



BRIEFING

Family migration to the UK

AUTHORS: Nuni Jorgensen
Peter William Walsh
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This briefing examines the migration of family members to the UK. This includes people who come to join British or settled residents in the UK (family unification), families of refugees, as well as people joining or accompanying migrants on temporary visas, such as for work or study.

Key Points

Family unification visas rose by 65% in 2023 compared to 2022, though numbers remained well below migration for work and study.

In the first quarter of 2025, 15% fewer family unification visas were issued compared to the last quarter of 2023, likely due to the new Minimum Income Requirement.

Around nine in ten family unification visa holders are partners of the sponsor – most being women.

Family unification migrants earn less and are less likely to be employed than other migrants and the UK-born population.

People on family unification visas are more likely to settle long-term in the UK than those on work or study visas. They are usually on a five-year route to settlement, though ten-year routes have become more common in recent years.

The UK has comparatively restrictive economic requirements for the sponsors of family unification migrants.

Between 2020 and 2023, dependants of work and study migrants significantly outnumbered family unification migrants.

The share of female workers and students bringing partners increased significantly after the pandemic.

Dependants and family unification migrants show similar levels of employment and earnings.

Work visa holders who come to the UK with dependants are more likely to obtain permanent status than those who come alone.

A partner who comes to the UK on a family unification visa could face immigration costs of around £13,200 on a typical route to citizenship.

Understanding the policy

This briefing examines three types of family migration. The first, “family unification”, refers to migrants entering or remaining in the UK to live with family members who are British citizens or non-British settled residents. The second type of family migration is refugee family reunion (or simply “family reunion”). It includes people who come join a relative with refugee status or humanitarian protection in the UK. The third type of family migration is of “dependants”. These are people who come to the UK as the family members of migrants who do not have settlement or British citizenship and are in the UK on any other temporary visa, such as for work or study.

On 30 March 2019, the government launched a new family route, the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) family permit. This allows for entry into the UK of a non-EU-citizen family member of an EU citizen who has been granted settled status or pre-settled status under the EUSS.

Family unification

Family members of UK citizens or permanent residents can apply for a family visa to join them in the UK. The only family members eligible for family unification visas are spouses or civil partners; fiancé(e)s or proposed civil partners; unmarried partners (including same-sex partners); children under the age of 18; parents responsible for a British child or settled resident, and, in a smaller number of cases, adult or elderly dependent relatives.

From November 2010, non-EU nationals applying to enter or extend their stay as a partner of a British citizen or settled resident were required to demonstrate a level of English language proficiency, with some exceptions.

In addition, since July 2012, the British citizen or permanent resident who acts as a sponsor needs to meet specific income requirements. Until 2023, this meant earning at least £18,600 annually—rising to £22,400 if one child was included, plus £2,400 for each additional child.

In December 2023, the Home Secretary [announced](#) a significant increase to this minimum income threshold, proposing to increase it by early 2025 to £38,700. The stated reason for this policy change is to ensure that only those who can financially support their families are eligible for a visa, although the required income exceeds the earnings of most full-time employees in the UK. The threshold was set to rise in three stages, initially to £29,000 in April 2024 before reaching £38,700 by early 2025. However, the previous government did not change the immigration rules to put the further increases in place. In July 2024 the newly elected Labour government said the Migration Advisory Committee would be commissioned to review the income requirement, with the threshold held at £29,000 until the review was complete. As of August 2025, the MAC review had concluded, but the government had not yet announced its response.

In July 2012, the UK implemented stricter eligibility criteria for the Adult Dependant Relative route, which UK citizens and settled residents use to bring, for example, parents or grandparents to the country. Since this rule change, the adult relative needs to prove that they require long-term personal care to perform daily tasks as a result of age, illness, or disability; that this care is not available or affordable in their country of origin; and that the sponsor can maintain the applicant in the UK without access to public funds.

Family unification visa holders may apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain after five years of residence in the UK. Until then, they usually have no access to public funds. Some family migrants, however, follow a ten-year route to settlement—typically because they do not meet all the requirements for the standard five-year route, such as the income threshold or English language requirement. In these cases, leave may be granted on the basis of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to family and private life. This results in a longer, more costly path to settlement, requiring multiple renewals over a ten-year period.

Throughout this briefing, we use the term *settled status* to refer to people with permanent rights to remain in the UK. This includes those with Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), British citizenship, or EU Settled Status.

Refugee family reunion

Refugee family reunion is the pathway through which the family members of a person granted refugee status or humanitarian protection can join them in the UK. Typically, only spouses, unmarried partners (including same-sex partners), and children under 18 are eligible for family reunion. Adult children are not eligible. The refugee and the applicant must have been part of a family and lived together before the refugee was forced to leave their country of origin. Separately from refugee family reunion, asylum applicants' partners and minor children can also stay in the UK as dependants if they arrive in the UK with the person seeking asylum, known as the "main applicant". The dependants on an application receive the same outcome as the main applicant. Family members of refugees can apply for ILR.

New humanitarian visa schemes for Ukrainians and British National Overseas status holders have broader definitions of family than those that apply to most refugees. The protection schemes created to admit people fleeing Ukraine include as dependants the siblings, adult children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews, parents-in-law, and other relatives of the main applicant. Hong Kong British National Overseas visa holders (BNOs) can also bring other dependant relatives, provided they lived with the main applicant and are highly dependent on them due to illness, disability or age.

Dependants

Until recently, most work or study migrants could apply to bring their families with them to the UK as "dependants". However, from April 2024, sponsored higher education students were no longer eligible to bring dependants, unless they are enrolled in research postgraduate programs, such as research master's degrees or PhDs. Care workers and senior care workers in the Health and Care Worker route also became ineligible to bring dependants from April 2024.

Only spouses, partners (including same-sex partners) and children below 16 of the main applicant are eligible to apply as dependants. Children aged 16 or older can be accepted as dependants in some circumstances.

Dependants are on the same route for settlement as the main applicant and do not have access to public funds until they obtain settlement (i.e., indefinite leave to remain). Children born in the UK to migrants who are not permanent residents do not automatically become British citizens; they must also apply for a dependant visa under the same route as their parents.

Understanding the evidence

This briefing draws mainly upon Home Office administrative data on visas issued. The Home Office classifies individuals by the type of visa or grant of protection they were granted, any subsequent grants of extensions of stay in the UK, and grants of settlement (ILR). The Home Office breaks down family migration into four main categories: "family" visas (i.e., visas for family unification) and "dependants" (i.e., those joining family members on temporary visas, such as for work or study); "dependants joining/accompanying"; and "EEA family permits", for non-EU migrants who enter or remain in the UK as family members of EU nationals.

To differentiate family visas from other types of leave granted to individuals joining or accompanying temporary migrants in the UK, this report uses the term “family unification visa” to refer specifically to visas granted to family members of UK citizens or settled residents.

Dependant visas are recorded by the Home Office under the immigration route of the “main applicant” (e.g., as a dependant of a worker or student).

There are also visas which act as a catch-all for dependants who have been issued a visa based on their relationship with another migrant who is not a settled person or British citizen. These are included within the Home Office category “Dependants joining/accompanying” (referred to in this briefing as “Dependant”) and may have been issued a visa for any reason (e.g., work, study, family).

To determine the total number of family migrants currently residing in the UK, we use the 2023 Annual Population Survey (APS). This survey provides information on the primary reasons that individuals went to the UK, including family unification (i.e., to join or accompany a British citizen or settled resident) and as the dependants of temporary migrants (i.e., to join or accompany someone who is not a British citizen or settled resident). The Annual Population Survey (APS) combines data from several Labour Force Survey (LFS) interviews conducted throughout the year, along with additional local data for England, Scotland, and Wales. To examine the characteristics of family -related migrants, including employment levels and earnings, we use the pooled APS dataset from 2020 to 2022. This combined dataset offers a larger sample size than the annual APS, and enables more robust analysis for categories with smaller survey counts.

This briefing also draws on a 2025 [evaluation](#) of the minimum income requirement for sponsors of family members conducted by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). As part of this evaluation, the MAC carried out a survey to collect data on the characteristics of family unification applicants and their sponsors—information that is not routinely gathered by the Home Office. The report also includes an analysis of employment outcomes and earnings, using administrative tax records from HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) linked to visa data. This dataset offers a more reliable picture of recent arrivals than the Annual Population Survey and allows for comparisons of earnings across different migrant cohorts. However, these data are not publicly available. No comparable analysis exists for dependants or for the families of refugees.

Information on the sex and age breakdown of people issued out-of-country visas come from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, as the Home Office does not routinely publish these data disaggregated by sex and age. In contrast, data on the number of asylum applicants and grants of asylum-related leave are drawn from the Home Office’s administrative databases, which do include the sex and age group of applicants.

The Home Office does not link data between main applicants and their dependants, making it impossible to calculate the exact number of dependants per main applicant. As an alternative, we use the ratio of main applicants to opposite-sex adult dependants. Given that most partnerships are heterosexual and that adult dependants are the applicant’s partner (with only one adult dependant per applicant), this ratio provides a rough estimate of the proportion of men or women who migrate with their partners. It is important to note, however, that this is only an approximation because some applicants are in same-sex partnerships. It is not possible to estimate the share of people migrating with dependant children, as a single applicant may be accompanied by multiple children, making simple ratios misleading.

