

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Compulsory Dispersal of Asylum Seekers and Processes of Social Exclusion in England

by
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INTRODUCTION

Compulsory dispersal of asylum seekers was introduced following the Immigration & Asylum Act 1999. A separate, centralized agency – the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) – was created to administer this policy and asylum seekers were separated from the mainstream benefits system. One of the main aims of dispersal was to accommodate asylum seekers away from London and the Southeast of England. Deterrence of further new arrivals of asylum seekers was an explicit aim of the policy as with previous immigration and asylum legislation (Bloch and Schuster, 2005; Cohen, 1994; Sales, 2002; Schuster, 2003, 2004; Solomos, 2003). Another aim was the avoidance of adding to problems of social exclusion and racial tensions.

This study of contemporary compulsory dispersal of asylum seekers in England was situated within an historical account of past cases of dispersal of refugees (Robinson, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2002; Robinson and Hale, 1989; Zetter, 1988, 1999, 2002). There were key differences between past cases of dispersal of refugees and the contemporary dispersal of asylum seekers. In the past, *ad hoc* dispersal arrangements had been implemented for refugees arriving *en masse* following highly publicised emergency situations (Duke, 1996; Hitchcox, 1987; Jones, 1982). These programmes involved recognised refugees and access to mainstream financial support was a key principle (Hale, 1993). Contemporary dispersal was the first time that all nationalities of individuals without secure status were dispersed across the UK by law. Previous examples of dispersal of refugees had been organised around the availability of employment (Kushner and Knox, 1999) or secure accommodation (Carey-Wood *et al.*, 1995) whereas contemporary dispersal was led by the availability of temporary accommodation or 'bedspaces'. Asylum seekers were dispersed on a 'no choice' basis to areas which were selected due to the availability of unpopular or vacant accommodation. This 'no choice' basis encompassed both the location and type of accommodation. A range of public, social and private accommodation was used and the privatisation of services to transport and accommodate asylum seekers expanded considerably as a result. Asylum seekers who were able to live with family or friends were able to opt for Subsistence Only support (SO only) foregoing any assistance with the cost of accommodation.

The theoretical foundations for the study came from the literature on social exclusion (Burchardt, 2004; Kofman and Sales, 1998; Levitas, 1998, 2000; Lupton and Power, 2002) and forced migration (Castles, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004; Harrell-Bond, 1986, 1999; Indra, 1999) with the anthropological concept of liminality (Bousquet, 1987; Kunz, 1973, Malkki, 1995) as well as trust (Colson, 2003; Daniel and Knudsen, 1995; Hynes, 2003; Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995) acting as a bridge between these literatures.

Debates on social cohesion (Zetter *et al.*, 2006), social capital, social networks of refugees (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005) and a wider system of 'burden sharing' within Europe (Thielemann, 2003) were ongoing throughout the study. Geographically-specific studies of dispersal and national overviews of the system have also emerged (Anie, *et al.*, 2005; Audit Commission, 2000; Carter and El-Hassan, 2003; Robinson *et al.*, 2003; Wilson, 2001).

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This research was carried out with the overall aim of investigating the social exclusion of asylum seekers during compulsory dispersal. The specific aims were to:

- Investigate processes of formal and informal social exclusion of asylum seekers
- Generate knowledge of the social exclusion of asylum seekers through spatial analysis.
- Investigate the impacts of dispersal on how asylum seekers access services
- Investigate how dispersed asylum seekers were able to maintain or create social networks
- Explore the longer term effects of the dispersal policy on 'belonging', 'inclusion' and the process of resettlement for those granted recognition as a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention or other form of status
- Understand how perceptions of asylum seekers were essential in understanding the impetus for the dispersal policy and the 'one size fits all' approach of policy makers.

METHODOLOGY

The study of contemporary compulsory dispersal required a research design and methodology capable of conveying complexity. The main methods used to carry out this research were qualitative combined with Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software to provide a spatial analysis of dispersal. Field research was carried out between November 2002 and February 2005, consisting of in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation with asylum seekers, refugees and key informants in three dispersal locations. Interviews were also conducted with policy makers, other key informants, refugees and asylum seekers in London. A range of published and unpublished reports and grey material were utilised as secondary data.

