



LOCKED OUT **AND LOCKED UP**

Experiences of asylum policy and systemic racism in the UK and northern France

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**REFUGEE
ACTION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, national politics and media in the UK have become fixated on Channel crossings and “small boats”. This research explores the impacts of UK asylum policies and narratives on the lived experiences of people seeking safety, on both sides of the UK-France border.

Before summarising key findings and recommendations, it is important to note that the mainstream narratives and policies around Channel crossings obscure some key facts:

- Since records began in 2018 (though crossings pre-date this), **97% of people arriving by small boat have sought asylum in the UK**, with 99% of small boat arrivals applying for refugee status in 2025.¹ The UK requires people exercising their Refugee Convention rights to arrive in the country before submitting an asylum claim – **they cannot apply from overseas**. This forces people into irregular routes like Channel crossings.
- **When people do use “regular” routes** such as student visas to arrive, and they later submit an asylum claim, **the government attacks this as “abuse”** and “backdoor” routes that “threaten the integrity of Britain’s borders”.²
- **The UK hosts a tiny proportion of the world’s refugees – less than 1% – despite its outsized role in generating the conditions for displacement**, whether through its colonial legacies or more recent foreign policy interventions.
- Between 2023 and 2025, **at least 89% of people arriving by small boat were from countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East / West Asia – meaning they were people who are racially minoritised within the UK**.³

Meanwhile, a large majority (68% between 2001 and 2024) of all people seeking asylum in the UK **come from countries that were directly impacted by British colonial rule**.

These facts make the UK government’s response to Channel crossings, and many of its wider asylum policies and practices, scandalously hostile to people seeking safety.

Given the lessons of the Home Office (Windrush) scandal, it is especially urgent that the government avoids developing harmful policies when they are likely to disproportionately impact racially minoritised communities. Yet, from the cruel “one in, one out” scheme introduced in 2025, to reducing refugee status to a short-term, temporary protection from 2026 – preventing people from feeling safe and settled in our communities – this government has maintained the racist “hostile environment” for people seeking safety that was introduced by its predecessors.

The research presented in this report finds that the externalisation of the UK border to northern France, and the systematic denial of safe routes for asylum, are hostile policies aimed at **locking people seeking safety out of the UK**. For those who do arrive in the UK, whether by Channel crossings or other routes, they often **find themselves effectively locked up in de facto detention conditions**, trapped in asylum hotels,

banned from working, and suffering from socio-economic isolation and the threat of far-right violence that is enabled by government rhetoric.

The UK's racialised border violence toward people seeking safety – including those in France hoping to come here – comprises policies, pushbacks, and other systemic forms of hostility that disproportionately affect racially minoritised communities. This violence is not an anomaly or accident. It has roots in longer and deeper histories of systemic racism in Britain, from colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade to fascist and Powellite politics in the twentieth century and the Home Office (Windrush) scandal in the twenty-first. But it is notable that, whereas refugees were often portrayed a decade ago (even in much anti-immigration discourse) as a more “deserving” category than “economic

migrants”, today they are specifically targeted by hostile narratives and policies and described as “illegal”. The treatment by mainstream political actors of even forced migration as somehow unacceptable and immoral has created a permissive environment for the far right to thrive, while also forming the backdrop for ever deeper assaults on human rights by successive governments of all main parties.

BASED ON THE FINDINGS IN THIS REPORT WE ARE CALLING FOR:

- **The government to immediately end its cruel “one in, one out” policy, which can return people who have survived life-threatening journeys to escape persecution back to deeply unsafe conditions in France. The government must instead create safe routes for people to arrive in the UK and seek asylum, including those who have reached northern France, preventing the racial border violence that causes deaths in the Channel.**
- **The government to immediately end its new policy of limiting refugee status to thirty months, which fundamentally conflicts with the UK's Refugee Convention obligations and will leave people feeling even more trapped in limbo, stuck waiting for up to twenty years before they can even apply for permanent settlement.**
- **The immigration regulator, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) to urgently launch an inspection focused on possible systemic racial disparities in the treatment and outcomes for people arriving in the UK, including those arriving by small-boat crossings of the English Channel.**
- **Politicians of all parties and media outlets to cease referring to people seeking asylum in the UK as “illegal”. Seeking asylum is a legal right under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, regardless of the route a person takes to reach the UK.**



INTRODUCTION

The UK's asylum system is made up of government policies and practices that shape how our country receives and treats people seeking safety from conflict and persecution overseas. The fundamental right to seek asylum from such dangers is enshrined in international law, by the 1951 Refugee Convention.

But the politics of asylum in the UK have reached a critical, dangerous moment. Refugees and people seeking safety have been instrumentalised and demonised in political and media narratives with increasing frequency and intensity in recent years.

Successive UK governments – led by both Labour and the Conservatives (and the Liberal Democrats, in coalition) – have engaged in a “race to the bottom” to erode the rights and living conditions of people seeking asylum, while a formerly fringe far-right party has surged in the polls and dragged political debate on immigration and asylum to places once considered taboo, such as “remigration” and “mass deportations”.

Meanwhile, as previous Refugee Action research has found, asylum in the UK remains a “front line for racial justice”.⁴ The fact that the vast majority of asylum claimants in the UK come from countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East / West Asia – and are therefore minoritised within the UK – means that their treatment at a systemic level, through policy, is a matter of racial justice. That most people seeking asylum also come from countries that were subject to British colonial rule adds historical and moral weight to the need for fair treatment. It is essential that people from societies that were subject to colonisation, exploitation, resource extraction, and even enslavement, at the hands of the British Empire – some of which have also been subject to more recent UK interventions – do not suffer further indignities when they seek safety here from political and economic instability and violence that is both an abiding colonial legacy and a feature of neo-colonialism.

