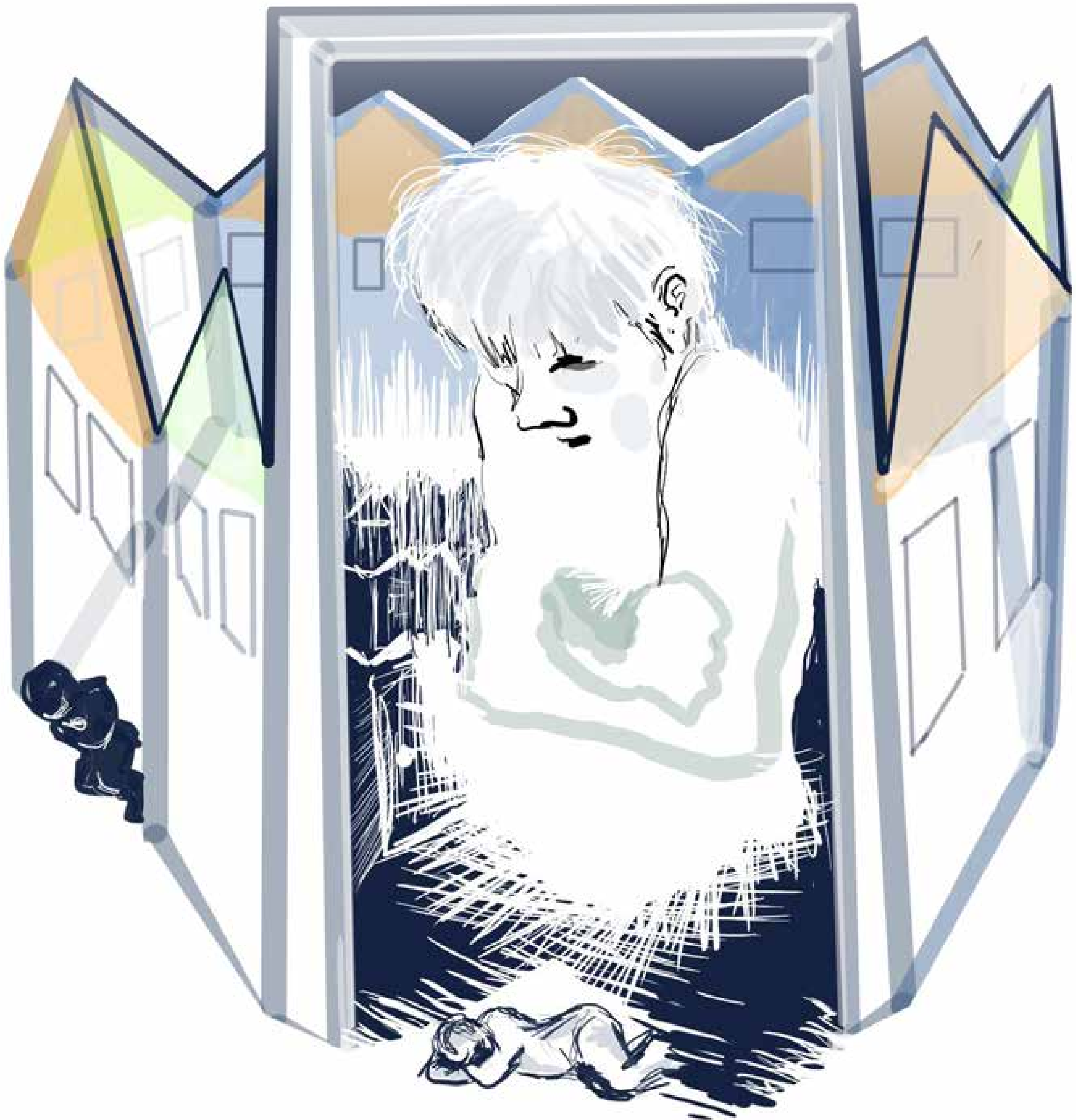
JRS JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE UNITED KINGDOM

Destitute and in Danger:
people made homeless by the asylum system



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Foreword

I sought safety in this country but then I was made homeless.

In the last years I have stayed in 15 or 16 places, and I have slept on the streets.

Homelessness made me lose my self-esteem and confidence.

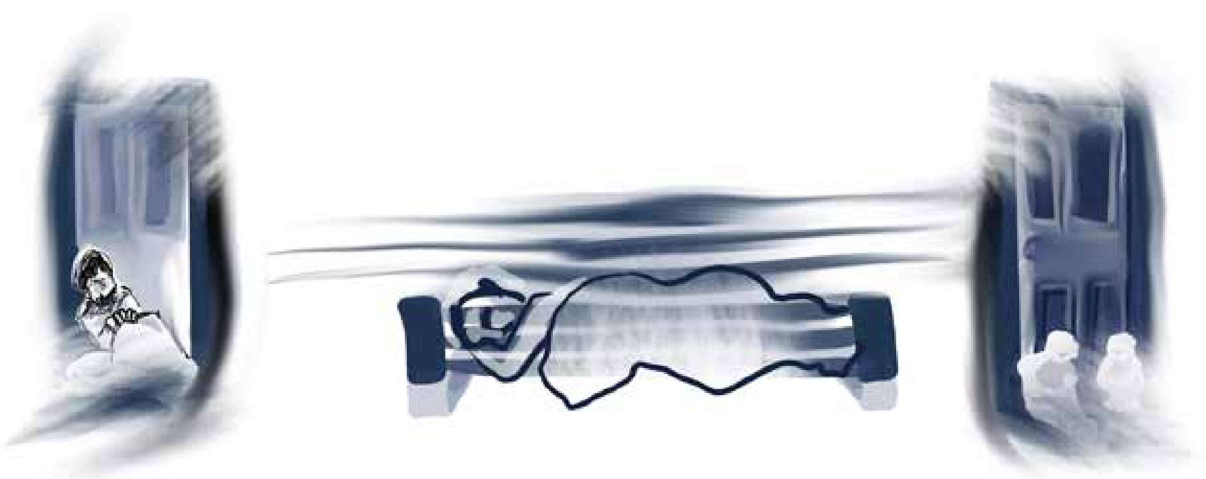
When you don't have a place to lay your head, then you cannot think straight. People would think I had serious mental illness but I was just losing my balance because I did not have a stable and safe place.

