

ERF Policy Brief

Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Progress on Education and Employment, Deteriorating Health

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In a nutshell

- Syrian refugee children in Jordan experienced improvements in school enrollment rates from 2016 to 2025, supported by policies allowing them to enroll in the public school system without fees for basic and secondary education.
- Employment rates for Syrians increased from 19 percent in 2016 to 28 percent in 2025. Over the same time period, unemployment rates increased from 23 percent to 39 percent of the labor force.
- The increased scope of work permits may have supported Syrian refugees' economic integration. However, more than half of the employed still lack work permits due to a variety of barriers, both on the employer side and in terms of costs and benefits of permits.
- Syrian refugees have worse health than Jordanians and deteriorating health over time. They are increasingly reliant on charitable care for health services in 2025 compared to 2016, likely due to changes in the prices they face for care in public facilities.

This policy brief is part of the ERF research project on the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey 2025 (JLMPS 2025).

We acknowledge the financial support of the European Union; the International Labour Organization (ILO) through the EU-Madad funded project 'Towards an inclusive national social protection system and accelerating decent job opportunities for Syrians and vulnerable Jordanians'; the World Bank; UNICEF; UN Women; and the International Growth Centre (IGC) for the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey 2025, on which this paper is based. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank, its Board of Executive Directors, or the governments they represent.

1. Syrian refugees' protracted displacement in Jordan

How are the Syrian refugees in Jordan faring after more than a decade of displacement? Syrian refugees began arriving in Jordan in 2011, with the onset of the Syrian conflict. More than a decade later, in 2024, Syrian refugees had renewed hope for the end of their displacement and return to Syria with the fall of Bashar Al-Assad. Yet hundreds of thousands of Syrians remained in Jordan in 2025 (UNHCR 2025a), continuing to face the challenges of displacement – but also important improvements due to Jordan's policy choices that support Syrian refugees' education and employment.

This policy brief explores the education, employment, and health outcomes of Syrian refugees¹ in Jordan over 2016-2025, drawing on the new Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey (JLMPS) data (Krafft and Assaad 2021; Krafft, Assaad, and Ragab 2026; OAMDI 2018, 2026).²The focus on education, employment, and health is particularly important in a context of protracted displacement, as part of a shift from humanitarian response to investing in long-term human and economic development.

While Syrian refugees experienced educational disruptions during conflict and initial displacement, educational progression had recovered to pre-conflict levels by 2016 (Krafft, Sieverding, et al. 2022). Enrollments had risen further by 2025, although enrollments were still below those of Jordanians. A supportive policy environment, including integration into the public school system, with no fees charged for basic and secondary education (Krafft, Malaeb, et al. 2022), has been key to this educational progress.

Syrian refugees have experienced rising labor force participation, driven by increases in their employment rates from 2016 to 2025, but also rising unemployment rates. Their work remains largely informal and in vulnerable types of employment. Syrian refugees can work legally in Jordan, in a limited – but expanded – set of occupations (Stave et al. 2021). Yet still less than half of Syrian refugees who are employed have work permits, due to a variety of barriers in the policy, in

¹ We focus on those Syrians in Jordan who are refugees through either UNHCR registration or meeting the definition of a refugee due to fleeing violence; this is 93 percent of Syrians in the country in 2016 and 97 percent in 2025 (Krafft and Tamim 2026; Krafft et al. 2019).

² This brief draws on the analysis in Krafft and Tamim (2026).

employer willingness to obtain permits, and due to the considerations of permits' costs and benefits.

Health and health care access have worsened from 2016 to 2025 for Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees have poorer health and less health care access than Jordanians. Refugees have become increasingly reliant on charitable care, likely due to changes in the cost of public facilities for refugees (Tamimi et al. 2024). The future of Syrian refugees in Jordan is uncertain and likely depends on the evolution of conditions in Syria. Ensuring the continued educational success, further improving labor market integration, and addressing the deteriorating health of this vulnerable population are key priorities for whatever future awaits Syrian refugees.

