



BRIEFING

Migration to the UK: Asylum

AUTHOR: DR SCOTT BLINDER
PUBLISHED: 26/10/2017
NEXT UPDATE: 20/07/2018

6th Revision



This briefing sets out key facts and figures, as well as information gaps, relating to the number of asylum seekers applying to stay in the UK, who these asylum seekers are, how many are rejected, what the overall impacts of asylum seekers are on UK migration statistics and what happens to asylum seekers after their applications have been processed.

Key Points

Asylum applications (excluding dependents) peaked at 84,100 in 2002 and reached a low point of 17,900 in 2010. After several years of increases, applications dropped by 6% to 30,700 in 2016.

Asylum applicants and their dependents comprised an estimated 9% of net migration in 2015, down from 44% in 2002.

In 2016, 68% of initial asylum applications were refused but 42% of appeals against initial refusals were successful.

Men made up 75% of main applicants for asylum in 2016.

The UK received about 3% of asylum claims made in EU countries (plus Norway and Switzerland) in 2016, and was the sixth highest recipient of asylum claims.

In 2016, 4,369 Syrians were resettled through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme.

Understanding the evidence

Asylum applicants or 'asylum seekers' are individuals who come to the UK and apply for protection as refugees. A refugee is someone who has fled his or her own country, and cannot return for well-founded fear of persecution there. The UK adheres to UN and European agreements on refugees and human rights and therefore must not return asylum applicants to a place where they are likely to face torture or persecution.

Data on asylum seekers are considered separately from data on resettled refugees. Unlike asylum seekers, who make their own way to the UK to claim asylum, resettled refugees are identified outside of the country and brought here with the help of the UK government and the United Nations. The largest resettlement programme in the UK is now the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme, announced in September 2015.

Asylum adds to the UK resident population in several ways. First, it adds to the legal, permanent ('settled'), population. A minority of applicants gain permission to stay in the UK ('leave to remain'), and may remain long enough to settle in the UK. Leave to remain might mean official recognition as a refugee or permission to stay for 'humanitarian protection' (HP) or through 'discretionary leave to remain' (DL). In each case, the protected individual can stay in the UK for five years and then has the opportunity to apply for indefinite leave to remain.

Second, asylum adds to the temporary population. Applicants who are unsuccessful and eventually leave the UK nonetheless will live in the UK for some time as they await a decision. Any such applicant who lives in the UK for at least 12 months is classified as a 'long-term international migrant'.

A third group is more difficult to count – individuals whose applications for asylum have been rejected, but who have not departed the country. Some in this group apply for 'hard case support' (also known as Section 4) while awaiting departure, and are tracked in Home Office data. Others may have departed outside of official removal or voluntary departure schemes; still others may remain illegally in the UK out of contact with immigration control, and thus uncounted.

The Home Office counts applications, decisions (initially and on appeal), and grants of leave to remain for asylum applicants. This includes dependents who arrived with the main applicant as part of the initial application. These data provide good estimates of the first two routes into the population for asylum seekers: 1) those who gain leave to remain in the UK, and 2) those that live in the UK temporarily while their cases are in process. The challenges in understanding the make-up of the third group, those whose application have been rejected but still remain here without legal permission, are discussed in the Evidence gaps and limitations section.

Throughout the briefing, data used are for the most recent full calendar year available.

Asylum applications peaked in the early 2000s. They increased from 2010 to 2015 and fell slightly in 2016, when they stood at 30,600 main applicants

Asylum applications increased from 1987 to 2002, but played a declining role in overall migration from 2003 to 2010. Since 2010 asylum applications have increased but remain well below the levels of the early 2000s.

As Figure 1 shows, asylum applications increased from 4,300 in 1987 to 84,100 in 2002, before falling to 25,700 in 2005. After little change until 2009, applications declined temporarily to 17,900 in 2010. Since then,

the numbers rose each year to 32,700 in 2015 but fell by 6% to 30,700 in 2016. These numbers include only 'main applicants', excluding 'dependents' who are family members accompanying the principal person making the application. The numbers including dependents are slightly higher, at 39,400 in 2016.

