

Perceptions of School and Community Safety and Links to Education Outcomes in Contexts of Forced Displacement: Evidence and Mitigation Strategies from Project 21 Countries in the Central Sahel

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (July 2026), pp. 54-90

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/75792>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/62xd-vkqv>

REFERENCES:

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Chávez Villegas, Cirenía, Alanna Heyer, Seun Bunmi Adebayo, Pierre Vernier, Arsenii Slieba, and Ivan Lopes. 2026. "Perceptions of School and Community Safety and Links to Education Outcomes in Contexts of Forced Displacement: Evidence and Mitigation Strategies from Project 21 Countries in the Central Sahel." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 11 (1): 54-90.
<https://doi.org/10.33682/62xd-vkqv>.

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PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LINKS TO EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT: EVIDENCE AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES FROM PROJECT 21 COUNTRIES IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring the provision of equitable, safe, and sustained learning in crisis-affected settings requires trustworthy and usable data on the risks in and around schools. However, evidence of this quality on safety at school and in the community in contexts of forced displacement is limited. Using Project 21 (P21), an interagency, cross-border, community-based monitoring initiative in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, in this article we examine perceptions of school and community safety, their association with education outcomes, and strategies that can mitigate risks to school safety. Our descriptive analysis shows that school participation in these P21 countries is only 46 percent, and lower among forcibly displaced households (40%). Perceived lack of safety in schools and the community is high; 41 percent of surveyed households judged schools unsafe and 33 percent felt unsafe in their communities. Our logistic regression analysis finds a significant relationship between school participation and perceptions of both school and community safety, as well as a decrease in the odds of school participation among forcibly displaced households. Our qualitative findings indicate that effective mitigation in these P21 countries, which are located in the Central Sahel, requires a layered package that includes sustained preparedness and emergency planning; systematic protection and gender-based violence (GBV) mainstreaming, which we define as the systematic integration of protection principles and GBV risk mitigation into educational programming, along with water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions,

Received December 1, 2025; revised February 9, 2026; accepted March 5, 2026;
electronically published July 2026.

Journal on Education in Emergencies, Vol. 11, No. 1.

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ISSN 2518-6833

psychosocial support, and referral pathways; adaptive delivery and proximity-based infrastructure, such as establishing learning centers closer to communities to reduce exposure to transit-related hazards, including armed ambushes and improvised explosive devices; and deep community engagement to address social norms in highly insecure environments. This study strengthens the education in emergencies evidence base by showing how community-based monitoring can address critical gaps in the data on safety in displacement contexts while modelling ethical, locally grounded approaches to generating actionable evidence.

INTRODUCTION

Robust and comparable evidence on safety in and around schools is a foundational element of an effective, equitable, and just data and evidence ecosystem for education in emergencies (EiE). Overlapping conflict, forced displacement, and climate shocks have severely disrupted education systems, in particular in West and Central Africa. More than 8.2 million people there are internally displaced and nearly 2.7 million across the region are refugees, with Burkina Faso alone hosting more than 2 million forcibly displaced people and more than 170,000 refugees since 2016. Hundreds of schools have been attacked, damaged, or repurposed as shelters, and school closures have surged in the Central Sahel subregion (UNHCR 2024). These dynamics heighten the salience of objective risks to school safety (e.g., threats and attacks by armed actors, improvised explosive devices [IEDs], occupation) and the perceived risks that shape families' decisions about whether to send their children to school.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a robust global literature documented the high prevalence of school-related violence, especially bullying, and its adverse consequences for student learning and wellbeing.¹ However, very few studies have examined the prevalence of school and community violence and their consequences for education specifically in contexts of forced displacement (e.g., Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; Karaman 2023). The limited quantitative evidence available points to high victimization rates among refugee learners, but this evidence is geographically narrow and methodologically constrained. At the same time, a smaller but compelling body of research shows that community violence often reduces school attendance and achievement even more than in-school violence. This underscores the need to measure community-level risks along with school-based harms, a need that has been largely overlooked in studies on the experiences of forcibly displaced learners.

¹ In 2019, for example, UNESCO estimated that 32 percent of students worldwide had been bullied at least once in the prior month.

These evidence gaps are the products of a wider challenge in the data and evidence ecosystem. Most large-scale international education assessments and surveys do not identify forcibly displaced students, which prevents a credible estimation of the number of learners affected by displacement and the disparities among them (OECD 2020). Existing proxies (e.g., immigrant status) are imperfect substitutes for the identification of refugees. Furthermore, instruments typically emphasize school-based violence (e.g., bullying) but give only limited attention to the community risks and threats to mobility that can dominate decisionmaking in conflict-affected settings. While they ensure comparability across countries and over time, indicator design and recall windows are rarely calibrated, meaning they are often too narrow to capture low-frequency, high-severity events, such as attacks on education. To address this, evidence systems require “right-sized” recall windows and indicators specifically designed to document these severe incidents while maintaining cross-country comparability. Finally, ethical and safeguarding considerations (e.g., referral mechanisms that center on protecting data on survivors, collecting the minimum data necessary, and masking personally identifiable information) are often underspecified for fragile and conflict-affected contexts, which impedes the safe sharing and use of data.

In this study, we respond to these gaps and to the need to mobilize an effective, equitable, and just data and evidence ecosystem for education in crisis and conflict contexts by leveraging Project 21 (P21), an interagency, cross-border, community-based monitoring initiative in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, which we refer to as the P21 countries.² P21 offers a rare multicountry platform, which includes disaggregation by forced displacement status, from which we can generate comparable indicators.

We focus on two policy-critical questions:

- What are households’ (parents’ and caregivers’) perceptions of school and community safety and their link to education outcomes in P21 countries?
- What effective strategies have been used in P21 countries to mitigate safety incidents in and around schools?

By analyzing P21 survey items along with qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs), we contribute in three ways. First, we generate comparable multicountry descriptive estimates of how safety is perceived in schools and communities in forced displacement settings, which complements and extends the largely single-country literature. Second, we synthesize field-informed perceptions that can inform and enhance mitigation strategies already in use, or that practitioners recommend to address the dominant

² To learn more about P21, go to <https://project21.info/>. To access the licensed P21 dataset, go to the UNHCR Microdata Library and create an account at <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/auth/register>. Search for “P21” to return data from all P21 countries. For each dataset, go to the “Get Microdata” tab and request access. For questions, contact the UNHCR Curation Team at dencomdl@unhcr.org.

identified threats to safety, such as armed-group activity, dangers to mobility (including IEDs), and vulnerable infrastructure. We also offer guidance on context-appropriate considerations for how these mitigation strategies may be implemented across different high-risk settings. Third, we draw out implications for a more equitable and just EiE evidence ecosystem in the Central Sahel that disaggregates data by experiences of forced displacement, including practical steps to balance standardization and localization, extend reporting timeframes to ensure that rare but severe events like school attacks are not missed, and strengthen ethical governance of data and community feedback mechanisms so that evidence is both safe and usable for educators and decisionmakers.

To begin, we outline why evidence on school and community safety is central to effective EiE decisionmaking, then we summarize the displacement and insecurity dynamics shaping education access in the Central Sahel, which includes the P21 countries. We review the literature on school- and community-related violence and introduce the theoretical framework linking risk exposure, safety perceptions, and schooling behavior. We next highlight key gaps in the evidence on forced displacement contexts and describe the P21 data, measures, and methods. We discuss findings on safety risks and suggest mitigation strategies drawn from our key informants' insights. We identify the study's implications for practice and offer suggestions for how to create a stronger, more effective, equitable, and just EiE evidence ecosystem. We conclude with the limitations of our study and ideas for future research.

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND RISKS TO EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The Central Sahel and adjoining West and Central African subregions face layered crises that have profoundly disrupted schooling and heightened risks for learners and educators. The region has experienced high levels of forced displacement and widespread damage to education infrastructure in recent years, conditions that affect the feasibility of maintaining schooling and the safety of school environments. Across the region, more than 8.2 million people are internally displaced and nearly 2.7 million are refugees, which underscores the scale and persistence of the mobility and protection pressures confronting education systems. For definitions of forced displacement status and other key terms, see Annex 1. Within this broader context, the Central Sahel, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have seen escalating violence and insecurity that directly target or spill over into education spaces, while Cameroon's Far North Region and Chad contend with overlapping conflict and climate shocks that similarly disrupt learning (see Table 1 for detailed country snapshots and regional patterns).

Table 1: Country Contexts

Country	Description
Burkina Faso	Since 2016, more than 2 million people have been displaced; more than 170,000 have fled as refugees to Burkina Faso. Attacks on education have surged (270 incidents reported in 2022-2023), destroying schools, disrupting learning, and prompting prolonged school closures.
Mali and Niger (Central Sahel)	Escalating violence has led to widespread school closures and persistent threats to students and teachers, which reflects entrenched nonstate armed group activity and chronic insecurity in the affected communities. As authorities respond to shifting security conditions, education systems face ongoing disruptions.
Cameroon (Far North)	Recurrent insecurity has damaged schools and led communities to repurpose facilities for emergency use. This has left many learners at risk of missing critical learning opportunities, and complicated efforts to stabilize staffing and timetables and provide safe access routes to school.
Chad (Salamat and Sila)	Home to more than 182,000 refugees, these regions of Chad have experienced extensive school closures and damage due to floods and conflict. This has put the infrastructure under extended strain and limited the capacity to deliver continuous education.

Targeted attacks on education have intensified existing vulnerabilities across the subregion. In Burkina Faso alone, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA 2025) documented more than 270 attacks on schools in 2022-2023, which has contributed to widespread destruction and displaced learners from the classroom. School closures have increased sharply in the Central Sahel as threats and attacks have proliferated, which magnifies the risks for children and teachers and reduces the availability of safe, predictable learning environments. Even where schools are not directly attacked, the proximity of conflict, the presence of armed actors, the use of explosives, and the occupation of facilities heighten the perceived and real risks, which results in precautionary school closures and reduces participation in school. Recurrent flooding and other climate-related shocks compound conflict-related risks by damaging facilities, creating the need to repurpose schools as emergency shelters and interrupting service delivery. These dynamics create prolonged periods during which learners lack access to safe, functional school spaces, while government ministries and partners face continual recovery efforts and restoration of services in highly constrained environments. The dual pressures of conflict and climate shocks erode infrastructure and strain national and local education systems' capacity to maintain equitable access to education (UNHCR 2024).

We posit that, based on the cross-border character of displacement, the fluidity of local security conditions, and the interplay of conflict and climate shocks, there is a critical need for an evidence approach that is timely, comparable, and grounded in community realities. P21, which was launched in mid-2020 and operates in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger, provides such a platform. By standardizing a core set of indicators across countries while preserving localization to capture context-specific risks, P21 helps to provide a clearer picture of the safety landscape that affects education in the Central Sahel and supports coordination among the education and protection actors who are responding to rapidly evolving conditions.

SCHOOL SAFETY AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES: EVIDENCE FROM GLOBAL, COMMUNITY, AND DISPLACEMENT CONTEXTS

Research on school safety consistently shows that experiences of violence, whether occurring within schools or in the surrounding communities, shape children's learning, wellbeing, and engagement in the classroom (Eriksen, Nielsen, and Simonsen 2014; Konishi et al. 2010). Three strands of evidence situate this understanding and point to effective strategies for strengthening the safety of learning environments across diverse and crisis-affected contexts.

First, global and regional studies demonstrate the high prevalence and detrimental effects of school-related violence, especially bullying among peers within the school system. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 32 percent of students worldwide had been bullied at least once in the preceding month (UNESCO 2019), and multicountry analyses report similar levels of victimization among adolescents (UNICEF 2018). The consensus across settings is clear: exposure to school-based violence disrupts learning and undermines psychosocial wellbeing for both the short and long term. Documented consequences for students include lower academic achievement, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, school absenteeism, and increased engagement in risky behaviors (Eriksen, Nielsen, and Simonsen 2014; Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor 2007; Barzilay et al. 2017; Smalley, Warren, and Barefoot 2017).

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries confirms similar patterns (Chávez et al. 2021; Delprato, Akyeampong, and Dunne 2017; Trucco and Inostroza 2017). Unsafe school climates and weakened student-teacher relationships can further exacerbate these risks, which lowers attendance and student engagement in the classroom (Konishi et al. 2010). Effective strategies found in the literature emphasize whole-school approaches: strengthening positive teacher-student interactions, implementing clear reporting pathways, training teachers on classroom management and inclusive practices, and building peer support systems (Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor 2007; Barzilay et al. 2017).

