



BRIEFING

Migrants and Discrimination in the UK

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This briefing examines migrants' experiences of discrimination due to their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent. It also presents experimental data on labour market discrimination against migrants and children of migrants.

Key Points

Migrants may experience discrimination for different reasons, some of which also affect UK-born ethnic minorities. This can be due to characteristics such as ethnicity and race, but also factors that particularly affect the foreign born, such as having a foreign accent or foreign qualifications.

In 2018, non-EU born migrants were over twice as likely to describe themselves as members of a group that faces discrimination because of nationality, religion, language, race or ethnicity, compared to EU-born migrants (19% vs. 8%). However, there was a sharp, temporary increase in EU migrants' perceptions of discrimination around the time of the EU referendum, in 2014–16.

Adult children of migrants who were born in the UK are much more likely to perceive discrimination against their group than migrants themselves (32% vs. 16% in 2016–18).

In 2016–2018, the share of migrants perceiving discrimination against their group was similar in Great Britain (16%) to in other EU-14 countries (17%). Among children of migrants, however, the share perceiving discrimination was higher in the UK than in other EU-14 countries (32% vs. 21%).

The majority of the foreign-born population (72%) think that the UK is hospitable or welcoming for migrants, and that migrants can get ahead if they work hard (91%).

About 13% of the foreign-born population said that they had been insulted because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent.

Both British and international evidence suggests that ethnic minorities are discriminated against in hiring decisions irrespective of the country in which they were born or received their education.

Understanding the evidence

Measuring harassment and discrimination

Discrimination is typically defined as the unfair or unjust treatment of people on the basis of certain characteristics, such as their ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation or religious beliefs. In this briefing, we focus on discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, race, nationality or national origins, and religion, which may affect people with a migrant background. Discrimination is often difficult to observe and measure directly: people do not always realise if they have been discriminated and on which grounds, while those who discriminate against others will often not admit it, whether because discrimination can be illegal or because they discriminate unconsciously. As a result, researchers often rely on surveys, where respondents report their perceptions of discrimination or whether they feel that they have personally experienced discrimination; or on field experiments, where, for example, fictitious applications are sent to real job vacancies, varying only applicants' ethnicity or country of birth. This briefing presents both types of data.

It is important to acknowledge that people's perceptions and reporting of discriminatory behaviours is inherently subjective (Auer and Ruedin, 2019). People might have different ideas of what discrimination is; for example, people living in countries with more effective anti-discrimination policies may be more aware of discriminatory behaviours (Ziller, 2014). Also, not everybody is equally sensitive to discriminatory behaviours (Steinmann, 2018).

Data sources and definitions

The word 'migrant' is used differently in different contexts. In this briefing, we use the term 'migrant' to refer to the foreign born, regardless of whether they have become UK citizens. For a discussion of this terminology, see the Migration Observatory briefing [Who Counts as a Migrant: Definitions and their Consequences](#).

The data presented in this briefing come from two different data sources: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the UK Longitudinal Household Survey (UKLHS). The ESS is a cross-national survey which collects data every two years on attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. The data are for Great Britain (Northern Ireland is excluded), and only respondents who are aged 15 and older and live in private households can be part of the sample. The UKLHS or Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey of approximately 40,000 households. Both surveys are designed to be representative of the population, although like all surveys there may be some error in the estimates resulting from the fact that not everyone agrees to participate.

Data breakdowns

The sample size for some of the variables is relatively small, so the data breakdowns only differentiate between UK born, EU born and non-EU born populations. People can be discriminated against because of their ethnic or national ancestry regardless of their country of birth, so we also consider the parents' country of birth (UK vs. foreign born) for the UK-born population. The ESS does not include information about the ethnicity of respondents for all years so this information has not been included in the analysis.

