

The academic evidence regarding immigration is overwhelmingly positive

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While national politicians continue to speak about immigration in negative terms, the academic evidence is overwhelmingly positive. Migrants tend to be highly-skilled on average, contribute substantially to the economy, and do not compete with natives for social housing. Moreover, there is no evidence that crime rates have been on the rise as a result of new immigration waves. [Neli Demireva](#) writes that there is a real danger the immigration debate will turn sour and have spill-over effects in unexpected places.



The immigration debate continues to rage and obsess the UK. The issue of immigration has managed to level with economic concerns and produces fireworks not only from UKIP but from a similarly infatuated Conservative camp. Unlike the political discourse which has stuck into “immigration is probably good, but” mode, the academic evidence remains almost unequivocally positive. The general public worries that there are many aspects of migration that could go awry and researchers have tried to address them in a similarly detailed fashion.

Take, for example, the concern over unskilled migration waves, and the danger to the welfare system that migrants with little transferable human capital can present. Several recent academic papers have demonstrated that these fears are overstated (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), for example). Immigrants to the UK tend to be [highly-skilled on average](#) compared to immigrants in other EU member states. In particular, [Dustmann and Frattini](#) show that the average level of education, as well as the share of individuals with a tertiary education, has been consistently higher in the UK’s immigrant population than among natives and that this difference has accelerated with the arrival of new immigrants since 2000.

Immigrant populations in the UK also have employment rates on average similar to those of natives. If anything, the policies aimed at managing migration put into place by successive UK governments appear to have ensured the acquisition of the desired and high skill-level migrants, and continuous employment spells are the norm rather than unemployment or inactivity. Yes, it probably matters whether we talk about refugees or labour migrants, about migrants from the European Economic Area or outside of it. However, the profile of the average migrant worker is undoubtedly positive and the refugee debate should not be conflated with the immigration one.

Migrants in the UK contribute substantially to the economy and their take up of welfare is very modest compared to the native population. In terms of [benefits claiming](#), only 6.4 per cent of the entire claimant population are estimated to have been non-UK nationals when they first registered for a National Insurance Number. Whereas there is significant variation in this rate by benefit type, still only 8.5 per cent of all Jobseekers are estimated to have been non-UK nationals when they first registered, contrasted with 3.5 per cent for working age disabled benefit claimants. Importantly, but only cursorily mentioned in this debate, the initial results from a sample exercise to match non-EEA claimants who were recorded as foreign nationals at the time they first registered for a National Insurance Number, suggests that more than half (54 per cent) will have obtained British citizenship subsequently, and the majority of the remainder will have some form of immigration status providing legitimate access to public funds.

In regards to social housing, Rutter and Latorre [present data](#) that new migrants to the UK over the last five years make up less than two per cent of the total of those in social housing. In fact, 90 per cent of those who live in social housing are UK born. Most of the newly-arrived migrant group who occupy social tenancies are refugees who have been granted permission to remain in the UK, however, their number remains very small. Other [work shows](#) that reflecting the relatively high levels of employment within A8 accession country households moving into the social rented sector, only a relatively small proportion of tenants or their partners were recorded as qualifying for or being

in receipt of state benefits, and only a very small proportion avail of social housing with no other source of income except for benefits. Moreover, looking across EU member states in general, Harrison et al. [found that](#) severe housing disadvantage persists amongst national indigenous minorities and that law, monitoring and regulation vary widely, and some Member States have only made limited progress towards equality of treatment or recognition of diversity.

There is also no evidence that crime rates have been on the rise as a result of the new immigration waves. An [LSE report](#) shows that, contrary to wide-spread beliefs, when the effect of flows associated with the A8 accession countries is examined (or with those entering with work permits or Tier 2 visas), significant negative effects on property crime (and no effect on violent crime) are found. In other words, areas with higher shares of these types of immigrants in the population experienced faster falls in property crime rates than other areas. The researchers concluded that A8 migrants are special in the sense that they came to the UK with the express intent of working and have very strong labour market attachment which materialises in a positive rather than a negative effect. Further still, a survey carried out by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in 2008 found no evidence that Eastern Europeans were responsible for a crime wave and Peter Fahy, the chief constable who co-authored the report has [since remarked](#) that a lot of worry about crime in Britain is encouraged by misreading of police statistics.

There is a real danger that the immigration debate will turn sour and have spill-over effects in unexpected places. Britain is experiencing an upsurge in overt prejudice with three in ten respondents for the British Social Attitudes survey describing themselves as being [very or little racially prejudiced](#). It is hard not to link these findings to the constant hammering about alleged 'skill' or 'performance' differences between the majority and the 'other' that the immigration rhetoric generates. An outflow of highly-skilled migrants or discouragement of potential ones due to a climate of marginalisation and prejudice is a disastrous scenario about which more research needs to be done.

Finally, little is so far mentioned about the increasing volume of [British retirement migration](#) (more than one million Britons own a home in coastal areas in Spain alone) and the challenges that British retired migrants could bring to the welfare systems of other EU member states. Migration is obviously a complex and polemic issue that deserves critical and careful analysis; yet, negativity supported only by vague generalizations can be misguided and hard to manage.

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