

WHY

DO PEOPLE ATTACK FOREIGNERS LIVING IN SOUTH AFRICA?

ASKING ORDINARY
SOUTH AFRICANS

A new study from the Human Sciences Research Council contributes to our public debate on anti-immigrant violence by looking at the opinions of ordinary South Africans. Using public opinion data, *Dr Steven Gordon* looks at which explanations for anti-immigrant violence are most popular amongst the country's adult population. By understanding how the public views this important question, we can better comprehend which xenophobia prevention mechanisms would be most acceptable to the general population.

A fan walk organised by Charly's Bakery in Cape Town to celebrate the 92nd birthday of Nelson Mandela and to create awareness of xenophobia in South Africa. Source: Wikimedia



Anti-immigrant violence is one of the major problems facing South Africa. This type of hate crime discourages long-term integration of international migrants and acts as a barrier to otherwise economically beneficial population movement. It also sours the country's international relationships on the African continent.

Relations between South Africa and Nigeria (one of the region's largest economies) have, for example, deteriorated because of recent episodes of anti-immigrant attacks. Since the early 1990s, state officials, legislators and policymakers in South Africa have debated the causes of anti-immigrant violence. There are a thousand different opinions on what causes such hostility and some politicians (like former President Jacob Zuma) have even suggested that this problem does not exist.

Getting an unbiased survey answer

Data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2017 was used for this study. A repeated cross-sectional survey series, SASAS is specially designed to be nationally representative of all persons 16 years and older in the country. Survey teams visited households in all nine provinces and the sample size was 3,098. Fieldworkers informed respondents that they were going to be asked: "some questions about people from other countries coming to live in South Africa". Respondents were then asked the following: "There are many opinions about why people take violent action against foreigners living in South Africa. Please tell me the MAIN REASON why you think this happens." This question was open-ended which allowed respondents to answer in their own words. This encouraged respondents to give an unbiased answer.

“ ABOUT 30% OF THE PUBLIC IDENTIFIED THE LABOUR MARKET THREAT POSED BY FOREIGNERS AS THE MAIN REASON FOR ANTI-IMMIGRANT VIOLENCE. ”

The response

Using SASAS, I identified main causes of xenophobic violence given by the public. These explanations are depicted in Table 1 across economic groups. Here, I use the well-known Living Standard Measure: Low (1-4), Medium (5-6) and High (7-10). Almost every person interviewed was able to offer an explanation for why people attack foreigners in South Africa. Only a small minority (5%) described such violence as irrational, illogical or unknowable. An even smaller portion (2%) of the public rejected the premise of the question and said that attacks against foreigners were 'just the work of criminals'. Before the different reasons are discussed in more detail, it is important to note that when talking about international migrants, respondents made

little distinction between different types of foreigners. Most made general reference to this group and only a relatively small proportion cited specific types (e.g. undocumented) of foreigners.

Table 1: Main reasons given to explain anti-immigrant violence in South Africa (multiple response)

	Total	Living Standard Measure		
		Low	Medium	High
Threat reasons				
Criminal activities of foreigners				
Immigrants bring/sell drugs	17.6	24.1	17.4	15.9
Immigrants increase/cause other types of crime	15.5	13.5	15.9	15.8
Economic activities of foreigners				
Immigrants increase/cause unemployment	30.4	29.3	31.1	30.4
The practices of foreign-owned businesses	4.8	6.2	4.7	4.6
Immigrants use up resources	5.3	2.7	5.1	6.4
Other threats from foreigners	5.4	8.1	5.2	4.2
Non-threat reasons				
People are misinformed about immigrants	2.0	0.3	1.4	3.1
People are prejudiced about immigrants	2.5	0.6	2.7	3.1
People are jealous of immigrants	10.3	8.6	11.7	9.4
The violence is the fault of the government	2.0	0.3	1.3	3.7
The violence is the fault of criminals	1.8	2.3	1.3	2.6
Immigrants are undocumented	2.2	0.1	2.2	3.5
Other reasons	2.8	4.6	2.8	2.0
The violence is irrational	5.4	5.1	5.8	5.6

The financial explanation

The most popular explanation given for attacks against international migrants concerned the negative financial effect that immigrants had on South African society. About a third (30%) of the public identified the labour market threat posed by foreigners as the main reason for anti-immigrant violence. The other main economic causes identified by the general public were: (i) the unfair business practices of foreign-owned shops and small businesses; and (ii) immigrants use up resources (such as housing). It is interesting to note that poor people were not more likely to give economic reasons than the wealthy.

Criminal activity

The criminal threat posed by international immigrants was the second most frequently mentioned cause of anti-immigrant violence. Almost a third (30%) of the adult population said that the violence occurred because communities were responding to the criminal activities of international migrants. Many people attributed the violence to foreigners' involvement in illegal drug trafficking specifically. Poor people were found to be particularly likely to give illicit drug trading by foreigners as a main cause. About 5% of adults identified other threats from foreigners as the main reason for the attacks. These threats included disease, sexual exploitation of women and children as well as a general sense that immigrants wanted to 'take over the country'.

Jealousy

Overall, 70% of the general public identified the threat posed by immigrants as the main explanation for anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. Looking at the minority that named a non-threat explanation for the violence, we found that few identified individual prejudice or misinformation spread about international migrants as a reason for anti-immigrant violence. Remarkably, the most frequent non-threat explanation for violence was jealousy. Approximately 10% of the population told fieldworkers that envy of the success or ingenuity of foreigners had caused this kind of hate crime. People who responded in this way tended to tell fieldworkers that South Africans were lazy when compared to international migrants.

Conclusion

Most South Africans have a strong opinion about why anti-immigrant violence occurs in the country. Reviewing the responses given to fieldworkers, it is apparent that the majority of reasons provided by the general population concern the harmful conduct of international migrants. There is no evidence to support the belief that South Africa's international migrant community is, however, a significant cause of crime or unemployment in the country. Indeed, as former President Jacob Zuma has himself acknowledged, many in the migrant community "contribute to the economy of the country positively". Current Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba has himself said that it is wrong to claim that all foreigners are drug dealers or human traffickers.

If a progressive solution to anti-immigrant violence is to be found, then there is a need to persuade the general population to support a different interpretation of the causes of anti-immigrant violence. Only with public support can anti-xenophobia advocates end hate crime against immigrants in South Africa. Government and activists need to change the way ordinary people think about this type of hate crime.

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People marching against xenophobia outside Little Ethiopia in Jeppe Street, Johannesburg
Source: Wikimedia