

Article

The changing picture of long-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021

Analysis of the migrant population of England and Wales and how it has changed looking at the characteristics of country of birth and passports held. It also includes analysis of economic activity and industry, and those most recently arrived.

Contact:
Ben Fitch
census.customerservices@ons.
gov.uk
+44 1329 444972

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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Overview](#)
3. [Migration across England and Wales](#)
4. [Economic status of non-UK-born residents](#)
5. [How the top non-UK countries of birth have changed over time](#)
6. [Country of birth by passports held](#)
7. [Recent arrivals](#)
8. [Long-term international migration data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Data sources and quality](#)
11. [Related links](#)
12. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- In 2021, 10.0 million (16.8%) usual residents in England and Wales were born outside of the UK, an increase of 2.5 million from 2011.
- The proportion of non-UK-born residents has increased across all regions of England, with London (positive 3.9 percentage points), East of England (positive 3.9 percentage points) and the East Midlands (positive 3.8 percentage points) showing the largest increases since 2011; Wales (positive 1.4 percentage points) also saw an increase, but this was much lower comparatively.
- Among the non-UK-born population of England and Wales, those from other EU countries (Cyprus, Malta and Croatia) were most likely to hold a British passport (71.2%), followed by Africa (63.0%) and the Middle East and Asia (59.1%); India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were the top three countries of birth with the highest number of UK passport holders.
- People born in Romania and Bulgaria (EU2) and EU8 countries have the highest employment rates; the most common industry for EU-born was wholesale and retail and repair of motor vehicles (15.8%), while for non-EU-born it was human health and social work (19.5%).
- In the year before Census 2021, the most common non-UK long-term migrant arrivals to England and Wales were from India, Romania and China for both country of birth and passports held; most recent arrivals from India and China are much younger than the typical resident population, driven by a higher proportion of students.
- Recent arrivals in the year before Census 2021 are more likely to be economically inactive students compared with those who have lived in the UK for longer; however, those born in the EU2 and EU8 have higher rates in employment and are more likely to have migrated for work than study.

2 . Overview

International migration is an important driver of population change. Our [International migration, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#) noted that the usual resident population in England and Wales grew by more than 2.0 million because of positive net migration in the period between censuses. Census 2021 data allow us to look at this change in detail to find out more about long-term international migration to England and Wales.

There are two primary ways we measure international migration to England and Wales using census data:

- a person who was born outside the UK, and therefore has migrated to the UK at some point in the past
- a person who holds a non-UK passport; used to indicate a person's nationality (this may include some non-UK citizens born in the UK)

This analysis considers both definitions. In the case of multiple passports being held, they were categorised in the following priority order for statistical purposes to prevent double-counting residents:

- UK passport
- Irish passport
- other country passport

For example, a dual citizen who holds both an EU and a UK passport is not classified in this analysis as a non-UK passport holder.

3 . Migration across England and Wales

In 2021, 10.0 million (16.8%) usual residents in England and Wales were born outside of the UK, compared with 7.5 million (13.4%) in 2011 and 4.6 million (8.9%) in 2001 (Table 1). Non-UK passport holders also increased to 5.9 million (9.9%), from 4.2 million (7.4%) in 2011.

The main increases in non-UK-born residents since 2011 were in London (positive 3.9 percentage points), the East of England (positive 3.9 percentage points), the East Midlands (positive 3.8 percentage points) and the West Midlands (positive 4.0 percentage points). The North East of England (positive 1.8 percentage points) and Wales (positive 1.4 percentage points) had smaller proportional increases.

Our [England and Wales census maps](#) show non-UK-born and non-UK passport holders in more geographical detail. For example, for Middle East and Asian-born (the top non-UK country of birth region), Hounslow (25.4%), Slough (24.3%) and Newham (23.2%) are among the highest areas, while there are other areas with high proportions around Leicester, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester.

Our census maps give the percentage of residents in local authorities, as well as the percentage of residents in smaller output areas within those local authorities.

