

*“This powerful and moving report deserves serious attention. The human cost of destitution among people who have sought our protection is terrible, and the case for immediate action is compelling.”*

Donna Covey  
Chief Executive of Refugee Council

*“The British Red Cross provides vital support to some of the most vulnerable people who have fled war and persecution. I very much welcome this report, which sheds light on the hidden plight of those at the end of the asylum process for whom return is not an option.”*

Roland Schilling  
UNHCR Representative in the UK

**BritishRedCross**

# Not gone, but forgotten

The urgent need for a more  
humane asylum system

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## Foreword

For a hundred and fifty years the Red Cross has been caring for human casualties. Many of the neediest people are drawn to the Red Cross because of their commitment to alleviating suffering wherever and whenever they can. In this report the British Red Cross faces us with the depth of suffering they encounter within British society.

*Not gone, but forgotten* tells us things about ourselves we would rather not know. It confronts us with the case histories of people who came to Britain for sanctuary and found themselves destitute on our streets.

As a Commissioner on the Independent Asylum Commission (2008), with my colleagues I heard the stories of people whose experience is like that of those whose voices we hear in this report. There is no question about the depth of suffering of those who are refused asylum and find themselves destitute. The commitment of the British Red Cross to the ending of destitution, to the protection of children, to permission to work, and access to healthcare is a commitment to fundamental human rights. It is a commitment to alleviate the suffering of those who are casualties twice over: first from whatever traumatic circumstances caused them to leave their country of origin and second from the workings of the UK asylum system.

This report is authoritative because it speaks with the voice of experience. What the British Red Cross is doing for destitute refused asylum seekers is fantastic. *Not gone, but forgotten* comes at a time, just after a general election, when we all want to see new political initiatives.

The report closes with the words of one destitute asylum seeker: 'I hope I have the strength to carry on standing'. It leaves me thinking, 'I hope I have the strength to carry on fighting – for asylum without destitution.'

**Nicholas Sagovsky**  
Canon Theologian, Westminster Abbey

## Summary


The British Red Cross is supporting an increasing number of refused asylum seekers in the UK who find themselves destitute. As a leading humanitarian organisation we believe that we have a responsibility to respond to their specific needs in times of crisis. Many of these asylum seekers come to us as a last resort, having exhausted all alternatives, with nowhere else to turn.

In *Not gone, but forgotten* we focus on the humanitarian situation facing refused asylum seekers who remain in the UK, and make recommendations on how to develop a more humane asylum system, which is so urgently needed. As one of a number of voluntary organisations who deliver support to this vulnerable group, in this report we draw on the findings of a British Red Cross survey and also from the direct experiences of the refused asylum seekers we help and support. Based on this evidence, we suggest four policy recommendations that would improve the humanitarian situation of this vulnerable group.

We believe that the government and the political parties should build a consensus and address the shameful incidents of destitution facing refused asylum seekers in the UK.

The British Red Cross supports the following changes to the asylum system:

1. The adoption of the principle that destitution should not be an outcome of the asylum system.
2. Additional support for all destitute refused asylum seekers with dependent children.
3. An end-to-end asylum support structure, including permission to work, until the applicant is either removed or granted leave to remain.
4. An entitlement to healthcare throughout the asylum process until removal or granted leave to remain.



Giving food to destitute asylum seekers here is not very different from handing out food from the back of lorries in the Sudan. The humanitarian need is the same.

## About the British Red Cross

The British Red Cross is a humanitarian organisation that helps people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are. We are part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – a global volunteer network that responds to conflicts, natural disasters and individual emergencies.

We enable vulnerable people at home and overseas to prepare for and respond to individual crisis, as well as emergencies in their own communities. When the crisis or emergency is over, we help people recover and move on with their lives.

As a member of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, we are committed to, and bound by, our fundamental principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. The principle of humanity is “to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found”. To address humanitarian needs, the principle of neutrality precludes the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement from taking sides or otherwise engaging in political controversies.

## Background

It has been estimated there are up to 500,000 refused asylum seekers in the UK<sup>1</sup>. These are people who, for a range of reasons, have not returned home, are still living in the UK with very limited or no access to support from the state and who are not allowed to work. They become reliant on the goodwill of friends and support from faith groups and charities. In many cases they experience exploitation, overcrowded living conditions, street homelessness, physical and mental illnesses and malnourishment.

The British Red Cross supports a government’s right to control its borders, and to remove asylum seekers who have not been granted protection. However, over the last six years we have spent an increasing amount of resources addressing a growing humanitarian need amongst this group, and we believe we have a responsibility to highlight their plight.

In line with the advocacy approach adopted by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, this report aims to complement our existing dialogue with government and increase the awareness of the dire humanitarian situation that many refused asylum seekers experience on a daily basis. Many of these findings also support the work of the Still Human Still Here campaign, of which the British Red Cross is a member, dedicated to highlighting the plight of refused asylum seekers who are destitute in the UK.

