BRIEFING

Non-European Migration to the UK: Family and Dependents

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This briefing examines data on non-EU/EEA migration to the UK of people whose basis for entry to the UK is through ties to a family member. Family migration includes what we identify as 'family unification' migration (those coming to join family members already living in Britain as citizens or settled residents) and 'dependents' who accompany or join a migrant with only temporary leave to remain in the UK.

Key Points

Non-EU Family migration increased from the 1990s to 2006, then declined between 2006 and 2012. Different data sources show dissimilar pattern regarding the number of non-EU family migrants since 2012.

Asia remains the most common region of origin for non-EEA family migrants to the UK.

A majority of non-EEA family unification migrants are women.

More than nine in ten non-EEA migrants with permission to enter the UK as spouses or fiancé(e)s are spouses (i.e. already married before they arrive).

Tier 1 and Tier 2 migrants bring the most dependents, per capita.

Understanding the evidence

Alongside work, study, and asylum, family migration is one of the four main categories of non-European migration to the UK, though there are multiple measures and definitions of it. In the most expansive definition, family migration includes anyone coming to the UK for the stated purpose of joining or accompanying a family member. Data from the Office of National Statistics, including the International Passenger Survey (IPS) and Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) estimates, are based on this broad definition. However different data sources show different levels of family migration. Some reasons for these discrepancies are well-known. For example, IPS data are limited to people planning to stay in the UK for a minimum of one year, but border admissions data and visa data are not.

In data based on non-EEA passengers entering the UK or entry clearance visas issued to non-EEA nationals, finer distinctions can be made among different sets of family migrants.

First, some migrants gain entry to the UK because they are the family member of a British citizen, or of a non-EEA national with indefinite leave to remain in the UK (i.e. a 'settled' migrant). These may be designated as "family unification" (or 'family formation and reunification') migrants.

Second, other migrants, called 'dependents', gain entry to the UK as family members of people who are themselves migrants to the UK with limited (temporary) leave to remain.
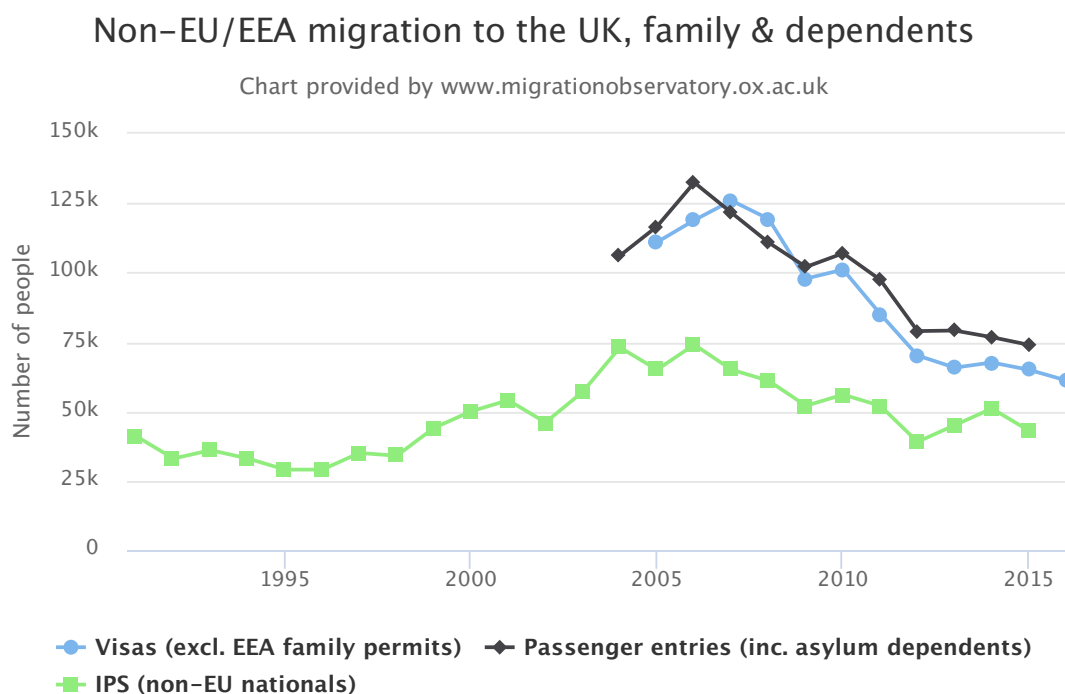
Third, some non-EEA migrants enter the UK as family members (almost always spouses or partners) of EEA nationals. Such individuals may obtain EEA family permits, but are not required to do so, and they may or may not be EEA nationals themselves. Thus this briefing does not generally include EEA family permits in counts of non-EU family migration, and focusses expressly on Non-EEA family migrants.

