## OPENING DOORS

### training modules

### training module 6: destitution

**What this module includes:**

- what destitution means
- why it occurs
- examples of local patterns
- finding out about destitution locally
- the legal position
- possible responses by housing associations

[Refer to chapter 4 of the CIH/JRF guide]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What destitution means</th>
<th>Destitution means 'lack of the means of subsistence': in this module a combination of homelessness and lack of money.</th>
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<td>Why it occurs</td>
<td>In the context of the <em>Opening Doors</em> programme, there are two main groups of people who are likely to become destitute:</td>
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<td>■ asylum seekers who lost access to publicly-provided accommodation or support when their claim was rejected (but see p36 of the CIH/JRF guide for other possible reasons)</td>
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<td>■ A8, A2 or other working migrants who have lost their job/place to stay and have no entitlement to benefits or housing assistance or are barred from 'recourse to public funds'.</td>
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<td>Another group is spouses whose relationships break down within two years of their arrival.</td>
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<td>While many migrants may be able to solve their problems by getting work, most asylum seekers are not legally able to work. Some may be eligible for limited support (known as section 4 support).</td>
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<td>What it means at local level</td>
<td>Several studies have looked at problems of destitution at local level, how many cases are involved, and what the support needs are:</td>
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<td>Newcastle-upon-Tyne</td>
<td>Several thousand asylum seekers with no legal status are thought to be living in the Newcastle area, many supporting themselves by working illegally. Of those who are destitute, 20-30 are found to be sleeping outdoors on any one night. The only facilities are 10-15 drop-in centres, some offering food, and a smaller number of charities offering limited cash support, clothing or take away food.</td>
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**Leicester**

Refugee Action reported 168 destitute asylum seekers known to agencies in the city in June 2005, of whom more than three-quarters had been destitute for more than a month. 32 had slept rough at some point.

**London**

A recent study of destitution among A8 nationals found over 600 cases in one week from the agencies surveyed. Most were unemployed and about half were sleeping rough. The majority were likely to be destitute only for a short time, and needed help in finding work. A smaller proportion, however, were in greater difficulty and needed longer-term support.

**How do we find out about destitution at local level?**

The three studies above (see resource list – and the briefing on the ICAR website which mentions other studies) all collected information from local advice/support centres dealing with either asylum seekers or rough sleepers or both.

In any locality it would be relatively easy to carry out a study of local agencies – and of MRCOs, where they exist – to obtain quantitative and qualitative information on how many people are destitute, the reasons, and what their needs are. Local agencies would also provide information about local services, their effectiveness and the gaps in provision. In some places ‘destitution funds’ exist, but they do not cover rents. The local authority or other agencies may have information on the effects of destitution at neighbourhood level.

The information from a survey could be used to make the case for extra resources at local level to tackle destitution and its effects.

**Wider effects of destitution**

Obviously, the main effect is on the individual who is sleeping rough or without sufficient food or clothing. But there are wider effects:

- Destitute people often seek help from family or friends within the same community, putting pressure on them, ‘sofa surfing’ and perhaps driving people living on very limited incomes into further hardship.

- Pressure is also put on local groups and advice agencies, which might not have the facilities (eg relevant language skills) to help. Many MRCOs report severe pressure on their resources caused by destitution, perhaps affecting their ability to help other types of case.

- Destitution can affect community relations if – for example – there are groups of young men congregating in an area with no money and nothing to do.

All of these problems have grown significantly (even though we cannot say by how much) over the last few years as policy towards asylum seekers has tightened and more migrants have come from accession states whose only resources come from their work here, and who are vulnerable if they lose their jobs.
**Discussion: What do we know about destitution in our area?**

- has there been a local survey? could we do one out or work with others to do so?
- has destitution been reported as an issue, for example at neighbourhood level?
- do we have contacts with local agencies that could supply information?
- what is the potential for new services to respond to destitution?
- which local agencies can best provide people with legal advice?
- is there a local destitution fund from which people can be helped?

**The legal position**

The government’s obligation to provide support to asylum seekers ends once their case has been rejected or rejected on appeal (except for those eligible for ‘section 4’ support and who are willing to meet the conditions that apply).

Many categories of other migrant are here on the basis that they support themselves (see module 3). Both groups may therefore be in a position where they have no recourse to public funds.

Local authority social services departments may be obliged to help some people, such as those with children, or those ‘in need of care and attention’ but may refuse some applications, such as those from EEA nationals, or offer only the fare home. Such decisions can sometimes be open to legal challenge, especially where the human rights to family life or against degrading treatment are involved.

**Possible responses by housing associations**

Housing associations are not prevented from helping destitute people in these cases, but of course they are not eligible for HB and may have no income to pay any rents or charges. Associations may be best able to help in partnership with local agencies which are trying to tackle destitution but have limited resources. They may be able to help by:

- Using charitable funds to assist drop-in or other local projects.
- Making premises available for use by other organisations.
- Providing limited emergency accommodation in association hostels (if they exist), in partnership with other local bodies, financed from the association’s own funds.
- Working with MRCOs to support them in their support services for destitute people.
- Making sure you are in touch with local expertise/networks, eg legal advisers, local help and research projects.
By carrying out, helping to resource, or taking part in the kind of survey mentioned earlier, associations will become aware of the problems in their area and will be better able to come up with ideas for the kinds of help they may be able to offer.

**Resources on destitution**

ICAR, the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, has a briefing on destitution among asylum seekers (which can be downloaded at [www.icar.org.uk/?lid=6575](http://www.icar.org.uk/?lid=6575)). It has information about some local surveys and other available resources.

One recent survey relating to asylum seekers is that in Newcastle, *Destitute and Desperate* (available from [www.opendoor-ne.org](http://www.opendoor-ne.org)).

Homeless Link has a page on its website about destitution among A8 and A2 nationals, with information on its research study *A8 Nationals in London Homelessness Services* and its practical guide *Sharing Solutions* ([www.homeless.org.uk/inyourarea/london/policy/a8](http://www.homeless.org.uk/inyourarea/london/policy/a8)).

Southall Black Sisters ([www.southallblacksisters.org.uk](http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk)) has produced a resource pack called *How can I support her?* - about helping women with no recourse to public funds.

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**Follow up to training module 6**

- √ is destitution a problem in the areas where we work?
- √ if so, can we help?
- √ what local partnerships exist or would be useful to tackle the problem?
- √ given the resource problems, what idea do we have for ways to help?
- √ how can we try to add value to what is being done already?

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