SHUT OUT BY DESIGN



The lives of unaccompanied young people subject to ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF)

By Malte Gembus & Rachel Rosen

A report by **Malte Gembus** & **Rachel Rosen**

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"I'm not homeless - I'm homeless times 100."

—Rahmatullah

1 Executive summary

This report draws on four years of long-term research with unaccompanied young people subject to 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF). This is an immigration rule that denies over two million people in the UK access to mainstream welfare support.

The report documents the devastating consequences of NRPF on young people who arrived as children without parents/carers and were subsequently denied support due to their immigration status.

HOMELESSNESS

- Every participant had experienced homelessness. Avoiding sleeping rough required significant daily labour: sofa surfing across fragile networks, performing the role of the 'perfect guest', and constantly managing the difficulties this created for hosts.

  The simultaneous denial of housing, other forms of support, and the right to work creates overlapping deprivations that are extremely difficult to escape.

RELATIONSHIPS

- With no family to fall back on, and no state support, informal social networks became essential to young people's survival; but NRPF placed enormous strain on these relationships.

- Some young people responded by building wide support networks; others became deeply isolated. Both responses represent a largely invisible and unrecognised form of everyday labour.

SURVIVAL WORK AND SUPER-EXPLOITATION

- Without access to social support, and denied the right to work, young people were forced into informal employment. They often worked extremely long hours, for minimal pay, and under exploitative conditions, but they could not afford to leave.

- This survival work causes lasting damage that extends over time, even if the NRPF condition is removed. It affects unaccompanied young people's health, long-term circumstances, sense of self, and the futures they can imagine.

STOLEN TIME, STUCK IN TIME

△ Many participants had been subject to NRPF for a decade or more, producing a profound sense of being trapped; watching their peers move forward while their own lives remained on hold indefinitely.

CURTAILED EDUCATION AND DREAMS DENIED

△ Education represented hope for the future for many participants, but NRPF systematically denied them access to it, not only through formal eligibility barriers but through the absence of resources and stability required for formal education.

ENDURING EMOTIONAL TOLL

△ All participants experienced significant emotional distress. These are not simply individual mental health problems — they are predictable human responses to prolonged structural exclusion, and their effects endure long after NRPF is lifted.

RACIALISED (IN)VISIBILITY AND CRIMINALISATION

△ NRPF makes young people invisible to the systems meant to support them, while making them hyper-visible to authorities. Everyday survival activities are treated with suspicion, and young people are penalised for the very strategies NRPF forces them to adopt.

DEHUMANISATION AND BORDERING OF SOCIAL

△ Participants consistently described NRPF as a denial not just of services but of their humanity itself — an incremental, racialised process embedded in the logic of the UK's hostile environment, which begins long before formal support is withdrawn.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

△ Our long-term research with unaccompanied young people paints a grim picture of extreme material deprivation, alongside persistent isolation and exclusion.

△ These consequences are not unexpected; NRPF makes life impossible for these young people by design.

△ We therefore recommend that the NRPF rule be abolished and, until then, interim measures are put into place to ensure that unaccompanied young people with insecure immigration status are not discriminated against, are supported to regularise their status, and their care leaving support is not terminated due to their immigration status.

2 Introduction

Unaccompanied young people who have migrated to the UK without parents make up some of the over two million people in the UK who are denied social support due to their immigration status – because they have a time-limited visa, are 'Appeal Rights Exhausted', or are undocumented. This report explores their experiences of being subjected to the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) immigration condition. NRPF prevents people from accessing most welfare benefits, social housing and other support, regardless of the situations they find themselves in.

Precise numbers of unaccompanied young people who are affected by NRPF are not available. However, in 2022 more than 10,000 care leavers were without citizenship with others known to have unresolved or temporary immigration status.[1] Our research indicates that among these care leavers are unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF. For example, almost all the Local Authorities (LA) we surveyed have unaccompanied young people who are 'Appeal Rights Exhausted' on their books and who are consequently being denied social support.[2]

A growing body of academic and community-based research has highlighted that mothers and children from Britain's former colonies are the hardest hit by NRPF, often forced into destitution and debt, made homeless, and subject to exploitation and abuse.[3] To date, far less has been explored about the impact of NRPF on unaccompanied young people. Advocates, however, have pointed out they may face similar problems if they are unable to regularise their immigration status before turning 18,[4] while Local Authorities (LAs) have warned there are rising numbers of unaccompanied young people with insecure immigration status who require support.[5]

Previous studies about NRPF have tended to focus on short-lived moments of crisis when people seek support from the third sector or local government. Relatively little is known about people's efforts and abilities to navigate NRPF's effects over time – even though NRPF often applies for years or even decades. With recent governmental proposals on 'earned settlement' slated to come into effect in late 2026 which will extend the time it will take to gain 'indefinite leave to remain' and be eligible for British

citizenship, unaccompanied young people may spend their entire young adulthood in precarious circumstances – even if they manage to regularise their immigration status. Others risk never gaining indefinite leave to remain if they have arrived without permission – a likelihood given that there are virtually no state-sponsored routes to come to the UK to claim asylum.[6] As this suggests, NRPF does not operate on its own, but is part of the UK's wider immigration system. Its effects both compound, and are compounded by, hostile immigration policies and limited legal aid support, as well as more generalised retrenchment of public provision of housing, health, and education.[7]

This report draws on our long-term research to shed light on the experiences of unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF, highlighting the interplay between their efforts to make and sustain meaningful lives *over time* and the evolving policy context that often cruelly constrains their life-making practices. In what follows, we show that being subject to NRPF is to be consigned to acute material deprivation with deep and enduring effects on emotional well-being and relationships with others. NRPF, we argue, is a form of extreme state abandonment[8] of unaccompanied young people with no or insecure immigration status. It rests, by design, not only on their negative differentiation from others, but also on a process of profound dehumanisation that persists well beyond the period they are subjected to NRPF. We show how, despite this, unaccompanied young people do their best to survive and *'hold on'* (as Mahmood, one of our research participants put it), refusing to accept the limited forms of existence to which they are consigned. Yet, they should never have to do so in the first place, particularly in a rich country like the UK, and we conclude with recommendations for change starting by terminating the NRPF policy.

