

Insecurity, transfer-seeking, and compounding stress among refugee and host-community teachers in Kenya: Evidence from Garissa and Turkana Counties

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in refugee and conflict-affected settings in Sub-Saharan Africa face acute and persistent insecurity that extends well beyond formal school boundaries. Despite growing recognition that teacher well-being is critical to education quality and retention, the relationship between insecurity and teacher attrition remains under-tested quantitatively in low-resource refugee contexts. This study examines how insecurity — encompassing physical violence, community hostility, armed threat, and adversarial parental relations — relates to teacher attrition risk in refugee camp and host community schools in Kenya. Using a concurrent mixed-methods design, we draw on survey data from 927 teachers across 74 schools in Garissa (Dadaab) and Turkana (Kakuma/Kalobeyei), complemented by 105 qualitative interviews and 11 focus group discussions with teachers, heads of institutions, and policy actors. Quantitative findings reveal that teachers feel less safe in their communities than inside school compounds across all groups studied, with gaps ranging from 5 to 16 percentage points. However, a multilevel logistic regression testing security-related stress, perceived safety, displacement status, gender, and county as predictors of teachers' intention to leave the profession found no statistically significant independent effect, and economic factors — particularly low salary (cited by 76.9% of teachers considering leaving) — emerged as the dominant stated driver of attrition intention. Qualitative data help explain this pattern: rather than leaving teaching altogether, teachers experiencing insecurity more often described seeking internal transfer — at times denied — with resignation emerging as a last resort in a small number of documented cases. We interpret insecurity as a compounding occupational stressor that shapes teachers' mobility and wellbeing within the profession, operating alongside rather than independently of economic precarity. Findings call for dedicated safety reporting mechanisms, community accountability structures, and emergency transfer provisions in fragile education systems, alongside continued attention to compensation as the primary lever for retention.

Keywords: Teacher well-being; insecurity; refugee education; teacher attrition; Kenya; Dadaab; Kakuma; education in emergencies; mixed methods.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, 43.4 million people live as refugees or asylum seekers, with 40% being school-aged children (UNHCR, 2024). Kenya hosts one of Africa's largest refugee populations — approximately 616,887 individuals as of March 2025 — concentrated in Dadaab (Garissa County) and Kakuma/Kalobeyei (Turkana County) (UNHCR, 2025). Kenya is a strategically important case for studying refugee teacher attrition: unlike Uganda's more integrated refugee education policy or Ethiopia's recent shift toward inclusion, Kenya has maintained a protracted encampment model in which refugee teachers remain largely excluded from national teacher

registration, pay scales, and protections — conditions that make insecurity's occupational effects both more visible and less institutionally mediated than in comparator contexts such as Jordan, where national teachers of refugee students operate within a more integrated, though still resource-constrained, system (Cohen, 2023). Despite substantial investment in refugee education, attention has remained stubbornly focused on learner outcomes, curriculum access, and enrolment rates, with comparatively little systematic inquiry into the teachers who make education possible under crisis conditions (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019;

Henderson, 2025).

Teachers in refugee and host community settings are not merely providers of instruction — they are frontline responders to trauma, social fragmentation, and material deprivation (Falk et al., 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Yet these same teachers operate within environments characterized by armed threats, community hostility, adversarial parenting, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional neglect (Falk et al., 2019; Anyanwu et al., 2026). The consequences for teacher well-being, motivation, and retention are severe and documented (Falk et al., 2022; West and Ring, 2015). What remains undertheorized and under-evidenced is how insecurity — not as background context but as a daily, institutionally unaddressed occupational condition — relates to teacher attrition and mobility in protracted displacement settings.

This paper addresses that gap directly. Drawing on the 2025 TeachWell Teacher Well-Being Study — a large-scale, concurrent mixed-methods study conducted by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and the TeachWell Consortium across 74 schools in Garissa and Turkana — we examine how physical insecurity, community hostility, and institutional unresponsiveness relate to teacher attrition risk and within-profession mobility in Kenya's refugee-hosting counties. We situate findings within the socio-ecological framework of teacher well-being (Falk et al., 2019), focusing specifically on the community and institutional levels of that framework — perceived safety outside school, and the administrative transfer system — as the two levels most directly implicated in our data, rather than testing the framework's full range of levels.

