

ASYLUM:
THE TRUTH
BEHIND THE
HEADLINES

Asylum Seekers Press Report
Ceri Mollard

asylum



Oxfam

ASYLUM: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HEADLINES

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	1
INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY.....	6
ASYLUM MYTHS	9
SOURCES AND TYPES OF ARTICLE	17
CONCLUSIONS	25
RECOMMENDATIONS	26
APPENDIX 1: Timescale of events involving asylum seekers, March-April 2000.....	28
APPENDIX 2: Key-words analysis	30
APPENDIX 3: All-party declaration on immigration and asylum issues	32

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was commissioned by Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme in Scotland. The Poverty Programme would like to thank a number of people who were involved in its production.

Special thanks must go to Ceri Mollard, who undertook the original research for the report, for her dedication and commitment in the writing and editing process. Thanks also go to the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) for allowing us to access their press-cuttings archive; to Derek Nixon of Oxfam for technical and IT support, and to Carolyn Culey and Mike Parkinson of Oxfam, Terry Williams of the National Union of Journalists, and Sophia Marriage of the SRC for their helpful comments throughout; to Catherine Robinson for copy-editing the text, and to Gemma Swart and Susan Calcluth, all of Oxfam, for their general support and guidance. Thanks also to Audrey Bronstein and Marie Hearle for their encouragement throughout, and to Sandy Ruxton for his unerring advice and comment.

Judith Robertson
Oxfam Poverty Programme Development Officer
Scotland
February 2001



INTRODUCTION

'The Committee notes with concern that, as acknowledged by the State party, there is increasing racial tension between asylum seekers and the host communities, which has led to an increase in racial harassment in those areas and threatens the well-being of established ethnic minority communities. The Committee also recommends that the state party take the lead by sending out positive messages about asylum seekers and protecting them from racial harassment.'

(UN International Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, UK Report, 18 August 2000, A/55/18, paras 346-372)



THE AIM OF THIS REPORT

This report arose from a serious concern about the quality of press coverage on asylum in Scotland, and the degree to which asylum seekers arriving in the country are badly affected by the negative coverage that they receive in the Scottish press. It aims to explore how this adverse treatment in sections of the press has been instrumental in creating a climate of fear and hostility towards asylum seekers among sections of the Scottish public, and in supporting government policies which increase hardship and suffering among Scotland's asylum community. The report also sets out a range of recommendations to ensure fair and informed reporting of asylum issues in future.

OXFAM'S WORK WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS

Through its work around the world, Oxfam has built up considerable knowledge and experience of situations that produce refugees, and the distress and suffering endured by those caught in such situations. Staff are currently working in seven out of the ten countries from which most asylum seekers in the UK arrive. Since Oxfam established its UK Poverty Programme in 1995, it has provided financial assistance and other forms of support for a number of host-country projects and programmes that address the short-term practical needs of asylum seekers. We have also participated in a range of activities to improve existing knowledge about the circumstances of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain, to change public and official attitudes towards them, and to help to shape government policy.

THE CONTEXT IN SCOTLAND

Prior to the implementation of the government's dispersal programme under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, which came into force in April 2000, Scotland was host to around 400 asylum seekers and refugees each year. Glasgow City Council's decision to offer 2500 units of accommodation to the Home Office for the purpose of dispersal, housing up to 6000 asylum seekers, will increase that number more than ten fold and has already increased the presence and visibility of this group of people enormously.

The press coverage around this shift has influenced the climate in which asylum seekers have been received in Scotland, particularly in Glasgow. A year after the peak of the media interest in the changes, reports to the Scottish Refugee Council of verbal and physical attacks on asylum seekers are commonplace, and there are reported instances of asylum seekers being too afraid to leave their homes.

Negative press coverage alone cannot fully account for these problems. Given insufficient resources by central government, attempts by local government, non-government organisations (NGOs), and the police to involve local communities in these changes have been inadequate. However, the failure of the press to hold local and national government to account for the inadequacies in their policies and the scapegoating of asylum seekers in the process has done nothing to ease the passage of this legislation and more importantly to meet the needs of this group of people.

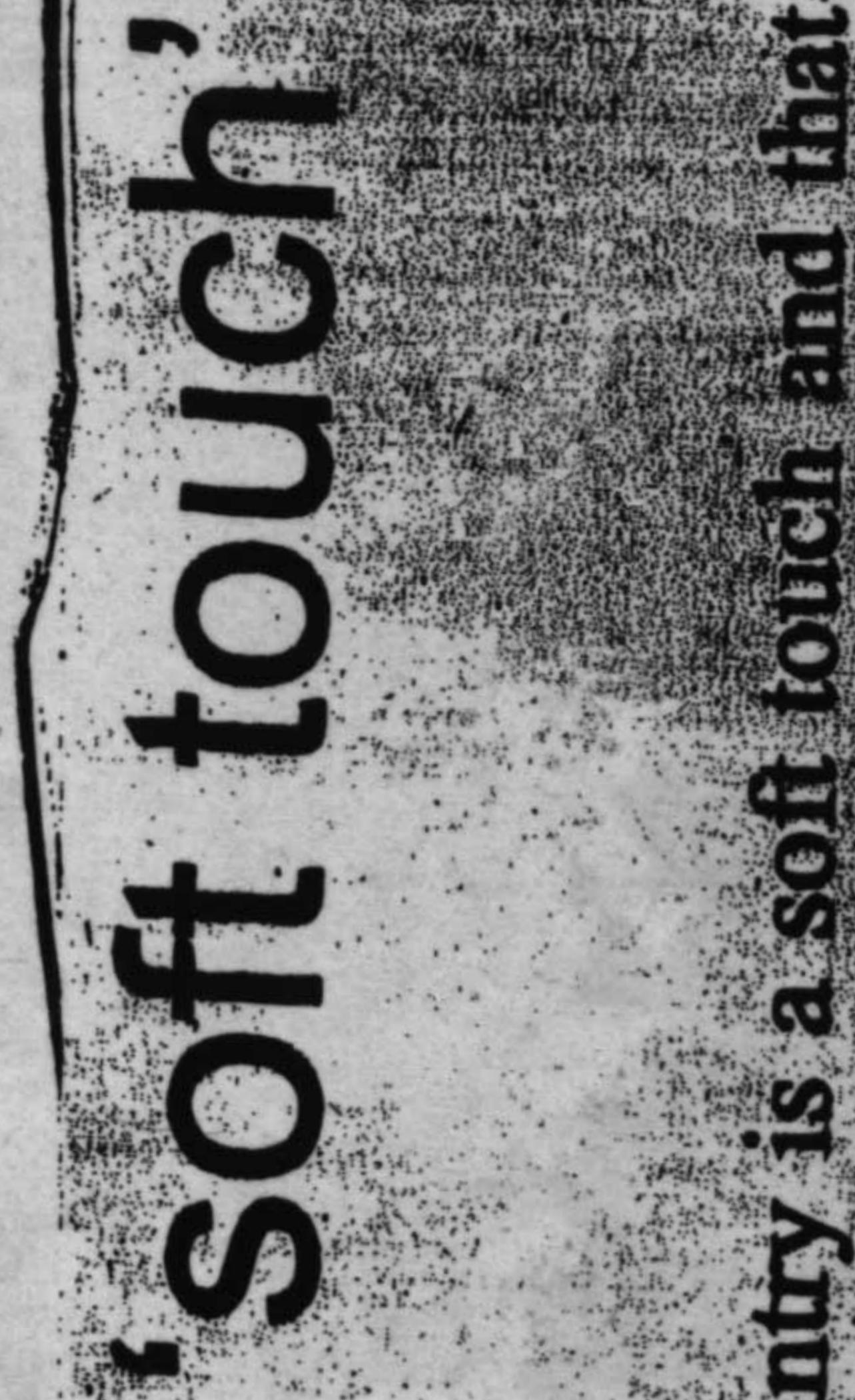
THE DAMAGE ARISING FROM NEGATIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

Although the British press has been instrumental in raising public awareness of many situations that have led to increased applications for asylum in the UK (for example during the crisis in Kosovo in 1999), press coverage of refugee and asylum issues in 2000 was characterised by negative imagery, hostility towards asylum seekers, and a 'culture of disbelief'. This report analyses the press coverage in Scotland over a two-month period during 2000, when the profile of asylum issues was at an all-time high. The coverage monitored began just before the first asylum seekers were due to arrive in Glasgow as part of the government's dispersal scheme. The coverage spanned a turbulent period that saw a number of the newly arrived asylum seekers begging in the streets, the introduction of new government measures aimed at deterring asylum seekers from entering Britain, and the announcement of tough new Conservative Party policy on asylum.

