
Migration, migrants and child poverty



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Although international migration has always been a feature of national life, this aspect of population change has increased over the last twenty years, mostly as a result of asylum seekers arriving in the 1990s and, more recently, migration from the new member states of the European Union (EU). While many migrant families have a reasonable income and a few are very prosperous, migrant children are disproportionately represented among children living in poverty. Many of the causes of child poverty for migrants are similar to those facing the UK-born population, but there are some factors that are specific to migrant households, such as language barriers and the severing of support networks. Here, Jill Rutter examines the link between child poverty and migration in the UK.

Who are migrants?

The United Nations' definition of migrants are people who are resident outside their country of birth. Many migrants in the UK have British citizenship, have been resident in the UK for many years and are more usually described as members of minority ethnic communities. This article uses the term 'foreign born' to describe those outside their country of birth, and uses the term 'new migrants' in a qualitative sense to describe those new to the UK.

Today, an estimated 11.3 per cent of the total population is foreign born, a figure that rises to one in three in Greater London.¹ **Migrants from EU states** comprise the largest foreign-born population. They include migrants from pre-2004 EU states, such as Ireland, France and Portugal, as well as those from the new accession states, of whom the largest number are from Poland. EU law gives them freedom of movement within Europe and the right of residence as European Economic Area (EEA) workers. EU migrants with EEA worker status also qualify for social housing and in-work benefits in the UK.

In the last five years, there has also been a significant onward migration of migrant communities from other EU countries. Significant numbers of Somalis, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Sri Lankan Tamils and Latin Americans have moved to the UK from other EU countries. While many have secured citizenship or refugee status elsewhere in the EU, some are irregular migrants. Most will have received their education outside the EU and may have different qualifications and prior employment profiles to other EU-born groups who have moved to the UK.

In 2009, 99,590 **work visas** were granted from outside the EU.² The work visa system has seen considerable change over the last five years and routes for unskilled or semi-skilled workers have all but ended. Prospective migrants are now subject to the new immigration cap and those who wish to bring their dependants have to show savings of at least £533 per child.

Some 49,065 dependent **spouses, children and civil partners** were admitted to the UK in 2009.³ Although the number of applications from **asylum seekers** has decreased since a

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peak in 2002, 24,485 asylum applications were lodged in 2009, with Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Iran being the top three countries of origin.⁴ Of those who received an initial decision on their asylum application in 2009, 17 per cent were granted refugee status and 11 per cent were given discretionary leave to remain or humanitarian protection and allowed to remain. In 2009, 73 per cent of asylum applicants were refused after an initial decision. While some of these are successful in their asylum appeals or are removed from the UK, the vast majority of those refused asylum remain and comprise a significant component of the UK's irregular migrant population.

The number of **overseas students** from outside the EU has gradually increased in the last 15 years, with some 311,111 admitted to the UK in 2009.⁵ While most are young and do not have dependent children, a small proportion do.

A further group of international migrants comprise **British nationals 'returning' to the UK**.⁶ They include those returning after short periods working abroad, and long-term migrants who have maintained their British passports and who are now faced with changed circumstances necessitating a 'return' to a country with which they may have few connections. Some face extremely straightened circumstances on arrival in the UK and see their rights to support as limited.

There are also an unknown number of **irregular migrants** in the UK and, in many cities, undocumented children are a sizable proportion of children living in poverty. The irregular migrant population mostly comprises visa and asylum overstayers, but also includes a smaller number of clandestine entrants. Recent estimates put their number at between 373,000 and 719,000 at the end of 2007, with a central estimate of 533,000 people.⁷ Using the same methodology, a new study suggests that, at the end of 2007, there were 104,000 to 216,000 children who had no permission to remain in the UK. These include overstayers, but also the UK-born children of irregular migrants. This research gives a middle estimate of 155,000 undocumented children, with 85,000 children born in the UK.⁸

What do we know about household poverty in migrant communities?

Immigration has been central to the UK's wealth and dynamism for hundreds of years. In London, a walk around leafy West Kensington or bustling West Ham reveals the centrality of immigrants to the capital's economy. Although the two areas feel very different – the former is

one of the most affluent parts of the UK while the latter is one of the poorest – foreign-born people make up almost half the resident population in both areas. The population of West Kensington comprises large numbers of highly skilled and highly paid migrants, many of whom work in the financial services. The migrants of West Ham are much poorer terms of their earnings and rates of employment.

