This briefing examines the deportation (or ‘enforced return’) and voluntary departure (‘voluntary return’) of irregular migrants and other foreign citizens from the UK. It presents statistics on the numbers and characteristics of people who are removed, or who leave voluntarily, and the method of their departure.

**Key Points**

1. In 2018, 24,510 people left the UK via enforced or voluntary return, the lowest annual level since 2014.
2. Voluntary returns have fallen substantially from 2016 onwards.
3. In 2018, around one quarter of returnees were citizens of South Asian countries.
4. Around one fifth of all enforced and voluntary returns in 2018 were of foreign national offenders.
5. The government has estimated that at least 83 members of the Windrush generation may have been wrongly removed from the UK since 2002.

**Understanding the Evidence**

Deportation, in ordinary usage, refers to a state’s removal of a foreign citizen from its national territory. In UK legal terminology, however, deportation refers to a specific subset of what the government calls enforced returns, in which the government will have been required to facilitate or monitor the removal of a person from the UK. Deportation, in this technical language, refers to enforced returns in which someone is removed from the UK because the government considers it ‘conducive to the public good’, for example after a prison sentence. Information on the number of deportations is not separately available, though the Home Office says that most enforced returns are not of people who have been deported, but who have declined to leave voluntarily and have hence been removed under the government’s administrative and illegal entry powers (Home Office, 2019a).

Enforced returns can be contrasted with what the government calls voluntary returns. In these cases, a person makes their own arrangements to leave the country or is assisted in doing so by the Home Office’s ‘Voluntary Returns Service’ or another organisation. This briefing uses the government’s terminology and hence the word ‘return’ to refer to all removals or departures from the UK of foreign citizens with no legal right to remain in the country.

The Home Office is the government department responsible for removing people who have no legal right to stay in the UK. This includes those who have entered the UK illegally; people who have stayed in the country longer than their visa allows, or who have otherwise violated the conditions of their permission to stay; those being deported in the narrow sense defined above, such as due to a serious criminal conviction; and those who have been refused asylum and have no legal right to remain in the UK.

British nationals cannot be removed unless they are under 18 and their parents are subject to removal. By contrast, any foreign national can be returned, including citizens of EEA countries or Switzerland, as long as it is on public policy grounds or for reasons of national security.
Data sources

Information on enforced returns and voluntary returns come from the Home Office. Enforced returns statistics refer primarily to people who left the UK as a result of removal directions set by the Home Office. These people may or may not have been in detention immediately before leaving, although most will have. However, the Home Office also includes in this category people who made their own arrangements to leave, if they were in detention beforehand (specifically, if they left within two days after leaving detention).

With regard to voluntary returns, the word ‘voluntary’ reflects a lower level of Home Office enforcement activity. In some cases, the return is “actively facilitated or monitored” by the Home Office but arrangements to leave are made either by the individual or another organisation (Home Office, 2019b, p. 99).

However, some voluntary returns, classed as other verified returns in the statistics, are people who have not notified the immigration authorities that they are leaving and may have had no contact with immigration enforcement officials. In these cases, the Home Office knows that the person has left the country primarily due to data matching processes (for example, visa records show that a person had overstayed their visa but exit checks subsequently identified them leaving the country). People will be included in this group even if they overstayed their visa by a relatively short period, such as a few days.

Importantly, data for the most recent year on other verified returns are likely to be undercounts. This is because of delays in the recording of departures when people have not informed the authorities that they are leaving. Counts of ‘other verified returns’ are usually revised upwards over time. For example, the 2017 count of voluntary returns was revised up by around 1,500 between February 2018 and May 2019. Therefore, comparisons over time that involve the most recent year for which there are data should be made with caution.

Another category of returns not discussed in this briefing is individuals refused entry at port and subsequently removed. People in this category have been denied legal permission to enter on arrival in the UK and were then removed. Because people removed in this way have neither passed through border controls legally nor evaded them illegally, we exclude them from this briefing.

The Home Office provides data on returns from 2004 onwards. However, in 2014 it introduced a new classification scheme for returns, as outlined above, which is why this briefing presents data from 2014 onwards only.

