

# LGBTQI+ people's experiences of immigration detention: A pilot study

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No Pride  
In Detention

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## **! Content warning:**

Some people may find the topics discussed in this report triggering. This report includes descriptions of homophobia, transphobia, verbal and physical abuse and violence.

# Foreword

**By Leila Zadeh, Executive Director of Rainbow Migration**

Around the world, LGBTQI+ people face criminalisation, violence and harassment on account of their sexual orientation, gender identity/expression and sex characteristics. Those who escape persecution and seek asylum in the UK should be welcomed with compassion and support, but instead they are met with an increasingly hostile asylum system.

In our 2016 report with Stonewall, [No Safe Refuge](#), we shone a light on one of the darkest corners of our asylum system: the UK's immigration detention estate and how appallingly LGBTQI+ people are treated inside it. We found that LGBTQI+ people were harassed and abused by others in detention, and discriminated against by staff who failed to keep them safe from harm. Healthcare for LGBTQI+ people – and especially trans people – was inadequate, and the dangerous environment they were trapped in had serious and long-lasting effects on their mental health.

In September 2016, the government introduced its [Adults at Risk in Immigration Detention](#) policy, recognising that trans and intersex people are particularly at risk of harm in detention and should not be detained in most circumstances. But despite the evidence of harm suffered, they did not include other LGBQ+ people in this policy.

We have long argued that all LGBQ+ people should also be considered at risk in detention – a recommendation supported by the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2019. We have also been part of a wider movement calling for a 28-day time limit on all immigration detention, as the UK remains the only country in Europe where people can be deprived of their freedom indefinitely for immigration purposes.

The initial findings in this report show that these calls remain as urgent as ever. LGBTQI+ people being detained for more than 6 months while suffering verbal and physical abuse is unacceptable and should be unthinkable in a country that prides itself on promoting human rights and LGBTQI+ equality.

We find ourselves now at a turning point for immigration detention in the UK. After several years of decline from its peak in 2015, the number of people entering immigration detention is rising again. Commitments made by previous governments to reduce the use of detention have been abandoned, with plans announced to re-open at least two detention centres that were closed in the last decade.

Numerous studies and parliamentary inquiries have highlighted the damage that immigration detention inflicts on people. The government's own statistics show just how unnecessary immigration detention is, with the vast majority of people being released into the community rather than removed from the UK.

This government urgently needs to end the use of immigration detention and invest in community-based solutions to resolving people's immigration status that do not carry the same human cost. But while detention remains part of our asylum and immigration system, it is vital that a time limit is introduced and everyone who is at even greater risk of harm in detention – including the whole LGBTQI+ community – is recognised as such and no longer detained.

**Join our No Pride In Detention campaign today and help end LGBTQI+ detention.**



Leila Zadeh,  
Executive Director of Rainbow Migration



# Executive summary

This report sets out the findings of a pilot study into LGBTQI+ experiences of immigration detention in the UK since September 2016. Five members of the LGBTQI+ community (three gay men and two non-binary people) were interviewed about their experiences in detention. Four of the participants had been held in Immigration Removal Centres for several months, and one in a Short-Term Holding Facility for 48 hours.

The project set out to explore whether there have been significant changes in the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in detention since the last research on this topic in 2015-16 and the introduction of the [Adults at Risk in Immigration Detention](#) policy in September 2016 (which recognises the risk of harm to trans and intersex people in detention).

The findings indicate that detention centres continue to be very dangerous places for LGBTQI+ people. In particular:

- ♦ Participants feared being 'out' while in detention and felt a need to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, they were not always able to do this despite trying to, so they remained exposed to the risk of bullying and abuse.
- ♦ Participants experienced verbal and physical homophobic abuse from other people held in detention, including from individuals they were forced to share locked rooms with at night.
- ♦ Participants' experiences of detention centre staff were varied. While some found staff to be a source of help and support, others reported:
  - Verbal homophobic abuse from staff that left them feeling ashamed and depressed;
  - Being afraid to report instances of homophobic bullying to staff;
  - Inaction from staff in the face of escalating homophobic bullying;
  - Misgendering by staff and the recording of incorrect information in participants' paperwork.
- ♦ Participants experienced worsening mental health and delayed access to mental health support while in detention, as well as being put in situations that resembled past traumatic experiences.
- ♦ Being held in detention and trying to remain in the closet made it hard for participants to keep in contact with or seek support from LGBTQI+ community groups and networks, as did the confiscation of their personal mobile phones. The difficulties this presented were mitigated for some participants by the fact that LGBTQI+ people within detention formed their own informal communities of support to share information and advice.

