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Results on migration from the 2020 population census round

Using Census 2021 to understand international migration in England and Wales from 2012 to 2023

Note by: Office for National Statistics

Abstract

Censuses provide an important data source for information on international migrants resident in England and Wales. In 2021, we collected a range of information on international migrants, including their country of birth, passports, year of arrival and intention to stay. This allowed us to identify both long-term and short-term migrants and produce a range of analysis on their economic and social characteristics compared to the wider population, as well as focusing on specific groups of interest such as international students and dual citizens.

The census also provided an important source for assessing the quality of our international migration estimates across the decade from 2012 to 2021. This informed revisions to our estimates of British nationals over the previous decade and helped refine our new methods for estimating international migration using administrative data. Therefore, providing confidence in our administrative-based migration estimates. This also informed how we continue to use administrative data to estimate migration in the future.

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NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

I. Introduction

1. In England and Wales, the census is undertaken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and in the past has been every 10 years. It collects information on all people and households to build a detailed snapshot of society. The most recent census was held on 21 March 2021.
2. Censuses for Scotland and Northern Ireland are run by National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency respectively.
3. The range of information collected by Census 2021 provides insight into both the number of international migrants living in England and Wales and their characteristics. It also provides a unique opportunity to assess the quality of new admin-based migration estimates and refine methods where necessary, as well as informing revisions required to migration estimates produced over the previous decade.

II. What Census 2021 told us about international migration and the characteristics of migrants.

A. Introduction

4. The outputs from Census 2021 for England and Wales were released in 2022. These included an international migration topic summary article (ONS, 2022) providing univariate data and supporting information on country of birth, passports held, address one year before the census and year of arrival.
5. Census 2021 showed that:
 - i. one in six usual residents of England and Wales were born outside the UK, an increase of 2.5 million since 2011, from 7.5 million (13.4%) to 10 million (16.8%),
 - ii. 5.9 million usual residents (9.9%) held a non-UK passport,
 - iii. 545,000 usual residents (0.9% of the population) had an address outside the UK one year before the census, down 11.0% from 612,000 (1.1%) in 2011.
6. A series of in-depth articles have subsequently been published based on multivariate census data. This more detailed data allows further analysis of the characteristics of different groups of international migrants, such as those staying long-term and short-term, international students and dual citizens.

B. Long-term international migration

7. Long-term international migrants in Census 2021 analysis were defined in line with the UN definition of a person who has moved to a country other than that of their usual residence for a period of at least 12 months, using two primary approaches:
 - i. those born outside the UK, who therefore have migrated to the UK at some point in the past,
 - ii. those who hold a non-UK passport (used to indicate a person's nationality).

8. Initial analysis of long-term international migration (ONS, 2023a) looked at the geographical distribution of long-term international migrants at regional and local level; economic status of migrants, such as employment rates and industries of employment; and the most common non-UK countries of birth and their passports held. A further article exploring the social characteristics of long-term international migrants (ONS, 2023b) covered topics such as the age, sex, housing, family, language, health, qualifications, religion, national identity and ethnicity of the non-UK-born population.
9. Between 2011 and 2021, the proportion of non-UK-born residents 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.
10. People born in Romania and Bulgaria (EU2) and EU8 countries had the highest employment rates in 2021. The most common industry of employment for EU-born migrants 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%).
11. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were the top three countries of birth with the highest number of UK passport holders. Overall, EU-born residents are less likely to hold a UK passport.
12. Those who had arrived in the year prior to Census 2021, were more likely to be economically inactive students; have been born in the Middle East and Asia (reflecting the large international student population from this area); and have a younger age profile than for all non-UK-born residents.
13. Most non-UK-born usual residents had high levels of English proficiency; 87% of recent arrivals between 2011 and 2021 reported speaking English very well or well, or having it as a main language.
14. The proportion of non-UK-born residents (43%) who lived in owner-occupied accommodation was lower than UK-born (67%); however, 57% of non-UK-born who had been in the UK for at least 10 years lived in owner-occupied accommodation.
15. Those who arrived in the UK earlier were more likely to describe their national identity as being one from the UK only. For example, 81% of non-EU-born residents who arrived between 1981 and 1990 reported an identity from the UK only, compared with 20% who arrived between 2011 and 2021.

