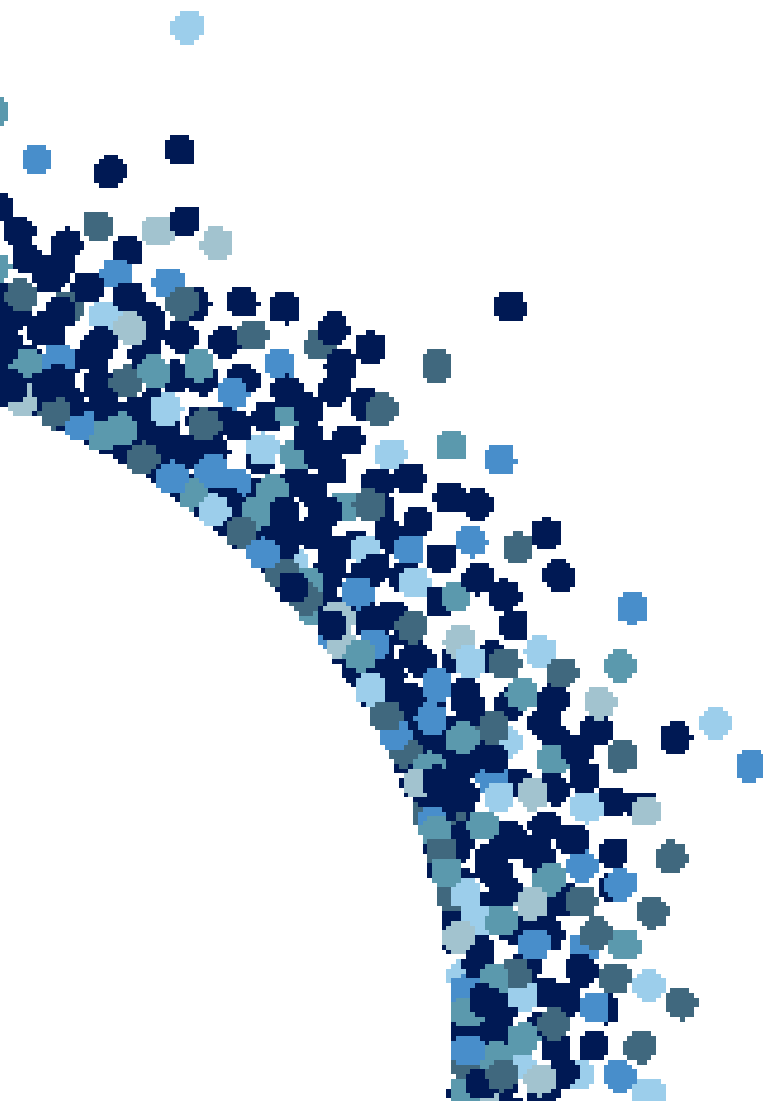




# BRIEFING

## People crossing the English Channel in small boats



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This briefing examines the phenomenon of people crossing the English Channel in small boats. It reviews what we know about the numbers, characteristics, and motivations of people making this journey.

## Key Points

Around 29,000 people were detected crossing the English Channel in small boats in 2023, down from 46,000 in 2022.

In early 2024, the provisional number of detected crossings was around 12,600 – a rise of 16% compared to the same period in 2023.

Nationals of five countries – Iran, Albania, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria – made up two thirds of those crossing in small boats since 2018.

The number of Albanian small boat arrivals, who made up the largest group crossing the Channel in 2022, fell by 93% in 2023.

93% of people arriving in small boats from 2018 to March 2024 claimed asylum; of those who had received a decision by 31 March 2024, around three quarters were successful.

Available data provide no clear or single explanation for the rise in popularity of the small boat route, although one plausible reason is that enforcement activity has made other irregular methods of entry less viable.

Research on the motivations of asylum seekers finds several reasons that some people prefer to claim asylum in the UK, and knowledge of UK asylum policy is not one of them.

Greece, Italy, and Spain have all experienced large numbers of unauthorised arrivals by sea since 2014, with numbers fluctuating over time.

Border enforcement measures may have reduced the number of unauthorised maritime arrivals in some European countries, but their effects are unclear.

A range of policies have been proposed to tackle small boat arrivals in the UK.

## Understanding the policy

Since 2018, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people arriving in the UK without authorisation after crossing the English Channel in small boats. In response, the UK government has introduced a number of policies to tackle small boat arrivals.

In March 2021, the government published its [New Plan for Immigration](#), a collection of changes of the UK's asylum system. The main vehicles for this policy statement include the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, and the Illegal Migration Act 2023. Collectively, these policies aim to deter people from travelling to the UK by small boat. For more information on these policies, see the Migration Observatory's briefing, [UK policies to deter people from claiming asylum](#).

Government policy to address small boat arrivals has also included co-operation with France. A [report](#) by the House of Commons Library provides a timeline of UK-French cooperation on tackling irregular migration. The government also [cooperates with Albania](#) on enforcement activities and the return of people who have not claimed asylum or have had their claims refused.

On 4 January 2023, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, made "stopping the boats" one of five [key policy pledges](#) for that year.

## Understanding the evidence

Since April 2022, the government has published provisional daily counts of small boats arrivals, which are derived from operational databases and are subject to revision. Finalised official statistics on small boat arrivals are published quarterly, as part of the government's [statistics on irregular migration](#).

Counts of small boat entries or other irregular entries refer to the number of people detected, and not the number of unique individuals. The same person may be detected multiple times, either under the same method of entry or under different methods (if an individual leaves the UK and then is detected re-entering). Such individuals will be counted multiple times in the statistics.

A 'small boat' is defined as one of a number of vessels used by individuals who cross the English Channel with the aim of gaining entry to the UK without a visa or permission to enter. The most common small vessels detected making these types of crossings are rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), dinghies and kayaks. Statistics on small boats include individuals who were detected on arrival in the UK, and those detected in the Channel and subsequently brought ashore.

