

The Truth About Channel Crossings

January 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, 45,746 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 25,000 men, women and children who crossed the channel in 2022 – at least six out of ten of all those who made the crossing - would be recognised as refugees if the UK Government processed their asylum applications.
- 8,700 children made the journey in small boats – nearly 20 per cent of all who made the journey.
- 4 in 10 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 86% and 82%.
- 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 36% 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 32,247.

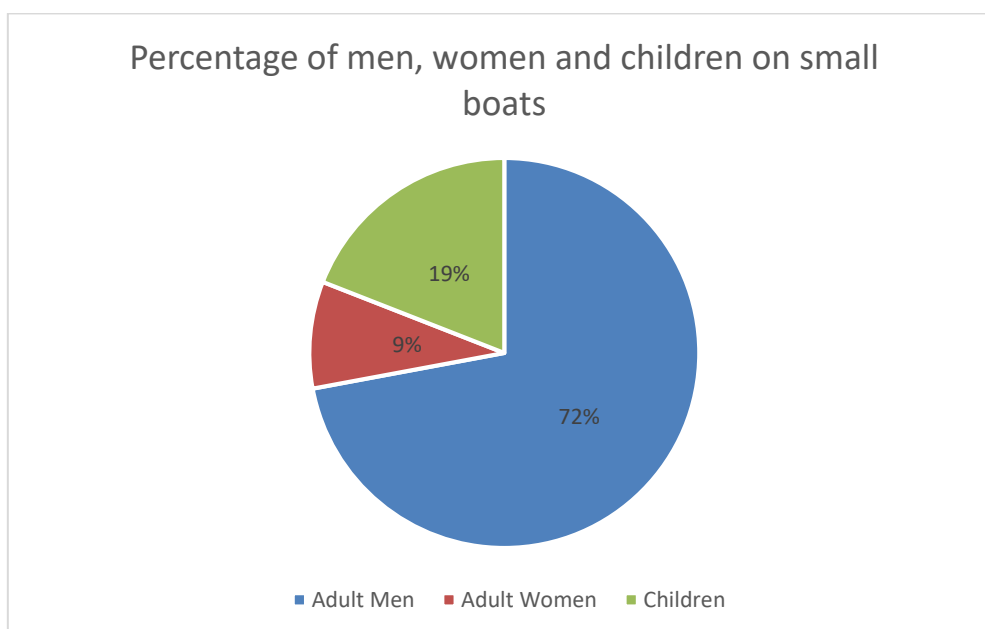
Detailed Home Office quarterly statistics covering the last three months of 2022 will be published at the end of February 2023. For the purposes of this briefing, where numbers are given for the whole of 2022 they are credible projections based on the statistics for January to September of that year. 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:

- 7 in 10 were adult men
- 1 in 10 were adult women
- 2 in 10 were children

This means that an estimated 8,692 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.



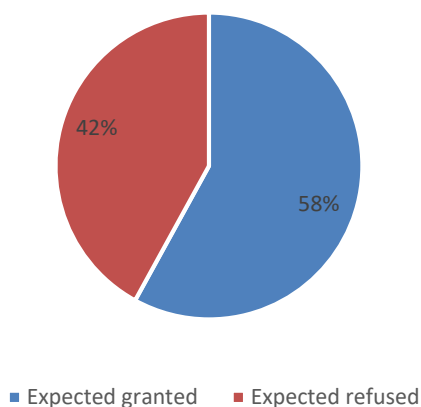
Source: Refugee Council analysis of Home Office statistics year ending September 2022, Irregular Migration to the UK data tables, table Irr_02c <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-september-2022>

Nationality and numbers recognised as refugees

Men, women and children from more than 20 different nationalities crossed the channel in 2022. **Based on the current asylum grant rates for those countries, Refugee Council's analysis has found that 25,119 of those people who crossed the channel – six out of ten - 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.

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Estimated asylum grant rate at the initial decision stage
for those crossing the Channel in 2022



Source: Refugee Council analysis of Home Office statistics year ending September 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 October 2021 and September 2022. The exception is for Albanians. While the grant rate for Albanians over that period overall was 50%, the analysis has instead used 16%. This reflects the significant differences in grant rates for Albanian men, women and unaccompanied children respectively, and is weighted by the overall breakdown of people who crossed the Channel between January and September 2022.

An estimated 34,461 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 86% and 82% respectively in the year to September 2022. People from those five countries accounted for an estimated 4 in 10 of all those who crossed the Channel last year.

