

PROTECTION WITHOUT PAPERS? ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN, POLICY DESIGN, AND INEQUALITY IN BIRTH REGISTRATION AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEE AND HOST-COMMUNITY CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Birth registration is fundamental to legal identity and can contribute to the extent to which children are able to access their rights, public services and institutional protection. However, registration is still not uniform for those whose legal status and relationship with the state is complex to manage. Pakistan is a significant case study as it has hosted Afghan refugees for over 40 years and has refugee-documentation systems in place, yet significant inequalities in birth registration exist. According to the UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey Pakistan 2024, 46 per cent of Afghan refugee children under the age of five were registered with a civil authority, while 81 per cent of children in neighboring host communities were registered, highlighting a gap of 35 per cent. This study focuses on the policy design and administrative processes, which may be contributing to this gap. It features a secondary mixed-methods design that draws on descriptive quantitative evidence from the Forced Displacement Survey and analysis of refugee-documentation procedures, civil-registration arrangements, legal-identity scholarship, and policy and institutional documents. Administrative-burden theory is used as the basis for distinguishing learning costs related to gaining knowledge of registration requirements from compliance costs related to documentation and procedural requirements and psychological costs related to navigating institutions in the context of uncertain or precarious legal status. The study does not see unequal registration merely as a matter of individual non-registration but as a problem of implementation that is located at the intersection of legal status, administrative design, household resources and institutional accessibility. It makes a contribution to the scholarship on public-administration and refugee-policy by illustrating the ways in which formal access to administrative procedures can lead to unequal effective access and by creating a matrix for assessing legal-identity systems based not only on administrative coverage but also on accessibility.

Keywords: administrative burden; birth registration; legal identity; Afghan refugees; policy implementation; administrative inequality; child protection; Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Birth registration is one of the most basic mechanisms of legal identity, and a key engagement between persons and the state. An

official record of child birth can provide documentary proof of age, parentage and place of birth and can help to enable access to further ID documents, education, health care, social

protection and legal protection. The importance of legal identity, which is also intimately linked to birth registration, has therefore been accepted as a development goal in international policy, as part of Sustainable Development Goal 16.9. However, even if there is formal recognition of the right to registration, this does not imply that access to administrative procedures for the implementation of the right is equal. Studies on civil registration indicate that certain groups, such as refugees, migrants, minorities, and geographically marginalised groups, can be disproportionately affected by a lack of awareness and inaccessible civil registration systems, documentary requirements, hidden costs, and logistical barriers (Castan & Gerber, 2021; Sperfeldt, 2021).

These challenges are especially important in situations of chronic displacement. Refugees often come into contact with the host country's 'normal' institutions and with intermediate structures that are in charge of immigration, refugee status, residence and the issuing of refugee documentation. This can, therefore, result in administrative processes that have different practical requirements for displaced families with a traditional identity and civil status documentation. An earlier scholarship on refugee law acknowledged that for refugees, ordinary administrative requirements can be problematic in part because it is precisely the ordinary, such as documents and state protection, that is likely to be interrupted by displacement (Weis, 1954). In addition, recent legal-identity research reveals that poor civil-registration allows children to be born without proof of birth and/or without proof of parentage, and that this disproportionately affects refugee and migrant children.

The case of Pakistan is significant to study this issue. Afghan displacement to Pakistan has continued for over 40 years, moving from an emergency of cross border displacement, to a complex and long-term governance challenge. Pakistan's policies on Afghan refugees have undergone several shifts over the years including the registration process and repatriation plans, documentation, and the legal and administrative treatment of refugees (Ghufran, 2011). As such, legal identity of Afghan children in Pakistan is not just a problem for the newly arrived children of

refugees. It is integrated in a long-standing institutionally established relationship between the displaced populations and the administrative structures tasked with recognising and documenting them.

Recent quantitative evidence shows there is significant inequality when it comes to birth registration. According to the UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey (FDS) Pakistan 2024, around 46 per cent of Afghan refugee children under 5 have been registered with a civil authority, as opposed to 81 per cent of children under 5 in neighbouring host communities in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2025). This is a 35-percentage-point gap in reported enrollment between the two groups. The same evidence shows that at least 90,000 children under the age of five who had fled their homes were not registered (UNHCR, 2025). These numbers are certainly indicative of an empirical difference, but they do not in themselves account for the difference.

This study is based on the difference between the observation of inequality and its explanation. Refugee and host-community households might be different in terms of socioeconomic resources, education, geographic location, household characteristics, documentation histories and relationship with public institutions. Furthermore, the refugee component of the FDS is sampling from the Afghan refugees under the Proof of Registration (PoR) sampling frame of UNHCR and not from the whole Afghan nationals in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2025). The 35-percentage-point gap should thus not be directly understood as proof that the situation of refugees, or administrative burden leads to non-registration. Rather, it offers an empirical puzzle, where the institutional processes of registration are studied. This puzzle is relevant especially to the public administration, as it is applicable to the administrative structure of Pakistan. Documented Afghan refugee children with birth registration have been using special procedures related to the PoR system. UNHCR guidance for PoR Card Modification Centres states that registering a child under five years of age can take supporting documents like a birth notification, hospital/basic health-unit record or vaccination card or medical prescription in addition to parent's original PoR

card. Along with registration, the respective parent's PoR record must also be modified (UNHCR, n.d.). These requirements are for administrative purposes for verification and integrity of the records; success in registering will depend on the ability of families to understand the process, acquire the necessary documents, arrive at the right institution, and have the interactions required.

The challenges for a single family may come even before they are able to reach the last mile of registration, as indicated by the FDS. According to the survey, about a quarter of refugee women who gave birth in the two years prior to the survey reported that they were refused to have a birth notification issued for their babies by the hospitals (UNHCR, 2025). As this documentation may be a part of the registration process, this finding shows that administrative access might require several interactions with different institutions. The absence of registration, consequently, can not be equated with parents' reluctance, ignorance or inability to follow. It can also be the result of design and execution of the administration process itself.

This paper examines that process in the context of administrative burden. Administrative-burden scholarships help focus on the costs to individuals of engaging with state as opposed to formal program and procedure. These costs are often thought of as learning costs to acquire and comprehend information, compliance costs to document, apply, travel, verify and meet procedural requirements, and psychological costs due to uncertainty, stigma, loss of autonomy, or interactions with public institutions that are stressful (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2015). The administrative process, which results in access to the legal identity, is especially helpful in the context of the legal identity, which requires successful completion of the administrative process for access to be granted.

When applying to refugee birth registration, applied administrative burden is not only an issue of administrative efficiency, it is also an issue of distribution. The same procedural requirement can have relatively small costs for a household that has documentation, familiarity with institutions, geographic access and secure legal status, and

much higher costs for a displaced household that lacks one or more of these resources. This worry is borne out by comparative legal-identity research, which shows that even when civil-registration systems obtain a relatively high overall coverage, discrimination, inequalities, hidden costs, logistical barriers, and problems with late registration can persist. Administrative accessibility is thus not only directly related to the formal availability of a registration procedure.

Meanwhile, the administrative systems can be reconfigured to minimise such barriers. Comparative evidence indicates that the use of more flexible registration processes, community-based support, inter-agency collaboration, and the minimisation of documents can facilitate access to legal identity for marginalised and/or undocumented groups. Pakistan, too, has tried to explore mobile and more and more 'interoperable' approaches to registration. These efforts are essential because they move the policy discussion from why eligible families don't register to whether the institution of registration is reasonably available for eligible families to engage with.

Although there are a large number of studies on refugee protection, legal identity and civil registration, the link between administrative burden and refugee birth-registration inequality in Pakistan is poorly researched. Although the literature on Afghan refugees has so far been largely focused on the issues of displacement, legal status, repatriation, security and refugee governance, the literature on the legal-identity has pointed out the consequences of gaps in documentation and the challenges faced by marginalized populations. What is less well developed is a public-administration explanation of how the design and implementation of registration procedures can have a differential impact on administrative burden on the refugee and host populations.

Therefore in this study the following main question is formulated for research:

How are the policy design and the administrative processes affecting unequal access to birth registration of Afghan refugee and host-community children in Pakistan?

The analysis is guided by three subsidiary questions:

RQ1. What quantitative evidence is available that shows the extent of the birth-registration gap for Afghan refugee children and host-community children?

RQ2. What are the learning, compliance and psychological costs that can be identified in the administrative procedures for refugee birth registration?

RQ3. What are the ways in which registration policy and service delivery design can minimize differential administrative burden, while upholding the integrity of civil-registration systems?

The study is a secondary mixed methods approach which combines descriptive quantitative evidence from the FDS Pakistan 2024 with a review of refugee-documentation procedures and policy and institutional documents and literature on administrative burden, refugee governance, legal identity, and civil registration. Using quantitative evidence, observable patterns of registration inequality are established and using documentary evidence, administrative processes through which these outcomes are produced are identified and interpreted. There is no attempt to make synthetic observations, fill in missing data, or use descriptive differences as causal estimates.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it introduces the concept of administrative-burden theory into the study of refugee legal identity and understands birth registration as a policy implementation issue and administrative access and legal recognition issue. Second, it situates this analysis in a quantifiable refugee - host registration gap and keeps the description of inequality and causal explanation separate. Third, it moves the focus from the presence of the formal registration systems to inequities in costs of access to the systems.