The table on page 8 presents data on the earnings and labour market experiences of selected groups in 2007. We need to be cautious about such figures as they are averages and there are often significant differences in income *within* different groups. But some groups, such as those born in the United States, earn far more than the UK-born population. Others, particularly those from EU member states, earn far less, with those born in Lithuania earning an average of £5.90 per hour in 2007. The overrepresentation of migrants from the EU's new member states in elementary occupations and in sectors such as agriculture and hospitality, where wage rates are low, accounts for this.

As can be seen, the employment status of different country-of-birth groups is also varied, and this broadly relates to their mode of entry into the UK. Newly arrived EU migrants and work visa holders, who have essentially come to the UK to work, have high levels of employment. Those populations who have come to the UK as refugees tend to have much lower levels of employment: just 29 per cent of Somalia-born adults and 36 per cent of Afghanistan-born adults of working age were employed in 2007.⁹ Research on barriers to labour market participation among refugees shows that poor levels of fluency in English, employer prejudice, the absence of qualifications, UK work experience and references, childcare obligations, and the fear of losing benefits and social housing are major barriers to work.

Longer settled populations from Bangladesh and Pakistan also experience low levels of employment: just over 46 per cent of the Bangladesh-born population were in work in 2007.

Many migrants have an additional demand on their income. For example, estimates suggest that £1.5 billion was sent from the UK as remittance payments in 2005. Research with low-paid migrant workers in London indicates that they are sending home between 20 and 30 per cent of their net income, and engage in many different money-saving strategies to do this (such as having more than one job and eating the cheapest food) – strategies that impact on

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children's wellbeing. Some migrant households also take in destitute co-nationals, who are often irregular migrants.

Immigration status and citizenship rights

For migrants who cannot find work, the welfare state is meant to prevent a family falling into destitution. However, many migrants have no entitlement to claim benefits. At present, only those who have secured British citizenship, those who possess EEA worker status, settled

status and those who receive positive decisions on their asylum case can access the UK benefit system. Moreover, since the late 1980s, increasing proportions of migrants have seen this safety-net removed. This is an EU-wide trend, with constantly shifting boundaries between citizen, legal migrant and outsider.

Since 2003, new asylum seekers have been unable to work legally in the UK. At the same time, they are supported by a system that condemns many to ongoing poverty. After arrival in the UK, asylum seekers without savings (the vast majority) apply to the UK Border Agency for a 'subsistence-only' package, or for subsistence and accommodation. Subsistence comprises a cash allowance, set at a level equivalent to 70 per cent of income support. This amounts to about £6.50 per day. Those requiring accommodation are housed by the UK Border Agency outside Greater London and the South East, often far from support networks. Unsurprisingly, about 20 per cent of asylum seekers opt for subsistence-only support and choose to live with friends and family. Providing accommodation to co-nationals impacts on the host, with more mouths to feed and less space.

Among migrants who are entitled to benefits, their uptake is at a lower rate than the UK-born population. This is a consequence of a lack of awareness of entitlements among migrant communities, an inability to understand the application process, often as a result of limited English language fluency, and an inability to produce documentation to support a benefit claim. There is also evidence of significant misinterpretation of benefit entitlement by benefits staff with EU migrants suffering most as a result of such mistakes. There are obvious consequences of low uptake of these benefits in relation to household income and poverty levels. Failure by migrants to register for benefits such as free school meals also distorts measures of child poverty.

Child poverty in migrant communities

Income inequalities caused by employment patterns, high levels of unemployment among refugee communities and some longer settled migrants, a lower uptake of benefits, asylum support systems that cause destitution and large numbers of irregular migrants are all factors that mean that migrant children are over-represented among those living in poverty. Newly arrived migrant children are also more likely to be housed in temporary and substandard accommodation. Indeed, research commissioned by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission shows that, in 2008, some 63 per

Population size, average gross hourly pay and economic activity for selected country-of-birth groups, Quarter Four, 2007

