

# **'It Would be Okay If They Came through the Proper Channels': Community Perceptions and Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers in Australia**

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Australia's humanitarian programme contributes to UNHCR's global resettlement programme and enhances Australia's international humanitarian reputation. However, as the recent tragedy on Christmas Island has shown, the arrival of asylum seekers by boat continues to stimulate debate, discussion and reaction from the Australian public and the Australian media. In this study, we used a mixed methods community survey to understand community perceptions and attitudes relating to asylum seekers. We found that while personal contact with asylum seekers was important when forming opinions about this group of immigrants, for the majority of respondents, attitudes and opinions towards asylum seekers were more influenced by the interplay between traditional Australian values and norms, the way that these norms appeared to be threatened by asylum seekers, and the way that these threats were reinforced both in media and political rhetoric.

Keywords: asylum seeker, survey, qualitative, community perceptions, attitudes

## **Introduction**

Australia has one of the largest refugee resettlement programmes in the world. Since the Second World War over 700,000 refugees or Displaced Persons (as they were originally termed) have settled in Australia. Each year

about 13,500 refugees are admitted under Australia's Humanitarian Programme (DIAC 2010c; Stevens 2002; DIAC 2007). Under this Humanitarian Programme, the Australian Government allocates a set number of places to refugees and others in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. While most refugees are accepted by Australia through this formal Humanitarian Programme and are granted refugee status before they arrive in Australia, an increasing number of individuals (referred to as asylum seekers) arrive at Australian land and sea borders and then ask for protection. Asylum seekers who arrive without a valid visa are detained in one of Australia's detention facilities until their case can be processed, usually several months but sometimes this process can take years (Australian Human Rights Commission 2008). Refugees accepted under the Humanitarian Programme are commonly perceived to be deserving of resettlement, partly because they are seen to be following the 'correct' procedure for entry into Australia (Every and Augoustinos 2007; Corlett 2002; Mares 2001). By contrast, negative media reporting and political discourse, and the public rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers, imply that their claims are not legitimate, that they pose a threat to Australian identity and security, and are in some way engaging in illegal behaviour by not following formal refugee processes (Haslam and Pedersen 2007; McMaster 2002; McKay *et al.* 2011; Clyne 2005). This perception of illegality is reinforced by the use of mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrive without a valid visa (Mares 2001). While Australia's acceptance of refugees has contributed to its positive international humanitarian reputation, the policies towards, and treatment of, asylum seekers has caused widespread national and international criticism (Edwards 2003; Marr and Wilkinson 2003).

### **Public Opinion towards Asylum Seekers in Australia: The Historical Context**

In 1976, the first known group of asylum seekers—five Vietnamese men termed 'boat people'—arrived in Darwin (Australia's far north) by boat and asked for protection (Hugo 2001; Boman and Edwards 1984). While these asylum seekers received support from the conservative Fraser Government, they did not receive the same support from the Labor Opposition. This disagreement between the major political parties led to a public debate about the fate of asylum seekers in Australia, resulting in widespread community antagonism directed toward 'boat people' arrivals (Betts 2001; Mares 2001). In the six years to 1982, about 2,000 Vietnamese 'boat people' arrived in Australia (Phillips and Spinks 2010), with a further 15,000 Vietnamese refugees settled directly from refugee camps under the Humanitarian Programme (York 2003). Despite the small numbers of asylum seekers who arrived by boat during this period, public reaction was largely negative (Betts 2001; Brennan 2003). Australians were generally happy to receive the Vietnamese refugees selected from camps in Southeast Asia under the Humanitarian Programme; however, 20 per cent wanted all 'boat

people' 'stopped from staying here' (Morgan Gallup Poll 1977 191A: 3–4, as cited in Betts 2001). Negative community reactions continued with the next 'wave' of approximately 3,000 asylum seekers, mostly from China, Vietnam and Cambodia, who arrived by boat between 1989 and 1993 (Betts 2001; Brennan 2003). News polls conducted during this period showed that the majority surveyed felt that the number of immigrants arriving in Australia was too high (Jupp 2001).

However, it was the arrival of approximately 12,000 asylum seekers, predominately from Afghanistan and Iraq, between 1999 and 2001, that led to unprecedented negative political, media and public reaction (Betts 2001; Dunn *et al.* 2007; Every and Augoustinos 2007; Phillips and Spinks 2010). While negative public reaction toward the arrival of asylum seekers was present before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, it was intensified in the immediate aftermath amid the responses to terrorism and the increasing negative political rhetoric directed at asylum seekers from Australia's conservative Howard Government (Marr and Wilkinson 2003; McAdam 2008). Such negative attitudes toward asylum seekers had already been seen in response to an incident shortly before, in August 2001. This incident involved the refused entry of the Norwegian freighter the MV *Tampa*, after the ship rescued 438 mainly Afghani nationals who were *en route* to the Australian territory of Christmas Island to claim asylum. The arrival of the *Tampa* sparked a surge in media interest in asylum seeker issues, and allowed the Howard Government to establish a link between asylum seeking and the threat to national sovereignty and terrorism (Marr and Wilkinson 2003). The Howard Government used the arrival of these asylum seekers, and the newly established rhetorical links between asylum seekers and terrorism, to implement a number of policies that made it more difficult for asylum seekers to access Australia's legal processes. One of these policies allowed for the excision of many external Australian territories, including Christmas Island, from the migration zone, while another was to allow asylum seekers only temporary protection. Opinion polls during this period showed increasing hostility toward asylum seekers. A poll conducted in September 2001 (6 weeks post *Tampa*) showed that 50 per cent of those polled would 'turn back all boats carrying asylum seekers' (Newspoll 2001a). Seven weeks later this response had risen to 56 per cent (Newspoll 2001b).

