

Tell it like it is: The truth about asylum

This is a guide to the facts about asylum. It will be of use to anyone who wants accurate information about asylum, and was originally created for use in the 2005 General Election. However you come to find yourself talking about the issue, this guide has some of the often forgotten facts and is designed to dispel some of the myths that have been spread in certain sections of the media, and by some politicians, during the 2005 election campaign and beyond.

This guide was produced by the Refugee Council in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council, the Welsh Refugee Council, Refugee Action and Student Action for Refugees (STAR).



Asylum seekers are looking for a place of safety. In fact...

- Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and to remain here until the authorities have assessed their asylum application. Therefore, there is no such thing as an 'illegal' or 'bogus' asylum seeker.
- Asylum seekers do not come here for economic reasons. The top ten refugee-producing countries in 2003 all have poor human rights records or are places where war or conflict is on-going (*Institute for Public Policy Research, 2003*).
- The 1951 UN Refugee Convention guarantees the right to apply for asylum. It has saved millions of lives. No country has ever withdrawn from it.
- Most refugees are not in a position to choose their destination country. If they are, they come to the UK because they have a family member or contact here.
- Many refugees hope to return home at some point in the future provided the situation in their country has improved.

Britain's asylum system is very tough. In fact...

- The UK asylum system is strictly controlled and complex. It is very difficult to get asylum.
- Asylum applications have more than halved over the last two years. There were 33,930 asylum applications in 2003 - and the number is falling. In comparison, around 90 million people visited the UK in 2003 - some 300,000 foreign students were studying here and 100,000 people were on work permits (*based on Home Office figures for 2003*).
- The reduction in asylum applications is partly due to measures which prevent people from getting to the UK to apply for asylum.
- People who do get here have their applications processed speedily. Four out of five asylum applications are decided within two months.
- Home Office decision-making remains poor. While nine out of ten asylum applications are initially refused, 20 per cent of cases that go to appeal are successful.

Poor countries - not the UK - look after most of the world's refugees. In fact...

- Two thirds of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in camps.
- Africa and Asia between them host over 60% of the world's refugees. Europe looks after just 25%.
- Conflict in Sudan has forced four million people from their homes. More than half a million have fled the country, mainly to neighbouring countries such as Chad. Fewer than 1,000 Sudanese applied for asylum in the UK in 2003.
- The UK is home to less than 2% of the world's refugees, around 200,000 people out of nearly 10 million worldwide.
- The UK is 9th in the league table of European countries for the number of asylum applications per head of population, behind countries like Cyprus and Luxembourg.
- In 2002, the UK ranked 22nd in the table of the world's refugee hosting countries on the basis of size, wealth and relative populations (*Above statistics are sourced from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*).

Refugee Council

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www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

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Who's who

Asylum seeker

Someone who is fleeing persecution in their homeland, has arrived in another country, made themselves known to the authorities, exercised the legal right to apply for asylum.

Refugee

Someone whose asylum application has been successful and who is allowed to stay in another country having proved they would face persecution back home.

Failed asylum seeker

Someone whose asylum application has been turned down and is awaiting return to their country. If it is not safe for unsuccessful asylum seekers to return, they may have to stay for the time being.

Illegal immigrant

Someone who has arrived in another country, intentionally not made themselves known to the authorities and has no legal basis for being there.

Economic migrant

Someone who has moved to another country to work.

Asylum seekers and refugees do not get large handouts from the state. In fact...

- Asylum seekers are not allowed to work and forced to rely on state support, set at 30% below normal income support.
- Asylum seekers do not come to the UK to claim benefits. In fact, asylum seekers know very little about the asylum system before they arrive (*Home Office Research Study 243 - Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers, 2002*).
- Asylum seekers do not jump the queue for council housing and they cannot choose where they live. The accommodation allocated to them is not paid for by the local council. It is nearly always 'hard to let' properties, which other people do not want to live in.
- Asylum seekers do not get special perks such as mobile phones or help to buy a car.
- Many asylum seekers are desperately poor. 85% of organisations working with them said that their clients experienced hunger, while 95% said their clients could not afford clothes or shoes (*Joint study by OXFAM and the Refugee Council, 2002*).

Asylum seekers and refugees are law abiding citizens. In fact...

- A report by police chiefs concluded that the "vast majority of people seeking asylum are law abiding citizens" (*Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) of England, Wales and Northern Ireland Asylum Seekers Policing Guide*).
- The Home Office has stated there is no evidence that asylum seekers are any more likely to commit crimes than anyone else (*Immigration Minister Beverley Hughes, 19 March 2003 Hansard Column 821W*).
- Asylum seekers are more likely to be the victims of crime. The ACPO report expressed concern that asylum seekers feel unable to report incidents of racial harassment or violence.
- A recent report found there is a likely link between media reporting of asylum issues and race-related crime (*Media Image, Community Impact, Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR), July 2004, commissioned by the Mayor of London*).

Refugees contribute a lot to the UK. In fact...

- Many asylum seekers and refugees are well-educated and highly qualified (*Department of Work and Pensions, 2003*).
- More than 1,000 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association's database. Only 69 are employed in the health service. According to the BMA, it only costs £10,000 to prepare a refugee doctor to practice in the UK. But it costs £250,000 to train a doctor from scratch (*BBC News on-line, 16 June 2004*).
- Many refugees have academic or teaching qualifications. 754 refugee teachers are registered with London-based agencies alone (*Refugee Teachers Task Force, 2004*).
- Asylum-seeking children contribute very positively to schools across the country. This in turn enables more successful integration of families into local communities (*OFSTED report, October 2003*).
- In 2001, the only year for which figures are available, migrants to the UK, including asylum seekers and refugees, made a net fiscal contribution to the UK economy of £2.5 billion. (*Home Office, The Migrant population in the UK: fiscal effects, 2002*).

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