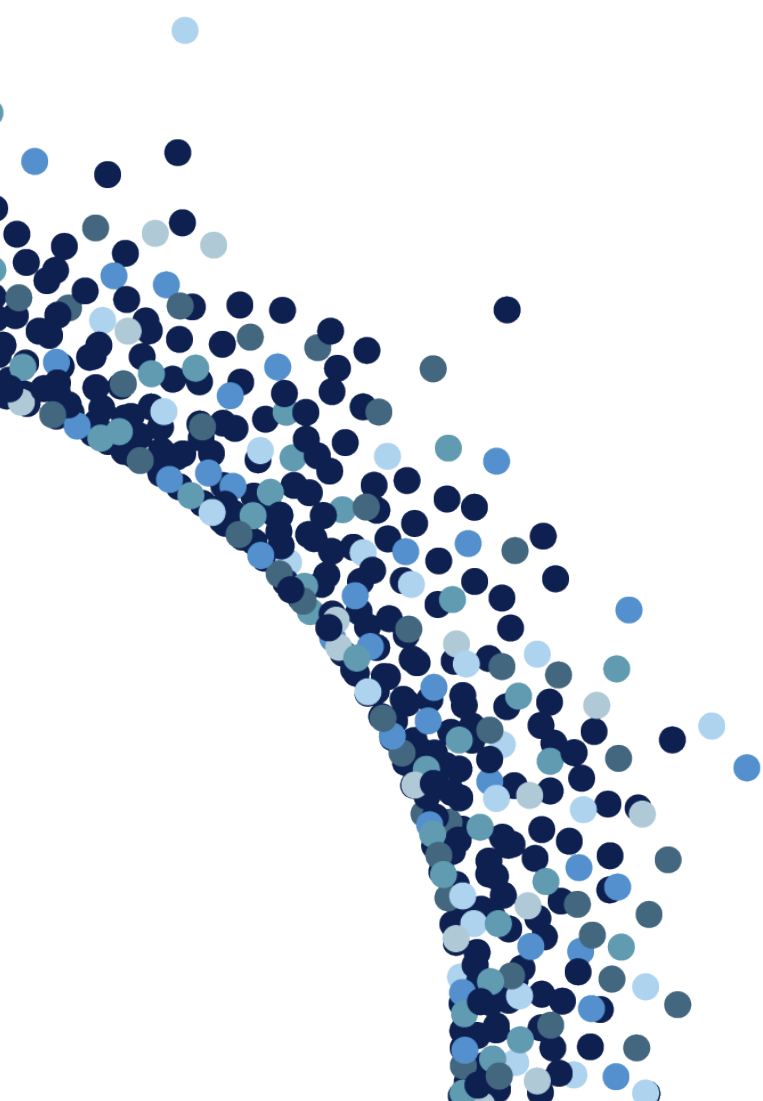




# BRIEFING

## Net migration to the UK



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This briefing covers the 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. The share of migrants in the population is higher than in Japan or Denmark, and lower than Ireland or Canada.

Net migration was 171,000 in 2025, lower than the levels seen during the 2010s and a sharp decline from the unusually high levels in 2022 and 2023. In 2025, 67% of non-EU immigration was for work and study purposes.

EU citizens made up a majority of immigration and net migration in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum. Since 2022, however, EU net migration has been negative, according to official estimates, with 42,000 more people leaving than arriving in 2025.

While the emigration of international students has been rising, they have become more likely to stay in the UK since Brexit, contributing more to net migration than they had done in the past.

There is net emigration of British citizens, with more leaving than returning. In 2025, this was estimated at 136,000, although the figures are highly uncertain. This is higher than previously published figures due to a change in methodology. There is not currently any evidence that emigration has increased since 2022, although fewer Brits are returning to the UK.

Projections of future net migration are inherently uncertain. In the past 20 years, official projections have usually underestimated future net migration levels.

## Understanding the policy

The scale of UK migration is affected by immigration policies but also depends 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 simply set eligibility criteria to determine who can qualify for residence. The number of people who meet the criteria will fluctuate over time even when policy does not change. This is one reason it is difficult for politicians to specify exactly what level of net migration they expect in future.

During some periods, specific numerical targets in immigration policy have been in place, however. In particular, the Conservative-led UK governments from 2010 to 2019 had explicit targets 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. The net migration target was never reached, and was abandoned at the end of 2019 under Boris Johnson's government. The Labour government elected in 2024 has said that it does not want to set a target for net migration.

In 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). An annual cap on skilled workers was also removed. [Projections made](#) before this system came into force suggested that it would reduce overall migration, compared to a system in which free movement had continued. These projections did not account for other factors that affect migration trends, such as the war in Ukraine and the establishment of a route for Hong Kong British National Overseas (BNO) status holders; and they did not anticipate the substantial increase in demand for migrant workers in the health and care sector post-Brexit, or the introduction of long-term work visas for care workers in early 2022.

Initially, the new immigration system was considerably more restrictive towards EU citizens and somewhat less restrictive towards non-EU citizens than the system that existed until the end of the post-Brexit transition period in December 2020. In early 2024, however, the previous Conservative government introduced a [suite of policies](#) designed to restrict immigration via several regular routes. They included higher salary thresholds for work and family migrants and restrictions on the dependants of newly arriving students and care workers.

In May 2025, the Labour government [announced](#) a range of further restrictions on visas, including the closure of the care worker route to new overseas recruitment. Home Office analysis estimated that the changes would reduce visa grants by 98,000.

