

# COMING BACK TO AFGHANISTAN: DEPORTED MINORS' NEEDS AT A TIME OF COVID-19

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## This Samuel Hall research brief:

1. Explores the knowledge, attitudes and practices towards the migration and return of unaccompanied minors in Afghanistan.
2. Provides actionable learning to inform more effective and relevant design, implementation, and adjustment of future interventions targeting minor deportees and their families.
3. Elevates the voices of deported children and their families, presenting direct input from respondents on the complexities, challenges, and nuances of lived experiences.
4. Presents an evidence base for advocacy efforts to target structural obstacles and opportunities to support minor deportees, their families and their communities.
5. Advocates for greater stakeholder engagement to address the needs of deported minors and their families at a time of COVID-19.

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## INTRODUCTION

This note is based on research conducted by Samuel Hall for War Child UK and UNICEF in 2019, as well as follow-up calls in April 2020 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on minor deportees and returnees.

The original study was conducted with 403 phone surveys with deportee children, and over 80 qualitative interviews deported children/youth or their parents/guardians across two western provinces – Herat and Badghis. In addition, 29 key informant interviews were conducted with government representatives, CPAN, UN and NGO representatives throughout the course of the research.

In 2020, due to the spread of COVID-19 reaching all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and with specific concerns in the Western region, additional interviews were conducted with some of the same social workers, guardians and family members. This brief summarises the data available to date.

## CONTEXT

### Global attention, but decreased support

In a global context where migration is exceedingly politicised, and where more than half of displaced people are children<sup>1</sup>, the situation of unaccompanied minors has drawn increased attention.

While the Global Compact for Migration includes provisions for child sensitive approaches and outlines a framework for establishing dignified returns, it does not provide a foundation for framing deportation. This gap leaves child protection especially vulnerable to disorganised and chaotic return contexts.

Unaccompanied children on the move have become more common. This demographic shift calls for a transition to child-sensitive return programmes and policies – yet despite increased returns and deportations, support has decreased over the last decade in Afghanistan.

### Reduced presence of international actors

Security incidents on the road from Herat to Islam Qala limit the number of organisations present at the border, as well as the presence of female staff. Overall, the few organisations that are present are operating with reduced staff capacity, and some activities have stopped or have been scaled down. This has allowed for COVID-19-related activities to be scaled up or added, with such measures tempered by temporary halts in operations as staff were affected by the pandemic.

The response remains insufficient to meet the needs at the border, especially for children and women. Apart from the United Nations Refugee agency (UNHCR) and CHA – which are focused on smaller refugee returns – the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and War Child UK, an implementing partner of UNICEF, are the main

international actors assisting deportees, alongside the national Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR) and the Department of Public Health (DoPH).

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) newly restarted providing, respectively, services on mine risk education and services on legal assistance to returnees. Gaps in knowledge still remain concerning reintegration needs at individual and community levels in high return areas in Afghanistan, and especially children's reintegration needs, and possibilities for supporting their journey 'home'.

Few comprehensive follow-up activities exist for these children beyond family reunification – and currently no programme responds to the specific threats imposed by COVID-19 on deported minors.

### Impact of COVID-19

Even in light of the pandemic and its closeness with the Iranian border, UN agencies, NGOs and other implementing partners are less present and have reduced movements to the border.

One of the core constraints to programming is the lack of knowledge of needs. COVID-19 risks widening the gap – unless we can meet these needs through conversations and information sharing with minor returnees and their families.

With reference to COVID-19, the brief highlights:

- The stigma that children face upon return, and the fear that children express at the border, including fears of having been contaminated and of carrying the disease to communities,
- The lack of means for families to put in place COVID-19 preventive measures, worsened by the inflation that affects food costs for families. This includes unclear conditions of quarantine, and questions over children's treatment in the 14 days of their return,
- Limitations in access to safe transportation for family reunification during COVID-19, with unsafe child protection standards,
- The inability to return to Iran or to attend school – a situation of limbo which leads many UAM returnees to work locally during COVID-19, even when others in the community do not work.

*"If we don't support these children now, when will we support them? They need us now more than ever. They all associate these children with the risks of coronavirus." – A social worker in Kabul*

<sup>1</sup> Save the Children / Samuel Hall (2018) Achieving Durable Solutions for Returnee Children: What do we know

## Afghanistan's mass displacement and transnational ties to Iran

Since 2012, over 1,362,900 Afghans have returned from Pakistan and 445,700 from Iran.<sup>2</sup> Returns from Europe, from Gulf countries, and from Pakistan and Iran have increased since 2015, with mass returns from Pakistan shadowing returns from Iran.

Yet, the constant stream of deportations from Iran – annually at around 400,000 between 2007-2017 – requires caution and attention. In 2018, nearly 800,000 undocumented Afghans returned or were deported from Iran<sup>3</sup>.