Non-EU family migration has increased less than other categories

According to IPS estimates, non-EU family migration to the UK increased from an average of 35,000 per year in the 1990s to 43,000 in 2015, or 18% of all non-EU immigration that year. These estimates include both dependents and family unification migrants. Family migration, like overall migration to the UK, increased from 1997 to the mid- 2000s, peaking at 74,000 in 2006 (see figure 1). Also similar to other categories of migration, family migration declined in the second half of the 2000s. These shifts in family migration were smaller in magnitude than similar shifts in migration for work. As a result of these trends, family migration comprises a smaller share of overall migration now than it did in the 1990s (see our briefing on Immigration by Category: Workers, Students, Family Members, Asylum Applicants).

Although this briefing focuses on non-EU migration, it is worth noting that, including EU nationals, family migration is now at similar levels to the 1990s. LTIM estimates of family migration were 90,000 in 1991 and averaged 75,000 during the 1990s. LTIM estimates had increased to 105,000 by 2006 but fell to 71,000 in 2015.

Figure 1

Non–EU/EEA migration to the UK, family & dependents

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

Sources: ONS Table 3.08a, Home Office Immigration Statistics Tables vi.04, ad.03.w, .s, .f, as.01, as.02

Note: Annual data for 2016 were not yet available for border admissions and estimates from the International Passenger Survey (IPS) at the time of the update of this briefing. All data sources include both family unification and dependants of migrants with limited leave to remain.

Similar to IPS data, Home Office data on border admissions and visas issued also show a rise in non-EEA family migration through 2006, followed by a sharp decline from 2006 onwards, becoming more gradual after 2012. IPS data show non-EU family migration fluctuates around 50,000 annually from 2008 , while visas and border admissions suggest a slight decrease over the same period. Because the data are collected differently and the IPS excludes people coming for less than one year, such discrepancies between data sources in the short term are not unusual.

Home Office data also show much larger numbers than IPS estimates. The inclusion of short-term migrants in the Home Office data, as well as people who were issued visas but did not actually make the trip to the UK, are one reason behind this difference.

Work dependents outnumber family unification migrants

Figure 2 shows that border admissions of those admitted as spouses, partners, or children declined from 53,300 in 2006 to 37,400 in 2010 and declined further to 21,600 in 2015. Dependents of work permit holders (including, since 2008, labour migrants in the Points-Based System) increased from 13,400 in 1990 to a peak of 49,000 in 2006 before levelling off around 33,000 annually from 2008 onwards . Border admissions data on student dependents show a decrease from 23,300 in 2010 to 11,500 in 2012. The number of asylum seekers' dependents decreased from 20,600 in 2001 to 6,700 in 2004, then fluctuated between 4,700 and 6,200 from 2005 to 2013 and increased to 7,900 in 2015.

