



BRIEFING

The migration intentions of British National (Overseas) status holders in Hong Kong

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This briefing presents key findings from the first round of a survey conducted in Hong Kong in February–April 2021 about the migration intentions of British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders in Hong Kong.

Key Points

In early 2021, 6% of BN(O)s were planning to come to the UK via the BN(O) visa scheme and a further 32% were considering coming.

Many potential BN(O) movers do not plan to move immediately or are uncertain about when they might move.

Factors making the BN(O) visa attractive included flexibility to work, bring family members, and the lack of an English language requirement.

Potential UK movers are younger and more educated than people who plan to stay in Hong Kong.

The UK is the most popular choice of destination countries among BN(O)s leaving or considering leaving Hong Kong, with a third choosing it as their first-choice country.

Over 40% of potential UK movers said they planned to move to London.

Dissatisfaction with the political, economic, and social environment in Hong Kong are push factors for BN(O) migration.

Potential BN(O) movers cited a wide range of political, social, personal and economic factors informing their interest in moving to the UK.

Understanding the policy

The sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from the UK to China on 1 July 1997. Prior to the handover, most residents of Hong Kong could apply for British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status. BN(O) status did not confer the right to live, work, or study in the UK (see our [Q&A: The new Hong Kong British National \(Overseas\) visa](#)). The BN(O) status is valid for life but cannot be passed to children or spouses.

In 2020, China passed a controversial [National Security Law](#) in Hong Kong, effective from 30 June 2020. The UK Government then introduced a [new](#) route on 31 January 2021, which provides a pathway to UK citizenship for an estimated 5.4 million Hong Kong residents (comprising 2.9 million BN(O)s and their estimated 2.5 million family members).

Hong Kong has dealt with mass emigration in the recent past. Between 1988 and 1994, following the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration by the UK and China in 1984, an estimated 330,000 people – 5.7% of the population – emigrated from Hong Kong (Sharpton, 2012). Emigration peaked at around 62,000 in 1990, the year after a crackdown on social movements in mainland China (Wong, 1992).

The BN(O) route allows a British National (Overseas) status holder who normally lives in the UK, Islands, or Hong Kong, to come to the UK with their close family members, including family members who are not BN(O)s. After five years of residence in the UK, they are entitled to apply for settlement (also known as indefinite leave to remain), and after one further year of residence to apply for British citizenship. BN(O) visa holders will be able to work or study in virtually any capacity in the UK, including applying for higher education courses. They will be able to use the NHS, but will not generally be entitled to claim benefits, a condition known as No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Whilst successful applicants to the BN(O) route are expected to be self-sufficient, in the event a BN(O) visa holder becomes destitute or is at imminent risk of destitution, or if there is a risk to the welfare of a child or the applicant is experiencing exceptional financial circumstances, they will be able to apply to lift the NRPF condition.

From the commencement of the policy on 31 January until 30 September 2021, there were approximately [88,800](#) applications for the BN(O) route, which includes main applicants and dependant family members (rounded to the nearest hundred).

Understanding the evidence

The authors conducted a survey to gauge the level of potential migration from Hong Kong to other countries including the UK, among those who had not already moved. The survey uses random phone samples drawn from phone directories. In total, 1,000 BN(O) status holders were interviewed in Hong Kong in Cantonese from February to April 2021. By definition this sample excludes people who have *already* moved to the UK. Due to COVID restrictions, respondents were sent the questionnaire prior to the interview, and the interviews were conducted by phone or via another interface such as FaceTime, WhatsApp, or WeChat.

To ensure representativeness of the findings, the data were weighted in the analysis based on the distribution of age, gender and educational levels of the Hong Kong population aged 23 or above (calculated from the 2016 Hong Kong Population by Census data). All BN(O)s were born before or on 1 July 1997, when the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned from the UK to China.

In this analysis, we compare three types of Hong Kong BN(O) respondents: (1) *Potential UK Movers*, who said they plan to move, or are considering moving, to the UK on the BN(O) visa scheme; (2) *General Movers*, who said they plan to move, or are considering moving, to a country outside China and Hong Kong, whether to the UK or another country); and (3) *Stayers*, who said they have no plan to emigrate to another country.

The present study analyses people's *intention* to migrate. But intentions do not always correspond with behaviour, and many people with the intention to immigrate do not in fact do so (see, for example, Dalen & Henkens, 2008).

