Permanent or Temporary: How Long do Migrants stay in the UK?

AUTHORS: Zovanga Kone
Madeleine Sumption

PUBLISHED: 29 January 2019
NEXT UPDATE: 28 January 2020

1st edition

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk
Some migrants to the UK stay permanently while others leave after a period of time. This briefing explains what we know about how long migrants stay in the UK after arrival.

**Key Points**

The majority of foreign-born people living in the UK have lived here for 10 years or more

A substantial share of non-UK citizens coming to the UK do so temporarily, but there is no single way of calculating what share of migration is temporary

Most non-UK nationals who leave the UK do so within 5 years

Among non-EU citizens, family migrants are more likely to stay long term than people coming on work or study visas

**Understanding the evidence**

Calculating how long migrants stay in the UK is difficult, both because there is no single definition of where a ‘stay’ starts and ends, and because there is no single data source that tracks each migrant over time.

The ONS International Passenger Survey (IPS), which surveys visitors and migrants as they arrive or leave the country, creates estimates of long-term and short-term migration based on how long migrants say they intend to stay. It also collects data from people as they leave, asking how long they actually stayed. People who say they are moving for at least a year are counted as long-term migrants. Long-term and short-term migration estimates are collected in slightly different ways, as long-term estimates are based on a person's intention when they enter, while short-term estimates are based on how long people say they actually stayed when they leave. Short-term migration estimates are for the number of trips or stays, not the number of individuals, as the same person could make more than one short-term trip in a given year.

The Annual Population Survey, which collects data on people living in the UK, asks individuals when they arrived in the UK and can be used to calculate how long the current population of migrants has lived in the UK at a given point in time. However, this data source cannot be used to track inflows and outflows of people over time. Recent arrivals appear to be underrepresented in the APS, which makes it difficult to infer emigration rates from changes in the population of people from a given year-of-arrival cohort.

Home Office data on visa issuances (including ‘migrant journey’ data) and entries/exports at the border can in theory be used to assess the duration of migrants’ stay. They are only available for non-EU citizens, however. There are also limitations, including the fact that people issued a visa do not necessarily enter the country and typically do not stay right up to the date on which their visa expires. Ongoing work by the ONS and Home Office aim to develop new statistics based on entries and exits combined with visa data, although this remains in progress and so far only limited snapshots of the data are available (see ONS, 2018).

While migration debates tend to distinguish between ‘temporary’ and ‘permanent’ migration, these categories can be defined in different ways. Legally, people can be given permanent rights to remain in the UK (known as Indefinite Leave to Remain [ILR] for non-EU citizens and Permanent Residence [PR] for EU citizens). Non-EU citizens will generally require ILR in order to stay in the UK for many years, but the duration of stay before a person receives ILR will vary depending on the visa type (for example, skilled workers become eligible for ILR after 5 years and cannot extend their Tier 2 (general) work visa beyond 6 years). EU citizens do not require PR to stay permanently, although after Brexit they will be required to apply for ‘settled status’ (ILR).
BRIEFING: Permanent or Temporary: How Long do Migrants stay in the UK?

Having ILR or PR does not mean that a person will necessarily stay forever, however. Conversely, people granted temporary visas could, in theory, make repeated visits and thus spend a large proportion of their years in the UK (although they will generally be required to spend periods out of the country if they are not on a visa that leads to indefinite leave to remain).

There is no single definition of a ‘migrant’. This briefing examines data on people with non-UK nationality or non-UK country of birth depending on the dataset. When examining immigration inflows, nationality and country of birth lead to very similar results. However, when examining the population of people living in the UK, the number of non-UK nationals will generally be lower than the number of non-UK born because of naturalisations, particularly among non-EU citizens. For more discussion, see the Migration Observatory briefing, Who Counts as a Migrant.

The majority of foreign-born people living in the UK have lived here for 10 years or more

Out of the 9 million foreign-born people living in the UK in 2017, 5.7 million or 61% had lived in the country for 10 years or more (Table 1). On average, non-EU born people have been in the UK for longer – 68% of the non-EU born had been in the country at least 10 years, compared to 50% of the EU born.

