

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVING CONDITIONS & SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF DESTITUTE ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE UK

UNDERGROUND LIVES



MARCH 2009



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A report for PAFRAS by Diane Taylor

**A big thank you to all the asylum seekers who
agreed to share their stories for this report**

MARCH 2009

FOREWORD

In 1997 the new Labour government promised a fundamental overhaul of the asylum system, claiming that it was 'too complex, too slow and too cumbersome'. Few envisaged that this would mean the removal of the right to work and an increase in the number of asylum seekers, including children, detained. Legal aid, especially in relation to appeal rights, has been so dramatically reduced that some people never get the chance to have their case reconsidered.

It is ten years since this government's first asylum and immigration act became law. This report focuses, primarily, on what happens to people at the end of the asylum process. Those whose claims have been rejected are supposed to return home but fearful of persecution including torture if they agree to this, many go underground, banned from working and in most cases from access to housing or benefits.

PAFRAS sees the devastating impact of the government's tough asylum policy at its twice-weekly drop-in. Destitute asylum seekers are offered free meals, food parcels, toiletries, and clothes; case workers provide advocacy, support, and advice. The demand for these services is increasing rapidly. In 2006 there were 2,230 visits to the project. In 2007 this had increased to 4,465, and in 2008 to 6,112. For many the drop-in is a lifeline. Having already survived torture they must now survive penury. Severe depression is widespread and more than one of our clients has tried to end their own life.

Underground lives is an investigation into the living conditions and survival strategies of those who experience destitution. Its findings are alarming. Of the 56 interviews with asylum seekers who have experienced destitution, almost half survive on one meal a day. With nowhere to live, some resort to sleeping on buses. Many are surviving on around £5 per week. Just over a third continue to suffer from the physical effects of the torture from which they fled. Of those who have lived on the streets more than a third have been physically attacked, and more than a third of the women reported sexual assaults, including rape.

This investigation offers a window into the lives of destitute asylum seekers and poses worrying questions about how well the system is working. The government argues that those in genuine need of sanctuary get it. Yet this report tells a different story. In the five years leading up to 2008, 77,000 people were refused asylum from countries that were described by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as 'major countries of concern'. Ninety-five per cent of those interviewed fled affluent, professional backgrounds. Why would they remain here at the end of the asylum process, sleeping outside, living on almost no money, with no prospect of things improving if it was safe to return home? This group are not here, as some sections of the media claim, 'to take our houses, jobs and benefits' because they have little or no access to such things. They remain here simply to try to save their lives.

The fact that so many people who have escaped persecution are suffering such extreme privations is nothing short of a completely avoidable humanitarian disaster in our own backyard. Underground lives offers sensible, achievable solutions to the problem.

Jon Burnett
PAFRAS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
ASYLUM UK: THE FACTS & FIGURES	8
RESEARCH	10
METHODOLOGY & MOTIVES	12
KEY FINDINGS	14
BACKGROUNDS OF DESTITUTE ASYLUM SEEKERS	16
WHERE PEOPLE SLEEP	18
UNDER ATTACK IN THE UK	20
FOOD	22
HEALTH	23
WORK & FINANCES	24
RESPONSES TO DESTITUTION	26
CONCLUSIONS	30
RECOMMENDATIONS	32
APPENDIX	33
CASE STUDIES	37

INTRODUCTION

We are used to seeing TV images of aid agencies handing out bags of rice and other essentials to people in countries stricken by natural or unnatural disasters. Those living in some of the poorest parts of Africa and Asia are the most frequent recipients of this kind of life saving aid.

What we are not used to, however, is seeing such sights in the middle of affluent parts of London and other major cities in the UK. Starvation and other facets of the physical struggle to stay alive are alien concepts to citizens of the UK, currently ranked the fifth richest country on the world.

But there is a hidden, largely unreported population in our midst who are living on 'less than a dollar a day' – the yardstick that defines acute and unacceptable poverty across the globe. These people are rejected asylum seekers who have 'chosen' destitution because they fear that their lives will be in danger if they are forced to return to their home countries.

The section of the Home Office responsible for asylum seekers, UK Border Agency, UKBA, does not put a figure on the size of this population but estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000. UKBA says that of a backlog of 450,000 unresolved asylum cases 150,000 have been dealt with. Of these 50,000 have been given leave to remain and 100,000 have been refused. It is not known how many of the 100,000 refused cases are still in the UK. These are known as 'legacy' cases and involve asylum claims lodged before March 2007. Not all of this 'unresolved' group will be destitute but many are likely to be. There are also many asylum seekers who lodged claims after March 2007 whose claims have been refused and who are currently destitute.

Even if the political will existed to try and accurately record this population it would be difficult because many people are living under the radar of the authorities. What is certain though is that this group is huge and growing. Large charities such as the Red Cross and the Refugee Council along with a significant number of smaller ones are offering support to this shadowy, desperately vulnerable group. They say that they are only able to offer the equivalent of sticking plaster to people whose traumas in their home countries are frequently compounded by their bad treatment in the UK. Like all asylum seekers rejected asylum seekers are not allowed to work and in the majority of cases are not eligible for housing or benefits. Some are refused healthcare. A minority (around 9,000) are in receipt of what is known as Section 4 support - £35 supermarket vouchers a week and no choice accommodation. But rejected asylum seekers have to fulfil certain criteria in order to qualify for this support and some are reluctant to apply for it because they are asked to sign an agreement consenting to be removed from the UK at a later date.

The overwhelming majority of the 56 interviewees from 20 different countries questioned for this report fled wealthy and/or professional backgrounds in their home countries. Their jobs included surgeon, lawyer, civil engineer, TV journalist, poet, painter, computer programmer and government accountant. As rejected asylum seekers in the UK they have no home, no job and shockingly the majority are living on less than £5 a week. Many sleep outside or on buses and have suffered physical attacks here, sexual assaults including rape in the case of some of the women, along with vicious racist abuse.

If the hundreds of thousands of people who are destitute were able to safely return to their houses, families and jobs in their home countries it is very likely that they would do so rather than existing in the wretched, twilight world of destitution in the UK. They have 'chosen' destitution for one reason only – to save their lives.

More than two thirds (seventy per cent) of those interviewed experienced torture in their home countries. Many carry the evidence on their bodies. Their fear of further persecution if they are forcibly returned home is well founded. The government insists that the decision making process for asylum claims is robust and fair and that those it decides to deport will not face danger on return. But the vast number of rejected asylum seekers living destitute and often underground in the UK suggests that something has gone badly wrong with the decision making process.

Asylum applications currently stand at a 14-year low with just 23,430 principal applications for asylum in 2007, down from 103,080 in 2002. Only four per cent of total immigration applications made in 2007 were lodged by asylum seekers. Some perspective on the issue is urgently required.

UKBA says that it has 'a proud tradition of offering a place of safety for genuine refugees' but this report reveals that many people who desperately need sanctuary are being turned away. One of the interviewees, a young woman from Democratic Republic of Congo, was forcibly removed from the UK following the rejection of her asylum claim. On her return to the capital, Kinshasa, she was detained and tortured, managing to escape, return to the UK and lodge a new asylum claim using her recent torture scars as evidence. Forced returns to countries with poor human rights records are not routinely monitored and UKBA appears to have little interest in the fate of those who are returned. Those unfortunate enough to lose their lives if they are arrested and detained on return cannot complain.

The people who have fled human rights abuses in their home countries ask only for the right to remain here where their lives will no longer be in danger and the right to work. Several of the interviewees said that being forced into destitution and banned from working and contributing to society was akin to being rendered disabled. This group is forced to live underground, enduring severe poverty, extreme hunger, mental and physical ill health and multiple forms of abuse as well as the constant fear of being rounded up and deported. They walk down the same streets as UK citizens but inhabit a terrifying, parallel universe.

ASYLUM UK: THE FACTS & FIGURES

Asylum is protection given by a country to someone who is fleeing persecution in their own country. It is granted under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. To be recognised as a refugee, a person must have left their country and be unable to go back because they have a well-founded fear of persecution.

The United Kingdom also adheres to the European Convention on Human Rights, which (theoretically) prevents the government sending someone to a country where there is a real risk they will be exposed to torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Those the government considers do not qualify for asylum but qualify for humanitarian or other reasons that allow them to stay in the United Kingdom, may be given temporary permission to remain here.

In 2007, 19 out of every 100 people who applied for asylum were recognised as refugees and given asylum. Another nine out of every 100 who applied for asylum but did not qualify for refugee status were given permission to stay for humanitarian or other reasons.

The government's position on asylum sounds reasonable but the material gathered in this report tells a different story. The government is keen to be perceived as taking a tough line on asylum and the statements it puts out trumpet the number of people removed from the UK rather than those who are granted leave to remain.

THE LANGUAGE OF A PRESS RELEASE PUT OUT ON 19 NOVEMBER 2008 IS TYPICAL

“THIRD QUARTER REMOVALS AT A SIX YEAR HIGH”

More people were removed from the country between July and September this year than in any other third quarter since 2002, the Home Office announced today.

In the three months to September this year 17, 525 people were removed - a nine per cent increase on the same period the previous year and the highest number of removals in any third quarter for six years.

This included a 14 per cent increase in non asylum removals – a group that includes foreign national prisoners – with removals increasing from 12,680 in the third quarter of 2007 to 14,405 in the same period this year.

