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Explainer

Are asylum seekers really more likely to commit violent crime in the UK?

As claims spread suggesting men from certain backgrounds have a propensity to commit certain crimes, here's why the statistics fail to provide the full picture



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A flurry of headlines and commentary follows, suggesting that men from the country, ethnic group or religion in question have a propensity to commit these types of offence. A common theme was crystallised by the Daily Mail's Sarah Vine on Wednesday after two Afghan asylum seekers were jailed for raping a 15-year-old girl: "For too long this country has ignored the reality of what happens when men from certain cultures are let loose in our liberal democracy."

Increasingly, politicians express outrage, too, not just at the offence itself - but at the immigration status of the perpetrator. They repeat pledges to make it harder for people to enter the country illegally.

Sometimes those commenting claim to be backed by statistics. But more often it is anecdotal, the preponderance of news stories themselves held up as evidence, accompanied by numerous police mugshots of brown or black men.

Vine also wrote: "I don't care if I'm accused of scaremongering, or worse. Facts are facts." But the difficult truth is that the evidence is complex and frequently absent from official data.

It is true, for example, that Afghan nationals offend in the UK at a higher rate than British nationals - but the difference has been exaggerated, and does not account for the difference in demographics between the two groups in the UK.

While lists of crimes committed by foreign nationals create one impression, a similar list could be created of violent offences by white British men that would create another, but rarely attract coverage focused on ethnicity. And while offending *rates* may be higher among some immigrant groups, it is also true that if you are a victim of a violent or sexual crime in the UK, the available evidence suggests that the ethnic makeup of the country means that the perpetrator is most likely to be a white man.

Sunder Katwala, the director of the thinktank British Future, said: "There's a big concerted effort on both sides of the Atlantic to create this migrant crime crisis argument as a big piece of the argument about the dangers of immigration and the impossibility of integration.

"In the end, it's a really tricky thing to counter because it captures something about perceptions about crime and something about the perceptions of migration and integration and it fuses them together." He noted that crime rates overall **were falling**, with sexual assault an important exception, but that that story rarely made the news. "For the citizen it's not something you see," he added. "Policymakers should collect the statistics, show you the statistics, and ask: is [the offending by asylum seekers and migrants] proportionate?"

What does the data say overall?

The reality is that the government's own data cannot tell us how many crimes are committed by asylum seekers because the Ministry of Justice does not record offences by immigration status. As such, there is no official way to compare offending rates of asylum seekers with the wider population.

There are various proxies but none of them give a cast iron answer. For example, information on crime is collected by nationality but that only gets us so far.

The category "foreign nationals" lumps together a wide mix of people: recent arrivals, long-settled immigrants, students, health and care workers, their dependants, and also asylum seekers.

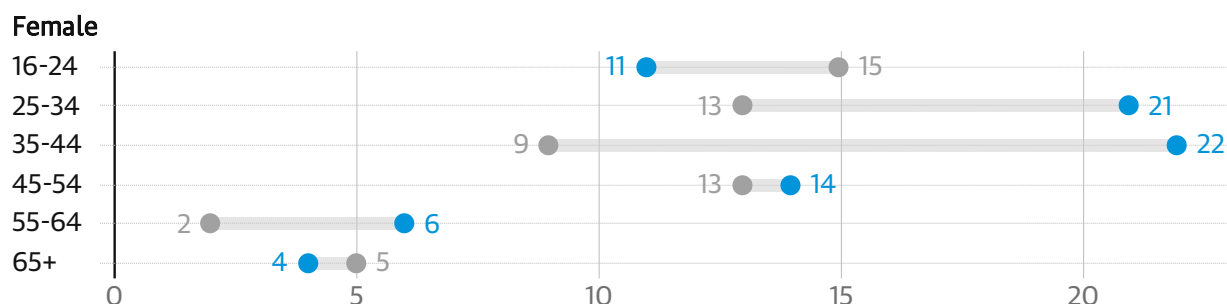
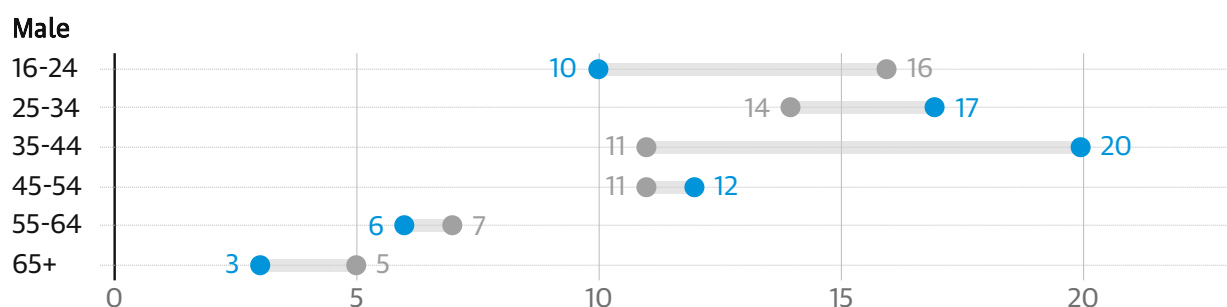
With that context in mind, the figures we do have show that, overall, foreign nationals in England and Wales are imprisoned or convicted at roughly the same rate as British nationals, according to [analysis by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford](#).

