

Attitudes to migrant workers in Northern Ireland: an improving landscape?

Lucy Michael

Northern Ireland experienced a significant upsurge in inward migration from 2001 onwards thanks to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Most of the immigrants then, as now, were not asylum seekers or refugees, or even students, but migrant workers. From 2004 to 2008, there was more inward migration than emigration as the economy improved. A significant proportion of immigration was from Eastern European countries which joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 (Bell et al, 2004).

At the last census, in 2011, there were 81,318 migrants in Northern Ireland excluding those from the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland (Krausova and Vargas-Silva, 2014). Just under a quarter (19,658) were Polish, and Lithuanians comprised the next largest group (7,241). Whilst 67 per cent of migrants from the rest of the UK and 61 per cent of those from the Republic of Ireland were economically active, the figure for migrants from the other 26 countries of the European Union (also called the EU26) was 83 per cent (Department for the Economy, 2018). Almost half (45%) of EU26 workers were employed in low skilled occupations, significantly higher than the average in Northern Ireland at 19 per cent. Immigration of migrant workers began to slow down, and Northern Ireland went from being the UK region with the highest migration rate in 2006-7 to the lowest in 2013-14. Hate crime incidents against migrants and offences with a racial motive increased substantially between 2011 and 2014, despite the decrease in inward migration (Michael, 2017).

By 2018, in light of the Brexit referendum result which produced huge uncertainty

for EU migrants in the UK, Northern Ireland had experienced a significant increase in return migration amongst that group. The number of EU nationals from outside the UK employed in Northern Ireland fell by more than a quarter (26%) between June 2016 and March 2018 (BBC, 2018). Some sectors of the economy highlighted problems in recruiting staff, including the health and social care sector and the hospitality industry.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey* has regularly asked questions about attitudes towards migrants in Northern Ireland. This Research Update uses data from the 2018 survey along with data from previous surveys to examine trends in public attitudes towards migrant workers in Northern Ireland.

European comparison of attitudes

Despite the impression of an overall hardening of attitudes in Europe towards immigration, there has instead been a divergence of opinion between and within countries. Between 2002/03 and 2016/17 public opinion on accepting migrants from poorer countries outside Europe became considerably more favourable in a number of countries, with particularly large shifts in a positive direction in Portugal, Spain, Norway and the UK (Heath and Richards, 2019). At the same time, opinion within the EU appears to have become more divided and polarized over time, with attitudes going in opposite directions among different sections of the population. Ireland was one of those countries demonstrating this pattern. There are markedly different patterns between attitudes to refugees

and attitudes to immigration in general, directly connected to the politics of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe, which warrant their separate analysis.

Levels of immigration

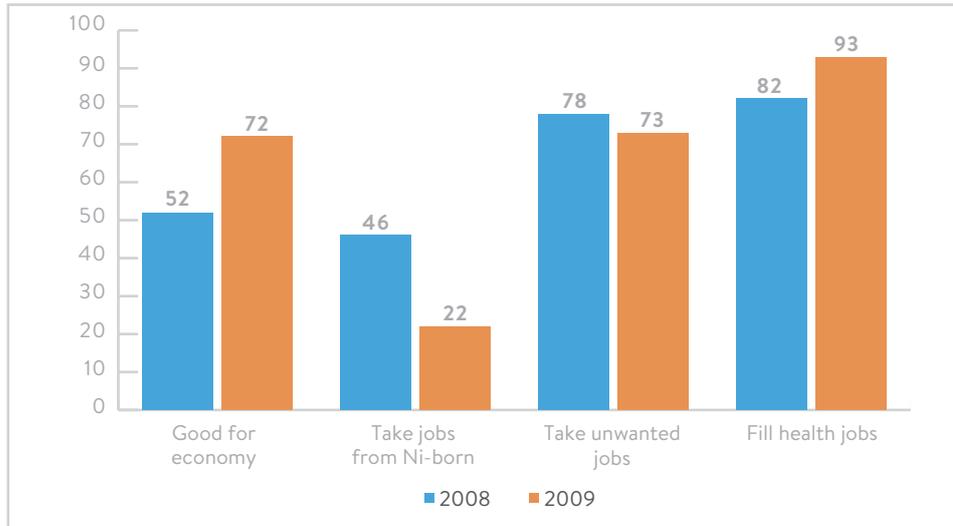
Among NILT respondents, attitudes towards immigration levels have changed. In 2018, 21 per cent supported a reduction in the number of immigrants to Northern Ireland and 16 per cent supported an increase, whilst the largest response was for no change (54%). This is a different picture than when the question was first asked in 2012, when 45 per cent of people wanted a reduction in the number of immigrants, although Northern Ireland had the lowest inward migration rate in the UK at that time. In 2012, across all age groups, support for reducing immigration was much higher than support for increasing immigration; for example, 40 per cent of those aged 25-34 felt that the number of immigrants to Northern Ireland should be reduced, whilst 10 per cent felt that it should be increased. However, by 2018, people in that age group were more likely to agree with increased immigration than decreased immigration (20 per cent and 17 per cent respectively).

