SEEFAR

Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan:

Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter

July 2018

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Introduction

Afghan migration - both inbound and outbound - is becoming increasingly more challenging. The biggest repatriation project in recent history is occurring with the forced exodus of millions of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran, and failed Afghan asylum seekers returning from Europe following the Afghan government's agreements with the EU.

For returnees, including those born in Afghanistan and abroad, life after return and the process of adapting and reintegrating into host communities will be full of challenges. The addition of millions of people with complex needs will also exaggerate existing challenges of poor infrastructure, stretched resources, and socio-political fractures. If the needs of returnees - particularly psychosocial needs - are not understood well enough for effective integration, there will be risks to social stability. Equally important is to understand the needs of host communities, and to foster community resilience and social cohesion in the context of return.

This report aims to:

- Develop an understanding of the challenges returning Afghans face in the process of integrating - economically, socially, and emotionally - into communities and Afghan society
- Explore the emotional and psychosocial implications of return and reintegration
- Propose a method to assess returnees' perceptions of their reintegration progress

Key Findings

Anticipating (Non-voluntary) Returns

Most returns were not voluntary. Returnees from Europe overwhelmingly viewed their return as involuntary, although only a minority had been officially deported. Returnees from Pakistan were more likely to view their return as completely voluntary.

Still, most respondents reported positive feelings before return, including optimism and happiness. Respondents tended to feel more positive about returning home when they:

- had stayed in close touch with family while abroad; or
- described feeling connected to Afghanistan while abroad.

Positive feelings were primarily driven by the prospect of seeing family, and the potential of a better future.

Although very few respondents chose their community of return, they nearly all had family in their community of return.

Pathways to Reintegration

Overall, respondents cited insecurity and unemployment - key drivers of migration, and issues that that many Afghans face, not just returnees - as their top concerns. As returnees, they faced additional challenges, particularly in the social and psychosocial dimensions. Respondents' experiences also differed based on the country from which they had returned.

Assessing reintegration progress

When asked how important various factors were across multiple dimensions related to integration,[1] respondents rated economic indicators "highly important", but also reported social indicators to be "important". To assess how much reintegration progress returnees felt they were making across these dimensions, we created a "perceptions barometer". We averaged the indicators to give a single numerical value on a scale from 1 to 4, where 4 represents maximum reintegration progress.

The mean progress score in the sample was 2.59, meaning that, on average, respondents felt that they were experiencing at least some difficulties in reintegration.

[1] Finding paid employment; seeking medical assistance, education for family/children, continuing education; becoming a part of my new community; reconnecting with family/friends; finding a house; relocating to another community/village; migrating out of Afghanistan (again).

Respondents tended to report *more* reintegration progress if they:

- Had returned from Pakistan
- Did not report experiencing negative treatment in the community
- Returned voluntarily
- Returned with dependent family members
- Reported feeling less anger after return.

Notably, employment was not correlated with perceptions of overall reintegration progress, indicating that **while highly valued by returnees, employment is a relatively weak indicator of reintegration progress**. This underscores the importance of social and psychosocial factors to successful reintegration.

Economic challenges: unemployment, underemployment, and discrimination

Respondents reported high levels of unemployment, with skilled jobs particularly scarce. Respondents with little to no formal income were more likely to be employed, but were more likely to work in elementary occupations such as casual labor, cleaning and street vending. **A culture of networks and patronage makes jobs very difficult to get for those, like returnees, who have fewer or weaker links to those networks.**

Respondents returned from Pakistan faced particular challenges, including discrimination by employers and difficulty getting educational certificates recognized.

Emotional and psychosocial well-being: some negative shifts after return

After return, negative emotional shifts were reported. In particular, **safety and security** was a major concern after return. Respondents also expressed concern about finding **employment.** These are widespread, structural problems that many Afghans face, not just returnees. This suggests that psychosocial assistance will be crucial for helping returnees adjust to the return context.

Respondents returned from Europe and Pakistan reported different drivers of negative emotions, implying different psychosocial needs: respondents who had returned from Europe expressed regret and shame for returning, which they viewed as a squandered opportunity, with money and time wasted. Returnees from Pakistan reported feeling that their expectations for life in Afghanistan were unfulfilled.

Negative emotions appeared to increase over time for returnees, indicating that reintegration is non-linear, and implies the importance of continuous psychosocial support, not just immediately after return.

Despite the negative shifts, a majority continued to report positive feelings (optimism, happiness) as the most frequently experienced emotion after return. Respondents reported **less loneliness** and **alienation** after return, which was attributed to reuniting with family.

Community relations: tied to country of migration

In general, community leaders expressed empathy and support for returnees, and there was mutual recognition by community leaders and returnees that support and benefits flowed both ways.

However, responses shone light on a number of factors that discouraged communities from supporting returnees:

Country of destination - There was clear stigma (perceived, experienced, or both) around migrating irregularly to Europe. Returnees from Europe or Turkey were more likely to report experiencing negative treatment since return than returnees from Pakistan. They were also more often in financial difficulty, having sold assets or borrowed large sums of money for the journey.

Medical and economic fears - A few leaders expressed concerns about the influx of returnees into their community and potential negative impacts such as inflated housing prices and strained medical clinics.

Lack of institutional reintegration assistance

While informal networks (family/friends) appeared to be strong, most respondents did not receive any

institutional reintegration support. Most respondents received assistance for reintegration from friends and family only, and overall satisfaction with assistance received was low.

Expectations of government to provide assistance was high. Many felt that corruption in the government was a major obstacle preventing returnees from receiving adequate assistance.

As it is unlikely that the government or international agencies will be able to meet all expectations in the short term, effective communication and support to help returnees adjust some of their expectations - and look to alternative sources for solutions - may be needed.

Alternatives to Reintegration

Re-migration aspirations appear to be linked to psychosocial indicators. Returnees who reported negative emotional changes after return were more likely to want to move abroad again than returnees who did not report negative emotional changes after return.

Positive relationships in the community and access to employment and health services may also be linked to lower desires to migrate out of Afghanistan again. This tentative finding suggests the need for more research on how emotional changes and social relations may impact decision-making.

When asked about the importance of various groups for ensuring safety, **a majority of respondents indicated they did not think the Taliban were important.** Of more interest was the high non-response rate to the question, which points to the sensitivity of the issue. Some categories of returnees were also more likely to view the Taliban as an important security actor (relative to other returnees).

Emotional change since return was related to perceptions of the Taliban. Returnees who reported feeling more anger after return were less likely to view the Taliban as an important security actor than returnees who did not report more anger. Although unclear why, this could imply an area for further research.

Context

Displacement

Afghans form one of the largest refugee groups worldwide, as well as one of the largest repatriation groups. As many as one in four Afghans (8.5 million) are estimated to have been displaced internally or abroad during the last four decades.[2]

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, over six million Afghans fled and entered Pakistan and Iran. Over 1.5 million were estimated to have crossed into Pakistan between 1979-1980. Most Afghans settled in refugee camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. In the following decade, approximately 2.6 million Afghans crossed into the Islamic Republic of Iran between 1979 and 1989, settling in rural and urban areas.

A second wave of Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran after the Taliban regime took control in 1992. A third, smaller wave again left the country near the end of the regime in 2002, mostly to avoid conscription by Taliban or to escape bombing by international forces.

Afghans have also migrated to Europe, in relatively low numbers during the Soviet occupation, but increasing substantially during Taliban rule. This culminated with a spike in the number of Afghans arriving in Europe in 2015 and 2016; 178,230 Afghans sought asylum for the first time in EU member states in 2015[3] and another 182,780 in 2016.[4] This figure dropped to 43,635 applicants in 2017.[5]

Returns

Since 2002, some six million people have returned to Afghanistan. This figure is mostly comprised of refugees repatriating from Pakistan and Iran,[6] with increasing numbers of those who temporarily migrated for labor purposes returning in recent years. Since the beginning of 2015, more than two million Afghans are estimated to have returned from abroad. 2016 saw a spike in returning refugees, with 372,577 returned, compared to 58,460 in 2015 and 58,817 in 2017. 560,552 undocumented

[2] International Organization for Migration, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017 - Summary Report," February 28, 2018. https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/joint_returnee_report_iom_unhcr_final.pdf.

[3] Eurostat, News release 44/2016- 4 March 2016, accessed at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6>

[4] Eurostat, Asylum applicants in the EU, 2016 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/news/themes-in-the-spotlight/asylum2016>

[5] Eurostat, Asylum applicants in the EU, 2017 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/news/themes-in-the-spotlight/asylum2017>

[6] Katrin Marchand. "Afghanistan Migration Profile." International Organization for Migration Afghanistan, 2014, 116.

returnees[7] also returned in 2017.[8] Since the Government signed the "Joint Way Forward" with the European Union (EU) in 2016, the returns have also included an increased number of failed asylum seekers from Europe.

Returns from Pakistan

The largest population of documented Afghan refugees continue to be hosted in Pakistan; in 2017, approximately 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees, and an estimated 1 million undocumented Afghans, were living in Pakistan.[9] The majority of Afghans in Pakistan are ethnic Pashtuns.[10] Many have lived in Pakistan for decades, while some were born and raised in Pakistan, and have never been to Afghanistan.

After hosting Afghan refugees for decades, the Pakistan government became more hostile toward refugees following a terrorist attack at the end of 2014.[11] Since then, and particularly following July 2016, Pakistani authorities have intensified measures to push Afghan refugees out of Pakistan. These include daily harassment by police, arbitrary detention, shutting down schools for Afghan children, and the closure of some camps. Over the last few years, the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards that give Afghan refugees legal authorization to stay in the country have been extended for only a few months at a time.[12] This uncertainty around maintaining legal status, with expiration dates looming, have also prompted many Afghans to leave Pakistan, and leave remaining Afghans in a state of legal uncertainty. Together, these factors have resulted in a surge of Afghans returning from Pakistan: more than 370,000 registered refugees and 284,000 undocumented Afghans returned in 2016,[13] and an estimated 60,000 registered Afghan refugees and 100,000 undocumented Afghans in 2017.[14]

Returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran

As in Pakistan, many Afghan refugees have lived in Iran for decades, including 2nd-generation Afghans born abroad. In 2017, the government of Iran reported hosting some 951,000 Afghan Amayesh[15] card holders as well as an estimated 1.5 to 2 million undocumented Afghans.[16] The majority of Afghans living in Iran are Hazaras, followed by Tajiks, and small numbers of Pashtuns, Balochs and Uzbeks.[17] Similar to the situation in Pakistan, regulatory changes in the last decade that make it difficult for Afghans to retain a job, send children to school, or afford housing have contributed to driving Afghans out of Iran.[18] In the last few years, nearly half a million Afghans have left or were deported from Iran

[7] 'Undocumented' in Pakistan refers to Afghans who do not hold PoR. In the Islamic Republic of Iran undocumented refers to Afghans who reside irregularly in the country, i.e. without Amayesh cards or valid visa. The designation as 'undocumented' does not refer to the possession of civil documentation in Afghanistan such as Tazkera and/or passports.' IOM and UNHCR, "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017"

[8] IOM and UNHCR, "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017", 4

[9] *Id*, 3

[10] According to a census carried out in 2006, Pashtuns constituted 81.5% of Afghans in Pakistan. *Afghanistan Migration Profile*. 2014.

[11] Human Rights Watch, "Pakistan: Renewed Threats to Afghan Refugees," July 1, 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/01/pakistan-renewed-threats-afghan-refugees>

[12] As of the writing of this report, the last extension grants Afghan refugees legal permission to stay until 30 June 2018.

[13] IOM, Return of Undocumented Afghans from Pakistan and Iran, 2016 Overview, 2017

[14] UNHCR, Tough choices for Afghan refugees returning home after years of exile" 03 February 2017 http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/2/589453557/tough-choices-afghan-refugees-returning-home-years-exile.html International Organization for Migration, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017 - Summary Report," February 28, 2018. https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/joint_returnee_report_iom_unhcr_final.pdf.

[15] Iran's Amayesh system is a registration program designed to identify and track recognized refugees

[16] International Organization for Migration, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017 - Summary Report," February 28, 2018. https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/joint_returnee_report_iom_unhcr_final.pdf.

[17] According to data collected by the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs in Iran. *Afghanistan Migration Profile*. 2014.

[18] Armando Geller, and Maciej M Latek. "Returning from Iran." *Forced Migration Review*. http://www.fmreview.org/afghanistan/geller-latek.html (accessed June 4, 2018).

each year, mostly back to Afghanistan through Herat and Nimroz.[19]

Returns from Turkey

While the majority of refugees in Turkey are Syrian, Turkey still hosts a significant number of Afghans, with approximately 145,000 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers reported in 2017. The Turkish government classifies Afghans as "conditional refugees," which allows them to stay temporarily and imposes some constraints on their movements and access to work. In recent months, the Turkish government has detained Afghan migrants crossing over the land border with Iran and sent approximately 7,100 Afghans back to Afghanistan in April 2018, with the government set to send back thousands more.[20] The Turkish government has called these returns voluntary, but human rights groups report the returns to be forced deportations.

Returns from EU member states

In response to increasing numbers of migrants arriving from Afghanistan, the European Union signed the Joint Way Forward (JWF) agreement with the government of Afghanistan in 2016 in order to prevent irregular migration to Europe.[21] The readmission agreement, which prioritizes voluntary return after a lawful order to depart is issued, allows EU member states to deport any Afghan migrant who refuses to leave the country. In return, EU member states agreed to ensure returning Afghans have valid travel documents and to cover costs of travel for Afghans to their final destination in Afghanistan. The JWF agreement was followed by a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements between EU member states and Afghanistan.

Since then, the number of voluntary returnees from Europe has increased significantly. The IOM helped nearly 7,000 individuals return through its Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program in 2016, up from around 1000 cases in 2015.[22] While these numbers are relatively small compared with the number of returnees from Iran and Pakistan, they have the potential to increase as Europe becomes an increasingly difficult place to seek asylum.