This is further evidence that the Home Office is succeeding in its commitment to remove anyone who has no right to be here - with a focus on targeting the most harmful first. Last year the UK Border Agency removed over 4,200 foreign prisoners and today's figures suggest it is well on track to meet its tough target to remove 5,000 before the end of 2008.

In the first six months of this year over 2,500 foreign prisoners were removed - a 23 per cent increase on the same period last year.

**BORDER AND IMMIGRATION MINISTER
PHIL WOOLAS SAID:**

“The huge shake-up we have made to the immigration system is paying off. Our borders are tougher than ever before, asylum applications remain low, and we are removing record numbers of foreign law breakers.

“Last year someone was removed every eight minutes - including more than 4,200 foreign national prisoners. Today’s figures show that we are well on track to kick out even more this year.”

To speed up the removal process further still, the Government announced earlier this year that the capacity of the immigration detention estate will be increased by 60 per cent, with an additional 1,300 to 1,500 spaces for immigration offenders within two years.

One removal every eight minutes in 2007 indicates significant resources are used to meet the government’s removal targets. Dawn raids – or enforcement visits as they are officially known – are one of the ways these targets are met. Homes are entered early in the morning and asylum seekers are dragged from their beds. Definitive figures relating to these raids are not easily available but in 2006 an average of 22 of these operations a day took place.

Part of the government’s pledge to be ‘tougher than ever before’ involves the severance of financial support 21 days after the refusal of an asylum claim for those without children. Immigration experts have called this a “deliberate tool” to rush people out of the country.

The UN Convention Against Torture, ratified by the UK, obliges states to provide the fullest possible rehabilitation to torture survivors. Many destitute asylum seekers are survivors of torture including seventy per cent of the interviewees for this report. It is hard to see how any aspect of destitution can be defined as rehabilitation.

Although of course it is not stated in any official government document critics argue that destitution is government policy. The average cost of one enforced removal is £11,000. Even if the government had the funds to track down and remove every rejected asylum the operation would be very difficult to implement. Rejected asylum seekers generally keep their heads down very low. They are terrified of doing anything that might attract attention and expedite a forced removal and they are not a drain on the public purse. Minimal engagement with this group and as little public discussion as possible about them may be the most politically expedient way for the government to deal with this issue. Ministers are vulnerable to criticism from both those who want to see this group deported immediately and those who argue that the government is in serious breach of its human rights obligations in its treatment of this vulnerable population. Destitution amongst rejected asylum seekers is a complex issue and its low profile avoids the need to engage publicly with the problem.

The Communities and Local Government Department publishes quarterly homelessness statistics. However, destitute asylum seekers do not appear in these figures even though there are many more of them than of UK homeless. The destitute asylum seeker population is usually invisible. Statistically it does not exist.

RESEARCH

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORT, ASYLUM MATTERS. RESTORING TRUST IN THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM, DECEMBER 2008.

There are increasing restrictions on asylum seekers. The Government has passed legislation that has prohibited asylum seekers from working; limited their access to the NHS; reduced the amount of benefit they can claim; and restricted them to five hours of legal aid per case.

Asylum seekers face increasing levels of destitution. 'Failed' asylum seekers are not entitled to work, benefits or housing unless they are prepared to return home, which for many is not possible. The Red Cross estimates that at least 26,000 destitute asylum seekers are living off Red Cross food parcels in the UK;¹ however, we estimate the actual number of destitute asylum seekers to be much higher as the Red Cross does not distribute food parcels in all cities.

Destitution costs the state. Making refused asylum seekers homeless at the end of the process makes it harder to keep track of them. This in turn makes it harder to engage with them to encourage voluntary return or indeed to instigate the forced removal process. The average cost of a forced return is £11,000 compared to the cost of a voluntary return at £1,100.

MORE DESTITUTION IN LEEDS, JOSEPH ROWNTREE CHARITABLE TRUST, JULY 2008.

The number of refused asylum seekers living destitute in Leeds has more than doubled over the last 18 months: the problem is chronic, with more vulnerable people lacking either the safety net of support or the right to work. The report builds on the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust's 2007 Destitution Inquiry reports *Moving On: from destitution to contribution* and *Destitution in Leeds*. We commissioned a repeat survey with the same five agencies to see how things have changed. The findings show the extent to which the situation has deteriorated.

INDEPENDENT ASYLUM COMMISSION REPORT, OCTOBER, 2007.

Thousands of people are forced to spend years living in abject poverty on the streets of Britain's cities after fleeing persecution in their own countries. The destitute have no access to help from the state as they have not been granted asylum yet they prefer to stay in Britain rather than return home because they are in fear of being tortured or killed. There are at least 280,000 people living in poverty in Britain after having their leave to remain refused. Some of them are appealing those decisions. Some just go completely underground taking their chances on the streets of the UK with no money or shelter. Living on the margins these outcasts have been 'failed' by the place where they thought they would be safe, the inquiry was told. Many sleep rough: few have access to the healthcare that UN legislation says they have a right to.

HOUSE OF LORDS, HOUSE OF COMMONS, JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS. THE TREATMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS, TENTH REPORT OF SESSION 2006-07, MARCH 2007.

In the light of the evidence presented, the Committee concludes that by refusing permission for asylum seekers to work and operating a system of support which results in widespread destitution, the Government's treatment of asylum seekers in a number of cases reaches the Article 3 ECHR threshold of inhuman and degrading treatment. The policy of enforced destitution must cease. The system of asylum seeker support is a confusing mess. We have seen no justification for providing varying standards of support and recommend the introduction of a coherent, unified, simplified and accessible

SUMMARY OF RECENT RESEARCH INTO DESTITUTION AMONGST ASYLUM SEEKERS

In the last two years several reports into the problem of destitution amongst failed asylum seekers have been published. **Brief extracts from these reports are set out below.**

system of support for asylum seekers, from arrival until voluntary departure or compulsory removal from the UK. We recommend that the Immigration Rules be amended so that asylum seekers may apply for permission to work when their asylum appeal is outstanding for 12 months or more and the delay is due to factors outside their control. We recommend that where there is evidence that an asylum seeker will not be able to leave the UK for 12 months or more, he or she should be granted limited leave for a 12 month period with permission to work attached.

THE DESTITUTION TRAP, REFUGEE ACTION, NOVEMBER 2006.

Asylum seekers are profoundly resourceful people who have come through a great deal. They have often lost everything, including children, family, friends, health, livelihood and status. Destitution is eroding their sense of self and their will to survive, which is often all they have left. They feel that their lives are forgotten and wasted.

A majority spoke of having little or no power over their lives, and of having contributions to make to society that will go unused because nobody knows they are there or cares about what happens to them. The broader impact of destitution. The burden of support is falling on refugee communities, faith groups, religious institutions and voluntary organisations, who sometimes literally save people's lives, ensuring that they do not starve. This is placing extreme strains on the individuals and groups involved.

The use of destitution is not having any significant influence on determining whether refused asylum seekers decide to return to their home country. The vast majority of those interviewed were clear that they preferred destitution to persecution.

It certainly does not enable people to return in dignity or safety. Whilst these documents have produced a range of useful and substantive insights into the asylum system this report aims to document the minutiae of people's lives as they struggle to survive the multiple privations of destitution, to provide an analysis of the backgrounds of those seeking asylum and to provide a human narrative to accompany the depressing statistics.

The vast majority of UK citizens have never met a destitute asylum seeker or indeed an asylum seeker at any other stage of the legal process. It is much easier to ignore or dehumanize the plight of an unknown group than it is one that there is insight and understanding of. It is hoped that this report will increase understanding of asylum seekers and the reasons why some become destitute.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, DOWN & OUT IN LONDON, THE ROAD TO DESTITUTION FOR REJECTED ASYLUM SEEKERS, NOVEMBER 2006.

Amnesty International believes that a clear analysis compels the conclusion that rejected asylum seekers are being made destitute to force them to leave the UK. This policy is clearly failing, as many destitute rejected asylum seekers remain in the UK. Almost all the people interviewed for this report were living from hand to mouth, surviving on the charity of others, their dignity stripped away by this existence. Some seemed to have lost the will to live.

The rejected asylum seekers interviewed for this report expressed deep disappointment and dissatisfaction at the unfairness and poor quality of the asylum process, and in some cases, the legal advice and representation they received. When the asylum process was finished and their financial support and accommodation ended, they described a bare existence, sometimes endured for years. All expressed their fears about return to their home country and none had applied to return voluntarily. The people who work with rejected asylum seekers in London describe an appalling situation for thousands of people. As well as destitution, many are ill and need health care to which, however, they are not entitled.

Name: Hamid

Age: 28

Country: Iran

Job in home country: Worked in family business

Time Destitute: Seven months

Hamid's father ran a large and successful building and car business in Iran, the family was wealthy and after leaving school he worked for his father. He became involved in a political movement that opposed the government and as a result was detained and tortured. Hamid's brother was executed by hanging by the Iranian government because he was politically active against the government.

Hamid managed to escape to the UK and after his asylum claim was refused he slept in abandoned cars, in the park, on buses and in phone boxes. He found food by going through the rubbish bins in restaurants.

"Sometimes I begged for £1 or £2 to buy food but begging made me feel very ashamed. I mainly survived by eating chips and pitta bread," he says.