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it provides large-sample quantitative and qualitative evidence examining insecurity as an occupational condition — not merely a contextual backdrop — among refugee and national teachers in Kenya. Second, it documents the institutional mechanisms that shape how teachers respond to insecurity: the absence of safety reporting channels and the frequent denial of emergency transfer requests. Third, it examines whether and how these dynamics connect to broader patterns of teacher shortage. Where transfers are denied, some teachers describe resignation as a last resort. Because these resignations are not systematically tracked, replacement in these same understaffed contexts may compound existing recruitment challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher well-being in crisis and refugee contexts

Teacher well-being in crisis-affected settings is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing physical health, psychological stability, professional satisfaction, and social safety (Falk et al., 2019; Durrani and Makhmetova, 2025). Falk et al.'s (2019) socio-ecological framework — validated with teachers in Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan —

organizes well-being determinants across individual, school, community, national, regional, and global levels, capturing the interacting environments that shape teachers' daily experience.

Within this framework, community-level factors — including safety, respect, parental engagement, and cultural norms — are recognized as significant determinants of teacher well-being (Ghasemi, 2025). Yet existing empirical research has overwhelmingly centred school-level and individual-level factors, with relatively limited attention to the structural dimensions of community insecurity as a discrete driver of occupational stress and attrition (Henderson, 2025; Falk et al., 2022). Studies from conflict-affected settings in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that insecurity — including armed attack, gender-based violence, robbery, and threats — is associated with heightened psychological distress, absenteeism, and withdrawal from teaching (Falk et al., 2019; Wolf et al., 2015; Adelman, 2019). However, most existing evidence is qualitative, small-scale, or embedded within broader well-being assessments that do not isolate insecurity as a primary variable.

Insecurity and teacher attrition

The relationship between insecurity and teacher shortage in refugee settings is well-acknowledged but poorly quantified (Henderson, 2025; West and Ring, 2015; Rajabi et al., 2025). UNESCO-IIEP and Education Development Trust (2022) document that in Kenya's camp settings, structural exclusion, poor remuneration, and insecurity collectively contribute to chronic attrition among both refugee and national teachers. Mendenhall and Falk (2023) show that Kenya's national refugee inclusion framework is largely silent on refugee teachers' rights, including their right to safe working conditions and emergency transfer.

A critical gap in the literature concerns the institutional response — or absence thereof — to teacher insecurity. Where insecurity is documented, the typical institutional response is administrative transfer. Ndiwa and Odhiambo (2019) show that rigid transfer policies in Kenya mean that transfer requests are frequently denied for extended periods, with resignation sometimes serving as teachers' only available means of escaping unsafe environments. This reflects a dual mechanism rather than a single pathway: insecurity may shape attrition directly, through resignation in a minority of cases, and indirectly, through the demoralizing effect of institutional unresponsiveness and constrained mobility within the profession — yet it receives almost no dedicated policy attention.

The Kenyan Context: Dadaab and Kakuma/Kalobeyei

Garissa County hosts the Dadaab refugee complex — one of the world's largest — with over 413,000 registered refugees and schools serving over 31,000 learners (UNHCR, 2025). The county suffers acute teacher

shortages rooted in insecurity-driven absenteeism, transfer instability, and chronic non-local teacher attrition (Ndiwa and Odhiambo, 2019). Turkana County, home to Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement collectively hosting over 200,000 refugees, faces pupil-teacher ratios reaching 1:88 in host community schools, with refugee teachers on incentive pay excluded from TSC registration, union membership, and formal professional development (Mendenhall and Falk, 2023; Mendenhall et al., 2019).

Both counties have been significantly affected by reductions in humanitarian funding since 2023, resulting in withdrawal of school feeding programmes, halted infrastructure construction, and reduced teacher support. These conditions form the material backdrop against which insecurity operates as an occupational stressor — not as an isolated risk but as one layer in a system of compounding deprivation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

We used a cross-sectional concurrent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. This approach allowed statistical quantification of insecurity-related stressors alongside in-depth exploration of the institutional and experiential dimensions of insecurity as experienced by teachers *in situ*.

Study setting

Data were collected from refugee camps and host

community schools in Garissa County (Dadaab refugee complex) and Turkana County (Kakuma Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement) between September and October 2025.

Sampling and participants

The quantitative component employed a stratified multistage cluster sampling design. The total population of 5,786 teachers across 692 schools was stratified into four groups: Garissa host community, Garissa refugee camps (Dadaab), Turkana host community, and Turkana refugee camps (Kakuma/Kalobeyei). Schools were selected using Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling, yielding 74 schools. Within selected schools, teachers were sampled proportional to school size, with disproportionate allocation to ensure representation of refugee and female teachers. Of 1,000 targeted teachers, 927 completed the survey (response rate: 92.7%). The Garissa host-community stratum's completed sample (128) exceeded its initial targeted allocation (114); targeted allocations were derived from average stratum-level school size estimates prior to fieldwork, and the completed count reflects enumeration of eligible, consenting teachers present at sampled schools on the day of data collection rather than a fixed per-school quota.

