

# Young refugees and public space

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# Introduction

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Young refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves on the margins of society: living in insecure housing, experiencing restrictions around employment, coping with a lack of money, and possessing a weak sense of social connections in the new places in which they have found themselves. In our research, the focus is on young refugees aged between 16 and 30 years. According to the 1951 United Nations [UN] Convention, a refugee is anyone who:

**'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'**

In many European cities, there is an informal network of voluntary and community organisations providing services to young refugees. Some groups provide health, counselling and wellbeing services, others often provide access to clothing, language classes or social support, and others still extend these and other services through arts and cultural initiatives. In many instances, asylum seekers and refugees lead or take active roles within organisations that provide services to those seeking asylum.

Even though young refugees are one of the most marginalised social groups, the message from many governments and from the media is that they are a problem, and that immigration needs to be restricted. For instance, media and political representations often stigmatise young refugees as either 'dangerous intruders' or as 'victims.' These simplistic stereotypes overlook the considerable mental, emotional, and physical strength that many demonstrate to build connections and re-establish their lives in a new and unfamiliar context.

In this research, we examined the role that cultural and arts initiatives play in the lives of young refugees and ways in which these groups help to promote young refugees' citizenship and senses of belonging. Alongside this, we were interested in understanding more about the arrival experiences of young refugees and the different organisations and groups that help them at this point. We also wanted to find out about the use of public spaces by young refugees and how they negotiate experiences of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, we were eager to understand how young refugees represent their own stories of making home in a new place.

## How we did the research

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We wanted to explore the everyday lives of young refugees, to listen to their voices, learn about their histories and experiences, and explore their contributions to their communities. To do so, we conducted research with young refugees in four European cities. Two of our four case study cities are the large and diverse cities of Amsterdam and Brussels, the capital cities of the Netherlands and Belgium respectively. Both cities are home to a diversity of ethnic and religious minority groups, including refugees. Our other two case study cities are Newcastle-Gateshead in North-East England and Leipzig in the German state of Saxony. Both cities are more regional, smaller, and less diverse than Brussels and Amsterdam. However, both bring with them an important history of providing sanctuary to refugee communities.

We adopted a qualitative approach so we could explore personal everyday experiences and pay attention to life stories, feelings, and attitudes. We worked closely with young refugees on their own terms, and we also worked closely with organisations that support them. Our approach ended up being quite different in each city, as we were responsive to the interests and preferences of local groups and of the young refugees who participated in the research. Some of the approaches that young refugees wanted to use were:

- mental mapping of public spaces and exploring urban experiences
- walk-along interviews to explore public spaces and encounters
- photography, community theatre, radio, art and drama.

We also conducted interviews with key staff from arts, cultural and other initiatives in each city. Overall, we worked with 145 young refugees across the four cities and interviewed 128 staff from arts, cultural and other initiatives. We use pseudonyms when we quote from young refugees to protect their confidentiality. We have kept the names of some of the organisations, but have used a pseudonym for others in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Some of the young people who participated had been granted refugee status. Refugee status is generally given to those who are deemed to meet the UN Convention definition of a refugee (see above). In most cases, refugees are given a period of leave to remain in the host country and have permission to work. Others were in the process of claiming asylum and so were waiting to hear from the state authorities about the outcome of their application to become a refugee. Those waiting for the outcome of an asylum application are often legally restricted in many domains of life, including access to employment opportunities, education, finance, and housing.



Public spaces are sites generally open to public use and range from public outdoor spaces, such as parks, streets, plazas and football pitches, to more enclosed spaces, such as libraries, shopping centres, community centres and museums. Access to public space is important to people's wellbeing, providing social interaction, daily routines, creative and educational opportunities, fresh air and green spaces. Across the four cities in the research, public space plays an important role in the everyday lives of young refugees, but it is also a space of uncertainty, where both positive and negative experiences occur.

In all four cities, there is a network of services that provide forms of solidarity, support and care to young refugees, such as charity, community and volunteer groups, religious centres, cultural and art groups and civic spaces. As asylum seekers and refugees experience high levels of social isolation, these initiatives provide important public spaces for social interaction and can assist in promoting feelings of inclusion and belonging. In addition, they are important spaces for accessing information, support, the internet and education, as well as for forming daily routines. For those who are in the process of claiming asylum or are destitute, and consequently have limited rights, money and networks, access to these spaces can be very important. Many asylum seekers and refugees play crucial roles in volunteering with service providers, and several organisations across the

four cities are led by refugees or have staff who have a refugee background in key roles.

