
Risks encountered after forced removal: the return experiences of young Afghans

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New research has documented the outcomes for young asylum seekers forcibly removed from the UK to Afghanistan. Its conclusions highlight both the difficulties facing the returnees and the need for sustained monitoring.

Over the past nine years, the United Kingdom (UK) has forcibly removed¹ back to Afghanistan 2,018 young Afghan men who came to the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and spent their formative teenage years in the UK care system. They are returned to often precarious and dangerous situations.

A few years ago, preliminary research undertaken by the UK-based Refugee Support Network (RSN) revealed some of the key

challenges confronting this cohort of youth facing forced return.² These challenges were exacerbated firstly by the abrupt transition from being 'looked after' children one day to being failed adult asylum seekers with limited rights the next, and secondly by the lack of connections and joined-up approaches between the UK-focused refugee and asylum support sector while they are in the UK and the international development sector after their return to their country of origin. At one

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of the most precarious stages of their life trajectory, former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children found themselves cut adrift from support, facing an uncertain future.

In response, RSN set up its Youth on the Move programme to support former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who had failed to secure refugee protection and now faced the possibility of forced removal to Afghanistan. The programme's overall, long-term goals were for no former unaccompanied minor to be left alone and unsupported in the face of potential forced removal to Afghanistan, and for research tracking the outcomes for these young people to bring about a better informed and more compassionate approach in the UK. Following an agreement announced in October 2016 between the EU and the Afghan government obliging the latter to receive many more refused asylum seekers, evidence about the reality on the ground for returnees is needed more than ever.

Researching the outcomes

For an 18-month period in 2014-15, RSN systematically monitored what happened to former child asylum seekers who had been forcibly removed to Afghanistan after turning 18, documenting their experiences and, for the first time, filling a vital evidence gap in assessment of their reintegration, safety and security, education, employment, health and well-being.³ We conducted 153 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 young people who had been forcibly removed from the UK.⁴

The first challenge experienced during the research process was establishing contact with the young people on return. 45 young people were referred to RSN's Kabul-based monitoring officer at the time of forced removal, yet 16 of these did not make contact and could not be contacted after return. It is not known why these young people either chose or were not able to contact the monitoring officer but it is of potential concern that it proved impossible to establish contact with such a significant number of young returnees (36% of total number referred).

The second challenge was remaining in contact with the returnees in order to facilitate multiple interviews throughout the research period. Six of the young people left Afghanistan during the research process, and an additional 12 moved away from Kabul. Where possible, in-depth telephone or Skype interviews were conducted with young people no longer in Kabul. In the case of 11 young people, contact ceased before the end of the research process because contact details held by the programme no longer worked, with their eventual whereabouts or well-being still unknown. Some may have deliberately withheld new contact details for reasons of security. Throughout the research, it was clear that many of the young people wanted to hide the fact that they had been in the UK because, for example, return was seen as a failure or associated with criminality and for their perceived westernisation which in turn affected their ability to secure work and housing and to reconnect with family. When travelling in Taliban-held areas in particular, they would not want to be heard speaking English or to be seen to have international contacts on their phone. The young people's safety is paramount and no pressure should be put on them to maintain contact if it would put them at risk.

Research findings and outcomes

In addition to identifying the significant number of young returnees who had again left Afghanistan, the research highlighted a range of interconnected challenges facing former child asylum seekers after forced removal to Afghanistan. These include:

- the impact of weakened or disappeared family and social networks
- fear of stigma and discrimination impeding the formation of new social networks, leading in turn to increased isolation
- challenges in accessing institutional support and reliance on ad hoc assistance from people in the UK
- generalised insecurity and victimisation due to issues related to the original asylum claim or to their identity as a returnee

- the near impossibility of continuing in education after forced return due to its cost, the prioritisation of earning money for survival, their lack of Afghan education, and the irrelevance of studies undertaken in the UK
- the difficulty of finding sustainable work and the impact of this on young returnees' ability to survive or remain in Afghanistan
- mental health difficulties and protracted deterioration in emotional well-being, with particular challenges where specialised care and medication were interrupted on removal
- limited access to essential support and health care.

Over three quarters of the young people monitored identified insecurity as a critical issue. Seven reported incidents where either they or other returnees close to them were targeted simply because they were a returnee. One young person was particularly distressed when he told us:

"I have just made one friend here. [...] He told me he couldn't stay, that he would go back to the EU. I told him not to go, but he was arrested by the Taliban on the way to Iran ... and they killed him because he had all his international papers and bank card on him. They killed him by cutting his head off and leaving it in the street."

Next steps

There is a need for more research on post-return outcomes in order to produce robust data about the realities around return for those who have spent time in the UK as asylum seekers. The value of such data is evidenced in the citation of the RSN research report *After Return* in the UNHCR guidelines for assessing Afghan asylum claims⁵ and in the report's use by solicitors representing individual former unaccompanied minors who have turned 18 but are still going through the UK asylum process.

Our hope is that due recognition will continue to be given to the persecution risks facing young people simply because they are returnees, regardless of the content of their original asylum claims. There is

currently a significant focus on bringing unaccompanied minors to the UK from Calais and other parts of the European Union. It is important that all those involved – policymakers, those lobbying for more unaccompanied children to be brought to the UK, and the solicitors representing them in their asylum cases – are aware that unless children get good legal representation in the first instance, the outcomes of forced removal experienced by young Afghans could be an outcome for them too.

It is also important to help young people at the end of the asylum process to access legal, practical and psychosocial support and to make contingency plans, where appropriate and when all options for remaining have been exhausted, for the possibility of forced return. Bringing together learning about supporting young people at the end of this process in the UK and about life on return, we have created a guide for other practitioners as one step in bridging the gap that separates UK-based refugee organisations and the international development sector, with a view to better supporting the young people who straddle these two contexts in their migration journeys.⁶

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1. The term 'deportation' is commonly used to refer to the state-enforced or enforceable departure of a non-citizen from the country. Deportation is, however, a specific term used by the UK government in reference to people whose removal from the country is deemed 'conducive to the public good', often in connection with conviction for a criminal offence that carries a prison term. 'Forced removal' is therefore the preferred term when referring to these young Afghans.
2. Gladwell C (2013) 'No longer a child: from the UK to Afghanistan', *Forced Migration Review* issue 44 www.fmreview.org/detention/gladwell
3. See Refugee Support Network (April 2016) *After Return: documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan* www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/resources/after-return
4. The interviews were conducted in Kabul by RSN's monitoring officer and three other staff members who made field visits to support the research process.
5. UNHCR (2016) *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan* www.refworld.org/docid/570f96564.html
6. www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/resources/ARE-practitioner-guide