OXFORD

Journal of Refugee Studies, 2024, 1–17
https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae024
Original Article

South African attitudes towards refugee settlement: Examining the importance of threat perceptions

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Abstract

Compared to many other countries, South Africa has quite a liberal refugee settlement policy. But public hostility towards refugees in the country is a serious obstacle to refugee protection. To understand what is driving anti-refugee sentiment amongst the masses, this study investigates refugee settlement policy preferences in the post-apartheid nation. Data from the 2020 round of the nationally representative South African Social Attitudes Survey ($N = 3133$) was used. Different possible drivers of policy preferences were tested. Data analysis showed that there was a robust relationship between immigrant threat perceptions and policy preferences. This finding is consistent with integrated threat theory, highlighting the damaging effects of widespread negative stereotypes about immigrants in the country. Other notable drivers of attitudes identified include economic anxiety and religiosity. Subjective knowledge, by contrast, only had a weak effect on attitude formation. The study concludes by discussing future research opportunities on anti-refugee sentiment in an African context.

Keywords: South African, public opinion, xenophobia, threat perceptions, economic anxiety

In recent years, refugee-led protests have been launched at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) offices in South Africa. Protesters claimed that they were victims of xenophobic violence, harassment from state officials as well as anti-refugee prejudice in the communities where they lived. Demanding repatriation to safer countries, refugees established protest camps outside the UNCHR offices in Cape Town and Pretoria. After a protracted standoff, security forces dismantled these camps and relocated protesters. The standoff occurred during a period when there is growing concern that refugee protections in the country are regressing. Over the last decade, scholars have shown how South African lawmakers have sought to make it more difficult to seek asylum and qualify for refugee status (Handmaker and Nalule 2021; Johnson 2022; Moyo and Botha 2022).

Received: 20 July 2023. **Editorial decision:** 22 April 2024. **Accepted:** 27 April 2024.

Scholars have not effectively mapped public attitudes towards refugee settlement in South Africa. From the little work that has been done, it is clear that popular sentiments about refugees are often quite negative (for a discussion of the existing scholarship, see Gordon 2016). But researchers have not considered under what conditions (if any) the mass public would accept the settlement of refugees. How much support, for example, is there for the establishment of refugee camps or for the right of refugees to work? This knowledge gap can be contrasted with existing research into refugee protections in the country (e.g. Landau and Amit 2014; Johnson 2022; Moyo and Botha 2022) which tends to emphasize legislation and ignore public opinion. It can also be juxtaposed against the growing body of research on xenophobia in South Africa (e.g. Mattes *et al.* 1999; Matsinhe 2011; Gordon 2017; Ruedin 2019), which has been inclined to underemphasize the refugee issue.

The evident knowledge gap on anti-refugee sentiment in South Africa is consistent with what we can observe elsewhere in Africa. Despite the fact that the continent hosts large refugee settlements, little relevant large-scale public opinion research has been conducted on refugee policy preferences in the region. Most of the existing work on attitudes towards the refugee issue has focused on the Global North (especially Europe, Australia, and the United States). This body of research has expanded considerably over the last three decades (for reviews of this research, see Esses *et al.* 2017; Anderson and Ferguson 2018; Cowling *et al.* 2019). Consequently, we know little about what drives public policy preferences on refugee settlement in an African context. This study will seek to address this knowledge gap by examining the determinants of public sentiment on granting refugees the right to live and work in South Africa.

Threat perceptions constitute a core mechanism in many studies of public attitudes towards refugees (e.g. Murray and Marx 2013; Landmann *et al.* 2019; De Coninck 2020), but there is a lack of research on the issue in South Africa. Past research has, however, shown that threat perceptions can translate into antagonistic behaviours in the country. For example, Gordon (2020) used nationally representative public opinion data to show that threat perceptions were correlated with self-reported participation in anti-immigrant activity. But we do not know if threat perceptions can influence mass support for refugee settlement. To provide an adequate test of the relationship between threat perceptions and policy preferences, it would be prudent to assess its relative strength against other possible drivers. After reviewing the existing body of research, the following drivers were identified: (i) economic anxiety, (ii) subjective knowledge, and (iii) religious attendance.

This paper will present one of the first large-scale public opinion studies of refugee settlement in South Africa. Utilizing representative public opinion data will demonstrate that there is a significant diversity of opinion on refugee settlement policy. Indeed, no policy position emerged as dominant, and the mass populace was polarized on whether refugees should be able to settle in the country. Employing a multivariate analysis, the paper was able to identify significant drivers of policy preferences and provide insight into *why* attitudes on refugee settlement were so varied. It showed that threat perceptions about immigrants act as powerful heuristics that people use to establish their preferences. From a comparative perspective, threat perceptions were the strongest policy-relevant correlates identified. Other notable drivers of policy preferences included economic anxiety and religious attendance.

1. Context

To place the study in its proper context, this section will discuss relevant patterns of refugee settlement in South Africa. However, at this stage, it is important to acknowledge the unique nature of South African society. For most of the 20th century, the nation was home to a uniquely rigid and unequal system of oppression. Legislation during this period stipulated that all should be categorized according to their membership in so-called 'race' population groups (i.e. Black Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites). State authorities enacted policies to benefit the white minority and oppress other 'race' groups, creating and maintaining a strict

racial hierarchy.[1] Successive white settler governments designed immigration policies to support this oppressive system. Recruitment campaigns were launched in Western Europe to encourage 'white' migrants to settle in the country (Klotz 2013). In addition, labour brokers recruited workers from elsewhere on the subcontinent to service the country's mineral and agricultural sectors (also see Wentzel and Tlabela 2006).

