First generation immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice

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Introduction

Published case reviews highlight that professionals sometimes struggle to engage with first generation immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Families are often unaware of the services and benefits they are entitled to in the UK or may, for various reasons, be reluctant to make their presence in the country known to the authorities.

The learning from these reviews highlights the importance of putting children’s rights as children above any consideration of their immigration status, and professionals should actively promote services to families newly arrived in the UK.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2010, where parents and/or children who were not born in the UK were the subject of the review and where the reports are sufficiently detailed to be useful for identifying and sharing learning points.

In these case reviews, children died or were seriously injured in the following ways:

- children died following a lengthy period of abuse or neglect, which was not picked up due to social isolation or family movement between countries
• children died or were seriously injured after parents' legal status left them unable to access the support and care they need
• children killed by parents suffering mental health issues, exacerbated by stress of uncertainty over right to remain and past traumatic experiences.

Risk factors for first generation immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in case reviews

Moving to a new country can be a stressful and lonely time for parents and children. It presents a number of risk factors for the families involved.

Social and cultural isolation due to lack of a network of family and friends
Families moving to the UK from other parts of the world may lack the network of family and friends that people who have lived here their whole lives have built up.

Language barriers for those who do not speak English
There are a number of risk factors when some or all family members do not speak English.

Lack of knowledge of entitlements and means of accessing support
New arrivals to the UK may not be aware of the services and benefits which they aren entitled to.

Transient population increases difficulty in services ability to offer consistent support
Newly arrived families may be relocated to different parts of the country. Moving between local authority areas makes it hard for services to build up relationships with families or ensure consistent support.

Uncertainty over right to remain
Families may have arrived in the UK illegally, or be waiting to find out if they are to be granted asylum. The on-going insecurity can have a considerable effect on mental health. It can also impact families' ability to access public funds; leaving them destitute or homeless.
Families who have not been given the right to remain are less likely to seek help or engage with services, as they will not want any official record of their presence in the country. This seriously limits their access to care, and their ability to access the help and support they need.

A precarious legal status may also leave families unwilling to reveal details of their past experience. Important background information that could help professionals support them may be withheld if it contradicts the story they told on their asylum application.

** Trafficking of some families into the country**

Some families have arrived in the country through trafficking. This leaves them owing a debt to their traffickers. This limits their ability to speak out, ask for or access help and support.

** Periods of separation amongst family**

Families sometimes arrive in the UK at different times, leading to periods of separation between parents and children. Some parents struggle to cope with bringing up children without their partner, and families can find it hard to readjust once they have been reunited after a period of time apart.

** Exposure to violence and trauma**

Some people have left their home countries to escape danger. They may be suffering as a result of their past experiences, for example through post-traumatic stress disorder.

** Gaps in knowledge of family history**

It can be hard for professionals to build up an accurate chronology of families who have lived in more than one country. Records are not automatically shared between countries, making it hard to identify families where there are pre-existing child protection concerns.

There may also be some uncertainty over children's ages. In some situations, particularly in cases involving child trafficking, a lack of official documentation may lead to children being incorrectly treated as adults, unable to access the protection owed to them by the state.
Learning for improving practice

Sharing records between countries
Professionals should try to build up information relating to newly arrived families by contacting the UK Border Agency or children's services in the family's home country.

Engaging with family members outside the UK
In cases where family members are dispersed it is important to try and contact members of the family from outside the UK who may be able to offer support.

Actively promote services to new arrivals
Professionals should not assume that new arrivals are aware of how to access the support they need in the UK. Families should be helped to navigate the UK health care, education and welfare systems.

Be aware of services available to children whose parents have no recourse to public funds
Children's rights outweigh any consideration of their immigration status. Local authorities have a duty to protect the welfare of all children, and professionals should ensure that children are able to access the support or protection they need.

More ways to help you protect children

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Sign up to our weekly current awareness email newsletter nspcc.org.uk/caspar
Read more learning from case review briefings.