

ASYLUM IN THE UK:

A FRONT LINE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE



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This briefing was made possible by the commitment and hard work of our peer researchers. We are grateful to them for their time, energy and insight. We are also grateful to the University of Birmingham for providing research training to our researchers.

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Racial injustice is at the heart of the hostility experienced by people who claim asylum in the UK. It works in two ways. Firstly, it is baked into the structures, policies and narratives that define the refugee protection system; secondly, as our brave and resilient interviewees outline below, it plays out in everyday experiences of racist abuse or discrimination.

Yet voices in the debates around asylum and refugee protection are often silent on the role racism plays. The UK border policies that shape immigration and asylum policy are racially charged and need to be explicitly identified as racial justice issues.

This paper aims to open and deepen a conversation between those interested in racial justice and refugee protection. Our position is clear: the treatment of people seeking asylum and refugees – and by extension all migrant communities – is racial injustice in action. If we want a just society in the UK, we must acknowledge and fight this.

Why do we say the system is racist? Because it overwhelmingly disadvantages Black and Brown people – many of whom were born in countries once subjected to British control and extraction. As the Chief Executive of a UK charity, I recognise that the very concept of charity is rooted in the 19th century ideas of deserving or undeserving that, at a time when the UK was colonising and enslaving, was deeply ingrained with hateful notions of racial hierarchies.

We step into this discussion with a desire to learn, while recognising we exist within these systems of injustice. We are on our own anti-racist journey, which we have made an organisational priority. As well as changing the way we think and talk about racial justice in the asylum system – as identified in this briefing – we know we must look inward.

Our Expert by Experience network has existed for years to steer and co-produce our work. It has played a key role with Trustees and our leadership team to design our annual plans and 2023-2030 Strategy. In fact, the majority of our board of Trustees are people with lived experience. Progress has been made but more must be done to remove barriers.

We have pioneered a Tackling Employment Disadvantage Policy. It was developed with detailed legal advice and allows us to ringfence job roles where there is under-representation in specific

departments and at specific levels. Up to May 2024, nearly 20 jobs have been ringfenced since the policy was introduced in November 2022. People with lived experience who apply for these jobs tell us the process is empowering and inclusive. Our leadership team is now majority lived experience. However, as with our Trustee team, we recognise representation is symbolic change and only a part of the picture.

In 2024, we have contracted JMB Consultants to deliver an Anti-Racism Learning Journey for all staff, volunteers and Trustees. Externally, our EBE & Partnerships team is supporting sector organisations to establish their own lived experience programmes. We are prioritising supporting lived-experience-led organisations to develop their legal advice skills and capacity, and building up a picture of lived experience and race within the migration and refugee sector through our Insight Hub bulletin on Race and Power.

We know all this is the tip of the iceberg. We also know we have – and will – get things wrong. But we know this racial justice learning journey is essential if we are to fight for asylum justice.

Our strategy for 2030 focusses on ending the hostile environment and the racist attitudes and beliefs that sit behind these laws and policies. This briefing highlights how these attitudes, beliefs and policies perpetuate oppression and discrimination in British culture and society, whether in housing, the job market, health care, or through far-right violence.

This approach insists that problems in the asylum system are not isolated. It recognises that the same structural racism that underpins and shapes the asylum system affects all communities of Colour in the UK. Secondly, it demands that all migrants have the same rights on health, education, housing, and welfare as the rest of the population, and the same recourse to human rights and equalities legislation.

The refugee sector must move beyond simply calling for a fair asylum system. It must call for one that centres racial justice.

That will help root calls for migrant and asylum justice within the racial justice movement. We know many organisations are having this conversation and have been for years, so we hope this report will increase the range of voices in this space.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The treatment of people seeking asylum and refugees is racial injustice in action. Those in favour of a racially just society in the UK must combat this. They cannot look the other way.

This briefing draws on peer research conducted by and with people seeking asylum to argue that refugee rights are, at core, a racial justice issue. It suggests that the siloes separating the refugee rights and racial justice movements should be torn down and that activists will make quicker progress if they adopt each other's positions, strategies, and goals. The denial of refugee rights is racial injustice in action, and racial justice cannot be achieved until all people in the UK, including people seeking asylum, are treated equitably. The two movements are really one.

Structural racism shapes the asylum experience in the UK. Our peer researchers found that people seeking asylum experience: official abuse and degradation; forced dependency and poverty; quasi-detention; and everyday racism. These have intergenerational effects that leave children as well as adults worse off. The survivors of these experiences today are overwhelmingly Black and Brown people who come from countries that have experienced British colonial rule (broadly defined) and/or violent resource extraction. Our peer researchers further found that, despite all this, people seeking asylum continue to demonstrate hope and resistance. They are not only allies in the fight for racial justice – they embody it every day.

This briefing is intended as an entry document rather than an exhaustive study of structural racism and racial injustice in the asylum system. It stakes out a position, explores some of the main effects of structural racism on people seeking asylum in the UK, and invites like-minded groups to work with us to achieve racial justice for all.



KEY FINDINGS

- 1. The UK asylum system is structured to disadvantage people seeking asylum, the majority of whom are Black and Brown, and to divert material resources away from them.**
- 2. People seeking asylum and refugees suffer many of the same racial injustices as long-standing communities of Colour in the UK.**
- 3. People seeking asylum and refugees experience the negative impact of structural racism on every aspect of their lives, to the extent that it can cause them to question their fundamental worth as human beings. Instead of offering them safety and support, the asylum system forces them into situations of poverty, isolation and low life chances.**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Commission an independent review of structural racism in asylum policy and practice within the Home Office and its private contractors.**
- 2. Fund reparative justice programmes led by people seeking asylum.**
- 3. Encourage activists within both refugee rights and racial justice spaces to see the fight for asylum as fundamentally a racial justice issue.**



INTRODUCTION

Asylum in the United Kingdom – how people can apply, how applicants are treated, and who gets it in the end – is a matter of racial justice.

Attaining refugee status is often thought of as the light at the end of the tunnel, but it only shines bright for a few. The rest experience it as a system designed to repel, undermine, control and penalise anyone daring to seek shelter in the UK. What's more, because of the demographics of the people seeking asylum today, it overwhelmingly disadvantages and discriminates against Black and Brown people – many of whom were born in countries that were once subjected to some form of British imperial control.

Given the above, it's startling how rarely racial justice is spoken about in conjunction with the UK asylum system. We've seen racial justice more commonly associated with the issues facing Britain's settled Black and Brown communities. For example, it has been a touchstone of the ongoing Windrush scandal, which saw the Home Office mistreat and at times **wrongfully deport hundreds of British citizens mainly originating from the Caribbean.**¹

This must change. While politicians may tell us that **the asylum system's failings come from it being "broken",**² it does exactly what it was designed to do. Starting in the 1990s all the way up to the 2024 Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act, a rapid increase in legislation to restrict asylum built a protection system that treats people differently depending on where they come from and **classifies people from non-White dominant countries as less deserving.**³ Successive

governments have further amplified the effects of these regulatory frameworks by using performative cruelty against people seeking asylum to score political points. Deporting people seeking asylum to Rwanda is the most blatant example of this. Racist outcomes are not a malfunction – they are what the system is programmed to produce.

For the benefit of both people seeking safety on these islands and long-standing communities of Colour, Refugee Action believes that the boundaries separating the refugee rights and racial justice movements must fade away. The denial of rights for people seeking asylum and refugees in the UK is racial injustice in action. And racial justice will never be achieved until all people in the UK, including people seeking asylum and refugees, are treated equitably. These two movements are one and the same.

We are convinced that we have more to gain in coalition than in artificial separation. Progress will come quicker if activists nominally attached to each movement incorporate the other's concerns, frames, strategies, and goals into their own work. This will allow the lines to blur, before hopefully disappearing entirely.

