



South Africa Immigration Debate: Public Perceptions And Contributing Factors to Crime

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Abstract

This study investigates public perceptions of illegal immigration in South Africa. It particularly focuses on the perceived relationship between immigration and crime rates. Despite limited empirical evidence linking immigration to increased crime, public discourse conflates undocumented immigration with criminal activity. This prompted policy debates including the current review of South Africa's Immigration Amendment Bill. Guided by Intergroup Threat Theory, this research examines how realistic threats (concerns over tangible resources and safety) and symbolic threats (concerns over cultural identity) shape public attitudes. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 131 South African residents using convenience sampling. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics in SPSS 29.0. Findings reveal an overwhelming consensus (96,3%) that immigration worsens crime, which is primarily attributed to undocumented status facilitating criminal activity (88,5%). Notably, 46,6% believe immigrants come to benefit from social services rather than provide for families (35,1%), and 78,8% believe controlled migration would reduce crime. Paradoxically, 64,9% express willingness to develop relationships with immigrants despite negative perceptions. The study concludes that public perceptions of immigration as a crime driver have become nearly widespread in South Africa, which creates a significant gap between public belief and empirical evidence. This disconnect highlights the urgent need for transparent communication from authorities about immigration realities and addressing underlying socioeconomic anxieties that fuel these perceptions, rather than treating immigration solely as a crime issue.

Keywords: Immigration, Public attitudes, Legal and illegal immigration, Crime.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa, often regarded as one of Africa's most developed nations, serves as a significant destination for migrants from across the continent (Moyo, 2021). Driven by political instability and economic hardship in their home countries, individuals seek better employment opportunities and improved living conditions within South Africa's borders. However, Chisadza (2024) noted that this influx of migrants, particularly those who are undocumented, frequently gives rise to complex psychological and social dynamics within host communities. Public perception towards illegal immigrants has become a central and often contentious point of discussion globally, and South Africa is no exception. The phenomenon of migration, both legal and illegal, continues to expand across various continents and countries (Okunade et al., 2024; Megersa & Tafesse, 2024), necessitating a deeper understanding of its societal impacts.

The discourse surrounding illegal immigration in South Africa is further complicated by the challenge of obtaining accurate statistics. Despite ongoing efforts,



Moyo (2019) argues that the South African government struggles to provide precise figures on undocumented immigrants due to persistent issues with border management control. This data vacuum, according to Maluleke (2025) has been exploited in political discourse, with some political leaders making unsubstantiated claims regarding the number of illegal immigrants. According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2022), approximately 3,96 million undocumented immigrants residing in the country. However, current accurate estimates remain elusive in 2025, and the situation is poised to become more critical with the anticipated arrival of refugees from the escalating conflict in Mozambique, if the political instability there intensify.

According to Hiropoulos (2019), public perceptions of illegal immigration in South Africa often raise attitudes that link it directly to an increased crime rate. This widespread concern about the high volume of immigration prompted the Department of Home Affairs, through its portfolio committee, to initiate public consultations for the review of the Immigration Amendment Bill. The aim of this review is to enhance national security standards and address public anxieties (Parliament of South Africa, 2025). According to Chabane (2025), a breakdown shows the Portfolio Committee on Home Affairs reported receiving 378 submissions on the Bill: 358 from individuals and 20 from organizations. Of these, 246 submissions supported the Bill, advocating for stronger border control, stricter deportation measures, and enhanced national security. Conversely, 12 submissions opposed the Bill, citing human rights concerns, the risk of indefinite detention, and constitutional issues. A further 120 submissions offered conditional support, endorsing some aspects while opposing others.

Furthermore, Alimohammadi & Muller (2019) notes that South African law prohibits the employment of undocumented foreign nationals, deeming it a punishable offense. According to international Labour Organization (ILO, 2018), the Immigration Act outlines provisions for promoting economic growth through needed foreign labor, foreign investment, the entry of exceptionally skilled individuals, increasing skilled human resources, academic exchanges within the Southern African Development Community and promoting tourism. However, the same Act, under its general prohibition of refusal of entry, expulsion, extradition, or return to another country in certain circumstances, stipulates that no person may be compelled to return to a country where they face persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, or where their life, physical safety, or freedom would be threatened due to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or other events disturbing public order (South Africa Department of Employment and Labour, 2022).

