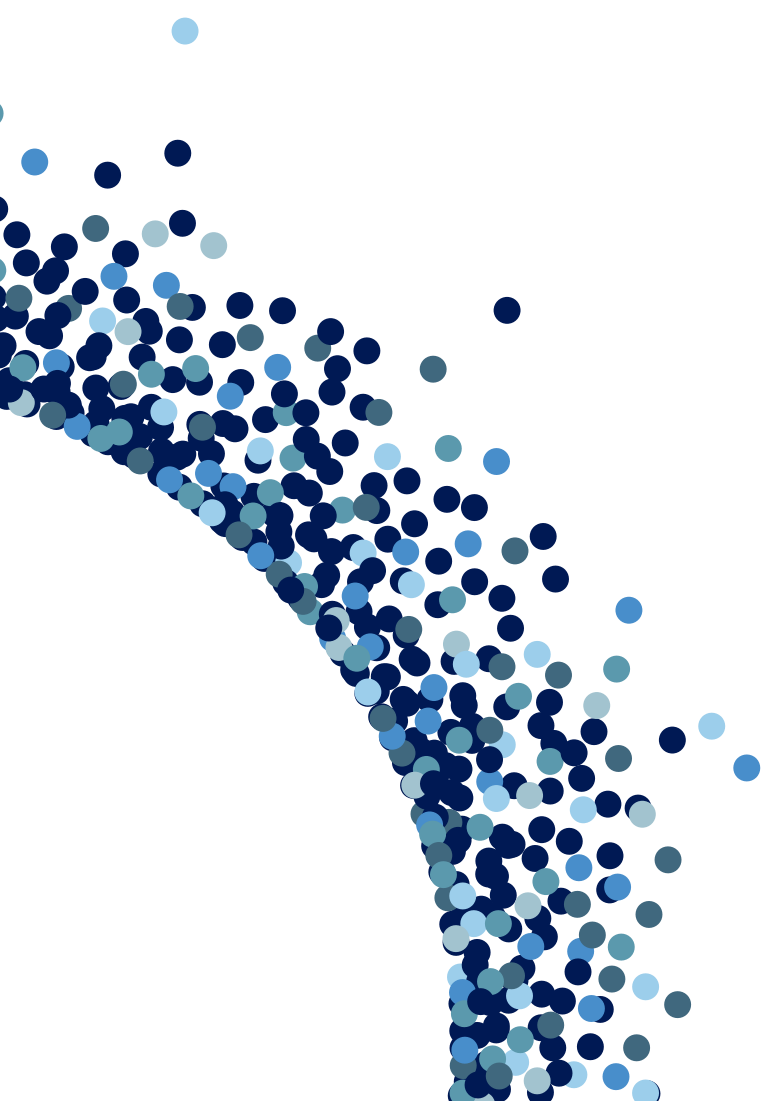




BRIEFING

Deportation and voluntary departure from the UK



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This briefing examines the deportation (or ‘enforced return’) and voluntary departure (‘voluntary return’) of people without the right to be in the UK. It presents statistics on the numbers and characteristics of people who are removed or who leave voluntarily.

Key Points

COVID-19 had a major impact on returns.

Returns have fallen substantially since 2015.

Enforced returns have fallen year on year since 2012.

Voluntary returns fell substantially after 2015.

Most people who are returned are not asylum seekers.

In 2020, a quarter of all returnees were EU citizens.

In 2020, over a third of all people returned were foreign national offenders, and around two-thirds of returned FNOs were EU citizens.

The government has found that at least 83 members of the Windrush generation may have been wrongly removed from the UK since 2002.

Understanding the policy

In ordinary language, deportation refers to the removal of a foreign citizen from a country’s territory. In UK legal terminology, however, deportation refers to a subset of government-enforced removals: of people with a criminal conviction, or those whose removal from the UK is determined to be conducive to the public good. Because of this technical usage of the word deportation, this briefing follows the government’s terminology and hence uses the word *return* to refer to a removal or departure of a foreign citizen whom the Home Office determines has no right to be in the UK.

The Home Office is the government department responsible for removing – or aiding or monitoring the voluntary departure of – people who have no legal right to be in the UK. This includes those who have entered the UK without authorisation; people who have stayed in the country longer than their visa permits, or who have otherwise breached the conditions of their visa; those being deported in the narrow sense defined above, such as due to a criminal conviction; and those who have been refused asylum and have no legal right to remain in the UK.

British citizens can be returned, but only if they are under 18 and their parents are subject to removal. Before the end of free movement, EU citizens could be removed either for not exercising Treaty rights (i.e., if they were not a jobseeker, worker, self-employed person, self-sufficient, or a student), or on public policy grounds, such as due to a criminal conviction or for reasons of national security. Now that EU free movement has ended, EU citizens can be removed for the same reasons as non-British citizens from the rest of the world.

