

**DESTITUTION
DISCRIMINATION
DISTRUST**

THE WEB OF THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

CONTENTS

PAGE

3 FOREWORD FROM CHURCH LEADERS

4 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

6 WHAT IS THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT?

9 A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT:

9 DESTITUTION

11 DISCRIMINATION

13 DISTRUST

15 A MORE HOSPITABLE ENVIRONMENT?

17 REFERENCES



FOREWORD FROM CHURCH LEADERS

As Church leaders, the injustices of the hostile environment alarm us. The hostile environment is described as a web. Churches around the country are supporting people who have suffered hardship as a result of being caught up in it; indeed our church members are some of the very people who are at risk of destitution and discrimination.

The hostile environment spins a web of distrust and encourages suspicion. As Christians we believe that God calls us to offer welcome to the stranger and care for the vulnerable, whoever they are.

We therefore encourage you to read this new report produced by the Joint Public Issues Team. It draws together some of the latest evidence, stories and offers a Christian response. Our Christian faith calls us to pray and work for a society founded on trust, respect and love for one another. Let's work together for a truly hospitable environment.

Revd Lynn Green

General Secretary of the Baptist Union

Revd Richard Frazer

Convenor of the Church and Society Committee of the Church of Scotland

Revd Loraine Mellor

President of the Methodist Conference

Revd Kevin Watson and Alan Yates

Moderators of the United Reformed Church



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'hostile environment' is a web of government policies designed to make life so difficult for people who cannot prove they have the right to live in the UK that they will choose to leave.

Recently we have seen how members of the Windrush generation were caught up in that web. They were British citizens, but those who were unable to provide the required documentary evidence lost, or were at risk of losing, their jobs, their homes, and access to free NHS treatment. In some cases they were detained and deported.

But the treatment of the Windrush generation is just the tip of the iceberg. The web of the hostile environment has a far wider reach.

The hostile environment uses the threat of **destitution** as a policy tool to encourage people to leave the country. It prevents access to the kinds of services we all need to live. Ultimately, vulnerable people are threatened with starvation, homelessness and despair. As Christians, we affirm the dignity of every human being and so do not believe that destitution should ever be used as a tool of government policy.

The hostile environment increases the risk of **discrimination**. By expecting landlords, employers or healthcare workers to make decisions about eligibility, the risk of discrimination based on assumptions and prejudice is increased. People who do not look or sound 'British' face being discriminated against. As Christians, we believe that racism and other forms of discrimination are a denial of the Gospel.

The hostile environment spins a web of **distrust**. We have internalised border controls, meaning many more of us are now expected to help police immigration policy. We have become entangled in a poisonous culture of suspicion where MPs, police and members of the public are reporting people for suspected immigration breaches. But as Christians we believe that God calls us into relationships founded on mutuality and interdependence, not distrust and suspicion. The hostile environment stands in the way of efforts towards integration and cohesion in communities.

This is not about who we allow into the UK. Governments have international responsibilities towards those fleeing persecution, but otherwise have the right to determine immigration policy and control their borders, and through due process, they can act against those who have no right to live there. Rather, it is about how we relate to one another inside our borders and treating one another with decency. Our concern is that the web of policies that make up the hostile environment are responsible for increasing levels of destitution, discrimination and distrust across our society.

As a group of Church denominations, the injustices of the hostile environment alarm us. Many of our churches and their members work with those who have suffered destitution and detention as a result of the hostile environment. Our churches include some of the very people who are at risk of destitution and



discrimination. Our Christian faith prompts us to pray and work for a society where people are treated justly and in which we are truly hospitable to one another.

We therefore call for an end to the hostile environment. This should start with a full independent review of Home Office immigration policy and practice which examines the damaging effect the policies of the hostile environment have on the whole of society.

Finally, we recognise the need for each one of us to examine our own hearts for the attitudes that the hostile environment is founded upon. We call on all people to exchange attitudes of discrimination and distrust for those of love and justice.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The hostile environment is aimed at ‘illegal immigrants’, a term much used by politicians and the media.

