



# COMMENTARY

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A magnet for migrants? How does the UK's migrant population growth compare with that in other high-income countries?

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[www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)

As the global population has increased considerably in the last two decades, so too has the number of international migrants – which increased from 156 million in 1990 to 214 million in 2010 according to UN data. Over the same period the number of migrants in the UK has increased to historically high levels. But has the UK experienced more immigration than other high-income countries?

To set the UK's situation in context, over the past two decades the country's foreign-born population increased from 3.8 million (equivalent to about 7% of the total population) in 1993 to almost 7 million (12%) in 2010. During the same period, the number of foreign citizens living in the UK doubled from just under two million (4% of the population) to over four million (7%).

Net-migration increased from 564,000 during the five years from 1996–2000, to 923,000 in 2001–2005 and 1,044,000 during 2006–2010. In 2010, net-migration reached 252,000, its highest level for a calendar year on record.

Before making comparisons between migration to Britain and migration to other countries, it is important to consider that different countries have different migration and political histories as well as different policies (the legacy of the British empire, for example, has played an important role in shaping migration flows to the UK), so there are many reasons why one would not expect to see convergence in migration levels or the population share of migrants across countries.

But, if we want to grasp whether or not the UK is an “outlier” – affected dramatically differently by migration than other states – we do need to compare the UK to other countries (please read the evidence gaps and limitations note below to understand the limitations of the data).

Figure 1 below compares the five year growth rates (each node represents the growth in the migrant population over a five-year period) of the migrant population in the UK between 1995 and 2010 with growth rates of:

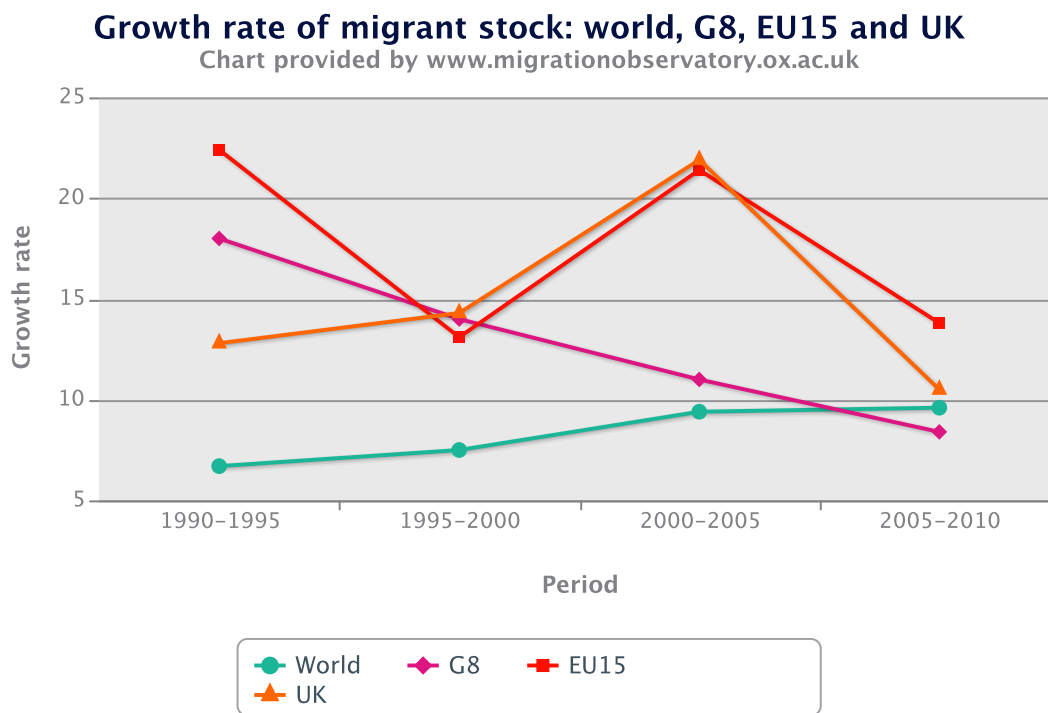
- the global migrant population
- the EU15 countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Irish Republic, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK)
- the G8 countries as a whole (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, UK, USA)

