



A hostile environment:

Language, race, surveillance
and the media

(phase two)

Camila Montiel-McCann and Maka Julios-Costa

RUNNYMEDE



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Foreword – Clive Lewis MP

There is a long history in the UK of migration being weaponised to sow political division and further particular political agendas. This has been stark in the post-Windrush period, and since 2012, after Theresa May's infamous announcement of a "hostile environment" for illegal immigration, there has been a marked turning point. Migration has been established as one of the most divisive issues in British politics, with anti-migrant rhetoric and policies taken to a new level of hostility. The policies that followed, the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, have entrenched 'everyday bordering' into British society – where borders are no longer confined to ports or airports but creep into our daily lives, and ordinary people are expected to pass judgment on the immigration status of those they come into contact with.

In a context where debates on immigration talk about "swarms" and "invasions" of migrants threatening 'British values', it's no surprise that it is people of colour who are most likely to be forced to prove their status, resulting in discrimination – discrimination that was laid bare in the Windrush scandal.

But we cannot allow ourselves to see the Windrush scandal as an isolated incident or unfortunate accident. It is not a one-off. It is an inevitable consequence of a system designed to exclude and discriminate. Indeed, the government's own report into the scandal acknowledged that UK immigration laws have historically been "designed to reduce the number of people with Black and Brown skin permitted to live and work in the country." The Windrush scandal is not an outlier; it is part of a pattern of systemic racism embedded in the very fabric of British immigration policy.

Since the 2019 general election, the government has only escalated its assault on the rights of migrants, especially those seeking asylum. The Nationality and Borders Act (2022), the Illegal Migration Act (2023), and the now-defunct Rwanda plan (2024) have all been used to further a hostile environment for people fleeing war, conflict, and persecution. These measures are not just cruel; they are disproportionately aimed at people of colour, many of whom come from countries that have been historically exploited by Britain through colonialism and extractive foreign policy.

The situation reached boiling point last summer, when far-right mobs attacked hotels housing people seeking asylum, minority-owned businesses and mosques. And yet, the current Labour government seems intent on continuing the Conservative legacy of hostility, with the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill continuing the enforcement-first, punitive approach.

While the withdrawal of the Conservative's disastrous Rwanda plan is welcome, the Border Security Bill continues to pander to far-right narratives that view migration as both a national security and existential threat to the country. It is not enough for Labour to simply oppose the Conservative

government's worst excesses. We must confront the reality, as presented in this report, that it is our response to migration - not migration itself - that poses the greatest threat to British society.

This report is wide-ranging - exploring how language from parliament and the media establishment has justified hostile immigration policy through dog whistles to Britain's colonial past and racial hierarchies. It shows how political slogans, such as "Stop the Boats", and their embrace by various sectors of the news media, have created an environment where racism is viewed as permissible, leading to the kind of violence witnessed last summer. Beyond this, it explores how immigration control threatens to subsume all other rights - taking over employment safety, our NHS, obligations to safeguard victims of gender-based violence, and our rights to privacy.

We need to offer a vision for immigration that recognises how all of our rights, but perhaps most of all the rights of working people, are tied up with the rights of migrants. We need a system that prioritises human dignity and one that confronts the racism and injustice embedded in our immigration policies. Until then, we risk allowing the far-right to continue to set the political agenda and sow social division which places us all at risk.

Executive summary

This report, the second in the Runnymede Trust's project on the 'hostile environment', expands on the first report, *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media*,¹ which explored the operation of the set of policies known as the 'hostile environment' from its inception in 2012 and its role in creating the conditions for the racist riots in the summer of 2024. This report shows how the increase in reactionary politics and the backlash against anti-racism has legitimised the targeting of people seeking asylum, who are largely people of colour. Racist discourse from the highest levels of UK society, including politicians and the media, is used to frame immigration and Channel crossings as an existential threat to the British way of life – reproducing Islamophobic and racist tropes which associate violence (including terrorism) and the erosion of 'British culture' with migrants. This works to justify ever more hostile immigration policies, such as the Illegal Migration Act (2023), which effectively bans asylum seeking in the UK, blocking claims from people who travel 'irregularly' via small boats on the Channel, 61% of whom were from five nations in 2024: Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Vietnam

1 Julios-Costa, M. and Montiel-McCann, C. (2025) *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media*, London: Runnymede Trust.

and Eritrea.² Immigration policy in the UK operates as a form of modern racism, working to order UK society racially by limiting the number of people of colour who can enter the country and taking increasingly intrusive steps to control those who are already here. The 'hostile environment' in particular, with its use of 'deputisation' and its insidious expansion of surveillance, has contributed to a cultural shift in which UK society is segregated according to citizenship status, with those who lack legal status vulnerable to state and public violence. And this cultural shift does not impact only migrants: it normalises the erosion of welfare, healthcare and human rights more broadly. The charging of some migrants for NHS treatment normalises the practice of charging for healthcare. Data-sharing arrangements between the Home Office and deputised authorities erode the safeguarding of victims of gender-based violence. And the overall lack of transparency about how the state collects, shares and uses our information undermines privacy rights. This report urges the government to move away from this hostile approach to immigration and recommit to the protection of human rights.

2 Home Office (2025) 'How many people come to the UK irregularly?' 27 February, [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-irregularly#:~:text=The%20top%205%20nationalities%20arriving,\(5%2C919\)%20compared%20to%202023](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-irregularly#:~:text=The%20top%205%20nationalities%20arriving,(5%2C919)%20compared%20to%202023).

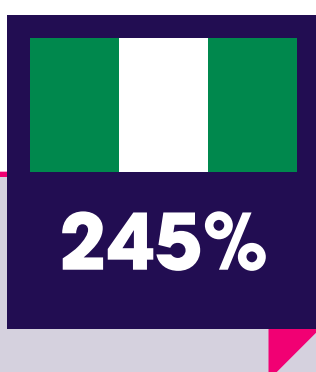
Findings

- From 2019 to 2024, migrants continued to be associated with crime and illegality. In fact, the word 'illegal' has become an even stronger word association with the terms 'migrant' and 'immigrant' in both news and parliamentary debates than it was in the 2010–14 period. **'Illegal' remains the number one association for 'immigrants' and has moved up from fourth to second most strongly associated term for 'migrant' in the news data.** This shows that the defining characteristic of migrants has been cemented as illegality over the past decade.
- **'Immigrant' typically refers to a person of colour, with the strongest nationality associations with the term being 'Mexican', 'Chinese' and 'Indian'.** The strongest religious associations with the term are 'Muslim' and 'Jewish'. This reconfirms Phase I findings and facilitates the idea that to be an immigrant is to be definitionally 'non-white' (another key word association for the term). This shows how discourse surrounding immigrants has been racialised.
- A distinction has emerged in both news and parliamentary debate in which 'refugees' are more humanised, whereas 'asylum seekers' are largely negatively represented. This suggests a strategy to normalise the **'securitisation'** of people seeking asylum (whose lack of status can be weaponised) by maintaining appearances of concern for refugees (who have status). As 'asylum seekers' become associated with a lack of genuineness and threats to national security, they become distinct from 'refugees' and so it becomes acceptable to large sectors of the public to deny them their rights to refuge in the UK.
- Word associations for 'asylum seekers' show a preoccupation in news and parliamentary debate with **accommodation**. In August 2024, riots broke out across the country in which hotels housing largely people of colour, seeking asylum, were violently attacked by supporters of the far right. This could have been a result of negative news media coverage of accommodation policies for people seeking asylum during this time, which perpetuated false narratives about 'asylum seekers' taking the country's resources, stoking up public anger and making accommodation such as hotels a clear target.

'illegal'

the number one
word association
for 'immigrants'

- **People from Albania are over-represented in immigration detention, and people from Brazil and Romania are over-represented in enforced returns (deportations) from 2019 to 2024. People from Albania, Brazil, China and India are over-represented in figures for voluntary returns during this period.** This shows that both detention and deportation appear to disproportionately impact people from countries with large populations of people of colour and people from Eastern Europe, who are ethnically minoritised and racialised in the UK, as shown in the first report.³
- Hostile immigration policies such as charging some migrants for NHS treatment mostly impact people from Eastern Europe and from countries with large populations of people of colour. **People from Nigeria are charged 245 per cent more on average than people from white-settler former colonies such as the USA.**
- Data-sharing between police forces and Immigration Enforcement continues to place migrant victims at risk. **The police continue to share the data of victims of domestic abuse who have irregularised immigration status with the Home Office for immigration control,** with the majority of such referrals being from Pakistan.



People from Nigeria are charged 245 per cent more on average than people from white-settler former colonies such as the USA.

3 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 54.

Glossary

Corpus/corpora: A (typically) digitised sample of texts (written or recorded), often collected for the purposes of researching how language, or specific aspects of language and communication, are used in a particular context and time period. Collecting large samples of texts about a topic can shed light on how that topic is talked about and understood by those who produced those texts.

Deputisation: The co-opting of organisations and people as de facto immigration officers responsible for enacting – and interpreting – immigration policy on the ground: for example, making it the duty of landlords to check the immigration status of potential renters.

Discourse: A set of ways of talking, writing about and representing particular topics or events that a particular group uses (e.g. media, political parties, institutions, communities or individual members of any of these collectives). Discourses can evolve over time, and ways of talking about different topics, from immigration to education to family to everyday life, can vary between communities.

'Hostile environment': The set of UK immigration policies, regulations and laws pursued from 2012. The term was coined by Theresa May in an interview for the *Telegraph* on 25 May 2012 but, as our earlier report shows, hostility towards immigrant communities existed before the term was coined and continues to this day. We place 'hostile environment' in single quotation marks in this report to draw attention to the fact that it is a curated policy pursued by successive governments who choose to continue to frame migration in this way.

Irregularised migrants: We use the term 'irregularised' to talk about migrants whose immigration status has not been regularised by the state to draw attention to the fact that it is the immigration system itself that renders people without status. Terms like 'illegal migrants' suggest that *people* can be 'illegal' when, in reality, their status is an administrative and political choice.

Othering: This happens when members of one group (the 'in-group') represent an individual or a collective (the 'out-group') as naturally and fixedly different from them – and often, though not always explicitly, inferior to them.

People of colour/ethnically minoritised people: In our reports on the 'hostile environment' we use the terms 'people of colour' and/or 'ethnically minoritised people' to draw attention to modern forms of racism and discrimination. This is because although racism still operates heavily along the lines of complexion, it also does so on the basis of a combination of cultural heritage, religion, global socioeconomic status, language, nationality and other factors. Any group perceived to be too different from those of a white, Western European, affluent background is at increased risk of being the target of racist discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion. We use 'ethnically minoritised' rather than 'ethnic minorities' because no group is a minority by default: they are *made* to be a minority, i.e. *minoritised*, when members of the group are systematically disadvantaged.

People seeking asylum/asylum seekers: An 'asylum seeker' is someone who is seeking international protection from persecution, war, conflict or violence but whose application has not yet been concluded. We use the term 'people seeking asylum' because of the proliferation of negative and dehumanising representations of 'asylum seekers'. 'People seeking asylum' puts people first, highlighting that we are talking about human beings.

Racialisation: The act of explicitly or tacitly assigning a group of people and its members an ethnic identity in ways that perpetuate the use of race/ethnicity to differentiate these groups from the assumed white 'default' and, ultimately, to devalue them in comparison with that default.

Racism: In this report we define racism as the set of beliefs and related behaviours by which anyone belonging to a historically privileged collective (e.g. white-settler communities) consciously or unconsciously represents an out-group as fixedly different or inferior due to any perceived combination of skin colour, language, nationality, cultural traditions, global socioeconomic status and religion.

Refugees: People who have fled their country to escape war, conflict, violence or persecution (because of their religious or political beliefs or identity) and have sought safety in another country.

Securitisation: The top-down process of assigning something (like migration) as a threat that requires emergency action or special measures, which are accepted by a significant audience as necessary and proportionate. Migration is 'securitised' when it is constructed as an external force seeking to undermine the behavioural customs and ethnic purity of a nation, representing an existential threat to national identity.

Desecuritisation: This occurs when the securitisation of an issue is reversed or contested and the subject falls out of the public sphere.

Introduction

Early in 2012, the Runnymede Trust published a report on the racism that lies behind the 'hostile environment' approach to immigration: *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media* (henceforth referred to as 'Phase I'). That report took a retrospective look at the early days of the 'hostile environment', exploring the language used by the country's politicians and news media to talk about immigration and, increasingly, to legitimise the 'really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' laid out by Theresa May, the home secretary at the time, in 2012.⁴ The report analysed large datasets (known as 'corpora') of news articles and House of Commons debates from 2010 to 2014, comprising more than 25 million words, to track how politicians and journalists talked about immigration, immigrants, migration and migrants. It found an alarming increase in the dehumanisation of migrant populations, with a fixation on numbers and metaphors of natural disaster to describe the movement of people across borders in a way that constructs them as a threat to the nation.

It also found that '(im)migrants', when used by these elite actors in politics and the media, overwhelmingly referred to people of colour and ethnically minoritised groups, with terms such as '(Eastern) European', 'African' and 'Muslim' frequently associated with the terms 'migrant' and 'immigrant'. When zooming in on randomised examples from House of Commons debates and news articles, it found the use of racist and colonialist tropes of white replacement, the 'othering' of people of colour as lazy, deceitful and dangerous, and the treatment of the UK as a homogeneously white nation.

These tropes work to construct migrants as a threat in a way that encourages support among the public for ever more intrusive and draconian immigration legislation, primarily the policy of 'deputisation'. This feature of the 'hostile environment' requires ordinary citizens working in public services, landlords and even the DVLA to work as de facto immigration officers, checking the status of people they come into contact with and reporting those deemed 'illegal' to the Home Office. A consequence of this policy has been racial discrimination in housing, education and marriage. The Phase I report therefore concluded that 'the government is responsible for legislating racial discrimination into immigration law' by compelling ordinary citizens to make judgements about the immigration status of others, in ways that, in the context of the racist discourse used to justify 'hostile environment' policy in parliament and the news, are likely to be motivated by racial prejudice.⁵

This follow up report is a continuation and expansion of this work. It explores the operation of the 'hostile environment' in the present day and its role in creating the conditions for the racist riots in the summer of 2024. This research phase ('Phase II') involved building and analysing corpora

4 Kirkup, J. and Winnett, R. (2012) 'Theresa May interview: 'We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception'', *Telegraph*, 25 May.

5 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 66.

of 51,990 news articles and 317 House of Commons debates on immigration from 2019 to the election in July 2024, totalling more than 62.7 million words. Phase II explore not just the terms 'immigration', 'immigrants', 'migration' and 'migrants' but also 'refugee(s)' and 'asylum seeker(s)'. This is because since the 2019 general election, there has been a slew of new legislation explicitly targeting the rights of people to seek asylum, accompanied by a rise in anti-refugee sentiment that came to a head in August 2024 when hotels housing people seeking asylum were brazenly attacked by sympathisers of the far right.⁶ This is alarming evidence of the perceived permission for racist abuse that has emerged from the increase in reactionary politics and backlash against anti-racism,⁷ which has emboldened the far right in this country and which increasingly targets some of the least protected people in our society – people who have already been forced to flee their home countries due largely to war and conflict. Despite the evidence of the dangers that 'hostile environment' policies produce for people of colour and ethnically minoritised people, the new government seems intent on continuing this approach, as evidenced by the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. The Bill purports to enhance border security, but its provisions largely reflect an enforcement-first, punitive approach reminiscent of previous policies such as 'stop the boats'.

The current report is similar to Phase I in its analysis of the language used from the top – that is, by politicians and news media – to discuss immigration, exploring how this trickles down to the rest of society through racist discourse which is designed to ramp up suspicion of migrants. It is also similar in that it explores how deputisation acts as a cover for racial discrimination by conveying a sense of entitlement to the UK public to make judgements on the rights to citizenship and belonging of people who are viewed as not white, or not white enough.⁸ Phase II differs from our previous report in the timeline it explores (2019–24), in the volume of data it analyses (with a 150 per cent increase in corpus size), and in its focus on the representation and rights of refugees and people seeking asylum.

The areas of deputisation that we investigate are also different. In this report, we analyse information from nearly 100 NHS Trusts and Health Boards across the UK and detention and removals figures from the Home Office to show how the apparatus of the 'hostile environment' disproportionately impacts people of colour and ethnically minoritised people. Phase II also analyses the practice of data-sharing that is central to the 'hostile environment', focusing on the sharing of migrant victims' data by the police with Immigration Enforcement. This is placed in the wider context of the expansion of the surveillance state in the UK. This report calls for a complete overhaul of the UK's immigration system, including the approach to and ways of talking about migration. It urges politicians, journalists and the general public to consider the ways that the current discourse on immigration has harmed the nation, leading to the violence witnessed last summer and paving the way for the erosion of some of the most fundamental rights: to welfare, healthcare, privacy and safety.

6 Al Jazeera (2024) 'Far-right rioters attack hotel housing asylum seekers in the UK', 4 August, www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/4/far-right-rioters-attack-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-in-uk.

7 Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2024) *Creating a Crisis: Immigration, Racism and the 2024 General Election*, London: Runnymede Trust, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/creating-a-crisis-immigration-racism-and-the-2024-general-election.

8 Schaap, A. (2024) 'The after rights of the citizen in the UK and its colonies: Who is the subject of the rights of the citizen in Britain's hostile environment?' *The International Journal of Human Rights* 28(8–9): 11–14.

Racist discourse from the highest levels of UK society, including politicians and the media, is used to frame immigration and Channel crossings as an existential threat to the British way of life – reproducing Islamophobic and racist tropes which associate violence (including terrorism) and the erosion of 'British culture' with migrants.

Constructing race

Immigration policy: The racial ordering of society

Immigration policy, in particular the 'hostile environment', is used to legislate racial discrimination into law without *appearing* to be discriminatory. The long history of how immigration policy has been used to racially order society in the UK was outlined in some depth with the release of the government-commissioned *Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal (HRWS)* report. This report stated that the politics of race and immigration have been so intertwined in UK politics that, at least from 1950 until 1981, 'every piece of immigration legislation was designed to reduce the number of people with Black or Brown skin permitted to live and work in the UK'.⁹ As shown in the Phase I report, the 'hostile environment' is merely a continuation of such policies (which that report dates back to 1905), using anti-migrant rhetoric and the policy of 'deputisation' to create and foment racial hierarchies through which UK citizens are emboldened, and compelled by law, to discriminate against migrants in housing, employment, education, healthcare, marriage and almost every other aspect of daily life.

The practice of colonisation, and the development of racial pseudoscience used to justify it, was central to how countries in Europe formed a sense of national identity.¹⁰ With the decline of colonialism, however, migration policies emerged as a means to maintain European dominance. As people began to migrate to the 'mother country' from formerly colonised nations, controlling (and subjugating) these racialised groups had to happen *within* the nation, whereas before it had been done *outside* of the nation, through colonial rule.¹¹ As it became less acceptable for national identity to be built on the explicit racial segregation of populations, migration policy and discourse began to be used instead to develop a national identity built on a set of *behavioural* (as opposed to supposedly 'biological') customs. These themselves rested on the concept of 'ethnic purity', and the external forces apparently seeking to undermine it.¹² As such, the cultivation of European dominance from the nineteenth century continued to be built on principles of exclusion, no longer based on so-called 'race science' but instead on the regulation, monitoring and exclusion of migrants.¹³

9 Home Office (2024) The Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal [HRWS], independent report, 26 September, www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-historical-roots-of-the-windrush-scandal.

10 Bhatia, M. and Lentin, R. (2022) 'Migration and racist state violence: Introduction', *State Crime* 11(1): 5–11, 7; Greenpeace and Runnymede Trust (no date) *Confronting Injustice: Racism and the Environmental Emergency*, London, 27–28, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/confronting-injustice-racism-and-the-environmental-emergency.

11 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 7.

12 Paterson, I. and Karyotis, G. (2022) 'We are by nature a tolerant people': Securitisation and counter-securitisation in UK migration politics', *International Relations* 36(1): 104–126, 105.

13 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 6; Home Office, HRWS, 41.

