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Hostile Environments: Housing and Asylum Policies as Drivers of Energy Deprivation Among UK Refugee Communities

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ABSTRACT

Although refugees in the UK are highly susceptible to the triad of factors – low income, poor housing and high energy bills – that produce vulnerability to energy deprivation, literature on this issue is rare. We therefore propose a framework towards understanding the role of “non-energy” policies as drivers of energy deprivation among UK refugees, using the conceptual lenses of deservingness, welfare chauvinism and domicile to demonstrate how the condition has been deliberately produced under the UK government’s Hostile Environment approach. We argue that this approach not only damages the physical materiality of housing and the emotional space of home, but also deleteriously impacts upon refugees’ ability to access adequate energy services. Energy deprivation thus emerges as a hidden consequence of policies that normalize precarious housing, a denial of rights, and inadequate incomes, in which “home” becomes a site of exclusion that achieves the Hostile Environment’s goal – making everyday life unbearable.

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Energy deprivation; housing; refugees; United Kingdom; hostile environment; deservingness

Introduction

It is well documented that refugees are more likely on average in the UK to live in conditions of precarity, poverty and exclusion, on extremely low incomes, and to occupy poor quality, insecure, overcrowded housing (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014; Bouzarovski et al. 2022; P. Brown, Gill, and Halsall 2022; de Noronha 2015; Phillips 2006; Powell and Robinson 2019). Although each of these factors contributes to increased vulnerability, defined as exposure to risk or harm (Simcock et al. 2021), to energy deprivation, a situation whereby a household is unable to obtain required levels of energy services to meet their needs (Bouzarovski and Petrova 2015), academic and policy literature, and wider societal awareness on the specific energy challenges faced by refugees is remarkably rare. This is despite the recent energy and cost-of-living crises that has seen 8.4m people in the UK facing energy-related hardships (National Energy Action 2022a).

In response to this research gap, following a purposive literature review, we propose an explanatory framework towards understanding the role of “non-energy”

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policies as drivers of energy deprivation amongst refugee communities in the UK (C. Butler 2022). We first trace how refugees are constructed as “Other” in a contemporary UK context, drawing on historical discourses of racialized deservingness and welfare chauvinism. We highlight how these tropes intersect with domicidal austerity and hostile environment policies to funnel refugees into precarious and poor quality housing in marginalized urban areas, thus preventing the making of home (Nowicki 2023). As a result, we propose that domestic energy deprivation arises in these communities as the everyday, hidden culmination of pernicious and punitive political decisions, which in turn have severe knock-on consequences for rebuilding home.

This paper offers a timely contribution to the literature, as the number of people claiming asylum increased by 44% in 2023, and as the UK government continues to roll out measures that punish and dehumanize refugees (UK Government (2023); Stewart 2023), amidst a landscape of perpetual crises surrounding broadening social inequality, migration, housing, energy and cost of living (Roitman 2022). The paper also offers key reflections for policymakers across the Global North, with its novel examination of energy issues within displaced communities beyond the context of the refugee camp, as numbers of forcibly displaced peoples grow globally, energy issues remain high on political agendas and socio-economic racialized disparity persists (Bednar and Reames 2020; Elissaoui 2023; EUAA 2024; Rosenberg-Jansen 2022).

Methodology and Definitions

Methods

We conducted an iterative methodological approach to the literature review (Saboor and Ammenwerth 2009), purposively reviewing materials from a range of sources, including academic papers, NGO-commissioned reports, policy documents and white papers, to draw out thematic narratives and construct the proposed framework. A purposive review allows for a reflexive, iterative and strategic approach to generate novel insights about an under-researched topic (Cook et al. 2019).

We started with the primary search string, “Energy Poverty” OR “Energy Deprivation” OR “Fuel Poverty” AND “Refugees”, in Scopus (for academic literature) and a general Google search (for other sources), sifting for relevance to a Global North host country context. This yielded extremely few results – only four academic papers, two NGO reports, one government strategy and three community projects fit the required criteria. We therefore returned to the triad of factors that lead to energy deprivation – low income, high energy bills and poor housing (Bouzarovski and Petrova 2015), breaking these down into sub-terms. The resulting search strings used are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature review search strings.

