BRIEFING

Deportations, Removals and Voluntary Departures from the UK

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This briefing examines the number of people deported or removed from the UK and those departing voluntarily after the initiation of enforced removal. It further examines the method and to the extent possible, the grounds for their removal and their nationalities.

Key Points

In 2015 there were 40,896 people who were removed from the UK or departed voluntarily after the initiation of removal.

Enforced removals have declined since 2004 while voluntary departures have increased. Changes in the recorded number of removals since 2004 may reflect changes in data collection on voluntary departures, however.

Removals and voluntary departures of asylum applicants and their dependents have declined every year since 2006, reaching 5,238 in 2015.

The UK removed 5,602 foreign national offenders in 2015.

Over 5 out of every 10 people (55%) deported or voluntarily removed from the UK in 2015 were nationals of Asian countries. Nationals of India, Pakistan, and China made up 37% of the 2015 total.

Understanding the evidence

In common language, deportation refers to the state-enforced or enforceable departure of a non-citizen from the country. However, to understand UK immigration rules and data about deportation, it is essential to distinguish three main categories of state-enforced or enforceable departures: deportations, administrative removals, and voluntary departures.

The first of these three categories, deportations, is a specific term that applies to people and their children whose removal from the country is deemed 'conducive to the public good' by the Secretary of State. Deportation can also be recommended by a court in connection with a conviction of a criminal offence that carries a prison term.

The second category, administrative removals (or just 'removals'), refers to a larger set of cases involving the enforced removal of non-citizens who have either entered the country illegally or deceptively, stayed in the country longer than their visa permitted, or otherwise violated the conditions of their leave to remain in the UK. Some of these administrative removals are individuals 'refused entry at port and subsequently removed'. People in this category have been refused legal permission to enter upon arrival and removed, often after a single overnight stay (UKBA 2010). In a way, those removed in this manner have never actually entered the country: although physically present on UK territory, they have neither passed through border controls legally nor evaded them illegally. So, they may be excluded from totals, such as in Figure 1 below. However, this category of removals is included in Home Office reports on 'removals and departures'. Therefore it is included in some of the figures in this briefing, as specified.

The third category of enforced removals is known as 'voluntary departures' which involve people against whom enforced removal has been initiated. (The term 'voluntary' describes the method of departure rather than the choice of whether or not to depart.) There are three kinds of voluntary departures. Some people depart by official Assisted Voluntary Return schemes, which are tracked separately in Home Office data. Others make their own travel arrangements and tell the authorities, or approach them for help with the arrangements. Home Office data group these departures with enforced removals. Finally, some people leave without notifying government. Up until a crucial change in data collection procedures in 2005, this group was not included in data at all.

British nationals, with the exception of children under age 18 whose parents are subject to removal, cannot be deported or administratively removed. Meanwhile, any foreign national can be deported, although there are stricter criteria for deporting an EEA national or a refugee.

Data on removals come from Home Office administrative sources. Home Office data classify removals and departures mainly by the categories discussed above, which are essentially procedures used by the government for ensuring departures. Since data collection has changed dramatically and might still be improving, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about trends in removals and departures since 2005: any increases might be the result of changing data collection rather than due to actual increases in departures. This briefing focuses mostly on enforced removals and voluntary departures, and for most purposes excludes individuals refused entry at port. Deportations are included in data on enforced removal and voluntary departures, as they may be carried out by any of these methods. But they are not identified separately except in provisional information on deportation of foreign national prisoners from case management files, and so are discussed only briefly.

Increases in removals since 2004 might reflect changes in data collection

The solid line in Figure 1 shows that in 2015 there were 40,896 people who were removed from the UK or departed voluntarily after the initiation of removal. The latest figure, is largely similar to the number of removals the year before (40,179, 2014). This figure excludes individuals refused entry at port and subsequently removed, in order to focus more closely on what most people normally think of as 'deportation'.

To interpret trends over time in Figure 1, it is important to understand the role of 'other confirmed voluntary departures'. Included from 2005 data onwards, it counts people who had removal action initiated against them and left voluntarily outside of the official removal schemes and without notifying immigration officials, but whose departure has been confirmed nonetheless. These confirmations may have come from Home Office efforts at data-matching, using identifications at border controls, subsequent visa applications, or passenger information gathered from airlines.

