

# *Hope costs nothing:*

the lives of undocumented  
migrants in the UK

**2010 Report**



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More than anything we salute the courage of our 43 participants, who understood the importance of making their voices heard, and were willing to open up painful experiences and risky survival strategies in order to do so. We hope we have done justice to their determination, idealism and resourcefulness in these pages.

We also thank MRC staff, volunteer and paid, for carrying out background research, holding interviews and transcribing them.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Migrants Resource Centre (MRC), with funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust. It is based on interviews with 43 undocumented migrants. It aims to give these people, who are generally both unheard and maligned, a voice in the discussion of their position in the media, by politicians and by the general public. These are vivid, first-hand accounts that reinforce the message of the human dignity and individuality of people leading extremely difficult and demanding lives. For this summary, we have extracted a small number of quotations to give an indication of the situations we found.

### Definition

We have used the definition of **undocumented status** put forward by the EU's Clandestino Research Project:

*..irregular or undocumented residents are defined as residents without any legal resident status in the country they are residing in; and those whose presence in the territory – if detected – may be subject to termination through an order to leave and/or an expulsion order because of their status.*

This includes:

**irregular entry:** *people who have entered the country avoiding border controls, or on false documents*

**overstayers,** *who have entered on a valid visa but have stayed beyond the period allowed*

**withdrawal of visa** *from people who have breached the terms of their visa (eg working full-time on a student visa)*

**refused asylum seekers** *who are unable to return home or who choose not to. people who've been trafficked, ie brought against their will.*

### Statement of ethics

For obvious reasons, it is difficult for undocumented migrants to trust unknown people coming to question them. MRC worked through partner organisations that were already trusted, which identified participants and hosted meetings. The agreement was for complete anonymity, and to this end we have given participants pseudonyms and identified only their region of origin. We agreed also not to attribute comments to particular partner organisations.

### About our participants

We interviewed 20 men and 23 women, aged between 16 and 61. They came from 19 countries of origin, in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Two had been less than a year in the country, and eight over ten years; the rest for period between. Thirty-five had been refused asylum, five had overstayed on valid visas, and three had become undocumented by other means.

## 1. How to become an undocumented migrant

Thirty-seven of our participants had left their country of origin for political reasons, including imprisonment and torture, and six for economic reasons. Many of the asylum seekers had had a pleasant life at home shattered by politics.

*My husband worked for the President.. A new President came; security forces came to our home and put us under house arrest.. The soldiers killed my mother, my aunt in front of me. I fled with my child who was nine years old. They put my husband in prison. I do not know anything about him.*

Therese, Central/Southern Africa

In the past, any of these people might have been granted asylum or exceptional leave to remain (humanitarian protection).

Those who came for economic reasons still felt they had little choice, with no way of earning at home and supporting their family.

Getting into the UK was not easy. Eight people had entered on valid visas. Others had made arduous journeys across continents, either alone or with the assistance of paid people smugglers. Having arrived, most had tried to regularise their status, by applying either for a visa extension or for asylum. Many had appealed when an asylum application was turned down: 25% of all decisions are reversed on appeal, with up to 40% for some nationalities. Others had put in a fresh claim. For all our participants, this was the main concern.

*My asylum was refused saying that there is no credibility in my story because I missed a court session when I was in hospital. I appealed again and again refused, fresh appeal refused. All medical report from (home country) hospitals and Medical Foundation.. I wanted to end my life. I got counselling and I am trying to be strong. At the moment my solicitor applied to Judicial Review and it was accepted. Barbara, Central/Southern Africa*

The well-known scarcity of competent immigration lawyers, and the increasing restrictions on the legal aid budget, both contribute to poor decision-making. Meantime people like Barbara are left in uncertainty.

## 2. Living here

### Language

Researchers have shown how for all migrants language proficiency is a key factor in adaptation and social inclusion. Although migrants are expected to learn English, even for those with the right to do so ESOL provision is limited and classes oversubscribed. In 2007, access to ESOL for asylum seekers was further limited, and in England and Wales, undocumented migrants including refused asylum seekers have to rely on courses provided by charities. In Scotland refused asylum seekers have greater entitlement to education.

### Employment

None of our participants, by definition, had the right to work, and twenty-three never had. Nine were currently working; five had previously been entitled to work but had stopped; three had previously worked illegally. Two people had been imprisoned for illegal working. Employment in the alternative economy was overwhelmingly in catering, cleaning and manual work. Employment, if it produced a living wage, was key to funding a tolerable lifestyle. Several economic migrants

had achieved a way of life that was satisfying, if hard work:

*Keep the office clean, it is easy really. I like to do it, I don't have any problem. I work for 8hrs and I earn £6 p/hr, sometimes even more.*

*I start work in the morning 5 o'clock in the morning so I get up at 4am, but people are flexible with me because they know me.*

Salvador, Latin America

Others had found that their status allowed them to be exploited:

*Some workplaces you just get food for work. You may work 35 – 39 hours and only get meals and accommodation but no pay. In other restaurants, I got paid more than the minimum wage. Sometimes good payment, sometimes not.*

Parvez, Asia

Only two of our participants had ever been able to use their professional qualifications. Fourteen had post-school qualifications from home. To add to being de-skilled, several people regretted not having the opportunity to contribute to UK society by paying taxes and being useful. For people who weren't working, it was sometimes a challenge to fill their day. Some undertook voluntary work in order to feel useful and challenged.

### Destitution

Those unable or unwilling to risk working risked destitution. Some were reliant on friends, who themselves were unlikely to have much spare cash. Others were given small amounts by charities. Those who have been refused asylum but who the authorities accept cannot return home are entitled to s.4 funding: accommodation and at that time vouchers, now replaced by a card, which can only be used in designated supermarkets.

*I was given vouchers; first £25 pounds a week, then £ 27, now £26, I don't know why this has changed.. You have to spend the vouchers in Tesco.. So whether you like Tesco food or not you have to go there. You have to spend it in one week; you can't keep any because it is only valid for that week. We don't want that food, we have our own ethnic food that is in the markets that we can't buy. Miriam, Central/Southern Africa*

In addition, seven of our participants were currently street homeless, sleeping in mosques and churches, stations, on night buses. Nine more had been in this situation in the past.

*I have been destitute for 6 months now. Even today, I haven't eaten anything, it's always bad. You want to tidy yourself at the start of the day but there isn't really anywhere. I can't go to a house. I have to wash my face and get water in MacDonald's. Eden, East Africa*

We concur with campaigning groups and the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights that this deliberate policy of enforced destitution is unacceptable.

### Housing

Other participants were housed by NASS, or Social Services, who have a responsibility to people seen as vulnerable; or in private rented accommodation. Most of this housing was insecure. The largest number were staying with friends or family; though this might mean only a few nights at a time before moving on. Only those people in reasonably paid long-term work had acceptable private rented housing.

## Health and security

Access to healthcare for undocumented migrants is strictly limited to primary care, at the discretion of the GP, A&E, and treatment for some communicable diseases (though not HIV). Seventeen of our participants reported health problems, some of these created or exacerbated by living in poverty. Five had no GP. This group is clearly vulnerable as potential victims of crime. We asked twenty-seven people if they would contact the police if they felt in danger: nine said yes, and eighteen no. Previous experiences with officials in home countries contributed to this wariness; but so did negative experiences in the UK.

## Why stay?

Given the conditions they lived in, and the clear government attempts to deter them, we asked participants why they stayed in the UK. The majority, whether asylum seekers or economic migrants, felt there was no option: their country of origin was dangerous or else offered even less chance of earning a living. Two who were HIV+ added the need for medication unavailable at home. In addition, some had had children here and felt that this was now home. Only one person, who had come as an unaccompanied child, had reluctantly applied for voluntary return; and one, an irregular entrant, said that he would accept returning if necessary.

*If I go back I will be tortured more. I know someone who was deported and tortured. Barbara, East Africa*

It seems as if the policy of enforced destitution, as well as being inhumane, is ineffective.

## 3. How to cope

The clandestine life clearly has a psychological impact. Even those who were reasonably happy with their life here expressed frustration at the restrictions; at the extreme, for one person this meant feeling unable to have children and subject them to these pressures. Families were far away, and in some cases their whereabouts unknown. People found various ways of maintaining self-esteem, through helping others, or learning, or simply talking to friends; and faith for those who had it was a comfort. Some however found their mental health compromised, and not all were receiving help.

Hopes expressed were inevitably about status, and fears focussed on deportation. Nevertheless some people maintained the hope of being useful once their status was resolved.

*Waiting for status is very depressing. People don't always understand what we go through. We can't move forward. Unless someone experiences that, they can't understand the effect it can have.*

*They think, you eat, you sleep; that is enough. For me being undocumented is dreadful, but compared to what I've been through (before reaching the UK), it is nothing. Raqiya, East Africa*

Organisations supporting undocumented migrants were concerned that funders were reluctant to endorse this work.

## 4. Perceptions

Participants felt that they were often misjudged by the host community, who didn't know their stories or the restrictions placed on them. Their own views of the host community were complex. Some enjoyed the multicultural society. Some praised the respect in principle for human rights, including the rights of women, even though they were not benefitting from them. One person, in long-term employment, was able to enjoy much about British life, from the radio to the royal family.

## Conclusions

How far they achieved any of this depended more than anything on employment, and for this reason the **economic migrants in regular work** had the most satisfying life here. This still depended on their working long hours, and they could be severely exploited because of their status. Those **economic migrants not in work** lacked the opportunities to improve their position, by training or education, and often felt great shame at no longer being able to support their family at home. Like the **refused asylum seekers**, the largest group in our study, they were dependent on friends or faith groups for support. The asylum seekers generally expressed a strong desire to work and contribute to society in the UK. Many were destitute and a number street-homeless. However, even the policy of enforced destitution cannot convince people to return to countries where they risk persecution and death.

Within this context, what is most striking is the endurance people show. Even the most despairing – and there is plenty of despair – has scraped together enough hope to take part in this survey. Many have thoughtful and even grateful comments to make about the culture around them.

## Recommendations

1. People who have been living undocumented in the UK for more than five years should be able to regularise their status.
2. The role of deciding on asylum cases should be given to an independent body, adequately resourced, with staff thoroughly trained to apply legal concepts and assess evidence.
3. A target should be set of deciding on all asylum applications within six months.
4. Asylum seekers who have not had a decision within six months should have permission to work.
5. As people's lives quite literally depend on the outcome of asylum cases, it is essential that the UK has a comprehensive, skilled legal representation service, available across the country.
6. Access to primary and secondary healthcare should be restored to undocumented migrants.
7. ESOL courses at all levels should be available to amnestied migrants, and to asylum seekers from early in their stay in the UK.

## INTRODUCTION

### Aim of the report

Migrants Resource Centre (MRC) is a user-led charity, based in Central London. MRC has provided advice and community development support to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees since 1984. Trusted by many people whose immigration status is irregular, MRC has been increasingly disturbed by their accounts of their life in the UK: stories of destitution, hunger, abuse and loss of dignity.

In 2008, MRC gained funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust for a project designed to enable some of these undocumented migrants to tell their story to a wider audience. This report is the result.

The report aims to give a voice to people who are generally both unheard and maligned. We hope to alter the perceptions of undocumented migrants held by policy-makers, the media, and by extension the host community. The report supplements the recent campaigns and the larger-scale studies (see Appendix B) with vivid personal accounts and reflections that bring home the reality of people's lives. Above all we want these first-hand accounts of migration, exile and the clandestine life to reinforce the message that people without legal status have the same human individuality and dignity as the rest of us, and more courage and endurance than many of us could muster.

### Definitions

An undocumented migrant is someone without the legal right to reside in the country s/he is in. The term is relatively new to the UK; it is used in preference to the derogatory terms used in the media: *illegal immigrant*, and even *illegal asylum seeker* (a logical impossibility), with their implications of criminality.

