

Scapegoating in South Africa

Busting the myths about immigrants

Anthony Kaziboni, Lizette Lancaster, Thato Machabaphala and Godfrey Mulaudzi



Public officials and politicians routinely blame immigrants for a range of social and economic problems in South Africa. This reinforces negative, xenophobic sentiments among many people. The research and analysis presented in this report tests the validity of these widely held beliefs. It shows that they are largely false and can only have detrimental consequences for South Africa's economy and people.

Key findings

- ▶ South African socio-economic problems are not caused by immigrants but by poor governance and corruption.
- ▶ Many politicians, public officials and other high-profile people regularly make anti-immigrant statements that fuel xenophobia.
- ▶ The number of migrants in South Africa is grossly exaggerated. There are about 3.95 million migrants in the country, comprising about 6.5% of the population. This is in line with international norms.
- ▶ Immigrants contribute positively to the country. They contribute about 9% of GDP and boost employment because every working immigrant creates two local jobs.
- ▶ Criminal justice data show that immigrants are less likely to commit crime than South Africans. Only about 2.3% of inmates incarcerated per year are undocumented foreigners.
- ▶ Immigrants are less likely than South Africans to be convicted of serious crimes such as murder and rape. However, they are disproportionately targeted in police operations and caught for minor crimes such as drug possession or use.
- ▶ While the 2019 National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (NAP) is welcome, inadequate attention is being given to implementing proactive programmes that address xenophobia.

Recommendations

- ▶ Statistics South Africa needs to make population data easily accessible and understandable to government departments and ministries, political parties and the general public.
- ▶ The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ&CD), which is responsible for implementing the NAP, needs to work with other government departments and civil society to gather accurate information that dispels myths and misinformation about immigrants in South Africa.
- ▶ The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) should ensure that credible, accurate and reliable information about immigrants is disseminated in all official languages, reaching communities in urban, peri-urban and rural areas.
- ▶ The DoJ&CD and GCIS should coordinate with other government departments and ministries in anti-xenophobia training, particularly those that deal with migrants like the Departments of Home Affairs, Health, Employment and Labour, Social Development and the South African Police Services (SAPS).
- ▶ The SAPS could improve public safety if it targeted individuals, groups and networks involved in specific priority crimes such as murder, armed robbery and extortion. Targeting broad categories of people, like immigrants, fails to reduce crime, wastes police time and state resources, and undermines police–community relationships.
- ▶ Organisations across all sectors should commit to tackling xenophobia as they would racism or sexism. Their representatives should use credible, accurate and reliable population data when addressing their respective constituencies about immigrants and immigration.
- ▶ Media outlets should fact check statements about immigrants and correct claims that are patently untrue.

Introduction

The issue of cross-border immigration is often the subject of contentious and emotive debate in the host country.¹ A disturbing trend emerging globally is that governments and right-wing conservative groups tend to blame and scapegoat immigrants for socio-economic problems like crime, disease, unemployment and poverty. The blaming and scapegoating of immigrants as a cause of socio-economic ills is not unique to South Africa.² This was the case in the United States of America with former president Donald Trump and especially Mexican immigrants,³ in Turkey with the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan-led Turkish government and Syrian refugees,⁴ as well as in England and France.⁵ This 'attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-nationals in a given population' is defined as xenophobia.⁶

Since democracy in 1994, anti-foreigner sentiment has been growing in South Africa, with more than 936 violent xenophobic incidents recorded. These have resulted in more than 630 deaths, the displacement of 123 700 people and the looting of about 4 850 shops.⁷ The most widespread xenophobic attacks, negatively affecting thousands of people and making international headlines, occurred in 2008⁸ and 2015.⁹ Unfortunately, the country seems unable to learn important lessons from this violence to prevent it from reoccurring.

The scapegoating of immigrants as a cause of socio-economic ills is not unique to South Africa, and is part of a disturbing global trend

While xenophobic sentiment is not new in South Africa, there are some worrying recent developments that deserve attention. During 2019, statements that fuelled xenophobic sentiment were made by a number of politicians from mainstream political parties while campaigning for the national and provincial elections held that year. The country also experienced violent attacks on foreign-born truck drivers. Many vehicles were torched and some drivers killed for being non-South Africans.

