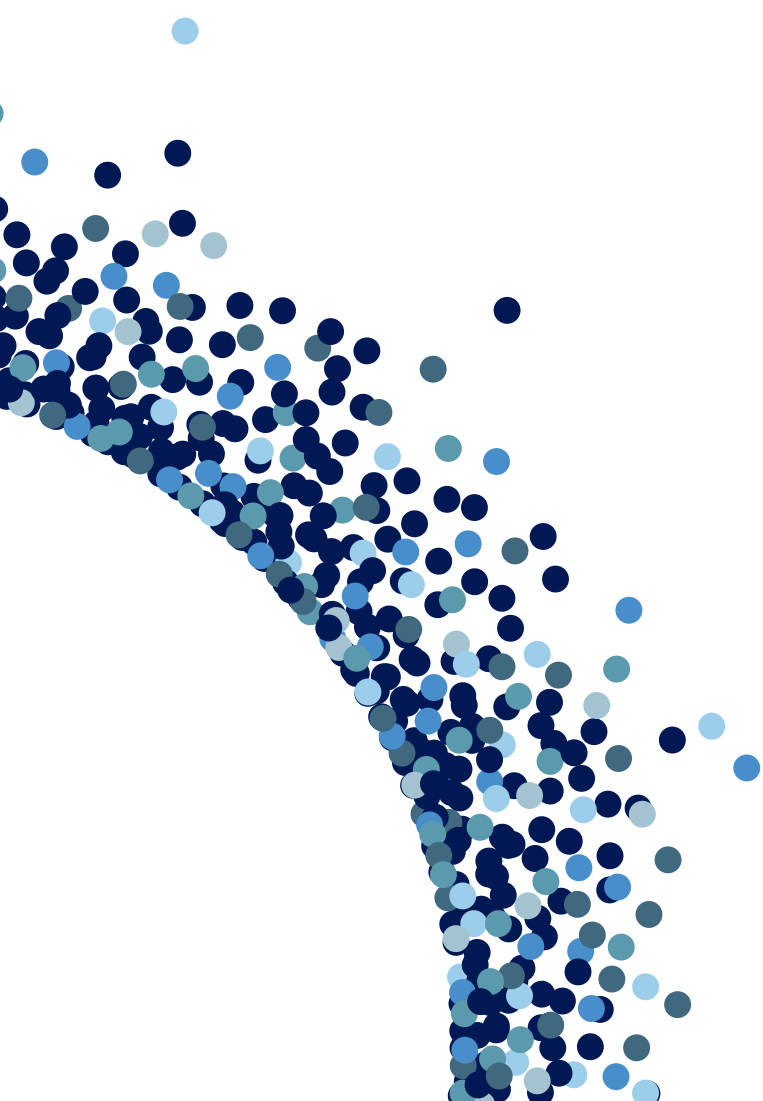




BRIEFING

Net migration to the UK



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Trust for London

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10th revision

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This briefing looks at the overall scale of immigration and net migration in the UK since the early 2000s and under the post-Brexit immigration system.

Key Points

The UK has experienced broadly similar levels of migration compared to other high-income countries, on average over the past few decades.

Net migration to England and Wales averaged 200,000 per year between the 2011 and 2021 Censuses, including British citizens. This suggests that official estimates of net migration over the course of the decade were about right *on average*—though this is not necessarily the case for the breakdowns by year within the decade or by country of origin.

EU citizens made up a majority of immigration and net migration in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum, but by the year ending June 2021 made no contribution to net migration at all, according to official estimates.

Non-EU immigration increased from 2013 to 2020, fell during the pandemic, and bounced back in 2021. A 2021 increase in visas granted does not result from the post-Brexit immigration system alone; other factors, such as the decision to open a route for British National Overseas status holders, play an important role.

Visa data do not tell us how the post-Brexit immigration system has affected immigration levels in the UK. Comparing visa data over time ignores the fact that EU citizens did not receive visas until 2021. At the time of writing there were not yet any statistics that could be used to compare immigration pre-pandemic vs. under the post-Brexit immigration system.

Understanding the policy

The scale of migration to the UK is affected by immigration policies, but also depend on other factors such as the state of the economy here and in countries of origin, demand for international study opportunities, and events and crises around the world. Immigration policies tend not to specify the total number of people who can move to a country, but rather set eligibility criteria to determine who can qualify for residence. The number of people who meet the criteria is expected to fluctuate over time even when policy does not change.

During some periods there have been specific numerical targets in immigration policy, however. In particular, a major migration policy objective of Conservative-led UK governments from 2010 to 2019 was to reduce net migration – immigration minus emigration – to under 100,000 a year. In the early 2010s, several policies were introduced to help achieve this target. They included a cap on skilled non-EU workers, minimum income requirements for those sponsoring the immigration of non-EU family members, and stricter requirements governing which educational establishments could sponsor non-EU international students, which non-EU students would be permitted, and the working rights of student visa holders. (A brief outline of some of the key policies introduced before the EU membership referendum can be found in the Migration Observatory commentary, [The State of the Nation: the Immigration Numbers Game](#).) The net migration target was never reached, and was abandoned at the end of 2019 under Boris Johnson's government.

On 1 January 2021, a new immigration system was introduced to replace free movement. Under the new system, EU citizens migrating to the UK have been subject to the same immigration rules as citizens from the rest of the world (though Irish citizens continue to have free movement rights under separate legal arrangements). The annual cap on skilled workers was also removed. Overall, the new immigration system is considerably more restrictive towards EU citizens, and slightly less restrictive towards non-EU citizens, compared to the system that existed until the end of the post-Brexit transition period in December 2020. [Projections made](#) before this system came into force suggested that it would reduce overall migration to the UK, compared to a system in which free movement had continued. For a discussion of the new points-based system, see our Policy Primer: [The UK's 2021 points-based immigration system](#).

