Opportunity Barriers Faced by Young Migrants in the UK

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Cover Image: Global Migration Flows as a circular plot [1]

Introduction

Background

Migration is a complex phenomenon. Its drivers are diverse [2], its effects are notoriously difficult to ascertain with certainty despite it being one of the most discussed topics in current general and political discourse [3], and even its definition is subject to contentious debate [4]. Increasingly, migration is the demographic process accounting for most of the population change in high-income countries, particularly in Europe [5]. It is estimated that 1.2 billion people will be displaced by environmental change, conflict, and civil unrest by 2050 [6].

Scope and Methods

We define 'opportunity barriers' as factors which restrict or prevent access to employment, education, institutional, social, or cultural support, or any prospects otherwise available to the non-migrant population. Opportunity barriers also prevent wider benefits of the social and economic participation of migrants such as an extended workforce and productivity improvements [7]. Social segregation is estimated to cost the UK £6 billion per year [8].

'Young migrants' are children and young adults (under 30s) whose permanent residence is in the UK but were not born there. There are an estimated 2.5 million people in the country who fit this definition, 1 in 10 of all people in this age group [9]. We also refer to young 'second generation' migrants as British-born children of one or more foreign-born parents. This is 34.3% of all children in the UK [10].

We make use of secondary data from government reports, academic and media sources, emphasizing lived experience where available

Challenge Landscape

Symptoms of Opportunity Barriers in the UK

Education

Education is the most common reason for the migration of 15–24-year-olds to the UK [11]. All children in the UK are entitled to free education. However:

- There is considerable variation between schools on provisions for pupils with 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) [12].
- Attainment of EAL pupils is good, though those who arrive in the British system later (years 10&11) are less than half as likely to meet the average Attainment 8 scores [13].
- There are "high levels of segregation in [British] schools" [14].
- This negatively impacts social mixing and exposure to a diverse range of opinions for both foreign and British-born students which improves social cohesion and potential job prospects [15].
- The Casey review: "In too many cases, the educational circumstances of children are not known to local authorities" [14]

Economic

Migrant workers in high-income countries earn 12.6% less on average than nationals, a gap which widened during the pandemic [16].

- Migrants are over-represented in low-skilled and low-paid jobs [17] [18].
- Families in this group are two-thirds as likely to own their home as all British-born households [19]
- The foreign-born population are more likely to live in poverty [20] and children of migrants are more likely to experience material deprivation [21]
- Casey [14] found unemployment rates to be far higher among those not born in the UK, especially among females.
- Asylum seekers and refugees are four times less likely to be employed and earn 55% less per week than the British-born population [22].

This has resulted in reports of asylum seekers taking on cash-in-hand jobs. More information on this is available in the appendix

Social

Psycho-social stresses caused by sometimes traumatic migration routes and a sudden loss of long-held friendship groups and support networks are especially prevalent among child migrants and asylum seekers [23]. This is compounded by segregation experienced in schools [14] and bullying due to markers such as accents or inability to speak English [24]. In addition:

- The household overcrowding rate is more than three times higher in foreign-born households [19]

- Overcrowding presents risks to mental and physical health [25], and negatively impacts educational outcomes and child social development [26]
- The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern over "shameful" rhetoric surrounding skilled migrants in the UK [27]
- Up to 60% of children believe that migrants and asylum seekers 'steal jobs' [28]
- The acculturation gap means that several children act as translators for their parents, sometimes being exposed to distressing documents and details [24]
- In London 58% of migrants view loneliness and isolation as the biggest challenge they face [29]

Health

Young migrants have historically been reported to be healthier than those born in the UK [30], although recent research in this area has been inconclusive [31].

- There may be a "health-mortality paradox" [32] which suggests migrants in England and Wales spend a greater proportion of their lives in poor health despite having lower mortality.
- 25.4% of vulnerable migrants without access to free primary care report that they do not understand the healthcare system and their rights, and 10% fear arrest if they attempt to do so [33]

The interaction between the above factors contributed to greater exposure and poorer outcomes among the migrant population during the COVID-19 pandemic [34]. Overrepresentation in customer-facing industries, poorer housing, and poorer health literacy in the context of predominantly English public health messaging [35] are likely to be contributing factors.