The term *undocumented migrant* is still subject to various interpretations. The most common assumption is that the person has entered the country by stealth, for economic reasons, and, unknown to all authorities, is working in the informal economy. Although this is true for numbers of people, the complexities of the asylum and immigration systems also leave other groups undocumented.

We have used the definition of undocumented status put forward by the EU's Clandestino Research Project:

*..irregular or undocumented residents are defined as residents without any legal resident status in the country they are residing in; and those whose presence in the territory – if detected – may be subject to termination through an order to leave and/or an expulsion order because of their status.*

This broader definition includes:

*irregular entry*: people who have entered the country avoiding border controls, or on false documents;

*overstayers*, who have entered on a valid visa but have stayed beyond the period allowed;

*withdrawal of visa* from people who have breached the terms of their visa (eg working full-time on a student visa);

*refused asylum seekers* who are unable to return home or who choose not to; *people who've been trafficked*, ie brought against their will. If people – mainly women – do escape from their traffickers, they are still liable to be deported.

In fact none of our interviewees are the victims of traffickers; not surprisingly, since those are the most hidden of a hidden population.

Any of these people are subject to detention and removal from the country, even though their presence is known and recorded.

In reality the categories are more fluid than might at first seem: eg an overstayer may eventually apply for asylum, or someone with a visitor's visa may use it to enter, though in fact fleeing persecution. The report will show the similarities as well as the differences between the experiences of these groups.

### Methodology and statement of ethics

This is not intended as – and clearly isn't – a representative sample of the undocumented migrant population. The proportion of refused asylum seekers to economic migrants is unlikely to reflect that in the country as a whole (though of course accurate figures are hard to come by). The range of nationalities, though broadly representative, is not complete. The report is rather a series of case studies that show how some individuals manage to cope day-by-day with the uncertainty and deprivation their status involves.

The report is based on face-to-face interviews with 43 undocumented migrants, living in England, Scotland and Wales. To counter the obvious difficulties in finding and gaining the trust of people who live out of sight of the authorities, MRC worked through established partner organisations, which identified potential interviewees and hosted the meetings. Participants were assured of anonymity, including the omission of any details that might identify them. Interviewers did not know their names, and we have here invented pseudonyms for them. We have indicated their regions rather than countries of origin, in case any aspect of their story is recognisable within their community. The compilers of this report were not told where in the UK the interviews took place. We consider these precautions to be essential, not only to ensure that participants felt able to tell their story, but also as part of our ethical responsibility to them.

In addition to these interviews, ten partner organisations, working more or less regularly with undocumented migrants, responded to a questionnaire on their experiences, and these have been incorporated into the report. To safeguard both them and their service users, we also assured these organisations that their responses would not be attributed.

For the legal and social background to the individual stories, and in formulating our conclusions, we have drawn on a range of materials, listed in Appendix B.

Part 1 of the report looks at the literal and metaphorical routes by which people become undocumented: why they leave their country of origin, how they get to the UK, and their often protracted relationship with the immigration authorities. Part 2 considers their experience of life in the UK, from employment (or the lack of it) to housing, health and security. Part 3 focuses on the emotional impact of being undocumented, and the effect on family life. Part 4 consists of perceptions: how our participants see the UK and the host community, and how they believe they are seen. In Part 5 we report the views of voluntary and community organisations working with undocumented migrants.

## Some facts and figures about our participants..

<b>Gender</b>	Male	20
	Female	23
<b>Age</b>	16 – 19	3
	20 – 49	31
	50 – 65	8
	Not stated	1
<b>Country of origin</b>	Afghanistan	1
	Angola	2
	Bangladesh	1
	Cameroon	1
	China	1
	Colombia	2
	DRC	8
	Eritrea	3
	Ethiopia	3
	Georgia	1
	India	1
	Iran	2
	Iraq	2
	Pakistan	2
	Somalia	3
	Sri Lanka	1
	Sudan	1
Uganda	1	
Zimbabwe	7	
<b>Length of time in UK</b>	Less than 1 year	2
	1 – 5 years	17
	6 – 10 years	16
	10+ years	8
<b>Reasons for leaving*</b>	Fear for life	7
	Prison/torture	11
	Other political	19
	Economic	6
	Other personal**	5
<b>Employment</b>	Never worked in UK	23
	Previously worked legally, but stopped	5
	Previously worked illegally, but stopped	3
	Working illegally	9
	Imprisoned for working illegally	2
	Not known †	2
<b>Status</b>	Refused asylum seeker ◊	35
	Overstayer	5
	Other ◊◊	3

\* some people gave more than one reason for leaving

\*\* includes emotional abuse, HIV infection, family reunion & study

† also included in previous categories

◊ includes people making appeals or repeat claims, and 'legacy' (longstanding unresolved) cases

◊◊ irregular entrants, and young people whose temporary admission has expired

## ..and who they are

These are the people quoted in the report. All names have been changed.

Name	Gender	Age	Region of origin	Status
Barbara	F	43	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Bashir	M	42	Asia	Refused asylum seeker
Candace	F	30	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Debre	F	44	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Dimitri	M	50	Europe	Refused asylum seeker
Dominique	M	47	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Eden	F	50	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Eric	M	33	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Fanos	F	23	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Fuad	M	44	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Genet	F	37	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Guy	M	25	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Habiba	F	61	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Henri	M	35	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Iman	F	42	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Ivan	M	37	Central/Southern Africa	Legacy case*
Jane	F	54	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Jean-Marie	M	34	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Khadija	F	27	Asia	Refused asylum seeker
Khalid	M	44	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Lila	F	58	Asia	Refused asylum seeker
Marc	M	26	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker

Name	Gender	Age	Region of origin	Status
Miriam	F	46	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Nabil	M	18	Asia	Unaccompanied child; temporary leave expired
Olivier	M	16	Central/Southern Africa	Unaccompanied child; temporary admission
Omera	F	35	Asia	Refused asylum seeker
Parvez	M	29	Asia	Overstayer
Patricia	F	50	Central/Southern Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Qadi	M	30	Asia	Overstayer
Raqiya	F	30	East Africa	Refused asylum seeker
Rashid	M	42	Asia	Overstayer
Salvador	M	49	Latin America	Overstayer
Suzanne	M	49	Central/Southern Africa	Overstayer
Therese	F	50	Central/Southern Africa	Legacy case
Tibor	M	37	Europe	Refused asylum seeker
Ursule	F	29	Central/Southern Africa	Legacy case
Veronique	F	37	Central/Southern Africa	Legacy case
Wei	M	48	Asia	Overstayer
Xaviere	F	16	Central/Southern Africa	Unaccompanied child; refused asylum
Yolanda	F	31	Latin America	Overstayer

Part 1  
*How to become an undocumented migrant*



“Undocumented migrants are the ones without the papers that would allow them to work, study, get their children into school, pay taxes and National Insurance contributions, go confidently to the police if they’re in danger”



We begin in **Part 1** with the circumstances that led to our participants becoming undocumented. **1a** consists of three representative case studies, and sets out the legal framework of their situation. **1b** collates some of the reasons people have for leaving home, and **1c** recounts their journeys. **1d** sets out the processes they have been through to end up undocumented.

### 1a. Three case studies

**Nabil** came into the country almost two years ago, when he was seventeen. He hadn’t really wanted to leave. His life till shortly before he fled was peaceful and satisfying. His father was a farmer, and well-off. Nabil finished primary school, then worked with his father on the farm. He was in love with a girl whose father worked for the government.

But then the problem started. Someone was killed. The girl’s father tried to pin the blame on Nabil, and was able to get a warrant issued for his arrest.

Nabil paid agents \$13,000 to get him out. He walked for two weeks, across the border to a neighbouring country. From there he and seven or eight others travelled in a refrigerated lorry for twenty-eight days, to the UK. They were very cold, and filthy when they arrived: he says the British police were shocked at the state of them.

He applied for asylum as soon as he arrived, and was given two months’ temporary admission, to take him up to his eighteenth birthday. It wasn’t renewed. He’s been in shared accommodation provided by social services, but is due to be evicted. He gets £40 per week to live on.

Nabil is seriously depressed: he talks of suicide. He can’t work or study. He says he doesn’t even exercise or play football any more; he can’t even be bothered to shave. His father has had a stroke and Nabil’s desperate to see him again. It’s risky for him, but he’s asked to be returned home. Even that is proving difficult, because the Home Office has two different dates of birth for him.

**Yolanda** also came to the UK as a teenager, on the day after her eighteenth birthday. Her family couldn’t afford to send her to college at home, so she thought she’d come here, work and study and learn English, and then go back with better job prospects. Twelve years later she says that her life is here: work, friends, her partner. She loves the UK: the people, the

countryside, multicultural London, even the radio. The only problem is that she’s undocumented. Yolanda gets up at 3.40 am and starts work at 5.00. She’s the supervisor for two groups of five office cleaners. When they finish work, at the start of the office day, she goes on to cleaning private houses. In the afternoons she has another job for a cleaning

### Immigration and Race Relations Legislation in the UK

1905 Aliens Act	First piece of legislation, aimed mainly at Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe
1919 Aliens Restrictions Act	Imposed further controls, made deportation easier
1948 Nationality Act	Gave rights of entry and citizenship to all Commonwealth nationals
1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act	Migrants from Commonwealth requiring entry vouchers
1965 Race Relations Act	Outlawed direct discrimination in public places
1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act	Distinguished between citizens born or naturalised in the UK and other residents
1968 Race Relations Act	Outlawed discrimination in employment and public services
1971 Immigration Act	Restricted immigration from Commonwealth, introduced work permit requirements
1976 Race Relations Act	Incorporated indirect forms of discrimination into previous acts
1981 British Nationality Act	Linked citizenship to concept of Britishness
1988 Immigration Act	Withdrew family reunion rights for Commonwealth citizens, made deportation easier
1993 Asylum and Immigration Act	Restricted social rights of asylum-seekers
1996 Asylum and Immigration Act	Furthered restrictions on groups subject to immigration control, voucher system introduced for asylum-seekers
1999 Asylum and Immigration Act	Creation of NASS system to co-ordinate asylum services, implementation of compulsory dispersal for asylum-seekers
2000 Race Relations Amendment Act	Introduced the concept of institutionalised racism, exempted immigration officials from prosecution
2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act	Introduced citizenship pledge for migrants, creation of detention centres for asylum-seekers
2004 Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act	Documentation requirements for immigrants, reduction of social rights for failed asylum applicants
2006 Asylum and Immigration Act	Citizenship restrictions on migrants wanting to settle, fines for employers taking on individuals subject to immigration control
2007 UK Borders Act	Immigration officers given powers to detain, search, enter and seize
2008 Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (part 10)	Migrants suspected of terrorism or serious crimes given Special Immigration Status and electronically tagged
2009 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act	Introduction of concept of earned citizenship and extension of naturalisation period from 5 to 8 years

company. On the afternoon job she pays tax, £150 per month (though she's not sure it actually gets to Revenue and Customs). The rest is cash in hand. Yolanda sends £400 a month home to her family. Her brother is disabled, and the care he needs is expensive, so her remittances are vital to them. She says, 'Because my half of the family is here and the other is at home, every single day I am two people. The one who lives here and have my family and friends, and the one who calls mum every single day, my two brothers, my sister, my father. It is not normal to be in a country for twelve years and you are not allowed to go back to see your family.'

Perhaps the worst aspect of Yolanda's situation is that she feels she can't have children. 'Because my husband will be working on his own and my children will be here illegally. I don't want that for my children.. I can't go to hospital to have children. I can't pay privately. My children cannot go to school without papers. That is the thing, you don't even have the right to have children. I don't want my children to experience the same thing I have experienced.. How to explain to them that they are not allowed to do something? How do you do that? To a four-year, to a two-year old? No, I can't do that to my children, I can't, I can't.'