During the pre-democratic period, the various white settler governments of South Africa were quite reluctant to admit refugees into the country.[2] This stance was highlighted by the refusal of the Union of South Africa to sign the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR). Following the end of white minority rule, the new government changed course and indicated its willingness to grant asylum to certain refugees. New policies emerged through incremental agreements with the UNHCR in the early 1990s, and the CRSR was signed in 1996. The Refugees Act (No. 130 of 1998) was passed soon afterwards, setting out the provisions and protections afforded to refugees (see Klaaren *et al.* 2008 for a review of the formation of the Act). If classified as a refugee, an individual could receive an identity document as well as the right to settle, work, and travel within the country. This fairly liberal approach can be compared, unfavourably, to many countries in the Global North where refugees are commonly housed in camps and denied the right to work or generate their own income.

To be recognized as a refugee in South Africa, an individual must first apply for asylum-seeker status and then undergo a screening process. Applicants are required, during this process, to prove that they meet the relevant refugee classification criteria.[3] Beginning in 2004, legislators sought to make it more difficult to apply for asylum-seeker permits and be awarded 'refugee' status. As part of the Immigration Amendment Act (No. 19 of 2004), people seeking refugee status had to apply at one of the country's Refugee Reception Offices (RROs) for an asylum transit visa within 14 days of entry. Failure to comply would automatically brand someone an 'illegal migrant' and subject them to arrest and deportation. Subsequent amendments to the Refugees Act made it more challenging to access RROs and renew asylum-seeker documents.[4] Other legislative amendments, in particular the Refugees Amendment Act (No. 11 of 2017), sought to place limits on the economic rights of asylum-seekers (for a review of the changing refugee infrastructure in the country, see Moyo and Botha 2022).

UNHCR data on recorded refugee flows into South Africa, segregated by refugees and asylum-seekers, are portrayed in Figure 1. It is apparent that the bulk of those seeking refuge were classified as asylum applicants by state authorities. The number of asylum applicants increased significantly between 2000 and 2014, growing from 15,139 at the start of the period to 463,909 at the end. About four-fifths of persons seeking refuge in 2014 were designated as asylum-seekers. A recent report by Amnesty International (2019) found that poor decision-making and inadequate bureaucracy resulted in a massive backlog of asylum-seeker applications. In addition, the report found that, due to inefficiencies, intransigence and maladministration, the acceptance rate for asylum applications was substantially lower than the global rate.

The size of the refugee and asylum-seeker population fell during the 2014–22 period, dropping from 576,091 at the start to 240,077 at the end. This was driven primarily by a decline in the

[1] This unequal system produced profound economic inequalities between these groups and in the end led to a highly unequal society in which class and race identities strongly overlapped. For this reason, following the end of white minority rule, the government introduced a series of policy interventions to address racial inequalities in economic wellbeing. In the post-apartheid period, economic and racial differences do not overlap as clearly as they once did (for a discussion of class and race differences in South Africa, see Seekings and Nattrass 2008).

[2] Pre-democratic South Africa lacked any formal relationship with UNHCR, and its membership in the United Nations had been suspended as a protest over apartheid. However, certain ad hoc accommodations were made to admit white immigrants fleeing conflict zones in Africa. For a discussion of this process within the broader context of the nation's immigration regime, see Klotz (2013).

[3] The Refugee Act (No. 130 of 1998) defines a refugee as a person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted or whose life is threatened on account of external aggression or other events seriously disturbing or disrupting public order (see Landau and Amit 2014 for a discussion of this definition and its problems).

[4] The Refugees Amendment Act (No. 33 of 2008) required asylum-seekers to renew their permit periodically at a designated RRO. The Refugees Amendment Act (No. 11 of 2017) excluded asylum-seekers from refugee status if they failed to report to a RRO within 5 days of entering the country or if they had not entered through a recognised port of entry (for a more comprehensive discussion of RRO legislation, see Johnson 2022).

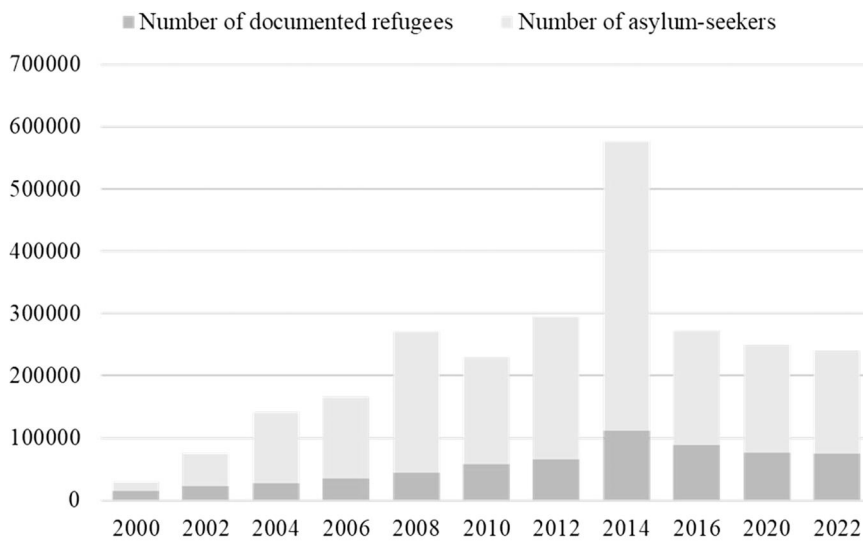

Figure 1. Number of refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa, 2000–22. *Note:* The data for the latest year (2022) is available up until the mid-year. *Source*: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

number of asylum applicants which fell substantially during this period. The rise and fall in the number of recorded asylum-seeker applications in South Africa is due to a number of factors, including the Zimbabwean political crisis.[5] Refugees constitute only a small fraction of the country's total international migrant population, about 9 per cent in 2020. This group is an even smaller subset of the national population, roughly 425 per 1000,000 in that year. The vast majority (84 per cent) of asylum-seekers and refugees in South Africa originated from other African countries. The main countries of origin were Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia.

