



Key issues: Public opinion on asylum and refugee issues

Briefing – June 2005

The past ten years have witnessed a rise in interest in public attitudes towards asylum issues amongst politicians, service providers and others, together with the introduction of **strategies on refugee integration¹ and community cohesion.²**

Information about attitudes comes from large scale surveys such as the **British Social Attitudes Survey** and the **European Social Survey** and other polls conducted by organisations like **MORI** and **YouGov**. In addition, qualitative research has been conducted on this issue.

What do people think about asylum issues?

Issues of immigration and asylum are of concern to the British public. Studies have found that:

- People are very concerned that immigration is not under control.

¹ The Home Office's National Strategy for Refugee Integration *Integration matters* was launched in March 2005. Further information and the full report are available at:

http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/laws_policy/refugee_integration0/a_national_strategy.html.

² See

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/H> for government strategies.

- People question the 'genuine-ness' of asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are associated with illegality and deviance and are perceived to be economically motivated.
- The perceived numbers of asylum seekers are seen to be a great problem. This, together with concern about the 'genuine-ness' of asylum seekers, constitutes a threat to British society, including religion, values, ethnicity and health, and to the British economy through criminality, increased competition for resources and as an economic burden.
- People feel that asylum seekers are given preferential treatment and are better off than the average white Briton.

These perceptions of threat are all set within the current socio-political climate of uncertain national identity and national security. Several writers have suggested that in this context, attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees in Britain today constitute a '**moral panic**'.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that generalised hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees may be compounded by other racial, religious and gender prejudices. Public opinion may therefore be particularly hostile to those refugees and asylum seekers who are also, for example, Black, Muslim, LGBT or Roma.

Considerable confusion, ignorance and misinformation exists about asylum issues. People in general have poor knowledge about asylum and immigration issues and there is a problem of information provision. For example, in one survey, on average people thought that the UK has 23% of the world's refugees. The actual figure is closer to 2%.³

Many of the concerns expressed in the UK are common to all western European countries. However, 'there is a lower level of acceptance where refugees and persons seeking political asylum are concerned'⁴ in Britain than elsewhere.

What shapes our attitudes?

There is general consensus in research that most tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers are associated with youth, high socio-economic status, high educational attainment and left wing politics. Where people live may also affect their attitudes. Little is known about how ethnicity and religion affect attitudes though some research indicates that there is a tendency for non-white people to have higher opinions

³ MORI/Migration Watch UK (2003) *British views on immigration*. London: MORI. Available at <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/migration.shtml>.

⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2001:14) *Attitudes towards minority groups in the European Union. A special analysis of the Eurobarometer 2000 Survey*. Vienna: EUMC.

Key work on attitudes towards asylum seekers

Commission for Racial Equality Literature review (2005)

Finney, N. with Peach, E. (forthcoming 2005) *Literature review: Attitudes towards asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants*. London: Commission for Racial Equality. <http://www.cre.gov.uk>

Asylum and public attitudes research by the Institute for Public Policy Research (2005)

Lewis, M. (June 2005) *Asylum: Understanding public attitudes*. London: IPPR. <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=294>

PhD research (2004)

Finney, N. (2004) 'Asylum seeker dispersal: Public attitudes and press portrayals around the UK'. PhD thesis, University of Wales Swansea.

ICAR's 'Understanding the Stranger' programme (ongoing)

D'Onofrio, L. and Munk, K. (2004) *Understanding the stranger. Final report*. London: ICAR. <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts003.pdf>

ICAR's 'Media Image, Community Impact programme' (ongoing)

ICAR (2004) *Media image, community impact. Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London. Report of a pilot research study*. London: ICAR. <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/mici004.pdf>

of recent immigrants, asylum seekers and ethnic minorities than white people.

The **contact hypothesis** suggests that contact between members of different groups has the potential to break down fears and anxieties and leads to greater understanding and tolerance. Research about newly arrived asylum seekers generally supports the notion that individual contact improves community relations. Recent theories suggest that encounters must have 'friendship potential' if they are to result in positive attitude change.

Information sources that can influence what people think about asylum issues include the media, politicians, government and refugee organisations but also more informal, everyday exchanges between people.

What role does the media play?

The British media has generally represented refugees and asylum seekers in negative ways. There has been a repetitive use of certain terms and types of language. Asylum seekers are described as a 'flood' or 'wave' and as 'bogus' or 'fraudulent'. Frequently, a 'binary logic' is deployed setting, for example, bogus against genuine and legal against illegal.