THE AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH

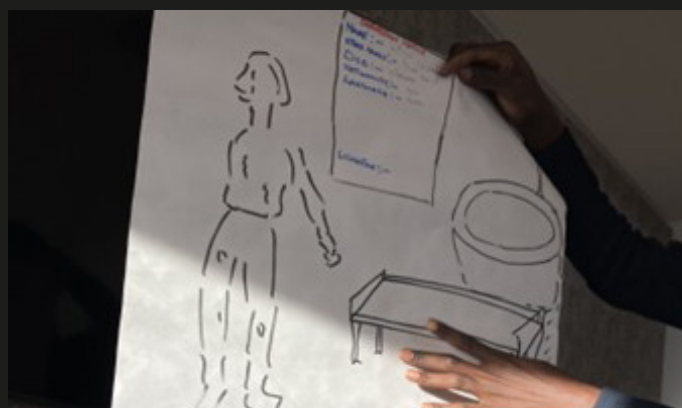
In this context, this report highlights how specific, recent trends in policy and practice around asylum in the UK exacerbate systemic racism. Following a scoping exercise that explored seven themes, the researchers selected two themes that loom large in the current government's approach, to frame our project: criminalisation of people seeking safety, and the externalisation of the UK's border to third countries such as France:

- **Criminalisation** has been an increasingly prominent feature of immigration policies in many countries in recent decades, with immigration now frequently rendered a matter of criminal, rather than civil, law in countries such as the UK.⁵ This trend, often referred to as "crimmigration", includes formal legislative measures, such as the government's Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025, which creates new criminal offences through which to prosecute people seeking safety in the UK, and more discursive, rhetorical practices, like frequently referring to people seeking asylum and their arrival in the UK as "illegal" in political speech and media articles.
- **Externalisation** is an approach to border controls, asylum and immigration policy that has become increasingly popular across Europe. It refers to the process through which a state effectively manages migration beyond its own territorial borders by shifting migration control to other states or external actors to prevent people from reaching its territory. Deals between Italy and Libya, and the EU and Türkiye are key examples of this practice.⁶ It can also take the form of "offshore hubs" in third countries, like those Italy has established in Albania, or which the previous UK government attempted to create in Rwanda. People may be detained in these externalised hubs while their claims are processed or after they are unsuccessful. The now-abandoned Rwanda scheme would even have seen refugees settled permanently in the third country if their asylum claims were successful. The current UK government has proudly announced its efforts at achieving more of these deals, but its most

prominent investment in externalisation has been – like its predecessors – deepening cooperation with French authorities as part of a "deterrence" strategy on asylum and Channel crossings.

To better understand these trends and how they connect to systemic racism in the UK, Refugee Action researchers designed a cross-border research project, collecting data in the UK and France from June to November in 2025.

Co-led by a researcher with lived experience of the UK asylum system, the research project was designed to centre the voices of those directly impacted by asylum policies and practices, who generously shared their stories with us through interviews, discussion groups, and participatory research workshops. These insights are presented alongside analysis of secondary sources including official immigration statistics published by the Home Office, academic and policy research publications, and relevant news media.



METHODOLOGY

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The researchers leading the study behind this report bring a mixture of lived and learned experience of seeking asylum to the project.

In addition to being a scholar in migration studies, Dr. Haleemah Alaydi is twice a refugee, having grown up as a Palestinian refugee in Jordan and later becoming a refugee in the UK. She has extensive experience working with forced migrants, employing trauma-informed and participatory approaches to centre their lived experiences. Dr. Ben Whitham has learned experience of migration and the UK-France border accumulated through academic and policy research, and through regular volunteering to support people in the living sites of northern France.

As professional researchers with higher degrees from UK institutions, the social “positionality” of the lead researchers is not necessarily shared with the research participants in this study. But it informs their aim of hearing and amplifying the voices of those participants in the quest for an improved asylum system.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach adopted for this project is broadly based on the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model.⁷ Beginning from the assumption that more “traditional” social science approaches – often rooted in colonial systems of knowledge production⁸ – can reproduce unequal and exploitative power relations, PAR aims to be more inclusive and empowering, encouraging engagement with people as full participants

rather than “subjects” of research. This means more dialogue between researchers and participants, and opportunities for participants to take the lead in defining key topics and themes. It also means treating and centring lived experience as a source of knowledge of equal value and validity to others. From the scoping stage to analysing findings, the lead researchers engaged co-researchers from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Voice (RAS Voice) – a network of lived-experience campaigners supported by Refugee Action – to embed lived-experience perspectives in the project. Meanwhile, participatory group and workshop-style discussions, and informal walking interviews, were among the methods of data collection employed to avoid more traditional “extractive” interview and survey approaches.

DATA COLLECTION

Primary research was conducted between June and November 2025. The researchers interviewed 32 participants with lived experience (12 in the UK and 20 in France). This included three interviews with small groups at a living site and drop-in centre in France. Additionally, a workshop-style group discussion was held with workers from five organisations supporting people on the move in northern France. Informed consent was obtained from participants in written or oral form depending on the research environment. Lived experience participants included men and women of a range of ages, from countries including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guinea, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria. Interviews were conducted in Amharic, Arabic, and English, and ranged from under 10 minutes to over an hour, resulting in more than 13 hours of audio recordings and 71,000 words of transcribed text.