In the Phase I report, An outline of the historical development of racist immigration policy in the UK can be found in our Phase I report and in the government's *HRWS* report, as well as others such as Migrants' Rights Network's *Hostile Office*.¹⁴ The current report does not go into further depth on this, but we highlight one statement made in the *HRWS* report: that the 'race-blind letter [of immigration law] hid its blatantly discriminatory spirit'.¹⁵

This is highlighted here because it illustrates the rationale behind the continued insistence that immigration discourse and policy has nothing to do with race or racism. This siloing of immigration and race is done in order to *hide* the racist intent of immigration law: immigration policy may be 'race-blind' in the sense that it does not spout overtly racist intentions to limit the number of people of colour who can live in the UK, but this does not mean that who it targets and renders easily removable or illegal is not motivated by racism.

Nationality and immigration law *produce* illegality by attributing the status of non-citizen to a category of people – largely people of colour – who then became targets of policy interventions including policing, surveillance, immigration raids, detention, destitution and deportation. This has been labelled 'scaling citizenship' to highlight how the granting of citizenship rights in the UK functions to marginalise certain groups that are otherwise protected from exclusion through the Race Relations Acts (1965, 1968) and, more recently, the Equality Act (2010).¹⁶ This siloing of racial equality and justice from immigration policy works as an effective veil for subsequent UK governments, allowing them to continue to discriminate against both settled and new immigrants of colour on the grounds of threats to 'national security', which are inherently racialised because the concept of the nation itself is built on fundamentally racist grounds.

14 MRN (2024) *Hostile Office: The Home Office Is Racist by Design*, London, <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/hostile-office/racist-by-design>.

15 Home Office, *HRWS*, 35–36.

16 Schaap, 'The after rights of the citizen', 8–9; Home Office, *HRWS*, 5.

'Hostile environment' policy, 2014-25

2014-18

Since 2014, 'hostile environment' policies have expanded deputisation in ways that rely on collaboration from the public, the expansion of state surveillance, and the criminalisation of immigration. This increasingly targets people seeking asylum and refugees, who are largely people of colour.¹⁷

The Phase I report highlighted how the provisions of the 2014 Immigration Act, in particular the deputisation of ordinary people into immigration control, led to racial discrimination in the rental sector, employment and education and normalised the surveillance of ethnically minoritised people engaging in marriages or civil partnerships. Since the 2014 Act, another Immigration Act was passed in 2016.¹⁸ The 2016 Act increased the penalties for employers hiring people without regularised immigration status to £15,000–£20,000 per worker or up to five years' imprisonment and created the new criminal offence of 'illegal working' – making it a criminal offence for people subject to immigration control to work in the UK, with a penalty of up to six months in prison.¹⁹ The 2016 Act also strengthened the enforcement powers of immigration officers and the circumstances in which employers can be found guilty of employing so-called 'illegal workers'. Previously, employers could be charged with an offence only if they knew their employee was without regularised status, but the 2016 Act changed this to make it an offence if the employer has 'reasonable cause to believe' an employee may be subject to immigration control. The vagueness of this wording allows Immigration Enforcement to broadly interpret what could cause a belief that an employee might be without status (there is no legal measurement to prove 'reasonable cause'). This places employers in a vulnerable position, potentially leading to discrimination of the sort identified in the rental sector, where deputised landlords have been found to be reluctant to rent to people who appear 'foreign' for fear they could be irregularised migrants.²⁰

However, the penalty that employers are subjected to for hiring people with irregular immigration status can be reduced if they cooperate with the Home Office. This acts as a coercive strategy available to Immigration Enforcement to get employers to inform on, entrap and ultimately cause

17 Corporate Watch (2018) *The UK Border Regime: A Critical Guide*, London, 145–146, <https://corporatewatch.org/product/the-uk-border-regime>; Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*.

18 Crawford, J., McKee, K. and Leahy, S. (2020) 'More than a hostile environment: Exploring the impact of the Right to Rent part of the Immigration Act 2016', *Sociological Research Online* 25(2): 237–238.

19 Immigration Act (2016), www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/section/35.

20 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 61.

harm to employees who are suspected of not having regularised migration status. In this way, the offence of hiring people without status is transferred from the employer back onto the employee, leaving employees especially vulnerable to both rogue employers and the violence of the state.²¹

The 2016 Act also increased penalties for those renting who have irregularised immigration status and allows for summary eviction without due process, leaving migrants vulnerable to homelessness and rogue landlords. This has been labelled 'one of the most prominent contemporary mechanisms of housing exclusion in the UK'.²² Further provisions of the 2016 Act include the rolling out of 'deport first, appeal later' to all migrants, not just foreign national offenders; permission to detain pregnant women in immigration detention for up to 72 hours (with ministers able to extend this period up to a week); the deputisation of the DVLA to check drivers' right to work in the UK; and, from 2017, requirements for hospitals in England to check patients' ID to make sure that migrants not 'ordinarily resident' in the UK are charged for their care.²³ Migrants not ordinarily resident in the UK ('Overseas Visitors') became chargeable for NHS healthcare in the 1980s,²⁴ but these charges were significantly expanded in 2015.²⁵ Requiring healthcare practitioners to check patient immigration status is another example of deputisation that could lead to racial discrimination, as hospital staff must make judgements about who they believe could be an immigrant, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that people of colour are more likely to be asked for proof of residence.²⁶

2019-25

Further concerning developments that particularly target people seeking asylum have taken place since the 2019 election, appearing to show the politicisation of the right to seek asylum which marks a significant attack on human rights and most affects people of colour from countries where the UK has had colonial rule or extractivist policies. This shows how immigration discourse and policy continues to reflect colonial-era hierarchies.²⁷ In 2022, the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) was passed into law. The NABA establishes a system of refugee protection where 'refugees who travel to the UK through third countries via irregular routes (like crossing the Channel in a small boat) will be given a new form of temporary protection with limited rights to welfare benefits and family reunion, and they'll have their status reassessed after 30 months', effectively creating a

21 Bales, K. (2017) 'Immigration raids, employer collusion and the Immigration Act 2016', *Industrial Law Journal* 46(2) : 280–287; Davies, A.C.L. (2016) 'Recent legislation: The Immigration Act 2016', *Industrial Law Journal* 45(3), 431–442, 438.

22 McKee, K., Leahy, S., Tokarczyk, T. and Crawford, J. (2021) 'Redrawing the border through the 'Right to Rent': Exclusion, discrimination and hostility in the English housing market', *Critical Social Policy* 41(1): 91–110, 92–93.

23 Immigration Act (2016) S.7; Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 148.

24 National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Amendment Regulations (1983), UK Statutory Instruments, 302, www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1983/302/made.

25 NHS England (no date) 'Overseas patient upfront tariff', www.england.nhs.uk/pay-syst/national-tariff/overseas-patient-upfront-tariff.

26 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 149.

27 Refugee Action (2024) *Asylum in the UK: A Front Line for Racial Justice*, 14, www.refugee-action.org.uk/racism; Migration Observatory (2024) 'People crossing the English Channel in small boats', Briefing, 28 June, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/people-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats>.

'two-tier system where some refugees will have more rights than others, purely based on how they entered the UK'.²⁸ This sits in direct contradiction to the Refugee Convention, which specifies that refugees should 'not be penalised for their illegal entry or stay'.²⁹ The government has not created any new safe routes other than the Ukrainian, Syrian and Afghanistan resettlement schemes, and so the NABA amounts to a near ban of asylum seeking in the UK as refugees are forced to make dangerous Channel crossings which now render their applications to seek asylum illegal.³⁰

Furthermore, the NABA implements offshore processing for people seeking asylum and introduces age assessment for minors – a dubious strategy that has been condemned as having harmful mental health impacts on already vulnerable children, as well as being unreliable.³¹ These provisions contribute to dehumanising people seeking asylum, who are largely people of colour or ethnically minoritised people fleeing conflict, persecution and natural disaster.³²

Just a year after the passing of the NABA, the government passed the Illegal Migration Act (IMA) in 2023. Designed to address loopholes in the NABA that left the home secretary vulnerable to judicial review for its discriminatory effects, the IMA makes it the home secretary's duty to remove people seeking asylum who have arrived irregularly to Rwanda or a 'safe third country'.³³ This goes even further than the NABA to punish people seeking asylum by dismissing claims from any refugees who arrive in the UK irregularly, offshoring their detention and limiting their ability to challenge their removal. Without any other safe routes, this means that almost all people seeking asylum are deemed illegal and their applications inadmissible, irrespective of the reasons why they were forced to take irregular routes into the country.³⁴ The IMA also makes it a duty of the home secretary to remove children who arrived in the country as unaccompanied minors as soon as they turn 18, leaving vulnerable children in a state of perpetual fear of 'refoulement' (being sent back to a country where they are at risk of persecution) or detention when they reach adulthood, all because they had to leave their homes and make dangerous journeys alone in order to survive. By focusing on illegality of entry (indeed, *creating* illegality of entry by not creating safe routes) and the means by which people seek to enter the country, the UK government is able to dehumanise and criminalise migrants, rendering them non-existent and expendable with terms like 'illegal' and 'bogus' and ignoring, even suppressing, the reasons why people are forced to seek asylum in the first place.³⁵

28 Refugee Council (no date) 'Differential treatment (Clause 11 of the Nationality and Borders Act)', www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/differential-treatment-clause-11.

29 UNHCR (2010) *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 3, www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees.

30 Taylor, D. (2025) 'Refugee Council urges UK to introduce special visas in effort to stop deaths in the Channel', *Guardian*, 2 January, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/January/02/refugee-council-urges-uk-to-introduce-special-visas-in-effort-to-stop-deaths-in-the-channel.

31 Helen Bamber Foundation, Human Rights Network and Refugee Council (2024) *Forced Adulthood: The Home Office's Incorrect Determination of Age and How This Leaves Child Refugees at Risk*, London, www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Forced-Adulthood-joint-report-on-age-disputes-January-2024.pdf.

32 Refugee Action, *Asylum in the UK*, 14–15.

33 Morgan, J. and Willmington, L. (2023) 'The duty to remove asylum seekers under the Illegal Migration Act 2023: Is the government's plan to 'Stop the Boats' now doomed to failure?' *Common Law World Review* 52(4): 103–109, 104–106.

34 Refugee Council (2023) 'What is the Illegal Migration Act?', www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/what-is-the-illegal-migration-act/#:~:text=Anyone%20crossing%20the%20channel%20in,will%20not%20process%20their%20claims.

35 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 5.

Finally, in the build-up to the most recent general election in July 2024, the Conservative government put forward the highly controversial Safety of Rwanda (Immigration and Asylum) Act (2024) (henceforth the Rwanda Act). The aim of this Act was to make enforceable provisions of the NABA and the IMA to remove refugees arriving 'irregularly' to 'safe third countries'.³⁶ The Rwanda Act was a response to legal challenges that emerged in response to the NABA's and IMA's provisions to deport people seeking asylum to Rwanda to have their claims processed. Such challenges were founded on the fact that these Acts breached the Refugee Convention's stipulation that refugees should not be subject to refoulement by legislating that refugees could have their claims processed in third countries, such as Rwanda. Many challenges were built on the fact that the majority of people seeking asylum *from* Rwanda have their claims approved in the UK, showing that there is a risk of persecution to some refugees there.³⁷ In response, the Rwanda Act made it possible to deport people seeking asylum to Rwanda by simply declaring it a 'safe' country.

Rather than addressing these human rights concerns and seeking ways to protect the rights of refugees, the previous government's politicisation of the issue, with continued pledges to 'stop the boats' and be tough on immigration, led them to rush through legislation that contravened the UK's international obligations. Hence, they produced reactionary legislation to make their plans under the NABA, and then the IMA, enforceable, creating yet more bureaucracy and chaos. Redefining the meaning of terms like 'safe' and 'illegal' allows the government to skirt around human rights legislation and international obligations, such as the Refugee Convention, by merely changing what constitutes 'illegality' when arriving to, and existing within, the UK and what constitutes 'safety' when it comes to deporting people seeking asylum.

Since the election in 2024, the new Labour government has withdrawn the Rwanda Act. However, rather than focusing on the inhumanity of the Act and its contravention of international human rights, the withdrawal was justified on the grounds of its cost and ineffectiveness. Indeed, early signs are pointing towards the continuation of the 'hostile environment' approach, especially regarding people seeking asylum, under the new government. The Labour government has pledged to create an 'elite border unit' to tackle so-called 'illegal' immigration and prime minister Keir Starmer met with Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni in 2024 in what appears to be a bid to work together on the continuation of offshoring border control for refugees under Meloni's own programme of offshoring in Albania.³⁸

What is more, the current Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill (BSAI) Bill is being presented by Labour as a response to the cost and ineffectiveness of the Rwanda Act while essentially applying the same logic of that draconian legislation. The new Border Security Command will be given tools to 'crack down on criminal gangs', particularly smuggling gangs running small boat crossings.³⁹ Provisions in the Bill expand surveillance, granting immigration officers the authority to

36 Safety of Rwanda (Immigration and Asylum) Act (2024) www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2024/8.

37 Morgan and Willmington, 'The duty to remove asylum seekers', 106–107.

38 Buchan, L. (2024) 'Keir Starmer names new border security chief as he jets to Italy for talks on small boats crisis', *Mirror*, 15 September, www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-names-new-border-33672398.

39 Home Office and the Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP (2024) 'Home Secretary launches new border security command', 7 July, www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-launches-new-border-security-command.

search, seize and retain electronic devices suspected of containing evidence related to immigration crime; and expand data-sharing among authorities, including the exchange of customs information and trailer registration data. Moreover, the Bill expands current detention powers even further, permitting detention even while the home secretary is merely considering deportation orders. None of this addresses the desperate need for more safe routes for people seeking asylum, with recent calls from the Refugee Council urging the government to issue refugee visas to prevent further deaths on the Channel.⁴⁰ Instead, the approach adopted by the government continues to criminalise and punish people seeking asylum.⁴¹ The new offences proposed in the BSAI Bill provide the government with more tools to arrest and imprison people on the move, in an expansion of the current practice.

As we show below, this has led to the proliferation of racial discrimination in the UK, with immigration policy becoming a means by which the government and ordinary citizens marginalise, surveil, control and criminalise people of colour and ethnically minoritised people.

40 Taylor, 'Refugee Council urges UK to introduce special visas'.

41 Centre for Criminology and Border Criminologies and Humans for Rights Network (2025) 'Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill: Briefing on the expansion of criminal offences relating to irregular arrival to the UK', briefing, www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/border_security_asylum_and_immigration_bill_briefing_on_the_expansion_of_criminal_offences_relating_to_irregular_arrival_to_the_uk_1.pdf.

Part I: **'Hostile environment' discourse in the media and parliament, 2019–24**



Analytical procedure

As with Phase I, we collected data from House of Commons debates and news articles to monitor the ways that migrants are represented by the elites in UK society (politicians and journalists). For Phase II, we searched the record of House of Commons debates (known as 'Hansard') from 2019 to the general election on 4 July 2024 using the 'Find debates' feature on the parliament website⁴² and collected debates mentioning 'immigrants', 'immigration', 'migrants', 'migration', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. This yielded a total of 317 debates. News articles were also collected from the same time period if they mentioned any of the above terms three or more times in the article headline or body. This yielded a total of 51,990 news articles.

With this data, we built two corpora using specialist software, one of the Hansard data, totalling just under 2.7 million words, and one of the news data, totalling just over 60 million words. As with Phase I, we used corpus-assisted discourse analysis⁴³ to analyse this data and make comparisons between Hansard and news representations. We conducted a word association analysis which involved looking at key terms ('immigrant', 'immigration', 'migrant', 'migration', 'refugee', 'asylum seeker') in each corpus to see what words typically came before and after them. These were then categorised into the themes shown in Figure 1. This helps us to understand the attitudes towards these groups and topics being represented in the news and parliament.

42 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/search/Debates?house=commons>.

43 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 76–78.

Figure 1: Thematic areas identified in the corpus

Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
References to numbers and statistics
((Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions)
Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
((Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse)
Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

We then used specialist software to pull out random examples of these terms as they are used in context, in Hansard or news articles, which were analysed qualitatively using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to gain a more in-depth understanding of how migration, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are represented.

Findings

Who do we see as migrants?

Phase I of this research found that, despite the terms 'immigrant' and 'migrant' themselves not referencing any specific nationality or ethnic identity, their use in real-world news reports and parliamentary debates was overwhelmingly associated with minoritised ethnic groups. This suggests that despite protestations that debates about migration have nothing to do with race or racism, when discussing migration and referring to migrants in the public sphere, commentators and journalists are typically invoking images of the racialised 'other'.

In this Phase II report we found similar patterns of racialisation. As shown in Table 1, the words most strongly associated with the term 'immigrant(s)' in the news from 2019 to 2024 all index ethnically minoritised groups and people of colour, except 'Irish'. However, when looking at the use of the phrase 'Irish immigrants' in context, it is typically in news reports talking about historical immigration into the UK from Ireland (i.e. in the nineteenth century), not present-day immigration. Moreover, it is important to note the history of colonial oppression in Ireland by Britain.⁴⁴ The ethnic categorisation of Irish people as 'white' is a construct that was designed to divide Irish indentured servants from Black slaves to prevent a united revolt by the two groups.⁴⁵ This, however, did not end discrimination against the Irish in the UK, with signs stating 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish' a common sight in post-war England. Hence, the presence of one ethnically white group, 'Irish', in the data is not without its own complications and colonial history.

44 McVeigh, R. (2008) 'The balance of cruelty': Ireland, Britain and the logic of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 10(4): 541–561.

45 Allen, T. (1994) *The Invention of the White Race*, London: Verso.

Table 1: Words associated with ‘immigrant(s)’ in the news data, filtered by nationality, religion, ethnicity and geographical location

Words associated with ‘immigrant(s)’	Frequency	Score
Mexican	127	7.18
Chinese	88	6.56
Indian	71	6.46
Asian	58	6.18
Irish	63	6.17
Haitian	54	6.14
Muslim	52	6.01
Jewish	42	5.65
non-white	35	5.57
Venezuelan	35	5.5
Cuban	33	5.47
African	38	5.41

Compared with the Phase I findings, there is an absence of ‘immigrant’ being associated with (Eastern) European. This is likely because the Phase I dataset covered the removal of restrictions on free movement for Bulgaria and Romania in 2014 and the build-up to the EU referendum in 2016. This meant that it captured anxieties over Eastern European freedom of movement specifically. It showed that these anxieties were rooted in xenophobic and racist prejudices against Eastern European ethnic identities, which were viewed as inferior to Western European identities.⁴⁶ The Phase II dataset, however, captures data from 2019 to 2024, after the referendum which ended the UK’s membership of the EU. In this dataset, ‘Mexican’ is the term with the strongest association with ‘immigrant(s)’. This is typically in the context of news reports about the USA, as is

46 Sime, D., Tyrrell, N., Käkälä, E. and Moskal, M. (2022) ‘Performing whiteness: Central and Eastern European young people’s experiences of xenophobia and racialisation in the UK post-Brexit’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(19): 4527–4546, 4528.

'Haitian'. 'Chinese' and 'Indian' are also very strongly associated with 'immigrant(s)', usually when reporting about immigration in the UK context. It is also of note that the only two religious groups associated with 'immigrant(s)' are 'Muslim', followed by 'Jewish' – two groups that face well-documented discrimination.⁴⁷

The news could talk about Canadian or Australian immigrants, or about immigration from the USA, New Zealand or Western Europe. Yet, it does not. Overwhelmingly, when the UK news media represents immigrants, the image that is invoked, and hence the image that is most likely to become associated with immigrants in the popular imagination, is of an ethnically minoritised person. This is further supported by the fact that 'non-white' appears in the list, providing more evidence that when 'immigrants' are discussed in the public sphere, by politicians or in the news, the people being referred to are people of colour, not white immigrants.

47 Runnymede Trust (2024) *Islamophobia: The Intensification of Racism against Muslim Communities in the UK*, London, <http://runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-the-intensification-of-racism-against-muslim-communities-in-the-uk>; Feldman, D., Gidley, B. and McGeever, B. (2025) *Facing Antisemitism: The Struggle for Safety and Solidarity*, London: Runnymede Trust, <http://runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-the-intensification-of-racism-against-muslim-communities-in-the-uk>.

