

International migration, population growth and households in the UK 1992 - 2019

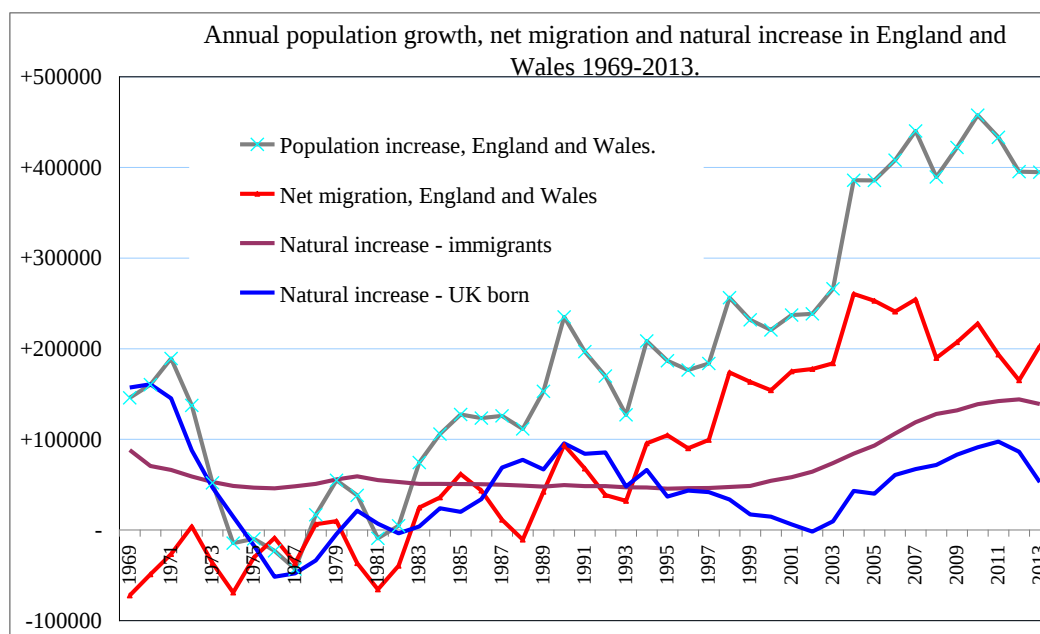
This paper estimates the contribution of international migration to the increase in the number of households in the UK from 1992 to 2019. It uses data from the household version of the Labour Force Surveys to estimate the change over time in the proportion of households headed by persons born outside the United Kingdom. It concludes that over 50% of UK household growth from 1992 to 2014 was the direct consequence of international migration to the UK, and over 60% of the increase after 1996. That will have had substantial implications for the demand for housing, most notably for the proportion of the additions to the housing stock needed to accommodate households arising from international migration to the UK. This predominant effect on the demand for housing is seldom mentioned in arguments about the current housing crisis.

Migration and population growth

International migration is now the chief driver of population growth in the UK. This is relatively new. In most years until the late 1980s net migration was negative. But from 1991 to 2001 net international migration rose to account for 44 percent of the increase in the population of the UK and by 2001-2013 for 56 percent. If the contribution to population growth from the natural increase of immigrants in the UK is also included, then migration accounted for over 80% of population growth from 2001 to 2013 (ref to previous paper). The relative contribution to population growth of net migration and of the natural increase of UK born and of immigrant residents of England and Wales from 1969 to 2012 is shown in Figure 1. The natural increase of the UK-born population of England and Wales (that is, the annual excess of births over deaths) has been the smallest component of population growth since 1997, and net migration the dominant one¹.

Figure 1. Source: data from Office of National Statistics.

¹ Calculations of natural increase are easier for England and Wales, which comprises 89% of the population of the UK. The need to refer to data for England and Wales, or England alone, as a surrogate for UK-wide data reflects the weakness of our national statistics and will be a recurrent feature of this paper.



