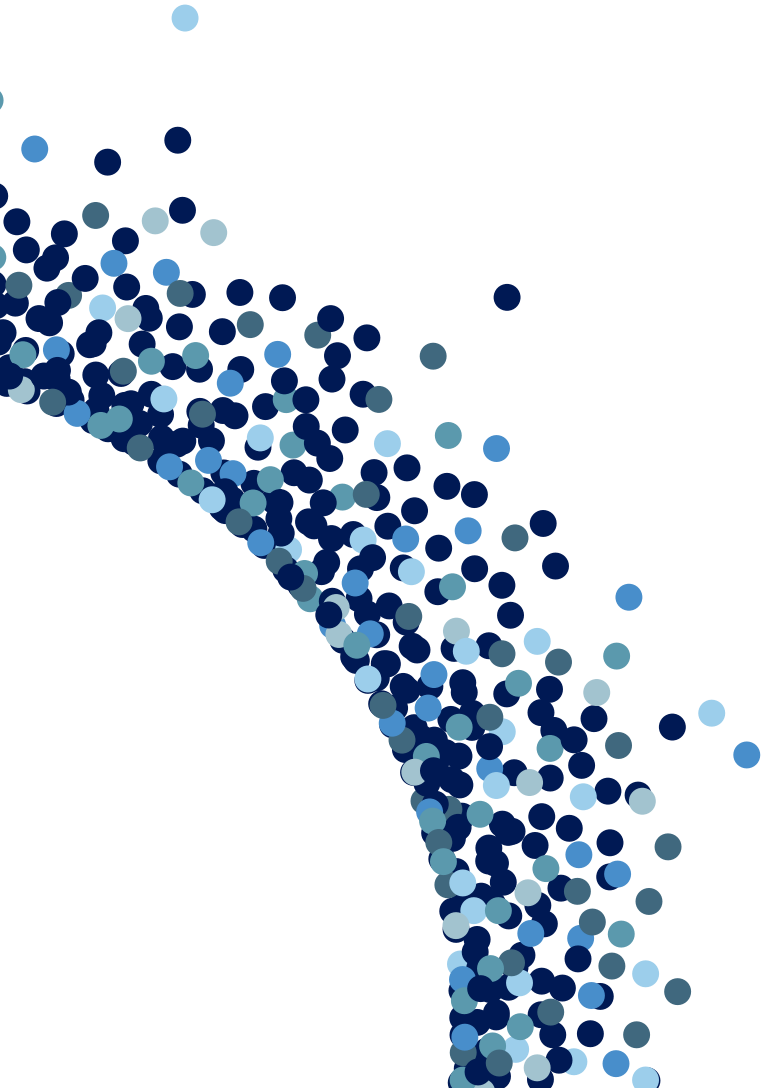
THE MIGRATION OBSERVATORY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

BRIEFING

Migrants' social relationships, identity and civic participation in the UK



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PUBLISHED: 17/03/2020
NEXT UPDATE: 14/03/2022

1st Edition

COMPAS
CENTRE ON MIGRATION, POLICY & SOCIETY

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This briefing examines the nature and types of social relationships of people who were born abroad and moved to the UK. It examines friendship networks and partnerships, perceptions of neighbourhood social cohesion, residential integration and concentration, civic participation and sense of belonging.

Key Points

The extent to which migrants form social connections with the country-born population is a key indicator of migrants' social inclusion in the destination country.

Most migrants in the UK are living in local authorities where the large majority of residents are not migrants.

Migrants and the UK-born report broadly similar levels of neighbourhood social cohesion, although perceptions of social cohesion were higher among adults born in South Asia (a finding quite salient in low-income areas).

Migrants' civic participation, such as volunteering or membership of clubs or other organisations, which is often seen as an indicator or facilitator of social relationships, increases with time spent in the UK.

South Asian and African migrants are more likely to experience social isolation compared to the UK born.

About 28% of foreign-born adults have all their friends from the same ethnicity, but the ethnic diversity in friendships is overall higher among migrants than the UK born.

About 41% of migrants and 90% of the UK born have partners born in the same country and of the same ethnicity.

Migrants who have been in the UK for up to 5 years are much more likely to consider the place where they grew up very important to their identity (89%) compared to those who have moved to the UK more than 15 years ago (46%).

Understanding the evidence

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 main data source used for this evidence is Understanding Society, also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS). The study includes a wealth of questions related to social relationships and civic participation. Despite its many strengths, we are limited in the types of comparisons that we can make, especially with regard to small numbers of people born in certain regions or the availability of detailed variables for certain respondents. In this briefing we present the most relevant survey questions, which can originate from different waves of the study. This means that the figures presented cannot always be directly compared so caution must be used (e.g. readers should not add or subtract figures from different charts).

We also use the latest local migration indicators from the Office for National Statistics to investigate residential patterns, which are derived from the Annual Population Survey (APS). As described elsewhere, the APS has its limitations but is one of the only sources of data for smaller geographical areas.