A parallel body of work highlights how community violence significantly shapes schooling outcomes and can interact with or overwhelm school-level safety efforts. Reviews and empirical studies show that exposure to neighborhood or community violence, often measured through local crime or homicide rates, reduces standardized test performance, increases inattention and impulsivity, and elevates absenteeism and suspension (Burdick-Will 2013; Caudillo and Torche 2014; Chávez and Aguilar 2021; Monteiro and Rocha 2016). Some studies find that community risks explain more variance in attendance and behavior than school-based risks (Bowen and Bowen 1999), as well as a lower prevalence of bullying, and its academic salience, in schools in high-homicide contexts. This implies that schools can serve as protective spaces for students within violent environments (Trucco and Inostroza 2017).

In the broader contexts of forced displacement, evidence on school safety is far more limited, fragmented, and methodologically constrained. Available studies suggest that negative stereotypes and discrimination heighten refugee learners' risk of experiencing bullying (Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali 2023; Yilmaz and Cikili-Yutun 2020; Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016), yet large-scale international assessments rarely single out refugees, relying instead on weak proxies such as immigrant status. These proxies reveal small average gaps in exposure to bullying (three percentage points in PISA 2018) and mixed predictive value (OECD 2020; Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt 2018), which underscores their limitations in helping to understand the safety of forcibly displaced students. Very few studies examine refugee students' perceptions of safety or explore how community-level threats affect their safety at school and influence their decisions to participate in school (e.g., Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; Karaman 2023). The literature nevertheless points out promising strategies: culturally responsive school climate interventions, antidiscrimination messaging, targeted psychosocial support, and context-specific risk mitigation that accounts for community-level threats.

Across these strands, three recurring measurement and governance gaps constrain effective and equitable decisionmaking within the EiE evidence ecosystem. First, most surveys and assessments lack reliable identifiers for forcibly displaced learners, which limits the visibility of disparities and prevents targeted responses. Second, data systems over-emphasize school-based violence, especially bullying, while undermeasuring community violence and mobility risks, despite strong evidence that these factors shape school participation and learning. Third, existing data-collection and governance practices are often poorly aligned with the realities of crisis-affected settings. Surveys with short recall periods tend to undercount both low-frequency and high-severity events, such as attacks on schools or armed ambushes. Moreover, broadly framed knowledge-based questions may not be context relevant. At the same time, safeguarding protocols include referral mechanisms that center on protecting the data on survivors, which means they collect only the minimum data necessary. What they do collect is masked, and personally identifiable information is inconsistently applied, which limits the safe sharing and practical use of data.

Our use of P21 data responds directly to these gaps by generating multicountry descriptive evidence with that includes attention to displacement on both school and community safety; incorporating learners' perceptions of safety; and linking observed risk patterns to field-informed mitigation strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systems theory provides an overarching conceptual lens for examining school safety, community violence, and education outcomes in contexts of forced displacement. Based on von Bertalanffy's (1968) work on living systems as interconnected and interdependent wholes, systems theory asserts that the behavior of any single component such as a school, household, or community can only be understood in relation to the wider system within which it operates. This perspective is especially relevant in humanitarian and conflict-affected settings, where education systems are embedded in complex social, political, and security environments that continually influence how children access, experience, and benefit from schooling.

A systems approach views schools not as isolated institutions but as subsystems interacting dynamically with broader ecological layers. These include community security conditions, household livelihoods, displacement status, and the presence or absence of state authorities. As Meadows (2008) highlights, such systems are characterized by feedback loops that reinforce or balance the processes that shape system behavior over time. For the purposes of this article, this means recognizing that children's schooling trajectories are influenced not only by school-level factors but by external stressors, such as conflict, mobility constraints, perceived safety, and socioeconomic pressures.

Systems theory also emphasizes nonlinearity and interdependence, meaning that small changes in one subsystem (e.g., a community's security situation, the presence of armed groups, the loss of infrastructure) can have disproportionate effects on another (e.g., school access, participation, parental decisionmaking). This framework supports an understanding of school safety as an emergent property that arises from the interaction of multiple subsystems, rather than from isolated incidents on school grounds. Luhmann's (1995) concept of structural coupling is helpful here: schools and communities remain distinct systems yet are tightly linked, such that instability, violence, or insecurity in one subsystem inevitably affects the other.

Applying systems theory in this research study enables two analytical contributions. It first provides a conceptual basis for examining the prevalence of school and community safety incidents, not as separate phenomena but as interrelated dynamics embedded within broader social and security conditions. Second, it informs the examination of mitigation strategies by situating them within a multilayered system, which demonstrates that effective interventions must operate across education, protection, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and community leadership, rather than through single-point solutions.

Systems theory provides this research study with a structured conceptual approach for analyzing how school safety, community conditions, and forced displacement interact to shape education access and experiences. It guides the interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data presented and supports an integrated understanding of the complex ecosystems in which forcibly displaced and host-community children pursue their education.

DATA AND METHODS

We employed a convergent mixed methods design to address two critical policy questions in displacement affected education systems:

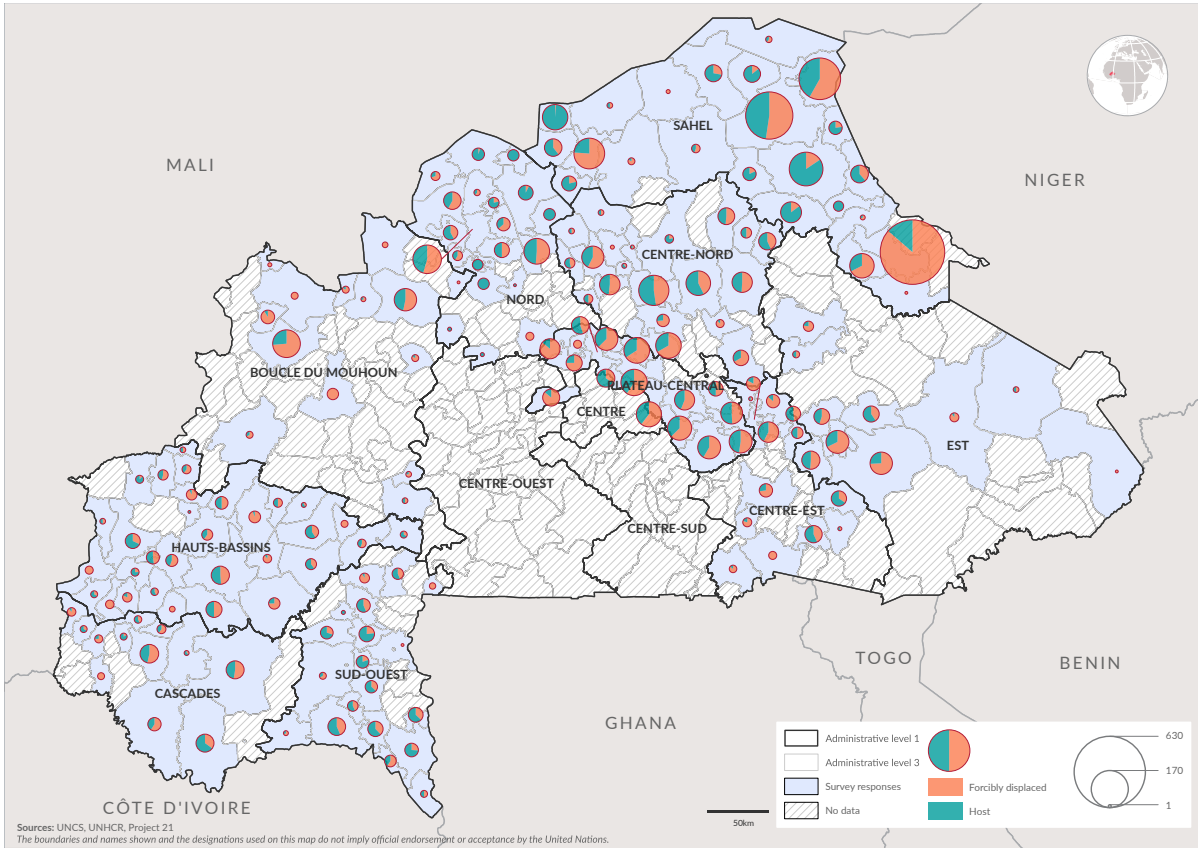
- What are households' (parents' and caregivers') perceptions of school and community safety and their link to education outcomes in P21 countries?
- What are effective strategies that have been used in P21 countries to mitigate safety incidents in and around schools?

Our quantitative analysis leveraged P21's 2020-2023 community-based monitoring survey in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger. The analysis synthesized observations of school and community safety, as well as mitigation strategies from two KIIs conducted in early 2024. The interviewees were based in Burkina Faso, where they held senior roles at international organizations involved in coordinating and implementing education and protection responses. Their expertise included child-protection programming, intercluster coordination, and the delivery of education services in emergency settings. We collected data through semistructured interviews conducted via internet-mediated communication platforms.

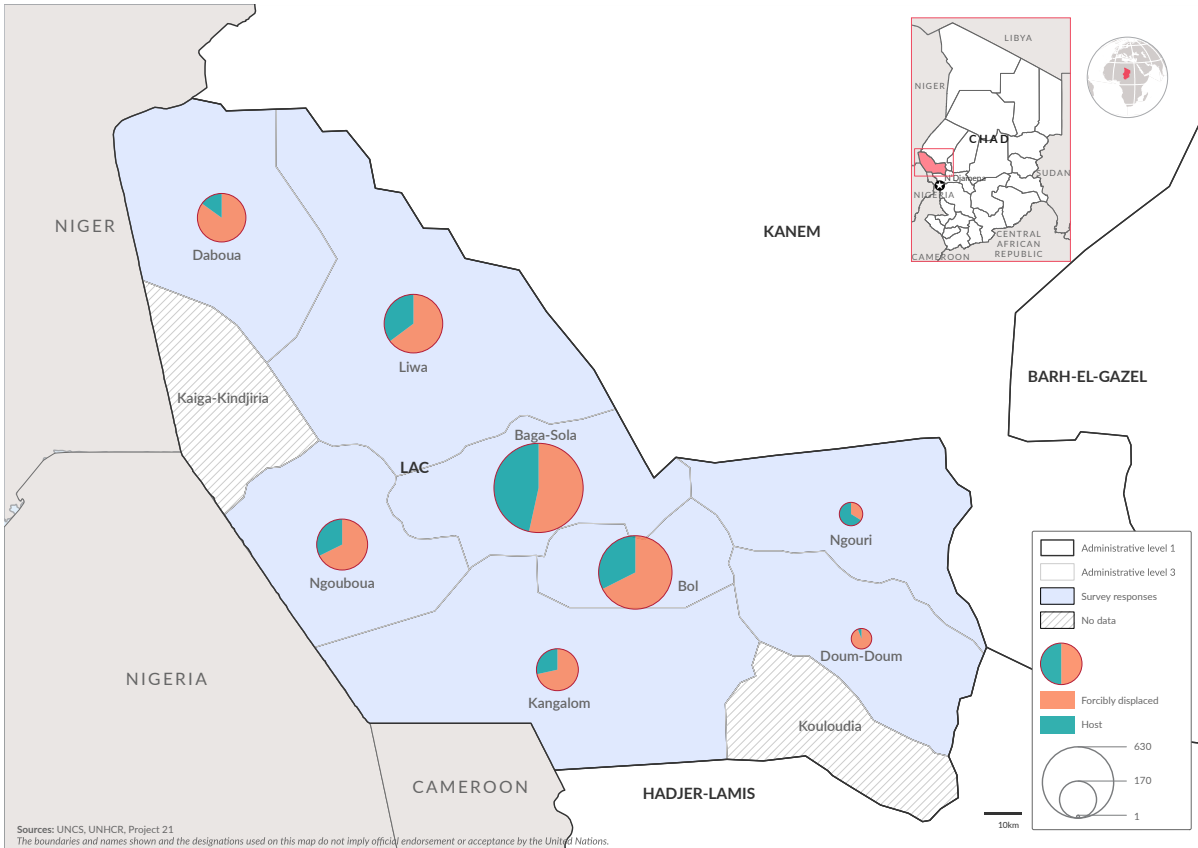
In interpreting the data, we aligned observed risk patterns with reported practices to recommend a coherent, context-appropriate mitigation package. This design is aligned with our systems theory framework, which treats school safety as the emergent property of interacting subsystems.

