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The Impact of Afghan Refugees on Crime Rates in Pakistan: An Empirical Analysis of Perceptions, Statistics, and Deportation Effects (2023–2026)

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ABSTRACT

During one of the most significant forced deportation campaigns in recent times, 2023-2026, this research paper highlights the intricate dynamics between the presence of Afghan refugees and the incidence of crime in Pakistan. Afghan citizens started to return to Afghanistan in large numbers in November 2023 as part of Pakistan's 'Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan', and by 2026, over 146,000 had been deported alone (Refugees International, 2026), with more than two million returned since then. Based on official statistics, reports from UN agencies, academic literature, human rights documentation and media discourse analysis, this paper explores three key research questions: (1) what is the empirical relationship between Afghan refugee presence and crime rates in Pakistan? (2) What are the perceptions of public crime associated with refugees and what are the statistics? (3) How will mass deportation policies affect crime rates? Interestingly, the findings show a huge perception-reality gap, as although in Pakistani media and public debate, Afghan refugees are considered as a source of rising crime, in official statistics, Afghan nationals accounted for only 1-3 percent of registered criminal cases in major provinces (Haq & Muhammad, 2026). Effective security measures have not resulted from deportation policies, but from documented human rights abuses, family separation, and a potential rise in undocumented status, which can actually harm crime control goals. Finally, the paper offers policy advice on evidence-based, rights-respecting policy options that address humanitarian and security needs.



1. INTRODUCTION

One of the largest and longest refugee populations in the world is in Pakistan. Afghan displacement has been transiting to Pakistan several times since the Soviet invasion in 1979, including the latest one since the return of the Taliban in August 2021. As of 2023, there were an estimated 3.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, of which about 1.3 million were registered on Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, and 800,000 on Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) and an estimated 1.6 million were not registered or documented (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a). This population is not only a humanitarian figure but a multifaceted socio-economic-political phenomenon which has had a tremendous impact on the current Pakistan.

It is not a new phenomenon that the connection between refugees and crime has been a field of debate in criminology. In various settings, including Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Somali refugees in Kenya, and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, host communities often voice worries that refugee flows are linked to an uptick in crime rates. These concerns, however, are typically based on anecdotal evidence, media amplification and already prevailing xenophobic attitudes and not on careful empirical analysis. This is especially true in Pakistan. Researching Afghan media discourse, a doctoral thesis has revealed that Afghan nationals are stereotyped as being responsible for “higher crime rates in the areas they inhabit, terrorism, worsening public order, congestion in the labour market, introduction of drugs, overpopulation and promotion of the ‘Kalashnikov culture’” (Hassan, 2021, p. 45). Refugees are often referred to by local communities as “Namak Haram” (traitors) and as “selfish, opportunistic and disloyal” (Hassan, 2021, p. 78).

The reaction of Pakistan to this perceived threat is quite dramatic in the coming four-year period (2023-2026). The government started the “Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan” (IFRP) on November 1, 2023, with the initial focus on Afghan nationals without documentation. In 2025, the campaign was extended to ACC holders and, as PoR cards expired in June 2025, nearly 2 million registered refugees were in threat of deportation (Amnesty International, 2025). The IFRP has been denounced as “state-led refoulement on an industrial scale” (Refugees International, 2026, para. (4) Breaches the principle of non-refoulement in the 1951 Refugee Convention and customary international law (Amnesty International, 2025).

This is a paper that covers an important gap in the current literature. Although there are significant studies on the economic burden of Afghan refugees, on health outcomes and challenges for integration in Pakistan, there are limited systematic studies which have examined the crime-refugee nexus with empirical rigour. Even fewer have looked into the implications of mass deportation policies for crime rates, a topic of pressing policy interest in the context of more than 146,000 deportations of Afghans in 2026 alone (Refugees International, 2026). The deportation campaign is based on the assumption that deporting the Afghan population would make the public safer, but there's no evidence of that.

The paper follows these steps: The second section looks at theoretical approaches and empirical studies of refugees and crime. The mixed methods research design is detailed in Section 3. The empirical results on crime statistics, perceptions and deportation effects are presented in section 4. The gap between perception and reality and the policy implications are discussed in Section 5. This section ends with recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks: Refugee Criminology

Theories on the link between forced migration and crime need to account for different types of migration. There are three theory strands that are of particular relevance.

