

Attitudes towards Refugees  
and  
Asylum Seekers  
A Survey of Public Opinion

Research Study conducted for  
Refugee Week



May 2002



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# Contents

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Introduction	1
Summary of Findings	3
Reasons for Seeking Asylum	3
If you were a Refugee what would be Important to you?	5
Perceived Percentage of the World's Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK	7
Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees	9
Behaviour Towards Asylum Seekers	11
Conclusions	12
Appendices	
Questionnaire and Topline Findings	
Technical Details	
Statistical Reliability	
Definition of Social Grades	
Definition of Socio-Political Activism	
Computer Tables	



# Introduction

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This report presents the findings of a survey among the general public. The research was conducted by MORI (Market & Opinion Research International) on behalf of the Refugee Council, UNHCR, The Commonwealth Institute, Amnesty International, Save the Children, Refugee Action and RefAid.

The objectives of the research were to establish awareness of and attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in the lead up to Refugee Week (17-23 June 2002). In addition, the views of 15-18 year olds were of particular interest and have been examined separately. This is the fourth such survey which MORI has conducted (for the Refugee Council)<sup>1</sup> on attitudes towards refugees – the previous ones being undertaken after refugee week.

**Methodology:** 5 questions were placed on MORI's Omnibus, the regular MORI survey conducted among the general public. A nationally representative quota sample of adults (aged 15 and over) was interviewed throughout Great Britain in 196 randomly selected sampling points.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes, using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) between 18 April and 7 May 2002.

In order to examine the views of 15-18 years olds, and so that the data would be sufficiently robust, the questions were asked over two waves of the MORI Omnibus to effectively double the number of people of this age group that were interviewed. The fieldwork for the first wave was completed 18-22 April 2002; fieldwork for the second was completed 2-7 May 2002. During the first wave, 15-18 years olds were asked the 5 questions; and during the second wave, all those aged 15+ were interviewed. The results of these two waves were then aggregated, and the data weighted back to their correct proportions at the analysis stage.

**Reporting:** The size of the sample from which percentage are derived is indicated. Note that the base may vary – the percentage is not always based on the total sample. Caution is advised when comparing responses between small sample sizes. This also applies to the computer tables appended to this report.

Please note that the percentage figures for the various sub-groups generally need to differ by a certain number of percentage points for the difference to be statistically significant. This number will depend on the size of the sub-group samples and the % findings themselves - as noted in the appendix.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1997 survey was also conducted for Oxfam.

Where an asterisk (\*) appears it indicates a percentage of less than half, but greater than zero. Where percentages do not add up to 100% this can be due to a variety of factors – such as the exclusion of ‘Don’t know’ or ‘Other’ responses, multiple responses or computer rounding.

**Publication of Data:** Our standard Terms and Conditions apply to this, as to all studies we carry out. Compliance with the MRS Code of Conduct and our clearing of any copy or data for publication, web-siting or press release which contains any data derived from MORI research is necessary. This is to protect our client’s reputation and integrity as much as our own. We recognise that it is in no-one’s best interests to have survey findings published which could be misinterpreted, or could appear to be inaccurately, or misleadingly, presented.

# Summary of Findings

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## Reasons for Seeking Asylum

The question of why people seek asylum has been asked by MORI four times since 1997. In previous years, escaping persecution has been the most common spontaneously given reason. However, in 2002 – reflecting the salience of the issue of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants entering Britain at present – the proportion of people citing economic reasons/looking for work has risen by 12 points since 1999, so that it is now the top answer along with escaping persecution. Each reason is cited by over two in five respondents (43%).

Other reasons cited include war and poverty (24% and 19%), reflecting an awareness of the difficult circumstances which many asylum seekers have come from. Indeed, mentions of poverty are up by 4 points, though this is still lower than both the 1997 and 1998 figures. Around 1 in 7 say that 'to draw benefits' is a reason for seeking asylum (up 4 points since 1999). Around 1 in 10 say it is to escape authorities – although this has fallen 6 points since 1997.