Figure 2

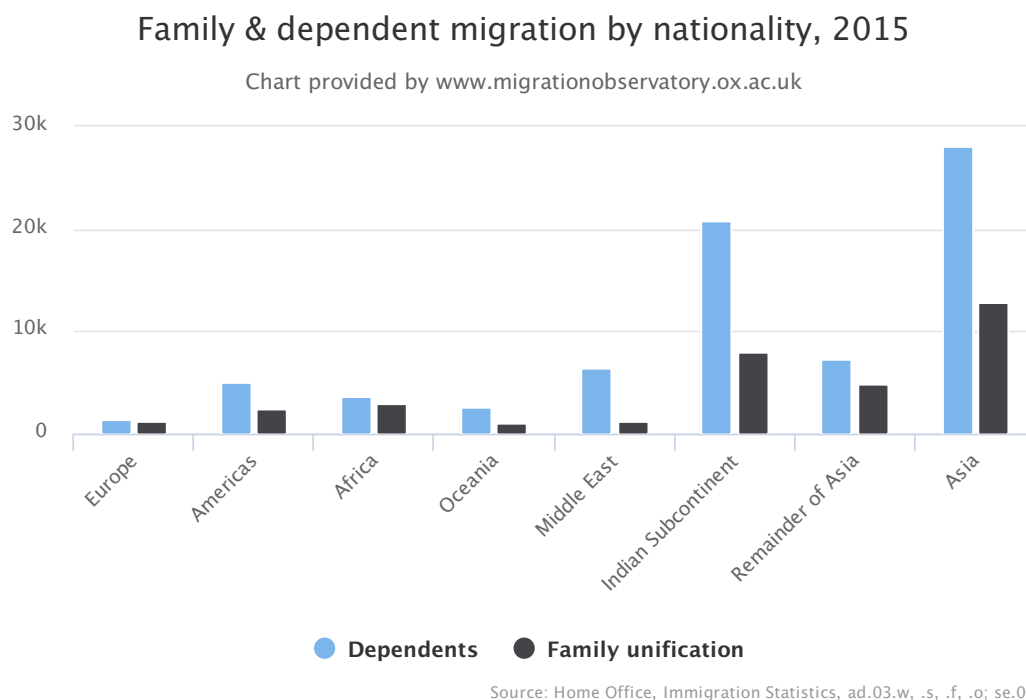Components of non–EEA family and dependent migration 1990–2015

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk
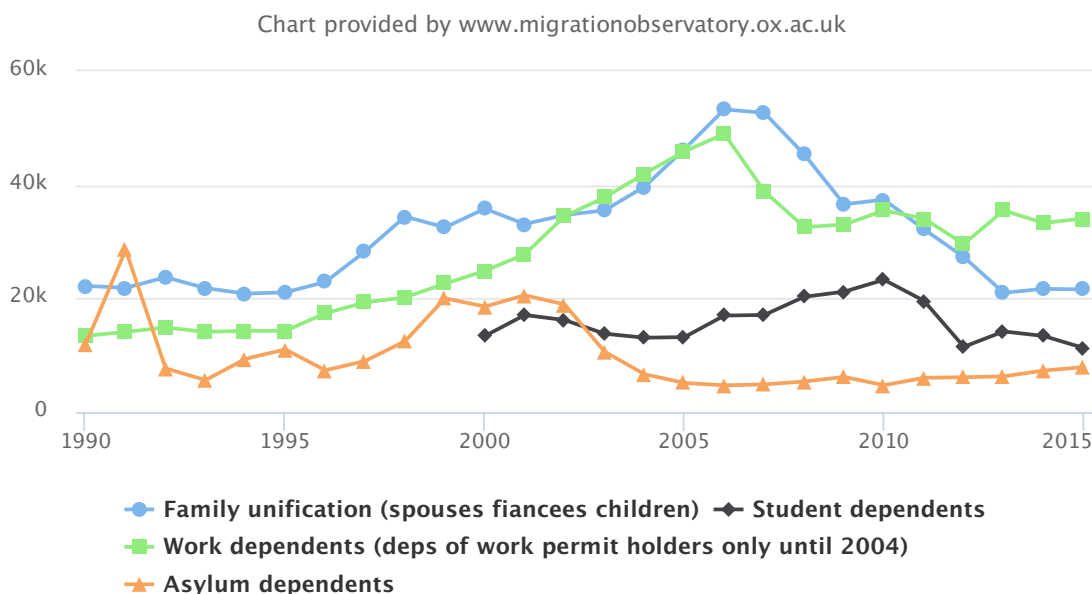
Sources: Home Office, Immigration Statistics ad.03.w, .s, .f, as.01, .02