Understanding the evidence

There is currently enormous uncertainty about immigration and net migration to the UK, due to challenges collecting accurate data. Broadly speaking, there are three main measures of the scale of migration to the UK:

- *Long-term immigration*: this includes anyone moving to the UK for at least 12 months, and is useful because it excludes very short-term migrants such as those who come on work visas for just a few weeks or months.
- *Net migration*: this is calculated as long-term immigration minus long-term emigration (i.e. those moving for at least a year in either direction); it can be a useful metric if we want to examine the contribution of migration to population growth.
- *Visa grants*: this includes anyone receiving a visa to live or work in the UK, including those who move for very short periods (although we exclude visitor and transit visas from all the data in this briefing). Visa data only cover people who require visas, which means that before the end of 2020, EU citizens were not included in the figures. **This means that they should not be used to examine how the scale of migration has changed since the pre-Brexit or pre-pandemic period.**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) have produced different estimates of both long-term immigration and net migration, using different data and methods. They say different things, which means that the picture sometimes depends on which estimate we use. In this briefing we provide the overall story told by looking at the different data sources together, and point out where this is sensitive to the choice of data. The four main methods are as follows:

Immigration and net migration figures based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS)

The main source for immigration and net migration data before the Covid-19 pandemic was the IPS, which had many flaws and limitations but did provide a long-term view of changes in migration patterns over periods of more than a decade. The survey, conducted at ports and airports, was based on respondents' *stated intention* to come to or leave the UK for at least one year. This may not be accurate. Indeed, in August 2019 ONS announced that its Migration Statistics Quarterly Report was being reclassified from *National Statistics* status to *Experimental Statistics*, to convey a lower degree of reliability following investigations that showed certain groups, such as non-EU students and Eastern European immigrants, were not being measured accurately.

In March 2020, the IPS was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it was later reinstated, it no longer includes the 'migrant boost' module that had previously enabled estimates of immigration and net migration. This means that its reliability is further reduced. ONS no longer publishes migration estimates based solely on the IPS, although it has played a role in some recent statistical modelling, discussed below.

Experimental estimates using administrative records

ONS has recently developed new methods of measuring migration using administrative data. These include tax and benefits records contained in the Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID), as well as Home Office data on visas granted and exit checks. These data sources have the potential to improve migration statistics but they also have important limitations.

Exit checks data currently only meaningfully cover non-EU citizens, although this will change over time as more EU citizens moving to and from the UK are incorporated in the visa system (rather than, for example, the EU Settlement Scheme). Estimates of EU citizens thus currently rely much more on RAPID. People who do not work or receive benefits will not be included in the RAPID data, and children are excluded from the migrant category. Students are not counted in the RAPID data either, but ONS has made an adjustment to include an estimate of student numbers in the figures. Understanding immigration and emigration using the RAPID database requires various assumptions about whether someone who (perhaps temporarily) is absent from the data has actually left the UK. These assumptions are likely to affect the estimates.

These estimates are not yet official statistics but ONS expects to develop official statistics using this method. People are classified as migrants in the RAPID database if they were a non-UK citizen when they applied for a national insurance number (NINo). Note that for consistency with other data sources and ONS practices, we describe the data as being for the period “year ending March”, although in practice the figures actually end with the fiscal year on 6th April.

New ‘modelled estimates’ of immigration and net migration

ONS has published various estimates using a statistical model to combine data sources (the most recent at the time of writing covered the year ending June 2021). These come with a high level of uncertainty and require a series of strong assumptions to produce figures from the imperfect available data sources. Different publications produced over time have led to widely varying numbers. ONS has presented these figures as their “best estimates” of migration in recent months, but readers should be aware that they could be substantially revised in future as the methods develop further and improve the quality of the data.

Net migration calculated from the Census

In June 2022, ONS published the first census data for England and Wales. This included an estimate of how much population growth resulted from births and deaths; the remainder is expected to result from net migration. Scotland delayed its census until early 2022, so a UK-wide picture of net migration from censuses is not yet available.

British citizens in the data

Finally, note that headline net migration statistics often include the net migration of British citizens. British citizens have traditionally had negative net migration, i.e. more of them leave than arrive in any given year. Including them in the estimates is useful in some circumstances, for example to calculate the overall contribution of international mobility to population growth. However, British emigration is generally not very relevant to policy discussions. In this briefing, we mostly provide figures that exclude UK citizens, but in some places provide figures to illustrate the impact of including them.

The UK has experienced broadly similar levels of migration compared to other high-income countries, on average over the past few decades

