



British Attitudes to Immigration in the 21st Century

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I. Executive Summary

Since 1999, concern about immigration in Britain has reached levels never seen before in the history of public opinion research, and surveys show strong support for tougher immigration laws. Higher immigration has corresponded with increased concern, and media coverage of asylum in particular has caused people to report immigration as a national problem even if not in their area. But opinions vary: younger, better-educated people and those who tend to live in areas with a longer history of immigration are more tolerant than older, less-educated people in more settled communities with low levels of immigration. In general, the British support multiculturalism but want newcomers to learn English and earn citizenship, and are concerned about the rate of change in some communities. Thus far, the economic downturn has not caused concern about immigration to increase.

II. Introduction

Public concerns about immigration into the United Kingdom have reached unprecedented levels in the last decade. Despite successive waves of migrants from former colonies since the 1950s, public concern about immigration did not rise significantly and consistently¹ until the late 1990s, when concern reached a sustained high in the 2003-2008 period. Anxiety peaked in 2007 due to unanticipated volumes of European Union (EU) accession-country workers arriving in Britain, coverage of foreign prisoners being released rather than deported, and a public debate about setting limits on numbers. It only began to recede in fall 2008 with evidence that some economic migrants were returning home and, more importantly, because economic concerns trumped all other worries.

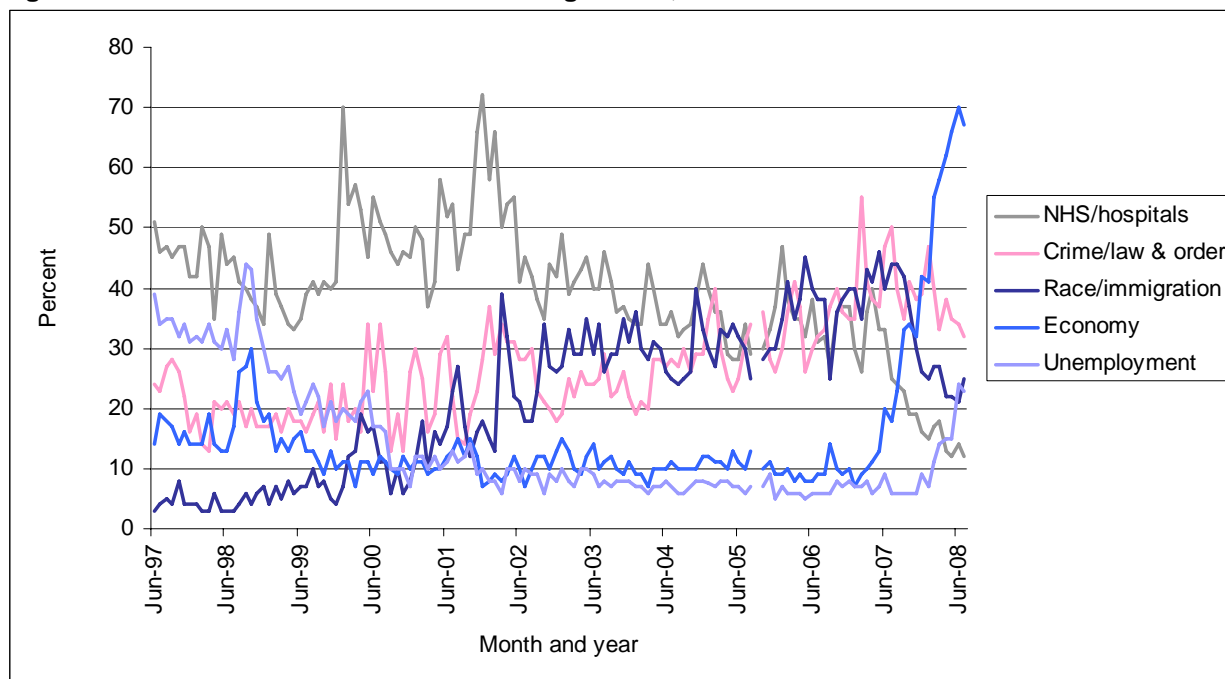
III. Who Is Most Concerned about Immigration?

The public mood regarding the “main issues facing Britain today” has completely changed since the late 1990s (see Figure 1). Concern about public services like the Health Service and education gradually waned (partly in response to huge government investment and rising user satisfaction), and replacing them were worries about crime, terrorism, and immigration.

Older white people are consistently more negative both about immigration and racial issues than other groups in society. More than four in five (84 percent) of those age 55 and older regard immigration as a large problem compared to 74 percent of the population as a whole, with concern lower among younger age groups, and the youngest less concerned. However, by 2008, a majority of those under 29 said they were concerned about immigration (see Table 1).

¹ Concern about immigration and race relations was generally well below 10 percent from the 1970s until 1999, with occasional flare ups over racial disturbances. After 1999 it began rising, hitting double digits in February 2000 and going as high as 40 percent in 2005 and 46 percent in 2007.

Figure 1. Public Concern about Issues Facing Britain, 1997 to 2008



Source: Ipsos MORI Issues Index, June 1997 to June 2008.

Table 1. Percent of People Who Agreed Britain Has Too Many Immigrants, 1999 and 2008

Age	1999 % agree	2008 % agree	Change in percentage points
15-29	44	67	+23
30-49	51	67	+16
50-64	64	71	+7
65+	69	78	+9
Social class			
Upper middle class (AB)	48	63	+15
Skilled working class (C1)	47	70	+23
Skilled working class (C2)	60	75	+15
Unskilled working class and those dependent on state pensions (DE)	65	74	+9

Source: Ipsos MORI.

Related to their older age profile (due to better longevity), women are more likely to regard immigration as an important issue (77 percent compared to 71 percent of men).²

² Ipsos MORI, 3rd wave of biannual tracking survey, January 2008, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/mpm080123.pdf>.

In terms of social class, the skilled working class³ are most negative. For example, 88 percent of this group, compared to 63 percent of the upper middle class⁴, wants to see immigration stopped altogether or seriously limited.

We found similar results in our 2006 analysis of support for the far-right British National Party (BNP), which supports stopping all immigration and incentivizing immigrants to return home. The skilled working class, who make up 21 percent of the population, are most likely to say they would support BNP (32 percent of BNP voters are skilled working class). Whereas the upper middle class forms 24 percent of the British population, they represent only 11 percent of BNP supporters. The unskilled working class and those living entirely on state pensions are also underrepresented among BNP supporters. In terms of age, 11 percent of BNP supporters are 18 to 24, (15 percent of the population) while 39 percent are 35 to 54 (34 percent in the overall population).⁵

IV. Has the Downturn Exacerbated Public Concern?

It is worth reflecting that despite some recent industrial unrest over “British jobs for British workers,” there has been no upsurge in concern about immigration as recession grips the United Kingdom.⁶ This might seem counterintuitive as unemployment rises, but the evidence seems to show that many economic migrants from European Union accession countries,⁷ for example Poland, are now returning home. Many were either on short-term contracts and more easily disposed of by employers, or they found jobs now more easily available elsewhere in Europe or even in their home country. By historic standards, concern about unemployment — with 24 percent of the British public citing it as a key issue in February 2009 — is still well below the historic levels of the 1970s and 1980s, when it was periodically in excess of 80 percent and averaged 38 percent between 1974 and 1995. Even when concern about unemployment peaked during this period, worries about immigration came nowhere near the peak attained in 2007.

In other words, British concern about immigration is not directly linked to economic competition over jobs but rather more to other factors, such as being “swamped” by foreigners, perceived unfair access to public housing and other state services, and concern about weakening of community.

³ Skilled working class = C2s in the classification of social grades in the United Kingdom. These are households where the main breadwinner does a manual job that requires an apprenticeship or extensive training – for example, a carpenter, a plumber, a car mechanic, or a skilled lathe operator.

⁴ Upper middle class= ABs, which include the elite of society and the most senior professionals, such as doctors, accountants, and lawyers, as well as senior business executives and those with supervisory responsibilities.

⁵ Bobby Duffy, “The BNP in Britain,” in *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, eds. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2009).

⁶ The unrest in late January 2009 centered on a refinery in northern England owned by France-based Total, which hired an Italian subcontractor for a building contract. The subcontractor then decided to bring in workers from Italy and Portugal, a move allowed under EU labor laws. The refinery strike was resolved when the company and unions agreed to 102 new jobs for Britons in addition to those already granted to the subcontractor.

⁷ The eight Eastern European countries that joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, received immediate access to the UK labor market. These countries include the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

V. More Immigrants, Increasing Concern

Other attitude-survey evidence, including the British Social Attitude survey and other research, match the longer term trend of rising levels of immigration concern shown in our own studies.⁸ Looking back over the last few decades, public concern about immigration has been low, with less than 10 percent citing it as key for most of the period. Furthermore, the occasional peaks tended to coincide with moments of social stress, typically inner-city race riots.