On the other hand, mentions of war have dropped by 5 points since 1999, despite the events of September 11 and the war in Afghanistan. In addition, mentions of escaping torture have dropped by 3 points since 1999 to the lowest level yet. This may reflect the fact that the 1997 study followed the genocide in Rwanda, and took place at a time of conflict (or post conflict) in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Opinions as to why people would leave their country to seek asylum as a refugee do differ by different sub-groups. While all sectors of society tend to give a reason, broadsheet readers, those with higher education qualifications (a degree or above) and socio-political activists<sup>2</sup> are more likely to mention escaping persecution and economic reasons. This is also true (to a lesser extent) for ABs, those aged 45-54 and Conservative voters. Men are more likely to mention economic reasons (but not escaping persecution).

Looking at young people (15-18 year olds), their views on this topic do differ from the overall population. The most common answer this age group gives is war (39%), followed by poverty and economic reasons/looking for work. Escaping persecution is fourth with 25%.

These young adults are considerably more likely than average to mention war (15 points more likely) and poverty (by 14 points).

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendices for definition.

**Q1    *In general, why do you think someone would leave their own country to seek asylum as a refugee in another country?***

	1997	1998	1999	2002
<i>Base: All respondents</i>	(1,961) %	(2,042) %	(2,003) %	(2,166) %
Escape persecution	43	35	45	43
Economic reasons/Look for work	11 <sup>3</sup>	16 <sup>1</sup>	31	43
War	29	24	29	24
Poverty	24	27	15	19
To draw benefits	NA	NA	11	15
Escape authorities	19	16	12	13
Escape torture	17	11	12	9
Famine	12	9	6	7
Committed a crime in own country	3	2	3	2
Drought/Floods	3	3	2	2
Easier to campaign/Lobby from outside own country	2	1	1	1
Raise profile of own country's campaign abroad	1	1	*	1
Other	15	31	17	23
No reason	*	1	*	1
Don't know	3	8	8	3

*Source: MORI*

<sup>3</sup> In 1997 and 1998, this category was 'looking for work' only.

## If you were a Refugee what would be Important to you?

The top priority for respondents, if they were seeking asylum in a foreign country, would be the ability to work to provide for themselves and their family, mentioned by two in five respondents. Also important would be freedom from persecution (32%), the right to have their case for asylum fairly considered and health care (both 28%).

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**Q2    *If you were a refugee, seeking safety in a foreign country, which three, if any, of the following would be most important to you?***

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	Total (2,166) %	15-18 year olds (190) %
<i>Base: All respondents</i>		
Be able to work to provide for myself and my family	44	40
Freedom from persecution	32	21
The right to have my case for asylum fairly considered	28	15
Healthcare	28	52
To be accepted into the community	21	26
To be free from racial harassment	20	26
Education	20	27
To be reunited with my family	19	14
Decent accommodation	11	14
Freedom to practice a religious faith	9	10
State benefits	9	6
Choice of where to live	8	9
Be provided with good legal advice	7	8
To be able to contribute to the community	7	5
The opportunity to learn/improve my (host nation's) language	6	7
Automatic right to appeal against a rejected asylum claim	4	2
Not to be detained while my case is being considered	4	3
None of these	1	1
Other	0	1
Don't know	2	2

*Source: MORI*

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Looking at different priorities among different groups, freedom from persecution and the right to have your asylum case fairly considered, are both more likely to be mentioned by ABC1s, broadsheet readers and those with higher qualifications – as something they would want if they were refugees. In contrast, healthcare is more likely to be chosen by C2DEs, tabloid readers, and those with no formal qualifications – as a priority if they themselves were refugees.