2. Threat perceptions

If an individual views an outgroup as threatening, integrated threat theory contends that they will be more inclined to adopt prejudicial attitudes towards that group. Stephan *et al.* (2005), for example, exposed research participants in the United States to information about the potential threat associated with Rwandan refugees entering the country. Those who were exposed were more likely to express anti-refugee sentiments than those who were not. When writing about threat perceptions, most scholars employing integrated threat theory tend to distinguish between symbolic and realistic threats (Stephan *et al.* 2016). The former is often associated with welfare burdens and labour market competition, while the latter concerns issues of national heritage (e.g. language or religion). Although many scholars prefer to make a distinction between these two types of threats, the specific threats that outgroups can elicit are quite diverse (Landmann *et al.* 2019). Indeed, there are *many* types of threats (e.g. threats related to safety and health) that do not fit neatly on the symbolic-realistic spectrum (also see Murray and Marx 2013).

There have been a number of public opinion studies of anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa. Researchers found that a majority of the mass public viewed immigration as a *realistic* threat, a major obstacle to the material propensity of autochthons (Mattes *et al.* 1999). But immigrants were also characterized as a safety threat, and immigration was blamed for the country's high crime rates (also see Crush *et al.* 2008). In contrast, little attention was given to symbolic

[5] For a discussion of refugee and asylum-seeker trends within the context of South Africa's border enforcement policies, see Handmaker and Nalule (2021). The authors, in particular, discuss the use of the so-called 'Special Dispensation for Zimbabweans' to manage refugee flows.

issues. Subsequent public opinion research found that immigrant threat perceptions were robustly intercorrelated; expressing one type of threat was closely associated with expressing others (Gordon 2017). Following the logic of integrated threat theory, it could be argued that such threat perceptions (whether they are realistic and/or symbolic in nature) should have a negative effect on attitude formation. Acting as a defence mechanism, prejudicial reactions are likely to emerge in the face of threat.

It is important to acknowledge that threat perceptions directed against immigrants in South Africa are often racialized. The popular image of the 'immigrant' is a 'dark-skinned' African who speaks a non-autochthonic language. Foreigners who are racialized as 'white', on the other hand, tend to be classified as 'tourists' and 'investors', a much more positive representation. Matsinhe (2011) utilizes the ideology of *Makwerekwere* as a theoretical framework to explain this representation of foreigners. The framework draws attention to a focus on the 'fantasy of the foreign body'. Xenophobic violence is sometimes mistakenly directed at South Africans. These individuals are accused of being foreigners because they were 'too dark' skinned or were unable to speak a majoritarian African language (e.g. Zulu). The special attention paid to language detection allows us to understand how xenophobia intersects with different ethnolinguistic nationalisms (e.g. Zulu nationalism) in the country.

In the growing body of public opinion research on anti-refugee sentiment, threat perceptions have emerged as highly salient. In their meta-analysis of 70 studies on the prejudice-relevant correlates of attitudes towards refugees, Cowling *et al.* (2019) found that perceived threats were the strongest correlates of all assessed. The authors discovered that the more threatened an individual was by refugees, the more likely they were to express prejudicial attitudes and support exclusion (also see Esses *et al.* 2017). Even though past research on anti-refugee sentiment has demonstrated the salience of threat perceptions, it is worth asking about the mass perceptions of immigrants. When asked to think about refugee policy, would people use their feelings about immigrant threat perceptions to decide upon their answer?

Prior work has shown that public attitudes towards different immigrant groups are highly intercorrelated. Using data from a representative survey in Switzerland, Ruedin (2020) found that those who felt threatened by one type of immigrant also tended to feel threatened by other types. But then some scholarship (e.g. Murray and Marx 2013; De Coninck 2020; Abdelaaty and Steele 2022) has emerged arguing that attitudes towards refugees diverge significantly from those towards other types of immigrants. Most of this work is quite Eurocentric and often contrasts refugees against immigrants from European Union countries. These are also contexts in which refugees are often seen as more culturally distant from national populations than other kinds of immigrants (also see Landmann *et al.* 2019). In summation, little is known about how immigrant threat perceptions may drive popular support for policies that exclude refugees in South Africa.

3. Testing relative strength

The goal of this paper is to test the following hypothesis:

> H#1. Immigrant threat perceptions will be positively associated with public support for exclusionary refugee settlement policy.

To accurately determine the validity of this hypothesis, it is important to establish that threat perceptions influence policy preferences and that any observed association is not a simple artifact of poverty or a lack of knowledge. Consequently, H#1 will be tested against a host of other possible predictors. This will provide a safeguard against omitted variable bias and will allow the study to explore different aspects of the threat perception framework outlined in the previous section. After a review of the available literature,[6] three primary hypotheses were identified for testing. These are outlined and discussed in the remainder of this section.

[6] The existing literature on xenophobia in South Africa is quite large and voluminous (for reviews of this extensive body of work, see Gordon 2020; Matsinhe 2011; Ruedin 2019).

In studies of anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g. Mattes *et al.* 1999; Gordon 2017; Ruedin 2019) in South Africa, material scarcity is frequently identified as a potential correlate of attitudes. The same is true of those works that look at anti-refugee sentiment. In a study of public opposition to refugee admittance, for example, Gordon (2016) found that economic deprivation was positively associated with exclusionary attitudes. But it is important to remember that deprivation is a *psychologically* mediated disposition. An individual may feel deprived because of their status expectations, a feeling that does not necessarily connect to their objective status (Jetten 2019). Anxiety about one's economic circumstances is generally thought to be a more potent driver of prejudicial attitudes than one's actual economic conditions *a priori*. Perceived deprivation tends to result in frustration, anger, and alienation in affected individuals which can, in turn, trigger a search for scapegoats. Because subjective deprivation tends to induce a fear of social status loss, such fears can produce prejudice even among those who are relatively affluent (Melcher 2023). Psychologically, such a response can be understood as a coping strategy, a reaction to a loss of control and self-esteem.