Among these large return numbers, research has highlighted the increased presence of children, with a rise in the number of unaccompanied children since 2015, as well as of children returned with their families<sup>4</sup>. Sustained, widespread violence, insecurity, lack of economic opportunities and displacement in Afghanistan have led Afghans to migrate to neighbouring countries, or further to Europe in the hope for stability and a better future.

The main response to this migration – which happens largely irregularly, due to a lack of legal pathways – has been for states to rely on forced returns.

Migration to Iran has sustained communities and families across Afghanistan for decades. Trade, cultural exchanges, common religious practices, and a common language tie the two countries.

Recent geopolitical shocks in Iran (a revolution, economic sanctions, and now a global pandemic) put at risk the situation of two million refugees and undocumented refugees, Afghan workers in niche sectors in Iran, and several generations of Afghan children now born in exile. Their return to Afghanistan is not just a migration issue; it is a historical and cultural break in regional exchanges.

With COVID-19, the returns of children has increased – including those who now decide to come back out of fear of staying in Iran, and out of the financial incapacity to pay for health care, the fees for health care having only been removed for Afghans officially registered as refugees in Iran.

## Need for a post-deportation protection framework adapted to the profiles of unaccompanied minors, their families and communities

To establish a protection system from the Western border to minors' home communities at a time of COVID-19 is particularly important. Migration in and out of Iran remains forced.

In areas of return, a stronger understanding of the attitudes and practices around unaccompanied minors' migration, their vulnerabilities, and exploring models for community-based responses is essential for children to find a home they feel safe in.

As scholars ask the question "when home does not exist, what does self-quarantine mean?"<sup>5</sup> this is a crucial moment to consider how children can be given a safe sense of "home" upon return, to welcoming families and communities.

Humanitarian assistance cannot be a catch-all response. While global and national level responses are being developed to protect citizens during a global pandemic, border and community-based protection measures for children can provide the support minors have often lacked in their journey.

### Box 1: Perceptions of Childhood

Prevailing narratives of childhood present a picture of young adulthood that begins quite early. dPast research had shown that children are frequently in positions where they have to work, support families, and even act as spouses or parents before age 18.<sup>6</sup> "There is a general rule in Afghanistan: when a person is above 10, he is no longer a child," confirmed a social worker<sup>7</sup>. As soon as a child hits puberty, according to this narrative, they may be considered an adult, with adult responsibilities.

Our research reveals, however, a more nuanced vision of this narrative. On the one hand, children take on significant responsibilities in their household – especially where the head of household is absent or unable to work, the burden of providing for the family most commonly falls on the child.

In interviews, youth and children themselves emphasised their role and the feelings of responsibility towards their families. "My father broke his hand twice in Iran [...] and I told [my mother] that I should migrate to Iran and help my father there, and my mother supported my decision," shared one 14-year-old<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> 1,362,979 and 445,798, respectively, as of June 2018, according to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)

<sup>3</sup> IOM (2019). Returns to Afghanistan: Joint IOM/UNHCR Summary Report 2018

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Khosravi, S. (2020) <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/when-home-does-not-exist-what-does-self-quarantine-mean-street-children-in-tehran/>

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF/Samuel Hall, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> KII W/UCUK Social Worker, Kabul. July 2019

<sup>8</sup> SSI with Child, Herat. August 2019.

*"No one asked me to go and earn money, but I felt responsible so that's why I went" echoed one of his peers.<sup>9</sup>*

On the other hand, parents acknowledge their child's right to childhood, even in later stages of adolescence. One father emphasised this: *"My child was young, and I saw him as a child, but because of economic problems he went to Iran with my approval; he was 15-16 years old when he migrated to Iran."<sup>10</sup>*

Several children interviewed mentioned that they "felt like a child" when they moved, and many highlighted moments along their journey or return when they felt scared or particularly at risk because of their age. Parents and guardians also remained keenly aware in interviews of the vulnerability their children face while moving due to their youth.

Migration itself was seen in some cases as a rite of passage, as the moment when the child becomes an adult. *"When my son was going to Iran, I thought he was a grown up then,"* highlighted one parent interviewed in Badghis.

This is echoed by minors themselves: *"I migrated to Iran three times and I did not think I was a child... The first time, I did not know about the risks along the way but the second and third time I knew about it but I was not worried."<sup>11</sup>*

## RISKS & MOTIVATIONS

### When children make decisions, what are their and their family's knowledge of the risks of migration?

The migration decision is neither hierarchical nor linear – especially when it comes to sending children.

Migration is a family decision, a decision that comes after many hesitations, back and forth discussions, and careful considerations. These decisions are also transnational and multi-sited with family networks in Iran weighing in and committing to providing support after the border crossing.

Most strikingly, children often become the 'decision maker' and initiate the migration conversation themselves, convincing the family to let them travel to Iran to support them.