Australia is currently experiencing the 'fifth wave' of asylum seeker arrivals (Mares 2009). Between the beginning of 2008 and the end of 2010, Australia received 9,422 asylum seekers by boat, including 6,535 in 2010, predominately from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka (Phillips and Spinks 2010; Maley 2011). The majority of these boats departed from Indonesia, and involved people smuggling operations (DIAC 2010a, 2010b). Consistent with previous asylum seeker arrivals, negative public sentiment has persisted throughout this 'wave'. For example, in 2010 an opinion poll showed that 75 per cent of Australians were concerned about unauthorized asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat (Lowy Institute 2010).

In the past decade a number of asylum seekers have perished while making their journey to Australia by boat (Marr and Wilkinson 2003). The presence of a boat carrying asylum seekers in distress at Australian shores often serves to both ignite and polarize public opinion about asylum seeker arrivals. A recent example from December 2010, in which a boat carrying around 100 people broke down and drifted onto the rocks off Christmas Island, killing at least 40 individuals on board, is consistent with past reactions (Hayward 2010). The arrival of these asylum seekers re-ignited an intense debate about 'border control' and how best to prevent and manage asylum seeker arrivals by boat. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, suggested that the boat was not intercepted in the normal way as the weather provided an impassable obstacle, while others suggested that the tragedy could have been avoided by the implementation of stronger asylum policies that do not 'tempt asylum seekers to risk their lives by trying to reach our shores', and a return to offshore processing on Nauru and temporary protection visas (Bowen 2010; *The Australian* 2010; *Herald Sun* 2010). Once again the political divide was mirrored by a divide in community attitudes and opinions towards asylum seekers. Australia's two major news organizations ran public opinion polls about the deaths and issues of border control on their news websites. Fairfax papers asked: 'should Labor increase border patrols after the Christmas Island asylum-seeker boat tragedy?' (yes=56 per cent, n=2581) (Stevenson *et al.* 2010), while the News Limited papers asked: 'should Australia open the door to asylum seekers to prevent further tragedies?' (yes = 11.48 per cent, n = 19,913) (Hudson 2010; Sheehan 2010). Although many of the news stories that were published alongside these polls were positive or reflected a more balanced style of reporting, the largely negative results from these polls, particularly that of News Limited, are consistent with previous opinion polls about asylum seekers.

### **Key Influences on Public Opinion towards Asylum Seekers**

Opinion polls, initially used to ascertain voting intention, are now frequently used to provide governments with information on whether they are in step with the opinion of the public on specific issues, allowing for public-driven changes in policy (Brett and Moran 2006). A number of studies in the last 40 years have explored the influences on public opinion toward asylum seekers in Australia. These studies have investigated the ways in which asylum seekers are represented in media and political fora (McKay *et al.* 2011; Klocker and Dunn 2003; Gale 2004), have investigated the beliefs and ideologies that influence public opinions toward asylum seekers (Pedersen *et al.* 2005, 2006; Haslam and Pedersen 2007), have reported on public opinion through the use of commercial opinion polls (Goot 2000) or have undertaken private polling to further investigate the attitudes behind such opinions (Markus 2010). Results of such studies suggest that socio-demographic factors, including age, gender, education, socio-economic status and political views, are

important influences on attitudes and opinions toward asylum seekers (Wilson *et al.* 2005; Hoskin and Mishler 1983; Pedersen *et al.* 2005). Research investigating influences on public opinion suggests that asylum seekers are portrayed by the media and politicians either as genuine and in need of protection, or as taking advantage of the policies of the host country for their own economic or personal gain (Lewis 2005; Every and Augoustinos 2007, 2008). Furthermore, some research suggests that negative portrayals of asylum seekers, particularly those that describe asylum seekers as 'illegal' or as 'queue jumpers', have resulted in their construction as a 'deviant social group' who pose a threat to national security and national identity (Pickering 2001). This construction of deviance has often been attributed to the influence of some of Australia's leading politicians. For example, one of the key messages of the conservative Howard Government was that Australian values and identity needed to be protected from asylum seekers who seek to change the Australian way of life (Clyne 2005). This theme of protecting Australia has been maintained by the current Gillard Labor Government which, by proposing an offshore resettlement centre on East Timor, for example, reinforced perceptions of the need to protect Australia's national borders from asylum seekers (Kelly 2010). This issue of protecting Australia's borders against the arrival of asylum seekers by boat re-emerged during reporting of the deaths on Christmas Island in December 2010. While acknowledging that the deaths at sea were a tragedy and devastating for the families, some commentators went on to call for more restrictive policies to act as a deterrent. Suggestions included greater border protection, a return to processing on Nauru and temporary, rather than permanent, protection (*Daily Telegraph* 2011; Ruddock 2011).

