

Full evaluation report



What have I done?

The experiences of children and families in UK immigration detention: Lessons to learn



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1. Introduction

This research investigates the experiences of UK immigration detention of children¹ and their families. Numerous research studies (Crawley and Lester, 2005; Lorek et al, 2009; Burnett et al, 2010) and inspection reports (Aynsley-Green, 2005; HMIP, 2008; 2010) have highlighted that the experience of detention, even for a relatively brief period of time, has a detrimental effect on the mental and physical health of children. This report is intended to provide further evidence of these experiences on children and families.

The research is based on the views and experiences of 32 families including 34 children who were detained with their parents and 14 children who experienced the detention of their parents while they lived in the community in the UK. The evidence was collected through family case files and qualitative interviews that took place between November 2009 and March 2010.

Although the policy context around family returns has changed significantly following the coalition government's announcement to end the detention of children for immigration purposes in May 2010, it remains to be seen what impact these reforms will have, in particular to what extent detention in pre-departure accommodation will genuinely be used as a last resort for the shortest time possible and in the most exceptional cases. It is critical that lessons are learned from the past and that the learning is applied to shape the new arrangements so that the needs and welfare of children in the asylum system are truly at the heart of the process.

2. Policy context

According to Home Office statistics, 1,120 children entered UK Border Agency (UKBA) detention centres for the purposes of immigration control in 2009, the majority of whom (695) were held at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal

¹'Children' and 'young people' are used interchangeably throughout the research.

Centre (Home Office, 2010). Between 2008 to 2009², 212 children were detained beyond 28 days with Ministerial authorisation (Hansard HC, 2009).

The previous government justified the detention of children with their families on the basis that it was used 'only as a last resort and for as short a time as possible' (Hansard HC, 2009). The Labour government argued that detention was an 'essential element in the effective enforcement of immigration control' in order to prevent families absconding (Home Office, 2002) and to effect their removal from the UK where they have refused to leave the UK voluntarily (Byrne, 2008).

Prior to 2001, policy on detention of children with families was set out in the July 1998 White Paper 'Fairer, Faster and Firmer' (Home Office, 1998, Ch. 12) which stated that:

'detention should be planned to be effected as close to removal as possible so as to ensure that families are not normally detained for more than a few days'

However, the 2002 White Paper 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven' (Home Office, 2002, p.67) set out a change in policy whereby families could be detained for longer periods:

'It was previously the case that families would... normally be detained only in order to effect removal. Such detention would be planned to take place as close to removal as possible so as to ensure that families were not normally detained for more than a few days. Whilst this covered most circumstances where detention of a family might be necessary, it did not allow for those occasions when it is justifiable to detain families at other times or for longer than just a few days. Accordingly, families may, where necessary, now be detained at other times and for longer periods

² Statistical year beginning 1st April 2008.

than just immediately prior to removal. This could be whilst their identities and basis of claim are established, or because there is a reasonable belief that they would abscond.’

At the time this research was conducted in late 2009 and early 2010, immigration detention of children and families could occur at different stages of the asylum or immigration process, including on arrival or after the family had been living in the UK for months or years. Prior to the closure of the family unit on 16 December 2010, most families in immigration detention were held at Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre near Bedford while others could previously also be held in Dungavel House, in Lanarkshire and Tinsley House, although the UKBA ceased detaining families in Dungavel in May 2010 (UKBA, 2010).

Unaccompanied children under 18 are not normally detained, but some may be detained ‘in the most exceptional circumstances and then only normally overnight, with appropriate care, whilst alternative arrangements for their care and safety are made’ (UKBA, 2011a, p. 34). Some unaccompanied children who are to be returned to an EU Member State under the Dublin Regulation or to their home country may be detained for escorting purposes to affect removal, although this should not involve overnight stays at Immigration Removal Centres or Short Term Holding Facilities (UKBA, 2011a, p. 35). Some children under 18 may also be detained if their age is disputed³ and the UK Border Agency believes that they are an adult. While the detention of children whose age is disputed is of serious concern, this falls outside of the scope of the present research.

Although the previous government’s policy stated that children and their families should only be detained for the shortest possible time (Hansard HC,

³ An age disputed application is when an asylum applicant claims to be a minor but a Home Office official believes that his or her appearance very strongly suggests that he or she is significantly over 18 years of age. In these cases, Home Office policy is to treat the applicant as an adult until there is credible documentary or other persuasive evidence to demonstrate the age claimed.

2009), evidence presented by several inspection reports published prior to May 2010 showed that in many cases children were detained for lengthy periods (Anysley-Green, 2005; HMIP, 2008, 2010; Ofsted, 2008). The report by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMIP, 2008) found that between May and October 2007, 83 children were held for more than 28 days at Yarl's Wood, a figure also cited by the Joint Chief Inspectors (Ofsted, 2008). The inspection (HMIP, 2008) also reported that the longest single period of detention recorded was 103 days but there were some very lengthy periods of cumulative detention, the longest being 275 days.

One argument that has been raised in support of ending the immigration detention of children relates to the significant financial resources needed to detain children and families. A report from the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2009) states that although the UKBA is unable to reveal the costs of operating Yarl's Wood for reasons of 'commercial confidentiality', the committee was nevertheless told by the UKBA that it costs £130 a day to keep a person in detention. The same report concludes that: 'in the most extreme situations, detaining a family of four for between 4 and 8 weeks costs over £20,000'.

The detention of children also runs contrary to national and international standards for the treatment of children. For instance, Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) 1989 states that:

'No child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time'.

Until relatively recently (November 2008) the UK government ruled that for the purpose of immigration control, they retained the right to exclude children and young people from this legislation. The government has since lifted its immigration reservation with the result that all articles of the UNCRC, including Article 37 quoted above and the 'best interests' Article 3, apply to all

children and young people, including those in immigration detention. Article 3 states that:

‘In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.’

Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, places a statutory duty on the Home Office to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Recent inspection reports of immigration detention (11 Million, 2009; HMIP, 2010), however, continue to cite the safeguarding of children as a major area of concern.

Numerous research studies (Crawley and Lester, 2005; Lorek et al, 2009; Burnett et al, 2010) and inspection reports (Aynsley-Green, 2005; HMIP, 2008; 2010) have highlighted that the experience of detention, even for a relatively brief period of time, has a detrimental effect on the mental and physical health of children. These effects include weight loss, sleeplessness, bed-wetting, nightmares, skin complaints and severe mental health difficulties including self-harm, depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Research indicates that detention, particularly over longer periods of time, is a highly traumatic experience for asylum seekers who have generally also experienced pre-migration and flight trauma (HREOC, 2004; Steel & Silove, 2001; Keller et al, 2003; Ichikawa, Nakahara and Wakai, 2006; Momartin et al, 2006).

In May 2010, the newly elected coalition government pledged to ‘end the immigration detention of children’ and on 16 December 2010 the government announced that it will be ‘implementing a fundamentally new approach to the whole end-to-end process of working with families in the immigration system’, consisting of different stages of return for families including assisted, required and ensured return. As part of the ensured return stage, the government stated (Hansard HC, 2010) that:

‘as a very last resort for those rare cases when families fail to co-operate with all other options, the [independent family returns] panel will have the option to refer the family to a new type of accommodation for only the last 72 hours before departure. This accommodation will not be an immigration removal centre. It will have a family-friendly environment, with an entirely different look and feel.’

The new family returns process announced in December 2010 would see some children and families held in ‘pre-departure accommodation’ under existing detention powers. According to information provided by the UK Border Agency in March 2011, ‘powers to require the family to remain at the accommodation are derived from Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971’ and will ‘ultimately be operated in accordance with new Short Term Holding Facilities Rules’ (UKBA, 2011b, p.7).

The policy context regarding the immigration detention of children has changed significantly since 2009 and early 2010, when this research was conducted. However, while the findings presented in this report relate to the detention of children prior to these changes, this research offers important lessons for the future treatment of children in the UK’s asylum and immigration system. The government should consider the report’s conclusions as it works to embed safeguarding practice into the end-to-end asylum and immigration process, including when families are subject to enforcement action. The findings highlight the need to continue to strive for changes earlier on in the process that would give families a fair chance to have their claims considered, and ensure that the UKBA effectively responds to any barriers to return if families are refused leave to remain in the UK. These changes are urgently needed if assisted return is to become a viable option for a greater proportion of families. The government should also consider how children’s unique perspectives inform the development of new measures that protect their rights as children.

3. Research aims and objectives

The main aim of this research was to investigate the experiences of UK immigration detention of children⁴ and their families and to build up a comprehensive picture of families in immigration detention that have come into contact with The Children's Society. Within this overall aim, the research had the following objectives:

- To produce a profile of the families that are being detained in the UK for the purpose of immigration control and who have come into contact with The Children's Society, including the age of children detained, the ethnicity of families and the length of time in detention
- To understand more about the background of these families: how long they have been in the UK and why they sought refuge in Britain
- To explore the implications of immigration detention on the adults' and children's physical and emotional wellbeing
- To understand more about the families' general experiences in immigration detention. What happens to them there and what are the main issues that they face?
- To investigate the outcomes of immigration detention for families and what happens to them post-detention.

4. Methods

The research was made of two main stages:

- 1) Between November and December 2009, 25 cases from The Children's Society monitoring system (CHYMS) were selected at random. The information and case notes contained on the system were

⁴ 'Children' and 'young people' are used interchangeably throughout the research.

analysed for a profile of the families and recurring themes in their experiences.

- 2) Between January and March 2010, qualitative interviews were carried out by two researchers from The Children's Society with 10 mothers, 10 children between the ages of three and 17 and with four professionals working with child detainees and their families.

Stage one – case file analysis

The Children's Society project workers who work directly with the families at Yarl's Wood (and post-detention) kept the case files. They based their notes on:

- direct work with the families themselves
- written correspondence from other professionals such as doctors and teachers
- assessments carried out by doctors and psychiatrists
- conversations with other professionals in touch with the families, such as legal professionals at Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID), solicitors, the Yarl's Wood Befrienders Group and doctors from Medical Justice, for example.

The case files that have been analysed for the purpose of this report are, therefore, based on the impressions, perceptions and experiences of the project workers working directly with the families, rather than on the first-hand accounts of the parents and children themselves. The project workers were led by the families' needs in the advocacy and welfare work they undertook with them and as a result, noted down the issues, which were presented to them as being most important by the families. If, for example, a family's legal case was uppermost in the parent's mind, the parents may not have mentioned other important facts about their experience, such as their own health or their child's sleeplessness. Reports of emotional and physical

symptoms reported by the families as explored later in this report are, therefore, likely to be an under-representation of the possible effects of immigration detention on physical and mental health.

Stage two – qualitative interviews

Ten families were referred to the research unit by The Children's Society project workers in January and February 2010 to take part in the qualitative part of the study. Although we requested some fathers to interview, the project workers have worked mainly with mothers, reflecting the majority of detainees in Yarl's Wood, so we were only able to access mothers to interview for the study.

