system. After return, they had to begin the practical and psychosocial process of attempting to adapt to life in Afghanistan. This section explores three key practicalities of life immediately after return - choosing a location to reside in, finding accommodation to live in and sourcing money to finance basic needs.

Key trends and statistics

The majority of young returnees monitored have experienced significant practical challenges on return to Afghanistan, with their logistical and practical efforts hampered by security concerns, a lack of social networks and fears of becoming a burden on others. Almost two thirds have not been able to remain in Kabul, and have moved on to other provinces. Over half have not been able to live with their family and have had to source accommodation elsewhere, often with great difficulty. Financial difficulties have also been a key feature of life for the majority of young returnees.

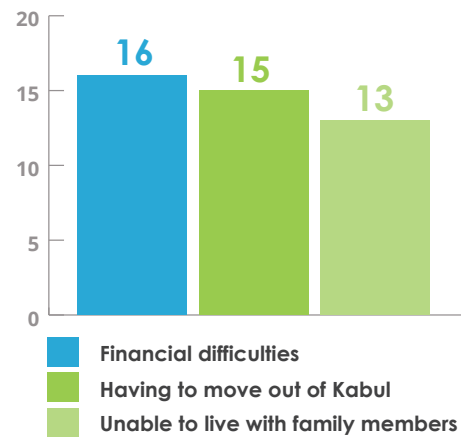


Figure 7. Key challenges affecting reintegration following return

Location following return

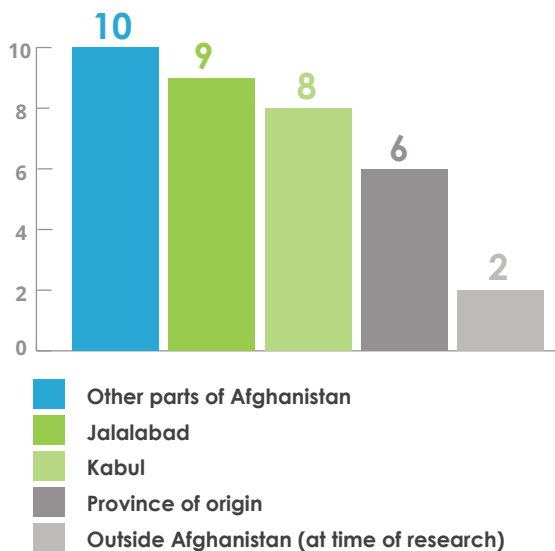


Figure 8. Location following return

Security

Security, or lack of it, is the dominant factor informing young returnees' location in Afghanistan (for more on experiences of insecurity, see Chapter 7). The young returnees monitored have prioritised security (or perceptions of security) over the whereabouts of family, employment opportunities and cost of living when making decisions about location. One young returnee described how

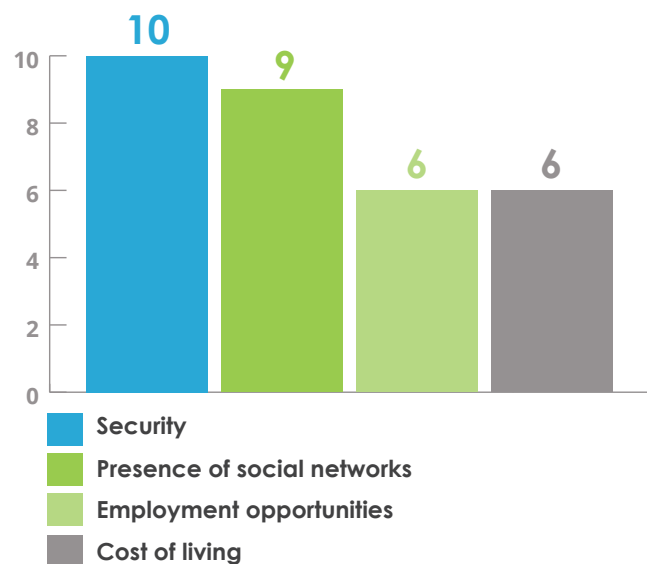


Figure 9. Influencing factors affecting young returnee's location following return

insecurity has been a barrier to him reuniting with his family, saying "my mum and sister are in Lashkar Gar, but it's too dangerous for me to be there... I would like to see my mum and my sister and they want to see me, but it is very dangerous to travel to Helmand" (R15, ILD).

In many cases, this prioritisation of security in choice of location has led to frequent and often sudden moves. During the course of the research, 15 young

returnees are known to have moved, with many doing so as a result of heightened insecurity. One young person explained that he would move to a neighbouring province “whenever I was witnessing any security problem...until it became quieter... I went to Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz and Takhar. Each time I was living from 2 weeks up to 1 month in those provinces. And then I was coming back to Samangan” (R13, IFI). Repeated moves have prevented young returnees from viewing their location as a long-term home where a life can be gradually built, and have created a constant sense of temporality and instability.

Presence and absence of social networks

Although insecurity may at times prevent young returnees moving to live with friends or family, nine young returnees still described the presence or absence of social networks as a key factor influencing their location (or attempts to locate themselves in a particular place).

Motivated by the potential of establishing a social network, one young returnee chose to move out of Afghanistan to Peshawar in Pakistan, explaining “I did not have anyone in Kabul or Afghanistan”, but that, because his uncle was in Pakistan, “it was much easier for me to come back here and find somebody who could help me settle” (R07, IAR). For other young people, it is not the presence of family that draws them away from Kabul, but a lack of family in their province of origin that forces them to remain there. One young returnee explained that going back to a province of origin without family there was nigh on impossible, and that he therefore couldn't return to Ghazni, “because I don't have any family network [there] to go to” (R08, ILD).

For young people without family remaining in Afghanistan, the decision about where to live was often based on the location of less stable networks. One young returnee, who returned to Afghanistan with no connections other than those he met on the return flight, said that “I am staying in Jalalabad. I came here with some of the other returnees who came with me in the same plane” (R10, IAR).

The role of social networks - friends, family and acquaintances - in helping young returnees to adapt to life back in Afghanistan is critical (and explored further in Chapter 6). Their presence influences access to basic necessities, emotional support, and future prospects - and is thus key in informing young people's attempts to locate, or relocate, in a particular place.



Photo credit: 'Afghanistan market scene' IFDC via flickr.com/photos/ifdcphotography (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Employment opportunities and cost of living

Whilst Chapter 9 analyses the search for employment and barriers to finding work, it must be noted here that employment prospects were the third most significant factor affecting young returnees' location or moves, with six young people citing this as a strong influence. One young returnee, for example, explained how he “came to Kabul for the search of work, but I could not stay there more than a day - there was no work, and the expenses were too high so I chose to go back to Jalalabad” (R06, IM9). Other young people have felt compelled to move away from family in order to attempt to find work, and for some, the lack of employment opportunities have fuelled their desire to leave Afghanistan again. One told us that having failed to find work in his current province, he would be forced to “go to another province or the capital...and if I don't find work there I will have to try to go back to another European country rather than starving here in Afghanistan” (R09, IAR).

In the majority of cases however, moving cities in order to try and secure employment has not proved successful. Work has either not been found, or has been temporary labour, leaving young returnees considering additional moves as they become jobless once again.

For young returnees who are out of work, cost of living is a particularly important factor in determining location. Kabul was repeatedly reported to be “too expensive” to live in without employment, and four young people enumerated their struggles to survive without a source of income, with one explaining a move by saying that “in Kabul things were very expensive, and I did not have any work or income to pay for all the expenses here” (R11, ILD).

Jalalabad was the single most lived-in location for young returnees monitored for this research, and one young person offered a potential explanation for this telling that “in Jalalabad things are very cheap” (R06, IFI).

Accommodation

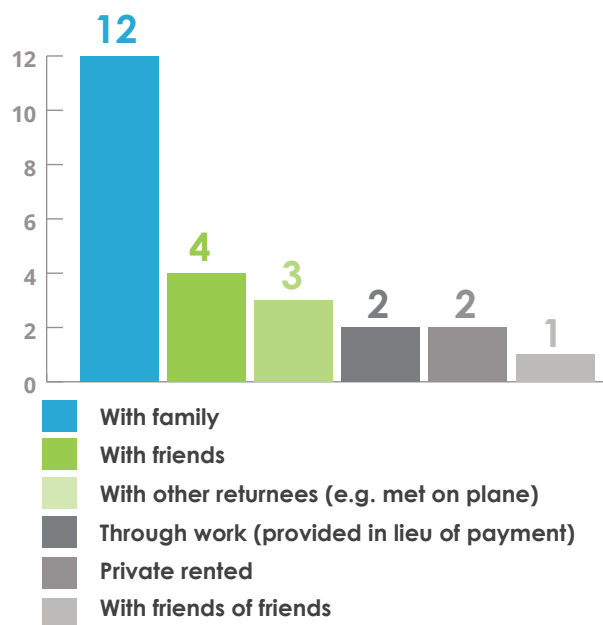


Figure 10. Accommodation type

Where to stay

Although just over half of the young returnees monitored for this research have not been able to reintegrate with their families, for the 12 young people who have, this has proved the most secure and reliable source of accommodation. The 13 young returnees not able to live with their families have taken a variety of routes to securing somewhere to live, with a lack of institutional, state or voluntary sector assistance meaning most rely on non-family social networks.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) run an initial reception facility, where returnees can stay for up to 15 days. None of the young people monitored had stayed in this facility, with the majority explaining that they believed to stay there would put them at risk by identifying them as a returnee (see Chapter 6 for more on institutional support for young people, including IOM, and Chapter 7 for the risks of being identified as a returnee). Instead, the young returnees monitored depended on even the most fragile social connections for help with accommodation, with three young people staying with other returnees they met on the plane, and one staying with a friend of a friend. Two others worked without pay in return for accommodation.

Dependence and risk of association

Several of the young returnees monitored reported entering into relationships of dependence with their hosts, whether extended family, friends or acquaintances. Despite the generous hospitality extended, five of the young people interviewed expressed concerns about being a burden on their

hosts and a need to either contribute financially, or move elsewhere as soon as possible. One young person explained the level of expectation on him, saying “I always feel I am a burden on my brother that is why I am desperately looking to find a job and help him financially” (R13, IM9). Another young person who was staying with a friend reiterated that “because my friend lives with his family, it is not very good to live in his home for long time” (R24, IM1).

During the course of this research, three young returnees’ concerns of being a burden became a reality as their hosts asked them to leave their accommodation. Notably however, the main factor causing hosts to ask young returnees to leave was not ultimately dependence, but risk of association. One young person, who had enemies within armed groups, was asked to leave his accommodation when a man came to the house looking for him, and questioned the host on his whereabouts. Fear that his presence could endanger the whole household led the hosts to ask him to leave. Just a few weeks into living with another friend in a different house, the young person was asked to leave again for the same reason. Two other young people were asked to leave their accommodation because the hosts perceived offering shelter to a returnee for a long period to be too risky.

As a result of these concerns, many of the young returnees monitored viewed their accommodation as a temporary shelter rather than a permanent home, even months after return to Afghanistan.

Finances

Almost two thirds of the young returnees monitored (16 separate cases) reported struggling to meet their basic financial needs following return to Afghanistan. The majority of the young people were using all that they had to pay for their food, shelter and other necessities and sometimes failing to make ends meet. Such tight budgets forced the young people to prioritise their expenses, with anything not considered essential for survival abandoned.

Whilst nine young returnees were able, at different times, to get small amounts of money from irregular day labour, temporary work, or for a time, more stable employment, other young people were entirely dependent on friends and family, or gifts from the UK.

For at least three young people, dependence on others for money – both money to fund travel to the UK originally and money to cover the young people’s basic needs after return – has left them with debt that they cannot afford to pay back. Indebted, these young returnees experienced hostility, security threats and worry.

One explained that although his mother was initially happy to see him when he returned, “she was unhappy of me being deported back with empty hands. When I went to UK we borrowed a lot of money to get to UK, and now I am worried on how to pay that amount of money back to them” (R09, IAR). Another reported that his landlord “is just adding up what I owe him - he gave me a warning that he is going to kick me out...there is one friend who is lending me money - I will have to pay him back too” (R21, ILD). For one young returnee, his debt led to serious difficulties when his uncle reported him to the police for not paying back the money used to send him to the UK, and he was arrested.

Conclusions

The process of navigating these interconnected practical issues – choosing where to live, what accommodation to live in and how to pay for basic necessities – structures the young returnees' experience of return. Their management of these practicalities throughout the duration of the research provides the context for the following chapters.



Photo credit: Ricardo Mangual via flickr.com/photos/ricardo_mangual/ modifications include tint and crop (CC BY 2.0) creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

6. Networks and support

Overview

Social networks are a vital source of practical and emotional support for young returnees. For many young people, however, the years spent out of Afghanistan have significantly weakened, or in some cases entirely destroyed, previous links, relationships and networks they had there. In this context, support from organisations becomes much sought after. This chapter analyses the access young people report having to networks of support - both personal and organisational - following their return to Afghanistan.

Key trends and statistics

Some eight young returnees have been unable to make any contact at all with their family (including extended family) since returning to Afghanistan,⁴³ and, of the 17 young returnees who have been able to contact family, only 12 have been able to live with them. The majority of young returnees (13) have struggled to make friends after return, describing fear of discrimination and stigma leading to isolation. In many cases, this isolation has been exacerbated by the lack of institutional or organisational support available for young returnees.

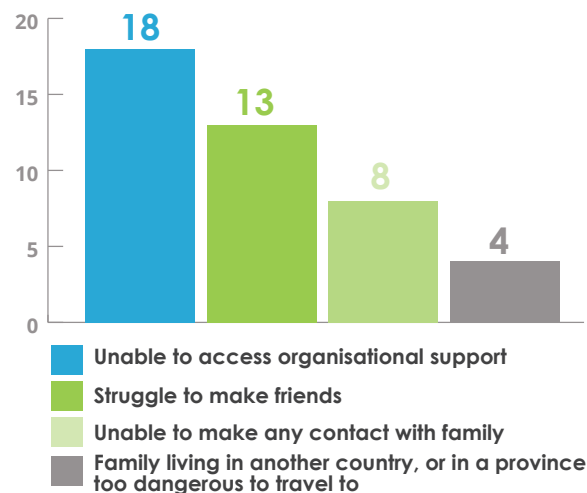


Figure 11. Reported difficulties in building or sustaining networks

Family

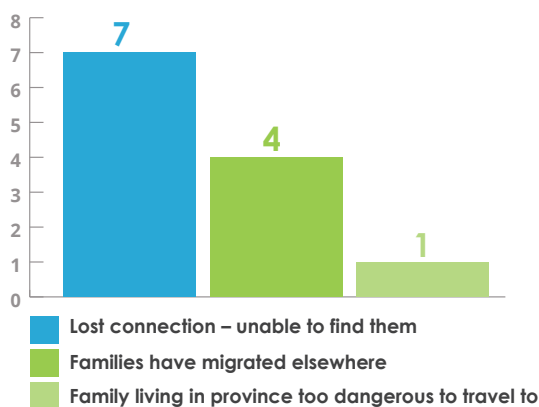


Figure 12. Influencing factors affecting young returnees' contact with family following return

When young people return to Afghanistan, there is often the expectation that they will reconnect with their families there and be supported by them. However, many have lost contact with their family, and, despite extensive searching, in seven cases, have not been able to do so. One young person explained that, almost a year after arriving back in Afghanistan, "I am still searching for my family... but

⁴³ One of the young people briefly met with his brother, who was almost immediately resettled to the US and has no further contact with any family member in Afghanistan.

I am not hearing anything, I have tried with so many organisations to find them but nothing" (R18, ILD). Several young people had traveled to other cities or villages in an attempt to locate family members, with no success, with one young person reporting "as soon as I was returned, I came to Jalalabad in search of my mother and sister, but I couldn't find anything about them" (R02, ILD).