British news coverage of asylum issues has been criticised for failing to provide context for the stories by not adequately explaining the reasons for asylum seekers' flights to the UK and the conditions of their journey and life on arrival, and for not giving a voice to the migrants themselves. However, recent research has found that the local press has produced some

Asylum attitudes statistics

- 28% of people identified asylum and immigration as an issue they wanted the political parties to address.

Source: Populus poll, February 2005 discussed in 'Opinion polls: scanning the issues' by David Cowling 12 April 2005, available at [Hhttp://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/issues/4436891.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/issues/4436891.stm)

- 85% of respondents feel that the government does not have immigration under control.

Source: MORI/Migration Watch UK (2003) *British views on immigration*. London: MORI. Available at [Hhttp://www.mori.com/polls/2003/migration.shtml](http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/migration.shtml)

- 70% of people support allowing more people with skills that are in short supply here to come to Britain.

Source: Guardian/ICM poll, discussed in Travis, A. and Blenford, A. (2001) 'The way we see it... and the way it is' *The Guardian: Welcome to Britain*, 21.5.2001: 6-7.

- 67% of people think that fewer than 25% of asylum seekers in Britain are genuinely fleeing persecution.

Source: YouGov Immigration and Asylum survey for *The Sun*, August 2003. Available at [Hhttp://www.yougov.com/archives/archivesPolitical.asp?slD=3&rlD=2&wID=0&uIDH=](http://www.yougov.com/archives/archivesPolitical.asp?slD=3&rlD=2&wID=0&uIDH=)

Asylum attitudes statistics

- 45% of people agree that 'asylum seekers who are genuinely fleeing persecution should be made welcome in Britain, even if they have arrived here illegally'.

Source: YouGov Immigration and Asylum survey for *The Sun*, August 2003. Available at <http://www.yougov.com/archives/archivesPolitical.asp?slD=3&rlD=2&wlD=0&ulDH=>.

- 49% of people think immigrants have benefited Britain's economy.

Source: as above.

- 64% of people think immigrants have benefited Britain's culture.

Source: as above.

- On average people estimated that Britain has 23% of the world's refugees (actually around 2% at the time of the poll).

Source: MORI/Migration Watch UK (2003) *British views on immigration*. London: MORI. Available at <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/migration.shtml>.

- 60% of people support and 24% of people opposed the Conservative Party's 2005 proposals to withdraw from the 1951 UN Convention.

Source: YouGov/Mail on Sunday survey, February 2005. Available at <http://www.yougov.com/archives/archivesPolitical.asp?slD=3&rlD=2&wlD=0&ulDH=>.

very balanced, accurate and, at times, imaginative reporting on asylum. More personalised and humanised stories are seen in the local press.

However, echoing broader debates about the role of the media in attitude formation, the ways in which media reporting of asylum affects public opinion is still the focus of debate. The relationships and exchanges between media messages and their audiences are **complex and multi-directional** and more research is needed to understand exactly how far and in what ways reporting affects attitudes.

Research suggests that media coverage does impact on attitudes (and behaviour) towards asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants but the causal relationships are extremely complex and media messages are seen to be **'filtered'** by the audience.

Key factors that influence the nature of media effects include the individual's perception of the media source; the individual's prior knowledge and personal experience of the issues; the prominence of a message including its repetition; and whether the message reinforces or challenges the individual's existing attitudes.

In the UK context, **'agenda setting'**, the definition of what issues are important to the public and politicians, is thought to be one of the media's strongest influences on public opinion.

How can opinions be better informed?

Many organisations have for several years been working for a more balanced and informed debate about asylum and immigration, including ICAR and the major refugee organisations in the UK.

Addressing negative and unbalanced media coverage of asylum has been identified by many as a priority in creating more informed opinions. This can be done by challenging inaccurate media portrayals by complaining to the **Press Complaints Commission** and other media regulators. However, a more sustainable approach may be to engage with the media to work towards more varied and positive coverage. Training and supporting refugee organisations to work with the media is a critical aspect of this.

Although public opinion is often highly misinformed, people's concerns should, nevertheless, be taken seriously. Research suggests that systems for responding to the concerns of people affected by the arrival of asylum seekers should be developed and **information provision** should be made a key part of asylum seeker and refugee settlement strategies.

Research suggests that increasing opportunities for **contact** between groups can help to create more informed opinions. Agencies could work together to encourage such situations and employers could develop a workplace culture that fosters contact between groups.

