

Prepayment technology is socially and financially isolating UK asylum seekers: Study

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A research team from the University of Oxford and the University of Glasgow has found that prepayment cards provided to U.K. asylum seekers by the Home Office are collecting their data and controlling their behaviors in ways that have highly detrimental impacts on their well-being.

The research details the restrictive and isolating impacts of the Asylum Support Enablement (ASPEN) card: the prepayment card U.K. asylum seekers are issued.

The research draws on an analysis of 53 documents (including policy papers, legal reports, web pages and Freedom of Information Act correspondence) alongside semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 21 participants. These included asylum seekers, refugees, and advocacy organization staff in Glasgow, as well as staff from Prepaid Financial Services (PFS)â€the company that supplies the card.

The research highlights the ways that the technology is harming U.K. asylum seekers. The findings are [published](#) in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Collection of their purchasing data invades asylum seekers' privacy and makes them afraid of buying the "wrong" thing. This is combined with highly restrictive rules, including prevention from shopping online, receiving money from friends or family, buying necessary goods such as warm clothing, and making it difficult to buy religious or culturally appropriate foods.

The card's lack of consistent functionality means that, despite already struggling to live on around Â£40 a week, asylum seekers are often left with no money at all. Here, they must find help from resource-stretched

charities to buy food and other supplies for themselves and their children.

In addition, the card's fluorescent orange color makes asylum seekers highly visible in public spaces, exposing them to abuse.

Sophie Bennani-Taylor, DPhil Student at Oxford Internet Institute and first author of the research, said, "While much has been said about the potential for AI or Machine Learning to alter the fabric of society, the ASPEN card serves as an important reminder that even mundane technologies such as prepayment cards retain a significant capacity to inflict harm: most notably through [social exclusion](#), financial precarity, and the heightened visibility of a marginalized group.

"Our research shows how elements of the UK's Hostile Environment have become embedded in the ASPEN card: a prepayment card provided to U.K. asylum seekers. It demonstrates how the digitization of welfare payments creates highly opaque conditions of data collection and new modes of social control."

The prepayment technology provided by Prepaid Financial Services (PFS) has moved from its use in the UN Refugee Agency's Cash Assistance Program in Greece to its adoption by the U.K. Home Office.

This research finds that the same restrictions highlighted by prior research in Greeceâ€"including lack of mobility and constraints over what goods and services can be purchasedâ€"have made their way into the payment technology imposed on destitute asylum seekers by the Home Office.

Co-author of the research Professor Nasar Meer, of the University of Glasgow's School of Social & Political Sciences, said, "Uncoupling the social welfare of people seeking asylum from the rest of society is a

policy choice. The lived realities of what it means for people caught in the systems that flow from this choice, as this research shows, are harrowing and should compel us to revise our entire approach."

PFS was fined in 2022 by the UK Payment Systems Regulator for engaging in cartel behavior in prepaid cards issued to vulnerable people. The researchers argue that this record indicates a persistent pattern of exploitation of marginalized groups, raising questions about the Home Office's decision to continue working with the company in the provision of prepayment technologies to U.K. [asylum seekers](#).

More information: Sophie Bennani-Taylor et al, Processing payments, enacting alterity: financial technology in the everyday lives of asylum seekers, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2024.2312249](#)

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