



# BRIEFING

## Migrants and Discrimination in the UK

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This briefing examines migrants' experiences and perceptions of discrimination due to their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, or accent. It also discusses evidence of labour market discrimination against migrants and children of migrants.

### Key Points

Migrants may experience discrimination for several different reasons, some of which also affect ethnic minority groups born in the UK. 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.

People in the UK are more tolerant of migrants than those in other countries, expressing less reluctance to have them as neighbours in 2022.

Around 16% of migrants in Britain described themselves as members of a group that faced discrimination in 2018–20. Ethnic minorities born in the UK were roughly twice as likely to perceive discrimination than people born outside the country.

Migrants in Britain were less likely to perceive discrimination than their counterparts in some other European countries in 2018–20. However, UK levels of perceived discrimination were comparatively high among the adult children of migrants.

Minorities of migrants in the UK said they felt unsafe (19%), were insulted (15%), or avoided places (10%) because of their background. In 2020, feeling unsafe or being insulted was more common among those born in the EU, whereas avoiding places was more likely among those born in non-EU countries.

British employers discriminate against job applicants based on their ethnicity. Pakistani and Nigerian applicants who grew up in the UK and have British citizenship and qualifications are called back for interviews significantly less often than White British applicants.

### Understanding the evidence

#### ***Measuring harassment and discrimination***

Discrimination is typically defined as the unfair or unjust treatment of people based on 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, as people do not always realise if they have been discriminated against and on which grounds. At the same time, those who discriminate against others will often not recognise it, either because they are not conscious of their discriminatory behaviours, or because they are aware that discriminating against others is not socially acceptable and can be illegal. As a result, researchers have used multiple methods and sources of data to measure the extent to which there is discrimination against specific groups of people in societies.

On one hand, surveys can inform us about people's personal experiences of discrimination. However, it is important to acknowledge that people's perceptions and reporting of discriminatory behaviours are inherently [subjective](#). 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. Also, not everybody is [equally sensitive](#) to discriminatory behaviours.

On the other, researchers have used field experiments or covert studies to measure discrimination without relying on people's perceptions and experiences. A common field experiment involves sending fictitious applications to real job vacancies or rental advertisements, varying only applicants' ethnicity or country of birth. By looking at employers' or landlords' responses, we can directly measure whether equally qualified applicants are treated differently based on their characteristics. This briefing presents both types of data.

### **Data sources and definitions**

The word 'migrant' is used differently in different contexts. In this briefing, we use the term to refer to foreign-born individuals, 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 three different data sources: the [World Values Survey](#) (WVS), the [European Social Survey](#) (ESS) and the [Understanding Society – UK Longitudinal Household Survey](#) (UKLHS). The WVS and ESS are cross-national surveys which periodically collect data on attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs about different topics. The WVS covers the adult (18+) population in a large number of countries around the world and collected data in 7 different waves since 1981. The seventh wave collected data from 66 countries and territories between 2017 and 2022 (British data was collected in 2022). The ESS covers individuals aged 15 and older who live in private households and collects data every two years. The latest wave for which data were available, the tenth, covered 31 European countries between 2020 and 2022. British data was for 2020 and only covered Great Britain, excluding Northern Ireland. The UKLHS is a longitudinal survey of approximately 40,000 households. All surveys are designed to be representative of the population, although, like all surveys, there may be some bias 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 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 UKLHS, the ESS, and the WVS 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

The UK 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, ethnicity, or national origin, was the first legislation of this kind in the country. 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 against 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, ethnicity, or national origin, and thus includes discrimination against people because they are migrants.

Under UK law, discriminatory behaviours are classified in different ways. These include:

- *direct discrimination* – treating someone with a protected characteristic less favourably compared to 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;
- *victimisation* – treating someone unfairly because they have complained about discrimination or harassment.

It is legal to take positive action if people with protected characteristics 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.

