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To cite this article: Taulant Guma, Yvonne Blake, Gavin Maclean, Kirsten MacLeod, Robert Makutsa & Kiril Sharapov (2023): “Are we criminals?” – everyday racialisation in temporary asylum accommodation, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2023.2238052](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2238052)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2238052>



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Published online: 25 Jul 2023.



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## “Are we criminals?” – everyday racialisation in temporary asylum accommodation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the placement of people seeking asylum in temporary accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on a 14-month collaborative ethnography conducted between 2020 and 2022 with asylum seeking individuals in Glasgow. While moves to temporary accommodation were framed by state authorities and private firms as providing a “safe environment” from COVID-19, we show how these relocations amounted to a racialised process which constructed our participants as “undeserving” and “unworthy” of protection and care during a period of crisis. Our analysis highlights how this racialisation took place not only on a policy level but also in practice through everyday encounters with private provider staff. Advancing the literature on asylum housing and dispersal through new theoretical and empirical contributions, we argue that the rise of temporary forms of asylum accommodation can be understood as constitutive of racial modes of belonging within a regime of differential humanity.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 13 January 2023; Accepted 20 June 2023

**KEYWORDS** Asylum seekers; COVID-19; Hostile environment; Housing; Outsourcing; Racism

### Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Home Office – the UK government body responsible for the asylum system – began to use hotels as additional temporary accommodation for housing people seeking asylum. While using hotels as an emergency form of housing in the asylum system dates back to 2015 (Darling 2022, 94), the pandemic marked a sharp increase in the number of people seeking asylum living in this type of accommodation, rising from 1,200 in March to 9,500 in October 2020,

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and almost trebling to reach over 26,000 by the end of 2021 (Refugee Council 2021, 1). Together with the private firms contracted to provide asylum accommodation in the UK, the Home Office argued that the relocations to hotels were necessary measures due to housing pressures caused by the COVID-19 crisis (Home Office 2021). The relocations were also described as protective, aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19 among people seeking asylum and to create a “safe environment” for them during the pandemic.

The number of people living in these temporary forms of accommodation has continued to rise further with more than 50,000 individuals currently living in around 400 hotels across the UK (Sandford and May 2023), keeping the issue of hotel-type accommodation at the forefront of media and public attention. Some of the media coverage has been characterised by negative portrayals of asylum seeking individuals, often describing them as people living in “luxury” in “four-star” hotels,<sup>1</sup> and thus “preventing” British citizens from being able to use these hotels. Senior politicians have also suggested that hotels are further problematic because they may act as “pull factors” for potential asylum seekers (Bulman 2021). The higher costs associated with these forms of temporary accommodation are routinely raised by both media and political actors as being a “burden” on the public purse.

In addition to hotels, another form of contingency asylum accommodation that emerged during the pandemic has been the rise of army barracks and military facilities. This form of housing has been met with growing criticism from various organisations and stakeholders working with asylum seekers and refugees as well as politicians.<sup>2</sup> The criticism has focused on the unsuitability of these military facilities for housing people especially in the context of COVID-19, where social distancing was difficult to maintain, and thus the safety of residents could not be guaranteed (APPG 2021).<sup>3</sup> Yet despite all the criticism and calls for closure these military sites continue to be used. Indeed, the UK government plans to extend its range of contingency forms of accommodation to include “giant barges”, which are described as part of attempts to reduce the costs and financial “burden” caused by asylum housing.<sup>4</sup>

The UK government’s determination to press on with sourcing additional contingency forms of accommodation despite the criticism and overwhelming evidence regarding their unsuitability should be understood in a context of an increasingly hostile public debate around asylum in the UK. Framed around Brexit tropes of “controlling our borders”, the UK government seems ever more fixated with policies of deterrence and the “question of how to make them stop” (Mountz 2020, xviii). Much of current government policy and discourse revolve around the so called “boat crisis” in the English Channel with significant efforts and resources being put in place to make the “boats stop” and to tackle what is termed an “illegal migration” and an “invasion” of south England (Sparrow 2022). The government’s introduction of the Rwanda policy in 2022, a plan which involves forcibly

“exporting” asylum seekers who are deemed to have entered the UK “illegally” to Rwanda, is part of this hostility and ongoing attempts to criminalise asylum.

While issues around temporary asylum accommodation continue to receive significant media and policy attention, amid this growing hostility little is known about the experiences and perspectives of people seeking asylum who are directly affected by these housing rearrangements and wider policy changes. As well as contributing to further stigmatisation and racialisation of people seeking asylum, the overwhelmingly negative media and public debate in the UK has led to a substantial misinformation about the actual living conditions in temporary accommodation. Talks of “luxury conditions” in the media have also led to some hotels housing asylum seekers being targeted by far-right groups for attacks.<sup>5</sup> While some media and parliamentary reporting contains more humanised accounts of people seeking asylum who live in temporary accommodations, these tend to be snapshots that offer little insight or understanding of the day-to-day realities of their housing experiences and how the pandemic affected their lives. Attending to this gap, this paper provides an in-depth account of the everyday experiences of asylum seeking individuals who were relocated to temporary forms of accommodation during the pandemic. It focuses on Glasgow as the local authority housing a significant number of asylum seeking individuals in temporary or hotel-type accommodation.<sup>6</sup>

