



Still destitute

A worsening problem for refused asylum seekers

Concerned by the continuing problem of the destitution among refused asylum seekers, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) commissioned a third survey of destitution in Leeds. It was first undertaken in 2006 as part of research to inform the JRCT Inquiry into Destitution Among Refused Asylum Seekers, and was repeated in 2008.

The survey again shows high levels of destitution and, in particular, that many people have been left in this dire situation for prolonged periods. The survey recorded each visit of destitute clients during a four week period in April-May 2009 to four of the five supporting agencies that took part in the previous two surveys.

The research found:

High levels of destitution

- 273 destitute clients were recorded – 232 individuals with 11 adult dependents and 30 children
- destitution still happens at all stages of the asylum process: 80% were refused asylum seekers; 12% were asylum seekers; 5% were refugees; 3% had unknown status
- administrative delays worsen destitution: 33% were destitute while waiting for Section 4 to begin, an increase from 27% in 2008
- a total of 515 visits were made during four weeks, an increase from 477 visits to the same four agencies in 2008

The system is not working

- 60 individuals had their asylum claims processed through the New Asylum Model, an increase from 45 in 2008 – the number of people being made newly destitute is increasing; it is not just a 'legacy' problem
- entitlement to apply for support does not mean entitlement to receive support – of the individuals surveyed, 32 were unable or unwilling to apply for Section 4 support and 13 had been refused section 4 support

Families and children are destitute

- 21 families with 30 dependents were counted, including 6 destitute for one to two years and 5 who had been destitute for two years or more

Destitution is serious and prolonged

- 85 instances of rough sleeping were recorded, an increase from 75 recorded in 2008 – this suggests it is becoming more likely that destitute people are being forced into street homelessness
- 37 individuals including 9 women slept outdoors or in a public building
- 100 individuals had been destitute for one year or more: prolonged periods of destitution cause worsening health and mental health problems

Destitution is linked to country of origin

- two thirds of those surveyed came from just four countries: Zimbabwe (21%), Iran (18%), Eritrea (16%) and Iraq (9%)
- people from countries with ongoing unrest that makes it dangerous or difficult to arrange return are most likely to be destitute; many for long periods

Charitable provision is at breaking point

- voluntary, charity and faith resources to support destitute people are pushed to the limit - restricted resources have forced two projects to stop temporarily
- incidents of aggression and violence caused by increasing levels of desperation from prolonged and worsening destitution have become increasingly commonplace for frontline staff

Recommendations

The original recommendations of the JRCT destitution inquiry remain pertinent and relevant (Adie et al., 2007). Had they been implemented, we would not be reporting on a worsening situation of destitution now.

Principles

- End the destitution of asylum seekers and refugees at all stages of the asylum process.
- Systems should be put in place to ensure no child or their parents are left destitute.
- Give asylum seekers at all stages the right to work so they can contribute to the UK and provide for themselves.
- Overhaul the whole system. Efforts to improve the existing system have not worked.
- Create an independent arms-length body to make asylum decisions.
- For those who cannot work, provide an end-to-end support system until they can be safely removed.
- Ensure asylum seekers at all stages of the process are eligible for and can access primary and secondary health care.
- Ensure access to proper legal representation at all stages of the asylum process

Practice

- Grant temporary leave to remain to people who cannot return to their country of origin through no fault of their own.
- Abolish Section 4 support. Make continuation of support automatic on refusal of an asylum claim until the individual leaves the UK.
- The local authority and refugee supporting agencies should share information and practice to safeguard families and children from destitution.
- Improve liaison between detention facilities and housing providers or refugee agencies in dispersal sites when granting bail.
- Allow religious, social networks and family connections to be recognised as meaningful connections for refugees in need of housing.

The full research report, 'Still Destitute' by Hannah Lewis, 2009, is available from JRCT. Further copies of this summary and the full research report can be downloaded from the website: www.jrct.org.uk

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