Nationality	Estimated arrivals via small boat in 2022	Asylum grant rate at initial decision
Albania	15,569	16%
Afghanistan	6,622	98%
Iran	4,978	82%
Iraq	4,258	53%
Syria	3,035	98%
Eritrea	2,090	98%
Sudan	1,677	86%

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Channel crossings vs safe routes

In the first nine months of 2022 24,881 people from the seven countries set out above crossed the Channel. **During the same period, only 867 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 14 and 9 people resettled from Eritrea and Iran respectively.

Nationality	Arrivals via small boat January – September 2022	People resettled to the UK January – September 2022
Albania	11,241	0
Afghanistan	4,781	54
Iran	3,594	9
Iraq	3,074	122
Syria	2,191	472
Eritrea	1,509	14
Sudan	1,211	196

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 the first nine months of 2022 – as of 3 January 210,800 visas had been issued to people displaced by the war in Ukraine through either the Ukraine Family Scheme or the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.¹

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 visas² 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 Year to Sep 2022	Change	% change
Resettlement	5612	1391	-4221	-75%
Family Reunion	7456	4786	-2670	-36%

Source: Home Office statistics year ending September 2022, Asylum and resettlement summary tables, tables Res_01, Fam_01

¹ [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/ukraine-family-scheme-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-and-ukraine-extension-scheme-visa-data)

² 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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Why do people leave their home countries?

This analysis shows that most refugees crossing the Channel come from seven countries. This section of the briefing, based on data from Human Rights Watch and testimonies from people we work with, summarises the challenges faced in those countries, and includes testimony from some of those who have fled to sanctuary in the UK. Some names have been changed.

The **Sudanese** people have faced violence and conflict for many years. Recent protests have led to killings, disappearances, torture, sexual violence against women, beatings, arrests and detentions. Political instability following a military coup has hampered efforts to deliver human rights improvements, while violence in the Darfur region has continued.

“I reached a point in Sudan where I had to be with or against them. If you are against them you will get killed. If I am with them I will lose myself and my family, those people are not human. I want my boys to be proud of me, not ashamed.” - Mohammed, Sudan

In **Syria**, arbitrary arrest and torture are common, while millions of people are going hungry as aid is diverted amid economic crisis. The Syrian-Russian military alliance now controls most of the country other than Idlib, where 3 million civilians are trapped.

“My brother died in front of me, I was on the balcony, my brother was amongst friends in front of the house and a bomb or rocket came out of the sky and hit the group... This is embedded inside my mind..

“It was really, really difficult before we left, the bombing was continuous. My mum, after my brother died, she was so afraid for us girls so we weren’t allowed to go out. She was so protective and worried about what might happen to us... You feel as if you are losing your mind.” - Alaa, Syria

Eritrea is a dictatorship with an extremely repressive government. Citizens face forced labour and conscription, restrictions on freedom of expression, opinion and faith and no independent civil society organisations, media or judiciary. Eritrean Defense Forces have committed massacres, summary executions, sexual violence, pillage, attacks on refugee camps and destruction of crops in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.

“In Eritrea you must join the army and I do not want to join the army. It is dangerous there.” - Jemal, age 16, Eritrea*

Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban in August 2021, leading to human rights violations restricting the rights of women and girls in particular. Journalists have been detained and beaten, while there have been revenge killings and disappearances of opponents. Armed groups linked to Islamic State have carried out attacks, killing and injuring hundreds. Over 90pc of the Afghan population faces serious food insecurity.

“I was told to leave Afghanistan or I would be killed, and if I return I am sure I will be killed by the Taliban.” – Amir, age 15, Afghanistan*

“With the existence of the Taliban I do not have hopes for my country... They are coming back to the country to take revenge, kill us and to destroy the country. I can’t say anything positive about what will happen in my country.” – Adil, Afghanistan.*

“They have some problem with Tajik people, and Hazara people, they think should be killed in Afghanistan. They attack events, places such as mosques and schools in the west of Kabul, where there are going to be these other groups.” – Zahra, Afghanistan

People in **Iraq** face the risk of wrongful arrest and imprisonment, torture and extrajudicial killings. There are reports of enforced disappearances, while millions of Iraqis face social and economic rights violations.

“Before the trouble happened in Iraq things were fine and everything was good. But when the problems started it was bad, we couldn’t live there.” - Ahmed, Iraq

Recent demonstrations in **Iran** and government action in response have hit the headlines, underlining the way the authorities deal with dissent. Protesters face excessive and lethal force and abuse in detention.