For women, it can be even worse because some men take advantage of them because they are vulnerable. They sometimes end up forcing themselves into relationships they don't want to be in so they have a roof over their heads.

When you are on the streets, you cannot eat when or what you want, you cannot follow your medical treatment precisely, you can't shower, you can't wash your clothes and dress properly. You can just drop dead anytime when you don't have accommodation. Everyone needs somewhere to rest and feel safe.

This report tells the stories of many people forced to live like this. It doesn't have to be this way. The asylum system shouldn't make people homeless the way it has made me homeless. Things need to change.

Joyce



Executive Summary

This report examines the experiences of homelessness among people refused asylum in London in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on surveys conducted with people refused asylum living across different areas of London and supported by JRS UK, in Autumn 2023. Most survey respondents had been declared appeal rights exhausted and had no formal means of support at all. A small handful were hosted or housed by NGO-run schemes aiming to provide safe, secure housing to asylum seekers, including JRS UK's Accommodation Project. A minority were in receipt of asylum support, having submitted a fresh asylum claim.

Key findings were:

- Rough Sleeping is common among people refused asylum. Further, there is widespread vulnerability to street homelessness and fear of it even among those who have not experienced it. Connected to this, there is a widespread pattern of couch-surfing punctuated by sporadic street homelessness, and generally unstable accommodation situations.
- Couch-surfing typically entails very little control over your daily life or activities, and sleeping in uncomfortable and over-crowded conditions. This includes parents and children being crammed into a single room.
- People generally have no choice over where they stay and have to accept whatever accommodation is available. Consequently, they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Around 20% of respondents did not feel physically safe around people they lived with, and there are indications of people living in unsafe or exploitative situations in the informal renting market.
- Home Office accommodation itself is very poor, and often feels physically unsafe.
- Destitution both has a negative impact on physical health and makes it very difficult to manage long-term health conditions. For example, destitution makes it harder to regulate medication. Hosting and housing schemes had exponentially improved the ability to manage health conditions for some respondents.
- Almost universally, long-term destitution in the context of asylum is very detrimental to mental health. Respondents reported anxiety, chronic sleep deprivation, and suicidal ideation.
- The experience of asylum destitution has a profound overall impact on sense of self. It marginalises people and denies them privacy, stability, and dignity. Consequently, it is dehumanising.

Recommendations

For National Government

1 End the Hostile / Compliant Environment

The systemic marginalisation of people without immigration status is the root cause of asylum destitution. The Hostile, or Compliant, Environment intentionally builds barriers to essential services, bringing immigration enforcement into every sphere of life. It must end.

2 End no recourse to public funds rules and ensure people refused asylum can access support where they need it

Restrictions on access to public funds bar people from basic safety nets on the basis of their immigration status. They are a key tool in manufacturing asylum destitution and should be abolished.

3 Lift the Ban on work: allow people seeking asylum to work for as long as they are in the UK

The ban on work for people seeking asylum consigns them to deep poverty and, when asylum support is cut off, destitution. It also marginalises them and makes it harder for them to take up work when their status is eventually resolved. Most people seeking asylum desperately want the opportunity to work and contribute to society.

4 Create a simplified route to settled status for everyone who has made the UK their home and is living here long-term

In this report we heard the stories of people living in the UK long-term, but trapped into destitution by lack of immigration status. Consigning people to an indefinite limbo, vulnerable to exploitation, ill-health, and abuse is cruel, and destructive for society as a whole. The current 20-year route obliges people to wait decades before they can simply get on with their lives.

5 Extend the move-on period for newly recognised refugees to at least 56 days from when residence permits are received

Rapid evictions from Home Office accommodation mean that newly recognised refugees routinely face homelessness. 28 days is simply not enough time to find somewhere else to live, access mainstream support, or find work. A move-on period of 56 days would bring Home Office policy in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act, which states that someone is at risk of homelessness if they face not having somewhere to live within 56 days.

6 Repeal the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022

The Illegal Migration Act threatens to extend asylum destitution and cut off all routes out of it. Already, the Nationality and Borders Act builds delays into the asylum process, leaving people vulnerable to destitution. Both Acts should be repealed.

For Local Government

7 Widen eligibility for homelessness support services to include those without recourse to public funds as far as possible

Local government plays a vital role in ensuring a safety net for vulnerable people.

8 Ensure robust data protection policies, and clear communication to people seeking support about how their data will be used

Our research shows how people refused asylum are often wary of approaching authorities for help. Data-sharing between local authorities and the Home Office is a huge barrier to people without immigration status seeking help from local authorities. It must be avoided.

Introduction

It is longstanding UK government policy to manufacture destitution among people refused asylum.[i] People waiting for a decision on their claims cannot access mainstream benefits and are typically banned from working. To survive, they must rely on asylum support – very basic accommodation, and minimal financial support currently set at £49.18 a week. If an asylum claim is refused by both the Home Office and a court, and declared 'appeal rights exhausted', all support is cut off.[ii] In this situation, people are left completely destitute, still banned from working and dependent entirely on charity and informal support from friends, family, and the goodwill of individuals in the community to survive.

A person seeking asylum is considered by the Home Office to be 'appeal rights exhausted' when no further appeals can be made on their existing asylum application.

Many people refused asylum, declared appeal rights exhausted, and made destitute are ultimately recognised as refugees after submitting fresh asylum claims – that is, presenting new evidence demonstrating that they need asylum. As an indication, in 2023, 2,294 people who had previously been refused asylum, and told they had no further chance to appeal, were recognised as needing asylum (or another form of leave to remain in the UK) after submitting a fresh claim.[iii]

Submitting a fresh claim for asylum requires bringing new evidence in what is often a complex case, and involves intensive work to prepare. While a fresh claim is under consideration, a claimant who would otherwise be destitute typically qualifies for financial and accommodation support under Section 4 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999. Section 4 financial support is provided solely through a card, from which no cash can be withdrawn. This restricts the places that people can shop, and makes budgeting more difficult.