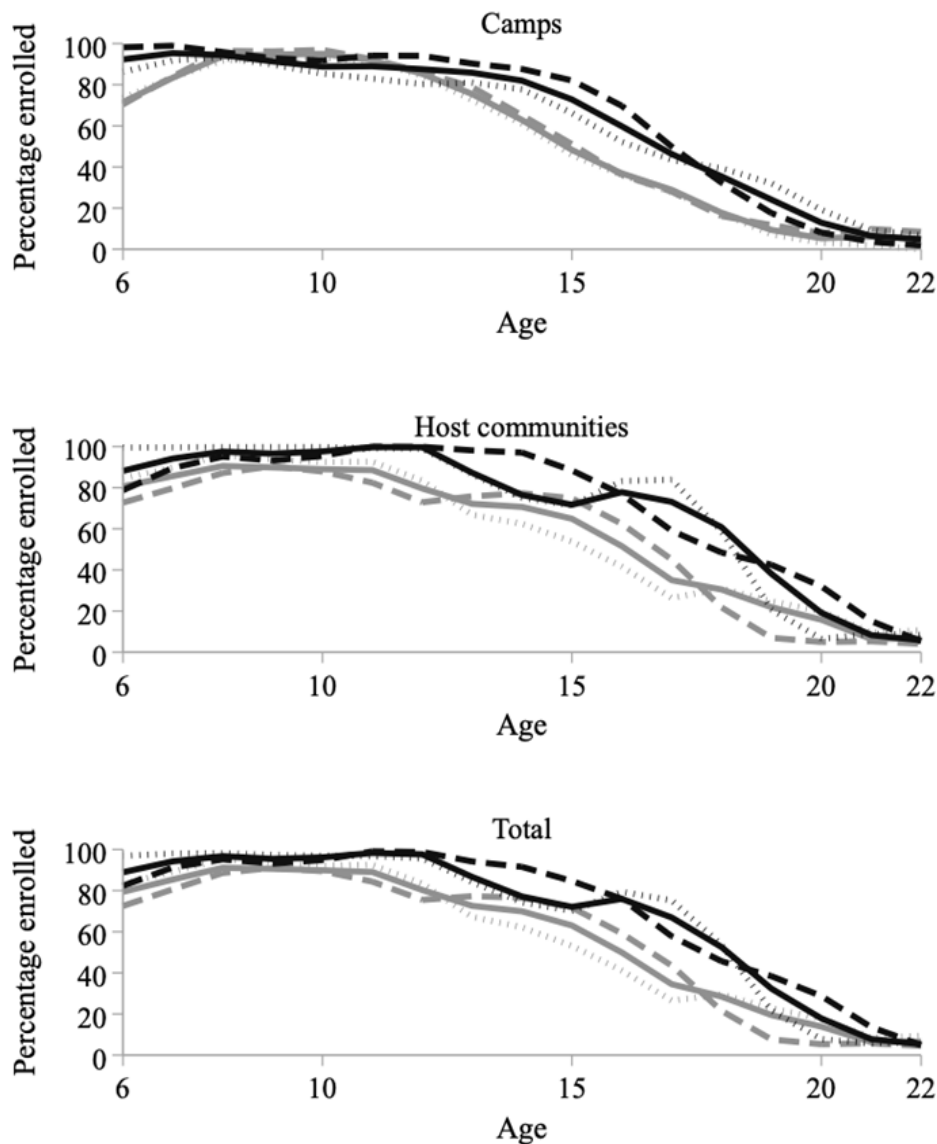
2. School enrollment progress

Jordan has been a regional success story in supporting the education of Syrian refugees. Syrian refugee children had, by 2016, achieved educational enrollments similar to the levels they had when they were in Syria pre-conflict (Krafft, Sieverding, et al. 2022). A critical component of Syrian refugees' access to school in Jordan, in comparison to other contexts such as Lebanon, has been their integration into the public school system, with no fees charged for basic or secondary education (Krafft, Malaeb, et al. 2022). The government used second-shift schools and new school building when needed to address the additional capacity demands created by the arrival of refugees (Salemi et al. 2018). Although some refugees faced initial barriers to enrollment, supportive families and a supportive Ministry of Education facilitated enrollment in Jordan (Krafft, Sieverding, et al. 2022). Drop out – due to struggles in school or the pull of family obligations – has been a struggle for Syrian refugees, but one concerted policy efforts have helped address (UNICEF and Ministry of Education (Jordan) 2020; UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2021).