C. Short-term international migration

16. Short-term international migrants in Census 2021 analysis were defined as those who met all of the following criteria:
 - i. born outside the UK,
 - ii. arrived within a year before census day,
 - iii. intended to stay for a period of between 3 and 12 months (those intending to stay for less than 3 months were not asked to answer Census 2021).
17. Analysis of this group (ONS, 2023c) covered their country of birth, economic activity, and industry as well as other characteristics such as age, sex and geographical distribution.
18. There were 136,000 non-UK-born short-term residents recorded by Census 2021; 45% were men and 55% were women, while a third (33%) were aged between 20 and 24 years.

19. Compared with the 2011 Census, the proportion of EU-born short-term residents fell from 35% to 25% in 2021, while the proportion of non-EU-born residents rose from 65% to 75%.
20. Almost a third of non-UK-born short-term residents lived in London (29%).
21. China was the most common country of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents (21%) followed by India (10%) and Romania (5%).
22. Of non-UK-born short-term residents, 42% were economically inactive students, with 45% of this population born in China.

D. International students

23. For the purpose of analysing Census 2021 data, international students were defined as those who met all of the following criteria:
 - i. in full-time education,
 - ii. non-UK-born,
 - iii. non-UK passport holder,
 - iv. aged 17 years or over upon most recent arrival in the UK,
 - v. aged 18 years or over on Census Day.
24. The country of birth, age, sex, employment status, industry, housing type and language spoken of international students was analysed in the article ‘The international student population in England and Wales: Census 2021’ (ONS, 2023d).
25. There were 373,600 non-UK-born, non-UK passport holding international students in England and Wales at the time of Census 2021.
26. India (11.6%), China (11.2%), Romania (9.5%) and Nigeria (5.3%) were the top four individual countries of birth of international students.
27. A third of the international student population was in London (33.9%).
28. One in three international students were in employment; Eastern European countries had the highest proportions in employment alongside studying (Romania, 73.9%; Bulgaria, 62.3%; Poland, 56.7%, and Lithuania, 56.0%).
29. Of the international students whose preferred main language was not English (239,000, 64.0%), 59.3% and 35.5% reported being able to speak English very well and well respectively.

E. Dual citizens

30. Analysis of dual citizens in Census 2021 data (ONS, 2023e) uses data on passports held, as direct information on citizenship was not collected. It is possible to use this to look at both international migrants who have or have not gained a UK passport, as well as UK-born citizens who may also hold non-UK passports.
31. In 2021, across England and Wales, 1.26 million usual residents held multiple passports (2.1%), up from 612,000 (1.1%) in 2011.

32. Overall, 1.2% of UK-born residents were UK-other dual citizens (587,600), rising from 0.5% in 2011 (231,600); for non-UK-born residents, 6.5% were UK-other dual citizens in 2021 (648,700), rising from 5.1% in 2011 (381,200).
33. The proportion of people holding both UK and EU passports increased by five times for UK-born residents and threefold for non-UK-born residents since 2011. UK-Irish passports also saw a sixfold increase for UK-born residents.
34. The majority of UK-other dual citizens identified with a UK national identity, and this increased notably the longer people had lived in the UK.

III. Using Census 2021 to assure estimates of international migration over the last decade

F. Introduction

35. Census-based mid-year estimates are the official mid-2021 population estimates, these are based on Census 2021 for England and Wales.
36. The 2021 rolled-forward mid-year estimates use the population estimate from the previous reference date (2020 in this instance) as the starting point for estimating the population at the current reference date. The previous population estimate is aged on and data on births, deaths and migration are used to reflect population change during the reference period. This process has been repeated each year since the last reconciliation and rebasing exercise took place with the 2011 Census.
37. The 2021 rolled-forward mid-year estimates (MYE) for England and Wales were 268,500 higher than Census 2021-based MYE.
38. The main components that could contribute to this difference for England and Wales are:
 - i. births,
 - ii. deaths,
 - iii. net migration,
 - iv. variability in Census 2021 estimates,
 - v. cross border flows between England and Wales and the other countries of the UK,
 - vi. the 2011 Census population base
39. The registration of births and deaths that occur in the UK is compulsory, and the data quality is high overall, any attribution of differences to these causes will be relatively small. There is no evidence to show that there is any substantial error in the cross-border flows to and from Scotland and Northern Ireland.
40. At the England and Wales level, an overestimation of net international migration is likely to be the main contributor to the difference seen between the 2021 rolled forward MYE and the Census 2021-based MYE. For the majority of the decade this component was produced using survey-based estimates.

