

Racism in the UK and Its Impact on Immigrants (2020–2025)

Immigrants' Contributions to the UK Economy and Society (2020–2025)

Immigrants have long been integral to the UK's economic and social fabric, a trend that continued through the 2020s. As of 2023, about **9.5 million** people in the UK were foreign-born (roughly **14%** of the population) ¹. These migrants fill crucial roles across many sectors. For example, **nearly 20% of the UK's healthcare workforce consists of immigrants** (including doctors, nurses, and care workers) ², helping sustain the National Health Service. Significant proportions of workers in technology (around 30%), hospitality (~25%), and construction (~20%) are also foreign-born ³ ⁴, reflecting how migrants help address skill shortages and labor demand. Beyond labor, immigrants contribute as entrepreneurs and taxpayers: one analysis estimated immigrants pay roughly **£20 billion in taxes annually** and account for **~27% of new startups** in the UK ⁵ ⁶.

Crucially, studies consistently find that **immigrants have a net positive (or at least neutral) fiscal impact** on public finances. The precise estimates vary, but the overall effect of migration on the budget is typically **under 1% of GDP** and often slightly positive ⁷. The UK's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has noted that higher immigration can **reduce deficits and public debt** because many migrants are of working age and contribute more in taxes ⁸. Indeed, recent arrivals tend to contribute more per person than longer-term residents, due to being younger and less likely to draw pensions or heavy healthcare costs ⁷. In short, from staffing hospitals and universities to founding companies and paying taxes, immigrants remain a **net benefit to the UK economy and society** – a fact acknowledged by policymakers who, for instance, made post-Brexit immigration rules easier for health care workers to address labor shortages ⁹.

Yet, despite these longstanding benefits, public appreciation of immigrants' contributions has wavered in recent years. In 2019, nearly half of Britons (47%) agreed that "migrants are good for Britain's economy," but by 2024 this fell to **only 39%** ¹⁰. Polling from 2023 likewise showed an uptick in negative sentiment: **52%** of the public believed immigration levels should be reduced ¹¹. This cooling of attitudes – against the backdrop of an aging society that arguably needs immigrant labor – sets the stage for examining racism and xenophobia in the UK during the 2020–2025 period.

Ongoing Racism and Discrimination Faced by Immigrants

Despite the UK's dependence on immigrant communities, many immigrants (especially people of color or visible minorities) report **racism, xenophobia and discrimination** in their daily lives. Surveys in recent years reveal the scope of the problem. Around **16% of migrants in Britain said they belonged to a group that "faces discrimination"** (2018–2020 data) ¹². This figure was even higher among British-born ethnic minorities (about twice as high), indicating that non-white Britons also perceive significant racism ¹³. Everyday discrimination takes many forms – from harassment on the streets to unequal treatment in jobs and housing. In one study, **19% of immigrants in the UK reported feeling unsafe, 15% said they had been insulted, and 10% avoided certain places** due to their ethnic or national background ¹⁴. Notably, experiences differed by origin: in 2020, EU-born migrants more often

felt unsafe or were verbally abused, whereas non-EU immigrants more frequently avoided places out of fear of hostility ¹⁴. These behaviors underscore a climate where many immigrants must modify their daily life to cope with potential racism.

Hate crime statistics reinforce this concern. Racially motivated hate offenses have been at high levels and even **surged in the early 2020s**. Over **109,000 racially aggravated offenses were recorded in 2021/22**, a **19% increase** from the prior year ¹⁵. Although improved reporting partly explains long-term rises, there were clear spikes around certain events. Notably, **after the 2016 Brexit referendum, incidents of racist abuse spiked** across the UK ¹⁶ – a pattern also observed after other polarizing events (e.g. the 2017 terror attacks and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests led to jumps in hate incidents) ¹⁷. These surges suggest that public debates and political events (like Brexit) can unleash latent xenophobic sentiments. Immigrants from various backgrounds have been targets: for example, **hate crimes against South and East Asian communities jumped 21% during the COVID-19 pandemic** (early 2020) ¹⁸, as racist scapegoating of Asians for the virus took hold. Police data showed a **threefold rise in hate incidents against Chinese people** in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the year prior ¹⁹. Likewise, Eastern European immigrants faced harassment after Brexit; anecdotal reports and monitoring groups noted a rise in slurs like “go back to your country” directed at Polish, Romanian and other EU nationals in the late 2010s, though such trends have continued into the 2020s in some locales (especially as Brexit curtailed free movement).

