Check for updates

Critical Social Policy

Original Research Article

Food aid as a source of support and visibility for migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

CLAIRE THOMPSON
University of Hertfordshire, UK

LAURA HAMILTON
University of Hertfordshire, UK

WENDY WILLS
University of Hertfordshire, UK

Abstract

In the UK, migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) conditions are denied full access to social security benefits and the labour market, rendering them 'invisible' and dependent on third sector organisations, like foodbanks. This qualitative study explored how third sector organisations used food aid to challenge the invisibilising of those with NRPF. In 2022, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out with 17 organisations supporting migrant households across the UK; and with 13 London-based migrants with experience of NRPF status. Organisations such as foodbanks have the resources to intervene in the uncertainty and liminality that NRPF confers by providing material and temporal structure. However, providing crucial support to migrants inadvertently perpetuates the shadow welfare regime that has grown around the ever-expanding gaps in state provision. This paper highlights some of

Corresponding author:
Claire Thompson, CRIPACC, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL4 0PJ, UK.
Email: c.thompson25@herts.ac.uk

Critical Social Policy 1–22
© The Author(s) 2026 Article reuse guidelines: sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/02610183261433547 journals.sagepub.com/home/csp
Sage

the ways that food aid organisations mitigate the harms of immigration regimes against the problematic backdrop of uncertainty and welfare failure.

Keywords
food aid, foodbanks, migrants, NRPF, UK

Introduction

Migration and the hostile environment

In the UK, immigration policies have historically been subject to racial prejudice and othering. The early twenty-first century saw a turn towards increasingly more exclusionary and punitive policies. In 2012, then Home Secretary Teresa May, announced her commitment to drastically reduce net migration, making the country a less attractive destination for migrants, and creating a ‘hostile environment’ for those who did try to make their home in the UK (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Since 2012, the hostile environment has substantially restricted access to residency and amplified racialised migrants’ vulnerability to poverty and destitution (Reynolds et al., 2024). Brexit signified a surge of cultural politics and anti-immigration rhetoric; with anxieties over British citizenship and access to resources and services (Spiliopoulos and Timmons, 2023), especially social security benefits, housing and healthcare. This was discursively linked to the influx of refugees into Europe following the Syrian conflict in 2015. Although Germany took in far more refugees than other EU countries, it was widely covered in UK media. An anti-immigration stance became core to populist campaigning to vote leave in the European Union membership referendum (Mondon, 2025). The Brexit Party was formed by Nigel Farage in April 2019 to contest the European Parliament elections following delays to the UK’s departure from the EU. In early 2021, The Brexit Party became Reform.

Reform remained a persistent presence at the political margins until 2023, when sustained pressure from the political right and far-right prompted the Sunak government to adopt policies further restricting the rights of migrants. This effort to bolster its failing support with hardline anti-immigration hostility laid the groundwork for ensuing discourse (Heath et al., 2025). Anti-immigration sentiment was effectively deployed in a ‘culture war’ strategy that positioned Remainers, Muslims, immigrants and transgender people (among others) as ‘threats’ to the nation (Hampshire, 2024). This culminated in April 2024, when the UK Parliament approved the contentious so-called ‘Rwanda policy’ (i.e., the Migration and

Economic Development Partnership), whereby people identified as 'illegal asylum seekers' would be relocated to Rwanda for processing and resettlement. The next British Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, quickly abandoned the scheme when he took office in July 2024. However, this did not signal a reversal of escalating anti-immigration movements. Reform, buoyed by local election successes in May 2025, now largely sets the tone for mainstream British domestic politics, with Labour and Conservative parities responding to and legitimising the politics of anti-immigration (Choonara, 2025).

The current Home Secretary (at the time of writing), Shabana Mahmood, has announced far reaching changes to the UK immigration system, which will position it amongst the most restrictive amid comparable high-income countries (Sumption, 2025). Introducing a longer qualifying period for settlement, increasing English language requirements, and further tightening visa conditions will restrict legal migration (McKinney and Gower, 2025). Asylum system reforms will make refugee status temporary and introduce a new 20-year wait for settlement. Controversially, legal duties to house and support migrants will be replaced by discretionary powers at the local level (Pike, 2025).

Hostile environment policies go beyond deterrence. Immigration has become increasingly politicised by the far right, with migrants frequently attacked and demonised as a means to build their popularity and advance political agendas (KhosraviNik, 2010). Donald Trump credits his punitive stance on migrants with helping him win the US presidential election (Cooper et al., 2021). Hostile environments also serve to 'wear down' migrants, regardless of their reason for migration (Ryan et al., 2024) and are underpinned by deliberate intentions on the part of the state to exclude certain groups from accessing services, legal rights or protection on the grounds that they are undeserving (Sales, 2002). This can be understood as migrants being purposefully rendered 'invisible' by different technologies of migration governance (Humphris and Sigona, 2019).

The invisibilising of migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

People deemed to have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status are among the most 'invisibilised' of migrants. Introduced in the Immigration Act of 1971, the rule imposes conditions on leave-to-enter or remain in the UK including the requirement for applicants to financially maintain themselves and their dependents (Jolly et al., 2022). NRPF excludes people from claiming benefits that are classed as 'public funds' for immigration purposes. These conditions usually apply if a person has leave-to-enter or leave-to-remain immigration status for a temporary purpose, are seeking asylum, or do not have lawful status in the UK. Table 1 summarises the benefit entitlement

Table 1. Main categories of migrant with no access to public funds (NRPF).