H#2. Economic anxiety will incentivize an individual to support policies that exclude refugees from the country.

The moral community thesis contends that social interactions (via frequent attendance at services or meetings) with co-religionists will increase the likelihood that participants will acquire a shared set of morals. Even if unaccompanied by belief, attendance will still have an impact on attitude formation. Using public opinion data from the United States, Putnam and Campbell (2012) show that regular participation in religious activities can influence pro-social values, helping participants internalize religious teachings of neighbourliness and tolerance. The authors find that participation in religious services and activities even has beneficial effects on the pro-social attitudes of non-religious people (also see Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Some studies seem to show that religious attendance will influence public preferences for refugee policy. For example, Vaughan (2021), using public opinion data from 22 European nations, found that liberal policy preferences increased with higher rates of religious service attendance.

H#3. Persons who attend religious services frequently will be more likely to support liberal refugee settlement policies than those who attend less frequently.

A number of researchers have examined whether knowledge of the refugee issue is correlated with pro-refugee sentiment. In a study on public attitudes towards Syrian refugees, for instance, Adida *et al.* (2018) found that even when people share the same factual understanding of a topic, they may arrive at different conclusions about policy. Preferences for refugee policy in their study were primarily informed by political ideology and not knowledge (also see Hopkins *et al.* 2019). Regardless of whether it is associated with pro-refugee sentiment, knowledge is an important issue in this study. South Africa is a low-information society, and many respondents may not know enough to answer questions about refugee settlement. Low awareness or limited knowledge may lead respondents to select 'don't know' when asked a question about policy preferences. Given concerns about the state of knowledge in the country, it is necessary to account for public awareness of refugees in the analysis.

H#4. People with low levels of relevant knowledge will feel unable to offer an opinion on refugee settlement policy.

4. Data and method

4.1 Sample

Data from the 2020 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) was used for this study. A repeated cross-sectional survey series, SASAS's sampling frame is based on Statistics South Africa's 2011 Population Census. In the first sampling stage, a set of 500 small area layers (SALs) was drawn. In each SAL, seven dwelling units (i.e. non-vacant residences) were randomly

selected. A respondent was then drawn from all persons 16 years and older at each unit using a computerized randomization method. Participation in the survey was voluntary and 10.5 per cent of the targeted sample refused to complete the interview. This realize rate for SASAS 2020 was in line with past SASAS rounds and quite high by international standards.

4.2 Procedure

SASAS questionnaires were translated into the country's major languages for ease of interpretation. All interviews were face-to-face and were conducted (when appropriate) in the participant's home language. Respondents were asked for written informed consent, and if the fieldworker was interviewing a minor, then a dual consent process was required (both from the minor and their parent/guardian). Fieldwork and questionnaire design were overseen by the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) Ethics Committee. After collection, the data was weighted to be nationally representative of the adult population in the country's nine provinces. All data displayed in this paper has been weighted unless otherwise specified.

Fieldwork for the SASAS 2020 round began in late February 2020 but was halted when the government announced COVID-19 stay-at-home orders on 27 March 2020. At this time, approximately 37 per cent ($N = 1217$) of interviews had been completed. About 6 months later, on 21 September 2020, restrictions were reduced and the HSRC Ethics Committee deemed it safe to resume fieldwork. The SASAS round was only completed on 15 February 2021. As a result of these delays, the 2020 SASAS fieldwork round constituted an unintended split sample design that will need to be accounted for in the study's multivariate analysis.

4.3 Outcome variable

When asked by fieldworkers about an issue related to a social group, respondents will call upon mental images of that group to help them make sense of the question. Respondents may, as work by Blinder (2015) has shown, use dissimilar mental images. Public opinion research on refugee sentiment has largely ignored this limitation, overlooking how survey respondents understand the term 'refugee' (Cowling *et al.* 2019). To limit respondents' tendency to have differing understandings of the term, SASAS included a relevant definition. Survey participants were read the following statement by fieldworkers before they were asked any questions about refugee settlement: '[p]eople come to South Africa because they are escaping political persecution in their own countries. These people are called refugees'. Although somewhat narrow and conservative, this definition is consistent with the one outlined in South African legislation (for a discussion of the legislative definition and its drawbacks, see Klaaren *et al.* 2008; Landau and Amit 2014; Moyo and Botha 2022).

SASAS respondents were read a list of four statements about refugee settlement and then asked which of these came closest to their own opinion. Public responses to this question are depicted in Figure 2, and the results reveal significant levels of anti-refugee sentiment in the country. More than a third (36 per cent) of the adult population selected the most exclusionary option, stating that refugees should be sent back to where they came from. A quarter believed that refugees should be confined to special camps on the border. About a tenth (11 per cent) of the populace thought that refugees could reside inside the country but not work. Less than a fifth (19 per cent) selected the most inclusionary option, voicing support for the current official policy. Given that South Africa is a low-information society, it was interesting to observe that only a small minority (9 per cent) were unsure of how to answer the question.

