

How willing are South Africans to participate in violent attacks on foreign nationals? This question was among those asked in the latest HSRC population survey and the findings are worrying. The authors warn against underestimating the true extent of the challenge of achieving social cohesion in South Africa – *Benjamin Roberts, Steven Gordon and Jarè Struwig*



23 April 2015. More than 3 000 people marching through the streets of Hillbrow against xenophobic attacks.

Credit: Moeletsi Mabe © The Times/Times Media

## IN THOUGHT *AND* DEED?

# Anti-immigrant violence and attitudes in South Africa

During the last decade there were growing concerns over the antipathy and incidences of violence directed towards foreign nationals in South Africa. In response, the national government convened a number of commissions to investigate the causes of these attacks. These have given rise to many interesting findings, though there is still much that is unknown about public attitudes towards anti-immigrant violence in the country. This article represents part of a programme of work seeking to better understand attitudes in this regard.

Data for the study comes from the 2015 round of SASAS, a nationally representative series conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey, undertaken between October and December 2015, included face-to-face interviews with 3 087 adults over 16 years of age, living in private homes. The data is representative of the adult public, using Statistics South Africa's most recent mid-year population estimates as a point of reference.

### The extent of violence

To capture reported engagement in anti-immigrant violence, respondents were asked: 'Have you taken part in violent action to prevent immigrants from living or working in your neighbourhood', after which they were presented with the following options to choose from:

- in the past year;
- in the more distant past;
- have not done it but might do it; and
- have not done it and would never do it?

In response, 80% of South Africans indicated that they had not taken part in such action and would never do so (Figure 1). This is an encouraging finding that highlights that anti-immigrant violence is broadly rejected by the public.

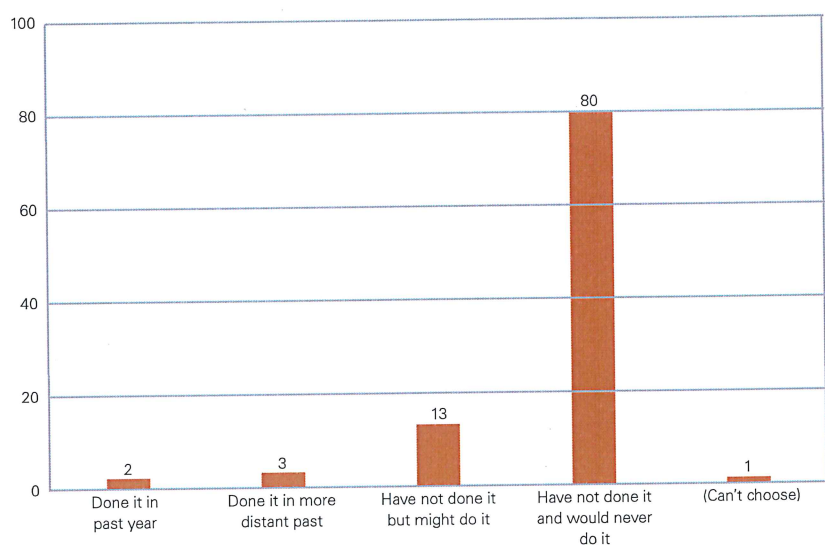
By contrast, 2.4% report having perpetrated such violence in the year prior to interviewing (late 2014-late 2015) and a further 3.4% stated that they had engaged in such behaviour in the more distant past. A combined total of 6% therefore report ever having committed such acts of violence against foreigners. On first impressions, this may not sound like an especially

**...anti-immigrant violence is broadly rejected by the public.**

large share of the population, but it is equivalent to approximately 2.2 million adults.

In addition, more than a tenth of the adult population (13%, or an estimated 4.9 million) said that they had not taken part in such an action but would be prepared to take part. That a significant segment of the public expresses the intention to possibly commit acts of violence in future is cause for concern.

**Fig 1** Reported participation in violent action to prevent immigrants from living or working in one's neighbourhood, 2015 (%)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2015

Questions may be raised about potential underreporting of past or potential future violence due to social desirability. However, similar research undertaken in Alexandra by the University of the Witwatersrand has shown that people do openly register their views on such matters. Even if there is a downward bias in reporting violent behaviour, the figures cited above are still unsettling.

