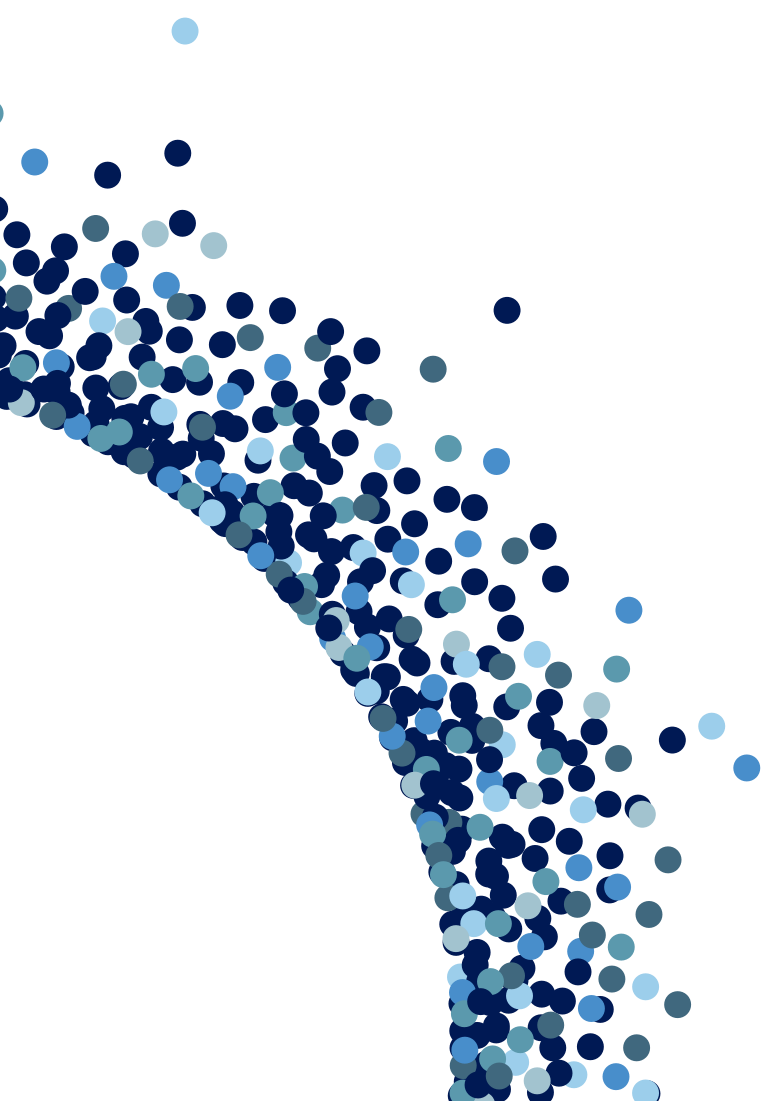




BRIEFING

Migration to the UK: Asylum



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This briefing sets out key facts and figures, as well as information gaps, relating to the number of asylum seekers applying to stay in the UK, who these asylum seekers are, how many are rejected, what the overall impacts of asylum seekers are on UK migration statistics and what happens to asylum seekers after their applications have been processed.

Key Points

Asylum applications (excluding dependents) rose from 4,256 in 1987 to a peak of 84,130 in 2002, and then declined to 19,865 in 2011.

Asylum applicants and their dependents comprised an estimated 7% of net migration in 2011, down from 49% in 2002, but up from 4% in 2010.

In 2011, 33% of asylum applications were accepted initially.

The majority of asylum seekers are men, while their dependents are mostly children, with some adult women.

In 2011 the UK received 0.41 asylum applicants per 1000 people in its population, below the European average (0.65 for EU plus Norway and Switzerland).

Understanding the evidence

Asylum applicants or “asylum seekers” are individuals who come to the UK and apply for protection as refugees. A refugee is someone who has fled his or her own country, and cannot return for well-founded fear of persecution there. The UK adheres to UN and European agreements on refugees and human rights and therefore must not return asylum applicants to a place where they are likely to face torture or persecution.

Asylum adds to the UK resident population in several ways. First, it adds to the legal, permanent (“settled”), population. A minority of applicants gain permission to stay in the UK (“leave to remain”), and may remain long enough to settle in the UK. Leave to remain might mean official recognition as a refugee or permission to stay for “humanitarian protection” (HP) or through “discretionary leave to remain” (DL). In each case, the protected individual can stay in the UK for five years and then has the opportunity to apply for indefinite leave to remain.