The dissemination of myths about asylum seekers and the openly hostile statements printed in some sections of the press have helped to justify the serious undermining of the human rights of a group of extremely vulnerable people. A poll carried out by MORI* in the latter half of the year indicates that many Britons have been influenced by negative press coverage on asylum seekers – for example, 80 per cent of adults polled believed that refugees came to Britain because they believed it to be a 'soft touch'. Most respondents also overestimated the amount of financial aid received by asylum seekers, believing that asylum seekers receive on average benefits worth £113 per week. In reality, a single asylum seeker over 25 receives £36.54 per week (*Reader's Digest*, November 2000).

There can be little doubt that negative press coverage has helped to create a climate in Britain where it is acceptable to detain asylum seekers, to give them support payments worth only 70 per cent of Income Support levels, to make that payment in vouchers, to provide sub-standard accommodation, and to disperse people across the country without recourse to individual need. In some cases the outcome of this coverage has been worse: asylum seekers in poor communities have been harassed and intimidated by people who believe that their presence has affected the quality of services, access to housing, and even access to jobs (although asylum seekers are not allowed to work for at least the first six months after their arrival).

*MORI interviewed 2118 adults (aged 15+) face to face in their homes between July 20th - 24th



METHODOLOGY

Over an eight-week period, starting on 6 March 2000 and ending on 28 April 2000, all weekday news coverage of asylum issues was collected from six Scottish newspapers. The papers were the *Daily Record*, *Herald*, *Scotsman*, *Scottish Daily Express*, *Scottish Daily Mail*, and the *Scottish Sun*.

Each printed article was evaluated by using a number of categories that aimed to quantify key trends in asylum reportage. Each article was classified as either **negative**, **balanced**, or **positive**. This rating was determined by the following factors.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Negative articles

- > Uses negative words and phrases to describe asylum seekers and discuss issues surrounding the asylum debate (see Negative Key Words below).
- > Uses racial stereotyping to describe asylum seekers and discuss issues surrounding the asylum debate.
- > Presents asylum myths as fact.
- > Makes open suggestion that asylum seekers should all be sent back to their country of origin.
- > Presents openly hostile views about the presence of asylum seekers in Britain.
- > Questions/denies the legitimacy of the claims of persecution without good reason.

Balanced articles

- > Presents (correct) information about asylum issues without further comment.
- > Presents both sides of the asylum debate equally.
- > Does not rely on negative/racist language or asylum myths to criticise asylum seekers/issues.

Positive articles

- > Contains only fact.
- > Discusses the benefits of the inclusion of asylum seekers into British society.
- > Critical of excessively negative attitudes to and coverage of asylum seekers/issues.
- > Presents views from those in the asylum debate who support the rights of asylum seekers in Britain.
- > Gives information about the conditions, attitudes, and treatment experienced by asylum seekers in the countries from which claimants are seeking asylum.
- > Includes the views of those seeking asylum in Britain.

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Type of article

Each article was classified under one of the following types of article: Letter to the Editor, Opinion Piece, Editorial Column, Front Page News, News Article, Feature Article. By identifying the type of article, we were able to understand in what form the newspapers allowed the most negative coverage and interpretation of refugee and asylum issues.

Subject of article

The main subject of each asylum article was recorded.

The subject areas were as follows.

- > Begging that occurred in a small section of the asylum community.
- > Cost of maintaining asylum seekers and refugees in Britain.
- > The dispersal of asylum seekers to Glasgow.
- > History: the circumstances that have forced people to seek asylum.

- > Language: the debate concerned with the language employed by some politicians and some sections of the press to discuss asylum seekers.
- > Opposition: reasons to oppose the presence of asylum seekers in Britain.
- > Policy: discussion of asylum policy in Britain.
- > Support: reasons to support the presence of asylum seekers in Britain.
- > Miscellaneous: subjects other than the eight listed above were classified as miscellaneous.

Identifying the amount of coverage in each area of the asylum debate made it possible to see what areas the press were focusing on in the debate, and which subject areas generated the most negative and the most positive coverage.

Source of article

The main source of each article was identified under one of the following categories: Asylum-seeker/Refugee, Government, Journalist, Judicial System, Local Government, Member of the Public, Miscellaneous, Non-Government Organisation (NGO), Politician (Conservative), Politician (Other), Scottish Refugee Council.

This allowed us to identify the main sources used in asylum coverage in the newspapers monitored and to understand what tone of coverage was predominantly generated by each source.

Secondary sources

Each article was also monitored for any secondary sources: sources that appeared in the article but were not the main focus of the piece. Secondary-source categories were the same as the 'Source' categories above.

Asylum group nationalities

The asylum nationalities that appeared most frequently in the coverage were recorded. They were Romanian, Gypsy (the word 'Gypsy' was assessed as this was more commonly used by the papers rather than the more acceptable 'Roma'), Kosovan, Somali, Albanian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Miscellaneous. By recording this information, we were able to see which nationalities received the most press coverage over this period and what the predominant tone of the corresponding coverage was.

LANGUAGE

Negative key words

Each article was monitored for the use of eight negative words to describe asylum seekers and the asylum situation. These words were *Flood*, *Wave*, *Bogus*, *Milk*, *Influx*, *Soft Touch*, *Scrounge*, and *Handout*.

Positive key words

Each article was monitored for eight words that were considered to be positive descriptions of asylum seekers and the asylum situation, or balanced alternatives to negative descriptions. The words sought were *Genuine*, *Ineligible*, *Friendly*, *Welcome*, *Compassionate*, *Respect*, *Support*, and *Resource*.

By monitoring the articles for frequently occurring positive and negative key words, it was possible to understand what kinds of words are most associated with asylum seekers in the press coverage monitored.

Each article was also subject to a textual analysis, and examples of highly negative reporting were recorded. The main themes of negative reporting in the newspapers were identified; this report includes textual examples.

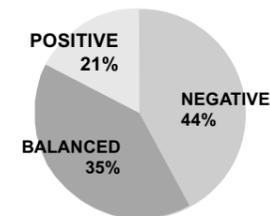
ASYLUM MYTHS

A number of incorrect facts (asylum myths) about asylum seekers and asylum issues have become a focus of the public debate. The appearance of these myths in the articles studied was recorded, and the findings are presented in the next section of this report.

ASYLUM MYTHS

The Press Complaints Commission cautioned newspaper editors in 2000 about 'the danger that inaccurate and misleading reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility which is not borne out by the facts'.

Over the two-month period of the study, the six newspapers monitored contained a total of 253 articles that were concerned with asylum seekers or asylum issues. The tone of these articles was classified as follows:



The repetition of a number of myths about asylum seekers and asylum issues was a major feature of the coverage analysed. Here we outline the facts behind the myths and the most common messages, based on the myths, that were articulated by the press.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM, AND QUESTIONS OF ELIGIBILITY

Myth: *The number of people applying for asylum in Britain is reaching crisis proportions. Britain is a 'soft touch' and takes more than its fair share of refugees.*

Facts: According to recent figures produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UK received a total of 76,040 applications for asylum in 2000; this represents a 7 per cent increase on 1999. However, *relative to the size of their population*, many other European countries take far more asylum seekers than we do per head: Britain ranks seventh out of 15 EU countries in these terms, with 1.66 applications per 1000 people. Belgium ranked highest (4.20 per 1000), with Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden all receiving more applications than Britain, relative to the size of their population.¹

Moreover, it is primarily the poor countries in the South that bear the brunt of refugee movements. There are an estimated 1.8 million refugees in Iran, more than 450,000 in Guinea, and over 400,000 in Tanzania.²

Myth: *Most asylum seekers come from safe countries.*

Facts: The majority of refugees arriving in the UK to seek asylum in recent years have been from the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. These are all countries where there has been serious conflict or where grave abuses of human rights are common.

Myth: *Only a tiny proportion of refugees are genuine, and the rest are ineligible for asylum.*

Facts: Even under the current system of assessing claims for asylum, about which many refugee organisations have expressed concern, around 47 per cent of asylum seekers were found to be in need of protection and were allowed to remain during 1999, and around 22 per cent during 2000, following first decisions. However, this ignores the fact that many refusals are overturned at appeal; in 2000, appeal adjudicators upheld 17 per cent of appeals that came before them.³

Furthermore, the past year has seen a dramatic rise in rejections based on technicalities – up from 1,085 in 1999 to 26,635 in 2000. This is because asylum seekers have been given only ten working days to complete

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2001), Asylum Applications Submitted in Europe 2000.

