



BRIEFING

Hong Kong BNOs living in the UK

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This briefing examines the migration of people with Hong Kong British National Overseas (BNO) status to the UK. It presents statistics on BNOs' characteristics, their economic outcomes, and their satisfaction with life in the UK.

Key Points

Between 2021 and 2025, 160,000 Hong Kong BNOs migrated to the UK. Survey data indicate that two-thirds came to the UK because they did not feel safe in Hong Kong. Wanting a better education for children and accompanying family members are the next most common reasons.

The large majority of BNOs expect to stay in the UK long-term, and almost all either have (4%) or want to acquire (94%) British citizenship. However, many BNOs may not be on track to acquire settlement after five years under the government's 'earned settlement' proposals.

BNOs are more likely to hold a graduate-level qualification and are more likely to own their own home than the overall non-UK-born population.

In July 2025, 67% of working-age BNOs were in work, but many have 'downgraded' and are working in jobs they are overqualified for.

A little over 20% of BNOs said they were financially better off in the UK compared to Hong Kong, while around 40% were worse off. Around 40% said they were neither better nor worse off financially.

Understanding the evidence

The sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from the UK to China on 1 July 1997. Prior to the handover, most Hong Kong residents could apply for British National Overseas (BNO) status. This status – which is valid for life and cannot be passed to spouses or children – did not confer the right to live, work, or study in the UK.

On 31 January 2021, the government introduced a new route that provided a pathway to citizenship for an estimated 5.4 million Hong Kong residents, comprising 2.9 million BNOs and their estimated 2.5 million family members. This followed the passing of a controversial National Security Law by the Chinese government in 2020, which tightened political controls and limited civil and political freedoms in Hong Kong. Before the route was launched, the government estimated that between 123,000 and 153,700 people would migrate in the first year, and between 258,000 and 322,400 over five years.

The BNO route allows British National (Overseas) status holders to come to the UK with their close family members, including family members who are not BNOs. In February 2026, the government expanded eligibility for the route, allowing adult children of BNO status holders who were under 18 at the time of the 1997 handover to apply as main applicants. It was estimated that an additional 26,000 people would arrive in the UK before 2031 as a result of the change.

BNO visa holders are able to work or study in the UK but are generally not entitled to claim benefits under the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, unless they successfully apply for an exemption to the Home Office. At the time of writing, people with BNO visas are entitled to apply for settlement (also known as indefinite leave to remain, or ILR) after five years, and can apply for British citizenship after one further year of residence. Note, however, that the government has proposed raising the eligibility thresholds for settlement (discussed in more detail in the main text).

Understanding the policy

In this briefing, we use the term 'BNO' to refer to people who hold a BNO route visa, rather than the BNO status granted at the time of the 1997 handover.

The data presented come primarily from the longitudinal Hong Kong BNO Migrants Panel Survey. The survey asks BNO visa holders about a range of topics, including their home and family, economic and financial situation, perceptions of discrimination, and health and well-being. It also includes BNO-specific topics, such as their reasons for moving to the UK, remittance patterns, and future migration intentions.

The invitation to complete the survey was sent by the Home Office to a random sample of email addresses tied to BNO visa applications. Those who accepted the invite were asked to share the survey with other adults (aged 16 and over) in their household. All individuals who completed the survey were also asked if they could be recontacted for the next wave.

At the time of writing, two survey waves have been conducted. Wave 1 took place between July and September 2024, with 2,162 BNOs completing the survey (1,592 main respondents and 570 household members). The second wave was conducted in June and July 2025 and was completed by 1,138 BNOs (807 main respondents and 331 household members). For more information on sampling and recruitment, see the technical reports for wave 1 and wave 2.

The figures presented in this briefing are weighted by age and sex, using Home Office data on visa grants. In other words, the survey responses from underrepresented age/sex groups carry more weight in the analysis presented in this report.

How many people have come to the UK on a BNO visa?