Immigration status	*Right to work*	*Social security benefits that may be accessible*	*Social security benefits that cannot be accessed (classed as 'public funds')*
Limited Leave-to-Remain (LLR) Temporary visa holders such as students, visitors, temporary workers, those on family visas and those with pre-settled status typically have NRPF as a default. Some exceptions apply.	Those on visitor visas are not allowed to work or be self-employed (with some exceptions). Some study visas allow part-time work, while temporary work visas permit employment within a specific sector and duration.	Free School Meals; Bereavement Support Payment; New Style Jobseeker's Allowance; New Style Employment and Support Allowance; Guardian's Allowance; Maternity Allowance; Statutory Maternity Pay (eligibility based on National Insurance contributions / having worked) Best Start Grant; Best Start Foods; Young Carer Grant (Scotland only) Emergency Assistance Payment: Discretionary Assistance Fund (Wales Only)	Attendance Allowance; Carer's Allowance; Child Benefit; Council Tax Reduction; Household support fund; most local government discretionary support payments; Housing Benefit; Income Support; Personal Independence Payment; Severe Disablement Allowance; Social fund payments; State Pension Credit; Universal Credit. Domestic Rate Relief (N. Ireland only) Adult Disability Payment; Carer's Allowance Supplement; Carer Support Payment; Child and Adult
Asylum seekers Those who have left their country due to a fear of or experiences of persecution, have formally applied for protection in the UK and are awaiting a decision on their claim.	Asylum seekers are not normally allowed to work. The Home Office may grant permission to work to those whose claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months.		

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Immigration status	*Right to work*	*Social security benefits that may be accessible*	*Social security benefits that cannot be accessed (classed as 'public funds')*
			Disability Payments; Funeral Support Payment; Job Start Payment; Pension Age Disability Payment; Scottish Child Payment; Winter Heating Payments (Scotland only)
Those without lawful status Individuals who overstay their visa, have it cancelled, do not leave after an asylum application and all appeals have failed, or enter the country illegally* (and do not subsequently claim asylum).	No right to work. It is a criminal offense for both the individual and the employer to work illegally	No legal right to benefits, but there is some scope for discretionary support. Local authorities have limited statutory duties to support families and children with NRPF (section 17 support). * *Those who entered the country illegally but are subsequently deemed a victim of trafficking or modern-day slavery and granted 'leave-to-remain' can access public funds.*	

and right-to-work statuses of these groups. It is worth restating the complexity and variability of the system. Some people with limited leave-to-remain will have access to public funds. Additionally, some people who would normally be subject to a NRPF condition may not have this imposed or can apply to the Home Office for it to be lifted.

Asylum seeker is demonstrably the most politicised and demonised migrant status (Cooper et al., 2021), and refers to those who have fled to

another country to seek protection. Due to decades of underfunding and resulting backlogs, it can take months or years for the Home Office to accept or reject their claim for asylum (Yeo, 2024). It is a system designed to fail, especially along racial line (Lonergan, 2024). Asylum seekers are not usually permitted to work. Given that most of the benefits not classed as public funds are only available to people who have previously worked and/ or paid National Insurance, they are typically left without income. In order to subsist, they receive minimal financial support (less than £50 per person per week if they have self-catering accommodation and less than £10 per week if food is provided) from the Home Office whilst their asylum case is being processed (NRPF Network, 2025).

Settlement (indefinite leave-to-remain) is the point at which most migrants become eligible to access public funds, but it is not automatic or guaranteed. For example, those with leave-to-enter or remain for settlement (as a relative of a British citizen or settled resident) and those with leave-to enter or remain subject to a maintenance undertaking (being dependent on a named relative) will likely have a NRPF condition (Asylum Matters, 2020).

Housing and accommodation for migrants is rooted in structural racism (Rogaly et al., 2021). The hostile environment makes people homeless, principally though NRPF, high visa fees, long routes to settlement, and asylum accommodation evictions of newly recognised refugees (Praxis, 2024). Those with NRPF are not typically eligible for homelessness assistance (NRPF Network, 2025). In practice, they are housed through a combination of local authority support, charities, shelters, hostels, and contracted providers. Those with a right to work have to try and find options like working accommodation or low-cost rental schemes.

Asylum seekers at risk of destitution and rough sleeping will be offered contingency accommodation, which is temporary housing while they await dispersal accommodation. Most commonly, this is in catered and uncatered hotels managed by private companies contracted by the Home Office. The medical consequences of longer stays in contingency accommodation can be dire, with reports of mental health problems, isolation, lack of access to primary care and essential services, and suicide attempts (Dobbin et al., 2023). Dispersal accommodation is longer-term more permanent housing. Usually, this involves the use of private properties split into HMOs and allocated by the Home Office, with a policy to spread the cost of housing migrants (and therefore migrants themselves) across the country. Migrants have no choice in where or how they are housed, limiting their mobility and subjugating them into new spaces of surveillance (Stavropoulou, 2024).

The third sector, food aid and state retreat

In the UK, and across Europe more widely, third sector responses to welfare reform, state retreat, reduced eligibility to services, public spending cuts,

and the pandemic, have been led by food aid providers, and especially by foodbanks (Jenkins et al., 2021; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, charitable food aid organisations were at the forefront of efforts to prevent vulnerable migrants becoming destitute and going hungry (Dickson et al., 2020). Former UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, stated publicly that foodbanks are taking over from the (welfare) state in fighting poverty, to the extent that they have become the last line of defence against destitution (Savage, 2023). Food aid is emblematic of welfare state failure (Riches, 2014), with its remit progressively expanding beyond emergency food and into areas such as debt advice, advocacy, and even legal assistance (Thompson et al., 2025). Foodbanks report that their clients, especially migrants, often have not received any help from local statutory services (The Trussell Trust, 2023).

