



## Consortium representing child refugees speaks out against Labour's AI plans

### Description

default watermark

Refugee child safety threatened by Labour AI plans

The [Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium](#) (RMCC) has [spoken out against government plans to access asylum seekers' age using AI](#).

On Friday 29 May, the Home Office announced plans to use AI in cases when an asylum seekers' age is in dispute. However, the RMCC warned that the scheme could lead to yet more wrongful detentions of vulnerable children in adult facilities.

The news follows April's [revelations from the independent](#) Humans for Rights Network, which exposed the fact that the Home Office routinely detains [so-called 'age-disputed children'](#) as adults. Of the [76 age-disputed detainees](#) at the time, 26 had been or were in the process of being reassessed as children by Social Services.

## Just get an AI to do it!

Most of the unaccompanied children who brave the journey to the UK in search of asylum [are 16-17 years old](#). The Home Office's own data shows that social workers are more than twice as likely to confirm that these individuals are minors compared to assessments carried out by immigration officers.

Ultimately, over two-thirds of the age-disputed individuals are confirmed to be their stated age. Nevertheless, Labour choose to focus on the 'threat' of the perceived adult migrants.

Alex Norris, the minister for border security and asylum, argued that:

For too long, adult migrants making false age claims have exploited the system and diverted vital support away from children at risk.

That is why we are rolling out AI technology to put a stop to this, ensuring those who game the system are identified, detained and removed without delay, and those who deserve support and protection are given it.

That now-familiar appeal to AI is part of Labour's massive push to use the technology across vast swathes of public life - including [policing and the court system](#)

## Private sector enrichment

Of course, that AI-push has also seen massive amounts of public money pad the pockets of tech-sector CEOs. One company alone - genocide-linked Palantir - currently holds [over Â£500m in public contracts](#) from the NHS to law enforcement.

The government's machine [was championed by Tony Blair](#) and his eponymous think-tank, which just happened to take information from AI-specialist CEO Larry Ellison.

With regard to refugee age verification, the Home Office [handed a 3-year, Â£322,000 contract](#) to Akhter Computers Ltd for testing and development.

But what exactly is the AI technology that Labour is aiming to deploy in this particular case? Friday's Home Office [announcement explained that](#)

Facial Age Estimation (FAE) uses machine learning technology to estimate an individual's age within seconds by analysing a facial photograph without further information about the individual. [!]

FAE is not the same as facial recognition technology. While both use artificial intelligence, they serve different purposes and use different algorithms. Facial recognition compares an image against a database to identify a person. FAE does not identify individuals and does not search any databases. It only estimates an age from an image.

The Home Office isn't using FAE at the present moment in time. However, the department plans to spend the remainder of the year testing the technology ahead of a rollout in 2027.

## Problems with bias and inaccuracy

However, [the plans have met with strong opposition](#) from organisations representing young refugees. Kamena Dorling, co-chair of the RMCC, stated that:

The government's proposals are deeply concerning. AI cannot account for the factors that can significantly affect a young person's appearance after fleeing conflict and persecution and undertaking dangerous journeys, including trauma, malnutrition, and exhaustion.

Existing evidence also shows that AI faces the same problems with bias and inaccuracy as human decision-making, with similar patterns of errors.

Whilst it may seem intensely obvious, the fact that children fleeing active warzones might look older than their years apparently escaped Labour's notice.

Likewise, as Dorling said, AI has [a tendency to replicate human errors](#) rather than eliminating them. Meanwhile, it obscures those errors in a cloak of cold, algorithmically-determined 'fairness'.

## 'A false sense of certainty'

Senior policy analyst and consultant Amber Kama Petruczenko, of the Refugee Council, said:

The government's own figures already show that thousands of children are being wrongly treated as adults following flawed visual assessments at the border, with devastating consequences for their safety and wellbeing.

AI and facial age estimation technology are not a simple or risk-free answer to these longstanding problems. Poor image quality and bias in datasets can also affect accuracy.

There is a real danger that this technology creates a false sense of certainty in decisions that are already extremely difficult to get right. If flawed assessments are simply automated, more children could end up wrongly placed in adult accommodation, detention centres or even prisons.

The government has already shown an awareness of these biases. However, beyond vague statements about trying to minimise errors, it simply doesn't care. The Home Office announcement [stated that](#)

There is evidence in testing data that FAE performance can vary depending on ethnicity, skin tone, gender, place of birth and quality of input image. NIST [The National Institute of Standards and Technology] found that error rates were almost always higher for female faces, although it didn't find out why as testing was purely on performance rather than how algorithms work.

Vendors take bias seriously and commercial FAE technology is trained to be representative of the broadest possible demographic range of potential users.

“The technology is racist and sexist, but we’re sure the people selling it to us are doing their best”. Well that’s all fine then, please carry on.

The RMCC [will release its full report](#), titled “Benchmarks and Borders: the use of facial age estimation to assess the age of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum”, in June this year. If the current state of Labour’s AI policy is anything to go by, the consortium will have no shortage of criticisms to fill its pages.

Featured image via [Leon Neal / Getty Images](#)

By [Alex/Rose Cocker](#)

[Source link](#)

CATEGORY

1. News

Category

1. News

*default watermark*