We begin by situating the relocations to temporary accommodation within the wider asylum policy of dispersal, a scheme which began more than two decades ago but which has been central to the field of asylum housing in the UK and more widely in Europe (Schuster 2005). In doing so, we chart the rise of the hostile and outsourced asylum state in the UK, showing how the current hostility is a continuation of policies and discourses that have been decades in the making. In the following section, we engage with key debates and approaches within the dispersal literature, showing how issues of race and racialisation have received little attention within this field. Approaching racialisation as a lived experience, we highlight several important ways in which we advance the current scholarship on dispersal and asylum housing more broadly. After describing the methodology, we introduce two empirical sections describing in detail the everyday experiences of racialisation in temporary accommodation in Glasgow. In doing so, we show how this racialisation occurred on a policy level as well as on the ground in everyday interactions between the participants and private accommodation providers. In conclusion, we summarise the different forms of racialisation that took place during the relocations to temporary and contingency forms of accommodation and argue that these moves amounted to a racialised process which constructed our participants as “undeserving” and “unworthy” of protection and support during a crisis period.

## The rise of the hostile and outsourced asylum system

Within the context of the UK, the late 1990s marked an important turning point concerning asylum accommodation, with the government introducing a dispersal scheme which saw people seeking asylum housed in different cities and regions throughout the UK. The rationale behind this policy was to ease the apparent “burden” that asylum housing was causing in London and the South East of England, the two regions that were the only parts of the country housing asylum seekers prior to this period (Darling 2011; Hynes 2008; 2011). From early 2000s people seeking asylum could no longer choose where to live and their eligibility for support with accommodation costs became conditional and linked to dispersal (Schuster 2005, 616). A new government body called NASS (National Asylum Support Service) was set up to administer the dispersal scheme, yielding a great deal of power in the management of the asylum system. Under the new administration, people were moved around the country with little consideration of their existing social and community networks, thus resulting in their social isolation (Darling 2011). Housing also became less secure and uncertain as NASS made it easier to not only move people around at will but also to terminate their contracts and evict them from their accommodation.

The compulsory dispersal scheme came at a time when asylum was a major political concern and a key priority for the UK government. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Balkan wars contributed to a rise in the number of asylum applicants, an increase which prompted talks of “asylum crisis” in the British media (Corporate Watch 2018, 21). In addition to the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act which launched the dispersal policy, a series of restrictive pieces of legislation were introduced by the British government in the 2000s which marked a new government approach to the asylum system. This approach was underpinned by a politics of deterrence aimed at preventing “fraudulent” asylum claims and making the UK an “unattractive” destination for potential new applicants. The dispersal policy formed part of these “deterrence” attempts aimed at presenting an image of a nation that is “seen to be in control” of the “asylum crisis” (Darling 2011; Hynes 2011; Schuster 2005). This trend of restrictive immigration policies continued in the 2010s, although the focus shifted from asylum to immigration more broadly. Most notably, this later period saw the introduction of two Immigration Acts in 2014 and 2016 which paved the way for what is now termed as the birth of the “hostile environment” (Goodfellow 2019). These policies entailed the expansion of immigration controls internally into all aspects of life in Britain, giving immigration-related powers to a range of (non-state) actors including landlords, doctors, teachers and employers, turning them into border-guards (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019).

While this policy was not specifically targeting the asylum population, its effects have been felt beyond the “unwanted” group of immigrants that it was purportedly aimed at, including people seeking asylum (Hynes 2022). In the most recent raft of UK government policies, asylum has taken centre stage once again. This is manifest in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the current Illegal Migration Bill 2023, pieces of legislation that “threaten the very basis of protection for refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention” (Hynes 2022, unpaginated) and treat as “illegal” and “criminal” anyone who arrives in Britain via irregular routes. The plans in these latest proposals include introducing large “reception centres” which seem designed to expand further the dispersal of the asylum population in the UK and bring more insecurity and uncertainty into this field.<sup>7</sup>

Dovetailing this hostility, privatisation has been another important feature of asylum dispersal in recent years in the UK and beyond. This process became particularly evident in the past decade when the UK Home Office began contracting out its asylum accommodation services to various private companies, a provision which had previously been mainly the responsibility of local authorities (Darling 2016). In 2012, a new asylum contract called COMPASS – Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services – was put in place aimed at “simplifying” the housing provision by outsourcing it to three private companies: G4S, Serco and Clearsprings Group. The first two of these private companies had previously been awarded contracts in the field of immigration detention, indicating the increasing role of privatisation as a major force covering all areas of the asylum system in the UK and beyond (McGuirk and Pine 2020). In 2019, COMPASS was replaced by AASSC – Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract – a new contract worth £4 billion over a 10-year period that still involved three major private providers, the only differences being that G4S was replaced by a new private company, Mears Group and a national contract for a new helpline and support service was introduced, AIRE – Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility.<sup>8</sup> The privatisation of asylum has further impacted negatively on the housing conditions and services provided to people seeking asylum. Issues around poorly maintained, unsafe and unsanitary housing are becoming increasingly common areas of concerns for stakeholders and organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees in the UK (Asylum Matters and Refugee Action 2020).