Figure 1: The proportion of non-UK-born residents varies across England and Wales

Percentage of residents born by country of birth, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

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Table 1: London has the highest proportion of non-UK-born residents
Distribution of the usual resident population born outside the UK in 2001, 2011 and 2021, English regions and Wales

| | 2001 Census (Thousands) | Per cent of all residents | 2011 Census (Thousands) | Per cent of all residents | 2021 Census (Thousands) | Per cent of all residents |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| North East | 74 | 2.9 | 129 | 5 | 179 | 6.8 |
| North West | 342 | 5.1 | 577 | 8.2 | 865 | 11.7 |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 261 | 5.3 | 465 | 8.8 | 622 | 11.4 |
| East Midlands | 252 | 6 | 448 | 9.9 | 669 | 13.7 |
| West Midlands | 399 | 7.6 | 630 | 11.2 | 902 | 15.2 |
| East of England | 378 | 7 | 642 | 11 | 944 | 14.9 |
| London | 1,943 | 27.1 | 2,998 | 36.7 | 3,576 | 40.6 |
| South East | 652 | 8.2 | 1,043 | 12.1 | 1,462 | 15.8 |
| South West | 249 | 5.1 | 405 | 7.7 | 582 | 10.2 |
| Wales | 92 | 3.2 | 168 | 5.5 | 215 | 6.9 |
| All non-UK born usual residents | 4,643 | 8.9 | 7,505 | 13.4 | 10,018 | 16.8 |
| All usual residents of England and Wales | 52,042 | | 56,076 | | 59,598 | |

Source: Office for National Statistics – Census 2021

4 . Economic status of non-UK-born residents

The census does not collect data for why migrants come to the UK, but it does give insight into whether non-UK-born or those holding non-UK passports are in employment or not. In Census 2021, we asked everyone completing the census aged 16 years and over to answer the questions on their economic activity status.

As the census uses different labour market definitions from those used by the Labour Force Survey (LFS), estimates differ between these two sources. You can find further information in our [Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: March 2021](#) article.

Census 2021 took place during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change. The national lockdown, associated guidance and furlough measures will have affected the labour market topic.

High rates of employment can be seen for those born in the EU2 (80%), EU8 (79%) and Antarctica, Oceania and Other (75%) in Figure 2. Self-employment rates are especially high for EU2 and other non-EU-born compared with those born elsewhere. For those born in the UK, 56% were currently employed. This is to be expected when looking at all residents aged 16 years and over as the older UK-born population has a higher proportion of economically inactive people (35%).

Figure 2: Employment rates of non-UK-born residents vary across different country of birth groupings

Economic activity by country of birth, usual residents aged 16 years and over, 2021, England and Wales

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For migrants who were in employment at the time of the census, we can look at the industries they were working in. Wholesale, retail and repair of motor vehicles (15.0%) is the most common industry for UK-born, followed by human health and social care (14.3%). These industries are also the most common for non-UK-born and for non-UK passport holders.

A number of industries stand out as having overrepresentation or underrepresentation of non-UK-born workers compared with UK-born. In Figure 3, we see that non-EU workers are much more likely to be in human health and social work (19.5%) and information and communication (6.4%) than UK or EU-born workers. The most overrepresented industries for EU workers are accommodation and food service activities (7.9%) and manufacturing (10.5%). Both EU and non-EU-born are underrepresented in education and public administration and defence compared with UK-born workers.

Figure 3: Industries have varying levels of over and underrepresentation of non-UK-born workers compared with UK-born

Percentage of usual residents aged 16 years and over in employment by country of birth, 2021, England and Wales

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5 . How the top non-UK countries of birth have changed over time

Figure 4: Top non-UK countries of birth have changed between 2001 and 2021

Top non-UK countries of birth, 2001, 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

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When looking at the top individual non-UK countries of birth over the last three censuses we see a few interesting differences. Between 2011 and 2021 we see Romania and Italy enter the top 6, while the United States and Jamaica fall out of the top 10.

Looking further back we see greater differences between 2001 and 2021. Some of the more notable changes include Kenya and Jamaica falling out of the top 10, with Germany, Bangladesh and South Africa all moving further down the order. In addition, 3 of the top 10 countries in 2021 did not appear in the top 10 in 2001. These countries were: Poland (number 18), Romania (number 86) and Nigeria (number 14). The rise in position of both Poland and Romania is likely because they joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, respectively, and therefore gained entitlement to free movement. These changes over the last 20 years reflect a notably different picture of international migration over time.