Illegal immigration is when a person crosses a border by unauthorised means. The term ‘illegal immigrant’ has been used to describe someone who is in the country illegally, but it has been criticised for encouraging the view that the *person* is illegal.

Undocumented migrants represent a far wider group of people who do not have a proven right to be in the UK. They may have overstayed their visa or exhausted appeals for asylum. Or perhaps they cannot afford to pay the significant fees required to become or remain documented;¹ there are many stories of families who find themselves without valid documents to prove their right to remain in the UK solely because they cannot afford it.²

There is also a group of people who are **unable to prove their right** to be in the UK. Perhaps they lost their documentation fleeing their home country, or the Home Office bureaucracy has failed.

But, as we show in this report, other people **legally resident** in the UK are affected by the hostile environment.³ They may be British citizens who lack some documents (like the Windrush generation) or people who have a lawful right to be in the UK, perhaps through having Indefinite Leave to Remain, but do not have a British passport.



WHAT IS THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT?

“The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration.”⁴

Theresa May, Home Secretary, 2012

Although Theresa May coined the term “hostile environment” as Home Secretary in 2012, it has its roots in the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of a succession of governments including the previous Labour administration.

The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 made it increasingly difficult for people without the right documentation to access housing, healthcare, banking, employment, education and other basic services. It has created a web of checks designed to catch people out, with the continual threat of indefinite detention or deportation for any who fail them.

Although the hostile environment has recently been rebranded by the government as “the compliant environment”, the underlying policies – and intention – remain largely unchanged.

HOW THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT WORKS: DENYING BASIC SERVICES

DENYING ACCESS TO HOUSING

Under the Immigration Act 2014, landlords have to check that tenants have the right to live in the UK before renting out a property – known as the ‘Right to Rent’ check. It is now a criminal offence to lease a property to a disqualified person if the landlord knows or has “reasonable cause to believe” that person does not have the right to rent in the UK. This carries a sentence of up to 5 years’ imprisonment or an unlimited fine.⁵ This policy effectively deprives undocumented migrants of housing. But it also makes it harder for people who have a right to live in the UK to access housing if they do not have a passport. 42% of landlords, when questioned, said they would be less likely to rent to someone without a British passport.⁶

DENYING THE RIGHT TO WORK

It has been illegal for a long time to employ a worker who does not have permission to work in the UK. The Immigration Act 2016 placed more responsibility on employers. Employers who have undertaken the right to work check can still be prosecuted if it is deemed that they had “reasonable cause” to doubt an employee’s immigration status. They can be fined up to £20,000 or even face a prison term.⁷ There is evidence that employers who do not understand the Home Office documents given to migrants with the right to work will refuse them employment.⁸ Without work, people can quickly become homeless, hungry and more vulnerable to depression. They are also less likely to be able to afford to pay the fees needed to apply to



renew their legal status. Documented migrants, for example with Limited Leave to Remain, can quickly become undocumented and lose proof of their right to be in the country.

DENYING ACCESS TO BANKING

Banks are banned from opening accounts for undocumented migrants.⁹ Banks are also required to check the immigration status of existing account holders, and to close accounts if they are held by undocumented migrants. The closure of existing accounts has recently been suspended over concerns that the immigration status information used was inaccurate, but new accounts are still being refused.¹⁰

It is estimated that...

10% of bank accounts closed by the Home Office belonged to people resident in the UK legally.

SOURCE: ICIBI REPORT
#ENDHOSTILITY

DENYING HEALTHCARE

Since 2015 migrants from outside the European Economic Area have had to pay a charge of £200 per year to use the NHS.¹¹ For those who have not paid the surcharge (including, inevitably, those who are undocumented), fees will apply for any medical attention.¹² Treatment, except in the case of emergencies and treatments specifically free to all, can be denied if an individual cannot prove they are able to

pay.¹³ This clearly has an impact on the individual's health. Public Health England have also warned the Department of Health that such moves could lead to an increase in infectious diseases.¹⁴ Doctors have reported encountering women who are too scared to seek medical care during pregnancy.¹⁵

£54,000

The bill Albert Thompson, a British citizen, received for cancer treatment.