What does a more granular look reveal?

When you adjust for age and sex - important because young men are disproportionately likely to commit crime, and migrant populations tend to be younger - **the share of non-citizens in prison is actually lower than the share of British citizens**. (There is no publicly available data on conviction rates after adjusting for age.)

Non-citizens are slightly less likely to be in prison than UK citizens

- Share of prison population age group that is foreign, %
- Expected share if foreigners were incarcerated at the same rate as UK nationals, %



Guardian graphic. Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Ministry of Justice data

📷 Non-citizens are slightly less likely to be in prison than UK citizens

Ben Brindle, a researcher at the Migration Observatory, who carried out the analysis, said: “I think it’s likely that asylum seekers are more likely to commit crimes, but that’s in good part due to some of the other characteristics that those people tend to have.

“For instance, asylum seekers are more likely to be young men and young men are more likely to commit crime. In a perfect world you’d want to be comparing a young male Brit to a young male asylum seeker to try and account for that but we can’t do that with the statistics that we’ve got.”

Those saying that there is an emergency around crime committed by asylum seekers argue that whichever comparison you draw, the demographic mix of those arriving is part of the problem. Meanwhile, although nationality data is available, there are big gaps in the underlying population data which make comparisons shaky. High-quality figures on the share of non-British citizens in the population are hard to come by, meaning that any crime rates are uncertain.

What causes differences in offending rates?

Brindle said: “There are a range of other things which impact likelihood that somebody commits a crime, both Brits and migrants. Trauma is certainly one of them, mental health more broadly, socioeconomic status, all of these things, and yet we can’t account for them with the data we’ve got.

“So we can see at one level whether certain nationalities, perhaps, are more likely to commit crime - although there are some limitations with the data there - but we’re not really getting into the why and the factors that are driving differences in crime rates between different groups.”

The last census took place in 2021 - before the peak in migration - and the Office for National Statistics has faced problems with [falling response rates](#) in its main population surveys.

There is another complication. Those surveys do not include people living in communal accommodation such as asylum hotels, which means many recent arrivals are not counted at all. Smaller groups of foreign nationals - for example Afghans - are most likely to be misrepresented.

All of this makes it difficult to produce firm, detailed conclusions about the relationship between immigration status and crime in the UK.

Are figures about the difference in offending rates reliable?

An example of the complexity is illustrated in the claim from the Centre for Migration Control, cited by Reform UK and the shadow justice secretary, Robert Jenrick, that Afghan nationals were 22 times more likely to be convicted of sex offences than British nationals.

The convictions data was from the years 2021-23 (capturing 77 sexual offences - not necessarily offenders - in that period committed by Afghan nationals) but the population data was from the 2021 census and the number of Afghans has increased greatly since, after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021.

Madeleine Sumption, the director of the Migration Observatory, [told BBC Radio 4's More or Less](#) programme that she estimated the rate to be 14.5 - not 22 - times higher for Afghan nationals. Her calculation came with caveats too because, unlike for the prison population data, there is no age breakdown.

That is still a very striking difference. But where there is a relatively small number of offences, a small change in the population - and we know population data is also unreliable and can be measured in different ways - can move the rate of offending significantly. As Brindle said: "Age is a really important factor when we look at the likelihood of criminality."

Are media reports a reliable representation of the issue?

There may have been a rash of crimes committed by asylum seekers reported in the media recently, but that does not necessarily mean that they are increasing; there may simply be more coverage.

"We saw that with the accidental release of a prisoner," said Katwala. "[It's a famous case](#) and suddenly you realise that the prison system's [accidentally \[been\] releasing prisoners](#) once a month or whatever."

He added: "The people who will be reassured by the statistics are probably not the people that you need to reassure." Without data on crime rates among asylum seekers, it is impossible to give a reliable answer.

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