Robert Merton and later, Agnew, theorised that criminal behaviour is a consequence of discrepancies between cultural expectations and available methods to attain them. These effects are exacerbated for refugees by legal obstacles to work, limited mobility, the lack of legal status, and discrimination. Strain theory is explicitly referenced in a study of juvenile delinquency amongst Afghan refugee communities in Pakistan, which links vulnerability to “low-level, survival-oriented offenses” such as petty theft, substance

use and gang activities to "structural poverty, the restriction of access to education, family instability, displacement trauma, and social stigmatization" (Haq & Muhammad, 2026, p. 45). The structural exclusion theory is used to explain the production of crime when it happens, and not the fact that someone is a "criminal" at heart.

The Chicago School of criminology, stemming from Social Disorganisation Theory, holds that the crime rate is determined by the neighbourhood characteristics independent of individual characteristics; poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity are important neighbourhood characteristics. These are the same conditions that can be seen in refugee settlements in Pakistan, especially informal urban settlements and peri-urban camps. The theory suggests that levels of crime in these areas could be high irrespective of the background of the dwellers. Most critically, this means that programs that would enhance housing stability, community institutions, and economic opportunities would have a more powerful effect on reducing crime than mass deportation.

A third lens is that provided by Labelling Theory. If host societies systematically mark refugees as criminals, it has two consequences. Refugees can end up believing these labels and may live by them, subjecting themselves to the self-fulfilling prophecies. Second, labelling is a justification for discrimination, such as in policing practices towards refugee communities. The research on Pakistani media discourse validates that the media is extremely negative towards the cultural markers of Afghans, like the burqa, which is termed as "small private tent" and "invisibility cloth" and financial support to suicide bombers and also terrorists' garments (Hassan, 2021, p. 92). This dehumanising depiction enables policies which are unthinkable to citizen populations.

2.2 Empirical Evidence: Refugees and Crime

There are increasingly nuanced and complex pieces of research from around the world on the relationship between refugees and the commission of crime. There is growing evidence of international research that examines the refugee-crime relationship. However, in terms of overall crime rates, a meta-analysis of European studies after the migration wave of 2015–2016 revealed that on average, refugee populations display lower rates than nationals of the host countries, after accounting for socio-economic factors (but this depends on the type of crime and the integration environment). In the literature, there is a consensus that the crime rate among refugees is not cultural, but rather is attributed to their socio-economic marginalisation.

There are some limited but instructive studies on the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The study titled "Assaultive crimes among Afghan refugees" in Malakand Division, carried out by Khan et al. (2021), found that Afghans have a "stiff, hard and aggressive nature" that makes them "unable to live in peace with the host society" (p. 274). But this study's methodology, which was based on the population of jails in two districts, suffers from selection bias because it examines only those who have been incarcerated instead of comparative data of Pakistani citizens. The end, which puts the blame on "nature" squarely, instead of structural factors, is the very "essentialism" that the labelling theory rejects.

A more stringent analysis of juvenile delinquency has been produced by the analysis of secondary sources undertaken in 2026, which draws data from 2015 to 2025. The study reveals that, based on official statistics, Afghan nationals (adults and juveniles put together) only make up about 1–3 percent of registered cases in provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, despite media and public perceptions of their involvement in rising crime rates among the local population. This figure implies that the number of registered refugees is not proportionate to the number of refugees in the population, as Afghan refugees make up a significant share of the population in these provinces.

A thorough study of the Afghanistan refugee crisis and its impacts on the Pakistani economy and security has been conducted using a mixed methods approach, which synthesises secondary data, a basic fiscal incidence/input-output model of the economy and qualitative analysis of insecurity (Mohani et al., 2025, p. 57). The study finds that "the effects of security are complex: the movement of refugees interacts with the borders that are permeable, the criminal and militant movements, becoming more complicated for

Pakistani security agencies" (Mohani et al., 2025, p. 62). This is an important distinction: A refugee-crime nexus is not necessarily a causal chain, but rather is affected by other factors, including border dynamics, militant networks, and state capacity.