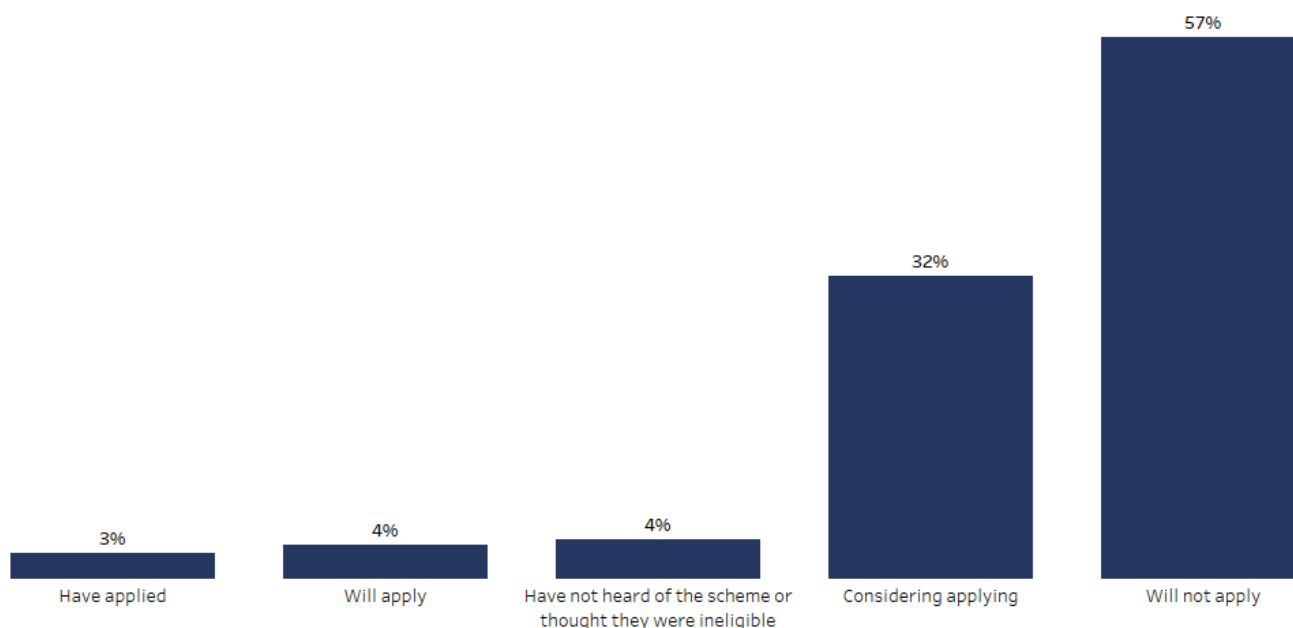
In early 2021, 6% of Hong Kong BN(O)s were planning to come to the UK via the BN(O) route and a further 32% were considering coming

Among all respondents in the sample, when asked whether they had applied, or will apply, for the BN(O) visa ("potential UK movers"), 3% said they had already applied, 4% said they would apply (6% in total, due to rounding). A further 32% were 'considering' applying (Figure 1).

Assuming there are [2.9 million](#) BN(O) people with status in Hong Kong, this suggests that 186,000 were planning to come to the UK via the BN(O) visa scheme (the sum of those who had applied or would apply); and a further 932,000 were considering applying. This indicates that there is considerable *potential* demand for the BN(O) visa well beyond the numbers who have already applied. However, note that the present study analyses people's intention to migrate. It is important to recognise that migration intentions do not always correspond with actual behaviour and that many people with the intention to migrate do not in fact do so (see, for example, Dalen & Henkens, 2008).

Figure 1

Have you applied or will you apply for a BN(O) visa?



Source: Authors' original survey. Notes: Excludes people who have already moved to the UK and thus are no longer in the sample of Hong Kong residents. The percentages are rounded to the nearest %.



Many potential UK movers do not plan to move immediately or are uncertain about when they might move

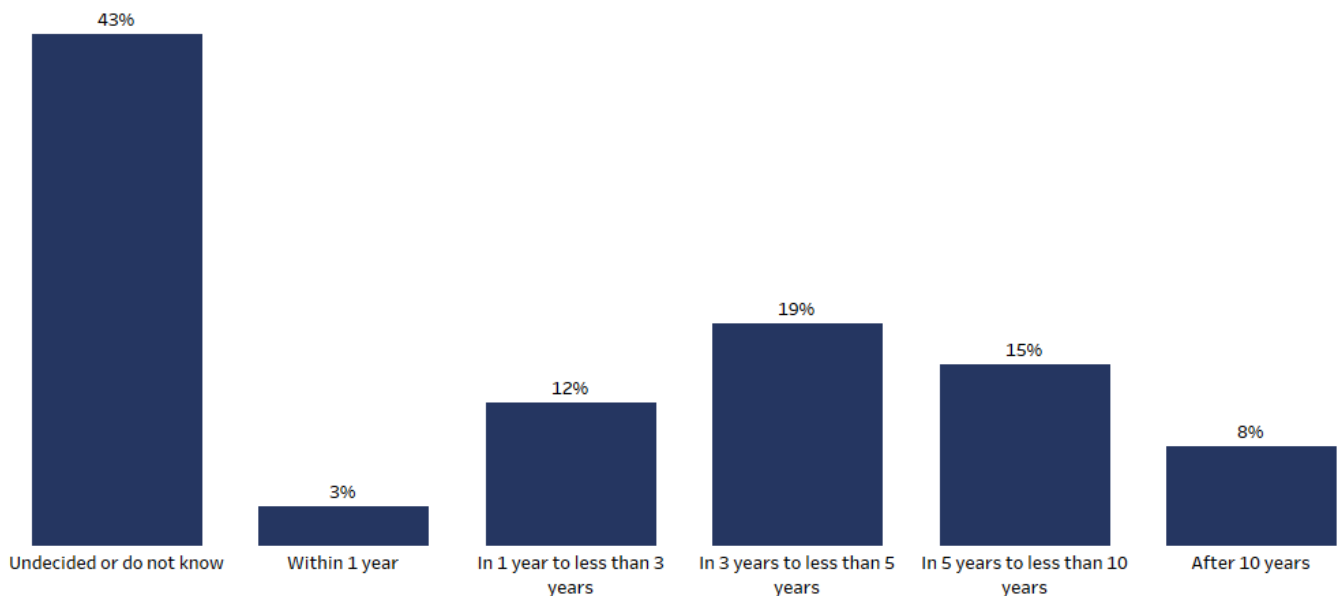
Among potential UK movers, 3% (equivalent to around 37,000 people) said they intended to move within a year, 12% (134,000) in one to less than three years, 19% (208,000) in three to under five years, 15% (169,000) in five to under ten years, and 8% (93,000) after ten years (Figure 2). The largest share (43%) had not yet decided or did not know. Since many of those considering moving did not plan to move immediately or were uncertain about when they might move, concrete migration plans will not necessarily materialize.