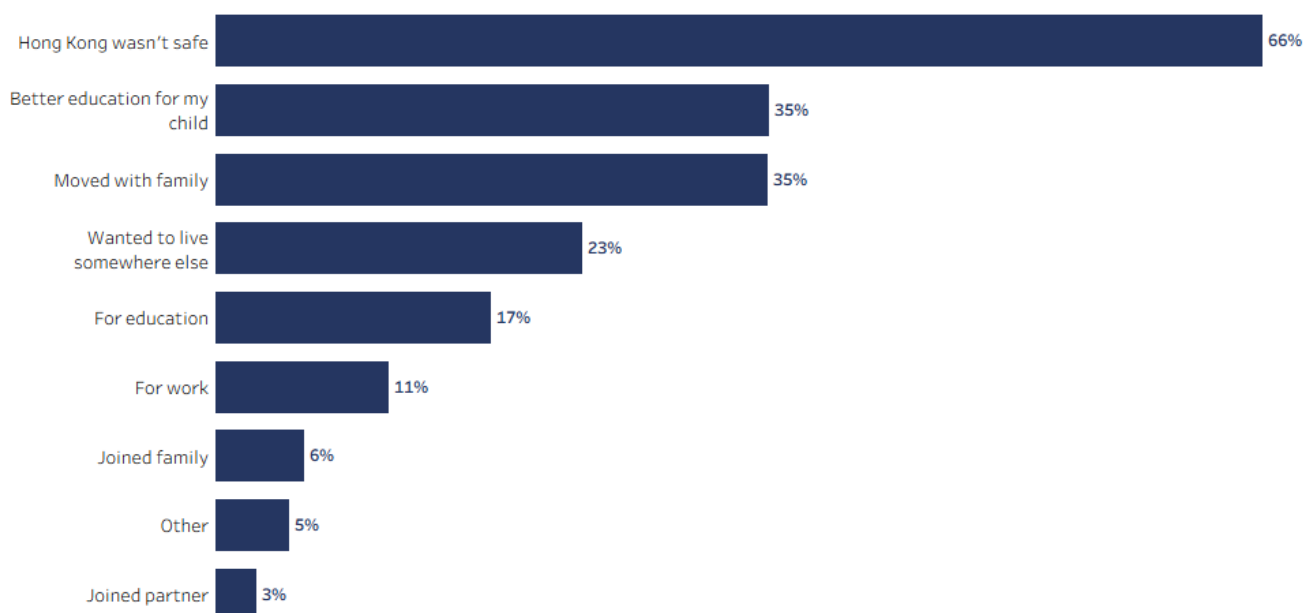
Between 2021 and 2025, 160,000 Hong Kong BNOs migrated to the UK, according to the ONS. This estimate is lower than the number of people who held a valid BNO visa at the end of 2025 (198,000), for two reasons. First, around 10,000 BNOs were already living in the UK and switched to the route after the scheme was launched. Second, not everybody granted a BNO visa will have come to the UK, and some who did arrive will have left again after less than a year.

The BNO visa is a humanitarian route, created after the Chinese government tightened political controls and limited civil and political freedoms in Hong Kong. It is therefore unsurprising that 66% of people on the route state that one reason they moved to the UK was that they did not feel safe in Hong Kong (Figure 1). The next most common reasons were wanting a better education for children and accompanying family members who were migrating to the UK. Note that multiple reasons can be given. For more information about BNOs' migration motivations, see [British Future's](#) research on Hong Kongers' experiences in the UK.

Figure 1

BNOs' reason for migrating to the UK

Respondents can select multiple reasons



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, wave 1.

Note: Sample size of 2,111. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.



How many BNOs would qualify for ‘earned settlement’?

The large majority of BNO visa holders expect to stay in the UK long-term, and almost all – including those people who expect to live in another country in the future – either already have (4%) or want to acquire (94%) British citizenship (Figure 2).

Figure 2

BNO visa holders’ future migration intentions

2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, wave 1.

Note: Sample size of 2,122. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.