## Why is this an issue for the British Red Cross?

The British Red Cross defines someone who is destitute as:

*“A person who is not accessing public funds, is living in extreme poverty and is unable to meet basic needs, e.g. income, food, shelter, healthcare, and who is forced to rely on irregular support from family, friends, charities or illegal working to survive.”*

Humanitarian assistance is a phrase that most people normally associate with the work of the Red Cross internationally with victims of persecution, conflict, or disaster. However, we are increasingly being called upon to provide such support to help refused asylum seekers who become destitute in the UK.

*“Giving food to destitute asylum seekers here is not very different from handing out food from the back of lorries in the Sudan. The humanitarian need is the same.”* Red Cross international aid worker

While there are a number of reasons why asylum seekers become destitute, for example as a result of delays in the asylum application process, this paper specifically focuses on refused asylum seekers who are at high risk of becoming destitute.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon, Scanlon, Travers & Whitehead (2009, February) Economic impact on London and the UK of an earned regularisation of irregular migrants in the UK: An Interim Report from LSE. Available: <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/publications/2009/docs/earned-amnesty-interim-summary.pdf>

## What happens when asylum applications are refused?

Once an asylum application is refused and all appeal rights have been exhausted, asylum support for applicants is withdrawn after 21 days. In some cases this notice period is shortened to as little as seven days when notification of the termination of support arrives later than notification of the decision. Asylum seekers whose claims for asylum have been refused are expected to return voluntarily to their countries of origin or are forcibly removed from the UK.

Asylum claimants who are unable to return immediately to their country of origin are entitled to a limited form of support known as 'Section 4'. To be eligible, they must be destitute and be taking steps to leave the UK, be unable to leave for logistical or health reasons, have an outstanding judicial review or have other outstanding representations. People on Section 4 are entitled to accommodation and £35 a week in vouchers or Azure Cards, effectively £5 a day. This is little more than 50 per cent of standard income support.

Despite this, many of the people who reach the end of the 21-day period do not submit an application for Section 4 support because they are frightened of what will happen to them if they return home. A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust<sup>2</sup> found that some refused asylum seekers felt they could not return to their country of origin. It reported that *"some desperately missed their family, but stayed in the UK to safeguard their lives, fearing death and persecution if they returned"*. In addition, people have also reported difficulties in accessing the range of advice that they need during this very short period in which they are expected to make such a major decision in their lives.

Asylum seekers may also become destitute due to difficulties in accessing Section 4 support as the case study on the right from one of our service users illustrates.

Delays in receiving Section 4 support have also been identified as a reason for destitution. An inquiry into destitution among refused asylum seekers in Leeds found that 'waiting for Section 4 to begin' was a cause of destitution for 33 per cent of individuals in their 2009 survey. This figure had increased from 27 per cent in 2008 and 19 per cent in 2006<sup>3</sup>.

Refused asylum seekers frequently feel they have poor legal representation, or that their case has not been understood due to poor interpreting. In many cases they are not able to get legal representation at all at the appeal stage<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless a substantial number of refused claims are upheld at the appeal stage. Around 70 per cent of asylum claims that result in refusal go to appeal and of these some 20-25 per cent are upheld<sup>5</sup>.

Despite having been refused protection, many of these asylum seekers still fear returning to their country to such an extent that they prefer to stay in the UK and face destitution.

People in this situation find themselves caught in limbo; unable to seek government support or to work legally, yet unable to return.

The evidence that so many refused asylum seekers risk destitution, rather than going back to their place of origin, reveals both the desperateness of the situations they have fled, and sometimes lack of knowledge about accessing Section 4 support.

## Case study

**Name:** Aatifa\*

**Age:** 21

**Country of origin:** Eritrea

**Job/Profession in home country:**

Shop assistant

**Time spent destitute in the UK:**

One and a half years

**Current location:** Leicester

Four main faiths – the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Islam – are officially recognised in Eritrea. In 2002, the government banned all minority religious groups. Since 2003, evangelical church members have been arbitrarily detained during "home-worshipping" or at weddings. Aatifa and her father were detained and tortured for two months in an attempt to force them to sign a document agreeing to stop worshipping. Aatifa managed to escape with the help of her uncle who organised her travel to Sudan and a flight to the UK. She had to leave her father in prison.

Aatifa, then 19 years old, arrived in the UK in February 2006 and after she was refused asylum, her support was stopped so that she became destitute for over a year.

During this time the British Red Cross provided vouchers and food parcels. Upon finding out she was unaware of her entitlements we talked to her about her entitlement to Section 4 support, and helped her find a solicitor.

*"I feel very sad and lost. I sometimes wish I were dead."*

*"Everyday is routine. I meet the same people and I do the same things."*

From week to week, she survived on a £10 food voucher from the British Red Cross and £5 cash from a friend. With this she could eat just once a day, sometimes twice. She sometimes slept on the floor of a friend's house and sometimes at a local church. She couldn't stay anywhere longer than a week and so she moved around a lot.

