East European immigration and community cohesion

Findings
Informing change

May 2007

This study profiles new immigrants from five Eastern European countries living in the London Boroughs of Harrow and Hackney and the City of Brighton and Hove. It explores how the presence of these new immigrants (from Albania, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro and Ukraine) affects community cohesion. The study involved questionnaire surveys with 388 new immigrants and 402 long-term residents in the same neighbourhoods.

Key points

- Generally, the immigrants interviewed were in the UK to work and had been very successful in finding employment, but in low paid work with limited occupational mobility.
- One in five working immigrants reported hourly wages below £5 and women were more likely to receive very low wages than men.
- Immigrants interviewed were well-educated (40 per cent arrived with a university degree, 33 per cent of men and 47 per cent of women) but were much more likely to be in low skilled jobs, whether compared to their own situation prior to departure, to long-term residents interviewed, or to the general population in the localities studied.
- When asked about 'sense of belonging', only a minority of immigrants felt they belonged to their neighbourhood (half as many as long-term residents), despite feeling they belonged to the UK as a whole (in similar proportions to long-term residents). Most felt a sense of belonging to both the UK and their home country.
- Immigrants' sense of belonging to the neighbourhood was positively affected by:
  - better housing status;
  - length of time in the UK;
  - plans to stay in the UK; and
  - having their children living with them.
- Among new immigrants and long-term residents, those with less education were more likely to say they belonged. Women long-term residents were more likely to say they belonged, but the opposite was true for new women immigrants.
- Both immigrant and long-term resident respondents reported high levels of social interaction with each other, with people from other ethnic groups generally and in the workplace.

The research
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Background

The rise of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe has attracted media and policy attention in recent years, particularly since European Union enlargement in 2004 and the recent accession of Bulgaria and Romania.

This research explored the characteristics and experiences of new European immigrants to the UK including their interaction with local long-term residents, and in relation to issues of community cohesion. The immigrants were from five non-EU countries: Albania, Bulgaria (which has since joined the EU), Russia, Serbia and Montenegro (which has since become an independent state), and Ukraine.

New European immigrant characteristics

More than half of the immigrants interviewed had been in the UK for more than five years. The peak years of arrival were 1999 (from Serbia and Albania) and 2003 (from Ukraine and Bulgaria).

Most had left their country of origin for economic reasons but Serbians and Albanians were more likely to report political instability as their main reason. Two Russians of Roma origin said they left Russia because of racial discrimination. For all groups, family, friends or marriage were important in the choice of the UK as a destination. For Bulgarians, Russians and Ukrainians, ease of obtaining an entry visa was also a factor.

By the time of interview, the majority of Serbians, Russians and Albanians had achieved permanent residence status. Bulgarians, as more recent arrivals, were more likely to have temporary status with the right to work. Ukrainians were the most likely to be undocumented.

Over two-thirds of the sample were married or co-habiting. Three quarters of their partners were living in the UK. Just under half of the sample (45 per cent) had dependent children, most of them living in the UK.

Education

The immigrants sampled were well-educated, with 40 per cent having a university degree or above (33 per cent of men and 47 per cent of women), a further 54 per cent having completed secondary education or college, and just 6 per cent having no qualifications. Bulgarians and Russians were the most educated. With the exception of Serbians, many of whom arrived as refugees, most had completed their education before arriving in the UK.

English language

More than two-thirds of the immigrants interviewed described their level of English on arrival as 'none' or 'basic', 70 per cent of Albanians reporting no English at all. English competence amongst men was lower than amongst women on arrival but by the time of the interview, men reported higher levels of fluency than women. Self-reported English proficiency had improved significantly amongst all groups – for example, nearly 80 per cent of Albanians now described their English as 'fluent' or 'adequate'.

Housing

Over half of the immigrants were living in private rented housing, although slightly more in Brighton were owner-occupiers and in Hackney were in social housing. Whereas Ukrainians and Bulgarians (the more recent arrivals) were more reliant on private rented housing, Serbians and Albanians were more likely to have council accommodation. Serbians were the most likely to have bought a house.