Again assuming there are 2.9 million BN(O)s in Hong Kong, this means that 379,000 thought they would move within five years (the figure excludes family members moving together). This is similar to the UK government's [forecasted](#) central estimate of 322,000 BN(O) visa applicants in the first five years of the policy (using Scenario 2 based on forecasted passport volumes; for more information see our [Q&A: The new Hong Kong British National \(Overseas\) visa](#)). However, the uncertainty of BN(O) status holders' intentions makes it difficult to forecast how many will actually move.

Figure 2

When do you plan to move to the UK under the BN(O) visa route?

Asked to those who said they had applied, will apply, or were considering applying, for a BN(O) visa



Source: Authors' original survey.



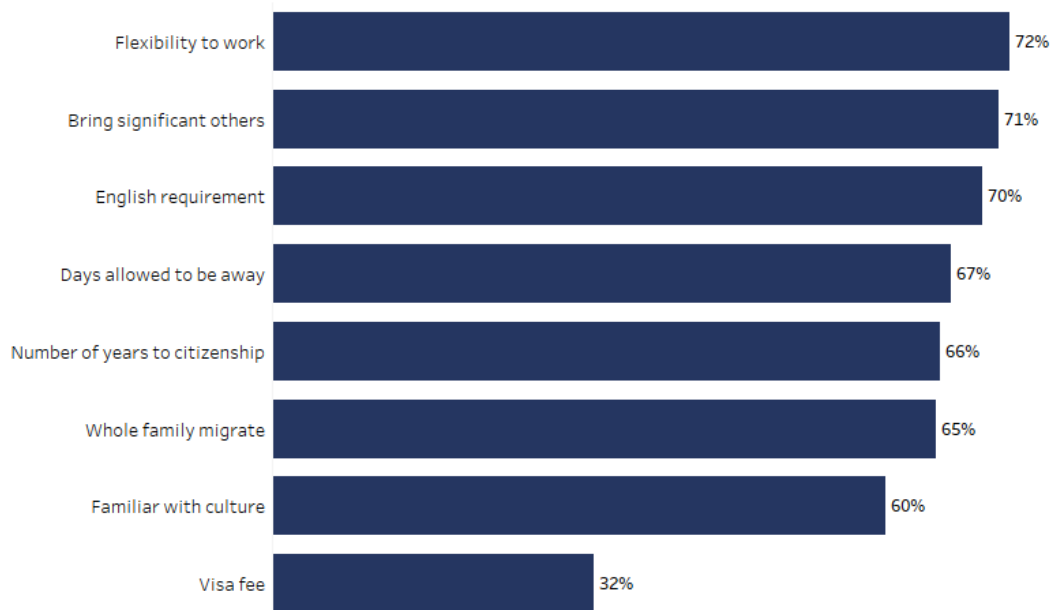
Factors making the BN(O) route attractive included flexibility to work, the ability to bring family members other than spouses or children, and the lack of an English language requirement

We asked potential UK movers (those who said they had applied, will apply, or are considering applying, for the BN(O) visa) the level of importance of several factors in considering whether or not to apply for the BN(O) visa scheme. The factors most commonly rated as important or very important were “the flexibility to work in any job without being sponsored by an employer” (72%), and “whether one could bring significant family members apart from children and spouse” (71%), and “the lack of an English language requirement”. Note that in the new route, adult children born before 1997 who still live in the same household as the BN(O) status holder applicant can apply to move to UK as a dependant; other family members are only eligible in the case of high dependency. There is also an English language requirement when BN(O) status holders apply for settlement. A minority – 30% – considered the cost of the visa a significant factor in affecting their decision to come (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Factors influencing the decision of HK BN(O)s to apply for the BN(O) visa

% of potential UK movers rating factor as 'important' or 'very important'



Source: Authors' original survey of 1,000 BN(O) status holders.