The comparison with G8 countries is useful as it allows us to consider other high-income nations, while the comparison with the EU15 allows us to consider the impact of EU-wide changes – in particular the accession of eight Eastern European countries in 2004 – on the original EU member states. For all the G8 countries, with the exception of Japan, migrants are defined as foreign-born residents in the data. In the data for Japan, migrants are defined as foreign citizens. In the case of EU15 countries, the data for Belgium and Greece is based on citizenship.

As shown in Figure 1, between 1990 and 1995 the growth rate of the UK's migrant population was lower than that of the G8 countries and the EU15. This coincides with very low net-migration levels to the UK during those years (and negative net-migration in some cases). Yet between 2000 and 2005 the growth rate of the UK's migrant population – about 22% – was substantially higher than both the global growth (9%) and the growth for the G8 countries (11%), though it was similar to the EU15 (21.4%). It is worth noting here that if the UK is not included in the EU data, the overall EU growth rate is practically the same (21.3%).

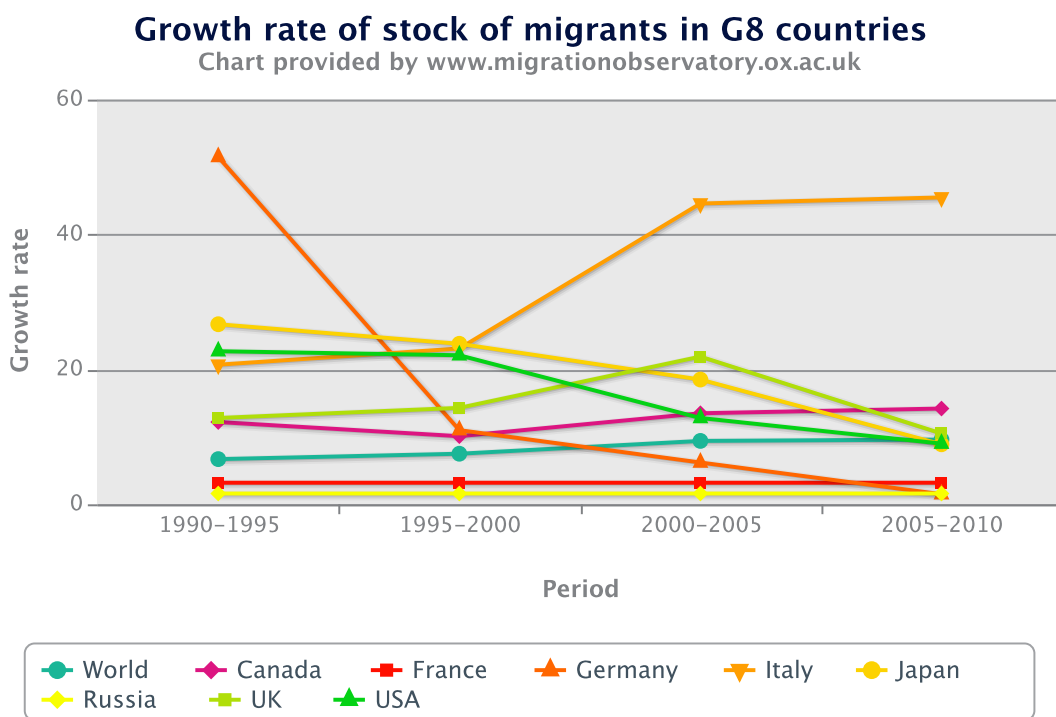
Between 2005 and 2010 the growth rate of the migrant population in the UK was just over 10%, not vastly different from the global or G8 average, though still higher. However, it was somewhat lower than the EU15 (about 14%).

