

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary



Kelly O'Brien, COMPAS Photo Competition Entry 2010

What does migration mean for the 'white working class' in the UK?

The impact of migration on the 'white working class' has been the topic of much policy and media debate in the UK over the last five years.

This briefing explores the development of this debate, outlines the current evidence, and suggests alternative ways of thinking about who takes part in migration and who is affected by it.

The 'white working class' in policy and media debates

This issue appears in public policy and media discourses in two distinct ways:

- The 'chav' - Widely used in everyday conversation and in the media, white working class people are often viewed as inferior, socially undesirable and culturally inept, and their poverty blamed on their behaviour and culture.
- The 'beleaguered native' - Some journalists, politicians and academics see the white working class as a tribe in danger of extinction. This strand is overtly angry, anti-immigrant and sees the white working class as in need of protection.

What is the evidence on the impact of migration on 'white working class' people?

Impacts vary by type of migration and differ across the country. Some key facts are:

- The House of Lords Select Committee 2008 report found that 'in the long run the main economic effect of immigration is to enlarge the economy, with relatively small costs and benefits for the incomes of resident populations'.¹

- Specific sectors of the economy - such as agriculture, food processing and hospitality - rely heavily on migrant labour.²
- Evidence points to ongoing discrimination in the labour market against migrants. Almost all of the immigrant groups outrank the UK-born in terms of length of time in education, but few groups seem able to translate this into positive labour market outcomes.³

Wages

- Evidence from a range of studies shows that overall the effects of migration on wages are 'either insignificantly different from zero or slightly positive'.⁴
- When overall impact is broken down by occupation, there is evidence to suggest a 'significant, but small negative impact'⁵ on wages in areas of high immigration, especially in semi/unskilled sectors.
- The House of Lords Select Committee report called for government to adequately enforce minimum wage legislation.

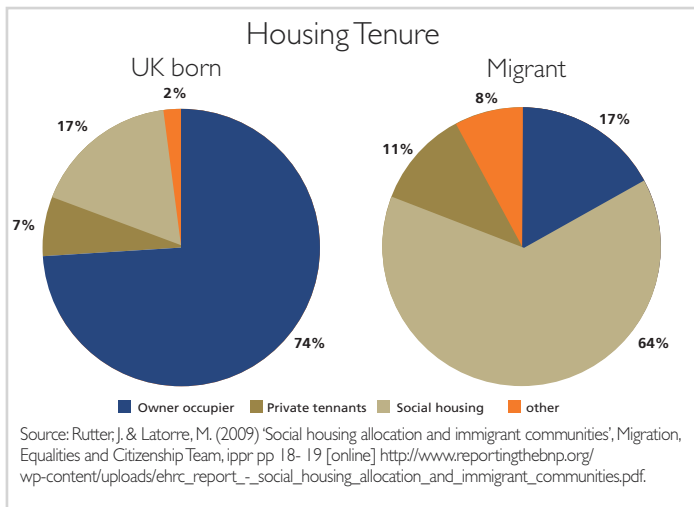
Benefits

- Evidence suggests that wage levels are more significant than generous benefits in migrants' choice of destination.⁶
- There is some evidence that immigrants are slightly more likely to receive benefits than non-immigrants⁷, but some groups, including A8 migrants, are less likely to claim benefits.⁸