### **Aims of this Study**

While this study seeks to build upon previous work in this area, this research differs in that we have investigated the influence of socio-cultural factors upon attitudes and opinions toward asylum seekers, and have sought to gain an understanding of the motives and influences of public attitudes and opinions. We hope that the findings of this research will contribute to the development of further study in this area, be useful for those working in the media and reporting on asylum seeker issues, and be of value to those working with asylum seekers. We believe that an important component of this research was the inclusion of the qualitative section that allowed participants to write freely in response to general questions about their feelings toward asylum seekers. As we report, in many cases this led to participants identifying and justifying their fear of asylum seekers, or highlighting some common myths about asylum seekers. In many ways, we believe that this is one of the most useful aspects of this research as this information may help those working to promote a more balanced reporting and discourse to dispel

fear-promoting myths and possibly change or adjust the information provided to the community.

## **Method**

### *Aims and Approach*

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this study explored the attitudes and opinions of the Australian public in relation to asylum seekers. In particular we sought to provide a critical depth of understanding about why the Australian public hold certain beliefs about asylum seekers, and what has influenced these beliefs. We designed a postal, mixed methods survey that aimed to investigate:

- The general public's understandings of how and why individuals seek asylum.
- Where the general public go to access and receive information about asylum seeking issues.
- How attitudes and opinions relating to asylum seekers may differ between different socio-demographic groups, and why these differences may occur.

The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for the triangulation of responses: that is, to see if the findings from the quantitative responses were consistent with those in the open ended written responses. The survey was three pages in length, consisted of 16 questions, and was divided into three sections.

1. *Socio-demographic characteristics.* The first section of the survey asked for basic demographic information (age, gender, education, income, immigration status (Australian born or immigrant) and marital status). These questions were important as we were interested to see whether attitudes and opinions varied according to socio-demographic factors as identified in previous studies (Betts 2001; Kehrberg 2007; Lewis 2005; Pedersen *et al.* 2006; Ward and Masgoret 2008).

2. *General understanding of asylum seeking issues.* Questions in this section explored respondents' understandings of why and how individuals might seek asylum in Australia. We also investigated whether personal contact with a refugee had influenced attitudes and/or opinions towards asylum seeking issues. These questions were quantitative, using 'tick box' options, and aimed to understand what respondents knew about some of the pathways and the reasons for entering Australia. In order to gauge if respondents were aware of the countries of origin of asylum seekers, we then asked if they could identify which countries asylum seekers were from. Finally, we asked respondents to state whether they thought Australia's asylum seeker policies

were 'too soft', 'too hard' or 'about right'. Here we provided space for respondents to elaborate on the option they had chosen.

3. *What influences attitudes and opinions.* The final section of the survey probed more deeply for attitudes and opinions toward asylum seekers. In this section we used open-ended questions which allowed individuals to write more extensively. We asked how asylum seekers should be treated upon arrival, and what respondents thought had most influenced their opinion on asylum seekers and why.

### *Sampling Strategy*

We calculated the sample size based on a  $\pm 3$  per cent accuracy (error). Based on a standard response rate to general community postal surveys of about 20 per cent (Edwards *et al.* 2002) we calculated that we would need to sample about 3,000 individuals to get a response rate of 600. For random sampling reasons, we sent the survey to 3,069 households. Surveys were sent between 15 March 2010 and 15 April 2010. The survey was sent with an information sheet, one survey, and a reply paid envelope. No follow up was made. We included a reply paid envelope as previous research had identified this would help to increase response rates (Edwards *et al.* 2002). It was important to get a sample from each state of Australia, as previous research had only focused on one state or geographic location (Klocker 2004; Pedersen *et al.* 2005, 2006). Some states in Australia are more politically conservative (e.g. Queensland) while others typically support more liberal political ideologies (e.g. Tasmania). If we had only focused on one of these states, our results might have been skewed. State based sampling involved taking the number of names from each White Pages directory (for each state) that was in proportion to the population of that state. We staggered the posting of surveys, with 500 sent every third day to ensure that the neither the university postal system nor the research team would be overwhelmed with responses.