Data breakdowns

This briefing presents data for the UK-born and foreign-born populations. Among the foreign born, we only distinguish between EU born, Indian born, born in other South Asian countries (including Pakistan), Sub-Saharan African born, and born in other non-EU countries. The small sample size for some of the variables examined in this briefing prevent us from making more detailed breakdowns by country of birth. We also provide some data breakdowns by age at migration for all respondents (as well as ethnicity and household income in the local area for specific variables) or and length of residence for migrants.

Margins of error in the estimates

Because the UKHLS is a survey, 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.

The extent to which migrants form social connections with the rest of the population is a key indicator of their social inclusion in the destination country

Social relationships are the personal links that individuals have with others. They are a source of exchange, help, and support that can affect well-being of both migrants and non-migrants in positive and negative ways (August and Rook 2013). For example, the presence and quality of personal relationships are generally important for well-being and avoiding isolation and loneliness. Migrants often have to rebuild their social networks when moving to a new country, which can be a challenging task.

Social ties between migrants and the rest of the population – and the degree to which these groups "mix" socially– can be an important indicator of whether and how much society is fragmented by country of birth. Multiple factors could explain any lack of social contact between the two groups, including (perceived) discrimination, social distance due to different working environments, or geographical segregation (see, e.g., Ager and Strang, 2008; Demireva and Heath, 2014).

Yet, what counts as a social relationship is quite diverse. Relationships vary in levels of closeness (e.g. social interactions with neighbours vs. interactions with a spouse) and different types of social relationships will have quite different functions. The opportunity for social mixing between groups (e.g. living in the same neighbourhood) will not necessarily mean that close personal relationships actually develop in practice.

Most local authorities in the UK have relatively low shares of foreign-born population because migrants tend to live in urban areas

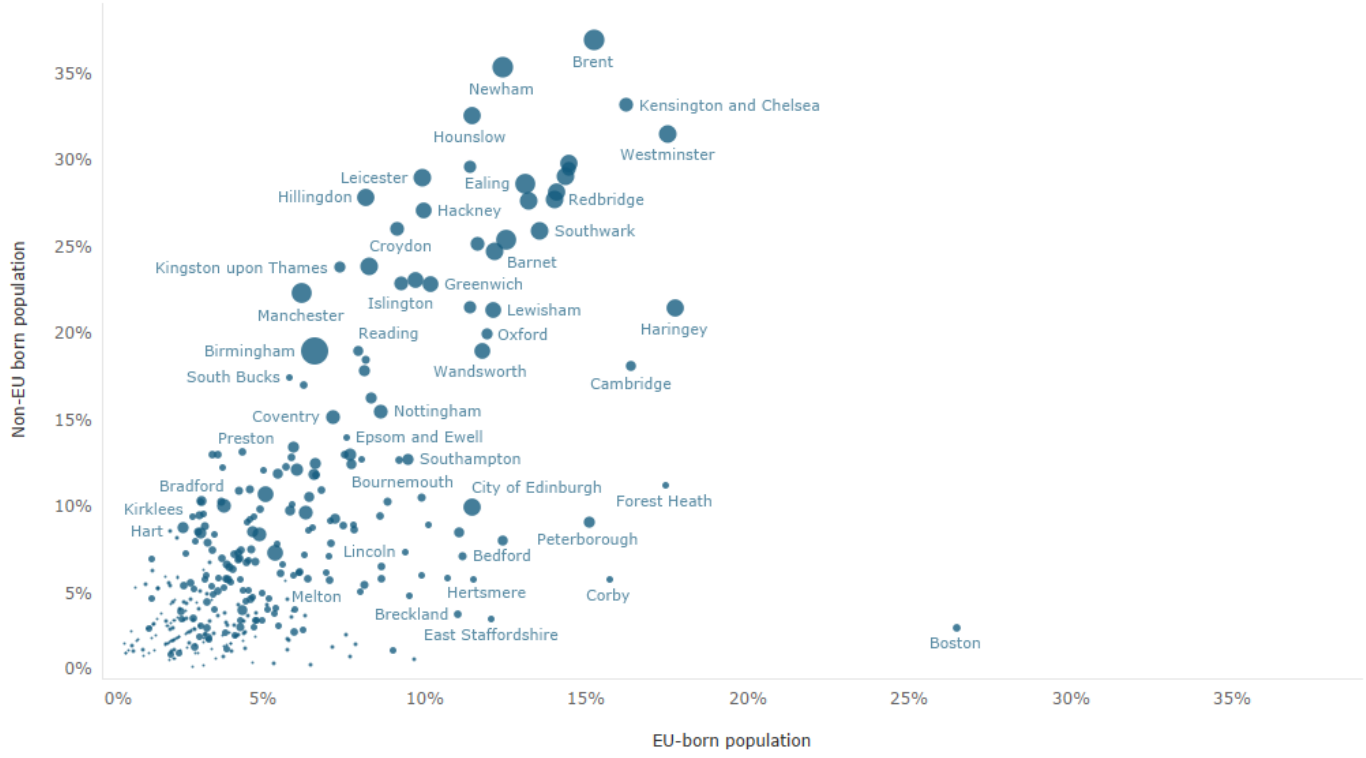
Residential patterns are relevant to inclusion because they indicate, among other things, potential opportunities

to form social relationships. Social relationships, however, are not restricted to the place where someone lives, as people can have close relationships with people that live in different places thanks to online communication technologies. It is also important to remember that the high concentration of migrants in certain areas is not just the result of individuals' choices but also inequalities in socio-economic status or even housing discrimination (Iceland, 2014; Koopmans, 2010). At the same time, so-called 'migrant neighbourhoods' may also be important sources of support, especially for newly arrived migrants (Ryan, 2011).