By engaging and offering support, food aid settings provide episodes of interpellation (Bassel et al., 2018) through which the production of 'legitimate' migrant identities is supported. According to Althusser, individuals are always already subjects (Althusser, 2012) and are made so via interpellation; the process by whereby ideology constitutes the nature of an individual's identity by hailing them in social interactions (Payne, 1997). Interpellation operates not only at the individual level, but also at the institutional level, as subjects are woven into relations with state apparatus (Butler, 1993; Korteweg, 2003). The identities made in food aid settings can run counter to othering and practices of exclusion experienced elsewhere. Food aid providers recognise and interact with migrants as legitimate citizens-in-waiting (Haas, 2017) who need to be supported through the many processes of being 'seen' by the state. In this paper, we explore the processes through which support and visibility are achieved in food aid settings.

Methods

The results presented here are based on a qualitative study, commissioned by The Food Foundation, looking at immigration and food poverty in the UK, with a specific focus on (NRPF) (Hamilton et al., 2022). Data were collected with two participant groups: 17 individuals from third sector organisations supporting NRPF families in locations across the four UK nations; and a cohort of 13 London-based migrants (12 from Nigeria and one from China) who had or recently had NRPF as a condition of their immigration status and were being supported by the same local charity. All data were collected remotely, by telephone or video call. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Hertfordshire [Protocol No. aHSK/SF/UH/04760(1)]. Data were collected over a five-month period in 2022.

Recruitment of organisations supporting migrants

The supporting organisation sample was recruited first through a combination of the authors' contacts, introductions made by The Food Foundation, and cold-calling. Initially, we used a snowballing technique and then a purposive approach, using the authors' knowledge of the UK food aid system, to make sure that we recruited organisations from across the UK to capture a range of different permutations of food aid (e.g., pantries, foodbanks, holiday hunger provision). The Food Foundation's scope of work and research spans the entire UK, with the explicit aim of generating recommendations that have wide-reaching relevance for policy makers (The Food Foundation, 2022). As such, we were motivated to elicit narratives and approaches to supporting migrants from a broad geographic range of organisations in order to maximise the reach and relevance of our findings for the funders. For the purposes of the research team (the authors), this also presented the opportunity to address the research gap on UK-wide studies of NRPF (Leon and Broadhead, 2024), albeit on a very modest scale. Indeed, the range of people we were fortunate enough to talk discussed a variety of diverse topics including the rural plight of migrants with NRPF, forced labour, involving migrants in food growing schemes, the challenges of feeding migrants in cities where Halal food was not readily available, and migrant families rough-sleeping in suburban areas.

We sought respondents with significant experience as frontline practitioners and/or with senior policy input. A total of 17 services and organisations were recruited to the study, including advocacy and campaign groups providing various forms of support (e.g., food, housing, legal advice). Of these, seven were from organisations in England, four from Wales, four from Scotland, and two from Northern Ireland.

Recruitment of migrants

The migrant sample was recruited via the supporting organisations. Migrants, particularly the undocumented or those trying to gain citizenship, present unique vulnerabilities and ethical considerations (McLaughlin and Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015). Given the long-term and often high-stakes relationships of support between migrants and Refugee Third Sector (RTS) organisations, a tendency to protect and shield clients from potentially exploitative or burdensome interactions becomes commonplace. As data collection progressed with the supporting organisations, we developed a relationship with one London-based advocacy group who agreed to pass our details on to groups of NRPF clients they thought might be interested in the study, leaving it up to potential participants to contact us.

This approach had its limitations. Despite the dearth of demographic data around UK migrants with NRPF, we do know that this group is highly

diverse and stratified by their specific immigration status, which shapes their risk of exclusion. This risk is compounded by intersecting characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, disability, and English language ability (Johnson-Hunter, 2025). By recruiting from a community of migrants who were all supported by the same charity, and many of whom knew each other, we engaged with a specific, situated group living in London (mostly – but not exclusively – Nigerian mothers of young children who were asylum seekers at the time of interview). Therefore, we are not able to explore a broad range of issues and challenges in a similar way to the breadth of experience detailed by the organisational sample. Recruitment was driven both by practicalities and the richness of the data. We had finite time within the project to form productive relationships with potential gatekeepers and participants. However, talking to people from just one city and charity-relationship allowed us to generate an in-depth understanding of how that charity worked with migrants and how they experienced it.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained in writing, via email, following an explanation of the study and a discussion of the participant consent form. Permission to publish findings from the study was included in the informed consent process.

Data collection: semi-structured and group interviews

The organisations sample were interviewed either one-to-one or in group interviews. A total of six participants took part in two online group interviews (three in each interview) and the remaining 11 took part in individual telephone interviews, often in the evening and/or while commuting. Participants were asked about the type of support their organisation provided, the main challenges of NRPF policies, and the impact of NRPF on families with children. Further, we asked participants to comment on their food aid provision and/or referral to food aid providers, and how they perceived NRPF to shape both dietary practices and experiences of poverty.