Family unification visas rose by 65% in 2023 compared to 2022, though numbers remained well below migration for work and study

The number of family unification visas issued by the UK remained relatively stable from 2009 to 2022, averaging around 42,000 per year. During this period, the levels of family unification migration have been consistently lower in number than those observed for work or study reasons (Figure 1), making up around 10% of visas issued per year.

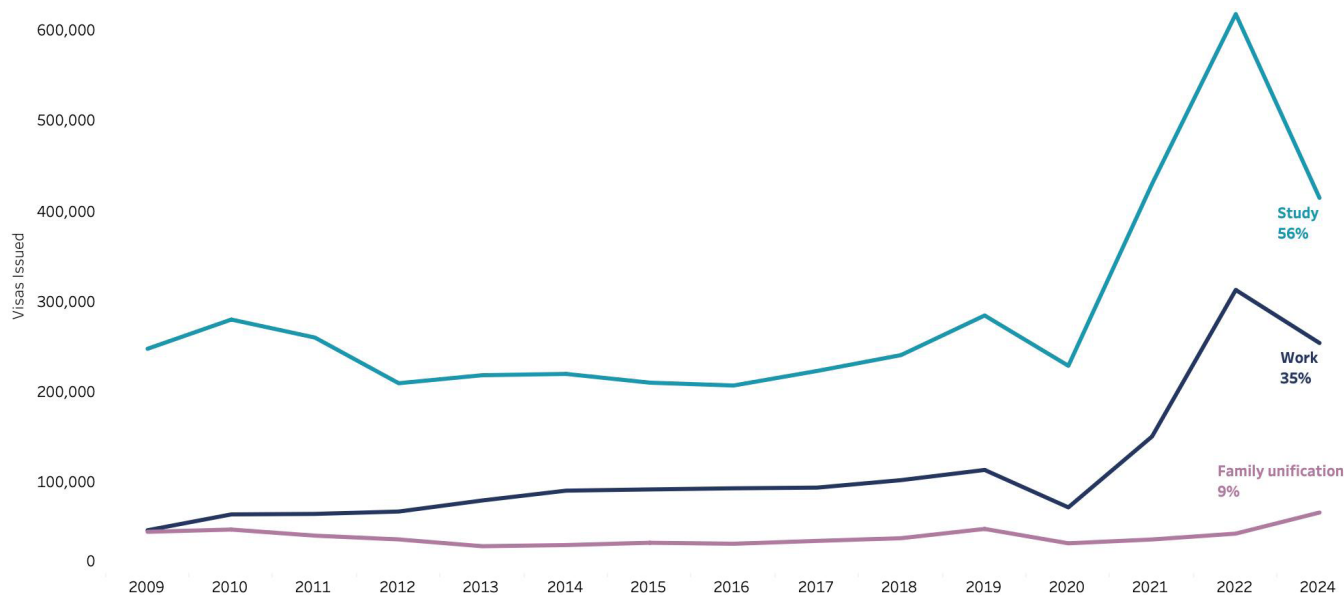
In 2023, data show a 65% increase in family unification visas (Figure 1), with growth observed across several nationalities. This rise may be partly attributed to the end of free movement in 2021, which may have prompted family members of EU nationals to apply through the family route instead. Another possible explanation is that the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the surge in humanitarian visas issued in 2021, led to a [backlog of family unification applications](#) between 2020 and 2022.

Despite the increase in absolute numbers, the share of family unification visas relative to work and study visas declined between 2021 and 2023, falling to between 4% and 6%. This was largely due to a significant rise in overall migration, mostly for work and study (see the Migration Observatory briefing on [Net migration to the UK](#)). In 2024, the share returned to around 9%, reflecting the impact of policy changes across multiple visa categories (see later section on the 2024 Minimum Income Requirement).

Figure 1

Number of visas issued in the UK, by visa type, 2009 to 2024

Sponsored study visas and work visas include main applicants and dependants



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02, Year ending March 2025.

Notes: Data refer to visa applications made outside the UK only. Study visas and work visas include main applicants and dependants. Work visas include only Workers and Study visas include only Sponsored students. Family unification includes Family:partner, Family:child, and Family:other.



In the first quarter of 2025, 15% fewer family unification visas were issued compared to the last quarter of 2023, likely due to the new Minimum Income Requirement

The sharp rise in family unification visas in 2023 may be partly due to the pandemic-related backlog. Visa issuances dropped significantly in 2020 and remained below average until mid-2022 (Figure 2). In 2023, the Home Office reintroduced a priority service for family visas, helping to clear the backlog—likely contributing to the spike seen in the third quarter.

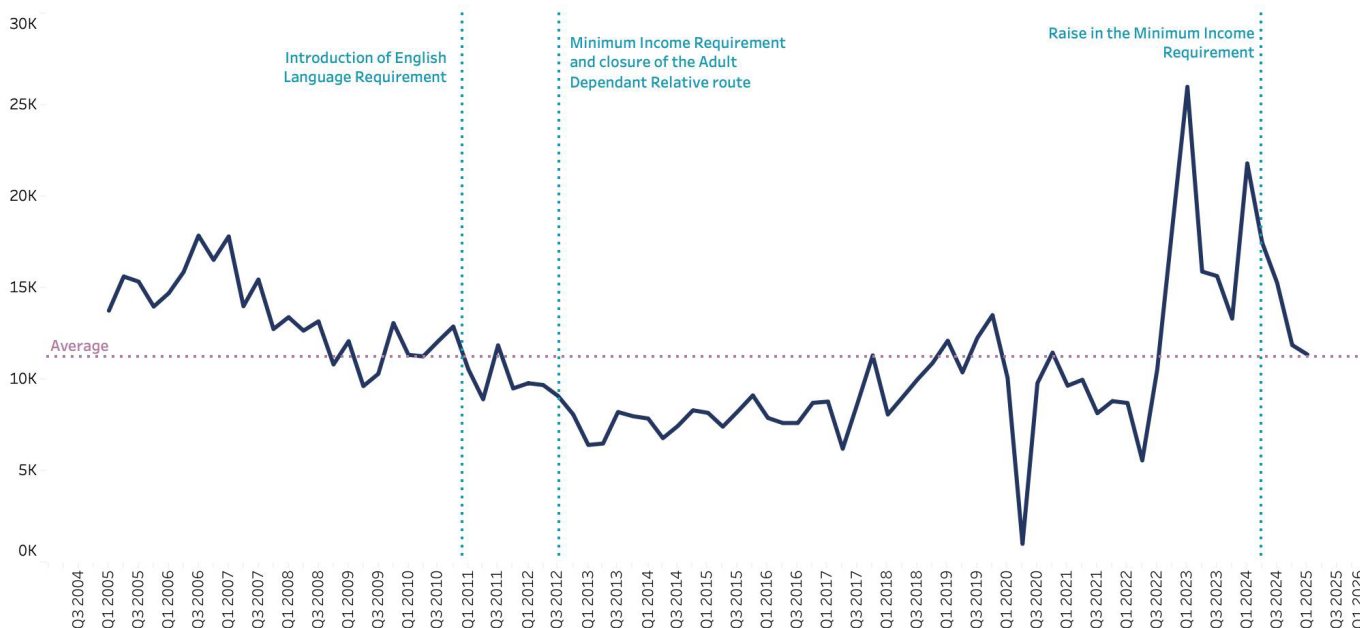
Another rise occurred in the first quarter of 2024 likely due to applicants submitting early in anticipation of the increase to the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) introduced in April 2024 – from £18,600 to £29,000. Following the policy change, visa numbers began to decline. In the first quarter of 2025, the number of visas issued was 15% lower than in the last quarter of 2023 (Figure 2).

Family migration levels have historically been sensitive to policy changes. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of family unification visas fell by nearly 20% (Figure 2). This decline may have been driven by the introduction of the English language requirement in 2010, restrictions to the Adult Dependant Relative (ADR) route, and the implementation of the Minimum Income Threshold in 2012 (see the [Migration Observatory commentary on the £18,600 minimum income requirement](#)).

Figure 2

Number of family unification visas issued by quarter

Q1 2005 to Q1 2025



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02, Year ending March 2025.

Notes: Data refer to visa applications made outside the UK only. Family unification includes Family:partner, Family:child, and Family:other.



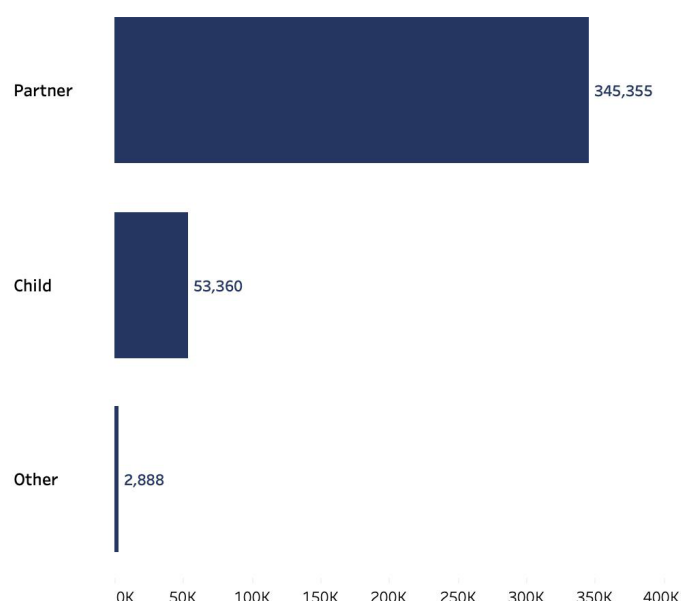
Around nine in ten family unification visa holders are partners of the sponsor – most being women

Between 2016 and 2024, 86% of all family unification visa holders were partners of the sponsor, 13% were children and 1% were other relatives (Figure 3).