Part of the migration narrative is tied to forgetting the fear and risks involved in a traditional yet irregular migration to neighbouring Iran.

COVID-19 brings migration fears back to the surface for children and youth, who are described as deeply shaken by their status as irregular migrants in a country living through one of the worse cases of the global pandemic.

### A) Fear

Fear is one of the drivers of return to Afghanistan from Iran – the children who took the decision to leave, now decide to come back to poverty rather than remain amidst Iran's high rates of the virus.

Return trends are likely to increase in 2020 compared to previous years – with a new trend in forced returns of Afghans who, without COVID-19, would have stayed in Iran.

According to the Ministry of Public Health teams at the border, who are monitoring the COVID-19 situation, there are about 15,000 people returning to Afghanistan from Iran every day.

*"There are two groups of children: those under 10 who don't understand anything about the virus. And those above 10 – who are very scared and very stressed out about the virus."*  
– Social worker, Herat

Communities fear that returnee minors are carriers of the disease – as do the children themselves. In the words of one social worker:

*"This coronavirus has negative impacts on children and their families: when children return, at the border they look scared, they have this fear in their stomach that they are carrying the disease back with them. The families are also worried that the children may be bringing the disease back. At the border, only their fever is checked. We have a saying that says "nabina dar cha hast" (the blind sits in the well) so we have to make them aware."*

A representative of the Human Rights Commission was also scared:

*"Right now, we can't interview the children as we are not sure if the children have the virus or not? We want to avoid getting the virus."<sup>12</sup> Social workers previously supporting deportee minors' return and reintegration had reportedly resigned out of the fear of the virus.*

*"In some provinces, families are too scared to welcome back their children. This happened in Logar and we had to explain, call numerous times, reassure them, explain to them the situation, until they accepted to take their son back."*

*"The biggest impact of this virus on children is the fear that it has instilled among children. They are scared that they will be stigmatized, and pointed at, for bringing the virus to Afghanistan."*

Social distancing is often not respected, and awareness raising at the border remains weak. Stakeholders interviewed suggested having a quarantine process at the border before taking the children home. This warrants further discussions, especially through the Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC), to avoid causing more irreparable damages on children's mental wellbeing.

<sup>9</sup> SSI with Child, Herat. August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> FGD with Parents, Badghis. August 2019

<sup>11</sup> FGD with Children and Youth, Badghis. August 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Rahimi, Human rights commission, Herat 20 April 2020

The virus may lead to a broader reflection on safe migration practice – could the return of minors during COVID-19 lead to a greater attention to trafficking and child labour?

*"We don't talk about it enough, but we need to stop this transnational system of child labour and migration. Children are going through so much – they should not be responsible for their families" or for interacting with individuals who are not their relatives on journeys on their own.*

*"The suspicion is there. Yesterday, I had to take an 11-year old to Mazar. His father had died, so the head of his household was his older brother. I handed him over. [His brother] asked me if I had kidnapped the child! Then he asked if his brother had the virus. We need to reassure them...*

*"Most of the children are scared, they cry to us, to take them home. This one child has no father or mother – we took him back to his brother, but these are orphan families with no income. People who have no housing will need a proper shelter if they are supposed to stay indoors!" – Human Rights Commission, Herat*

## B) Ties to Iran

Many still speak of going back to Iran once the pandemic is over. All respondents interviewed highlighted that, whether they were moving to Iran with or without the initial knowledge of their immediate families, they were reuniting with other members of family, friends, or community members in Iran.

The ties that bind Afghan migrants to these social networks in Iran are strong, and these can play a mitigating role when potential young migrants and their families are assessing the risks of migration.

Most children and their families do not want to move but feel that they have no other choice but to do so. In discussions, participants often used the language of obligation and of being 'forced' to make a decision on migration because they see no other options.

*"When I sent my child to Iran, his mother and I were crying for three days but I was forced to send him to Iran because our economic situation was too weak."<sup>13</sup> – Parent, Herat*

## C) Family shocks

Specific family shocks, such as parents or family members who were ill or disabled, are drivers of migration and this will only increase under COVID-19.

Finding work abroad can mean being able to support the provision of healthcare and medicine for family members (a common occurrence), ensure that younger siblings and other family members have enough to eat, and generally support one's family in avoiding or reducing the significant stress of economic precariousness.

<sup>13</sup> FGD with Parents in Herat. August 2019

<sup>14</sup> FGD with Parents, Badghis. August 2019.

## D) Poverty

Poverty is linked to other concerns related to conflict and climate and cannot be delinked from this.

In Badghis, a region highly dependent on its agricultural production, severe droughts in the past few years have had a devastating effect on households. This has translated into both internal displacement and migration to Iran as coping mechanisms for dealing with climate disasters.

