The Biopolitics of Asylum Seeker Housing Provision in the United Kingdom: The COMPASS Asylum Housing Project and the Securitisation of Home

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Aims

A key aim of this PhD thesis was to explore residents' perceptions of their housing and community experiences under the Home Office's 'COMPASS' project (the government's privatised asylum accommodation programme).

Methodology

- The fieldwork was undertaken in three asylum seeker dispersal regions: Glasgow, Yorkshire and Humber, and the North East of England.
- The author used the snowball sampling method to recruit participants, through ‘gatekeepers’ in close contact with asylum seekers.

There were semi-structured interviews with 26 asylum seekers. 12 were women and 14 were men. All were aged 18 or over. Participants came from a range of countries. There were also 18 interviews with support workers and volunteers. In Yorkshire and Humber, the author consulted asylum seekers dispersed to Leeds who had recent experience of living in COMPASS housing managed by G4S and subcontracted to Cascade.

Key issues

The author considers the notion of ‘discomfort’ and whether discomfort for asylum seekers is the outcome, if not the explicit aim, of the dispersal programme. The dispersal programme generally results in asylum seekers being moved away from urban centres, and the author considers the impact of this on children’s schooling, access to culturally appropriate food, and access to support networks. He also considers initiatives which may aim to create a state of ‘ease’ rather than discomfort, such as the City of Sanctuary scheme. He also looks at the impact of housing quality on mental and physical health. Participants were asked about their experience of housing, and reported feeling that their accommodation was substandard. Concerns related to

disrepair and health and safety, and participants reported inaction from the landlord when issues were reported. Some participants reported experiences of racism in the communities to which they were dispersed. There is substantial theoretical discussion of the notion of power, with the author arguing that Foucault's notion of 'biopower' reflects asylum seekers' experiences within the COMPASS programme. The author looked at ways in which asylum seekers can be agents of resistance and initiate changes to their situations, for example through confronting housing staff and accessing support networks. Participants reported the value of organisations which provided support with issues such as mental health and education.

Conclusion

The author concludes that the government's approach to the dispersal scheme suggests a lack of concern for asylum seekers' wellbeing, and that it has an exclusionary effect. He argues that through the programme asylum seekers experience a lack of control over their lives, although challenges the portrayal of asylum seekers as simply victims, stating that individual agency is still evident with asylum seekers making efforts to learn English, and undertaking voluntary work.

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Asylum seekers
Topic

Dispersal
Housing and welfare
Housing patterns
NASS
Place
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