Support for reduced immigration has dropped among Catholic (26 percentage points) and Protestant (25 percentage points) respondents, and among those with no religion (13 percentage points) since 2012, to 16 per cent, 26 per cent and 22 per cent respectively in 2018.

Job opportunities

NILT includes several questions exploring attitudes to migrant workers and the

Figure 1: Migrant workers and the labour market (% agreeing/strongly agreeing)



labour market. In 2018, 72 per cent of NILT participants agreed or strongly agreed that “Migrant workers are generally good for Northern Ireland’s economy” (see **Figure 1**). Just 9 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Comparing this to previous surveys, there is a positive trajectory. In 2008, 52 per cent agreed, rising to 66 per cent in 2016. However, the change in the strength of agreement is more marked. Those agreeing strongly increased from 10 per cent in 2008 to 18 per cent in 2016, and then to 27 per cent just two years later in 2018.

Strong agreement doubled over the decade from 2008 to 2018 amongst Catholics (from 15% to 32%) and those of no religion (from 12% to 24%). However, it quadrupled amongst Protestants (from 5% to 21%), who started from a much lower base. In 2018, whilst 18-24 year olds were least likely to agree that migrant workers are generally good for the economy (58%), this age group was most likely to say that they did not know how to answer this question (15%).

There is decreasing support for the idea that “Migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland”. Agreement with this statement dropped by more than half (from 46% to 22%) between 2008 and 2018, and most people (59%) disagreed with the statement by 2018. A decrease in support is evident across Catholic, Protestant and no religion groups.

Correspondingly, there is strong support for the idea that “Migrant workers take

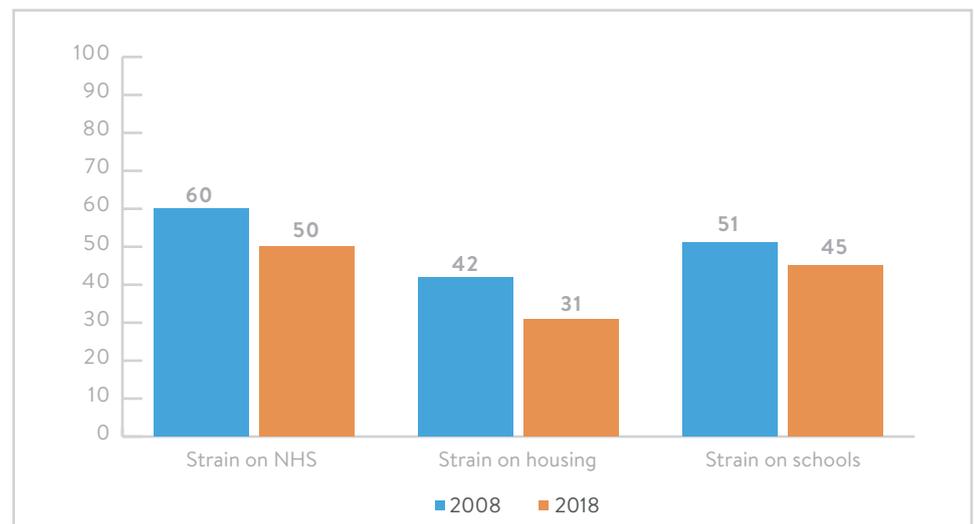
up jobs that Northern Ireland workers don’t want”. In 2018, almost three-quarters (73%) agreed with this position, representing a small decrease from the 2008 figure of 78 per cent. Nevertheless, the proportion strongly agreeing has risen from 18 per cent to 31 per cent in that time. Attitudes are similar among Catholic and Protestant respondents. However, there has been a large decrease in the proportion of those with no religion agreeing that migrant workers take jobs that people in Northern Ireland don’t want – from 81 per cent in 2008 to 57 per cent in 2018. A large decrease in support for this statement is also evident about 18-24 year olds (from 71% to 50%), with an increase in the proportion not knowing how to answer this question.

