



## Migration and migrant workers in Northern Ireland

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Migration is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history humankind have spread across the globe. Ireland has always experienced both emigration (people leaving) and immigration (people coming to Ireland). Since the nineteenth century Ireland has been a country where larger numbers emigrated than arrived in Ireland as immigrants. Since the partition of Ireland in 1921 patterns of migration into and out of Northern Ireland have been more like those in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) than those in the rest of the United Kingdom (UK).

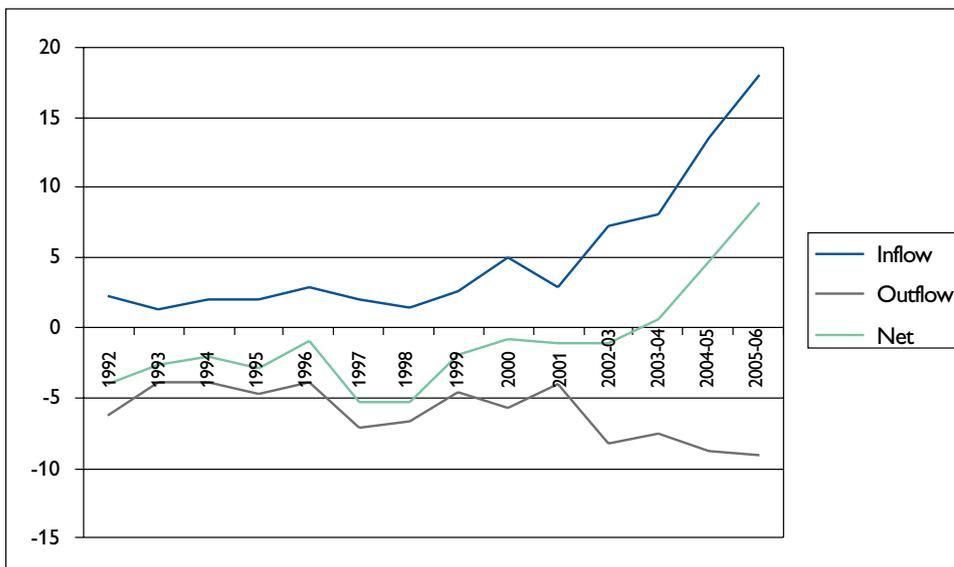
Since 2001 there has been a significant growth in immigration into Northern Ireland from countries outside the British Isles, a trend which was evident in the RoI a few years earlier. Since the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 there have been more people coming to Northern Ireland from abroad than there have been leaving for destinations abroad, a significant proportion of this immigration has been from the Eastern European countries which joined the EU in 2004 (Bell et al, 2004).

In 2006 the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey incorporated a number of questions on attitudes towards migration and migrant workers. This Research Update uses data from the 2006 survey along with UK and Northern Ireland government data on international migration to examine some public attitudes towards migration and (immigrant) migrant workers in Northern Ireland and to put these into a wider context.

### Recent trends in migration to and from Northern Ireland

International migration is a significant phenomenon in the early years of the twenty-first century. Most countries in the world now have an experience of significant numbers of people leaving and other people entering (Castles & Miller, 2003). There are various reasons for migration: work; retirement; reuniting of families split up due to migration; emigrants returning to their country of birth. Immigration to Northern Ireland from places such as Poland and the Philippines has been widely publicized. It is less widely known that this increase in immigration from abroad has been

Chart 1: International migration to and from Northern Ireland, 1992-2006, thousands



Source: 1992-2001 Office of National Statistics; 2002-06 NISRA

accompanied by an increase in people from Northern Ireland moving to countries around the world. In 2005-06 the highest number of people in recent history (9,100) emigrated from Northern Ireland to destinations abroad (see Chart 1). (And this figure does not include those who moved to the rest of the UK or to the Republic of Ireland, both of which remain more popular than any other destination).

This emigration from Northern Ireland is part of a global increase in international migration. An indication of the geographical mobility of the population of Northern Ireland can be seen in the fact that more than one in four people surveyed for the 2006 NILT survey said that they had lived outside Northern Ireland for more than six months (a much smaller proportion (2%) claimed a nationality other than British, Irish, Northern Irish or Scottish).

## Attitudes towards migration within the European Union (EU)

When asked about the right to live and work in any part of the EU the majority of people in Northern Ireland appear to be in favour of people being free to migrate to and from Northern Ireland. 80% said that they welcome the fact that people from Northern Ireland are free to live and work in

any other part of the EU. Almost as many (74%) welcomed the fact that other EU citizens are free to live and work in Northern Ireland and few, less than 5%, thought that this right was unwelcome (see Table 1).

The population of Northern Ireland, however, appear to have mixed feelings about the free movement of people in the EU. When asked whether they agreed with the British government's decision not to place restrictions on immigration from the east European countries when they joined the EU in 2004, 73% said that the government should have placed restrictions. These contradictory findings are puzzling.