The data do not include those who arrive in the UK on larger vessels (e.g., yachts, motor cruisers, tugs, fishing vessels, ferries), those who arrive in the UK clandestinely on larger vessels not referenced above (including where hidden in a vehicle on a ferry), or individuals who arrive in the UK undetected. Nor do they include people who were prevented from departing France, or were intercepted by French authorities and returned to France.

This briefing also presents Home Office information on detected irregular entries other than by small boat. These statistics cannot be summed to infer the total number of people entering the UK irregularly. This is because they refer only to *detected* irregular entries. Because small boat arrivals are more likely to be detected than those using other methods of entry, statistics for different methods of entry cannot be directly compared. Moreover, changes in the number of irregular entrants detected could be a result of changes in operational activity or recording practices, and not only changes in the number of people attempting to enter the UK irregularly.

## Around 29,000 people were detected crossing the English Channel in small boats in 2023, down from 46,000 in 2022

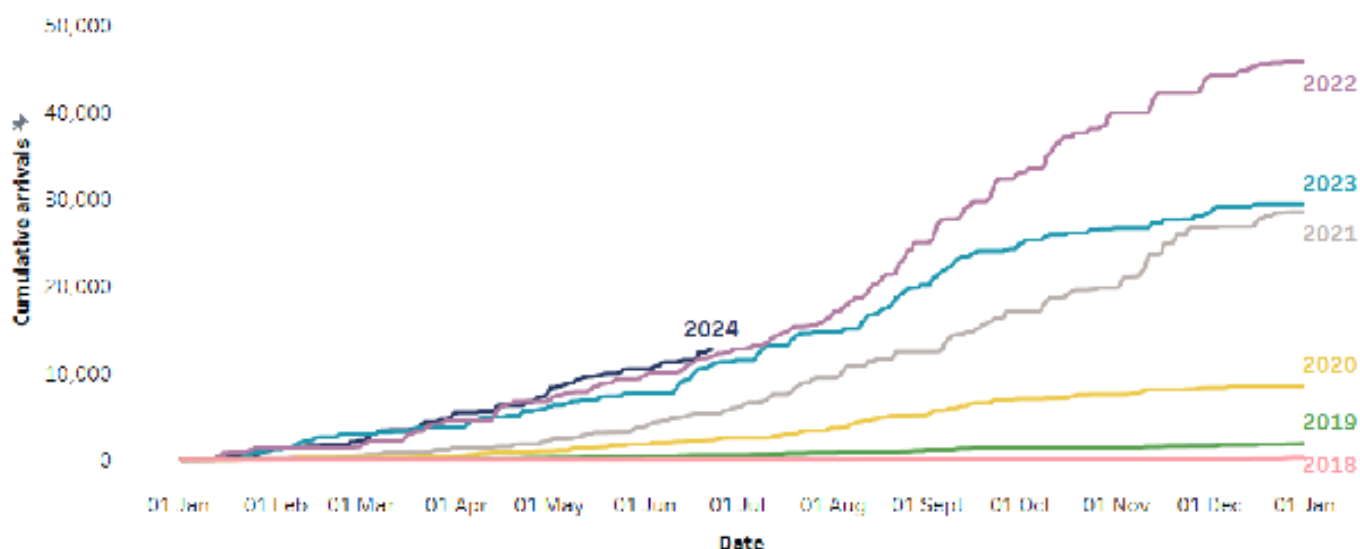
The overall number of small boat arrivals has increased substantially since 2018. While reports of people attempting to enter the UK by crossing the Channel go back [over fifty years](#), significant numbers did not begin to be detected until [late 2018](#).

According to the Home Office, 29,437 people reached the UK in 2023 after crossing the English Channel in small boats. This compares with 45,774 in 2022.

In the first half of 2024, 12,646 small boat arrivals were detected, up 16% on the first half of 2023 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

### People crossing the English Channel in small boats Daily cumulative total, each year from 2018 to 22 June 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office, Migrants detected crossing the English Channel in small boats - monthly data and Small boat arrivals - last 7 days.  
Notes: Counts refer to those detected on arrival to the UK in a small boat, or who were detected in the Channel by UK authorities and subsequently brought to the UK, having travelled in a small boat. Small boats include rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), dinghies and kayaks, but not larger vessels, such as go-fast craft, yachts, motor cruisers, hugs, and fishing vessels, which the Home Office says are "rarely used" by irregular migrants.