Household growth, population growth and migration

Household growth is driven by population growth, changes in the age-structure of the population, and social changes and birth and death rates that influence the number of people living by themselves and in households of different sizes. For most of the 20th century the number of households rose faster than population growth, as average household size fell: in England and Wales from 4.32 persons in 1911 to 2.42 in 1991 (ONS 2011). Family size has declined. The proportion of one-person households has more than doubled since 1961. Households of three people or more have become relatively less frequent. More recently, however, those social trends have slowed and since the 1990s average household size has changed little (Holmans 2014, ONS 2011, 2014), with result that population growth² has been accounting for more and more of the increase in the number of households³. Between 2001 and 2011 single-person households increased less than expected, especially middle and older-age persons, living instead in multi-person households. Housing shortages, and housing costs, have contributed to this. More young people continued to live with their parents, marriage and union formation, and home ownership, have been delayed. The unusually large number of immigrants in recent years had a household formation rate which was initially lower, at any given age, than that of the population as a whole (Holmans 2013). Since the 1990s therefore the increase in the number of households has mostly been due to population growth.

² The relevant population here is the household population; that part of the population living in private households, not in communal establishments of various kinds. For example in 2011 the total population of England and Wales was 56.1 million while the household population was 55.1 million, the latter being almost 2 percent smaller than the total population.

³ For the 2011 census a household was defined as: *'one person living alone; or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area'*.

By contrast population growth in England and Wales, from being nearly zero in the 1980s, greatly increased since 2001, mostly through the contributions of net international migration, directly through net migration and indirectly through the natural increase of the immigrant population (Figure 1). In the decade up to 2011, the household population grew by 3.964 million or 7.8%, the greatest increase ever (ONS 2012; Figures 1, 9 and 10) and the highest intercensal percentage growth since the 19th century.

The ONS has not analysed the relative quantitative roles of population growth, migration and social trends in past and current household formation and there seems to be no prospect of its doing so (ONS reply to Parliamentary Question HL4978, February 2015). In the absence of official estimates this paper aims to throw some light on the issue.

Basic data on household population and households from 1961 to 2021 for England and Wales are given in Table 1. (as noted above, data for England and Wales are often more readily available than for the UK).

Table1.

Household population and households , England and Wales

1961-2021

year of census	total population (thousands)	household population (thousands)	households (thousands)	mean household size
1961	46105	44953	14641	3.064
1971	48750	47296	16434	2.898
1981	49634	47948	17706	2.708
1991	51099	49135	20279	2.423
2001	52360	51108	21660	2.360
2011	56076	55071	23366	2.357
2021	59642	58556	24783	2.363

Sources: ONS 2012, 2022 Census- Population and Household Estimates

for England and Wales, March 2011. Data from Figure 9, Number of household residents and households 1911-2021, 16 July 2012.

The role of international migration in household growth.

As population growth is now driving most of the increase in households in the UK, and as at least one half of population growth arises from net immigration, it must follow that a substantial and increasing element of household growth in the UK must be driven by the latter. Data from successive Labour Force Surveys (LFS), presented here, shows that this is indeed the case. We demonstrate this by comparing in successive years the relative

number of households identified as having a ‘household reference person (HRP)’⁴ born respectively in the UK, and outside the UK. The number of households is taken to be the number of ‘household reference persons’. That is usually identical to the number of ‘heads of household (HoH)’ in older terminology and is very similar to the number of occupied dwellings. Usually in practical terms, the HRP and the HoH will be the same individual. Here, the terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘born outside the UK’ are used synonymously.

The Quarterly Labour Force Surveys (QLFS) and the earlier Labour Force Surveys have been the chief source of regular official data on employment and personal circumstances in the UK since 1973. Now held quarterly since 1992, each quarterly sample of 60,000 private households is spread over five successive quarters. Sample numbers of interviews are grossed up to national (UK) population totals by weighting procedures. The weighted numbers, not the sample numbers, are given in Table 2. The QLFS is available in two forms of weighting. One is more suitable for the analysis of individual characteristics. There is also a twice-yearly household dataset, instituted in 1990, more suited to analysis at the level of the household⁵. The annual April-June household datasets were used in this analysis. The sample size is very large: for example the 2014 April-June household dataset comprised 103,269 persons of whom 41,644 (40.3%) were ‘household reference persons’ representing therefore 41,644 households. Those are grossed up to 26 million households for analysis at the UK level.