The main premise is that birth-registration inequality cannot be only viewed as a result of household behaviour or refugee status. It should also be considered as an institutional outcome which happens at the intersection of legal status, administrative requirements, household resources and accessibility. There might then be a formally universal registration system that is substantively unequal for some populations because they have to pay much higher to obtain the same

administrative recognition. This view offers a starting point for thinking about legal-identity system beyond the scope of registration coverage, but also as a matter of the administrative design of the system, and the accessibility and distributional impact of this design.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

There is a need to understand that birth registration is an intersection of legal identity, public administration, refugee governance and child protection. The lack of documentation can have repercussions beyond the event of registration, as existing scholarship shows. Meanwhile, administrative burden studies show that when integration with the state is expensive and/or complex, formal eligibility does not necessarily lead to actual access. These literatures can be combined to offer a foundation for understanding the considerable gap between Afghan refugee and host-community children in Pakistan when it comes to birth registration.

2.1 Birth Registration, Legal Identity and Access to Rights

Birth registration performs both legal and administrative functions. Produces an official record of a child's birth and can be evidence of age, parentage, place of birth and subsequent acquisition or proof of nationality. Weak civil-registration systems can, therefore, leave children vulnerable to legal-identity issues, as there may not be evidence available to prove these. Studies also show that these deficiencies are highly prevalent among migrant, refugee, minority and geographically marginalised people.

There is more to registration than having a birth certificate. Castan and Gerber view birth registration as being linked to the implementation of other rights, such as education, child protection, and barriers as distance, costs, limited awareness and administrative requirements. Weissbrodt and Collins also make a distinction between formal citizenship and de facto citizenship. People who are unable to create their legal identity can face difficulties in a number of walks of social and institutional life.

An important distinction from this literature is between a legal entitlement and administrative

realization. A state can formally accept birth registration and specific groups of people are less likely to go through the process of registering births. Registration coverage therefore is not just a reflection of whether or not it is legally available but also of the accessibility and the workings of the institutions responsible for delivering registration.

2.2 Refugee Status and Documentary Vulnerability

Displacement can make it harder to get documentation and at the same time make documentation more important. Refugees might also not have regular documentation or may find it challenging to secure documentation from their country of origin, or the documentation may have to be obtained through administrative procedures that are different from the requirements for citizens.

The issue is fraught with complexity and lies at the heart of refugee-law scholarship. Weis noticed that the normal legal and administrative requirements of refugees can be difficult to meet, as they often depend on national documentation and diplomatic protection, which may not always be available for refugees. More recent legal-identity scholarship also shows that gaps in civil registration are linked to migration status, mobility, and discriminatory practices and restrictive administrative provisions.

Comparative experience shows the functioning of these mechanisms. Evidence on Syrian refugees in Jordan indicates that having access to administrative documentation may be contingent on having multiple documents such as identity and residency documents. Some parents' failure to register their children's birth, which was impacted by the inability to obtain civil-status paperwork, had potential downstream effects on education and health care. What's significant about this evidence is that it shows how documentation systems can create a series of dependent administrative structures for displaced people, rather than it proving that the procedures are the same in Jordan as in Pakistan.

Legal identity can therefore become cumulative, with a need for one document for another, and without one document, legal identity will be impeded at later administrative stages. Refugee

documentation, as well as being suitable for analysis in terms of a public-administration approach to the citizen-state or resident-state interface, is especially important for refugee documentation.

2.3 Afghan Refugee Governance in Pakistan

The Afghan displacement in Pakistan offers a unique institutional environment. The Afghan refugees in Pakistan are multi-generational and the government's policies have gone through reception-registration-repatriation and variable documentation phases. Ghufuran shows that shifting dynamics between legality, registration, repatriation policy, and cooperation between the Pakistani government, Afghanistan and UNHCR have influenced the governance of Afghan refugees.

The set-up of the Proof of Registration (PoR) system was especially significant as it created a documentary category for registered Afghans. But documentation of refugees and ordinary civil documentation in Pakistan are not the same administrative processes. While some FDS evidence appears on the contemporary differences in refugee and host-community children's access to birth registration (UNHCR, 2025), there is a need for further research to better understand the situation of refugees' access to birth registration and to identify the gaps that can be addressed.

These institutional distinctions are consequential because the administrative classifications can influence the ways in which people interact with the state. Malkki's groundbreaking analysis of displacement highlights the importance of conventional political institutions in operating with an implicit logics of place and of the connection between people and their place of origin and destination. Refugees challenge these prediction and for this reason are treated with particular categories and practices. Baak also shows how refugee categories can become more than just a formal legal definition and influence the institutional and social treatment and perception of refugees.

Administratively, for the purposes of the current study, these arguments are significant. There are various types of law that could lead to various paths in procedure. The issue is then not only

whether refugee children are eligible for documentation, but also whether the institutional path of refugee children is different in terms of the practical requirements that it entails, as compared with that of host-community families.

2.4 Administrative Burden and Unequal Access to the State

Administrative-burden theory is a helpful theory to understand these differences. Public programs often involve a significant amount of work on the part of the individual in order to receive benefits, services or legal recognition. Moynihan, Herd and Harvey (2015) consider these experiences in three broad categories: learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs.

Learning costs occur when people have to find out that a procedure or benefit is available, know if they are eligible, know what they have to do to document it, know what institutions are responsible for it, and how to go about it. For birth registration, these costs could involve knowing the time limits for a registration, the acceptable proof of birth, which authority has jurisdiction and an understanding of how refugee documentation relates to civil registration.

Compliance costs include material and procedural efforts to meet administrative demands. These may involve filling out a form, getting documents to support the application, coming to offices, waiting, appointments, verification, corrections and revisiting for new levels. The costs can be “equal” for all households, but in reality, unequal depending on the resources or pathways available to the households.

Psychological costs may be experienced as stress, stigma, uncertainty, loss of autonomy and anxiety in relation to dealing with government institutions. These costs are especially pertinent when administrative interactions involve undetermined immigration or refugee status. The literature reviewed for this study fails to reveal the extent of psychological burden endured by Afghan parents in Pakistan; hence, this dimension is an analytical category for this study and needs to be explored.

This means that the discussion shifts from being a binary one of eligibility vs ineligibility to one of administrative burden. An individual might have

a right but may have to pay a lot to access it. This is especially true in the case of birth registration, where the final administrative success or failure (registration or no registration) may mask the level of effort invested in achieving the result.

2.5 Policy Design and the Distribution of Administrative Costs

Administrative loads are not evenly spread. The nature of documents to be produced, of institutions to be visited, of the frequency of the interaction between persons and administrators, of the centralization or decentralization of the processes, and of information communication are all aspects of policy design. The ability to meet those needs in turn depends on household resources and legal situations.

There is a wealth of material in the civil-registration literature to support this distributional view. Marginalized and hard-to-reach groups may have pockets of unregistered people in even the countries with relatively high registration rates. Slow enrollment, discrimination, embedded costs, and language and logistics issues can be obstacles to universal coverage. These patterns show that there can be significant differences in a system despite overall good administrative performance.

On the other hand, institutional redesign can decrease burdens. Based on comparative evidence, reforms such as more flexible civil-registration procedures, community-based assistance, cooperation between governmental and nongovernmental actors, reduced documentary barriers, and mechanisms specifically aimed at reaching undocumented populations, were identified. In Vietnam for instance, the temporary relaxation of the documentation was helpful for granting citizenship to the extended family of a long-displaced population. Digital identification systems can also increase access to services but can also exacerbate exclusion if legal identity is a condition to gain access to other rights and services.

The results indicate that the concept of administrative burden cannot only be interpreted as inconvenience. Its distribution can determine who gets recognized by the state and thus

accentuate inequalities between groups even if that is not an explicit policy objective.

2.6 Birth Registration as an Implementation Problem

Many of the birth-registration literature pieces talk about legal rights, capacity of civil registration, awareness of civil registration, poverty, geographical location, or household-level factors when it comes to explaining why people are not registering births. While all are important, there's a question that may not occur to anyone in this list, unless you're thinking in terms of public administration: what happens between eligibility and getting registered?

This space of implementation consists of the institutions, documents, information, interactions and decisions that transform a legal right into an administrative result. It might seem simple at the registration stage, for instance, to require proof of birth, but it isn't. This effective burden can vary dramatically if families have trouble getting that proof from the institution that provides it. Likewise, decentralizing registration can help lower travel expenses and not affect the legal qualification.

This also helps to avoid auto-inferring non-registration as an individual behavior. The lack of information or the postponement of the enrolment by the families can indeed be a factor, but it is in an administrative environment which will make it easy or difficult to obtain information, and which will make it easy or difficult to carry out the enrolment procedure, and which will make the offices easy or difficult to access, and which will make it easy or difficult not to be registered.

Registration coverage is therefore - at least in part - an implementation result in public administration. The formal correctness of procedures is not the only way to evaluate a well-designed system; it must also take into consideration whether eligible populations are able to realistically navigate the procedures.

2.7 Research Gap

There are thus three fields of scholarship that are relevant but not well connected. A discussion of refugee and legal-identity scholarship and the importance of documentation and the

vulnerability of having an uncertain legal status. Civil-registration research uncovers barriers to universal birth registration and the different rates of exclusion of marginalised groups. Administrative-burden scholarship is the idea that government policy can have a learning, compliance and psychological cost to those interacting with government.