Figure 1

Share of the population who are born in EU and non-EU countries, by local authority in Great Britain, 2018

Bubble size indicates total foreign-born population in each local authority



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of ONS Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality datasaet for England and Wales and National Records Scottland (NRS)
Note: Estimates are not available for some localities or have been supressed due to confidentiality requirements. Values of zero include values measured as and rounded to zero. Foreign-born population data by local government district are not available for Northern Ireland.

The share of migrants within the UK's local authorities is generally quite low (Figure 1): relatively few of the UK's 382 local authorities have a resident population where over a quarter of people are foreign-born. Areas with larger shares of migrants tend to be concentrated in and around London. The EU and non-EU born population also have differing patterns of residence: there are more areas with high shares of people born outside of the EU than within the EU, which will in part reflect the fact that non-EU migrants are more numerous in the UK population.

This means that migrants in the UK tend to live in local authorities primarily populated by UK-born residents. Within each local authority, there will be specific places (e.g. wards) that have higher or lower shares of migrants than the local authority average. However, recent data for smaller geographic areas are not available (and will not be until the 2021 Census)

South Asian-born adults in low-income areas reported higher levels of neighbourhood social cohesion than the UK born in 2014-16

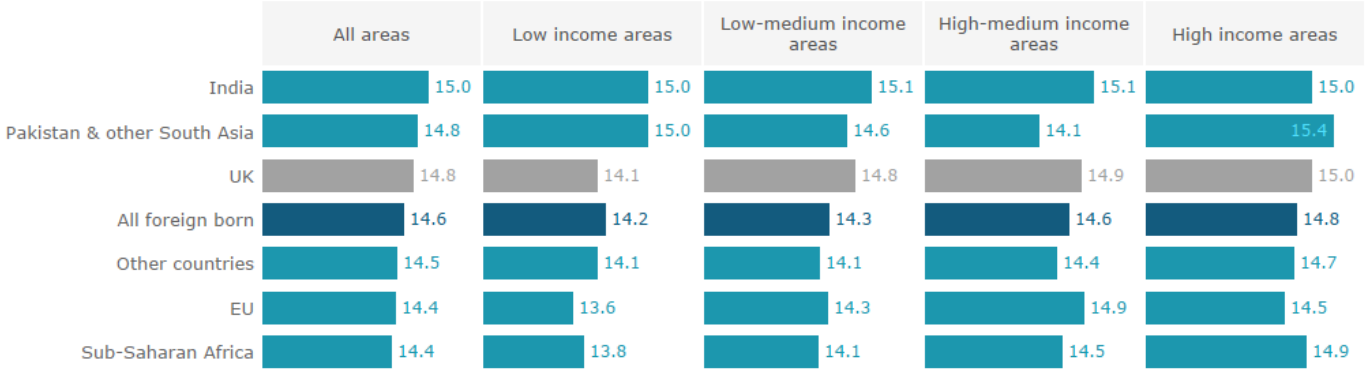
Social relationships are also often linked to social cohesion. While a commonly used term, social cohesion does not have a standard definition (for a discussion about the concept of social cohesion, see the Migration Observatory briefing Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion). A recent definition describes social cohesion as: "The ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society" (Fonseca et al., 2019, p. 246). In line with this definition, we compare perceptions of social cohesion for migrants and UK-born residents in different neighbourhoods.

When people are asked about how they perceive various aspects of social cohesion in their neighbourhood (such as whether people get along together locally), migrants on average tend to report similar perceived levels of social cohesion compared to the UK-born (Figure 2).

Indian and Pakistani born migrants living in low income areas are significantly more likely to report higher levels of social cohesion compared to the UK-born. This is also the case for individuals born in Pakistan and other South Asian countries in high income areas. By contrast, EU-born migrants living in high income areas and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africans in medium-low income areas perceive lower levels of social cohesion in their neighbourhood compared to the UK born.

Figure 2

Perceived neighbourhood cohesion, by respondents' region of birth and geographic area, 2014-2016
Average value (0 to 18) in each area (Middle Layer Super Output Area)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS (years 2014-2016).
Note: The Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) are gegraphic areas created by the ONS based on the population living in a local area (between 5000 and 7200). The MSOAs classification is based on ONS data on the average net equivalised household income before housing costs in each MSOA in 2015-16. The neighbourhood social cohesion scale used in this briefing uses items from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. This is derived from questions about the perceptions of respondents' neighbourhoods (how close-knit it is; the willingness to help neighbours; trust in neighbours; and whether people get along) and its values ranges from 4 (low level of cohesion) to 20 (high level of cohesion).