"When you're sleeping outside one night feels like one year because it's so cold. I never managed to sleep for more than an hour or two and when it's raining it's hard to sleep for more than fifteen minutes at a time."

He was denied the prescription anti-depressant he'd been prescribed in Iran to help him cope with the after-effects of torture and in desperation turned to street heroin in this country to blot out the pain of torture.

"When I started smoking heroin and crack I didn't feel any pain any more. I had never used street drugs in Iran but here I needed them here just to get through the day. "

He made three suicide attempts by swallowing large quantities of pills and after the third spent time in a psychiatric hospital.

"I miss my family so much. My father died recently and it broke my heart that I couldn't be with him. It is very hard to survive here when you have nothing but life in Iran is impossible."



METHODOLOGY & MOTIVES

The research in this report is qualitative and is based on 56 detailed face-to-face interviews with destitute asylum seekers from 20 different countries. The interviews were conducted between April 2008 and January 2009. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The same 31 questions were put to all interviewees covering their lives and jobs in their home countries, whether they were detained or tortured in their home countries and why they had to flee, where they sleep in the UK, what they eat, how they get money to stay alive and what their health problems and state of mind are. All interviewees were asylum seekers who had fled persecution, not economic migrants who had left their countries in search of work.

Interviewees describe their experience of destitution in London and a range of other cities including Manchester, Leeds, Wolverhampton and Sunderland. Some are required to sign on regularly at government reporting centres. When they arrive to do so they have no idea whether they will simply have to register their presence or whether they will be held by UKBA officials and taken to immigration removal centres in preparation for forced removal from the UK.

Although some are obliged to report they are not given money for fares and physically reaching reporting centres may involve many miles of walking if they cannot scrape together money for the bus fare.

Others are living entirely under the radar. UKBA has no knowledge of where they are or how to track them down. They do not appear as a statistical group in the quarterly figures relating to asylum seekers released by the government. Some have lawyers who have submitted fresh asylum claims for them, others have given up on trying to secure leave to remain in the UK and have resigned themselves to living in a perpetual and miserable limbo.

Other pieces of research have been conducted by various human rights and refugee charities, as well as by a parliamentary committee into the experience of destitution. (See previous section). This report aims to document the minutiae of people's daily lives as they struggle to survive the multiple privations of destitution and to provide a human narrative to accompany the depressing statistics. The vast majority of UK citizens have never met a destitute asylum seeker or indeed an asylum seeker at any other stage of the legal process. It is much easier to ignore or dehumanise the plight of an unknown group than it is one that there is insight into and understanding of. It is hoped that this report will increase understanding of asylum seekers and the reasons why some become destitute.

KEY FINDINGS

■ Fifty-two per cent of those interviewed were women and forty-eight per cent men. All were rejected asylum seekers who were currently experiencing destitution or who had previously experienced destitution.

■ Interviews were conducted with people from 20 different countries – 45 came from 12 different African countries, seven from the Middle East three from Asia, and one from the Caribbean.

■ The youngest person interviewed was 20, the oldest 68. The average age of interviewees was 36 years and five months.

■ More than one third – thirty-eight per cent – had to flee their countries leaving their children behind with friends or relatives, fifteen per cent of them had not managed to contact their children since they fled and did not know whether they were alive or dead. Only six per cent were able to bring their children with them and these children were grown up. The extremely hazardous circumstances of flight for all of the African interviewees meant that none were able to bring their children with them.

■ When the interviewees became destitute in the UK following the refusal of their asylum claims seventy-two per cent have spent time sleeping outside and/or are currently sleeping outside. Of these thirty-eight per cent have experienced physical attacks from English people. More than a third of the women sleeping outside – thirty-five per cent – have experienced sexual assaults including rape by English men. In only one case – a racist attack in a pub in which one of the interviewees was blinded in one eye after his attacker stuck a piece of glass into his eye – was the attack reported to the police. The interviewees have enormous fear of the police, partly because of the trauma they experienced at the hands of the police in their home countries and partly because they fear that coming to the attention of the police in this country will expedite their forced removal from the UK.

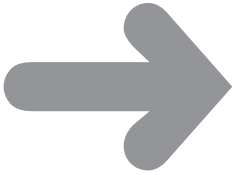
■ Almost one third of interviewees – twenty-seven per cent – have children born in the UK. All of these children are under five.

■ The average length of time living destitute is two years and five months. One interviewee was destitute for three weeks while another has been living destitute for seven years.

■ Almost all of the interviewees fled wealthy and/or professional backgrounds. In many cases they had to flee because they had dared to speak out against oppressive regimes in countries where opposing the government routinely leads to detention, torture and sometimes death. Only one interviewee – a woman who had been trafficked from Nigeria into prostitution in Italy and had subsequently escaped to the UK – described herself as coming from a poor background.

■ Seventeen per cent of interviewees were in the middle of a university course when they had to flee, eight per cent were still at school, twenty-one per cent had their own businesses or worked in their family's business. The kinds of careers interviewees had at the time they fled their countries include surgeon, lawyer, TV and print journalists, surrealist painter, English teacher and skilled technical translator, civil engineer, mechanical engineer, pharmacist, nurse, senior government tax official, a poet and scholar, a teacher and playwright, an employee of a political association.





■ More than half - fifty-four per cent – had been in detention in their home countries and one woman had been trafficked into prostitution. More than two thirds – seventy per cent – had been tortured in their home countries, either while in detention or attacked in their own homes or while trying to escape from soldiers, government officials etc. Many of the women had been raped while in detention in their country and some are now bringing up children conceived through those rapes.

■ Sixty five per cent of interviewees had had family members killed or gone missing as a result of conflicts back home.

■ Thirty-six per cent of interviewees have experienced racist abuse in the UK while they have either been walking down the street or sleeping outside.

■ Twenty one per cent have been exploited by immigration lawyers. Generally this exploitation has taken the form of the lawyers demanding large sums of money and then doing no work on their client's asylum claim.

■ One of the most shocking findings is that the average amount of money people are surviving on each week is £7.65. The average was boosted by three interviewees who are earning £60 a week working illegally in shops and factories run by members of their own communities. The majority of interviewees are actually surviving on less than £5 per week. This money is given to them either by other asylum seekers, by family members or is acquired through begging.

■ Twenty-nine per cent of interviewees have worked illegally in the UK or in 'underground' jobs such as prostitution. Some people have worked in shops or stores with false documents, others do intermittent painting, decorating or building work.

■ Almost everybody complained of being hungry and eating a poor diet, consisting mainly of chips, rice, bread and cheap biscuits. Fifty three per cent of people sometimes go for one or more days eating nothing at all. Forty-eight per cent of people only eat once a day. Only four per cent of interviewees, one supported by extended family and the other by an English person, did not go hungry.

■ The findings of this research suggest there is a hierarchy amongst those who are destitute. Generally those from African countries fare worse and are exposed to the most severe forms of destitution. They are less likely to receive support from family members and organisations from their own communities for the simple reason that they are less likely to have family members with leave to remain in the UK and their communities are more likely to be poor and lacking in the infrastructure to provide them with informal or clandestine work, accommodation and other forms of support. Those who speak poor English are further marginalised. Many of the interviewees from Middle Eastern countries are receiving support from extended family members who have leave to remain here and are often well established with homes and good jobs. The Eastern European interviewees fare best of all. They have not experienced the racism and discrimination in the same way as those with a different skin colour. Generally their English is good and they seem better able to navigate their way through the jungle of destitution than other groups, for example involving themselves in voluntary work and making connections with English people who are well disposed towards helping them. However, it is important to acknowledge that racist attacks on Eastern Europeans are increasing.

■ A hundred per cent of interviewees said they are depressed and stressed. Seventy-five per cent have a clinical diagnosis of depression. Physical health problems are many and varied. Thirty-six per cent of people suffer pain from injuries sustained while they were being tortured in their home countries. Twelve per cent have been diagnosed with and treated for TB, ten per cent have been diagnosed with malnutrition. Other illnesses include hepatitis, diabetes, anaemia and asthma.

■ Forty-five per cent of interviewees survive thanks to the support given to them by friends and families, twenty-eight per cent are helped by charities, nineteen per cent are helped by churches.

■ Much of the help received by destitute asylum seekers is provided by other impoverished asylum seekers, some of whom are still having an initial asylum claim processed and so are in receipt of accommodation and cash calculated at seventy per cent of income support. As one asylum seeker put it, "It's left to those of us with almost nothing to support those with absolutely nothing." In many cases the kind of support offered to destitute asylum seekers by members of their own communities is a literal lifeline and is selflessly offered. But with little or no money of their own some asylum seekers are taking the food parcels and toiletries provided by charities and faith groups and offering them as a kind of informal rent to the people who allow them to sleep on their sofas or floors. Examples of exploitation have emerged where destitute asylum seekers have been offered a roof over their heads and in exchange have been treated like domestic slaves, expected to work long hours for no pay cooking, cleaning and looking after children.

BACKGROUNDS OF DESTITUTE ASYLUM SEEKERS

The rejected asylum seekers interviewed for this report fled a range of countries across Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Overwhelmingly the interviewees come from affluent, professional backgrounds. Their socio-economic status in their home countries debunks the myth that asylum seekers are usually poverty-stricken individuals whose primary aim when they reach the UK is to claim benefits and secure council housing. Most only managed to escape from their country and often from detention in their country because they or a member of their family paid people smugglers or agents up to \$10,000 US to get them passage to a safe country. In poor countries only the wealthy elite have access to this kind of money and so flight to the UK, other European countries and north America, is not a realistic option for the majority.

