

starting over

young refugees talk about life in Britain



'...We have all too much on our minds, but we all know we have to survive. We're all hopeful for the future...'

Diana

THE WORK CONTINUES

THE PRINCE'S TRUST





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The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund has a commitment to funding and championing work with young refugees as part of its UK and International grants' programme, until at least 2005. It is particularly interested in work that promotes the inclusion of young refugees into mainstream provision; specialist youth work, culturally appropriate advice, information and counselling, helping young refugees to express their views and experiences and engendering positive attitudes towards young refugees. www.theworkcontinues.org

The Prince's Trust helps give young people aged 14-30 opportunities to succeed which they would otherwise not have. We help them to acquire skills, achieve economic independence and employment. We encourage them to play a full part in their community. Over the past 26 years, we have helped over 450,000 young people. We care about what young people think and keep up-to-date on changing issues that affect them. In 2001, 86p out of every £1 donated was spent directly on programme delivery, research and development. www.princes-trust.org.uk

Introduction

Young refugees and asylum seekers are a growing minority of vulnerable young people in the UK. Many arrive with family and friends, others make the journey alone or with strangers. For some, their time in Britain is a stopgap - a safe haven in which to study, work and start a family until they are able to continue their lives back home. Other young people have no home to return to.

Although research into refugees is still in its early phases, a number of organisations have already investigated the needs of refugees in terms of practical care arrangements.

The scope of this research is to assess ways in which voluntary organisations such as The Prince's Trust can work better with young refugees to enrich their self-development and improve their skills. All of which will help them become economically independent, confident and motivated young people who are able to make a net contribution to society.

The Trust's broad objective is to provide help and support to young people in need, which will lead to work, education, and English language development. These are the key factors which lead to integration.

The Trust's specific objectives include:

- To assist young people to join mainstream Prince's Trust activities.
- To refer young people to partners who provide further advice and support.
- To help young people contribute to their community.

This report, jointly funded by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, has been published in the hope it can provide guidance for other voluntary organisations who are yet to devise a policy approach for young refugees.

Focusing on almost 200 young refugees aged 14 to 30, we investigated not only their experiences since arriving in Britain, but also their aspirations and concerns for the future. We have encouraged young people to tell us about the lives they left behind as well as the new lives they have embarked on.

To highlight the lottery of experiences amongst young refugees once they arrive in Britain, we have identified where housing and other forms of support have influenced their outlook of Britain. Also where possible, we have highlighted any differences in attitudes of young people arriving in Britain alone, or with strangers, compared to those who arrived with people they already knew.

Voluntary organisations have an important role in creating a better environment for, and public attitudes towards, refugees and asylum seekers. They also fill in the gaps in statutory service provision and act as a further safeguard for people at risk of social exclusion.

Voluntary organisations are also instrumental in giving young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunities to succeed, which they otherwise would not have.

The Trust's commitment is to integrate young refugees into our programmes and to assist them in becoming welcome and valued members of our community.

The scale of the issue

Local Authorities in London and the South East look after over 80 per cent of asylum seeking children in England requiring social services. This is 10,255 out of 12,080 children.

(Source: Department of Health Children in Need in England 2001)

London Asylum Seekers Consortium (LASC) statistics show that:

- Unaccompanied children and young people comprise 11 per cent (4,836) of all asylum seekers in London.
- There are 17,685 young people aged under 18 in asylum seeking families. Under 18s make up 55 per cent of individuals in asylum seeking families in London.

(Source: LASC London Boroughs at December 2002)

A third of the 6,127 dispersal cases in Scotland are children, with 1,029 attending school. The majority are in Glasgow City.

(Source: Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium)

Summary

- Young refugees enjoy contributing to society. Working and studying in Britain fulfils young people's aspirations in feeling that they are playing their part in society.
- The best three things about Britain were considered to be the people, the education, and the freedom.
- 48 per cent of the sample have no formal qualifications from their country of origin. 56 per cent said education was one of the best things that Britain has to offer them.
- The top three forms of help cited as the most useful revolved around giving them the means to prove their worth and integrate into British society.
 - *66 per cent prioritised help with their English.*
 - *41 per cent wanted to spend more time with their British peers.*
 - *37 per cent wanted help getting into school or college.*
- Schools and colleges provide young refugees with vital opportunities for social integration. Integration in schools leads to integration in society creating respectful and tolerant communities. Young refugees we spoke to reported a welcoming environment in their school/college.
- This report highlights the fact that many young refugees fleeing persecution from their home country often travel to Britain alone or with strangers. There were subtle differences in their outlook of life in Britain.
 - *55 per cent of the young people travelled alone or with strangers.*
- Those with family links in Britain often live in crowded conditions until alternative accommodation is found.
- Young people arriving in Britain alone or with strangers are more likely to be found living alone, often in accommodation worse off than those who arrived with people they knew.
 - *Overall, 23 per cent lived alone.*
- The main barriers to feeling part of British society were perceived to be language difficulties, lack of family and friends (support network), and not being educated here.
- Young people were very aware of the effects of negative media. Young people were found to care how the public perceived them. It was important for young people to do well in Britain.
- 55 per cent of young people agreed that they felt their race put them at a disadvantage.
 - *37 per cent of young people who travelled alone or with strangers would not seek help or advice if they experienced racism, compared to 17 per cent of young people who travelled with people they already knew.*
- Young refugees travelling alone or with strangers are more reluctant to seek general advice or help if they need it.
- Young people who arrived in Britain alone or with strangers were frequently found to experience early parenthood. This is either from a wish to create a family of their own, or indicative of inaccessible health services.
- In five years time the three most popular goals for young people were working, studying, or bringing up a family in Britain.
- 64 per cent wanted to resettle in Britain. 21 per cent intended to wait and see how they felt when the situation in their home country changes.
- Despite their adverse life histories, the majority, (87 per cent) of young people were positive about the future.