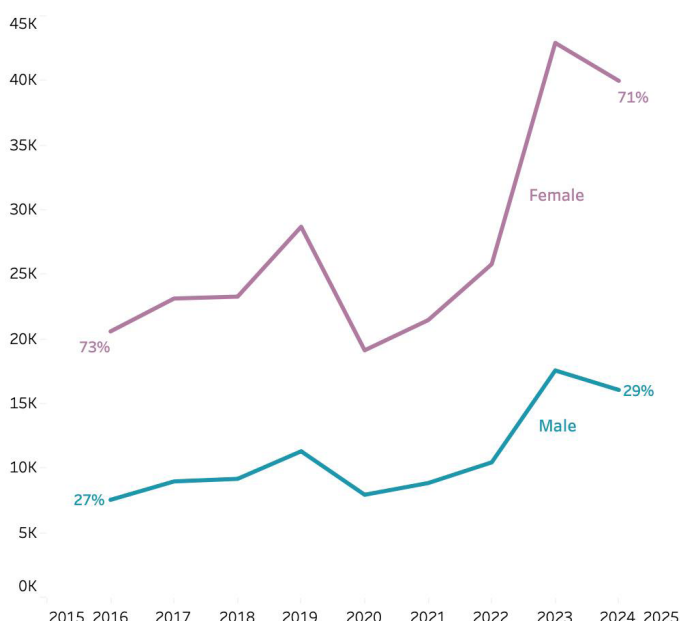
Most people on partner visas are women. Of all people granted this type of visa from 2016 to 2024, 71% were women, with this share remaining relatively stable over the years (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Number of Family visas issued, by type
2016-2024



Number of Partner visas issued by sex and year
2016-2024



Source: For Family unification visas issued by type: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02, Year ending March 2025. For Partner visas issued by sex: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Freedom of Information request, FOI2025/04035.

Notes: Data refer to visa applications made outside the UK only. Family unification includes Family:partner, Family:child, and Family:other.



In a [survey](#) conducted in 2024 with people who had applied for a family unification visa within the last five years, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) found that a large majority of sponsors were British citizens (82%), while 13% held Indefinite Leave to Remain and 2% were European nationals with pre-settled status. Among the British citizen sponsors, 58% were citizens by birth and 42% had acquired citizenship through naturalisation.

They also found that nearly half of family unification visa applicants (43%) were responsible for children under the age of 18 at the time of the survey. These children are usually British citizens if they are also the children of the sponsor—that is, a British citizen or someone with settled status. However, if the child is a stepchild of the sponsor and not legally their child, they would typically need to apply for a child family visa to come to the UK.

Nearly half of the migrants granted family unification visas in 2024 were from Pakistan, India, Nepal, the United States, and Bangladesh

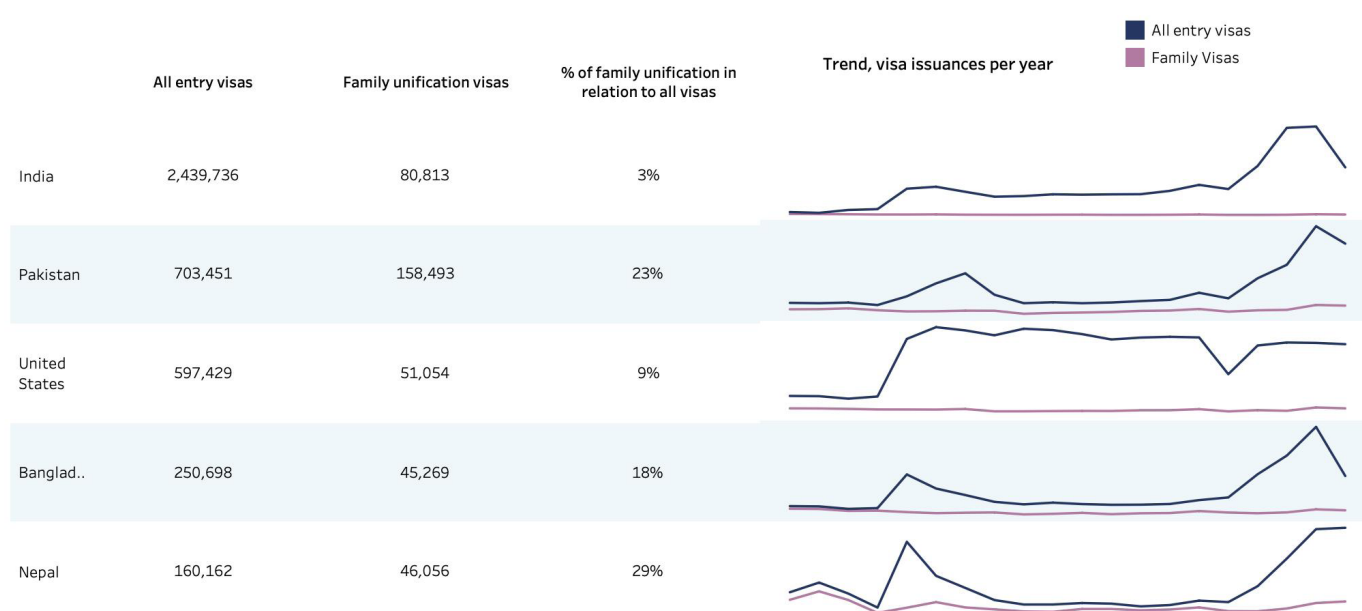
In 2024, 38% of family unification visas were granted to nationals of South Asian countries, and 16% to nationals of Sub-Saharan African countries. These patterns have remained relatively stable over the last two decades.

Nearly half of the migrants granted family unification visas in 2024 were from Pakistan, India, Nepal, the United States, and Bangladesh. These nationalities are also more likely to come to the UK on study and work visas. From 2005 to 2024, the share of family unification visas in relation to all entry visas varied from 3% for Indian nationals to 29% for people from Nepal (Table 1).

Table 1

Total family unification and entry visas issued in the UK, by country of nationality, 2005 to 2024

Top 5 nationalities in number of family unification visas issued in 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02. Year ending March 2025.

Notes: Family unification includes Family:partner, Family:child, and Family:other. The data presented for all entry visas exclude the following categories: "Visitor", "Short-term study", "Frontier workers", and "Transit"



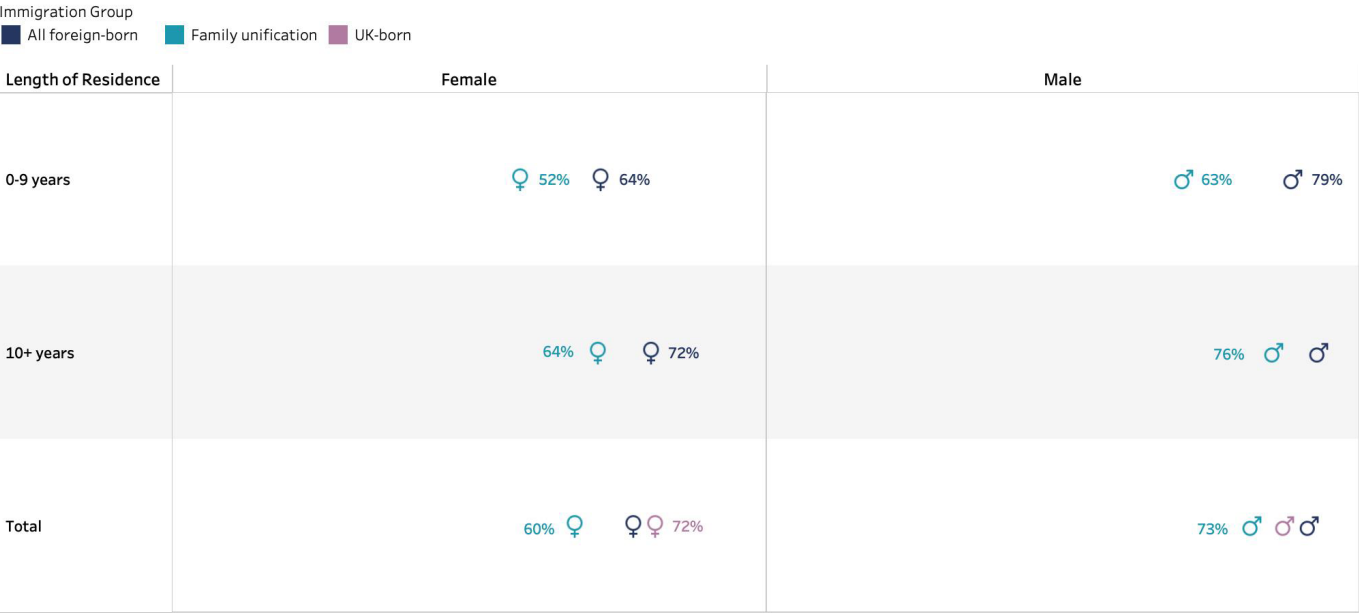
Family unification migrants earn less and are less likely to be employed than other migrants and the UK-born population

Analysis of data from the Annual Population Survey indicates that family unification migrants are less likely to be employed and more likely to be economically inactive (not seeking work) compared to both the total foreign-born population and the UK-born. This pattern holds true for both men and women (Figure 4).