The Department of Home Affairs has demonstrated increased enforcement, deporting 46,898 illegal immigrants in the 2024/25 financial year (South African Department of Home Affairs, 2025). It notes that this represents an 18% surge from the previous year's 39,672 deportations, marking the highest number in at least five years and tripling figures from recent years. This context highlights the pressing need to understand public perceptions, as these perceptions directly influence policy debates, social cohesion, and the overall response to immigration challenges in South Africa.

Studies has shown that the lack of precise data on undocumented immigrants in South Africa, coupled with the politicization of immigration figures, creates a fertile ground for misinformation and heightened public anxiety (Manji et al., 2023; Machinya,



2022). This environment fosters a strong public perception that illegal immigration worsens crime rates, despite limited empirical evidence consistently linking the two (Moyo, 2019). The ongoing review of the Immigration Amendment Bill, driven by public submissions, underscores the urgency of understanding the subtleties of these public attitudes. Without a clear understanding of the factors shaping these perceptions and their relationship to concerns about crime, effective policy-making and social integration efforts are severely hampered. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by empirically exploring the drivers of public attitudes towards illegal immigration and its perceived impact on crime in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) as its guiding theoretical framework to understand the formation of public perceptions and attitudes towards illegal immigration in South Africa. Developed by Stephan and Stephan (2000), ITT posits that prejudice and negative attitudes towards out-groups (in this context, immigrants, particularly undocumented ones) arise from perceived threats that members of an in-group (South African citizens) experience or anticipate from the out-group. These perceived threats can manifest in two primary forms: Realistic Threats; These involve concerns over tangible resources and the physical well-being of the in-group. In the context of immigration, realistic threats often relate to perceived competition for scarce resources such as jobs, housing, social services (e.g., grants, education, healthcare), or the fear of increased crime and insecurity. The presence of a large immigrant population, especially if perceived as undocumented, can evoke fears that they burden public services or displace native workers, which directly impact the in-group's material well-being. The other one is Symbolic Threats: These involve concerns over perceived differences in values, beliefs, cultural norms, and national identity. Symbolic threats arise when the out-group is seen as challenging the in-group's way of life, moral standards, or fundamental understanding of their collective identity. In the immigration context, this could involve fears of cultural erosion, changes to societal values, or a perceived threat to national cohesion.

Intergroup threat theory provides a healthy lens through which to interpret the public perceptions of illegal immigration in South Africa. The socio-economic realities of the country, that is marked by high unemployment, inequality, and stretched public services (Enaifoghe, 2020), make its population particularly susceptible to perceptions of realistic threat from immigrants. Any perception that indicate a belief that immigrants come to benefit from social services or steal jobs directly align with the concept of realistic threat. Similarly, the perception that immigration worsens the problem of crime can be understood as a realistic threat to personal safety and community order.

Furthermore, any underlying concerns about national identity, cultural integration and the rule of law (e.g., the emphasis on undocumented status facilitating crime) may also reflect symbolic threats. The theory helps explain why South African citizenship might be associated with more negative perceptions, as it highlights the in-group/out-group dynamic and the protective stance of the in-group against perceived external threats. Applying the ITT, this study aims to go beyond merely describing public attitudes, and seeks to explain why these attitudes exist by linking them to specific perceived realistic and symbolic threats. This framework will guide the interpretation of



how demographic factors, daily interactions, and prevailing narratives contribute to the public's overall perception of illegal immigration and its perceived impact on crime in South Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a quantitative research design. Specifically, it employs a cross-sectional survey approach. This design allowed for the collection of data from a large sample of respondents at a single point in time, and enables the examination of relationships between variables and the identification of predictors of public perceptions regarding illegal immigration.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised individuals aged 18 and above residing in South Africa. A total of 131 respondents participated in the survey. The sampling method employed was a non-probability sampling technique. Specifically, it utilized convenience sampling due to its practicality and accessibility in reaching a broad range of participants. While convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of findings, it was deemed appropriate for an exploratory study aiming to understand diverse public perceptions.