Asia most common region of origin

Passenger entry data, compiled from samples of landing cards submitted at ports of entry, provide further information on the components of family and dependent migration. Among the regions used in Home Office classifications, Asia is the source of more family migrants and dependents than any other area, as shown in figure 3. In 2015, according to border admissions data, 41,000 family migrants and dependents were from Asia (classified by nationality rather than country of birth), or 60% of the total. This included 28,000 people admitted as dependents of migrants and 13,000 admitted as spouses, partners, and children of British citizens or migrants previously granted settlement. The latter figure includes 12,700 conventional family route migrants and 200 husbands, wives, or children granted settlement on arrival.
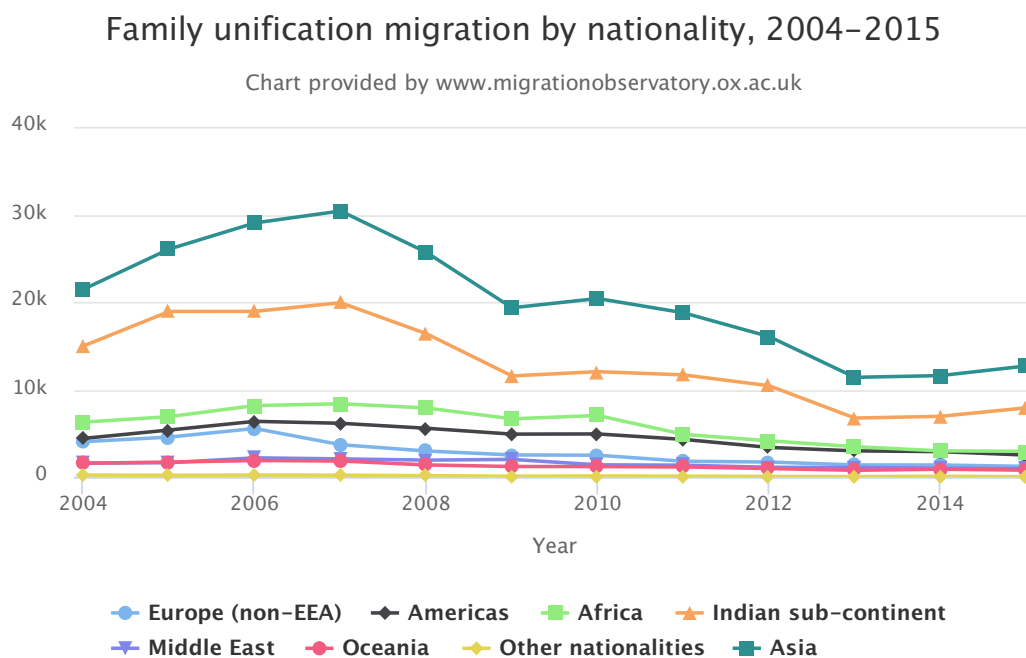
Figure 3

Family & dependent migration by nationality, 2015

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

● Dependents   ● Family unification

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, ad.03.w, .s, .f, .o; se.03

Asia has been the most common region of origin for family migrants since at least 2004, as shown in figure 4 (which excludes dependents and migrants granted settlement on arrival). Family unification migration from Asia has dropped from 30,400 in 2007 to 12,900 in 2015, which is below 2004 s.

Figure 4

Family unification migration by nationality, 2004–2015

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

Europe (non-EEA)   Americas   Africa   Indian sub-continent   Middle East   Oceania   Other nationalities   Asia

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics ad.03.f

Women outnumber men, spouses outnumber fiancé(e)s, adults outnumber children

Examining family migration by relationship type, again using passenger entry data, reveals several key points. First, women outnumber men among family migrants, in contrast with labour migrants and student migrants (figure 5). There are more wives than husbands entering the UK for family unification. Women comprised 76% of migrants admitted as spouses or fiancé(e)s in 2015, and at least 60% in every year since 1997.

Among admitted marital partners, 94% of 2015 arrivals were spouses compared to 6% fiancé(e)s. The percentage who were spouses remained between 87% and 94% in each year since 1997.)

In addition, children comprise an increasing share of family unification migration, increasing from 7% (1,890 children) in 1997 to 10% (2,170) in 2015. Migrants entering as civil partners, unmarried partners, and proposed civil partners increased to 2,470 (12% of family unification migration) in 2015, up from 90 people in 2004 when this category first appeared.

