

The Truth About Channel Crossings

March 2023

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation devoted to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK. We provide a broad range of services to both children and adults, including an established and comprehensive service that supports refugees who have been resettled to the UK.

Introduction

During 2022, 45,755 men, women and children crossed the Channel in a small boat to reach the UK. Each of those people will have had their own experiences before, during and after making that crossing. Many will have been very traumatic.

This briefing uses published Home Office data to set out who these people are, where they are from, and how many are permitted to stay in the UK as refugees. It also looks at the reduction in safe routes and how they have no option but to take dangerous journeys to reach the UK. Finally, it looks at the potential impact of the Government's plans to prevent all people arriving across the channel from applying to stay in the UK as refugees.

The briefing shows that:

- Over 27,000 men, women and children who crossed the channel in 2022 – **two thirds of all those who made the crossing** - would be recognised as refugees if the UK Government processed their asylum applications.
- **7,177 children made the journey in small boats** – 16 per cent of all who made the journey.
- **Nearly half of those who crossed the channel came from just five countries** – Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Eritrea and Sudan. Three of those nationalities currently have asylum grant rates of 98% and the other two are 84% and 80%.
- With the exception of Ukrainians, there are **far fewer refugees arriving through safe routes than prior to the covid-19 pandemic**. Resettlement numbers are 75% lower than in 2019 and the number of family reunion visas issued is 40% below the pre-pandemic level.
- The UK Government's proposed legislation to prevent anyone who crossed the channel from having their asylum claim processed would leave **over 45,000 at risk of destitution and homelessness each year**, stuck in limbo and potentially facing long periods locked up in detention. If the returns agreement with Albania is implemented this number could be reduced to 36,082.

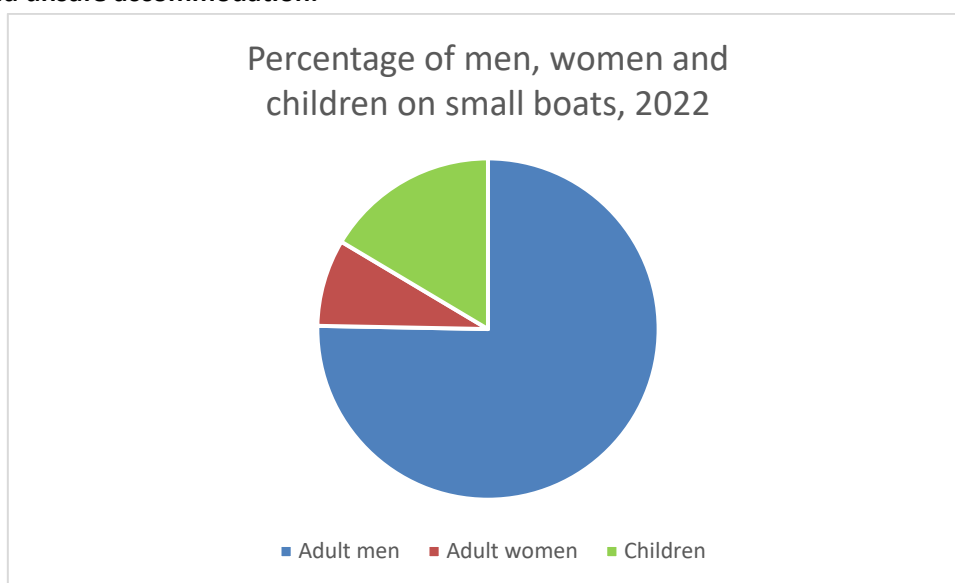
Unless otherwise stated, this briefing uses Home Office statistics published on 23 February 2023. Details of the methodology used are set out in Appendix A.

Gender breakdown

Home Office data shows that of those who made the journey last year:

- 15 in 20 were adult men
- 2 in 20 were adult women
- 3 in 20 were children

7,177 children were among those who crossed the channel during 2022. We know from our work with children who arrive alone, or as part of family groups, that they are very likely to be traumatised having undergone a dangerous, arduous journey. They are often then met with suspicion, have their age doubted, and can end up in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation.



