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## Press Release

**Date:** Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> January 2018

**Embargo:** 00:01 Friday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2018

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### **Widespread street homelessness of destitute refugees “a sign of the times” say Jesuit Refugee Service**

Troubling patterns of street homelessness and vulnerability to abuse amongst destitute refugees have been uncovered by research from the Jesuit Refugee Service UK (JRS UK), published ahead of Homeless Sunday this weekend. The study finds that most of the destitute refugees attending the JRS UK Day Centre had slept rough at some point in the previous year, and one in five had been forced to spend more than a month on the streets. More worrying still was that a third of those with accommodation reported not feeling physically safe there.

The research, undertaken just before Christmas, uncovered a widespread pattern of sporadic street homelessness affecting men and women of different ages and backgrounds who had fled to the UK for safety and sought asylum, but struggled to gain recognition of their status as a refugee. Unable to leave the UK, yet barred from working and with no government support they were left destitute, often for many years, as they found themselves subject to the web of policies described by policy-makers as the “hostile environment agenda”.

One young woman who had spent over six months living on the streets had become resigned to the fact that physical dangers were to be expected by someone who is street homeless, stating **“We are left to the mercy of people we don’t know. Abuse is common and somewhat expected.”**

The report found that 62% of refugees surveyed by JRS UK had been street homeless within the last year. Even those who were staying in some form of accommodation had no guarantee of security with 47% of refugees stating that they did not have a regular place to sleep. JRS UK found that this instability and uncertainty surrounding accommodation was having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of refugees with one respondent **stating “I feel worried as I don’t get permanent place to live and my health become worse.”**

36% did not feel physically safe in their accommodation and 42% did not feel comfortable around the people with whom they were staying. Taken together this implies that many may have been forced into unsafe or abusive living situations as a preferable alternative to sleeping on the streets. One refugee stated **“When it’s cold I have to accept any mistreatment.”**

Sarah Teather, Director of JRS UK, said, **“This report highlights the harrowing reality for many destitute refugees who survive by moving between a series of precarious living arrangements, with the anxiety of knowing they could be terminated at any moment. The situation becomes more pressing during winter months because many can only avoid sleeping in the cold by placing themselves in potentially unsafe and even abusive situations.**

**“The climate of hostility towards migrants has resulted in the human beings at the centre of this public storm being all but forgotten. Pope Francis reminds us that stories such as these are a sign of the times we must pay attention to and reflect on. My hope is that their stories might awaken some sense of our moral responsibility and open the way for a more humane response.**

**“We need to repeal the policies associated with the hostile environment and give asylum seekers the right to work to support themselves.”**

JRS UK is one of a number of organisations which provides a hosting scheme for destitute refugees. The JRS UK scheme, *At Home*, primarily enables religious communities in the London area to host for short periods of time. Anyone who would like to support a destitute homeless refugee in this way can contact JRS UK via [uk@jrs.net](mailto:uk@jrs.net)

Homeless Sunday is a chance for Churches and Christian groups from across the country join together to pray, reflect and plan practical action on homelessness, but also for a united Christian voice to offer solidarity and be a prophetic voice for change.

- Ends -

### Notes to Editor

1. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation, at work in 51 countries around the world with a shared mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. In the UK, our work currently focuses on those who find themselves destitute as a consequence of government policies and those detained for the administration of immigration procedures.
2. Homeless Sunday is a Christian ecumenical initiative encouraging churches to pray, reflect and plan action on homelessness.
3. JRS around the world uses a broader definition of refugee than is contained in the UN’s 1951 Convention or 1967 Protocol. Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, JRS therefore applies the expression ‘de facto refugee’ to all “persons persecuted because of race, religion, membership of social or political groups”; to “the victims of armed conflicts, erroneous economic policy or natural disasters”; and, for “humanitarian reasons”, to internally displaced persons, that is civilians who “are forcibly uprooted from their homes by the same type of violence as refugees but who do not cross national frontiers.” JRS UK operates within this more holistic definition; anyone in this situation is referred to in our work as a refugee, regardless of whether the government in their host country recognises them as such.
4. In 2016 41% of appeals were granted, indicating the determination system for asylum itself is notoriously arbitrary.
5. The full report is published on the JRS UK website: [www.jrsuk.net](http://www.jrsuk.net)
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