Jobs in the Northern Ireland health services are of particular interest, given the dependence of the sector on migrant professionals. Support for migrant health professionals was growing slightly from 2008 to 2016, but there is a significant change from 2016 onwards. Those ‘strongly agreeing’ that “It is good for Northern Ireland that migrant workers come to work as doctors and nurses when there is a shortage of medical staff” rose from 26 per cent in 2008 to 54 per cent in 2018, while overall agreement rose from 82 per cent to 93 per cent. In 2018, Catholics, Protestants and those of no religion all demonstrated extremely high support (95%, 94% and 88% respectively). In particular, support from Protestants rose by 17 percentage points over the decade, compared to Catholics and those with no religion (8 percentage points and 4 percentage points respectively).

Concerns about services

Fewer people in 2018 were concerned about the impact of immigration on access to health services than a decade ago (see **Figure 2**). Those agreeing with the statement “The number of migrant workers coming into Northern Ireland puts a strain on the Health Service” dropped from 60 per cent to 50 per cent between 2008 and 2018. In 2018, people aged 45 or over were more likely to agree than those aged under 45 (54% and 44% respectively). Protestants were more likely to agree (60%) than other groups (Catholic 43%, no religion 48%).

Figure 2: Concerns about services (% agreeing/strongly agreeing)



Housing is also of less concern than a decade ago. Those who agreed that “The number of migrant workers moving into Northern Ireland means that there is a shortage of local housing” decreased from 42 per cent to 31 per cent overall. At the same time, however, there has been an associated increase in the proportion saying that they don’t know how to answer the question (from 2% in 2008 to 16% in 2018). Those aged 45-54 years old were almost twice as likely to strongly agree as 35-44 year olds (16% and 8% respectively), and more than three times more likely than 18-24 year olds (5%). In contrast, 35-44 year olds were more likely than any other age group to strongly disagree (19%). Overall support for this statement is highest among Protestant respondents (36%), compared to Catholic respondents (29%) and those with no religion (28%). Across all three groups, support has fallen since 2008, especially among those with no religion (down from 45%).

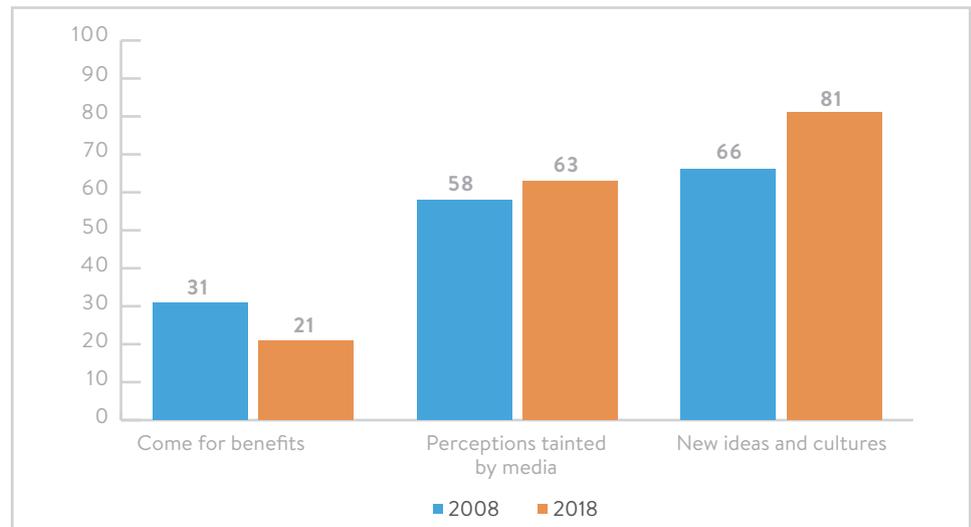
There was a smaller change in attitudes around education. Those agreeing with the statement “The needs of migrant workers’ children are putting a strain on schools” decreased from 51 per cent in 2008 to 45 per cent in 2018, but the proportion strongly agreeing rose from 11 per cent to 17 per cent. In 2018, support for this statement increased with age: 51 per cent of those aged 65 years or over agreed, compared to 36 per cent of those aged 18-24 years. However, these oldest and youngest age groups were also most likely to say that they did not know how to answer this question. Protestants were more likely to agree (55%) than other groups (Catholic, 37%, no religion 44%).