*'Action Foundation and N.E.S.T are really good. They help us with our English. They provide classes. But they also provide lots of practical support, like how we pay gas and electricity bills, or other problems we might have.'*  
**(Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, East Africa)**

*'At the initiative, I met Anna and Hani. And they have changed my thoughts. The atmosphere was so familiar there... There, I could really have contact with German people and talk with them and go out together. For me, that was really a positive push. I have evolved there, personally, and learned a lot.'* **(Leipzig, Male, Syria)**

Various other public spaces were highlighted as having positive impacts on personal wellbeing. For instance, outdoor green and recreational spaces, such as parks, river walks and sport pitches (football, basketball etc) can provide moments of relaxation, socialising, self-care and distraction from everyday difficulties. Retail and leisure spaces, such as cafes, gyms and shopping centres, also play an important role, providing opportunities for socialising, spending time in, and learning about, the city.

*'I really like this park. You have water you know. Like a kind of a small lake or something like that and I just sit there, just relax. I spend my whole summer there, you know, just sitting there like in the afternoon and looking at the dogs, looking at water everything like, and I'm amazed by this little thing you know. I just sit there and put my headphones on, happy like, I'm cool and what I'm craving for is to be alone you know.'* **(Brussels, Male, Burundi)**

*'There is a little pathway, through the bushes, that leads to a little square in the middle of the park. It's well hidden. That is my place – for reading and for releasing my head, to relax a bit. I always cycle past that place when I have something to do in the Western part of the city. It is very calm there. That is my favourite place.'* **(Leipzig, Male, Cameroon)**

The experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in public spaces are also formed in the local context and relate to the specifics of each city:

*'Amsterdam is the biggest city of the Netherlands with lots of activities... and the people in Amsterdam are beautiful people, very polite. When I walk in Amsterdam, I hear lots of English words, no Dutch. In a café, I hear English. In the streets, I hear English. Amsterdam isn't Dutch, it's a city of the world.'* **(Amsterdam, Male, Turkey)**

Yet, in all the case study cities, asylum seekers and refugees also experience hostile and unwelcoming encounters in public spaces. Many experience situations of 'sticking out' in public spaces, and this can lead to experiences of racist hostility, such as verbal and physical abuse. To mitigate potential hostility, some conceal aspects of their identity when in public spaces, for example by not speaking in their native language while on public transport. For others, hostility leads to the avoidance of certain public spaces in the city.

*'When I'm at the bus stop with my sister or friend, I try not to speak in my own language. I try to speak quietly or [in] English because they're going to think I'm speaking about them...'* **(Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Syria)**

*'When I entered the tram at the beginning, just after I arrived, I noticed that people backed away from me. Or when they entered, they didn't want to stand or sit close to me. I started to dread every moment the tram approached a stop. It hurt me a lot.'* **(Leipzig, Male, Cameroon)**



Across all the cities in the research, everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion overlap for young refugees. They face discomfort, insecurity and hostility on a regular basis while, at the same time, experiencing acts of solidarity and inclusion that enhance their sense of attachment and belonging.

*'Cause to be honest, there are some places you feel like you are something else and not a human being... You are a monkey or I don't know.'* (Brussels, Female, Burundi)

Inclusion and exclusion are experienced differently, according to the multiple social identities and cultural backgrounds of young refugees. For example, Muslim women refugees who wear a headscarf often deal with multiple exclusions in public spaces. Yet, other young women refugees experience a greater sense of inclusion and freedom in public space than in their home countries.

*'Something I find interesting, as a woman in Germany – especially here in Leipzig – is that there is so little consideration and understanding for the culture of other women. There are also no places for women from different cultures to go to and feel comfortable. As an example, I really enjoy swimming, but I haven't been for two years now, as there are no women-only swimming pools here. And I don't feel comfortable to undress in front of others either, which here, in a swimming pool, you cannot avoid.'* (Leipzig, Female, Yemen)

Other refugees experienced the mere 'whiteness' of public spaces as a shock, as Lucius explained when he spoke about a protest he had been engaged in:

*'Yeah, but I was so shocked to know, in a very big city like this, making that kind of protest in the city centre, there were a lot of policemen on the ground you know. And I was the only Black person. The protesters and people who were passing by, they were all white.'* (Leipzig, Male, Nigeria)

Those with refugee status often experience exclusion from the local job market and find it difficult to gain meaningful employment. Factors such as structural racism, unrecognised qualifications and lack of opportunities for work experience make it difficult for refugees to find employment.