² US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey 2000.

³ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/asy-dec00.pdf

Asylum seekers
in Scotland get
cash handouts

and submit a 19-page 'Statement of Evidence form', in which they must outline the basis of their claim. Often without legal help and lacking sufficient English to complete the form properly, their applications are frequently refused on the grounds of 'non-compliance'. In such cases, the validity of their actual claim is therefore not even considered.⁴

Adjudication meetings for asylum claims have also been a cause for concern. For example, notification of meeting dates in London for asylum seekers dispersed to Glasgow has often been given at extremely short notice – in some cases one or two days before the date of the meeting. It takes a further five days for a travel pass to be issued, and if someone fails to attend for the meeting the case is dismissed until appeal.

Finally, there are also some who appear to be rejected unfairly. For example, their application may be turned down for entering the UK with false papers, despite the fact that this may have been the only way to escape persecution in the asylum seeker's country of origin – a reality that is acknowledged under international refugee law (Article 31, 1951 Refugee Convention).

On this basis, there is no justification for routinely attaching the adjective 'bogus' to all those seeking asylum, which does tremendous harm to those legitimately seeking asylum.

Myth: *Most asylum seekers are 'economic migrants'.*

Facts: There are clear connections between increases in the incidence of human-rights abuses and persecution in particular countries and rises in the numbers of asylum applicants from those countries (as set out in the response above). On the basis of these figures, large numbers of applicants have legitimate grounds for claiming asylum.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that migration is increasing. Given that there are virtually no legal routes for migrants to enter the UK for the purposes of finding work, some clearly do seek to claim asylum in order to gain entry. To reduce this pressure on the asylum system, it is essential that the government should develop a more open policy towards migration, as recently recommended in a Home Office report.⁵

The evidence is growing that the immigration of workers – not only skilled workers but also unskilled labour – does not impair the welfare of British citizens. On the contrary, it stimulates the economy, and thus the prosperity of the indigenous population. Indeed, given an ageing population and an increasingly service-orientated economy, the welfare of the host population, especially elderly citizens, depends on increased immigration of unskilled workers. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the vast majority of migrants do not wish to settle in the UK, but to work here temporarily in order to send money home to their families.

HOW THE PAPERS HANDLED IT

The number of people applying for asylum in the UK was presented in many newspaper articles as a justification for opposing the admission of asylum seekers. Many articles exaggerated both the numbers of people applying for asylum in the UK and the possible negative effects of increased numbers of asylum seekers on State services, such as the health service.

'We also need to recognise that the problem of asylum is only just beginning. As our prosperity continues, pressure to get here will intensify... An asylum free-for-all is a time bomb ticking away...that could one day explode with terrifying public violence.' (*Scottish Daily Mail* 13/04/00).

Asylum seekers were frequently presented in terms of numbers: 'flood', 'wave', and 'influx' accounted for 31 per cent of negative keywords found in the coverage monitored (see Appendix 2 for further details). These words appeared almost as frequently in articles rated as balanced and positive as they did in articles rated as negative. Such descriptions dehumanise asylum seekers and shift the focus of the debate away from the reasons why people are seeking asylum in the UK towards how many people are applying for asylum. Hardly any of the articles which discussed the increase in asylum applications in the UK over recent years associated this increase with the world-wide increase in civil war and ethnic conflict seen at the end of the twentieth century. Instead, the increase is primarily discussed with reference to ineligible applications for asylum. Journalists and other commentators often presented Britain as a target for those making unsupported

claims for asylum in the hope of a better life. Those found to be ineligible for refugee status are accused of targeting Britain to obtain State benefits and achieve a higher standard of living.

A 'climate of fear' about asylum seekers has been supported by the press, with the use of unsubstantiated claims about the numbers of people claiming asylum in the UK, their motives, and alleged anti-social behaviour among asylum groups. As identified above, the terms 'asylum', 'economic migration', and 'illegal immigration' are often used synonymously, and asylum seekers are presented as a threat to Britons, instead of the highly vulnerable section of society that they are.

'Asylum seekers continue to pour into Britain at the rate of 6,500 a month. Thousands more illegal immigrants are pouring over the English Channel undetected. And to the disgust of taxpayers across Britain, the incomers are creaming off the benefits system...And in Dover, the huge influx of refugees across the Channel has led to almost nightly street battles, thefts and attacks' (*Daily Record*, 16/03/00).

Asylum applicants found to be ineligible for refugee status in Britain have been labelled 'bogus' by the British press – a derogatory term that was quickly adopted by many politicians. The word 'bogus' accounted for 32 per cent of the negative key words found in the coverage monitored. Forty-seven per cent of articles including the word 'bogus' were rated as negative, but 27 per cent of occurrences were in articles rated as balanced, and the remaining 26 per cent were found in articles rated as positive. The continual use of the word 'bogus' alongside 'asylum seekers' fixes very negative stereotypes in readers' minds and gives the impression that all those who are refused refugee status have tried in some way to cheat their way into the UK.

'Senior judges have made a string of absurd rulings – and made Britain the Costa Del Dole for bogus refugees...That is why 300,000 refugees have poured into Britain in the past ten years. The vast bulk of them are here illegally. And with wives and children the true figure could be as high as ONE MILLION' (*The Scottish Sun*, 11/04/00).

Many of the monitored articles discussed economic migration. A key aim of UK asylum policy in recent years has been to deter 'economic migrants' from attempting to use the asylum system to enter the UK illegally in order to work and settle, a fact which has inextricably linked these two distinct actions.

'Asylum seekers who are transferred to Scotland will still receive cash handouts of £150 a week, despite the introduction of tough new laws to curb the number of bogus immigrants.' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 27/03/00).

'Government plans to clamp down on bogus asylum seekers came into force yesterday...lorry drivers will be hit with £2000 fines if they are caught trying to smuggle illegal immigrants into the country' (*Daily Record*, 04/04/00).

Highly negative articles that began by discussing the number of people claiming asylum in the UK would often end by asserting that the rise is due solely to increasing numbers of would-be economic migrants. Coverage of economic migration is a highly emotive subject, and almost all of the articles that broached this subject were negative in tone and opinion. Discussion of economic migration in articles that are concerned with asylum is confusing and seems to close down the debate on both subjects.

'Doubts were also raised that the Romanians may not be refugees who were genuinely fleeing political or religious persecution, but in fact are economic migrants seeking a better quality of life.' (*Scotsman*, 17/03/00).

Not all ineligible applications for asylum can be classed as an attempt at economic migration, as was frequently implied in press coverage.

'Unfortunately, due to a bungle by the London borough of Wandsworth, many turned out to be "economic migrants" – beggars to the rest of us. Such bogus refugees have to be dealt with swiftly and decisively.' (*Scottish Daily Express*, 17/03/00).

'However, concern grew last night that some of the Polish refugees may not be fleeing from persecution but are economic migrants' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 31/03/00).

⁴ If one deletes those refused on grounds of non-compliance from the total number of asylum applications for 2000, 44 per cent of asylum seekers were found to be in need of protection and allowed to remain in 2000; and even more were permitted to stay after they appealed.

⁵ S. Glover et al. (2001), *Migration: an economic and social analysis*, Home Office.

THE COST OF SUPPORTING ASYLUM SEEKERS

Myth: *Asylum seekers get huge State handouts.*

Facts: Britain, a wealthy country, spends only 0.17 per cent of total government expenditure on supporting asylum seekers and their dependants.⁶ Since 3 April 2000, asylum seekers have been provided with vouchers to meet their basic needs while they await a Home Office decision on their asylum claim. The voucher scheme means that asylum seekers currently exist on around 70 per cent of basic Income Support levels (ie a significantly *lower* level than that for UK citizens). Moreover, there is substantial evidence that income support itself is insufficient too – therefore payments of 70 per cent of that level, aside from being discriminatory, are evidently grossly inadequate. Asylum seekers are among the poorest and most vulnerable groups in the UK, and are further stigmatised and demeaned by having to use vouchers to purchase their basic requirements.

Under the new arrangements, the levels of voucher support (£10 of which will be redeemable for cash per person per week) are as follows:

Person aged 18-24	£28.95
Person aged 25+	£36.54
Couple	£57.37
Lone parent	£36.54
Child under 16	£26.60
Child 16 or 17	£31.75

A joint report by Oxfam, the Refugee Council, and the Transport and General Workers' Union (*Token Gestures*),⁷ has provided the first clear-cut evidence of the damaging impact of the scheme on asylum seekers. In a survey conducted for the report, 49 out of 50 organisations stated that the scheme is creating serious difficulties: asylum seekers go hungry, are unable to buy essential items (such as nappies, baby milk, hygiene products, clothes, bus tickets, telephone cards), are denied change for unspent portions of vouchers, and are humiliated and harassed in shops and on the streets.