In its published statistics, the Home Office includes counts of the number of people who made an asylum claim prior to their enforced or voluntary return. This includes not only asylum seekers whose claim has been refused and who have exhausted any rights of appeal, but also those granted asylum or humanitarian protection but who have then been removed for other reasons, such as a criminal conviction (Home Office, 2019b, p. 95).
**In 2018, 24,510 people left the UK via enforced or voluntary return, the lowest annual level in the past five years**

There were 24,510 enforced and voluntary returns from the UK in 2018, down 25% from 32,551 in 2017 (though the actual percentage change will be lower because of the initial undercounting of voluntary returns). This fall forms part of a longer downward trend from 2016, with decreases each year thereafter. Declines in both enforced and voluntary returns contribute to this overall decline, though voluntary returns have fallen more steeply, due in part to initial undercounting (Figure 1).

There were 9,461 enforced returns in 2018, 21% fewer than in the previous year. The Home Office reports (2019a) that this fall has coincided with changes across the immigration system. For example, the government has reduced the use of detention and the size of the detention estate (Home Office, 2019d), and proposed changes following the Windrush situation to give more scrutiny to detention decisions and ‘make better use of face-to-face engagement’ with detainees (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2018). The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (2019) review of enforcement against illegal working also identified factors that may have affected removals following Windrush, including a pause in data sharing with other government departments and lower morale among front-line enforcement staff.

Most people who leave the UK via enforced return do so from detention: 91% in 2018 (in the Home Office datasets this is given by the sum of enforced removals from detention and other returns from detention). For more information about detention, see our briefing, *Immigration Detention in the UK*.

Still, voluntary returns make the bigger contribution to all returns, typically accounting for between 60% and 70% of the total.
From 2014, the Home Office has recorded the age and sex of returnees. Over this five-year period, between 70% and 74% of all people returned each year have been male. In 2018, 71% of returnees were male and 28% female. Of all returnees in 2018, 90% were aged 18 to 59, 5% were under 18, and 5% were 60 or older.

In 2018, 4,028 people who had previously sought asylum in the UK left via enforced or voluntary return, 16% of all departures. This was the same proportion as the previous year. In other words, a large majority of returnees (84%) are not asylum seekers. Returns of people who have previously sought asylum are more likely to be enforced than are non-asylum departures. In 2018, 56% of asylum returns were enforced, compared to 35% of non-asylum returns.

**Voluntary returns have fallen substantially from 2016 onwards**

Like enforced returns, voluntary returns have also fallen from 2016 onwards (Figure 2).

Some voluntary returns are facilitated and monitored by the Home Office, while others are not. Figure 2 breaks down the data into cases in which the Home Office has facilitated or monitored the return, and ones in which it has only established that the person left after the fact (‘other verified returns’).

Facilitated returns fell by 6,784 or 46% between 2015 and 2018, the year in which they were highest in the five-year period from 2014–2018.

Other verified returns have fallen from their annual peak in the last five years in 2014, although the 2018 level will be revised upwards, reducing the size of the decline.

![Figure 2. Voluntary returns from the UK, 2014–2018](source-image-url)
BRIEFING: Deportation and Voluntary Departure from the UK

Data on voluntary returns are sometimes discussed when assessing the effects of the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy, now sometimes known as the ‘compliant environment’ policy. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee has described (2018) this policy as having a dual aim: “to deter people without permission from entering the UK and to encourage those already here to leave voluntarily.”

Data on voluntary returns provide little evidence that the hostile environment policies introduced in 2014 have encouraged a larger number of people to leave. Nor is it possible to say whether the share of the irregular migrant population leaving the UK has increased since the policy’s implementation in 2014, because the total number of irregular migrants in the UK is not known (see our briefing on Irregular Migration in the UK), nor the number of those returned who were irregular migrants (see Evidence Gaps and Limitations). Similarly, if new policies had deterred people from entering the UK illegally or overstaying their visas, one would not necessarily expect this to be reflected in returns statistics. It is thus difficult to evaluate the impact of the hostile environment using voluntary returns data alone.

In 2018, around one quarter of returnees were citizens of South Asian countries

In 2018, nationals of South Asian countries made up the largest share of those who left the UK via enforced or voluntary return, at 24%. This region is followed by the EU at 16% and non-EU European countries at 15% (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Returns by region of returnee nationality, 2018](image)

By country of returnees’ nationality, India (12%), Albania (8%), and Pakistan (8%) contributed the largest numbers of returnees in 2018, collectively making up 28% of the total. These are shown in Table 1, along with the rest of the top ten for 2018.
BRIEFING: Deportation and Voluntary Departure from the UK

Table 1: Enforced and voluntary returns by country of nationality: the top ten in 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Country of nationality</th>
<th>Number of returns</th>
<th>Share of all returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>2,886</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>1,920</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1,859</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,712</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>1,384</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1,070</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,040</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Returns tables, Table rt_02: Returns by country of nationality and type.

