

Article

The changing picture of short-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021

An overview of non-UK-born short-term residents in England and Wales, who were born outside the UK and intended to stay for under 12 months in total. The report includes information on their country of birth, economic activity, and industry as well as other characteristics.



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1 . Main points

- There were 136,000 non-UK-born short-term residents recorded by Census 2021; 45% were men and 55% were women, while a third (33%) were aged between 20 and 24 years.
- Compared with the 2011 Census, the proportion of EU-born short-term residents fell from 35% to 25% in 2021, while the proportion of non-EU-born residents rose from 65% to 75%.
- Almost a third of non-UK-born short-term residents lived in London (29%), while Westminster (and City of London) (1.4%), and Cardiff (0.6%) were the English and Welsh local authorities with the highest percentage of non-UK-born short-term residents in their total population.
- China was the most common country of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents (21%) followed by India (10%) and Romania (5%); in 2011, India, China and United States were the most common, while Romania was not present in the top 10.
- Of non-UK-born short-term residents, 42% were economically inactive students, with 45% of this population born in China.

2 . Overview

This paper defines non-UK-born short-term residents as those who met all of the following criteria:

- born outside the UK
- arrived within a year before census day
- intended to stay for a period of less than 12 months

People who stayed or intended to stay for less than 3 months were not asked to answer Census 2021.

Non-UK-born short-term residents represent a small group of census respondents compared with usual residents. However, they are an important population group, contributing to the labour market in England and Wales as well as the student population.

Census 2021 provides a unique opportunity to research this population in more detail, using a wide range of social and economic characteristics such as age, sex, passports held and industry to provide an insight into how non-UK-born short-term residents engage in society.

This paper uses our [2011 Census: Non-UK-born short-term residents in England and Wales article](#) and our [2021 Census: The changing picture of long-term international migration, England and Wales article](#) to provide context for how the non-UK-born short-term resident population has changed since 2011, and how it differs from the usual resident population.

Census 2021 provides a snapshot of the population in England and Wales on 21 March 2021 at a time when travel patterns were heavily disrupted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which limited people's ability to travel freely between countries. The short-term nature and seasonality of non-UK-born short-term migrants also means the data are reflective of the time when the census was taken, and trends are likely to change if taken at different times throughout the year.

Non-response adjustment of non-UK-born short-term residents

The data presented here only include those who responded to Census 2021 who were short-term residents living in England and Wales. This means that the 2021 census data on short-term residents will be liable to some elements of under-estimation and effects of "non-response bias". These possible effects should be taken into account when interpreting the 2021 Census figures on short-term residents or comparing them with results from the 2011 Census. More information on this is provided in [Section 9: Data Sources and Quality](#).

3 . Age and sex of non-UK-born short-term residents

There were 136,000 non-UK-born short-term residents in England and Wales, of which 33% were aged 20 to 24 years. Over 40% (57,135) of non-UK-born short-term residents were economically inactive students, which may explain the high proportion of short-term residents in this age group. In Census 2021, 45% of non-UK-born short-term residents were men and 55% were women. This differs from the 2011 Census, where 50% were men and 50% were women.

Figure 1: The most common age group for EU and non-EU-born short-term residents was 20 to 24 years

Percentage of non-UK-born short-term residents by age, and country of birth group

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Figure 1 shows the distribution of the EU and non-EU-born short-term resident population by age. EU and non-EU-born short-term residents follow a similar age distribution pattern, with a peak in short-term residents aged 20 to 24 years. This age grouping accounts for a third (34%) of non-EU-born short-term residents, and just below a third (30%) of EU-born short-term residents.

There was a higher proportion of EU-born short-term residents aged between 16 and 19 years while non-EU-born had a higher proportion between ages 25 and 29 years. This may be partly because of the Erasmus student exchange programme, where EU students have the mobility to study abroad at Erasmus partner universities. This likely contributed to the EU-born short-term resident population in the UK.

Although the UK withdrew from the Erasmus programme in January 2021, all Erasmus projects commencing under the 2014 to 2020 programme were able to continue operations until their completion. As many Erasmus projects are multi-annual, those involving the UK were allowed to continue if they were not complete by January 2021.