*"Last year we experienced a very severe drought and famine – the agriculture farms did not harvest. As a result, my son decided to migrate to Iran and we agreed as well." – Parent, Badghis*

War and security impact poverty and the ability to work, as well as explicitly informing the decision to migrate.

## E) Insecurity

Insecurity is often the impetus of an initial familial internal displacement that precedes a child's migration to Iran. This internal displacement, while addressing concerns of safety, can have an impact on a family's financial situation and debt.

Finding new means of livelihoods, new shelter, and restarting their lives in new areas may be temporary requirements, but they have long lasting impacts even when the family returns to their province of origin.

*"We went to Herat for a year during the Taliban period. Our situation was relatively better when we moved to Herat. But currently we owe people money and are suffering a drought also. We have to live here but the creditors are making us flee and move somewhere else."<sup>14</sup> – Parent of a child deportee, Badghis*

Internal displacement due to drought or conflict, before migration or following the return, was very common amongst research participants from Badghis.

## Knowledge of risks is generally high

Families are aware of the risks they or their children may face on the migration journey. Parents or guardians interviewed specifically named the dangers surrounding vehicle accidents, hunger and thirst, robbery, kidnapping, sexual violence, physical assault, torture by police, shootings and death.

One deportee interviewed recalled being 17 years old and seeing dead bodies strewn along the road during his migration journey. Previous research highlights similar risks, including increased risks of violence or detention along the return journey.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Save the Children/ Samuel Hall. 2018

## Risk awareness is not a deterrent

Knowledge of risks is not a deterrent to movement; if families feel that migration is the only option for hope that they have, they will take that hope along with the risks.

They will, however, take measures to mitigate these risks as much as they are able. The most frequent, but often too costly, mitigation measure cited by families for reducing harm to children on the move was for children to travel accompanied.

Ideally, minors would travel in the company of an older relative or a trusted adult – but even where this is recognised, resources for sending more than one family member are often limited. In many cases there is either no available adult or the cost of sending two people is too high.

One child from Herat told the following story: *“When I left for the first time, I was not alone as my brother was with me. When the vehicle jumped, I bounced as I was light-weighted and I was about to fall out of the vehicle, but my elder brother grabbed my hand; it means, if he was not there, I might had fallen down and died as no one cares about anyone in the way toward Iran”<sup>16</sup>.*

## THE RETURN EXPERIENCE

### Context

When the study was conducted in Autumn 2019, parents and children corroborated allegations of abuse by Iranian police, describing physical assault, electroshock, being deprived of food, being shot at by border police, and being forced to stand naked in the snow for significant periods of time.

Parents of children who experienced these violations reported noticeable changes in their child's behaviour upon their return, including being withdrawn, expressing humiliation and shame, aggressive behaviour, and physical pain as a result of assault injuries lasting at least a week.

The initial happiness at the return of their child is a common but tempered reaction. Both parents and children interviewed frequently highlight the happiness families feel when their child returns to them alive and healthy, but also the anger and stress that surfaces after this initial reunification, especially given the financial stress that ensues upon a child's return.

In some cases, War Child social workers also highlight initial anger and tensions around a child's return.

*“In some cases fathers are not interested to meet their sons again. The families greet their children very superficially – they do not even hug them... They are sad or angry about the child returning is because there are no employment opportunities for them in their area.”<sup>17</sup> – Social worker*

Children however highlight in interviews that, in spite of this common financial stress and some initial anger, they are overall welcomed back into their families or communities, sometimes treated with more compassion because of their youth and general community knowledge of the hardships of the journey.

### Impact of COVID19

COVID-19 has added new complications to the sense of belonging and welcome felt upon return. Some children are even hidden from communities to avoid raising concerns for them and their families – in fact, most community leaders are not aware that the children are returning.

Families greet the social workers to be reunited with their children, but often want to keep a low profile. Some families ask for their children to go back to Iran and not to come home.

Organisations are aware of the family reunification process for child returnees from Iran.

Transporting children has risks due to COVID-19 – especially with restrictions on mobility between cities in Afghanistan.

Smaller cars are required, replacing the larger vans used by social workers and NGOs to take children from the western border back to their province of origin. These are currently forbidden as a preventive measure by the government during coronavirus.

New systems have been put in place – keeping distance in the car or a van, with one seat separating children in the car. Despite this, there is a broader security concern related to the transportation and the increase in the number of checkpoints. Social workers explain that:

*“We need to go through streets and back roads to avoid checkpoints because we have not received official permits/authorisations allowing us to transport these children during the virus. We don't have the right cards, we don't even carry identification cards because of the insecurity now. We have suggested to receive forms from the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR)”.*

*“It is very difficult for us to enter Kabul these days. We have suggested that we are given specific ID cards so that we can be let in Kabul and on the roads – this is a vital part of our family reunification process.”*

Transporting children has a higher cost – as a result of COVID-19 each car transports half of the number of children to allow space in between passengers. This means children and their families pay not 1,000 Afghanis, but 2,000 Afghanis. The price has doubled due to the pandemic.