There are situations where differential treatment of non-UK citizens based on their nationality is not unlawful. For example, only non-UK citizens from Ireland and Commonwealth countries are allowed to vote in general elections, and only certain nationalities 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 several different reasons, some of which also affect minority groups born in the UK

Discrimination can have a significant impact on people's lives, and it is often found in the housing market (when buying or renting a house) or the labour market (hiring and promotion practices). However, it can occur in any domain. Experiences and perceptions of discrimination can affect people's chances in life, their sense of belonging and [well-being](#), or their [mental health](#).

Discrimination against migrants in the UK can occur for multiple reasons. Some of these, like ethnicity, skin colour, or religion, are shared with ethnic minorities born in the UK. Other reasons, such as having foreign qualifications or accents, are more likely to affect the foreign-born. Disentangling the precise reasons behind discriminatory behaviours is difficult since multiple factors might be at play at the same time. For example, a worker born in Somalia might be discriminated against on account of their ethnicity, race, religion, accent, or foreign credentials.

Migrants are a diverse group in the UK. This is true of their national and ethnic origins, as well as their economic and educational backgrounds. These differences affect experiences and perceptions of discrimination. People who are more different from the local majority, culturally and ethnically, are [more likely](#) to experience discrimination. Likewise, migrants born in less developed countries are perceived [more negatively](#) than those from rich countries, regardless of personal characteristics.

The links between public attitudes, group stereotypes, and discrimination are complex. Negative attitudes and stereotypes don't always translate into discriminatory behaviour, although they facilitate it. For example, minority groups who are viewed more negatively by the public also tend to experience the [most discrimination](#) (for more information about attitudes towards migration in the UK, see the Migration Observatory's briefing, [UK Public Opinion toward Immigration](#)).

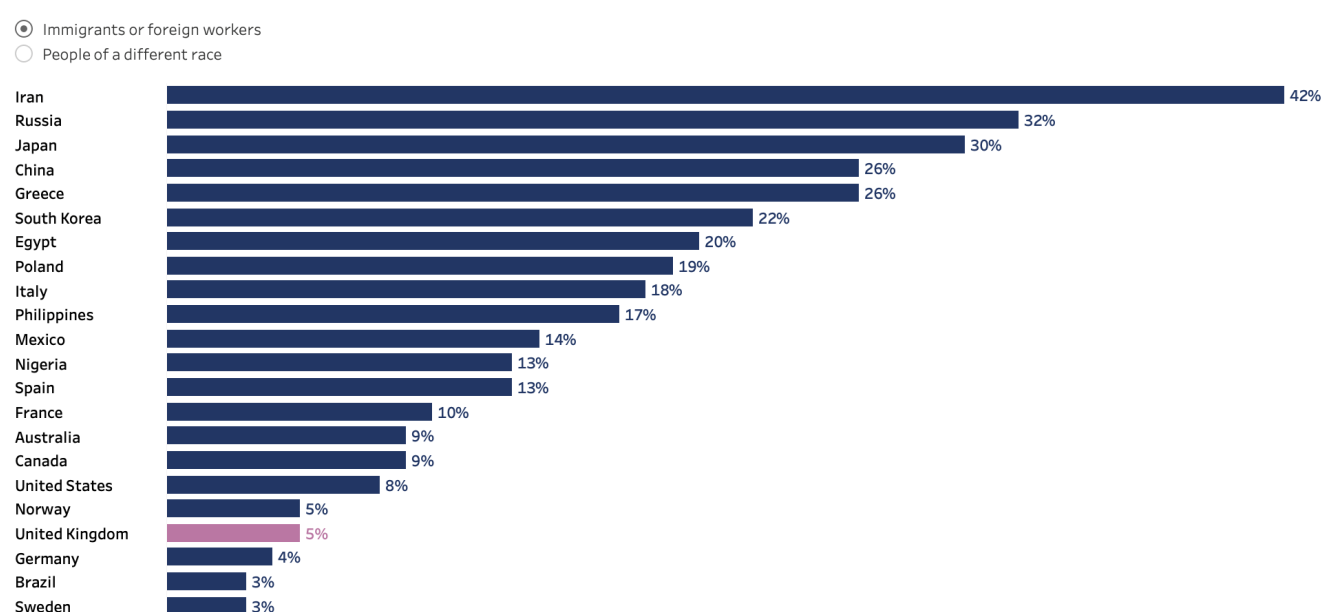
## People in the UK are more tolerant of migrants than those in other countries, expressing less reluctance to have them as neighbours in 2022