*'Work is still the hardest thing to find... But the difficult thing is actually for me being accepted about who I am. What I mean by that is yes, I have a Geordie accent now but it's still far from being an English person. So when I go for the interviews, I feel like sometimes I'm not being understood. So work is one thing in my life that's been absolutely a nightmare and is still being a headache.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Southern Africa)

In a few cases, we found that refugee women were limited to staying at home most of the time due to childcare commitments and their lack of access to childcare facilities and related welfare entitlements.



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Arrival is a core part of the asylum experience. Yet, arrival is neither a one-off event nor a simple process that happens quickly. Rather, asylum seekers negotiate many forms of arrival in a new place: learning about new institutional procedures, building new social networks, and finding new spaces for the self. For many, this feels like a long-drawn-out process.

Arriving requires ongoing effort on the part of young asylum seekers and refugees as they work to gain knowledge, learn new languages, make friends and create a new life in a safe place. This arrival 'work' is to escape harmful impacts of the asylum process, such as isolation, waiting and exclusion.

*'Sometimes, from the camp, I travelled to the city centre to attend the language class. Then I got really exhausted in class. And I had to travel back by bus. And then I had to trek another 20 minutes by foot to the camp. That's another challenge... Then, we refugees are finding it difficult to find a job. And we don't know what the next decision will be, you know. I'm just here, you don't have anyone to talk to. The only thing we receive are letters, letters and letters, you know. Different kinds of letters.'* (Leipzig, Male, Nigeria)

Some of those we spoke to had to live in an asylum or reception centre. This is often difficult, as one employee in Brussels pointed out:

*'We always have incidents in the centres, yes, many young people who don't get along.'* (Brussels, Female, Service provider)

A Syrian refugee in Brussels concurred:

*'Actually, it's very difficult here because they put me in a room with another five people, so six people in the same room. And my situation is very difficult because you know it's very sensitive, but the other people and they are homophobic. It's very difficult for me to be honest.'* (Brussels, Male, Syria)

Disorientation is a common experience during this arrival process. Engaging with new places, cultures and languages, as well as government asylum policies, such as enforced dispersal, complicated bureaucracy and strict regulations, combine to produce disorientating arrival experiences.

*'When we first come to these accommodation places, we need to take some orientation classes to take information about what you can do in this city, what are the opportunities for us? We are just all on our own and that's a big problem. When I arrived, they told us that we shouldn't go to any other cities, and they didn't give us any other information about anything else.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Western Asia)

*'The first time I arrived in Europe I panicked. I looked around me, at the people. The culture is so different. I was also afraid of the police and what they would do to me. The authorities in my country are really strict, and I thought it would be similar in the Netherlands. I thought that the police will bring me to the prison. But then I realised that it is actually secure here. Their behaviour is ok.'* (Amsterdam, Male, Iraq)

*'I started to ask people. In the beginning, I was afraid because I didn't know these people. I had heard that the Europeans didn't like people in the Middle East, especially with black hair, with beard. Maybe they would look at me and think that I'm dangerous. But I didn't have any choice then just to ask. And I asked a man because I was afraid to ask women. Maybe women would call the police or something. I didn't know.'* (Amsterdam, Male, Palestine)

# Arrival infrastructures

Arrival infrastructures refer to the places, services, institutions, and people that migrants encounter and engage with during their process of arrival in a new city. In the research, we examined the types of arrival infrastructures that young refugees interact with and the types of public spaces that such interactions generate.

Initiatives that provide solidarity, support and care, such as charity, community, arts and volunteer groups, are of particular importance for young refugees. They provide practical support, helping with the navigation of a new city and the complexities of asylum systems. They also provide a space for participation and creativity, where young refugees enact belonging through volunteering and the setting up of artistic and social activities.



