

Immigration – Myths, Perceptions and Reality

How many immigrants are there in the UK and aren't there too many? The total population at the Census in 2011 by the Office of National Statistics was 63.3 million, of which 56.1 million were in England and Wales. The increase since the previous census in 2001 had been the greatest since the first national census in 1801. The 2011 Census found that foreign-born residents of the UK were 13.1% of the UK population. More than 31% had come from three countries, Poland, Ireland and India.¹

The UK population has continued to grow at the fastest rate of all 27 countries in the Europe Union. The numbers from Europe and non-European countries have out-stripped the numbers leaving the UK and births in the UK. If the current trends continue, the population is expected to reach 67.2 million in 2020.²

These numbers for UK immigration cause concern for many UK-born people and for some longer-term immigrants. The immigrants are not, of course, distributed evenly across the UK although the high levels of segregation in such cities as Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester and Bradford are declining steadily as immigrants move into rural areas. The southeast of England saw the highest increase in 2001-11 of foreign-born residents. London had the biggest increase and now is 37%.³

But the rapid changes in the UK population over recent decades seem to have had a disproportionate effect on attitudes towards immigration. Many numbers and figures on immigration and attitudes are presented as information for the public by many different organisations some of which cannot be described as impartial. With wildly different interpretations and commentaries on reports, the result is few surveys are trusted by the public, even those issued by the Office of National Statistics. Finding reliable, understandable information is not easy. Surveys by reliable survey organisations often associated with universities are widely relied upon. Comments on such surveys by broadsheet newspapers such as the Financial Times, The Independent and The Guardian and television journalists, particularly of the BBC, would seem to reach large numbers and be influential.

An unusual survey was published in 2014 and received wide attention from the media. "Perception and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration" by Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith, senior researchers from the Ipsos-Mori Social Research Institute, is a summary of surveys and reports on immigration numbers and attitudes. It is the major source of information for this PAP Issues Paper.⁴

Terms such as "immigrant" and even "foreign-born" are hardly precise. Many people born outside of the UK and now resident in the UK are children of British parents and arrived after the independence of British colonies and possessions around the world. Today, many British parents resident abroad register their children as British citizens in consular offices.

Another reservation concerns the meaning of "British" since it appears to differ according to the views of respondents to surveys. An interesting aside comes from the study funded since 2004 by the Wellcome Trust of the DNA in regions of the UK, "The People of the British Isles". The study has found 17 genetic "tribes" and their continuity in DNA since the final phase of Anglo-Saxon settlement around 600 AD, over 1400 years. These findings destroy myths such as the existence of a "Celtic nation". The DNA shows the groups in the Celtic fringe relate closer to their Romano-British neighbours than to other Celtic tribes. Those attracted by the apparent scientific proof of the continuity of the British nations are confronted by a leader of the study at the Centre for Human Genetics at Oxford. Professor Peter Donnelly states, "(The study) reminds us that everyone in Britain is an immigrant. It is only a question of when people arrived." ⁵

Whether it is the numbers, the rapidity of the recent increase in immigrants or other causes, the concern of the British about immigration is evident. Perhaps surprising is the level of concern of the British is much greater than that of the people in other European countries, including those which have admitted greater proportions of immigrants. Concern may not, of course, mean hostility to immigration. But again, the proportion of the British who see immigration as a major national concern (c.43%) compared to European neighbours (c. 10%), is much higher when asked if it is seen as a problem (c. 64% in UK: Europe, a range between 22% in Sweden and 52% in Slovakia). Similarly, when asked if they see immigration as an opportunity, respondents with concern in UK record 29% whereas respondents in Sweden record 68%. The British figure is the lowest of the range, apart from Slovakia which records 16%. ⁶

When asked to estimate the types of migration, British errors in perceptions about immigration become very evident. In a survey conducted by Ipsos-Mori in 2011, the most mentioned were refugees/asylum-seekers at 62%, an overestimation by a factor of 10. The least mentioned type of migrant were students at about 17% whereas all the data sources agree persons coming to the UK for formal study are the largest type at about 35%. This mis-estimate may be driven by the limited time stayed in the UK by 85% of the students who will have left this country within five years. Further surveys have refined the figure for asylum-seekers. When asked in 2013 by Ipsos-Mori to estimate the proportion of asylum-seekers, the British respondents gave an average estimate of 21%, a much more accurate figure but still three times the real proportion. ⁷

These very flexible estimates by British respondents, usually overestimations, are again different from the responses of residents in other European countries who are generally more accurate. It suggests the British answers are influenced by "directional goals" or "emotional innumeracy". These technical terms mean that the answers, consciously or otherwise, reflect a measure of the concern of the respondents about immigration. This can be tested. If rewards are promised for the accuracy of the answers, the answers are much less wrong. ⁸