### **Dispersal as racialisation**

As shown above, since its introduction more than two decades ago there has been a wider consensus within the current literature around the exclusionary nature of dispersal and asylum housing more generally, as processes that have produced and perpetuated the social isolation and marginalisation of

the asylum population in the UK. Scholars have conceptualised and approached the field in different ways, largely reflecting disciplinary interests. Within social policy, researchers have treated asylum dispersal as a form of institutional exclusion, tracing its origin in the restrictive policies introduced in the 1990s as part of the ongoing retrenchment of state welfare linked with the rise of neoliberalism in the UK and more widely in Western countries (Hynes 2008; 2011; Sales 2002). Two pieces of legislation – the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 and the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 – have been highlighted as key in terms of decoupling the category of “asylum seeker” from the term “refugee” (Sales 2002, 463). This gave rise to the problematic distinction between “deserving refugees” and “undeserving asylum seekers” which continues to shape housing policies and public discourses regarding asylum to this day. Another legal separation noted as important during the 1990s has been between “in country” asylum applicants and “at port” applicants, with the former having their welfare entitlement withdrawn (Hynes 2008; Sales 2002). This change led to some degree of dispersal in the period prior to 1999. London and South East of England – the only two regions that housed asylum seeking individuals in the 1990s – were faced with the responsibility to provide accommodation for “in country” asylum applicants who had now become “destitute” (Hynes 2011). This created a shortage in the existing housing provision for these local authorities, prompting the relocation of asylum applicants on an *ad hoc* basis in cheaper accommodation and in areas of multiple deprivation. As Hynes (2008, 102) notes, these institutional processes of exclusion continued with the launch of compulsory dispersal in the late 1990s, most notably with the introduction of NASS which further consolidated “the separation of asylum seekers from society and the legal distinctions between refugees and asylum seekers.”

A second line of inquiry that has emerged largely within the geographical literature has conceptualised dispersal as a form of neoliberal governance, aimed at regulating and controlling the asylum population across the country (Darling 2011; 2016; 2022; Gill 2016). Here the links to wider processes of neoliberalism are also made but there is more emphasis on the way these processes have shaped dispersal. According to Darling (2016), neoliberalism and its key hallmarks of privatisation, economic efficiency and outsourcing of responsibility have been central to asylum accommodation as well as in the way in which the figure of “asylum seeker” has come to be perceived in the public discourse. He describes how privatisation was present in asylum accommodation provision even prior to 1999, but that the introduction of compulsory dispersal marked a significant turning point, with power and control shifting from local authorities to private providers. This trend further intensified with the introduction of the COMPASS and AASSC contracts in 2012 and 2019 respectively, completing the full marketisation of

asylum in the UK. One effect of this outsourcing has been around issues of responsibility, leading to more diffusion in the dispersal system and less oversight and transparency. Importantly, asylum accommodation itself has transformed into a “market” and a “commodity” where profits are prioritised ahead of people’s welfare. As a result, private providers are incentivised to drive down costs, house asylum seeking individuals around the country in insecure and deprived urban locations and keep them “captive” in poor and substandard accommodation (Hill, Meer, and Peace 2021). The end result of this ongoing transformation has been a dispersal system that is “often a carceral experience, one associated with confinement, insecurity and cumulative harm” (Darling 2022, 185). Darling (2022) describes it as amounting to a form of “distributed violence”, one which is slow and extensive, produced by a complex system of state and non-state actors and organisations. On a more discursive level, privatisation of asylum has also had a “depoliticising effect” (Darling 2016, 23), i.e. reenforcing the idea of “asylum seeker” as a “burden” or a “problem” that needs to be regulated through good management efficiency.

Finally, asylum dispersal has also been discussed as a form of state control underpinned by a racialised logic. Approaching the field mainly from a sociological perspective, research has placed more emphasis on the key role played by the state in the dispersal process, seeing the latter as driven by racialised policies and discriminatory strategies (Piacentini et al. 2021). Thus, the separation of “asylum seeker” as a specific type of migrant and the establishment of a tiered welfare system from the 1990s onwards has been described not only as institutional exclusion but also as a form of racialised othering (Piacentini et al. 2021). The dispersal process itself is seen as underpinned by “racialised spatial politics” (Piacentini et al. 2021) and constitutive of a “racialised spatial economy” (Hill, Meer, and Peace 2021) which is manifest in the “dumping” of migrants in the peripheral areas of multiple deprivation and the generation of profits resulting from this spatialisation. The recent use of hotels as a form of emergency asylum accommodation during the Covid pandemic has also been noted as the latest manifestation of these state-designed and ideologically driven processes of racialisation aimed at controlling and containing the asylum population (Piacentini et al. 2021, 2). Importantly, within the literature that highlights the racialising effects of dispersal, links have also been drawn between the latter and wider housing provision for minoritised populations in the UK, situating asylum accommodation within a broader context of social inequality and racial disadvantage that underpins housing governance in the UK (Brown, Gill, and Halsall 2022). Within a historical context, dispersal can be also seen as part of “racialised policy interventions” on migrant groups and minoritised populations that have happened well before the 1990s including during the post-war period (Bloch and Schuster 2005, 503).