## Understanding the evidence

Broadly speaking, there are three main measures of the scale of migration to the UK:

- *Long-term immigration*: includes anyone moving to the UK for at least 12 months. This measure 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*: is calculated as long-term immigration minus long-term emigration (i.e., those moving for at least a year in either direction). It shows the contribution of migration to population growth.
- *Visa grants*: include 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 they can only be used to look at changes in migration since the pre-Brexit or pre-pandemic period for non-EU citizens.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) have produced different estimates of both long-term immigration and net migration, using different data and methods. In this briefing, we provide the overall story by looking at the different data sources together. The three main methods are as follows:

### *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) and Home Office data on visas granted and entries and exits at the border. These data sources have the potential to improve migration statistics but are not yet labelled National Statistics as they have important limitations. In the last few years, some changes in methodology have led to substantial revisions to migration data. For example, ONS initially revised the estimate of net migration in 2022 and 2023 up considerably, while the estimate of net migration for 2024 was later revised down. Some of these changes were one-off methods developments, but there is still some uncertainty.

For non-UK citizens, recent ONS estimates rely on border data. To decide who is a long-term immigrant or emigrant in the most recent data, ONS makes assumptions about how long people will stay. These may not be accurate when behaviour is changing, for example, due to policy changes. This is why provisional estimates will still be revised over time. In addition, the ONS method is not currently able to account for people who overstay visas without claiming asylum (they are assumed to have emigrated), or people who arrive or leave with Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Border data only meaningfully covers non-UK citizens. Estimates of British citizens thus currently rely on RAPID, a database of individuals' interactions with the tax and benefits system. Understanding British immigration and emigration using the RAPID database requires assumptions about whether people absent from the data have actually left the UK. These assumptions will affect the estimates. The RAPID data will not include people who do not work or receive benefits. Children and students are not counted in the RAPID data either, but in recent migration estimates ONS has made an adjustment to include them.

Experimental ONS estimates also include asylum applicants and resettled refugees. Arrivals are estimated using internal Home Office data on the asylum applications and grants of status for resettlement, with an adjustment made to avoid the double-counting of those who applied for asylum after entering the country on a long-term visa. The number of departures is sourced from Home Office data on voluntary and enforced returns of asylum seekers. This category does not include immigration or emigration of people who arrive through irregular routes and never go on to claim asylum, because their numbers are not known.

#### *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 provided 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' intention to come to or leave the UK for at least one year. Intentions 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. This move followed analysis showing that certain groups were not being measured accurately. Estimates in this briefing for before 2012 are based on the earlier, IPS-based figures.

## How do migration levels in the UK compare to those in other countries?

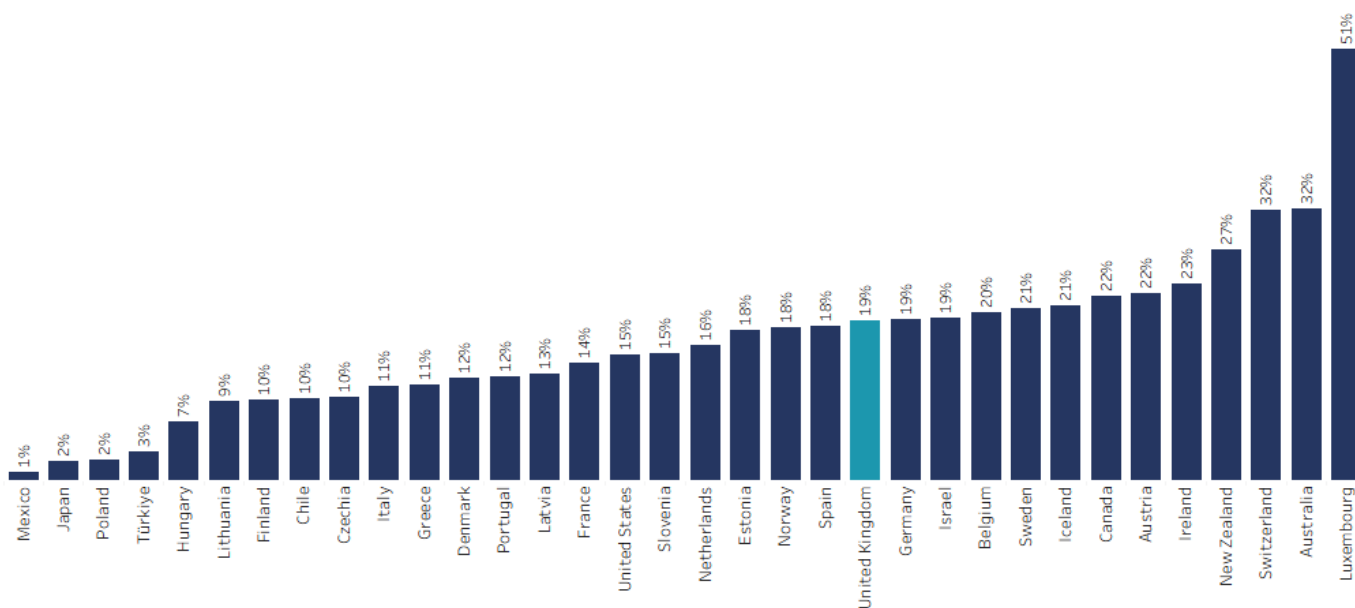
Migration levels fluctuate from year to year, but over long periods, a useful measure of how much immigration a country has experienced is the size of the foreign-born population as a percentage of the population. Countries with high levels of net migration—defined as people immigrating minus those emigrating—develop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

According to ONS [estimates](#), 19% of the UK's population was foreign-born in June 2024, similar to shares in Spain and Germany (Figure 1). The UK had a smaller foreign-born population than Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. By contrast, the UK had a higher share of foreign-born people in its population compared to France, the United States, and most Eastern European countries, and a much higher share than Japan. Note, however, that the foreign-born shares [reported](#) for some countries shown in Figure 1 are based on survey data that underestimate the migrant population due to survey non-response.

