

# Foreign exchange

## Monitoring xenophobia in South Africa

Nearly four years have passed since countrywide xenophobic violence resulted in 62 deaths and the forced displacement of tens of thousands of people. In the aftermath of the May 2008 attacks, the South African government and civil society pledged to fight xenophobia. **STEVEN GORDON, BEN ROBERTS** and **JARÉ STRUWIG** present findings on public attitudes towards foreign migrants and the extent to which they have changed over the last decade. The results suggest that xenophobia has not significantly declined post-2008, and remains an entrenched phenomenon in our society.

To understand changing attitudes towards foreigners, we used data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), a repeated cross-sectional survey that has been conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey series consists of nationally representative samples of South Africans aged 16 years and older living in private households.

The number of respondents in each survey round was as follows: 2003 (2 483), 2004 (2 784), 2006 (2 939), 2007 (3 164), 2008 (3 292), 2009 (3 305), and 2010 (3 183).

The survey employs a range of questions designed to capture South African perceptions of foreigners, thereby providing a range of indicators with which to better understand and monitor South African attitudes towards immigrants.

### A TOLERANT MINORITY?

Following the 2008 violence, state and civil society stakeholders embarked on a vigorous campaign to address xenophobia and inflammatory rhetoric. Recent incidents of violence in Gauteng, the Free State and the Western Cape targeting foreigners, however, have led some to criticise the effectiveness of such collective efforts. The attitudinal evidence from SASAS lends some credence to these criticisms. Using trend analysis, it is possible to trace patterns of hostility towards foreign migrants over the 2003-2010 period (Figure 1).

In all years except 2005, survey respondents were asked whether they generally welcome all, some, or no foreign migrants in the country. In 2003, approximately a third (32%) of South Africans expressed the view that they would not welcome any immigrants in South Africa. Another third indicated that they would be receptive to the presence of some immigrants, with only 34% unconditionally accepting foreign migrants to the country.

Such xenophobic sentiment has tended to

fluctuate within a relatively narrow range over the nine rounds of SASAS conducted between 2003 and 2010. The violence that occurred between the 2007 and 2008 SASAS rounds and its subsequent high-level condemnation did produce a modest dampening of anti-immigrant sentiment, but this effect appears to have been short-lived, with the 2009 and 2010 data suggesting xenophobia returned to pre-2008 levels. In late 2010, only 32% of the population stated they welcomed all immigrants to South Africa.

The question arises: despite national efforts to fight xenophobia, why has anti-immigrant sentiment not declined significantly since 2008?

### XENOPHOBIA AND PERCEIVED ECONOMIC COMPETITION

An HSRC investigation into the causes of the 2008 violence highlighted relative deprivation, especially intense competition for jobs, as a salient factor contributing to xenophobia in South Africa. Using the SASAS data it was possible to identify whether those expressing hostility towards foreign migrants perceived them as a threat to job opportunities for local citizens.

The belief that immigrants are a threat to jobs appears strongly entrenched among those claiming that 'no' or 'only some' immigrants (Figure 2) were welcome. Throughout the decade, a significant majority of this group of South Africans consistently reported that foreigners represent a job threat.

In 2010, 72% of those who said they would welcome 'no' or 'only some' foreigners agreed with the statement that migrants pose a job threat, with only 18% disagreeing. The depiction of foreigners as a threat to local job opportunities has not changed appreciably since 2008, though the intensity of sentiment reduced modestly in the 2008-2010 period relative to 2003-2007.

Even if we include those who unconditionally welcomed foreign migrants to the country, the analyses does not substantially diminish this perception of economic threat. In each of the 2008-2010 survey rounds, approximately six out of every ten South Africans said that foreigners pose a job threat, with around a quarter reporting otherwise.

### LINK TO OTHER NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

Perhaps what is most disconcerting about this sense of job competition is how closely it is related to other negative depictions of foreign migrants. Locals who view foreigners as a threat to employment opportunities tend to hold more critical opinions about foreign migrants relative to those who do not feel economically threatened (Figure 3).

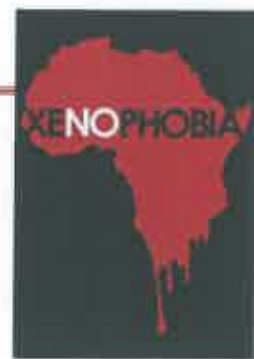
In 2010, respondents reporting 'job threat' were considerably more likely to view foreign migrants as a threat to 'law and order' (85%), a threat to scarce national resources (76%), and as a threat to 'health' (68%). Conversely, these respondents were less likely to believe that immigrants were good for the economy (22%) or brought needed skills to the country (37%).

It would thus appear that negative, stereotypical views about foreign nationals are fairly widespread, especially among those South Africans who perceive them as a job threat. This latter group has a worrisome tendency to ascribe many of the nation's current economic and social challenges to foreign migrants.