The environment of deterrence towards asylum seekers impacted on the research. The research context was sensitive and this meant that particular issues of access, methodology and ethics were involved. In this context the ethical principle of 'avoiding harm' had to be interpreted broadly to encompass the deterrence environment and structural constraints of the policy.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

A key finding of the research was that multiple forms of social exclusion of asylum seekers existed. These different forms related to the declining entitlements of asylum seekers as well as the **structure**, **geography** and **process** of the NASS system. These forms are explored in turn:

The Structure of the NASS system

The speed at which the NASS system was set up and implemented did not allow for consultation with local communities in dispersal locations. The original idea of language-based clusters of asylum seekers was effectively abandoned early in the life of the policy. Because asylum seekers were separated from mainstream welfare provision they were more visible as a group and the distinction between asylum seekers and recognised refugees became entrenched.

The dispersal policy was widely criticised by the voluntary sector when initially outlined (Refugee Council, 2000) but the voluntary sector ultimately undertook a frontline role in local level implementation of the policy. As a direct result of dispersal, the number of agencies involved with asylum seekers grew with the deterrence element becoming a taken for granted aspect of the system. Since the commencement of compulsory dispersal, a range of further legislative measures and mechanisms have been introduced to deter new arrivals. Dispersal has therefore been implemented at the same time as asylum seekers were denied permission to work¹, withdrawal of social support for asylum seekers applying 'in-country'² as well as pilot projects to take the children of refused asylum seekers into care if they do not 'voluntarily' return to their countries of origin. The 'co-option' (Zetter *et.al.*, 2004) of agencies to provide emergency accommodation meant that voluntary sector agencies were at the interface between asylum seekers and in-country deterrence measures and inhabited the most visible and contested space within the system. Asylum seekers navigating this conflicting dual advocacy and implementation role did not always distinguish refugee agencies from the Home Office.

The structure of the NASS system was hierarchical. This meant that agencies at the top of the hierarchy were least likely to be involved with asylum seekers. Agencies working locally on a face-to-face basis with asylum seekers had less influence over the evolution of the dispersal policy. Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) assisted with dispersal by undertaking a 'buffer' role but often did so without additional financial support. Private sector organisations operated largely outside this hierarchical structure even though the privatisation of services for asylum seekers expanded considerably as a result of contemporary compulsory dispersal. The NASS system was characterised by widespread disillusionment from agencies involved in implementing dispersal and from asylum seekers.

The Geography of the NASS system

The geographic concentration of social exclusion has a long history in the UK as has the degree of concentration of minority groups (Lupton and Power, 2002; Mohan, 1999). Dispersal of minorities has also been a part of the racialised social policy interventions that occurred following black post-war settlement in the UK (Bloch and Schuster, 2005). Currently, some 70% of all BME communities live in the 88 most deprived districts, compared to 40% of the general population (ODPM, 2004).

A debated aspect of contemporary dispersal during the policy formation stage was the overlap between dispersal locations and multiply deprived areas. Refugee advocates felt that locating asylum seekers in deprived areas would lead to problems of social exclusion and racial tensions, contrary to one of the aims of dispersal. Ultimately, however, the geography of dispersal was a reflection of the exclusionary policy context and the availability of unpopular or vacant housing. It was also a consequence of earlier informal dispersal arrangements between local authorities in London and the Southeast and local authorities in the North of England, the Midlands and seaside towns in the South of England. Official dispersal in England grew from 54 locations in June 2001 to 78 locations by June 2004 (see Annex I for map of local authority districts participating in dispersal).

In this study it was found that there was a significant relationship between dispersal locations, the 88 most deprived local authority districts and areas with high levels of employment. The use of mapping software allowed for this relationship to be graphically illustrated (see Annex II for the geography of dispersal locations, multiple deprivation and employment deprivation). At the outset of dispersal nearly 80% of dispersal locations were in multiply deprived districts (percentage as of June 2001). Three years later just over 70% of dispersal locations were in deprived districts (June

¹ The Home Office withdrew permission to work on 23 July 2002.

² Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act 2002 withdrew social support for 'in country' applicants from 8 January 2003.

2004)³. The aim of avoiding adding to problems of social exclusion and social tensions were not met with several dispersal locations being suspended or ceased at the request of the police or other agencies⁴.

Asylum seekers opting for SO support were generally those with pre-existing social networks. Uptake of this option provides a proxy-indicator of both the social networks of asylum seekers and where asylum seekers feel comfortable in the UK. Asylum seekers opting for SO support effectively 'dispersed' themselves more widely than the official dispersal policy (see Annex III for the geography of dispersal and SO support locations). Those in receipt of SO support were located mainly in Greater London, the Southeast of England and other large cities. This indicated that pre-existing social networks are largely based in the areas that dispersal aimed to move asylum seekers away from.

