



POLICY BRIEF

Strengthening Inclusion of Urban Refugee Children in Thailand's Public

Schools

What's at Stake

As of September 2024, 5,855 refugees and asylum seekers from 46 countries were registered with UNHCR and residing in urban areas in Thailand. As Thailand is a non-signatory to the Refugee Convention and its Protocols, and in the absence of official recognition by the Royal Thai Government (RTG), these people are treated as illegal immigrants and remain vulnerable to arrest, detention, raids, and deportation, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.¹

The National Screening Mechanism (NSM), established in 2019 to identify “protected persons,” reviewed its first cases only in September 2024, recognizing just three individuals. Consequently, the *security situation of refugees and asylum seekers remains largely unchanged*.²

In education, UNHCR supports enrolment in Thai-accredited schools through its partner, the Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC), under the 2005 Cabinet Resolution guaranteeing school access regardless of documentation. Eligible children ideally complete Thai language preparation before enrolment facilitation in 30 designated schools, with financial support for transport, uniforms, and learning materials.³ Tertiary education support is minimal,⁴ while alternative education pathways receive little to no institutional support from the UNHCR beyond basic information provision.

Key Findings

- **Official data gaps**—especially missing enrolment, dropout, and school-type information—prevent a clear understanding of refugee children's access to public schools.
- **Language preferences**—particularly the prioritization of English over Thai—shape schooling decisions, given refugees' limited integration prospects and reliance on alternative learning pathways
- **Structural legal and economic constraints**—such as insecure status and inability to work—significantly influence families' decisions to enroll, continue, or withdraw their children from school.
- Studies consistently show **school-level barriers**, including unclear admission practices, language-based misplacement, bullying, and insufficient support for teachers, parents, and students.

¹ UNHCR Multi-Country Office Thailand (2024, November 7).

² Ibid.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.).

⁴ Ibid.

A significant number of refugee children remain excluded from public schooling despite UNHCR support and established RTG policies. Between March 2020 and September 2024, only 500–600 refugee and asylum-seeking children were enrolled in accredited public or private schools.⁵ A 2020 UNHCR survey further indicated that, prior to the pandemic, 50% and 16% of surveyed households with school-aged children had children enrolled at the primary and secondary levels, respectively.⁶

This policy brief underscores the need for closer scrutiny of gaps in UNHCR's publicly available data and calls on stakeholders in urban refugee education to reassess current approaches. In particular, it highlights the importance of identifying unmet needs and challenges affecting both refugee children who remain outside Thai public schools and those currently enrolled.

Method

This policy brief is developed from secondary data drawn from a literature review conducted as part of ongoing thesis research on the schooling experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Bangkok, supported by the SHAPE-SEA Research Grants Program. The study synthesizes insights from scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals, graduate theses and dissertations, as well as UNHCR publications and other publicly available reports.

Findings

Critical Gaps in Official Education Data

The absence of reliable, comprehensive data from UNHCR and the Ministry of Education remains a major barrier to understanding urban refugee children's access to education in Thailand. The only precise enrolment figures appear in UNHCR quarterly factsheets, March 2020–September 2024,⁷ which omit the total number of school-aged refugee children, provide no breakdowns beyond primary and secondary levels, and now appear discontinued.

UNHCR's 2020 survey⁸ reports enrolment only at the household level, counting households as "enrolled" even if just one child attends school, making child-level enrolment estimates impossible. It also aggregates reasons for non-attendance across all schooling types without distinguishing public schools, while the quarterly factsheets repeatedly cite "language barriers and costs" from 2021 to 2024 without further explanation or evidence of change. Neither source documents interventions, school-level responses, or progress over time.

No other empirical studies provide more comprehensive or updated data, and limited engagement by UNHCR and BRC officers in academic research further constrains available institutional insight.

⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020–2024)

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021)

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020–2024)

⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021).

Emerging Findings from Existing Studies



Even though the current datasets are too limited for definitive statistical conclusions, some qualitative inquiries collectively offer insights into the challenges and reasons behind the non-attendance at public schools among urban refugee and asylum-seeking children, whether as a primary focus or discussed only in fragmented or piecemeal ways within broader studies.

1. Language Priorities and Learning Pathways

Many refugee parents and students prefer English over Thai because English offers clearer value for future careers and higher education anticipated when resettlement comes, whereas opportunities for integration, tertiary education, and employment in Thailand remain extremely limited.⁹ This preference discourages enrolment in Thai-medium public schools.

2. Legal and Policy Barriers

Thailand's immigration law criminalizes irregular entry, overstaying, and unpermitted employment. For refugees and asylum seekers, who lack legal status and are vulnerable to arrest and deportation, this creates serious barriers to school access.

