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# Eastern European Young People in Brexit Britain:

Racism,  
anxiety  
and a  
precarious  
future

Research and Policy Briefing No.1

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# What is this Briefing about and why we have produced it



Here to Stay? is a research project which explores the lives of young people who arrived in the UK as migrant children from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It focuses on young people aged 12-18 who migrated after the EU enlargement in 2004 and have lived in the UK for at least 3 years.

The project explores how migration and current immigration policies are impacting their lives, how satisfied they are with local services, the quality of their relationships, and what are their feelings of identity and belonging in the UK.

The study is important because it presents the first analysis since the Brexit Referendum on how current plans for Britain to leave the European Union are impacting on young Eastern Europeans' lives.

We have gathered the opinions and experiences of over 1,100 young people on a range of issues, including Brexit, their participation in communities and access to services, their experiences of racism and exclusion, their relationships, well-being and plans for future now that the UK is planning to leave the EU.

These Briefings aim to inform a wide range of audiences on the experiences of young Eastern Europeans living in contemporary Britain.

The Briefings should also help local authorities and other organisations develop policies and improve services for young people, taking into account their needs and experiences.

## How we produced the evidence for this Briefing

Here to Stay? is a project carried out by researchers from the Universities of Strathclyde, Plymouth and Durham. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

We consulted Eastern European young people living across the UK in urban and rural areas. We also work with a group of Young Advisors who give us their thoughts on how best to carry out the study.

To get a UK-wide picture, we asked young Eastern Europeans (who had lived in the UK for 3+ years) to complete an online survey. This was promoted through schools, youth clubs and social media. Over 1100 young people took the survey.

We then talked to more than 20 groups of young people in schools and youth clubs across Scotland and England. We asked them about their everyday lives, places they go to, things they do and can't do, and how they feel about living in the UK.

We also talked to organisations that engage with Eastern European young people, such as schools, youth clubs and health centres.

Our next step is to speak to some more young people and their families about their life in the UK to allow them to share their individual experiences in more depth.

Findings in this Briefing are mainly based on the analysis of the survey data. More Briefings will be released as the research develops.

# The Brexit vote has had a major impact on Eastern European young people's lives

Young Eastern Europeans living in the UK are likely to be considerably impacted by the UK's decision to exit from the European Union, with some effects already manifest. Young people who took our survey came from all over Europe and identified as Eastern European (see Box 1).

When we asked them how they felt about the UK's decision to leave the EU, the majority said that they felt 'uncertain', 'worried' or 'scared' over their future (see Figure 1). Others reported feeling 'sad' and 'angry' (we allowed young people to give more than one response here).

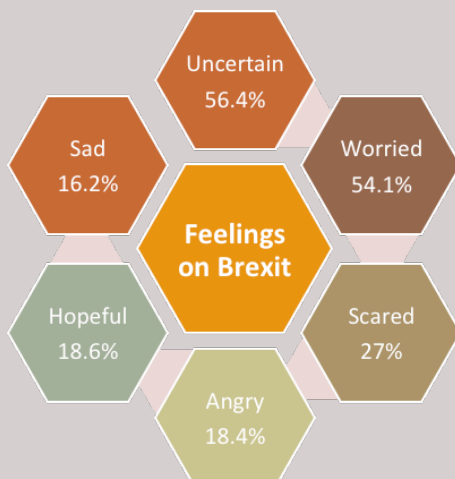
Young people said they were worried about their insecure position in Britain, the uncertainty over their future, whether they will be allowed to stay, and the risk that some of their family members might want to return to their country of birth. As many of the young people had lived most of their lives in the UK, many were concerned they would have to abandon their homes, friends and family in the UK post-Brexit and move elsewhere.

## Box 1. Profile of survey respondents

- The survey took place between October 2016 - April 2017. In total, 1120 young people completed the survey, with 807 full completions.
- Overall, the survey attracted mainly young people aged 16-18 (67.7%), while 32.3% of respondents were aged 12-15. There were more female respondents (60.1%) than male (37.5%). The vast majority of respondents (96.7%) identified as White (n=1062). The majority said they were Christian (58.9%), while over a third (36.8%) identified as non-religious/atheist.
- Over half of the respondents were Polish (56%), followed by Romanian (10.4%) and Lithuanian (9.1%) nationals. The other 25% of respondents were originally born in 30 other EU and non-EU countries.
- Most respondents lived in England (71.4%) and some in Scotland (18.6%), while 10% did not give their location.
- Over a third said they had lived in the UK for 10 or more years.