6 . Country of birth by passports held

In this release, passports held have been prioritised by UK passport first, followed by Irish and then other passports. Where individuals hold more than one passport, we have only recorded them once based on this prioritisation. The interaction of country of birth and passports held allows us to look at how many non-UK-born have gained a UK passport and how many only hold an EU or non-EU passport.

African (63%), Middle East and Asian (59.1%) and other EU-born (Malta, Cyprus and Croatia, 71.2%) residents had the highest proportion of UK passport holders excepting those born in the UK and British Overseas territories (Figure 5). This contrasts with EU14 (23.9%), EU8 (7.5%) and EU2-born (7.5%) where a comparably small percentage of residents hold a UK passport.

EU-born tend to have a very high proportion of residents holding an EU passport, in particular the EU8 (89.2%) and EU2 (86.9%). Non-EU born regions show a greater range of passports held, with a notable proportion of the Americas and Caribbean (14.4%), African (9.9%) and Other non-EU-born (21.0%) holding an EU passport. Wales and England show similar patterns for country of birth and passports held, though there is a notably higher proportion of Antarctica, Oceania and Other-born holding a UK passport (64.5%) in Wales.

Figure 5: EU-born residents are less likely to hold a UK passport

Percentage of non-UK-born residents by country of birth grouping and passports held, 2021, England and Wales

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When breaking down into individual non-UK countries of birth, India (483,000, 52.5%), Pakistan (420,000, 67.4%) and Bangladesh (188,000, 69.0%) have the highest number of UK passport holders overall. Of the top 10, five are Middle East and Asian countries. Looking at the proportion of other passports held, EU countries make up 7 of the top 10 countries of birth. The top three from this list are Poland (663,000, 89.3%), Romania (477,000, 88.6%) and India (423,000, 45.9%).

The proportion of residents holding a UK passport can give an indication of naturalisation for non-UK countries of birth. Figure 6 looks at the top 10 and bottom 10 proportions of UK passports held across the top 60 non-UK countries of birth by total volume. Those born in African countries are the most likely to hold UK passports, with Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda having the highest proportions. The countries of birth with the lowest proportion of UK passports held are all EU member countries, except Moldova, with Lithuania, Moldova and Romania showing the lowest proportions.

Figure 6: Those born in African countries are most likely to hold a UK passport while those from EU countries are least likely

Percentage of residents who hold a UK passport, top and bottom 10 non-UK countries of birth (from top 60 most common non-UK countries of birth), 2021, England and Wales

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No passports held

Around 1 in 6 (7.7 million) usual residents born in the UK did not hold a passport. Whereas around 1 in 29 (343,000) non-UK-born residents did not hold a passport

The reasons for this will vary by country, with many UK-born non-passport holders having no need for a passport, such as children or the elderly. For non-UK-born this may include:

- asylum seekers without travel documentation awaiting a decision
- those born in the Republic of Ireland who did not require a passport to enter the UK
- those from other EU countries who may have arrived here using a national identity card
- those who may have acquired UK nationality but do not currently hold a passport
- those who moved here whose passport has subsequently expired or not been renewed
- those who settled in the UK under the Windrush scheme and did not require a passport
- those who arrived as children on a parent's passport

7 . Recent arrivals

Migration by most recent year of arrival

People born outside of the UK were asked when they most recently arrived to live in the UK. Migration is often temporary, and people who arrived in the UK more recently are more likely still to be present than those who arrived in earlier years. Census data can tell us how past migration patterns have contributed to the migrant population in 2021, but do not fully reflect all of the migration that took place in previous years.

Our [International migration, England and Wales: Census 2021 bulletin](#) showed that of the 10.0 million non-UK-born residents, 4.2 million (42.4%) had reported their most recent arrival in 2011 or after. The largest group of these were born in the Middle East and Asia (1.3 million, 30%), with other substantial groups being the EU14 (713,000, 17%), EU2 (565,000, 13%), EU8 (550,000, 13%) and Africa (464,000, 11%). England and Wales both show similar trends here, with the majority of those recent arrivals to Wales also born in the Middle East and Asia (29,000, 32%).

