

BECOMING ADULT

Forced returns and protracted displacement

Research Brief 7

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Key findings

- The needs of unaccompanied migrant young people transitioning to adulthood with precarious or no legal status are absent from UK policy agendas.
- Current policies governing possible outcomes for these young people particularly forced return to country of origin can undermine young people's wellbeing and fundamental rights.
- Returns policies are expensive and have unintended consequences such as re-migration and/or forced transitions to survival through illegal means.
- The prospect and reality of forced removal have severe adverse impacts on young people's health and wellbeing, often leading to protracted displacement over many years.
- Forced return to countries of origin fails to acknowledge the connections and potential contribution made by these young people in the UK and underestimates the challenges to reintegration in countries they haven't lived in for several years.

Introduction

Young people who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied children, have not been granted refugee status by the time they turn 18, and have become what is termed appeal rights exhausted (ARE), may be returned to countries of origin. The likelihood of this happening depends on the circumstances within each country of origin and the current international arrangements between the UK/ Europe and those countries. From the perspective of the *Becoming Adult* research project, Afghanistan and Albania at the time of writing were considered to be countries to which people could be returned, while, this was not the case for Eritrea. Young people from Eritrea were more likely to be successful in their applications for asylum than young people from the other two countries. The chart below (Figure 1) shows the trend in voluntary and forced removal for Albanian, Eritrean and Afghan nationals between 2004 and 2015.

Removal, either voluntary or forced¹, is an overwhelmingly male experience, especially for Afghan young men (between 95 and 98% of all removals in the last 10 years). Most removals take place among young people between 18–24 years old as shown in the chart below (Figure 2).

Previous work has demonstrated that following deportation back to Afghanistan young people frequently re-migrate². Our research confirms these trajectories but also highlights the complexity of the re-migratory experiences after return from the UK and the fact that this can become global in scope³ and protracted over many years.

Findings

Young people from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania experienced fundamentally different pathways through the asylum and immigration system and in turn these different pathways determined distinct wellbeing outcomes and possibilities. Albanian young people are most likely to be refused a right to remain in the UK; a large proportion of young people from Afghanistan in the study were either returned to Afghanistan or disengaged from statutory services to avoid deportation. Young people from Eritrea were most likely to have their claims to asylum accepted and in most cases (although not exclusively) secured indefinite leave to remain. Given the focus here is on deportation, examples are drawn from young people from Afghanistan and Albania participating in the study.

Afghanistan

Of the 30 young people from Afghanistan included in the study, eight young people had been deported to Afghanistan (and of these seven had re-migrated); the remaining young person remains at the time of writing