4.4 Predictors

4.4.1 Perceived threat

The SASAS questionnaire included four Likert-type items on the alleged threat posed by international migrants with response categories ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). All 'don't know' answers ($N = 179$) were treated as missing. The threat types under

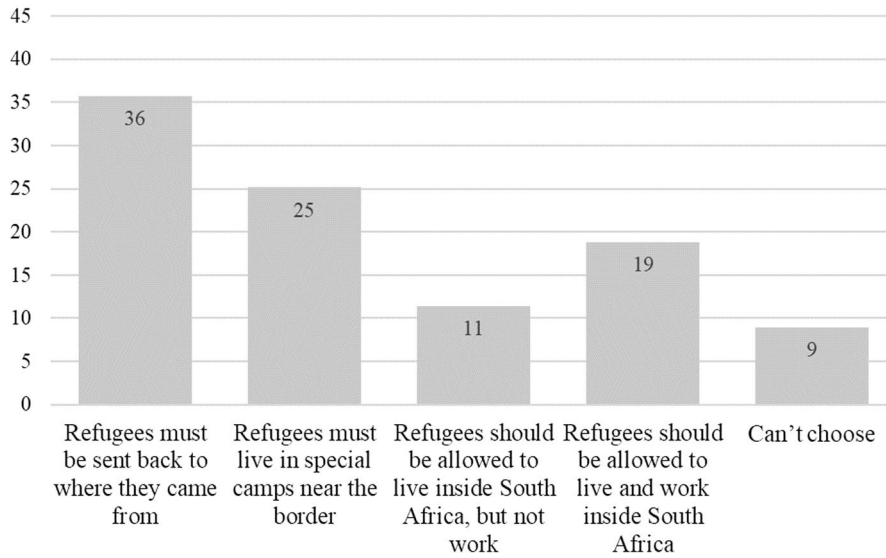

Figure 2. Public responses to the question: '[t]hinking of refugees coming to South Africa, please indicate which ONE of the following statements is closet to your opinion?'.

consideration were as follow: (i) safety, (ii) labour market, (iii) health, and (iv) resources.[7] These items were similar to a standard set employed in the International Social Survey Programme to measure immigrant threat perceptions. Testing showed that the items loaded well onto a single index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.784$), indicating that the resultant measure had good level of internal validity and reliability. The index was coded onto a scale with a 0–10 range; the higher the score, the greater the level of perceived threat.

4.4.2 *Economic anxiety*

SASAS participants were asked five questions on whether they felt that the following were adequate for their household needs: (i) housing, (ii) transport, (iii) health care, (iv) clothing, and (v) food over the past month. Response options were less than adequate, just adequate, and more than adequate. To assess the multileveled nature of deprivation felt by the respondent, a composite index was created using these five items.[8] 'Don't know' responses ($N = 181$) to these questions were coded as missing. The resultant indicator was arranged on a 0–10 scale; the lower the value, the less likely an individual was to state that they felt deprived of their basic household needs.

4.4.3 *Religious attendance*

Religiosity was measured using the following item: '[h]ow often do you attend religious services'. Answers were given on an 8-point scale ranging from 'never' (1) to 'several times a week' (8). 'Don't know' responses ($N = 268$) to this question were coded as missing. This is a common measure of religious attendance used in studies of attitude formation (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Deslandes and Anderson 2019; Vaughan 2021).

[7] Survey participants were requested to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: (i) immigrants increase crime rates; (ii) immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in South Africa; (iii) immigrants bring disease to South Africa; and (iv) immigrants use up our country's resources.

[8] Standard reliability and validity testing showed that these items loaded satisfactorily onto a single index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.874$).

4.4.4 Subjective knowledge

The following question was utilised to measure self-reported knowledge: '[o]verall, would you say you are very knowledgeable, somewhat knowledgeable, not very knowledgeable, or not at all knowledgeable about refugees living in South Africa?' Responses to this question were coded on a four-point scale (1, not at all knowledgeable to 4, very knowledgeable). All 'don't know' answers ($N = 163$) were classified as missing.

4.5 Background variables

In addition to the predictors outlined above, the study will control for a range of socio-demographic correlates when testing the relationship between threat perceptions and refugee policy preferences. Studies on anti-refugee sentiment have given significant attention to such correlates with a particular focus on gender, age, and formal schooling (Cowling *et al.* 2019). The literature typically identified stronger anti-refugee sentiment among the elderly, the less educated, and men (also see Anderson and Ferguson 2018). One possible explanation for this general finding is that these groups tend to be more conservative in their political leanings. To account for a respondent's socio-demographic characteristics, a number of standard demographic dummy variables were constructed for this study.

The standard demographic dummy variables created captured gender, age, population group, urban status, religious affiliation[9] and province of residence. Two socio-economic background variables were also constructed for the multivariate analysis. Formal educational attainment was assessed using the question: '[w]hat is the highest level of education that you have ever completed?' and was measured in terms of formal years of completed schooling. The following labour market categories were derived from a question on work status: (i) employed, (ii) unemployed, and (iii) outside labour market. Unweighted descriptive summary statistics are provided in Table 1. Additionally, the study included a variable (labelled 'interview date') that controlled for whether an interview was conducted before the lockdown period or afterwards.

4.6 Model specification

To construct an appropriate regression model for this study, it is important to look at the response options of the outcome (or dependent) variable. These options could be interpreted as categorical ordinal, moving from the least inclusionary option to the most. However, we cannot assume that respondents have the same interpretation, they may treat the different categories as nominal (i.e. there is no order to the categories). Given the exploratory nature of the present research, it was thought best to adopt a multinomial probit approach which allows for different interpretations. In the multinomial probit model, coefficients estimate the effects of variables on whether a respondent gave an answer that conformed to one of the stated preferences. The base outcome here is 'total exclusion' and the model compares those who selected this outcome with the four other response options. By using a multinomial regression model, it will be possible to assess whether any of the predictors outlined in this section have a non-linear relationship with the dependent variable.

5. Results

Results for the multinomial probit regression analysis are portrayed in Table 2. It is clear that immigrant threat perceptions were found to be a robust correlate of whether an individual would adopt an inclusionary approach to hosting refugees (H#1). Compared to the base outcome, a one-unit increase in the index lowered the log odds in the first three pairings. The relationship appeared to be quite linear with the largest correlation observed in the third pairing ($r = -0.324$; $SE = 0.035$; $p = 0.000$) and the weakest in the first pairing ($r = -0.117$; $SE = 0.032$; $p = 0.000$). The

[9] To capture the diversity of religious identity within the sample, respondents were asked which religious denomination they belonged to. Using responses to this question, dummy variables were then created for the different faith groups, these were (i) Christian, (ii) non-Christian, and (iii) unaffiliated.