Figure 1



For the remainder of the commentary we will concentrate specifically on the G8, as several EU15 countries provide only limited useful comparisons. As there is significant variation in migration dynamics among G8 countries, we also need to consider how the UK compares to individual G8 countries.

Figure 2

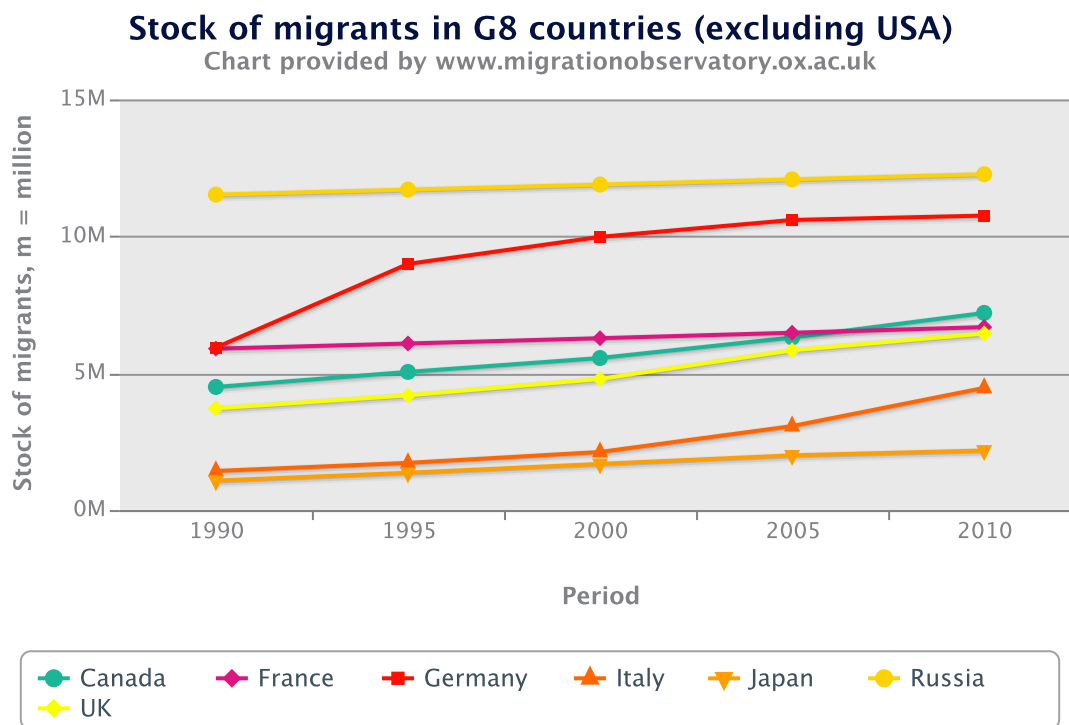


As shown in Figure 2, the growth of the UK's migrant population outstripped growth in all other G8 nations other than Italy between 2000 and 2005, and while the UK's growth rate fell in more recent years, only Canada and Italy had higher migrant population growth rates between 2005 and 2010 (in all charts in this commentary, you can click on the country labels to select and display specific countries).

Note: migrants are defined as foreign-born residents for all G8 countries except for Japan, where migrants are defined as foreign citizens.

Turning to the absolute numbers and share of migrants in the population, the UK is mid-ranking in comparison with other G8 countries. For presentational purposes Figure 3 does not show the number of migrants in the USA as the number is much higher than that of all other countries in all years (e.g. the number of migrants in the US was 42.8 million in 2010). Figure 3 shows that in absolute terms, Russia, Germany, Canada and France all have more migrants than the UK (this in addition to the USA which, as mentioned, is not presented in the figure). Meanwhile, Japan and Italy have smaller migrant populations than the UK.