Other young returnees' searches resulted in finding out that their parents had died, with one explaining that "my dad passed away before I left for UK. When I went back to my village, everyone told me my mum passed away too" (R04, ILD). In other cases (four incidences), young returnees discovered that families had migrated to Iran, Pakistan, or the US and were unable to locate them further.

Where there is evidence family living in Afghanistan, the level of support young returnees are able to receive from them is inconsistent. The simple existence of family in Afghanistan does not equate to protection for the returnees. Some young people are not welcomed by family as they have returned from the UK without having met family expectations of their initial migration, while, for others families' resources are too limited for them to provide for a returning young person.

Case study 1: Erfanullah

Erfanullah and his sister fled Afghanistan when their uncle killed their father and brother. While they were in the UK, they lost contact with their mother. On his return to Afghanistan, Erfanullah avoided further problems with his uncle by living a safe distance from him.

His sister had been granted permission to stay in the UK and Erfanullah described his devastation at being separated from her. "I was crying that I don't want to go. I want my sister. No one listened," he explained. "They restrained my wrists and beat me. It was too hard. I wanted to stay with my sister" (R12, IM1).

After his removal, Erfanullah's sister continued to support him by sending him money and talking to solicitors in the UK to find out if she could bring him back. Over the coming months, being reunited with his sister remained his top priority.

At least four young people who were able to find their families spoke of being confronted with hostility and disappointment when they returned to their family. Often living in poverty and sometimes still indebted from financing the initial migration of the young returnee, families' resources were under strain. A lack of understanding of the circumstances under which young people may be forcibly removed from the UK further exacerbated relations, with one young returnee describing his uncle's reaction to his return as "heartbreaking", because, "he thinks the same as most Afghans think" and "told me told me I must have committed a crime due to which I have been deported back to Afghanistan. I have been trying to explain him about the condition and policies UK have, but it doesn't work" (R24, IAR).

These tensions characterised many family relationships after return, and have increased young returnees' sense of urgency in finding work (see Chapter 9 for more on employment) to enable them to contribute as expected to the family unit, or live independently when they can no longer stay with family.

Friends

Like family, friends too were a primary source of support for many of the young people on return to Afghanistan, yet, for just over half of the young returnees monitored, making and maintaining friendships after return was challenging. When asked about friends, the majority of young people who had made friends reported making just one or two.



Figure 13. Influencing factors affecting young returnees' ability to build friendships

Trust and transparency

One of the greatest barriers to building strong friendships that young returnees expressed was a fear of trusting people. Six of the young people interviewed referred to this.

Aware of their vulnerability to security threats and the reported sense of shame that being a returnee brings, young people were reluctant to share their stories or reveal their real selves. In many cases, this led to a level of internal isolation even when friends or acquaintances are physically present. One young person explained, "although I spend time with friends they are all new to me. I don't share every secret with them. I can't trust them; they are not very close to me" (R02, ILD).

This same obscuring of their stories and consequent curtailment of their ability to be themselves can be seen in how young returnees relate to friends that are back in the UK. Of the nine young people still in contact with friends from the UK, three were maintaining those relationships by Facebook, text and phone, without disclosing that they had in fact been returned to Afghanistan but pretending instead that they had, for example, moved to another city in the UK.

This level of dissimulation in friendship leaves many young returnees with few people they can turn to for understanding and support with the challenges surrounding return.

For several young people, the desire to be able to express their real selves led them to forming friendships with other young returnees. Their common experience allows an emotional bond to be formed, with one young returnee explaining that "I am spending time with three friends who have also been deported from the UK... because we have the same pain and have gone through the same process. That is why we understand each other better" (R14, ILD).

For those young returnees who were able to make friends, the practical support some of these friends

gave them became essential for survival. Three told of friends who, in the absence of family, had demonstrated substantial kindness and generosity, providing, on a variety of different occasions, accommodation, money, clothes and food.

Lost and disrupted relationships

For five young people, the friendships they had had before leaving Afghanistan, or managed to form since returning, were curtailed or brought to an abrupt end by migration or violence. Several young people found that friends they had had prior to fleeing Afghanistan had moved on to other provinces within Afghanistan, or to other countries (particularly Iran and Pakistan). For others, serious violence had resulted in the deaths of their only friends, with one young person describing how his friend had been arrested and beheaded by the Taliban whilst trying to travel to Iran (see Chapter 7 for more on this incident), and another whose friend had also been killed by the Taliban.

This cycle of losing UK friends through forced removal, and then losing Afghan friends through onward migration or violence has, along with the issues of trust and transparency outlined above, meant that young returnees are living and surviving in a context of increasingly fractured and fragile social networks.

Organisations and institutions

The above-described weak social networks have led many of the young returnees monitored to seek support from organisations or institutions in Afghanistan. For the majority however, such support was difficult or impossible to obtain. Young returnees had some success securing in-kind support from IOM, and assistance with family tracing from the Afghan Red Crescent. Others depended on informal support from UK-based organisations (predominantly advice and contacts) or individuals (finance).

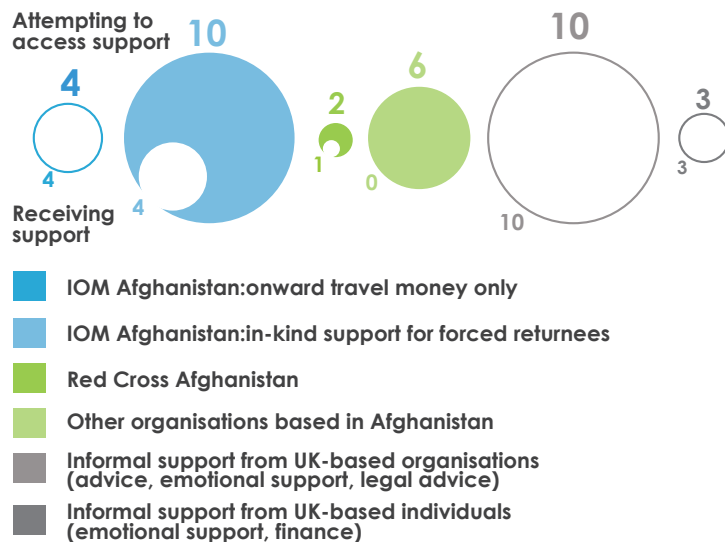


Figure 14. Source of support following return

In addition to seeking assistance from IOM, two young people had sought support with family tracing from the Afghan Red Crescent. One had successfully registered with them, and was still waiting (after 6 months) for any news of family members, and the other had repeatedly failed to locate the office, and then moved on from Kabul. None of the young people approaching other organisations for support (predominantly for support with employment) had received help.

Instead, 10 young people were forced to rely on informal and unsustainable networks of support in the UK. None of the UK organisations contacted have a mandate to support, help or advise young people after return, and, in the majority of cases, staff members had provided informal emotional support or advice in a personal capacity, outside of the parameters of their role. One young returnee expressed the psycho-social value of this support, often the only continuum between their former and current lives, saying "maybe no-one can help me, but just keeping in touch with [name of support worker from UK] has helped me, because she knows everything about me" (R18, ILD). Other young returnees were provided with ad-hoc and informal financial and emotional support from their UK foster carers, teachers or friends.



Support for forced returnees from IOM

Forced returnees from the UK to Afghanistan are eligible for a package of support from IOM. This package is not the same as the support available for returnees who have participated in the Assisted Voluntary Return (or comparable) scheme.

Forced returnees are met at the airport by a representative of IOM, and offered small amounts of cash for onward travel to other provinces should they wish to leave Kabul immediately. Accommodation in a hostel known as 'Jangalak' is available for up to two weeks, and 'in-kind' reintegration assistance is available up to the value of £750 to support those setting up their own business, and up to £900 to cover the cost of training or education.³ All support must be claimed within three months of return to Afghanistan.⁴

None of the young returnees monitored for this report had stayed in the Jangalak accommodation centre. Thirteen young people reported that they were not aware that they had this option, and 11 had heard of the centre, but felt that staying there would identify them as a returnee and expose them to ongoing discrimination and stigma. One young person had visited the centre, but decided he would instead try to stay with the friend of a friend.

The majority of young people attempting to access the monetary reintegration support struggled to do so. Whilst all young returnees who wanted immediate cash for onward travel to another province were given it in the airport, less than half (four of 10) of those who tried to access the more substantial business/education support were able to do so.

The young returnees monitored for this research provided various explanations for their struggles to obtain the support. Two young people reported that they were told they would only be eligible for the business support if they could find a business partner and bring documents demonstrating the viability of the business - this was not possible for them and so they received no support. For three other young people, the administrative processes around accessing the support had proved impossible to navigate. They told of repeated appointments over several months which failed to result in the granting of support. A final young person was told, on several visits, that he was not on the relevant list, and so was not entitled to support. Other young people (not included in the 10 who attempted to access support) had not realised that the support existed until the three month deadline had passed, or had travelled immediately to another province and not been able to return to Kabul in time for an appointment. Others had simply lost the information leaflet and so had not known what number to call or where to go.

On two occasions, young people had been so desperate for the financial support that they had fabricated evidence of business expenses in order to obtain it. One explained:

"About 8-9 months ago I took my papers to IOM but they said you have to start a shop or a business or something and then we can help you. Someone said if I paid money to a man he would make a paper to take to IOM to prove I was doing a business - but for that I had to give him 80% of the IOM money. But they said the paper he gave me wasn't correct, and about 5-6 times I went and finally they gave it to me - about £500, and I had to give 80% to the man." (R15, ILD)

Conclusions

Familial and social networks are a critical part of Afghanistan's social fabric. Whilst some young returnees have been shown significant generosity and hospitality by friends and family, for the majority, these networks have disappeared, weakened or become fractured. A fear of stigma or discrimination has, in many cases, created a barrier to building open and honest friendships, leaving young people internally isolated and disconnected. Institutional support, particularly from IOM, has been helpful to a minority of young people, but the majority have faced substantial barriers to accessing help and remained either without support or dependent on unsustainable and ad-hoc assistance from individuals in the UK.

7. Safety and security

Overview

This chapter examines the extent to which young returnees' lives are affected by insecurity and violence in Afghanistan. Both their direct experiences of insecurity and their perceptions of risk are explored, along with the impact of generalised insecurity and violence on their daily lives. The extent to which young people are affected by violence both as a result of issues connected to their original asylum claims, and as a result of their status as a returnee, is analysed.

Key trends and statistics

Over three quarters of the young returnees monitored over time identified insecurity as a critical issue in their life. Twelve young returnees have been directly involved in a security incident. For 12 young people (not necessarily the same 12), the security challenges they have faced have been directly linked either to their status as a returnee or to issues connected to their original asylum claim.

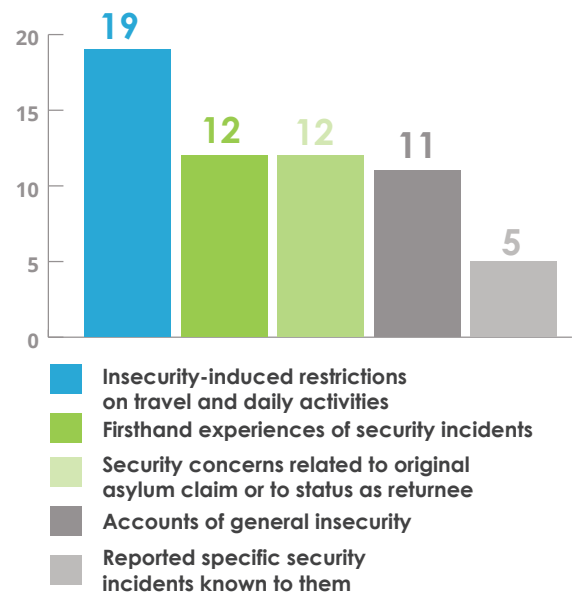


Figure 15. Overview of young returnees' experiences of security incidents

Young returnees' experiences of security incidents

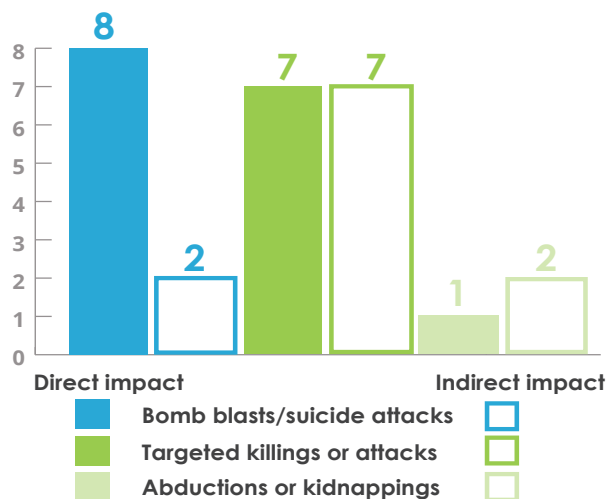


Figure 16. Types of security incidents experienced by returnees

Twelve young people were directly involved in security incidents, eight of which were bomb blasts or suicide attacks at close range which shattered windows and injured bystanders. Three young people experienced explosions on multiple occasions, in Kabul, Jalalabad and Paktia. The young returnees were clearly shaken by these experiences, and all expressed relief at not

being injured. When asked about the most positive thing that had happened since return to Afghanistan, one young person said that his experiences of insecurity had been such a dominant part of his life after return that simply his survival of three blasts was "the most positive aspect of me being back" (R02, ILD).

The other security-related incidents directly involving young people were targeted attacks (three cases) and one shootout. In the latter, the young person described how his car journey came to a halt and he came under fire when "there were four people shooting at the police base from the mountains and the police were shooting back. The sounds were awful; like lots of small explosions" (R23, SI1). The first young victim of a targeted attack was held up at gunpoint in a Taliban-controlled suburb of Jalalabad and, on a second occasion, was stopped on the Jalalabad Surkh road where "some people became suspicious of me and arrested me. They threatened to hand me over to the Taliban and kill me" (R06, IM9). A second young returnee was beaten to unconsciousness by unknown assailants in Kabul while searching for a bus station. A third witnessed, at close range, the killing of another young returnee who was "targeted standing in front of a mosque in the village he was living" (R14, ILD).

