

UNRWA's education, health, relief and social services, infrastructure, environmental health and protection operations are available to Palestine refugees in Gaza, West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Forecasts suggest that, by 2021, there will be 6.45m Palestine refugees. The number of Palestine refugees aged 60 and above within this population is estimated to reach 804,000, up from 656,000 in 2012. This includes many first generation Palestine refugees, i.e. who themselves fled or were forced to flee from Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948.

UNRWA's medium term strategy states the following with regard to the aged: "Persons in old age have specific and additional needs with regard to protection, livelihoods and access to health services, including psychosocial support. Lack of economic opportunities and security earlier in life accumulate into vulnerabilities in old age. Often this group experiences social exclusion and marginalization with more acute vulnerability to food insecurity and violence, particularly affecting widows and those without children. Inadequate housing has a disproportionately high negative effect on the elderly. The changing disease burden among Palestine refugees will be especially challenging to respond to in the context of an ageing population, high rates of poverty and unemployment, protracted crises, access restrictions and the Agency's own chronic financial constraints. An ageing refugee population will lead to an intensification of existing health trends, with increasing numbers of older refugees at risk of NCDs and 70 per cent of refugee deaths caused by NCDs at present. This changing disease profile will give rise to a corresponding growth in demand for cost-intensive and longer-term medical care. Managing the challenges of chronic diseases and illnesses will be crucial in meeting the health and broader human development needs of refugees. Failure to do so will not only affect the individual, but will also have a crippling impact on families and communities." UNRWA continues to make efforts to address the vulnerabilities/needs of the aged through the provision of comprehensive primary health care and secondary/tertiary health care, through the provision of relief and social services to the poorest and those affected by crisis and emergency, where the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the elderly can create major challenges for wellbeing and survival. UNRWA also extends environmental health and shelter-related projects/interventions subject to the availability of funding. UNRWA's services are, however, insufficient to meet all of the needs of the aged Palestine refugee population.

The vulnerabilities of the aged population of Palestine refugees are, in many respects, similar to the vulnerabilities of all Palestine refugees. Palestine refugees (including the aged) enjoy different levels of rights in each Field of operation. Many Palestine refugees are excluded from key aspects of social, political and economic life. This is often linked to military occupation, as well as their legal status, with the result that in many contexts they do not enjoy the same basic human rights as other citizens. In Lebanon, refugees face a number of legal restrictions that limit their rights, including the right to work, and have severely curtailed access to public services and job opportunities. In Jordan, of the 2.1 million Palestine refugees in the country, some 150,000 are ex-Gazan refugees and have a legal status that contributes to their vulnerable living conditions. Palestine refugees are also facing increasing challenges in fleeing the conflict in Syria and the risk of being returned to Syria. These persons are particularly vulnerable due to their status as Palestine refugees. Those who have made it to neighbouring countries often reside there irregularly and therefore have limited freedom of movement, face limited access to crucial civil registration procedures, and live in constant fear of arrest and refoulement to Syria.

UNRWA's research, analysis and advocacy relates to refugees as a whole and UNRWA is not well placed to answer most of the guiding questions relating to laws concerning equality, non-discrimination, violence, neglect and abuse towards the aged. UNRWA would advocate for any protections afforded to the aged under the law in each host country to be equally applicable to the aged Palestine refugee population.