Figure 1

## Foreign-born population as share of total population

OECD countries, in 2024 or latest date available



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of ONS mid-2024 population estimates, ONS Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2012 to YE December 2025, Table 9, and OECD International Migration Database.

Note: OECD estimates are provided to OECD by the governments of particular countries, and may have methodological limitations, which have not been scrutinised by the Migration Observatory.



The scale of migration to a country may have some economic impact, but research suggests that for many economic impacts, 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 impact of migration on public finances and productivity, for example. 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](#).

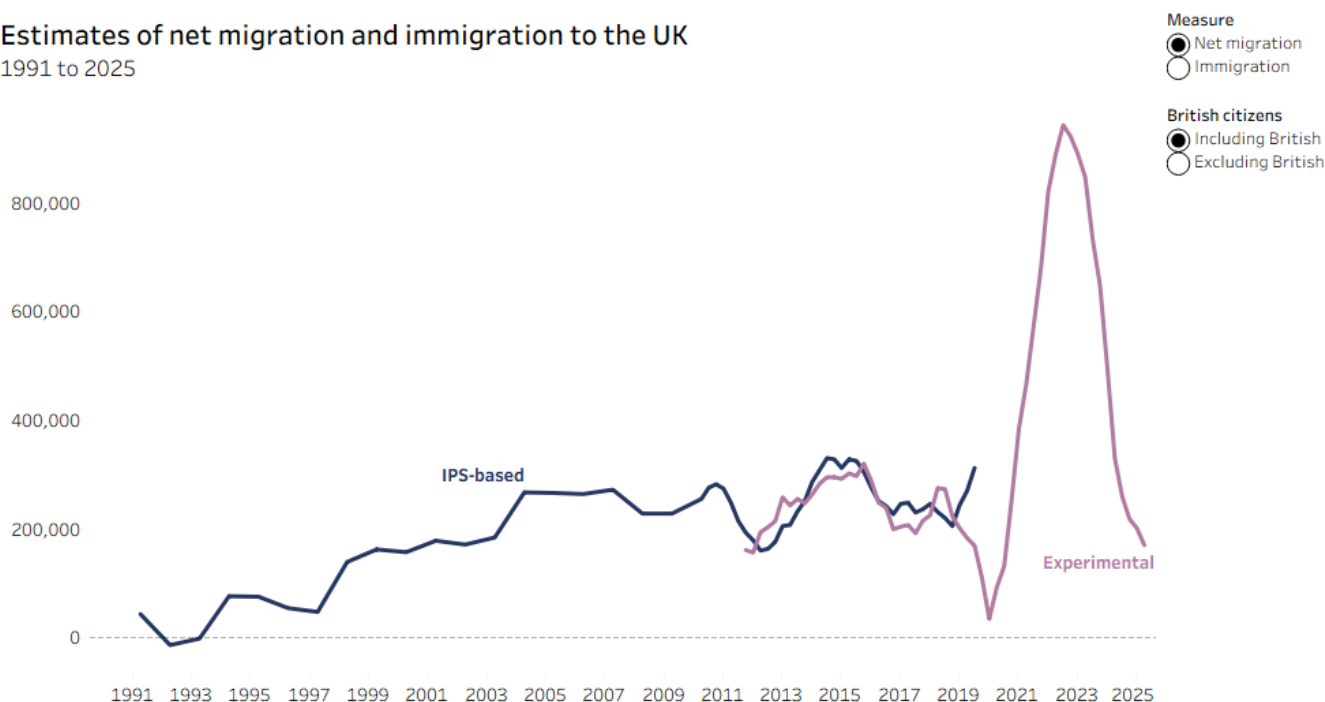
## How many migrants came to the UK in 2025?

Net migration is a commonly used measure of the overall scale of migration in the UK. It takes into account not just people moving to the country, but also those leaving. This helps understand migration's contribution to population growth—especially since many people who move to the UK do not remain here permanently. However, the net migration measure also has flaws. For example, it tells us little about *who* is arriving and leaving or what their impacts are. It can also produce counterintuitive or misleading figures when migration patterns change substantially in a short period, as discussed further below. The UK is [unusual in its choice](#) to use net migration in policy debates as the main measure for discussing migration levels. See the Migration Observatory commentary, [Net Migration: Frequently Asked Questions](#), for more information.

Estimates from the Office for National Statistics suggest that total net migration was 171,000 in 2025. This figure is lower than net migration levels during the 2010s and represents a sharp decline compared to the year ending March 2023, when net migration peaked at a historical high of 944,000 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

### Estimates of net migration and immigration to the UK 1991 to 2025



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to 2009: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and for YE Dec 2010 to YE Mar 2020: ONS, provisional estimates of long-term international migration, year ending March 2020. Modelled estimates: ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2012 to YE December 2025, Table 1.

Note: Both IPS and experimental estimates come with substantial uncertainty.