The families were not purposively selected for the research; instead they were referred on the basis of more random circumstances such as the timing of their release and the absence of risk factors such as the most severe mental health difficulties, which may have been exacerbated by taking part in a research study and geographical location. Most importantly, the families were referred because they had agreed to take part in the study. Some were approached but, for a variety of reasons, did not want to participate in the study.

When the families were referred to us, we were given very little information about the ages of the children, their location and telephone numbers. This meant that we were able to approach the interviews with an open mind as we were not aware of any detailed specific experiences, the reasons why the family had been in touch with The Children's Society or the circumstances of their release. We rang the mother of each family to confirm that they were happy to take part in the research by being interviewed at home and we also asked them to give permission for us to ask their child or children if they would also be interviewed when we visited. We then made arrangements to visit

them at home at a mutually convenient time. One interview with a mother was carried out on the telephone as she did not wish to be visited.

At the visit, we used an open-ended topic guide to interview the mother and the children and gave them the choice of whether they wanted to be interviewed separately or together. Out of 10 mothers, five were interviewed alone; the other five were all interviewed with their children present. All the children, except one teenage boy, were interviewed with their mothers present. A teenage girl from another family refused to be interviewed, although the researcher was able to interview her mother and two siblings. The visits lasted for between one and two hours. The very young children were given some colouring pens and paper as a thank you for taking part while the mothers and older young people received a gift card as a thank you.

The topic guide covered questions about the families' lives in the UK before they were detained, their experiences of going into detention, what it was like to be in Yarl's Wood, any effects, in their opinion, on their mental and physical health, how long they were there, what helped them cope in the detention centre, being released and their lives post-detention. With some of the younger children, we drew pictures with the children while talking about their experiences to facilitate the discussions and in an attempt to make the interview more informal and fun. The four professionals who were interviewed for the study were asked for their views about the effects of immigration detention on children and families, the main challenges they face in their jobs working with detainees, their views about absconding and the alternatives to the immigration detention system.

5. The families

This report is based on the views and experiences of 32 families. This number is made up of the 25 family case files that were analysed and the 10 families (10 mothers and 10 children) who took part in the qualitative interviews. Three

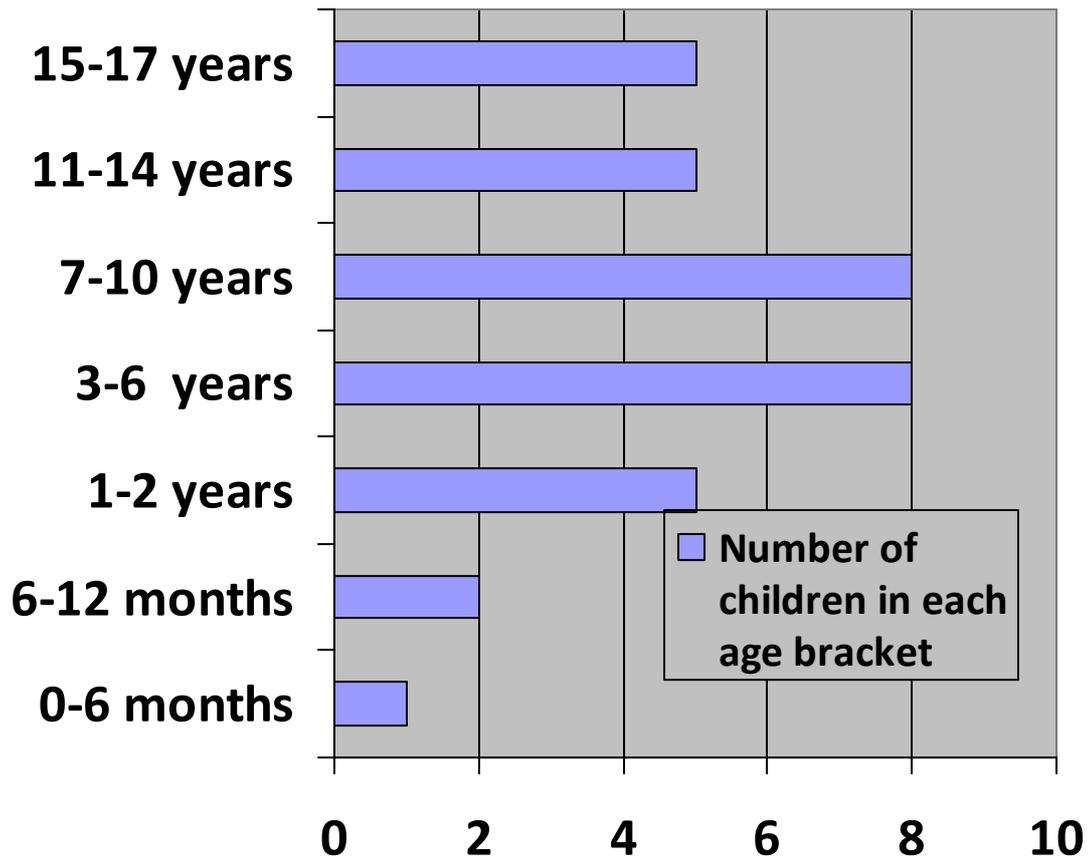
of the families who took part in the qualitative interviews were also included in the analysis of case files, making the total 32 families instead of 35.

The 25 family case files referred to the experiences of a total of 79 individuals affected by immigration detention, of which 65 adults and children were actually detained and 14 children who were in the community while their parent was detained. The total of 79 people affected by immigration detention includes the following groups:

- 28 detained parents – 14 mothers and four fathers
- one teenage mother who had been age disputed
- two detained adult sons or daughters, both aged 18
- 34 detained children between the ages of four months and 17 years
- 14 children living in the UK who were not detained but were living with either a member of the extended family or looked after by the local authority while their mother was being detained (following a period in prison).

5.1. Children's ages – case files

The ages of the 34 detained children varied enormously and this is illustrated in the table below:



Eight children were aged less than two years. The youngest was only four months old; two other babies were under a year old and there were five others aged between one and two years. Eight children were aged three and six years and there were eight more children between the ages of seven and 10. Five were aged between 11 and 14 with another five aged between the ages of 15 and 17.

5.2. Children's ages and gender – qualitative study

The 10 children who were interviewed for the study ranged from age three to age 17. The majority (eight) were girls; two were boys. Their ages and genders are as follows (all names are pseudonyms):

Chantal, girl, age three

Sue, girl, age three

Alison, girl, age six
Patricia, girl, age six
Sarah, girl, age eight
Kima, girl, age eight
Sylvie, girl, age nine
Sevak, boy, age 12
Patrick, boy, age 15
Ese, girl, age 17

5.3. Ethnicity

The 32 families were mainly from African countries with the most originating from Nigeria (nine), Malawi (four) and Uganda (three), Cameroon (three), Kenya (one), Sierra Leone (one), Zambia (one), Mozambique (one), the Sudan (one) and Congo Brazzaville (one). There were families from Jamaica (five), Algeria (one) and Armenia (one).

5.4. Length of detention

Out of the 32 cases, only six families had been detained for less than one month. The shortest period a family was held was 12 days. One family was detained for four weeks while 16 of the families with children had been held for between five and 12 weeks. One family were detained for five months. The longest period in detention amongst the 32 family cases was seven months for another family. Five lone mothers, separated from their children, were detained for between five and eight months and two more lone mothers were detained for a year or more.

5.5. Multiple detentions

For 11 of the 32 families, the period in detention recorded in the case file held by The Children's Society was not their first experience of immigration detention. Ten of these families had been detained on one previous occasion with their children; one family had been detained on five previous occasions.

5.6. *Their lives in the UK pre-detention*

Many of the families had been in the UK for several years before being detained for the purpose of immigration control. Half (16) of the 32 families had been in the UK for five years or more, since 2004. One family had been in the UK for nine years, since 2000, and three families had been living in the UK for eight years, since 2001. Only two of the families had arrived recently, during the first few months of 2009. The rest of the families (n=14) had been in the UK for periods of between one and five years.

Given this pattern, many of the families had experienced a settled life in the UK prior to being detained in Yarl's Wood. Several reported having relatives in Britain that they were either living with or being supported by. One mother had married a British citizen and another was living with her mother who had British citizenship. A father of one of the detained children was living in the community with his other children while a mother was living with her fiancé, a British citizen with whom she had been engaged for many months, at the time when she was detained with her daughter.

Many of the children had been born in the UK or, if they were older, had been living in the UK for several years. As this professional commented, going into detention disrupted the everyday lives of the children and young people, without any warning or notice:

‘Everything stops, the day before [being detained] they might be in school and for example planning to go to a friend’s birthday party, the day before it happens everything is ticking along, children have their normal routines, swimming on Thursday, whatever, and suddenly...’
(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

Many of the young people in our sample were studying for exams at the time of their detention. One 18 year old, for example, had just got his A-level results, having achieved grades ABB with a place at university, while another,

aged 17, was just about to sit an entrance exam in order to study medicine at university. Several other young people were studying for GCSEs and A-levels as well as other qualifications such as NVQs in health, social care and childcare, which some of the mothers were also studying. Many of the families also reported being settled in communities with strong local social support networks. Some were being supported by local groups who were campaigning for their release while other parents were studying and volunteering for local voluntary organisations and schools.

Research findings

The following sections set out the key findings of the research and are divided into key stages of the detention process, including being taken into detention, experiences within the immigration detention centres and the impact of the experience after release.

6. Going into immigration detention

Vivid descriptions of being taken into immigration detention have been well documented in previous research (Cole, 2003; Amnesty International, 2005) and inspection reports (Aynsley-Green, 2005; HMIP, 2006a; 11 Million, 2010). Our interviews with children and mothers for this study also revealed detailed accounts of being woken up early in the morning to be taken to Yarl's Wood. The most common complaint of the families was that there were many officers, often eight or nine, to detain only a mother and one or two children, leading them to question the necessity of such an approach. The accounts also showed how frightening, confusing and shocking the experience was for them:

‘It was a complete surprisewe were completely shocked. They came to the door and they were banging “OPEN!, OPEN!” We were all

sleeping and we were all scared and my mum woke up and opened the door and they came in pushing and they took her into the other room and we were sleeping and they woke us up and we were wondering what's wrong, what's happening, and we can't stop crying and we were saying what's happening and they said you're being detained and you need to dress up and go. It was frustrating because you don't know what's happening and it's not just one of them, there are many of them in the house and they were scaring the girls'.

(Mary, mother).

In addition to the shock and confusion felt by many of the families when taken into immigration detention, some of the mothers and children described feeling threatened by the officers who came to the door:

'Six o'clock they come, boom-boom-boom, I didn't know why. They came straight to my door, I say "Why?" I asked "Somebody there? Who's that?" "Oh don't ask, who's that? You are illegal in this country. It's Immigration. It's Immigration, open the door. If you don't open the door, I am going to break the door".'

(Liliane, mother).