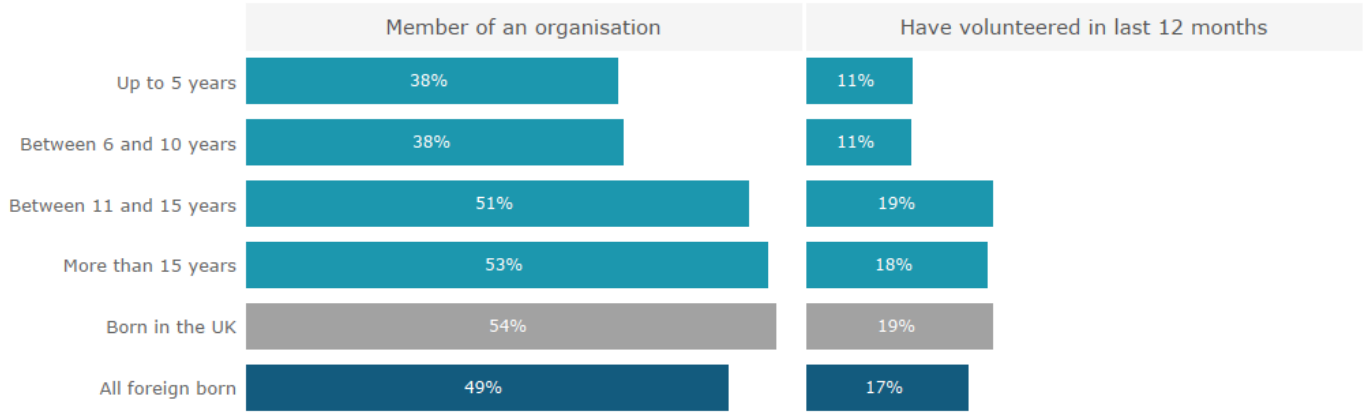
Migrants' civic participation, such as volunteering or membership of clubs or other organisations, increases with time spent in the UK

Civic participation, such as volunteering or membership of clubs or other organisations, is seen as a key indicator of social inclusion (Lessard-Phillips, 2017), since it can offer a valuable forum for community and network building for migrants as well as facilitate the formation of social ties with the local population.

Overall, both organisational membership and volunteering are slightly less common among migrants (49% for membership; 17% for volunteering) than UK-born respondents (53% for membership, 19% for volunteering) (Figure 3). For migrants arriving as children, however, there are no significant differences in civic participation compared to the UK-born. Only migrants who have been in the UK for 10 years or less report lower levels of participation (38% for membership; 11% volunteering) than the UK born, while those who have been in the country for more than 10 years have similar rates of civic participation to the UK-born. Although civic participation is likely to increase with length of residence, Figure 3 compares migrants who arrived to the UK at different points in time, so it is possible that the differences are the result of changes in the composition of migration over time.

Figure 3

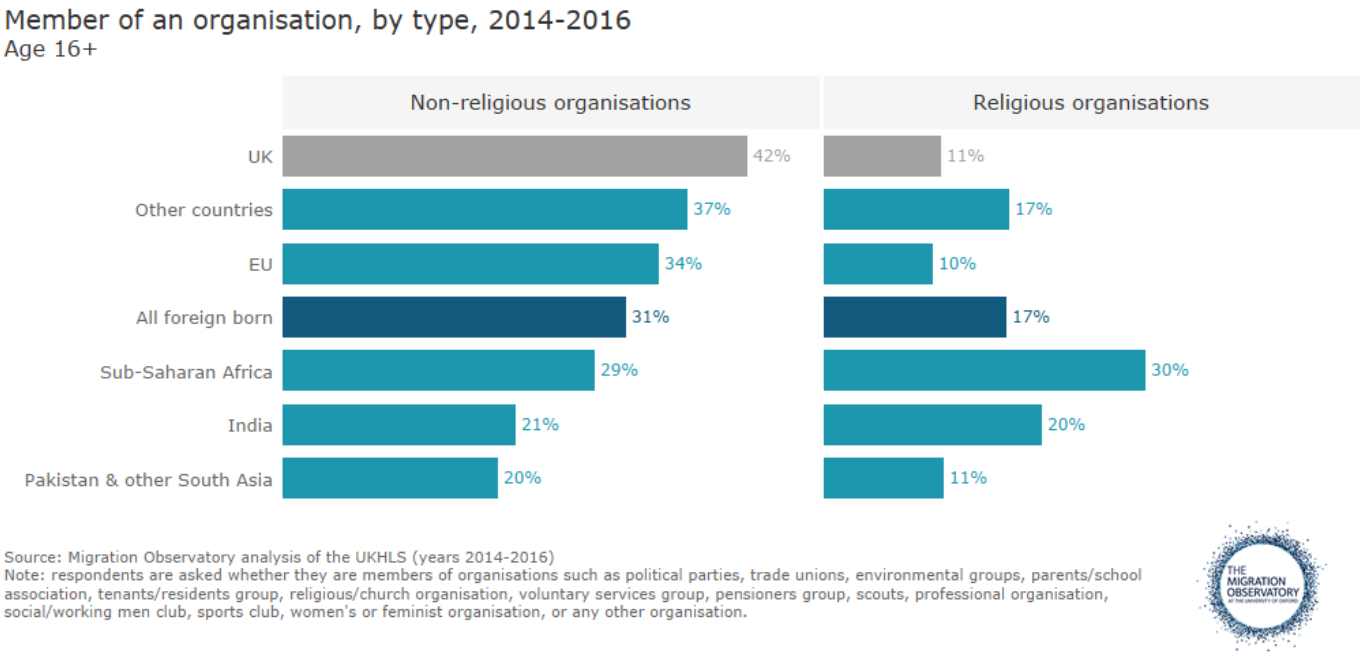
Civic participation, by respondents' length of residence in the UK, 2014-2016
Age 16+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS wave (2014-2016)
Note: respondents are asked whether they are members of organisations such as political parties, trade unions, environmental groups, parents/school association, tenants/residents group, religious/church organisation, voluntary services group, pensioners group, scouts, professional organisation, social/working men club, sports club, women's or feminist organisation, or any other organisation.