For advocates of racial and reparatory justice, this begins by explicitly including people seeking asylum and refugees in their campaigns. For refugee rights activists, this starts with re-interpreting the cruelties of the UK border regime and the failures of the asylum system as deeply rooted in racial injustice.

There's plenty of work to do. Let's do it together.



ASYLUM AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Racial justice, following the definition set out by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, seeks **“the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone.”** It does this by combatting structural racism, which is **“the racial bias across institutions and society. It describes the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege White people and disadvantage people of Colour.”**⁴

These factors do not need to baldly expose racial hierarchies to contribute to structural racism. Think the postcode lottery, where service quality is linked to residents’ tax bracket, or ‘neutral’ facial recognition software that **disadvantages Black and Brown people more often than White people.**⁵

Similarly, many of the worst offenders within the context of asylum – for example preventing anyone arriving irregularly from applying for asylum, **as the 2023 Illegal Migration Act does**⁶ – can be described by their proponents as **‘colour blind’.**⁷

That is immaterial. The only question that matters is whether, at the end of the day, they generate

disparate outcomes to the disadvantage of Black and Brown people. And by that standard we can say that the British asylum system is shot through with structural racism in every respect.

Long-standing communities of Colour in Britain will recognise the problems facing people seeking asylum and refugees. They share many of the same racial justice issues. Reflecting the racial justice priorities **set out by the Runnymede Trust,**⁸ people seeking asylum and refugees are regularly and disproportionately subjected to: poverty, labour market discrimination, undignified accommodation, curtailed freedoms and detention, degradation at the hands of government officials, and reduced access to healthcare and education.

Tolerating racial injustice for some helps normalise it for the rest, and racialised attacks on one group – be they physical, verbal, legal, economic, or social – negatively impact the environment for all Black and Brown people living in the UK. Without racial justice for all, we are more likely to have racial justice for none.

PEER RESEARCHERS

This briefing stems out of a peer research project that Refugee Action commissioned to shine light on the structural racism of the British asylum system as experienced by the people seeking shelter inside it. It highlights issues that are common to both the racial justice movement and the refugee rights movement, and it identifies points of purchase that could be used to advance our common cause.

With support from Refugee Action, three refugees and one person seeking asylum were trained by the University of Birmingham to become peer researchers in 2023. They were women in their 30s and 40s from Zimbabwe, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius and El Salvador.

After completing their programme, they conducted interviews with 18 people seeking asylum and refugees about their experiences. Sixteen were women, and at least two-thirds came from areas that had experienced some sort of

British imperial rule, including: Cameroon, Kenya, Mauritius, Pakistan, Trinidad and Tobago, Namibia, Nigeria, and Malawi. Three people from El Salvador were also interviewed, as were two men. Most were in the mid-20s to mid-40s, but people in their 50s and 60s were also included. They sought shelter in the UK for a variety of reasons, including sexuality, domestic violence, or forced migration.

Taken together, their observations demonstrate not only structural racism within the asylum system, but racial justice contested and denied at every stage of the process. This damning indictment is not lessened by the fact that most interlocutors eventually received refugee status. That did not end their ordeal, it only changed it, removing some of the ways they were made vulnerable while exposing them to new ones. For these individuals, and for others in and on their way to the UK to seek asylum, racial justice continues to be denied.



OFFICIAL ABUSE AND DEGRADATION

The 2016 Brexit referendum to withdraw from the European Union was a turning point in how migration and asylum were talked about in the UK. With the stakes so high, Leave campaigners abandoned caution and unleashed heavily xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric in order to bring voters on board.

To give just a few examples. They installed **billboards showing a long line of primarily Black and Brown migrants** with the text “Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all”.⁹ They **hung posters** claiming “Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU: Vote leave, take back control.”¹⁰ And, without a shred of evidence, **they claimed:** “we can expect to see an additional million people added to the UK population from Turkey alone within eight years. ... This will not only increase the strain on Britain’s public services, but it will also create a number of threats to UK security.”¹¹

The seeds sown here have since become a hallmark of recent Conservative Party politics. Repeated statements from former Home Secretary **Priti Patel solidified the idea** that the British people voted to “take back control of our borders”¹² – although a majority of voters did not actually do this¹³ – and in the intervening years Government

officials have become increasingly bold in their xenophobic and racist statements about migrants, people seeking asylum, and refugees.

For example, **Patel said in parliamentary debate** that: “The British people have had enough of open borders and uncontrolled immigration; enough of a failed asylum system that costs the taxpayer more than £1 billion a year ... enough of foreign criminals, including murderers and rapists, who abuse our laws and then game the system so that we cannot remove them.”¹⁴

Her successor, Suella Braverman, **suggested without evidence** that people lie about their sexual orientation to receive asylum in the UK.¹⁵ She and her colleagues further undermined trust by baselessly asserting that migrants are **“gaming”**¹⁶ modern slavery laws to submit **“bogus”**¹⁷ applications for protection. Braverman even admitted to **fantasising about deportations**, saying: “I would love to have a front page of the Telegraph with a plane taking off to Rwanda, that’s my dream, it’s my obsession.”¹⁸

All these examples draw strongly on xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racialised Othering for their power, even if no one directly mentions race.

As the Runnymede Trust also notes, “current immigration debates rely on racialised Othering, **often in euphemistic and indirect ways.**”¹⁹ Here the suggestions are that people from elsewhere are “breaking” the EU; that Turkish Muslims are inherently a security risk inside Britain; and that people seeking asylum commit heinous crimes and nefariously lie on applications.

These amplify negative stereotypes about people seeking asylum, and thus about Brown and Black people, while offering justifications for preventing access to equitable policies and basic human rights, including the right to asylum. They have the potential to incite violence by positioning people seeking asylum as a clear and present danger to the UK. And, because this performative cruelty comes from politicians, including those at the top of the Home Office, it also enables structurally racist asylum policies.

One clear sign of this is the 2023 Illegal Migration Act, which directly attacked the right to international protection. It prevents anybody arriving in the UK by irregular means, for example by small boat, from claiming asylum and makes them **liable to detention and deportation.**²⁰

This not only contravenes the 1951 Refugee Convention, which recognises that people fleeing for their lives must often cross borders **without**

permission in order to reach safety.²¹ It also removes the last viable route to international protection in the UK for most Black and Brown people seeking asylum, because for the overwhelming majority of them there is no legal way to travel from their country of origin to the UK. All possible visa routes have, for them, been shut down. Irregular entry is their only chance.

The Government’s plan to detain anyone arriving irregularly and deport them to Rwanda reveals its preference for punishing refugees rather than establishing safe routes for their entry. In doing so it is intentionally endangering the people it plans to send there. Myriad organisations including the UNHCR has documented that Rwanda is not a safe place for refugees, and after reviewing the evidence the UK Supreme Court **agreed with that position.**²² In response, the Government has used the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration Act 2023-24 to legislate that Rwanda is safe so that can continue its performative cruelty legally. This is a fiction that no amount of law can make real. In pushing through this plan, the Government has shown its willingness to expose Black and Brown people seeking safety to a defective asylum processing system, inadequate human rights safeguards, police violence, and potential refoulement to the countries they escaped.²³



SPONSORSHIP OR HARDSHIP?

Ukrainians are overwhelmingly perceived as white people in Europe and the UK.