In contrast, in the 21st century, immigration regularly topped all other issues as the biggest problem facing the country. This change came about for two reasons: a real rise in the volume of people entering Britain, but also the media debate about immigration.

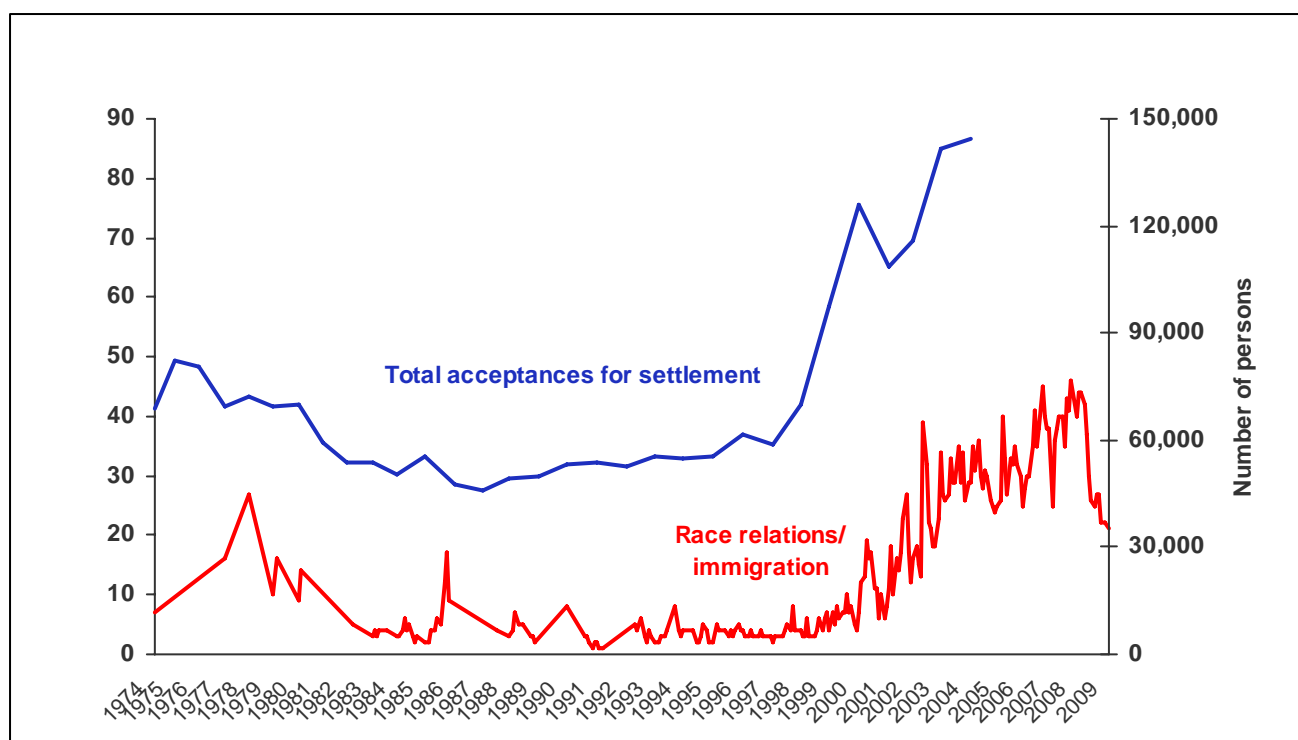
Figure 2 shows how levels of concern rose with the annual volume of legal immigration. This correlation marks a contrast with US evidence that is not necessarily counterintuitive.⁹ The United States was built on centuries of immigration so that the very story of the nation is one of different people coming together. Having different nationalities and ethnic groups living side by side is common, and its identity reflects this, as do the principles behind some of its institutions. In contrast, the United Kingdom experienced large immigration flows only after World War II; change happened very quickly, especially in certain British communities. Many British traditions and institutions date back centuries and assume common cultural and ethnic backgrounds (for example, the English annexation of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland into a “British identity” was taken for granted until the late 20th century). Moreover, as political scientist Robert Putnam has remarked, one of the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom (and other European societies) is that many American institutions and traditions that seem incongruous to Europeans — such as swearing allegiance to the flag — are precisely designed to bind diverse communities together. Similarly, he points out that whereas countries like France have determinedly ignored ethnic differences on the basis that all citizens belong are equal, North Americans are much more comfortable and habituated to the idea of different ethnic and cultural groups celebrating their diversity.¹⁰

⁸ For an overview, see Shamit Saggarr and Joanne Drean, *British public attitudes and ethnic minorities* (London: Cabinet Office, 2001), <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/british.pdf>.

⁹ See Roberto Suro, “America’s Views of Immigration: The Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys” (working paper, Transatlantic Council on Migration, Bellagio, Italy, May 6-8, 2009).

¹⁰ Robert D. Putnam, “Education, Diversity, Social Cohesion and ‘Social Capital’” (note for discussion, meeting of OECD education ministers, Dublin, March 18-19, 2004), <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/55/30671102.doc>.

Figure 2. Public Concern about Immigration, 1974 to 2009



Source: Ipsos MORI and the UK Office for National Statistics.

VI. Immigration through a Media Prism

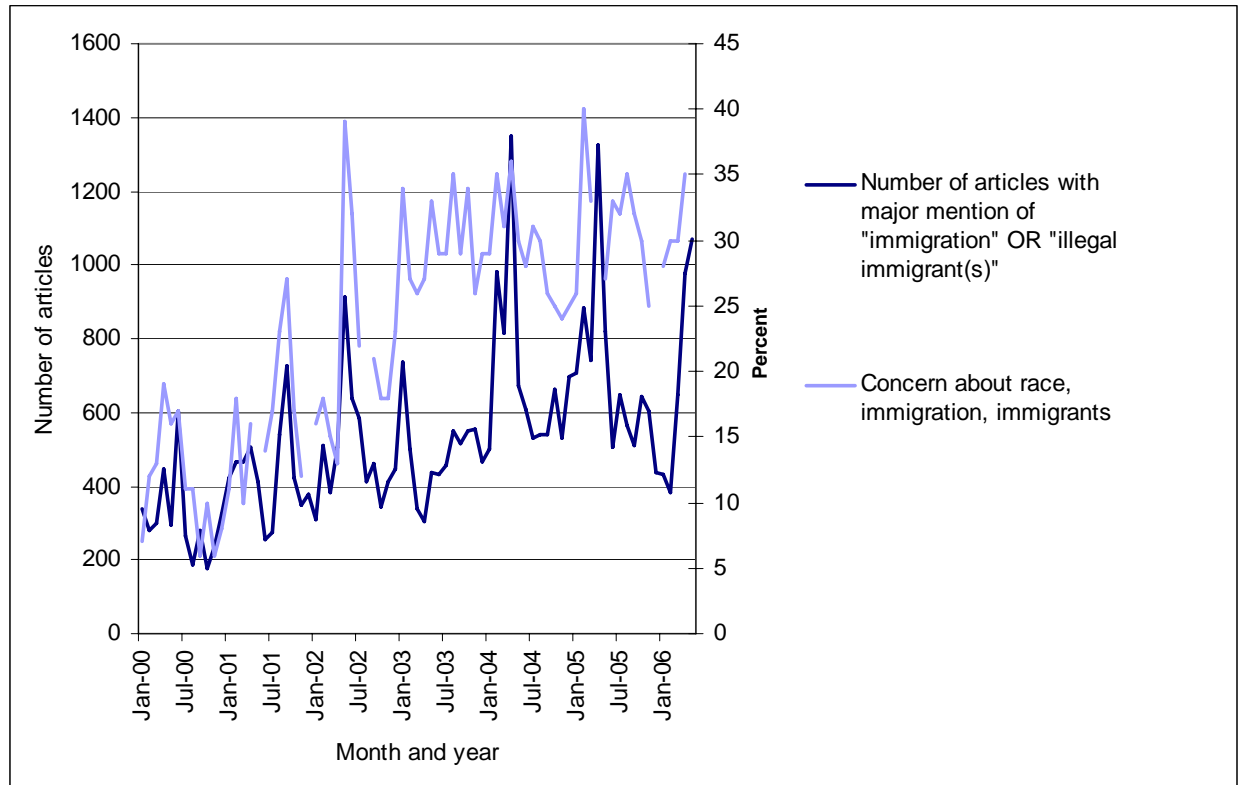
Many individuals have only encountered the rising volume of immigration through the media — at least before the recent wave of migration from the Eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004.