Second, asylum adds to the temporary population. Applicants who are unsuccessful and eventually leave the UK nonetheless will live in the UK for some time as they await a decision. Any such applicant who lives in the UK for at least 12 months is classified as a “long-term international migrant”.

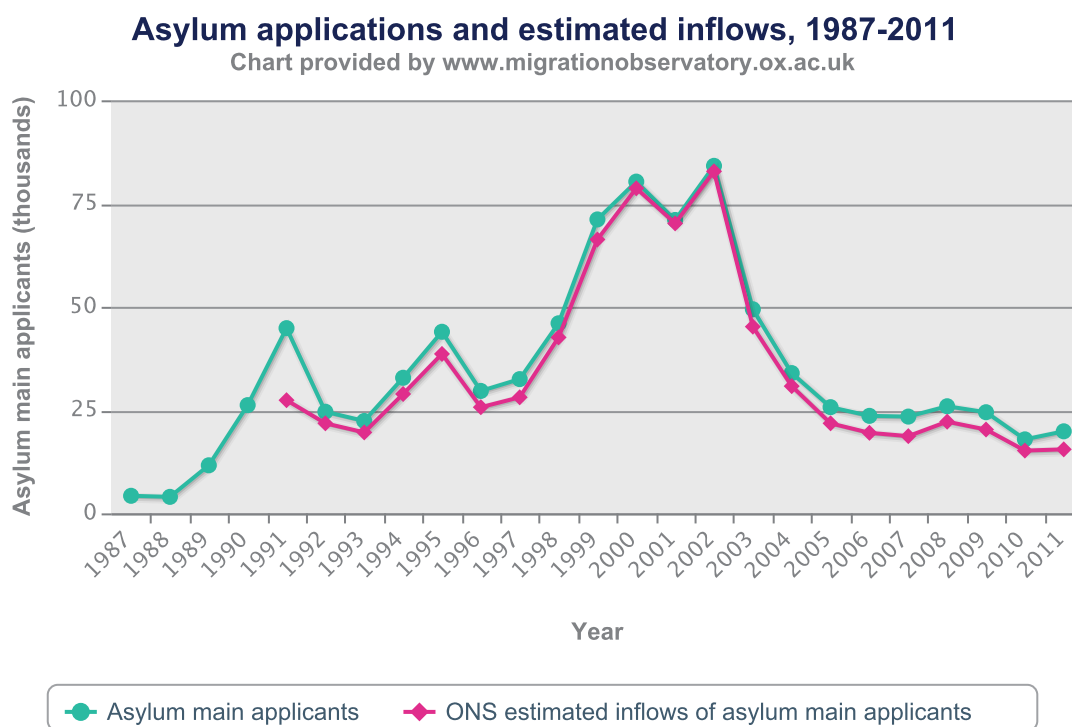
A third group is more difficult to count – individuals whose applications for asylum have been rejected, but who have not departed the country. Some of this group applies for “hard case support” (aka Section 4) while awaiting departure, and are tracked in Home Office data. Others may have departed outside of official removal or voluntary departure schemes; still others may remain illegally in the UK out of contact with immigration control, and thus uncounted.

The Home Office counts applications, decisions (initially and on appeal), and grants of leave to remain for asylum applicants. This includes dependents that arrived with the main applicant as part of the initial application. These data provide good estimates of the first two routes into the population for asylum seekers: 1) those who gain leave to remain in the UK, and 2) those that live in the UK temporarily while their cases are in process. The challenges in understanding the make-up of the third group, those whose application have been rejected but still remain here without legal permission, are discussed in the Evidence gaps and limitations section.

Asylum applications peaked in the early 2000s

Asylum applications increased from 1987 to 2003, but have played a declining role in overall migration since 2004, as part of a trend across Europe. As Figure 1 shows, asylum applications increased from 4,256 in 1987 to 84,130 in 2003, before falling to 25,710 in 2005. After little change until 2009, applications declined further until 2010 before increasing to 19,865 in 2011. These numbers include only “main applicants,” excluding “dependents” (family members accompanying the principal person making the application).

