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# MOVING ON? DISPERSAL POLICY, ONWARD MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN THE UK

Discrimination  
and Racism  
Briefing

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# Moving on? Dispersal policy, onward migration and integration of refugees in the UK

## Discrimination and racism briefing

Since 2000, the UK has operated a policy of compulsory dispersal, designed to 'spread the burden' of housing asylum seekers across the UK and to discourage long-term settlement in London and the South East. This research enhances the understanding of refugee integration in the UK by focusing on the onward migration after dispersal of those who were granted refugee or humanitarian protection status.

### **This two-year (2012–14), ESRC-funded project:**

- mapped the geography of onward migration among refugees dispersed across the UK as asylum seekers;
- explored the main factors that influence refugees' decision to move or stay in a town or city and how this affects the process of integration; and
- considered the policy implications for the different levels of government, service providers and the voluntary sector of the impact of UK dispersal upon refugee onward migration and integration.

The results are based on quantitative and qualitative research data from four different sites across the UK: Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester and London. The data included 83 in-depth interviews with refugees, analysis of Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) client data (2008–11) and Home Office Survey of New Refugees (SNR) data (2005–09).

### **The key findings of the study are:**

- Dispersal policy has diversified the ethnic composition of UK cities, with evidence of growing numbers of refugees staying in the areas to which they were dispersed.
- Nevertheless, refugees who are dispersed as asylum seekers still have higher levels of onward migration than other new refugees.
- Multiple factors influence refugees' decisions to stay or move on from dispersal locations including co-ethnic and local communities, employment, education, life course, housing, place of dispersal, racism and health.
- Refugees may onward migrate or decide to stay after being dispersed, but neither of the two options can be regarded as always being the best for integration.

This briefing focuses on discrimination and racism as factors influencing decisions to onward migrate or stay, as well as their impact on refugee integration.

## Policy context

UK dispersal policy began in 2000, a result of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Asylum applicants can opt to be 'fully supported' (i.e. receive housing and subsistence) or 'subsistence only'. If individuals require housing while awaiting their asylum decision (fully supported), they are dispersed across the country on a no-choice basis. Alternatively, they can choose to live with friends or family in any location (subsistence only). Once an individual is granted refugee status, those fully supported must leave their dispersal accommodation within 28 days. Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act 2004 provided that asylum seekers establish a local connection to the dispersal site where they are provided accommodation. This means that refugees who require local authority housing must apply in the same area to which they were dispersed and is known as the 'local connection rule'. Local authorities can refer individuals to the original dispersal area for housing claims with the aim of reducing onward movement.<sup>1</sup>

Dispersal policy, which has been largely housing-led, has left many asylum seekers being accommodated in relatively small communities where they face social isolation, loneliness, racism and exclusion,<sup>2</sup> with potentially negative impact on their integration prospects. At the same time, refugees are unwilling to report incidents of racial harassment due to the fear of potential impact on their asylum claim and of being seen as ungrateful, making racism difficult to identify and address.<sup>3</sup> Although there are regional variations in attitudes towards asylum-seekers and refugees, a significant number of the population view them unfavourably.<sup>4</sup>

Previous integration strategies at the national,<sup>5</sup> regional and local<sup>6</sup> level have acknowledged the importance of refugees feeling safe in their communities and the need to combat racism and discrimination, including by encouraging refugees to report racist incidents to the police. Under the Equality Act 2010 all public authorities are subject to the general equality duty, requiring them to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Different rules apply in Scotland where asylum seekers are not deemed to have established a local connection as a result of being provided with dispersal accommodation there.

<sup>2</sup> Phillimore, J. and Goodson, L. 2006. Problem or opportunity? Asylum seekers, refugees, employment and social exclusion in deprived urban areas. *Urban Studies*, 43:10: 1715–36.

<sup>3</sup> Kirkwood, S., McKinlay, A. and McVittie, C. 2013. 'They're more than animals': refugees' accounts of racially motivated violence'. *British Journal of Psychology*, 52, 747–62.

<sup>4</sup> Migration Observatory. 2014. *Immigration and Independence: Public Opinion on Immigration in Scotland in the Context of the Referendum Debate*.

<sup>5</sup> Home Office. 2000. *Full and Equal Citizens: A Strategy for the Integration of Refugees into the United Kingdom*; Home Office. 2005. *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*; Home Office. 2009. *Moving On Together: Government's Recommitment to Supporting Refugees*.

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government. 2013. *New Scots: Integrating Refugees In Scotland's Communities*; Welsh Assembly Government. 2008. *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*; Yorkshire and Humber Regional Migration Partnership. 2009. *Finding Sanctuary, Enriching Yorkshire and Humber – the Regional Integration Strategy for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (2009-2011)*; Greater London Authority. 2009. *London Enriched: The Mayor's Strategy for Refugee Integration in London*.