ANALYSIS

Following the data collection phase, the first stage in analysis was the convening of a lived-experience PAR workshop. Co-researchers from RAS Voice, with lived experience of the UK asylum system, were invited to study, respond to, and lead discussion of, collected data, from highlighting key themes to creative responses including poetry and drawings. The lead researchers used the outcomes from this workshop to begin a full coding of the transcripts using Lumivero NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

The findings presented in this report represent the researchers’ (including lived experience co-researchers’) analysis and interpretation of the key themes and issues that emerged from the transcribed interview and discussion data. 29 distinct themes were identified, 10 of which were initially established through the RAS Voice lived-experience analysis workshop. Five of those themes were among the top 10 themes emerging across our interviews and workshops:

Table 1. Top ten themes identified in interview and discussion group data

THEME	REFERENCES IN TRANSCRIPTS
1. Direct discrimination and interpersonal racism	44
2. Mental or physical ill-health (e.g. trauma, depression, injury)	40
3. Hostile policies or rhetoric	33
4. Bad living conditions or accommodation*	32
5. Seeking safety or protection*	31
6. Asylum applications, interviews, appeals	30
7. Waiting and delay	30
8. Dangerous journeys and risk to life*	28
9. Unemployment and work bans*	24
10. Fear and uncertainty*	21
*Themes first identified through the RAS Voice lived-experience analysis workshop	

The next section of this report highlights key findings from within the identified themes and their implications for the role of current UK asylum policy trends in reproducing or worsening forms of systemic racism.

THE UK

"REFUGEES ARE SEEKING SAFETY. WE ARE NOT COMING HERE TO DO ANYTHING BAD"

Immigration has become a national fixation in the UK thanks to the efforts of politicians and media outlets. Most of the political and media attention directed at the topic is negative, with "migrants" or "immigrants" most often represented as being "too many" in the UK and as being "illegal".⁹

Within these broader narratives on migration, people seeking asylum – and especially those doing so via the English Channel – have been targeted in particularly hostile ways. The lack of safe routes for people to arrive in the UK and apply for asylum means that many are forced to arrive by "irregular" means, which the UK government has represented and treated as "illegal", despite the protections by the Refugee Convention.

Cases in which people seeking asylum have committed or been accused of criminal offences have been exploited by national news media, far-right influencers, and politicians to create moral panics, leading to harassment and "protests" (often involving far-right organisations) outside asylum accommodation. Some of these panics – particularly around crimes against women and girls, and around people seeking asylum often being young men – revive age-old racist narratives, as characteristic of early twentieth century European "white slavery" panics or the Jim Crow-era US South, that portray Black, Brown, and Muslim men as a sexual threat to white women and a demographic threat (through "replacement"¹⁰) to majority-white societies more broadly. Meanwhile, Islamophobic tropes are deployed about men of "fighting age" threatening "national security" and even being "terrorists".¹¹

In this context, government policymaking on asylum has been increasingly hostile and regressive, rolling back fundamental human rights. This happens in two broad ways: first, by using legislation like the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 – passed by the previous Conservative government but retained and used for its own purposes by the current Labour one – to criminalise arrival and limit claims made under the Refugee Convention; and, second, seeking to disapply some basic rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (and brought into English law through the Human rights Act 1998) specifically in relation to asylum cases, for those who do arrive and seek asylum.

As the timeline opposite shows, attacks on the rights and character of refugees have been frequent and vicious under the current government and show no sign of letting up. In March 2026, the Home Secretary confirmed that the government is implementing a "Denmark-style" system of restricting refugee status in the UK to a temporary 30-month period.



TIMELINE:

2025: Another year of hostile policies, laws, and rhetoric

In 2025 alone, the government announced a wide range of new measures to further erode the rights of people seeking safety in the UK, adding to the policies and narratives that criminalise and stigmatise asylum-seeking.

KEY MOMENT	HOW IT CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE
JANUARY Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill	The government introduces a new bill (now Act), further stigmatising asylum-seeking as a “security” issue, enabling the seizure of people’s mobile phones on arrival, and creating new criminal offences associated with irregular arrival.
FEBRUARY “Good character” guidance change	A drastic and hostile change to the asylum system is made without legislation or democratic scrutiny when the Home Office updates its “good character” guidance to prevent anyone who arrived in the UK via a “dangerous journey” from ever attaining British citizenship.
MARCH PM says “you are right to be angry”	In the wake of 2024’s racist and anti-refugee riots, Prime Minister Keir Starmer uses a tabloid newspaper column (headlined “Believe me, I get it. You are RIGHT to be angry about illegal migration”) to contradict some of his earlier statements on migration and austerity, attributing “strain on our public services” to “illegal migrants”.
MAY “Island of Strangers” speech	Announcing his government’s Immigration White Paper, Keir Starmer claimed that stricter controls are necessary to prevent the UK becoming an “Island of Strangers”, in a speech widely seen to echo Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968.
JULY “One in, one out” policy	During French President Emmanuel Macron’s state visit to the UK, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announces a UK-France treaty and a pilot scheme to detain some people crossing the Channel in small boats on arrival and allow an equal number in France to apply for safe travel – within months this leads to some people making potentially lethal crossings a second time.
SEPTEMBER Large site plans and family reunion pause	Then-Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announces that government is looking to use more large sites for asylum accommodation in place of hotels and confirms that is looking at “warehouses” as well as “military sites”. The Home Office “pauses” refugee family reunion.
NOVEMBER “Restoring Order and Control”: temporary status, 20-year route, and rolling back rights	Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood launches the government Command Paper “Restoring Order and Control”, containing policy proposals that would further erode rights and protections for people seeking safety. The paper says refugee status will become temporary by default, lasting for only 2.5 years and with the right to apply for permanent residence changing from five to 20 years. Other plans include limiting access to Article 8 of the ECHR (the right to family life) for people seeking asylum and watering down Article 3 protections against “inhuman or degrading” treatment.

The Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood’s announcement in March 2026 that “we will have a much more difficult system for illegal arrivals”¹² parroted her Conservative predecessor, Theresa May’s, infamous announcement in 2012 that “the aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration”.¹³ From a racial justice perspective, the current government’s decision to continue with such an approach is particularly egregious given that the government-commissioned Windrush Lessons

Learned Review found that “hostile environment measures, could, and later on did, have significant and traumatic effects” on racially minoritised communities in the UK. Similarly, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism found that “a hostile environment ostensibly created for, and formally restricted to, irregular immigrants is, in effect, a hostile environment for all racial and ethnic communities and individuals in the United Kingdom”.¹⁴

LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOSTILE ASYLUM POLICIES AND RHETORIC

Our research found that people in the asylum system are often aware of the role played by specific hostile policies and government practices in causing harm to them and exposing them to danger. Chuma,¹⁵ a research participant in the UK, was less concerned about direct racial discrimination from Home Office officials, whom he described as ordinary working people who “might as well be working in Costa”. Instead, he said: “I blame the policies, I don’t blame the actual person who’s implementing those policies”. With reference to the safe route that was created for Ukrainians to travel from France to the UK in 2022, Chuma added that:

It’s just the policies that I hated because they weren’t fair, they weren’t just. It’s bordering on racist policies, because when you look at what happened in 2022, when it kicked off in Ukraine, that’s how the asylum process should work. That’s how a normal process should work. People shouldn’t have to get on boats or into lorries. Build a facility and process them like normal people. But it’s just the policy.

Chuma’s comments point to the racial disparity in the UK’s provision of safe routes for people seeking asylum. Research has found that: “As a privatized route was opened for people displaced from Ukraine, other routes were closed for people racialized as “non-European” via hostile legislation including the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.¹⁶ It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that while Ukrainians were spared Channel crossings, they were not afforded full asylum claims or settlement in the UK.

Ahmed, who arrived in the UK via a Channel crossing and has spent more than a year in an asylum hotel awaiting an initial decision on his asylum application, observed that UK asylum policy is “changing a lot now and they paused family reunion ... and there are strict rules for asylum and they want to copy the Denmark experience”. Ahmed added that he was “disappointed” by this shift, explaining: “I went through this dangerous journey just to have a better life for my kids, just to live a safe life.” He also noted that the current government “are just listening to Reform UK ... They don’t care about the weak people who will be affected, the lives that will be changed” and added:



Because of the pausing of the family reunion, they are now considering making their families make this journey. Imagine a family with small kids – they would cross the Channel in these small boats. That will put their lives in danger because the government policies would make people do this. They have to do this because they want to meet with their families. So by pausing the safe journey, they [the government] is making the journey riskier here.

This disregard for the potential of a policy change to cause further deaths among racially minoritised people, including children, in the Channel can be understood as what the Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics”, where “racism is the driver of ... a sacrificial economy, the functioning of which requires, on the one hand, a generalized cheapening of the price of life and, on the other, a habituation to loss”. The ban the government

imposed on student visas for people from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan in March 2026, to prevent them later submitting asylum claims further exemplifies this point. This closed yet another “regular”, safer visa route and will potentially force more people into risking Channel crossings.

Iman, a female participant in the UK asylum system, pointed to the connection between the hostile policies of the present government and the dangerous rhetoric it has employed – such as Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s “Island of Strangers”¹⁷ speech, which was widely viewed as echoing the white nationalist sentiment of Enoch Powell:



These speeches about refugees are difficult to hear, because refugees are seeking safety. We’re not coming here to do anything bad. We’re not terrorists. I think the UK is not doing enough for refugees.



Another UK-based participant, Salim, linked political rhetoric directly to the racist violence that has repeatedly targeted asylum hotels, including in the riots of 2024 and the hotel “protests” and targeted harassment in 2025:

Mainly it’s the politicians. Most of the British people are kind and pleasant, it’s just the politicians’ speech, it’s worrying. A year ago, there were troubles in Liverpool and the hotels were targeted; this was frightening. We thought someone is going to come over and attack, the children were attending school at this stage and it was a constant worry.



Meanwhile, Ahmed summed-up the way that stereotyping and generalisation by politicians feeds negative public opinion towards people like himself and is a form of punching down:



Actually, here in the UK, especially because of the effect of politicians, people tend to generalise. Among everyone we have many categories. So if someone in this category did something bad, it doesn’t mean the whole category is bad. We always have bad people, we have good people, so why do they tend to generalise? Maybe they generalise because they want someone to attack and they turn to the weak people who can’t defend themselves, like asylum seekers or migrants.



The rhetorical demonisation and stereotyping of the predominantly Black and Brown people seeking safety in the UK fulfils what has been defined as one of the core elements of systemic racism, “the rationalizing white-racist frame”, through which the implementation of racist policies and laws is justified.¹⁸





**COMMUNITY
NOT
SCAPEGOATING**

DE FACTO DETENTION AND ENFORCED STATE DEPENDENCY

Many participants in the UK had faced months or even years of waiting for a decision on their asylum applications. In several cases, this included lengthy spells in the hotels that are used as asylum contingency accommodation, and which have become the focus of racist political attention and hostile policymaking in recent years. These are not hotels in the sense most of us would recognise them – they are run by a handful of private contractors, who reap huge profits from government contracts while often cramming whole families into cramped rooms. Conditions and treatment in hotels varies but Ahmed found that:



The staff are kind, they are helpful and kind. But it's also kind of boring. You feel useless. You are not allowed to work, you are not allowed to support yourself, and the allowance is not enough.



