

Syrian refugees in Jordan: better off than before but still vulnerable

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There are currently about 650,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan making up about 6.5% of the country's 10 million population. The majority of the refugees live in urban areas and towns while fewer than 20% live in camps.

Since 2014, unemployment has been substantially reduced and is now close to the unemployment level in the host population. However, the quality of employment is significantly poorer for Syrian refugees: salaries are lower, work is often temporary, employment contracts are rare, and informality is a key characteristic of most jobs.

There has also been a significant increase in enrolment levels for basic schooling, especially for the youngest children; however, many drop out early and few move on to secondary education. Access to higher education continues to be a major challenge for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

The refugee population in Jordan

Following the outbreak of unrest in Syria on 15 March 2011 and the subsequent civil war, Syrians started fleeing to the neighbouring countries. The largest influx to Jordan occurred in 2012 and particularly 2013, when about one-half of all Syrian refugees arrived. In 2015, Jordan 'closed' its border to Syria, and since then only small numbers of Syrians have arrived. There are currently about 650,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan¹, a figure that has remained stable since May 2017. Hence, the Syrian refugees make up 6.5% of the country's 10 million population. Fewer than 20% of the refugees live in refugee camps whilst the majority, who are often referred to as 'urban refugees', reside in small towns and larger cities, mainly the capital Amman. The two largest refugee camps are situated in desolate areas of desert terrain in the north, some 10 km (Zaatari camp) and 20 km (Azraq camp) from the nearest town.

The Syrian refugee population in Jordan is quite young, as 48% are below 15 years of age. One in five was born in Jordan. Prior to the war, there were close relations between Syria and Jordan characterized by substantial trade, Syrian guest workers in Jordanian agriculture and

intermarriages between the two populations in the border regions. However, only 2% of all Syrian refugees who currently live in Jordan report that they resided there before the war.

The Syrian refugee population in Jordan consists largely of people from the nearby Dara'a province. Although the Dara'a population only made up 5% of the pre-war population in Syria, refugees from Dara'a make up 48% of all Syrian refugees in Jordan². People from Dara'a with its strong rural character are thought to have a more traditional outlook on life compared with Syrians in general. This also includes a high frequency of child marriage, a practice they appear to have brought with them to Jordan: 42% of Syrian refugee women aged 20–24 were already married by the age of 18. It is not clear, however, if this practice can be attributed to the war or if the high prevalence of early marriage is a consequence of selection effects, whereby the more rural and traditionally oriented refugees have chosen to seek refuge in Jordan. Along with traditional practice in a select group of Syrians, poverty and vulnerability are arguably drivers of early marriage³.

¹ As of 5 September 2019, the exact number of refugees registered with UNHCR is 657,445 individuals. Of those, 123,073 reside in camps. This implies that the Syrian refugee population has decreased somewhat in the past 6 months as the comparative figures on 11 March were 670,238 and 124,625 respectively (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>; accessed 30 September 2019).

² When comparisons are made with the situation in Syria before the civil war, we rely on data from the 2006 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the 2009 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES).

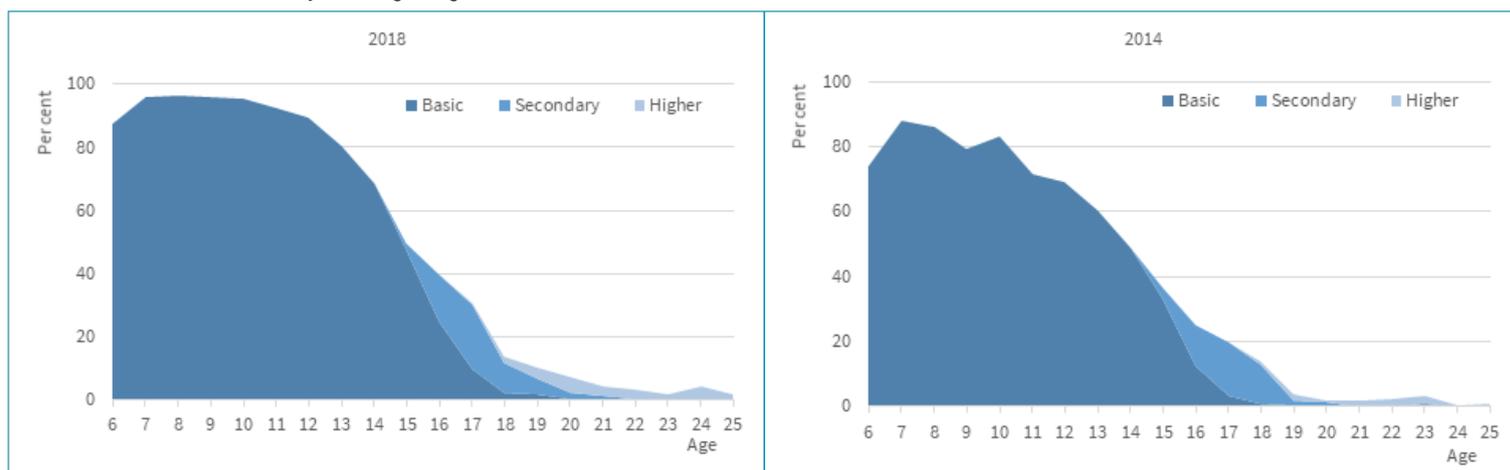
³ J. Pedersen (2019, forthcoming), Early marriage among Syrians in Jordan, Oslo: Fafo-report 2019:16.