Our analysis draws from P21 country datasets and questionnaires covering the years 2020-2023 (accessed in 2024). We identified items relevant to education, safety, mobility, and protection and assessed cross-country comparability. Where identical wording existed, we defined fully comparable indicators; where wording differed slightly, we conducted crosswalks (a data-mapping process used to harmonize different survey items into a single comparable indicator) and documented residual noncomparability. The number and distribution of the 14,337 households surveyed at the geographic administrative 3 level across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger are reflected in Maps 1-4. Note that P21 monitoring began in Cameroon toward the end of 2023, therefore a map of those household responses cannot be generated.

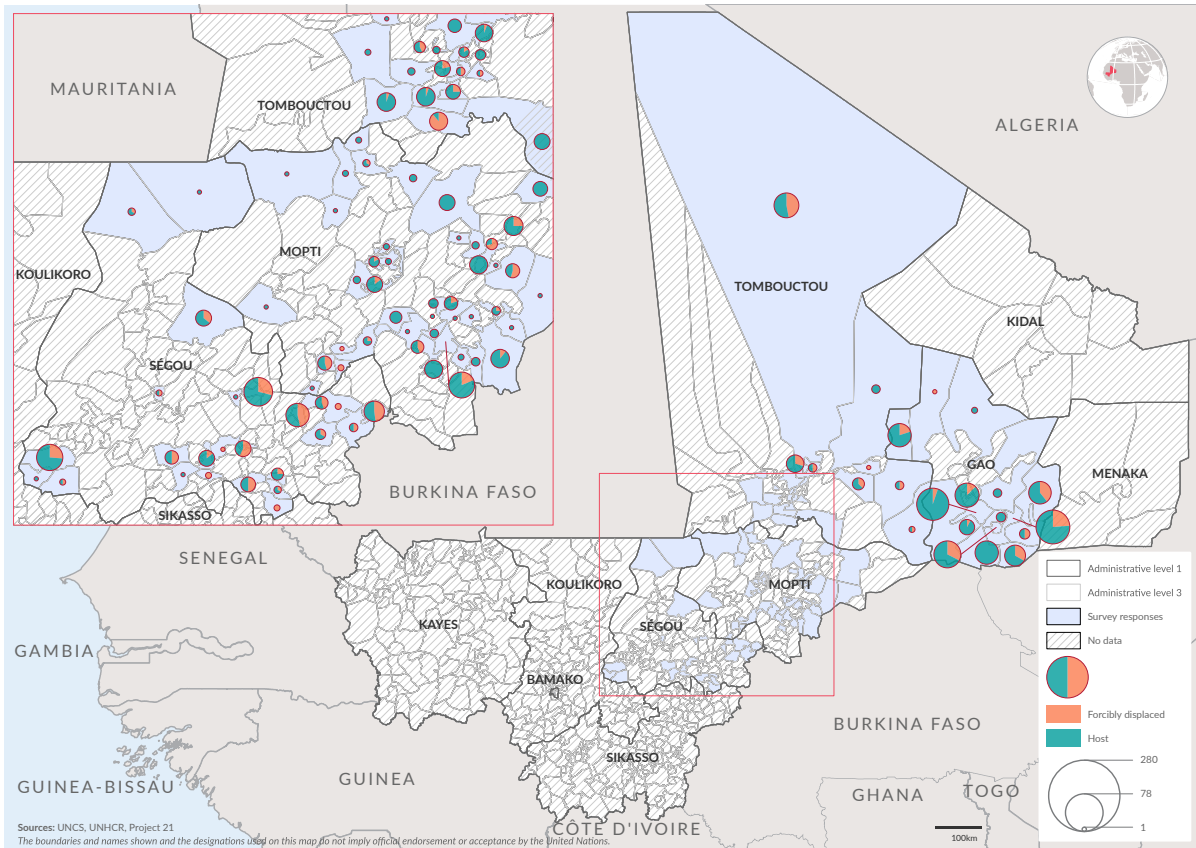
Map 1: Households Surveyed, Burkina Faso



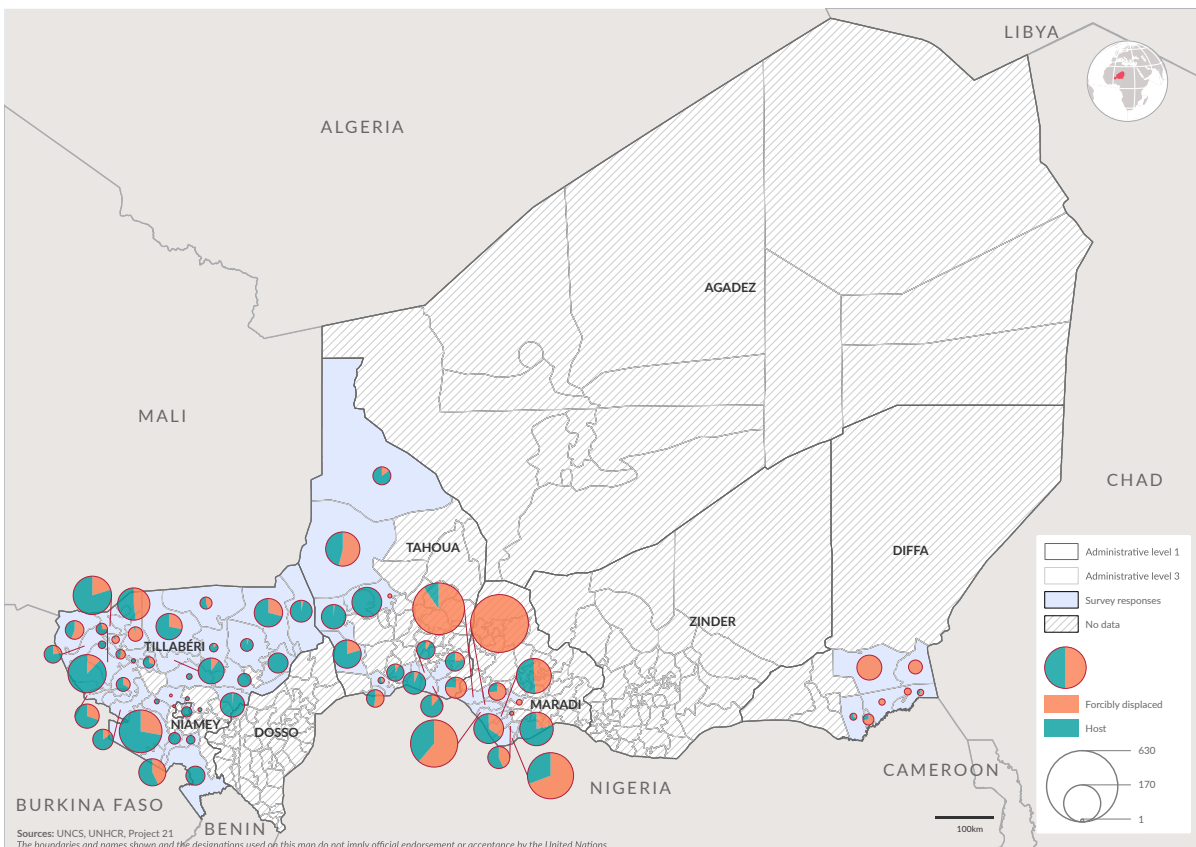
Map 2: Households Surveyed, Chad



Map 3: Households Surveyed, Mali



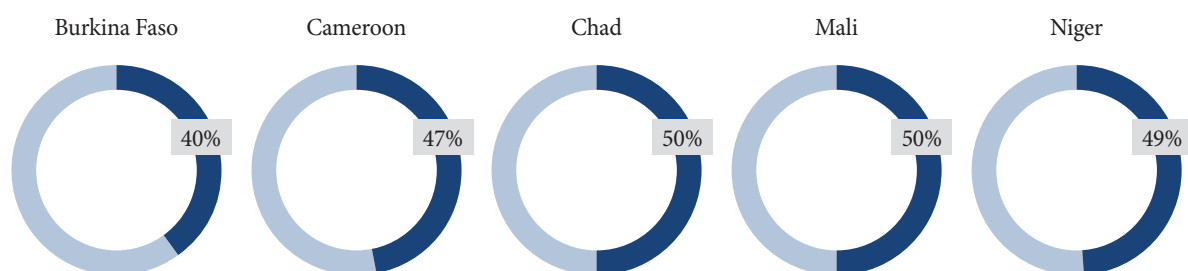
Map 4: Households Surveyed, Niger



FINDINGS: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY, AND LINKS TO EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN P21 COUNTRIES

Across all P21 countries, school participation is already deeply constrained: only 46 percent of households reported that children “go to school regularly,” with even lower rates in higher-risk settings such as Burkina Faso (40%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of Households Where Children Are Regularly Attending School, by Country

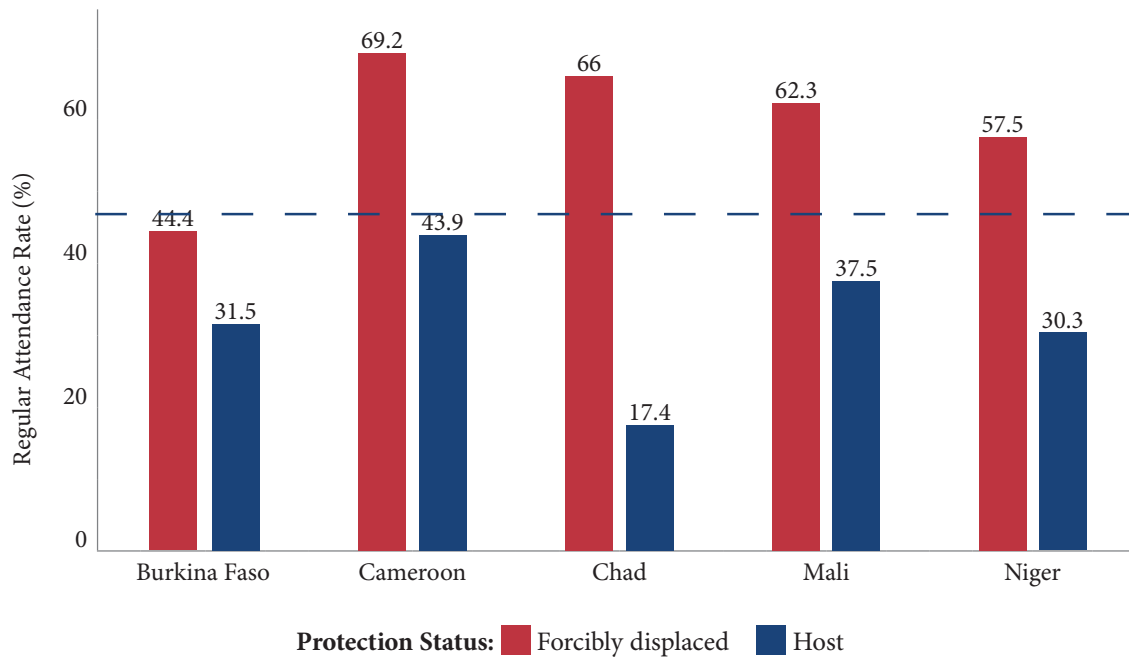


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 2,043 (Burkina Faso), 91 (Cameroon), 1,464 (Chad), 552 (Mali), 2,099 (Niger)

Consistent with existing global education metrics, participation declined from primary (59.9%) to secondary schooling levels (32.1%) and, on average, school participation was lower among children in forcibly displaced households (39.7%) than in host community households (52.5%) (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This contextualizes all subsequent indicators, as school participation is a minority condition, and patterns of safety incidents must be interpreted within a landscape of already restricted access.

