



Chance or choice?

Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK

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The Refugee Council commissioned *Chance or Choice*, a major independent research study, to investigate the decisions made by asylum seekers who come to the UK and explore the extent to which these decisions are a reflection of chance or choice. The research, drawing on in-depth interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, was carried out by Professor Heaven Crawley of Swansea University.

Key findings

- Most asylum seekers had been in fear of their lives in their home countries and had often had to leave within only a few days or weeks. The primary objective for all was reaching a place of safety.
- Over two-thirds did not specifically choose to come to the UK to claim asylum. Most only discovered they were going to the UK after leaving their home country or even upon arrival. Some people wanted to go to countries other than the UK but were unable to do so.
- Most people fleeing for their lives were helped to leave by an external party or agent, who made the key decisions about their destination and helped to facilitate the journey to safety.
- There is no evidence that asylum seekers came to the UK because of access to welfare or work. Three-quarters had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK and most had no expectation that they would receive support. There is no evidence to suggest that the UK welfare system was considered more generous than elsewhere.
- 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 underlying that decision.
- Around a third came from countries which had previously been British colonies or under British administration. For the minority who made choices about where to claim asylum, historical and colonial links appear to play an important role. Language was not found to be a significant factor.

Policy context

The UK, along with other European countries, has responded to concerns about the number of asylum applications and perceived weaknesses in its asylum system by making significant changes to its asylum policy and practice.

Since 2003 the number of asylum applications in the UK has fallen dramatically. The Home Office has attributed the decline to changes to the asylum system. There is, however, no clear evidence of a causal relationship between asylum policies and the level of asylum applications. It seems likely that most of the fall in applications is consistent with a common trend of falling applications across Europe.

Since there is no legal way to travel to the UK for the specific purpose of claiming asylum, refugees are forced to travel irregularly in 'mixed flows', and encounter the same border controls as other irregular migrants. There is evidence that pre-entry measures have had the greatest impact on the number of asylum claimants, not so much deterring applications as preventing them.

Policies to remove social and economic opportunities for asylum seekers once they have entered a country of asylum have had little or no effect on the number of applications.

The research

The research is based on evidence gathered through a review of the existing literature and semi-structured interviews with 43 refugees and asylum seekers living in the UK, including ten who arrived as separated children. Focus group discussions were also held with 25 people.

Research participants were asked about their knowledge of the UK before their arrival, whether they planned to come to the UK, and how they thought they would survive.

The demographic characteristics of research participants broadly reflect those of all asylum seekers coming to the UK. The research participants came from a wide range of countries including Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran and Zimbabwe.

The decision to leave

There is clear evidence that conflict is the single biggest reason why asylum seekers come to the UK and that most asylum seekers are primarily concerned with escaping from persecution or war. It is these 'push' factors that are decisive in the decision to migrate, rather than the 'pull' of any particular destination country.

The majority of respondents (over 80 per cent) had very little time to plan their journey and left within a matter of days or, at most, weeks of deciding their safety was at risk if they did not leave the country.

The decision to come to the UK

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 underlying that decision.

Just over two-thirds of respondents did not choose to come to the UK to seek asylum. This includes all but one of those who arrived as separated children. Many respondents described having little or no knowledge of the UK. Some were aware of the existence of Europe but had no knowledge about the differences between individual countries or even that individual countries existed.

The single most important reason why these asylum seekers had ended up in the UK was because a decision to bring them here had been made by others. Agents played a very significant role in providing access to travel documents and facilitating the journey. Most only became aware that they were going to the UK after leaving their country of origin. Some, including many of those who arrived as children, only found out that they were in the UK after their arrival. Some people wanted to go to countries other than the UK but were unable to do so.

Social networks and the role of agents

A minority of people had direct or close contact with others in the UK prior to leaving their country of origin and even fewer received any information that might have directly informed the decision making process.

Strict migration controls across Europe mean that many migrants who wish to claim asylum have no choice but to arrive illegally. This means many asylum seekers must rely on agents in order to secure access to protection. Approximately two-thirds of research respondents indicated that they paid for the services of an agent.