When looking at the breakdown by region of birth (Figure 4), migrants born in South Asian countries, excluding India, have lower rates of overall participation (31%) compared with the UK-born (54%). Migrants born in Sub-Saharan Africa have significantly higher rates of participation in religious organisations (30%) than other migrants and the UK born (11%).

Figure 4

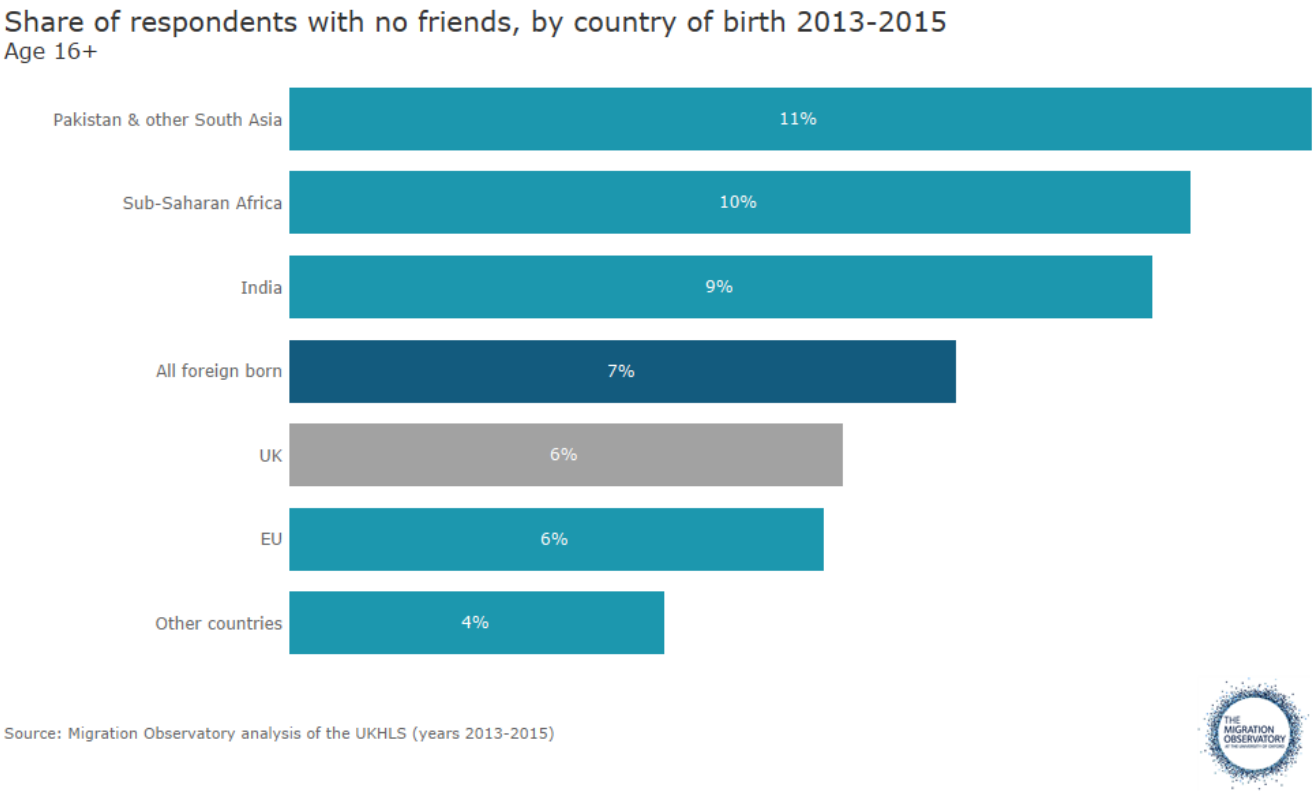


Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS (years 2014-2016)
Note: respondents are asked whether they are members of organisations such as political parties, trade unions, environmental groups, parents/school association, tenants/residents group, religious/church organisation, voluntary services group, pensioners group, scouts, professional organisation, social/working men club, sports club, women's or feminist organisation, or any other organisation.