Figure 7 looks at what proportion of the non-UK-born population most recently arrived in England and Wales, in each year from the last decade. The Middle East and Asia make up a much larger proportion of those who arrived in the last three years. This reflects the large international student population from this area, and the more temporary nature of student migration. The proportion from the EU14 and Africa remains relatively stable. The EU8 shows a much lower proportion from 2015, following them making up almost 1 in 4 of those who arrived in 2013. Those born in the EU2 show a different picture, with a large increase from 2014, influenced by working restrictions for Romanian citizens being lifted in this year. The proportion of EU2-born has decreased over the last three years while the proportion of those born in the Middle East and Asia has increased.

Figure 7: The countries of birth of non-UK-born arrivals have changed over the decade

Percentage of non-UK-born residents by most recent year of arrival between 2011 and 2020 and country of birth, 2021, England and Wales

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Migration in the year prior to Census 2021

Because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, UK travel restrictions were enforced from March 2020 onwards and restrictions were also put in place in other countries across the world. As a result, migration to and from the UK in the year before the census was highly restricted.

Census 2021 asked non-UK-born residents when they most recently arrived to live in the UK, and how long they intended to stay. Migration to the UK in the year before the census can be identified by focusing only on those who arrived after March 2020 and intended to stay in the UK for 12 months or more.

The most common countries of birth for those who arrived in the year prior to the census were India (11.8%, 63,000), Romania (8.2%, 44,000), and China (6.1%, 33,000), seen in Figure 8. Compared with 2011, recent arrivals in 2021 were higher for those born in Romania, India, Nigeria and Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China), with Romania showing a much greater difference. In contrast, recent arrivals for those born in Poland and China were lower.

Figure 8: More people born in India and Romania arrived in the year before Census 2021 than in the year before the 2011 Census

Top arrivals by country of birth in year prior to Census 2021 compared with 2011, England and Wales

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Looking at the age and sex breakdowns of the top three countries of birth in Figure 9, we see that those arriving in the year before the census who were Indian born were typically aged 20 to 34 years, and consisting of slightly more men. This is also true for those born in Romania, though there is a higher proportion of men aged 40 years and over. Those born in China show a very different picture, with 56% of recent arrivals aged 20 to 24 years, and 59% of overall arrivals, being women.

Considering all those arriving in the year before the census, the median age was just 26 years compared with 40 years of age for the overall population of England and Wales. Recent arrivals are more likely to be studying and are typically younger, while longer-term residents are more settled. This can be seen in the Indian and Chinese-born arrivals, though Romanian-born arrivals show a greater similarity to the total Romanian-born population.

Figure 9: The age and sex distributions of non-UK born residents who arrived in the year prior to Census 2021 differ from the pattern for all non-UK born

Resident population by sex, five-year age bands and country of birth compared to those who arrived in year prior to Census 2021, England and Wales

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Economic activity for recent arrivals

Of those who had most recently arrived in the year prior to Census 2021 (Figure 10), we can see that a large proportion of recent arrivals tend to be economically inactive students. This group make up the majority of recent arrivals for other EU (56%) and Middle East and Asian (37%) countries of birth, and a large proportion of those from the EU14 (32%). We plan to look at international students in more detail in a future article later this year.

Other areas show a much lower proportion of economically inactive students and instead show high levels of employment, such as the EU2 (70%), Antarctica, Oceania and Other (61%), and the EU8 (61%). Of those in employment, EU2 and other non-EU-born also stands out for self-employment, with one in five self-employed (EU2, 21%; other non-EU, 19%). Similar trends can be seen when considering the types of passports held.

Figure 10: Economically inactive students make up a large proportion of people who arrived in the year before Census 2021

Economic activity by country of birth, usual residents aged 16 years and over who arrived in the year before Census 2021, 2021, England and Wales

[Download the data](#)

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Non-UK-born arrivals over the last five years by local authority

The non-UK-born population who had recently arrived in the UK can also be looked at by local authority to show important areas of movement. The proportion of all non-UK-born by local authority who arrived in the last five years is shown in Figure 11.

