

Out in the cold

Homelessness among destitute
refugees in London

Refugees reveal the reality of living in destitution

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report examines patterns of homelessness amongst the destitute refugees served by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in London. JRS UK provides support to those who have fled to the UK for safety and sought asylum, but who are struggling to gain recognition of their status as a refugee. Unable to leave the UK yet barred from working and with no access to government support, they are left destitute, often for many years.

Our survey of those who attended the JRS UK Day Centre in East London uncovered a widespread pattern of sporadic street homelessness: indeed the majority of respondents, including men and women of various ages, had been street homeless within the last year. This was coupled with very insecure accommodation in general. The threat of sleeping on the streets was ever present for a large number of those we serve. For those who had accommodation, it was frequently inadequate – dilapidated, dirty and cold, and often overcrowded, even with hostile strangers. We also found indications that many respondents were cornered into living situations that left them vulnerable to abuse. A substantial minority of respondents did not feel physically safe in their accommodation, and many specifically described being afraid of those they lived with. Overall, these conditions, unsurprisingly, had a negative impact on physical and mental health.

As respondents were asked to reflect on their situation, it emerged that most felt trapped. They were denied the capacity to order their own lives or perform basic tasks, and therefore deprived of freedom and privacy. Many pleaded simply to be treated as human. These perceptions and experiences were framed by concerns over immigration control. The threat of detention and removal compounded other

fears, and lack of immigration status was often seen as the root of destitution and homelessness.

The pervasive homelessness documented here emerged as a key aspect of destitution – a destitution which is not accidental, but a deliberate aim of government policy, which has been enforced and strengthened by the matrix of still-unfolding policy and legal measures that make it ever more difficult for undocumented migrants to meet their basic needs and criminalise, for them, many day-to-day activities. This is described by policy makers as the *hostile environment agenda*. It targets those who are often already vulnerable as a result of situations that brought them to the UK in the first place, and manufactures further vulnerability by barring them from supporting themselves. We argue that deliberately making individuals destitute, with the knowledge that it is likely to result in street homelessness and significant risk of exploitation and abuse is not an acceptable tool of government policy, particularly as a means of enforcing decisions taken in an asylum determination system widely viewed as flawed.

We note that many of those surveyed were deeply appreciative of hosting arrangements, such as the JRS UK *At Home* scheme, which provides some temporary relief from street homelessness. However, we conclude that street homelessness and the vulnerability associated with insecure housing amongst destitute refugees can only be solved by repealing the policies associated with the hostile environment agenda and, crucially, by giving those seeking asylum the right to work to support themselves until their situation is resolved. We invite communities across the UK to join us in calling for these policy changes.



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