<sup>7</sup> The relevant protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnicity and nationality), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

## Dispersal, racism and refugee integration: findings and policy implications

Community safety is a common concern amongst refugees and the host society. Experiences of racism and discrimination affect integration negatively and exacerbate feelings of not belonging. The research explored how such experiences influence onward migration decisions as well as how they impact on refugee integration.

### Key findings

#### Onward migration decisions are informed by:

- experiences of racism in dispersal or temporary accommodation;
- experiences of racist behaviour in local neighbourhoods, schools and parks frequently perpetuated by children and youths; and
- negative, racist attitudes shown towards refugees by drivers and passengers on buses.

#### Experiences of racism are closely linked to refugee integration and feeling accepted:

- Perceptions of discrimination or experiences with racism can negatively affect refugees' mental health and exacerbate feelings of not belonging.
- Racism or discrimination can occur in different domains and affect integration negatively, even in cities where refugees are content living.
- Muslims, and women in particular, experience overt racism in post-9/11 Britain.

## Discussion

Concerning the impact of experiences of racism on refugees' decisions to stay or move on from their dispersal location, the research found that:

- Refugees often experience their first encounters with racism in dispersal or temporary accommodation, shaping their perception of the cities and influencing onward migration decisions.
- Children and youths perpetrate racist behaviours in schools, parks, and toward residents in their neighbourhoods, which can influence onward migration decisions.
- Racist behaviours are prevalent on local buses (bus drivers and passengers), resulting in refugees feeling unwelcome and considering moves to cities perceived as more diverse and multi-cultural.

Perceptions of, and experiences with, racism – in cities or in a particular neighbourhood – can profoundly affect refugees' willingness to invest in dispersal sites and influence their migration decisions. These findings show that, in addition to complying with their public sector equality duties and taking a leading role in maintaining and fostering community cohesion, local authorities could tackle racism and discrimination by providing a welcoming environment to refugees and encourage them to remain in their dispersal

location. In light of the research finding that refugees first encounter racism in dispersal accommodation, local authorities should ensure that a robust mechanism is in place to allow them to monitor adherence to cluster limits<sup>8</sup> as well as accommodation providers' compliance with the obligation to take into account social cohesion and local services' capacity when selecting properties to provide accommodation.

An important finding is that asylum seekers and refugees are often reluctant to report harassment:

*'The area wasn't very good and we faced harassment there and whenever the children used to go out for schools, there were children in the street [who] abused them, Scottish children. Their behaviour wasn't very good and they used to throw stones to our windows and, you know ... they took all my washing from downstairs and they binned it. I spoke to my ... housing provider and she said you can report to the police if you want, but I didn't want really because I was on asylum that time and I didn't want. I thought if I will complain to police, police will come to our house and this can make worse the things. After I joined Red Cross, I spoke to my manager and they encouraged me, 'You need to speak to the police. You shouldn't live there', and then they called a police officer in British Red Cross and I spoke to her and then she helped me a lot to move my accommodation and they moved us.'* [Alisha, F, Pakistan, Glasgow].

Although the information leaflet provided to asylum seekers by the Home Office encourages them to report harassment,<sup>9</sup> more detailed information about how to file a complaint and the possibility of requesting a move to different accommodation, as well as assurance that reporting would not have an adverse impact on their asylum application, would be beneficial. Moreover, the Home Office's procedure<sup>10</sup> for dealing with requests for change of accommodation because of the asylum seeker being subject to racial harassment could be made more transparent.

The research also found that racist behaviours on buses, perpetrated by both drivers and passengers, are prevalent and can negatively influence perceptions of cities. As one refugee recounted:

*'The most racist is the bus drivers. I believe that for myself. When you are standing the bus stop, if you are alone and you have headscarf and you're a black woman, they left for you even with my hand up.'* [Dunia, F, Somalia, Glasgow].

Under the Equality Act, the general equality duty applies to public authorities as well as private bodies exercising public functions. Bus operators should therefore ensure that they comply with their duty, in particular by establishing a mechanism to report racial harassment, encouraging passengers to make use of it and providing training and guidance to staff on identifying and handling racial harassment.

<sup>8</sup> Dispersal accommodation is located in particular areas in the community where the local authority has agreed to take asylum seekers up to a defined cluster limit (no more than one asylum seeker per 200 residents, based on the 2001 Census figures for population). However, it is sometimes applied inconsistently (National Audit Office. 2014. *COMPASS Contracts for the Provision of Accommodation for Asylum seekers*).

<sup>9</sup> UK Visas and Immigration. 2014. *Information about your asylum application*.

