

An essential guide to... refugee families

Immigration will be a key issue in the run up to the General Election, but how do refugees fit into the picture and what is the reality of their situation? *Ruth Stokes* reports



In just over a fortnight's time (7 May) we will be able to cast our votes in the General Election. Party allegiance, education policies, the future of the NHS will be among the key issues influencing our decision about who to vote for. So too will immigration.

Immigration to the UK has raised the political heat on all the major political parties in recent years, but it also raises important – and basic – questions. What is an immigrant, or a refugee? How do refugees fit in to the overall picture of immigration? And how many of them are there?

Political debates, particularly ahead of elections, often provide little clarity about definitions or numbers, as

Natalie Williams, policy adviser at The Children's Society, explains: 'A lot of election campaigning is targeted at reducing numbers of new migrants coming to this country. But these campaigns often wrongly combine the issues of immigration and refugees as one. This makes it hard for the public to understand that they are different – that refugees are people coming to this country seeking safety from war, violence and persecution.'

DEFINITIONS

What is the definition of a 'refugee', an 'immigrant' and an 'asylum-seeker'?

The 1951 Refugee Convention, as set out by the UN Refugee Agency

Atmeh camp, Syria – January 2013: internally displaced Syrians, including children, at a refugee camp near the Syrian-Turkish border

(UNHCR), defines a refugee as someone 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'.

The persecution that refugees are fleeing can be tied in with conflict, violence and human rights violations. A migrant, by comparison, is someone who chooses to move outside their country of origin in search of a better quality of life.

A person only officially becomes a refugee once they have been ➤

granted refugee status. During their application for the status – which gives them protection on the basis of the 1951 Refugee Convention or article 3 of the European Court of Human Rights – they are classed as an asylum seeker.

NUMBERS

How many refugees are there?

The number of refugees worldwide has hit its highest level since World War II, according to a 2014 report from the UNHCR. More than 50 million people were forcibly displaced in 2013 – six million more than in 2012. About 16 million of the 2013 number were refugees, and half of these were under 18 years old.

The steep rise in their numbers has been largely attributed to the civil war in Syria, but conflicts in the Central African Republic and South Sudan have played a part too. Also included in the 50 million are asylum seekers and those who are displaced but remain within their own countries.

Perhaps surprisingly, given some Western concerns about immigration, developing countries host the majority (86 per cent) of the world's refugees. And about half of refugees are to be found in urban environments rather than refugee camps.

Pakistan is currently sheltering the highest number of refugees, followed by Iran, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Wealthy countries host just 14 per



cent, and the imbalance between developed and developing nations in this area is growing – ten years ago developed countries hosted 30 per cent, and developing countries 70 per cent.

LIFE AS AN ASYLUM SEEKER AND REFUGEE What is life like for an asylum seeker when they arrive in the UK?

The UK has a system of support for those going through the process of

Dadaab, Somalia –August 11: children live in the Dadaab refugee camp where thousands of Somalis wait for help because of hunger. The camp is currently under threat of being shut down

applying for refugee status, but life as an asylum seeker or a refugee comes with its challenges.

'Best case scenario is that you come to the UK, you immediately claim asylum and you get granted refugee status,' says Amy Lythgoe of the charity Refugee Welcome Trust.

'But there are a lot of people who get refused the first time and are only granted refugee status on appeal, which can take a long time. As an asylum seeker, you have limited control over your life. You have £35 a week to live, which is not a lot, and you don't choose where you live. You can get moved at any time, and then you lose any support network you might have built up. It can be a really big deal for children.'

The process can be stressful for other reasons too, she adds: 'The appeals can be horrible. I've seen children who have had to sit in hearings and hear about torture and threats on parents' lives. And as children tend to have a better grasp of English because they learn faster, they often become the interpreter for parents – for example, when the doctor is giving a HIV diagnosis. They can be put in situations that are very adult.' This comes on top of any trauma they may already have been exposed to first hand in their home countries.