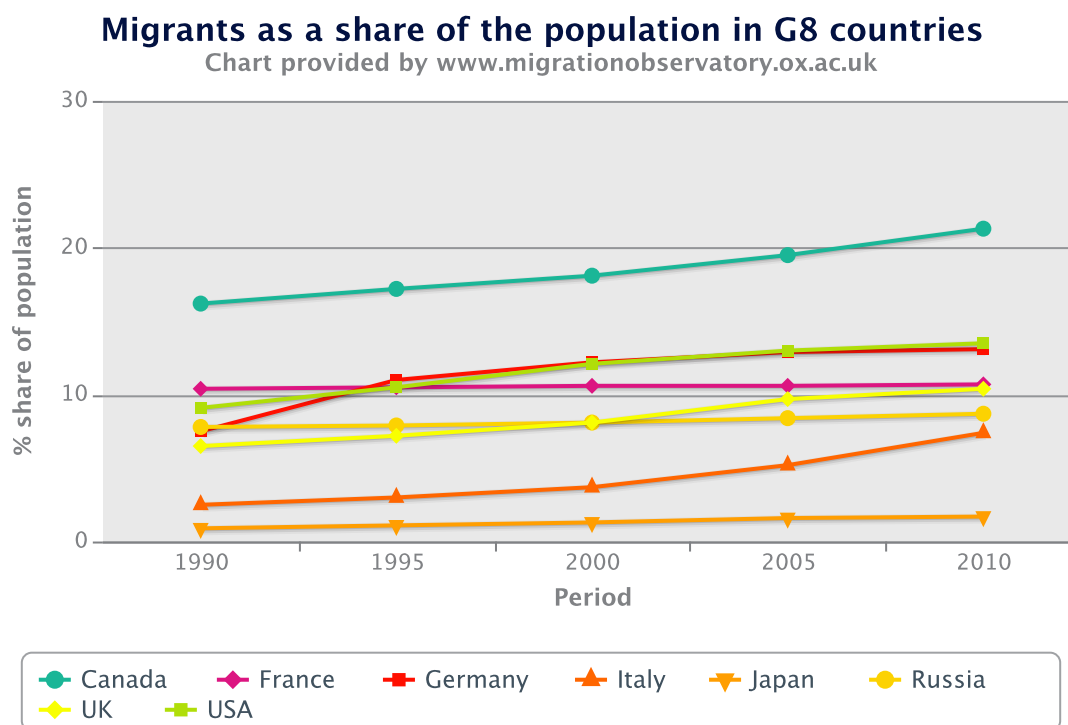
Figure 3



Source : United Nations Population Division

Figure 4 shows that in 2010, migrants made up a larger proportion of the population in Canada, the USA, Germany and France than in the UK – with Japan, Russia and Italy having a smaller proportion of migrants in the population than the UK – these figures, of course, hide substantial regional differences within each country.

Figure 4



Source : United Nations Population Division

So, on the basis of this evidence, the UK does not seem particularly different from other major high-income countries in regards to the overall number of migrants in its population or the number of migrants as a proportion of the population.

However, the available data do suggest that during some periods (especially 2000–2005) the UK migrant population grew at a considerably faster rate than in most other G8 countries and the global average. However, this rapid change was in line with the overall changes in the EU15.

So, while the UK's mid-ranking migrant stock means that it could not reasonably be described as an outlier, the pace of change that it has seen since 2000 is one of the fastest among G8 countries.

### Evidence gaps and limitations

International comparisons of migration data are challenging. The figures reported in this commentary originate from the global migration database of the United Nations Population Division, one of the most popular sources of migrant stock data for international comparisons. In most cases the definition of the stock of international migrants is the stock of foreign-born residents (close to 80% of countries), but the stock of foreign-citizens is used for some countries. In the case of G8 countries, the data reported for Japan is based on citizenship. In the case of EU15 countries, the data for Belgium and Greece is based on citizenship. Also, at the time of publication, 2010 figures were based on projections from previous years. Yet even with these and other limitations, these data are the best tool available to present international comparisons of migrant stocks.

### Related material

- Migration Observatory Briefing – International Migration: The UK Compared with other OECD Countries
- Migration Observatory Briefing – Global International Migrant Stock: The UK in International Comparison



## 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.



## COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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