There are many reasons that lead to people being wrongly refused asylum. There is a well-evidenced culture of disbelief and refusal within Home Office decision-making[iv], and a vaunting crisis in non-availability of asylum legal advice, without which it is all but impossible to navigate the asylum process.

Over half of legal aid providers for immigration and asylum cases were lost between 2005 and 2018.[v] Research from Dr Jo Wilding shows how cuts to legal aid have led to the creation of legal 'advice deserts', where no legal aid asylum providers exist, and 'advice droughts', where they appear to exist, but legal advice is in practice hard to access, due largely to providers' limited capacity.[vi] Cuts and structural changes to legal aid have created a perfect storm where demand for immigration and asylum legal advice far outstrips supply of these services, both across England and Wales, and within London, restricting access to justice for asylum seekers, and migrants more broadly.[vii]

Under the 'Hostile Environment' – now rebranded the 'Compliant Environment'[viii] – asylum seekers deemed appeal rights exhausted are subjected to a matrix of policy and legislation that bars them from essential services and criminalises for them many day-to-day activities such as working and renting. The aim of this is to make their lives unbearable in the hope that they will leave the UK. That is, human suffering is weaponised as a means of immigration control.

The 'Hostile Environment' was formally launched by the government in 2012 and developed in subsequent policy and legislation. It centrally involves requirements for various public bodies and members of the public, including NHS staff, landlords, employers, and banks, to check individuals' immigration status before allowing them to access services or carry out tasks integral to everyday life. Under such hostile immigration control, someone without leave to remain faces barriers to healthcare, and cannot open a bank account, access housing, get a driver's license. Ultimately, the 'Hostile Environment' pushes people into extreme hardship and poverty, with no legal way to support themselves, and means they are more easily targeted for exploitation and abuse. Aspects of its operation have previously been ruled unlawful by the UK High Court.[ix] The Equality and Human Rights Commission concluded that it had illegally fostered racial discrimination,[x] and it has similarly been condemned by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for stoking racism and xenophobia in the UK.[xi] Around 2017-2018, the government began referring to the policy as the 'Compliant Environment'.[xii] The 'Hostile Environment' was formally rebranded the 'Compliant Environment' in 2018, in the wake of the so-called 'Windrush' scandal when it came to public attention that British citizens born in Commonwealth and former Commonwealth countries had been subjected to immigration control, including Hostile Environment policies, and in some cases detained and removed from the UK. [xiii] The policy continues to operate.

For decades, JRS UK has worked with people refused asylum and made destitute, and has witnessed the painful reality of this. People who have already lost everything are forced to live in limbo, unable to rebuild their lives until their immigration status is resolved, whilst destitution itself makes it even more difficult to navigate the asylum system. This situation can go on for decades. Sometimes people make fresh claims only to be refused again. Previous research by JRS UK on homelessness among destitute asylum seekers accordingly uncovered a bleak situation.[xiv]

One core part of JRS UK's work is our Accommodation Project for people made destitute by the asylum system, which facilitates hosting with families, individuals, or religious communities; and offers direct provision of shared housing. Currently, JRS UK have two houses in London, Emilie House for women and Amani house for men. These provide safety, comfort, and a measure of stability that allows people refused asylum and made destitute to focus on resolving their status.

At the time of writing, we are living in the aftermath of a global pandemic which caused great suffering and upheaval, especially to those who were marginalised; and in a cost-of-living crisis, that is extremely dangerous to those who were already on the breadline. This research lays out the experience of asylum destitution in this context.

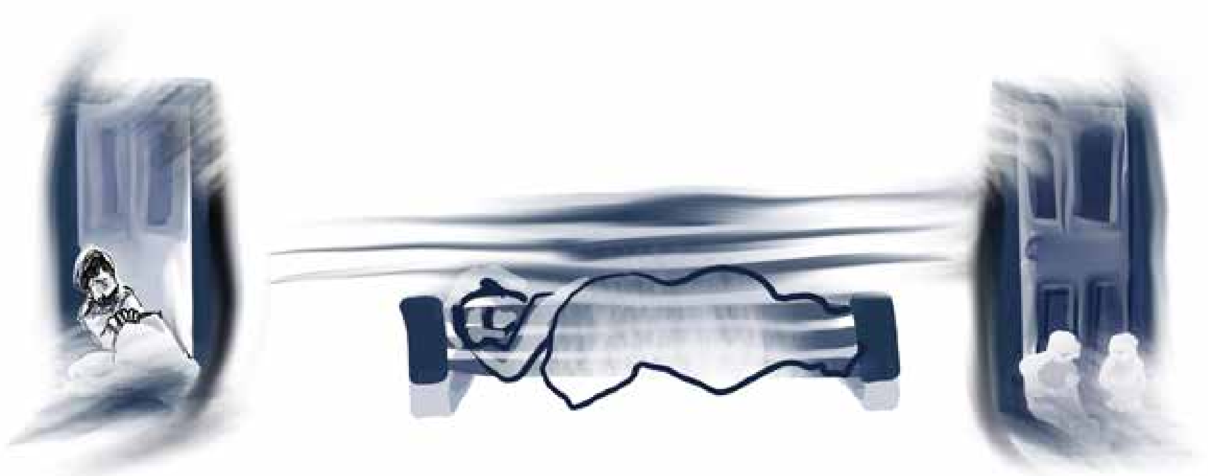
The current asylum system is in upheaval and subject to imminent change, as the Illegal Migration Act, passed in July 2023, creates what the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has described as "an asylum ban".[xv] If fully enacted, the Act would prohibit most people claiming asylum in the UK from having their claims considered, and many of these would face indefinite limbo.[xvi] It was estimated, in the context of previous government policy, that the Illegal Migration Act would leave 115,575 people seeking asylum in indefinite limbo, unable to access protection and at significant risk of destitution by the end of 2024.[xvii] Additionally, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 already builds long delays into the asylum process by refusing to admit claims to the asylum process for long periods of time.[xviii] The present research therefore shows a lived reality of asylum destitution at risk of becoming even more widespread. At the time of going to press, the new government has stated that it will process asylum claims previously not admitted to the system because of these laws, and has made regulations to make this possible..[xix] The government has an opportunity to fully reject the Illegal Migration Act and Nationality and Borders Act, which hold people seeking asylum in limbo.