Overall, the findings suggest that all LGBTQI+ people (not just trans and intersex people) are at particular risk of harm in immigration detention and should be included within the [Adults at Risk in Immigration Detention](#) policy.

# Introduction



LGBTQI+ people come to the UK seeking refuge from persecution based on their sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or sex characteristics (**SOGIESC**). However, many find themselves detained in 'Immigration Removal Centres' (**IRCs**) or 'Short-Term Holding Facilities' (**STHFs**) suffering harassment, bullying and poor mental health (Bachmann, 2016).

In 2016, the [Adults at Risk in Immigration Detention](#) policy was introduced, defining which "conditions or experiences" indicate that a person "will be particularly vulnerable to harm in detention" and creating a presumption that such people should not be detained (Home Office, 2021).

The list includes being a trans or intersex person, however other LGBTQ+ people are not included despite evidence that they experience significant harassment from other people in detention and staff working in IRCs.

The last specific project on this subject seven years ago was the [No Safe Refuge](#) report published jointly by Rainbow Migration and Stonewall (Bachmann, 2016; further discussed in Singer, 2021). That research showed that LGBTQI+ people in detention face violence from others in detention and discrimination from staff, with serious effects on their mental and physical health. They also faced specific obstacles in evidencing their claims for asylum.

Many felt that they had to hide their SOGIESC in detention to stay safe, and had difficulties accessing social media and contacting former partners or the LGBTQI+ community for evidence and support.

This project set out to explore whether there have been any changes in the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in immigration detention since [No Safe Refuge](#) and since the [Adults at Risk](#) policy was introduced, both of which happened in 2016.

Studying current experiences of detention is methodologically challenging. Most research is conducted with people who have been released from detention, predominantly because of difficulties in negotiating access to detention sites. There was some important ethnographic research carried out in detention centres between 2009-2012, but this study did not explore gender identity/expression, sexual orientation and sex characteristics in detail (Bosworth, 2014). This is likely because many LGBTQI+ people are not visibly 'out' while in detention. Research with LGBTQI+ people currently in detention poses additional challenges related to participant safety – for example the risk of 'outing' participants in a hostile environment.

There is a significant body of scholarship that explores the experiences of people seeking asylum and people with refugee status (for example the work of the [Migration Observatory](#), e.g. Silverman et al., 2022), and work that focuses on LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum (for example the SOGICA project, e.g. Danisi et al., 2021).

However, since 2016 there has not been a project focused specifically on LGBTQI+ people's experiences of immigration detention in the UK.

In this context, the pilot study had the following aims:

**1. To investigate changes or continuities in LGBTQI+ people's experiences in detention since September 2016**

2. To explore recruitment strategies for a larger project about LGBTQI+ people's experiences in detention
3. To examine the possibility of participatory research with LGBTQI+ people currently held in detention
4. To explore the suitability of different creative methods for research about the experiences of LGBTQI+ people during and after detention

This report presents initial findings related to aim 1, focused on changes and continuities in LGBTQI+ people's experiences in detention since September 2016. This pilot study confirms that LGBTQI+ people continue to face serious harassment and abuse in immigration detention.

# Methodology and participants

The fieldwork for this project was carried out between July – December 2022. Five participants were interviewed (either in person or via Zoom or telephone), and one participant was interviewed a second time. Interviews were semi-structured and explored participants' experiences before, during and after being held in immigration detention in the UK. Participants were recruited via online and hard copy flyers distributed by LGBTQI+ asylum and immigration support organisations and professionals, and further circulated by participants or other LGBTQ+ community members interested in the research. All participants were offered an emotional support call with Rainbow Migration after taking part.