Due to British Red Cross advice and intervention, Aatifa had access to Section 4 support and a therapist to help her cope with her depression.

I feel very sad and lost.  
I sometimes wish I were dead.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (2009) Still destitute

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (2009) Destitution in Leeds: the experiences of people seeking asylum and supporting agencies

<sup>4</sup> Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) and Asylum Aid (2005) Justice Denied: Asylum and Immigration Legal Aid – a System in Crisis

<sup>5</sup> National Audit Office (2009) The Home Office - Management of Asylum Applications by the UK Border Agency

\* For the purpose of this report the names of these asylum seekers have been changed.

## Why do refused asylum seekers stay in the UK?

There are a range of reasons why refused asylum seekers stay in the UK. These include:

- > They cannot leave the UK through no fault of their own (e.g. they are stateless and have no country to return to, their government will not provide them with travel documents, they are too sick to travel or there is no viable route to return home).
- > They have been in the UK for a long period and have developed strong ties with the UK (e.g. entering relationships and having children).
- > They think it is unsafe and fear death or persecution if they return.

## Number of refused asylum seekers in the UK

*“No government has been able to produce an accurate figure of the number of people who are in the country illegally and that includes failed<sup>6</sup> asylum seekers. By its very nature it is impossible to quantify and that remains the case.”<sup>7</sup>*

In 2009, the London School of Economics estimated there were 500,000 refused asylum seekers<sup>8</sup> in the UK. In 2007, Refugee Action<sup>9</sup> suggested there were 200,000 and the National Audit Office estimated between 155,000 and 283,500. This would suggest the current policy is not meeting the government’s stated objectives, as well as creating what is effectively a humanitarian crisis.

There is evidence that the number of refused asylum seekers in this country is growing. Based on Home Office statistics<sup>10</sup>, we estimate that the number of refused asylum seekers remaining in the UK increased by as much as 2,685 in 2008 alone. However these figures may underestimate the true extent of those who are destitute. A recent statement from the Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers’ Voluntary Sector Forum illustrates the hidden nature of destitution. It stated:

*“The desire to remain invisible is also the likely explanation of why the agencies who patrol the streets of Leicester at night such as the Rough Sleepers Unit and Street Pastors verbally report that they rarely come across asylum seekers sleeping rough.”*

*“Similarly, destitute asylum seekers are rarely to be found begging on streets. Asylum seekers feel extremely vulnerable and make every effort to remain out of sight of ‘officials’. As well as feeling open to personal attack and abuse the penalty of being discovered is likely to be deportation.”<sup>11</sup>*

Many refused asylum seekers stop visiting destitution support projects when there is no longer any service or form of support that agencies are realistically able to provide and therefore become even more invisible.

It is important that the ongoing uncertainty of the exact population of refused asylum seekers does not distract from the desperate situation that some of these individuals find themselves in.

No government has been able to produce an accurate figure of the number of people who are in the country illegally.



6 The British Red Cross refers to ‘failed’ or ‘rejected’ asylum seekers as ‘refused’ asylum seekers in this report  
7 www.parliament.uk (2008, October 21) Asylum. House of Commons Hansard written answer from Phil Woolas MP, Immigration Minister Available: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081021/text/81021w0020.htm>  
8 Gordon, Scanlon, Travers & Whitehead (2009, February) Economic impact on London and the UK of an earned regularisation of irregular migrants in the UK: An Interim Report from LSE Available: <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/publications/2009/docs/earned-amnesty-interim-summary.pdf>  
9 Refugee Action (2007) The Destitution Trap  
10 UK Border Agency (2008) Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary, United Kingdom, October – December 2008 (second edition) Available: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/immiq408.pdf>

11 Refugee Action and Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers’ Voluntary Sector Forum (2005) A report of destitution in the asylum system in Leicester

## Policy context

If an asylum application has been refused, the asylum seeker is expected to return to their own country voluntarily or face forced return. A parliamentary answer re-affirmed this policy stating that: *“Failed asylum seekers of all nationalities who have been found by the Home Office and the appeals process not to be in need of international protection and have no legal basis of stay in the UK are expected to return to their country of origin and may have their removal enforced.”*<sup>12</sup>

Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights has highlighted concerns about government policy in this area. When investigating the treatment of asylum seekers the Committee reported that: *“We have been persuaded by the evidence that the government has indeed been practising a deliberate policy of destitution of this highly vulnerable group. We believe that all deliberate use of inhumane treatment is unacceptable. We have seen instances in all cases where the government’s treatment of asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers falls below the requirements of the common law of humanity and international human rights law.”*

In a further report the Committee concluded that: *“The policy of enforced destitution must cease. The system of asylum seeker support is a confusing mess. We have seen no justification for providing varying standards of support and recommend the introduction of a coherent, unified, simplified and accessible system of support for asylum seekers, from arrival until voluntary departure or compulsory removal from the UK.”*