3 The Shadows research project

This report draws on a 4-year research project conducted at University College London (UCL) between 2023-2026: *Social reproduction in the shadows: Making lives with NRPF (Shadows).*[9] Alongside archival investigation and research with families subject to NRPF, *Shadows* explored the experiences of unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF.

This involved long-term fieldwork with 11 unaccompanied young people in Birmingham, Kent, and London.[10] *Shadows* researchers engaged with individual participants, taking part alongside them in their everyday activities, accompanying them to appointments with state and third sector representatives, and 'hanging out' with a purpose.[11] This involved between 6-24 visits with each participant over a period ranging between 6-14 months. During this time, the young people were also invited to do a narrative interview, where they were asked to tell their story of being subject to NRPF; engage in a mapping activity where they charted 'critical moments' in their life over time and place; take photos on a co-determined theme; and keep a research journal. Towards the end of the fieldwork, participants were also invited to contribute to a book and public exhibition entitled *Fragments of Existence: Testimonies of life with NRPF.*[12]

We were introduced to the participants by our partner organisations (Displaced Collective, Kent Refugee Action Network, and South London Refugee Association), who had met the young people during youth group activities or through their advocacy work. All the participants were male. Ten were in their twenties when we met them, and one participant was in his early thirties. They came from a variety of countries including Afghanistan, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Syria.

All the participants had arrived in the UK without parents or guardians and claimed asylum as 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking children' (UASC). Nine were put in the care of a Local Authority as 'looked after children', in some cases for several years. However, these young people did not receive a positive decision on their immigration applications and, unlike peers with regularised

status, were cut off from 'leaving care support' at some point after they turned 18-years-old. This left them subject to NRPF without other options for support – a negative distinction built into the care system in England.[13] Elsewhere we have characterised this rapid and often unexpected withdrawal of services and termination of support as 'policy cliff edges',[14] resulting from unaccompanied young people's precarious position at the intersection of Local Authority (LA) social care and Home Office migration systems.[15] The tenth participant was age contested and, after an invasive assessment, was denied care as a child. His application for asylum was not successful, and he became 'Appeal Rights Exhausted' not entitled to any support due to NRPF.[16] The final participant was given Discretionary Leave to Remain as a child. However, because he had extended family members living in the UK he was not considered to be 'unaccompanied'. As a result, he was not put in local authority care and was subject to NRPF without support options – even though his extended family could not take him in.

While the focus of our research was on the effects of being denied social support through NPRF, this cannot be easily disentangled from other aspects of the UK's immigration-welfare nexus. For our participants, being subject to NRPF was linked to their immigration status more generally – whether this was regulated yet precarious (e.g., those with time limited visas or 'Appeal Rights Exhausted') or they were undocumented. Further, because of their immigration status, many did not have the right to rent or work in the UK. It was clear that participants had been affected by the ongoing 'legal aid crisis'.[17] In some cases, participants had found themselves at the sharp end of arbitrary, cruel, or mistaken immigration decisions with limited support to contest them. Constant tinkering of immigration rules and consecutive funding cuts have decimated the availability and capacity of legal aid and pro bono legal representation for immigration cases, particularly asylum claims at appeal stage. Indeed, the lack of appropriate legal advice and representation has led to a 'steep rise in refusals' of asylum claims.[18] Some of the

participants also faced ‘digital poverty’, such that limited access to phones, computers, and data plans complicated their ability to navigate highly digitalised bureaucratic processes. Such a pernicious set of interlocking factors trapped many of the young people; once they were subject to NRPF, it became virtually impossible to escape.

Our in-depth research with unaccompanied young people was supplemented by:

- Co-research with three young people with experiences of NRPF. This involved co-designing and leading three ‘polyvocal’ workshops with other young migrants to explore, discuss, and collaboratively make meaning from participants’ narrated experiences;
- Semi-structured interviews with 13 education, advocacy and social care professionals; and,
- Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 41 local authorities in Birmingham, Kent, and London about policy and practice related to unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF.

"Your world becomes really small when you're in a situation like that."

—Ahmed

4 The precarious lives of unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF

Our research with unaccompanied young people with insecure migration status highlights the impacts of being subject to NRPF, alongside other policies and practices in the UK's immigration-welfare nexus. In what follows, we draw on our long-term fieldwork to explore the brutal consequences of being cut off from social support at a young age, showing how this can lead to homelessness – including sleeping rough; enduring volatile and exploitative work; going hungry; having educational trajectories cruelly curtailed; and being subject to criminalisation simply for trying to stay alive. But, as we show, the consequences of NRPF are not only material. Negative emotional and social impacts accumulate over time, leading our participants to feel a profound sense of dehumanisation due to NRPF.