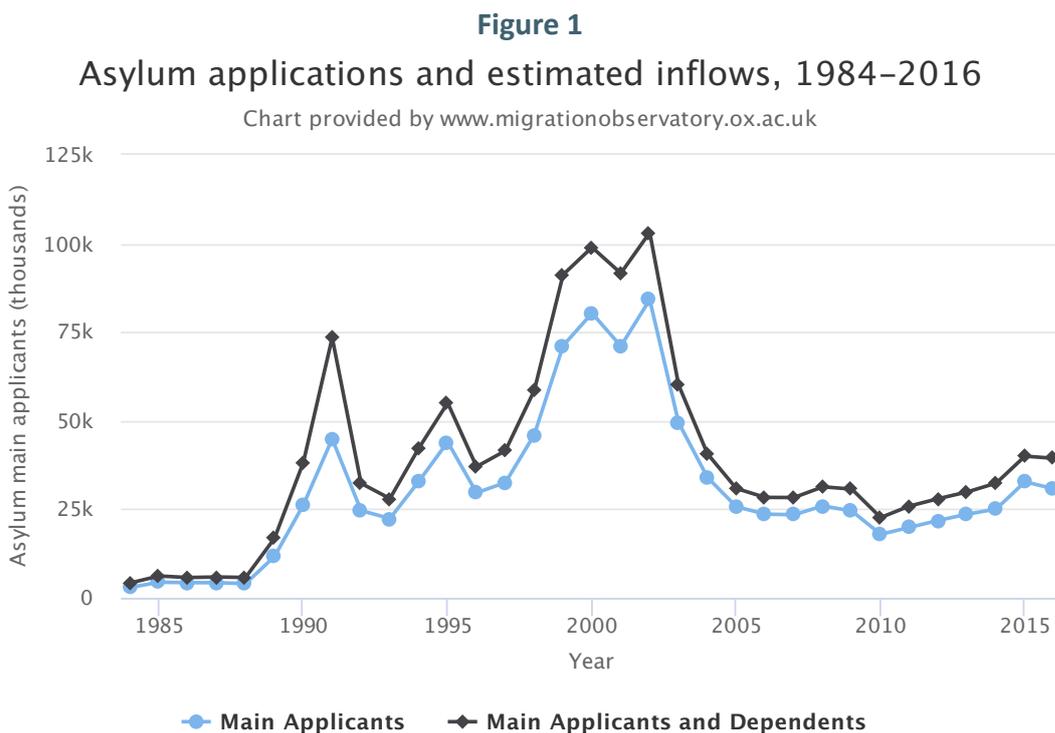
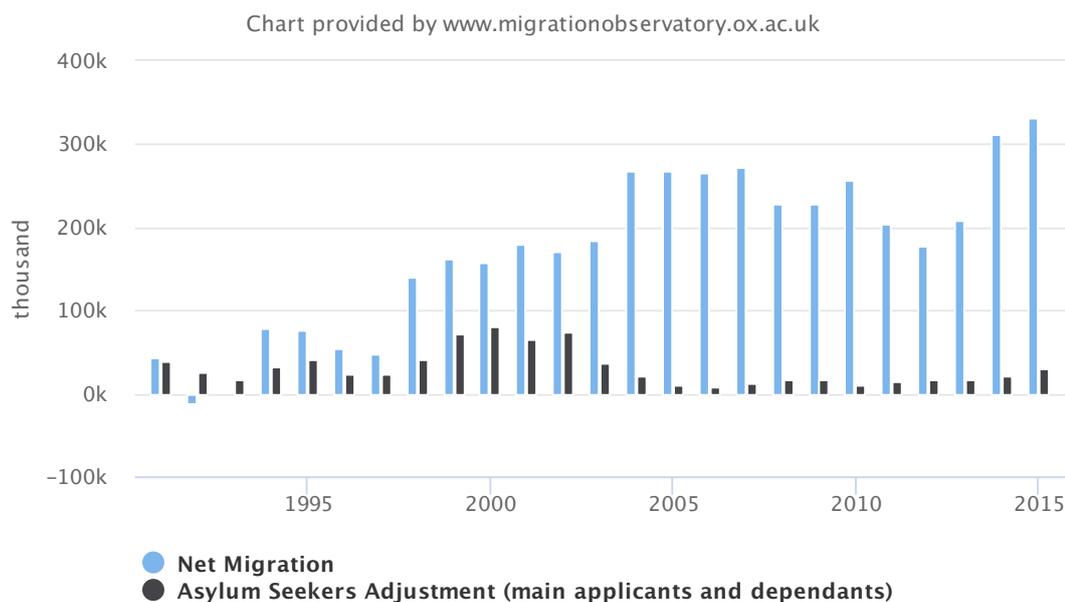