The overall pattern of multiple deprivation was closer to the geography of dispersal (70-80%) than the geography of those opting for SO support (50-60%). This indicated that asylum seekers do not always locate themselves in the most deprived areas if some choice of location is available. Asylum seekers' experiences of dispersal were related to the link between dispersal and deprivation and the knowledge that accommodation allocated to them was largely in deprived areas. The link between dispersal locations and multiple deprivation was also evident at ward level in certain cities.

The Process of the NASS system

It was found that the process of the NASS system created a sense of policy-imposed liminality. This meant that an extra layer of 'limbo' had been added to the experience of claiming asylum in the UK due to the dispersal policy. The dispersal process was characterised by compulsion, control and inefficiency. The NASS system did not take into account the histories, class, socio-economic backgrounds or age of individual asylum seekers. The qualifications and skills of people arriving in the UK were also ignored. The earlier stages of the refugee experience in countries of origin were not considered during the administrative process and an understanding of the prior experiences and subsequent needs of asylum seekers was lacking. Asylum seekers made little distinction between these earlier stages which may have involved torture and their current circumstances under the NASS system.

The initial period in emergency accommodation allocated to asylum seekers pending dispersal was described as a period of boredom, uncertainty and a waste of time. This created a sense of temporariness, and time left prior to dispersal was often unpredictable and beyond the control of the individual. The compulsory nature of dispersal was highly problematic. Dispersal was perceived as a 'lottery' in that both the dispersal location and type of accommodation were beyond the control or influence of individual asylum seekers. The requirement to report to police stations during dispersal separated asylum seekers from other migrants. This meant that attempts to avoid the stigma of the asylum seeker label were thwarted at a local level due to the centrally devised character of the policy.

Relocation during dispersal was common and built into the NASS system. The main complaint about relocation was that it disrupted education of both children and adults and therefore contributed to future social exclusion. Relocation during the dispersal process was disruptive in several other ways. Having several addresses in areas with 'bad' postcodes created ongoing problems with obtaining credit, bank accounts, loans, credit cards and mobile phones. Having several addresses impacted on applications forms for employment and credit ratings. In this way

³ The reduction by June 2004 was, in part, due to the inclusion of 10 Greater London dispersal locations in the statistics.

⁴ In December 2002, several dispersal locations (Blackburn, Burnley, Nelson, parts of Manchester and Huddersfield) were suspended at the request of the police, local authority or regional consortia. In November 2004, dispersal was also ended either partially or fully to another eight cities at the request of the police (Doncaster, Nottingham, Derby, Burnley, Nelson, Bootle, Manchester and Swansea).

the legacy of the NASS system affected the future social exclusion for those granted refugee or another form of status.

Upon receipt of a decision on their refugee status, dispersed asylum seekers faced new difficulties. If a negative decision was received, asylum seekers were evicted from NASS properties with around 7 days notice. If a positive decision was reached, eviction also occurred with 28 days notice and 'move-on' from the NASS system involved negotiating with a new set of mainstream agencies. Policy initiatives surrounding 'integration' commenced at this point and there was a lack of linkage between these initiatives and the NASS system.

In many cases the NASS system created the impulse for asylum seekers to secondary migrate in order to rejoin family members dispersed to other cities. The experience of the NASS system and the link between dispersal and deprivation were also causes for secondary migration.

Refugees mistrust and are mistrusted at many levels in both industrialised and developing countries and the issue of trust is central to any study with refugees or asylum seekers (Colson, 2003; Daniel and Knudsen, 1995; Hynes, 2003; Robinson, 2002; Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995). Mistrust is also a key concept in debates surrounding social exclusion (Lupton and Power, 2002) and in some theories of social capital relationships of trust and reciprocity are paramount (Putnam, 1993) as is a link between social and political trust (Newton, 2006). Mistrust of neighbours, service providers and figures of authority are characteristics of the experience of forced migration and a broader feature of social exclusion with resonance beyond the dispersal of asylum seekers. During dispersal, asylum seekers were able to restore some trust during the process but very little trust was restored in institutions or the political process. Mistrust of officialdom was often adopted by asylum seekers as a survival strategy and asylum seekers resisted policy-imposed liminality using techniques that avoid direct confrontation with authority. This was important because community participation and user engagement depend upon the ability to build political and institutional trust (Demos, 2003). Greater resources were available to concentrate on the administrative process of the NASS system rather than community development and opportunities for trust to be restored were therefore minimal.