Quarterly Labour Force Surveys (QLFS) and Annual Population Surveys (APS) (HRP)⁶, show that the majority of additional households in the UK in each year now have an immigrant ‘household reference person’ formerly known as ‘head of household’.

From 1990 to 2019 the number of households in the UK increased by 5.1 million (22%). Of those 4.7 million with information on country of birth, 2.6 million (56%) had an immigrant ‘head’. This proportion increases up to the present: 67% of additional households from 1997 to 2019 and 74% from 2015-2019. Overall, in 2019 16% of UK households had an immigrant ‘head’ compared with 7% in 1990. This data source (the household QLFS) started only in 1990. But according to the conventional person-level LFS (which somewhat overstates the number of all households) the proportion of

⁴ The Head of Household (HoH), or the Household Reference Person (HRP in more modern usage) is the individual that is taken to represent the household for statistical purposes in censuses and surveys. The definition of the household reference person has changed over time from being the eldest male within a household to the eldest person within a household.. The number of households recorded by the QLFS differs by up to 2% from the number recorded in the census of the same year.

⁵ Non-responders are not included in the person-level weighting. Accordingly a two-person household with a non-responder is treated as a single-person household. That gives such households a higher weight, changing the ratio between households and population and inflating the estimate of the overall number of households. For further details see http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/7586/mrdoc/pdf/lfs_user_guide_vol8_household2008.pdf

⁶ The Head of Household (HoH), or the Household Reference Person (HRP in more modern usage) is the individual that is taken to represent the household for statistical purposes in censuses and surveys. The definition of the household reference person has changed over time from being the eldest male within a household to the eldest person within a household.. The number of households recorded by the QLFS differs by up to 2% from the number recorded in the census of the same year.

households headed by immigrants in the 1980s had been roughly constant at 7-8 percent. Unfortunately, population estimates from the LFS from 2017 onwards became seriously defective (Portes and O'Connor 2021)⁷.

Table 2 below shows the percentage of additional households from 1990 to 2019 from successive starting points, where the HRP was born in the UK or abroad. Data provided by the ONS in response to a Parliamentary Question (2015) confirms a substantial increase in additional households with heads born abroad, from fewer than one half of additional households in the 1990s, to over three quarters in the last decade. Additional households do not translate exactly into additional housing demand, because immigrants from developing countries are more likely to share accommodation. Nonetheless it is evident that immigration must drive the greater part of housing demand, and therefore house-prices and rents. That is seldom mentioned in discussions of the housing crisis, the most serious of the numerous evasions in discussion of the consequences of immigration.

Table 2 .Increase in the number of households up to 2019 in the UK, according to whether the household reference person was born in or outside the UK.

Increase in households from successive years up to 2019 in the UK, numbers and percent, according to whether the household reference person was born in the UK or not.									
Years	All households	All households with birthplace data	UK born hh reference person	Non-UK born HH reference person	of increase in hrp between specified years where the hrp was born outside the UK.	This study		ONS	
1990-2019	5,057,986	4,718,479	2,056,352	2,662,127					
			43.6	56.4					
1995-2019	4,116,130	3,701,980	1,286,160	2,415,820					
			34.7	65.3	1996-2000	37.7	46.0		1996-2000
2000-2019	3,294,787	2,878,884	792,171	2,086,713					
			27.5	72.5	2000-2005	47.0	46.9		2000-2005
2005-2019	2,473,562	2,060,952	359,029	1,701,923					
			17.4	82.6	2005-2010	69.1	67.3		2005-2010
2010-2019	1,451,147	1,037,038	42,465	994,573					
			4.1	95.9	2010-2015	147.0	94.8		2010-2015
2015-2019	697,404	722,563	190,239	532,324					
			26.3	73.7	2015-2019	73.7			

Source: Written response Table 4318 from ONS to a Parliamentary Oral Question, reply by Baroness Williams 7 July 2015. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/business-transparency/freedom-of-information/what-can-i-request/published-ad-hoc-data/pop/june-2015/index.html> . Data in the 'ONS' column are for England only.