The qualitative component used purposive sampling across 12 schools (4 locations, 3 schools each), selected to capture variation across displacement status, county, and school type. A total of 105 participants were recruited (Table 1)

Table 1. Qualitative sample composition.

Participant type	Method	n
Teachers	In-depth interviews (IDI)	18
Teachers	Focus group discussions (11 FGDs, ~6 participants each)	66
Heads of institutions	Key informant interviews (KII)	12
Policy actors (government, UN, NGO)	Key informant interviews (KII)	9
Total		105

Data collection

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires programmed in SurveyCTO and administered via password-protected tablets by trained enumerators.

Occupational stress was measured using a 24-item Teacher Stress Inventory developed for this study, drawing on item domains established in prior teacher well-being research (workload, class size, discipline, career structure, recognition, environmental shocks, and violence exposure). Internal consistency was strong (overall Cronbach's alpha = 0.95). Exploratory factor analysis identified two subscales relevant to this study's

focus: A Classroom and Organizational Stress factor (alpha = 0.92) and an External, Environmental, and Security-Related Stress factor (4 items: exposure to environmental hazards, violent attack, pressure from local authorities, and pressure from armed groups; alpha = 0.88). Items specific to this analysis also included perceptions of safety in school and community, and intention to remain in the teaching profession over the next five years.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis combined descriptive, bivariate,

and multivariate approaches. Descriptive statistics summarized safety perceptions and security-related stressors overall and by nationality and gender, using proportions with 95% Wilson confidence intervals. Bivariate group differences were assessed using chi-square tests. Composite stress indices were validated using internal consistency measures (Cronbach's alpha), reported above.

To test whether insecurity independently predicts attrition risk, we estimated a multilevel logistic regression with teachers (Level 1) nested within schools (Level 2), given that a substantial share of variance in related wellbeing outcomes has previously been found to lie between schools. The model regressed intention to leave the teaching profession within five years on the security stress composite, perceived community safety, displacement status, gender, and county, with a random intercept for school. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion; of 927 completed surveys, 862 respondents (93.0%) had complete data on all model variables and were retained for the primary analysis. We additionally estimated a bivariate model (security stress only) for direct comparison against the full multivariate specification, and tested the security-stress effect separately among displaced/refugee teachers and via an interaction term, to check whether any association was concentrated in this subgroup.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded inductively and deductively using a codebook aligned with the study's socio-ecological framework, developed collaboratively by the research team. A secondary round of coding isolated the theme of insecurity across IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs, mapping its dimensions: physical threat, institutional unresponsiveness, gendered risk, and attrition consequences. Triangulation across methods and data sources strengthened credibility. Frequency counts by code were not systematically exported at the coding stage; qualitative findings are therefore reported narratively rather than quantified, and this is noted as a limitation below.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from APHRC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Save the Children International (SCI), followed by clearance from Daystar University and authorization from Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Additional permission was secured from the Ministry of Education and County

Directors of Education. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with enumerators trained to explain voluntary participation, the right to decline any question, and the option to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitivity of insecurity-related disclosures, qualitative focus groups were conducted in single-gender groups, consistent with the gender-disaggregated data collection reflected in the study's qualitative sample. Data were handled confidentially and stored on password-protected systems accessible only to authorized team members.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Table 2 presents the demographic composition of the quantitative sample (N = 945, excluding 16 pilot records).

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	%
Gender — Male	71.9
Gender — Female	28.1
Nationality — Refugee/displaced	57.9
Nationality — National (Kenyan)	42.1
County — Turkana	60.5
County — Garissa	39.5
Marital status — Married/partnered	52.1
Marital status — Single	43.7
Education — Secondary school	39.7
Education — Diploma	18.8
Education — Post-secondary certificate	18.8
Education — Bachelor's degree	17.5
Contract — 1-year contract	55.3
Contract — Permanent	32.9
Age, mean (SD)	31.9 (7.2)
Teaching experience in years, mean (SD)	3.4 (3.1)

Safety perceptions: School vs. community

Table 3 presents teachers' safety perceptions by nationality and gender. Across all four groups, teachers reported feeling markedly less safe in their communities than within school compounds, with gaps ranging from 5.4 to 16.2 percentage points.