Notes: 'Potential UK movers' refers to Hong Kong BN(O)s in the sample who said they had applied, will apply, or were considering applying for a BN(O) visa. Respondents were asked how important the factor was on a five-point scale: Very unimportant, Not important, Moderate, Important, and Very important.

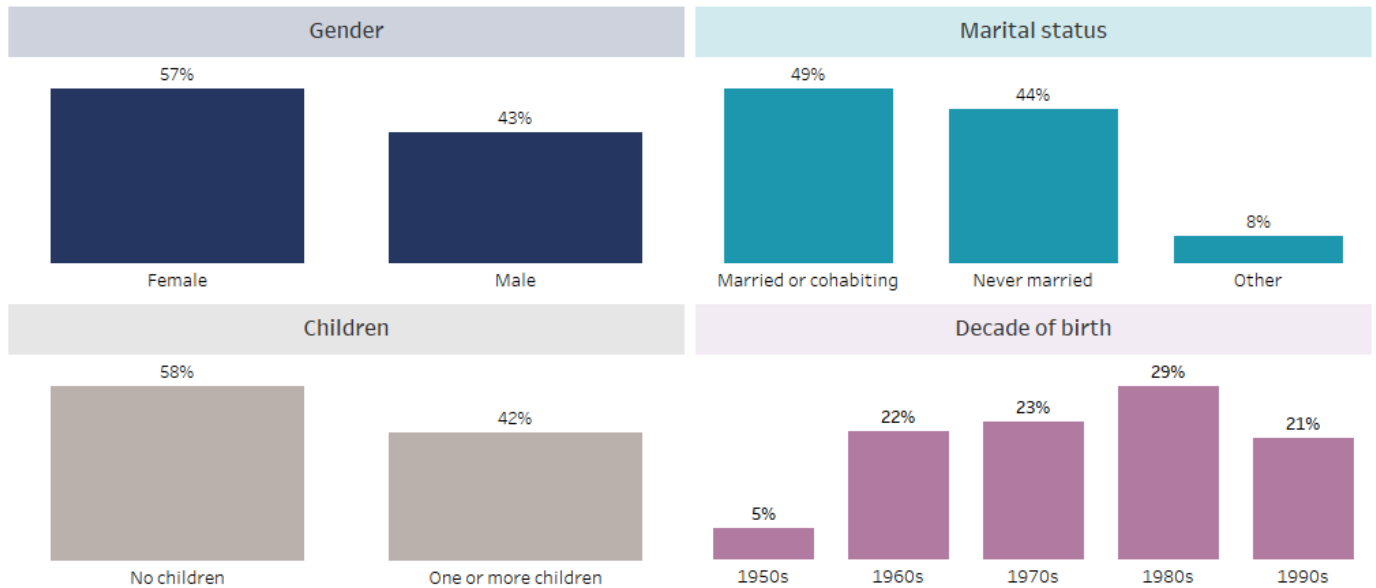


Potential UK movers are younger, and more educated than people who plan to stay in Hong Kong

The demographic profile of BN(O) movers is provided in Figure 4. It shows that BN(O) movers skew female, 42% are parents, and half were born in the 80s or 90s (i.e., are between the ages of 22 and 41).

Figure 4

Demographic characteristics of BN(O)s in our sample who had applied, will apply, or would consider applying, for a BN(O) visa ('potential UK movers')



Source: Authors' original survey.

Notes: Those with "other" marital status includes widows, widowers, and those divorced or separated.