Figure 2 Asylum seekers with dependents & net migration, 1991–2015

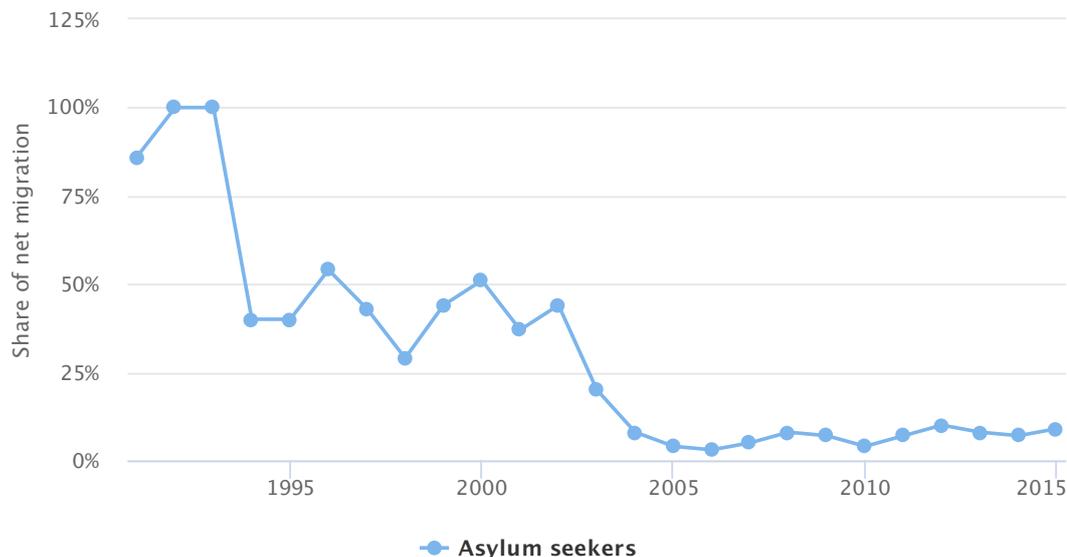


Asylum seekers make up a smaller share of net migration than they did in the 1990s and early 2000s. Between 1994 and 2003, asylum seekers' share of annual net migration ranged from 20% to 54% in annual data. This trend had changed decisively by 2004 as net migration again increased and asylum declined. Between 2004 and 2014, asylum ranged from 3% to 10% of net migration, and was estimated at about 9% for 2015.

Figure 3

Asylum seekers with dependents as share of net migration, 1991-2015

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: ONS LTIM, Table 1.01

Note: Asylum seekers include main applicants and dependants.

Net migration calculations depend on assumptions about asylum-related outflows. The ONS calculation of asylum seeker departures includes asylum applicants who were returned to their country of origin, those who withdrew applications and were known to have left the UK, and 'a small number' of those who had been 'refused asylum in the previous year or who had withdrawn their application and were not known to have left

the UK'. This latter number is unverifiable without complete data on departures from the UK (ONS 2008:11).

Data on grants of settlement to migrants also show asylum constituting a falling share of the total from 2005 to 2010; during this period the share of asylum applicants among all settlement grants fell from 38% to 2%. Numbers then began to rise again, reaching 24% in 2016 (see Figure 4). An August 2005 policy change contributed to the sharp decline from 2005-2011.

This change meant that asylum seekers granted leave to remain were no longer immediately granted settlement. As a result, this delayed settlement for those granted refugee status, humanitarian protection (HP) or discretionary leave to remain (DL).

The rising share of settlements attributable to asylum in 2013-2016 is primarily due to the decline in the number

Figure 4

Asylum (including dependents) as share of settlement

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics Table as.02

of grants of settlement for other reasons, rather than an increase in the number of asylum-related grants.

On the other hand, it appears that a significant share of settlements from 2005-2011 came from government efforts to address backlogs of undecided asylum applications and refused asylum applicants who remain in the UK. This is detailed in our briefing 'Settlement in the UK'.