The sharp rise in net migration after Brexit was driven by an increase in non-EU citizens coming to the UK. This followed policy liberalisations made under the Conservative government. For example, it reintroduced a post-study work route – which likely made the UK more attractive to international students – opened new humanitarian visa routes for Ukrainians and Hong Kongers, and made care and senior care workers eligible for work visas. At the same time, immigration policy also interacted with other factors unrelated to immigration. UK universities recruited students overseas [more actively](#) as their financial situation deteriorated, and social care providers hired migrant workers to fill vacancies caused by low pay and poor working conditions in a sector with limited funding.

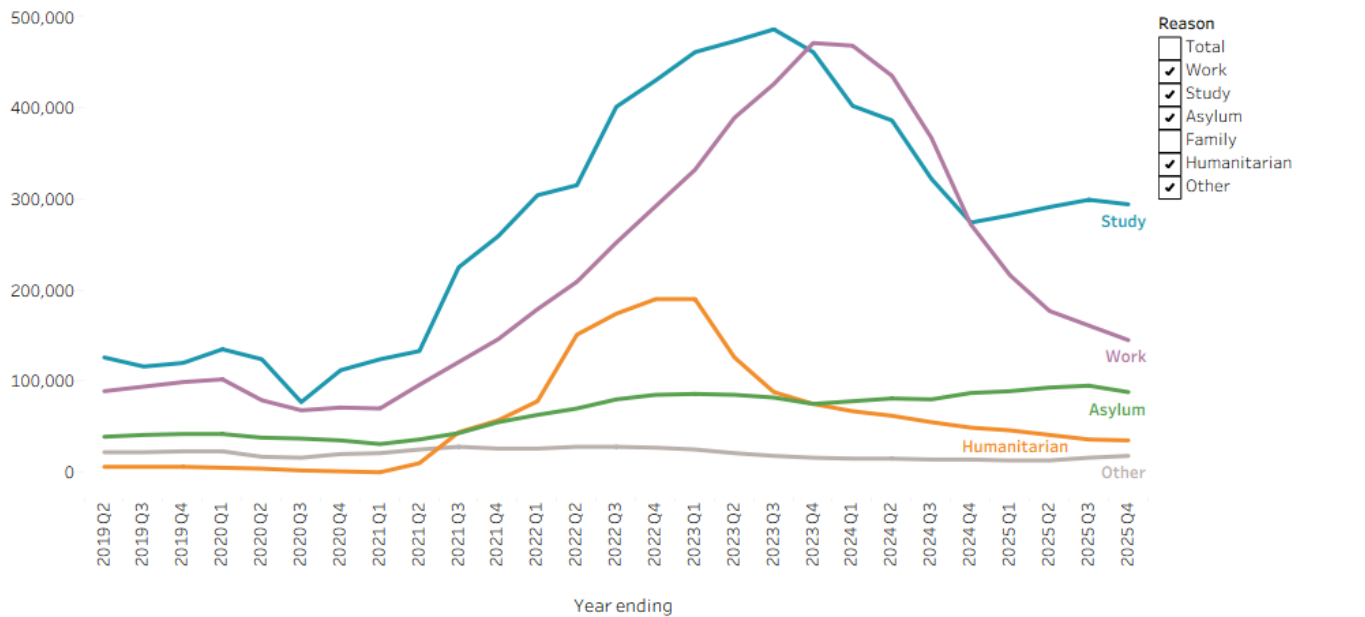
Net migration fell sharply in 2024, however, after the Conservative government introduced a suite of policies aimed at reducing immigration. These included visa restrictions on the family members of care workers and most international students. Widespread reports of exploitation in the social care sector also led to a Home Office move to scrutinise applications to sponsor migrant care workers more closely. The current government introduced further restrictions on work visas and refugee family reunion in the second half 2025, but these are not yet fully visible in the 2025 statistics.

The ONS estimates that non-EU immigration stood at 627,000 in 2025, 20% lower than in 2024 (Figure 3). Just under 70% of non-EU arrivals came to study at UK universities (44%), as a worker (11%), or as the partner or child of a work migrant (12%). Asylum accounted for a further 14% of non-EU immigration—however, unlike other types of migrant, relatively few asylum migrants left the UK, so their impact on population growth will be larger than this. More information on the drivers of work and student migration is available in the Migration Observatory briefings, [Work visas and migrant workers in the UK](#) and [Student migration to the UK](#).

Figure 3

Non-EU immigration to the UK, by reason

Year ending June 2019 to year ending December 2025



Source: ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2012 to YE December 2025, Table 4b.

Note: Figures are experimental and rely on ONS assumptions. 'Humanitarian' comprises arrivals under bespoke routes for Ukrainians and Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) status holders, as well as other small humanitarian routes.