In general, people living in the UK are relatively tolerant towards immigrants. In 2022, only 5% of the British public said they would not like to have immigrants as neighbours (Figure 1). This is a common indicator of prejudice in research, which captures underlying attitudes towards migrants as well as social norms that make it unacceptable to express hostility. The share of people expressing prejudice towards migrants in Britain was one of the lowest in the world and notably smaller than in other democracies like Japan (30%), Greece (26%), Italy (18%), or even France (10%).

**Figure 1**

### Share of respondents expressing prejudice against immigrants or people of a different race

Individuals aged 18+, selected countries, 2017-22



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of World Values Survey, wave 7.

Notes: All surveys were conducted between 2017 and 2022. British data was collected in 2022. Respondents were given a list of groups, and respondents were asked to select all those which they would not like to have as neighbours.



A similar conclusion emerges with regard to racial prejudice – in 2022, only 2% of the British public said they would not like to have people of a different race as neighbours, significantly lower than in most other countries (Figure 1).

While Britain is relatively tolerant towards migrants and ethnic minorities, there is nonetheless significant evidence that some of them perceive and experience discrimination in their daily lives, as detailed in the sections below.

## Around 16% of migrants in Britain described themselves as members of a group that faced discrimination in 2018-20

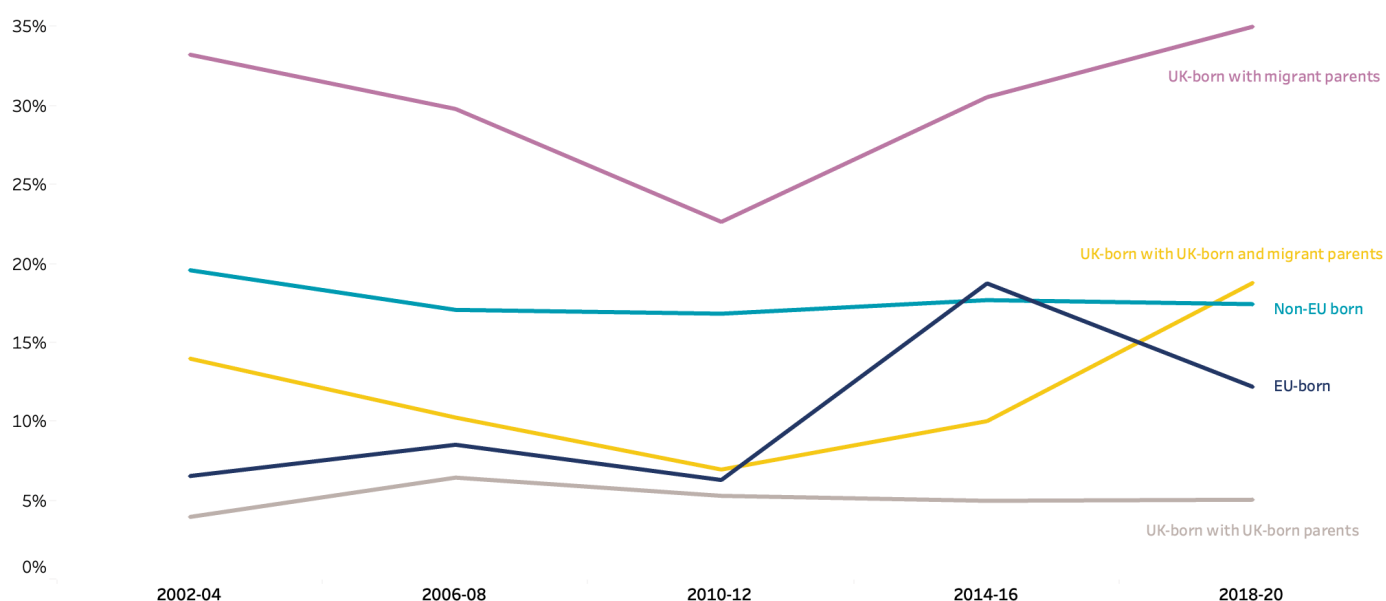
In 2018-20, around 16% of the foreign-born population in Britain described themselves as members of a group that was discriminated against for reasons of race, nationality, religion, language, or ethnicity.

Before 2014-16, the level of perceived discrimination was notably lower among EU-born migrants (Figure 2). However, people born in the EU experienced a large increase in perceived discrimination in the period leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, reaching levels comparable to those seen among non-EU migrants. In 2018-2020, the share of EU-born migrants perceiving discrimination against people like them declined but remained above pre-referendum levels.

**Figure 2**

### Self-reported levels of perceived discrimination (colour/race, nationality, religion, language, or ethnicity)

By origin, individuals aged 15 and over, 2002 to 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of European Social Survey data, 2002-20, United Kingdom.

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



People born in the UK to migrant parents were much more likely to see themselves as belonging to a discriminated group than the foreign-born, at 35% (Figure 2). Among this group, levels of perceived discrimination declined in the 2000s before notably increasing in the 2010s. A similar trend can be observed among those with mixed heritage who had a single parent born abroad.

Adult children of migrants consistently report higher levels of discrimination in surveys than the foreign-born, and this is not unique to the UK. Perceptions of discrimination tend to increase with length of stay, a phenomenon that scholars

refer to as the ‘[integration paradox](#)’. There are several reasons that could explain this pattern. First, adult children of migrants, almost all of whom are British citizens and grew up in the UK, have higher expectations of equal treatment and are more aware of their rights than their parents; as a result, they are less likely to tolerate being discriminated against. Second, UK-born ethnic minorities may be both more exposed to discrimination and more aware that they are being discriminated against than the foreign-born, as they are native English speakers, consume English media, and have extensive contact with the White British population. Third, adult children of migrants may also be more aware of existing ethnic inequalities and more likely to attribute them to discrimination. [Research](#) has indeed shown that UK-born ethnic minorities earn less and are more likely to be unemployed than white Britons. At least part of this gap is caused by [discrimination](#). Finally, it is also possible that migrants, especially those with lower levels of education, are more reluctant to disclose their experiences of discrimination in surveys compared to higher-educated migrants and ethnic minorities born in the country.

Data from the UK’s household survey, which allows for more detailed breakdowns by origin and ethnicity, confirms these patterns. Compared to the foreign-born, UK-born ethnic minorities were roughly twice as likely to describe themselves as members of a group that faced discrimination in 2020 (40% vs. 19%, see Figure 2). This is also true if we only include discrimination based on colour, race, nationality, language, or religion (27% vs. 13%).