Methodology

We conducted 113 anonymous surveys with JRS UK service users between September and November 2023. These were available in English, French, and Arabic, and interpreters were provided where necessary. Respondents had the option of filling out the survey themselves or going through the survey with a JRS UK team member. A small number of survey responses were also recorded over the phone, where it was unfeasible for the participants to attend JRS UK to do the survey in person. The surveys included a combination of multiple-choice questions that sought to categorise people's living situations, and open questions that collected qualitative data about individuals' experiences and insights. All survey respondents had been declared appeal rights exhausted at some point and most had no formal means of support at all. A minority were in receipt of asylum support, having submitted a fresh asylum claim.

It is our experience that the most vulnerable individuals often struggle to even access NGO support services. Additionally, when they do, they are less likely to be in a position to engage with research projects such as this one. An interview JRS UK conducted with a destitute asylum seeker in 2019 gives an indication: after arriving in the UK from his-war torn country of origin, he was immediately detained without explanation. After a month, he was released, again without explanation. For the next six years, he lived on the streets, dependent on informal support from strangers to eat. It was only after six years that he first made contact with a charity supporting asylum seekers. This allowed him to connect with a wider support network and begin to pursue his case again.

It should therefore be borne in mind that, despite efforts to conduct as inclusive a process as possible, the findings of this research likely underrepresent the true scale of vulnerability among destitute people refused asylum and living in London.



Key findings

On the streets

Rough Sleeping was common:

- Over 13% of all respondents, and 17% of respondents not in Home Office accommodation, described themselves as street homeless at the time of the survey.
- 43% of all respondents had slept rough within the last year, over 21% of all respondents for over a month. This figure was even higher for people neither in Home Office accommodation nor in JRS UK hosting or housing: 49% had slept rough within the last year, 28% for over a month.

There was even wider vulnerability to street homelessness, and fear of it:

- Many people who had not been homeless in the last year still mentioned having slept rough previously, in some cases for years. For many, their previous experience of rough sleeping continued to have a psychological impact on them. Someone who had been rough sleeping and couch-surfing until finding a hosting placement several months earlier explained that they still felt very insecure in their accommodation: "The prospect of sleeping on the streets is frightening."
- Even for those who had not experienced street homelessness, the spectre of it hung over them and was a source of fear and anxiety. Asked if she had slept rough in the last year, one woman responded: "I dread it happening to me if my situation continues."

No stable place to stay

> **"Every night in different places."**

Connected to the vulnerability to rough sleeping, there was a widespread pattern of couch-surfing punctuated by sporadic street homelessness, and generally unstable accommodation situations. This closely echoes findings from research conducted by JRS UK in 2017, indicating it is a longstanding pattern.[xx]

Approximately half of respondents were primarily staying informally in someone else's home or moving between several different people's homes. Most did not have a regular place to sleep: of those not staying in Home Office accommodation or JRS UK hosting or housing, 55% stayed in different places on different nights. This figure includes some people who were accommodated in other hosting schemes, so in fact underrepresents levels of instability for destitute people without accommodation.

The following common themes about couch-surfing strongly recurred:

- **Shut out and displaced.** Respondents would often have to leave the place they were staying at short notice. For example, many people explained they had to leave their friends' home if their friend had guests, or due to family members who lived there part-time returning: *"Sometimes the friend that I stay with has friends or family staying round so I can't stay on those days."*

- **Short periods in one place.** Several people explained they were only in one place for a short time, though length varied within this pattern *"2 or 3 days in each place."*; *"I've been going with one friend for a few days. About two months in each place, sometimes a week or a month."*

- **Unwelcome.** Respondents were regularly very unwelcome and had to perpetually navigate possible displeasure from those they were staying with: *"[I] don't feel comfortable since these people are helping temporarily and they know I will go someday they make me feel that I am not welcomed or my presence being appreciated."* Several referred to moving around friends' houses and leaving when they noticed their friend becoming annoyed: *"[I] change house when I see... [the people I'm staying with] getting upset."* People who described being well-treated by those they stayed with still regularly said they felt they were imposing, disliked feeling dependent and beholden to others, and were insecure in their accommodation.

- **No choice about where to sleep:** Inevitably, respondents rarely had any choice over where they stayed, but had to take whatever was available: *"if someone invites me, I go straight away."*

- **Nights on the streets:** Because a friend's roof was not guaranteed, many people who were mainly staying with friends nonetheless sometimes had to sleep rough. Several people who said they lived with friends, when asked about their current accommodation, went onto remark that they also sometimes slept on buses or on the street. Some people who were long-term street homeless also found occasional respite by sleeping on a friend's floor for the night.

One man explained that he had been "on the streets" for over 6 months. Typically, he slept in his sleeping bag in either the park or a shop doorway. Sometimes, he stayed with a friend.

As the experience of destitution without immigration status went on for years, individuals' specific circumstances had often fluctuated. For example, some had experienced a relatively stable situation with family or close friends for a while until this was disrupted by a specific event, such as the death of their friend: "a friend accommodated me. Then she died of cancer so I'm on the street."

Typically, respondents had been in Home Office accommodation at some point, and had very often experienced street homelessness directly after eviction from Home Office accommodation: "when you are refused asylum, you have nowhere to go, no family. When it happened to me, I slept on the streets."

Additionally, periods of time in Home Office accommodation had often punctuated destitution, forming part of a picture of unstable living arrangements that included friends' couches, night buses, and homeless shelters. Some people described finding themselves in a cycle between street homelessness and asylum accommodation, having been refused asylum and made destitute, but then again accessing Home Office accommodation. Sometimes, during this process, they had been moved around different UK cities: "I moved to NASS [National Asylum Support Service] accommodation in London. After rejection of my asylum application, I became homeless again."