Employment

Around a quarter of the immigrants interviewed had been students before coming to the UK, and 10 per cent were not in the labour market. Of the remainder, most were in a managerial, professional or associate professional position in business, health and social work, wholesale, retail trade and repair work.

Over half had entered the UK labour market in the hotel and restaurant sector, construction or 'other' services (mainly domestic cleaning). Most found their first job through co-nationals. However, relatively few had been employed by co-nationals, two-thirds reporting that their first employer was white British. A similar proportion had a white British employer now.

Employment rates were very high. Immigrants and long-term residents had similar employment patterns, with around 60 per cent of each group in full-time employment, and relatively few self-employed or in casual work. However, immigrants were significantly more likely to be employed in low skilled jobs than before they arrived in the UK, compared to the long-term residents interviewed and compared to the population as a whole in the localities studied.

There was very limited occupational mobility for immigrants, despite some movement out of the hotels and restaurants sector, and a small increase in the percentage finding work in public services such as education and health. The proportion in the construction sector had also grown, with one-third of immigrant men employed in this sector at the time of interview.

One in five working immigrants earned below £5 an hour, and two-thirds of these were women. No men were working for less than £4 an hour but eleven women reported working at this rate. Very low wages were most common in the hospitality or personal services sectors, most common in Hackney and least common in Brighton. Some 42 per cent of working immigrants reported receiving no fringe benefits at all,

such as paid holiday. Only 4 per cent belonged to a trade union.

Although some immigrants were working long hours in order to achieve decent monthly incomes, they were no more likely to work long hours than the long-term residents in the sample.

Legal status

Most of the immigrants who were working were doing so legally. However, 64 individuals were working illegally, two-thirds of them from Ukraine or Albania. Those working illegally were more likely to be employed in the construction sector and earned slightly more on average, perhaps reflecting non-payment of taxes. However, similar numbers of documented and undocumented workers reported working over 45 hours a week, or earning monthly incomes below £1,000.

Immigration and cohesion in diverse communities

Sense of 'belonging'

Amongst the sample of new immigrants, only 35 per cent felt a sense of belonging 'very strongly' or 'fairly strongly' to their neighbourhood, compared with 72 per cent of long-term residents interviewed and 75 per cent of respondents in the Home Office 2005 Citizenship Survey.

This appears to reflect a real lack of identification amongst the new immigrants interviewed with the neighbourhoods in which they were living, since nearly twice as many (63 per cent) said they did feel they belong to Britain. Immigrants reported a greater sense of belonging to their borough or city of residence than to the local neighbourhood. Many felt they belonged to the UK and to their home country.

Those who felt they belonged 'very strongly' to their neighbourhood had lived there on average eighteen months longer than those who felt they did not belong at all. Those who felt they belonged had been in the UK on average three years longer than those who felt they did not belong at all.

Those living with children were more likely to say they belonged, as were those without plans to return to their home country soon, those with less education, and those living in council accommodation. Type of accommodation, education and gender were also associated with sense of belonging amongst the long-term residents. Amongst long-term residents, women (74 per cent) were more likely to express a sense of neighbourhood belonging than men (67 per cent) but only 30 per cent of new immigrant women felt they belonged compared with 40 per cent of new immigrant men. Legal status and English language ability at time of interview did not appear to affect individuals' sense of belonging.

In in-depth interviews, all immigrants raised similar issues about their neighbourhoods:

- transience of residents making it hard to know your neighbours;
- crime;
- drugs;
- alcohol;
- rubbish collection;
- cost of living; and
- limited out-of-school provision for children and young people.

However, some people had very positive views of living in Harrow and Brighton.

Valuing diversity

Both immigrants and long-term residents (87 per cent of each group) agreed that their neighbourhoods were places where different people get on well together – more so than the population as a whole in the 2005 Citizenship survey, and particularly in Brighton.

However, both immigrants and long-term residents were much more negative when asked whether people in their neighbourhoods help each other: only one in five agreed with this.