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How the research was conducted

Using quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study came into contact with almost 200 young refugees aged between 14 and 30 years old in England and Scotland.

- 150 face-to-face interviews in Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, London and the South East.
- 2 discussion groups in London and Glasgow.
- 10 life maps of young refugees who have already been in contact with The Prince's Trust in southern England.

For the purposes of this study 'refugee' is defined as a young person who has left their country of origin under the UN definition and is currently seeking asylum in the UK.

We did not set out to determine at what stage in the asylum process the young people were at. Some of the participants would have received full refugee status or Exceptional Leave To Remain (ELR), whilst others would still be anxiously waiting for a decision on their application.

Initial decisions in 2001 granted UK asylum to nine per cent of cases and Exceptional Leave To Remain in 17 per cent of cases. 74 per cent were refused.

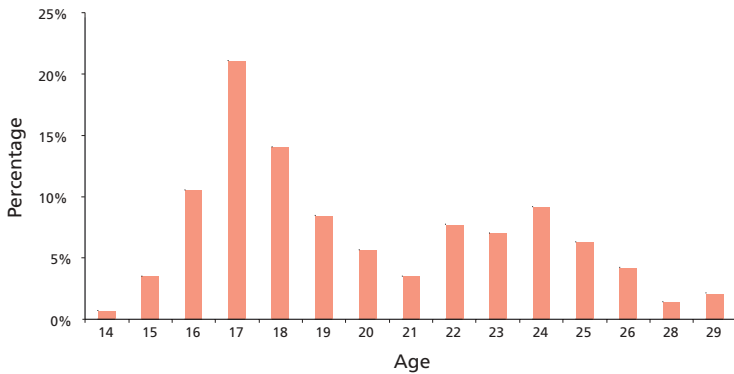
(Source: Home Office Asylum Statistics, United Kingdom 2001)

UN Convention on Status of Refugees (1951)

A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country"

Profile of sample

Figure 1. Age profile of sample



- 43 per cent were aged between 16 and 18 years old.
- 58 per cent were male.
- 55 per cent arrived in Britain alone or with strangers.

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of sample



- Participants originated from a wide range of countries. The top three nationalities were: Afghan, Iranian, and Iraqi.
- 59 per cent were Muslim.
- 27 per cent were Christian.
- 8 per cent were of no religion.
- 26 per cent came from managerial backgrounds, 18 per cent came from professional backgrounds.
- 16 per cent came from skilled, non-manual backgrounds.

Foundations for a new beginning

My journey

For the young refugees we spoke to, the decision to leave their homeland for Britain was not made lightly. The level of planning for young people's journeys varied considerably. Some young people had links in Britain, while others did not.

'...I came to England quickly. For one month, I was staying at the church, then I go to the Homeless Person's Unit where I was sent to a hostel. It was OK, but it was also full of drinkers and drug takers. I complained and was sent to another hostel for younger girls only...'
– Female, 23

Personal circumstances tended to dictate whether young people travelled with members of their family or alone. In some cases it was considered too dangerous or too expensive for families to travel together. Equally, the levels of existing support for young people on their arrival varied. In some cases, young people had followed siblings or parents who had already found accommodation and were working in the UK.

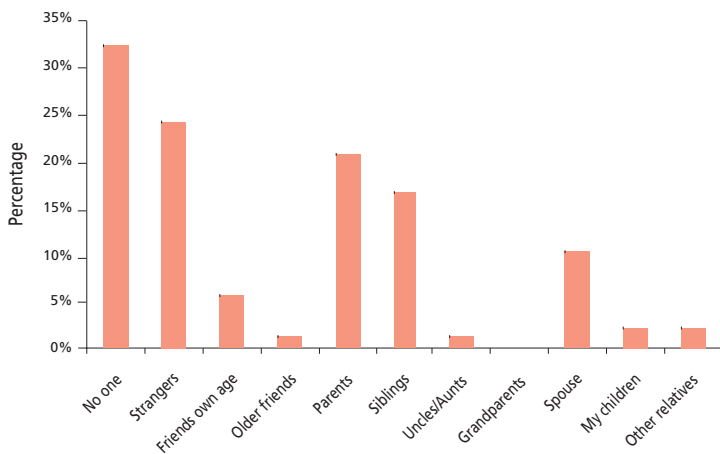
Just over a third of young people who arrived alone or with strangers were following their parents to the UK. However, 55 per cent of young people were not as fortunate and had left their parents behind.

One young person spoke of being 'taken to an agent who got me into the UK'. There was also a real fear that once in Britain, young people who travelled alone may not be reunited with their family members straight away.

Our study revealed the extent of the number of young people who arrive in Britain alone or with strangers. Thirty one per cent of young refugees we spoke to travelled alone, many of them unaccompanied minors at the time. Twenty three per cent came to Britain with strangers. In total, 55 per cent arrived with no one, or strangers (figure 3).

Parents were the third most frequently mentioned group that young refugees travelled with.

Figure 3. Travelling companions to Britain



Further investigation indicated that young refugees travelling with their families were more likely to come via airports and seaports. Marginally more young refugees travelling alone or with strangers arrived via the channel tunnel or 'other' means, predominantly by lorry.

Some young people did not want to disclose how they arrived.

A roof over my head

The majority of young people we spoke to for our life maps had existing family links in the UK when they arrived. This meant periods of shared accommodation, often in cramped conditions, until alternatives were found. Some young people found this difficult due to a lack of privacy.