This mother's son, aged 15, was interviewed on a separate occasion for the research study. His description of being taken into detention was very similar to his mother's:

'They came here about 6 o'clock in the morning. I was already up by then as I had stuff to finish for school so I was doing that. They knocked at the door – not quietly, but loudly – and they demanded to open the door. They didn't actually ask – they demanded and then they threatened to break the door down if we didn't open the door'.

(Patrick, age 15).

One child, Chantal, was only three when she participated in the research study and gave a detailed description of being taken into detention:

'Researcher: What was it like when you were in detention with Mummy?

Chantal: It was very, very bad.

Researcher: Tell me what happened

Chantal: Just the police arrest me.

Researcher: Oh. And how did that feel?

Chantal: And they pushed me. They pushed me in my leg here [points to ankle].

Researcher: And then what happened?

Chantal: They took me to the police station....and say I am going on holiday.

Researcher: And how did you feel?

Chantal: Scared.....and my Mum she was crying, and me.'

Later, Chantal and her mother told the researcher more about the experience of being detained and how there were nine officers to detain the two of them:

'Chantal: My Mummy opened the door and somebody was running when I woke up.

Severine (Mother): They were banging hard at home, that's what she heard, they were banging.

Researcher: They came in?

Severine (Mother): Nine people! For two of us!'

All four professionals who were interviewed for the study identified the experience of being detained in the early morning, or 'dawn raids' as one of the most traumatic experiences for children and parents who have been detained:

‘The way they are detained is so traumatic because it’s usually early morning dawn raids. They are so amazingly traumatic for children, so often they say the officers were rude, they were hammering on the door, leaning on the door bell and.....a lot of shouting....and to wake up and to find an officer in their room is just appalling.’

(Professional working with detained children and families)

For several of the children who participated in the study, the shock of being arrested and detained by uniformed officers had left them fearful of police officers or of anything that reminded them of being detained, such as the SERCO logo, which is on the vans used to transport people to Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre. Chantal’s mother described the long-lasting effects of being detained on her daughter:

‘Basically she cannot see police in the street. The moment she sees them she is too anxious, it’s so very painful.....at the moment now she cannot see them [the police] on the street and she get upset, like she’s talking to you and every night “Oh Mummy I’m scared that they are coming again”. ...Another time, the police is coming [makes the siren noise] “Mummy, please, give me a hug. Mummy, Mummy, maybe they are coming for us again.”’

(Severine, mother of Chantal, age three)

7. Everyday life in Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre

7.1. Arriving

Once at Yarl’s Wood, many of the mothers we spoke to described how the shock and stress of the experience continued as they did not know what was happening or why they had been detained:

‘It was really scary – you have to wait in the lounge, we had to wait for them to clear – I was crying, the girls were crying, you don’t know what’s going to happen next, you’re anxious, you’re scared, you’re scared about what’s going to happen tomorrow, it’s a complete nightmare because it’s like you’re in a prison because there are all these people walking up and down with keys and everything and you think what have I done? Why oh why are these things happening to us?’

(Mary, mother)

And as this 15-year-old boy described his first impressions of Yarl’s Wood:

‘There’s a gate at the back of the building and we were there for about half an hour – the car just stopped. They said they were waiting for permission to open the gates. It opened and they gave papers to the people who work inside...then they took our stuff and then there was a waiting room...then we went through. There was about three doors with really long corridors and there were doors everywhere. They opened the door and we went down a long corridor and then there was another door.’

(Patrick, age 15)

7.2. Children’s descriptions of Yarl’s Wood

Children interviewed for the study used words like ‘bad’, ‘freaky’, ‘terrible’ and ‘appalling’ to describe Yarl’s Wood, adding that they felt ‘confused’, ‘angry’ and ‘sad’ when they were there:

‘It [detention] didn’t make me feel happy, it made me feel like, erm, sad and angry, feel like screaming or breaking something.’

(Sylvie, age nine)

Interviews with children and young people also revealed descriptions of Yarl's Wood as being institutional and prison-like; being locked in and the lack of privacy were recurring themes in their accounts as was the general description of it as being a 'bad place':

'Kima: They locked us in one room. With small beds. We couldn't have fresh air because they locked the windows.

Sevak: We could have a key [to their room], but they still could come in.

Sevak: The beds were like the floor.

Kima: Yeah, the beds were hard.'

(Kima, age eight and Sevak, age 12)

Sarah's description of being in Yarl's Wood also emphasises the restrictions on her and the general institutional nature of her experience, of being locked in, when asked how she felt when she was there:

'Sad, unhappy. I couldn't even sleep. At night time they give you some cake with milk, you get milk every time, or a donut. You sleep at 12 o'clock. When you have your snack you have to go to bed, everyone has to go to bed, all the doors are locked everywhere, you can't go outside, you can't go upstairs to anyone else's bedroom, they lock it. If you get locked, you have to sleep on the floor. I woke up so early, breakfast wasn't even ready, breakfast was 8 o'clock.'

(Sarah, age eight)

Other aspects of Yarl's Wood that were described by the children and young people, such as many doors and long corridors, reflected their experiences of feeling confined and restricted, characterising some elements of being institutionalised. As one professional commented:

'You're never going to get away from the fact that the institution environment itself is scary for children; there are big gates and barbed wire and people in uniformsthe jangling of keys, the footsteps, the doors locking and doors banging...'

(Professional working with children and families detained in Yarl's Wood)

One teenager, Ese, who was in the middle of her A-levels, explained that although there were some activities for young people in Yarl's Wood, she had lost all interest and focus when she was detained as a result of being confined to a small space:

'I wasn't interested in doing anything anyway. They tried doing things with young kids but you're in that situation, you're not that interested. It's like a daily routine, you get really down....You can't go outside and if you go outside, there's a little square thing, you think about a lot of things, obviously, you can go mad, it can drive you crazy, you get fed up.'

(Ese, age 17)

Patrick expressed a similar response to being confined. Some limited provision of education and activities were made for children in Yarl's Wood. However, a lack of freedom, choice and agency, as a result of being detained, meant that the children in this study were not in the frame of mind to benefit from the limited activities which were available to them. The lack of freedom and the uncertainty appeared to freeze the energy and enthusiasm of some of the children:

'I felt quite sad and unhappy [in Yarl's Wood]. I didn't feel like going to all the activities – it got boring. They had a playground outside but there was a really long wall so you couldn't see outside and stuff so it got really boring just seeing the same scenery every single day. You

kind of do when you live at home but it's kind of different because you can go anywhere you want if you want to, if you wanted to do, it got boring doing the same thing every single day, it became really annoying'

(Patrick, age 15)

7.3. School

Reports from research studies and visits to detention centres (HMIP, 2008; Ofsted, 2008) have highlighted a number of concerns about the educational facilities in detention centres. These concerns included the lack of outside recreational areas and the wide range of ages and abilities in the classes. Before the closure of the Yarl's Wood family unit in December 2010, some improvements were made to the school in Yarl's Wood, , and these were acknowledged both by inspection reports (11 Million, 2010; HMIP, 2010) and the professionals interviewed for the study. However, many of the children who were interviewed for the research criticised the school for not being a 'proper' school. Generally, they did not feel challenged and thought the work that was provided was not difficult enough and that the school was, therefore, more about playing than learning in a more formal sense. As Ese explained:

'They had a teacher. I went sometimes but I don't think they did proper studies, it was more like drawing and colouring stuff; I was doing my 'A' levels!'

(Ese, age 17)

Patrick, age 15, similarly saw the school in Yarl's Wood as being unchallenging and quite different from his own school in the community:

'Patrick: You get up at 8, go to breakfast, and then a school, well it wasn't really a school, just something to occupy yourself with while you're there.

Researcher: Why wasn't it like a school?

Patrick: Well at school, there are teachers and different people, there's a Head Teacher, that's a school; a school has a Head Teacher, but there's no Head Teacher in Yarl's Wood, just a lady who taught; you come in and she teaches but she doesn't force you to do anything if you don't want to'.

Sarah, who had been detained twice, described the voluntary nature of the school at Yarl's Wood:

'We had a teacher there and she said if you can't do it and it's too hard, you don't have to do it and if it's too easy, you have to give it back, if you can't do none of that, you have to read a book.'

(Sarah, age eight)

Sylvie was critical of the school at Yarl's Wood, particularly when comparing to her school in the community:

'There was a little school there [in detention], but they didn't teach us properly and they would shout so I didn't go to school that much. Our normal [community] school, our teachers help us a lot. First of all my school is helpful, helps us, if you don't understand something they help you understand. The other one was like, playtime a lot, and they give you paper you do something on paper and just waste the paper.'

(Sylvie, age nine)

In the case files that were analysed, a small number of children were reported to be very reluctant to attend the nursery or school in the centre and one mother made a formal complaint about a bullying incident in the nursery, although this complaint was not upheld. Some of the children started attending the school but then stopped, as they could not 'see the point'. Two boys started going to the school when they were detained but after seven weeks in the centre, they started to refuse to attend the school, saying they

did not want to leave their room. Despite being anxious about missing forthcoming exams, a 14 year old said she did not want to go to the school anymore as she did not see the point and her nine-year-old sibling also stopped going to the school as she said she did not enjoy it.

One child, aged eight, often did not want to go to the school as he did not think it was a 'proper school' and would often say to his mother, 'what's the point?' when he was asked to go into school that day. This child's community school had sent some work to the centre for him but the mother reported that the school in Yarl's Wood had not made contact with the community school for information or an assessment.

For some young people, being detained had, in their view, seriously disrupted their educational progress. One 17-year-old, for example, was doing her A-levels before being detained. She said she was trying to do some coursework by using the internet in order to keep up but she had no textbooks and found it hard to progress without a teacher. She had also had to withdraw from her AS-level exams whilst being detained. Another young person had missed the exams in her health and social care course. Two of the younger children had lost their primary school places whilst in detention.

7.4. Food

The food in Yarl's Wood was unanimously criticised by all the children and adults we spoke to for the study; in most cases, this information was volunteered rather than asked for. The routine of eating is an important aspect of everyday life, particularly in an institution such as an immigration removal centre like Yarl's Wood. The following conversation between a researcher and two girls illustrates the strong feelings about the food provided:

'Researcher: What was it like being in the detention centre?

Alison: It was bad.

Sarah: I didn't like it

Researcher: Why?

Both: I didn't like the food, it made me sick, we had chips for lunch every day [in unison] and every day for dinner and hot dogs, not good food. There's a shop there, didn't have healthy things, like chocolate'.

(Sarah, age eight and Alison, age six)

Several children and mothers told us that they had been served chicken with hair still on it and that the menu was repetitive and monotonous. As Mary explained:

'The food is not what you'd enjoy eating. There are two options, but chips all the time. It's not healthy but you don't have any other option.'

(Mary, mother)

7.5. Relationships with staff

Generally, the children and mothers we spoke to for the study had had mixed views with regard to their relationships with staff at Yarl's Wood. Many of our interviewees said that some staff were very 'nice' and 'helpful' or 'just doing their job' whereas other staff were not:

'Sevak : Some of them [the Officers] were supportive.

Mother: Some them were supportive, kind, yeah.