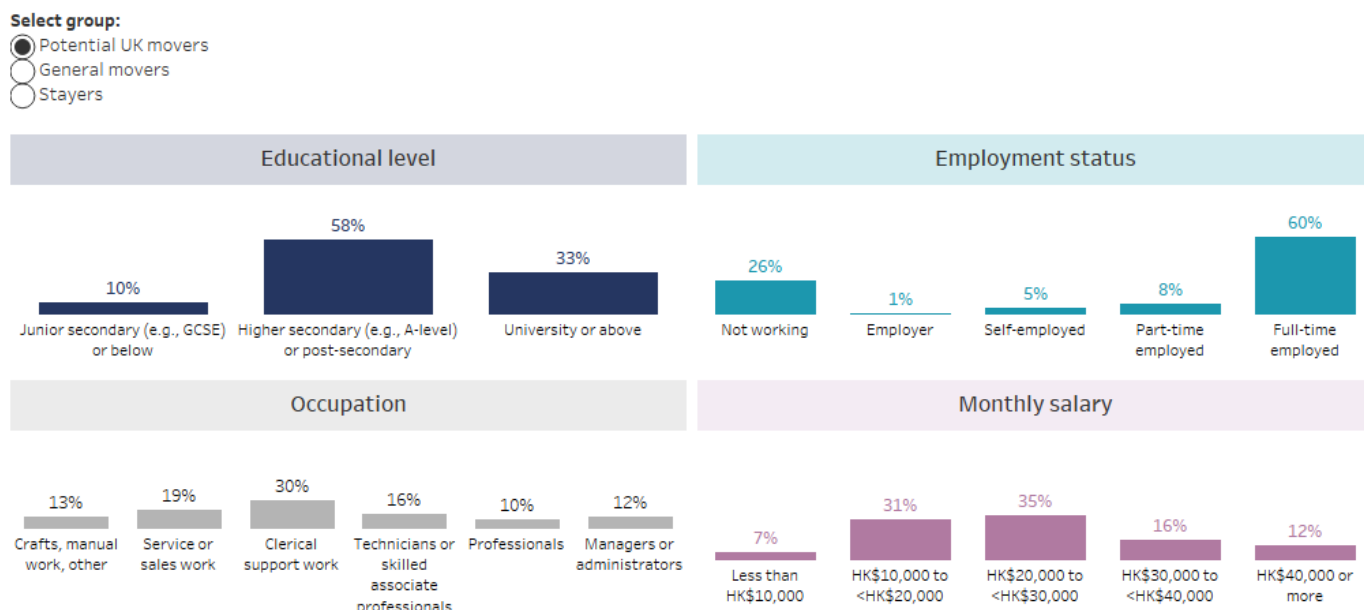


The educational, employment, and income characteristics of our sample of BN(O)s movers are provided in Figure 5, by type of BN(O) (potential UK movers, general movers, and stayers). Potential UK movers who had applied or might apply for the BN(O) visa scheme are younger, have higher educational qualifications, a higher employment rate, and are more likely to engage in managerial and professional occupations than people who plan to stay in Hong Kong (stayers).

Figure 5

Education, employment, and income characteristics of our sample of HK BN(O)s, by group

For potential UK movers, general movers, and stayers



Source: Authors' original survey.

Notes: 'Potential UK movers' are those who said they had applied, will apply, or are considering applying for the BN(O) visa. 'General movers' are those who said they plan to leave or were considering leaving Hong Kong, to go to any country, including the UK. 'Stayers' said they had no plan to leave Hong Kong. 'Not working' includes those unemployed and looking for work, those unemployed and not looking for work, and other categories of unemployed, such as students and housewives.



Most BN(O) movers plan to work in the UK: 53% (with 18% saying they would not work, and the remaining undecided). Yet BN(O) movers expect to take a pay cut, with 63% saying that they expect to earn less in the UK than in Hong Kong.

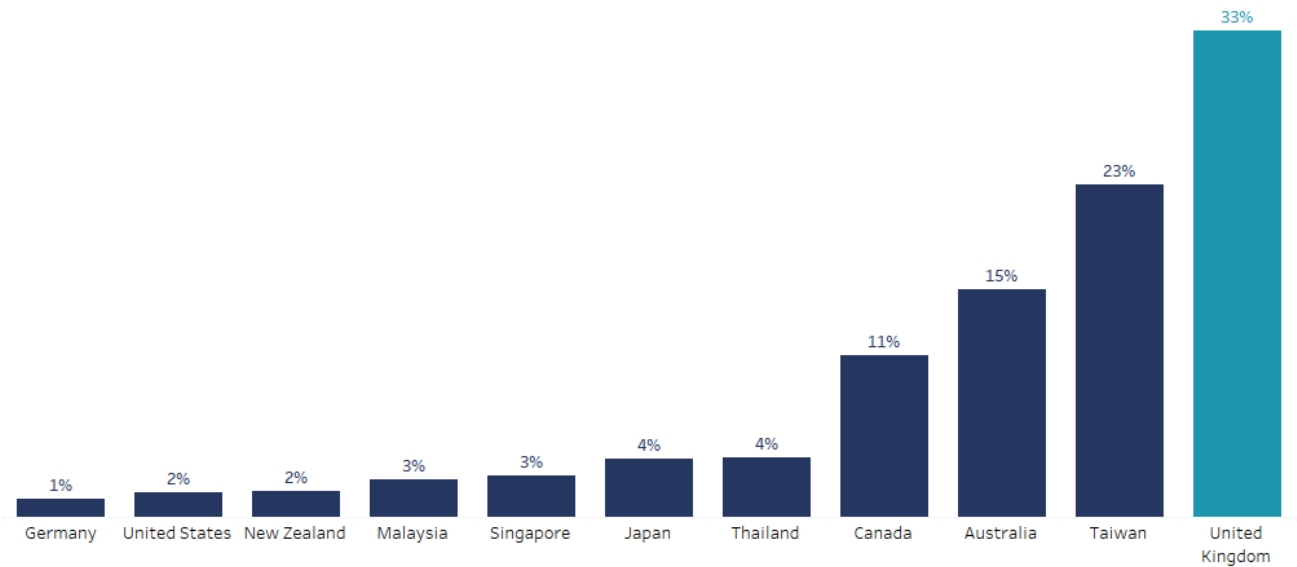
The UK is the most popular choice of destination countries among BN(O)s leaving or considering leaving Hong Kong, with a third choosing it as their first-choice country