Myth: *The numbers of asylum seekers using State-provided services, such as the National Health Service, are spiralling out of control and crippling the services.*

Facts: The costs of looking after asylum seekers are currently intended to be met by central government, rather than by local council taxes; this basic principle should ensure that the costs do not fall disproportionately on particular authorities. In practice, the Home Office estimates that it will spend £300 million to meet the cost of supporting asylum seekers in 2000-2001. Despite some recent government concessions, local authorities say they face a shortfall of £90 million in funding to support asylum seekers. In particular they argue that the extra costs of health care, education, and social care are not fully met by central government.

One major reason why support for asylum seekers is proving more expensive is that cases are taking so long to process; the average time of 19 months is far in excess of the government's stated aim (for families) of two months (plus four months for any appeal). When the Labour government came to power in May 1997, there was a backlog of some 50,000 outstanding asylum cases, but in January 2000 the overall backlog had risen to 102,870, before falling back⁸ to 66,195 at the end of December 2000.⁹ This is largely the fault of the Home Office, whose recently introduced computer systems have failed, and whose performance is suffering from the introduction of new casework arrangements, insufficient staffing, and poor-quality decision-making).

Myth: *Asylum seekers are taking our housing*

Facts: Asylum seekers are primarily being housed in 'hard to let' accommodation that is unattractive to people on local council waiting lists. Dispersal under the existing interim arrangements is happening far more slowly than originally envisaged by the government; this is evidence of the poor state of the housing stock in many areas, and the fact that appropriate accommodation is simply not available. A recent report by Shelter (*Far from Home*)¹⁰ has provided further information on the very low standard of housing available to asylum seekers in the private rented sector.

⁶ Parliamentary Question number 65, put by Miss Ann Widdecombe, MP for Maidstone and The Weald (12/04/00), Hansard.

⁷ www.oxfam.org.uk/policy/papers/vouchers/intro.htm

⁸ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/asy-jan00.pdf

⁹ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/asy-dec00.pdf

¹⁰ D. Garvie, *Far from Home*, Shelter (2001).

HOW THE PAPERS HANDLED IT

The cost of supporting asylum seekers was the subject of 11.5 per cent of the articles monitored over the two-month period. With 70 per cent of articles concerned with the cost rated as negative, a relationship must be drawn between press focus on the cost of asylum seekers and public hostility to asylum seekers.

'And to the disgust of taxpayers across Britain the incomers are creaming off the benefits system. Within hours of arriving in Glasgow, the latest asylum seekers received the first of their £149-a-week income support handouts.' (*Daily Record*, 16/03/00).

Many newspapers in the period monitored failed to discuss failures in government policy in relation to tackling poverty among Britons, and the pressures facing State services in some areas due to high concentration of asylum seekers. Articles concerned with the cost of asylum seekers rarely acknowledged issues such as the poor quality of housing usually offered to them, nor the fact that Britain's laws ban asylum seekers from work in the first six months after their arrival, forcing them into total dependence on the State.

Articles presented details of how much it costs to sustain each asylum seeker, and some newspapers even published articles that looked at alternative uses for money spent on asylum seekers. Like the focus on the numbers of asylum seekers entering the UK, discussion of the issue in terms of cost is dehumanising and accords more significance to the cost of helping those in need than to the importance of relieving human suffering.

'Refugees cost taxpayers more than £300 million last year – that's £13 for each family in Britain.' (*Scottish Sun*, 30/03/00).

Many articles linked poverty among the host population with the money used to support asylum seekers, implicitly blaming asylum seekers in the process. In doing so, newspapers have successfully diverted legitimate criticism away from the government's failure to address UK poverty effectively. The blame for the pressure placed on State-provided services in areas which house high numbers of asylum seekers was also widely attributed by the press to asylum seekers themselves and not, as it should be, to failures in Britain's asylum policy. Asylum seekers were often incorrectly reported to receive more in State benefits than British claimants and they have been inaccurately presented as a cause of poverty in Britain and not as the victims of poverty that they actually are. Asylum seekers are among the poorest members of our community and suffer greatly from under-resourced State services.

'A deaf teenager is to lose his specially-trained teacher at school – while 10 new ones are drafted in for refugees. [Child X], 14, has been told there isn't enough cash to pay for his personal sign language expert. But money WILL be found for a team of teachers to help asylum seekers' kids' (*Scottish Sun*, 14/03/00).

The potential gains to British society through the inclusion of highly educated and skilled asylum seekers were ignored in the majority of articles, and monetary costs were presented as a key reason to oppose the admission of asylum seekers. Such an emphasis means that a large proportion of coverage in the asylum debate has focused on what asylum seekers take from British society, instead of their enormous potential to give.

THE 'SOCIAL COST' OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Myth: *Asylum seekers do not have the capacity to contribute anything monetarily or socially to British society.*

Facts: Asylum seekers and refugees contribute to British society in many ways and at many levels. Their presence has helped Britain to become a culturally rich and varied society, contributing a diversity of food, clothes, music, religion, and beliefs from all around the world. The Body Shop has recently highlighted a number of specific and important contributions to British life made by refugees: the retail business of Marks and Spencer was established by refugees; fish and chips were brought by Portuguese immigrants; the Austin Mini and the Morris Minor were developed by the Italian ex-patriate designer Alex Issigonis; the contraceptive pill was invented by the Austrian ex-patriate, Carl Djerassi.

Many asylum seekers and refugees are highly educated people, whose skills can be utilised in Britain and make an important contribution to Britain's economy. More than 60 per cent of current refugees have professional qualifications. The average cost of re-training refugee doctors to qualify them to work in Britain is on average £3,500 per person. The cost of training a new medical student is estimated to be £200,000 (source: Audit Commission 2000).

HOW THE PAPERS HANDLED IT

Articles suggesting that asylum seekers are detrimental to British society have helped to create and support strong opposition to them among some sections of British society. Articles dealing with opposition to asylum seekers accounted for 21 per cent of coverage over the two months, and 88 per cent of this coverage was rated as negative. In contrast, support for asylum seekers accounted for only 8.5 per cent of coverage, nearly all of which was rated as positive. These statistics show that the weight of the asylum debate is heavily biased towards those who oppose asylum in Britain, and that many reasons for opposing asylum seekers have featured in press coverage of the issue.

'Mass immigration into this country was never required economically, and there are no advantages to be gained from multi-culturalism. The immigrants are, for the most part, as good and hard-working and likeable as any, and cannot be blamed, because they have no real idea what their arrival here has destroyed.' (Scottish Daily Mail, 27/03/00).

'Clearly it makes sense to give asylum seekers vouchers rather than cash, since this enforces the purchase of genuine life-enhancing commodities, rather than cigarettes, videos and other inessentials.' (Scottish Daily Mail, 27/03/00).

Those who criticised the negativity of the asylum debate were condemned in a number of articles, a fact that highlights the negative bias of the reporting. These articles all denied that either the press or politicians had expressed overtly hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers, and accused those who had criticised this coverage of making unfounded allegations of racism in order to inhibit discussion in the asylum debate.

'Challenge the politicians and the unelected commissars and they accuse you of 'playing the race card'. That's what's currently being levelled against anyone attacking the government's indifferent policies for tackling the flood of bogus asylum seekers.' (Scottish Sun, 11/04/00).

'Yet because we dared to report a few weeks back that some of the refugees bussed up from London to Glasgow were out begging within days of their arrival, we've been branded racist.' (Daily Record, 17/04/00).

Such articles did not acknowledge the overt hostility of some statements from politicians and some press coverage. They dismissed serious concerns about the treatment of asylum seekers by the press and politicians as 'politically correct' over-reactions to justified opposition of asylum, and they supported the idea that the inclusion of asylum seekers in British society incurs social costs. Such accusations are in themselves stifling to the asylum debate, because they deny the right to criticise those who oppose asylum and the integration of asylum seekers into British society. Moreover they are detrimental to the acceptance and well-being of asylum seekers in Britain.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONALITY

Myth: Some asylum seekers are more deserving of support than others.

Facts: As a party to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, the UK has an obligation to examine applications for asylum. If an asylum seeker can demonstrate a 'well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion', then he or she should be given refugee status. The UK has a duty to ensure that, through its actions, no one is forcibly returned to any territory where his or her life or freedom may be in danger.