All participants had been detained in the UK at some time since September 2016. Four participants were held in Immigration Removal Centres for several months, and one participant had been held in a Short-Term Holding Facility at an

airport for 48 hours. These sites are collectively referred to in this report as 'detention centres'. All those detained in IRCs were held for between 3 and 7 months in the first instance, and one participant was detained a second time for a further 2 months. The average overall time spent in detention for participants held in IRCs was 6.25 months.

The people who took part were in a range of different circumstances in relation to their asylum claims, including participants still in the process of making an asylum claim, granted refugee status, and removed from the UK. Countries of origin have not been specified in this report because of the small sample size and risk of identification – instead, broad geographical areas of origin have been used.





Participants were from countries in East and West Africa, Central America, South Asia and South East Asia. All participants identified as male or non-binary. It was very difficult to recruit women participants to take part in the project, despite some interest from support groups involving women seeking asylum. The next stage of the project will involve working with participants over a longer period of time, with more participatory methods to help build trust with a wider range of participants.

The original project set out to interview only participants in the UK who were not currently held in detention. Over the course of the project, advice from support organisations, including third sector organisations, activist groups, therapists and lawyers fed into changes in the research design, which will also be used to shape the next phase of research.

Briefly, the pilot highlighted that the next phase of the project should be designed with multiple means of involvement for participants. First, online interviews enabled interviews to be conducted with participants who are no longer in the UK. Second, one participant requested the presence of a therapist in the research interview, to help facilitate the sharing of experiences which were traumatic in a safer space.

Finally, a contact from an organisation suggested that participants who wanted to share their experience could submit already existing documentation such as statements used in asylum claims, or other documents in which they have already discussed their experiences in immigration detention.

Documentary evidence was not used in this pilot but will be designed into the next phase of the research to enable people to participate in this way if they prefer.

**All names used in the report are pseudonyms.**

# Initial findings and analysis

The data collected for the pilot study highlighted the ongoing struggles that LGBTQI+ people face in their countries of origin and while seeking asylum in the UK. The analysis in this report focuses specifically on participants' experiences in immigration detention as they relate to their status as LGBTQI+ people.

## **“It’s not something you can hide forever”: Risks and fears of being ‘out’ in detention**

Echoing findings from previous research (Singer, 2021), participants reported feeling afraid to reveal their sexual orientation, and in the case of one participant, their gender identity. These fears were shared by participants with varied experiences of living openly as LGBTQI+. Even participants who had been living openly in the UK and participating in LGBTQI+ community life and relationships talked about their fears of openly expressing their gender identity and sexual orientation while held in detention.

When first living in the UK, Johnson did not seek out the LGBTQI+ community or any professional support because they felt ashamed and afraid after the homophobic abuse, trauma and grief they had experienced in their home country. Johnson fled to the UK from a country in South Asia after experiencing homophobic and transphobic abuse from family, and a violent homophobic attack in which their partner was killed. Johnson did not apply for asylum when they first arrived in the UK, as they did not know that they could apply based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Johnson identifies as non-binary, and did not initially reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation to staff or other people held in detention, because they were afraid about what would happen:

*“When they’ve taken me [into immigration detention] I was in big shock, I don’t know what to talk, what to tell, and I don’t know what’s going to happen... I’m in shock so that’s why I didn’t tell about my sexuality first because I was very worried what I say, I don’t want to hide my sexuality here but I didn’t tell anyone because I was so scared and I didn’t went to doctors also because I have very scared about doctors also on that time.”*

**Johnson (South Asia)**

Johnson was eventually approached by other LGBTQI+ people held in the detention centre, who offered support and advice. These connections and community support among people in detention are discussed in more detail below. Johnson did not explicitly ‘out’ themselves, but was recognised as someone who was LGBTQI+ by other community members. This was helpful in some ways, but highlights the challenge that LGBTQI+ people face in ‘hiding’ their gender identity and sexual orientation. In this instance, the result was community-forming, but such recognition by others also opened Johnson up to homophobic abuse, discussed later in the report.