Parents often avoid schools and service providers due to fear of legal consequences, making enrolment inquiries, daily travel, or engagement with teachers extremely difficult. Scholars identify these legal insecurities as major barriers to public school attendance.¹⁰

3. Economic Hardship

Because refugees are denied work permits, families face chronic economic hardship. With UNHCR and NGO support shrinking in recent years, parents must shoulder costs not fully covered by UNHCR or RTG, such as uniforms, meals, transport, or activities.

These out-of-pocket costs discourage enrolment and contribute to discontinuation.¹¹

4. Limited School Availability and Discretionary Practices

Few RTG schools welcome refugee students.¹² Despite regulations permitting documentation-free enrolment and free education, schools lack detailed guidelines on how to admit and support refugees.¹³ Many children are rejected for reasons such as being "too old," "too young," "too tall," or because "applications are closed".¹⁴ Admission practices therefore remain inconsistent and discretionary.

5. Thai-Language Testing and Age-Inappropriate Placement

Schools often require Thai-language assessments, rather than other basic subjects, for admission and grade placement. Given that it is common for many refugee applicants to resume or begin schooling at an older age due to multiple factors, older students who pass are frequently placed in beginner classrooms with much younger peers, exposing them to bullying, embarrassment, and disengagement.¹⁵ Many students report learning almost nothing in class for months because of linguistic barriers. Some eventually adjust, but many withdraw.¹⁶

⁹ See Lee (2011); Broadhead (2012); Thoresen et al. (2016); Srichomphu and Vungsiriphal (2020); Akhtar (2020); Warren (2021); and Tohsa (2024).

¹⁰ See Broadhead (2012); Teclé et al. (2018); Tauson (2018); Srichomphu and Vungsiriphal (2020); and Tohsa (2024).

¹¹ See Broadhead (2012); and Tauson (2018).

¹² See Tauson (2018); and Akhtar (2020).

¹³ See Srichomphu (2019); Srichomphu and Vungsiriphal (2020).

¹⁴ Tauson (2018); Warren (2021); and Thoresen et al. (2020).

¹⁵ See Srichomphu (2019); and Srichomphu & Vungsiriphal (2020).

¹⁶ See Tauson (2018); Srichomphu (2019); Srichomphu and Vungsiriphal (2020); Tohsa (2024); and Lord & Anderson (2023).

6. Limited Access to Thai-Language Preparation for Students and Parents

Thai-language preparation is essential for admission, placement, and school survival, yet BRC offers Thai classes only at one central location,¹⁷ leaving many families living in more affordable suburban areas unable to attend. Parents with low Thai proficiency often avoid school activities, hesitate to report bullying, and must rely on BRC officers for mediation—leading to delays and miscommunication.¹⁸ Moreover, the effectiveness of the Thai-language preparatory course remains understudied and has been questioned in some accounts.

7. Bullying, Discrimination, and School Violence

Bullying and violence are widely documented concerns. Refugee students have reported verbal harassment, social exclusion, and physical attacks. Some cases involve violence by refugee students themselves, possibly linked to trauma. Teachers in several studies responded minimally or ineffectively, and some placed responsibility for adjustment solely on refugee students. Instances of teacher violence—including physical punishment, religious discrimination, and threatening students with immigration enforcement—have also been reported.¹⁹

8. Lack of Teacher Preparation and Systematic Support

No evidence indicates that RTG teachers receive structured preparation—either during pre-service education or through in-service training—to teach linguistically diverse, traumatized, or highly vulnerable students. Without guidance, resources, or institutional support, teachers struggle to meet refugee students' academic, social, and emotional needs or to facilitate meaningful integration.

9. Alternative Learning Pathways

Many families pursue other learning pathways as preferred choices or last resorts: community learning centers, faith-based or NGO programs, online courses, self-study for qualifications, or homeschooling.²⁰ Each option has strengths and limitations, but none receives systematic financial support or meaningful endorsement from UNHCR.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Data and Research** - UNHCR and the RTG should share existing data and collaborate with researchers to produce systematic evidence on enrolment, dropout, and effective interventions—including studies that directly engage refugees.
2. **Develop Clear Practical Guidelines** - UNHCR and the RTG should jointly establish operational guidelines for schools and teachers on admission, grade placement, and support for linguistically diverse and vulnerable refugee students.
3. **Provide Resources and Support for Parents and Teachers** - Allocate sufficient financial, instructional, and psychosocial resources to equip parents and teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and materials needed to support refugee children effectively.
4. **Reassess UNHCR/BRC School Support Strategy** - UNHCR and BRC should review the current school-enrolment framework and the Thai-language preparatory course to ensure it meets refugees' needs and aligns with the diverse educational pathways available to them, whether within the RTG system or provided by other entities.

¹⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.).

¹⁸ See Tauson (2018).

¹⁹ See Tauson (2018); Srichomphu (2019); UNHCR (2020); Thoresen et al. (2020); Warren (2021); and Tohsa (2024).

²⁰ See Broadhead (2012); Winter-Villaluz (2015); Tauson (2018); Warren (2021); Tohsa (2024); and Akhtar (2020).

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