The disparity is more pronounced among recent arrivals: only 56% of family unification migrants who had been in the UK for nine years or less were employed, compared to 71% of the total foreign-born population. Among those who had been in the UK for longer, the gap narrows: 69% of family unification migrants were employed, compared to 77% of the foreign-born and 75% of the UK-born. Differences by length of residence are particularly notable among men (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Employment rates, by immigration group, sex and length of residence
2020-2022. People aged 16-64. All foreign-born, Family unification, and UK-born



Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey (APS) three-year pooled dataset 2020-2022. Employment is defined according to the ILO criteria: a person who has done at least one hour's paid work in a given week, or who is absent from work for certain reasons and for a certain period of time. Data refer to people aged 16-64. Family unification migrants are defined as people who reported that their main reason for coming to the UK was to join or accompany a British citizen or settled resident.

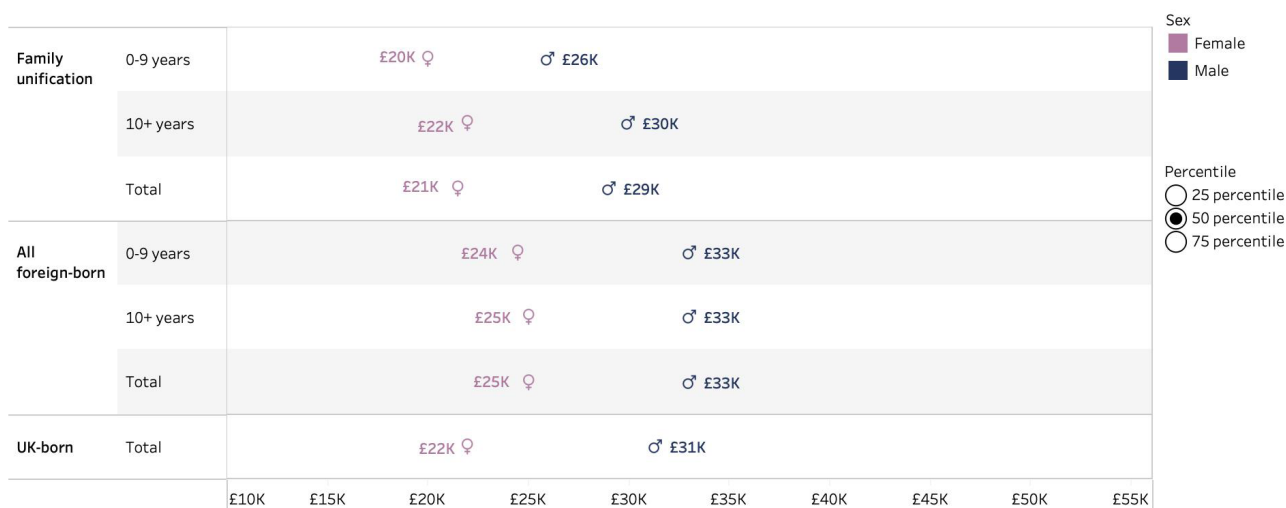


Annual earnings show a similar pattern, with employed family unification migrants earning less than both the foreign-born and UK-born populations. However, these differences tend to narrow among those who have been in the UK for a longer period (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Annual earnings in main employment, by immigration group, sex and length of residence

Employees aged 16-64. 2020-2022. All foreign-born, Family unification, and UK-born



Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey (APS) three-year pooled dataset 2020-2022. Data refer to employees aged 16-64. Earnings figures from the APS are gross annualised earnings, i.e. weekly earnings multiplied by 52. Family unification migrants are defined as people who reported that their main reason for coming to the UK was to join or accompany a British citizen or settled resident.



It is important to note that data from the Annual Population Survey does not provide reliable information for individual year cohorts and has limitations when looking at recent arrivals. A more accurate source for this analysis is the HMRC data used by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). Their data links tax records with visa information, giving a clearer picture of earnings over time (see the Understanding the Evidence section).

According to the MAC's analysis, partner visa holders who came to the UK in 2019 had median monthly earnings of £1,500—around £18,000 a year. This is consistent with a 2024 [Home Office analysis](#) of Work and Family visa earnings and employment. The MAC analysis also showed that earnings increased more slowly over time for family unification migrants compared to the wider UK workforce. The MAC concluded that the relatively low earnings and employment rates of people on partner visas would result in a net cost to UK public finances, largely because of the cost of public services such as the NHS.

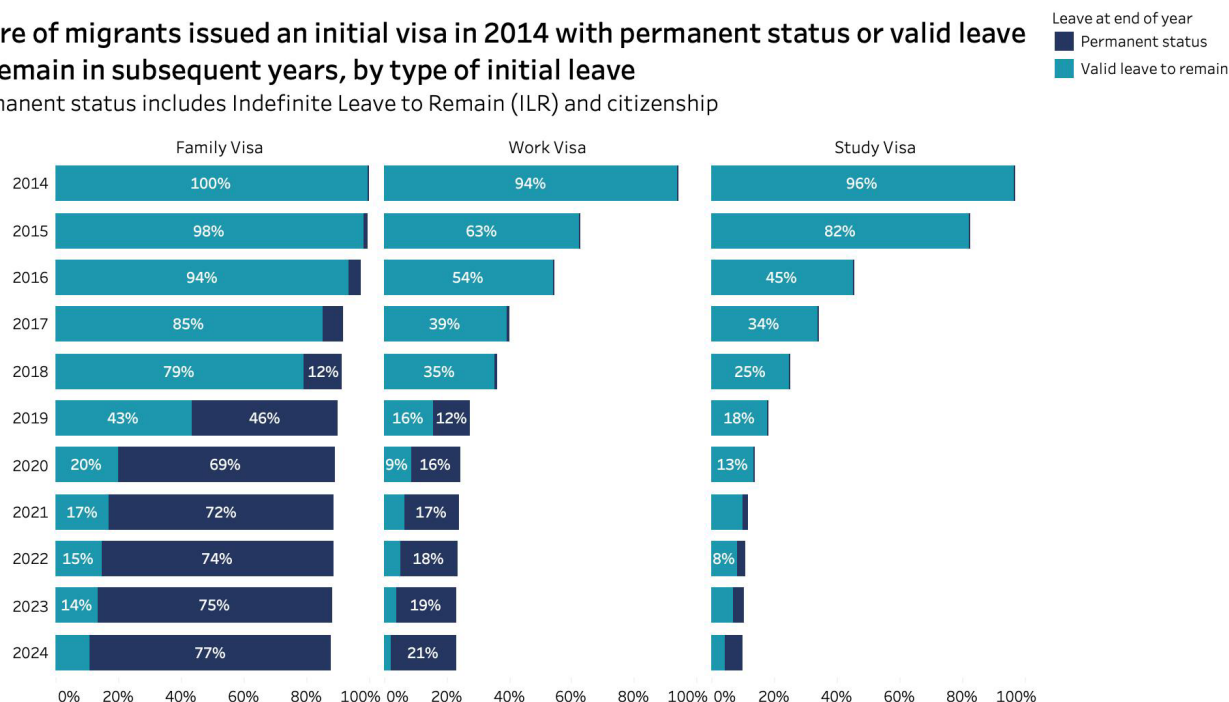
People on family unification visas are more likely to settle long-term in the UK than those on work or study visas

Of all people granted a family unification visa in 2014, 77% had citizenship or indefinite leave to remain by 2024. Family unification visa holders are significantly more likely to settle in the UK than holders of work or study visas (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Share of migrants issued an initial visa in 2014 with permanent status or valid leave to remain in subsequent years, by type of initial leave

Permanent status includes Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and citizenship



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey, Table MJ_D01. 2024 Report. Note: Family Visas include families of refugees on Family Reunion visas. Work and Study visas include main applicants and dependants on the "Worker" and "Sponsored study" categories.