Post-Arrival Assistance

Once back in the country, Afghan returnees face many economic, social and psychosocial challenges. In the short-term, many struggle to access decent housing, may face food insecurity and experience significant negative emotions. Longer-term, many returnees face steep challenges in accessing sustainable livelihoods, education and basic services. In partnership with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, UNHCR manages four support centers along the border where registered Afghan refugee returnees can receive an average grant of USD 200 to cover immediate needs after return. In 2017, this program benefited nearly 50,000 vulnerable (refugee) returnee, IDP and host families (350,000 individuals) across 34 provinces.[23]

The IOM and the Directorate of Refugee and Repatriation (DoRR) is leading assistance directed at undocumented Afghan returnees. In arrival transit centers, persons with special needs (PSNs)[24] are provided with immediate humanitarian post-arrival assistance. Undocumented returnees can obtain cash-based assistance at these

[19] IOM, *Return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan and Iran - 2016 Overview;* IOM Afghanistan, *Return of undocumented Afghans - Situation Report December, 2017.*

[20] Amnesty International, "Turkey: Thousands of Afghans swept up in ruthless deportation drive," April 24, 2018 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/turkey-thousands-of-afghans-swept-up-in-ruthless-deportation-drive/>

[21] https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_afghanistan_joint_way_forward_on_migration_issues.pdf

[22] Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/voluntary-and-forced-returns-to-afghanistan-in-201617-trends-statistics-and-experiences/

[23] International Organization for Migration, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Returns to Afghanistan in 2017 - Summary Report," February 28, 2018. https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/joint_returnee_report_iom_unhcr_final.pdf.

[24] PSNs are generally: girls and boys at risk, including unaccompanied and separated children, persons with serious health conditions, persons with special legal or physical protection needs, single women, women-headed households, older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons with a diverse sexual orientation or gender identity.

centers, which may also include transportation from the border to their final destination. In addition, INGOs, such as NRC, UNHCR, Danish Refugee Council, WFP, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and UNICEF provide food and shelter assistance to smaller numbers of returnees. [25]

Province of Nangarhar

Since 2016, well over 600,000 returnees have traveled through or settled into Nangarhar, a province that has one of the largest displacement-affected populations in Afghanistan. Most are returning refugees are from Pakistan; a minority are failed asylum-seekers returned from Europe. Nangarhar simultaneously hosts a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or migrants from other provinces. One in three people in Nangarhar is either an internally displaced person or a returnee.[26]

Returnees from Pakistan often settle in Jalalabad city, the capital of the province of Nangarhar, or in surrounding districts such as Behsud, Surkhrod, Khogiani, Rudat and Ghanikhel.[27] The influx of returnees and IDPs has put considerable strain on health and education services as well as local housing markets. The boom in property prices has exacerbated land grabbing, already a major source of conflict in the province.

Many new arrivals struggle to find employment. In Jalalabad City, some returnees seek work as day laborers in the Talashi Square. This form of employment, called *mazdurkaran* (hard laborers), is widespread and precarious. According to anecdotal stories, the numbers of day laborers seeking work has jumped dramatically, making this form of employment even more unreliable.[28] Other coping mechanisms include child work and early marriage. Despite the difficult conditions, many returnees stay in Nangarhar because conflict and violence prevent their return to their "province of origin."[29]

[25] IOM, Returns Summary Report (2018)

[26] Ruchi Kumar. "As Conflict Spreads, Chronic Displacement Becomes a Powderkeg in Afghanistan." IRIN, April 9, 2018. https://www.irinnews.org/feature/2018/04/09/conflict-spreads-chronic-displacement-becomes-powderkeg-afghanistan.

[27] "Resettling Nearly Half a Million Afghans in Nangarhar: The Consequences of the Mass Return of Refugees | Afghanistan Analysts Network," May 12, 2017. https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/resettling-nearly-half-a-million-afghans-in-nangrahar-the-consequences-of-the-mass-return-of-refugees/.

[28] *Id.*

[29] Norwegian Refugee Council, IDRC, Samuel Hall, *Escaping War: Where to Next? - A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan,* January 2018

Methods

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to obtain both breadth and depth of information.

Structured survey

A structured survey was administered to 250 Afghan nationals in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. Participants were restricted to male Afghan nationals between the ages of 15 and 34 who had returned to Afghanistan from abroad within the past two years. The questionnaire was comprised of 108 questions and addressed demographics, circumstances of return, reintegration experiences, and perceptions about the reintegration process.

Respondents were selected using a purposive snowball sampling technique in which respondents were identified through referral. Findings from the survey cannot be generalized to the broader population of Afghan returnees. Correlation analysis[30] was applied to the dataset to explore in-sample variation; findings that are statistically significant are noted in the body of the report.

In-depth interviews

Researchers conducted 18 semi-structured individual interviews with male returnees (who were not included in the survey) in order to provide a deeper perspective than could be elicited through the survey alone. The same screening criteria were used as in the structured survey i.e. male respondents between the ages of 15 and 34 who had returned from living abroad within the last 24 months.

Researchers also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with community leaders from both host and returnee communities.

Field sites

The surveys and interviews were conducted primarily in Jalalabad City, and in Behsood and Surkhrod districts in Nangarhar.

Ethics

Seefar's research methods followed a "do no harm" approach. The research team obtained respondents' voluntary participation and informed consent.

[30] Tests of statistical significance used in the analysis include chi-squared tests, Pearson's R tests, and multivariate regression approaches.

Circumstances of Return

Returns take many different forms and can vary depending on factors such as the reasons for initial migration, the duration of time abroad, and the country of migration. It is common for countries hosting asylum seekers and irregular migrants to divide "returns" into three types:

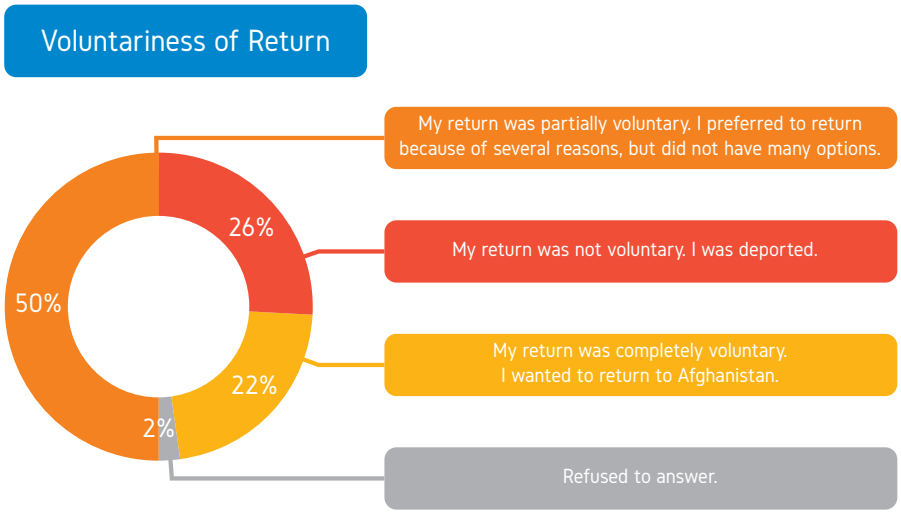
- **Voluntary returns**, which are "based on the free will of the returnee;"[31]
- **Assisted voluntary returns**, in which migrants receive logistical or financial assistance to return; and
- **Forced returns**,[32] usually understood as deportation or some action by the national government.

In practice, the differences between these categories, particularly between voluntary and forced returns, are less clear: *voluntary* may not adequately describe the return of migrants who feel compelled or pushed to return by various factors, but were not officially deported. Another consideration is whether a voluntary return can be considered truly voluntary if the alternative is forced return. Understanding how returnees think of their return is important for understanding the types of assistance - particularly psychosocial assistance - they might need.

Types of Return

Most respondents did not view their return as completely voluntary:

Figure 1:



[31] Defined by the IOM's 2004 Glossary of Migration as "the assisted or independent return of the country of origin, transit or third country, based on the free will of the returnee."

[32] Defined by the IOM's 2004 Glossary of Migration as "the compulsory return of an individual to the country of origin, transit or third country [country of return], on the basis of an administrative or juridical act."

Returnees from Pakistan were significantly more likely to view their return as completely voluntary.[33] Nearly half (49%) of returnees from Pakistan described their return as completely voluntary, suggesting that they had made plans to return and perhaps have certain expectations for the return. Still, push factors likely contributed to decisions to return; in qualitative interviews, multiple returnees from Pakistan noted that police harassment, difficulties obtaining education for their children, and lack of freedom of movement and restrictions on employment as significant reasons they decided to return to Afghanistan.

Returnees from Europe overwhelmingly tended to view their return as involuntary, even though only a minority were officially deported. Respondents who returned from a European country almost unanimously reported that they had not returned voluntarily (only 1 individual indicated his return to be voluntary). Three-quarters (77%) of them reported their return as partially voluntary.

Responses suggest that their return to Afghanistan was not based on a positive choice, but a response to negative experiences in Europe ("too difficult," "the biggest mistake in my life," and a "bad experience").

These findings indicate that perceptions of voluntariness fall along a spectrum, and point to significant differences in how respondents returned from different countries perceive the voluntariness of their return.

Choice of Community

Very few respondents (5%) indicated they had chosen the community to which they returned, but nearly all respondents (97%) reported having close family and friends in the community of their return. Slightly more than half (54%) reported they had been directed to move to there, while one-third (31%) reported their family chose the location. It's likely that many respondents returning from Pakistan ended up in Nangarhar by default after crossing at Torkham, and were then unable to return to a "home province" due to conflict. Returnees from other countries may have similarly ended up in Nangarhar because conditions prevented them from returning to their home provinces. These findings indicate high levels of internal movement. Of the 91 individuals who reported they or their family chose their community of return, 58 stated the reason was because it was their home province.

Only 15 respondents indicated they chose that particular community because assistance was offered. The most likely explanation is that few people received reintegration assistance from government or external bodies.

Returnees from Pakistan in the sample were significantly more likely to indicate their family chose the community of return than returnees from Turkey or European countries.[34] This is possibly related to the fact that a large proportion (39%) of respondents who returned from Pakistan did so with members of their immediate family.

Anticipating Return

The concept of 'return' involves not only a physical journey but also an emotional one. Recent studies have begun to document the complexities of return.[35] A myriad of internal and external factors influence what return means to each individual and their emotional response. Some returnees left Afghanistan willingly, others unwillingly, and still others lived their whole lives outside the country. Some had strong ties to Afghanistan even when abroad, returned to communities and families who welcomed them, found work and meaningful roles in their new communities, whereas others are returning to shockingly unfamiliar environments. We sought to explore the extent to which these psychosocial issues impacted returns and may potentially impact reintegration.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the period immediately prior to their return to Afghanistan and

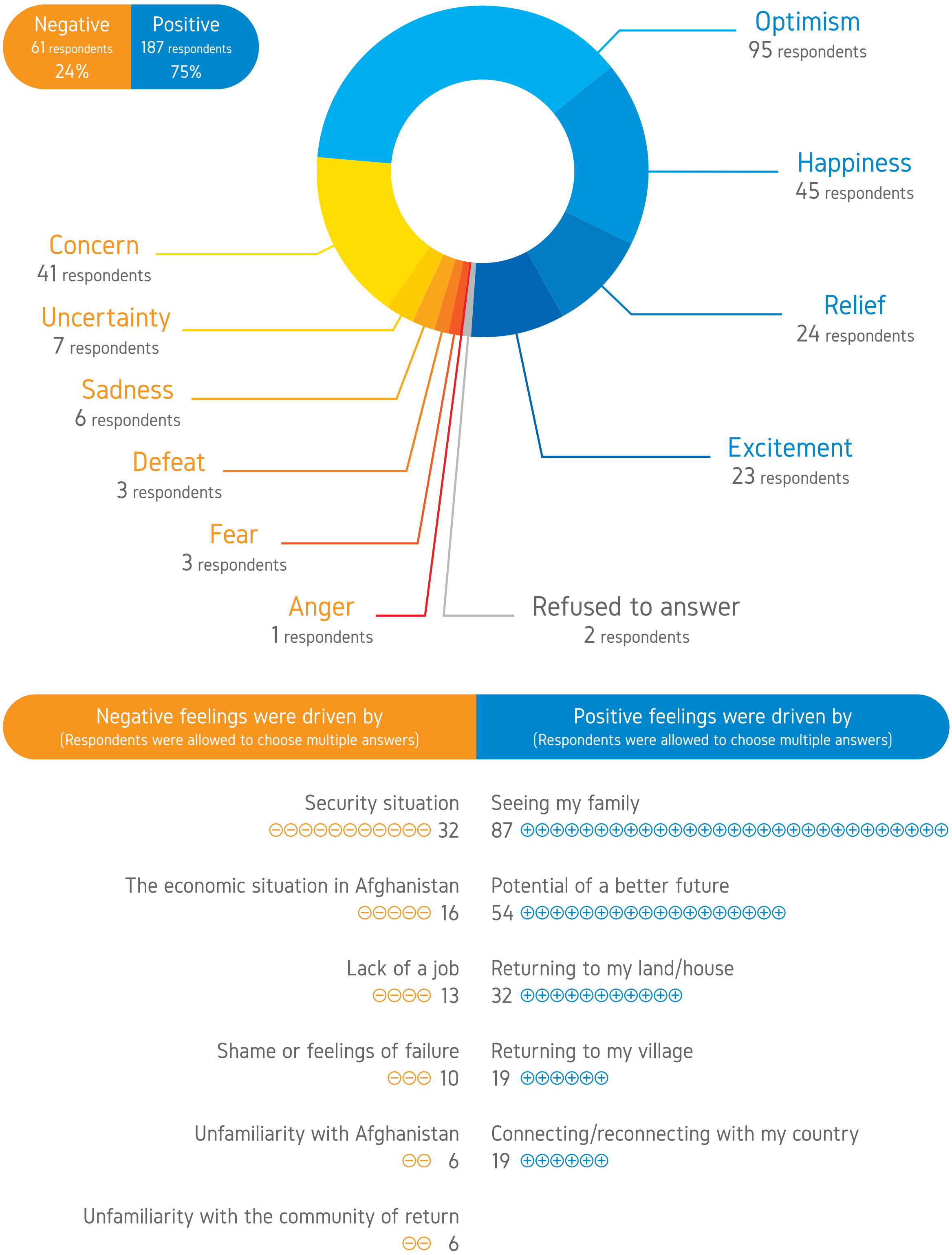
[33] $p>.01$

[34] $p<.05$

[35] *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourse, Policy-making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families,* ed. Zana Vathi and Russell King.

asked what one emotion they most frequently experienced.[36] Figure 2 shows the most commonly reported emotions and drivers of those feelings.

Figure 2:



[36] Respondents were read a list of positive and negative emotions. This was followed with a question asking what one factor most contributed to that feeling.

As shown above, a significant majority of respondents reported experiencing positive feelings, including optimism, happiness, relief, and excitement. Considering that the majority of respondents reported their return as not voluntary, these positive feelings are particularly striking and point to the complex emotional facets of return.

