What is the situation facing immigrants and asylum seekers in Britain?

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Official statistics refute the claims that Britain is being "swamped" by immigration and show the desperately impoverished conditions in which immigrants live and work.

Annual net immigration is closely correlated with Britain's economic growth and for many years, more people left than came to Britain. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), there were 5.5 million Britons living abroad in 2005. Every year, at least 90,000 nationals leave Britain to work overseas.

The trend of negative net immigration reversed during the boom years of the 1980s, but net immigration only really took off after the 1990s recession, as it did in almost all industrialised countries. Since 1998, it has exceeded 100,000 a year, although many migrant workers tend to return home after a short stay.

Many economic migrants are employed in low paid, minimum wage jobs. More than a few are subject to ruthless exploitation by human traffickers who forced them to pay extortionate sums to get to Britain, or by gang masters who treat them like slaves working in the most dangerous conditions. The case of the 19 Chinese cockle pickers who lost their lives in 2004 is one of the most tragic examples.

Even at the peak of immigration in 2004—after the expansion of the European Union when Britain was one of only three countries to open its doors to the new accession countries—the total number of migrants was 244,000, largely from Poland and Eastern Europe. Economic migration has since fallen as many immigrants have returned home. Immigration fell sharply in 2008 with the onset of the recession and could fall to 100,000 a year.

The Labour government's points-based system, introduced in 2008, restricts immigration to what is deemed in Britain's "economic interests". It gives work permits to highly skilled workers and those with a job offer where there are no other applicants. Only about 96,000 permits a year have been given since 2006, mainly to workers from Asia and Australia.

About 47,000 spouses, partners and dependents are admitted—but only after they have jumped through numerous hoops to prove their relationship. While 309,000 visas a year are given to overseas students who pay to study in British universities —mostly youth from China, Russia, Japan and the US—they are often too late for students to start their courses on time. Education is now a major export industry.

A report by the London School of Economics shows that the UK has a lower share of immigrants in its population (10.2 percent) than Australia (25 percent), the US (13.6 percent), Sweden (13.6 percent), Germany (12.9 percent) and the Netherlands (10.7 percent). They come from a more diverse range of countries than ever before, most frequently Poland, India, Pakistan, South Africa and the US. They tend to be younger and better educated than the UK-born population and the more recent immigrants are even better educated.

The number of asylum seekers and refugees is small. In 2007, according to Home Office figures, there were 23,430 asylum applications, mostly from the war-torn regions of the world: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Turkey, Afghanistan, China, Iran, Iraq and Sri Lanka. Including dependents, there were just 27,900 asylum seekers. As most are young men without dependents, they are not eligible for social housing under Labour's 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

Asylum seekers face almost insurmountable hurdles to

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defend their right to stay. Of those who received an initial decision on their asylum application in 2007, just 16 percent were granted refugee status. Eleven percent were given humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to stay, while 73 percent were refused. Just 23 percent of those who appealed a decision were successful.

After an application is rejected, the Home Office suspends all financial assistance, usually within 21 days, and then issues a removal order. The failed asylum seekers can then be seized by the UK Border Agency police without notice and incarcerated pending deportation. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, at least 55 asylum seekers have taken their own lives since 2000 rather than go back to their own countries.

Many failed asylum seekers “disappear” and become part of the growing black economy where they are cruelly exploited. Others become destitute and are reduced to begging and sleeping on friends’ floors. The Home Office estimated that the number of “irregular” or undocumented migrants was between 330,000 and 500,000 in 2001. Their plight is horrific. Since 2004, undocumented workers have been denied access to hospital treatment, much to the concern of doctors.

Economic migrants have very limited entitlement to social welfare, depending on thier citizen and residency status and National Insurance contributions. Those who have been in Britain less than five years are not entitled to social housing or housing benefits and tax credits, even when on low incomes.

The overwhelming majority of economic migrants rent from private landlords, some of whom have bought up former council houses, fuelling misconceptions about “queue jumping”. Less than two percent of the 10 million people who live in social housing are new migrants. They are mainly refugees who have been given permission to stay in Britain and have been allocated empty social housing in the north of England and Scotland.

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