



# REPORT

## Locking out the keys? Migrant key workers and post-Brexit immigration policies

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This report explores the profile of migrants in the UK's key worker population during the Covid-19 crisis.

Although foreign-born workers and UK-born workers are just as likely to be defined as key workers in the overall UK workforce, some occupations rely disproportionately on migrant key workers. Many of them would not have been admitted to the UK under the proposed post-Brexit immigration system, with pronounced impacts on particular sectors.

Other characteristics, such as age, ethnicity and sex are also distributed unevenly among the UK's key workers in relation to the overall workforce and in particular occupations.

## Who is a key worker?

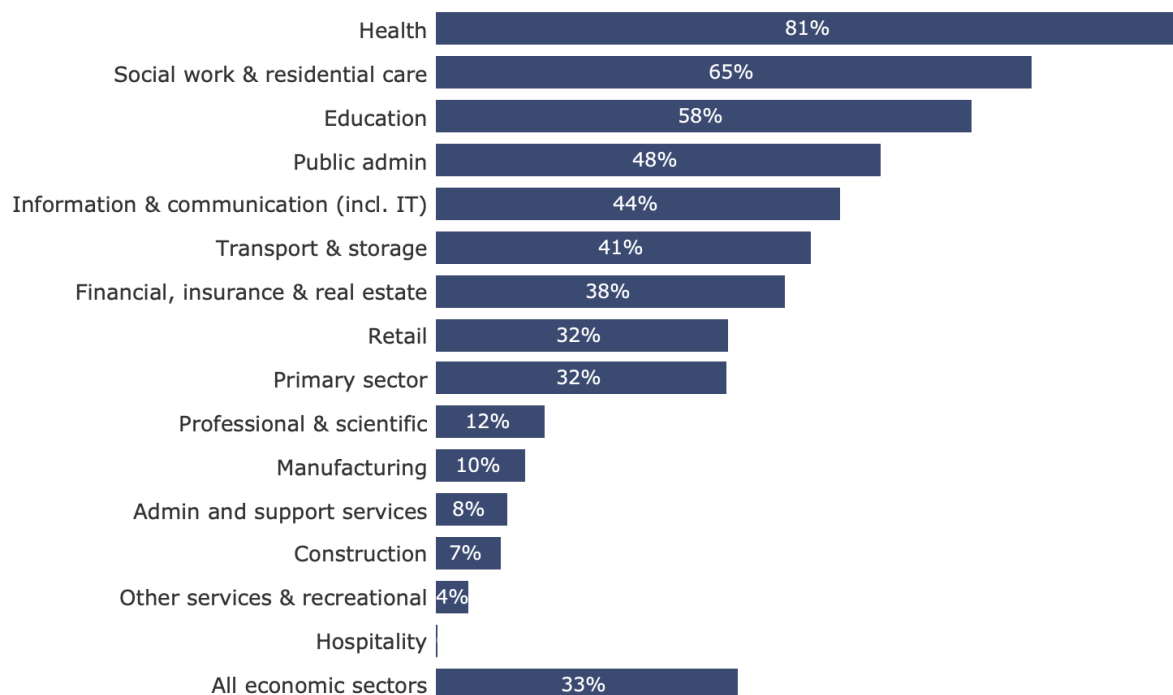
There is no single definition of a key worker, but several countries, including the UK, have published lists of 'key' or 'essential' workers who are considered central to maintaining basic economic and public health infrastructure during the Covid-19 pandemic. The role of these lists is to identify people who should be able to go to work if they need to and/or send their children to schools.

In the UK, the Cabinet Office and Department for Education jointly published a list of critical occupations and economic sectors in March 2020, which include a large share of workers in sectors such as health, education, food manufacturing, transportation, law enforcement, utilities and communication. There is some room for interpretation as to which occupations can be considered essential because the list provided by the government is quite broad. In this report we use the ONS definition of key worker (Office for National Statistics, 2020), which estimates that about 33% of the workforce in the UK are key workers (Figure 1). Other researchers have provided slightly different estimations; for example, Fernández-Reino, Sumption and Vargas-Silva (2020) calculate that 38% of workers are in essential occupations.

Figure 1

## What is the share of key workers in each economic sector?

Employees and self-employed aged 16+, 2019



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)  
 Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines.