Kima: Some of them weren't.

Mother: It is not their fault. This is not their fault. They are just working.

Being yes, very kind, very good.

Sevak: Some of them were bad.

(Sevak, age 12, Kima, age nine and mother)

In common with many of the mothers and children we spoke to, this teenage girl felt spoken down to by some staff while thinking that other officers were nice:

‘Some were really horrible....I thought I’m not stupid....just because I’m here doesn’t mean I’m stupid or anything or I don’t know what you are saying....they seem to treat everyone as if we don’t know what they’re saying....shouting at you....I know what you’re saying so there’s no need to look at me like that...some of them are really nice and you wonder why are you working here?’

(Ese, age 17)

One mother gave a detailed account of verbal abuse she received:

‘One of them was taking roll count, it was taking too long and everyone was getting frustrated and we wanted to go and eat, we were standing by our doors and he was walking up and down, saying that he can’t count because they were messing up the line because they wanted to go home and he said “well at least I’m going home” and I said “that’s rude for you to say that, you’ve got people in here who haven’t see their families and stuff; you’re an Officer and you’re not supposed to say that”. And we got into an argument and that and he told me it’s not his fault I’m a monkey in a cage, a monkey locked up in a cage. I put in a complaint but they did nothing about it. They said they spoke to the officer and said they’re going to work to make sure that nothing like that happens again.’

(Marion, mother, detained in Women’s Unit, Yarl’s Wood)

In one of the family case files, a mother criticised the general treatment by the staff at the centre, saying that people had chosen to go on hunger strike as a means of protesting against their treatment there. She described fights

between the children and how the guards took no action to intervene. She went on to report that the Detention Custody Officers there can be very intimidating and make fun of the detainees, laughing at them. As this three-year-old commented:

‘So many guards inside! [Yarl’s Wood]. One laughed to me “ha-ha-ha-ha” [like ner-ner, ner-ner sound].’

(Chantal, age three)

One of the children we interviewed had felt verbally abused when she was taken to the airport by some officers with her mother and sister to be removed from the country:

‘The lady called me silly and stupid – it was horrible.’

(Sarah, age eight)

Some of the young people and mothers who were interviewed for the research described how they started behaving differently in response and possibly in retaliation to how they were being spoken to, as a means of taking back some degree of control. As Ese explained:

‘I argued with one and she was mouthing back. I don’t talk back to people like that – I never do at school, but I was really frustrated.’

(Ese, age 17)

7.6. *Witnessing traumatic events*

Some of the parents and children included in our sample of 32 families had experienced some extremely stressful and traumatic events in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre during their detention. Some had witnessed hunger strikes and demonstrations and one child had witnessed a woman trying to hang herself. The mother of this child was very concerned about the repercussions of this on the child, especially as she felt he was bottling up his feelings and was reluctant to talk about what he had seen.

One mother and daughter who were interviewed for the study described three incidents that they had witnessed that they had been shocked by:

'There was a man who poured hot water over himself – we saw him!
We were there!'
(Ese, age 17)

They also described how one woman was deported to Uganda and said she did not know how she got there and believed she had been drugged and another was taken to the airport, they felt, by force. Another mother, who was detained in one of the single women's units in Yarl's Wood, said she had witnessed a woman, who was naked, being pushed downstairs and then dragged by male officers.

In a separate incident, two children we spoke to mentioned how they had witnessed the maltreatment of one woman during an attempt to remove her:

'Sevak: There was this woman, her arm was all bruised.
Kima: 'Cos one day they took her, yeah, and she wanted to go back, and they were like strangling her arm.
Sevak: [correcting his sister, Kima] She didn't want to go back.
Researcher: How did that make you feel to see that?
Sevak: Scared. Because it might happen to us.'
(Sevak, age 12 and Kima, age nine)

Sylvie, age nine, told the researcher a detailed account of how she and her family were taken to the airport to be forcibly removed from the UK and there she witnessed what she thought of as aggression and force used against her mother and older brother. She described how the family were separated into different cars and then:

‘And then I was crying and then after that they dragged my Mum, they were dragging my Mum up the stairs and my Dad said “You are dragging her like a sack of potatoes” and my Mum hurted herself.’
(Sylvie, age nine)

8. Immigration detention and health

This section outlines the physical, mental and emotional health difficulties experienced by children and parents in the research prior, during and following time spent in immigration detention.

8.1 Decision to detain despite pre-existing medical conditions

According to Home Office guidance, people with serious health problems, including mental illness, should not normally be detained. The guidance states that:

‘the following are normally considered suitable for detention in only very exceptional circumstances: those suffering from serious medical conditions which cannot be satisfactorily managed within detention; those suffering serious mental illness which cannot be satisfactorily managed within detention.’

(UKBA, 2011a, p.38)

Of the 32 families included in the research sample, 56% (n=18) of them included a family member with a pre-existing medical condition. One 15-year-old was learning disabled with special educational needs. At the time of his detention, his school was in the process of assessing him for a statement of special educational needs. A 14-year-old had experienced an eye condition

following an eye injury when he was younger, for which he was receiving medical treatment at his local hospital.

One mother had mobility difficulties due to a problem with her hips. This was related to an injury she had sustained when she gave birth. One mother had sickle cell anaemia and another was suffering from high blood pressure and blood circulation problems. One woman, a torture claimant, was suffering from a severe back problem while a few of the women said they had experienced female genital mutilation in their country of origin, leaving them with both emotional and physical repercussions. A small number of the women had also reported being raped previously and three of the women out of the 32 cases were detained despite being pregnant.

Some of the children and adults with pre-existing medical conditions at the time of their detention missed important hospital appointments as a result of their incarceration. From case records, it was reported that two siblings with swollen glands had their medication removed when they arrived at Yarl's Wood. A mother also reported that her medication had been removed upon arrival and she subsequently developed a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). After their release, the family reported that their solicitor was helping to lodge a claim in relation to the health care they had received in Yarl's Wood.

The most common pre-existing condition experienced by the detainees – both children and adults – was pre-diagnosed mental health difficulties. Sixteen people, including four children, were already suffering from mental health problems prior to detention. These mental health difficulties included depression, panic attacks, phobias and self-harm. All of these children and adults were either already taking medication for depression or other mental health problems and many were receiving professional help including intervention from Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS). One woman, for example, who was imprisoned in criminal custody prior to being detained, was due to be assessed by her local mental health team before being

detained. She was on medication for severe depression and a medical letter from her GP had stated that removal would be extremely detrimental to her mental health. Her husband had also been on anti-depressants prior to their period in Yarl's Wood and had recently seen a psychiatrist. As the mother explained:

'Life in Yarl's Wood is very depressing 'cos I when I was in prison I became depressed and I suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and depression and I'm on a lot of medication and treatment so Yarl's Wood wasn't the best place for me to be. Then people tried a lot for me to be moved from that place and the solicitors, The Children's Society, BID and family and friends...because I went very low, I became very low, I became a self-harmer whilst I was in prison and when I went into Y's Wood I became very bad...and I attempted suicide twice in Y's Wood, I overdosed myself with drugs and I was rushed into hospital unconscious. I attempted suicide twice in prison and twice in Yarl's Wood'

(Katherine, mother)

One 10-year-old was detained for a second time despite suffering from severe mental health problems and a diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) given to her by psychiatric professionals after the first period in detention, which lasted over three weeks. Since her first time in Yarl's Wood, a few months previously, the child had been suffering from severe anxiety and nightmares and was receiving help from a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. The psychiatrist had assessed her after her first period of detention, stating that she should not be detained again. Contrary to this professional assessment and recommendation, she was detained again a few months later. Her mother had also suffered from depression previously and had been on anti-depressants for a period of three years.

8.2. Impact of detention on mental and emotional health

Previous research literature has highlighted in detail that the experience of detention has a detrimental effect on the mental and physical health of children. (Crawley and Lester, 2005; Steel et al, 2006; Fekete, 2007b; Lorek et al, 2009; Burnett et al, 2010). Of the 32 families in our research sample, about two thirds reported emotional symptoms and distress while they were in immigration detention. This is likely to be an under-representation of the possible impact of detention on mental and emotional health as, for the 25 families whose case files were analysed for the study, these symptoms were volunteered to The Children's Society project workers who completed the case files; the clients were not asked directly about health problems. Some of these symptoms of emotional distress were reported in professional statements and assessments seen by The Children's Society project workers while some were reported by the families themselves. One doctor's report, for example, stated that the mother was very withdrawn in the immigration centre; comments were made about her 'low mood', about her being 'tearful' and 'monosyllabic' and that she was depressed and not sleeping. Another mother had suffered from mental health difficulties and had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act after a previous period in detention. Despite her psychiatrist recommending that she was not re-detained, she was detained again. She was subsequently sectioned again whilst in Yarl's Wood and separated from her children who remained in detention with their father.

8.3. Depression and hopelessness

Several parents reported being depressed, for which they were taking anti-depressants and having anxiety and panic attacks; they expressed emotions like fear and anger and both adults and children reported feeling very scared in the environment of the immigration centre, crying constantly and not sleeping. Some mothers felt they had lost the ability to cope and felt helpless and hopeless about their situation. One mother, for example, wrote a text to her project worker expressing this sense of hopelessness:

‘This is getting too hard for me to see my little girl cry every night and ask questions I can’t answer. In case anything happens to me will you promise to find a happy home for her one day cause she’s such a happy little girl. I am not what she needs. I am sorry I might not make this race I am so tired.’

(Mother of eight-year-old)

According to some of the parents included in our research sample, the hopelessness and depression they experienced in detention was becoming too much and meant that they started to self-harm. One mother started cutting herself and then overdosed on malaria tablets. Afterwards she said that she thought that if she died, her children would be released from detention. Three of the mothers were on suicide watch during their detention and several mothers from the 32 families expressed suicidal thoughts. One mother, who had experienced depression and self-harm prior to going into Yarl’s Wood, overdosed and was subsequently hospitalised after her bail application failed. After being discharged from hospital, she was re-detained. Katherine, a mother we interviewed for the study, explained how she attempted suicide twice while in Yarl’s Wood:

‘I was there [Yarl’s Wood] for eight months and some really bad things happened, I was on suicide watch, I was on constant watch...it was really really horrible and my health just deteriorated, my health deteriorated when I was sent to Yarl’s Wood’.

(Katherine, mother)

Another common emotional response to being detained was feeling devalued, worthless, losing dignity and control over one’s life. This mother described in detail the effect the experience had had on her:

‘You feel helpless, you can’t do anything, it’s like you have to accept what is happening to you, you don’t have the right to complain, you are

helpless...You can't do anything, you are helpless, you have no control over anything. It's like you get used to it, you get used to the frustration, it becomes normal and you see yourself as worthless because that's how they think of you, they don't value you, you don't value yourself, they treat you how they want to treat you and that's it, you can't tell anybody, you won't do anything, you're just there to accept it'
(Mary, mother)

8.4. Children's mental and emotional health

A large proportion (about 60%, n=21) of the children included in the sample experienced emotional distress during their time in detention, which included sleeplessness, nightmares and constant crying. One child, aged eight, kept asking her mother 'what have we done?' She constantly asked when she could go home and was anxious about missing a school trip. A young person, aged 18, described how detention 'messes up your mind' and that he was trying to 'keep his spirits up'; his younger sibling, aged 14, said how he was finding detention very hard to handle mentally and another young person, aged 17, said she was anxious and 'could not think straight'.