Living in modest living quarters with other family members was difficult - some complained of boredom. Young people were grateful of opportunities where they were introduced to activities and other creative interests. Joining youth groups such as drama societies introduced them to new circles of friends and opportunities to pass time constructively and learn new skills.

'...In those two years, I applied for asylum and was told not to leave London. I did not apply for accommodation but I did apply at Westminster College for intermediate English and got involved in an activity centre. I got a grant from [The Prince's Trust] Millennium Project, making things using cameras and film. It was great fun! I learnt a lot and thought the money was well spent...'

– Male, 25

Those who came to Britain unaccompanied experienced a range of shelters. A small number of young people described their living arrangements as 'sofa surfing' with friends and living in squats. This illustrates the 'hidden homeless' population pointed out by homeless charity, Centrepoint. None of the young refugees mentioned experiences of sleeping on the streets, but there is a high risk of this occurring and it is an important area of future research that is equally relevant to the prevention of homelessness agenda.

'...I lived with a Colombian female school friend for two years, but she decided to leave London – so I was homeless. I started to live in squats...'

– Male, 25

Who I live with

There was no significant age difference between those travelling to Britain alone or with strangers, and those arriving with people they knew. However, young people arriving in Britain alone or with strangers were significantly more likely to be living alone. Young people who travelled with people they already knew were significantly less likely to be living by themselves.

This is an important discovery as young refugees travelling alone are particularly vulnerable to long-term social exclusion. They require guidance, friendship and financial support to rebuild their lives. Minors in local authority care should not be living on their own, and greater checks should be made to ensure that National Asylum Support Services (NASS) and local authorities do not place young adults who travelled to Britain alone in living arrangements that will make it harder for them to forge connections.

Although one in four young refugees we spoke to lived with friends of their own age, living arrangements like this should happen more frequently amongst young people arriving in Britain alone or with strangers. This type of peer support is essential in addition to pastoral support provided by adults.

Only six per cent of the young people we spoke to for our quantitative interviews were found to be living with friends and family already settled in the UK. Only two young people were in foster care, both unaccompanied minors. This suggests that foster care is not a popular option for young refugees.



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Type of housing

Most of the respondents were dependent on their local authority and NASS to find them adequate housing. Thirty six per cent were living in social housing provided by their local authority, while 29 per cent were living in a hotel or hostel allocated by NASS or local authorities. Twenty one per cent were living in private rented accommodation, also found by NASS or local authorities. Flats were found to be the most common type of dwelling.

When looking at differences in type of housing, almost twice as many young people who had travelled alone or with strangers reported living in a studio or bedsit.

Furthermore, almost five times as many young people who travelled alone or with strangers lived in property classified as 'other'. On further inspection, 'other' accommodation was described as 'a small dirty room', a bed and breakfast, 'just a room', or 'on a friend's sofa'.

Further investigation is required into why young people travelling alone or with strangers seem to be allocated 'sub-standard' forms of accommodation.

Education & employment

The majority of young refugees had received some form of education in their country of origin. Despite receiving education, 48 per cent of our sample had no formal qualifications from their country of origin and 85 per cent had no UK recognised qualifications.

Their level of education was dependent on their parent's livelihood. Some were university educated and had parents who were university lecturers. Others were from farming backgrounds and had received little education, choosing to leave school early in favour of employment.

An obvious disadvantage of resettling in a new country meant studying or re-training in a foreign language.

'...I did A levels in my own country, but I didn't come to England with the certificate, so I had to redo them...'

– London, male 22

'...It's not my language, English. I speak five languages – I did tell them that, but they don't listen...'

– London, male 22

'...They need from us an exam here in English, which is very difficult – even for some British people...'

– Glasgow, male 25

The importance of qualifications was not lost on this group of young people. Like other groups of young people The Prince's Trust has studied, the perception that qualifications lead to success was universal.

'...Qualifications mean respect. If you don't have qualifications, people treat you like nobody – just cheap labour...'

– Glasgow, male 25

It was widely accepted that the education provided in the UK was one of the best aspects of life in Britain. All of the Glasgow focus group participants were attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.

For many young people, the reason for studying was to enhance job prospects – but many were frustrated about the limitations their status put on their educational options.

'...I went to one college. They say, "We can't support you – have to be in the country for three years". But I was already in college and needed the help...'

– London, female 19

'...I asked for travel support, and they say, "You have to be here for three years...'

– London, female 21

Basic skills of respondents

Speaking English

- 54 per cent believed their level of English was 'good'.
- 18 per cent were 'very confident'.
- 10 per cent were 'not at all confident'.

Reading English

- 42 per cent thought their standard of reading was 'good'.
- 24 per cent believed it to be 'patchy'.
- 13 per cent were 'not at all confident'.

Writing English

- 13 per cent were 'very confident'
- 33 per cent described their writing skills as 'patchy'.
- 24 per cent were 'not at all confident'.

Most of the young people who participated in this study had a good grasp of the English language. Spoken English was the area which young people were most comfortable with. However, it was clear that confidence levels towards written English were lower than for speaking or reading.

This is a concern because the asylum seeking process involves a large amount of paperwork. Enrolling in education courses and obtaining accommodation also calls for a certain standard of written English. Voluntary organisations can help by ensuring that Basic Skills training is incorporated into the programmes on offer.

Learning a new language and way of life on top of personal circumstances was a true test of character.

'...I found London very tough and I was very depressed for the first year. I found it hard to adjust to the weather, to the people – and to the language. I also had to find work...'

