How many migrants are there in the UK? Where do migrants live? What countries do migrants to the UK come from? This briefing provides an overview of the UK’s foreign-born population.

**Key Points**

In 2019, people born outside the UK made up an estimated 14% of the UK’s population, or 9.5 million people.

Compared to the UK born, migrants are more likely to be aged 26 to 64, and less likely to be children or people of retirement age.

London has the largest number of migrants among all regions of the UK, 3,317,000 – or 35% of the UK’s total foreign-born population.

In 2019, India was - once again - the most common country of birth for migrants (863,000) in the UK after a number of Polish-born people left the UK, and the Indian born population grew slightly. Poles still represented the biggest non-British nationality (900,000).

About half of non-EU migrants said they came to the UK for family reasons in 2019, while the most common reason for migration among EU migrants was work.

**Understanding the evidence**

This briefing defines the migrant population as the foreign-born population in the UK. Where relevant, the briefing also provides figures for foreign citizens residing in the UK, as well as for recent migrants – defined as foreign-born people who have been living in the UK for five years or less. Definitions have a significant impact on the analysis of the number of migrants in the UK and there is significant overlap between those who belong to the foreign-born group and those who belong to the foreign-citizen group. For more information about how migrants are defined, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Who Counts as a Migrant?](#).

Most of the data in this briefing are taken from the Office for National Statistics' Annual Population Survey (APS). The APS has some important limitations. Some people are excluded, such as residents of communal establishments like hostels, and other groups may be under-counted due to survey non-response. Its response rate has declined over time, and is now below 50% (ONS, 2016); this means that people who are more likely not to respond to the survey may be under-counted. ONS analysis based on the Census suggests that non-response is a greater problem among people born outside of the UK (Weeks et al, 2013).

The terms EU-8 and EU-2 refer to migrants from countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, respectively. EU-8 refers specifically to migrants from Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia while EU-2 refers to migrants from Romania and Bulgaria.

This briefing focuses on the population of migrants living in the UK. For more information about migration to and from the UK, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Net migration to the UK](#).

These data cover the period to the end of 2019 and so do not yet provide insights into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK’s migrant population. Further analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on migration to and from the UK can be found at our [COVID-19 and Migration in the UK](#) project page.
In 2019, people born outside the UK made up an estimated 14% of the UK’s population, or 9.5 million people

The size of the foreign-born population in the UK increased from about 5.3 million in 2004 to almost 9.5 million in 2019 (Figure 1). The growth of the foreign-born population appears to have slowed slightly since 2016 as emigration increased, but net migration remains positive (see the Migration Observatory briefing, Net migration in the UK). As the data in this briefing do not cover 2020, they do not yet show the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK’s migrant population. For discussion about early indicators of the impact of the pandemic on UK migration flows, see our commentary “New Measures: COVID-19, the end of the International Passenger Survey, and the November 2020 migration statistics.”

Although the numbers of EU migrants have increased more rapidly than non-EU migrants over the past decade, the non-EU foreign born still make up a majority of the foreign-born population. In 2019, 38% of migrants were born in the EU. More information about EU migration is available in the Migration Observatory briefing, EU Migration to and From the UK.

Figure 1

Foreign-born population in the UK by place of birth, 2004-2019

The share of foreign-born people in the UK’s total population increased from 9% from 2004 to 14% in 2019 (Figure 2). During the same period, the share of foreign citizens rose from 5% to 9%.

Over time, the foreign-born share of the population typically rises more than the non-citizen share, because many migrants become UK citizens over time. EU migrants have traditionally been less likely to naturalise as British citizens than people from non-EU countries. However, citizenship applications of EU citizens increased after the 2016 referendum. The non-citizen population also includes some children born in the UK: in 2019, there were an estimated 361,000 UK-born children (under the age of 18) who were EU nationals and 107,000 who were non-EU nationals, according to the Annual Population Survey. In total, this is up by 63,000 compared to 2018. For more information about citizenship and naturalisation of UK migrants, see the Migration Observatory briefing, Naturalisation as a British Citizen. For more about the children of migrants read the Migration Observatory briefing: Children of migrants in the UK.
Compared to the UK born, migrants are more likely to be aged 26 to 64, and less likely to be children or people of retirement age

Compared to the UK-born population, migrants are more likely to be adults aged 26–64 and less likely to be children or people of retirement age (65+) (Figure 3). In 2019, 70% of the foreign born were aged 26–64, compared to 48% of the UK born. The share of migrants in this age range varies by place of birth, with the highest percentage being for those born in the EU-8, Africa, Pakistan, and EU-2.