### ATTRIBUTES OF THE XENOPHOBIC

In profiling xenophobia in South Africa, it has become commonplace to cite poverty and unemployment as causal factors. But can material and employment deprivation be placed at the heart of this phenomenon? Does competition among the poor for scarce resources, including jobs, radicalise the





dispossession against foreign nationals?

The 2010 results were broken down by a range of socioeconomic characteristics to better understand who are most likely to regard immigrants as a threat to employment.

The results (not shown) seem to question the notion that only the poor and the unemployed regard foreigners as a 'job threat', with such concerns evident across the socioeconomic divide. The poor and the unemployed are *not* more inclined towards viewing immigrants as a 'job threat' than the rich or the employed.

Similar findings are observed on the basis of age, sex, population group and geographic location. This evidence therefore challenges the popular tendency to assign responsibility for hate crimes directed at foreign nationals to specific groups such as 'the youth' or 'hostel dwellers'.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The attitudinal data reviewed in this article confirms that xenophobic sentiment in South Africa continues to be shared by a considerable proportion of South Africans across the socio-demographic and economic spectrum. Despite efforts at promoting tolerance, there has not been a progressive and enduring improvement in the prevalence of xenophobia over the last few years.

This is a disquieting development given the importance attached to social cohesion, post-transformation integration and an entrenched culture of human rights in our society. It speaks to the need for an intensified commitment together with creative policy thinking in the fight against xenophobia in our country.

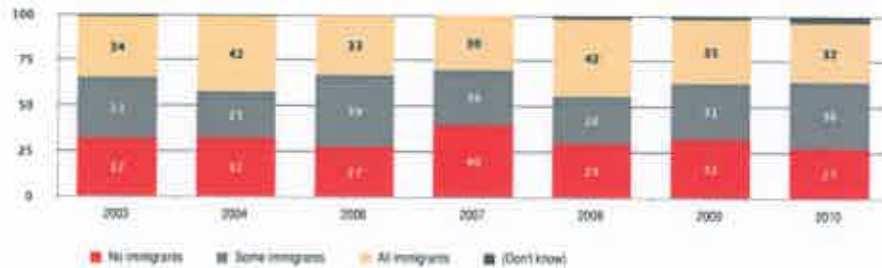
It is hoped that the government's national strategy on social cohesion, which is scheduled for completion in the coming year, will provide such direction and impetus.



#### AUTHORS

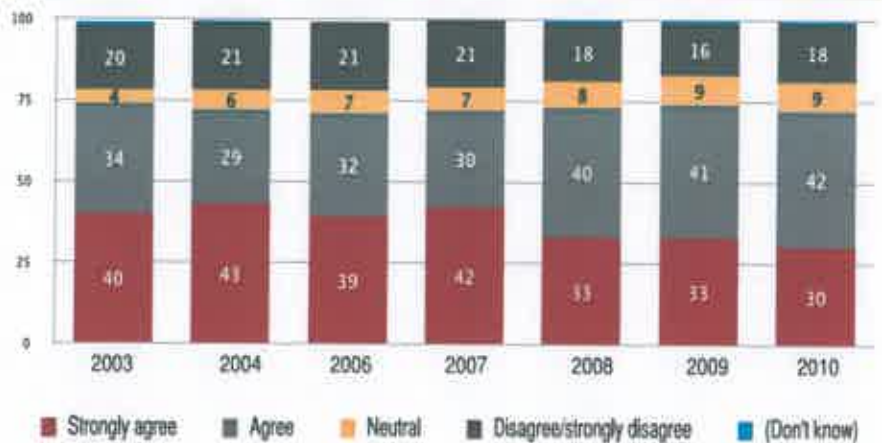
Steven Gordon, Master's intern; Ben Roberts and Jaré Struwig, SASAS coordinators; Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery research programme, HSRC.

Figure 1: South Africans overall perception of foreigners, 2003-2010 (percent)



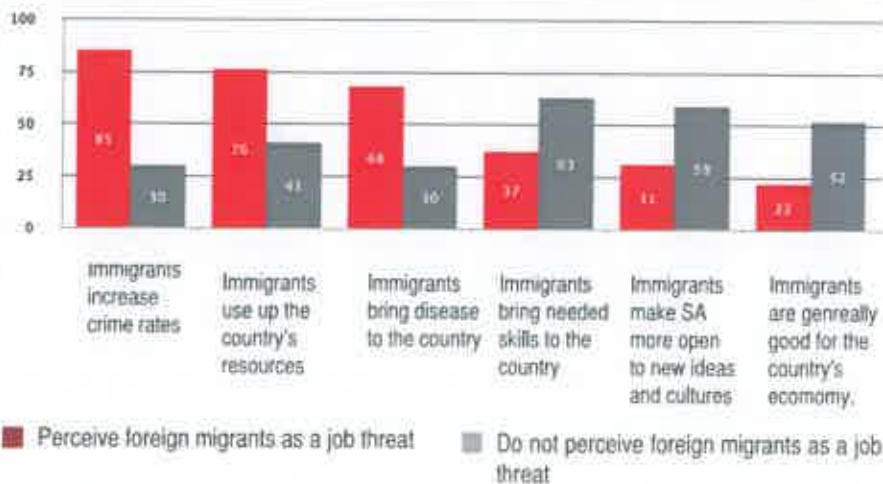
Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2004, 2006-2010.