Figure 1

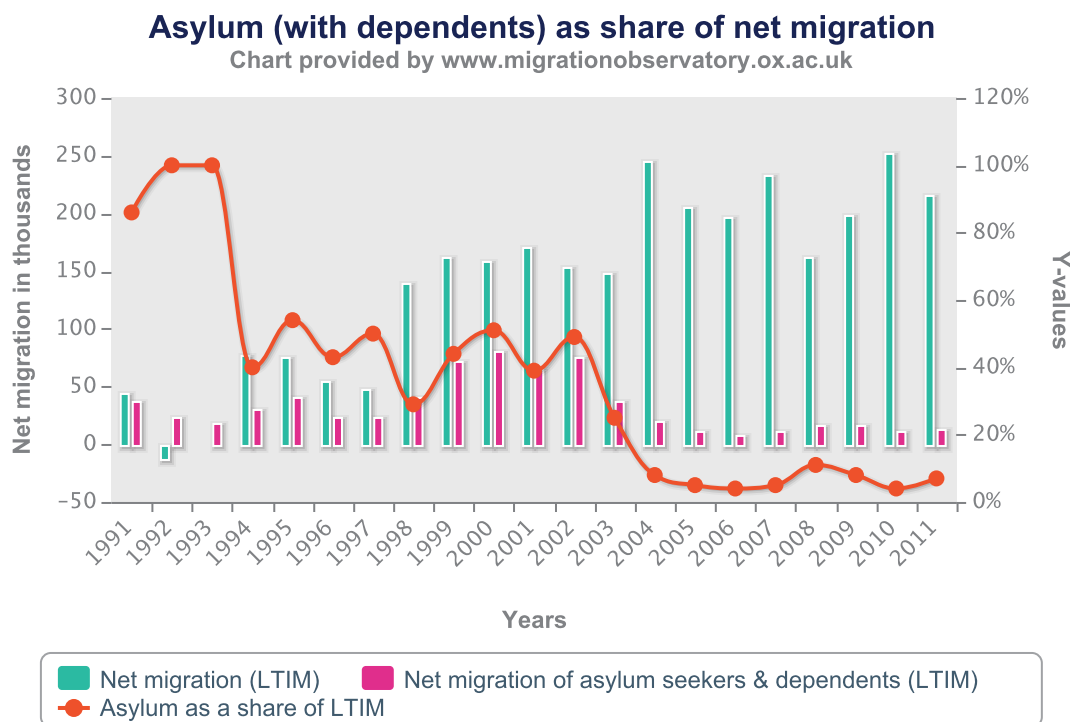


Source : Office of National Statistics, Long-Term International Migration (LTIM)

As a component of overall migration into the UK, asylum accounted for all or nearly all net migration as estimated by the ONS’ LTIM figures in the early 1990s. Asylum contributed significantly to net increases in migration in 1994 and again in 1998. Between 1994 and 2003, asylum seekers’ share of annual net migration ranged from 25% to 54% in annual data. This trend had changed decisively by 2004, as net migration again increased but asylum declined. Between 2004 and 2011, asylum ranged from 4% to 11% of net migration, and was estimated at 7% for 2011.

Unfortunately, net migration calculations depend on a crucial assumption about asylum-related outflows. The ONS calculation of asylum seeker departure includes asylum applicants who were returned to their country of origin, those who withdrew applications and were known to have left the UK, and “a small number” of those who had been “refused asylum in the previous year or who had withdrawn their application and were not known to have left the UK”. This latter number is unverifiable without complete data on departures from the UK (ONS 2008: 11).