Ipsos MORI’s analysis suggests that individual peaks and troughs in concern do seem related to print newspaper coverage (and of course TV and radio news, not included in this analysis) (see Figure 3). For many regions in the United Kingdom, the most visible sign of increased immigration prior to 2004 was the heavy media coverage of asylum migration.¹¹ This was particularly heavy in tabloids like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, which have regularly run front-page news stories about “shocking” asylum and immigration figures.

¹¹ There is widespread confusion over the scale of immigration. For instance, while one in nine of the UK population was born abroad in 2009, a 2002 MORI survey, even before migration took off, showed that the public believed 23 percent of the population was foreign born (April 6 to May 2, 2002; 822 adults). See MORI Social Research Institute, *Britain Beyond Rhetoric: Delivering Equality and Social Justice* [Study for the Commission on Racial Equality] (London: MORI, 2002).

In Ipsos MORI's 2005 analysis, *You Are What You Read*, we found that in general, the concerns of those who do not read newspapers were very similar to those of the overall population. However, readers of the print media were more worried about immigration than nonreaders, as were particular readers of titles that have had a heavy negative focus on this issue. This does not mean that concern is caused by this coverage. It may just be that those with the strongest anti-immigration views are attracted to these titles, but the ebb and flow of concern relative to media coverage does suggest, if not prove, a causal link (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Media Coverage of Immigration and Public Concern, 2000 to 2006



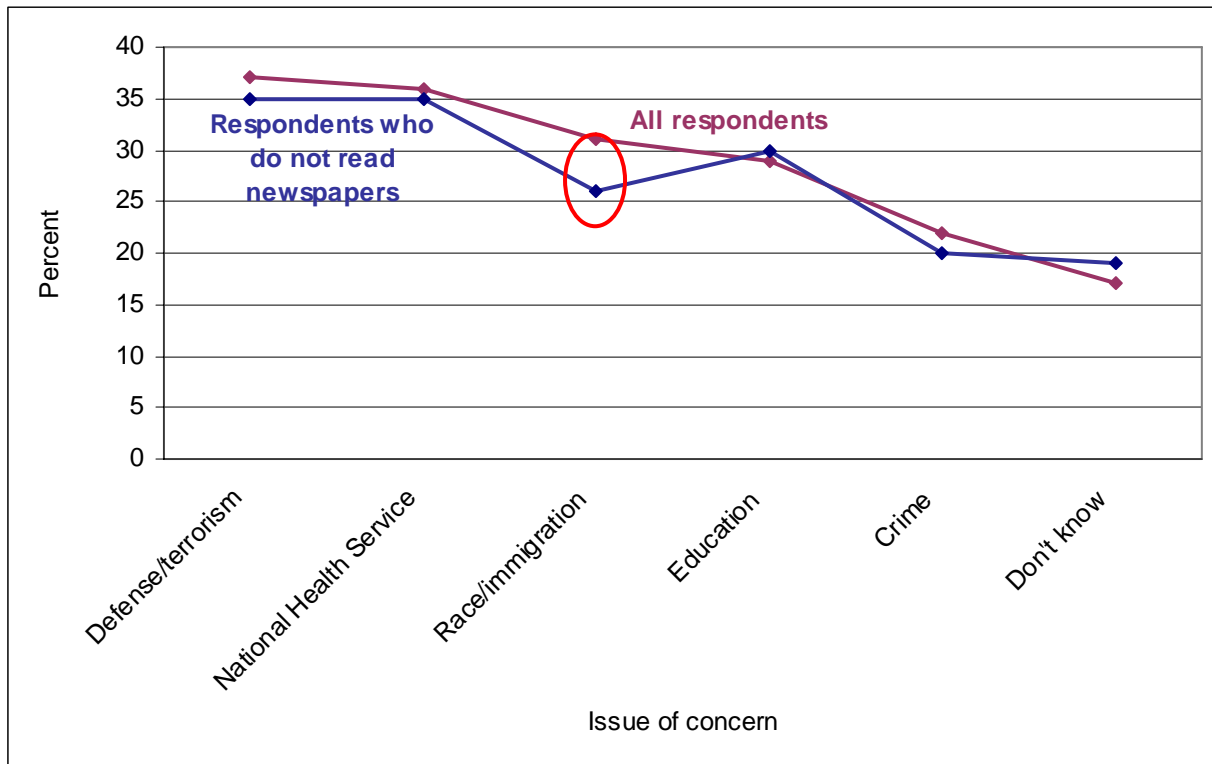
Source: Ipsos MORI.

Of course, the media did not fabricate a dramatic rise in immigration into Britain. As we have seen, public concern rose as migrant numbers increased. Nevertheless, the media focus on particular aspects of immigration has undoubtedly fueled this concern, especially among those living in areas with little or no actual migration.

In a similar fashion, crime became more and more prominent over this period as a national issue. Despite most people feeling safer in their own neighborhoods than they did a decade before, anxiety peaked in July 2007 with the coverage of the shooting and killing of the young schoolboy Rhys Jones in Liverpool. While his death indicated the dysfunctionality of some communities and young people in some British cities, the overall volume of crime has fallen since 1995. Even in London, most people feel safer in their own neighborhoods than in the past. But the manner in which the media reported on this event — front-page news splashes in most titles, as with many immigration stories — caused it to have a much greater impact, and it became a “signal” of what is wrong in Britain.

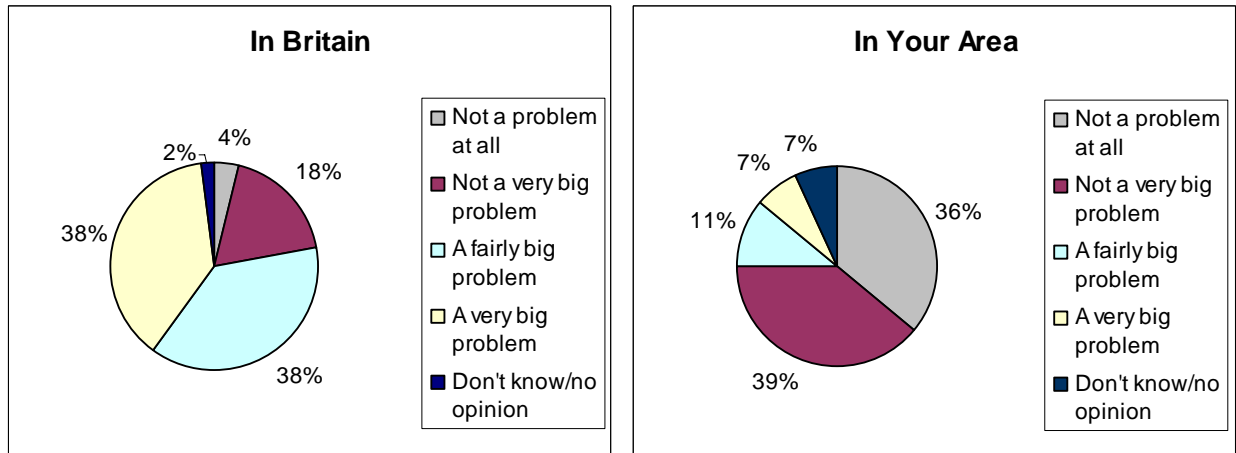
Further reinforcing the media’s key role in driving national concern about immigration is the fact that while 76 percent of the population sees immigration as a big national problem, only 18 percent see it as a problem locally (see Figure 5). In other words, people know that immigration is an issue in Britain but do not see it as one in their own areas. The mass media, and in particular the print media, therefore, are key in communicating the problems of immigration to the public, even though members of the media will point out they are only reporting the “real” numbers.

Figure 4. Responses to Various Issues by Media Exposure, 2004



Source: Bobby Duffy and Laura Rowden. *You are what you read? How newspaper readership is related to views* (London: Ipsos MORI, 2005.), <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/publications/mori-reveals-how-newspaper-readership-impacts-on-p1.ashx>.