Are all migrants illegal? The 'securitisation' of migration

Table 2 shows the top ten word associations for the term 'migration' in the data from House of Commons debates ('Hansard'). In Phase I, the most common theme for words associated with this term was references to numbers and statistics, with seven of the top ten being in this theme.⁴⁸ In the Phase II data, only four of the top ten word associations for 'migration' refer to numbers and statistics. In the Phase I study, 'illegal' was not in the top ten word associations for 'migration' in the Hansard data, but in the current dataset it is the number one association.

48 Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 43.

Table 2: Top ten word associations for 'migration' in the Hansard data

Gramrel*	Words associated with 'migration'	Frequency	Score
modifiers of X	illegal	396	11.5
modifiers of X	net	168	10.9
nouns modified by X	Committee	197	10.3
nouns modified by X	Act	188	10.2
nouns modified by X	bill	114	9.65
verbs with X as object	tackle	77	9.6
... of X	level	52	8.99
verbs with X as object	reduce	43	8.74
nouns modified by X	system	104	8.71
modifiers of X	mass	34	8.68

Note: *Gramrel refers to 'grammatical relations' and specifies how the keyword relates to its word association in a sentence. For example 'illegal' is classed as a modifier/adjective of 'migration', since it typically appears in the construction 'illegal migration'. 'Act' is a modifier of the noun 'migration', as in 'Illegal Migration Act'. Scores for word association strength are calculated as logDice coefficients, which take into account not just how frequently a given word appears in the whole corpus but how often it appears next to a given keyword compared with how often it appears next to any other words in the corpus.

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- (Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- (Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

The term 'tackle', as in 'to tackle migration', is also dominant. This suggests that migration has been successfully constructed as a 'problem' that needs to be dealt with in a robust, even aggressive, manner. Moreover, words referring to immigration institutions, legislation or control (such as various Acts, Bills and Committees) make up four of the top ten associations with 'migration' in the Hansard data, compared with just two in the 2010–14 corpus. This suggests that legislating immigration has become more dominant than making the argument for legislation via the emphasis on numbers. This is connected to the dominance of 'illegal' as a word association of 'migration'. During this time, legislation was going through parliament, such as the NABA (2022) and IMA (2023), that was *creating* 'illegal migration' by making arriving in the UK 'irregularly', via small boats across the Channel, illegal in itself. In this the government has created a circular argument for itself against immigration – legislation is needed to 'tackle' 'illegal migration', which the legislation is in fact producing. Despite claims by both the previous Conservative government and the current Labour government that legislation targeting small boat crossings is designed to protect people seeking asylum from criminal gangs and people smugglers, the NABA and IMA punish people seeking asylum by rendering their claims inadmissible because of how they come to the UK. Yet without the establishment of any new safe routes (such as through special visas), people seeking asylum are forced to make these dangerous journeys, with a record number of people dying crossing the Channel in 2024.⁴⁹ This suggests that the safety of these migrants is not a real concern for the government after all.

When it comes to the news corpus (see Table 3), 'illegal' remains the dominant word association for the term 'immigrant(s)', as in Phase I. This shows that when the term 'immigrant' is brought up in public discourse, the term most likely to come to mind is still 'illegal', even though not all immigration is 'illegal'.

49 Taylor, 'Refugee council urges UK to introduce special visas'.

Table 3: Top ten words associated with 'immigrant(s)' in the news data

Gramrel	Words associated with "immigrant(s)"	Frequency	Score
modifiers of X	illegal	3,712	11.2
modifiers of X	undocumented	1,402	10.7
... of X	Welfare*	268	8.49
nouns modified by X	community	345	7.62
verbs with X as object	deport	180	7.39
... of X	thousand	228	7.37
nouns modified by X	advocate	135	7.36
... of X	number	443	7.32
verbs with X as object	detain	160	7.27
modifiers of X	Mexican	127	7.18

Note: *This refers to the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, which brought a court case against the government's hostile-environment 'Right to Rent' scheme during the time period of interest.

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms (im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- (Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- (Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

The dominant theme emerging from these word associations is 'illegality, crime and other negative terms'. Along with 'illegal', other key associations relate to the lack of regularisation of 'immigrants', such as 'undocumented', and the punitive measures used to police them ('deport' and 'detain'). This representation of immigrants as illegal and criminal and therefore as a 'problem' that needs to be addressed is called 'securitisation' – where powerful speakers (like politicians and journalists) *create* a problem where a group is represented as a threat to national security. The invocation of 'security' means that a sense of urgency is created and so a special claim can be made for the need to use 'whatever means necessary' to block the constructed 'threat'. (This process is often used to justify 'counter-terrorism' measures that disproportionately target Muslim communities.⁵⁰) This makes it easier to justify support for legislation that dehumanises and victimises irregularised migrants, including the expansion of powers to deport and detain so-called 'illegal immigrants'.

When it comes to the use of the term 'migrant' in the news (Table 4), 'illegal' is a dominant word association, moving up two places since the 2010–14 dataset.

50 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 107; Gilks, M. (2020) 'The security–prejudice nexus: 'Islamist' terrorism and the structural logics of Islamophobia in the UK', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13(1): 24–46.

Table 4: Top ten words associated with 'migrant(s)' in the news data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'migrant(s)'	Frequency	Score
verbs with X as subject	cross	4,321	9.94
modifiers of X	illegal	4,241	9.92
verbs with X as subject	arrive	3,190	9.44
... of X	number	3,803	9.42
... of X	thousand	2,079	8.96
verbs with X as object	send	1,943	8.74
modifiers of X	Channel	1,701	8.6
... than X	more	2,569	8.54
X and/or ...	refugee	2,059	8.41
verbs with X as object	stop	1,399	8.27

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms (im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- (Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- (Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

Terms like 'economic' and 'skilled', which were strong associations in the 2010–14 corpus are no longer dominant, replaced by movement terms such as 'cross', 'arrive' and 'send'. This suggests that attention has shifted from migrants who come to the UK to work and onto *how* migrants arrive in the UK, reflecting the government's shift in approach to focus on Channel crossings and people seeking asylum. This is also evidenced by the presence of the term 'Channel' as a modifier of 'migrant', creating the noun 'Channel migrant(s)'. Hence, how migrants make their journey to the UK has become a way to define who these migrants *are*. This is further evidence of dehumanisation as people are labelled according to their manner of travel. By focusing on modes of transport, it is easier to target these migrants with violent legislation and criminalisation than it would be if they were viewed as human beings first and foremost.

Refugees and people seeking asylum: The renewed frontier

The preoccupation with the ways that migrants come to the UK reflects a renewed focus by the government on policing refugees and people seeking asylum, as was the case with New Labour's immigration policy in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵¹ Given that most of the people affected by the string of legislation introduced from 2022 to today (i.e., those crossing the Channel on small boats to seek asylum) are people of colour,⁵² the claim in the *HRWS* report that UK immigration policy is designed to 'reduce the number of people with Black and Brown skin permitted to live and work in the UK' becomes not an observation on history but an indictment of immigration policy today.⁵³

Tables 5 and 6 show the top ten word associations for the terms 'refugee(s)' and 'asylum seeker(s)' in the Hansard data.

51 MRN, *Hostile Office*, 13.

52 Refugee Action, *Asylum Justice in the UK*, 14; Migration Observatory, 'People crossing the English Channel'.

53 Home Office, *HRWS*, 2.

Table 5: Top ten word associations for 'refugee(s)' in the Hansard data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'refugee(s)'	Frequency	Score
nouns modified by X	convention	462	11.2
X and/or ...	seeker	219	9.95
modifiers of X	Ukrainian	128	9.64
nouns modified by X	status	157	9.57
... for X	Commissioner	108	9.44
nouns modified by X	camp	96	9.25
modifiers of X	genuine	84	9.03
verbs with X as object	resettle	77	8.96
nouns modified by X	Council	75	8.86
modifiers of X	Afghan	65	8.69

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms (im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- (Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- (Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

Table 6: Top ten word associations for 'asylum (seeker)' in the Hansard data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'asylum (seeker)'	Frequency	Score
X and/or ...	refugee	219	9.95
modifiers of X	genuine	61	9.44
verbs with X as object	house	52	9.32
verbs with X as object	accommodate	53	9.31
verbs with X as object	fail	54	9.07
verbs with X as object	support	72	8.8
... of X	number	67	8.64
verbs with X as object	send	34	8.4
verbs with X as object	allow	40	8.32
verbs with X as object	treat	27	8.1

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms (im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- (Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- (Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

The term 'genuine' is a strong word association in both Table 5 and Table 6, ranking seventh for 'refugee' and second for 'asylum seeker'. The apparent positive associations of the terms 'genuine refugee' or 'genuine asylum seeker' are dependent on their distinction from 'ungenuine', or 'bogus', refugees or asylum seekers. In other words, the use of the term itself implies that many refugees and people seeking asylum are *not* genuine. Yet this is not borne out by the evidence: the majority of UK asylum applications are approved by the Home Office,⁵⁴ meaning that they *do* meet the government's own threshold for demonstrating a genuine need for asylum. In fact, legislation such as the IMA (2023) means that people seeking asylum have their claims deemed illegal not on the basis that they're not 'genuine', but based on how they came to the UK. The presence of the term 'fail' in association with 'asylum seeker', as in 'failed asylum seeker', is also potentially misleading, as it implies a failure on the part of the person seeking asylum, perhaps a failure to be 'genuine'. And yet legislation during this period was *creating* failed asylum seekers by rendering applications inadmissible based on irregularity of entry, not on the applicant's actual case for needing asylum. These associations create a strong link between refugees and people seeking asylum and supposed dishonesty, which is then played on to justify the very legislation that deems them illegal and their applications inadmissible.

54 Home Office (2024) 'How many people are granted asylum in the UK?' Accredited Official Statistics,

Ukrainian and Syrian refugees

The crises in Syria and Ukraine have both produced millions of refugees of war, but evidence shows that there are inconsistencies in how refugees from these countries are treated. The mainstream media has been accused of double standards in how they report on Ukrainian refugees compared with refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): MENA refugees are dehumanised, homogenised and represented as threats to European safety and values.⁵⁵ One study found that 85 per cent of news articles about refugees from Ukraine employed a humanitarian crisis frame, compared with just 59 per cent of articles about refugees from Syria.⁵⁶ In addition, British people are more likely to help Ukrainian refugees than Syrian refugees.⁵⁷

Looking more closely at the Phase II datasets and comparing the use of the term 'Ukrainian' and 'Syrian' in the Hansard corpus, differences emerge in how these groups are represented by politicians – see Tables 7 and 8.

55 El-Nawawy, M. and Hamas Elmasry, M. (2024) 'Worthy and unworthy refugees: Framing the Ukrainian and Syrian refugee crises in elite American newspapers', *Journalism Practice*, 24 January: 1–21.

56 El-Nawawy and Hamas Elmasry, 'Worthy and unworthy refugees', 4.

57 Open University (2023) 'New research says Britons more likely to help refugees from Ukraine rather than those from Syria or Somalia', OU News, www.open.ac.uk/blogs/news/arts-social-sciences/new-research-says-britons-more-likely-to-help-refugees-from-ukraine-rather-than-those-from-syria-or-somalia.

Table 7: Top 15 word associations for 'Ukrainian' in the Hansard data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'Ukrainian'	Frequency	Score
nouns modified by X	refugee	128	9.64
nouns modified by X	household	10	9.34
nouns modified by X	ambassador	7	8.91
nouns modified by X	passport	10	8.71
X and/or ...	Russian	6	8.54
X and/or ...	Polish	5	8.44
nouns modified by X	national	16	8.29
X and/or ...	valid	5	8.17
nouns modified by X	guest	4	8.16
nouns modified by X	Diaspora	4	8.13
X and/or ...	brave	4	8.06
nouns modified by X	community	15	7.93
nouns modified by X	wife	4	7.89
nouns modified by X	club	3	7.73
nouns modified by X	friend	6	7.73

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- ((Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions)
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- ((Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse)
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

Table 8: Top 15 word associations for 'Syrian' in the Hansard data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'Syrian'	Frequency	Score
nouns modified by X	scheme	46	8.78
nouns modified by X	regime	6	8.76
X and/or ...	Eritrean	3	8.75
nouns modified by X	refugee	60	8.61
nouns modified by X	programme	7	8.6
nouns modified by X	crisis	9	8.39
X and/or ...	Christian	3	8.38
X and/or ...	vulnerable	15	8.36
X and/or ...	Lebanese	2	8.25
nouns modified by X	Kurd	2	8.22
X and/or ...	Afghan	5	8.19
X and/or ...	civil	3	7.67
nouns modified by X	war	4	7.39
subjects of 'be X'	Kurdish-led	1	7.27
X and/or ...	Yemeni	1	7.24

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- ((Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions)
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- ((Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse)
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
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The top word association for 'Ukrainian' in the Hansard data is 'refugee'. For 'Syrian', the strongest word association is 'scheme', as in the 'Syrian resettlement scheme'. Hence, when talking about Ukrainian refugees, parliamentarians are more likely to talk about people, i.e., refugees, themselves. On the other hand, when talking about Syrian refugees, parliamentarians are more likely to dehumanise the issue by talking about the government's resettlement scheme, a programme whereby refugees from Syria are resettled in the UK.

Parliamentarians are more likely to use humanising terms when talking about 'Ukrainian(s)' – terms that invoke friendly welcome, such as 'guest'; terms with positive connotations, like 'brave'; familial terms like 'wife'; and terms invoking a collective identity, like 'community' or 'diaspora'. When it comes to the use of 'Syrian', however, most terms denote a national, geographical, religious or ethnic grouping, such as 'Christian', 'Kurd', 'Yemeni' or 'Eritrean'. This tends to be in the context of phrases such as 'Syrian and/or Eritrean refugees', suggesting that the rights of Syrian refugees are discussed largely alongside the rights of other MENA refugees, who are also likely to be people of colour – ensuring a continued homogenisation of refugees of colour.

Terms that denote sympathy with Syrian refugees are present, such as 'vulnerable', but this is also a term that renders Syrian refugees passive – helpless and dependent on British goodwill – while Ukrainian refugees are represented as having agency, with adjectives like 'brave'. 'War' and 'crisis' are also terms that come up when Syrian refugees are discussed in the Hansard data but are not as dominant when discussing refugees from Ukraine. These terms have negative connotations of chaos and violence that, though potentially invoking sympathy, also associate refugees' region of origin with brutality and instability.

The understanding extended towards refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine can be taken as an example of the approach that the government *could* take towards all refugees, if it chose. The data shows how different refugee communities are represented differently, and that these differences can be linked to how groups are racialised differently, and at times opportunistically.

This case study indicates that refugees from Ukraine are more humanised than those from Syria. Alongside the figures of those resettled in the UK from the two nations (154,500 refugees from Ukraine settled between 2021 and 2023, compared with just 20,000 from Syria between 2015 and 2021⁵⁸), this suggests that refugees from Ukraine are viewed as more desirable than those from Syria, exposing how the asylum system in the UK favours refugees from parts of the world viewed as culturally and politically aligned with the UK.

58 Home Office (2023) 'Safe and legal routes', Policy Paper, 20 July, www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/safe-and-legal-routes.

Refugees and people seeking asylum: Hierarchies of exclusion

Turning to the news corpus, we find a difference in how the categories 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are talked about (Tables 9 and 10).

'Refugees' are represented in relation to where they are from, typically Ukraine but also Afghanistan and Syria. News reports discuss aspects of immigration legislation such as refugee status, refugee agencies and the Refugee Convention, to which the UK is a signatory and which contains obligations to accept refugees. There is a negative term, 'crisis', in the news data, referring to the so-called 'refugee crisis', which is used to construct the presence of refugees as a problem that must be addressed. Yet there are also positive word associations, such as 'welcome', and those that show sympathy, such as 'help':

Table 9: Top 15 words associated with 'refugee(s)' in the news data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'refugee(s)'	Frequency	Score
modifiers of X	Ukrainian	5117	10.6
nouns modified by X	camp	3734	10.2
modifiers of X	Afghan	1980	9.48
modifiers of X	Syrian	1537	9.16
nouns modified by X	status	1511	9.06
verbs with X as subject	flee	1629	9.01
nouns modified by X	crisis	1811	8.95
X and/or ...	seeker	1795	8.91
nouns modified by X	agency	1378	8.82
nouns modified by X	convention	1161	8.75
nouns modified by X	Council	1145	8.69
X and/or ...	migrant	2059	8.41
verbs with X as object	help	1209	8.3
verbs with X as object	welcome	774	8.08
... of X	number	1232	8.08

Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- ((Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
- References to in-group (us/Britain/the public)
- References to out-groups (non-British, people of colour/POC and/or ethnically minoritised identities), whether in terms of nationality, age, religion, familial relation
- ((Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

When it comes to the term 'asylum seeker', however, the word associations seem more negative overall (see Table 10).

Table 10: Top 15 words associated with 'asylum (seeker)' in the news data

Gramrel	Words associated with 'asylum (seeker)'	Frequency	Score
verbs with X as object	house	1519	10
verbs with X as object	send	1491	9.38
X to ...	Rwanda	1183	9.04
X and/or ...	refugee	1795	8.91
verbs with X as object	deport	655	8.71
verbs with X as subject	arrive	904	8.62
modifiers of X	housing	640	8.59
verbs with X as object	accommodate	445	8.41
verbs with X as object	fail	562	8.31
... of X	number	858	8.04
... of X	thousand	465	7.96
X in ...	hotel	402	7.76
modifiers of X	failed	242	7.59
modifiers of X	genuine	245	7.57
verbs with X as object	remove	300	7.56

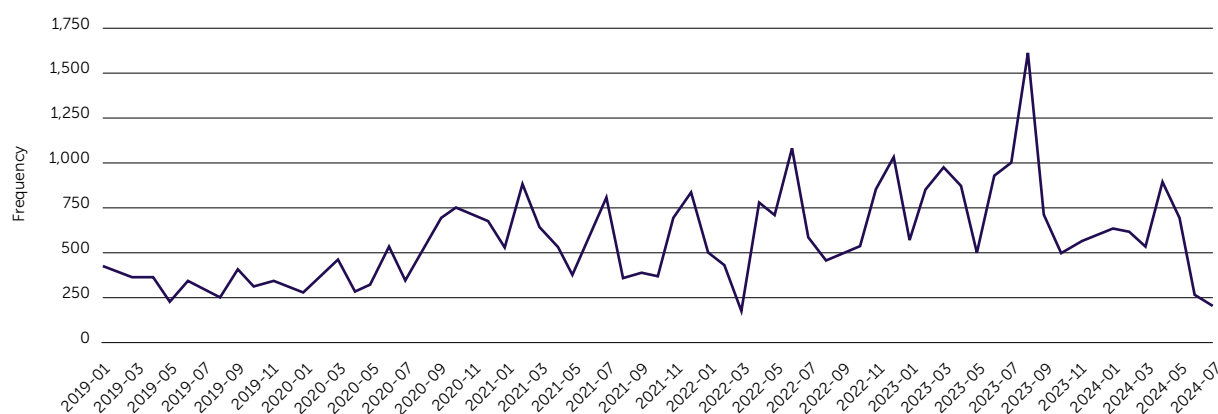
Key

- Illegality, crime and other negative terms ((im)migration as a problem and/or (im)migrants as agents of negative actions)
- References to labour market, economy, health, education sector
- References to numbers and statistics
- ((Im)migration institutions, (im)migration legislation and control actors/actions)
- Movement of people/experience of (im)migration (living abroad, moving)
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- ((Im)migrants as agents/objects/possessors of positive actions or attributes, or (im)migrants as targets/victims of abuse)
- Political parties and actors or their actions/other government institutions not exclusively tied to immigration control/law
- References to what people say/think about (im)migration and (im)migrants

Policies that are referred to the most are those seeking to 'send' people seeking asylum to 'Rwanda' and policies regarding the 'housing' and accommodation of people seeking asylum, including hotels. Terms denoting numbers are more dominant than for 'refugee(s)', and settlement seems to be a key concern. Terms such as 'deport' and 'remove' are strongly associated with 'asylum seeker(s)', and we also find a strong association with 'failed' and 'genuine' (as in the House of Commons data), creating the false dichotomy of legitimate/illegitimate, deserving/undeserving, that was materialised through the NABA (2022), which created a two-tier system of refugee protection. The focus on settlement and numbers points to anxieties over using state resources to 'house' people seeking asylum, which plays on fears of migrants 'taking' 'our' resources.