Back home, **Patricia** was working with women who were victims of domestic violence. In the run-up to the parliamentary election, violence, especially against women, was on the increase. Women's organisations were accused of assisting women who were against the government. Patricia was arrested and beaten: she left, fearing for her life. Only a month before, Patricia had come to the UK on a visitor's visa, to bring back the body of her sister who had died. She was arrested on arrival, accused of bringing back the body of a traitor; her brother was beaten up for the same reason. When she needed to leave, her visa was still valid. She came to stay with another sister here, and claimed asylum.

Patricia's asylum application was refused, and that decision was confirmed on appeal. The case went to the High Court, which ordered the tribunal to reconsider, given Patricia's involvement with the political opposition. The tribunal still insisted she would be safe if she went home. She knows that returning would put not only herself but her family's lives in danger.

Patricia is still active here, though she can't do paid work. She's a volunteer with a refugee agency, and she's given talks to social work students on the

situation of asylum seekers. She feels strongly that the system de-skills people. 'They are saying you have to go back home and re-build your country. How can I do that if I cannot build my qualification? We should not be welfare cases. They should let people contribute to society.'

*Undocumented migrant* is the term used now used nationally and internationally to cover the situations of Nabil, Yolanda and Patricia: but in some ways it's misleading. It's not the government that's missing documentation, even if files do regularly get lost. Many of our interviewees have to sign regularly to confirm that they're still here and can be accessed for deportation. The French term, *sans-papiers*, is more accurate: they – all of them - are the ones without the papers that would allow them to work, study, get their children into school, pay taxes and National Insurance contributions, go confidently to the police if they're in danger.

Nabil, Yolanda and Patricia, like our forty other participants, demonstrate what happens when the blunt instrument of immigration law touches the delicate and complex material of people's lives.

## 1b. Why leave home?

There is, unsurprisingly, a considerable disparity in the reasons for leaving given between people seeking asylum, and those who came to the UK to earn money. As the Refugee Council's report *Chance or Choice?* confirms, many of those leaving for political reasons have little time to plan, and less choice:

*Less than a third of the research participants specifically wanted to come to the UK. Among those who did choose the UK, the presence of family and friends and a belief that their human rights would be respected were the most important factors..*

*The single most important reason.. was because a decision to bring them here had been made by others. Agents played a very significant role in providing travel documents and facilitating the journey. Most (asylum seekers) only became aware that they were going to the UK after leaving their country of origin. Some.. only found out that they were in the UK after their arrival.<sup>1</sup>*

This is borne out by our participants. A few of the asylum seekers had family here, or had already been

living here as students or with permission to work. Those who had come for economic reasons, generally knew a little more about the UK, having heard what to expect from compatriots.

Many of our asylum-seeking participants originally had a satisfying life at home:

*I am a computer programmer. I had my own consultancy business. I left my top job in an international company. Life was going well. Ivan, Central/Southern Africa*

*Living peacefully in your country is a blessing and as far as I was concerned I enjoyed living with my family. It is the bad government that forced us out. I was leading a very happy family life. Debre, East Africa*

*I was an artist. I studied Fine Arts then went into print making, sculpting and painting. Dimitri, Europe*

Peaceful lives were disrupted by politics, with often appalling consequences:

*I was a supporter of the opposition party. Because of this I was imprisoned twice. First time I was jailed for 1½ years for political activities. When I got out I fled to Germany. Then they returned me.. But I was imprisoned again for one year... I was tortured in prison. Dimitri*

*My husband worked for the President.. A new President came; security forces came to our home and put us under house arrest.. The soldiers killed my mother, my aunt in front of me. I fled with my child who was nine years old. They put my husband in prison. I do not know anything about him. Therese, Central/Southern Africa*

In some cases, political and personal issues were mixed. One of our participants risked being killed because he was gay. A woman had been forced into prostitution by her husband, who had threatened to kill her when she protested. Another woman said:

*I had.. a forced marriage. I didn't want to live with him but there was no law to offer me any chance of getting divorced. If I do leave they will kill me, they were not good people... What men say you have to do, you do. Khadija, Asia*

Four people came as unaccompanied children.

*They chased us in our area. I fled to (capital). Then I went to (neighbouring country) but was chased there as well. One lady recognised me and invited me here to UK. Xaviere, aged 16: Central/Southern Africa*



Twenty years ago, most of these people would have been granted either asylum, or exceptional leave to remain on humanitarian grounds. Still Human, Still here, a coalition of concerned organisations, points out the change:

*Since the mid-1990s, successive governments have passed both legislation and regulations designed to reduce the number of people who come to the UK to seek sanctuary.. These policies have included a narrower interpretation of who should qualify for protection in the UK..*

*For example, many asylum seekers have been refused protection in the UK even though it is recognised that it is too dangerous to send them back to their country of origin. Thousands of people from Zimbabwe and Sudan have been left in this position.. The policy framework is seriously flawed if it is not safe to return individuals to their country of origin, and yet they are denied any legal status in the UK.<sup>2</sup>*

Some people who had left home for economic reasons still felt they had little choice:

*I had my own business; I used to work as a taxi driver. I always try to make something for myself but I didn't have any qualification, at one point I open my own coffee shop and I had it for an long time, but things were hard in there, there isn't much opportunity to do something. I left; that was for me the only option to support my family. Salvador, Latin America*

1. Crawley, Heaven: *Chance or Choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK*. London, Refugee Council 2010.

2. At the End of the Line: restoring the integrity of the UK's asylum system. Still Human Still here, 2010.

*UK is a rich country. To work, to make money for a little while. At the time I left, there was political riots, instability, and there was no work.*  
Parvez, Asia

However, necessity is not the only reason to travel. Young people across the world have similar aspirations:

*You want opportunities when you are eighteen years old and you are in a foreign country and you can learn the language. Study and go for a better job and that kind of thing.* Yolanda, Latin America

A few people had come to the UK for other reasons, but later found that political and personal circumstances made it impossible to return.

*I came as a visitor. Then I applied to be a student for three years, then when I finished my studies I got a job on a cruise ship. This job meant I was travelling in and out of the UK. I fell ill though and my employer sent me back here because this was where my next of kin was.. I had been diagnosed with HIV. There was no medicine in my country for HIV and the lifestyle (there) was deteriorating.* Miriam, Central/Southern Africa

*(I came) to further my study in biochemistry, as a student... Following a series of events (at home) my parents were targeted by the opposition. They did not feel it was safe for me to return, they asked me to stay; apply for asylum. It would be senseless going back because I would never get out.* Marc, Central/Southern Africa

These various initial reasons clearly affect people's life in the UK: we examine how in Part 2.



## 1c. Getting here

Getting into the UK is far from easy. Most EU nationals can come and go freely, but some (from the poorer, more recently joined countries) have to register. For everyone else coming to work, there's a points-based scheme, which favours highly skilled workers and people with an existing work-permit. The jobs which most migrants actually fill – office cleaning, catering and so on – are not covered. Even visitors' and student visas are hard to come by: there have been well-publicised stories of wedding guests from certain countries being refused entry in case they stay.

Seeking asylum is a right in international law, but successive governments have made it extremely difficult to exercise in practice. Being seen to visit the British embassy – assuming there's one within reach – is hardly a way to avoid persecution. Airlines are fined for carrying passengers without valid papers; UK Border Agency officials remove any who manage to board Eurostar trains. Travelling on false papers is a criminal offence, though often it's the only way to get to safety. People-smugglers are paid thousands of pounds to transport people on foot, by bus and container lorry across borders.

Eight of our participants entered legally, on valid visas:

*I originally came as a visitor, but I could not go back. A friend of mine was here, in the UK. She went back and was killed. She was a teacher like me. I flew to the UK, when visiting my sister.* Suzanne, Central/ Southern Africa

*I applied for a visa, tourist visa, it is always tourist visa as they never give you any other visa. It was not hard to get a visa at the time, I heard now it is getting harder and harder but for me then was very easy, I applied and they give it to me. Once I got the visa I travelled to Madrid and then to the UK.* Salvador, Latin America

For many others, the journey was hard. Fifteen people had travelled on foot, by road, and by sea, sometimes culminating in a plane journey:

*I walked from my country to (neighbouring country). It took me three months through forests. I was eating cassava, the roots of a plant which has*



*a sweet taste. I slept in the jungle, outdoors. Then I flew to the UK. The journey in the jungle was hard. It was cold, walking on my own. I left my family behind. My wife also fled, my children fled. I do not know where they are.* Henri, Central/Southern Africa

*I come through Afghanistan, Turkey on the tree lorry, then to Slovenia, Albania, Slovakia, France and then to England. The whole journey took twenty days. With me people from Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdish, Iraqis: fifty people, some people hid inside the lorry, others in the axle of the lorry, very, very dangerous.. No talking, only someone come and open in the night, it was very hot, and some come and open door of the lorry and cover our eyes and take us by the hand to the second lorry.. Then someone lead us by the hand and said Toilet here.* Bashir, Asia

*I walked from (own country) for one month; we ran away, soldiers were chasing us. Sometimes we ate and sometimes we didn't. We drank dirty water from streams polluted with camel urine. There were dangerous animals; insects, snakes and hyenas; it was a terrible journey. (Then) we travelled in a land cruiser through the desert, where some of the eight people travelling with me died because of the desert storms.* Eden, East Africa

Nine of our participants reported paying agents to get them out of their home country: Nabil, still in his teens, paid \$13,000. The sums involved are even more striking given the economic situation in countries of origin. Qadi, also from Asia, spent not only money but time:

*I had a business and made enough to pay a broker to help me get here. It was a long process. So it cost a lot of money. I travelled by lorry and sometimes train. I went through (neighbouring country), Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy and France and finally the UK. It took more than a year. I was spending one to two months in each country waiting for the next broker.*

The difficulty and risks of the journey may well make people all the more determined to succeed once they get here; though equally they must have an impact on health and emotional security. Unfortunately, merely arriving in the UK does not automatically mean a respite, as we shall see.

## 1d. Trying to get papers

For all our participants, however they came to be undocumented, the main desire was to get papers – to have some recognised legal status in the country. This is true even for someone who has never had contact with the immigration authorities and earns a good living:

*If I got caught by immigration police I would go willingly. I'm always ready to go. But if I'm not caught I would like to stay, I'm happy to take the risk.. I want the government to improve the lives of illegal people so they can get their papers. At the end of the day; paperwork is the most important thing.* Qadi, Asia

Qadi is the only one of our participants to be philosophical about the possibility of leaving.

Some overstayers had tried unsuccessfully to regularise their status:

*I come and stay with my aunt and then I apply for a student visa before my tourist visa expired, I sent my passport and paid for it but they refused me the visa and never gave me the passport.. They sent me a letter saying you have been refused and you can pick your passport on the way out in the airport and ... I never went to the airport. Yolanda, Latin America*

Six people having entered on tourist or student visas then claimed asylum:

*I came on a visitor's visa after my husband died. My visa ran out after six months then I applied for asylum which was refused. But when it was refused I didn't do an appeal.. I have put in a fresh claim now but they said I will not get an answer until 2011. Lila, Asia*

Suzanne appears to have a case for asylum, but hadn't applied:

*I didn't go to claim asylum first because I was afraid, too depressed. I am still depressed and unwell. I have not applied for anything. I spoke to some friends about it, they told me what I need to do and where I need to go. But I'm still waiting until I am better and stronger before applying,*

*I want to live legally in this country and work. Suzanne, Central/Southern Africa*

Thirty-three of our participants have been refused asylum:

*I claimed for asylum when I arrived in 88. I didn't hear anything for 10 years. I have to go the Home Office every 25 months and sign a form, but I don't have status, I don't have any support and I've been here for 21years. Dominique, Central/Southern Africa*

Around 25% of initial asylum decisions are overturned at appeal. For some nationalities, the proportion is up to 40%. Not surprisingly, many people do appeal. It is also possible to put in a fresh claim; though after the second claim legal aid is no longer available, and people may be deported.