Country	Estimates of population size	Average gross hourly pay	Working-age population employed %	Working-age population unemployed %	Working-age population economically inactive %
India	592,000	£11.70	79	5	26
Poland	458,000	£7.10	86	4	10
Ireland	410,000	£14.40	73	4	23
Pakistan	393,000	£9.20	48	5	47
Germany	268,000	£12.50	79	4	17
South Africa	205,000	£14.60	85	2	12
China ¹⁰	193,000	£11.50	72	6	21
Bangladesh	177,000	£8.80	46	6	48
United States	177,000	£18.90	80	3	17
Jamaica	175,000	£10.70	71	8	21
Nigeria	146,000	£10.60	83	6	11
Kenya	142,000	£12.50	77	2	20
Australia	125,000	£18.30	88	2	9
Sri Lanka	120,000	£10.80	74	6	20
Italy	99,000	£12.10	79	8	13
France	97,000	£13.20	85	5	10
Zimbabwe	96,000	£12.40	82	7	11
Somalia	93,000	£9.00	29	11	60
Philippines	90,000	£8.90	88	2	10
Ghana	81,000	£9.50	84	6	10
Turkey	71,000	£8.80	52	8	41
Cyprus ¹¹	70,000	£11.70	66	5	29
Malaysia	65,000	£13.70	84	1	15
Portugal	63,000	£8.90	74	5	21
Iran	63,000	£11.00	54	7	39
Canada	59,000	£16.50	78	8	14
Netherlands	59,000	£16.50	84	5	11
Spain	55,000	£11.10	89	3	8
Slovakia	54,000	£6.50	83	7	10
Afghanistan	53,000	£6.40	36	21	42
Iraq	53,000	£10.10	45	11	44
Uganda	52,000	£11.10	79	4	17
Lithuania	52,000	£5.90	80	11	9
Brazil	49,000	£12.00	74	3	22
New Zealand	46,000	£14.90	82	5	13
UK		£11.30	79	4	18

Source: Labour Force Survey and Institute for Public Policy Research calculations

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cent of migrants who had arrived in the UK in the last five years were housed in the private rented sector, much of which is of a temporary or substandard nature. Housing mobility can magnify the impacts of a low income on children. When they move house, their education is usually disrupted and local support networks may be fractured.

There are also significant health inequalities by country of birth, although epidemiological data is under-analysed from the perspective of migration. Stillbirth at term and infant mortality is higher among Africa-, Asia- and Caribbean-born populations than it is for those born in the UK. It is highest for Pakistan-born populations, a trend partly attributed to cousin marriage. But infant mortality is almost as high among mothers born in the Caribbean and West Africa, where consanguinity is uncommon. A child born to a mother born in the Caribbean is twice as likely to die before the age of five than a child born to a UK-born mother. Poverty and absence of contact with health professionals are factors that may contribute to increased mortality.¹²

Five groups of migrant children seem particularly at risk of poverty.

- 1. Children of low-paid migrant workers.** This is a numerically large group. Many children are from the new member states of the EU, but this group also includes children from outside the EU whose parents entered with work visas and are working in low-paid jobs. Families in this group are often housed in the private rented sector, sometimes in very poor quality and overcrowded accommodation. The nature of this accommodation means that families sometimes experience high levels of housing mobility, with children's schooling being interrupted. One study of low-paid migrant workers showed that nearly 40 per cent did not always have enough money to pay for food for their children and over one-third could not pay for children's clothes.¹³
- 2. Children who are irregular migrants and undocumented UK-born children of parents who are irregular migrants.** Again this is a large group of children, disproportionately settled in London. Research examining the survival strategies of irregular migrants in the UK highlights shocking levels of household poverty and reliance on the informal sector for employment. Irregular migrants who are in work may be paid at levels near to or below the national minimum wage and fear of officialdom makes it difficult for them to

seek redress. Those without work rely on charities such as the Red Cross. Informal sector working and the hidden nature of irregular migration may mean that data that is meant to capture patterns of poverty may be distorted because it does not account for irregular migrants.

- 3. Asylum-seeking children in receipt of support from the UK Border Agency.** This group presently numbers about 6,000 children and is dispersed around the UK.
- 4. Children of refugees and some other migrants who are unemployed.** This is a significant group and welfare-to-work initiatives have had limited success.
- 5. Children in low-income households supporting destitute co-nationals,** where generosity to others impacts on family income and children's welfare. There is little research on this group, but they are likely to be a sizeable community in London.

The size of these groups – particularly the in-work poor and irregular migrants – makes the target of eradicating child poverty by 2020 difficult to achieve without substantially reducing poverty in these five categories of children.

Does migration cause child poverty in the broader community?

Migration not only impacts on migrants themselves but also has the potential to impact on receiving communities. One issue that has concerned both media commentators and academia is the impact of migration on the UK-born population. If migration affects the employment prospects and earnings of the UK workforce, it has the potential to increase levels of child poverty.