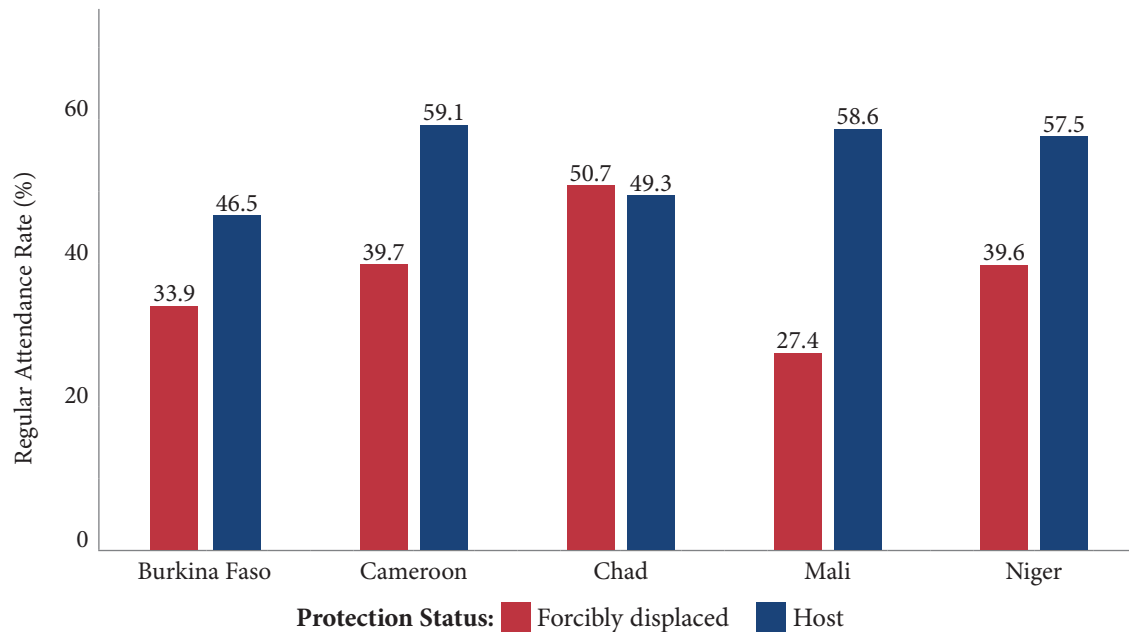
Figure 2: Percentage of Children Regularly Attending Primary and Secondary School



Source: P21 data

Note: Regular attendance rate is calculated by dividing the number of children regularly attending each level of school by the total population of the relevant school-level age group. In the P21 data, the primary school-level age group is 6-12 and the secondary school-level age group is 13-18. The blue dashed line represents the average rate of all children regularly attending school (46%). N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 6,249.

Figure 3: Share of Households Where Children Are Regularly Attending School, by Forced Displacement Status

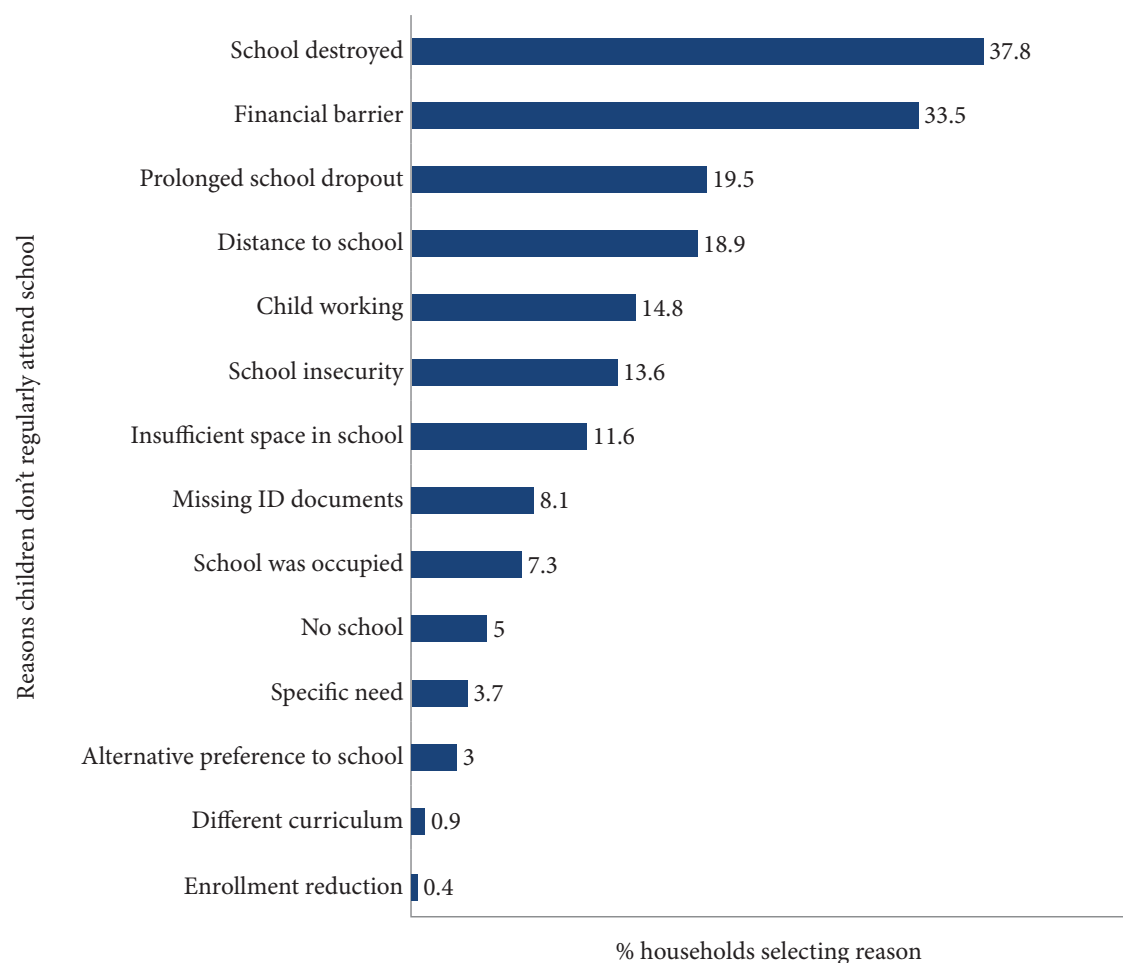


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children regularly attend school = 3,446 (host community), 2,798 (forcibly displaced)

Nonparticipation is attributed to overlapping risks and constraints on access. Nearly 40 percent of households with children who do not go to school regularly cited the destruction of their school, with large country variations (51% in Burkina Faso, 5% in Cameroon). Other prominent reasons included lack of financial resources (34%), prolonged disruption due to conflict or displacement (20%), and distance to school (19%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Share of Households Where Children Were Not Regularly Attending School and the Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries

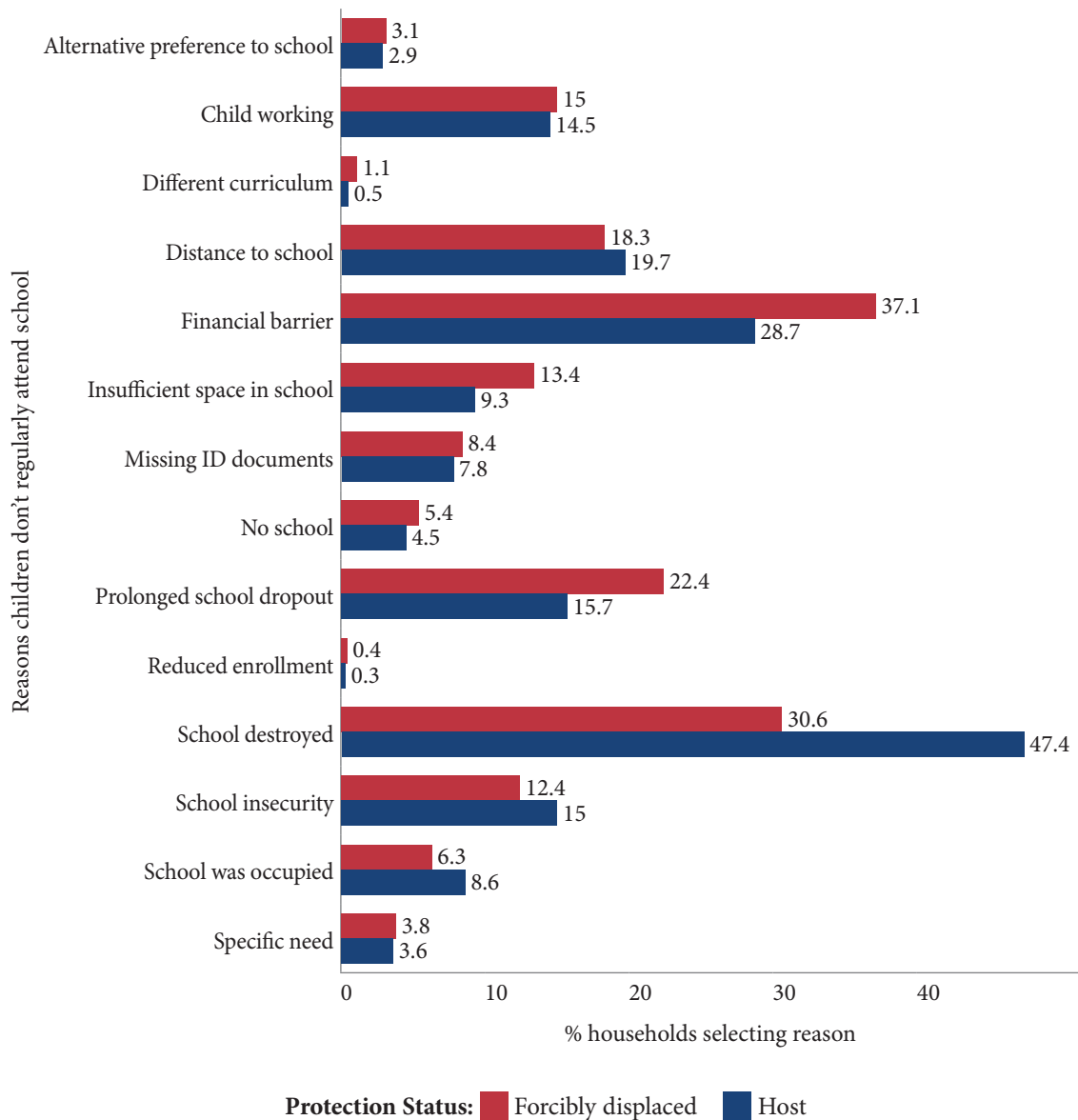


Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 7,036

Upon disaggregation by forced displacement status, a higher proportion of host community households (47%) than of forcibly displaced households (31%) referred to school destruction, while forcibly displaced households referred more often to financial barriers and prolonged disruption of schooling due to conflict or displacement (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries, by Protection Status



Source: P21 data

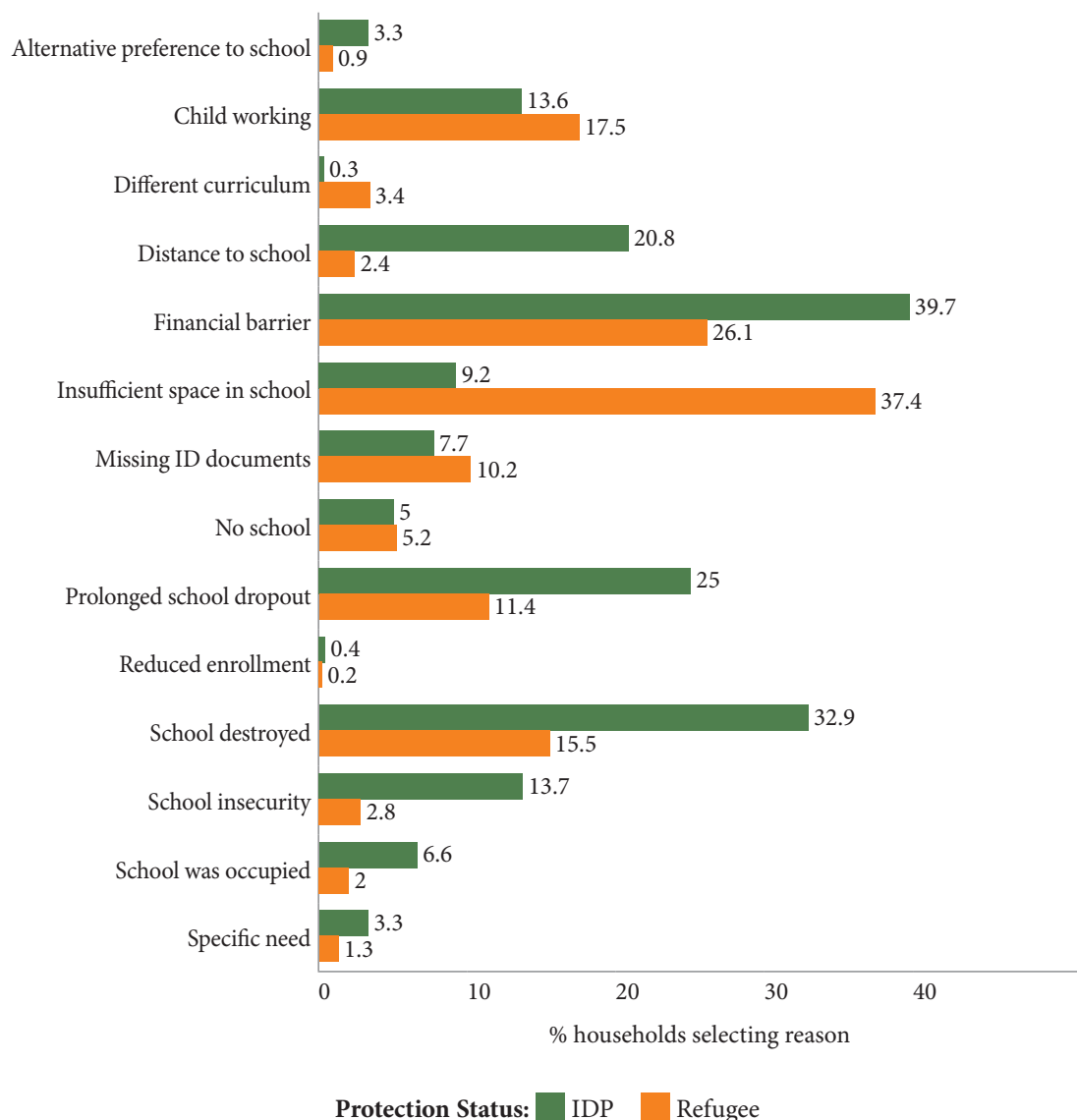
Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 3,015 (host community), 4,019 (forcibly displaced)

Households experience differences in humanitarian support, geographic concentration, and policy applicability, based on their type of forced displacement. Therefore, we further disaggregate all indicators by type of forced displacement and compare responses from refugee and internally displaced respondents.