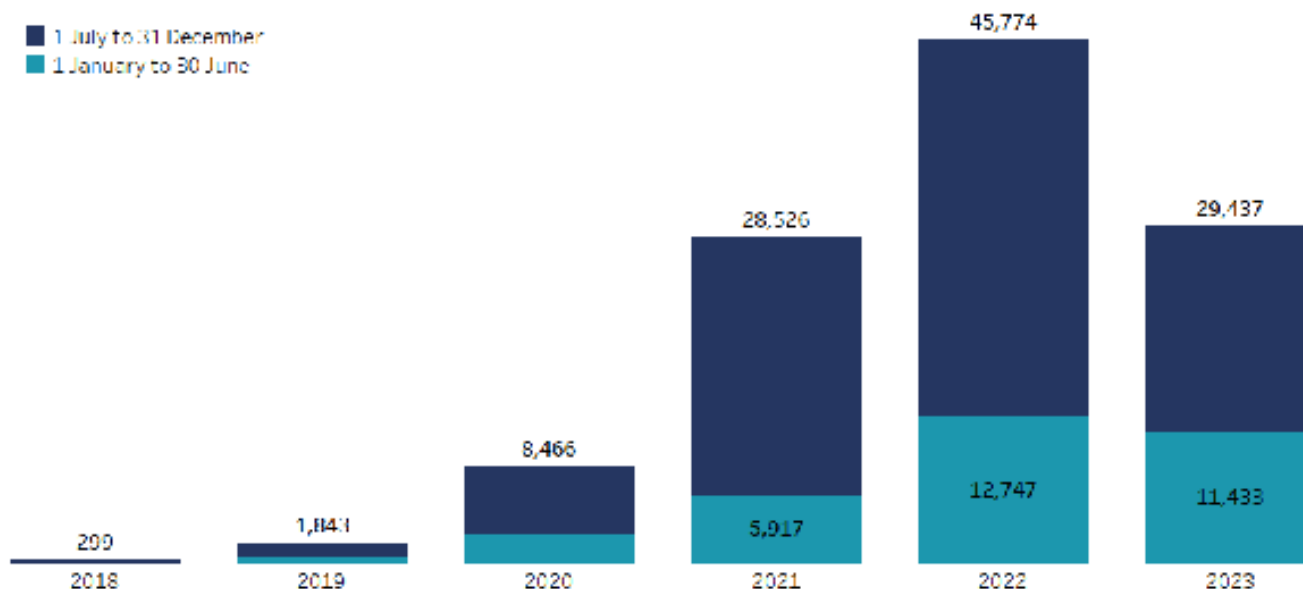


These figures are partly provisional, and at the time of writing, it was not possible to say if the increase indicates a sustained trend. Historically, most crossings have occurred during the second half of the year (Figure 2). However, there can also be large, short-term fluctuations in the number of people crossing the Channel due to factors including local weather conditions.

Figure 2

### Number of people detected crossing the English Channel in small boats

By semester and year, 2018 to 2023



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office irregular migration statistics, year ending March 2024, IrM 001.

Notes: Counts refer to those detected on arrival to the UK in a small boat, or who were detected in the Channel by UK authorities and subsequently brought to the UK, having travelled in a small boat. Small boats include rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), dinghies and kayaks, but not larger vessels, such as go-fast craft, yachts, motor cruisers, tugs, and fishing vessels, which the Home Office says are "rarely used" by irregular migrants.



The majority of those arriving in small boats are men. In the year to 31 March 2024, 75% (22,357) were male and aged 18 or over (excluding those of unknown age or sex). Another 16% (4,630) of arrivals in the same period were children (under 18). These proportions have been stable over time, and similar to those observed in asylum applicants more broadly (72% and 19%, respectively, in the year to March 2024). One reason for the higher share of men among asylum seekers in general is the danger associated with irregular migration journeys. In many cases, female and minor family members [join later](#) through family reunification routes.

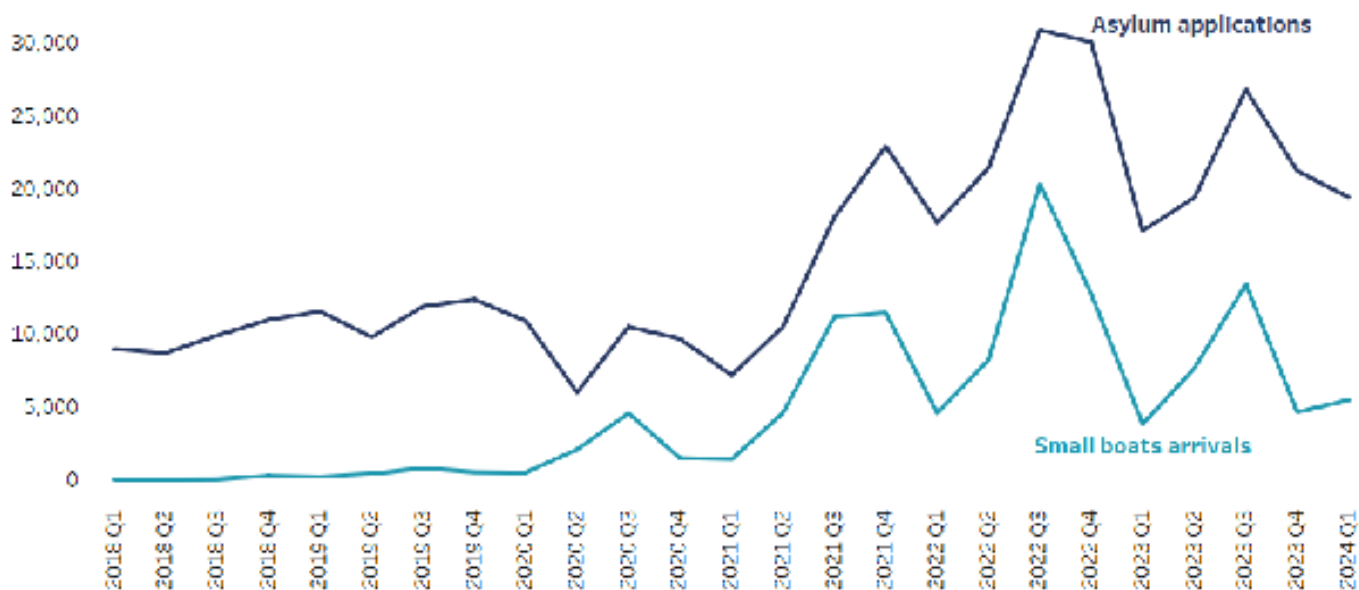
Most people who cross the Channel in small boats claim asylum once they are in the UK. According to the [Home Office](#), 93% (109,954) of all those crossing the Channel from 2018 to March 2024 either applied for asylum themselves or were named as a dependant (partner or child) on an application.

The total number of people seeking asylum increased in 2021 and 2022 before falling in 2023, in line with the trend for small boat arrivals (Figure 3). Over 84,000 people applied for asylum in the UK in 2023, 85% more than in 2019. A large proportion of this growth is driven by applicants arriving in small boats, although most asylum applicants have not come by small boat. In 2023, small boat arrivals accounted for 33% of total asylum claims.