This negative representation is particularly alarming when looking at the frequency with which 'asylum seekers' were discussed in the news during our period of interest (see Figure 2).


Figure 2: Use of term 'asylum (seeker)' in the news, 2019-24




In the summer of 2024, riots broke out across the UK which saw people seeking asylum become the targets of violent attacks, including the attacking of, and even setting fire to, hotels housing people seeking asylum.⁵⁹ It is therefore important that 'asylum seekers' were discussed frequently in the news in the years and months leading up to the riots. News media coverage dehumanised people seeking asylum through statistics and numbers, and frequently discussed them in relation to where they were housed. This preoccupation with resources allocated to people seeking asylum made them seem a legitimate target for public rage, which came to a head in August 2024.

This analysis shows the emergence of different approaches to 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers': refugees are extended a degree of sympathy while people seeking asylum are not. This could be a strategy to obscure the ways that recent legislation (such as the NABA, IMA and Rwanda Act) contravenes the Refugee Convention by providing the appearance of continued concern for refugees while people seeking asylum (who have not yet been granted refugee status) become fair game for negative and demonising coverage.

59 Al Jazeera, 'Far-right rioters attack asylum-seeker hotels'.



News media coverage dehumanised people seeking asylum through statistics and numbers, and frequently discussed them in relation to where they were housed. This preoccupation with resources allocated to people seeking asylum made them seem a legitimate target for public rage, which came to a head in August 2024.



Hostile narratives at large: Extended examples

In this section, we explore in more detail specific examples of how some of the above narratives are produced in news articles and parliamentary debates from across the political spectrum.

Migrants as criminals

In the data, migrants are persistently represented as criminal, deceitful and dangerous. Their criminalisation and disparagement helps to justify hostile policies: representing migrants as criminals means that the general public are more likely to view them as less deserving of basic rights. The quote below is from the Hansard data, during a debate on the Rwanda Act (2024), and was made by a Conservative MP:

Those illegal immigrants, who are jumping the queue by going outside the rules and regulations on how they should come into our country, are making it harder and harder for people in this country. The Bill is necessary, needed and proportionate. Illegal immigrants are putting a huge strain on public services. They are putting a huge strain on the things that everyday people use: doctors, GP services, schools.⁶⁰

In this statement, the speaker creates an 'us vs them' narrative about migrants. Referring to 'Those illegal immigrants' not only makes being 'illegal' a defining characteristic of 'immigrants' but also assigns migrants (in this case, refugees crossing the Channel⁶¹) the label 'them'. This constructs them as the 'other' in relation to 'us', which is constructed through references to 'our' country. 'Our' country clearly does not belong to 'those illegal immigrants' who, it is claimed, 'are making it harder and harder for people in this country'. Despite the fact that migrants are also in this country and also have to deal with hardships relating to public services, they are represented as being the architects of the difficulties faced by the public in healthcare and education. This is not borne out by any substantial evidence but is a popular claim in both parliament and the news.⁶² With

60 Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, Volume 743: debated on Monday 18 March 2024, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-03-18/debates/CBCCA842-22CA-43F6-AE27-B635BD8D7264/SafetyOfRwanda\(AsylumAndImmigration\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-03-18/debates/CBCCA842-22CA-43F6-AE27-B635BD8D7264/SafetyOfRwanda(AsylumAndImmigration)Bill).

61 Refugee Council (2023) 'Almost three-quarters of those crossing the channel would be allowed to stay in the UK as refugees', 2 October, www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/almost-three-quarters-of-those-crossing-the-channel-would-be-allowed-to-stay-in-the-uk-as-refugees.

62 Hanefeld, J., Lunt, N. and Smith, R. (2013) 'Health tourism and the NHS: Facts or fiction?', *The Lancet* (British edition): 382(9890): e2; Horsfall, D. and Pagan, R. (2017) 'Jumping the queue? How a focus on health tourism as benefit fraud misses much of the medical tourism story', *Social Policy Review* 29: 219–242.

repetition, its truthfulness becomes less important than the fact that it is heard again and again in the same context as immigration. This makes it more likely that the public will continue to associate 'illegal' immigration with failures in public services despite the lack of evidence.

In the news and the parliamentary debates, claims about 'bogus' asylum seekers are also frequently made to justify new, ever more draconian policies. The example below is taken from a House of Commons debate on the NABA (2022) and was spoken by a Conservative MP:

By economic migrants pretending to be asylum seekers ... I am amazed to hear the Hon. Gentleman say that asylum seekers should be allowed to work. What sort of signal does that send out to legitimate migrants who have come to this country seeking to perform a role in our economy to serve this country?⁶³

Here, the claim is that 'economic migrants' (people who immigrate into a country for work and employment opportunities, often from economies destabilised by extractivist business models) are 'pretending to be asylum seekers'. Again, this is not borne out by the evidence, with the majority of asylum claims being granted.⁶⁴ The government's argument is that lifting the restrictions on the right to work for people seeking asylum would send the wrong signal to 'legitimate migrants' who come to the UK to 'serve this country' because it would be making the small boats crossing and asylum process more 'attractive' for supposed 'economic migrants'. This is built on the assumption that only those who 'contribute' to 'our economy' and who want to 'serve' us are 'legitimate migrants', whereas people seeking asylum are illegitimate, wanting to abuse the asylum system to come into the UK to take resources and work the UK public, and indeed from more 'deserving' migrants. In a wider sense, this plays on colonial narratives which represent the role of the foreign 'other' as primarily one of grateful servitude. Asylum seekers are construed not only as dishonest but also as making life harder both for the British in-group and for other migrants deemed 'legitimate' by the state, and in this way they are doubly demonised. This creates a clear division in which 'deserving' migrants are those who come on work visas via regularised routes while people seeking asylum, predominantly people of colour, are undesirable. But in either case, migrants as a whole are clearly inferior to the British in-group, whom they must 'serve' in exchange for basic rights.

Below are similar examples found in the news media in which people seeking asylum are constructed as criminal, opportunistic and fraudulent:

Many also lie about their nationality to try to secure residency rights by claiming to be refugees fleeing persecution. For example, Pakistani nationals claim to be Afghans fleeing the war while Kenyans claim to be Somalis.⁶⁵

63 Nationality and Borders Bill, Volume 712: debated on Tuesday 26 April 2022, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-04-26/debates/6254645E-540D-4C4A-921A-EED42D7517A7/NationalityAndBordersBill>.

64 Home Office, 'How many people are granted asylum?'; Migration Observatory, 'People crossing the English Channel'. Note also that after the NABA becomes law, asylum claims can be deemed inadmissible not because the person making the claim does not have a genuine need for asylum but solely because of how they have arrived in the UK.

65 Mooney, J. (2023) 'Why Ireland's asylum system is on the brink of collapse', *Sunday Times*, 21 May, www.thetimes.com/article/why-irelands-asylum-system-is-on-the-brink-of-collapse-7c5vrpmnd.

This year, 7,000 have made the treacherous cross-Channel trip. Some are genuine asylum seekers, fleeing war or persecution. But the vast majority are economic migrants, lured by the prospect of a better life and benefits.⁶⁶

We are all angry and frustrated about the boats coming across the English Channel from France full of illegal immigrants (they are not refugees fleeing war-torn lands and persecution – they are fleeing France for goodness' sake) and look forward to flights taking off to Rwanda once the House of Lords next week hopefully stops its delaying tactics.⁶⁷

This last example appears to be suggesting that 'illegal immigrants' could not possibly be refugees as they are not 'fleeing war-torn lands and persecution' but crossing the Channel from France. However, evidence shows that the vast majority making the dangerous Channel crossing are refugees.⁶⁸ Travelling through a third country is recognised as legitimate both in the Refugee Convention and in UK case law.⁶⁹ Yet the news media takes up the government line underpinning the proposed policy of sending irregularised migrants to Rwanda by making sensationalist claims about people seeking asylum being fundamentally deceitful and a threat. In the example from the *Sunday Times*, a claim that Pakistanis are pretending to be Afghan refugees and that Kenyans are pretending to be Somali refugees is made without any evidence (note, too, that Kenya and Pakistan, formerly part of India, were British colonies). This offers a clearly racialised image to the public of whom they should suspect of being 'illegal'. When combined with the implicit use of stereotypes associating people of colour with deceit, this invokes racist ideas about who 'deserves' to be allowed in the UK and who does not – ideas that align with and reinforce colonial-era racial hierarchies.⁷⁰

Another dominant narrative (especially in the news), which is tightly linked to tropes of criminality is the idea that migrants are draining the UK of its resources, in particular access to public services and benefits, via fraudulent and deceitful means and with the help of 'lefty lawyers'.

Those who do arrive know they will still be housed and fed and given access to NHS treatment if required. They also know they will be able to enter the illegal economy pretty easily.⁷¹

This plays on people's anxieties about access to healthcare and welfare and diverts attention away from government cuts and poor management onto a section of the population which has little opportunity to counter these arguments. Over the past decade and more, public services have

66 Daily Mail Comment (2020) 'Beware a winter of discontent, Boris', *Daily Mail*, 2 October.

67 Philip, E. (2024) 'Opinion polls show that immigration is the issue that most concerns people', *Express*, 13 April.

68 Refugee Council, 'Almost three-quarters'; Migration Observatory, 'People crossing the English Channel'.

69 Saenz Perez, C. (2023) 'The securitization of asylum: A review of UK asylum laws post-Brexit', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 35: 304–321, 312.

70 Refugee Action, *Asylum Justice in the UK*, 14–15.

71 Farage, N. (2021) 'Has a solution to Britain's illegal immigration problem been found at last? I have my doubts', *Telegraph*, 24 March, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/24/has-solution-britains-immigration-problem-found-last-have-doubts.

been cut through austerity measures, with sweeping cuts to education, the NHS, council housing and benefits such as Universal Credit. Yet by and large, stories in the UK news media do not focus on government decisions to cut, reduce or privatise these services. Instead they opt to represent migrants as the reason that people are struggling to access public services.

This myth that 'bogus' asylum seekers abuse the asylum system to come to the UK, effectively as benefit tourists, draws on racist stereotypes about people of colour as lazy, deceitful and fraudulent, and as 'taking over' the country and resources that should be for the benefit of UK people only. Such stereotypes compound to make the case about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants, which in turn justifies legislation such as the NABA in which only a very few people seeking asylum are viewed as 'deserving' and the majority are viewed as undeserving and criminal.

As mentioned in the review of 'hostile environment' policy from 2014 to 2018, the NHS does charge some migrants for treatment as a way of countering the supposed 'abuse' of free healthcare. However, such policies bring in next to no money for the NHS (as shown in Part II of this report). Instead, their main impact is to help to construct discriminatory immigration measures in healthcare as 'logical' responses to the so-called problem of 'health tourism'. Another related effect of such discourses is that anti-immigration voices in power can ensure that migrants can always be scapegoated for issues with the NHS.

Through arguments such as those above, migration is framed as a threat to the lives of ordinary people in the UK – people who use the NHS, state school system and council housing. The public are told that migration means the UK cannot 'build a cohesive, harmonious country' because it is causing too much 'societal change'. The idea that it is migrants who are causing disharmony and a breakdown in cohesion in UK society ignores the possibility that it may be *society's response* to migration that is causing societal breakdown and mistrust.⁷² Media claims about migrants abusing immigration and asylum systems and taking resources reinforce divisive 'us and them' narratives, undermining the potential for solidarity between migrants the general public.⁷³

Other claims about people seeking asylum being dangerous criminals use reports about apparent threats to women's rights and violence against women and girls (VAWG) to sensationalise their apparent threat to the British way of life:

Channel migrants driving prostitution and crime, warns Braverman; People coming here unlawfully have values at odds with UK, says Home Secretary as Bill is passed.⁷⁴

ISIS extremists at a Syrian refugee camp threaten to burn Australian women and children in their sleep as revenge for the evacuation of eight orphans.⁷⁵

72 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 112.

73 Bhatia, M. and Burnett, J. (2022) 'Immigration raids and racist state violence', *State Crime* 11(1): 33–51, 45.

74 Hymas, C. (2022) 'Illegal migrants fueling crime and prostitution, warns Suella Braverman', *Telegraph*, 27 April, www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/04/26/illegal-migrants-crime-prostitution-suella-braverman.

75 Poposki, C. and Mazzoni, A. (2022) 'ISIS extremists at a Syrian refugee camp threaten to burn Australian women and children in their sleep as revenge for the evacuation of eight orphans', *Mail Online*, 26 June, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7184053/ISIS-extremists-threaten-burn-alive-Australian-women-children-remaining-Syria.html.

A failed asylum seeker whose deportation was blocked when do-gooder cabin crew refused to fly him home has pleaded guilty to raping a 15-year-old girl.⁷⁶

These are just a sample of the many similar examples found in the news corpus – stories about distressing crimes that emphasise the immigration status of the perpetrator. Here, claims by the former home secretary are echoed in the *Daily Telegraph* linking 'Channel migrants' (again, a dehumanising term) with supposed increases in prostitution and crime.

There are also two examples of reports about refugees or people seeking asylum harming women and children specifically. In the report in the *Mail Online*, 'ISIS extremists' are linked to a Syrian refugee camp. The fact that women are the targets of the alleged threats is key, as it materialises for readers Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim men being 'backwards' in their approach to women and women's rights. This exploitation of alleged concern for women's safety in order to justify xenophobic and racist attitudes towards Muslim men has been labelled 'femonationalism' – where white, Western culture is represented as superior to Eastern, Islamic culture because of presumed liberalism, evidenced in apparently better conditions for women.⁷⁷ Not only does this suppress the fact that VAWG is pervasive in the UK, recently being declared a national emergency,⁷⁸ but it plays on racist assumptions of people of colour as less advanced and developed than white, Western cultures. Examples of this kind of discourse emerged recently in the resurgence of the debate on grooming gangs, with calls for a national inquiry into the issue seeing politicians linking it immigration. For example, Conservative MP Robert Jenrick posted on X that the 'scandal started with mass migration ... importing hundreds of thousands of people from alien cultures, who possess medieval attitudes towards women'.⁷⁹ With the focus on the supposed association of such gangs with Asian men, the implication of Jenrick's statement is clear – immigration from Asian countries where white, Western and Christian culture has not been dominant has led to VAWG in the UK. One of the long-term effects of such claims is that it helps to normalise VAWG by white men by making it seem as if VAWG is determined by ethnicity rather than the perpetuation of misogynist practices in society.⁸⁰

Taken together, the examples above can be seen as reflective of the 'spectacle of refugee deviancy', whereby representations in public discourse amplify refugee deviance and downplay the state's own deviance and violence directed against refugees in the form of the 'hostile environment', i.e. deviance from the Refugee Convention.⁸¹ The language used to represent migrants helps to

76 Godfrey, T. (2023) 'Saved' to rape: Failed asylum seeker whose deportation was blocked by do-gooder cabin crew pleads guilty to raping 15-year-old girl', *Sun*, 18 April, www.thesun.co.uk/news/27387451/anacet-mayela-saved-from-deportation-admits-rape.

77 Farris, S.R. (2017) *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

78 Dodd, V. (2024) 'Violence against women and girls a 'national emergency' in England and Wales, police say', *Guardian*, 23 July, www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/July/23/violence-against-women-national-emergency-england-wales-police.

79 Mitchell, A., Cooke, M. and Maddox, D. (2025) 'Badenoch urged to sack Jenrick for saying "immigrants from alien cultures have medieval attitudes towards women"', *Independent*, 8 January, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jenrick-grooming-gangs-badenoch-immigration-b2675049.html.

80 Montiel-McCann, C.S. (forthcoming) *Language, Politics and New Constructions of Hegemonic Femininity in the British Broadsheet Press*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

81 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 5.

legitimise the violent intent of the state against irregularised migrants and people seeking asylum. News media outlets appear to pick up the government line coming from parliamentary debate to provide instructions on who is to blame for public service cuts. Racialised images and stereotypes are used to align these groups with deception and criminality and, consequently, disguise the reality of immigration control (which *creates* illegality) with lies, concealment and euphemism.⁸² Hence, discourses of deviancy are a way to legitimise policy and are constantly repeated to justify repressive and aggressive state responses.⁸³

82 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 5.

83 Bhatia and Lentin, 'Migration and racist state violence', 6.

The numbers game (continued)

In the Phase I report, we found that talking about immigration in terms of numbers and statistics was a way to abstract away from the fact that 'hostile environment' policies ultimately affect human beings, and mostly people of colour. In this Phase II study, the use of terms related to numbers ('thousands', 'net', 'more') continues to dominate discussions of migration in the Hansard and news data. As argued in Phase I, 'By recurrently presenting migrants in terms of large numbers and as an ever-growing crowd, the sense of magnitude is over-inflated. In this light, any actions to "reduce" or "shrink" the number of people in this group of "others" can be more readily presented as the "natural" or "logical" course of action.'⁸⁴

Below are quotes from two House of Commons debates, the first spoken by then leader of the opposition Keir Starmer, the second by the then shadow home secretary, now home secretary, Yvette Cooper:

Over 40,000 people have crossed the Channel this year – that is a record – but only 2 per cent have had their asylum claim processed. What happens to the other 98 per cent? They are placed in hotels, costing around £7 million a day.⁸⁵

Four years ago, the Cabinet said that they would halve Channel crossings; they have gone up twentyfold since then. A year ago, they said they would end hotel use; they have opened more than ever. They keep making new announcements, but it just keeps getting worse.⁸⁶

In both speeches, figures and statistics are used to refer to migrants. In the first quote, it is claimed that 40,000 people have crossed the Channel and only 2 per cent have had their claims processed. In the second quote, it is claimed that Channel crossings have increased 'twentyfold'. These numbers are not compared with anything, such as the number of refugees entering other countries, which makes it easy to view them as excessive. When starting from a presumption that immigration is bad, any number is going to be viewed negatively, and so statements about a 'twentyfold' increase are always going to look as if immigration is out of control. This then justifies any steps to stop or reduce it.

Both statements also reference the use of hotels to house people seeking asylum. This focus, alongside figures such as '£7 million', associates people seeking asylum with a drain on 'our' resources. Hence, the main party in opposition at the time of these quotes was providing no meaningful challenge to the 'hostile environment' approach to immigration but in fact was taking up the same logic and criticising the government for not being *more* effective at reducing the numbers. This has been borne out by Labour's actions since coming to power, with the BSAI Bill being condemned by Amnesty International for continuing to produce harmful and hostile attitudes

⁸⁴ Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, *A Hostile Environment*, 43.

⁸⁵ Illegal Immigration, Volume 724: debated on Tuesday 13 December 2022, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-12-13/debates/DB61C374-16B5-411C-9A29-CC3DCA119EB3/IllegalImmigration>.

⁸⁶ Illegal Migration Update, Volume 730: debated Wednesday 29 March 2023, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-03-29/debates/5C905292-65BA-4B59-9AB9-D41F52605895/IllegalMigrationUpdate>.

towards refugees and asylum seekers that are dismissive of their rights.⁸⁷ This shows that anti-immigration politics has become the norm in UK politics, assuming an almost common-sense position that drowns out much of the humanitarian, rights- and evidence-based resistance to hostile immigration legislation.

Below, examples from the news media show how embedded the numbers game has become in the way that immigration is reported on:

Britain's Press Association news agency calculates that more than 7,400 migrants have crossed the Channel to the UK by boat so far this year, up from about 1,800 in all of 2019.⁸⁸

Almost 9,000 migrants have crossed the English Channel in small boats so far this year – more than the total for 2020 – and almost 400 asylum seekers were detained by British authorities on Sunday alone.⁸⁹

Detached from and careless of the concerns of Britons about the unprecedented numbers of illegal immigrants crossing the Channel, claiming to be fleeing persecution and so seeking asylum here, they have done all they can to stymie the Government's proper efforts to stop the boats.⁹⁰

It should be remembered that nothing in principle prevents news articles from talking about the universality of the right to seek asylum, or about the plans that people making these journeys have for their futures. Instead, they seem to recursively emphasise numbers (rather than the people themselves), talking of thousands and hundreds, or making vague allusions to 'unprecedented numbers', leading readers to fill in the gaps with their own assumptions about how many this represents. This runs the risk of fuelling the belief that the UK is being overwhelmed by people seeking asylum, who are (as shown again in the last quote) persistently represented as deceitful and bogus.

