

The Hostile Environment, insecure immigration statuses and NRPF: impact on mothers' relationships and access to support

Policy briefing

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Executive summary

Hostile Environment policies contribute to the destitution, homelessness and vulnerability of many mothers and children in the UK who have 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) and limited or no 'leave to remain'. The research study on which this briefing is based found that these policies affect mothers' relationships and access to support. This has implications for mothers' and children's health, safety and wellbeing. The briefing highlights the need for policy changes to help mothers and children access secure immigration status, and to provide information, advice and social support in safe, accessible spaces.

Context

Since the Conservative-led Coalition government announced its 'Hostile Environment' approach in 2012 to reduce immigration, a series of policies, laws, regulations and rules have been implemented. These make it more difficult to obtain and renew residency rights, and make life very difficult for people without leave to remain or only temporary ('limited') leave to remain. Hostile Environment policies restrict access to healthcare, housing, higher education, employment and childcare. These policies have particularly negative effects on racially minoritized mothers with insecure immigration status who are parenting alone and experiencing financial hardship. Their children are also adversely affected. Hostile Environment policies have also affected racially minoritized UK citizens.

Research aims and methodology

The 'Mothering in a Hostile Environment' research study explored the impact of Hostile Environment policies, insecure immigration statuses and no recourse to public funds (NRPF) on mothers. It looked at how these shape mothers' relationships and access to different kinds of support. The study consisted of ethnographic research conducted over 20 months in a London neighbourhood with 22 mothers and with local advocates and advisors. The findings – and implications for policy change – were discussed with mothers and frontline professionals through a series of knowledge exchange workshops and presentations.

Research findings

There were six main findings:

- Hostile Environment policies contribute to destitution, debt and homelessness for mothers and children (including those born in the UK). These policies include the exceptionally high costs of visas, leave to remain applications and the NHS surcharge; the complex ten-year route to settlement; the expansion of the NRPF condition; and restrictions on access to public services. The policies increase the risk of mothers losing their 'leave to remain' because

they cannot afford to pay for applications and make it extremely difficult to regularize their status once lost. This creates a deep sense of insecurity and can harm mothers' mental and physical health.

- The policies affect mothers' interpersonal relationships, including with their children, partner, wider family and friends.
- The effects of Hostile Environment policies, including the financial pressures, can contribute to couple breakdown. Moreover, insecure status and hostile policies can make women vulnerable within a couple relationship and can put them at risk of exploitation or abuse. Seeking help when in an abusive relationship can be exceptionally difficult, especially for those who do not have official leave to remain.
- Financial and legal precarity affects the development of friendships, which restricts sources of support. Mothers have to limit what they share about their personal circumstances, which reduces possibilities for sharing emotional and other kinds of support. It can be difficult to ask friends for material or financial help, because of limited ability to reciprocate, or because friends may have limited resources themselves. This means mothers largely have to cope alone.
- Safe, sociable, accessible spaces (such as schools, nurseries, children's centres, healthcare centres, legal advice centres, food banks and faith organisations) are vital for enabling mothers to make connections with other mothers, families and frontline advocates. In these spaces, mothers can build trusting relationships and develop friendships. They can share information, access professional advice, and share material, practical and emotional support.
- To prevent destitution and risks of exploitation, and to enable mothers and children to thrive and contribute fully as members of society, hostility needs to be removed from immigration policies.

Recommendations for local authorities, education settings and community organisations

1. Be attentive and responsive to the potential needs and challenges faced by families with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF facing financial hardship, for example by recognising this as a priority group when commissioning services and providing training for frontline staff.
2. Ensure the provision of safe, accessible community spaces to provide legal advice, information, advocacy, food aid, signposting and other kinds of support to families face-to-face.
3. Maximise the use of such places by giving attention to how they can promote social connections with/amongst mothers and children and to facilitate the development of support networks.
4. Provide clear guidance (and regularly update this) to families and frontline practitioners about the eligibility of families with diverse immigration statuses for different kinds of services, including healthcare, early childhood education and care as well as free school meals.
5. Provide legal advice to support families on the ten-year settlement route with NRPF who are living in poverty to apply for the NRPF condition to be lifted.

Recommendations for central government

1. Extend the period of leave to remain on the basis of 'family/private life' from 30 months to five years to help mothers put down roots and feel part of the community without having to worry about finding the money for the next application.
2. Reduce the ten years required to apply for 'indefinite leave to remain' to five years so that mothers can make long-term plans for themselves and their children.
3. Reduce Home Office application fees to administrative costs only, to lessen the financial pressures on families and to reduce the risk that families lose their 'leave to remain' because of being unable to afford the fees.
4. Take a flexible approach to mistakes made in filling in complex application forms which may be due to unexpected changes to eligibility criteria, difficulty accessing legal support and speaking English as an additional language.
5. To prevent children facing destitution, benefits intended to support children (such as Child Benefit) should be excluded from the definition of 'public funds' to which they have no access; parents with children under 18 should have access to public funds after a maximum of five years of living in the UK.
6. Provide sufficient funding to local authorities for adequate support of families in need of accommodation and financial support.
7. Allow people to do paid work to support themselves and their children, regardless of their immigration status.
8. Ensure early childhood education and care provision is free to access for families regardless of their immigration status.

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