Margins of error in the estimates

Because the UKHLS and the ESS are sample surveys, the estimates come with margins of error. This means that small differences between numbers or percentages may not be statistically significant. However, **all the differences between groups that are described in the text of the briefing are statistically significant**. A difference between two groups is considered statistically significant when the probability that this difference is caused by chance is very small. In that case, we assume that the differences we observe in the data are likely to exist in the population. Note that small differences between estimates for different groups may not be statistically significant, if they are not described in the narrative of the briefing.

Understanding the policy

Great Britain was one of the first countries to pass anti-discrimination legislation in Europe. The Race Relations Act 1965, which prohibited discrimination in public spaces on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins, was the first legislation of this kind in the UK. The Equality Act 2010 replaced previous anti-discrimination laws (Sex Discrimination Act 1975, Race Relations Act 1976 and Disability Discrimination Act 1995) with a single Act. The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination at work, in education, as a consumer, when using public services, when buying or renting property, and as a member or guest of a private club or association. Similarly to past anti-discrimination laws, the Equality Act 2010 only applies in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Equality Act 2010 makes it illegal to discriminate anyone because of age, gender reassignment, marital status, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race (which includes colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, and sex or sexual orientation. These are all considered *protected characteristics*. Race discrimination under UK law refers to any discrimination on grounds of colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, and thus includes discrimination against people because of the fact that they are a migrant.

Under UK law, discriminatory behaviours are classified in different ways. This includes: *direct discrimination* (treating someone with a protected characteristic less favourably than others); *indirect discrimination* (putting rules or arrangements in place that apply to everyone, but that put someone with a protected characteristic at an unfair disadvantage); *harassment* (unwanted behaviour linked to a protected characteristic that violates someone's dignity or creates an offensive environment for them); or *victimisation* (treating someone unfairly because they have complained about discrimination or harassment). It is legal to take positive action if people with a protected characteristic are at a disadvantage, have particular needs or are under-represented in an activity or type of work.

An international comparison through the Migration Policy Index (MIPEX), found that the UK had one of the most favourable anti-discrimination policies in Europe in 2015. MIPEX measures policies to integrate migrants in all EU Member States and other Western countries, examining 167 indicators across multiple policy areas, one of them being anti-discrimination.

On the other hand, there are some areas of UK immigration law which analysts have argued are likely to encourage or facilitate discrimination against migrants, especially where landlords, employers and others are not fully aware of their legal obligations. For example, a High Court decision in 2019 (Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants v Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2019) found that government's Right to Rent scheme, which involve landlord checks on their tenants' immigration status, encouraged discriminatory behaviour and was incompatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

There are other situations where differential treatment of some migrant groups or foreign nationals is not unlawful. For example, most non-UK citizens with settled status are not allowed to vote in general elections; immigration rules specify that people from some countries can follow different rules (e.g. only certain nationalities such as Australians and Canadians are eligible for youth mobility visas). These situations are sometimes described as unfair or discriminatory, though most democratic states have such laws. In this briefing, we focus on types of discrimination that are most likely to be unlawful, i.e. discrimination by individuals such as employers or members of the public.

Migrants may experience discrimination for a number of different reasons, some of which also affect UK born minority communities

Experiencing discrimination can have an important impact on people's lives. Researchers have been particularly interested in discrimination in the labour market (e.g. in hiring and promotions) and in the housing market (when buying or renting a house), although discrimination can occur in any domain. Research has also shown that experiencing discrimination or perceiving that one's group is unfairly treated in society affects people's objective chances in life, as well as their sense of belonging, well-being (Safi, 2010) and mental health (Nandi et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2014).

Foreign-born individuals living in the UK may be discriminated against for multiple reasons, some of which might be shared with UK-born ethnic minorities (e.g. ethnicity, skin colour or religion) while others are more likely to affect the migrant population (e.g. having foreign qualifications or a foreign accent). It is difficult to disentangle the reasons for discrimination because multiple factors might be at play at the same time. For example, a Somali-born worker

might be discriminated against for his/her ethnicity, race, Muslim affiliation, foreign accent or foreign credentials.