Few events demonstrate the structural racism of the asylum system more clearly than the contrast between the treatment Ukrainians received when they fled the devastating war in their homeland and the treatment of refugees racialised as Black or Brown. On 4 March 2022, just eight days after the Russian invasion, the European Union activated the **Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians**.²⁴ This gave all those fleeing: a temporary residence permit; access to work, housing, social welfare, education and medical care; the opportunity for family reunification; and substantial free movement rights. According to official figures over 4.2 million Ukrainians are now receiving **this protection across Europe**.²⁵

Following Europe's lead, the UK also showed remarkable willingness to facilitate Ukrainians' flight to safety. In March 2022 it launched **the Ukraine Family Scheme**, which allowed "eligible Ukrainian nationals to join their family members or extend their stay in the UK ... applicants were able to stay in the UK for up to three years, work, study, and access public funds."²⁶

It also created the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, which allowed people to sign up to host Ukrainian nationals who were not yet in the UK. Hosts received "thank you" payments from the Government of £350 a month for the first year and £500 a month in subsequent years. **Sponsored Ukrainians were** "granted three-year visas to stay in the UK, with full access to public services, benefits, and other support."²⁷

These schemes were not perfect, and a lack of government oversight has been blamed for **reports of Ukrainians being neglected** and exploited by their sponsors.²⁸ It's also crucial to understand that this method of protection is counterbalanced by impermanence: temporary protection isn't the same as a durable refugee status. But both EU and UK schemes offered safe routes in, a regularised status, various kinds of support, choice of location and the ability to work to sustain oneself to vulnerable people when they needed them.

When faced with violence and war, Brown and Black non-Ukrainian people seeking asylum are excluded from such treatment. Instead, they are hounded through **Europe, forced to risk their lives in the English Channel**²⁹ only to enter a punitive and structurally racist system in the UK.

The UK has not opened a sponsorship programme comparable to Homes for Ukraine for displaced people in Sudan, despite over 14,000 people killed there between April 2023 and April 2024 and millions at risk of famine – a situation the **Norwegian Refugee Council describes** as "textbook ethnic cleansing".³⁰ Afghan veterans living in the UK, who risked their lives to help the British military conduct operations in their home country, have **seen family reunification visas perversely rejected**.³¹ So too have people from the Gaza Strip, whose relatives, **according to the Home Office**, do not "face a personal risk of harm, 'which is separate to the level of risk faced by the wider population.'"³²

And all Syrians know that, when the 2015 summer of migration happened and the UK was still part of Europe, the Temporary Protection Directive existed but was not activated for them. Instead, with few exceptions **Europe's politicians slammed their internal borders shut**,³³ **kettled people** in coastal 'countries of first arrival',³⁴ and then **externalised their borders through the EU-Turkey deal**³⁵ and **support for the Libyan Coast Guard**.³⁶

IF THIS ISN'T RACIAL INJUSTICE IN ACTION, WHAT IS?



Given this trajectory, it comes as no surprise that our peer researchers heard stories of abuse and degradation at the hands of Government officials, above all at the Home Office.

“The earth could have opened and swallowed me, the way the woman was shouting at me,” one said. “Her spit was flying in my face. She looked down on me. She was downgrading. I felt that just because I was a Black woman coming from a very small island that they didn’t see me as somebody of value, or as somebody they could assist or help in any way.”

Others had similar stories. “The way the officers will speak to you ... they always had a very rude attitude,” another said. “Some of the officers were neutral, not nice, but neutral. It felt that they were just doing their job. But some of them would make it feel really upsetting for us, because they had a very rude, very arrogant tone.”

Another simply said: “my mental health and wellbeing were scarred from the word go.”

“DEALING WITH THE HOME OFFICE IS JUST DEPRESSING, THEY DON’T TRUST YOU ON SO MUCH OF WHAT YOU SAY.”

These traumatic experiences had follow-on effects, as many said they shy away from reporting racist incidents and hate crimes to the police because they fear doing so will bring them into contact with the Home Office.

“Hate crimes are a thing that don’t get reported a lot,” one said. “Especially for a person seeking asylum, they always assume that it will affect their case if they report it to the Home Office.”

“If you go to the police in an asylum seeking situation, you are already dealing with a lot of issues: your accommodation, your payments, your debt,” another said. “On top of that is like, what is the Home Office going to do to me? You’re constantly living in that stress, ... [so] you’re just like, ok, bear it.”

None of the people the peer researchers spoke with reported experiencing racism directly from the police. But few thought going to them for help would serve their interests. Some had tried reporting racism or hate crimes to law enforcement, only to see no visible follow up. Others discovered that pursuing charges would mean sustained interaction with the justice system – something they weren’t willing to do given their precarious situation. So, they let their complaints drop and said they were unlikely to report further incidents.

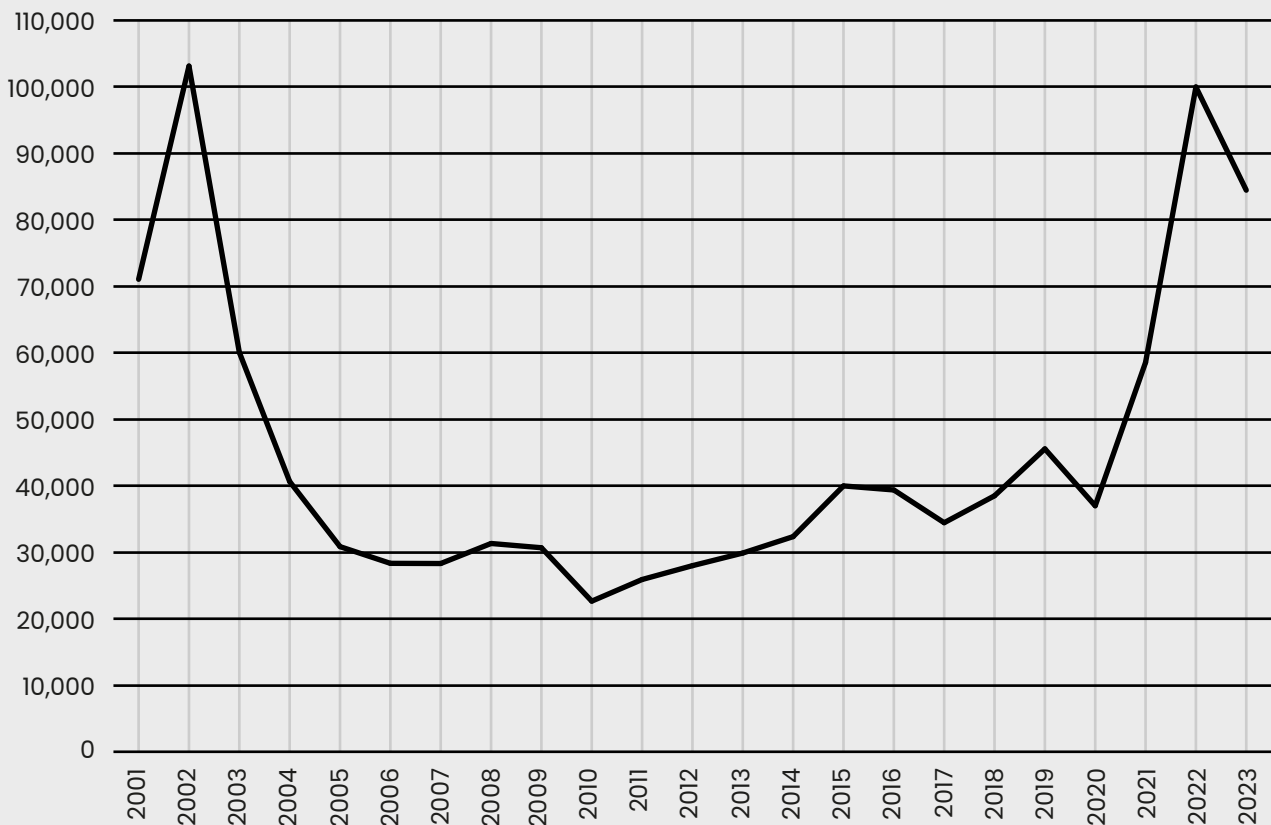


UK ASYLUM APPLICATIONS AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

According to the Home Office, between 2001 and 2023 **the UK received 1,040,635 asylum applications** – an average of around 45,000 a year.³⁷ These applications are not evenly distributed. The graph is shaped like a hammock, with two large spikes in applications in 2001–03 and again 20 years later in 2021–23.