### *Data Analysis*

Given the mixed methods approach of the survey, a combination of techniques was used to analyse the data. The quantitative data analysis used basic descriptive statistics to characterize the sample. Categorical data were reported using simple frequencies and percentages, while continuous data were presented as means, medians and standard deviations. To determine socio-economic status (SES), we used the Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA deciles (Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage). Areas with a high index value (8–10) have few families on low incomes, or people who have little training or who work in unskilled occupations. Areas with low values (1–3) have many low income families, people with little formal training and people who work in unskilled occupations. The distributions of index scores are generally similar across the states, although the Northern

Territory has a higher proportion of disadvantaged areas, and the Australian Capital Territory has a lower proportion than Australia as a whole (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). In this paper, the distribution of index values is summarized into low (1–3), medium (4–7) and high (8–10).

The qualitative responses were managed and coded using the qualitative analysis software QRS NVivo 8, which allows for the marking and subsequent retrieval of text according to a particular theme (QSR International 2008). Following Miles and Huberman (1994) we used a thematic style of analysis, reading and rereading the survey responses, and coding and comparing patterns and clusters of responses between the surveys. To identify if there were any patterns between responses and demographic variables or geographic variables, the responses were consistently checked against the quantitative data.

## Results

### *General Characteristics*

The general characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. Of the 3,069 surveys sent, we received 585 completed surveys, and 224 ‘returned to sender’. Excluding those returned to sender, this was a response rate of 20.5 per cent. There were no differences between the state and SES characteristics of the respondents and non-respondents. The sample was skewed toward older adults, with an average age of 58 years (SD = 15.06, range = 19–91). Just over half of the respondents were male (n = 323, 55.2 per cent), and most were married (n = 414, 70.8 per cent). Over half were from an area of low or middle SES (n = 342, 58.5 per cent); had completed at least some high school education (n = 320, 54.9 per cent); and reported a household income of less than AU\$80,000 (n = 403, 68.8 per cent). Most respondents were born in Australia (n = 425, 72.6 per cent).

### *Knowledge about Asylum Seeking Issues*

More than half of all respondents thought that asylum seekers came to Australia ‘for a better life’ (n = 328, 56.8 per cent), and about one quarter (n = 141, 24.4 per cent) to flee persecution. As shown in Table 2, there were no statistically significant differences in either of these responses by socio-demographic or economic variables. Respondents most frequently identified Afghanistan (n = 236, 40.0 per cent) and Sri Lanka (n = 190, 32.5 per cent) as asylum seekers’ country of origin. Almost half identified that asylum seekers’ method of arrival to Australia was by boat (n = 250, 43.1 per cent). Almost half of all respondents said that Australia’s current policy toward asylum seekers was ‘too soft’ (n = 285, 49.2 per cent). These respondents were significantly more likely to be male (n = 173, 54.1 per cent,  $p = 0.011$ ); working in a ‘trade’ occupation (n = 27, 81.8 per cent,  $p = 0.00$ ); or retired (n = 114, 51.1 per cent,  $p = 0.00$ ).

Table 1

<b>General Characteristics</b>	
Total surveys returned	585
Socioeconomic status of respondents	
High	243 (41.5%)
Middle	251 (42.9%)
Low	91 (15.6%)
State from which surveys were returned	
Australian Capital Territory	21 (3.6%)
New South Wales	152 (26.0%)
Northern Territory	10 (1.7%)
Queensland	122 (20.9%)
South Australia	54 (9.2%)
Tasmania	16 (2.7%)
Victoria	164 (28.0%)
Western Australia	46 (7.9%)
Demographics	
Age <sup>1</sup>	
Under 30	28 (4.8%)
31–50	147 (25.3%)
51–65	216 (37.2%)
66–80	152 (26.2%)
80+	37 (6.4%)
Gender	
Male	323 (55.2%)
Female	262 (44.8%)
Where born	
Australian born	425 (72.6%)
Immigrant	160 (27.4%)
Marital status <sup>1</sup>	
Married/partnered	414 (70.8%)
Widowed	51 (8.7%)
Divorced	61 (10.4%)
Single	58 (9.9%)
Income <sup>1</sup>	
Under \$50,000	256 (45.3%)
\$50,000–\$80,000	147 (26.0%)
\$80,000–\$100,000	64 (11.3%)
\$100,000–\$130,000	39 (6.9%)
More than \$130,000	58 (10.4%)
Education <sup>1</sup>	
Did not complete high school	110 (19.0%)
Completed high school	148 (25.5%)
Post-secondary diploma/certificate	138 (23.8%)
University degree	184 (31.7%)
Occupation <sup>1</sup>	
Student	17 (2.9%)
Trade	33 (5.7%)
Self employed	75 (12.9%)
Retail	20 (3.4%)
Professional	162 (27.9%)
Unemployed	8 (1.4%)
Other	40 (6.9%)
Retired	226 (38.9%)

<sup>1</sup>Does not equal 585 as not all respondents supplied this information.