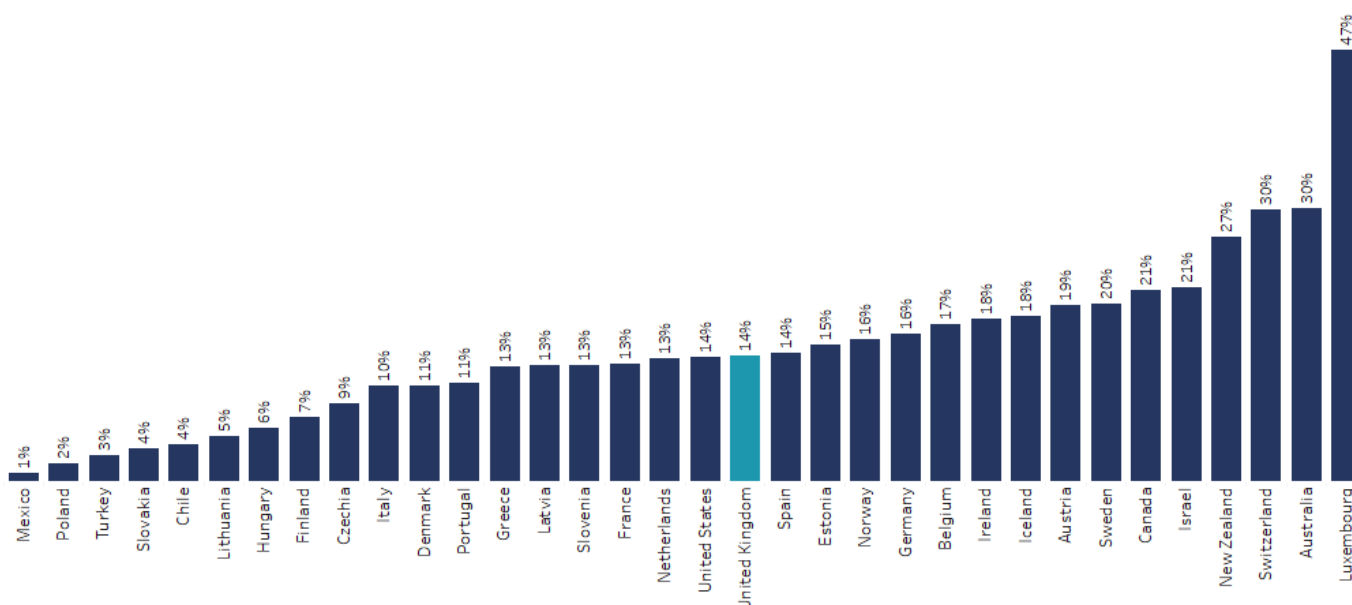
Migration levels fluctuate from year to year, but over long periods of time a useful measure of how much immigration a country has experienced is the size of the foreign-born population as a percentage of the population. Countries with high levels of net migration—defined as people immigrating minus those emigrating—develop larger foreign-born or migrant populations over the long run.

By the beginning of the 2020s, the UK’s foreign-born population was approximately 14%. This is similar to other high-income countries such as the United States and Spain (Figure 1). The UK has a smaller foreign-born population than Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The foreign-born population in Australia, for example, is roughly double that of the UK as a share of the population. By contrast, the UK has a higher share of foreign-born people in the population compared to Italy, Portugal, and most Eastern European countries.

Figure 1

Foreign-born population as share of total population

OECD countries, in 2019 or latest date available



Source: OECD, International Migration Database.



The scale of migration to a country may have some economic impact, but research suggests that the composition of migration is more important than the numbers alone. Whether migrants are working and what skills and qualifications they bring are among the key factors that affect the effects of migration on the economy (MAC, 2018). For more discussion of the economic impacts of migration, see the Migration Observatory briefings, [The Fiscal Impacts of Immigration in the UK](#), and [The Labour Market Effects of Immigration](#).

Net migration to England and Wales averaged 200,000 per year between the 2011 and 2021 Censuses, including British citizens

Net migration is a commonly used measure of the overall scale of migration. It takes into account not just people moving to the UK, but also those leaving. This can be useful for understanding the contribution of migration to growth

in the migrant population or the UK population overall—especially since many people who initially move to the UK do not remain here permanently. However, it is important to remember that net migration figures do not tell us much about *who* is arriving and leaving, or what their impacts are.

Official estimates of net migration are currently very uncertain, for the reasons explained above in the ‘Understanding the Evidence’ section. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has made different estimates of net migration in recent years, and differences in methods and coverage mean that they are not entirely comparable.

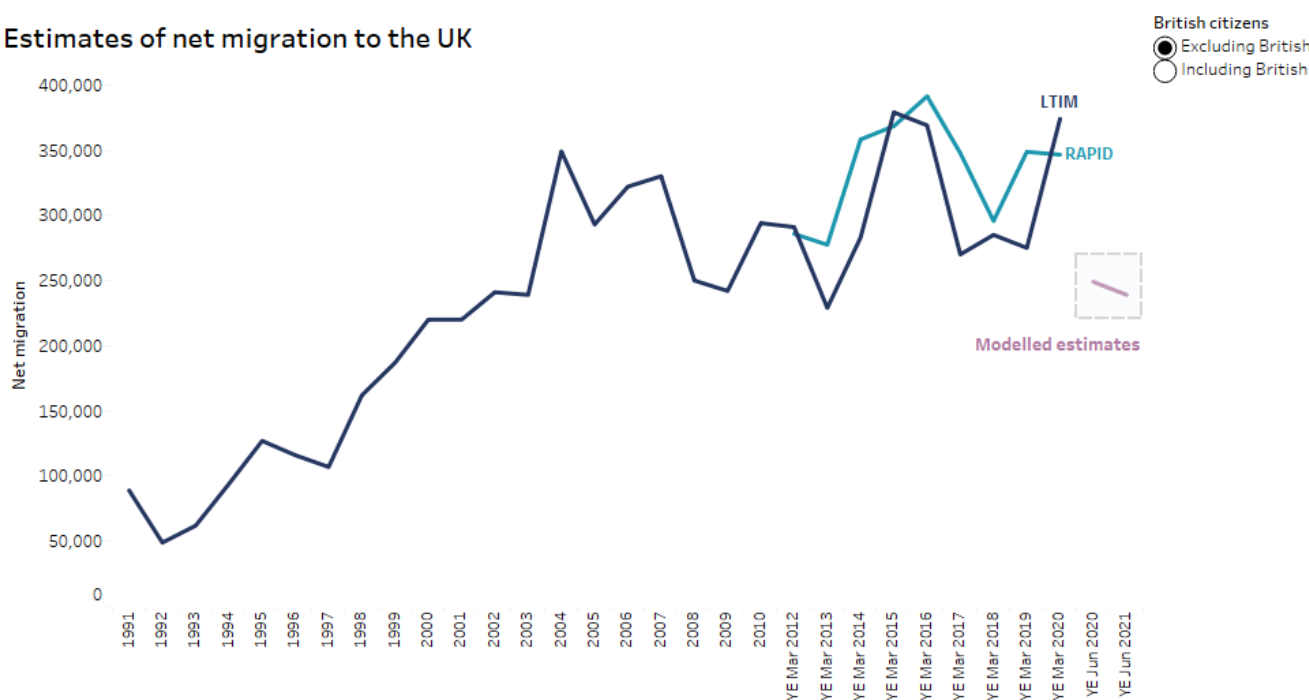
Between the 2011 and 2021 Censuses in England and Wales, ONS estimates that net migration contributed 2 million towards population growth. This suggests that net migration, including British citizens and people moving to or from Scotland and Northern Ireland, averaged 200,000 per year over the decade. Note that in recent years, around 90% of net international migration to the UK was to England and Wales, according to separate [ONS estimates](#).

