



# COMMENTARY

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Too many? Too few? Too difficult? How should the UK think about how many refugees to take?

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[www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)

The refugee crisis in the Middle East has been the defining international issue of 2015. Images and stories of people fleeing conflict – as well as a stream of statistics documenting sharp increases in asylum applications in Europe – have filled the media and generated a powerful public response.

The UK response to the crisis – and particularly to the number of refugees it has been willing to accept – has provoked intense debate. Faced with a surge in public concern, the government agreed in September to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK by 2020, from camps in Syria's neighbouring countries.

Some, including [NGOs](#), [celebrities](#), participants in '[Refugees Welcome](#)' campaigns, and politicians in the [UK](#) and [overseas](#) have criticised the government for failing to do enough. Others [disagree](#), saying that current numbers are sufficient and should not be increased.

Polls in September and October suggested the UK public was ambivalent, with [no majority](#) in favour of any of the three main options of increasing, reducing, or maintaining refugee numbers; and a [majority](#) saying they did not know how many Syrian refugees should be admitted. A poll conducted after the 13 November terrorist attacks in Paris suggested an increase in the share of the public supporting lower levels of refugee resettlement – or none at all. (For further discussion on migration and security issues see our previous commentary, '[Migration and Security: Navigating the Risks](#)'.)

Faced with this uncertainty, how should the UK decide how many refugees to take? One of the reasons this has been such a difficult question is that there are many different lenses through which it can be viewed. In this commentary, we examine some of the different approaches that have been taken to thinking through the numbers.

## Asylum vs. resettlement in numbers

Before tackling these questions, it is important to emphasize that refugees gain residence rights in the UK in two very different ways: through the asylum system and through refugee resettlement.

Asylum seekers are people who arrive in the UK under their own steam and apply for protection. As a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention the UK is obliged to ensure that they will not be sent back to a country where they may face persecution. In most cases, the UK government assesses applicants' claims and if it finds that they meet the criteria, grants them refugee status or humanitarian protection, enabling them to remain in the UK. (Some candidates may be rejected for these statuses but receive Discretionary Leave to remain.) Asylum applicants come from a range of countries; the [top nationalities in 2014](#), for example, were Eritrea, Pakistan, Syria, and Iran.

The UK cannot impose quotas on the number of applicants to whom it will grant protection, because this could mean rejecting applicants with valid claims. However, successive governments have attempted to reduce numbers of asylum applications. In 2003, for example, Tony Blair announced a target of [halving asylum applications](#) within a year. A [series of policies](#) introduced during the early 2000s aimed to make it harder for people to reach the UK to make a claim and to create an unwelcoming environment for people while their claims were being considered. This included the revocation of work rights while claims are being processed and a dispersal system requiring people to live outside of London and the South East.

Refugee resettlement programmes, by contrast, involve taking in people whose need for protection has already been established outside of the country by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The 20,000 refugees the prime minister pledged to accept by 2020 will be resettled through an existing programme of this kind known as the [Syrian Vulnerable Persons scheme](#). Compared to the current asylum system, resettlement therefore gives the government more direct control over the numbers of refugees it will take.

Until the recent announcement to expand the programme for Syrian refugees, the vast majority of people given some form of protection in the UK came through the asylum system and not through resettlement. For example:

- In 2014, just over 25,000 people applied for asylum (or 32,200 if dependants are included in the total). These numbers have been increasing gradually from 17,900 main applicants in 2010, but remain well below the peak of just under 84,100 main applicants in 2002.
- Close to 10,900 main applicants from the 2014 cohort had been granted some form of protection by August 2015 (either initially or after an appeal), although the final decision was not yet known for a further 5,500 applicants.
- The UK resettled 630 refugees from around the world under its Gateway programme in 2014; 14 through its [Mandate programme](#) for recognised refugees with family members or other close ties in the UK; and 143 through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons scheme.

Assuming that the number of people granted asylum does not fall from the 2014 level and an average of 5,000 Syrians are resettled per year until 2020, successful asylum applicants will therefore continue to outnumber resettled refugees, albeit by a much smaller margin than in the past.