Figure 1 shows the promising progress taking place in school enrollments, comparing enrollments by age, sex, and in camps versus host communities, over 2016 versus 2025. There is some delayed entry in 2025, but enrollments at ages 8-12 are nearly universal. Although enrollments in 2025 begin to decline in the teen years, the drop is smaller and delayed relative to 2016, when enrollments fell after age 10. Comparing 2016 and 2025, there is a particularly large difference in enrollments for teenagers (aged 13-19), and enrollments are higher (but remain low) through age 22.



Figure 1. Educational enrollment of Syrian refugees (percentage) by sex, age group, and location, ages 6-22, 2016 and 2025



Source: Authors' calculations based on JLMPS 2016 and 2025

Notes: Percentage of age group enrolled, regardless of grade. Lowess (locally weighted regression) mean smoother, with a bandwidth of 0.33 years of age.

Although some of these enrollments may be delayed and outside the correct grade for age, net enrollment rates – capturing those enrolled in the correct grade for their age – have risen over time. Net enrollment rates for Syrian refugees in Jordan rose from 83 percent in 2016 to 90 percent in 2025 for basic education (ages 6-15), from 21 percent in 2016 to 58 percent in 2025 for secondary school (ages 16-17) and from 3 percent in 2016 to 14 percent in 2025 for higher education (ages 18-22).

Enrollments tend to be higher in host communities than camps, particularly in the teenage years. Girls' enrollments are comparable to boys, and higher in the

early teens, when boys start to drop out, potentially to participate in the labor market (Presler-Marshall et al. 2025). Although Syrian refugees' enrollment rates have made substantial progress over time, these school enrollment rates remain below those of Jordanians (Krafft, Assaad, and Abushehab 2026).

3. Expanding employment – and unemployment

Although initially Syrian refugees in Jordan were not legally allowed to work, starting in 2016 with the Jordan Compact, they were allowed to legally work in



a limited set of sectors if they obtained a work permit (International Rescue Committee 2017; Lenner and Turner 2018). While the set of occupations remains limited, it had expanded by 2025, along with other improvements such as increased flexibility in work permits (not necessarily tied to a single employer) and inclusion in social insurance (Stave et al. 2021). However, in 2025, the costs of permits were high and required social insurance contributions (UNHCR 2025b). Thus, the changes in the policy landscape for employment have been a mix of new supports and challenges for work permits.

As a result of these mixed changes in work permits, there has been relatively little expansion in the percentage of Syrian workers with a work permit. The percentage with a work permit has risen slightly from 2016 to 2025, from 43 percent to 47 percent (Krafft and Tamim 2026). Those who had work permits did so primarily because they were required by the law (86 percent) or their employer (36 percent), not primarily to protect their rights and safety (13 percent).

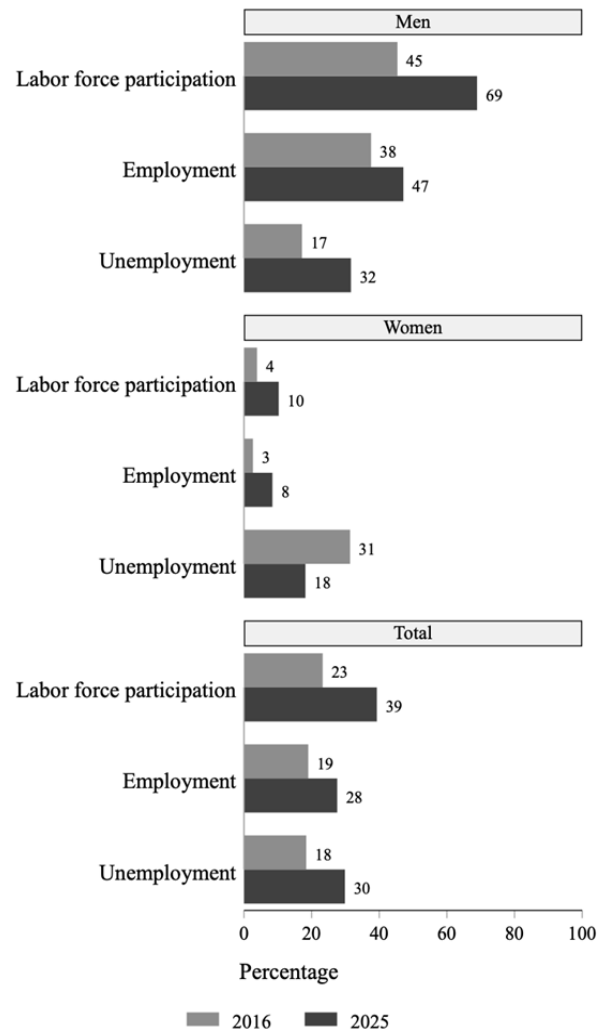
Those who did not have work permits commonly faced employer barriers (not allowing, 36 percent, not registered, 16 percent), or thinking they were not needed (24 percent) or eligible (8 percent). The costs of permits (6 percent) and no benefits (5 percent) along with concerns about losing social assistance (4 percent) were also factors.