South Asian and Sub-Saharan African migrants are more likely to experience social isolation compared to the UK-born

Friendships are an important source of support. As a measure of social isolation, we looked at the share of respondents who report not having any friends. The share of such isolated individuals seems to be fairly low in general, though all of the main migrant groups, with the exception of those born in EU countries, report higher levels of social isolation (Figure 5).

Figure 5

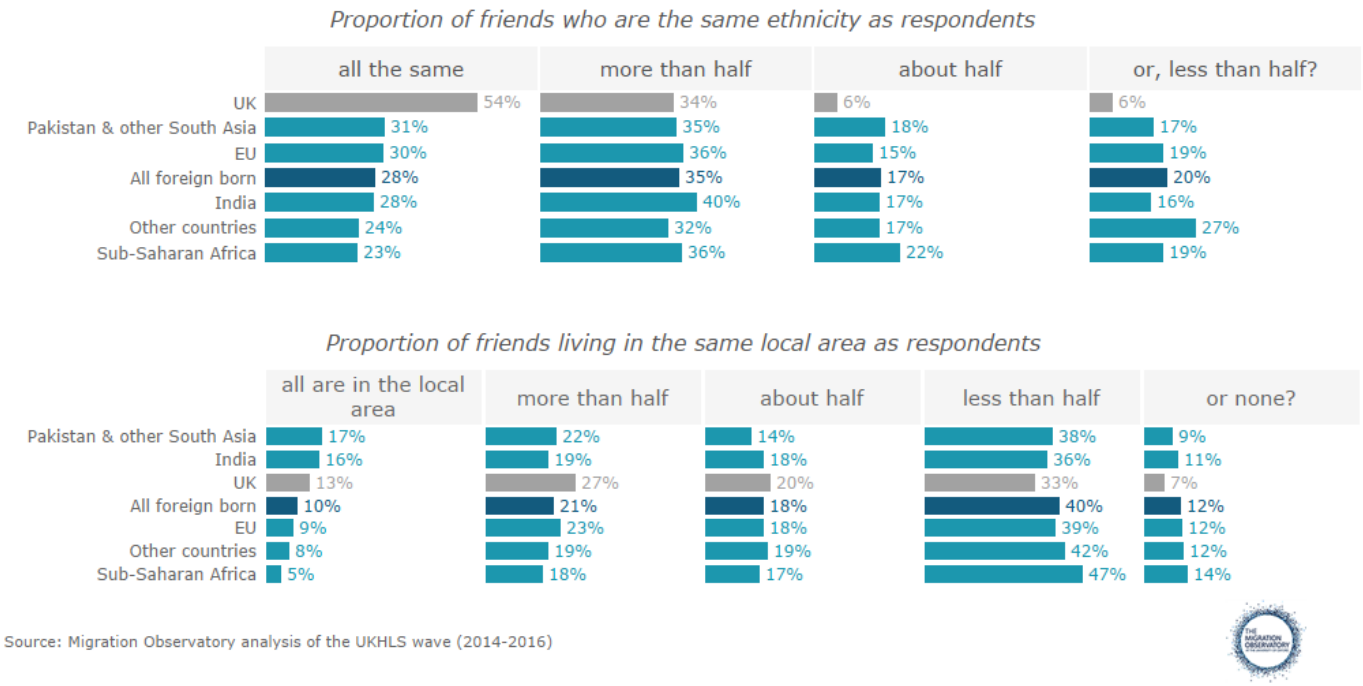


About 28% of foreign-born adults only have friends of the same ethnicity, but overall the ethnic diversity in friendships is higher among migrants than the UK-born

Having friends exclusively or primarily of the same ethnicity is more common among the UK-born than migrant respondents (Figure 6). This could be due to several factors, but the availability of potential friends from the same ethnic background where respondents live and work is likely to be one of the main explanations. (In general, it is expected, statistically, that people who are in a minority will be more likely to encounter people who make up part of the majority.) UK-born respondents also have a higher share of friends from their local areas compared to migrants, especially to those born in the EU, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other countries (mostly from Jamaica, North America and East Asia).

Figure 6

Composition of friendship network, by respondents' country of birth, 2014-2016



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS wave (2014-2016)

