

# Migrant Workers in NI

Neil Jarman, Institute for Conflict Research

**Migrant workers have become an increasingly visible social group within Northern Irish society over the past few years. However, little has been known about the number of people moving to NI to take up work, their background and countries of origin or indeed about the areas of work that are attracting migrant workers. To address this lack of knowledge the Equality Directorate Research Unit of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) commissioned the Institute for Conflict Research to undertake a baseline study of migrant workers in NI.**

The definition of a migrant worker that was adopted for the purposes of the research was ‘an individual who arrives in the host country either with a job to go to or with the intention of finding one’. This definition is broad enough to include professionals as well as manual workers and documented as well as undocumented workers. However, migrants from both GB and the RoI working in NI were excluded from the study.

The report, published in June 2004, drew upon data and statistics from a broad range of government departments and statutory agencies and includes the findings of a survey of 176 migrants living and working in NI. The research also included interviews with representatives of numerous statutory bodies, various employers and employer’s organisations, trade unions and a number of voluntary and community organisations.

This brief review of the research focuses on the baseline data on the number of migrant workers in NI and the sectors in which they are employed, before providing an overview of recruitment and employment procedures and issues.

## Categories of Migrant Workers

There are a number of different and distinct categories of migrant workers or non-nationals who have varying rights to work

in NI. The main categories are as follows:

- Nationals of the European Economic Area: who have a right to travel, live and work in the UK.
- Nationals of Switzerland and British Overseas Territories: who require clearance to enter the UK but do not require a work permit.
- Nationals of all other countries: who require a work permit, which is obtained by an employer who cannot find a suitable national to fill a post?
- Commonwealth Working Holidaymakers: individuals between the ages of 17-30 who can work in the UK for up to 2 years.
- Students from outside the EEA: who can work part-time whilst enrolled on a course.
- Undocumented workers: this includes both individuals who have entered the UK legally but are working without a legal right to do so and those who have entered the country illegally.

## Number of Migrant Workers

This diverse range of categories, only some of which require formal documentation, means that it is difficult to identify the total number of migrant workers in NI with any real amount of accuracy from the currently compiled statistics. At present different departments have different means of classifying individuals, while some departments do not separate



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migrants from nationals. This means that it is not possible to give a definitive figure for migrant workers currently in NI.

- The Labour Force Survey of Spring 2003 estimated that there were 9,000 non-UK and RoI nationals working in NI.
- Data on work permits issued between 1998 and 2003, provided by the Department for Employment and Learning and Work permits UK, suggests there are a maximum of 7,082 people with valid work permits.
- The UK Immigration Service estimated that there are 2,000 undocumented or illegal workers currently in NI. However, a large number of these were from countries that joined the EU in May 2004 and now have a legal right to work here.

The most comprehensive data is from the 2001 Census, which provides data on the economic activity status of people aged 16-74 born in 'Other EU Countries' (this includes a small number of people born in 'non-specified' areas of the UK and RoI) and the rest of the world. The data indicates that there are 14,287 people actively employed, 1,308 unemployed and 8,040 who are economically inactive. This suggests a figure of 15,595 migrants who are either employed or seeking work.

The Census data also illustrates the employment areas of these 14,287 people and the broad categories of occupation in which they work. The figures are set out in **Tables 1** and **2**. **Table 1** indicates that the main areas of employment for people born outside the UK and RoI are

health care, hotel and restaurant trade, wholesale and retail trades and manufacturing. It also indicates that few people who completed a Census form are employed in agriculture in NI.

**Table 2** provides information on the nature of the work that those born outside the UK and RoI are engaged in. The Census data indicates that 49% are employed in the managerial, professional and associate professional categories, while only 22% are employed in the sales, machine operatives and elementary categories.

These figures may thus provide a base line for migrant workers resident in NI in 2001. However, evidence from other aspects of the research suggests that they do perhaps underestimate the numbers who are in low-paid

**Table 1:** Areas of employment of individuals born outside of UK and RoI.

	Other EU	Elsewhere	Total
Health and Social Work	555	1,631	2,186
Hotels and Restaurants	365	1,476	1,841
Wholesale and Retail	646	1,181	1,827
Education	654	964	1,618
Manufacture	611	987	1,598
Real Estate, Renting, Business	406	950	1,356
Public Administration	523	784	1,307
Transport, Storage and Communications	258	411	669
Construction	245	317	562
Financial Intermediaries	121	254	375
Agriculture, Hunting, Forestry	58	71	129
Electricity, Gas and Water	20	42	62
Mining, Quarrying	9	8	17
Fishing	4	4	8
Other	219	513	732
Total	4,694	9,593	14,287

Source: Census Table EXT20032908G

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**Table 2:** Occupation of individuals born outside of UK and RoI.