Syrian refugees in Jordan have increasingly participated in the labor force. Figure 2 explores labor force participation, employment, and unemployment rates over 2016 and 2025 and by sex for Syrian refugees aged 15-64. Labor force participation has risen over time, driven by increases in both employment and unemployment rates. While in 2016 the labor force participation rate was 23 percent for Syrian refugees, this rose to 39 percent in 2025. Women's participation increased over time but remained low, rising from 4 to 10 percent, while men's rose substantially from 45 percent to 69 percent.

Employment rates rose by less than labor force participation, but did rise from 19 percent in 2016 to 28 percent in 2025. They rose from 3 to 8 percent for women and 38 to 47 percent for men. Syrian refugees who are employed continue to be primarily informal private sector wage workers, with a quarter working irregularly (casually or seasonally).

Unemployment rates among Syrian refugees are very high and rose substantially over 2016 to 2025; from 18 to 30 percent of the labor force. Men's unemployment rate

Figure 2. Labor force participation (percentage of the population), employment (percentage of the population), and unemployment (percentage of the labor force) rates by sex, Syrian refugees aged 15-64, 2016 and 2025



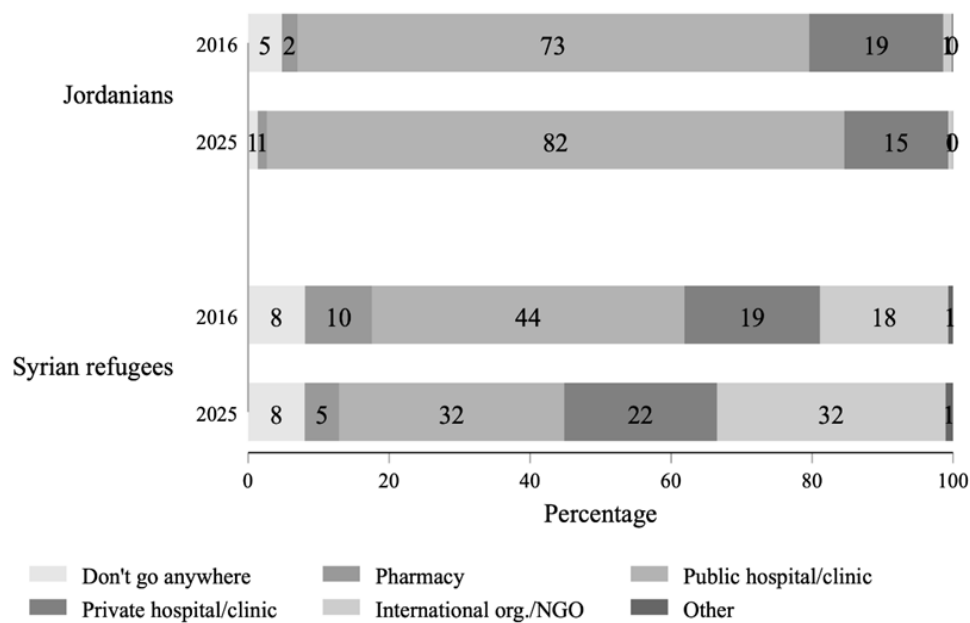
Source: Authors' calculations based on JLMPS 2016 and 2025.

increased from 17 percent to 32 percent. Women's rates of unemployment were already high, 31 percent in 2016, falling to 18 percent in 2025. Overall, the picture that emerges over time is that increasing shares of Syrians, especially Syrian men, want to work, and while more have found employment, men have also experienced increasing unemployment.