Figure 5. Public Opinion on How Much of a Problem Immigration Is in Britain and in Respondents' Area, 2006

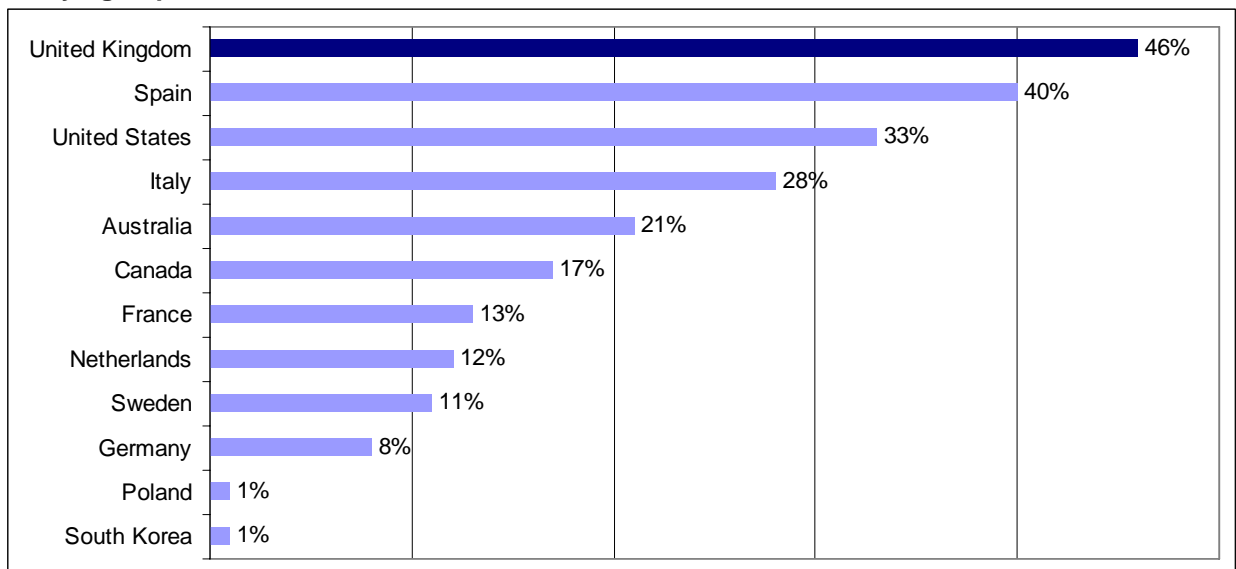


Source: Ipsos MORI.

VII. National, Regional, and Local Concerns

Compared to many other countries, concern about immigration is very high in the United Kingdom (see Figure 6).

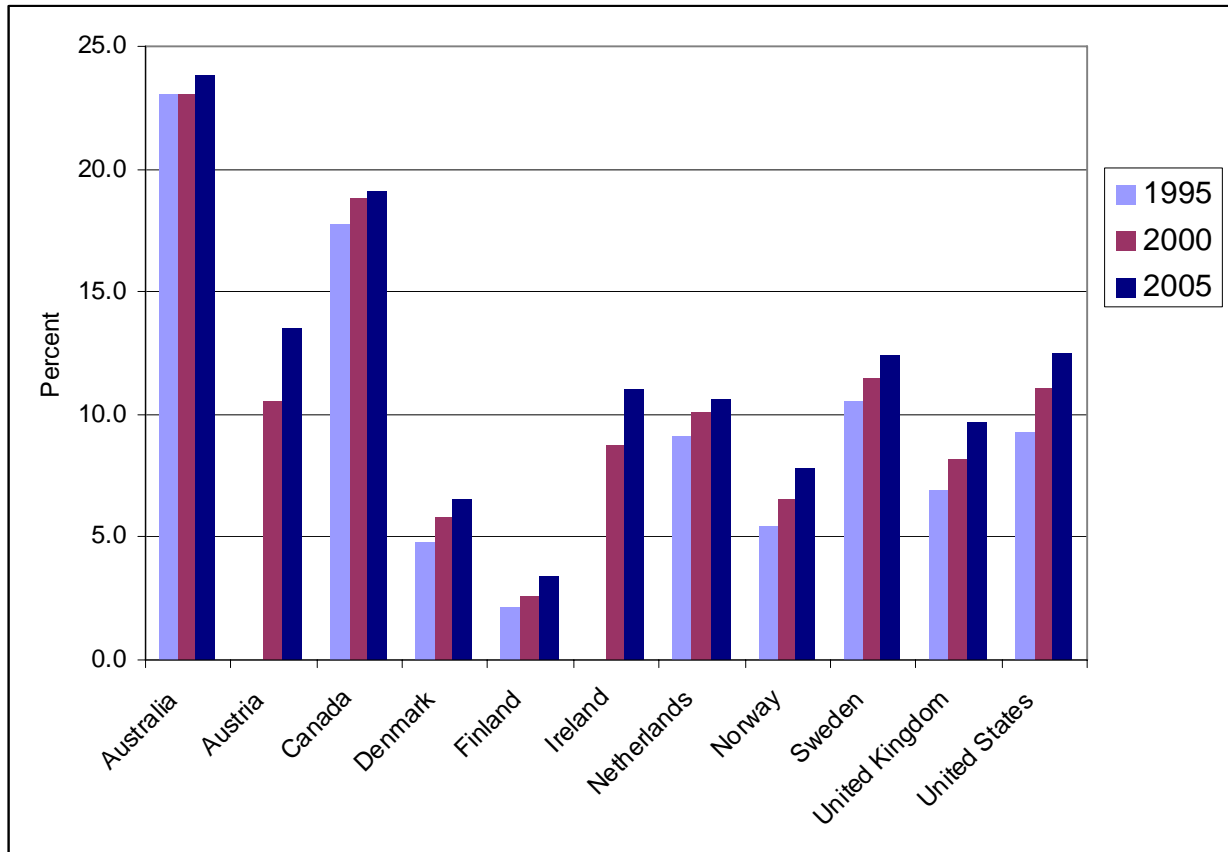
Figure 6. Percent of Respondents Who Chose Immigration Control as One of the Three Most Worrying Topics, Various Countries, 2006



Source: Ipsos MORI.

This level of anxiety belies the fact that foreign-born residents make up a smaller share of the population than in Western European countries like Sweden or Ireland (see Figure 7).

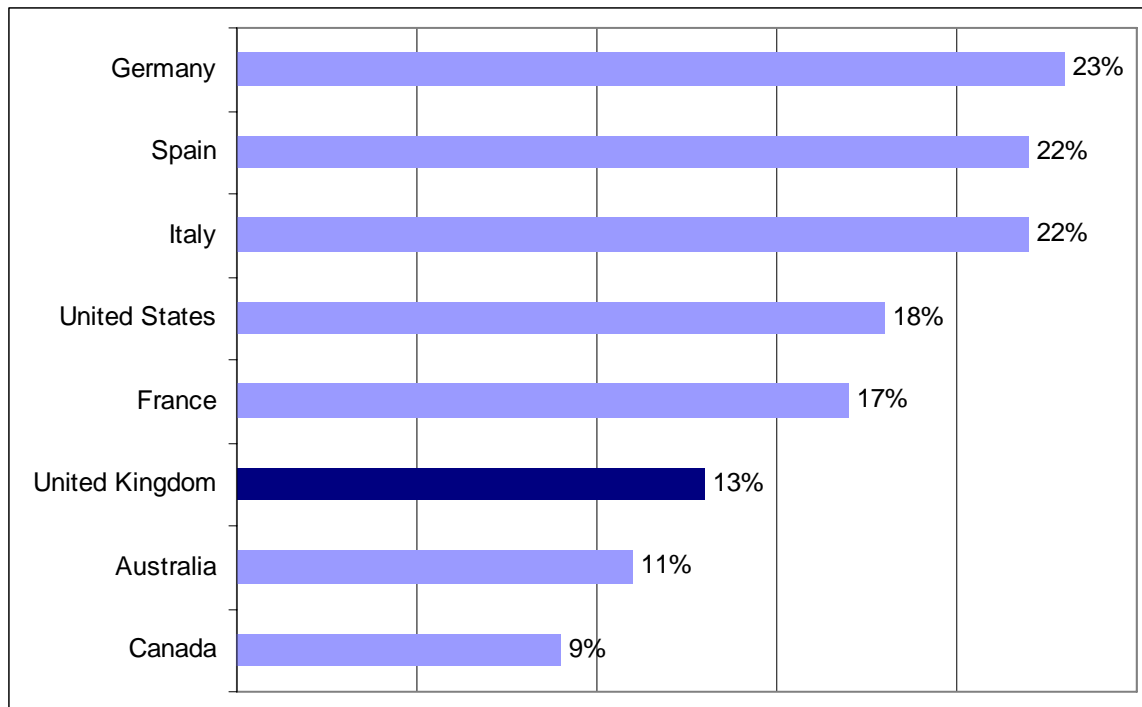
Figure 7. Foreign-Born Population as a Percentage of the Total Population in Select OECD Countries, 1995 to 2005



Source: MPI Data Hub, "Foreign-Born Population as a Percentage of the Total Population," <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/1.1.shtml>, citing Australian data from Government of Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics and refer to 1996, 2001, 2006; Canadian data from Statistics Canada and refer to 1996 and 2001; Norwegian data from Statistics Norway; US data from 1995 Current Population Survey, 2000 Census, and 2006 American Community Survey; and data from Table A.1.4 in SOPEMI (Système d'Observation Permanente des Migrations), 2006 and 2007, *Trends in International Migration* (Rome: OECD).