“I was rich in my country but not here”.

Bayonne, 20, DRC

The jobs of interviewees included university students, people running their own business or working in the family business, footballer, journalist, doctor lawyer, son of police officer, computer programmer, civil engineer, hairdresser, English teacher and skilled technical translator, pharmacist, poet and scholar, magazine printer, youth worker, nurse, senior tax official working with the UN, teacher and playwright, driver, mechanical engineer, employee of a political party association. A few interviewees were still at school when they had to run away without their parents.

In most cases they encountered problems because they spoke out against the government of their country or attended an anti-government demonstration.

“I was an electrical engineer in Kinshasa working for politicians repairing their cars. I got involved in the UDPS party against President Kabila. One day Kabila’s soldiers come to my home and forced me to rape my mother. She was crying and said to me, “It’s not your fault.” Then I was blindfolded taken and to prison. I was forced to sit out in the hot sun for hours with no clothes on. I was beaten every day. The guards said that I was going to be killed the next day. But then I was put on a plane to Angola. I was told my father had paid a bribe to save my life and at the airport I was given a ticket to the UK. “That’s too far,” I said. The man with the ticket replied, “There you will be safe and no one will ever be able to touch you.” In this country I am treated like I’m in prison but I’m happy here because I know that if I was still in DRC I’d be dead.”

Etienne, 34, DRC

None of the people interviewed left their country, their family, their home, their job and their community willingly. Everybody who fled believed that they would be killed if they remained where they were. The majority of interviewees suffered detention (fifty-four per cent) and torture (seventy per cent) before they left.

Most of the women and some of the men who were detained were raped. One pregnant woman was beaten until she miscarried. Many of those detained were subjected to electric shocks and repeated beatings. Usually following the payment of a bribe interviewees were released from detention by those working on the inside. One man was given a military uniform to put on so that he could walk out of the prison he was being held at without arousing suspicion.

Another, a surgeon, was injured so badly while he was tortured in detention that he was taken to a hospital he had previously worked at for treatment. After he had been treated his former colleagues smuggled him out of the hospital in a doctor's uniform.

The interviewees have been left profoundly traumatized by their experiences of torture and the brutality they have witnessed. One woman saw her friend being shot dead by soldiers when both of them attended an anti-government demonstration. Another also saw friends killed in horrific circumstances.

“My son was forcibly recruited by rebels in eastern Congo to be a child soldier when he was just 13. I formed a women’s group to protest about the forcible recruitment of child soldiers but we were targeted by the rebels. My worst memory was watching three women from my group being buried alive by the rebels as a punishment for protesting about what they were doing.”

Anne, 49, DRC

In this country people smugglers are considered to be malign individuals who exploit human suffering for financial gain but the asylum seekers who were led to safety by the smugglers often view them in a very different light.

“A smuggler took me to Morocco and hid me for two days then we got on a plane to Heathrow. There he took my passport off me so he could use it for someone else. That smuggler saved my life. I would have been killed if I’d stayed in Guinea. More than 100 people were killed at the demonstration that I attended which resulted in my detention.”

Moustapha, 41, Guinea

Many people fled after one or more members of their family were killed in one form of conflict or another. Sixty-five per cent of interviewees lost one or more family members in the conflict.

“The government of Iran hanged my brother with a rope. If I had stayed in Iran the same thing would have happened to me.”

Hamid, 28, Iran

“My brother was killed, my nephew was killed, my wife’s cousin was killed and another of my brothers has disappeared.”

Emad, 60, Iraq

“Both my parents were killed in the Liberian civil war. I was orphaned at the age of five.”

Tamba, 21, Liberia

“My father was killed because he protested to my trafficker about me being forced to work as a prostitute in Italy.”

Pat, 35, Nigeria

“When I think about my family and children I had to leave behind I go crazy.”

Boni, 42, DRC

The conflicts interviewees were involved with led to heartrending separations. Death was not the only form of loss experienced by interviewees.

“I last saw my parents 25 years ago. We became separated during the war when everyone was running and I was brought up by adoptive parents. I was overjoyed when I got back in contact with my real parents six years ago. They are now living in northern Eritrea. My mum cries every time she hears my voice on the phone, my dad has gone blind so he will never see my face again. I desperately want to see my parents before they die but it’s too dangerous for me to return to Eritrea and I don’t have a passport to travel anywhere else in Africa.”

Bashir, 32, Eritrea

Name: Alain

Age: 34

Country: DRC

Job in home country: TV journalist

Time Destitute: Over two years

Alain fled to the UK from Democratic Republic of Congo in January, 2002 and claimed asylum. He had worked as a journalist in the capital Kinshasa and presented a TV show that was critical of the government. His downfall came when he helped to organise a demonstration against the government. Police arrested, detained and tortured him for doing so, first in a private house and then in Katanga Prison. He was due to be transferred to a private house notorious for torture by government agents. Many people were killed there and Alain was convinced that his life too was almost over. His father discovered his whereabouts and paid a bribe to get him out of Makala Jail and out of the country fast before he could be rearrested. After he was attacked the rest of his family had to flee Kinshasa and sought refuge in Bukavu in the east of the DRC.

"It's hard to believe that your whole life can change so suddenly," says Alain.

His asylum application was refused and he began sleeping rough in the Elephant & Castle area of London. He was very hungry and had no money at all. He had to survive on food from charities and the kindness of friends.

"I was sleeping outside on the streets with drug addicts who were often shouting and swearing. My government is very bad but they don't put people out onto the streets the way the government does here. The UK government treats asylum seekers very badly because they don't believe us when we tell them how hard we've had to fight to survive. If President Kabila were no longer in charge in DRC I would love to return home. I'm only here to save my life and desperately miss my home, my family and my work. I've been punished twice, once in Congo and now in England."

He is completely destitute and is struggling to survive on nothing at all.

"I wake up hungry and go to sleep hungry. I'm dependent on one friend who is also a refused asylum seeker but who has Section 4 support (£35 supermarket vouchers a week and no choice accommodation). I'm sleeping on my friend's kitchen floor. It's very hard and cold but he has given me a blanket."

He was the victim of a racist attack in north London and was blinded in one eye by a white man who stabbed him through his eye with a piece of broken glass.

"I stepped into a pub to look at the football showing on the TV screen when a stranger approached me, abused me with racist language and then pushed the piece of broken glass into my eye."

His attacker is serving a jail sentence for the offence. The attack has left him devastated and traumatised and has compounded the misery he feels.

"You can't even get married here without getting permission from the Home Secretary first. The way the Home Office treats asylum seekers is not right. I have to see many doctors about my eye and suffer a lot from depression.

"Everyone knows that the UK is a country that says it respects human rights. But in fact they don't respect everybody's human rights. As asylum seekers we have been punished twice – once back home and once here. In Kinshasa I was tortured physically and here I'm tortured mentally. I've transferred from one prison to another. I used to dream of having a good life but now that dream is gone."



WHERE PEOPLE SLEEP

Sleeping arrangements for destitute asylum seekers are many and varied but most of them are grim. Interviewees sleep on park benches, at railway stations, in the stairwells of council flats, in car park lifts, under bridges, in phone boxes, on night buses, in squats, abandoned cars or on friends' floors or sofas. A few people sleep upright on public toilets. If friends allow them to stay for a few days they sleep on the floor, on sofas or sometimes share single beds in tiny rooms, sleeping head to toe with their friend or family member. Most carry everything they own with them at all times – a couple of changes of clothes, usually a mobile phone, a toothbrush and their Home Office documents.

Everyone longs to have a room of their own or as one woman put it she doesn't aspire to having a room of her own, just a bed of her own. It is hard enough to flee country, family and community in extremely traumatic circumstances but to then not be able to put down new roots is very difficult. Sometimes people sleep alongside rough sleepers from the UK, often people with drink, drug or mental health problems. They reported feeling uneasy and sometimes intimidated by these people who are sleeping on the streets for very different reasons than them.

Sleeping outside makes interviewees particularly vulnerable to a range of attacks (see next section) and has led to a range of chronic health problems. Washing themselves and their clothes is often difficult for people sleeping outside.

Some people combined sleeping outside with sleeping on the floor of churches or staying with friends. While it is preferable to be indoors to outdoors, especially during the winter months, staying with other people causes various problems. Sometimes people stay clandestinely with asylum seekers who have been provided with accommodation. Generally it is forbidden for asylum seekers to have guests staying overnight in their accommodation and so interviewees have to hide if spot checks are carried out by accommodation providers. The asylum seekers who allow them to stay are jeopardising their own right to accommodation because they are breaking the 'no guests' rules.

Those who stay with family members often find that their presence has led to heightened household tensions. Conditions are often cramped and resentments can build. In a few cases mothers who have stayed with sons or sisters who have stayed with brothers were not welcomed by the men's wives - sometimes they threw them out. While there were examples of extreme altruism and kindness, often from other asylum seekers who were prepared to share their last mouthful of food with some of the interviewees there were also stories of exploitation of various kinds in exchange for accommodation.