Respondents tended to feel more positively about returning home when they:

- **Had stayed in close touch with family while abroad.** Respondents who reported that they spoke to family members 'at least once a week' or 'at least once a month' were more likely to report positive feelings.[37]
- **Felt connected to Afghanistan while abroad.**[38]

Respondents returned from European countries were more likely to report that **seeing their family** was a contributing factor to their positive feelings, compared to returnees from Pakistan, who were more likely to report the **potential of a better future** as a contributing factor. In-depth interviews were consistent with these responses and provided additional context: they suggested that returnees from Europe most likely migrated abroad without their families, often for labor purposes, and so looked forward to reuniting with their family. Respondents returned from Pakistan cited the difficulties they faced there and hoped for a better life in Afghanistan.

A minority of respondents reported experiencing a range of negative feelings, including concern, uncertainty, sadness, defeat, fear and anger.

Several observations can be made:

- **A higher proportion of returnees from Europe (32%) 'strongly agreed' that they felt connected to Afghanistan, compared to only 3% from Pakistan and 17% from Turkey who 'strongly agreed' with this sentiment.** This difference is likely due to the longer periods of time returnees from Pakistan spent abroad before return, making it more challenging to remain connected with their home country.
- **The majority (73%) of respondents 'somewhat agreed' (48%) or 'strongly agreed' (26%) with the statement, "While living abroad, I felt more at home in my new country than I did when I lived in Afghanistan."** This indicates strong adaptability. Unsurprisingly, respondents who lived abroad for less than 6 months were more likely to 'strongly disagree' than respondents who had lived abroad longer. Notably, over one-third of respondents who had spent significant time abroad (5-10 years) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, perhaps an indicator of identity struggles.
- **A majority of respondents (88%) indicated that while living abroad, they had not considered returning to Afghanistan to live.** Those who had lived abroad for more than 5 years or were born abroad were slightly more likely to have considered returning to Afghanistan to live (22% as opposed to 12% of all respondents). It is possible that those who had previously considered return would be more likely to react positively to return, while if return was not part of these migrants' plans, returning might be a bigger shock or have additional psychological implications. This issue requires further research to clarify.

[37] $p<0.01$
[38] $p<0.01$

Figure 3:

What does it mean to be Afghan and born abroad?

Following the Soviet-Afghan war and subsequent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, over 1.5 million Afghans crossed the border into Pakistan between 1979 and 1980. In total, an estimated 6 million Afghans fled to Pakistan or Iran between 1979 and 1989.

Since 2002, 4.2 million registered Afghans have returned from Pakistan, with the numbers expected to climb when legal status for Afghan refugees ends. Many of these returnees were born abroad or have lived abroad for most of their lives and are returning to a homeland they have never known.

Five of the respondents in this study were born abroad in Pakistan, and several dozen more have spent the majority of their lives in Pakistan. As expected, respondents who were born abroad felt less connected to Afghanistan while abroad than those who spent shorter amounts of time abroad; 4 out of the 5 respondents (80%) born abroad reported that they did not feel connected to Afghanistan while abroad. In comparison, only 18% of all respondents who spent less than 1 year abroad and 10% of respondents who spent 1-5 years abroad indicated the same feeling.

Return Assistance

Overall, respondents were evenly split between those who received assistance (50%) and those who did not (50%). Several factors were related to whether respondents received assistance: **Younger respondents** (15-24 years old) were more likely to report receiving assistance than older respondents (25-34 years old).[39] A far greater percentage of sampled returnees **from Pakistan** (70%) reported receiving assistance than those from Europe (36%) and Turkey (48%).

When assistance was received, it was mostly in the form of transportation and financial assistance. Overall, only 35% of returnees interviewed had their transportation arranged, and only 28% received financial assistance for their return. Transportation was arranged primarily by the sending country and by UNHCR, and all financial assistance reported was provided by UNHCR. Very few individuals reported receiving other forms of assistance such as legal aid, training, housing, or job placement.

[39] Pearson's R coefficient was sufficient ($p<.01$)

Pathways to Reintegration

What Does Reintegration Mean in Afghanistan?

While there is no universally accepted definition of reintegration, a typical definition is "a re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or a process, for example of a migrant into the society of their country of return."[40] Perhaps a more concrete definition of successful reintegration, one that presents a more measurable goal, is **when a returnee is reincorporated back into the local context so that they are indistinguishable from a non-returnee.**

There is increasing recognition that reintegration should be considered a multidimensional process. For example, one model set out by IOM and Samuel Hall recognizes the need for interventions at three levels - individual, community, and structural - that take into account factors across three dimensions: economic, social, and psychosocial.[41] While it is useful to think about these dimensions as separate, they are highly interconnected: for example, personal relationships affect returnees' ability to find employment, as well as their feelings of acceptance and happiness. Returnees may have also experienced emotional trauma or loss, in turn affecting their relationships with the community. In short, reintegration involves a number of interrelated factors across multiple dimensions that impact overall reintegration progress.

Importantly, models of reintegration should be highly specific to local contexts, taking into account structural conditions that may exist in the return context. This means that in Afghanistan - a conflict/post-conflict environment with high levels of emigration and internal movement - certain concepts or standards for reintegration (e.g. "economic self-sufficiency, social stability within communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers"[42]) may not be appropriate. The Afghan context is one in which many Afghans live with elevated insecurity, high irregular employment and unemployment rates, and transient communities. Drivers of migration (conflict, displacement, unemployment) remain present for many Afghans, not just those who have migrated and returned. As a result, having a certain propensity to migrate or considering migration as a coping mechanism is not necessarily aberrant behavior in a local context where many Afghans struggle to obtain economic self-sufficiency, stable communities, and psychosocial wellbeing. In order for measurements of successful reintegration to be realistic, they should be benchmarked to the local context.

[40] IOM, *Glossary on Migration.*

[41] Measure Project, *Setting standards to an integrated approach to reintegration* (2017), p. 3.

[42] IOM, *Towards an integrated approach to reintegration in the context of return* (2017), p. 3.

Towards Understanding Perceptions of Reintegration Progress

While third-party assessments of reintegration are useful, this study focused on returnees' perceptions of progress and what they consider important for reintegration. In the Afghan context, where traditional benchmarks of successful reintegration such as employment and social stability are difficult to obtain, the psychosocial indicators of reintegration are arguably more important. This includes how returnees feel about their reintegration process.

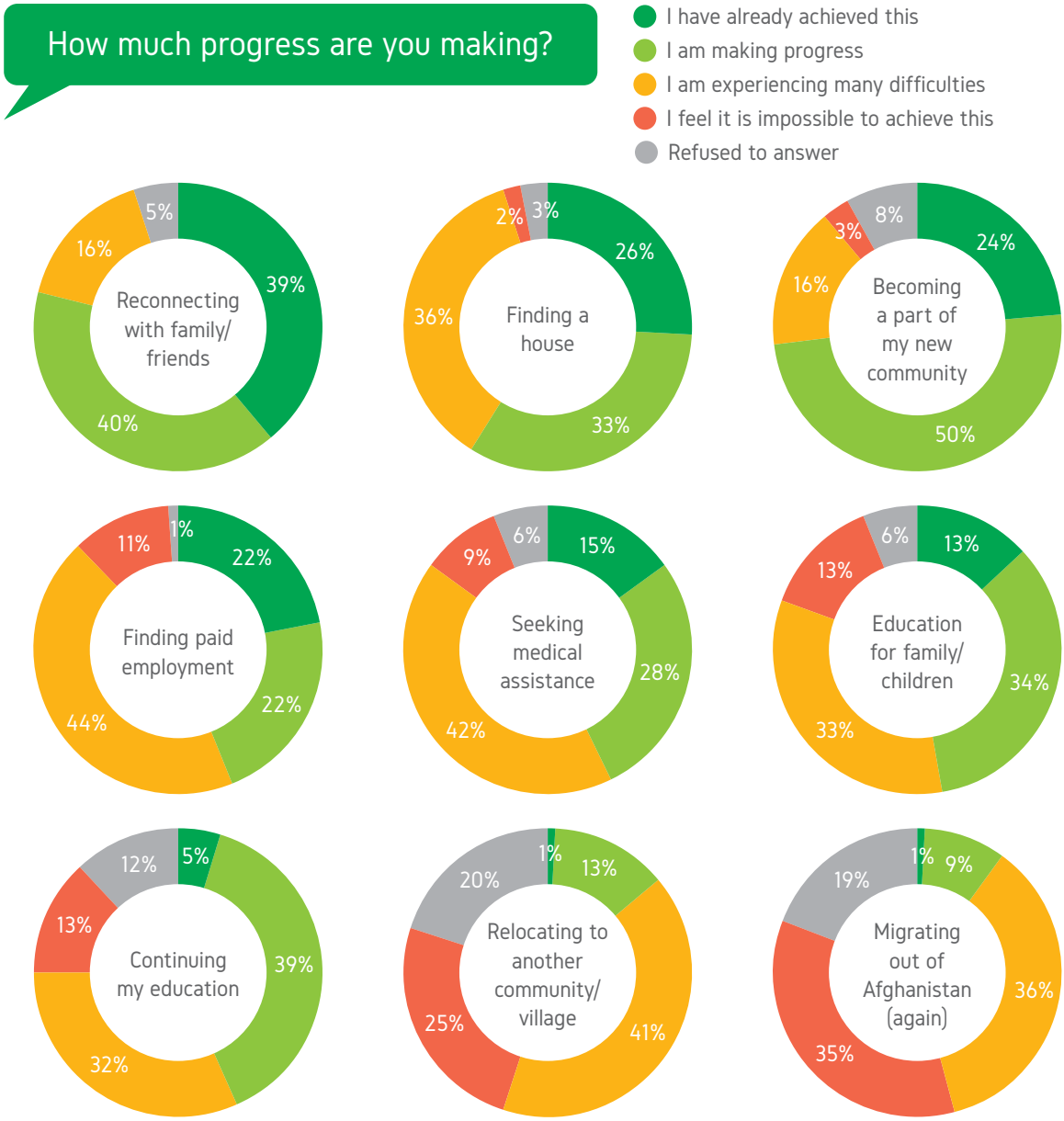
Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various considerations upon their return to Afghanistan, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4:

As expected, respondents overwhelming assessed economic indicators as 'important'. They also rated social indicators as 'highly important'. Taken together, these findings paint a picture of returnees eager to settle into their communities of return, and indicate they were not necessarily looking to re-migrate.

Respondents assessed their own progress on these factors on a 4 point scale, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5:



These results show that respondents felt they were making the most progress on some of the social aspects of reintegration - reconnecting with family and friends, and becoming a part of their new community. Fewer returnees interviewed felt they were making progress on economic indicators such as finding paid employment and obtaining education for themselves and their families, with finding a house an exception.

The largest gap between what respondents found important and reported progress was in finding paid employment. Notably, finding regular paid employment is extremely difficult for many Afghans across Afghanistan, not just returnees, implying that many returnees are unlikely to make progress in this indicator.

Figure 6:

A "Perceptions Barometer" of Reintegration Progress

In order to measure returnees' perceptions of their reintegration progress overall in areas relevant to reintegration, we created a "perceptions barometer". Each response to each question was assigned a score from 1 - 4:

1	2	3	4
"I feel it is impossible to achieve"	"I am experiencing many difficulties"	"I am making progress"	"I have already achieved this"

- "Refuse to answer" responses were excluded.

The scores were then aggregated and averaged, resulting in a single value representing an individual's overall assessment of their reintegration progress. Lower scores (i.e. closer to 1) indicate a more negative overall perception of reintegration progress; higher scores (i.e. closer to 4) indicate a more positive perception.

Figure 7 demonstrates how each respondent's overall progress perceptions score was calculated.

Figure 7:

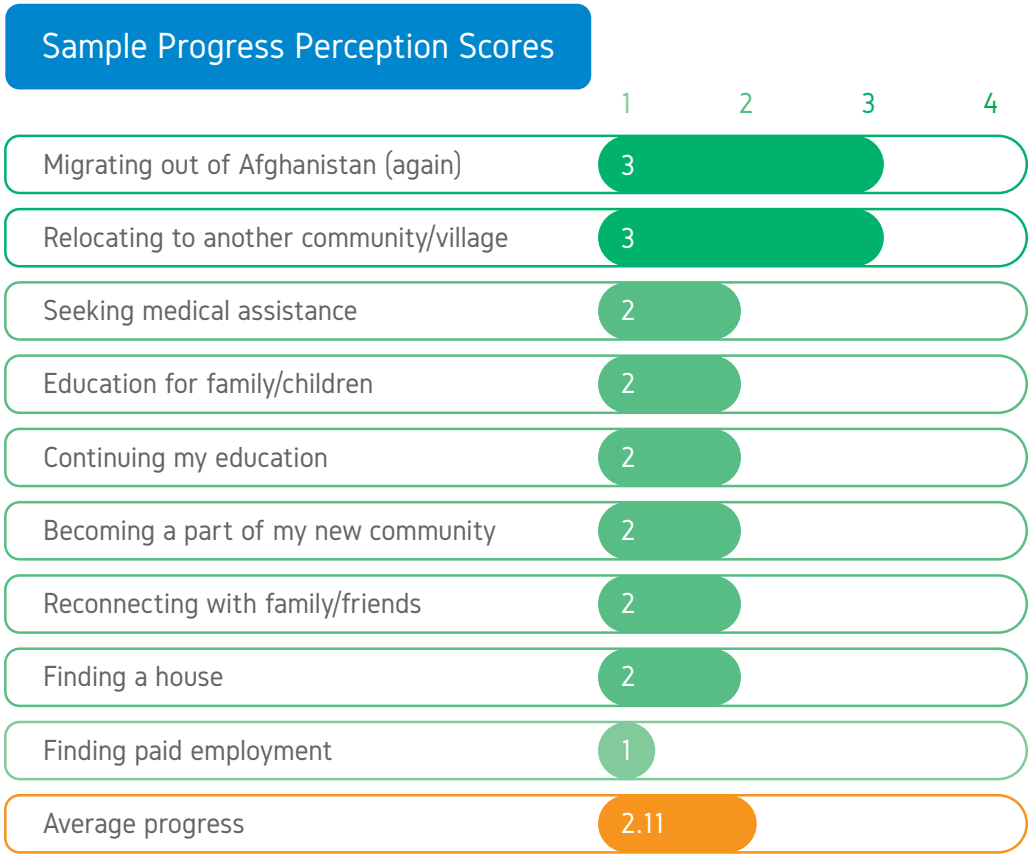
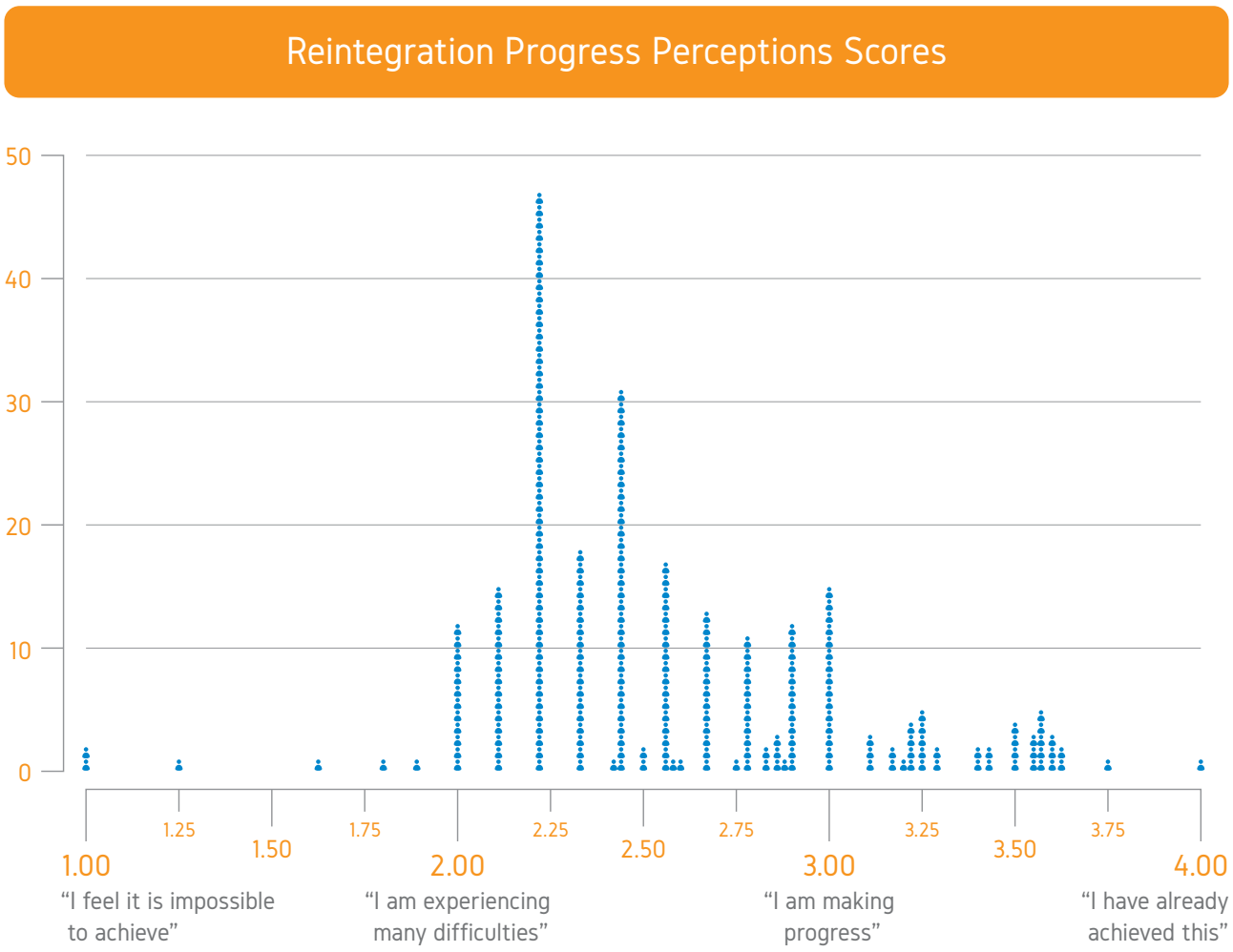


Figure 8 shows the frequency that each score appears in the data. Each point represents the progress score of an individual respondent. More than 45 returnees had the most common score in the data (the mode): 2.22, a score indicating that respondents perceived more challenges in reintegration than progress achieved. A small percentage of respondents (7%) had a progress score of 2 or lower, suggesting that they held a very negative view of their reintegration progress.

Figure 8:



The mean progress perceptions score in the sample was 2.59. This means that, when considering multiple aspects of reintegration, most respondents felt that they were experiencing at least some difficulties. This trend remained similar even when the two questions on relocating/migrating were removed from the analysis.

Figure 9:

Key factors statistically related to perceptions of reintegration progress

Respondents more likely to report more reintegration progress:

Respondents who did not report experiencing negative treatment in the community
Compared to respondents who reported experiencing negative treatment in the community. This correlation was highly statistically significant, with a coefficient of 0.28, which suggests that those who experience negative treatment in the community have an average reintegration progress score that is 0.28 lower (meaning less progress) than those who do not report experiencing negative treatment

Respondents returning from Pakistan
Compared to respondents returned from other countries

Respondents who voluntarily returned
Compared to respondents who reported their return as partially voluntary or not voluntary

Respondents who returned with dependent family members
Compared to respondents who did not return with dependent family

Respondents who reported feeling less anger after return
Compared to respondents who reported feeling more or the same amount of anger after return

Notably, **employment was not correlated with perceptions of overall reintegration progress,**[43] indicating that **while highly valued by returnees, employment is a relatively weak indicator of reintegration progress.** This in turn underscores the importance of social and psychosocial factors to successful reintegration.

[43] Basic regression models were run with different sets of controls.

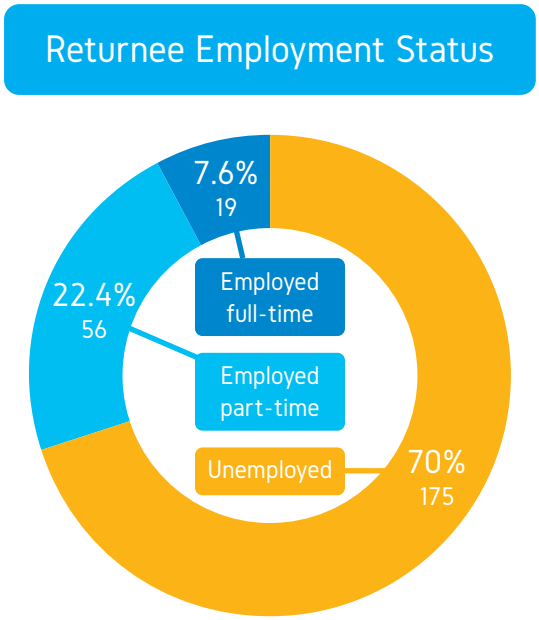
Challenges to Reintegration

The following sections further explore some of the challenges returnees face in the reintegration progress.

Economic Challenges

On economic indicators, returnees interviewed faced many challenges. They reported high levels of unemployment, with skilled jobs particularly scarce. Only 30% of respondents reported being in full or part-time employment (Figure 10). For context, the Asia Foundation reports that 45% of Afghans engaged in income-generating activity in 2017.[44] The 30% figure in this study likely does not capture individuals engaged in income-generating activity that is not considered employment, so the low levels of employment reported by respondents in this study may not be significantly lower than for Afghans overall.

Figure 10:



Respondents with little to no formal education were more likely than returnees with higher levels of education to report being employed, but their employment was likely to be in elementary occupations such as casual labor, cleaning and street vending. 77% of respondents with a secondary education and 60% of respondents with a university degree reported being unemployed, compared with only 44% of respondents with no formal degree. This data could indicate a lack of available jobs for those with more advanced educational qualifications. Younger respondents (15 - 24 years old) were also more likely to be unemployed than older respondents (25 - 34 years old), likely due to the fact that many were still in school.

While finding employment is difficult for many Afghans, returnees indicated that they face additional challenges: **more than half (57%) of respondents indicated they 'strongly agreed' or 'somewhat agree[d]' that their experience with migration made it more difficult for them to gain employment.**

Interviewees reported that returnees who grew up and were educated abroad in Pakistan faced discrimination by employers. "Their Dari and Pashto are difficult to understand"[45] or they "face troubles [using] Dari and Pashto languages," so "many employers don't consider them for employment,"[46] community leaders explained. One man observed that returnees from Pakistan in particular "face extreme difficulties finding jobs" because "Pakistan and Afghanistan are no longer on good terms with each other."[47]

Returnees from Pakistan also had difficulty getting their educational certifications recognized. One community leader observed:

> *Some refugees returned from Pakistan have studied until grade 10 or 12, but when they wanted their educational documents attested, some encountered corrupt officials who demanded money, and some couldn't get them attested at all.*[48]

[44] Asia Foundation, *Survey of the Afghan People* (2017).
[45] Community Leader, Interview 2
[46] Community Leader, Interview 1
[47] Community Leader, Interview 1
[48] Community Leader, Interview 6

Additionally, **interviewees described a culture of networks and patronage, making it very difficult for those without such links, like returnees, to find jobs**. One community leader explained:

> *In Afghanistan everything works on nepotism and recommendation. The returning refugees don't understand this culture or have any recommendation... everyone gets a job through recommendations, not on merits, so it becomes very difficult for them to find a job.*[49]

The difficulties of breaking into this system were recognized by returnee respondents. One returnee from Europe echoed this sentiment: "Unless you have a recommendation, it is difficult to find a job in Afghanistan. I am searching to find a job, but without recommendation and bribes, it is difficult to get it."[50] Another respondent observed that poverty was an additional barrier to accessing networks: "Jobs are available only for those who have recommendation or money, no one cares about poor people; might is right."[51]

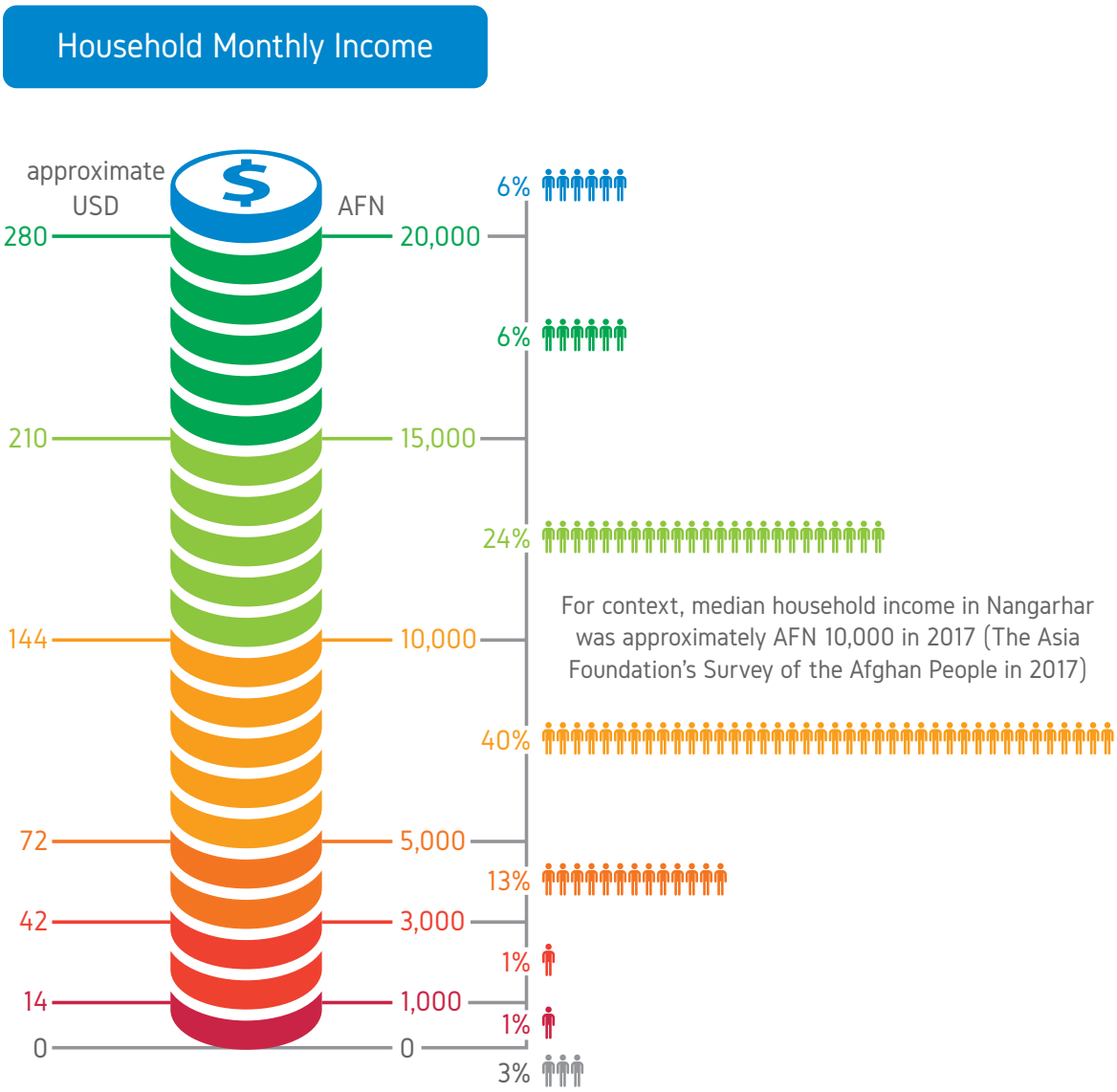
While the lack of employment opportunities has clearly been a driver of migration and irregular migration to Europe, one community leader also cautioned that lack of suitable employment in Afghanistan was a **cause for re-migration** among returnees from Pakistan:

> *There are no jobs here, especially in the field of skilled labor. A man who has spent 15 years doing one thing will find it very difficult to change profession suddenly. Like a military guy who serves 20 years in the military can't be expected to run a shop successfully, because he has adjusted himself to that particular system. So these refugees go back to Pakistan to work. When their visas expire, they run back to Afghanistan to renew them. There's no other way for them. I have sat down with these people many times. They too have requested us to help them settle. In my opinion, they aren't to blame because we realize we as a country can't manage things right now.*[52]

Despite these issues, although reported median household income (5,000-10,000 AFN) is low, it is not significantly lower than the median income of 10,000 AFN for Nangarhar (including returnees and non-returnees) reported by The Asia Foundation in 2017. On the contrary, the reported levels of income are slightly surprising given the high unemployment figures. Figure 11 shows household monthly income reported in the sample.