Upon further disaggregation and comparison between types of forcibly displaced households, there is minimal difference in regular school participation: 57.3 percent of refugee households and 57.8 percent of internally displaced person (IDP) households reported children do not regularly attend school. However, the reasons why vary a great

deal. A higher proportion of IDP households (40%) than of refugee households (26%) cited financial difficulties. In fact, this is the most common reason for nonparticipation among IDP households, which also more frequently cited distance to school as a barrier to participation (21%) than refugee households (2%). On the other hand, while insufficient space in school was not often mentioned by households overall (12%), this was the number one reason given for nonparticipation among refugee households (37%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Main Reasons Children Do Not Regularly Attend School in P21 Countries, Refugees and IDPs



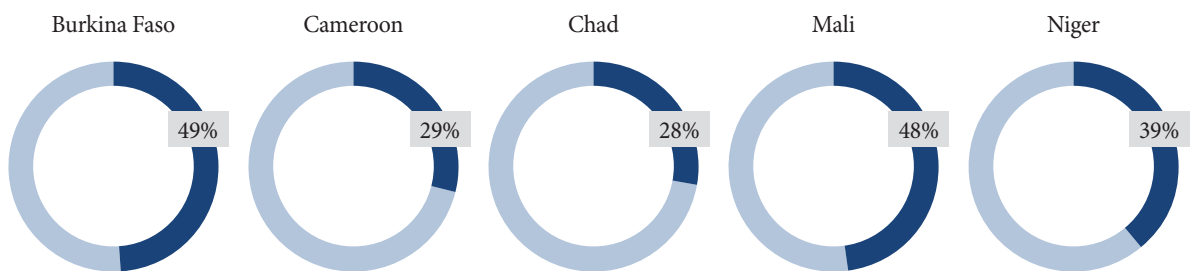
Source: P21 data

Note: N households reporting that children do not regularly attend school = 540 (refugee), 3,124 (IDP)

These responses demonstrate that the most frequently cited reasons children do not go to school regularly have little to do with in-school violence, such as bullying. Community-based and family context, as well as local education infrastructure, played a more significant role; forcibly displaced households frequently cited structural barriers and lack of resources. However, these varied by type of forced displacement; IDP households more often cited resource barriers, and refugee households pointed to a lack of inclusion in school.

Although households most frequently cited reasons for nonparticipation that had little to do with the immediate school environment, P21 data indicate that families generally did not perceive the schools to be safe. More than 40 percent of households felt that schools were unsafe, with clear differences by country. While nearly half of parents in Burkina Faso believed the school environment was not safe (49%), less than one-third of parents in Chad felt the same (28%) (Figure 7).

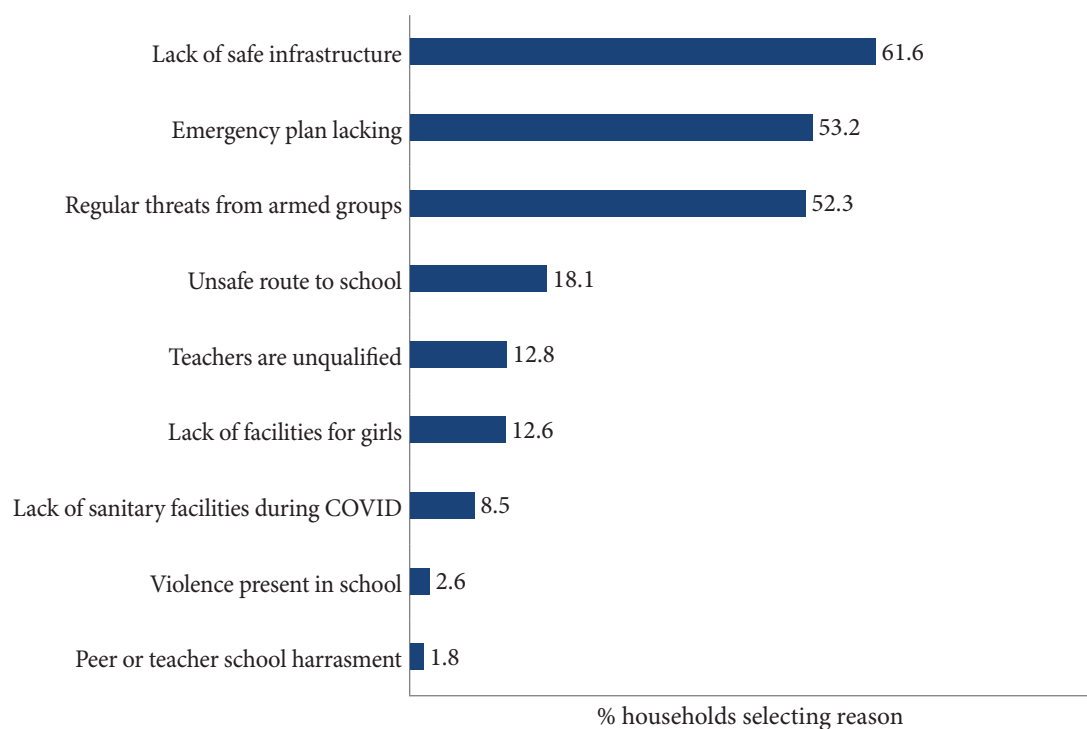
Figure 7: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe, by Country



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 2,536 (Burkina Faso), 55 (Cameroon), 816 (Chad), 522 (Mali), 1,639 (Niger)

When asked why they believe schools are unsafe, the top reasons were largely community-based threats and the school's inability to create a safe space in response. Households most often cited a lack of safe infrastructure (62%), lack of an emergency plan (53%), and regular threats from armed groups (52%) (Figure 8).

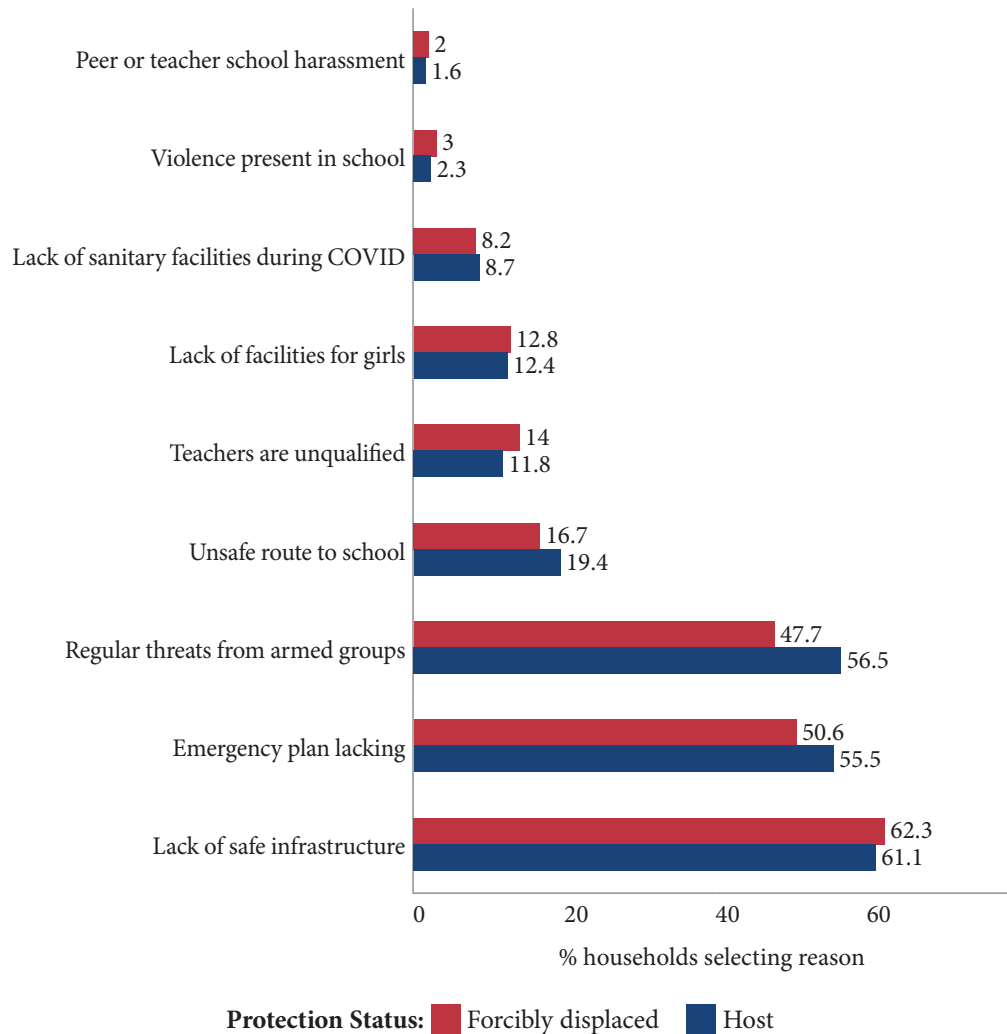
Figure 8: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons

Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 5,568

It is worth noting that a slightly higher percentage of host community households considered schools to be unsafe (45%) than forcibly displaced households (37%), but the reasons remained largely consistent, even after further disaggregation by type of forced displacement and comparisons between IDP and refugee households. However, a much higher proportion of IDP households felt that schools were unsafe (40%) than refugee households (19%) (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

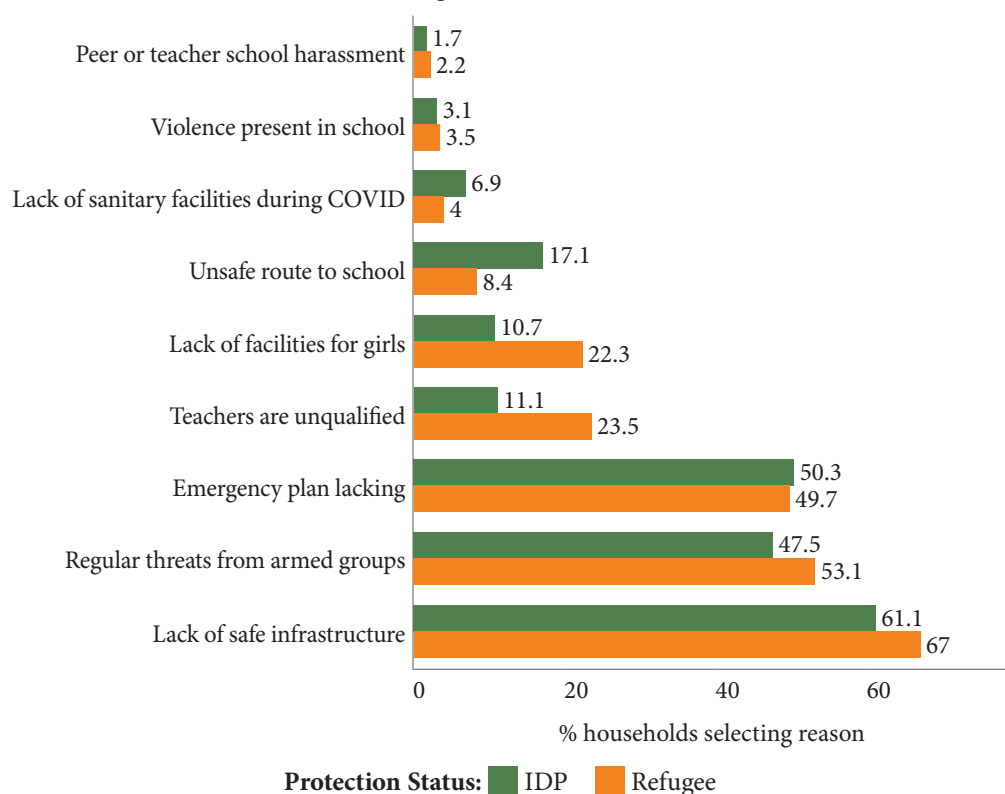
Figure 9: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, by Protection Status



