



A Migration Revolution

What new ONS data tells us about Britain's demographic transformation

By Karl Williams

Overview

Britain has gone through a period of unprecedented mass migration. As we pointed out in a major CPS paper on immigration policy last year, 'Taking Back Control', cumulative net migration went from 68,000 in the 25 years before Tony Blair's election to at least 5.89 million in the 25 years after it. We showed that since 2010, migration had added almost four million people to the population – the equivalent of the populations of Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, Stoke, Bristol and Cardiff put together. Data from the last census pointed to even greater churn, with just under seven million people in England and Wales saying they had arrived in the UK between 2001 and 2021.¹

Yet new figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest that we have still been underestimating the impact of migration on Britain's demography – not least because of an undetected surge in emigration of British nationals.

For more than two decades, the ONS and others have been aware of major flaws in our official migration statistics. In particular, the only data we had for who was entering and exiting the country was the International Passenger Survey (IPS) – literally people with clipboards approaching travellers at airports – which had originally been designed for monitoring tourism, not migration.² These problems have been compounded by the impact of the pandemic on both the ONS's day-to-day work and the 2021 census.³

The ONS has gradually been moving towards using administrative data (such as HMRC payroll data, National Insurance numbers issued and so on) rather than surveys. Hence in part the repeated, retrospective revisions to the ONS Long-term International Migration (LTIM) statistics over recent years.

The latest improvements to the LTIM data focused on EU and British nationals, long known to be areas of relative weakness.⁴ The data revised was for the 2021-24 period – since the new, post-Brexit immigration system was put in place under Boris Johnson. And what it reveals is an extraordinary level of demographic churn.

Immigration and net migration

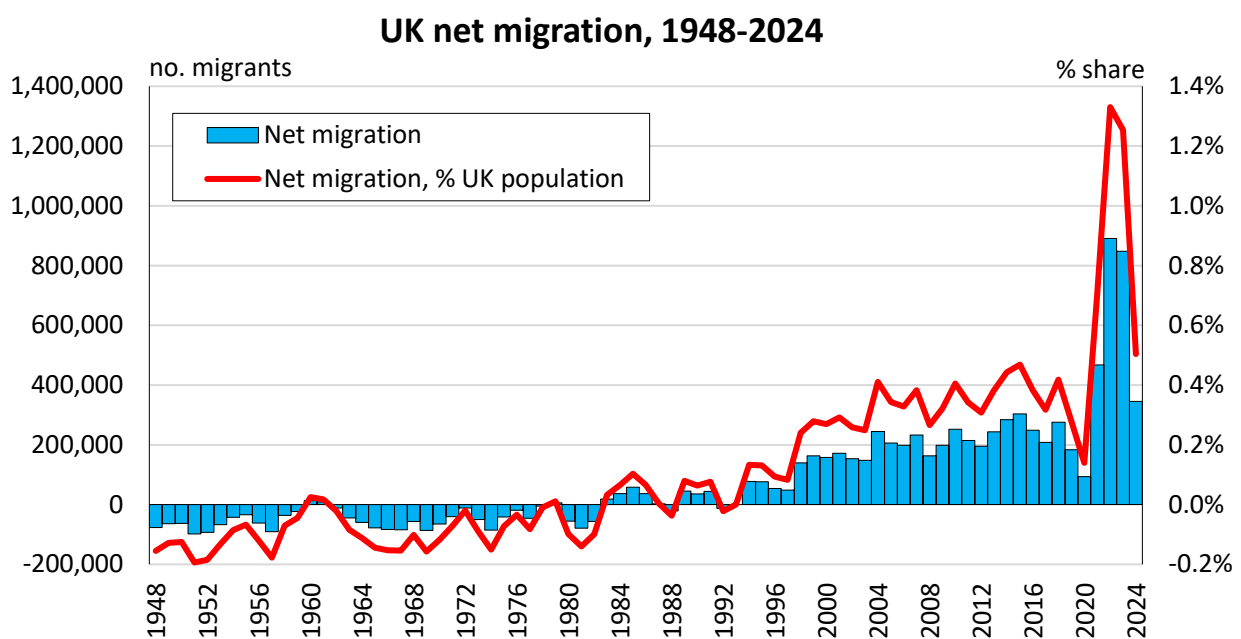
As everyone knows, Britain has experienced a massive surge in immigration in recent years, starting in January 2021 when the new immigration system came into force. The highly online term for this phenomenon is 'the Boriswave', a label which now seems to have gone mainstream in Westminster.