The migrant sample were also offered the option of an online or telephone interview. All participants chose telephone interviews, typically explaining that it helped overcome time constraints and a lack of childcare options because they could talk on the phone while doing something else, like making their way to pick children up from school or doing housework. We took time to build connections with participants, sometimes over several telephone calls, and reassured them that we understood the necessity of rearranging or cancelling interviews to accommodate other (and much more important) calls on their time. Although efficient, remote interviews did present some problems. Namely, potential difficulties with rapport when

visual cues are lost. During the interview, participants were asked about the circumstances related to their NRPF status; their housing situation; details of any support they received; how they accessed food; and their food practices at home. They were reimbursed for their time with supermarket vouchers (of their choice) worth £35.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, anonymised, uploaded to NVivo software, and subject to a thematic analysis, which sought to identify patterns of experience, talk and behaviour (Aronson, 1994). Initially, open coding was used to categorise interactions with food aid in terms of social context, perceptions, and identities. Selective coding was subsequently used to identify the values, practices, and perceived outcomes of food aid-based interactions. The transcripts were then re-examined for contradictions, dilemmas and omissions. Finally, a coding frame was developed and refined to capture the main concepts. We drew upon both the notion of in/visibility (Humphris and Sigona, 2019) and the concept of citizen-in-waiting (Haas, 2017) as an analytical framework.

Results

Upon entering the UK, migrants can find themselves in a hostile environment, unable to meet their basic needs or integrate into communities (Farmer, 2017). In this context, relationships with food aid providers can be transformative. Organisations such as foodbanks have the resources to intervene in the uncertainty and liminality that NRPF confers by providing material and temporal structure. They meet basic material needs (where possible) and provide episodes of support that signify the beginning of a journey towards settlement and legitimacy, even if it cannot always be realised. Providing this crucial support also, and inadvertently, perpetuates and reinforces the shadow welfare regime that has grown around the ever-expanding gaps in state provision. The advocacy of the third sector on behalf of migrants compels it to engage in the well-worn and self-defeating discourses of need, deservedness, and othering, somewhat reproducing the dynamics of marginalisation. In the sections that follow, this paper will explore the crucial roles that food aid plays in rendering migrant visible to the state against the problematic backdrop of uncertainty and welfare failure. All names are pseudonyms.

Liminality: the protracted waiting of citizens-in-waiting

Migrants' accounts were characterised by descriptions of long and uncertain waits, spanning months and years, trying to resolve their migration status.

This type of waiting is a defining and corrosive feature of immigration regimes. It is not a passive waiting, but rather a performative one. Migrants are required to interact with the bureaucratic mechanisms of the immigration regime, attending appointments with professionals, providing documentation, appealing, and awaiting decisions. These protracted performances necessitate resources, knowledge, and resiliencies that migrants do not possess or even know – initially – that they need to possess. Haas (2017) describes this as an existential limbo that places the very viability of migrants' lives is a state of profound uncertainty. Similarly, Rainbird draws attention to the 'liminal existence' of asylum systems that induces existential (not to mention material) crises (Rainbird, 2014).

Food aid providers actively intervene in this limbo and uncertainty. The provision of food, one of the most basic of human needs, is material and tangible. The physicality of this help stands in stark relief to the liminality and abstract notions of the immigration system and the legal processes involved in the pursuit of citizenship. Migrants typically came into contact with organisations providing food aid via referral (individually or as a group) by local authorities or by other charities. For participants, the provision of food by third sector organisations represented one of the few, and perhaps the first, episodes of welcome and acceptance amongst the hostilities and refusals they had encountered thus far. For Grace, a mother to four children, a foodbank being run in a church provided a source of food and a place to stay that meant she could avoid sleeping-rough with her children.

> *Yeah, I couldn't have access to anything, because I don't have no recourse to public funds. Yeah. So I live on a foodbank… I had to sleep, like, in the church, where they have space in the church, that's where I was… Yeah, with my children… I slept, like, one year … I'm in temporary accommodation now.*

The foodbank met Grace's most fundamental needs for food and shelter when she was refused elsewhere. These first interactions with food aid were, by their very nature, usually when they were at their lowest ebb; facing (or already experiencing) destitution and hunger. Food aid providers were acutely aware of this and described the desperate circumstances in which migrants found themselves as the result of, at best, an overstretched immigration system and, at worst, a punitive one characterised by structural violence.

Remaining unacknowledged and unseen by statutory services, despite having come forward for help is a facet of cultivated invisibility; one of the multiple ways in which migrants internalised invisibilisation as an embodied disposition (Stewart and Sanders, 2023). Being recognised and legitimised by food aid providers was a process. Organisations in different settings developed programmes for migrants, weaving them around the anticipated challenges, waits and uncertainty that they were almost certain to face while trying to

become settled residents and citizens. In the extract below, Alicia, the manager of a community integration charity (with its own foodbank) in Scotland, described their programme for welcoming migrants.

> *Mostly, our intervention is for newcomers, so what we aim to do is to provide services and activities that help newcomers in {City} to settle comfortably and achieve their full potential … our main services are free English classes, from beginners to advanced. Then we have an employability and business guidance support …. …. Yeah, so basically we started working on food growing, initially; that's how we entered this area of work. We developed a community garden, and we were helping refugees' families to start their own food growing at home.*

NRPF imposes a state of temporal and legal liminality. Time itself can be weaponised as structural violence against migrants through bureaucratic cycles, deferrals, waits, and complex processes (Bazo Vienrich, 2025). By contrast, a 'welcome programme', being assigned the role of 'newcomer', and receiving a range of language and food activities delivered at different stages (i.e., learning about food growing and then being supported to grow food at home once they have refugee status) provided migrants with temporal structure. It implied that they were at the beginning of a process that has stages and timeframes that they could progress through. Therefore, recognition in food aid spaces can be understood as the initial step in a long and uncertain interpellation to be 'legitimately' British (Bassel et al., 2018). This helps create a citizen-in-waiting identity (Haas, 2017), putting migrants on the path to (potential) visibility and inclusion (Humphris and Sigona, 2019).