Figure 2: The proportion of non-UK-born short-term residents varies by age and sex

Percentage of non-UK-born short-term residents by age and sex

Notes:

1. Some differences in the age-sex distribution of non-UK-born short-term residents between 2021 and 2011 may be attributable to the inclusion of a non-response adjustment in 2011.

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Figure 2 shows the distribution of short-term residents by age and sex, compared with the 2011 Census. Non-UK-born short-term residents tended to be aged between 16 and 29 years, with a higher proportion of women than men. This was most apparent in ages 20 to 24 years, where 19% of the total non-UK-born short-term resident population were women, while 14% were men.

In the 2011 Census, although non-UK-born short-term residents were also most likely to be between the ages of 16 and 29 years, the higher proportion of women to men was less pronounced in ages 20 to 24 years. The subsequent ages of 25 to 34 years were characterised by a higher proportion of men (16% of non-UK-born short-term residents) to women (13%).

4 . Local geography of non-UK-born short-term residents

Figure 3 shows the regional distribution of non-UK-born short-term residents in England and Wales. London accounted for the highest percentage of non-UK-born short-term residents (29%), followed by South East (14%) and North West (11%). The top three regions remained the same as they did in the 2011 Census.

Wales contained the smallest percentage of non-UK-born short-term residents (3%), followed by the North East (3%) and East Midlands (6%). This is consistent with the 2011 Census where these also had the smallest proportion of non-UK-born short-term residents, though the North East showed the smallest percentage.

Figure 3: London has the highest proportion of EU and non-EU-born short-term residents

Non-UK-born short-term residents by region and country of birth group

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The North West had the largest proportional difference between EU (20%) and non-EU-born (80%) short-term residents. The East of England had the smallest proportional difference, with 34% EU and 66% non-EU-born short-term residents. For Wales, 23% were EU-born and 77% were non-EU-born.

Figure 4 displays the 15 highest counts of non-UK-born short-term residents by local authority and shows these residents as a percentage of the total population in that local authority.

The top 15 local authorities contained 43,315 non-UK-born short-term residents, accounting for nearly a third of the total in England and Wales. The local authority with the most non-UK-born short-term residents was Manchester, with 5,420 short-term residents (0.9% of Manchester's total population). This was followed by Birmingham, with 4,110 non-UK-born short-term residents (0.4% of Birmingham's total population). Coventry was third at 3,260 (0.9% of Coventry's total population). In Wales, Cardiff was the local authority with the most non-UK-born short-term residents at 2,045 (0.6% of total population).

Of the top 15, non-UK-born short-term residents made up the highest percentage of the total population in Westminster (and City of London) and Oxford, at 1.4% each, followed by Camden, at 1.3%. Each of the 15 local authorities are city areas and contain at least one university.

Figure 4: Manchester has the highest number of short-term residents, while Westminster (and City of London) has the highest as a proportion of the total population

Top 15 local authorities for non-UK-born short-term residents

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Short-term residents by residence type

Breaking down non-UK-born short-term residents by residence type shows that a large proportion of EU-born short-term residents lived in households (82%) compared with communal establishments (18%). Non-EU-born short-term residents were slightly more evenly distributed, with 67% residing in households, and 33% in communal establishments. In comparison, a small proportion of usual residents lived in communal establishments for both EU (2%) and non-EU-born (3%).

When looking at residence type by economic activity, economically inactive students accounted for 85% of all non-UK-born short-term residents living in communal establishments. In comparison, just over half (53%) of non-UK-born usual residents living in communal establishments were economically inactive students.

5 . Short-term residents by country of birth and passport held, and how this has changed over time

Figure 5 shows that compared with the 2011 Census, there was a smaller proportion of EU-born short-term residents compared with non-EU-born in 2021, falling from 35% to 25%.

Figure 5: The proportion of non-EU-born short-term residents has increased since 2011

Short-term residents by EU and non-EU country of birth, compared with 2011 Census

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Figure 6 shows that the majority (54%) of non-UK-born short-term residents in England and Wales were born in Middle East and Asia, followed by EU14 (see [Section 8: Glossary](#) for the list of countries included in this group) (14%) and Africa (7%).