Unfortunately, passenger entry data do not clearly distinguish people admitted as parents, grandparents, and other relatives of UK citizens or residents. Such relatives are tracked in data on grants of settlement. A Home Office (2011) Occasional Paper also disaggregated family migrant visas granted in 2010, showing that 2,665 visas were granted to adult and elderly dependents, or 5% of family route visas. Passenger entry data also do not show how many spouses or fiancé(e)s are (to be) married to British citizens, as opposed to migrants with indefinite leave to remain in the UK. Again, this information is available for grants of settlement since 2006, and shows at least 81% of such settlement grants in 2015 went to migrants who married British citizens.

Data do not show how many of those British citizens were foreign-born themselves. The Home Office (2011) examined a selection of 531 records of migration through marriage in 2009 among applicants from selected countries to analyse this question, although the data have limitations: samples are small for each country and not all the samples were randomly selected. For those that were randomly selected, according to Migration Observatory correspondence with the Home Office, the data show variation in the share of sponsors who were themselves foreign born, from 11% of people sponsoring American spouses to 43% of those sponsoring Indian spouses and 67% of those sponsoring Bangladeshi spouses.
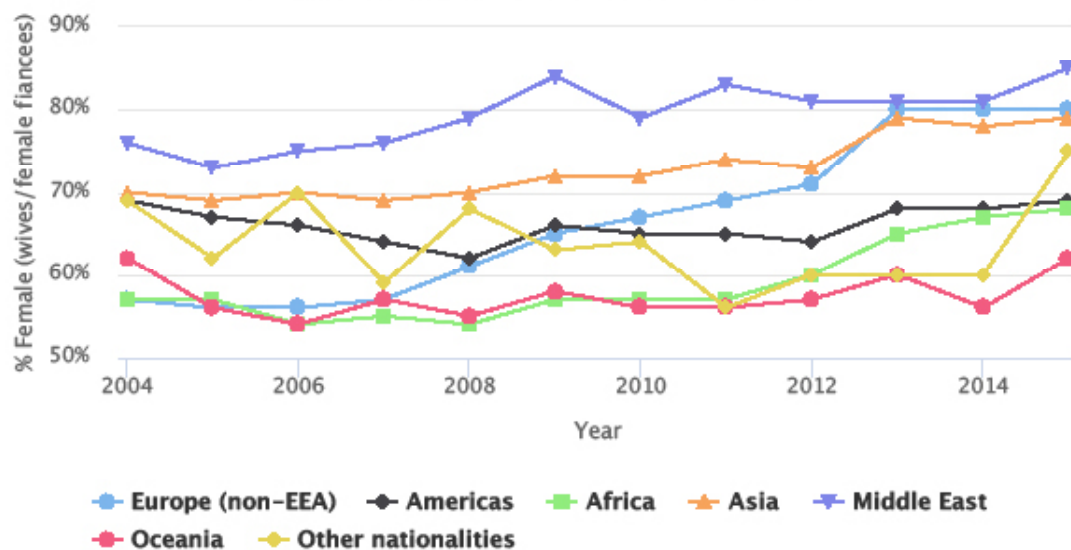
Figure 5