*My asylum was refused saying that there is no credibility in my story because I missed a court session when I was in hospital. I appealed again and again refused, fresh appeal refused. All medical report from (home country) hospitals and Medical Foundation.. I wanted to end my life. I got counselling and I am trying to be strong. At the moment my solicitor applied to Judicial Review and it was accepted. Barbara, Central/Southern Africa*

*My solicitor told me I should claim asylum on compassionate grounds (she is HIV+). I was refused asylum twice more and told to go home and live with my son, but my son died in 2004. Jane, Central/Southern Africa*

The difficulty of finding competent immigration solicitors is well-known, and has been compounded recently by the closure of Refugee and Migrant Justice, then handling around 10,000 cases across the country. The problem is highlighted by Miriam's situation:

*As the visa was running out I took all my papers to the solicitor who just seemed to put my papers in the drawer.. I know the solicitor must have just put my papers away because I didn't get any response.. I got a letter of apology saying they hadn't dealt with it because the solicitor had gone on holiday when my visa had run out. So when my new application went through it was after my visa had run out, so the Home Office refused saying 'You failed to comply with immigration rules and didn't get your application in before your visa ran out'. Miriam, Central/Southern Africa*

Four participants have cases in the legacy system, designed to deal with long outstanding claims:

*After 6 months I was refused. I appealed but was refused again. In 2006 they sent me a legacy case letter saying it would take years for me to get an answer. Veronique, Central/Southern Africa.*

Young people who arrive without their family are generally granted temporary admission until their eighteenth birthday, after which they may be removed, as Nabil's case, cited on page 9, shows.

Uncertainty is the context in which all our participants conduct their lives. In the next section, we examine how they manage daily life within this constraint.

## Part 2 Living here



For anyone coming to live in a new country, there are adjustments to be made and day-to-day cultural norms to learn. For those who have freely chosen to migrate, enthusiasm may make the transition easier, though the realities of clandestine life can quickly dent that eagerness. Many of those seeking asylum are struggling at the same time to cope with trauma, and the combination can be overwhelming.

In this section of the report, we look at the various factors that contribute to people's experience of life in the UK: language, employment and other occupations, housing, health, practical support, and personal safety. Finally – and especially relevant given what we learn about people's daily life – we ask why they stay in the UK, in the face of so many attempts to deter them.

## 2a. How to communicate

A major factor in making a life in the UK is of course language. Those who arrive with some knowledge of English and the Latin alphabet, whatever other trials they face, can at least read the labels in supermarkets, and the destination boards on buses. They also have a better chance of understanding the documents they are given:

*The police caught me selling DVDs and they took me.. somewhere but I would not know where and then they gave me this paper and let me go. This paper says that I cannot work but I can live here and that I need to go and sign in every week. I just know is from the Migration Centre. They just gave me this piece of paper and told me to go and because I don't speak any English I couldn't tell them anything either. I didn't know what it was. After I got the paper I went and asked someone and he told me about this. Wei, Asia*

Researchers have demonstrated the correlation between English language skills and integration:

*Proficiency in the language of the country of asylum is fundamental to the social and economic integration of refugees. Those with fluency in the language.. have a greater range of employment options. Those who lack fluency are limited in their employment opportunities either to those within their own community or to those that do not place a premium on language. These tend to be low-skill*

*jobs. Both these situations limit the opportunities for refugees to interact with members of the country of asylum and to develop language skills.<sup>3</sup>*

The same clearly applies to economic migrants, and even more so to those without permission to work. It is arguably counter-productive for any country to leave a substantial number of its residents effectively excluded from interaction with the majority, for the sake of social stability as well as their own welfare.

Learning English, however, is not simple, even for those who are strongly motivated to do so. Local authority ESOL classes are frequently oversubscribed. A report for the Mayor of London suggested that:

*The capital alone had 600,000 people with some level of need for ESOL teaching; and that most provision was at entry level and insufficient for access to employment.<sup>4</sup>*

In addition, in 2007 access to ESOL classes for asylum seekers in England and Wales was limited to those waiting more than six months for a decision. (The right in Scotland remains more generous). Refused asylum seekers and other undocumented migrants are limited to any courses offered by charities that are willing to take them.

Bearing this in mind, in the next section we look in detail at undocumented migrants' experiences of employment.



“A major factor in making a life in the UK is of course language. Those who arrive with some knowledge of English and the Latin alphabet, can at least read the labels in supermarkets, and the destination boards on buses”

## 2b. How to earn a living

By definition, none of our participants has the right to work in the UK, and twenty of the forty-three were not in employment. Nine more had previously worked in the UK: five legally, three illegally, and one who had stayed in a job after his permission to work expired.

Without the right either to work or to claim benefits, the question of how to finance even a minimal daily existence is acute.

*(In answer to the question Can you work?): No, no, too dangerous. I have a fresh application for asylum, I am still waiting, I have already exhausted all the process. I have no money, I cannot work.*

However, he added:

*I work sometimes for 10 hours for £5.00, £6.00, sometimes £10, very rarely, at a cash and carry*

*shop. What can I do? I have no help, I cannot go back. Bashir, Asia*

Because they have no right to work, undocumented migrants are more than usually subject to exploitation by the employers who risk taking them on.

*Some workplaces you just get food for work. You may work 35 – 39 hours and only get meals and accommodation but no pay. In other restaurants, I got paid more than the minimum wage. Sometimes good payment, sometimes not. Parvez, Asia*

Nine of our participants were working in the alternative economy, and for some who had come to the UK expecting this, it was perfectly acceptable:

*Keep the office clean, it is easy really. I like to do it, I don't have any problem. I work for 8hrs and I earn*

3. Bloch, Alice: *Making it Work: refugee employment in the UK*. London, IPPR 2001.

4. *London Enriched: the Mayor's Refugee Integration Strategy*. MoL, 2009

*£6 p/hr, sometimes even more.*

*I start work in the morning 5 o'clock in the morning so I get up at 4am, but people are flexible with me because they know me. Salvador, Latin America*

*I'm working at the moment. It's illegal, but because I'm a good chef I can get work anyway.. I'm paid well, the environment is good. Qadi, Asia*

The UK Borders Agency actively seeks out firms that may be employing people without permission to work; there are sanctions against the company as well as the employee. The penalties for illegal working can be severe. Two of our participants had been imprisoned:

*I have worked as a truck/machine operator. I had a fake work permit and underwent training for three months. I worked for 17 months. Packaging, etc. Half of the pay I had to give to the guy who lent me his document. The other half went to the solicitor, my son, housing and living expenses.*

*I was sentenced ten months. I did five months in jail. Eric, Central/Southern Africa*

*I went to prison for 9 months in 2007 for illegally working and the judge gave me a deportation order. I appealed against the decision but was refused.*

*Now I'm waiting. I'm signing weekly, always reporting. I didn't work. But the police found false ID in my house. They searched it when I wasn't there. I told them I hadn't used it to work but they didn't believe me. Khalid, East Africa*

Employment in the alternative economy was overwhelmingly in catering, cleaning and manual work. One person had worked in an office, and one as a cabinet maker. There was more variation among those who had previously had permission to work. Two, both English speakers, had been able to use their professional qualifications; this bears out Alice Bloch's findings about language, quoted above. Others had worked in retail and office jobs, and in a care home.

It is notable that the care worker was in fact a qualified accountant. Of the forty-three participants, four had gained a technical qualification at home, three a first degree, one a higher degree, and six a professional qualification. There was little correlation between these achievements and the employment opportunities available, the two people cited about, an alternative therapist and an accountant, being the only ones to make use of the skills and knowledge they'd learnt.



Among the various difficulties of being undocumented, de-skilling should not be underestimated as a cause of stress. Exile by its nature creates some loss of confidence: how do you use public transport in the new country, or speak to your neighbours, or shop? For people who have invested time, money and effort in gaining skills to give them a defined role, to be deprived of the opportunity to use those skills can be a severe blow to self-respect.

A further blow, however, was the loss of even a reduced chance to work and feel useful. Debre, the accountant turned care worker, said:

*I was so happy to work in elderly care, to help them, to care for them. The pay was fair, the same as everyone else. I was getting free training from the council too.. As I had a work permit, I was paying taxes from the day I started working, for 8 years. I had my own flat, I was paying rent. When I lost my job I became homeless. It's very sad, paying taxes, obeying the law, but still I don't have any rights.*

There is a clear practical impact of losing work, a devastating one in Debre's case; but equally the change from being a responsible and useful resident of the country to being undocumented.

Employment and the lack of it are key to undocumented migrants' experience of the country, since there is no other way for them to have enough money to live on. We see in the next section how those who were not working coped.

## 2c. What else to live on

With no employment, and no access to benefits, people are likely to become destitute. The British Red Cross defines destitution like this:

*A person who is not accessing public funds, is living in extreme poverty and is unable to meet basic needs, eg income, food, shelter, healthcare, and who is forced to rely on irregular support from family, friends, charities, or illegal working to survive.<sup>5</sup>*

People who have been refused asylum and agree to return home are entitled under s.4 regulations to accommodation and vouchers to live on, but no cash.

*I was given vouchers; first £25 pounds a week, then £27, now £26, I don't know why this has*

*changed; no one explains anything to you. You are not a person; you are not entitled to have anything explained to you..*

*You have to spend the vouchers in Tesco. They are only for Tesco and they only last for one week. So whether you like Tesco food or not you have to go there. You have to spend it in one week; you can't keep any because it is only valid for that week. We don't want that food, we have our own ethnic food that is in the markets that we can't buy. Miriam, Central/Southern Africa*

*What can I buy in Tesco, nothing. It's not Halal, it is difficult. I eat in a homeless place with friends. Khalid, Africa*

People also spoke of the stigma of being seen using vouchers. These have now been replaced by the Azure card, which is valid in several supermarkets, but still not in community-run stores and markets.

At the time of these interviews, the Red Cross, which supports destitute asylum seekers, was also providing Tesco vouchers: it has since moved to cash. Many people rely on the Red Cross and other charities and faith groups.

*I get £20 every 2 months from a charity. I used to also get a food parcel from a refugee centre but not anymore because they don't give me any travel money so I can't collect it. Khadija, Asia*

Probably the most important source of support is friends and family; though that is inevitably limited by their own resources:

*Sometimes I borrow money from friends. I have no social life so that cuts costs. I don't do any activities, celebrate any festival, no new clothing, not enough food, barely surviving. Rashid, Asia*

*I try to live on a zero pound budget. I try to live on nothing. I cycle everywhere. I do not buy any clothes. I just wait for Christmas for people to buy me presents. Guy, Central/Southern Africa*

As the Still Human, Still Here report<sup>6</sup> points out, destitution has been used deliberately by governments to encourage people to leave, or even to deter them from arriving in the first place. It is not only campaigning organisations that are concerned. The Joint Committee on Human Rights reported:

*We have been persuaded by the evidence that the government has indeed been practising a deliberate policy of destitution of this highly vulnerable group. We believe that all deliberate use of inhumane*

5. *Not gone, but forgotten.* p7 British Red Cross, 2010

6. op cit, p.4

*treatment is unacceptable.. The policy of enforced destitution must cease.*<sup>7</sup>

Evidence from our participants demonstrated vividly the inhumanity of this policy. We consider later whether it is effective in its own terms.

## 2d. Where to live

The question of housing is clearly linked to income and immigration status. In the worst case, people were not only destitute but homeless. Seven of our participants were currently in this situation, and nine more had been in the past.

