



How many people are expected to take up the new Hong Kong visa?

Non-EU Immigration: MW 487

Summary

1. The government expects about 300,000 people to come to the UK over five years on a new path to citizenship that will - from 31 January 2021 - be available to more than five million people in Hong Kong (nearly three-quarters of the territory's population). This note summarises the government's methodology in making its estimates, which have a very broad range. The lower limit of their projection is 5,000 in five years and the upper limit is over a million people during that period. Another anecdotal and informal estimate suggests as many as two million people may come by 2026.

Detail

2. At the last census in 2011 more than 110,000 people born in Hong Kong were living in the U.K. At present there is no requirement for Hong Kong citizens to obtain a visit visa in advance of coming to the UK for up to six months. In the past five years for which figures are available there were an average of 170,600 passenger admissions by Hong Kong citizens visiting the UK each year, with 190,000 such admissions in 2018.¹

3. The UK opens a new immigration route on 31 January that, in principle, grants nearly 5.4 million Hong Kong residents a path to move to the UK and eventually become British citizens. The total is broken down as follows:

- 2.9 million holders of British National (Overseas) - or BNO - status in Hong Kong;
- 2.3 million dependants of Hong Kong BNOs; and
- 187,000 18–23-year-olds who are not considered to be the dependants of BNOs (in view of being adults), but have at least one BN(O) parent and are a part of the same household.²

4. In late October 2020 the government published an impact assessment of the numbers that might eventually come.³

5. The fact that Hong Kong citizens are not required to obtain a visa before coming here for a visit effectively means that all can arrive at the border and only at that point need to make clear whether they seek the path to settlement or a short stay. Those with Hong Kong citizenship only (who are not BNOs)

could of course claim asylum, which is highly unlikely to be refused. The government have effectively opened the door to virtually all of Hong Kong under circumstances in which they will have no control over the number of people coming each year, and little thought as to amenities that those coming will need. Housing, schools and additional demands on the NHS are just three areas where there appears to have been scant planning.

6. Since mid-2020, BNO status holders and immediate family have also been able to enter the UK if a Border Force officer gives discretionary permission. This form of entry is known as ‘Leave Outside the Rules’, and only applies to the applicant and close family, allowing them to remain here for up to six months after which they will be able to apply for the new path to citizenship from 31 January. Just over 2,100 people (BNO main applicants as well as dependants) were granted such leave between 15 July and 14 October 2020.

7. It should be noted that the UK government has a poor record when it comes to making predictions on migration (e.g. Tony Blair’s Labour administration massively underestimated the number of arrivals from former communist states after the 2004 EU enlargement). Possibly with this in mind, the government have stressed that their recent estimates of the impact of the Hong Kong route are “subject to a very high degree of uncertainty due to the lack of data and reliance on several assumptions.” **As a central order of magnitude, the government estimates that 290,000 people will arrive over the first five years with 138,000 in the first year** (also see para 15 below). The government’s highest scenario, mentioned only briefly, envisages just over one million migrants over five years with half a million arriving in the first year (based on the second scenario detailed below), although it does state that this scenario is ‘more unlikely’. Both figures include dependants.

8. The starting point for their estimates was the increase in the number of new BN(O) passport holders in recent months although they will not be required to move to the UK under the route. However, the government has stated that applicants ‘should apply for the BN(O) visa in advance of travelling’.⁴ The rise in BN(O) passport holders at different points since the start of the protests can be seen in Table 1 below.

9. By the end of 2020 the increase in passport holders was expected to total between 445,000 and 566,000.

Table 1: Home Office’s estimate of recent increase in BN(O) passport holders.

Date	BN(O) passport holders
Jul-19 (prior to)	167,000
Feb-20	350,000 ⁵
Oct-20	469,400
Dec-20	733,000 (566,000 being considered as recent passport holders) ⁶
Maximum range of estimated increase	566,000

Government's 1st scenario: 122,000 in first year; 257,000 over five years

10. The government's first scenario was based on a rise of 445,000 in BN(O) passport applications and made the following assumptions:

- a. That only 24% of those who have recently acquired a BN(O) passport would leave in the first year. 24% of 445,000 is 106,800.
- b. Of this number 60% would choose the UK – that is 64,080
- c. Of the remaining 2.45 million eligible Hong Kong citizens only 1.5% would migrate in the first year. That is 36,750.
- d. Of this last number only 13% would choose the UK – so around 4,500.
- e. These elements give a total inflow to the UK in year one of just over 68,000.
- f. Adding an allowance for dependents of about 54,000. Gives an estimate for the first year of more than 122,000.
- g. The scenario has rapidly declining numbers for later years giving a total over five years of around 257,000.