Sample criteria: Please note that this was a convenience sample, recruited through schools, youth clubs and social media. The data could not be weighted due to the absence of existing reliable data on EU nationals in the UK.

Figure 1.  
Young people's feelings  
over Brexit (n=948)



However, a minority of young people saw opportunities in the Brexit vote. About a quarter of the survey participants said they felt 'hopeful', 'happy' or 'excited' about their future. When we asked them why in the group discussions, they said less immigration from Europe might benefit their own chances of employment.

Although most of the young people had lived in the UK for more than 5 years, only a very small minority of survey respondents (7.8%) had British or dual nationality. With the cost of a citizenship application currently at £1,282, many young people said their families would struggle to afford the fee, while others did not think it was fair to pay a high fee for citizenship given their parents' contribution in taxes. In group discussions, some young people said their parents were prioritising children's citizenship applications over their own to help make their children's status more secure.

This suggests that settled Eastern European youth and their families are in a precarious situation in Brexit Britain. Uncertainty over their future status is a source of anxiety for many of them and their families.

# Young Eastern Europeans have experienced more racism since the Brexit Referendum

Most young people described racist incidents they experienced or witnessed since the Brexit vote. Almost half (49.2%) of the respondents said that they had seen 'more racism' since the Brexit Referendum, while 23.5% said they had seen 'about the same amount of Racism'.

The majority (77%) said they had experienced racism because of their nationality, accent or the way that they look. For 1 in 5 young people (18.7%) these racist experiences happen 'often' or 'very often'.

We did not find any statistically significant associations (at the 1.6% significance level) between experiencing racism and age category ( $p = 0.604$ ), living in Scotland/England ( $p = 0.028$ ) and gender ( $p = 0.063$ ).

In the survey, over 500 young people described in detail their experiences of racism. These experiences ranged from 'everyday racism' such as name calling, 'jokes' and friendly banter over accents, looks or country of origin, to physical attacks on young people, their family members and damage to their homes or property. These incidents included face-to-face and online attacks.

*'School, streets, bars... incidents of being called a prostitute based on my background, being told to go back to my own country, a couple of more severe incidents included having rocks thrown at me and me being chased down the street by a group of teenage boys.'* (Oksana, 18, Female, Poland)

*'At my house when my neighbour called my brother an immigrant (although he was born here), at school I had people telling me to fuck off back to my country, a girl throwing bricks and rocks at me and yelling racist things and more incidents.'* (Marlyn, Female, 16, Poland)

**Racism is clearly a feature of many young migrants' lives and these findings are very concerning. Many young Eastern Europeans seem to experience racism on a daily basis in places where they should feel safe such as schools, public transport, parks and shops. For many, it seems that the post-Brexit Referendum atmosphere has made them more likely to experience or witness racism in their everyday lives. Our study also reveals the pervasive nature of racism, whereby it is seen as normalised behaviour and young people do not report it as they think teachers and police will not be interested.**

*'It's happening at school. I am getting bullied and I feel like they're bullying me because of my nationality as they do sometimes say racist things to me.'* (Lydia\*, Female, 14, Poland)

*'It varies, but one of the things that happened at school was people telling me I should be working in the dining hall or cleaning their houses as I'm Polish. Obviously that's a stereotype and I'm pretty sure they were just having a laugh, as that's the type of humour we have.'* (Carmen, 15, Female, Poland)

# Eastern European young people's precarious future post-Brexit

Despite their feelings of uncertainty since the Brexit Referendum and the increase in racist incidents young people have witnessed and/or experienced, the majority of survey respondents (73.8%) felt 'fairly satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their life in the UK.

Three quarters (75.2%) said they are 'likely' or 'very likely' to continue living in the UK in the future, with only 11% saying they did not think that they will stay (n=803).

Those who planned to stay in the UK said they hoped to continue their education in school, college or university, or through a training scheme (70.2%). Many thought that they would be in full-time or part-time work or working while studying (44.7%) or volunteering (10.5%).

The fact that most young Eastern Europeans see

themselves as living in the UK long term indicates their feelings of belonging and being 'at home' in the UK, as many have lived most of their lives in the UK. Many feel a strong sense of local and national belonging.

Eastern European young people who moved to Britain during childhood, and have participated in schools and communities across the country, want to make their future in Britain. The current post-Brexit Referendum uncertainty and an increasingly anti-immigrant environment are leading many to question their position and rights in Britain.

