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Nearly 300 Detained in Nationwide Sweep Targeting Illegal Work by Asylum Seekers

August 9, 2025

– Categories: *Breaking News*



On July 29, 2025, the United Kingdom's Home Office announced the arrest of 280 individuals during Operation Equalize, a week-long crackdown targeting asylum seekers illegally working in the gig economy, particularly as delivery riders in cities like Hillingdon, Dumfries, and Birmingham. The operation, which inspected 1,780 people, underscores the government's commitment to enforcing immigration and employment laws, addressing public concerns about border security and unauthorized labor.

Operation Equalize, conducted from July 22 to July 28, 2025, focused on areas with high concentrations of asylum seeker accommodations, notably Hillingdon, London's borough with the most migrant hotels, as well as Dumfries, Scotland, and Birmingham, England, according to the Home Office. In West London alone, seven Indian nationals were detained on July 22, with five facing immigration-related charges, per a Home Office statement. Of the 280 arrests nationwide, 53 individuals now face reviews of their asylum support, which could lead to suspension or withdrawal, reflecting the government's firm stance on upholding legal work restrictions for asylum seekers.

The Home Office described the initiative as a "nationwide intensification week," targeting illegal work in the gig economy, where asylum seekers, barred from employment while their claims are processed, have been found working for delivery platforms like Deliveroo, Just Eat, and Uber Eats. Border Security Minister Dame Angela Eagle stated, "Illegal working undermines our border security, and we're cracking down hard on it," per The Guardian. The operation also issued penalty notices to 51 businesses, including car washes and restaurants, facing fines of up to £60,000 per illegal worker, reinforcing accountability for employers.

Eddy Montgomery, Home Office Enforcement Director, emphasized ongoing efforts, saying, "Officers are taking action around the clock against those who think they can get away with working illegally," as reported by The Independent. A £5 million investment from a £100 million border security fund will bolster Immigration Enforcement (IE) visits to hotspots over the coming months. This follows June 2025 reports of "clear evidence" of migrants working illegally while residing in asylum hotels, prompting the government to share hotel location data with delivery firms to disrupt such activities, per The Telegraph.

The operation, supported by police forces, resulted in the seizure of 71 vehicles, including 58 e-bikes, £8,000 in cash under the Proceeds of Crime Act, and £460,000 in suspected illegal cigarettes, according to the Home Office. Delivery companies have pledged to enhance facial verification and fraud checks to prevent unauthorized workers, per BBC News. Asylum seekers typically cannot work in the UK until their claims are processed, though they may apply for permission after 12 months, a rule critics argue creates incentives for illegal labor.

This crackdown reflects a broader push to reduce "pull factors" for migration, addressing public frustration with lax enforcement. By targeting illegal work and penalizing complicit businesses, Operation Equalize aims to restore trust in the immigration system, ensuring

compliance with laws that prioritize legal residents' opportunities while maintaining order and fairness in the labor market.