Discrimination is also evident in **employment and institutional settings**. Field experiments and studies have found that **British employers systematically favor white native applicants** over equally qualified minority candidates. For instance, **Pakistani and Nigerian heritage applicants raised and educated in the UK are significantly less likely to get interview call-backs than white British applicants with the same qualifications** ²⁰. This indicates persistent racial/ethnic bias in hiring. Other research has documented institutional biases in policing, housing, and health care. The UK’s **Windrush scandal** (revealed in 2018, with repercussions into the 2020s) showed how Black Caribbean Britons – many of whom were de facto immigrants who arrived in the post-war decades – were wrongly classified as “illegal immigrants” and denied services, reflecting structural racism in government policy. More broadly, **structural racism** in housing, employment, and criminal justice continues to **reinforce inequalities** that indirectly affect immigrants and minorities ²¹. As The King’s Fund observes, racism and discrimination directly **harm the physical and mental health** of ethnic minority people in Britain ²². In short, immigrants of all backgrounds – whether first-generation newcomers or British-born children of immigrants – continue to encounter a range of racist attitudes and discriminatory barriers in modern UK society.

Protest outside a hotel accommodating asylum seekers in Rotherham, England (August 2024). Such demonstrations, often fueled by misinformation and xenophobic sentiment, reflect how anti-immigrant hostility has flared up in recent years. ²³ ²⁴

Impact of Racism on Immigrants’ Mental Health

Experiencing racism and xenophobia has profound **negative effects on immigrants’ mental health**. A growing body of research confirms that exposure to racial discrimination correlates with higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma among those targeted. In the UK context, health experts note that *“racism is increasingly recognised as a key contributor to poor mental health.”* ²⁵ The chronic stress of being treated as an outsider – whether through subtle prejudice or overt hate incidents – can erode one’s psychological well-being. Immigrants who face hostility may develop hyper-vigilance, low self-esteem, or social withdrawal, all of which are risk factors for mental illness. For example, surveys have

found that a notable share of migrants feel unsafe or avoid public places due to fear of harassment ¹⁴ . This kind of persistent fear can contribute to chronic anxiety and isolation, undermining mental health.

There is evidence that **racist victimization leads to trauma symptoms** in many cases. Community organizations and charities (like Stop Hate UK and the Mental Health Foundation) have reported immigrants suffering **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**-like symptoms after hate crimes – including disturbed sleep, flashbacks, and loss of trust in others. Asylum seekers and refugees, in particular, often already carry trauma from conflict or persecution in their countries of origin; when they then encounter racism or hostile policies in the UK (such as being accused of “bogus” claims or subjected to detention), it can severely aggravate their mental health struggles ²⁶ ²⁷ . The *Mental Health Foundation's* 2025 report on refugees notes the intersection of immigration status and race: being a non-white immigrant in the UK often means facing prejudice that **compounds other stressors** (like the uncertainty of asylum procedures) ²³ .

Even for long-settled immigrant communities, **everyday discrimination (“microaggressions”), xenophobic media rhetoric, and political scapegoating** take a psychological toll. The King's Fund explains that racism – whether structural or interpersonal – contributes to **health disparities** by inducing chronic stress responses in the body ²¹ . Over time, this stress can manifest as hypertension, substance misuse, or other health issues, alongside mental illnesses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Chinese and other East/Southeast Asian Britons not only faced higher risk of virus-related anxiety but also **a wave of racist abuse and assaults**, which experts say led to heightened fear and distress in those communities ¹⁸ ¹⁹ . Such compounding traumas illustrate how **racism can worsen immigrants' mental health on a broad scale**. In summary, the hostile climate created by racism in the UK has directly impacted the emotional well-being of many immigrants, often leaving them feeling unwelcome, fearful, and psychologically burdened in a country that relies on their contributions.

Economic Downturns and the Scapegoating of Immigrants

Public attitudes toward immigrants tend to deteriorate during times of economic hardship, a pattern visible in Britain's recent economic turbulence. When the economy slumps or social services struggle, **immigrants often become convenient scapegoats** in political and media discourse. This was evident during the **post-2020 cost-of-living crisis** and periods of recession. Polling data show that as inflation and economic anxiety grew in 2022–2023, immigration climbed back up the list of public “concerns.” By late 2023, **immigration was named as a top issue by 41% of Britons (tied with healthcare and second only to the economy itself)** ²⁸ . In fact, a YouGov poll in December 2023 found **20% of Britons called immigration the single biggest issue** facing the country – a level of concern not seen since the height of the Brexit debate ²⁹ . This surge in concern coincided with stagnant growth and strained public services, suggesting some Britons increasingly **blamed immigrants for economic woes** such as job scarcity, housing shortages, and NHS waiting times. Notably, anti-immigrant sentiment was highest among those on the political right: two-thirds of 2019 Conservative voters said immigration was a top issue for them ³⁰ . Populist rhetoric from certain media outlets and politicians has amplified the notion that immigrants are behind Britain's problems, from unemployment to the housing crisis.

