

REPORT ON NEEDS OF REFUGEES IN ICELAND

2026



Introduction

Migration trends and dynamics in Iceland are rapidly evolving. In 2000, migrants accounted for 2.5% of the total population; by 2023, this figure had risen to over 18%.

There has also been a significant increase in the number of refugees and applicants for international protection. In 2022, a record 3,455 individuals were granted protection, compared with just 350 the previous year (the increase mainly due to the influx of refugees from Ukraine).

At the same time, public attitudes toward migration have shifted. Since 2017, the research company Maskína has surveyed Icelanders' views on refugee reception. For the first time, in 2023, a majority of respondents (60%) believed that too many refugees were being granted asylum in Iceland, compared with around 27% in 2022 (Maskína, 2023).

Meanwhile, support services for refugees are being reduced.

Thus, a stronger evidence base is needed to support and direct our work as the Icelandic Red Cross in the field of migration and supporting the refugees. **Information gathered through this Needs assessment can help the National Society to understand the risks faced by refugees as well as people's strengths. It can also help the IceRC to enhance its advocacy efforts, strengthen partnerships, and help ensure that no one is left behind in the humanitarian response.**

This report presents the final findings from needs assessment of refugees in Iceland that has been conducted between January and May 2026.

The assessment has sought to achieve the following **objectives**:

- To improve understanding of migration trends and dynamics in Iceland;
- **To identify and analyze the main needs of refugees;**
- **To provide clarity of how current NS activities might be expanded to better address the needs of the refugees in Iceland and/or develop new activities based on the needs identified;**
- To strengthen evidence-based advocacy on the humanitarian needs of refugees;
- To strengthen internal capacity to respond more effectively to humanitarian needs.

Icelandic Red Cross: Role in assisting refugees

The Icelandic Red Cross, founded on 10 December 1924, has long played a leading role in healthcare, social care, and humanitarian assistance in Iceland. The organisation plays a central, humanitarian role in assisting refugees in Iceland, acting as an auxiliary to the government since 1956.

The IceRC **Refugee Team** is a dedicated unit that supports refugees in Iceland from the moment of arrival through the end of their integration process.

Key services provided by the team include:

Language training: Volunteer-led Icelandic and English lessons.

Wellbeing events: Expressive arts, theatre, painting, yoga, and healthy exercises.

Capacity-building events: Lectures *Keys to the Icelandic society* guiding refugees on their rights, access to healthcare, employment, and integration.

Support hubs: Volunteer-supported spaces where refugees can address practical challenges and access guidance and support.

Specific groups: Women's group, Youth group, LGBTQ+.

Integration: InterACT project aimed at incentivising refugees' active civic participation in Icelandic society.

Apart from the social support, the team assists with **RESTORING FAMILY LINKS (RFL) and family reunification** – assistance with looking for lost family members, and assistance with family reunification applications and follow-up.

Advocacy – the Red Cross in Iceland advocates for the protection of rights of refugees and persons seeking international protection.

Though much is being offered, the needs assessment aimed to test whether activities and services provided are still in line with people's needs, and how current activities might be extended and/or adjusted to better address the needs identified.

Methodology

The primary goal of this assessment was to highlight the needs and challenges of people with refugee status in Iceland. Understanding the specific needs of people seeking asylum, the needs of the host community, and the gaps in available services is crucial for identifying solutions.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted in this assessment, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Quantitative data

The primary method of data collection was an **online questionnaire** for refugees offered in 5 languages: English, Spanish, Ukrainian, Arabic and Persian. **A total of 318 respondents participated in the online survey ([link](#)).**

Qualitative data

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants working directly with refugees, including social workers and specialists from the Directorate of Labour, the Directorate of Education and School Services, municipalities, schools, and NGOs.

A total of 30 participants from 13 different organisations located in Reykjavik and Akureyri were interviewed. Their contributions provided diverse professional perspectives from case workers and service providers.

The following 13 organisations participated in the assessment:

- Directorate of Labour in Reykjavik
- Directorate of Labour in Akureyri
- Reykjavíkurborg (City Council in Reykjavik)

- Akureyrarbær (City Council in Akureyri)
- The Directorate of Education and School Services
- Menntaskólinn á Akureyri (Akureyri Junior College)
- NGO NorðurHjálp in Akureyri
- Ungmennahús Akureyrarbær (Youth Centre in Akureyri)
- Hitt Húsið (Youth House in Reykjavik)
- Amtsbókasafnið á Akureyri (Library in Akureyri)
- Barnavernd Reykjavíkur (Reykjavík Child Protection Services)
- Women's Shelter Reykjavik
- RC movement, Refugee Team
- Druze community in Iceland.