Although this category has grown over time, it is impossible to know to what extent this growth comes from either better data collection, actual changes in the number of removals, or a combination of both. A UKBA report suggests that the 'steep rise' might come from better data matching being provided by the monitoring of departures at major airports through the early stages of the eBorders program (now known as Semaphore) (Poppleton and Rice 2009).
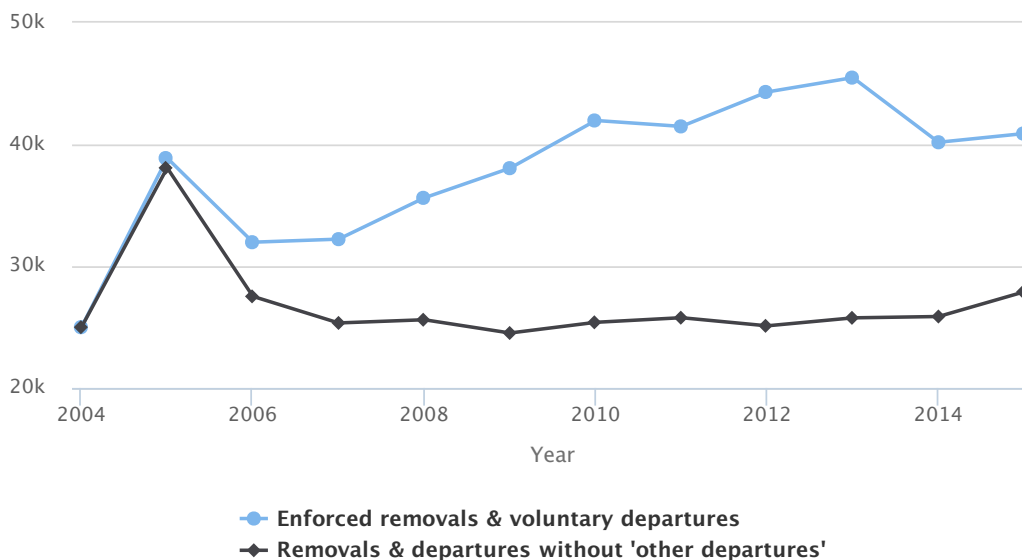
The dotted line in Figure 1 provides a more consistent picture of trends over time, by excluding the category of 'other confirmed voluntary departures'. This view allows a 'like for like' comparison that shows how enforced removals and voluntary departures through official schemes have changed over time. It reveals that the changes to overall voluntary departures and removals since 2007 have been mainly driven by this 'other' category. This category was also responsible for the apparent decrease in departures in 2014.

The 2015 data are still provisional. It is worth noting that the number of voluntary departures is often understated when the provisional figures are first published, because some people leave without notifying the authorities. For example, the 2012 figure was revised up by more than 3,600 after its initial publication, whereas the 2014 figure was revised up by about 1,400. In short, the dotted line in Figure 1 may be preferable for examining change over time, but the solid line more accurately reflects the total number of removals and departures, especially in more recent years as data collection has improved.

Figure 1

Removal and departures by type, 2004–2015

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

- Enforced removals & voluntary departures
- Removals & departures without 'other departures'

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Q1 2015, table rv.01

Enforced removals have declined since 2004 while voluntary departures have increased

As explained in the Understanding the evidence section, Home Office datasets classify departures and removals by the way that they take place. Table 2 breaks up the broad categories seen in Table 1 into their parts and compares them over time. This provides more detail showing what kinds of departures and removals have taken place. In 2015, 30% (12,056 people) left the UK via enforced removal. Meanwhile, 35% (14,206 people) departed and notified the UK Government, 4% (1,635) left through Assisted Voluntary Return programmes, with the remaining 32% (12,999) classified as 'other confirmed departures'.