Within our sample, some BN(O)s said they planned to leave Hong Kong, to the UK or any other country ('General movers'). When we asked these people which country they would prefer to move to, a third said the UK, making it the most popular destination (Figure 6). Other popular choices of emigration include Taiwan, Australia, and Canada.

Figure 6

What is your first choice of country to move to?

Asked to HK BN(O)s who said they were planning to leave or considering leaving Hong Kong ('General movers')



Source: Authors' original survey.



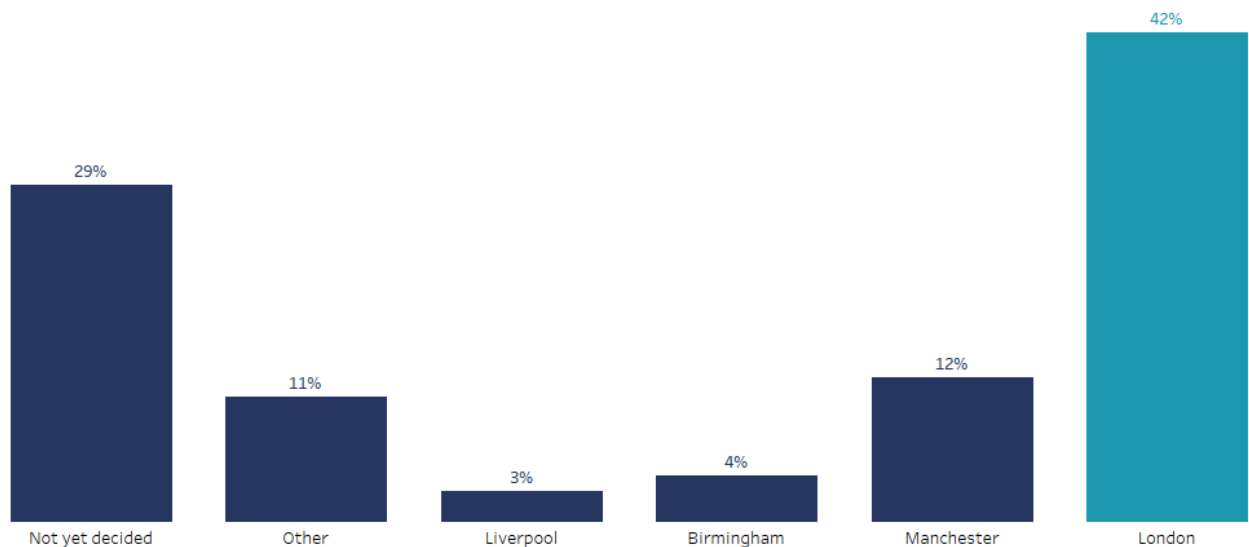
Over 40% of potential UK movers said they planned to move to London

When potential UK movers were asked which city or town in the UK they might move to, 42% said London, 12% Manchester, and 4% Birmingham, while 29% had not yet decided (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Which town or city in the UK might you move to?

Asked to HK BN(O)s who said they had applied, will apply, or were considering applying, for a BN(O) visa ('potential UK movers')



Source: Authors' original survey.