Much less developed, however, is the overlap of these literatures in regard to Afghan refugee birth registration in Pakistan. Existing literature on the Afghan displacement in Pakistan has mostly focused on issues of refugee governance, refugee status and repatriation, and long-term refugee status, with little research on birth registration as an administrative process that can result in unequal effective access. Meanwhile, comparative legal-identity scholarship shows administrative and documentary challenges, and fails to account for the current refugee-host registration mismatch in Pakistan.

The FDS Pakistan 2024 offers this opportunity as it also collects evidence from refugee and neighbouring host-community populations. The difference observed, 46 per cent of refugee children under five to 81 per cent of host-community children (UNHCR, 2025), creates an outcome that needs to be explained. There is no evidence to give a causal attribution of the whole gap to the administrative burden. It does allow for systematic examination, however, into whether the institutional processes that result in the registration of refugees and host nationals include mechanisms that are analogous to learning, compliance and psychological costs and whether they work differently for refugees and host nationals.

It is for this reason that this study relates administrative burden to legal identity and considers unequal birth registration as a policy implementation and administrative inequality issue. What it is central in analysing is the distinction between three stages which generally are treated as one registration outcome:

A formal eligibility process → administrative accessibility → registration outcome.

The difference permits the study to go beyond asking, "Is there a registration procedure?" to "Are

administrative expenses to be successfully registered the same for populations?"

2.8 Analytical Expectations

The study does not propose causal explanations which are not testable by the secondary evidence available, but instead, generates three analytical expectations to inform the mixed methods analysis.

P1. Administrative differentiation: When refugee and host-community families are registered in different systems, there is a risk of unequal effective access to formally available birth registration.

P2. Burden accumulation: Registration disadvantage is likely to be highest when a number of learning and compliance demands are layered on institutions, as opposed to just one institutional administrative requirement.

P3. Burden reduction: Institutional design that streamlines procedures, decreases documentary requirements, decentralises services or combines the registration with public services which are easily accessible should lead to a lower practical cost of registration.

These propositions structure the empirical analysis, but do not assume that administrative burden is the only factor affecting the refugee-host registration gap. They also offer a direct link between public-administration theory and the institutional evidence that is discussed below.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study views birth registration as an administrative procedure which does not always

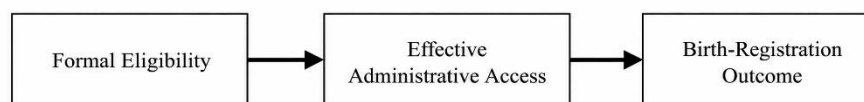
mean that formal eligibility corresponds with actual access. The framework links legal and administrative status, policy design, administrative burden, institutional accessibility and household resources with the birth-registration outcomes. An underlying assumption is that variations in the outcomes of registration can arise not only as a result of variations among families but also as a result of the administrative processes a family is required to navigate to secure legal recognition.

3.1 Formal Eligibility and Effective Access

Although a legal or administrative mechanism for birth registration is present, it does not provide evidence of the ease with which all eligible families can use it. Civil-registration systems involve people engaging with institutions, knowing what to do, presenting evidence and taking administrative actions which then result in a visible registration. This is especially significant to displaced populations. While working under administrative frameworks other than those for citizens, refugees might be eligible for documentation. The scholarship on refugee law has long acknowledged that refugees may have trouble complying with commonplace administrative needs, which assume that refugees have access to documentation and institutional ties that are jeopardized by displacement (Weis, 1954).

The separation of the two concepts formal eligibility and effective access thus ensures that the study does not equate a formal registration process with an administrative equality. It is important to consider whether eligible families are able to go through the process and actually be registered.

Figure 1. From Formal Eligibility to Registration Outcome



3.2 Administrative Burden

The main mechanism considered in this study to examine the formal eligibility-effective access gap

is administrative-burden theory. Moynihan, Herd and Harvey (2015) identify three main types of costs involved in encounters with public

institutions, namely: learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs.

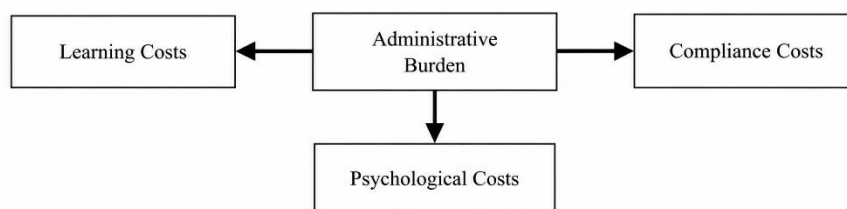
Learning costs due to getting and comprehending information. Birth registration may involve deciding if and where a child can be registered, what documentation is needed, who the institution is for the registration process and how to resolve incomplete or late registrations.

Compliance costs are costs that are incurred due to meeting the procedural requirements. May involve getting supporting documents, filling out forms, making trips to administrative facilities, waiting, record verification, and multiple trips to institutions. Studies of civil registration demonstrate that the need for paperwork, geographical location, indirect costs and procedural barriers can pose significant barriers for marginalised groups.

Psychological costs include not knowing, stigma, stress or fear when interacting with administration. Since the available evidence does not directly measure psychological costs for Afghan refugee parents in Pakistan, this study takes a theoretical approach and does not assume that they exist or the extent to which they do.

These dimensions can be interacting with one another. Lack of information can result in procedural errors; failure to have the required documents may necessitate further visits; and multiple administrative challenges could mean that the process of getting registered may be more burdensome. Administrative burden thus is better thought of as a process that may be compounded over time and not as discrete obstacles.

Figure 2. Dimensions of Administrative Burden



3.3 Legal Status and Administrative Differentiation

The framework does not presume that the refugee status as such is an administrative burden. Instead, the institutional route a family takes to register may depend on its legal and administrative status. Various pathways may have varying authorities, documentation and verification processes, and public institution involvement.

This is especially true in Pakistan where Afghan refugees with Proof of Registration and Pakistani citizens do not necessarily face the same registration processes. Refugee status is thus partly analytically significant because it provides a way of organizing administrative experiences.

The distinction of legal status is not used as an administrative distinction and is not necessarily assumed to be a refugee characteristic if a person is not registered. Rather, it focuses on the issue of

whether institutional rules lead to diverse procedural experiences in the translation of the legal categories.

3.4 Administrative Dependency and Burden Accumulation

Typically, registration is not one administrative process. Prerequisite documentation, verification requirements, information to be submitted to the appropriate authority and incorporation of the child's record into the existing documentation systems may be required for successful completion. This can make a subsequent stage more expensive (or even impossible) because of the difficulty of the previous stage.

The refugee comparative evidence shows that the lack of civil-status documents can create a ripple effect of problems in administrative procedures. This study calls this relationship “administrative

dependency”, namely the successful completion of one administrative step is dependent partly on the successful completion of the previous administrative step.

This is especially pertinent to the Pakistani evidence since at later registration, the documentation attached to a child's birth might be needed. Administrative burdens can thus arise beyond the administrative borders and not just within the agency that is responsible for the final registration.

3.5 Household Resources and Institutional Accessibility

Different households may not face the same costs with respect to administration. The extent of their impact will largely depend on families' resources and the reach of the institutions that are putting them into practice.

For instance, an office visit might be a relatively small need for a household near a registration site, but a much larger need for a household that is far from a registration site or one who has distance, transportation, work or mobility issues. The cost of documentary requirements is also different, depending on whether families have the necessary documentation, or can obtain the documentation or supporting evidence.

The framework makes a distinction between administrative requirements and effective administrative burden. Requirements are the characteristics of administrative design and burden is the cost of the requirement it is placed on certain individuals. This is significant because the implementation of verification and documentation can result in unequal effective access, yet can be used for legitimate administrative purposes.

3.6 Administrative Inequality

Administrative inequality is the overall issue investigated in this study. This happens when

there is systemically unequal access to a formally accessible public process due to inequities in the cost of engaging in the process.

Does not always involve intentional discrimination. Neutral procedures can have differential impacts if there are disparities between groups in legal documentation, institutional access, geographic access to services, information and/or household resources. Experience with civil-registration research shows that marginalised groups are likely to be under-registered even when the overall level of registration is relatively good.

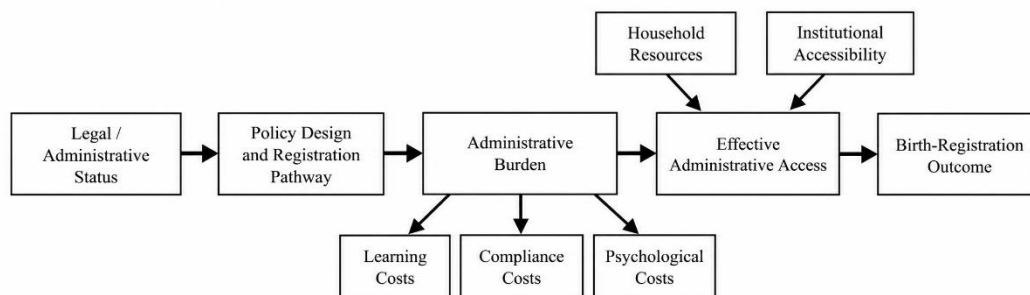
Therefore, the question whether a procedure for birth registration exists for both refugee and host population cannot form the basis for determining equality. It also involves consideration of the practicality of the procedures and administrative requirements and their distribution between groups.