Source: Refugee Council analysis of Home Office statistics year ending December 2022, *Irregular Migration to the UK data tables*, table Irr_02c <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022>

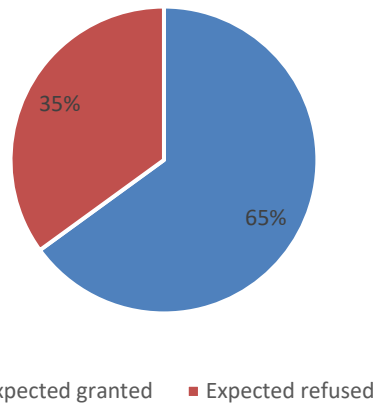
Nationality and numbers recognised as refugees

Men, women and children from more than 20 different nationalities crossed the channel in 2022 and the vast majority (90%) applied for asylum.¹ Only 340 of those applications, less than one percent, had been processed by the end of 2022. **However, based on the current asylum grant rates for those countries, Refugee Council's analysis has found that 27,816 of those people who crossed the channel – two thirds – would be recognised as refugees at the initial decision stage by the UK Government once their asylum claim was processed.** Given a significant number of people will be recognised as refugees after appealing their initial decision, the ultimate number is likely to be even higher.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-december-2022/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-december-2022#how-many-migrants-were-detected-arriving-in-the-uk-via-small-boats>

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Predicted asylum grant rate for those crossing the channel in 2022



Source: Refugee Council analysis of Home Office statistics year ending December 2022, Irregular Migration to the UK data tables, table Irr_02b; Asylum applications datasets, table Asy_D02. For 19 of the 20 stated nationalities, the asylum grant rate used is that for main applications between January 2022 and December 2022. The exception is for Albanians. While the grant rate for Albanians over that period overall was 47%, the analysis has instead used 25%. This reflects the significant differences in grant rates for Albanian men, women and children respectively, and is weighted by the overall age and sex breakdown of people who crossed the channel during 2022.

An estimated 35,811 people who made the crossing in 2022 came from just seven countries:

- 1) Albania
- 2) Afghanistan
- 3) Iran
- 4) Iraq
- 5) Syria
- 6) Eritrea
- 7) Sudan

People from three of those countries – Afghanistan, Syria, and Eritrea – had an asylum grant rate at initial decision of 98%, and those from Sudan and Iran had a grant rate of 84% and 80% respectively in 2022. People from those five countries accounted for nearly half (48%) of all those who crossed the channel last year.

Nationality	Arrivals via small boat in 2022	Asylum grant rate at initial decision in 2022
Albania	12,301	25%
Afghanistan	8,633	98%
Iran	5,642	80%
Iraq	4,377	54%
Syria	2,916	98%
Eritrea	1,942	98%
Sudan	1,704	84%

Channel crossings vs safe routes

In the first nine months of 2022 35,811 people from the seven countries set out above crossed the channel. **During the same period, only 1,025 people from those same countries were resettled through a safe route, working in collaboration with the UNHCR, to the UK.** The majority of those people were resettled from Syria, with only 19 and 10 people resettled from Eritrea and Iran respectively.

Nationality	Arrivals via small boat in 2022	People resettled to the UK in 2022
Albania	11,241	0
Afghanistan	4,781	72
Iran	3,594	10
Iraq	3,074	137
Syria	2,191	569
Eritrea	1,509	19
Sudan	1,211	218

This clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of refugees who make dangerous journeys being exploited by ruthless people smugglers have no choice – they do not have access to safe routes to reach the UK. There were no Ukrainians recorded as having crossed the channel during 2022 – as of 21 February 219,400 visas had been issued to people displaced by the war in Ukraine through either the Ukraine Family Scheme or the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.²

The safe routes available to refugees from other parts of the world are extremely limited, and fewer people are currently accessing them compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. Refugee resettlement provided in collaboration with the UNHCR is currently 75% lower than the pre Covid level in 2019, and refugee family reunion visas³ are 36% down on their pre-covid level as this table shows.