These children, whether classed as asylum seekers or refugees, have the same rights as any other child in the UK. This means they have access to education (including benefits such as

REFUGEES: FACTS AND FIGURES

- In 2014, the number of applications for asylum in the UK, excluding dependents (24,915), was 23,584.
- 13,400 people were granted protection in the UK in 2013.
- The number of asylum applicants under five (dependants) in the UK for 2013 was 2,423.
- In 2013 the EU member states granted protection to 135,700 asylum seekers, up from 116,200 in 2012.
- In 2013 the UK, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden accounted between them for nearly 80 per cent of those granted protection in the EU.
- Over the past five years, about 3,000 children, mostly teenagers, have arrived in the UK alone every year seeking asylum.
- Albania is the country of origin for the largest amount of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK.
- Women and girls accounted for 49 per cent of the world's refugee population in 2013.
- More than 25,000 asylum applications worldwide were made in 2013 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia. This is the highest number since UNHCR started collecting this data in 2006.
- Pakistan has an estimated 1.6 million refugees.
- At the end of 2013, the UK had a total of 126,055 refugees, 23,070 pending asylum cases and 205 stateless persons.
- Of the 19,936 initial decisions made in the UK in 2014, 11,840 (59 per cent) refused and 7,270 (36 per cent) granted refugee status.



free entitlement) and healthcare. The situation is more complex for families as a whole, however, since most adults seeking asylum are not allowed to work. And until they have refugee status, adults and children live under the threat of being sent back to their country of origin at any time. 'People are really resilient, but it's that lack of control over your life that's really damaging,' says Ms Lythgoe.

How does life change once they have refugee status?

Even once a person is granted refugee status difficulties can remain, because while the status means they have equal rights to other UK citizens, the barriers to building a secure life in the UK can be significant.

'You've been supported in this parallel system and you then have to shift into the mainstream system, which can be a real problem,' explains Refugee Council policy manager Judith Dennis.

After status is granted, refugees have 28 days to move out of accommodation provided for them under the asylum process. 'Ironically, people in this situation can become homeless,' Ms Dennis says. 'They won't have access to savings so can't get private rented accommodation, meaning it's back into different temporary accommodation. Usually families would be a priority and the housing department would hopefully house them, but you might have to move again, and the children might have to move school. There might also be a gap between applying for benefits and getting them.'

The Refugee Council offers help with the transition, and other similar organisations can also provide support for the various different challenges faced by refugees. Assistance can also sometimes be found at children's centres – which The Children's Society's Ms Williams says can be a 'lifeline'. 'The way we [at The Children's Society] come into contact with refugee children is often through the children's centres we run,' she explains.

'Many of the families we work with said that these centres were a vital resource for them – that they were crucial in helping them settle in, meet other parents, get support and sometimes get free baby clothes and English lessons.'

In some schools, says Ms Dennis, community groups have been helping to run projects targeting refugee families. 'The parents can come along and do homework with the children,' she says. 'So they're learning about the school system and getting some support with that.'

The National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum notes that 'some refugee children may have missed out on play

Beqaa, Lebanon – May 2003: Syrian refugee children in one of the tented camps in Beqaa Lebanon

Munich, Germany – November 2014: refugees on hunger strike in Munich, demonstrating for more rights and against racism

'As an asylum seeker, you have limited control over your life'

opportunities', but that having access to play through early years provision can provide 'therapeutic opportunities to make sense of the world and gain confidence through positive interaction with their peers and exploring their environment'.

WORLDWIDE What are the challenges faced by refugees outside the UK?

Refugee children living in countries such as Syria or Sudan have, on the whole, a rather different set of challenges to contend with. The level of support provided and the quality of the living conditions depend on the host country, but often a coalition of NGOs, local authorities and governments can be involved in offering help, alongside sympathetic local communities.

Caroline Anning of Save the Children says: 'In the host countries, refugee children face a range of challenges: sleeping in tents and flimsy shelters through freezing winters and hot summers; not having enough to eat or clean water to drink; missing months and even years of school; separation from family members; and facing stigma from host communities who sometimes struggle to integrate the new arrivals.'

On this last point, there is some comparison to be drawn with the UK, where integration can also be a difficult process. A lack of awareness about realities faced by refugees and asylum seekers can contribute to this.

'There is a general lack of understanding about the process, the uncertainties these people face, and how they have to live their lives,' says Ms Lythgoe. 'You don't really get good stories about asylum seekers, for ➤'

ORGANISATIONS

The Children's Society, www.childrenssociety.org.uk
 Refugee Council, www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
 Refugee Welcome Trust, <http://refugeewelcometrust.org>
 Save the Children, www.savethechildren.org.uk



Swabi, Pakistan – May 2009: Buner refugees travel by road as they flee fighting between Pakistan armed forces and the Taliban. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani people have fled their homes due to the fighting in the Northwest Frontier Province. Photo by Daniel Berehulak

example, in the newspapers. We do some awareness-raising sessions, and it always comes up is that these people are “stealing our jobs”.