This debilitating sense of “uselessness” and of “being stuck” or trapped was voiced in various ways by participants in relation to asylum accommodation, the UK’s irrational work ban,¹⁹ and inadequate asylum support payments. Asked about his experience of the work ban, Chuma – who came to the UK from Zimbabwe – described something close to “de facto detention”²⁰ conditions:

[It's] frustrating and depressing because it takes away your motivation to do stuff, to apply yourself. You don't have focus because you can't plan. If you don't have work, you can't plan. You can't do anything. You are literally just there. The way that I could best describe it is, I'm no different from someone in an open prison where you're allowed to roam around, but you can't participate in commerce or anything. You're just there, you know.



Mamadou, a Guinean man awaiting the outcome of his asylum appeal, reported racism in how some asylum hotel staff treated him: “In the hotel, the problem is that most of the people working there are not professionals. You have a lot of discrimination.” Iman, meanwhile, found the whole contingency accommodation system to be dehumanising:

Sometimes, they would ask us to prepare ourselves to move and when we asked them where we would go, they would say ‘we don't know yet. It could be London or Bradford’. If we were going somewhere far, we would pack only the most essential items and not everything. We don't feel like we were treated as humans. We're treated as if we were animals. They would ask us to prepare ourselves and leave at any time. We don't know where we're going. Is it to a hotel, house or somewhere else? We never know.



The theme of dehumanisation is one that we return to in Section 5 of this report (on cross-border findings) but is one of the most well-known and well-evidenced dynamics at play in systemic racism. Treating people as objects, or non-human animals, to be “kept”, moved, traded and disposed of, is how dehumanisation plays out in practice.

FRANCE!

"THEY EVEN TAKE THE BLANKETS. AT LEAST THEY COULD LEAVE THE BLANKETS"

Picture a refugee camp. What comes to mind? Perhaps the familiar sight of rows of blue-and-white United Nations tents. The reality of camps for people seeking safety in northern France is very different, and evidence from our fieldwork indicates that the living conditions can be substantially worse.

There are no formal refugee camps in France, only informal "living sites". Since the final destruction of the so-called Calais "Jungle" – a large living site on the northern French coast – in 2016, the remaining sites are much more precarious and transient spaces. These sites are not provided or supported by the French state or a major international organisation like the UN. They have no piped drinking water, mains electricity supply, or refuse collection. In addition, the camps lack healthcare and education facilities, fixed structures or shelters, electricity generators, and plumbed toilets or showers.

In fact, under the "zero fixation points" policy – a French counterpart to the UK's "hostile environment" – the French state has spent a decade actively trying to make life at the living sites harder to sustain for displaced people. In addition to the deliberate denial of basic facilities, the sites are subject to near-continuous police harassment, "clearances" every 48 hours, and evictions, along with the routine seizure of people's personal property. As one research participant put it: "They even take the blankets. At least they could leave the blankets." Recent research by the Humans for Rights Network found that "widespread state violence" against people on the move in northern France is "by police officers"²¹, while Project Play, an NGO that supports children on the move in the region, has extensively documented the violence and

trauma they suffer at the hands of the French state.²² The Human Rights Observers (HRO), a French organisation participating in this research, has even recorded the regular seizure of life-vests, potentially adding to the lethal danger faced by those attempting a Channel crossing.²³

What makes this situation more outrageous is that the UK pays for this brutal and dehumanising treatment of people seeking safety in northern France – to the tune of almost half a billion pounds from 2023–2026.²⁴ Like the previous government's failed "Rwanda scheme", which wasted at least £715 million of public money, or the current government's plan to place more people seeking safety in "camps" and ex-military sites (a policy the government acknowledges could cost more than hotels²⁵), the UK's funding of border violence and suffering in France is costly, performative cruelty. These policies show that: "Border violence is not cheap: it is backed by expensive, punitive and wide-ranging measures... a big show that the government is doing 'something' to help its more deserving citizens even if it won't help them feed their children or warm their homes".²⁶

While reliable data on the populations of living sites cannot be generated, partly due to the high turnover as people make successful crossing attempts or move between sites, the statistics for those arriving in the UK are a fairly reliable proxy. These figures show that at least 89% are from African, Asian, and Middle Eastern / West Asian countries²⁷ – groups that are racially minoritised within Europe and impacted by systemic racism. The treatment of people at living sites is a consequently a question of racial justice.

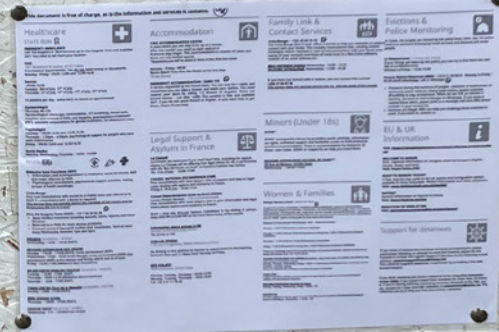
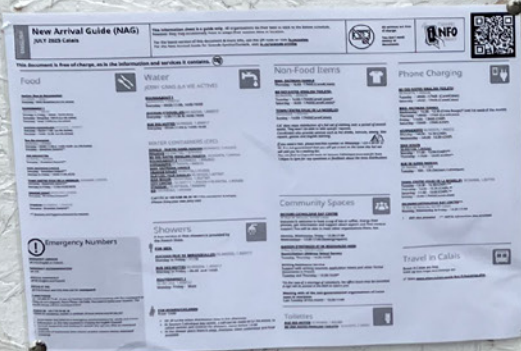


INFO

معلومات

INFORMATION AVAILABLE:

English
Français
Deutsch
Tigrinya ትግርኛ
Amharic አማርኛ
Arabic العربية
Dari دري
Farsi فارسي
Sorani سۆرانی
Türkçe
Afaan oromo
Pashto پښتو
Af Soomaali
Vietnamese Tiếng Việt
Hindi हिन्दी
Urdu اُردو