The migrant population in the UK is diverse, not only in terms of their national and ethnic origins, but also with regard to their economic and educational backgrounds. These differences will affect their experiences and perceptions of discrimination. For example, studies have shown that migrant groups who are culturally and ethnically more distant from the local majority population are more likely to experience discrimination than those who are more alike (Dancygier and Laitin, 2014), while migrants from less developed countries are often perceived more negatively than those from developed nations, regardless of their personal characteristics (Kustov, 2019). However, not all discrimination against migrants has an ethno-racial or national component (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010). For example, attitudes towards low-skilled migrants are generally more negative than towards the high skilled (Hainmuller et al., 2011), which could in turn affect the experiences of discrimination of high- and low-skilled migrant workers.

Understanding why people discriminate is complex and ultimately involves the study of social attitudes and stereotypes about certain groups. Although negative attitudes and stereotypes do not always translate into discriminatory behaviours, they are likely to facilitate discrimination. Multiple studies have shown that where members of a population have negative attitudes towards certain minorities, these minorities also tend to be the ones that experience most discrimination (Cuddy et al, 2011). For more information about attitudes towards migration in the UK, see the Migration Observatory briefing [UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern](#).

In 2018, 19% of the non-EU born and 8% of the EU born in the UK described themselves as members of a group that faces discrimination because of nationality, religion, language, race or ethnicity

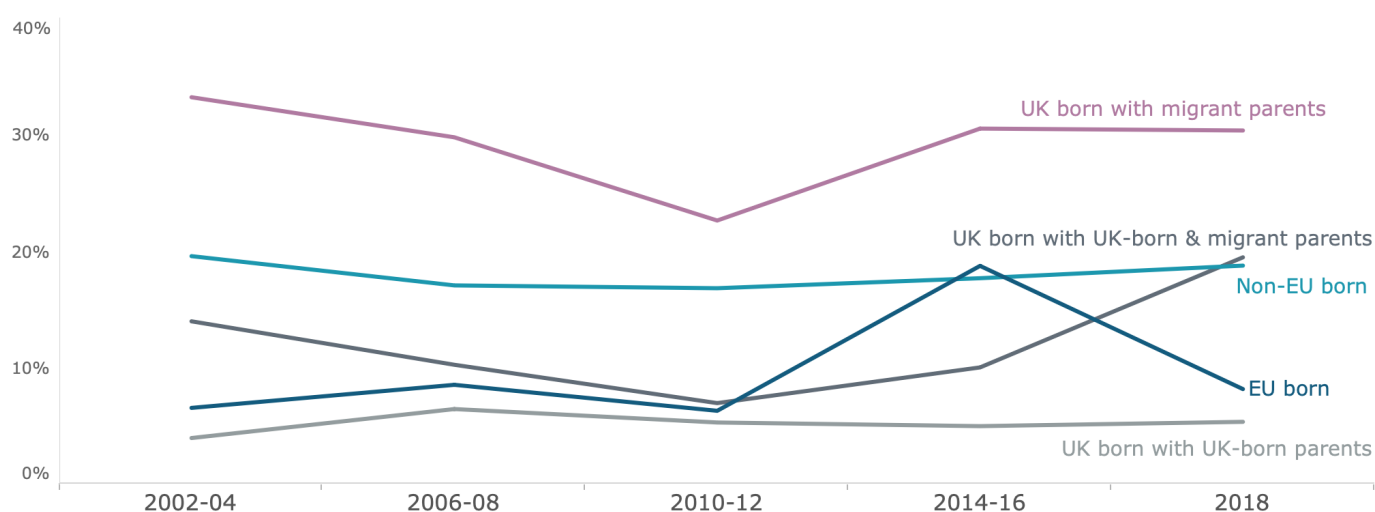
On average, 16% of migrants in Great Britain in 2018 said that they would describe themselves as ‘members of a group that is discriminated against in this country’ because of their colour/race, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity’ (Figure 1). This share is higher among the UK-born population with foreign-born parents (30%).