In November 2025, however, the government announced its intention to raise the eligibility thresholds for settlement in the UK (also known as indefinite leave to remain, or ILR). Under its plans – which, at the time of writing, have not been implemented in law – Hong Kong BNOs would still qualify for settlement after five years, but only if they meet new minimum requirements. For further information, see the Migration Observatory commentary [Changes to settlement: what do they mean?](#)

If the proposals were introduced in their current form, the change that would likely have the most significant impact on BNOs is a minimum requirement stating that ILR applicants must have had an annual income of £12,570 for 3 to 5 years. Just over 70% of BNOs were either employed or retired in both 2024 and 2025 and, therefore, may have had a regular source of income sufficient to meet the proposed income threshold (Figure 3).

A second minimum requirement says that ILR applicants must pass an English language test at the B2 level. In other words, they must be able to ‘communicate with reasonable fluency and produce detailed, clear writing.’ A Home Office statement in March 2026 [said](#) that BNOs may not be subject to this requirement. However, if they were, a large majority would likely meet it – in 2025, 90% said they could speak ‘day-to-day English’ without difficulty (Figure 3). See the next section for more discussion of BNOs’ English language proficiency.

Figure 3

Characteristics of Hong Kong BNOs relevant to earned settlement proposals

Individuals who said they intend to acquire citizenship as of 2025



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, waves 1 and 2

Notes: Sample size of 1,016 respondents who appeared in both waves and said they wanted to acquire UK citizenship in July 2025. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.



In general, BNOs are not eligible for benefits because they are subject to the [“No Recourse to Public Funds” \(NRPF\) condition](#), which prevents access to state-funded welfare, such as Universal Credit. But they can apply to have this condition lifted. Under the earned settlement proposals, people who successfully apply to have their NRPF condition lifted would see their qualifying time to settlement increased by either 5 or 10 years, depending on whether they claim benefits for less or more than 12 months.

If this proposed change were implemented, very few BNOs would be affected. As of July 2025, only 1% of BNOs had claimed a type of benefit that would lead to an extension.

What characteristics do BNO visa holders have?

Figure 4 compares the characteristics of BNO visa holders as of August 2024 with those of non-UK-born individuals more broadly, as recorded in the 2021 Census (or, in Scotland, the 2022 Census).

Almost two-thirds of Hong Kong BNOs hold a degree-level qualification, compared to 44% of non-UK-born individuals. They are also more likely than other migrants to own their home – the BNOs' 52% homeownership rate is nine percentage points higher than the non-UK-born overall and three times that of recent non-UK arrivals (i.e., those who migrated to the UK in 5 years preceding the Census). In general, migrants' homeownership rates [increase](#) with their length of residence in the UK.

Most BNOs can speak day-to-day English (e.g., when shopping or catching the bus) without difficulty, primarily reflecting the fact that English is an official language in Hong Kong (alongside Cantonese) and is widely used by the Hong Kong government, legal system, and businesses. However, 1% of BNOs cannot speak English at all. The majority of these people are of retirement age and came to the UK because other family members were migrating.

A quarter of BNOs live in London, with a further 20% in the North West and 16% in the South East.