RACIAL PROFILING, SEGREGATION, AND DESTITUTION

While they reside in the living sites, people are subjected to the dual phenomena of “hypervisibility” and “invisibilisation”, experiences common to many minoritised communities and well documented in research on systemic racism across different contexts.²⁸ Abdo, a young Sudanese man we spoke to at a drop-in centre in Calais told us: “I get a lot of police come up asking me ‘where are you from?’”. NGO participants talked about “a clear wish to invisibilise people” – expressed through hostile architecture like strategically placed boulders used to prevent camps from emerging or the delivery of humanitarian aid, forcing people out to the “peripheries” – as well as through policing of public transport, where officers at train stations or on buses routinely stop and question people for “being Black or ‘looking like’ a person on the move”.

This is the double-bind of systemic racism, where minoritised racial identities are invisibilised through “white ignorance”²⁹ on the one hand, yet strategically deployed to profile, police, and render “hypervisible” targeted populations on the other. A Syrian participant who survived a dangerous crossing of the Channel to the UK recalled experiences of hypervisibility on French public transport: “Whenever someone would see you on the train because they know that you’re a migrant, they would come to you and they would fine you because you’re different”. Meanwhile an NGO worker in northern France reported:

When there are a lot of people on the move around the bus stop, the police come before the bus and ask white people if they are taking it. If they say “yes”, the police say “ok, so you’re going to go first”. When the bus comes, the police then go to the front of the bus, make the people on the move to line up, and count them. Because what we knew later is that there are eight seats allocated for the “locals”, who are white people, and the rest are for people on the move, and if there are no white people then they use the seats. And this, we saw it happen several times.

French NGO workers also reported forms of direct discrimination and interpersonal racism by the state that extend beyond policing. They described ambulance services as sometimes asking about the nationality and skin colour of patients and subsequently refusing to attend medical emergencies at living sites, or disbelieving people on the move who report medical symptoms to them. They also highlighted differential treatment of people on the move with regard to state duties around child protection and education, housing provision and squatters’ rights, and municipal services like waste collection.

Meanwhile, a participant from a women’s group at a Calais drop-in centre shared her own experience of segregation and stereotyping:



In general, we are far away from the French people. We are destitute, lower level than other people, when they see you in the street, they start laughing at us. We used to have homes in our country, and the war made us leave.



HARSH LIVING CONDITIONS, FEAR, AND STATE VIOLENCE

The harsh living conditions and frequent police violence in informal living sites were a common theme emerging in our discussions with participants in France. Two women we spoke with as part of a women's group at a drop-in centre in Calais talked about sleeping rough in forest outside the city: "There is suffering in the forest, it's unbearable. If we have a safe place we wouldn't suffer." She added: "I'm not able to sleep in the forest, because there are strange noises".

Okot, from Sudan, mentioned that "there are clashes with the police" as people attempt to make crossings in the area, while one of the women at the drop-in centre told us that: "A father with two children told the French police not to spray tear gas, the police then hit a child and broke his ribs". Another participant added: "The police are the problem, they even hit the children and spray tear gas on them. They are racist as well. The French said that they do not want anyone [like us] in France. I was racially abused because I am Muslim and wear a hijab".

Several participants suggested they had initially hoped to stay in France, but had either been told or decided that crossing the Channel to seek asylum in the UK was the only option. In some cases, this was explicitly connected to experiences of structural racism, including state-sanctioned Islamophobia:

If there is a chance for us to obtain residency, we would have stayed. If my daughter had the chance to start school wearing a hijab, we would've have stayed. We didn't cross the sea...personally I'm scared of crossing the sea. I wish there was a safe way to Britain for the families and children, especially for the children.

The UK's claims that people seeking safety should stay in France, and the government's refusal to provide them a safe route to seek asylum in the UK, are routinely justified by stating that France is a "safe country", but this clearly is not how it is experienced by many Black, Brown, and Muslim people on the move. A man who was among a group that spoke to us close to a water container left for people on the move by a local charity, the Calais Food Collective, expressed his anger at the treatment he and others received in France, as well as his hope that the UK would be a fairer society in which to seek safety. When we asked about staying in France he said:



I don't want to stay, this country is terrible. There's no help for people, no hospital, no school, no nothing. The UK respects people, they help people. They give people medication, doctors. They help people with lawyers, all this. This is a shit country. This water? These people travelled like three kilometres [on foot] for water, you see that? Police come every day, every day. They even take the blankets. At least they could leave the blankets. We can only shower one time a week.







ADULTIFICATION OF BLACK, BROWN, AND MUSLIM CHILDREN

“Adultification” of children of colour – and particularly those racialised as Black – is a well-documented expression of systemic racism within majority-white societies. From the the history of empire and enslavement to the present day “criminal justice” system, European states and societies have often refused to recognise Black, Brown, and Muslim children as children. For example, research has found that in such societies “Black boys are seen as older and less innocent and that they prompt a less essential conception of childhood than do their White same-age peers”, enabling a perception that they are “more appropriate targets for police violence”.³⁰

This pattern of adultification is clearly identifiable in the treatment of and responses to children at the UK-France border. A worker at Project Play, an organisation that supports children on the move in northern France, told us that children are “still victims of the same violence that everyone else is”:

They still have their tents taken away in front of them. They still have their belongings taken. We’ve had lots of accounts of children being teargassed by the police during crossing attempts. I’ve known a baby as young as two months old to be teargassed.