HOMELESSNESS AND REPEATED DISPLACEMENT

All the young people who took part in the research had experienced homelessness in the UK. Although the effects of being unhoused took markedly different forms, our research participants universally spoke about the pervasive and profoundly destabilising effects of not having housing. Rahmatullah explained: ***'So basically I'm just existing, I'm not living a life, I am just surviving, I'm just breathing – I don't have nowhere to go... All I'm left is with the streets, with no housing, no benefits.'***

While their peers were entitled to LA accommodation or social housing as care leavers, these unaccompanied young people were left to piece together fragile and precarious form of housing the best they could. Where possible, this included local authority and Home Office-provided accommodation, voluntary hosting schemes coordinated by the third sector, and shelters, alongside informal

stays with friends and acquaintances. Although fraught, these arrangements, for periods at least, kept them from having to sleep rough.

Nonetheless, every one of our participants described prolonged periods of being entirely unhoused, with nowhere to turn, forced to sleep on the streets, in tents, or in other makeshift public locations. For some participants 'sleeping rough' was limited to short periods in-between, while for others these lasted months or even years. As Rahmatullah described it: ***'I have been homeless since a long time [...] If someone asks me how I've been living since the past seven or eight months... I mean not many people would survive in this time, seven or eight months.'***

Being forced to sleep rough was triggered by the deliberate denial of public funds, often combined with restrictions on the right to work or rent. For the young participants, this created multiple, overlapping deprivations that reinforced and multiplied one another. Without housing, it became harder to find work – not least because of lack of sleep and places to bathe and dress. With decreasing public space available in cities, even meeting basic bodily requirements becomes virtually impossible. For example, parks are closed at night limiting spaces to sleep, and public restrooms are few and far between. Yet, without work, it becomes next to impossible to secure housing. Each deprivation deepens the other, creating what our participants described as a downward spiral that was hard to escape.

As Rahmatullah put it: ***'I'm not homeless – I'm homeless times 100.'***

The young people we spent time with did everything they could to avoid sleeping rough. Many resorted to what is colloquially termed 'sofa surfing': staying intermittently with friends and acquaintances willing and able to offer a spot on a sofa or floor. However, beneath the deceptively casual euphemism 'sofa surfing' lies a far more

precarious reality: one that enforces frequent relocations and puts extreme pressure on otherwise friendly relationships. 'Hosts' are frequently peers – other marginalised young people who are themselves facing precarious situations.

Our participants described different strategies they undertook to minimise pressures their presence might create for their peers. Some described cultivating broad networks to ensure they always had somewhere to sleep and to avoid feeling like they were a burden on any one person. As Icho explained: ***'I don't want to make people uncomfortable, and sometimes they need time by themselves. So usually after 3-4 days I move to the next place [...] but wherever I go, I know I will be happy. If I wouldn't have friends, you would see me sleeping in the streets or in a tent.'***

Zaheed spoke about trying to stay with people who had Council housing rather than those burdened with large private rental costs. He framed his strategy as a form of informal 'redistribution' – a way of indirectly accessing the very institutional support and services from which he had otherwise been excluded.

Young people also actively tried to offer their hosts something in return. They described cooking, cleaning, running errands, and translating to make their presence as unobtrusive, useful, and welcome as possible. Sustaining interpersonal relationships across multiple households and performing the role of the 'perfect guest' were all integral to young people's everyday labour in the face of NRPF-induced housing precarity. Zaheed explained: ***'Like mostly [I would stay with people] like a week so I don't let them feel like I'm too much in the house as well. Like I'm a clean person, always helping with cleaning, cooking. That's why people always liked me and always welcomed me to their house. As well because I'm always looking after their house like it's mine.***

So, I was welcome most of the time. People didn't mind me because I'm not that type of person who was making problems. So, I was always looking after them. I was also the one who spoke more English than them, so there was benefit in the middle.'

Being unhoused is not simply one hardship among many. It is one of the most visible and acute expressions of a system of state-imposed barriers that make ordinary life impossible. It is the direct consequence a set of immigration and welfare policies that remove every available means of support simultaneously.

NAVIGATING FRAGILE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Thanks God, for my good friends. Because when I used to have a place, I always welcomed everyone. That's why, now that I'm homeless, a lot of people … wherever I go, any town – everyone invites me to their houses. They help me so I have something to eat, and that's important. (Icho)

With no family in the UK, and abandoned by the state, unaccompanied young people with NRPF find themselves particularly reliant on informal social networks. Friends, acquaintances, and even strangers become potential lifelines in a context where structural exclusions create suffering and scarcity.

The deprivations caused by NRPF fundamentally shape the way unaccompanied young people are forced to relate to those around them – even in relation to very small and everyday matters. For example, Jamal explained: ***[Sometimes] I have to stay at home because … say like you don't want to wear dirty clothes outside, and then you have to stay home until the money's come so then you and you go shop. I do send people sometimes, just get me like shop … like soap or shampoo, all that kind of things. And then they brought me and I wash my clothes, and just after that come out fresh you know.***

As Jamal's comments make clear, NRPF makes informal social networks extremely valuable, even essential to survival, but difficult to navigate because of the deep reliance and needs it produces. Despite these pressures, the young people with NRPF we met did not withdraw from social life, but they worked hard to navigate it.