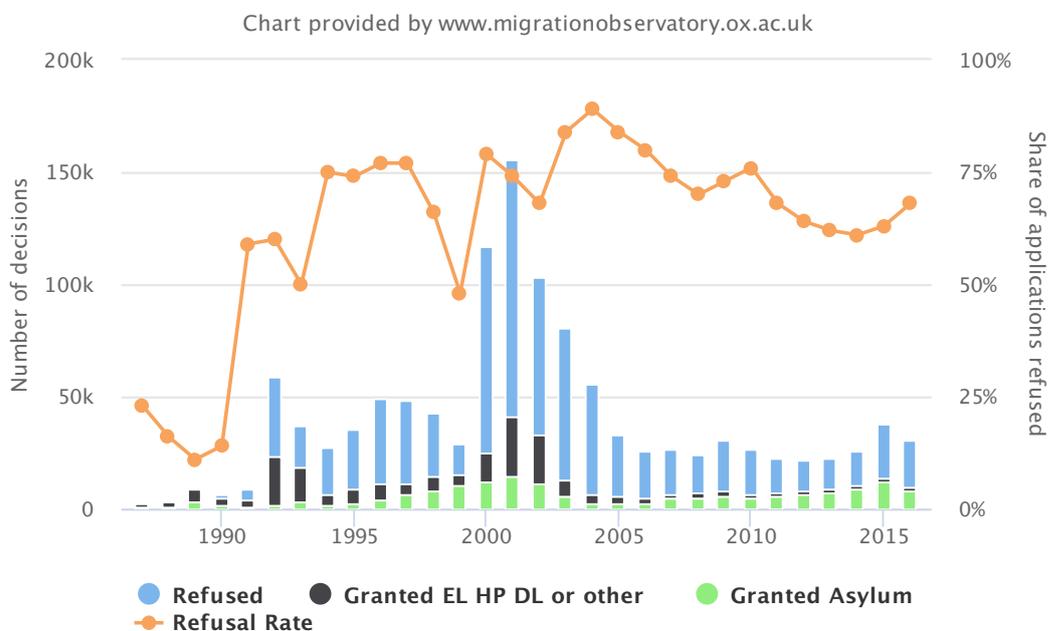
In 2016, 68% of initial asylum applications were refused but 42% of appeals against initial refusals were successful

Looking first at decisions by year, Figure 5 shows that the majority of initial decisions were refusals in each year since 1991. In 2016, 68% of initial decisions were refusals.

A majority of initial refusals are appealed. Looking at annual cohorts of applicants