ACCESS TO SERVICES

Another key finding of the research was that social exclusion was experienced due to the new structure devised under the NASS system for accessing services. Asylum seekers were given access to health and other services on a temporary basis during dispersal. This temporary access to services was rapidly institutionalised by agencies involved in implementation with separate teams for asylum seekers and refugees the norm.

Refugee-specific services in dispersal locations had to play 'catch-up' rapidly upon the initial implementation of dispersal. Several gaps in service provision were identified as a result of the speed at which dispersal was designed and implemented. These included services for domestic violence, culturally specific services for gender-specific forms of persecution such as rape, 'honour' crimes or female genital mutilation as well as the provision of female doctors. Cross-cutting issues of mental health, childcare and advocacy for rights were also difficult because they were not the responsibility of one agency. A major gap in the provision of services surrounded information about family reunification and family tracing services for asylum seekers. These gaps were indicative of a lack of overall coordination throughout the system.

Relocation during dispersal had considerable impact on how asylum seekers accessed services. Asylum seekers placed access to good quality legal services as the highest priority and were often willing to travel to their initial dispersal location to maintain these services. Other priorities for asylum seekers were access to good quality accommodation and translation services, including access to interpretation services in specific dialects. Access to adequate interpretation services was also often raised as problematic. Asylum seekers did not automatically trust interpreters even if the same language and dialect was spoken. It was clear that dialects were not properly catered

for throughout the RSD and NASS process. The priorities for good quality legal, accommodation and translation services indicated the weaknesses of the NASS system.

Access to health and education services, although remaining within mainstream provision, was also problematic as a result of the dispersal process. The temporary nature of health and dental services provided to asylum seekers were consistently raised. Individual school admission policies were cited as ways in which children of asylum seekers were informally socially excluded. Problems surrounding certificates, accreditation of education in the countries of origin and proof of age were also ways in which children were socially excluded from certain schools. For adults, admission clauses in FE colleges and universities meant that ESOL classes were often an option but vocational training and studying at degree level were not possible. The perception of asylum seekers by educational service providers was also cited as an informal barrier to vocational training.

The quality, form and availability of information provided to asylum seekers about services were variable. Lists of services written in English were not always helpful and face-to-face advice was considered more useful by asylum seekers.

The basis of an individual's claim of persecution often revolved around a fear of persecution due to reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (definition of 1951 Refugee Convention; Zolberg, 1983, 1989). The basis of an individual's persecution was not adequately addressed within the framework of the NASS system and guidance on this during dispersal was lacking. Different nationalities, clans and opposing nationalities were dispersed together. The term 'warring factions' was interpreted differently by implementing agencies and there was confusion and lack of understanding as to the implications of factionalism between asylum seekers. Given the constraints imposed by the NASS system and this lack of understanding, factionalism between asylum seekers in shared accommodation was a source of conflict particularly when bedrooms were allocated on a shared basis. Trainings on the root causes and experience of forced migration would sensitise and raise awareness of this issue for staff involved in dispersal.

Accommodation during dispersal was strictly allocated according to 'bedspaces' available. Several issues surrounding the allocation of accommodation arose including privacy when landlords held the keys to a property and entered accommodation unannounced; not being able to cook culturally appropriate food; asylum seekers not having control over their own finances; signing for accommodation on a regular basis to prove their presence; children having to sign for accommodation in the absence of their parents. The privatisation of services to asylum seekers was characterised by the requirement to control and monitor asylum seekers. Due to their contractual reporting role to the Home Office, accommodation providers were a key part of the network of monitoring of asylum seekers.

There were also intangible barriers to accessing services. The self-esteem and confidence of individuals was adversely affected by the hostile and deterrent environments within which asylum seekers lived in. Language ability was a part of this but the collective perception of asylum seekers, the declining socio-economic status upon arrival in the UK and the sense of temporariness invoked during dispersal were also factors.

Generally, refugees and asylum seekers identified more structural and rights-based barriers to accessing services whereas agencies involved identified refugee-specific barriers emanating out of the process of becoming a refugee (Koser, 1997). This latter concentration on trauma and the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers meant that asylum seekers were compelled to access services by invoking the victimhood facet of their identity.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND BELONGING

Other than immediate family members, the social networks of asylum seekers were generally not taken into consideration by NASS. Asylum seekers without pre-existing social networks within the UK were unable to opt for the SO support option and maps of dispersal may therefore contain a higher proportion of individuals and families who have had their social networks destroyed or severely disrupted during forced migration. Accommodation provided by NASS did not allow for relatives claiming SO support to be accommodated within it.