The local authorities with the highest proportions of non-UK-born arriving recently tend to be those with large universities such as Cambridge and Oxford. The area with the highest proportion of arrivals in the last five years was West Suffolk. This is driven primarily by American-born residents and is expected to be linked to the US RAF base in the area. In Wales, the highest proportion was in Gwynedd.

Local authorities with a low proportion of recent arrivals included Rochford, Tendring and South Staffordshire. The lowest proportion of arrivals in Wales was in Caerphilly.

Figure 11: The local authorities with the highest proportions of non-UK-born who arrived in the last five years tend to be university areas

Proportion of non-UK-born population who arrived in the past five years, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

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8 . Long-term international migration data

[Characteristics of the long-term international migrant population, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Dataset | Released 27 January 2023

Analysis of the long-term migrant population of England and Wales by country of birth, passports held and other characteristics.

9 . Glossary

Long-term international migration

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Centre for International Migration uses the UN-recommended definition of a long-term international migrant: "A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence."

EU

EU is the sum of the EU14, EU8 and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013).

EU14

EU14 is Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

EU8

EU8 is Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

EU2

EU2 is Romania and Bulgaria.

Other EU

Other EU is Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 2013).

Non-EU

Non-EU is the sum of the rest of the world including the rest of Europe. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

Other non-EU

The category "Other non-EU" refers to the following list of countries:

Albania, Andorra, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Cyprus (Non-European Union), Faroe Islands, Georgia, Guernsey, Iceland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Svalbard and Jan Mayen, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Vatican City.

Economic activity

People aged 16 years and over are economically active if, between 15 March and 21 March 2021, they were:

- in employment (an employee or self-employed)
- unemployed, but looking for work and could start within two weeks
- unemployed, but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted

It is a measure of whether or not a person was an active participant in the labour market during this period. Economically inactive are those aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 March to 21 March 2021. Or they are those aged 16 years and over who have not looked for work between 22 February to 21 March 2021 or could not start work within two weeks.

The census definition differs from International Labour Organization (ILO) definition used on the Labour Force Survey (LFS), so estimates are not directly comparable.

Employee

An employee is a person aged 16 years and over in employment doing paid work for an individual or organisation.

This relates to people's main jobs or, if not working at the time of Census 2021, their last main jobs.

Self-employed

Self-employed people aged 16 years and over who own and operate their own business, professional practice or similar enterprise, including those operated with a partner.

This relates to people's main jobs or, if not working at the time of the census, their last main jobs. This can include people who work freelance, which means someone who is self-employed and works (or worked) for different companies on particular pieces of work.

Self-employed people who are not freelance can have employees who work for them.

Industry

Classifies people aged 16 years and over who were in employment between 15 March and 21 March 2021 by the [Standard Industrial Classification \(SIC\) code](#) that represents their current industry or business.

The SIC code is assigned based on the information provided about a firm or organisation's main activity.

Employment by industry

Census estimates of the number of people employed by industry differ from estimates from the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES). BRES collects data directly from business. In contrast, the census relies on respondent information about the business they work for in their main job only. The BRES estimates are the preferred measure of the number of jobs within each industry while the census estimates allow analysis of characteristics of people working in each industry not possible with the BRES data.

10 . Data sources and quality

The census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned [National Statistics](#) status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. We ensure the census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of people who were not recorded on a census response. This means that the census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical uncertainty associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. As we round all figures individually, table totals may not sum exactly.

Quality considerations along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the specific quality considerations in our [Demography and Migration quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#) and our [Labour Market quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#). Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates report](#).

11 . Related links

[International migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 2 November 2022

International migration, including country of birth, passports held and year of arrival, Census 2021 data.

[Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: March 2021](#)

Article | Released 8 December 2022

Comparing the percentages of adults in employment and other labour market data between Census 2021 and the Labour Force Survey, and the reasons why they differ.

12 . Cite this article

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