

'The situation will force you to think of death...you are a burden to other people...you feel useless, just useless - before I was working, now I have given myself a bad name, anyone can look at me and think that this woman is not a good person...I've got a bad name, but I'm not bad, I'm not that kind of a person... when I think of that, locked up like a criminal, it makes me down, down down...'

Mai Moyo, detained claiming asylum 2001, 6 months detention after prison sentence for illegal work in 2005

'It still gets to me, still comes back, even now, when I'm just lying down...the not being free, the fear, the being in prison when you've not committed a crime, just for running when they tried to kill you...the handcuffs like a thief, people swearing at you... sometimes seeing a policeman I can think of that, but I try to tell myself...some British people are good people...'

Maxwell, torture survivor, detained 9 months 2001-2, status since 2006

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Conclusions

The psycho-social and political legacies of detaining asylum seekers can be enduring, even for those detained for periods much shorter than the EU maximum of 18 months. Though the capacity to adjust after being released was shaped partly by detainees' personal history, the length of time inside and their support networks, this study emphasised the overwhelming importance of **insecurity and enforced dependence** after release in hindering this process, especially when this lasted for years. Expanding the use of detention in the asylum process and failing to resolve 'legacy cases' has emotional and political effects that extend beyond the short term and beyond the individuals detained, influencing broader ethno-national communities, producing resistance, and working against the integrated, cohesive society other aspects of government policy aim to create.

To read the full report, or support the Zimbabwe Association's work with asylum-seekers and detainees, go to www.zimbabweassociation.org.uk

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LEGACIES OF DETENTION

Zimbabwean asylum seekers' experiences

A summary of research on psycho-social and political legacies of immigration detention in Britain, based on a study conducted by the UCL Migration Research Unit and the Zimbabwe Association.
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The study

The study involved interviews with 21 ex-detainees and 14 detainee visitors. All but two of the ex-detainees had been held for more than two months, and the longest was detained for two years. Some spent additional periods with electronic tags. None had committed a serious crime: some had been detained simply for seeking asylum or failed claims, others had served prison sentences for working illegally/using false documents as well as spending time in detention centres. Nine of the ex-detainees were torture survivors, eight had status at the time of the interview while 13 had cases that were still pending. This summary focuses on the legacies of confinement (the full report also details detainees' accounts of experiences in detention, including mental health, access to the law, comparisons with prison, coping strategies, protests and hunger strikes).

Zimbabweans are not among the top nationality groups detained in the UK, but a recent survey by the Refugee Council found that 14% of a sample of 292 Zimbabwean asylum seekers had been detained, half for more than three months, one fifth for between six months and two years. The fact that significant numbers were detained between 2000-2 and in 2005 when deportations were active but most were not removed, provides a good case for exploring legacies.

'I'll never forget that...a year inside – you feel it's true, is it me?... You just feel like someone who is dead – when you come out it's like someone who has risen from the dead...you feel you are just a useless thing...you feel you are really mad to be in this world, you feel to be dead is much better than such a life.'

Mai Moyo, seeking asylum since 2001, detained 1 year

'I feel I don't have my human rights with me, that has been taken away from me – cut from the world, kept in detention for no reason, you haven't committed a crime but you're mixed with criminals...seeing all these things, people committing suicide, cutting their hands with razor blades ... then coming out... not allowed to work and support yourself ... that is a degradation...'

Jacob, torture survivor, seeking asylum since 2003, detained 2 years

'Recently I got the British passport ... being granted citizenship can't cross out that experience of being in detention... persecuted by my government ...and then to come to a country where I'm detained for saying I'm persecuted by my own government ...I think maybe it will be something I live with for the rest of my life.'

Francis, torture survivor, detained 5 months, status since 2002

'At the moment my mind is just blank... When I'm just sitting like this, my heart will be beating, as if something can happen. I can't sleep... All the time I hear cars passing, I'm always thinking about those vans that took us to the airport ...'

Chipo, seeking asylum since 2002, detained 2 months 2005

STILL SEEKING ASYLUM

'It is a mind game they are doing, and I worry all the time I can be detained again... I had to go to see my GP as soon as I came out, because I was having so much depression – now I forget a lot of things within a short space of time, I still don't sleep, or very light... and flashbacks they can come in dreams... you can't move on... you're still insecure, can be deported anytime'

Nyasha, torture survivor seeking asylum since 2003, detained 3 months 2005, 3 weeks 2009, 2 failed deportations

'The worst thing is not knowing what's going to happen to you – you have the worst nightmares, when, what, how long am I going to be in this state for. It can haunt you, even up to today... it has repercussions and after effects and you live with them for a very long time... Nowadays I wake up and I'm too scared to get out of the door most of the time'

David, teacher arrived 2001, detained 4 months in 2005

'I do try to forget, but it comes, especially the most thing I remember, when they take you around... handcuffed before deportation, moving you about like a criminal... Then there was this one episode... one guy... tried to stab himself in the neck, it always comes to my mind... he'd taken the knife from the canteen, he was in pain, blood everywhere... disturbing and shocking'

Vincent, detained 4 months, deported, escaped detention to return to UK, fresh claim 2005 unresolved

Detention of asylum seekers in Britain

In the past, detention was considered a 'last resort', but over the last decade, its use has been extended and mainstreamed. There are now 11 Immigration Removal Centres in Britain with a capacity to hold around 3000 detainees, and an annual turnaround of 30,000 foreigners a year. In May 2008, the government announced a further expansion, with the aim of fast-tracking 30% of asylum claims from within detention centres and increasing removals of those who fail. The cost of this policy is significant: in 2008-9, the UKBA spent over £27.6 million of public funds on attempted removals, while the cost of holding a single detainee for a year in Colnbrook IRC was around £68,000 in 2006.