“Sometimes when I stay with people they expect me to do everything in the house and look after the children. They treat me like a slave. I have to do a lot of work just so I have a place to sleep. I carry my whole life around with me in one small bag – clothes, toothbrush and my Home Office papers. Sometimes during the day I walk around in parks. At night I sleep on the night buses but it’s hard to fall asleep with bright lights shining on you from the street and in the bus. A lot of the time I’m just walking round alone.”
Chouchou, 28, DRC

“I don’t think there’s one night I’ve slept normally in this country. All I want is a bed of my own. Not even a room of my own.”
Gealass, 57, Iraq

“I have slept in parks, on buses, in phone boxes, in an old broken car. Often it’s too cold to stay asleep and I wake up every hour through the night. When it rains I wake up every 15 minutes. One night feels like a year. I never used drugs in Iran but I started smoking heroin and crack here because it took my pain away.”

Hamid, 28, Iran

“There were 13 of us destitute asylum seekers sleeping in a disused factory. In the space of a year three died brutally – two were killed and one was run over. Sometimes I sleep sitting up on a public toilet in Wembley but the cleaners come at 4am so I have to leave then.”

Sellah, 41, Sri Lanka

“I’ve got pains from sleeping outside. I used to panic at first but I’ve got used to it now. Sometimes they try to provoke me when they see me sleeping. They say, “Oh there’s a nigger sitting there.”

Tamba, 21, Liberia

All the interviewees longed to have a place of their own to lay their heads at night. With no fixed address it is very difficult to receive letters from solicitors, to keep appointments and to get involved in vital activities such as fighting a threatened removal or getting medical attention. Combined with a lack of money to make phone calls to solicitors, doctors etc and no funds to travel to meetings it becomes almost impossible to for this group of asylum seekers to ‘help themselves’ advancing their asylum cases and trying to secure healthcare and other essentials of life.

Those who are able to arrange to stay with friends can often only stay in one place for one, two or three nights. They spend much of their time trudging from one friend’s home to another, often walking several miles because they have no money for bus fares, a grim kind of pilgrimage with little hope attached.

Tamba's parents were killed during the Liberian civil war when he was five years old. He comes from the Mandingo tribe, members of which fought against Charles Taylor's troops during the civil war. He says that his father made enemies during the war and that if he went back those enemies would seek him out and punish him as his father is no longer around.

"I don't really remember my parents, but I do remember what the war was like. Everything was crazy with shooting and killing. The Taylor Boys chopped me on my face and the wound wasn't stitched properly so I still have a big scar there." He spent time moving through various west African countries including Guinea and Sierra Leone. He met a man he met in Sierra Leone who befriended him and helped him escape to England in April 2004, reassuring him that once he reached the UK he'd be safe. He was screened for TB on arrival in London and when he was found to have the disease he was taken away in handcuffs to be treated.

"They treated me very badly," he says. He received support until February 2005 but when his asylum claim was rejected he was left destitute.

"February 2005 was the last time I slept in a bed. sleep on the night bus if I have a buss pass, or in the park, in a phone box and behind a car wash. English people think about how they can make progress. Me, I think about where I'm going to sleep tonight. Sometimes I am allowed to sleep on the floor of a barber's shop in exchange for cleaning the shop for the owner. I get pains in my body from the bad way I have to sleep. Sleeping outside used to make me panic but I've got used to it now. Sometimes when I was sitting on a bench in the park white people have come up to me and said, 'Oh there's a nigger sitting there.'"

Name: Tamba

Age: 21

Country: Liberia

Job in home country: School student

Time Destitute: Four years

Tamba was offered a place at Hammersmith College but had no money to travel there. "Sometimes I set off walking there at 5am so I could make it to college but it was just too difficult to continue like that."

One of his biggest problems is finding enough food to eat. He is entirely without support and survives on a couple of pounds a week, usually by 'targeted' begging – appealing to people he hears speaking his own language on the bus or in the street for small amounts of cash.

Getting food can be a problem," he says. "Once I went a whole week eating only a banana. Sometimes I eat once a day, sometimes once every two days. I survive eating cheap custard cream biscuits from a supermarket that cost 27p per packet. Because of eating so much sugary food I've now got a problem with my teeth. I would love to be able to afford African foods but I never have the money to buy them."

"Destitution discriminates against people like me. It makes me feel that I'm different from others, that I'm not a human being. I spend a lot of time by myself, sometimes I go to the library and check football websites to pass the time. My dream is to go to university and train to be a doctor but I can't see that happening. I carry my bible around with me and when I get the chance I sit quietly and read it."



UNDER ATTACK IN THE UK

When the interviewees fled their countries there was only one thing on their minds. To get as far away as possible from danger and to find a place to run to where they would be safe. Many had no idea that they were coming to the UK and generally those who did know where they were coming to had not chosen England but were going wherever they were taken by a smuggler.

They had little or no knowledge about the asylum system, about the difficulty of being granted asylum and about the chance that they might end up destitute and living underground. They were shocked by the harshness of the system and horrified to find that they were victims of various kinds of attacks by English people – physical attacks, racist attacks and sexual assaults including rape. While many had endured persecution in their home countries racism was a new and alien concept to them.

Interviewees were terrified of reporting attacks to the police for two reasons. Firstly they had enormous fear of the police because of the brutality many had endured at the hands of police in their home country. Secondly they believed that the police were unlikely to protect them and instead would liaise with immigration officials to expedite their removal from the UK. As a result many serious crimes perpetrated against one of the UK's most vulnerable groups have gone undetected by police and prosecutors and unpunished. The interviewees had already undergone considerable trauma in their home country and the crimes they have been victims of here has compounded those traumas. Knowing that the perpetrators of the crimes against them will not be brought to justice adds to their sense of their lives being out of control.

Many of the interviewees were victims of crime because they were forced to sleep outside. Their attackers sensed their vulnerability and knew that they would be soft targets.

Interviewees reported widespread racist abuse. “Monkey” “nigger” “fucking immigrant” “black bastard” and “dog” were frequently used terms of abuse. White English people frequently urged interviewees to “go back to your country”. Several people reported having raw eggs thrown at them.

“I was walking down the street when raw eggs were thrown at me in Sunderland. They called me a ‘nigger’ and told me to go home.”

Anne, 49, DRC

“I usually sleep outside. When I spend the night in London’s Hyde Park I hide in the bushes until the keepers have locked the gates. Sometimes I sleep in Finsbury Park. Sleeping on the bus is like being in a five star hotel to me compared with sleeping in the park. The last time I slept in a bed was January 2005. Medication for depression helps me sleep but sometimes I can only sleep for three hours at a time. People call out to me, “Black bastard, go back home monkey,” when I’m trying to sleep. You have to be patient in this country because there is no help so you have to help yourself. Life is a jungle. You can’t understand destitution unless you’ve been through it.”

Jami, 23, Somalia

“Some skinheads threatened to kill me with knives. I hid in the library until they’d gone.”
Jami, 23, Somalia

“Last year a white man attacked me in a bar. He smashed a piece of broken glass into my eye and now I’m blind in that eye. Somebody called the police and he was arrested, charged and convicted of a racist attack on me.”
Alain, 35, DRC

An alarming thirty-five per cent of women who slept outside reported being sexually assaulted including being raped. None of the women reported the assaults to the police. Some of the women agreed to go back to the homes of men who approached them when they were sleeping outside because they thought they’d be safer, as well as warmer, inside a house than out in the open air. Once the men got the women into their homes they raped them. One woman was attacked by a gang of five men while she was sleeping in a park - two of them raped her. Another was sexually assaulted by a UKBA sub-contractor who let himself into Section 4 accommodation she had been provided with, with a key. He threatened to return the following night to rape her. She alerted the police who investigated but did not press charges.

“I was sleeping on a park bench because I had nowhere to stay. A man came up to me and said I could stay at his house. In desperation I agreed to go with him but he forced me to have sex with him. After two nights he threw me out because he said his wife was coming back, then I found out I was pregnant. The worst thing is being abandoned. Before I arrived here I thought a country like England would help in my situation, now I think differently. I have suffered a lot here.”

Patricia, 32, DRC

“One night I agreed to go back to the house of a man who said he would help me. When we got there he raped me.”
Guyguy, 28, DRC

Thirty-eight per cent of interviewees reported being physically attacked. Many were kicked and beaten. One woman was hit repeatedly by a man wielding an umbrella, while she was waiting for a bus. One man encountered a group of girls who set their dog on him. Some interviewees were spat at by white people.

All the attacks were unprovoked, underlining just how vulnerable destitute asylum seekers are. Because of their fear of the police they are unlikely to seek redress when they are victims of crime and injustice.

FOOD

All but two of the interviewees went hungry some or all of the time. Interviewees were heavily dependent on churches, charities, friends and family to feed them because they rarely had money either to buy any food at all or to buy enough food to keep them going.

Several female interviewees suffered destitution while pregnant. While 'Section 4' support is offered to pregnant women in the latter stages of pregnancy long-term damage may be caused if the mother is under-nourished in the early months of her pregnancy.

Diets were very unbalanced, containing few fruits and vegetables and little protein. Many interviewees survived almost entirely on chips, rice and biscuits.

Ten per cent of interviewees had suffered from malnutrition and fifty-three per cent sometimes ate nothing at all for one or more days. Forty-four per cent only ate once a day. Some became ill as a result of their poor diets but accessing healthcare for refused asylum seekers can be difficult.

People felt uncomfortable about taking food in houses they were staying in and sometimes no food was offered and they were forbidden from helping themselves to food.