The key informant interviews covered questions across three main themes:

- **Context:** What services do they provide to refugees?
- **Needs and challenges:** What are the three biggest challenges faced by refugees in Iceland? What are their main needs? Do current services meet these needs? What is missing?

MEANS OF DATA COLLECTION:

Key informant interviews



Online survey



Focus group discussion



- **Access to services:** Are there certain groups of refugees who are unable to access, or are excluded from, the services provided?

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed to identify shared patterns.

During this process, an isolated group of Afghan women was identified. To better understand the needs of this community, the researcher adopted an additional data collection method: **a focus group discussion**. This approach was necessary because a considerable number of participants in this group were illiterate and therefore unable to participate in the online survey.

Limitations and ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of confidentiality throughout the study and anonymity was ensured.

Findings

Demographic profile

Of the 318 participants in the online survey, the majority were from Ukraine, Venezuela, Palestine, and Syria:

- Ukraine – 60%
- Venezuela – 12%
- Palestine – 9%
- Syria – 8%

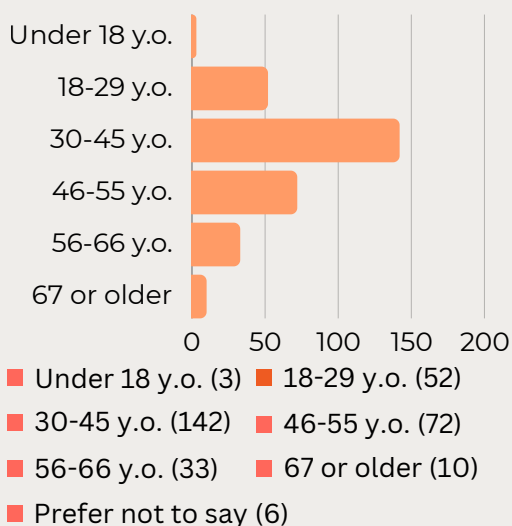
Approximately 66% of survey participants were female, while 31% were male, and 3% identified as non-binary or preferred not to say.

Some nationalities were less represented in the survey than others. **To address these gaps and supplement the missing data**, key informant interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders.

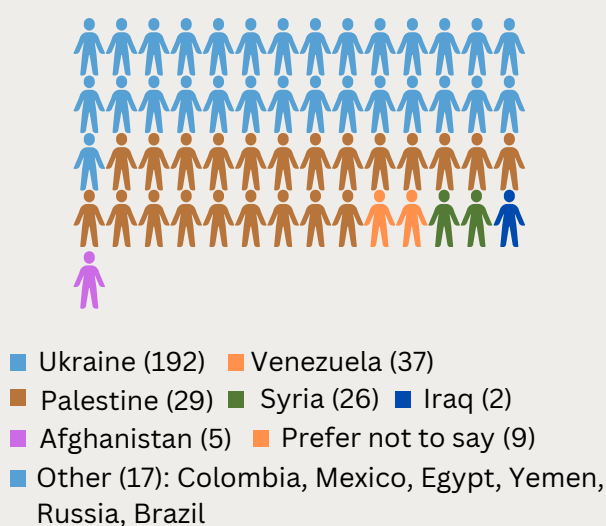
In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted with the underrepresented group of Afghan women through the Saumó project.

Participants of the online survey

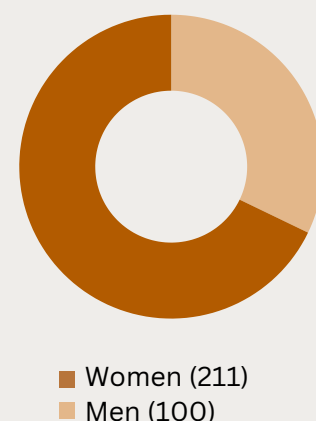
Age



Country of origin



Gender



Needs and challenges

Refugees in Iceland face several interconnected challenges.

When asked to identify the three main challenges refugees face in relation to living in Iceland, both key informants and the refugees themselves identified **language barrier, employment challenges, and housing** as the three main challenges affecting refugees' everyday lives and well-being.

Each of these key challenges are discussed in more detail below.

“One of the biggest challenges is the language, which makes communication and employment difficult. Another challenge is social isolation, as many people feel disconnected from Icelandic society. Finally, finding stable work that matches people's skills is also a major struggle.”

