



Research Update

Attitudes on Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Northern Ireland

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On Census Day 2021, Northern Ireland's (NI) population stood at just over 1.9 million, with nearly 125,000 people (around 6.5%) born outside the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland (NISRA, 2022). Mid-year statistics from June 2024 show that net migration was the main driver of a 7,500 increase in the population of NI during the previous year. In order to understand these flows, it is important to look at who is arriving into NI and who is leaving. Between June 2023 and June 2024, 11,400 people moved to Northern Ireland

from elsewhere in the UK, while 11,600 left for other parts of the UK. Over the same period, 10,900 people left NI for destinations outside the UK, compared to 16,900 who arrived. This latter group includes people seeking asylum who have not yet been granted refugee status (NISRA, 2025). The Law Centre NI estimated in September 2025 that around 2,500 people were receiving asylum support (Law Centre NI, 2025), a figure that represents just under 2 per cent of all people living in NI who were born outside the UK and Ireland.

Census data also show that the number of people born in NI who come from minority ethnic backgrounds has increased over the past decade (See Table 1). While the population remains predominantly White, the 2021 Census figures indicate clear growth in the number of people born in NI from Irish Traveller, Chinese, Indian, Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic backgrounds since 2011. This increased ethnic diversity reflects a pattern of migration that is followed by settlement and family formation over time which impact beyond first generation arrivals.

Table 1: Ethnic Groups of people born in Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2022)

	White	Irish Traveller	Chinese	Indian	Black	Mixed	Other ethnicities
2011	1,598,843	1,027	1,723	1,161	528	3,656	1,915
2021	1,626,337	1,946	2,378	1,862	1,870	8,554	3,329
% change	1.7	89.5	38.0	60.4	254.2	134.0	73.8

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey has tracked public perceptions of immigration and diversity for over two decades. The findings offer a nuanced lens through which to understand how NI has responded to these issues. This Research Update draws on the most recent results from the 2024 survey to take stock of current attitudes towards minority ethnic communities and broader views on diversity.

A Welcoming Place?

The NILT survey has consistently explored perceptions of racial prejudice by asking respondents whether NI is more prejudiced now compared to five years ago. This question has appeared annually since 2005, allowing trends to be tracked over two decades. The most pessimistic outlook was recorded in the early years: in 2005, around seven out

of ten of respondents (68%) believed prejudice had increased. Since then, the proportion has generally declined, though with notable fluctuations. For example, the figure fell to 35 per cent in 2013 before rising again substantially to 52 per cent in 2014.

Table 2: Do you think there is generally more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland now than there was 5 years ago, less, or about the same amount? (NILT, 2020-4)

	%				
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
More now	26	27	24	31	56
Less now	27	24	30	24	13
About the same	38	39	36	35	23
I don't know	9	10	10	9	7

Between 2020 and 2023, NILT recorded the lowest proportion of respondents who felt NI had become more racially prejudiced compared to five years earlier (Table 2). This trend may reflect the dominant influence of the Covid-19 pandemic as a core public concern, which often pushed other social issues to the margins during that period. However, the 2024 figure marks a notable shift, as 56 per cent of respondents believed NI is more racially prejudiced. This marked a 25 percentage point increase from the previous year.

This recent rise likely reflects heightened racial tensions, particularly during the summer months. Persistent false narratives about immigration and the allocation of public resources during the cost-of-living crisis have consistently framed migrants as scapegoats. For example, in the summer of 2023, a series of racist arson attacks on minority-owned businesses and homes prompted several anti-racism rallies in Belfast. The violence and the subsequent anti-racism marches,

organised by local communities, were reported widely across local and national media (BBC, 2023). Given the level of coverage, these events were likely still present in public consciousness when the 2024 NILT survey took place a few months later.

Media Influence

As noted above, immigration and questions of cultural diversity have become increasingly prominent in public discourse, often intertwined with global events. The mass media, and social media in particular, constitute a significant component of public discourse on immigration in NI. They frequently serve as a primary arena for debate and opinion exchange, including the false narratives highlighted above. Such a role was pertinent during global debates relating to immigration and race such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of populism in many Western democracies, and the Russia-Ukraine war. A core question, therefore,

is whether or not narratives circulating through these channels, especially on social media platforms, have contributed to shaping local perceptions of immigration and immigrants.

In the 2024 NILT survey a series of questions asked about the influence of the media on the debate around immigration and cultural diversity. In particular, respondents were asked how far they think the media shapes perceptions of migrant workers and asylum seekers. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that the media has a major influence in generating negative stereotypes for both groups. Table 3 shows that approximately seven out of ten respondents 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that people's perceptions of migrant workers are tainted by the media. Furthermore, a similar proportion thought that people's perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers are negatively affected by the media.