Note: in 2011 there was a marked increase in the number of household reference persons (hrp) for whom to country of birth is unavailable, from 9700 in 2010 to 687400 in 2011 and at the level thereafter.

⁷ Comparison of the ethnic distributions for 2018 compared with 2017 are highly implausible, reporting half a million increase from 2017 to 2018 in the number of 'White British' in England and Wales. That is impossible: the census confirms that the number in that group continues to diminish.

By 2010-14, on average there were only 5900 additional households annually with a UK-born household reference person (hrp) but 109,700 (95%) with one born outside the UK. These data give us only an approximate indication of the impact of migration. Not all in a household with an HRP born outside the UK will be immigrants. Some born outside the UK will be living in households with a UK-born HRP⁸; The translation of household formation into housing demand and construction is inexact. New dwellings are also needed to replace old, inadequate, worn out or badly designed buildings and to allow for shifts in the distribution of population. A single dwelling can accommodate two or more households, each with its own 'occupied household space', including 'concealed households' unable to find independent accommodation. Those concealed households will want to escape.

Recent QLFS show that the majority of new households in the UK in each year now have an immigrant 'household reference person' or 'head of household' (appendix table). From 1990 to 2014 the number of households in the UK increased by 4.1 million, for which information on country of birth is available for 4.0 million. Households with an immigrant reference person accounted for 2.1 million (53%) of that increase of four million households.. The immigrant share of household increase has grown faster in more recent years following the upsurge of net migration from the late 1990s. Of the 2.7 million increase in all households from 1997 to 2014 (with information on country of birth), 1.8 million (65%) had an immigrant household reference person. Overall, in 2014 14% of UK households had an immigrant household reference person compared with 7% in 1990. The household QLFS does not extend back before 1990 but the analysis of the conventional person-level LFS before 1990 (which somewhat overstates the number of all households) shows that the proportion of households headed by immigrants had been roughly constant at 7-8 percent of all households during the 1980s.

These data from the Labour Force Surveys do not include the contribution to household formation of the UK-born children of immigrants, only that of the immigrants themselves. The former cannot be derived from QLFS data. As noted earlier, the demographic contribution of immigrant natural increase together with the demographic contribution of net migration takes to over 80% the share of recent population growth due to the effects of migration.

Interpretation and caveats

These data give us only an approximate indication of the impact of migration on household formation, and on the pressures on housing stock. It is important to remember that not all persons living in a household with a reference person born outside the UK will themselves have been born outside the UK. Many children will not be, and some adults. Likewise there will be persons born outside the UK who live in households with a

⁸ In 2014 13% of all UK (household) persons had been born outside the UK compared with 14% of all heads of household. That makes a ratio of 2.21 immigrants for every immigrant-headed household compared with an average ratio of 2.38 for the national population.

UK-born reference person. The LFS cannot tell us how many⁹; but here we are concerned with household formation. The translation of household formation into housing demand and construction is complex. New dwellings are not just required for the additional households: they are also needed to replace old, inadequate, worn out or badly designed buildings and to provide for shifts in the distribution of population, even in the absence of growth of populations or households. A single dwelling can accommodate two or more households, each with its own 'occupied household space', including 'concealed households' unable to find independent accommodation.

Household formation is not a uniform process and among immigrants it is particularly diverse. Some immigrants may take longer to set up independent households than average, and when they do, then immigrants from some origins may be more likely to favour more multi-adult and multi-family households than average, with a larger than average household size. Some of the fast-growing immigrant populations in London have adapted to shortage of housing by increasing their level of overcrowding (Gordon 2014, p.48) presumably including dwellings with more than one household. While new arrivals in 2001-11 from rich countries did not alter local densities of occupation, average occupation per room of new immigrants from poor countries was about 2.5 times that of established residents. We do not know, however, what proportion of households headed by immigrants share the same dwelling.