Figure 2

Removal and departures by type, 2004–2015

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

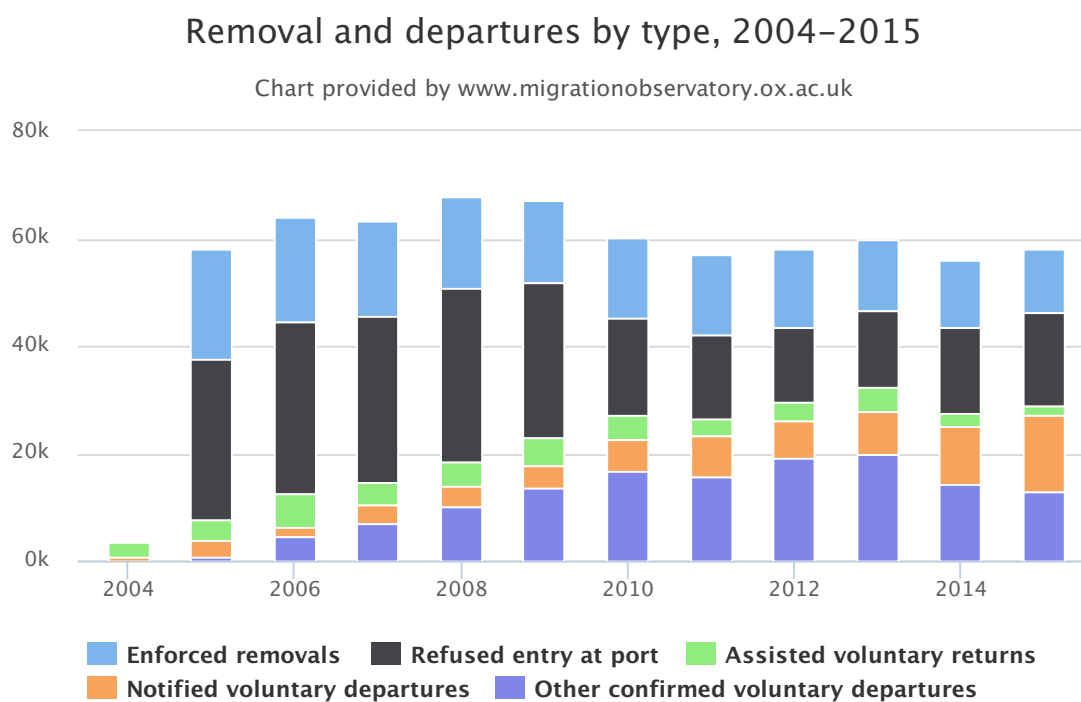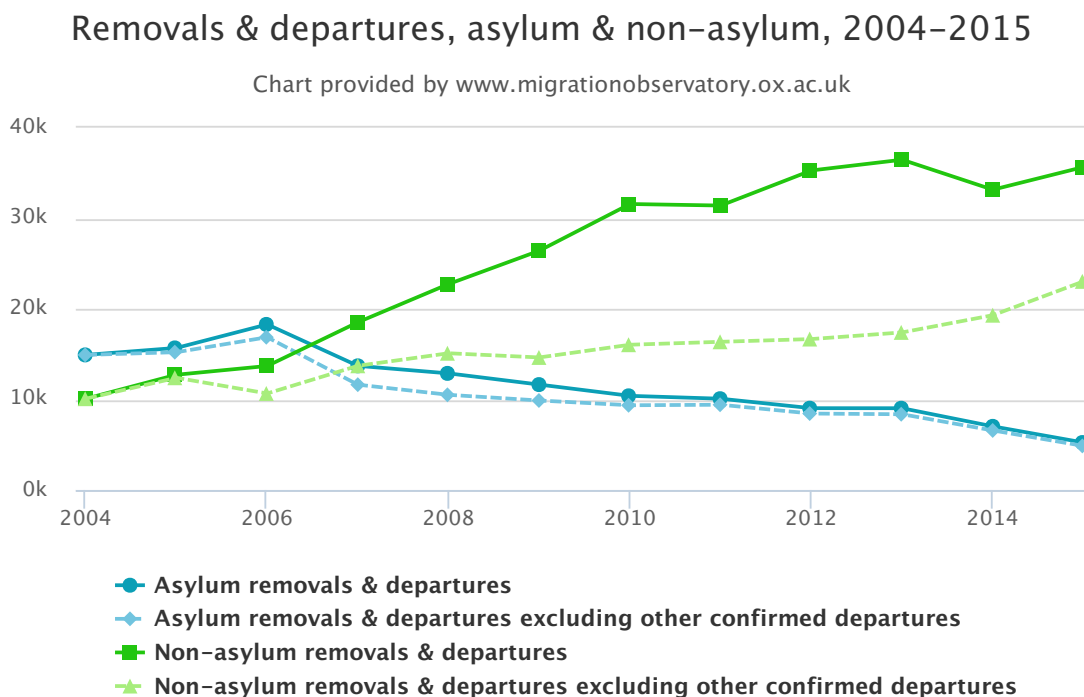Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Q1 2015, table rv.01