### Who is more inclined to anti-immigrant violence?

There were no significant gender or age differences underlying the reporting of anti-immigrant behaviour in the country. This is a notable finding since media representations often portray younger citizens and men as more greatly predisposed to violent behaviour. There are nonetheless race and class-based variations in response to self-reported violence measure.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a distinct racial gradient in responses, with black African adults showing higher reporting on both past violent behaviour and potential future violence relative to white, Indian and coloured adults. This is likely to reflect an underlying association between deprivation and violence.

To assess living standards, use is made of the Living Standard Measure (LSM),

which is a ten-point scale ranging from the poorest (LSM 1) to the wealthiest (LSM 10) and based on the possession of household assets, services and location.

We found that there was not much difference between economic groups in the reporting of past participation in anti-immigrant violence. The share of reported violence ranged between 5% and 7% for all except those in the highest living standard group. However, these figures mask subtle variations in the percentage that reported such violent action in the last year. Six percent of those with a low living standard level reported violent action in the last year, compared with 2% to 3% of those in the lower middle through upper high categories, and less than 1% among the highest category (not shown in figure).

The economic differences are more pronounced with regard to potential violence. Those in the lower and upper middle categories show a greater inclination towards potential future violence than other categories, which in turn translates into a lower overall rejection of anti-immigrant violence. This may reflect perceptions of economic threat, though this remains to be tested.

The more affluent are the most prone of all the groups in the table to

denounce violence against foreigners. Similarly, if we examine patterns by educational attainment, those with a tertiary level education are less inclined towards violence than those with less formal schooling.

### Spatial variation

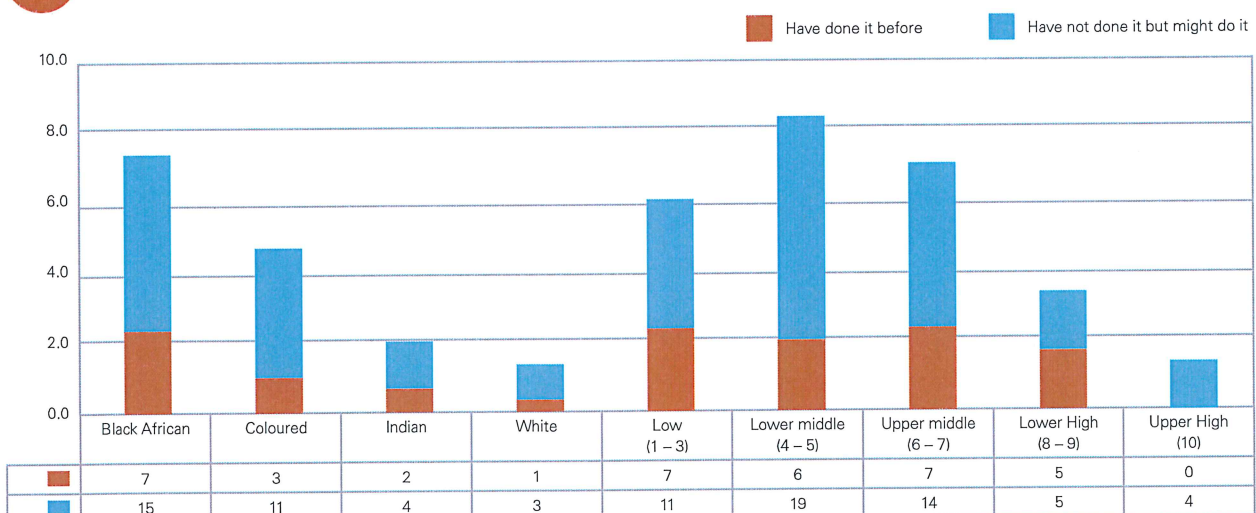
Geographic differences also exist in the reporting of past and potential anti-immigrant violence. Provincially, the share of residents reporting past violent behaviour was highest in the Western Cape, Free State and North West (all 9%), with those in the North West more likely to report recent violent action (6%) relative to all other provinces.

More disconcerting though was the evidence suggesting that around a fifth of residents in Limpopo, Free State and the Western Cape felt that they would be prepared to take violent action to prevent immigrants from living or working in their neighbourhood.