For 15-18 year olds, freedom from persecution and the right to have their case for asylum fairly considered are less important than they are for the general population (21% versus 32% and 15% versus 28% respectively). Instead, healthcare is the top priority for this age group, chosen by over half of respondents (52%). Second most important is being able to work to provide for themselves and their families, and third is education (selected by 40% and 27% respectively).

## Perceived Percentage of the World's Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK

The percentage of the world's refugees and asylum seekers that are in the UK is 1.98%, based on UNHCR estimates. One in ten respondents answers this question correctly, saying 'up to 2%'. However, the vast majority of respondents believe the figure is higher than this. The mean score, or average answer,<sup>4</sup> is 23% - more than 10 times greater than reality. Around three in ten respondents say they do not know.

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**Q3      *Based on what you know, what percentage of the world's refugees and asylum seekers are in the UK?***

	Total (2,166) %	15-18 year olds (190) %
<i>Base: All respondents</i>		
None	1	1
<b>Up to 2%    Correct Answer</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>
3% - 4%	6	3
5% - 9%	9	9
10% - 19%	12	15
20% - 29%	10	9
30% - 39%	6	10
40% - 49%	5	7
50% - 59%	4	7
60% - 69%	3	6
70% - 79%	2	2
80% - 89%	1	2
90% - 100%	1	0
Don't know	28	25
Mean score	23	31

*Source: MORI*

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<sup>4</sup> Based on those expressing an opinion.

The mean scores vary significantly by sub-group. Broadsheet readers, those with higher qualifications and socio-political activists once again display greater awareness of the issues. This is also true, to a lesser extent, of ABs and men. Men, ABs, broadsheet readers, activists and those who have higher qualifications are more likely to have a mean score lower than average (meaning that their answer is closer to the correct figure than average).

On the other hand, women, DEs, and those with no formal education are more likely to give a higher estimate of the proportion of the world's refugees in the UK (30%, 30% and 31% respectively).

Younger respondents (15-18 year olds) are also more likely to believe the percentage of the world's refugees in the UK to be higher than it is, with a mean score of 31%.

## Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Respondents were asked which three words, from a list of 20 descriptions,<sup>5</sup> they feel the media most uses when referring to asylum seekers and refugees. The top answer is 'illegal immigrant' (mentioned by 64%). This suggests that the media's depiction of asylum seekers and refugees is that they are illegal entrants to this country – and there is no difference among broadsheet and tabloid readers' views. Next comes 'desperate' (35%), 'foreigners' (24%) and 'bogus' (22%). The words selected are overwhelmingly negative (85%), though around a third selected positive descriptions.<sup>6</sup>

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**Q4** *Thinking about the media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, which three of these words, if any, do you feel the media most uses when referring to asylum seekers and refugees?*

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TOP MENTIONS	Total	15-18 year olds
<i>Base: All respondents</i>	(2,166)	(190)
	%	%
Illegal immigrant	64	59
Desperate	35	36
Foreigners	24	43
Bogus	22	6
Scroungers	21	14
Persecuted	20	16
Economic migrant	17	8
Soft touch	16	3
Beggars	11	17
Unskilled	10	21
None of these	1	1
Don't know	5	6
Positive	35	36
Negative	85	80

*Source: MORI*

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Broadsheet readers are more likely to choose 'bogus' (34%, compared with 22% of tabloid readers) and 'economic migrant' (32%, compared with 14%). Tabloid

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<sup>5</sup> The full list of descriptions appears in the marked-up questionnaire in the Appendices. The words were classified as follows (although some are difficult to categorise definitively). Negative: bogus, beggars, illegal immigrant, scroungers, soft touch, unskilled. Positive: survivor, skilled, intelligent, persecuted, prisoners of conscience, talented, hard working, tortured, welcome. Neutral: desperate, determined, economic migrant, foreigners.

<sup>6</sup> Some respondents selected positive and negative descriptions, which is why the figures add up to more than 100%.

readers, on the other hand, are more likely to choose ‘scroungers’ (23%, compared with 16% of broadsheet readers).