Figure 5

Asylum application outcomes, 1987–2016

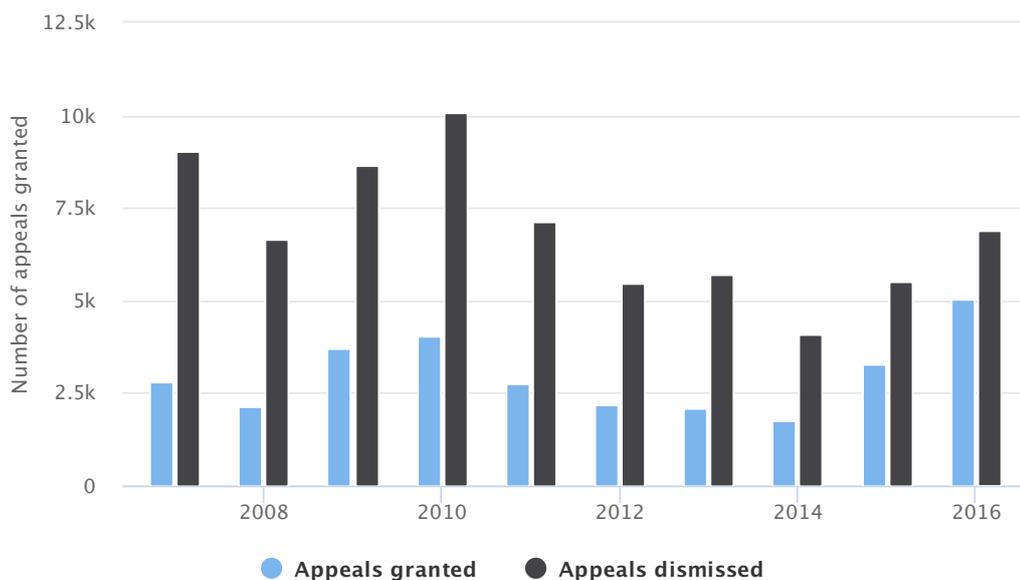


Source: Home Office Statistics Table as.02

Figure 6

Outcomes of asylum appeals, 2007–2016

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics Table as.14

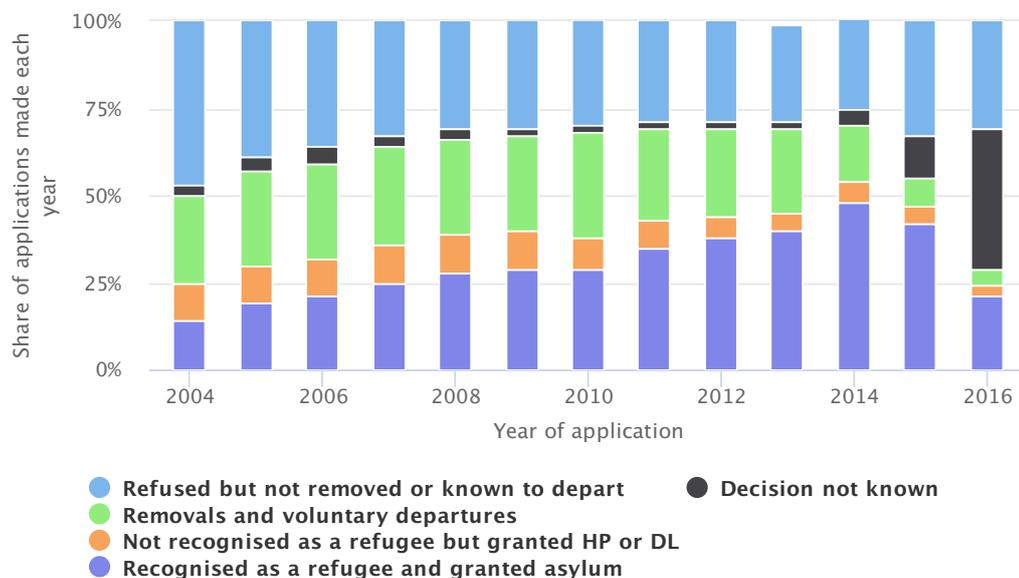
making applications in 2004-2015, between 70% and 86% of applicants whose initial application was refused lodged an appeal (Home Office, 2017c, table as_06).

As shown in Figure 6, over 2007 to 2016, there were between 6,000 and 15,000 appeals decided each year, and the number of appeals allowed varied between 1,700 and just over 5,000 each year. On average, 30% of appeals during this period were allowed and 70% were dismissed. The share of appeals allowed increased

from 2013 onwards, reaching 42% in 2016.

Figure 7
Asylum outcomes by cohort, 2004–2016

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: Home Office as.06

Taking into account the number of successful appeals, it is possible to calculate a revised share of asylum applications that are eventually granted or refused. Among people who applied for asylum in 2015, just under half (48%) were granted some form of protection by May 2016 – either as refugees (42%) or through HP or DL (5%) – while 41% had been refused protection. For 12% the final decision was not yet known (Figure 7). Also among 2015 applicants, 19% were

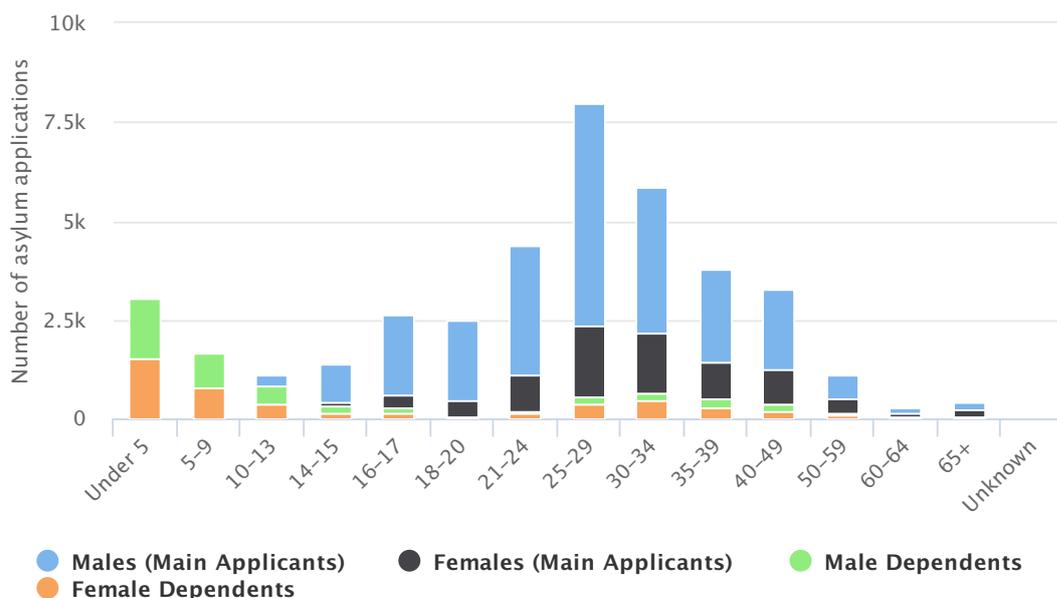
known to have left the country. There are no data showing how many refused asylum seekers remained in the UK and how many departed in another way without being detected in Home Office data.

Figure 7 shows the outcomes of asylum applications by cohorts as at August 2016. The share of asylum applicants granted some form of protection in the UK has gradually increased over time since 2004, albeit with a slight dip in 2015. This increasing share meant that for the first time since these data have been available, more of the 2014 and 2015 applicants have now been granted some form of protection than refused.

The final outcomes for recent cohorts (particularly people applying in 2016) are subject to change because earlier cohorts of asylum applicants have had more time for their cases to be processed than later (i.e. more recent) cohorts (Home Office, 2016b: 63). Thus, more recent cohorts tend to have a greater proportion of asylum applications awaiting the outcome of their initial decision or appeal.

Figure 8
Asylum applicants by age and sex, 2016

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics Table as.03

Men made up nearly 75% of main applicants for asylum in 2016

Available demographic data show that main applicants are predominantly adult men from nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, although a large share came from Europe in the early 2000s, due to conflicts in areas such as Kosovo. In 2016, asylum applicants (excluding dependents) were 75% male and 25% female. Young adult main applicants were especially likely to be male, as seen in Figure 8. Dependents were more likely to be female, especially those between the ages of 21 and 49.

Table 1 - Top ten nationalities, UK asylum applicants, 2016

Country	Number of Applicants	Share of Total
Iran	4837	12.3%
Pakistan	3774	9.6%
Iraq	3734	9.5%
Afghanistan	3115	7.9%
Bangladesh	2256	5.7%
India	2054	5.2%
Nigeria	1894	4.8%
Albania	1884	4.8%
Syria	1569	4.0%
Sudan	1445	3.7%

The nationality of asylum seekers changes as crises come and go across the globe, since asylum seekers come mainly from countries embroiled in political and military conflicts (Crawley 2010). In 2016, the leading sources of asylum applicants in the UK were Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Albania, Syria and Sudan. Asylum applicants from Syria increased sharply in recent years, from 160 in 2010 to 2,794 in 2015. There were

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics Table as.01

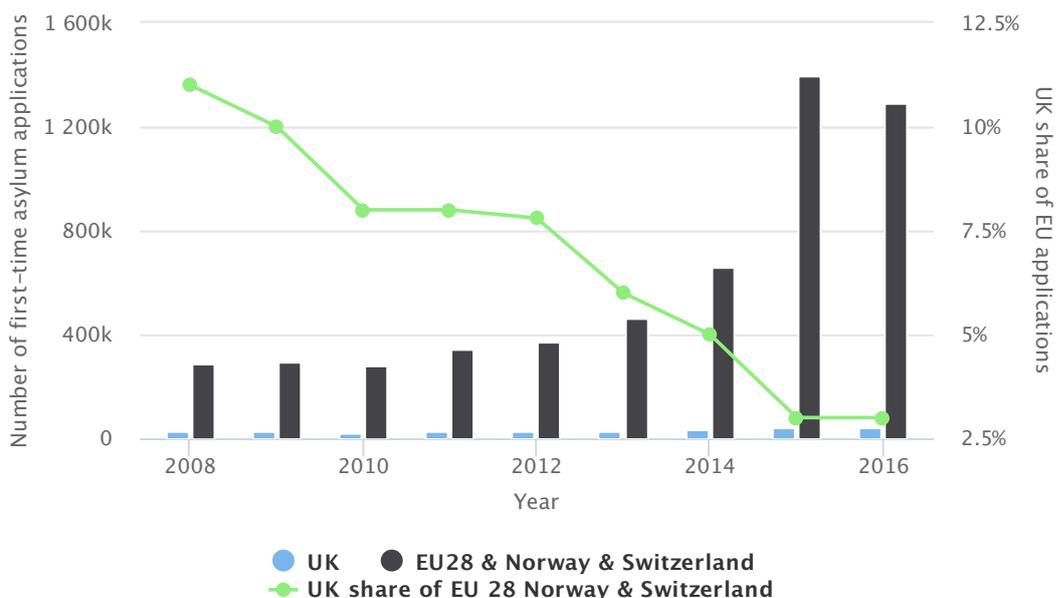
1,569 applications from Syrian in 2016. These figures do not include people resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (SVPR) scheme.

As recently as 2000, the UK received more than 20,000 asylum seekers from Europe, more than from Africa or the Middle East, including thousands from Serbia and Montenegro and thousands more from 2004 EU Accession states. Resolution of crises, as well as EU enlargement, seems to have reduced the number of asylum seekers in the UK: European asylum seekers in the UK accounted for 2,200 in 2016.

Figure 9

Asylum claims in UK & Europe, 2008–2016

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



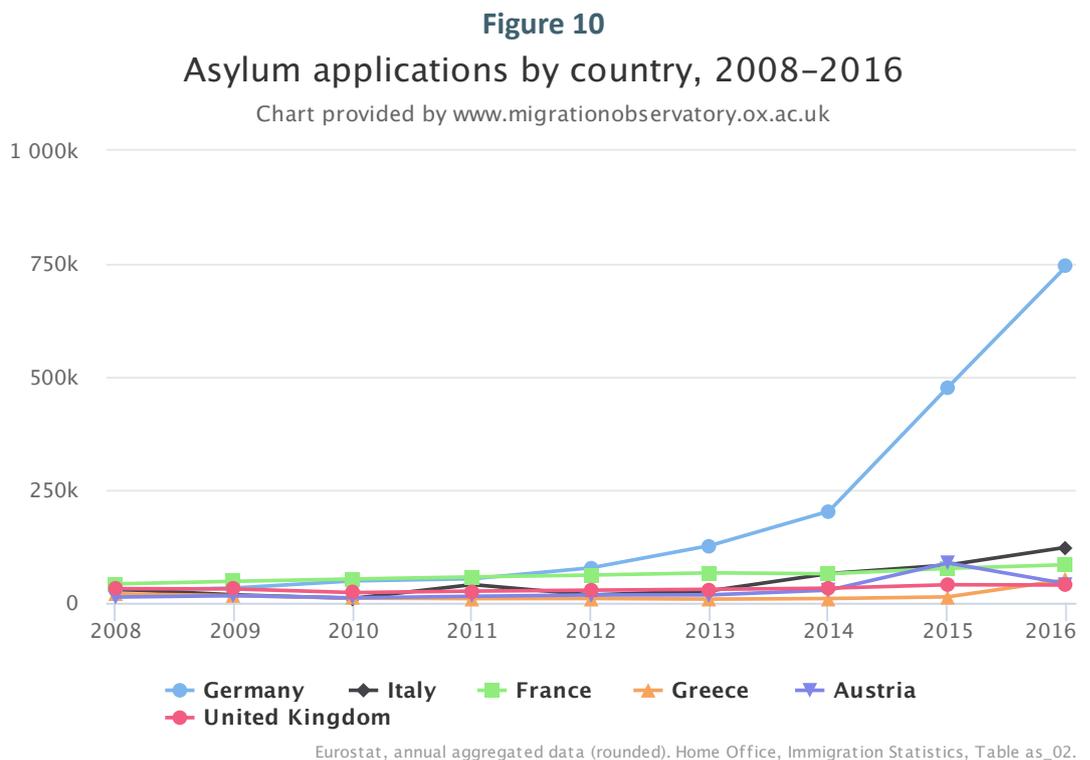
Eurostat, annual aggregated data (rounded). Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Table as_02.

Note: Figures relate to claims, not individuals; people who apply in more than one EU country will be counted more than once.

The UK's share of Europe's asylum claims declined from 2008 onwards

Eurostat figures provide information on asylum applications across Europe. As seen in Figure 9, UK asylum applications since 2008 have stayed relatively stable compared to Europe-wide trends. In 2016, asylum claims in European countries (EU-28 plus Norway and Switzerland) reached just over 1,290,500, according to Eurostat.

The UK's share of Europe's asylum claims declined from approximately 11% in 2008 to about 3% in both 2015 and 2016.



Figures relate to claims, not individuals; people who apply in more than one EU country will be counted more than once.