Table 2

Quantitative Results

	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Did not complete high school (%)	Completed high school (%)	Completed further study (%)	Age				
							<30 (%)	31-50 (%)	51-65 (%)	66-80 (%)	80+ (%)
Why do you think that most people seek asylum?											
To gain employment	10 (1.7)	4 (1.3)	6 (2.3)	3 (2.8)	4 (2.7)	3 (1.0)	2 (7.1)	2 (1.4)	3 (1.4)	2 (1.4)	1 (2.7)
Because they are fleeing persecution	141 (24.4)	65 (20.5) <sup>1</sup>	76 (29.3) <sup>1</sup>	17 (16.0) <sup>1</sup>	24 (16.4) <sup>1</sup>	100 (31.3) <sup>1</sup>	6 (21.4)	39 (26.8)	50 (23.4)	38 (26)	6 (16.2)
To get their children educated	1 (0.2)	1 (0.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.3)	0 (0)	1 (0.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
To send money home	2 (0.3)	2 (0.3)	0 (0)	2 (1.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.7)	0 (0)
For a better life	328 (56.8)	189 (59.6)	138 (53.3)	63 (59.4)	78 (53.4)	182 (57)	19 (67.9)	86 (58.5)	120 (56.1)	79 (54.1)	23 (62.2)
To get their family to Australia	95 (16.5)	56 (17.7)	39 (15.1)	21 (19.8) <sup>1</sup>	40 (27.4) <sup>1</sup>	33 (11.6) <sup>1</sup>	1 (3.6)	19 (12.9)	41 (19.2)	26 (17.8)	7 (18.9)
How do most asylum seekers arrive in Australia?											
Boat	250 (43.1)	142 (44.1)	108 (41.9)	54 (50) <sup>1</sup>	89 (60.5) <sup>1</sup>	104 (32.4) <sup>1</sup>	14 (50)	63 (43.4)	97 (45.3)	60 (39.5)	14 (37.8)
Plane	182 (31.4)	105 (32.6)	77 (29.8)	28 (25.9) <sup>1</sup>	30 (20.4) <sup>1</sup>	124 (38.7) <sup>1</sup>	7 (25)	39 (26.9)	73 (34.1)	47 (30.9)	15 (40.5)
Don't know	148 (25.5)	75 (23.3)	73 (28.3)	26 (24.1)	28 (19.0)	93 (28.7)	7 (25)	43 (29.7)	44 (20.6)	45 (29.6)	8 (21.6)
Are Australia's asylum seeker policies too soft, too hard or about right?											
Too soft	285 (49.2)	173 (54.1) <sup>1</sup>	113 (43.4) <sup>1</sup>	70 (64.8) <sup>1</sup>	98 (67.1) <sup>1</sup>	113 (35.4) <sup>1</sup>	10 (35.7)	65 (44.5)	111 (52.1)	79 (52.7)	18 (48.6)
Too hard	54 (9.3)	19 (5.9) <sup>1</sup>	35 (13.6) <sup>1</sup>	9 (8.3) <sup>1</sup>	7 (4.8) <sup>1</sup>	38 (11.9) <sup>1</sup>	2 (7.1)	11 (7.5)	27 (12.7)	10 (6.7)	2 (5.4)
About right	121 (20.9)	83 (25.9) <sup>1</sup>	38 (14.7) <sup>1</sup>	16 (14.8) <sup>1</sup>	23 (15.8) <sup>1</sup>	81 (25.4) <sup>1</sup>	5 (17.9)	29 (19.9)	39 (18.3)	40 (26.7)	8 (21.6)
Don't know	119 (20.6)	45 (14.1) <sup>1</sup>	73 (28.3) <sup>1</sup>	13 (12.0)	18 (12.3)	87 (26.9)	11 (39.3)	41 (28.1)	36 (16.9)	21 (14.0)	9 (24.3)

<sup>1</sup> P < 0.05.

Table 3

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**Key Themes to Emerge from the Qualitative Data**


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*Theme 1: Asylum Seekers Exploit Australia's Democratic Systems and Processes*

- Respondents often identified the method of arrival of asylum seekers as an example of how they exploit Australia's systems and processes. The use of people smugglers and boats to enter Australian waters were frequently identified by respondents as an example of an 'illegal' act
- Respondents were concerned that asylum seekers who arrive in Australia exploit the Australian welfare system. Some respondents stated that asylum seekers are only in Australia to receive welfare and other social benefits
- Some respondents stated that some asylum seekers arrive in Australia for their own economic gain, rather than for humanitarian or protection reasons

*Theme 2: Asylum Seekers Threaten Australia's Values and Culture*

- Some respondents expressed concern that asylum seekers were not willing to integrate into an Australian way of life
- Respondents frequently used examples to highlight asylum seekers' reluctance to assimilate. Common examples included the perception that asylum seekers were 'unprepared' to change their traditional dress, religious or cultural beliefs
- Respondents stated that this reluctance to assimilate posed an extreme threat to Australian identity and nationhood

*Theme 3: Asylum Seekers Threaten the Security of Individuals, Communities and the Nation*

- A few respondents stated that asylum seekers threatened national border security through their method of arrival, their use of people smugglers, and their perceived links with terrorists
  - Some of these respondents stated that if asylum seekers enter Australia then Australia will be a more violent society and will experience more 'social problems'
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Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative results. See Table 3 for an overview.