Expenses have also increased for the NGOs supporting children. Additional cars have been rented to take children back safely to their homes. Social workers required more chairs, more psychosocial support, gloves, masks and two soaps for every child.

<sup>16</sup> FGD with Children, Herat. August 2019.

<sup>17</sup> KII with WCUK Social Worker, Kabul. July 2019

*"Expenses have doubled on our end. The economic impact of coronavirus is however mostly largely felt on the families who were already poor. If the government doesn't help them, they will have to keep going back to Iran and putting themselves in even greater danger".* – NGO worker

Public offices, or children's shelters, report they are missing the basic hygiene requirements to face the spread of the virus – both in terms of equipment and facilities.

*"We are a public office. All the children come to us. But we don't have any specific hygiene precautions or resources – we need sinks, soap, etc"* – Child protection officer working with the Ministry of Public Health.

Children are given masks and gloves when they arrive in Afghanistan, followed by additional clothes and food at the transit center in Herat. They are also taken through information sessions about return in general and the virus in particular.

*"Children are asked to inform their families of the COVID situation,"* explains one social worker, since it is not within their mandate to inform the families. This may put greater pressure on children, who find themselves taking on the stress of yet another responsibility.

Social workers have the families' telephone numbers and liaise with them to arrange a meeting point for the collection of their children but are not in touch beyond family reunification.

Most families cannot afford buying gloves and masks, especially as prices have risen. Some social workers went even further, explaining that once they tell children to wash their hands, a common reaction is that they may not have access to soap at home: *"It's not enough to tell them to do X Y Z, we should not take it for granted that families have soap."*

It is not just equipment that is out of financial reach for most families, but also fruit and vegetables – much needed sources of the vitamins that they are encouraged to take to build their immune system. The prices of fruits and other essential goods have doubled with the virus in many places in Afghanistan. For example, soap bars that used to cost 20 Afghanis now cost 50 Afghanis.

Social workers do provide returnee children with two bars of soap, but they do not give families the same resources. Children were therefore told to keep the soap for themselves – and to spend more time in the sun.

Social workers also noted that some do not have food at home – so how will they afford soap or masks?

*"Most families cannot afford soap or fruit [and] they are vulnerable to the virus as a result. They don't have enough food under regular circumstances. They have to send their children to work, to Iran, on their own, under regular circumstances. People may have information, but they don't have money! [Only] those who have money can protect themselves from the virus. We tell people that anyone in*

*Kabul should wear the mask – but the reality is very different."* – Social worker, Herat

*"For 14 days they are told to go into quarantine, to use masks and gloves, but will they?"* Social workers underline that even those who are better off do not necessarily clean their hands with soap as opposed to just water. Just because people know about the guidelines does not mean they are able to follow them – or that they will choose to do so.

## REINTEGRATION NEEDS OF CHILD RETURNNEES

*"Most of the children who go to Iran have either stolen, fought, or have lost their parents – they need a program to reintegrate, they need to be taught how to do something else, to stop going to Iran."* – Social worker, Herat

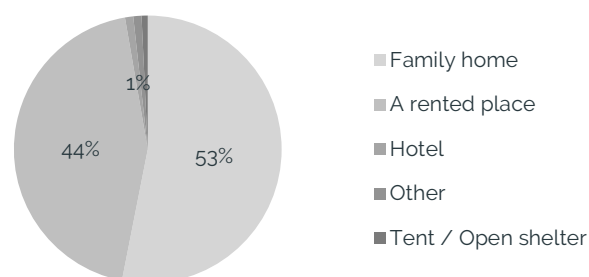
### Housing

HLP and shelter are a top priority for respondents. While the majority live in their own family homes, a significant minority (44%) rent accommodation (see Figure 1).

Renting represents a significant portion of family budgets – putting financial pressure on the family to meet payments each month, even as money for food or healthcare remains tight.

Rentals are negatively perceived as not constituting a 'true' family home and, for poor families, as a sign of tenure insecurity. Multiple participants interviewed described owning their own home as a central tenant to stability and dignified family life.

Figure 1: Current Accommodation Type



Disasters and loss of property have led to internal displacement, creating increased pressures on HLP needs and access. While the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reports that some deportees are covered by its shelter programme in Herat<sup>18</sup>, none of the children or families interviewed in our study received support on shelter or HLP from any entities.

Social workers report that homes are too small for COVID-19 quarantine requirements. Children are out playing in the streets due to the lack of space inside.