[49] Community Leader, Interview 1
[50] Returnee from Europe, Interview 1
[51] Returnee from Europe, Interview 5
[52] Community Leader, Interview 6

Figure 11:



There did not appear to be a relationship between employment status and reported household income. However education does appear to be related to household income. Respondents reporting no education or only a primary education were more likely to report a low household income of 3,000-5,000 AFN than those with more education.[53]

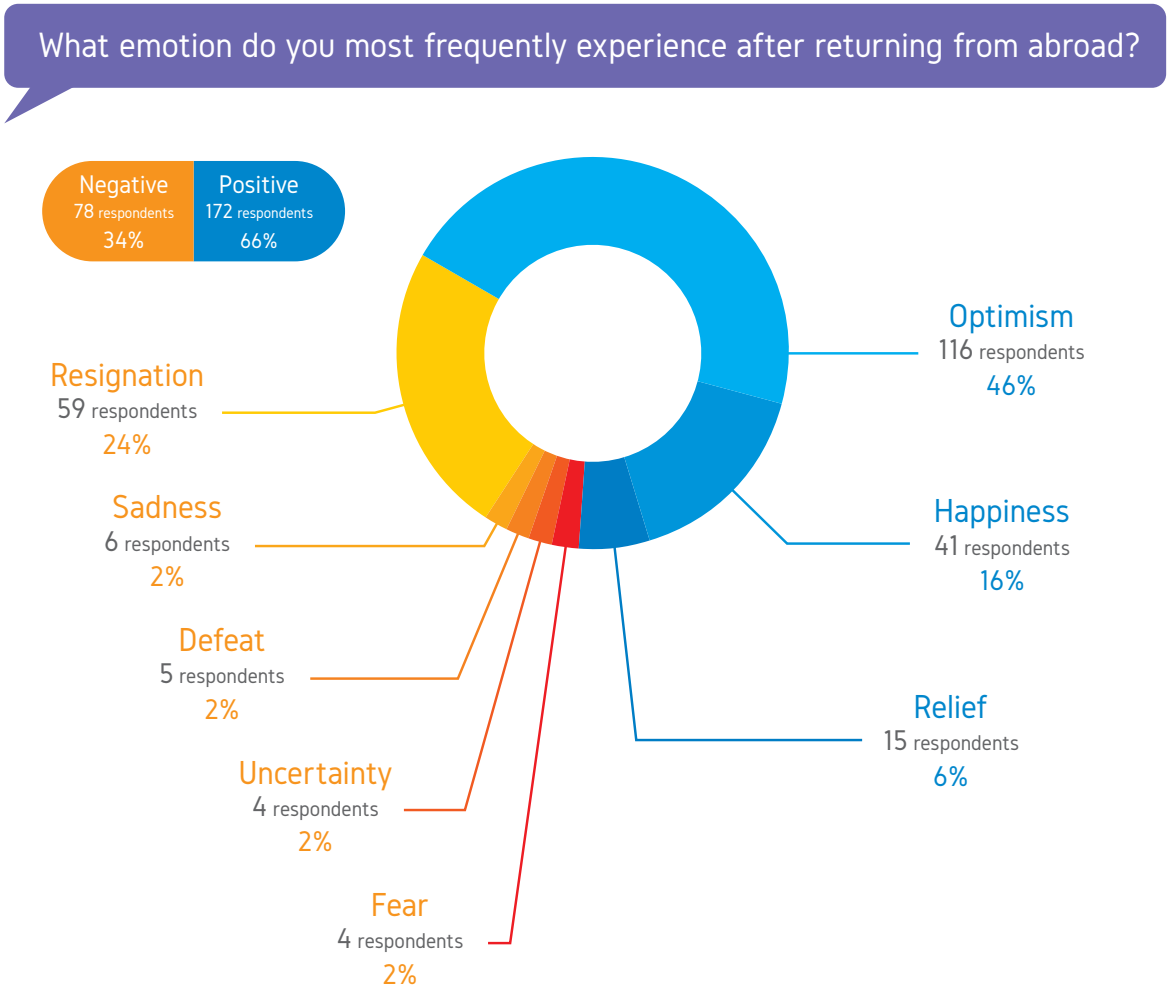
Overall, respondents reported very few sources of income or support outside of their immediate family. Nearly half (48%) reported relying on the earnings of a spouse, child or parent while the other half (41%) reported no other source of income. Only 18 respondents (7%) reported relying on assistance from UNHCR.

[53] p>0.01

Emotional and Psychosocial Well-being

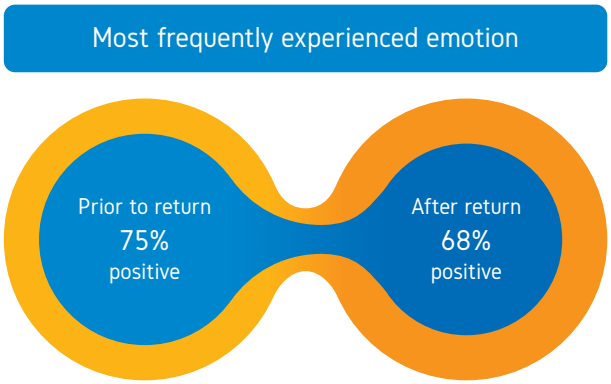
Respondents were asked to reflect on what one emotion they most frequently experienced *after* return, as shown in Figure 12 below.

Figure 12:



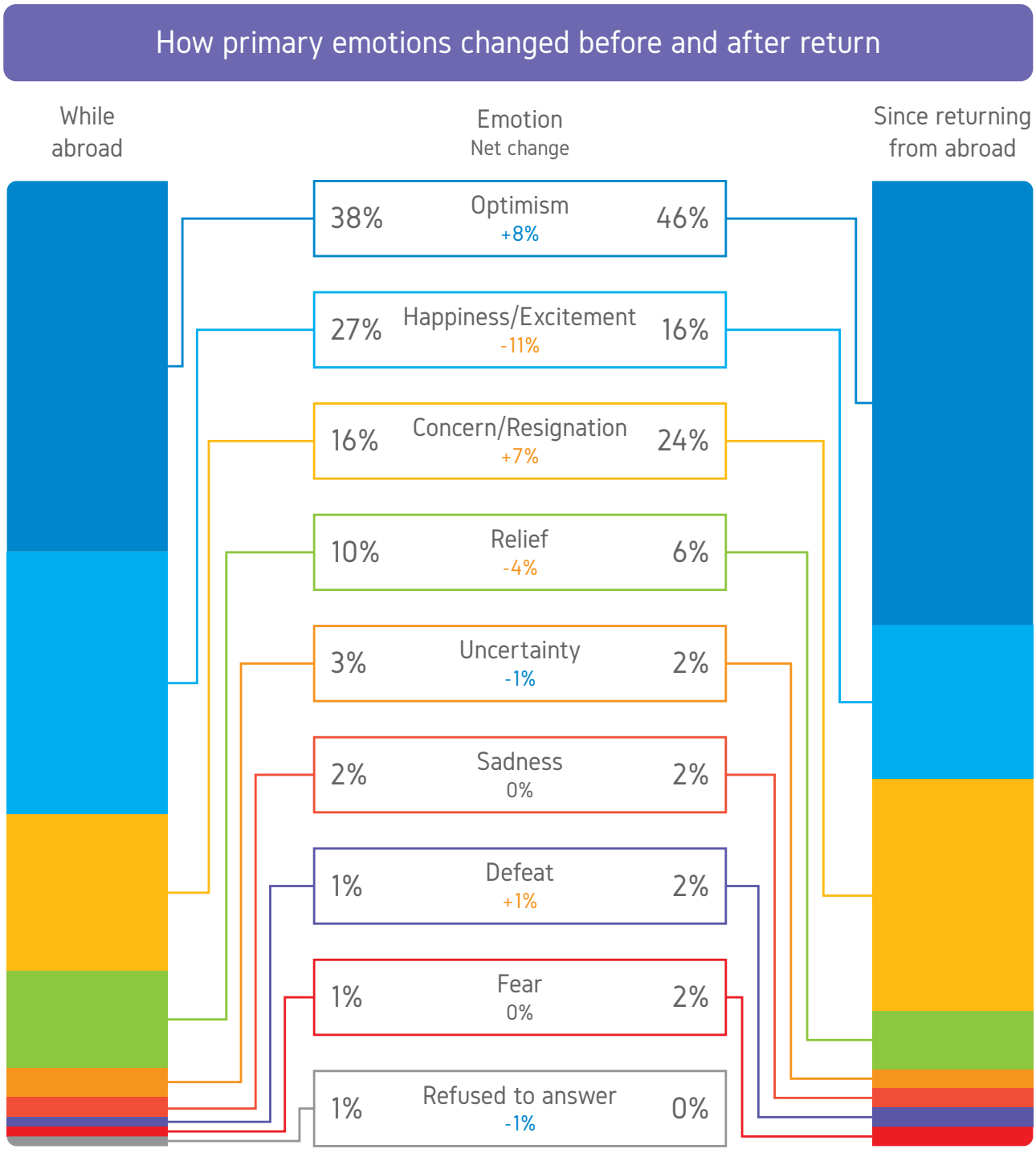
When compared to primary emotions reported prior to return, there was a slight negative shift in emotional well-being after return (see Figure 13). While 75% of respondents reported the most frequently experienced emotion immediately prior to return to be *positive*, a slightly smaller figure, 68%, reported their primary emotion to be positive after return.

Figure 13:



Emotional shifts after return varied (see Figure 14, below). For example, while 27% of respondents reported that prior to return their most-frequent emotion was happiness or excitement, this number dropped by 11 percentage points, and only 16% of respondents reported their most-frequent emotion after return as happiness or excitement. On the other hand, while 38% of respondents reported optimism as their most-frequent emotion, this number increased by 8 percentage points, and 46% of respondents reported optimism as their most-frequent emotion after return.

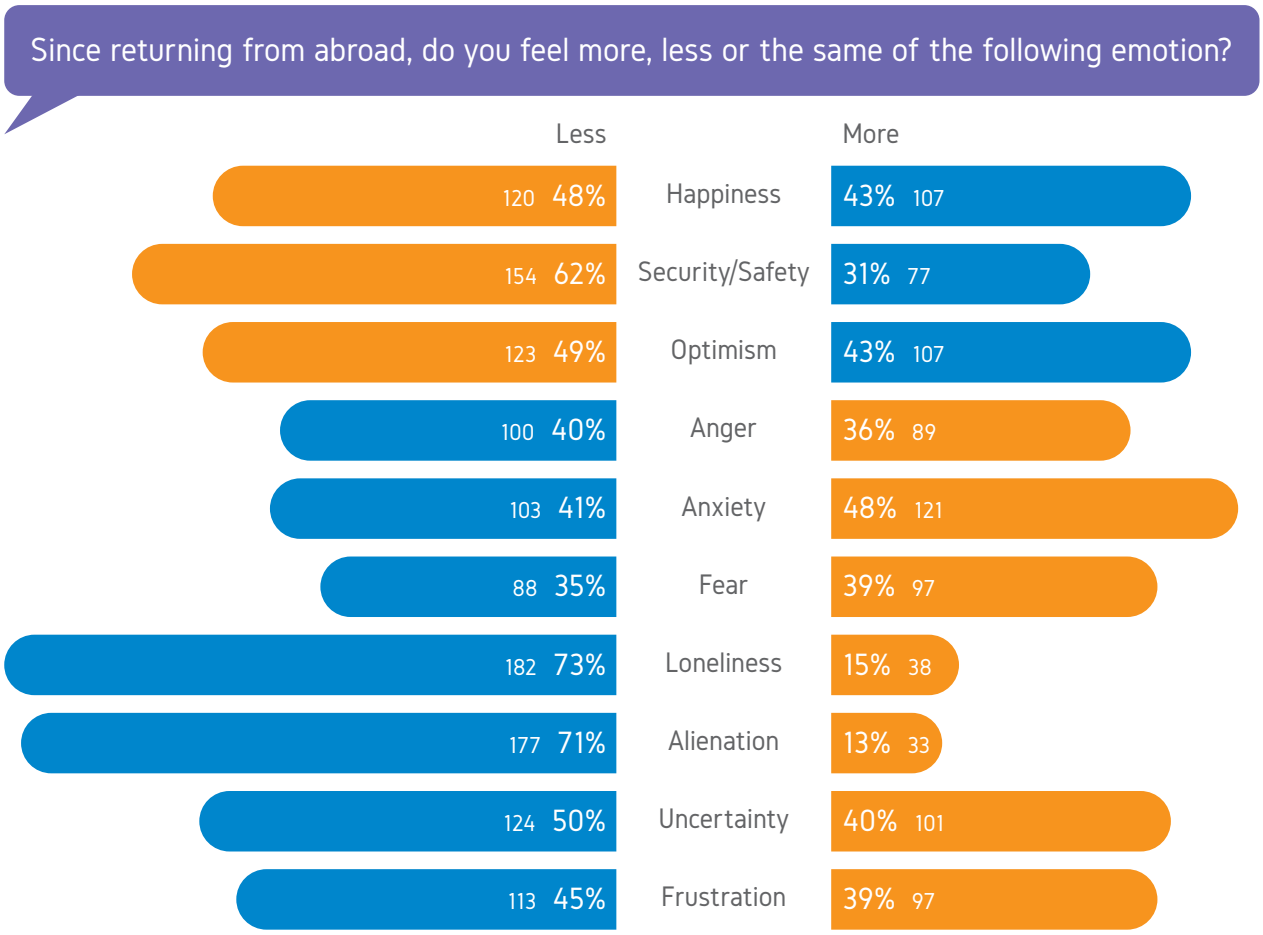
Figure 14:



As respondents were asked to think back to their emotions prior to return - rather than being assessed in real time - these findings are inherently limited and may be biased by respondents' intervening experiences. *These preliminary findings indicate that longitudinal studies that ask returnees to repeatedly assess their emotions over a period of time would be useful in understanding the emotional impacts of return.*

When assessing emotional change since returning to Afghanistan,[54] many respondents reported **some positive emotional changes,** most notably, **significant decreases in loneliness and alienation.** However, **widespread negative emotional changes** were also reported, including a **decrease in feelings of safety and security.**

Figure 15:



[54] Respondents were asked whether they felt more, less, or the same of particular emotions since returning to Afghanistan.

Emotional changes occurred in parallel. This was particularly true for negative emotions. For example, returnees who reported feeling more anger were more likely to report more anxiety and less happiness than returnees who did not report feeling more anger after return.[55] Other examples:[56]

- 83% of respondents who said that they felt more fear after return also reported feeling less happiness.
- Among respondents who said that they felt safer after return, 76% indicated that they felt more optimism after return.
- 88% of respondents who said that they felt more anger after return also reported feeling more anxiety.
- More than half of respondents (57%) reported feeling less loneliness as well as less alienation after return; but among respondents who reported feeling more alienation after return, a plurality (42%) said that they also felt more loneliness.