A survey of 7,500 Syrian refugees

Most of the statistics used are taken from a nationally representative sample survey of more than 7,500 Syrian households in Jordan. The survey was implemented by Fafo in collaboration with Jordan's Department of Statistics (DoS) between mid-November 2017 and mid-January 2018. The survey was financed by the European Regional Development and Protection Programme for the Middle East (RDPP).

For more information, see: Å. A. Tiltnes, H. Zhang and J. Pedersen (2019), The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Results from the 2017–2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps, Oslo: Fafo-report 2019:04. It can be downloaded at: <https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2019/20701.pdf>.

Enrolment rates of Syrian refugees aged 6–25 in 2018 and 2014.



Health

As can be expected, the prevalence of chronic health failure is higher in the Syrian refugee population than in the host population. 20% of those that crossed the border from Syria into Jordan after 15 March 2011 suffer from a longstanding health problem that can be attributed to the war or flight. Nearly 80% of refugees with a chronic health problem are in need of medical follow-up, something one-fifth of them do not receive. The refugees turn to NGO facilities as well as public and private service providers for both chronic disorders and acute illness. The NGO sector is the largest provider of health services in the camps and in the north of the country. In Amman, private doctors receive a higher share of Syrian refugee patients but public facilities are the most important provider of healthcare services overall, and treat 40% of the acutely infirm.

Education

The educational attainment of Syrian refugees in Jordan is slightly below that of the pre-war Syrian population. Above all, they are less likely to have higher education, attained by only one-half as many as the pre-war Syrian average and one-fourth as many as the host population. Enrolment rates for refugee children aged 6–11 are nearly

100%, but children start dropping out of school from age 12 and by age 15–16, only four in 10 remain in school. Still, the situation has significantly improved since 2014, when only 22% of 15-year-olds attended basic schooling⁴. Enrolment in secondary and higher education is also slightly up since 2014. Nevertheless, only 2–5% of Syrian refugees aged 18–22 attend post-secondary education compared to 24–46% of Jordanians in the same age group. Whilst basic schooling for Syrians is mainly run by the public sector (95%), Syrian refugees can only access private universities, and scholarship programmes are rare. Affordability is thus a major obstacle to higher education for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

With the arrival of Syrian refugees, Jordan re-introduced two-shift schools where the girls typically attend the morning shift and boys the afternoon shift. Inside the camps, all children attend such a system, while seven in 10 children outside the camps attend two-shift schools. One of the consequences of two-shift schools is shorter school days. This may be one of the reasons why one in 10 Syrian refugee children currently enrolled in basic education has repeated at least one school year. Before the Syrian refugee crisis, Jordan had terminated the two-shift educational system, but its re-introduction has also had a negative impact on the quality of education for Jordanian children.

⁴ When comparisons are made with the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2014, we draw on S.E. Stave and S. Hillesund (2015), Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market: Findings from the governorates of Amman, Irbid and Mafrq, ILO and Fafo. The 2014 data only cover refugees living outside of camps. Since the camp population makes up only 20% of the total Syrian refugee population in Jordan, and do not differ significantly from the non-camp population on the indicators used for comparisons, such comparisons are illustrative.

Employment

The male labour force participation rate for Syrian refugees stands at 59%, which is up from 52% in 2014 and thus similar to the level for Jordanian men. The rate for women has seen a positive but minor change from 2014 and stands at 7%, which is less than half the Jordanian rate.