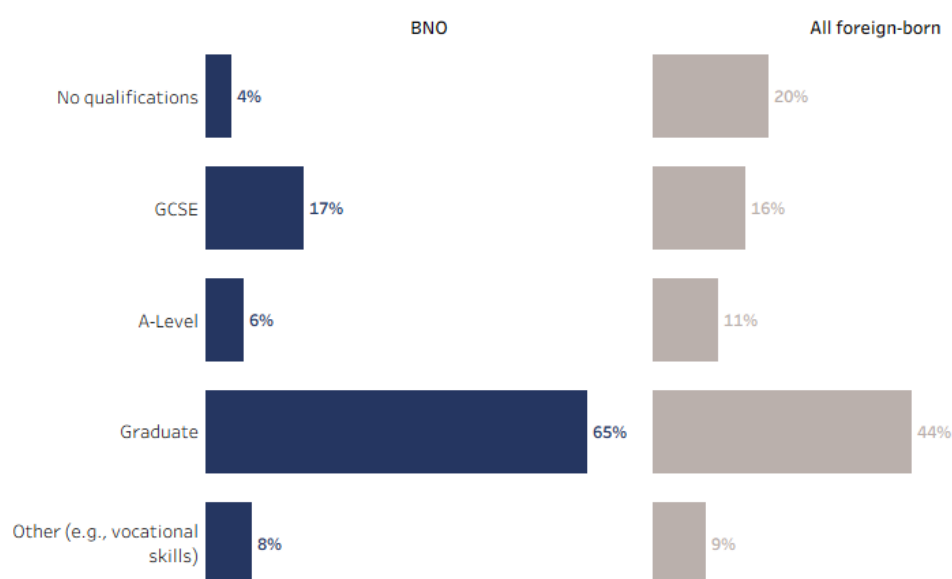
Figure 4

Characteristics of BNO migrants, 2024

Compared to all foreign-born, as stated in the 2021/2022 Censuses

Select characteristic

- ☐ Age
- ☐ Day-to-day English ability
- ☒ Education
- ☐ Homeownership
- ☐ Region
- ☐ Sex



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, wave 1, and England and Wales (2021), Scotland (2022), and Northern Ireland (2021) Census.

Note: BNO figures are weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office. Language proficiency figures are based on two questions: respondents were asked if English was their first language and, if not, if they had any difficulty speaking English to people for day-to-day activities such as shopping and taking the bus. Language proficiency cannot be compared, as there is no equivalent question in the Census.



How many BNOs are employed?

In July 2025, 67% of working-age BNOs were in employment (see Figure 5), [similar](#) to the rate among family migrants but well below that of work migrants (approximately 90%). Turning to those who were not in work, 6% of BNOs were unemployed, and 27% were not active in the labour market – the most common reasons were being retired or looking after the family or home.

The BNO employment rate has increased over time, however. A year earlier, in August 2024, it stood at 60%.

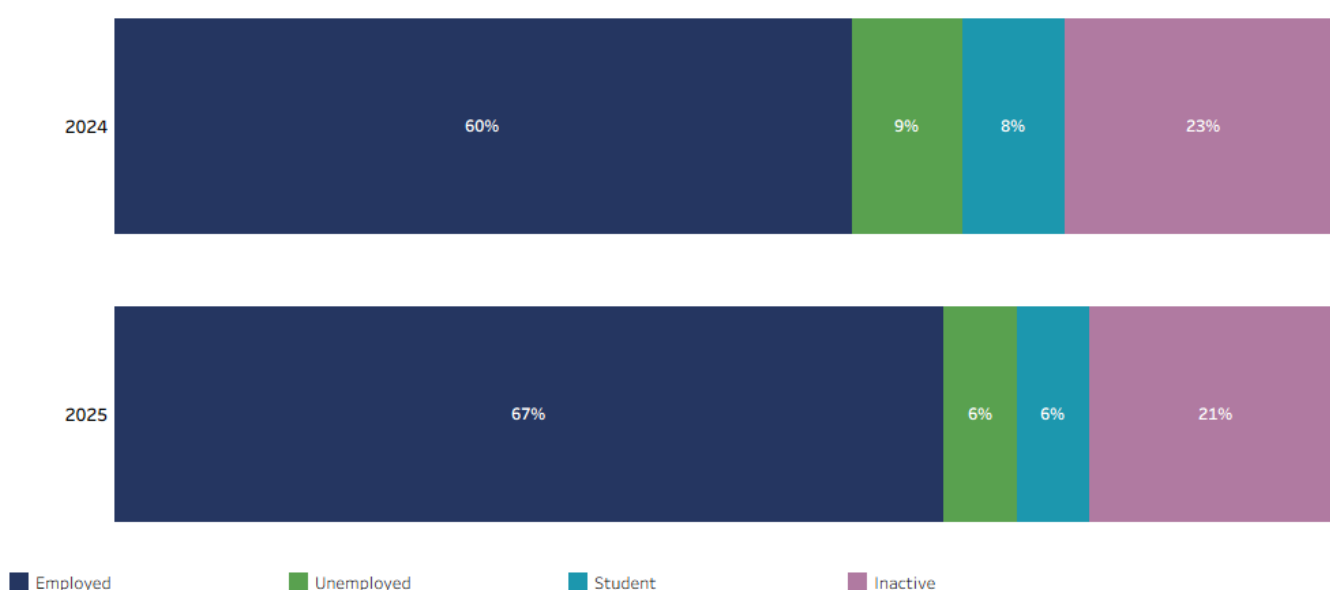
Figure 5

Hong Kong BNOs' economic activity, by year

Aged 16 to 64

Select view

☒ Broad
☐ Detailed



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, waves 1 and 2

Notes: Sample size of 1,003 respondents who appeared in both waves. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.