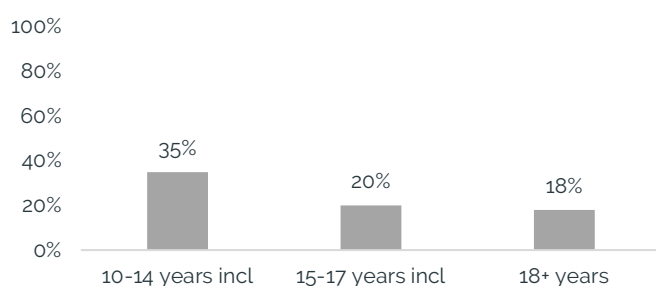
<sup>18</sup> KII NRC, Herat, August 2019.

## Education

Families interviewed unanimously want their children to study. *"The best thing for our children is studying. If someone makes their child drop out of school, they are in fact the enemy of that child."*<sup>19</sup>

However, education remains difficult to access and unaffordable for some due to the opportunity cost of having to choose between school or work. Attendance rates post deportation are low, and data suggests that these decrease steadily as the child gets older (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: School attendance after deportation by age % currently enrolled



Reasons for these low attendance rates are varied. In areas that are Taliban held, as is the case for many families in Badghis, government schools are inaccessible and limited forms of religious education are the only education available.

Migration often marks the end of a child's educational trajectory – this is a break in their childhood, a turning point that is often difficult to come back from. The education system is not built to re-accommodate or re-integrate those who left school and decide to return, sometimes months or years later.

*"When I left school, they insisted that I should continue my studies, but now they tell me to not go to school because it has been a long time since I left school."*<sup>20</sup> – Child returnee

Social workers emphasise the critical need to enrol minor returnees in school – to help children to cope with the effects of migration and COVID. They explain that as children are less informed, they need to go back to school to become accustomed to normal life after all they have been through. Yet these children do not have access to online learning.

Families see schools as a virus-prone space. Once schools reopen, many children will not go back – out of fear. The worry is that even if one child has the virus in a class of 40 or 60 children, they will all get it and take it back to their families.

*"There are 40 children in any Afghan classroom. So, most parents will not want their child to go back even when the school reopens."* – Community leader, Herat

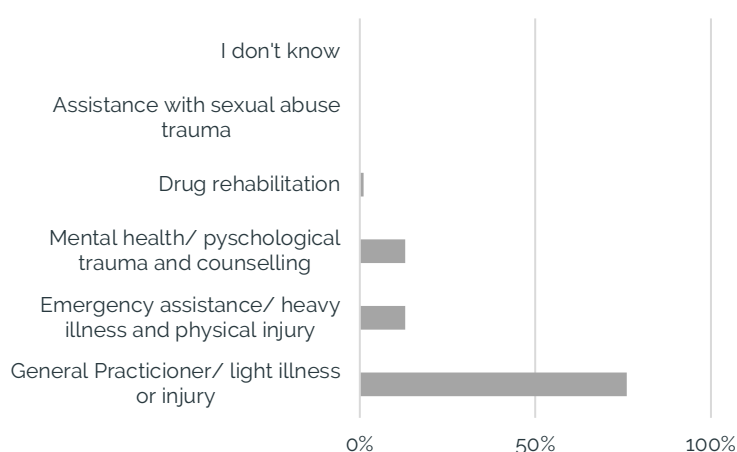
Some children report having developed mental health issues – if schools can reopen then they can step out of this negative cycle.

Most children keep asking why they are not going to school, why their studies have been stopped, they are very nervous that without work nor education, their prospects will be bleaker than before.

## Health

When asked directly "do you or anyone in your family need medical assistance?" 58% of survey participants answered 'yes'. Of these, a little over a quarter reported needing heavier physical or psychological trauma support (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: What type of Medical Assistance does your family Need?



Mental health is a key need and criteria for evaluating minors' reintegration needs.<sup>21</sup> Minors and their families need support, implicitly or explicitly. It is not uncommon for parents to describe their children as "frightened" since their return, "too tired" to attend school or work, feeling shame or sadness, and either more withdrawn or more aggressive than before they migrated.

In some cases, these behaviour changes result in exacerbated tensions at home. One parent in Herat describes how their child turned violent towards his brothers and sisters after his return: *"Since my child has returned, his behaviour has changed, he has become more aggressive, impatient and he is always fighting with his sisters and brother and beats them up. I think he has mental issues."*<sup>22</sup>

*"We know their children still roam the streets to find work – even when there is no work and the streets are empty. Children should be staying at home."* – Community leader, Herat

<sup>19</sup> FGD with Parent, Badghis, August 2019.

<sup>20</sup> SSI with Child, Herat, August 2019

<sup>21</sup> Save the Children/ Samuel Hall, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> SSI with Parent, Herat, August 2019.



## Box 2: COVID-19 explained by families

*"We can't afford any of the prevention measures – but we understand how serious the virus is. We don't even have food to eat."* – Father of a deportee, Mohammad Jan, Herat.