Adult children of migrants, almost all of whom are UK citizens, may be more likely to see inequalities through the lens of discrimination than the foreign-born population because they have higher expectations of equal treatment in UK society. There are differences in the ethnic composition of the migrant population and the UK-born population with foreign-born parents that only partially explain these differences; that is, the UK born with foreign-born parents are still more likely to perceive group discrimination even when taking respondents’ ethnicity into account. In addition, UK-born ethnic minorities are still disadvantaged with respect to UK-born whites in relevant outcomes such as unemployment or wages (Dustmann et al., 2011) and part of this disadvantage is likely to be caused by discrimination (Heath and Di Stasio, 2019).

This measure indicates respondents’ *perception of group discrimination* and does not attempt to capture actual experiences or incidents of discrimination. Scholars and policy makers use measures like this because people’s perceptions of unfair treatment at the group level are important for their well-being and health, as well as for societies’ social cohesion in general (Auer and Ruedin, 2019). Perceptions of unfair treatment among the migrant population may be an indicator of how welcomed or accepted by the local population they feel, and therefore relevant in their process of integration (De Vroome et al., 2014).

Figure 1

Respondent is a member of a group that is discriminated on grounds of colour/race, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity, 2002-2018
Age 15+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 for Great Britain.

Note: respondents are asked whether they "describe themselves as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country". Those answering affirmatively are asked on what grounds their group is discriminated against (colour/race, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity).



In general, the EU born population reported lower perceived discrimination compared to the non-EU with the exception of the years 2014–16, when similar shares of EU and non-EU born migrants identified as a member of a group that faces discrimination (19% and 18%, respectively). The sharp increase in the perception of group discrimination among the EU born in the years 2014 and 2016 could be related to the atmosphere surrounding the EU Referendum in 2016 (Rzepnikowska, 2019), when public concerns over immigration were the top issue for voters (Ipsos MORI, 2016). Previous research has consistently shown that political elites can shape attitudes towards certain groups, even if only for a short period of time (Flores, 2018). Recent studies have also confirmed an increase in perceptions of hostility and discrimination among EU migrants during and after the EU Referendum, which led to a worsening of their mental health (Guma & Dafydd, 2019; Frost, 2019).

In 2016–2018, the share of migrants perceiving discrimination against their group was similar in Great Britain (16%) as in the EU-14 countries (17%)

In 2016–2018, the share of non-EU born migrants describing themselves as members of a group that is discriminated in society was higher in Belgium and Austria (32%) and in France (20%) than in Great Britain (17%), while this share was similar in countries such as Germany (17%) (Figure 2).