Figure 3

### Small boat arrivals and asylum applications

By quarter of arrival or claim, Q1 2018 to Q1 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office irregular migration statistics, year ending March 2024, Irr\_D01 and Home Office immigration system statistics, year ending March 2024, Asy\_D01

Note: Asylum applicants refers to all people claiming asylum and not just those who arrived via small boat

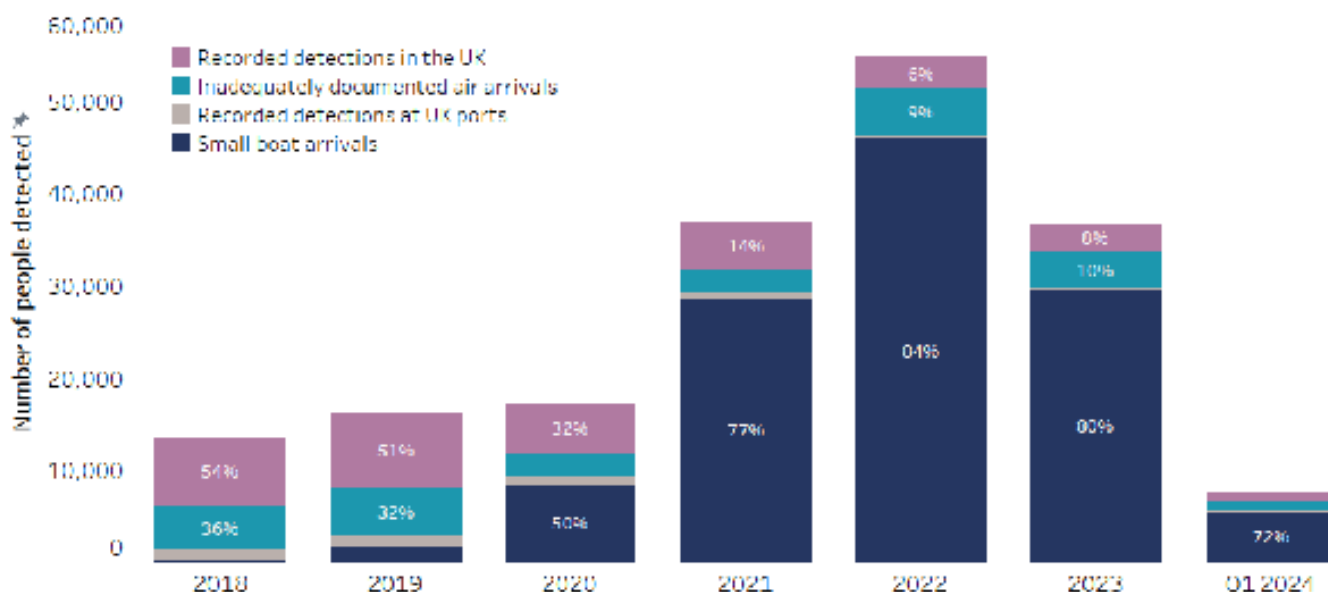


Some people enter the UK through irregular means other than small boats, such as in lorries or containers. The sharp rise in small boat arrivals has driven a large increase in overall irregular entries, with numbers more than doubling between 2019 and 2023. Correspondingly, the proportion of small boat arrivals among detected irregular entries went from 2% in 2018 to 80% in 2023 (although a higher share of boat arrivals are detected compared to other irregular arrivals).

Figure 4

### Detected irregular arrivals to the UK

By mode of entry, 2018 to 31 March 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office irregular migration statistics, Irr\_D01.

Notes: Comparisons between the different methods of irregular entry should be made with caution, because the detection rates across methods of entry differ. Changes in the number of irregular entrants detected could be a result of changes in operational activity or recording practices, and not only changes in the number of people attempting to enter the UK.



### Since 2018, the nationals of five countries – Iran, Albania, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria – have made up two thirds of those crossing in small boats

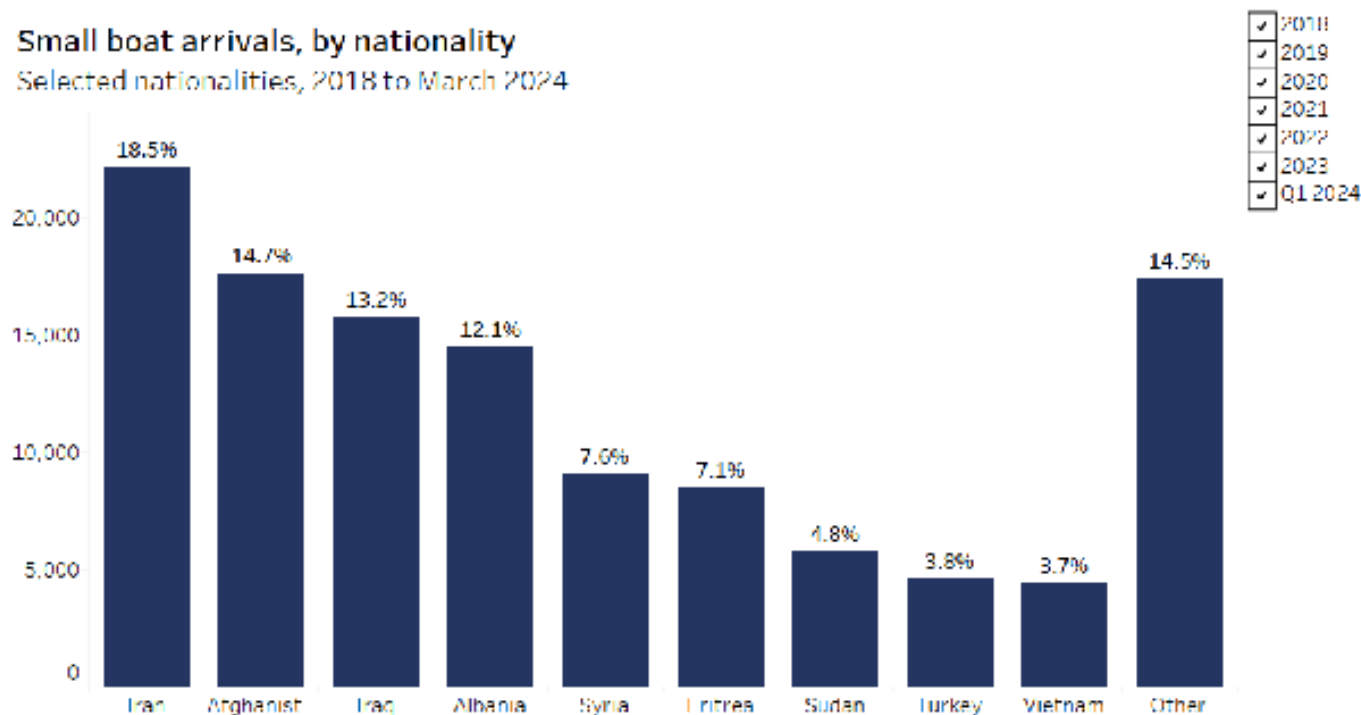
A small number of nationalities make up a large share of people crossing the Channel in small boats (Figure 5). From 2018 to 31 March 2024, two thirds of total arrivals (79,149) had one of five nationalities: Iranian (18%), Afghan (15%), Iraqi (13%), Albanian (12%), Afghan (13%), or Syrian (8%).