Table 3. Safety perceptions by nationality and gender.

Group	N	School safe (95% CI)	Community safe (95% CI)	Gap
National Male	205	81.0% (75.1–85.8)	75.6% (69.3–81.0)	5.4
National Female	192	85.4% (79.7–89.7)	74.5% (67.9–80.1)	10.9
Refugee Male	470	88.7% (85.5–91.3)	72.6% (68.3–76.4)	16.2
Refugee Female	73	91.8% (83.2–96.2)	82.2% (71.9–89.3)	9.6

Chi-square tests indicated a statistically significant difference in school-safety perceptions across the four groups ($\chi^2(3) = 9.33$, $p = 0.025$), but no statistically significant difference in community-safety perceptions across groups ($\chi^2(3) = 3.32$, $p = 0.34$). The school-versus-community safety gap itself was consistent and substantial across all groups, though group-level differences in the size of that gap should be interpreted with appropriate caution given the absence of a statistically significant omnibus test for community safety specifically.

Qualitative accounts elaborated on the nature of the community safety deficit. Teachers in Garissa described routine exposure to stoning, armed robbery, and blockades during commutes:

"I don't feel safe when I am coming from school. They will stone you. Even in the vehicle, we are not

safe — the driver was blocked and stabbed in the neck." (Female teacher, Garissa, 2025)

In Turkana, teachers described armed groups entering school compounds:

"An armed group entered... the students are scared. The teachers are also [scared] here." (KII, HOI, Turkana, 2025)

Predictors of attrition intention

Overall, 16.4% of teachers (141/862 with complete data) reported an intention to leave the teaching profession within five years. Table 4 presents the multilevel logistic regression testing security-related and demographic predictors of this outcome.

Table 4. Multilevel Logistic Regression Predicting Intention to Leave the Profession (N=862, 74 schools).

Predictor	OR	95% CI	p
Security stress composite	1.08	0.92–1.27	0.36
Community safety perception	0.82	0.61–1.09	0.17
Displacement status	0.75	0.49–1.15	0.19
Female	0.86	0.52–1.41	0.55
Garissa (ref: Turkana)	0.85	0.54–1.35	0.49

None of the modeled predictors, including the security stress composite, reached statistical significance. A likelihood-ratio test comparing the bivariate (security-stress-only) and multivariate specifications approached but did not reach conventional significance ($\chi^2(4) = 8.03$, $p = 0.09$). Subgroup analysis restricted to displaced/refugee teachers ($n = 490$) and an interaction term (security stress $\times$ displacement) likewise showed no significant association ($p = 0.24$ and $p = 0.97$, respectively), indicating the null finding was not concentrated in, or masked within, any particular subgroup.

In contrast, self-reported reasons for leaving among the 143 teachers intending to exit the profession were dominated by economic factors: low salary (76.9%), lack of career progression (30.1%), interest in another profession (28.0%), and heavy workload (23.8%). Unsafe working environment was cited by 7.0% of these teachers, and conflict-related resettlement by 1.4%.

Insecurity as a driver of transfer-seeking: Qualitative evidence

Qualitative accounts across both counties consistently linked insecurity to teachers' intentions to leave their posts, though rarely to leaving the profession outright. Several teachers described insecurity as directly shaping a desire to transfer rather than resign: one male

teacher in Turkana recounted being attacked while commuting between schools and requesting a transfer, which was initially denied before eventually being granted to a nearby school:

"I request for a transfer, but they were telling me in the office, there is no transfer... then they transferred me to a nearby school." (FGD, Male Teachers, Turkana)

Others named insecurity explicitly as a reason they would consider leaving teaching altogether, distinct from the more commonly cited economic pressures:

"The insecurity. The insecurity issue. Yeah, that is one of the things that can make me leave." (IDI, Male Teacher, Garissa host community)

Female teachers in Garissa FGDs described a pervasive sense of unsafety extending from the commute to the school compound itself, including theft, harassment, and, in one account, a colleague's death. These narratives suggest that insecurity's effect on attrition operates primarily through a transfer-seeking pathway rather than direct exit from the profession — consistent with the null finding in the multivariate model, where the outcome measured (intention to leave teaching entirely) may not capture teachers whose response to insecurity is to seek internal relocation rather than resignation.