HOW THE PAPERS HANDLED IT

The acceptance of asylum seekers into the Scottish community seems to be directly related to the levels of public understanding in Scotland about the circumstances that have led people of various nationalities to apply for asylum. The importance of the press in the dissemination of full and factual information about asylum seekers cannot be underestimated. The following chart presents the numbers of references to asylum seekers and the rating of the article in which the reference appeared. Roma Travellers accounted for 41 per cent of references to asylum nationality in total, and 56 per cent of references that appeared in articles rated as negative.

Refugee/Asylum Nationality	Negative	Balanced	Positive
Roma/Gypsy	56	39	20
Kosovan	15	18	11
Somali	8	13	4
Albanian	3	4	3
Lithuanian	1	5	1
Polish	3	6	7
Miscellaneous	17	22	25
Total	103	107	71

None of the articles concerned with Roma Travellers mentioned incidents of violence and discrimination towards the Roma people, of which there is considerable evidence. A study by the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe)¹¹ which was published in April 2000 confirmed that the plight of Roma people has worsened dramatically in recent years, with increases in racially motivated attacks against them, rising levels of unemployment, evictions, and even exclusions from their home towns.

Instead, many articles explicitly denied the legitimacy of asylum claims from Roma people and focused on the negative actions of a small number of Roma asylum seekers to support the idea that all asylum applications from this community are problematic.

'They [Romanian Gypsies] said they could not speak English, although many of them had lived in London for a year. If they needed to get a point across, however they managed sentences...As the women who had been begging smiled, you could see gold-capped teeth, far outnumbering the white ones. They also managed to tell us how much they disliked Scotland.' (Scottish Daily Express, 17/03/00).

'The woman stood clutching her baby to her breast, wrapped in multi-coloured shawls...she worked, this was the correct word, with two other Romanian gypsy women...and they lived in a north London suburb she pronounced Seeeven Seeesters.' (Scotsman, 17/03/00).

In contrast, the suffering caused in Kosovo by the war with the Serbs has been widely reported in Scotland and has provoked a sympathetic reaction among the Scottish public, generating much support for the presence of Kosovans in Britain. In a number of articles, Roma asylum seekers are unfavourably compared with Kosovan asylum seekers, supporting the idea that asylum eligibility can be determined solely by virtue of nationality. Such reportage denies the complexity of circumstances surrounding claims for asylum from some nationalities and makes it easier for the legitimacy of asylum claims to be questioned in the press, without a proper discussion and understanding of the experiences of these asylum seekers.

'Those residents had already welcomed genuine refugees from the war in Kosovo, but they recognise that Romanians are economic migrants.' (Scottish Daily Mail, 17/03/00).

'...It would be futile to pretend that those [refugees] from Romania are not more problematic than, say, the Ugandans who settled in Scotland in the seventies.' (Scottish Daily Express, 17/03/00).

¹¹ M. van der Stoep (2000), Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area, High Commissioner on National Minorities, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.



MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND READERS' LETTERS

Members of the public were the most common source of articles, accounting for 37.5 per cent of coverage over the two-month period of study. The majority of this coverage was found in the form of letters to newspaper editors, constituting 36 per cent of coverage. The overwhelming tone of letters from the public was negative (58 per cent in total), extremely so in the case of letters printed in the tabloid newspapers. The vast majority of negative letters appeared in the tabloid newspapers. Averaging two to three sentences in length, the tabloid letters rated as negative did not contain considered arguments about the asylum debate: in the majority of cases they could be considered as factually inaccurate, unqualified, and overtly negative statements of opposition to asylum seekers. All quotations reprinted in this section are taken from readers' letters.

'The late Enoch Powell must be turning in his grave.' (*Daily Record*, 06/04/00).

A large proportion of the negative letters made use of language that was very hostile towards asylum seekers and those in Britain who support asylum seekers. In some cases the language was wholly inappropriate.

There was widespread use of asylum myths to support negative positions in the asylum debate, and on four occasions the *Scottish Sun* printed whole pages that were dedicated to letters expressing negative views about asylum seekers. The uncompromising position of many of the views expressed in negative letters is illustrated by the fact that over half of these letters expressed opposition to the very presence of asylum seekers in Britain.

'[Resentment] [is] directed against our own politicians and civil servants who have allowed and still encourage the cultural and physical destruction of our erstwhile Great Britain. Mass immigration into this country was never required economically, and there are no advantages to be gained from multiculturalism. The immigrants...cannot be blamed because they have no idea what their arrival here has destroyed.' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 27/03/00).

'I'm sure that there cannot be many people in this country who are happy to see unfairness heaped on deserving Scots while the great unwashed of Europe gatecrash our party, increase their standard of living and laugh in our face.' (*Scottish Sun*, 17/03/00).

'It's very good that they [Romanian asylum seekers dispersed to Glasgow] are going because we have had enough. The Kosovans who came last year are very nice people – that lot are dirty thieves.' (*Scottish Sun*, 17/03/00).

'...am tired of hearing the PC brigade telling me how I should welcome these people to this country. Perhaps if the PC brigade concerned themselves more about our own homeless people...I would be willing to listen.' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 21/03/00).

It may be argued that such hostile attitudes are a reflection of the negative tone and policy adopted towards asylum seekers by some of the newspapers monitored in the study. In view of the failure of the press, especially the tabloid newspapers that were monitored, to present a balanced picture of the asylum debate, and their readiness to disseminate myths about asylum, it is unsurprising that many readers felt moved to write hostile letters that in some cases verged on overt expressions of racism.

The publication of highly inflammatory letters and the fact that the tabloid newspapers printed predominantly negative letters (except the *Scottish Daily Express*) seems to be a reflection of the negative editorial line taken on asylum by these newspapers.

'I am absolutely outraged at the thousands of immigrants flooding into the country. If the Government don't stop this, we Britons will become an 'ethnic minority' in our own country.' (*Daily Record*, 23/03/00).

'Every immigrant and asylum-seeker has a moral responsibility to indicate respect for the laws and customs of their new land by arriving legally and truthfully. Unfortunately the majority of asylum seekers do not do this.' (*Herald*, 24/03/00).

'What is racist in complaining about con-artists coming into this country and getting handouts to the detriment of pensioners, hospitals and schools?' (*Scottish Daily Express*, 19/04/00).

It must be noted that the tabloid newspapers have given maximum space to the opinions of those who have little contact with asylum seekers and who base many of their opinions on the asylum myths perpetuated by the popular press. Very few letters that were rated as negative appeared in the broadsheet newspapers monitored. This is most probably a reflection of the fact that these newspapers did not produce large amounts of coverage that was reliant on asylum myths.

'Thankfully, some towns are still free of gipsy beggars because they don't have railway stations. God bless Dr Beeching after all.' (*Scottish Daily mail*, 23/03/00).

In essence, the papers monitored have chosen almost exclusively to publish letters which reflect their own policy. The tabloid papers particularly have used exaggeration and hyperbole to fan public concern, and have then published the public's response. By publishing multiple examples of letters whose tone they have helped to establish, they justify further and increasingly hostile coverage.

JOURNALISTS, OPINION PIECES, AND EDITORIALS

Articles that originated solely from journalists accounted for 15.5 per cent of the coverage. The majority of these articles were in the form of editorials and opinion pieces. Editorial columns made up 6 per cent of the total asylum coverage, and 67 per cent of this coverage was rated as negative. All but one negative editorial appeared in either the *Scottish Sun* or the *Scottish Daily Mail*, and nearly 66 per cent of these editorials expressed opposition to the presence of asylum seekers in Britain. This is indicative of the very hostile position that both of these newspapers took in the asylum debate. These editorials constituted some of the most negative asylum coverage and were often reflected in the views expressed by readers in the letters pages.

'When the *Sun* and its readers protest that asylum seekers are making mugs of us, the chattering classes have a standard response. 'You're prejudiced because you're ignorant of the facts.'...They are taking us for a ride...and they're using...their social security which is paid for by **YOU** – to build marble palaces for scroungers back home...Tony Blair must recognise the danger signs and act – before it is too late.' (*Scottish Sun*, 14/03/00).

'No wonder the public is alarmed. The system is on the verge of breakdown and it is imperative that this growing scandal should be debated. This country with its proud and generous reputation for welcoming those in genuine need of asylum, simply cannot allow itself to continue as a soft touch for those who ruthlessly exploit our generosity.' (*Scottish Daily mail*, 18/04/00).