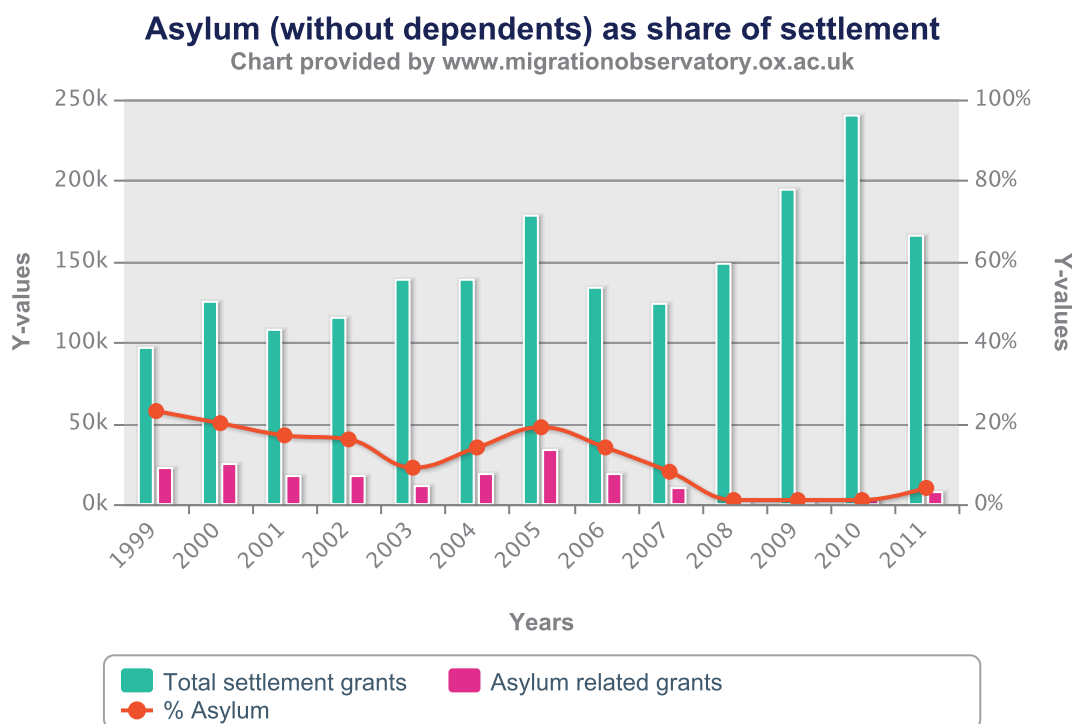
Figure 2



Source : ONS, Long-Term International Migration

Data on grants of settlement to migrants also show asylum constituting a falling share of the total over the long term, though with an increase between 2010 and 2011 (see Figure 3). An August 2005 policy change also contributed to the sharp decline from 2005–2011. Asylum seekers granted leave to remain are no longer immediately granted settlement, delaying settlement for those granted refugee status, humanitarian protection (HP) or discretionary leave to remain (DL) since this change.

Figure 3



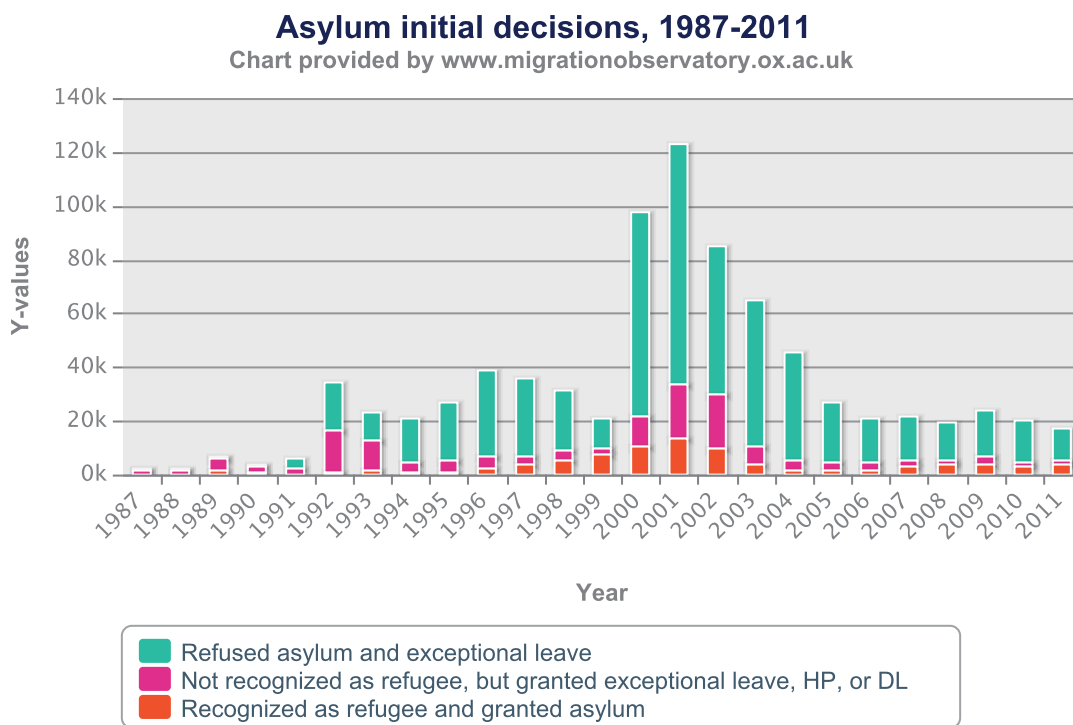
Source : Home Office, Control of Immigration Report Q2 2010