Safe Route	Resettlement arrivals / family reunion visas issued 2019	Resettlement arrivals / family reunion visas issued in 2022	Change	% change
Resettlement	5,612	1,185	-4,427	-75%
Family Reunion	7,456	4,473	-2,983	-40%

Source: Home Office statistics year ending December 2022, Asylum and resettlement summary tables, tables Res_01, Fam_01 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022>

New legislation in response to channel crossings

² [Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme \(Homes for Ukraine\) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022)

³ Adults with refugee status in the UK can apply to sponsor their close family members to join them. These family members are limited to spouses/partners and dependent children under the age of 18. There is no fee to apply for a visa, although people need to attend a Visa Applicant Centre to submit their application and, if their application is successful, pay for their travel to the UK.

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The Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has said that the Government will introduce further legislation with the stated intention of stopping people crossing the channel in small boats. On 4 January 2023, he said this legislation would make sure that “if you come to this country illegally, you are detained and swiftly removed.”⁴

While the detail of the legislation is not yet available, the intention appears to be that anybody who comes across the channel and has passed through another country will be in effect banned from applying for asylum in the UK. Instead, their claim would automatically be deemed inadmissible.

The Refugee Council has analysed what this would mean in practice. **Our analysis has found that if the Government were to implement this policy without additional returns agreements being in place, for example with the European Union, and if the number of people making the crossing in small boats remained the same as in 2022, it would leave 45,446 men, women and children – or 98.9% of those crossing – stuck in a permanent limbo.** They would not be able to be removed, but neither would they be able to progress an asylum application, work or access support from statutory services. If, as reported⁵, the Home Office’s estimate that channel crossings in 2023 could increase to 65,000 is accurate, then the number of people in that situation increases to 64,545.

This is based on the number of people the Home Office has been able to secure returns agreements for as part of the new inadmissibility process introduced on 31 December 2020. Between 1 January 2021 and 31 March 2022⁶, the Home Office issued 12,286 Notices of Intent where they believed someone’s claim may be inadmissible. However, up to 30 September only 83 inadmissibility decisions⁷ – which can only be made once the Home Office have an agreement with a third country for the removal of the individual concerned – have been issued. This means that the Home Office has only been able to get agreement that an individual can be removed in 0.7% of cases.

Applying that same success rate to all those who crossed the channel in 2022 would mean that 309 people were removed. Even if an additional 200 people were removed as a result of the Rwanda scheme becoming operational, this would still leave 98.9% - 45,246 people – unable to be removed.

Since 2014, UK Governments have also agreed eight bilateral agreements with the Albanian Government relating to migration issues. This includes an agreement for the readmission of respective citizens of the two countries.⁸ Despite being agreed on 8 July 2021, this agreement does not appear to have come into force. If it did, it could in theory allow the UK Government to more quickly return Albanians who arrive via small boats. In order to do this, the UK Government would need to make decisions on those asylum claims – they would not be able to be deemed inadmissible as that would prevent the return of that person to their country of nationality. Based on current asylum grant rates at initial decision, it is estimated that 25% of Albanians (3,075 people) would be successful in their asylum claim. The successful operation of the agreement between the UK and Albania could

⁴ [PM speech on building a better future: 4 January 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-building-a-better-future-4-january-2023)

⁵ See [Migrant crisis: 65,000 ‘will cross Channel in small boats this year’ | News | The Times](https://www.thetimes.com/news/world/migrant-crisis-65000-will-cross-channel-in-small-boats-this-year)

⁶ We have only used Notice of Intents issued up to the end of March 2022 as the Home Office’s guidance gives caseworkers up to six months to secure a removal agreement. Therefore, at the time of the Home Office’s latest statistics being published up to the end of September 2022, any cases where a Notice of Intent was issued within the previous six months could still be within the inadmissibility process. The Home Office did not provide updated inadmissibility data in the statistics published in February 2023. See [Inadmissibility – third country cases: caseworker guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/guidance/inadmissibility-third-country-cases-caseworker-guidance) for more information about the inadmissibility process.