Maintaining and creating social networks (Marx, 1990) were key ways of resisting the limbo imposed by the NASS system. For asylum seekers who had recourse to social networks this was the most important way in which a sense of 'belonging' in the absence of political belonging was created. For those without recourse to social networks, dispersal could lead to extreme social isolation and social exclusion and the ability to create social networks took on greater importance. The maintenance and creation of social networks involved a trajectory that, over time, shifted asylum seekers away from the stigma and shame of the asylum seeker label and the NASS system. The desire to live a normal life meant that in some cases aspects of personal histories, legal status and other issues considered shameful would be hidden or kept secret from friends or work colleagues. It was found that such 'strategies of invisibility' (Malkki, 1995) were often present.

The main uses of social networks were for survival, information (including gaining awareness of rights), advice, as an insurance against crisis situations such as threats of deportation as well as to feel human within the asylum and NASS systems. The negative side of social networks related to domestic violence, 'honour' crimes and cultural expectations. Rituals of exile surrounding holidays and key dates for different nationalities were useful in the creation of social networks. The social aspect of these festivals and occasions facilitated belonging.

Asylum seekers gained information about the negative or positive characteristics of different dispersal locations largely through family, friends, acquaintances and through brief encounters with other asylum seekers. Generally, agencies involved in the implementation of dispersal were not approached to obtain this type of information and this related to their dual roles of advocacy and implementation of dispersal and the lack of space for the restoration of trust during the process.

Asylum seekers engaged in an active process of remaking 'belonging', thus beginning the process of 'integration' upon arrival rather than when formal integration policies commenced. 'Integration' therefore occurred despite asylum policies and the NASS system and was largely as a result of resistance to policy-imposed liminality. However, this form of 'belonging' remained outside policies for social inclusion.

The demands of survival undermined the potential for restoration of social trust. The assumption that co-nationals would support asylum seekers out of a sense of duty was not sustainable in the deterrence environment. For refugees working within refugee agencies implementing dispersal, the issue of professionalism was problematic and created a barrier to the restoration of institutional trust. The creation of difference between helpers and victims was disempowering for asylum seekers.

CONCLUSIONS

- The primary lens for understanding the experiences of social exclusion of asylum seekers was the policy-imposed liminality of the NASS system. Asylum seekers were often relocated several times during the time spent awaiting refugee status determination and this reinforced the period of 'limbo' experienced. The right to freedom of movement was subsumed by the dispersal policy.
- Overall, contemporary dispersal was not based on factors reflecting the state of the British economy or the availability of employment. Rather, the policy was formulated in an environment of mistrust towards refugees, had an explicit deterrence element and the geography of dispersal was led by the availability of unpopular or vacant housing.
- Involvement between NASS and the voluntary, public and private sector was qualitatively different to past cases of the dispersal of refugees with secure status. Dispersal led to an expansion of services from the voluntary sector and privatisation of services to asylum seekers.
- There was a significant relationship between dispersal locations and the 88 most deprived local authority districts and this study used mapping software to graphically illustrate this relationship. Placing asylum seekers in areas of high deprivation meant that the original aim of avoiding adding to problems of social exclusion and other tensions was not fulfilled.
- Asylum seekers opting for Subsistence Only support 'dispersed' themselves more widely than the formal dispersal mechanism. These cases were concentrated in London and the Southeast.
- Perceptions of asylum seekers oscillated between extremes and the polemic literature did not provide an adequate representation of the lives of asylum seekers. Positive images celebrating diversity ran alongside images of 'victimhood' as well as extremely negative images of 'bogus' asylum seekers. The focus on the administrative process of the NASS system emphasised the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers rather than capabilities.
- A more accurate description of asylum seekers was that they were ordinary people who had been through extraordinary circumstances and who continued to experience extraordinary circumstances in the UK. Individuals were simultaneously capable and vulnerable.
- There was a mismatch between what asylum seekers felt were the barriers to accessing services (structural and rights-based factors) and a concentration on the victimhood (vulnerabilities) of asylum seekers by agencies involved.
- One of the main characteristics of dispersal was the lack of space for the restoration of trust in institutions and the political processes of the UK. This impacted on the longer term resettlement process of those granted refugee or another form of status.
- Social networks were used to counter the indignities imposed by the NASS system and the stigma and shame of the asylum seeker label.
- The main way asylum seekers resisted the limbo of the dispersal process was through recourse to trusted social networks. In the absence of these networks, compulsory dispersal led to cases of extreme isolation.
- The NASS system often created the impulse for asylum seekers to secondary migrate in order to rejoin family members dispersed to other cities. The experience of the NASS system and the link between dispersal and deprivation were also causes for secondary migration. The assumption that secondary migration was a negative outcome of dispersal was challengeable. Routes to independence often involved moving to different cities and secondary migration could be seen as a positive