After seven weeks in detention, two boys from one family, aged 16 and 13, started to refuse to leave their room and would not go to the school. Two other siblings, aged 14 and nine, were referred to The Children's Society because they were so withdrawn, a characteristic also observed by the project worker when she saw them. Several of the younger children were reported by their parents to be very 'unsettled' with a lot of crying, disturbed sleep, and 'clingy' behaviour. An eight-year-old who had witnessed a woman trying to hang herself while in Yarl's Wood had become very withdrawn and would not express his feelings and thoughts. According to the child's case notes, he became very upset when a friend he had made in the centre was forcibly removed from the UK, and he then became bored and listless, refusing to attend the school. He was also suffering from nightmares and disturbed sleep.

Three children from the research sample became so severely traumatised that they threatened suicide, with one actually attempting it. One boy aged 15 refused to eat and said he was trying to starve himself; another child, aged 12, was on suicide watch for self-harming behaviour, threatening to kill herself and refusing to eat. One girl, aged 10, who had been suffering from nightmares and anxiety since a previous period in detention, cried all the way to Yarl's Wood Immigration Centre and arrived with her eyes swollen. The next day she attempted to strangle herself.

8.5. Impact of detention on physical health

About half of the children and parents from the 32 families (n=39) included in our sample reported physical symptoms while in Yarl's Wood. Several of the mothers and about 52% of the children (n=18) in the sample were reported by their parents and professionals to be not eating and/or losing weight while in the detention centre. As before, this figure is likely to be an under-representation of the physical symptoms experienced by the families as this figure is largely based on the case file information that was volunteered rather than in answer to a direct enquiry about their health.

One three-year-old, for example, was reported by her mother not to have eaten any solid foods since going into Yarl's Wood. Another child, aged 18 months, had to be forced to eat by his mother whilst in the immigration centre. Two of the mothers reported the food being unhealthy with high levels of sugar and fat. One mother said it was difficult getting food for her baby after the canteen had shut and that her baby had lost weight. One father said that he had to force his children to go to the canteen at mealtimes and had to buy snacks for them from the shop.

In addition to a loss of appetite and sometimes body weight, common physical symptoms experienced by both adults and children while being detained, were headaches, tummy pains, nosebleeds, hair loss, diarrhoea and vomiting. Some children were affected by a chickenpox outbreak in the centre. One

child, aged 11 months, had diarrhoea for nine days. The father reported what happened:

‘They didn’t give her anything, just water. They waited for four days and then gave her Diarolyte. At the end of that dosage, she still had diarrhoea. She had to go to hospital when she came out.’

(Father of 11-month-old, Yarl’s Wood, 2009)

One mother started to experience high blood pressure whilst in the immigration removal centre, a condition she did not have previously. She also suffered from breathlessness, palpitations, and headaches and had lost her appetite. Her 15-year-old son had disturbed sleep and had developed sore gums and sore skin. He had also been feeling sick and stayed in bed during the day. Another young person, aged 17, developed rashes on his face and hair loss. One mother reported frequent headaches and nosebleeds, which the doctor said were caused by stress, and a constant pain in her back.

8.6. Access to medical treatment in Yarl’s Wood

Several of the 32 families included in the research study reported problems with accessing prompt health care and said they were not treated sympathetically by health care staff in the detention centre. Two of the children we spoke to for the qualitative stage of the study had sustained physical injuries whilst at Yarl’s Wood but had not received prompt medical treatment. One, aged six, was reported to have been jumped upon by some other children and as a result, she had a very painful back. In an interview she told us about this in her own words:

‘There were these boys who were following me and jumping on my back, there were six of them. I fell down and they started jumping on my back.’

(Alison, age six)

Her mother was very concerned about her daughter and took her to see the nurse at Yarl's Wood on two occasions, who the mother reported kept saying there was nothing she could do. She felt that they were not taken seriously or cared for sympathetically. Her narrative below illustrates feelings of worthlessness but at the same time an attempt to take back control as a detainee:

'When I saw the nurse, she was shouting at us, Alison was there, she was scared, she was crying. I said to her [the nurse], I've come for you to have a look at Alison, to see if there's something wrong because I wouldn't be here if I wasn't concerned, because I am her mum and I know if there's something wrong, I know, regardless of where we are or who we are or whatever situation we are in so at least take a few minutes to take a look at her and see and you know what she did, she was shouting and said there was nothing she could do. I said you are a nurse and you have a duty of care regardless, even if I am an asylum seeker or in detention, the same way you treat someone outside is the same way you should be treating us. You know what she say, she say there's nothing I can do and she went. What is the point of you being here if you can't help, and she said I'm not going to do anything and she left. I can't do anything. They treat you as if you are a piece of shit, not even a human, and she is a child.'

(Mary, mother)

The mother subsequently made a complaint about the medical treatment she and her family had received in the centre. Chantal, aged three, broke her collar bone when she fell down stairs in the centre, but did not receive any hospital care for 24 hours. Instead the child was given paracetamol and her mother had to insist on her being seen in hospital. As her mother explained:

'If I was home, I would have called an ambulance already to go to hospital'.

(Severine, mother of Chantal, age three)

Similarly, a little boy, Maxime, also age three, fractured his arm whilst in Yarl's Wood. However, he did not receive medical treatment for the injury which was subsequently diagnosed after leaving the centre. His case notes report that he now has a protruding lumpy bump in his arm and has been told by doctors that he may need an operation to repair it.

Katherine, a mother who was suffering from severe mental health difficulties, both in prison and then subsequently in Yarl's Wood, criticised the treatment she received in Yarl's Wood, comparing it to, in her view, a much better service in prison:

'The health care you have at Yarl's Wood is not fit for purpose because it's just people going there and sent away....it is really horrible, you can't get proper treatment, the psychiatrist has a long list of people that you have to see that is waiting, the appointment is not made for you when you need it, the psychiatrist was taking a long time to see people who were detained, people need quick psychiatric treatment and need to be referred, referrals are not done, I was not referred to nobody, I was just there being fed my medication with no other psychiatric treatment. The psychiatrists called at the time when it was suiting for them then...I was assessed properly when I was in prison and I was assessed to be needed cognitive behavioural therapy in the community environment where I can be able to cope with my depression and post-traumatic stress; they said I needed to be in an open environment so I was assessed but then I was brought to Yarl's Wood but the facilities just wasn't there; they had a counsellor and relaxation courses for people but you have to be in a good environment to be able to take relaxation courses – you can't have a relaxation treatment in Yarl's Wood because there's no way you can relax in Yarl's Wood!'

(Katherine, mother, detained for eight months)

Some of the mothers we spoke to also complained about the lack of continuity in receiving their medication. As this mother explained:

'I had very bad nightmares, headaches and migraines and they wouldn't give me my medication. I didn't have it for two weeks. They don't care. I finished the ones I had before. Every day I used to ask. They couldn't be bothered. Why are you doing this? I am not an animal. They treat animals better than the way you treat us. You cry sleeping, you wake up sleeping and no one really cares and you get used to it. I asked to see a counsellor but never got one, no one cares. I used to see one before I went into detention.'

(Mary, mother)

9. Impact of detention of parent-child relationships

One of the main detrimental effects of immigration detention for families that was reported by all four professionals who were interviewed for the study is the impact on parent-child relationships. These professionals felt that seeing their parent(s) and other adults around them in a constant state of anxiety and distress was likely to detrimentally affect children's emotional health. As this professional commented:

'It's affecting the relationships between children and their parents too because suddenly the children are seeing their parents no longer in control; sometimes you see examples of children trying to parent, why is mummy crying? And the parent isn't coping. And they are taking on board all of this stuff and witnessing all the stuff they shouldn't.'

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl's Wood)

Some mothers we interviewed felt that they were not able to explain their situation to their children, because they did not know themselves why they were detained:

‘The girls were saying “what have we done? We haven’t done anything wrong, what is happening to us?” But you can’t even explain it to them because even for me it’s a surprise, it’s a shock and I don’t know what to tell them and I don’t know what to do’.

(Mary, detained with her two daughters, aged eight and six)

Some children spoke to us about seeing their parents upset and a common account was of children comforting their parents and helping other adults when they were distressed or could not cope. Kima helped another woman look after her baby as she was clearly not coping:

‘I helped the mother to look after the baby. Because she was stressed and she couldn’t look after the baby.’

(Kima, age eight)

This mother vividly described how her three-year-old daughter comforts her when she is upset and how this affects the child:

‘She’s already...depressed, like me, the mother, I’m already...because sometimes I sit in this house, I’m crying, she says “Mummy, why are you crying? It’s because of the immigration, Mummy? Don’t cry, okay, you’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.” I’ll be crying. My child knows already we’re living in a bad situation, you know, because I’m upset myself, I’m upset, she’s upset. And a moment she asks me, I will tell her, she will say “Mummy I know if they are coming to get us, Mummy don’t cry, you know, Mummy don’t cry.” It is painful. It is painful for a three year old. She knows everything. Chantal knows we are living in a condition with police. She knows.’

(Severine, mother of Chantal, age three)

During the interview, the researcher observed a similar scenario with Severine becoming visibly upset when talking with the result that Chantal started to comfort her mother, saying, 'Don't cry, Mummy'. Another child we interviewed told us how she felt after seeing her mother being dragged in a manner which she felt was humiliating during an attempt to forcibly remove her from the UK:

'I went to my bedroom and I felt really sad. And I started screaming. And as well, and after that I just started banging the door. My Dad said "What is that?" He said "It's OK, don't worry, she's alright."' (Sylvie, age nine)

9.1. Protecting and safeguarding

Some mothers also spoke of feeling powerless to protect their children in the immigration removal centre. Mary told us how one day in Yarl's Wood, two older boys followed her two daughters into the toilet:

'They were screaming and I was so angry. I told an officer and asked "Why are they doing this, why? If something happens to them...if I wasn't there, anything might have happened". They were crying, saying they were bullied, no one cares. I wasn't in a position to do much for them.'

(Mary, mother)

Mary also recounted an incident of three-year-olds involved in 'sexual acts'; again, she felt powerless to protect her daughters as she felt the experience of detention had taken away her worth and value both as a human being and a parent:

'You wonder, what sort of a place is this? You get for your kids being in that environment. They are being exposed to things they didn't even

know, you have no power to control, to do anything. What else can you do, nobody cares.'

(Mary, mother of two girls, aged eight and six)

10. Coping strategies

As we have seen in sections 8 and 9, many of the families we spoke to found their experience in detention and the uncertainty surrounding their own and their children's futures very difficult to bear. As previous research about asylum seeking young people has shown (Chase et al, 2008), some inevitably coped better than others and this was probably due, according to some of the participants, to an inner strength that is hard to explain or measure; some were more able to describe where their coping mechanisms came from.