What are the concerns of the British who see immigration as a problem? The many surveys have shown that most of these can be gathered into four main

headings – Abuse of benefits/burden on public services, Pressure on jobs/employment, Too many immigrants/asylum-seekers and Lack of effective controls/policies. Like the estimates above, these can vary greatly depending on economic conditions and mentions in newspapers and media, sometimes of very isolated and exceptional incidents. The obvious example is that of Pressure on jobs/employment which suddenly became the principal concern at a time of high unemployment in 2008-9 and which fell away just as suddenly as the jobs market recovered.⁹

There is one outstanding concern mentioned by people who see immigration as a problem. Abuse of benefits/burden on public services ranks much higher than the other main concerns above at about 45%. The other main concerns as well as the minor concerns all fit in a range between 33% (jobs/employment) and 5% (Crime/anti-social behaviour). The concentration of the respondents on economic matters hardly fits the facts. The age profile of migrants makes it probable they will be net contributors. The UK avoids having to educate working age adults although any children arriving with them may draw on the UK's state schooling. The increase in working adults lowers the "dependency ratio" between worker and the unemployed, including the retired. The migrants pay towards the costs of benefits and pensions for the natives.

In 2004-8 following the enlargement of the European Union by the "Accession 8" countries of Eastern Europe the migrants with free access to the UK had high employment rates. They are 59% less likely to be in receipt of benefits and 57% less likely to live in social housing than UK-born residents. People from the A8 countries made less than 1% of the claims for working age benefits in February 2012 while being 2% of the UK population according to the 2011 Census.¹⁰

The economic contribution of migrants is considered most important by UK residents just as they apply it to natives. In November 2014, the Financial Times reported research by academics of University College London in response to claims by Conservative politicians that migrants are "benefit tourists". The findings are that European migrants, the majority from the A8 countries since 2004, made a net fiscal contribution to the UK of £20 billion. The research has found EU migrants are younger than the average UK-born resident and more likely to have better educations, including degrees.

The pattern of concerns is different between British social groups. The better off highlight concern for the impact of immigration on public services and benefits. They are less affected by employment and housing pressures. So this perception of pressure on public services appears across all British social classes albeit for different reasons.¹¹

The attitudes of UK residents are more positive than residents in other European countries in one area of contributions by immigrants. When asked whether the contributions by immigrants make the UK a better place to live, the response is more positive in the UK than in most European countries apart from Sweden, Poland and Germany.¹² Among the reasons given by the British people as to why they see immigration as a very big or fairly big problem, "Community tension/lack of integration" is seen as a relatively minor concern.

Researchers approach the issue of integration or “values convergence” by asking UK residents who are UK-born with British parents and foreign-born UK residents such questions as “How British do you feel you are?” or “Do you feel you belong to the UK?” The results are that both groups feel almost the same at 80-85%. Recent immigrants have, as might be expected, a lower sense of belonging to Britain. But they are balanced by the responses at 92% of the longer-term immigrants who have a much stronger sense of belonging, even stronger than the native British.¹³

At 84%, the sense of belonging may be reduced for the natives by immigration, either because they believe immigrants are integrating or they believe immigrants are not integrating or not at the speed they require. The views of the British towards the need for integration are a lot lower than those of other European nations. The British appear to have a greater tolerance of difference. The outstanding requirement of immigrants by the British is for them to speak and understand English, followed by lesser requirements that immigrants “obey our laws and pay their taxes”.

Why do the British see immigration as such a major national concern? Why are their perceptions about immigration so markedly different from reality? Surely it cannot be explained by lasting effects of the “Rivers of Blood” speech in April 1968 by Enoch Powell (although the Conservative politician did not use the expression in his speech).¹⁴ Whatever the sources and causes of British attitudes towards immigration, attitudes are very difficult to change. In the view of the Ipsos-Mori report, “the real driver of views is the vivid anecdote which may be based on vanishingly small (but correct) instances”.¹⁵

Is the spirit of the infamous (in the view of the writer) “Rivers of Blood” speech still alive and kicking?

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1 ONS (2012) 2011 Census

2 ONS (2011) Summary: UK Population Projected

3 ONS (2012) International Migrants in England and Wales 2011

4 Ipsos-Mori “Perception and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration” (January 2014) is available as a free download on https://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1634_sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf

5 See The Independent 21.3.2015 on study published in journal *Nature*.

6 Ipsos-Mori p. 14.

7 *ibid*, p.76.

8 *ibid*, p.27.

9 *ibid*, p.52.

10 *ibid*, p.46

11 Financial Times, 5.11.14. See <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c49043a8-6447-11e4-b219-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3VK2ACbYb>

12 Ipsos-Mori p.66.

13 *ibid*, p. 67.

14 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivers_of_Blood_speech

15 Ipsos-Mori p.97.