An ICAR report for the CRE concluded that for attitudes initiatives to be successful six key criteria should be considered: the precise **aims**,

Asylum attitudes quotes

'I think on a local level in the villages the concern is that overnight there will be more than double the population of the two villages. Now [if that were] asylum seekers, or anybody else, that in itself would be life-changing.'

Community representative cited in D'Onofrio, L. and Munk, K. (2004) *Understanding the stranger. Final report*. London: ICAR. Available at [Hhttp://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts003.pdf](http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts003.pdf)H.

'A lot of them are criminals, you've only got to read about these Albanians who are running prostitution rackets in London...a lot of crime is perpetrated by asylum seekers I should imagine.'

Local resident cited in Finney, N. (2004) 'Asylum seeker dispersal: Public attitudes and press portrayals around the UK'. PhD thesis, University of Wales Swansea.

'They are getting thousands of pounds for cars, they get mobiles, they get computers...they get everything. But like, you see, me and [friend] we're both single parents so if we go to get anything, we can't get it...That's what gets a lot of people's backs up.'

Local resident cited in D'Onofrio, L. and Munk, K. (2004) *Understanding the stranger. Final report*. London: ICAR. Available at [Hhttp://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts003.pdf](http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts003.pdf)H.

Asylum attitudes quotes

'Any civilised country would welcome asylum seekers... the tabloids and people who say there are too many asylum seekers don't appreciate the types of things they're running away from.'

Local resident cited in Finney, N. (2004) 'Asylum seeker dispersal: Public attitudes and press portrayals around the UK'. PhD thesis, University of Wales Swansea.

'Any time there is anything in the media, subsequently there are follow-ups – there are incidents.'

Community representative cited in ICAR (2004) *Media image, community impact. Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London. Report of a pilot research study*. London: ICAR. Available at [Hhttp://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/mici004.pdf](http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/mici004.pdf)H.

'I saw a group of boys...the oldest was about ten. They gathered stones and began to throw them at me...I started to run away from them but that didn't stop them.'

Refugee cited in Temple, B., Moran, R. et al *Learning to live together: developing communities with dispersed refugee people seeking asylum*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at [Hhttp://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0085.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0085.asp)H.

the **target audience**, the **theories of attitude change** upon which to base the design of the initiative, the appropriate **geographical and time scales**, the **media relations strategy** to be employed, and how the initiative will be **evaluated**. It is important that any efforts and resources devoted to creating more informed opinions on asylum are not wasted through poorly planned and implemented initiatives.

Similarly, a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report concluded that projects that most successfully challenged prejudice had well defined objectives; a clear **structure**; a **range of facilitators, presenters and activities**; **sustained activities** over a period of time; **reflection** on personal attitudes and experiences; and **learning through doing** and experiencing not just talking.⁵

⁵ HLemos, G. (2005) *The search for tolerance: Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at [Hhttp://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0135.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0135.asp)H.H

Further reading

A full discussion of these issues and concepts can be found in the **Navigation guide to public opinion on asylum and refugee issues**, available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/res/nav/keyiss.html>.

The navigation guide features a full list of resources and projects. Additional key readings to those featured on page one are listed below.

Article 19 (2003) *What's the story? Results from research into media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK*. London: Article 19.

Barclay, A., Bowes, A., Ferguson, I., Sim, D., Valenti, M., Fard, S., and MacIntosh, S. (2003) *Asylum seekers in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Social Research. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/social/asis-00.asp>.

Clark, A. (2004) *The reporting and recording of racist incidents against asylum seekers in the North East of England*. Newcastle: University of Northumbria. Available at http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/csru/pdfs/NECARS_report.pdf.

Hewitt, R.L. (2002) *Asylum seeker dispersal and community relations – An analysis of development strategies*. London: Goldsmith's College, University of London.

Hollands, M. (2001) 'Upon closer acquaintance: the impact of direct contact with refugees on Dutch hosts' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(3): 295-314.

Lemos, G. (2005) *The search for tolerance: Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0135.asp>.

Temple, B., Moran, R. et al *Learning to live together: developing communities with dispersed refugee people seeking asylum*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0085.asp>.

Valentine, G. and McDonald, I. for Stonewall (2004) *Understanding prejudice. Attitudes towards minorities*. London: Stonewall. Available at http://www.stonewall.org.uk/docs/Understanding_Prejudice.pdf.

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