⁷ See *Home Office statistics year ending September 2022, Asylum and resettlement summary tables, table Asy_09a*

⁸ [Agreement between the Government of the UK and the Republic of Albania on the Readmission of Persons \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/agreements/agreement-between-the-government-of-the-uk-and-the-republic-of-albania-on-the-readmission-of-persons)

increase the number of people removed from the UK to 9,473 people. This would still leave 36,082 unable to be removed, trapped in limbo.

If the number of people crossing the channel increased to 65,000 in a year then, based on previous arrivals and current asylum grant rates, this would result in 13,469 people removed overall (including 13,106 Albanians). This would then leave 51,331 stuck not having their asylum claim considered and being unable to be removed.

If the Government detained everyone who crossed the channel this would have a considerable cost implication. **There is currently no public information on how long individuals may be detained for under the Government’s plans, but as an indicative figure this could cost between £219 million per year (or £600,450 per day) to detain all 65,000 people predicted to cross the channel for 28 days, up to £1.408 billion per year (£3.86 million per day) to detain everyone for six months.**⁹ Considerable additional expenditure would also be required to expand the current capacity of the immigration detention estate, which is currently around 2,286 bed spaces.

Conclusion

Refugee Council’s analysis shows that the majority of people crossing the channel and applying for asylum in the UK would, if their claims were processed, be recognised as refugees by the Government. A significant number making the crossing are women and children. However, with the exceptions of those on offer for Ukrainians, there are exceedingly limited safe routes available. This means that refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK have no choice but to take dangerous journeys and be exploited by criminal gangs and people smugglers.

Rather than address the reasons why people are making such a dangerous journey, the Government’s planned legislation would, based on the Prime Minister’s clearly articulated intention, leave tens of thousands of people homeless and destitute, stuck in a perpetual limbo. It could also result in many thousands being held for long periods locked up in detention.

Appendix A

Estimated Channel Crossing arrivals and grant rates

	Nationality	Recorded channel crossings 2022	Asylum grant rates 2022 at initial decision (main applicants)	Number of people arriving predicted +ve initial asylum decision based on grant rates	Resettled 2022
1	Albania	12,301	25%	3075	0
2	Afghanistan	8,633	98%	8460	72
3	Iran	5,642	80%	4514	10
4	Iraq	4,377	54%	2364	137
5	Syria	2,916	98%	2858	569
6	Eritrea	1,942	98%	1903	19

⁹ Based on the current cost to detain one person per day of £120.42. See *Immigration Enforcement transparency data Q4 2022, table DT_02*

7	Sudan	1,704	84%	1431	218
8	Egypt	1,160	45%	522	0
9	Turkey	1,076	79%	850	1
10	India	683	2%	14	0
11	Ethiopia	514	69%	355	14
12	Vietnam	477	73%	348	0
13	Kuwait	382	85%	325	0
14	Georgia	300	21%	63	0
15	Pakistan	207	58%	120	44
16	Stateless	203	93%	189	0
17	Sri Lanka	176	71%	125	0
18	Yemen	153	99%	151	4
19	Algeria	130	19%	25	0
20	Libya	127	98%	124	0
	All other nationalities	691			
	Not currently recorded	1,961			
	Total	45,755			

Sources:

Small boat crossings: *Home Office statistics year ending December 2022, Irregular Migration to the UK data tables, table Irr_02b* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022>

Asylum grant rates and resettlement numbers: *Analysis of Home Office Statistics year ending December 2022, Asylum applications datasets, table Asy_D02* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets>

The asylum grant rate for Albanians is calculated as follows:

In the year to December 2022, the asylum grant rate at initial decision for Albanian men was 2%, women 86% and children (including where dependents) 87%. During 2022, 75% of those who crossed the channel in a small boat were adult men, 8% adult women, and 16% children. 12,301 Albanians crossed the channel in that same period. An estimated 8,980 would have been adult men (of whom 180 would be expected to get refugee status), 1,107 would have been adult women (941 getting status) and 2,214 would have been children (with 1,926 getting status). This estimate would mean that 3,047 of the 12,301 Albanians who crossed the channel would be predicted to have successful asylum claims, a grant rate of 25%.

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