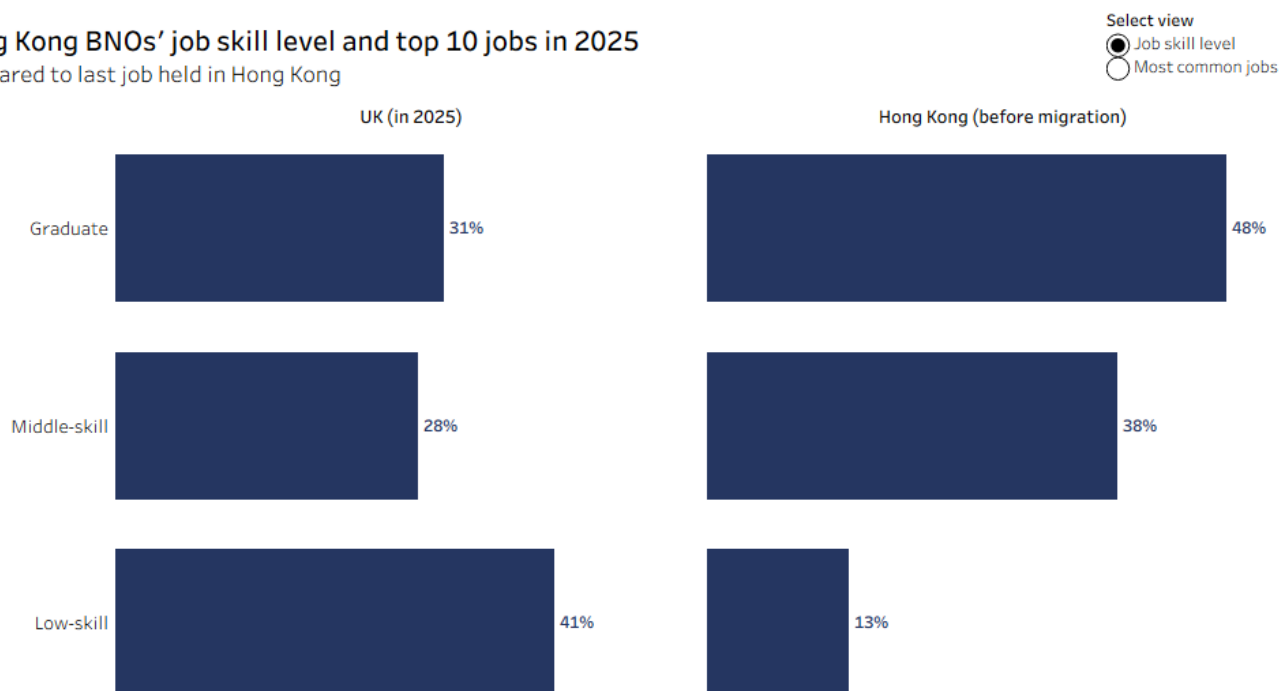
Occupation data indicate that some BNOs have ‘downgraded’ and taken jobs for which they are overqualified. In July 2025, 31% of employed BNOs were working in graduate-level occupations; however, 48% of the same individuals had been working in graduate-level jobs in Hong Kong before they migrated (Figure 6). BNOs who had found it difficult to get a job matching their skills and experience cited a lack of local knowledge and connections (50%), English language barriers (46%), and difficulty getting employers to recognise foreign qualifications (39%) as the biggest barriers. Qualitative research has [produced](#) similar conclusions.

BNOs were most likely to be working as IT professionals, warehouse operatives or marketing professionals (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Hong Kong BNOs' job skill level and top 10 jobs in 2025

Compared to last job held in Hong Kong



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, waves 1 and 2

Notes: Age 16 to 64 only. Sample size of 1,003 respondents who appeared in both waves. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office. The classification of job skill levels is based on the amount of education and training required to perform the role, and does not consider other types of personal skills that are valued in the labour market.