Despite these claims by the news media and politicians, in reality a very small number of the world's refugees come to the UK, and most who do are forced into destitution. It is well established that the majority of refugees stay close to their home country, with the world's largest refugee populations being in Turkey (3.5 million), followed by Uganda and Pakistan (1.4 million each).⁹¹ Of the smaller number that come to Europe, an even smaller number come to the UK.

87 Amnesty International UK (2025) 'Refugee and migrant rights: Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill', briefing, 5 February, www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2025-02/Border%20Security%20Asylum%20and%20Immigration%20Bill.pdf?VersionId=eHmcDNY0RF3891Tf_Frar20AkI27I2Vy.

88 *Independent* (2020) 'France calls off search after capsized in Channel kills 4', 28 October, www.independent.co.uk/news/france-calls-off-search-after-capsized-in-channel-kills-4-french-hope-english-channel-survivors-boats-b1395045.html.

89 Dearden, L. (2021) 'Thousands of asylum seekers waiting to cross English Channel amid record small boat arrivals', *Independent*, 26 July, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/channel-crossings-record-migrants-boats-france-b1890842.html.

90 Knowles, M. (2024) 'This latest 'bonkers' ruling from the ECHR shows why we must leave, Tory MPs declare', *Express Online*, 10 April, www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1886857/Rishi-Sunak-ECHR-Rwanda-climate.

91 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 127.

'Stop the boats'

One stark example of the partnership between parliament and the news media in framing public perceptions of immigration in the UK can be found in connection with the 'stop the boats' political slogan. The explicit use of this slogan by rioters in the summer of 2024 on banners and in chants demonstrates that the hostile language we have identified in our analysis has emboldened sectors of the UK public to engage in racist violence, aimed particularly at people seeking asylum but also other minoritised groups (specifically Muslim communities and Roma and Traveller communities) and at people of colour in general.⁹²

Throughout the 2019–24 period, news articles and political debates disseminating this kind of narrative come out in fairly close alignment with each other, both reaching their peak in 2023 and declining slightly into 2024, but with still very high levels of usage in both contexts. Figures 3 and 4 represent the use of 'stop the boats' throughout our time period in the news and in Hansard.

Figure 3: Frequency of occurrence of the phrase 'stop the boats' in news media 2019–24

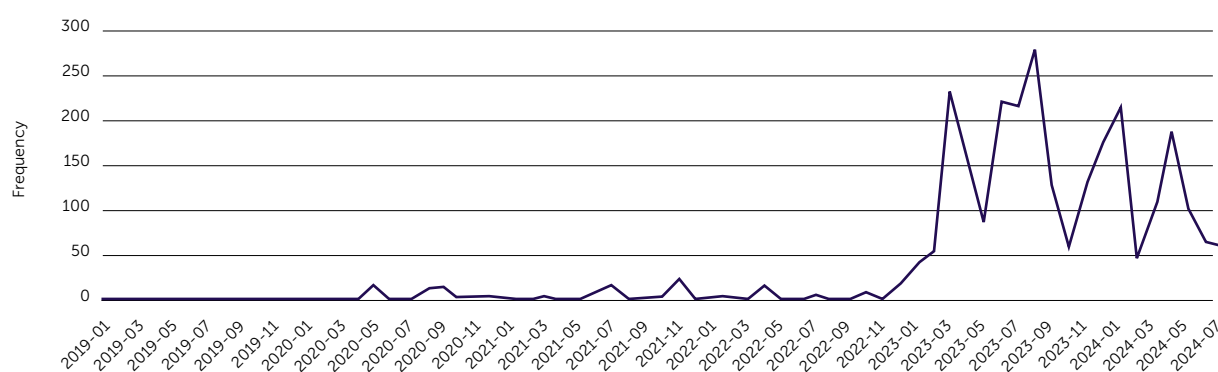
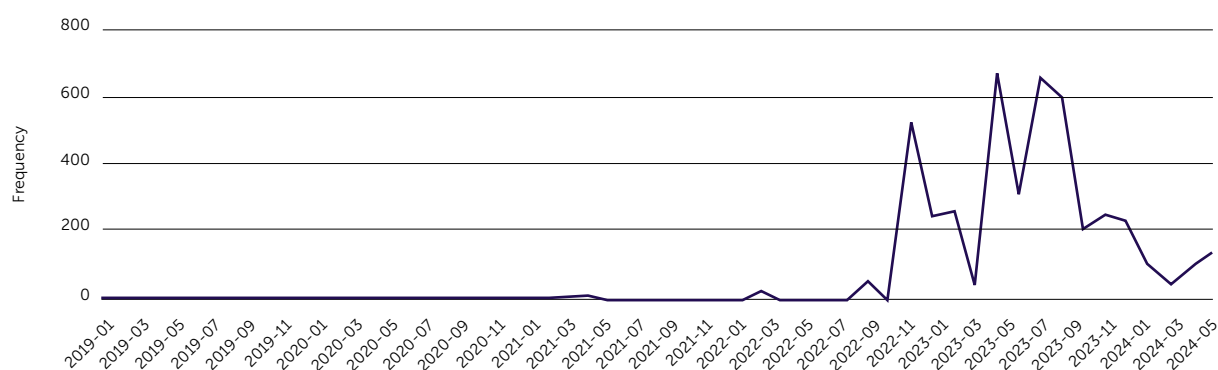


Figure 4: Frequency of occurrence of the phrase 'stop the boats' in parliamentary debates, 2019–24



92 Horwood, C. (2024) 'Fake news-driven anti-migrant riots and protests in the UK', Mixed Migration Centre, 3 October, <https://mixedmigration.org/fake-news-populist-violence-uk-anti-migrant-riots>.

One of the most notable findings here is that the slogan seems to have appeared in the news first on 31 August 2019, in a press statement by then home secretary Priti Patel following a meeting with French authorities:

It's vital we ensure our collective expertise is used to stop the boats from leaving French shores and dismantle the criminal networks driving this activity.⁹³

That said, the phrase does not become a staple feature of narratives of immigration in the UK until early 2023. From this point, its use continues to increase until it becomes the go-to slogan of the racist riots.

Below are some examples of the phrase being repeated in news articles in the months just before the 2024 racist riots:

The UK was one of the drafting states of the European Convention and we have a proud record of defending human rights. We have worked carefully to ensure our plan to secure our borders and stop the boats is compliant with our international obligations. We are a decent, reasonable country, trying to do a reasonable thing to protect ourselves from criminals breaking into Britain.⁹⁴

The numbers coming across the Channel will rise. There will be continued loss of life in the Channel and there will continue to be imported into the UK criminal, or worse, terrorist elements. In failing to stop the boats, loss of life and criminality will increase. Civil society in the UK will suffer. Our social and cultural fabric will continue to be ripped apart.⁹⁵

The first excerpt perpetuates a common portrayal of migration which frames UK society as inherently tolerant, with migrants forcing the country to become less so.⁹⁶ The invocation of reason (being a 'decent, reasonable country' doing the 'reasonable thing') represents the UK as a beacon of human rights, as a nation that upholds its international obligations. Yet this reputation is simultaneously invoked to justify denying these very rights and obligations through immigration legislation that breaches the European Convention of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention. The argument seems to be that because the UK has at one time or another shown some respect for human rights and international obligations, it is also allowed to breach them at will.

93 Home Office, Border Control and the Rt Hon Priti Patel MP (2019) 'Britain and France to strengthen joint action against small boats', 30 August, www.gov.uk/government/news/britain-and-france-to-strengthen-joint-action-against-small-boats.

94 Williamson, D. (2024) 'Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer go head to head for Express as rivals answer your questions', *Express Online*, 29 June, www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1916718/rishi-sunak-keir-starmer-questions-express-general-election.

95 Habib, B. (2024) 'Keir Starmer will bring down Britain with unchecked mass migration', *Express*, 10 May, www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/1897708/keir-starmer-britain-mass-migration.

96 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 113–114.

Here, arguments of 'British decency' and apparent inherent rationality are used to justify 'securing our borders' against 'criminals breaking into Britain'. As the UK is framed as a humanitarian, enlightened nation, migrants are simultaneously framed as criminal, reinforcing notions of British superiority.⁹⁷ In this case, however, the UK must protect itself and its values from 'criminals' coming *in* by maintaining separation through border security, rather than exercising a civilising mission in going *out* and colonising other nations. Likewise, in the second quote above, Channel crossings are represented as a threat because they allegedly 'import' criminals and 'terrorist elements'. The presence of migrants to the UK is framed as 'ripping apart' the 'social and cultural fabric' of the nation. These kinds of representations serve to sustain the idea that migrant communities, including those seeking asylum, are criminal by default, harmful to UK society and antithetical to 'British' values of 'decency' and 'reason'.

The invocation of terrorism to justify the 'securitisation' of immigration is nothing new. For example, New Labour introduced the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act in 2001, part 4 of which is entitled 'Immigration and Asylum', framing the management of immigration as an important element in the fight against terrorism.⁹⁸ Likewise, the current Labour government's BSAI Bill frames immigration as a national security issue and uses counter-terrorism-style laws to police it. The spectre of terrorism provides the ultimate image of a threat to the nation, and consequently it is used to justify aggressive immigration policy that aims to block certain migrants (in this case, people seeking asylum travelling on small boats) from coming to the UK, just as it is used to justify intrusive policies such as Prevent, which target specific groups within the UK who are framed as having values antithetical to 'British' values. The invocation of terrorism is a securitising tool that works to frame certain groups (in particular, people of colour and Muslim people) as 'other' or opposed to Western (i.e. British) values and hence as a threat to 'community cohesion' and national security.⁹⁹ This then works to justify the policing of such groups either through immigration control and border security, or through domestic policing practices such as surveillance.

As can be seen from Figure 4, the phrase 'stop the boats' begins to appear more and more frequently in parliamentary debates from 2023 onwards, peaking in the autumn of 2023 before dropping off slightly by the start of 2024, but still remaining in public discourse (as in the news). Below are some examples of how this phrase was used in the Commons:

Our first duty is to break the business model of the people-smuggling gangs, stop the boats and reduce the number of those coming to this country illegally. Alongside that, we are working to ensure that decent but not luxurious accommodation is available while asylum claims are being processed.¹⁰⁰

97 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 113.

98 Spencer, A. (2008) 'Linking immigrants to terrorists: The use of immigration as an anti-terror policy', *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 8(1): 4.

99 Alam, Y. and Husband, C. (2013) 'Islamophobia, community cohesion and counter-terrorism policies in Britain', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 47(3): 235–252, 245; Spencer, 'Linking immigrants to terrorists', 10.

100 Refugees: Accommodation, Volume 727: debated on Monday 6 February 2023, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-02-06/debates/3E8B497A-D617-4BA0-BEC2-C0D73714EB82/RefugeesAccommodation>.

[Labour] have failed to stand up for the British people and failed to support our measures to stop the boats. All they want is open borders and unlimited migration.¹⁰¹

Labour's plan will strengthen our border security and smash the criminal gang networks and their supply chains with new powers and a new cross-border police unit, so that we stop the boats reaching the French coast in the first place. We will clear the backlog with new fast-track systems, end hotel use – saving the taxpayer more than £2 billion – and improve enforcement with a new returns and enforcement unit to reverse the collapse in returns for those who have no right to be here.¹⁰²

The quotes above illustrate how this slogan eventually became a major campaigning tool in the House of Commons. The first quote is taken from a speech given by the then minister for immigration in a debate on accommodation for refugees. The use of the term 'duty' legitimises the government's intense focus on small boats at this time and its further use of numbers to dehumanise the issue. The myth reinforced in this quote that people seeking asylum are housed at taxpayers' expense in luxury hotels is a strategy used to bolster claims that migrants are taking advantage of the UK immigration system to receive favourable treatment, which itself ties in to discourses representing migrant communities as fraudulent and deceitful and as enemies of 'the British people'. In fact, the appalling conditions of asylum accommodation, whether in communities or warehoused in designated 'centres' such as RAF Wethersfield, are well documented.¹⁰³

The reality of asylum accommodation

While they have their claims processed, people seeking asylum are forced into destitution, forbidden from working or finding their own accommodation, and instead provided with a meagre allowance of just £49.18 a week, or just over £7 a day, to survive.¹⁰⁴ People seeking asylum are typically first placed in one of seven initial accommodation centre hostels or private hostels, and then moved on to dispersal accommodation, usually in houses of multiple occupation and with no consideration of community or familial bonds.

101 Illegal Migration Bill: Asylum Seekers, Volume 730: debated on Monday 20 March 2023, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-03-20/debates/7AD0FDDC-D3DE-4A8A-A2A2-DA685BF500C2/IllegalMigrationBillAsylumSeekers>.

102 Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, Volume 743: debated on Tuesday 16 January 2024, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-01-16/debates/6EF16CCA-91F1-469C-BC41-1D01B1FD888D/SafetyOfRwanda\(AsylumAndImmigration\)Bill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-01-16/debates/6EF16CCA-91F1-469C-BC41-1D01B1FD888D/SafetyOfRwanda(AsylumAndImmigration)Bill).

103 Kapoor, A., Hood, S. and Marwood, H. (2024) *Racial Segregation and the Asylum System: The Case of RAF Wethersfield*, London: Runnymede Trust and Care4Calais, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/racial-segregation-and-the-asylum-system-the-case-of-raf-wethersfield; Refugee Action (2023) *Hostile Accommodation: How the Asylum Housing System Is Cruel by Design*, London, www.refugee-action.org.uk/hostile-accommodation; Migrant Voice (2017) *A Report on Housing Conditions for Asylum Seekers in Birmingham and the West Midlands*, Birmingham, www.migrantvoice.org/img/upload/4_Asyum-Housing-in-Birmingham-January_2017_.pdf.

104 Gov.uk (no date) 'Asylum support', www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get.

In the second quote, from a speech given by then home secretary, the phrase is used to attack the Labour Party, which is accused of 'failing' to 'stop the boats' and so 'to stand up for the British people'. Of course, at this time Labour had not been the party of government for 14 years. But the argument that Labour is 'soft' on immigration is a common one and has been successfully used to force Labour to respond defensively by showing that it, too, is tough on immigration.¹⁰⁵ This is shown by the final quote above, from a Labour MP, in a debate on the Rwanda Act. Here, it is Labour that claims it will be the party to 'stop the boats' and 'end hotel use'. Again, the focus is placed on the taxpayer, implying that it is costing the UK public too much to house people seeking asylum, lending weight to the argument that the UK that people seeking asylum are a 'burden'.

The slogan, then, crosses political divides to normalise the shift away from inclusion, humanity and dignity when it comes to immigration and into ever more draconian, violent and inhumane immigration legislation, with both main parties competing to outdo one another in this regard.

The persistent use of the slogan 'stop the boats' in the ways described above has important implications for relationships between communities and levels of violence towards people of colour, which, though recurrently present in society, reached boiling point during the riots. At the same time, representing the journey of people via an objectifying term like 'boats' and the imperative to 'stop them' enables policymakers to ignore universal humanitarian principles and the human impact of their policies. Rather than protecting people seeking asylum, the measures taken to 'stop the boats' criminalise and disadvantage them by rendering applications from anyone who makes the Channel crossing inadmissible while refusing to establish any more safe routes that could ultimately disrupt the business model of smugglers. By placing 'stop the boats' at the heart of immigration debate at this time, the government could more readily make the claim that legislation such as the IMA was designed to protect people seeking asylum, even when an important underlying aim that is seldom considered is that of preventing these communities, many of whom would be racialised and othered in the UK, from settling in the UK.

¹⁰⁵ Watt, N. and Wintour, P. (2015) 'How immigration came to haunt Labour: The inside story', *Guardian*, 24 March, www.theguardian.com/news/2015/March/24/how-immigration-came-to-haunt-labour-inside-story.

Part II: **Life in the 'hostile environment'**



The racial discrimination identified in the Phase I report, particularly in relation to the policy of deputation, is not the result of a lapse in procedure; it is not spectacular or unusual but in fact strategic, functional, mundane and operating with a 'cruel rationality'.¹⁰⁶ The UK immigration system has long served the purpose of dividing migrants, granting some status and rights while others are persecuted as 'illegals', with the scope of illegality or lack of citizenship defined on racial and ethnic grounds.¹⁰⁷ Below, we explore how immigration policy works via apparatuses of the state and deputation, looking at detention and deportation, NHS charging, and the use of surveillance and data-sharing arrangements to control and limit migrant populations.

106 Bhatia and Burnett, 'Immigration raids', 44.

107 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 55; Home Office, *HRWS*.

Detention and deportation

Perhaps the clearest state intervention in immigration in the UK is the detention and deportation of migrants who are deemed to be in the country 'illegally'. This increasingly targets people seeking asylum who have had their claims denied, with 'detain' and 'remove' in the top 15 word associations for the term 'asylum seeker(s)' in our news data. Migrants who are deemed 'illegal' are held in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) while the government tries to deport them. Despite government claims that this does not constitute detention, these are 'detention-like settings' that isolate irregularised migrants from wider society in conditions that are well documented for their squalor, lack of safeguarding and intimidation.¹⁰⁸

To show how detention and deportation are used by the state, and whether they target particular groups, we analysed immigration returns and detention figures from 2019 to 2024.¹⁰⁹ Table 11 shows the nationalities most commonly held in immigration detention in this period.

108 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 90; Kapoor et al., *Racial Segregation*; Johnson, D. and Littlewood, A. (2024) 'Bibby Stockholm: Others may harm themselves, says dead man's roommate', BBC News, 10 January, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67927647.

109 Home Office (2024) 'Detention summary tables, year ending September 2024', 28 November, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#detention; Home Office (2024) 'Detention summary: Previous data tables', November, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/detention-summary-previous-data-tables; Home Office (2024) 'Returns summary tables, year ending September 2024', 28 November, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#detention; Home Office (2024) 'Returns summary: Previous data tables', 28 November, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/returns-summary-previous-data-tables.