Historically, economic downturns have indeed provided fertile ground for xenophobia. Social scientists point out that during recessions, **politicians often “develop measures focusing on limiting immigrants,” framing migrants as competitors for jobs and welfare** ³¹ ³² . After the 2008 financial crisis, for example, some European governments (like Spain) even paid migrants to go home ³³ . In the UK's recent context, the pattern holds: amid the pandemic recession and the inflation surge of 2022, calls to cut immigration intensified. Opinion data show that after a long period of softening attitudes (2015–2020), **the share of Britons wanting immigration reduced jumped from 42% in 2022 to 48%**

in 2023 ¹¹, reversing earlier tolerance gains. This shift likely reflects heightened public **anxiety over competition for resources**, which some politicians have strategically redirected toward immigrants.

Indeed, **migrant communities have increasingly become scapegoats for policy failures**. Free-market analysts observe that it's politically easier to blame migrants than to address systemic issues. As one commentator noted, *"Immigrants are increasingly becoming scapegoats for Britain's myriad problems... After many years of government failures on house building, it's much easier to talk about immigration than admit that even if the UK closed the borders tomorrow, there would still be a housing crisis."* ³⁴. This refers to how UK leaders, such as former Home Secretary Suella Braverman, have suggested Britain is "full" – implying that migrants are causing overcrowding and housing shortages – even though housing shortfalls are largely due to under-investment and planning issues ³⁵. Similarly, during NHS crises or school shortages, some have pointed fingers at "health tourism" or migrant families, deflecting attention from funding cuts or mismanagement.

Media and political narratives during 2023–2024 frequently **portrayed asylum seekers and refugees as burdens** on the system. For example, as small boat crossings in the English Channel hit record numbers, tabloids and certain politicians linked rising asylum claims to strains on budgets and security, stirring public hostility. Anti-immigrant demonstrations erupted in several towns (as depicted in the Rotherham protest image above) when hotels were used to house asylum seekers, often driven by false rumors about migrants' involvement in local crimes ³⁶ ²³. In these cases, **economic frustration and social fears merged into xenophobia**, with immigrants wrongly blamed for broader societal problems. As one analyst summed up, *"challenging economic times can lead some to place blame on [immigrants]."* ²⁴ This scapegoating phenomenon underscores a vicious cycle: economic stress fuels racism, and racism in turn undermines the social cohesion needed for an effective economic recovery.

Conclusion

From 2020 to 2025, the UK has witnessed a paradox: even as immigrants continue to bolster Britain's economy and public services, they have faced **persistent and at times intensifying racism**. Immigrants of all backgrounds – Europeans, Asians, Africans, Middle Eastern and others – contribute billions in taxes and fill vital roles, yet many British individuals (primarily white Britons) harbor prejudicial attitudes that manifest in discrimination, hate crimes, and political scapegoating. This prejudice has **tangible human costs**. It erodes immigrants' sense of belonging and safety, and as research shows, it negatively impacts their mental health through stress and trauma ²² ²⁵. The early 2020s brought additional challenges like the pandemic and economic turbulence, during which **immigrants were often unfairly blamed for societal problems** – be it the spread of COVID-19 or unemployment and housing shortages. Such narratives, though largely unfounded, gained traction in populist politics and sections of the media, contributing to a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment by 2023–24 ¹¹ ²⁸.

Addressing racism in the UK remains an urgent task. Not only is racial justice a moral and legal imperative, but Britain's future cohesion and prosperity depend on **valuing its diverse immigrant communities** rather than vilifying them. Reducing racist hostility would likely improve immigrants' mental health and integration, enabling them to more fully contribute to society. Conversely, allowing economic frustrations to be misdirected as xenophobia risks deepening social divisions and harming the very people who drive growth and staff essential services. In summary, the period 2020–2025 in the UK highlights both the **enduring benefits of immigration** and the **destructive impact of racism** – a dual reality that policymakers and citizens must reckon with to build a healthier, more inclusive Britain.

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