These six years accounted for nearly half of all the asylum applications submitted since the turn of the century. The top seven countries of origin during the first spike were Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Iran, Turkey and Sri Lanka. During the second spike they were Iran, Albania, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea and India.

TOTAL UK ASYLUM APPLICATIONS BY YEAR

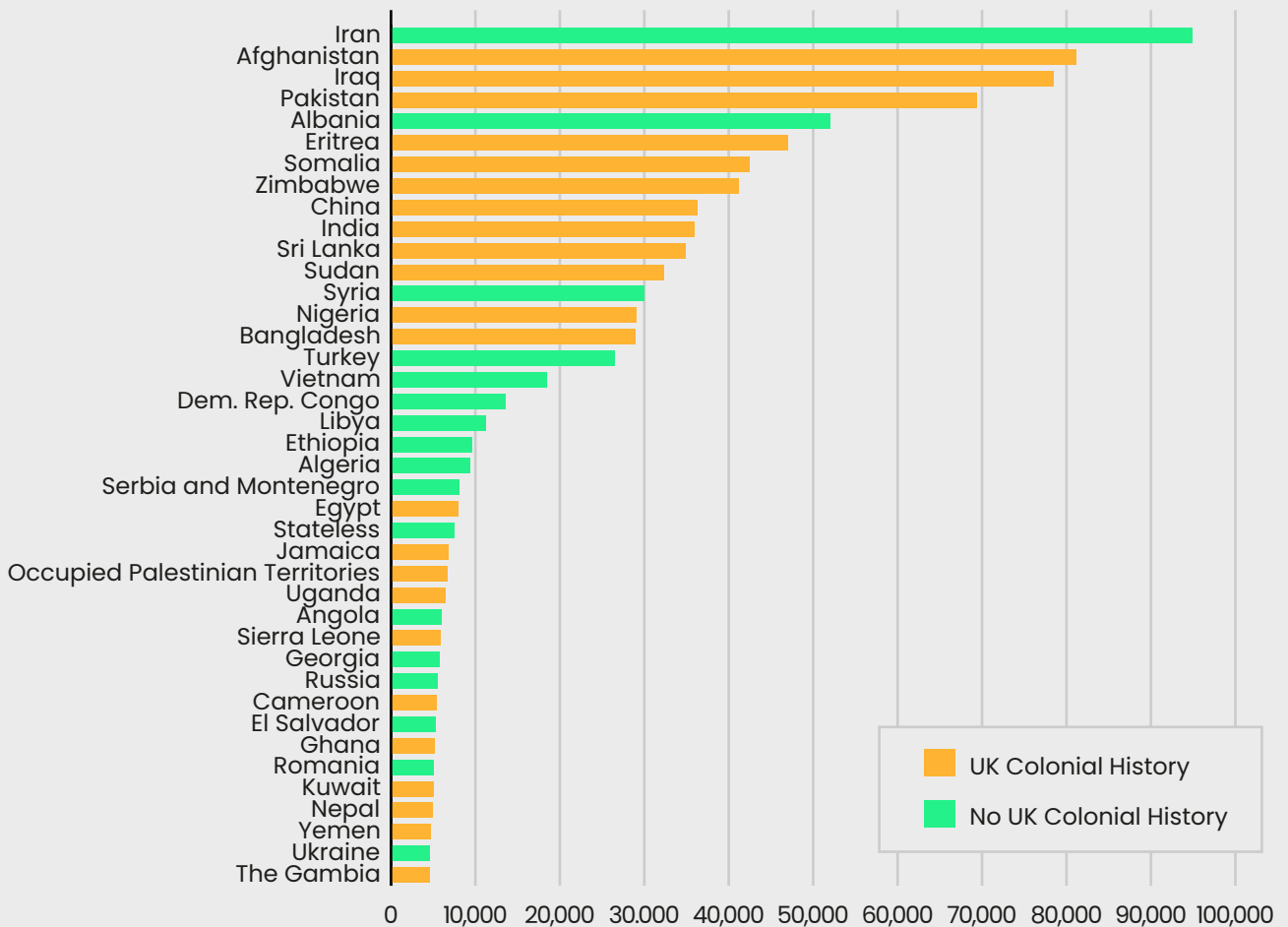


Source: Home Office (2024). Immigration System Statistics for year ending December 2023, Asylum and Resettlement – Applications, Initial decisions, and Resettlement. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65d884a387005a001a80f8bf/asylum-applications-datasets-dec-2023.xlsx>

When talking about racial justice and colonial legacies, it's crucial to understand that countries of origin are not simply emitting people to the UK. The volatility, repression and violence these countries experience have not come about in a vacuum, and most have histories in which Britain was intimately involved.

Since 2001, 15% of people seeking asylum came from Iraq and Afghanistan, the UK's two major war zones during this time period. The majority of applications (68%) were made by people originating from countries that have experienced British colonial rule (broadly defined) or high levels of violence and resource extraction for the benefit of Britain.

TOTAL UK ASYLUM APPLICATIONS (2001-23) - SEPARATED BY UK COLONIAL HISTORY



Source: Home Office (2024). Immigration System Statistics for year ending December 2023, Asylum and Resettlement - Applications, Initial decisions, and Resettlement. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65d884a387005a001a80f8bf/asylum-applications-datasets-dec-2023.xlsx>

Stated a different way, just 40 countries of origin account for nearly all of asylum applications since 2001. Of these, 23 experienced some form of direct British rule.

Other countries of origin also felt the malign effects of British imperial projects, even if they were never directly subjugated: the kidnapping of people for the transatlantic slave trade; **the 1884 Berlin Conference**, which “established the rules for the conquest and partition of Africa”;³⁸ the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement and 1917 Balfour Declaration, which redrew the map of the Middle East according to European priorities; **the cultivation of opium addiction in China** in order to force open access to resources in the 19th century.³⁹ The British Empire was at the centre of these and countless other efforts to exploit Black and Brown-majority countries and peoples for its own benefit.

Iran, the top country of origin for people seeking asylum in the UK this century, was never colonised

by the British Empire. But there too the UK wielded destructive influence for decades. The UK monopolised the extraction of Iranian oil before the second world war, a powerplay that **Winston Churchill described as** “a prize from fairyland beyond our wildest dreams.”⁴⁰ In 1953 the UK helped end democracy in Iran when it conspired to stage a coup d’état against prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh. And, during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, **the UK secretly supplied Iraq with a chemical plant** capable of making mustard gas, even though they knew it would likely be used against Iranian troops.⁴¹

If we include Iran with the other orange-coloured countries in this graph, we can say that nearly seven in ten asylum seekers to the UK in the past 23 years have come from countries where the UK has an extensive history of extraction and violence. It is no coincidence that the populations of all of these countries are also racialised in British society. From the standpoint of racial and reparatory justice, a debt is owed.



391 DEAD AT THE UK BORDER IN 25 YEARS

If racism is, as **Ruth Wilson Gilmore says**, “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”,⁴² few places demonstrate the structural racism of the UK asylum system more clearly than the English Channel.

According to recent reporting by Maël Galisson for Les Jours and openDemocracy, between 1 January 1999 and 1 January 2024, **at least 391 people died on the UK border with France and Belgium** – a rate of more than one a month.⁴³ This is likely an undercount as not all deaths will have been reported, or even discovered.

At least 249 of these deaths happened after 2014, and it is no coincidence that the UK also committed approximately **£800 million to Channel-related border security in that same time period.**⁴⁴ It has paid for guards, fences, detection equipment, **maritime harassment,**⁴⁵ even drones and moats. This is not just state-sanctioned indifference to vulnerability to premature death – the Home Office is using public money to purchase the equipment that makes deaths more likely.

Yet while plenty of evidence suggests British public funds are actively contributing to suffering on and around the Channel, there is no good evidence demonstrating that deterrence measures on the border **are effective at preventing crossing**

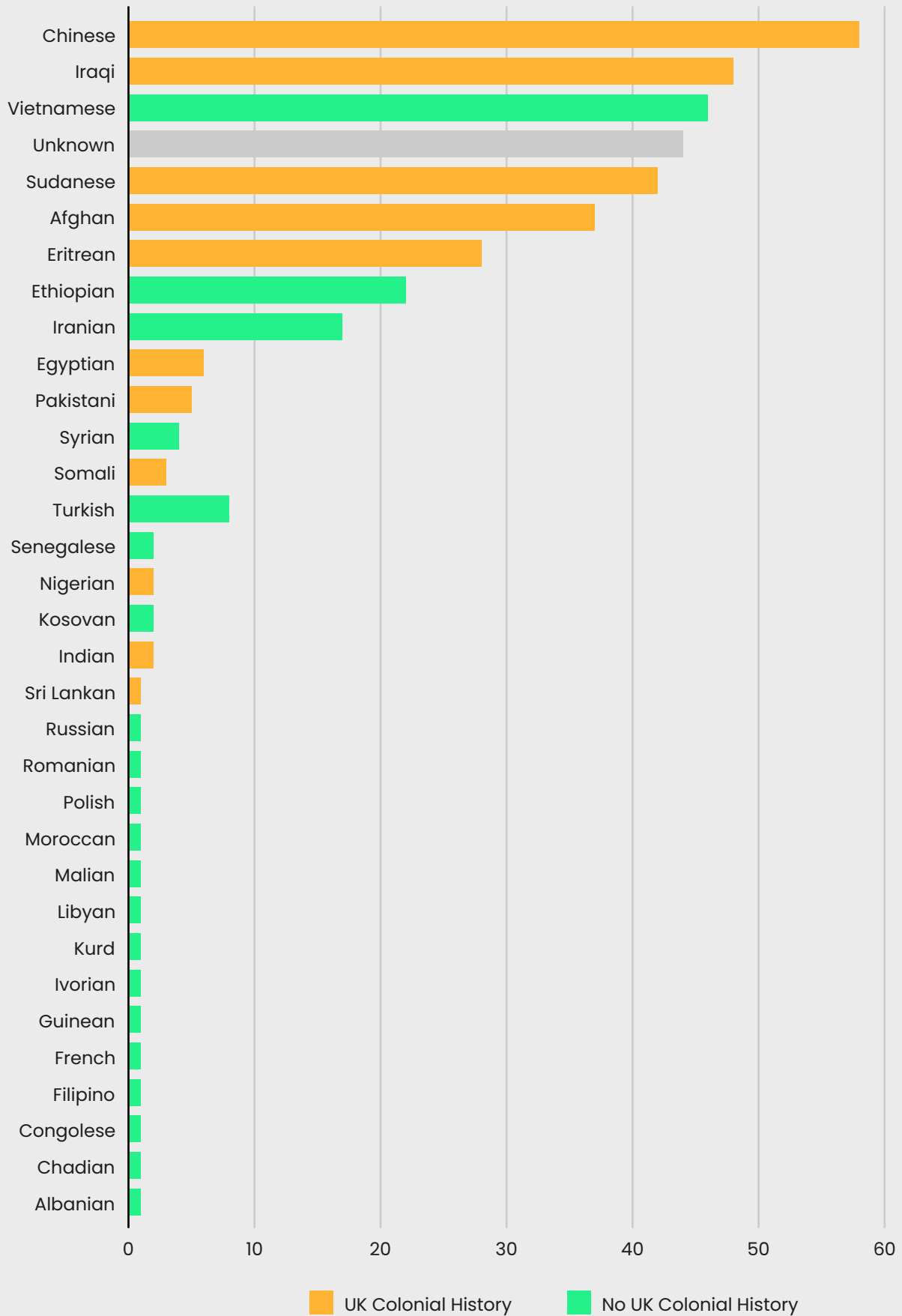
attempts.⁴⁶ Instead, they primarily induce people to take more dangerous routes, thereby increasing their chances of injury or death and **making the involvement of human smugglers more likely.**⁴⁷

What’s happened in Calais and the surrounding areas bears this out. Over the years the predominant transport method has varied between lorries, trains, ferries, and small boats, suggesting people coming to the UK have adapted each time a new security measure has come into force. And they appear to have been successful: the number of asylum applications filed with the Home Office **has been trending upward since 2010.**⁴⁸

Yet, also in line with this hypothesis, the death toll has not only been rising, but the frequency of death has been increasing. And they’re dying in horrific ways. Of 391 deaths, over 75% were caused either by asphyxiation (28%), road accidents near crossing points (26%) or drowning (24%).

The overwhelming majority were men, but 27 women and 43 children also died, as well as 76 unidentified people. The median age at death was 25 years old. What’s more, although there are so many unidentified, we know that at least 60% came from countries that have experienced high levels of exploitation and violence at British hands (see previous box).

391 DEATHS AT UK BORDER WITH FRANCE AND BELGIUM, BY NATIONALITY



Source: Galisson, M. (2024) 'The silent serial killer: 391 deaths in 25 years at the UK border'. openDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/the-silent-serial-killer-391-deaths-in-25-years-at-the-uk-border/>

FORCED DEPENDENCY, FORCED POVERTY

Racism is not just a set of negative ideas about groups of people, but a system through which wealth is extracted and resources are allocated. Looking at racism through the lens of unequal distribution makes easier to understand why it isn't just something perpetrated by individuals. The asylum system itself is structurally racist.

Racial justice advocates have long known that poverty **disproportionately affects Brown and Black people.**⁴⁹ As the **Runnymede Trust reports**, "46% of ethnic minority children are living in poverty in Britain ... For every £1 of White British wealth, Indian households have 90–95p, Pakistani households 50p, Black Caribbean 20p, and Black African and Bangladeshi households have 10p."⁵⁰ This disparity of distribution sits at the core of racial injustice in the UK.

People seeking asylum are largely banned from working while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim. According to the Home Office, at the end of 2023 **over 166,000 people were awaiting an initial decision on their case**, and of those nearly 70% had been waiting six months or more.⁵¹ In 2021, **Refugee Council analysis** found that the average waiting time was between one and three years.⁵²

People seeking asylum are only permitted to apply for the right to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. Even then, the few people who are granted such permission are very rarely able to work in practice. This is because their employment is restricted to the narrow list of professions included on the Government's Immigration Salary List (Previously called the Shortage Occupation List). As a result, the vast majority are forced into poverty and dependency on charities and the state.

The prohibition on work and myriad other restrictions for people seeking asylum contribute to the disparity of distribution reported by Runnymede Trust. They are racist policies because their effect is to prevent resources from flowing toward mainly Black and Brown people by force of law. Seeking to abolish this "systematic ... disadvantage [to] people of colour", as the Annie E. Casey Foundation describes structural racism, has long been a project of refugee rights activists.

It is also by definition to strive for racial justice, which is "the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone."

The Government provides people seeking asylum with accommodation, access to the NHS, school places if they are 5–17 years old, and an allowance. This is currently set per person at £49.18 per week. That's £7.02 per day or £2,557.36 per year. In 'full board' hotel accommodation, where food is often of such low quality that it **creates and exacerbates illness and malnutrition**,⁵³ **this allowance** is severely reduced to £8.86 per week. That is £1.27 per day or £460.72 per year.⁵⁴

By comparison, the 2022 poverty line for a single person living in the UK was, **according to the Social Metrics Commission**, more than double that at £177 per week.⁵⁵ A person working a 35-hour week at the 2024 National Living Wage (£11.44 per hour) **earns nearly £21,000 pre-tax.**⁵⁶





IT WAS LITERALLY KILLING ME FROM THE INSIDE BECAUSE I JUST THOUGHT, I HAVE A MIND, I WANT TO DO SOMETHING.

Even with housing costs covered, people seeking asylum live at the level of bare subsistence. The people interviewed by our peer researchers experienced this debilitating dependence as difficult to stomach, reporting negative effects on both their material well-being and mental health. And it's a condition of required poverty that, given the demographics of people seeking asylum today, is enforced overwhelmingly on Black and Brown people.

"It makes you feel small – you feel you're not even a human being," one explained. "You feel you don't have a right to anything, that you're a different part of this whole society. You're just not included – you're excluded from everything."

Another said: "Sometimes when people see you they feel you look so poor ... I don't want to use a bad word, but you live under this poverty ledge."

Many of our participants linked their economic conditions back to their exclusion from the right to work. Removing self-sufficiency, they said, even brought forth questions about their fundamental worth as a human being.

"If you want to work they should allow you to have work," one said. "When I feel that I am what I have on my table, if I am able to [work] ... it helps me to have my confidence back."

This is both an individual and family issue, as a ban on work impedes not only self-care but also care for others. "Living off £90 a week is not much when the baby needs nappies, wipes, obviously food," another said. "It's £45 for him and £45 for me, and I need to make sure that he's got everything he needs."

One woman explained that her adult child was refused his request to work, despite having been in the UK for more than a year, shortly after she had given birth. Desperate, they tried to apply for special permission for her to work instead. That was also refused.

"It's all about power, control and dominance," one said. "[They're] saying, we're giving you this, you should be thankful. Not that they're giving you an opportunity. Because those opportunities they keep for themselves."

CAMPAIGN TO LIFT THE BAN

Lift the Ban is a coalition of over 300 charities, trade unions, businesses, faith groups and think tanks campaigning since 2018 to overturn the Government's ban on people seeking asylum being able to work.

The coalition believes that people seeking asylum should be legally allowed to access employment if they wish. It should never be a legal requirement, but for many working is an important part of living a good life and becoming settled into communities, so the opportunity should be there.

Lifting the ban would also break the Government's ability to force people into poverty and dependency by allowing for the possibility of self-sufficiency. The right to work is a crucial route out of the poverty they are currently subjected to, and access to legal work reduces the chances of people being forced into situations of severe exploitation because they lack options. This is important because so many are struggling to

make ends meet. Food and energy prices have soared, yet the rate of asylum support allowance has barely risen. Between 2008 and 2022, **the real value of asylum support fell by 27%.⁵⁷**

The UK's restrictive approach makes it an outlier to comparable countries across Europe, where people are given access to employment at an earlier stage and with fewer restrictions. In France and Spain they must wait six months, in Germany three months. In Canada and Australia, people can apply to work straight away.

That is why the Lift the Ban coalition is calling for the right to work for people seeking asylum and their adult dependents after six months of having lodged an asylum claim and unconstrained by the Immigration Salary list.



QUASI-DETENTION

It cannot be emphasised enough that people seeking asylum experience poverty in the UK in large part because laws prevent them from taking care of themselves. Their impoverishment is effectively mandated by the state, through hostile and racist policies such as the ban on work, for as long as they remain unrecognised as refugees.

People feel their lack of resources in all areas of life, from education to health and from service provision to paying for their daily needs. Few places are their constraints more apparent, however, than in their accommodation. As with access to employment, the Government maintains control over where people seeking asylum live. They must go where they are sent and follow the rules of the house, regardless of their needs or reasons for wanting to be somewhere else.

This is another way structural racism comes through in the asylum system. By controlling where people live and how much freedom of movement they enjoy, the Government also controls what resources are allocated to thousands of Black and Brown people. To be clear, by control we mean limit, as far more important than the Government providing accommodation, a subsistence payment, and a handful of other services is the access it prevents by requiring people to live in a certain place.

Access to better housing, schooling, nutrition and services. Access to diverse populations, cities, and things to do. Access to family and friends, support networks, and job opportunities. Access to reasons to stay and ways to thrive. When location is mandated these resources too often remain out of reach, and when they are directed away from a population of mainly Black and Brown people racial injustice is committed.

More than 100,000 people seeking asylum were in Government-funded accommodation at the start of 2024.⁵⁸ Half of these were living in “dispersal accommodation”, **described by the Government as** “longer-term temporary accommodation managed by accommodation providers on behalf of the Home Office”.⁵⁹ As the name implies they are dispersed across the country, with the highest concentrations in North West and North East England, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and The Humber.



The vast majority of the other half are in what’s known as “**contingency accommodation**”, ad-hoc living spaces which the Home Office pays for because it controls “insufficient bedspaces ... to provide for the essential living needs of all destitute asylum seekers.”⁶⁰ These are primarily hotels, but also include docked barges and former military barracks. In contrast to dispersal accommodation, these are largely concentrated in London, East and South East England, and the West Midlands.

As we argued in our 2023 report **Hostile Accommodation: how the asylum housing system is cruel by design**, contingency accommodation is a system of “de-facto detention” for people seeking asylum:

“In hotels, freedom of movement and basic liberties are restricted ... they are unable to receive guests or arrange childcare, and they are told that if they leave for short periods, such as one or two days, they will not be able to return.”⁶¹

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention similarly **noted in 2021** that conditions at former Napier barracks and other sites “replicated many of the features found in detained settings”.⁶²

Often housed in isolated areas poorly served by public transport, people in contingency accommodation are subjected to curfews and sign in/sign out protocols in their places of residence. Accommodation can be unsanitary, overcrowded, and ill-suited for the special needs of people who have endured traumatic experiences.



IT ACTUALLY FEELS LIKE A PRISON.



Dispersal accommodation allows for more freedom of movement, but in terms of quality it can be just as bad.

“Our situation was very, very, very horrible. They put us up in a flat with no heating, where we almost didn’t survive the winter. They had to rush us out of there because we called the emergency services,” one person seeking asylum told our peer researchers. “Eventually we had to take the Home Office to court ... and the judge found the Home Office to be wrong and mistreating us.”

Multiple people described the moment of arriving to their new home, only to find that the Government had deposited them in squalor. “The house, it was that dirty. My kids [were going to grow] up there

and I was like, ‘it’s ok, I [just need to] make sure it is ok for my kids,” another said. “But I mean, they’re dealing with people, they’re not dealing with animals. Even an animal – a dog or a cat – you have to look after them.”

In some cases there is nothing ‘quasi’ about the detention. **Nearly 16,000 people entered immigration detention during 2023:** around 7,000 of these were people seeking asylum and 18 were children.⁶³ Most spend 28 days or less in detention before being deported or moved to other accommodation,⁶⁴ however **there is no legal upper limit.** From the moment they entered the closed facility they are in indefinite detention **until the Government chooses to release them.**⁶⁵



REFUGEE ACTION'S MOST WANTED

Remember that racism isn't just individual utterances and attitudes. It's also a system of unequal distribution that channels wealth and resources away from Black and Brown people and toward White people. Housing makes this dynamic clear for all to see: it's a miserable existence for those on the inside, but for those providing the services it turns a hefty profit.

