

Migration policy must be based on more than just numbers

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*Debate regarding immigration in the UK is highly charged and often consists of the use (or misuse) of statistics to underline one's argument. While it is important to consistently challenge purposeful misrepresentations of facts that worsen perceptions of migration, **Alex Glennie** argues that countering numbers with yet more numbers will only reinforce the existing reductive framing of the debate, and confuse or alienate the public further. Treating migrants as statistics rather than people fails to recognise the complex emotional drivers of public attitudes.*



Numbers are a pervasive feature of the migration debate in the UK. The coalition government's policymaking in this area is driven by a target of reducing annual net migration from the 'hundreds to the tens of thousands' before the next general election. In 2012, a [petition](#) spearheaded by the Migration Watch pressure group demanding that the government take 'all necessary steps' to prevent the British population from exceeding 70 million people attracted more than 100,000 signatures and triggered a backbench parliamentary debate. More recently, the publication of a report by the European Commission on the impact of EU migration on social security systems prompted alarmist headlines claiming that there were 600,000 unemployed European citizens living in the UK – a deliberate [misinterpretation of statistics](#) which actually referred to the number of those who are economically inactive. This group includes older students, carers and partners not in work, many of whom will not be jobseeking or claiming benefits.

A focus on absolute numbers is often unhelpful when it comes to designing immigration policies. The net migration target has led to a series of bad policymaking decisions in recent years, such as the cap on high-skilled migration and the introduction of new rules limiting the number of visas issued to international students. These two categories of immigrants are hugely valuable to the UK and are groups that the public is [least concerned about](#). And though the 'overcrowded Britain' narrative has an intuitive appeal, advocates of this argument are hard pressed to explain why there is a set number of people that the UK can support and short on practical ideas about how to achieve drastic cuts in current levels. Without imposing morally and economically indefensible restrictions on family size, cutting down on immigration can only go so far in reducing natural population growth in the medium to long-term, and may create other problems, such as hastening the aging of Britain's society.

While numerical targets are counterproductive, this is not to say that the scale and pace of immigration does not matter. On the contrary, policymakers have a clear responsibility to ensure that the UK is able to absorb and benefit from the levels of immigration it receives. Large numbers of new arrivals over a short time period can overwhelm the capacity of local communities and services, and it is a legitimate policy objective to look for ways to bear down on certain types of migration in order to reduce these pressures. However, trying to manipulate net migration levels is a blunt and ineffective way of doing this. For instance, the government could reduce net migration to zero if London received one million new immigrants and one million people left the UK from Glasgow in a year, but it is highly unlikely that this would be good for either city.

The ways in which numbers are currently used by the government and the media has also diverted those who want have a more productive conversation about how to encourage the types and levels of migration that will benefit the UK. Much time has been spent trying to correct the misuse of statistics, or in arguing that recent immigration flows have had little overall negative impact on jobs and wages. It is important to consistently challenge purposeful misrepresentations of facts that worsen perceptions of migration. But there is a danger that countering numbers with yet more numbers will only reinforce the existing reductive framing of the debate, and confuse or alienate the public further.

Treating migrants as statistics rather than people fails to recognise the complex emotional drivers of public attitudes. It is difficult to relate to abstract figures about the long-term benefits of migration for public finances, but very easy to

see the immediate and sometimes negative impacts of immigration flows, such as increased competition for jobs and housing or rapid changes in the make up of communities. Indeed, many say that they would be willing to accept lower levels of economic growth or slightly higher taxes in order to have lower levels of immigration when presented with this cost-benefit framing.

Current discussions about EU migration are a case in point. This has been a source of public anxiety in recent months, driven by uncertainty about how many Bulgarian and Romanian citizens may move to the UK when restrictions on their ability to work here [are lifted in 2014](#). It is impossible to predict how many 'A2' nationals will come to live and work in the UK from next year, although it is very unlikely that we will see flows on the same scale as from the eight states that joined the EU in 2004. [Evidence also shows](#) that EU migrants are on average more likely to be in work and paying taxes and less likely to be claiming benefits than their British counterparts, although this will not necessarily be the case in all local areas. Regardless, the government has again focused on the numbers rather than the impacts, simultaneously pursuing measures aimed at reducing the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for these migrants and [limiting their access to welfare and services](#). This has failed to help local authorities prepare for unpredictable new migration flows. It has also done little to alleviate public concern and strengthened the argument of those who see withdrawal from the EU as the only 'solution' to the immigration question.

It is possible to change the way that these issues are framed. Forthcoming IPPR research has found that when migration is discussed in terms of fairness and reciprocity – where the tangible contributions that migrants make are recognised and valued as long as they play by the rules and put as much in to their communities as they get out – and when local areas are properly prepared for managing the impacts of new arrivals, people are more likely to support principled policies that are not driven by reaching an arbitrary net migration target. Of course the size and pace of migration flows matter. But they cannot be the only basis for policymaking if our aim is to create a migration system that is fair and effective, and seen to be so in the eyes of the public.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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