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN
#ENDHOSTILITY

A CULTURE OF SUSPICION

Home Office Immigration Enforcement officials have powers to raid properties and premises, stop and search people on the street and ultimately detain or deport anyone who cannot prove their right to be in the UK.¹⁶

An Immigration Enforcement hotline encourages members of the public to report suspicions of "immigration crime".¹⁷

Members of Parliament made 482 tip-offs to the Immigration Enforcement hotline between 2014 and 2016.¹⁸ This raises the prospect that MPs are reporting their own constituents to the authorities when they have come to them for help. The police have also admitted that they report victims and witnesses of crime to the Home Office if they have suspicions about their immigration status.¹⁹



DETENTION: NO TRIAL. NO LIMITS. NO ACCOUNTABILITY?

Indefinite detention, along with deportation, is one of the ultimate threats underlying the hostile environment.

Indefinite detention is the process by which migrants – usually undocumented migrants or those who have had their asylum claim rejected – are held in prison-like conditions. Once detained in an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), they cannot leave until the Home Office releases them, or returns them to their country of origin or they choose to return to their country of origin.

The recommended time limit for holding individuals is 28 days, but in reality there is no limit. Britain is the only country in the European Union where this policy is in operation without a legal limit.²⁰ In 2016-17 more than a third of people detained were held for more than 28 days. As of 30 June 2017, one person had been held in detention for 1514 days, which is over four years.²¹

Ed sought asylum in the UK as a victim of torture. Her first asylum application was denied and Ed was taken into detention: **“they came in the night and arrested me... it was like more traumatism in me... I was crying crying crying ... just ask to God why why why?”**

After being in detention Ed explained that **“the Home Office said that normally somebody vulnerable [like me] should not be in detention... and they apologised about that”** but a month later she was taken into detention again for 8 days and **“one month later... they were there to arrest me for the third time... can you stop traumatising me?... enough is enough...”**

Ed, aged 42

We spoke to Ed at a drop-in centre run by a United Reformed Church



A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

As Churches, we have many concerns about the hostile environment, grounded in our beliefs that:

- Every human being is a child of God and should be treated with dignity and respect.
- Society and therefore the state have a duty of care to welcome strangers in our midst, protect the vulnerable and provide for those in extreme poverty, wherever they are from.
- Racism and related forms of discrimination are a denial of the gospel.

DESTITUTION

The hostile environment deliberately deprives undocumented migrants of access to the services we all need to survive day-to-day. Unless you have significant private resources, having no access to employment, housing, healthcare or banking inevitably leads to homelessness, ill health, and poverty.

Denying individuals any form of income or financial provision plays into the hands of the underground economy. Vulnerable people are at an increased risk of human trafficking and exploitation.

This is intentional. By denying basic needs, the government intends to make life so difficult for undocumented migrants that they have no option but to leave the UK. In reality, many cannot do so, either because they are stateless or because they are afraid of what might happen to them if they return.

It is never acceptable to use destitution as a policy tool. It is inhumane. People who cannot leave are ending up destitute on the streets of the UK.

Yet the use of destitution is not even proven to be effective. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration noted that “justification for extending the ‘hostile environment’ measures is based on the conviction that they are ‘right’ in principle... rather than on any evidence that the measures already introduced are working or need to be strengthened, since no targets were set for the original measures and little has been done to evaluate them.”²²

Moreover, the impact of the hostile environment is felt beyond the so-called ‘illegal immigrants’ it was intended to affect. As we saw recently with members of the Windrush generation, even British citizens found themselves made homeless and destitute. In 2016 two-thirds of people who had been granted asylum in the UK were at risk of destitution and homelessness as a result of bureaucratic mistakes and delays.²³

For example, delays in issuing National Insurance numbers have prevented successful asylum seekers from moving into the world of



A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DESTITUTION

work.²⁴ The denial of basic services can mean that even those who have the right to be in the UK are at risk of destitution.