The most common nationalities have changed over time in response to a wide range of factors, including developments in origin countries (Figure 5). In the first quarter of 2024, the latest for which data are available, the largest group of arrivals were Vietnamese (20%), followed by Afghans (19%) and Iranians (11%). It was not until the second half of 2022 that significant numbers of migrants from Turkey started being detected crossing the Channel – there were 331 arrivals in the first quarter of 2024, compared to only 14 in the same period of 2022. The number of Indians, meanwhile, briefly surged between September 2022 and March 2023 before falling to a negligible proportion.

Figure 5

### Small boat arrivals, by nationality

Selected nationalities, 2018 to March 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office irregular migration statistics, year ending March 2024, Imr 1001



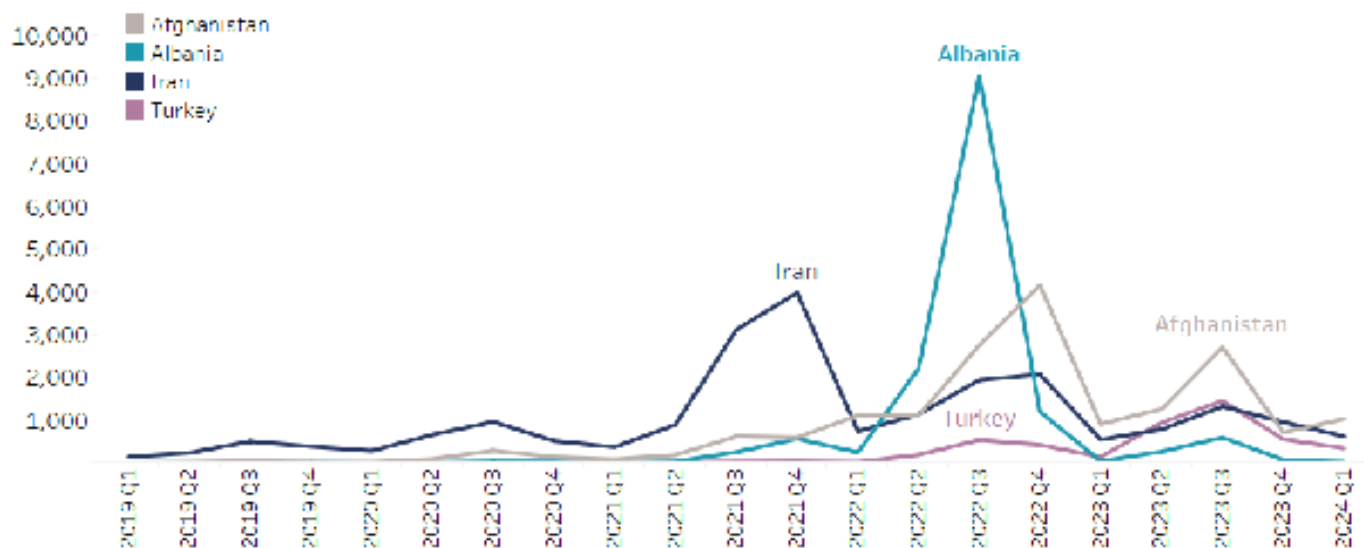
There was a sharp rise in Albanian nationals crossing the Channel in 2022, which drove much of the overall increase in arrivals that year (Figure 6). Over 12,600 arrived in small boats that year, compared to around 800 making the trip a year earlier. This sudden increase was the source of political controversy, leading the UK government to respond with a [pledge](#) to fast-track the removal of unauthorised Albanian arrivals and cooperate with the Albanian government on enforcement activity. In 2023, the number of Albanians crossing in small boats dramatically declined, with 924 making the crossing (and just 15 in the first quarter of 2024). It is difficult to know how much of the decline results from policy compared with other factors.



Figure 6

### Small boat arrivals, by nationality

Selected nationalities, 2019 to March 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Irregular migration to the UK, year to March 2024, (rr: 1001)

Notes: Counts refer to those detected on arrival to the UK in a small boat, or who were detected in the Channel by UK authorities and subsequently brought to the UK, having travelled across the English channel in a small boat. Small boats include rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), dinghies and kayaks, but not larger vessels, such as gulet, small, yachts, motor cruisers, tugs, and fishing vessels, which the Home Office says are “rarely used”.



