

Research outline

Precarious lives: refugees and asylum seekers' experiences of forced labour

What is the precarious lives project?

This is an 18 month study (March 2011 to August 2012) to explore experiences of forced labour among refugees and asylum seekers. The research is run jointly by academics at the Universities of Leeds and Salford and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

What are we exploring?

The aim is to understand experiences of forced labour among asylum seekers and refugees.

Our working definition of forced labour draws from the International Labour Organisation's Convention on Forced Labour (1930) that defines forced and compulsory labour as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily'. This may include: the withholding of wages in violation of previous agreements; threats of denunciation to immigration authorities; and the loss or retention of identity and travel documents. But we are considering alternative understandings of labour exploitation that, while not strictly forced, are nevertheless not 'freely entered into'.

People seeking asylum are normally prohibited from working. However, limited or non-existent welfare entitlements and pressures to earn money to pay off debts or support family may push asylum seekers into the shadow economy. Refugees may have had long periods out of work while their asylum case was considered and are also vulnerable to labour exploitation. There is anecdotal evidence that refugees and asylum seekers are drawn into exploitative and possibly forced labour but there has been no systematic research documenting their experiences of forced labour in England and the reasons why they are drawn into it. This new evidence base will contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates on the causes of, and solutions to, forced labour in the UK among refugees and asylum seekers.

What are the objectives?

1. To investigate the key factors and processes that make refugees or asylum seekers vulnerable to forced labour and to consider how they might be challenged.
2. To explore how immigration status (i.e. 'asylum seeker', 'refused asylum seeker', 'refugee' status) and gender relate to the necessity to engage in, and the experiences of, forced labour.
3. To advance understandings of the notion of precarity (multiple insecurities) and review its appropriateness in respect of refugees and asylum seekers engaged in forced labour.
4. To consider different meanings and interpretations of forced labour.
5. To allow the voices of refugees and asylum seekers with direct experience of forced labour to inform debate on appropriate policies and interventions designed to prevent forced labour.

How do we plan to do this?

Our aim is to conduct 60 interviews with people who are asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers or refugees in Yorkshire and Humber who have experiences of forced labour. We can conduct the interviews face to face, over the telephone, or through an internet or written questionnaire.

Want to know more?

The research team is Dr Louise Waite, Dr Stuart Hodkinson and Dr Hannah Lewis (School of Geography, University of Leeds) and Professor Peter Dwyer (Centre for Social Justice Research, University of Salford). See our website: www.precariouslives.org.uk. For more information or to refer someone for an interview contact Hannah Lewis **0113 3435671** h.j.lewis@leeds.ac.uk