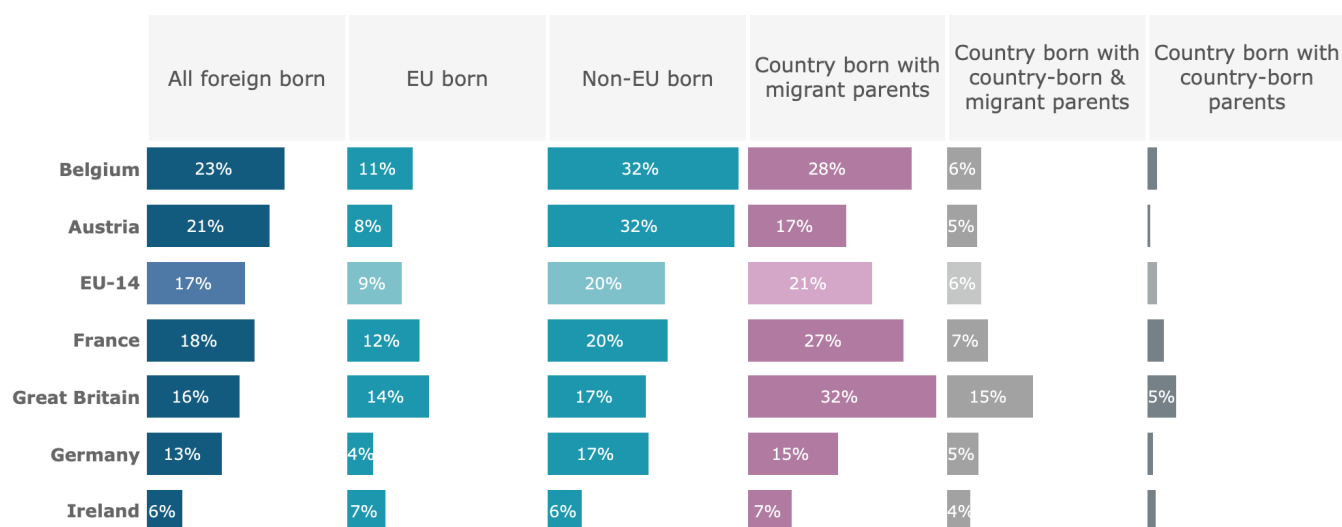
The comparatively high share of EU migrants describing themselves as members of a discriminated group (14%) in Great Britain compared to other EU-14 countries (9%) in 2016–18 can be explained by the high level of perceived discrimination reported by EU migrants during the time of the EU referendum in 2016. (As noted earlier, this share dropped in 2018.)

A third of UK-born respondents with migrant parents perceived discrimination against their group (32%), substantially higher than in other EU-14 countries (21%). The share of country-born respondents with only one foreign-born parent perceiving discrimination against their group is also higher in the Great Britain (15%)

than in the rest of EU-14 countries (6%). The reasons for this cannot be confirmed from the data (which simply show respondents' perceptions on discrimination), but could include differences in actual outcomes and levels of discrimination, expectations of equal treatment, parents' or grandparents' narratives about their past experiences of discrimination, or awareness of discrimination. Nonetheless, Great Britain stands out as a country where a high share of migrants' UK-born children perceive discrimination against their group on grounds of colour, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity.

Figure 2

Respondent is a member of a group that is discriminated on grounds of colour/race, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity, 2016-2018
Age 15+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 for Great Britain.

Note: respondents are asked whether they "describe themselves as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country". Those answering affirmatively are asked on what grounds their group is discriminated against (colour/race, nationality, religion, language or ethnicity).