Understanding the evidence

Statistics on returns come from administrative data provided by the Home Office, as part of its Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release. The data report the number of returns rather than the number of individuals. Therefore, if a person were returned, say, twice in a given period, they would be counted twice in the statistics.

Home Office datasets break down returns into two broad types, *enforced* and *voluntary*.

Enforced returns refer primarily to the removal of people who have declined to leave the UK voluntarily, and where the Home Office enforces their departure. There are three categories of enforced returns: (1) *enforced removals from detention*, where the individual is removed directly from detention or within two days of leaving detention; (2) *other returns from detention*, where the individual is removed directly from detention or within two days of leaving detention and has notified the Home Office that they wish to make their own arrangements to leave the country, with the Home Office facilitating or monitoring the return (in this briefing these are called *voluntary returns from detention*); and (3) *non-detained enforced removals*, where the individual is removed more than 2 days after leaving detention, or where there was no period of detention prior to the enforced removal. Enforced returns thereby reflect a high level of Home Office enforcement activity.

By contrast, *voluntary returns* are subject to a lower level of Home Office enforcement activity, or none at all. In Home Office statistics, two types of voluntary return are facilitated or monitored by the Home Office: *assisted returns* and *controlled returns*. *Assisted returns* are where returnees voluntarily make an application to the Home Office's Voluntary Returns Service and who are accepted to receive a re-integration package as part of their departure (of between £1,000 and £2,000), or where the Home Office arranges and pays for the flights. *Controlled returns* are where a person leaves the UK voluntarily at their own expense and who either notifies the Home Office prior to departure or has the Home Office oversee their departure. In this briefing, assisted returns and controlled returns are grouped together under the label *facilitated or monitored returns*, because these returns are actively facilitated or monitored by the Home Office.

A third type of voluntary return, called *independent returns* in this briefing (and *other verified returns* in the Home Office datasets) are made independently of the authorities. These returns refer to people who have not notified the immigration authorities that they are leaving and may have had no contact with immigration enforcement officials. In these cases, the Home Office knows that the person has left the country primarily due to data matching processes. For example, visa records may show that a person has an expired visa and exit checks confirm that the individual has left the UK.

Importantly, data for the most recent two years of voluntary returns are likely to be undercounts. This is because independent returns (*other verified returns* in the datasets) are initially undercounted and later revised upwards, as in some cases it takes time to identify people who have left the UK without informing the authorities. Therefore, comparisons over time involving the most recent two years for which there are data should be made with caution.

Another category of returns not discussed in this briefing is *individuals refused entry at port and subsequently removed*. People in this category have been denied legal permission to enter the UK on arrival and subsequently departed. Because people removed in this way have not passed through border controls into the UK, we exclude them from this briefing.

All returns statistics in this briefing include both main applicants and their dependants. The Home Office data do not separate these categories and so it is not possible to determine the number of returns of families.

In its published statistics, the Home Office includes counts of the number of people who made an asylum claim prior to their enforced or voluntary return. This includes not only asylum seekers whose claim has been refused and who have exhausted any rights of appeal, but also those granted some form of asylum-related protection, but who have then been removed for other reasons, such as criminal behaviour (Home Office, 2021c).

In 2020, the Home Office revised its returns statistics from 2007 onwards, as a result of improved data-matching, and a more accurate categorisation of returns as enforced or voluntary (Home Office, 2021c).

COVID-19 had a major impact on returns

Travel restrictions imposed because of the pandemic substantially reduced all major types of return from the UK in 2020 (Figure 1). The effect was most pronounced in the second quarter of 2020, after the first national lockdown, with some bounceback in Q3 and Q4 2020.