Family migration by relationship to UK citizen/resident

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk
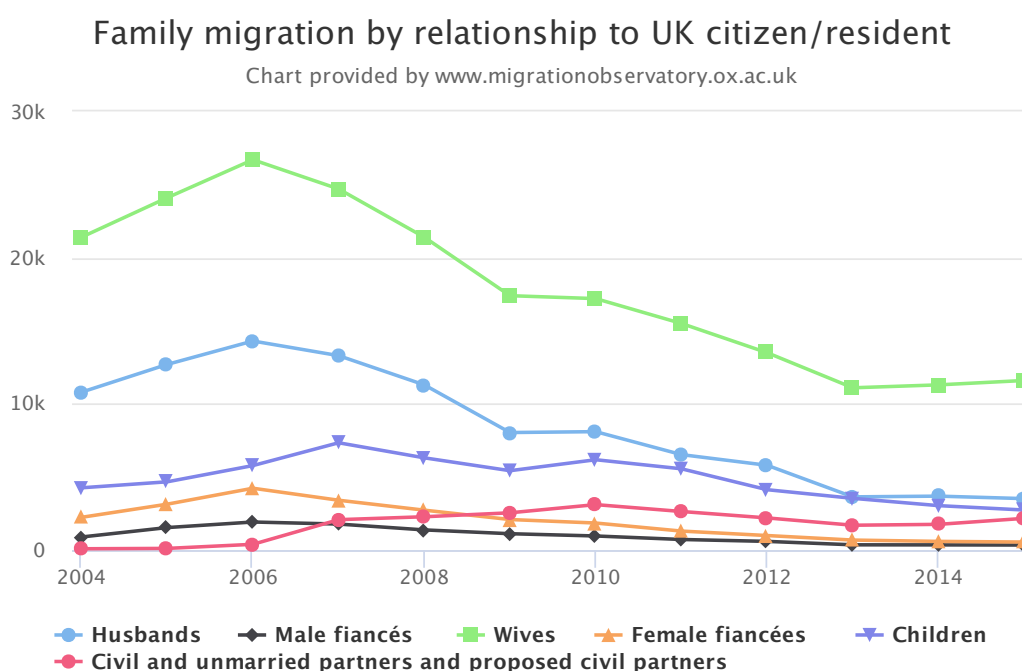
Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Table ad.03.f

Figure 6

Percentage of female of marital partner migrants, 2004–2015

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

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Table ad.03.f

The composition of family unification migration varies with migrants' nationality, as shown in figure 6 (gender The composition of family unification migration varies with migrants' nationality, as shown in figure 6 (gender proportions) and Figure 7 (proportion of marital partner migrants who arrive in the UK as already-married spouses). The percentage of arriving spouses and partners who are female is highest among Middle Eastern and non-EEA European nationals. The share of women is lowest among nationals of countries in Oceania and Africa.

Figure 7

Spouses as share of marital partner migrants, 2004–2015

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

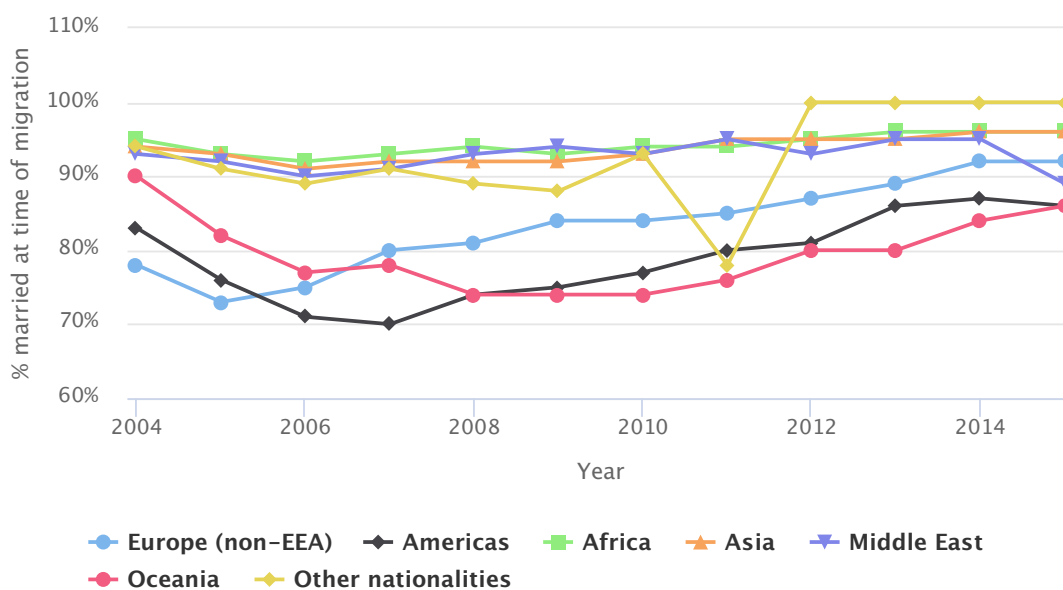Source: Home Office, Immigration statistics Table ad.03.f

Migrants from different regions also show differences in the ratio of spouses to fiancé(e)s – or, in other words, the share of marriage-related migrants who are already married when migrating to the UK, compared with those coming to the UK to get married. Comparing regions of origin, the share of already-married partners has consistently been highest for migrants from Africa and Asia, at around 96% for each region in 2015. The lowest percentages of spouses, meanwhile, are found among migrants from Oceania and the Americas both around 86%.