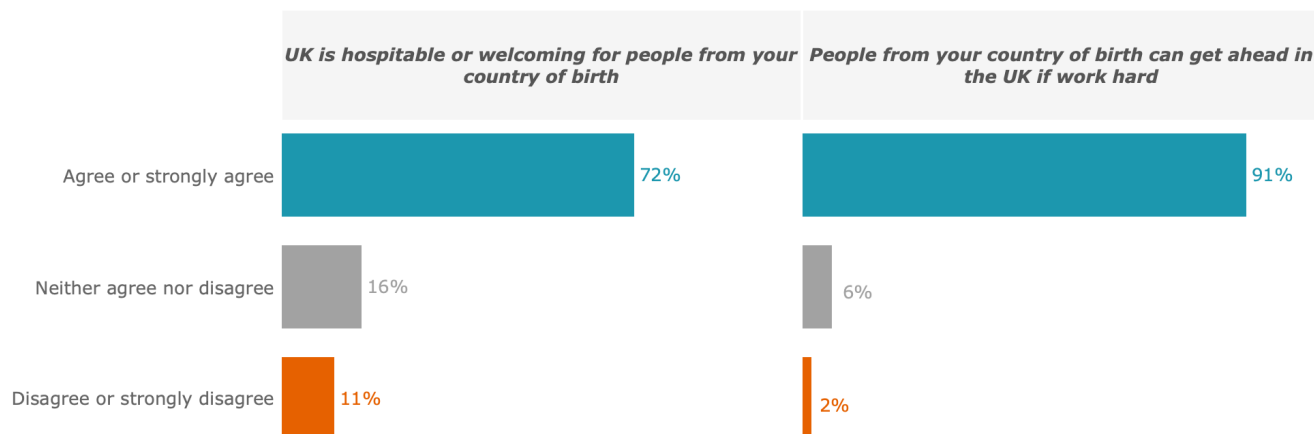


The majority of the foreign-born population (72%) think that the UK is hospitable or welcoming for migrants, and that migrants can get ahead if they work hard (91%)

The perceptions that the foreign-born population have about the UK are generally positive (Figure 3). Almost three quarters (72%) thought that the UK is hospitable or welcoming for people from their country of birth in the 2015-2017 period, while 91% believed that migrants can get ahead if they work hard.

Figure 3

Migrants' experiences in UK society, 2015-17
Foreign born, age 16+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS wave 7 (2015/16/17). Respondents that do not know or who refuse to answer the question are not shown in the chart. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding



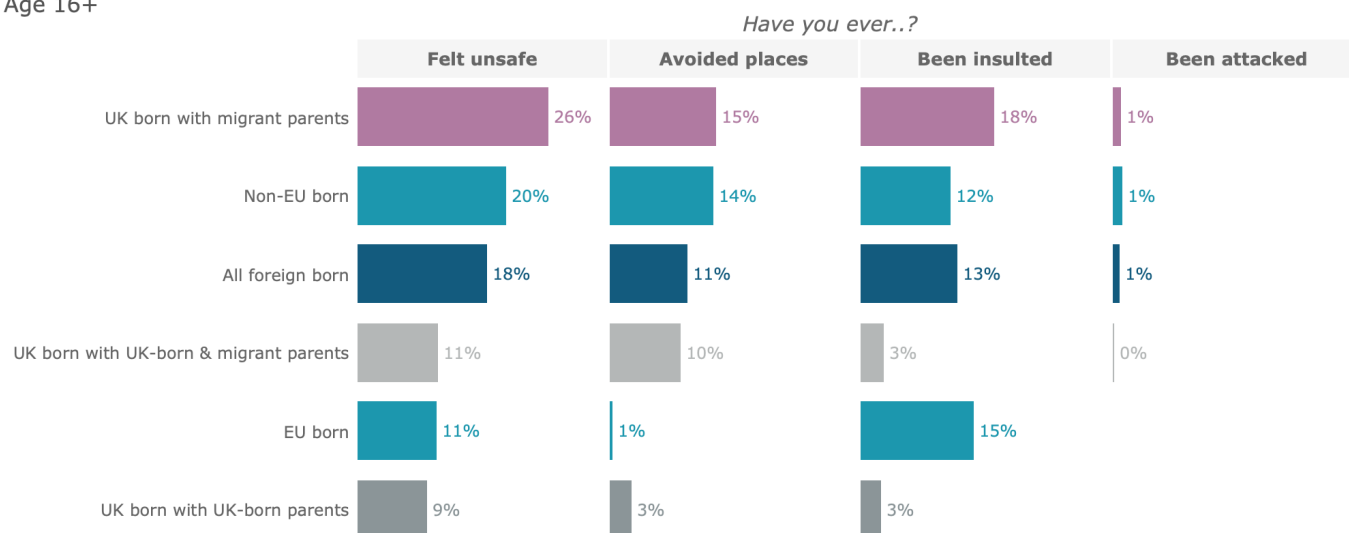
About 13% of the foreign-born population in the UK in 2015-2017 said that they had been insulted because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent

On average, 18% of foreign-born respondents said that they had felt unsafe, and 11% said they had avoided certain places, because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent, according to data collected from 2015 to 2017 (Figure 4). About 13% of the foreign born said that they had been insulted on one of these grounds. EU born migrants were significantly less likely to say that they avoided certain places due to the aforementioned characteristics than the non-EU born.

