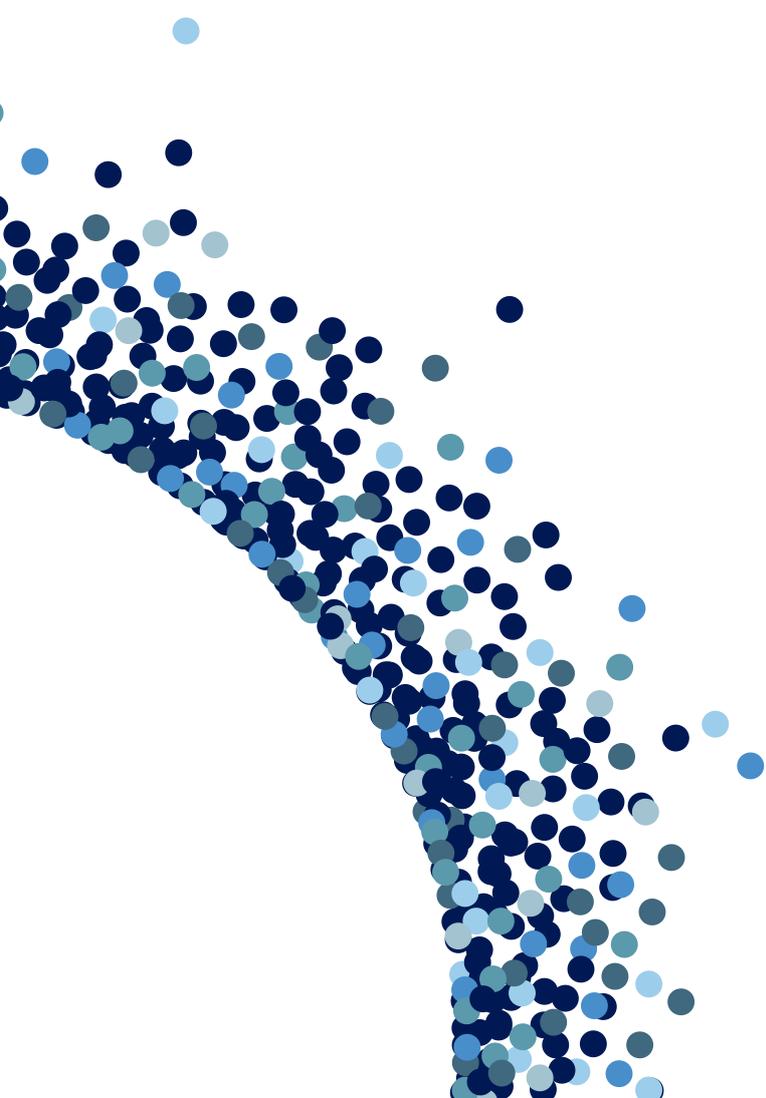




BRIEFING

Who Counts as a Migrant?

Definitions and their Consequences



AUTHORS: Professor Bridget Anderson

Dr Scott Blinder

PUBLISHED: 10/07/2019

NEXT UPDATE: 10/07/2021

6th Revision



This briefing considers the different ways in which one can understand who counts as a migrant in the UK and the implications of using different definitions.

Key Points

There are many different ways to interpret the term 'migrant' and no definition of a 'migrant' in law.

Different data sources define migrants in different ways. Migrants may be defined as foreign-born, foreign nationals or people who have moved to the UK for a year or more, among other possibilities.

Different definitions have significant consequences for how many and which types of 'migrants' are counted as entering and living in the UK. This in turn affects analysis and understanding of the impacts of migration.

The use of the term 'migrant' in the public discourse is extremely loose and often conflates issues of immigration status, race, ethnicity and asylum. Misuse of the terminology can produce inaccurate reporting and complicate policy debates.

Understanding the evidence

This briefing looks at the complexities of understanding the key definition in migration – that of a 'migrant'.

For simplicity, this briefing uses the term EU to refer to all EEA and EFTA countries.

There are many ways to interpret the term 'migrant'

When counting migrants and analysing the consequences of migration, who counts as a migrant is of crucial importance. Yet there is no consensus on a single definition of a 'migrant'. Migrants might be defined by foreign birth, by foreign citizenship, or by their movement into a new country to stay temporarily (sometimes for as little as one month) or to settle for the long-term. In some instances, children who are UK-born or UK nationals, but whose parents are foreign-born or foreign-nationals, are included in the migrant population.