Energy Deprivation Factor	Search strings
Low income	“Deprivation” OR “Poverty” AND “Refugee”
[Inefficient] housing	“Hous*” OR “Accommodation” AND “Refugee”
High energy bills	“Debt” OR “Bills” AND “Refugees”

Definitions

Although the definitions of “refugee” and “asylum-seeker” contextually vary and are used interchangeably in common discourse, this paper will utilize UK legal definitions; that is, *an asylum-seeker is someone who has arrived in the UK and applied for asylum, whilst a refugee is a person whose claim for asylum has been approved* (Kirkwood et al. 2016). Although this paper is concerned with energy deprivation amongst refugees, it is impossible to unpack this issue without understanding conditions and processes experienced by people throughout the asylum system, thus, we include sources from the review that relate to both. It is also important to note that for specific refugee groups, the UK has a range of resettlement schemes with a number of differences from the mainstream asylum system, thus affecting people’s experiences of seeking sanctuary (Sturge 2023). Although this is beyond the scope of the paper to explore, we acknowledge that refugees are not a homogenous group; they are individuals with a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences and challenges, and that our framework will not therefore capture every refugee’s story.

With regard to the term energy deprivation, this was deliberately selected over the related term(s) of energy or fuel poverty. Energy deprivation is broadly defined as a harmful lack of energy services that are socially considered as basic necessities, such as adequate heating, lighting and access to transportation (Bouzarovski and Petrova 2015). We posit that in relation to refugees, it critically also includes a *deliberate denial* of that necessity by the state; when access to a resource is denied to a person, that act is a form of exercising power and control (Voutira and Doná 2007).

The Absence of Knowledge is Not the Absence of a Problem

As aforementioned, the first iteration of the purposive review yielded very few results. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that refugees are indeed affected by energy deprivation, for example, referencing them as a vulnerable group (e.g. Bouzarovski et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2022; Little, Barnes, and Power 2024), identifying refugees as needing extra support with bills (Scottish Government 2021) or signalling that this group merited further research with regard to energy issues (Martiskainen et al. 2023), as well as two more substantive references to the issue by NGO reports (Netto and Fraser 2009; North East Child Poverty Commission 2013). The search also returned three projects that offer advice and energy-saving packs in response to identified energy-related hardships amongst the refugee groups they work with. Two are small-scale community projects (Welcoming Home Energy Efficiency Project and the Derby Refugee Forum), and one is a national-scale project (Empowered by Energy), each highlighting low income and unfamiliarity with the UK energy system as key barriers for refugees. In most of these sources, there was a recognition that energy deprivation is an issue faced by UK-based refugees, but with little to no cited literature or statistics to support statements, reflective of the lack of evidence we were able to identify on this topic. From the second iteration of the review, there were also instances from refugee-specific literature that allude to the impacts of the asylum system on poverty, difficulties with paying bills and understanding the UK energy system (Lindsay, Gillespie, and Dobbie 2010), as well as the outcomes of energy deprivation on health, for example, high levels of mould and damp, and

inadequate or insufficient heating and cooling in the home (Ziersch and Due 2018; Ziersch et al. 2017).

Given these sparse results, energy deprivation amongst UK refugee communities can be described as invisible, or “hidden”. “Hidden” energy deprivation, highlighted by Willand, Torabi, and Horne (2023), is a condition suffered by marginalized social groups who are not recognized by mainstream indicators, or included within policies, programmes and dominant narratives around energy, due to “wider conditions that shape their vulnerability” (Willand, Torabi, and Horne 2023, 2). Being institutionally ignored and rendered invisible in this manner results in both critical socio-political knowledge gaps and blockages for accessing the resources and support that people need to address energy-related hardships (Martiskainen et al. 2023; Simcock, Frankowski, and Bouzarovski 2021). In the absence of existing data, we therefore need to look beyond energy-poverty-related policy and academia, to understand how “non-energy” arenas of policymaking shape everyday practices, experiences and conditions of energy deprivation (C. Butler 2022; C. Butler, Parkhill, and Luzecka 2018). In this vein, we grouped the results from the second iteration of the literature review around two key policy areas which we identified as contributing to conditions of energy deprivation in refugee communities, due to their impacts on a (refugee) household’s ability to access and afford adequate energy services within and without of the home. These two themes act as the key pillars of our explanatory framework – the first being the poverty-enforcing mechanisms of the asylum system, and the second, the neoliberalization of housing.

