

## 2 Explainer

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# How is the refugee policing system in Kampala faring?

Several refugees say police officers were helpful, and non-discriminatory. But this positive perception of treatment does not translate into successful outcomes.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

A new study on refugee access to police services in Kampala shows a system that is widely accessed and often described as respectful, yet still constrained by long waiting times, language barriers, and incomplete case resolution. While most refugees say they are "helped," several leave police stations without their problems fully resolved, exposing a justice system that is accessible in principle but uneven in practice.

### What has made the system come under pressure?

Uganda hosts more than two million refugees and asylum seekers, making it Africa's largest refugee-hosting country and one of the top globally. In Kampala alone, nearly 477,000 refugees, about 26.5 percent of the national total, live in urban settlements where they depend heavily on public services for survival, protection, and justice.

Unlike those in formal settlements, urban refugees must navigate city systems with limited humanitarian support. Police stations in areas such as Old Kampala, Kabalagala, Katwe and Kawempe have, therefore, become critical entry points for reporting crime, replacing lost documents and seeking protection.

A 2025 survey by SEMA Uganda, covering 384 refugees and asylum seekers alongside 11 police officers, offers a detailed look at how this system functions in practice. It finds a service that is widely used and generally appreciated, but marked by structural inefficiencies that prevent many cases from reaching resolutions.

The study adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data to capture both refugee experiences and police perspectives. Two structured tools were used: one targeting refugees who had interacted with police within the previous year, and another administered to officers working in refugee-facing units such as CID, the Child and Family Protection Unit, and general duties desks.

Respondents were drawn from high-traffic stations serving refugee populations across Kampala. The approach ensured the findings reflected not only demand-side experiences but also the operational realities within police stations. The respondents reflected the diversity of Kampala's refugee population. Men accounted for 63 percent of participants, compared to women at 37 percent, while the majority were aged between 25 and 34 years. Most were either formally recognised refugees or asylum seekers, with Congolese, Eritrean and Somali nationals forming the largest groups.



Some of the families that fled from South Sudan due to conflict and settled in Lamwo District, northern Uganda. PHOTO/REUTERS

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The number of refugees in Uganda as at May 31, 2026 was 1,955,141, according to the Office of the Prime Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The same entities indicate that Uganda had 69,275 asylum-seekers as at May 31, 2026, bringing the total of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda to 2,024,416. Of these, 52 percent were from South Sudan, followed by DR Congo, Sudan, Eritrea and Burundi, among others.

Education levels varied widely, ranging from no formal schooling to post-graduate qualifications, though most respondents had attained secondary or diploma-level education. This diversity is important because it shaped how different groups experienced and interpreted access to police services.

### What do the study's findings reveal?

At first glance, access to police services appears relatively strong. Most refugees described access as either easy or very easy, while only a small minority reported severe difficulty. This suggests that police stations in Kampala are physically and institutionally within reach for many urban refugees. However, this broad picture masks deep inequalities.

While a third of respondents live within walking distance of a police station, nearly a quarter travel more than five kilometres to seek assistance, and a small but significant group travels over 10kms. These distances matter in an urban context where transport costs are high and time lost often translates into missed work or delayed reporting of crime. The study shows that access is, therefore, not simply about the availability of services, but about how geography shapes the ability to use them effectively.

One of the most striking findings is the variation in waiting times across police stations in Kampala. At Katwe and Old Kampala stations, refugees reported average waiting times of just under an hour. In contrast, Kabalagala recorded longer delays, while Kawempe stood out with waiting times exceeding one and a half hours. These delays are not merely administrative inconveniences. For several refugees, particularly those who depend on daily income or must travel long distances, waiting time determines whether a case is even pursued. Long queues discourage follow-up, reduce willingness to report incidents, and gradually weaken trust in the system. The data shows a clear pattern: where waiting times are shorter, satisfaction levels are higher. Efficiency, more than any other factor, emerges as a key deter-

minant of refugees' experiences with police services.

