

OUT IN THE COLD: Homelessness among destitute refugees in London

Refugees reveal the reality of living with destitution

In this climate of hostility towards migrants, we have forgotten that at the centre of the public storm are human beings. This report examines patterns of homelessness amongst the destitute refugees served by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), in their own words. It is based on the **lived experiences** of people who came to Britain seeking sanctuary, but who instead found themselves trapped in destitution, cornered into situations of abuse and forced out in to the cold.

JRS UK provides support to those who have fled to the UK for safety and sought asylum, but who are struggling to gain recognition of their status as a refugee. Unable to leave the UK but yet barred from working and with no access to government support, they are left destitute, often for years.

The pervasive homelessness uncovered by this report is a key aspect of destitution – **a destitution which is not accidental**, but a deliberate aim of government policy, which targets those who are often already vulnerable as a result of situations that brought them to the UK in the first place, and then manufactures further vulnerability by barring them from supporting themselves.

Nearly everyone surveyed in this study was **legally homeless** by the accepted definition within English and Welsh law, however they have **no legal route** out of homelessness.

Key Findings

Our survey uncovered a **perpetual vulnerability to street homelessness**, with 62% of respondents stating they had experienced street homeless within the last year and, worryingly, 1 in 5 for over a month. For those who have access to shelter or accommodation, it is described as **insecure, inadequate and unsafe**. Almost half of the respondents explained that they would informally couch-surf with different friends on different nights and, often find themselves **locked out without notice** on any given night, regardless of weather conditions.

The total uncertainty of their lives is exacerbated by fear of detention, and in some cases, removal into even greater danger. It emerged that most **felt trapped**, denied the capacity to order their own lives or perform basic tasks, and therefore **deprived of freedom and privacy** – one man **likened destitution to imprisonment**.

“The forced destitution of asylum seekers and refugees is not good to anyone – not to themselves, their communities, or family. It is a major violation of human rights.”
John, a destitute refugee

“...all human beings have the right to have accommodation. This should not be regarded as a luxury but as a priority for all.”
Celine, a destitute refugee.

Key Statistics

62% experienced **street homeless** in the last year

36% feel **physically unsafe** in their accommodation

47% have **no regular place to sleep**

87% do not feel in control of their accommodation

42% feel **uncomfortable** with those they live with.

The report finds that destitute refugees are often utterly dependent on the hospitality of others, **feeling like an unwelcome burden** fitting around someone else’s life in every possible way – unable to choose when to eat, sleep, or wash, and sometimes prevented from doing so altogether.

A repeated, unsolicited, theme in the report was a desire to **contribute** to community and their households; alongside the **explicit desire to be treated as human beings**, to be more than passive recipients of charity, even where they were deeply appreciative of help given.

Recommendations

Deliberately making individuals destitute, with the knowledge that it is likely to result in street homelessness and significant risk of exploitation and abuse, while also simultaneously adding barriers to prevent individuals from resolving their situation is not, in JRS UK's view, a morally acceptable tool of government policy, particularly when used as a means of enforcing decisions taken by an asylum determination system which is widely viewed as flawed.

The stories on which this report is based draw out the vast injustice and human cost of deliberate destitution and homelessness. We invite communities across the UK to join us in calling for the following policy changes to end destitution.

1. Give all seeking asylum the right to work

Asylum seekers in the UK are currently barred from working. Our experience of accompanying those at different points in the asylum process suggests that most want the right to work to support themselves rather than rely on government or other sources of financial support. The findings of this report reinforce that conclusion with repeated calls to be able to **participate and contribute**. Many refused 'asylum seekers' are unable to leave the UK, even where the Home Office does not acknowledge this. **We recommend that all asylum seekers be allowed to work to support themselves**, for as long as they are in the UK.

2. Provide *asylum seekers* unable to support themselves through work with basic financial support

Destitution experienced by *asylum seekers* who are refused creates significant vulnerability leaving people open to exploitation and abuse. **If an *asylum seeker* is unable to support themselves their basic material needs should be met via government support.**

3. Abandon the hostile environment agenda

The hostile environment agenda dehumanises, fostering a cruel society that spreads beyond its immediate targets, and should have no place in a **decent humane immigration system**. Government should focus on creating a society that fosters values of hospitality, community, participation, and respect for dignity.

Enacting these changes would mean a **vital step towards a more just, more humane society**. They are crucial if the human tragedy of refugee destitution is to be addressed.

Litzian was street homeless, and had been so for more than 6 months, sleeping outside on her own. She moved around from place to place each night, depending on the weather. She explained that she was often in physical danger: "*Living on the streets means that I am at great risk of being assaulted.*" This, she thought, was typical, but that didn't make it endurable:

"We are left at the mercy of people we don't know. Abuse is common and somewhat expected. People like me have an impossible life to lead."

How you can help to change the reality of lives for destitute refugees

Pope Francis reminds us that stories such as these are a *sign of the times* – that they are a sign we should pay attention to and reflect on, allowing the stories to touch us deeply and convert our hearts.

Help us to create hospitable spaces for destitute refugees facing difficulty:

- **Use your voice:** tell others in your parish, family or community about the situation affecting destitute refugees and why it matters to you that they should be treated humanely.
- **Contact your MP:** engage them in dialogue and ask them to give those seeking and refused asylum the right to work.
- **Volunteer:** with your local refugee organisation and share your time and skills.
- **Engage your Parish:** think about how your parish could respond e.g. hosting a destitute *asylum seeker*, fundraising, collecting toiletries
- **Pray:** for refugees, for those who support them, and for a more humane and just society.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation, operating in over 50 countries worldwide. Our mission is to *accompany, serve* as companions, and *advocate* on behalf of refugees. Our work is based on the principles of hospitality and carried out in a spirit of compassion and solidarity, encouraging participation and community, aiming to give hope, justice and dignity to refugees. In the UK, JRS has always had a special ministry to those held in immigration detention and those made destitute by the asylum process.

Briefing produced to support the JRS UK report, *Out in the Cold: Homelessness among destitute refugees in London*. To access the full report visit www.jrsuk.net or e-mail uk@jrs.net