Angelo entered the detention centre in a very different situation to Johnson. He too had experienced homophobic abuse in his country of origin in South East Asia, but had been part of a community of LGBTQI+ people in the UK before being detained. Angelo was confident in asserting his identity as a gay man, but nevertheless talked about the risks of presenting himself openly in this way in immigration detention:

*“There is no way I want to, you know, put the rainbow in my shoulder, you know, like shout it out loud, like hey I’m gay, there is no way, it’s not that sort of place, trust me it’s not, you don’t want, you don’t want to get in trouble, keep yourself for yourself.”*

**Angelo (South East Asia)**

Like Johnson, Angelo also found that others held in detention recognised him as gay, despite trying to “behave as straight as possible”.

Similarly, Usman talked about the challenges of ‘hiding’ his sexual orientation while in detention:

*“By the time you’re making some calls, the way you behave, the way you do some things, you make people around you to know who you are. Sometimes you don’t need to tell them. Uh huh. It’s not something you can hide forever. That’s how it works.”*

**Usman (West Africa)**

In some situations, participants confirmed their sexual orientation when asked by other people in detention, and this enabled them to make connections with others.

However, this again highlights the lack of control that LGBTQI+ people can have over the disclosure of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation while held in detention.

## “He spat on my face for being a gay”: Verbal and physical abuse from other people held in detention

The majority of participants faced discrimination or abuse while held in detention. Three participants were victims of direct verbal homophobic bullying, and two participants experienced attempted physical attacks from other people who were detained. Two participants were forced to share a room, which was locked overnight, with someone who subjected them to homophobic bullying, with one participant enduring repeated threats of violence culminating in a physical attack in their room.

Usman, who was a victim of homophobic abuse and violence in his country of origin in West Africa, experienced repeated homophobia from the man he shared a room with in detention:

*"When he realised, just foul language is just fucking gay, stupid gay man, all those stuffs was what he was telling me and he was able to talk to his friends about who I am...and the people are demanding what you are in a negative way.*

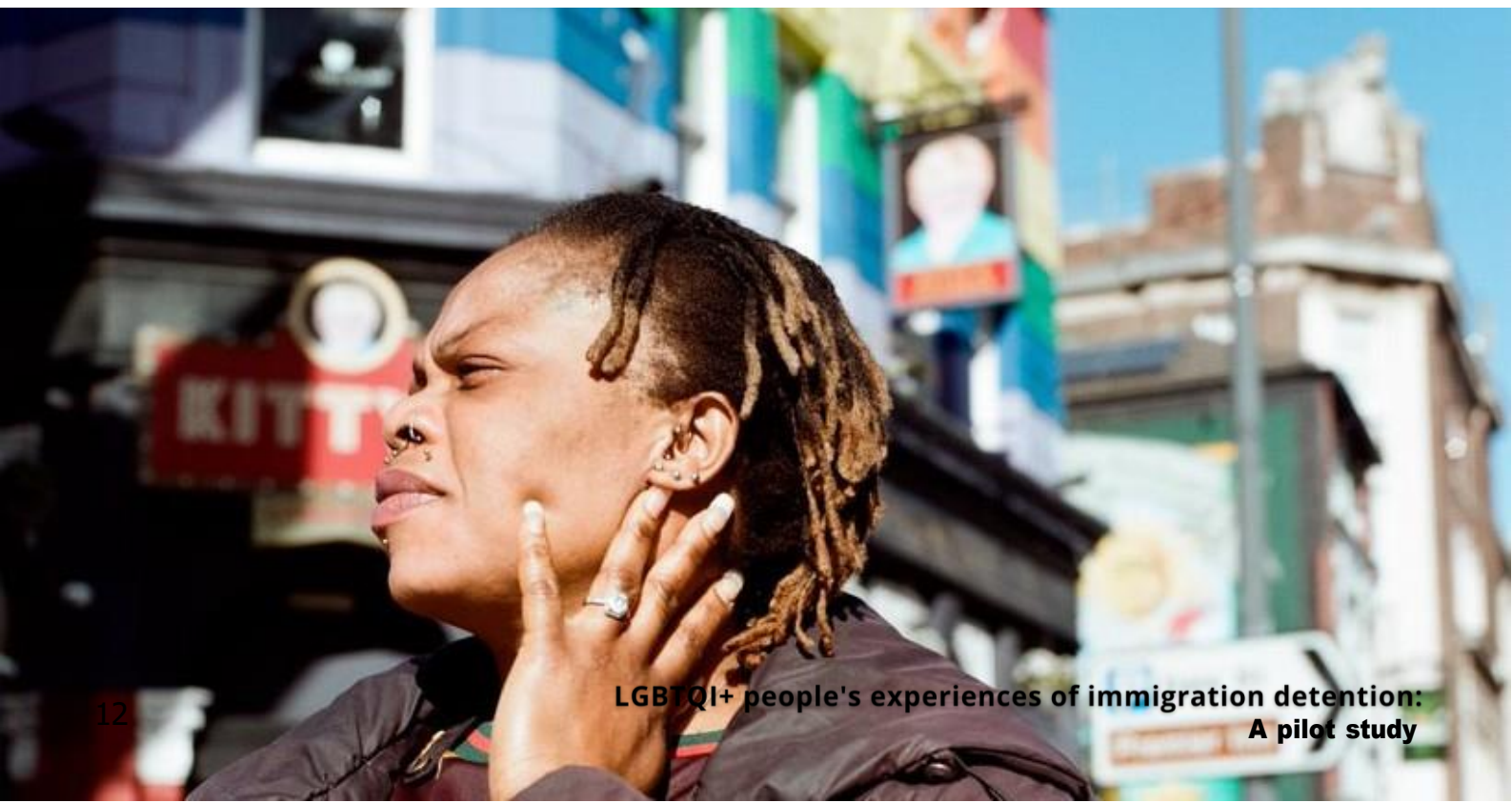
*He spat on my face, yeah. And I had to report him as well but I'd already, yeah, they couldn't do anything tangible. He spat on my face for being a gay."*