In addition, the Home Affairs Select Committee stated their concern highlighting that: *“Where the removal of a failed asylum seeker is delayed through no fault of his own, it is morally unacceptable for him to be rendered destitute.”*

Members of Parliament have also questioned the effectiveness of this policy and have called for a re-think in this area to help prevent refused destitution. For example, the Rt. Hon. Iain Duncan Smith MP called for an end of the withdrawal of support to asylum seekers. He stated that: *“It also appears that a British government is using forced destitution as a means of encouraging people to leave voluntarily. It is a failed policy...”*<sup>13</sup>

Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, also called for a migrants’ amnesty. He recently commissioned the London School of Economics to conduct a piece of research which found that an amnesty could potentially yield £3 billion in revenue. This figure is partly made up from increased tax revenues and increased wages<sup>14</sup>.

## What they say

Based on our experience, refused destitute asylum seekers who seek support are men, women and children from a range of cultures, ethnic groups and faiths. However, many of those engaged with Red Cross services are from Africa. This is not surprising because research points to a high percentage of individuals seeking asylum in the UK coming from the African continent. For example, in 2008, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust survey in Leeds found that nearly 75 per cent of those destitute were nationals from countries which were in conflict or had widespread and serious human rights violations including Zimbabwe, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea<sup>15</sup>.

Often, these individuals are highly educated and skilled but are left in a state of limbo, unable to return to their home countries because of fear. They are highly motivated individuals who would like the opportunity to contribute to society.

Here are the experiences of some refused asylum seekers who sought assistance from the British Red Cross when destitute.

12 [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) (2009, March 30) Asylum – Deportation. House of Commons Hansard written answer from Phil Woolas MP, Immigration Minister. Available: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090330/text/90330w0024.htm>

13 Asylum and Destitution Working Group (2008, December) Asylum Matters – Restoring Trust in the UK Asylum System. The Centre for Social Justice

14 Alan Travis (2009, June 16) Migrants amnesty would aid economy by £3bn, says study, The Guardian

15 Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (2008) More Destitution in Leeds

## Case study

**Name:** Adam\*

**Age:** 29

**Country of origin:** Sudan

**Job/Profession in home country:**

University student

**Dependents in home country:**

Wife and two children in Sudan

**Time spent destitute in the UK:**

Nine months

**Current location:** Cardiff

Adam was a university student in Sudan. The government arrested him when problems broke out in Darfur. He was accused of inciting fellow students. Adam was detained on two separate occasions and was tortured during his detention; he was kicked and beaten with iron poles, locked in a small room where burning material was thrown in to choke him, and tied upside down if he did not give the answers his torturers wanted. When Adam was released, he was told to regularly report and sign in with the authorities, but he decided to flee the country.

Adam paid an agent to take him somewhere safe but he did not know where he was going. Adam claimed asylum in the UK in January 2008 and was refused asylum a year later in February 2009.

He now spends his time trying to search for food by visiting different people he knows. He has no income at all and has no regular source of food or shelter.

*"I eat once a day if friends can spare some food."*

He says he really wants to be able to support himself and not rely on handouts from other people.

*"I feel really bad not having a job. I want to be independent and not depend on others' kindness for food. I want to be able to support my family as well."*

Adam tries to occupy himself by going to language classes and reading at the library. He says that life in the UK is now similar to life in Sudan because in both places he was not able to support himself; in the UK he is not allowed to work and in Sudan he could not live openly because the authorities were looking for him. The situation has caused him severe depression.

The British Red Cross has been able to support Adam in a limited capacity. We are able to provide £10 food vouchers per week, and clothes and toiletries from our clothing project. Adam has been given advice on where he can access a homelessness project and receive hot food on a daily basis.

I want to be independent and not depend on others' kindness for food. I want to be able to support my family.



## Case study

**Name:** Mary\*

**Age:** 26

**Country of origin:** Uganda

**Dependents:** Three children in Uganda

**Time spent destitute in the UK:**

Four years

**Current location:** London

*“My twin sister died of female genital mutilation (FGM) when she was 13 years old.”*

However, when Mary turned 13 years old, she was pregnant with her father’s baby. Her father had been sexually abusing her since she was eight.

*“After giving birth, it became time for me to be cut. My mother came from a different tribe where they do not practise FGM and did not want me to have it done because she was scared that I would die like my sister. When I refused, community members beat me very badly. My father then kept me in a room where I was repeatedly beaten and five men came and raped me. I gave birth to another baby girl as a result of these rapes. They were trying to break me so I would agree to be cut.”*

At 19 years old, her mother arranged for an agent to help her to escape. The agent took her from her home and put her on a flight to the UK. On arrival, she was abandoned on a bus bound for London.

Mary later found out that her parents were beaten to death by the community for allowing her to escape. Her younger sister now looks after her three children that she had to leave behind. They are constantly on the run in case the community tracks them down and kills them.