¹ HOUSE OF LORDS, Select Committee on Economic Affairs, 'Economic Affairs- First Report' (2008) [online] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldeconaf/82/8202.htm> ² Chappell, L., Latorre, M., Rutter, J., and Shah, J. (2009) 'Migration and Rural Economies: Assessing and addressing risks', ippr [online] <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=670> ³ Srisankarajah, D., Cooley, L., Kornblatt, T. (2007) 'Britain's Immigrants: An Economic Profile', ippr; [online] <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=563> ⁴ Reed, H. and Latorre, M. (2009) 'The Economic Impacts of Migration on the UK Labour Market', ippr [online] <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=649> ⁵ Nickell, S. and Saleheen, J. (2008) 'The impact of immigration on occupational wages: British evidence', Nuffield College Oxford, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and Bank of England. [online] "available from" - <http://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/users/nickell/papers/ImpactofImmigration-Apr08.pdf> ⁶ De Giorgi, G. and Pellizzari, M. (2006) 'Welfare Migration in Europe and the Cost of a Harmonized Social Assistance', IZA Discussion Paper No. 2094 ⁷ Barrett, A., and McCarthy, Y. (2008) 'Immigrants and welfare programmes: exploring the interactions between immigrant characteristics, immigrant welfare dependence, and welfare policy', Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 24(3): 542-559 (study using British Household Panel Survey of 2005) ⁸ Dustmann, C., Frattini, T., & Halls, C. (2010) 'Assessing the Fiscal Costs and Benefits of Migration of A8 Migration to the UK', Fiscal Studies, 31(1): 1-41 ⁹ Dustmann, C., Frattini, T., & Halls, C. (2010) 'Assessing the Fiscal Costs and Benefits of Migration of A8 Migration to the UK', Fiscal Studies, 31(1): 1-41 If this was adjusted to reflect the same demographic profile as the existing population, A8 migrants were still 29% less likely to be living in social housing. ¹⁰ Rutter, J., & Latorre, M. (2009) 'Social housing allocation and immigrant communities', Migration, Equalities and Citizenship Team, ippr [online] http://www.reportingthebnp.org/wp-content/uploads/ehrc_report_-_social_housing_allocation_and_immigrant_communities.pdf ¹¹ Suzanne Fitzpatrick's (Herriott-Watt University) recent work presented at Policy Exchange seminar, London February 2011. The data presented in the form of a powerpoint were drawn from Fitzpatrick's ongoing ESRC-funded quantitative study. See <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-188-25-0023/read> ¹² For example, the Saxons, having become English, would then subsequently work to anglicize the Normans in turn. The assimilation of the Normans represents the first instance of the idea that being English is something that you do not have to be born into but that you can become' (Young 2008: 19). Young, R., 2008, The Idea of English Ethnicity, Oxford: Blackwell.

Housing

- Right-to-buy policies and less new-build social housing have occurred at a time when there has been an increase in the number of households in the UK, caused by greater longevity, marital breakdown and, to a lesser extent, immigration.



- Migrants overwhelmingly live in private accommodation, not social housing. New migrants to the UK over the last five years make up less than 2% of the total of those in social housing. Some 90% of those who live in social housing are UK-born.
- A8 migrants are 57% less likely to live in social housing than 'natives'.⁹
- The sale of social housing and its subsequent use as private rental accommodation for migrants has fuelled misconceptions about the allocation of social housing. Local residents may believe it is still 'owned by the council' despite it now being in the private sector.¹⁰
- There is a high proportion of migrants among the homeless.¹¹

Moving away from 'myth busting'

Despite fears generated by media and political debate and expressed in public opinion polls, the economic and social impact of immigration has been positive and small. However, presenting the evidence is not enough to tackle preconceptions about the impact of migrants on the 'native' population head on. Reframing the debate is crucial.

The fact that British people move too is missing from public discussions. There is a preconception that migrants are moving around, settling into and affecting 'British' communities, in contrast to British 'natives' who stay put and are impacted upon. The idea that net immigration figures include

emigration from the UK by British born people, British nationals and others is overlooked. They also contain immigration by people of British origin, or whose antecedents were emigrants from Britain.

Moving Histories of Class and Community

included conversations with 73 mostly white working class residents of a social housing estate in Norwich. Older people thought back across their lives, including childhoods in the 1930s. The interviews revealed how spatial mobility and immobility go hand-in-hand. Many more people who would not consider themselves a migrant, had in fact experienced living abroad and had significant connections to migration experiences.



- We need to consider the different nations and different migrant heritages that make up contemporary Britishness and to 'de-racialise the debate'. Finding commonality in spatial mobility is one way to do this – this means bringing in internal migration within the UK as well as temporary emigration.
- Foregrounding forms of transnational life that involve long term settled majority ethnic residents of England can be used to help move beyond the idea of an 'indigenous' Englishness.¹² Migration out of the UK is as important as migration into it in the making of its constituent nations and the idea of 'Britishness'.

Conclusions

'White working class' people are represented in two main discourses in the media – the 'chav' and the 'beleaguered native', set in opposition to either the multi-culturally sophisticated middle classes or to (often implicitly black) immigrants. In neither are they seen as having their own connections to minority and immigrant populations.

Detailed oral histories reveal the extent to which the lives of 'native' British people are imbued with internal and international migrations. By revealing the migration histories and 'indigenous' transnationalism of the British population we can shift the terms of the debate and break down the false opposition between 'British' and 'immigrant' groups.

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