**Usman (West Africa)**

Usman reported the abuse, but was not moved until the situation had escalated to the point where the man attempted to physically attack him in their shared room. He threw a heavy object at Usman but thankfully missed. It was only at this point that Usman was removed from this dangerous room-sharing situation.

*"He has been threatening me all the while but that day he decided to do it himself with that weapon."*

**Usman (West Africa)**



Similarly Johnson, who was seeking asylum after very traumatic experiences of homophobic abuse and violence in South Asia, was subjected to homophobic bullying from the person he shared a room with:

*“My person in the room, my person in my cell he knows but he’s, he used to say it’s not good thing...he said it’s a sin for God. He used to tell about the God, God here how hates you, that’s why you’ve got all these troubles...you can’t do anything, I don’t know what to, I just stay listening to him but I didn’t say anything.”*

**Johnson (South Asia)**

Johnson and Usman, whose partners had been killed in homophobic attacks in their home countries, found themselves locked in rooms overnight with people who were abusive and hostile about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Usman, who lived with regular threats from the other person in his room, had to share a bunk bed with this person, despite complaining to officers about the threats.

These small locked rooms functioned as both sleeping spaces and toilets. Johnson, who identifies as non-binary, was so afraid in this situation that they tried not to use the toilet:

*“I was very scared because, and we have loo inside the room, living inside the room, so when he going to loo I need to watch him and I can’t use loo. I held so long because I was, I can’t strip in front of him...I hold...There’s only curtain for the loo. But there is, but I still scared to use that one.”*

**Johnson (South Asia)**

The accounts of verbal and physical abuse and fears about revealing LGBTQI+ status highlight the specific issues that LGBTQI+ people can face in detention. This was particularly acute for Johnson, who had experienced being locked in a room in their family home as part of the abuse that they had suffered.

Experiences of more general abuse and intimidation contributed to fears that participants had about revealing their sexual orientation or gender expression. Michael left his country of origin in East Africa because it was not possible for him to live openly as a gay man there.

Michael had not revealed to most other people in the detention centre that he was gay – the abuse that he received in detention was focused on his perceived poverty and appearance, including another person who was detained attempting to hit him.