“Breakfast lunch and dinner is all one meal for me.”

Shahnaz: 42, Iran

“Getting food and finding places to sleep are my 2 biggest problems. One week I only had a banana all week. Sometimes I eat once a day. I buy economy custard cream biscuits from the supermarket for 27p but they have caused me problems with my teeth.”

Tamba, 21, Liberia

“When I was pregnant I was hungry all the time. I had to keep asking my friends for food.”

Madalena, 25, Angola

“I made my children sleep more when we only had enough food for one meal a day in the hope that they would feel less hungry. I have to go round from place to place to look for money for the children. Destitution has made me fear everything and it has broken my heart.”

Pat, 35, Nigeria

“I have no money, sometimes, I beg people for food when they come out of food shops with their carrier bags full of shopping.”

Prospero, 21, Angola

“I am ashamed to ask for money for food but sometimes I beg and am given £1 or £2. Other times I search through the rubbish bags put out by restaurants.”

Hamid, 28, Iran

“When I was very hungry I went to McDonalds and ate the half-eaten food left on the tables,”

Blondine, 21, DRC

Many people, especially those from African countries, commented on how different our attitudes to food are to those in their home countries. There it would be inconceivable if people were eating and saw a hungry person, not to share food with that person even if s/he was a stranger. People longed to eat familiar food from their home countries but the cost of this food and a lack of cooking facilities put these foods beyond their reach.

HEALTH

Many interviewees are in a poor state of physical health. All have mental health problems including traumatic stress disorders and depression. People's psychological problems are a toxic combination of trauma endured in their home country and trauma endured here. Many live in terror of being caught by the UK authorities. When they fled to the UK they hoped they would have a chance to heal from persecution and the loss of loved ones in brutal circumstances. Instead a series of further blows have been dealt to them in the UK, weakening them and causing them to lose hope for the future.

Access to both primary and secondary healthcare has proved problematic for some interviewees. GPs and their, sometimes ferocious, gatekeepers, the receptionists, have discretion about whether or not to take on a new patient and destitute asylum seekers are not always approved. Some refuse to register patients without an address even if they are clearly in need of urgent medical attention. The consequences of this can be far reaching. Social services and Section 4 assessments often rely on medical reports and without such reports rejected asylum seekers are hugely disadvantaged.

The government proposed to limit access to primary care for rejected asylum seekers but these plans have been quietly shelved. A court ruling in 2008 endorsed the right to secondary care, also a problematic area for rejected asylum seekers who have been sent bills for thousands of pounds for hospital stays for giving birth.

Twelve per cent of interviewees have been diagnosed and treated for TB and ten per cent have been diagnosed with malnutrition. Anaemia is another problem along with diabetes, hepatitis and asthma. Stomach problems caused by eating bad food are also common. Thirty-six per cent of interviewees are suffering ongoing physical pain from torture injuries sustained in their home countries. Seventy-five per cent of respondents have a diagnosis of clinical depression. All the respondents complain of feeling depressed.

“I was on the 149 bus and I was heavily pregnant. Suddenly I felt very hot and dizzy and I collapsed onto the floor. I couldn't stand up but nobody came to help me. That would never have happened in Cameroon. I went to social services to ask for help but they said they could do nothing for me apart from taking my children into care. I told them I'd rather die than be separated from my children.”

Josiane, Cameroon: 28

“I was screened for TB when I arrived in London at the age of 16. When they found I had TB they put me in handcuffs.”

Tamba, 21, Liberia

The majority of the interviewees are under the age of 40. Destitution has seriously damaged their physical and mental health. While some medical professionals refuse to treat them others offer a wonderful, caring service. Often the depression and ill health rejected asylum seekers suffer can be directly linked to the way they've been treated here. Had they had the same access to housing, healthcare and work as UK citizens their state of health would be far better.

WORK & FINANCES

The average amount of money the destitute asylum seekers interviewed for this report survive on each week is £7.65. The majority were living on less than five pounds a week. It is hard to imagine how people are able to physically survive on such sums. The amount is less than the 'dollar a day' yardstick that defines extreme global poverty. We are not used to thinking about poverty in the UK in such extreme terms.

The government has many initiatives to combat poverty and homelessness in the UK but for the purposes of these initiatives the destitute asylum seeker population are invisible and irrelevant.

Some destitute asylum seekers engage in moneyless transactions – for example sweeping the floor of a barber's shop in exchange for a free haircut. While some of these exchanges are reasonable and of mutual benefit to the asylum seeker and the provider of one or other service, others tip over into the realms of exploitation (see Under Attack in the UK) where people are treated as domestic slaves in exchange for a roof over their heads.

Many interviewees are too scared to engage in work of any description for fear of coming to the attention of the authorities. Those who do engage in intermittent work in the black economy are paid far less than the legal minimum wage.

Of all the interviewees three Sri Lankan Tamils have fared best. They do odd jobs such as sweeping floors and unloading boxes in shops run by people from their own community. For this work they receive around £60 per week.

Other jobs include work in takeaway restaurants, building work and painting and decorating. One man was paid £5 for three hours work in a factory. Some of the women worked in street prostitution where payments to sex workers are generally much lower than to those working in indoor establishments. While English women, often working on the streets to support a Class A drug habit, can charge around £20 for sex the interviewees were only getting £3-5 and sometimes men tricked them into having sex but refused to pay them anything at all afterwards. The interviewees involved in prostitution did not use condoms because of a lack of knowledge of their importance, a lack of ability to access them and a lack of confidence and command of English to persuade the men to use them.

“I’m scared of everything here. The men who drink a lot, the police, sleeping in the park. One man approached me and said if I did cleaning work for him he would give me a passport. I worked very hard for him but he paid me just £10 a week and gave me no passport. The lady in the house said people knew I lived there and might tell the police so I went back to sleeping in the park in Edmonton. It was very cold sleeping there so out of desperation I agreed to give my body to men for money – men from England, Jamaica, Nigeria, Congo - I had to do that to eat. One day I got pregnant from a customer. He wanted me to have an abortion but I said no because I’m a Christian. Then he hit me in the street and I collapsed and was taken to hospital.”

Blondine, 22, DRC

“The worst thing for me was living on the streets and selling sex. Men lied to me and said they were going to help me but it wasn’t true. They had sex with me then gave me no money. Sometimes I thought about killing myself. Every day I had to have sex so I could eat. I was hearing voices. I couldn’t sleep. All I could think about was hunger.”

Thania, 20

Begging is one way some interviewees have of getting money for food but many feel ashamed of resorting to such measures and it is a practice which is carried out discreetly and often involves people the interviewees know. If they beg from strangers the begging is likely to be targeted.

“Sometimes I beg from people if I hear them speaking my language.”

Tamba, 21, Liberia

All of the respondents are desperate to work and many have professional qualifications. A change in the rules permitting asylum seekers to work would solve many of the problems outlined in this report and would restore much of the dignity and self-respect which has been stripped away from people as a result of their treatment in this country. It would also provide net benefits to the treasury in increased revenue from taxation.

The majority of interviewees were too scared of being caught and deported to engage in any sort of illegal work, such as a factory job. The small minority who were working illegally were exploited by their bosses. The very justified fear of workers that they may be imprisoned if they report this exploitation to the relevant authorities ensures that injuries and harms that workers suffer frequently go untreated and unrecorded.

Name: Gealass

Age: 57

Country: Iraqi Kurdish

Job in home country: Teacher and playwright

Time Destitute: Five years

Back home Gealass lived in the Kurdish city of Kirkuk, where she worked as a primary school teacher and a playwright. Her father was a senior judge in the city. She wrote seven books and plays for children but never dared get them published because they were critical of Saddam. She was detained and tortured for having anti-Saddam views and later released. The period of detention left her with problems of incontinence and a knee injury that still causes her so much pain she has to walk with a stick.

"I grew up surrounded by books and learnt a lot about England, Shakespeare, world War Two and Madam Tussauds! We were taught that England has the best democracy in the world. I dreamed of visiting Hyde Park but now I'm here I don't go."

One day Saddam's security forces raided her home and arrested her husband. They discovered copies of some of her plays and she knew she had to get out of Iraq before she too was detained. Friends hid her for a few days then she was bundled into a lorry and smuggled over the border to Turkey. From there she boarded a plane to London and claimed asylum in March 2003.

Her asylum claim was rejected and she has been destitute for most of the time she has lived here.

"Usually I stay with family members but occasionally I have slept in a sheltered courtyard area in Ladbroke Grove but I got very cold and hungry there."

"My memories of home are of both the good things and the bad things. It is said that Kurdistan is like paradise and in some ways that is so. There is a very nice relationship between neighbours and relatives. Everyone knows where everyone else lives so we don't even need to have numbers on the houses. But I also remember the rapes that went on when I was in prison."

She says that despite all the hardships she endures here it is better than life in Iraq.

"I was always waiting for the knock of the secret police on the door back home and at least here I am far away from those people. I appear strong but I'm very damaged by all the things that have happened to me. My dream is to have a bed of my own to sleep in, not even a room of my own, just the bed. I don't think I've slept properly for a single night since I've been in England.

"I'm scared of my future. If the British government send me back to Iraq I'll kill myself on the plane because I know that all that is waiting for me when the plane touches down in Iraq is death."