Data collection instrument

Structured questionnaires were utilized for data collection. These questionnaires consisted of closed-ended questions designed to gather demographic information (e.g., age, gender, education, employment status, income, province of residence, citizenship, property ownership) and to assess respondents' attitudes and perceptions regarding various aspects of illegal immigration, including its impact on service delivery, job competition, cultural integration, and its perceived link to crime. The questions were designed to be clear and unambiguous to ensure consistent interpretation by respondents.

Data analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to describe their general perceptions and attitudes towards illegal immigration. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to voluntary participation, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were ensured throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they completed the questionnaires.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=131)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	66	50.4
	Female	64	48.9
	Other	1	0.8
Age	18-25	19	14.5
	26-35	39	29.8
	36-45	43	32.8
	46-55	23	17.6
	56+	7	5.3
	Education Level	Matric	16
Diploma		20	15.3
Undergraduate Degree		22	16.8
Postgraduate Degree		73	55.7
Employment Status	Yes	94	71.8
	No	24	18.3
	Not yet, still studying	13	9.9
Main Source of Income	Income from work	97	74.0
	Social grant	8	6.1
	I rely on relatives and friends	14	10.7
	I do not have any reliable source of income	12	9.2
Province of Residence	Gauteng	39	29.8
	KZN	2	1.5
	Mpumalanga	4	3.1
	Limpopo	71	54.2
	Northern Cape	1	0.8

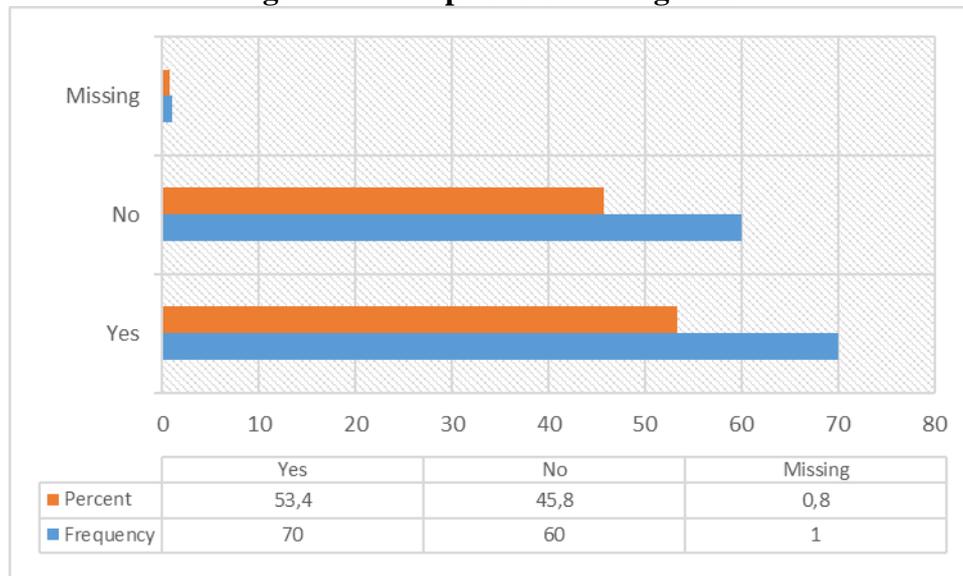


	Eastern Cape	13	9.9
	Western Cape	1	0.8
South African Citizen	Yes	129	98.5
	No	2	1.5
Property Ownership	Yes	81	61.8
	No	50	38.2
Monthly Income (R)	R100-R500	11	8.4
	R600-R900	6	4.6
	R1000-R5000	19	14.5
	R6000-R10000	8	6.1
	More than R10000	83	63.4
	None	4	3.1

The above demographic data reveals a fairly balanced gender distribution, with males slightly outnumbering females. The largest age group falls between 36-45 years (32,8%), followed by 26-35 years (29.8%), indicating a significant portion of the sample is in their prime working age. A substantial majority of respondents (55,7%) hold a postgraduate degree, suggesting a highly educated sample. Most respondents are employed (71.8%) and derive their main income from work (74%). Geographically, the sample is heavily concentrated in Limpopo (54,2%) and Gauteng (29,8%). Almost all respondents are South African citizens (98,5%), and a majority own immovable property (61,8%). A significant proportion (63,4%) reported a monthly income of more than R10,000.