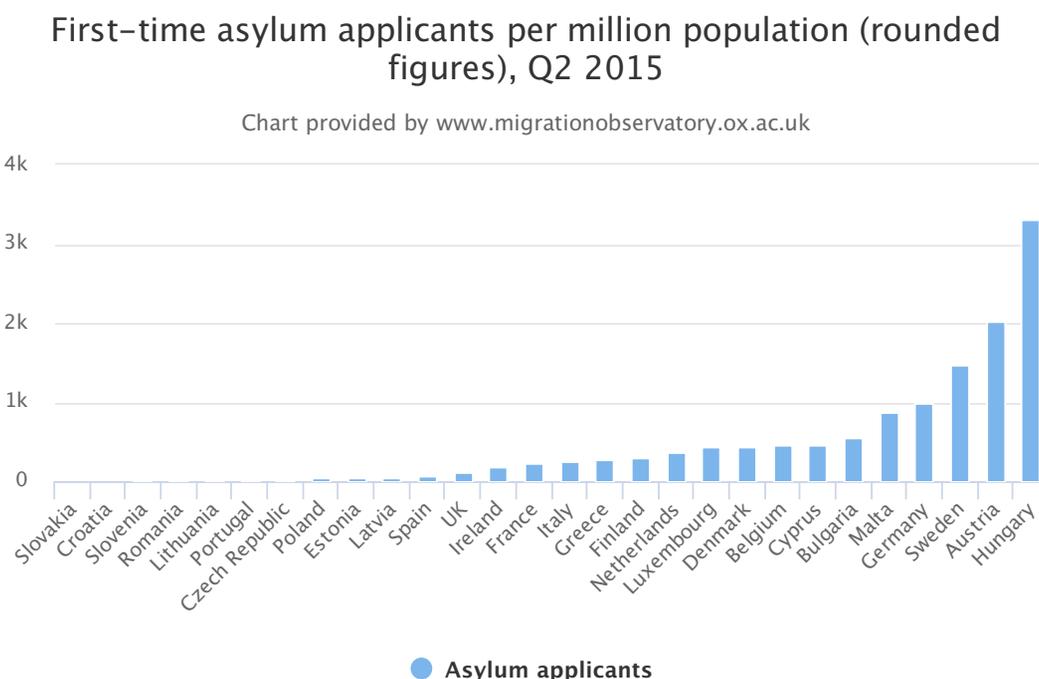
### International responsibilities: What is a ‘fair share’?

A major part of the political debate about asylum in Europe has been how countries should share responsibilities for admitting people in need of protection. This has included a discussion about whether and how asylum seekers should be relocated from EU countries with larger numbers of applications to those with fewer.

The UK’s geography, its non-participation in the EU’s Schengen free movement zone and existing policies to reduce access to the UK by people who might claim asylum have contributed to the fact that its increases in applications have been considerably smaller than in other EU countries.

In the second quarter of 2015 the UK was 17th out of 28 EU countries in terms of the number of asylum applications per capita it received (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



Source: Eurostat Asylum quarterly report Sep 2015: First time asylum applicants, Q2 2014 – Q2 2015

According to Eurostat, the UK had 115 asylum applicants for every million residents in the country in the second quarter of 2015. Compared to the UK, the number of applicants per million population was 9 times higher in Germany, 13 times higher in Sweden, and 18 times higher in Austria. The EU-28 average was 3.7 times higher than in the UK, at 420 per million residents.

The concept of a “fair share” of refugees is fundamentally subjective, however, and there are many different ways that such a share could potentially be calculated.

For example, the EU agreed earlier this year a [plan to relocate](#) asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to other EU countries, excluding the UK which did not opt to participate. The plan used a formula to allocate shares to participating countries, taking into account four factors: the size of the country’s population, its income (GDP), the number of asylum applicants it has already received over the past five years, and the unemployment rate. (This plan is due to be implemented in the coming months, although some EU countries still oppose it.)

The total number of refugees a country chooses to take is not the only factor that one could consider when thinking about ‘fair’ contributions. For example, the Home Secretary [has argued](#) that the UK’s approach of relocating people directly from the region around Syria is more responsible than participating in a relocation programme from the EU because it prioritises those most in need (for example, people with complex health needs) and does not encourage people to take dangerous journeys to access protection. The Prime Minister [has emphasised](#) that the UK makes a different kind of contribution in the form of larger international aid donations than other EU countries to [displaced people](#) in Syria and neighbouring countries.

There is no obvious way to determine exactly how factors such as these should be weighted, and which other factors, if any, should be taken into account.

One’s perspective on what counts as a ‘fair share’ may also depend on which other countries are used for the comparison. The EU provides one frame of reference, but taking other groups of countries would yield different results. If we choose to compare EU member states to Syria’s immediate neighbours that have received the vast majority of displaced people from Syria – Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon – then even states such as Sweden and Germany would fall short.