Fear of homelessness after recognition of refugee status

Alongside the desperation for immigration status, and the sense that this was a route out of destitution, people in Home Office accommodation were worried about being made street homeless after their status was recognised and they were evicted from Home Office accommodation. Someone who had just been recognised as a refugee and was living in Home Office accommodation stated: "*I can't go to the council until I have the eviction letter. I will be very stressed when I have to go. I will need to get prepared.*"

Newly recognised refugees are routinely plunged into homelessness because they are evicted from Home Office accommodation before they could realistically have time to secure other accommodation, alongside Universal Credit or paid work: the 'move-on' period before newly recognised refugees have their asylum support cut off is 28 days from when a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) Card is issued to them. Without this BRP, they cannot begin to seek other accommodation or work, or access mainstream support. By contrast, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 defines someone as at risk of homelessness if they will be without somewhere to live within the next 56 days.[xxi]

Homelessness for newly recognised refugees is a longstanding problem.[xxii] At the same time, it has recently been growing. Government statistics show an unprecedented 239% rise in the number of households requiring, and owed, homelessness support from local authorities on eviction from home office accommodation in the two years up to September 2023, the vast majority being newly recognised refugees.[xxiii] A recent cross-party survey shows that rough sleeping among newly recognised refugees in London was 234% higher in January 2024 than in September 2023, suggesting the problem has continued to grow.[xxiv]

The move-on period for newly recognised refugees, always too short, has been the subject of disorderly policy changes that push people into further risk of homelessness. In August 2023, the government began giving only 7-days' notice of eviction, and gave this at any point from 28 days after recognition of refugee status – rather than receipt of BRP cards, which happens later. [xxv] This meant people had less than 28 days to connect with mainstream support networks and seek work and alternative accommodation, and only a week in which they could apply to the council for emergency housing. This policy was in operation at the time JRS UK conducted surveys for this research. Four months after enacting it, the Home Office reversed this specific policy, following a drastic increase in refugee homelessness.[xxvi] The wider problem of rapid eviction continues.

The pandemic's impact upon accommodation situations

Many people who had previously been street homeless or couch-surfing had been housed during the pandemic. However, some faced homelessness again afterwards:

- *"I was staying in a council hostel during the pandemic but became homeless after the pandemic."*
- *"When the pandemic time I got an accommodation from the government after ended pandemic I am homeless".*

On the other hand, for a few, the pandemic had precipitated more volatility in their situation – for example, friends had asked them to leave. Sometimes they had gone on to access government support, sometimes not:

- *"First time in Corona, I was very sick. Everything closed, refused, homeless..."*
- *"One of my friends was so scared he kicked me out. I called...[a charity], they help me, I got a hotel and then a temporary house."*

Poor and overcrowded living conditions

Most people staying informally in others' houses lived in uncomfortable, overcrowded, and often dirty conditions. Of those neither in Home Office accommodation nor in JRS UK hosting or housing:

- Half did not sleep in a bed. It was common to sleep on the floor, the sofa, or a chair.
- Parents staying informally with family or friends with their children described sleeping in one room in cramped conditions with their children: *"[I] can sleep on the cushion, mattress on the floor, and sometimes manage the bed with the children."*

There was very limited access to basic amenities like laundry and cooking facilities. Of those neither in Home Office accommodation nor in JRS UK hosting or housing:

- 27% stated they could not use the washing machine at all where they were staying. Only 52% had ready access to a washing machine.[xxvii]
- 23% had no access to a kitchen in the place they were staying. Only 54% had ready access to a kitchen.[xxviii]

No freedom or privacy

"I lack privacy and I can't bring my friends/family."

In line with inadequate access to basic amenities, couch-surfing typically entailed very little control over day-to-day activities and respondents were routinely unable to structure their own lives even in a trivial way. Living in someone else's home, according to someone else's daily routine, meant both no freedom and no privacy. Of those neither in Home Office accommodation nor in JRS UK hosting or housing:

- 29% were not able to come and go as they wanted. One man explained, "At others' houses, you live according to the house's owner. When he goes out, you go out and you can only return when he returns." A woman who was sleeping on a friend's couch said she was not allowed to return after 6pm, or leave very early in the morning, though no clear reason was given.
- 83% were not able to invite guests. Of the few respondents who could invite guests many explained that this was only occasionally possible, and guests could never stay overnight.

Michelle has been living in destitution for 7 years. She couch-surfs with friends, spending between a week and a few months in each place, and watching for her host to become annoyed. She typically spends her day at a charity such as JRS UK. Where she's staying now, she can't cook, use the washing machine, or invite friends around, and does not have a bed to sleep in. She has slept on the streets for more than a month within the last year.

For the people participating in our survey, this was not a situation extending for months, but for years. It was what life had become.

Conditions in Home Office asylum accommodation

Home Office accommodation itself is very poor, and often does not feel safe. Recurring themes about Home Office accommodation were:

- Overcrowding, with parents and children sharing a room that was their only familial space. The words of one mother were: "It's bad. 3 kids and mum in 1 room."
- Lack of privacy, and associated lack of even the most basic freedom.
- No space to relax other than bedrooms.
- Basic facilities such as washing machines being broken for long periods of time.
- A volatile situation.
- Break-ins and thefts were common and contributed to a general climate of fear.
- 42% of people in Home Office accommodation said they did not feel safe there. This statistic must be treated with caution because the sample size is small – we only surveyed 19 people in Home Office accommodation. Nonetheless, it is notable that the percentage of those in physical fear in Home Office accommodation is even higher than the percentage of completely destitute people in physical fear.

Our findings on Home Office accommodation corroborate existing evidence of a longstanding pattern of poor conditions in asylum accommodation.[xxix] The bodily fear that respondents felt in asylum accommodation is especially striking – and troubling.

Context: Ever greater scarcity

All of this occurred against the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis that makes it more and more expensive to access basic necessities like food, nappies, and toiletries.

