

Britain: Report critical of treatment of child refugees

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Separated Children in the UK, a report from the British Refugee Council and Save the Children charities, investigates the plight of unaccompanied children who arrive in Britain seeking asylum.

Based on research carried out last year, the report shows the appalling lack of care offered to children who are often the victims of torture, persecution and trafficking.

The report documents that:

- * The UK locks up more asylum seekers than any other European state and is planning to expand its detention capacity. At least 220 children have been detained in the last five years.

- * There are no guidelines on applying refugee status to separated children, and the recognition rate for separated children remains low.

- * The care system is under strain due to cut backs over an extended period and a significant increase in the numbers of separated children coming to the UK. There is a lack of suitable accommodation.

- * Separated children have no legal guardian in the UK and are thus without an independent person who can ensure that their voices are heard and that they receive proper care and treatment.

- * Many separated children are in extremely vulnerable circumstances, without the support of a responsible adult, and may become prey to those who would exploit them, for example in the sex industry.

- * Separated children are often effectively excluded from education, due to Labour's dispersal policies, difficulties with accommodation and out-of-borough placements.

- * The report points out that the definition of what constitutes a separated child is not applied uniformly throughout Britain. Many local authorities will not treat children as being "separated" if they are accompanied

by a sibling or other relative, a benefactor, family friend, another young person or the agent who arranged their trip. In such cases they will not get the appropriate care.

A recent examination of 218 case studies of separated children who had come to Western Europe is cited, in which reasons for fleeing are given as:

"The violent death of parent(s), sometimes in front of child; detention and torture of child; armed conflicts that target child civilians; genocide; forced recruitment of children into armed forces, some under 10 years of age; trafficking of children for the purposes of prostitution under brutal conditions; persecution of child's ethnic group; denial of education due to child's ethnic identity; political activities of child or child's family members resulting in persecution; rape and sexual assault; abuse and/or abandonment by parents; poverty and complete lack of opportunity."

Last year 2,735 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in Britain, relatively few of these were awarded refugee status, instead being granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) in the UK, usually up to the age of 18. The study points out, "Whilst ELR can provide temporary protection, it leaves the child facing major uncertainties about his/her future which can be emotionally demanding as well as having significant consequences on matters such as education."

Once the child reaches 18 years they can be required to leave the UK. The Home Office is presently considering how to develop moves to have such young people returned to their country of origin, provided it is deemed "safe" to do so. Such evaluations can result in placing the young person back in extremely dangerous circumstances.

It is estimated that between 5,000 and 6,500 separated children are currently receiving services from local

authorities, an increase of 2,500 over the same period last year. Over 70 percent of these children stay in the Greater London area or in southeast England, where there are often communities coming from their home countries. Many local authorities do not have specific policies for working with separated children.

The care of separated children is primarily regulated by the Children Act 1989, falling within the definition of “children in need”. However, the vast majority of separated children are aged 16-17 years old, meaning they are not treated as “looked after children” that would have many more rights in law relating to education, health and welfare, family tracing and legal representation. Instead, they are placed in unsupported bed-and-breakfast accommodation where they are forced to manage on vouchers, and may or may not be visited by a social worker.

The report states: “While some separated children have developed ‘survival’ skills due to their experiences in their home country, they are nonetheless vulnerable adolescents in a daunting situation. Those who have specific mental health needs due to exposure to violence and repression are likely to suffer more acutely from isolation and loneliness.”

Even more alarmingly, the report notes that an Audit Commission Briefing found that, “12 percent of children under 16 have been placed in single adult accommodation.”

Of particular concern is the situation where children are housed by a different local authority to the one responsible for them. This often means that they will receive no education, no contact with social workers and be completely isolated in a community where they have no contacts, friends or access to refugee organisations. It is not uncommon for a child to be sent to another area with nothing more than a train ticket and a letter of introduction.

This practice has been exacerbated by the changes brought in under the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999, which involves asylum seekers being dispersed throughout the country, including to areas where previously few or no asylum seekers have gone.

Even where childcare professionals are involved, many have little or no understanding of the specific circumstances under which such children have arrived. Thus blunders are made in relation to contact with embassies, which can put the child and their families at

greater risk in the country from which they are fleeing.



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