When compared with the usual resident population, there were some differences. Residents born in Middle East and Asia had a higher proportion of the short-term resident population (54%) compared with usual residents (41%). This may be explained by the large presence of economically inactive students (42%) in the non-UK-born short-term resident population, where the top three countries of birth were China, Hong Kong (Special administrative region of China) and India. Meanwhile, residents born in Africa made up a higher proportion of the usual resident population (11%) than short-term residents (7%). Usual residents also had a higher proportion of people born in the Americas and the Caribbean and EU2 (see [Section 8: Glossary](#) for the list of countries included in this group) compared with short-term residents.

Figure 6: The proportion of non-UK-born short-term residents varies by country of birth subgroup

Non-UK-born short-term residents by country of birth subgroup, compared with usual residents who arrived in the UK a year before Census 2021

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Figure 7 shows the most common individual countries of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents, compared with 2011 Census. There has been a large rise in the proportion of short-term residents born in China, increasing from 11% (2011) to 21% (2021). Compared with 2011, there was a smaller proportion of short-term residents born in some EU14 countries such as France and Italy, with France falling from 5% to 3%, for example.

Another important change in 2021 was the rise of Romania to be the third most common country of birth among short-term residents. As these comparisons are proportional, they are unable to show whether the changes were caused by fewer EU-born individuals coming to the UK or influenced by changes in people from non-EU countries.

When compared with usual residents, there were some differences between the two population groups. Poland was the second most common country of birth for usual residents, compared with the eighth in non-UK-born short-term residents. China was the most common country of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents but was not present in the top 10 for usual residents. Ireland was also not in the top 10 for non-UK-born short-term residents but fifth highest for usual residents. India and Pakistan were ranked highly for both population groups, with India the most common for usual residents and second for non-UK-born short-term, while Pakistan was third (long-term) and fourth (short-term).

Figure 7: The most common countries of birth of non-UK-born short-term residents has changed since 2011

Most common countries of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents, compared with 2011 Census

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When broken down by passports held, Figure 8 shows that the proportion of non-UK-born short-term residents holding United Kingdom passports had more than doubled since 2011, rising from 5% to 11%. Despite being outside the top 10 in 2011, Hong Kong (Special administrative region of China) passport holders were the seventh most common in 2021.

There was also a decrease in the proportion of United States passport holders, falling from the third most common in 2011 (5%) to the 10th in 2021 (2%). Other changes included a decrease in the proportion of France and Italy passport holders since 2011, while Romania passport holders became the third most common among non-UK-born short-term residents.

Figure 8: The most common passports held by non-UK-born short-term residents has changed since 2011

Most common passports held for non-UK-born short-term residents, compared with 2011 Census

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6 . Economic characteristics of short-term residents

Short-term migrants come to the UK for a variety of reasons, including for study, employment and looking after family. Breaking down by economic activity means we can see why people from different countries may have come to the UK. The Census provides a snapshot of non-UK-born short-term residents and may not reflect the movements of short-term residents in employment throughout the year, such as a potential increase in short-term residents working in agriculture during harvest season for example.

Census 2021 took place during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change; the national lockdown, associated guidance and furlough measures will have affected the labour market topic. Take care when using these data for planning and policy purposes. For more information see our [article comparing LFS estimates to census labour market estimates](#).

Figure 9 breaks down non-UK-born short-term residents by economic activity and country of birth. It shows that 46% of non-UK-born short-term residents were economically inactive students, with 83% of this group born in non-EU countries. This was followed by those in employment (23%) where 59% of this group was born in non-EU countries.

Figure 9: Nearly half of non-UK-born short-term residents are economically inactive students

Short-term residents by country of birth and economic activity

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Figure 10 breaks down the economically inactive student group by the most common countries of birth and compares these values with the 2011 Census. In 2021, short-term residents born in China made up a large proportion of this category (44%). The next most common countries of birth were Hong Kong (Special administrative region of China) (5%) and India (5%).

Compared with the 2011 Census, the top 10 most common countries of birth for economically inactive students contained the same countries, except for Cyprus replacing Pakistan in 2021. However, the order of these countries had changed. The proportion of short-term residents born in China in this category rose substantially between 2011 (20%) and 2021 (44%). Meanwhile, the proportion of non-UK-born short-term residents from EU countries such as France, Germany and Spain (including Canary Islands) also decreased compared with 2011.