After Mary’s claim was refused in 2004 and her support was cut, she begged food from friends. She received weekly food parcels from a refugee organisation in Manchester. After this she found friends who needed help looking after their children in exchange for food or a floor to sleep on. She would spend all day looking after the children and doing housework. She worked hard so that they might let her stay a little longer.

*“Some would let me stay for a week, some a month. I lost count of how many times I moved. The last friend that I stayed with let me stay for one and a half years. She is so kind. I was lucky.”*

Mary was detained in 2008 when the immigration officials raided a house she was staying in. There was a mix-up by the Home Office with her case, which they later admitted. Her case is still unresolved.

Mary is HIV positive but has never disclosed this to any of her friends or acquaintances. She has numerous health problems stemming from this, including eye infections. Because of her poor diet she is severely anaemic. She has considered committing suicide on a number of occasions.

Mary came to the British Red Cross in 2009. She had been destitute for four years even though she had submitted further evidence to support her asylum claim in 2006. We provided food vouchers and arranged emergency accommodation for a weekend.

## Case study

**Name:** David\*

**Age:** 31

**Country of origin:** Sudan

**Job/Profession in home country:**

Shop manager

**Time spent destitute in the UK:**

Two years

**Current location:** Manchester

When the Sudanese government found out that David was a member of the opposition party they detained and tortured him. Upon release, he paid an agent to smuggle him on a ferry. He survived on one sandwich and bottle of water a day for 23 days hiding in the bottom compartment where the cars and lorries were parked.

*“It was a horrible experience. I could only use the toilet once a day.”*

Before the ship arrived in port David was told to get inside a lorry. After driving for three hours, the lorry abandoned him in a small town near Liverpool. David eventually found his way to Liverpool screening unit. He claimed asylum in July 2005. He was refused asylum in 2007.

*“It was a nightmare not knowing where to go and thinking about night and how to find a warm place to sleep.”*

David slept rough in Manchester Piccadilly train station and was attacked there by a group of young men.

*“I used to go to Piccadilly Gardens in Manchester city centre. People used to give me change to buy sandwiches or chips.”*

He visited the British Red Cross destitution project in Manchester every week and was given a food parcel.

*“The Red Cross gave me hot drinks and snacks. It was the best day.”*

*“It didn’t make sense to me that I found myself in Great Britain not having a roof on my head and not having food to eat. But the only good thing was I felt safe even when I was sleeping rough; there was no bombardment from government aeroplanes at night.”*

The British Red Cross provided David with food parcels and vouchers for two years. We helped him with travelling costs to London to meet with a solicitor and assisted in transferring his documentation to a local solicitor in Manchester.

It was a nightmare not knowing where to go and thinking about night and how to find a warm place to sleep.

## Responding to the crisis of destitution

Since 2003, our work supporting destitute asylum seekers has grown significantly and continues to rise. In 2004, we directly assisted 7,920 destitute asylum seekers and by 2009 this had increased to more than 11,600. Our largest project in Birmingham sees around 120 people a week at its twice-weekly destitution clinic. The overwhelming majority of these clients are refused asylum seekers.

We have a number of specific destitution support services across the UK. Each service provides short-term emergency support to people with nowhere else to turn to and no means to support themselves. Our emergency support can consist of food vouchers, food parcels, toiletries, travel expenses, clothing, maternity packs, accommodation for a few nights and emotional support.

We signpost people to services where they can get further assistance, and advocate on their behalf. Support is provided on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of managers and caseworkers. Most of our support is limited to short periods of time to help destitute people through periods of acute crisis while they explore and consider other options. We signpost to organisations that can assist their return to their country if they want to pursue that option.

We treat people with dignity and provide a space for them to tell their story. Often clients tell us that it is this aspect of our support that they appreciate most.



## The effects of destitution facing refused asylum seekers

Lack of shelter, sleeping rough, an inability to feed and clothe oneself, and a reliance on informal support structures are all characteristics of destitution.

When experiencing such circumstances it can have a devastating impact on an individual's well-being. Mental and physical health problems are frequently either caused, or compounded by, destitution leading to crisis situations.

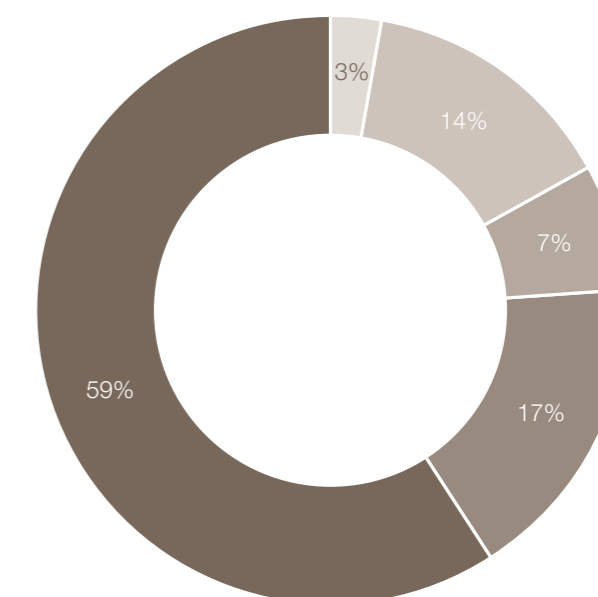
Most refused asylum seekers feel safer being destitute and homeless in the UK than returning to their home country despite being at risk of violence and exploitation.