2.3 The Perception-Reality Gap

One of the patterns that has been identified in all refugee-hosting situations is the gap between the view of refugee-related crime in the public mind and the actual statistics. This difference is created by several mechanisms. This is 'disproportionate reporting' – crimes committed by refugees are more likely to be reported in the media than their numbers would suggest. Refugees are used as a political pawn in the struggle between political and economic problems and security concerns. And, cognitive biases make people remember and tell dramatic stories more easily than numbers.

The doctoral thesis of Saqlain Hassan (2021) from the University of Navarra demonstrates this in a systematic way in Pakistan. After studying the press coverage in Pakistan, Hassan concluded that the refugees were "depersonalised" by means of counterpositions like 'us and them' or 'Afghans and Pakistanis' (p. 67). The study also points out that "some people think it's true because the Afghans are involved in crimes, while others believe that the media is in the hands of the government and the elites and that the journalists are responsible for spreading this negative image" (Hassan, 2021, p. 112). There is a level of consciousness on media bias among some members of the Pakistani society, which is the division that suggests.

There are theoretical issues to be addressed. There are theoretical issues to be addressed (2.4 Deportation and Crime).

The theory behind deportation and crime rates is unclear. Those who support the principle of removing individuals who commit crimes, or who are believed likely to commit a crime, believe that it reduces victimisation. But three countervailing elements indicate that deportation could worsen, not reduce, crime. In the first place, deportation generates an undocumented population. Without legal means to get into the country, those who stay behind are undocumented and lose access to the labour market, housing stability and protection from exploitation. As undocumented people are forced to enter the informal economy, the odds of being arrested for survival crimes are higher. Pakistan's deportation campaign has already made nearly 1.3 million pre-documented refugees effectively undocumented as a result of the non-renewal of their PoR cards (Amnesty International, 2025).

Second, deportation wreaks a sense of dislocation on families and communities. This disruption of the family unit, especially for the primary breadwinner family member, can make the other family members more susceptible to criminal activities. According to the Afghanistan Media Support Organization [AMSO] (2026) report, 75.6% of respondents experienced threats, humiliation and other psychological forms of abuse during detention, and 72.4% were detained for over 48 hours without the involvement of a judge (p. 8). Such traumatic experiences can have long-term criminogenic effects.

Third, deportation has an adverse effect on police-community cooperation. Refugee communities are less willing to report crime, cooperate with investigations, or serve as witnesses when they view law enforcement as an enforcer of expulsion. This decreases the crime clearance rates in the formal system and may increase the rates of victimisation, as one may become a victim while the other does not. Predictably, the documented "arbitrary arrests, mistreatment, extortion and threat of forced deportation" (AMSO, 2026, p. 12) undermines trust in the Pakistani law enforcement.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research method used in this study is a mixed method of quantitative analysis by using secondary data and qualitative analysis by using the discourse analysis method. The temporal scope is from January 2023, which represents the baseline of pre-deportation, to November 2023, when the IFRP was launched; to 2025, when it was expanded to include holders of the ACC and PoR status; and to 2026, when deportation

will be in full swing. The geographic coverage includes the four provinces of Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Sindh, Punjab), and the Islamabad Capital Territory, especially the districts that are home to large numbers of Afghan refugees, such as Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi, and Islamabad.

3.2 Data Sources

Crime Statistics: Provincial police data reported in UNHCR-IOM joint reports and academic sources are used for official crime statistics. The Pakistan Journal of Criminology study offers the most structured estimate of the ratio, suggesting that the proportion of ‘Afghan nationals (adults and juveniles combined)’ to registered cases in provinces such as KPK and Balochistan ranges between 1–3 per cent (Haq & Muhammad, 2026, p. 48). There are, however, a number of caveats that should be noted: Refugee victims of crime may not report if they are afraid of interacting with the police; there are differences in how crimes are classified by province; and arrest figures may not necessarily be an accurate reflection of crime commission.

Afghan Arrests, Detentions, and Returns: UNHCR and IOM weekly reports provide systematic data on Afghan arrests and detentions and returns from September 2023 to March 2026. They are broken down by documentation status (undocumented, ACC holders, PoR holders), geographic location, and reason for return (as stated). The latest available report on March 22-28, 2026, shows that a total of 781 Afghan nationals were arrested and detained, down 50% from the previous week, with 82% of those arrested being undocumented or accommodated persons (ACC) and 18% PoR holders (UNHCR & IOM, 2026b, para. 3). Cumulative data from September 15, 2023 to January 10, 2026 show that "1,957,694 individuals have returned" (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a, para. 2).