Although it might seem commonsense that large-scale migration will lead to the greater unemployment of UK-born workers, academic studies about the labour market impacts of migration are inconclusive. Moreover, much research on this issue is limited by imperfect data and conceptual difficulties.¹⁴

If there were a fixed number of jobs in the UK, increased net migration would increase the level of competition for these jobs and could lead to some of the existing workforce being displaced by migrants. However, the number of jobs available in the UK is a function of the demand for labour. Micro-economic evidence and macro-economic modelling shows very limited job displacement as a result of immigration.¹⁵

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The belief that migrants undercut UK-born workers' wages is also prevalent in some communities. Here again, economic evidence is inconclusive. Overall, the best UK research on the impact of immigration on wages suggests that there are no large negative impacts of increased migration on average wages, although there may be a small impact on the 5 per cent least well paid.¹⁶ This is an argument for a living wage for all, rather than curbing all migration.

What policy changes do we want?

Overall, migrant and refugee children are over-represented among children living in poverty in the UK. The causes of child poverty in poor migrant families are often the same as in the larger population, as are the solutions. These include enabling parents to move into and stay in work, affordable childcare, ensuring that benefit levels do not punish children and supporting low-income families in work. But migrant families also face some specific issues. Many are starting again, without the accumulated possessions of others. Support networks that enable other low-income families to cope can be severed by migration. Language barriers can impact on migrants' employment prospects and lead to a lower uptake of benefits. Remittance payments and support for destitute irregular migrants also impact on family welfare.

Many of the policy recommendations for all communities are equally applicable to migrants. At a time when many people are feeling the pinch, it is important, from a community relations perspective, to forge links across communities, rather than engage in special pleading for child migrants. Nevertheless, there are some policy changes that would benefit children in migrant families.

First, we need to make sure that our local and national data picks up on patterns of child poverty in migrant communities. Sometimes the use of broad ethnicity categories such as 'Black African' means that we miss communities experiencing poverty. Using free school meal uptake as a measure of poverty in schools misses out undocumented children.

Second, we need to tackle in-work poverty and campaign for the wider adoption of the living wage, as opposed to the minimum wage.

Third, we need to continue to lobby on asylum support, to ensure that this is not cut and is updated in line with inflation. A major campaign in 2010 reversed cuts in support but, at the time of writing, we know that further cuts are threatened.

Fourth, welfare-to-work programmes need to be tailored towards parents' specific needs. It is meaningless to channel people into job-search courses if they cannot read or write English.

Lastly, we need to take a more realistic approach to irregular migration. There are around half a million irregular migrants in the UK, including over 100,000 children. Some could go home, but many cannot or will not return. Forcible removal is hugely expensive: £12,000 to £25,000 on average. Even if the UK Border Agency could locate more irregular migrants, it could not afford to remove them. Many individuals and organisations, including the Mayor of London, argue for an earned regularisation programme, where law-abiding individuals are allowed to settle in the UK. Almost all undocumented children are living in poverty and their immigration status prevents their parents from moving out of poverty. This is a fundamental inconsistency in a country that aims to eradicate child poverty.

To achieve these aims, we need the government to be committed to enacting policy interventions focused on migrants. But negative public debates around migration limit the government's willingness to introduce progressive policy. Regularisation programmes, for example, are seen as a vote loser, as we saw in the last election campaign. If we want policies that improve the life chances of migrant children, we need to change public opinion. ■

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- 1 Population estimate from the *Labour Force Survey*, Quarter 4, 2009
- 2 Home Office, *Control of Immigration Statistics 2009*, Home Office, 2010
- 3 See note 2
- 4 See note 2
- 5 See note 2
- 6 T Finch, M Latorre and H Andrew, *Making the Most of the British Diaspora*, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2010
- 7 Greater London Authority Economics, *The Economic Impact on the London Economy of an Earned Regularisation of Irregular Migrants to the UK*, GLA, 2009
- 8 N Sigona and V Hughes, *Being Children and Undocumented in the UK*, Centre for Migration Policy and Society, University of Oxford, 2010
- 9 Informal sector employment among Afghans is significant and is not reflected in these figures. Male employment for the Afghanistan-born population is 59% and female employment is 10%.
- 10 Includes Hong Kong
- 11 EU and non-EU
- 12 J Rutter and M Latorre, 'Migration, Migrants and Inequality' in J Hills, T Sefton and K Stewart (eds), *Towards a More Equal Society*, The Policy Press, 2009
- 13 Y Evans, J Herbert, K Datta, J May, C McIlwaine and J Wills, *Making the City Work: low-paid employment in London*, Queen Mary, University of London, 2005
- 14 See H Reed and M Latorre, *The Economic Impact of Migration on the UK Labour Market*, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2008
- 15 See note 14
- 16 See note 14

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