Deservingness, Welfare Chauvinism and the Hostile Environment: Constructing the “Other” in UK Asylum Politics

Otherness, as defined by Edward Said, is a binary construct of “Occidental” Europe against its “Oriental” Eastern colonies, with Othered, non-Western bodies imbued with inferiority, danger and threat (Said 1978). Scholars have theorized that racialized discourses of Othering and deservingness, in particular, welfare chauvinism, operate throughout the UK’s asylum process, perpetuated by media and popular discourse, to create a system of destitution and suffering where asylum seekers’ “bodies (are) more acceptably degraded than others” (Darling 2022; Guentner et al. 2016; Mayblin 2017, 3). In this section, we outline how these narratives intertwine to justify the deployment of dehumanizing policies that degrade refugees’ rights, choices and agency.

The trope of deservingness has long been employed to justify particular allocations of state welfare, gaining prominence in Britain with the introduction of the 1834 English Poor Laws. These were underpinned by clearly defined categories, distinguishing between the “deserving” – respectable, hardworking, and living in line with middle-class values – and the “undeserving”, who were seen to be poor due to their personal choices, profligate behaviours and vices (O’Connor 2016; Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2016). Who is deemed “deserving” continues to underpin the allocation of resources in contemporary society (Welshman 2013); foregrounding the threat of an undeserving Other diverts public attention away from root causes of social problems and failings of state policy, towards a scapegoat – usually the poorest and most vulnerable – which in turn, justifies their enforced poverty (Gans 1994; Slater 2014).

Which group is seen as Other is constantly shifting, however, who has access to state resources has been racialized from “(the) abolition (of slavery) to Brexit to serve elite interests” (Dickson and Rosen 2021, 547), deeply entangled with the UK’s colonial history and its postcolonial present (Hirschler 2015). Processes of Othering are the most pronounced where inequalities are greatest, operating to legitimize hierarchies of oppression and pushing people outside of the privileges of citizenship, which are critical for securing dignity and respect (Lister 2021; Tyler 2010). As a result, the welfare system is deployed as “an agent that defines who is a member of the nation state and who is not” (Bloch and Schuster 2002, 395). Racialized migrant groups, in particular people seeking asylum, are consistently seen as the least deserving of social welfare, variously labelled as workshy, freeloading from a benefits system to which they have not contributed, or as culturally threatening (Kootstra 2017; Tyler 2013). By problematizing poor migrants as benefitting from an overstretched and “generous” system, and thus creating a drain on government resources, punitive changes to benefit policies and allocations are legitimized (Slater 2014).

Simultaneously, the incidence of poverty in the UK is higher among all minority ethnic groups than white groups, linked to stereotyping, discrimination and institutional racism, an issue prevalent across the Global North (Lister 2021). The racialization of poverty, Lister argues, has been “a central feature of the political delegitimization of poor people ... (which has) facilitated the dismantling of welfare rights” (Lister 2021, 75). The “purposeful impoverishment” of racialized groups, we posit, has been most markedly deployed towards refugees and asylum seekers in the UK (Mayblin 2019, 46), delivered via a particularly pernicious strand of welfare chauvinism enacted through immigration policy (Gill 2016).