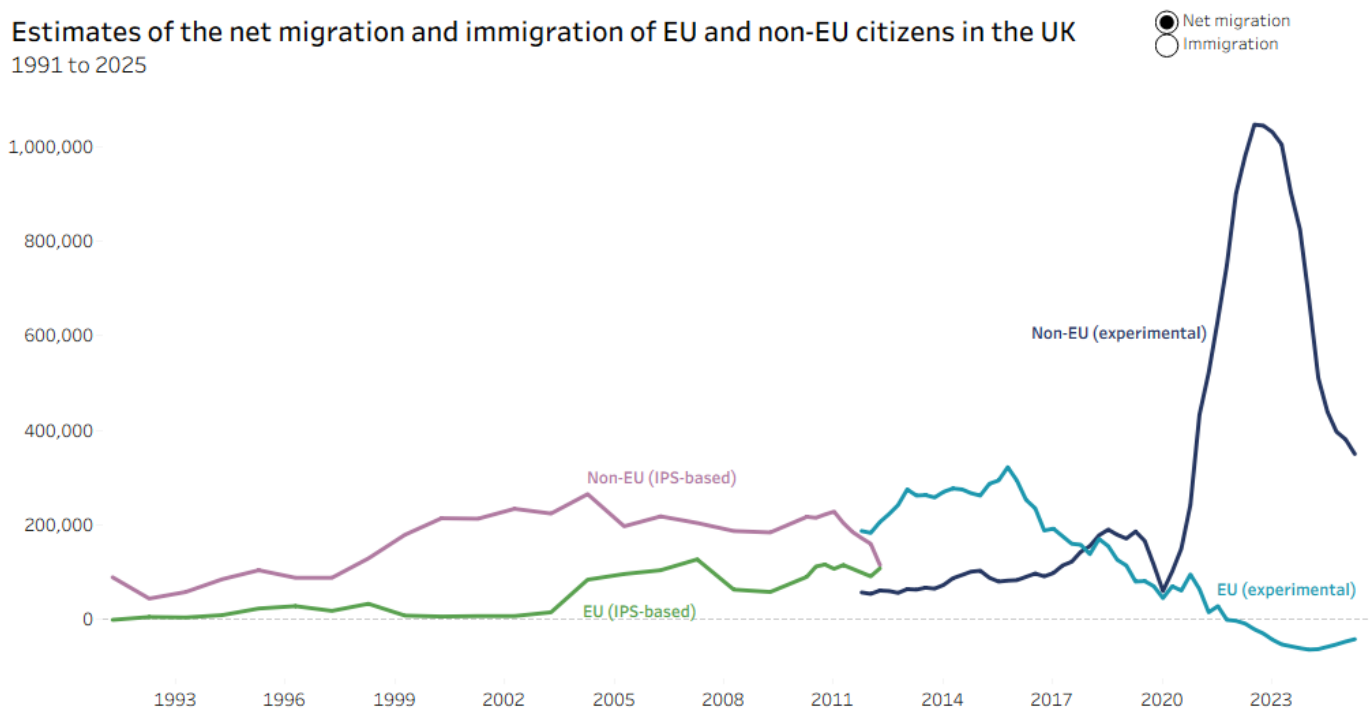
Indian nationals were by far the largest nationality coming to the UK, accounting for 17% of overall immigration, followed by Pakistani and Chinese citizens (7% each).

Which parts of the world do UK migrants come from?

Shortly before the 2016 referendum on EU membership, EU citizens made up the majority of all net migration to the UK (excluding British citizens). Depending on the data source used, EU citizens contributed between 59% and 77% of estimated net migration in the year ending March 2015. This high share was unusual by historical standards and partly resulted from temporary factors: Romanian and Bulgarian citizens receiving full access to the UK labour market in 2014, and migration from Southern European countries where youth unemployment was high due to the Eurozone crisis.

Since the 2016 referendum, the picture has changed (Figure 4). Although policy towards EU citizens did not change until January 2021, EU net migration began to fall 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.

Figure 4



EU net migration subsequently turned negative in 2022, as the post-Brexit immigration system greatly reduced opportunities for EU citizens to move to the UK. Take-up of work visas among EU citizens has been relatively low since Brexit, for example, as explained in the Migration Observatory briefing, [Work visas and migrant workers in the UK](#). EU migration is expected to become less negative over time. This is because EU emigration is driven by people who arrived before Brexit, when EU immigration was higher.

Net migration of EU citizens in 2025 was estimated at -42,000. More detail on how EU net migration has changed following the Brexit referendum and COVID-19 pandemic can be found in the Migration Observatory briefing [EU Migration to and from the UK](#).

### Do international students stay in the UK long term?

In the past, many non-EU citizens—particularly international students—have come to the UK for periods of just a few years before emigrating again. Among non-EU citizens with visas granted in 2008, for example, 83% saw their visas expire by the end of the seventh year after arrival. The resulting emigration subtracts from the overall net migration figure.