In 2020 various community-based groups started to mobilise around an anti-immigrant agenda. These include Operation Dudula, which started in Soweto and has since opened branches across the country, and the unrelated Dudula Movement, based in the Johannesburg township of Alexandra. The isiZulu word *Dudula* means 'to push', seemingly denoting pushing foreigners out of the country.

Both groups blame immigrants for a range of socio-economic challenges, including high levels of crime and unemployment. Immigrants have also been accused of being the cause of poor service delivery with regards to public housing, health and schooling, as they use these services which some people believe should be reserved for citizens. These groups espouse the

>630

NUMBER OF DEATHS
RESULTING FROM
XENOPHOBIC INCIDENTS
IN SA SINCE 1994

idea that if immigrants were removed from the country, citizens would have more jobs, less crime and better service delivery.

However, the assumptions that immigrants are the cause of these problems or contribute to worsening conditions for locals are rarely interrogated. Furthermore, some public officials and politicians have used migration to direct citizens' anger toward immigrants and away from state failure relating to poor governance, corruption and non-responsiveness to community needs.¹⁰

United Nations experts tracking the growing xenophobia in South Africa issued the following public statement in 2022:

Anti-migrant discourse from senior government officials has fanned the flames of violence, and government actors have failed to prevent further violence or hold perpetrators accountable. Without urgent action from the government of South Africa to curb the scapegoating of migrants and refugees, and the widespread violence and intimidation against these groups, we are deeply concerned that the country is on the precipice of explosive violence.¹¹

This report examines what the evidence says about some of the most common accusations against immigrants, including that:

- There are many millions of immigrants in the country, and in the Johannesburg CBD, for example, more than 80% of the population consists of immigrants.
- The large numbers of immigrants are the cause of, or contribute to, high levels of unemployment in South Africa.
- Foreign nationals are the cause of, or contribute to, the country's high levels of crime.
- Foreign nationals place an undue burden on public services, which contributes to poor service delivery for citizens.
- Immigrants do not want to be documented and choose to be in the country illegally.

While the above statements reflect the commonly held beliefs of many people in South Africa, this paper will show that it is not possible to sustain them on the available evidence. Consequently, in order to prevent

xenophobic sentiment from spreading and contributing to violence, it is necessary to challenge these sentiments. Moreover, political parties and other organisations need to familiarise themselves with immigration facts so that they can counter such narratives and hold their officials or members accountable for spreading false information that fuels xenophobia in South Africa.¹²

In this report, the term 'immigrants' denotes non-South Africans residing in the country as asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants, students, permanent residents and undocumented foreign-born nationals or their children.

Linking poverty, inequality, unemployment and xenophobia

For more than a decade, South Africa has exhibited increasing levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment – what some commentators have termed the 'triple challenge'.¹³ More than half of the country's population lives in poverty, and with a Gini coefficient of 0.65, South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world.¹⁴ This is partly due to the country's exceptionally high unemployment rate. Almost two-thirds (63.9%) of people aged 15 to 24 and 42.1% of people aged 25 to 34 are out of work. At the time of writing, the official national rate stood at 34.5%.¹⁵

Around 6.5% of South Africa's population is foreign born, which is in line with international norms

In his 2021 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana warned about the impact of corruption on public finances. Annually, South Africa is estimated to lose about R27 billion to corruption. This figure is more than one-third of the 2021/22 national health budget.¹⁶ Corruption and other illicit activities deplete funds available for critical areas such as housing, social grants and public healthcare.¹⁷ Godongwana has warned that local government's continued decline in basic service provision is a 'breeding ground for economic strife and future instability in South Africa'.¹⁸

Despite these challenges, South Africa is a destination of choice for many African immigrant groups such as

economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. This is because of the country's comparatively better economy compared to other African countries, along with a strong judicial system anchored in the rule of law and respect for human rights.¹⁹

Moreover, South Africa is party to a range of conventions that compel the government to support refugees. For example, the country is party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.²⁰ In line with this, Pretoria ratified the Refugees Act 1998 (Act 130 of 1998). Through the Act, refugees have the right to work and travel, and to access social welfare, healthcare and education.