outcome of dispersal. However, the mobility of asylum seekers was perceived as a disadvantage by several agencies towards the top of the hierarchy.

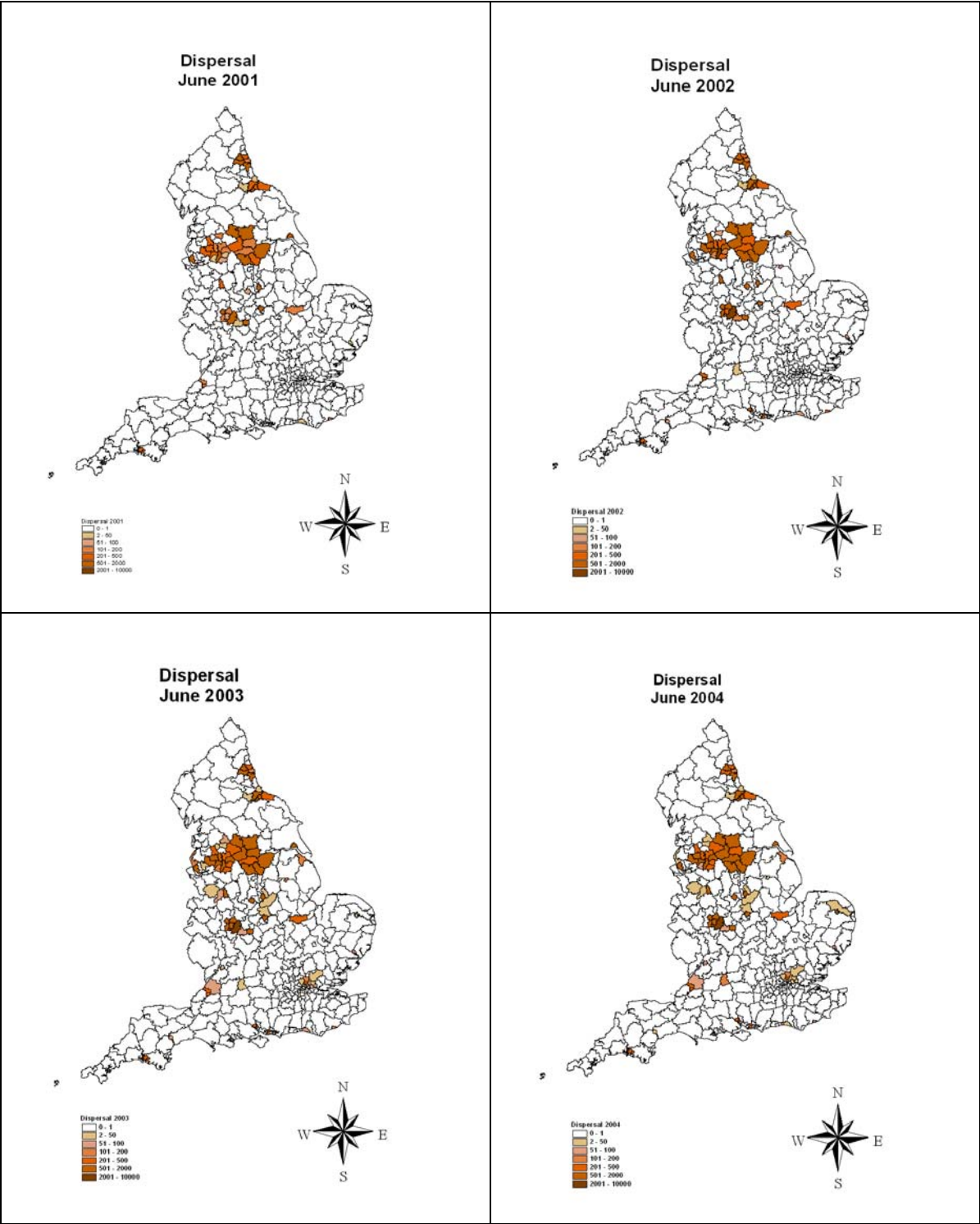
- Resistance to policy-imposed liminality was also carried out with strategies that avoided direct confrontation with official agencies. Resistance to liminality was the main way in which asylum seekers began to acquire a sense of belonging or inclusion in the UK. This form of belonging was outside the policy mechanisms for 'integration' and 'social inclusion'.
- The NASS system ran directly counter to integration strategies for refugees upon receipt of refugee status determination decisions. This 'negative equation' for newly arrived asylum seekers impacted greatly on longer term sense of belonging, inclusion and the process of resettlement.
- Dispersal socially excludes asylum seekers over time by distinguishing their rights to welfare and other services from other populations. This separation from mainstream welfare provision laid the foundation for the tightening of access to other services in subsequent legislation.