3.7 Integrated Conceptual Model

All of the above mechanisms can be combined to make a parsimonious model. Household's exposure to a registration pathway may be influenced by legal/administrative status. The requirements in the pathway are determined by policy design. Those requirements can create learning, compliance and psychological costs, which can be more or less effective depending on the resources of the households and the accessibility of institutions. These processes can, in turn, influence the probability of formal eligibility to completed registration.

Not the entirety of the refugee-host registration gap is due to administrative burden, as the model does not presume that to be the case. Other differences related to socioeconomic, demographic, geographic and other factors may also play a role. Administrative burden is rather seen as a one theoretically formulated institutional mechanism that can give rise to unequal access.

Figure 3. onceptual Model of Administrative Burden and Birth Registration



4. Data and Methods

4.1 Research Design

The secondary mixed-method study design is used in this study to explore inequality in birth registration rates of Afghan refugee children and host community children in Pakistan and to understand the administrative procedures that might contribute to unequal BR. The design is a combination of descriptive quantitative evidence gathered from the UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey (FDS) Pakistan 2024 and structured documentary analysis of refugee-documentation procedures, civil-registration arrangements, institutional reports, policy materials and relevant academic literature.

The functions of the two are analytical in nature, complementary, and distinct. The quantitative evidence serves to quantify the extent and visible trends of the inequality of birth-registration and documentary evidence is applied to pinpoint the institutional arrangements and administrative procedures by which registration is gained. The incorporation of these strands occurs in the conceptual framework developed in section 3, the learning/compliance/psychological costs distinction.

This study does not involve primary survey, interview or experimental data. It does not build synthetic observations, fill-in missing outcomes, or view descriptive differences as causal effects. Research type can therefore be said to be explanatory with caution in the causal claims.

4.2 Quantitative Data

The main quantitative source is the UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey Pakistan 2024. The

FDS is part of UNHCR's harmonised survey programme for the generation of comparable socioeconomic evidence on forcibly displaced and host populations. The refugee component in Pakistan was nationally representative of Afghan refugees who held Proof of Registration (PoR) cards at the time of the survey, and the host-community component sampled households in refugee-hosting communities.

This separation between these populations can be useful in the interpretation. The refugee sample is not necessarily representative of all Afghan nationals living in Pakistan and the host-community sample should not be assumed to be nationally representative of all Pakistanis. Instead, the survey offers a structured comparison of the documented Afghan refugees and host communities in the geographic settings covered by the survey.

The main outcome analysed in this study is the status of birth registration of children under the age of 5. The FDS caregiver dataset indicates if the birth of the child selected for this data was registered with the appropriate civil authority. As per published survey results, 46 per cent of the Afghan refugee children under the age of five were registered, while 81 per cent of children in the host-community comparison group were registered (UNHCR, 2025). This 35-percentage-point difference is the main quantitative gap that the study looks at.

4.3 Quantitative Analytical Strategy

The quantitative analysis is purposely descriptive. The main indicator is the difference in percentage points in the birth-registration rates of refugee

children and host-community children. The estimated registration rates for host-community and refugee children are 81 percent and 46 percent, respectively, resulting in the observed gap of 35 percentage points (FDS 2025).

This discrepancy is considered evidence of inequality in registration, not as an estimate of the causal effect of refugee status. There can be variations in socioeconomic, demographic, geographic, educational and institutional refugee and host-community household characteristics which may also affect registration outcomes. The analysis, therefore, does not consider administrative burden as solely being responsible for the observed gap.

If there are additional FDS indicators that also allow for valid comparisons, they are described to put the registration disparity into perspective. Population estimates are made from only the appropriate survey results which have been appropriately weighted or from published FDS estimates. Instances where observations are missing are not considered to be zero, sample counts are not considered to be population estimates and geographic estimates are not created where not supported by the original survey design.

4.4 Documentary Evidence

The qualitative aspect is based on the structured documentary analysis of administrative procedures relative to the access to birth registration. Sources are chosen based on their relevance to the following areas: Legal and administrative eligibility; Registration procedures and documentation requirements; Implementation and accessibility of the services; Institutional changes to facilitate registration.

Primary and authoritative institutional sources, such as UNHCR documentation, relevant Pakistani administrative and civil-registration documents, UNICEF reports and other official policy sources are given priority. These arrangements are interpreted within the wider scholarship on administrative burden, refugee governance, legal identity and civil registration through peer-reviewed scholarship.

One of the key institutional mechanisms for the period covered by the FDS 2024 data was the PoR Card Modification (PCM) system. UNHCR

guidance has been published which shows that eligible PoR-card holders were able to register biological children under 5 years of age via designated centres. The procedure involved the presence of the child and parent, parent's original PoR card, and supporting evidence of birth (birth notification, health-facility record, vaccination card, or medical prescription). Registration of the child was also linked to changes and re-issuance of the PoR of the attending parent (UNHCR, n.d.). These procedural materials are intended to create the administrative procedures that must be taken formally by families. However, the existence of a requirement cannot be assumed to automatically mean that the requirement is excessive. Claims of burden are only made if there is evidence of procedural or implementation additional costs (informational, documentary, geographic, institutional or other costs).

4.5 Documentary Coding and Analysis

The analysis of documentary evidence is conducted deductively based on the administrative-burden framework, which has been developed in Section 3. Evidence is categorised into four types of analytical evidence: learning costs, compliance costs, psychological costs, and burden reducing institutional design.

Evidence related to learning costs covers awareness of registration, availability of procedural information, eligibility knowledge, identification of institutions to which to apply and knowledge about documentation necessary for registration. Documentary requirements, travel, institutional visits, verification procedures, record modification, repeat interactions or other actions required to complete registration are all examples of compliance costs. Psychological costs consist of directly documented evidence of uncertainty/experience of stigma, stress, apprehension or other negative experiences resulting from administrative interactions.

Special care is taken with the psychological-cost category. The secondary evidence that was available does not directly assess subjective experiences of Afghan parents and their experience of birth registration. Psychological costs are thus only mentioned if there is

documentary evidence; mere refugee status is not taken to imply psychological costs.

A fourth class is related to burden reducing institutional design. These involve decentralizing registration, making it mobile, digitizing it, simplifying procedures, providing better

information, coordinating inter-agency, and integrating birth registration with available public services. The measures are reviewed to see how administrative design can minimise the 'legal identity' cost.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Analytical Framework

Concept	Operational meaning	Primary evidence
Registration outcome	Birth-registration status of children under five	FDS Pakistan 2024
Registration inequality	Difference between refugee and host-community registration rates	FDS Pakistan 2024
Learning costs	Information and knowledge required to navigate registration	Policy and institutional documents
Compliance costs	Documentary, procedural, travel, verification, and interaction requirements	Procedural and implementation evidence
Psychological costs	Directly documented uncertainty, stigma, stress, or apprehension	Documentary evidence where available
Institutional accessibility	Practical ability to reach and complete registration procedures	Institutional and implementation evidence
Burden reduction	Measures that simplify, decentralize, or integrate registration	Policy and programme evidence

4.6 Mixed-Methods Integration

Evidence is understood in the context of purpose and limitations of the sources. Survey evidence is used to observe at the population level descriptive patterns within the scope of the FDS sampling design. Administrative requirements are formal requirements set forth by procedural guidance from the officials. Government and institutional reports are used to provide evidence to implementation and policy development, and academic literature provides theoretical interpretation and comparative context.

Multiple sources of information that discuss the same mechanism are strengthened by triangulation. For instance, a requirement in procedural guidance to submit a documentary evidence reveals the existence of a compliance step, but families may have a problem meeting that step, as shown on a separate implementation evidence. Likewise, it is understood that

institutions' mobile, decentralized or digital registration processes do not mean that the administrative burden has been removed, but rather that institutions are making efforts to increase accessibility.

This is relevant as institutional reform, in itself, can evidence the issues that administrators are trying to resolve, but it does not in itself determine the extent of the issues, or even if they exist.

4.7 Temporal Scope

The year of principal empirical reference is 2024 which is in line with FDS Pakistan 2024. Consequently, administrative arrangements are interpreted in the light of the institutional arrangements of that time. This temporal limit is important as there has been a shift in the refugee-documentation context in Pakistan in the years that followed.

Specifically, PoR Card Modification Centres (PoR CMCs) which played a significant role in the refugee-documentation architecture during the study period have been discontinued since August 2025, with some even repurposed for voluntary repatriation operations (UNHCR, 2025). Consequently, the PCM procedures are not showcased as the current registration architecture of Pakistan, but rather are explored within the context of the administrative system instrumental in the 2024 registration outcomes.

Developments after 2024 are only taken into account if they shed light on the successive institutional reactions or the change of policy. They are not used to explain outcomes, which are observed, *a posteriori*, during the FDS reference period.

4.8 Mixed-Methods Integration

The sequential analytical approach is used to connect the quantitative and documentary aspects. Firstly, FDS evidence is used to quantify the refugee – host birth-registration gap. Second, administrative processes are documented in institutions and procedures, defining the way in which refugees were registered during the study period. Third, documented requirements and conditions for implementation are categorized in terms of learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs. Finally, evidence about administrative reform is used to determine if certain institutional arrangements seem to have the potential to reduce these costs.

Integration thus takes place at the level of interpretation and not by the forced amalgamation of different sets of data. First, quantitative evidence can point to the consequence that needs to be explained and documentary evidence can be used to examine the institutional mechanisms that might be responsible for this. Where there is convergence between the two kinds of evidence, it supports interpretation, and where there are inconsistencies or gaps in the evidence, these are not “filled in” by unsupported assumptions.