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 2,930 (host community), 2,632 (forcibly displaced)

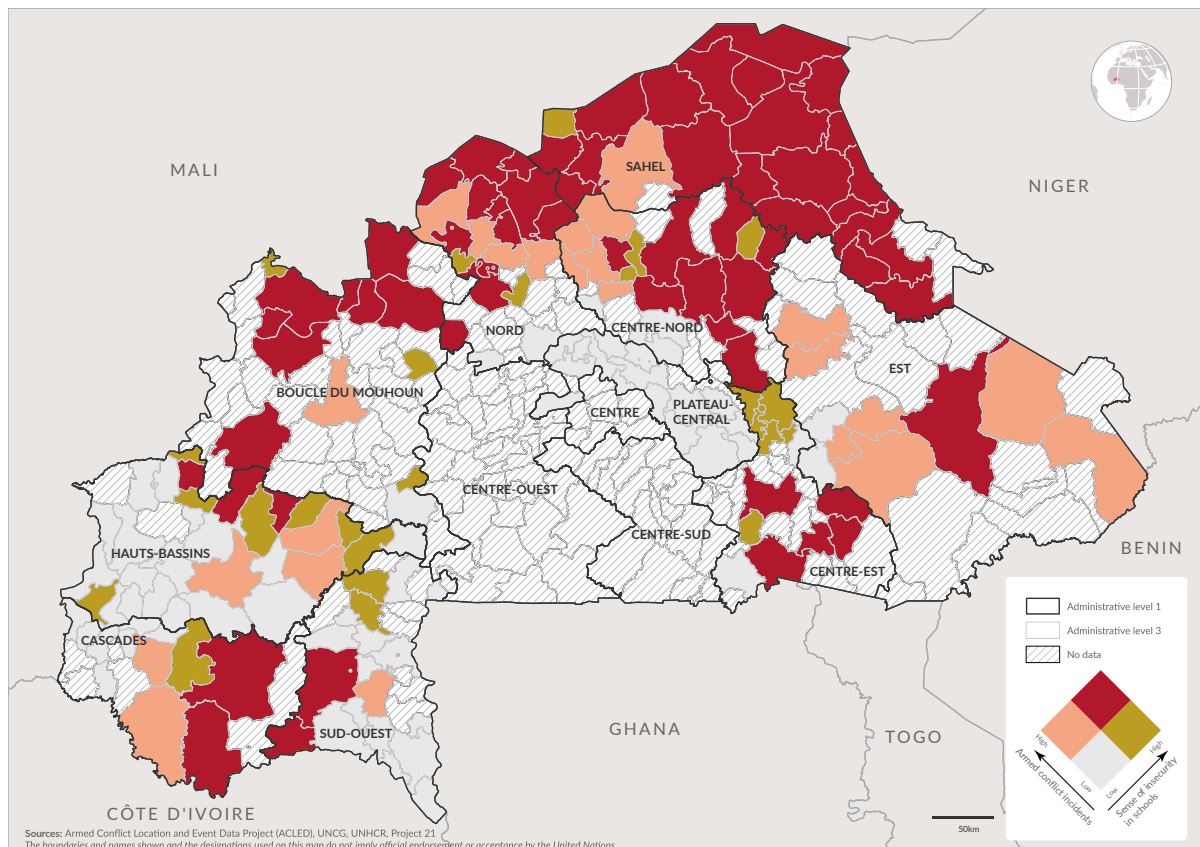
Figure 10: Share of Households That Believe Schools Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, Refugees and IDPs



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive schools to be unsafe = 183 (refugee), 2,160 (IDP)

This may explain why there is also geographic alignment between where a majority of households perceived schools to be unsafe and where there is a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents cataloged in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) dataset. In bivariate Map 5, we compare these two variables (ACLED data on the prevalence of armed conflict incidents between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2023, and P21 data on the proportion of households perceiving that schools are unsafe). The light pink areas indicate a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents but a low proportion of households reporting that they perceived schools to be unsafe. The dark yellow areas indicate the reverse. Finally, the dark red areas indicate a high prevalence of armed conflict incidents and a high proportion of households perceiving schools to be unsafe. Dark red areas dominate the map, indicating a possible association between broader insecurity in the community and perceptions that schools are not safe. This map uses the quantile classification method. The “low” class contains 50 percent of the classes with the lowest values and “high” contains the half with the highest values. Note that Burkina Faso is the only country with sufficient countrywide spread for the meaningful geospatial analysis and comparison represented in the dataset covering 2020-2023.

Map 5: Perceived School Unsafety and Armed Conflict Incidents, Burkina Faso

In the KIIs, respondents concurred that the primary threats to school safety are conflict-related, not peer or interpersonal. The senior child-protection specialist noted that incidents are “not specific to refugees, but [to] school children in general,” and that they occurred “on the way to school or when schools are attacked and occupied,” including incidents involving explosives. An education cluster coordinator in Burkina Faso said they reported “incident[s]...almost every day,” including attacks using dynamite and shootings that targeted children traveling to school. They described cases in which “12 children [were] shot...going to school,” which illustrates the profound mobility-related risks shaping parental decisions (KII, education cluster coordinator). Exposure to ambushes, IEDs, and the presence of armed actors undermine enrollment, participation, concentration, and learning: “It is not possible to perform in school” under such conditions (KII, senior child-protection specialist).

To investigate whether there is a relationship between sense of school safety and school participation, we ran a logistic regression with perceptions of school safety (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = perceived safe, 0 = not perceived safe) on the dependent variable of school participation (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = all children in the household regularly go to school, 0 = all children in the household are not regularly going to school). When controlling for the number of children in the household within the available age-range groups in the P21 dataset (6-12, 13-18), number of meals (proxy

for household income), and forced displacement status (recoded as a binary variable where 1 = forcibly displaced, 0 = host), the analysis found an increase of 601 percent in the odds that all children in the household going to school regularly is associated with a household perceiving that their children's school is safe (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). In addition, the odds of a child regularly going to school decline when the household is forcibly displaced (significant at the $p < 0.01$ level) (Model 1). Other relevant covariates, including school grade, gender, distance to school, recent school closures, or household exposure to conflict-related incidents, are not available in the P21 dataset.

Model 1: Effects Perceptions of School Safety Have on Regular School Participation
(Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
school_safe_environment_yes	1.948***	(0.040)
number_six_twelve	0.038***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.026**	(0.010)
number_meals_child_all	0.075*	(0.041)
protection_status	-0.715***	(0.040)
Constant	-0.978***	(0.050)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -7,783.589		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 15,579.180		

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

To explore system-level interactions, with a focus on the dynamics associated with forced displacement, we ran a second logistic regression with the interaction of perceptions of school safety and forced displacement status on the dependent variable of school participation. When controlling for the number of children in the household and the number of meals, the analysis found that perceiving a school as safe is associated with a smaller increase in attendance for forcibly displaced children than for host community children. Specifically, the effect of a perception that a school is safe on school participation is 15 percent smaller for forcibly displaced children than for host community children (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level) (Model 2).

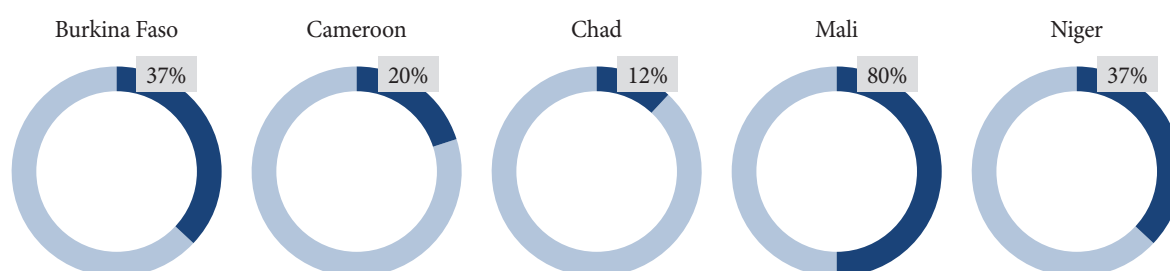
Model 2: Effects Perceptions of School Safety Have on Regular School Participation, by Forced Displacement Status (Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
school_safe_environment_yes	2.026***	(0.056)
protection_status	-0.623***	(0.061)
number_six_twelve	0.038***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.026***	(0.010)
number_meals_child_all	0.077*	(0.041)
school_safe_environment_yes:protection_status	-0.160**	(0.080)
Constant	-1.017***	(0.054)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -7,781.599		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 15,577.200		

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Although a slightly smaller proportion of households in P21 countries reported that they did not feel safe in their communities (33%) than the proportion that felt schools were unsafe, some common trends emerged. Disaggregation by country of perceptions that a community is unsafe aligns closely with a disaggregation of perceptions that school is unsafe, with the highest proportion of households perceiving their communities to be unsafe in Mali (50%), Burkina Faso (37%), and Niger (37%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Share of Households That Do Not Feel Safe in Their Communities, by Country

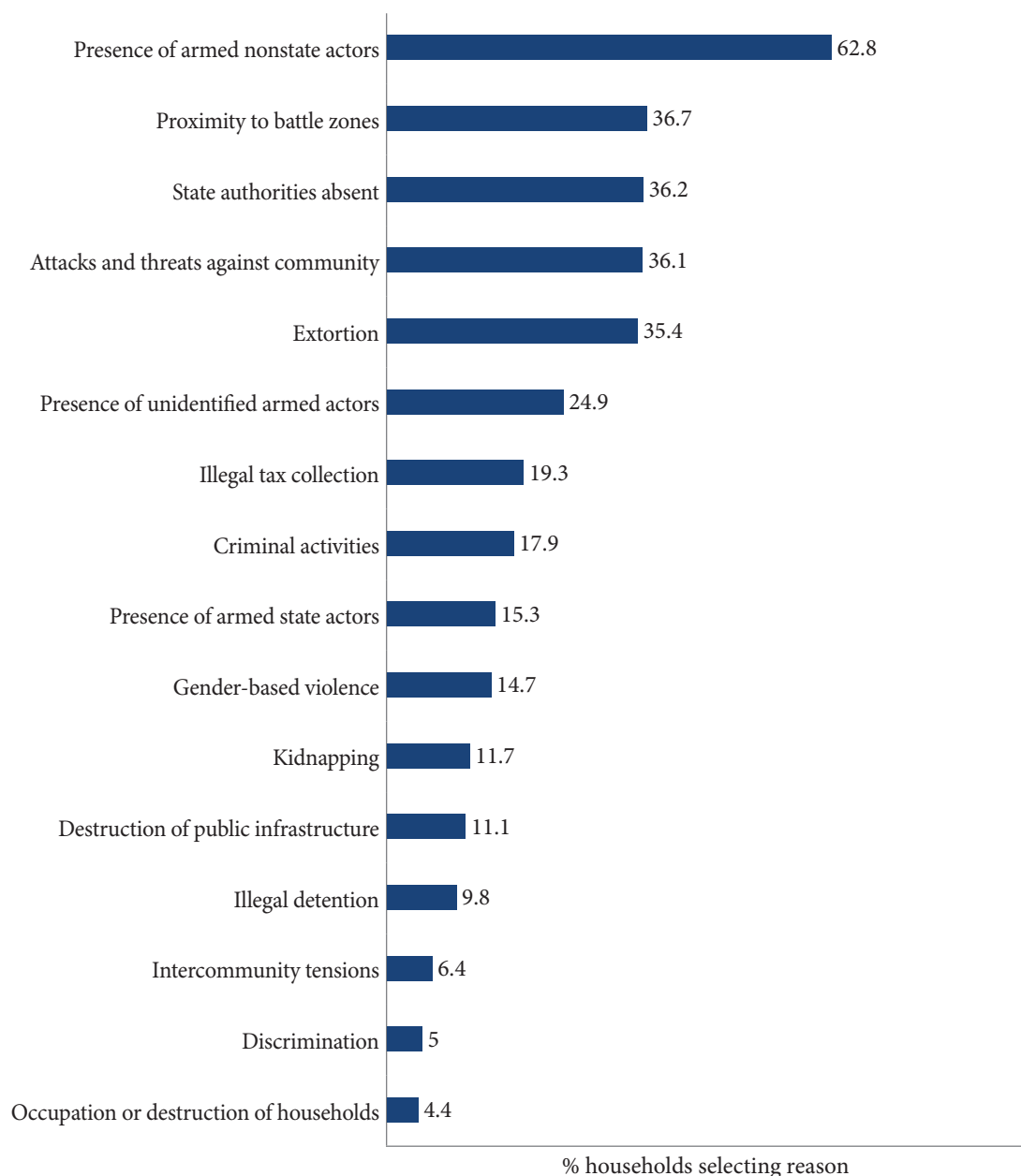


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that perceive community to be unsafe = 1,980 (Burkina Faso), 42 (Cameroon), 376 (Chad), 597 (Mali), 1,696 (Niger)