Analyzing indicators of emotional well-being alongside other data points, we found some interesting patterns in the sample:[57]

- **Negative emotions appear to increase over time for returnees.** Compared to returnees who had been in Afghanistan for more than 6 months, newer returnees (those who arrived less than 6 months ago) were less likely to report negative emotional shifts (such as feeling increased anger) after return**.** This could suggest that returnees are having difficulties coping with being back in Afghanistan, indicating the need for psychosocial support. *Again, this suggests that longitudinal research studies that track returnees' emotions over time would be useful to understand the emotional aspects of reintegration.* This finding may also be linked to another finding that newer returnees are less likely to report experiencing negative treatment by the community.
- **Unemployment was correlated with increased feelings of anger and anxiety**
- **Having family or friends experience negative treatment by the community was correlated with feeling more anger and anxiety.**
- **Voluntary return was associated with positive indicators** (e.g. less anxiety).

These tentative findings indicate that emotional aspects of reintegration are linked with various other indicators of reintegration progress across economic and social dimensions. Further research would be useful to better understand these linkages.

Factors Contributing to Emotional and Psychosocial Wellbeing

Positive emotions: Driven by family and hopes for education

Despite some negative shifts, the majority (68%) of respondents still reported that their most frequently experienced emotion after return was positive.

Respondents cited 'reuniting with family' as the factor that contributed most to positive feelings. This sentiment was also seen in key informant interviews, with respondents noting: "Now I am so happy as I'm living with my family, who is giving me a lot of love"[58] and "We all live together, my father…encourages me a lot. I have a great family and I don't have any negative feelings."[59] Some returnees from Europe were happy simply to be back in Afghanistan.

Feelings of optimism and hope were also linked to educational opportunities. One respondent who had returned from Austria explained:

> *Because I have a facility for education, I see my future as bright. With the help of my family and society, I will get a job and will start a good life.*

[55] Statistically significant relationships

[56] While these examples are given in terms of sample percentages, they were confirmed using correlation analysis. All examples are statistically significant correlations at the p<.01 level.

[57] Correlation and regression analysis. Models controlled for voluntary return, age, dependent family members and education level.

[58] Returnee from Europe, Interview 4

[59] Returnee from Europe, Interview 2

Luckily, all these facilities are available to me, and I want to take full advantage of these facilities to get an education and meet my hopes.[60]

Another returnee shared:

I am continuing my education here [in Afghanistan] and have lots of hope... I have plenty of hopes for my future to be able to get a good education and try hard enough to have a comfortable future. I am an optimist for my future.[61]

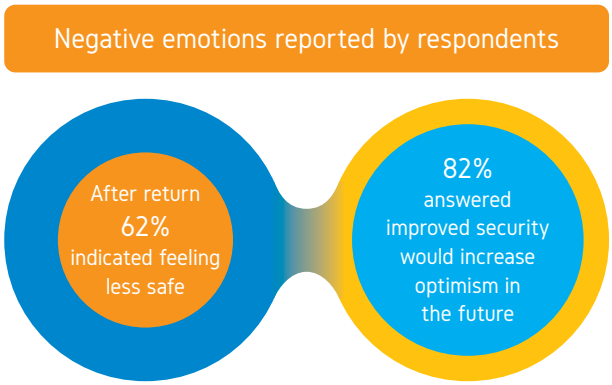
A respondent returned from Pakistan noted:

I wanted to come back to Afghanistan and study in one of the better universities. I came back. I took the placement test. I passed and I am here now. Just like we hoped to go to Afghanistan and work for our country, we've initiated that. There are a few problems but hopefully they will be resolved very soon.

Negative Emotions: Driven by insecurity and unemployment

Respondents were concerned about safety and security, which was related to psychosocial wellbeing (see Figure 16, below):

Figure 16:



This finding is echoed in interviews where returnees from Europe and Pakistan regularly raised insecurity as a top concern:

We shouldn't be hopeless for our future. We have lots of hopes, but looking at these situations, when we go out from home in the morning, we are not quite sure whether or not we will return alive, or whether we will return disabled. Innocent killings are common and human blood has no worth.[62]

Unemployment, insecurity, blasts - they're part of the daily routine. Thousands of innocent people are killed, but there is no one to assist them. My life is in a bad situation, but being hopeless is not good.[63]

Respondents also expressed concern about finding paid employment, which was linked with psychosocial well-being; nearly half of respondents (46%) named securing paid employment as the second greatest factor that would increase optimism about the future. In in-depth interviews, respondents expressed hopelessness for the future due to unemployment and poor employment prospects:

When I decided to return to Afghanistan, I had lots of hopes. I wanted to get a good job and build my life, but when I came to Afghanistan and saw the situation, I became heartbroken. The reality on the ground was very different. I had no place of my own to reside in, so we had to rent a place. Now that I don't have a job, I find it difficult to pay the rent. I can't put food on the table for my family. It is very difficult to get a job in Afghanistan, you have to either know someone of authority or pay someone a bribe to get a job. Generally, my life is miserable and all the hope that I had, none is fulfilled.[64]

60 Returnee from Europe, Interview 3
61 Returnee from Europe, Interview 2
62 Returnee from Europe, Interview 7
63 Returnee from Europe, Interview 1
64 Returnee from Pakistan, Interview 8

For my future, I just want to have a job. We don't have land or a house. Every problem has to do with joblessness. We go out of the house in the morning and the only thing we are concerned with is whether or not we will have enough to go back home in the evening.[65]

Given the structural nature of these concerns - that is, insecurity and unemployment remain widespread challenges in Afghanistan - these problems are unlikely to be immediately solved by reintegration assistance. *This underlines the importance of psychosocial assistance to support returnees in adapting to a difficult context.*

Many returnees from Europe reported feeling shame for returning back to Afghanistan, which they viewed as a failure. A young man deported from Austria explained:

Since I've returned, everyone looks down on me and hates me. I even hate myself as what my father earned with difficulty, I spent very easily [for funding my irregular migration journey to Europe]. I have so much regret, but repenting doesn't benefit anyone now. I should have thought of that before, then I wouldn't be in this situation... I feel ashamed when I meet my friends as my neglect brutally destroyed my father's money and my precious time."[66]

Even those who did not experience negative treatment, who were welcomed back into the community, felt ashamed at migrating. "It is a blessing of Allah that I have good relations with my family and friends," one man explained, "but whenever I face my family, I feel ashamed because I haven't done anything good for them."[67]

Respondents returned from Europe also expressed feelings of regret for wasting money and time on migrating. Nearly every in-depth interview respondent returned from Europe viewed their time abroad as a mistake and rued the opportunity costs of their decision to migrate:

I was very keen to go abroad and went illegally to Bulgaria where I stayed for one year and nine months. That was the worst decision. It upset me a lot and wasted a year of my life.

I lived in Bulgaria for nearly six months and returned two years ago. It was the biggest mistake of my life. I didn't listen to my elders and went there. It is my pleasure that I returned to my country.

I was in Austria for 8 months and deported one year ago. It was a bad experience, may Allah never repeat it. I wasted my time and money. In addition to wasting 8 months, I made my friends and family upset. I didn't care for their advice and went there. Now Allah has given me an opportunity to reimburse all my loans

I lived in Greece for 13 months [...] May Allah bring peace in our country, it was a bad experience, may Allah never repeat it again. I just wasted my time and money.

I really regret going abroad because I could have started a business with the money that I spent on going out of the country.

I fully regret my past life because I spent my money on an activity that benefited me in no way.

[65] Returnee from Pakistan, Interview 7
[66] Returnee from Europe, Interview 6
[67] Returnee from Europe, Interview 7

Respondents returned from Pakistan reported feeling that their expectations for life in Afghanistan were unfulfilled:

> *We had a lot of expectations. A poor man doesn't have expectations but needs. Our expectation was that we would have a house of our own, which we don't have. Another expectation was that our kids would have education. The government didn't support us and neither have we been able to support our kids. None of our expectations were met. I am a high school graduate, but none of the organizations accept my educational certificates. I now buy and sell bicycles and live an ordinary life. None of our expectations were met here.*[68]

> *We had high hopes. We thought when we came back to Afghanistan [from Pakistan], we'd be surrounded by a wonderful environment. We thought that we'd have a good life as well as quality education. But the reality was different. The security is bad. The police also don't make our lives easier and there aren't enough organizations that have extended a hand of support. So we are losing hope because life there was comparatively better than life here.*[69]

In summary, these findings point to the need for further research on the emotional impacts of return, as well to the need for psychosocial assistance to support returnees in adjusting and adapting to their new environment. Many returnees from Pakistan may experience difficulty accepting a situation that is much worse than they envisioned. Although they constitute a small minority of returnees, migrants from Europe have very different psychosocial needs and could benefit from targeted assistance.

[68] Returnee from Pakistan, Interview 8
[69] Returnee from Pakistan, Interview 7

Community Relations

Maintaining positive relations with communities is also at the root of many challenges to reintegration, as economic, social and psychosocial factors are all implicated. A large influx of new individuals can cause disruptions in existing community dynamics, while the newcomers themselves may face ostracization and social exclusion, or may not accept the communities to which they have returned.

Respondents' country of migration appeared to impact relationships with communities. For example, returnees from Europe or Turkey were more likely to report experiencing negative treatment than returnees from Pakistan.[70]

Figure 17:

There was clear stigma - perceived, experienced, or both - around migrating irregularly to Europe, making it more difficult for returnees to reintegrate. In interviews, returnees said they received negative treatment or exclusion because they migrated specifically to Europe or Turkey and returned. One young man who was deported from Austria lamented, "Since I've returned, everyone is looking down on me and hate me. I even hate myself as what my father earned with difficulty, I spent very easily."[71]

Feelings of failure were compounded by the fact that **many returned from Europe deeply in debt,** having sold assets or borrowed large sums of money for the journey. young man who had returned from Bulgaria explained:

> *Because I migrated illegally, people now look down on me [...] When I planned to go abroad, everyone in my family and my friends were against my decision. People were telling me not to go illegally as this [move] is full of danger and could even take your life, but I listened to no one and went illegally. I made*

[70] Additional analysis controlling for additional factors such as voluntary return, newly returned, age, employment and education levels confirm that returning from a European country or Turkey is correlated with experiencing negative treatment.

[71] Returnee from Europe, Interview 6

my family take loans and wasted a few years of my life. This might be a reason I don't have good relations with people.[72]

A community leader observed:

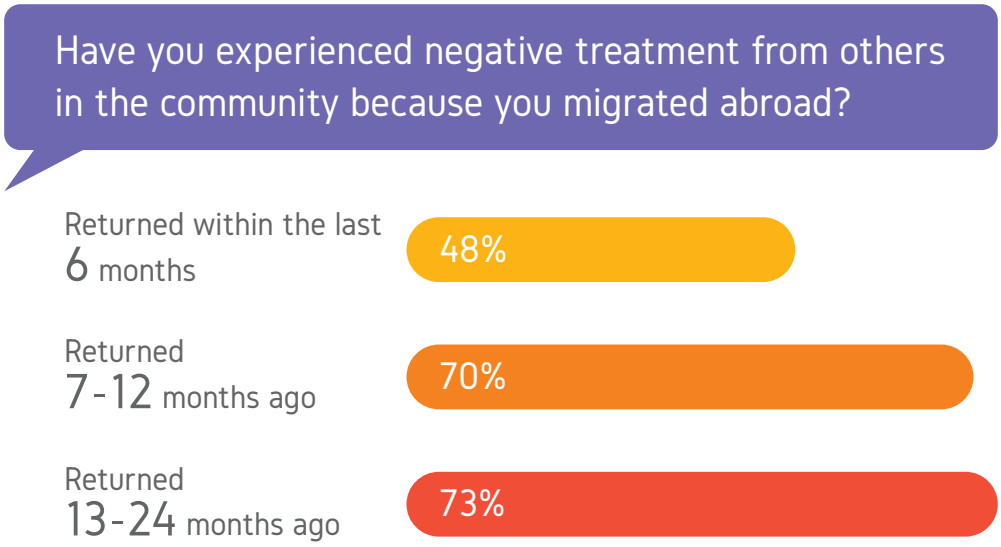
Those brothers returning from Western countries face many problems because they have a lot of expenses. Each of them have spent between 1 and 1.5 million afghanis, but now they've been deported back. When they come back, their relations with their families and elders aren't always good because they have spent a lot of money without any gain. They owe money to people so when they return, they're always in a state of depression. They are under tremendous stress.[73]

These interviews highlight a key difference in the migration and return experiences of returnees from Europe and those who returned from Pakistan, and the subsequent way they are received by people in the community. Those who moved to Europe often migrated alone or with friends, selling assets or borrowing money to finance their trip, and their return is associated with stigma and shame. *This suggests that returnees from Europe could substantially benefit from psychosocial support. In parallel, initiatives could be aimed at building cohesion between these returnees and their family members*. On the other hand, those who moved to Pakistan often fled with their families to escape conflict and have returned in search of better opportunities. And because the number of returnees from Pakistan dwarf the numbers of returnees from Europe, host communities are likely much more familiar with - and perhaps accepting of - returnees from Pakistan.

Several other factors relate to poorer relations with the community:

Respondents that had been in Afghanistan for a longer period since their return were more likely to be treated negatively by community members than respondents who had returned more recently. Newer returnees were less likely to report experiencing negative treatment than returnees who came back to Afghanistan over 6 months ago (see Figure 18, below).[74]

Figure 18:



[72] Returnee from Europe, Interview 1
[73] Community Leader Interview 1
[74] Statistically significant correlation between recency of return and negative treatment.

This finding underscores that reintegration is not a linear process improving over time, and that indicators can worsen over time, *pointing to the importance of longitudinal research studies.*

The longer respondents spent abroad, the less likely they were to think their migration experience made it harder to relate to other community members. Three-quarters (73%) of respondents who had lived abroad for less than one year indicated they somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, "My migration experience has made it difficult for me to relate to others in the community." By contrast, only one-third (34%) of respondents who lived abroad 1-5 years, and one-fifth (21%) of respondents who lived abroad for more than 5 years agreed with the statement. Further research would be required to understand why this is true.

Feeling connected to Afghanistan while abroad was linked with feeling accepted and welcomed in their new community, but also linked with experiencing negative treatment.[75] These findings reinforce the complexity of returnee-community relations.