## Attitudes towards migrant workers

We might expect that the widespread desire for restrictions on immigration from Eastern Europe would be associated with negative attitudes towards the contribution that migrant workers make to Northern Ireland. The evidence from NILT 2006, however, shows ambivalence on questions regarding the contribution that migrant workers make to Northern Ireland. A common prejudice expressed in some of the media coverage of immigration is the idea that immigrants come to Britain to enjoy the benefits of the welfare state. People in Northern Ireland, however, are much more likely

to disagree or strongly disagree (47%) than agree or strongly agree (25%) with the idea that migrant workers come to Northern Ireland just to get Social Security benefits. A mixed picture emerges on other questions about migrant workers and state services.

44% thought that the needs of migrant workers were putting a strain on schools. A majority (51%) thought that the number of migrant workers was leading to a shortage of local housing and a higher proportion (60%) thought that a strain was being put on the Health Service. Ambivalence about immigrants, however, is evident in the fact a majority (54%) thought that migrant workers were good for Northern Ireland's economy. And 83% thought that it was good that migrant workers come to Northern Ireland to work as doctors and nurses when there is a shortage of medical staff. Two out of every three people surveyed also thought that migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and cultures (see Table 2).

The ambivalence is probably most evident on the questions regarding jobs. Almost half (48%) thought that migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland. But more (80%) thought that migrant workers mostly take up jobs that Northern Irish workers don't

Table 1: Attitudes towards the right to live and work in the EU, %

	Very welcome	Fairly welcome	Neither welcome nor unwelcome	Fairly unwelcome	Very unwelcome
Right of people from Northern Ireland to live and work in the EU	44	36	17	2	1
Right of people from the EU to live and work in Northern Ireland	34	39	16	3	1

Source: NILT 2006

Table 2: Attitudes towards migrant workers contribution to Northern Ireland, %

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is good for Northern Ireland that migrant workers come to work as doctors and nurses when there is a shortage of medical staff	25	58	7	7	2
The number of migrant workers coming into Northern Ireland puts a strain on the Health Service	13	47	13	20	3
Migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and cultures	13	54	13	15	2

Source: NILT 2006

want. And even more (85%) thought that employers take on migrant workers because they are prepared to work for lower wages than local workers (see Table 3).

## How to interpret the data?

The idea that the reality of living with global mobility necessarily leads to a more positive attitude towards immigrants is not borne out by

the data. The idea that a growth in immigration leads to negative attitudes towards immigrants is not borne out by the data either. The evidence from NILT 2006 suggests a more complex and apparently contradictory picture. How are we to interpret this data?

One possibility is that a majority of people agree with the right of free movement within the EU *in principle*, but they are uncomfortable with some of the changes which, *in practice*, have been associated with increased

immigration. Opinion polls in Britain indicate that a majority of people have thought about emigrating from Britain. This data from Northern Ireland suggests that many are taking this option. Technological developments and commercial changes which have brought such things as cheap flights and the internet have opened up new opportunities for geographical mobility and international communication. The positive attitudes towards free movement and general welcoming

Table 3: Attitudes towards migrant workers and jobs in Northern Ireland, %

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland	14	34	11	33	6
Migrant workers mostly take up jobs that Northern Ireland workers don't want	22	57	7	10	2
Employers take on migrant workers because they are prepared to work for lower wages than local workers	35	50	4	7	2

Source: NILT 2006

of new ideas and cultures reported in the NILT survey may indicate a desire for a more cosmopolitan world. Amongst people living in Northern Ireland however, there is also a perception that an increase in immigration has been accompanied by a strain on state services. This suggests that some people have, in practice, a negative experience of some aspects of migration to Northern Ireland.

Another possibility is that the contradictory findings may be because people are not sure whether to blame the strain on services on the government or on migrant workers. Although they may agree that there

has been a strain on services they may blame lack of government funding or organisational mismanagement for this strain. The fact that many people welcome the contribution that migrant workers make to the Health Service indicates the ambivalence regarding the impact that immigration makes to Northern Irish society. The answers to the questions on employers and migrant workers can be interpreted as indicating that there is even more suspicion of employers than there is of migrant workers.

## Conclusion

The data from the NILT survey in 2006

indicates ambivalence towards migrant workers. The fact that more than two thirds of people think that migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and cultures suggests that potential areas of tension are not likely to be around cultural conflict. And the fact that a slight majority thought that the number of migrant workers was leading to a shortage of local housing and a higher proportion thought that a strain was being put on the Health Service suggests that the potential areas of conflict are around the allocation of state resources. People seem to feel that current levels of investment in housing and health are inadequate, whether they blame this on immigrants or on the government, however, remains an open question.

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## References

Bell, K., Jarman, N., & Lefebvre, T., (2004), *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*, Institute for Conflict Research (ICR), Belfast

Castles, S., & Miller, M. J., (2003), *The Age of Migration: International Populations Movements in the Modern World*, Palgrave, Houndsmills

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2006, 1200 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by MillwardBrown Ulster.

The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

The migrant worker questions on the 2006 Life and Times survey were funded by the Research Branch of OFMDFM.

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