Estimates for the whole of the UK are based on more uncertain data, because UK-wide census data are not yet available, but they do give picture of change over time within the past decade. The overall picture is that net migration fluctuated over the course of the 2010s, with a peak taking place in the run-up to the June 2016 referendum on EU membership. It then declined substantially during the pandemic (Figure 2). Separate [ONS estimates](#) for calendar year 2020, using a different methodology again, put net migration at 34,000 for calendar year 2020, although the revised methodology shown in Figure 2 would likely produce a somewhat higher estimate for 2020.

At the time of writing, data covering the full first year of the post-Brexit immigration system were not available.

Figure 2

Estimates of net migration to the UK



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to 2010: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and for YE Mar 2012 to YE Mar 2020: ONS, provisional estimates of long-term international migration, year ending March 2020, Table 1. RAPID: ONS, Long-Term International Migration and estimates from Registration and Population Interactions Dataset (RAPID). Modelled estimates: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2021.
 Note: RAPID data are for non-British citizens only. LTIM figures include children but RAPID figures do not. Post-2010 LTIM figures are for years ending 31 March. RAPID estimates are not for years ending 31 March, but for tax years ending 6 April. Both IPS and RAPID estimates come with substantial uncertainty.



All of these figures are likely to be revised in light of the Census results. At this stage, it is still difficult to compare the net migration estimate from the England and Wales Censuses with other ONS estimates, because the definitions and coverage are different. However, it is worth noting that the traditional, survey-based estimates of net international

migration to England and Wales (including Brits but excluding cross-border migration within the UK) put average net migration from 2011 to 2019 inclusive at 216,000 per year. This is quite similar to the Census-based figure of 200,000 per year from 2011 to 2021.

That suggests that *over the course of the whole decade*, ONS estimates were relatively accurate *on average*. However, it does not tell us whether this was true of all periods within the decade: for example, the same result could emerge if official estimates of net migration had understated migration during the 2010s but then understated the decline in net migration during the pandemic. It also does not tell us whether net migration estimates for different groups (e.g. EU vs. non-EU) were accurate; there is some evidence from other sources that they were not (ONS, 2019).

Below the overall net migration figures we see very different trends for EU and non-EU migration, both before and after the pandemic. The next section discusses these trends.

EU citizens made no contribution to net migration by the year ending June 2021

Different estimates of overall net migration may be relatively similar, but there is more disagreement between data sources on how much was EU vs. non-EU net migration. The traditional survey-based estimates suggested that EU citizens made up around half of long-term immigration and net migration (47% and 51% respectively) in the four years leading up to March 2016 (Figure 3). Estimates based on tax and benefits records (RAPID) suggest considerably higher shares—an average of 74% of net migration and 62% of long-term immigration.

The higher estimates of the EU share that comes from tax and benefits records are more plausible when [compared to other data sources](#), such as estimates (from a different survey) of the increase in the number of EU and non-EU born people living in the UK during that period. Census 2021 data by country of birth are due to be published in the autumn of 2022 should help to shed more light on the accuracy of these figures.

One thing that emerges consistently across data sources is that EU citizens made up a declining share of immigration and net migration after the referendum (Figure 3, Measure: Percentages). Although policy towards EU citizens did not change until January 2021, EU net migration began to fall substantially immediately after the referendum. Possible explanations for this decline include the economic recovery in southern European countries following the Eurozone crisis; the decline in the value of the pound after the referendum, which made work in the UK less attractive; and uncertainty about the political climate. The decline in the EU *share* also resulted from rising non-EU migration during the same period (discussed in the next section).