In 2011, the second most common non-UK country of birth was the United States, making up 7% of economically inactive students. By 2021, those born in the United States had dropped to sixth, making up 2% of short-term economically inactive students. Meanwhile, Hong Kong (Special administrative region of China) was the seventh highest country of birth in 2011 and rose to the second most common in 2021.

Figure 10: The most common countries of birth for non-UK-born short-term residents who are economically inactive students has changed since 2011

Most common individual countries of birth for economically inactive student short-term residents, compared with 2011 Census

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Figure 11 breaks down economically active non-UK-born short-term residents by the most common countries of birth. Economically active short-term residents include those who are employed, self-employed and unemployed but looking for work and available to start within 2 weeks. In 2021, India was the most common country of birth for economically active non-UK-born short-term residents (14%), followed by Romania (11%), Poland (6%) and Pakistan (4%). Other countries in the top 10 include Bulgaria, China and Nigeria.

When compared with the 2011 Census, there was a decrease in the proportion of economically active short-term residents born in EU14 and EU8 (see [Section 8: Glossary](#) for the list of countries included in this group) countries present in the top 10. For example, the proportion of economically active short-term residents born in Poland decreased in 2021 (5%) compared with 2011 (8%), while the proportion born in France fell from 6% to 3%.

In contrast, the proportion of economically active short-term residents born in EU2 (see [Section 8: Glossary](#) for the list of countries included in this group) countries rose compared with 2011. For example, Romanian-born residents accounted for 10% of economically active short-term residents, compared with 3% in 2011, while in 2021 Bulgaria became the fifth most common country of birth in this group.

Figure 11: The most common countries of birth for economically active non-UK-born short-term residents has changed since 2011

Most common individual countries of birth for economically active short-term residents, compared with 2011 Census

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Census 2021 also provided industry breakdowns of non-UK-born short-term residents who were employed at the time. However, it is important to acknowledge the relatively small counts involved (28,880) when interpreting these breakdowns.

Wholesale and retail and repair of motor vehicles was the most common industry among all non-UK-born short-term residents in employment, accounting for 15% of both EU and non-EU-born. This is followed by non-UK-born short-term residents employed in human health and social work activities, representing 12% of EU-born and 15% of non-EU-born.

There is variation in the proportion of EU-born by industry compared with non-EU-born short-term residents by industry. For example, there was a higher proportion of non-EU-born short-term residents employed in information and communication (6%) compared with EU-born (3%). Non-EU-born were also more likely to work in professional, scientific and technical activities (8%) compared with EU-born (5%).

EU-born short-term residents in employment were much more likely to work in agriculture, forestry and fishing (7%) compared with non-EU-born (1%). There was also a higher proportion of EU-born short-term residents in employment in the manufacturing and construction industries.

Figure 12: The proportion of EU-born and non-EU-born short-term residents in employment varies by industry

Top 12 most common industries for short-term residents in employment by country of birth (% of total short-term residents in employment by both EU and non-EU country of birth)

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When comparing short-term residents to usual residents, many industries showed similar proportions of EU and non-EU born such as wholesale and retail and repair of motor vehicles; education; and transport and storage.

However, there were some notable differences between the two population groups. EU-born short-term residents included a higher proportion of those working in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry (7%) compared with EU-born usual residents (1%). Non-EU-born short-term residents had a lower proportion of its population working in human health and social work activities (15%) compared with non-EU-born usual residents (19%).

7 . Short-term international migration data

[The changing picture of short-term international migration in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 22 March 2023

Analysis of the short-term migrant population of England and Wales by country of birth, passports held and other characteristics.

8 . Glossary

Short-term resident

A short-term resident is anyone who was born outside the UK, arrived within a year before census day and intended to stay for a period of less than 12 months.

People who stayed or intended to stay for less than 3 months were not asked to answer Census 2021.

Usual resident

A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day, 21 March 2021, was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more, or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

EU

EU is the sum of the EU14, EU8 and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013).

EU14

EU14 is Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain (including Canary Islands) and Sweden.

EU8

EU8 is Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

EU2

EU2 is Romania and Bulgaria.