*I'm homeless; sometimes I stay in the church, near the church, in the street, near the station, everywhere. I have been destitute for 6 months now. Even today, I haven't eaten anything, it's always bad. You want to tidy yourself at the start of the day but there isn't really anywhere. I can't go to a house. I have to wash my face and get water in MacDonald's.* Eden, East Africa

*night buses because I was afraid to sleep outside. I did this for 2 or 3 months. After this a lady offered me accommodation with her, but I had to leave in the day. Even in the winter when it was cold and I was hungry and ill. I didn't have proper clothes or shoes.* Iman, East Africa

At the time of interview, eight of our participants were in accommodation provided by NASS (National Asylum Support Service). The majority of these are on s.4, the so-called 'hard cases' support, for people who have been refused asylum but cannot leave the country. Even this housing can be insecure:

*We are moved a lot by the providers, we have to find a new proof of address, find a new doctor, again and again, it is horrible. It's like you treat an animal. I've been moved 9 times since I've been here.* Genet, East Africa

*They have not chased me out yet. But you anticipate that you can be kicked out any time.* Patricia, Central/Southern Africa

Two people were currently housed by Social Services, who have a responsibility to people seen as especially vulnerable: one on release from a psychiatric hospital, the other, Nabil, as an unaccompanied child. Having reached the age of eighteen, however, Nabil was likely to be evicted:

*Our support will be terminated in a month, we're going to be evicted, no-one has told us why.*

Four respondents were in private rented accommodation, two in hostels. One had a room in a private house, arranged by a local charity; another a shared room in a flat run by his community:

*The accommodation was not very good, but provided by an organization. It's very old, toilet is not too good. There is no shower. Public baths.* Parvez, Asia

The greatest number of our participants – fourteen – were staying with friends or family. One – Lila, from Asia – had come specifically to be with her son after her husband died; two others were also with family members. Almost all those who were put up by friends were effectively homeless, though managing to avoid sleeping on the streets. Many said how difficult their situation was:

*I just ask them to have some place to sleep. I can ask help for four days, five days, one month, and after that it's a problem, you know. You have to ask another people.* Fuad, East Africa

*I sleep on a mattress on the floor. It is very hard to stay with other people; I go to them in the evening just to put my body on the floor. Sometimes I go without food. I pretend I am smiling.* Candace, East Africa

Predictably, the people who managed to work and earn a reasonable income had the fewest housing problems.

*I live in a flat, private flat; I pay my rent and live with my boyfriend. We used to live with other people but we now live by ourselves. We are living together for ten years so we need to live by ourselves. We pay council tax, our TV licence, gas electricity etc. Like all citizens.* Yolanda, Latin America

## 2e. What to do

If you can't work, or take a course, or pay for entertainment, how do you spend your time? Managing daily life becomes a complex issue, not least because of uncertainty. Our participants had a range of strategies.

*I read and study a lot. I try to better myself. I listen to music, do research, meditate, and sometimes see friends.* Marc, Central/Southern Africa

*Sometimes I do extra jobs in the orthodox Jewish community or I go to the library to read and learn more English; to keep me busy and not think about my family.* Dimitri, Europe

*I roam the streets, go see friends, sign in at the Home Office. I can't use public transport; they don't give you the money so I have to walk for 2 hours from where I live to get to where I sign.* Khalid, East Africa



*When my asylum claim was refused I slept rough on the streets for 2 weeks. A lady from the mosque offered me a room for 2 weeks. After that she asked me to leave because she had visitors coming. In the day I went to mosques, at night I went on*



7. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansard/cm090330/text/90330w0024.htm>

Six people had created some structure and a sense of purpose by volunteering:

*Doing voluntary work for different organizations. I run a night shelter which takes a big part of my time every day of the week until 10:30 pm. I go home and read until morning. Ivan, Central/Southern Africa*

Participants in England and Wales had no right to study, unless they could find a course run by a charity.

*As asylum seeker, I can't study much. We can do only the ESOL bloody courses only for few months. And I'm fed up now. I've done this course a hundred million times. Omera, Asia*

The Scottish government gives people a greater right to education, and this could provide more stimulus, as well as greater demands on people's time.

*7:00 wake up my son and take breakfast and go out at 8 to put my son in nursery. College is Monday to Friday. Weekend is for cleaning the house, visiting Scottish friends, and inviting them over. One voluntary job every Tuesday; one every week, one every month. Ursule, Central/Southern Africa*

People in paid work might have even longer days.

*Well, I get up at 3.40 am and start work at 5am. I supervise two jobs in the morning. Each job I have 5 cleaners, I have to be there from the time they arrive till they finish and supervise them. After that I clean houses; Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Mondays and Friday I have my morning off. Then in the afternoon I go to do my other cleaning job. Yolanda, Latin America*

Having a meaningful structure to one's day, being able to support oneself, and feeling that one has something to contribute to other people, are all ways of maintaining mental health.

## 2f. How to keep healthy

Access to healthcare has become an issue not only for undocumented migrants, but for politicians. Regulations ostensibly designed to deter 'health tourism' make people not 'lawfully resident' liable to NHS charges for most hospital treatment. GPs can decide whether or not to register any patient, whatever the immigration status.

Seventeen of our participants reported some kind of health problem. Agencies told us that many migrants arrived healthy, but found their situation took a toll on their health.

Some were grateful for the treatment they were getting, and aware that it would have been harder at home:

*I'm always praying for the British people to thank them. In our country we wouldn't survive. Suffering here is better than suffering in our country.*

*I'm praying they don't send me back because of my medication. If they sent me back, I wouldn't survive for one year. Habiba, East Africa*

Five had no GP, including Olivier, aged 16, and Qadi, who told us:

*I have arthritis. There are no doctors that I can go to. If you go to the hospital they want your passport and proof of address.*

Others had had problems registering in the past:

*I had a lot of pain in my womb. I wasn't able to see a GP straight away. They wanted an address but I was living in hostels. But a person came and helped me to go to the hospital. But I had this pain for 6 weeks before it was helped. Genet, East Africa*

One person had dental problems but was told she wasn't entitled to treatment.

With some exceptions - A & E, and treatment for some communicable diseases, though not HIV - hospital care has to be paid for, and hospitals are entitled to turn away people who can't pay, unless the care is 'immediate and necessary.' This may deter GPs from referring undocumented migrants for secondary care. It is difficult to know what doctors' motivation is, though by some it was experienced as casual or prejudiced:

*I think the GPs here don't take my health problems seriously. I had cervical problems and I didn't see a specialist for 2 years. Iman, East Africa*

*I have high cholesterol/blood pressure also and my eyes were clouding over. I went to the doctor. The doctor was nasty, saying 'this condition is for people from Africa, there is no cure'. Jane, Central/Southern Africa*

*I went to see a doctor when I was really depressed. I asked to see a psychiatrist. My GP suggested I should go back home. Ivan, Central/Southern Africa*

Having been seen and diagnosed, a further issue was the cost of treatment:

*I have a heart problem. I get palpitations. The medicine is expensive. I can't buy it on vouchers so I have to borrow money from my friends or from church. Jean-Marie, Africa*

And finally, living in poverty itself can exacerbate health problems:

*Because I have very little money I don't eat properly. I'm told I need to eat vegetables, but I can't get 1 a day, let alone 5. All I eat is pasta and rice. If I could eat properly then my blood sugar levels would be better and I would feel better. Habiba, East Africa*

It is hard to see how any of these people could be thought of as health tourists.

In Part 3, we consider the emotional impact of being undocumented, including its effect on mental health.

## 2g. How to get practical help

We asked participants where they went for support. The responses are revealing. Some spoke about emotional support: this is obviously a vital question in the extreme circumstances involved, and we give some examples in Part 3. Others immediately cited the places and people they turned to for practical help.

For some people, the question had little meaning:

*Nowhere. Library, Internet. No charities etc. Eric, Central/Southern Africa*

For others, getting the basic necessities of life was the main consideration.

*My friends, if they invite me to eat, I can eat, if not it's very difficult for me. I (also) go to a Jewish*



*"Because I have very little money I don't eat properly. I'm told I need to eat vegetables, but I can't get 1 a day. All I eat is pasta and rice. If I could eat properly then my blood sugar levels would be better and I would feel better"*

*charity that helps migrants. There is also the mosque in Ramadan, and they give a little, but they don't have much.* Debre, East Africa

*I go to the Red Cross, friends, churches. You get used to going to different churches for food or money.* Jean-Marie, Central/Southern Africa

*I go to churches, the Refugee Council sometimes, where I can get vouchers for food and sometimes a shower.* Eden, East Africa

It's worth remembering how vital to self-respect ordinary hygiene facilities are, and how unavailable they can be to people who are destitute.

Faith groups – not necessarily those the participant belonged to – were often mentioned, along with a number of charities. Sometimes faith groups provided more than just food and money:

*My church, there are people in my church like an English lady who was teaching me English. She has fought the Home Office and the (NASS accommodation) providers for me.* Genet, East Africa

Miriam described vividly the impact of being dependent on others for basic needs:

*The government should let us contribute. We want to help society.*

*It can be very diminishing to be looked after, it can be very painful. The press say we are scroungers. When you're in the queue in Tesco's and you have to use your vouchers, the way people look at you; it's very humiliating, it's very dehumanising indeed.*

The omissions are equally revealing. No-one, including those housed by social services, named social workers as a source of support, and no-one specifically named refugee or migrant community organisations. One did cite his caseworker at MRC.

## 2h. How to keep safe

People who are homeless, destitute, or just known to be undocumented, can readily become targets for crime. We asked whether people felt able to go to the police if they felt in danger. Nine people said yes, and eighteen no.

Some of the no answers were based mainly on the inherent insecurity of being undocumented: one might be discovered and deported at any time:

*I was with a friend, an incident happened. She wanted to contact the police. I asked her not to, but she insisted. She called the police. They asked me who I am, it was fine; but afterwards I was terrified and couldn't sleep for two nights. I feel I'm guilty; I'm not entitled to work or to accommodation. I'm not entitled to stay in the country.* Candace, East Africa

However, as well as this realistic fear, people are naturally influenced by their experience of the security services in their country of origin; and in the case of many asylum seekers, this has been traumatic. A handbook on social work with refugees states:

*It is important to realise that people's suspicion and mistrust are a necessity for survival.. The experience of brutalisation probably took place at the hands of people who held official and responsible positions.. The victim may not dare risk that an unfamiliar responsible official will behave differently from those involved in their.. past experiences.<sup>8</sup>*

Candace continued: *In my country I was raped twice in prison, so I don't like the police.*

These experiences may be reinforced by problems with the police in the UK:

*I was investigated by the police for three days following a robbery. I was suspected because of my colour and ethnicity.* Marc, Central/Southern Africa

*One day I was very ill. My husband's friend was driving me and my husband to the hospital. The police stopped us. I was in a lot of pain but they separated us because of our details. We gave them our names, told them who we are. But there was a problem with the spelling, my husband was taken to the police station and I had to get his ID so he could be let out. We had not committed any crime. Even the driver was not at fault. They let my husband go when I brought the ID.* Genet, East Africa

Agencies working with undocumented migrants report that racist attacks and abuse are a reality, particularly in some dispersal areas. It is a matter of concern that so few vulnerable people feel able to turn to the police if they are in danger.

## 2g. Why stay?

Successive governments have hoped that the lack of material support or legitimate work opportunities would encourage undocumented migrants to return to their country of origin. The assumption is that those whose asylum case has been rejected are able to return home, and should do so. However, s.4 support (accommodation and vouchers) is provided for those who are found to have neither a valid asylum claim, nor a claim to stay on humanitarian grounds, but who, if it is accepted, cannot return. (The logic of this has always been bewildering).