As already discussed, some mothers attempted to take back some control they felt they had lost by asserting themselves and their needs when talking to Officers. Some of the mothers and children described talking to and comforting others in immigration detention as a source of support; some took greater action and helped others make official complaints.

As this professional explained:

'There's a lot of mutual support in Yarl's Wood, I've noticed, more so within the single women's unit because they're there for much longer and they get to know each other more, but there is also a bit of mutual support for the families.'

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl's Wood)

Some of the families told us how their religious faith helped them cope and gave them a greater sense of purpose while in Yarl's Wood and waiting for an outcome. This mother and daughter explained how their faith in God had

helped them give them the conviction that they would not be deported and they would eventually be released:

Ese: My faith helped a lot, my faith helped a lot [Christian faith], it helped a lot and I just knew...I guess...I thought you know what, I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, I can't go back there, I wouldn't fit in, there's nothing for me there, there's no point, I thought there's no way I'm going back there anyway, I thought it's just a matter of time before I get out.

Abeo: There's no way I'm going, that's why I didn't rush when they came. If God didn't want me in this country, I would not come, but God allowed me to come to this place and there's no way I'm going because everything is here, I don't have anybody, just Ese and I want the best for her, and my fiancé, who wants to marry me.

(Ese, age 17 and her mother, Abeo)

Ese also found great strength from talking to friends on the phone when she first went into Yarl's Wood and subsequent visits from friends and their parents:

'The lucky thing for me was that my friends outside in the world were calling me, that was the helpful thing, we'd talk for hours and that helped me. When we were in the van, they asked me if I needed to call some people; I used the phone. I thought I might as well use their credit! I used the phone and I spoke to my friends and told them and they said to other people you need to call her, you need to do this, you need to do that, it was kinda like that, and their parents as well; some of their parents came to visit.'

(Ese, age 17)

Ese was, however, unusual in this respect. A more common response from the children and mothers we spoke to was to keep their period in detention a

secret from friends and acquaintances at school and in the community, echoing previous research about the experiences of unaccompanied refugee and asylum seeking young people (Kohli, 2005; Chase et al, 2008). Patrick explained why he did not tell people at school where he had been:

‘For us kids, we can sometimes use things against other people so for example, it might be for a joke but then you end up saying it and you don’t know that you’re hurting the person while you’re saying it so I decided it was best if I just didn’t say anything.’

(Patrick, age 15)

One family received a lot of support from the local community, including the church and school, when they were detained. This attention had, however, badly affected the teenage daughter who was embarrassed to return to school after she was released. Eventually a teacher spoke to her and persuaded her to return to school. After Alison and Sarah were released from detention the second time, their mother wanted to tell the school, especially after Alison had become upset and was told off one day, but the older daughter, Sarah, age eight, was unhappy about school knowing, saying, ‘Don’t tell her [the teacher], just leave it, it’s OK’.

Other children and their mothers described coping by receiving help from professionals such as social workers, psychiatrists and project workers from voluntary agencies. Patrick described the ways he was coping with the effects of being detained and not knowing what his future held:

‘I have a psychiatrist so I talk to him sometimes. There are meetings and we have sessions and stuff. I’ve had him since I came out the second time. The lawyer suggested it. I see him every month or anytime I want to go I can. Also sports because I play basketball, I really like playing. Sometimes I just go out on a Saturday and stay in the park most of the afternoon. For a couple of hours, you forget about

everything, then you snap back and everything comes back. I just try and keep myself as busy as possible so I don't have to think about it much.'

(Patrick, age 15)

11. The experiences of 'split' families

One of the most striking recurring themes to emerge from our study was how many families experienced some form of separation as a *result* of being detained. Nearly half of the 32 families experienced separation of parents and children as a direct consequence of immigration detention. One mother's adult son, age 18, was in a different immigration centre while she was at Yarl's Wood. One 16-month-old girl was separated from her mother for two days because she was not at home when her mother was taken to the detention centre. In a separate incident, a baby of a few months old was separated from her mother for 72 hours while she was still breastfeeding when her mother was detained. During another period of detention, the baby was separated from her mother again, this time for two days, as a result of her mother being sectioned under the Mental Health Act. A family of six was split as a result of being detained, as not all members of the family were at home when the immigration officers called to take some of the family into detention. In another case, one parent and three of the children were detained while the other parent and another child were left living in the community. When the immigration officers called, the children tried to resist being detained by hiding under the beds and refusing to come out.

Patrick, age 15, spoke about the separation he had experienced from his father – and was still experiencing when we interviewed him for the study – as his father had been detained in a different immigration removal centre.

'I haven't seen my dad since the end of year 7 because they took him into detention long before, I didn't know about it so I thought he'd gone

away on holiday or something and then it got kind of long and I started to worry but I just thought OK he's away on holiday or something....then a couple of months passed and then a year and he didn't show up for Christmas and he wasn't there when I had my first Communion – but he said he was going to be there but he wasn't there – so I thought oh OK maybe he's busy and then there was the day they [immigration officers] came and I realised he'd been in detention the whole time.'

(Patrick, age 15)

11.1. Women separated from their children

A small number of the mothers out of the 32 families (n= 7) were in Yarl's Wood after being transferred there straight from prison custody. During their prison sentences, their children were living either with relatives or with foster carers in local authority care and remained there as their mothers were transferred into immigration detention. One three-year-old was living with her aunt while her mother was in immigration detention and a two-year-old was living with a family friend while her mother was being detained in the women's unit of Yarl's Wood Immigration Centre.

Some of the women who were detained without their children immediately following on from prison sentences said they had had more contact with their children while they were in prison than when in immigration detention, leaving them with the conclusion that they had more rights as a prisoner than as a detainee for immigration purposes. One mother had been separated from her four children for a year while she was in prison and had received regular visits from them. These visits, she said, had stopped since going into Yarl's Wood Immigration Centre and over a six month period, she only saw the children on two occasions. Her local children's services social work team eventually started to organise monthly visits but said these could not increase in frequency due to a lack of resources.

As this mother explained:

‘At least once a week I saw my child – in prison. That kept me going because I had something to look forward to – every week I had to dress up for my visit and that kept me going for a while. But when I went to Yarls’ Wood it all stopped because of the distance – it is quite far to go to Yarls’ Wood from London to see me, because she [child’s carer] has other children as well. I only saw him twice when I was in Y’s Wood...twice – maximum of three times in eight months.’

(Katherine, mother)

Yet although the women we spoke to were distressed at being separated from their children, they were also glad that their children were not experiencing detention:

‘I found it difficult really to cope on my own, I keep saying that, and the children are very very scared, when you see them around Yarls’ Wood they are very scared and very unhappy, very withdrawn and there is no life really for them there, it is not a place to be, it’s not a good environment for them. Although I wanted to be with my child, I knew it wasn’t the right place for him, so I would rather not put my child through that life at all, I would rather not have him in there because I knew he was getting everything he wanted outside with my family; he had a life, he went to a proper nursery school, he ate proper food, not like what it is cooked in Yarls’ Wood, it is very very poor in Yarls’ Wood, they don’t cater much for children, you know children growing up, how much they need to have proper meals and they just provide the basics.’

(Katherine, mother detained in Women’s Unit)

The experience of being detained apart from their children straight after completing a prison sentence is seen by some as a double punishment:

‘They are usually in that situation because they have committed a crime in this country but they have all served their time....so it’s a double punishment that you will lose your relationship with their children.’

(Professional working with detained children and families)

And as this mother explained:

‘When I came to Yarl’s Wood I was on my own so that put a lot of pressure on me because I wanted to be reunited with my child and then I finished my sentence and then I was denied again of my parental rights to my child whilst I was in Yarl’s Wood, my sentence had already gone, I had done my time.’

(Katherine, mother of three-year-old)

The most recent HMIP (2010) inspection report on Yarl’s Wood expressed particular concerns about the single women’s section of the detention centre and highlighted the lack of activities there and the length of stay of many of the women. The seven women in our sample all spent between five and nine months in Yarl’s Wood and many spoke at length about the treatment they received there and the lack of activities and facilities.

All of the four women we interviewed felt strongly that being in prison was better than being in Yarl’s Wood. They said that this was because they knew why they were in prison and how long they would be there, and because there was more structure and activities. In addition, they commented that there was better healthcare in prison and more regular contact with their children than in detention. As this mother explained:

‘I would say that prison life was better, it was better structured than Yarl’s Wood, because in prison you always have a place to go to, you have things to do, you have an education but in Yarl’s Wood, nothing,

people are locked in there with nothing. In the mornings you are just on your own, in the afternoons you don't know what to do, in the eveningsso the time stretched a lot in Yarl's Wood but in prison, it was really structured, there was time for work, there's time for education, people moving about doing stuff and gardening, keeping themselves busy but in Yarl's Wood it wasn't like this, it was just a small space, with people just packed into the one place. In prison, you have an idea of how long you're going to be there and then you work towards your release but in Yarl's Wood, you have no idea, you don't know how long it's going to last, you don't know that there's another life outside...'

(Katherine, mother, detained in women's section, Yarl's Wood)

12. Outcomes and post detention issues

At the time of this research Home Office guidance stated that 'detention must be used sparingly, and for the shortest period necessary' (UKBA, 2009, p.5). Concerns (HMIP 2010) have been expressed that of the families that were detained in Yarl's Wood previously, half of them were subsequently released, calling into question the need to detain them in the first place.

Of the 32 families included in this study only seven (22%) of them were removed from the UK, two were still being detained at the time of analysing their case files, leaving 23 (72%) of the families being released. This rate of release is higher than the 50% quoted by the HMIP (2010) report but reflects the fact that for families to take part in this research study, they needed to be living in the community after release so that they could be interviewed about their experiences.

The families were either released on bail or after being granted temporary admission. Some families were electronically tagged, whereas others were

not; some families were requested to report on a daily basis after release whereas others had to report weekly or less. For many of the mothers who were tagged upon release, the restricted hours which they were allowed to leave their accommodation in affected their ability to take their children to see family or engage in other activities in the evenings. Liliane explained how it had affected her and her children:

'I need to stay at home from 7 until 10 o'clock (pm) and in the mornings 6 o'clock until 8 o'clock in the morning. I am in prison. I cannot go anywhere. Like this Christmas, I don't have my husband here, I can't meet my friend somewhere, I stay just home. We need to stay just here, I can't go to another place. Why? I didn't do nothing...I never see this...I am not a criminal. They put a tag on someone if he was in prison, and they give him conditions and they put him a tag. But me I never go to prison. Why they put me a tag? Why they put me a tag? Why? ...[pause]...I can't believe that. This is a prison for me and my children. It gives me just a second for them to go to school. After school they need to stay at home. A year now.'