In general, community leaders expressed empathy and support for returnees. One man from Nangarhar shared:

> *The community feels happy their brothers are returning back to the homeland to serve their own country. In general, the reaction is very positive. Our people are very supportive. If there are any problems we try to resolve them. We have developed into a community where we try to support each other in day-to-day matters. People who have been with us for some time have completely integrated, those who are new also find their place. [...] The community's role is to help them. The community has to identify the new returning refugees and assist them with integration. Since I am the chief of this community I know who has come and when, and what his condition is. So I ensure that they are well integrated and become a part of the community.*[76]

Another community leader, himself a recent returnee from Pakistan, whose hometown is in a different part of Afghanistan, had similar sentiments:

> *The returnees are part of our community because they are our countrymen. We will always welcome them. They are part of our community because prosperity and development is brought by people and not by the lack of them.*[77]

There was mutual recognition by community leaders and returnees that support flowed both ways, that returnees could also benefit host communities. One community leader stated:

> *They have our support just as we have theirs. It's impossible to live if we don't help each other out. We are obligated to help all Muslims, let alone our countrymen. So those who are with us today are part of our community. They live in our community and they strive to develop our community. Whatever they do or plan to do is also part of our community and our prosperity.*[78]

They recognized that returnees positively impacted the communities of return by bringing investment, education and skills.[79] One man explained at length the ways returnees had benefited his community:

> *I think they have more positive than negative impact. The reason why we have more security now is because we have more people. People who have returned are skilled laborers, like bakers. Our village didn't have a baker; now we have many. Our kids didn't have any vocation; the returning refugees had carpenters amongst them, so now our kids are learning that vocation. [...] By doing daily labor, they are adding to our economy, and they are serving their own nation. Our farmers are now receiving more help and better experience from our returning refugee brothers. [...] Before there was only seasonal agriculture. Now, with the new techniques [learned from the returnees], we harvest all throughout the year and make*

[75] p>.01
[76] CLI 9
[77] CLI 5
[78] CLI 5
[79] CLI 2

> *business selling the produce all through the year. This has greatly increased our development. The market prices have been affected for the better and we have a stable micro economy. We have also built new markets. The returning refugees have brought with them great skills in handicraft and carpet weaving.*[80]

Returnees likewise felt they could contribute to the community, with two thirds of respondents (67%) agreeing that their experience with migration had made them more capable of contributing to their community. *This mutual recognition of the ways in which returnees can benefit host communities presents opportunities to facilitate social cohesion and strengthen community relations.*

Still, a few leaders expressed **concerns about the influx of returnees into their community and potential negative impacts**. The increase in population affected food and housing prices, one man observed.[81] "Our clinics are now burdened, our community is burdened," another man stated. "They bring with them diseases such as hepatitis, dengue, etc."[82]

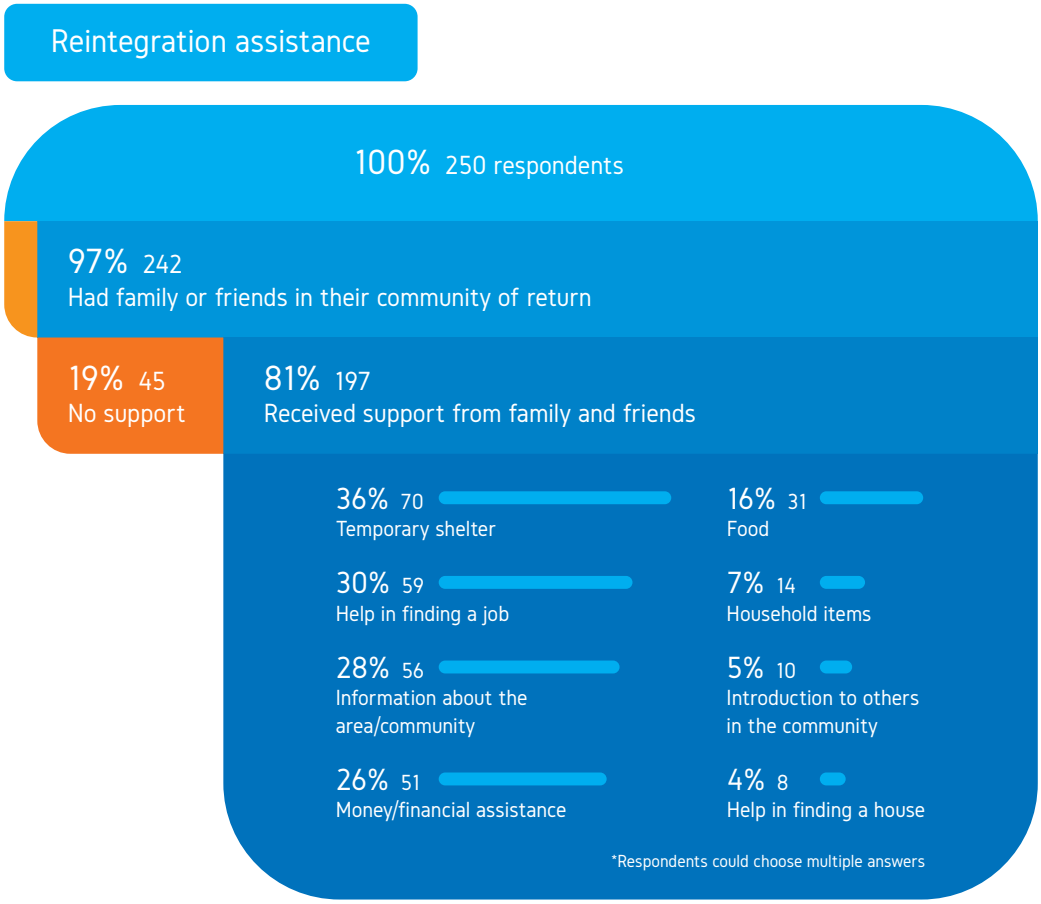
It should be noted that both the positive and negative comments by community leaders were in reference to returnees from Pakistan, rather than Europe. This is likely due to the much larger numbers and visibility of returnees from Pakistan in Nangarhar.

[80] Community Leader, Interview 8
[81] Community Leader, Interview 4
[82] Community Leader, Interview 2

The (Lack of) Supply and Demand for Reintegration Assistance

Most respondents received assistance for reintegration from friends and family. Figure 19 shows the types of reintegration assistance received.

Figure 19:



Returnees who had settled into Behsood district were more likely to report receiving temporary shelter, money, and food assistance from family and friends. Returnees from Pakistan were also more likely to receive support in the form of information about the area/community.

A stark contrast can be observed between the self-reported efforts of community leaders to support returnees *("We will help them with whatever we can because they are a part of our society"; "Any support that we can extend personally, we do it - like temporary housing, food, and medical problems. We try to do it ourselves because we know how difficult it is if you don't have any support"; "We try to coordinate with the government about their plight, help them financially or in emergency situations")* **and the single respondent who reported receiving assistance from community leaders.** This is a possible indicator of alienation, and could additionally indicate a gap between the type of support offered by community leaders and what returnees

consider to be assistance, or that many returnees have no contact with community leaders.

Another explanation could be that community leaders are misrepresenting their support because they want to be seen as good leaders but that the reality is short of their claims. *This in itself is interesting as a possible indicator of a gap between existing leaders and newcomers. This issue would benefit from further study.*

While informal networks (family/friends) appeared to be strong, institutional support was severely lacking as most respondents (75%) did not receive any other reintegration support. Only 18% of respondents reported receiving support from UNHCR, and 6% reported receiving support from IOM. In our sample, community leaders, neighbors, and a sending country supported only one respondent each. Three-quarters of the support from non-family/friends was in the form of cash/financial assistance. **No returnees interviewed received psychosocial support at the moment of return or after return**.

Satisfaction with the reintegration assistance received was low, and tended to decrease over time. Approximately half of respondents (55%) indicated they were 'not sure' if they were satisfied with assistance for reintegration; only 14% of respondents agreed they were provided with enough support to settle into the community of return. Respondents who had returned for more than 1 year were significantly more likely to report they were not satisfied with support received for reintegration (75% of returnees who responded 'no' had returned for more than one year). Although there is a possibility this could be interpreted to mean that recent returnees received more assistance, this is unlikely to be true because most respondents received assistance from their families, and very few received assistance from anyone else. **The greater dissatisfaction with assistance over time is more likely due to rising frustration in not receiving institutional assistance, and linked to the rise in anxiety and anger.** This finding again points to the nonlinear nature of reintegration and the need for continued assistance even after returnees have spent some time back in Afghanistan.

Although reported rates of government assistance were low, expectations for economic assistance from the government were high. In interviews, respondents uniformly stressed the need for returnees to be provided economic assistance and opportunities upon return. Community leaders stated that communities tried their best to assist returnees, but also called on the government and NGOs to provide assistance for immediate needs as well as educational and employment opportunities:

> *The government should support the returning refugees. The people who are registered are assisted to a certain extent by organizations like UNHCR and IOM at Torkham. Those who aren't registered cannot find assistance. The government should ensure they are assisted with cash, houses, food, and provided with land documentation.*[83]

[83] Community Leader, Interview 3

The government should pay close attention to our friends on multiple fronts. First, those who are educated should be provided with a platform to work, because he is the son of this country, and can make it better. They are educated. It becomes their right. If we have an individual who has a bachelor or a master's degree, they should be provided with job opportunities. [... [Secondly, we appeal to the government to pay special attention to families, especially the children of returning refugees, by providing them facilities for education. This appeal goes out to both government and non-government agencies. The non-government agencies may work with us on temporary basis but it is the government's responsibility to oversee these issues.[84]

The Afghan government, especially the Ministry of Refugees and its representatives in provinces, should ensure that these returning refugees are provided with housing facilities so that they may try to live in peace. Secondly, they should be provided with employment because most of the returning refugees, specifically from Pakistan and Iran, have a lot of responsibilities.[85]

Many felt that corruption in the government was a major obstacle preventing returnees from receiving adequate assistance:

We try to assist the refugees because we understand that there are people within the government who take funds out in the name of refugees but never deliver them. They keep everything for themselves.[86]

The Directorate of refugees is now overtaken by a select few individuals. The head of the department is appointed based on nepotism and political connections. He is always under pressure to provide monthly paybacks to those who have appointed him, so those who are truly deserving never get the aid. [...] There are groups of people who we know have received food aid and other things 50 times while other truly deserving people haven't received anything in years.[87]

These expectations are significant. If left unbridged, the gap between these expectations and the reality most returnees face could lead to increasing negative emotions, including resentment against the government. While material (economic) assistance is essential, it is unlikely that the government or international agencies will be able to meet all expectations in the short term, such as providing everyone with jobs. *As such, psychosocial support to help returnees adjust some of their expectations as well as to help identify other coping mechanisms may be crucial.*

[84] Community Leader, Interview 9
[85] Community Leader, Interview 1
[86] Community Leader, Interview 5
[87] Community Leader, Interview 3

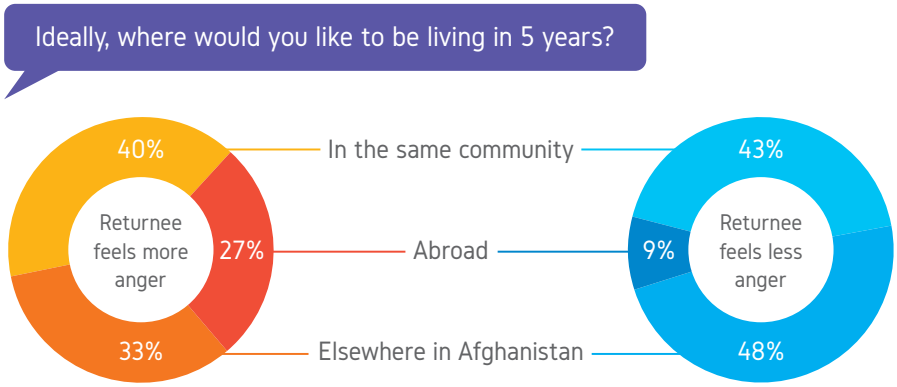
Alternative Paths

As noted by a range of academic and policy actors, reintegration assistance can mitigate drivers related to remigration and violent extremism.

Remigration

Re-migration aspirations appear to be linked to psychosocial indicators. Returnees who reported negative emotional changes after return were more likely to want to move abroad again than returnees who did not report negative emotional changes after return.[88]

Figure 20:



Respondents reporting **feeling more anger** after return were **more likely** to want to live abroad in 5 years; those reporting less anger were less likely to want to live abroad. Similarly, those reporting **feeling more anxiety** were **more likely** to want to live abroad again; those with less anxiety were less likely to want to move abroad again. Emotional changes were *not* associated with the desire to stay in the same location - that is, feeling less anger is not associated with the desire to stay in the same community.

In the same manner, returnees who were **more optimistic** about their future in Afghanistan were **less likely** to indicate that migrating out of Afghanistan was important to them than returnees who were not as optimistic about the future.[89]

These findings, although not conclusive, suggest that psychosocial assistance may help reduce the desire to re-migrate. They also suggest that further research on how emotional changes affect decision-making on migration aspirations would be useful.

[88] Regression analysis, p<.01
[89] Chi-squared, p<.05

Positive relationships with the community may also be linked to lower desires to migrate out of Afghanistan again.

- Respondents who **strongly agreed they had reconnected with family and friends** were less likely to think that remigration was important, compared to those who had more difficulty reconnecting.[90]
- Respondents who **strongly agreed their migration experience made them more capable of contributing to their community** were less likely to think that remigration was important, compared to those who did not think their migration experience made them more capable.[91]

Although inconclusive, these preliminary findings imply that initiatives to build community cohesion may help minimize desires to re-migrate. Further research in this area would be useful.

Less surprisingly, access to employment and health services may also influence perceptions of remigration.