Figure 2: Forced and voluntary removals from the UK by age, 2015

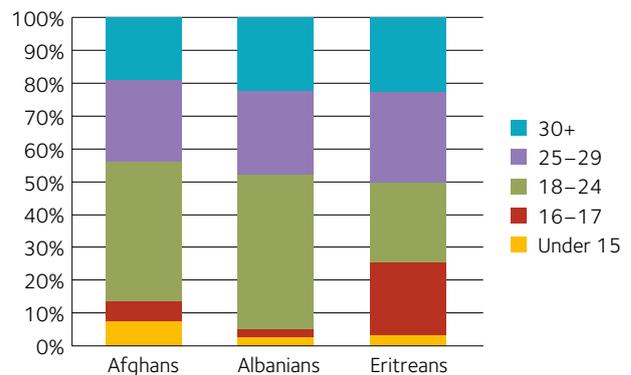
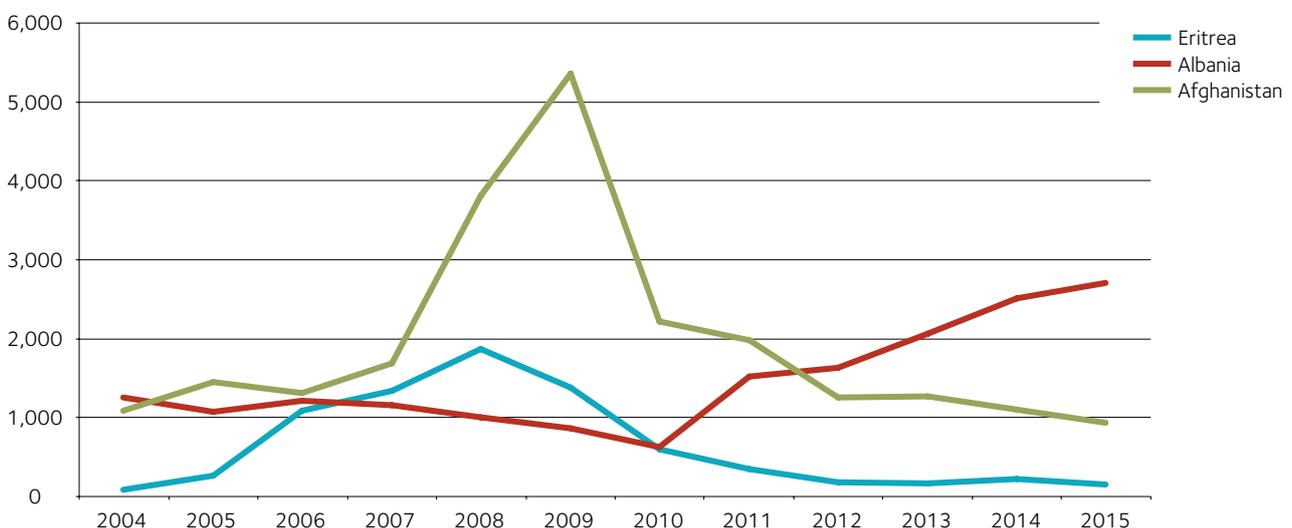


Figure 1: Forced and voluntary removals of Eritrean, Albanian and Afghan nationals from the UK, 2004–2015



in Afghanistan, travelling the country in search of work and still dependent for survival on networks of support in the UK. Three other young people from Afghanistan had 'disappeared' (from social services, police and immigration control) in order to avoid deportation; three were appeal rights exhausted and two were waiting the outcome of their asylum appeal; five were waiting for an outcome of their application for further leave to remain; 12 had indefinite leave to remain (two of whom had previously been refused) and one person had UK citizenship.

A number of young people had spent up to 10 years of their lives on migratory pathways, seeking out secure legal status and a place to call 'home'. This had important impacts on their health and wellbeing. These ongoing migratory journeys involved return to Afghanistan or purposeful disengagement from statutory services in order to avoid the risk of deportation (fear of which was highly salient in their narratives). Where it took place, enforced return to Afghanistan was usually followed by re-migration, either back to Europe or elsewhere. These protracted uncertainties in young people's lives are illustrated in the following examples:

*Akram:*⁴ Afghanistan–UK (2005: aged 14) –Italy (2011: aged 20) and returned by Italian authorities to UK – (removed to) Afghanistan (2013: aged 22) –Australia (2014: aged 23) but intercepted in Indonesia (next 18 months in immigration detention centre).

"Making these journeys made me realise how hard life can be, I was risking my life to make all these journeys and crossing the borders to get to another country. It is really difficult to go from one country to other country illegally. The first journey I made to England I enjoyed it because I had high expectations and motivations but the second time I really hate it. When I arrived in the UK for the first time, I was really, really happy and I was thinking my life is sorted now and I was hoping for a better future. When I have been refused, I was fearing for my life and running away from the government to avoid deportation to Afghanistan." (Akram, aged 25, currently in Indonesia)

Bashir: Afghanistan–UK (2009: aged 15) –(removed to) Afghanistan (2015: aged 20) –Italy (2016: aged 21) – Serbia (2017: aged 23).

"The second time was more difficult, how many borders? You count them... from Afghanistan to Pakistan, from Pakistan to Iran; from Iran to Turkey; from Turkey to Greece; Greece to Macedonia; from Macedonia to Serbia; from Serbia to Hungary; from Hungary to

Czechoslovakia; from there to Austria; from Austria coming here (Italy), more than like 8,9, countries." (Bashir, aged 23 currently in Serbia)

Noor: Afghanistan–UK (2008: aged 16) –(removed to) Afghanistan (2010: aged 18); moved across provinces in Afghanistan for 5 years –Bulgaria (2016: aged 23) – (removed to) Afghanistan (2017: aged 24).

