

Destitution within the asylum system

'I lost my whole adult life in misery in this country. I was not poor in Iran – I did not come here for your money but I was seeking refuge. I ask those in the Home Office to think, if you were to spend one day in my shoes how would you like to be treated?'

Independent Asylum Commission hearing in Manchester. Published in *Fit for Purpose Yet*, IAC interim findings, 2008, see www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk/
For full testimonies visit www.humanrightstv.com

People who come here seeking sanctuary often have no money when they arrive and it can take a while for them to be able to access support. They then receive payments and accommodation while their application is heard. The payments used to be 70% of normal welfare benefits but some are now much less.

A couple	£70.34
A lone parent	£42.62
A single person aged 25, or over	£42.62
A young person at least 16, but under 18	£38.60
A person under 16	£51.37

The UK group, **Refugee Action** has found that people on asylum support find it hard to provide enough food and clothing for their children, afford expenses such as school uniforms, that 70% had been unable to buy fresh food and vegetables in the previous week, 94% were still wearing the clothes they arrived in and more than 60% could not afford medical goods such as painkillers.

(See http://www.refugee-action.org/documents/AsylumSupport_Refugee%20ActionFeb2010.pdf)

Failed asylum applicants are not entitled to work and may lose their benefits. Some cannot be removed because, for example, they are too ill, the journey could not be made safely, or their own country will not allow them to return. In these cases, if they are co-operative, they may receive **Section 4 Support** which can include emergency accommodation and a contribution towards their food and other purchases, through pre-paid cards that can only be used in a limited number of shops. These cards, representing £35 of purchases per person per week, replace a previous voucher system. People have difficulty proving that they are destitute enough to receive support and great hardship results.

(For more on Section 4 Support see www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/support/apply/section4/.)

They may be forced to live on charitable handouts or slip into the black economy with all its dangers and potential for exploitation. Most are asked to leave the country as soon as possible. Although the Government has increased the number of people they remove, it is unable to enforce removal in all cases. An independent inquiry reported that the present system falls between two stools in terms of being too soft-hearted or too tough, and leaves 'an invisible population of destitute people who can neither go home nor contribute to British society'. The **Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust** has undertaken a **Destitution Inquiry**. (See: <http://www.jrct.org.uk/text.asp?section=0001000200030006>.) Research in Leeds found people failed by 'a tattered safety net', rough sleeping, with grave social and health problems and many wrestling with thoughts of suicide. The report called for revocable licenses giving permission for people to work until they can go home, and reasonable assistance such as basic food, shelter and care. Inquiry chair Kate Adie said

'For the benefit of everyone, there has to be urgent and pragmatic reform which brings these people in from the shadows so that they can be treated humanely, contribute to the community and remain inside the system.' (28 March 2007)

The Refugee Survival Trust and the British Red Cross in Scotland have also highlighted the destitution experienced at various stages of the asylum system in their report **21 Days Later**. (See: <http://www.redcross.org.uk/news.asp?id=90673>.)

The Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP) report, **Not Destitute Enough**, documents the UK Border Agency's failure to apply the correct legal definitions of destitution in asylum support decisions and the poor levels of assessment.

(See: http://www.asaproject.org/web/images/PDFs/not_destitute_enough.pdf)

Locally, it is hard to assess how much destitution there is at the end of the asylum process. There were 26 men, 3 women and 21 families on Section 4 support in March 2010 but obtaining this support is not easy. Recent examples of inability to access Section 4 support quickly in Belfast include the following.

- A pregnant homeless woman was said to have applied too early because she was over 8 weeks away from her due date.
- Further submissions were required of a homeless, destitute man from Darfur who requires treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- A homeless family of 4 was told that the case was awaiting review after 3 months.

People who are entitled to support and who have little or no chance of return to countries such as Sudan or China may end up facing destitution for months. They must rely on the generosity of others or starve on the streets. The EMBRACE **Emergency Fund** is able to give one-off assistance to some people through support organisations such as NICRAS and the Red Cross.

For those who do receive Section 4 cards the difficulties continue. The scheme is now administered by a private company Sodexo. The personalised **Azure Cards** can be used in Sainsbury, Boots, Tesco and Asda. It is impossible for individuals to save money out of the £35 per week. If there is more than £5 left at the end of the week Sodexo reclaims the money from the card. (Families receive one card and money is not reclaimed from family cards.) This cashless existence means that people have no possibility of buying even such basic items as bus tickets or phone cards.

Those who have not agreed to leave and receive no payments, live in fear of removal. They are likely to avoid official bodies and recognised charities. They may stay with friends for a while, work in the black economy and only resurface if they are in desperation. The **Still Human Still Here** (<http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/>) and **Let them Work** (<http://e-activist.com/ea-campaign/clientcampaign.do?ea.client.id=121&ea.campaign.id=2672>) campaigns are dedicated to highlighting the plight of tens of thousands of people in the UK who have been refused asylum and who are being forced into abject poverty in an attempt to drive them out of the country. Nick Broomfield has made a documentary film **Still Human Still Here** and the report, **At the End of the Line: Restoring Integrity of the UK's Asylum System** contains further moving and disturbing material.

(See: <http://stillhumanstillhere.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/at-the-end-of-the-line-2010.pdf>.)

The **Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)** has published **Living in limbo; Forced Migrant Destitution in Europe** and has called on European states to change their policies so that people at the end of the line can access basic human rights such as housing social assistance and work, regardless of their legal status.

(See: http://www.jrseurope.org/news_releases/ANDES%20report2010.htm.)

EMBRACE Emergency Fund: to find out more about this response to destitution amongst migrant people see <http://www.embraceni.org/category/about-us/projects/>