Unlike other forms of detention, immigration detention is not legally a punishment and has no rehabilitative aim or time limit. Britain opted out of an EU directive on returns which had a legal maximum of 18 months. Rather, the goal is removal and asylum-seekers and other foreigners can be deprived of their liberty for administrative convenience in meeting this aim, on the decision of a single immigration officer.

But many immigration detainees are not deported. Significant numbers are let out on bail, go on to make successful asylum claims and build a life in Britain. This research asked what happens to such ex-detainees after their release? What problems do they face? Are there short and long term psycho-social or political legacies? How do they integrate into British society? How does detention affect attitudes towards Britain and the law?

Findings

Detention caused acute distress over the short-term for the majority in the study: interviewees reported deterioration in their mental and physical health, loss of property, shame, fear, flashbacks to confinement and past trauma, difficulty in adjusting and strained relationships. The long term legacies of detention depended less on personal histories (eg whether or not interviewees had experienced torture, or the length of time detained), than on whether or not asylum cases were resolved after detainees' release. The major disjuncture in the interviewees' lives hinged on whether or not they had status.

Detainees explained their immediate problems adjusting largely in terms of on-going insecurity, and fear over re-arrest and deportation. All were released with unresolved cases and lacked rights of participation.

Prohibitions on work led to **poverty and dependence**, causing **shame and straining relationships** as ex-detainees felt a burden on sureties and relatives. Those dispersed into NASS accommodation were isolated from support networks. The **stigma** of having been detained was enhanced by electronic tags, but also by the sense of moral failure from being unable to fulfil adult roles: all worried to the point of distress about family and their **inability to support dependants**.

The ex-detainees who lacked status universally described **depression and anxiety**, some reported **suicidal thoughts** and became visibly distressed in the interviews. They continued to experience flashbacks to their time in detention in Britain, provoked by reporting, the sight of white vans or police officers, and sometimes to prior episodes of confinement/torture in Zimbabwe, for years after their release.

The ex-detainees who had **status in Britain**, in contrast, were **forward-looking**. Some were in **professional employment**, most were **combining work and study**. Most did not talk about depression in relation to the present and many spoke enthusiastically about their prospects and opportunities. Yet although they desired to put the experience of detention behind them, the majority (all but three) were unable fully to do so and described still living with intrusive memories. For those with criminal records, there were very direct legacies of detention, as they had lost jobs following CRB checks.

All three ex-detainees with refugee status in Britain who did not describe lasting negative emotional legacies had direct personal experience of violence. One was a torture survivor and relatively well known politician who arrived with unhealed wounds on his head and high profile contacts who helped bring about his release (though his initial claim made in detention was refused); the second gave a vivid account of how detention caused him to relive past violence, but felt with time and support from family, he had been able to 'bounce back', and that the episode had taught him more about his rights and about how to challenge abuses. The third likewise felt detention gave him a sense of having rights and entitlements.

Experiences of detention **affected attitudes towards Britain and the law**. Most ex-detainees lived with the sense of having been victims of injustice, and a conviction that the asylum system is arbitrary and unfair, having been shaped by immigration policies that responded to anti-immigrant sentiment and racism. Though some arrested for illegal working described feeling resigned to serving criminal sentences, being held for indeterminate periods under immigration powers with the fear of removal was more difficult to cope with. Some described feeling hate or anger towards Britain, the British and 'the system'. The sense of having experienced an injustice was not eradicated by subsequently having asylum claims accepted or being granted British citizenship. To cope, the ex-detainees had turned to religion and/or became involved in Zimbabwe diaspora politics and protests. Although some had withdrawn from public and political life, the experience of detention had turned a larger proportion of ex-detainees in this study into civic activists.

THOSE WITH STATUS

'Even us with papers, it affects us still – even up to now, I haven't put that whole episode out ... that fear comes back... When I left Zimbabwe, I'd been taken during the night... abducted, interrogated... so then in UK, being taken again, at 4am in the morning ... it was just the same'

Farai, detained 6 weeks 2001, status since 2007

'It's difficult for me to find work – the reason was that criminal record ... all I'd done was to try to escape and then work on false papers... the detention affects me directly because of that... If I had a way to wipe that memory, I would wipe that memory... I can't rebuild my life... being known as a criminal, it damages people and their relationships'

Dumisani, former student activist, 3 months for illegal work, 9 months tag, papers since 2007

'If I hadn't had support from family to get over this, then maybe I could have ended up mentally disturbed for the rest of my life... I retrained as a social worker as I had been at the receiving end, short changed, deprived of my rights... you want to go into a profession where you can make a difference... three years after coming out, maybe life started after that'

Vimbai, ex-policeman, detained 2 months 2001, status since 2002