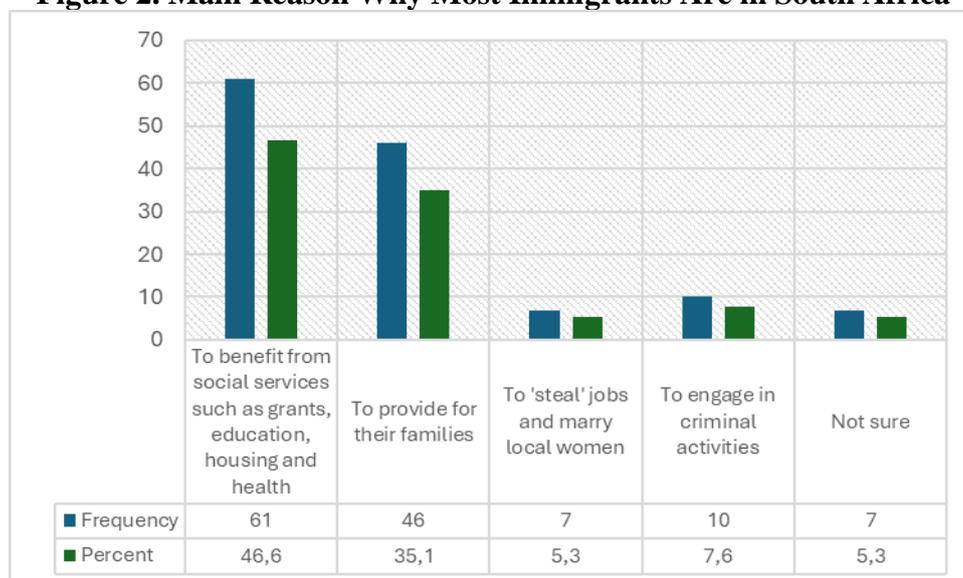
ATTITUDE TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS

Figure 1: Perceptions on Immigration



When asked about fighting immigration-related fraud, 53,4% of respondents indicated “Yes,” while 45,8% indicated “No,” with a small percentage missing. This suggests a nearly even split in opinion, indicating that while a slight majority supports efforts to combat immigration fraud, a substantial portion either does not see it as a priority or holds a different view.

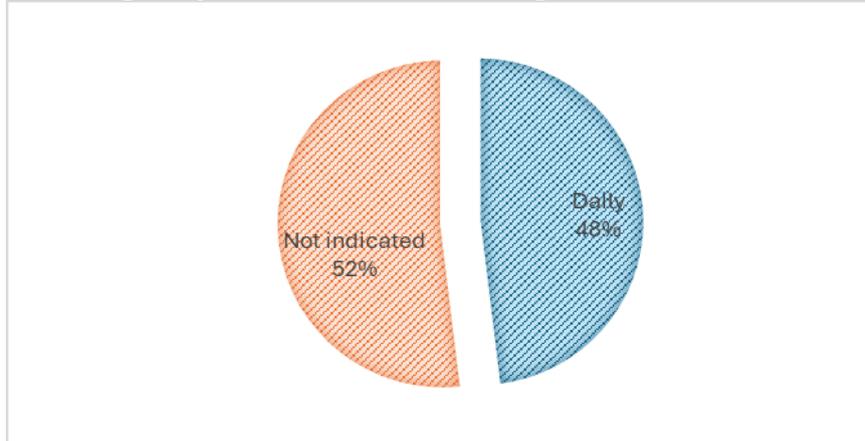
Figure 2. Main Reason Why Most Immigrants Are in South Africa



Respondents' perceptions regarding the main reasons immigrants come to South Africa varied: 46,6% believe immigrants come to benefit from social services such as grants, education, housing and health. 35,1% believe it is to provide for their families. A smaller percentage believe it is to engage in criminal activities (7,6%) or to steal jobs and marry local women (5,3%). 5,3% were not sure. These results highlight a prevalent perception that immigrants are primarily motivated by access to social services, followed by family