Table 1: Duration of residence in the UK by country of birth and nationality, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EU born</th>
<th>Non-EU-Born</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-UK national</td>
<td>UK national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9 years</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: APS 2017. Note: total incudes foreign-born with unknown duration of stay in the UK

Many of those who have lived in the UK for more than 5 years are now UK citizens. On average foreign-born UK citizens have lived in the UK for longer. Approximately 90% of both EU and non-EU born people who were UK citizens had been in the UK for at least 10 years. These people are of course more likely to be eligible for citizenship (which requires at least 5–6 years of residence) and have had longer to make a successful application.

There is no single way of calculating what share of migrants leave the country

Many non-UK citizens who come to the country do so for short periods and would not necessarily be classed as ‘migrants’ by some definitions. Others stay for several years before leaving the country, and many settle permanently in the UK. Some may come back and forth. This makes it difficult to produce a single number summarising what share of migrants are ‘temporary’ vs ‘permanent’.

A substantial number of people coming to the UK do so for less than 12 months. In the five-year period from 2012 to 2016 inclusive, non-UK citizens made an average of 970,000 short-term trips of the UK lasting 1–12 months, of which on average 270,000 were at least 3 months long (Table 2).

In addition, many long-term migrants (i.e. those who come to the UK for at least a year) also leave after a period of time. The second panel of Table 2 shows average long-term inflows and outflows in the ten-year period from 2008 to 2017. During this period, there was an average of 500,000 long-term arrivals and 200,000 long-term departures. (Note that these figures exclude UK citizens, who are included in headline quarterly net migration figures.)
Table 2: Total estimated inflows and outflows of non-UK citizens by duration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short term migration inflows, 2012-2016 average</th>
<th>Inflows and outflows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All moves 1-12 months</td>
<td>970,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which for employment or study</td>
<td>320,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All moves 3-12 months</td>
<td>270,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which for employment or study</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-term migration inflows and outflows, 2008-2017 average</th>
<th>Inflows</th>
<th>Outflows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All reasons</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ONS tables STIM.01 and LTIM.2.01. Note: figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000. STIM inflow and outflow figures are the same because each short-term inflow is by definition also an outflow within the same 12-month period; this should not be confused with official ‘short-term outflow’ figures provided by ONS, which measure trips by UK residents who are temporarily leaving then returning to the UK (i.e. people whose departure from the UK is short term). STIM data cover periods for the year ending June, while LTIM data cover calendar years. Long-term and short-term figures are calculated in different ways (see ‘Understanding the Evidence’ above), so these figures cannot be directly compared. Data will include repeated moves by individuals who moved more than once during the 5- or 10-year period. Note that long-term outflows will include people who arrived before 2008 and inflows will include people who had not yet left in 2017; however, averaging over a 10-year period will mean that the inflows and outflows measured here will largely refer to the same cohort of people.

Most non-UK citizens who leave the UK do so within 5 years

Between 1990 and 2017, a large majority of non-UK nationals who left the UK had lived here for less than 5 years: between 67% and 83% each year (Figure 1). The data suggest that once migrants have been in the UK for several years, it becomes increasingly likely that they will stay permanently. Only small numbers of non-UK citizens who have lived in the UK for more than 10 years leave—an average of 11,000 per year from 2007-2016. In addition, a small number of foreign-born who are UK citizens emigrate, accounting for 12,000 emigrants in 2016 (not included in figure).

Figure 1

Long-term emigration of non-UK citizens, by length of stay in the UK (in 1,000s), 1990-2017

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

Source: IPS Table 3.15
Family is an important driver of permanent settlement

The majority of non-EU citizens issued a visa to come to the UK for family, work or study do not become settled residents in the long term. In 2011, 377,900 visas were issued to non-EU citizens for work, study or family reasons. Of these, 283,100 or 75% had expired by the end of 2016 requiring the visa holder to leave the country (although some may later return on a new visa).

Figure 2 shows the percentage of non-EU citizens granted visas to come to the UK for work, family, or study, whose visas had expired between 1 and 5 years after arrival and thus who are expected to have left the UK. After 5 years, work and study visas are much more likely to have expired than family visas.

By the end of 2016, 86% of study visas issued to non-EU citizens in 2011 had expired, i.e. the holder had not stayed on with a different visa or received indefinite leave to remain or citizenship. The same applied to 75% of those issued work visas.