The worker added that in the aftermath of living site clearances, children told us “how all their toys had been taken away, for example. It felt like a very active decision to do that”. Meanwhile, although unaccompanied minors – often adolescent boys who have travelled thousands of miles across many countries alone or lost their family members in the process – are commonly present in the living sites, their presence is frequently denied. Another participant from a French organisation told us:



When you ask for emergency housing for an unaccompanied minor, some nationalities might be seen by the authorities as more prone to lying. Someone told me that when she called to have emergency housing for a specific nationality, she said ‘I have three minors in front of me who are this nationality’, the person on the other end of the phone, like the state authority, said ‘yeah but we know this nationality, they are always adults lying to get into housing’.



A third organisational participant referred to child protection, noting that while “you are supposed to be taken care of if you are an unaccompanied minor, here it’s not working so well”. Even where the state does become involved, this participant viewed it as a matter of “clear racism”, noting that when they alerted authorities to the presence of an unaccompanied minor at risk of exploitation, “the state decision is often to look at the child as a witness to a human trafficking gang and not as a victim to be protected. Like the light [it is viewed in] is not child protection, it’s criminal activity”.

This adultification does not end if the children in question survive a Channel crossing to seek asylum in the UK. The British government often incorrectly age assesses children as adults.³¹ The government also plans to use Artificial Intelligence tools – notorious for reproducing and exacerbating inequalities³² – to support the age assessment process. Through incorrect age assessments, unaccompanied minors have been subjected to detention in the UK, mirroring the disproportionately punitive and carceral outcomes faced by young Black and Brown Britons more broadly.³³

CROSS-BORDER FINDINGS

Many of the themes identified in this research arose from experiences on both sides of the UK-France border. Three key cross-border themes that emerged from our discussions with participants were:

DEHUMANISATION

The representation and treatment of human beings as non-human have been a feature of European racism since the era of colonialism. The anti-colonial thinker and activist Frantz Fanon, for instance, documented white settlers using animalistic language about the people they occupied and oppressed, referring to “breeding swarms”³⁴ (a term later echoed by former UK Prime Minister David Cameron in reference to people seeking safety in the UK³⁵). Dehumanisation was explicitly acknowledged by both people sleeping rough in the living sites of northern France and those already in the UK’s asylum system. A Nigerian man interviewed at a living site in Calais described feeling as though “I’m an animal now” because he was forced to beg to survive. Youssef, a Syrian man, similarly told us:

I lost my dignity as a human being living in a tent and feeling like I am an object. I try to dress decently, but the conditions are terrible. To have a shower, I have to walk for an hour. It doesn’t feel like there’s anything else I can do to feel like a normal person ... the way the French state is treating us feels like we’re treated as animals and not as human beings.

In the UK, Layla – a Sudanese woman who had struggled with inadequate asylum accommodation, where gas and electricity were disconnected – said that “we do not feel as humans, we like to live a good life”. Iman, who was forced to move repeatedly at short notice, told us “We’re treated as if we were animals”. Also in the UK, Chuma referred to the experience of tagging and tracking as being like “cattle, you know, you put a tag on its ear or something”.





CRIMINALISATION

Criminalisation has been a longstanding feature of systemic racism – a strategy for “othering” and containing racially minoritised groups by representing them as “threats” to social order. Some people on the move in France, and some already in the UK and awaiting asylum decisions, described being treated like criminals by the state and local people. They often found this experience jarring, not least because their backgrounds in their countries of nationality were sometimes as middle-class and “law-abiding” citizens. One French NGO worker told us that “people on the move are facing criminalisation in France also, more and more”. An Egyptian

participant in France said: “I definitely think that people believe we’re criminals, people who have come from nothing and know nothing about life. But coming from Egypt, I lived in a nice neighbourhood and house, though I eventually had to leave that life behind”. In the UK, two participants, Chuma and Rimi, both described being made to feel like criminals through Home Office tagging and tracking. Mamadou reported that supermarket security tended to treat him differently to white customers because of his skin colour. A fourth UK participant, Ali, blamed criminalisation on Home Office policies: “I didn’t do any wrong in the UK, I don’t have any criminal offence. But Home Office staff, they’re following their process”.