The Human Rights Documentation: The Afghanistan Media Support Organisation (AMSO, 2026) report is based on the survey responses of 41 Afghan nationals and six in-depth interviews, which were submitted to the UN Committee against Torture on March 13, 2026. AMSO (2026) found that "68.3% of surveyed Afghans said they had been detained or imprisoned" and "96.4% of detainees reported experiencing multiple types of abuse during arrest or detention". The sample size is small, but the uniformity with the findings of UNHCR, IOM, Amnesty International (2025), and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan lends validity to the findings.

The doctoral study, *Media Discourse* (2021), systematically explores the Urdu/English press discourse on Afghan refugees in Pakistan with the support of the corpus of Pakistani English. This analysis highlights three patterns of criminalisation, depersonalization and scapegoating.

3.3 Proposed Methodology for Primary Data Collection

This secondary data analysis should be complemented with primary data collection using a longitudinal cohort design in future research. The proposed methodology would include: (1) randomly sampling 2,000 Afghan refugee households, stratified by documentation status (undocumented, ACC, PoR) and geographic location (KP, Balochistan, Sindh); (2) baseline interviews aimed at establishing levels of self-reported offending, victimization, and police contact; (3) monthly follow-up interviews over 24 months to track changes as deportation policies escalate; (4) comparing the results of the baseline interviews with a set of 500 low-income Pakistani households interviewed in similar neighborhoods to eliminate the neighborhood effect from refugee-specific effects; and (5) administrative data linkage to official crime records where consent is obtained. The design would allow for difference-in-differences analysis of the effects of deportation policy, with controlling for other factors that could affect the outcomes. Trauma-informed interviewing methods are an essential component of ethical protocols, as are any confidentiality measures applied to the person being interviewed, because they are legally vulnerable, and any referral links to legal and social services.

3.4 Analytical Approach

The three stages of quantitative analysis are:

The quantitative analysis is carried out in 3 phases: Descriptive statistics provide a description of the scale and geographic distribution of arrests, deportations and returns in Afghanistan. Secondly, comparative

analysis compares the proportion of Afghan nationals in official crime statistics to their population share, and in cases where denominator data are available, the rate ratio is calculated. Third, trend analysis will determine if the arrest and deportation rates of offenses are correlated with rates of reported offenses over time.

Qualitative analysis utilizes thematic analysis of human rights reports, UN documents and media coverage to uncover (1) dominant narratives that associate refugees with crime; (2) documented violations of their rights during arrest/ detention; and (3) policy justifications and critiques.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Scale of Deportation: 2023–2026

Pakistan's deportation drive is one of the biggest forced population transfers of recent history. According to the cumulative data of the period 15 September 2023 to 10 January 2026, 1,957,694 Afghans have returned to Pakistan (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a). In 2026, returns have picked up in 2026 with an estimated 19,666 Afghans having returned during the period of the 4th to 10th of January alone, which is equivalent to a 38 percent increase in returns and deportations from the previous week (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a, para. 4).

The campaign has been gradually expanded. Phase one (November 2023-December 2024) was directed at undocumented Afghans. Phase two (2025) was opened up to ACC holders. Phase three (mid-2025 and beyond) essentially covered the PoR holders as a result of the government's decision to not renew any expired cards. Amnesty International (2025) reported that by February 2026, there were more than one million Afghan nationals, many of whom were undocumented, deported from Afghanistan (p. 7). According to the Refugees International (2026), the number of Afghans deported over the past 20 years is over 146,000 in 2026 alone (para. 2).

There have been geographical changes in arrest patterns. As early as the campaign has begun, Balochistan has seen 73% of the arrests (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a). The distribution in March 2026 was spread across 31% in KP, 27% in Sindh, 21% in Balochistan, 13% in Islamabad and 5% in Punjab (UNHCR & IOM, 2026b). This dispersion indicates that the enforcement activities are spread out to large urban areas like Karachi, Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Documentation status is a strong predictor of arrest risk. Throughout the campaign, "undocumented Afghans and ACC holders represented 87 percent of the total rate of arrest and detentions, and PoR holders represented 13 percent" (UNHCR & IOM, 2026b, para. 5). As of March 2026, the percentage of those arrested with PoR was slightly higher, at 18% (UNHCR & IOM, 2026b), a result of the effective criminalization of formerly documented statuses. The primary factor for their return was, critically, "fear of arrest" (95 percent) among both undocumented people and ACC holders (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a, para.). 7).