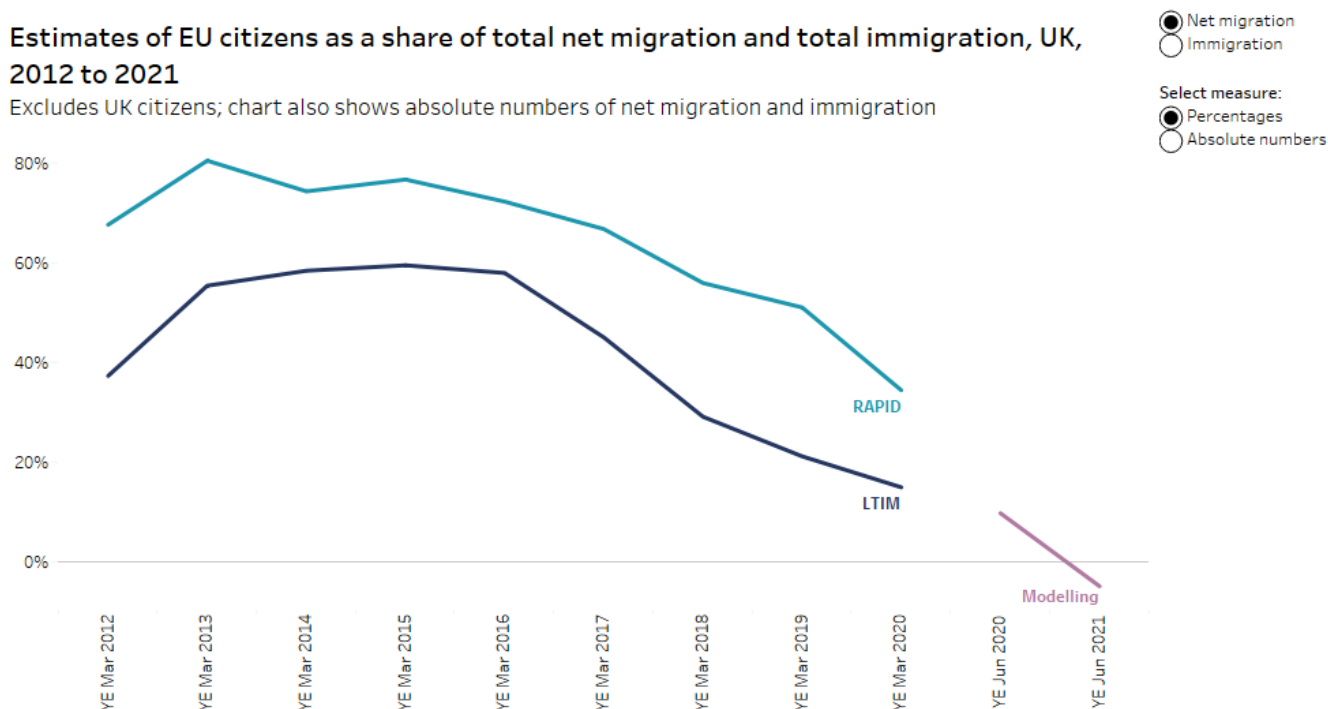
During the pandemic, provisional ONS experimental estimates suggest that EU net migration fell precipitously. EU net migration was estimated at -94,000 EU in calendar year 2020 (i.e. there was 94,000 net *emigration*). These provisional figures suggest that it then remained low during the pandemic period, with an estimate of 12,000 net emigration in the year ending June 2021 (Figure 3, Measure: Absolute numbers).

Take-up of work visas among EU citizens in the post-Brexit immigration system in 2021 was relatively low, as explained in the Migration Observatory briefing, [Work visas and migrant workers in the UK](#). At the time of writing, long-term immigration and net migration figures were not yet available for the full year, however.

Figure 3

Estimates of EU citizens as a share of total net migration and total immigration, UK, 2012 to 2021

Excludes UK citizens; chart also shows absolute numbers of net migration and immigration



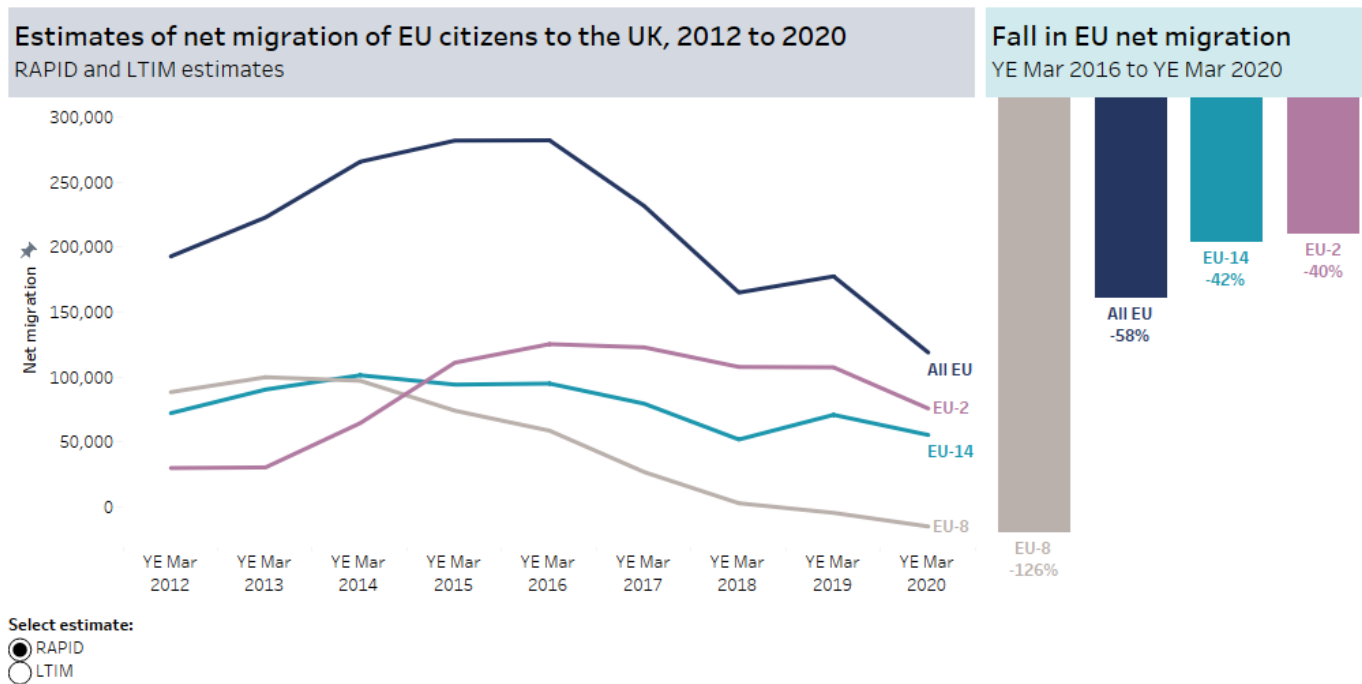
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The decline in EU immigration and net migration from 2016 to 2020 was driven primarily by countries that joined the EU in 2004 (“EU-8” countries, i.e. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Czechia). In fact, both sources of data agree that net migration of people from EU-8 countries was negative by the year ending March 2020 (Figure 4).