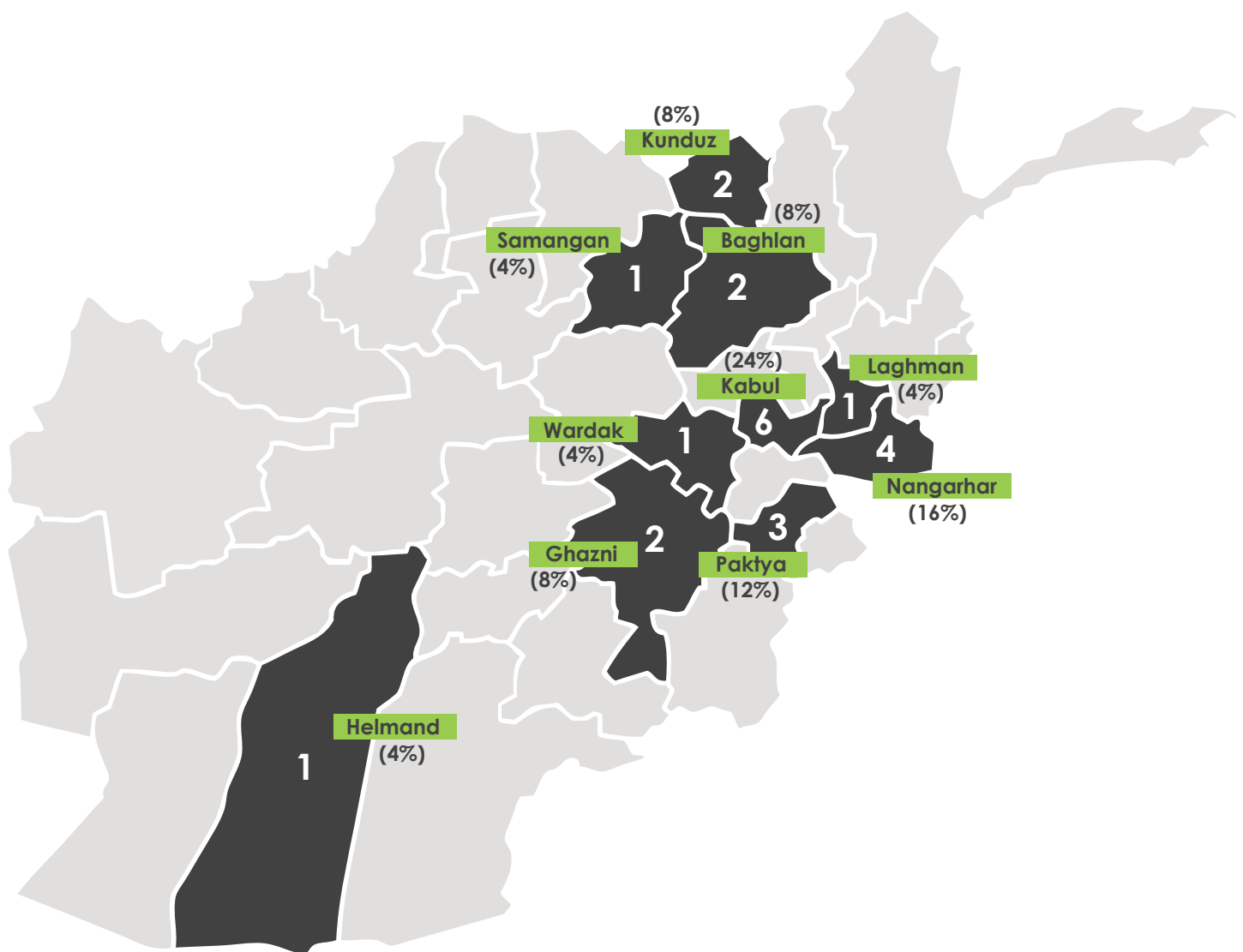


Figure 17. Location of security incidents or of heightened insecurity

Direct experiences of insecurity

In addition to these 12 personal experiences of security incidents, five others recounted specific security incidents known to them, including the killing of a cousin's daughter and another family member, an abduction by the Taliban, two suicide attacks and shootings in Kabul, the killing of a friend en route to Kandahar, and a man being "slaughtered" (R24, IM1).

It is worth noting that six young people drew attention to specific security fears in Kabul, with a returnee noting in his final interview that security in the capital had deteriorated significantly in the year he had been back. Incidents were cited of suicide attacks, bomb blasts and targeted violence in the capital, and several young returnees had been disturbed by the killing of Farkhunda Malikzada.⁴⁴ One commented:

"People are not safe even in the capital Kabul. You heard about the girl who was accused of burning

Quran and was tortured, killed and then burned in the centre of Afghanistan, just few kilometres far from the presidential palace. Police was present in the scene but they did not and could not do anything to stop the mob and avoid the incident, instead they were standing and looking at the crowd torturing that poor girl. I am so shocked about this incident and incidents like this makes me think what would be the future of us?" (R02, ILD)

Impact of generalised violence and insecurity

Even among those who had not personally experienced or witnessed a specific security-related incident, fears about insecurity in Afghanistan featured prominently in young returnees' narratives. Eleven young returnees (of whom six had not personally experienced or reported a specific incident) spoke about the prevalence of insecurity and their constant security-related fears.

⁴⁴ BBC World News. 2015b.

Map image credit: NordNordWest via commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan_location_map.svg. Modified colour, added data. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Security was described by five young returnees as the most challenging, or one of the most challenging, aspects of being back in Afghanistan. Four drew attention to the unpredictability of the security situation, and the growing influence of ISIL, explaining that “[the] security situation in Afghanistan is getting worse and people are living in an uncertainty” (R14, IFI). Factors including elections and the weather were reported to have an influence on security, with one young person saying that “the number of ISIL presence in the area has dramatically increased after the weather has got warmer and better” (R25, ILD). Two young returnees specifically referenced a lack of government control and two more said that they did not feel able to avail themselves of the justice systems available in Afghanistan.

Time spent in the UK exacerbates young people's fears about security, with six young people drawing a specific contrast between the insecurity in Afghanistan and their experiences of life in the UK. Words including “calm”, “peaceful” and “good” appear 23 times in young returnees' reported memories of the UK, whereas “fear” and “dangerous” are used 41 times in descriptions of their current circumstances. One young person described his reaction to this acute contrast when a nearby street was cordoned off due to the presence of a bomb, saying:

“As soon as I heard about that I quit doing whatever I was doing and returned back home, because I have never seen such conditions and I was so afraid, I was only 15 when I arrived in UK and now I am sent back to a place and condition I have never been to”. (R24, IAR)

Specific persecution related to original asylum claim/returnee status

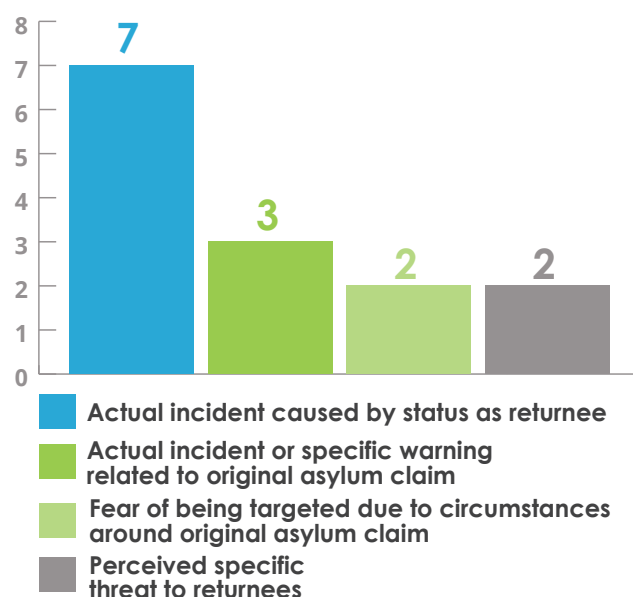


Figure 18. Threat or persecution due to original asylum claim or returnee status

Targeting due to issues related to original asylum claim

After return, three young people experienced actual incidents or specific warnings related to the circumstances of their original asylum claim. One young person travelled to his home province in search of his family but was twice warned by local residents that certain commanders, “enemies” of his father (a member of Hezb-e-Islami), were powerful there and “could easily find me and get rid of me” (R02, ILD). A second young person had been constantly followed by his “enemies” who “came after me since I have arrived back in Afghanistan” (R22, IM9), while a third was threatened by Taliban commanders in his home province, who told him:

“You had gone to UK to escape us, but now you are back and you are still under our hands. We can do whatever we want with you’ [...] In my province, I am scared of the commanders. They might deliberately try to target me. ‘My Taliban’ will know me here in my home province, even if not in other places.” (R13, IM3)

Two other young people were fearful that their past problems would make them vulnerable to targeted attack, and thus felt unable to return to their home provinces. One explained that:

“I haven't been able to go to Paktya due to the threats from Taliban and the enmity that drove me out of Afghanistan at first place. Taliban are very active in Paktya and arrest and kill anyone they are doubtful about.” (R17, ILD)

Targeting due to status as returnee

Seven young returnees reported incidents in which other young people were targeted simply because they were a returnee, and an additional two articulated their perception that being a returnee puts individuals at particular risk of attack.

Young returnees believed that this was because, in the eyes of the Taliban and local residents alike, “those who have gone to European countries and now have come back are spying for those countries” (R17, ILD). Another explained that:

“My uncle lives in one of the suburbs of Jalalabad city and whenever I plan to go and meet him he says it is dangerous for me to go there. Because Taliban are active in those areas and I can be a soft target for them [...] The other very problem is the fear of abductions for ransom, if they know you have come from a foreign country like UK, and then it can be dangerous for you. Most of the time when somebody asks me where have I come from, I say Pakistan.” (R24, IAR)

Data collected demonstrates that in many cases, these fears are not unfounded. Seven examples are cited of specific incidents arising due to returnee status. In one case, a young returnee was held up at gunpoint by someone who said, “we know you have come back from UK” (R06, ILD), a second knew of a “guy [who] had returned from UK voluntarily and [who] was kidnapped in our area” (R13, IAR), while a third was warned by relatives not to return to his home province because his “life would be in danger if the militant extremist find out I have been to UK and have returned back. They don’t know what deportation means! They would kill me on the spot calling me infidel and spy” (R25, ILD). A fourth young person told of the abduction by the Taliban of an

older returnee interpreter working with ISAF, and a fifth of the killing of another older returnee affiliated with the ANA.

Two examples were given of former unaccompanied minors being killed for having spent time in a European country. In one case, a returnee told of his anxiety after:

“[A] boy who was also deported from UK was killed in our area. He had newly arrived from UK and was living peacefully with his family until people found out about him, though he did not have any enemy at that time. But he was badly targeted standing in front of a mosque in the village he was living. I participated in his funeral and Fatiha.” (R14, ILD)



Another young person was particularly distressed as he recounted the killing of his friend, a young returnee from Norway, explaining:

"I have just made one friend here. [...He] told me I can't stay here, I will go back to EU. I told him not to go, but he was arrested by Taliban on way to Iran on the way to Kandahar – between Ghazni and Kandahar - and they killed him because he had all his international papers and bank card on him. They killed him by cutting his head off and putting it on the street." (R15, ILD)

Impact of insecurity on daily life

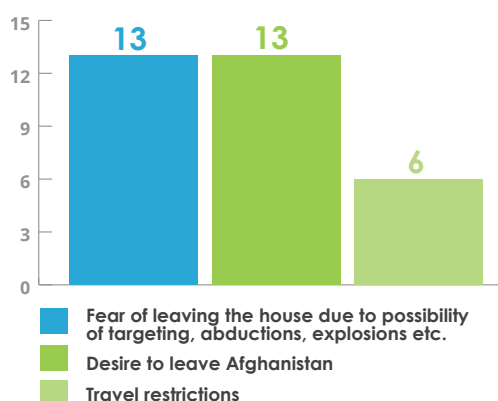


Figure 19. Impact of insecurity on daily life of returnees'

The vast majority of young returnees monitored for this report stated that the ongoing insecurity in Afghanistan had a direct impact on the practicalities of their daily lives.

Thirteen young returnees articulated their fears of leaving the house because of insecurity or threats, with two explaining that this had negatively affected their ability to find work. Other young returnees spoke about the restrictions on their daily movements, with six particularly mentioning the dangers of travelling between cities, and three citing specific examples of violence during travel (a journey disrupted by a gun fight, a personal arrest at gunpoint, and the murder of another young traveller). For two young returnees, insecurity prevents them from travelling safely to reconnect with family. "I call them [my family] often" said one young person, "but I have not been able to go and visit them due to the ongoing insecurity in those areas" (R15, IM12).

Conversely, insecurity also can be a trigger for movement, as six young people reported moving round the country in search of safety.

For 13 young people, insecurity is a key push factor in decisions to leave Afghanistan again. One reported that:

"the insecurity is increasing every day and people are obliged to get out of Afghanistan for the safety of their lives. Taliban at first, and now ISIS has made life difficult for people to live." (R17, ILD)

Engagement with Armed Opposition Groups (AOG)



Figure 20. Engagement with AOGs or organised criminal groups

The aforementioned case study is the only example of a young person becoming involved personally in an AOG, and he subsequently left the group after becoming disillusioned with the violence. His primary motivation for joining - the need for personal safety rather than an ideological affiliation - reflects research carried out by the International Council on Security and Development in 2010 which found that need for a job or money was the primary reported reason for joining the Taliban.⁴⁵ This rationale for joining an AOG is also reflected in the reported story of a young returnee who joined a criminal gang in Pakistan, whose friend explained:

"A friend of mine who was also deported from UK... couldn't find his family. He went to Peshawar, Pakistan after he did not find any job or something to do here in Afghanistan. He is now working for some mafia groups in Pakistan. He invited me also to come to go and join him. I thought that was not a good idea. So I stayed in Afghanistan and have been struggling here since." (R02, ILD)

45 International Council on Security and Development. 2010.

Case study 2: Mohammed

Mohammed was returned to Afghanistan at the age of 21. He had been studying in college in the UK and had a British girlfriend. Interviews from his first 12 months back in Afghanistan demonstrate his challenges finding work and his fear of “enemies” who had “tortured” him “many times” (R22, IM3) before he left Afghanistan. On return, Mohammed initially lived with a friend of his father, but threats from his “enemies” meant he was asked to leave to avoid putting his host in danger. When homeless and without food, and afraid of being found by those pursuing him, Mohammed was approached by the Taliban who told him they would protect him from his enemies and give him food and shelter. He explained that he “thought a lot about my decision, but I did not see any other way... I had to join the Taliban to be able to defend myself from my enemies and survive” (R22, SI2).

In the Taliban, Mohammed fought in two battles, narrowly avoiding an IED injury, and did not know who he was fighting against, though he assumed they would be foreign troops or Afghan forces. He told the Taliban, who his “enemies” were and his “enemies” subsequently “disappeared” (R22,SI3). He also told his commanders about his time in the UK, and was told to take every chance to fight against the UK and get revenge for his deportation. He was told “they have wasted many years of your life, and put you in this situation” (R22, SI3). Mohammed explained that he “would love to leave the Taliban and live a better and safer life. But it was my only and last option” (R22, SI2).

Conclusions

Insecurity has been found to be a very real part of life for young returnees, and coping with this is particularly difficult because of the contrast with the more peaceful life they had become accustomed to in the UK. In some cases, young people have been threatened or targeted as a result of issues connected to their original asylum claims, and, for a significant group, simply being identified as a returnee has put them at considerable risk of violence.



8. Education and training

Overview

Education is a critical element of a young person's growth, development and transition to adulthood. This chapter examines education outcomes for young returnees, exploring the extent to which the young people monitored for this report prioritise education upon return, the degree of success experienced in accessing education, and the key barriers faced by those who want to move forward with their studies.

Key trends and statistics

The desire to continue in education is a recurring theme amongst the young returnees monitored for this report, with 20 identifying this as a high priority. However, only two have succeeded in accessing education since their return to Afghanistan. The most significant barrier faced by the young returnees has been the need to invest their time and energy into work in order to survive. Gaps in previous education, issues with certification of prior learning and the cost of study have also been prohibitive.