The Migration Advisory Committee has [indicated](#) that BNOs are likely to have a positive but small impact on public finances over their lifetimes, similar to the dependants of Skilled Workers (£3,000 per person, on average). It argued that BNOs' net fiscal impact would be less positive than that of Skilled Workers due to their lower employment rates and the prevalence of downgrading.

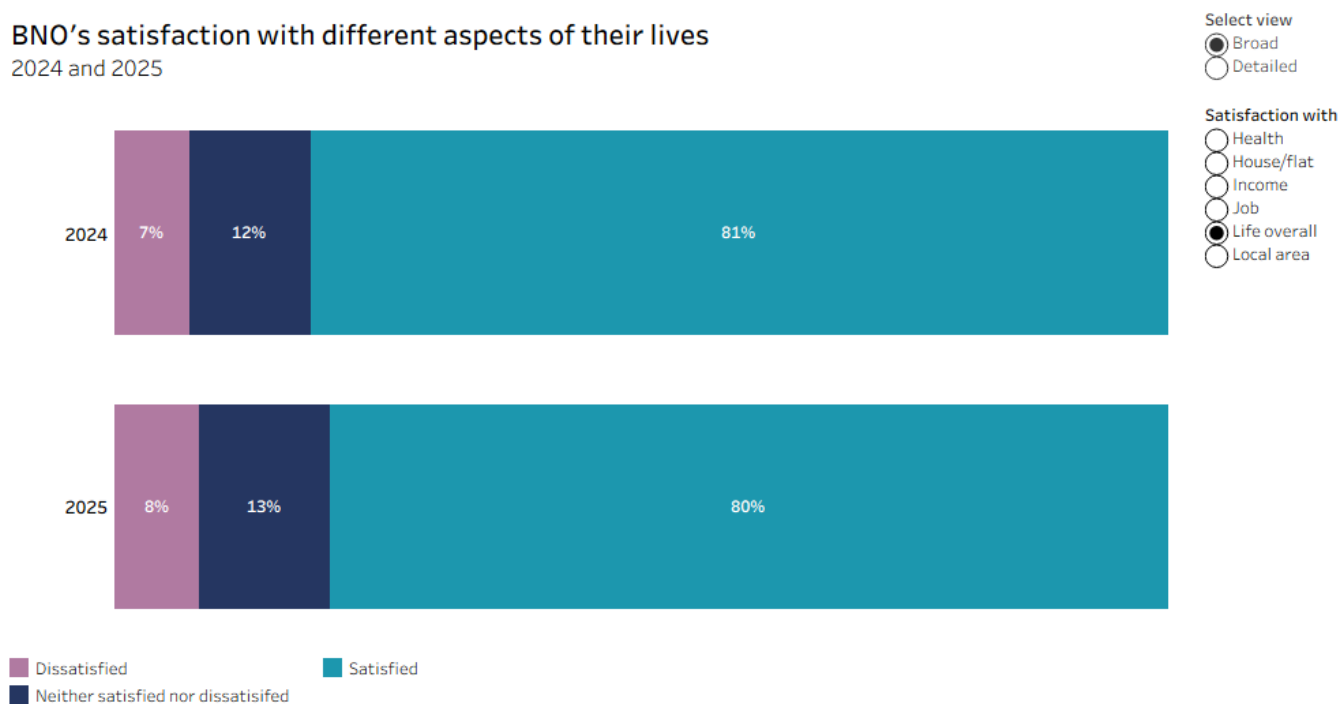
Are BNOs satisfied with life in the UK?

In July 2025, 80% of BNOs were satisfied with their lives overall, with 85% satisfied with their local area, and 73% with their job (Figure 7). These proportions are similar to those of a year earlier, in August 2024.

Hong Kongers are less positive regarding their income, however. Just under half were satisfied – 14% mostly or completely – while 31% were dissatisfied.