UK asylum policies since 1993, which we highlight here, are keenly illustrative of our argument. In response to increasing numbers of arrivals in the late 1990s, and decreasing public support for refugees, resettlement became the responsibility of the Home Office, rather than that of local authorities, shifting asylum from a social system to one tied to immigration controls and border security (Sheldrick 2021). As part of this move, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was set up in 2000, completely separating mainstream welfare from the asylum system, linking social support to immigration status. The Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act of 1993 reduced welfare support given to asylum seekers to 90% of what was available to UK citizens, reduced again to 70% in 1996. The amount stands currently at £49.18 per week, widely critiqued as being insufficient to avoid destitution (Shelter 2024). In 2002, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act denied people awaiting a decision on their asylum application the right to work, and welfare support was withdrawn from those who “failed to apply for asylum as soon as practicable” on arrival. Refugee status was changed from permanent-once-granted, to 5-year subject to review, introducing a new period of uncertainty and limbo into people’s lives.

Widespread cutbacks throughout the 2010s under austerity included the scaling back of English language classes – many of which now have waiting lists of thousands – hindering the ability for people to access the job market (Balas and Caggiano 2021), and the Refugee Integration and Employment Service, which provided refugees with personal integration plans, job skills courses and employment support, was scrapped in 2011 (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014). Austerity resulted in novel “forms, intensities

and dimensions of poverty” (Dangschat 2009, 836), throughout the country, igniting discourses of deservingness and support for welfare chauvinism to new extremes. Austerity created “rivalries instead of solidarity . . . for scarce resources” among vulnerable and socio-economically deprived groups, further demonizing poor migrants (Darling 2016; Hoggett, Wilkinson, and Beedell 2013, 567). Accordingly, in 2012, the Home Office officialized the Hostile Environment stance towards people seeking asylum, explicitly designed to make life as difficult as possible for people without leave to remain in the country, and consequently penalized entire communities who are racialized or culturalized as Other (Byrne et al. 2020). The Hostile Environment aimed to prevent so-called uncontrolled migration and was justified with the promise that it would alleviate untenable pressure on the UK’s housing, healthcare and education systems (Phillimore 2018; Spratt 2022). However, as shown by these policies, a hostile environment, in reality, has existed since the 1990s (Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants 2023).

All of the above is tantamount to “state permitted forms of discrimination” (Byrne et al. 2020, 49), a “sustained intensification” of methods of governing which have led to increased visibility of refugees in political and popular discourse, rising incidences of racism, destitution, exploitation and misery (Gill 2016), as well as the barring of people from essential services (Essex et al. 2022). Via deliberate political choices across three decades of hostile environment policies, the contemporary UK asylum process can be understood as a “poverty producer”, with destitution as a deliberate outcome, diametrically opposed to the system of protection meant to be afforded people who are fleeing from conflict or persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Darling 2009; Hodgkinson et al. 2021; Lewis 2007). In this time, refugees have become so Othered, so less-than-human, that they are seen as deserving of the conditions that they find themselves in, which in turn justifies the policy choices made to dehumanize them further (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014; J. Butler 2020; Kirkwood et al. 2016).

Refugees and Housing: A Domicidal Hostile Environment?

Adequate housing is a human right; a right to affordable and safe shelter and a place to call “home”, which “supports the development and social integration”, health and well-being of its inhabitants (Ziersch and Due 2018, 200). Housing has therefore been identified as critical to refugee resettlement and integration (Carter, Polevychok, and Osborne 2009) by multiple national governments, including the UK (Ager and Strang 2008). For displaced people, often fleeing the loss and destruction of a home, a lack of access to appropriate housing in a host country can exacerbate existing inequality, social exclusion and poor mental wellbeing (P. Brown, Gill, and Halsall 2022). However, the importance attributed to housing in the asylum process has not been embedded into practice; nowhere has the interplay between welfare chauvinism, deservingness and asylum outlined in the previous section been more apparent than in the state provision of housing (Darling 2022).