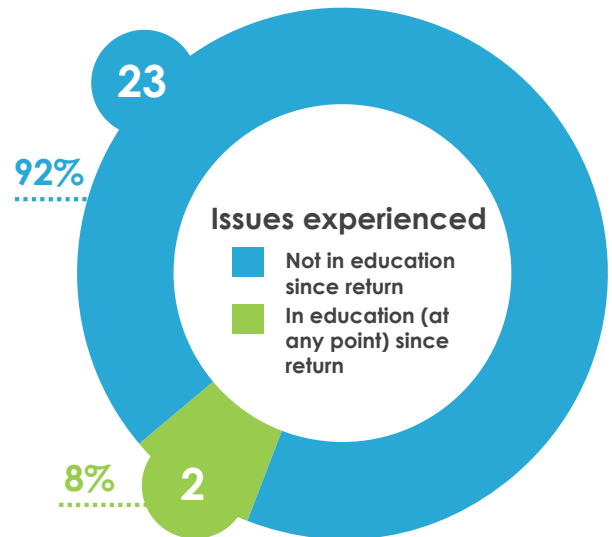


Figure 21. Access to education following return

Education context in Afghanistan

Despite significant gains in provision of basic primary education across large parts of Afghanistan in recent years, the educational landscape for the young people this report is concerned with remains bleak. Primary Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) have risen dramatically over the last ten years,⁴⁶ and yet attendance rates remain relatively low, at 64.4% for boys and 48.3% for girls.⁴⁷ Attendance rates in secondary school drop further to 42% for male students and 23.2% for female learners.⁴⁸ Those students who are able to attend school encounter the risk of targeted attacks on education by anti-government groups. In 2014, schools were attacked in 163 verified incidents.⁴⁹ These incidents included 29 attacks or threats of attack against protected personnel, and 28 incidents of placement of IEDs inside school premises. Of the 163 verified incidents, 94 were attributed to the Taliban and other armed groups and one to international forces. The remaining 68 attacks could not be attributed.

46 UNICEF. 2015.

47 *ibid.*

48 *ibid.*

49 Office of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict. 2015.

In addition to targeted attacks on schools, at least 469 schools remained closed across Afghanistan as a result of insecurity, interrupting education for an estimated 100,000 children.⁵⁰

In contrast, the last decade has also seen the emergence of a highly educated young Afghan elite, who have completed university, often in Kabul or internationally, and are competing for work in the political, business and international NGO sectors.⁵¹ It is into this polarised context that the young people studied for this report have returned.

The majority of young returnees interviewed for this report were already in their early teens when they left Afghanistan in the mid to late 90s or early 2000s, and therefore not young enough to have benefitted from the above-mentioned increased access to primary school.

Their education (or lack of) in Afghanistan has been supplemented to varying degrees by studies undertaken in the UK (see figure 22). For the majority of young returnees, this has meant studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), at times with integrated numeracy and IT programmes. For others, they have managed to complete, or partially complete BTEC National Diplomas in subjects including business, IT and mechanics.

50 *ibid.*

51 Rarick, W. et al. 2013.

Case study 3: Zahid

Access to "any kind of education" (R24, IAR) was, for Zahid, one of the things that made the UK a "good place". Zahid was in his third year of studying Mechanical Engineering at a college in London when he was detained and removed. On return, he wondered if he would have the same opportunities again, saying:

"In Afghanistan I had not studied much, and I think it is not possible to continue the kind of study I was doing in the UK... My friends feel sorry for me because I could not continue my studies and had to quit everything. They look happy continuing their studies, but for me now it looks a nightmare to find that kind of opportunities to study again" (ibid).

A month later Zahid still hoped to "continue my education if I find a job and get able to pay for the expenses" (R24, IM1). Six months later, having discovered that just finding work had been hard enough, Zahid described the vicious circle which had curtailed his education, saying, "if you are working, you don't have time to do education. But if you want to do education, it is impossible without money" (R24, IM6).

Zahid was only able to continue his education after he had left Afghanistan for a second time and travelled to Italy, where he had Italian lessons twice a week. "It is not much helpful," he said, "not like in UK. Teaching was good there" (R24, SI4).

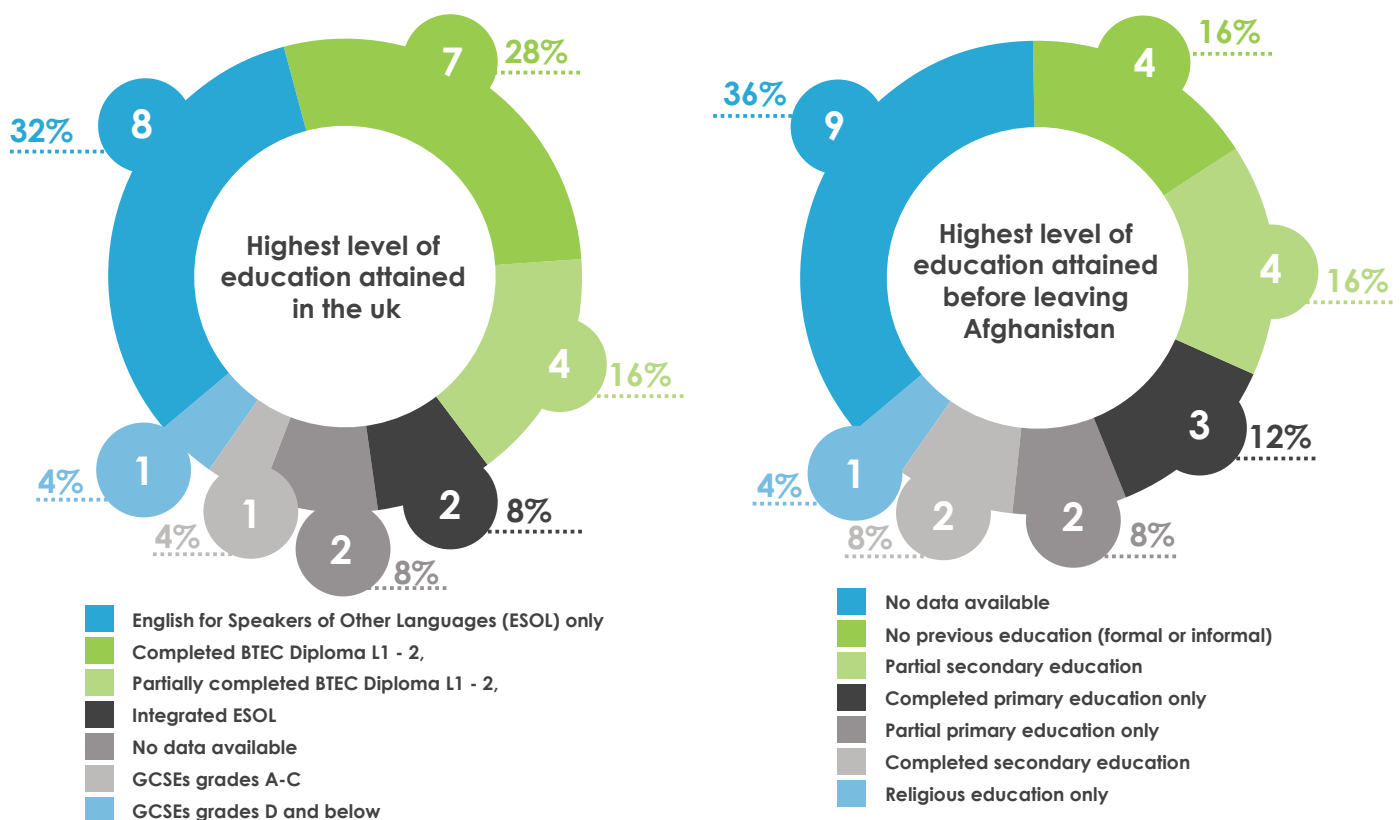


Figure 22. Level(s) of previous education

The remainder of this chapter explores the extent to which young returnees prioritise continuing education, the opportunities they have to do so, and the impact of their time in the UK on their ability to progress vis-a-vis that of their non-UK educated Afghan peers.

Prioritisation of education by young returnees

Education is known to be a priority for young asylum

seekers in the UK, with many unaccompanied minors expressing a belief that investing in their education will better prepare them for the future, whether in the UK or elsewhere.⁵² Similarly, displaced children and young people living in conflict-affected fragile states have been increasingly found to cite education as one of their top life-priorities.⁵³ Those forced to return to Afghanistan after spending formative years in the UK continue to value education (see figure 23) - often in acutely difficult circumstances.

⁵² Refugee Support Network. 2011.

⁵³ Gladwell, C and Tanner, L. 2013.

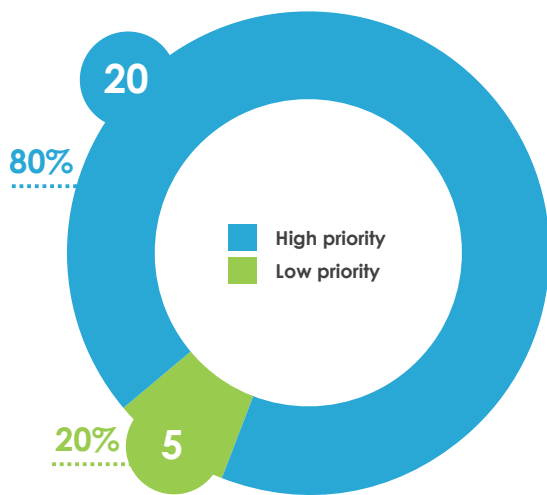


Figure 23. Prioritisation of education by returnees

Prioritisation of education

Amid security fears, unemployment, homelessness and mental and physical health difficulties, the vast majority of young returnees interviewed maintained that being able to continue their education was critical to their chances of rebuilding a life in Afghanistan. Iterations of the phrase “I wish I could study” (including “I want to study”, “I wish to go to school”, “I am desperate to continue my studies” and other similar phrases) featured in transcripts 39 times, and in the interviews of 19 individual young returnees. As they had done in the UK, young returnees initially continued to see education as a potential route to employment and the ability to build a future, whether in Afghanistan, or (for the majority) elsewhere.

However, whilst their valuing of education remained consistent throughout their interviews, a growing trend of disappointment and disillusionment emerged for many young people around months nine to 12, as their (often significant) endeavours to pursue their studies have consistently failed or been interrupted. Young returnees monitored have searched for courses, been referred to education providers, visited schools and universities where they have tried to enrol, and attempted to translate certificates obtained in the UK. Despite these efforts, and the high level of enthusiasm for education, only two of the 25 young people monitored have been in education at any point since returning to Afghanistan. Twenty-three have not been in education at all.

The two young people who have succeeded in accessing education, even if only temporarily, since returning to Afghanistan, have typically found temporary work (see Chapter 9 for more on employment) and managed to subsequently attend a course, or been sent money by a former foster carer or support worker in the UK. The two young people have managed to complete Year 12 standard education, and gained an Afghan

School Leavers' Certificate, and one also attended two terms of a teacher training college, but did not complete the course.

The four young returnees who maintained throughout their interviews that education was not a priority for them stated repeatedly that this was as a result of other pressing concerns that they considered to be more important for their survival or wellbeing, such as “finding a job to live” (R03, ILD). On other occasions the notion of pursuing education in Afghanistan was rejected along with all ideas of attempting to rebuild a life in Kabul. One young returnee repeatedly stated in his first few interviews that his priority was not education but “getting back to my girlfriend [in the UK] and getting out of danger” (R22, IAR), and that as a result, he “couldn't even think about [education]” (R22, IM6). Another explained that he “[couldn't] think of continuing my education or working here, because I can't live here. I have to go back to the UK to join my sister” (R12, IM1).

Barriers to education

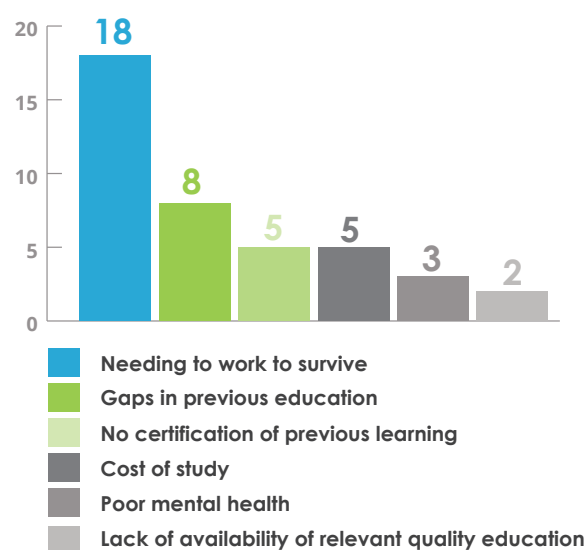


Figure 24. Barriers to accessing education experienced

Working to survive

The need to work, or look for work, for basic survival was the most commonly cited barrier to education, with 18 separate young returnees repeatedly mentioning this as a key factor preventing them from continuing their studies.

For many young people, although their desire to continue their education appeared to be a recurring intellectual theme, the majority of their physical and practical energies necessarily went into the daily struggle to find work to meet their daily basic needs for accommodation and food. Several young people articulated a direct choice

Case study 4: Sajid

Having managed to gain his year 12 certificate a few months after his return to Afghanistan, Sajid, who had studied ESOL in the UK, wanted to apply to a university in Kabul to study computers and English. He travelled to Kabul to visit two private universities there, hoping that he would be able to secure a loan and use “the small amount of money I have” (R13, IM6) to pay for a course.

Sajid is one of only two young people who managed to make progress in his education on return, thanks to the assistance of his brother, who had been providing him with housing and support. One university “promised to let me know when the entry exam was due” (R13, IFI) but did not do so with enough time for Sajid to travel to Kabul to sit it. This meant that he “lost the opportunity to continue my education in this semester” (ibid.).

In his final interview, Sajid, despite “doing all my efforts to continue my education” had not yet managed to enrol in university. He said “if I could not continue my studies for any reason then the only option I will have is to get out of Afghanistan and find somewhere safer” (R13, IM9).

between continuing their education and eating, with one young returnee saying “if I go to school how can I work? If I don’t work then how can I manage for food?” (R01, ILD), and another saying “you cannot study well with an empty stomach” (R16, IM9). For others, the need to work to survive simply left them with no time for education. One young person initially told us he was unable to continue studying because he was spending all his time looking for work, and then, several months later, when he had found some temporary work, that “I want to continue studying IT, or pharmacy, but I don’t have any time because I have to work in the perfume shop to survive” (R04, ILD). At the point of having been back in Afghanistan for four months, another young returnee confirmed that “if you are working, you don’t have time to do education. But, if you want to do education, it is impossible without money” (R24, IM3).

For the young people who had managed to find family after returning to Afghanistan, pursuing their studies was not necessarily easier. In fact, having to support family members was named as a concrete barrier to education by four young returnees, who talked about not being able to study as a result of pressure to find work to “run the family” (R17, ILD), “feed my family” (R20, IM6), “help my family and pay the money I had borrowed to get to the UK” (R09, IM1) and “get a little money and support the family” (R25, ILD).

Gaps in previous education

For eight of the young returnees, gaps in their previous education were cited as key barriers to continuing their studies.

For the vast majority of the returnees, who left Afghanistan before completing their secondary education (see Figure 22), not having an Afghan

school leavers’ certificate has prevented them from enrolling in higher levels of education - despite having studied to a comparable or higher level in the UK. Several months after returning to Afghanistan, one returnee told us that “without that [Year 12] certificate, I can’t do anything” (R01, ILD), and other young people explained that they had repeatedly attempted to enrol in school in order to complete Year 12 and gain the school leavers’ certificate, only to discover that not having the Year 11 certificate was a barrier to entry into the Year 12 course. After more than six months of being back in Afghanistan, only two of the young people monitored had managed to enrol on a Year 12 course and were in the process of studying for their school leavers’ certificate.

Other young returnees were unable to continue their studies in Afghanistan as a result of low level mother-tongue literacy levels. The 2015 youth literacy rate (for 15 - 24 year olds) in Afghanistan is 61.9% for males and 32.1% for females.⁵⁴ In contrast, only nine of the young returnees monitored for this report were literate in their mother tongue. One young returnee who had completed Diploma level studies in the UK talked of how he was prevented from entering university in Kabul because of his “problems with Dari and Pashto writing” (R23, SI1), and almost all of the young people who had not completed primary school before leaving Afghanistan mentioned not being able to read or write in Dari or Pashto as a barrier to continued learning (and indeed to broader functioning in society). One young person told us that, like many young returnees, he had never fully mastered writing in English, and that now, because he had “no reading English really, no reading Pashto” it was not only “too late for me to go to school here because I am a man”, but that in addition “when you can’t read you sign all these forms and you don’t know what” (R20, ILD).