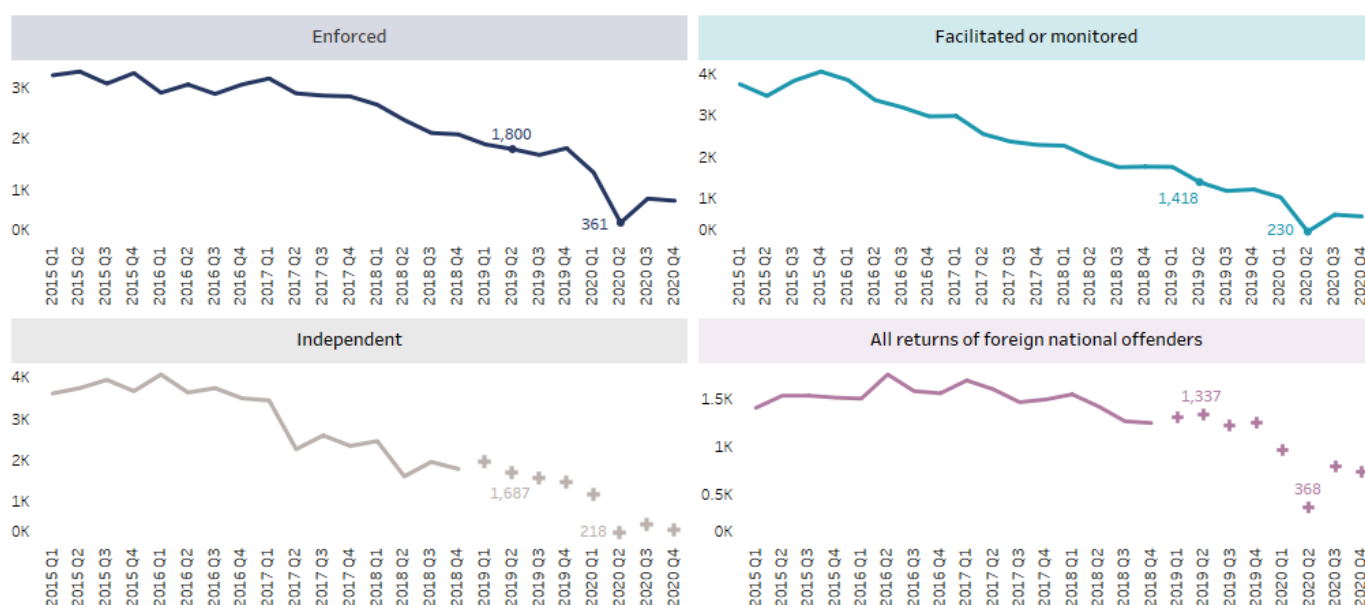
When comparing Q2 2019 with Q2 2020, enforced returns fell by 80%, facilitated or monitored returns by 84%, and independent returns fell by up to 87% (the true percentage will be lower because of initial undercounting).

In part, these falls in returns have resulted from a reduction in the population of immigration detainees in the UK, which reached a record low of 698 at the end of Q2 2020 (30 June), down 60% on the number for Q2 2019. For more information on COVID-19 and detention, see our briefing [Immigration Detention in the UK](#).

Figure 1

The impact of COVID-19 on returns from the UK, by type of return

Number of returns per quarter, Q1 2015 to Q4 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics. For enforced, facilitated or monitored, and independent returns: Table Ret_D01. For FNO returns: Ret_02q.

Notes: Excludes those who departed after being refused entry at ports. *Facilitated or monitored returns* is given by the sum of *assisted returns* and *controlled returns* in the Home Office datasets. *Independent returns* are known as *other verified returns* in Home Office data. The 2019 and 2020 counts of Independent and FNO returns are provisional ("+") because Independent returns are undercounted initially and later revised upwards.



Total returns have fallen substantially since 2015

In 2020, there were fewer than 8,000 returns from the UK, comprising both enforced and voluntary returns, though this number will increase due to initial undercounting of voluntary returns. This is down from a peak of around 47,000 in 2013 (Figure 1).

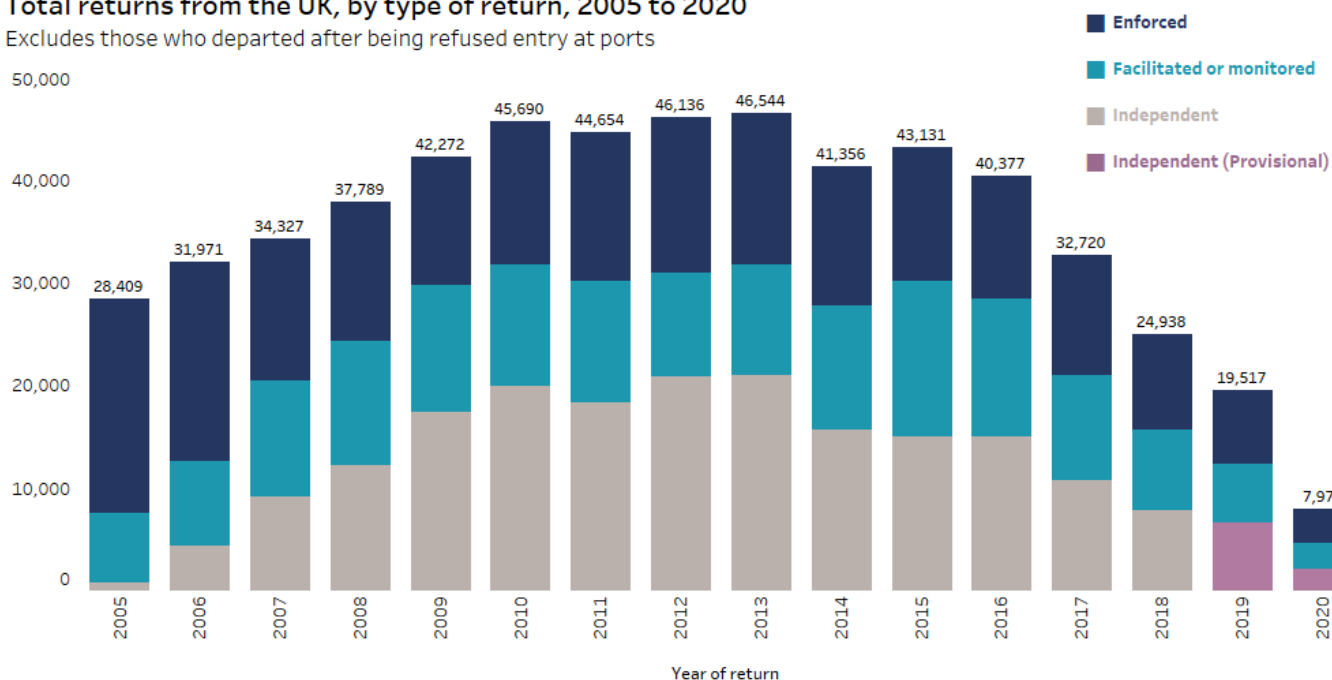
From 2007 onwards, voluntary returns have outnumbered enforced returns in every year. The Home Office prefers voluntary returns (National Audit Office, 2020, p. 35), in part because its research shows that they are much cheaper: the average cost of a voluntary return is £1,000, compared to £15,000 for an enforced return (Home Office, 2013, p. 4).