- **Employed** respondents were less likely to think migrating again was important, compared to unemployed respondents.[92]
- Respondents who had **access to medical care** were less likely to think migrating again was important, compared to those who had difficult accessing medical care.[93]

[90] Chi-squared, p<.01
[91] Chi-squared, p<.01
[92] Chi-squared, p<.05
[93] Chi-squared, p<.01

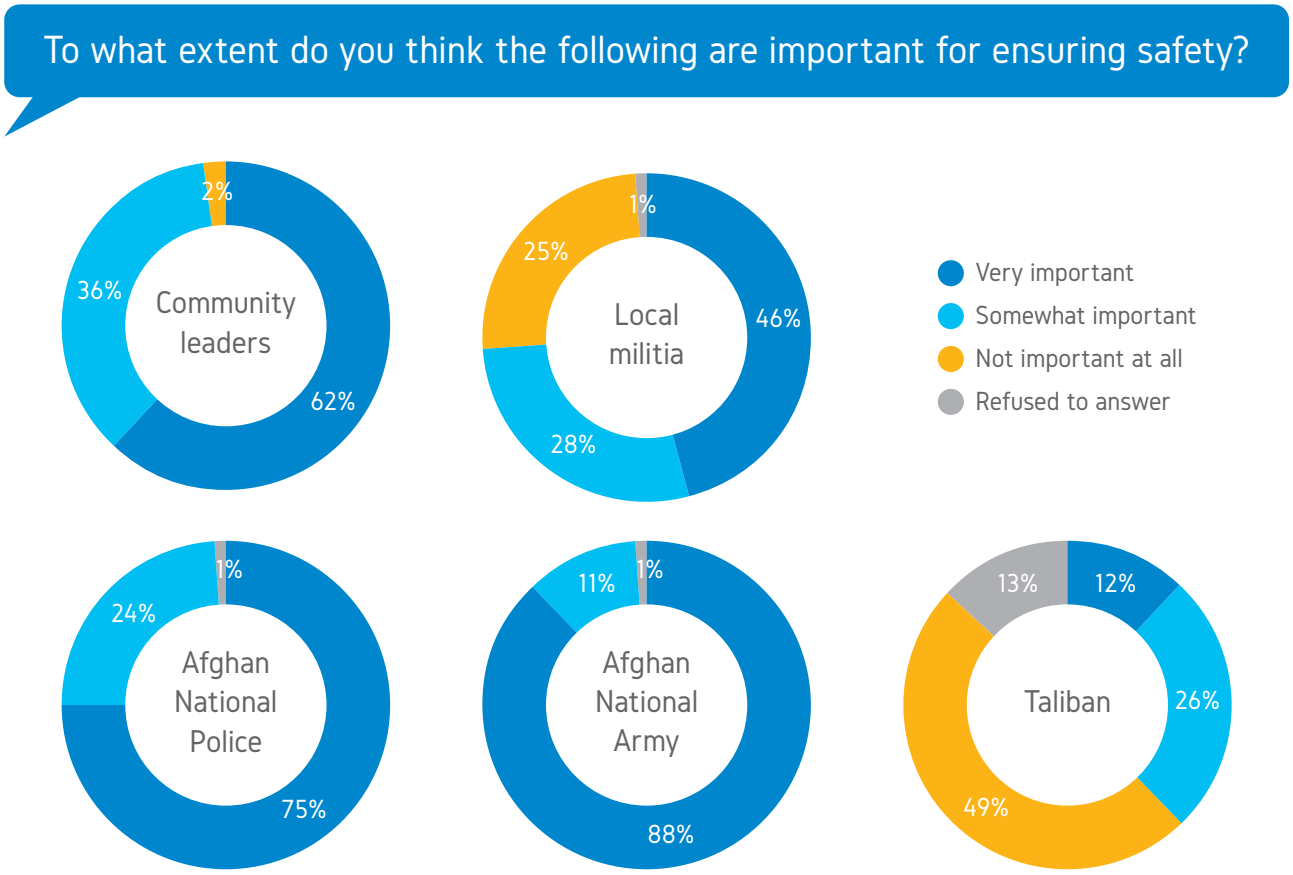
Perceptions of Armed Groups

Although studies are scarce, some anecdotal stories suggest that returnees may be at greater risk of radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist groups.[94] Because there is already a tendency to view returnees as a security risk, this issue is difficult to explore without further stigmatizing returnee groups. However, understanding returnees' opinions of various armed groups, including the Taliban, could have useful lessons for conflict sensitive programming.

Respondents were asked to reflect on groups they thought were important for ensuring safety (see Figure 21, below).[95]

Respondents thought the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police were the most important actors for ensuring safety, with community leaders considered slightly less important. A majority of respondents did not think the Taliban were important for ensuring security. This question should not be considered a proxy for support for the Taliban: viewing the Taliban as an important security actor could imply sympathy or support, but it could also suggest recognition of the Taliban's role as a party to the conflict in Afghanistan. The high non-response rate on the question about the Taliban does indicate a particular sensitivity to the issue. *Though no conclusions can be drawn, this highlights an area for potential research.*

Figure 21:



[94] USIP, Belquis Ahmadi and Sadaf Lakhani, The Afghan Crisis in 2016; UNHCR, Enhanced Voluntary Return and Reintegration for Afghan Refugees, 2016.

[95] Survey question: "Thinking about security, I am going to read a list of groups of people. To what extent do you think they are important for ensuring safety?"

Some returnees were more likely to view the Taliban as an important security actor (relative to other returnees):

- **Returnees from Pakistan**[96]
- **Newer returnees (those who returned < 6 months ago)**[97]
- **Returnees who returned voluntarily**[98]
- **Returnees who choose their community of return**[99]

As many returnees from Pakistan in our sample were also newer returnees who voluntarily returned, these factors indicate that the experience of living and returning from Pakistan may have had some impact on some returnees' perspectives of the Taliban. Another potential theory could be that newer returnees have less knowledge of or experience with the Taliban, thus shaping their perspectives on the importance of the Taliban in ensuring safety.

We also found that emotional change since return was related to perceptions of the Taliban. Returnees who reported feeling more anger after return were less likely to view the Taliban as an important security actor than returnees who did not report more anger. They were also more likely to say it was easy for a new returnee to work for the Taliban.[100] The reasons for these results are not entirely clear, but this finding highlights that psychosocial factors may impact returnee perspectives of armed opposition groups like the Taliban, *suggesting an area for further research*.

When returnees were invited to reflect on why young men with similar experiences as their own might decide to join the Taliban, they identified both **structural and personal drivers, as well as factors across economic, social and psychosocial dimensions**:

> *There are plenty of reasons behind this: being away from family and society, being looked down on by family and society, unemployment, and financial problems. If they find work opportunities and solve their financial problems, they won't join insurgent groups.*[101]

> *Literacy, absence of family and government attention, drug consumption and unemployment are the reasons a youth would join the Taliban. But if a youth*

[96] Regression analysis controlling for voluntary return, age, dependent family members, employment status, and education level, p<.01

[97] Regression analysis controlling for age, dependent family members, employment status, and education level, p<.01

[98] Regression analysis controlling for age, dependent family members, employment status, and education level, p<.01

[99] Regression analysis controlling for age, dependent family members, employment status, and education level, p<.01

[100] Survey question: Thinking about employment, I'd like you to imagine that a young man in your community is looking for a job. He is 20 years old with a high school diploma. He has just returned from living abroad for one year, and he does not have any savings. I'm now going to read a list of potential jobs and employers. How easy or difficult do you think it would be for him to get this job?

[101] Returnee from Europe, Interview 1

joins the Taliban, people don't keep close relations with him; they feel afraid of him.[102]

In particular, respondents emphasized economic drivers:

There are plenty of youths who join the Taliban because of joblessness. This is the government's responsibility to boost employment opportunities for the youth. If these youths find jobs, they will never join Taliban.[103]

Well, if there is no work, [there is] no security. A person shall be forced to join the ranks of the Taliban.[104]

One community leader related an anecdote from his own community:

A few days ago, some men left the village to join the Taliban lamenting that they don't have work or jobs, and that the government doesn't attend to their problems. Even though we are educated, no one gives us a job, they said. So we appeal to the government that it pays attention to these issues so that we can divert people from the Taliban or Daesh.[105]

[102] Returnee from Europe, Interview 2
[103] Returnee from Europe, Interview 2
[104] Returnee from Pakistan, Interview 6
[105] CLI 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

Returnees in this study reported facing many reintegration challenges across multiple dimensions: As outsiders, returnees lacked networks and faced discrimination, making finding employment particularly difficult. Many indicated being treated poorly by community members, or found it difficult to be accepted back into the community. Widespread negative emotional shifts were reported after return, with concerns over safety and security paramount. Still, a majority of respondents continued to feel positive emotions after returning.

A clear difference can be observed between the reintegration experiences of respondents returned from Europe and respondents returned from Pakistan. They faced different psychosocial challenges: returnees from Europe were more likely to feel shame and experience stigma and negative treatment because they migrated, whereas returnees from Pakistan were more likely to feel let down by the circumstances they returned to in Afghanistan.

Some of the top concerns reported by respondents - heightened insecurity and high unemployment - are structural challenges that will not be immediately solved in the conflict/post-conflict context of Afghanistan. As they are returning to a difficult context in which many will be unlikely to find jobs or live in safe, stable communities, psychosocial assistance is even more crucial to help returnees adapt and reintegrate into a situation that may be far below their expectations.

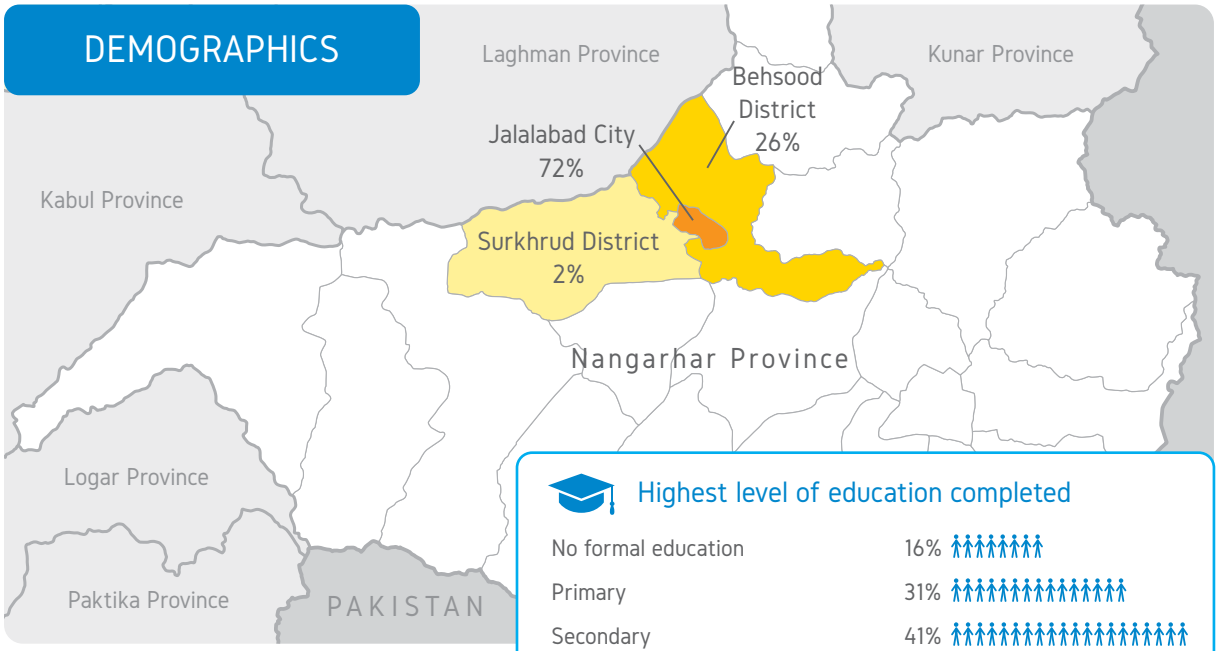
Recommendations:

- **Models of reintegration and interventions should be appropriately benchmarked so that reintegration assistance aims to reintegrate returnees back to the local context.** Assistance providers should consult local communities to determine appropriate targets (i.e. what constitutes "successful reintegration") in reintegration projects. For example, an intervention in Nangarhar should factor in the high proportion of displaced people and internal movement already present. This will help ensure goals are realistic and measurable.
- **Psychosocial assistance should be prioritized**:
    - Psychosocial support to returnees to help them accept, adapt and adjust to the context to which they've returned.
    - Psychosocial interventions to provide hope and inspiration to returnees as well as build confidence in their abilities to change their environment. These can be done through existing community structures such as community development councils, at schools, and through religious and community leaders.
    - Psychosocial interventions targeting family and community members to help them to better understand the challenges faced by returnees, so that they can better support returnees.

- **Interventions to improve community cohesion and facilitate social reintegration should be initiated:**
    - Activities to facilitate knowledge/skills-exchange between returnee and host populations, in order to build confidence and trust
    - Joint community, civic, and agricultural projects to inspire collective ownership
    - Collaboration platforms for exchange of ideas across communities
- **Research on the emotional and psychosocial impacts of return should be carried out, in order to better understand the psychosocial needs of returnees.** Suggestions include longitudinal studies of emotional change, and how psychosocial well-being (generally) and emotional changes (specifically) affect decision-making.
- **Reintegration assistance should be appropriately tailored for returnees returning from different countries.** In particular, psychosocial support should be targeted at specific needs (e.g. stigma for returnees from Europe vs. expectations for returnees from Pakistan).

Annex

DEMOGRAPHICS



15 – 24 years old 62%

25 – 34 years old 38%

Highest level of education completed

No formal education	16%
Primary	31%
Secondary	41%
Technical/ vocational	2%
Tertiary, university undergraduate	5%
Tertiary, university postgraduate	5%

From which country did you return?

Pakistan	39%
Turkey	12%
Austria	8%
Bulgaria	8%
Greece	6%
Belgium	6%
Germany	6%
France	5%
UK	4%
Netherlands	2%
Sweden	2%
Iran	1%
Finland	1%

When did you return to Afghanistan?

Within the last 6 months	24%
Within the last 7-12 months	30%
Within the last 13-24 months	45%

How long did you live outside of Afghanistan?

Less than 6 months	11%
6 months – 1 year	23%
1-2 years	22%
2 -5 years	26%
5-10 years	10%
10-20 years	5%
I was born abroad	2%

The survey was administered in several locations in Nangarhar, chosen for the density of recently returned returnees:

- Jalalabad City (72%, 180 respondents)
- Behsood District (26%, 64 respondents)
- Surkhrud District (2%, 5 respondents)
- Khewa District (0%, 1 respondent)

Two-thirds (68%) of respondents reported being single, and 32% reported being married. More than half of respondents (56%) stated that they financially supported at least one dependent family member; this was correlated with age. Respondents with higher educational backgrounds were also more likely to financially support at least one family member. On the other hand, employment status had no statistical impact on the likelihood of supporting family members, perhaps indicating that the role of being a breadwinner is not necessarily linked with the financial ability to provide.

The respondents in this study reflect the historical waves of migration out of Afghanistan and recent returns. Nearly half of the respondents (47.2%) returned from a **European** country, with the other half comprised mostly of returnees from **Pakistan** (39%) and **Turkey** (12%). Besides the country from which they returned, the vast majority of returnees (99%) had not lived in another country.

Several differences about their time abroad were observed between returnees from Pakistan, Turkey, and European countries:

- The vast majority of returnees from Europe (98%) spent 5 years or less abroad, with one-third (37%) spending less than one year abroad. These respondents likely migrated for labor reasons.
- Returnees from Pakistan were more likely to have lived outside Afghanistan for long periods of time (32% of returnees from Pakistan reported living 5-20 years outside Afghanistan compared to only 3% who returned from a European country and 7% from Turkey). These respondents likely left Afghanistan because of conflict in the country.
- The only respondents who reported being born abroad were born abroad in Pakistan.

Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan:

Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter

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