In 2018, of 24,510 total enforced and voluntary returns, 81% (19,952) were of an individual to their country of nationality; 7% (1,713) were to an EU country that is not the country of their nationality; and 12% (2,845) were to another country or an unknown destination, meaning that the destination was not available for statistical purposes (Home Office, 2019c).

**Around one fifth of all enforced and voluntary returns in 2018 were of foreign national offenders**

Home Office statistics report the number of foreign national offenders (FNOs) returned from the UK each year, for EU nationals and non-EU nationals, without any counts for specific countries. A foreign national offender is a non-British citizen who has been convicted either in the UK of any criminal offence, or abroad of any serious criminal offence.

In 2018, 5,391 foreign national offenders left the UK via enforced or voluntary return (the majority being enforced), making up 22% of all returns. Since 2009, when these statistics became available, this number has ranged from around 4,500 in the year ending March 2012 to around 6,400 in the year ending March 2017.

From 2009 to 2017, the share of returned FNOs that were EU citizens has risen, from 14% in 2009 to 68% in 2018. This is the result of a steady decline in the number of non-EU FNOs returned and a rise in the returns of EU FNOs (Figure 4). The rise in the return of EU nationals coincided with an increase in the population of EU citizens resident in the UK.
A total of 4,043 EU citizens left the UK via enforced or voluntary return in 2018, comprising both FNOs and non-FNOs (see Figure 3 above). This means that a large majority of EU nationals returned are foreign national offenders: 91% in 2018 (3,670 of 4,043). This share was up from 70% in 2016, when 4,093 of the 5,638 EU nationals returned were FNOs. The absolute number of non-FNO EU national returnees dropped sharply from 1,545 in 2017 to 373 in 2018.

The government has estimated that at least 83 members of the Windrush generation may have been wrongly removed from the UK since 2002

The Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, has since 21 September 2018 provided regular updates on the Windrush situation to the Home Affairs Select Committee. To identify whether members of the Windrush generation could have been wrongly removed from the UK, the government conducted a review of returnees’ case files, for certain nationalities. The Home Secretary’s report of 10 June 2019 found that 83 individuals of the Windrush generation may have been wrongly removed from the UK by the Home Office, 31 of whom were detained beforehand (Home Office, 2019e, p. 22). Of these 83 individuals, 61 (73%) were Jamaican nationals. The remaining 22 individuals were nationals of eight other Caribbean countries. The government has not been able to confirm whether all of these individuals were in fact wrongly removed, because it has not been able to contact all of them.

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

There is a range of information about returns from the UK that is not included in the published Home Office statistics. Data on the reason for removal is limited to information on whether the person previously made an asylum claim and whether a person was a foreign national offender. There is no information regarding the immigration history of returnees, and so no counts of how many of those returned are illegal entrants, refused asylum applicants, visa overstayers, or who otherwise violated the conditions of their leave to remain in the UK. The same applies to returned EU citizens. Information is not publicly available on the reason for their removal, such as whether they
were removed for abusing treaty rights, for reasons of national security or public policy, or something else. There is also no information on how long visa overstayers had been in the UK without permission before their departure, which means we do not know to what extent the ‘other verified returns’ category (i.e., people who leave voluntarily without intervention from immigration authorities) comprises people who lived and worked illegally in the UK for a substantial period, as opposed to those who overstayed their visa for a few days only.

Relatively little is known about the personal or demographic characteristics of those returned, beyond their age, sex, and nationality. We do not know how long returnees have lived in the UK, where they lived, whether they were settled residents, or whether they were labour, student, or family migrants.

Finally, the published data refer only to enforced returns and do not break this down into people removed via deportation and “those removed under other administrative and illegal entry powers who have declined to leave voluntarily” (Home Office, 2019a). We know only that deportations make up a minority of enforced returns, but no separate counts are provided.

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References


Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Immigration Detention in the UK
- Migration Observatory briefing – Irregular Migration in the UK
- Migration Observatory briefing – Migration to the UK: Asylum
- Migration Observatory Election 2015 briefing – Enforcement: Enforced Removals and Voluntary Departures of People Violating Immigration Law
- Migration Observatory report: Top 10 Problems in the Evidence Base
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.

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