Figure 2 shows that the numbers of enforced removals have declined since 2004. The sharpest rise has been in 'other confirmed' voluntary departures, from 805 in 2005 to 19,731 in 2013, and 12,999 in 2015. As noted above, this might result from better data matching and monitoring of departures at major airports (Poppleton and Rice 2009), but there may still be an unknown number of voluntary departures occurring that are not detected by the Home Office. As a result, it is difficult to know how much of this trend is the result of more people actually leaving this way, or whether it comes from better data about such departures. Finally, the advent of assisted voluntary returns programs in 1999 and 2004 made up an additional category of removals that are tracked separately in Home Office data since 2004.

Removals and departures of asylum cases have declined steadily since 2006

Home Office datasets also classify removals and departures into asylum and non-asylum types. Figure 3 shows how the number of people leaving in each category have changed over the past decade. In 2015, 5,238 people removed or forced to depart were asylum cases. This is the lowest total since the current system of data collection began. These decreases are not surprising in light of the smaller number of asylum applications made to the UK since 2002 (see the briefing on Migration to the UK: Asylum).

Figure 3 also shows that while asylum cases have been declining since 2006, non-asylum cases increased annually since 2006 except for a small decline in 2011. However, it is important to recall that these trends include the additional category of other confirmed voluntary departures. When excluding this category non-asylum cases are still increasing, but not by as much (as the dotted line in Figure 3 shows).

Figure 3

Removals & departures, asylum & non–asylum, 2004–2015

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

- ● Asylum removals & departures
- ◆ Asylum removals & departures excluding other confirmed departures
- ■ Non–asylum removals & departures
- ▲ Non–asylum removals & departures excluding other confirmed departures

Source: Home Office, Immigration Statistics Q1 2015 Table rv.01

Figure 3 also shows that while asylum cases have been declining since 2006, removals and departures of non-asylum cases have increased annually since 2006 except for a small decline in 2011. It is important to remember that these trends include the additional category of other confirmed voluntary departures. Excluding this category reveals that non-asylum cases are still increasing, but at a slower rate (as the dotted line in Figure 3 shows).

The types of removals occurred at different rates for asylum cases compared to non-asylum cases (not illustrated in the figures). In 2015, 62% of asylum removals and departures were enforced, compared to 25% of non-asylum removals and departures.

Just over 5,600 foreign national offenders were removed in 2015

Home Office datasets also report the number of foreign national offenders deported each year. In 2015, 5,602 foreign national offenders were removed from the UK. These numbers have fluctuated between 4,600 and 5,600 since 2009, when these statistics become available.
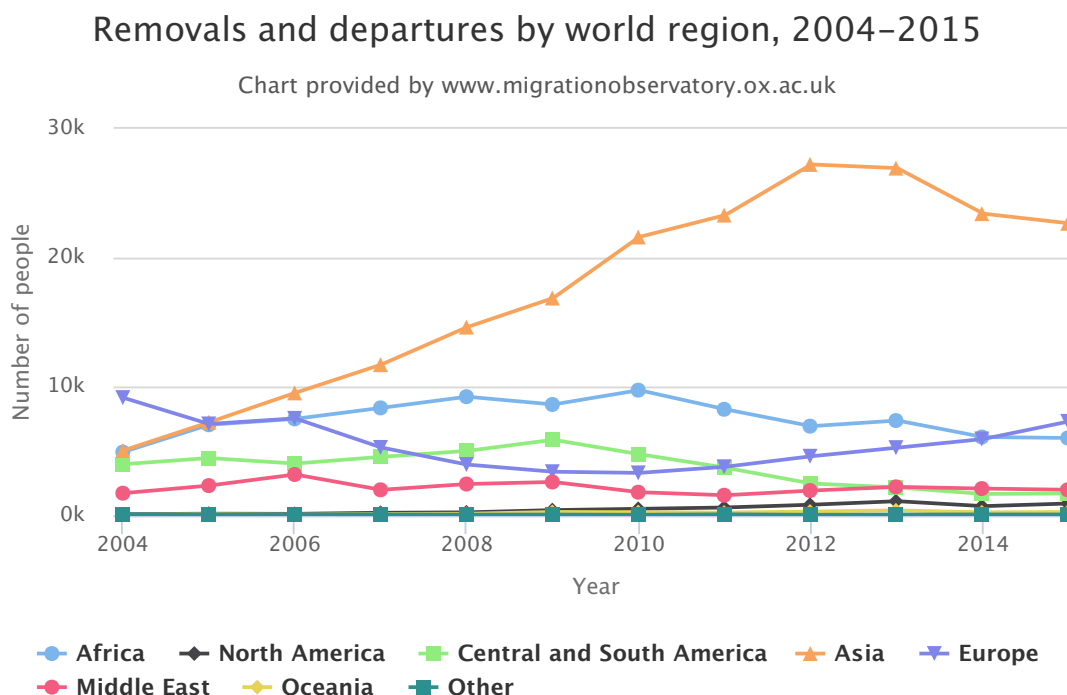
Figure 4