For some, navigating relationships while subject to NRPF was about always being helpful, like the 'good guest' described above. For others it was about being 'nice' to everyone, both as a way of showing solidarity to people in similar positions and because they felt they would never know when they might need someone's kindness in return: ***One day Malte was out for a walk with Rahmatullah, who was facing an acute and extended spell of sleeping rough. They spotted a couple in torn clothes walking towards them. The man and woman smiled and Rahmatullah smiled back and slowed down just enough to give them both a fist bump. They exchanged a quick succession of greetings, and the women finished with 'God bless you my friend', to which Rahmatullah responded, 'Let me know if you need anything and have a lovely day'.***

Rahmatullah explained that they attend the same homeless shelter and said, 'They're British so they get support, but you can guess what they spend it on, right? But you have to be nice with people. I try to be nice with everyone and say "hi". Even if I don't want to stop and have a conversation, you still have to be nice with people and show them respect. Keep it nice and friendly.'

Rahmatullah's efforts to maintain and establish positive social relations are evident here – despite the conditions of NRPF which make life impossible and divide people with differential access based on racialised categories of deservingness. Like Rahmatullah, some of the other participants responded to the pressures of NRPF by actively building social networks: reaching out to peers and friends, cultivating informal connections for mutual support, and engaging proactively with organisations, practitioners, and institutions that could help them navigate complex systems and advocate on their behalf. These young people were often highly knowledgeable about where to find different kinds of support and showed considerable determination in seeking it out.

Others, however, moved in the opposite direction and became deeply isolated. This was in part because of the circumstances of NRPF which caused their worlds to contract sharply. As Ahmed described: ***'Your world becomes really small when you're in a situation like that. I couldn't think beyond my room and the shop. That was my world.'***

In part, limiting social connections was also a way that some young people sought to address their worries in relation to others. Having experienced disappointment, betrayal, or exploitation in their relationships with peers and institutions, they felt it was advisable to navigate their situation alone. As Zaheed put it, *'people are trouble'*, and he had learned *'not to accept help from no one next time.'*

Whether by expanding or contracting their social networks, the unaccompanied young people who took part in the research responded to the hardships caused by NRPF with remarkable resourcefulness. What comes out vividly in their accounts are the ways in which, despite everything, they carved out spaces for themselves, sustained relationships, and found strategies to keep going. We saw this as they engaged in a careful balancing act, determining when to connect, when to keep a distance, and how to maintain harmony with those around them.

The efforts of these young people represent a significant and largely invisible form of everyday labour. The sheer intensity and complexity of this labour is remarkable as they forged relationships in contexts characterised by the extreme forms of dependency produced by NRPF. In such situations, social connections are both fraught but highly necessary; desired but risky; and a lifeline and an anchor.

Despite these challenges, all our participants held on to the hope social connections have to offer in circumstances that systematically deny both hope and connection. As Jamal reminded us: ***To go out, to meet people and have a discussion. Talking. All these things. It makes me strong you see ... and like listening other people's stories...***

SURVIVAL WORK AND SUPER-EXPLOITATION

'If you can't get a legal job, you are likely to do a really low payment job for really long hours, literally 7 days a week and you don't have time for yourself or you don't even have time to look for another job [...] And it's really like, to survive, you need this job, and you're just stuck, and you have to work in the same place for who knows... as long as you can or until maybe God saves you.' (Ahmed)

Ahmed's account captures a dynamic that was common across many of our participants' experiences: an acute and often total reliance on 'cash-in-hand' employment as one of the only viable means of survival when formal support systems are inaccessible and they are denied the 'right to work'.

With no alternative source of income and no safety net to fall back on, unaccompanied young people with NRPF face an impossible choice. If they do not take up cash-in-hand work, they risk profound destitution or worse, without ways to afford food, clothing, or personal hygiene products. As Mohammed explained: ***Left with no recourse, I felt utterly powerless. Days passed with me sitting quietly. I continued to rely on my friends for sustenance, but there were times when I went without food for days due to my lack of funds.***

If young people do engage in cash-in-hand work because of their precarious immigration status, they end up having to accept whatever conditions they encounter, often enduring extreme exploitation simply to stay alive. This results in a sense of overwhelming entrapment.

As an education professional we interviewed pointed out: *'The longer a young person doesn't have access to public funds and legitimate work, the more they are distracted from education.'* He explained this creates a *'risk of significant exploitation'* and makes unaccompanied young people even *'more vulnerable'.*

While it may be indispensable for survival, such labour is hard graft and offers no path toward stability. It puts young people in a relationship of extreme dependency with employer(s), one shaped and intensified by the backdrop of existential threat. It is this combination of necessity, exclusion, and structural vulnerability that defines the super-exploitative conditions in which many of our participants lived and worked.

The conditions of super-exploitation meant that many of our participants spoke about holding multiple jobs, and often at the same time. Their precarity in these circumstances was also compounded by the volatility of informal employment. Zaheed explained: ***'So I worked in this one job to save some money, borrow some money and then I could buy a motorbike. With the motorbike I could do another job of doing delivery services. But then the first week [that I was doing both jobs] – Boom – Accident....And I lost both jobs'***

Without rights as a care leaver or a worker, unforeseen circumstances like Zaheed's accident mean losing the small lifeline offered by informal employment.

Prolonged survival work in super-exploitative conditions are not temporary fixes for momentary crises but rather a mode of precarious life-making with effects that extend far beyond the duration of NRPF. Reflecting on the decade and a half he spent with NRPF without a work permit, Zaheed commented: ***'For so many years I was just thinking: How am I going to get through this day? What am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep? So now it's hard to think about these long-term things, like which job I want to do.'***

The survival work and super-exploitation produced by NRPF and related immigration policies have extended consequences, shaping unaccompanied young people's health, long-term circumstances, as well as how they think about themselves and their possible futures.