"I have really, really done journeys you know, a hard time... It's a bad situation. I have become old inside in my heart you know." (Noor, aged 24, currently in Afghanistan)

Albania

Albanian children form the third largest group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK but are the least likely to be granted refugee status in the UK. Of the 18 young people taking part in the study, in line with national figures, the majority had been refused leave to remain beyond the age of 18 or were waiting the outcome of an appeals process. Recent work by Shpresa, a London-based Albanian support NGO, confirmed that such outcomes were similar for many other unaccompanied young people from Albania. Only four young people in the study had been granted indefinite leave to remain (usually after an extended appeals process with highly expert legal advice). Aware that people from Albania constitute one of the largest groups of deportees from the UK, young Albanians in the study appeared to avoid removal through disengaging from statutory services as they turned 18 and when their applications were refused; or frequently moving to other places of residence (See Research brief no. 6 on going 'missing'). This point of transition was typically a time of high levels of stress and anxiety. Young people who had disengaged from services spoke about their fear of immigration officers and the constant possibility of deportation.

"For me, one of the hardest parts of life is deciding whether to walk away or to try harder. Dealing with the Home Office and all the problems is very stressful for young people who come to the UK. It is so hard when people cannot understand you. But it is even harder when you cannot understand yourself anymore because of the hard life and problems you have to face. These problems affect your mind, your life, your goals, and you don't know what to do." (Ida, Albania)

"I am scared, they (Immigration officers) came looking for me but I was not where they thought I was. I stay with friends and find money but I can't even pay taxes. I love X (name of city) but it can't be my home." (Dalmat, Albania)

Policy implications

- The specific needs of unaccompanied young people transitioning to adulthood with uncertain immigration status need to be more clearly profiled in national policies.
- The health and wellbeing consequences of forced or threatened removals of young people for whom local authorities previously had a duty of care require much closer monitoring.
- There is an urgent need for reconsidering the impact of removal as a 'durable solution' and promoting alternative pathways to regularisation for young people who have had their asylum claims rejected but have established long term links with the UK.

1. None of the young people in the current study had opted for assisted voluntary return (ASV).
2. See Schuster, L. and Majidi, M. (2013) 'What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans'. *Migration Studies* 1(2): 221–240. Gladwell, C. Bowerman, E. Norman, B. and Ghafoor, A. (2016) *After Return: Documenting the Experiences of Young People Forcibly Removed to Afghanistan*. London: RSN.
3. Chase, E. and Sigona, N. 2016. Lost in the world: Former unaccompanied minors in orbit. *The Conversation*, March 10. <https://theconversation.com/lost-in-the-world-the-young-people-shunted-around-a-global-asylum-system-55991>
4. All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

The Becoming Adult project

The Becoming Adult project is a three-year ESRC-funded research project exploring the post 18 wellbeing outcomes of young people who migrated on their own to the UK as children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania. While the main focus of the research has been on young people who arrive in the UK, the policy implications are relevant to Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the grant-linked studentship has enabled a comparative analysis of experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK and Italy.

Methodology

The study comprises three research components addressing (i) how ideas about migration, futures, 'becoming adult' and wellbeing are conceptualised in different cultural media; (ii) unaccompanied young people's lived experiences of becoming 'adult' after migrating on their own as children; and (iii) policy and practice governing unaccompanied young people.

Young people between the ages of 18–25 took part in research. A narrative enquiry approach was used, combining retrospective narrative interviews and longitudinal research with participants up to a period of 18 months. Questions were asked about: experiences of turning 18 and other key transitions; educational experiences and outcomes; accommodation and living arrangements; factors perceived to promote or undermine their health and wellbeing; migration history, influences and experiences; social ties and networks; experiences of social care and leaving care; family ties; and aspirations for the future. In addition to taking part in interviews, other young people engaged in the research through activities including photography, art, writing, and theatre projects. A core team of young people who had previously migrated to the UK on their own worked as core members of the research team. In total some 100 young people participated in the research in the UK and Italy. Fifty interviews with policy stakeholders and practitioners in four local authorities and a FOI survey of all local authorities in England offered insights into the governance of this population and the encounters between the asylum and child protection regimes and young migrants.

How to cite

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