In spite of government hopes, our participants, like thousands of others, have felt they had no option but to stay. Only eighteen-year-old Nabil had signed up for voluntary return, out of a combination of despair here and intense worry about his sick father. Ironically, his return was being delayed:



*I have asked to be sent back home, but the Home Office has 2 different dates of birth for me.*

We have seen that Qadi was philosophical about the prospect of return:

*I like this country. I earn good money. I don't want to go back but I'm willing.*

Other people stayed because the economic prospects were even worse for them at home:

*There are no jobs, there's no future there.* Dimitri, Europe

*I have no means of income back home. I just want to settle here and support the rest of my family back home.* Rashid, Asia

This was true even for some who had sought asylum:

*If I knew I could get a job in (home country) I would go, but I can't. Anybody would go if they knew they could get a better life.* Jane, Central/Southern Africa

For other refused asylum-seekers, however, the prospect of return was inconceivable:

*The government will kill me, I am the homosexual, they kill me, I cannot go back.* Bashir, Asia

*All my family was killed. I took the chance to come here. If they say I can't stay I will stay all my life in this situation. No possibility for anything else.* Eric, Central/Southern Africa

*If I go back I will be tortured more. I know someone who was deported and tortured.* Barbara, East Africa

*Because in my country, I've lost everything now. No house, no peace, no government, no family.* Fuad, East Africa

People with serious medical conditions pointed out that their survival depended on treatment:

*Basically because of medication. For a person living with HIV, medication and other conditions like access to food are vital as well. In my country the conditions have deteriorated hugely.* Miriam, Central/Southern Africa

There was also the reality of a life established in the UK, however hard the conditions. Children and partners helped create roots here.

*I have nothing to return to in my country. It is just me and my son. I have a life here. I have lived here for five years. My son has friends here. He was born here. His whole life is here.* Ursule, Central/Southern Africa

For all these reasons, it seems that even destitution fails to persuade people to return. Still Human, Still Here confirms that view:

*Successive governments have assumed that the introduction of punitive measures, particularly*

8. Finlay, R., and Reynolds, J.: *Social work and Refugees*. National Extension College/RefugeeAction, Cambridge, 1987

*around access to support, would deter asylum seekers from coming to the UK and force refused asylum seekers to return home. All of the available evidence, including from the Home Office itself, indicates that these policies have not had the intended effect.. Making living conditions more difficult for those who have been refused asylum is unlikely to encourage returns when the individuals concerned continue to have fears for their safety in their country of origin.<sup>9</sup>*

The evidence of our participants suggests that the same may apply to economic migrants, when they feel they have no way of making a living at home.

*"I have nothing to return to in my country. It is just me and my son. I have a life here. I have lived here for five years. My son was born here. His whole life is here"*



## Part 3 *How to cope*

9. op cit, p.4



Part 3 looks in more detail at the emotional impact of being undocumented, its implications for mental health, and on family life, whether here or at a distance. It also details the hopes and fears participants expressed: fears for their ongoing safety and their stay here, and hopes for a more fulfilling future.

### 3a. How it feels

*It is hard to settle in one place to be honest, there are many day by day (instances); when I want to work or I want to do something, that is stopping me. I cannot have fun properly, I cannot relax. Always thinking; when I came here for this interview I was thinking: it is alright to do this? Am I right to do this? Because I never know, I don't know. I know I am fine here and all, but you lived like this for so long that you don't know what to think anymore. It is a bit psychological.* Tibor, Europe

The impact of months and years of clandestine living is bound to be 'a bit psychological.' This is not to say that most undocumented migrants' response to their past and current situation is pathological, or leads to mental health problems. To be unhappy or angry about deprivation and isolation is a normal response.

Only one of our participants was entirely positive about his situation: Qadi entered the country without contact with the immigration authorities, and earns a good living as a chef:

*I'm always ready to go. But if I'm not caught I would like to stay, I'm happy to take the risk.*

Yolanda, also employed, finds much to enjoy in her life here, but is still aware of the costs:

*I am cross, disappointment, I feel frustrated, because it is not normal to be in a country for 12 years and you are not allowed to go back to see your family.*

People who had come to the UK in an effort to send money home might feel diminished when this was not possible:

*Sometimes paid work, sometimes voluntary work. There is no family*

*here and most importantly, cannot support my family, so this is a bad thing to think about.* Parvez, Asia

Finding meaningful activity was important for several people:

*Lots of volunteering. Playing on the computer. Assisting my friends with studies. Keeping myself up to date with technology.* Ivan, Central/Southern Africa

*At the moment I am doing voluntary work to keep myself sane.* Guy, Central/Southern Africa

*I've been volunteering, and a bit of studying through charities. I did a diploma in HIV and Aids and I trained to become a health trainer; so I can talk to people with HIV on how to live positively. I haven't been doing this recently because I have been tired. But I do still do complimentary therapy with people with HIV and Aids to help with their treatment.* Miriam, Central/Southern Africa



*"I do some voluntary work, in a charity shop and sometimes I teach refugees sewing. But it's only voluntary work. I want to get work because it is good for me and so I can help myself"*

Being able to help other people was clearly a source of self-respect:

*I do some voluntary work, in a charity shop and sometimes I teach refugees sewing. But it's only voluntary work. I want to get work because it is good for me and so I can help myself. When I help other people with asylum problems this makes me feel very good. If I couldn't help anymore I would feel very bad.* Lila, Asia

The difficulty of managing without this kind of structure could itself be an incentive to be of use to other people:

*I would like to feel at ease and I can't because I can't do anything now. Not studying. If all goes well, I want to help others. I don't want others to suffer like me.* Xaviere, aged 16, Central/Southern Africa

Nevertheless, chronic uncertainty affected people's general well-being, and a number of people reported feeling stressed:

*It is not easy. Sometimes you are scared. You are scared of the postman, what the Home Office will say in the letter he delivers. You don't sleep well. You have stress. Everyday, you have pain. Every month, you go in to sign and you are not sure if you will be detained.* Ursule, Central/Southern Africa

Some people identified their problems as an issue of mental health. Several participants said they were or had been clinically depressed, like Habiba and Debre, both from the East Africa:

*I think I am depressed, I get up in the morning, take my medication, I have arthritis, thyroid problems and diabetes. It makes me very tired. I don't even want to comb my hair, I don't care what clothes I put on. I just want to sleep.*

*I have depression and have been on anti-depressants. I became depressed when I left work. I felt bad before, being on my own, but I was being paid and able to help myself through working. But now because of the problems happening to me I feel physically and mentally disabled.*

More worryingly, others, like Jean-Marie, expressed distress but were not receiving treatment:

*I am not stable; my mind is in pieces. I don't know what will happen to me.*

These painful statements are hardly surprising, given the practical and emotional demands on

undocumented migrants, many of whom had already had traumatic experiences before coming to the UK. It should be noted however that many refugees, and psychotherapists working with them, regard these feelings as a normal response to abnormal circumstances, and argue against medicalising the experience. Derek Summerfield, formerly of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, writes in The Psychiatrist journal:

*The frequent references to refugee 'mental health problems' (a term that is often used loosely, or figuratively), and concern about access to services, may sometimes belie the complex realities at stake. Even those who have overcome the initial hurdles, including the right to remain in the UK, may continue to grapple with dilemmas rooted in a broken world – disrupted trajectories, loss of status and cultural alienation – for which psychiatry and talk therapy do not have solutions.<sup>10</sup>*

What is also striking, however, is the resilience with which people managed to cope. Religious faith was a resource to some:

*I have a lot of problems. When I read the Qur'an I feel peace.* Lila, Asia

*I trust in God, you know. He is the one who creates. He is the one who give me anything; He's the one who's planning for me, so I keep praying for it.* Fuad, East Africa

*I go to church and get the spiritual and emotional support that I need there.* Patricia, Central/Southern Africa

The support of friends and other groups could make a big difference to people's ability to cope:

*Friends mostly. It is everything. The reason why I kept my sanity.* Ivan, Central/Southern Africa

*Even though I have my relative, I feel closer to the people in my HIV support group. I am relaxed with those people. We talk about what to do and give each other advice.* Jane, Central/Southern Africa

Although several people mentioned family members as a source of support, there was remarkably little detail. It may be that families are too close to offer a useful perspective on the situation; or simply that family support is daily and low-key.

The faith groups and charities that offered practical help could also be a source of emotional comfort:

*Charity: the people who help you, when you talk, they understand you. If I have a problem they know*

10. Summerfield, D: *Asylum seekers, refugees and mental health.* The Psychiatry, 2001

*how I feel. They don't give money but advice. It makes me feel better. Veronique, Central/Southern Africa*

Sometimes informal networks can provide a welcome change of focus:

*I go to a few places, a shisha (water-pipe) place, and a 'Halal pub!' as I call it. We discuss ideas with Muslims and non-Muslims. It means a lot. You can forget about not being allowed to work. You can relax, laugh and talk. Otherwise you will be depressed. Raqiya, East Africa*

Raqiya went on to explain how she puts her current experience into perspective:

*Waiting for status is very depressing. People don't always understand what we go through. We can't move forward. Unless someone experiences that, they can't understand the effect it can have.*

*They think, you eat, you sleep; that is enough. For me being undocumented is dreadful, but compared to what I've been through (before reaching the UK), it is nothing.*

### 3b. Family life

People leave their home country to find a way to support their family, or to bring their immediate family to safety; or, very often, in situations of conflict they have to leave their family behind.



In the difficult circumstances of being undocumented, family support may be what people most yearn for. Additionally, as we have seen, the inability to provide support to family at home can be very demeaning. Our participants had a variety of family situations, but none were uncomplicated.

A few people had family members with them in the UK:

*I came here when my husband died, he had a stroke. I was living on my own in (home country) after he died, I can't live alone. I came to visit my son; he got me a visitor's visa and wanted to help support me. Lila, Asia*

Even that was not always a solution:

*After 11 years I got news about where my family were from a lady. She gave me my mother's number. They were living in Sweden; they saved some money and sent it to me so I could join them. But it didn't work, so they moved to the UK so I could join them there. My family is here. But Immigration doesn't see that. I was refused because of my age; they told me I didn't need my family at my age. Raqiya, East Africa (she was 24 at the time).*

Living with family members might be a relief in some ways, but could have its own strains:

*I'm living with my sister. But it's very hard as I'm putting pressure on their marriage. Khadija, Asia*

*When I first came I lived with my sister. When she found out I had HIV, she changed. I had to sleep on the floor and she would open the window in my room, even during the winter. Jane, Central/Southern Africa*

Eight people were in the painful situation of not knowing what had happened to their family at home:

*I haven't had contact with them for 7 years. I have 3 children; they're 14, 12 and 9 years old. The Red Cross tried to find them but didn't. Veronique, Central/Southern Africa*

*I have a son in South Africa, he used to contact me by telephone but this stopped. I don't have a mobile number for him. I had a daughter and she was sick. So she went to the hospital*

*and the doctors gave her an injection. She had to walk back from the hospital and got sick on the way and she died. I want to find my son. I'm old and sick now, and I haven't seen my son. I haven't seen him in 8 years. I don't know his situation; if he has housing or not, even if he is still alive. I just want to see my son before I die, that's all. Habiba, East Africa*

Others, particularly those who had come from economic rather than political reasons, were in regular contact with family at home:

*I am married, I have two children but they are all grown-up and I am a granddad now. I have two grandchildren one is 1 year old the other is few months. I see them through Internet. I sent most of my money back home. Wei, Asia*

For people who had faced persecution, even family contact might have to be guarded:

*Back home. Children: two daughters and one son. Daughter scared to say much. The intelligence in my country know how to trace me. Patricia, Central/Southern Africa*

And distance itself could cause difficulties:

*It is a difficult situation; I am married back in Colombia, but separated, I mean I am here for many years, you can imagine what this has meant to my marriage. I have two daughters and I support them, I am here to support them. One is now a doctor the other one is still studying. Not being able to see them has influenced me and my life really. And of course theirs. Salvador, Latin America*

Yolanda, also from Latin America, spoke eloquently about the complex feelings involved in living away from ones original family:

*Apart from my boyfriend I have an auntie and my cousin so they are my family here.. I am very close to them. They are my family and then I have my friends of course, my boyfriend we didn't marry yet because we cannot do it officially. In (country of origin) I have brothers and sisters, my mother and father. I have a niece she is one and of course I never saw her. I am really close to them I keep in touch everyday.*

*I communicate with webcam every week; we have Internet conversation every week. The first time we saw each other on webcam it was very hard. My dad was crying and still cries whenever I call them he cries every day. My mum is the stone of the family. My brother is strong but sometime he breaks-down. He makes beautiful paintings and he saves the special ones for me so I have a lot of paintings*

*waiting for me in (country of origin). My sister is also studying and working and I do help her. I pay my brother education, the disabled one; because his education is so expensive I have to help out with money.*

We quoted Yolanda earlier in the report, explaining why she feels she can't have children while she's undocumented: for practical reasons, because she isn't entitled to maternity healthcare; and for emotional ones, because she doesn't want to inflict the problems of her status on a child. This is another way, often ignored, in which family life is impeded by immigration status: the basic human need to start and bring up a family becomes unattainable.