The fall in returns after 2015 has been driven by declines in both enforced and voluntary returns, though the number of voluntary returns has fallen more steeply (though some of this fall, as explained above, is due to initial undercounting). This fall is likely due to several factors. There is little evidence to explain the fall in voluntary returns, though several potential reasons have been provided for the decrease in enforced returns, which are reviewed in the next section.

Figure 2

Total returns from the UK, by type of return, 2005 to 2020

Excludes those who departed after being refused entry at ports



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Ret_D01.

Notes: Enforced returns reflect a higher level of Home Office immigration enforcement activity. Voluntary returns are subject to a lower level of Home Office enforcement activity, or none at all. The 2019 and 2020 counts of voluntary returns are provisional because one of its subcategories, independent returns, are initially undercounted and later revised upwards.



From 2004 to 2020, most returnees have been male, ranging in any given year from 68% to 73%.

Of all people returned in 2020, 7% (344) were children under 18, 83% were aged 18 to 49 (6,689), and 9% (940) were 50 or older.

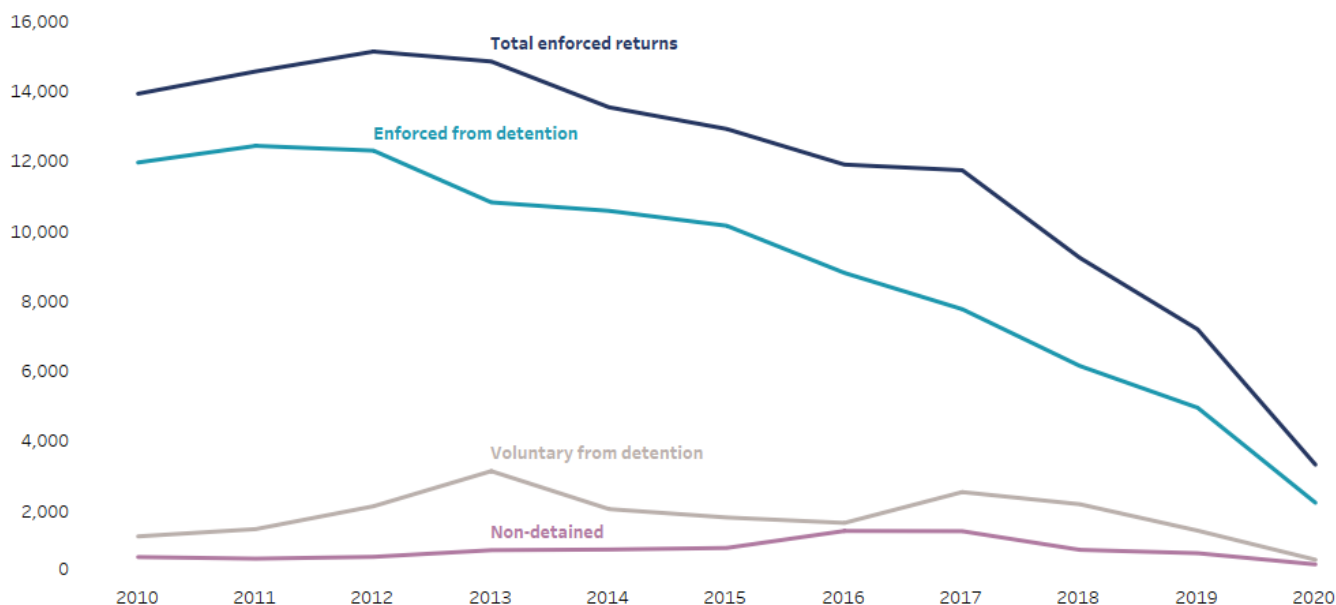
Enforced returns have fallen year on year since 2012

In 2020, there were around 3,300 enforced returns, 54% fewer than in 2019, and the lowest annual number since records began in 2004 (Figure 3). This steep fall is likely to have resulted from the pandemic.