4.2 Crime Statistics: Refugee Representation in Official Data.4.2 Crime Statistics: Refugee Representation in Official Data.

The most systematic available evidence shows that the Afghan nationals are between 1-3% of registered criminal cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Haq & Muhammad, 2026). By way of comparison, the Afghan population accounts for 15 – 25% of the total in certain parts of these provinces. The rate ratio, which is the proportion of Afghan nationals in crime statistics compared to the proportion in the population, indicates that Afghan nationals are significantly underrepresented in official crime statistic

There are a number of caveats that need to be kept in mind. First, these statistics are of registered cases which may underestimate crimes committed by refugees if victims do not report to police. This bias would, however, likely lead to lower numbers of refugee crimes being recorded. Secondly, the term "Afghan nationals" encompasses documented and undocumented individuals; police data do not always

differentiate between these. Third, the provincial aggregates hide local variation – some areas with high refugee concentrations may have different patterns.

The juvenile delinquency study offers specific data on each type of offence. The identified risk factors are: "structural poverty, limitation of access to education, family instability, displacement trauma, and social stigmatisation", which results in the vulnerability to petty theft, substance use and gang activities as "low-level, survival-oriented offences" (Haq & Muhammad, 2026, p. 45). This trend, for example, of relatively greater frequency of property and substance-related offences than of violent crime, is in line with the predictions of strain theory.

Although this study did not use representative sampling, the findings indicate that violent crime occurred at a disproportionate rate among certain sub-populations and not across refugee communities in 2021 (Khan et al., 2021). The study's conclusion, about violence being 'nature', is not supported by its own evidence, and goes against the fact that crime rates do not exceed host population rates when structural factors are taken into account.

Dire Straits: Public Perceptions & Media Framing

Afghan refugees are routinely framed as threats to Pakistan by the media. According to Hassan's (2021) Corpus Analysis, refugees are blamed for the "current bad status of the country" in terms of higher crime rates in the areas they predominantly occupy, "terrorism", worsening public order, "labour market congestion", introduction of drugs, "overpopulation", and promotion of the 'Kalashnikov culture' (p. 45). This litany of charges paints refugees as the root of nearly all social issues, a typical scapegoating pattern. The media does this by using certain strategies of discourse. Refugees are de-personalised using 'counterpositions' like 'us and them' or 'Afghans and Pakistanis' (Hassan, 2021, p. 67). Afghan cultural markers are systematically stigmatised, the burqa is described as the "financial aid for suicide bombers" and "terrorists' garment" (Hassan, 2021, p. 92). Such dehumanising language helps to create policies that make refugees a disposable commodity.

These media framings shape public opinion, but with some nuances. According to Hassan (2021), "most respondents associated them with the following traits: selfish, opportunistic, and disloyal (namak haram) (p.78). But "surveys with Pashtuns (who share the culture and language of the Afghans) revealed signs of ethnic nationalism and cultural and religious identity" (Hassan, 2021, p. 103). This indicates that anti-refugee sentiment is not homogenous in Pakistan but is determined by ethnic affinity and distance.

Policy implications of the gap between perception and reality are real. Political pressure to take a punitive action is imposed on politicians even in the absence of evidence when the public feels that refugees are causing crime. Amnesty International (2025) announced the IFRP following a rise in suicide bombings allegedly by Afghan nationals or by militants who launched cross-border attacks from Afghanistan. While it is unclear whether this was true or not (Afghanistan has denied the allegations), the policy reaction was immediate and harsh.

Human rights abuses during deportation

The deportation drive has left behind well-documented human rights abuses. AMSO (2026) surveyed 41 Afghans and identified that 68.3% of Afghans surveyed reported being detained or imprisoned, and 96.4% of those detained experienced several forms of abuse. These include physical violence, psychological abuse, extortion and extended detention without judicial review.

Economic exploitation is all-pervasive. Rates of money paid to avoid arrest or release from detention facilities (MSF) were highest, as 85.7% of respondents had been required to pay money for this purpose (AMSO, 2026, p. 18). The extortion takes place at checkpoints, home raids, and detention centres. This is an appalling turnaround for Pakistani refugees who have been here for decades.