RESPONSES TO DESTITUTION

Many of the interviewees described in detail how their treatment in this country in general and their experience of destitution in particular had left them broken and devastated.

Organizations like the Red Cross, the Refugee Council, Refugee Action and many smaller charities are providing a vital lifeline for destitute asylum seekers along with churches and other religious establishments. However, this support cannot be sustained indefinitely and many smaller charities in particular are struggling to meet the needs of asylum seekers who have been forced into absolute deprivation. Similarly, networks of refugees and asylum seekers, who provide the majority of direct support for destitute asylum seekers, put themselves at great risk whilst providing assistance in the form of accommodation. While some individuals in the UK have extended the hand of friendship, many interviewees have had extremely negative experiences with both individuals here and officials from UKBA, lawyers and others who work with asylum seekers in a professional capacity.

“Destitution has destroyed me. In Iraq I helped destitute people and now I am destitute myself I don’t know what my future will be or that of my wife and children, we’re living in limbo. I don’t think we have a future here. I borrow history and music books from the library to fill my time. In Iraq I was a highly qualified engineer but here I can do nothing.”

Emad, 60, Iraq

“I thought I’d be treated like a human being in this country. It was a real shock not to be. We’re people who want protection not criminals. All we want to do is contribute. Being raped and tortured in DRC and losing my family was the worst experience of my life, but here in England I don’t know what to do next.”

Irene, 32, DRC

“We want to go forward but all we can do is stand still. My sister and I are here together. We are very close to each other. Two is more than one. When one of us is down the other one pulls her up. I miss the sense of belonging I had at home, the warmth of people, and the solidarity. Back home we didn’t need papers to live. If our lives were not in danger in DRC we would love to return. Destitution has made me lame mentally and physically.”

Marie Claire, 34, DRC

I am a mother. I feel a pain in my heart not to be with my children. Every day you ask yourself where you're going to sleep today don't know whether or not you're going to eat, living in fear because you're outside on the street. I told the Home Office the truth but they didn't believe me. Not being believed is the worst thing."

Anne, 49, DRC

"Some lawyers ask me for cash. When I said to one that I had no money he said I'd have to work illegally to pay him! I'm living like an animal. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. Human beings can't live like that."

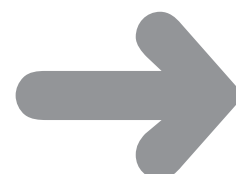
Viem, 35, DRC

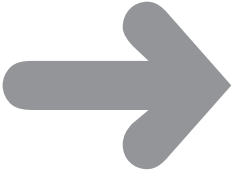
"Sometimes a white person won't sit next to me on the bus. I try not think about that. Detention here in Harmondsworth, Campsfield, Manchester and Doncaster at age 16 was my worst experience. The Home Office didn't believe me when I said I was 16. I keep away from the police and don't drink, smoke or go to clubs. In Africa people who have food to eat feed others. You don't see someone and let them starve, but it's not like that here. I did a lot of work as a Millennium volunteer and had certificates signed by the secretary of state. I was doing GCSEs but had to stop half way through them because my asylum claim failed. I ask myself why have so many bad things happened to me in my life? I don't have an answer. I just want to live a normal life and be part of society. My aim is always to try to save up £13 for a bus pass. I am less stressed if I can be on the move and I try to be on the move all the time. The more I'm moving the less I am thinking. Thinking doesn't help me. I just want live."

Rodrigue, 20, Cameroon

"I wanted to marry my English girlfriend but the home secretary wouldn't give permission. (asylum seekers require permission from the Home Secretary before they can marry) I can't work. I can't go anywhere. What am I supposed to do? Why are we treated like beggars here? I don't have the answers to those questions. I don't have money or accommodation. Living with nothing is the worst thing. I'm not allowed to work even though I'm young and strong. This government should do something about people who have been here for a long time but can't go back to their country. We must have another choice as human beings. Destitution has affected my life. I don't know what will happen tomorrow, I don't have any hope and I don't have any plans. The way I'm living now its not a life, I need to work. I feel as if I'm disabled. It shouldn't be like that for a person of my age, it's unacceptable. It doesn't help when I mention to the Home Office the scars on my face from when I was imprisoned and tortured in Eritrea. The Home Office tells me I'm a liar."

Bashir, 32, Eritrea





“I don’t belong in England but Iran is like I big prison. I’m nothing in this country and if the regime changes I’ll be the first on the plane home. I haven’t been able to wash my clothes for the last two or three months. I’m homesick and I miss my family. Destitution has robbed me of what should have been a good life. I hope that one day I’ll see my family again. The knowledge that if I’d stayed in Iran I may have been hanged up by the government by now for distributing some copies of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses to my friends, has helped me to survive here.”

Khosro, 40, Iran

“They treat us like we are disabled when all we want to do is work. We’re treated like dogs or some other kind of animal. I’m always sick from not having a proper place to sleep and eating bad food. I’m tired of it all.”

Monica, 32, DRC

“I seem strong on the outside but inside I’m damaged. I’m not asking for anything from this country except for my rights. In my country the innocent are in prison and the guilty are outside, if they send me back I’ll kill myself on the plane.”

Gealass, 57, Iraq (Kurdish)

“I was tortured in Congo and now I’m tortured again by the Home Office. The way they treat asylum seekers is not right. They don’t understand how hard asylum seekers have to fight to survive. I can’t believe my life changed so suddenly. The torture here is mental. I dreamed once that I’d have a good life but that dream is gone.”

Alain, 34, DRC

“I never tell any English person I am an asylum seeker because I know English people think that’s a bad thing. I tell them I am visiting my son who has leave to remain here. The most hurtful thing that happened to me in this country was when the judge refused my case and said it was obvious that I’d only come here because I wanted a better life. I used to live in such a beautiful place and had a wonderful life before the war started in my country. If I get status will be able to find my place. I want to work and contribute.”

Vahtang: 62, Abkhazia

“I am very sad that I can’t work as a doctor here. During the day I go to the library and study medical textbooks so I don’t forget everything. Everyone needs to live with their family but I have no family now. Claiming asylum means losing everything. Being an asylum seeker here is like not being a human being. I know how much Africa needs doctors and if I get papers here one day I will go and work as a volunteer with MSF somewhere in Africa.”

Mustapha: 41 Guinea

“The Home Office kills us morally. My girlfriend left me because I cannot provide for our son. I thought the UK supported human rights but they have left me for five years without support. At home I had three meals a day but here I sometimes go a whole day with nothing. I have no bus pass so I walk a long way from one friend to another to get food or I get things from charities. All of this affects your brain. You want to do something but aren’t allowed to do anything.”

Harold, 29, DRC

“English people don’t care if we suffer or die. That’s not good. In life we have to help each other. Sometimes I go to church and pray for things to get better but I can’t see any difference at all. I leave the church expecting miracles to happen but my problems remain the same.”

Prospero, 21, Angola

“Here we have become animals, able only to eat, drink and sleep. We cannot do the rest of the things that humans do.”

Negisti, 43, Eritrea

Madalena was a student at school in Angola when her problems began. Her father was a supporter of FLEC (Forces de Liberation des Enclaves de Cabinda) Cabinda is a region of Angola that is seeking independence.

Madalena's father was killed by the Angolan government because of his political activities and she was arrested, detained and badly beaten.

She became very ill while she was in detention and was temporarily released. Once outside the jail a friend of her father's helped her to escape to the UK before the authorities could detain her for a second time. Her mother went missing when Madalena was detained and she does not know whether she is alive or dead. She is an only child and has been destitute since soon after she arrived in the UK in August 2007. Her asylum claim was refused and in terror of being forcibly returned to Angola a friend agreed to let her share a room with her.

"My friend's room was tiny, cramped and dirty but I had no choice, just as I had no choice about coming to the UK. I had to come here to try and save my life."

Sometimes she has survived an entire week with no money at all, depending on friends, charities and churches to give her food.

"I'm hungry all the time. At the end of last year I had a baby with my boyfriend who is also an asylum seeker from Angola. I was starving all the time during my pregnancy. I had to go to my friends who gave me tea to drink in the morning and rice to eat in the afternoons. It is very hard to bring a baby up with no money and no place to stay."

Name: Madalena

Age: 27

Country: Angola

Job in home country: School student

Time Destitute: One year



CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this report reveal a catalogue of avoidable suffering. Many asylum seekers had no idea how much they would suffer in the UK when they fled persecution in their home country. It is government policies that determine the experience of asylum seekers and ultimately it is government that can effect change.

Whatever incentives are in place people will not voluntarily return to their home countries if they believe they are going to be persecuted or even killed there. And they will do everything in their power to avoid being returned against their will.

Neither the government nor other organizations routinely monitor returns to countries with poor human rights records. Memorandums of understanding have been signed between the UK government and countries like Somalia and Iraq that suggest they are well aware of the risks faced by returned asylum seekers. Generalised assurances from the UK government that it is safe to return to a particular country hold little water with people who have suffered at the hands of their own country's government and often know more about the treatment of reluctant returnees than the UK government.

There is an often quoted 'culture of disbelief' at UKBA. This hinders many genuine asylum seekers from being granted asylum because they are so frequently disbelieved or not regarded as credible.

This simple question is rarely asked. Would people who have fled materially comfortable lives, families and good jobs choose to live destitute in the UK if they had nothing to fear on return to their home country? People choose destitution for one reason only - to save their lives. A greater awareness of the realities of the situation and a more humane response to it from government would go a long way towards bringing about change.