Similarly, when we look at whether people believe that immigration is causing problems in their immediate neighborhoods, fewer citizens are concerned in the United Kingdom than in many other European countries (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Percent Who Responded "More to Cause Problems" When Asked Whether RECENT Immigrants Have Done More to Improve Their Neighborhood, Create Problems for Their Neighborhood, or Haven't Had Much Effect Either Way, 2006



Source: Ipsos MORI.

Public concern about immigration is not spread uniformly across Britain. In 2004, concern was highest in the two regions that experienced the least immigration (the South West and North East). Yet white Londoners, who live in a city that is nearly 40 percent nonwhite and have experienced the highest levels of immigration in the country, were the least concerned of all (see Figure 9).

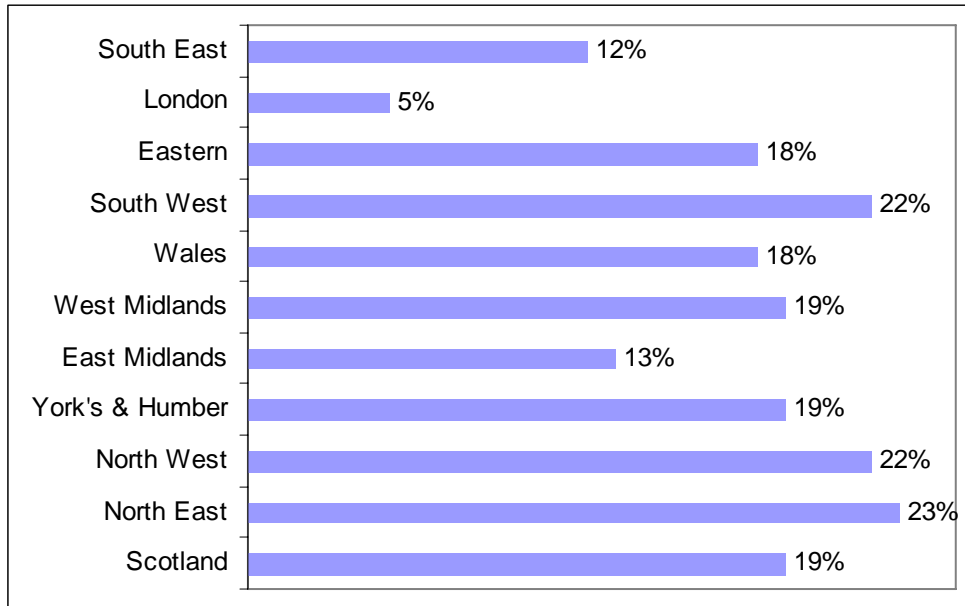
Why were people in these regions more worried? The *relative* amount of change and potential speed of change are likely to have been important factors. In contrast, Londoners may be less anxious because the city has been an immigrant destination for decades. Also, white Britons who enjoy the excitement of a diversity city choose to live in London. This arguably makes city residents more accustomed to immigration and immigrants. London, of course, is one of the world's most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in terms of the origin countries of people living here.

When we analyzed which local municipalities in Britain are becoming the most ethnically heterogeneous most rapidly (defined as how mixed an area is, not just how many people are nonwhite) one area stands out as becoming more heterogeneous and more quickly than all other local areas: Barking and Dagenham, a borough in East London. This is a traditionally white, working-class area, originally dominated by the Ford plant at Dagenham, a major employer. The area remained much whiter than most other parts of London for a long time.

Despite having fewer black and minority ethnic (BME) residents than many other largely white outer London boroughs, Barking changed from being almost entirely white to around 9 percent foreign born, which is close to the national UK average (yet much lower than the rest of London), in just a

few years. Barking and Dagenham voted for the British National Party in large numbers in the 2006 election, and their candidates won in *every* seat they contested. When considering public reaction to immigration in this borough, the speed of change and concentration of immigrants must be seen as key issues.

Figure 9. Percent Who Disagree That “It Is a Good Thing that Britain Is a Multiracial Society” by Region, 2004

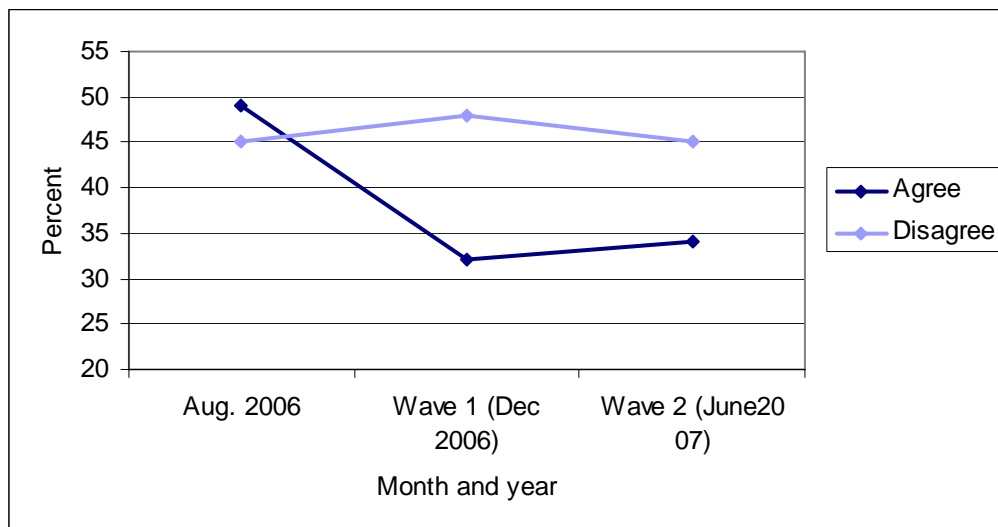


Source: Ipsos MORI, 2004.

While there is not widespread concern about immigration at a local level, especially in those communities that now have larger BME communities, rapid changes in the composition of local populations — for example, the sudden arrival of large numbers of new immigrants from very different cultures — can cause problems. For instance, the decision of large numbers of Somalis to move to Leicester from Amsterdam has put pressure on local school places.

Yet, the perceived and real impacts of immigration affect popular opinion. Overall, the British have very mixed views on whether immigration is “positive”: while one-third of the population believes it is good for the country, 45 percent disagree (see Figure 10).

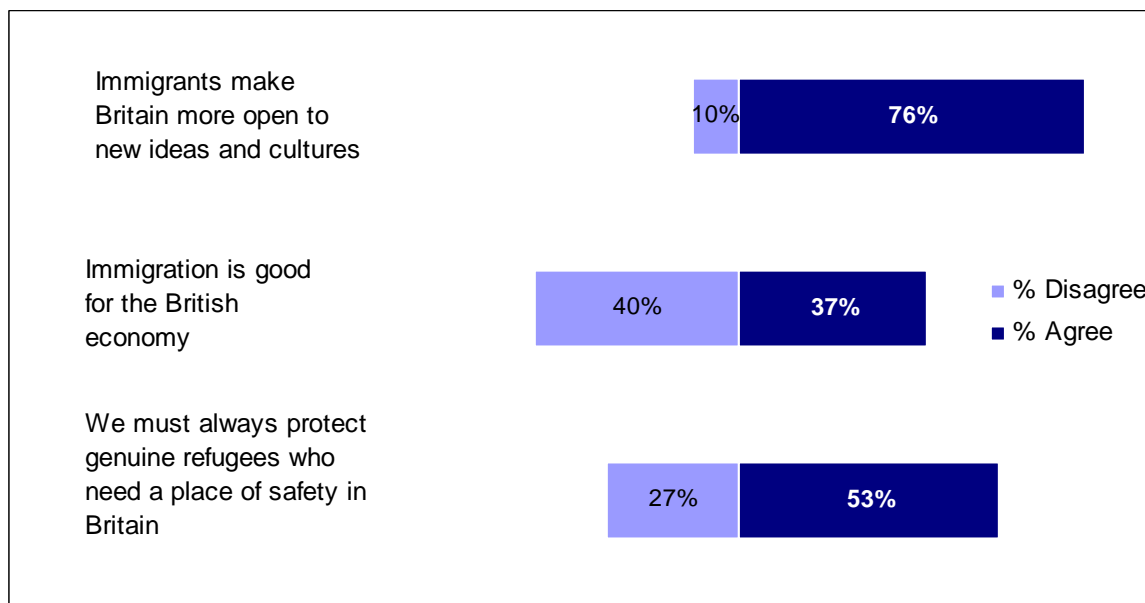
Figure 10. Respondents' Reactions to the Question "Immigration is Good for Britain," 2006



Source: Ipsos MORI.

On the positive side, the public agrees that genuine refugees need protection and that immigration makes the country more open to new cultures (see Figure 11).