South Africa is often internationally praised for its refugee programme. For example, in 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Filippo Grandi, noted that it was one of the best systems globally, at least on paper. However, due to a combination of inefficiencies and corruption, it has also been alleged that in practice the system contributes to xenophobia.²¹

Unfortunately, due to government policy and implementation failures, along with events such as the COVID-19 lockdown regulations, the socio-economic conditions have worsened notably in recent years. Unwilling to acknowledge their own failures, many politicians and public officials attempt to use their positions of authority and power to redirect the citizenry's anger away from themselves. They do this through scapegoating foreign nationals as the source of many of these challenges. Blaming immigrants also provides an increasingly frustrated population with an easy explanation for their difficult situation. Narratives that blame social ills on immigrants, if repeated often, are likely to drive xenophobia. As Crush and Ramachandran note:

Scapegoating tendencies and public rhetoric of fear and loathing collectively shape and define the contours of the symbolic threat posed by immigrants. That is, they transform diverse immigrant groups in the public imagination as an undifferentiated mass, representing a menace and threat to the well-being and security of host populations.²²

In South Africa, black African and Asian immigrants have been negatively stereotyped as 'illegal' and 'job stealers' who are 'criminal' as well as 'diseased'.²³ While immigrants from African countries with shared ethnic characteristics to South Africans, like Botswana, Lesotho and eSwatini, are generally more tolerated, immigrants from other African countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique are disliked and referred to as *kwerekwere*.²⁴ The term denotes that locals consider other black Africans strange, with peculiar-sounding dialects,²⁵ thus condoning violence against them.

Is South Africa swamped with immigrants?

Since the 1990s, a dominant discourse has been the existence of 'uncontrollable' in-migration. All immigrants, irrespective of residency status or gender, are typically grouped into arbitrary categories such as 'aliens,' 'illegals' and 'foreigners'.²⁶ Over the years, various politicians have remarked on the number of immigrants in the country. For example, the first post-apartheid Home Affairs minister, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, made the following unsubstantiated claim to the National Parliament in 1997:

With an illegal population estimated at between 2.5 million and 5 million, it is obvious that the socio-economic resources of the country, which are under severe strain as it is, are further being burdened by the presence of illegal aliens.²⁷

Twenty years later, in 2017, then Deputy Police Minister Bongani Mkhongeni alleged that 80% of inner-city Johannesburg was under migrants' control. He added that failure to address this would result in the country being about '80% dominated by foreign nationals and the future president of South Africa could be a foreign national'.²⁸ More recently, in 2021, Gayton McKenzie, the leader of the Patriotic Alliance (PA), tweeted that there were 10 million undocumented immigrants in the country.²⁹

These unfounded statements have contributed substantially to many South Africans' perceptions that the country is overrun with immigrants. The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) for 2021 found that almost half (48%) of the population believed there were between 17 and 40 million immigrants in the country.³⁰ However, this is totally false.

According to South Africa's statistician-general, Risenga Maluleke, there is 'erroneous reporting of undocumented

migrants in SA.³¹ Based on the best available 2021 mid-year population estimates, there are about 3.95 million immigrants in South Africa. Therefore, around 6.5% of the country's population of over 60 million is foreign born, with many having moved to South Africa with their parents when they were children.³² This figure includes all immigrants, irrespective of legal status, where they come from or their socio-economic situation.³³

Moreover, this percentage is in line with international norms and does not indicate that South Africa has a higher proportion of immigrants than most other countries.³⁴ Regarding refugees, in 2019 there were 280 004 refugees in the country of whom 189 491 were asylum seekers and 90 513 had official refugee status.³⁵ Most refugees and asylum seekers are from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia and Zimbabwe, countries plagued by conflict, poverty and food insecurity.³⁶

Do immigrants steal jobs?

A common belief, not only in South Africa, is that immigrants steal citizens' jobs.³⁷ This persistent myth has been propagated by senior politicians and public officials.³⁸ For example, former energy minister Jeff Radebe claimed foreign nationals were 'dominating trade in certain sectors such as consumable goods in informal settlements which has had a negative impact on unemployed and low skilled South Africans.'³⁹ The PA's McKenzie blamed immigrants for 'job stealing': 'South Africans don't have jobs. White businesses (in South Africa) have found new slaves in foreigners.'⁴⁰ These remarks were part of his party's election campaign manifesto in 2021 and were broadcast on national television.⁴¹ Such remarks are clearly aimed at stirring up discontent towards immigrants.