Government contracts give private contractors the opportunity to make millions in taxpayer-subsidised profit from hostile accommodation. The accommodation is nowhere near adequate to provide for people's needs – Refugee Action has seen cases of collapsed ceilings, mould, infestations and sewage leaks – yet contractors still charge the Government large sums to provide it. In other words, the system channels resources away from people seeking asylum and toward large, for-profit companies. It's racial injustice in action.

In October 2023, Refugee Action launched the **Most Wanted campaign** to draw attention to the hundreds of millions of pounds of profits private companies are collectively making from their hostile accommodation.⁶⁶

- **Corporate Travel Management received a two-year contract valued at approximately £1.6 billion from the Home Office in 2023.** One of their activities under the contract is to operate the Bibby Stockholm barge as an asylum accommodation centre.
- **Serco posted £249 million in underlying operating profit in 2023.** It operates prisons and detention centres alongside accommodation for people seeking asylum.
- **Clearsprings made £62.5 million in profit during 2022, and that same calendar year its three directors shared dividends of almost £28 million.** According to its 2021 strategic report, a principal activity of the company is providing asylum accommodation, support and transport services to the Home Office.
- **Mears Group reported a pre-tax profit of £46.9 million in 2023, up from £34.9 million in 2022.** It provides, manages and maintains housing for local and central Government across the country, **including asylum accommodation.**⁶⁷

We are calling on the Government to end for-profit asylum accommodation and instead spend every penny available on building asylum infrastructure that respects the rights and dignity of people seeking safety, rejects quasi-detention practices, and houses people in communities.

We recommend a phased withdrawal that prioritises areas of greatest harm, such as closing barges and camps, but which does not stop until for-profit asylum services cease to exist. Money should instead be diverted to local authorities so they can pursue place-based housing solutions and other vital public services for everyone, including people seeking asylum and refugees.

COPING WITH EVERYDAY RACISM

The majority of refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK today are racialised once they reach British shores. This means that regardless of whether they are from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Caribbean, and regardless of their social standing in their country of origin, they are assigned an inferior status (treated as non-White) on the street, at work and school, and in government offices. Too often this includes being the target of verbal and physical racist attacks.

Sometimes these make headlines, such as when petrol bombs were thrown at a migrant processing centre in Dover. In **his final racist and Islamophobic tweet** before the attack, the bomber wrote: “We will obliterate them Muslim children [they] are now our target. And there [sic] disgusting women will be targeted mothers and sisters is burn alive.”⁶⁸ Hate also surfaced in the news when **a far-right group armed with hammers and fireworks** descended on a hotel housing people seeking asylum in Merseyside in 2023.⁶⁹ But attacks on people seeking asylum and refugees have become normalised and public attention is rare. Most incidents pass by unnoticed by all but the victims themselves.

Our peer researchers found dozens of examples of everyday racism, ranging from microaggressions and harassment to spectacles and outright violence. People were made to feel small, out of place, without value, and under attack. Rubbish was emptied into yards, skin colour was disparaged in shops, and objects were thrown at them from moving vehicles.

Part of the issue, the individuals interviewed believe, is the way people seeking asylum are forced into housing and locations that are not of their choosing. The Home Office distributes them across the country at its discretion, and people can end up in locations with little diversity.

One said she felt like she “was the first [Black woman] who came to live in Barnsley”. She described feeling invisible in the shops because of the colour of her skin, ignored by the shopkeepers when she asked for help. “I was so ashamed. I can’t walk around like that, [with people asking] who’s this, who’s this?”

Some described it as a feeling of unspoken but tangible discomfort when they enter a situation, for example when boarding a bus as a woman with a headscarf. One said that in the UK it’s rarely as obvious as being told “you’re not from my country or my race ... but the way they treat you, you can see. It’s subtle.”

“They don’t think of you as a human being,” another said. “If you’ve got the asylum seeker tag, it’s like people [question] whether we should talk, whether we are going to be at the same level.”

Some experiences are anything other than subtle. Two were hit by bottles thrown from cars, another heard a neighbour say things like “You don’t belong to this country, you are an immigrant ... Go back to your country, you’re not a human here.” More than one respondent said they had been demeaned on the street with slurs like monkey, “the blackest thing ever seen”, and the n-word.

The most common coping strategy against such racist attacks was self-isolation. Many said they try to leave the house only when necessary and avoid interactions in case they turn ugly. “I don’t really mix, because I always feel like I’ll be like the odd one out,” one explained. “I wouldn’t be accepted for my colour, based on past experience. So, I just prefer to just stay indoors than to go out and intermingle.”

Many shared similar sentiments. “If it gets late and I need to get some milk or something for the kids, I’ll think twice. I’ll give them water [with their] oats [rather than] go out to get the milk at night,” another said. “I’m not saying that the country isn’t safe. It’s my own personal fear that [prevents] me from doing things at night.”

Those who do venture out said they need a thick skin to make it through. “My strategy was to just put up with anything,” another said. “Don’t go to that place, or don’t answer, or just bear it. I did not have any energy to confront other people about their behaviour.”

Refugees and asylum seekers deploy these strategies and coping mechanisms to try to stay safe, but they come with negative long-term consequences: “It really did affect how I integrated in the community, because I feared not being accepted or not being welcomed.”



I FELT JUST BECAUSE I WAS A BLACK WOMAN COMING FROM A VERY SMALL ISLAND THAT THEY DIDN'T SEE ME AS SOMEBODY OF VALUE.

THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

It's rare a day goes by without the British press showing us a photograph of Black and Brown men risking their lives to cross the English Channel or the Mediterranean.

These men have as much right to safety and dignity as anyone else. But amidst this constant stream of images, it can be easy to forget that families and unaccompanied children also claim asylum in the UK. **Between 2009 and 2024 one in five asylum applications were for children**, or in absolute terms around 140,000 over 15 years.⁷⁰

We've seen the state-sanctioned degradation, enforced poverty, curtailed freedoms, and everyday racism suffered by people seeking asylum in the UK. These are all parts of the structural racism built into the UK asylum system – elements within the “array of factors that systematically privilege White people and disadvantage people of Colour”. And as with all racial injustice, their effects cross generations.

The structural racism of the UK asylum system traumatises children and puts them at a disadvantage in the country in which they are to build their future. Children are supposedly the most vulnerable, most protected individuals in British society. But children seeking asylum here today face the same lack of equity in opportunity and outcome – for them vis-à-vis in comparison to their White, British-born counterparts – as adults do. This is the definition of racial injustice.

At the official level, perhaps the most egregious example is that children seeking asylum frequently encounter disbelief about their age if they've already entered puberty. The Home Office has already subjected hundreds of children to tooth and bone scans to try to 'prove' that they are over 18, and the Illegal Migration Act **has laid the groundwork to test many more**.⁷¹

This is despite the fact that most tests conducted so far have **confirmed⁷² that the children being tested are indeed children** – repudiating the Home Office's attempts to say otherwise – and the fact that **the Council of Europe has recommended** such tests only ever be used as “a matter of last resort”.⁷³ It also goes against the **warnings of human rights experts**, who fear that the tests traumatise children and make it more likely that they will end up in dangerous situations.⁷⁴

None of the people we interviewed or their children had to endure such testing, as far as we are aware. But their children have suffered trauma, nonetheless. They've felt the effects of poverty, watched their parents suffer verbal abuse, and been the targets of it themselves on the street and in the schoolyard.

“One of the kids in [my daughter's] class said that all Black people are monkeys,” one said. “You're not born with racism. Racism is being taught by some parents to their kids. A child of that age, to make that kind of statement would mean he is being taught this at home. It was so sad.”

Like their parents, children are turning to self-isolation for self-defence. “My son does not like to join teams, because he doesn't want people thinking that he's an immigrant and that he was different,” another said. “He has learnt to have an English accent, but it is difficult to integrate. ... In my daughter's case, she's still not finding friends.”