4.9 Limits of Inference

There are three principles of interpretation. First, the descriptive differences between refugee and

host community children are not considered as causal effects of refugee status. Second, the presence of an administrative requirement does not necessarily mean that there is excessive burden. Third, evidence from other refugee or civil-registration settings is introduced to shed light on theoretical mechanisms, but are not necessarily assumed to directly apply to Pakistan. Interactions between families and frontline administrators can also not be fully captured in the documentary component. The study lacks primary interviews or direct observation and/or experimental evidence to measure individual households' subjective experience with each administrative requirement. This analysis is thus best suited to the identification of observable institutional arrangements, documented barriers to implementation and theoretically specified mechanisms.

However these restrictions do not necessarily bar the systematic assessment of the central public-administration problem. Instead, they define a range of possibilities for the relationship between policy design, administrative burden and the effective access that is unequal.

4.10 Ethical Considerations and Analytical Transparency

There is no direct engagement with children, refugee families or other human participants in the study, and only secondary evidence is being used. The quantitative evidence is from anonymous FDS data and published survey results and the qualitative evidence is from publicly available institutional, policy and scholarly materials.

Analytical clarity is ensured by keeping the definitions, populations, spatial scope and reference periods of original sources. Only quantitative estimates are given where backed by the underlying evidence and documentary claims are traceable to their source. The lack of information is not translated into the lack of quantitative observations and the non-observation of an administrative problem is not interpreted as the absence of a problem.

This allows for both quantitative and qualitative evidence to be incorporated with the study and provides a clear differentiation between the

observed outcomes, documented administrative processes, theoretical interpretation and causal inference.

5. Findings

The results show a significant gap in birth registration rates between children of Afghan refugee and host community; and several administrative pathways which can lead to unequal effective access. The evidence is structured around four dimensions: the size of the registration gap, the administrative differences between the pathways of registration, the learning and compliance costs and institutional responses to reduce barriers to registration. In line with the research design, the research results differentiate between the observed quantitative differences and the documented information about potential mechanisms and do not solely blame the registration gap on the administrative burden.

5.1 The Refugee–Host Birth-Registration Gap

There is most direct evidence of inequality from the Forced Displacement Survey Pakistan 2024. UNHCR (2025) finds that 46% of Afghan refugee children under the age of 5 were registered with a civil authority, whereas 81% of children under the age of 5 in the host-community comparison group were registered with a civil authority. The difference amounts to 35 percentage points. This differences are substantively large. In other words, the number of refugee children who were registered was about 57 percent the number of host-community children who were registered. UNHCR also estimates that around 90,000

refugee children aged below five were not registered at birth at the point in time when the survey took place (UNHCR, 2025).

The difference does not reflect a direct measure of discrimination nor the causal effect of refugee status. There can be inter-population variation by household, socioeconomic, geographical and institutional features. However, the size of the gap can be used to conclude that formal access to birth registration has not yielded equal birth registration results for the populations studied.

5.2 Administrative Differentiation in Registration Pathways

Administrative records show that birth registration process has not been necessarily the same for Afghan refugee and host-community families. Young children (aged up to 12) who were eligible in the PoR system were able to get documentation during the FDS reference period, via the specialised PoR Card Modification system. So instead of simply replicating the typical administrative process that exists for Pakistani citizens, refugee-documentation was linked to registration.

Published procedural guidance for those under 5 years of age stipulated the presence of the child and an eligible PoR holding parent for registration. The parent had to bring the original PoR card and proof of birth of the child (birth notification, birth record from the hospital/basic health unit or vaccination card or medical prescription). This also included changes and re-issuance of the PoR documentation of the attending parent (UNHCR, n.d.).

Table 2. Birth Registration among Afghan Refugee and Host-Community Children Under Five

Population	Birth registered (%)	Birth not registered (%)
Afghan refugee children	46	54
Host-community children	81	19
Percentage-point difference	–35	+35

In and of itself, these requirements do not show that the refugee procedure was unduly onerous. However, there is administrative differentiation among them. Refugee families had to link the birth of a child to an existing refugee-

documentation system, and legal status became pertinent to the way of access to that system.

This finding helps to validate the first analytical proposition in a minimal sense but nonetheless important. Even though there was formal

availability of registration, there were also differentiated administrative processes and quite different outcomes of registration. The evidence does not prove that the 35-percentage-point gap is due to procedural differentiation, but it does prove that equality of formal access is not to be presumed from the fact that it has a registration system.

5.3 Documentary Dependencies and Compliance Costs

Documentary dependency is clearly among the evidence identified as a potential compliance burden. Records created in other institutional relationships may be the key to successful registration. A requirement to provide proof of birth, for instance, is both fairly simple if a family obtains an acceptable birth certificate, but more serious if it is the obtaining of the birth certificate that is problematic.

Such a difficulty is directly attested to in the FDS. UNHCR (2025) reports that about one-quarter of refugee women who had given birth in the two years leading up to the survey said that health facilities denied them a birth notification for their child. This is noteworthy as birth notification may be part of the evidentiary process leading to further registration.

Thus, the mechanism is trans-institutional. A family can come up against a barrier at a health facility before arriving at an institution which can complete registration. The burden that comes from this is also cumulative: without obtaining a prerequisite document, more effort will need to be spent at later stages or it might even be impossible to complete the project.

This is a common phenomenon, as there are other displacement situations where the lack of civil-status documents causes a chain of administrative problems. However, in the Pakistani situation, the evidence should be read in a limited fashion. The lack of birth notifications reported does not show that all children impacted were subsequently not registered, but rather creates an observable administrative barrier.

5.4 Learning Costs and Information Accessibility
Information is a second possible source of burden. Families should be made aware of their eligibility,

the institution responsible for registering them, what evidence is acceptable and how their registration will relate to their existing refugee documentation. These informational needs are more significant in the context of registration, as it is carried out through a dedicated administrative channel.

Indirect evidence of the need for information accessibility can be found in the institutional responses. UNHCR has accompanied information campaigns with refugee-documentation and birth-registration activities, including campaigns related to the restart of the issuance of birth certificates. Interventions show institutional awareness that where a service is available, there may not be enough information available to eligible families that is accessible to them in order to make use of the service.

Documentary evidence is more conducive to identifying learning needs than measuring their household-level impacts. No direct survey questions on knowledge of registration procedures allows an estimate of the proportion of the lack of registration which can be attributed to lack of information. The learning costs should therefore not be interpreted as a quantified reason for non-registration but rather as an administrative environment that is documented as a learning cost.

5.5 Geographic Accessibility and the Cost of Institutional Contact

The availability and structure of the registration services may have an impact on the actual cost of compliance. Centralized service delivery involves families having to go to a specific facility, which could lead to higher transport costs, loss of work or care duties and challenges in accessing repeat services.

Geographic accessibility has been important enough on its own to make refugee-documentation initiatives in Pakistan consider using mobile registration teams to reach the communities. These interventions provided registration and PoR related services closer to households, thereby decreasing the burden of some households needing to go to fixed registration sites.

Mobile registration is important – both analytically and operationally. When the location of service delivery is a part of the registration process and does not change the effort required from applicants, but merely their underlying eligibility, then part of the registration process is based on administrative design alone. This is aligned with the overall findings of civil-registration research that distance and logistical obstacles are important factors of exclusion for marginalised groups.

The evidence cannot be used to make any estimate of how many extra registrations this was due to reducing travel requirements. It does, however, carry a certain institutional access as a relevant dimension of an administrative burden.

5.6 Accumulation of Administrative Burdens

The evidence indicates the administrative costs relevant to the situation is better thought of as a succession of acts rather than a set of discrete requirements. Access to information on refugee registration, acceptable birth documentation, valid parenthood documents, access to a suitable refugee registration centre, refugee verification and modification of refugee records may be necessary for a refugee household.

There is no one magic step that is an unreasonable burden. The problem is that, when requirements pile up, the analytical concern comes. A household may start at the wrong institution, lack documents may need more visits, distance may make repeat visits more expensive and reliance on other institutions' documentation may make completion contingent on the administrative performance of others other than the registering institution.

Thus, the documentary evidence cannot be said to support the idea of a burden accumulation to the detriment of an explanation based on any one procedural requirement. This is, in line with the second analytical proposition, that sequential administrative requirements may result in a practical cost of the registration that is larger than the sum of the individual administrative costs, even if each administrative requirement has a sound administrative rationale.

5.7 Psychological Costs: Evidence and Limits

Third dimension of citizen-state interaction is called administrative-burden theory, which is psychological costs. Uncertainty over legal status, stigma, mistrust or fear of dealing with authorities would potentially have an impact on administrative practices in refugee contexts. However, available evidence to this study does not directly assess these experiences of Afghan parents in Pakistan, who are seeking birth registration.

The analysis thus does not presume psychological burden because of refugee status, and because of the nature of documentation requirements. It's a significant negative result. While there is proof at the level of procedures and implementation of learning and compliance requirements, the psychological dimension is still not sufficiently documented to draw strong empirical conclusions. Psychological costs are therefore kept in the concept and model, but should not be considered as an empirically shown explanation of the registration gap. The importance of these would only be able to be determined through primary qualitative research or survey measures that specifically explored refugee families' experience of registration.