However, such identities are ambiguous and contested (Ní Mhurchú, 2015). Power's work, for example, highlights that other foodbank users do not always share organisational and sector priorities around welcoming and supporting migrants, particularly asylum seekers (Power and Baxter, 2024). Issues of race, resentment, and stigmatisation run counter to the narratives of integration (Ibid). Our study focused exclusively on those with NRPF, so we are not able to contextualise these accounts alongside those of non-migrant food aid recipients.

There is no legal entitlement or right to third sector support. As such, while food aid organisations work to mitigate uncertainty for migrants, they also function as liminal spaces. They operate and mediate access through a pastoral (rather than state) power, which typically requires confessions of crises from service users, and their obedience to an expert regime in the diagnosis and treatment of (food) poverty (Möller, 2021). Identities formed inside sites such as foodbanks are exceptional and would otherwise be unacceptable for UK citizens (Farmer, 2021). While the positioning of migrants as citizens-in-waiting ultimately confers visibility, even if only partially, it remains a negotiated and uncomfortable identity that can be rooted in both

acceptance *and* marginalisation. The interpellation of migrants, via interactions with food aid providers, can operate through regimes of difference (Bassel et al., 2018) that engender states of tolerated citizenship, in which deservingness is precarious and fragile (Rosen and Dickson, 2024).

Food is used by RTS organisations to welcome and support migrants, but it is not an adequate welcome. A diet of donated and surplus food lacks dignity. The biopolitics of precarity lock people into an endless state of uncertainty and its associated distress through 'crisis' as both a mode of governance and an everyday experience (Gentili, 2021). A citizen-in-waiting identity, and the uncertainty it entails, is not a dignified experience. Martha is a single parent to four children. When she first moved to the UK, she had NRPF status attached to her family visa for four years. She was permitted to work but could not claim benefits classed as public funds. During this time, she lived in temporary shared accommodation. She had to work multiple jobs with long hours and rarely got to see her children or cook and eat with them. It was also very difficult for her to cook because other residents would take her food (Hamilton et al., 2022). She listed her use of foodbanks as one of the many corrosive privations resulting from her status.

> *I found myself going to foodbanks most of the time [...] And it devalued your dignity [...] it affects you a lot. [...] Even if you're tired, you still have to go out to work [...] because you know they're not going to pay you; the government is not going to pay you for being sick.*

Because of her right to work, Martha may have been able to access some means-tested benefits, but she did mention or discuss this route. There is a lack of awareness among migrants with NRPF about the specific benefits and support options they can access. The complexity of the rules, combined with a general perception that all benefits are off-limits, means many migrants can be pushed into destitution and dependence on charities unnecessarily (Chrobakiewicz et al., 2025). Often, they only learn more about their entitlements and rights when they come into contact with the third sector organisations that try to support them (Ibid). While the right-to-work is generally considered to reduce the risk of destitution for those with NRPF, the intersection of gender and (single) parenting responsibilities can off-set many of the advantages that work brings. This is further complicated by the racialised impacts of NRPF, with black and minoritised and migrant women at increased risk of poverty and destitution (Women and Ethics Committee, 2020).

The refugee third sector (RTS): shadow welfare

The third sector attempts to fill a widening and significant gap between the residual support provided by the state and the material and social needs of migrants. A refugee third sector (RTS) has developed around the needs of

this group. It is an ad hoc parallel welfare system of unofficial, piecemeal support for people who are excluded from mainstream social security (Mayblin and James, 2019; Price and Spencer, 2015). Where interactions with the state can be characterised by bureaucracy, exclusion and hostility, the RTS attempts to compensate with acceptance, long term support, and the possibility of resistance to everyday bordering. In doing so, third sector support can counter the emotional and legal distanciation (Potter and Meier, 2024) that is mobilised as a technology of exclusion and control.

Distanciation is the active production of distance as a method of control, perpetuation of the hostile environment, and a means of racializing and criminalising migrants (Potter and Meier, 2024). One of the ways distanciation plays out and is subsequently resisted is through migrant parenting and the needs of children. Parents with NRPF routinely face the dilemma of needing to seek help but, at the same time, fearing that disclosing their struggles will brand them an inadequate parent and may even result in them being separated from their children. This can be understood as a result of emotional distanciation, which leaves people with a feeling or sense of never being safe and fully at home (Ibid), and therefore inherently distrustful of potential sources of support. Juliette, a campaigns co-ordinator for a refugee support charity in England, explained how this double-bind plays out and exactly why migrants were sometimes reluctant to ask local authorities for help:

> *When they get into crisis, there is no mainstream support for them. So the local authority cannot support, unless they have a child and are destitute. And this, of course, leads to people getting into cycles of homelessness, deep poverty, destitution, and, of course, that ricochets into all sorts of really bad problems … Lots of people don't want to report to local authorities, because there is a feeling of bad faith from those local authorities. There have been experiences of people being told, 'you're not a fit mother, we're going to take away your child'.*

Migrant children embody an underlying tension embedded in immigration regimes between protecting the vulnerable and protecting borders (Humphris and Sigona, 2019). In part, this is a legacy of the British postwar consensus, particularly around welfare. Effective entitlement to newly established welfare in the 1940s was based on participation in work, war and reproduction. This resulted in three types of social identity: worker-citizens, warrior-citizens, and parent-citizens. Those with NRPF are not usually allowed to work and almost never allowed to join the armed services. Although NRPF can be seen as discouraging the reproduction of migrant families, as it severely limits access to support (Lonergan, 2024), social participation through reproduction (parenting) still remains somewhat viable (Turner, 2001).

