

# Five xenophobic myths about immigrants in South Africa debunked by researchers

September 26 2022, by Anthony Kaziboni

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In South Africa, immigrants are often scapegoated as the root of socio-economic problems. In the post-apartheid landscape, Black African immigrants, mainly, from other African countries have [been negatively](#)

[stereotyped](#) as "illegal" and "job stealers" who are "criminal" as well as "diseased."

This attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-nationals in a given population is [xenophobia](#).

[Since 1994](#), more than 900 violent xenophobic incidents have been recorded in South Africa, resulting in at least 630 deaths, displacement of 123,700 people, and looting of about 4,850 shops. The eruption of xenophobic violence undermines social stability and cohesion, tolerance, the constitution of South Africa, and the social fabric on which the country's democracy is founded.

Misstatements by [public officials](#) and politicians have time and again fanned the flames of xenophobia and violence associated with it. United Nations experts [recently warned](#) that "the country is on the precipice of explosive violence."

Almost three decades after the country's first democratic election, South Africa faces what [commentators have dubbed](#) the triple challenge of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

More than half of the country's population lives in poverty, with [close to 12 million people hungry and 2.5 million experiencing hunger daily](#). The country has a Gini coefficient of [0.65](#), making it one of the most unequal countries in the world.

A [meager 10%](#) of the population owns more than 80% of the wealth. South Africa is still "a country of two nations," as former president Thabo Mbeki [once described it](#).

[Youth unemployment is a huge problem](#). Of the more than 10 million people aged 15–24 years, only 2.5 million are active in the labor force,

either working or searching for work. Over 75% of this group is out of the labor force.

The significance of negative stereotyping and scapegoating in relation to the "triple challenge" is that immigrants are portrayed as the cause and a threat to national sovereignty. Inflammatory remarks about migrants by public officials and [politicians harden mythologies](#).

In a recent [research paper](#) we set out to debunk negative immigrant myths. We provided evidence demonstrating the influence of myths on the citizenry's perceptions, as well as contradictions.

The research drew from authoritative and credible sources of data and information.

Beyond debunking the myths, this research sets a baseline of what facts exist regarding immigrants in South Africa.

## **Myth 1: South Africa is swamped with immigrants**

It is widely believed that the country is flooded with immigrants. The 2021 South African Social Attitudes Survey indicates that almost half the sample believed the country had between 17–40 million immigrants. This belief is incorrect. [Statistics South Africa \(StatsSA\)](#) estimates the number to be about 3.95 million, accounting for 6.5% of the country's population. This is not unique to South Africa.

This figure includes regular and irregular immigrants

## **Myth 2: Immigrants steal jobs and employment opportunities from locals**

While there is anecdotal evidence that migrants are "job stealers," in general, migrants do not appear to take employment opportunities from locals. In South Africa, ["one {regular} immigrant worker generates approximately two jobs for locals."](#)

Migrants are also more likely to be self-employed and employ South Africans.

### **Myth 3: Immigrants contribute to, or are responsible for, high levels of crime**

[Our report cites](#) 2008 South African Social Attitudes Survey data which showed that 62% of the sample believed that immigrants were responsible for crime in the country. By 2016 it had gone up to 66%. Paradoxically, when asked who commits crime in their communities, most people say it is locals. For example, between 2011 and 2017, the national Victims of Crime surveys showed that 5.7%–6.7% of households stated that crime in their areas was caused by "people from outside South Africa."

Statistically, [there is no relationship between international migration in South Africa and crime.](#) There is no evidence that most foreign-born nationals commit crime, or that they are responsible for most crime in the country.

### **Myth 4: Most immigrants are in the country illegally**

Often, immigrants enter South Africa with a regular status but fall into irregular status due to poor immigration policy management. The Department of Home Affairs [is struggling](#) with a visa backlog partly due to departmental dysfunction and corruption. In addition to the department's backlogs, the cost of applying for visas is exorbitant.

## Myth 5: Migrants are flooding public health care services

The Limpopo health MEC, Dr. Phophi Ramathuba, recently came under the spotlight for berating an [immigrant](#) woman. The moment was caught on video which then went viral. Her remarks seemed to [reinforce the myth](#) that immigrants are overburdening the country's public healthcare system. At about 6.5% of the population, it is statistically impossible for immigrants to be responsible for the national healthcare system's failings.

### Futility in scapegoating

Scapegoating [immigrants](#) will not result in significantly improved healthcare service provision, reduced [crime](#) or less unemployment.

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Provided by The Conversation

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