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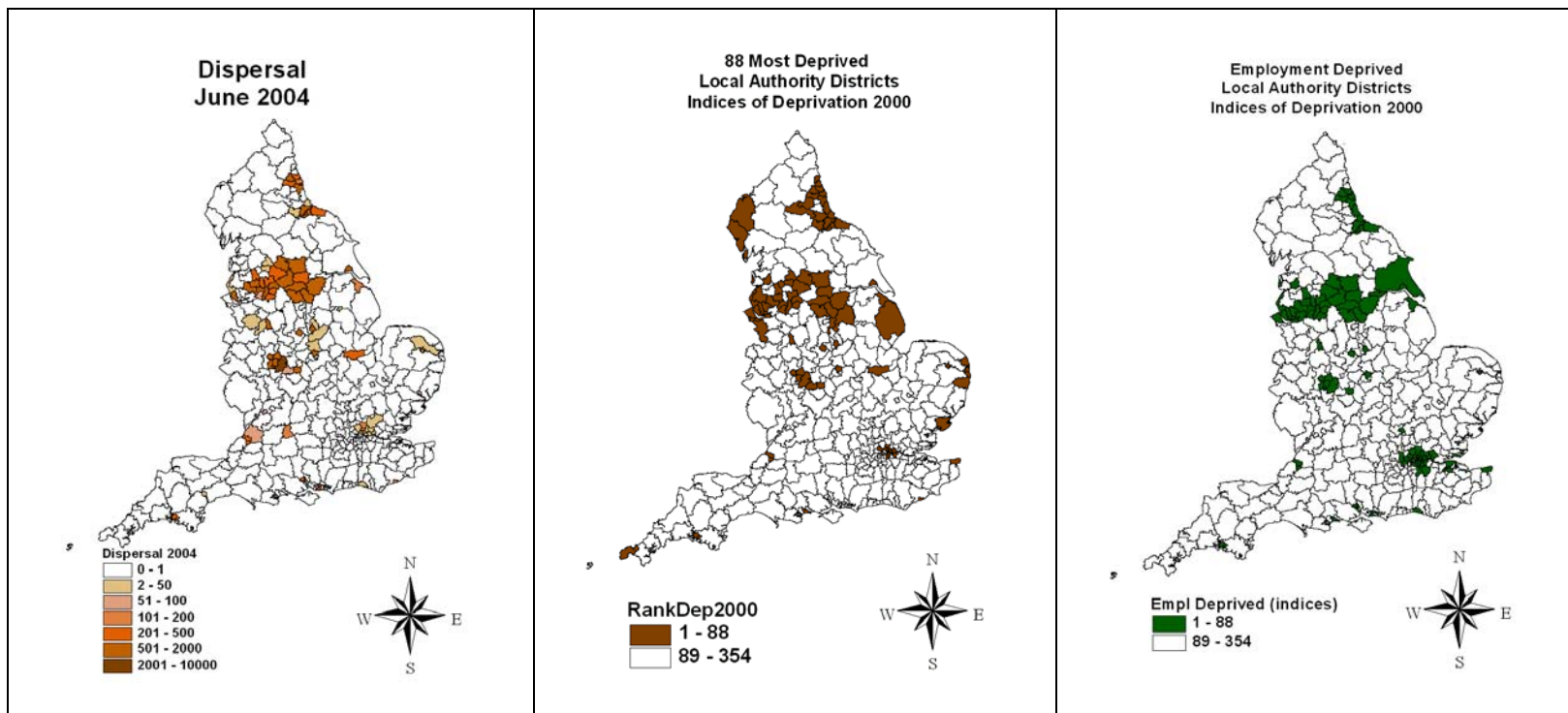
This research was conducted for the purpose of a doctoral thesis and is disseminated as a result of the award of an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship (number PTA-026-27-01254)