Table 3: Influence of the media on perceptions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (NILT, 2024)

	%	
	People's perceptions of migrant workers are tainted by the media	People's perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers are negatively affected by the media
Strongly agree	34	27
Agree	37	42
Neither agree nor disagree	18	17
Disagree	7	7
Strongly disagree	2	2
I don't know	2	4

Recent events underscore these perceptions. Following the murder of three young girls in Southport in July 2024, riots erupted across the UK, fuelled by false claims about the assailant's identity. More locally, on 3 August 2024, Belfast experienced serious unrest as anti-immigration protesters attacked and set fire to businesses owned by foreign nationals. Social media played a central role in mobilising and amplifying these events.

In summer 2025, riots broke out in Ballymena following the arrest of two Romanian teenagers on suspicion of sexual assault. The violence escalated quickly, with attacks on the Police and damage to property. A further stark example was when an effigy of refugees on a small boat appeared on a loyalist bonfire bearing the slogan 'Stop the Boats'. These incidents highlight how, for some sections of the population, migrants have increasingly been framed as an 'outsider', 'deviant' and 'other'. The mass media, and social media in particular, have been ever-present in this context, serving as prominent arenas where narratives circulate and gain visibility. It is within this broader climate that data from the 2024 NILT survey should be understood. While the data clearly show strong perceptions of media influence on attitudes toward immigration, future waves of the survey may well reflect the severe impact of more recent events from 2024 and 2025. Tracking these shifts will be critical for policy and community engagement.

False narratives have also circulated about asylum seeker housing. In NI, as in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, asylum seekers are often housed in repurposed hotel buildings adapted for temporary use rather than hospitality. Yet such arrangements have frequently been misrepresented, again often on social media, as offering luxury, when in reality facilities are basic and designed only to meet essential needs. What is clear is that the NILT data have indicated that most respondents felt that the mass media negatively portray the issue of immigration.

What remains unclear is which forms of media are most responsible for generating negative opinion, as the survey questions do not distinguish between public service broadcasters, private channels, newspapers, blogs, websites, or social media. However, one NILT question highlighted a broader concern which is the relative absence of minority ethnic voices in public debate. A majority of respondents (63%) felt that minority ethnic people appeared either a little (32%) or hardly at all (31%) as commentators on issues directly affecting them. Only 12 per cent of respondents thought that minority ethnic people appeared a lot, whilst one quarter (25%) did not know. Responses to this question have shown very little fluctuation over the past five years, pointing to a wider issue of minimal representation of minority ethnic communities within important media debates that directly concern them.

Cultural Contact

As a society often classified as 'deeply divided', one of the core challenges of the NI peace process has been the need to increase cultural contact and understanding between people of all cultural backgrounds. While Good Relations agendas have moved beyond the traditional binary of Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic/Republican/Nationalist (CRN) identities that were so prominent in the 1990s and early 2000s, their focus now includes promoting positive relationships among all individuals and cultural groups in the region (McDermott, 2024). The transition to a more plural society has, however, not been without its challenges. When asked whether they personally know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities living in NI, only six per cent of respondents strongly agreed, with a further 26 per cent agreeing. In contrast, 65 per cent were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, indicating a significant gap in cultural awareness.

However, when responses to this question are broken down by age, more optimistic patterns emerge. Those aged 18–24 years were notably more confident than other age groups in their knowledge of other cultures and identities in the region. Almost half of this group either strongly agreed (18%) or agreed (30%) with the statement. In particular, the proportion selecting strongly agree was noticeably higher than for all other age categories.

Table 4: I personally know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland (NILT, 2024)

	%						
	All	18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65+ years
Strongly Agree	6	18	6	7	5	7	2
Agree	26	30	25	30	23	24	25
Neither agree nor Disagree	24	22	21	23	22	28	24
Disagree	36	27	42	34	38	33	38
Strongly disagree	5	1	4	4	8	6	8
I don't Know	4	4	3	2	4	4	4

Younger respondents, therefore, appear most influenced by living in a more diverse society, which might suggest that a broader pluralistic Good Relations approach in schools, youth organisations and at the community level more generally may be having a positive impact for cross cultural relationships among these groups. The data may also reflect a broader feature of socialisation within the generally more diverse society in which they have grown up. This is reflected in the level of diversity among respondents' social circle.