Table 1. Summary statistics of the South African Social Attitudes Survey, 2020.

	Obs.	Min	Max
Gender group			
Male	1320	0	1
Female	1890	0	1
Age	3199	16	98
Population group			
Black African	2060	0	1
Coloured	491	0	1
Indian	343	0	1
White	302	0	1
Geotype group			
Urban	2390	0	1
Rural	816	0	1
Religious affiliation			
Christian	2134	0	1
Non-Christian	449	0	1
No affiliation	602	0	1
Years of schooling	3120	0	17
Employment group			
Employed	1029	0	1
Unemployed	1184	0	1
Labour Inactive	1160	0	1
Provincial residence			
Western Cape	432	0	1
Eastern Cape	373	0	1
Northern Cape	248	0	1
Free State	200	0	1
KwaZulu-Natal	617	0	1
North West	234	0	1
Gauteng	513	0	1
Mpumalanga	266	0	1
Limpopo	282	0	1

Note: Data are unweighted.

more threatened an individual felt by international migrants, the more likely they were to support excluding refugees from South Africa. It would be interesting to consider which of the perceived threat types had the strongest effect on refugee policy preferences. Each of the threat index sub-indicators was sequentially tested in a different model. Reviewing the outcomes of the four modified models, resource threat was found to have the strongest correlation with the dependent while health threat had the weakest.

Model outputs show that the economic anxiety index was a statistically significant (and negative) correlate in three of the model's four pairings (H#2). The relationship seemed to be non-linear with the weakest correlation observed in the most inclusionary third pairing ($r = -0.064$; SE = 0.029; $p = 0.012$). The strength of the index's effect was, by contrast, stronger in the first ($r = -0.089$; SE = 0.025; $p = 0.000$) and second ($r = -0.100$; SE = 0.030; $p = 0.001$) pairings. As a robustness test, the model was modified to replace the anxiety index with a household asset register, considered a more objective measure of household poverty.[10] Modified model outputs showed

[10] Respondents were asked about the assets they had in their household that were in working order. The questions used to create this measure ranged from a swimming pool to a microwave oven. In addition, information was gathered on whether the household had access to piped tap water, electricity and an indoor flush toilet. Twenty-five questions, in total, were used to produce the household asset register. The register was placed onto a 0–10 scale with the higher value indicating the greater number of assets. Standard reliability and validity testing showed that these items loaded well together (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.902$).

Table 2. Multinomial probit regression on public preferences for refugee exclusion or inclusion in South Africa.

	Camp confinement	Work restrictions	Full inclusion	Uncertain
Gender (ref. female)	−0.085 (0.125)	0.359 (0.132) **	−0.140 (0.132)	−0.023 (0.163)
Age	−0.003 (0.004)	−0.008 (0.004)	−0.009 (0.004) *	−0.004 (0.005)
Population Group (ref. Black African)				
Coloured	−0.113 (0.188)	0.584 (0.184) **	0.098 (0.183)	0.333 (0.278)
Indian/Asian	−0.543 (0.316)	−0.125 (0.273)	0.212 (0.275)	−0.011 (0.378)
White	−0.544 (0.237) *	0.205 (0.268)	0.156 (0.266)	0.369 (0.272)
Years of schooling	0.016 (0.017)	0.009 (0.018)	0.024 (0.016)	0.037 (0.022)
Work status (ref. unemployed)				
Employed	0.349 (0.154) *	0.312 (0.168)	0.109 (0.161)	0.112 (0.201)
Other	0.310 (0.160)	0.146 (0.166)	0.208 (0.153)	0.322 (0.195)
Geotype (ref. urban)	−0.058 (0.144)	0.153 (0.157)	0.109 (0.150)	−0.112 (0.186)
Interview date (ref. before lockdown)	0.361 (0.141) *	0.074 (0.152)	0.099 (0.146)	0.425 (0.187) *
Threat perceptions	−0.117 (0.032) ***	−0.309 (0.034) ***	−0.324 (0.035) ***	−0.226 (0.040) ***
Economic anxiety	−0.089 (0.025) ***	−0.100 (0.030) **	−0.064 (0.029) *	−0.003 (0.033)
Religious attendance	0.027 (0.029)	0.057 (0.028) *	0.081 (0.029) **	−0.015 (0.034)
Religious affiliation (ref. unaffiliated)				
Christian	−0.043 (0.180)	−0.307 (0.176)	−0.416 (0.172) *	−0.206 (0.204)
Non-Christian	−0.027 (0.350)	−0.252 (0.298)	−0.045 (0.271)	0.041 (0.365)
Subjective knowledge	0.089 (0.063)	0.016 (0.071)	0.174 (0.067) **	−0.748 (0.089) ***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
Notes: 1. Entries are multinomial probit estimates of refugee policy preferences; 2. The baseline choice for each column (or pair) is 'total exclusion'; 3. Standard errors appear in parentheses; 4. Model controls for province of residence; and 5. The number of cases is 2, 942 (Wald $\chi^2(96) = 608$; Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$) and the log likelihood is −53,163,073.

that the asset register was a less reliable predictor of attitudes than the subjective measure. The asset register was a negative correlate in all the modified pairings but was only a statistically significant one in the fourth.[11] Objective economic status was, in conclusion, a poor predictor of attitude formation here.