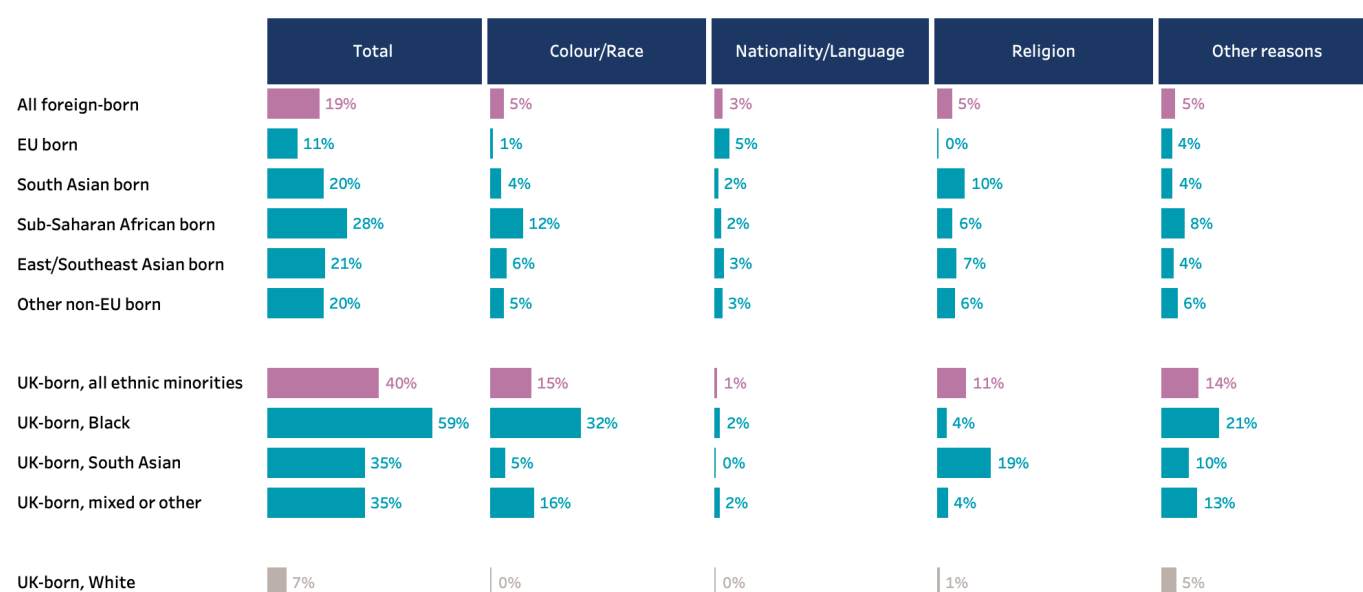
Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa were more likely to perceive discrimination than people born in other regions of the world, mostly on account of colour or race (Figure 3). Individuals born in the EU were more likely to feel their group was discriminated against because of their nationality or language.

Perceptions of discrimination also varied among ethnic minority groups born in the UK. The highest reported levels of overall discrimination were among UK-born individuals who identify as Black, at 59%. Around a third of this group perceived discrimination on account of colour or race. In contrast, people of South Asian heritage born in the UK, many of whom are Muslims, were more likely to feel discriminated against on account of religion.

**Figure 3**

### Self-reported levels of discrimination

By place of birth and ethnicity, and reason for discrimination, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UKHLS, wave 11.

Note: respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country. They were then asked about the grounds for this discrimination, with options including colour or race, ethnic group, nationality, language, religion, age, gender, sexuality, disability, or other.



Perceptions cannot fully capture actual experiences or incidents of discrimination. However, perceptions of unfair treatment at the group level are [important](#) for social cohesion, as well as individual well-being and health. Such perceptions among migrants can indicate how accepted they feel by the local population, making it relevant to their [integration](#).

Attitudes towards certain groups can be [shaped](#) by political elites, at least for short periods. An example is the period surrounding the Brexit referendum when perceptions of hostility and discrimination among EU-born migrants [increased](#).

## Migrants in Britain were slightly less likely to perceive discrimination against their group than those in some other European states in 2018-20

In 2018-20, 16% of migrants in Great Britain said they belonged to a group that was discriminated against in society. This share was lower than in other Western European countries like France (24%), Germany (22%), or the Netherlands (21%). However, levels of perceived discrimination were lower still in Switzerland (8%) and Ireland (9%).