Ms Williams adds: ‘In some areas where there’s more local competition for resources, such as accessing a doctor for example, public attitudes can be more hostile. But when it’s understood that these are people who are fleeing persecution or war, attitudes improve. It’s understood that these are people who have a genuine need for protection.’

MORAL OBLIGATION **Will the UK continue to accept more refugees?**

At the end of 2014, the UK and other Western nations pledged to increase the number of refugees they would accept fleeing from the crisis in Syria. The UNHCR said that 28 countries had ‘expressed solidarity with the Syrian refugees but also with the five neighbouring countries which are hosting them... offering what we estimate will be more than 100,000 opportunities for resettlement and

humanitarian admission’. However, the organisation also admitted it had hoped for more, as so many refugees are suffering from ill health and war trauma. Neither the US nor the UK specified a number.

Right now, the Syrian crisis continues to apply pressure – with Amnesty International, Christian Aid, Islamic Relief and other organisations recently calling for the British Government to do more. This comes alongside ongoing campaigns from charities such as The Children’s Society working for greater understanding more generally, attempting to challenge common myths surrounding refugees.

Ultimately, believes Ms Dennis, there is a moral obligation to help those fleeing from conflict or persecution, despite the potential difficulties in doing so. ‘We should play our part,’ she says. ‘It’s right that we signed the UN Convention on Refugees, which was written just after World War II when there was a very strong feeling that we mustn’t ever have people who arrive on our shores who we’re turning away. So the more we can remind people of why the convention was written, and that it needs to be respected, the better.’ ■

CASE STUDIES: CYNTHIA AND NICOLA

Cynthia from Zimbabwe

Cynthia (not her real name), aged 41 and from Zimbabwe, is now living in Coventry. When she and her two daughters, now aged four and eight years old, were granted discretionary leave to remain, the UK Border Agency terminated her support. As a result, the three were left homeless with no means of support.

Eventually, they were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. After six weeks they were housed, but the house was empty and Cynthia had no money to furnish it.

She applied for the mainstream benefits she was entitled to, but due to a series of administrative errors she was left destitute for four months. With no financial support whatsoever, she was unable to buy food, clothing

or nappies for her baby. ‘I felt stressed and helpless – my daughter kept asking me why we were sleeping on the floor,’ she says. ‘My children were suffering from coughs and colds as a result of sleeping on the floor which is cold and dusty.’

Fortunately, she was referred to The Children’s Society, which provided the family with the essentials, such as food, nappies and clothing. After four months of being wholly dependent on support from charities, she received her first income support cheque.

Nicola from Ghana

Nicola and her six-year-old daughter Emma (not their real names) have been struggling to survive on asylum support for the past three years. The amount of money they receive is enough to eat only once a

day. As a result, they often survive on handouts from the local church and eating fruit or vegetables is a treat rather than a daily or even weekly part of their diet.

‘Here they say it’s equal, but it’s not at all. You can see the difference between asylum seekers and someone who has status,’ Nicola says.

Since 2011, the amount families on asylum support receive has been frozen, which, according to The Children’s Society, represents a cut in real terms of 7.5 per cent. In some cases, families receive only half of what they would be entitled to in the mainstream benefits system. This system has pushed more than 10,000 children seeking safety from war and persecution into poverty.

Thanks to help from The Children’s Society, Nicola has

been able to get free clothing for her and her daughter.

But the lack of money means that Emma is socially excluded. ‘There is no money for school trips; tutoring and other activities are completely out of reach financially,’ she says. As a result, Emma can’t go swimming with the rest of her class and couldn’t attend a friend’s birthday party as they had no money to buy a present.

The poverty and stress are taking their toll. Nicola explains, ‘It’s torture living this way. I am depressed all the time. You feel useless.’

‘I’m always living in fear. You want to do something for yourself, you want to work on your own, don’t want to depend on the Government. It takes years. Why can’t you go back to your country? You know why you can’t go but they don’t care.’