

# Coping with Destitution.

Survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers living in the UK.

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**Thousands of refused asylum seekers in the UK are living in destitution. This research, part-funded by Oxfam and conducted by the Centre for Migration Policy Research, reveals the strategies they are forced to use to survive.**

## Destitution of refused asylum seekers

UK asylum policy has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access to welfare support, both while their application is being processed and if they are refused. Over recent years, there have been growing concerns about the scale and impact of destitution among refused asylum seekers. It is estimated that 283,500 refused asylum seekers were living in the UK in 2005, and this number seems likely to have increased (National Audit Office 2005). Existing evidence suggests that many asylum seekers have been destitute for more than six months and a significant proportion for more than two years. This strongly indicates that refused asylum seekers are prepared to face long periods of destitution in the UK rather than returning to their country of origin.

## Introduction to the research

This research uncovers how the hundreds of thousands of people currently living in the UK, with no access to legitimate means of securing a livelihood, survive on a day-to-day and longer-term basis. The strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers have been analysed within a sustainable livelihoods framework, to ensure a systematic understanding of the different types of resources to which asylum seekers do – and do not – have access, and the impact this has on their lives. This approach also allows us to identify changes to government policy that could help prevent destitution among refused asylum seekers. Fundamentally, the need to remain hidden and to avoid any risk of being deported affects every decision made by destitute asylum seekers, and in turn the coping strategies which they adopt.

### CASE STUDY: NO PLACE TO GO

**'You might use a bus pass, shuttling round all night on the bus. It's very risky as you go to places that you don't know, spend time at the bus stop during the night, and might be caught. You might have a place to go, but you feel that your friend needs privacy or you don't feel comfortable staying there.'**

*Refused asylum seeker*



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## Key findings of research

### Institutional resources

- Many refused asylum seekers would rather remain destitute than apply for government support because they fear it will result in deportation.
- Many are unaware of their entitlement to free primary health care, or are anxious about contact with the authorities and therefore do not access health services.
- Destitute asylum seekers are often deterred from accessing support from large voluntary organisations because of a perceived lack of independence of these organisations from the Home Office.
- Churches appear to provide an important source of support for many of those living in destitution.

### Social resources

- Social contacts are often the most important resource and include a range of social relationships. Some asylum seekers receive support that is completely altruistic, but many are exploited by others in return for resources that help ensure survival.
- Some relationships are overtly transactional, with destitute asylum seekers providing childcare, cooking and/or housework, and sometimes sex, in exchange for meals, cash, shelter, or other daily necessities.
- Both men and women form sexual relationships with local people as part of their livelihood strategy, but these relationships are sometimes disempowering.

### CASE STUDY: MARJANI'S STORY

**Marjani is a refused asylum seeker. For the last 18 months, she has been supported by dozens of different people from the region she comes from, moving between their houses after a few days or weeks. Marjani feels ashamed about her reliance on other people and always offers to clean and run errands for her hosts.**

### Economic resources

- All destitute asylum seekers know it is illegal for them to work, but often have no choice but to work illegally to survive. Wages were mostly reported as being between £1 and £3 per hour, and in some cases were even lower.
- Most examples of illegal work involved low-skilled jobs, with low pay, long hours, poor working conditions, and a constant fear of being raided by immigration officials.
- There are very few examples of destitute asylum seekers being involved in criminal activity other than illegal work, as they are extremely fearful of being caught by the authorities and deported.

- There is evidence of both men and women involved in commercial sex work, with many of those who pursue this strategy being physically abused, sexually exploited or manipulated, or forced to stay against their will.

### Access to resources

- Speaking English is a crucial asset to allow access to broader social resources, and in turn to further institutional and/or economic resources.
- The existence of refugee and migrant communities from the country of origin plays a significant part in shaping asylum seekers' coping strategies and future possibilities.
- Gender plays an important role in determining the livelihood strategy adopted, with men sometimes viewed as better-equipped to find work and make friends, while women were more likely to have to stay at home looking after children.
- Destitute asylum seekers will avoid coming into contact with authorities, even if they are subject to abuse or are the victims of criminal behaviour.

## Conclusion

Destitute asylum seekers use a range of strategies to cope with destitution and are forced to lead little more than a hand-to-mouth existence, with no hope that their situation will ever come to an end. Their overwhelming lack of access to institutional, social and economic resources denies them a sustainable livelihood, and results in a life that is robbed of dignity and unacceptable by human rights standards.

