

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE AMONG PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PREVALENCE

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Introduction

The purpose of this review of the literature is to establish the prevalence of torture and other human rights abuse amongst people seeking asylum and refugees in the UK, and in Europe more broadly [Box 1].

The search strategy used can be found in Annex 1.

Box 1. Human rights abuse

The term ‘human rights abuse’; covers torture, and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Torture can be briefly defined as situations in which severe pain or suffering is intentionally inflicted on a person by State agents for a specific purpose. In particular, but not limited to, the extraction of information, obtaining a confession, retaliation, punishment or discrimination (*UN General Assembly, 1984*). Where intent cannot be established or the purpose is uncertain, or where the pain or suffering is considered to be of lesser severity, it is deemed, from a legal point of view, as cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (CIDT) (*Amnesty International, 2016*). The distinction between torture and CIDT is of little relevance from a clinical point of view. Both are covered by the Convention Against Torture and are forms of legal classification that imply a duty to detect and document from the health professionals. There are alternative definitions to that of the International Convention that are based on criteria closer to the field of health. Torture is referred to, from a clinical point of view, as the use of strategies to weaken and break an individuals’ free will. This may be done through techniques that cause physical (pain, debilitation, manipulation of the environment) or psychological (fear, humiliation, shame, anguish, guilt) suffering and harm (*Pérez-Sales & de la Fuente 2023*)

Limited evidence

The key finding from this review is that there is a lack of reliable evidence on the prevalence of torture among asylum seekers in the UK, and in Europe more broadly. The Home Office does not regularly publish statistics on this.

Studies in the UK

A recent report, based on a small group (122) of male asylum seekers in Wethersfield Containment Site in the UK, from **Médecins Sans Frontières and Doctors of the World** (2024) notes that 68% (83/122) reported, when asked by a health professional, having experienced violence or abuse in their lifetime, with 36% reporting experiences of having been tortured. The majority of men accessing their services were aged 20-39 (88%, 108/122), with the largest proportion originating from Iran followed by Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria. The vast majority (98%) arrived in the UK after 20th July 2023. The violence had occurred in their home countries as well as during their migration journeys. 29% (35/122) reported experiencing abuse at the hands of traffickers or smugglers and 11% (14/122) reported experiencing violence at or within the borders of Europe.

Studies in Europe

In a study of 300 non-Western patients across 46 GP surgeries in Copenhagen, 28% of people reported having been exposed to torture in the country of origin or in transit (**Ostergaard et al**, 2020).

Morina et al (2016) found that amongst 134 refugees in Switzerland, 85% reported experience of torture. This included isolation (76.9); imprisonment (76.9); physical assault (75.4); combat (75.4); murder of friend or family member (64.9) forced separation from family (60.4); brainwashing (47.8); disappearing or kidnapping (47).

Tinghög et al (2017) studied 1215 Syrian refugees resettled in Sweden, 31% of whom reported experience of torture. They also recorded reports of other potentially traumatic events, including forced separation from friends or family (67.9); loss of significant other (64); witnessed violence or assault (63); sexual violence (7).

Guarch-Rubio et al (2020) cite Crepet et al (2017)'s study in Italy that found that a large percentage of recently arrived migrants/refugees (89%) experienced traumatic events along their journey. The most frequent events experienced were finding themselves in a situation of combat or at risk of death (29%), detention/kidnapping (24%) and kidnapping/torture (11%).

In **Guarch-Rubio et al's** (2020) study, all participants (26 of whom left their home countries for economic reasons and 28 of whom left due to political/ religious persecution and war) stated that they had been subjected to traumatic experiences associated with their migratory experience. Within this small sample, 40.7% claimed that they had been physically tortured or perceived themselves as torture victims. Participants were mainly male (51 men, 3 women) and aged 18-34 (95%), from a range

of countries, primarily Algeria (39%), Morocco (19%), Iraq (15%) and Syria (15%). Those who were refugees rather than economic migrants reported having experienced a higher number of potentially traumatic events en route, but there was no difference between the two groups in the number of torture experiences they suffered during their journey.

Systematic reviews

Kalt et al (2013) conducted a systematic review of literature (23 studies) on violence and related health concerns among adult asylum seekers in high-income host countries. Prevalence of torture, variably defined, was above 30% across all studies, but this included countries outside Europe, such as the US, Australia and Japan. Four of the studies related to the UK as host country, but these are outdated and do not include representative samples which can be generalised from. Kalt et al report that since the studies they reviewed were based on almost exclusively non-representative, small convenience samples of highly specific subpopulations (e.g., specific nationalities or language groups), there was no benefit in reporting summary measures of violence exposure. Furthermore, many studies specifically selected for violence victims, for instance, by examining victims of torture or any political violence, so prevalence estimates were partly artifacts of the study design. Findings on sexual violence were limited and studies emphasised collective and premigration violence, often excluding postmigration risks and offering no findings on family, intimate partner, or elder violence. Despite these limitations, they suggest that the studies they reviewed indicate that asylum seekers have great exposure to myriad forms of violence and their health consequences. Torture, although defined in varying ways, was the most widely researched exposure. Although definitional variations complicated interpretation, prevalence of reported torture was higher than one third across research settings, with indications of higher prevalence among men.