5.8 Institutional Responses and Burden Reduction

The general experience of birth registration in Pakistan has shown that administration design can be changed to make it more accessible. Digital and community based registration efforts have aimed at approaching registration closer to the family, ease of information transfer and linkage of frontline services to Union Council and NADRA systems. UNICEF has reported on digital birth-registration approaches in which trained local actors gather the information electronically for subsequent verification, in which case, the need for all office-based approaches is minimized.

The latter, more recent, institutional developments have prioritized interoperability between birth registration and health services. 110,000 children were registered in 2025 via the health-interoperable birth-registration systems supported by NADRA, UNICEF reported. These developments have come since the principal period of reference for FDS and will not help

account for the registration disparity seen for 2024. But they do offer signs that policymakers can take steps to change the administrative structure of registration.

This is a similar trend that can be seen in refugee-specific mobile registration projects. Administrative contact decentralization cuts down on travel and accessibility costs and doesn't necessarily diminish verification requirements. These interventions are thus congruent with the third analytical proposition that administrative burden can be cut not only by changing eligibility provisions, but also by changing service designs.

5.9 Synthesis of Findings

All of these findings indicate three key patterns. First, there is a significant observed inequality in birth registration: the FDS estimates published show a 35-percentage point difference between the birth registration of Afghan refugee and host-community children under five. Second, the refugee registration during the study period was done on a differentiated administrative pathway, with refugee specific documentation and institutional interaction. Third, there is documentary evidence that allows one to identify reasonable learning and compliance mechanisms – such as information requirements, documentary dependencies, institutional contact, and geographic accessibility – through which administrative costs can accrue.

There is the strongest evidence with regards to the registration disparity and for administrative requirements that are observable. It is less helpful in quantifying the exact size of the contribution of each of these mechanisms to non-registration and is not useful for measuring the full refugee–host gap as being due to administrative burden. Psychological costs are still theoretically relevant but there is little documentation of their empirical relevance.

The results thus suggest that there is a limited conclusion: formal availability of birth registration is not guaranteed with effective access. This illustrates the importance of understanding registration results in the context of the administrative processes that families go through to obtain legal recognition, as is the case in Pakistan. In the subsequent discussion, it is

considered whether these mechanisms represent administrative inequality and what this means for the performance of public-sector and for the design of public-sector policy.

6. Discussion

The results indicate a significant gap in birth registration rates for Afghan refugee children compared to host community children in Pakistan, and show why rates are not a sufficient measure to interpret the gap. While the 35-percentage-point gap captured by the FDS Pakistan 2024 is an important measure of unequal outcomes, the institutional evidence shows that registration is through administrative pathways that are shaped by the legal status, documentation requirements, information demands, institutional accessibility, and interactions between public agencies (UNHCR, 2025). Administrative-burden theory thus makes the question of who is formally eligible and under which conditions therefore not the central question.

6.1 From Registration Inequality to Administrative Inequality

UNHCR, 2025, found that there is significant disparity in administrative outcomes, with 46 per cent of Afghan refugee children under five registered as opposed to 81 per cent of host-community children. It does not, however, state that the total imbalance is due to bureaucracy, discrimination or refugeehood. Other factors, such as household resources, geographic situation, education and socioeconomic factors, may also play a role.

The administrative-burden argument has the power to request an institutional mechanism whereby such inequality can be created or maintained. This is because, at the same time as registration is formally available, there may be unequal practical access to it as groups have to go through different processes, or have unequal ability to meet administrative requirements. This distinction relates to wider legal-identity studies that demonstrate that people may have rights that do not require documentation to be exercised, but that they do require it to be exercised effectively (Weissbrodt & Collins, 2006).

In the case of Pakistan this is an example of a general issue in public-administration settings: Administrative equality is not congruent with formal eligibility. The effectiveness of policy performance must also be assessed based on the ability of eligible populations to realistically go through the processes that allow them to receive benefits, services or legal recognition.

6.2 Administrative Differentiation and Policy Design

Results corroborate the first analytical proposition to a certain degree. Historically, Afghan refugees covered by the PoR framework went through a special documentation process through PoR records, which included birth, verification and modification of the parental documentation. This was a different institutional route than to that taken up by citizens of Pakistan.

Administrative differentiation is not necessarily an issue. Various types of law may appropriately have different verification processes. The key question is whether that differentiation has a negative impact on effective access in a systematic way and at what cost. The registration disparity observed and evidence of documentary and institutional requirements strongly suggest that this is a possibility that should not be ruled out.

This interpretation would fit with the refugee scholarship which highlights that refugee populations are often subject to administrative systems that were designed under the assumption of stable nationality, documentation and institutional attachments. Weis (1954) noted that standard administrative procedures could be especially challenging for refugees, if they assume some form of documentation or state protection that were affected by the flight. The current Pakistani case provides a way of studying this perennial issue not merely in the discourse of refugee law, but also in the jargon of administrative design.

6.3 Burden Accumulation across Institutions

There is more documentary evidence to support the second proposition. Registration seems to be not one but rather a series of interdependent administrative interactions. Families might require information on eligibility, proof that the

birth took place, proper parental documentation, access to a proper registration facility, verification, and record modification afterwards.

The FDS finding with regards to the birth notifications is significant. Some 25% of recently pregnant refugee women reported that they were refused a birth notification by hospitals (UNHCR, 2025). This does not mean that all the affected newborns were never registered, but it does show that an administrative hurdle can get in the way of a family before they arrive at the institution that makes the final registration.

This shows that there is an administrative dependence issue. The performance of institutions farther along the administrative chain may affect the ability of one agency to provide a final service if that service requires documentation from the other agency. An otherwise sound requirement can thus result in much higher burden if applicants have a problem with meeting its precondition.

This interpretation is substantiated by comparative refugee evidence. Displacement documentation issues can have repercussions on administrative levels, as lacking civil status documentation can impact subsequent documentation and access to services. The key policy issue is that administrative burden needs to be assessed at the level of the service pathway and not within individual agencies.

6.4 Learning and Compliance Costs as Implementation Problems

The results offer more evidence regarding learning and compliance costs than psychological costs. Knowledge about the relationship between registration and existing PoR records, responsible institutions and acceptable documentation were required for refugee registration. These needs are learning needs even if there is information formally available.

Requirements for compliance were more directly apparent. Applicants had to be physically present, verify, obtain documentation, contact an institution and modify a record. In some cases these costs might be greater due to geographic accessibility, if the households had to travel to the facilities they were designated to go to. In this regard the historical use of mobile registration

teams is significant as it shows that the location of services was seen as an implementation issue.

Such an interpretation is supported by the research in the field of civil-registration, which has highlighted that for disadvantaged groups, there may be a mix of factors of distance, required documentation, indirect costs and procedural complexity that may lead to persistent non-registration. It also helps to inform the wider argument about administrative burden, which suggests that the costs of accessing policies can be a barrier to whether or not policies are actually used (Moynihan et al., 2015).

Hence, households' lack of registration cannot be assumed to be noncompliant. Public-administration standpoint, low take-up/incomplete registration may also give indications of the accessibility of the implementation system.

6.5 The Limits of the Psychological-Cost Explanation

Results are more reserved when it comes to psychological costs. Stigma, uncertainty, stress and loss of autonomy are all potentially important consequences of interactions with public institutions, according to administrative burden theory (Moynihan et al., 2015). Such mechanisms are especially likely to be true in refugee interactions with authorities, legal status and migration policy are part of the contexts.

But plausible is not evidence. The sources analysed in the current study have not directly addressed the psychological experience of Afghan parents of the birth-registration process. It would thus be methodologically inappropriate to consider fear, stigma or distrust as proven explanations for lower registration.

This is an analytically useful evidentiary restriction. It provides a good example of how to distinguish between the mechanisms and the actual findings from the experiments. The conclusions of this study are based on the observable learning and compliance requirements; future interviews or survey modules could be used to determine if the psychological costs would affect the registration behavior.

6.6 Administrative Burden and State Capacity

The results also cast doubt on the notion of administrative burden as a measure of poor state capacity. Administrative functions such as maintaining accurate records; preventing duplication and/or fraud; and verification may be legitimate functions. It is thus not realistic or always desirable to entirely do away with all the administrative requirements.

Rather, the policy challenge is how to separate essential administrative verifications from the unnecessary "friction" of administrative verifications. An effective administrative framework is required to keep official records accurate and allow the population to process claims at a reasonable cost and at the same time ensure that eligible populations do not suffer from the absence of the claims process. Such measures are especially relevant to legal-identity systems, where the system's design might be overly restrictive, resulting in a high degree of administrative correctness but nevertheless leaving individuals out of the system it aims to keep. This point of view relates administrative-burden theory to the wider debate on state capacity.

Good government is more than the capacity to apply and enforce the rules uniformly; it is also the capacity to create and structure institutions that are able to convert policy goals into a public product. In this context, coverage of birth registration may be considered not only a measure of household behavior, but also a measure of capacity of implementation.

6.7 Burden Reduction through Administrative Design

Evidence to support the third analytical proposition is the mobile, the decentralized, the digital and the interoperable registration. These are measures which involve the variation of the cost of registration, but not the right to it.

By registering mobile people can save on geographic and travelling expenses. Use of digital information transfer can limit repetitive Administrative interactions. Health service integration can help to move registration closer to the place where births take place. Increased the clarity of information provision can lower the cost of learning. All these interventions show that

administrative burden need not be intrinsic to registration, but can be influenced by the design of policies.