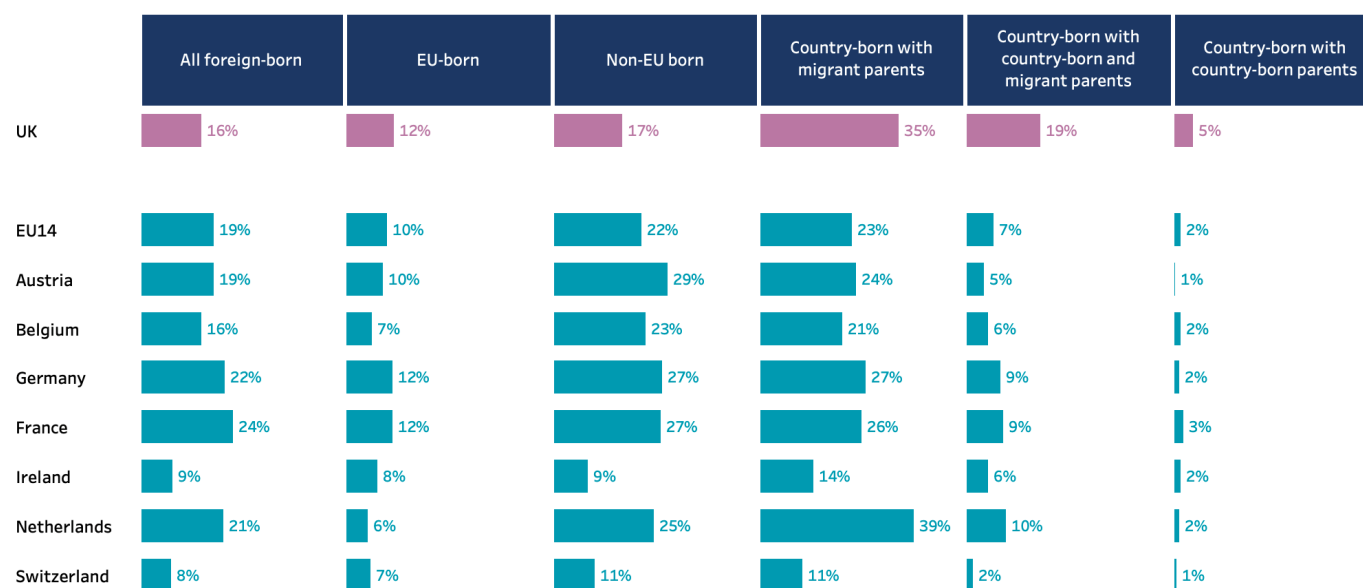
Non-EU migrants tend to report more discrimination against their group than those born in the EU, in the UK and in other Western European countries alike. However, migrants born outside the EU were notably less likely to perceive discrimination in Britain than in European countries like Germany, France, or Austria (Figure 4). These differences persist even when accounting for the different national origins of the non-EU-born population in each country.

EU-born migrants were less likely to report discrimination than non-EU ones in most countries. However, differences between countries were much smaller among this group. Levels of perceived discrimination in Great Britain were similar to those seen in EU14 countries.

**Figure 4**

### Self-reported levels of perceived discrimination (colour/race, nationality, religion, language, or ethnicity)

By country of residence and origin, individuals aged 15 and over, 2018-20



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of European Social Survey data, 2018-20.

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





Among those born locally to migrant parents, levels of perceived discrimination were significantly higher in Great Britain (35%) than in many other European states, including France (26%) and Germany (27%). People with just one migrant parent were also more likely to perceive discrimination in Britain (19%) than in EU-14 countries (7%).

The reasons for this pattern are unclear and might include differences in levels of discrimination, socio-economic outcomes, expectations of equal treatment, family narratives about past experiences of discrimination, or social awareness. Nonetheless, Britain stands out as a country where large numbers of people born in the country to migrant parents perceive discrimination against their group.