*"Since corona has arrived, our lives have changed – there is no work, we don't go out. There is nothing we can do. They told us to clean our hands with soap, where masks and gloves, but we can't do that. We need help."* – Ghulam Ali, brother of a deportee.

*"After he was deported from Iran, Mohammad Naeem used to work but also attend school (he is in grade 6) and the mosque for religious education. With the virus, there is no work, everyone is staying home. But I have to send my son out – so he goes with his cart to sell vegetables. But no one buys. This virus is killing us without us having been infected! Before the quarantine, I used to work– the bazaar is closed, and prices have gone up. In the future, we may not be able to afford food anymore – that is our biggest source of anxiety."*

*"But my son is happy to be here he keeps saying "I am so happy not to be in Iran right now, if I were still there, I would probably have the virus already! We are well informed about the prevention measures, but we can't afford them. Our children still go outside to play – we all know that it is a risk with the virus. But they still go outside. It's all in Allah's hands now."* – Father of Mohammad Naeem, Badghis.

*"Corona has put a stop to all of our work. We are all in a job quarantine! That is the only thing we do! It has a very had impact. Everyone is scared. All of those that come from Iran, mix with the rest of the community here. Our clinics are not equipped to care for them."*

*"I take loans from shops to feed my family. I keep taking loans from all the shop owners I know. So, I will have to send Mohammad to Iran again. How will I pay the loans otherwise?"* – Mohammad Juma, Herat, whose son was deported six months ago.

## ASPIRATIONS & HOPES DURING COVID-19

Being able to return to school, to study and access education at the highest levels was one of the more common aspirations of deportee children. The ability to continue their education is seen as a way to improve their own life, but also that of their family, their community, and their country.

*"I am enthusiastic about my future. If I study, I am sure that I will be a useful person for the community. I want to continue to my education and become a successful doctor in the future in order to serve others. I love my future and know that*

<sup>23</sup> SSI with Child, Herat. August 2019.

<sup>24</sup> FGD with Children, Herat. August 2019.

<sup>25</sup> SSI Child Badghis. August 2019

*I will have a bright future because I try my best and study my lessons to achieve to my dreams."*<sup>23</sup> – 14-year-old, Herat

Many children interviewed highlight their desire to stay in Afghanistan and help their country and support their communities. *"As we say, East or West, home is the best,"* shared one FGD participant in Herat<sup>24</sup>.

Some children recognize that this community support requires sacrifices of their own, in order to ensure a good future for siblings or family members.

*"I want to have a good life in the future, I want to open a shop in the future. I send my brothers to school to study and improve their future. I built our house that was collapsed by the flood. I try to do alone, if I cannot, I ask help from my uncles."*<sup>25</sup> – Child participant

However, children and youth's aspirations are often confronted with realities that make it difficult for them to conceive or plan for their desired future. Both children and parents express confusion and anxiety about their options and the situation in Afghanistan.

## SUPPORTING THE ASPIRATIONS OF DEPORTEE MINORS & FAMILIES

While improvements since 2016 – including a stronger reception system at the border, the inclusion of social workers and a case management approach, as well as coordination between agencies – are positive signs of change, follow through with referrals and long-term support is lacking.

Social workers rest their hopes on the Child Protection and Action Network (CPAN), an "inclusive network of governmental and non-governmental organisations with mandate for field interventions in the area of child protection."<sup>26</sup>

The network's main task with respect to the protection of child deportees is to support reunification with their families, especially in cases where identification of parents or guardians is a challenge, or where standard reunification mechanisms fail.

CPAN network focal points have ties to community leaders and structures at the smallest district and village levels, and their ability to tap into these is their strength when it comes to supporting family tracing and reunification. This is most frequently done through case conferences, which are organised to bring together all actors working on child deportees in order to establish a solution.

There remains a lack of clarity and decisiveness when it comes to how these case conferences work in practice, and on how well versed they are in child protection.

<sup>26</sup> UNICEF (2017). "2017 Afghanistan: Evaluation of Child Protection Action Network"

COVID-19 highlights the urgency of training CPAN staff on child protection, best-case determinations, maintaining professional levels of confidentiality, and referrals to networks.

*"We need CPAN to explain to people not to fear the children who are returning from Iran."* – Social worker, Herat

*"We are in contact with the community leaders through CPAN. The children come from different backgrounds – some of them need basic food, most need money as they live in poor households. If we want for people to stay in, we have to provide them money to stay home."* – Social worker, Kabul

Second, there is an opportunity for IOM, War Child and UNICEF to work more closely with the Ministries of Labour, Economy and Education to jointly design solutions for these children and their families. The lack of work during COVID-19 presents an opportunity to re-school children according to some of the social workers interviewed.