For children it's about much more than simply being lonely. Children seeking asylum are prohibited from passing through the same milestones and rites of passage as their peers. As long as they are in the system, they can only watch as the people they've grown up with outpace them. “It's like I'm stuck in one position, I'm not moving forward,” one said. “My friends, my classmates, are going through their third year at uni. I'm still dangling.”

The struggles and disappointments of children, which they face through no fault of their own, add further stress to the already difficult situations of parents seeking asylum.

“They can't spread their wings and fly like a child who is British already,” one parent said. “They can't go abroad with their friends, they can't take part-time jobs, there are no driving schools for them because they don't have permission to drive a car [as long as they're] seeking asylum. There are so many challenges ... this comes down to their mental health, so well-being is affected.”



**THEY CAN'T SPREAD THEIR WINGS AND
FLY LIKE A CHILD WHO IS BRITISH.**

HOPE AND RESISTANCE

“Racism affects,” one said. “It makes me feel not just uncomfortable, but insecure, fearful, angry and sad all at the same time. To have such worrying thoughts and feelings is difficult to manage.”

This was the common thread that ran through all our interviews. Structural racism, often mixed with elements of xenophobia and Islamophobia, leads to all sorts of negative outcomes for victims. This is true regardless of whether they are British citizens and residents, or refugees and people seeking asylum. The racial injustice is the same.

We’d like to end by emphasising two main messages.

First, racism is a defining feature of the asylum experience in the UK. It creates fear, abuse, self-isolation, poverty and low life prospects for the large numbers of Black and Brown individuals who have sought shelter in this country. Moreover, many of the individuals now suffering racist mistreatment at the hands of the modern British state, are the direct descendants of those who suffered racist mistreatment at the hands of the British imperial state.

The treatment of people seeking asylum and refugees is racial injustice in action. Those in favour of a racially just society in the UK must combat this. They cannot look the other way.

Second, it is equally important to emphasise that, despite their encounters with British racism, people seeking asylum and refugees continue to display hope. They continue to resist. This makes them not just allies in the fight for racial justice in Britain – they embody racial justice every day.

“[Holding] my rage, it made me stronger,” one said. “I’m not a person who needs a place where I can go and control my anger, like anger management. I don’t need that. [My rage is] how I coped.”

“I can’t wipe away 450 years of Black hereditary slavery and White oppression. I can only go forward with the 450 years of [people] who paved the way with positivity [and showed] us how better we are as a race and a people,” another said. “I do the best that I can in perpetuating, pushing the betterment of Blackism and knowing exactly what it is to be a Black, Caribbean man.”

Many have channelled their urge to fight back into activism. The wider asylum support landscape is full of groups led by survivors of the asylum system who have chosen to support others despite their experiences. Among these leaders are some of the people our peer-researchers interviewed.

One said her personal experiences prompted her to focus on resisting hate crime, and in the community group she founded police officers now educate people seeking asylum on the process of reporting an incident. “I really push [reporting], because once it did happen to me and I walked away from it,” she said. “I thought to myself, I will not do that again.”

Another has focused on helping people co-exist in their communities and navigate the asylum system. “I’ve tried my best to be fighting against [racism],” she said. “All those lessons I learnt, it made us start up that project ... to assist other people ... so that they don’t get themselves really impacted negatively with those kinds of processes.”

Another succinctly put it: “This is a fight we cannot sleep on. We need to continue going, and continually going until our voices are heard.”

Defiance can be armour when necessary. So can pride. And one thing our interviewees made perfectly clear. At the end of the day, they still believe in themselves.

“I’m a very confident person, I love being Black so much” one said. “I know that not everyone is going to be happy with the way I look, but I’m not always going to try to make them feel better. It’s my life, and I’m very proud of my skin.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE NEXT GOVERNMENT:

1. **Commission an independent review of structural racism in asylum policy and practice within the Home Office and its private contractors.**
2. **Fund reparative justice programmes led by people seeking asylum.** These should support groups and individuals to create networks of repair, and to build the capacity and skills necessary to seek redress for racial and intersectional injustices. They should be rolled out in community, political and media spaces such as schools, workplaces, universities, housing, health, media organisations and local and national Government.
3. **Roll back Hostile Environment policies and repeal anti-refugee and anti-migrant legislation.**
4. **Fund local authorities, housing associations and NGOs to run integrated housing, support and legal advice.**
5. **Ensure standards in housing, health, and access to work, welfare support and education are at minimum compatible with Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Prohibition of discrimination) and the Equalities Act 2010.**

TO THE REFUGEE RIGHTS AND RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS:

6. **Encourage activists within both refugee rights and racial justice spaces to see the fight for asylum as fundamentally a racial justice issue.**
7. **Centre racial justice in all campaigns concerning refugees, the right to asylum and the rights of people seeking asylum.** This includes, but is not limited to, campaigns around: accommodation, 'no-choice' dispersal and detention-like practices; forced poverty and the right to work; age verification; and legal routes into the UK for the purpose of seeking asylum.

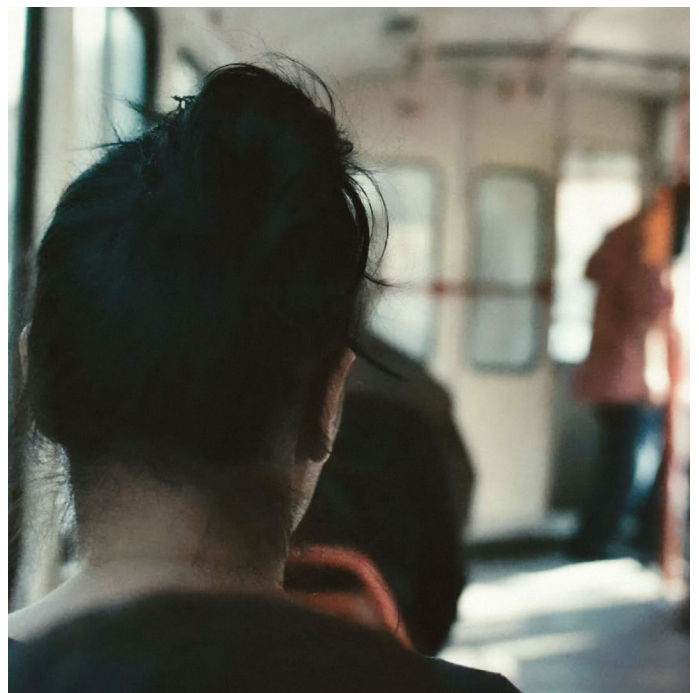




LIMITATIONS

This briefing was designed as an entry document and is not a full analysis of the structural racism within the UK asylum system or the racial injustice created by it. It has many limitations, including:

- **A limited selection of case studies and examples.** People from all over the world seek asylum in the UK – Home Office statistics show 207 places of origin since 2001 – and each person comes laden with different experiences, reasons for flight, and legacies of colonialism. We do not have the resources to capture them all and as a result many important examples were left out. This in no way implies that the racial injustice others have experienced is any less, only that we have much more work to do.
- **A small and incomplete set of interlocutors.** Our peer researchers conducted 18 interviews, which is a small sample size for a study of this nature. They also, as the name implies, conducted most of them with peers and people within their networks. This resulted in more women being interviewed than men, even though far more men seek asylum in the UK than women. Children were also not interviewed. Further studies will seek to redress the imbalance of this initial project.
- **A focus on the personal.** This briefing explored the structural racism of the asylum system by way of people's experiences inside it, but it did not engage with those structures directly. Future work should expand the scope by, for example, interrogating Home Office guidance, policy and practices, interviewing and observing case officers at work, and analysing internal and external official communication. To go some way to countering these limitations, this briefing was reviewed by the Institute of Race Relations, the Runnymede Trust and Migrants' Rights Network.



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