For some young people, the uncertainty over the Brexit plans means that a future in another country is increasingly attractive. This will mean a loss for Britain's economy and society, in terms of the skills and knowledge young people have developed in their formative years in the UK.

*'I feel very connected to Europe and European culture. There has been some concern regarding whether I want to stay in this country in future due to the political changes happening in UK. I am considering moving to EU after finishing university despite the fact I enjoy living in this country.'* (Michael, 18, male, Latvia)

*'For a while now I've felt like I don't belong in the UK, which has driven me to make a few decisions that would hopefully allow me to move away from this country in a few years.'* (Alan, 17, Male, Bulgaria)

*'I feel European more than anything. The Brexit Referendum has me severely worried for the future of this country, its people and foreigners living here.'* (Slodan, 15, Male, Czech)

*'I don't want to stay in the country in which I need to hide my nationality to be treated equally. I'm learning German now so that my job prospects will not be limited after I finish university and move out of Britain.'* (Dorota, Female, 18, Poland)

*'I just hope I can stay in UK because I don't want to leave. I want to study here, I want to work here, I want to start my own family here.'* (Maria, 17, Female, Latvia)

## About the Here to Stay? Project

*Here to Stay? Identity, belonging and citizenship among Eastern European settled children and young people in the UK (a decade after EU enlargement)* is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/M011038/1, 2016-2018).

You can read more about the project at: [www.migranteryouth.org](http://www.migranteryouth.org)

Find us on Twitter @MigrantYouth or Facebook [www.facebook.com/MigrantYouthUK/](http://www.facebook.com/MigrantYouthUK/)

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# Key findings

The main issues to emerge from the research are:

- The UK's decision to leave the EU makes many young Eastern Europeans uncertain, worried and scared. The current post-Referendum environment leaves young people with significant uncertainty over their right to remain in the UK after Brexit; this uncertainty over rights has already led to an increase in the number of EU nationals returning to Europe or moving to another country (ONS, Migration Statistics, May 2017).
- The uncertainty over their future puts young Eastern Europeans at risk of mental health issues and school dropout. Young people who have EU citizenship are more at risk of feeling excluded and unwelcome in their communities as a result of current uncertainties over their status and the anti-immigration rhetoric.
- The Brexit Referendum has created a more divided society. Young people say that the debates on Brexit have polarised communities into pro and against Europe and European citizens. For many young people who have migrated to the UK as children, Britain is their home and social divisions make them feel unwelcome and anxious.
- Young Eastern Europeans have reported increased levels of racism post-Brexit Referendum. Many young people experience racism on a daily basis, disguised as jokes or banter, on the basis of their accent and country of birth, while others have experienced serious attacks on themselves, their families or properties.
- Eastern European young people feel that their future is precarious. While the majority of the young people in our study said they are likely to live in the UK in 2020, the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies of controlling immigration have made many contemplate their future plans.

# Policy and service recommendations

**Based on the survey findings, we are making the following recommendations to local authorities and organisations working with young people originally from Eastern Europe. We hope these recommendations will ensure that young people can benefit from services and policies which support them throughout the Brexit transition.**

- Organisations and devolved Governments should work with the UK Government to make the guarantee of rights of EU nationals a matter of priority. This would reduce their insecurities and avoid the risk of EU nationals leaving.
- Organisations working with EEA nationals should ensure that young people and their families can access up-to-date information on decisions made in relation to the post-Brexit situation and their status. Currently, young people are unsure over their rights and where to find information.
- Schools and statutory services are key to tackling racism and anti-immigration attitudes. Many schools are sites of racism where young people are victims do not report incidents and learn to avoid or normalise racist situations. There is an immediate need to ensure schools are challenging racist attitudes amongst pupils and teachers and improve mechanisms of reporting and dealing with incidents.
- Services should consider providing young Europeans with emotional support during the Brexit transition, given the insecurities many will experience in relation to their future. While many young people will have lived in the UK since childhood, their future migrations often will be decided by their parents. These decisions will also depend on their views of Britain as an attractive and safe place to continue to live and work in.
- Continue consultations with young Eastern Europeans on future policies. Young people are clearly thinking about the implications of Brexit for themselves and their families. We believe they should be fully involved in any consultations at local, regional and national level, to ensure their experiences and needs shape policy and practice.