Iceberg Model

Events:

- **Higher levels of poverty and child material deprivation**
- **Underemployment**: Highly educated young migrants fail to find jobs matching their skillset causing '**deskilling'**
- Social Isolation and loneliness due to **lack of access to networks, language, and cultural difficulties** as well as **discrimination**
- Individuals at **high risk of being trafficked** and **disappearance**
- Difficulty in accessing **right to work** means many turn to low paying 'cash-in-hand' jobs, meaning **employer exploitation**
- **Restricted political participation and representation**

Patterns

- **Migrant flows into the UK have increased**, as have the number of second-generation migrants, as a result of crises such as the Ukraine war and other hardships
- The interaction between **migration and urbanisation** combined with an **expensive housing market** has led to clustering and household **overcrowding resulting in isolation and segregation**
- **Increasingly negative media portrayal** of migrants, headlines such as "Migrants Rob Young Britons of Jobs" and "Migrant Chaos all Summer"
- **Lack of expansion of existing infrastructure** to support migrants, where initiatives have been implemented, these have been few and far between

Structures

- **"Hostile Environment" Government Policies** intended to deter illegal migration also cause exclusion those in the country legally and have been shown heighten levels of **public suspicion, prejudice, and discrimination of migrants**
- Migrant stocks and flows have increased due to **familial connections** or people speaking English due to Britain's **colonial past**
- The **"British Values" agenda** in schools fuels **social exclusion** in the classroom
- Processes of securing right to work are often **complex and inaccessible** to many
- **Access to the welfare state is denied** to many with the restriction of "**no recourse to public funds**", backlogs and administrative difficulties make this a challenge to overcome despite support in principle being available to under 18s
- Humanitarian routes set up to offer visas favour few, specific groups and **do not treat all vulnerable displaced persons the same**; the UK government has been accused of '**double standards**' relating to responses to the Ukrainian and Syrian refugee crises
- **Weak employment regulation** fails to ensure **fair consideration of overseas qualifications** and places the UK educated higher on the perceived hierarchy
- **Intersectionality** between migrants and other systemically disadvantaged groups, in particular by race, religion, gender and, socio-economic status

Mental Models

- **Assimilationist Notions of Integration**: assumptions about what it means to "integrate" into UK society are assimilationist in nature, implying migrants must **conform** to British culture and values, rather than valuing diversity and different cultural expressions
- **Notions of "good" and "bad" migrants**
- **Exclusionary Nationalism**: narrow definitions of British identity which assume those of different descent to be incompatible with the country's way of life
- 'Subterranean' forms of **racism** are systemic and span various aspects of British society and labour market, **stereotyping of migrants and multiculturalism itself as a threat** or even as **radicalised**

Root Causes

The Government's prioritisation of policy for securitisation purposes, contradictory agendas, complex immigration procedures and legislation, a lack of safeguarding of the vulnerable and ultimately, exclusionary nationalism and racism at the level of Government and politics have fostered a toxic environment for migrants and fundamentally changed the nature of border enforcement. Recent policy decisions, such as the threat of deportation to Rwanda and the "Stop the Boats" rhetoric surrounding the Illegal Migration Bill, are part of this. Such policies also fuel misinformation due to a lack of clarity and constant changes. Migrants are also invariably underrepresented in national and community-level leadership.

In 2012, then-Home Secretary Theresa May declared the Government's intention to create a "really hostile environment" [36] for irregular migrants living in the UK. The legislation which followed this, the Immigration Act 2014 and Immigration Act 2016, became known as the hostile environment policies. The main characteristic of which is the introduction of what some scholars term New Border Agents [37]. This allows the nation-state to enforce its national border remotely by requiring public-facing officials, including employers, landlords, and NHS staff to carry out immigration and identity

checks. This has created a system which enforces citizens to act on behalf of the Home Office against one another. This legislation also expanded non-Suspensive asylum appeals, meaning that asylum seekers who had their claims rejected would be deported before an appeal could be heard. Between 2017 and 2018, 73% of appeal cases reaching an upper tribunal were lost by Home Office [38].