We draw on Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou's (2015) definition of racialisation as a process that produces hierarchies of belonging and worthiness and is rooted in colonialism to extend the above discussions in the field of dispersal and asylum housing more broadly in three important ways. Firstly, foregrounding racialisation within asylum accommodation enables us to explore diverse forms of racialisation that occur not only on policy or ideological realms but also in practice through everyday interactions and encounters. As discussed above, in much of the existing literature race and racialisation have remained largely implicit or approached from a top-down perspective, rather than as a lived experience. Secondly, as Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou (2015) have noted racialisation also "occurs through marking of the bodies", which directs our attention to processes of racialisation as they shape people's bodies and construct subjectivities. Thirdly, and importantly, a racialisation lens enables us to situate asylum housing within the context of colonialism, extending historical connections beyond the UK government's post-war immigration policies or more recent transformations associated with neoliberalism and a "punitive" turn in Western countries. As Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou (2015, 641) argue the field of asylum and immigration is not a neutral space but imbued "with racial power relations with a long colonial history". It is part of the coloniality of power, a system of domination of European colonialism and Western imperialism which began more than four centuries ago but continues to be fundamental to contemporary migration policies and discourses in Western societies (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015). Mayblin and Turner (2021) have shown, for example, that racialisation of people seeking asylum in Britain and more widely in Western societies has colonial roots; starting from the late 1980s, asylum applicants coming from non-European countries were constructed as "different" from the European refugees, with the latter being seen as "normal" and thus more welcomed and "desirable". A key effect of this racial (re)ordering (El Enany 2020) and the enduring coloniality of power has been what Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou (2015) refer to as the creation of an "abyssal line" which perpetuates a hierarchical and racial mode of belonging. Immigrants from the Global South – including people seeking asylum – and racial minorities are those who occupy the "zone of non-being", that is "where people are dehumanised in the sense of being considered below the line of the human as non-human/subhumans" (639). In what follows, we draw on these critical ideas to explore how this "abyssal line" is being reproduced in the context of asylum accommodation.

## Methodology

The paper is based on ethnographic research carried out in Glasgow between 2020 and 2022 (Guma et al. 2022, 13–15). The placement of people seeking

asylum in hotels following the first COVID-19 lockdown “took place at scale in Glasgow because the initial accommodation there was deemed unsuitable for social distancing” (Sturge and Gower 2020, 24). As a result, around 350 asylum seekers were moved to various hotels in the city centre following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020.<sup>9</sup> The study was co-designed and co-produced with Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE), a grassroots organisation based in Glasgow advocating for human rights and dignity for asylum seeking communities in the UK. MORE’s work is led by migrants with experience of seeking asylum, i.e. individuals “who possess grounded, nuanced knowledge of the areas in which they live and work, often generated over many years” (Berg and Nowicka 2019, 5). Two members, Yvonne Blake, one of the co-founders, and Robert Makutsa, worked as community researchers to recruit participants and carry out the fieldwork. 14 key informants were recruited as part of the research. Their lives were documented through mediated and sustained contact throughout the course of the research. This involved regular (often weekly) online meetings between the community researchers and the participants, using softwares such as Zoom and WhatsApp. Interviews were conducted mainly in English; interpreters were used for three participants who spoke limited English: a French, a Spanish and an Arabic speaker. The key informants were a diverse group of individuals; 8 men and 6 women, ranging from 18 to 72 years old, and coming from different countries in the Global South including Syria, Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe. Their length of residence in the UK also varied significantly from those who had arrived in the country a few months ago to some who had spent more than a year in the UK, with one participant having lived in the country for more than 20 years. All participants had experiences of living in hotel-type/contingency forms of accommodation during the pandemic.

To capture and document their experiences during COVID-19 times, participants were provided with laptops and internet data to connect and communicate with community researchers. We chose to use laptops in this project (as opposed to other devices such as mobile phones) because MORE identified that laptops would, firstly, help vulnerable participants to cope with social isolation during the pandemic, and secondly, laptops would also be useful for educational purposes. This is because many asylum seeking individuals were either enrolled in courses or hoped to pursue education, but lacked access. Having a laptop enabled them to carry on with their learning during the pandemic.