Tiers 1 and 2 migrants bring most dependents, per capita

Shifting from family unification of settled residents and citizens to dependents of people with limited leave to remain in the UK, available data show the number of dependents attached to each main category of migration (work, study, family, and asylum), and to each subcategory with the Tiers of the PBS. These data show which groups of migrants more often bring family members with them, often expressed as a ratio of dependents to main applicants.

As seen in Figure 8, Tier 1 and Tier 2 work migrants bring more dependents per main applicant with them than other groups. For every visa granted to main applicants in the five year period from 2012 to 2016, there were 2.4 dependent visas in Tier 1 and 0.7 dependent visas in Tier 2. Ratios were lower in other categories: 0.1 dependents per student, 0.05 per Tier 5 temporary worker, and 0.3 dependents per asylum applicant.

Figure 8

Dependents, by main applicant visa 2012–2016

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

● Ratio (dependent visas per 1 main applicant visas)
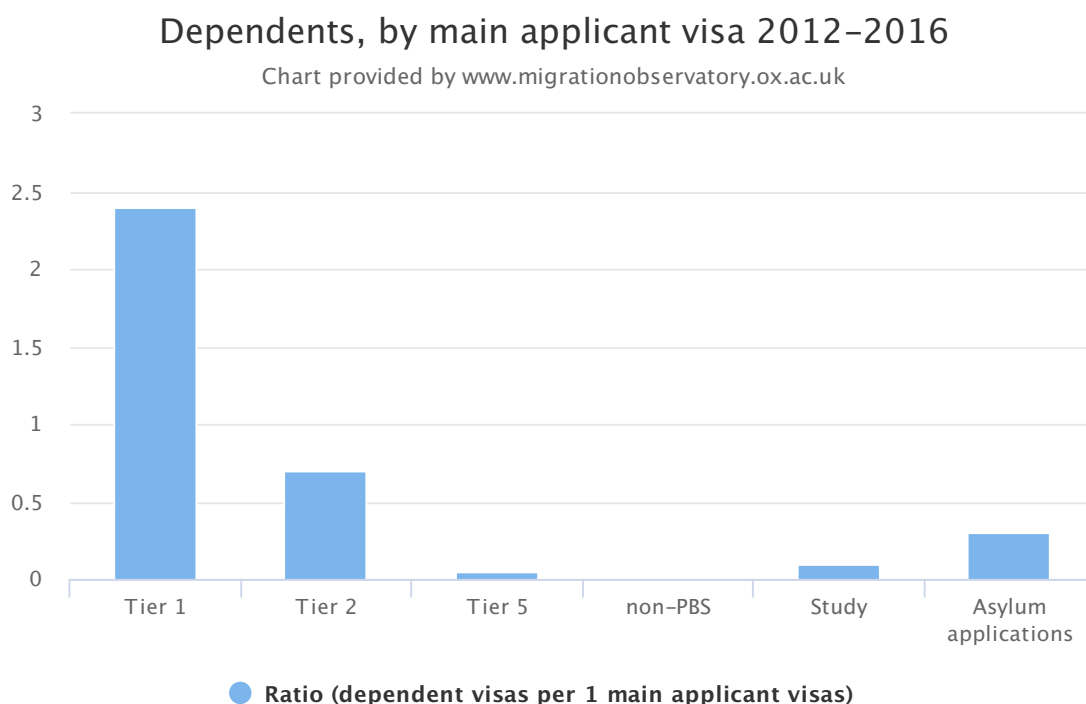
Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics vi.04 and as.03

Note: student visitors are excluded. Due to data availability, calculations for asylum applications refer to the five year period of 2011-2015

High likelihood of settling

Family and dependents comprise a larger share of settlements than of initial in-flows of migrants to the UK. A Home Office study found that 80% of family migrants entering the UK in 2010 had been granted settlement by the end of 2015, while 15% no longer had valid leave to remain in the UK ("Statistics on changes in migrants' visa and leave status", 2017 (formerly known as "The Migrant Journey")).