For more information on Albanian small boat arrivals, see [Albanian asylum seekers in the UK and EU: a look at recent data](#).

### 93% of small boat arrivals from 2018 to March 2024 claimed asylum; of those who had received an initial decision by 31 March 2024, around three quarters were successful

Since 2018, when small boats arrivals started to be routinely recorded, [around 110,000 small boat arrivals \(93%\) claimed asylum in the UK](#) or were named as a dependant on an application. Less than half (45%) of main applications had received an initial decision by the end of March 2024. Many were withdrawn or deemed to be withdrawn, while others await processing.

Of the applications decided, 77% – about 34,500 – were granted refugee status or some other form of permission to stay. The Home Office gives a [different figure](#) – 72% – because it includes “third country refusals” as refusals. In these cases, the UK does not consider a person’s asylum claim because of a connection to a safe third country. However, current evidence suggests that very few are removed and many are later admitted to the asylum system, and have their claim processed. Our preferred measure thus excludes this category from the calculation.

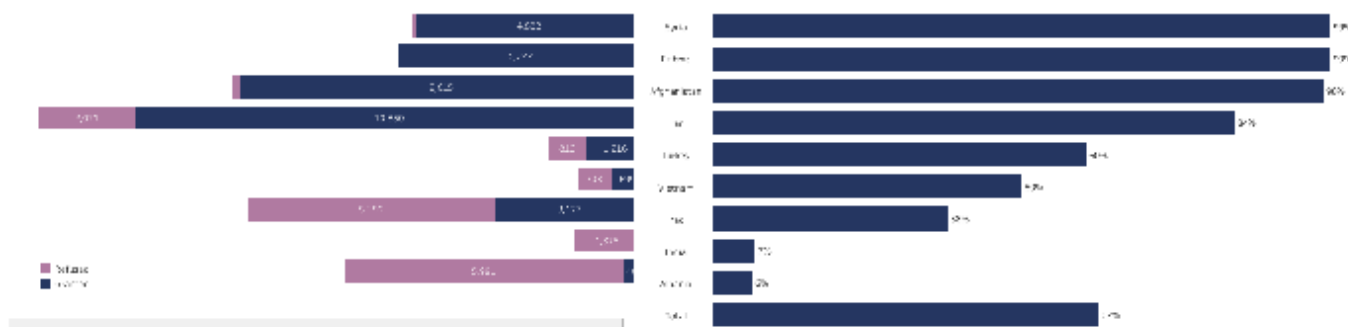
So far, the grant rate for people arriving in small boats to date has been higher than the average grant rate for asylum applications generally. In the year to 31 March 2024, 62% (54,372) of all asylum decisions (87,501) were grants of refugee status or other permission to stay.

The likelihood of people being granted asylum or other permission to stay varies widely by nationality (Figure 7). Some of the most common nationalities among Channel migrants, notably Afghan, Iranian, Eritrean, and Syrian, have a [higher-than-average likelihood](#) of being granted asylum or other permission to stay. Other common nationalities, however, such as Iraqis or Albanians, have a lower likelihood of being granted – 38% and 6%, respectively, in the year to March 2024 (note that these figures include all asylum applicants, not just those arriving in small boats).

In late 2022, there was a spike in the number of withdrawn asylum applications by Albanian nationals arriving in small boats. Of all asylum applications submitted by Albanian nationals arriving in small boats since 2018, around two thirds (65%, or 7,400) had been withdrawn or deemed withdrawn by March 2024. This is much higher than the average (14%) for all asylum seekers arriving in small boats. Applications can [be considered withdrawn](#) for various reasons, including if the person asks to withdraw the application; if they are detected leaving the UK; or if they do not maintain contact with the Home Office while their claim is pending.

**Figure 7**

**Asylum initial decisions and grant rates**  
 By country of nationality, 2018 to year ending 31 March 2024  
 (Asylum seekers in small boats)



Source: Migration Data and Statistics of the Home Office, UK Immigration Statistics, year to March 2024, Apr. 2024.  
 Note: This figure only shows the number of successful initial decisions and grants. There are also a number of unsuccessful initial decisions and grants. The Home Office does not publish the number of successful initial decisions and grants for small boats.



**Available data provide no clear or single explanation for the rise in popularity of the small boat route, although one plausible reason is that enforcement activity has made other irregular routes less viable**

In 2020, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration [reported](#) that Home Office officials believed that the emergence of the small boat route was a consequence of the work done by the UK and France in making other methods of irregular entry more difficult (p. 55). The Institute for Public Policy Research, a think tank, has made [similar arguments](#) based on interviews with expert stakeholders.

Since 2014, the UK and French governments have invested in enhanced security in and around French ports and the Eurotunnel to prevent stowaways on lorries and trains bound for the UK. These measures include more perimeter fencing and lighting, additional CCTV, more guards and dogs conducting more frequent patrols, CO2 scanners, infra-red motion detection, and vehicle screening cameras (Chief Inspector’s report, p. 34).

The United Nations Refugee Agency [argued](#) in 2021 that more stringent controls on road travel, and the coronavirus pandemic, had closed off lorry and air routes to the UK, leading to more people crossing in small boats.

Another contributing factor has been the expansion of smuggling operations across the Channel. Smuggler groups are said to have become [larger and increasingly professionalised](#) in recent years, and were able to capitalise on their experience as enforcement measures were progressively tightened. Other possible explanations [include](#) a perception that the UK will not be able to return asylum seekers to France because it no longer participates in the Dublin system (although few people were returned under Dublin in recent years), and a deterioration in UK–France enforcement cooperation post–Brexit. But it is very difficult to disentangle the different potential drivers and identify which have been most important.