Opinion pieces accounted for 10 per cent of asylum coverage. This type of article produced some of the most negative and also some of the most positive coverage found in the survey. Fifty-two per cent of opinion pieces were rated as negative, and all but one of these articles appeared in a tabloid newspaper, while 40 per cent of opinion articles were rated positive (such as the comment quoted here from *The Herald*). Opinion pieces, like readers' letters, are expressions of the views of individuals and as such have greater scope to express extreme views and ideas.

'We like to kid ourselves that in Scotland we are a comparative model of tolerance, an illusion which successive reports on racial harassment have failed to dent. But what our MSPs could and should have done was kick up an almighty row about the replacement of benefits with vouchers here in Scotland. A matter not devolved is not necessarily a matter for complicity.' (*The Herald* 20/04/00).



This is reflected in the fact that 54 per cent of negative opinion pieces expressed opposition to asylum seekers. Many of these articles were based on asylum myths concerning the alleged scale of the asylum problem, and the cost of supporting asylum seekers. Such coverage is a further example of the lack of balance that was observed.

Editorial columns in the broadsheet newspapers monitored (and a number in the *Scottish Daily Express*: see first *Express* quote below) provided some of the best asylum coverage in this period. Many of these articles made sensible and worthwhile comment, thus presenting their readers with both sides of the asylum debate.

'This is far from a "flood" in Britain or anywhere else. North America has about twice the number of asylum seekers that Europe does. Last year the EU took 348,600 asylum seekers, roughly 1 for every 1,000 of its own citizens. We must be feeble, impoverished, frightened people if we feel swamped by a "thousandth" of our number.' (*Scottish Daily Express* 12/4/00).

'The problem of asylum seekers is now the biggest issue in British politics. It affects all of us. Its immediate impact is on the major cities, especially London and Glasgow, which already have sizeable "ethnic" populations ... the public believes that mass asylum-seeking is just another name for old-style immigration by poor people who just want to better themselves' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 13/04/00).

'The truth is New Labour cares more about bogus asylum seekers and militant homosexuals than it does about pensioners...Blair just sees all of that history as baggage to be discarded en route to our shiny, multi-cultural European future.' (*Scottish Sun*, 18/04/00).

'They have nothing at all in common with the people now coming here in ridiculous numbers, from countries where they have nothing to fear from their rulers. Those who are truly afraid do not care about anything except reaching safety. They would not mind spending months in detention camps, in the most basic conditions' (*Scottish Daily Express*, 10/04/00).

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT, POLITICIANS, AND NEWS COVERAGE

Of the total coverage of asylum issues, 26.5 per cent emanated from central government (10.5 per cent), local government (12.5 per cent), and Conservative politicians (3.5 per cent), indicating the extent to which the issues have become politicised, to the detriment of humanitarianism. The majority of this coverage (70 per cent) was contained in balanced news and front-page news articles. The most prevalent subjects of these articles were asylum policy and the arrival of the dispersed asylum seekers in Glasgow.

Although much of the coverage that originated from these sources was rated as balanced, the messages that it conveyed were often highly negative. News about government policy was concerned with official efforts to deter asylum seekers from seeking asylum in the UK. Local-government coverage focused mainly on an incident of begging that happened within days of the dispersed asylum seekers arriving in Glasgow, and the Council's subsequent decision to suspend its part in the dispersal programme.

Coverage that originated from Conservative politicians generally discussed Tory criticism of current asylum policy and outlined the party's proposals on asylum – starting from the allegation that the UK is inundated with ineligible asylum applications because of lax asylum laws. Thus even news coverage that purported to be balanced presented (and by implication appeared to support) negative views about asylum. This is illustrated by the fact that 13 per cent of negative key words found in the coverage appeared in 'balanced' news articles.

The proportion of news articles that were rated as negative was very high: 27 per cent in total. All but one of these articles appeared in the tabloid newspapers monitored. The subjects covered in the negative news articles were varied, but the reasons why they were rated as negative were very similar: the uncritical repetition of asylum myths, the use of overtly negative and alarmist language, and the exploitation of news reports to support opposition to asylum seekers in Britain. The inclusion of asylum myths in news articles lends an air of 'fact' to the myths, and thus closes down the asylum debate further.

'Cheeky beggars – Refugees arrested scrounging days after they got here' (*Daily Record*, 16/03/00).

'Tony Blair has ordered a crackdown on asylum seeking beggars similar to the Romanian gypsies ordered out of Glasgow last week' (*Scottish Daily Express*, 20/03/00).

'Fury As "Asylum Seekers" Rape Girl – Police appealed for calm last night after a young woman was raped by three suspected asylum seekers...Police say they are not yet certain how many times the girl was raped before the beasts ran off' (*Scottish Sun*, 21/03/00).

'A new influx of asylum seekers will begin arriving in Scotland today, just days after 60 refugees were expelled from the country...Despite promises of full benefits, furnished accommodation and a new life in Scotland, they should never have been allowed here' (*Daily Record*, 30/03/00).

'Asylum Seekers Home in on Debt Ridden City – Britain's most debt-ridden local authority is to take the entire quota of 7,000 asylum seekers being transferred north of the border under a Home Office deal' (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 30/03/00).

ASYLUM SEEKERS, SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL, NGOS, AND FEATURE ARTICLES

The proportion of coverage that used asylum seekers/refugees, the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), or non-government organisations (NGOs) as its primary source was 6 per cent in total. If one compares the weight of coverage that originated from members of the public, journalists, and political sources (79.5 per cent) with the 6 per cent of coverage originating from asylum seekers, the SRC or NGOs, the unbalanced nature of the asylum debate in the press becomes clear. The vast majority of coverage has been generated by people who have limited knowledge and experience of asylum and asylum issues, or by people with a political interest in influencing the public's views on asylum issues. The lack of space given to the opinions of asylum seekers or those who work with them means that the asylum debate in the British press is distorted, and that the non-political, humanitarian aspects of asylum are being ignored.

Very few articles over the period monitored tried to educate readers about the situations around the world that culminate in people needing asylum. Instead the asylum debate in large sections of the British press has been confined to the political wrangles between the two main political parties on asylum policy. The legitimate fears of asylum seekers about speaking out on the asylum debate in Britain – fear of harassment if identified, and the risk of negative impact on one's case, for example – have further compounded the problem, by discouraging the majority of asylum seekers from putting forward their views to an already hostile press.

Feature articles were one way in which asylum seekers were given space to put forward their opinions on the asylum debate. Feature articles accounted for 5 per cent of the total coverage, and 40 per cent of such articles were rated as positive. These articles were very important, because they tackled issues that were largely ignored in the asylum coverage monitored, and because they allowed asylum seekers to speak for themselves and give a human face to the asylum debate.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Results of the secondary-source monitoring exercise confirmed the bias towards reporting the views of members of the public, politicians, and journalists, with 66 per cent of the total coverage originating from these groups. However, asylum seekers, NGOs, and the SRC accounted for 24 per cent of secondary-source coverage, a marked improvement on their status as main sources. Most often they were used in news articles as sources of information, but it is important to note that one-third of these articles were rated as negative. This illustrates the fact that secondary sources were very rarely given enough attention by the press to change the tone of the article from negative to either balanced or positive. For example, a number of the negative articles that included asylum seekers as secondary sources involved the manipulation of their opinions and words to support negative views on asylum. Even though there was a greater use of asylum seekers, SRC, and NGOs as secondary sources, it was not significant enough to redress the disproportionate amount of coverage afforded to political sources, especially sources expressing negative opinions.

Secondary Source	Negative	Balanced	Positive
Local government	9	6	4
Asylum-seeker/Refugee	5	1	0
Member of public	8	3	0
Scottish Refugee Council	1	8	4
NGO	5	4	3
Politician (Conservative)	13	14	3
Politician (Other)	4	7	1
Government	3	7	4
Miscellaneous	2	6	5
TOTAL	50	56	24



CONCLUSIONS

- > The principal finding of the analysis is that most of the press coverage during the period monitored was negative to the point of being hostile.
- > In order to sustain this level of hostility, the reporting had to be partial, based on false assumptions (myths) and on the exaggeration of specific incidents.
- > The media sought to justify this position through the publication of letters from the public which reflected back the papers' own negative reporting on the issue.
- > The consequences of this sustained negative coverage have been disturbing: public opinion is now less well informed than it was, as demonstrated by key findings in opinion polls (*Mori Poll for Readers Digest, November 2000*).
- > Government policy is no longer subject to independent scrutiny: the press reflects the government's line that making conditions less welcoming and more hostile for asylum seekers will deter them from travelling to Britain. In contrast, Oxfam believes that most asylum claimants are driven to make their claim through intolerable situations at home, rather than a desire to exploit the UK as a 'soft touch', and that all that current legislation will achieve is to drive asylum seekers into ever more desperate attempts to enter the country.
- > The lack of desire to use information and comment from NGOs and other organisations who support asylum seekers, and of course the lack of interest in quoting asylum seekers themselves, is a problem which needs to be addressed by the newspapers.
- > The impact of all this hostility is to increase the threat under which the asylum-seeking community lives and to enable the government to send potentially legitimate claimants back to situations where they will face personal danger. The net result is an overall increase in human suffering in local and refugee communities.