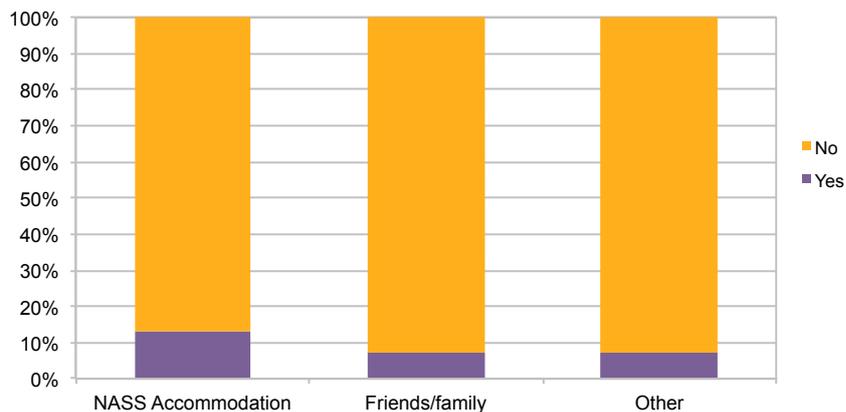
<sup>10</sup> UK Visas and Immigration. 2014. *Change of Address*.

The research found that experiences of racism are closely linked to integration and feeling accepted:

- Racism or discrimination can occur in different domains (service providers or job market) and affect integration negatively even in cities where refugees are content living.
- Perceptions of discrimination or experiences with racism can negatively affect refugees' mental health and exacerbate feelings of not belonging.
- Muslims, and women in particular because of their headscarves, experience overt racism in post-9/11 Britain.

The SNR indicates that refugees who were part of dispersal report nearly double the levels of physical/verbal attack (13 per cent) even after some time in the UK, when compared to new refugees living with friends or family or in other accommodation.

Figure 1: Refugees reporting to have been a victim of physical/verbal attack in the past 6 months (21 months after grant of status) (N=815)



Source: SNR (2005–09)

This finding could be the result of refugees accepting housing in deprived areas lacking ethnic diversity when faced with homelessness after obtaining status. Additionally, the results indicate that refugees face negative behaviour as a result of wider negative views on asylum and the realities of post 9/11 Britain, with refugees noting changes in attitudes and the ways in which racist comments are directed towards them. Consider the thoughts of one refugee woman who lived in the UK prior to 9/11:

*'There've been issues with a lot of hate crime and we've had eggs thrown and sometimes you cannot walk in the street. Things got worse after September Eleven. As a Muslim and as a refugee, you know, that's two pressures you have to deal with ... I just felt very vulnerable.'* (Faduma, F, Somalia, London).

Perceptions of such attitudes or experiences with racism can negatively affect refugees' mental health, exacerbate feelings of not belonging and hinder their ability to find work and a place to call home. Efforts to challenge negative attitudes by disseminating accurate information to the public and

engaging with their concerns would help promote an environment conducive to integration. The findings of the study show that progress is being made: refugees who were sent to cities at the start of the dispersal policy have observed a slow but positive transformation as various agencies have endeavoured to provide a welcoming environment. Nevertheless, there is still a continued need to tackle the discrimination and racism experienced by refugees in UK cities.

## Recommendations

### **The Home Office should:**

- provide asylum seekers with detailed information about how to report harassment and the possibility of requesting a move to a different accommodation, as well as emphasising that reporting will not have an adverse impact on their asylum application; and
- develop clear and transparent guidance on dealing with requests for change of accommodation as a result of the asylum seeker being subject to racial harassment.

### **The Department for Communities and Local Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments should:**

- develop initiatives that inform communities about the presence of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as focusing on two-way integration; and
- ensure asylum seekers and refugees provide input into and benefit from initiatives for tackling racism and hate crime.

### **Local authorities should:**

- initiate multi-agency partnerships to tackle racism, including representatives from the police, accommodation providers and the Home Office (these should be linked to initiatives run by organisations such as Runnymede or the Migrants Rights Network as well as refugee organisations);
- ensure a robust mechanism is in place to monitor adherence to cluster limits as well as accommodation providers' compliance with the obligation to take into account social cohesion and local services' capacity when selecting properties to provide accommodation; and
- engage with community organisations and refugee-assisting NGOs to encourage asylum seekers and refugees to report racist incidents; develop and implement strategies to disseminate accurate information about asylum seekers and refugees and address local residents' concerns.

### **Police forces should:**

- ensure that police officers receive training on issues affecting refugees and the barriers they face to reporting harassment.

### **Bus operators should:**

- establish a mechanism to report racial harassment, encouraging passengers to make use of it and providing training and guidance to staff on identifying and handling racial harassment experienced by all parties.

The results presented are drawn from the project report: Stewart, E. and Shaffer, M. [2015] *Moving on? Dispersal Policy, Onward Migration and Integration of Refugees in the UK*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

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