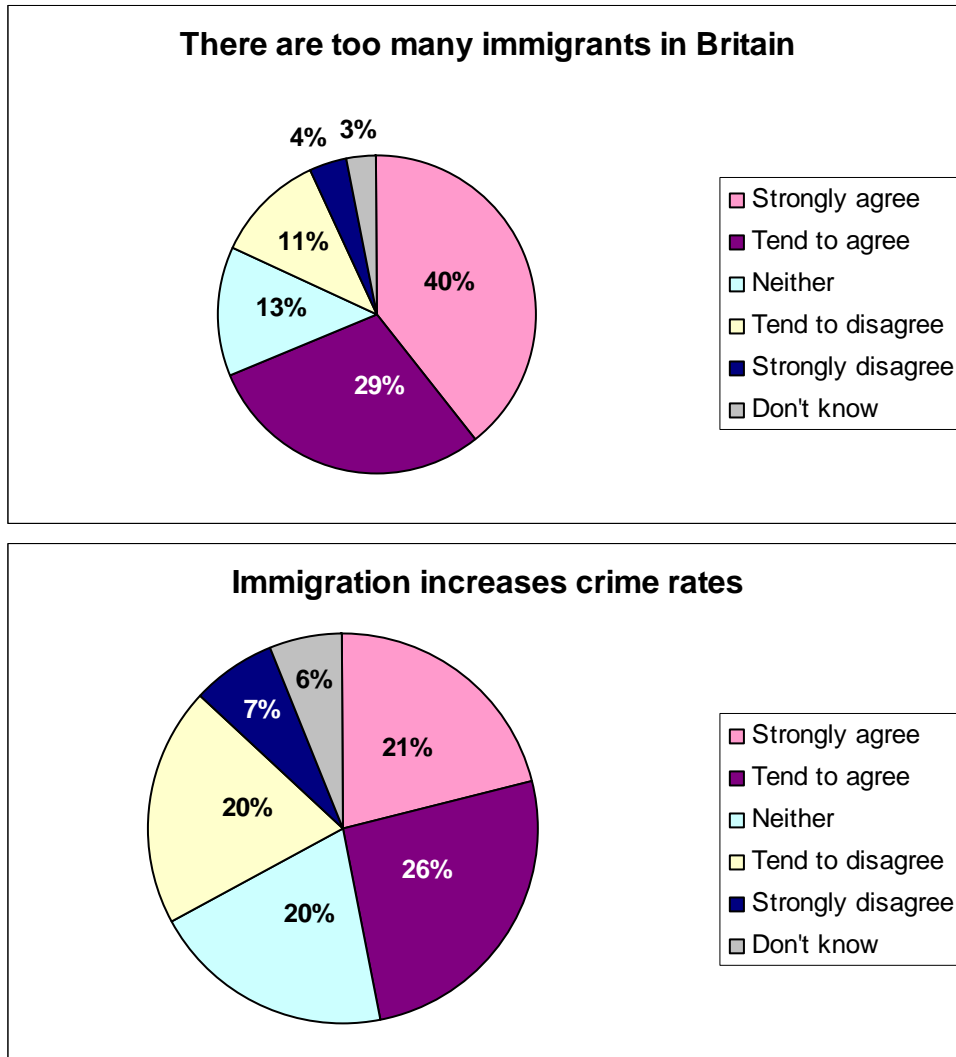
Figure 11. Respondents' Reactions to Statements about Immigrants, Immigration, and Refugees, 2007



Source: Ipsos MORI.

Nearly seven out of ten believe Britain already has too many immigrants (although it is worth noting that the majority of the population held this view even before immigrant numbers rose in the past decade). Almost half believe that increased immigration leads to higher crime rates (see Figure 12).

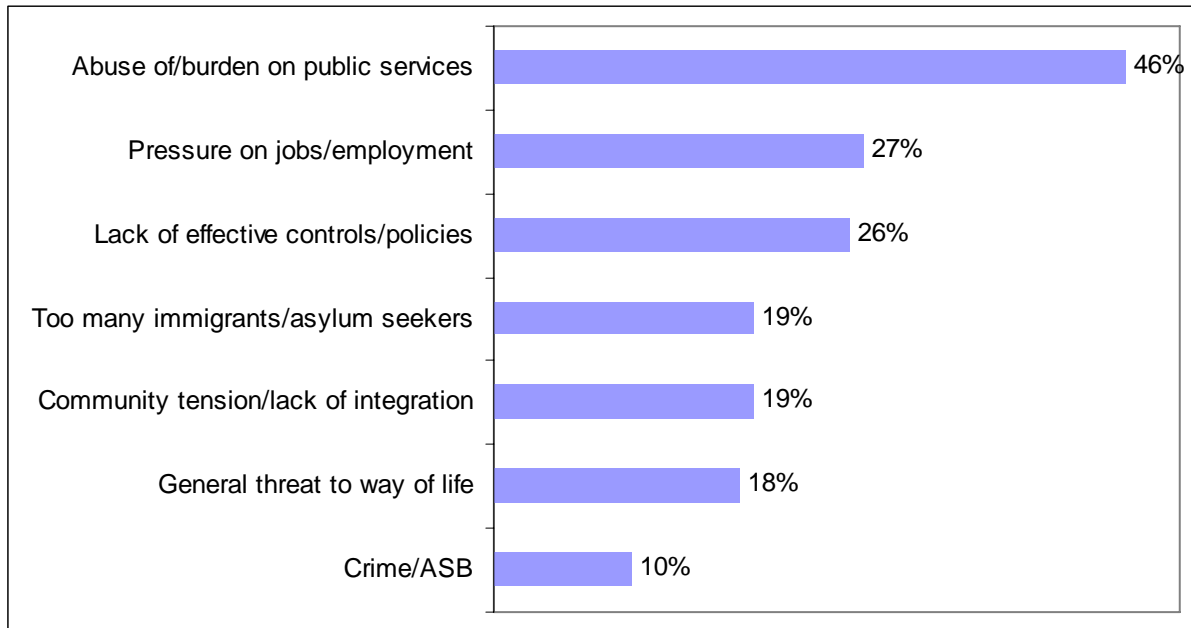
Figure 12. Respondents' Reactions to Questions about Immigrants and Crime, 2007



Source: Ipsos MORI.

A closer look shows that British citizens are less concerned about increased crime, however, and more anxious about pressures on public services and competition for jobs. They are also concerned (albeit less so) about potential community tensions, threats to the British way of life, and a lack of effective controls by the authorities, so that “anyone can come here” (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Concerns of Respondents Who Said Immigration Is a Very or Fairly Big Problem in Britain, 2007

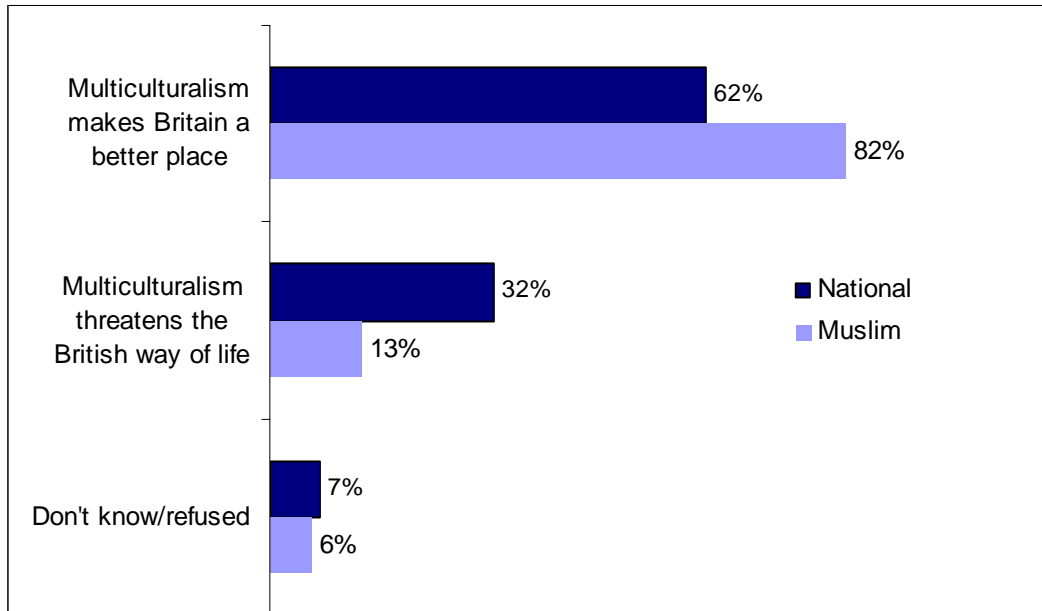


Source: Ipsos MORI.

