Choice and dependence: refused asylum seekers and destitution

YHRMP ID
92
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Aims

The article suggests that destitution is an intentional outcome of UK asylum support policies and that the lack of means for meeting basic needs creates precarious lives characterised by dependence and lack of choice.

Methodology

Based on a survey of destitute clients at 5 agencies; interviews with 8 destitute asylum seekers; 23 interviews, two focus groups and a questionnaire with statutory and voluntary agencies and participant observation at drop-ins providing support.

Key issues

The policy causes of destitution are multiple with various roots both in the asylum determination process and in the asylum support system. Three intentions of destitution in the asylum system are identified: the separation of an even ‘more undeserving’ group within the asylum system [people whose asylum cases are rejected]; developing controls that attempt to incentivise return to country of origin; and as a tool of deterrence to discourage future arrivals, especially those deemed to be making fraudulent use of the asylum system to gain entry for economic reasons. The assertion that withdrawal of welfare support operates as a coercive tool has had far reaching effects for individuals subject to the asylum system and voluntary sector agencies that seek to support them. Section 4 support is available to some refused asylum seekers but people are often destitute in the period between asylum support being removed and applying for Section 4; some who apply are refused; and take up is low due to a fear of return to country of origin. Dependency on others for basic needs means experiences of various elements of destitution change over time in relation to information, opportunities and social relationships. While some refused asylum seekers benefit from vital support from fellow migrants, their undocumented status places them in vulnerable position. There is an expectation that voluntary, charity and church bodies will provide, but attempting to meet the urgent, basic needs of destitute clients diverts their resources from social, integration-focused activities.

Conclusions

Thousands of refused asylum seekers have been left for extended periods, often for years, in a seemingly intractable situation of forced destitution that manifests multiple serious health and social problems and leaves voluntary agencies and charitable support overstretched. There is no evidence that destitution achieves its aims of encouraging return, and it may even make return less likely as refused asylum seekers are forced to focus on daily survival. Granting the right to work would allow people to support themselves, but is a highly sensitive political issue.

Migrant Group
Asylum seekers
Refused asylum seekers
Topic
Housing and welfare
Destitution
Welfare entitlements
Place
Leeds
West Yorkshire
Resource Type
Journal article
Resource
Critical Social Policy - forthcoming

Source URL: *https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/choice-and-dependence-refused-asylum-seekers-and-*

destitution