# More than half of top GCSE achievers leave hometown by 32, deepening regional divides



The decision to leave one's hometown is often a significant milestone in life, shaped by a variety of personal and economic factors. For many high achievers, particularly those who excel academically in their teenage years, this move tends to happen by the early thirties, driven largely by the pursuit of better career opportunities and personal growth.

A recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies reveals that 59 per cent of individuals who scored in the top five per cent on their GCSEs and were raised outside London had left their hometown by age 32. This migration pattern reflects broader regional inequalities, as highlighted by Xiaowei Xu, a senior research economist and author of the study. Xu explains that talented individuals are motivated to relocate to secure jobs that match their skills, which are often found in more productive firms offering training and career advancement. Without improved local opportunities, simply boosting skills in less prosperous areas will not be enough to bridge economic divides. Instead, creating places where skills are rewarded and opportunities abound is essential.

London emerges as a primary destination for graduates, attracting around 25 per cent of these top achievers in their mid-twenties, despite only 13 per cent originally growing up in the capital. An additional 14 per cent settle in the surrounding "Travel to Work Areas" (TTWAs), such as Kent, East Sussex, Surrey, and Oxfordshire, bringing the total concentration of high-achievers in and around London to 40 per cent. After spending several years establishing themselves in the city, many move out in their early thirties, often seeking more affordable housing or preparing to raise families. Interestingly, these individuals tend to relocate not back to their hometowns but to already prosperous areas nearby, reinforcing the socioeconomic divide between the South East and other regions of England.

Studies from government bodies and research organisations corroborate the financial incentives underpinning this migration. Graduates in London earn markedly higher salaries—on average around £32,657 per year—compared to their peers in other regions such as the South East (£28,148) or the North East (£27,598). Median weekly earnings in London remain the highest in the UK at £853, compared with just £661 in the North East, reflecting the costly but lucrative allure of the capital. Over the years, graduates in London have seen nearly a 20 per cent increase in median earnings, outstripping regions like the East Midlands and North East.

However, these regional disparities exacerbate social immobility. Graduates born in northern areas, particularly the North East, face lower lifetime earnings and reduced opportunities to live and work elsewhere. For example, ten years post-graduation, London-born graduates earn roughly £35,600 annually, compared to just £29,200 for their North East counterparts. Moreover, only about 70 per cent of those from the North East have the ability to relocate within England, a factor that further entrenches economic and social divides.

The South East’s status as an economic hub attracts considerable numbers of talented individuals who often maintain strong economic ties within commuting distance of London. The migration trends, highlighted by the report, indicate that while graduates leave London in their early thirties, they predominantly move to already thriving TTWAs rather than returning to their origins. This pattern reshapes the spatial distribution of skills, reinforcing London's role as a magnet for talent and amplifying regional inequalities.

While moving away from a hometown can bring excitement and opportunities, the research underscores how these decisions both reflect and intensify existing regional disparities across the UK. Tackling these challenges requires more than just skill enhancement in less prosperous areas; it necessitates strategic investments in creating rewarding careers and vibrant communities outside economic hotspots like London.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/graduate-salaries-in-the-uk), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-2021-to-2022)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandlivingconditions/articles/earningsandhoursworkedbyagegroup/2024), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-2021-to-2022), [[6]](https://www.fenews.co.uk/skills/shocking-stats-that-reveal-the-true-extent-of-social-immobility-in-the-uk/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14838051/exact-age-left-hometown-clever-revealed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandlivingconditions/articles/earningsandhoursworkedbyagegroup/2024> - This report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides detailed data on earnings and hours worked across different age groups in the UK. It highlights that median annual earnings increase with age, peaking in the forties, before declining in the fifties and sixties. The report also discusses regional variations, noting that London has the highest median weekly earnings at £853, followed by the South East at £779, while the North East has the lowest at £661. Additionally, it addresses the gender pay gap, with men earning a median of £709 per week compared to women's £529. The data underscores the impact of age and location on earnings in the UK.
3. <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/graduate-salaries-in-the-uk> - Prospects.ac.uk offers comprehensive data on graduate salaries across the UK. Their analysis reveals that graduates employed in London report higher salaries than those in any other region. The average annual salary for graduates working in London is £32,657, compared to £28,148 in the South East and £27,598 in the South West. The report also highlights that while higher salaries in London are attractive, the cost of living is significantly higher, which can affect graduates' disposable income. This information is crucial for understanding the financial implications of regional employment choices for graduates.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-2021-to-2022> - The UK Department for Education's 'Graduate Outcomes' report provides insights into the employment and earnings of higher education graduates. It shows that graduates living in London have the highest earnings, with a 19.5% increase in median earnings between 2015/16 and 2021/22. In contrast, the East Midlands and North East experienced the lowest increases at 14.3% and 14.5%, respectively. The report also illustrates that graduates in London earn significantly more than those in the North East, with median earnings five years after graduation being £32,657 in London compared to £27,417 in the North East. This data highlights the regional disparities in graduate earnings across the UK.
5. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-big-englands-north-south-divide-graduate-salaries> - An article from Times Higher Education examines the significant North-South divide in graduate salaries in England. It reveals that graduates from universities in the South of England earn, on average, nearly £5,000 more than their counterparts from the North five years after graduation. The study highlights that the median salary for law graduates from southern universities is just under £5,000 higher than that of their northern peers, while for mathematical sciences graduates, the difference is almost £4,000. The article underscores the economic disparities between the North and South of England and their impact on graduate earnings.
6. <https://www.fenews.co.uk/skills/shocking-stats-that-reveal-the-true-extent-of-social-immobility-in-the-uk/> - An article from FE News discusses the extent of social immobility in the UK, focusing on the earnings of graduates from different regions. It highlights that graduates born in London can expect to earn £35,600 ten years after leaving university, while those from the North East earn £29,200 over the same period. The article also notes that graduates from the North East have the least ability to live and work in different regions of England, with only 70% able to do so. These statistics reveal significant regional disparities in graduate earnings and mobility within the UK.
7. <https://www.plumplot.co.uk/South-West-salary-and-unemployment.html> - Plumplot provides data on average salaries and unemployment rates in the South West of England. The average salary in the South West is £40,500, compared to the UK average of £45,800 in 2024. The report also breaks down average salaries by sex, noting that the average salary for females in the South West is £35,800, while for males it is £43,700. Additionally, it compares these figures to other regions, highlighting that London has the highest average salary at £66,000, and the South East at £46,000. This data offers insights into regional salary variations and gender disparities within the UK.