Family migrants are usually on a five-year route to settlement, though ten-year routes have become more common in recent years

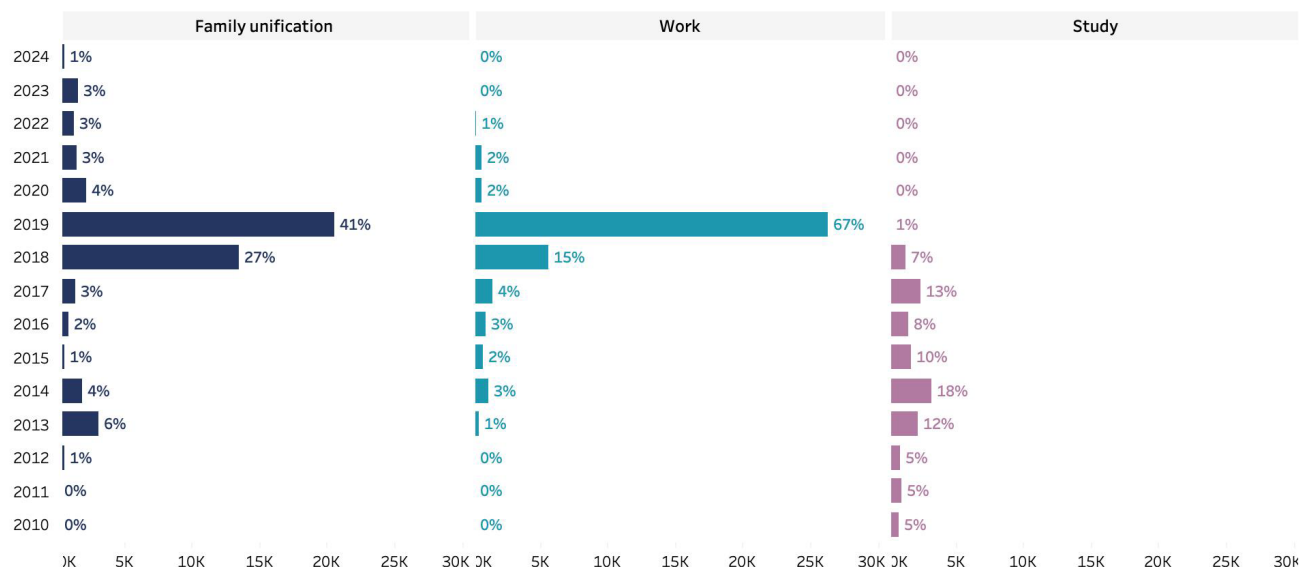
Of the roughly 50,600 family unification visa holders granted settlement, i.e. the right to permanent residence, in 2024, around three-quarters received their initial visa from 2017 to 2019, consistent with a typical route to settlement of five years (Figure 7).

Family visa holders tend to become settled faster than people who arrive via other routes. On average, students take significantly longer to reach settlement, because time spent in the UK on a study visa does not count towards the typical five-year residence requirement for settlement. By contrast, residence on work and family visas does typically contribute to the five-year residence requirement for settlement. Workers tend to acquire settlement more quickly than family unification migrants. Among those granted settlement in 2024, 82% of family unification migrants had settled within six years, compared to 89% of workers and just 8% of students.

Figure 7

Year of initial visa for migrants granted permanent status in 2024, by type of initial visa and type of application

Permanent status includes ILR and citizenship



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey, Table MJ_02. 2024 Report. Note: Family Visas include families of refugees on Family Reunion visas. Work and Study visas include main applicants and dependants.

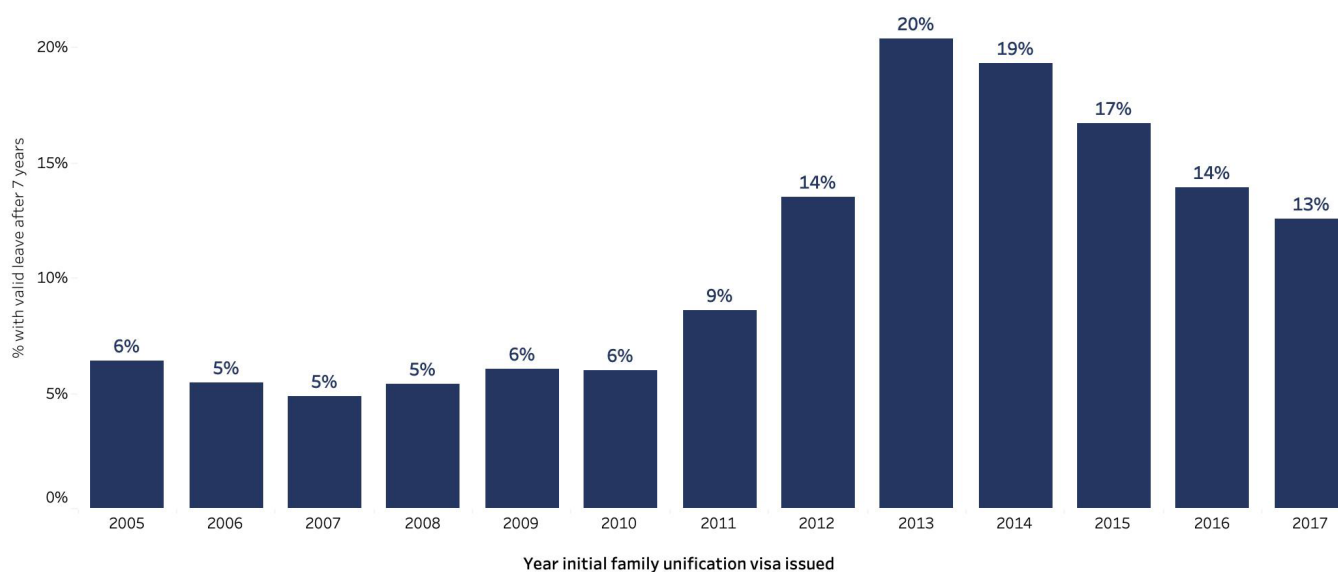


In recent years, an increasing share of family unification migrants have been on a ten-year route to settlement (see the Understanding the policy section). This will not be reflected fully in the settlement statistics for another few years because most are not yet eligible for settlement. However, the increase in people taking a longer route to settlement can be seen by looking at the share of people with leave to remain seven years after initially being issued a family unification visa. For example, of the roughly 26,000 people issued a family unification visa in 2014, 19% (around 5,000) had valid leave to remain, but not settlement or citizenship, at the end of 2021 (Figure 8). This share is around three times greater than for cohorts arriving from 2005 to 2010, before the current system of ten-year routes to settlement was introduced (See the “Understanding the policy section”). It is possible that, due to the new minimum income threshold that came into effect in April 2024, more family unification migrants will be allowed entry into the UK based on “exceptional circumstances” for failing to meet the income requirement, which will put them on ten-year routes for settlement.

Figure 8

Percentage of family unification migrants with leave to remain (but not settlement or citizenship) 7 years after receiving their initial visa, by year of initial visa issuance

Main applicants and dependants



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey, Table MJ_D01. 2024 Report. Note: Family Visas include families of refugees on Family Reunion visas.



In 2023, an estimated 2.9 million people living in the UK said they had originally moved to join a British citizen or settled resident

According to the Annual Population Survey, in 2023, an estimated 9.2 million foreign-born people aged 18 and older were living in the UK. Of these, approximately 2.9 million said that they originally moved to the country mainly to join or accompany a British citizen or UK-settled resident. This means that around one third of all the adult foreign-born in the UK are family unification migrants.

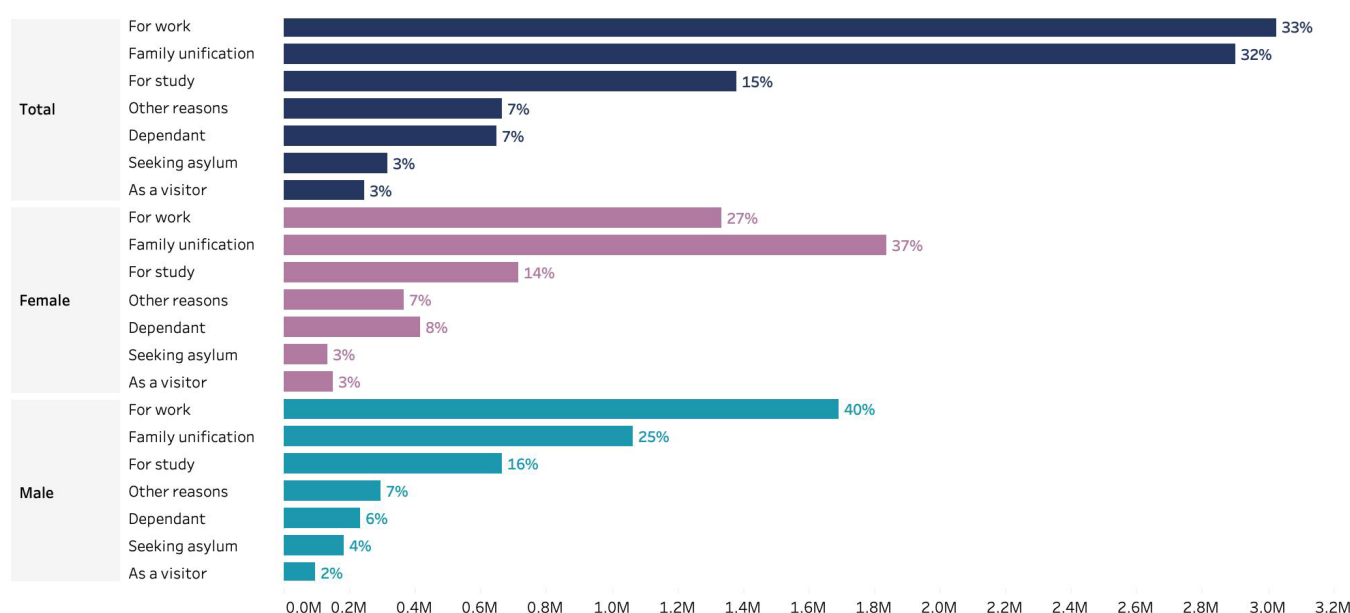
Because, as the previous section explained, family unification migrants are more likely to settle, they make up a large share of the migrant population living in the UK (Figure 9) despite making up a small share of total migrant inflows to the UK (Figure 1).