Violations of procedures are systematic. "72.4% were detained for over 48 hours without judicial review, and none of the deported individuals had an individual risk assessment conducted before deportation from Pakistan" (AMSO, 2026, p. 19). No individual assessment is in line with the principle of non-refoulement, which bans the return of refugees to countries that pose a serious risk to them. Under the Taliban

government in Afghanistan, women, human rights activists, journalists and critics of the regime have been subjected to “arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions” (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 22), which are known harms of deportation.

Refugees International (2026) has urged Pakistan to “immediately end forced deportations” of Afghan refugees and implement “legal channels for Afghans to stay” by renewing visas and PoR cards (para. 5). The IFRP has been criticized by Amnesty International (2025) for being illegitimate and inhuman, and for failing to recognize that Afghans are refugees and facing risks under Taliban rule, despite being labelled as “criminals and terrorists” by the executive order (p. 28).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Perception-Reality Gap: Implications for Policy

This analysis's most important conclusion is the systematic discrepancy between people's perceptions of Afghan refugee-related crime and what it actually is (Haq & Muhammad, 2026; Hassan, 2021). Afghan refugees are invariably blamed as the main source of crime in Pakistan, but official data show that Afghan nationals are a smaller proportion of registered crime compared to their presence in high-density provinces. This gap is not just an academic interest, but has been the foundation for one of the largest deportations in recent history, impacting more than two million human beings (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a). Why is this rift still there in the face of antithetical evidence? Multiple mechanisms operate simultaneously. The first availability heuristic is the tendency for people to remember vivid anecdotes of crimes committed by refugees rather than statistics about the frequency of these events, so that they overestimate the frequency of crime among refugees. Secondly, confirmation bias: people with negative opinions of refugees search for information to support their negative opinions and ignore disconfirming information. Third, political amplification: political actors have strategic reasons to highlight refugee crime, because it offers a quick solution to complex issues and helps to garner election support.

These mechanisms interact as illustrated in the case of Pakistan. The government's declaration of the IFRP was explicitly connected to “a spike in suicide bombings” caused by Afghan nationals (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12). The political utility of this attribution is more important than whether or not it was correct. But once the connection between refugees and security threats is made, the most extreme range of policies becomes permissible.

5.2 Deportation as a Minute Women policy

The evidence presented here raises doubts if deportation policy aims to reduce crime. Three mechanisms exist that can lead to more, not less, crime when deportation takes place.

One, deportation generates an undocumented population. People who have lived in Pakistan for decades, including those born there who have never been to Afghanistan, lose their legal status and are faced with impossible choices. Many resort to informal economies when they cannot find jobs in the legal economy. Many lose housing because of the lack of security for them. Without protection from exploitation, many become victims or perpetrators of survival crimes. PoR cards have been withdrawn for about 1.3 million refugees, effectively making them “undocumented” (Amnesty International, 2025). This population did not disappear; they still exist in Pakistan and are now unprotected, unregistered, and criminally exposed, as well as vulnerable to the abuse of law enforcement.

Second, deportation can harm police–community relations. Crime control requires community cooperation, which means that victims of crime need to report to the police or other law enforcement officials, witnesses need to come forward, and other members of the community need to share with law enforcement. As police become the enforcers of deportation, through night raids, asking for bribes and detaining people without judicial review, they lose the goodwill of the refugee community. Predictably, the documented “arbitrary arrests, mistreatment, extortion and the threat of forced deportation” (AMSO, 2026, p. 12) undermines trust. In the long run, it affects the crime prevention of Pakistani citizens as well as Pakistani refugees.

Third, deportation could actually displace, not deter, crime. If poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunity are root causes of crime, then deportation is not a solution. Refugees can be deported to commit the same crimes in Afghanistan, or new people can take over the economic role of the refugees. As in the "balloon effect" of drug enforcement—where the elimination of a supply problem just moves it to another place—may drug-related crime be the same?

5.3 Structural Determinants of Refugee Crime

Where crime does happen, there is evidence that it is not a 'pathological' problem of Afghan refugees, but a structural marginalisation issue. In the juvenile delinquency study, it is explicitly stated that those factors that lead to committing offences are 'structural poverty, restricted education access, family instability, displacement trauma, and social stigmatisation' (Haq & Muhammad, 2026, p. 45). These are not characteristics of Afghan culture, but as a result of the policies of the Pakistani government.