While dictionary definitions distinguish 'immigrants' – people who are or intend to be settled in their new country – from 'migrants' who are temporarily resident, 'immigrant' and 'migrant' (as well as 'foreigner') are often used interchangeably in public debate and even among research specialists. In some scholarly and everyday usage, people who move internally within national boundaries are called migrants. No two definitions of migrant are equivalent, and their effects on our understanding of migration and its impact are significant.

There is no definition of 'migrant' or of 'immigrant' in law. From a legal perspective, there is a key distinction between 'Persons Subject to Immigration Control', who need permission to enter or to remain in the UK, and those 'Not Subject to Immigration Control' who do not. While the UK remains part of the EU, EU nationals are not subject to immigration control although they are often described as migrants.

But if a migrant is not necessarily 'someone subject to immigration control', what alternative definitions exist?

Migrants in datasets

Datasets for understanding migration in the UK use – and allow for analyses based on – different definitions of ‘migrant,’ as shown in Table 1. These vary along several dimensions.

Country of birth: Analyses of the impacts of migrants on the UK economy usually define migrants as ‘foreign-born’. These studies typically rely on the [Labour Force Survey \(LFS\)](#) and the [Annual Population Survey \(APS\)](#), which are comprehensive sources of data on workers and labour markets in the UK. Although this is an intuitive definition of a migrant, many foreign-born people are also British citizens. They are not subject to immigration control, nor do they count as migrants, when migration is defined by nationality.

Nationality: ‘Migrant’ alternatively may be defined as ‘foreign national’, for example in data obtained from [National Insurance Number \(NINo\) applications](#). This definition is viewed as more problematic than country of birth, as a person’s nationality can change. If self-reported, ‘nationality’ may be interpreted as describing an elective affinity dependent on social and cultural factors and personal feelings, rather than legal status. UK nationals with other citizenships further complicate this picture, as oftentimes only one of their citizenships is captured in the data source.

Length of stay: In its analyses of migration into and out of Britain, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses the UN definition of ‘long-term international migrant’: “A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year [...] so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence (UN 1998)”. The main source of data on this is the [International Passenger Survey \(IPS\)](#), which is in turn the basis for ONS estimates of net migration. This definition is relevant to policy, as reducing net migration is a key policy objective of the current government, and the ONS estimate is the usual measure cited in policy discussions. But measuring migration according to this definition of ‘long-term migrant’ poses several challenges. First, for any given individual arriving in the UK, we do not know how long they will stay. IPS data are based on respondents’ intentions rather than recording what they actually do. In calculating its [estimates of Long-Term International Migration \(LTIM\)](#), the ONS attempts to adjust for ‘switchers’ – those who stay longer than intended or depart sooner than intended – but this is only an estimate.

Table 1: Definitions of migrant as represented in government data sources

Type of definition	ONS LTIM	LFS	Home Office
UN definition (at least one year)	Yes (self-reported intent)	Yes (can approximate based on length of stay)	No (non-EEA data exists but not usually published)
Dictionary: “enter in order to settle”	No	No	No (but separate data available on settlement grants)
Subject to immigration control	No (does not identify people with indefinite leave to remain)	No (does not identify people with indefinite leave to remain)	Yes
Foreign-born	Yes	Yes	No
Foreign nationals	Yes	Yes	No (includes non-EEA nationals only)

These different definitions of ‘migrant’ are not interchangeable. For example, people who are foreign born are not all foreign nationals; likewise, some foreign nationals may have lived in the UK for decades while others have resided in the UK for only a year. Perhaps most importantly, not all foreign-born UK residents are subject to immigration control. Some are the children born abroad of UK national parent(s) – e.g. service personnel. Others are long-term

British residents who have acquired citizenship. EEA nationals are also not subject to immigration control—although after Brexit this is expected to change—yet are often considered migrants in public debate and in ONS net migration counts. This includes EU nationals born outside the EU.

In addition, ‘migrant’ is sometimes distinguished from, and sometimes includes, foreign nationals who are seeking asylum in the UK. These represent a small proportion of the overall entrants to the UK, though they have attracted a great deal of public and policy attention.