(Liliane, mother of three children, aged three, nine and 15)

12.1. Housing and belongings

Many of the families were able to return to their previous address after being released from detention but for some of the families, they had been in immigration detention for so many weeks that their accommodation had been re-allocated and this meant that they were unable to return to the same home or community they had lived in previously. Not only did many of the families lose their accommodation, they also lost belongings in the process of being detained. One mother, for example, who was detained for about nine weeks with her 16-month-old child, had to live in bed and breakfast accommodation after being released as her previous property had been re-allocated. She lost all her belongings and the council told her that they had been destroyed when the property was re-allocated. Others lost property when they were released

from Yarl's Wood as they left bags there, unable to transport both their luggage and their children back to their accommodation. One mother, for example, was released with three bags and a toddler, without a pushchair. A friend eventually collected her bags from Yarl's Wood on her behalf.

Some families also experienced practical difficulties in their accommodation after their release, such as problems with heating, rotting windows and a broken fridge and washing machine⁵. Some families also experienced on-going financial difficulties; one mother was receiving vouchers from the Red Cross Refugee Support Unit as she was destitute after her release. Many children eventually returned to their previous schools but some were not able to because they had either been moved to a different area after their release or because their school places had been reallocated.

12.2. Making sense of being in immigration detention

During our interviews with children and mothers for the study, many of the participants appeared to be trying to make sense of the experience by asking general questions about the immigration system and the purpose of what had happened to them:

'Researcher: What about the way it [detention] made you feel?

Sevak: Mysterious. Because I didn't know if they would take us again. Why would they keep us in England for so long, and then put us in there [the detention centre]?

Kima: Yeah, they might as well send us back to your country, instead of bringing us and taking us in there'.

(Sevak, age 12 and Kima, age nine)

'I just want to say that someone should be investigating what people are doing, are the jobs good, something like that [meaning at Yarl's

⁵ Applicants who have been refused asylum in this situation don't have a right to work and are generally dispersed outside of the London and south east regions to accommodation designated by the Home Office, unless they have a private address to reside at.

Wood and Immigration], are they allowed to lock people up in some detention centre, or I don't know, the Queen might solve it or something, I don't know.'

(Sylvie, age nine)

As this professional commented, many children theorise about their time in detention, wondering what they had done wrong to be sent there:

'For the children a big question is why are we here? What have we done wrong? And the simple reason for a lot of children is we must have done something wrong, we must be bad people, bad people go to prison, evil people go to prison.'

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl's Wood)

12.3. Long-term effects of detention on mental health

The most common experience of the families after their release from detention, recorded in the case files and based on the views of the parents and professionals working with them, was the on-going and persistent effect their period in detention had on their mental and emotional health. Parents' and children's health problems were often so severe as to warrant professional intervention from psychiatrists, psychotherapists and counsellors and members of CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) teams. Of the families released in our sample, about 70% of the children and parents had on-going mental health difficulties.

Several of these families reported how their children – who were doing well and had been happy at school previously – were now finding it hard to settle at school. One mother, for example, who was detained for four weeks (for the second time) with her eight-year-old child, said that her daughter was not doing well at school and was very anxious. She said that her daughter was very frightened and would run away every time there was a knock at the door. The mother herself was also feeling very depressed. She went to see her GP

who had referred the child for counselling and for both of them to be assessed by a psychiatrist.

Another mother, who was detained with her two teenage sons for three months, reported being very concerned about one of her sons who, she said, was falling behind at school as a result of the detention, and was also showing a lot of aggression and anger recently. Mary, who we interviewed for the study, felt strongly that her two daughters had lost some skills since being in detention:

‘Since we were in detention, they’ve forgotten everything, what they used to know, it’s not there anymore.’

(Mary, mother)

Several teaching staff from schools outside the detention centre had also reported witnessing deterioration in the children’s behaviour in the school environment, behaviour that they had not presented previously. One family, for example, who had been detained for seven months, reported that their very young child was now ‘having trouble’ at school since the period in detention. His father described how his child had acted out of character when he was ‘aggravated by a teacher when told to do something and slapped her’ and said that the detention experience had been a ‘devastating’ one for his son and the rest of the family. The father also said that the children were all very frightened since their period in detention and were having bad dreams about police officers. The school was providing extra support for the children and a referral had been made to CAMHS for them. Their mother was also receiving psychiatric intervention and the father was referred for counselling but found it hard to get help for himself given his caring responsibilities.

Another family that had been separated during a period of detention (and had previously been detained together), experienced a dramatic change in the children’s behaviour post-detention. Their Children’s Society case records

report that the family were all anxious, sad, depressed and frightened since their period in detention and were finding it hard to trust any professionals. They had been allocated a social worker and a family support worker but the professionals were finding it hard to engage with the family as the children did not want to talk to them. To help give them more support, a multi-disciplinary meeting was held at the school and brief reports were given on the four children.

One child was reported to be lacking in confidence and was given a mentor at school; his school report said that he was reluctant to talk about his experiences but he was displaying angry behaviour, getting into spats in the playground and kept asking why he was hated so much. The school felt that there had been a progressive change in the behaviour of the younger sibling since returning from being detained. For example, they said that he had started to take things without asking and was being a bit 'rough' in the playground.

Another child's school reported that 'he is not the boy we know' since returning from detention; he had become more boisterous but at the same time was reluctant to speak about his experiences with any of his peer group. His sister was reported to be very withdrawn by the professionals who came into contact with her. She and her mother were seeing a psychotherapist for on-going mental health issues. A CAMHS team later diagnosed the child to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; she was having frequent nightmares and was thought to be self-harming.

12.4. Fear and uncertainty

Of the 10 mothers and 10 children we spoke to for the qualitative stage of the study, the majority referred to the fear that they experienced now they were back in the community, fear of anyone in uniforms and of people knocking on their door, in case they were being re-detained. This mother explained how they were all living in fear since the two periods in detention:

'And it's scary sometimes. But now if someone comes and just knock the door, boom-boom-boom, they [the children] run away straight away here from the balcony "Mummy, I think it's immigration come back again." You know...sometimes in the morning I lock my door in the balcony because I am scared because they could run away in the balcony, they [the children] can run away from the balcony, yeah, they can jump down, I'm scared for that, and the same with Patrick, and Patrick said: "I need to try and kill myself." Yeah...he needs to "kill me Mummy, by myself" [clarifies in French] se suicider [to kill oneself]" Ah...with the situation for now, I don't know. I just pray. For now, I think again for my life, what tomorrow come for me, or after tomorrow come for me, because now I am in prison. For this moment I don't think again for my future. Tomorrow comes, what can I do? For this moment I just think immigration, I don't know. Here or tomorrow in the morning, they will come and knock again on my door, boom-boom-boom, you know, I can't think again for the future.'

(Liliane, mother of three children)

Mary's two daughters were having nightmares on a frequent basis and gave vivid descriptions of them, narratives characterised by fear:

'Alison: I'm going to tell you my worst nightmare! There's a scary lady following me and Sarah, yeah. I have that dream nearly every day and it's the same dream. It's someone, very scared; I don't know who it is.

Sarah: Can I tell you my dream? I haven't told this for a year. It was in my last place, someone was following me...witches.

Alison: We went into this restaurant and we went into someone's house for a party and then someone locked the door and everyone in the party got stuck and no one could get out. And everyone was stuck, we couldn't come out. He'd thrown the door, and everyone couldn't come out. That was my badest one!

Sarah: Let me tell you this one –we were going to a restaurant, we slept there and then we ate and then a bad person who followed us into our house and then he wanted to kill everyone in the restaurant and he followed us everywhere; he was using his gun – he nearly got you mum, and me, and everyone. That was one of my scariest one...

Alison: I have bad dreams every day, sometimes good dreams. My dreams are so scary.'

(Alison, age six and Sarah, age eight)

While some of the young people and a small number of the mothers were able to make plans for the future, by starting college courses, for example, many of the mothers we spoke to told us how they had been left with physical ailments and mental health difficulties that were making it very difficult to care for their children. Many spoke of their feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness after being released and fear for an uncertain future. Alison's narrative sums up many of the families' experiences:

'Once you get out, you think you would go back to normal but you don't, it's not like it will go away, all the things that have happened to you, the children still come to me and sleep in my room and say they're scared, saying mummy we're having nightmares. You're here but you're still not sure what's going to happen tomorrow, they may come here tomorrow, they never say when they are coming. When I came out of detention, I felt like I didn't have the will to live anymore; I came out and I used to sit down on my bed and every time I wanted the end of my life, I wanted to die so much; the first time I went into detention and I came out, I had a social worker and I used to go counselling and they said you don't need to give up, you need to carry on, you mustn't feel like it's the end of the world and I said I will do it for Alison and Sarah and I started to go to college but after I was in detention again, I went back for one day and I felt like I can't carry on, I have too much, as much as I'd like to, I'm not in the position to do anything else right

now, I felt like my whole life had come to a stop. I go for counselling, I talk about the past and they say you need to look forwards; you need to be positive and need to do all of this. But I came to realise that no matter how I think everything will be positive, well it's not because I don't feel safe; when I go to counselling I feel safe but when I come out of that room, I go back to normality, this is my life, I can't do anything . When I came out of detention, I felt as if that's it now; even up to now, I'm not doing it for me, I'm doing it for Alison and Sarah, I don't have the will to live anymore, because I'm scared, every day of my life I'm scared...'

(Mary, mother)

13. Detention and immigration policy

During the interviews families spoke about their views on a range of issues related to detention and immigration processes, including which factors influenced their decisions to come to the UK and their views on returning 'home'. This section outlines the key findings from families and practitioners.

13.1. Coming to the UK

The vast majority of the families in this research reported that they had come to the UK as a result of experiences of violence in their country of origin. Some parents had reported fleeing their country of origin because of civil war there or because of their husband's or other relatives' political activities that had resulted in the deaths of their partners or other family members, and with threats on their own lives. Other parents had reported coming to the UK after experiencing sexual abuse and domestic violence within their families. One mother and her older daughter had said they had been raped in front of her other children, another woman said she had been tortured and then raped by her husband. Several mothers reported having experienced female genital mutilation (FGM) in their countries of origin and feared for their own daughters if they were to return. One age disputed young person said she was a victim

of trafficking. Another woman reported that she had been brought to the UK by someone else:

‘I didn’t plan to come to Britain, I did not know where, somebody brought me to Britain.’

(Severine, mother)

Although we asked the families about which factors influenced their decision to come to the UK, this question implies a degree of prior knowledge of the UK, planning and foresight. Events that resulted in families coming to the UK were wide ranging, however, of the families in this research, their decision to leave their country of origin was generally a response to a traumatic and threatening situation. According to most of the families in our research sample, safety and sanctuary and a better life for their children were uppermost in their minds when arriving in the UK; they did not have prior knowledge of the UK welfare or immigration systems and these did not, therefore, influence their decision to come to the UK, if it was their decision at all. As these professionals commented:

‘Quite a lot of people come into the country with agents and quite often, from my experience, they don’t know which country they are coming to. When people are fleeing their countries, they often do not have that level of control over which country they go to.’