As well as holding regular ethnographic interviews with the researchers, the participants were also asked to produce visual diaries, which included photos and videos of daily life over the period of six months. This visual data also led to the making of a research documentary, “I’m Still Here” (<https://tempacco.wordpress.com/>), a film co-produced with the participants

aimed at capturing their everyday life and struggles in Glasgow during the pandemic. Alongside interviews and visual diaries, the project also carried out several group discussions/zoom meetings with asylum seeking individuals residing in temporary accommodation around the city, including five dedicated meetings with a group of mothers living in a “Mothers and Baby Unit”. In the course of our 14-months project, we spoke to more than 50 asylum seeking individuals living in Glasgow. Other data produced in this research – which received ethical approval from the School of Applied Sciences’ Research Integrity Committee at Edinburgh Napier University – included fieldnotes taken from various meetings related to issues faced by those seeking asylum in Glasgow involving key stakeholders and organisations in the city as well as other relevant materials such as posters, leaflets, emails and social media posts.

### “Open prisons”

When announcing the relocations to hotels, Mears Group, the private accommodation provider covering Scotland, stated that these arrangements were made, “to protect service users during COVID-19 [...] to ensure the safety and well-being of asylum-seekers in our care, as well as our staff, and our role in helping to limit community transmission by maintaining social distancing” (Mears 2020). For our participants however, the idea that they would be more protected from COVID-19 by being housed in hotel-type accommodation made little sense in practice. Many explained that physical distancing within the hotels was difficult or impossible to observe. Whether queuing for food together, meeting at reception or touching the same door handles, all of the everyday experiences of living in the hotels went against the public health messaging at the time and made these places feel Covid unsafe (Guma et al. 2022). Hotels were described as crowded places, with new residents moving in and out frequently. There were also issues around a lack of ventilation in the rooms and the staff showing little concern about Covid-related issues:

One thing that really troubles me is the cleaners ... the ladies who come to clean the [room]. I am not saying that they have got Covid or anything, but when we are talking about Covid and social distancing ... being ... what you call it ... maintaining the social distance ... they just come any time, when you are sleeping, they just come to clean your room and you have to leave your room, they are wearing gloves, they are touching everything that belongs to you, with gloves, and they leave your room going to the next room wearing the [same] gloves. (Evoque Diva, 35–40)<sup>10</sup>

There were thus little efforts by the private providers to restrict the spread of COVID-19 within hotels and prevent our participants from being infected. This included also a lack of Covid testing provision in hotels, confirming a

wider policy trend regarding relocations of asylum seeking individuals throughout the UK during the COVID-19 outbreak (Home Affairs Committee 2020). Moreover, risk assessments were not usually carried prior to people being moved to hotels to check individual vulnerabilities vis-à-vis COVID-19. Overall, our participants' accounts highlighted a service provision underpinned by a lack of care and the sense that their health and lives were not worthy of protecting during a crisis period.

Such racialisation also manifested itself in the restrictive and carceral conditions (Moran, Turner, and Schliehe 2018) that characterised these temporary housing arrangements. Along with unsafe conditions the imposition of curfew hours on residents made life in hotels difficult and challenging, as it restricted people's mobility and ability to socialise. Hotel residents were told that they could not spend nights away from the accommodation, e.g. sleeping at their friends. These restrictions affected particularly the old participants or those who suffered from mental health issues. Moving to hotels also involved the withdrawal of the weekly allowance for participants as hotel accommodation was deemed "full-board" where "utilities, meals and essentials are provided by the accommodation provider"<sup>11</sup> and thus cash allowance was removed. The allowance received by people seeking asylum was already small (currently standing at £40.85 per week)<sup>12</sup> but its removal had significant implications, both financially and psychologically, because it reduced people's ability to make even small choices in their everyday lives:

I would go to the shop and buy certain vegetables that we [i.e. culturally] use to make soups to calm my mind but I don't have any money and I don't have any cooking facilities ... what can I do? (The Duke, 70–75)

Food served in hotels was the same for everyone and months of living in places with no access to cooking facilities often took a toll on our participants. Many did not eat well and felt unwell or sick as a result. Three of our participants had stopped eating the food served in hotels and relied on the little snacks that they could afford. A participant in their 50s was receiving medical treatment for iron deficiency due to lack of food/poor diet, a condition that started while living in the hotels. The meals offered also did not consider religious and cultural observances (e.g. being halal), despite these being contractual obligations on the providers to offer culturally appropriate food.

The withdrawal of the small amount of financial assistance reduced further the agency of our participants and reinforced the racialised idea of "undeserving asylum seekers" at a time when the Covid crisis had triggered calls and actions for more rather than less care and solidarity within wider society. Racialisation was exercised here not only through this policy change but also experienced through the body, i.e. people going hungry, falling ill and generally treated as "not worthy" of being given nutritious or culturally

appropriate food. The impact of living in hotel-type accommodation could be seen, for example, in the way in which our participants' health and wellbeing dramatically changed when they were moved out of hotels. While housing issues did not end with people being moved to flats, their accounts indicated a noticeable improvement in their wellbeing once they moved from hotels into dispersed accommodation. This was often framed as an "escape", as our participants spoke about their newly acquired "freedom" to reconnect with food, social life and just generally be able to be active again. It was in this context that our participants spoke of life in hotels as being a detention-like experience (Burns et al. 2022).