Syrian refugees have worse health than Jordanians, which may be a result of conflict as well as experiences during displacement. While initially Syrian refugees could access health care for free, in 2015 they faced the same prices as Jordanians and in 2018 were charged higher prices as foreigners (Tamimi et al. 2024). While



Figure 3. Health care source (percentage), Jordanians and Syrian refugees aged 6+, 2016 and 2025



Source: Authors' calculations based on JLMPS 2016 and 2025.

there is an exception for maternity and childhood services (Tamimi et al. 2024), this shift has likely contributed to deteriorating health for Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees' health is worse than that of Jordanians in 2025 and has also declined over time, to a greater extent than for Jordanians. Syrian refugees rarely have health insurance, with only small improvement over time in rates of health insurance (from 25 percent to 28 percent).

These policy shifts have affected where Syrians go for care (Figure 3). For Syrians, there has been a steady share not going anywhere for care, 8 percent in 2016 and 2025 (compared to just 1 percent for Jordanians in 2025). Use of pharmacies (from 10 percent to 5 percent) and public hospitals/clinics (from 44 to 32 percent) as care sources declined for Syrian refugees, while the public system became more common for Jordanians. Use of private hospitals/clinics remained stable for Syrians (19-22 percent), and use of international organization/NGO care increased substantially for Syrians (from 18 percent to 32 percent), likely as a result of increasing fees in public settings over time (Tamimi et al. 2024).

4. Build on educational and employment progress, reverse deteriorating health

The Jordanian government's approach can provide an important model for other countries' refugee education policy. Jordan ensured that Syrian refugees can access

education in displacement, first recovering to pre-conflict enrollment levels (Krafft, Sieverding, et al. 2022), and then subsequently expanding enrollments. Fee-free basic and secondary education as well as supportive government and INGO efforts to get and keep students in school have been essential (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti 2021; Krafft, Malaeb, et al. 2022). Importantly, mechanisms such as using second shift schools allowed for rapid expansion while ensuring there were not negative impacts on Jordanian students (Assaad et al. 2023).

Although Jordan has done much to support Syrian refugees' education, Syrian refugees continue to struggle in school compared to Jordanians – as well as to have gaps between their educational aspirations and attainment (Presler-Marshall et al. 2025). Boys, in particular, face challenges due to gender norms emphasizing the need to work and financially support their families, as well as education quality issues, which are particularly acute in boys' schools (Presler-Marshall et al. 2025). Restrictive gender norms can also limit girls' education, particularly when they lead to early marriage – but early marriage has been declining over time for Syrian refugees in Jordan (Krafft and Tamim 2026). Since education quality is an issue in Jordan more generally (Hailat 2019; Presler-Marshall et al. 2025; International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) 2022), efforts to improve school quality may be particularly beneficial for refugees, but also politically feasible as they will benefit Jordanians as well. One education approach



that has been well-tested globally for improving learning is “Teaching at the Right Level” (Banerjee et al. 2016; J-PAL 2020).

Syrian refugees in Jordan can legally work, but within the constraints of the work permit system. Slightly more than half of employed refugees continue to work without permits, underscoring the limitations of the current system. The costs and benefits of permits are key – and addressable – drivers for limited permit take-up. Fee waivers for permits should be restored. Importantly, while fee waivers may deprive the Jordanian government of revenue, encouraging decent work for refugees can also have economic benefits for the Jordanian economy. Syrian refugees do not have negative impacts on Jordanians’ labor market outcomes, more so displacing other migrant workers (Fallah et al. 2019; Malaeb and Wahba 2024). Their economic activity and spending also likely benefits the Jordanian economy (as in other contexts, e.g., Alix-Garcia et al. 2018).

The deterioration in Syrians’ health over time is a concerning trend and key area for policy action. Only a quarter of Syrians have health insurance and Syrians have become increasingly reliant on charitable care as their access to public systems has become more expensive (Tamimi et al. 2024). Restoring Syrians’ access to health care at the same costs as uninsured Jordanians, a previous policy (Salemi et al. 2018), could help reverse this trend. This action would, however, require either substantial international donor funding to the government, or government spending. Yet the costs of inaction – in terms of lost years of life and human capital – are also substantial. Investments in health now can pay off across generations of Syrian refugees.

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