*“They told me that I look so poor and they don’t think I will ever make it out of here, that they don’t feel that I will be able to meet up to the standard in the UK.”*

**Michael (East Africa)**

In this context, Michael did not want to risk the possibility of further bullying and intimidation from other people in the detention centre, so only revealed that he was gay to a very small number of people who he had built trust with:

*“I feel that this is a very personal lifestyle, so I don’t know how they will react towards it, and I don’t know if that should be some forms of stuff that they may use for bullying, so I just feel that it’s better for me to keep that private so that I may not end up pissing people off or I may not end up looking like a bad person in the faces of people.”*

**Michael (East Africa)**

In contrast to Johnson and Anonymous, one of the people who was supportive towards Michael was the person he shared a room with:

*“I was lucky enough to share a room with someone that was, you know, understanding... they were very supportive.”*

**Michael (East Africa)**

This meant that being locked in the room at night was a mixed experience for him. On the one hand, he found it isolating and difficult not to be able to move around or check on other people he had connections with. Nonetheless, it was the only place that he felt safe from the troubles he was experiencing in the communal areas:

*“The only safe place in there was the room, the room that I was in, so you know, except of being isolated, except from having this feeling of isolation, in there was a quite bit very safe, so you realise that when you are in there you have avoided a lot of trouble from other inmates.”*

**Michael (East Africa)**

Although these accounts from participants show quite different experiences of their locked rooms, they highlight the risks of harassment and abuse in detention in general. While Michael was ‘lucky’ that the person he shared a room with was not

homophobic, the safety of LGBTQI+ people should not be left to the ‘luck of the draw’. Michael’s worry about looking ‘like a bad person’ by being open about being gay highlights the role that detention centres can play in further marginalising LGBTQI+ people who have come to the UK seeking a life in which they can be themselves without fear of violence or intimidation.

These accounts of fear and harassment are particularly concerning in the context of the cramped conditions in Short-Term Holding Facilities, such as those at borders and airports, where many people may be held together in a small space.

Alex, who also identifies as non-binary, was held in a Short-Term Holding Facility in an airport with many other people for 48 hours during the height of the pandemic, with no possibility for social distancing, and nowhere to sleep but the floor:

*“That was a real bad journey because everyone is waiting, they don’t give you any answer and they try to kind of put you down and let you know that you don’t matter, like you don’t, they don’t care about you, and you sleep on the floor.”*

**Alex (Central America)**

These findings suggest that being confined in immigration detention continues to be unsafe for LGBTQI+ people. The risk of harm is particularly acute for LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum, as many people fleeing persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression have already experienced significant trauma related to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic violence.



## **“They couldn’t do anything tangible”: Staff in the detention centres**

Participants described mixed experiences of detention centre staff, with some reporting supportive encounters and relationships while others reported misgendering, verbal abuse from staff, or inaction from staff in response to homophobic abuse from other people in detention.

A number of participants spoke about support received from welfare officers and other detention centre staff, including staff who were gay themselves:

*“I said to the welfare at the time, you know, “I’m one of the LGBTQ members, you know what I mean,” and the lady in the welfare was really nice to me, and she said to me, “Oh you don’t need to be worried, there is other people like you,” “Yes I notice that,” “If there is anything happen, anything bad happen to you, somebody here try to do something bad to you come to us, you know, we’ll sort it out.””*

**Angelo (South East Asia)**

*“They put some officers as well, they will come to you, talk to you, tell you if you are being abused or bullied, report it to us, all those things, and if they think you are a gay you have to open up to us so that we know how to protect you, you know.”*

**Usman (West Africa)**

Angelo felt that the officers generally treated people as they should and dealt with issues fairly. Johnson described an officer who encouraged them to eat food when they were feeling afraid.

However, two participants reported verbal mistreatment from staff, with one participant describing homophobic abuse from detention officers that left him feeling ashamed and upset:

*“This person...told me that if not for the system in the UK that if I was still in my home town that he believed that I would, you know, walking in the street, like an outcast, like you know that by now my penis would be chopped off because of this forms of stuff I’m practising, that I’m just lucky that I found myself in here.*

*"That was so so disheartening, you know, I felt emotionally down and I became more depressed at night, you know, that thought was running all over me and I realised that what this person said was actually true, you know, and it gives me this feeling of, you know, not - you know I felt so ashamed and things like that, and so so down."*

**Michael (East Africa)**

Michael did not feel like he could make a complaint about this experience, in case this would have a further negative impact on him:

*"I don't want to run into trouble...everybody's eyes looking and watching on me maybe kind of trying to plan some evil acts towards me, so I just took it by myself and tried to control the feelings, yeah so I didn't make any forms of report."*

**Michael (East Africa)**

Michael's experience highlights the risks for LGBTQI+ people in revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity to staff, and challenges in seeking support or reporting experiences of harassment and intimidation if they occur. In a context in which people are often attempting to conceal their LGBTQI+ status to avoid harassment, making complaints about experiences like the one Michael describes is even more challenging.