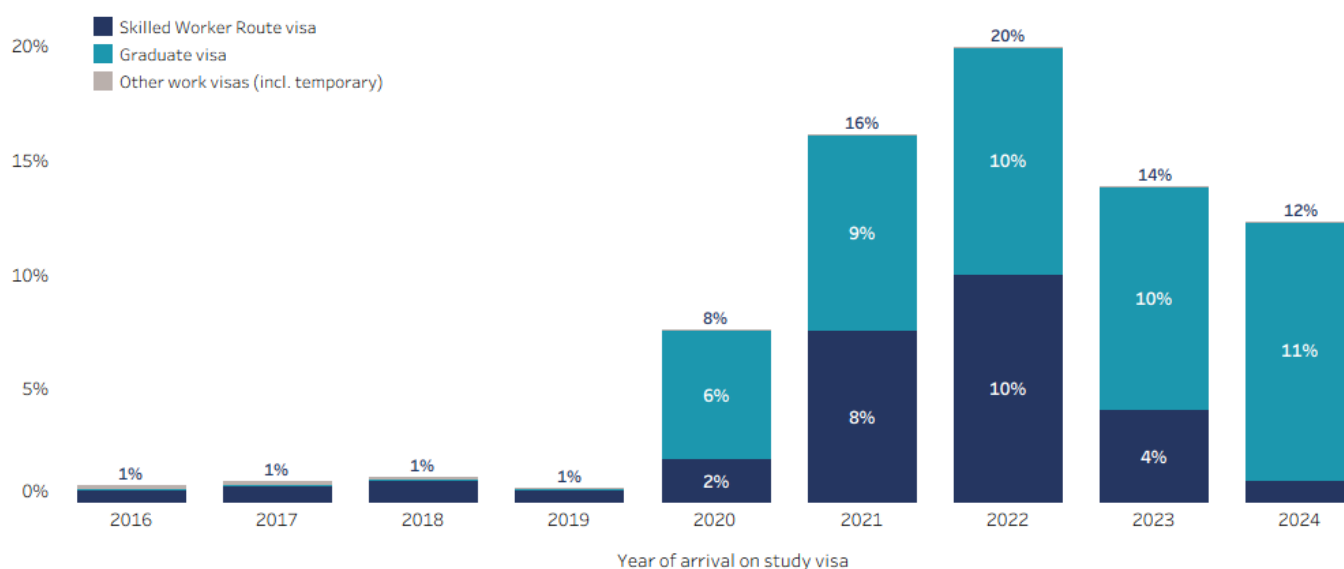
Recent increases in study migration have contributed to rising emigration: the estimated number of students emigrating in 2025 was more than three times the number emigrating in 2021 (159,000 compared to 49,000). However, there is some evidence that international students became more likely to remain in the UK long term, under the post-Brexit immigration system (Figure 5). This is not just because of the Graduate visa, but also because more students from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts switched to long-term Skilled Worker visas. As a result, international students have been contributing more to long-term net migration than they did in the past.

The decrease in the share of international students switching to long-term work visas since the 2023 arrival cohort may result from restrictions introduced in 2024 that prevented people from switching *with their family members* into the care worker visa route, and increased salary thresholds for skilled work visas in other jobs. For more information, see the Migration Observatory commentary, [International students entering the UK labour market](#).

Figure 5

Share of former non-EU students switching to work visas by the end of the first year after arrival

By calendar year of arrival on study visa



Select view From 2016, by visa category

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Migrant Journey: 2025 report, Table MJ\_D01.

Note: Figures denote share of entire cohort, including those still on study visas, and include dependants. "From 2004" view includes a small number of former international students who transitioned to temporary work visas.



Even if a majority of students and workers eventually leave the country, those who do remain contribute to net migration in the long term and not just the short term. For example, if 500,000 sponsored students arrived in a given year and 20% remained permanently, that annual cohort would contribute 100,000 to net migration over the long term.

Students' temporary stays have previously [generated debate](#) about whether they should be included in net migration statistics. Net migration data are used to generate population estimates, and since students are part of the population, removing them from the UK's main net migration figures would make population estimates less accurate. Other countries [routinely include students](#) in their net migration statistics, including Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand. One difference between the UK and other countries is that UK policy debates focus more on net migration (and thus are more affected by idiosyncrasies of the net migration measure), while debate in other countries tends to focus on immigration and grants of temporary or permanent status.

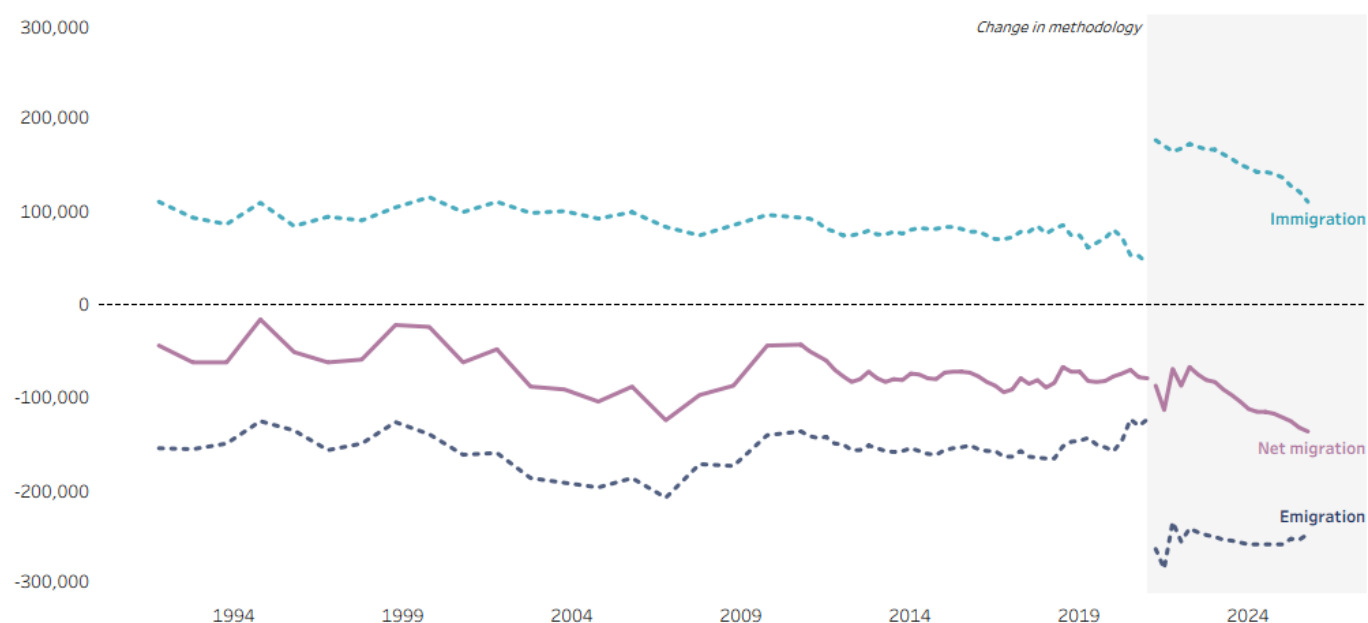
## How many British citizens left the UK in 2025?