Without entitlement to welfare support or access to the labour market, destitute asylum seekers can become involved in irregular employment, often under exploitative, dangerous but hidden conditions. Research has exposed instances of prostitution<sup>16</sup>. By its very nature, this activity and therefore the extent of the problem are hidden.

## Destitution impact survey findings

The British Red Cross asked one hundred and one asylum seekers who used our services about their experiences of the asylum process<sup>17</sup>. One of the most striking findings was that six out of ten respondents had been destitute for a year or more. In fact, some had been destitute for over five years.

Length of time of destitution



- 0-1 months
- 2-3 months
- 4-6 months
- 7-12 months
- 1 year+

<sup>16</sup> Malfait, R. & Scott-Flynn, N. (May 2005) Destitution of asylum seekers and refugees in Birmingham

<sup>17</sup> In 2008 the British Red Cross interviewed 101 of its destitute service users in order to gain more of an insight into the characteristics, humanitarian needs and experiences of destitute asylum seekers. We interviewed at 22 locations offering Red Cross services and the interviewees were from 33 countries. (39 were female and 62 were male). We found the overwhelming majority of respondents to have become destitute due to being at the end of the asylum process and having their application refused.

## Case study

**Name:** Michael\*

**Age:** 31

**Country of origin:**

Democratic Republic of Congo

**Dependents:** Three children in Uganda

**Time spent destitute in the UK:**

Five years

**Current location:** Birmingham

Michael completed his university degree in economics before taking charge of a flourishing family business. When the conflict began, Michael and his family fled to their farm in Minova. Many civilians including Michael's father and his son were killed in the fighting. A month later Michael was falsely arrested and jailed for four months without trial.

*"I was beaten constantly and violently throughout the day and night. Rebel guards even urinated on me after beating me. I was interviewed several times about my family and my link with the Mai-Mai militia. I was accused of funding the militia."*

Michael had never had any contact with the Mai-Mai militia and he had never been a political activist even as a student. As a result of the beatings Michael became very ill. He lost a testicle due to severe infection from an injury inflicted by the rebels.

A nurse helped him escape, by saying that he needed an operation. A priest then helped him get to Uganda. From Uganda he fled to the UK, where he claimed asylum in October 2003.

Michael's asylum claim was refused in August 2004 and since then he has been destitute. Michael says he is surviving because of the generosity of people. He was once unable to get food for three days, and decided to walk into a supermarket. In desperation he spoke to the shop manager about his problem. The shop manager gave him some unsold fruit and bread.

He was attacked by some homeless people in a coach station. Michael has received treatment for severe depression. He has had thoughts about killing himself. He is shocked at the reception he has received in the UK.

*"The human right should be the first thinking for English people. I am really suffering."*

Michael came to the British Red Cross destitution clinic in Birmingham. We assisted him with food vouchers, clothing vouchers, and travel expenses to attend medical appointments in London.

I was beaten constantly and violently throughout the day and night. Rebel guards even urinated on me after beating me.

## British Red Cross support

Respondents received a range of services and essential support from British Red Cross projects around the UK. The graph below shows that the most commonly given forms of support are food vouchers, food parcels, advice and information, toiletries and clothes.

### Shelter

Our survey found that refused asylum seekers are forced to compromise their safety and dignity when making sleeping arrangements. When asked 'where do you normally sleep?'

> 69 per cent of those we surveyed who were destitute were staying with friends

> 28 per cent reported sleeping rough at different stages of their destitution.

One respondent said she stayed with "friends at first, but now I have the baby I sleep rough outside their home".