When Alex claimed asylum on their arrival at an airport in England, they were detained for 48 hours in a crowded room. Alex was fleeing homophobic persecution in their country of origin in Central America. They were told to sign paperwork for their detention at the airport, and when they explained that they were claiming asylum to protect themselves, were told by an officer, "you shouldn't be here, this is not the right country for you".

Later, during a screening interview at the airport, an officer misgendered them and left out important information about their asylum claim from the paperwork:

*"So some questions did not ask me, some questions were assumed such as my gender, which is very, very important, I think you never should assume genders... The most important thing that actually he did not put in that screening interview and I think he did it on purpose was that I claim asylum due to my sexual orientation because I was suffering due to my sexual orientation in [Country] and he didn't write that in my screening interview."*

**Alex (Central America)**

As outlined in the section above on verbal and physical abuse, some participants also reported being afraid to report instances of homophobic abuse to staff and inaction or slow action from staff to address threats from other people held in detention.

Although this pilot does not enable a thorough comparison of the different detention centres, one participant who was held in multiple IRCs talked about the differences between staff from centre to centre. For example, they found the staff at Tinsley House to be "more friendly" than those at Harmondsworth. However, they noted that officers at Tinsley House would also exploit these differences by threatening people with transfer to Brook House, which was perceived to be a more prison-like centre.



## “The life I had during detention was a miserable one”: LGBTQI+ mental health in detention

It is well-documented that LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum often experience serious mental health problems and trauma (Danisi et al., 2021). Participants in this project were dealing with depression, dissociation and thoughts of suicide.

All the participants were fleeing persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and had experienced homophobic and/or transphobic abuse and violence, as well as rejection and mistreatment from family since childhood. Two participants had experienced periods of homelessness after their arrival in the UK.

Existing research shows the high incidence of poor mental health among LGBTQI+ people, especially those who have experienced trauma from abuse, harassment and homelessness (Ecker et al., 2019; Sutter and Perrin, 2016).

Previous research also shows that detaining and confining people can retraumatise and worsen mental health for people who have already experienced severe hardship (Bosworth, 2016).

Michael was detained after claiming asylum, and initially thought this was a short process to check that he “didn’t mean any harm to the country”. However, the experience of being detained for months, along with the uncertainty of what would happen to him and others he met in detention, caused him to feel hopeless. Michael talked about depression and thoughts of suicide while detained:

*“I was so much anxious... I started feeling that maybe I would have just, you know, just stayed where I was and maybe you know, maybe tried to end my life, seeing as I didn't actually you know, have a proper lifestyle. I started having feelings of, you know, I didn't actually believe I could even go far again in life, because the life I had during detention was a miserable one.”*

**Michael (East Africa)**



On top of the effects that indefinite detention and the related uncertainty can have on a person's mental health, for some people the experience of detention also resembled past traumatic experiences and was therefore profoundly distressing.

Johnson, who was detained for six months before being released, had been locked in a room by their family as a child. They had suffered violent homophobic attacks – including one in which their partner was killed – yet they were repeatedly locked in a room overnight with someone who openly homophobic towards them.

Lack of adequate and timely mental health support was also an issue for participants, and in one case seriously impacted their asylum claim. Johnson had serious mental health issues before being detained, following multiple traumatic experiences of abuse and violence. A GP who saw Johnson while in detention referred them for mental health support, however they waited three months to see a psychiatrist.

This delay meant that Johnson did not have access to psychiatric support before their asylum interview, following which their claim was rejected on the grounds of lack of evidence.

When Johnson was finally able to access mental health support, they could build trust with the psychiatrist to talk about their experiences. Through this process the psychiatrist supported Johnson to get the medical evidence that eventually resulted in their release from detention on the grounds that continued detention would cause them harm. The psychiatrist also supported Johnson to access to legal representation that enabled a judicial review of their asylum claim.