Nowicki posits that this has occurred because successive governments have employed “domicidal” housing policies, whereby the physical built environment, the ability to undertake homemaking practices and the emotional space of home, is intentionally destroyed (Nowicki 2014, 2023). The denial of housing, the determination of who has the right to a house and thus make a home, provides a key mechanism of

(re)producing systemic social inequalities and poverty. This section therefore traces how domicidal housing and poverty-inducing asylum measures coincide to create “policy-imposed marginality” and precarity – in this context, meaning structurally imposed uncertainty, vulnerability and risk in the housing sphere, which in turn stymies the ability for refugees to make home in the UK (Darling 2022, 6; Dotsey and Chiodelli 2021).

For four decades, housing has been a key component of UK socio-economic policy change, morphing from “house as home” to “house as real estate” (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 8), against a backdrop of neoliberalism, austerity, widening inequality, and increasing poverty. Quality housing is so important to a well-functioning welfare state, because other public goods and services – such as education and health – which are ostensibly provided equally, are in reality “allocated through the housing market” (Cheshire and Sheppard 2004, 392). In this sense, housing is a socio-spatial determinant, affecting access to all other services, and in turn people’s life chances, operating as a power structure that can either empower or oppress (Malpass 2008). Unlike health, social security and education, which in the UK are universally available services, the provision of housing has never occupied a de-commodified status (Lund 2017). Thus, housing was a relatively easy target for the early dismantlement of the welfare state; its non-universal status allowed it to be the subject of policies within a neoliberal agenda that financialized and commodified housing.

For example, in 1980, the policy known as Right to Buy, whereby social tenants were able purchase their homes from the local authority at a large discount was expanded, whilst construction of social housing was reduced to its lowest rate since the 1920s (Lund 2017; Smyth 2013). These factors resulted in a landslide decline of social housing availability so that, by 1997, over two million council homes were privately owned (Aalbers 2016; Malpass and Murie 1999; Powell and Robinson 2019). Alongside social housing decline was the rise of the private rented sector (PRS), facilitated by the 1988 Tenancy Act, which ended security and rent stability with the introduction of assured shorthold tenancies, no-fault evictions and market-rate rents (Crook and Kemp 1996). Regulations, and thus relative protection for tenants, were removed, and the power balance tipped in favour of landlords, making the sector more attractive for investment and paving the way for the neoliberal “domicidal turn” (Nowicki 2023, 13).

As such, the UK is currently experiencing a situation where social housing has become increasingly residualized, provided only for the most vulnerable (Clarke, Monk, and Taltavull 2011). In many localities, there are very strict criteria on who may apply to the housing register, and many authorities demand that an individual must have lived in the area for a certain amount of time to be eligible, which can disadvantage new refugees (Shelter England 2021). Nevertheless, the waitlist for council housing sits at over 1.5 m households, with demand far outstripping supply (Powell and Robinson 2019). Hence, people who classically would have been housed in social accommodation, such as low-income households and vulnerable groups, are more frequently pushed into the PRS (Byrne et al. 2020; Kemp 2011). Tenants in lower-income brackets are more likely than households in social housing in the same income brackets to be in inappropriate accommodation, a result of the lower end of the PRS being characterized by poor conditions, overcrowding, disrepair and insecure tenancies, housing types in which new migrant groups are particularly concentrated (Spratt 2022).

In relation to refugees, Brown *et al.* contend that housing has been the locus of reforms to the UK's asylum process (P. Brown, Gill, and Halsall 2022). In 1999, the Immigration and Asylum Act saw dispersal policy, whereby people are given no-choice accommodation, with financial support contingent on the acceptance of this accommodation, come into play to reduce the strain on housing in London. Ostensibly distributing people seeking asylum more fairly around the country (Sheldrick 2021), the reality is that dispersal areas are often localities with existing (severe) deprivation, cheap housing stock, low demand for social housing, and where austerity measures have had the greatest impact on public services (Darling 2016; Hancock and Mooney 2013). In 2012, responsibility for dispersal accommodation was transferred from NASS to a privatized system, operated by for-profit companies. Accommodation has since been widely criticized for being rife with issues, including quality, safety and appropriateness for people fleeing conflict, for example the use of military barracks and hostels (Berg and Dickson 2022). In dispersal accommodation, people have no tenancy rights and can be moved out at short notice; the insecurity of tenure means that it can be extremely difficult to forge and maintain social connections or meet cultural needs, particularly when housing is located in isolated areas far away from city centres, and where appropriate services are "piecemeal" (Hirschler 2015, 87).