### What else does the study disclose?

Beyond physical access and waiting times, communication remains one of the most significant barriers in the system. Only about four in ten refugees reported receiving interpreter support from police stations. In contrast, nearly a third said no interpreter was available at all, while others relied on NGOs or brought their own interpreters. This inconsistency has serious consequences. Many refugees do not speak English or Luganda fluently, and critical information about assaults, theft, or documentation loss is often lost or distorted in translation. Without effective communication, investigations slow down, and the accuracy of statements is compromised. Language, therefore, emerges not just as a logistical challenge but as a structural barrier that affects fairness, accuracy, and ultimately justice outcomes.

Perhaps the most important finding in the study is a contradiction at the heart of refugee-police interactions. An overwhelming majority of respondents said officers were respectful, helpful, and non-discriminatory. Most also felt that services were friendly and fair, particularly towards women.

Yet this positive perception of treatment does not translate into successful outcomes. Only a little over half of respondents said their cases were fully resolved, while a significant proportion reported leaving without any resolution. This creates a clear paradox. Refugees feel acknowledged and treated with respect, but the justice process often stops midway. The system performs well in terms of interaction, but less effectively in terms of resolution.

### How does this paradox of service delivery impact the refugees?

The gap between assistance and resolution points to deeper structural challenges within the policing system. Some cases are transferred between departments due to jurisdictional confusion, while others stall due to limited investi-

gative capacity or resource constraints. In some instances, refugees are redirected from one station to another, prolonging delays and increasing frustration. For those affected, this creates a cycle of repeated visits, lost time, and growing mistrust in formal justice systems. The result is not rejection of the police, but rather a sense of incomplete justice.

Inequalities in experience: The study also highlights clear differences in how refugees experience policing based on gender, education, and nationality. Women are more likely than men to report difficulties in accessing services, often due to mobility constraints, childcare responsibilities and safety concerns. Education also plays a role. Those with vocational or secondary education generally reported smoother access, while respondents with no formal education experienced significantly higher levels of difficulty. At the same time, more educated refugees sometimes reported higher frustration, possibly because of higher expectations of service delivery.

Nationality further shapes experience, with Somali and Congolese refugees generally reporting better access and satisfaction compared to other groups, while Rwandan and Ethiopian respondents reported more difficulties. These differences reflect variations in community networks, language compatibility, and settlement patterns within the city.

### So, is there a missing accountability loop?

Despite the importance of accountability, awareness of feedback mechanisms remains extremely low. Only a small fraction of respondents knew how to formally provide feedback on police services, even though the vast majority believed that feedback is important and could improve service delivery. This disconnect suggests that while refugees are willing to engage constructively with institutions, the channels for doing so are either weak, invisible, or ineffective. Most respondents expressed a preference for face-to-face engagement, reflecting the importance of trust and personal interaction in feedback processes.

### What does law enforcement have to say?

From the perspective of police officers, the challenges are equally complex. Officers report difficulties related to language barriers, limited awareness of refugee laws, and cultural differences that sometimes complicate case handling. Resource constraints, including logistical challenges in managing detainees, further strain the system. These insights underline the fact that challenges in refugee policing are not one-sided but reflect broader institutional pressures within urban law enforcement.

### What are the standout takeaways from the study?

The findings of the study present a nuanced picture of urban refugee policing in Kampala. On the surface, the system is accessible, widely used, and generally respectful. Refugees can reach police stations, interact with officers, and receive assistance. Yet beneath this accessibility lies a more complicated reality. Long waiting times, language barriers, and weak case resolution mechanisms mean that many interactions do not result in full justice outcomes. The system, in effect, is open but incomplete.

The central challenge moving forward is not simply improving access, but ensuring that access translates into understanding, efficiency, and resolution. Without that shift, refugees will continue to be helped, but not fully heard, and certainly not fully served.

### THE STUDY

A 2025 survey by SEMA Uganda, covering 384 refugees and asylum seekers alongside 11 police officers, shows how the justice system functions in practice. It finds a service that is widely used but is marked by structural inefficiencies that prevent many cases from reaching resolutions. Uganda hosts over 2 million refugees and asylum seekers, making it Africa's largest refugee-hosting country. In Kampala, nearly 477,000 refugees, about 26.5 percent of the national total, live in urban settlements.