*Theme One: Asylum Seekers Exploit Australia's Democratic Systems and Processes*

Under this theme responses fell into three subthemes: the method of the asylum seekers' arrival to Australia; their exploitation of Australia's welfare system; and the belief that asylum seekers come to Australia for economic rather than humanitarian protection reasons.

When writing about the method of arrival of asylum seekers, respondents often used the terms 'illegal', 'illegal asylum seeker', 'boat people' or 'queue jumpers'. Some wrote that asylum seekers 'cheated the system', by not

following refugee processing procedures in their own countries before travelling to Australia:

These people should follow due process and not be queue jumpers (Male, aged 46, professional).

Others said that if asylum seekers were genuine, they would not use people smugglers to facilitate their journey to Australia. Rather, their willingness to use 'people smugglers' meant that by association, they themselves were criminals. For many, this highlighted that asylum seekers were trying to exploit a system that had been implemented to ensure a fair and just process when examining claims for refugee status. As such, these asylum seekers were seen to be jeopardizing the future of refugees who were in legitimate need of protection.

Send the boat people home. They are not genuine misplaced people, if they can pay and organize themselves to come to Australia illegally. Accept those from refugee camps only!!! (Female, aged 46, professional).

Some respondents said that after meeting a refugee they realized that asylum seekers would seek to exploit Australia's welfare system for their own advantage.

I used to feel sorry for them. But that changed when I saw how they milked the system (Male, aged 40, trade occupation).

Respondents generally had one of three attitudes as to how asylum seekers should be treated when they arrive in Australia: 1) With caution, but respect ( $n=207$ ); 2) With humanitarian values ( $n=161$ ); or 3) That they should be 'sent back' ( $n=158$ ).

Those who felt that asylum seekers should be treated with caution but respect stated that asylum seekers should be treated with fairness, but that it was important for asylum seekers to follow the 'proper Australian process' ( $n=207$ ). In many cases this included a period of detention at Australia's offshore asylum seeker processing facility on Christmas Island, security and health checks, or some form of reduced welfare access until they 'prove themselves worthy' of Australia's hospitality. This suggestion was most commonly made by those who were retired ( $n=86$ ), and those in professional occupations ( $n=61$ ), as well as those who were aged 81 and over ( $n=14$ ). Those identified as lower ( $n=56$ ) or middle ( $n=137$ ) SES were also more likely to suggest caution when dealing with asylum seeker arrivals.

Other respondents ( $n=161$ ) wanted asylum seekers to be treated in a 'humanitarian' way. The main point of difference here was that they felt that asylum seekers should be allowed entry into Australia and given housing, medical treatment, clothing and food, rather than being held in detention.

These respondents stated that asylum seekers should be treated with ‘compassion’, ‘respect’, ‘dignity’ and ‘courtesy’ upon arrival:

The asylum seekers on arrival should be treated with compassion and be provided with shelter, food, clothing and medical treatment (Male, aged 71, professional).

The remainder of respondents (n = 158) took a restrictive approach to how asylum seekers should be treated. These respondents suggested that all asylum seekers should be ‘sent back’. This suggestion was more common in male respondents (n = 97), as well as people from the conservative Australian states of Queensland (n = 46) and Western Australia (n = 14). These respondents were often radical and extreme in their responses and exhibited extensive hostility:

Turn the boat around and tell them to go back to where they come from—should they fail to respond—fire shots across the bow—should they fail to respond fire shoot at the ship (Male, aged 61, trade occupation).

Respondents in this category justified their responses by stating that asylum seekers should have followed ‘proper channels’. Many wrote about wanting to send a signal to other individuals that were considering ‘exploiting’ Australia, that Australia would not tolerate this behaviour.

### *Theme Two: Asylum Seekers Threaten Australia’s Values and Culture*

Some respondents stated that recent asylum seekers were more reluctant and resistant to integrating into an Australian way of life than previous immigrants to Australia. Although these individuals were few in number, the tone of their comments was extreme. These respondents described asylum seekers who were ‘unprepared’ to change their traditional dress, religious or cultural beliefs, as individuals who posed an extreme threat to Australian identity and nationhood.

If they’re granted entry into our wonderful country they should become Australians, live and dress like us, and leave their customs in the country they come from (Female, aged 67, self-employed).

Respondents described a set of basic standards for those even contemplating coming to Australia, which included ‘bothering to learn English’, ‘conforming to our way of life’, having a ‘high standard of education’ and employment skills that were relevant to Australia’s economy. Respondents repeatedly identified Muslim asylum seekers as being the most resistant to conform:

For starters the way Muslim people (not all) carry on with their beliefs, but don’t care about ours (Male, aged 39, professional).