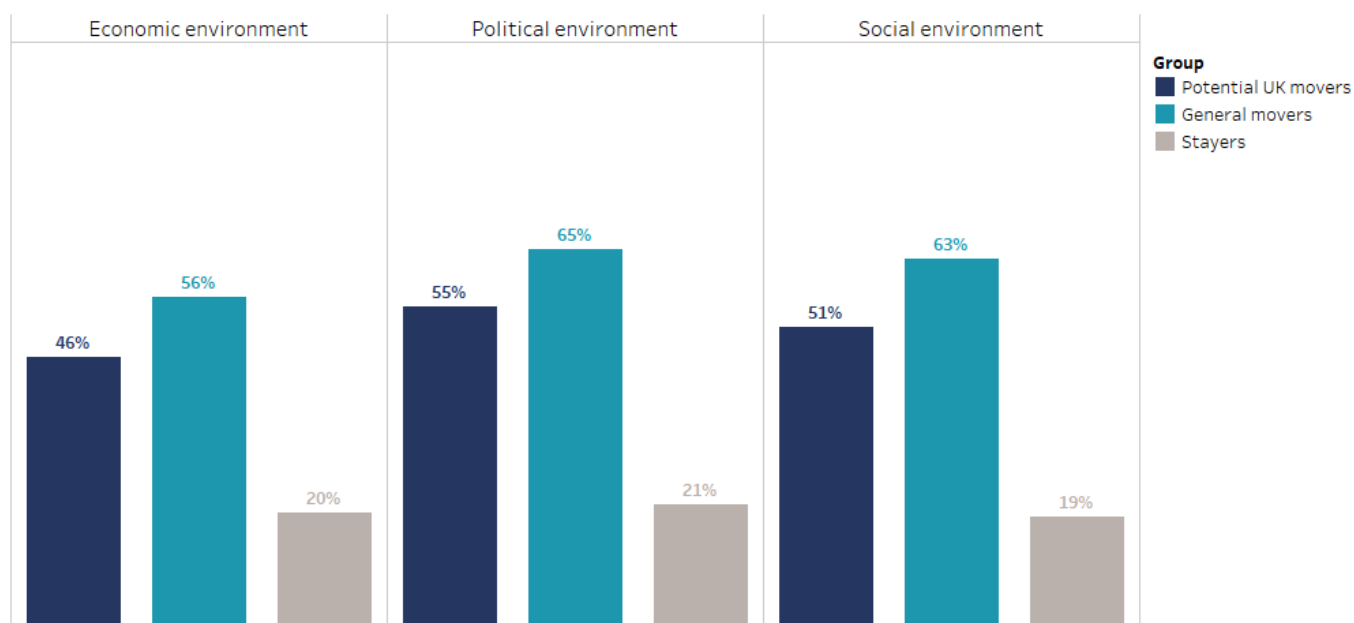
Dissatisfaction with the political, economic, and social environment in Hong Kong are push factors for BN(O) migration

We compared three types of Hong Kong BN(O) respondents: (1) *Potential UK Movers* (people who plan to move, or are considering moving, to the UK on the BN(O) visa scheme; (2) *General Movers* (BN(O)s who plan to move, or are considering moving, to a country outside China and Hong Kong, whether to the UK or another country); and (3) *Stayers* (BN(O)s who have no plan to emigrate to another country).

Respondents were asked how they thought the political, economic, and social environment in Hong Kong would change over the next five years (“become worse”, “remain the same”, “become better”, “don’t know”). A higher proportion of UK Movers and General Movers think that Hong Kong will become worse in political, economic, and social terms in the next five years. For example, the figures are over 40% for UK Movers, compared to just above 20% for Stayers (Figure 8).

Figure 8

% of respondents who think Hong Kong’s political, economic, and social environment will get worse in the next five years, by group



Source: Authors’ original survey.