People like us

Anti-immigrant attitudes often harden around the idea of different values. Three questions interrogated perceived difference and its impact, using ideas of ‘benefit tourism’, media bias, and cultural novelty. On all three questions there are signs of strongly improving attitudes to migrant workers across the last decade – see **Figure 3**.

Fewer people agree with the idea that “Migrant workers come to Northern Ireland just to get social security

Figure 3: Perceptions of migrant workers (% agreeing/strongly agreeing)



benefits” than a decade ago (from 31% down to 21%). In 2018, Protestants were more likely to agree (27%) than Catholic respondents (17%). However, the largest change was among those with no religion (down from 34% in 2008 to 19% in 2018).

Nearly two-thirds of people (63%) now believe that “People’s perceptions of migrant workers are tainted by the media”, which reflects a small rise since 2008 (58%). Catholics and Protestants are more likely to agree than a decade ago, while people of no religion are less likely than before.

There is very high support for the idea that “Migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and cultures”. Over the decade, support for this statement grew from 66 per cent to 81 per cent overall, with those strongly agreeing rising from 10 per cent to 31 per cent. Overall agreement in 2018 was 87 per cent amongst Catholics, 79 per cent amongst Protestants and 67 per cent amongst people with no religion.

Conclusion

Given the recent release of post-Brexit immigration plans by the UK government, it is timely and important to consider the level of public acceptance and recognition of the role of migrant workers in Northern Ireland. There has been a marked decrease in negative attitudes towards migrant workers. For example, in 2008 31 per cent of NILT respondents believed that migrant workers came to

Northern Ireland just to get social security benefits, but by 2018, that had dropped to 21 per cent. On health, housing and education, respondents are less negative than a decade ago, and notably less negative than before 2016. The impact of migrant workers to the economy and to the cultural life of Northern Ireland are also both viewed much more positively since 2016. It is likely that debates about the impact of Brexit have contributed significantly to this shift. There are few other factors which are likely to have produced such an effect.

The 2018 statistics demonstrate some polarisation and a small number displaying extreme anti-immigrant sentiment, even in the context of improving attitudes across the decade. This reflects the polarisation of opinion which is captured in surveys across Europe.

Of note is the strong growth in positive sentiment towards migrant workers amongst Protestant respondents. Protestants were still most likely to agree with statements about the negative impact of migrants on housing, health and education, and least likely to agree about the positive benefits of immigration. However, the level of change demonstrated in this group since 2016, and more generally since 2008, is remarkable.

Key points

- In 2018, 54% of people taking part in NILT thought that the levels of immigration to Northern Ireland should not change.
- In 2018, 72% of NILT respondents felt that migrant workers are good for Northern Ireland's economy, and 73% thought that migrant workers take up jobs that local workers don't want.
- The majority of respondents (93%) think that it is good for Northern Ireland that migrant workers come to work as doctors and nurses when there is a shortage of medical staff.
- 22% of NILT respondents in 2018 felt that migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland and 21% think migrant workers come here to get social security benefits.
- 63% of NILT respondents believe that people's perceptions of migrant workers are tainted by the media.
- Between 2008 and 2018, there was a fall in the proportion of NILT respondents thinking that the number of migrant workers puts a strain on the NHS, housing and schools.
- In 2018, 81% of NILT respondents believed that migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and cultures

References

BBC (2018) *NI sees 26% drop in EU workers since Brexit vote*, 28 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-44642297>

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

Department for the Economy (2018) *An analysis of migrant workers from the Northern Ireland Census*, Belfast: Department for the Economy

Heath, A. and Richards, L. (2019) *How do Europeans differ in their attitudes to immigration?: Findings from the European Social Survey 2002/03 – 2016/17*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 222, Paris: OECD Publishing

Krausova, A. and Vargas-Silva, C. (2014) *Northern Ireland: Census Profile*, Migration Observatory briefing, Oxford: University of Oxford

Michael, L. (2017), *Racism and intolerance towards minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland*, ARK Research Update 112

Dr Lucy Michael is a Research and Training Consultant in the areas of integration and equality. www.lucymichael.ie

The questions on migrant workers were funded by The Executive Office.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Jordanstown Campus, Ulster University
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB

Tel: 028 9036 6339
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk