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Refugees and asylum seekers – evidence summary

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Disclaimer: This evidence summary includes relevant literature identified from searches on the above topic. It is not an exhaustive list, it presents key finding and not recommendations for practice.

Overview

For the purpose of this report the term refugee refers to any person who has fled their home country and has rights to international protection. The term asylum seeker refers to any person who has fled their home country and is seeking protection but hasn’t yet been granted refugee status.

This report looks at the issues that are faced by refugees and asylum seekers. It then looks at additional issues that are faced by specific groups of refugee and asylum seekers including children and young people, LGBTQ+, disabled people, and women.

The report focuses on research and reports based mainly on Wales or the UK. Research from elsewhere is only included when relevant.

Challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers can face challenges. These may include:

- Poor mental health [1–7]
- Poor physical health (poorly managed chronic conditions or communicable diseases) [3,6]
- Experience of significant loss, physical hardships and other stressors [1,4]
- Uncertainty about immigration status / changing policies [1,4,5,8,9]
- Having to wait a long time for their asylum decision, can compound trauma [4,5,8–10]
- Being held in secure facilities (detention centres) for long periods [1,2,4]
- Experiencing hostility, prejudice, stigma, and discrimination [1,4,8–11]
- Lack of housing or poor living / housing conditions [1,2,4,5,10,12,13]
- Increased risk of homelessness, due to difficulties sourcing housing in the short period they are given to find accommodation [4,8,10,12–14]
- Poverty / financial challenges due to not being allowed to work and limited financial support during asylum process [1,2,4,5,8,9,12–15]
- Resorting to crime to survive [13]
- Difficulties finding employment [4]
- Feelings of instability / loss of autonomy [8]
- Having multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and risk [2]
- Having fled conflict, violence, sexual violence, torture, or other traumas [2–5]
- Having faced harm as they fled to a place of safety, including violence, lack of shelter, sexual violence, and dangerous travel conditions [2,4]
- Beinta at risk of exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery [3]
- Having lost or been separated from family and friends [4]
- Loneliness / social isolation / lack of social connection [4,5,10]
- Barriers to accessing services (support, health, mental health), including:
    - Language barriers [1,3–7,11–13,16]
    - Lack of information on services and how to access [1,7,11,16]
    - Long waiting times [1,4,5]
    - Not trusting services [1,4,11]
    - Stigma or fear of stigma [1,3,4,11]
    - Cultural differences / misunderstandings [4–6,11,12,16]
    - Difficulties registering if they don’t have identification [4,6,11,12,16]

    - Lack of awareness of mental health issues [1,3]
    - Lack of public transport or affordable travel options to access services [5]
    - Fear of deportation or being separated from children [6,12]
    - Fear of being charged for treatment / services [7,11,12]
    - Digital access to services [6,9]

Challenges faced by specific groups of refugees and asylum seekers

Children and young people

Child refugees and asylum seekers may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Unaccompanied children being separated from or having lost their parents [17]
- Experiencing multiple adverse childhood experiences [1]
- Vulnerability to exploitation and violence on their route to safety [2]
- Being misevaluated as an adult if they do not have documentation to prove their age, and look physically older, resulting in lack of support [2]
- Facing long waiting times for decisions, putting them at risk of mental health issues (self-harm, emotional breakdown, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and the inability to concentrate) and physical health issues (hair loss, skin irritation, and pain related to stress) [2]
- Accommodation being unsafe and / or unsafe for children [18]
- Reluctance to form friendships for fear of being moved [18]
- Barriers to accessing, remaining in, and thriving in education, including:
    - Long waiting lists [4]
    - Complex application processes [4]
    - Lack of suitable placements [4]
    - Experiencing bullying [4]
    - A lack of understanding of their issues [4]
    - Difficulties making friends due to language barriers [4]
    - Costs of equipment, transport, uniform, and school trips [4,9]
    - Fear of being separated from their family [12]

LGBTQ+

Refugee and asylum seekers who are LGBTQ+ may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity [4,19,20]
- Inappropriate questioning and insensitive treatment in the asylum system [4,19]
- Experiencing verbal and physical harassment in asylum accommodation [4,19,20]
- Multiple layers of stigma (xenophobia, racism, homophobia, transphobia) [4,20]
- Not being able to prove their relationship is genuine as some countries do not permit same sex relationships / marriage, this may result in them being denied asylum [19–21]
- Their LGBTQ+ identity not being believed, due to stereotypes [19–21]
- Rejection from some communities due to homophobic attitudes / beliefs [19,21]
- Being socially isolated [19]
- Concealing their identity to maintain links with their faith communities [19,21]

Disability

Disabled refugee and asylum seekers may face additional challenges including:

- Being at increased risk of exploitation [4]
- Living in unsuitable accommodation without support [4]
- Increased risk of being isolated [4]
- Experiencing discrimination [4]

Female refugee and asylum seekers

Female refugee and asylum seekers may face additional challenges including:

- Experience of gender-based violence and this not being understood [4,12]
- Accessing period products [4]
- Increased risk of exploitation, abuse and domestic violence [4,12]
- Feeling trapped in abusive relationships [4]
- Childcare commitments being a barrier to working [4]
- Pregnancy issues (malnutrition, accessing medical appointments, poorer birth outcomes, and maternity clothing) [4]
- Barriers to accessing healthcare for those experiencing domestic violence [6]

Search strategy

Basic searches of Gov.wales, Senedd Cymru, Senedd research, Bevan Foundation, Welsh Refugee Council, and Google were completed. A detailed search of Scopus was also completed. Countries were included as an abstract search as well as affiliation country, due to the nature of this topic bringing up large numbers of articles based in other countries.

Scopus

refugee* OR “asylum seeker*” OR “displaced person*” (abstract)
AND
need* OR requirement* OR demand* OR support* OR assistance OR help OR barrier* OR challenge* OR obstacle* OR issue* OR problem* OR difficult* OR concern* OR risk* (abstract)
AND
england OR scotland OR wales OR "united kingdom" OR UK OR Britain (abstract)
AND
england OR scotland OR wales OR "united kingdom" OR UK OR Britain (affiliation country)
Limit: 2021-2026

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