Regularisation of this twilight population would mean that at last their human rights would be recognized. They would then have the opportunity to try to put together the pieces of their fractured lives. The enforced limbo of destitution does not allow them to move forwards and heal.

Allowing this group of people who are skilled and keen to work to contribute to society is a practical as well as a civilised way forward. Current policies on border controls and illegal working are full of contradictions. Illegal working is clamped down on yet the lack of legal work leaves people forced some to work illegally in order to survive. Strict border controls leave asylum seekers with few options other than to employ the services of people smugglers. Finding good legal representation is a major problem for asylum seekers. Twenty-one per cent of interviewees have been exploited by lawyers. Legal aid for immigration cases has been slashed and lack of access to good lawyers reduces people's chances of getting asylum. Sometimes people smugglers, who are far from experts themselves, advise asylum seekers to make up a story on arrival in the UK. If asylum seekers naively follow this advice, believing it will increase their chances of gaining leave to remain it can damage their case permanently. Often asylum seekers of both sexes do not disclose all information at an initial interview, for example the fact that they have been raped in detention, because they are ashamed. It is vital that these factors are taken into account. If asylum seekers had the confidence to tell the full truth at their initial interview and if they had good legal representation to guide them through the bewildering maze that is the asylum system, more would be likely to be granted leave to remain and fewer would end up living destitute. Reductions in legal aid and reduced access to judicial review have a major, detrimental outcome on people's cases.

Asylum seekers in general and detained and destitute asylum seekers in particular have minimal contact with the rest of the population. This separation breeds ignorance and suspicion of asylum seekers from UK citizens. If more asylum seekers were able to mix freely with the rest of the population friendships could develop and prejudices would reduce. The government is keen to promote community cohesion but there is little chance of it developing when some asylum seekers are fast tracked into detention the moment they arrive here and others are driven underground in a bid to avoid forced removal to a country where their lives will be in danger. Some of the best examples of community cohesion can be found in communities who have asylum seekers living amongst them. The children attend the same schools as UK children and when asylum seeker families have been threatened with forced removal from this country their UK friends have often gone to great lengths to campaign against these removals in a bid to keep the people they care about safe and remaining in their midst. Dispersing, detaining and criminalising asylum seekers hinders this process.

Allowing misinformation about asylum seekers to flourish is very dangerous. We are not being 'swamped' by asylum seekers who have come here fishing for benefits and council homes. Asylum was just four per cent of overall immigration in 2007 and the number of people claiming asylum has fallen sharply in recent years.

It is not only adult asylum seekers who are crippled by destitution but the next generation too. One interviewee described how her children aged eight and ten had been out of school for a year because she was living underground. Many of the interviewees have children who are not yet of school age but what will happen when they reach the age of four or five? Most of these children are being reared in set ups which are neither conventional nor satisfactory. Most are being brought up only by their mothers – some of the mothers are reluctant to give the fathers access to their children because they are unable to provide for them financially. In other cases the mothers are not in a relationship with the fathers and do not know of their whereabouts. Many of these mothers are traumatized and unsupported in their parenting roles.

The children, like their parents, have to endure extreme poverty and sometimes go hungry. An increasing number have been born into destitution. Urgent change is needed to prevent this suffering spilling over into the next generation who are currently leading harsh, dysfunctional lives in their early, formative years. Children are being punished in a bid to reduce the overall numbers of people seeking asylum in the UK.

Much of the suffering experienced by this population could be extinguished at a stroke if a more compassionate policy was introduced allowing sanctuary to a greater number of people who have fled their countries in genuine fear for their lives, granting them permission to work and move forward with their lives.

Name: Geraldine

Age: 34

Country: Zimbabwe

Job in home country: Artist and businesswoman

Time Destitute: Five years

Geraldine was a successful artist and businesswoman in Zimbabwe before the problems began with Mugabe. She has three children, one aged sixteen and 12-year-old twins. For many years life was good to her. The arts and crafts she made and sold in her shop were in great demand both in Zimbabwe and in Europe and she sometimes travelled to trade shows in the UK to display and sell her work to English buyers. Financially she and her family were comfortably off.

She joined Movement for Democratic Change and as well as getting involved in political activities also did voluntary work with impoverished widows, giving them the skills to become self-sufficient after their husbands died. She was never detained by Mugabe's officials but they frequently paid visits to her shop and beat her violently to punish her for her political allegiance.

"After these beatings I was unrecognisable. My whole body turned purple. I couldn't move and I couldn't eat. My mum had to do everything for me, even sitting me on the toilet."

She knew that her life was in danger if she remained so she fled to England. Her asylum claim was refused and since then she has been destitute, surviving only thanks to her cousin who is here on a student visa which permits her to work for 20 hours a week. The two women share a single bed in a rented room in east London little bigger than a walk in cupboard.

"I know hundreds of other people in the same situation as me," she says. "Some of them take great risks by using false papers so that they can work. It's the only way they can survive."

She finds life as a destitute asylum seeker both physically gruelling and emotionally shaming.

"Not being able to work and provide for myself the way that I did back home is terrible. I need to send money to Zimbabwe to feed my children but I have nothing. I have to beg people I know for cash. They know they won't get the money back and after a while they stay away from me. I stay away from people too because I feel inferior as a result of having no job. Sometimes I pretend to people I meet that I'm working or studying because I'm ashamed to tell them the truth."

"Often all I have to eat in a day is a bowl of porridge. I'm surviving on about £3 per week." Her cousin and the other people living in the flat all do what they can to support her.

"They have helped me to survive. I take them all as my brothers and sisters."

Her health has deteriorated dramatically, at least partially as a result of being destitute. She is anaemic because she is malnourished and has been hospitalised so that she can be treated for conditions related to malnutrition. Before she became ill she worked in an unpaid voluntary capacity as information and communications officer for the central London branch of MDC.

As well as her physical ill health, the pain of destitution, the limbo about her future and her anxiety about her family back in Zimbabwe she remains traumatised about her experiences at the hands of Mugabe's men.

"All the time I have nightmares about people coming and beating me up. In these dreams someone is holding me down and I'm getting more and more scared."



RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Allow asylum seekers to work at all stages of the process. A court ruling in December 2008 (*Dawit Tekle v SSHD*) ruled, “What I can and do declare for the reasons given in this judgment that the present policy is unlawfully overbroad and unjustifiably detrimental to claimants who have had to wait as long as this claimant has.” *Lord Justice Blake*. In February, 2009 the Church of England General Synod called for the right of asylum seekers to work.

■ Make provision for those who cannot work such as pregnant women and those who are ill.

■ Compulsory training for UKBA staff and appellate decision makers on why people with valid and serious claims have credibility issues. Monitoring and reporting on the safety of those who are forcibly returned.

■ Send each asylum applicant a list of Legal Service Commission-approved suppliers of immigration advice in their area. Ensure that legal aid is available at all stages of the asylum process.

■ One clear system for asylum seekers to obtain financial support and accommodation from the date of application until they are given leave to remain or are deported.

■ Implement a change of culture at UKBA so that asylum seekers’ cases are regarded neutrally from the outset.

■ Embark on a public education campaign about who asylum seekers are, why they flee their countries and how small the numbers of asylum seekers coming here are in the overall context of migration.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

These are the questions that all 56 interviewees were asked for this report.

1. Date of interview.
2. Name.
3. Date of birth.
4. Name and date of birth of any children with you in the UK.
5. Contact details.
6. Country of origin.
7. What was your job in your home country or if no job, job of husband/wife/father/mother.
8. Why did you run away from your country?
9. When did you first arrive in the UK and claim asylum?
10. Length of time destitute?
11. How many others do you know who are destitute?
12. Where and how do you sleep? If with friends do you sleep on the floor or on a sofa or in a bed? How often do you move around from one place to another? If you sleep outdoors where do you sleep – parks, buses, doorways?
13. Have you been attacked or robbed while sleeping outdoors or at any other time?
14. How many children do you have: were they conceived in the UK or back home/with partner/ ex-partner, someone you didn't know well or were they conceived through rape?
15. Are your children with you or back home?
16. How many members of your family are dead/missing?
17. Have you been exploited by people in this country who offered to help you (eg: lawyers, men who offered you a bed for the night or food etc). Have you experienced discrimination from home office officials (racism, someone from your country but from a different tribe/political party)?





18. Have you experienced racism/discrimination in this country?
19. Are you and your children living underground, outside the school system etc?
How do your children spend their days if they are not at school?
20. Explain how your family unit has changed since arriving in the UK (families fractured by process of fleeing danger, temporary family units, dysfunctional family units)?
21. What is the worst thing that has happened to you here, your worst moment?
22. What was your impression of the UK before you arrived here?
23. What is your opinion now?
24. What is your most powerful memory from home?
25. How often do you eat? What do you eat and how do you get food?
26. Have you ever worked in this country? What work have you done?
How much have you been paid? Have you been exploited?
27. What health problems do you have a) from your country (torture injuries etc)
b) health problems here such as malnutrition etc?
28. How much money do you have to survive on each week?
Where do you get this money from and what are your spending priorities?
29. What has destitution done to you?
30. Who or what has helped you survive in the UK? Churches, Libraries, Individuals?
Please supply names and contact numbers if possible?
31. Please explain how any 'underground' networks work?