Since 2010, Home Office statistics have broken down enforced returns into three categories. These data show that most enforced returns are from detention: 86% in 2020 (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Number of enforced returns per year, total and by type, 2010 to 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Ret_D01.

Notes: "Enforced from detention" is where the individual is removed directly from detention or within two days of leaving detention. "Voluntary from detention" is known as "Other returns from detention" in the Home Office datasets and refers to the returns of an individual directly from detention or within two days of leaving detention where they have notified the Home Office that they wish to make their own arrangements to leave the country, with the Home Office facilitating or monitoring the return. "Non-detained" returns are where the individual is removed more than 2 days after leaving detention, or where there was no period of detention prior to the enforced removal.



The decline in enforced returns in 2020 forms part of a longer-term fall in enforced returns after 2012. The Home Office [reports](#) (2019a) that pre-pandemic falls in enforced returns have coincided with changes across the immigration system. Most notably, the government reduced the use of detention and the size of the detention estate (see our briefing on [Immigration Detention in the UK](#)), and implemented changes following the Windrush scandal to give more scrutiny to detention decisions and 'make better use of face-to-face engagement' with detainees (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2019, p. 4). A [review](#) of illegal working by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (2019) also identified factors that may have reduced removals following Windrush, including a pause in data sharing between government departments and lower morale among front-line enforcement staff.

A Home Office [report](#), *Issues raised by people facing return in immigration detention*, credits part of the decline in enforced returns to an increase in detainees raising "issues", such as asylum claims or legal challenges, that prevent their return. Most people who leave the UK via enforced return do so from detention, that is, directly from detention or within two days of leaving detention. In 2020, 86% of enforced returnees left from detention (Home Office, 2021a).

Voluntary returns fell substantially after 2015

Like enforced returns, voluntary returns have also fallen substantially in recent years (Figure 2, above).

Some voluntary returns are facilitated or monitored by the Home Office, while others are not. Figure 3 breaks down the data into *facilitated or monitored returns*, and *independent returns*, where the Home Office establishes that the person has left the UK after the fact.

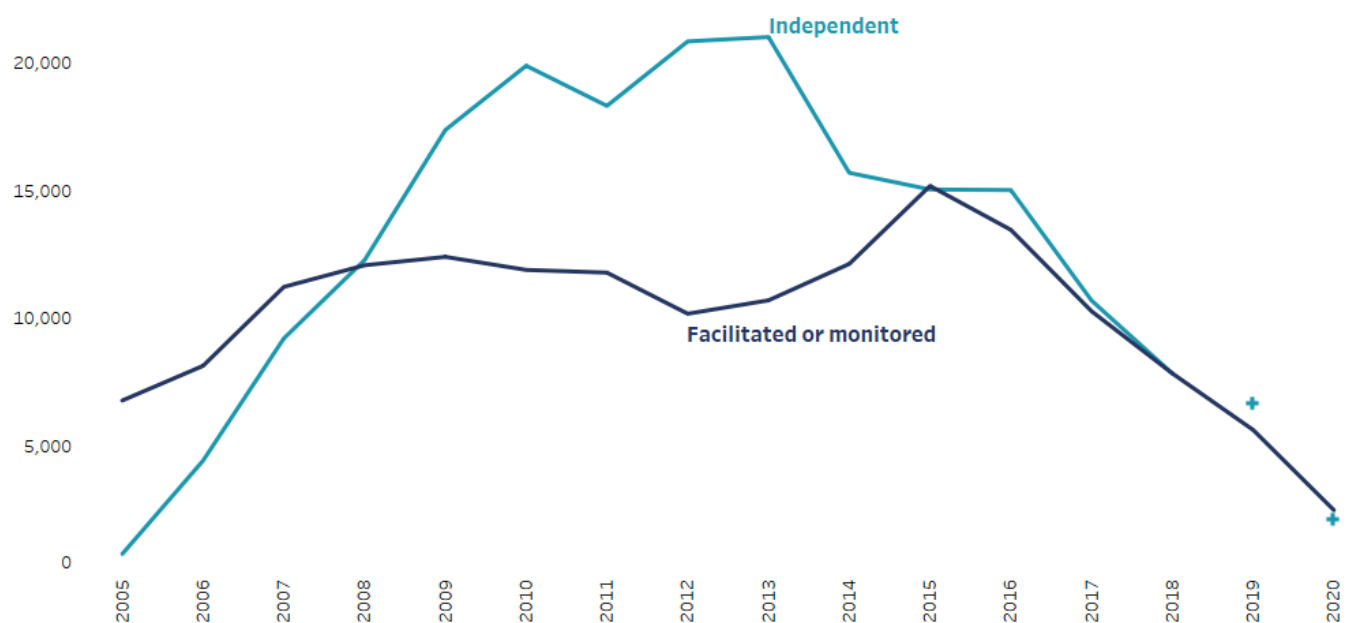
Facilitated or monitored returns have fallen every year from 2016 onwards, and were 85% lower in 2020 than their peak in 2015 (Figure 4).