Again, the views of 15-18 years olds differ from the population as a whole. Although ‘illegal immigrant’ is also the top answer, it is chosen by a smaller proportion of this group (59%, versus 64%). The order of the answers following the top mention also differs: ‘foreigners’ is the second most popular answer, followed by ‘desperate’, ‘unskilled’ and ‘beggars’ (selected by 43%, 36%, 21% and 17% respectively). All these answers are significantly different from the overall population (apart from ‘desperate’).

## Behaviour Towards Asylum Seekers

Overall, respondents are positive about how they would act towards refugees and asylum seekers in their community (37% positive, compared with 10% negative). The action which people would be most likely to take would be to find out information about refugees and asylum seekers (31%). One quarter say they would be welcoming (26%), and one in six say they would make friends with refugees and asylum seekers (16%). Five per cent would go so far as to actively campaign for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Around one in ten say they would not be interested, and a similar proportion say they would not be welcoming towards asylum seekers (13% and 10% respectively). These two groups largely comprise different people, so much so that 21% mention one or both statements. One quarter say they would do nothing.

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**Q5     *Which if the following, if any, describes how you would be most likely to act towards asylum seekers in your community? I would.....***

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	Total	15-18 year olds
<i>Base: All respondents</i>	(2,166)	(190)
	%	%
Find out more about asylum seekers and refugees	31	30
Be welcoming to asylum seekers/refugees in my community	26	19
Make friends with asylum seekers/refugees	16	14
Not be interested in asylum seekers/refugees in my community	13	18
Not be welcoming towards asylum seekers in the UK	10	10
Campaign for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers	5	8
Do nothing	25	25
None of these	1	1
Don't know	3	1
Positive	37	34
Negative	10	10

*Source: MORI*

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Conservative voters are significantly more likely than Labour voters to say they would not be welcoming towards asylum seekers in the UK (17% versus 8%).

15-18 year olds are less likely to say they would be welcoming compared with the overall population (19% versus 26%). Also, they are more likely to say they would not be interested in asylum seekers and refugees in their community (18% versus 13%).

## Conclusions

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The survey shows that the public's attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers are, in many aspects, positive. The British public would be more likely to be positive than negative towards asylum seekers in their community, with a small percentage being willing to get actively involved in campaigning for their rights. However, we cannot be sure about the extent to which this is true; some respondents may have given the socially acceptable answer.

In line with the more positive than negative reception towards refugees, the public would themselves want to be treated fairly if they were seeking asylum in another country. Their top priorities are being able to work, freedom from persecution and the right to have their case for asylum fairly considered.

On the other hand, the public's perception of how the media treats asylum seekers is more negative. The phrase most associated with media reporting of asylum issues is 'illegal immigrant'. This is a phrase that in January 2002 the Advertising Standards Authority found to be racist, offensive and misleading, as asylum seekers are not in the UK illegally. Reports in the media of refugees 'flooding' into the UK, and Britain being an 'asylum haven', may have contributed to the public's over-estimation of Britain's role in receiving refugees (and perhaps contributed to the increase in the proportion of people saying that refugees seek asylum for economic reasons).

Compared with the population as a whole, 15-18 year olds do display different attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees on several aspects. It appears that they are more negative. However, it may be that they are simply less well informed on issues surrounding asylum in the UK. (As this study shows, it is often the less well educated groups who are more negative.) Young people are more likely to over-estimate the percentage of the world's asylum seekers and refugees that come to Britain and are less likely to say they would be welcoming. This would suggest that communicating with young people on issues of asylum should be an important task for those groups involved with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK if they wish to increase young people's awareness of the issues.

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Michele Corrado

Claire O'Dell

# Questionnaire and Topline Results

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# Technical Details

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## Sample Design

The sample design is a constituency based quota sample. There are 641 parliamentary constituencies covering Great Britain. From these, we select one in three (210) to be used as the main sampling points on the MORI Omnibus. These points are specially selected to be representative of the whole country by region, social grade, working status, MOSAIC rurality, tenure, ethnicity and car ownership. Within each constituency, one local government ward is chosen which is representative of the constituency.