**Refugees
need our
help, not
contempt**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although press reporting on race issues has improved over the past decade, asylum coverage has got worse. A recent academic study of media reporting of race-related matters confirmed that most journalists and editors themselves believe that 'sensitivity in writing copy on ethnic relations has increased greatly over the last decade', but that '... negative reporting has shifted from minorities – who are no longer regularly stigmatised – to asylum seekers – who are'.¹²

In the period covered by this report, much treatment of asylum issues in Scotland has been characterised by the use of myths and overtly negative language, the dehumanisation of asylum seekers, racial stereotyping, marginalisation of asylum seekers and asylum supporters, and ill-informed journalism. Negative press coverage has been exacerbated by a lack of commitment by the UK government, the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Parliament, and local government to presenting positive information and challenging myths about asylum seekers.

The asylum debate in Scotland has been almost exclusively couched in negative terms. To shift the focus of this debate towards more balanced and positive coverage, Oxfam makes the following recommendations.

TO THE PRESS

Building on its existing Code of Practice and working with key stakeholders, the Press Complaints Commission should establish guidelines to encourage the media not to produce coverage that relies on the use of asylum myths or overtly negative language.

Editors and journalists should commit themselves to seeking out accurate asylum information from a wide variety of sources, rather than being over-dependent on official accounts; such sources should, as far as possible, include NGOs and refugee community organisations.

Newspapers (and other media) should seek to explain the reasons why asylum seekers and refugees come to Britain, drawing upon clear and well-supported information about conditions in source countries, and adding a global perspective to UK debates.

Editors should seek to develop particular expertise in relation to asylum issues among key journalists, inviting external bodies such as refugee organisations to provide appropriate training. Home Affairs staff should be encouraged to work closely with Foreign Affairs staff on asylum issues.

Newspapers and other media should be sensitive to the fears of asylum seekers and refugees about the possible impact on their cases of talking openly, and should make it easy for them to tell their stories confidentially.

TO THE UK GOVERNMENT AND ALL POLITICAL PARTIES

All political parties in the UK should reaffirm their commitment not to exploit prejudice on the grounds of race, nationality, or religion in order to gain political advantage, as set out in the 1999 All-Party Declaration on the Immigration and Asylum Bill (See Appendix 3). This is especially important during the general election period.

TO THE SCOTLAND OFFICE, THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE AND SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

The Scotland Office, the Scottish Executive, and the Scottish Parliament should develop and implement a Communications and Media strategy to combat negative images and media stereotypes with informed, accurate, and positive information about asylum seekers. Key government spokespeople should be appointed in Scotland to communicate accurately and responsibly on this issue.

TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government should be given additional resources to develop community-relations strategies to encourage awareness and understanding between local residents and asylum seekers. For example, information should be made available to local residents about asylum seekers in areas to which they are to be dispersed, to ensure that residents' questions can be answered with full and accurate information before problems and tensions arise.

TO NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

The capacity to combat negative coverage in the press must be developed within the NGO sector and community organisations. NGOs can provide positive stories about asylum seekers to the media, and information about the countries from which people are fleeing. Another priority should be the training of asylum seekers and refugees in how to engage meaningfully with the press and media in a way that helps to ensure that they are not exploited in the process.

¹² D. Morrison and P. Statham, 'Racist Sentiments, Movements and the Mass Media', Leeds University, 1999.

APPENDIX 1

TIMESCALE OF EVENTS INVOLVING

ASYLUM SEEKERS, MARCH-APRIL 2000

09/03/00 First asylum seekers arrive in Glasgow as part of the government's new dispersal scheme. Families are housed in high-rise flats in Glasgow's Sighthill area.

15/03/00 Twelve asylum seekers are cautioned by Strathclyde police for begging in the Glasgow suburb of Bishopbriggs. No charges are pressed, but the asylum seekers are warned by social workers that a repeat incident could result in serious consequences.

16/03/00 Glasgow City Council returns the 16 Romanian families involved in the begging incident to Wandsworth Council, London. Checks were carried out by immigration officials in Glasgow after the incident and it was found that a number of the women were under reporting restrictions in London and faced being detained in London if they did not report the following day. Glasgow City Council suspends its part in the Government dispersal scheme.

Anne Widdecombe, shadow Home Secretary, calls for all asylum seekers to be detained until their cases are settled, to stop them from absconding.

20/03/00 The Home Office announces that British immigration officers are to check Eurostar passengers at French railway stations as part of a new initiative to deter unfounded asylum claims.

21/03/00 The British National Party (BNP) distributes racist leaflets in the north of Glasgow, linking social problems in Britain to the arrival of an unchecked number of ineligible asylum seekers.

22/03/00 A Glasgow City Council spokesperson condemns the leaflets as an insult to the city. Scottish Refugee Council leader, Sally Daghlian, links the BNP leaflets to negative statements made by politicians and hysterical media reports about asylum seekers.

24/03/00 Glasgow City Council agrees to resume its part in the government's asylum dispersal scheme.

29/03/00 Greater Glasgow Health Board and the Glasgow Primary Healthcare Trust write to the Chief Executive of NHS Scotland to express concern about the ability of the health service to meet the medical needs of the 8,000 asylum seekers due in Glasgow by 2001, within the £1.5 million available in the city's health budget. Glasgow Council's Director of Education expresses concern that Glasgow could have difficulty recruiting enough teachers to work with asylum-seekers' children.

03/04/00 The government introduces new measures to deter asylum seekers from entering Britain. Under the measures, people claiming asylum at their port of entry into the country will no longer receive State benefits in cash, but instead food and clothing vouchers worth 70 per cent of Income Support payments. (£10 of the benefit will be paid in cash.) The vouchers can be used only in participating shops, and no change may be given. Lorry drivers found with illegal immigrants in their vehicles will be fined £2,000 per illicit passenger.

Oxfam condemns the 'no-change' vouchers and refuses to take part in the scheme. Former Beirut hostage John McCarthy attacks government asylum policies, calling them 'reprehensible and abhorrent'.

08/04/00 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mary Robinson, accuses the Conservative Party of 'playing the race card' over the asylum issue. The UNHCR announces its belief that the

Conservative manifesto breaches an all-party agreement not to exploit prejudice on the grounds of race, nationality, or religion in order to gain political advantage.

09/04/00 The Conservative Party spokesperson on overseas aid, Gary Streeter, admits to being 'uncomfortable' with some of the language used in the Conservative manifesto to describe asylum seekers.

10/04/00 Jack Straw defends Labour's asylum policy, claiming that it is 'firm and fair'. A spokesperson for the Prime Minister denies that the PM would allow the Labour party to 'play the race card' over the asylum issue. Immigration Minister Barbara Roche accuses the Conservatives of doing so. She pledges to modify the language used by Labour MPs about asylum seekers and asserts that Britain needs more detention space for asylum seekers.

Ann Widdecombe claims that the asylum situation is 'out of control'.

Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesperson Simon Hughes announces that the Liberal Democrats are planning to ask the Commission for Racial Equality to investigate the language used by Conservative and Labour frontbenchers about asylum seekers. The Glasgow Committee to Welcome Refugees, backed by trade unions and civil-rights groups, is launched. It condemns attacks on asylum seekers. Bill Speirs, the General Secretary of the STUC, describes the voucher system as 'morally wrong'.

The leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union, Bill Morris, accuses the Home Office of 'giving life to racists' and 'creating a climate of fear and loathing' around the asylum issue.

16/04/00 Representing the government, Margaret Beckett MP appears on *Dimpleby* and blames sections of the British press for inflaming debate on asylum, declaring that it is the press that has set the agenda for the English and Welsh local election campaigns, not the politicians. She says that ministers are now anxious to avoid 'potentially hostile' language such as 'bogus' in relation to asylum seekers. She also announces that a proposed bond scheme for certain visitors to Britain is to be scrapped, amid fierce opposition.

Ann Widdecombe defends the use of the term 'bogus' in relation to asylum seekers.