Obtaining leave to remain does not transform refugees into suddenly deserving citizens (Mayblin 2019); once granted refugee status, people only have 28 days in which to apply for benefits, find housing and a job before they are evicted from Home Office accommodation, which often occurs before a source of income has been secured (Hughes 2023). This means that many end up homeless – a group in which refugees are over-represented, are forced to live in poor quality, unsuitable or informal rented housing, or rely on friends or charities to find accommodation (Baillot and Connelly 2018; Cebulla *et al.* 2010; Doyle 2014; Phillips 2006). Although refugees have the same rights to apply for social housing as UK citizens, the severe shortage and lengthy waiting lists mean that only the most vulnerable find accommodation in this sector, in which housing usually is provided unfurnished, including white goods and appliances. The Refugee Integration Loan, frequently used to pay for a deposit on privately rented accommodation, only allows a single person to borrow up to £500, inadequate to cover a month's upfront rent in many areas of the UK. People receive so little in weekly allowances when in the asylum system that it is almost impossible to save for a rent deposit themselves; paradoxically, if people do manage to accumulate savings, then their asylum support is at risk of being stopped (Baillot and Connelly 2018).

Through these policies, we can see how housing, and the site of the home, is deeply imbued with socio-political relations, and where "the power relations of wider society are played out" (Blunt and Dowling 2022; Brun and Fabos 2021, 7). The mobility of an individual is predicated on their economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, broadened by resources such as housing, infrastructure and local networks, and limited by place-based and personal forms of stigma (C. Butler 2022; Dangschat 2009). Housing is a necessity, a central component for participation in social, economic and political life, a key determinant in health outcomes, access to resources and institutional relationships, and for the provision of physical and ontological security (de Noronha 2015; Madden and Marcuse 2016; Powell and Robinson 2019). Conversely, inadequate housing is detrimental to physical and mental wellbeing, with documented impacts on family breakdowns,

negative consequences for child development, and is a key barrier to social inclusion and equality (de Sa 2017; Hauge, Støa, and Denizou 2017; Logan and Murdie 2016).

In this sense, determining who is deserving of a suitable, safe and secure home, and who is denied one, determines many more facets of an individual's life and life outcomes than just their housing situation. We can understand why this has occurred with the knowledge that if the goal of the UK asylum system is to deter, to hinder, to exclude, then by removing access to housing, the possibility of living a "normal" life is vastly reduced, and the status of Other is maintained. By stunting the ability for people to put down roots, to create a stable, meaningful life for themselves, asylum seekers and refugees remain illegitimate outsiders, excluded from society, and thus the potential to curtail their rights becomes justifiable (Bommes and Geddes 2000; Brun 2015; Nowicki 2023).

Hidden Consequences and Everyday Realities: Energy Deprivation Under the Hostile Environment

Thus far, we have traced how neoliberal housing policies and enforced destitution mean that refugees are more likely to live in precarious housing situations. The policy examples we have outlined in the previous two sections illuminate how a dual-pronged domicidal hostile environment deliberately damages both the physical materiality of housing as well as the emotional ability to make a home (Brun and Fabos 2021; Nowicki 2023). In this section, we return to energy deprivation as the "hidden" consequence of "non-energy" policies and practices that have normalized poor and insecure housing, the removal and denial of rights, services and adequate incomes for refugees.

As aforementioned, enforced destitution created by the asylum system does not evaporate when refugee status is granted, rather, it is a situation that endures, often for decades, after leaving the system (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014). In relation to energy deprivation, poverty reduces people's ability to respond, adapt and manage during periods of cold or heat (Thomson et al. 2019), in this case, whereby people cannot afford to adequately keep their homes thermally comfortable (Thomson et al. 2019, National Energy Action 2022b). Although there is no specific data available on refugees, analysis found that people from Asian, Black, or Mixed ethnicities had the highest expenditures on energy, and the lowest disposable incomes when compared with those from White ethnic groups (Bouzarovski et al. 2022).