Immigrants were less likely to say they talked frequently to their neighbours, although over half of both groups reported talking to a neighbour at least once a week. Those with children present were more likely to talk to their neighbours.

All resident respondents reported quite high levels of social interaction with people from other ethnic groups, with 85 per cent of long-term residents and 72 per cent of immigrants interviewed having friends from different ethnic groups. Levels of cooperation with work colleagues from other ethnic backgrounds were also high, with the majority working in ethnically diverse workplaces and reporting that people at their workplace respected each other.

Expectations of life opportunities

Around half of the immigrants surveyed reported that they wished to return to their home country at some stage, with Bulgarians and Ukrainians (the more recent arrivals) more likely to wish to return. However, just eight individuals had fixed a date.

Ukrainians were the most likely to have a definite plan to return. Of those who intended to return, earning enough money in the UK was the main factor, followed by family and personal reasons, and an improvement in economic conditions at home.

Many factors shaped immigrants' expectations of their future life opportunities in Britain:

- age;
- family status;
- educational background;
- length of stay in the country; and
- plans to return.

What surfaced as most important was a stable job that would pay enough for a decent life. Younger people also wanted to improve their education and English language skills.

Community participation

Under a quarter of the immigrants interviewed felt that they could influence decisions at a local level, much lower than amongst long-term residents or the UK population as a whole. Albanians were the most positive about this. Similarly, immigrants were less than half as likely as long-term residents or the UK population to report helping to solve a local problem and only half as likely to have volunteered locally in the last twelve months or to have given money to charity.

> "I am not interested in volunteering. I have other things to do. I am renting and it is a landlord's job to be involved in the activities of the local community."
> (Russian man, aged 28, living in Harrow)

Although similar proportions of immigrants (60 per cent) and long-term residents (70 per cent) reported being involved in a group, club or organisation, immigrants were more likely to be involved in sports clubs, with long-term residents more likely to be involved in social clubs. Few immigrants were politically active and only 6 per cent joined ethnic community organisations.

Levels of community participation increased the longer immigrants spent in the UK. Also important were housing status and language ability. Owner-occupiers, who entered the UK more than five years ago and spoke better English, were likely to report more community participation.

Emerging issues

Evidence from this study suggests that relations between new East European immigrants and long-term residents in neighbourhoods in Hackney, Harrow and Brighton showed some signs of a 'cohesive community', particularly through social interaction and respect for diversity. However, for new immigrants this is less true in terms of a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, certain forms of community participation and access to better-paid employment.

There was a clear link between housing tenure and community cohesion, with those in private rented accommodation less likely to participate in community activities or feel they belonged to their neighbourhood than those in council accommodation or owner-occupiers. There was also a link between time spent in the UK and community cohesion.

Where there is a problem of cohesion, this is reported as a 'local' problem, which exists despite the broader society appearing welcoming. It is difficult to pinpoint why belonging and community participation appear problematic, even though immigrants have local friends, meet local people regularly, interact in ethnically diverse workplaces and identify positively with Britain. However, all three localities are places of 'transit' more generally.

> "One of the main problems in Harrow regarding social cohesion and community togetherness is that the houses were being converted into flats which meant that there are always new people moving in and out, which made it difficult to know who your neighbours were, never mind building any relationship with them. This is eroding any community spirit."
> (English woman, aged 40, living in Harrow)

The findings suggest a need for neighbourhood-specific responses to promote 'belonging'. For new European immigrants, this may be better achieved through initiatives in sports clubs, churches, workplaces and schools. The situation of women immigrants also requires attention, with their lower levels of improvement in English (despite arriving with better English than men), lower sense of belonging, and increased likelihood of very low wages in spite of higher qualifications on arrival.

About the project

The study used a questionnaire survey of 388 new immigrants and 402 long-term residents, with qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews with 21 immigrants and 8 long-term residents between June and November 2005. A snowball sample using multiple entry points identified both immigrants and long-term residents living in the same neighbourhoods. This was not a representative sample, and findings are only suggestive of the wider population.

For further information

The full report, **East European immigration and community cohesion** by Eugenia Markova and Richard Black is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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