Amnesty International warns that asylum seekers could become victims of racist attacks because of their treatment by politicians and sections of the media. Members at the Amnesty annual meeting in Britain vote unanimously for a motion raising concerns over the safety of asylum seekers in Britain. The Scottish National Parliament calls on the government to scrap the voucher scheme.

17/04/00 The Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) passes a motion critical of the government's Immigration and Asylum Act.

18/04/00 In a speech to the right-wing Social Market Foundation, William Hague outlines Conservative plans for asylum: to detain all new asylum applicants in 'reception centres', to set up an agency to remove ineligible asylum seekers, and to draw up a list of 'safe' countries from which Britain would not accept refugees, including Romania and Poland. Mr Hague asserts that such initiatives are made necessary by the 'organised abuse' of the British asylum system. Downing Street accuses him of attempting to stir up the asylum issue.

APPENDIX 2

KEY-WORD ANALYSIS

NEGATIVE KEY WORDS

The eight negative key words monitored were chosen out of a selection of words that appeared frequently in asylum coverage in this period. Over the two months, the negative key words appeared a total of 194 times – a significantly higher number than that recorded for the positive key words. Of this total, 52 per cent appeared in articles that were rated as negative, 23 per cent in articles that were balanced, and 25 per cent in positive articles.

Negative Description	Negative	Balanced	Positive
Flood	10	6	13
Wave	6	2	2
Bogus	29	17	16
Milk	4	0	0
Influx	6	12	4
Soft Touch	9	6	3
Scrounge	14	2	8
Handout	22	0	3
TOTAL	100	45	49

A number of the key words appeared frequently in negative articles. 'Bogus' was the most common, with 29 recorded occurrences. The frequent use of such words in negative articles can be understood as a form of 'shorthand' in some sections of the press for expressing negative views about asylum seekers. Just as the Romanian refugees were often treated as synonyms for the negative actions of some asylum seekers, these negative words were used as reasons why readers should oppose asylum in Britain. That is, there is a 'flood' of 'bogus' asylum seekers in Britain who 'scrounge' from the British taxpayer by claiming State 'handouts'. The continual use of such words in news articles concerned with asylum seekers fixes very negative stereotypes of asylum seekers in readers' minds.

It is interesting to note that a large number of these negative words appeared in articles that were rated as balanced. 'Bogus' and 'influx' were the most common words to appear in balanced articles, and many of these words appeared in news articles about asylum seekers. The use of these words in balanced news articles is, in many ways, just as problematic and detrimental to the asylum debate as their use in negative articles. By using such negative terms in balanced news articles, journalists are normalising ideas and understandings about asylum seekers that are both untrue and very damaging to relations between the asylum community and British society. The common use of 'bogus' and 'influx' in balanced news articles helps to support the asylum myths that large numbers of ineligible asylum seekers are entering Britain.

POSITIVE KEY WORDS

Positive Description	Negative	Balanced	Positive
Genuine	26	14	8
Ineligible	0	0	1
Welcome	14	16	19
Compassionate	2	0	3
Friendly	2	2	4
Respect	0	0	0
Support	0	1	0
Resource	0	0	1
TOTAL	44	33	36

Every article was scrutinised for eight positive key words. These words were chosen as good examples of words that would signify acceptance and tolerance of asylum seekers; for example, 'welcome' and 'respect' have very positive connotations in relation to the asylum debate. 'Ineligible' was chosen as an alternative to the word 'bogus' for asylum seekers whose claims were not upheld.

In total the eight positive key words appeared 113 times in news coverage over the two-month period. However, only 31 per cent of these words appeared in articles that were rated as positive, and the largest proportion appeared in articles that were in fact rated as negative (40 per cent). 'Genuine' and 'welcome' appeared 26 and 14 times respectively in negative articles, a fact which indicated that these articles were of the view that some asylum seekers were neither 'welcome' nor 'genuine'. These two words also appeared frequently in articles that were rated as balanced and positive, and in these instances the meaning of the words had not been subverted. The remaining six positive key words appeared very infrequently, and 'respect' did not appear in any asylum article over the two-month period.

APPENDIX 3

ALL-PARTY DECLARATION ON IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM ISSUES

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM BILL 1999

All-Party Declaration on Principles of Good Practice for the Debate

We support the call by the Commission for Racial Equality, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Refugee Council that the UK, in accordance with its international obligations and its traditions of civil and political liberties, must continue to provide protection to those who have a well-founded fear of persecution.

These are important issues and so the debates which take place in Parliament and elsewhere during the passage of the Immigration and Asylum Bill 1999 should be vigorous. However, the right to free political expression must not be abused in pursuit of political advantage by inciting or exploiting prejudice on the grounds of race, nationality or religion.

We, as leaders of the Parliamentary parties in England, Scotland and Wales, agree that all MPs, MEPs, councillors and officials of our respective parties should undertake:

- > Not to publish, cause to be published, or in any way endorse any material which incites hostility or division between people of different racial, national or religious groups, or which might reasonably be expected to stir up or incite such hostility or division.
- > To ensure that in any dealings with the public no words or actions are used which may stir up racial or religious hatred, or lead to prejudice on grounds of race, nationality or religion.

We call upon all others who are in any way involved in the passage or reportage of the Immigration and Asylum Bill, especially the media, to do the same.

Rt Hon Paddy Ashdown MP
Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
Rt Hon William Hague MP
Alex Salmond MP
Dafydd Wigley MP

'... when I arrived in England as an asylum seeker about 35 years ago, it was with an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude to be in a free and tolerant country where human rights were respected and those fleeing from persecution were welcomed. When I was granted British citizenship five years' later, I felt immeasurable pride to be a citizen of such a country. But today, when I read the newspapers demonising immigrants and recklessly stirring up hatred of them, with many politicians competing with each other in proposing ever more draconian measures to prevent immigrants entering this land, I hardly recognise this country as one of which, above all others, I had aspired to become a citizen.' LORD JOFFE CBE, CHAIR, OXFAM GB

'All we are asking for is open minds, not an open door. We need more light and less heat in this debate about these important issues. We must have this discussion in a measured and sensible way.' NICK HARDWICK, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BRITISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

'Readers won't tolerate newspapers that treat racial minorities in an offensive manner. And nor will I. Contained within the newspaper industry's Code of Practice there is a clause that deals with race... If readers want to ratchet up standards as much as I do, to ensure that all journalists are foot-soldiers with us in the battle against intolerance, then complain when something goes wrong. They will find my Commission ready, willing and able to assist.' LORD WAKEHAM, CHAIRMAN, PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION, AT THE 1996 CRE RACE IN THE MEDIA AWARDS

'Experience over the last four years has been that where Asylum communities have been established there has been ill-informed adverse media coverage which has contributed to heightened local tensions and resentment of asylum seekers.' ASSOCIATION OF CHIEF POLICE OFFICERS: GUIDE FOR POLICING ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES, FEBRUARY 2001

'Asylum seekers have for some time been in the eye of the immigration storm, stimulating three major Acts of Parliament over six years, and a series of increasingly vitriolic press campaigns. Targeted groups have included Tamils, Turkish Kurds and Somalis. Most recently, odium has been focused on Roma from central and eastern Europe. The consequences of a failing asylum system, and the racist and xenophobic attitudes engendered by the media and encouraged by many politicians, are extremely damaging both for individual asylum seekers and for the security and dignity of Asian and black communities in general.'

THE PAREKH REPORT, THE FUTURE OF MULTI-ETHNIC BRITAIN, RUNNYMEDE TRUST, 2000

'... negative press coverage can inflame local public opinion and create a climate in which fair treatment is hard to achieve. At present, press coverage of asylum seekers is overwhelmingly negative. The Commission analysed 161 local press articles collated by the Refugee Council in October / November 1999: only 6 per cent cited the positive contribution made by asylum seekers and refugees.' AUDIT COMMISSION, ANOTHER COUNTRY: IMPLEMENTING DISPERSAL UNDER THE IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM ACT 1999, 2000

'Anyone in doubt about the consequences of the racist tone of the asylum debate need only look at the growing number of racist attacks on refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. The tone of the political and media debate is giving a respectability to racism in the UK. People fleeing persecution and fear are finding more of the same on the streets of Britain.' TERRY WILLIAMS, NATIONAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS, AND THE REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THE MEDIA PROJECT

'The UNHCR is relying on the British public to demonstrate the tolerance that has been their hallmark over the years.' HOPE HANLAN, UK AND IRELAND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES



This report was published by the UK Poverty Programme of Oxfam GB in March 2001. For further information, please contact UK Poverty Programme, Oxfam, 274 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DZ. T 01865 311311

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