Immigration and net migration of other EU citizens decline less in the immediate post-referendum period but the picture is less consistent across data sources (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to 2010: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and for YE Mar 2012 to YE Mar 2020: ONS, provisional estimates of long-term international migration, year ending March 2020, Table 1. RAPID: ONS, Long-Term International Migration and estimates from Registration and Population Interactions Dataset (RAPID). Modelled estimates: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2021.
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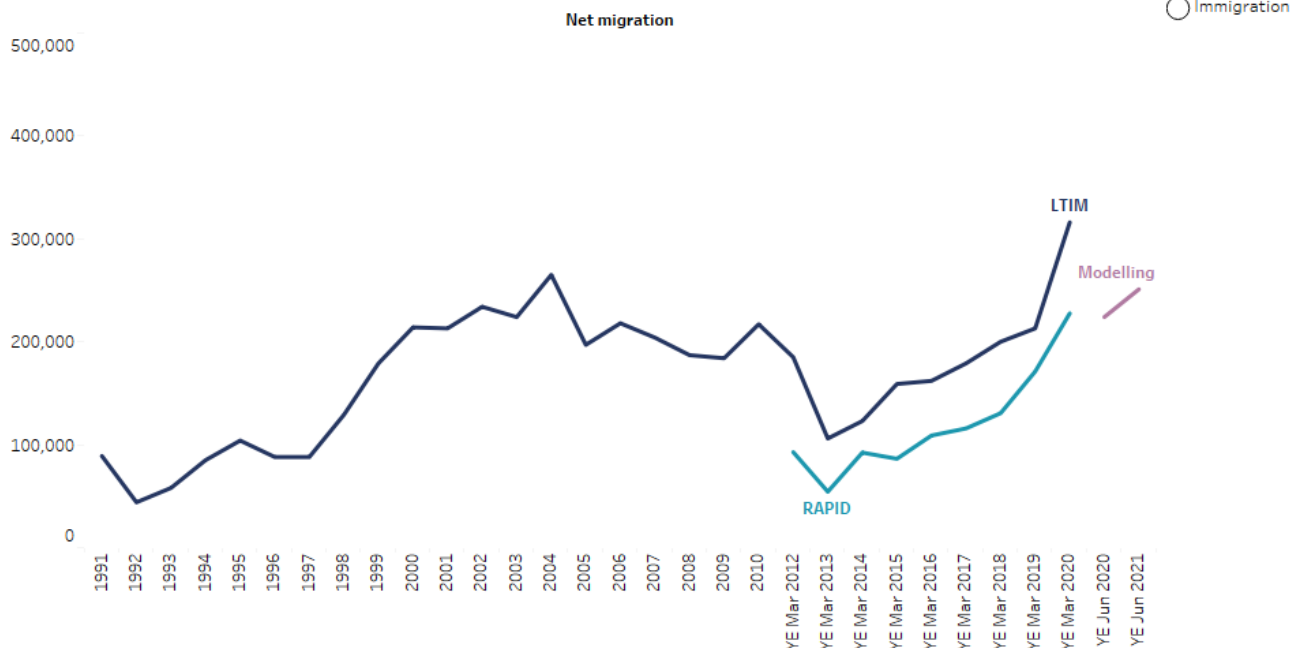


Non-EU migration increased from 2013 to 2020, fell during the pandemic, and bounced back in 2021

Non-EU citizens made up an increasing share of net migration after the EU referendum, as noted above. The total number of non-EU citizens moving to the UK long term gradually increased in the second half of the decade, while the number of EU citizens fell. During the pandemic, when estimated net migration of EU citizens was negative, all of the total net migration to the UK came from non-EU citizens. Figure 5 shows different estimates of non-EU net migration to the UK. The most recent figures are for the years ending June 2020 and 2021, which masks a [substantial drop](#) in non-EU immigration in calendar year 2020.

