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.

Produced by the UCL Migration Research Unit and the Zimbabwe Association
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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

I’ll never forget that…a year inside – you feel it is 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…
– Malaya, 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…
– Frank, 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 if something can happen. I can’t sleep…'
– Chipa, seeking asylum since 2002, detained 2 months 2005
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 turnover 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 £65,000 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. All the ex-detainees had a sense of having been victimised, 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 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.

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