Correspondingly, respondents commented on not having enough to eat. *"The government could give us help to eat... [charity] support is not enough to eat."*

The increased difficulty destitute asylum seekers have in accessing food is corroborated focus groups conducted by JRS UK together with the charities Sustain and Life Seekers Aid, also in Autumn 2023. Focus group participants repeatedly remarked that the cost of food and other essential items had increased. Some also reported a reduction in direct food provision from charities in recent years.[xxx]

Cost was a significant factor in limiting people's access to basic amenities when couch-surfing, because the cost of bills to the person they were staying with was a big issue. Several people explained that the reason they were not allowed to use the washing machine was because of the cost. Others explained they felt they could not: *"I don't want to use the washing machine because my sister has to pay the bill. [I] hand wash."*

Against this background, several respondents remarked on how dependent they were on charitable support, though that was insufficient: *"If not for JRS many of us would not have found it easy."*

Vulnerability to exploitation and abuse

Several respondents described a situation in which they were abused, mistreated, or exploited, but were powerless to do anything about it as they couldn't pay for somewhere to live: *"Physically and mentally [I experience] abuse as [I] stay with other people... free of payment."*

Rough sleeping was particularly dangerous and meant living in perpetual fear: *"Just going round on the bus all night so I'm scared." "You never feel safe on the streets."*

A handful of respondents offered a description of their living situation that strongly implied they were living in slum housing with an exploitative landlord. Several people who were staying in someone else's property informally talked about overcrowding and poor conditions: *"[There are] 12 people in the house. Overcrowded...Stress, depression, paranoia. No one [in the house] knows my immigration status. [I'm] Constantly afraid to be uncovered and lost [sic] space in the house."*

As part of enacting the Hostile Environment, The Immigration Act 2014 made it an offence for people without immigration status to rent property.[xxxi] This both increases risk of homelessness and pushes people away from the formal rental market leaving them even more vulnerable to abuse.

Overall, 21% said they did not feel "physically safe" where they lived, and this appears to underrepresent the portion of people living in physically dangerous situations, because some respondents who said that they felt physically safe went on to describe situations of abuse. 34% said they did not feel comfortable around those they lived with.

Taken together, these findings suggest that people in asylum destitution are vulnerable to different kinds of labour, domestic, or sexual exploitation, and so to modern slavery and human trafficking. This is corroborated by previous research interviews conducted by JRS UK, in which several respondents shared experiences of being made to work, without pay, in exchange for staying at someone's house, and by a wide body of research finding that asylum destitution and precarious immigration status increase vulnerability to exploitation and modern slavery.[xxxii]

A recent joint report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty found that "restrictions on the right to work...can...lead people to accept low paid and exploitative employment in the informal economy".[xxxiii]

This should be set in the broader context of fear of involvement with police, which meant people had nowhere to go for help: "I have seen people fight and call...police and then you're forced to move and can even get a police record/ caution sadly."

A focus group conducted with destitute asylum seekers concurrently with the surveys, and focusing on food, relatedly found that people without immigration status may feel unsafe approaching the council for help.[xxxiv]

Trapped in indefinite destitution by immigration status

Respondents were trapped into destitution by their immigration status – with the routes out of homelessness available to UK nationals blocked to them. The future felt entirely dependent on the outcome of their asylum case, and this led to deep uncertainty and a sense of being in limbo: "I don't know how long [I'll be living as I am now], I don't know my case, maybe it goes slowly, just pray."

Correspondingly, uncertainty about what would happen next was at the heart of their experience of living arrangements: "I don't know whether I leave today or tomorrow." This was physically and mentally exhausting, and meant it was impossible to rest: "Not knowing where to go next and not having found the next place is awful to bear. A more permanent place will provide more security, more peace of mind, an opportunity to build my life again. I am tired of going from different places."

There was often a sense of simply treading water until immigration status was finally resolved: "Not comfortable just managing until everything is sorted out."

Many respondents had been trapped in this situation for a very long time, even longer than a decade: *"12 years, still suffering, still homeless."*

Informed estimates suggest that several hundred thousand people are living in the UK without immigration status despite being long-term resident in the UK.[xxxv] Many undocumented people have lived in the UK for more than 5 years and have put down roots and made the country their home. At the moment, many people living in the UK without status only have a way to settle their status after 20 years. That is if they can document their residence, which can be difficult for people barred from most areas of daily life, and even then that only opens a pathway to indefinite leave to remain, for which they must wait another ten years.[xxxvi]

Impact on Physical health

Destitution had a negative impact on physical health and made it very difficult to manage long-term health conditions. There were strong indications this was actively dangerous to individuals who already had serious health problems. One woman who only had one kidney described her fear and helplessness living in a situation where she was disproportionately at risk of infection: *"There was a time I think I have an infection…I've got one kidney. I have to be very careful."*

People refused asylum are subject to charging for NHS secondary healthcare in England, and this also entails being subjected to data-sharing between NHS Trusts and the Home Office. Thus, they struggle to access healthcare due to both lack of funds and fear that accessing treatment will result in immigration enforcement.[xxxvii]

People regularly had very little control over when or whether they ate or slept. This was a significant factor contributing to poor health and making it hard to manage health conditions.

One woman explained that she had been diagnosed with borderline diabetes. This meant she had a narrow window in which to improve her health and therefore avoid developing diabetes, which is irreversible. However, it was impossible to follow medical advice whilst destitute. *"My doctor told me my diabetes is border but be careful with stress [and life is very stressful]."*

Destitution made it difficult to manage medication, and this problem was especially acute for those who were street homeless. One man said, *"I'm sleeping rough on parks, buses, trains. I find it difficult because of my medical issues as I'm on a lot of medication. What about if I lose my medication? I think it may cause some complications because some of the medication [is] not supposed to be missed."*