54 UNICEF. 2015.

Certification of learning

For other young returnees (five separate cases), it was not a concrete gap in their previous education that prevented them from moving forward, but an inability to prove that they had obtained a relevant level of learning - either because certificates were unavailable, or unrecognised.

Three young people told of how they did not have the certificates to evidence their studies in the UK. In all cases, this was as a result of having been detained and forcibly removed without the relevant certificates. One young person explained that although he had Level 1 BTEC certificates in his house, "when they detained me, they didn't let me get my stuff" (R01, ILD), and another elaborated further, saying:

"I have not been able to continue my education. I studied until the end of Year 11 in the UK. When I came to Kabul and went to a school for admission, they wanted the documents from UK, but I did not have my documents with me... [In the UK] Police arrested me from outside my room and all my stuff, including certificates remained in my home. There was nobody who I could request to go and get them for me. I love to study and I am desperate to continue my studies. But the challenge in continuing my education is to have all the documents and take it to the school or the education department. Then they might accept me back to school. Unfortunately I don't have any of those documents." (R04, IM12)

Other young returnees had managed to bring back their UK certificates, or had had support workers send scanned copies to them, only to discover that they were not recognised in Kabul. One young person was told that he would need to get his UK certificates certified by the Afghan Embassy in the UK to demonstrate that they are equivalent to an Afghan Year 12 School Leavers' certificate, and another reiterated that "I have all my certificates, but the certificates don't help me here" (R18, ILD).

Cost of study

Five young returnees identified the explicit or hidden costs of studying itself as a barrier to continuing education.

In many cases, enrolling on a course costs money. As a part of this research, a mapping exercise identified numerous organisations, many NGOs, offering literacy, skills training and vocational courses in Kabul and other major cities in Afghanistan. However, the vast majority either had very specific eligibility criteria that excluded the young people of concern to this research (for example, courses for girls who had experienced Gender Based Violence (GBV) only), or charged fees. When visiting education providers and

enquiring about the availability of places for young returnees, our researchers were repeatedly told that the given institution would be happy to provide them with a course - but only if they were contracted to do so at high cost by a referring agency.

Other young returnees struggled with the hidden costs of continuing their education, with one of the few who managed to re-enrol in school telling us that "I did not have money to pay for the bus ticket, so I was walking a long distance every day" (R14, ILD), and another that "I have to pay for books, and travel to and from school - I can't do this for long" (R15, SI9).

Poor mental health and availability of relevant education

Mental health difficulties emerged as one of the most significant challenges for young returnees (see Chapter 10). In the context of continuing education, three young people repeatedly told our researchers that mental health struggles have prevented them from studying. They explained that anxiety and feelings of hopelessness meant that they "don't have the mindset for studying" (R14, IFI). For other young people who explained that they tried to push ahead despite experiencing comparable feelings, the quality and relevance of available education discouraged them from persisting, with one young returnee concluding (after making repeated attempts to continue his education, with some success, and some failure, for 18 months) that "the education system here is not very serious. To be honest, everything I try is a waste of time" (R15, IFI).

Conclusions

For the vast majority of young returnees, continuing their education in Afghanistan has proved impossible. Education, work and finance are inextricably linked for almost all young people. For those without family, the need to work (or search for work) in order to meet their basic needs has left them without time for study. For those with family, the pressure to contribute to the family unit after years of absence has also prevented them from studying. Education completed in the UK has rarely led to further education options in Afghanistan, with young people unable to evidence or gain recognition for studies completed in the UK. Neither of the two young people who had participated in some form of education since returning to Kabul remained in education at the time of writing this report.



9. Employment

Overview

The ability to find and sustain appropriate employment is critical to survival in Afghanistan - particularly for those young people attempting to build new lives without the support of family. This chapter examines the employment context in Afghanistan and the efforts made to obtain work by young returnees. Patterns in the type of work young returnees are able to find and the barriers to employment that they encounter are also analysed.

Key trends and statistics

The young returnees monitored for this report have employed a range of approaches in their search for work. Despite this, only one fifth have been successful in securing stable employment. Ten young returnees have secured only irregular day labour, temporary work or work in exchange for food or accommodation, while a further 10 have not worked at all since their return to Afghanistan. The most frequently cited barrier was the lack of available work; other challenges included a lack of personal networks, certificates, support or relevant skills, and discrimination.

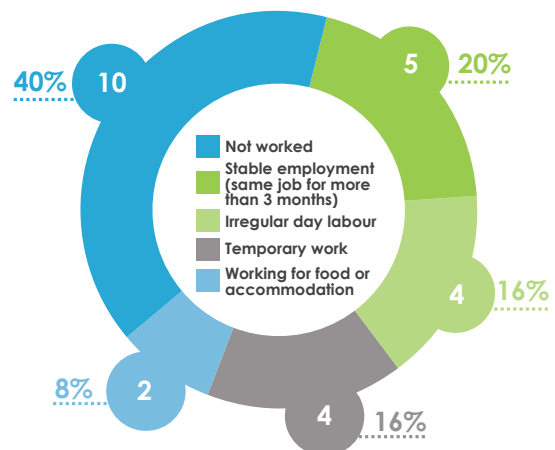


Figure 25. Experiences of employment following return

The search for work

The most recent statistics available from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) show that only 45.7% of the total working-age population are employed in Afghanistan,⁵⁵ and the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group estimate that 50% of the Afghan population was unemployed at some point in 2015⁵⁶. and the Afghan Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs estimate that there are 1.8 million work-

eligible Afghans out of work.⁵⁷ The vast majority of the young returnees monitored for this report have invested significant, time, energy and resources in attempting to secure employment. Approaches to finding work have included using personal connections (friends, family members, landlords, other returnees met on the plane etc.), contacting employers directly (often by going in person to

Case study 5: Sajid

Sajid's top priority on his return to Afghanistan was "first to find a job and a source of income, which will help me to continue my education at the same time" (R13, IAR). (See case study 4 for more details about his pursuit of education.)

To find work, Sajid travelled from his home in Samangan to Kabul, where he submitted his CV to various organisations. Three months after return he had not had any success, saying "so far I have heard nothing. Nothing at all" (R13, IM3). Six months after his first interview, Sajid explained:

"I have not been working here in Samangan. I need a job; I need to work, but when I have applied for jobs they don't accept me. They say to me, "We don't know you". I have applied for so many different jobs – more than 150 jobs, some with the government, and some with NGOs and businesses. None of them reply though, or if they do, they don't know me and there is no-one to speak for me. Also they say to me that I need a Bachelor's degree, and some sort of bribe or connection there." (R13, IM6)

55 ILO. 2015.

56 Alexander, L. 2015.

57 ToloNews. 2015.

hand in a CV or make an enquiry), and making use of third-party job search entities including employment focused NGOs, advice centres and online platforms.

These efforts have yielded varying measures of success (see figure 26). The most successful approach to finding work for young returnees has been through personal connections, with seven of the 12 young people who found at least a few days of temporary manual labour doing so this way. In contrast, only two of the 13 young people who attempted to secure employment by contacting employers directly have managed to do so. One of these two young returnees estimated that in five months of searching, he contacted over 150 businesses and shops directly, with no success until recently starting work in a shop for a very low wage. Young returnees who attempted to set up their own business saw greater success - but only two were able to do this, because of the initial financial investment required. Both had purchased taxis and worked as taxi drivers for several months, but, ultimately found that there was not enough work to make a living. None of the six young returnees who had tried to make use of third party services, including NGOs, to find jobs, had been successful. In the few cases where no effort to find employment was made, this was as a result of security concerns (fear of leaving the house) or mental health difficulties (see Chapter 10).



Figure 26. Strategies employed to find work and associated success rate

Work obtained

As seen in figure 25, of the young people who have obtained work, twice as many have found only temporary or day labour as have found stable employment. Over half of those who were in stable employment for a period of the research project are now unemployed.

Although the majority of young people said that they would accept 'any job, just to get food' (R01, ILD), for all young people monitored a significant

disconnect between the type of work desired and the type of work (if any) obtained emerged. The three most frequently reported desired elements of a job for young people were 1) that it was stable, 2) that it paid (i.e. was not working for in-kind support), and 3) that it made use of the skills gained in the UK, rather than being casual manual labour. The reality for the young people who were able to find work however, has been that it has been unstable, unpaid or low paid, and manual labour that does not use the skills gained in the UK.

With the exception of one young person who managed to secure a one month contract teaching English (but who is now unemployed), and one young person who undertook significant risks working as an interpreter for ISAF in Helmand province, all of the work obtained by young returnees has been low-skilled or manual. Young people have demonstrated significant determination, attempting to earn a living (or be provided with accommodation and food) by washing dishes; picking fruit; driving, guarding or washing cars; selling vegetables from a cart; working in small shops, on construction sites, in factories; and repairing items including fridges and roofs. The one young person who had managed to obtain work relevant to his training in the UK was working as a trainee mechanic (having studied a L1 Mechanics course at college before forced removal), but, because of his status as a 'trainee' had not been paid for the entire year of working.

This lack of employment led three young people to consider undertaking high risk work with the ANA (1 case), or as an interpreter with ISAF (two cases). One young person spoke frankly about this decision making process, saying, "I need to work, and I can speak English, but I am afraid that if I do this I will be killed after the troops leave, so I'm not sure. I am trying to decide... it is very dangerous to work in Zabul or Helmand and Kandahar, this would not be easy" (R15, IM3).

Barriers to finding work

A number of issues preventing young returnees from finding work emerged during the course of the research (see figure 27). Some of the identified barriers are related to the broader employment situation in Afghanistan (lack of available work), and others are either caused or exacerbated by young people's status as returnees (lack of connections, lack of certificates and discrimination). Significantly, whilst each barrier is examined separately for the sake of clarity below, it is important to note that the majority of young people monitored have experienced multiple, interconnected barriers. For example, a lack of personal connections significantly reduces initial possibilities for work; then lack of certificates or documents makes approaching

Case study 6: Hussein

When Hussein got back to Afghanistan he sometimes slept on the street and sometimes in a cheap hotel if he found a day's work. Finding a job in a perfume shop enabled him to start renting a room. He described his job search:

"To find my work I went to every shop, go to every shop and ask if they have work. Lots of them say no but this one said yes, and that I should come at 8am in the morning. I didn't know him before. He's OK with me because I work very hard. I found the job after 5 months, but I'm not happy with it because with 100 Afs a day I can't do anything." (R04, ILD)

A year later, he had found a different type of work as a tailor. He explained:

"I did not know anything about tailoring in the start. But now I have learnt a lot and am able to do most of the job at the work. However I am trying to find another work now. My boss at work often tells me to find another work, because business is down now, and there is not a lot of work at the shop." (R04, IFI)

However, although he was simply looking for a "work that would feed me and was enough for me to run my life here", he recognised that this would be difficult, saying, "finding work in Afghanistan generally and Kabul especially is not very easy. If you don't have good links and power, then nobody will give you a job" (ibid).

businesses directly without connections less fruitful; and then, if work is obtained, suspicion of or discrimination against returnees often makes it impossible for the young person to sustain the role.

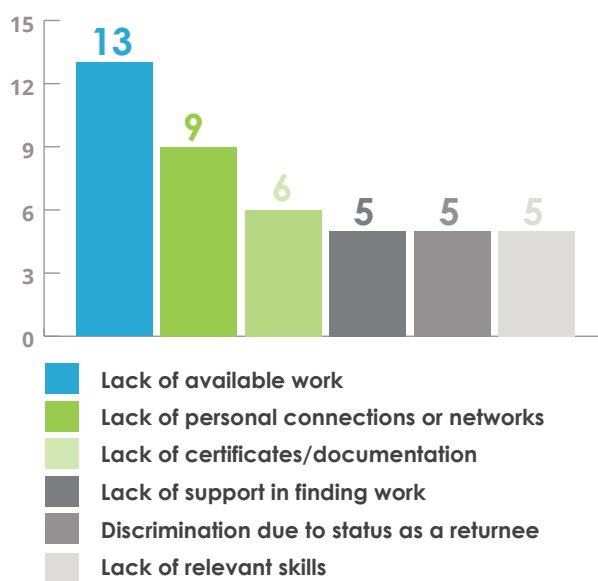


Figure 27. Barriers to finding work

Lack of available work

The level of awareness of the broader employment situation in Afghanistan was high amongst young returnees monitored, with 13 repeatedly citing this as a barrier. When asked about their attempts to find work, they included assessments of the labour market context in their replies, including general comments such as "millions of people are jobless here" (R08, ILD). More specific analyses of the unemployment context also emerged, with three young people mentioning the elections as a contributor to employment freezes, saying that

"no-one is recruiting" (R23, SI2) because of insecurity about the future. Other young people identified the seasons or their location as an additional aggravator of the lack of work, saying that finding a job is "especially [difficult] now with the winter" (R18, SI3), or that "in my province it is very hard, but to come to Kabul with no job...the expenses are too high" (R06, ILD). The two young people who had used reintegration finance from IOM or loans from friends or family to purchase taxis explained that generalised unemployment had also made this an over-saturated market, noting that "everybody who doesn't find a job but have a little money will buy a taxi in Kabul. Therefore, there is not much work for the taxi drivers" (R17, ILD). Neither of the two have been able to sustain their taxi businesses.

Lack of personal connections or networks

Strength of personal networks emerged as the single most important factor in determining a young person's likelihood of finding work following forced return. As noted above, seven of the 12 young people who obtained work during the course of this research (albeit often temporary, manual labour) did so as a result of personal connections.

For many returnees however, this presents a considerable problem. Spending formative years outside Afghanistan disrupts the formation of natural connections within Afghan society. The significant numbers of young people not able to be reintegrated into family units following forced return (see Chapter 6) find themselves with little recourse to social networks. It is perhaps not surprising then, that in the cases of nine separate young people, this was cited as a primary barrier to finding work.

Young people told us that “there are no jobs, and when there are, people given them to people they know” (R03, ILD), and “it is impossible to get a job without someone to speak for you... you need to know someone and I don't know anyone” (R23, SI2). Interestingly, this appeared to be a challenge that persisted for young returnees throughout the research period, with young people citing this as a barrier to finding work even after being back in Afghanistan for several months. This was particularly the case when looking for what they described as “a job for an educated person” (R13, IM3). Several young people hoped their UK qualifications in IT or Business might enable them to find employment with a Government ministry, in a school or other public institution. Their experience however, suggests that the role of personal connections is even more pronounced in these sectors, with young people explaining, months after return, that “I haven't been able to find work [because] I did not have any contacts in the government” (R15, IFI), and that vacancies in the public or NGO sector “will only come to those who have strong contacts within those organisations” (R13, IM9).

Lack of certificates and/or documentation

As with education (see Chapter 8), a lack of recognised certificates or required documentation has also prevented young returnees from securing employment. Six of the young returnees monitored felt that they had missed out on work as a result of not being able to provide school certificates - whether the Afghan school leavers' certificate, or recognised evidence of qualifications gained or training undertaken in the UK.

At the point of having been back in Afghanistan for just over a year, one young person explained that “it's difficult to find work because everyone is asking for Year 12 Afghan school leaving certificate. I can write a little in Dari, good Pashtu. I have all my [UK school] certificates. But the certificates don't help me here” (R18, ILD). Another young person confirmed that “if I don't have the Grade 12 certificate it will be very hard for me to find a job here in Afghanistan” (R15, SI13). Other young people went further explaining that “they say to me that I need a Bachelor's Degree” (R13, IM3).

Lack of support or assistance

Five of the young returnees monitored noted that one of their challenges in finding work had been simply not knowing how to go about getting a job in Afghanistan. Several young people repeated that they “just don't know how” (R06, IM12; R15, ILD) to find work.