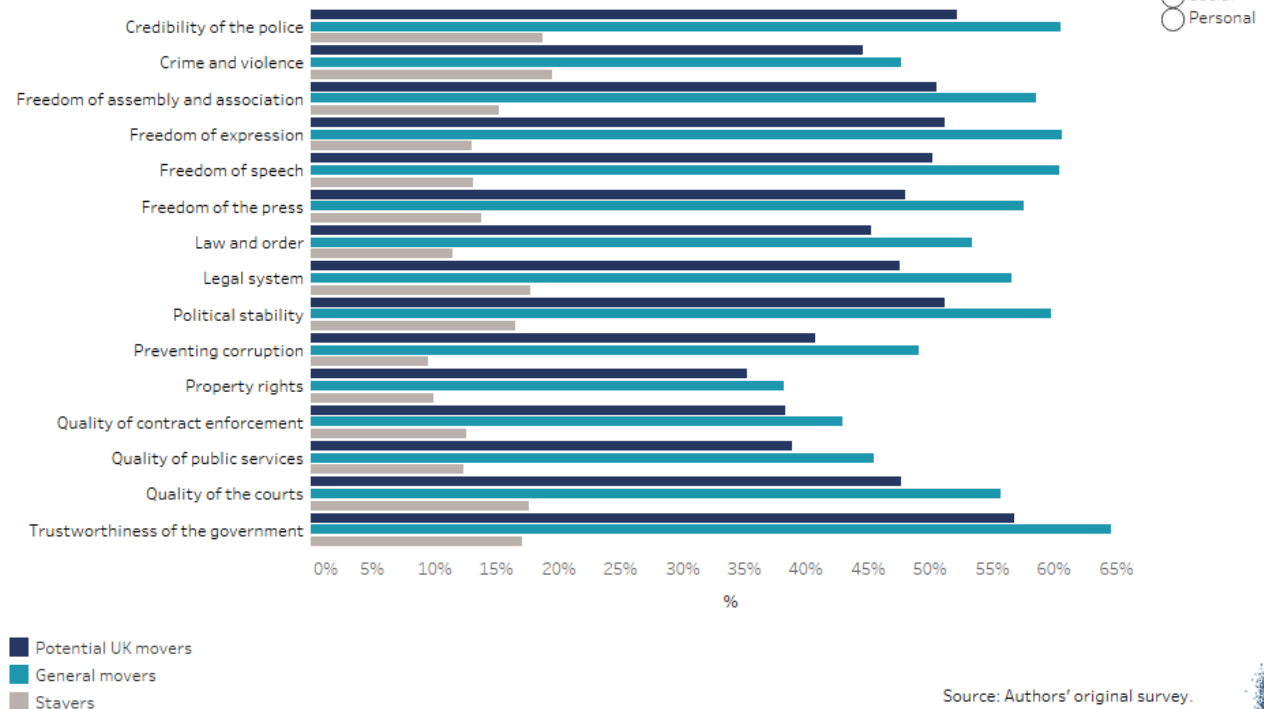


Respondents were also asked to about their satisfaction with the political, economic, and social environment of Hong Kong as well as their personal and family circumstance, on a 5-point scale from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”. A higher proportion of UK movers and general movers feel dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the political and economic environment in Hong Kong than stayers. It is interesting to note that general movers have a higher level of dissatisfaction than UK movers (Figure 8).

Large shares of respondents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with a wide range of political, economic, and social factors, including trustworthiness of the government, property prices, the size of living space, and working hours (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Dissatisfaction with aspects of life in Hong Kong, by environment and type of respondent



Potential BN(O) movers cited a wide range of political, social, personal and economic factors informing their interest in moving to the UK

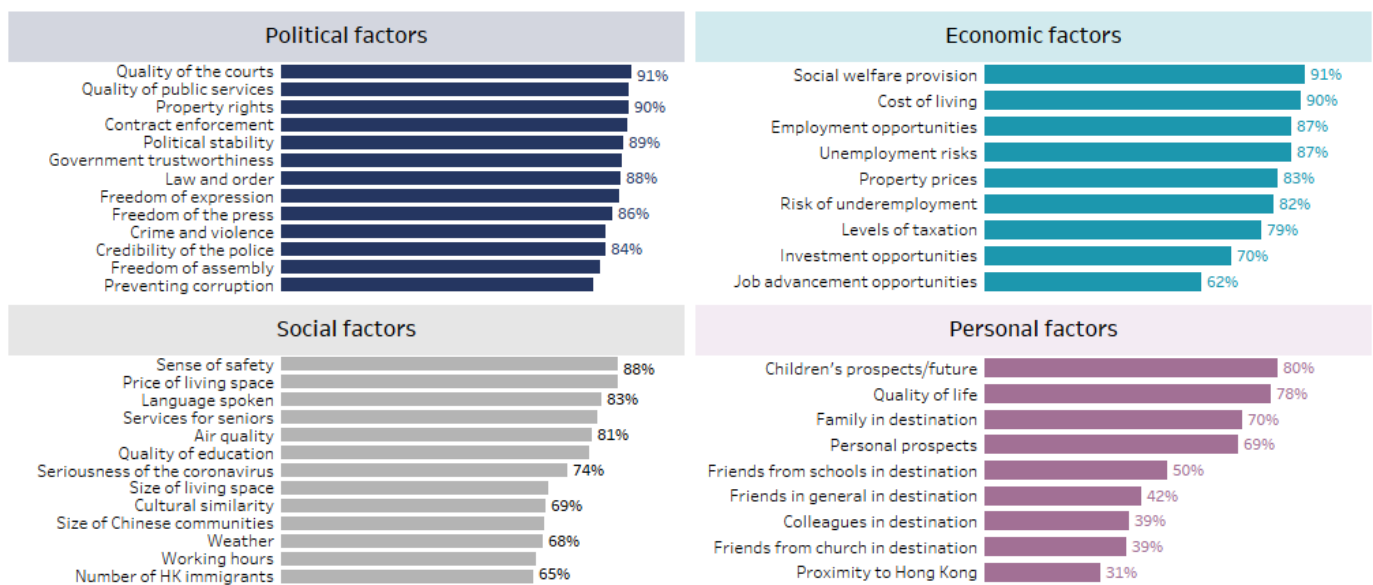
Potential UK movers had many different reasons for being interested in the UK as a destination. When they were asked to rate the level of importance of a list of political and economic factors when deciding the UK as their first- or second-choice destination country, quality of the courts was the most common political factor (91%), and social welfare provision the most commonly cited economic factor (91%) (Figure 7).

When we asked BN(O) movers which social and personal factors were important or very important in influencing their preference for the UK as their first- or second-choice destination country, a sense of safety was the most commonly cited social factor (88%), and their children’s future the most commonly cited personal consideration (80%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Political and economic factors considered to be important or very important in preferring the UK

% of *potential UK movers* citing political or economic factors as important or very important in choosing the UK as their first or second choice destination



Source: Authors' original survey.

Notes: Potential UK movers are defined as those who said they have applied, will apply, or are considering applying for the BN(O) visa scheme.



Further research

The data used were collected between February and April 2021. Since then, around 89,000 BN(O)s have applied for the visa, even if the number who have actually moved is not known. We have planned two more rounds of the survey to investigate the migration intentions of the BN(O)s who remain in Hong Kong.

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Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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