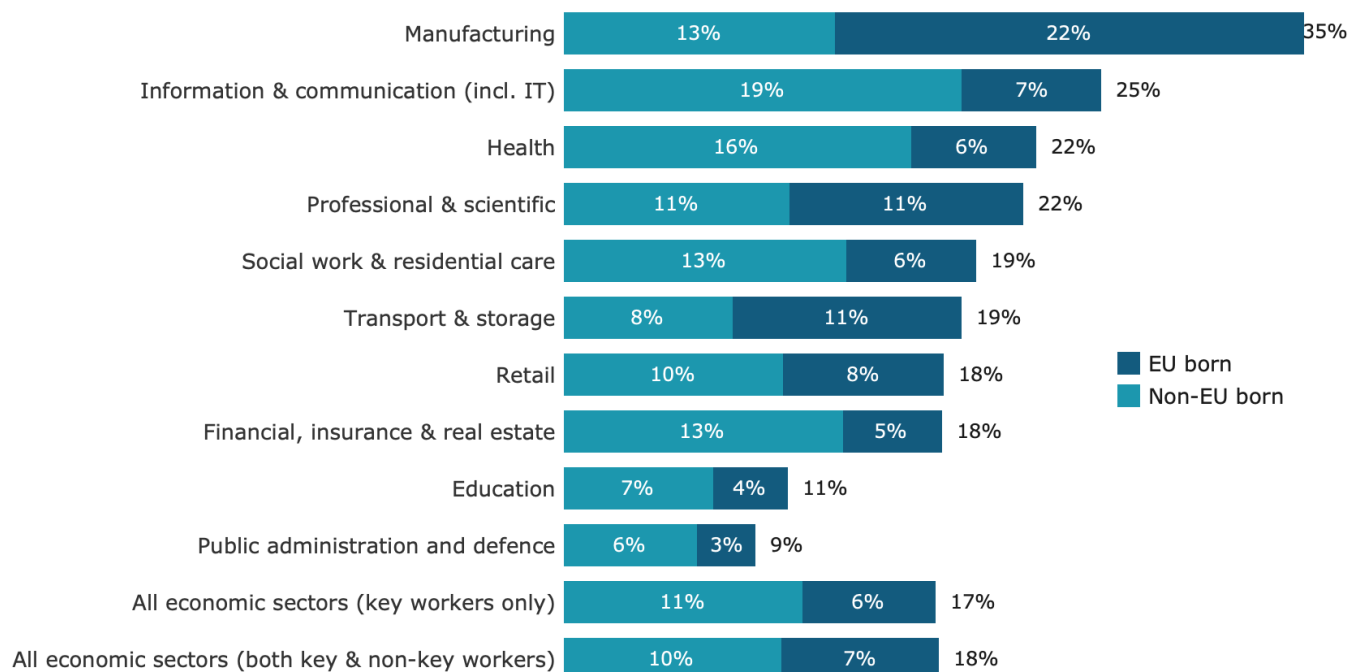
## Which sectors are most dependent on migrant key workers?

The sectors with highest shares of key workers are health (81%), social work and residential care (65%), and education (58%) (Figure 1). Overall, migrant workers represent 17% of the key workforce, which is exactly the same share that they have of the total labour force in the UK. However, the share of key foreign-born workers is higher in specific sectors of the economy. For example, non-EU born workers represent 10% of the British labour force, but they comprise 19% of the key workforce in the IT and communications sector and 16% in the health sector (Figure 2). EU born workers comprise the 7% of the workforce, but they are over-represented among key workers in the manufacturing sector (22%), in the scientific and professional sector (11%) and in the transport and storage industries (11%).

Figure 2

## What is the share of migrants among key workers in each industry?

Employees and self-employed aged 16+, 2019



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)

Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines. Numbers may not sum to total due to rounding.