Rather than undermining South Africa's economy, immigrants contribute around 9% of GDP and have a positive net impact on the government's fiscus

Although the South African job market is shrinking, as evidenced by quarterly labour force surveys, with each quarter showing a great expansion of the unemployment rate, it is not accurate to blame immigrant labourers.⁴² There is no evidence to suggest that immigrants take employment opportunities away from South African workers.⁴³ Rather, there is evidence that the opposite is true – that immigrants often create employment for South Africans.⁴⁴ According to a 2018 World Bank study drawing from data collected between 1996 and 2011 in South Africa, 'one immigrant worker generates approximately two jobs for locals.'⁴⁵

Immigrants are generally more likely to be self-employed and to employ South Africans. Moreover, a little-known fact is that rather than undermining the economy, immigrants contribute an estimated 9% of the country's

3.95
MILLION

NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS
IN SA ACCORDING TO 2021
POPULATION ESTIMATES

Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴⁶ They also have a positive net impact on the government’s fiscus, which is attributed to the fact that they generally pay income and value-added taxes.⁴⁷

A 2019 Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) report found that immigrants made up only 5.3% of the labour market.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, between 2012 and 2017, the height of the state capture years, the percentage of the labour employed decreased markedly for all groups, irrespective of migration status (Chart 1).⁴⁹ Migration status in this context refers to citizens and residents that did not move during this five-year period (‘non-movers’), persons that did move internally in the country (internal migrants) and foreign ‘immigrants’.⁵⁰ Interestingly, immigrants are about 7% more likely to be employed than internal migrants and about 11% more likely than local non-movers.⁵¹ This can arguably be attributed to immigrants having limited access to social protection networks and support, which is a compelling factor for them to seek employment.

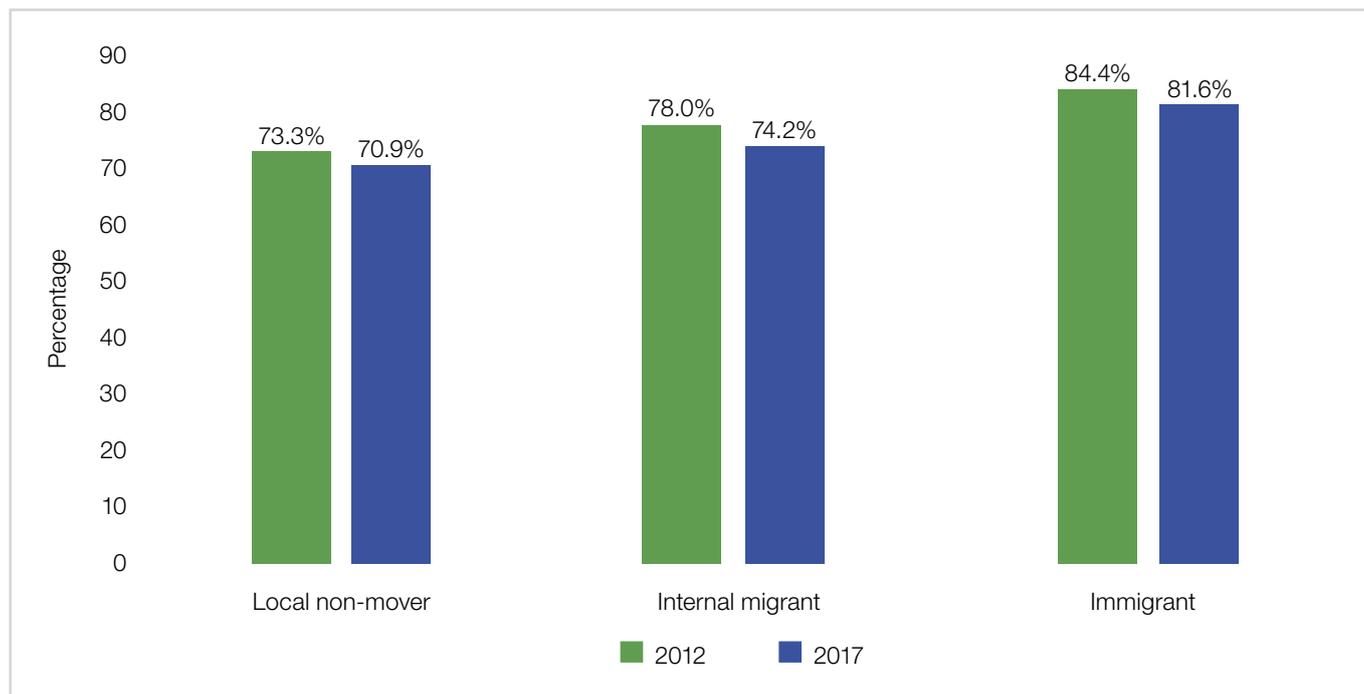
Chart 1 indicates that while the employment rate is consistently higher for immigrants, the decrease in employment opportunities is similar across the three groups, irrespective of migration status.