Violence within school compounds

Insecurity was not confined to the space between home and school. Teachers described violence from learners within school boundaries, including a documented case where a female teacher was hospitalized after a student brought a knife to school:

"A teacher punished a boy, seven or eight years old. The next day, the boy came with a knife... the teacher was cut and hospitalized... taken to Nairobi for further medication... a female teacher." (FGD, female teachers, Garissa, 2025)

Adversarial parental engagement compounded this in-school insecurity. Parents entering classrooms during lessons and arriving in groups with sticks to confront teachers over disciplinary actions created an environment of chronic threat. Teachers reported the rational response was withdrawal from discipline:

"So we say let them be." (IDI, female teacher, Turkana, 2025)

Gendered dimensions of insecurity

Insecurity operated with particular intensity for female teachers, especially those from outside the community. Non-local female teachers described environments where language barriers were weaponized against them:

"You are just floating. You cannot communicate with the learners, you cannot communicate with the parents, and they take that advantage to gossip about you." (Female teacher, Garissa, 2025)

In predominantly Muslim contexts, non-compliance with community dress codes was framed by some community members as a safety consideration rather than a cultural preference, placing an additional burden on female teachers. Some accounts described explicit resistance to the presence of female teachers in the community.

Physical environment: Compounding conditions

The physical school environment intensified the effects of insecurity and precarity. Teachers described working in conditions that compromised basic dignity and comfort, including limited access to water and sanitation during the teaching day, and, in some cases, living in classrooms that doubled as sleeping quarters. Withdrawal of school meal provisions in some schools meant teachers went hungry through the teaching day.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine insecurity as a driver of teacher attrition in refugee and host-community schools in Kenya. The findings complicate that framing in an

informative way. Teachers across all groups reported feeling substantially less safe in their communities than within school compounds — a consistent and non-trivial pattern — yet a multilevel model testing security-related stress, perceived safety, displacement status, gender, and county as predictors of intention to leave the profession found no statistically significant independent effect, robust across multiple specifications. Direct, self-reported reasons for considering departure were dominated overwhelmingly by economic factors, particularly low salary (76.9%), with unsafe working environment cited by only 7.0% of prospective leavers.

Read alongside the qualitative data, however, this null finding is not evidence that insecurity is irrelevant to teacher attrition — rather, it suggests the mechanism operates differently than a standard exit-intention measure can detect. Qualitative accounts across both counties describe insecurity prompting teachers to seek internal transfer rather than resignation, with resignation emerging only when transfer requests were denied and no other option remained. A survey item measuring intention to leave the teaching profession entirely will not capture this transfer-seeking pathway, which by design keeps affected teachers within the profession, just not within the same post. This distinction matters for how the finding should be interpreted: insecurity may shape where and how teachers are willing to work, and their persistence within a given post, without showing up as a population-level predictor of profession-wide exit.

This reframes insecurity's role from a standalone structural driver to a compounding occupational stressor that interacts with, rather than substitutes for, the economic precarity that teachers themselves identify as their primary concern. This is consistent with existing literature situating teacher wellbeing within overlapping structural pressures rather than any single dominant cause (Falk et al., 2019). It also means the strongest quantitative claim this study can support is descriptive rather than causal: teachers in these contexts experience a substantial, consistent gap between how safe they feel at school and in their surrounding communities, and this gap coexists with — but is not shown here to independently predict — attrition risk.

Alternative explanations for the observed patterns also warrant consideration. Reverse causality is plausible: teachers already planning to leave the profession for economic or career reasons may be less invested in, or more attentive to, their perceived safety, potentially affecting any association in either direction. Similarly, the cross-sectional design cannot establish whether insecurity precedes attrition intention or is one of several co-occurring hardships that teachers experience simultaneously. Pay and working conditions, which this study's own data identify as the dominant stated concern, likely operate as the primary structural pressure on retention, with insecurity functioning as an additional, unevenly distributed burden rather than an independent causal pathway.

This study's findings on gendered insecurity extend existing literature on the compounded risks faced by female teachers in crisis-affected settings (Chalouhi et al., 2025; Veronese et al., 2025), and are consistent with

broader evidence linking female teacher presence to girls' educational outcomes (Smiley et al., 2018; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016).

Policy implications

While this study's quantitative findings do not support insecurity as an independent statistical predictor of attrition, the consistent safety gap documented here, together with qualitative accounts of denied transfers and unaddressed safety concerns, points toward several evidence-informed — though not directly evidence-derived — recommendations: (1) establishing a formal, confidential safety-reporting channel for teachers in refugee and host-community schools; (2) reviewing transfer request procedures to allow expedited review in cases involving documented security threats; and (3) prioritizing salary and career-progression reforms as the primary lever for attrition, given this study's finding that economic factors substantially outweigh safety concerns in teachers' own stated reasons for considering departure. These recommendations should be treated as hypotheses for policy experimentation and further research rather than as findings directly established by this study's data. They are consistent with the direction of the companion policy brief produced by APHRC and the TeachWell Consortium (Farah et al., 2025).