Household size in many ethnic populations is in any case traditionally higher than in Western countries, partly because of larger family size and a preference for an extended family to live together in one household. In London, boroughs with a high proportion of immigrants such as Brent (55%), Newham (54%), Ealing (48%), Harrow (45%) Tower Hamlets (43%) all have the highest levels of household density, with between 5 and 10 percent of households containing six or more persons, along with other towns such as Luton, Slough, Bradford and Leicester with high concentrations of population of South Asian origin (ONS 2012, table 4; ONS 2014, table 6). That is unlikely to be true of the new households from Eastern Europe; mostly young people (initially) without family and from societies accustomed to small family and household size. All this makes it difficult to know exactly how the growth in households headed by immigrants translates into demand for housing.

It may be objected that, even though the data above show that immigrants account for more than half the increase in households since the 1990s, this may not be very apparent to observers in terms of perceptions of 'visible' immigrants moving into the new developments that are springing up throughout the country especially outside metropolitan areas. This is because despite the geographical dispersal of immigrants, many immigrant households move into urban housing vacated by UK born residents, expanding the numbers and proportions of the overseas-born in urban areas. But new housing still has to be built for those displaced, which would not otherwise have been

⁹ In 2014 13% of all UK (household) persons had been born outside the UK compared with 14% of all heads of household. That makes a ratio of 2.21 immigrants for every immigrant-headed household compared with an average ratio of 2.38.

required. Numbers of the UK- born are leaving London and other major cities, while London's non-UK born population increased by just over a million from 2001-11 (54%). The UK-born are not dying out; they are moving out, and not being replaced by native incomers to the same extent as in the past (Kaufman and Harris 2014). All population increase in the Greater South East Region in 2001-2011 (London and its environs) was from persons born abroad, and therefore, presumably, all its household increase (Gordon 2014 pp 44 - 51). About 40% of the adaptation to the migration inflow to London appears to have been through displacement of households from London to outside the Greater South-East region altogether.

Neither the LFS nor the published tables from the 2011 census give information about household size according to the country of origin of the household head or reference person (only for ethnic origin), and of course we are interested in newly formed households, not the larger established ones. For information, average household size of households in England and Wales with an ethnic minority HRP was 2.96 compared with 2.26 for the White British population and 2.36 overall (source: analysis of NOMIS tables D1201EW QS 201, 2011 census).

Projections and the future

This paper does not deal with projections of future household creation arising from migration. We do not have enough information about household formation rates for immigrant populations to enable accurate projections to be made about its impact on housing demand. The latest household projections for England (DCLG 2015) are most disappointing in this regard. The thin (10 page) report lacks such detail and omits without explanation the variant projections presented in earlier issues. Those used to include a zero-migration variant, which enabled an estimate to be made of the effect of migration on household formation from the start date of the projection. The last report to do so, the interim projections based on 2008 (DCLG 2010, table 6), estimated that 36% of housing demand up to 2033 would arise from net migration (then estimated at a rather low annual 157,000). But that assumed that only 72% of household growth would arise from population increase, not almost all of it as Holmans' work suggests and the DCLG (2015) states, and in the depths of a recession.

In a report for the Town and Country Planning Association, Alan Holmans (2013) estimated that suggest 240,000 to 245,000 additional homes would be required each year to meet newly arising demand and need. About 25 per cent of housing requirements would be concentrated in London, and 60 per cent in the four southern regions. The policy changes that promoted immigration from the late 1990s were never matched by policies to increase housebuilding to meet the inevitable additional demand. New completions of housing have been in long-term decline for many years (Heath 2014). From about 200,000 around 1990, housing completions in England fell to about 130,000 in 2000-2001, rising to a transient peak of 170,000 in 2007-8 before falling to fewer than 120,000 in 2014. That is wholly inadequate to the demand driven by population growth. In the current (April 2015) election campaign at least one political party is committed to building 200,000 new dwellings annually.

Unless there is a radical change in policies and their effectiveness or there occur other, as yet unforeseen, events, population growth will continue to be the overwhelmingly important component of new household formation and net migration will drive most of that growth. On present trends the relative patterns of household growth of UK born and non-UK born that we have seen in recent years will develop in the future. In that case a majority of those proposed 200,000 plus additional dwellings each year will be needed to absorb the pressures arising from new immigrant households.