– Male, 21

'...I started at an English school. Nobody spoke Spanish – I used to get picked on. I was beaten up a couple of times – really hated it. My mother found out, and said we have to move again...'

– Female, 18

Young people's experience of employment was equally frustrating. Although only a small number were currently in employment, focus group participants indicated a clear desire to work, and to work well.

'...If you've got a good job, you don't need any help...'

– London, male 22

Young refugees, like other young people, want their work to be more than just menial tasks. The young people we spoke to were involved with work ranging from helping out at their college to working part-time in a fast food outlet. Some had negative experiences of work.

'...Sometimes you go to ask for a job, but they see you and don't even give you an application form...'

– London, female 22

'...If you go to work, "You're taking our jobs". If you stay at home, they say, "You're taking our money"!'

– Glasgow, male 25

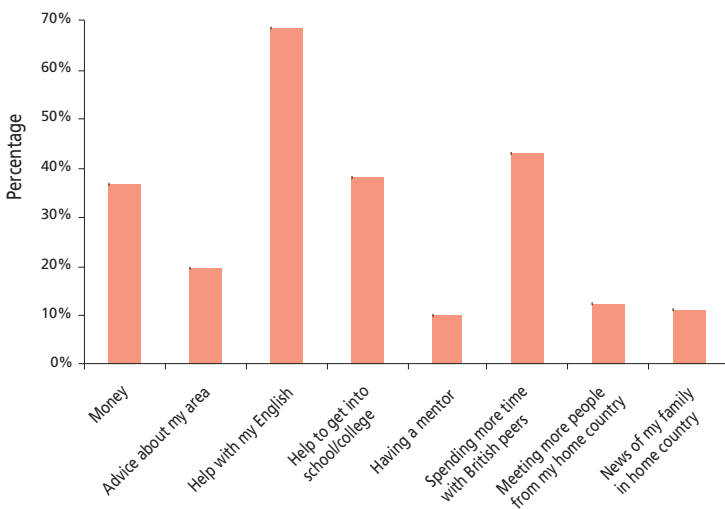
Young refugees thought it was important to gain qualifications to get a job they liked. Also, the type of job they hoped to do mattered greatly to them. A sense of pride in personal achievement came across in the interviews. It was seen as important to do well in school and some young people believed that studying and working helped them feel part of Britain.

How can we help?

It is evident from this study that voluntary organisations can help young refugees with housing, by ensuring that those who arrive alone or with strangers do not feel alienated by their type of accommodation. Voluntary organisations can also put pressure on local authorities to ensure that young refugees, particularly those arriving unaccompanied, are not allocated sub-standard accommodation often with little or no support provided.

When asked what type of help young refugees would prefer, it is clear that help associated with integration into British society was the most popular.

Figure 4. Types of help and support considered to be the most useful



Although money was seen as a useful form of support that young people wanted, it came behind other more socially focussed aspects. What appears to matter to young refugees is a belief that they have earned the right to belong in Britain, and could become citizens on an equal footing. This meant contributing to society either through working, or studying.

Therefore, young people would most appreciate the means to realise this aspiration.

Making Britain home

Participants in this study lived in England's larger cities. This was often a real contrast to where they lived previously. Young people expressed being overawed by their first impressions of London. The majority of young refugees reside in London and the south of England. Although some voiced a preference for London over Glasgow, others yearned for the countryside.

School or college was where young people spent most of their time during the week. When not at school, young people who arrived in Britain alone, could be found at drop in or advice centres or at work. Young people who arrived with family or friends described other main activities as spending time with friends, and being at home with family.

This highlights the importance of the school/college environment for young, unaccompanied refugees. To many, it is their main opportunity to make new friends and establish a support network.

Self awareness

Young refugees were very aware of the power of negative media in influencing public opinion and care considerably about what the public think of them.

'...From 16 to 25, they think that we are here to destroy them or take their money. When they see us, they say 'OK, this guy came here to take our jobs...'

– Glasgow, male 25

The Glasgow discussion group were concerned about young people's attitudes towards refugees and were more vocal about the downfalls and labels put upon them. They were aware that some people thought they were getting 'everything for free'.

'...Being labelled as a refugee – it does upset us. I don't want to become like that...'

– Glasgow, male 23

'...First of all, they put us in very high buildings surrounded by poor and homeless people. They look on us as a refugee. A lot of boys or girls say, 'Go home refugee'. Now, I'm a university lecturer in Iraq. This is not right...'

– Glasgow, male 27

However, one young person bluntly admitted that difficult situations often brought out the worst in people: *'We can't say, "All these refugees are good". There are always people with bad tempers. But when you put lots of people in bad places, then you get problems.'*

Far from being the exploiters, some young people described experiences where they were the ones being exploited.

'...We arrived in London, Victoria. We stayed in a bed and breakfast for two days – they charged us £860 for two days stay. Of course, they knew we did not know what the currency was in this – we were taken in. In those two days, we contacted my brother who was already here before us. Mum and I went and stayed with him as a family group – also with a cousin as well. That reminds me, we were charged £70 by a minicab for a £10 fare...'
– Female, 18

Young people in London and Glasgow also worried about levels of street crime and commented on acts of delinquency they had seen. This questions the myth that young refugees are more likely to be involved in street crime and gang violence.

Young people arriving in the UK alone or with strangers appeared to be more ambivalent towards public opinion. Almost twice as many young people who travelled unaccompanied stated that they are unaffected by what the public think of them. This differentiation in mindset could be due to the intensity of their experiences and sense of self-preservation. Their determination to be happy meant they cared less of what people think of them.