On the other hand, it appears that a significant share of settlements from 2005–2011 have come from government efforts to address backlogs of undecided asylum applications and refused asylum applicants who remain in the UK. This is detailed in the briefing on ‘Settlement in the UK’.

Decisions and departures: a majority of applications are rejected

Aside from settlement in the UK, what other outcomes occur? Available data show decisions in asylum cases, along with removals and voluntary departures. These data are available as events in each year (or quarter). Since 2004, data are also available by annual entering “cohort”—the group of people who applied for asylum in Britain in a given year. Looking first at decisions by year, Figure 4 shows that the majority of initial decisions were refusals in each year since 1994. In 2011, 67% of initial decisions were refusals. These initial decisions are often appealed: among the 2004–2011 cohorts, 75% of rejected applicants lodged appeals, with a success rate of 22%. Over the decade of the 2000s, successful appeals ranged from 17% to 23% of total appeals until increasing to 28% in 2009, 27% in 2010 and 28% in 2011.

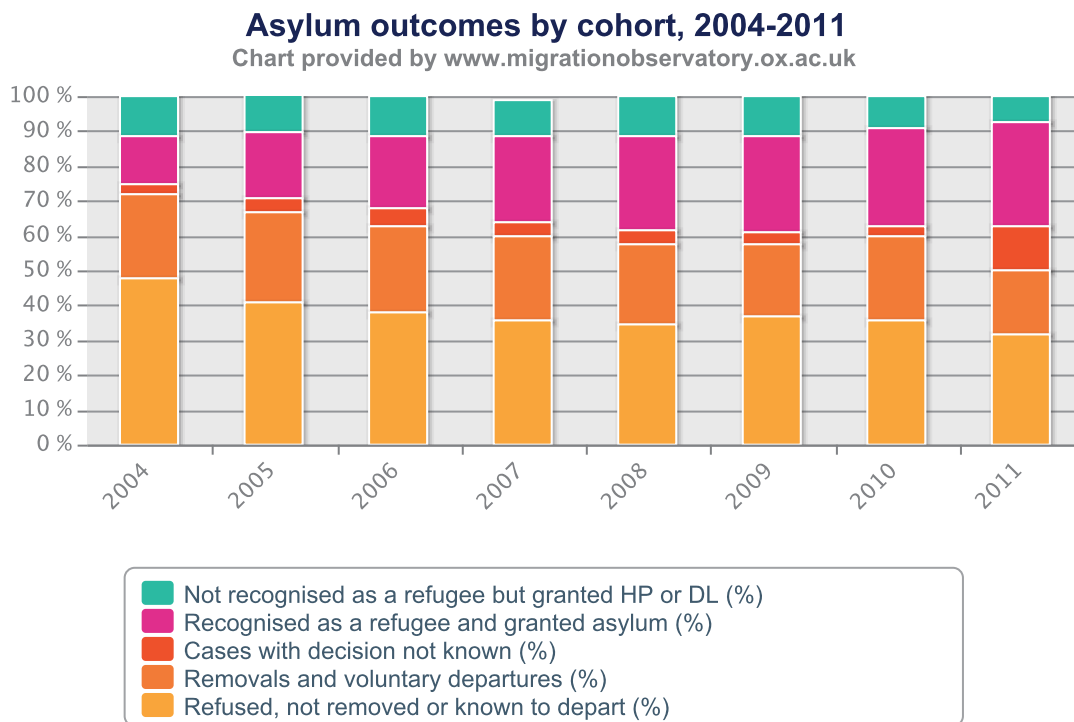
Figure 4



Source: Home Office