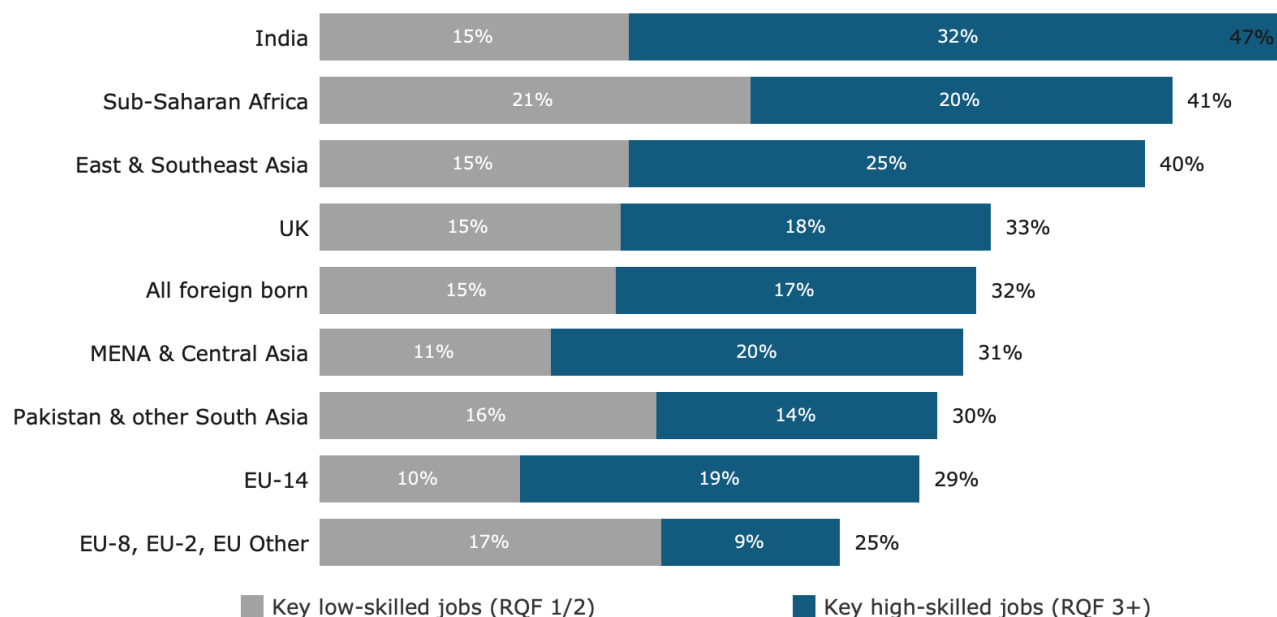
## What is the share of key workers among the foreign-born population?

Key workers are in occupations with different levels of required training and formal qualifications, from highly specialised professionals to minimum-wage workers. The share of key workers among the foreign-born labour force (32%) is very similar to the UK-born (33%) (Figure 3). However, the share of key workers is higher among certain migrant groups; for example, 47% of Indian-born workers in the UK can be defined as key workers, while this share is 41% among those born in Sub-Saharan Africa and 40% among those born in East and Southeast Asia.

Figure 3

## What is the share of key workers among the UK-born and foreign-born population?

Employees and self-employed aged 16+, 2019



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)

Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines. *Low skilled* occupations are those classified as RQF 1/2 and RQF 3/Low skilled in the Home Office Immigration Rules Appendix J. These jobs do not meet the skill threshold under the new immigration rules. Numbers may not sum to total due to rounding.



## What are the characteristics of migrant key workers in the UK?

More than half of foreign-born key workers are women (Figure 4). This share is, however, higher among key workers born in East and Southeast Asia (63%) as well as Sub-Saharan Africa (63%), and lower among key workers from India (47%) and other South Asian countries (42%); and those born in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asian countries (44%).

Over half of UK-born and foreign-born key workers are in occupations requiring at least A-level or equivalent qualifications – level 3 or above, based on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Most Indian-born key workers are in high or medium-high-skilled jobs, but about two-thirds of key workers born in countries that joined the EU after 2004 and 55% of those born in South Asia (except India) are in low-skilled occupations (Figure 4). Women are more likely than men to be key workers in low-skilled occupations, making up two thirds of the lower-skilled labour force born in EU-14 countries and in East and Southeast Asia.

Figure 4

## Characteristics of key workers, by country of birth, 2019

Employees and self-employed key workers aged 16+

*What is the share of men and women?*

	UK	All foreign born	EU-14	EU-8, EU-2, EU Other	MENA & Central Asia	India	Pakistan & other South Asia	East & Southeast Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa
Men	41%	45%	43%	47%	56%	53%	58%	37%	37%
Women	59%	55%	57%	53%	44%	47%	42%	63%	63%

*What is the share in low- and high-skilled occupations?*

	UK	All foreign born	EU-14	EU-8, EU-2, EU Other	MENA & Central Asia	India	Pakistan & other South Asia	East & Southeast Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa
High skilled (RQF 3+)	55%	55%	66%	34%	64%	68%	45%	62%	49%
Low skilled (RQF 1/2)	45%	46%	34%	66%	36%	32%	55%	38%	51%

*What is the share of women among key workers in high and low-skilled jobs?*

	UK	All foreign born	EU-14	EU-8, EU-2, EU Other	MENA & Central Asia	India	Pakistan & other South Asia	East & Southeast Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa
High-skilled (RQF 3+)	55%	52%	52%	51%	40%	42%	37%	61%	63%
Low skilled (RQF 1/2)	64%	59%	68%	54%	53%	60%	47%	66%	63%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)

Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines. *Low skilled* occupations are those classified as RQF 1/2 and RQF 3/Low skilled in the Home Office Immigration Rules Appendix J. These jobs do not meet the skill threshold under the new immigration rules



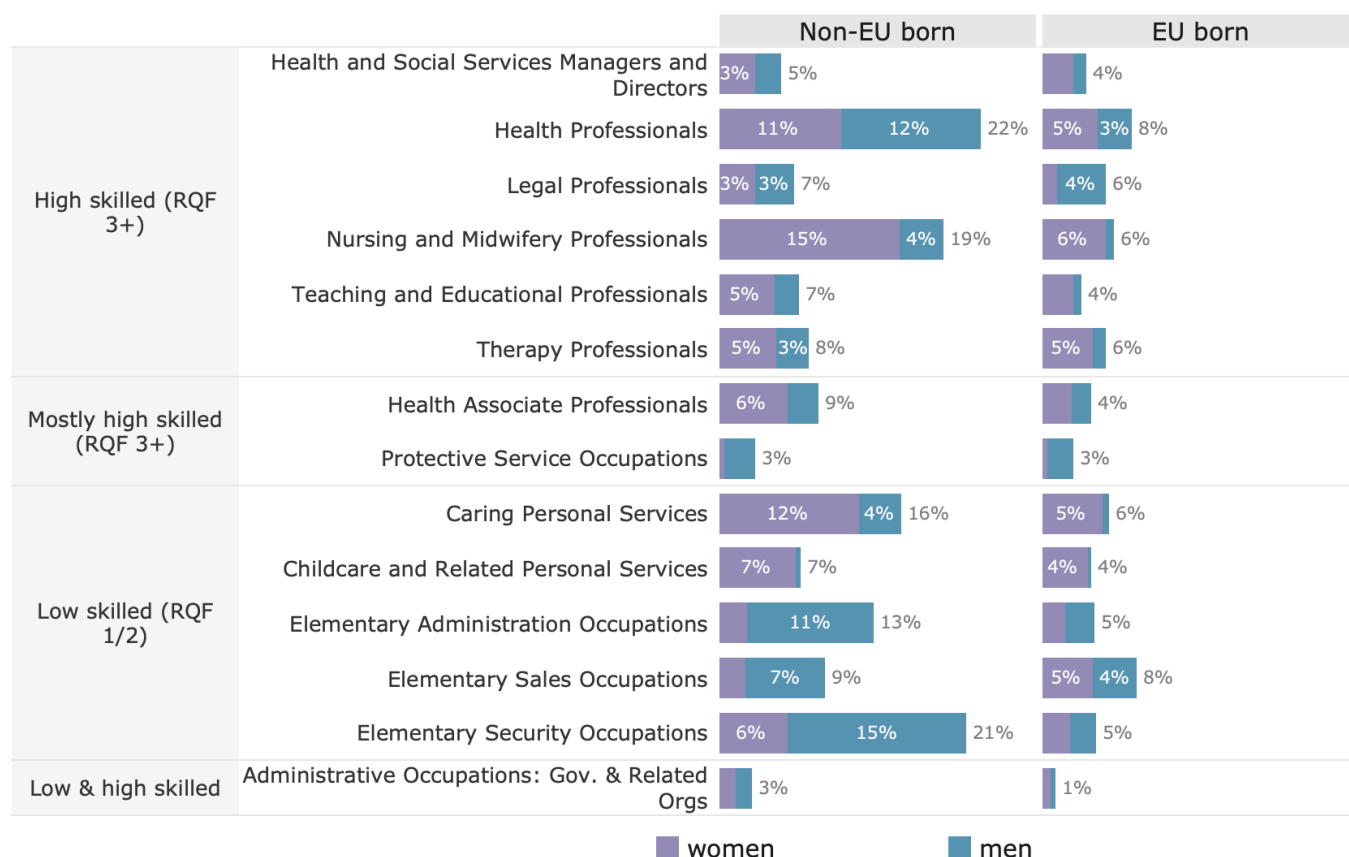
## What is the share of migrants among the top essential occupations?

Non-EU born workers represent about 10% of the labour force in the UK. However, they are over-represented among key workers in occupations such as health professionals (23%), nurses and midwives (19%), basic security jobs (21%) or care jobs (16%) (Figure 5). The gender imbalance is particularly pronounced among nurses and midwives and care workers, where a majority of foreign-born key workers are women.