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

‘If people are desperate to get out of a situation where they fear for their lives or things are so awful that they can’t feed their families or for whatever reason they’re coming, this doesn’t affect them, they do not look at detention. It doesn’t stop people coming; most people don’t even know what the immigration rules are when they come.’

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

13.2. Returning 'home'

As we have already seen, the majority of families in our research sample were leading well established lives in the UK when they were detained; many of the children were either born in the UK or had spent many formative years in the country and therefore identified themselves as British. Returning 'home' for the majority of families in our research sample either filled them with fear for their lives or presented them with a completely uncertain future in an alien place. As Christine explained:

'If I went home, where would I go? My auntie's here. There would be violence there, killing of young girls like me....'

(Christine, mother of four-year-old boy)

Patrick identified himself as British first and African second and explained how difficult it would be for him to return to a country he could hardly remember:

'I've lived here for more than half of my life and I have kind of forgotten how to speak my own language a little bit; I can still understand but speaking is hard so I would probably say I'm more British than African but I'm still African and proud of where I came from but 'cos I'm so used to here now, I have friends here, I had friends there but I can't remember them anymore, I have friends here and I'm doing very well and everything's going OK for me right now so I see that I am more part of here now cos everything's here now, there's nothing for me there...'

(Patrick, age 15)

13.3. Absconding

UKBA guidance on detention and temporary release sets out the factors to be taken into account when considering the need for initial or continual detention. One of these factors is 'any evidence of previous absconding' (UKBA, 2009, p.12). Limited research has been carried out in this area but the available

evidence suggests that families are unlikely to abscond if they have the welfare of their children to consider (Cole, 2003; Amnesty International, 2005).

As has already been explained, the vast majority of the families in this research had been living in the UK for many years before being detained, had settled lives with their children and reported that they had not considered absconding. As this mother explained:

‘I have loads of family ties! Why would I run away? I don’t have any time for that! My son is in nursery now. I wouldn’t run away, it’d be too difficult.’

(Christine, mother of four-year-old son)

And as this professional said about the risk of families absconding:

‘The basic principle is that especially with children, the most important thing is to meet the welfare needs of your children, to make sure they are safe, they go to school and they are learning and if you abscond or go underground, you can’t do any of that. Families need services and they need to remain connected....also they know they’re not going to get that resolution or outcome if they go underground. The majority of families we work with have complied with their reporting conditions...’

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

13.4. A detention-free system

The professionals that participated in this research saw the key to improving the system as having a fairer and more efficient immigration and asylum system, which they thought might prevent some families from resisting removal and help some families consider alternatives such as voluntary returns. As this professional said:

‘Children don’t need to be detained; families don’t need to be detained. If families had access to good legal representation so that their cases were looked at in a fair way from the outset, many of them would perhaps not feel the need to keep trying again, you know different things, if they felt that they had been treated fairly, then by the time they did get to the end of the process if it was a no then they might think well it has actually been dealt with fairly. But if they get to that point when they are being sent back and they feel their situation hasn’t been understood or they haven’t had legal representation, then they are going to try and resist removal. Some of them are terrified of being removed, they have genuine fears and genuine concerns that are not being taken seriously, so I think take them seriously, treat it seriously when they are in the community and maybe people are more likely to take up the voluntary returns with assistance; it’s about treating people as human beings really.’

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

14. Conclusion and recommendations

‘Whatever things are, whatever colour the walls are, it is still a prison. If it was a five star hotel and people were locked in it, it would still be a prison. And they [children] still see people dragged out and still see desperately upset people, they still don’t know what’s going to happen to them, they still have not had the opportunity to say goodbye to their friends or make arrangements. You can’t make that alright, I don’t think. It’s not how children can be treated. Nothing can make it OK.’

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl’s Wood)

Most of the families in our sample have said that they fled from their country of origin after experiencing severe violence, such as the murder of their husband or other close relative for political reasons or for threats on their own lives, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, torture and rape. According

to their accounts, the vast majority of the families detained for immigration control are already very vulnerable and have sought sanctuary, refuge and asylum in the UK.

Most of the families in our research sample who were detained for the purpose of immigration control had been in the UK for several years. They had built lives in Britain, establishing new relationships and support networks as well as re-establishing relationships with members of their family who have obtained legal status in the UK. Many of the children were either born in the UK or had spent many formative years in the country and therefore identified themselves as British. Returning 'home' for the majority of families in our sample either filled them with fear for their lives or presented them with a completely uncertain future in an alien place. One of the criticisms of the asylum and immigration system is a failure to actively address the fears that many asylum seekers have about returning home (Centre for Social Justice, 2008; Independent Asylum Commission, 2008). The fact that many asylum seekers do not feel that these fears have been properly addressed by the determination process presents a barrier to them considering returning to their countries of origin voluntarily following the refusal of their legal applications.

The quality of decision-making in asylum cases continues to be an area of concern as outlined in a number of studies: this can be compromised by time limits, varying quality in asylum interviewing practice, selective use of country of origin information or other evidence, and lack of accountability for decision making (Tsangarides, 2010; UNHCR, 2006; Baldaccini, 2004; Smith, 2004). The UKBA must seek to improve the quality of decision making in family cases as well as enabling families to access good quality legal advice throughout the determination process in order to ensure that their protection needs are consistently met. This will enable greater confidence in the decisions made and a greater proportion of families will be in a position to consider returning to their countries of origin without the need for enforcement action.

Despite government guidance (UKBA, 2009) stating that detention should only be used sparingly and for the shortest possible time, our findings showed that many families were detained for long periods of time, despite having significant mental and physical health difficulties. Some had been detained previously and had been living in the community for months or even years before being detained again.

The findings show that the majority of the 79 children and parents in the sample were detrimentally affected by a period in immigration detention and experienced deterioration in both their physical and mental health – a loss of appetite, weight loss, hair loss, sleeplessness and nightmares were all commonly reported symptoms. Some children and many parents experienced severe depression in detention, which they reported led them to self-harming behaviour and even attempts to commit suicide.

Previous governments have argued that it is preferable to detain children with their parents rather than splitting families and detaining one or both parents. However, nearly half of the families whose case files were analysed had experienced some form of separation as a result of being detained. A few families were split during the process of being detained for the simple reason that not all the family were at home when the immigration officers arrived; others continued to be separated from their children when they were transferred to an immigration centre from prison. For these mothers, prison life was preferable as contact with their children became more spasmodic after going into immigration detention.

Many of the families who were included in the research were in receipt of intensive social work and psychological service provision as a result of their traumatic experiences, both prior to arriving in the UK and during their period in detention. In almost all the examples, the mental health of the children – and many of their parents – had deteriorated since being detained. This was

evident from the children's behaviour and lack of progress at school, for example, revealed in the family's case records and verbal accounts. It appears, from these examples, that the resources required to support and treat families who have spent periods in detention are enormous. The need for such high-level services inevitably places pressure on the finances and resources of the local authorities in which families live post-detention. Over 70% of the families in our sample were released into the community, leaving their local authority to take responsibility for supporting both the children and their parents. This sometimes required intensive support if the family reached crisis point, in order to meet the needs resulting from a period in immigration detention.

Contrary to the paramountcy principle - the central premise of the Children Act 1989⁶, the evidence presented in this report suggests that the welfare of children subject to the UK asylum system and detained in an immigration removal centre is not paramount but is secondary to the government's aim to control immigration. As one of the professionals we interviewed concluded from her work with children and parents in immigration detention:

'The main challenge is that these children in immigration detention sit outside of all mainstream structures and systems and processes that are in place to safeguard and meet the welfare needs of children....these children are treated as children subject to immigration control first and foremost and secondly as children. It's like normal processes don't ever seem to quite apply in the same way. When we advocate for processes to be applied in the same way and say this isn't what would normally happen in the community, the response is always that "it's different isn't it?" because they're in this kind of bubble that sits outside all of that.'

(Professional working with children and families in Yarl's Wood)

⁶ Section 1 of the Children Act 1989 provides that when a court determines any question with respect to the upbringing of a child, the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration.

We end with a description of being detained in Yarl's Wood from a nine-year-old girl:

'Well, I'll say one more thing okay, in being in Yarl's Wood, nobody should be there; Yarl's Wood should only be for people that are bad, who stay there for years, with proper kind of problem, they should be in there not us, because the people that are in there are good people and stuff like that, they really want to go home, I don't know why they keep on locking people, and locking the doors, you know everything is like closed, you can't even open one single door.'

(Sylvie, age nine)

Recommendations

General principles

- There should be no attempts to separate families in order to detain parents without their children because of the detrimental impact on children and families.
- Appropriate mechanisms should be developed for the UKBA to take into account the views of children subject to enforcement action on all decisions which affect them. This should be planned and facilitated in an age-appropriate manner, in a way which safeguards and promotes children's welfare. Lessons should be drawn from other social care models including care planning for looked-after children.

Access to legal representation

- All families should have access to good-quality publicly funded legal representation from an early stage in their claim, and throughout the determination process to ensure they have had a fair chance to have their claims considered. The frontloading model trialled in the Solihull Early Legal

Advice Pilot should be rolled out for all family cases across the UK, to ensure more sustainable decision-making and long term cost benefits.⁷

Enforcement and ensured returns

- The UKBA should outline clear criteria for how decisions will be made about whether a medical need or vulnerability makes a family unsuitable for a particular ensured return option.
- If enforcement action is used, the UKBA should ensure that the time and number of officers involved in any arrest of families takes full account of the particular circumstances of the family and considers the impact on children to prevent any harm.
- Children and parents should be provided with welfare support throughout the ensured returns process including access to specialist mental and physical health care services and emotional support.

Accommodation facilities

- The UKBA must develop effective processes to monitor the health and welfare of children to be held in open and pre-departure accommodation.
- The UKBA should set out clear protocols for managing the risks of harm to children of the ensured returns process, including witnessing instances of self-harm and child protection issues.
- Families need to be given privacy within ensured return accommodation facilities that allow for their rights and dignity to be respected.
- Parents need to be able to exercise control to meet their children's welfare, dietary and medical needs and be supported to ensure their children's safety.
- Families should be enabled to access legal representation from accommodation facilities including continued contact with existing legal representatives prior to being moved into ensured return accommodation facilities.

⁷ Evaluation of the Solihull Pilot 2007:
http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/137/Solihull_Pilot.pdf

- Families should continue to receive financial support until they reach the end of the asylum process to ensure that they are able to provide for their family and meet their needs, including being able to buy phone cards for their mobile phones, necessities for their family, access travel to visit friends and family or other support networks.

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The Children's Society wants to create a society where children are valued, respected and happy. We are committed to helping disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, including children in care, or those who have run away. We give a voice to disabled children so their needs are met in ways suited to them. Through our work, young carers find time away from their responsibilities, and young refugees have a chance to rebuild their lives in new communities.

Children are at the heart of all we do, and we want to build a better childhood for every child.



We are grateful to all the children, young people and families who took the time to share their stories with us.

By Abigail Knight, Research Unit, The Children's Society

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