Safe but not settled: The impact of family separation on refugees in the UK

YHRMP ID

354

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Aims

This research aimed to explore how continuing separation from family members affects resettled refugees' experience of integration. The project was conducted by the Refugee Council and Oxfam.

Methodology

- Secondary data was obtained through a literature review of research on the link between family reunion issues and successful integration.

- Qualitative data was collected through structured telephone interviews with Refugee Council staff. It was felt that interviewing refugees could be distressing because of the sensitivity of family reunion issues. The Refugee Council staff spoke on behalf of

people with refugee status in Leeds, Sheffield, Hull and Hertfordshire.

- 6 members of staff were interviewed, and they discussed issues raised by 44 families resettled from 7 countries. Among these families were 14 single women households; 7 single men households; and 23 heterosexual couples, most of whom had children. Among these were 33 families with children under 18 or elderly parents.

Key issues

In the UK, the family reunion rules limit the scope of family to partners (married or civil) and dependent children under 18 other than in demonstrably exceptional cases; and only adult refugee are eligible to apply for family reunion. This makes it difficult for unaccompanied child refugees, and those whose support system comprises legally disqualified family members, to successfully go through the integration process in the UK. In 32 of the 44 cases considered in this study, the separated relative in question did not meet the criteria for family reunion. Legal aid is not now available for family reunion cases, and the financial cost of representation and advice is unaffordable for many.

The authors found that the absence of family members can prevent people from moving forward with their lives in the UK. Family reunion is an overriding concern for many - for example 15 of the 44 families weren’t able to settle here not knowing the outcome of their family reunion case. 33 families struggled to focus on key integration activities such as English language learning. 10 families struggled to integrate due to caring responsibilities for other resettled relatives – previously these were shared with a separated family member.

Anxiety about loved ones was found to impact on mental health – in 18 of the families at least one person had experienced a mental health issue such as anxiety of depression, which Refugee Council staff attributed to family separation. Again this impeded their ability to take steps to settle here. For at least 10 families the concerns were particularly acute due to either a separated family member being unable to care for themselves, or whose circumstances had been made riskier by the family separation. Linked to this, guilt was another key theme emerging from the study. People expressed guilt at being safe when family members were still in difficult situations. Knowing their family's circumstances, some found it hard to enjoy experiences in the UK, and sent money to their families, not only to meet their needs but also to assuage their own feelings of guilt.

The authors found that some consider resorting to measures as drastic as paying smugglers to bring legally disqualified family members to the UK, going back to an unsafe environment after an unsuccessful family reunion application, or a legally disqualified family member refusing a resettlement offer in another country in the hope of being reunited with relatives in the UK.

In nine of the 11 instances where family reunion was eventually successful, this was a catalyst for the pace of integration increasing. For the newly arriving family members, settlement was easier because the relatives already here were able to share their knowledge of systems and culture.

Recommendations

The authors recommend that:

- The definition of ‘family member’ should be expanded for refugee family reunion purposes.
- Legal aid should be reintroduced for family reunion cases.

Web Link

https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/safe-but-not-settled/

Migrant Group

Refugees

Topic

Community and society

Family migrants

Integration

Legal aid

Mental health

Policy

Place

Hull

Leeds

Sheffield

Year

2018

Resource Type

Report

Source URL: *https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/safe-not-settled-impact-family-separation-refugees-uk*