Racialisation through carcerality was particularly discernable in the case of the "Mothers and Baby Unit", a contingency form of accommodation which emerged in the context of relocations of people seeking asylum during the Covid pandemic. The facility was repurposed by Mears to provide accommodation for asylum seeking mothers and their children from pregnancy up until the child is two years old. In January 2021, at the height of the second Covid lockdown, more than 20 asylum seeking mothers and pregnant women were moved into this "Unit". The move left some in profound shock:

So, when they brought me to this place ... I was shocked at first, I thought maybe this place is where maybe it will give me the paper [refugee status] and later on, they will take me to the apartment. So, I asked the lady that "is it here that I'm going to stay?" She said yes and I asked her how long? She said after I give birth and I was so, so angry and I was crying because the room is small, the window ... the window opens small ... and at times it will be cold, at times it will be hot and my bed is close to the kitchen, the bed, I'm even taller than the bed and I have to squeeze myself so that I can sleep. (Participant 6, Mother & Baby Unit zoom meeting)

The participant's description of the "Unit" as a "reporting centre" was due to the institutional-like nature of the facilities, having been used previously to house young homeless people, rather than families. The women reported a range of issues with their bedsit-style accommodation in the "Unit", which included the small size of the rooms, tiny beds, lack of space for children, unsuitable furniture, inadequate washing facilities, insufficient ventilation, noisy accommodation, inability to social distance. While they had access to a kitchenette/cooking facilities, the cramped conditions made it difficult to cook inside the room due to proximity of the cooking facilities to the sleeping area for babies. Issues around safety were raised repeatedly by the mothers. One participant who was a mother of a newborn had stopped cooking in her room as the cooker was too close to the cot and she was scared for the baby. Cooking steam and poor fire ventilation often set off the fire alarm in the building, sometimes several times a day, which necessitated the mothers and babies to leave the building and be on the streets outside the facility in all weather.

Women residing at the “Unit” were not allowed to have partners or visitors in their rooms. They had no key to the main entrance, and to access the building they had to be buzzed in. In addition, they said that doors were locked at 8pm and they could not access the building after this time. It was in the context of all the restrictions highlighted above that our participants spoke about being “trapped” and held “captive” like “criminals”:

I was saying I don't know what this building was used for but in front of the building it says criminal detention. So, for us mentally when you think of that it's like what have I done? Like, are we having some criminal records? Or what is it, cos already that is messing us up? And then we have to sign in and sign out and you're coming in this place? Sometimes we are locked outside, sometimes the guard is not there. (Participant 3, the Mother & Baby Unit zoom meeting)

Relocation to the “Unit” thus felt like a punishment and can be seen as representing a form of “necropolitical abandonment” (Mbembe 2003), i.e. housing people in a place to keep them “alive but in a state of injury” (21). That “state of injury” was manifest in the zoom meetings that we held with mothers and the pregnant women in the “Unit”, meetings which often became a cry for help, a plea for support to get out of the place which, as one of the mothers put it, was like an “open prison”. It was further apparent during our visit to the “Unit” when one of our community researchers burst into tears when seeing from close up (rather than through zoom) the cramped conditions, the small size of the rooms, the mothers sleeping on the floor with their babies, and the lack play areas. It was in this context that we requested an inspection of the “Unit” by the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, who after visiting the building in June 2021 concluded that it was not suitable for mothers and babies and that no children should be accommodated there (CYPCS 2022).

## Humiliation and resistance

Our participants spoke extensively about a lack of communication and transparency from both the Home Office and the private provider during their relocations. Many were not told in advance that they would be moved into hotels or “Mothers and Baby Unit”, and participants only found out about their accommodation when they arrived at the destination. Some participants spoke about how Mears staff would often turn up unannounced and give individuals little time, in some cases less than 20 minutes, to get ready for their move. There also appeared to be a lack of clarification about the criteria for moving people out of hotel-type accommodation as many were kept waiting and in limbo, not knowing when they might be moved out:

When we came in, we were told by the Mears guy, “no, in three days, [housing officer] will give you accommodation” ... [but] three days turned into three

months, three months is now five months ... you just sitting here wondering ... every time we call Migrant Help, it is the same situation, "No, it's Covid, nobody is moving", but people are moving ... "No, it's Covid, there is no accommodation", but how are the other people getting into accommodation?!. So, it is so frustrating that they are not clearly communicating to us ... it completely shuts us down just because of the fact that we gain information that it is not true. (Participant 5, zoom meeting with individuals living in a city centre hotel)