Also relevant is a lack of knowledge on how to keep homes thermally comfortable and respond to a cold home in a UK context, resulting from two key factors. Firstly, in asylum accommodation, bills are taken care of by the housing provider, leading to a lack of awareness about the cost of energy in the UK (Lindsay, Gillespie, and Dobbie 2010), and secondly, the non-existent systematic dissemination of energy advice by local authorities, the Home Office or accommodation providers, both when people are in and when they leave the asylum system. Advice is usually then the purview of charitable organizations, which is either piecemeal, or insufficiently tailored to the needs of refugees, being a generalized service. As a result, many refugees are left without knowledge of how to navigate the UK's neoliberalized energy system, with its specific, highly responsibilized consumer requirements, alongside potentially different domestic energy demand regimes than in their country of origin (MacGregor, Walker, and Katz-Gerro 2019; Satish and Brennan 2019).

This could include contending with how to switch providers, reading a meter or knowing how to use a thermostat; thus, new refugees can often quickly accumulate debt (Bouzarovski et al. 2022; North East Child Poverty Commission 2013). This is exacerbated by the 28-day notice period; competing priorities such as finding housing and applying for Universal Credit in such a short space of time (Hughes 2023), which combined with existing destitution means that energy can be a secondary concern, remaining unaddressed until debt has already accrued (Lindsay, Gillespie, and Dobbie 2010).

When a household faces arrears on their utility bills, they can be forced onto prepayment meters, on which the cost of energy cannot be spread over the year, resulting in extremely high costs over the winter months when energy needs are highest. This leads many to self-disconnect, as they cannot afford to top up the meter, leaving them without energy at the coldest time of year (Citizens Advice 2023; Ofgem 2023). Living in a cold home has deleterious consequences on mental and physical health, exacerbates social exclusion and deepens poverty by impacting upon educational attainment and job prospects (C. Butler 2022; Day, Walker, and Simcock 2016; Willand, Middha, and Walker 2021). For new refugees, many of whom suffer from trauma, a lack of adequate energy can severely compound existing health conditions and worsen integration opportunities.

Although important, energy advice is insufficient without tackling the systemic and institutional drivers of the underlying issue, which is precarious and energy-inefficient housing (Simcock and Bouzarovski 2023). The residualization and inaccessibility of social housing, as well as asylum policies that cement destitution, funnels many refugees into the low-end of the PRS, increasing exposure to overcrowded, poor quality housing, exploitation and discrimination (Bouzarovski and Cauvain 2016; Carter, Polevychok, and Osborne 2009; Kemp 2011), and therefore increasing vulnerability to energy deprivation. The UK's PRS has the highest number of non-decent homes according to the Decent Homes Standards, with 10% of all homes containing damp, and 45% of failed homes not meeting thermal comfort standards (Rugg and Rhodes 2018). Poor insulation in ageing buildings, inefficient older appliances and the presence of damp are widespread across the lower end of the PRS, which has the highest rates of energy deprivation across all tenure types (Bouzarovski, Burbidge, and Stojilovska 2023). These factors contribute to indicators for the inability to keep homes adequately warm/cool, arrears on utility bills and presence of leaks, damp and/or rot all being higher in the UK's rental sector than across the general population (ENPOR 2023).

In addition, relying on cheaper housing that is far away from community, cultural and religious networks can increase vulnerability to energy deprivation (Cebulla et al. 2010). Research by Martiskainen et al. (2023) found that many refugees and asylum seekers rely on public transport services, which can be extremely costly, especially for those on a limited budget, and, particularly in more rural or suburban areas, unreliable, fragmented and infrequent (C. Butler 2022; Martiskainen et al. 2023). In such situations, people often prioritize money for transport to be able to access employment, thus reducing their budget for other energy services, such as adequate heating (C. Butler 2022). Middlemiss et al. find that a strong foundation of social relationships can enable access to energy services and that social connections can arise from access to such services (Middlemiss et al. 2019). If community ties are severed due to the inadequacy of transport services and a no-choice dispersal system that can see a family moved across the country at short

notice, conditions of energy deprivation can be exacerbated if people cannot reach networks that they depend on for support, such as legal aid, friends or family.