## **“My same sexuality people, they came”: LGBTQI+ community and support in detention centres**

Being held in detention made it much more difficult for participants to seek support from or keep in contact with LGBTQI+ community groups and networks. When people are detained, they have their phones confiscated and are given a replacement that is not a smartphone. The removal of participants' phones and restrictions on the use of the internet made it more difficult for them to contact friends or family and seek support:

*“They took all of my personal belongings, you know, like clothes, and then keys and coins and wallets and whatever, and then they give me a small telephone, an old phone, I can make call with this phone but I'm, I need to top it up with the money, basically, and so I'm allowed to take part of the amount of the money that I got in my wallet so I can top up this phone, and then I'm, this is how I get in touch with [lawyer] as well ... apart from that there is a library there in the detention centre, in their library there is a computer facilities, that we can use to communicate, but only Skype, so I got in touch with everyone, when I say everyone it's just [lawyer] and my family on the Skype basically. And then they said no social medias, and no other things, and then everybody, only use these facilities for one hour and then you have to book a slot to use the computer system.”*

**Angelo (South East Asia)**

Most participants reported that it was difficult to find LGBTQI-specific support and advice, even in cases where they were able to access more general welfare support in the detention centre.



For example, Johnson had been scared to reveal their LGBTQI+ status because of past traumatic experiences, and the frightening experience of being locked in a room on arrival in detention added to this feeling of needing to hide. When they were first detained, they thought there was nothing they could do to avoid being sent back to a dangerous situation. It was only on the day they were due to be removed from the UK, when someone found them crying in their room and asked them what was wrong, that they found out they could claim asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation. They did not have a lawyer at this point and had previously thought that only people from Syria and Afghanistan could claim. This suggests that fear of revealing SOGIESC in detention is a barrier to finding out that it is possible to claim asylum on these grounds.

Despite the difficulties that participants faced in accessing LGBTQI+ information and support, three of the participants reported that they had been able to find support from other LGBTQI+ people in the detention centre.

*“My same sexuality people, they came. I’m not sure how they know about me. They came and they talked to me, they also said they also like me and they also doing same thing with this Home Office thing, and they said “you’re okay, you’ll be fine, don’t worry” and they said “you’ll face interview, you tell”, which on your own but bit worried...I used to talk to them sometimes.”*

**Johnson (South Asia)**

These networks of support were small groups of LGBTQI+ people quietly providing information and care for each other. In this case, the people had recognised that Johnson was a member of the LGBTQI+ community and been able to give them advice and support about the possibility of seeking asylum related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression when they did not have a lawyer.

# Conclusion

This pilot study highlights that LGBTQI+ people still face considerable and ongoing risk of harm in immigration detention in the UK. The data suggest that detention centres are inherently risky for LGBTQI+ people, who are trapped in a space that they cannot leave, in which abuse and harassment are difficult to escape. LGBTQI+ people who took part in this research were detained for months at a time, in some cases sharing locked rooms with people who were openly abusive towards them as LGBTQI+ people. Participants reported attempting to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity to reduce the risks they faced, but also highlighted how hard this can be even while trying to appear 'straight'.

While experiences of staff were mixed, with some positives, participants also experienced discrimination, verbal abuse and misgendering from staff, and inaction from staff in the face of escalating homophobic abuse.

The findings also point to continuing difficulties that LGBTQI+ people have in accessing LGBTQI-specific support while detained. Participants reported not knowing how or where to find information about organisations who provide specialist support, and some participants who were hiding their sexual orientation did not know it could form the basis of an asylum claim. However, there were instances of supportive networks between LGBTQI+ people that quietly worked 'under the radar' to share information and provide care to each other.

Overall the findings echo many of those from the [\*No Safe Refuge\*](#) report, showing that LGBTQI+ people continue to be at particular risk of harm in detention and are not protected by the staff and systems currently in place.



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The learnings will be used to develop a larger study on the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in immigration detention since 2016. This wider study, currently in the planning stage, will involve people with experience of detention from the outset in the design of the project, using creative, participatory methods and involving participants as co-researchers.

For more information about the wider project or to get involved, contact [l.j.harvey@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:l.j.harvey@brighton.ac.uk).

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