	Other EU	Elsewhere	Total
Professional	818	1,989	2,807
Associate Professional, Technical	735	1,539	2,274
Managers, Senior Officials	462	1,417	1,879
Skilled Trades	495	1,287	1,782
Administrative and Secretarial	537	1,013	1,550
Elementary Occupations	597	866	1,463
Sales and Customer Services	359	561	920
Personal Services	331	484	815
Process, Plant & Machine Operatives	360	437	797
Total	4,694	9,593	14,287

Source: Census Table EXT20032908H

work, in unskilled work, in agriculture and in factory based work. In part this may be due to the fact that people employed in these sectors may be less likely to complete a Census form and in part it may be due to the fact that employment in these sectors has been increasing most rapidly in the past three years. It may also be related to the fact that some migrant workers may only be employed on short term contracts, or may only remain here a relatively

short time due to difficulty in securing adequate employment.

The currently available data thus suggests that the Census figures of 15,595 people should be treated as the minimum for migrant workers in NI and that an allowance for under-completion of Census forms among some sectors of the broad migrant community, and an increase in numbers of migrants arriving to take up employment in some low pay

sectors since the Census was completed, suggest that a figure of at least 20,000 migrant workers in NI is more reasonable.

## Nationality

The Census Unit provided details of the nationality of people born outside the UK and RoI living in NI in 2001. **Table 3** provides figures for the population of the top ten EU countries resident in

**Table 3:** Number of persons born in EU states and Non-EU states resident in NI at Census 2001.

EU States		Non-EU States	
Country	Number of persons	Country	Number of persons
Germany	3,879	USA	3,369
France	750	Canada	2,449
Netherlands	398	Hong Kong	1,746
Spain	364	Australia	1,544
Italy	288	South Africa	1,301
Portugal	168	India	1,170
Belgium	142	China	756
Sweden	117	Malaysia	582
Austria	105	New Zealand	448
Greece	92	Cyprus	377

Source: Census Table EXT20032908A



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NI and figures for the population of those born in the top ten non-EU states.

An indication of the changing patterns since the Census was held is evident in the numbers of Portuguese nationals enumerated in 2001. Recent attention to the numbers of migrant workers in the food processing industry Dungannon, Cookstown and Portadown has suggested that there may be up to 1,500 Portuguese speaking nationals in NI, while claims have been made that up to 10% of the population of Dungannon is Portuguese speaking.

Further recent information is available on the nationalities of work permit holders. Data for the period 1 May 1998 to 31 August 2002 was provided by DEL, while data for the period 1 September 2002 to 31 October 2003 was provided by Work Permits UK, which is now

responsible for administering all work permits in the UK. The top ten countries for work permit holders for both these periods are shown in **Table 4**. For both time periods, the largest number of work permit holders came from the Philippines followed by India. However, when trends for the two periods are compared they reveal that Eastern European countries have replaced more distant countries as the main source of work permit holders, with seven East European countries in the top ten in the most recent period compared with only one in the earlier period. One example of the change is that there were 64 work permits issued to Moldovians between September 2002 and October 2003, whereas this group does not even feature as a separate category in the statistics for May 1998 to August 2002. However, this picture will change again following the expansion of the

EU in May 2004 as four of the top ten nationalities are now EU member states and their nationals will no longer require work permits.

## Residential Locations of Migrants

The Census 2001 reveals that the 26,659 people born outside of the UK and RoI are spread across all 18 parliamentary constituencies. In total 7,650 people born outside of the UK and RoI live in the four Belfast constituencies, this is 29% of the total of such people. The other parliamentary constituencies with relatively large numbers are North Down (2,120), Lagan Valley (2,005), South Antrim (1,663) and East Londonderry (1,615), while the smallest numbers are in West Tyrone (811) and Mid Ulster (750).