Women are significantly more likely than men to state that they moved to the UK to join a British citizen or settled resident (Figure 9). Among the adult population, over 60% of family unification migrants are women, which is consistent with the average share of women among Partner visa recipients (Figure 3).

Figure 9

Size of the UK's foreign-born population in 2023, by sex and original main reason for migration

Adult population (18+)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey, Jan-Dec 2023

Notes: Some residents of communal establishments are excluded from the coverage of this survey. The estimates come with a margin of error, which is not shown.



The UK has comparatively restrictive economic requirements for the sponsors of family unification migrants

The UK's main economic requirement for the sponsors of family unification migrants is a minimum income threshold. From 2012 to 2023, if a non-EU citizen applies to enter the UK as a partner of a British citizen or non-British citizen with settlement, the sponsor needed to have an annual income of at least £18,600, or £22,400 if the partner sponsored is bringing one child, plus £2,400 for each of any additional children.

In April 2024, the minimum income requirement for partner visas was increased to £29,000 (see the Understanding the Policy section, above). The new UK minimum income requirement stands out in relation to many other high-income countries' policies by linking the threshold to the level of skilled salaries, rather than the minimum wage. (Norway has a similar income threshold to the UK, while other countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, have lower or no financial requirement.) According to income estimates from the 2024 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), this policy renders around 30% of UK full-time employees ineligible to bring a partner to the country, although some may still qualify through other means, such as savings (see also the Migration Observatory [commentary](#) on the 2023 income requirement for partner visas). [Unlike other countries](#), the UK does not allow the earnings of the foreign partner living abroad to count toward the income threshold.

More broadly, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) analyses 56 countries with respect to their policies for integrating migrants. The index comprises eight policy areas, one of which is 'family reunion'. Within the policy area of family reunion, there are ten policy indicators, covering, for example, eligibility criteria for family migrants; integration requirements for family migrants; economic resources and accommodation requirements for sponsors; and the rights granted by family visas. Among the 56 countries analysed, the UK is ranked as the second most restrictive on family migration policy—just behind Denmark—according to the MIPEX assessment of ten key indicators.

A [survey](#) conducted by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) in 2024 found that some British citizens or settled residents had their lives severely affected by the Minimum Income Requirement, especially those unable to meet the requirement. Their data revealed that while applicants who qualified typically faced only minor issues—such as brief separations—those who did not qualify often endured prolonged separation, financial strain, and mental health challenges. British children separated from a parent were particularly impacted. The MAC concluded that there was thus a trade-off between the negative fiscal impacts of family migration below the threshold, and the negative impacts of the threshold on British and settled residents.

Over 90% of the people who enter the UK as families of refugees are women and children

In 2024, the UK issued around 29,200 visas to the family members of refugees, either through refugee family reunion (where family members join those granted asylum or humanitarian protection) or as the dependants of successful main asylum applicants. This represents less than 4% of the total migrant visas issued in the same year.

From 2014 to 2024, the UK issued a total of 350,500 grants of refugee status and other protection. This figure includes people coming to the country as resettled refugees, under the Afghan relocation schemes, and under the family reunion route, but excludes Ukrainians and Hong Kong BN(O)s). Of these, 123,800 grants were to refugees' family members who came as dependants or under the family reunion route, which was only slightly fewer than the number of grants of protection given to main asylum applicants (164,200) (Home Office Statistics, Asylum and Resettlement, Table Asy_D01, YE March 2025 and Home Office Statistics, Family Reunion visas grants, Table Fam_D01, YE March 2025, Home Office Statistics, Resettlement, Table RS_D02, YE March 2025).

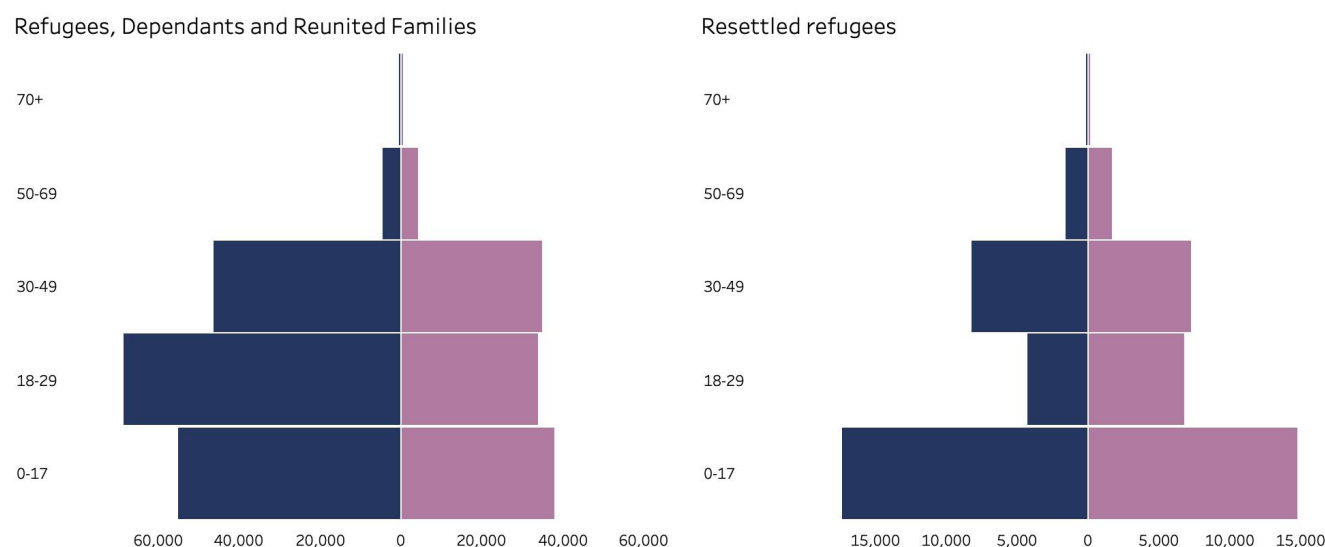
Families of refugees tend to enter the UK after the refugee has arrived in the country and was granted refugee status or humanitarian protection. From 2014 to 2024, of the grants of protection issued to family members, 62% were given through family reunion, with the remaining 30% being given to the dependants of main asylum applicants.

From 2014 to 2024, over 92% of the people who received permission to live in the UK as close family members of refugees or holders of humanitarian protection (whether as dependants or family reunion beneficiaries) were women and children. This reflects most main applicants during the same period being male (68%). Men and boys are [more likely to migrate ahead of their families](#), often taking long and risky journeys, and then apply for family reunion once they have secured asylum.

Family reunion makes the refugee population in the UK more gender balanced, and even more evenly distributed across ages than resettlement (Figure 10). (See also the Migration Observatory briefing on [Asylum and Refugee Resettlement in the UK](#)).

Figure 10

Age and sex distribution of refugees who arrived in the UK between 2014 and 2024, by type of arrival



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asylum, Asylum applications and decisions, Table Asy_D01, Year ending March 2025; Home Office Statics, Asylum and Resettlement – Family Reunion visa grants, Table Fam_D01, Year ending March 2025; Home Office Statics, Asylum and Resettlement – Resettlement, Table Res_D02, Year ending March 2025.

Note: The charts present aggregated data from 2014 and 2024. Figures for the left-hand chart include family reunion beneficiaries (Table Fam_D01), and main applicants and dependants who were granted protection and other forms of leave (Table Asy_D01). Figures for the right-hand chart include resettled refugees (Table Res_D02).



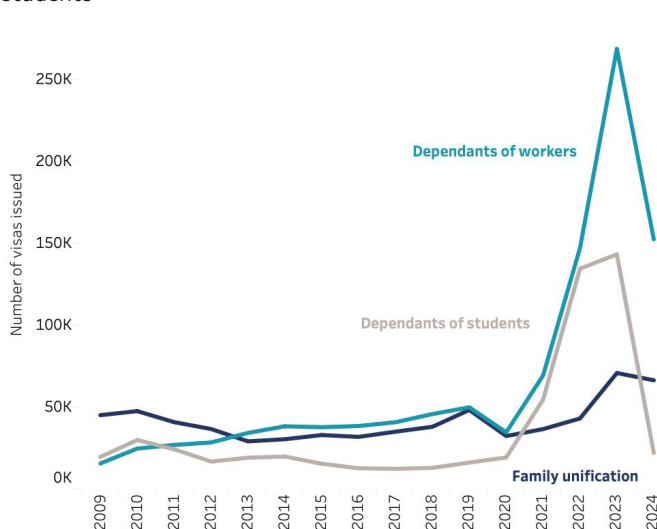
Between 2020 and 2023, dependants of work and study migrants significantly outnumbered family unification migrants

The number of people migrating as dependants – the partner or children of main migrants – tends to follow the same trend as the number of main applicants being granted visas, such as for work or study. Unlike family unification, which has remained relatively constant over the years, the migration of dependants has seen a significant increase from 2020 (Figure 11), which is linked with the growth in visa issuances for work and study visas in the same period (See the Migration Observatory briefing on [Net Migration to the UK](#)).