If the latest migration data is anything like correct, then at least in terms of pure magnitude, the 'Boriswave' has some claim to be the single most significant demographic event in modern British history.



In terms of overall migration of British, EU and non-EU nationals over 2021-24:

- Net migration peaked at 944,000 in the year to March 2023. This was almost four times the average annual inflow in the 2010s (241,000), and almost three times the pre-2021 record of 321,000 in the year to June 2016, immediately before the EU referendum.
- The inflow over 2021-24 was 4.80 million people and net immigration was 2.55 million people, equivalent to population growth of 3.8%.
- Net migration accounted for 99.1% of the net increase in the population of the UK over this period.
- ONS and Bank of England population data shows that 2022, 2023 and 2024 were the three fastest years for population growth since the 1940s. One of them, 2022, saw the fastest rate of population growth since 1828.⁵
- In numerical terms, the population increased by more in each of 2022, 2023 and 2024 than in any other year in British history since at least 1701 (which is as far back as Bank of England data for Great Britain and Northern Ireland goes).
- We now know that net migration has added just over five million people to the population since the start of 2010 – the equivalent of the populations of Birmingham, Glasgow, Newcastle and Portsmouth.

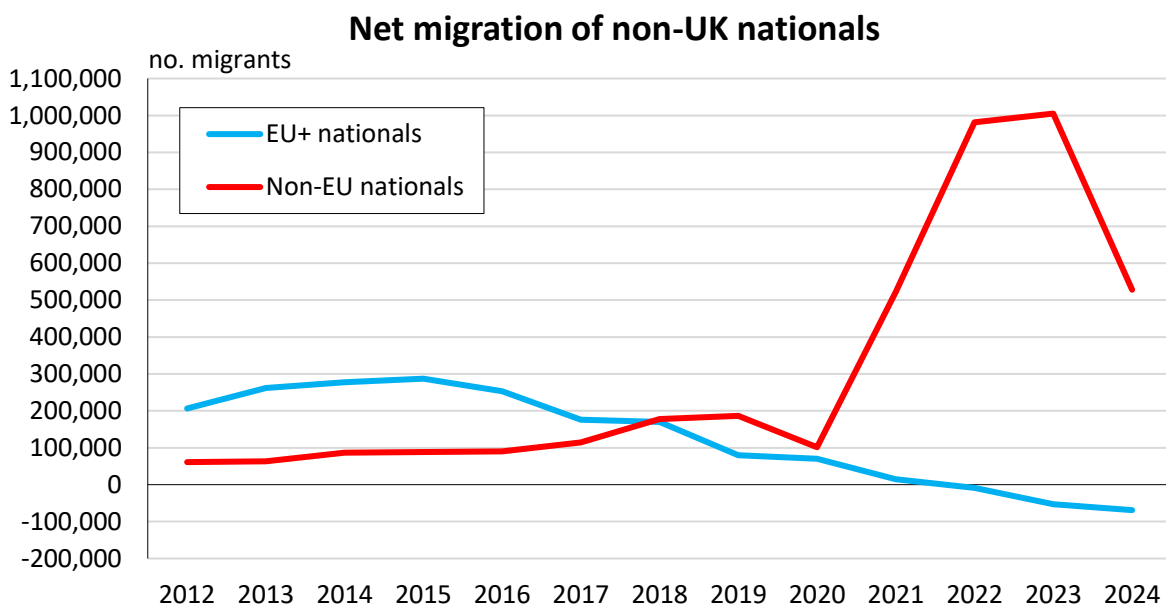


Sources: ONS, BoE, CPS analysis



In terms of the inflows and outflows of non-British nationals over 2021-24:

- The inflow was 4.18 million people but this was counterbalanced by departures, resulting in net migration of non-British nationals of 2.92 million.
- This is equivalent to about 4.4% of the pre-Boriswave population. To put it another way, at least one in every 25 people walking the streets of Britain today has arrived in the last four years.
- According to the 2021 Census data, the foreign-born share of the UK population was 16.0% in 2021, but rough calculations suggest that due to the Boriswave, around 19.6% of the population is now foreign-born.
- Given that it took 20 years for the foreign-born share of the population to increase from 8.3% in 2001 to 16.0% in 2021, an increase of around 3.6pp in just four years would represent a marked acceleration in the rise of the foreign-born share of the population.⁶
- The net outflow of EU nationals is now thought to be have been around 116,000 over 2021-24 rather than 316,000 – but with a net inflow of non-EU nationals exceeding three million, the composition of migration has still decisively shifted towards non-EU migration since 2016 and especially 2020.