While the share that would never engage in such action still remains high across the provinces, ranging from 71% in the Western Cape to 88% in Gauteng, the results do suggest that there is at least some tacit support for anti-immigrant violence among a sizeable minority in a number of provinces.

In terms of type of geographic location, there is no significant difference in the

Fig 2 Reported participation in anti-immigrant violence by race and living standard level, 2015 (%)



Source: StatsSA, 2008-2015

mentioning of past violent behaviour in rural and urban areas (6%-7%). However, residents of informal settlements were appreciably more likely to report that they might engage in such behaviour in future than residents of other urban and rural localities (28% compared to 11% to 12%). This again points to an association between poverty, vulnerability and anti-immigrant violence.

### Attitudes and behaviour

Our previous research has shown that many South Africans hold negative and hostile views of foreign migrants. The 2015 results are no exception. Respondents were asked whether they would welcome all, some or no immigrants to the country. About a third (33%) said that they would welcome all, roughly two-fifths (41%) reported that they would conditionally welcome some, while a quarter resolutely stated that they welcome no foreigners.

One question often asked is how such attitudes inform violent anti-immigrant behaviour. Just because someone views foreigners with animosity does not necessarily mean that he or she will participate in anti-immigrant violence.

The survey results suggest that there is a significant but modest association between anti-immigrant sentiment and violent behaviour. While there is no difference in the patterning of past violent action, a more negative

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view of immigrants does influence the likelihood of reporting possible future violent behaviour (Figure 3). A quarter of those that welcome no foreigners indicate a potential for future violence, compared with 12% of those that conditionally accept and 5% of those that unreservedly accept the presence of foreign migrants in South Africa.

So, there clearly is a relationship between attitudes and behaviour. Yet it remains modest in character, as we can see that two-thirds (68%) of those welcoming no migrants would still never resort to violent action to prevent immigrants residing or working in their neighbourhood. This does not preclude the fact that they may resort to 'softer' ways of registering their opposition (such as avoidance or boycotting foreign owned shops), but it does suggest that large shares reject extreme behavioural expressions of their hostile views towards foreigners.

### Conclusion

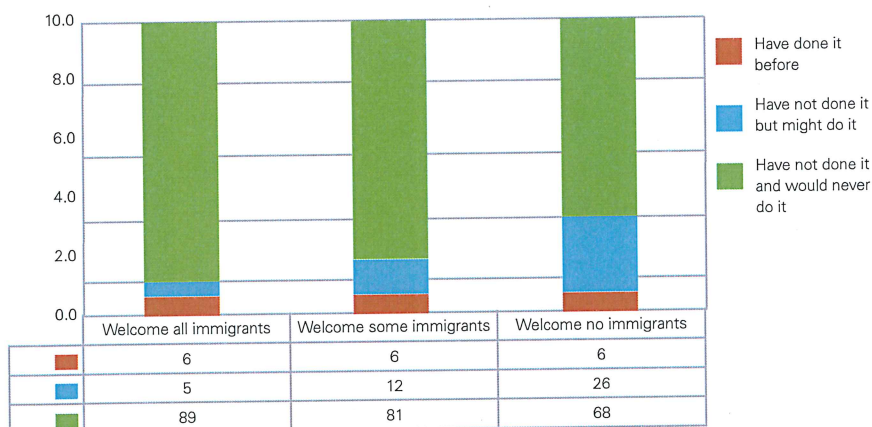
The most important finding to come from our analysis is not that a couple of million South Africans report that they have perpetrated violence against foreigners, but arguably that more than a tenth of the adult population deems its involvement in future anti-immigrant violence as a real possibility.

An apparent class dynamic appears to inform such intentions, which is worrying given the levels of material and social disadvantage that persist in the country. This situation is compounded by the fact that anti-immigrant attitudes drive the intention to engage in violent action to some degree, even though a majority of those voicing such views do not support such aggression.

The government is aiming to address the issue of anti-immigrant violence in our society through its social cohesion strategy. In embarking on this programme, we would caution policymakers and civil society leaders against underestimating the true extent of the challenge they are confronting. With considerable shares of the population experiencing economic vulnerability, expressing anti-immigrant sentiment and reporting possible targeted violence in future, it is paramount that the effort and resources devoted to addressing xenophobia in South African society are commensurate with the scale of the problem.