Zaza fled Turkey after having his house burned down by the military in 1994. He sought asylum in the UK but had his first claim denied. His status is now unclear, but he is living without recourse to public funds or the right to work: **“they destitute you... nobody should live homeless... should I live on the street? Destitution kills you, you are constantly sick. I’m underground so I’m too scared to go to the doctors”.**

Zaza, aged 37

We spoke to Zaza at a drop-in centre run by a United Reformed Church

“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

James 2:15-16

Destitution kills, as one asylum seeker told us. People can end up hungry, homeless and ill. But destitution also kills the spirit.

We believe that people are promised abundant life through Christ (John 10:10). Not having enough to eat or anywhere to live crushes life, preventing people from experiencing life in all its fullness. God’s intention is that we should thrive and grow whatever our immigration status.

The UK has the right to maintain effective control of its borders and, with due process, determine who has the right to live in the country. But we do not believe that it is appropriate or effective to use destitution or the threat of destitution as a policy tool for achieving this end.

How we treat one another matters. The image of God is present in every person. The poverty, homelessness and ill health that result from our national attempts to manage migration harm our society and the whole of humanity.



DISCRIMINATION

The hostile environment increases the risk of discrimination against certain groups of people, regardless of their immigration status.

The hostile environment is enforced by members of the public such as landlords, doctors and employers. They are required to effectively become amateur immigration officers and make decisions about who can have access to jobs, homes or healthcare. Yet inevitably they cannot always understand or apply the law accurately. They face serious penalties for getting it wrong so err on the side of caution.

Kate came to UK as a student. Whilst reviewing her student visa and right to remain her passport was sent to the wrong address by the Home Office. She showed her landlord the letters from the Home Office and he rented the property to her. When she complained about repairs, however, he reported her to the Home Office who told him he had immigration grounds for ending the tenancy. The landlord then issued a claim to repossess her room. Kate was also prevented from working or claiming benefits during this time.

Source: i News²⁵

The consequence is that people who do not look or sound 'British' face increased levels of discrimination in finding homes and employment. People are more likely to be rejected as tenants if they have "foreign accents or names".²⁶ Those with the right to work can still be turned down because employers do not understand the evidence they are shown. We have arrived at a point where government policy is encouraging informal racial profiling in private and public services. The consequences of this are devastating for people who are losing or struggling to find homes, jobs or to access essential services.

42% of landlords

said they would be less likely to rent to someone without a British passport.

SOURCE: RESIDENTIAL LANDLORDS ASSOCIATION
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A policy aimed at so-called 'illegal immigrants' is in fact diminishing the opportunities and livelihoods available to members of minority ethnic communities, many of whom are British citizens and legal migrants.



A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DISCRIMINATION

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

In his ministry, Jesus did not discriminate against any group of people. He ate with religious leaders and sinners. He talked theology with foreign women and scholars. He healed Romans and Jews. His message of freedom, of forgiveness, of a new relationship with God was for everyone regardless of their ethnic group, wealth or status. As St Paul put it, “God shows no partiality” (Romans 2:11).

Our belief that we are all made in the image of God and are one people in God shapes how we see and relate to each other. We recognise that

we are an imperfect people living in an imperfect world. But as we long for the kingdom of God where all will be put right, we must decry discrimination as a denial of the gospel.

Therefore as Churches we are very cautious of government policies which apparently result in certain ethnic groups, often those who are already the most vulnerable in society, experiencing further discrimination. The consequences of not being able to find a job or a home can be devastating. Families’ right to a home – and to feel at home – should not be affected by their ethnicity. Treating any ethnic group as lesser and with suspicion diminishes all of us. We must take seriously voices from BAME communities who say the hostile environment makes their day to day lives more difficult.