Challenge	Key informants (%)	Refugees (%)
Language barrier	83	65
Employment	56	56.9
Housing	46	33.9
Social isolation	33	18.8
Financial challenges	26	25.4
Adapting to a new society	26	0
Xenophobia / prejudice	23	0
Healthcare access	0	22.6
Uncertainty about the future	20	0
Past trauma	13	0
Infrastructure	0	7.5
Access to kindergarten	6	0
Difficulties faced by children at school	0	4
Limited digital literacy	3	0

#1 Challenge: Language barrier

"A lot needs to be done around the language. We are not meeting the demand there."

In the online survey, 208 out of 318 refugees identified the **language barrier as the main challenge related to living in Iceland**. It affects not only their access to the labour market but also their handling of day-to-day tasks, including visiting stores, studying in school, using the health services and infrastructure, and more.

Similarly, when participants in the key informant interviews were asked to identify the three biggest challenges faced by refugees in Iceland, **83% (25 out of 30 respondents) steered the conversation to the topic of Icelandic language**.

Dissatisfaction with the quality of Icelandic language classes was also frequently mentioned.

"Language training must be accessible, professional and purposeful. Not just individual courses where the quality is a complete lottery. Here we should look at, for example, Sweden where people are in school half the day from the moment they move to the country. If people want to have proper opportunities for work and study, language teaching must be good."

65%

of surveyed refugees identified **language** as their main challenge



208 out of **318** respondents



The need for community-based language training was particularly emphasized during the focus group discussion with Afghan women, who expressed the need for a Icelandic language course designed specifically for Persian speakers.

#2 Challenge: Employment

Employment is another key area in which support is needed (cited as a main challenge by 181 out of 318 respondents of the survey). Here, often educated specialists who had respected, high-paying jobs in their home country don't have the language skills to find appropriate jobs in Iceland and have no choice but to do low-skilled manual work.

"There is a major employment challenge that refugees in Iceland face due to language barrier - finding a job that matches a person's skills, education and abilities."

"Language barrier keeps people in jobs that don't fit their education."

Other barriers often cited by the refugees were lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, and a lack of access to relevant job networks in the host country.

Women from MENA region are especially vulnerable, as revealed by the focus group discussion :

“Even though most of them have lived in Iceland for a long time, they still feel very lonely and don’t think they fit in. They can’t speak the language, have no jobs, and no Icelandic friends. Many said that because of all this, they sometimes feel as if they are back in Afghanistan.”

“There is a need to support the refugees with navigating the housing market: teaching them how to use Igloo, how to look for the rental housing”.

#4 and #5 Challenges: Social isolation & Financial difficulties

#3 Challenge: Housing

A total of **108 out of 318 refugees** who participated in the online survey **reported that finding housing was extremely challenging**. They cited limited availability, the complexity of navigating the rental market with limited language proficiency, unfamiliarity with the typical process of searching for accommodation in a new country, and a lack of social connections that could assist them.

These findings correspond with data gathered through interviews with social workers and specialists assisting refugees, who emphasized the need to provide greater support for refugees in their housing searches. This need is particularly urgent because housing support is no longer provided by the biggest municipality, Reykjavík, as the service ended in December 2025.

An interesting finding of the survey was that the results of interviews with specialists providing services to refugees identified social isolation as the fourth most significant problem faced by refugees in Iceland. In contrast, the refugees themselves ranked financial difficulties as the fourth most significant challenge, placing social isolation in fifth position on their list of concerns.

“... Another challenge is social isolation, as many people feel disconnected from Icelandic society..”

Refugee women and older people appear to be particularly vulnerable to social isolation. Most key informants identified Afghan women and Arabic-speaking women as among the most vulnerable groups.

Other findings: Interesting insights

- Experience of racism and discrimination

Another interesting insight from the assessment concerns experiences of racism and discrimination.

This issue was raised by key informants but was not reported by the affected population itself: **none of the 318 respondents to the online survey reported experiencing xenophobia or prejudice toward refugees.**

One possible explanation to this may be so-called institutional racism. Unlike individual prejudice, institutional racism operates through standard procedures and systems that disadvantage minorities—often unconsciously—rather than through direct or intentional discriminatory acts by individuals.

While fewer people may experience racism in direct forms, such as comments, mistreatment, or physical threats, everyday racism and institutional discrimination continue to shape the experiences of immigrants.

More direct and aggressive forms of racism and Islamophobia, for the most part, tend to manifest in online spaces and behind closed doors.

- Uncertainty about the future

“An agreement between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing and the City of Reykjavík is hanging in the air at the turn of the year. ...so it remains to be seen how that will develop and if the service for refugees will continue.”

Another important finding identified in the study was a widespread sense of uncertainty about the future, predominantly reported by social workers and case workers. This uncertainty relates not only to the challenges refugees face regarding their future in Iceland, but also to **service providers’ own uncertainty about retaining their jobs.**

—“The main problem of the reception of refugees is the lack of direction. We need a plan that is no 1 year, we should have a long term stand on the refugee matter. The idea of coordinated response is good, but lacking employees. These are the gaps.”