Although a variety of organisations, websites and advice centres that aim to help people find work do exist in Kabul, none of the young people monitored had had any success finding employment in this way. Several young people explained that they had left CVs but never heard back, and argued strongly that although a service might exist in name, without money or connections within that service, the likelihood of obtaining useful support was minimal.



Photo credit: Emily Bowerman (RSN)

Discrimination

Other young people struggled to either find or sustain work as a result of experiencing discrimination against returnees. In five separate cases, young people talked about being made redundant or refused employment when it emerged that they were a returnee. It appears that this is not an issue that subsided with time, with one young person reporting that even several months after being back in Afghanistan, his employer “had to let me go - because he said I had a bad story... now it's hard to find work because if anyone knows about my story I'm afraid because my life would be in danger” (R18, ILD). Another two young people said that fear of being discovered as a returnee had prevented them from going out to find work, with one explaining that “they will find out who I am and where I have come back from if I work. The rumours will spread from there” (R22, IM3). Another explained that he was told by a potential employer to go to the ministry to get his UK school certificates validated, but that he didn't go because he was afraid of what might happen if people “know that I studied in the UK” (R23, SI2).

Lack of relevant skills

Another five young people found that the skills they have developed were not relevant for the job market in Afghanistan. Lack of, or poor, literacy skills in Dari and Pashtu emerged as a key problem for several young people. One explained that “it is difficult for me to get a job because I have problems with speaking and writing Dari and Pashto. My English is in fact better because of so long in the UK!” (R23, SI2). When competing with the young Afghan elite (many of whom are also fluent in English) for work, lack of literacy in their mother tongue has been a significant barrier for young returnees.

Others have found that the skills and work experience gained in the UK do not transfer easily to Afghanistan. When they had been back in Afghanistan for several months, two young returnees explained that they used to work in pizza shops in the UK, “but in Afghanistan nobody eats pizza, so there aren't any pizza shops where I could go and work” (R07, IAR).

Case study 7: Nasratullah

Nasratullah, 23, had been back in Afghanistan for three and a half years before his initial interview. For seven months, he had worked for the owner of a construction company who had been introduced to him by someone he met on the plane. However, his employer “had to let me go because he said I had a bad story” (R18, ILD). Scared that “my life would be in danger because of my father” (ibid) he moved around regularly but occasionally found casual driving or construction work.

Although he had his ESOL Entry 3 certificates from the UK, he had still been unable to find a job because “everyone is asking for year 12 Afghan school leaving certificate”. “I made a CV,” he said, “but I haven't found a proper job.” He filled his time “just working and looking for work” and still held out for “a good job” (ibid).

A year later, little had changed. Nasratullah had continued to find occasional daily work whose duration was “so short” but “was the only way I was able to manage my expenses” (R18, IFI). He had studied briefly in a teachers' training school and hoped this might lead to work, and was still waiting to hear back from an organisation where he had applied for a job as a driver. He explained, “They told me they would contact me if there was not any other suitable person for that post. That might happen in 10 days” (ibid).

Four and a half years after his forced return, his motivation for finding work had moved beyond mere subsistence. “I am working hard,” he said, “to earn and save some money and then get out of Afghanistan as soon as I can. Life is not safe here” (ibid).

Conclusions

Without strong personal networks and connections, finding sustainable work has been almost impossible for the young returnees monitored, and setting up a business only a potentially viable option for the small minority with access to money and resources. Lack of work has made it difficult for the majority of young returnees to establish a life for themselves post return, and 19 of the 25 young people monitored said that their work situation was so desperate they would have to leave Afghanistan again.



Photo credit: Laura's Eye via Foter.com/ CC BY-ND

10. Health and wellbeing

Overview

This chapter explores findings related to both the physical and mental health and the emotional wellbeing of young returnees.⁵⁸ The interconnectivity of physical health with mental health and emotional wellbeing is analysed, along with the myriad influencing factors that have led to or exacerbated emotional ill-health following return, including experiences or perceptions of threats to personal safety and security, the absence of support networks, the perceived hopelessness of their situation and future, and the stigmatisation and challenges of reintegration experienced.

Key trends and statistics

The majority of young people monitored have reported physical, mental and emotional health difficulties since being returned to Afghanistan (see figure 28). Experiences of poor emotional wellbeing are particularly notable, as are the challenges faced by young people attempting to secure medical treatment for both physical and mental health difficulties.

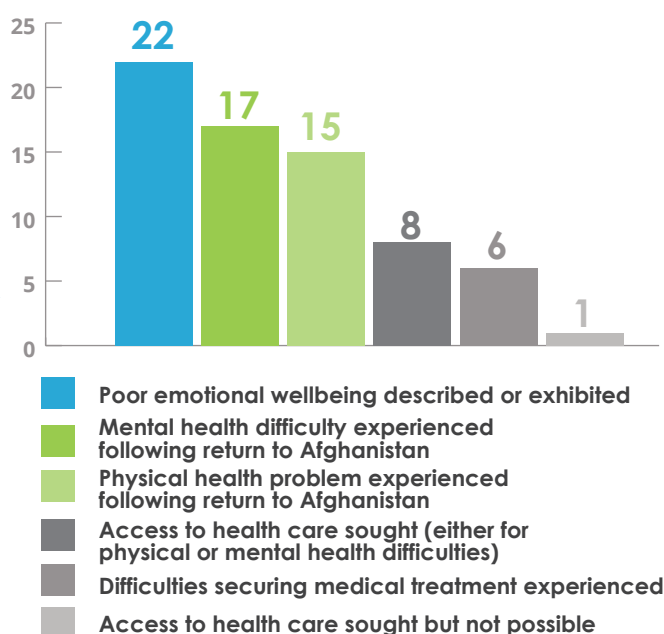


Figure 28. Health or wellbeing difficulty experienced and access to appropriate health care

Physical health

Young people were less likely to describe physical health issues than issues affecting their mental health. However, the kinds of physical health issues young people chose to highlight are noteworthy, as is the extent to which they prioritised seeking medical treatment for those issues, above or alongside other priorities (e.g. securing employment, pursuing education, internal relocation). Of similar importance is evidence of barriers faced by young returnees in accessing appropriate health care and services, and its overall effectiveness. Most often, the cost of services was highlighted as a key barrier to accessing vital support.

Physical symptoms indicative of poor mental health or emotional wellbeing

The most frequently reported manifestations of physical ill health were ailments symptomatic of poor mental health or increased emotional turmoil. These were consistently noted by the same young people throughout the monitoring period, though for a minority were especially heightened following

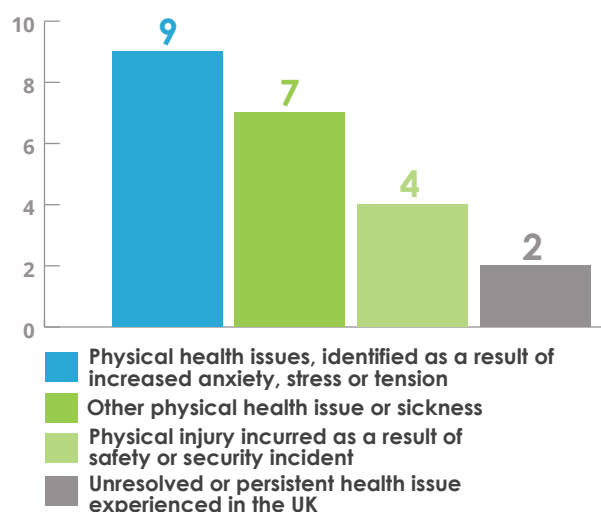


Figure 29. Physical health issue experienced

their immediate arrival in Afghanistan. Removal from familiar support networks, as well as interruption in health care, had exacerbated physical symptoms in most cases. Challenges with sleeping, including insomnia or regularly broken sleep, appetite and weight-loss, headaches and dizziness, or raised blood pressure were reported as relating directly to feeling depressed, tense, stressed, anxious or fearful.

⁵⁸ The researchers involved in this publication recognise the challenges associated with terminology such as 'mental health' or 'mental health issues/ difficulties', and the indivisibility of such issues from the wider political, social and economic situation. The researchers do not provide diagnoses; but instead report the self-described symptoms experienced by the young returnees.

Several young returnees demonstrated a continuous deterioration in physical health, which they linked to their mental and emotional wellbeing, throughout the period of research. One young returnee, for example, presented with severe mental health difficulties, having been treated within the UK for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and visibly struggled to cope upon his early return to Afghanistan. He described having “lost weight due to tension and depression”, and experiencing bouts of “unconsciousness”, “numbness” in his legs, and dizziness, which had forced him to “make [his] movement limited”, having a debilitating influence over his ability to reintegrate. “These”, he noted, “are the significant changes I have felt since my return to Afghanistan. I had none of these problems when I was in the UK” (R12, IM3). This rapid onset of physical symptoms following return to Afghanistan was reported by at least nine young people in the study.

Physical injuries incurred as a result of insecurity or violence

Of the young returnees monitored, four had sustained a physical injury as a result of insecurity or violence. One young returnee sustained damage to his eardrum due to his proximity to an explosion. Although not injured, eight other young people described narrowly avoiding physical harm when caught in or witnessing an explosion, highlighting the risk that this poses to young people returning to an increasingly volatile environment.⁵⁹ Another young returnee was hospitalised for five days following a targeted beating by an unknown group of assailants when he attempted to visit to his home town in another province. Despite his injuries, due to restricted resources and a lack of beds in the hospital, he was prematurely discharged.

Six young returnees fled Afghanistan again during the period of the research. Of these, at least two were physically injured whilst in Iran - one as a result of physical beating during his detention there, and one during his involvement in a serious car accident whilst evading police, which left him with a head injury and

resulted in the deaths of two of his fellow passengers. Despite receiving medical treatment over the monitoring period, he remained deeply distressed by the events, regularly experiencing tension headaches.

Unresolved or persistent physical conditions or injuries, carried over from the UK

Although these were some of the rarest examples of physical health issues, they highlight avoidable, unnecessary challenges that significantly impacted young returnees, as well as some of the barriers that they face in trying to access effective health care. For one young returnee the overlooking of a simple health issue in the planning for his removal from the UK led to serious challenges upon his return to Afghanistan (see case study 8). He also suffered from a protracted back injury, incurred whilst beaten by police in detention in an EU country on his way to the UK, which hindered his efforts to secure manual labour in Afghanistan. Another described a protracted pain in his wrists, after having been forcibly handcuffed during his removal from the UK.

Other physical illnesses or ailments

In addition, stomach pains, sickness, migraines, raised blood pressure, an eye infection, an acute respiratory infection, a bladder infection, and side and chest pains were recorded by seven of the young returnees monitored. Most commonly cited were stomach pains and sickness, which, in two instances, were directly related to the safety and quality of water or food that they were consuming.

Four of the seven young returnees reporting other physical illnesses or ailments highlighted two or more physical health issues. In one of those cases the young person had to prioritise between different health concerns because he could not afford the fees associated with treating them simultaneously. He said,

Case study 8: Zakir

Zakir was forcibly returned to Afghanistan with a full set of fixed braces. In the UK, these were adjusted on a bi-weekly basis by his orthodontist. Upon return, he faced significant barriers to accessing ongoing treatment, and was forced on one occasion to try and remove the braces himself. His endeavours to seek orthodontic treatment were met with costly quotations, often because he was wrongly perceived, as a returnee from Europe, to be wealthy. Zakir visited approximately seven separate dentists in Kabul, and his braces were eventually removed, almost a year after he was returned to Afghanistan. This was only possible as a result of financial support from the UK.

59 UNAMA. 2016: 2.

"I had some problem with my blood as a result of which I used to feel dizzy often. I went to the doctor to check for that, and they say it has increased. But now I am not in a position to treat that, which is why I am just focusing on my teeth now. Once I am done with my teeth I might do treatment of that also."
(R15, IM12)

As a result of receiving financial support from a personal connection in the UK, he was ultimately able to successfully treat both health issues that he was experiencing. This does however demonstrate both a concerning dependency on external financial support, and a staggered approach to securing treatment which could exacerbate serious health issues.

Access to and effectiveness of treatment

Of the 15 young returnees who recorded experiencing physical health issues, eight confirmed seeking treatment from a healthcare professional or service. In five of those cases, the health care received was at least partially successful in treating the issue presented. Six of eight young returnees who sought relevant health care, however, reported experiencing barriers to doing so. One young returnee (whose story is outlined in case study 9) despite attempts to secure counselling, was not able to even see a relevant mental health professional. In three instances, the health care treatment that was secured was not effective.

Notable barriers included high costs for services or treatment, especially when it was known that the young person has returned from the UK, and restrictions on resources, as in the case of one young returnee who was prematurely discharged from hospital due to a lack of beds. Medicines were also notably limited or lacked specialisation, with one young returnee being prescribed paracetamol and ibuprofen to treat an ongoing severe migraine.

Concerns regarding the quality of health care services emerged throughout the research and several young people relied on advice accessible only through UK foster parents and RSN's Monitoring Officer in Kabul. During an early interview with one young person, RSN's Monitoring Officer noted,

"I invited doctor [name of INGO doctor] to join us to provide medical advice. He was concerned that the hospital the young person had been to was primarily about making money, that he would not be seen by a Urology specialist and his problems will therefore just continue. He has recommended a Urology specialist who works part time in a government hospital and part time in a private clinic. We have asked the young person to go and get a quote from this doctor instead. The doctor has

also recommended a dentist and offered to take the young person there himself..." (RSN Monitoring Officer, R15 SI2 post interview notes)

This research does not question the existence of some quality health care provision in Afghanistan, but it does highlight that, without support networks in place and access to financial resources, young people are more susceptible to not accessing that support, or to paying for and receiving sub-standard treatment.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Mental health difficulties were an acute challenge for the young returnees monitored, with 17 describing or exhibiting relevant illnesses or concerns. Mental health concerns were most apparent immediately following the returnees' arrival in Afghanistan, and/or after specific traumas. However, only three young people described or demonstrated significant improvement in their mental health over time, while for the majority of young returnees monitored, mental health difficulties remained a major challenge.

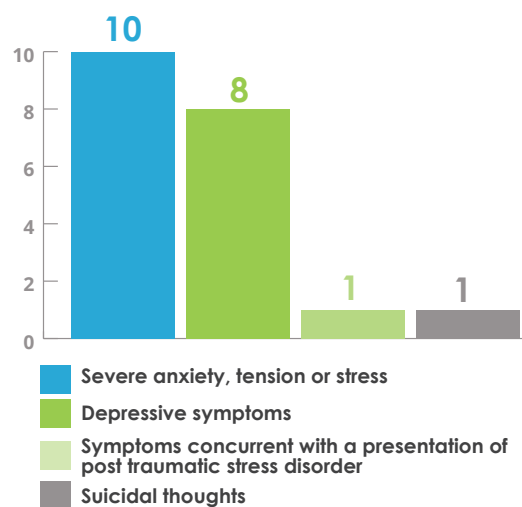


Figure 30. Mental health difficulties experienced

Pronounced anxiety, tension or stress

Ten of the young returnees monitored reported feeling anxious, tense, or stressed. Of these, just two later noted an improvement of their symptoms.⁶⁰ For the majority, however, these issues remained significant, often impacting their physical health and interactions with other people.

Headaches, raised blood pressure, and insomnia or broken sleep were reported as some of the manifestations of these mental health issues. One young returnee (R07, IM1), for example, described

⁶⁰ At least one of the two young people here referenced is known to have subsequently left Afghanistan again.