When asked why they perceive their community to be unsafe, the largest share of respondents indicated a prevalence of nonstate armed actors (63%), followed by proximity to battle zones (37%), absence of state authorities (36%), and attacks against the population (36%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons

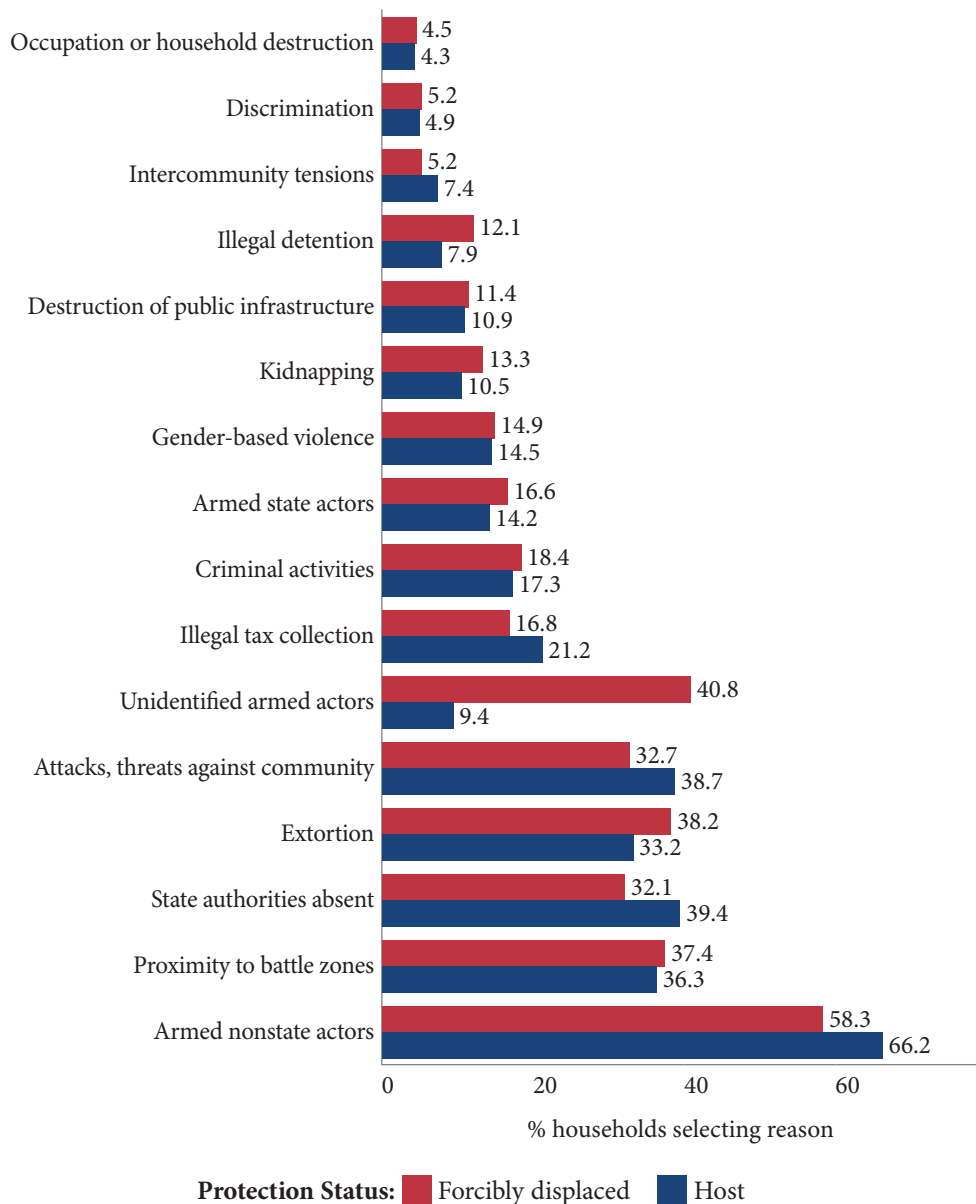


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe = 4,691

A higher percentage of host community households (38%) than forcibly displaced households (28%) believed communities were unsafe. When households were asked why they perceived the community to be unsafe, forcibly displaced and host community households tended to select the same reasons, with one very notable exception: the presence of unidentified armed actors. Almost half of forcibly displaced households attributed their perception that the community is unsafe to this (41%), while fewer than 10 percent of host community households selected this reason (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, by Protection Status

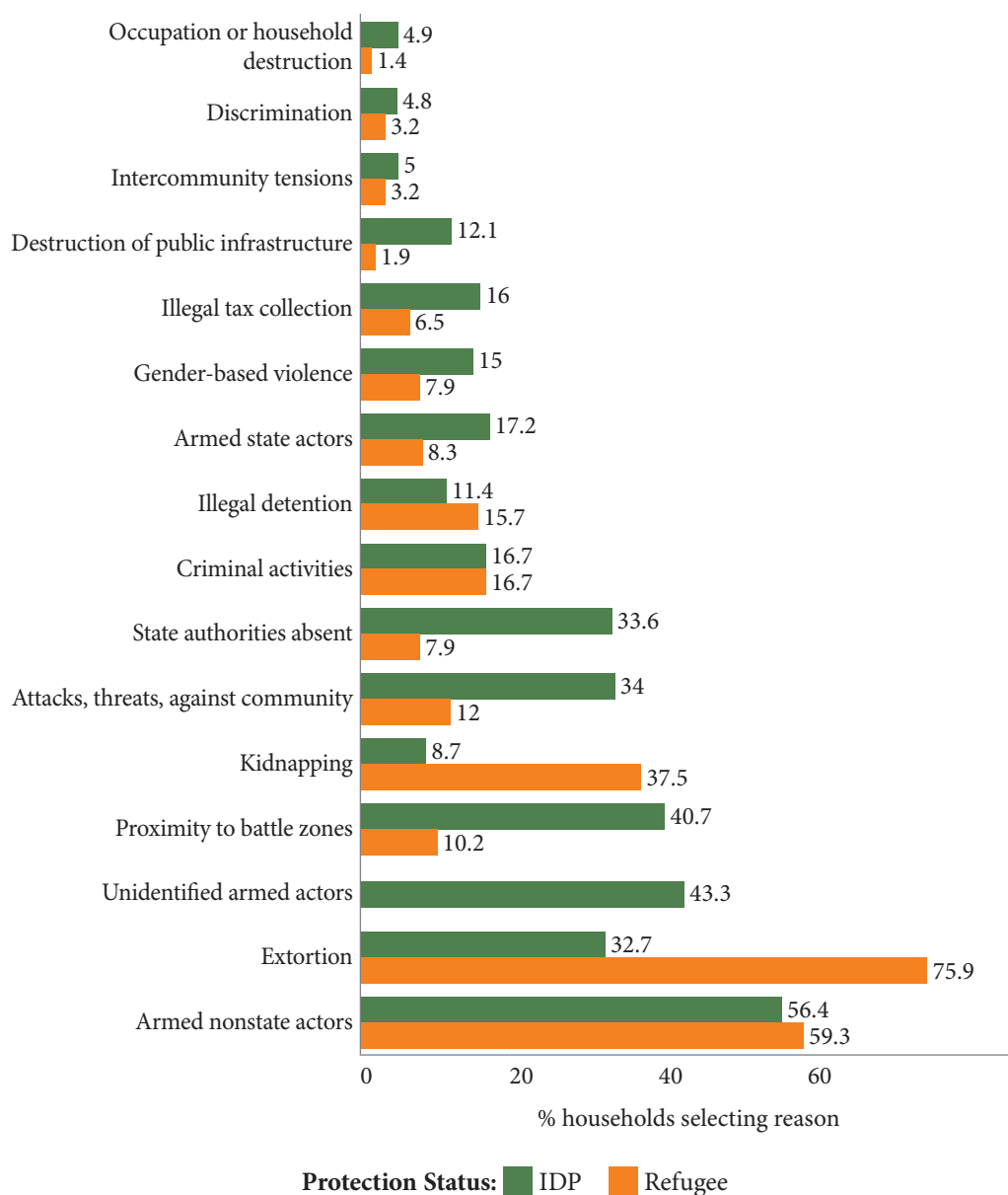


Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe = 2,643 (host community), 2,042 (forcibly displaced)

When we further disaggregate households by type of forced displacement and compare responses from refugee and IDP households, we can see a trend similar to that of perceptions of school unsafety. A slightly higher proportion of IDP households (29%) than refugee households (22%) perceived their communities to be unsafe. The general reasons referenced most often for this perception by both groups align with the trends cited by forcibly displaced households overall. However, extortion is the top reason mentioned by IDP households (76%), but only 33 percent of refugee households gave that reason (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Share of Households That Believe Communities Are Unsafe and Their Reasons, Refugees and IDPs



Source: P21 data

Note: N households that believe communities are unsafe: 216 (refugee), 1,610 (IDP)

As with a sense of school safety and school participation, a logistic regression affirms that there is a clear link between sense of community safety and school participation. In Model 3 we ran a logistic regression with perceptions of community safety (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = perceived safe, 0 = not perceived safe) on the dependent variable of school participation (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = all children in the household are regularly going to school, 0 = all children in the household are not regularly going to school). When controlling for the number of children in the household within the available age-range groups (6-12, 13-18), number of meals (proxy for household income), and forced displacement status (recoded as a binary variable, where 1 = forcibly displaced, 0 = host), the analysis found that a 203 percent increase in the odds of all children in the household going to school regularly is associated with a household perceiving the community to be safe (results statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). This result indicates that a sense of safety in the community is linked to a higher probability that children in the household are going to school regularly (Model 3).

Model 3: Effects Perceptions of Community Safety Have on Regular School Participation (Logistic Regression)

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
sense_safety_yes	1.107***	(0.040)
number_six_twelve	0.033***	(0.008)
number_thirteen_eighteen	-0.041***	(0.009)
number_meals_child_all	0.142***	(0.038)
protection_status	-0.665***	(0.037)
Constant	-0.691***	(0.050)
Observations: 13,419		
Log Likelihood: -8,723.739		
Akaike Inf. Crit.: 17,459.480		

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

To explore additional systems-level interactions, we ran a logistic regression with the interaction of perceptions of community safety and forced displacement status on school participation. However, when controlling for the number of children in the household and number of meals, the results were not statistically significant.

The qualitative findings may identify three complementary strategies used across P21 contexts to mitigate school safety risks that directly respond to patterns observed in the quantitative data. Preparedness and emergency planning, including the integration of safe school protocols into teacher training, address the household concerns reflected in the quantitative findings, where a lack of safe infrastructure and the absence of

emergency plans were among the most frequently cited reasons for perceiving schools to be unsafe. Protection mainstreaming (i.e., the systematic integration of protection principles and GBV risk mitigation into educational programming) implemented through a collaboration between education, protection, and WASH actors, responds to vulnerabilities experienced by displaced and marginalized learners, which the quantitative data show are associated with lower rates of school participation and higher perceptions of insecurity, particularly among forcibly displaced households. Adaptive education delivery models (e.g., locating learning centers closer to communities, introducing staggered shifts, conducting protection activities within school compounds, and deploying temporary learning spaces) directly target the barriers identified in the quantitative data, including distance to school, mobility-related insecurity, and disruption caused by conflict and displacement.