Figure 10 shows Eurostat data for the top five European countries and the UK, in terms of 2016 asylum applications. The highest numbers of claims were seen in Germany (745,155), Italy (122,960), and France (84,270). Among these countries, Germany and Greece experienced the greatest annual increase in applications between 2015 and 2016 of 133% and 61% respectively. Home Office asylum applications data for the UK including dependents show a small decline (-2%) from 39,968 in 2015 to 39,357 in 2016.

In 2016, 4,369 Syrians were resettled through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme

In September 2015, the government announced plans to resettle up to 20,000 Syrians in need of protection in the UK by 2020 (Home Office, 2016a). These people are identified by the United Nations and brought directly to the country (in contrast to asylum applicants who must reach the UK first in order to claim asylum). By the end of 2016, 4,369 Syrians had been resettled through the new scheme, known as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (Home Office, 2017c, table as_19_q).

Evidence gaps and limitations

Information on rejected asylum applicants - and whether or not they leave the country - is a critical weakness in existing data sources. Some rejected applicants depart by government removal or various voluntary departures schemes for which data are available. Others, as noted above, might either depart without notifying authorities or remain in the UK as part of the irregular migrant population. Reliable data do not exist to discern between these two categories.

Indeed, lack of data on departures from the UK is a weakness in asylum data and migration data generally in the UK. The Home Office has begun to use passenger data from airlines and other sources to track departures, but it may be some time before the data can be used reliably for statistical purposes.

Thus, estimates of asylum's role in net migration are uncertain, as total outflows can currently only be guessed. The Office of National Statistics assumes the departure of some percentage of asylum seekers in its widely-used estimate of Long-Term International Migration, or LTIM, as in Figure 1 (ONS 2008: 10-11).

Dependents arriving in the UK after the initial decision on the main applicant are counted in entry statistics as dependents, but are not distinguished as dependents of asylum-seekers or refugees. Similarly, dependents are counted in settlement statistics only if they were granted settlement at the same time as the main applicant they accompany (ICAR 2009). Thus, we cannot accurately capture the total number of people coming to the UK with asylum seekers, as some may arrive later to join a successful applicant.

Most published administrative data count the number of events in a given month, quarter, or year. Thus, data for a given time period show, for example, how many asylum applications were made, how many applicants were recognised as refugees, and how many refugees were granted settlement. But each of these pieces of information refers to a different set of people. Many applicants whose claims were decided in 2009 applied in an earlier year, for example. Thus, it would be incorrect to calculate the percentage of 2009 asylum seekers granted settlement by taking the number of settlement grants in 2009 and dividing by asylum applications in 2009.

The Home Office's new tracking of annual 'cohorts' of asylum applicants helps with this problem. Cohort data show the eventual outcomes for each yearly group of applicants since 2004. For more recent years many cases remain undecided, however.

References

- ICAR. "Key Statistics about Asylum Seeker Applications in the UK." ICAR Statistics Paper 1, Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, London, December 2009 update.
- Crawley, Heaven. "Chance or Choice? Understanding Why Asylum Seekers Come to the UK." Refugee Council Report, Refugee Council, London, 2010.
- FRONTEX. "Migratory routes map".
- Home Office. "Policy and legislative changes affecting migration to the UK: timeline " Published 19 February 2014, last update 24 August 2017.
- Home Office. "User Guide to Home Office Immigration Statistics" Last updated: August 2017b.
- Home Office. "Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release" Home Office, London, August 2017c.
- Home Office. "Policy and legislative changes affecting migration to the UK: timeline " Published 19 February 2014, last update 25 February 2016a.
- ONS. "Methodology to Estimate Total International Migration 1991 to 2008." Office for National Statistics, Newport, 2008.
- Stewart, Emma. "Deficiencies in UK Asylum Data: Practical and Theoretical Challenges." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no 1 (2004): 29.

Further readings

- Aspinall, Peter and Charles Watters. "Refugees and Asylum Seekers. A Review from an Equality and Human Rights Perspective." Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 52, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Manchester, 2010.
- Robinson, Vaughan and Jeremy Segrott. "Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers." Home Office Research Study 243, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, London, 2002.

Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing - Settlement in the UK



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

About the author

Dr Scott Blinder
Research Associate, COMPAS
scottblinder@polsci.umass.edu

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

Recommended citation

Blinder, Scott. "Migration to the UK: Asylum." Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, UK, October 2017.