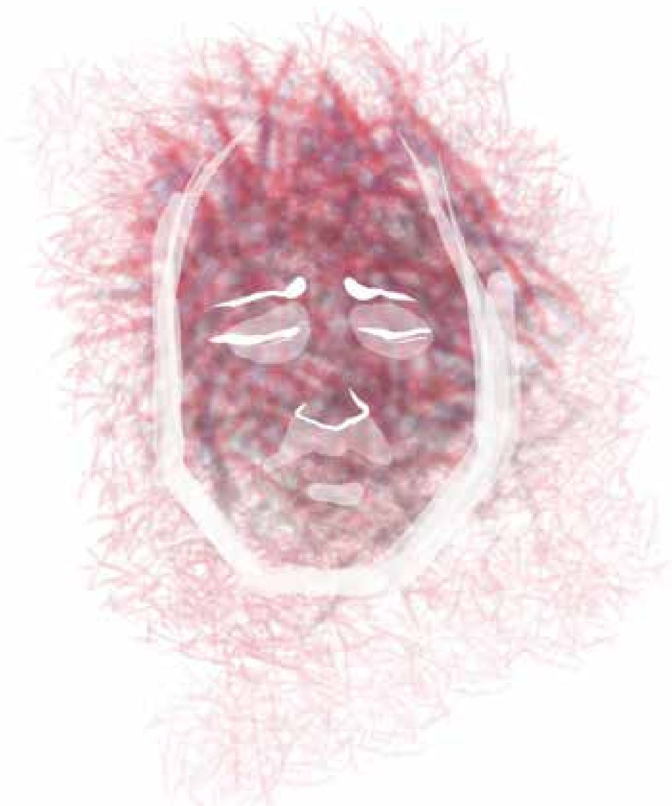
Conversely, hosting or housing schemes could have a hugely positive impact on health. One respondent with multiple intersecting health problems had recently been street homeless before being accommodated in Emilie House, JRS UK's house for destitute asylum-seeking women. When homeless, she had likewise struggled to manage her medication. She explained that living in Emilie House had finally enabled her to take her medication properly: *"Before Emilie House I was… homeless. A lot of medication, a lot of problems, diabetic, a lot of stress. Very struggle. Not easy. Now [that I am living in Emilie House], [I] take medication properly."*

Recent collaborative research by JRS UK, Sustain, and Life Seekers Aid similarly found that destitution makes it difficult to manage health conditions. It likewise revealed that destitute people seeking asylum found it problematic to manage medication, especially if it needed to be taken with food, as sofa-surfing and homelessness make it hard to regulate meal times; and that food insecurity and malnutrition connected to long-term destitution had a serious negative impact on health.[xxxviii] These findings together indicate that destitution is detrimental to management of health conditions on multiple levels – such as malnutrition, sleeplessness, and anxiety.

Impact of destitution on mental health

Almost universally, long-term destitution in the context of asylum was very detrimental to mental health, and mental and physical health could be closely connected: *"living on [the] street [is] not only bad physically but it affects mental health as well."*

- Some respondents explained they had experienced suicidal ideation: *"Sometimes you want to...kill yourself".*
- Respondents repeatedly explained they suffered from depression, anxiety, or both: *"[I feel] stress, depression, paranoia".*
- An unsafe living environment generated fear and anxiety, impacting health as a whole: *"That's why I'm having these problems with my health. I think someone will attack me."* The length of time in destitution, without the privacy or basic human agency that a home entails took a huge toll on mental health.



- Living in limbo, in or at risk of destitution, for years and sometimes for over a decade, was especially painful: *"I don't feel well, my mental health is down, in this country 8 years, no status, no accommodation. I can see that things are changed in my body. People say to me I am talking to myself."*
- Chronic sleep deprivation, due to both physical sleeping conditions and anxiety, was common: "It's stressful. Never sleep". *"Not having a permanent place has a bad effect on me. This is making [me] worried and I can't sleep at night."*

Overall, respondents felt they were living in a very bleak situation. One man described his situation as *"hell"*. Another talked about *"a nightmare"*.

Impact on sense of self

> ***"I have no sense of belonging, stability, and dignity".***

The experience of asylum destitution had a profound overall impact on sense of self. Strongly recurring themes were:

- **Destitution was felt to be dehumanising.** For some, dignity was coupled with concrete aspects of daily life that destitution denied them, such as privacy and stability, and participation: instability, marginalisation, and the lack of any private space physically or emotionally entailed a lack of dignity: "every human being deserves to have some kind of privacy and dignity and some of us haven't got it."

- **Respondents had a strong sense of powerlessness.** This was connected to the total lack of choice in where they slept or lived, and bound up in an inability to choose anything about the direction of their life until their immigration status was resolved. Lack of choice meant they could end up living in very uncomfortable or dangerous situations, and severely restricted their control over the structure of their days, as noted above. This theme came across especially strongly when people were asked to comment on their situation as a whole, and that of destitute people seeking asylum more broadly: "I have no choice. They have no choice. One must accept one's situation." From many, there was a sense that they were not allowed to expect reasonable living conditions, or entitled to a choice about where they lived.

- **Respondents felt profoundly marginalised, and desperately wanted to be able to participate in society, support themselves, and get on with their lives:** *"[I] want to be independent, have work, have kids, but now have nothing, especially at this age." "If I had a job, I would pay a rent. I have no choice. I just want to have permission to work."*

A call for change

- Respondents were clear that refugee destitution was a consequence of government policy, and that the government should ensure refugees were not left in this situation: "*Sad, disappointing, refugees are rejected, abandoned without financial, material, or monetary support by the government.*"

- They also repeatedly called for the right to work: *"Government should take necessary steps for the homeless people and allow asylum seekers to work."*

There is good evidence that permitting asylum seekers to work, as well as allowing people in the asylum system to lift themselves out of poverty, would improve asylum seekers' mental health and support integration.[xxxix]

Conclusion

This report reveals the human reality of asylum destitution: people who have come here in order to be safe and rebuild their lives instead spend years living in limbo, with no stable place to sleep. They are unable to rest and often in physical danger. They are left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and their mental and physical health is permanently damaged.

This situation is not an accident, but a consequence of a government policy of manufacturing destitution among people refused asylum. Specifically, government policies barring people refused asylum from working or accessing public funds cut off routes out of homelessness that are available to others. It is far from new. Indeed, some people who responded to our survey had been in this situation for decades. Change is long overdue. Now, we face the implementation of laws that could extend asylum destitution to many others, and cut off any route out of it. We are in a cost-of-living crisis where the most vulnerable are at ever greater risk. We have choices to make about what kind of society we want to be. It is long past time to end destitution.

Recommendations

For National Government

1 End the Hostile / Compliant Environment

The systemic marginalisation of people without immigration status is the root cause of asylum destitution. The Hostile, or Compliant Environment intentionally builds barriers to essential services, bringing immigration enforcement into every sphere of life. It must end.

2 End no recourse to public funds rules and ensure people refused asylum can access support where they need it

Restrictions on access to public funds bar people from basic safety nets on the basis of their immigration status. They are a key tool in manufacturing asylum destitution and should be abolished.