Figure 11

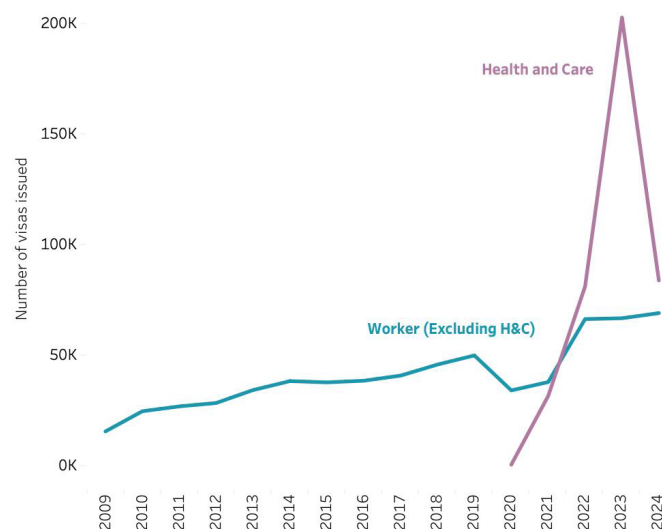
Number of visas issued in the UK, by type of visa, 2009 to 2024

Family unification, dependants of workers, and dependants of students



Number of visas issued to dependants of workers, by type of visa, 2009 to 2024

Health and Care and other Workers



Migration Observatory Analysis of Home Office Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02, Year ending March 2025.

Notes: Data refer to visa applications made outside the UK only. Family unification includes Family:partner, Family:child, and Family:other. The data presented include only dependants of Workers (excludes temporary workers) and Sponsored students.



Over the past decade, family unification visa grants have remained fairly stable. In contrast, the number of visas issued to dependants of both workers and students rose sharply between 2021 and 2023, mirroring trends in the main applicant categories. The sharp peak seen in 2023 for dependants of workers was largely driven by the Health and Care Worker route (Figure 11).

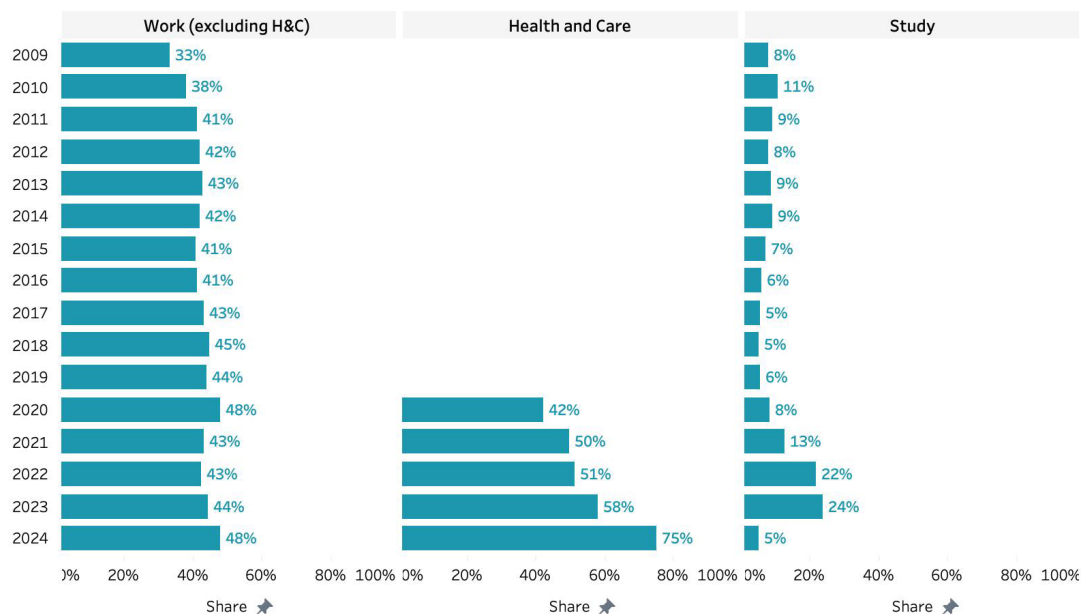
The increase in dependant visas issued during this period reflects two key factors: first, a higher number of visas were issued to students and workers overall; and second, a greater proportion of these people brought dependants with them (Figure 12). For students, this higher propensity to bring families may be linked to the introduction of the Graduate Route in 2021, which may have encouraged people to view student migration as a medium- to long-term labour migration strategy. In the UK, dependants of students have more flexible work rights than main applicants: there is no limit to the number of hours they can work, or the type of job they can do.

Among workers excluding the Health and Care route, the proportion of visas issued to dependants has remained relatively stable over the years: between 2009 and 2016 around 40% of visas in this category were issued to dependants, ranging from 33% in 2009 to 48% in 2024. However, Health and Care Workers are notably more likely to be accompanied by family members. In 2023, before the ban on dependants of care workers came into place, 58% of Health and Care Worker visas were issued to dependants, compared to 44% for other types of workers (Figure 12). In 2024, this share rose even further to 75% (figure 12). The possible reasons for this increase are explained in the next section.

Figure 12

Share of visas issued to dependants, by visa type and year

2009-2024. Study and work visas



Migration Observatory Analysis of Home Office Statistics, Entry Clearance Visas – Applications and Outcomes. Table Vis_D02, Year ending March 2025.

Notes: Data refer to visa applications made outside the UK only. The data presented include only dependants of Workers (excludes temporary workers) and Sponsored students.



The share of female workers and students bringing partners increased significantly after the pandemic

Women on work visas (excluding Health and Care) have been historically less likely than men to be joined by a partner. In 2016, most female workers migrated alone, while half of men brought a partner (Figure 13). Over time, this trend shifted, with more women arriving with partners and the share gradually approaching that of male main applicants (Figure 13). The data alone do not explain why this shift has occurred. One possible explanation is that, as gender norms across the world shift, highly skilled women may be increasingly able to balance moving abroad with family life.

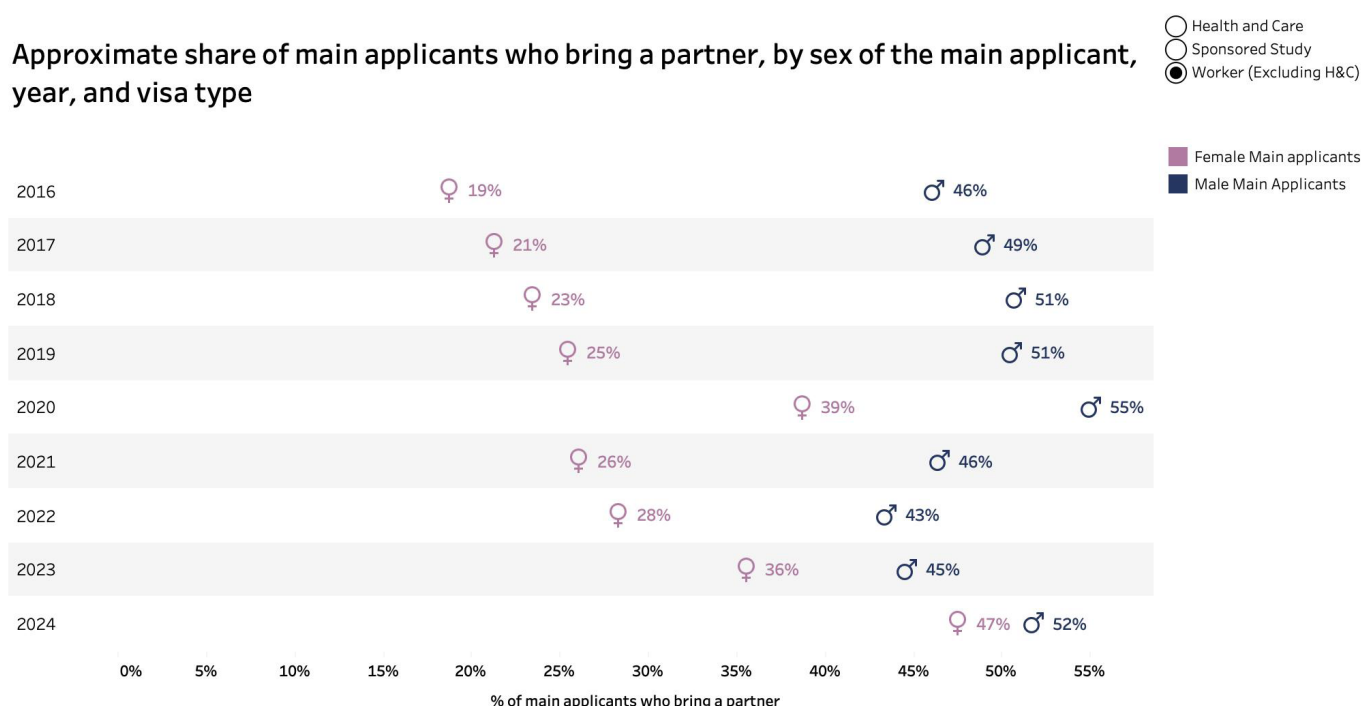
Both men and women migrating through the Health and Care worker route are more likely to be accompanied by family members than other workers. In 2023, 73% of female main applicants and 59% of male main applicants brought a partner (Figure 13). In 2024, the number of dependants accompanying Health and Care Worker visa holders surpassed the number of main applicants (Figure 13). Following the introduction of the ban on new dependant visas in April 2024, only care workers and senior care workers already living in the UK, as well as people in other eligible occupations within the route, remained able to bring dependants. While the issuance of new main applicant visas slowed in response to the policy change, it is likely that people already in the UK continued to sponsor their partners from abroad.