Stats SA’s analysis found that most immigrants work in the informal sector where they are not protected by labour laws and are afforded minimal worker rights.⁵² Using the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) decent job framework, Stats SA’s analysis shows that immigrants are more likely to be employed in the informal sector when compared to South African non-movers or internal migrants.⁵³

In comparison to locals, immigrants are more likely to work excessive hours, are less likely to be entitled to benefits or protections such as maternity or paternity leave, have an employment contract, hold a permanent employment position, have an employer contributing to pension or the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) or be affiliated to a labour union. The data show that in 2017, 29.3% of the immigrants who were employed were in the informal sector.⁵⁴

Most immigrants and internal migrants are drawn to Gauteng because of the province’s relatively high level of economic development, which provides the greatest work opportunities. The second most desirable province is the Western Cape.⁵⁵ Immigrants are also more likely to be concentrated in metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Cape

Chart 1: Proportion employed by migration status



Source: Stats SA, 2019

Town and eThekweni. These areas are already characterised by rapid urbanisation caused by high internal in-migration from the rural areas, where there are few employment options.

Do immigrants cause high crime levels?

One of the country's most dangerous criminals, currently serving a 35-year prison sentence for a range of crimes and facing trial on numerous other charges, is Radovan Krejcir, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia.⁵⁶ While some immigrants do commit crimes in South Africa, there is a widely held public perception that they contribute an inordinate amount to the overall crime levels. This perception is partly fuelled by populist statements made by politicians.

During his first 100-days-in-office address in 2016, the former Democratic Alliance (DA) mayor for Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba, expressed his determination to deal with 'illegal' immigration. He indicated that '[irregular foreigners] are holding our country to ransom and I am going to be the last South African to allow it.'⁵⁷ In a follow-up interview, he stated that foreign nationals who are in Johannesburg without documentation are linked to criminal activity in the city.⁵⁸ The mayor could not provide evidence or data that supported this claim.⁵⁹

There is no evidence that most immigrants commit crime or are responsible for most crime in SA

At an African National Congress (ANC) rally in 2019, South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, undertook to deal decisively with immigrants who were being blamed for setting up unlicensed establishments: 'Everyone just arrives in our townships and rural areas and sets up businesses without licenses and permits. We are going to bring this to an end. And those who are operating illegally, wherever they come from, must now know.'⁶⁰ These too were unfounded remarks. Some of the president's critics indicated that these remarks ignited subsequent attacks on immigrants in Durban.⁶¹ More recently, anti-immigrant vigilante groups, such as

Operation Dudula, have also indicated that immigrants are responsible for most crimes in South Africa.⁶²

According to the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) SASAS data, most South Africans believe that immigrants are responsible for crime in the country.⁶³ The 2008 survey found that 62% of South Africans believed that immigrants increased crime. By 2016, 66% agreed with this statement.⁶⁴ However, when asked who commits crime in their areas, most people say it is locally based citizens. For example, between 2011 and 2017, the national Victims of Crime surveys showed that only a small minority of households (5.7%–6.7%) stated that crime in their areas was caused by 'people from outside South Africa.'⁶⁵ This shows how dangerous populist statements can be in influencing people's general perceptions.