There is also comparative evidence showing that flexible documentation processes, community level support and fewer barriers to documentation can help increase the access to legal identity for marginalised populations. The lesson is not that Pakistan should just dispense with verification, but that verification can be done in such a way that eligible families need to do less.

It is important to also be wary of the post-2024 reforms, however. The disparity in registration reflected in 2024 cannot be explained by subsequent initiatives which took place after the FDS reference period. Their significance is rather in showing how institutional reactions to the accessibility issues highlighted by the analysis can be imagined.

6.8 From Individual Compliance to Institutional Performance

The key implication from the results would be the change of the unit of explanation. If a child is not registered, then an outcome is measured at the household level. But this could also be a result of the interplay between families, health centres, registration agencies, refugee-documentation facilities, information systems and frontline officials.

Non-registration is often considered purely an individual failure, which may make this chain of institutions less visible. An administrative-burden perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the work that the state asks individuals to do, and whether the allocation of that work has an impact on access.

This reframing has first order implications for performance measurement. The number of certificates issued and the total registration rate should not be the only indicators in evaluating the registration agencies.

However, procedural completion and accessibility, unsuccessful applications, repeat visits, time taken to register, geographic disparities, missing prerequisite documentation and differences in completion by population groups can be addressed in the performance assessment. This would render

administrative obstacles more apparent than as eventual non-registration.

6.9 Broader Implications for Refugee Governance

But the implications of the Pakistani situation go beyond birth registration. Refugee governance is often reliant on the categories established in documents that are used to define and identify refugee populations, as well as to establish eligibility to access institutions. Documentation can thus serve at the same time as a means to protect, and as a means that is used to exclude administration.

A more general theoretical background for this problem is given by Malkki's analysis of refugees as populations in liminal situations in relation to political systems based on the principles of nationality and territorial belonging. While legal categories are essential for administration, the institutional structures connected with the categories can affect the actual relationship between displaced populations and the state.

An administrative example is birth registration which is an early point of recognition and can impact on ongoing documentation. Errors in this process may lead to compounding disadvantages if important records for further identification or services are reliant on previous records. Accessibility of birth registration is thus pertinent for civil registration as well as for refugee governance and child protection in the longer term.

6.10 Interpretation of the Analytical Propositions

These findings in combination offer varying evidence for the three propositions. Evidence for P1 (administrative differentiation) suggests that refugee and host populations went down distinct institutional routes, but evidence is not available to gauge the extent to which administrative differences created the observed registration gap. Documentary dependencies and evidence of a range of barriers developing at the various institutional stages provide comparatively strong support for P2 on burden accumulation. With regard to P3, burden reduction, institutional

experience in mobile, decentralized, digital and integrated registration arrangements are available. The study does not, therefore, suggest that the administrative burden is responsible for the whole 35-percentage-point refugee-host registration gap. A more defensible conclusion is that administrative design is a feasible and tangible part of institutional environment in which that imbalance is created. The evidence shows differentiated procedure, learning compliance requirements, dependencies across institutions and attempts by institutions to decrease accessibility costs.

The overarching theoretical ramification is that there is a difference between formal policy inclusion and administrative inclusion. Access to a legal process can exist in theory but experience a higher level of systemic barriers to an administrative action. Understanding this difference could be used to more accurately assess the performance and equity of legal-identity systems.

7. Policy and Public Administration Implications

The results are relevant not only with regard to birth registration as a separate civil registration function. They argue that legal-identity policy should further be assessed not just from the formal eligibility and aggregate level of coverage of registration, but also from the administrative efforts needed by various groups to achieve recognition. In the field of public administration, the key challenge is to maintain verification and record integrity and minimize unnecessary obstacles that could disproportionately impact displaced and publicly vulnerable households.

7.1 Measure Administrative Access, Not Only Registration Outputs

Outputs are traditional performance indicators that include the number of registrations accomplished, certificates distributed or registration coverage. These are important but are not comprehensive metrics. They do not capture data on families who start but do not finish registering, who may have to go through the process more than once, or who do not register

due to the high costs of access, yet they do show successful administrative outcomes.

Consideration of performance would then be improved by adding indicators of administrative accessibility to registration coverage. These measures may include processing time, number of interactions, repeat visits, incomplete applications, application incomplete because reasons, geographic distance to services, documentation needed to register, and registration differences between population groups. This is in line with the public-management literature that suggests that choices of performance measures should align with the uses of the performance information (Behn, 2003).

Disaggregated monitoring is especially critical for refugee populations. Overall high registration rates can coexist with much lower rates for particular legal, geographic or socioeconomic populations. This means therefore that an overall performance should not be considered as proof of equitable administrative performance.

7.2 Reduce Cross-Institutional Documentary Dependencies

The results suggest that registration might be dependent on documents created in the process of the prior institutional encounters. A failure at one stage could be carried along the administrative process where a health facility, registration authority, refugee-documentation institution controls a prerequisite which is required by another agency.

Policy reform, therefore, must be targeted at the whole registration process and not at individual agencies individually. Verified information already in the possession of one public institution should be readily available to another institution, where legally and technically possible, without the family having to reproduce it again. The more interoperable the health facilities, civil-registration authorities, and identity-management systems, the lower the costs of compliance, without compromising standards for verification.

This is especially applicable on birth notification. The potential for less administrative interruption and fewer documentary dependencies may be realized for families if evidence created at the point of birth can be safely conveyed to the registration

system. Moving toward health-interoperable birth-registration systems in Pakistan is an example of the potential of such an approach, but refugee inclusion in such systems would need to be addressed separately, both institutionally and legally.

7.3 Bring Registration Closer to the Point of Service

Geographic accessibility is still a significant aspect of administrative burden. Families may need to travel to special facilities, which can be a transportation, time and opportunity cost, especially if there is a need for repeat visits. Past experiences with mobile registration services for refugee communities show that those costs can be reduced by reorganizing the service delivery.

A more accessible model would be to incorporate registration possibilities with the institutions already used by families, where legally possible. Health facilities are especially pertinent in that they provide an approach through administrative contact at childbirth and early childhood services. There is a need to provide community-based registration, mobile services and fit-for-purpose digital processes, rather than having every household go through the same centralized process to register at fixed registration centres.

Digitalization is not the goal of the policy. This is the reason why technology is said to reduce burden – it must reduce or remove the burden of doing administrative work for users. A digital process that involves the same documentation requirements, necessitates continued, costly, and repeated physical checks, or does not cater to the needs of households with limited digital access can shift, not lessen, the burden.

7.4 Simplify Information and Procedural Communication

Clearer, more accessible information can help cut down on learning costs. There should be a way for families to find out what registration is available, who is eligible, what documents are needed, where they can be done, and what options are available if they don't have the normal documents.

Provision of information is particularly significant when there is variation in procedures for legal/administrative status. Lack of consistency

and/or rule changes create the danger that households will get wrong information and/or seek the wrong institution. Administrative agencies are, therefore, strongly advised to give uniform procedural guidance via various channels and in languages that are accessible to the people affected.

It is important to evaluate information campaigns also as an administrative intervention and not only as a communication activity. Their effectiveness is measured by changes in procedural knowledge, number of applications completed, unsuccessful visits and results of registration.

7.5 Preserve Verification while Introducing Procedural Flexibility

Administrative burden reduction can't be achieved without verification. Birth Registration helps to ensure the integrity of civil and identity registers and there is a legitimate interest by governments in the establishment of identity, parentage and the fact of a birth. But the important question is whether it can be verified by the least burdensome reliable procedure.

When there is no standard evidence, when it is clearly defined what alternative proof can be used, it can make it so that the lack of one document is no longer an absolute administrative obstacle. Comparative legal-identity research shows why it is essential to have flexible processes and fewer documentary hurdles for populations with a displacement history where conventional documentation is difficult to access.

Such flexibility should be based on rules and be transparent. An explicit statement of acceptable alternatives can serve as a mechanism to preserve the integrity of administration while at the same time decreasing the amount of discretion, uncertainty, and follow-up.

7.6 Incorporate Equity into Administrative Performance

The refugee-host registration gap is an example of the need to think in terms of effectiveness and equity. An administrative system can process many more registrations, but will be much less accessible to specific groups.

Distributional indicators should thus be incorporated in performance management.

Agencies can not only look at the number of children registered, but also at the number of children who are not yet registered and where they are being lost. Administrative status, geography, sex, socioeconomic status and other relevant characteristics can shed light on barriers not apparent in national averages.

This way, administrative equity is turned into a quantitative and measurable component of institutional performances rather than a normative goal. Agencies can identify, where the gaps are long-term, if they are mainly related to information, documentation, accessibility, coordination within the agencies or other implementation stages, and focus on the reforms needed.

7.7 Strengthen Interagency Accountability

Birth registration is more than just the institution that record the birth. Initial documentation may take place in health facilities, civil registration may be carried out by local authorities, and records may be held by identity-management systems and refugee agencies may help in providing access by displaced populations. Distribution of responsibilities between organizations can lead to a lack of accountability.

A more robust governance structure would clarify who is responsible for each step and would provide a process to determine where applications or application/ documentation processes break down. Referral systems should be designed to help with documentation issues that are occurring at the frontline institutions and not push back to families.

Interagency performance monitoring might then be done on the full administrative stream. This would allow to determine whether the non-registration is due to the lack of notification, to incomplete documentation, to verification issues, to accessibility issues or to non-registration at the last registration step.