ONS [estimates](#) dating back to 1964 indicate that British net migration has been negative in all but one year (1985). In 2025, net emigration of British citizens was estimated at 136,000 (Figure 6), using an experimental new methodology that makes the figures particularly uncertain. According to the ONS, emigration of British citizens has been [stable over time](#)—the change in the data in Figure 6 results from a change of methodology, not a change in the underlying trend (see Understanding the evidence for more information). However, net emigration of British citizens has increased since 2022, because of fewer British people moving (back) to the UK.

Figure 6

### Net migration of British citizens in the UK

1991 to 2025



Source: LTIM: for 1991 to YE March 2011: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-term international migration time series; and from YE June 2012: ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2012 to YE December 2025, Table 1.

Note: Estimates from 1991 to YE March 2021 are based on the International Passenger Survey, and estimates from YE June 2021 to YE December 2025 are based on RAPID data. Both sources come with substantial uncertainty.



Relatively little is known about which British citizens leave the UK, or the reasons why. A little over half of British emigrants in 2025 were estimated to be aged between 16 and 34, reflecting the fact that migration is usually concentrated among younger people. Qualitative research has [found](#) that they often move for career or lifestyle reasons.

According to United Nations [population estimates](#), 4.8 million British citizens were living overseas in 2024, with just over half living in either Australia (23%), the United States (19%), and Canada (9%). More recently, between 2020 and 2024, the countries which saw the biggest increase in their British populations were Poland, Malta, and Romania. One reason may be that EU migrants are returning home, joined by British family members.

## How are net migration levels expected to change in the future?

ONS produces population projections that are used for planning services and making public finance forecasts, among other things. This requires assumptions about future net migration. Making these assumptions is difficult because migration patterns depend on many different factors, both within and beyond government policy. ONS assumptions typically have not taken into account migration policy announcements or political intentions, but instead are [based on](#) historical migration and consultations with academic experts.

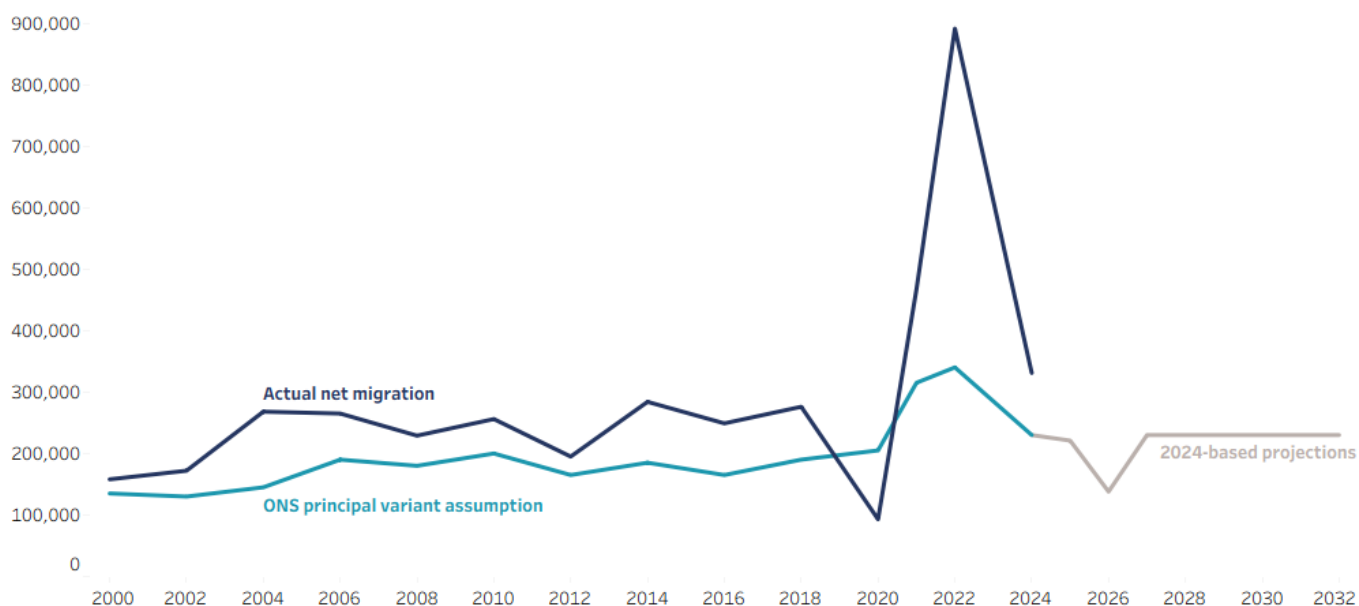
In its most recent [population projections](#), produced in 2026 and based on 2024 data, ONS assumed that net migration would rise to an average long-term level of 230,000 by 2028. It projects that net migration will fall further in 2026 before increasing again in later years. The years 2026 and 2027 may see unusually low net migration because immigration has decreased but emigration remains temporarily high as some workers and students who arrived during the net migration spike of 2022 to 2023 leave. If this happens, it is likely to be temporary.