Figure 5

## Occupations where more than 60% of the workforce are key workers, 2019

Employees and self-employed key workers aged 16+



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)

Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines. *Low skilled* occupations are those classified as RQF 1/2 and RQF 3/Low skilled in the Home Office Immigration Rules Appendix J. These jobs do not meet the skill threshold under the new immigration rules. Occupations where the number of foreign born respondents is very low have been excluded. Numbers may not sum to total due to rounding.



## Will the new policies prevent key workers from moving to the UK?

Current plans for the post-Brexit immigration system involve the application of skills and salary requirements equally to EU (excepting Irish) and non-EU migrants. These policies reduce the existing salary and skills requirements for non-EU migrants, but future EU migrants – who have previously been able to enter the UK under free movement regulations – will face significant new barriers to immigration to the UK (for more information about the new immigration rules, see the Migration Observatory [Q&A: The UK's new points-based immigration system after Brexit](#)).

The second reading of the new Immigration Bill took place in late May. While public and media support for migrants in key sectors (e.g. Gerver, Lown and Duell, 2020) might have helped drive certain policy changes – such as the proposed cancellation of the NHS surcharge for immigrants working in the NHS, and assurances that dependants of NHS workers who die as a result of Covid-19 will receive indefinite leave to remain – the new post-Brexit policies would potentially have excluded many of those same key workers from entering the UK.

Table 1 shows that 58% of EU born and 49% of non-EU born full-time key workers aged 25 to 64 would not qualify for a Tier 2 visa under the newly proposed immigration rules (Table 1). This share is higher for EU-born workers as would be expected given that EU migrants have not been subject to significant restrictions on moving to and working in the UK and are over-represented in jobs that are considered low-skilled (for more information, see the

Migration Observatory briefing [Migrants in the UK labour market: an overview](#)).

People applying to jobs on a list of 'shortage occupations' or with a PhD in a subject relevant to the job might qualify at lower salaries, so long as it is no less than £20,480. Importantly, the skills requirement (having a job that is classified as requiring A level qualifications or equivalent) is a crucial factor determining eligibility; that is, changing the salary requirements without changing the skill requirement would have a relatively limited impact (see Table 1).

It is also worth noting that almost half of non-EU born key workers would not have qualified for a visa under the new system, although they have been subject to tougher salary and skills requirements than those being introduced under the new system. This highlights that work visas are not the only route through which non-EU citizens have entered the UK labour market: many of these non-EU born key workers may have entered the UK as family migrants or students.

**Table 1**

### Share and number of key migrant workers who would not have qualified for a general work visa under proposed new immigration rules, 2019

Full-time employees aged 25 to 64

	All foreign born		EU born		Non-EU born	
Does not meet skill or general salary thresholds (£25,600)	608,000	52%	260,000	58%	348,000	49%
Does not meet skill or lower salary thresholds (£20,480)	520,000	45%	226,000	50%	294,000	41%
Does not meet skill threshold	466,000	40%	199,000	48%	267,000	36%
Meets skill threshold but salary below £25,600	133,000	12%	50,000	11%	83,000	12%
Meets skill threshold but salary below £20,480	46,000	4%	16,000	4%	30,000	4%
Meets skill threshold but salary between £20,480 and £25,600	88,000	8%	34,000	8%	54,000	8%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2019 (average of 4 quarters)

Note: key workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK government guidelines. *Low skilled* occupations are those classified as RQF 1/2 and RQF 3/Low skilled in the Home Office Immigration Rules Appendix J. These jobs do not meet the skill threshold under the new immigration rules. The general salary threshold for workers above age 25 is set at £25,600; for those coming to shortage occupations will have a lower salary threshold of £20,480. Numbers may not sum to total due to rounding.



## Conclusions

The role migrants have played in the UK throughout the Covid-19 crisis has been hugely important. Key workers – both migrants and the UK-born – have put themselves in harm's way, saving lives and keeping basic services functioning. In recent months we have seen a shift in attitudes towards migrants – especially towards those in low-skilled key jobs, which have typically been negative (Heath and Richards, 2019; Naumann et al., 2018) – but proposed post-Brexit policies are still largely focussed on reducing access to the UK for lower waged and lower-skilled EU migrants – which would certainly include some key workers.

As it stands, despite the new Immigration Bill passing the Second Reading stage in May, the new immigration system is not yet set out and could be different to that laid out in the government's February Policy Statement. The actual substance of new immigration controls will, in fact, be detailed in the form of amended Immigration Rules in the coming months. While it currently appears that EU key workers will face significant new restrictions, a sustained change in public attitudes toward this group of migrant workers could still change the political calculus, which means

that the long-term implications for key workers are still far from clear.

## Acknowledgements

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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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