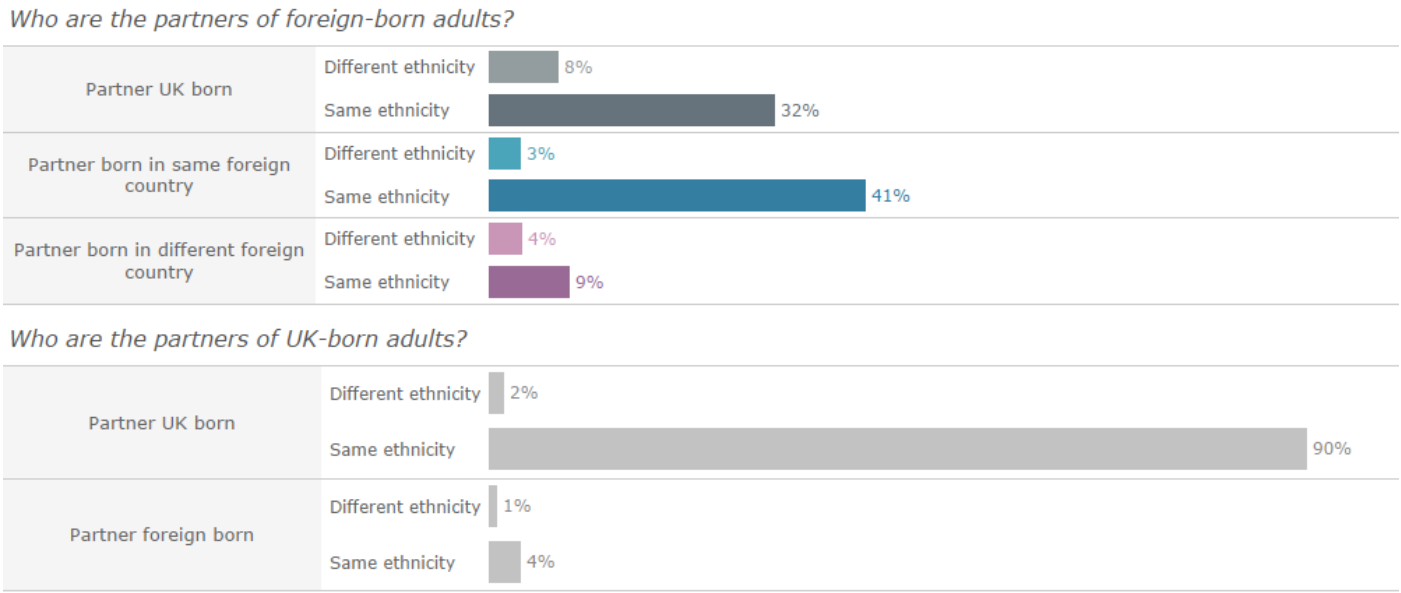
About 41% of migrants and 90% of the UK-born have partners born in the same country and of the same ethnicity

Mixed partnerships were once hailed as the ultimate litmus test for inclusion (e.g., Gordon, 1964), although this is now contested (Song, 2009). These partnerships are dependent on the level of diversity in the population because the opportunities for interaction with members of other groups are higher in diverse areas (Blau 1977). Previous research on intermarriage in the UK has mostly focussed on interethnic marriage (unions where partners are from different ethnicities), finding that rates of intermarriage vary across ethnic groups and are linked to the level of ethnic diversity in the area. The propensity for White British people to marry people who are members of an ethnic minority has increased over time, and it is also higher amongst children of migrants and men migrating at an early age (Muttarak and Heath, 2010).

In the data analysed here, we look at mixed partnerships based on the country of birth and ethnicity of partners. About 41% of foreign-born adults have a partner born in the same country and of the same ethnicity, while 32% have a UK-born partner of the same ethnicity (Figure 7). (Note that UK-born partners of the same ethnicity will not necessarily be the children of migrants from the same country – this latter category would include, for example, a white person born in the United States married to a white British person.) By contrast, 90% of the UK-born have partners who are also UK-born and of the same ethnicity.