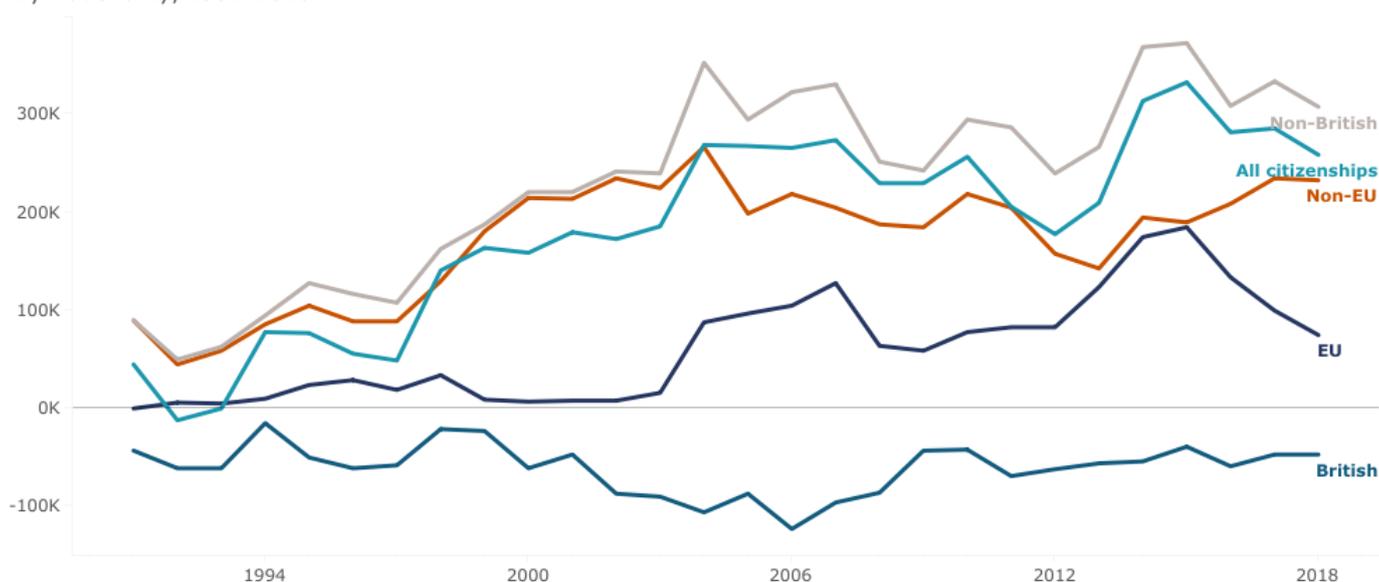
Why does it matter? Data and analysis

Definitions affect data, including measures of the number of migrants living in the country at any given time and people moving into or out of the country.

For example, in Jan–Mar 2019, 17.8% of people employed in the UK were foreign-born, while 11.3% were foreign nationals (ONS, Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity by nationality and country of birth, 14 May 2019). Thus, if migrants’ share of the labour market is a concern for policy-makers, that share appears significantly larger if one considers all foreign-born workers rather than foreign nationals.

Different definitions of ‘migrant’ also yield different estimates of the net balance of migrants moving to and from the UK. Current official government net migration estimates include some groups that would be excluded under other definitions. They include people of all nationalities as migrants, including UK and other EU nationals, so long as they are crossing national boundaries with the intention of staying for at least one year. Yet UK nationals obviously would not be considered migrants if defining migrants as ‘foreign nationals.’ The British nationals included in net migration statistics reduce the headline net migration figure, since more British nationals depart than arrive (Figure 1).

UK Net Migration
By Nationality, 1991-2018



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of ONS LTIM Table 1. Note: Includes people moving for at least 12 months; total net migration figure has been revised following results of the 2011 Census; revised figures are not available by nationality.



Definitions and public debate

Who is a 'migrant' is often unclear in public debate. For example, migrants are often conflated with ethnic or religious minorities and with asylum seekers (Saggar and Dreaan 2001, Crawley 2009, Beutin et al. 2006, Baker et al. 2008).