Source: ONS



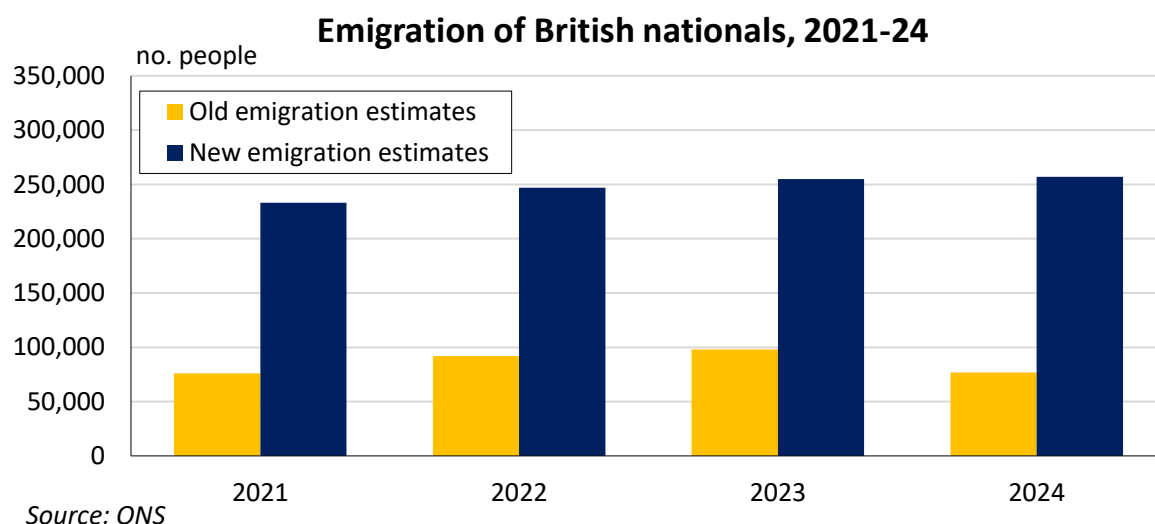
Emigration of British nationals

The big surprise in the new data, however, was not about the numbers rising but the numbers leaving.

A mountain of anecdotal evidence has built up in recent years pointing towards an exodus of young, ambitious Britons for better wages, lower taxes, cheaper housing and better weather.⁷ But this 'brain drain' was showing up everywhere apart from the actual migration data.

Yet the shift away from the International Passenger Survey has resulted in a dramatic shift in the numbers.

- Whereas previously it was thought that around 332,000 British nationals had emigrated over the 2021-4 period, the new ONS data puts this number at 992,000 – 190% higher than thought, and an average of 679 per day.⁸
- With 623,000 British nationals returning to the UK, the net outflow was 368,000 – equivalent to about 0.55% of the population at the end of 2020.⁹
- We cannot be as sure of the emigration figures for the years before 2021, due to the shift in methodology. But even within the four years of new data we have, there has been an acceleration: the annual net outflow in 2022 (the first year after the pandemic) was 81,000 but by 2024 that had risen by 40% to 114,000.
- The rise in net emigration is also being driven by a fall in the number of British nationals returning to the UK – just 143,000 in 2024, down from 166,000 in 2022.
- The gross outflow of British nationals reached a peak of 259,000 in the year to September 2024, equivalent to around 0.37% of the whole population.
- If pre-2021 data is to be trusted,¹⁰ then this would represent the largest gross outflow of British citizens in numerical terms since at least 1964, when the data series began, and as a share of population, the largest outflow since 1970 (0.39% of the population).





Conclusion

Whatever your position in the migration debate – whether you think it has been broadly positive for the country, or broadly negative, that we have got the composition mostly right or completely wrong – there is no arguing that the spike in migration in recent years, coupled with the newly revealed rise in emigration, has had an outsize and very probably historically unprecedented impact on Britain's demography.