There is evidence that agents are becoming increasingly influential in determining the destination of asylum seekers. There is significant variation in the range of services provided by agents. Agents are both the villains and the heroes of the piece. If it were not for the services that agents provide many asylum seekers would not be able to escape from conflict, political repression and human rights abuse. On the other hand, most agents are involved in making arrangements for an individual's journey for reasons of financial gain and do not necessarily have the interests and safety of individuals at the forefront of their considerations. With the exception of one person, all of the research participants who had been granted refugee status had used the service of an agent to travel to the UK.

The journey to the UK

The journey was relatively straightforward for the minority of asylum seekers who travelled directly to the UK and entered using a legitimate visa or travel documents provided by an agent.

However, many respondents described complex journeys. Some of those who travelled through other countries on their way to the UK had initially thought that they would be safe and had intended to stay there. Others had spent weeks or even months in 'transit countries' whilst they decided on their next steps or raised additional funds. They did not consider it would be safe for them to apply for asylum in these countries. Several commented on the implications of political relationships between countries for the ability to secure protection and on the treatment of co-nationals in the countries through which they passed.

Knowledge of the UK

Very few asylum seekers had any detailed or meaningful knowledge of the UK asylum or welfare system.

Most respondents had been working in their home country and expected they would be able to and need to work in order to support themselves and their families when they came to the UK. Very few were aware that they would not be allowed to work. Three-quarters had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK and most had no expectation they would be given financial support. There is no evidence that respondents consider the UK welfare system to be more generous than that of other countries.

Around a third came from countries which had previously been British colonies or under British administration. For the minority who made choices about where to claim asylum, historical and colonial links appear to play an important role.

The single biggest area of British life with which respondents were familiar was football. Language was not found to be a significant factor in this research. Nearly half (44 per cent) described their English language skills before coming to the UK as 'very poor' and many said that they spoke no English at all when they first arrived.

Many respondents, particularly those who had been persecuted as a result of their political activities, commented on the importance of human rights in the UK and on the perceived independence of the judiciary and systems of law and order.

There is clear evidence that conflict is the single biggest reason why asylum seekers come to the UK and that most asylum seekers are primarily concerned with escaping from persecution or war.

Policy recommendations

Current political and policy debates in the UK are underpinned by the assumption that asylum decision making is motivated primarily by economic considerations and reflects rational choices by asylum seekers based on full knowledge of asylum systems in different countries of origin. The findings of the research undermine these existing assumptions about why asylum seekers come to the UK. There are clear implications for UK policy and practice including:

- The need for joined-up policies at the UK and European levels to address the causes of forced migration;
- The importance of establishing protection sensitive border controls which can ensure that individuals are able to flee conflict and human rights abuse and, in turn, reduce the power and reach of agents;
- The need for the asylum determination process to be underpinned by a clearer understanding of the circumstances under which asylum seekers leave and the difficulties they face in securing legitimate travel documents;
- The need for policy makers and politicians to accept that there is no evidence to support the assumption that either the asylum system or policies for support and integration act as 'pull' factors, and to introduce changes to policy on work and welfare support to ensure that asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives;

- The need for politicians, policy makers and the media to change the terms of the public and political debate on asylum by explaining more clearly the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK and challenging (rather than reinforcing) the idea that the asylum system acts as a 'pull' factor;
- The need for further research on what motivates agents to bring asylum seekers to the UK, on whether there are particular factors that are more or less important for people from certain countries and about the motivations and knowledge of people who do choose to come to the UK.

Asylum policy making should be based on evidence rather than assumption. Many recent policies are driven by fundamental misperceptions about the extent to which asylum seekers actively 'choose' to come to the UK.

It is only through in-depth research, such as that undertaken for this report, that it is possible to identify the complex set of factors that lead individuals to claim asylum in the UK rather than elsewhere.

The findings of this research
undermines the existing
assumptions about why asylum
seekers come to the UK.

The full report *Chance or Choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK* by Professor Heaven Crawley of Swansea University is published by the Refugee Council and is available as a free download from www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

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