



# Research Update

## Black Lives Matter? Attitudes to minorities and migrants in Northern Ireland

*Lucy Michael*

The Black Lives Matter protests in the USA garnered much global attention during 2020, and highlighted the deaths of Black and indigenous people at the hands of police. It also prompted similar protests in cities around the world, including in Northern Ireland, about the impact of racism in general on the lives of Black and indigenous people in other countries. In the current European context, the Black Lives Matter movement has focused on hate crimes, racial profiling and deaths in custody, rather than armed policing. There is also a focus on the experiences of criminalisation, poverty and poor health outcomes which are the results of structural and institutional racism. The wider issue of racism has also come into focus for policymakers, as reflected in the EU's new Anti-Racism Action Plan (European Commission, 2020).

Each year, the [Northern Ireland Life and Times \(NILT\) Survey](#) asks questions about attitudes to minority ethnic communities, and similar questions have been included in the [Young Life and](#)

[Times \(YLT\) Survey](#) of 16 year olds. These provide valuable indicators of the vulnerability of Northern Ireland to xenophobic discourses which understate the value of diversity and migration, and emphasise self-segregation and exclusion (Michael, 2017).

This Research Update examines racism in Northern Ireland today, exploring social attitudes towards Black, minority ethnic and indigenous people using NILT data since 2016. In addition, the Update looks at attitudes to immigration and refugees. These are worth considering not just because of the overlap between racism and anti-immigrant attitudes, but because Black and minority ethnic groups are often confused with migrant and refugee groups. In addition, racism in the Northern Irish context is understood to include discrimination and harassment against white migrants from outside the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland.

### **Racism in Northern Ireland**

At the last census, in 2011, Northern Ireland remained the least ethnically diverse region

in the UK. 32,400 (1.8%) of the resident population belonged to minority ethnic groups, more than double the proportion in 2001. The largest minority ethnic groups were Asian (19,130), Black (3,616), Mixed (6,014), Traveller (1,301) and Other (2,353). There are few indications that these numbers have changed dramatically in the intervening years. White EU migrant numbers are likely to have fluctuated since 2011. Employers are concerned about the difficulties of recruiting European Union (EU) migrant workers due to Brexit (CBI, 2018; DfE, 2019). Census data indicate that the minority ethnic population is younger than the white population. Black and Asian groups have slightly higher proportions of under 16s than the white population, but nearly twice the proportion of 25 to 44 year olds, probably due to adult migration. The Traveller population is heavily skewed towards under 16s due to low life expectancy rates.

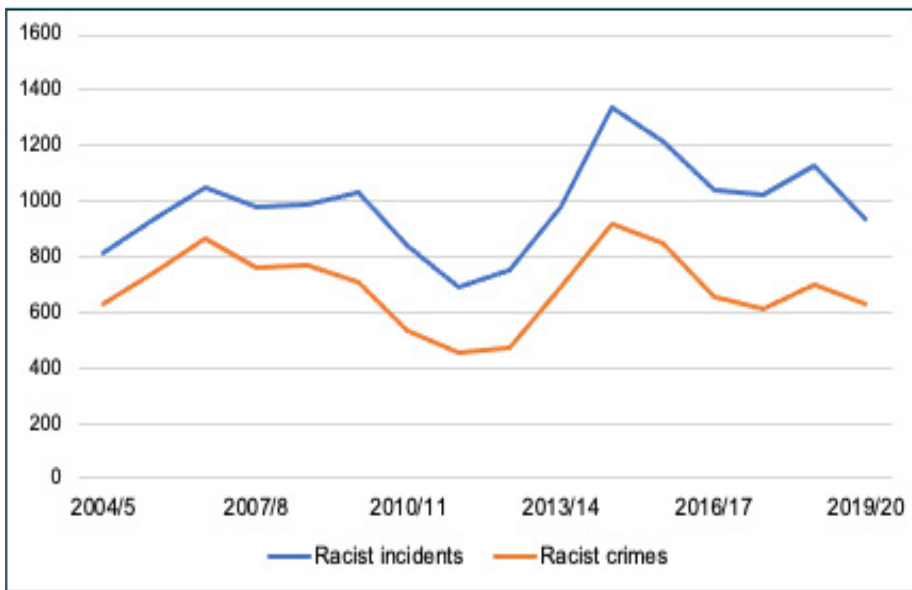
Prior to the 2016 EU referendum, there was an observable increase in racist and anti-immigrant

sentiment in many media outlets, and expressed publicly by politicians and community leaders across the United Kingdom. NILT data on social distance from 2006 to 2014 suggested that ethnic minority groups were increasingly

based on racist incidents and crimes recorded by the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2020), and shows a peak of hate crimes reported in 2014. Racist hate crimes and racist incidents reported to police went up slightly

about current attitudes and behaviours towards minority groups. In 2019, one third of respondents believed that there is about the same amount of prejudice as five years previously, and this figure was similar between 2016 and 2018. While 49 per cent of people believed that racial prejudice was increasing in 2016 and 2017, just 30 per cent thought this in 2019. Those who believed it was decreasing rose from 11 per cent in 2016 to 24 per cent in 2019. These figures suggest an increasing level of optimism year on year.