**Table 4:** Top ten countries for work permits for 1 May 1998 - 31 August 2002 and 1 September 2002 - 31 October 2003

1 May 98 - 31 Aug 02		1 Sept 02 - 31 Oct 03	
Country	Number of permits	Country	Number of permits
Philippines	732	Philippines	516
India	354	India	421
USA	275	Ukraine	372
China	248	Poland	251
South Africa	171	Bulgaria	185
Poland	143	Romania	139
Canada	137	Lithuania	132
Malaysia	117	Slovakia	104
Australia	115	Latvia	75
Hong Kong	108	Pakistan	74

Source: Department for Employment and Learning and Work Permits UK

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## Recruitment and Employment

It is generally accepted that host countries benefit from inward migration of labour both in terms of the skills people bring with them and the increased labour capacity for jobs for which there is often a limited local labour interest. The evidence from this research suggests that migrant labour is filling significant gaps in the labour force in NI, both in terms of providing skilled workers, for example in the health system, and unskilled factory labour, for example in the food processing industry and in certain sectors of agriculture. The UK National Statistics for example, indicates that there has been a net outflow of population from NI since 1992. Over this time emigration has exceeded immigration by 1,300 persons. Furthermore, the influx of migrants can have positive impact on the society more generally. This includes the positive impact of migrants on a local economy in terms of consumption, housing and entertainment, and the increasing cultural diversity such immigration can bring to the wider society.

Our research revealed that migrant workers are being widely utilised in a small number of areas of employment: as nurses within the health service; as workers within food processing factories, particularly meat processing work; within the agricultural sector particularly working in areas that are not suitable for mechanisation, such

as mushroom picking, and within the service and catering sector both in ethnic restaurants and take-aways, but also increasingly in the wider hotel sector. Migrant workers are also employed prominently in the further education sector, in construction trades and they are increasingly being seen as a useful source of labour by a wide range of businesses.

Many migrants obtain employment by being recruited through an employment agency. For workers from the EEA countries, the main trend has been recruiting people with Portuguese Identification Cards (including people from Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, East Timor and Brazil) to work in meat and food processing factories, while growing numbers of nursing staff are being recruited on work permits (from the Philippines and India) through a process which involves an employment agency at some level. The ICR survey revealed that 44% of respondents were recruited by an agency while they were still in their own country, while 13% were recruited by an agency after having arrived in NI. The survey indicated that 43% obtained their current job by applying directly to the employer. The method of recruitment largely depends on the employment sector involved and the immigration status of the migrant worker, while the experience of recruitment and employment is very different for different categories of workers.

Most Portuguese-speaking migrant workers have been recruited by an employment agency to work in a food-processing factory. Workers are usually recruited in Portugal and then flown to NI, where they are provided with shared accommodation (with the rent deducted from their wages). They are assigned a factory and taken to work each morning by taxi, the money for which is again deducted from their wages. A Portuguese-speaker acts as a 'supervisor', sets the hours to be worked, acts as an intermediary with the factory manager, and sorts out pay and housing issues. Under this system the migrant workers are employed by the agency, not the factory in which they are working. The factory pays the agency for the labour, which in turn pays the migrant workers a wage that they determine is appropriate after all deductions. Most workers are initially employed on a six-month contract and while many return home at this stage, some remain. Among those who remain some find new sources of employment, while others become employed on a more formal basis with the factory, thus excluding the agency.

Overseas nurses are recruited to work in NI under one of three models. In the first model the employer works in partnership with an agency to identify a source country, and is directly involved in the selection process of new staff. Some health trusts have sent employees to the recruiting country to interview



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potential staff, while others have held interviews by phone or video conference. An alternative approach is for the employer to appoint an agency to identify a source country and takes the lead on recruitment, selection, and placement with less input from the employer. Finally an agency may actively recruit nurses on their own behalf and will then try to 'encourage' a hospital to find jobs for overseas nurses even when they are not advertising any vacancies. Some nurses have also been charged substantial fees by agencies to 'process' their applications and have been employed without any interview.

Increasing numbers of foreign nurses are being recruited by hospitals and health trusts, which are in turn beginning to provide better and more targeted support for new employees. This might include arranging accommodation prior to their arrival; providing an individual mentor for an adaptation period; provision of education in language colloquialisms during the induction period; sessions with trade union representatives; arranging for registration with a GP; and arranging visits to the Social Security Agency to get a National Insurance number. One recruitment agency reported that 94% of their overseas nurses who had come to the end of their initial contract had renewed the contract and they expect overseas nurses will continue to be recruited to NI for at least the next ten years.

The research thus indicates that migrant workers are an attractive labour option for a growing number of businesses in NI, either due to a lack of suitably skilled individuals or due to a lack of willingness to take up work in some sectors by local people. Increasingly flexibility in the regulation of the employment of migrants and a wider range of recruitment practices indicates that migrant workers will increase in number in coming years.