3 Lift the Ban on work: allow people seeking asylum to work for as long as they are in the UK

The ban on work for people seeking asylum consigns them to deep poverty and, when asylum support is cut off, destitution. It also marginalises them and makes it harder for them to take up work when their status is eventually resolved. Most people seeking asylum desperately want the opportunity to work and contribute to society.

4 Create a simplified route to settled status for everyone who has made the UK their home and is living here long-term

In this report we heard the stories of people living in the UK long-term, but trapped into destitution by lack of immigration status. Consigning people to an indefinite limbo, vulnerable to exploitation, ill-health, and abuse is cruel, and destructive for society as a whole. The current 20-year route obliges people to wait decades before they can simply get on with their lives.

5 Extend the move-on period for newly recognised refugees to at least 56 days from when residence permits are received

Rapid evictions from Home Office accommodation mean that newly recognised refugees routinely face homelessness. 28 days is simply not enough time to find somewhere else to live, access mainstream support, or find work. A move on period of 56 days would bring Home Office policy in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act, which states that someone is at risk of homelessness if they face not having somewhere to live within 56 days.

6 Repeal the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022

The Illegal Migration Act threatens to extend asylum destitution and cut off all routes out of it. Already, the Nationality and Borders Act builds delays into the asylum process, leaving people vulnerable to destitution. Both Acts should be repealed.

For Local Government

7 Widen eligibility for homelessness support services to include those without recourse to public funds as far as possible

Local government plays a vital role in ensuring a safety net for vulnerable people.

8 Ensure robust data protection policies, and clear communication to people seeking support about how their data will be used

Our research shows how people refused asylum are often wary of approaching authorities for help. Data-sharing between local authorities and the Home Office is a huge barrier to people without immigration status seeking help from local authorities. It must be avoided.

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[iii] According to information provided by the Home Office to NACCOM in response to a freedom of information request, FOI 2023/05756.

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[x] Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Public Sector Equality Duty of Hostile Environment Policies*, (November 2020).

[xi] See the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on her visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (June 2019), paragraph 56.

[xii] House of Lords Library, "*Impact of 'Hostile Environment' Policy*" (June 2018), p.1.

[xiii] See Wendy Williams, *Windrush* Lessons Learned Review, (March 2020).

[xiv] JRS UK, *Out in the Cold: homelessness among destitute refugees in London* (January 2018).

[xv] UNHCR, "*UK asylum policy and the Illegal Migration Act*" (2023).

[xvi] JRS UK and St Vincent de Paul Society, "*Briefing:* the Illegal Migration Bill", (July 2023).

[xvii] Refugee Council, Briefing Paper, Cost, chaos and human misery *– the impact of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Rwanda Plan* (April 2024). The analysis suggests that 93,931 people will have had their asylum claims deemed permanently inadmissible under the Illegal Migration Act (IMA), but not been removed from the UK, and a further 21,644 will be barred by the IMA from obtaining leave to remain. This analysis was done in the context of the previous government's policy, and calculated that that government would successfully forcibly remove at most 1,900 people to Rwanda in that time. The newly elected government has already scrapped the scheme to forcibly transfer people seeking asylum to Rwanda.

[xviii] See JRS UK, Briefing, "*The Asylum System in the Nationality and Borders Bill*" (July 2021).

[xix] Statutory Instrument 2024 No. 815 Immigration and Asylum, *The Illegal Migration Act 2023 (Amendment) Regulations 2024*.

[xx] JRS UK, *Out in the Cold: homelessness among destitute refugees in London* (January 2018).

[xxi] Refugee Council, *Keys to the City 2024: Ending refugee homelessness in London* (April 2024), p.8.

[xxii] See NACCOM, *Mind the gap: homelessness amongst newly recognised refugees* (May 2018).

[xxiii] For analysis see Refugee Council, *Keys to the City 2024: Ending refugee homelessness in London* (April 2024). People evicted on refusal of asylum, nearly always not being entitled to government support, are not included in these statistics.

[xxiv] As cited by Tim Farron, "People Granted Asylum: government support" (Hansard, *volume 747*, debated on 26th March 2024), Column 446WH.

[xxv] Right to Remain, "*Increase in Home Office evictions for those who have refugee status*", (January 8 2024). See also the joint briefing from NACCOM, Crisis and others, *Why the changes to the "move-on" period mean more refugees are facing homelessness and destitution* (October 2023).

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[xxvii] Others stated they could only use the washing machine "occasionally" or "at certain times".

[xxviii] Others stated they could only use the kitchen "occasionally" or "at certain times".

[xxix] For details and examples, see Mette Louise Berg and Eve Dickson, "*Asylum Housing in Yorkshire:* a case study of two dispersal areas" (June 2022); and Home Affairs Committee, "*Asylum Accommodation Replacing Compass*" (House of Commons, 17th December 2018).

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[xxxv] Pew Research Center, Factsheet, "*Unauthorized Immigrants in the United Kingdom*", (November 2019).

[xxxvi] Regularise, "*A Safer path to settlement: undocumented migrants and the 20 year rule on long residence*" (May 2021).

[xxxvii] See JRS UK, "*Topical Briefing: NHS charging regulations: impact on undocumented migrants, refused asylum seekers, and other vulnerable groups*" (December 2017).

[xxxviii] Sustain, JRS UK, and Life Seekers Aid, *Food Experiences of People Seeking Asylum in London: areas for local action* (March 2024).

[xxxix] Refugee Action, *Lift the Ban: why giving people seeking asylum the right to work is common sense* (July 2020).

About JRS UK

The Jesuit Refugee Service works with refugees and forcibly displaced people in 50 countries worldwide. In the UK, JRS specifically works with people refused asylum and made destitute, many of whom are pursing fresh claims, and with people in immigration detention. For destitute asylum seekers, JRS UK runs a legal advice service; an Accommodation Project consisting of a hosting scheme, At Home, and houses for women and men respectively; and offers befriending, advice, and a programme of activities. JRS UK also run outreach to people held in the Immigration Removal Centres at Heathrow – Harmondsworth and Colnbrook, providing practical, pastoral and casework support.

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