The trends up to the present that have been demonstrated above show that there is a close connection between immigration and new household formation, and therefore between immigration and demand for additional housing. In all the fierce controversies about how many dwellings to build, and where to build them, this crucial connection is seldom made. It should surely be a consideration in any government's approach to policies in both these areas.. Housing built anywhere (especially in the rest of the south east) is needed to reduce housing pressures in the sorts of places where most of the new immigration-driven household formation is taking place.

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Appendix table

UK 1990 - 2014. Trend in number of households where the household reference person is born in the UK, and born outside the UK. Source: QLFS household datasets (A-J).

HRP = Household Reference Person.

year	All households (= number of HRP.s.)	All households with birthplace data	Country of birth of HRP		Percent in year		Increase since 1990		Increase since 1997	
			UK HRP	Non-UK HRP	UK HRP	Non-UK HRP	UK HRP	Non-UK HRP	UK HRP	Non-UK HRP
					percent of total	percent of total	percent of total	percent of total	percent of total	percent of total
1990	22632977	22554017	20,954,467	1,599,550	92.9	7.1	total	total	total	total
1991							increase	increase	increase	increase
1992	22928195	22923705	21,051,465	1,872,240	91.8	8.2	26.2	73.8		
1993	23274615	23266183	21,417,973	1,848,210	92.1	7.9	65.1	34.9		
1994	23473688	23469226	21,607,625	1,861,598	92.1	7.9	71.4	28.6		
1995	23574833	23570516	21,724,659	1,845,857	92.2	7.8	75.8	24.2		
1996	23679338	23441496	21,625,624	1,815,872	92.3	7.7	75.6	24.4		
1997	23865101	23864658	21,890,783	1,973,875	91.7	8.3	71.4	28.6		
1998	24035719	24033592	21,961,797	2,071,795	91.4	8.6	68.1	31.9	42.0	58.0
1999	24209083	24206341	22,140,739	2,065,602	91.5	8.5	71.8	28.2	73.2	26.8
2000	24396176	24393612	22,218,648	2,174,964	91.1	8.9	68.7	31.3	62.0	38.0
2001	24534942	24179693	22,013,279	2,166,414	91.0	9.0	65.1	34.9	38.9	61.1
2002	24791613	24787096	22,502,300	2,284,796	90.8	9.2	69.3	30.7	66.3	33.7
2003	24917072	24914196	22,534,547	2,379,649	90.4	9.6	66.9	33.1	61.3	38.7
2004	24993339	24988379	22,595,797	2,392,582	90.4	9.6	67.4	32.6	62.7	37.3
2005	25217401	25211544	22,651,790	2,559,754	89.8	10.2	63.9	36.1	56.5	43.5
2006	25378875	25377908	22,609,482	2,768,426	89.1	10.9	58.6	41.4	47.5	52.5
2007	25608505	25602723	22,667,871	2,934,852	88.5	11.5	56.2	43.8	44.7	55.3
2008	25875379	25871603	22,759,090	3,112,513	88.0	12.0	54.4	45.6	43.3	56.7
2009	25837134	25831895	22,681,168	3,150,727	87.8	12.2	52.7	47.3	40.2	59.8
2010	26239816	26235458	22,968,354	3,267,104	87.5	12.5	54.7	45.3	45.5	54.5
2011	26408609	25727240	22,386,157	3,341,083	87.0	13.0	45.1	54.9	26.6	73.4
2012	26613985	26605888	23,099,539	3,506,349	86.8	13.2	52.9	47.1	44.1	55.9
2013	26653956	26645311	22,981,055	3,664,256	86.2	13.8	49.5	50.5	39.2	60.8
2014	26702837	26569878	22,842,338	3,727,540	86.0	14.0	47.0	53.0	35.2	64.8

Note: The figures for the total number of households in column 2 differ slightly from the official figures given in the ONS Families and Households release of 15 January 2015. In the latter the numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand and there a small number of other minor discrepancies.

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2014/rft-1--families-and-households--2014.xls>