Table 11: Top 14 nationalities held in immigration detention, 2019-24**Key**

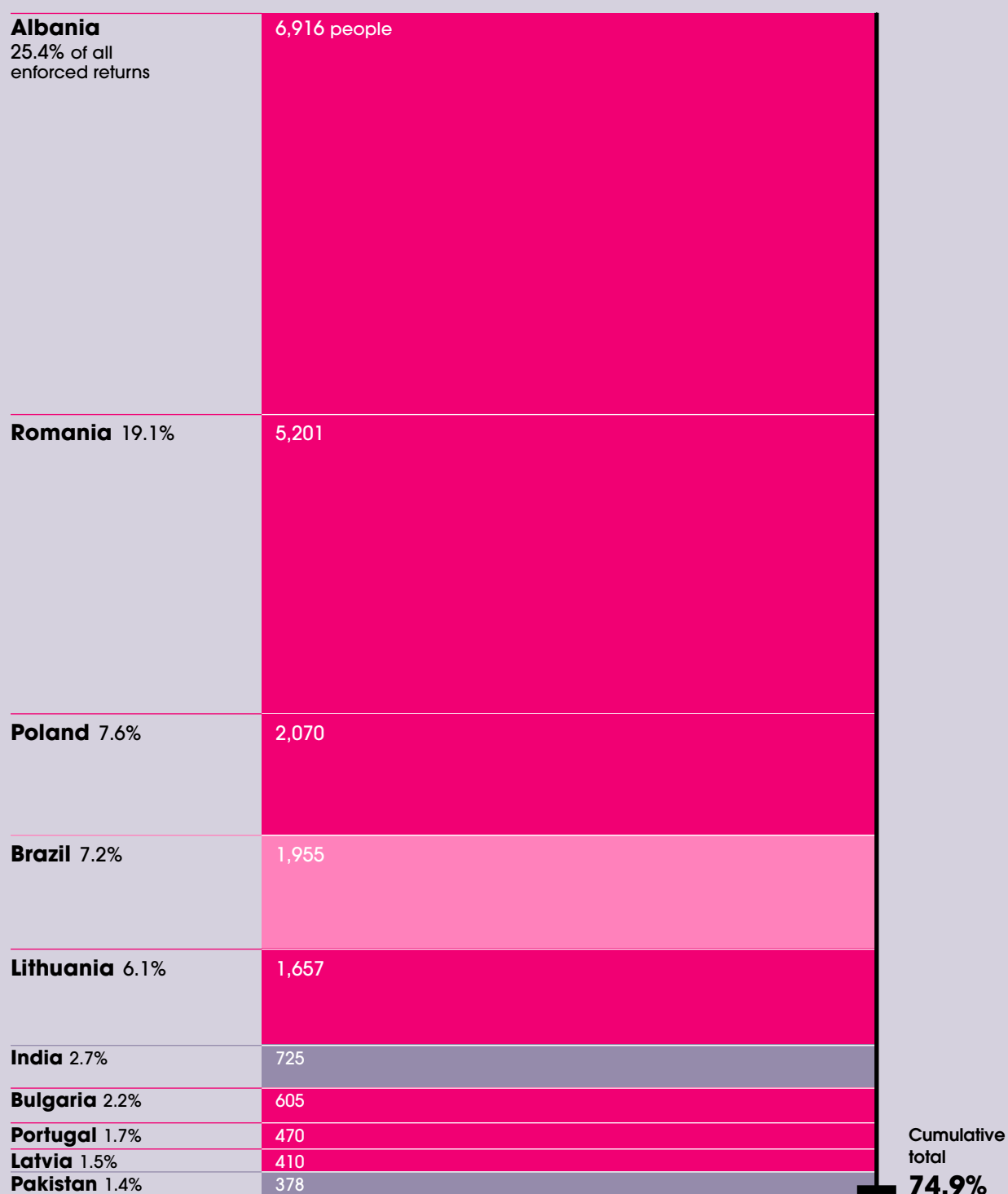
Europe	Central Asia	South America
Middle East	South Asia	North America
African	East and South East Asia	

The top nationalities in detention in this period were Albanians, Iranian and Romanians, followed by Iraqis, Indians and Brazilians, together making up over half of all immigration detainees in our period of interest. Indeed, of all the top 15 nationalities in detention, making up three quarters of all immigration detainees, most are from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. People from Albania make up nearly a quarter of all people in detention but made up only 16 per cent of asylum applications in 2022 and under 2 per cent of small boat (i.e. 'irregular') arrivals in 2024.¹¹⁰ People from Iran, Iraq and Brazil are among the top nationalities in detention but were not in the top five non-EU+ nationalities arriving to the UK in 2024.¹¹¹

Table 12 shows the top ten nationalities for enforced returns (i.e., deportation) during this period.

110 Walsh, P.W. and Oriishi, K. (2023) 'Albanian asylum seekers in the UK and the EU: A look at recent data', Migration Observatory, 27 April, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/albanian-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk-and-eu-a-look-at-recent-data>; Home Office (2025) 'Irregular migration summary: Previous data tables', www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/irregular-migration-detailed-dataset-and-summary-tables#detailed-datasets.

111 ONS (2024) 'Long-term international migration, provisional: Year ending June 2024', 28 November, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2024#:~:text=of%20their%20courses.,Long%2Dterm%20immigration,reasons%20in%20YE%20June%202024.

Table 12: Top ten nationalities among forced returns, 2019-24**Key**

Europe	Central Asia	South America
Middle East	South Asia	North America
African	East and South East Asia	

As Table 12 shows, people from Albania, Romania and Poland made up over half of all enforced returns during this period. Again, there is over-representation here, as people from Romania make up just 5.2 per cent of the migrant population in the UK but 19.1 per cent of all enforced returns.¹¹² Brazil is also over-represented, again being in the top five nations for enforced returns but not in the top five nationalities arriving to the UK: neither Brazil nor Albania are in the top ten nations of origin for migrants in the country, according to the 2021 Census.¹¹³ All of the nationalities in the top ten for enforced returns are Eastern European, South American (Brazilian) or South Asian (Indian and Pakistani). This makes up nearly three quarters (74.9 per cent) of all deportations from 2019 to 2024.

Table 13 shows the top 20 nationalities from 2019 to 2024 in terms of voluntary returns, where people with irregularised immigration status choose to return to their country of origin – which is the stated aim of the 'hostile environment'.

112 Migration Observatory (2023) 'Migrants in the UK: An overview', 9 August, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview>.

113 Migration Observatory, 'Migrants in the UK'; ONS (2022) 'International migration England and Wales: Census 2021', 2 November, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/internationalmigrationenglandandwales/census2021#country-of-birth.

Table 13: Top 20 nationalities among voluntary returns, 2019-24**Key**

Europe	Central Asia	South America
Middle East	South Asia	North America
African	East and South East Asia	

The top nationality returning voluntarily in this period was Indian, followed by Albanian, Brazilian and Chinese, together making up nearly half (48 per cent) of all voluntary returns. Again, Albania and Brazil are over-represented, as are people from India, who make up 19.5 per cent of voluntary returns but just 9 per cent of the migrant population.¹¹⁴ People from China are also not in the top ten nationalities of origin for migrants in the UK, according to the 2021 Census, but place fourth for voluntary returns.¹¹⁵ The top nationalities making up three quarters of all voluntary returns (76 per cent) come from a broad spread of regions: Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America, along with the USA, which places eighth and makes up 1.8 per cent of all voluntary returns.

This analysis suggests that deportation (enforced returns) overwhelmingly impact migrants from Europe, but specifically *Eastern* Europe. The largest group among voluntary returns, on the other hand, are migrants from South Asia, where Britain had a significant colonial role, with people from India disproportionately affected. In terms of detention, again people from Eastern Europe are most impacted. On the whole, in detention and all forms of returns, the nationalities most represented are from areas in the world where the majority of the population are not white, or where they are white but specifically Eastern European white, with an over-representation of Albania in the detentions and returns system in particular.

This shows several things. First, the policing of the 'hostile environment' is targeted at people from countries with populations that are largely ethnically minoritised in the UK. Though it could be argued that this is because there are more so-called illegal entries or overstayers among people from these nations, it should be noted (as stated in the *HRWS* report) that immigration law in the UK has been designed to most exclude these groups, with migrants from white-settler nations such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and migrants from Western Europe having more legal routes to immigrate to the UK. Immigration policy has long been designed to keep out people of colour and ethnically minoritised people and to accept and include white migrants of Western European descent, all in all upholding the racial hierarchies of the colonial era.

¹¹⁴ Migration Observatory, 'Migrants in the UK'.

¹¹⁵ ONS, 'International migration'.

NHS charging

When it comes to the impacts of immigration policy, the 'hostile environment' expansion of deputationisation means that irregularised migrants face discrimination and suffering beyond the detention and returns system, in every aspect of their day-to-day lives, including healthcare.

A study on who was charged as an 'Overseas Visitor' within the NHS from 2016 to 2018 collected 13,484 items of anonymous patient data from 64 NHS Trusts in England, comprising data from a total of 9,953 patients. The largest number of invoices for treatment were received by patients from Nigeria (1,436), India (1,170), the USA (729), Pakistan (606), China (410), Ghana (235) and Canada (206), while 797 patients had their nationality recorded as 'unknown/other/not stated'. Patients from North America – i.e. the white-settler ex-colonies of the USA and Canada – were charged significantly less than those from other continents. This indicates that not only is the charge for 'Overseas Visitors' directed more at people from countries with large populations of people of colour but people from these nations are likely to be charged more than those from Western nations. Explicit ethnicity data was provided to the researchers by only 12 Trusts. Of those covered by this data, the largest patient ethnic group subject to charging was 'Any other ethnic group' (with 1,234 patients) and the next was 'Mixed ethnic/Multi-ethnic', with the largest subgroup being 'White/Black African'.¹¹⁶ Without all ethnicity data from all Trusts, or even a majority of Trusts, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the overall impact that charging has on people from ethnically minoritised groups, but the data that was collected suggests that charging seems to largely affect people of colour and ethnically minoritised people.

The Runnymede Trust attempted to replicate this study by sending Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 201 NHS England Trusts, 5 NHS Trusts in Northern Ireland, 14 Health Boards in Scotland and 8 in Wales.¹¹⁷ Information was requested on the number of people charged for healthcare as 'Overseas Visitors' and the amount they were charged, along with the nationality and ethnicity of the patients charged, from 1 January 2019 to 1 January 2024. There were similar issues as with the study cited above, with 85 Trusts coming back with no data. Of these, 25 Trusts/Health Boards stated that they did not hold this data centrally, 32 reported that they had no Overseas Visitors during this period, 25 stated that they did not charge for healthcare, and 3 stated that they could not provide us with the information due to the small number of patients who were charged during the time period.

¹¹⁶ Dobbin, J., Milner, A., Dobbin, A. and Potter, J. (2020) 'Charging of overseas visitors in England and universal health coverage: A cross-sectional analysis of NHS Trusts', *Journal of Public Health* 44(1): 68–75, 69–70.

¹¹⁷ Checking immigration status of patients is mandatory only in hospitals in England, but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own guidance, with charging on the NHS first legislated in 1982.

Of the 97 Trusts and Health Boards that did come back with some information,¹¹⁸ what they provided was very mixed. In terms of nationality, data was analysed from 58 NHS Trusts and Health Boards (5 in Scotland, 1 in Wales and 52 in England) that listed a total of 180 nationalities among those charged for healthcare during the period. The nationalities that received the most invoices for treatment were 'Unknown' (900), Indian (427), Nigerian (248), US (218) and Bulgarian (215). The nationalities that were charged the most for treatment on the NHS were 'Unknown', Nigerian, Indian, US, Albanian, Pakistani, Ghanaian, Chinese, Polish and Romanian. Of course, we cannot draw conclusions about ethnicity based on nationality alone. However, this analysis does show that people who are charged for healthcare as an 'Overseas Visitor' and list their nationality as 'Nigerian' were charged, on average, over 220 per cent more than those whose nationality is listed as 'Unknown' and 245 per cent more than those whose nationality is listed as 'US'. Those whose nationality is listed as 'Polish' were charged over 90 per cent more on average than those whose nationality is listed as 'Unknown' and more than double what those who list their nationality as 'US' were charged. In fact, people who list their nationality as 'Nigerian' were charged the most by far, followed by people who list their nationality as 'Polish', then those who list it as 'Ghanaian', 'Albanian' and 'Unknown'. This confirms the findings of the above study that patients from white-settler ex-colonies are charged less for healthcare than those from 'New Commonwealth' ex-colonies and Eastern Europe.

When it comes to ethnicity, there is much less data to work with, as only 26 Trusts (all in England) came back with any ethnicity data; 57 Trusts/Health Boards stated that they did not record ethnicity data for 'Overseas Visitors'. Of those that did provide ethnicity data, the format of this data varied. After extensive analysis of a large volume of differently formatted data, only 13 NHS England Trusts provided ethnicity data that could be analysed, similar to the study cited above. Until the NHS makes it mandatory for all Trusts and Health Boards to record ethnicity information for visitors subject to charges (see Recommendations), a comprehensive equality analysis of the impact of this aspect of the UK's immigration policy cannot be done.

In the analysis of data from the 13 NHS Trusts in England that did provide useable information, however, it was found that the ethnicity groups with the highest volume of patients charged in the period 2019–24 were 'Not Stated', followed by 'Any other White background', 'Any other ethnic group', 'White British' and 'Asian/British Asian – Indian'. But when we look in more detail at the limited data available, it becomes apparent that the ethnicity groups that are charged the most on average *per patient* are 'Mixed – White/Black African', 'Asian/British Asian – Indian' and 'Black/Black British – African'. So, despite not representing the largest number of patients charged overall, these ethnic groups appear to be charged more on average per person. This may be for several reasons other than racial bias, such as the type of treatment required. However, it is important to remember that racial health disparities are well documented.¹¹⁹ Consequently, it is reasonable to think that any policy that charges for healthcare may have disproportionate impacts on people of colour.

¹¹⁸ The remaining Trusts/Health Boards did not get back to us before the data collection period ended.

¹¹⁹ Nazroo, J. (2022), 'Race/ethnic inequalities in health: Moving beyond confusion to focus on fundamental causes', IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, London: IFS (Institute of Fiscal Studies), 3, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Race-health-inequalities-final-IFS-Deaton-Review-Inequality.pdf>; Raleigh, V. (2023) 'The health of people from ethnic minority groups in England', The King's Fund, 17 May, www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/long-reads/health-people-ethnic-minority-groups-england; see also Walcott, S. and Nightingale, G. (2025) *How Racism Affects Health*, London: Runnymede Trust and the Health Foundation, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/how-racism-affects-health.

Finally, where the most data was made available was for the amounts charged to 'Overseas Visitors'. Of the 78 Trusts in England who provided this information, the total invoiced for this period was £171,514,284 – that is, on average, £34,302,857 a year being made by these Trusts as a result of charging some migrants for healthcare. Looking at this in the context of NHS England's annual resource budget (£168.8 billion¹²⁰ in 2023–24) and taking into account that there are 215 NHS Trusts in England, the amount raised by these 78 Trusts from charging 'Overseas Visitors' is an average of just 0.06 per cent of the NHS England budget annually. Similarly, for Scotland, seven Health Boards provided data on charges to 'Overseas Visitors' and this amounted to, on average, 0.01 per cent of the annual NHS budget for Scotland. Four NHS Trusts in Northern Ireland provided invoice data, amounting to, on average, 0.29 per cent of the annual NHS budget for Northern Ireland. Lastly, six Health Boards in Wales provided invoice data, amounting to 0.3 per cent of the annual budget for the NHS in Wales.

In short, this analysis shows that charging migrants for healthcare brings the NHS a paltry sum of money overall compared with its annual resource budget. In addition, there is as yet no analysis of the amount that charging patients actually costs the NHS in terms of chasing payments, extra time spent checking immigration status, and the costs that may be created by migrants avoiding healthcare for fear of being charged, only to require treatment for longer-term, more serious illnesses later on. Moreover, this study analyses only the invoices given to patients eligible for charging, which may not reflect the actual amount that the NHS receives: the true figures are likely to be even lower.

The analysis in the previous section showed that news reports and politicians in the House of Commons frequently make claims that migrants are abusing the NHS, and these arguments have been touted as justification for the policy of charging some migrants for healthcare. Yet, the study of data from NHS Trusts and Health Boards from 2019 to 2024 debunks any claim that charging 'Overseas Visitors' brings in a significant sum of money to the NHS. Moreover, accusations of the sort found in our data from the House of Commons and the news – that migrants come to the UK to take advantage of the NHS – have also been found to lack substantial evidence.¹²¹ In terms of the argument that only those who pay tax in the UK 'deserve' free healthcare, the British Medical Association has consistently opposed charging in principle, stating: 'We believe this has deterred and delayed vulnerable groups from accessing the healthcare they need, while diverting vital NHS staff time away from patient care'.¹²² Indeed, the motivation for NHS charging for some migrants may be not to bring in any significant funds that could actually help the ailing NHS, but rather to create a cultural shift towards a segregated healthcare system in which free healthcare is provided only to those deemed 'deserving' by the state.

Not only is it possible that it may cost the NHS more to identify patients for charging than they make back from doing so: the human cost must also be considered. Charging may act as a

120 NHS England (2023) 'Our 2023/24 business plan', 12 October, www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/our-2023-24-business-plan/#:~:text=Our%20commissioning%20budget%20for%202023,for%20commissioning%20local%20health%20services.

121 Hanefeld et al., 'Health tourism'; Horsfall and Pagan, 'Jumping the queue?'

122 BMA (2024) 'BMA view on charging overseas visitors', 28 June, www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/refugees-overseas-visitors-and-vulnerable-migrants/bma-view-on-charging-overseas-visitors.

deterrent from seeking healthcare for some of the most vulnerable in society. A 2019 report documented at least three maternal deaths potentially attributable to women avoiding the NHS due to fear of being charged.¹²³ The data analysed above shows that people from countries such as Nigeria, Poland, Ghana and Albania are more likely to be charged more for treatment, and that the 'Mixed White/Black African', 'Asian/British Asian – Indian' and 'Black/Black British – African' ethnic groups are potentially being charged more. This may show a racial bias in how charges are applied – for instance, in who is asked to prove their status – or it may reflect how charging for healthcare further disadvantages groups who are already more likely to face health disparities due to racism. This all comes at a cost to the NHS and its ability to deliver care to *all* patients. Instead of being able to prioritise patient care, health practitioners are being pressured by the government to preoccupy themselves with acting as immigration officers, checking patients' status, and administering and collecting charges. The consistent prioritising of immigration control over all other rights takes attention and resources away from the services that the public depend on, regardless of our immigration status, ethnicity or nationality.

123 Dobbin et al., 'Charging of overseas visitors', 72.

Surveillance and data-sharing arrangements

The policy of deputisation which is so central to the 'hostile environment' can be viewed as part of a wider state project to expand surveillance into all parts of our everyday lives. The UK is already one of the world's most surveillance-heavy states, with a 'surveillance industrial complex'¹²⁴ comprising CCTV, routine internet and mobile spying, and wide-ranging government databases that are used to store our personal information.¹²⁵ In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that the UK's mass interception of the communications of millions of people violated rights to privacy and freedom of expression.¹²⁶ A recent report by Amnesty International found that the use of data-based and data-driven systems to attempt to predict, profile and assess the risk of crime occurring in the future violates people's human rights and reinforces racism and discrimination in policing.¹²⁷ It is in this context that we must understand the use of surveillance technologies on a population that has largely been deprived of their rights – migrants.

The 'securitisation' of migration normalises and justifies the surveillance of migrants by the government, other authorities and ordinary citizens. However, in order to become normalised, the supposed 'threat' has to be accepted by a significant sector of the general public.¹²⁸ One way that this is done is through the use of racist discourse which renders UK-born people superior to migrants. Such hierarchies make it more acceptable for some people in society to monitor and inform on others – in this case a group that, as we have shown, is heavily associated with people of colour and ethnically minoritised people.

124 Watt, E. (2021) *State Sponsored Cyber Surveillance: The Right to Privacy of Communications and International Law*, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 8.

125 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 173.

126 Amnesty International (2021) 'Europe's top court rules UK mass surveillance regime violated human rights', 25 May, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/05/uk-surveillance-gchq-ecthr-ruling.

127 Amnesty International (2025) *Automated Racism: How Police Data and Algorithms Code Discrimination into Policing*, London, www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2025-02/Automated%20Racism%20Report%20-%20Amnesty%20International%20UK%20-%202025.pdf.

128 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 107.

Prevent: Another type of deputisation

This report, along with Phase I, focuses on the policy of 'deputisation' as key to how immigration control encourages and reproduces racial discrimination by obliging ordinary citizens to surveil others they suspect of being in the UK 'illegally'. However, 'deputisation' is not limited to immigration policy. The Prevent duty is another form of deputisation which has been accused of institutionalising suspicion against a targeted group: Muslim people in the UK.¹²⁹ It was introduced in 2003 by the Blair government and was translated into law from 2015, making it a legal duty for teachers, GPs and other public sector workers to inform on people, including children, whom they suspect of being vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism.¹³⁰ It is worth pausing here to explore the policy of Prevent because it is inextricably tied up with 'war on terror' narratives that also enable the securitisation and racialised policing of immigration.