**Figure 1:** Trends in racist incidents and crimes recorded by PSNI



accepted in Northern Ireland, despite pockets of entrenched racism and xenophobia (Devine, 2018). By 2015, the majority of respondents acknowledged the benefits of diversity and inclusion in governance, but fewer than one in five respondents were optimistic that there would be less prejudice against minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland in 5 years' time.

### Racist crime

Cases of Black, Asian and refugee families forced out of their homes because of orchestrated racist harassment have been intermittently exposed in the media since 2000. *Figure 1* is

in 2018-19 but still continue the downward pattern started in 2015. In 2018/19 reports showed fewer than half the number of racially motivated crimes committed against Black people than in the previous three years (PSNI, 2020). In 2019-20, 10 per cent of crimes were perpetrated against people described as Black (mainly African origin), 17 per cent against Asian (mainly Chinese and South Asian), and 39 per cent against White (including Eastern European).

### Racial prejudice

Perceptions of racial prejudice in a society are important because they reveal what people think

In 2019, one quarter (25%) of participants described themselves as a little prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities, and 4 per cent as very prejudiced. The proportion of people describing themselves as not prejudiced at all (69%) was the same in 2019 as in 2015, although it had reached 79 per cent in 2017. Matching the pattern found in previous years, Catholics in 2019 were more likely to describe themselves as not prejudiced (76%) than either Protestants (65%) or people of no religion (69%).

However, while general attitudes to minority ethnic groups appear largely positive, the data suggest that attitudes towards personal relationships are influenced

more by general society than by personal contact with specific groups. In 2019, NILT participants were asked about their friendship with people from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds. This is one of the few questions in the survey that specifically mentions Black identities. The proportion of participants saying that they have Black friends (14%) was lower in 2019 than at any time in the previous decade: the highest point was in 2016 (19%). In contrast, 28 per cent of participants in 2019 said they had Polish friends, although this figure had also fallen since 2016 (37%). In general, levels of friendship with people from different backgrounds was lowest among the oldest age group.

Levels of self-reported racial prejudice were lower among the 16 year olds taking part in the Young Life and Times survey. In 2019, 15 per cent said they were a little prejudiced and 1 per cent reported being very prejudiced against people from minority

ethnic communities. Nearly three quarters (73%) described themselves as not prejudiced at all, and these responses are very similar to 2017 and 2018. The responses of Catholic and Protestant respondents were not significantly different. However, males were significantly more likely to report some level of prejudice (19% compared with 13% for females), and were also more likely to say that they did not know. A higher proportion of females compared with males said that they were not at all prejudiced (77% and 67% respectively).

Nearly one half (45%) of YLT respondents in 2019 had witnessed some kind of racist bullying or harassment in their school. The responses in 2019 matched those from 2017 and 2018 in relation to mixing with people from different backgrounds. Around one third of YLT participants (34%) said that they rarely or never socialised or played sport with people from a different ethnic background to

them. Nevertheless, 33 per cent did this sometimes, and 29 per cent did this very often.

### Diversity and culture

Six out of ten NILT respondents (61%) felt that the culture and traditions of different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society (see Table 1). Only 14 per cent disagreed with this view, while one fifth (20%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Responses to this question have remained stable since the question was first asked in 2013. While responses did not vary much according to gender or age, Protestant respondents were less likely to support this statement (57%) compared with Catholic respondents (62%) or those with no religion (68%). As might be expected, support for this statement was much higher among those who said that they were not prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities, compared with those who reported some level of prejudice (75% and 27% respectively).