Cohort data gives a useful portrait of outcomes for a set of individuals arriving in a given year, including results after appeals. For example, among 2004 asylum applicants 25% had gained leave to remain in the UK as refugees (14%) or through HP or DL (11%), and 75% had been refused protection. Among those refused, 24% of the initial cohort departed by government removal or official voluntary return schemes, leaving 48% of the initial cohort who neither gained leave to remain nor departed by removal or voluntary return schemes. There are no data showing how many of this 49% remained in the UK and how many departed in another way without being detected in Home Office data. Meanwhile, 3% of 2004 applications remained unresolved or had unknown outcomes as of May 2012. Similar data are available for cohorts up to 2011, and appear in Figure 5.

Figure 5

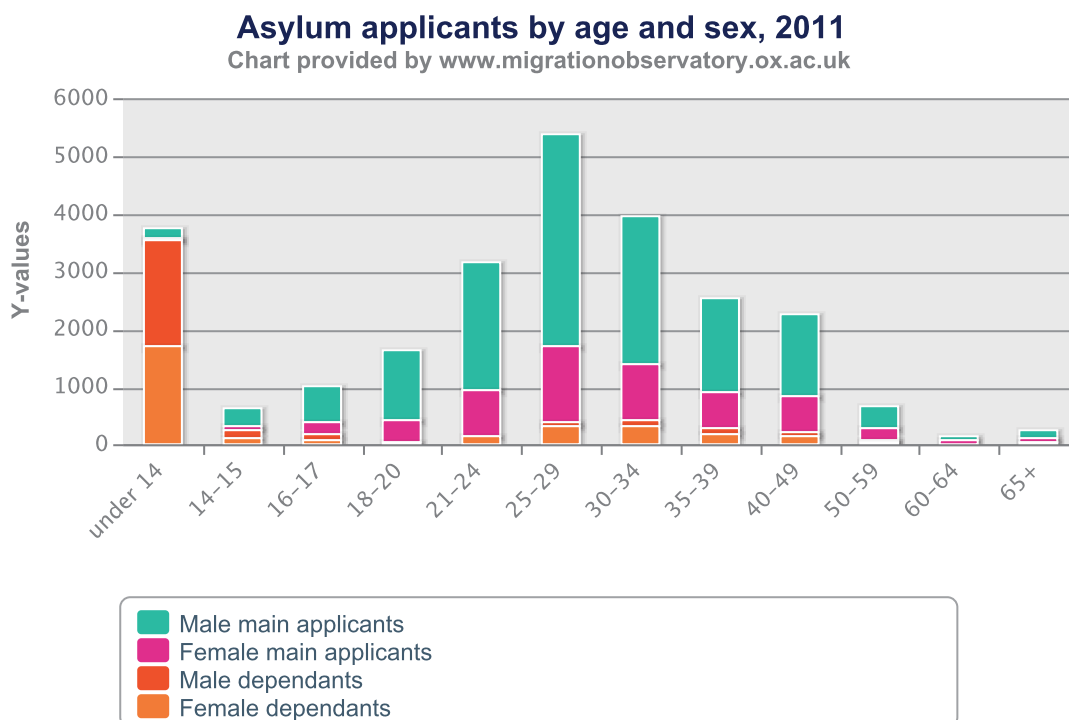


Source: Home Office

Majority of asylum applicants are male except among older adults, children and dependents

Demographic data show that main applicants are predominantly male adults from conflict-ridden nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, although a large share came from Europe in the early 2000s, due to conflicts in areas such as Kosovo. In 2011, asylum applicants (excluding dependents) were 73% male and 27% female. 42% applicants aged 60 or older were female, but males comprised at least 63% of every other age range. Children and young adult main applicants were especially likely to be male, as seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Source: Home Office 2011, tables as.03 & as.04