Dependents are less likely to settle than family unification migrants, since their stay in the UK depends on the length of stay of the "main" migrant in their family. Among main applicants, rates of settlement are lower in the work and study routes than in the family route, which should apply to dependents in those paths as well, since their ability to settle depends on the main applicant in the family being granted settlement. Additional details, including the only available data on parents, grandparents, and other family members, can be found in the Migration Observatory briefing on Settlement in the UK.

Evidence gaps and limitations

There is no single clear way to measure family migration and thus estimates of family migration vary not only across different data sources, but also across different definitions of family migration. Although the differences these measures and sources are well known, issues still arise with some datasets.

For example IPS data are from a sample survey that is subject to a margin of error. Also, the IPS classifies family migrants based on migrants' own self-reports, rather than the basis of their legal right to enter the UK. (For more on different among data sources, see the Migration Observatory Report: Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base for Public Debate and Policy-Making on Immigration in the UK.) The LTIM estimates used in this briefing have been only partially revised by the ONS. In their 'Quality of Long-Term International Migration estimates from 2001 to 2011' report published on 10th April 2014, the ONS revised the total net migration estimates for 2001-2011; this suggests that the total net migration between 2001 and 2011 was underestimated by 346,000 net migrants. This revision is based on evidence of underestimation by the LTIM, especially of migration from the A8 Eastern European countries. However, a revised version of inflows and outflows as well as breakdowns by citizenship or reason for migration, etc., is not available.

Similarly Home Office data's inclusion of short-term migrants as well as those given leaves to enter, but who did not arrive into the UK, causes discrepancies between IPS. Similarly most Home Office data gathered through control of immigration include only non-EEA/Swiss nationals, whilst the IPS collects data on migrants of all nationalities, dividing them between EU and non-EU, but this has been accounted for in this briefing by focussing on Non-EEA. The Admissions data used in this briefing do not include statistics on parents and grandparents, though this is available from the Home Office's Settlement data. Dependents are not distinguished in the same way that Family migration is, so the nature of the relationship of the dependents (children or partners) with the main applicant is not available from the data. Similarly whilst the gender of spouses and fiancé(e)s are available, this breakdown is not available for civil partnerships for family unification data.

References

- Home Office. "Statistics on changes in migrants' visa and leave status" Home Office, London, 2017
- Home Office. "Family Migration: evidence and analysis, 2nd ed." Occasional Paper 94, Home Office, London, 2011

Further readings

- Charlsey, K., N. Van Hear, M. Benson, B. Storer-Church. "Marriage-related migration to the UK." *International Migration Review* 46, no. 4 (2012): 861–890.
- Kofman, Eleonore, Sue Lukes, Veena Meetoo, and Pauline Aaron. "Family Migration to United Kingdom: Trends, Statistics and Policies." NODE Policy Report, BMWF/ICMPD, Vienna, 2008.
- Kraler, Albert. "Civic Stratification, Gender and Family Migration Policies in Europe." Final Report, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna, 2010.

Related material

- Migration Observatory Report - Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base for Public Debate and Policy-Making on Immigration in the UK. http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/top-ten/overview
- ONS - Quality of Long-Term International Migration estimates from 2001 to 2011 www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/population-and-migration/international-migration-methodology/quality-of-long-term-international-migration-estimates-from-2001-to-2011---full-report.pdf%20
- Migration Observatory briefing - Immigration by Category: Workers, Students, Family Members, Asylum Applicants. http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/immigration-category-workers-students-

family-members-asylum-applicants

- Migration Observatory briefing - Settlement in the UK. http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/
  settlement-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

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About the author

Dr Scott Blinder
Assistant Professor, UMass-Amherst
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

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