Figure 5

Estimates of net migration and immigration of non-EU citizens, UK



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to 2010: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and for YE Mar 2012 to YE Mar 2020: ONS, provisional estimates of long-term international migration, year ending March 2020, Table 1. RAPID: ONS, Long-Term International Migration and estimates from Registration and Population Interactions Dataset (RAPID). Modelled estimates: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2021.
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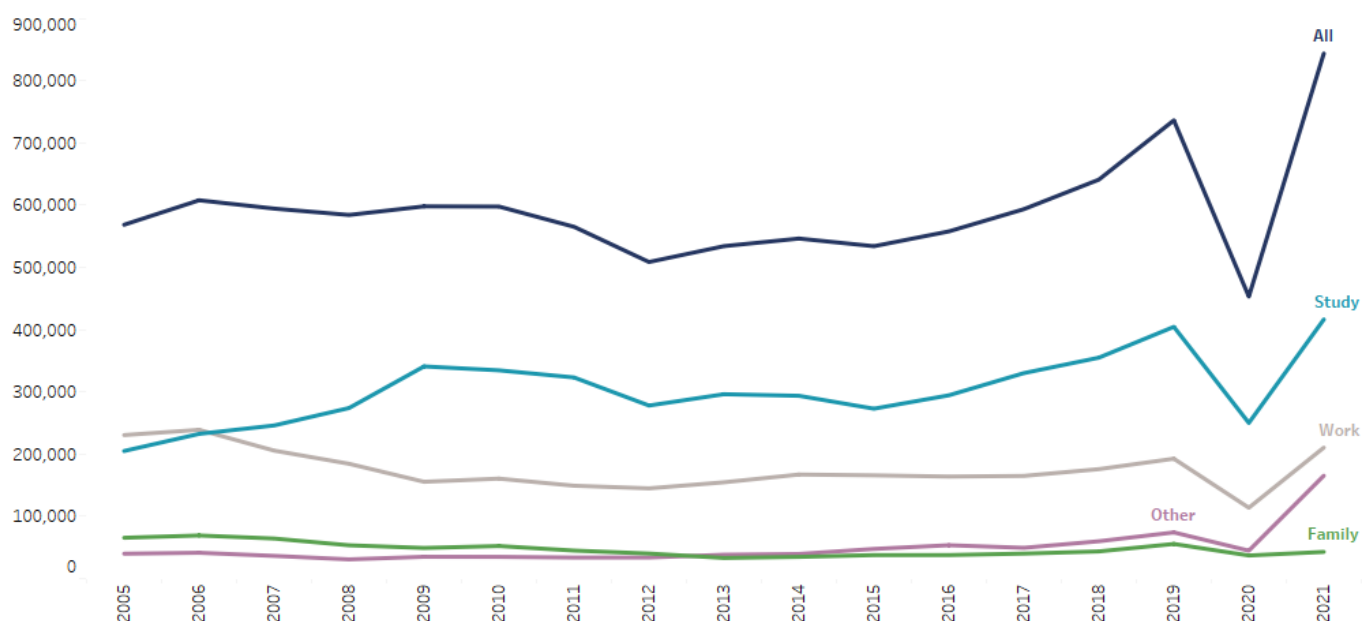
Visa data provide more detail on the reasons for migration to the UK, as well as patterns of migration for non-EU citizens during the pandemic and in 2021—the first year of the post-Brexit immigration system (Figure 6). The largest increase in visa grants from 2015 to 2019 was for international students. There was also an increase in Skilled Worker visas granted, with the largest share going to the health sector. This increase in work visas is described in more detail in the Migration Observatory briefing, [Work visas and migrant workers in the UK](#).

All of the major categories of non-EU migration—work, family and study—declined in 2020 during the pandemic. This was largely due to a substantial drop in visa grants during the second quarter of 2020 in particular. By 2021, work, family and study migration had recovered to roughly pre-pandemic levels. One category, labelled as “other” in Figure 6, was considerably higher. This category includes various temporary visas including the British Nationals Overseas (BNO) status holders route, which alongside international students was the main contributor to growth in visa grants between 2019 and 2021.

Figure 6

Number of visas issued to non-EU citizens per year, UK, 2005 to 2021

By type of visa



Source: Home Office immigration statistics, Vis_D02.

Notes: Data exclude Visitor and Transit visas. 'Other' includes BNO visa issuances.



The increase in non-EU visa grants is not necessarily a direct result of the referendum or the post-Brexit immigration system. As explained in the 'Understanding the Policy' section above, the post-Brexit immigration system introduced a package of measures that included ending free movement of EU citizens and liberalising certain policies towards non-EU citizens. However, much of the increase in visas granted in 2021 does not result directly from this package of policies. The BNO route, for example, which accounts for 71% of the 107,000 increase in visas granted between 2019 and 2021, was not a response to the ending of free movement. Some of the increase in 2021 may also be a 'bounce-back' from the pandemic—i.e. people who would otherwise have moved in 2020 but deferred their move to 2021. A clearer picture of that pattern will emerge when 2022 data become available.

For more information on different types of migration to the UK, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Who migrates to the UK and why?](#)

Visa data do not tell us how the post-Brexit immigration system has affected immigration levels in the UK

The absence of the usual immigration and net migration statistics have led to some speculation that migration reached record highs in 2021 and early 2022. This is based on visa data, which show that 897,000 visas were granted in 2021—including 844,000 to non-EU citizens. The number of visas granted to non-EU citizens was 15% higher than it was in 2019, but this does not necessarily mean that overall migration post-Brexit is higher than it was under the old immigration regime and before the pandemic.

This is because EU citizens did not require visas until 2021 and thus do not appear in the visa figures until then. EU citizens made up at least half of all long-term immigration in the mid-2010s, as described in the sections above. Comparing visa grants over time thus ignores the large decline in EU migration and overstates the scale of immigration now compared to the mid-2010s.