A balance between child labour and education is required to support deportees and their families in the reintegration phase. The education system for them requires flexibility. A partnership between MoLSA – MoE – MoEd and UNICEF could provide a phased approach to cash assistance to families, and re-schooling initiatives for their children.

The Directorate of Economy (DoE) in Herat has been involved with case conferences and support for deportees since the beginning of the program.

DoE representatives interviewed for this study highlighted positive coordination between different government bodies, noting that successes in this programme have been greater than the challenges, and suggesting that tensions in coordination between government bodies at the national level are not necessarily replicated at the local level.

Finally, the Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC) can also partner with UNICEF and broadcast specific information regarding returns, so that families and communities welcome children – and other returnees – back with solidarity and not fear.

Communities still have limited understanding – *"Some people still think that this illness is only in Iran, not in Afghanistan."*

Such a system needs to maintain effective communication channels from people, to specialised agencies, and back again. Opportunities for information, counselling and assistance – even over the phone – are required. Platforms for referral services – such as Avaaz.org – can include a focus on high return provinces to monitor child protection.

*"We tell them it's spread almost everywhere in Afghanistan; we explain the situation to them etc. But overall about 80% of people have that information. The issue is that these families are not able to prevent the spread of the disease, they can't use masks and gloves. Them taking returnees back presents a risk."* – Community leader, Herat

### Box 3: Supporting Social Workers

Even before COVID-19, social workers were challenged by the number of cases of deportee minors assigned to them. The numbers of social workers need to be increased to be present more seriously by the side of minor deportees.

Social workers interviewed for this study noted that they often managed over 6 cases at a time, and sometimes 40 a month, especially as numbers increased. Given the time social workers spend travelling, it is difficult in these circumstances to follow through with a comprehensive case management approach – one which contains systematic, personalized, and that goes beyond the return moment and at the reintegration level.

While funding has increased very slightly since 2016 – 3% of IOM's funding now goes to support these deportees, versus a non-existent budget in 2016 – the disparity between money and support needed remains enormous. Greater advocacy is required to combat donor misconceptions of migrants to Iran, and to clarify that if reintegration funding is to be sustainable it needs to be available in the long term.

Social workers should be recruited locally and trained to ensure that they have access to children even in communities of return. The current number of social workers and their limited access limits their effectiveness. It is not possible for social workers to do proper follow up of cases when they are 11 across 18 provinces of high return. The issue of access needs to be at the heart of the selection of social workers, and a strategy to scale the presence of social workers will be needed. How can partners ensure that a social worker can reach a disabled woman of seven children in a Taliban area? How to ensure that social workers reach the most in need?

This requires community-based approaches to reintegration, and community-based monitoring. Community level relays can help address tensions and fears, provide information to CPAN and social workers, while monitoring COVID-19 related vulnerabilities, and transiting children back into their environment.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

### Child

Persons who are below the legal age of majority and are therefore not legally independent. This term includes adolescents. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a "child" is a person who is below the age of eighteen, unless the applicable law sets a lower age. The CRC equates "child" with "minor".

### Unaccompanied Children

Persons under the age of majority in a country other than that of their nationality who are not accompanied by a parent, guardian, or other adult who by law or custom is responsible for them. Unaccompanied children present special challenges for border control officials, because detention and other practices applied to undocumented adult non-nationals may not be appropriate for children

### Separated Children

Children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from either parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver.

### Guardian

One who has the legal authority and duty to care for another's person or property, usually because of the other's incapacity, disability, or status as a minor. A guardian may either be appointed for all purposes or for a specific purpose.

### Family reunification

The process of bringing together families, particularly children and elderly dependents with previous care-providers for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care. Separation of families occurs most often during armed conflicts or massive displacements of people.

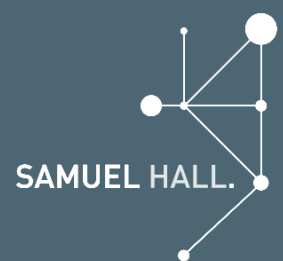
### Sustainable Reintegration

"Reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity" (IOM 2017).

## ABOUT SAMUEL HALL

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by issues of migration and displacement. Our mandate is to produce research that delivers a contribution to knowledge with an impact on policies, programmes and people. With a rigorous approach and the inclusion of academic experts, field practitioners, and a vast network of national researchers, we access complex settings and gather accurate data.

**Our research connects the voices of communities to change-makers for more inclusive societies.** Samuel Hall has offices in Afghanistan, Kenya, Germany and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates. For more information, please visit [www.samuelhall.org](http://www.samuelhall.org)



## ABOUT WAR CHILD UK

War Child UK is a specialist child protection charity. In partnership with UNICEF it is one of the few actors working directly with deported minors on the Western border. The two organisations partner to deliver a programme of work to improve the protection of unaccompanied minors and separated children deported from Iran through the Islam Qala border crossing, focused primarily on their reunification with their families.