Sadly, there is still far too much we do not know about the scale, nature and composition of recent migration, and indeed about what the new arrivals are actually doing. Many of the economic indicators previously relied on by the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) – notably the Labour Force Survey (LFS) – have been essentially useless since the pandemic, when survey response rates fell off a cliff.^{11 12}

The data released this week underscores how damaging the lack of proper data has been for policy-making.

Population and migration is relevant to virtually every area of policy, from what estimates of tax revenue and public expenditure the Chancellor should pencil in, to how high interest rates should be, how many houses we need to build or what infrastructure we need.¹³ For example, if we had known more about the scale of emigration, and had a better idea of the kinds of people who were leaving, action might have been taken on taxation and the cost of living to stem the flow of Brits leaving the country.

Even with this improved ONS data, there is still a great deal we don't know about how the population has changed in recent years. We have some aggregate numbers, and regional breakdowns, but given the level of churn, we don't really know who is here (and who has left), where they are living, and what they are doing for work.

In light of these unprecedented demographic changes, and the persistent question mark over the reliability of the official population and migration data, there is therefore a strong case to be made for an emergency census in 2026, as political commentators such as Rakib Ehsan have urged.¹⁴ Indeed, the idea of an emergency census in 2026 was floated by academics at the time of the 2021 census.¹⁵

Alongside the ongoing efforts of the ONS to tighten up migration data, an emergency census could restore trust in the population data and make for better, more evidence-based policy. As it is, we still only have a relatively hazy picture of this extraordinary demographic phenomenon.

Karl Williams is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Studies



Endnotes

¹ R. Jenrick, N. O'Brien & K. Williams, 'Taking Back Control', CPS (May 2024). [Link](#)

² On the IPS methodology, see: C. Culwick, 'International passenger survey methodology', ONS (6 October 2023). [Link](#)

³ Moreover, estimates for the population of illegal migrants living in Britain range from around 700,000 to 1.2 million, and are mostly from the 2010s, so numbers might well be even higher now, with the population of Britain perhaps 1-2% bigger than can be captured in official data. See: M. Cubius & P. Walsh, 'Unauthorised migration in the UK', Migration Observatory (21 January 2025). [Link](#)

⁴ ONS, 'Improving long-term international migration statistics, updating our methods and estimates: November 2025' (18 November 2025). [Link](#)

⁵ BoE, 'A millennium of macroeconomic data for the UK' (30 April 2017). [Link](#)

⁶ Census data for 2011 and 2001 (and earlier census) is available via Nomis. See: Nomis, 'Census of Population'. [Link](#)

⁷ S. Payne, 'We must find a way to keep our brightest young people', *The Times* (21 August 2025). [Link](#)

⁸ ONS, 'Improving long-term international migration statistics; updating our methods and estimates' (18 November 2025). [Link](#)

⁹ For UK population data since 1955, see: ONS, 'UK resident population: mid-year estimates (Qtly data interpolated)' (13 November 2025). [Link](#). For older data see: BoE, 'A millennium of macroeconomic data for the UK' (30 April 2017). [Link](#)

¹⁰ The older ONS data has not been revised and relies on the IPS still. However, it is the only data we have. See: ONS, 'Dataset: Long-term international migration 2.00, citizenship, UK (Discontinued after 2019)' (26 November 2020). [Link](#).

¹¹ M. Khan, 'Mansion House speech: Andrew Bailey says poor jobs data 'a substantial problem'', *The Times* (14 November 2024). [Link](#)

¹² See for example: M. Simmons, 'Datageddon: Britain's stats have become dangerously unreliable', *The Spectator* (1 November 2025). [Link](#)

¹³ Indeed, as the CPS argued in 'Taking Back Control', the inability of our capital stock – houses, roads, rail stations, GP surgeries, machinery and so on – to keep pace with immigration-driven population growth is likely a significant factor in Britain's economic stagnation. See: R. Jenrick, N. O'Brien & K. Williams, 'Taking Back Control', CPS (May 2024). [Link](#)

¹⁴ R. Ehsan, 'Britain needs an emergency census', *UnHerd* (2 January 2025). [Link](#)

¹⁵ M. Savage, 'Emergency census in 2026 'needed to show true picture of UK'', *The Guardian* (14 March 2021). [Link](#)