Male unemployment has dropped radically from 57% in 2014 to 23% and is now not very different from the national unemployment rate. While unemployment is two times higher for Syrian refugee women, it has been reduced by 50% since 2014. It should be noted that some of the jobs held by Syrian refugees are ‘artificial’ in the sense that they are not created by the market but by donor money and relief through so-called cash-for-work programmes run by NGOs. Such jobs are more accessible inside the camps than outside. In comparison to only 12%

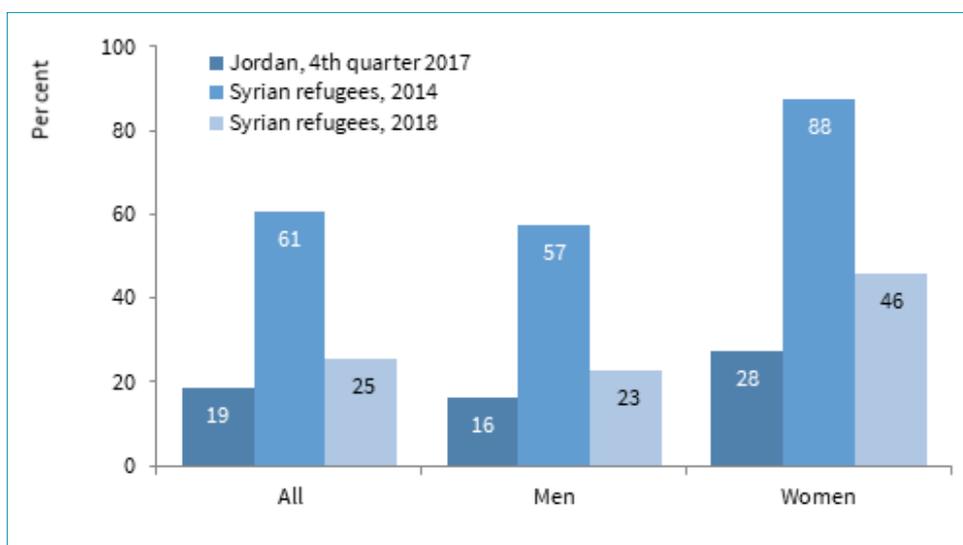
Labour force indicators in line with ILO standards

The unemployed: the population aged 15 and above who did not work even one hour the preceding week, and who actively sought work and were able and willing to accept employment if offered a job.

The employed: the population aged 15 and above who worked as a minimum one hour the seven days preceding the survey.

The labour force includes both the employed and the unemployed.

Unemployment among Syrian refugees in 2014 and 2018, and the host population in 2017.



outside camps, as many as 44% of all Syrian camp refugees who were employed during the past year, had worked on a cash-for-work scheme. Furthermore, a higher proportion of women (34%) than men (19%) had held cash-for-work employment during the past 12 months.

Whereas the employment level of Syrian refugees in Jordan is no longer markedly different from that of the host population, the quality of jobs is lower. When they first arrived in Jordan, Syrian refugees were not given access to formal jobs in all sectors. Gradually, however, the Jordanian government has issued work permits to Syrians in a few sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and construction, where respectively 8%, 20% and 23% of them are employed. Other large sectors are wholesale, retail trade and vehicle repair (19%) and accommodation and food services (9%). All professional jobs are closed to Syrians, and they cannot operate as taxi drivers. Although one-third of all those employed hold a work permit, very few have work contracts and informality is a key characteristic of most jobs. Work is often irregular, and only one-third worked continuously and one-third worked less than 6 months in the past year. Pay is low, and the average monthly salary for individuals working full time — defi-

ned as working at least 35 hours a week — is 250 dinars or USD 352. Non-pay benefits are rare, and a mere 1% have a pension scheme and 5% are entitled to paid sick leave. Furthermore, many refugees report having been cheated by their employers; 16% have experienced non-payment for a job.

A major complaint from Syrian refugees is that they are denied the right to own and drive a car. This limits their ability to establish and run their own businesses and this — in a country with an extremely poor public transportation system — makes commuting to work (and school) burdensome, at best, or impossible for many.

Household economy

Since 97% of the refugees are registered with UNHCR, a majority are entitled to cash assistance from the UN. Other donors and NGOs provide support to pay rent and monthly utility bills, hand out school kits and provide stipends allowing some young Syrians access to higher education. Years after their arrival in Jordan, a majority of Syrian refugees are still dependent on poverty relief: nearly six