An estimated 19% of the UK-born were at least 65 years old in 2019, compared to 11% of migrants. Among the foreign-born, there is a lot of variation depending on the place of origin. Only 1% of people born in Romania or Bulgaria were aged 65+ compared to 17% of those born in the EU-14.

The overall shares of young people aged 16 to 25 are very similar for those born in the UK (12%) and abroad (11%). The smallest percentage (5%) of young people are born in India, and the largest percentage (15%) originate from EU-2 and EU-8 countries.
Although the numbers of both female and male migrants have increased over time, women constitute a small majority of the UK’s migrant population. In 2019, 52% of the foreign-born population were women or girls, according to APS data.

**London has the largest number of migrants among all regions of the UK**

Migrants are much more likely to live in some parts of the UK than others. In 2019, about half of the UK’s foreign-born population (48% in total) were either in London (35% – 3,317,000) or the South East (13% – 1,215,000). Northern Ireland, Wales and the North East have a low share of the UK’s total foreign-born population, at 1–2% each. In comparison, the UK-born population is more evenly distributed. In 2019, only 10% of the UK-born population lived in London (Figure 4). For more information about the geographical distribution of the UK’s migrant population, see the Migration Observatory briefing, *Where do migrants live in the UK?* For detailed local-authority level data on migration, see the Migration Observatory’s *Local Data Guide.*
India became the most common country of origin for migrants in the UK after a number of Poles left the UK

In 2019, India, Poland and Pakistan were the top three countries of birth for the foreign-born, accounting respectively for 9%, 9% and 6% of the total (Figure 5). Poland dropped from the first place in 2018 after roughly 100,000 Poles left the UK over the previous two years. Nevertheless, Poland is still the top country of citizenship of foreign citizens, accounting for 15% of non-UK citizens living in the UK. For more information on Polish and EU migration, please see the Migration Observatory briefing, EU Migration to and From the UK.
About half of non-EU-born migrants in the UK said they came to the country for family reasons in 2019, while the most common reason for migration among EU migrants was work.

In 2019, the most common reason that non-EU migrants gave for having originally moved to the UK was family (49% of non-EU born), followed by work (21%). The high shares of family migrants in the non-EU population in part reflects the fact that people who come on family visas are more likely to settle permanently than people who come on work or student visas – as explained in the Migration Observatory briefing, Settlement in the UK.

By contrast, EU migrants were more likely to have moved for work (48%). Work was a particularly important reason for migration for migrants from new EU member states, with 59% of EU-8 migrants and 62% of EU-2 migrants giving this reason.

**Figure 6**

Main reason for moving to the UK among the foreign-born population, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
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<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-EU</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Study</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ONS, Annual Population Survey, Table 1.5. Note: Excludes residents of communal establishments.

For more information about family migration, see the Migration Observatory briefing, Family migration to the UK. More information about work visas and work migration is available in the briefing, Work visas and migrant workers in the UK. Information about international students can be found in the briefing, International student migration to the UK.

**Evidence gaps and limitations**

The APS has some limitations for estimating migrants in the UK. First, it does not measure the scale of irregular migration. Second, it does not provide information on asylum seekers. Third, the APS excludes those who do not live in households, such as those in hotels, caravan parks and other communal establishments. The APS is therefore likely to underestimate the UK population of recent migrants.

There are also some limitations in the APS variable on nationality, which currently does not collect full information on dual citizens. Where a respondent mentions more than one nationality, only the first nationality is recorded. This could mean that the number of non-British citizens is overestimated in this briefing. Respondents’ answer to the question ‘What is your nationality’ will not necessarily always reflect their legal citizenship, and will depend on how individuals understand the meaning of this term.

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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.

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