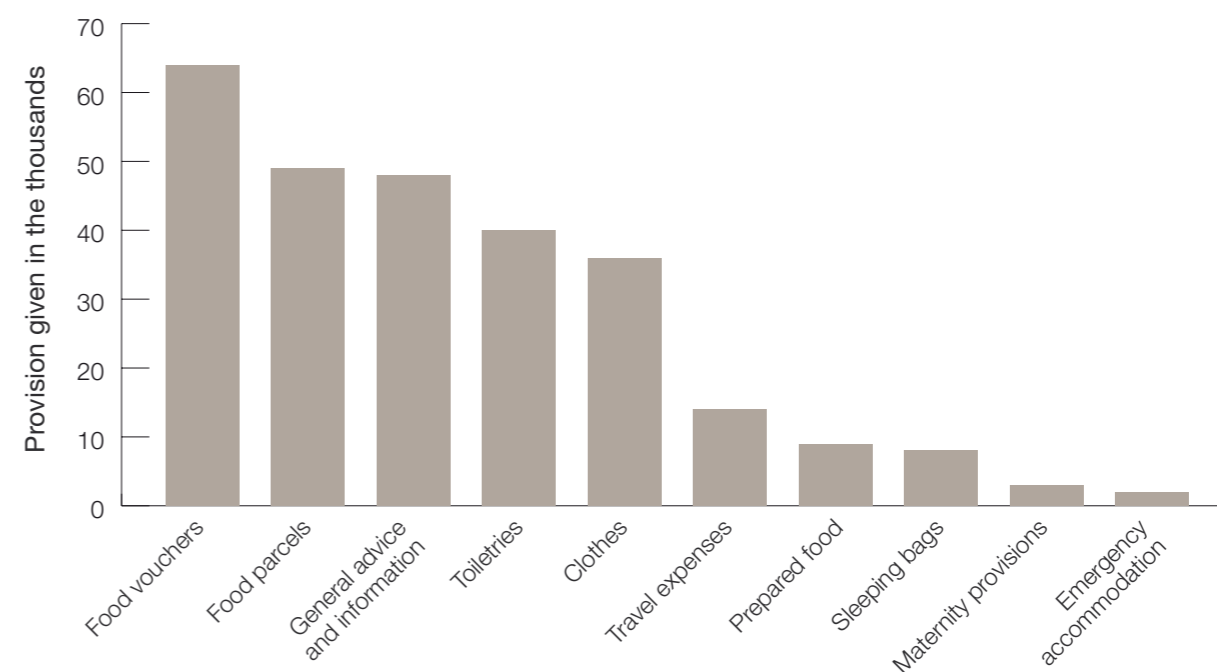
Many become dependent on 'goodwill' support from family and friends. However this can create strains on relationships, particularly if the resources of the family or friends are also very limited. Such strain is demonstrated by this comment: *"Today this friend, then another. Sometimes they wouldn't open the door as they knew it was me. I had to find somewhere else to sleep and to try and escape the rain."*

Even where support from family and friends is available, it is often in poor conditions and overcrowded housing. Of those we interviewed, 42 per cent reported not being able to stay at their sleeping base during the day.

Churches and mosques were also identified as an important source of shelter.

*"We have also slept in a church. When we were in Coventry we stayed with a friend but we had to leave due to my wife's mental health problems. Then we stayed at the church."*

### British Red Cross services



Types of British Red Cross support provided to destitute clients in the year the survey was undertaken

### Hygiene

Respondents highlighted the variation in their ability to access facilities to wash and keep clean. One said: *“I go to my friend’s house twice a week to use his bathroom.”*

Refused asylum seekers are increasingly degraded when their personal hygiene deteriorates as a result of being unable to pay for laundry services, haircuts, clean underwear or other essentials. Women require materials for menstruation, a basic need that is often forgotten. A destitute woman nervously told us: *“I need special things for being a girl.”*

### Children

Twenty-four of the respondents had children, making it even harder to survive on the minimal support available: *“I need more food. I have to give what I have to my children.”*

In some cases the arrival of a child meant existing arrangements to stay with friends were stopped.

The inability to provide small gifts such as toys and sweets for their children was a significant source of distress for destitute parents: *“I cannot even buy them sweets”.*

**87 per cent of respondents often survived on only 1 meal a day.**

### Health and mental well-being

Lack of food and nutritious diet affects the physical health of an individual and is exacerbated by the removal of health provision for some categories of people. Physical health patterns include hepatitis C or B, HIV, TB, kidney failure (requiring dialysis treatment), infectious diseases, diabetes, heart conditions and cancer.

*“I’ve been hungry for days.”*

Those who took part in the survey were dependent on churches, mosques, charities, friends and family for food.

- > 87 per cent of respondents often survived on only 1 meal a day, with some reportedly going whole days without food.
- > 56 per cent stated that the British Red Cross was an important source of food, and 34 per cent cited the British Red Cross as the main provider of their food.
- > 19 per cent reported that purchasing their food was commonly facilitated through the provision of vouchers by the British Red Cross.
- > 42 per cent said that much of their food was provided by friends.

There was a strong and consistent theme of gratitude and resignation that beggars can’t be choosers. One interviewee explained, *“It’s not a good diet, but I eat what I eat because I have nothing else.”*

Another showed signs of a complete loss of dignity with the comment: *“I don’t want to ask or be a nuisance. It is hard to ask for help. It’s how I was brought up – to be independent. I don’t want to be a burden. But I am a beggar now. My friends have provided for me but it has been too long. It gets harder to ask them for help.”*

- > Only 26 per cent reported ‘always’ having access to adequate cooking facilities.
- > More than half ‘never’ or ‘only sometimes’ have access to cooking facilities.