When asked whether they knew who the Prime Minister of the UK was, almost twice as many young people who arrived in Britain alone or with strangers were strongly confident of the answer, compared to young people who travelled to Britain with people they already knew. Perhaps those travelling independently had a greater knowledge of political affairs.

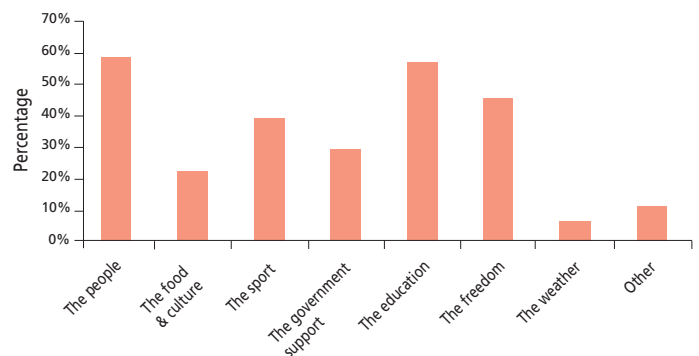
When we asked whether or not young people believed that politicians care about 'people like me', responses showed a very divided opinion. Again, this highlights the lottery of treatment amongst young people.

Best things about Britain

Young people felt varying levels of integration in Britain, which appeared to be dependent on the period of time they had spent in Britain.

The majority (57 per cent) of young refugees cited 'the people', as one of the best aspects about life in Britain. Amongst those who disagreed with this, twice as many were young people who had travelled alone or with strangers.

Figure 5. The best things about life in Britain



Education and freedom were the second and third most popular aspects of life in Britain. These are the two things that young people were denied in their home country.

From figure 5, it is evident that young refugees expressed an interest in sports. Voluntary organisations could encourage sport-based initiatives for young refugees to meet and mix with their British peers. Such an initiative would be an extension of current initiatives to help battle racism in sport.

Young people held relatively positive views towards government support. Only a small group believed the government was one of the worst things about life in Britain. These were more likely to be young refugees who arrived in Britain alone, or with strangers.

Other favourable aspects of British society were the availability of new opportunities, youth culture and mix of people.

Barriers to feeling part of British society

Respondents experienced a range of welcomes when they first arrived in Britain.

The main barriers to feeling part of British society were perceived to be 'not speaking the same language' and 'not having friends and family here'. However, one in four young refugees put this down to 'not being educated in Britain'.

A good school can act as a focal point in making young refugees feel more settled. Teachers have recognised this and awareness of refugees and asylum seekers is a topical issue in pupils' current affairs education.

Schools and colleges are tasked with providing young people with qualifications that help them succeed in later life, as well as a social environment to improve soft skills and increase ties in Britain. This highlights the disadvantages of the new Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act (2002) which states that asylum seeking children of school age are to be educated in new accommodation centres.

When examining differences in outlook between young people, we found that fewer young people who arrived alone or with strangers considered education and the views of British people as barriers to feeling part of British society. Their lower levels of perceived barriers reinforces earlier findings of their determination to succeed in Britain.

Although succeeding in the future means a lot to all young refugees – young people who travelled alone or with strangers were more fervent about this than young people who travelled with people they already knew. Seventy four per cent of young refugees who travelled alone felt that it meant a 'great deal' for them to do well, compared to 56 per cent of young people who travelled with family and friends.

When we asked the young people whether they felt part of British society, the most frequently given answer was 'some of the time'.

Young people felt most integrated into a British way of life when attending school or college. Teachers often made this the environment that was the most welcoming for them. At school or college, young refugees were of equal status to other students and this was found to be uplifting for them.

Language difficulties were another main barrier. An inability to communicate makes young people unable to express themselves, which is why sport-based and arts-based initiatives for young refugees could be a useful way

for voluntary organisations to boost young refugees' self-confidence.

Some young people did not feel part of British society. This was because they were still unsure whether they could stay indefinitely in the UK.

Even amongst those who had mixed well into life in Britain, young people always felt that there was another aspect that set them apart:

'...I got a part-time job as a kitchen cleaner – but I wasn't happy. I decided to come back to college to get a better job. Racism is still there...'

– Glasgow, male 24

'...They just see the black, they hear your accent – they don't know nothing...'

– London, female 20

'...You have to act like them. But you can't change the inside of yourself...'

– London, male 18

Fifty five per cent of young people agreed that they often felt at a disadvantage because of their race. For the purpose of this study, 'race' was defined as skin colour, language, religion, country of origin, and refugee status.

Encouragingly, young people did not feel that the police picked on them, or that teachers excluded them due to their race. They also disagreed with the statement that their neighbourhood had little to offer them.

Other points raised in the discussion groups related to race was that young people felt that non-white Britons were the most unwelcoming towards them.

'...People who were born here but whose parents aren't from the UK, they're the problem – they back off you...'

– London, male 20

This point echoes with findings from previous Prince's Trust research *The Way It Is (2002)* where young people from minority ethnic groups stated that differences between minority ethnic communities can often be larger than assumed differences between white and non-white communities.

Britain has hundreds of multi-ethnic community interest groups, many of which already work in tandem with larger charities. One way forward with art-based and



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sport-based initiatives for young refugees is to set up and promote inter-community events consisting of mixed teams. This sits well with equality and diversity agendas for the country as a whole.

Importance of family

Someone to turn to

After speaking to almost 200 young refugees, the true extent of the importance of family has become apparent. On a practical level, having family in Britain meant these young people had existing support structures.

In general, the top three agencies young people found the most useful were: The Refugee Council's Panel of Children Advisors (96 per cent), NASS (40 per cent), and Local Authority Social Services department (31 per cent).