Among international students, women have also increasingly migrated with their partners in recent years. In 2016, both male and female students were unlikely to bring family members. However, this pattern began to shift under the post-Brexit immigration system. By 2023, one in every four female students arrived with a partner (Figure 13).

This change may be linked to evolving perceptions of international study as a long-term investment, particularly following the introduction of the Graduate Route in 2021 (Figure 13). This policy may have encouraged more women to pursue study abroad as part of a broader family migration and career strategy.

Figure 13

Approximate share of main applicants who bring a partner, by sex of the main applicant, year, and visa type



Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Freedom of Information request, FOI2025/04035. Notes: the share of main applicants who bring a partner is obtained using the ratio of main applicants and opposite-sex adult dependant visas issued in a given year. This is an approximate calculation because it does not take into account same-sex partnerships.

Work visa holders who come to the UK with dependants are on average 1.6 times as likely to obtain permanent status than those who come alone

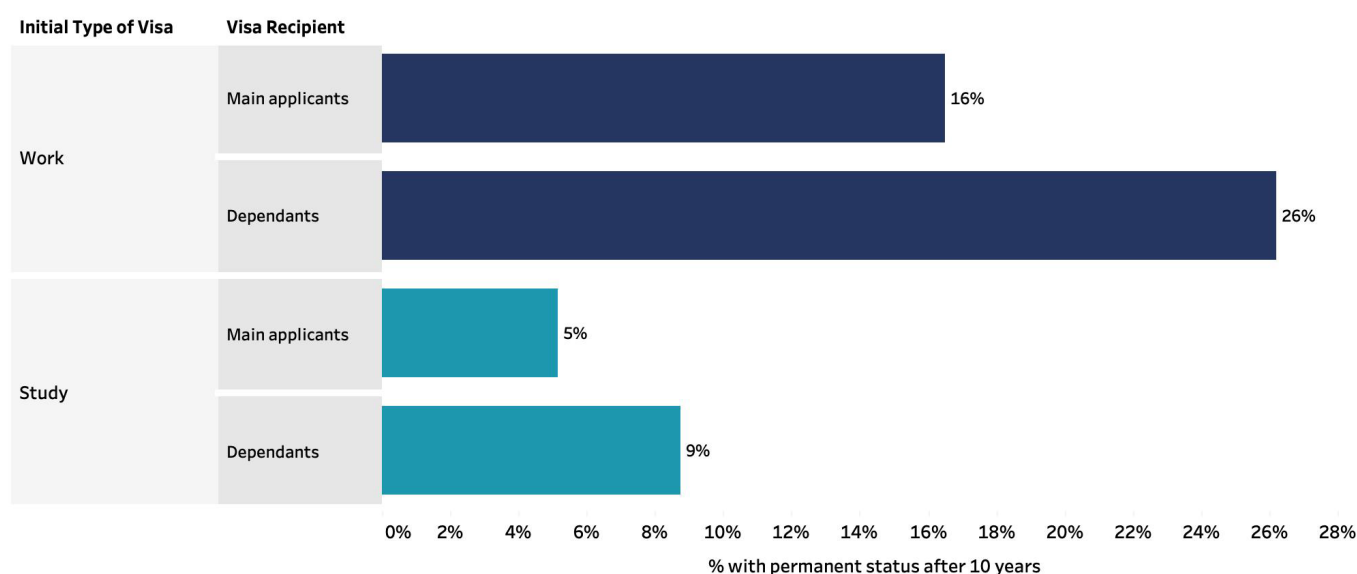
Across all visa categories, dependants are, on average, more likely settle in the UK than main applicants. We do not have information about settlement rates between dependants and main applicants *within* the same family. However, since dependants have their right of residence tied to the main applicant, these data indicate that main applicants who come with dependants are more likely to get permanent status than those who come alone.

The difference in settlement rates according to the type of visa recipient (main applicant or dependant) is higher for workers than for sponsored students. Study visa holders are historically unlikely to obtain ILR or citizenship in any scenario (Figure 14). Among work visa holders, dependants are, on average, 1.6 times as likely to settle as main applicants (Figure 14). The greater likelihood of families settling in the UK compared to single individuals may be due to several factors, including that those who come with families [may already have plans to settle](#) and that families may be less mobile than single individuals.

Figure 14

Immigration status in 2024 for individuals granted visas in 2014, by type of visa recipient and type of initial visa

Work and study visas



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Migrant Journey. Table MJ_01, 2024 Report.

Note: The data presented exclude temporary students, investors, business development, talent, other work visas and extensions and dependants joining or accompanying.



A partner who comes to the UK on a family unification visa faces immigration costs of around £13,200 on a typical route to citizenship

People who want to bring family members to the UK can face substantial costs, whether they are British people using the family unification route, or whether they are migrants on a work visa bringing dependants with them. Figure 17 illustrates the amount of money that different types of families would need to pay in immigration fees in order for them to stay long term and ultimately become UK citizens. This includes fees for visas, settlement, citizenship, and the Immigration Health Surcharge. On average, it takes five years of residence in the UK for family unification migrants and dependants of workers to obtain settlement and six to seven years to obtain citizenship.

According to immigration fee levels and Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) costs as at May 2025, a partner who comes to the UK on a family unification visa would need to pay around £13,200 in fees to become a British citizen. Families consisting of two adults and two children who arrive in the UK on a skilled worker visa, would incur over £42,300 in immigration costs under 2025 fee levels. This represents a 40% increase on September 2023 fee levels.

In the case of workers, it is unclear what percentage of immigration and IHS fees are covered by employers, and whether they typically pay only for the fees of the main applicant or also include dependants. As a result, immigration costs can have a varying impact on different immigrant groups, depending on factors such as work arrangements, entry visa category, and family size.

Figure 15

Total immigration fees on routes to citizenship, by type of initial visa, family type and date

Cost of routes to citizenship for different types of family, as at September 2023 and May 2025



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UK Immigration and Nationality and IHS fees.

Notes: 2023 costs include visa, ILR, nationality and IHS fees as at September 2023. 2025 costs include visa, ILR and nationality and IHS fees as at May 2025. These are potential routes to citizenship. For Skilled Workers, it assumes a person who applied for their initial leave outside the UK and received a certificate of sponsorship for a duration of five years. In the case of a family-visa holder, it considers a person who applied for the visa outside the UK and extended their stay after two years and nine months.



For more information on fees, see the Migration Observatory Q&A, [Immigration fees in the UK](#).

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

There is no single definition of family migration used across all datasets, meaning the evidence from different datasets is often not directly comparable.

Some dependant visas are recorded as “Joining or Accompanying” rather than being categorised according to the visa of the main applicant. Differences in recording protocols over the years could have an impact on the figures presented.

There are two limitations of Annual Population Survey data, summarised [here](#). In addition, it is possible that people do not correctly state their reason for coming to the country, particularly if they arrived in the UK a long time ago, which could impact family migration estimates.

There are substantial gaps in the evidence about the impacts of family migration policies in the UK. For example, it is currently not possible to estimate reliably how many people have been prevented from coming to the UK due to policies such as the minimum income requirement. [Previous estimates](#) looked at the decline in family visa grants immediately after the policy was introduced in 2012, but it is harder to estimate the longer-term impacts of these changes.

Because fee waivers for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) applications are only granted in rare cases—typically where applicants can demonstrate that paying the full fee would cause extreme hardship—some family members who cannot afford the fee remain in the UK on temporary immigration status. This can prolong their route to settlement, as they are unable to transition to ILR when eligible. However, due to limitations in

published Home Office statistics, it is not possible to determine how many people are affected by this issue.

The Home Office does not link data on dependants with that of main applicants, making it impossible to determine with precision what share of migrants arrive in the UK with partners and children.

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Related material

- Migration Observatory Briefing – [Net Migration to the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory Briefing – [Student Migration to the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory Briefing – [Children of Migrants in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory briefing – [Migrant Settlement in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory commentary – [How many people have been prevented from bringing a partner to the UK due to the £18,600 minimum income requirement?](#)
- Migration Observatory report – [The Minimum Income Requirement for Non-EEA Family Members in the UK](#)
- Migration Observatory report – [Top Ten Problems in the Evidence Base for Public Debate and Policy-Making on Immigration in the UK](#)



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.



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www.compas.ox.ac.uk

About the authors

Nuni Jorgensen

Researcher,

The Migration Observatory

nuni.jorgensen@compas.ox.ac.uk

Peter William Walsh

Senior Researcher

The Migration Observatory

peter.walsh@compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil

Head of Media and Communications

robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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