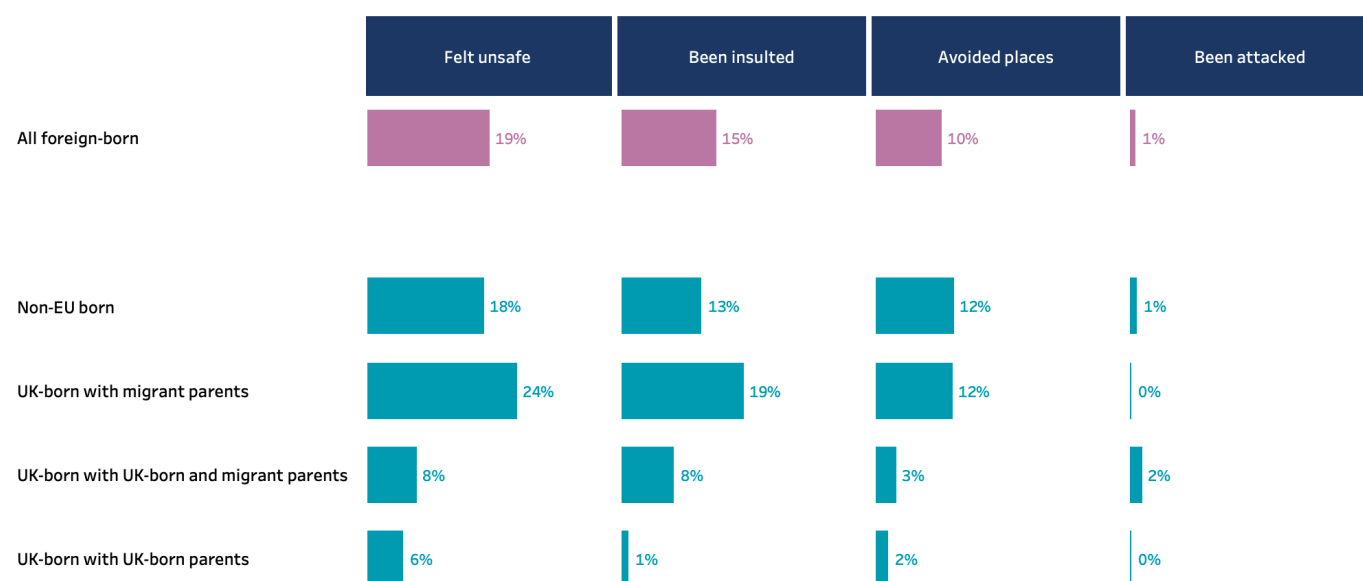
## Minorities of migrants in the UK say they felt unsafe (19%), were insulted (15%), or avoided places (10%) because of their background

Most migrants in the UK are not regularly harassed in their daily lives. However, some report having negative experiences because of their background, such as feeling unsafe, being insulted, or avoiding specific places. In 2020, 19% of individuals born abroad said they had felt unsafe because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, or accent. For the same reasons, around 15% of all migrants had been insulted, and 10% had avoided certain places (Figure 5). Outright physical violence, though, was rare – only 1% of migrants reported being the victim of an attack.

Figure 5

### Reported experiences on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, or accent

Individuals aged 16+, by origin, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS, waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11.

Notes: In each wave, respondents were asked, in turn, if they ever had one of these experiences in the last 12 months. A positive response is recorded if a respondent said yes in any of the previous survey waves. Estimates for the EU-born population are not shown because sample sizes were too small, making estimates unreliable.



## Research shows that ethnic minorities experience discrimination in the labour market regardless of their country of birth, nationality, or qualifications

While surveys can capture people's perceptions and experiences of harassment and discrimination, they cannot provide objective measures of direct discrimination in key areas, such as the [labour](#) or [housing](#) markets. For this, researchers generally employ field experiments or audit studies. A common approach of these studies is to submit multiple applications on behalf of fictitious candidates, such as for a job, and examine the outcomes. The applications

