

FALSE BELIEFS DRIVE XENO PHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA – AND EDUCATION ONLY HELPS UP TO A POINT

Elube Mwalwen, a Malawian national, surveys the damage done to the room she rents in the house in Rosettenville that was set alight during a vigilante attack (2017).

Photo: Ihsaan Haffjee/GroundUp

In September 2019, a fresh spate of deadly xenophobic violence swept Gauteng, just months after the government launched a national action plan to combat xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. While dissatisfaction with service delivery is often said to drive xenophobia, a recent HSRC study failed to find evidence to support this assertion. Instead, intolerance was most strongly linked to false beliefs about migrants. In some ways, this appears a truism. But the finding also contains important insights for how intolerance might best be tackled. *By Andrea Teagle.*

Three out of four South African adults agree that immigrants increase crime rates, steal jobs and spread disease, according to a recent HSRC study by Dr Steven Gordon using data from the 2014 *South African Social Attitudes Survey*.

It is commonly believed that poor service delivery drives animosity towards immigrants – particularly in light of protests that devolve into the looting of foreign-owned shops and homes – and that xenophobia is concentrated among lower socioeconomic groups, among whom unemployment is rife. Yet, Gordon found that individuals reporting dissatisfaction with service delivery were no more likely to reject migrants than other participants.

Driven by fear

Unwelcoming attitudes appeared to be driven by false beliefs about the economic impacts of immigration. This suggests that intolerance is driven by fear, rather than experiences of deprivation for which migrants are often scapegoated.

To assess beliefs about migrants, the study created an immigration

consequence index, including questions about the economic effects of immigration, and whether participants agreed that immigrants bring needed skills and increase openness to new ideas and cultures. For the most part, they disagreed.

“The general South African public seems ill-informed about the diverse international immigrant population living in the country,” Gordon writes. He says popular discourse on this is informed by myths and misinformation. For example, the belief that immigrants (especially black immigrants) are a major cause of crime is often used to justify discrimination.

Gordon notes that there is little evidence that migrants are a source of any great social ills in the country. A 2018 [World Bank study](#) found that, contrary to beliefs, they have a positive impact on employment in South Africa, with each migrant generating two jobs, on average.

Gordon’s attitudinal study is the latest in a series of HSRC investigations seeking to understand the origin of anti-immigrant attitudes in South

Africa. Similar to results from earlier studies looking at attitudes between 2003 and 2012, a third of participants agreed that they generally do not welcome immigrants, while another third said they welcome some, but not all, immigrants. Only a quarter agreed that they welcome all immigrants.

The role of education

Interestingly, while education made rejecting all immigrants less likely, it did not increase the probability that an individual would welcome



all immigrants. The study notes that welcoming some immigrants is not necessarily a midpoint in a progression from “reject none” to “reject all” but rather should be considered as its own distinct category, possibly informed by different factors. More granular data would be needed to unpack this further, but it is possible, for example, that education might make individuals more welcoming towards skilled migrants, or migrants from certain parts of the world.

In a previous study, Gordon found that locals named Nigerians most frequently as the group they would least like to come and live in South Africa.

Service delivery?

The study did not explore whether dissatisfaction with service delivery – although it does not increase the likelihood that an individual rejects migrants – might increase the likelihood of that non-welcoming attitude manifesting in violence. However, previous research suggested that participants who previously partook in peaceful protests might be prompted to act violently under certain conditions.

“I have found that past and potential involvement in violent behaviour was

strongly correlated with previous experience with peaceful anti-immigrant activity,” says Gordon. He adds that, by analysing particular instances of collective violence, “this work demonstrates the importance of a geographical analysis of xenophobic behaviour.”

Responses to xenophobia often focus on the conditions under which it manifests itself violently. Law enforcement, for example, is emphasised in the government’s recently published *National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. While this is important, it should be accompanied by efforts to investigate and tackle the root causes of attitudes that underlie xenophobic behaviour.

Psychology of violence

“A socially cohesive society is not maintained solely through the strong-arm of law and order... Psychology has made a significant contribution to understanding the determinants of violence,” says Gordon. “The role of attitudes in predicting participation in anti-immigrant violence, however, has been underappreciated.”

Some of the negative narratives about African migrants, in particular, have a long history. As the National

Action Plan acknowledges, “The many years of a racist and isolationist policy of apartheid have planted seeds of xenophobia, particularly towards Africans, undoing centuries of brotherhood and sisterhood among Africans in South Africa and those from other parts of the continent.”

Nation-building efforts post-apartheid may have had the unintended effect of cementing notions of “the other,” shifting the “us and them” narrative from within to outside our borders.

Gordon’s study points to media and government as particularly powerful channels for reproducing falsehoods about migrants – and could also be a means of debunking them. Political parties have been repeatedly criticised for failing to name and confront xenophobia, instead dismissing it as the work of ‘criminal elements’. And xenophobic rhetoric is often employed to score political points – particularly ahead of elections – and divert attention away from the root causes of poor service delivery.

The role of leaders

Critics are saying that comments such as those made by former health minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi last



November, blaming over-crowded hospitals on foreigners or those of President Cyril Ramaphosa in January about the need for border control to ensure public safety, perpetuate myths about the impacts of immigration.

In the HSRC's latest book in its State of the Nation series, *Poverty and Inequality: Diagnosis, Prognosis and Responses*, Dr Temba Masilela and his colleagues highlight the paradoxical and fragmented nature of the government's policy stance on migrants, which emphasises tough border controls while contending that migration is "largely positive".

These paradoxes are further evident in government criticisms of human-rights organisations working to protect the rights of migrants.

Referring to the National Development Plan (2030), which aims to alleviate poverty and inequality, Masilela and his colleagues write, "national policies have failed to recognise the social and political value of migrants beyond their potential economic contribution." They add that meaningful narrative change at government level needs to incorporate the voices and representations of migrants, through art, performance and other media.

Gordon notes that, while the government's recent action plan is constructive – if somewhat vague – its references to a previous, unimplemented plan serves as a reminder that existing recommendations have yet to be followed.

"To me, it would appear that the most evident response to xenophobic activity in recent years is greater scrutiny of foreign nationals living/working in the country's townships," he says. There is an urgent need for the government to "take seriously the role of attitudes and work to dispel disinformation about the impacts of immigration on South Africa".

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Police released stun grenades and tear gas to disperse the crowds during an anti-immigrant march in Pretoria (2017).

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