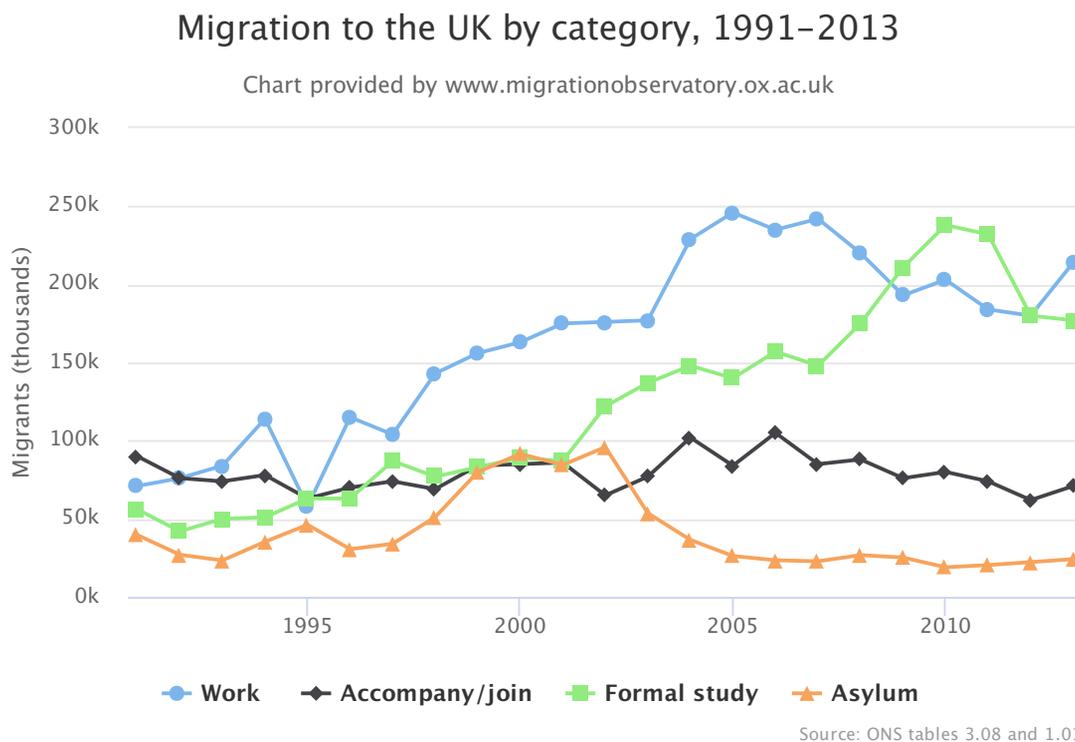
## Population and housing: does the UK have enough room?

A very different way to look at the question of refugee numbers is to consider a country’s capacity to admit newcomers.

Discussions about migration in general—rather than refugees in particular—have focused in recent years on the scale of migration and its contribution to population growth. Narratives about [overcrowding](#), pressure on [public services](#) and the [housing market](#) caused by an increasing population also feature heavily in media and political debates.

Net migration includes asylum seekers and refugees, although they make up a relatively small share of the total. Asylum is the smallest of the four main routes that immigrants use to enter the UK, after work, study and family (see Figure 2). Asylum applicants’ share of net migration has fluctuated between 3% and 10% since 2005. With net migration currently running at over 300,000, the additional 5,000 refugee arrivals per year proposed by the government would make up less than 2% of the total.

Figure 2



In other words, refugees are currently a relatively small contributor to population growth. Asylum seekers have a political importance that is not reflected in these statistics: [previous analysis](#) by the Migration Observatory suggests that when thinking about immigrants, members of the public were more likely to think of asylum seekers than other groups such as workers or international students.

Even if asylum seekers and refugees were more numerous, it would be difficult to give a clear answer to the question how many people the UK can accommodate.

There is no obvious way to decide what the ‘optimal’ population of the UK would be, as the Migration Observatory [has explained elsewhere](#). Any specific target for population growth or migration levels must by its nature be largely arbitrary. That is not to say that population growth or population density are irrelevant—just that analysis of the population provides little practical guidance for decisions about migration policy.