“Iran has a lot of political and religious problems... Due to religious problems I was forced to flee the country... then I came here by dinghy. It was a huge risk, basically. It was in the middle of winter, I didn’t have any other chance to take.” - Farzad, Iran

Criminal and sexual exploitation, including trafficking, is a problem in **Albania**, where blood feuds have also led some to flee the country. The vast majority of asylum claims by women and girls are granted by the UK authorities.

“The main thing is trafficking, and there are connections with the mafia in Italy.

“For women, it’s sometimes about the way their husbands treat them, they force them to work in modern slavery...”

The system is not good in Albania..., there’s lots of corruption. People might want to kill them for money.” - Fatbardha, Albania

New legislation in response to Channel crossings

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.”³

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 then it would leave 45,237 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 reported⁴, the Home Office’s estimate that

³ [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)

⁴ See [Migrant crisis: 65,000 ‘will cross Channel in small boats this year’ | News | The Times](https://www.thetimes.com/travel/article/migrant-crisis-65000-will-cross-channel-in-small-boats-this-year-12345678)

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Channel crossings in 2023 could increase to 65,000 is accurate, then the number of people in that situation increases to 64,454.

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 2022⁵, 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 decisions⁶ – 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% – 45,237 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.⁷ 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 16% of Albanians (2,491 people) would be successful in their asylum claim. The successful operation of the agreement between the UK and Albania could increase the number of people removed from the UK to 13,499 people. This would still leave 32,247 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 19,114 people removed overall (including 18,582 Albanians). This would then leave 46,866 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 £148 million per year (or £405,000 per day) to detain everyone for 28 days, or up to £950 million per year (£2.6m per day) to detain everyone for six months.**⁸ Considerable additional expenditure would also be required to expand the current capacity of the immigration detention estate.

⁵ 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. See [Inadmissibility – third country cases: caseworker guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/inadmissibility-third-country-cases-caseworker-guidance) for more information about the inadmissibility process.

⁶ See *Home Office statistics year ending September 2022, Asylum and resettlement summary tables, table Asy_09a*

⁷ [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/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1014576/agreement-between-the-government-of-the-uk-and-the-republic-of-albania-on-the-readmission-of-persons.pdf)

⁸ Based on the current cost to detain one person per day of £115.32. See *Immigration Enforcement transparency data Q3 2022, table DT_02*

Conclusion

The 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 (Jan - Sep)	Estimated Channel crossings 2022	Asylum grant rates year to Sep 2022 at initial decision (main applicants)	Number of people arriving predicted +ve initial asylum decision based on grant rates	Resettled Jan to Sep 2022	Predicted resettled to end of 2022
1	Albania	11,241	15,569	16%	2,491	0	0
2	Afghanistan	4,781	6,622	98%	6,489	54	72
3	Iran	3,594	4,978	82%	4,082	9	12
4	Iraq	3,074	4,258	53%	2,257	122	163
5	Syria	2,191	3,035	98%	2,974	472	629
6	Eritrea	1,509	2,090	98%	2,048	14	19
7	Sudan	1,211	1,677	86%	1,442	196	261
8	Egypt	852	1,180	38%	448	0	0
9	Turkey	689	954	78%	744	1	1
10	Ethiopia	440	609	63%	384	9	12
11	Vietnam	415	575	75%	431	0	0
12	Kuwait	315	436	89%	388	0	0
13	India	233	323	3%	10	0	0
14	Stateless	183	253	93%	236	0	0
15	Georgia	182	252	32%	81	0	0
16	Pakistan	150	208	54%	112	37	49
17	Sri Lanka	143	198	76%	151	0	0
18	Yemen	126	175	99%	173	0	0
19	Libya	112	155	99%	154	0	0
20	Algeria	90	125	20%	25	0	0
	All other nationalities	498	690				

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	Not currently recorded	1,000	1,385
	Total	33,029	45,746

Sources:

Small boat crossings: *Home Office statistics year ending September 2022, Irregular Migration to the UK data tables, table Irr_02b* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-september-2022>

Asylum grant rates and resettlement numbers: *Analysis of Home Office Statistics year ending September 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 September 2022, the asylum grant rate at initial decision for Albanian men was 3%, women 86% and unaccompanied children 36%. For the first nine months of 2022, 73% of those who crossed the Channel in a small boat were adult men, 9% adult women, and 18% children. 11,241 Albanians crossed the Channel in that same period. An estimated 8,206 would have been adult men (of whom 246 would be expected to get refugee status), 1,012 would have been adult women (870 getting status) and 2,023 would have been children (with 728 getting status, assuming they were all unaccompanied). This estimate would mean that 1,845 of the 11,241 Albanians who crossed the Channel would be predicted to have successful asylum claims, a grant rate of 16%.

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