Knowledge of refugees was hypothesized to increase the likelihood that an individual would answer the question about settlement policy preferences (H#3). This hypothesis was validated; a one-unit increase in the scale reduced the log odds of selecting 'uncertain' by 0.748 (SE = 0.089). When compared to other correlates, subjective knowledge was the most powerful predictor of selecting 'don't know' in Table 2. Interestingly, this study's knowledge measure was only a statistically significant predictor of attitudes towards refugee settlement in one other pairing. This variable was a positive correlate ($r = 0.174$; SE = 0.067; $p = 0.006$) of choosing the 'full inclusion' option. It could be argued that controlling for formal education in the model confounds the knowledge correlation findings. However, additional testing shows that even when the model was altered to remove the formal education attainment variable, the observed knowledge finding still holds.[12]

Attending religious services or meetings increased the likelihood of adopting a progressive policy position on refugee settlement (H#4). Attendance was a statistically significant (albeit weak) correlate in both the third ($r = 0.081$; SE = 0.029; $p = 0.007$) and the second ($r = 0.057$;

[11] In the modified model, a one unit increase in the household register reduced the log odds of selecting 'uncertain' by 0.133 (SE = 0.046).
[12] In this adjusted model, the subjective knowledge variable had a positive (and statistically significant) correlation with the dependent in the third ($r = 0.180$; SE = 0.067; $p = 0.007$) and fourth ($r = 0.743$; SE = 0.089; $p = 0.000$) pairings.

SE = 0.028; $p = 0.043$) pairings. To check the relative strength of this finding, the model was adjusted to include a variable that measured self-reported religiosity.[13] Altered model outcomes revealed that this variable was a negative correlate in the first three pairings but not at a statistically significant level. In other words, when compared to religious attendance, self-reported religiosity was a poor predictor of attitudes. The inclusion of this religiosity variable in the model did not meaningfully change the correlation between religious attendance and refugee sentiment. In the third and second pairings of the modified model, attendance still had a positive (and statistically significant) correlation with the dependent variable.

With the exception of the second pairing, religious affiliation was not found to be a robust correlate of refugee settlement policy preferences. When compared to the base outcome, belonging to the Christian faith reduced the log odds of selecting a residence with work restrictions by 0.416 (SE = 0.172). The socio-demographic correlates in the model were found to be weak predictors of policy preferences. However, some are worthy of note. There was a moderate (and negative) age effect in the third pairing ($r = -0.009$; SE = 0.004; $p = 0.028$). A somewhat unexpected gender finding was also noted in the third pairing, being female was a positive correlate ($r = 0.359$; SE = 0.132; $p = 0.007$) of selecting inclusion with work restrictions. The model controlled for interview date, and the results showed that conducting the interview after lockdown had only a moderate impact on how a person responded to the refugee settlement question.[14]

As a final robustness check, the model presented in Table 2 was reproduced using a different specification that treated the dependent as an ordinal categorical variable. All four study hypotheses were validated using this alternative model specification, supporting the conclusions drawn from the multinomial probit regression. The results of the supplementary regression models are provided in Appendix A.

6. Discussion

The results of this study add to our understanding of South African attitudes towards refugee settlement, assessing under what conditions (if any) people in the country might welcome refugees. The data shows that the public is not uniform in its preferences on this issue, and a great level of variation was observed. But a plurality of the adult populace favoured excluding refugees, advocating for turning them away or restricting them to camps. Only a minority adopted a liberal policy position, supporting the right of refugees to live and work in the country. This negativity is consistent with earlier public opinion studies that examined mass attitudes towards refugees in South Africa (e.g. Mattes *et al.* 1999; Crush *et al.* 2008; Gordon 2016). The study also explored a variety of different correlates, contributing to the growing body of literature on the determinants of refugee policy preferences.

The central thesis of this paper focused on how immigrant threat perceptions influenced policy preferences for restricting refugee settlement amongst the general public. It was discovered that threat perceptions had a robust correlation with policy preferences; the relationship was linear and validated the expectations of the integrated threat theory framework (Stephan *et al.* 2016). Threat perceptions were the strongest correlate to emerge from the analysis, much more powerful than other predictors (such as economic anxiety) identified in this study. In assessing threat perceptions, the study did find that resource threats had the strongest effect on attitudes. Due to data unavailability, symbolic threats were not assessed in this study, and future research should seek to rectify this limitation. Despite this shortcoming, the findings presented here make a significant contribution to the wider scholarship (e.g. Murray and Marx 2013; Esses *et al.* 2017; Landmann *et al.* 2019) on how threat perceptions shape patterns of anti-refugee sentiment.

[13] To create this variable, responses to the following question were used: '[r]egardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?' The measure was scaled 0–10 where 0 means 'not at all religious' and 10 means 'very religious'.

[14] The interview date variable had a positive (and statistically significant) association with the first ($r = 0.337$; SE = 137; $p = 0.025$) and fourth ($r = 0.464$; SE = 0.183; $p = 0.011$) pairings of the model. This could be indicative of some kind of early pandemic period effect on attitude formation here. But the character of the split sample in SASAS 2020 was not conducive enough for testing period effects.

Data analysis showed that religious attendance was a positive (albeit weak) correlate of refugee policy preferences. This finding is consistent with the moral community thesis but out of step with other research on anti-refugee sentiment. A meta-analysis by Deslandes and Anderson (2019) examined 37 studies that explored religion as a correlate of prejudice towards refugees and immigrants. The authors concluded that religiosity had no effect on attitudes towards refugees. Given that this meta-analysis was skewed towards the Global North, the present finding may present an indication of a systematic difference in the African context. Indeed, Bohman and Hjerm (2014) have shown that the nature of religion as a prejudice-relevant correlate can change depending on the national context. Although further research will be needed, the observed finding may be due to the secular nature of South African politics.