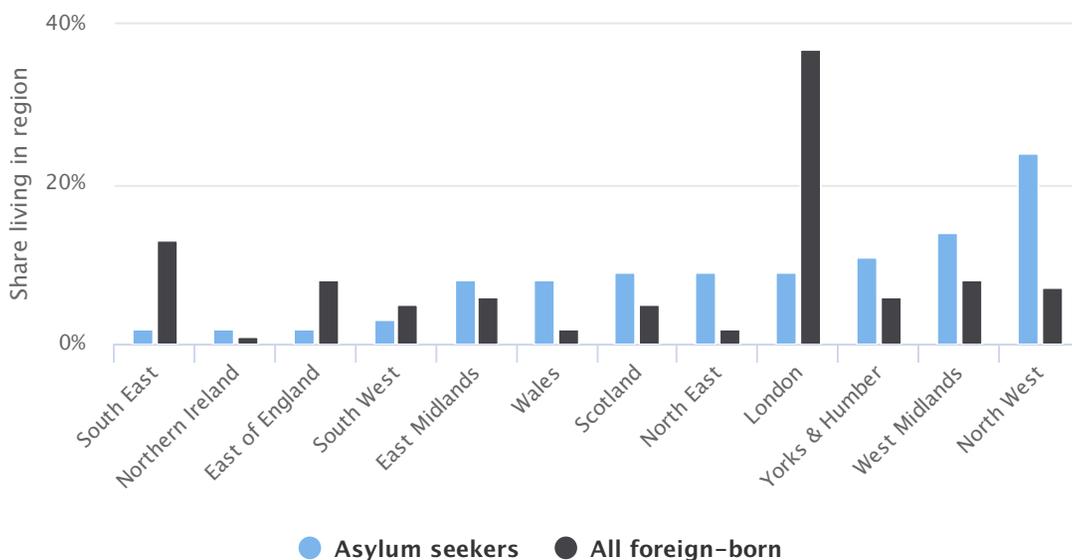
The arrival of refugees and asylum seekers may be expected to affect the UK’s population somewhat differently from other types of immigration, because of policies that encourage them to live in particular places. Destitute asylum seekers can apply to live in government-provided housing; since 1999, a “dispersal” system has provided this housing primarily outside of London and the South East, in areas where housing costs are lower. Resettled Syrian refugees will also be provided with housing in specific local authorities that agree to take them.

The effects of dispersal policies are visible in data on the locations of asylum seekers who are receiving financial support. London is home to 37% of the foreign-born population, but only 9% of supported asylum seekers (Figure 3, using data from 2014 and Q2 2015, respectively). Asylum seekers were considerably more likely to live in the North West, West Midlands, or Yorkshire and Humber than the overall foreign-born population.

Figure 3

### Location of asylum seekers receiving Section 95 support vs foreign-born population, 2014

Chart provided by [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics table as\_16\_q & ONS mid-year pop estimates by country of birth

Table 1 – Number of asylum seekers receiving section 95 support, by local authority, Q2 2015

Number of asylum seekers	Number of local authorities	Share
None	186	46%
1 to 5	104	26%
6 to 10	16	4%
10 to 20	14	3%
20 to 50	16	4%
50 to 100	15	4%
More than 100	61	15%

### Economics: Will refugees bring benefits or costs?

The rationale for accepting refugees is not an economic one, although decisions about refugee policy may have economic implications.

Refugees can work in the UK if their claims for protection have been recognised, and many may have had skilled jobs before they fled. However, resettled refugees will generally be arriving in the UK without employment lined up and many are expected to have complex health needs. Supporting refugees and their families will therefore involve financial outlays, particularly in the short term. In the long run, the economic implications of refugee flows may also depend on how successfully government and non-governmental organisations are able to support their integration.

Existing research on the impacts of migration has examined effects in the [labour market](#) or on [public finances](#), but it generally cannot distinguish between people coming for different reasons or holding different immigration statuses. Moreover, new refugees admitted through resettlement schemes may have different characteristics from those who have come in the past.

Previous research does suggest that, overall, the economic impacts of migration tend to be relatively small. The EU Commission's most recent [economic forecast](#) also came to this conclusion, arguing that the overall impact on public finances would be 'very limited' and the impact on overall GDP would also be small.

## Conclusions

None of the lenses for examining the UK's capacity or responsibility for accepting people in need of protection provide a clear prescription, even if they can help us to think through the issue.

Responses to humanitarian crises involve a suite of very different considerations, from questions of moral responsibility to financial resources, diplomatic relations and the views of the UK public. Faced with a problem as complex as the ongoing refugee crisis, it would be surprising if responsibility could be quantified in any straightforward way.



### 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](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk)

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### Press contact

Rob McNeil

Head of Media and Communications

[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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