For family members, by contrast, the large majority (86%) of visas issued in 2011 were still valid five years later. Of the total family cohort, 52% had received ILR (permanent settlement) by the end of 2016 and a further 27% had become UK citizens (Home Office, 2018).

Figure 2

Note: Figures for people with expired leave to remain are a proxy for emigration but do not account for the fact that some people issued visas may never arrive in the UK, and some people with expired visas may not leave (see note in ‘Understanding the Evidence’ section above. Study category excludes unsponsored short-term study visas which cannot be extended in-country. Work and study categories include dependants of work and study visa holders; the ‘all’ category also includes a relatively small number of other dependants of migrants with limited leave to remain in the UK who are not included in the work/study figures.

Nationals of some countries are more likely to receive indefinite leave to remain than others. Among family visa recipients in 2011, 83% of Pakistanis and 84% of Indians had gained settlement five years later, compared to 66%
of Americans, for example. Among work visa recipients, 42% of Pakistanis, 17% of Indians and only 4% of Americans had been granted settlement (ONS, 2018).

Evidence gaps and limitations

The main source of data on emigration (and thus duration of stay) is currently the International Passenger Survey (IPS). However, there are some known problems with IPS estimates of emigration of certain groups, the reasons for which remain unresolved. Preliminary analysis from the ONS published in July 2018 compared the IPS figures, which are used to calculate net migration, with Home Office data on visas issued and entries or exits from the UK. It found that while estimated immigration inflows in the two sources were similar, the IPS showed much less emigration than the Home Office data (ONS, 2018). The gap was driven primarily but not exclusively by non-EU students, whose emigration appears to be significantly undercounted in the net migration figures. What this means for the measurement of emigration among other groups—i.e. non-EU nationals coming for other reasons and EU nationals—remains unclear. For this reason it is currently difficult to compare emigration trends by place of birth.

Some studies have used the Labour Force Survey or Annual Population Survey to examine emigration patterns, by looking at how the size of a given cohort of migrants (e.g. those arriving in 2006) changes over time (e.g. how many are still living here in 2007, 2008, and so forth). For example, Migration Watch (2017) uses the LFS to estimate how many migrants arriving from 2008–2014 were still in the UK in 2010–2016. For non-EU citizens, the patterns are roughly as expected: the estimated size of a given year-of-arrival cohort decreases over time, presumably due to emigration. For EU citizens, however, the cohort sizes mostly do not decrease and in some cases actually increase over time. This is quite different from the picture provided by IPS data, which show EU national emigration of 75,000–140,000 per year since 2008. While one should not expect a perfect match between the two data sources due to differences in measurement and methodology, the difference between the two results—one of which suggests substantial EU emigration and one of which does not—is surprising and makes it difficult to make conclusive statements about what share of EU citizens emigrate.

Finally, it is worth noting that the concept of ‘duration of stay’ is itself not always clear and can be difficult to operationalise in the data. For example, an international student who studies on a 3-year course in the UK but returns home each summer for 2 months and leaves permanently at the end of his or her studies would intuitively be defined as having stayed in the UK for 3 years, even though each individual trip lasted only 10 months. As a result, the ONS notes that: “it is not straightforward to generalise the patterns that are seen within the data to come up with definitive rules around how to classify someone as a long-term migrant” (ONS, 2018).
References

- ONS. “International migration data and analysis: Improving the evidence.” Office for National Statistics, February 2017
- ONS. “A report on international migration data sources.” Office for National Statistics, August 2018
- Migration Watch. “The need for continued inflows of EU workers to the UK”, MW 401, 2017

Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Immigration by Category: Workers, Students, Family Members, Asylum Applicants
- Migration Observatory briefing – Settlement in the UK
- Migration Observatory briefing – Who Counts as a Migrant

Thanks to John Salt and Carlos Vargas Silva for comments on a previous draft of this briefing.

This report was produced with the support of Trust for London and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Trust for London is one of the largest independent charitable foundations in London and supports work which tackles poverty and inequality in the capital. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation is an independent funder working to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives.
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
Zovanga Kone
Researcher
zovanga.kone@compas.ox.ac.uk

Madeleine Sumption
Director
madeleine.sumption@compas.ox.ac.uk

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

Recommended citation
Kone, Zovanga & Sumption, Madeleine. “Permanent or Temporary: How Long do Migrants stay in the UK?” Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, UK; January 2019