The rates at which migrants from non-EU countries reported negative experiences could be higher than those reported by adult children of migrants, but the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant. The factors explaining the likelihood of experiencing events of this kind are complex and will not just reflect social attitudes towards different groups, but also migrants' socio-economic background, the places where they live and work, or even the socio-political context. For example, 'trigger events' such as terror attacks can lead to 'spikes' in racially and religiously motivated hate crime (Hambly et al., 2018).

Figure 4

Experiences of harassment and safety perceptions on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent, by country of birth
Age 16+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS wave 1, 3, 5 and 7.

Note: only respondents surveyed in wave 7 (2015/16/17). Answers given in previous waves (1,3 and 5) are considered. In each wave, respondents are asked whether they have felt unsafe; been insulted, called names, threatened or shouted; been physically attacked; or avoided going to or being in certain places (list provided). Those answering affirmatively reported the reasons that motivated the harassment (sex, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health or disability, nationality, religion, language or accent, dress or appearance, or other reason).



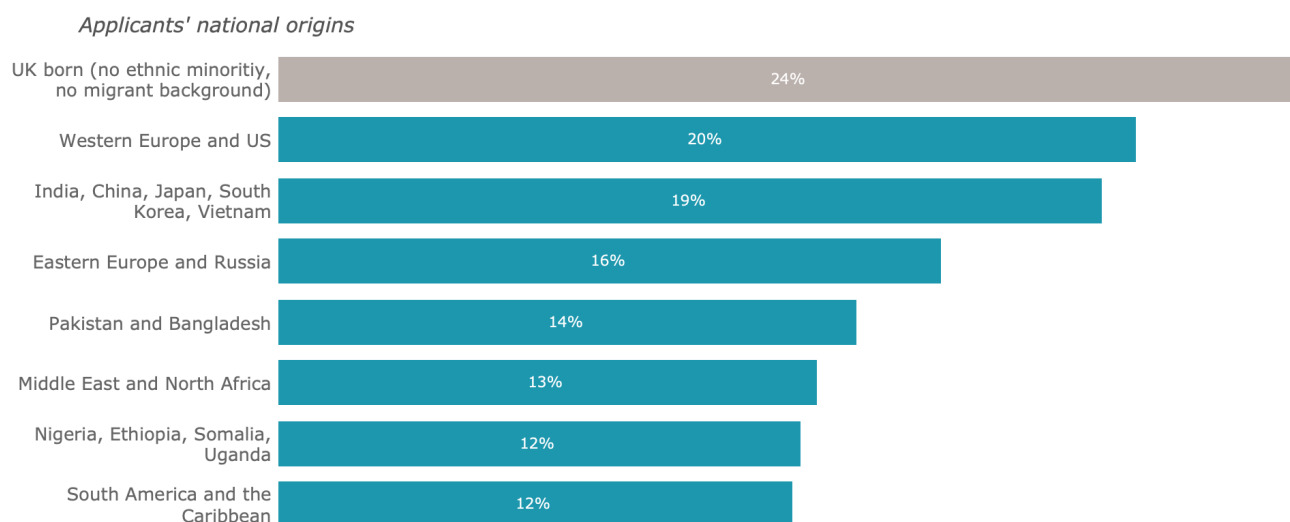
In Western Europe and the United States, research shows ethnic minorities are discriminated against in hiring decisions irrespective of whether they are foreign born, have foreign nationality or foreign qualifications

While surveys measure people's subjective perceptions of discrimination, field experiments represent an objective way of measuring discrimination in a certain environment, usually the labour or housing markets. In field experiments, researchers submit numerous applications, for example for a job, on behalf of fictitious candidates. The applications are exactly the same except for the applicants' ethnicity (usually signalled with their names), country of birth or other characteristics of interest.