VIII. Multiculturalism and the Muslim Community

An analysis of public opinion after the London bombings on July 7, 2005, underscores British support of multiculturalism. Ipsos MORI surveyed both the population as a whole and the Muslim community on July 19-20, 2005, looking at a wide range of issues. Interestingly, most people did not want to abandon “multiculturalism,” which can be seen as having allowed different communities to live entirely separate lives side by side. The majority (62 percent) of the public still felt it made Britain a better place to live – although a minority of 32 percent disagreed (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Public Opinion on Multiculturalism, National and Muslim Samples, 2005

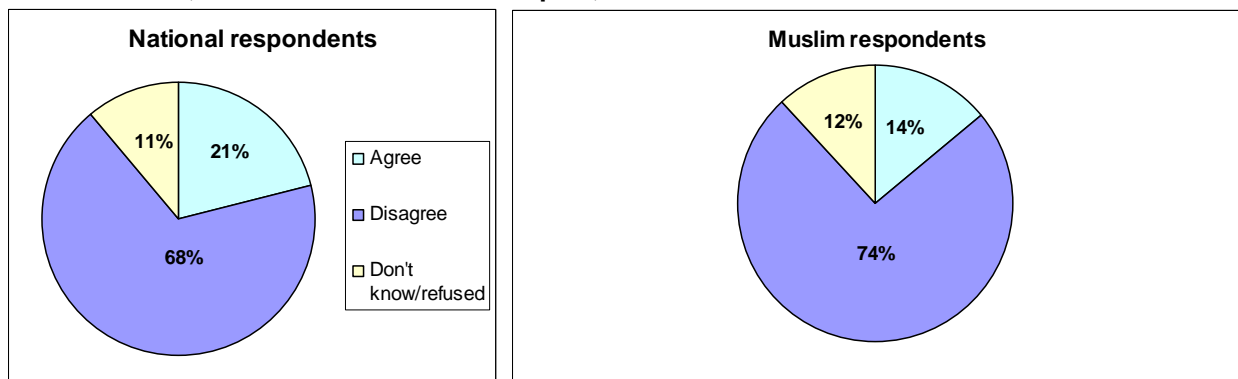


Note: This survey contrasts a nationally representative sample (of which circa 3 percent are Muslim), with a booster survey of 500 Muslims undertaken at the same time.

Source: BBC/MORI Multiculturalism Poll, August 2005.

Asked whether multiculturalism should be abandoned, there was a resounding “no” — only one in five Britons wanted to give up on the concept (see Figure 15). By both measures, though, Muslims in Britain viewed multiculturalism more favorably than the population overall.

Figure 15. Reactions to the Statement "Policy of Multiculturalism Has Been a Mistake and Should Be Abandoned," National and Muslim Samples, 2005



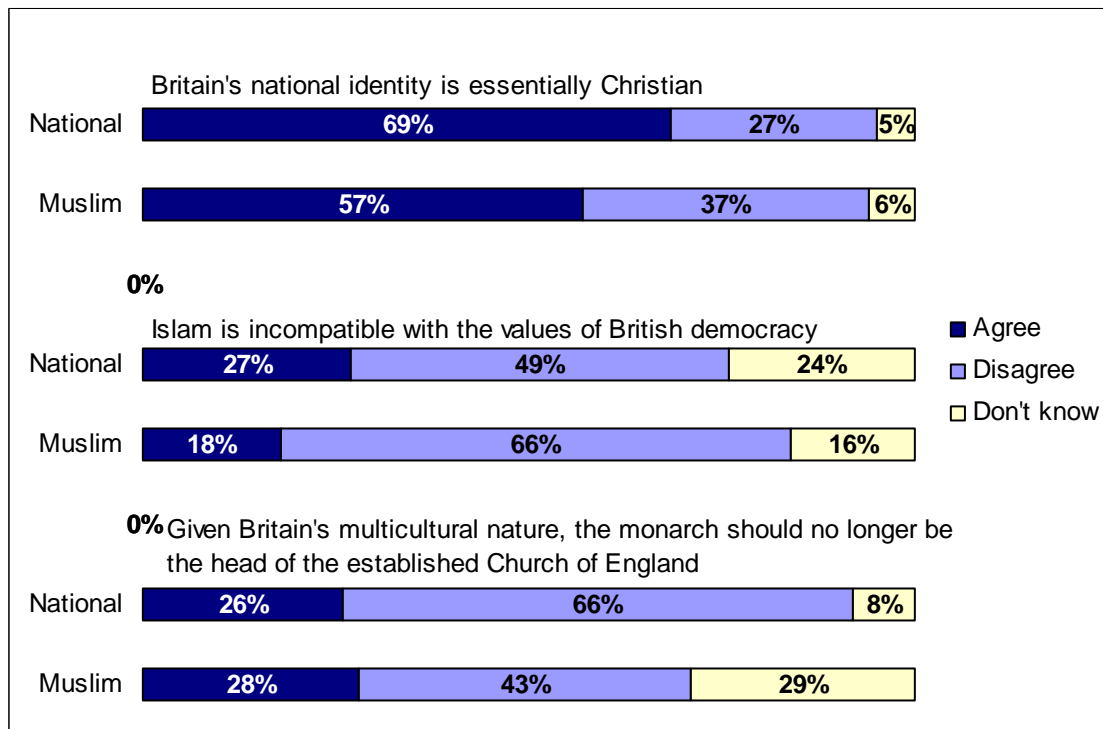
Note: This survey contrasts a nationally representative sample (of which circa 3 percent are Muslim), with a booster survey of Muslims undertaken at the same time.

Source: BBC/MORI Multiculturalism Poll, August 2005.

It might be assumed that the support for multiculturalism partly reflects the fact that for many Britons, disagreeing with multiculturalism implies one is racist. However, generally speaking, Britons do not make this connection. For example, the vast majority agree you do not need to be white to be British.¹²

Moreover, when we look at views on a range of subjects, the British remain generally tolerant — despite their concern about the number of immigrants. Only a minority feel Islam is incompatible with British democracy, for example. This tolerance also holds true for British Muslims. For instance, in our various surveys of British Muslims, we found that most Muslims agree that Britain is essentially a Christian country and that they disagree with disestablishing the Church of England (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Reactions to Statements about National Identity and Religion, 2005



Note: This survey contrasts a nationally representative sample (of which circa 3 percent are Muslim), with a booster survey of 500 Muslims undertaken at the same time.

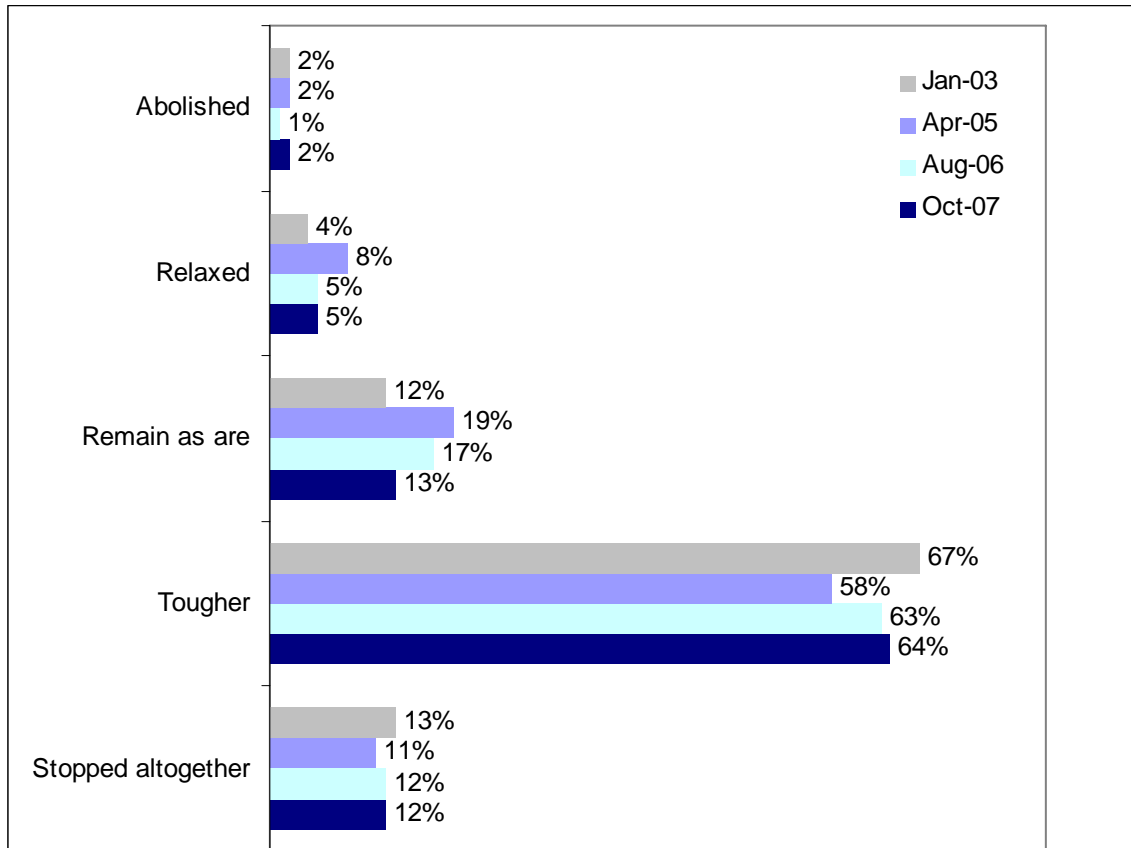
Source: BBC/MORI Multiculturalism Poll, August 2005.