**Table 1:** “The culture and traditions of different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society” (2019)

	%					
	YLT			NILT		
	Prejudiced	Not prejudiced	All	Prejudiced	Not prejudiced	All
Strongly agree/agree	44	58	52	27	75	61
Neither agree nor disagree	25	23	24	33	14	20
Strongly disagree/disagree	20	7	9	35	5	14
I don't know	12	12	15	5	6	6

One half of 16 year olds (52%) in 2019 expressed some level of agreement with the statement that the culture and traditions of different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society. Only 9 per cent disagreed, while one quarter (24%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 15 per cent did not know how to respond. There was no significant difference in response according to religious

and exclusion came to the fore, as well as the issue of racial hierarchies in which some ethnic minorities are more acceptable than others. These hierarchies have been consistently evident within the NILT data, with levels of acceptance of Irish Travellers being particularly low. **Table 2** also shows that levels of acceptance varies according to the closeness of the relationship. While attitudes to certain groups can be influenced

were more accepting of these groups as colleagues than Protestant participants were, especially in relation to Irish Travellers. The final column in **Table 2** shows a difference of 25 percentage points between the figures for Catholic and Protestant respondents. Respondents were less accepting of having people from Eastern European (80%), Muslim (64%) and Irish Traveller (58%) backgrounds as a relative

**Table 2:** Acceptance of groups in specific circumstances (NILT, 2019)

*Note: Members of these groups were not asked questions relating to their specific group*

	%			
	All respondents	Catholic	Protestant	Difference
<b>Colleague</b>				
Eastern European	90	96	87	9
Muslim	80	85	77	8
Irish Traveller	70	83	58	25
<b>Relative through marriage</b>				
Eastern European	80	89	74	15
Muslim	64	75	55	20
Irish Traveller	58	73	45	28

background or gender. Again, responses varied according to self-reported prejudice, although the gap was not as large as among NILT respondents.

### Hierarchies of acceptance

As the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement grew, there emerged new and renewed solidarities between Black and indigenous communities across the globe. The common experiences of cultural erasure, criminalisation

by lack of familiarity with the group, they can also be affected by consistently negative media coverage, such as that received by both Travellers and Muslims in both British and Irish media.

In 2019, most respondents would accept someone from Eastern Europe as a colleague at work (90%), although lower proportions would accept a Muslim as a colleague (80%) or an Irish Traveller (70%). Catholics

were more accepting of these groups as colleagues than Protestant participants were, especially in relation to Irish Travellers (28 percentage points).

### Levels of immigration

Black and ethnic minority groups are often perceived to be recent migrants, even when significant proportions of these populations were born in Northern Ireland. Black residents are also often believed to be asylum seekers

or refugees (Murphy and Vieten, 2019), further deepening the perception of them as ‘outsiders’ (Malischewski, 2013). It is valuable, therefore, to look at attitudes towards immigration and asylum when considering attitudes to minorities, whilst remembering that these are different groups of people.

immigrants to Northern Ireland is similar to the proportion who wanted it decreased (20% and 18% respectively). This contrasts with 2014, when nearly one half of respondents (46%) supported decreased immigration. Negative attitudes to immigration had nearly halved by 2016, perhaps driven by high profile public

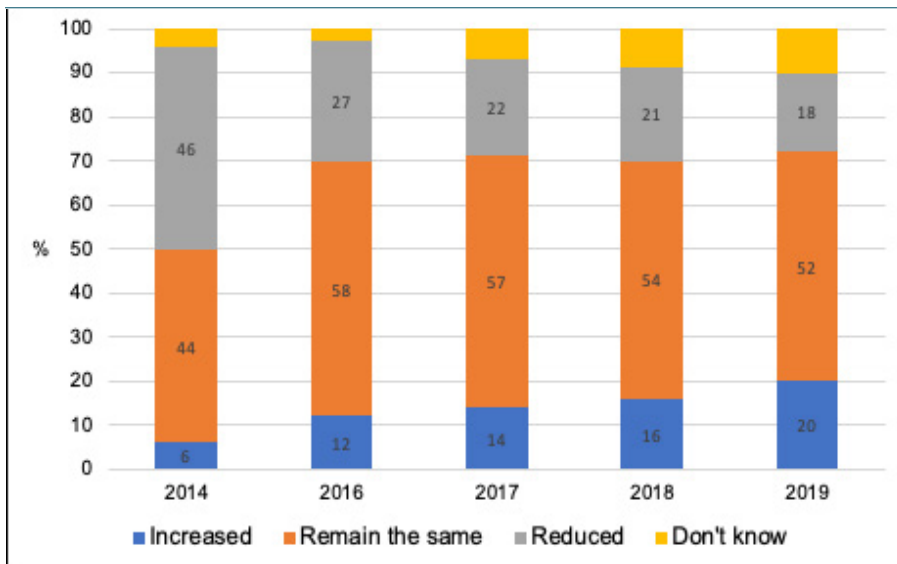
favoured decreased immigration (Blinder and Richards, 2020). While Northern Ireland remained the least ethnically diverse region in the UK in 2011, it also has been the most dependent on migrant workers, and this appears to have had an impact on recent attitudes (Michael, 2020).