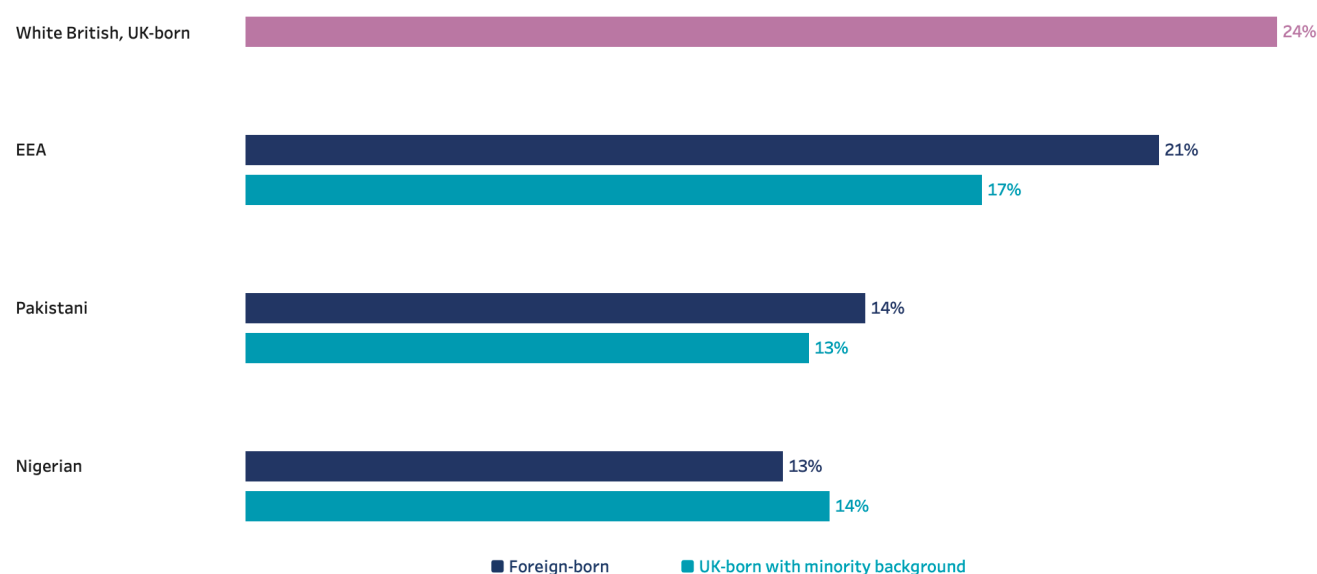
are identical except for certain characteristics of interest, such as country of birth or ethnicity, which are usually signalled through names.

For example, a [study](#) conducted in the UK in 2017 found that applicants were much less likely to receive a positive response from employers if they had Pakistani or Nigerian names (Figure 6). Applicants with names from EEA countries were only slightly discriminated against compared to job candidates with White British names. Notably, these differences occurred even though all applicants were British nationals and had UK qualifications.

**Figure 6**

### Share of invitations for a job interview, by ethnic origin and place of birth

Applicants living in the UK, with British citizenship and qualifications, 2017



Source: The GEMM Study (Lancee, 2019)

Note: Regardless of their country of birth, all fictitious applicants had UK citizenship and educational credentials from a British institution. Applicants' origins were signalled in applications with their names and the languages they were fluent in.



A [field experiment in the London market for shared housing](#) conducted between 2011 and 2012 found ethnic discrimination against minority applicants. The probability of being invited for a room viewing was 13 percentage points lower for applicants with non-British names than for those with British names and 20 percentage points lower for those with Muslim names.

Overall, research indicates that the main driver of discrimination is [ethnicity](#) rather than being a migrant – similar experiments in Europe revealed that applicants were discriminated against on account of ethnicity [regardless](#) of where they were born. Across countries, individuals with Middle Eastern or African origins were most likely to suffer discrimination from employers.

Religion can also drive labour market discrimination, particularly against [Muslims](#). Muslim minorities suffer from widespread [hostility](#) in Western countries, including from [liberals](#) who support immigration but see religiosity as a [threat](#) to European secularism.

## 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, the real levels of discrimination and harassment may be 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 [Lancee \(2019\)](#) 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 fewer than ten), 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 the 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.



## 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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## Recommended citation

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