From its inception, Prevent funding has gone to local areas with the biggest proportion of Muslims and has historically largely targeted Muslim people. For example, in 2016, 68 per cent of all Prevent referrals were of Muslims, yet the 2011 Census showed that Muslims made up just 4.8 per cent of the population of England and Wales at this time.¹³¹ The central tenet of Prevent is the idea that violence can be predicted – an idea that is unsupported by evidence. The 'signs of radicalisation' that public sector workers are meant to look out for come from one study, the 'Extremism Risk Guidance 22+' (ERG22+), which is a classified document and has never been peer-reviewed or publicly scrutinised, something wildly out of step with the norms of scientific rigour.¹³² The 'signs' are noticeably vague: they include normal behaviours – especially for young people – such as 'searching for answers about your identity', 'being unwilling or unable to discuss views' and 'changing friendship groups'.¹³³ With such vague and subjective 'signs', it has been claimed that Prevent relies instead on Islamophobic myths which render Muslims as definitionally prone to violence, making people suspicious of Muslim people and more likely to read these behaviours as a threat when exhibited by people from Muslim communities.¹³⁴

It is important to consider Prevent, Islamophobia and the 'hostile environment' as deeply interconnected and mutually sustaining. This is evident in Labour's BSAI Bill, which uses counter-terrorism-style powers to 'go after' criminal gangs managing small boat crossings and to increase enforced returns and surveillance mechanisms targeting migrant communities.¹³⁵ Evidence from

129 Gilks, 'The security–prejudice nexus', 35.

130 Manzoor-Khan, S. (2022) 'Racist prediction as public duty', in *Tangled in Terror: Uprooting Islamophobia*, London: Pluto Press, 65; Qurashi, F. (2018) 'The Prevent strategy and the UK 'war on terror': Embedding infrastructures of surveillance in Muslim communities', *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 4(17): 1–13, 2.

131 Qurashi, 'The Prevent strategy', 8.

132 CAGE International (2016) 'Leading academics question 'science' that underpins Prevent strategy', Press release, 29 September, www.cage.ngo/articles/leading-academics-question-science-that-underpins-prevent-strategy.

133 Manzoor-Khan, 'Racist prediction', 64–65.

134 As well as academics, teachers and GPs have frequently expressed concern about the racist implications of Prevent. In 2016, teachers backed a motion to reject Prevent due to its targeting of Muslims, and doctors have labelled it a waste of time and resources, as well as a breach of confidentiality (Gilks, 'The security–prejudice nexus', 35).

135 Centre for Criminology and Border Criminologies and Humans for Rights Network, 'Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill: Briefing'.

our Phase II dataset shows how links between immigration and the importation of supposedly 'terrorist elements' are used in the news to materialise a sense of threat from small boat crossings, which in turn justifies policies designed to 'stop the boats', such as the BSAI.

Below is an example from the news data, from an op-ed in the *Daily Mail*:

We need to clamp down on illegal migrants entering Britain, most of whom are young men, and establish a genuine third-country deterrent, in Rwanda or somewhere else ... We also urgently need an unflinching policy of integration, forcing newcomers to adapt to British society ... We also need to deport foreign nationals who glorify Islamist terrorism or commit serious crimes ... We should also leave any international court or convention which stops us from prioritising the security and safety of the British people over the rights of illegal migrants.¹³⁶

In this article, as in many of its type, migrant communities are immediately represented negatively as 'illegal migrants' mostly made up of 'young men', which in turn fuels the belief that only women and children 'count' as vulnerable or needing protection and plays on associations of 'non-Western', ethnically minoritised young men with the threat of violence. The implication is that migrants damage UK society and culture and so represent a 'security threat'.

The policies advocated for here include sending people seeking asylum to Rwanda, 'forcing' integration, leaving the ECtHR and the Refugee Convention, and deportation – which is justified through the connection of 'foreign nationals' to 'Islamist terrorism'. It is explicitly stated that human rights should be disregarded in favour of 'security'. This is made acceptable by the representation of migrants as non-human, or subhuman – as numbers, statistics, and 'Islamist' terrorist outsiders and threats.

For the system of deputisation to be accepted, there needs to be a security threat that encourages people placed in deputised roles to be suspicious of certain people or groups, like migrants and Muslim people. As mentioned earlier, 'Muslim' is one of the words most strongly associated with 'immigrant' in the Phase II dataset when filtered by social categories such as nationality, religious heritage and geographical location. Through the association of migrants and immigration with Muslims and terrorism, the 'threat' of immigration is further materialised through Islamophobic tropes that associate Muslim people with inherent foreignness and opposition to 'British values'. In this way, it is not just immigration policy but also policies like Prevent that are justified and normalised.

136 Goodwin, M. (2024) 'It's high time our virtue-signalling ruling class stopped pandering to people who despise Britain', *Daily Mail*, 28 February, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13132593/high-time-virtue-signalling-ruling-class-stopped-pandering-people-despise-Britain.html.

Below, we show how the 'hostile environment' works to expand and normalise the surveillance state, along with how this impacts communities of colour and migrant victims of domestic abuse specifically.

Detention on reporting

One of the ways that migrants are controlled under the 'hostile environment' is through surveillance via reporting. Some 80,000 migrants are subject to reporting requirements – where they have to report to a designated centre or sometimes a police station so that immigration authorities can keep track of their whereabouts. Reporting centres are intimidating and secure environments where people can be detained on arrival, making the process stressful and potentially traumatic for those subjected to it. Between April and September 2016, 2,646 people were detained on reporting, and by January 2017, 812 of these had been deported and 99 were still in detention pending removal, while 1,735 (65.6 per cent) were released due to barriers to removal.¹³⁷ A FOI request by BID found that in 2018, 3,598 people were detained on reporting.¹³⁸ Of those, only 600 (17 per cent) were removed from the UK at the end of their period of detention. That means that 83 per cent of people detained on reporting in 2018 were simply released again at the end of their period of detention. This tells us that the majority of those detained on reporting have to be released and, consequently, that this is not an effective strategy for the identification of removable migrants. In turn, this suggests that this strategy functions mainly as an intimidation tactic against migrants whose immigration conditions mean they must consent to be surveilled in this manner, where the threat of detention is ever present.

The Runnymede Trust sent a FOI request to Immigration Enforcement asking for information on how many people were detained on reporting in the years 2019–24, and what their nationality was. This request was refused. Despite recognising that 'There is a public interest in the disclosure of [this] information to ensure departmental transparency and accountability,' the request was refused on the following grounds:

It would not be in the public interest for the Home Office to release operational information due to sensitivity and confidentiality of the data. Disclosing the detain on reporting and detention outcomes can create harm that would arise or would likely arise from disclosing this information, [and] such disclosure would be likely to prejudice our operational reporting compliance and any investigations/procedures. The need for a safe space for government and civil servants to formulate and debate issues away from public scrutiny.

¹³⁷ Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 56.

¹³⁸ BID (2020) 'BID response to Home Office position paper against a time limit for detention', 2 July, www.biduk.org/articles/670-bid-response-to-home-office-position-paper-against-a-time-limit-for-detention#:~:text=Data%20gathered%20by%20us%20through,of%20their%20period%20of%20detention.

It is unclear how disclosing this information would create harm or 'prejudice ... operational reporting compliance', and no explanation was offered. It is also notable that government and civil servants require a 'safe space' to formulate and debate issues and that this 'safe space' apparently necessitates being away from 'public scrutiny.' It is unclear what needs to be 'debated' in relation to the information about who is being detained on reporting. The psychological safety of government and civil servants is clearly prioritised here, marking a totally different attitude from the Home Office's approach to migrants, whose employment safety has been disregarded and eroded through the Immigration Act of 2016.¹³⁹ This lack of transparency from the Home Office inhibits Runnymede Trust and other organisations in the sector from holding the government to account over its legal obligations under international human rights law to protect the safety and dignity of people in immigration detention, as well as its obligations under the Equality Act (2010) to not discriminate against people on the grounds of race or ethnicity.

The lack of rights that migrants are granted means that they can be surveilled and controlled more easily, through requirements like making some migrants report to a specific location so that authorities have constant information on their whereabouts. This surveillance technique is used in some cases to detain migrants. Thus, in the very act of complying with their immigration conditions, migrants are routinely targeted for punishment just because of who they are. The Home Office's reluctance to open itself up to scrutiny shrouds this aspect of surveillance and detention in secrecy. The Runnymede Trust urges the Home Office to release data on people who have been detained on reporting since 2019 and to record ethnicity for those who are detained in this way, so that independent equality analyses can be conducted to determine whether 'hostile environment' policies are breaching human rights and equality legislation. This is especially important in light of proposals in the BSAI Bill to ramp up intelligence-gathering activities targeting migrants, with provisions to expand powers to search electronic devices and enable electronic monitoring.¹⁴⁰

139 Bales, 'Legislation notes'; Davies, 'Recent legislation'.

140 Runnymede Trust (no date), 'Briefing: Analysis of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill', https://docs.google.com/document/d/1772bsQf-okCL_jyJ6-jb8JLnN6UN-vqG9HE-tL7tyJY/edit?tab=t.0.

Data-sharing between police and Immigration Enforcement

Crucial to the expansion of the surveillance state is the collecting and sharing of people's data by and between government and other authorities, public services and even ordinary citizens. In 2018, Liberty and Southall Black Sisters made a super-complaint raising serious concerns about the police's passing on of data on victims of domestic violence with irregularised immigration status to the Home Office for the purpose of immigration control. They argued that this placed victims at risk of detention and deportation and made many migrant victims of domestic violence (typically women of colour/ethnically minoritised) fearful of going to the police.¹⁴¹ Liberty and Southall Black Sisters argued that this emboldens perpetrators, who are able to use the threat of Immigration Enforcement to silence their victims and continue to harm them and others.

A BBC investigation in 2018 found that over 50 per cent of the 45 police forces it asked referred both victims and witnesses of crime to Immigration Enforcement, including victims of rape, domestic violence and trafficking.¹⁴² This means that some of the most vulnerable victims of crime are effectively being punished and subjected to immigration control for coming forward and exposing their abuse. Liberty and Southall Black Sisters argued that this reflects an 'entrenched culture of prioritising immigration control over public safety and the fair treatment of victims'.¹⁴³ They called for a data-sharing firewall to prevent the police from sharing victims' data with Immigration Enforcement. This recommendation has also been backed by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, who has urged migrant victims to be treated as victims 'first and foremost'.¹⁴⁴

In response to this super-complaint, a report titled *Safe to Share? Report on Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' Super-Complaint on Policing and Immigration Status* was published in 2020 by the College of Policing (CoP), H[is] Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire Services (HMICFS) and the Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC).¹⁴⁵ It accepted the evidence submitted by Liberty and Southall Black Sisters that migrant women victims of domestic violence are being deterred from reporting crime due to the fear of Immigration Enforcement. The report fully supported 'the idea of an immediate change in police practice to allow a separation between the response to a victim's report of domestic abuse and the handling of their immigration status'.¹⁴⁶

141 Liberty and Southall Black Sisters v. police forces England and Wales (2018) 'Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' super-complaint on data-sharing between the police and Home Office regarding victims and witnesses to crime', www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/liberty-and-southall-black-sisters-super-complaint-on-data-sharing-between-the-police-and-home-office-regarding-victims-and-witnesses-to-crime/#page-section-1.

142 Nye, C., Bloomer N. and Jeraj, S. (2018) 'Victims of serious crime face arrest over immigration status', BBC News, 14 May, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44074572.

143 CoP, HMICFS and IOPC (2020) *Safe to Share? Report on Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' Super-Complaint on Policing and Immigration Status*, Birmingham: HMICFS, 1, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/945314/safe-to-share-liberty-southall-black-sisters-super-complaint-policing-immigration-status.pdf.

144 Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023) 'Police report victims of domestic abuse to Immigration Enforcement, 'empowering abusers'', 9 November, <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/police-report-victims-of-domestic-abuse-to-immigration-enforcement-empowering-abusers>.

145 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*

146 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*, 14.

However, it did not support the call for a complete firewall, claiming that data-sharing between the police and Immigration Enforcement is necessary for 'safeguarding' victims and witnesses.

Researchers for the Runnymede Trust spoke to Southall Black Sisters and the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), who also worked on the super-complaint, in 2024 to discuss their views on the *Safe to Share?* report and its recommendations. Both organisations expressed deep disappointment and frustration with the rejection of a complete firewall and the use of safeguarding as a justification for this. They stressed that the function of Immigration Enforcement is *never* based in safeguarding and reiterated their findings that the current system of data-sharing places the general public, and disproportionately migrant women with irregularised status, at risk.¹⁴⁷

The Runnymede Trust aimed to replicate the study conducted by the BBC to assess changes in police practice since the super-complaint and the *Safe to Share?* report. FOI requests were sent to the 39 police forces in England, four in Wales, Police Services Northern Ireland and Police Scotland. Each force was asked if it referred victims and witnesses of crimes to the Home Office for immigration control during the time period 1 January 2019 – 1 January 2024, and what the nationality and ethnicity was of those who were referred. Of the 45 forces contacted, 42 forces stated that they could not provide us with this information as it is not recorded. This is despite the recommendations of *Safe to Share?* that all police forces should adopt a standardised and centralised procedure for the sharing of victims' data with Immigration Enforcement and record the ethnicity of those whose information is shared. Without this data, it is impossible to conduct any form of equality analysis on the data-sharing arrangements between police and Immigration Enforcement. Of the three forces that did respond with some information, one gave a somewhat detailed account of how it centrally records referrals and told us that in the time period specified it had referred two people from Eritrea to the Home Office; one merely confirmed that it does refer victims and witnesses to Immigration Enforcement but was unable to provide ethnicity or nationality data on this; and one stated that it does not refer victims and witnesses to immigration control.

We then sent a FOI request to the National Command and Control Unit (NCCU), a branch of Immigration Enforcement acting as a 24/7 hotline available to all UK police forces to advise on the immigration status of individuals. The NCCU was advised from 2020 to record the ethnicity and nationality of victims referred to them by the police for immigration information. Immigration Enforcement responded to this FOI request with information on referrals of victims to the NCCU from May 2020 to December 2023 and their nationalities. However, it did not provide ethnicity data or data on witnesses referred, despite assuring the authors of *Safe to Share?* that it was now collecting this data. This practice of excluding data on witnesses who have been referred to the NCCU by the police was criticised in *Safe to Share?*, which stated that this meant that 'neither police nor the Home Office are able to assure communities that all people with whom they have contact will be treated safely and fairly'.¹⁴⁸

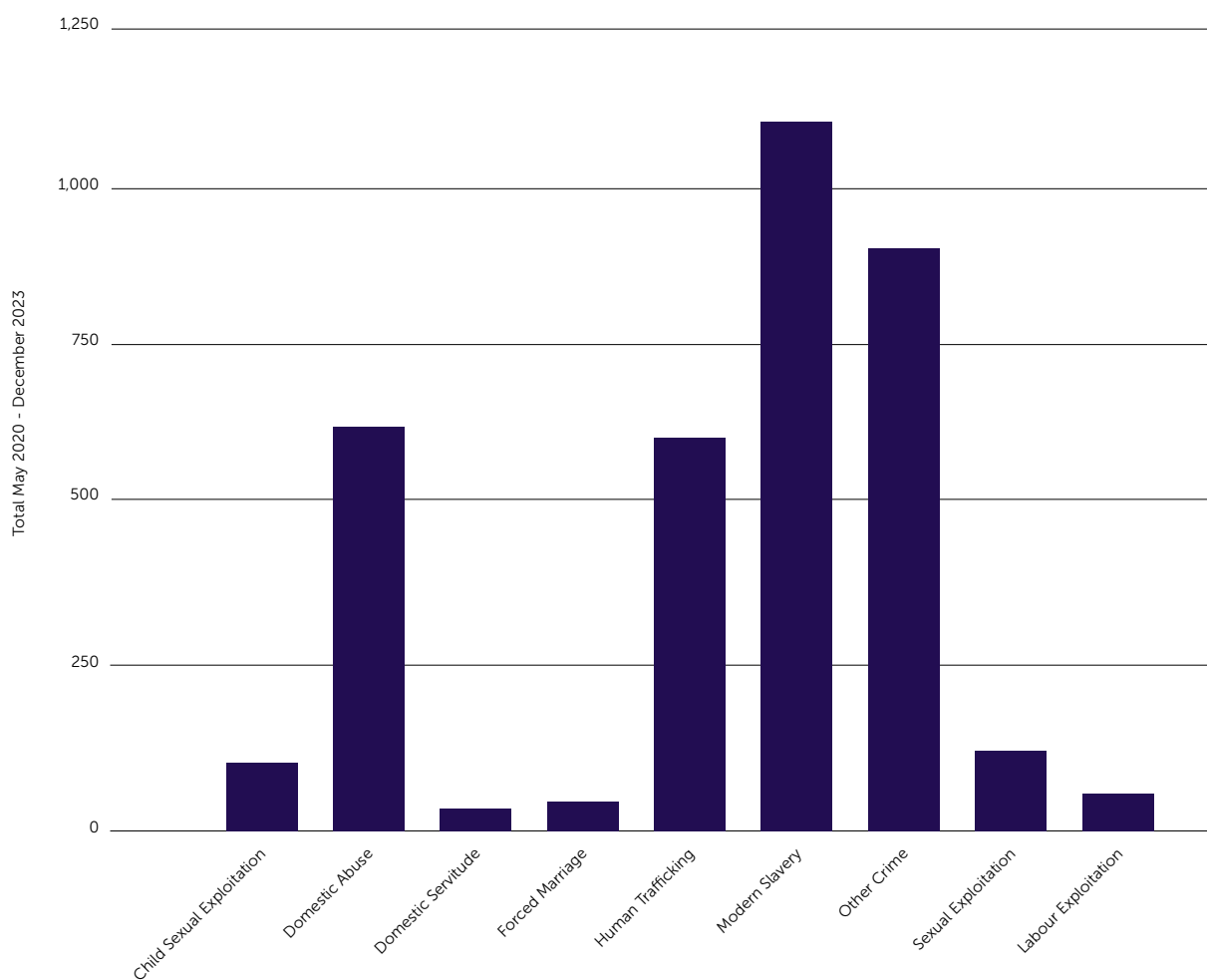
147 Liberty and Southall Black Sisters v. police forces England and Wales, 'Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' super-complaint'.

148 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*, 10.

Analysing the data that was provided, we found that more than 750 victims a year are still being referred to the NCCU (with over 1,100 victims referred to the NCCU in 2021 alone). These victims are therefore potentially subjected to Immigration Enforcement action, such as detention and deportation, as a result of reporting a crime. This number does not reflect witnesses being referred or victims and witnesses who have their immigration status checked by the police on the Police National Computer and are then referred directly to the Home Office. Consequently, numbers of referrals of victims to Immigration Enforcement are likely to be much higher.

Victims of domestic abuse remain dominant in referrals to the NCCU, with over 620 referrals in total. Victims of modern slavery were the most likely to be referred to the NCCU for immigration control, followed by victims of 'other crime', then domestic abuse and human trafficking. This means that people who have come into contact with the police because they have been forced into slavery, trafficked over borders and abused are having their information shared with Immigration Enforcement and are, as a result, potentially being penalised for immigration offences. These victims are thus doubly victimised, first by the perpetrators of the crimes committed against them and second by the joint efforts of the police and the Home Office, which take advantage of their vulnerability to hunt them down and punish them for immigration offences (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: NCCU victim referrals by crime, May 2020 – December 2023



Of the victims referred to the NCCU by the police from May 2020 to December 2023, the top five nationalities were Vietnamese, Albanian, Romanian, Chinese and Pakistani. The majority of victims referred to the NCCU from Vietnam, Albania and China were victims of modern slavery, while the majority of those from Romania were victims of human trafficking. Finally, the majority of people from Pakistan who were referred by police to the NCCU were victims of domestic abuse. These are all people who were in contact with the police because they were victims of crimes – crimes of slavery, trafficking and domestic violence, whose victims are most likely to be women. They are also people from countries in South, South East and East Asia or Eastern Europe. It is thus feasible, if not very likely, that women of colour/ethnically minoritised women are being disproportionately referred by police to Immigration Enforcement, perhaps because of their appearance, accent or first language. However, without ethnicity data we cannot draw robust conclusions on this.

This analysis shows that the sharing of information between the police and Home Office on victims with irregularised immigration status remains a feature of policing, more than six years on from the super-complaint made by Liberty and Southall Black Sisters, and more than four years on from the recommendations of the *Safe to Share?* report.¹⁴⁹ Recommendation 1 from the report was that police officers 'immediately stop sharing information on domestic abuse victims with immigration enforcement' where they have only concerns or doubts about status. Though we cannot determine based on the data provided *why* victims were referred to the NCCU by police, the analysis shows that victims of domestic abuse *are* still being routinely referred, with at least 624 referrals of domestic abuse victims from mid-2020 to the end of 2023. Moreover, the police are meant to refer victims of modern slavery to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for their support and protection. Yet our data shows that victims of modern slavery are being referred to Immigration Enforcement, showing that procedures put in place for their safety are not being prioritised.