In the UK, a recent field experiment conducted by Di Stasio and Heath (2019) revealed that applicants who were born or whose parents were born in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sub-Saharan Africa or the Caribbean were less likely to receive a positive response from UK employers compared to applicants without an ethnic minority or migrant background (Figure 5). Applicants with Western European or American (US) origins were the only group receiving a similar share of call-backs for an interview to the UK born White-British group. All applicants had UK citizenship and UK educational credentials. A summary of their research project can be read [here](#).

Figure 5

Share of invitations for a job interview, by applicants' national origins, 2017
Applicants living in the UK (50% foreign born, 50% children of migrants)



Source: Di Stasio, V. and Heath, A. (2019)

Note: half of the applicants' with national origins other than British are foreign born and the other half are children of migrants. Regardless of their country of birth, they all have UK citizenship and educational credentials from a British institution. Applicants' national origin can be identified in their CVs by their names and the languages they speak, and it is also mentioned in the cover letter. Eastern Europe includes Albania, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania.



The same field experiment was carried out in four other European countries in addition to the UK (Germany, The Netherlands, Norway and Spain). Overall, the results show that applicants were more likely to be discriminated against on grounds of their ethnicity regardless of whether they were foreign born or not (Veit and Thijsen, 2019). These findings confirm previous research showing that the main driver of discrimination is ethnicity rather than being a migrant (Quillian et al., 2019). Foreign-born applicants from Middle Eastern or African origins were the most discriminated against by employers in all five countries, particularly in The Netherlands and UK.

Minorities from predominantly Muslim countries (e.g. Pakistan) also experience discrimination due to their religious affiliation in the UK, the Netherlands and especially in Norway (Di Stasio et al., 2019). Multiple research has shown that there is a widespread hostility towards Muslim minorities in Western countries (Helbling, 2013). Previous research has found that hostility can also come from liberal supporters of immigration, who perceive Muslims' religiosity as a threat to European secularism and liberal values (Helbling and Traunmuller, 2018, Van der Noll et al., 2018).

Overall, labour market field experiments carried out in Western Europe and North America during the last decades have revealed significant levels of discrimination against ethnic minority applicants, including migrants, in employers' hiring decisions (Zschirnt and Ruedin, 2016) as well as in rental housing markets (Auspurg et al., 2019). These studies show that ethnic minorities tend to be discriminated against regardless of whether they are foreign born or have a foreign nationality, suggesting that ethnicity tends to be a better predictor of discrimination than immigration status (Quillian et al., 2019). Despite not having any language problems and holding domestic credentials, children of migrants do not face lower levels of discrimination than their parents.

Evidence gaps and limitations

This briefing presents survey estimates of perceived discrimination or harassment due to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or country of birth, based on survey data (UKHLS and ESS). Because these data are based on people's perceptions, it is possible that the real levels of discrimination and harassment are higher or lower than the estimates presented in the briefing. Individuals' perceptions are based on their actual experiences with discrimination and/or their sensitivity to the issue of discrimination. Unfortunately, the data do not allow us to unpick the effect that each of the two factors (experiences and sensitivity) have on the perceptions of each respondent.

By contrast, labour market field experiments such as the study conducted by Di Stasio and Heath (2019) are the gold standard to measure discrimination. Despite its advantages, however, the actual level of discrimination in the labour market might be higher or lower than the level of discrimination estimated by a field experiment simply because experiments tend to focus only on certain occupations (usually a maximum of 10) and they do not necessarily mirror the actual sociodemographic composition of ethnic minorities. For example, if there are only 10% of graduates among workers of a certain ethnic minority but 50% of applicants of that ethnicity in the experiment apply to high-skilled positions, the average level of discrimination measured in the experiment will not precisely match the actual level of discrimination faced by this ethnic group. In addition, most field experiments do not tell us anything about any discrimination that may take place either at interview stage or after a person has been hired.

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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.



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