Those advocating on behalf of migrant families were very much aware that migrants could be rendered visible through their children. Having initiated relationships with migrant families by helping to meet their basic needs, like food and shelter, RTS organisations went on to advocate for them. They leveraged their status as parents and the needs of their children to compel statutory agencies to activate rights and entitlements. In this way, feeding migrant children hailed migrants as parent-citizens. Kaleem, the policy advisor for a children's charity in London, explained how that charity used the bureaucratic failings and under-resourcing of local government as a mechanism to legally compel it to support and provide housing for migrant NRPF families:

We ended up, in 2008, making referrals for families to {City Council} Children's Services, horrific conditions, kids with cerebral palsy, pregnant women sleeping in bus shelters etc, and the local authority wouldn't support. We found an angle, a loophole, in regards to getting support for critical families. This was around 2008, 2009. That loophole was that we would take them to Court every single time on the basis that they have to complete an assessment and support the family at the same time. Because they were overworked, they couldn't get the assessments done on time, so the judge would every single time support our cases.

Intervening in the legal system on behalf of migrants served to establish that they were appropriate subjects of care, deserving objects of state care and, by association, worthy of a form of citizenship and belonging (Humphris, 2022). However, the grim necessity of deploying children and child welfare as moral leverage points in the everyday technologies of migration governance is a flawed strategy. It draws on common stereotypes of children as victims and can reinforce negative and racialised stereotypes of the children's parents. Migrant parenting practices are used as a key index of deserving citizenship and a means of policing unwanted migrants (Benchekroun et al., 2024)

The gaps left by welfare reform and state spending cuts have engendering new forms of responsibility that are, unfortunately, unevenly distributed and performed. Austerity, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, have prompted a spatial shifting of responsibility away from public institutions with diminishing budgets, and onto those communities most effected by the 'gaps' (Strong, 2020). The move towards wrap-around support and family-centred provision on the part of food aid organisations is an outcome and manifestation of these new forms of responsibility. Brian, a project manager for a community youth charity in Northern Ireland, described how the service had evolved from a youth centre to a family support hub.

It's more than a youth centre, really, it's very active, so there would have been ongoing provisions … it was much more than food. It was, I suppose, like a summer club with a meal provided. So, absolutely, there would have been a really good relationship with the young

people, and increasingly their families as well. That's where we found the big change over a long number of years … it has helped the organisation work with families a lot more, and there'll be a much better relationship with the parents

Despite the efforts of food aid organisations to support migrants and other vulnerable groups, they could serve to maintain, as well as address, the alienated status of recipients (Andriessen and van der Velde, 2024). Participants described complex feelings about their plight, feeling rejected by statutory service and being both grateful for and failed by the foodbanks that supported them. Joy, a single parent of four children, who had spent five years with NRPF at the time of interview, articulated some of the complexity and distress her status entailed:

I should show some appreciation {to the foodbank}, I know that, yeah…. I know we're undocumented, I know the system fails the asylum seekers. They are just nobody with the system and feel we are not human … but if the foodbank can give us food that has not expired, because sometimes you take it home, and half of it is gone, and I can't eat it … sometimes I figure that I get home and I start crying and I say, is it because of my condition, I have to take this food that is expired? … I felt bad. I felt rejected. I felt I was worthless.

And later:

I know we're undocumented, I know the system fails asylum seekers {…} It's just as if we are not even existing.

There is a strong incentive for government to fail in its provision for those with NRPF. Giving support to migrants and meeting their essential living needs is an enduringly unpopular and sometimes politically controversial duty of any government that is unlikely to be desirable to the electorate (Mayblin and James, 2019). The UK is a wealthy country, and the state is unwilling – rather than unable–to fulfil its duties. Despite implementing policies designed to fail these groups, it claims that it does provide adequate support for migrants and, in doing so, negates a collaborative or official relationship with the food aid providers (Ibid). As such, food aid remains shadow or second-tier welfare, which limits accountability to those it serves (Lambie-Mumford, 2019).

Conclusion

This study provides insight as to how migrants with NRPF experience the technologies of migration governance and how organisations providing food aid help to mitigate and resist them. Typically, food aid serves as an entry point for migrants into relationships with third sector organisations that

will advocate for them and help them to resolve these tensions. In turn, third sector organisations offering support face their own contradictions: seeking to challenge prevailing social inequalities (Anitha and Gill, 2022) but, in doing so, also being implicated in the perpetuation of a 'shadow welfare state' that exists in a hierarchically inferior position to statutory services (Trudeau, 2008). Migrants can become mired in the subjectivities of citizens-in-waiting (Haas, 2017) or tolerated citizenship (Rosen and Dickson, 2024), even with the support of food aid providers. In which case, the episodes of interpellation performed in food aid settings can also be understood as misinterpellation (Martel, 2015) and migrants with NRPF as misinterpellated subjects. They answer the hail, but they are not wanted by the state to which they are gradually being rendered visible. Their presence is viewed as potentially damaging and dangerous (Martel, 2015) because of deliberate misinformation and a growing political consensus that most migrants, and asylum seekers especially, are not genuine (Ryan et al., 2024). The findings presented here go some way to challenging the empirically dubious but politically expedient rhetoric that underpins this consensus.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants of the study for their time and engagement. Claire Thompson and Wendy Wills are supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration East of England (NIHR ARC EoE) at Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Data availability statement

Authors elect to not share data.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Hertfordshire {Protocol No. aHSK/SF/UH/04760(1)}.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The University of Hertfordshire research team were commissioned by The Food Foundation to

carry out this research and the research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

ORCID iD

Claire Thompson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0864-9811

References

Althusser L (2012) Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation. In: Gigi Durham M and Kellner DM (eds) *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 79–88.