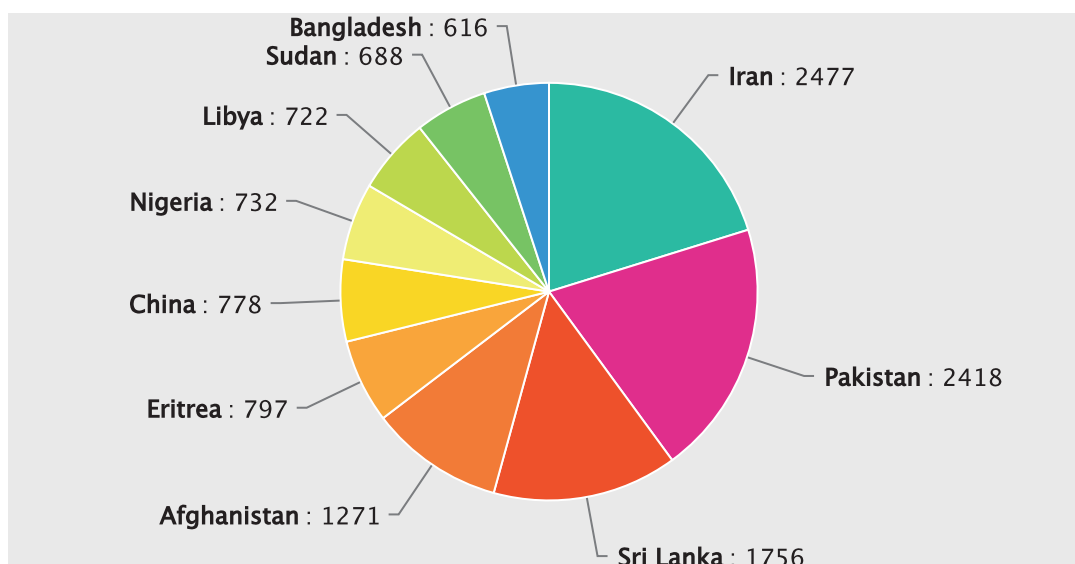
Among dependents, the gender composition was different. Dependents aged 18 years or more were more likely to be women (77%, 1,228 out of 1,667). Slightly less than half of dependent children were female (48% out of 4,010).

The nationality of asylum seekers changes as crises come and go across the globe, since asylum seekers come mainly from countries embroiled in political and military conflict (Crawley 2010). In 2011 the leading sources of asylum applicants in the UK were Iran, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Eritrea. The number and share coming Iraq and Somalia have decreased since high points in 2002 for Iraq (14,570 applicants, 17% of that year's total) and 1999 for Somalia (7,495, 11% of total), meaning that in 2011 Iraq and Somalia dropped out of the top ten.

Figure 7

Top 10 nationalities, UK Asylum Applicants, 2011

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source : Home Office, Control of Immigration Statistics

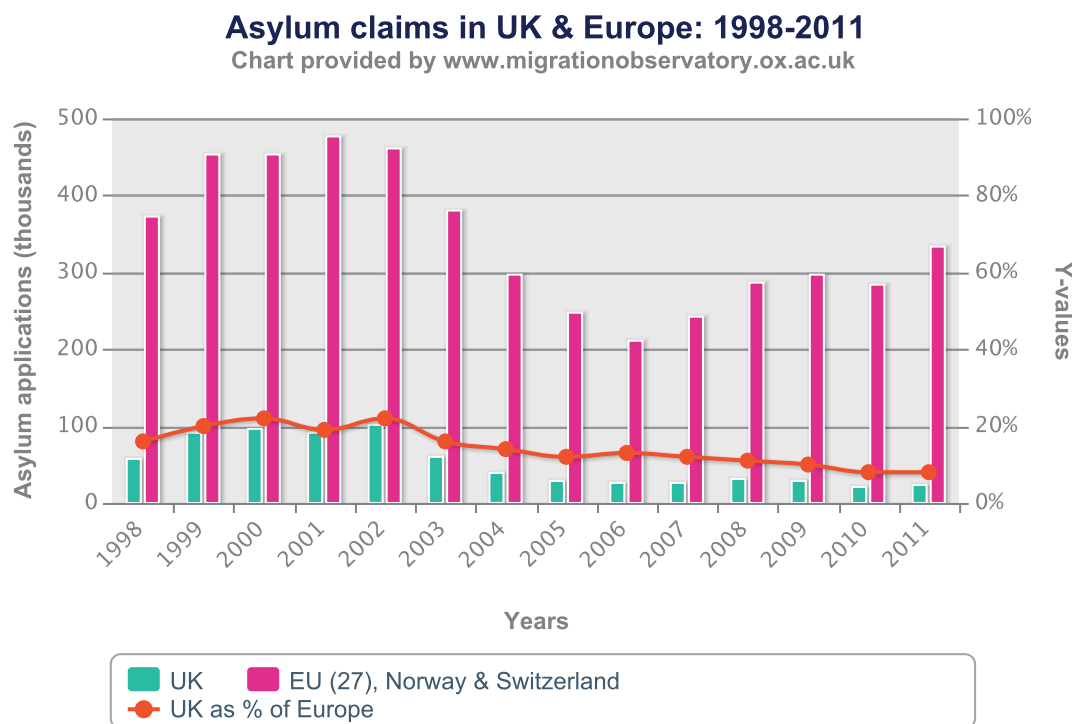
As recently as 2000, the UK received more than 20,000 asylum seekers from Europe, more than from Africa or the Middle East, including thousands from Serbia and Montenegro and thousands more from 2004 EU Accession states. Resolution of crises as well as EU enlargement seemed to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK; European asylum seekers in the UK accounted for only 3025 cases in 2004 and fell further to 826 in 2011.