Other EU

Other EU is Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 2013).

Non-EU

Non-EU is the sum of the rest of the world including the rest of Europe. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

Other non-EU

The category "Other non-EU" refers to the following list of countries:

Albania, Andorra, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Cyprus (Non-European Union), Faroe Islands, Georgia, Guernsey, Iceland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Svalbard and Jan Mayen, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Vatican City.

Passports held

In the case of multiple passports being held, they were categorised in the following priority order for statistical purposes to prevent double-counting residents:

- UK passport
- Irish passport
- other country passport

For example, a dual citizen who holds both an EU and a UK passport is not classified in this analysis as a non-UK passport holder.

Employment

The number of people aged 16 years and over who did paid work, as an employee or self-employed. It also includes those who had a job that they were temporarily away from.

Type of employment

People in employment are split into employment types.

Employees are those doing paid work for an individual or organisation.

Self-employed people are those who own and operate their own business and can be further split into those with or without employees.

Unemployment

People without a job, but who were actively looking for work between 22 February and 21 March 2021 and could start within two weeks. They are also people who had found a job and were waiting to start it in the two weeks after Census Day, 21 March 2021.

Economically active

People aged 16 years and over who were active participants in the labour market between 15 and 21 March 2021, as they were:

- in employment as an employee or self-employed
- unemployed, but looking for work and could start within two weeks
- unemployed, but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted

Economically inactive

People aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 and 21 March 2021 and had not looked for work between 22 February and 21 March 2021 or could not start work within two weeks.

Reasons for inactivity

Economically inactive people could state that, between 15 and 21 March 2021, they were:

- retired
- studying
- looking after home or family
- long-term sick or disabled
- other

Industry

Classifies people aged 16 years and over who were in employment between 15 and 21 March 2021 by the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) 2007 code that represents their current industry or business.

The SIC code is assigned based on the information provided about a firm or organisation's main activity.

For definitions of labour market variables more generally, see our [guide to labour market statistics](#).

9 . Data sources and quality

The Census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned National Statistics status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 was conducted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a period of unparalleled and rapid change, and it is possible that this affected the way some people responded to the labour market questions on the census. Estimates from the census will also differ from those collected on the [Labour Force Survey](#), because of a range of conceptual differences between the two sources. Please see our [Comparing Census 2021 and Labour Force Survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales: 13 March 2021 article](#) for further information about interpreting census labour market data.

To provide the best estimate of the population, we usually adjust census data for people who did not respond using statistical models and information from other sources. For Census 2021, this adjustment was applied for usual residents only. In 2011, the non-response adjustment was calculated using a simpler method, which was applied for both usual and short-term residents.

This means that the Census 2021 data on short-term residents may be affected by some elements of under-estimation and non-response bias, as some groups of people are more likely to respond to the census than others. This does not affect the main estimates of usual residents. These possible effects should be taken into account when interpreting the 2021 Census figures on short-term residents or comparing them with results from the 2011 Census.

In 2011, the estimated response rate for short-term residents intending to stay between 3 and 6 months was 73%, while for those intending to stay between 6 months and 1 year it was 81%. This compares with an estimated response rate of 94% for usual residents, as shown in this [Response and imputation rates methodology information in the National Archives](#).

While the estimated response rate for usual residents was 97% in Census 2021, it is reasonable, given the 2011 figures, to assume that the response rate for short-term residents is lower than that for usual residents.

Additionally, we apply statistical disclosure control to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. As we round all figures individually, table totals may not sum exactly.

Quality considerations along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally are provided in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about specific quality considerations in our [Demography and migration quality information for Census 2021](#) and in our [Labour market quality information for Census 2021](#). Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates report](#).

10 . Related links

[The changing picture of long-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 27 January 2023

Analysis of the long-term migrant population, looking at characteristics such as country of birth, economic activity and industry.

[Comparing Census 2021 and labour force survey estimates of the labour market, England and Wales](#)

Article | Released 13 March 2023

Comparing the percentages of adults in employment and other labour market data between Census 2021 and the Labour Force Survey, and reasons why they differ.

[International migration, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 2 November 2022

International migration, including country of birth, passports held and year of arrival, Census 2021 data.

11 . Cite this article

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