For many of our participants, the hope of finally regularising their status was intimately linked with the desire to reunite the family:

*Because I don't have documents; I can't bring my family here. I haven't seen my child in 4 years. I'm not happy at the moment. I think about my family, my child - I want to see them. It is natural, even a lion must be with its cubs. Dimitri, Europe*

### 3c. Hopes and fears

To ask undocumented migrants what they fear most may seem redundant. Over half our participants, especially those who had sought asylum, lived with the terror of forced return:

*If my Judicial review doesn't succeed and I am deported. I don't know what happens to my life, I have had nightmares of being handcuffed or deported. Barbara, East Africa*

*Actually my situation is not good, always relying on friends and also my health is deteriorating. If it goes on like this they might catch me. Deportation is what I'm most frightened of. Debre, East Africa*

Others also had more immediate concerns:

*Very, very scared of my dreams, the stress, of work, not having money. Scared of Immigration yes, just of the waiting. Destitute, depression; people angry at me because very dirty. Bashir, Asia*

*Police and drunk people because sometimes they may attack people. I haven't experienced this, but am afraid it might happen. Parvez, Asia*

*My biggest fear is not knowing what is going to happen tomorrow. The HIV virus is very well contained, this will not kill me, it is all the other things that will, the stress. That's why there are*



*"I want to complete my course in English and I want to do some education on woman's rights, because I know of these problems"*



*many mental health problems linked to HIV. It is not just taking a tablet that stops the virus, there needs to be a holistic approach. Miriam, Central/Southern Africa*

The accompanying question was about hope. For one or two, this was hard to contemplate:

*Not much, I don't want to hope really. If I hope then it doesn't happen is very difficult. Well, no, I am human so I do hope, but then when you reapply and then you get your hope up and then it doesn't happen, it is really hard. The disappointment becomes too much, so don't hope too much. Tibor, Europe*

Many however sustained themselves with the thought of what they could do if their situation was regularised:

*I want to complete my course in English and I want to do some education on woman's rights, because I know of these problems. I want to be able to help women. Khadija, Asia*

*I want to be able to settle down; to work and pay taxes and support myself. Just to be like other people. Iman, East Africa*

*I would like to work in a hospital as a nurse. I am entitled to study in Scotland. Here they allow us. My son says I am Scottish. I would like to stay here. Ursule, Central/Southern Africa*

*To study, to get a job, to be free, to be a good mum. Fanos, East Africa*

For everyone, having status in the country was a prerequisite. Miriam told us:

*My biggest hope is that one day they will get round to my file, and answer positively and I can get on with my life. 10 years of my life have been wasted.*

And Salvador saw the contrast between his own situation and that of the many young British people who can travel to his country:

*To see my mum and family again, to come here again and go around all the country around, with freedom and without this constraint. That is my hope. To travel see the world, yes I would love to travel the world, without worries. This is what people do, why not me?*

## Part 4 *Perceptions*



As well as reporting on our participants' experiences in the UK, we wanted to know how they saw the host community, and how they felt they were seen. Contact with the host community could be minimal; or limited by language difficulties and employment options; or in some cases direct and personal. People's perceptions of the population might also be affected by their own lack of rights and experiences of immigration authorities.

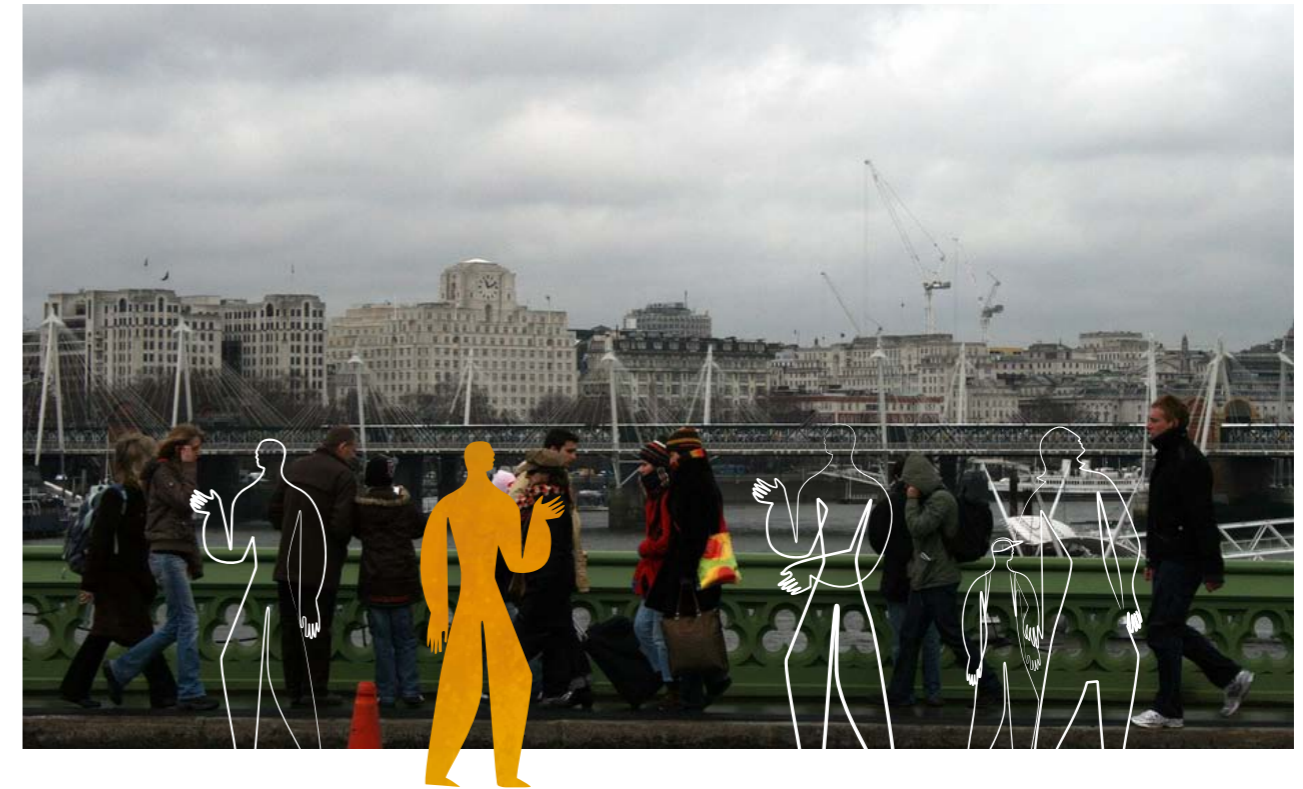
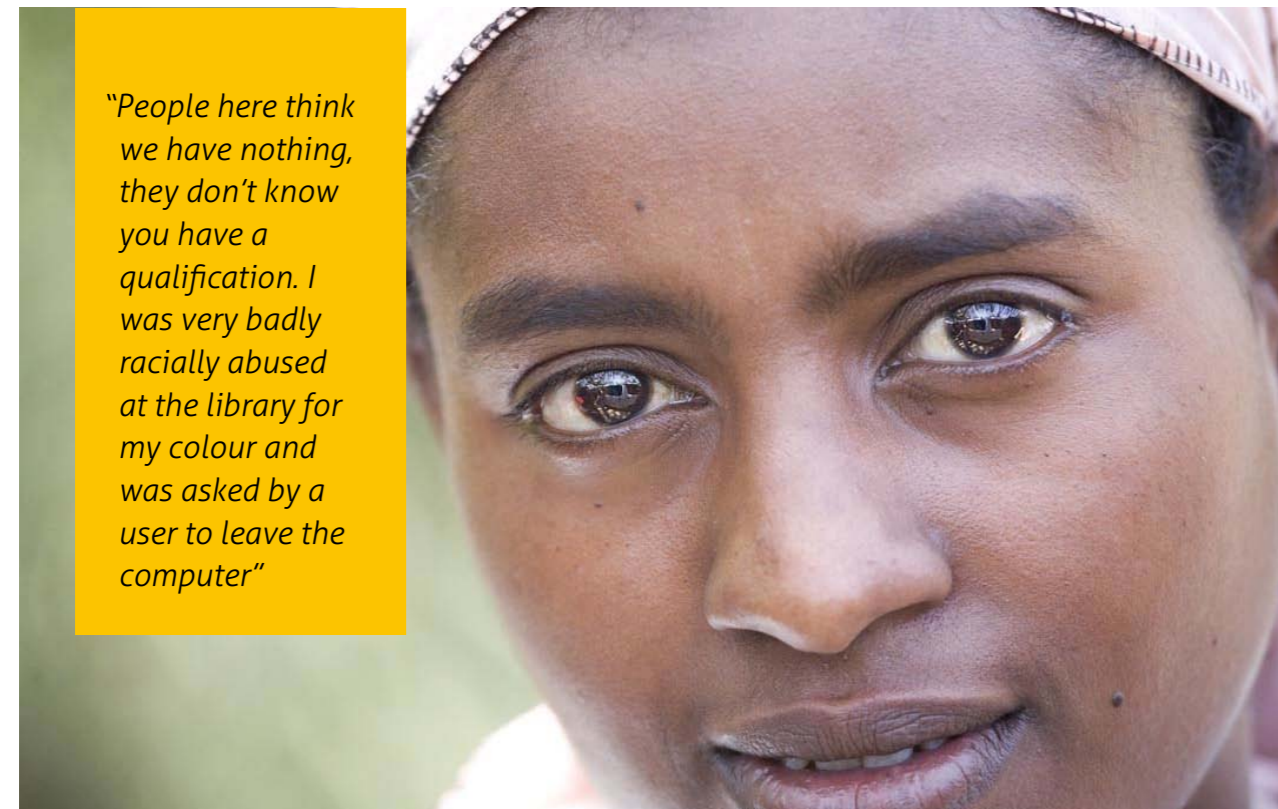
#### 4a. How do you think you're seen?