Previous research has highlighted the difference between factual knowledge (i.e. the processing of information in a systemic manner) and self-perceived expertise which is associated with dogmatism, bias, and prejudice. Mansouri and Vergani (2018), for example, found that self-reported knowledge of Islam was associated with anti-Muslim sentiment in an Australian public opinion study. The present study, however, discovered that subjective knowledge was associated with popular support for the full inclusion of refugees into South African society. Building on this finding, future researchers should seek to understand whether improving a person's knowledge of refugee settlement will reduce anti-refugee sentiment in the country. There is some existing research that suggests that increasing a person's knowledge will make them more tolerant of outsiders. In a large-scale experimental study, for instance, Facchini *et al.* (2022) found that information exposure about immigration made people less likely to express antagonism and more likely to prefer inclusionary policies.

One of the strongest correlates to emerge from the analysis was economic anxiety. Objective economic status was, by contrast, a poor predictor of attitudes in the data analysis. Intriguingly, the relationship between economic anxiety and policy preferences was found to be non-linear. This finding demonstrates the importance of adopting a multinomial regression approach to testing the different hypotheses designed for this study. Feeling deprived had a more powerful (and negative) effect on selecting 'refugee camps' or 'inclusion with work restrictions' than on 'full inclusion' or 'uncertain'. Perhaps this is because these would be the costliest of the settlement options provided, and more deprived individuals may worry that these options would stretch state resources. Scholars looking to expand on this work should seek to investigate the effects of the perceived resource burden of certain settlement options and how this may affect attitude formation.

It is worth reflecting on the language used around the targets of this study. Although aligned with relevant legislation in South Africa, the definition of 'refugee' provided to survey participants by fieldworkers during SASAS 2020 was quite narrow and conservative. Future research may consider using a more expansive definition or perhaps looking at different types of refugees. Many public opinion studies do not differentiate refugee populations and generally treat the term 'refugee' as an overarching category (Cowling *et al.* 2019). However, given that they constitute the greater part of the population seeking refuge in South Africa, future research may benefit from investigating public attitudes towards asylum-seekers. SASAS did not include questions about asylum-seekers, and it is not possible to discern from the data available whether public attitudes towards this group differ significantly from other groups of immigrants. In addition, future work may look at other types of differentiation amongst refugees. A distinction, for example, could be drawn based on state of origin (e.g. Somalian refugees) or motivation (e.g. climate refugees).

7. Conclusion

The findings presented in this study have contributed to a growing body of knowledge that aims to map the drivers of refugee policy preferences. This body of knowledge is quite Eurocentric, and the research presented here helps bridge the evident knowledge gap about African attitudes

towards refugees. Having discovered a number of policy-relevant correlates, the paper also identified several issues that could act as catalysts for future work in the country. But beyond these contributions to the existing scholarship on public attitudes towards refugee settlement, the study has provided valuable information for those looking to reduce anti-refugee sentiment in South Africa. Public hostility towards refugees is an obstacle to refugee protection and should be reduced. The data provided here can be used to design targeted messaging campaigns that help increase popular support for refugee settlement.

In closing, it is also worth considering whether, if analogous research were conducted elsewhere in Africa, similar findings would be observed. Many African countries (such as Cameroon, Kenya, and Tanzania) host large refugee populations and have developed different policies to manage these populations. But attitudes towards refugee policy have not been adequately mapped and studied in most African countries. Indeed, outside South Africa, there is limited public opinion research on anti-refugee sentiment in this part of the world. In order to test the generalizability of the research presented here, large-scale public opinion studies of policy preferences for refugee settlement in different African countries are required.

Acknowledgements

Guidance for this study was provided by the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). For their support and encouragement, special thanks to Benjamin J. Roberts and Jarè Struwig.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Human Sciences Research Council. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available at https://hsrc.ac.za/special-projects/sasas/ with the permission of the Human Sciences Research Council.

Appendix A

A linear regression model was considered an alternative to the multinomial model used in Table 2. But this option was judged to be problematic. A non-interval outcome variable would violate the assumptions of a linear model specification, biasing estimations of any coefficients and standard errors produced. After a review of the available options, an ordered probit regression approach was adopted for this test. When constructing this model, all 'don't know' responses ($N = 289$) in the outcome variable were treated as missing. Each of the outlined predictor variables was introduced sequentially into the regression analysis, and four models were created. All models produced contained the background variables constructed for this study. Model outcomes are portrayed in Table 3; a high coefficient indicates a high level of support for liberal refugee policy.

Threat perceptions were, consistent with H#1, negatively correlated ($r = -0.191$; SE = 0.019; $p = 0.000$) with the dependent variable. Compared to what was seen in Table 2, economic anxiety had a weaker association with refugee sentiment in the ordered regression model. A one-unit increase in the scale decreased the log odds of holding a pro-refugee position by only 0.040 (SE = 0.016). Model outcomes validated H#3, showing that religious attendance was positively (albeit weakly) associated ($r = 0.047$; SE = 0.17; $p = 0.004$) with liberal refugee policy preferences. Subjective knowledge had a more robust correlation with pro-refugee sentiment in Table 3 than in Table 2. A one-unit increase on the knowledge scale improved the likelihood of holding

Table 3. Ordered probit regression on public preferences for refugee exclusion or inclusion in South Africa.

	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
Threat Perceptions	−0.198	(0.018) ***	−0190	(0.018) ***	−0.187	(0.018) ***	−0.191	(0.019) ***
Economic Anxiety			−0.043	(0.016) **	−0.041	(0.016) *	−0.040	(0.016) *
Religious Attendance					0.045	(0.017) **	0.047	(0.016) **
Subjective Knowledge							0.104	(0.039) **
Number of obs.	2784		2778		2707		2707	
Wald chi^2	209	(21)	230	(22)	242	(23)	240	(24)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
Notes: 1. Standard errors appear in parentheses and 2. Each model controls for all background variables including interview date.

pro-refugee attitudes ($r = 0.104$; SE = 0.039; $p = 0.008$). Much like what was observed in the multinomial regression model, socio-demographic variables were weak predictors of refugee policy preferences.

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Journal of Refugee Studies, 2024, 00, 1–17
https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae024
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