Net migration assumptions contained in population projections over the past twenty years have usually undershot (Figure 7). For example, net migration was an estimated 229,000 in 2008. The 2008-based population projections assumed that net migration would fall to 180,000 within a few years, but it remained persistently above 180,000, with a brief exception in 2012. Another exceptional year was 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly reduced net migration. For a further discussion of ONS population projections, see the Migration Observatory briefing, [The Impact of Migration on UK Population Growth](#).

Figure 7

### Projected vs. actual net migration in the UK

Projected from 2000 to 2032; actual net migration from 2000 to 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of ONS Population Projections; Migration Statistics Quarterly Reports; and ONS (2025).

Note: ONS principal variant figures from 2000 to 2024 refer to the long-term net international migration assumption and are for the base year of the projections. For example, 2016 refers to the long-term international migration assumption in the 2016-based projections, published in 2017. Projections from 2024 to 2032 use the 2024-based projections. Net migration figures use IPS-based figures until 2010, and experimental figures from 2012 onwards.



One reason net migration projections have often been too low is that they usually assume net migration will be similar to previous trends over a long period. This will mean the projections will be too low when migration levels are on an upward trajectory, as has generally been the case since the late 1990s. More recent ONS projections take a shorter period of historical data (10 rather than 25 years), which might help to address this problem.

### Evidence gaps and limitations

When producing the most recent year of data, ONS relies on assumptions about future travel patterns that are necessarily uncertain. As a result, provisional estimates are sometimes revised substantially. In particular, ONS must make assumptions about the share of people granted long-term visas who will not remain in the UK for the full duration of their visa, but migration behaviours have changed following the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system. ONS thus faces a trade-off between timeliness and accuracy of its provisional statistics.

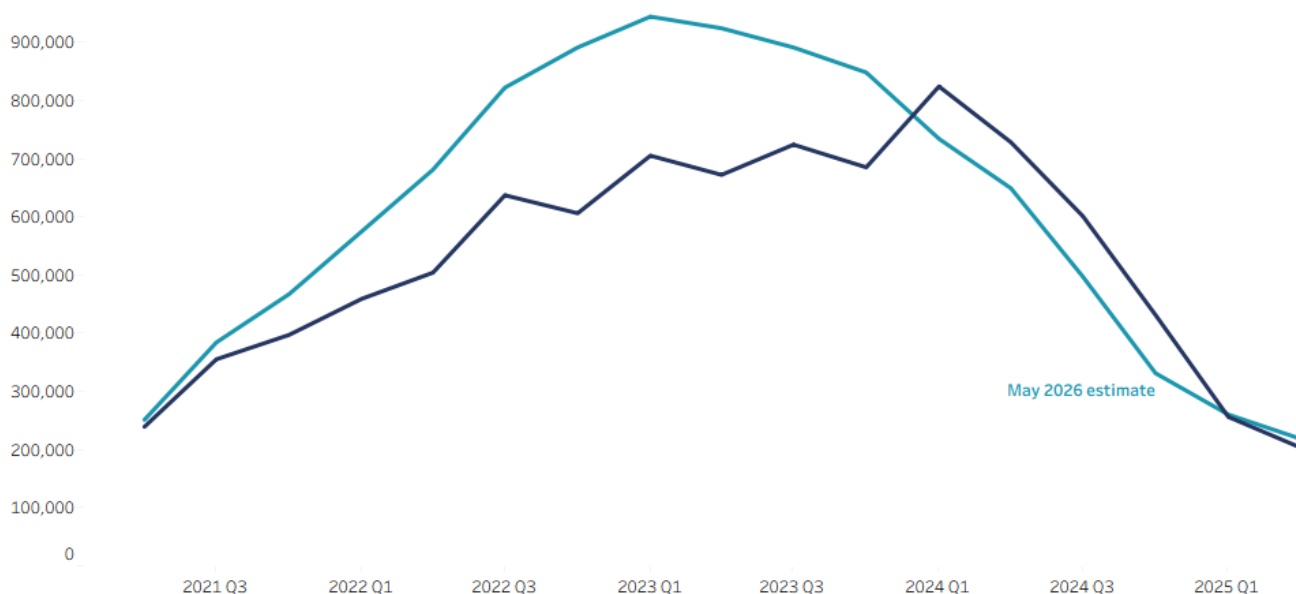
Net migration publications also provide revised estimates for previous years, using more complete travel data. Due to both changing mobility patterns and one-off factors, including improvements in the methods and data used, substantial revisions were made to net migration estimates between 2022 and 2024.

The May 2026 [publication](#) made further revisions, primarily because the method used to estimate EU and British migration was changed. Net migration for 2024 was revised down by 100,000 (or 23%) compared to the initial estimate in the May 2025 publication (Figure 8). For more information about ONS revisions to migration estimates, see [Sumption \(2024\)](#).

Figure 8

#### Initial vs. revised net migration estimates

Year ending June 2021 to year ending June 2025



Source: ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: YE June 2012 to YE December 2025, Table 1.

Note: The May 2026 estimates for net migration in the year ending March 2025 and June 2025 are provisional. However, all estimates come with substantial uncertainty.



People who enter the UK without permission (e.g. [in small boats](#)) are included in the statistics if they claim asylum, but irregular migrants who do not claim asylum will not be included.

## Acknowledgements

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## Further reading

- ONS. 2026. International migration research, progress update: April 2026. Newport: ONS. [Available online](#).
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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.

[www.compas.ox.ac.uk](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk)

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