Independent returns have also fallen significantly from a peak in 2013, although the counts for 2019 and 2020 will be revised upwards, reducing the size of the decline (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Number of voluntary returns from the UK per year, by type of voluntary return, 2005 to 2020

Excludes those who departed after being refused entry at ports



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Ret_D01.

Notes: *Facilitated or monitored returns* is given by the sum of *assisted returns* and *controlled returns* in the Home Office datasets. *Independent returns* are known as *other verified returns* in Home Office data. The 2019 and 2020 counts of independent returns are provisional (indicated by "+") because it is typically undercounted initially and then revised upwards.



An increase in voluntary returns was a key objective of the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy, introduced in 2014 and now referred to by the government as the ‘compliant environment’ policy. The policy aimed to make life in the UK so difficult for people without immigration status that they would leave the country voluntarily. However, it is unclear what impact the policy has had on voluntary returns. A 2020 [report](#) by the National Audit Office into the effectiveness of the hostile environment states that the Home Office is “currently unable to measure whether these activities have the desired effect of encouraging people to leave voluntarily” (National Audit Office, 2020, p. 28).

In 2020, around one-fifth of returnees were asylum seekers

In 2020, 1,484 people who left the UK departed via enforced or voluntary return had previously sought asylum in the UK – equivalent to 19% of all departures. This means that more than four-fifths of returnees (81%) in 2020 were not asylum seekers.

Returns of people who have previously sought asylum are less likely to be enforced than are non-asylum departures. In 2020, around one-third (33%) of asylum returns were enforced, compared to 44% of non-asylum returns (Home Office, 2021b, Ret_05).

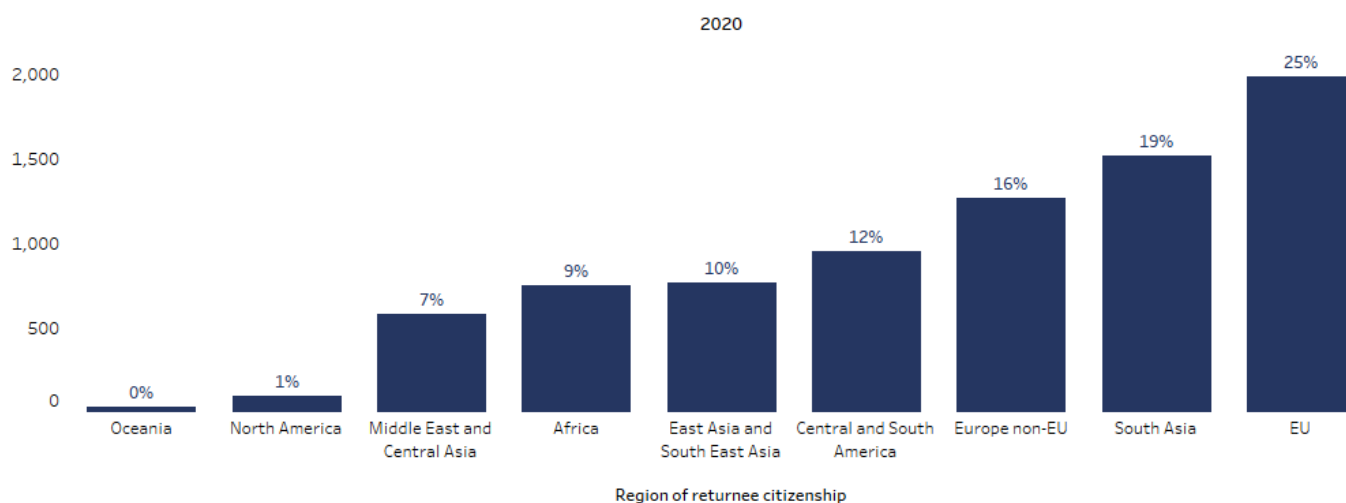
In 2020, a quarter of all returnees were EU citizens

In every year from 2010 to 2019, citizens of South Asian countries made up the largest share of those who left the UK via enforced or voluntary return. However, in 2020, for the first time since records began in 2004, EU citizens were most likely to be returned, making up a quarter of all returnees (Figure 5). The rise in the return of EU nationals coincided with an increase in the population of EU citizens resident in the UK, which took place before free movement ended, including during the transition period up to 31 December 2020 (see the Migration Observatory briefing, [EU migration to and from the UK](#)).