Figure 7

Region of birth and ethnicity of partners, 2016-2018



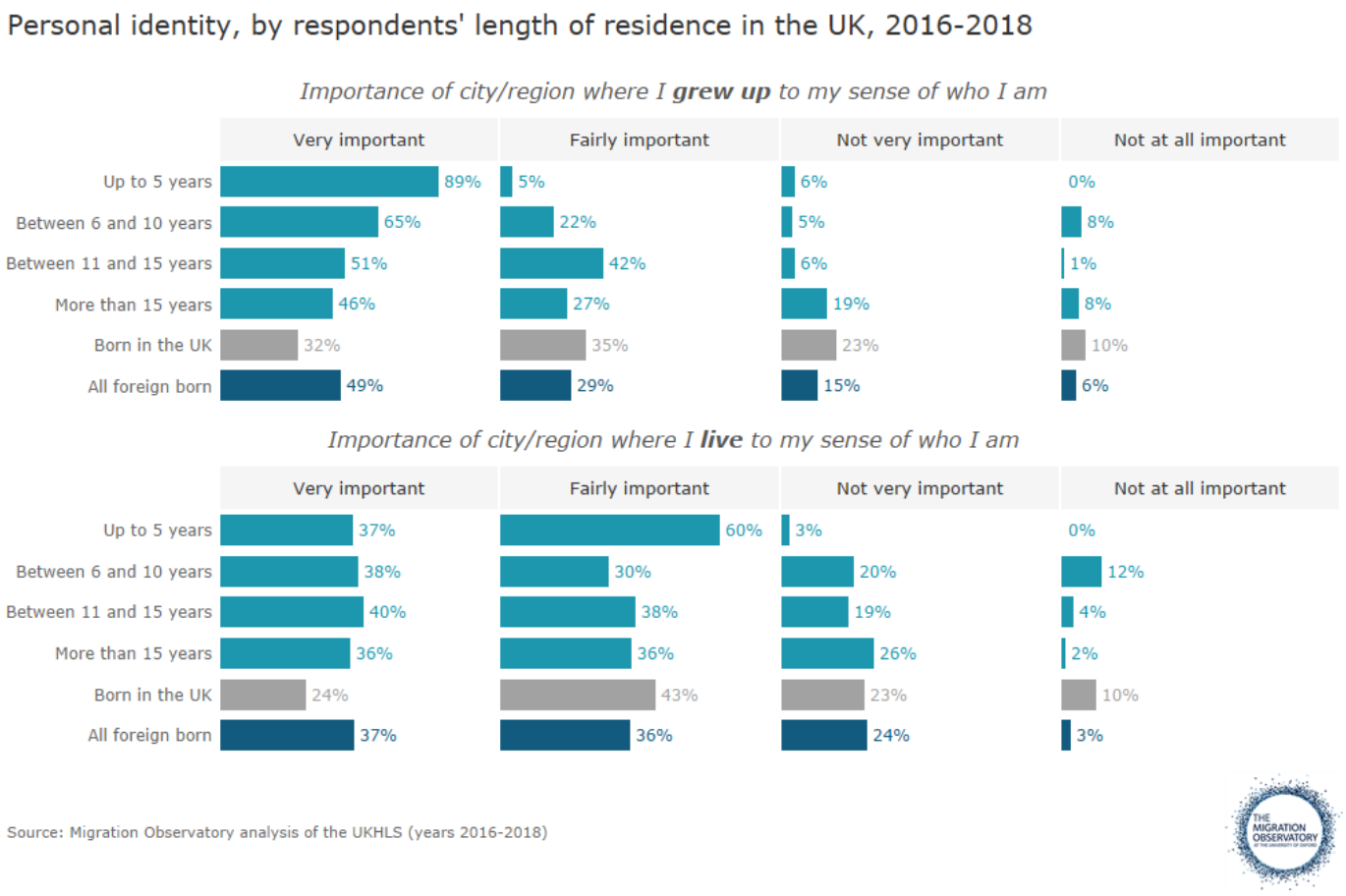
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS (years 2016-2018)
Note: percentages do not add up to 100% because individuals with unknown ethnicity have also been counted but they are not displayed. The following ethnicities are considered: white, mixed (white and black Caribbean), mixed (white and black African), mixed (white and Asian), any other mixed background, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Other Asian, Caribbean, African, other black background, Arab, and other ethnicity.

Migrants who have been in the UK for up to 5 years are much more likely to consider the place where they grew up to be very important (89%) compared to those who have been in the UK for over 15 years (46%)

People have multiple identities (national, ethnic, religious or sexual, among others), but most research on migrants' identification processes tends to focus on their ethnic and national identities. It is often assumed that immigrants' continued identification with their origin country will prevent them from developing an identity tied to the destination country, even though existing evidence suggests that the two identities can coexist (Bilgili, 2014; Nandi and Platt, 2014). In general, migrants develop over time "a shared identity and sense of belonging with the place, nation, communities and people among whom they live" (Spencer and Charlsey 2016: 5). Most processes of integration take place at the local level; in fact, identifying with the place where someone lives has long been a marker of inclusion, facilitating the ease with which people belong to a 'new' place.

Overall, migrants and the UK born alike tend to identify more strongly with their city or region of origin than their current area of residence (Figure 8). Unsurprisingly, recently arrived migrants show stronger rates of identification with their place of origin than those who have been living in the UK longer: 89% of those who have been in the UK for up to 5 consider the place where they grew up to be very important, while this percentages decreases to 46% among those who moved to the UK more than 15 years ago. Identification with the current place of residence, however, is not significantly related to length of residence in the UK.

Figure 8



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the UKHLS (years 2016-2018)

Evidence gaps and limitations

This briefing sheds light on the complexity of looking into migrants' social relationships. The UKHLS data provide many indicators of interest but there are limitations, especially with regard to sample sizes. This briefing is descriptive, which means that we do not attempt to identify the causes of some of the described patterns.

Whilst this briefing offers a baseline picture of migrants' social relationships, there are also ways in which this could be elaborated further. One example is by trying to look into the quality of relationships between migrants and the UK-born, rather than their quantity, which ties into discussions of strong and weak ties (Fajth and Bilgili, 2018). We have also not examined how people meet their friends and partners, e.g. in the neighbourhood, at work, at university/school or online, which might vary across social groups. Another one, linked to the previous, would also be to investigate the dynamics of social relationships in more detail, to see how people interact with each other. A final important avenue of enquiry would also be to explore relationships between different measures of social relationships, such as the potential link between ethnic diversity in friendship networks and intermarriage rates.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jacqueline Broadhead for comments on a previous draft of this briefing. This briefing was produced with the support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. 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.

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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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Recommended citation

Lessard-Phillips, Laurence, Fajth, Veronika, and Fernández-Reino, Mariña. "Migrants' social relationships, identity and civic participation in the UK" Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, October 2020