Media discourses commonly use such terms interchangeably, particularly in tabloid newspaper discussions of asylum (Baker et al. 2008). When asylum applications in European countries increased sharply in 2015 and 2016, media coverage often used the term 'migrants' pejoratively to refer to economic migrants in contrast to 'genuine refugees'. Meanwhile the UK government's official estimates of migration (ONS' Long-Term International Migration estimates) include asylum seekers in counts of migrants entering the UK, while attempting to adjust the total numbers to exclude those who stay in the UK for less than a year and thus do not qualify as migrants defined by length of stay.

Public opinion surveys on immigration attitudes reflect, and may add to, this confusion. Some surveys do not define their terms, leaving respondents to answer questions based on their own implicit definitions. Other surveys define an immigrant as someone who has come to the UK 'to live' (Ipsos-MORI) or 'to settle' (British Social Attitudes survey). These do not match the ONS definition, but they do fit the dictionary definition of immigration.

With such a variety of definitions and loose usage, there is not a straightforward mapping of migration data onto the subjects of public debate and concern. For example, some evidence suggests that, when used by employers, 'migrant' may signify recent arrivals rather than foreign-born, or even foreign national (Anderson and Ruhs 2010). For another, data gathered using a rigorous definition of 'migrant' may include groups who are not generally thought of in public debate as migrants – after all, famous British people such as Freddie Mercury and even Prince Philip are foreign-born. Finally, the Migration Observatory's [public opinion survey research](#) and its 2018 briefing, [UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern](#), show that members of the public who want to see immigration reduced are more likely to focus on certain types of migrants – especially 'illegal' immigrants but also asylum seekers, extended family members, and low-skilled workers among those with legal status. Other types of immigrants such as students and high-skilled workers also are counted in immigration statistics, but have been of less concern in public opinion.

The existence of multiple definitions poses a particular problem for consistency in public debate regarding the number or impact of migrants, as the same discussion might simultaneously draw on two different definitions accidentally or to suit the author's purposes. For example, in discussions of migrants' fiscal impact, concerns about 'migrants' aging and drawing pensions in the UK may indicate a focus on migrants who settle permanently, yet invoke LTIM statistics on the number of migrants in the UK. These statistics use the UN/ONS definition, which includes arrivals planning to stay for as little as a year and who are thus unlikely to ever draw a UK pension.

The definition of 'migrant' is not simply a technical problem, but has an important effect on migration data and the analyses generated from the data. This in turn has an impact on public understanding and on policy debates. The confusion in public debate over the definition of 'migrant' poses challenges for government policy. Not all those who are considered 'migrants' in public debate and datasets are subject to immigration controls and policies. The definition of 'migrant' used by most official sources includes many British citizens and others whose right to work and access to services in the UK are not determined by immigration controls alone.

References

- Anderson, B. and M. Ruhs, "Migrant Workers: Who Needs Them? A Framework for the Analysis of Staff Shortages, Immigration, and Public Policy." In *Who Needs Migrant Workers? Labour Shortages, Immigration and Public Policy*. Oxford: OUP, 2010.
- Baker, P., C. Gabrielatos, M. Khosravini, M. Krzyzanowski, T. McEnery, and R. Wodak. "A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press." *Discourse & Society* 19 (2008): 273–306.
- Beutin, R., M. Canoy, A. Horvath, A. Hubert, F. Lerais, P. Smith, and M. Sochacki. "Migration and Public Perception." Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), European Commission, Brussels, 2006.
- Crawley, H. "Understanding and Changing Public Attitudes: A Review of Existing Evidence from Public Information and Communication Campaigns." The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, London, 2009.
- Sagar, S. and J. Drea. "Public Attitudes and Ethnic Minorities." Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit, London, 2001.
- United Nations, "Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1," Statistical Papers, Series M, No.58, Rev.1. Sales No. E.98.XVII.14., 1998.

Related material

- Migration Observatory report: [Thinking Behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain](#)
- Migration Observatory Briefing: [UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing: [Short-Term Migration in the UK: A Discussion of the Issues and Existing Data](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing: [Migrants in the UK: An Overview](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing: [Migrants in the Labour Market: An Overview](#)



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 authors

Professor Bridget Anderson
Professor of Migration, Mobilities
and Citizenship
bridget.anderson@bristol.ac.uk

Dr Scott Blinder
Assistant Professor of Political
Science
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

Anderson, B. & Blinder, S. "Who Counts as a Migrant? Definitions and their Consequences"
Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, UK; July 2019