## Research on the motivations of asylum seekers finds several reasons some prefer to claim asylum in the UK, and knowledge of UK asylum policy is not one of them

There is little evidence on why people cross the English Channel in small boats. The Director General of Immigration Enforcement [said in 2020](#) that Channel migrants are asked why they came to the UK, but those data are not routinely published.

Research on the motivations of asylum seekers and the factors influencing the decisions about where to apply for asylum has found that:

- **Policy is not the most important factor influencing changes in the number of people claiming asylum.** Global developments, such as conflicts in countries of origin, appear to be statistically more important.
- **Decisions about where and how to move depend on a range of factors.** The presence of friends and family members in the UK<sup>1,2</sup> plays an important role. For example, the most common nationalities crossing the Channel have larger diaspora populations in the UK rather than France<sup>3</sup>. Other factors include language and cultural links UK<sup>2</sup>, perceptions of the UK as safe, welcoming, and democratic<sup>2</sup>, as well as negative experiences in other European countries<sup>3,4</sup>.
- **Prospective asylum seekers often know little about the policies that will face them when they arrive.** The information they have may be inaccurate or misleading and not particularly detailed. In some cases, research also suggests that the decision to come to the UK is influenced more by smugglers, agents, or handlers than by the migrants themselves<sup>5</sup>.

France’s Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, has [suggested](#) that Britain’s liberal labour market regulations act as a pull factor for Channel migrants, “because you can work without identity papers in England and that creates a demand”. There is little evidence to indicate that the UK’s lack of an ID card system acts as a draw to migrants. In the UK, as in France, employers can be fined or imprisoned if they are found to have hired someone without permission to work and did not check the immigration status of that person. In fact, [World Bank data](#) suggest that the “informal economy”—which includes undeclared activities of many different forms and is [likely to rely on the employment of people without work authorisation](#)—makes up a smaller share of GDP in the UK (12% to 13%) than in France (14% to 15%) (for a definition of informality, which includes forms of work other than the employment of irregular migrants, see this World Bank [report](#) on the informal economy).

For more information on the motivations of asylum seekers, see our briefing on [UK policies to deter people from claiming asylum](#).

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1. Bouhenia M, Farhat J B, Coldiron M E, Abdallah S, Visentin D, Neuman M, Berthelot M, Porten K and Cohuet S (2017) ‘[Quantitative survey on health and violence endured by refugees during their journey and in Calais, France](#)’, *International Health*, 9(6)

2. Robinson V and Segrott J (2002) [Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers](#), Home Office

3. IPPR, [Understanding the rise in Channel crossings](#)

4. The Human Rights Observers Project, [Forced Evictions in Calais and Grande-Synthe](#), 2019

5. Crawley, H (2010) [Chance or choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK](#), Refugee Council

## Greece, Italy, and Spain have all experienced large numbers of unauthorised arrivals by sea since 2014, with numbers fluctuating over time

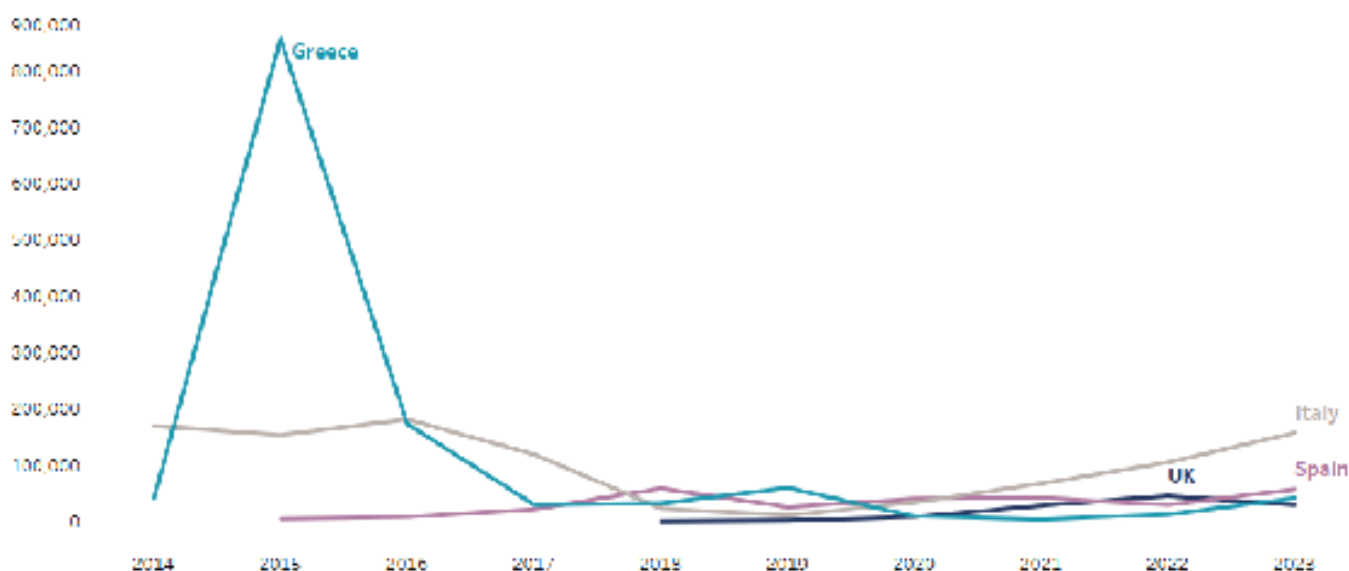
Since 2014, Greece, Italy, and Spain have also received large numbers of people arriving without authorisation by boat.

In 2023, [Italy](#) received around 158,000 irregular arrivals over the Mediterranean, while [Spain](#) received 57,000 and Greece 42,000. This compares to the approximately 29,000 arrivals over the Channel in the UK. At the peak in 2015, Greece and Italy together received over a million irregular arrivals by sea, with Greece detecting a record high of over 850,000 crossings.