*What I have seen is that people in the UK see only bad things about migrants. They don't think about the positive things. But they should also see the positive things. Even immigrants could fight in Iraq give the opportunity. Not everyone is negative in society. There are bad and nice people as well.*  
Eric, Central/Southern Africa

Although not many people might go as far as to join the army, there was considerable frustration among our participants at being seen as idle and uneducated:

*People here think we have nothing, they don't know you have a qualification, you have an education. They think you come here because you're poor. I was very badly racially abused at the library for my colour and was asked by a user to leave the computer.*  
Suzanne, Central/Southern Africa

*People sometimes don't understand that it is not my choice. You are not able to work, but people ask me, 'Why are you not working, are you lazy?' I'm very tired of having to explain myself. Immigrants are seen as filling spaces and taking their places.*  
Raqiya, East Africa



Some people, like Habiba, felt that British people were hostile, but out of ignorance:

*I don't think they like us. We don't have any papers, we can't work. So we have to take, we have to beg, to live. What else can we do? But people blame us for everything. I don't blame them. I think if people knew why we had to beg; to ask for help, they might give us the right to work.. If they didn't have permission to work anyone would do this, if people are in this situation, you will do anything to survive.*

Those who had worked with British people had sometimes seen a more complex reaction. Tibor said:

*I never thought of it actually. But they do give me support at work and things. I used to work in this job at first and the guy didn't know I was undocumented; but after a year I felt I had to tell him because of him rather than me, he could get in trouble. We are still good with each other if we meet. But he didn't know at the beginning but then after I told him, he told me he had to let me go because it was dangerous for him. He was surprised, he would have helped me if he could but that was the situation.*

#### 4b. How you see the host community

The undocumented migrant, trying to be invisible, is in a good position to observe the life going on around her or him.

*I like the multicultural society; I meet so many people from around the world, hear so many languages and learn about so many cultures. I can speak Italian and Portuguese and my English is not bad so that gives me the chance to meet and speak to people.* Salvador, Latin America

*(I don't like) the drinking culture.* Rashid, Asia

*I don't like the way old people are treated. There is no respect. People die alone in this country. But Jane added: They are generous, I don't know of any other country that would give you a house and money.*

Even small things could be comforting:

*I am an animal lover, I like all species of dogs there are. I like to visit (local) park, and wait for people with their dogs, to touch their dogs. It makes me happy.* Barbara, East Africa

Some people pointed up the contrast between their own situation and the overall culture:

*I always believe that there are human rights in the UK; I don't get these human rights. But it is different to (my country) because there are human rights in the UK. But since I have become destitute I know I don't get the countries' human rights. So now nothing makes me happy, there is nothing to enjoy. Debre, East Africa*

*At the moment I don't have any rights. But I like the way they respect woman's right; like the education for woman. Khadija, Asia*

By way of contrast, we quote Yolanda at length:

*There are so many things I love about life in the UK. I love the radio, every morning I listen to Capital station. I love the TV programmes, I love the food, the culture. I love England, it is amazing. I have visited many part of the country, it's really beautiful. The people is very polite, I really love that. The most interesting thing is all the other cultures in here. It is really interesting because you can know the world in this city. Everyone is here. I like the summer here. People are so much nicer. People are out with their children in the playground , I just like to see that. And when people know you and you are part of a community it is a nice situation. I know my neighbours and they know us and they know we are Colombian and they have learnt to say "hola".*

*They know us so it is like you belong here, I am part of a community I am part of England. I love that. I love when the queen go out in her beautiful coach. I love that. I love the princes. I love the seasons. We don't have that in (home country). I love the countryside and in summer I love to travel during the weekends. I never been to Scotland but I know much of England. I love when you are in a small village and the people are so happy to see you there. They are happy to tell you where to go what to see. Actually, one couple I work for, the husband like to tell me what to visit and we do what he tell us, it is perfect.*

It should be remembered that Yolanda was working – a long, arduous working day, but satisfying and reasonably paid. It seems likely that people have to be economically reasonably secure, and not in fear for their lives, to allow themselves this intense enjoyment.



## Part 5 *What the organisation said*



Ten organisations from around the UK responded to our questionnaire about support for undocumented migrants. Some were small, local refugee and migrant community organisations; others were mainstream voluntary agencies.

Given the estimate of 500,000 undocumented migrants in the UK, the ten organisations between them saw very few. It seems likely that many people in this situation either don't know where help is available, or avoid any contact for fear of disclosure. However, one respondent wrote:

*Because they are turned away by the statutory organisations and generic voluntary sector agencies, they are desperate to get help, because they trust the community organisations such as ours and they do not trust easily others, due to language and cultural insensitivities.*

It is worth noting however, that very few of our migrant participants cited community organisations

as a source of support. This seems strange, since most participants were contacted through community organisations, and by agreeing to take part would seem to demonstrate that they trusted them.

The organisations taking part offered the services shown in the "Support/Organisations" chart below. As well as the obvious issues – status, destitution, housing – organisations outlined a range of issues that they saw affecting undocumented migrants:

*Fear and mistrust – many are worried about not getting status. Some are suicidal after waiting for too long.. Isolation – many are housed in remote area away from their communities – the housing*



Support	Organisations
Housing advice/accommodation	3
Healthcare advice	3
Education advice	2
Money/debt advice	1
Employment advice	1
Emotional support	2
Information	4
Advocacy	1
Money/vouchers	1
Volunteering opportunities	1
Leisure activities	1
Accessing community support	1

*providers do not consider this, they might put you in working class white areas where people are not used to see coloured persons. This leads to isolation and other problems, verbal abuse and threats, racism, especially in the current financial situation.*

*Don't know where to go. Some are very skilled, having no access to education/work makes them under pressure, frustrated. Don't have any goal, target. They don't know how to access the resources required.*

These observations confirm the experiences of many of our participants.

Nine out of our ten organisations cited funding as a barrier to work with this group:

*We have to use existing resources to support undocumented migrants – funders not interested.*

Legal constraints, and the perceptions of the public and policy-makers clearly contributed:

*Service providers and policy makers do not take this issue seriously.. Public sector organisations are not aware of these people.*

Three pointed out how complex the needs of undocumented migrants were. Eight of the ten

organisations worked with other agencies to support people in this situation; though one added that the main voluntary agency in the region had had to cut its own services.

We asked what policy or activities should be developed to improve the situation of undocumented migrants. Four organisations wanted an amnesty or other regularisation process:

*Other countries in Europe do regular regularisation process; in this country this is not happening.*

*Amnesty for everybody who has been here over 3 years. Time limit for looking at applications (for asylum) or give people status.*

Three wanted people to be able to work legally; two proper financial support. Two were looking for awareness-raising campaigns:

*Better understanding/disaggregation of the different kinds of undocumented migrants and the pathways that have led them to become undocumented. More policy and advocacy work relating to contribution these people make to society and how the vulnerable position they are in leads to exploitation.*

This report aims to make a contribution to these aims, which we share.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experience of compiling this report – and we hope of reading it – has been of engaging with intelligent, articulate people who want the same things that most of us want: to live securely, healthily, and in reasonable comfort; to be with and support the people we love; to know that we're contributing to the society we live in; to plan for the future; to develop our skills and personal strengths. Many have had these opportunities in the past, in their home country; some have had them here. In varying degrees, however, their present situation removes some or all of these options from them.

### Economic migrants in work

The people in our survey who best achieve these aims are those who came for economic reasons – and thus have less fear of having to return – and have been able to earn a living here in the alternative economy. Their income gives them access to acceptable accommodation; they can send money home; they feel secure enough to enjoy aspects of life in the UK. All this is still at considerable cost: long working hours, separation from close family for many years, since they can't leave the country and come back. Because of their status, they are at risk of exploitation by employers, being paid less than the minimum wage (or not at all), without normal employment rights such as paid leave for sickness or holiday. They are also highly likely to be under-employed, technical or professional qualifications unused as they carry out the low-paid, low-status jobs available. They have to remain healthy, since they have access only to primary healthcare, and that at the discretion of the practitioner; worse, they may feel they can't have children. It is a tribute to these hardworking people that they continue cooking our meals and cleaning our homes and offices. It is also an indictment of the global economy, that leaves them little choice if they want to feed their family, and leaves the economy of poor countries heavily dependent on remittances like theirs.

### Economic migrants not in work

Those who came to the UK to work and can't any longer are dependent on the generosity of family members, their own community, faith groups and charities. They may be simply unable to find work; they may become ill, not least because of the conditions they live and work in; they may have been arrested and imprisoned for illegal working, and unwilling to risk the same thing happening again. They have no access to the ordinary ways of improving their chances: education, training, job-search courses. The shame of being no longer able to support the family at home, after the financial and emotional investment in getting them here, can contribute to depression and anxiety, and thus make finding a job even harder.

### Refused asylum seekers

They join the largest group of our participants, the refused asylum seekers. The asylum determination system recognises that many of these cannot safely return to their country of origin, but still denies them both the chance to work and access to financial support at even subsistence level. These are the people who are documented in the sense of being known to the authorities, and yet still have no legal status. Many express the desire to work, to contribute to the country that has at least given them some level of shelter, and to make use of their skills and

experience. Significantly, many do voluntary work as a way of retaining dignity and purpose. Others, already traumatised by the experiences that made them seek asylum, struggle with depression and physical illness, with access only to primary medical care. Many are destitute and some street-homeless; others move from one spare bed to another. It is hard to make sense of a system that chooses to leave thousands in this situation, while at the same time exclaiming at human rights abuses in the countries they've fled from.

Overall, our participants are contending with enormous obstacles in the attempt to achieve a recognisable lifestyle: not luxurious, not idle, but ordinary. And within this context of deprivation and loss, what is most striking is the endurance people show. Even the most despairing – and there is plenty of despair – has scraped together enough hope to take part in this survey, to trust our interviewers and to believe that their contribution may make things better, if not for themselves, at least for others. Many have thoughtful and even grateful comments to make about the culture around them. They want to be law-abiding residents, to pay taxes and contribute their skills to the society they live in.

The recommendations we list in the next section are aimed at recognising what people like our participants have been through and continue to go through; and how their strength and generosity could contribute further to this country.



## Recommendations

MRC believes that it is inhumane to leave large numbers of people in a state of constant uncertainty and, often, extreme poverty. It is also counter-productive to keep them excluded from mainstream society, even though they are keen to contribute. This has an impact on their own well-being, but also on society as a whole.

For these reasons, MRC makes the following recommendations to policy-makers:

1. People who have been living undocumented in the UK for more than five years should be able to regularise their status, so that they can contribute in tax and national insurance, and have access to the services that their contribution has earned. This would also mean that they could join the formal economy, and would avoid at least the worst exploitation by employers. It cannot be wise for any government to leave large numbers of residents and their children socially excluded, not least when they themselves seek inclusion.
2. The asylum determination system has been heavily influenced by domestic political considerations for at least the past twenty years. Decisions are often arbitrary and ill-informed, and a quarter are found unsafe on appeal. The role of deciding on asylum cases should be given to an independent body, adequately resourced, with staff thoroughly trained to apply legal concepts and assess evidence.
3. A target should be set of deciding on all asylum applications within six months; this should be monitored and appropriate measures taken if the target is not reached.
4. Asylum seekers who have not had a decision within six months should have permission to work.
5. Competent immigration and asylum solicitors are hard to find, and early access to publicly funded legal advice is crucial to making a successful application. Without it, migrants and asylum seekers are left prey to unscrupulous and unlicensed practitioners. However, cuts in the legal aid budget have already made access to legal advice hard for many. As well as disadvantaging applicants, poor representation at the early stage results in more appeals and more cost to the public purse. As people's lives quite literally depend on the outcome of asylum cases, it is essential that the UK has a comprehensive, skilled representation service, available across the country.
6. The conflation of 'health tourism' and migration should be reversed. Access to primary and secondary healthcare should be restored to undocumented migrants. These should be entitled to free primary healthcare, as well as care for pregnancy, childbirth and treatment of all serious conditions. Healthcare providers should not be expected to do the work of the UK Borders Agency, not least because of the confusion and risk of unlawful refusal of essential care.
7. The social inclusion, employability and ultimate adaptation of all migrants depend heavily on their English language skills. ESOL courses at all levels should be available to amnestied migrants, and to asylum seekers from early in their stay in the UK. This implies not only re-introducing the legal right to asylum seekers, but ensuring an adequate provision of courses.

## APPENDIX

### Further reading

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