**REFUGEE
ACTION**

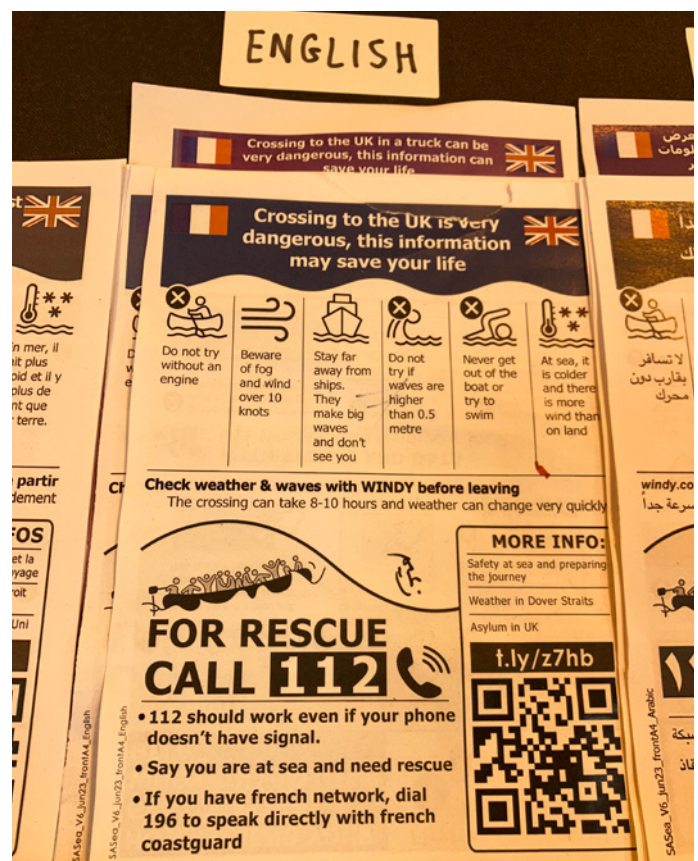
**ASYLUM
MEANS
SAFETY**

WAITING AND DELAY

Experiences of time or “temporality” have often been overlooked in studies of racism and migration, which traditionally tended to focus on “spatial” or geographic questions of movement and mobility. But “racialized temporal inequalities” are pervasive in lived experiences of migration. Recent studies have acknowledged the widespread perceptions of “stolen time”³⁶ and “immobility”³⁷ in lived experiences of people seeking asylum. While displaced people may be able to move across geographical borders, they must navigate temporal borders created by states, where their time is regulated and controlled, significantly degrading their quality of life in their new societies. Recent research identifies a “mental state of confinement” for many refugees, resulting from “being rendered politically and morally surplus” in host societies like the UK where “refugees come to inhabit spaces where they are not only denied entry, but denied recognition”, so that “mobility loses emancipatory meaning”.³⁸ In the UK, for example, Iman told us:

I would say to treat refugees who come here with more compassion. People spend such a long time in the system. They should try to make decisions on people's cases in a shorter time. Sometimes by the time they do make a decision, it is too late. People psychological and physical health is impacted from this waiting.

In France we met people who had spent weeks, months, and in some cases several years, stuck in limbo. They were unable to claim asylum there and had not managed to arrange passage to the UK, or had already failed in their attempts. Ali underscored the fundamental role of asylum policies on shaping the temporal experiences of refugees, where he describing being stuck in Calais for years on end: “So I’m waiting; it’s difficult”. Another man, among a small group of Syrian men we spoke to at a drop-in centre on the day the UK announced its first detentions under the “one in, one out” policy, expressed anxiety about coming to the UK but stated that in France “lots of people applied and waited for about two years and received refusal. I will be wasting two to three years waiting to hear”.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In September 2025 the UK government published a country policy note for France, for the purposes of asylum decision-making – the only such note for a European Union country – underscoring its statutory status in the UK as a “safe third country”.³⁹ The note fails to account for the appalling conditions in refugee living sites, beyond including a few references to media coverage, and makes no reference to the widespread racial profiling, harassment and violence experienced by people on the move there. Contrary to successive UK Home Secretaries’ claims, France simply is not experienced as “safe” by many of the people our government says should stay there.

Meanwhile, the current government is effectively continuing its predecessors’ project of creating a “really hostile environment” in the UK for those who do manage to arrive, causing immense suffering to people who have already survived war, persecution, and dangerous journeys to be here.

As this report has shown, our research found that current UK asylum policies brutalise and severely constrain the lives of people seeking safety, both within the UK’s borders and in northern France, in ways that sustain or exacerbate patterns of systemic racism:

- The “hostile environment” persists, with a succession of hostile and harmful asylum policies introduced by the current UK government disproportionately harming racially minoritised people and exacerbating the systemic racism that underpinned the Home Office (Windrush) scandal.
- The UK’s funding of France’s “zero fixation points” policy, and its implementation of policies like “one in, one out”, create a dehumanising and hostile environment on both sides of the UK-France border for people seeking safety, the vast majority of whom are people from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East / West Asia.
- People regularly experience dehumanisation and treatment they perceive as reducing them to “animals”, which reinforces a pattern of systemic racism established in the era of British and European colonialism.
- Experiences of waiting, delay, and feeling “stuck” are common both for those trapped in the living sites of northern France, and those awaiting decisions on their asylum claims in the UK. “Temporal racism” means that even as society fixates on the apparent mobility of refugees, they often find themselves immobile and experience a “mental state of confinement”.



- Policies of criminalisation and a culture of disbelief around people seeking safety reproduce longstanding racist tropes and stereotypes that also impact wider racially minoritised communities in the UK. Locking people up for seeking asylum in the UK, whether in the de facto detention of contingency accommodation or in actual detention facilities, furthers the grave historical harms of racially unequal access to justice and experiences of the criminal justice system in the UK.
- In light of its role in the Home Office (Windrush) scandal, the UK government should have moved urgently to correct systemic racism in its policies and practices. Instead, current asylum policies are exacerbating these harmful patterns.
- The government to immediately end its new policy of limiting refugee status to thirty months, which fundamentally conflicts with the UK's Refugee Convention obligations and will leave people feeling even more trapped in limbo, stuck waiting for up to twenty years before they can even apply for permanent settlement.
- The immigration regulator, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) to urgently launch an inspection focused on possible systemic racial disparities in the treatment and outcomes for people arriving in the UK, including those arriving by small-boat crossings of the English Channel.
- Politicians of all parties and media outlets to cease referring to people seeking asylum in the UK as "illegal". Seeking asylum is a legal right under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, regardless of the route a person takes to reach the UK.

Based on these findings, we are calling for:

- The government to immediately end its cruel "one in, one out" policy, which can return people who have survived life-threatening journeys to escape persecution back to deeply unsafe conditions in France. The government must instead create safe routes for people to arrive in the UK and seek asylum, including those who have reached northern France, preventing the racial border violence that causes deaths in the Channel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors first and foremost thank the participants in the UK and France who shared their experiences with us. By necessity – because of the multiple risks they face, some of which are highlighted in this report – these participants remain anonymous. But their contribution cannot be over-estimated. This report exists to amplify their voices and share their experiences to advocate for fair and just asylum policies and practices.

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END NOTES

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