There is no statistical relationship between international migration in South Africa and crime.⁶⁶ There is also no evidence that most immigrants commit crimes or are responsible for most crimes in the country.⁶⁷

The SAPS also responds to and perpetuates notions about immigrants being engaged in crime. This is partly due to the high level of political interference in their operations. For example, in 2015, Operation Fiela was initiated in response to attacks on immigrants in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. However, it morphed into a targeted campaign against immigrants when citizens complained to politicians that the police were responding to xenophobic violence when they had largely ignored or been ineffectual in tackling local criminal activity.⁶⁸

As a result, 15 396 persons were apprehended and deported between April and July 2015. The large number of deportations had no positive impact on the crime situation. For example, the crime statistics for that year show that violent crime continued to increase, with a 4.9% increase in murder and 2.7% increase in armed robberies.⁶⁹

More recently, the SAPS used similar tactics in response to the vigilante Operation Dudula's illegal search and seizures.⁷⁰ These actions are criminal and leave victims vulnerable to further criminal acts such as intimidation, trespassing, malicious damage to property, arson, robbery, assault and death.⁷¹ Yet, arrests of vigilantes are

the exception. Instead of acting against the criminal actions of Dudula members, the police again targeted immigrants.

Targeting immigrants has had little impact on crime levels and, paradoxically, has contributed to higher violence levels. Annual crime statistics show that crime levels, especially violent crime levels, remain high and continue to increase while trust in the police is declining.⁷² Low levels of trust in policing result in a service delivery gap filled by vigilantism.⁷³

Although a vigilante group may start with the intention of protecting its community, it often descends into punitive criminal behaviour as the group operates outside the rule of law. If left to act with impunity, vigilante groups can rule areas with fear and violence, further driving insecurity and instability.⁷⁴ Furthermore, crime statistics and the SAPS annual reports show that law enforcement has not been able to prevent the proliferation of organised crime (including robbery, kidnapping and extortion), and intergroup and public violence.⁷⁵

While the SAPS do collect data on the demographics (sex, race, age, nationality, etc.) of suspects arrested for various crimes, these data are not shared publicly and appear to be a closely guarded secret. Nevertheless, given that the police target immigrants as a group, it can

be expected that immigrants will be overrepresented in the data of people arrested and charged for various crimes.

In the absence of SAPS data, the next best option is to look at the available data on the nationality of people who are in South African prisons. In a parliamentary response on 7 January 2022, the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, Ronald Lamola, provided the following figures for the number of ‘foreign nationals’ convicted of crimes in South Africa: 2019 – 13 897; 2020 – 9 892; 2021 (as of 21 September) – 4 887.

The minister also provided the number of immigrants convicted of murder, rape or drug-related offences. In the two-year period from January 2019 to December 2020, 30 foreign nationals were convicted for murder and 42 for rape. Of the 942 drug-related cases resulting in convictions, 39% were for dealing in drugs, with most (61%) convicted for the minor charge of drug possession or use.⁷⁶

When the figures for convictions are compared to the total number of sentenced and unsentenced inmates incarcerated per year, immigrants made up 8.5% of convicted cases in 2019 and 7.1% in 2020.⁷⁷ Chart 2 shows that between 2017 and 15 November 2021, an annual average of about 3 599 undocumented foreigners were incarcerated out of a total of 158 329 inmates. This

Chart 2: Number of ‘illegal foreigners’ incarcerated per year and their proportion of total inmates, 2017–2021

Years of recording	Number of ‘illegal foreigners’ incarcerated			Total number of inmates incarcerated			Proportion of illegal to total inmates
	Unsentenced	Sentenced	Total	Unsentenced	Sentenced	Total	Percentage of total
Period							
2017	1 325	1 670	2 995	31 604	145 995	177 599	1.7
2018	1 609	2 137	3 746	44 020	133 692	177 712	2.1
2019	2 254	2 219	4 473	46 308	116 017	162 325	2.8
2020	1 707	1 550	3 257	47 842	90 871	138 533	2.4
2021 (up to 15 Nov.)	1 780	1 743	3 523	51 727	83 749	135 476	2.6
Average over five years	1 735	1 864	3 599	44 300	114 065	158 329	2.3

Source: Department of Justice and Correctional Services; calculations by ISS

represents an average of 2.3% of the total inmate population, a far smaller percentage than is popularly believed.⁷⁸

Procedurally, once the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) releases an inmate on parole, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) is tasked with checking their nationality and immigration status. It is then the 'responsibility of the DCS to hand over such offenders to the relevant authorities either for release or deportation based on status confirmed by DHA.⁷⁹ If they are undocumented, they are typically deported to their country of origin.