Annex I: Dispersal Locations by Local Authority District, 2001-2004



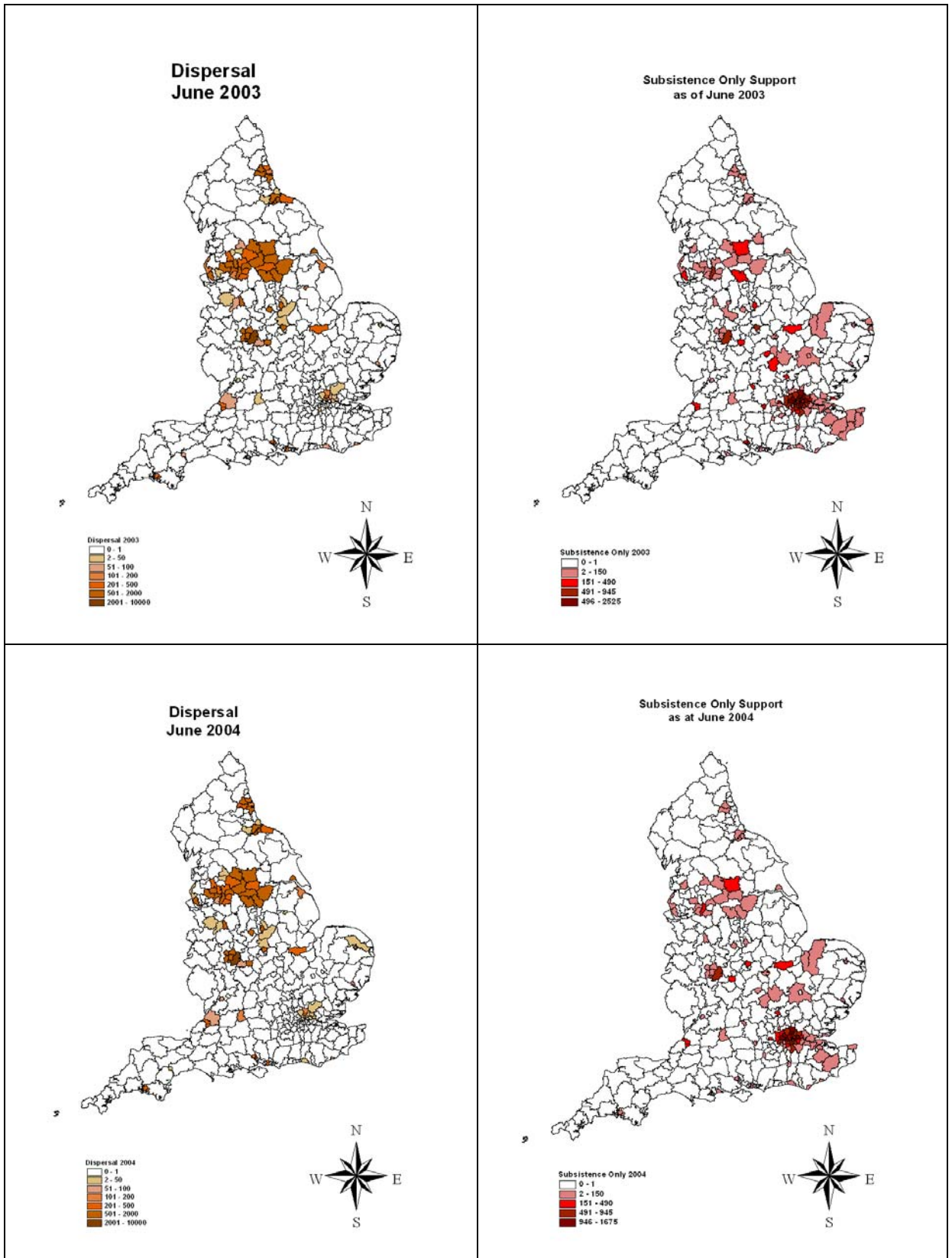
Statistical source: Home Office

Annex II: Pattern of Dispersal Locations, Areas of Multiple Deprivation and Employment Deprivation by Local Authority District



Statistical sources: Home Office; DETR Indices of Deprivation 2000; UK Population Census 2001

Annex III: Dispersal and Subsistence Only support by Local Authority District, 2003 – 2004



Statistical source: Home Office

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