Andriessen T and van der Velde LA (2024) How the social dignity of recipients is violated and protected across various forms of food aid in high-income countries: A scoping review. *Agriculture and Human Values* 41(1): 363–379.

Anitha S and Gill AK (2022) Domestic violence during the pandemic: 'By and for' frontline practitioners' mediation of practice and policies to support racially minoritised women. *Organization* 29(3): 460–477.

Aronson JA (1994) A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report* 2(1): 1–3.

Asylum Matters (2020) *Locked into Poverty: Life on Asylum Support*. Leeds: Asylum Matters.

Bassel L, Monforte P and Khan K (2018) Making political citizens? Migrants' narratives of naturalization in the United Kingdom. *Citizenship Studies* 22(3): 225–242.

Bazo Vienrich A (2025) Temporal liminality: How temporal parameters in immigration policy adversely affect the lives and futures of precariously documented immigrant young adults. *Social Sciences* 14(11): 24.

Benchekroun R, Humphris R and Sigona N (2024) Mothering in hostile environments: Migrant families negotiating the welfare and immigration regime nexus. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 285–306.

Butler J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London: Routledge. pp. 121–122.

Choonara J (2025) Starmer's lurch to the right. *International Socialism* 187(2): 3–18.

Chrobakiewicz M, Manga B and Papachristopoulou D (2025) *Navigating Life with No Recourse to Public Funds*. Birmingham: SIFA Fireside; Refugee and Migration Centre.

Cooper G, Blumell L and Bunce M (2021) Beyond the 'refugee crisis': How the UK news media represent asylum seekers across national boundaries. *International Communication Gazette* 83(3): 195–216.

Dickson E, Jolly A, Morgan B, et al. (2020) *Local Authority Responses to People with NRPF during the Pandemic: Research Report*. Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton.

Dobbin J, Soares CA, Burns F, et al. (2023) Medical consequences of 'contingency accommodation' for people seeking asylum: Thematic analysis of a survey from professionals working in contingency accommodation. *The Lancet* 402: 38.

Farmer N (2021) 'I never felt like an illegal immigrant until social work turned up at the hospital': No recourse to public funds as necropolitical exception. *The British Journal of Social Work* 51(8): 3301–3318.

Farmer NJ (2017) 'No recourse to public funds': Insecure immigration status and destitution: The role of social work? *Critical and Radical Social Work* 5(3): 357–367.

Gentili D (2021) *The Age of Precarity: Endless Crisis as an Art of Government*. London: Verso.

Griffiths M and Yeo C (2021) The UK's hostile environment: Deputising immigration control. *Critical Social Policy* 41(4): 521–544.

Haas BM (2017) Citizens-in-waiting, deportees-in-waiting: Power, temporality, and suffering in the US asylum system. *Ethos* 45(1): 75–97.

Hamilton L, Thompson C and Wills W (2022) *Hostile Environments: Immigration and Food Poverty in the UK*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire.

Hampshire J (2024) Full-fat, semi-skimmed or skimmed? The political economy of immigration policy since Brexit. *The Political Quarterly* 95(2): 234–242.

Heath O, Prosser C, Southall H, et al. (2025) The 2024 general election and the rise of reform UK. *The Political Quarterly* 96(1): 91–101.

Humphris R (2022) Homemade state: Motherhood, citizenship and the home in child welfare encounters. *Sociology* 56(5): 876–891.

Humphris R and Sigona N (2019) The bureaucratic capture of child migrants: Effects of in/visibility on children on the move. *Antipode* 51(5): 1495–1514.

Jenkins RH, Aliabadi S, Vamos EP, et al. (2021) The relationship between austerity and food insecurity in the UK: A systematic review. *EClinicalMedicine* 33. doi:10.1016/j.eclinm.2021.100781

Johnson-Hunter M (2025) *Families with No Recourse to Public Funds are Trapped in Hardship*. London: Joesph Rowntree Foundation.

Jolly A, Singh J and Lobo S (2022) No recourse to public funds: A qualitative evidence synthesis. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 18(1): 107–123.

KhosraviNik M (2010) The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Language and Politics* 9(1): 1–28.

Korteweg AC (2003) Welfare reform and the subject of the working mother: 'Get a job, a better job, then a career'. *Theory and Society* 32: 445–480.

Lambie-Mumford H (2019) The growth of food banks in Britain and what they mean for social policy. *Critical Social Policy* 39(1): 3–22.

Lambie-Mumford H and Green MA (2017) Austerity, welfare reform and the rising use of food banks by children in England and Wales. *Area* 49(3): 273–279.

Leon L and Broadhead J (2024) *Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK: Research Findings*. Oxford: The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity.

Lonergan G (2024) Pregnant racialised migrants and the ubiquitous border: The hostile environment as a technology of stratified reproduction. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 222–241.

Martel JR (2015) When the call is not meant for you: Misinterpellation, subjectivity, and the law. *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 48(4): 494–515.

Mayblin L and James P (2019) Asylum and refugee support in the UK: Civil society filling the gaps? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(3): 375–394.

McKinney CJ and Gower M (2025) *Research Briefing: Changes to UK visa and settlement rules after the 2025 immigration white paper*. London: House of Commons Library, UK Parliament.

McLaughlin RH and Alfaro-Velcamp T (2015) The vulnerability of immigrants in research: Enhancing protocol development and ethics review. *Journal of Academic Ethics* 13(1): 27–43.

Möller C (2021) Discipline and feed: Food banks, pastoral power, and the medicalisation of poverty in the UK. *Sociological Research Online* 26(4): 853–870.