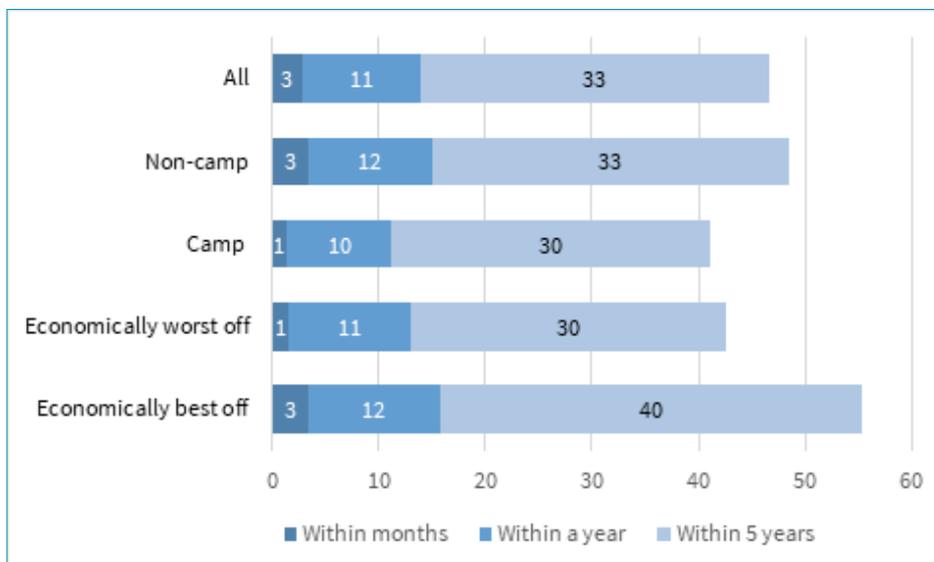
in 10 households have transfer income as either their only (33%) or main (26%) source of income⁵. Whereas 64% of all Syrian refugee households reported at least some employment income in the past 12 months, only one in 4 households rely primarily on employment income.

Ownership of durable goods (e.g. a TV, a computer and a smartphone) is an indicator of economic standing less vulnerable to underreporting and seasonal fluctuation than monetary income. There has been a positive development with regard to the possession of durable goods in the Syrian refugee population since 2014. Although access to durables is generally lower in the camps, many durables are found in most households. For example, the majority of the refugee households have access to TVs (95%), satellite dishes and receivers (89%), refrigerators (also 89%) and washing machines (82%). However, very few own computers (2%) and have Internet connection at home (4%). Expenditure is lower in the refugee camps due to free health services and housing, and therefore the camps have become the preferred place of living for many of the poorest households – despite their remote location and scarce employment opportunities. Two-thirds of all Syrian refugee households have debt. The mean debt is 450 dinars, which is equivalent to two months' average expenditure for a refugee camp household. Only 2% of all households have savings. Food insecurity amongst Syrian refugees is 50% higher than the regional and Jordanian average and 45% of all households worry about not having enough food to put on the table.

Prospects for return

The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan have seen significant improvements since 2014. However, poverty and vulnerability are still abundant and the population is facing significant living condition challenges. Most refugees dream of a return to their homeland, and as the situation in Syria is now calmer and more stable than before, a few thousand have already returned and others are contemplating it. Altogether 14% of the refugees think that Syrians such as themselves will be able to return within a year, and another 33% believe return will be possible within 5 years. However, more than one-half of the Syrians hold the opinion that return will only be possible within a decade (29%) or never (24%). This means that a significant proportion of the Syrian refugees envisage a life in Jordan for a long time to come. In light of the limited livelihood opportunities in the refugee camps, it is interesting to note that the non-camp population is somewhat more likely to consider a return than the camp population. Similarly, a slightly higher percentage of the relatively better-off households (those in possession of a high number of household assets) are more likely to consider return than poorer households. A possible interpretation of this pattern is that intentions to return are shaped more by pull factors in terms of perceived opportunities in Syria rather than push factors in terms of experienced hardship in Jordan.

Realistically, when do you think that displaced Syrians will be able to return to Syria? By place of residence and economic standing.*



* Economic standing is here measured with an asset index based on ownership of durable goods and certain aspects pertaining to the dwelling (e.g. space per person, separate kitchen, private toilet, safe drinking water and electricity), and constructed applying principal component analysis (PCA). The 'worst off' households are the bottom 20% on this index, while the ones classified as 'best off' are the top 20%.

⁵ While some refugees receive support from relatives and friends, transfer income mainly refers to cash and in-kind support from the UN and other relief organizations.

The project (MARE)

MARE (Research on European Management of Migration and Refugees) is a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project aim is to produce better knowledge on how European policies for refugee protection and migration management shape the rights and opportunities of migrants and refugees, on the one hand, and how this is linked to political stability in host countries, on the other.

The researchers

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Fafo

Fafo is an independent social science research foundation (established in 1982) based in Oslo, Norway. Fafo consists of three subsidiary companies: The Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Technology Consulting (Beijing) Co. Ltd, and Economics Norway. Fafo produces policy relevant research on social welfare and trade policy, labour and living conditions, migration and integration.