Comment:

11. All these assumptions are uncertain, as the government freely admit. Both (a) and (b) look like low estimates. The weakest are to be found at steps (c) and (d) of the calculation detailed above - that only 13% of 1.5% (that is 0.2%) of those who have not yet applied for a BN(O) passport would leave in the first year. A potential emigrant to the UK does not need a BN(O) passport to apply under the new route and visa-free visits are already allowed as is 'Leave Outside the Rules'.

Government's 2nd scenario: 153,000 in first year; 322,000 over five years

12. A second scenario based on a higher estimate of passports issued by the end of 2020 of 566,000 gives a central estimate of the inflow to the UK in the first year of 153,000 and a total of 322,000 in the first five years.

13. The rest of the government's impact assessment is calculated on the mid-point between the figures arrived at via the two scenarios, namely an inflow of 290,200 in the first five years and 138,300 in the first year.

14. The impact assessment also refers to a publication by Survey Sampling International which suggested that around 50% of Hong Kong citizens are seriously considering emigrating and that of these 10% had the UK as their first choice destination. This would produce an inflow of 269,000 over five years. Since some might not be able to get to their first choice and might instead come to the UK they added a higher estimate of 15% which would give an inflow of 404,000 over five years.

15. This is a much simpler methodology, although reliant on a single survey. Its total inflow of some 400,000 can be compared to the central point of just under 300,000 in the government's Impact Assessment. This is the central estimate used for the purposes of calculations in the Impact Assessment, although sensitivity analysis in the document also takes account of the outlying higher and lower estimates.

Other estimates

16. Two other anecdotal and informal estimates have been made by bodies and stakeholders in the months since the new visa was announced:

- a. **'2 million over five years' (an average of 400,000 per year)** - A migration lawyer suggested in January 2021 that up to two million people from Hong Kong could apply for the new UK visa over five years. However, this estimate does not appear to include dependants, since the lawyer, Kezia Daley, senior associate and immigration specialist for law firm Winckworth Sherwood, suggests that almost three million who are eligible⁷. In fact, the Home Office makes clear that over five million people are eligible when dependants are included.
- b. **'More than 600,000 in the first three years' (an average of 200,000 per year)** - A group called Hongkongers in Britain (HKB) surveyed city residents hoping to emigrate. HKB said the number could be more than 600,000. Four out of five of those surveyed want to come in the next two years, quicker than anticipated by the UK government. There may be some limitations to this estimate. HKB looked for survey participants on social media channels, where it has a strong following. Over 300 people participated anonymously, so this sample was necessarily self-selecting.⁸

29 January 2021

Notes

1. Home Office admissions data, 2014-18, These data were collated from landing cards completed by non-EEA nationals on arrival at the UK border and provide numbers crossing the UK border by nationality and category of entry. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848093/admissions-sep-2019-tables.ods
2. Home Office Impact Assessment, 'Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa', 22 October 2020, URL: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia_20200070_en.pdf
3. Home Office Impact Assessment, 'Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa', 22 October 2020, URL: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia_20200070_en.pdf
4. Home Office factsheet, Hong Kong BN(O)s, 23 December 2020.
5. Home Office factsheet, Hong Kong BN(O)s, May 2020.
6. This estimate appears to include both live passports in circulation and applications in process but, at that stage, not yet processed. As of October, there were 612,000 such passport holders (including the over 400,000 live passports in circulation and applications in process but not yet processed). See Home Office Impact Assessment, 'Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa', 22 October 2020.
7. *Daily Telegraph*, January 2021, URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2021/01/18/2m-hongkongers-could-move-uk-new-visa-amid-investment-boom/>
8. *The Guardian*, December 2020, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/12/uk-government-underestimates-takeup-hong-kong-resettlement>