Within each ward or sampling point, we interview ten respondents whose profile matches the quota. The total sample therefore is around 2,100 (10 interviews multiplied by 210 sampling points).

Gender: Male; Female

Household Tenure: Owner occupied; Council Tenant/HAT; Other

Age: 15 to 24; 25 to 44; 45+

Working Status Full-time; part time/not working

These quotas reflect the socio-demographic makeup of that area, and are devised from an analysis of the 1991 Census combined with more recent ONS (Office of National Statistics) data. Overall, quotas are a cost-effective means of ensuring that the demographic profile of the sample matches the actual profile of GB as a whole, and is representative of all adults in Great Britain aged 15 and over.

## Fieldwork

Fieldwork is carried out by MORI using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). All interviews are conducted face to face, in the home - one interview per household. No incentives are offered to respondents.

## Weighting and Data Processing

Data entry and analysis are carried out by an approved and quality-assured data processing company. The data are weighted using 6 sets of simple and interlocking rim weights for social grade, standard region, unemployment within region, cars in household, and age and working status within gender. This is to adjust for any variance in the quotas or coverage of individual sampling points so that the sample is representative of the GB adult population.

## Statistical Reliability

Because a sample, rather than the entire population, was interviewed the percentage results are subject to sampling tolerances – which vary with the size of the sample and the percentage figure concerned. For example, for a question where 50% of the people in a (weighted) sample of 2,166 respond with a particular answer, the chances are 95 in 100 that this result would not vary more than 3 percentage points, plus or minus, from the result that would have been obtained from a census of the entire population (using the same procedures). The tolerances that may apply in this report are given in the table below.

Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels (at the 95% confidence level)			
	10% or 90% ±	30% or 70% ±	50% ±
2,166	1	2	3
<i>Source: MORI</i>			

Tolerances are also involved in the comparison of results between different elements of the sample. A difference must be of at least a certain size to be statistically significant. The following table is a guide to the sampling tolerances applicable to comparisons between sub-groups.

Differences required for significance at the 95% confidence level at or near these percentages			
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
1,008 (Men) v 1,158 (Women)	3	4	4
190 (15-18 year olds) v 2,166 (Total)	5	7	7
768 (North) v 744 (South)	3	5	5
279 (Broadsheet) v 1,040 (Tabloid)	4	6	7
<i>Source: MORI</i>			

## Definition of Social Grades

The grades detailed below are the social class definitions as used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, and are standard on all surveys carried out by MORI (Market & Opinion Research International Limited).

<b>Social Grades</b>			
	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Occupation of Chief Income Earner</b>	<b>Percentage of Population</b>
A	Upper Middle Class	Higher managerial, administrative or professional	2.9
B	Middle Class	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional	18.9
C1	Lower Middle Class	Supervisor or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional	27.0
C2	Skilled Working Class	Skilled manual workers	22.6
D	Working Class	Semi and unskilled manual workers	16.9
E	Those at the lowest levels of subsistence	State pensioners, etc, with no other earnings	11.7

## Definition of Socio-Political Activism

**Q     Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years?**

	Percentage of Population
<i>Base: All respondents</i>	<i>(2,166)</i> %
Presented my views to a local councillor or MP	14
Written a letter to an editor	7
Urged someone outside my family to vote	20
Urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP	15
Made a speech before an organised group	15
Been an officer of an organisation or club	12
Stood for public office	1
Taken an active part in a political campaign	3
Helped on fundraising drives	23
Voted in the last general election	71
None of these	20
Activist (5+ activities)	8
Semi-Activist (3-4)	18
Non-Activist (0-2)	75

*Source: MORI*

# Computer Tables

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