Case study 9: Erfanullah

When RSN staff met with Erfanullah a second time, he was hyper-alert and talked manically about his experiences both before and following his forced return to Afghanistan. He recounted two incidents that occurred in the UK which had left him with mental and physical health difficulties - an incident when he was stabbed trying to protect a roommate in a fight, following which he was put on medication by his UK doctor, and physical and emotional harm sustained whilst being removed from the UK. He recounted: "At 7:30, they came to get me for the flight but I said no... My sister is here. I cannot go. I refused to go. Then they brought in the special squad. They hit me... in my chest and hurt my wrists. They put handcuffs on me. I was still crying when they took me. I cried for four or five hours. They had to carry me - four or five people - to the plane. My wrists still hurt... I didn't eat for five or six days, and I couldn't speak because my stomach was empty. I was crying that I don't want to go. I want my sister. No one listened. They restrained my wrists and beat me. It was too hard. I wanted to stay with my sister." (R12, IM1)

how, "I am in tension and can't sleep well during the night". Constant distraction and anxious thoughts were also manifestations of tension and stress highlighted by five of the young returnees. One (R18, ILD) reported that, "I'm thinking too much about my family and it's making me crazy; there is too much tension in my head." For one young returnee, (R12, IM1), the intensification of anxiety and worry had led him to increasingly seek isolation from his peers to the point that he rarely felt able to leave the house of the friend who was accommodating him, saying "I prefer to stay alone in the room".

Forced removal from the UK was highlighted as having worsened existing experiences of tension and anxiety for at least two young returnees, and a further two described how their return to Afghanistan had itself prompted issues of stress, anxiety or tension. One reported that "most of the time I am stressed and have anxiety. I didn't have any of these problems when I was in the UK" (R04, ILD). The impact of external forces on the deterioration of mental health post-removal, and on the emotional wellbeing of individual respondents, is highlighted in figure 31.

Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were experienced by eight of the young returnees monitored and was similarly exacerbated by the impact of leaving the UK, and specifically being separated from communities of support and loved ones. Just one returnee noted an improvement in his symptoms. Some young returnees voiced that the hardest times they experienced were those immediately following that separation, with one telling that he "had serious depression for almost six or seven months. Couldn't sleep well through night at that time." (R14, ILD)

Depression had a debilitating impact on young people's health and interactions with others. One young returnee was described by the older friend he was living with as "sick and depressed about his condition. He sometimes breaks down and makes it difficult for us to have him in control" (about R22 to Monitoring Officer). The young returnee in question reported that he struggles to secure effective mental health support.

Without effective treatment, these young people are highly vulnerable to trialling unsafe and unregulated means of coping with their illness and its symptoms. One young person described how, like many others,⁶¹ he had begun to use cannabis whilst living in the UK as a strategy to manage his feelings about the ongoing uncertainty surrounding his unresolved immigration status as well as to block out painful memories. This substance-dependency had worsened following his forced return to Afghanistan to a point that he could no longer control it, saying "I am smoking hash and I can't stop it... it was helping me forget sadness and depression" (R09, IM6).



Photo credit: mobyhill via Foter.com /CC BY-NC-SA

⁶¹ RSN's Specialist Educational Support Worker, working with young asylum-seekers and refugees in London, has seen this manifest itself amongst clients as a means to self-medicate and manage trauma, and a means to relieve insomnia or regular nightmares.

Symptoms concurrent with a presentation of PTSD

One young person had been the victim of a violent assault in the UK, resulting in the death of one of his friends and injuries to himself, and had been diagnosed with PTSD. He showed RSN staff letters from the victim support unit, as well as appointment letters for counselling that he had been receiving following this incident. His treatment had been interrupted when he was detained, and eight months following his return to Afghanistan he had still not been able to access any further treatment. This young returnee presents a compelling example of the damage that can be incurred by removing a patient from essential, ongoing mental health treatment. His challenges in accessing appropriate support once returned to Afghanistan exacerbated his already serious mental and physical health issues.

Suicidal thought patterns

In many young returnees, fear or experiences of insecurity, underemployment, financial instability, poverty and physical and mental health issues converge to create a sense of growing futility. For one young person, who described the hopelessness he perceives in his life and future, these thoughts had become suicidal, as he told "I am so tired of this life... sometimes I feel to take my own life rather than living the life I am living now" (R07, IM1). This downward spiral of mental and emotional wellbeing was increasingly exacerbated following his return to Afghanistan. In an earlier interview, he emphasised the absence of a future, as he perceives it, stating: "I always have tension in my mind when I think about my future, which is now very much ended" (R07, IAR). But later this had developed into more sustained patterns of suicidal thought.

Reduced emotional wellbeing

22 of the young returnees monitored have experienced high levels of poor or deteriorating emotional wellbeing since their return to Afghanistan, and a growing sense of hopelessness. One young returnee said that "the most positive thing that I can think about [since returning] is that I am still alive. Other than that, I don't think that anything positive has happened in my life" (R17, ILD). Where positive statements of progress were made, they were qualified by an overall context emphasising the multi-faceted challenges that negatively impacted young returnees' wellbeing and perceptions of the future.

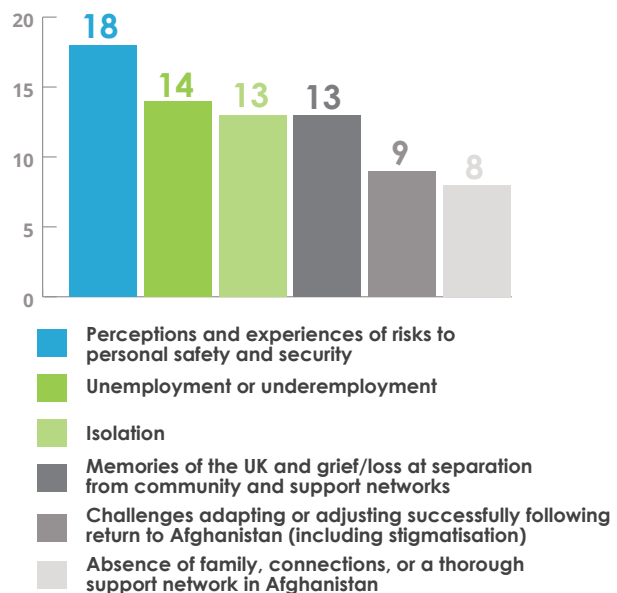


Figure 31. Factors influencing returnees' wellbeing

The ongoing fragility of the young returnees' situations, including their personal safety, financial stability and employment outcomes, starkly contrasts with their experiences of growing up in the UK, and generated a sense of failure and fatalism. Thirteen out of 25 young returnees highlighted challenges in adapting to life in Afghanistan, with one young returnee saying, "I have seen my worst days after the return to Afghanistan" (R08, ILD). Thirteen returnees also emphasised the impact of feeling isolated, whilst nine felt stigmatised or lacked a sense of belonging and identity in their new context. One young returnee explained that "people mock me all the time. They say I have wasted my life and now have returned with empty hands. It feels so depressing from inside" (R08, IFI).

Hope appeared to emerge temporarily for those who are able to secure employment, but disappeared when employment was not sustained and they become "jobless and [return] to the zero level" again (R14, IFI). Others appeared temporarily hopeful as they contemplated safety and a respite from the insecurity in Afghanistan by leaving again, only to experience further trauma and violent humiliation in a second forced return. This gradual erosion of emotional wellbeing led one young person to join the Taliban (see case study 2 in Chapter 7). His description of his motivation to do so highlights a weakening sense of emotional resilience. "I might live or die", he said. "Either way, that life would be better than the life I am living now" (R22, SI11).



HEALTH IS

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Conclusions

Mental health difficulties and a protracted deterioration in emotional wellbeing are clear and significant outcomes for former unaccompanied minors returned to Afghanistan. Interruption in access to specialised care, especially where young people had been receiving counselling or medication for mental health issues whilst living in the UK, has been recorded as a key challenge, with increased physical symptoms experienced in the absence of regular and appropriate treatment for mental health conditions. Health care services, where sought out either for physical illness or mental health difficulties, have ranged in their effectiveness. Unaffordable costs have often prevented young returnees from accessing or continuing essential support, or, on other occasions, insufficient resources or expertise have prevented adequate health care provision.

The barriers to flourishing mental, emotional and physical health are multi-faceted, and often exacerbated by the particular vulnerabilities of this target group. They have reported a lack of familiarity with the security and safety context in Afghanistan, and constantly contrasted their experiences in the UK with a hopelessness about their futures upon return. Loss of support networks (including social workers, key workers, GPs and counsellors), along with experiences of stigmatisation as a returnee, has contributed to worsening health and wellbeing outcomes for more than half of the young returnees monitored.

11. Plans and reflections

Overview

Young returnees' plans for the future are explored in this chapter, along with their reflections on their lives in the UK. Their forward-planning and evaluation of the past are coupled with the advice they would give to boys in Afghanistan who are considering making the same journey to the UK.

Key trends and statistics

Many young returnees have reported an inability to plan for the future, constrained to a state of limbo. Pushed by both insecurity and the lack of opportunity in Afghanistan, over half the young people in this study have articulated a desire to leave Afghanistan, in spite of the risks of the journey. The majority of young returnees have reflected positively on their lives in the UK, but have also reported struggles with the tension between happy memories and anger and sadness at their forced return. Their 'good' times in the UK have thrown their current reality in Afghanistan into stark relief.

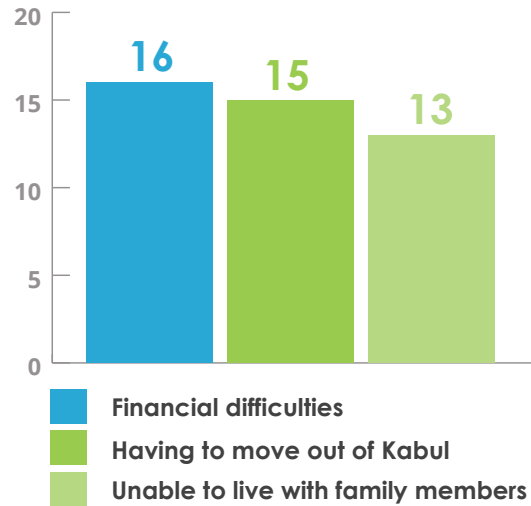


Figure 32. Future plans and reflections on the UK

Future Plans

Lack of clear plans

Over half the young returnees in this study expressed an inability to plan ahead. In eight cases, young people were only able to form plans for day-to-day living and the very near future. A further five young people were unable to articulate even short term

plans, either because of the worsening security situation and the fact that "things change so fast in Afghanistan and I don't know what will I do in the next coming days or week" (R20, IM6), or because the prospect of planning is too stressful in itself:

".... I always have tension in my mind and I think about my future, which is now very much ended [...] I can't plan anything. I don't know what will happen to me the coming day. I don't have any money, no work." (R07, IAR)

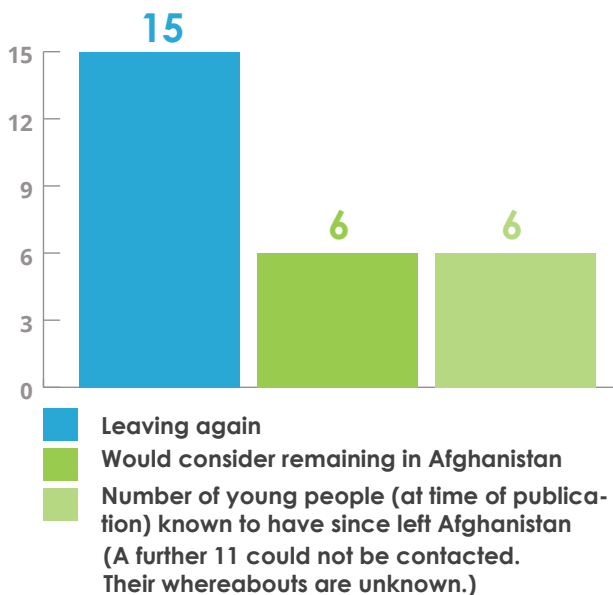


Figure 33. Returnees' plans for and experiences of leaving Afghanistan again

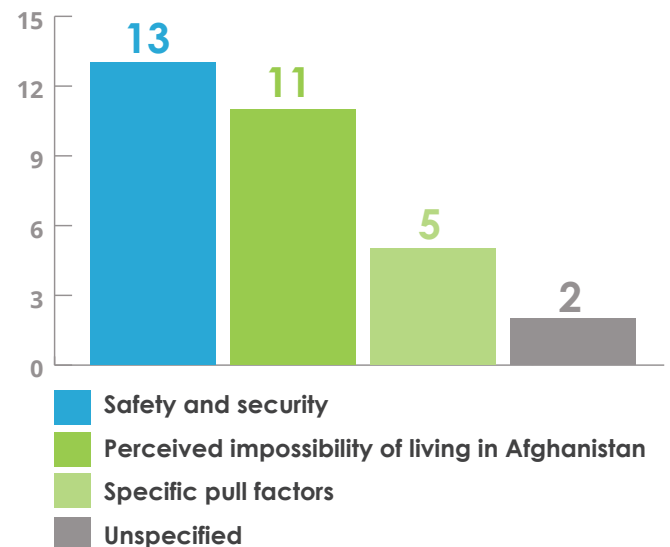


Figure 34. Rationale for wanting to leave Afghanistan again

Leaving again

The possibility of leaving Afghanistan again was frequently raised by young returnees, with 15 young people reporting that this was their priority for the future, making statements such as “my priority is not to start studying or working here, but to go back to my girlfriend and get out danger” (R22, IAR).

Four young people expressed a desire to go back to the UK specifically. Five others stated that they would like to travel to somewhere in Europe, two preferred Pakistan or Iran, while another four reported planning to travel anywhere in order to leave Afghanistan. Only five young people articulated specific pull factors: two cited a desire to be back in the UK because it is “good and peaceful” (R06, IM12), two wanted to be reunited with their girlfriends and one with his sister.

These pull factors are far outweighed by the push factors, the most prevalent of which are the security situation, lack of opportunity and lack of networks in Afghanistan. Five young people cited safety and security as the most pressing push factor, six spoke about the lack of opportunities, and a further five described a combination of the two. Young people reported feeling that they had no future in Afghanistan, and three young people framed leaving Afghanistan as a survival issue. One said:

“They ruined my life by sending me back to Afghanistan. My plan is to get out of Afghanistan as soon as I can. My life is now ruined; I don’t have any future here. Look at my health situation; I hardly can do anything now. It is so bothering me.” (R16, IM12)

Of the 15 young returnees who articulated a desire to leave, six had specific ideas about how to go about this. Three talked in almost identical terms of their plans “to make some money and get out of Afghanistan as soon as possible” (R02, ILD; R04, ILD; R18, IFI). Three others considered legal options for return to the UK, with one pursuing an out of country

appeal and two seeking help from their UK-based girlfriend and sister respectively to look into other legal routes.

Nine other young returnees who talked about their desire to leave lacked clear plans and were confused about their options for leaving the country again. A lack of understanding about the feasibility of return to the UK, or EU more broadly, was demonstrated by five young returnees, with one asking, for example, “is there any chance to apply again for the UK? Any chance?” (R01, ILD). The uncertainty and lack of clear advice are encapsulated in the words of R06 (IM12):

“He [a friend who “was also deported from UK many years ago” but “went back to Italy and got papers”] told me; if I want to go Europe again, then better I go to Italy and take paper. But I still think I should go to UK. I have spent around 6 years in UK, and it is very hard for me to forget those good days. But I am also concerned if I go there and they deport me back. When they deported us, they said; we could not go to UK for five years at least. I know a friend of mine in UK. He was deported once from UK, and only after few months he came back to UK and sought asylum again. I don’t know how this systems work.”

