

Out in the cold

Homelessness among destitute
refugees in London

Refugees reveal the reality of living in destitution

- CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS
- RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

This study has shown an exceptionally vulnerable group of people who are on the very margins of society and whose most basic needs are not met. Nor is this an accident (as they clearly understood).

Many of their experiences are shared with other destitute people. However, refugee destitution has several distinctive factors: it is deliberately created, and is framed by immigration control, which both bars most routes out of destitution and keeps ever-present the possibility of detention and removal into further danger.

1.1 No way out of homelessness

Nearly everyone surveyed was legally homeless by the accepted definition within English and Welsh law. Some had no accommodation or slept in hostels or night shelters. Nearly all who did have accommodation either knew by pre-agreement that they only had it for a few months – as is the case with hosting schemes – or lived under constant threat of eviction and might lose access to that accommodation at any time without notice. Furthermore, for many with accommodation, it was overcrowded or of poor condition. In these situations, those with regularised immigration status would have recourse to local, national, or UK-wide government support networks, or both. Those whose claims for asylum have been rejected have none. In their report on destitution, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation notes that typical routes out of destitution were an end to benefit sanctions or finding work.¹ These routes are barred to all migrants deemed undocumented, including refugees whose asylum cases have been refused. In order to resolve the human tragedy that is refugee homelessness, it is necessary to alter laws and policies around immigration and asylum.

1.2 The extra vulnerability of undocumented refugees in destitution

Homelessness rendered most of those surveyed extremely vulnerable, with widespread fear of abuse, a strong sense of physical danger, and the feeling that any mistreatment had to be accepted. This has something in common with homelessness in the general population. However, this needs to be set in the further context of a fear of immigration control, and the chronic, all-encompassing uncertainty with which it frames these refugees' lives. The total uncertainty of their lives is physically incarnated in their living arrangements. Fear of one's housemates, landlord, or abusive partner is exacerbated by fear of detention, and in some cases removal into even greater danger.

This extra vulnerability has a very disturbing implication indeed: someone who is forced to obey those they live with, and who effectively has no recourse to the law, is at great risk of exploitation. Many of the qualitative interviews conducted suggest the potential for this to happen – recall the reports of having to accept abuse. None explicitly show that it is currently happening to the respondents. However, this is a reality that it is hard to uncover by conducting a survey and points to an issue to which JRS and others supporting refugees need to be very alert.

1.3 Looking to the future

Right to rent laws, as they begin to be more widely enforced, will inevitably make it harder for destitute refugees to find anywhere to live, and therefore worsen their situation relative to the picture painted here. That legislation will also, specifically, force many into an even more vulnerable position, needing

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "Destitution in the UK" (April 2016), p. 64.

to accept whatever roof they can find on whatever terms. The lack of any address will, in turn, make it more difficult to access any government support that might be available; to access such support, one must evidence one's addresses up to the point of application.²

1.4 Justice intrinsic to charity

The refugees we hear in this report are forced to rely entirely on handouts, and to be completely dependent on others. Obviously, this means that their needs are routinely not met. The enforced asymmetrical dependency has other, related consequences. It places refugees in renewed danger, and it prevents them from participating freely in communities or structuring their own lives, *i.e.* from flourishing. Three privations – of basic material needs, of safety, and of autonomy within community - arise out of destitution. Through charitable gifts focusing on material needs, it is possible to address the first of these privations. But even with sensitive framing of support, the second and third privations remain features expressly associated with status in law. A deep charity calls for justice, recognising that charitable offerings are not enough.

² See Appendix 2 for details of (very limited) support for some people who have had asylum claims refused.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

Refugee homelessness is a consequence of destitution – a destitution that is endemic and life-destroying. This reality sits deep within UK communities, yet on their margins, often invisible. This should trouble us as a society. How should we and can we respond?

There is much that can be done by individuals, families and communities to create hospitable spaces for destitute refugees facing difficulty. Hosting, for example, can provide vital safety and relief. **We encourage all who can to participate by welcoming a refugee into their homes either for a period of a few months, or for a night as emergency accommodation.** As well as providing for basic needs, hosting can help to protect refugees from the abuse and exploitation to which destitution otherwise leaves them vulnerable. There are many organisations who facilitate such hosting arrangements throughout the country, of which the JRS UK *At Home* scheme in London, working primarily with religious communities, is one such example.

Refugees we spoke to in our survey were deeply appreciative of hosting arrangements. However, there was also recognition that such arrangements are nevertheless still only temporary; tackling the lack of stability and autonomy which are sources of anxiety and suffering requires structural policy change. Refugee destitution is a consequence of a range of policy measures, known as the hostile environment agenda, created deliberately by government to ensure exclusion of those it considers undocumented migrants for the purposes of enforcing immigration control. The undocumented status of those it is enforcing action against is in turn bound up with the process for determining an asylum claim itself and the sense that many have of not having been adequately heard.

In pursuing the hostile environment agenda, the government employs aggressive means to enforce compliance with decisions about which evidence suggests it should not have confidence; worse, as the introductory section to this report makes clear, this compliance process itself then adds further barriers to accessing justice. **Deliberately making individuals destitute, with the knowledge that it is likely to result in street homelessness and significant risk of exploitation and abuse, while also simultaneously adding barriers to prevent individuals from resolving their situation is not, in JRS UK's view, a morally acceptable tool of government policy, particularly when used as a means of enforcing decisions taken by an asylum determination system which is widely viewed as flawed.**

The stories on which this report is based especially draw out the vast injustice and human cost of deliberate destitution and homelessness. **We invite communities across the UK to join us in calling for the following policy changes to end destitution:**

1. Give all seeking asylum the right to work

'Asylum seekers' in the UK are predominantly barred from working. Indeed, more recent legislation has increased the criminal penalties associated with working without permission to do so. Our experience of accompanying refugees at different points in the asylum process suggests that most want the right to work to support themselves rather than government or other sources of financial support. The findings of this report reinforce that conclusion with repeated calls to be able to participate and contribute. The desire to work is more than just about

providing for material need, but because work provides people with a sense of meaning and purpose and a way to contribute to and participate in society. Anyone who remains in the asylum system for a prolonged period of time can experience substantive atrophy of skills and employability making integration very difficult if and when their immigration status is eventually resolved. Many refused 'asylum seekers' are unable to leave the UK, even where the Home Office does not acknowledge this. We recommend that the right to work be extended to those in the asylum system, including those who have been refused, for as long as they are in the UK.

2. Provide 'asylum seekers' unable to support themselves through work with basic financial support

If an 'asylum seeker' is unable to work to support themselves their basic material needs should be met via government support. This includes those who have been refused, for as long as they are in the UK. Destitution experienced by 'asylum seekers' otherwise creates significant vulnerability leaving people open to exploitation and abuse.

3. Abandon the hostile environment agenda

This agenda to create destitution is at the root of refugee homelessness. Furthermore, it dehumanises, fostering a cruel society. It should have no place in a decent, humane immigration system. Government should focus on creating a society that fosters values of hospitality, community, participation and respect for dignity.

Enacting these changes would mean a vital step towards a more just, more humane society. They are crucial if the human tragedy of refugee destitution is to be addressed.



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