- Adapting to a new society (lack of understanding, cultural differences)

As reported by refugees, in general, the services exist, but they are not always easy to understand or reach. Many refugees find the system complicated and feel unsure about where to go or what they are entitled to.

Red Cross Assistance

Participants in the assessment highlighted the importance of Red Cross support. **76%** of the respondents reported being **satisfied with the services provided by the Icelandic Red Cross to refugees.**

At the same time, **26%** of participants reported being **unaware of the services and activities offered by the Icelandic Red Cross.**

In addition, **24%** of the refugees feel that **current services** and activities provided by the Icelandic Red Cross **are not meeting their needs**, for the following reasons:

Lack of awareness and information about services.

Many refugees reported that they are not familiar with the services offered by the Red Cross.

Insufficient focus on long-term integration.

Refugees feel that current support mainly addresses immediate needs rather than helping them build independent and stable lives in Iceland.

One participant described the services as:

“giving painkillers for the symptoms while leaving the illness and its root cause untreated. The role of the Red Cross is relief and empowerment, but so far I have not seen any clear plans for real empowerment or meaningful, targeted courses that help individuals truly integrate and become self-sufficient.”

highlighting the perception that support is temporary rather than long-term.

Limited employment and labour market support.

A major concern raised by participants was the lack of practical, employment-focused initiatives. Refugees expressed a need for more support to understand and enter the Icelandic labour market.

One participant noted that people tend to remain within isolated national groups and experience stagnation in their job opportunities.

There were also suggestions to collaborate with VMST representatives to provide regular employment-related workshops and training.

Need for stronger integration efforts.

Several refugees emphasized that more focus is needed on social and economic integration into Icelandic society. Current activities were perceived as insufficient in helping refugees connect with Icelandic communities, workplaces, and broader society.

Inadequate language support

Participants identified **language learning as a key unmet need.** Limited focus on Icelandic language development was seen as a barrier to employment and integration.

Overall, refugees called for a shift toward more targeted empowerment initiatives that promote employment, language learning, and integration.

Conclusions

In summary, the assessment demonstrates that refugees face significant challenges when settling in Iceland.

The findings of this research have several practical implications.

First and foremost, there is a clear need for improved language training.

Language acquisition is a critical factor in successful integration, yet for many refugees, finding the time and resources to improve their language skills can be challenging.

The Icelandic Red Cross should therefore focus on creating flexible and accessible language learning programs that respond to the needs of refugees.

Employment is another key area where support is needed.

The participants in this study, and other migrants too, bring valuable skills and experiences from their previous migration contexts. However, they often encounter significant barriers to entering the Icelandic labour market. These barriers may include language difficulties, limited recognition of foreign qualifications, and a lack of support in navigating the Icelandic labour market.

Addressing these challenges through targeted employment assistance could facilitate both integration and long-term participation in Icelandic society.

Moreover, this study highlights the need for stronger outreach and communication regarding available services, as **one fourth of survey participants reported not being familiar with the services provided by the Icelandic Red Cross.**

The experiences of racism and discrimination reported by key informants also suggest that negative narratives surrounding refugees may influence how they are perceived and received within Icelandic society. This underscores the importance of consistent, evidence-based advocacy efforts.

Suggestions for improving existing services based on identified needs:

#1 Focus on language training:

- Increase the quantity and consistency of Icelandic language courses.
- Introduce more flexible schedules for language lessons, including evening and weekend classes, to allow refugees who are employed during daytime hours to access language learning opportunities.
- Mainstream Icelandic language into other social support events, offered by the Icelandic Red Cross.

#2 Focus on employment:

- Offer practical employment-related workshops focused on CV and cover letter preparation, guidance on the Icelandic labour market, and digital job applications.
- Improve the cooperation with relevant stakeholders to assist refugees with diploma recognition, access to education, credential translation, professional licensing, and skills validation.

#3 Focus on improved outreach and access to services:

- Organise regular orientation sessions for newly arrived refugees to introduce available Red Cross programmes and support services. / Use the existing Key to the Icelandic society lectures for this purpose, supplementing it with the material about available Red Cross services.
- Appoint community ambassadors or peer volunteers from refugee communities to help disseminate information.
- Strengthen collaboration with municipalities, schools, and other organizations to ensure refugees receive information through multiple trusted sources.

#4 Focus on social inclusion and advocacy against racism and discrimination:

- Strengthen advocacy efforts aimed at countering racism, discrimination, and negative narratives about refugees.