Figure 5

Returns from the UK by region of returnee citizenship, 2004 to 2020

Excludes those who departed after being refused entry at ports



Select year:
2020

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Ret_D01.

Notes: One additional category, 'Other', appears in the Home Office data tables, which is not shown in the chart due to small numbers (but which is included in the percentage calculations). For the countries that make up each world region go to:

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/home-office-world-regions-and-their-constituent-countries/>



Of the roughly 8,000 people who left the UK via enforced or voluntary return in 2020, 62% were the citizens of just ten countries (Table 1). To some extent, these patterns reflect the total number of each country's citizens in the UK. However, the citizens of some countries are overrepresented in returns statistics. For example, in 2018, Albanians made up 0.4% of foreign citizens in the UK, but 8% of people returned.

Table 1

Enforced and voluntary returns by returnee country of citizenship, top ten, 2004 to 2020

Excludes people refused entry at port and who subsequently departed

Year	Country	Returns	Share of all returns	Estimated population in the UK (and % of all foreign citizens in the UK)
2020	Albania	799	10%	36,000 (0.6%)
	India	792	10%	365,000 (6%)
	Romania	748	9%	450,000 (7%)
	Brazil	638	8%	54,000 (0.9%)
	Pakistan	506	6%	207,000 (3%)
	China	411	5%	112,000 (2%)
	Poland	393	5%	900,000 (15%)
	Lithuania	271	3%	189,000 (3%)
	Ukraine	189	2%	25,000 (0.4%)
	Nigeria	183	2%	98,000 (2%)

Select year:

2020

Source: For returns: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Ret_D01. For population estimates: Migration Observatory analysis of ONS dataset, Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality, Table 2.3.

Note: The population estimates are derived from a sample survey and come with a margin of error, which is not shown in the table. For consistency, the populations for 2020 are given as those for 2019 because of new weights applied in the APS for 2020. Percentages below 1% are given to one decimal place while percentages over 1% are rounded to the nearest per cent.



In 2020, of the roughly 8,000 enforced and voluntary returns, 83% were of an individual to their country of nationality; 7% were to an EU member state that was not the returnee's country of nationality; and 10% were to another country or an unknown destination, meaning that the destination was not available for statistical purposes (Home Office, 2021a, Ret_D01).

In 2020, over a third of all people returned were foreign national offenders, and around two-thirds of returned FNOs were EU citizens

Home Office statistics include the number of foreign national offenders (FNOs) returned from the UK each year. A foreign national offender is a non-British citizen who has been convicted either in the UK of any criminal offence, or abroad of any serious criminal offence. These data are broken down by returnee citizenship, whether EU or non-EU (but not specific nationalities).

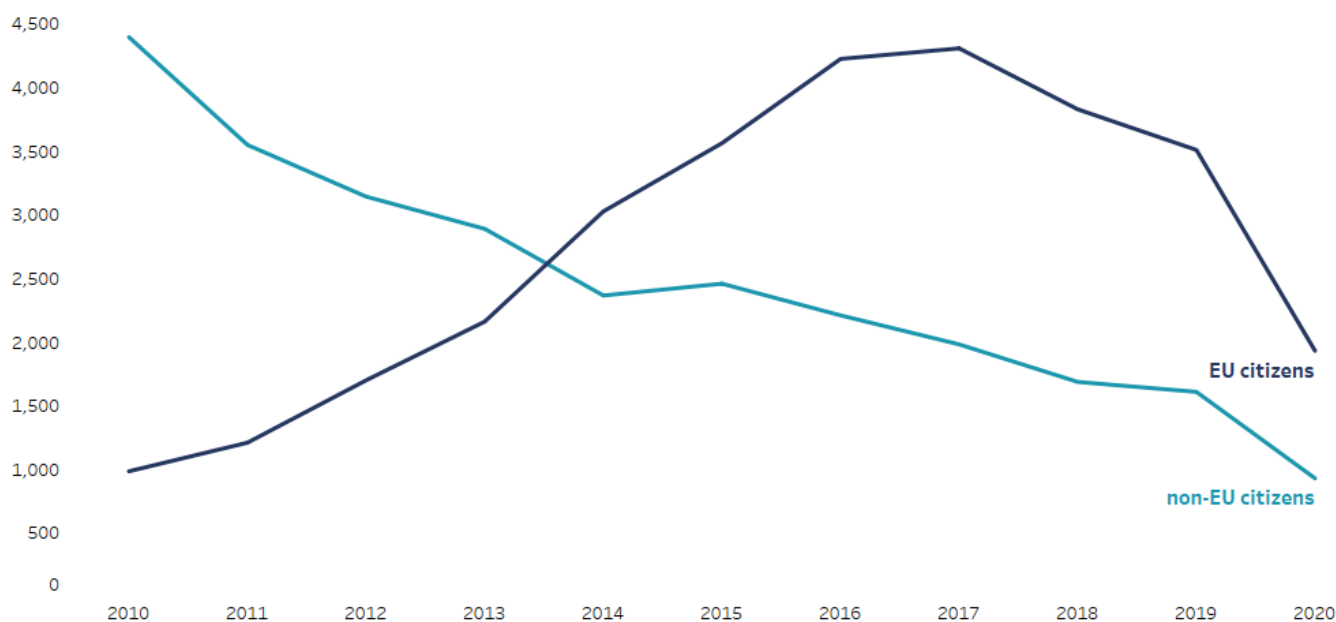
In 2020, around 2,900 foreign national offenders left the UK via enforced or voluntary return (most will have left via enforced return), making up 36% of all returns. This number will increase due to initial undercounting of voluntary returns.