Consider education access. Children of Afghan refugees in Pakistan have significant restrictions on school access, such as documentation, language restrictions, discrimination, and economic pressure to work. Children are more likely to be involved in delinquent activities if excluded from school because they are not naturally bad, but they do not have an alternative structure to engage in their lives. The adults who cannot find formal work also have a binary outcome: they either take up informal work (with possible legal violations) or get no pay.

This analysis indicates a policy alternative. Exclusion is the cause of crime among refugees, and inclusion is the solution. Mass deportation is unlikely to have a more effective impact on reducing crime than accelerated entry into school for refugee children, vocational training, legal employment pathways, and community policing models that foster trust instead of fear. The opposite is the current policy, which further isolates and criminalises existing populations and weakens protective systems in education, work and community that stop people from committing crimes.

5.4 International Legal Obligations

Pakistan's deportation campaign is a serious violation of international law. The principle of non-refoulement, enshrined in the Refugee Convention 1951 and customary international law, is that refugees should not be forcibly sent back to states where they may be at risk of life or freedom. Many individuals are deported as refoulement in Afghanistan, a country where women, journalists, human rights defenders, and former government officials are targeted in attacks by the Taliban (Amnesty International, 2025).

Amnesty International (2025) has clearly stated that the policy "violates the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits states from returning a person to persecution, torture, or indiscriminate violence, and thus, the 1951 Refugee Convention, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and customary international law" (p. 31). In a similar vein, Refugees International (2026) reports: "Forced returns are an offence against the principle of non-refoulement in international law" (para. 6).

Limited legal rights of challenge in Pakistan due to non-participation in the 1951 Refugee Convention. The prohibition on refoulement, however, is generally recognised as customary international law, and thus applicable to all states even if they do not sign or ratify a treaty. Furthermore, Pakistan has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture, which incorporate non-refoulement clauses. The report (AMSO 2026) was submitted to the UN Committee Against Torture, which can make findings that may be binding and critical of Pakistan's compliance.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary of Findings

This paper has investigated the relationship between Afghan refugees and increased crime in Pakistan during the deportation campaign (2023-2026). There are four major findings.

First, the deportation campaign has displaced more than two million Afghans since November 2023, and the displacement is accelerating in 2026 (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a). The campaign has worked to make the movement about people who cannot be documented, to include PoR holders and undocumented

individuals effectively, turning those who were documented stateless in all but name (Amnesty International, 2025).

Second, according to official statistics, Afghan nationals have a share of 1-3 percent of cases of registered criminals in major provinces as compared to the share of Afghan nationals in the population of major provinces (Haq & Muhammad, 2026). This is the opposite of what is often reported in the media and perceived by the public as an association between the presence of refugees and the increase in crime rates (Hassan, 2021).

Third, Afghan refugees are routinely dehumanised in the media and politics in Pakistan by dehumanising language, disproportionate reporting and the scapegoating of Afghan refugees (Hassan, 2021). This perception-reality disconnect has policy implications, in that deportation policies are legitimate based on a misguided perception that is not substantiated by empirical evidence.

Fourth, the deportation campaign has led to a significant number of documented human rights violations, such as arbitrary arrest, detention without judicial review, extortion, physical and psychological abuse, and deportation without individual risk assessment (AMSO, 2026). These offences undermine international legal obligations (Amnesty International, 2025), and can have paradoxical effects on crime, generating undocumented populations that can hinder police-community relations and even push crime away from rather than towards elimination.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

The above findings suggest the following policy recommendations:

- End forced deportation and restore legal avenues. Pakistan should immediately put an end to the deportation of Afghan nationals, extend the expired PoR cards and resume visa processing. In light of the documented human rights violations and refoulement concerns (AMSO, 2026; Amnesty International, 2025), the deportation of these asylum-seekers would not appear to serve any security purposes.
- End deportation, replace it with crime prevention based on inclusion. Evidence indicates that inclusion (education, employment, legal status, community trust) is more effective for crime reduction than expulsion (Haq & Muhammad, 2026). Pakistan should push for the education of refugee children to be expedited in schools, establish legal avenues for employment for refugees, and invest in refugee communities, instead of destroying them.
- Change how media is used to decrease stigmatisation. Media in Pakistan should set guidelines for covering the refugee community as to avoid using dehumanising language, giving statistics on the refugee community and differentiating individual crimes from the characteristics of a group (Hassan, 2021). Journalist training should cover cognitive biases leading to imbalanced reporting.
- Establish independent monitoring of law enforcement. Pakistan should allow for independent monitoring of arrest, detention and deportation practices by UNHCR, IOM and human rights groups. This monitoring would enhance accountability, minimise documented abuses (AMSO, 2026) and may help to regain the refugees' confidence in the police.
- Promote regional solutions through dialogue. A regional approach to coordination is needed to address the Afghan refugee crisis. Pakistan should discuss sustainable solutions with Afghanistan, Iran, UNHCR and donor governments that take refugee rights and address the legitimate concerns for security (Mohani et al., 2025).

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations in this study, which should be addressed in future studies. Official crime figures in Pakistan are lacking in disaggregation by nationality, documentation status and type of crime. While the percentage of Afghan nationals reported as registered cases is estimated as 1-3 per cent based on a single academic source (Haq & Muhammad, 2026), there is a pressing need for replication of this estimate using data generated by the police administration. The human rights violations survey responses are

gathered from a small sample of 41 respondents and are therefore not representative. Human rights violations survey responses are limited to a small sample, and larger-scale, representative surveys would improve the precision of the results. Data on deportations is available only up to March 2026; continuous monitoring is needed in the ongoing campaign.

Finally, further studies could study variation across the Afghan refugee community. There may be variations in crime patterns based on the documentation status (undocumented, ACC or PoR), length of stay in Pakistan (recent arrivals, multi-generational residents), geographic location (urban or rural, border or interior), and demographic factors (age, gender, family size). This variation is important policy-relevant information that can't be captured by aggregate statistics.

Finally, there is a need to study deported persons' outcomes. What happens to the two million Afghans who have returned (UNHCR & IOM, 2026a)? Are they persecuted, as human rights groups have said? (Amnesty International, 2025)? Do they commit crimes in Afghanistan? Are there any who try to go back to Pakistan? A longitudinal study of deported people would be very useful evidence on the impact of deportation policy.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

Refugees and crime always go together in more ways than one. It is a discussion on how societies build threats, how fear drives policy, and how policy impacts vulnerable populations. In Pakistan, the association of Afghan refugees with crime has led to one of the biggest deportation drives in recent history, which has resulted in families' separation, the extortion of savings, violations of human rights and, for many, the return to a country where they experience persecution (AMSO, 2026; Amnesty International, 2025; Refugees International, 2026).

The facts highlighted in this paper indicate that this story is not substantiated by empirical facts. According to official statistics, there is no significant contribution of Afghan refugees in the crime rate in Pakistan (Haq & Muhammad, 2026). Media amplification and political scapegoating influence public perceptions of the risk of crime posed by refugees, not the actual risk (Hassan, 2021). Undocumented populations, loss of community trust and moving problems instead of solving them are paradoxical consequences of deportation policies that make it harder for communities and neighbourhoods to stay safe. In fact, deportation policies can paradoxically make communities and neighbourhoods less safe by creating undocumented populations, eroding community trust and pushing problems away.

This does not diminish the fact that some Afghan refugees engage in crime or that there are legitimate concerns for the safety of host communities. There are always those in each population who break the law and there is the right to security in every community. However, a good diagnosis is essential to a good policy. Inclusion and not expulsion is the remedy if structural marginalisation is the driver of the crime. Media and political accountability is necessary if refugee crime is widely perceived as being exaggerated. Thus, if deportation is a violation of international law, and it does not serve the stated goals, then a change of policy is needed.

Pakistan has been welcoming Afghan refugees for more than four decades and has been a safe haven for millions of people who have left Afghanistan due to war and persecution. It is the best of Pakistani society that it has embraced this tradition of hospitality. The current deportation campaign is based on fear rather than on proof, and is not just threatening Afghan refugees, but the rule of law and respect of human rights in Pakistan. There is another way: one based on facts, human rights, and the understanding that security and compassion are not mutually exclusive, but in fact mutually reinforcing.

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