In the absence of family support, young people who travelled to Britain alone or with strangers were more likely to seek general help and advice from a religious leader, voluntary worker or careers advisor. Seven times as many young people who travelled to

Britain with family or friends sought parental advice for general help and support.

Unaccompanied travellers were five times more likely to be reluctant in seeking general help or advice.

Young refugees who travelled on their own were also less inclined to seek help or advice if they were lonely. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that young, unaccompanied refugees do not feel alienated, especially through their living arrangements.

Racism can be one of the most confidence destroying forms of bullying for young people. One in five young people said they had experienced bullying because of their race. Worryingly, when all young refugees were asked who they would turn to if they experienced racism, most wouldn't seek further advice or help from anyone. This could be because they were unsure what could be done about it, or did not want to attract further attention to themselves. Young people who travelled alone or with strangers were more likely to say this than those who travelled with family and friends.

Who would you turn to if you experienced racism?

Travelled alone or with strangers

- I wouldn't seek advice or help (37 per cent)
- Other (23 per cent)
- Friends (15 per cent)

Travelled with family or friends

- Parents (28 per cent)
- Friends (18 per cent)
- I wouldn't seek advice or help (17 per cent)

The type of housing also influences young people's network of contacts. More young people living in social housing or hotels/hostels allocated by NASS turn to social workers for general help.

Those who said they would turn to friends for general help, were more likely to be young people living in the private rented sector (found by NASS or their local authority). This implies that young people living in the private rented sector have a wider social network than young people living in social housing. It could also be a factor influenced by age and duration spent in Britain.

Almost a third of young people who said they did not find NASS to be one of the most helpful organisations were actually living in a hotel or hostel allocated by NASS or their local authority.

When looking at overall sense of wellbeing, our sample showed no discernible difference in outcomes between those who arrived in Britain independently and those who arrived with family and friends.

Despite their adverse circumstances, most of the young people felt good about themselves and retained a sense of control over their lives. Adversity had made them stronger. Young people expressed a confidence in their abilities and wanted to finish their studies so they could start work and support themselves. The type of work they did was important to them after studying hard and learning a new language.

A family of my own

In the absence of existing family support structures, young people's stories indicate that many find partners and start families early, perhaps in a bid to create a sense of family.

'...I started living in bed and breakfasts. I shared rooms with a good family with a good background. But I had no privacy – and I was nearly 19 then. I fell pregnant and the baby arrived. I was alone in a small room with the baby. This was not good. I was 20 – here I was, no support at all. I told the social services and they moved me. Same again I think, but it was better. It's my own room and it's better...'

– Female, 22

'...I had my own room and started to learn English better. I have a boyfriend now and I am expecting a baby soon. I want to study at a college and learn IT...'

– Female, 23

Factors leading to early parenthood amongst young refugees is an area for further research. Known factors leading to early parenthood amongst the British population include; coming from a low-income household, a low level of education, having low expectations and little knowledge of contraception. However, it is unclear at this stage the extent of cultural influences on the refugee population.

Living in overcrowded conditions with family members often compelled some of the young people to live with partners very early on in their relationship. One young girl - who had previously been living with her mother, brother and cousin in a bed and breakfast – had moved in with a boyfriend and was pregnant at age 16. Her story was not uncommon.

'...Coming up to 16, I knew there were money problems. And so I moved by my own choice into a boyfriend's flat...I had to stop studies because I found out I was pregnant. At the end of last year, I lost the baby due to a miscarriage. Plus I lost my boyfriend – he wasn't for me...'

– Female, 18

Early pregnancy could also mean that young refugees, in particular females, are not accessing health services. Voluntary organisations are best placed to check whether young refugees are able to access appropriate health services such as family planning advice. Language and other cultural barriers also explain why many young women do not actively seek advice themselves.

Although early motherhood is considered a blessing for many young women, it can also act as a barrier to education and employment opportunities. Sex and

Relationships Education (SRE) is an important aspect of the government's teenage pregnancy prevention strategy and should be available to all young people, particularly if they are the most vulnerable and least likely to be aware of their options.

Aspirations for the future

In five years time

When considering their plans for the next five years, working in Britain, getting an education in Britain, and bringing up a family in Britain were top priorities.

Future goals

- 39 per cent wanted to be working in Britain.
- 35 per cent hoped to be studying in Britain.
- 22 per cent aspired to be bringing up a family in Britain.

'...I'm studying because I want to do something with my future...'

– Glasgow, female 22

Very few young refugees said they wanted to be doing vocational training in five years time. This could also be indicative of a lack of awareness of vocational training routes.

Support networks to help young people achieve their aims is crucial, otherwise young people may fail to cope with the isolation and turmoil of starting a new life in a new country.

'...I've seen many people go mad. When they reach 18, at that moment, they don't get any help. Some of them died, they hanged themselves...'

– London, male 19

The London focus group was determined to ensure that this wouldn't happen to them – they would support each other.

'...When you get the chance, it's something everyone can wish for...'

– London, female 21

'...It's up to me – I have to make life better...'

– London, male 21

Anxiety was also a common feeling amongst young people. Some were unable to focus their plans because they had not yet heard whether they had been granted Refugee status or Exceptional Leave to Remain.

'...If the future's the same as the last two or three years, then a lot of people will go mad. I'm not a critical person, but I'm in a critical situation...'

– Glasgow, male 25

Other young people wanted to travel further:

'...I would like to go to France to dance using therapy as part of it. Also, I'd like to go to Australia and research the Aborigines as they also are a downtrodden people...'