The survival strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers are a consequence of asylum policy in the UK. That hundreds of thousands of people would rather live in poverty and in constant fear of deportation – reliant on friends, transactional relationships, commercial sex work or low-paid illegal work – rather than return to their country of origin, suggests the failure of government policy.

The government should accept the growing body of evidence that shows that destitution does not lead refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin. The risks associated with continuing to pursue this approach are enormous, with significant implications for wider society. The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests the need for an entirely new policy approach – one which recognises both the human rights of asylum seekers and also their right to be human. Being human means having access to the resources needed to survive on a day-to-day basis with dignity. It also means having hope for the future.

## Recommendations

It is not acceptable for asylum seekers to continue to live in destitution, and the government has a responsibility to ensure that the human rights of asylum seekers are upheld. The humiliating and degrading strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers to survive and avoid deportation reflects the need for changes to government and civil-society policy and practice. All aspects of the asylum system – including the flawed asylum-determination process that often leads to wrongful denial of asylum, and policies that deny access to resources (such as the right to work and access to welfare support) – must be urgently reviewed to ensure that all asylum seekers are able to secure a sustainable and dignified livelihood.

Our key policy recommendations are as follows:

1. Improve the quality of asylum decision-making.
2. Provide protection for those in need and those who cannot be returned.
3. Ensure access to free legal advice and representation for all refused asylum seekers, in order that they can submit an appeal or submit a fresh claim if appropriate.
4. Reinstate the right to work and earn a livelihood.
5. Reintegrate asylum seekers into the mainstream benefits system.
6. Provide welfare support for all asylum seekers until the point of return.
7. Provide access to primary and secondary health care for all asylum seekers.
8. Improved support and information should be provided to all asylum seekers by voluntary sector organisations.

### CASE STUDY: ABEDA'S STORY

Abeda's claim for refugee status was refused while she was pregnant. Her partner's sister was granted refugee status, so she moved into her house and slept on the sofa. When the time came to deliver the baby she was too afraid to go to hospital, and thought she could not register with a GP, so she stayed at home. An older woman (not a health professional) who lived nearby attended the birth.

### CASE STUDY: DJANY'S STORY

Djany faced destitution after her asylum claim was refused and she was told to leave her accommodation (provided by the government), leaving all her belongings behind apart from her toothbrush. She had nowhere to go, so routinely spent evenings in pubs, looking for a man to take her home so she could have a place to stay that night. She met an older man for dinner on another evening, told him about her situation, and he invited her home. Djany moved in with him and soon became pregnant. However, his family disapproved of the relationship, and forced her to leave the house. In desperation she turned to the church, where someone volunteered to accommodate her.

## CASE STUDY: ILLEGAL WORK

**'I knew a man who worked for three months, and was promised £35 every day. After three months he asked for the wage, but [the manager] said he would give him just £50 for three months. He said, "I need £3,000!" But the manager threatened to report him to immigration, so what could he do?'**

*Refused asylum seeker*

### Oxfam's work with asylum seekers in the UK

Oxfam works with partner organisations in Scotland and Wales to support women refugees and refugee community organisations, working to enable refugees to advocate for their rights and participate more fully in society. Oxfam also works with service providers such as the NHS, local authorities, and housing associations, training and supporting them to understand and meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, and to take into account the particular needs and experiences of female asylum seekers.

### The Centre for Migration Policy Research

The research was part-funded by Oxfam and undertaken by the Centre for Migration Policy Research (CMPR). CMPR is an inter-disciplinary research centre, established in 2007 and based at Swansea University. The Centre's approach is underpinned by three key principles: a commitment to a rights-based approach to migration, a desire to understand and reflect the migration experience, and a recognition of the importance of policy-relevant research and analysis.

### Research methodology

The research was conducted using the Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) methodology, a qualitative research method in which a relationship of trust is built up between the researcher and the researched. The PEER method is undertaken by members of the community of study, referred to as peer researchers, who interview other community members.

The research was conducted by 16 researchers, the majority of whom were refused asylum seekers with experience of destitution. The researchers spoke to 45 people, all of whom were, or had been, asylum seekers. Those interviewed talked not only about their own experiences, but those of a wide network of friends and contacts, providing an overall picture of the experience of hundreds of asylum seekers in the UK.

### Read the full report

*Coping with Destitution: Survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers in the UK*, Heaven Crawley, Joanne Hemmings and Neil Price. Available to download at [www.oxfam.org.uk/publications](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/publications)

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