

THE COST OF STAYING

BARRIERS TO SCHOOL RETENTION IN THE NORTH JORDAN VALLEY

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Executive Summary (abridged)

The North Jordan Valley (NJV) faces significant development challenges, including concentrated agricultural poverty, high rates of child labor, and persistent school dropout that national data routinely fails to capture. Dropout rates in NJV exceed national averages, yet the region remains underrepresented in Jordan's education research and policy frameworks.

This research fills that gap. Commissioned by Save the Children Jordan (SCJ), it generates the first context-specific, qualitative account of the push-and-pull factors shaping school retention and reintegration in NJV. The research produces triangulated findings that SCJ and its partners can use to adapt programming and strengthen advocacy. Findings were derived through thematic analysis of three data sources: focus groups with caregivers, an implementers' roundtable, and an experts' roundtable. All sessions were transcribed, translated, and coded independently by authors. Codes were organized into themes and categorized as either barriers or enablers to education across school, family and community dimensions. Findings were then compared across stakeholder groups to identify converging and diverging perspectives. Cross-cutting findings that emerged consistently across at least two data sources were treated as triangulated conclusions, while differing perspectives were documented and analyzed separately.

Three findings emerged consistently across all data sources. Caregivers made the first unambiguous: economic pressure and child labor drive dropout, not indifference to education. Families described strong aspirations for their children and recalled their academic achievements, yet agricultural livelihoods, seasonal labor cycles, and the absence of any safety net make child labor a survival response. Addressing dropout here requires economic solutions, not behavioral ones. Second, structural access barriers compound household poverty in ways program design has underestimated. Families absorb daily transportation costs of approximately two dinars per child, which, combined with food, clothing, and tutoring, routinely exceed the value of cash transfers they receive. Children walk three to four kilometers in extreme heat along unsafe routes. These frictions convert financial stress into absenteeism and absenteeism into permanent dropout. Third, SCJ's psychosocial support (PSS) sessions were frequently cited as valued program elements. Caregivers described them as transformative, shifting their understanding of child labor's long-term costs and strengthening their children's motivation to return to school. But gains were consistently lost when program support ended abruptly. Findings suggest that dropout and re-enrollment in Shaykh Husayn are not fixed educational states, but fluctuating responses to chronic economic instability, requiring interventions that support long-term educational continuity rather than short-term re-enrollment alone.

This research recommends that SCJ adjust cash transfers to reflect the true cost of attendance, and program exits should be gradual rather than abrupt. At the school level, SCJ should institutionalize its reintegration model combining PSS and social-emotional learning beyond individual program cycles, and advocate to the government for transportation subsidies and school meal incentives. At the community level, SCJ should pilot micro-enterprise support to reduce household dependence on child labor, and use this evidence base to push for a national policy dialogue on dropout in agricultural communities, a context Jordan's education planning has yet to adequately address.