In spite of the risks of undertaking a further journey, at the time of writing, six young people are known to have left Afghanistan, one had made several unsuccessful attempts to leave, while a further 11 could not be contacted.

Would consider remaining in Afghanistan

Three young people spoke with some positivity about the prospect of remaining in Afghanistan, with one saying that “at the end of the day, it is my own country” (R19, IM1), but nevertheless recognised that “if the problem I have here wasn’t solved, then

Case study 10: Shoaib

Having spent six and a half years in the UK, Shoaib’s initial plan on return was to leave Afghanistan again “if I get some money” (R16, IAR). At the same time, he expressed an interest in learning a skill that would be useful to life in Afghanistan.

By his ninth month back in Afghanistan he reflected on the fact that he had still not found work and that security conditions were getting worse. His new aim was “to get out of Afghanistan as soon as possible” (R16, IM9). Three months later he continued talking about the difficulties of life, saying that he was “just waiting for the right time to get out of here again” (R16, IM12). Four months later (20 months after his forced removal) Shoaib was still planning to “get out of Afghanistan as soon as I find the chance” (R16, IFI), following in the footsteps of his other friends “who were also deported from UK [and] have already left Afghanistan and are on the way back to Europe”, although he had made no tangible progress towards this end.

I might have to flee Afghanistan and get back to one of those European countries". The same caveat was expressed by the three others who mooted the possibility of remaining in Afghanistan.

Reflections on the UK

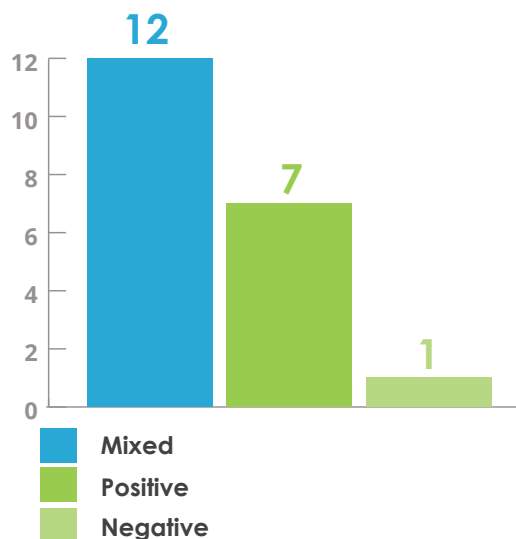


Figure 35. Returnee reflections on their life and experiences in the UK



Figure 36. Aspects to life in the UK valued by returnees

Positive reflections on the UK

Young returnees reported that their time in the UK had been a significant and formative part of their lives. Seven young people only had positive remarks to make about the UK and a further twelve, though more nuanced in their memories, also spoke of things they had valued about their lives there. Prevalent throughout were descriptions of the UK as

a place of physical safety and peace, where young people were happy, with nine drawing attention to particular places, friendships, organisations and individuals which had supported them and created a nurturing environment within which they felt safe and could flourish. The positive words used to describe the UK contrasted starkly with the negative words used to describe their life in Afghanistan. Young people talked about hope being "buried" (R04, IM12) and life being "destroyed" (R16, IFI).

Despite being forcibly removed one young person explained that he was

"very happy about the UK and all organisations in the UK. Even though the Home Office refused me and didn't let me stay, UK let me get education and stay in a house and I will always respect that" (R23, ILD).

Negative reflections on the UK

Only one young person had purely negative words about his time in the UK, explaining that:

"I don't have good memories from UK. Whenever I think about my life in UK, and the way they deported me back to Afghanistan. I get angry. [...] people like me who was avoiding any kind of wrong doings are deported back to danger and hopelessness." (R11, ILD)

Twelve young people contrasted happy recollections with their anger and disappointment at being returned to a "place where there is no security" (R13, IM1), and expressed a sense of disillusionment and betrayal about being returned "after doing nothing wrong" (R14, IFI). Another articulated his sadness and anger that the country which had been home for so long had sent him away, saying:

"The government in the UK don't care whether I live or whether I die. After eight years of being in the UK, when I came back to Afghanistan everything had changed. I feel like a non-Afghan citizen here." (R13, IM3)

Only two young people had negative reflections about the UK that were not connected to return. One of these had witnessed one roommate stabbing another in the UK, for which he had been receiving counselling in the UK, and a second remembered that "there are also groups that are not very happy with refugees and immigrants in their country" (R13, IFI). However, he qualified these memories by stating that "the bad things happening in UK was better than good things happening here in Afghanistan" (R13, IM9).

Advice to other young people

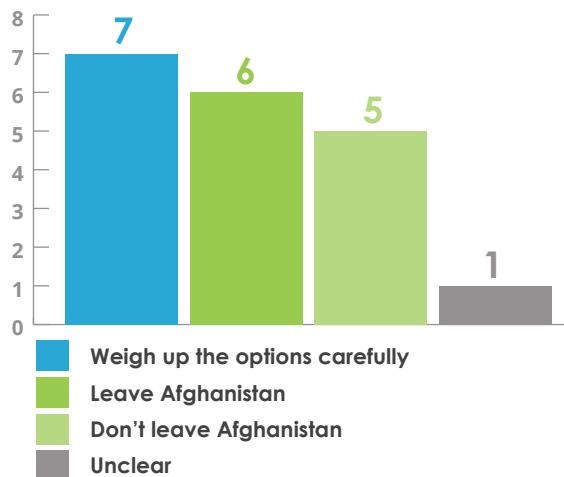


Figure 37. Advice to other young people about leaving Afghanistan

Advising others to leave

Young returnees were asked what advice they would give to a boy of about 13 years old who was considering leaving Afghanistan, as they had done many years before. Five said they would advise others not to try to leave Afghanistan, because they would be unlikely to be granted refugee status, and because the journey itself was too dangerous. One young person explained that:

"I will them that going to UK is a do or die situation. What I mean is that whether you will get to UK or you will lose your life. I saw many of my friends who died on the way in front of my eyes. When I was going to from Turkey to Greece, we were 22 people on a small tiny boat. And in the kind of conditions we got in Greece is unexplainable really." (R19, IM1)

Five young returnees stated that they would nevertheless encourage other young teenagers to leave Afghanistan for a country where they could both be physically safe and find the work they needed for physical survival. One young person stated that "there is no better place than UK" (R24, IM1). Two others, though still encouraging people to leave, emphasized the possible negative outcomes of going to the UK, with one explaining that "It's only good if they accept your case" (R18, ILD).

The words of one returnee sum up the frequently reported conviction that if someone is in danger in Afghanistan, it is worth risking the dangers to travel somewhere safer:

"If he has problems then he should leave Afghanistan. If they don't have any problem they shouldn't go. The journey is very dangerous... 99 percent danger. If people don't have problem then they would not put their lives in danger at first place. So then it is better to get out of here and find somewhere safer to live." (R25, ILD)

The challenge of weighing up both the risks of the journey and the possibility of eventual forced return with the potential to live in peace and freedom leads seven young returnees to simply say they would explain the reality to others but not advise them what to do as each situation is unique. "I can't say nothing," argued (R01, ILD), "because if I tell him to go to the UK they will just send him back, but if I tell him to stay maybe his life is in danger, so I can't tell him nothing!"



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Conclusions

Young returnees have struggled to imagine or create a future for themselves in Afghanistan, with happy memories of their formative years in the UK making their current reality feel even more difficult. It is worth noting how far removed their circumstances on return are from the UK government's ambition to "give care leavers the same level of care and support that other young people receive from their parents"⁶² and how distant they are from UK initiatives which have been created "to support them [care leavers] into and through their early adult lives and into more secure and settled futures".⁶³ Seeking more settled futures for themselves, young returnees have articulated their desire to leave Afghanistan again, in spite of the risks of the journey.

62 HM Government. 2014:3
63 New Beginnings. 2016.

12. Recommendations

The findings of this research highlight the multi-faceted and substantial challenges and safety risks experienced by young people following their forced return to Afghanistan, and suggest that it is not in the individual best interests of the young people to leave the safety, security and support they have experienced and the networks they have established during their formative years in the UK.

Those who make policy decisions about the return of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to Afghanistan and those who assess the merits of individual cases should give due attention to the following critical considerations.

- 1 Decision-makers should acknowledge the specific vulnerabilities, stigmatisation, and associated safety and security risks faced by former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as a result of their status as returnees from the UK.
- 2 Decision-makers should give due consideration to the impact of the deteriorating security situation on the safety of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as a particular social group who are made more vulnerable by their lack of essential support networks. Special consideration should be given to their physical, mental and emotional safety in view of the increasing number of targeted attacks in urban centres (including Kabul).
- 3 Decision-makers should acknowledge the difficulties young people face in building relationships with people following return to Afghanistan, including with family members. Consideration should be given to the challenges this creates for young returnees attempting to reintegrate into Afghan society and meet basic needs.
- 4 Decision-makers should recognise that there are very few services that help young returnees, particularly those from Europe, to navigate the practicalities of reintegration. Due consideration should be given to this as a potential barrier to the safe return and sustainable reintegration of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 5 Decision-makers should review the prevailing assumption that education received in the UK will have given young returnees skills and qualifications that can lead to further education or employment in Afghanistan.
- 6 Decision-makers should recognise the impact of forced return on the health of young returnees. Particular consideration should be given to pre-existing physical and mental health issues or difficulties, especially those requiring ongoing or specialist treatment. Evidence in this report suggests that young people who experience complex mental health issues should not be forcibly returned to Afghanistan as this can lead to a rapid deterioration of mental and physical health.
- 7 Policy-makers should address the contradiction between the Government's stated ambition to improve care leaver outcomes and the forced return of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to a context where they are unable to build safe and settled futures.



Photo credit: Sara Shinkfield

13. Glossary of terms

Appeal Rights Exhausted	People described as 'Appeal Rights Exhausted' are those who have been refused asylum or any form of temporary protection or whose leave to remain has expired (and an application to extend it refused), and who have exhausted all appeals.
Assisted Voluntary Return	Assisted Voluntary Return is a programme which supports non-citizens to return to their country of origin. At the time of the research process, Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) was delivered by Refugee Action through their (now closed) 'Choices' project. Individuals returning through this programme were eligible for up to £1,500 worth of reintegration assistance, including a £500 relocation grant, paid in cash on departure from the UK, and further payments through IOM on return. Choices also provided those considering AVR with independent, confidential and non-directive advice ⁷ . AVR is now delivered directly by the Home Office ⁸ .
Care leaver	A young person who was supported by their Local Authority as a minor and continues to receive support under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.
Charter flights	A charter flight is one which is arranged for a specific purpose. People forcibly sent back to Afghanistan travel on special flights which have been chartered by the UK government to enforce their removal.
Child	A person under the age of 18.
Child in care	A person under the age of 18 who is being looked after by their Local Authority.
Deportation	<p>The term deportation is commonly used to refer to the state-enforced or enforceable departure of a non-citizen from the country⁹. Deportation is, however, a specific term that applies to people whose removal from the country is deemed 'conducive to the public good' by the UK government and can also be recommended by a court in connection with a conviction of a criminal offence that carries a prison term.</p> <p>The young returnees whose experiences are documented in this report were not deported from the UK, however sometimes they use the term to describe their forced removal.</p>
Detention (or immigration detention)	People can be held in immigration detention if their applications to be in the UK are being processed or have been refused. Some are waiting to hear if they will be accepted as refugees while others have been refused asylum and will be sent back to their countries of origin ¹⁰ . Some former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children spend time in detention before being removed to their country of origin.
Forced removal	The process of enforcing the removal of non-citizens who have been refused legal permission to remain in the UK.
Home Office	The lead government department for immigration and passports, drugs policy, crime, counter-terrorism and police. The Home Office oversees the asylum process in the UK.
Leaving Care	<p>The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sought to ensure that young people do not leave care until they are ready and that they receive more effective support once they have left. The general aim of leaving care duties is to provide a child or young person with the sort of guidance and support which most young people growing up in their own families can take for granted but which those who are separated or estranged from their families cannot. The government has stated its commitment to ensuring better outcomes, and support of, care leavers¹¹.</p> <p>The majority of separated young people will be entitled to leaving care services under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. There are different categories of young people who are or have been 'looked after' and are entitled to some form of leaving care support, such as a personal advisor and financial assistance¹².</p> <p>Most young people aged 18 or over who are appeal rights exhausted and have no further lawful basis to stay in the UK will become 'unlawfully in the UK'. This can lead to a withdrawal of their leaving care support¹³.</p>

Local Authority	<p>One of the terms used to describe local government in the UK. Local Authorities (also called councils) provide a range of services and have responsibility for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their area.</p> <p>Local Authorities have duties to support all children 'in need' in their area. A child can be 'in need' for a huge variety of reasons, including, in the case of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, because they have no parents or carers in the UK to support them and often no financial means at all. Immigration status is irrelevant to whether a child is in need; duties are owed to all children regardless of where they come from¹⁴.</p>
Looked after child(ren)	<p>Under the Children Act 1989, Local Authorities have a duty to provide accommodation for children who need it, for example because there is no-one with parental responsibility for them. A child who is accommodated by a Local Authority falls within the definition of a 'looked after' child. Where a child is 'looked after' by the Local Authority the Local Authority acts as the child's 'corporate parent'. There are a series of duties that Local Authorities owe to 'looked after' children. In addition, under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 the Local Authority will also owe a 'looked after' child longer-term duties as they progress into adulthood.</p>
Returnee	<p>The term used throughout this report to describe Afghans who have left Afghanistan at some stage but have now returned.</p>
Social worker	<p>Social workers work with individuals and families to help improve outcomes in their lives. This may be helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse or supporting people to live independently. Social workers are often employed by a Local Authority.</p> <p>Social workers usually have a 'caseload' – a number of cases of individuals/families who they work with at any one time. Their work entails visits to service users, assessments, organising packages of support, making recommendations or referrals to other services and agencies.</p> <p>Under leaving care provision, young people are generally given a personal advisor not a social worker, unless they have specific or complex support needs.</p>
Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child/children (UASC)	<p>The Home Office defines unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as persons who are under 18 years of age when their asylum application is submitted; who are applying for asylum in their own right; and are separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so¹⁵.</p>
Voluntary return	<p>See assisted voluntary return.</p>
Young returnees	<p>Used in this report to describe former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who had been removed to Afghanistan after turning 18.</p>
Young people	<p>Used in this report to refer to those between the ages of 18 and 25.</p>

- 1 Participating in this research project was not considered to constitute receiving organisational support, as RSN is not a service provider in Afghanistan.
- 2 The figures here relate to support sought and accessed by young people eligible for support as forced returnees.
- 3 The primary difference between the support offered to forced returnees and voluntary returnees is that voluntary returnees are entitled to receive direct cash grants, the first installment (£500) in the UK, and second installment (£1000) on arrival in Afghanistan. The provision of cash enables voluntary returnees to use the reintegration assistance to cover daily living and accommodation costs, rather than just business, education or training costs.
- 4 All data on IOM support is drawn from direct interviews conducted by RSN staff in Kabul with IOM management in March 2014.
- 5 NB Some young people have experienced multiple types of incidents/concerns and so the total figure here is not 100%
- 6 NB Some young people have experienced both bomb blasts and targeted killings: the total figure for young people directly experiencing a security incident remains 12.
- 7 Refugee Action. 2015.
- 8 Gov.uk. 2016.
- 9 Blinder, S. 2015.
- 10 See also Detention Action website FAQs <http://detentionaction.org.uk/frequently-asked-questions> (accessed 17 March 2016)
- 11 HM Government. 2014.
- 12 See also Coram Children's Legal Centre. 2013a.
- 13 See also Coram Children's Legal Centre. 2013b.
- 14 See also Coram Children's Legal Centre. 2013c.
- 15 Refugee Council. 2016.

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