Energy deprivation is not just an abstract concept, it has real, tragic and avoidable human consequences. This is exemplified poignantly with the death of a toddler from a refugee background in Rochdale in 2020, who had suffered extreme exposure to black mould in his home (M. Brown 2022). Reports stated that the housing provider's employees said mould was "acceptable" in refugees' homes, individualizing the issue by blaming the presence of mould on the household's lifestyle choices. Though this case triggered national attention, the lack of action taken, whereby in 2022, 80% of households on the estate where the child died still had damp and mould, highlights the systemic normalization of poor-quality housing conditions in vulnerable households, and entrenched attitudes that refugees are undeserving of liveable homes (Booth 2022, 2023).

Through practices of domicidal and hostile environment policymaking that have constructed refugees as undeserving Others, we can trace how housing and asylum policy places constraints on where and how people are able to live and which have multifaceted and tangible outcomes on vulnerability to energy deprivation (C. Butler 2022). Refugees can be said to occupy liminal spaces, in a house – if they are able to access one at all – but not a home, neither fully included nor recognized, neither homeless nor at home, constantly navigating precarity in a policy landscape with moving goalposts (Blunt and Dowling 2022; Brun and Fabos 2021; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019).

Conclusion

This paper has traced how, as a result of punitive "non-energy" policy decisions, refugees become susceptible to the triad of factors that render a person vulnerable to energy deprivation; low income, poor housing and high energy bills, as well as being subject to racialized, discriminatory and punitive structural mechanisms that create and perpetuate conditions of destitution. We have proposed an explanatory framework, using Butler's concept of "non-energy policies" to shed light upon the drivers of energy deprivation amongst refugee communities. Hostile environment measures enacted since the 1990s, which have entrenched destitution whilst constructing refugees as an undeserving Other, alongside domicidal housing policy approaches which have led to refugees being more likely to live in poor quality, insecure and inefficient housing, contribute to increased exposure to energy deprivation.

This paper has contributed to ongoing debates in the following ways. First, it highlights how issues initiated in the asylum process extend beyond and are endured by refugees after leave to remain has been received. Second, it has contributed towards filling a critical gap within the energy literature into how and why refugees experience energy deprivation, as well as broadening the focus of scholarship on energy issues experienced by refugees beyond camp scenarios. Thirdly, we have argued that understanding drivers and experiences of energy deprivation is important because it underpins several other elements of socio-economic inequality, including health, education, mobility, employment and social inclusion, and in severe cases, leads to avoidable deaths. However, in the process of bringing this issue to the fore, we note that we are in some cases speculative, considering both the hiddenness of energy deprivation and the absence of pre-existing data.

Although this paper uses the UK as its case study, it nevertheless has relevance for policymakers in other Global North contexts, given that the UK is not alone in its punitive treatment of refugees, increasing numbers of refugee arrivals, prevalence of energy deprivation, or racialized Othering. In addition, the literature review exposes how little is known about energy deprivation amongst refugee communities, as well as the consequential interplay between energy and broader policymaking agendas. Further research is required to understand the extent to which refugees are equipped to navigate the UK energy system, to expose the critical vulnerability points where refugees are being exposed to energy deprivation, and how those working in the asylum system can better support refugees with energy-related issues to prevent energy deprivation. If we are to create a society where refugees are treated with dignity and respect, deserving of a home and a life beyond merely existing, we must unsettle the “systems of suffering” (Darling 2022) that leads to the invisibilization and thus normalization of energy deprivation experienced by these communities. Working to uncover injustices that are beyond the visible can lead to greater awareness, agency, political mobilizations and recognitional justice.

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