Figure 7

BNO's satisfaction with different aspects of their lives 2024 and 2025



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, waves 1 and 2

Notes: Sample size of 1,116 respondents who appeared in both waves (or 715 for job satisfaction). Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.

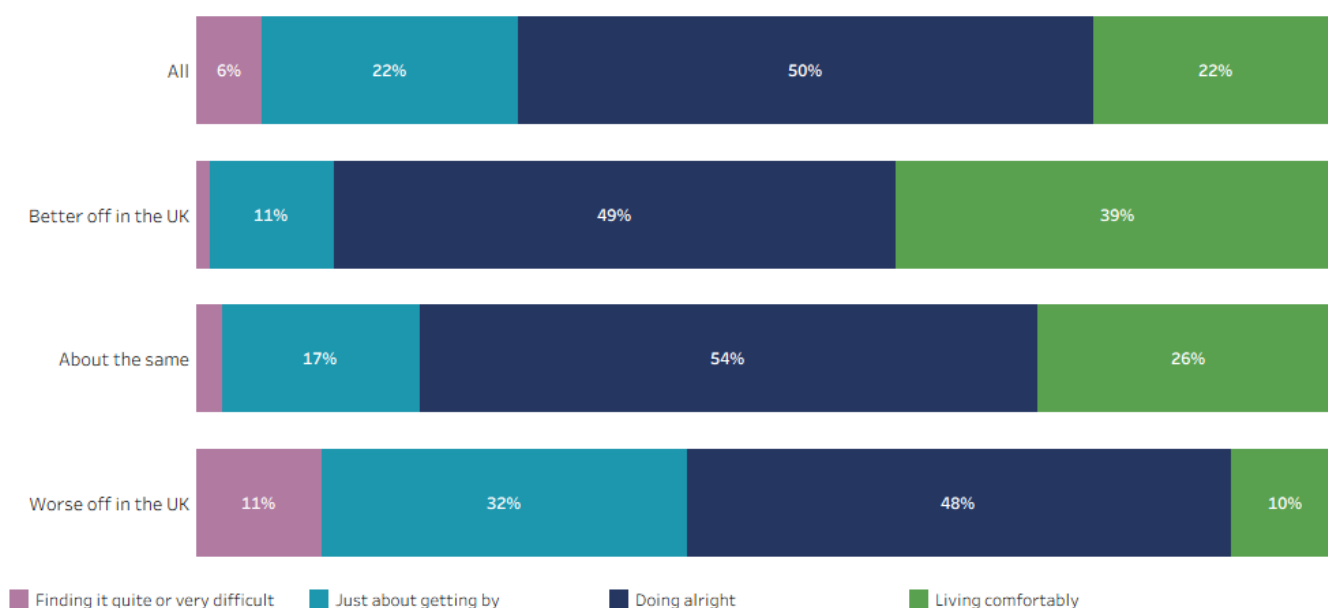


A little over 20% of BNOs said they were financially better off in the UK compared to Hong Kong, while around 40% were worse off. Yet relatively few of these people who said they were worse off in the UK found it 'quite' or 'very' difficult to manage their finances – instead, almost half were 'doing alright' (Figure 8).

Figure 8

BNOs' financial situation in July 2025

By financial situation compared to Hong Kong



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Hong Kong BNO Panel Survey, wave 2

Notes: Sample size of 1,100 respondents. Data is weighted by age and sex to match grants of BNO visas, as per the Home Office.



BNOs who reported finding it quite or very difficult to manage their finances are more likely to be disabled, working in low-skill jobs, renting, or the parent of a dependent child in the household.

Evidence gaps and limitations

Although survey responses in the Hong Kong BNO Migrants Panel Survey are weighted to reflect the characteristics of BNO visa holders living in the UK, the experiences of respondents may not be representative of the wider population. This will be the case if people who chose to answer the survey are different to those who did not.

In addition, only one year passed between the two survey waves, a relatively short period in which to assess changes. Migrants' outcomes often improve over time as they become more established in the UK, so BNOs' employment rates and English language ability may increase in future. This could, in turn, affect whether they would qualify for a five-year route to settlement under the government's proposed earned settlement rules.

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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

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