There was a strong theme of respectfulness and consideration for their host’s cooking facilities. One respondent said: *“My friend would let me use her cooker but I don’t want to impose or make her bills higher so I don’t use her facilities”.*

Men and women who have fled torture and persecution in their home countries suffer from a range of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder and disorientation. These problems are exacerbated by their destitution upon a negative asylum claim.

Refused asylum seekers can suffer from extreme anxiety, depression and vulnerability. Thoughts of suicide are not uncommon, and at least four of our respondents had contemplated killing themselves.

*“Sometimes I feel like killing myself, I feel crazy”.*

One respondent, who had lost a limb, shared the story of how he went for countless fittings for a prosthetic replacement. However, upon his asylum claim being refused, he was denied the limb that had been made up for him. This is an example of the limited entitlement to healthcare having an effect on a person’s health and mental well-being.



### A typical day

Boredom and an inability to make plans for the future is another characteristic of destitution. One explained: *“It was very difficult. Very depressing, not knowing what the future will be, and facing people who do not understand. I attended college and volunteered in one of the churches.”*

There was a lot of reference to walking about to pass the time: *“I cannot stay with my friend during the day so I spend the day walking like homeless people in the city centre. Watching people and sitting on benches.”* Many came to spend time at British Red Cross and Refugee Council offices. Eighteen said they spent time in the local library.

*“It was horrible. Sometimes I wanted to kill myself. Just walked around, went to the park or mosque to pray. Slept there sometimes. All day visit friends. Watch TV if they’re in a good mood. If not go into town and try to forget. Clear my mind.”*

### Plans and hopes for the future

Refused asylum seekers live in limbo and are never sure of their future.

*“All my plans are on hold. My worries concern my family at home.”*

Most of those interviewed said they could not make plans for the future as they could only take each day at a time. One said: *“I do not see a future. I have no plans although I used to. I now just survive each day at a time. How can I think about the future?”* Another interviewee said: *“I have no hope. If I have to go back home I will kill myself.”*

More positive responses included: *“I would like to finish my political science degree.”*

This respondent was shot in Zimbabwe during a political demonstration. Another respondent showed enthusiasm towards wanting to work and contribute to the UK:

*“If I get my papers I can work and study, pay taxes and give something back. I wanted to be a doctor, but now maybe foreign affairs to help people”.*

A disheartening response from one respondent summed up their experiences of destitution: *“I hope to have the strength to carry on standing”.*

In addition to this survey, the British Red Cross has also been involved in other pieces of work, which have highlighted similar evidence of destitution among refused asylum seekers.

A recent report confirms there are a significant number of destitute asylum seekers in Leicester<sup>18</sup>; some have been trying to cope with destitution for several years now. It found that 54 per cent had been destitute for over a year and 16 per cent have been destitute for five years or more, the longest being for 13 years. Thirty-six individuals reported that they were caring for dependent children.

A further report<sup>19</sup> by the Asylum Support Partnership, which included a survey of British Red Cross services in the UK reinforced such findings. It found that nearly half of visits to refugee charities are from those who are destitute. The majority of these have had their claims refused, with many having been destitute for longer than six months. It also showed that half of all those recorded as destitute came from just four countries – Iraq, Iran, Zimbabwe and Eritrea<sup>20</sup>.

If I get my papers I  
can work and study,  
pay taxes and give  
something back.

<sup>18</sup> *Destitution in the asylum system in Leicester*, Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers’ Voluntary Sector Forum (2009) (The survey involved 148 destitute individuals, of which 101 were British Red Cross clients)

<sup>19</sup> *The Second Destitution Tally*, Asylum Support Partnership (2009) (British Red Cross services based in Manchester, Peterborough, Norwich, London and Birmingham took part in the survey)

<sup>20</sup> The British Red Cross does not make judgements on the safety or otherwise of countries for returning refugees and asylum seekers. The UNHCR issues statements about the safety of countries in the context of returning refugees.



## Recommendations

This paper highlights the humanitarian suffering facing refused asylum seekers.

As a humanitarian organisation, the British Red Cross believes there is a need for policy-makers to do more to focus on, reduce and relieve the suffering many of these vulnerable individuals have to endure.

We urge the government and the political parties to build a consensus to address the issues highlighted in this report and create a more humane asylum system.

The British Red Cross supports the following changes to the asylum system:

1. The adoption of the principle that destitution should not be an outcome of the asylum system.
2. Additional support for all destitute refused asylum seekers with dependent children.
3. An end-to-end asylum support structure, including permission to work, until the applicant is either removed or granted leave to remain.
4. An entitlement to healthcare throughout the asylum process until removal or granted leave to remain.

## Acknowledgements

The British Red Cross would like to thank all those individual asylum seekers who took part in our survey and gave their time to share their experiences with them. We hope that this report and your input will contribute to ending destitution for you and others.

We would also like to thank all the British Red Cross services that helped facilitate this piece of work and in particular Hugo Tristram and Karla Hawke in helping make this report possible.