The number of boat arrivals in other countries has also varied widely over time. Numbers in Italy and Greece fell by 2017-18 as border enforcement was increased (more on policy responses in the section below), but these decreases were not sustained permanently. Italy saw a rapid increase in arrivals from 2019 to 2022 – a trend similar to that seen in the UK. But, as the UK government points out, boat arrivals fell in the UK in 2023, whereas they rose in Italy and other EU countries (Figure 8).

Figure 8

**Number of migrants arriving without authorisation by sea**  
By year and country of arrival, 2014 to 2023



Source: For Greece, Italy, and Spain: UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Mediterranean Situation. For the UK: Home Office Irregular Migration Statistics, Im\_201.

Notes: The counts for Spain include sea arrivals to the Canary Islands.



Data from the International Organization for Migration's [Missing Migrants Project](#) suggest that more than 250 people have died while trying to reach the UK from 2014 to June 2024. During the same period, the number of deaths in the Mediterranean was almost 30,000.

The UK continues to receive fewer asylum applicants than some other large European countries. In 2023, around 84,000 people applied for asylum in the UK (main applicants and dependants). This is more than most EU countries, but fewer than Italy (136,000), Spain (162,000), France (167,000), and Germany (352,000). Of the roughly 1.2 million people who claimed asylum in the UK and EU-27 in 2023, 7% claimed asylum in the UK.

For more information on the UK asylum system, including in comparative perspective, see our briefing on [Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK](#).

## **Border enforcement measures may have reduced the number of unauthorised maritime arrivals in some European countries, but their effects are unclear**

In response to the 2015 increase in irregular maritime arrivals, European governments introduced new border enforcement measures, particularly through bilateral deals with key neighbours. Some measures aimed at deterring migrants, such as restricting asylum seekers' rights, were also implemented.

Greece experienced the highest numbers of arrivals across the Mediterranean, with over 850,000 in 2015. The main response was [the EU-Turkey statement](#), signed in 2016. Turkey agreed to help prevent further crossings and accept returns, in exchange for more than €6bn in humanitarian aid and the resettlement of some Syrian refugees from Turkey. Greece also [tightened its asylum eligibility rules](#), expanding its definition of safe third countries.

In Italy, unauthorised arrivals by sea peaked at over 180,000 in 2016. A series of deals with the Libyan government and other organisations in 2017 increased policing in exchange for financial and logistical support. This strategy was criticised following alleged [human rights violations](#) against migrants in Libya. Additionally, measures to prevent boat arrivals and restrict asylum seekers' rights [were introduced](#) starting in 2019, including port closures, fines, and criminal investigations against humanitarian NGOs. Over time, the government has also gradually [curtailed search-and-rescue operations](#) in the Mediterranean.

Spain took a similar approach after a rise in unauthorised arrivals in 2017-18. It asked Morocco to prevent departures [while providing funding](#) to the country's border control. The government [also](#) reduced previous search-and-rescue operations and refused navigation permits to NGO rescue ships.

Border security was also the focus of a limited response at the European level – [Frontex](#), the EU's shared border and coast guard agency, was significantly expanded.

The implementation of these policies coincided with decreases in the number of unauthorised arrivals by sea. The number of crossings [fell sharply](#) in Italy, Greece, and Spain after bilateral agreements were signed, for example—at least initially. However, it is difficult to determine how much of this decline is due to the change in policy, as opposed to other factors. The number of people arriving by sea has been volatile in recent years, with Italy seeing sharp increases in boat arrivals.

## A range of policies have been proposed to tackle small boat arrivals in the UK

There is widespread agreement across government, civil society, and the UN that the phenomenon of small boat arrivals should be addressed. However, proposals for how to do this vary widely.

Government responses have focused primarily on [deterrence](#) and physical enforcement. Enforcement strategies have included operational cooperation with France (e.g. funding French patrols on beaches) and with some countries whose citizens arrive in boats (particularly [Albania](#), including an agreement for returning refused asylum seekers or people who have not claimed asylum, but also [Vietnam](#)). Deterrence policies have included policies to reduce the rights of asylum seekers after they arrive – most recently through [the Illegal Migration Act 2023](#) which would prevent people who enter through irregular routes from receiving an asylum decision – as well as [an agreement with Rwanda](#) to relocate asylum seekers there. While there is [some evidence](#) that physical enforcement activities to prevent people from reaching a country's territory can have some impact on asylum applications, the [academic evidence](#) on whether changes to asylum applicants' rights affects their choices to move is less convincing.

By contrast, civil society proposals have focused on providing 'safe and legal routes' for people to claim asylum, so they do not have to make dangerous crossings by boat. [For example](#), these have included creating or expanding refugee resettlement programmes, expanding visa routes for refugees to join family members in the UK, providing additional humanitarian visas, or creating an option to apply for asylum from overseas. While there is [evidence](#) that more liberal legal routes can reduce the use of irregular routes, not all such policies may have this effect, especially if people are unable to access a legal route. For example, no Ukrainians have been detected crossing the Channel in small boats due to the uncapped visa scheme for this group, whereas Afghans – who have a limited resettlement scheme available to them – have been one of the largest nationalities crossing in small boats.

Other proposed responses offer a mix of policies. The UN has [proposed](#) a combination of tackling smuggling networks and an expansion of safe routes. The Labour Party has [argued in favour of new deals](#) with European countries that would allow Britain to return Channel migrants to countries they previously passed through, along with a [crackdown on smuggling and changes to schemes](#) for refugee resettlement. Others have proposed that the UK should [rejoin the EU's Dublin agreement](#), which allows asylum seekers to be returned to countries they have passed through; this would also create a small safe route into the UK for children and other family members.

## Acknowledgements

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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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