7.8 Implications for Refugee and Child-Protection Policy

The registration of births should also be seen as an element of preventive child-protection policy. Not having their documentation recognised can make it difficult to establish proof of age, family linkages,

nationality claims and engagement with education, health and protection systems. Castan and Gerber stress the broader connection between the registration of births, legal existence and the actual exercise of children's rights.

The documentation of early childhood experiences may be especially significant for children living in protracted displacement as administrative disadvantages can compound over the life course. This does not mean that a problem that occurs at birth can be easily and cheaply corrected later on. Early and accessible registration can, therefore, minimize administrative burden later on, and enhance current legal recognition.

The policy goal should, as a result, exceed the quantity of certificates issued. It must be for the purpose of implementing the registration system without unnecessarily further complications for a child's ability to receive basic administrative recognition for his legal status or displacement status.

7.9 Policy Priorities

The analysis concludes that there are five priorities for administrative reform:

1. Add indicators of processing time, failed applications, re-visits to measures of access, as well as of documentary obstacles and group disparities.
2. Minimize documentary fragmentation: enhance lawful information-sharing and coordination between health, civil-registration, identity-management and refugee related institutions.
3. Decentralize service delivery – increase registration via health facilities, mobile services and community accessible services when possible.
4. Streamline procedures and information: give clear requirements and alternative evidentiary pathways that are clear and transparent where standard documents cannot reasonably be produced.
5. Institutionalize Equity Monitoring: regularly review administrative processes to assess if they are likely to be systematically affecting completion rates or costs for population groups.

These priorities are not at the expense of reducing the quality of civil registration. Instead, they bring together an analysis of the principle of public administration that was reached: search for effective verification and administrative accessibility should be done together.

The overall conclusion is that legal-identity systems ought to be analyzed from a double-perspective, as institutions and as users, by governments. What might seem like a simple procedure, in terms of the number of formal steps involved, can be challenging for households that must take these steps in multiple agencies and multiple systems of documentation. However, designing policies has the potential to move birth-registration systems from being formally available to being effectively and equitably used by incorporating administrative burden.

8. Limitations

There are several limitations which constrain the conclusions of this study. While these are not detrimental to the analysis, they caution with the interpretation of the relationship observed between refugee status, administrative processes and birth-registration outcomes.

Firstly, the quantitative analysis is descriptive not causal. The FDS Pakistan 2024 finds a significant gap in the birth-registration rate among Afghan refugee children and host-community children, which is not solely because of the administrative burden. Socioeconomic, education, geographic, household, health facility access, documentation history and other registration-related characteristics can vary between refugee and host community households. This 35-percentage point difference in reported outcomes, however, reflects the inequality in observed outcomes not the causal impact of refugee status or administrative procedures (UNHCR, 2025).

Secondly, there are important limits to generalization as it pertains to the populations represented by the FDS. The refugee component is designed to show Afghan refugees in the sampling frame of the survey based on PoR and is not representative of all Afghans in Pakistan, especially for those undocumented and those who are under other documentation. Like the host-community component, it is also not an estimate

of the country's entire stock of Pakistani households and, instead, a comparison of the communities in refugee-hosting areas (UNHCR, 2025). Conclusions are therefore limited to the populations and contexts of the evidence used.

Thirdly, the study uses second-hand documentary evidence to determine administrative mechanisms. Official procedural material is ideal for setting out formal requirements, and institutional reports can offer insights into the implementation issues and policy responses. They are not, however, able to fully represent the experiences of individual families in practice when registering. Documentary sources may not adequately reflect informal practices, frontline discretion, failed administrative interactions, and/or discrepancies between formal customs and practices.

Fourthly, evidence on learning and compliance costs is much stronger than evidence on psychological costs. While informational needs, documentation needs, institutional interactions and accessibility barriers are noted in available sources, there is no direct measurement of stigma, stress, uncertainty, distrust, or other subjective experiences of parents seeking registration in Afghanistan. Psychological costs are thus kept as a concept of administrative burden that is theoretically relevant but not as an empirically supported explanation for the registration gap.

Fifth, in Afghanistan, institutional conditions in the context of Afghan refugee documentation in Pakistan have shifted since the main reference period 2024. PoR Card Modification Centres, which are part of the administrative architecture analyzed in this study, have stopped functioning in August 2025 (UNHCR, 2025). The analysis consequently depicts the administrative pathway as it existed during the period that the key outcome data were gathered rather than the existing pathway. Later policy changes are only added as indicators of institutional change and not utilized to explain 2024 outcomes.

Finally, the study does not isolate the unique effect of each of the administrative requirements on non-registration. Documentary evidence can suggest possible mechanisms and show where administrative dependencies are present, but it would be difficult to find evidence at the

individual level to measure the contribution of each mechanism to the registration outcome. Future studies might investigate these mechanisms directly through combining administrative data with household surveys and/or interviews of refugee families and frontline officials, or with longitudinal data that is appropriately designed. The limitations create a purposeful constrained interpretation of the findings. The study finds a large registration gap and has identified institutional arrangements that are consistent with the administrative-burden theory, but that theory does not account for all of the registration gap. However, its value is in showing how and why the differential in the rate of births registered can be understood in part as an issue of administrative design and implementation and in pointing to specific mechanisms that might be tested more directly in future research.

9. Conclusion

Birth registration is regarded as a simple administrative process, but the Afghan refugees' situation in Pakistan has shown that a registration process does not guarantee equal access to legal identity. This study explored how, viewed from the perspective of administrative burden and policy implementation, there is a significant difference in the birth registration rates of Afghan refugee children and children in the host communities. According to the FDS Pakistan 2024, 46 percent of Afghan refugee children under five are registered at birth, while 81 percent of children, in a comparison group in the host community, are registered at birth, resulting in a gap of 35 percentage points (UNHCR 2025). Instead of seeing this distinction as the proof of one cause, the institutional processes of formal eligibility to administrative recognition were explored.

The analysis distinguishes between two concepts: that of formal availability and that of administrative access. During the course of the study period, Afghan refugees under the PoR framework went through a particular documentation process through eligibility criteria, supporting document, institutional contact, verification and modification of existing documents. These procedures were legitimate administrative need but could be points at which

informational, documentary, geographical, and institutional costs could occur. The evidence is highly suggestive of learning and compliance costs and the literature is too limited to infer the size of any psychological costs.

The results are also an indicator of administrative dependency. People can be registered at the time of birth, but not necessarily in one visit to a registration authority. Can rely on documents and decisions made by others. Some refugee mothers have reported facing challenges when they receive birth notification, which demonstrates that a challenge at one stage of the institutional process can impact the subsequent administrative process (UNHCR, 2025). This moves focus away from just the individual steps of the registration process to the cumulative nature of the registration process.

The study thus questions, from a public-administration point of view, interpretations of non-registration which focus on responsibility for individual households. The results of the registration process are influenced by the institutions that families must go through, as well as household conditions. Compliance is to some extent a function of the availability of information, the availability of needed documents, the presence of institutions, the coordination of procedures, and the administrative burden. There may thus be a formal inclusion with substantive administrative inequality as well.

The analysis also shows that the administrative burden can be designed in a policy. Mobile services, decentralized registration, better information of procedures, alternative evidentiary arrangements, interagency coordination, and health and identity systems integration can mean less work for families and still allow for proper verification. It's not a reason to dispense with the need to put in place administrative controls, but a way to separate necessary verification from unnecessary administrative friction. Record Integrity and Accessibility should be both goals of an effective legal-identity system.

There are implications for the measurement of public-sector performance in general. Administrative outputs (such as aggregate registration coverage and numbers of certificates issued) may mask inequities in access to registration across populations. Performance

systems should, therefore, include indicators that will identify such challenges to applicants: unsuccessful applications, repeat applications, delays in the processing of applications, lack of necessary pre-application documentation, geographic accessibility, and differences in completion rates between groups of people. Administrative equity in this regard is not a goal in and of itself, but should be considered as a part of institutional performance.

It is not demonstrated that the refugee-host registration gap is entirely due to administrative burden. The secondary and mostly descriptive evidence cannot differentiate between the independent impact of administrative procedures and the impact of other socioeconomic, geographic, demographic and factors. Nor does it mean it is possible to make a generalisation on the populations represented by the FDS. The significance of these boundaries is that the contribution of the study is not that it establishes or suggests a causal relationship which the evidence can't support, rather it identifies an institutional mechanism whereby unequal access can be systematically studied.

The general lesson is not only for Afghan refugees but for Pakistan as well. Individuals make sense of public policies as they are experienced in administration. Equality in the form of the rules may not result in equality in the levels of access to a right, service or legal status, where substantially different levels of efforts are required for different populations. The issue of birth registration reflects this problem well since it is one of the first means of recognition by the state, and can shape subsequent engagement with public bodies.

Thus the policy question in the centre should not be restricted to the question of legal availability of birth registration. Also it should question how part of the administrative burden has to be undertaken by the families in order to obtain it, where it comes from and whether it is distributed fairly. This lens for reviewing legal-identity systems shifts the emphasis from the availability of the legal identity to effective access, from the lack of registration of one person to the responsibility of the institutions. Making it easier for refugee children to access public administration is for them thus more than just a matter of convenient

procedure; it is a critical part of improved and equitable public administration that is more accessible and effective.

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