In terms of policy, contingency forms of accommodation such as hotels occupy a "grey" area within asylum housing provision as they fall "outside" the two "normal" categories recognised by the Home Office which are "initial accommodation" and "dispersed accommodation" (Home Office 2019). The former usually includes hostels and people residing there are expected to do so for up to 4 weeks (under Section 98 of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act) before being moved to longer term or dispersed accommodation (under Section 95).<sup>13</sup> Some of our participants were moved to hotels and the "Mothers and Baby Unit" from their dispersed accommodation, while for a few who were new arrivals hotel accommodation was their first or initial housing. More recently, however, the Home Office has included hotels as a form of "initial accommodation" in its categorisation,<sup>14</sup> perhaps reflective of their recent widespread use. Thus, officially living in hotels is meant to be short-term/temporary, lasting no longer than 4 weeks. In practice, however, the length of stay varied for our participants and there did not seem any consistency. Many ended up spending months in hotels, with one participant staying 9 months before being moved to a dispersed accommodation. Others were moved around continually, with a 70 + year old man with underlying health conditions being relocated to 5 different hotels within a ten-month period with each displacement having considerable impact on his mental and physical health and wellbeing:

I am a light sleeper and it's impossible to sleep properly at nights with people talking and walking in the corridors all night, most nights I don't sleep until 4 am in the morning I just can't take this kind of living anymore, deep in my heart I cry every day, where am I? what is happening to me? I am 70 + years old... what if I was their father would they treat me this way? (The Duke, 70-75)

The racialised nature of the relocations can be seen here in the way which these were ostensibly driven by market requirements rather than migrants' needs and vulnerabilities as participants were moved around at will and treated as "commodities". The effects were particularly felt by those who were vulnerable due to health or other factors such as age. This was evident in the case of another participant, Olivia, a woman in her sixties who spoke of her humiliation during her time in a hotel. Having had her cash allowance withdrawn due to her move to "full-board" accommodation, she was unable to purchase even basic items such as underwear, making her feel humiliated to ask for underclothing in front of (male) Mears' staff: "I am an

old woman with children and grandchildren, and I am so embarrassed ... imagine not having any underwear and I can't even afford to buy any." She spoke frequently about her experiences of being distressed and disclosed several incidents where she was repeatedly mistreated by staff members who on occasions withheld food from her.

The move to temporary forms of accommodation created conditions in which vulnerable people like Olivia could be easily dehumanised and made to feel "worthless". This was evident also in other contexts involving interactions between the participants and the housing provider staff. While being relocated to the "Mother and Baby unit", for example, one of our participants questioned the move with the Mears driver who came to collect her from the flat-type accommodation:

"You are a destitute, you an asylum seeker. You're not supposed to have all these things." So, I'm like, what am I supposed to have? He said "you're only supposed to have the essential things." And I'm like, "give me the list of the essential things." So, if I'm an asylum seeker, I'm not supposed to have any belongings or what do you mean? Then he said "yeah, basically that's it." And then I said no, "what if I refuse to go?", and [he] said "it's your right, if you can refuse, you can refuse. But you should know that if you refuse [the] Home Office can also decide to deport you". (Grace, 30–35)

Grace continued:

That [threat] felt quite harsh ... all my food and everything else that I really used, even my winter clothes and underwear, everything [was left behind] ... My underwear and stuff were in the drawer that I didn't touch because I wanted to take that last ... because I thought I remember where I put it because moving in is quite hard, so I totally forgot about that, I didn't take that ... even my jacket were [hanged] behind the door ... and then I sent him [the driver] a text when I got here, "I want those things, my jacket and underwear, I forgot them there, can you please help me and bring them? Or I don't know, can I go and get it?" He said that I can't go and get it but they will bring it the next day. But when he brought it, he only brought a few underwear ... I am sorry I had to ask him but I didn't know who else to ask because he had the key.

The encounter clearly shows the bordering (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019) and stigma "work" carried out by the Mears staff. The participant was reminded of being "a destitute" and made to feel "grateful" by the staff for the minimal support they were receiving. She was racialised as "less deserving", and a boundary was drawn between "us" and "them", "deserving citizens" and "undeserving migrants". In both cases of Olivia and Grace, their encounters with private provider staff left them shaken and humiliated, exposing their weakness and vulnerability and stripping them of their dignity as women and human beings.

Racialisation was also enacted through the silencing of individuals. As noted, food was a major issue in hotels and our participants frequently raised it with the Mears staff. But when they complained Mears would

respond by defusing responsibility, saying that it was the Home Office that decided what they should eat, even though the contract states that it is the private contractor's responsibility to "provide a full board food service".<sup>15</sup>

We talked to them [about the food]; they have Mears staff at the hotel. We talked to them, but they did nothing. They said we cannot do anything about it. If you want to eat it or leave it, it's up to you. So, it was their response from the beginning it's up to you. We provide you food and it's Home Office who decide what we eat, the menu ... I said to them "are Home Office deciding to put for us salt in salad"?! ... it's not just mayonnaise and forgot the name of it, so there is no tomato, nothing or nothing in the salad. So, we said to them like all the rice ... you're cooking rice anyway ... cook it in, cook it in a way so we can eat it. And also, the chicken was undercooked. (Tiger, 30–35)