– Female, 18

The main obstacle young people faced was their grasp of the English language and lack of qualifications. Clearly, the focus on refugee integration revolves around language acquisition. Currently, there is little funding for refugee re-training. Voluntary organisations could help with grants for young refugees trying to develop their education and training prospects.

'...I don't know what I think about the future. Language is the important thing at the moment...'

– Glasgow, male 22

'...I want to learn, I enjoy it. How can my children communicate with me then they're older if I don't learn English?...'

– Glasgow, male 28

Those who wanted to stay in education would seek education related advice from teachers first, and then their parent(s). In equal third place, young people said they would seek help from voluntary workers, or wouldn't seek help at all.

Those who said they wanted to be working in five years time wanted to be in managerial jobs, that require skills of either a manual or non-manual nature.



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Those who wanted to be working in five years time would seek employment advice firstly from a priest or religious leader, followed by careers advisor, and then friends.

Britain forever

Like all young people we have studied in our *Attitudes and Aspirations* research series, young refugees were optimistic about their future. Eighty seven per cent described feeling good about their future. In this study, young people were aware that they were fortunate to have escaped the atrocities of their homeland.

'...Before? What had we before? We could be in graves like the others back home. Now we have to prove ourselves, to show we're studying well, working well...'

– Glasgow, male 23

'...What does it matter about being happy. I'm alive...'

– Glasgow, male 24

The majority (64 per cent) of young people wanted to resettle and start a new life in the UK. None of the young people who expressed a wish to return to their country of origin when it became safe, had travelled to Britain alone. This implies that those who travelled to Britain alone were not in a hurry to return to their family, perhaps it was because they had little family to return to.

Those who did want to return home, wanted to bring their new families too.

'...My future? Well, I'd like to go back to South America and study – and would take my partner and baby with me of course...'

– Male, 21

'...I would like to go back with my wife and child to Colombia and start an education project in which we will be able to share the knowledge we have gained in London. This would involve teaching country people to express their views through the arts. It will also be a community in which anyone willing to share with the people is welcome to live and enjoy life in a peaceful way...'

– Male, 23

Twenty one per cent intended to wait and see how they felt when the situation at home changed.

The reasons given for feeling good about the future varied, however common threads were: a sense of determination, getting an education, and feeling safe. Young people's feelings for the future were unaffected by who they travelled to Britain with. Simply having survived and having doors to open was a reason to be hopeful.

'...I'd like to be a teacher – anywhere I am needed – to help make other people's lives easier...I have been living a lot of the time hand to mouth – eat sometimes at friends, sometimes I go to centres that offer cheap food, and sometimes I use the free food places the homeless on the streets use. But today I'm here. And now I can feed myself for a couple of days...'

– Male, 25

'...I'm back at school now – you have such a good standard of education here in the UK. You have a choice. I want to be creative, maybe an artist. I have no mind at all of being a housewife. I'd like to be a career lady...'

– Female, 16

'...We have all too much on our minds, but we all know we have to survive. We're all hopeful for the future...'

– Glasgow, male 28

Discussion

It is clear from this research that young refugees are eager to play a meaningful role in Britain. Although young refugees experienced varying levels of support networks and standards of accommodation, their experiences gave all of them a steely determination to succeed in this country. However, language barriers and education work against them in the short to medium term.

Ways in which charitable organisations such as The Prince's Trust can help young refugees regarding self-development particularly those aged over 18 years, will be influenced by new legislative changes.

The recent Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) has changed the landscape for many young refugees through the introduction of accommodation centres. The new Act impacts heavily on two crucial aspects; how best to access young people and how to deliver the type of help that is most relevant.

Although unaccompanied minors remain under Local Authority care as stipulated by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, young adults from 18 upwards will be housed in new accommodation centres until their application is processed. This includes young people who may be under 18 but whose age is under dispute, and young people who are supported by social services but are never in the care system and not covered by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

A provision is made in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act for asylum seekers to be able to leave the accommodation centre if their process is not completed in six months. The Refugee Council states that the average time for an initial asylum decision is 13 months with an additional 26 weeks for an appeal. This will increase pressure for the government to process asylum applications, hopefully not at the expense of attention to detail in decision making.

This means that access to unaccompanied under 18s and under 18s with families already dispersed by NASS will be mainly through local authorities, schools, community groups, drop-in centres and the Refugee Council's Children's Panel.

Once the accommodation centres are in place, charities seeking to work with young refugees aged 18 and over, and those who arrived with family will have a new set of access issues to wade through.

Mentoring, a type of help which could be effective in helping young refugees integrate into Britain, is often best delivered in an educational environment. This will not be available to school aged children arriving in Britain with their families. They will be educated in accommodation centres, a decision teachers have already expressed concern over. In a recent MORI survey (June 2002) 63 per cent of people surveyed believed that asylum seeking children should have the same access to local schools. Many felt that educating children separately would damage race relations.

Moreover, it is unclear exactly what educational opportunities will exist for young adults aged 18 and over in accommodation centres. So far, little information is available on education provided in accommodation centres for school aged children. The issues surrounding this are manifold. For instance, where will teachers be recruited from? Will classes be clustered by language rather than age?

Basic Skills, arts-based and sports-based initiatives may be delivered in accommodation centres, but they lack the essential ingredient of diversity that gives young refugees the opportunity to mix with their British peers.

The right to work, a concession introduced in 1986, has also been withdrawn. This takes away the ability to retain a sense of dignity, which is important to young people. Working in Britain was something that made them feel part of society. Voluntary work is encouraged, and yes, this type of work is a worthwhile activity – but the meaning changes when acted not from choice but from lack of it.