Are most foreign migrants illegally in the country?

The notion that immigrants are generally in South Africa illegally is distorted and derogatory. Using the term 'illegal' is prejudicial and criminalises persons who may not have a status that qualifies them as regular. This sentiment encourages the false perception that immigrants deserve to be mistreated. When an immigrant has a suspended or expired permit or visa, they assume an 'irregular' status but are not 'illegal'.

The backlog in the Department of Home Affairs, along with corruption, impact the finalisation of permit outcomes, which compromises immigrants' status

Often, immigrants enter the country with a regular status but fall into irregular status due to poor immigration policy management. The DHA struggles with a backlog, partly as a result of departmental dysfunction,⁸⁰ and is plagued by corruption. This has impacted the finalisation of permit outcomes, which further compromises the status of immigrants.⁸¹ The existing backlogs were exacerbated by a hold placed on the processing of visas and waivers that occurred during the 2020 state of disaster regulations under the COVID-19 lockdown. Recently, the DHA instituted a 'blanket extension' until 30 September 2022 for immigrants with pending waiver and visa applications.⁸²

In addition to the DHA backlogs, it is increasingly difficult to obtain the relevant documentation in an affordable and speedy manner. The cost of applying for permits is exorbitant, which makes it difficult for individuals to achieve compliance in their migration status.⁸³ Achieving compliance is also affected by allegations (and investigations) of corruption in various DHA facilities, resulting in further barriers to accessing the correct status.⁸⁴

Do immigrants burden public services and social welfare?

Immigrants are believed to put pressure on schools, the healthcare system, social grants and service delivery.⁸⁵ For example, the former minister of health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, stated, 'The weight that foreign nationals are bringing to the country has got nothing to do with xenophobia ... it's a reality. Our hospitals are full, we can't control them.'⁸⁶

4%

PERCENTAGE OF SA
UNIVERSITY POPULATION
IN 2018 MADE UP BY
IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

As noted, immigrants account for about 6.5% of the population.⁸⁷ It is thus statistically impossible for immigrants to be responsible for the healthcare system's failings.⁸⁸ Continued claims of 'hordes' of immigrants flooding South Africa's public healthcare facilities dominate the national discourse and promote 'medical xenophobia'.⁸⁹

However, in the short run, immigrants tend to be healthier than locals. This phenomenon, called the 'healthy immigrant effect', found immigrants to have healthier diets and lifestyles, making them less likely to develop chronic diseases.⁹⁰ Furthermore, many foreign nationals come to private medical facilities for operations that they either cannot get in their countries or that are cheaper in South Africa. This results in foreign nationals spending money that benefits South Africans more broadly as they book hotels, and buy food and other goods.

Due to the birth and death registration laws in South Africa, children of immigrants often have difficulty accessing healthcare as well as education services such as schools.⁹¹ However, many South African children face a similar struggle, especially in rural areas. The regulations around registering births and deaths⁹² make it difficult for parents to receive a birth certificate for their child without a valid identity document, passport or asylum-seeker documentation.⁹³ The cost of obtaining these documents within the 30 days required to register a birth is often beyond the reach of low-income and rural communities given that DHA facilities are located in metropolitan areas and towns. Children of immigrants are often the victims of the challenges faced by their parents at the DHA.

At 6.5% of the population, it's impossible for immigrants to be responsible for SA's failing healthcare

With respect to education, the South African High Court in Makhandla handed down a ground-breaking judgment ruling that all children, whether documented or not, have the right to access education.⁹⁴ This balances the interests of the children of immigrants, stateless children and South African children.⁹⁵

The rights of a child are of paramount importance according to Section 28 of the Children's Act 38 of

2005. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has since released a circular related to the admission of undocumented children.⁹⁶ The DBE acknowledges that the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) recorded 11 905 509 children of South African origin in schools in 2021. Of those learners, 10 873 891 had verified identification documents.⁹⁷ In total, 465 826 South African learners were without identity documents in 2021. The DBE and the DHA have established teams to focus on all undocumented learners, led by the directors-general of both departments.⁹⁸

The blame for overpopulated and overwhelmed schools is incorrectly placed on immigrant children when it should instead be placed on the poorly managed education department. Similar to public healthcare facilities, schools are poorly maintained, under resourced and the construction of new schools has not kept pace with population growth.⁹⁹

Similar myths apply to higher education. Claims that immigrants are overpopulating South African universities are not true. Although South Africa is a popular education destination for neighbouring African countries, immigrant students made up only 4% of the total university population in 2018.¹⁰⁰ This is down from the previous year's 4.1%.¹⁰¹ These are generally fee-paying students who also add wealth to the overall economy due to the money they spend while studying in the country.