Another respondent stated that she was so concerned about the influx of Muslim asylum seekers and their values, that she felt that she would soon not be allowed to celebrate Christian traditions in Australia:

Why the hell shouldn't we be allowed to celebrate our Christmas without offending other cultures!! This is Australia!! (Female, aged 40, professional)

For some individuals, meeting a refugee, or refugees, had strongly influenced their opinions towards asylum seeking issues (n = 119, 20.3 per cent). Most of these had been positively influenced by this experience (n = 72). Individuals in this group had a distinct set of socio-demographic characteristics. Most were female, in a professional occupation, of middle or high SES, or held a university or post-secondary education. Some wrote about critically rethinking opinions about asylum seekers after face to face contact. One woman stated that the insight gained from hearing about a refugee's experiences made her feel less fearful, and appreciative of the asylum seeking experience:

[Meeting a refugee] gave me a deep insight into life as a refugee. It was a most rewarding experience as it took away my fear of refugees (Female, aged 55, professional).

Yet for others, these negative opinions had only been formed after personal contact with a refugee. Most of these individuals were either retired, or male. One of the most common examples given was that on meeting a refugee, they appeared to be unable to speak English adequately in their everyday interactions. Others wrote about refugees clustering in certain areas and only socializing with one another. For some respondents, this was 'proof' that asylum seekers would not be prepared to change their own culture to become 'Australian'. Others used examples of media reporting to justify the unwillingness of asylum seekers to integrate into Australian society:

[The media show me that] they don't want to integrate in to the Australia way of life. They are just bringing their problems here and tying [*sic*] to have a separate community that is just their way of life. (Female, aged 42, self-employed).

### *Theme Three: Asylum Seekers Threaten the Security of Individuals, Communities, and the Nation*

In this theme, responses fell into two categories. The first was that asylum seekers threatened national border security. The second was that Australia would be a more violent society with more social problems should asylum seekers be allowed to enter.

For many respondents, issues of national security were almost exclusively linked to 'Muslim extremism' and terrorism. For example, respondents expressed a 'genuine fear of Islam' and were 'worried about the number of Muslims arriving'.

I am concerned with the ease that Muslims are welcomed into Australia. We are 'infidels' to them (Female, aged 73, retired).

Some respondents' narratives directly linked the asylum seekers with Islam, violence and terrorism. However, others (predominantly students, those who were highly educated, women, and those from high socio-economic areas) challenged this view. They stated that the lack of balance in media reporting had only served to create 'fear campaigns' about the impact that asylum seekers would have on the Australian community:

They would have us all fearing that we will be overrun by violent Muslim extremists. This makes it difficult to form a rational opinion (Female, aged 52, home duties).

Others had formed negative views about security, based on their experiences with refugees in their own suburban areas. For example, a few respondents, who lived in areas with a high number of refugees, perceived that 'social problems' were a result of refugees and asylum seeker arrivals:

We have a lot of problems in our area with refugees forming gangs and a lot of anti-social behaviour (Female, aged 46, professional).

Older respondents (those over 60), were particularly worried that the presence of cultures and religions from other countries could lead to an increase in violence in Australia. Some wrote about feeling scared for future generations of Australians:

I do feel for my children and grandchildren in times to come, as violence in Australia has increased. Australia is a much different place today (Female, aged 68, retired).

## **Conclusion**

It is important at this point to discuss the limitations of this study. As this was a postal survey, the main issue is with the self-selection of the respondents. It is possible that we received more responses from those in the older category as they were more likely to have the time to complete and then post back the survey. Another issue that could be a limitation, but may also be regarded as a strength of the study, is that responses may have been received from people who had a high level of interest in this issue. As this was a written survey, we may have received fewer responses from people with a limited education, and as with any qualitative study, the analysis is reflective of the research team's interpretation of the responses. While there was consistency of interpretation within our research team, it may be that others could interpret the data in different ways.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights that attitudes towards asylum seekers were influenced by a complex interplay between political

rhetoric, media reporting, personal experiences, socio-demographic factors and the way that respondents conceptualized traditional Australian values, and what could potentially pose a threat to these values. This study provides a critical depth of information about attitudes and opinions, which complements large scale studies of the prevalence of these attitudes. Three clear findings emerged:

1. The method by which asylum seekers arrive in Australia had a clear influence on negative attitudes and opinions.
2. Constructed socio-political stereotypes, particularly around the link between Islam and terrorism, created the perception that asylum seekers pose a 'threat' to Australian national identity and security.
3. Most respondents had limited accurate knowledge about asylum seeking issues, with knowledge highly dependent on media reporting of the issue.