Not all of the young people in this study had heard a decision on their right to stay in Britain – but their optimism for the future was unanimous. This report argues that voluntary organisations seeking to work with young refugees should help all young people who are now in Britain legally, regardless of their stage in the asylum seeking process of this country.

Young refugees stated that the education, the people and the freedom were the three best things about life in Britain. These are the very three things that will be most affected by the arrival of accommodation centres.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, a number of recommendations have arisen. The following suggestions tackle the three main perceived barriers to becoming part of British society: language difficulties, a lack of support networks, and education.

Other voluntary organisations seeking to enrich young refugees' self-development may wish to use these recommendations to inform their own thinking and practice.

Housing champions

Voluntary organisations can help to ensure that all young refugees who travelled to Britain alone or with strangers are not living alone or in sub-standard accommodation by being aware of their clients' living arrangements.

Pressure on NASS representatives or local authorities in charge of allocating inappropriate accommodation should be applied. The advent of arrival centres means that voluntary organisations can act as a further safety net to check appropriateness of housing after young refugees have left the centres (either because their asylum application has been approved, or it has taken over six months to process).

Independent living skills training

For many young refugees, living alone in Britain may be the first time they have lived by themselves. On top of this, managing day-to-day life in a foreign language is a daunting prospect. A mentoring programme could be one solution.

Arts-based and sports-based initiatives

Findings showed that sport rated relatively highly as an aspect of Britain young refugees liked best. This is a well-established voluntary organisation role which can be used as a starting point to engage young refugees and give them further opportunities to make friends and spend time with their British peers. The non-direct use of language allows young people for whom English is a second language, to express themselves in different ways.

Once accommodation centres are in place, delivery of such initiatives can be unified across the country. Some may argue that accommodation centres will bring a greater need for such initiatives for young people.

Refugee Education, Employment and Training Allowances (REETAs)

Organisations which allocate individual and/or group grants could advertise amongst refugee communities prioritising grants that aim to improve education, employment and training prospects. Until young people gain positive outcomes on their asylum decision they are ineligible for Education Maintenance Allowances. REETAs would fill the current gap in financial provision for refugee re-training. Such a grant should be available to all young people regardless of status, but perhaps with greater funding for those who have received positive outcomes.

Basic skills toolkits

Basic skills toolkits should be embedded in all outreach work with young refugees. This gives young people every opportunity to improve their English writing, reading and speaking skills.

Mentoring programmes

In addition to specific independent living skills training, mentoring gives young refugees the support network that will allow them to get back on their feet and feel a genuine part of British society. It is the form of help they expressed as the most useful.

Health & relationships advice

Access to Family Planning and Sex and Relationships Education may be an area where advice would be welcome, particularly for young women. Voluntary organisations can help deliver 'advice days' in community centres or accommodation centres. Accessing health services is known to be difficult for people with English as a second language. Young refugees are particularly vulnerable.

Inter-community initiatives

Equality and Diversity is an important issue for every person living in Britain today. Voluntary organisations could go one step further and use sports-based or arts-based initiatives to bond communities of different faith. This will be an invaluable learning experience for all young people involved and sets the tone for the levels of civic responsibility Britain expects from all who reside here.

Accommodation centres alarm clock

Local organisations and schools should act together to ensure that young children educated in accommodation centres are not there for longer than six months.

Share best practice

It is important to share best practice in work with young refugees. For example, this can be done either through a dedicated website or a regular forum. Like all work in the voluntary sector, the best programmes are those that are easy to copy and effective in their aims.

Future research

This report has thrown light onto areas that require further investigation. Initial suggestions for further research include:

- Homelessness amongst young refugees.
- Types of accommodation allocated to unaccompanied minors.
- Evaluation of mentoring programmes for young refugees.

Some charities are better placed than others in conducting research. Voluntary organisations should share future research ideas, to ensure work is not duplicated and to pool resources to obtain the best quality research.

Umit, age 19

Hi my friend! I was born in Istanbul in Turkey. I have two sisters. My father was a cook in a restaurant and also a trade unionist as well. He's disabled now.

Until I was five years old, we were always moving from place to place. I remember between two and three being in Iskendamrum – a year of 'borrow to borrow'. Still, as I said at five there were problems. No permanent friends, no links to the past. We were not allowed to be Kurdish, our culture, our religion. It became more and more political.

I remember at ten or maybe 12, my father was captured by the police. My mum and friends went on hunger strike for 15 days for him. My father was being tortured, we know. Eventually, he was released – there was no evidence against him. He came home, but we saw that people were disappearing around us. We were getting regular visits from the police.

I left school at 14. Around me during the day I knew children that were being used as drug mules. Other children were forced to live on the streets. Everyone was on low wages to keep the population in poverty.

We moved again, this time to Angora – a big city – to disappear and live as free people. But my father was captured again and was tortured very badly. My mother went on hunger strike again, but this time we don't know where he is gone for a number of days. Just gone, disappear. We read in the papers that many were shot on the streets and we were getting continual harassment. Some problems from the Turkish mafia as well – we know who they work for.

My father, he escaped from prison – he meet us and we moved quickly to Bulgaria. I remember Bulgaria – I cry every day, was very unhappy. We met some other people and myself and my sister got into the UK. We stayed with some friends my parents know. I was 15 then – that was four years ago.

From 15 to 17, we stayed with our uncle and at 17, my father joined us. Now, all our family – including my mother – is together, but we started having money problems with my uncle so we had to leave.

We went into a council hostel, still with money problems. There was no TV, no culture – nothing to do. I missed it all. Then in January this year, my father he get a flat for us all. I have started to get involved with a community centre and got involved with folk dancing and football and an independent youth group.

Me and my sister, we support each other through times of crisis and many we have been through.