Respondents were asked if any of their friends, that is, people they mix with socially, came from a one or more of a range of backgrounds (Black-African-Caribbean, Chinese, South Asian, Irish Traveller, Portuguese, Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian, other Eastern European, or Filipino). Six out of ten respondents (61%) indicated that they had friends from at least one of these backgrounds. Table 5 shows that there are clear generational differences in social contact with minority ethnic communities. Younger respondents (18–24 years) were the most likely to report friendships with people from diverse

backgrounds (84%), while this figure falls to just over half among those aged 45 years and older. Those aged 25–44 years sat between these extremes, with just under two-thirds reporting diverse friendships. These findings suggest that opportunities for intercultural contact are unevenly distributed across age cohorts, with younger generations experiencing greater exposure to diversity in their everyday social networks. This may be a consideration in the future development of Good Relations projects which might place additional emphasis on people aged 45 and above.

Table 5: Do any of your friends - that is, people you mix with socially - come from one or more of the following backgrounds: (Black- African-Caribbean, Chinese, South Asian, Irish Traveller, Portuguese, Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Eastern European, Filipino)? (NILT, 2024)

	%						
	All	18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65+ years
Friends from at least one of these backgrounds	61	84	65	62	53	58	52
None of these backgrounds	39	16	35	38	47	42	48

The pattern of greater social contact among younger respondents is also reflected in questions around potential friendship with people from different backgrounds. Table 6 presents the willingness of respondents to accept someone from Traveller, Eastern European, Muslim or other minority

ethnic groups as a close friend. As in previous years, acceptance was lowest in relation to Travellers, followed by Muslims (Devine, 2018). Respondents in the 18–24 cohort were the most accepting of all age groups, except in relation to people from Eastern Europe.

Table 6: Would you accept someone from these groups as a close friend? (NILT, 2024)

	% saying 'yes'						
	All	18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65+ years
Traveller	68	87	72	68	64	65	57
Eastern European	89	85	95	92	85	93	89
Muslim	85	95	86	85	85	85	80
Other ethnic groups	89	97	91	89	90	89	85

A similar pattern also appears in the question asking whether respondents would accept someone from specific groups into their family by way of marriage (See Table 7). Acceptance remained high across all age groups, although slightly lower than acceptance

of friendships. The pattern of acceptance was similar to that evident in Table 6, with respondents least likely to accept a Traveller as a relative via marriage. In addition, those aged 18 to 24 were the age group most likely to accept this type of relationship with Travellers, Muslims

or other minority ethnic groups. These results suggest that the greater cultural contact experienced by younger people in their own social networks may be associated with more positive attitudes towards both friendships and acceptance into a family through marriage.

Table 7: Would you accept someone from these groups as a relative by way of marriage to a close member of your family? (NILT, 2024)

	% saying 'yes'						
	All	18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65+ years
Traveller	66	82	65	64	66	63	63
Eastern European	87	83	91	85	86	90	90
Muslim	77	89	80	72	79	78	71
Other ethnic groups	87	94	89	85	87	87	83

Conclusion

The Executive Legislation Programme for the 2025-26 session of the NI Assembly includes the Race Equality Bill, the purpose of which is to ensure that racial equality legislation fully reflects and responds to the needs of minority ethnic communities. In addition, it aims to offer protection to these communities from racism and discrimination in the environments in which they live and work. However, the data from the 2024 NILT survey underscores the continuing challenges NI faces. Rising perceptions

of racial prejudice, and the exacerbation of the issue in the arena of mass, including social, media, point to a climate in which migrants are often framed as outsiders. At the same time, the survey highlights the limited visibility of minority ethnic voices in public debate, reinforcing patterns of exclusion.

The data also reveal important generational differences. Younger respondents reported greater cultural awareness and more diverse social

networks, suggesting that the lived experience of diversity may be reshaping attitudes among younger cohorts. Taken together, these findings highlight the persistence of prejudice amidst the potential for change. Addressing these issues will require not only countering harmful narratives but also expanding opportunities for intercultural contact and ensuring minority ethnic communities are heard in public discourse.

Key Points:

- There were clearly rising concerns about prejudice. In 2024, 56% of respondents felt NI had become more racially prejudiced, a sharp increase from previous years.
- The media is widely seen as amplifying negative stereotypes of migrants and asylum seekers, with 71% agreeing it shapes perceptions of migrant workers.
- Minority ethnic voices are perceived to be absent as commentators in important media debates on issues directly affecting them.
- Younger respondents are far more likely to report friendships with people from minority ethnic backgrounds and to demonstrate greater cultural awareness.
- The 2024 NILT suggests that those aged 18–24 hold the most accepting attitudes towards people from minority ethnic groups in their own friendship and family networks.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University 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. The questions on immigration and diversity were funded by The Executive Office.



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