These policies have had a disproportionate effect on ethnic minorities [39], the young [40], have fostered racism [41] and wrongfully targeted those legally in the UK such as the Windrush generation (see Appendix). Associated border securitisation measures have increased the number of people with no recourse to public funds. This is currently attached to the Leave to Remain conditions of 1.4 million people [42] including 180,000 children, many of whom were born in the UK. This makes them far more likely to use food banks and become homeless [43]. Children find themselves between "contradictory policy areas" [20, p. 71]. Under Section 17 of The Children Act 1989, local authorities have the responsibility of safeguarding all vulnerable children. This includes providing accommodation and meeting basic needs. A study by Project 17 revealed that families with no recourse to public funds found it significantly harder to access Section 17 support [44]. In 60% of cases examined, support was refused by local authorities, 22% of these were incorrectly decided on the grounds of immigration status and as result, 24% of children in the study were left homeless.

We see in contemporary policy and discourse, what Wagner and Childs [45] term 'subterranean' forms of racism, which are enabled by weak policies and structures which fail to ensure fairness. There is a lack of flexibility and consideration of context in the system; for example, the last-minute movement of Afghan families from London to northern England weeks before children completed their GCSE studies meant they could not be registered at a new school in time to take exams [46].

Casey [14] has suggested a fear of radicalisation and the far right and media as a source of racist sentiment, as below.
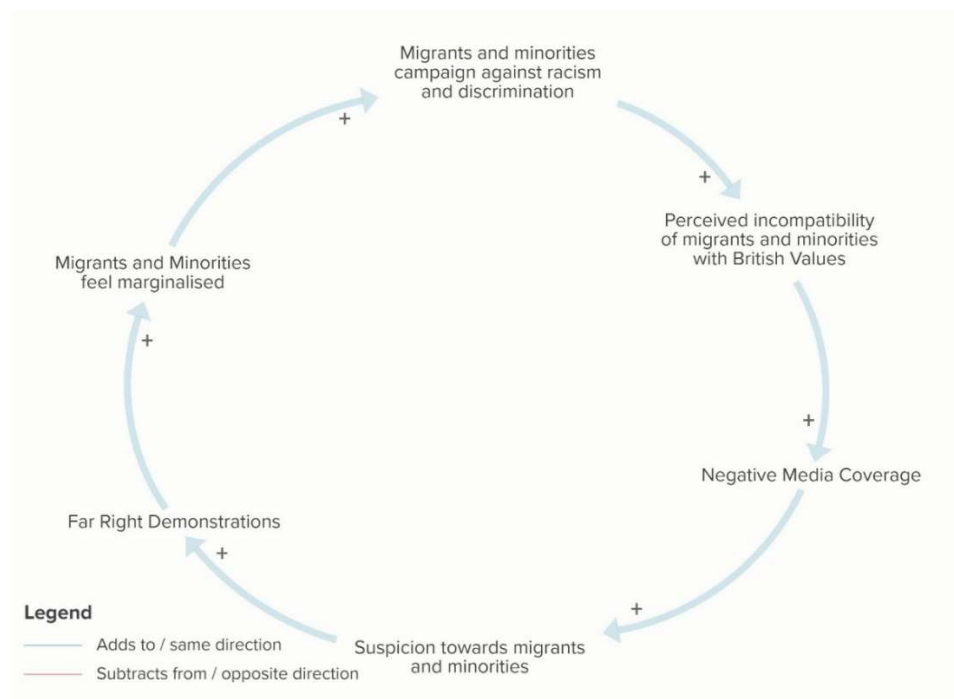
The Problem of 'Integration'

The British Minister for Veterans' Affairs recently announced a new set of schemes to aid Afghan refugees in gaining the right to work, he stressed that "there is a responsibility on them [Afghan refugees] to take the opportunities offered under those schemes and integrate into UK society" [47]. Integration in terms of "vital health, education and employment support". The concept of integration is generally held to be the solution to migrant disadvantage. We include it in the challenge landscape because it is a term "used by many but understood differently by most" [48]. Favell [49, p. 47] argues that "new integration models are still a means of asserting the superiority of Western societies in terms of diversification and their transformative powers".

In the UK there are no policies to specifically support integration and no formal definition. The Home Office [50] has however published this framework:
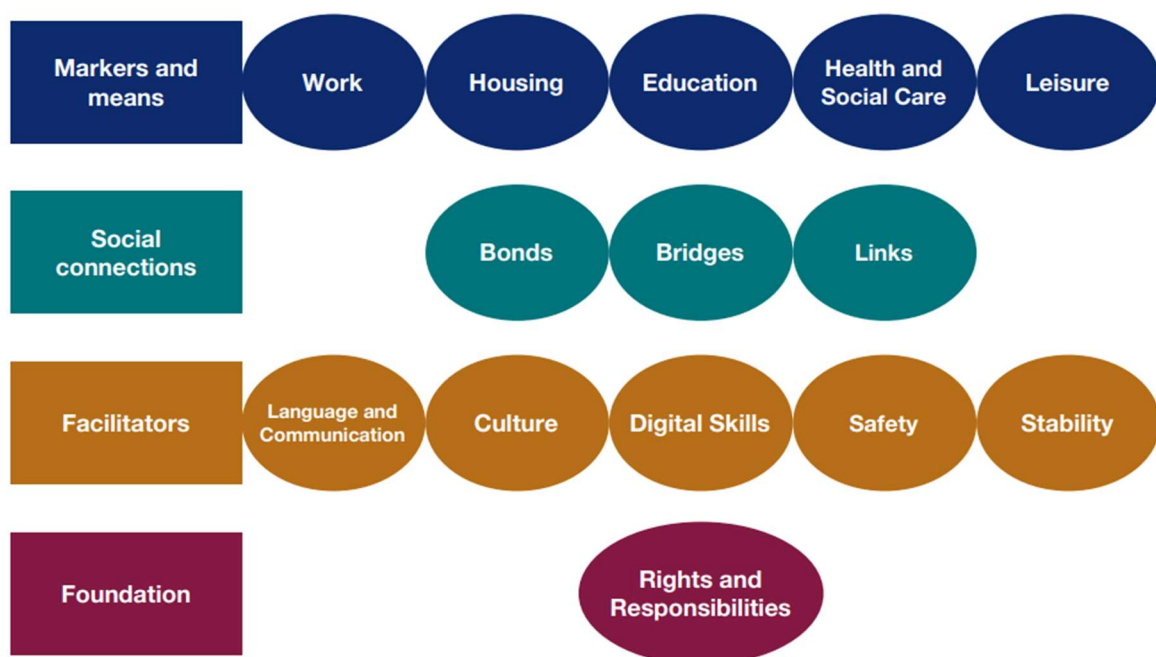

Indicators of Integration Framework as in: Home Office, 2019 [50]

The Home Office report states that "the framework does not seek to specify causal relationships between domains" (p. 20). The lack of systems thinking hinders the model's usefulness as these factors interact to produce lived experiences. Government policy is strong on immigration control and policing but weak on acknowledging systemic problems and interconnections.

Systems Approach

Reframing the Home Office Model
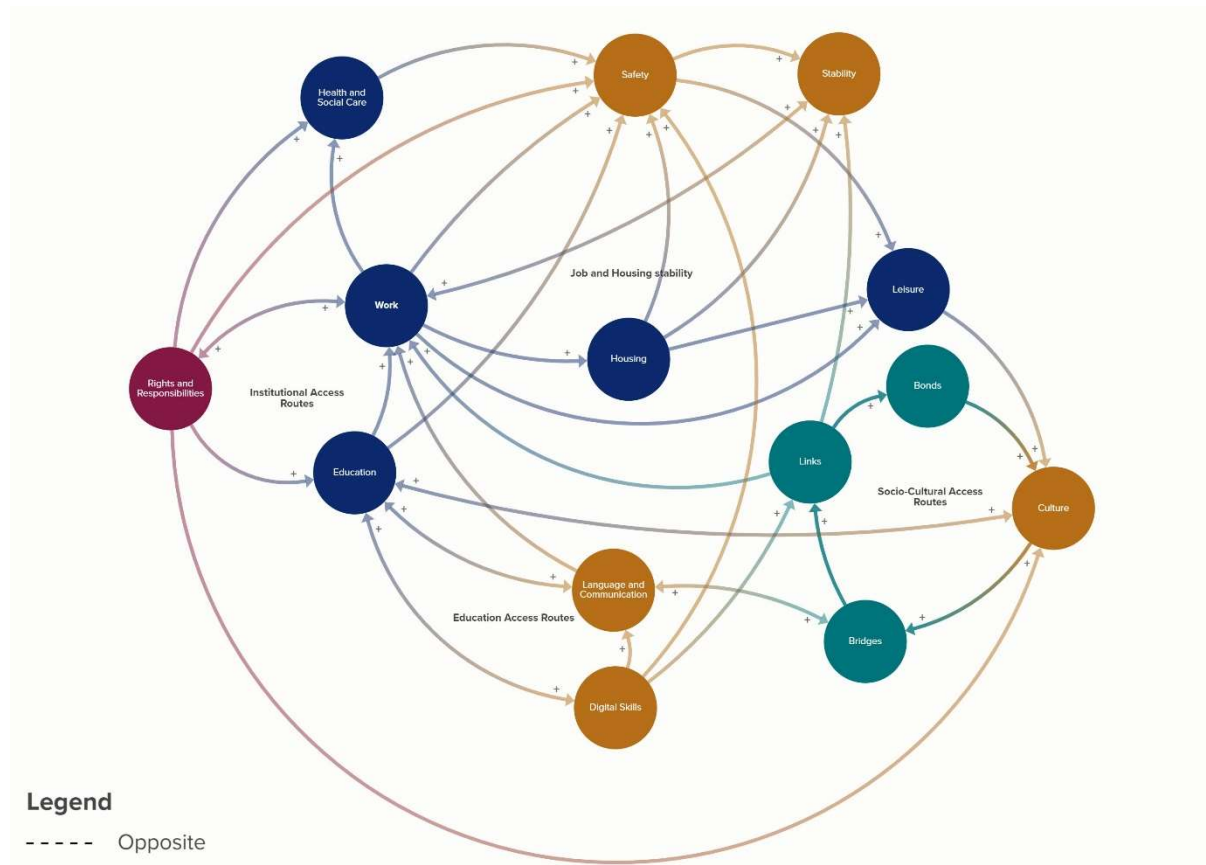
Based on: Home Office, 2019 [50]; available at: *https://embed.kumu.io/acf4873e4f41b9c2bc8647ad03e7dfc2*

We created this map as a research tool to investigate the perceived routes through which integration is expected to take place by the government, recognising that the initial model is a 'solutions first' attempt to address the issue.

We identify several issues which these routes from being accessed, namely an exclusionary housing market [51] and "abstruse" and unclear immigration laws [52]. Detailed analysis is available in the appendix.

Systems Map

Available at https://embed.kumu.io/d318b2ec50c3ab994edf84b91e2db6d3
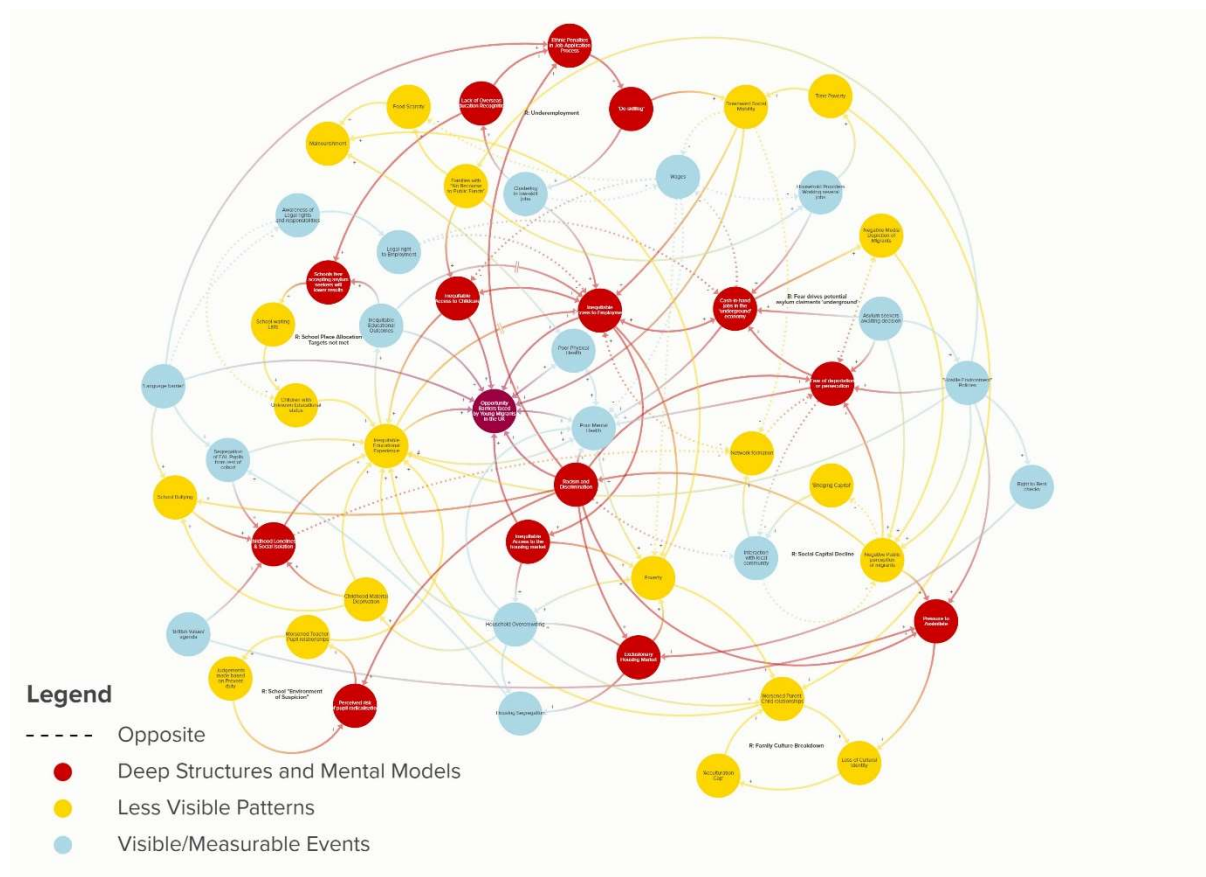
We used the Migrant Integration Policy Index [53] definition of equity, that "migrants are not disadvantaged with respect to nationals. This usually requires equal treatment, but where migrants have different needs, it means that special measures should be taken for them."

We found several interconnections which created feedback loops.

School "Environment of Suspicion"

Hughes [54] identified an "environment of suspicion" (p. 84) in EAL classrooms and the wider school due in part to Prevent Duty measures and the perceived heightened risk of radicalisation among this group. Prevent Duty measures, alongside the British Values agenda in schools, were introduced to combat potential radicalisation. Teachers were encouraged to act on "gut instincts" and feelings of nervousness by Police guidance, these feelings about which pupils could be vulnerable could be predicated on racial biases. Muslim children are far more likely to be wrongfully flagged under Prevent Duty. This has had the effect of increasing isolation and fear amongst an already vulnerable group and inhibits network and friendship formation out of fear of being identified as a 'bad crowd'. Fear on the students' part and suspicion on the teachers' part reinforce one another and cause a breakdown of student-teacher relationships, significantly disrupting educational experiences.

School Place Allocation Targets not met

A UNICEF report published in 2018 revealed that in the academic year proceeding, no region of the UK had met the 20 school-day target to give unaccompanied child asylum seekers school places with 25% waiting up to 3 months to obtain them. It is also unaccompanied migrants who face the highest attainment gaps at GCSE level [55]. Serious concerns have been raised that this is because of a fear that a "recently arrived child with little English might lower league table results" [56]. This fear exists due to educational inequities caused by barriers to education such as this.

Underemployment

Educated young migrants find it more difficult to secure employment matching their skill level meaning they experience very high levels of underemployment [57]. This has led to the somewhat unrecognised problem of 'deskilling' of migrants, particularly in areas of high population density such as London [58]. Heath and Di Stasio [59] found "enduring contours of racial discrimination" within Britain's labour market, their 2019 field experiment revealed that non-British-born candidates were less likely to be invited to interview when given identical CVs, qualifications, and cover letters. This discrimination may be due to reservations held by employers about the skill level of migrant workers given that several are clustered in low-skilled jobs, or preconceived notions of the types of jobs they had worked in other countries being of a lesser standard. The Growth Equal Opportunities, Migration and Markets (GEMM) Project [60] concluded that, despite apparently more comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, discrimination was more prevalent in the UK than in other European countries.

Solutions Landscape

Charities & NGOs

Global: International Rescue Committee

- An NGO responding to humanitarian crises and promoting safe transit, resettlement, and integration of refugees
- Refugee Integration in Southeast England (RISE): offers a 6-month program in collaboration with local authorities, providing employment readiness training, CV support, cultural orientation, and opportunities for network formation
- An equivalent program in the US showed measured success, with 84% of refugees becoming economically self-sufficient within 180 days

Caution should be exercised as administrative barriers may influence the success of such programs.

Nationwide: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

- A charity adopting systems thinking as part of their "Theory of Change" [61], they provide investments through:
- Shared Ground Fund: Support for organisations assisting asylum claims and engaging in community work to foster cross-cultural communication
- Justice Together: Free advice on citizenship and legal rights
- Inquiry into Lived Experience in the Migration Sector: a research project currently being conducted into how migrants can be equitably included in policy debate

We have concerns however that access to such schemes is geographically restricted. Initiatives in London received 5 times as many grants in 2021 than those in the West Midlands. The Midlands and Birmingham are some of the most segregated areas in the UK in terms of schooling and housing [14].

Nationwide: Against Borders for Children

- Ran a political activist campaign which ran between 2016-2018 to boycott the collection of nationality and country-of-birth data in schools
- This policy was seen as discriminatory and created fear for migrant parents

This campaign was successful in ending the policy and the group continues to fight legally for the rights of children and raise awareness of systemic racism.

Local: New Routes Integration

- A Norwich-based charity promoting community awareness and cross-cultural integration in the city
- Operates grassroots schemes to assist young people and promote social cohesion, including EAL family workshops, international families club and one-to-one education mentoring

We appreciate community-level integration schemes, but they fail to address deep-rooted discrimination in the housing and job markets. Strong community ties may mitigate these issues, but national perspectives and policies can mask their impact

Individual Providers

Individual providers such as schools and employers have recognised their responsibility in this system. The University of Birmingham Secondary School tackles housing segregation by having four catchment areas which reflect the city's demographics. Pupils have reported positive experiences with this system and the breakdown of racial and religious barriers experienced in primary school [62].

The problem of opportunity barriers faced by young migrants is wide-reaching and as such, these solutions all provide valuable efforts in terms of addressing the global contexts of migration, advocating for wholesale policy reform, and funding and providing grassroots-level support to families. These solutions represent different compartments of the problem.

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Intervention Opportunities

While the current solution landscape succeeds in some areas, particularly social and community cohesion, we identify the following gaps which we believe must be addressed by future intervention:

Stakeholder Interaction

Efforts must be made to:

- Establish regular communication and openness between industries and authorities to combat discrimination
- Evaluate the potential unintended systems-wide impact when forming policy, especially policy targeted at irregular migrants

Data Collection and Availability

More robust data collection is needed, including:

- Standardised and comparable metrics underscoring economic exclusion
- Regular monitoring and collection of indicators which consider both barriers and opportunities

Recognition of the importance of public discourse

Public discourse "creates, contests, and moves the borders of belonging, both metaphorically and materially" [63, p. 2]. Solutions must be mindful of this and:

- Investigate the impacts of racism, white supremacy, and the far right on social cohesion.
- Acknowledge and tackle the fact that the effects that securitization policy has on racism and increasing ethnic penalties in the workforce.
- Acknowledge the public and local authority confusion that contradictory policy areas bring.

As such, we propose the following interventions:

End unlawful refusal of Section 17 support for children through additional regulation or a public body to assess the needs of vulnerable children where local authorities fail to act.

Ensure all children have school places through a public body responsible for allocation where local authorities do not meet targets.

Focus on cultural diversity in schools rather than "British Values" and foster cohesion and collaboration in the classroom to reduce potential negative sentiment towards migrants in the long term. More classes should be made available for all pupils to support the ability to secure employment and introduce pupils to the British tax system and their legal rights.

Decolonise EAL practice and provision through anti-racism teacher training for Prevent Duty, openly discussing systemic racism, offering similar provisions as SEN pupils where appropriate in terms of assessment adjustment, and allowing more mobility between 'sets' [12].

Target research efforts to assess potential impacts, direct and indirect, of the Illegal Migration Bill on legal and second-generation migrants.

Strengthen institutional recognition of overseas education by establishing a "National Skills Recognition Scheme" [64] to enable fair consideration of professional experience and qualifications, with more guidance for employers.