State-subsidised Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing is another service immigrants are assumed to have 'stolen'. Housing allocated under the RDP is targeted at formerly disadvantaged people. However, the provision of RDP housing has been plagued by mismanagement and corruption.¹⁰² Forced illegal evictions have occurred in communities such as Alexandra, where immigrants occupying RDP houses were ejected.¹⁰³

However, RDP houses can only be applied for by South African citizens or immigrants with permanent residency permits. Refugees, asylum seekers and temporary residents are not eligible. If a non-citizen without permanent residency in South Africa stays in an RDP house, it has been sub-let or sold to them by the registered South African owner.¹⁰⁴ The lessor and lessee, or buyer and seller, are thus both acting illegally regardless of their nationality.

Conclusion

While politicians often publicly denounce and condemn violence against immigrants and prefer to link it to criminality, not xenophobia, there are no effective mechanisms in place to address it. This lack of political will to address the scourge is most likely because it is easier to blame others for governance failures.

The adoption of the long-awaited and much anticipated 2019 NAP,¹⁰⁵ for example, fulfilled a longstanding commitment made by South Africa to develop and implement the Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, which took almost 20 years to develop.¹⁰⁶

However, earlier drafts of the NAP did not even refer to 'xenophobia'. The NAP treats xenophobia in a 'perfunctory manner', providing no information about the nature and extent of the phenomenon, and contains no proactive steps to address it.¹⁰⁷ The proposed remedies are largely reactive, such as condemning violence when it occurs, ratifying hate crime laws, strengthening law enforcement and prosecuting offenders. Furthermore, xenophobia is conceptualised as an economic problem within the NAP rather than a social or political one.¹⁰⁸

Due to the history of xenophobic incidents that have culminated in widespread violence and the loss of lives, it is crucial to deal with issues around migration using accurate information. Scapegoating immigrants will not result in significantly improved healthcare service provision, reduced crime or address unemployment, as suggested by some politicians and people in government.

Public officials and political leaders should refrain from making unsubstantiated allegations regarding

immigrants as these can influence general perceptions. Xenophobic remarks must be condemned in the strongest terms. Political parties and organisations must commit to tackling xenophobia as they would racism and sexism. The more xenophobic-inspired myths are perpetuated and immigrants are scapegoated, the more discrimination, hate and violence will continue breaking down social order and social cohesion.

Promoting xenophobic attitudes along with failing to take steps to prevent it will lead the country to ruin. Migration is not a problem to be solved, but an issue to be managed. Bloomberg has warned that violence against immigrants 'causes investment concerns in South Africa.'¹⁰⁹ Increasingly, because of xenophobic violence, South Africa's goods and ports are being bypassed in favour of other markets.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the ripple effects are being felt by South African businesses and migrants operating in Africa.¹¹¹

Political parties and organisations must commit to tackling xenophobia as they would racism and sexism

Fortunately, many South Africans do not hold severely xenophobic sentiments. They simply want politicians to put the country and those who live in it first. They want capable public servants who work to solve the various challenges we face and improve the economy, public safety and government services to all people. It is these South Africans who do not resort to scapegoating, who believe in the importance of facts and truth, who will ultimately determine whether the country achieves the much higher levels of safety, prosperity and development that are possible.

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About the authors

Dr Anthony Kaziboni is a political sociologist and Head of Research at the University of Johannesburg's Institute for the Future of Knowledge.

Lizette Lancaster is the Manager of the Crime Hub at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria.

Thato Machabaphala is a Junior Researcher at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria.

Godfrey Mulaudzi is a Researcher at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria.

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This report is funded by the Embassy of Finland, the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Open Society Foundation. The ISS is grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

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ISSN 2617-8206 Print
ISSN 2617-8214 Digital



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