Since the mid 1970s, the Australian public has been exposed to negative discourses in the media and from politicians about asylum seekers, and in particular 'boat people'. This negative discourse has firmly constructed asylum seekers as a 'deviant social group' (Pickering 2001). The power of this rhetoric has been the construction of popularized labels which shift the public view from the structural reasons for asylum seeking, to the individual behaviour of those who arrive in Australia by boat. This construction has been formed through an overwhelmingly negative and sensationalized focus on the method of arrival, and the constant linking of arrivals by boat with labels of 'queue jumpers', 'terrorists', 'boat people' and 'illegals'. Furthermore, media reports often combine politicized labels with extreme images of behaviours: 'unauthorized' boats, overcrowded with predominantly Muslim males; reports of the use of criminal gangs and people smugglers to facilitate the journey to Australia; and extreme protests within detention facilities (McKay *et al.* 2011). As reported by respondents in this study, this media reporting reinforces the popularized image of asylum seekers as 'violent', 'different', 'illegal' and seeking to exploit the procedures Australia has in place to accept 'genuine' refugees.

While there has been some balanced reporting on asylum seeker issues, including reports concerning the welfare of detainees and conditions in detention centres, as well as a number of opinion pieces and articles that allow asylum seekers a voice and a venue to describe their persecution, detailed analysis and international context remain absent. However, the reporting of the deaths in the waters around Christmas Island in December 2010 went some way in providing balance to this issue. Despite the somewhat negative public opinion polls, the early media reporting and community concern included a greater awareness of the humanitarian issues. While there were some reports that maintained or called for a restrictive or hard-line approach to asylum seekers (AAP 2010; Smith 2010), many reports were sympathetic in tone and provided a humanitarian angle to the story (Jacobs 2011; Zwartz

2010). There were also calls for changes in the way that Australia deals with the arrival of asylum seekers by boat (Thomas Dobson 2010), and suggestions of a wider change to the asylum seeking process (Hanson-Young 2010; Akerman 2010). While this incident occurred after the data was collected for this study, and therefore we are unable to suggest how this might change public opinion in the long term, it does highlight the importance of continued research in this area. A number of studies have suggested that the media have an important role in influencing public opinion (Mutz 1989; McCombs and Bell 1996), therefore this change in reporting may signal a change in community understandings and opinions about asylum seekers, further highlighting the importance of engaging with the media on these issues.

In addition to the influence of media reporting, we also observed that most of those who held negative views of asylum seekers wrote about the undesirable individual behaviours of asylum seekers, and the threats they posed to Australian identity, values and culture. Respondents created this narrative by incorporating the perception that asylum seekers had come to Australia for their own personal benefit rather than for humanitarian reasons (e.g. for a 'better life' or for economic reasons, rather than fleeing persecution). Implicit in respondents' narratives was the construction of a group who they perceived would maintain their own languages, customs and traditions (e.g. not being able to speak English, unwilling to assimilate to Australian values, exploiting welfare systems or protesting against detention), and that this cultural diversity posed an extreme threat to Australian national identity. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that Australians fear losing their 'national identity' by allowing immigrants with other cultural backgrounds to settle in Australia (Wazana 2004; Simon and Lynch 1999). Further, attitudes appeared to be particularly extreme when directed towards asylum seekers from Islamic backgrounds. These asylum seekers not only appeared to be visibly different from white Australians, but also were surrounded by a political rhetoric of danger and threat because of a perceived link with terrorism. The overwhelmingly negative discourse which links asylum seekers, Islam and terrorism means that further research that specifically investigates the distinct issues around Islam is needed.

In contrast, those who were more sympathetic towards asylum seekers were able to take a more global, humanitarian, and structural view of the reasons for asylum seekers taking extreme measures to flee their country of origin. They were able to look beyond individual factors and labels and engage critically with media reports about asylum seeker behaviours. Socio-demographic factors appeared to play a role in the formation of attitudes. In particular, younger, more educated individuals held more positive views toward asylum seekers. This is consistent with other research focused on racial prejudice, which shows that younger individuals hold more tolerant attitudes towards minority groups, by association with changing cultural attitudes towards diversity and ethnicity (Martin *et al.* 2000), and that younger, more educated groups are more tolerant and are less threatened

by a culturally diverse society (Bobo and Licari 1989; Hello *et al.* 2006). This may also explain why this group is less reactive towards asylum seeker arrivals. While they appear to be aware that not all asylum seekers may be genuine, they are more supportive of due process to determine who should be allowed to stay in Australia, and who should be returned.

Altering negative attitudes and opinions regarding asylum seekers will necessarily require a significant shift in political rhetoric and media reporting. We appreciate that these shifts are not easy to achieve. Political parties have played a central role in creating these negative public attitudes, and must now respond to the public's ideals, opinions, and expectations in maintaining a 'hard line' approach towards asylum seekers. These shifts will also be difficult for the media. However, the inclusion of a humanitarian angle in some of the early reporting of the Christmas Island tragedy of late 2010 has given us some hope that the media are beginning to provide balance in their reporting. The future challenge for asylum seeker advocacy groups is to find messages and strategies which help to uncouple asylum seekers from 'threat rhetoric', and replace this with a broader humanitarian understanding and knowledge of the structural factors that influence asylum seeking.

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