*'[The asylum centre] is the only organisation that really helped me, because they are the ones [that] also find me a studio, they're the ones who actually kept me in touch with like some interims (small jobs) also even though like those interims didn't call me back yet. But no, like [the asylum centre] is really like my mother at the moment, like they are really trying to get things done, and people are really helping me here.'* (Brussels, Male, Burundi)

The type of accommodation and housing accessed by asylum seekers and refugees varies between the case-study cities and depends on the stage that people are at in the asylum processes. For example, reception centres, dispersal housing, social housing and hotels are some examples of housing and accommodation. Across all the cities, housing and accommodation are one of the biggest concerns for asylum seekers and refugees, significantly impacting wellbeing and senses of belonging and home.

*'.. As I said before, we had to move house like two, three times in different areas. So, a lot of packing and unpacking, and the last house was terrible that we lived in because, I don't know, there was some humidity reason inside that. Like, the walls started to get really dirty and just... you know? It was terrible. The area, even going to work from that area was a struggle because of the buses and, you know. So, between that and then moving*

*houses, we just weren't comfortable in the space that we were given, and now, we're finally in the house that we're okay with.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Female, South Asia)

During early resettlement, arrival infrastructures offer opportunities to be around other people who are in similar circumstances and face similar challenges in a more spontaneous and voluntary manner. Community, arts or cultural centres can function as a stepping stone from which wider public spaces can be explored if they feel more confident about their knowledge of local practices and language.

*'I see other people talking to each other [in a public space] and I would like that as well. I cannot do that though and I am looking for ways of how to approach this. Here, I don't have this problem. Here, there are people who want to talk to you and who are here to help you with the language. Then, it is less problematic if you make a mistake. There are a lot of teachers here, but it's not like that in the streets. There, I'm afraid to make mistakes.'* (Amsterdam, Male, Eritrea)



Asylum seekers and refugees are forced to make home anew in the place or places to which they have relocated. In the research, and across all four cities, home for asylum seekers and refugees is complex and changing and it overlaps with feelings of loss and experiences of exclusion. Moreover, feelings of home are shaped by the legal status and rights offered to those seeking asylum.

*'If I would obtain my residence permit, I think my future would be even more bright. But until that point, I am not fully feeling at home in the Netherlands. I remain optimistic, but it's very hard.'* (Amsterdam, Male, Afghanistan)

Spaces and feelings of home are interconnected with emotional aspects of being in the 'home' country. Emotional relations to the home country are translated into practices and activities in the new location, such as visiting particular places or carrying out certain activities that trigger memories. In the following quote, a Syrian woman illustrates how gardening can connect refugees to their home country.

*'That is something many people are trying: to grow some plants here they know from home, some trees, cucumbers, tomatoes. They are always trying to plant them, getting the right equipment to make it work in this colder climate, using a greenhouse or something.'* (Leipzig, Female, Syria)

A sense of home can also be created by keeping or cherishing certain cultural artefacts, materials or items. Refugees and asylum seekers may find familiarity and comfort in these objects due to memories of past events and consequently are reminded of 'home'. This can be difficult, however, as in many cases forced displacement comes with dispossession.

# Belonging



Belonging is developed through everyday practices and activities in public and private spaces. For young refugees, working at or securing belonging is a complex process and is related to various factors, such as people, places, activities, knowledge, and legal rights. For example, playing sports such as football is particularly important to some young men, providing social contact, comradery, and a shared interest, which can generate a sense of belonging to people and place.

*'... and there was football as well because I was going to football two times a week. I loved football then. I was going on Monday night and on Wednesday night. It was more like foster care kids all over the place. That's where I found some of my friends, and we're still in contact today.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Southern Africa)

Participants sometimes refer to the diversity of the receiving country as a source of belonging:

*'Because if you live in Brussels, you think and feel that Brussels is the home for people who have no home. Because there is a very big mix: there are Africans, there are Moroccans, there are Syrians, you see Iraqis, you also see a lot of Belgians, you see Flemish, you also see French. You see a lot of people who speak Spanish, people who speak Italian. So it's a very big mix; in fact, it's very international... And if it's a mix... you think less and less about racism. And you also feel less and less you know racism or people, the ways people will look at you.'* (Brussels, Male, Syria)

A sense of belonging to place is developed through the accumulation of knowledge about the layout and culture of a city. This knowledge is often gained through walking, cycling and using public transport within the city, as well as receiving help from local people and local groups.