A long-term goal is the end of the hostile environment and the condition of no recourse to public funds for children. These policies are currently under review, but we recognise that their repeal will be difficult to achieve with plans such as the Illegal Migration Bill to remove several rights of irregular migrants including modern slavery protections which could worsen the underground economy and associated risks [65]. More public attention should be drawn to this, political advocacy has been successful within this system in the past.

Insights and Conclusions

This system sits between larger and smaller systems: the larger being the global increase in forced migration and the significant challenges faced by displaced young people and the smaller being the differential impact of opportunity barriers of different groups of young migrants in different areas in the UK. We identify avenues for further investigation, particularly in terms of inner-city migrants and urban environments. This is particularly the case for Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants, 98% of whom live in urban areas. The system influences cited in this report will still apply to this group, but some elements will be more amplified than others, especially overcrowding and household segregation.

We have identified the barriers of most impact which confer disadvantage upon what is a very diverse group of young migrants. Addressing these challenges requires fundamental changes in the British system, a system which is a segregator by design, inhibited by its 'securitisation first' nature and a failure to acknowledge barriers in a meaningful way. Interconnections exist between educational, economic, and social exclusion. Tackling these issues will require wholesale change, there is no single solution. Breaking down these barriers will make the UK more just, safer, and better equipped to tackle oncoming challenges

Appendix

A: First-hand accounts of cash-in-hand jobs

One young Afghan refugee told the Daily Mail that "a lot of people" were working for as little as £5 an hour [66]. Two Sri Lankan men, aged 21 and 28, reported to Sky News that they had abandoned formal claims for asylum when they heard about government plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, and that they and many others were now living and working "outside the system", doing "odd jobs" such as gardening and cleaning for below minimum wage [67]. The scale of this 'underground' economy is simply unknown.

B: Further analysis of hostile environment policies

The effect of these policies in reducing irregular migration has also come under scrutiny, Britain remains the country in Europe with the most irregular migrants, up to 1.2 million [68]. These policies have also wrongfully removed the rights of legal migrants such as depicted in the Windrush scandal, which saw several hundred Caribbean migrants threatened with wrongful deportation, fired from their jobs and made destitute for several years [69]. Many of this group had arrived as children and young adults in the post-war period to fill labour shortages. The Windrush generation demonstrated the lack of power and agency afforded to migrants and showed long-running colonial influences within the British labour and immigration system.

A Government report stated that the immigration legislation of the period 1950-1980 had the prime intention of reducing "the number of people with black and brown skin who were permitted to work in the UK" [70]. Citizenship requirements under the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act separated "belonging" and "non-belonging" citizens in a two-tiered system. Essentially those who were deemed as "belonging" were those who had white parents or grandparents. Within the hostile environment, citizenship is effectively regulated and decided by the populous.

C: Analysis of the Home Office model

We noted that the socio-cultural access route perceived to exist by establishing 'bonds', connections between people of similar cultures and 'bridges' between people of different cultures was influenced highly by the landscape of fear and worry about deportation preventing access to social ties and ultimately increasing the risk of exploitation and poverty [71].

The institutional access routes, provided by gaining citizenship or other rights, are inaccessible to many due to language barriers and lack of clear guidance and administrative hurdles. Many do not have the resources to contest decisions. In one Court of Appeal judgement, Lord Justice Jackson referred to immigration law, as an "impenetrable jungle of intertwined statutory provisions" [72]. In another, former Sir Patrick Elias, PC states that immigration laws had become "abstruse" and inaccessible to those unfamiliar with English law [52]. This also highlighted that the Government website is also frequently out of date given the nature of changing policy.

The job and housing stability loop was impeded by an exclusionary housing market which pushes many into overcrowded spaces and renting. Because of a fear of being found to house illegal migrants, landlords and 44% less likely to rent to someone without a British passport, and 53% less likely to rent to someone with limited time to remain [51]. The Government's out-sourcing of border control requires untrained officials to make decisions which leads to a lack of clarity, and poor, non-

standardised practice. Before Right to Rent checks, migrants were already marginalised in both the private and social housing markets but were invariably portrayed in media as the causes of the housing crisis [73]. Asylum seekers are also frequently relocated. The exclusionary housing market creates instability in terms of the employment, and depending on catchment areas can cause significant disruption to children's education and support networks if they are moving around due to difficulty in securing permanent residence. These disadvantages persist intergenerationally.