Destitution in Leeds: the experiences of people seeking asylum and supporting agencies

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Author(s)
Lewis, Hannah

Aims

The research was commissioned to inform the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust Inquiry into Destitution among Refused Asylum Seekers. It explores the impact of destitution on asylum seekers and agencies in Leeds, how people attempt to meet their basic needs, the challenges for agencies and the possible solutions.

Methodology

The research between September and December 2006 included: a four-week survey of destitute clients involving five key agencies; interviews with eight refused asylum seekers; 23

interviews, two focus groups and a questionnaire with agencies; and participant observation at two drop-ins.

Key issues

Most of those destitute were refused asylum seekers, including families. Some had been processed by the New Asylum Model [NAM]. Destitute asylum seekers rely upon friends and charity from voluntary organisations and churches to try to meet their basic needs. People remain destitute for protracted periods. This has an acute impact on their wellbeing, and can lead to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Rough sleeping was common for some, including women. The response to destitution has involved campaigning and provision of support, but agencies are hampered by lack of resources, reliance on donations and restrictions on refused asylum seekers' entitlements. This support provides a vital lifeline, but may conceal the seriousness and extent of destitution from decision makers. Some of those destitute benefit from support 'in the community' but for others dependency can facilitate exploitation. Staff in supporting agencies are left demoralised and emotionally drained in trying to meet basic needs which diverts from integration-focused activities.

Conclusions

Linking support to asylum claims creates destitution. Destitution in not a deterrent, nor does it encourage return. Section 4 is not

the answer to destitution: many people are unable or unwilling to take it up. Voluntary return cannot be the only option for refused asylum seekers. The destitution caused by asylum policy contradicts other policies including those on reducing homelessness, community cohesion, children's rights, race relations and social exclusion.

Recommendations

Regularisation - give asylum seekers the right to work; improve legal representation and decision-making for asylum claims; provide clear guidance on support and improve communication between refugee agencies, statutory bodies and the Home Office; monitor NAM outcomes – early indications suggest the need for improvements to quality of decisions, timeframes, training for staff, and presentation of options for voluntary return.

Migrant Group
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