*'I met them after a few weeks, and they were my friend's host family. And then we started to be in contact, more and more. And they suggested to host me while I learn the language. And so I went to stay with them for a year, a year and two months, where I also learned the language. I experienced moments that were special, spiritual, common moments and it was, so it was, how shall we say, the countryside. So it was a simple, quiet life. They surrounded me well, they also welcomed me well. I didn't feel that I was a refugee with them.'* (Brussels, Male, Syria)

A range of factors makes it difficult to develop a sense of belonging for young refugees. For instance, exclusionary politics, limited or no rights to work, social isolation, racism, cross-cultural differences and a lack of social networks all hinder the development of belonging and place-attachments.

*'For three years, I have been living in the same area. I visit the same shop every single day. I see the same people every day, but they don't recognise me. When I was in Zaandam, I went to the same shop too, the Aldi. They knew me at some point. When I showed up, they gave me attention, greeted me, knew who I was. In Amsterdam, you can walk through the same area every day; they don't notice you.'* (Amsterdam, Male, Sudan)

## Cultural and arts initiatives



In all four cities, cultural and arts initiatives provide important spaces of solidarity and engagement for young refugees. Art and creative practices have a range of personal and therapeutic benefits for them, providing an opportunity for recognition and to make themselves feel less invisible and marginalised. Moreover, creative practices can improve mental wellbeing and provide a form of healing from stress and trauma.

*'And so there was also the idea of giving a voice to the less visible... young artists. Well, it's not easy to create a place for themselves in Belgium and Europe... So there was this attention that made us seek out partnerships with talented artists, young artists, who are known but snubbed or sometimes a little less visible in certain circles or because they themselves may also feel types of discrimination based on their origins, social background, age, etc.'* **(Brussels, Service provider)**

Cultural and arts initiatives provide important spaces for social interaction and developing feelings of inclusion and belonging. They are particularly important for cross-cultural encounters between young refugees and local communities.

*'I found this organisation here in Leipzig and met so many nice people there. But at that point, I was still in a reception centre in Dresden. When I was about to move to a flat in Dresden, it really got me thinking:*

*Should I move to Dresden or stay in Leipzig and basically start life from scratch? And I told myself: 'Alright, I know this organisation here; they will help me with the language and everything. They will help me to arrive in Leipzig and get to know even more new people. Really, this group is like my family, and they really were the reason I stayed here in Leipzig!'* **(Leipzig, Male, Syria)**

In response to increasingly restrictive and complicated asylum laws, many cultural and arts initiatives combine creative arts practice with more practical and 'critical' forms of support and care for asylum seekers and refugees, for example language lessons, helping with translating documents, helping with paperwork and asylum claims, providing essential items such as food and toiletries.

*'... and then of course when people come in, they ask, they would ask me to help them, to write a letter or to translate something. So, we started to signpost people because my background is totally art and art history. So, I felt we became a conduit for information.'* **(Newcastle-Gateshead, Female, Service provider and artist)**

## Voluntary, community and charity groups



In all the cities, voluntary, community and charity groups also play an important role in the everyday lives of young refugees. Diaspora and religious groups with strong cultural ties to home regions are particularly important for recent arrivals and for developing feelings of inclusion and belonging. As they are often multi-lingual spaces, where the native languages of asylum seekers and refugees are spoken, they can provide important spaces of social interaction and assist with learning about the city and the asylum process.

*'Well, the first thing that was important for me to settle down to be honest was ACANE (African Community Advice North East) because I remember, at the time, every Friday we had a different meal, just like you saw today, but it was more like a proper meal from the African community, from African country. So one Friday you came in and you find Nigerian, another one from Ghana, another one... there was more African people around here so, when I was coming here, it was feeling more like home because I could speak Portuguese, I could speak Lingala, English and people could understand. We could exchange ourselves properly. This was the main thing because I was coming here twice a week.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Southern Africa)

Voluntary, community and charity groups play a critical role in providing financial support and essential items to asylum seekers and refugees in moments of

crisis. For destitute and undocumented asylum seekers, who no longer receive any financial support, voluntary, community and charity groups are often one of the only sources of support and care. Moreover, such groups often play a critical role in language provision, providing online and offline language classes.

*'But the thing is, we have around a dozen destitute asylum seekers that we support financially with emergency support every week... And there was one gentleman specifically, an Iranian guy who's been here for 25 years, still doesn't have status. And so he came, and we gave him some money. And we said, "Look, we're giving you two weeks' worth of money because we can't be face to face with you.'* (Newcastle-Gateshead, Male, Service provider)

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