## Migrant Experiences

The research identified a range of 'push' and 'pull' factors that either encouraged people to leave the country they were living in, or attracted them to move to NI. For the migrants themselves limited opportunities for work at home was cited as the most prominent 'push' factor that encouraged them to

migrate. However, a range of positive attractions to NI were also cited, these included: a higher salary, an opportunity for career development, a better standard of living, as well as the influence of an active recruitment process for specific occupations.

The survey, completed by 176 migrant workers, reveals something of the diversity of their occupations, backgrounds and circumstances in NI. The respondents were employed in 29 different types of jobs, just over 44% of the questionnaires were completed by nurses, while factory operatives accounted for 16% of respondents, and 7% and 6% of people worked in academia and as medical doctors respectively. The range of occupations of respondents is set out in **Table 5**.

Nearly half of the respondents (47%) had been in their current

**Table 5:** Occupations of migrant workers in NI

	Number	%
Nurse	71	44
Factory operative	25	16
Academic	11	7
Medical doctor	10	6
Farm labourer	7	4
Information Technology	3	2
Administrator	3	2
Chef	3	2
Domestic	3	2
Project worker	2	1
Community worker	2	1
Classroom assistant	2	1
17 other occupations	17	11

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employment for less than one year, while 16% had been working here for between two and five years. Only ten migrant workers had been in their job for over five years. Three quarters of people have had only one job in NI. The most common previous job, which migrant workers have had in NI, was that of a factory operative, which accounted for 41% of instances where a previous job was listed.

Respondents were also asked to state the job(s) they had done in their home country. It was interesting to compare the replies to this question with the jobs that people are currently doing in NI. 66 of the 71 nurses currently working in NI said they had previously worked as nurses in their own country, in contrast only 5 of the 25 respondents who worked in a factory had done this job in their own country. There are a number of jobs which migrant workers had done in their own country but which they had never done in NI, these include electrician, hairdresser, journalist, painter and decorator, psychologist, public servant and fireman. Furthermore, while there were 7 respondents who had worked as teachers in their own country, only 2 people had taught in NI, neither was currently employed as a teacher.

We requested information on the educational qualifications and language abilities of respondents, 73% said they possessed a degree level qualification, 22% had

secondary school education and 5% were educated up to primary school age. We also asked them to rate their ability in English, 87% of respondents considered themselves as able to speak and write English fluently or satisfactorily, while 13% stated that they could not speak or read any English.

The survey asked people about the hours they worked and their salaries. The number of hours worked by respondents varied between less than 16 and up to 70 per week. Two thirds of people worked between 36 and 40 hours per week, while 24 people worked more than 46 hours a week. The Working Time Regulations set a limit of 48 hours as the average number of hours per week that a worker can be required to work, although people may voluntarily choose to work longer hours.

There was also great variation in terms of migrant workers' salaries. The most common pay bracket was £16,001-£18,000, which accounted for 27% of respondents. 15% of respondents earned over £18,001, while 37% earned between £10,001 and £16,000. In contrast 19% of respondents earned £10,000 a year or less and although some of those on low salaries might work part-time hours, 3 people stated that they earned less than the National Minimum Wage. Salaries also varied according to the level of spoken English that a person possesses. 90% of those migrant workers who

spoke fluent English earn over £10,000 per year and 24% of them earned over £20,000. In contrast, only 47% of those people not able to speak English earned over £10,000 a year and none earned over £20,000.

## Issues, Problems and Responses

Both the survey and the interviews revealed a range of recurrent employment related problems. Some of these are due to a lack of information, for example in relation to obtaining National Insurance numbers; others are due to poor working conditions or poor training. 10% of survey respondents said that they had had problems receiving pay, with migrants who were recruited through an agency more likely to experience problems related to pay than those who obtained work by applying directly to the employer. Others complained of being unfairly dismissed for a variety of reasons, but particularly if they complained about conditions, and problems with holiday, sick pay and maternity leave.

A number of migrant workers felt that potential employers did not recognise their qualifications nor take into account their work experience in other countries, for example 26% of the survey respondents believe that their educational qualifications were not recognised in NI. Others felt that employers tended to assume that they were only



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capable of low-skilled work. As a result, the skills of many migrant workers may be under-used in the labour market.

37 of the survey respondents (22% of the total) had experienced some kind of harassment or discrimination at their work place. Interviewees described a variety of forms of discrimination including being made to justify their reasons for coming to NI during interviews for jobs, being denied small privileges which were granted to Northern Irish employees (such as toilet breaks outside authorised breaks), being referred to as 'criminal asylum seekers' by colleagues, and being excluded from staff social events.