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**Fig 3** Reported participation in anti-immigrant violence by attitudes towards foreign migrants, 2015 (%)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2015

# REVIEW

Making sense  
of racism

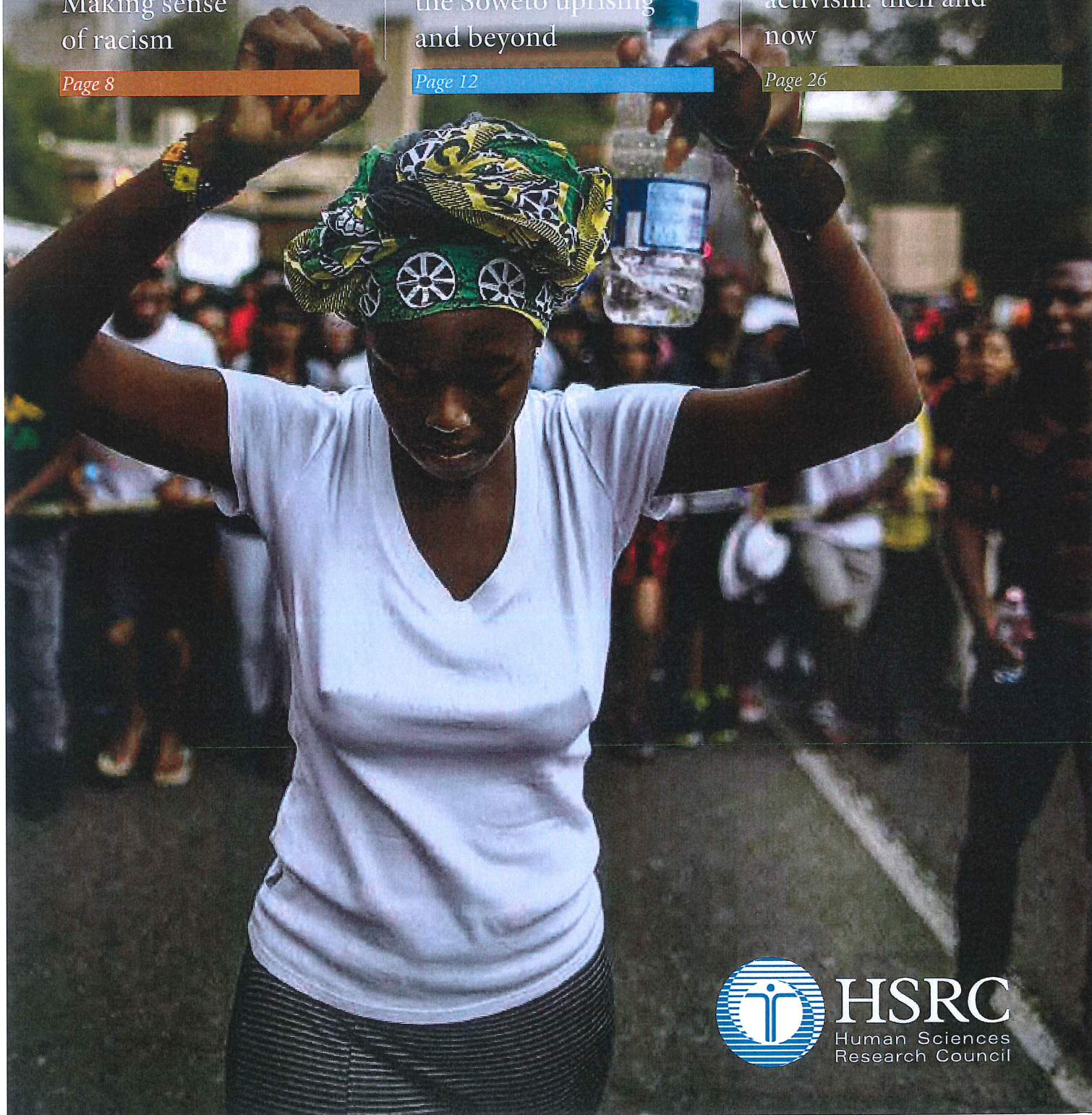
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Remembering 1976:  
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Youth (educational)  
activism: then and  
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