DISTRUST

The policies at work in the hostile environment are founded on distrust. Internal border controls, reliant on suspicion and distrust, are being enacted not just by the Home Office but also other government bodies and individuals.

Alongside its regulatory measures, the government has encouraged a climate of suspicion by equating undocumented migrants with criminality. The public is encouraged to be watchful for breaches of the regulations. In 2013 vans patrolled our streets with the slogan:

“In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest”

On the Home Office website members of the public are urged to join in with the act of border control:

“Contact the Home Office if you think someone is living or working in the UK illegally, or is employing someone who isn’t allowed to work in the UK”²⁷

Many of our churches, with members who are seeking leave to remain in the UK, testify to the pervasive culture of disbelief in the immigration system and the subjective judgments of case-workers and immigration judges. Half of the initial refusals of leave to remain are reversed on appeal²⁸. The situation is not helped by the

fact that many case-workers are stressed and over-worked.²⁹

The hostile environment thrives on mutual suspicion, and this is having a wider impact on society. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees has expressed concern that aspects of the hostile environment, “can have a detrimental impact on future integration for those who are granted refugee status”.³⁰ We all suffer when policies work to discourage community cohesion and integration.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DISTRUST

“Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgement.”

John 7:24

The New Testament returns again and again to the importance of communities being founded on mutuality and unity. We are called to holiness and righteous living together, as one body, “for he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14).

We should therefore be concerned about the suspicion upon which the hostile environment thrives. When we become complicit in the act of judging and suspecting one another, our relationships are corrupted.

We are called to see the good in our neighbour. Each new person offers a unique set of gifts, and a unique insight into the character and the

Between 2014 and 2016
482 tip offs were made
to Immigration
Enforcement by MPs.

SOURCE: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION
#ENDHOSTILITY



image of God. Relationships founded on distrust sow seeds that deny God's intention for humanity.

Due process, justice and the proper implementation of immigration policies should not require us to live in suspicion of our neighbour. Distrust of our fellow human beings

makes community integration less likely and as a result we are all poorer. Our self-identity becomes less about community and welcome and more about suspicion and hostility.

As Christians, if we are called to righteous living, how can we remain complicit in the face of such injustice?



A MORE HOSPITABLE ENVIRONMENT?

The hostile environment is inhumane because it deliberately inflicts destitution.

The hostile environment is discriminatory, and encourages xenophobia and racial profiling.

The hostile environment builds a culture of suspicion and distrust.

It is time to challenge the hostile environment and to promote a more hospitable environment. We invite churches, church groups and individuals actively to challenge the hostile environment.

1. REVIEW THE IMPACT OF THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

A first step for the Government would be a full and independent review of immigration policy and practice, to examine the damaging effect the policies of the hostile environment are having on the whole of society.

Contact your MP explaining why you think the policies of the hostile environment must be reviewed and dismantled. Conversations with or letters to MPs will be strengthened if you are able to reflect upon your own experience of the hostile environment or the experience of those connected to your church's community. Otherwise, you can refer to the case studies in this resource. Visit www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/endhostility for advice on meeting with your MP and for a template letter.

2. HOW CAN WE BUILD A MORE HOSPITABLE ENVIRONMENT?

It may be that you have been affected by the hostile environment. Or perhaps your church is involved in supporting people through offering help to asylum seekers or recent migrants. Maybe you can share ideas about building a more hospitable environment.

Tell your story. We'd love to hear from you. We will safeguard the confidentiality of any sensitive information. You can email us at: church.society@urc.org.uk

You can get involved in the conversation online using the hashtag [#EndHostility](https://twitter.com/EndHostility)



3. CHALLENGING OURSELVES

Take this opportunity to engage in conversations within your church or your community about the hostile environment. What is your experience of hostility and hospitality? How do we balance immigration control and welcoming the stranger? How does language affect how we think? Do you feel drawn to repent personally or corporately for being complicit in a culture of suspicion or distrust in our society? How can we work to build a hospitable society?



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For further information visit: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/endhostility



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