UK share of asylum applicants: per capita, less than European average

Asylum claims in the UK per capita are below the European average: for 2011, the UK received 0.41 asylum applications per 1000 inhabitants, compared to 0.65 across Europe.

As shown in Figure 8, trends in asylum applications in the UK have mirrored Europe-wide trends, but more sharply. The peak years saw a UK increase not only in the number of applicants but also in its share of Europe's total asylum claims. Asylum claims peaked across Europe at the same time as in the UK, reaching 466,000 to 483,100 between 1999 and 2002. Claims declined sharply over the next three years, but more steeply in the UK than in the rest of Europe. The UK's share of Europe's asylum claims therefore has declined as well, from approximately 20% at its 4-year peak (1999-2002) down to 8% in 2011.

Figure 8



Source : OECD. Home Office

Evidence gaps and limitations

Information on rejected asylum applicants—and whether or not they leave the country—is a critical weakness in existing data sources. Some rejected applicants depart by government removal or various voluntary departures schemes for which data are available. Others, as noted above, might either depart without notifying authorities or remain in the UK as part of the irregular migrant population. Reliable data do not exist to discern between these two categories.

Indeed, lack of data on departures from the UK is a weakness in asylum data and migration data generally in the UK. Outward migration is only estimated by the International Passenger Survey, which does not accurately discern whether the departing person originally came to the UK for work, study, family, or asylum. Outward migration is not counted in administrative data. The Home Office has begun to use passenger data from airlines and other sources to try to track previously unknown departures, but even this improvement may not yield complete coverage.

Thus, estimates of asylum's role in net migration are uncertain, as total outflows can only be guessed. The Office of National Statistics assumes the departure of some percentage of asylum seekers in its widely-used estimate of Long-Term International Migration, or LTIM, as in Figure 1 (ONS 2008: 10–11).

Official data have at least one other key omission. Dependents arriving in the UK after the initial decision on the main applicant are counted in entry statistics as dependents, but are not distinguished as dependents of asylum-seekers or refugees. Similarly, dependents are counted in settlement statistics only if they were granted settlement at the same time as the main applicant they accompany (ICAR 2009). Thus, we cannot accurately capture the total number of people coming to the UK with asylum seekers, as some may arrive later to join a successful applicant.

Compared to other nations, there are additional gaps in UK asylum data. Demographic data about asylum seekers are limited to age, sex, and nationality. By contrast, nations such as Sweden and Australia collect additional information on asylum applicants' marital status, ethnicity, religion, parents' countries of birth, date of migration, education, prior occupation, health, language, and future migratory intentions (Stewart 2004).

An additional note: most published administrative data count the number of events in a given month, quarter, or year. Thus, data for a given time period show, for example, how many asylum applications were made, how many applicants were recognized as refugees, and how many refugees were granted settlement. But each of these pieces of information refers to a different set of people. Many applicants whose claims were decided in 2009 applied in an earlier year, for example. Thus, it would be incorrect to calculate the percentage of 2009 asylum seekers granted settlement by taking the number of settlement grants in 2009 and dividing by asylum applications in 2009. The Home Office's new tracking of annual "cohorts" of asylum applicants helps with this problem. Cohort data show the eventual outcomes for each yearly group of applicants since 2004. For more recent years many cases remain undecided.

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Further Readings

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The Migration Observatory

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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