When connected to the BHPS, the survey is one of the few in the western world making it possible to track both the demographic backgrounds and attitudes of large numbers of individuals over time.

Rich data on mixed marriages, mixed-race individuals, friendships and households will enable researchers to explore whether these factors are associated with less white British people leaving an area, lower levels of anti-immigration sentiment and right-wing voting.

Other features of Understanding Society that make the research possible include:

- the large sample size permits analysis of people living in ethnically diverse wards (segregated or integrated) and relatively white wards adjoining diverse ones
- Wave 5 of the survey captures information from 200 BNP and 200 UKIP supporters, sufficient to test a range of interesting variables
- information can be linked to ward-level census data
- unlike national surveys, this allows for the analysis of how attitudes change at local level, how moving is connected to attitudes, and how the local affects the national.

Policy implications – what the research says

Contact with immigrants and minorities is not as important as some believe in changing attitudes because diverse areas are also transient, and transience affects white attitudes more than diversity.

Greater opposition in local authority areas compared with smaller wards can be explained by the idea that people with few face-to-face contacts with immigrants and minorities can be threatened by an awareness of ethnic change in their wider area, but this sense of threat is reduced by contact with minorities and immigrants who live close by.

Further information and resources

Exit, voice or accommodation?: white working-class responses to ethnic change in Britain. Demos. http://www.demos.org.uk/research/interests/white-working-class

Kaufmann. White Flight from London. http://www.demos.co.uk/blog/whiteflightfromlondon


If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email info@understandingsociety.ac.uk.
As immigrants move in, so the argument goes, white residents who consider themselves as being in the minority move out. Some see this as a sign that Britain is becoming more segregated and that the UK is becoming polarised as white British people ‘flee’ or ‘squeezed out’ of the cities.

But is it just the white working class who are moving out of British cities? Is the notion of ‘white flight’ a simplist view of a much more complex and nuanced picture? And is, in fact, a third possibility that certain ethnic newcomers and the white British population produce ‘white acceptance’ of diversity?

In an effort to paint a picture of white working class responses to increased diversity a team of researchers from Birkbeck College London and the think tank Demos are conducting an unprecedented programme of research. Ex. Vote or Accommodation? while working class responses to ethnic change in Britain, is a project funded by the ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative.

Key findings include:
- Although evidence of ‘white flight’ is significant, when white British people move - notably the white working class and white homeowners - they are more likely to opt for whiter areas than minorities. This may be because people move toward friends and family, or because they prefer different cultural amenities, all of which draw whites and minorities to different locales.
- Far from being driven out, white British people who move (be this to a diverse or homogeneous area) tend to be more tolerant of immigration than those who stay in their neighborhoods.
- Whites in more transit areas with a higher share of renters and single tend to be more tolerant of immigration even if they themselves homeowners or council tenants.
- While middle class people attitudes are more affected than those of white working class people by contact with ethnically diverse communities.
- Even evidence of ‘white flight’ is negotiable, when white British people move - notably the white working class and white homeowners - they are more likely to opt for whiter areas than minorities. This may be because people move toward friends and family, or because they prefer different cultural amenities, all of which draw whites and minorities to different locales.

Policy context
According to the 2011 census, over the last 10 years London grew by 32% to 8.2 million. Over the same time, the white British population fell by 620,000. Ethnic minorities now represent 40% of London’s total population.

Far from being driven out, white British people who move tend to be more tolerant of immigration than those who stay in their neighborhoods.

Some groups that criticise the previous Labour Government’s ‘mass immigration’ policy say it led to large numbers of immigrants flooding into big cities, and driving out the local white population. Others, such as researchers Professor Eric Kaufmann and Dr Caitlin Harris argue, however, that most ethnically diverse words are urban and poor and that whites may be leaving for better schools, cheaper homes, fresher air, because they are more likely to be retirees, wealthier or better educated. Kaufmann asserts:

- commuter towns that fringe the capital are quietly becoming more mixed.
- as European migrants head towards cities, richer Asians and blacks are leaving city centres for largely white suburbs and young whites are moving mostly with other cultures in the cities.
- ethnic mixing and integration is being helped by more minority people moving into England’s whiter areas.
- people of all races are moving out, although there is evidence that when people move, whites - especially working-class whites - tend to move to significantly whiter areas than minorities.
- With neighbourhood integration at the heart of David Cameron’s ambitions for a Big Society, coupled with increased diversity due to new immigration, it is an issue which will continue to dominate policy debate and the headlines.

A mounting concern that the white British population is abandoning cities due to an influx of ethnic minorities has led some commentators to conclude there is ‘white flight’ from urban areas.

However, as the ESRC project research shows, many white British people are not being driven out but are moving to areas that are already white.

The research project
The research looks at whether white British working class people are moving away from the city to avoid the influx of ethnic minorities or whether other factors are at work.

It also explores interconnections between white working-class mobility, opposition to immigration and far-right voting and looks in depth at processes of accommodation or what brings about the acceptance of diversity.

The project uses four major UK datasets:
- Understanding Society/British Household Panel Survey
- The Home Office Citizenship Surveys
- ONS Longitudinal Survey and
- ONS small-area census data (2011 and when available, 2011 release).

Electoral data going back to 2000 is also being used.

Why Understanding Society and BHPS?
Understanding Society is being used to look at the connections between the ethnic composition of local authorities and:
- how this affects individuals’ attitudes towards immigration
- how this affects individuals’ actual movement of neighbourhood
- individual’s intentions to leave their neighbourhood
- individual’s opinions about their neighbourhood
- voting behaviour.

The study asks a range of relevant and useful questions about people, political and ideological leanings, English national identity, intentions to move, how they plan to vote in religion and migration history.

Most ethnically diverse wards are urban and poor. Whites may be leaving for better schools, cheaper homes, fresher air; or because they are more likely to be retirees, wealthier or better educated.