living on the edge of despair: destitution amongst asylum seeking and refugee children
The Children’s Society is increasingly concerned about reports of destitute asylum seeking and refugee children across England. In a two-week survey carried out by local charities in Birmingham in 2007, 14 out of 105 destitute asylum seekers seeking help had children. This is mirrored by national studies. By destitution we mean lack of regular access to basics, like food, medicine and a place to live.

The research
We conducted interviews with 13 destitute families and young people, collected eight case studies from professionals and interviewed eight professionals to determine the causes and consequences of destitution for children.

The findings are stark. We uncovered stories of children growing up in households without food, heating or toys, mothers who felt forced to prostitute themselves to survive, young people in care cut off from any help at 18 becoming homeless, and pregnant women who cannot afford to eat or access healthcare.

Our study shows some children are growing up in destitution. All of the families we interviewed had been destitute for several months. One family had been without financial support for four years.

Our study is based in the West Midlands where charities and community groups are very active in supporting large numbers of destitute people. But The Children’s Society’s experience suggests children are destitute in other areas of England as well. We are currently supporting destitute children and young people in London, Oxford, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle. Official estimates suggest there are at least 283,500 refused asylum seekers still in the UK. They are not allowed to claim benefits and not allowed to work.

How does destitution affect children?
Children in the families we interviewed were growing up in dirty, unsafe, overcrowded conditions, moving frequently. One family of six were living in a single room. Many families were in hostels where they were afraid of other residents’ behaviour and their property and food was stolen. Some had no heating or electricity.

Children and their families were in constant fear, both of return, and because they were living in unsafe places and were vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Two children had been conceived as a result of sexual exploitation. Pregnant women we interviewed did not have enough to eat, and one was homeless during her pregnancy. Families struggled to access health care and some were not entitled to it. We came across one case where a destitute mother was given a £3000 bill for maternity care.

Children were frequently hungry. Some children were only able to eat once a day and sometimes their parents did not eat for several days on end. Children did not have the space, resources or opportunities to play and develop. Some children did not have access to healthcare or education, and were not able to learn English or to read and write in any language.

The parents were extremely stressed and this had a strong impact on their children’s emotional wellbeing. Many of the families were single parent families and some of the mothers had experienced rape and torture before they arrived in the UK. Many were depressed and felt powerless because they could not care for their children.
What should these families be entitled to?
Families claiming asylum, who are destitute, are entitled to asylum support. They are given accommodation outside of London and the South East (if they have nobody to stay with) and cash, at 70% of income support levels. They are not allowed to work.

Families recognised as refugees are allowed to work and claim benefits like anybody else in the UK. They have 28 days to leave their accommodation and find somewhere else to live when they are granted asylum. This can be a vulnerable time for families which can lead to temporary destitution.

Families who are refused asylum are not allowed to work, but usually continue to get asylum support, like asylum seeking families, until they are removed from the UK, in recognition of the fact that there are children involved. There are two exceptions to this:
- Under Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 the Government has the power to stop all money and accommodation to a family. When they believe a family are not taking ‘reasonable’ steps to leave the UK, they can ban local authorities from supporting the whole family. This means children must remain on the streets with their parents, or go into care without them.
- Single asylum seekers who are refused asylum but cannot return home immediately can get Section 4 (hard case) support, provided under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This is typically a hostel bed and £67 in vouchers every two weeks. Women who are refused asylum before giving birth are treated as single adults. This means they cannot work or claim benefits. A condition of Section 4 support is that the person must agree to leave the UK when it is safe for them to do so.

Families can sometimes get extra help from local authority children’s services departments but this depends on their immigration status and the local authority’s own criteria for providing help.

Why are children destitute?
Nine of the 13 families we interviewed had been refused asylum. This meant they were not allowed to work, or claim benefits. Many of these families were scared to return home for fear of their lives.

Some women had given birth after having been refused asylum. Where Section 4 (hard case support) was the only option left to families they were afraid to sign up to it because they were too scared to go home. The families came from a range of countries including Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Afghanistan. Some families had signed up for Section 4, however this was not the end of their problems – interviewees described inappropriate accommodation for children and limitations of the voucher support system which prevented them from accessing the essentials they needed for their babies.

There were a wide range of reasons given by the families as to why they were unable to access financial help and accommodation. It was clear as that there was a great deal of confusion as to entitlements and where to go for help. Families described how they found it hard to get any help from the local authorities children’s services departments.
because they could not prove they were eligible for help even when they were, and
found it hard to advocate for themselves.

Nearly all (10) of the families did not receive adequate legal
representation during their asylum claim. This ranged from having no legal
representation at all, to having no legal representation at various stages, and seven
families said the advice had been poor. Professionals said this was, in their opinion, the
main cause of destitution as it was directly responsible for an asylum claim failing and
the family becoming destitute. Many of the families were attempting to make fresh
asylum claims.

One Romanian family had become destitute when Romania joined the EU and they were
no longer classed as asylum seekers. It meant they had to find work and were not allowed
to claim benefits. The Home Office stopped supporting them immediately and they
could not find work, but were too afraid to return to Romania. Two families became
destitute because they claimed asylum after being in the UK for some time. The Home
Office would not support them because they had not claimed asylum immediately, on
entry. Two young people had been challenged about their age. They had fallen through
the gap between child and adult support and as a result they became destitute.

The Children’s Society is determined that, in the future, no child or young
person will have to grow up in destitution, like the children in this report.

The full version of this report is available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/research

The Children’s Society is a leading children’s charity committed to making childhood
better for all children in the UK. Key among our areas of operation is the work we
do with refugee children and their families, protecting their rights, campaigning on
their behalf and helping them rebuild their lives in new communities. We stand by children.
We fight for their childhood. We never give up.

For further information please contact:
Lisa Nandy, Policy Adviser, Tel: 020 7841 4400 ext 5010
lisa.nandy@childrenssociety.org.uk

Nicky Clarke, Programme Manager, Midlands Refugee Project, Tel: 0121 236 3968
nicola.clarke@childrenssociety.org.uk

The Children’s Society, Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London, WC1X 0JL

References

1 We have used the term “asylum seeking and refugee children” to refer to children whose parents are seeking
sanctuary in the United Kingdom, regardless of their official immigration status.
3 Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK, 2006.
5 The Government states they provide less money because families seeking
asylum have their utility bills paid for them.

This document can be made available in alternative formats

Charity registration No. 221124 | Images: © shutterstock