Recommendation 3 of *Safe to Share?* called for the development of a 'safeguarding protocol between the Home Office and police service to guide responses to all migrant victims and witnesses of crime that draws on the expertise of relevant specialist organisations for supporting victims with insecure status'. Southall Black Sisters recently conducted a cost–benefit analysis for local public services of funding specialist services for victim-survivors of VAWG which are designed and delivered by and for Black, minoritised and migrant women ('by and for' services).¹⁵⁰ This analysis found that the services benefiting the least from 'by and for' services include the police, indicating that the police are not taking up specialist services to help safeguard victims of VAWG with irregularised immigration status. Moreover, though a complete firewall was rejected, the Migrant Victims' Protocol was established which prevents police from sharing victims' data with Immigration Enforcement while a criminal investigation is ongoing. However, having spoken to Southall Black Sisters and LAWRS on this matter, it is clear that this does not protect victims but merely delays referrals, causing stress and further endangering victims who may be referred to immigration control if their case is dropped or as soon as an investigation is concluded. Hence, the established protocol does not have the support of experts in the field and is thus not fit for purpose.

149 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*, 10.

150 Sheil, F. (2024) *Investing in Safety: The Financial Case for Investing in, by, and for Services Supporting Victim-Survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds*, London: Southall Black Sisters, LAWRS, Safety 4 Sisters, Ubuntu Women's Shelter and the Angelou Centre, <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/04/investing-in-safety-report-final.pdf>.

Data protection law enables data to be shared only when there is a legitimate purpose and when data-sharing is necessary and proportionate for that purpose. Organisations sharing data must be clear with people on how their data will be processed and must document their decisions in the event of any legal challenges, including the basis of sharing under data protection law.¹⁵¹ There is, however, an exemption from this protection for immigration control, showing how migrants are denied basic rights which others are entitled to. This exemption reflects how rights are being scaled according to citizenship status, rendering migrant victims, and the general public, vulnerable to perpetrators of abuse. The sharing of data by the police with Immigration Enforcement undermines their role in supporting victims and witnesses of crime. It also undermines their obligations to investigate crime, such as domestic abuse and trafficking, and to refer victims of modern slavery to the NRM. Sharing data on a victim's immigration status with Immigration Enforcement is neither necessary for safeguarding nor proportionate, and it is apparent that victims and witnesses are not being clearly informed about how their data is being processed, as specialist services to support migrant victims are not being used by the police. Further, it is clear from the volume of refusals to share information under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) that the police are not documenting their decisions to share data.

A statement from the Home Office in *Safe to Share?* states that it 'expects that if an officer comes to know or suspect someone not under arrest is an immigration offender they will refer the relevant information to the Home Office'.¹⁵² This, along with the exemption from rights to data protection in the context of immigration control, is further evidence that immigration control is subsuming all other rights, including the right to privacy and the safeguarding of victims.

Our analysis of news articles from 2019 to 2024 found stories of VAWG being used to represent migrant men, especially those from Islamic countries, as threats to white women. Yet the analysis of data-sharing arrangements between the police and the Home Office shows that when it comes to victims of VAWG who are migrants, this concern about the perpetrators being a threat to society is nowhere to be found. Prior to the 2024 election, Labour's manifesto pledged to halve VAWG within a decade.¹⁵³ If the party remains committed to this goal and to the protection of *all* women and girls who are victims of violence, regardless of race, nationality or immigration status, a firewall between police and Immigration Enforcement must be mandated by this government in the public's interest.

151 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*, 33.

152 CoP et al, *Safe to Share?*, 47.

153 End Violence Against Women (2024) 'New government elected: EVAW's priorities for the Labour leadership', 9 July, www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/new-government-elected-evaws-priorities-for-the-labour-leadership.



Racist and Islamophobic discourse used by the media and parliament to justify increasingly hostile immigration legislation has created a culture where sections of the UK population feel increasingly emboldened to engage in racial discrimination and violence.



Conclusion

Summary

This Phase II research analysed two datasets of a combined 62.7 million words, encompassing 52,990 news articles and 317 House of Commons debates on immigration from 2019 to 2024. The analysis has shown that migrants continue to be associated with crime and illegality and continue to be associated with people of colour. This research has found the continued use of racist tropes and stereotypes, including representing migrant men from Islamic countries as threats to women and associations of migrants with deception and laziness, which were also found in Phase I. The partnership between parliament and news media identified in Phase I continues, with both sources repeating sensationalist and unfounded claims about migrants taking advantage of resources and being a burden to the UK taxpayer. In particular, such representations were found regarding people seeking asylum, who were almost universally negatively represented and treated with suspicion.

This rhetoric in the news and in parliament has been used to justify the increasingly draconian measures that were taken during this period to limit the rights of people seeking asylum, with a focus on criminalising Channel and small boat crossings in ways that undermine the human rights and safety of a group who are largely people of colour fleeing war and conflict. Our analysis of the implementation of 'hostile environment' policy in this time period has shown that detention and deportation targets Eastern European people and people from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America, with people from Albania, Brazil, Iran, Iraq and India over-represented in detentions and returns. This is mirrored in charges for healthcare, with people from Nigeria being charged 245 per cent more for treatment than people from the USA and people in the 'Mixed – White/Black African' Census group being charged the most on average per patient. Finally, building on the 2018 super-complaint of Liberty and Southall Black Sisters, we have found that the sharing by the police with the Home Office of data on victims with irregularised immigration status is a continued feature of policing, despite the risks it poses to the public interest, and targets victims of trafficking, modern slavery and domestic abuse from Eastern Europe and Asia.

The government claims that the riots that happened in summer 2024 were a law-and-order issue, rather than a racism issue. Successive governments have also claimed that immigration is a security issue, using this to criminalise people seeking asylum. In both cases, arguments have been made

that immigration into the UK is causing a breakdown in social cohesion. Yet an alternative argument exists: that it is the *response* to immigration by the government and in the news media that is causing a breakdown in social cohesion in the UK. This is most clearly evidenced by the racist riots themselves. During the riots, supporters of the far-right attacked hotels housing people seeking asylum, in some cases chanting 'stop the boats' – a slogan that had been used by the former Conservative government as a tagline for its approach to immigration control, and that our analysis shows was frequently repeated in parliament and in the news in the months leading up to the riots. When this is taken into account alongside the fact that mosques and businesses owned by people of colour were targeted by rioters, it becomes clear that the racist and Islamophobic discourse used by the media and parliament to justify increasingly hostile immigration legislation has created a culture where sections of the UK population feel increasingly emboldened to engage in racial discrimination and violence.

Attacks on human rights, welfare and equality

A common claim in both the news media and parliament is that hostile legislation such as the IMA (2023) is justifiable because people crossing the Channel are not 'genuine' asylum seekers but migrants playing the system to take advantage of our resources, which they apparently take from UK-born people, leaving waiting lists for housing, NHS treatment and so on. These claims are untrue, and yet their repetition by MPs and news outlets has real consequences, many of which may be desirable to the government. By demonising people seeking asylum, the 'divide and rule' of the public is achieved as the impact of austerity on access to employment, housing and healthcare is blamed on migrants instead of those in power.

Yet the very same policies aimed at creating a 'hostile environment' for migrants are also laying the groundwork for a further erosion of rights and public services that will affect the public more broadly. Charging for treatment on the NHS is perhaps the clearest example of the threat of immigration policy to all in UK society, as it seems to be laying the groundwork for the eventual extension of charging for healthcare to all. An Ipsos MORI study of hospital charging for migrants showed that the government has been using all kinds of motivations to create a 'cultural change' in the NHS in favour of charging.¹⁵⁴ This represents a normalisation of privatisation, with the study finding that charging migrants was being presented to healthcare professionals (i.e., nurses and doctors) strategically in order to counter NHS values based around care with a 'corporate ethos: based around money-saving'.¹⁵⁵ Such a strategy will likely make it easier to transform the NHS into privatised healthcare for all.

Another fundamental right that is undermined by the 'hostile environment' is the right to privacy. The Data Protection Act (2018) sets out strict rules, called 'data protection principles', that everyone responsible for using personal data must follow, including the government and public services.¹⁵⁶

154 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 190.

155 Corporate Watch, *The UK Border Regime*, 192.

156 Data Protection Act (2018), www.gov.uk/data-protection.

As we detailed in the section on data-sharing between the police and the Home Office, these rules include that information must be used fairly, lawfully and transparently; only for specified, explicit purposes; only in a way that is adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary; and is not kept for longer than necessary. The super-complaint made by Liberty and Southall Black Sisters in 2018 argued that the practice by police forces of sharing victims' and witnesses' data with Immigration Enforcement breaches this law. The present research has confirmed that this practice is ongoing, and we contend that the sharing of this data is not made explicit, is not relevant to the police's safeguarding role for victims and witnesses, and is unnecessary, indeed actively harmful. The Home Office's position that immigration control must subsume all other concerns, including the safeguarding of victims of VAWG, sits in direct contradiction to data protection law and shows how the 'hostile environment' explicitly undermines other rights and protections. The government's and police's pretensions of concern over VAWG are undone by their disregard for victims who are migrants. This undermines public safety, as perpetrators of VAWG are able to abuse women with irregularised immigration status and intimidate them into silence with the threat of Immigration Enforcement being involved if they go to the police. This enables such perpetrators to continue to harm these women and others.

For now, the breaches of these rights are largely targeted at one group of the population – irregularised migrants. But alongside the use of surveillance and deputisation to target other sectors of the population, through policies such as Prevent and the use of so-called 'predictive policing',¹⁵⁷ it is clear that the deprivation of rights extends to other racially marginalised communities. The myth that we frequently found in the data that migrants and people seeking asylum take jobs, resources and public goods is used to obscure the gradual removal of the wider public's entitlement to state welfare, which has been under attack since the austerity measures introduced by David Cameron's coalition government.¹⁵⁸

People seeking asylum are not to blame for NHS or council house waiting lists, for under-resourced schools or welfare projects. These are the results of political choices. Yet the demonisation of people seeking asylum encourages divisions in the communities that they enter, meaning that these very communities are less likely to build solidarity to challenge government policies which leave the whole community vulnerable to the private rental sector, the crumbling of the NHS and the reduction of state benefits. When rights that are meant to be universal, such as human rights, are systematically removed from one group in a population, these rights cease to be rights at all but become privileges. The UK public must reckon with the fact that such privileges can be taken away at any time.

157 Amnesty International, *Automated Racism*.

158 Schaap, 'The after rights of the citizen', 14.

Issues with freedom of information and transparency

In the course of both phases of this large-scale research project, researchers came up against barriers to accessing information from the Home Office and police under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) (FOIA). Immigration Enforcement refused to share information on people who have been detained on reporting from 2019 to 2024. Immigration Enforcement did share information on police referrals to the NCCU, but this notably excluded ethnicity data. This means they either have not begun to record this information, as they said they would, or that they have chosen not to share it with the Runnymede Trust. In the course of this project, the Runnymede Trust has spoken to at least five other charitable organisations that have also reported issues in getting the Home Office to share information under the FOIA. Section (1) of the FOIA states that 'Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled – (a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and (b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to [them]'.¹⁵⁹ There are exemptions to this, including those cited by the Home Office to us. These include:

- **Section 12(1) – where the cost of complying with the request would exceed the appropriate limit (at this time, £650)**
- **Section 14(1) – where requests have the potential to cause a disproportionate or unjustified level of disruption, irritation or distress**
- **Section 31(1) – this is a prejudice-based exemption relating to where the sharing of information may prejudice ' (a) the prevention or detection of crime,' (b) 'the apprehension or prosecution of offenders,' (c) 'the administration of justice' and so on¹⁶⁰**

Though the Home Office is entitled to refuse to share information on these grounds, it is notable that similar refusals are being made to other charities working in the sectors of migrants' rights and racial justice, which are asking for information that would enable equality analyses to take place. Moreover, when researchers first requested information from Immigration Enforcement on detention when reporting, they were refused under Section 12(1). When they refined their request to ask for less data, they were refused with a Section 31(1) notice. The nature of the exemptions means that they are often cited without in-depth or detailed explanation. This means that it is hard to tell whether these refusals are genuine or whether exemptions may be used as excuses for not sharing information that could open up the Home Office to public, and potentially legal, scrutiny.

The Home Office has never yet commissioned any review into the effectiveness of 'hostile environment' immigration policy. This research, as well as the significant body of research cited in this and the Phase I report, has time and again shown that the 'hostile environment' does not work

¹⁵⁹ Freedom of Information Act (2000), S.7, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents.

¹⁶⁰ Freedom of Information Act (2000), S.2, S.14, S.31.

on its own terms. This suggests that the government could be resistant to a review of the policy because it would force it to publicly acknowledge that its approach is ineffective at meeting its own aims. This may then force the government to backtrack on this policy or to acknowledge that the true aims of the 'hostile environment' are *not* those openly stated by its architects and supporters (about reductions in numbers of migrants or tackling people smugglers and criminal gangs), but are in fact about using immigration as an effective campaigning issue that draws public attention away from government failures in education, housing and the NHS, using disenfranchised migrants as scapegoats who become the target of racist ire from the public.

The lack of transparency from the police regarding their data-sharing arrangements with the Home Office is also notable, with 42 of 45 forces citing Section 12(1) exemptions. While in 2018 at least half of forces asked did at least answer the question of whether they referred victims to immigration control, when we asked this question in 2024, only three answered. This may be because of backlash in light of the revelations of the BBC investigation and the super-complaint back in 2018, or because of the nature of the Runnymede Trust as a racial justice organisation – perhaps forces do not want to share information that will reflect badly on them in terms of racial justice. Either way, this shows that recommendations made to police forces by the IOPC, the HMICFS and the CoP are not being implemented. It is worth noting that both the police and the Home Office have been criticised by these bodies and by the Independent Inspectorate of Borders¹⁶¹ explicitly for their record-keeping, particularly regarding ethnicity. It is therefore all the more alarming that these criticisms are not being addressed.

When it comes to the NHS, there are also issues with record-keeping. The majority of Trusts and Health Boards that refused our requests for ethnicity data stated that they simply did not record this information, nor are they obliged to. This was also a feature of refusals made in the earlier study that we replicated.

All public services should be keeping ethnicity, as well as nationality, data on those migrants that they are now obliged to collect data on as deputised authorities. This would enable independent reviews on whether the 'hostile environment' is having a disproportionate and discriminatory impact on people of colour and ethnically minoritised people. In the long term, however, firewalls should be established between all public services and the Home Office to prevent breaches of data protection law through the sharing with Immigration Enforcement of data collected for the purposes of education, healthcare and policing. Deputisation itself, in principle and practice, is undermining the data protection laws which are designed to protect our privacy and is resulting in a culture change where mass surveillance is normalised and accepted, with members of the public often unwittingly sharing data with Immigration Enforcement in their roles as deputised citizens.

161 ICIBI (2024) *An Inspection of Contingency Asylum Accommodation*, London: Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/671a1b0cf7c956b7d065a417/An_inspection_of_contingency_asylum_accommodation_November_2023_June_2024.pdf.

Recommendations



As this report demonstrates, the government must take urgent steps to end the 'hostile environment' approach to immigration. We view this as an important part of the desecuritisation of immigration, where the immigration 'issue' falls out of the public sphere and returns to politics consistent with democratic norms – including informed and evidenced debate in line with international human rights obligations.¹⁶² The government therefore must:

- 1** Acknowledge asylum policy as a racial justice issue and review the impact of recent legislation and rhetoric on outcomes for communities of colour. Following the precedent of the *Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal* report, the government should commit to a similar review of immigration and asylum laws and policies since 1981 before embarking on more legislation in this area. Asylum and immigration policy and legislation must be explicitly identified as a racial justice issue. This review should also consider the role of the government in manufacturing crises through its rhetoric around issues such as small boats.¹⁶³
- 2** Repeal policies of 'deputisation', through which public sector officials act as border enforcement.
- 3** Repeal the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) and the Illegal Migration Act (2023) and their creation of a two-tier system of refugee protection.
- 4** Take a new approach to the upcoming Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. Instead of criminalising people of colour and people seeking asylum, the government should take action to negotiate safe routes and address the root causes of displacement.
- 5** Apply Equalities Act obligations to asylum policy. The government should adopt the Alliance for Racial Justice recommendations¹⁶⁴ in full, and should use its powers to impose a specific duty on English local authorities and national public authorities

162 Paterson and Karyotis, 'We are, by nature, a tolerant people', 107.

163 Runnymede Trust and Refugee Action (2024) 'Asylum in the UK: A front line for racial justice', key messages, December, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/674f071f2f8446f94883f70c_Asylum%20in%20the%20UK-%20A%20Front%20Line%20for%20Racial%20Justice.pdf.

164 Alliance for Racial Justice (2024) 'A better way to tackle institutional racism', briefing, <https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/A-better-way-to-tackle-institutional-racism-Alliance-for-Racial-Justice.pdf>.

to assess the likely impact on race equality of current and proposed policies around the asylum system.¹⁶⁵

6

Adopt comprehensive measures to combat the proliferation of racist hate speech from the highest sections of UK society, committing to applying appropriate sanctions on those who use their position to spread hate.¹⁶⁶

7

End data-sharing practices that are placing victims, witnesses and the general public at risk. We join LAWRS, Southall Black Sisters, Liberty and others in calling for a complete firewall between the police, and all statutory agencies, and immigration authorities.

This report has emphasised the urgent need for further transparency of data on issues surrounding migration, race and racism in the country's immigration and asylum systems. Transparency from the government is paramount in a democratic society, allowing the public to understand how policies are being implemented and how they may impact the public interest. Increasingly, this relates to rights to privacy and freedom from discrimination. The government must therefore:

8

Make it mandatory for all NHS Trusts and Health Boards to store on a centralised system ethnicity and nationality data for 'Overseas Visitors' charged for treatment so that equality analyses can be conducted.

9

Release figures on detention on reporting, including ethnicity data, from 2019 onwards and commit to honouring its obligations under the FOIA (2000).

¹⁶⁵ Runnymede and Refugee Action, 'Asylum in the UK'.

¹⁶⁶ Runnymede Trust and Refugee Action (2024) 'Beyond crisis: Analysing responses to the racist riots', briefing, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/66f16005bbb560933efa6bf9_Runnymede%20post-riot%20policy%20response%20-%20FINAL.pdf; Gentleman, A. (2024) 'UK must curb rise in racist hate speech by politicians and public figures, UN says', *Guardian*, 23 August, www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/August/23/un-urges-uk-to-tackle-rise-in-racist-hate-speech-by-politicians-and-public-figures.

Limitations

One limitation of this study relates to the recommendation above about the need for better record-keeping practices in public services and for transparency from the government. The analysis of detention and deportation, NHS charging, and the sharing of victims' data by the police with the Home Office primarily relied on nationality data and used this to draw conclusions about how 'hostile environment' policies disproportionately impact people of colour. Yet making assumptions about ethnicity based on nationality is problematic in that it fails to reflect the diverse ethnic makeup of nations in an increasingly globalised world. However, researchers were limited by the fact that the Home Office, NHS and NCCU largely only provided nationality data and either completely or partially omitted ethnicity data. Until the government and public services commit to transparency and improved record-keeping, organisations will be unable to conduct robust equality analyses relating to ethnicity.

As noted in the Phase I report, a criticism of the method used in this study (CDA) is that it is too interpretive, relying on qualitative analysis and arguments to root out how discrimination is coded into language in parliament and the news. We aimed to counter this limitation through the use of corpus-assisted discourse analysis, using large datasets (62.7 million words) built on tens of thousands of news articles and hundreds of House of Commons debates on immigration. This was used to track patterns via word associations, identifying dominant associations which then informed the qualitative analysis, which in turn was supported by similar findings from other studies and historical and contemporary analyses of immigration policy in the UK. As such, our dataset is reflective of the mainstream of immigration debate in the UK throughout 2019–24, and the patterns identified in ways of talking about migrants, including 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers', clearly emerge from the evidence.

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Runnymede Trust

207 Brickfields
37 Cremer Street
London
E2 8HD

T 020 7377 9222

E info@runnymedetrust.org

Registered Charity Number 1063609

www.runnymedetrust.org

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