Undocumented workers can encounter their own set of employment-linked problems. They are more open to exploitation from employers because of the fear that their immigration status will be discovered, which usually prevents them from contacting the authorities to complain about unsatisfactory working conditions and undocumented workers are often paid less than the National Minimum Wage. Members of the Chinese communities in Belfast and Craigavon noted that undocumented workers employed in Chinese restaurants are prepared to work long, hard hours for low pay. Not surprisingly, they appear an attractive proposition to some restaurant owners, especially when compared to documented

workers who will not work such long hours and will expect a proper wage.

The research also revealed that while many recruitment agencies are fair and supportive, others are less scrupulous. At present employment agencies in NI are unregulated and some agencies appear to have adopted practices that exploit the vulnerability of the migrant workers. The NI Association of Citizens Advice Bureau has raised a number of concerns with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) about the treatment of migrant workers by employment agencies. NIACAB has recommended that legislative provisions should be introduced to regulate private recruitment agencies; that private recruitment agencies should be audited; that agency workers should be provided with National Insurance numbers; that safeguards should be introduced to protect the health and safety of agency employees in their place of work and when agency workers' accommodation is tied to their employment there should be adequate protection for employees in the event of the termination of their employment contract. DEL is currently taking forward amendments to existing legislation and will initiate a consultation exercise during 2004 as part of a plan to introduce new legislation to establish minimum standards for employment agencies working in NI.

The research revealed that migrant workers experience a range of problems associated with living in NI. Many migrant workers living in rented accommodation had experienced problems over housing, particularly when their employer supplied their home. In such cases leaving a job also meant finding a new home. Some people had also experienced harassment related to their housing situation, while others had experienced racism and harassment in the workplace and in the street.

Many migrants had had contact with a range of statutory agencies including the Housing Executive, Social Security Agency, PSNI, the health service and the education system. Each of these bodies had begun to acknowledge the existence of migrant workers as an emergent and distinctive category of client/customer and had begun to adapt systems in response. The major concerns for migrant workers were accessing information and basic knowledge of rights to services, and the provision of interpreter services. All statutory bodies had acknowledged this latter issue and some steps had been made to respond, but the need to be able to communicate with clients and customers in a growing number of languages was proving a challenge.

Many migrant workers also sought help and support from a diversity of non-governmental

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organisations when dealing with their problems and were turning to trade unions and the Citizens Advice Bureau as well as community based projects such as STEP in Dungannon, which had established a number of projects to support the Portuguese speaking population in the area.

## Conclusions

Migrant workers are a growing category of employees in NI and they are a necessary factor for many employment sectors due to a shortage of available local labour. The migrant worker population is a diverse and growing constituency. Migrant workers live in urban and rural areas, and include both single people and family units. In 2002-2003, work permit holders from 66 different countries came to NI, in addition to nationals from EEA countries. Many migrant workers are members of minority ethnic communities and are subject to forms of discrimination, abuse and harassment that are experienced by the permanently resident minority ethnic communities.

It is difficult to predict how numbers will increase or decrease in the future. The arrival of new migrant workers to NI depends on a range of factors: continued active recruitment for shortage occupations, government migration policies, the accession of countries to the EU, the

initiatives of recruitment agencies and the economic conditions in the countries of origin of migrant workers.

Many statutory bodies, government agencies and NGOs have begun to recognise and respond to the need of this growing sector, but there is still a lack of integrated and cross-departmental data, on the number of people moving to NI to live and work. This needs to be rectified so that service providers have a clearer indication of the needs they will be responding to. There is also a need for better information for migrants arriving in NI, which clearly identifies the full range of their rights and their responsibilities. There is thus a need to improve cross-sectoral partnerships within and between statutory agencies and NGOs to clarify issues of concern, identify emergent good practice and develop appropriate strategies for future action.

The Institute for Conflict Research is an independent research organisation based in Belfast. ICR has carried out work for organisations such as OFMDFM, Community Relations Council, Eastern Health and Social Services Board, Northern Health and Social Services Board, NI Housing Executive, Police Ombudsman and the Policing Board. ICR also works closely with a wide range of community based organisations and initiates its own research projects.

*Migrant Workers in NI* by Katherine Bell, Neil Jarman and Thomas Lefebvre, is available in hard copy from ICR, North City Business Centre, 2 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast BT15 2GG or in PDF format at [www.conflictresearch.org.uk](http://www.conflictresearch.org.uk)