Sigvardsson et al (2016) also conducted a review of the research literature reporting prevalence of torture and/or war-related potentially traumatic experiences (PTEs) in adult forced migrants living in high-income countries (41 articles). Reported prevalence rates of torture ranged between 1-76% (median 27%) and was, in general, higher in men and in older age groups. Torture had often occurred in a context of several other war-related PTEs. Trauma history and prevalence of torture were found to be highly dependent on the background of the group studied and the situation in the place of origin that caused them to migrate. Most of the studies included in the review focused on specific ethnic groups or nationalities, with Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern and Balkan being the most frequent. The nature of the conflict or situation, the timing of refuge, and also socio-demographic characteristics influence the probability of having been subjected to certain types of PTE. The authors conclude that the heterogeneity of data, as well as the methodological challenges in reaching forced migrants and defining and measuring traumatic experiences, prevent generalisation concerning trauma history across groups. They also reflect on methodological challenges involved in establishing the prevalence of torture. The research instrument used and the trauma items included, as well as their definitions, are important factors in how and what items can be reported. They outline the different ways in which this has been dealt with, and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Burnett & Ndovi (2018) reported that estimates of the proportion of asylum seekers who have been tortured ranged from 5 to 30%, depending on the country of origin, although they cite a source published in 1992 to support this.

Sexual violence

Araujo et al (2019) conducted a systematic review on the prevalence of sexual violence among refugees and asylum seekers of any country, sex or age. They identified 60 relevant research papers; approximately one-third of the studies (32%) were carried out in refugee camps and more than half (52%) in health services using mental health assessment tools. The reported prevalence of sexual violence was very variable (0% to 99.8%), independently of where the data were collected and how they were collected. Although six of the studies included in the review were based on data collected in the UK, these were from 1996, 1998, 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2010, so provide limited information about the prevalence of sexual violence amongst asylum seekers and refugees in the UK currently. Studies conducted in Europe were Switzerland (1999), Netherlands (2000), Denmark (2006), Sweden (2007), Finland (2011), Germany & Italy (2012), Sweden (in schools 2017). Others were based on data collected outside Europe. The sexual violence was perpetrated particularly by intimate partners, but also by agents of supposed protection. The authors note that it is likely that prevalence is underestimated, since many victims – especially men – do not report sexual violence because of shame, threats by perpetrators, fear of being found guilty or suffering from stigma and exclusion from family and community.

De Schrijver et al (2018) review evidence on the prevalence of sexual violence among migrants, applicants for international protection, and refugees (MAR) in Europe and the challenges encountered in research on this topic. A critical interpretive synthesis of 25 peer-reviewed academic studies and 22 relevant grey literature documents was conducted based on a socio-ecological model. Evidence shows that sexual violence is very frequent in MARs in Europe, yet comparison with other groups is difficult. Methodologically and ethically sound representative studies comparing between populations are still lacking. Compared to the attention given to sexual violence in the general population, research on sexual violence in MARs is extremely scarce. De Schrijver et al conclude that sexual violence experiences amongst MARs living in Europe are widespread, yet representative studies providing a solid data base are lacking.

Khouani et al (2023) interviewed 267 asylum seeking women in France and found that 202 (75.7%) had experienced some type of sexual violence prior to arrival in France, with 139 reporting having been raped.

Health settings

Pérez-Sales, long-term editor of the *Torture Journal*, concludes that studies within the primary health care sector globally show that (1) prevalence of torture survivors may be much higher than most health professionals expect, (2) people who have experienced political violence or torture in their country of origin do not refer this experience to their primary care physician, either because they think it is not relevant, due to cultural reasons, or because they believe that their physician will not have time to listen to them or will not be interested in the issue and (3) in the vast majority of cases, the doctor also did not ask, despite suspecting that the person may have suffered violence, and did not record the suspicion in the medical record. (Pérez-Sales & de la Fuente, 2023)

Conclusions

TortureID commissioned this review with the aim of improving understanding of the frequency of human rights abuse among people seeking asylum in the UK.

The main conclusions are:

- Estimates of the prevalence of human rights abuse vary greatly, depending on the population studied and the definitions and methods used.
- There is very little UK-based information.
- Studies in Europe and systematic reviews based on the wider literature suggest that :
 - Human rights abuse is very frequent, with abuse categorised as torture likely to affect at least 30% of those seeking asylum.
 - Many people experience multiple forms of abuse along with other traumatic experiences such as death of family members or forced separation.
 - Sexual abuse is common and likely to be under-reported.
 - People experience human rights abuse both in their country of origin and during their journeys to seek safety.
- In health settings, human rights abuse is likely to be under-reported, and under-recognised.

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Annex 1. Search strategy

Asylum seeker* OR Refugee*	AND	Torture OR “Modern slavery” OR “Human trafficking” OR “Human rights abuses” OR “Sexual abuse”	AND	Prevalence	AND	UK OR Europe
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Asylum seeker* OR Refugee* AND Torture OR “Modern slavery” OR “Human trafficking” OR “Human rights abuses” OR “Sexual abuse” AND Prevalence AND UK OR Europe NOT USA OR United States OR US