From 2010 to 2020, the share of returned FNOs that were EU citizens has risen, from 18% in 2010 to 67% in 2020. This is the result of a steady increase in the number of EU FNOs returned and a decrease in the returns of non-EU FNOs (Figure 6). The rise in the return of EU nationals coincided with an increase in the population of EU citizens resident in the UK, and with a gradual decrease from April 2009 in the threshold of seriousness of crimes that led to an EU citizen being considered for deportation (Home Office, 2019b, p. 12).

Figure 6

Returns of foreign national offenders (FNOs) by citizenship (EU and non-EU), 2010 to 2020

Comprises enforced and voluntary returns; excludes those who departed after being refused entry at ports



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Returns – Summary tables, Ret_02.

Notes: A foreign national offender is someone who is not a British citizen and has been convicted either in the UK of any criminal offence, or abroad for a serious criminal offence. Data for 2019 and 2020 are liable to small upward revision.



A total of 1,978 EU citizens left the UK via enforced or voluntary return in 2020, comprising both FNOs and non-FNOs (see Figure 4 above). This means that a large majority of EU citizens that are returned are foreign national offenders: 98% in 2020 (1,933 of 1,978), a record high. This share is up from a low of 76% in 2016, when 4,226 of the 5,547 EU nationals returned were FNOs.

The government has found that at least 83 members of the Windrush generation may have been wrongly removed from the UK since 2002

In some cases, long-term legal residents or even British citizens who are unable to prove their status have been returned, as illustrated by the 2018 Windrush scandal (see Williams, 2020).

The Home Office Windrush Historical Cases Review examined the immigration records of 11,800 British residents of Caribbean Commonwealth nationality who were born before 1973 and who had been held in immigration detention or removed from the UK since 2002. The review found that the Home Office may have wrongly removed 83 people of the Windrush generation from the UK, 31 of whom were detained beforehand (Home Office, 2020).

Of these 83 individuals, 61 (73%) were Jamaican nationals. The remaining 22 individuals were nationals of eight other Caribbean countries. As at 28 April 2020, 13 of these 83 individuals are deceased. The Home Office has been unable to contact a further 14 individuals. Of the 56 individuals with whom the Home Office has made contact, 28 have been granted citizenship or some form of leave, 9 will submit an application under the Windrush documentation scheme, 11 are awaiting a decision, and 8 have confirmed that they are not making an application (Home Office, 2020, p. 16).

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

Much information about returns is not included in the published Home Office statistics. Data on the reason for removal is limited to information on whether the person previously made an asylum claim and whether a person was a foreign national offender. There is no information regarding the immigration history of returnees, and so no counts of how many of those returned are unauthorised entrants, refused asylum applicants, visa overstayers, or who otherwise breached the conditions of their permission to stay in the UK.

Before the end of EU freedom of movement, EU citizens could be returned for more limited reasons than non-EU citizens, including no longer having residence rights under EU law, national security, or public policy. But as for all other returnees, information has never been publicly available on the reason for EU citizens' return.

There is also no information on how long visa overstayers had been in the UK without permission before their departure, which means we do not know the extent to which independent returns (of people who leave voluntarily without intervention from immigration authorities) comprises people who lived and worked irregularly in the UK for a substantial period, as opposed to those who overstayed their visa for only a few days.

Relatively little is known about the personal or demographic characteristics of those returned, beyond their age, sex, and nationality. Age, sex, and specific nationality breakdowns are not provided for the returns of asylum seekers or FNOs. We do not know how long returnees have lived in the UK, where they lived, whether they were settled residents, or whether they were labour, student, or family migrants.

Finally, the published data refer only to enforced returns and do not break this down into people removed via deportation (due to a criminal conviction) and "those removed under other administrative and illegal entry powers who have declined to leave voluntarily" (Home Office, 2021d).

Acknowledgements

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Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – [Immigration detention in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing – [Irregular migration in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing – [Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory Election 2015 briefing – [Enforcement: Enforced Removals and Voluntary Departures of People Violating Immigration Law](#)
- Migration Observatory report – [Top 10 Problems in the Evidence Base](#)



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