The frustration of participants is clear here as staff "toyed" with their desperation, refusing to provide even basic food items such as salt. It is another encounter that shows how the racialised idea of the "undeserving asylum seeker" was reproduced in practice. The "spectre" of Home Office/authority was raised here not only to diffuse responsibility but also as a way of "reminding" the participants of their precarious immigration status. While these silencing techniques did not stop individuals from raising complaints and demanding better service, they worked to wear people down and make resisting the system really challenging.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the different forms of racialisation that took place during the relocations of asylum seeking individuals to temporary and contingency forms of accommodation at the start of the Covid pandemic. These moves were associated with further restrictions for the participants including losing their cash payments, being unable to cook their own food, having their mobility restricted, being unable to visit friends or have visitors, restrictions which extended the control of the outsourced and hostile state in areas which included not just accommodation but also food, clothes and travel. Importantly, our findings have shown that these racialisations were enacted not only through various restrictive and profit-driven policies but also in practice through everyday interactions and encounters between our participants and the private provider staff. Be it through silencing individuals' concerns, "toying" with their vulnerability, dehumanising or humiliating them in public, the private provider staff often played the role of "border guards" (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019), putting into practice the idea of "underserving asylum seeker" and making people feel "worthless". This in turn made it difficult for participants to resist the carceral conditions related to life in temporary accommodation.

While the moves to temporary accommodation were framed by state authorities and private providers as being informed by a public health

approach aimed at providing a “safe environment” from risks of Covid-19, our participants experienced these temporary arrangements very differently and negatively, likening the conditions to detention centres and “open prisons”. This impacted negatively on their health and wellbeing, with participants going hungry, falling ill or generally being unable to feed themselves properly. Here racialisation worked through producing people with weakened and exhausted bodies (Castro Neira 2023), “undeserving” of nutritiously and culturally appropriate food and whose mental health was “messed up” as a result of being treated like “criminals”. The carcerality highlighted in our participants’ accounts indicates a reality that is a far cry from the “luxurious” and “comfortable” conditions reported in some of the British media regarding hotel-type asylum accommodation. As the case of the “Mothers and Baby Unit” showed, such carcerality also extended beyond adults to include the lives of children and small babies.

Looked at from the perspective of the everyday experiences, the moves to hotels and the “Unit” thus produced conditions whereby the participants could be “more easily and appropriately humiliated [and] starved” (Gilroy 2003, 263) and who could be kept “alive but in a state of injury” (Mbembe 2003, 21). In other words, they created conditions where they could be “dehumanised in the sense of being considered below the line of the human” (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015, 639). In this sense, the rise of temporary and contingency forms of accommodation during the Covid pandemic can be viewed not only as an extension of asylum dispersal and the “distributed violence” associated with a neoliberalised asylum system (Darling 2022) or as further indication of the wider and ongoing social inequalities related to housing in Britain (Brown, Gill, and Halsall 2022) but also as constitutive of racial modes of belonging within a “regime of differential humanity” (Mayblin et al. 2020, 120). The violence associated with these accommodations and asylum housing more broadly is not only spatial and social in nature (Darling 2022) but also racial; it maintains an “abyssal line” that places the asylum population within a racialised zone of non-being. As we have shown, the placement of our participants in temporary accommodation was a racialised process which constructed them as “undeserving” and “unworthy” of protection and care during a period of crisis. In foregrounding this process, our paper thus calls for more research that takes seriously race and racialised forms of exclusion in asylum housing, an area which remains largely understudied and undertheorised.

## Notes

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10380855/Migrants-staying-four-star-hotel-rooms-125-night-British-taxpayer.html>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-56325360>

3. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/08/end-housing-asylum-seekers-old-army-barracks-uk-ministers-urged>
4. <https://news.sky.com/story/giant-bergo-to-house-hundreds-of-asylum-seekers-set-to-arrive-in-uk-heres-its-journey-12872020>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/11/merseyside-violence-outside-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-arrests>
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-53205396>
7. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/what-is-the-nationality-and-borders-act/>
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-asylum-accommodation-contracts-awarded>
9. Prior to this period Mears Group – the private provider of asylum housing in Scotland – had not used hotels as a form of accommodation.
10. For ethical reasons, all names in this report have been anonymised. Instead, we use pseudonyms or nicknames chosen by participants themselves. We also have allocated an age group to participants rather than reveal their exact age.
11. <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/03/factsheet-asylum-accommodation-and-applications/>
12. <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get#:~:text=Cash%20support,cash%20from%20a%20cash%20machine>
13. <https://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/asylum-support/#section98>
14. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-asylum-accommodation/living-in-dispersal-accommodation-english>
15. Statement of Requirements to the Asylum Support and Accommodation Contract (AASC), p. 24. [http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC\\_-\\_Schedule\\_2\\_-\\_Statement\\_of\\_Requirements.pdf](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC_-_Schedule_2_-_Statement_of_Requirements.pdf)

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our participants for giving their time, sharing their experiences and for being part of the project, especially as it took place during a very challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are also very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions for improving the article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was funded by the UK Research and Innovation/Economic and Social Research Council under the Grant: ES/V015990/1.

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