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should inform interpretation of its findings.

First, and most importantly, this study measures teachers stated intention to leave the profession, not actual attrition. Intention and behaviour can diverge substantially, and this study cannot speak to whether, or how often, expressed intentions to leave translate into actual departures.

Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Neither the direction nor the causal status of any association between insecurity and attrition intention can be established from this data; reverse causality and confounding by unmeasured factors remain plausible alternative explanations.

Third, while this study's multivariate model addresses earlier concerns about relying solely on bivariate analysis, the resulting null finding should be interpreted as an absence of detected effect in this dataset and sample, not proof of no relationship; the study may be underpowered to detect a modest effect, particularly for subgroups such as refugee women ($n=73$).

Fourth, this study lacks direct quantitative data on transfer requests and denials — the specific institutional mechanism most directly implicated by the qualitative findings — and relies instead on a small number of qualitative accounts to illustrate this pathway. This should be treated as a hypothesis for future testing rather than an established quantitative pattern.

Fifth, an internal data verification exercise conducted during manuscript revision found that this study's original

safety-perception statistics could not be fully reproduced from the underlying dataset using the descriptive approach available to the research team at the time of revision; the figures reported in the current version reflect a corrected, verified analysis, and the associated significance claims have been revised accordingly to reflect only the comparisons that reach conventional statistical thresholds.

Sixth, qualitative theme frequencies (e.g., the number of participants raising a given concern) were not systematically tracked during the coding process and are therefore described narratively (e.g., "several," "multiple accounts") rather than quantified.

Finally, this study does not apply corrections for multiple statistical comparisons across the several group and predictor comparisons tested, which increases the risk of false-positive findings; results should be interpreted with this in mind, particularly the school-safety group difference reported at $p = 0.025$.

CONCLUSION

Teacher insecurity in Kenya's refugee-hosting counties is a real and consistent feature of the occupational environment, not a peripheral welfare concern. Teachers across all groups in this study reported feeling markedly less safe in their communities than within school compounds, and qualitative accounts document a specific institutional pathway — denied transfer requests leading, in some cases, to resignation — through which insecurity can shape teachers' careers. However, this study's quantitative data indicate that insecurity operates primarily by shaping teachers' mobility within the profession rather than as an independent, population-level predictor of leaving teaching altogether; economic factors, particularly low salary, remain the dominant driver of attrition intention as reported by teachers themselves.

These findings call for a dual policy response: continued and strengthened attention to compensation and career progression as the primary lever for retention, alongside targeted reforms addressing the specific transfer-resignation mechanism documented in this study's qualitative data — including safety reporting mechanisms, community accountability structures, and emergency transfer provisions for teachers facing credible, documented security threats. For the more than 47,000 learners across Garissa and Turkana who depend on these teachers, both the economic and safety dimensions of the teaching profession warrant sustained policy attention.

AUTHOR SUMMARY

We studied why teachers in Kenya's refugee camps consider leaving their jobs. The clearest answer, in teachers' own words, is economic: low salary was cited by more than three-quarters of teachers considering leaving, far more than any other reason. At the same time, our survey found that teachers across all

backgrounds feel notably less safe in their surrounding communities than inside their schools, and in-depth interviews describe a specific and troubling pattern: when teachers request a transfer away from an unsafe posting, that request is often denied, and in some documented cases, resignation became the only way out. Because Kenya's transfer policy requires five years of service in a hardship posting before a transfer is normally granted, this creates a real, if not population-wide, risk for individual teachers. Our study combines survey data from 927 teachers with in-depth interviews and focus groups to examine both the scale of the safety gap and the specific institutional mechanism behind it. Alongside this research, our team has produced a policy brief for county governments, UNHCR, NGO education leads, and the Ministry of Education, recommending both improved compensation and a dedicated emergency transfer pathway for teachers facing documented security threats. The findings matter for the more than 47,000 students across Garissa and Turkana whose education depends on having teachers who are fairly paid, safe, and supported enough to stay.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The anonymized quantitative dataset supporting the findings of this study is available through the APHRC data repository upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical approval conditions protecting participant confidentiality. Qualitative transcripts contain potentially identifying information and are available for review on request to the corresponding author under a data sharing agreement.

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