¹² This is confirmed by Ipsos MORI surveys for the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and now the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

IX. Policy and Political Responses

So with real national concern about immigration, what do the British want their politicians to do? The majority wants them to be “tough” (see Figure 17). A stable, sizeable minority wants the state to stop immigration entirely.

Figure 17. Public Opinion on Which Statement Comes Closest to Respondents' Views on Immigration Laws, 2003 to 2007

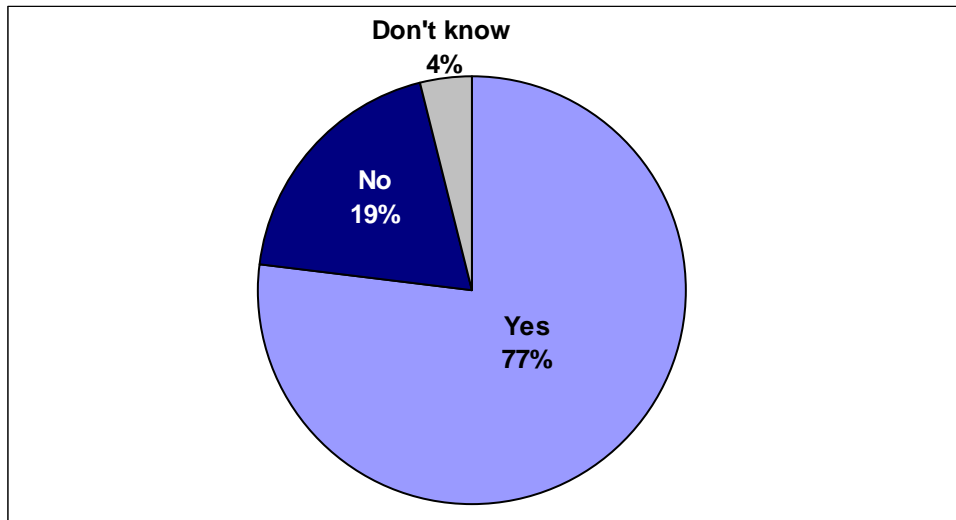


Source: Ipsos MORI.

Over three-quarters of British adults support the idea of a fixed annual cap on immigration (see Figure 18). However, the desirable number varies hugely, and suggested limits are heavily influenced by popular estimates of current immigration levels.¹³

¹³ Ipsos MORI, “Tracking Attitudes to Immigration and Asylum,” July 2007.

Figure 18. Respondents' Answers to Whether Britain Should Set an Annual Cap on Immigration, 2007

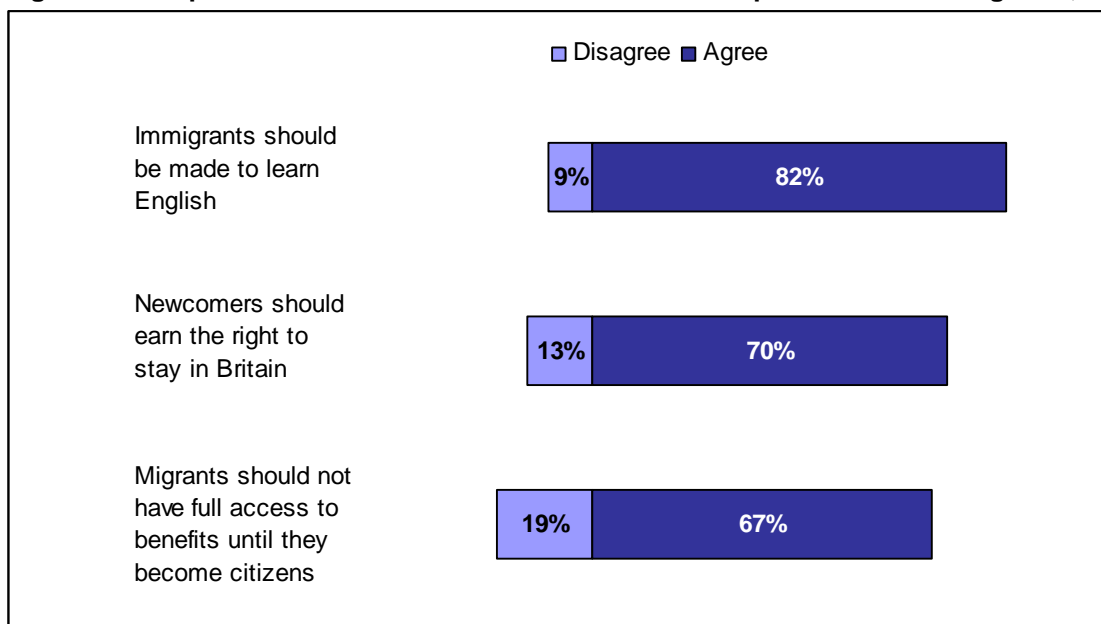


Source: Ipsos MORI.

It is also worth remembering that while most people do not hold entirely negative views about immigration, an individual's perception of the benefits may be very different from the benefits envisioned by the Treasury or the Confederation of British Industry. Both these institutions have concluded that immigration has allowed Britain to remain competitive and encouraged economic growth with more benefits than disadvantages in terms of increased costs to public services, saying "in the long run, migration to the UK is still likely to mean a net fiscal transfer to the native population."

Baseline attitudes to nationality and immigration among the overall population seem to be more open than headlines might suggest, notwithstanding local flash points. The public has certain clear parameters for "acceptance." The main one is immigrants learning to speak English, which minority communities endorse too, more for practical than integration reasons. The ideas of earned citizenship, obligations, and duties are also popular (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Respondents' Reactions to Statements about Expectations of Immigrants, 2008



Source: Ipsos MORI.

X. Conclusion

Overall, British attitudes to immigrants and immigration have hardened in the last decade. Although the media has influenced public perceptions of immigration, British attitudes are more pragmatic than tabloid headlines might imply, especially now that the economy has become the top concern. Wide differences span British society, with younger, better-educated people and those who tend to live in areas with a longer history of immigration more “tolerant” and relaxed about it than older, less-educated people in more settled communities with low levels of immigration. As generational change occurs, it would seem that the tolerance of younger generations may become more widespread, in the same way that it has on issues such as homosexuality.

However, for both young and old, issues of “fairness” and equality will continue to dominate any debate about the future of immigration. Few people of any age think it “fair” that a recent arrival with four children should jump the queue for social housing, taking priority over someone with two children who has been on a waiting list for three years and who is born in Britain. While comfortable with the word “multiculturalism,” the public does not take that to mean separate languages or laws. For most people, living in Britain means speaking English and respecting British law, the monarchy, and established institutions. “Earned citizenship” is popular.

Outside these core issues, public opinion on actual volumes of immigration and preferred level of flows are much less well defined: the numbers involved simply have little meaning for most people. Although the British people tend not to welcome change and would rather have less immigration, the country’s population has in fact changed dramatically in the last 60 years. The United Kingdom will continue to change, as will its own definition of what it means to be British. The challenge for British society will be having an open debate on the issue.

XI. About the Author

Ben Page is Managing Director of Ipsos MORI Public Affairs and Chairman of its Social Research Institute. Mr. Page, who joined MORI in 1987, sits on the Global Ipsos Management Council, and leads on government research globally. A frequent writer and speaker on leadership and performance management, he has directed hundreds of surveys examining quality of life, service delivery, customer care, communications, and the democratic deficit. Since 1992 he has worked closely with both Conservative and Labour ministers and senior policymakers across government in the United Kingdom, leading on work for Downing Street, the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, Communities and Local Government, and the Department of Health, as well as a wide range of local authorities and National Health Service Trusts. Named one of the "100 most influential people in the public sector" by the *Guardian* newspaper, Mr. Page is a Member of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and sits on the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Market Research*, and on the Board of INVOLVE, a charity promoting citizen participation.

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