STOLEN TIME, STUCK IN TIME

One of the most striking features of our participants' experiences is that of NRPF's enduring effects. In part, this is because unaccompanied young people can be subjected to NRPF for long periods of time, a situation linked to and compounded by precarious and often unresolved immigration status. Saeed explained: ***'I came at the age of 17, now I am 29, and I am still in the same position.'***

The lengthy periods of having insecure status and being subject to NRPF, often without a clear end date, made our participants feel trapped and 'stuck': ***'I see people laughing, making plans, moving forward. And I'm just... stuck. Stuck in my head, stuck in this sadness, stuck in a place where hope feels like a distant memory [...] And I'm just here, barely holding on, stuck in a cycle I can't break.' (Mahmood)***

> "I'm just here, barely holding on, stuck in a cycle I can't break."
>
> — Mahmood

Yet, while time felt stuck, they explained that life-making while subjected to NRPF was so precarious, filled with overlapping deprivations, that they could never rest. Multiple intensive jobs in the informal sector, constant movement to find somewhere warm and safe to sleep, continually helping others in order not to feel like a burden – these activities filled their days.

For Ahmed, this meant that time felt like it was both stuck and flying by, never punctuated by any change: ***'That was literally the routine for seven days or six days a week, to do the same thing again and again and again. [...] And to me the time just flies, like you don't even notice that 3 years have passed. [...] the time just passed that quick.'***

These are formative experiences that shape young people's existence well beyond having NRPF removed as an immigration condition. Our participants repeatedly described, and demonstrated, the long-term consequences of NRPF in all aspects of their lives. Saeed, for example, mentioned how NRPF even affected his memory. He explained that he had problems remembering years, dates, and the order in which things happened. ***'It's because of the time I've spent like this without support [...] all the years blur into one, and I don't remember what happened when - it's driving me crazy'.***

While unaccompanied young people's descriptions of feeling 'stuck' and trapped by time are crucial to understanding lives shaped by NRPF, Mahmood's reflections highlight that this is not a problem without a cause. He explained: ***'Even if I get my papers [Leave to Remain] now, they [the Home Office] will have stolen so many years from me'***

He reminds us that NRPF, alongside a raft of 'hostile environment' immigration policies, 'steals' important years from the lives of unaccompanied young people – by design.

"I came at the age of 17, now I am 29, and I am still in the same position."

— Saeed

CURTAILED EDUCATION AND DREAMS DENIED

'When I first came, I really wanted to study, but now I think they have wasted too much of my time.' (Mahmood)

Mahmood's comment highlights the profound effect of NRPF, as a policy that 'steals' time, on young people's educational trajectories. For Mahmood and many unaccompanied young people arriving in the UK, education is not simply a route to a qualification or employment, it is a source of hope for the future and a dream they have nurtured throughout their displacement. Most of our participants did not complete secondary education before arriving in the UK, having undertaken long and often dangerous migration journeys. Particularly when placed in local authority care, formal education became a central focus of their lives.

While it is technically the case that a person subject to NRPF may be able to access Further Education if they meet the relevant eligibility criteria,[19] the reality on the ground tells a very different story. Icho told us about an interaction with the local authority leaving care team: ***'But then when I told them I wanted to study to become a barber in college they told me that it was too expensive and that I would have to pay for it myself. That wasn't too long before they stopped supporting me. Sometimes they just kill your dream.'***

Icho was describing the moment he came face to face with what we call a 'policy cliff edge' built into social care: the local authority terminated his care leavers support, he was left subject to NRPF, and his aspirations were dashed. In his case, formal education simply became unaffordable in a severe and devastating manner.

Our research also shows that meeting an eligibility threshold on paper means little when the basic conditions needed to pursue education are absent. For example, two of our participants did manage to enrol in Further Education colleges during the fieldwork period, a feat which required considerable determination and effort. However, the courses available to them were extremely limited, restricted to ESOL and Maths. More significantly, both participants were ultimately forced to withdraw. The volatile and precarious conditions of their housing and day-to-day subsistence made regular attendance impossible to sustain. Educational opportunities are not simply a matter of ensuring access in the narrow, formal sense. Rather, formal education requires a level of stability that NRPF systematically denies.

During an interview, Ahmed reflected on his experience of NRPF to think about what advice he could offer to others. He commented: ***'I know it's a really difficult period in their life, but I think they need to work on learning new skills – to learn as much as they can. I am obviously saying this now [that my situation improved] but if someone told me I would have to work 12-hour shifts for 6 or 7 days a week always doing the same thing, I would say still try to learn something new, try to become an expert in something else. I think that's the only way to save you from this circle.'***

> "[Studying is] 'the basic thing that every human being should be allowed to do.'"
> — Rahmatullah

Ahmed's words speak to something that all our participants identified: NRPF disrupts young people's educational journeys, and the consequences go far beyond lost qualifications. Being cut off from formal education denies young people access to what the UK government recognises as a basic right for all children and young people: the right to lifelong learning and personal development. As Rahmatullah put it, studying is *'the basic thing that every human being should be allowed to do.'*

To be denied education is not only a practical setback but a profound assault on young people's intellectual, emotional, and personal formation; and, by extension, on their sense of who they are and who they might become. But Ahmed's words remind us of something else: despite the profound injustices of having formal education denied, learning can and does still take place among those subjected to NRPF. Young people are resourceful in the pursuit of knowledge – even when the system seems to be designed against them. We have met avid readers, poets, carers, cooks, photographers, technicians, DJs, youth workers, mechanics, barbers, and footballers – all who seek to hone their skills and understandings despite their abandonment by the state.

THE ENDURING EMOTIONAL TOLL OF NRPF

'I have felt in the 12 years here [in the UK] that if you have a dream that you wish to achieve, suddenly you find yourself in problems and at the same point where you started and you didn't achieve what you wished for, disappointed and lacking desire. [...] I got a lot of anxiety and mental problems thinking about the future.' (Saeed)

The emotional toll of living with insecure migration status and being subject to NRPF comes through clearly in the testimonies of all our research participants. Feelings of uncertainty about the future, a profound sense that time is being lost or stolen, and a struggle to see a way forward when denied access and support for even the most basic necessities for life were widely reported by the young people we spoke with. For many, this produced persistent low moods and, in some cases, suicidal feelings. As Mahmood explained: ***'The prolonged uncertainty has taken a severe toll on my mental health. I am battling severe depression, compounded by persistent suicidal thoughts, and I have previously attempted to end my life. The mental health support and medication I receive offer little solace in the face of this overwhelming despair.'***

These experiences are often labelled as mental health issues and assigned medical diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including by the young people themselves.

'I feel like I live between life and death. I have depression and I am unable to feel happy or even the pleasure of anything. I feel like there is nothing left that makes me happy in this world, and I do not care about eating. I don't feel the taste of food.' (Saeed)

While such clinical terms may accurately describe the symptoms, they risk obscuring something important. These are not simply individual psychological struggles. They are entirely understandable human responses to the extraordinarily difficult circumstances people are forced to endure because of NRPF and other hostile policies in the UK's immigration-welfare nexus.

When young people are systematically denied access to basic rights, excluded from housing, work, education and social support, and left in prolonged legal and administrative limbo, it would be remarkable if this did not negatively affect how they feel

about themselves and their lives. The emotional distress our participants describe – the sense of being *'a mentally and emotionally broken person'* as Saeed put it – is inseparable from the structural conditions that produced such feelings. Treating them as a purely internal psychological phenomenon, without addressing those conditions, places the burden of the problem on the individual rather than on the policies and structures that create social suffering.

Our long-term ethnographic research revealed that the trauma these young people experience is not purely the residual effect of their displacement, nor is it simply caused by specific events. Rather, our participants show us that this emotional landscape is the human consequence of the slow violence wrought by administrative and legislative exclusion. Being trapped in an impossible present, while the future remains out of reach, creates a negative spiral that is difficult to break. It is telling that our participants commonly referred to their time subjected to NRPF simply as *'the situation',* a phrase that captures how all-encompassing and inescapable it feels in daily life.

> "[NRPF made me feel like] 'a mentally and emotionally broken person.'"
> — Saeed

RACIALISED (IN)VISIBILITY AND CRIMINALISATION

NRPF, by design, means that the unaccompanied young people subjected to it are actively abandoned by the state in relation to welfare and well-being. NRPF simultaneously means that they are hyper-visible to the state's carceral operations. Both occur through racialised processes of (in)visibility.

As Rahmatullah explained, to be denied the right to social support and participation means being erased from the social fabric, rendered invisible and unrecognisable in public life: ***'Right now I am invisible – I am invisible because I can't work, I'm not allowed for work, I'm not allowed for study, I'm not allowed for housing, I'm not allowed for benefits. So what do they want from me?'***

But the social invisibility of unaccompanied young people's suffering and their erasure from supportive systems coexists with intense and often threatening state surveillance. Yazan described the acute toll of this contradiction: being told his name was *'not even in the system, like you don't even exist for us',* while simultaneously experiencing panic attacks at the sight of a passing police car, and carrying the constant fear that peers might discover his situation.

His anxieties were not unusual and reflected the extreme precarity unaccompanied young people found themselves in when subject to NRPF. Participants spoke about the way that their life sustaining activities – from sleeping rough and working cash-in-hand to migration itself – were treated with suspicion and punitive responses. Jamal, for example, explained that he had to leave Eritrea to avoid conscription and had been on the move on his own for nearly a decade. But when he arrived in the UK autonomously, rather than waiting indefinitely for a safe and state-sanctioned route to open, he was immediately imprisoned. He said with incredulity: ***'The interpreter told me, "You are in United Kingdom, welcome United Kingdom." I'm in prison for 3 days, and you know come out of prison. And then they say to me, "Welcome to the United Kingdom."'***

While Jamal was shocked by both the way that mobility was criminalised and the irony that imprisonment was framed as a welcome, other participants spoke in matter-of-fact ways about their continual encounters with law enforcement. One day,

"Right now
I am invisible
- I am invisible
because I can't
work..."
- Rahmatullah

Rahmatullah pointed to an opening in one of the lanes between a pub and a café, explaining that he slept there previously because it was more protected. But then the police came and sent him away, telling him the bins were for local shops and restaurants. He said: ***'I think probably the people from the businesses called the police, so they tell me. They maybe didn't want to talk to me directly thinking I was dangerous.'***

His account highlights how the conditions of life imposed by NRPF, such as being unhoused, mean that unaccompanied young people wind up living their lives very much in public and, until recently, subject to direct criminalisation for rough sleeping.[20] Surviving NRPF's 'enforced destitution'[21] is, in part, what makes these young people hyper-visible, with their everyday lives very visibly on display.

But their hyper-visibility is also the result of the growing pervasiveness of racist, anti-migrant rhetoric which renders them suspect. Participants spoke about being singled out and stopped by police, falsely accused of crimes, and yelled out and threatened by people on the street or in places where they were receiving support. Some contrasted the treatment of Ukrainian asylum-seekers with their own, arguing that was a clear example of racism within immigration policy.

The conditions of life produced by NRPF pushed unaccompanied young people into making impossible decisions, often having to weigh up what they considered to be evidence of a moral life in contrast to the limited options they had available for survival. Zaheed explained that: ***'Either you end up in jail, back in [the country you've had to leave], or dead. None of these are good options.'***

Like Zaheed, many participants spoke about 'other' young people who slipped into 'criminal activity'. Our participants sought to distinguish themselves by explaining that even when they were targeted for involvement in what they considered to be criminal or morally disreputable activity, they resisted. They were at pains to point out that they did so when this was often really the only option to make money they needed to survive. Not able to work or study, and subject to NRPF, Mahmood asked: ***'What am I supposed to do? I don't want to be a criminal, but this bad guy approached me outside the mosque and told me that I should sell drugs for him. He told me I could use the money to get married. But I don't want to start my life that way with haram money. I know that if I do it, I will go to Jahannam for sure even though I have been a***

good Muslim all my life. The money is dirty it will follow me and I wouldn't be happy.'

"[NRPF is an] 'outdoor prison.'"
— Rahmatullah

The point here is not to judge young people for the decisions they make about survival in impossible circumstances or the ways they seek to come to peace with the decisions they make. Instead, what stands out here is our participants' efforts to make moral decisions. This is perhaps even more impressive given the context in which such efforts occur; NRPF heavily limits options for life making in the face of racialised suspicion and criminalisation.

Rahmatullah described NRPF as an *'outdoor prison'*. State abandonment, coupled with criminalisation, confines unaccompanied young people, trapping them by inhibiting the conditions for making meaningful lives. To be unseen by the systems meant to provide support, and simultaneously hyper-visible to those designated to police and control, means unaccompanied young people subject to NRPF face profoundly precarious lives.

DE-HUMANISATION AND THE BORDERING OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

'Being in this situation, I feel like not human. It's like I see every single person that I know they got all the facilities that they can use [...] and I just wish I had the basic life that any human being is allowed for. One of them is just basically being a human ... and they took all my rights from me that I'm not even human anymore. Because being a human you should be allowed to study, work, for housing and everything else ... but I'm not.' Rahmatullah

As we have shown above, NRPF enforces profound material deprivation and exerts a toll on emotional well-being and social networks, but its consequences run even deeper. As Rahmatullah explains above, the systematic withdrawal of social support in the UK is a denial of all those things which make a full human life possible.

The sense of dehumanisation he described was echoed across our participants' narratives: ***'I want to say the Home Office they care for some people and for other people they destroy their lives... I feel that dogs have a better life than me. At least they have people that feed them and they can travel, but not me.' (Saeed)***

As Saeed so vividly conveys, NRPF does not merely restrict access to services, it produces and enforces cruel hierarchies of belonging, in which some people are granted the rights and entitlements understood to be universal, while others are refused them entirely.

For many of the young people in this research, this process of exclusion – from both support and 'humanness' – is experienced as both sudden and cumulative. For those who were supported by local authorities as 'looked after children', the termination of care leaving support due to their immigration status is often described as a radical and traumatic rupture – the result of what we call 'policy cliff edges' elsewhere.[22] As Mahmood described: ***'The support that was once a lifeline was abruptly withdrawn [...] [I am] unsure if proper procedures were followed in this decision. Deprived of this crucial support, I faced the harsh realities of homelessness.'***

In this way, the transition to leaving care services, understood in government policy as a move from 'care to independent life',[23] which is already a challenging time for any care leaver, is compounded by an abrupt withdrawal of all legal protections and entitlements. This leaves unaccompanied young people with

insecure immigration status exposed to destitution at precisely the moment when they are expected to become 'independent'.

The experience of de-humanisation is not solely a consequence of this specific rupture. Rather, our research shows that a cruel categorisation as 'undeserving' begins earlier and extends much further, forming a continuous thread running through unaccompanied young peoples' lives in the UK. As Yazan reflected: ***'But it started even before [local authority support was terminated]. I used to live with someone else in the same situation [care leaver] and he used to get everything from the council and the Home Office. The minute he orders something from them they give it to him. But with me, I don't know what it is, I think they didn't treat me very well ... they didn't even want me to be here.'***

> "...they didn't even want me to be here."
> — Yazan

Yazan's account reveals that the sense of being marked out as less 'wanted' precedes the formal imposition of NRPF conditions. It speaks to the 'patchy, uneven and deeply racialised' care services for unaccompanied young people even though the Children's Act (1989) emphasises that 'all children – regardless of their immigration status – are entitled on paper to the same support, services and rights.'[24]

De-humanisation is not a single event that begins when support is withdrawn for young people with insecure immigration status, although this is a particularly stark example of such exclusionary logic. Instead, de-humanisation is something our participants experience as incremental, quotidian, and deeply embedded in the logics of a racialised border regime (which includes and precedes the UK's infamous self-proclaimed 'hostile environment'),[25] and the ways in which access to social support has been weaponised against them. It is, Jamal explained, a form of extreme racialised *'segregation',* between human and non-human, deserving and un-deserving. Interlocking immigration and welfare policies that are designed to make life in the UK increasingly difficult for those without secure immigration status provide the framework in which de-humanisation through NRPF takes place.

5 Conclusion

Our long-term research with unaccompanied young people with insecure immigration status paints a grim picture. The conditions they are forced to endure because they are subject to NRPF are ones of extreme material deprivation and profound and enduring forms of isolation, abandonment, and exclusion. Despite this, the young people we have met through this research demonstrated an incredible resourcefulness, doing all that they can to make meaningful lives within these dire circumstances.

We have suggested that their experiences are not, however, the result of individual failings nor are the consequences unexpected. Instead, NRPF is intended to make life impossible for these young people – by design. Making links between slavery, colonialism, and the treatment of migrants and poor people in the UK – including those subject to NRPF, Jamal asked: ***'How can you do this kind of horrible things to humans?'***

But the recognition that the consequences of NRPF for unaccompanied young people are the result of policy design is important as it reminds us that things can be different – by design. Jamal continued, referencing social movements for change: ***'The history is telling you a lot of things...We have been treated very differently, but we still need to be strong. We need to be great and work hard and give other people knowledge... Everyone should be equal. No more difference between White or Black or rich or poor... We are humans, all of them, but we are just a different in colour.'***

Jamal's words were echoed by young people in the 'polyvocal' workshops we held. They asserted: ***'There should be support for anyone regardless of immigration status and where they are from. Because they are human, they should have the right to be supported.'***

We strongly agree.

"How can you do this kind of horrible things to humans?"

— Jamal

6 Recommendations

Based on our long-term research with unaccompanied young people with NRPF, other young people, advocates, and professionals, we make the following recommendations for change:

1 End NRPF. We recommend that the NRPF rule be abolished, enabling unaccompanied young people to access Local Authority (LA) care leaving services, asylum support, and/or the mainstream welfare system where needed, thereby ensuring the best interests and human rights of these young people are assured.

While the NRPF condition remains in place, interim measures we recommend include:

2 Ensure the Children's Act 1989 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 are not overridden by immigration law (e.g., by Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002) to make certain that unaccompanied young people are not discriminated against because of their immigration status. This includes making sure they have safe accommodation, enough food to eat, and access to the same support and services as other care leavers. While this requires changes in national law, we note that not all LAs end or limit support – offering the gold standard in care under current legislation.

3 Local authorities must ensure that young people do not fall into destitution when leaving care support is terminated at age thresholds (i.e. turning 18, 21, or 25). Safe housing, adequate subsistence, and continued access to support must be guaranteed until migration status is resolved, regardless of age thresholds. This may be achieved through existing vulnerable adult care provisions.

4 Provide funding for Local Authorities (LAs) to enable them to support unaccompanied young people akin to that of other care leavers, regardless of their immigration status. LAs should be adequately funded to provide accommodation, education, and financial support to unaccompanied young people regardless of their immigration status. Minimum standards should be introduced at a central government level to ensure that support is never below the support a care leaver would receive were they entitled to the mainstream welfare system, though discretion to provide additional or extra support should remain where needed e.g., guaranteed housing until age 25 or regularised immigration status is achieved.

5 Local Authorities (LAs) should be funded to ensure that proactive signposting and adequate support is provided for unaccompanied young people to regularise their immigration status. This includes connecting these young people with good quality legal advice and providing ongoing support throughout immigration processes. LAs should develop guidance to ensure that age-based and other changes to support are not abrupt terminations of support that exacerbate these young people's feelings of precarity. We further recommend that LAs take the pledge written by SLRA and Coram: 'How local authorities can best address immigration issues of children in care'.[26]

6 Provide funding for third sector organisations to enable them to start or expand their existing work with unaccompanied young people with NRPF. This should include funding for complex case work, as well as youth groups designed to combat the isolation caused by NRPF and to support unaccompanied young people to sustain social connections and develop a sense of belonging in the UK.

7 Ensure that funding for non-governmental support (such as food banks and shelters) does not set stipulations which exclude unaccompanied young people from using the provision due to their immigration status.

8 Ensure that unaccompanied young people are supported to stay in education of their choosing through funding and accommodation equivalent to that of their peers with secure immigration status. This includes prioritising accommodation and local residency for young people near to their educational provider.

9 Conduct robust Policy Impact Assessments (e.g., on stop and search guidance) to ensure that policies do not enable direct or indirect discrimination against unaccompanied young people.

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9 For more information on Social Reproduction in the Shadows: Making lives with NRPF see https://nrpfintheshadows.com/

10 We are extremely grateful to the young people who took part in the research. They took the risk of opening up their lives to us despite their precarious statuses. This research would not have been possible without their searing insights about the causes and brutal effects of NRPF.

11 For more information about Shadows researchers Malte Gembus and S Khan see https://nrpfintheshadows.com/team/

12 Book: https://nrpfintheshadows.com/learn-more/#books Exhibition: https://nrpfintheshadows.com/fragments-of-existence/

13 Although UASC are subject to NRPF, this is overridden by LA responsibilities under the Children's Act 1989. These responsibilities may be discharged at some point when the young person is 18-25-years-old and would otherwise be entitled to care-leaving support. Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 excludes adults from receiving LA support, including leaving care support, if, for example, they become appeal rights exhausted (ARE) and have no outstanding immigration application or asylum claim.

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15 Unaccompanied young people may also be subjected to NRPF and have no other options for support if they (a) are given 'leave to remain' subject to the NRPF condition or (b) are undocumented, in which case NRPF applies by default. https://nrpfintheshadows.com/the-changing-face-of-nrpf/

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