G. Admin-based migration estimates

41. International migration statistics for the UK have historically been measured using the International Passenger Survey (IPS), a face-to-face survey at most air and sea-ports in the UK. The IPS measures a migrant's intention to stay in or depart from the UK long-term (for 12 months or more). Previous analysis has demonstrated that certain groups of migrants have a higher degree of uncertainty in their intentions to move to and from the UK (ONS, 2019). Therefore, it has long-been acknowledged that the reliance on the IPS for migration statistics stretched it beyond its original purpose.
42. These findings led the ONS to launch a transformation programme in 2019, focusing on measuring migration using administrative data first and foremost.
43. In 2020 when the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic stopped international travel, the IPS was also suspended. In response, we accelerated our approach for transforming migration statistics using administrative data supported by statistical modelling.
44. Although the IPS resumed operation in January 2021, we continue to focus on using administrative data to estimate international migration. Its migrant focused shifts, aimed at specifically boosting the number of migrant contacts, are no longer being run and therefore recent IPS data is even more limited than it was previously. .
45. Since May 2022 we have produced estimates of international migration using administrative data (UNECE, 2022). Our research since then has focused on replicating these methods to estimate international migration using administrative data for the intercensal period between 2012 and 2021.

H. Revised admin-based migration estimates from 2012 to 2021

46. ONS published an article in 2023 (ONS, 2023f) that provided information on the methods used to update our long-term international migration estimates to and from the UK, including comparisons with other data sources. This demonstrated confidence in these updates figures and provided a better understanding about migration patterns over the last decade.

1. British Nationals

47. Using administrative data to measure international migration of British nationals is more difficult as there are many reasons they could stop interacting with administrative systems but remain living in the UK, for example to study.
48. Therefore migration estimates for British Nationals are still predominantly based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS).
49. However, census data provides an alternative source for estimating international migration of British nationals to and from England and Wales over the decade from 2011 to 2021, by looking at changes in the UK-born population and adjusting this to estimate migration of British nationals.
50. Change in the UK-born population in England and Wales between the 2011 Census and Census 2021 is the result of:

- i. Births

- ii. Deaths
 - iii. cross-border migration to Scotland and Northern Ireland
 - iv. international migration
51. This analysis has suggested that there was net migration of British nationals from the UK of negative 787,000 between 2011 and 2021.
 52. The IPS estimated that 317,000 more people left the UK than arrived over the same period. This was considerably lower than the level of migration indicated by evidence from the census.
 53. Therefore, based on this evidence from the census we changed our estimates of net migration of British nationals by approximately negative 471,000 over the decade compared with our previous best estimates. As the IPS consistently showed British nationals left the UK over the decade, we believe it is more likely to be caused by missed emigration and have attributed most of this adjustment to emigration.

2. EU Nationals

54. We use interactions with the tax and benefits system to estimate international migration of EU nationals over the decade.
55. These show consistently higher levels of net migration than our previous IPS based estimates, however evidence suggested that the IPS was underestimating the migration of EU nationals who had more uncertain intentions to move to or from the UK.
56. Our initial research using the tax and benefits data included 4 arrival categories. The first two most closely align with the UN definition of a long-term migrant. However, we expanded on this definition of long-term activity in order to reflect the complexity of people's lives. This created two further categories which only make up a small proportion of total arrivals.
57. However, as these additional categories do not align with the UN definition of a long-term migrant, we have since removed these from our estimates. This is supported by analysis from Census 2021, which suggested that including these arrivals expanded too far on the UN definition of long-term migration.
58. After these additional categories had been removed the updated admin-based estimates for EU nationals were around 98,000 higher than the Census 2021 implied immigration, based on passports held as an indicator for nationality. The census likely underestimates migration to the UK because it is an estimate for England and Wales rather than the UK as whole. It only reflects intentions, which, as evidenced previously, do not always reflect actual migration behaviours, and is based on passports held; EU passport holders who also held a UK passport were not included in the census EU estimate.

3. Non-EU Nationals

59. We use visa data linked to travel events to estimate international migration of non-EU nationals.
60. Census 2021 implied immigration, based on passports held as an indicator of nationality, shows 264,000 non-EU nationals having arrived in England and Wales in the YE March

2021. This is about 29,000, or 11%, lower than the estimate for the same time-point in the updated UK back series.

IV. Conclusion and Future developments

61. Census 2021 provided a unique insight into the characteristics of international migrants living in the UK in 2021.
62. Census 2021 also provided an insight into international migration across the last decade. Along with other comparator sources, it provided confidence in our admin-based migration estimates for EU and non-EU nationals and evidence to support the need to revise our methods for measuring British nationals.
63. Our next steps for further improving UK level international migration estimates are focused on producing admin-based migration estimates for British Nationals, which still relies on the International Passenger Survey.

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