Number of foreign national offenders removed 2009–2015

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

Foreign national offenders removed

Nationals of Asian countries comprised the largest share of removals and departures in 2015 (55%) followed by Europeans (18%) and Africans (15%)

Figure 5 shows that, by region of nationality, the largest numbers of people removed in 2015 came from Asia (22,662, or 55% of the total), Europe (7,296; 18%), Africa (6,005; 15%), and the Middle East (1,986; 5%). The "Europe" category includes both EU countries and non–EU European countries (such as Albania and Ukraine). Note that these figures do not include people refused entry at port and subsequently removed.

Figure 5

Removals and departures by world region, 2004–2015

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

Africa ● North America ◆ Central and South America ■ Asia ▲ Europe ▼ Middle East ● Oceania ● Other ■

By country, India (19%), Pakistan (12%), and China (6%) were the countries with the largest shares of removals and departures in 2015, collectively comprising 37% of the 2015 total. These are shown in Table 1, along with the rest of the top ten for 2015.

Table 1 – Top ten countries of enforced removal or voluntary departure, 2015

Rank	Country	Number	Share of total
1	India	7883	19%
2	Pakistan	4981	12%
3	China	2335	6%
4	Nigeria	2305	6%
5	Bangladesh	2208	5%
6	Albania	1548	4%
7	Romania	1453	4%
8	Sri Lanka	1128	3%
9	Nepal	1042	3%
10	Poland	1018	2%

Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics table rv.03

Evidence gaps and limitations

There are a few notable gaps and limitations in the data on deportation, removals, and departures. Data on the grounds for removal show number of rejected asylum applicants and foreign national prisoners, but do not go beyond that. Other removals and departures are not disaggregated by reason for removal, so we cannot say how many deported migrants were illegal entrants, how many overstayed visas and how many violated the conditions of their leave to remain in the UK in other ways. In fact, no up-to-date and reliable figures currently exist on the total number of unauthorised migrants in the UK (for more information see the Election 2015 briefing on Enforcement).

Finally, the lack of administrative exit data has created uncertainty around other confirmed voluntary departures (see our report on the Top 10 Problems in the Evidence Base). Although a system of exit checks is now being implemented and is expected to produce better data on departures in the future, there is no good way to go back and estimate the occurrences of such departures prior to Home Office efforts to detect such departures beginning in 2005.

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References

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Further Readings

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- Paoletti, Emanuela. "Deportation, Non-deportability and Ideas of Membership." Working Paper Series No. 65, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford, 2010.

Related Material

- Migration Observatory briefing - Migration to the UK: Asylum http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migration-uk-asylum
- Migration Observatory Election 2015 briefing: Enforcement: Enforced Removals and Voluntary Departures of People Violating Immigration Law www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/election-2015-briefing-enforcement-enforced-removals-and-voluntary-departures-people-viola
- Migration Observatory report - Top 10 Problems in the Evidence Base http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/top-ten/1-emigration

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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