Figure 2: Perceived job threat posed by foreign migrant among those that generally welcome no/some immigrants, 2003-2010 (percent)

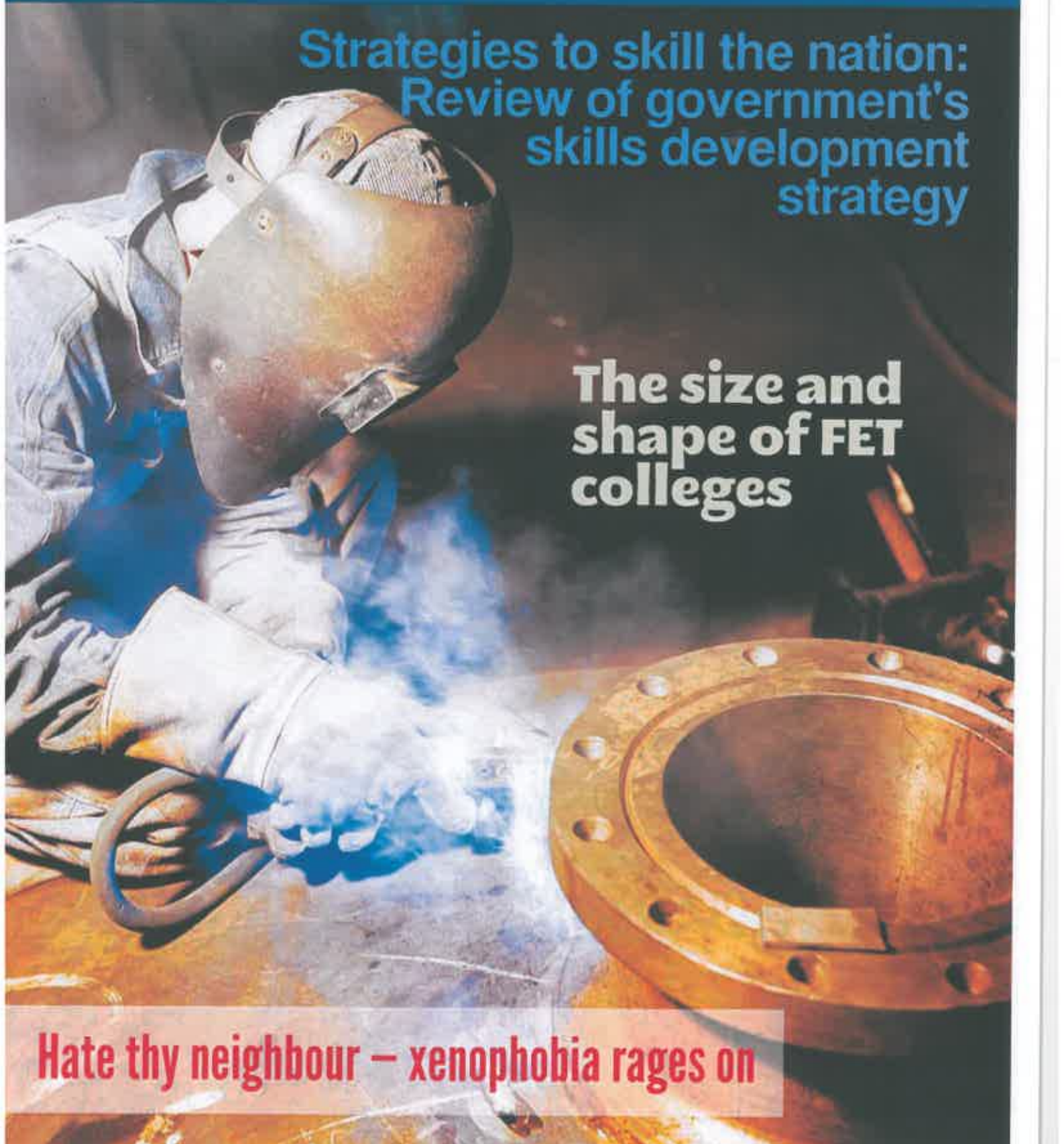


Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2004, 2006-2010.

Figure 3: Perceptions of foreigners, by perceived job threat in 2010 (%) that agree/strongly agree



Source, HSRC SASAS 2010.



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