Mondon A (2025) Populism, public opinion, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The ‘immigration issue’and the construction of a reactionary ‘people’. *Politics* 45(1): 19–36.

Ní Mhurchú A (2015) Ambiguous subjectivity, irregular citizenship: From inside/outside to being-caught in-between. *International Political Sociology* 9(2): 158–175.

NRPF Network (2025) *Immigration status and entitlements: How immigration status affects eligibility for public funds and other services.* Available at: https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/information-and-resources/rights-and-entitlements/immigration-status-and-entitlements/who-has-no-recourse-to-public-funds.

Payne C (1997) *Althusser: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Reading Knowledge: An Introduction to Foucault, Barthes and Althusser*. London: Wiley.

Pike J (2025) Will the government’s new asylum plans work? *BBC News*, 17 November.

Potter JL and Meier I (2024) Distanciation as a technology of control in the UK hostile environment. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 263–284.

Power M and Baxter M (2024) Lived experiences of food insecurity and food charity among asylum seekers in England: Racialized governance and a ’culture of suspicion’. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 49(1): 1–23.

Praxis (2024) *How hostile immigration rules push people into poverty and homelessness*. Available at: https://www.praxis.org.uk/news/how-hostile-immigration-rules-push-people-into-poverty-and-onto-the-streets (accessed 8 December 2025).

Price J and Spencer S (2015) *Safeguarding Children From Destitution: Local Authority Responses To Families*. Oxford: COMPAS.

Rainbird S (2014) Asserting existence: Agentive narratives arising from the restraints of seeking asylum in East Anglia, Britain. *Ethos* 42(4): 460–478.

Reynolds T, Erel U and O’Neill M (2024) Editorial introduction: Racialised migrants navigating the UK’s hostile environment policies. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 165–177.

Riches G (2014) Food banks don't solve food poverty. The UK must not institutionalise them. *The Guardian*, 8 December.

Rogaly K, Elliott J and Baxter D (2021) *What's Causing Structural Racism in Housing? A Briefing*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Rosen R and Dickson E (2024) The exceptions to child exceptionalism: Racialised migrant 'deservingness' and the UK's free school meal debates. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 201–221.

Ryan L, López M and Dalceggio A (2024) Encountering the hostile environment: Recently arrived Afghan migrants in London. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 242–262.

Sales R (2002) The deserving and the undeserving? Refugees, asylum seekers and welfare in Britain. *Critical Social Policy* 22(3): 456–478.

Savage M (2023) Food banks are taking over from the welfare state, warns Gordon Brown. *The Observer*, 9 May.

Spiliopoulos G and Timmons S (2023) Migrant NHS nurses as 'tolerated' citizens in post-Brexit Britain. *The Sociological Review* 71(1): 183–200.

Stavropoulou N (2024) Sharing 'hostile' stories: Exploring the UK's 'hostile environment' through participatory arts-based methods. *Critical Social Policy* 44(2): 178–200.

Stewart S and Sanders C (2023) Cultivated invisibility and migrants' experiences of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Sociological Review* 71(1): 126–147.

Strong S (2020) Food banks, actually existing austerity and the localisation of responsibility. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences* 110: 211–219.

Sumption M (2025) *Press release. Dr Madeleine Sumption, Director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford said: Settlement consultation indicates move to much more restrictive system*. Oxford: The Migration Observatory.

The Food Foundation (2022) *Policy Briefing: Immigration Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK*. London: The Food Foundation.

The Trussell Trust (2023) *Local Policy: Why local policy matters when it comes to ending the need for food banks*. Available at: https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/working-with-local-government/ (accessed 28 April 2023).

Thompson C, Smith D and Hamilton L (2025) Cracks in the food system: Food poverty, food aid and dietary health inequalities. In: *What Went Wrong with Britain?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 163–180.

Trudeau D (2008) Towards a relational view of the shadow state. *Political Geography* 27(6): 669–690.

Turner BS (2001) The erosion of citizenship. *The British Journal of Sociology* 52(2): 189–209.

Women and Ethics Committee (2020) *Unequal impacts? Coronavirus and BAME people: No recourse to public funds*. London: UK Parliament.

Yeo C (2024) Repairing the United Kingdom's asylum system. *The Political Quarterly* 95(2): 243–252.

Author biographies

Claire Thompson is a Reader in Food, Inequality and Health at the University of Hertfordshire. She is a qualitative health researcher working largely within the disciplines of public health, geography and sociology. Her research interests focus on place-based inequalities, particularly in relation to food. Claire's published work mostly concerns dietary health inequalities in the UK, with a focus on food poverty, precarity and deprivation. Recent publications have appeared in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2025) and *Urban Planning* (2025).

Laura Hamilton is a Senior Research Fellow in Food and Social Policy at the University of Hertfordshire. She uses an interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approach in her research, which primarily focuses on food, poverty and social policy, including school food provision, state welfare benefits, and statutory support services. Laura's research often involves working in collaboration with local government, schools, community, charities, and third-sector organisations. Recent publications have appeared in *BMJ Public Health* (2025) and *NIHR Open Research* (2025).

Wendy Wills is Professor of Food and Public Health and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) at the University of Hertfordshire. Wendy became the Director of the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) for the East of England in October 2022, having previously led their Prevention and Early Detection in Health and Social Care (PEDHSC) theme. She has directed many major research grants, including for the NIHR, ESRC and Food Standards Agency. Wendy's research expertise in the socio-economic determinants of health and wellbeing particularly in relation to obesity, food practices and malnutrition. Recent publications have appeared in *Health Research Policy and Systems* (2025) and the *Journal of Critical Public Health* (2025).