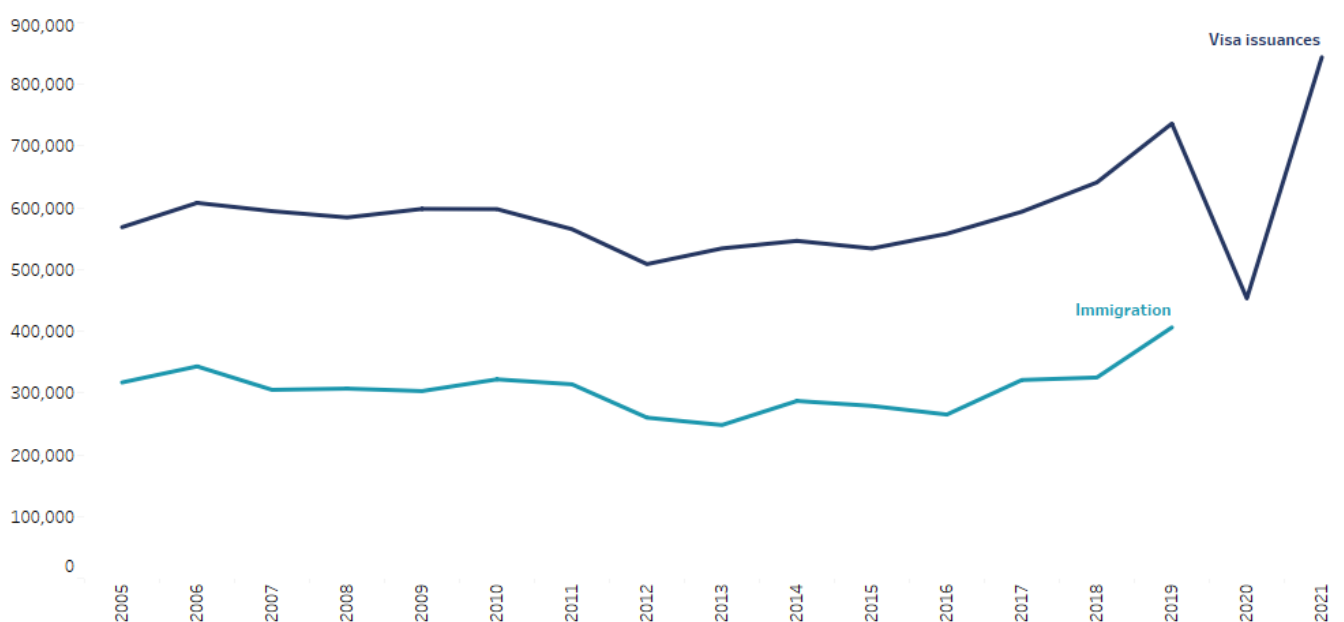
At the time of writing in July 2022, there were no figures allowing a robust comparison of the scale of immigration under the post-Brexit immigration system vs. during the 2010s. To understand change over time, it will be necessary to wait for further ONS estimates. At the time of writing, provisional figures for the year ending June 2022 were due to be published in November 2022.

Note that visa data overstate long-term immigration because not all people who receive visas actually move to the UK, and many come for just a few weeks or months and are not long-term migrants. As Figure 7 shows, long-term immigration (defined as those moving for at least a year) has typically been around 40% to 50% lower than visa grants since 2010, among non-EU citizens. Visa issuances to non-EU citizens in 2021 were around 15% higher than in 2019, so we should expect long-term immigration in 2021 to be somewhat higher too, when the figures are published.

Figure 7

Visa issuances are typically much higher than long-term immigration

Visa issuances and long-term immigration to the UK, non-EU citizens



Source: For long-term non-EU immigration: for 2005 to 2018: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and for 2019: ONS, provisional estimates of long-term international migration, year ending March 2020, Table 1. For visa issuances: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Vis_D02. Notes: Counts do not include visas issued to EU citizens. A long-term international migrant is a person who declares their intention to move to the UK for at least one year.



Visa grants to EU citizens were low in 2021—only 53,000, of which many will involve only short stays in the UK. By contrast, ONS estimates that long-term immigration of EU citizens was between 200,000 and 500,000 per year during most of the 2010s (see Figure 4, above). The level of EU immigration in 2021 and subsequent years may depend to a large extent on how many EU citizens returned to the UK without visas (e.g. those who had previously lived in the UK before the end of 2020 and had status under the EU Settlement Scheme). This number is not currently known.

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

Official migration statistics are in a period of change. All recent estimates are provisional and highly uncertain. The COVID-19 pandemic also reduced the quality of migration data, making it difficult to work out exactly what happened to net migration since the beginning of 2020.

Different data sources have different limitations, which means that it is often sensible to look at the overall picture across several data sources, rather than focusing on short-term changes in a single dataset. For example, IPS survey-based estimates appear to have overestimated net migration of non-EU citizens and underestimated net migration during much of the 2010s. RAPID estimates based on tax and benefits records also have flaws; the Census 2021 data for England and Wales suggest that RAPID figures may have overestimated total net migration, although further analysis will be required to understand whether this is the case. Recent approaches using statistical modelling have helped to fill in the gaps in the absence of other data, but are more speculative and less transparent than the other data sources, and often require strong assumptions that may create new sources of error.

While it is useful to be able to distinguish between long-term and short-term migration, doing so is not easy. Survey-based estimates require someone to know how long they are moving for (which many do not, because intentions can change), while analysis based on administrative records require assumptions about how much activity we expect to see from someone who remains in the country.

ONS [has identified](#) several limitations in current data sources, and is currently developing new approaches to producing migration statistics to address them. This is likely to lead to substantial changes in official migration data over the next 2-3 years, and it is likely that many of the sources used in this briefing will need to be revised.

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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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