The quantitative and qualitative findings together indicate that schools and communities in P21 countries are generally not perceived to be safe. These sentiments are overwhelmingly attributed to armed-group activity, mobility hazards, and infrastructure vulnerability, rather than to intraschool violence. Nevertheless, household perceptions of both school and community safety have a significant association with whether children go to school regularly. It is important to note that forcibly displaced households may account for, experience, or prioritize perceptions of school safety differently from their host community peers when making schooling decisions.

DISCUSSION

Across the five P21 countries, we observe a consistent pattern of constrained participation, conflict-related disruption, and chronic protection risks to be associated with household schooling decisions. Only 46 percent of households reported that all children regularly go to school (40% among forcibly displaced households), which situates all subsequent safety indicators within a context of already limited access that is amplified for forcibly displaced families. Nonparticipation in school is attributed to overlapping risks and barriers: nearly 40 percent of households whose children do not go to school regularly cited the destruction of their school, along with lack of financial resources (34%), prolonged disruption of classes due to conflict or displacement (20%), and distance to school (19%). Forcibly displaced households, with notable variation by type of displacement, disproportionately cited a lack of financial resources, insufficient space in school, and prolonged school dropout as the primary barriers they face. These challenges compound an environment with high rates of insecurity, forced displacement, conflict, and climate shocks.

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that households generally do not feel that schools (41%) or communities are safe (33%). The most common reasons for this include a lack of safe infrastructure or school preparedness, threats from various armed actors, proximity to battle zones, absence of state authorities, and attacks against the population. The trends appear similar, regardless of forced displacement status. However, among forcibly displaced households, a higher proportion of IDP households felt their schools and communities were unsafe (40% and 29%, respectively) than of refugee households (19% and 22%, respectively).

These findings are reinforced by the KIIs, in which participants emphasized that the dominant school safety risks are conflict related and that they are particularly acute along the routes to school. The KIIs participants referred to armed ambushes, IEDs, attacks using explosives, and shootings targeting children in transit; for example, “12 children [were] shot...going to school.” These factors may undermine student enrollment, participation, concentration, and performance; as an interviewee reflected, “It is not possible to perform in school” under such conditions. Informants also reported near-daily incidents in some areas and the precautionary school closures that rippled across the surrounding communities following the attacks, which corroborates the quantitative picture of a persistent environment of danger where the constant fear of violence drives behavior, even if specific violent incidents are only captured sporadically in the data.

School-related violence (especially bullying) is prevalent worldwide (e.g., UNESCO estimates that 32% of students worldwide were bullied at least once in the previous month) and is consistently associated with worse learning and wellbeing outcomes. However, research in contexts comparable to P21 countries suggests that in-school peer violence is not the dominant signal of risk in crisis-affected, forced displacement settings (UNESCO 2019; UNICEF 2018; Barzilay et al. 2017; Smalley, Warren, and Barefoot 2017; Chávez et al. 2021; Delprato, Akyeampong, and Dunne 2017; Trucco and Inostroza 2017). Furthermore, complementary evidence shows that community violence reduces academic performance, attention, and attendance, often more significantly than in-school violence (Burdick-Will 2013; Caudillo and Torche 2014; Chávez and Aguilar 2021; Monteiro and Rocha 2016; Ramirez et al. 2012).

Notably, Bowen and Bowen (1999) found neighborhood danger to be more predictive of attendance and behavior than school danger. Trucco and Inostroza (2017) reported that, in high-homicide contexts, the prevalence and academic salience of bullying are relatively lower, which suggests that schools may function as protective spaces in violent communities. Our logistic regression analysis (see Models 1 and 3) and review of other studies helps explain the P21 pattern: ambient community threats, the presence of armed actors, extortion, IEDs, and proximity to attacks appear to be closely associated with perceptions and behaviors that suppress regular participation in school. In forced displacement contexts, the quantitative literature is sparse and often relies on imperfect proxies. Existing studies suggest that there is a high degree of victimization among

refugee learners and frequent discrimination, while large assessments (e.g., PISA 2018) show small average gaps in bullying between immigrants and nonimmigrants, and mixed predictive power for immigrant background (Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali 2023; Yilmaz and Cikili-Uytun 2020; Alsharabati and Lahoud 2016; OECD 2020; Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt 2018). This reinforces the need for context-grounded monitoring that is attentive to displacement (including within group variation), such as P21, to surface the risks most salient to forcibly displaced and host communities in conflict zones.

Using the systems theory lens, macrolevel conflict dynamics (armed groups, weak state presence) and climate shocks create a high-hazard environment; mid-level mobility risks (ambushes, IEDs, extortion) and service disruptions elevate exposure; and microlevel school vulnerabilities (infrastructure, safeguarding capacity) shape the protective value of schooling. Within this system, low-frequency, high-severity incidents can trigger precautionary school closures that persist and reshape household routines. Communities may reopen schools despite improved security, which produces nonlinear, place-specific patterns in participation and perceived safety. From our quantitative data analysis, perceived safety in the community, and especially in schools, is positively and significantly associated with the probability that all children go to school regularly. However, our exploration of the interaction between perceived school safety and forced displacement status (Model 2) finds that the effect of perceived school safety associated with school participation is smaller for forcibly displaced children than for host community children. Perhaps prior experience of forced displacement and the risks associated with it make perceived school safety less of a priority, which emphasizes the importance of contextualized mitigation strategies that account for the household needs as a result of forced displacement.

The three clusters of strategies identified by the KIIs align with the dominant risk pathways documented by P21. First, safe school preparedness (integrated into teacher training) and refreshed emergency planning build a school-level capacity to absorb shocks from low-frequency, high-severity threats, which can improve perceived safety when practiced, despite the psychological toll they take. Second, child protection and GBV mainstreaming, implemented with WASH partners, psychosocial support delivered by teachers, identification of distress, and referral to specialized protection and health pathways, addresses in-school harms and gendered barriers. In Burkina Faso, GBV training has been made a mandatory educational activity, which serves to institutionalize protection within the education response. Further, community engagement with traditional and religious leaders supports norm changes where legal prohibitions (e.g., corporal punishment) coexist with entrenched practices: “You have to act on both” the legal and social fronts (KII, senior child-protection specialist). Third, adaptive delivery and infrastructure, locating places of learning closer to children, staggering shifts (including during vacations), hosting protection activities on school grounds, and deploying temporary or semifinished classrooms near operational schools reduce exposure to ambushes and IEDs along the route to school. Although temporary

structures are fragile (e.g., tents last about one year), they help sustain access to schools under conditions of blockade or high threat. These measures target distinct leverage points (school protection capacity, social norms and services, mobility exposure) and collectively weaken the coupling between community insecurity and disrupted schooling.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that, in the Central Sahel P21 context, the school safety risks cited most often are rooted not in intraschool peer violence but in the broader conflict environment. This specifically includes armed-group activity, mobility hazards such as IEDs, and the fragility of the surrounding infrastructure. Families' perceptions of safety, formed within this landscape of chronic threats, are closely linked with household decisions to send children to school. These findings align with our regression analysis and the broader evidence base linking community violence, perceived risk, forced displacement, and education access. Taken together, the results underscore the need for a layered mitigation approach that integrates preparedness and safeguarding, systematic protection and GBV mainstreaming, and proximity-based, flexible delivery models. Such efforts must be supported by an evidence ecosystem that is simultaneously standardized and context responsive, ethically governed, and designed for practical use by both educators and the affected communities.

A central strength of this research lies in its multicountry design that is attentive to displacement, which combines school participation data, community perceptions, and protection and GBV contexts with field-informed mitigation strategies. This integration provides a rare descriptive foundation across fragile border zones, where systematic education data are often sparse. The ability to link quantitative patterns with qualitative insights further enhances the interpretability and operational relevance of our findings for EiE actors.

However, due to several limitations, generalizations should be made carefully, primarily in relation to similar conflict-affected environments that are affected by displacement. Missing denominators for certain indicators restricted the precision of our descriptive estimates, and the inability to apply sampling weights due to absent design variables limited cross-country comparability. The limited availability of education outcomes indicators (only regular school participation) and the limited KII sample constrains the depth of qualitative triangulation. The research team made several attempts to recruit additional key informants, including UNHCR staff, but were unable to do so. This was largely due to limited staffing availability in the field, a consequence of shrinking global humanitarian funding, as well as capacity constraints among field staff members to participate as key informants. We also were unable to include interviews

with other relevant stakeholder groups, such as parents or caregivers, school principals, teachers, or other community actors, due to the challenging security and operational environment and the need to prioritize the protection and safety of all stakeholders. Field-level capacity constraints and reduced staffing also limited our ability to recruit other stakeholder groups. Finally, in the data available at the start of the analysis for this research (collected from 2020-2023), Burkina Faso was the only country with sufficient countrywide spread for a meaningful geospatial analysis; therefore, cross-country comparison was not possible.

Future research should examine more deeply how actual and perceived school-related violence interacts with education outcomes for refugees and crisis-affected learners, with particular attention to longitudinal patterns of regular school attendance (not solely participation), learning, and wellbeing. Although qualitative findings strengthen the interpretation of quantitative results, several gaps remain that require further research. Qualitative evidence suggests that chronic exposure to insecurity affects student wellbeing, concentration, and academic performance, yet the P21 quantitative data do not capture broader learning or psychosocial outcomes. While preparedness training, protection mainstreaming, and adaptive delivery models were identified as effective mitigation strategies, there is limited quantitative evidence that assesses their long-term impact and scalability. Qualitative findings also highlight tensions between formal legal protections and entrenched social norms, which current quantitative indicators do not measure, as well as operational constraints that limit data collection among refugee populations. Additionally, variation in risk experiences and perception by type of forced displacement indicates the need for longitudinal and comparative research, along with qualitative studies with larger and more diverse samples. This will lead to better understanding of how mitigation measures are implemented in practice, how variation in support from humanitarian actors and policy implementation may affect the needs and safety perceptions of IDPs as compared to refugees, and how communities negotiate risk in everyday schooling decisions.

Finally, data collection using the P21 questionnaire continues to take place, and future research may take advantage of the expanded dataset as well as more robust within-country coverage. This also would improve cross-country comparisons by multicountry displacement situation, including use of ACLED data to further explore associations between education outcomes and actual incidents and perceptions of violence. Such research would strengthen the transferability and practical relevance of evidence for the educators, protection actors, and decisionmakers working in volatile settings.

Advancing this agenda requires an EiE evidence ecosystem that balances standardization with contextual specificity through a core set of comparable indicators, complemented by locally tailored modules; that establishes clear, ethical governance standards on data stewardship, consent, safeguarding, access, and dissemination; and that strengthens local capacity for analysis, visualization, and responsible use. This approach was directly

informed by our analysis of Project 21 data across the Central Sahel, which reveals that school participation is significantly associated with perceptions of safety that are driven more by systemic threats like armed-group activity and mobility hazards than by typical intraschool violence. Sustained investment in these systems in alignment with operational decision cycles, including by NGOs and government ministries working in displacement-affected education systems, as well as prioritization by researchers and donors, will improve the relevance and uptake of evidence for educators, protection actors, and decisionmakers. This will result in more equitable, effective, and contextually grounded approaches to school safety in crisis-affected regions.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Definitions

Term	Definition
School-related violence	This term encompasses a range of harms, including physical, psychological, and sexual violence (UNESCO 2017). It includes bullying, weapon- and drug-related incidents, corporal punishment, sexual and verbal abuse, and gender-based violence.
School safety	We define school safety as a secure and inclusive learning environment that protects students from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. It includes measures to prevent and address aggression, bullying, and violence while promoting a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Astor, Guerra, and Van Acker 2010)
Community violence	This term is defined as a series of deliberate acts intended to cause physical harm against a person in the community (Cooley-Strickland et al. 2009) where children live and/or go to school. Armed violence and drug-related violence that occur in communities where children live and/or go to school can also be included.
Education outcomes	Due to available data, we focus on school participation, understood as pupils or students who have attended a given grade or level of education at least one day during the academic reference year (UNESCO-UIS 2024).
Refugee	This term includes individuals who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country” (UNHCR 2025a).
Internally displaced person (IDP)	This term includes “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (UNHCR 2025b, 1).