

# Just Comment

A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education & The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

## Debunking the Myths about Asylum Seekers

### Myth 1 - Boat People are Queue Jumpers

**Fact:** In Iraq and Afghanistan, there are no queues for people to jump. Australia has no diplomatic representation in these countries and supports the International coalition of nations who continue to oppose these regimes and support sanctions against them. Therefore, there is no standard refugee process where people wait in line to have their applications considered. Few countries between the Middle East and Australia are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and as such asylum seekers are forced to continue to travel to another country to find protection.

People who are afraid for their lives are fleeing from the world's most brutal regimes including the Taliban in Afghanistan and Sadaam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq. Antonio Domini, Head of UN Humanitarian Program in Afghanistan, states that Afghanistan is one of the most difficult places in the world in which to survive.

### Myth 2 – Asylum Seekers are Illegal

**Fact:** This is untrue. Under Australian Law and International Law a person is entitled to make an application for refugee asylum in another country when they allege they are escaping persecution. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."

People who arrive on our shores without prior authorisation from Australia, with no documents, or false documents are not illegal. They are asylum seekers – a legal status under International Law. Many Asylum Seekers are forced to leave their countries in haste and are unable to access appropriate documentation. In many cases oppressive authorities actively prevent

normal migration processes from occurring. 'Illegals' are people who overstay their visas. The vast majority of these in Australia are from western countries, including 5,000 British tourists.

### Myth 3 - Australia Already Takes Too Many Refugees

**Fact:** Australia receives relatively few refugees by world standards. In 2001 Australia will receive only 12 000 refugees through its humanitarian program. This number has remained static for three years, despite the ever-increasing numbers of refugees' worldwide. Australia accepted 20 000 refugees each year at the beginning of the 1980's.

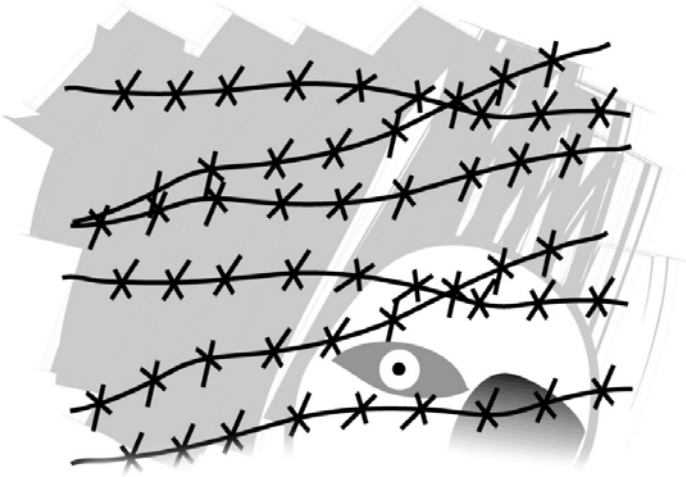
According to Amnesty International 1 in every 115 people on earth are refugees, and a new refugee is created every 21 seconds. Refugees re-settle all over the world. However, the distribution of refugees across the world is very unequal.

- **Tanzania** hosts one refugee for every 76 Tanzanian people (**1:76**)
- **Britain** hosts one refugee for every 530 British people. (**1:530**)
- **Australia** hosts one refugee for every 1583 Australian people. (**1:1583**)

### Myth 4 – We're Being Swamped by Hordes of Boat People

**Fact:** 300 000 refugees arrived in Europe to seek asylum last year. In contrast, 4174 reached Australia by boat or plane. In 2000, Iran and

Pakistan each hosted over a million Afghan refugees. The real burden of assisting refugees is borne in the main by the world's poorest nations.



### Myth 5 - They're Not Real Refugees Anyway

**Fact:** 97% of applicants from Iraq and 93% of applicants from Afghanistan seeking asylum without valid visas in Australia in 1999 were recognised as genuine refugees. Therefore, under Australian law they were found to be eligible to stay in Australia. Generally, 84% of all asylum seekers are found to be legitimate refugees and are able to stay in Australia.

### Myth 6 – They Must Be ‘Cashed up’ to Pay People Smugglers

**Fact:** It is alleged that people who have the resources to pay people smugglers could not possibly be genuine refugees. The UNHCR disputes claims about ‘cashed up’ refugees saying that payments made to people smugglers in fact range from \$4000 - \$5000 AUD. In reality, many families and communities pool their resources in an attempt to send their relatives to safety. People smuggling is a crime that the international community needs to combat. However, this does not negate the legitimacy of asylum seekers’ claims, nor their need to seek refuge. The international community, in eradicating people smuggling, is also required to address the growing numbers of asylum seekers throughout the world. As a Western nation, Australia has a role to play.

### Myth 7 - There is no Alternative to Mandatory Detention

**Fact:** Asylum seekers claims need to be assessed for legitimacy. Australia is the only Western country that mandatorily detains asylum seekers whilst their claims are being heard. Asylum seekers are not criminals and detention should be minimal. At a cost of \$104 a day per head the policy of detention is very expensive. Community based alternatives to mandatory detention can be found internationally and within the current Australian parole system.

A select Committee of the NSW Parliament has costed alternatives to incarceration including home detention and transitional housing. The average cost of community based programs are (per person, per day): Parole: \$5.39. Probation: \$3.94. Home Detention: \$58.83. These options are clearly more economically efficient, and much more humane.

Sweden receives similar numbers of asylum seekers as Australia, despite having less than half the population. Detention is only used to establish a persons identity and to conduct criminal screening. Most detainees are released within a very short time, particularly if they have relatives or friends living in Sweden. Of the 17,000 asylum seekers currently in Sweden 10,000 reside outside the detention centres. Children are only detained for the minimum possible time (a maximum of 6 days).

### Myth 8 - If We Let Them In, They'll Take Our Benefits

**Fact:** A common misconception is that refugees arriving in Australia will ‘steal’ the entitlements of Australians. The reality is that refugees, like migrants, create demand for goods and services, thus stimulating the economy and generating growth and employment. A recent UCLA study has shown that unauthorised immigration boosts the US economy by \$800 billion per year.

**Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education**  
90 Underwood Rd  
Homebush, NSW AUSTRALIA 2140

**Phone:** 61.2.9764 1330 **Fax:** 61.2.9764 1743  
**Email:** [zeena@erc.org.au](mailto:zeena@erc.org.au)  
**Website:** [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)