### Asylum seekers and refugees

Both NILT and YLT included questions relating to the support given to refugees. In 2019, two thirds of NILT respondents (65%) felt that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country (see **Table 3**). This was highest among 45-54 year olds (74%), and lowest among 18-24 year olds (55%). Matching this, a slight majority of YLT respondents (58%) felt this sense of duty towards refugees.

Nevertheless, only 39 per cent of NILT respondents felt that Northern Ireland was a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country, and again, there was

**Figure 2:** Attitudes to number of immigrants (NILT, 2014 to 2019)



As seen in **Figure 2**, approximately one half of participants in 2019 (52%) believe that the number of immigrants to Northern Ireland should remain as it is. The proportion of people supporting an increase in the number of

conversations about the benefits of immigration in the context of Brexit. The positive attitudes towards immigration in Northern Ireland put it at odds with the wider UK picture: in 2019, 44 per cent of people across the UK

**Table 3:** Attitudes towards refugees (2019)

	%			
	Duty to provide protection		Northern Ireland welcomes refugees	
	NILT	YLT	NILT	YLT
Strongly agree/agree	65	58	39	28
Neither agree nor disagree	16	21	22	29
Strongly disagree/disagree	15	15	27	30
I don't know	4	7	12	13

variation according to age. Whilst 47 per cent of 45-54 year olds felt that Northern Ireland welcomed refugees, only 25 per cent of 18-24 year olds did. This was similar to the figure of 28 per cent among YLT respondents (16 years old). Across both surveys, Catholics were more likely than Protestants and those with no religion to feel that we have a duty to provide protection to refugees, and to think that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees.

Among NILT respondents, support for asylum seekers to stay in Northern Ireland increased from 54 per cent in 2018 to 60 per cent in 2019. In particular, higher levels of support was evident among people of no religion and Catholics (67% and 66% respectively) than among Protestants (51%).

## Conclusion

The surveys tell a mixed story. There has been a fall in the proportion of people thinking that racial prejudice is rising. There is a general appreciation that the culture and traditions of different

minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society. Attitudes towards immigration levels have become more positive since 2014.

However, increasingly positive attitudes are not due to having personal relationships with Black and minority ethnic communities. The population remains small and the proportion of participants who claimed to have Black friends (14%) was lower in 2019 than at any time in the previous decade. The indigenous minority, Irish Travellers, continue to be the least accepted ethnic group in Northern Irish society, as neighbours, friends, colleagues and family.

Three in ten NILT respondents (29%) described themselves very or a little prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities, compared with 16 per cent of YLT respondents. Despite a majority of respondents thinking that we have a duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution in their home country, a minority of respondents (39% for NILT and

28% for YLT) feel that Northern Ireland is a welcoming place for refugees.

The Black Lives Matter protests attracted widespread attention and debate during 2020. Thus, the data from the 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey will provide an important indicator of how much these protests have impacted on public attitudes.

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## Author

Dr Lucy Michael is a Research and Training Consultant in the areas of integration and equality  
[www.lucymichael.ie](http://www.lucymichael.ie)

## Key points

- In 2019, 29% of NILT respondents described themselves very or a little prejudiced against people of minority ethnic communities. 69% said that they were not prejudiced at all.
- 16% of YLT respondents said that they were prejudiced, and 73% said they were not prejudiced at all.
- 45% of YLT respondents had witnessed some kind of racist bullying or harassment in their school.
- 61% of NILT respondents, and 52% of YLT respondents agreed that the culture and traditions of different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society.
- Attitudes to Black, minority ethnic and indigenous groups have not improved since 2016.
- Fewer people reported having Black or Eastern European friends in 2019 than in previous years. The proportion who claimed to have Black friends was lower in 2019 than at any time in the previous decade.
- In 2019, 65% of NILT respondents and 58% of YLT respondents felt that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country.
- 39% of NILT respondents in 2019 thought that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country. Only 28% of YLT respondents thought this.

[The questions on minority ethnic groups were funded by The Executive Office.](#)

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times and Young Life and Times surveys are carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. The surveys are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey websites at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt> and <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt>

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University



School of Social Sciences, Education and  
Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034 E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Applied Social and  
Policy Sciences  
Ulster University  
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB  
Tel: 028 9036 6339 E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)



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