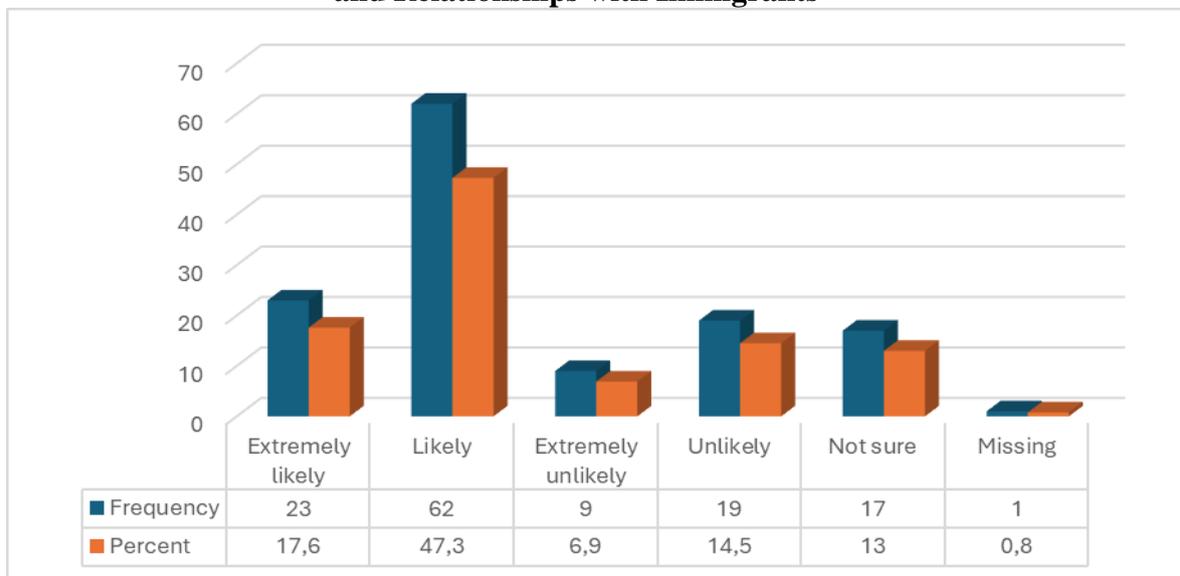
provision. A minority of respondents associate immigration with negative intentions like crime or job displacement.

Figure 3: Frequency of Interaction with People from Outside South Africa



The data in figure 3 shows that 48,1% of respondents interact with people from outside South Africa daily, while 51,9% did not indicate their frequency of interaction. The high percentage of not indicated makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the overall frequency of interaction. However, nearly half of the respondents who provided an answer engage in daily interactions, suggesting a degree of regular contact with foreign nationals among a significant portion of the surveyed population.

Figure 4: Likelihood of Developing Constant Interactions and Relationships with Immigrants



Regarding the likelihood of developing constant interactions and relationships with people from outside South Africa: 17,6% reported being extremely likely, 47,3% reported being likely. Conversely, 6,9% were extremely unlikely and 14,5% were unlikely. Meanwhile, 13% were not sure, and 0,8% were missing. Cumulatively, 64,9% of respondents expressed a likelihood (extremely likely or likely) to develop ongoing



relationships with immigrants, indicating a generally open attitude towards integration and interaction among the majority of the surveyed population.

IMMIGRATION AND CRIME

Perception of Immigration Worsening Crime in South Africa.

Category	Frequency	Percent
Yes	126	96.2
No	4	3.1
Not indicated	1	0.8
Total	131	100.0

The table 2 above shows that a striking 96,3% of respondents believe that immigration worsens the problem of crime in South Africa. Only 3,1% disagreed, and 0,6% did not indicate. This finding reveals an overwhelming public perception linking immigration, particularly illegal immigration, to an increase in crime rates.

Table 3: Ways immigration impacts crime

Category	Frequency	Percent
Most immigrants are undocumented, and they easily commit crime	116	88.5
The police are more lenient to immigrants	2	1.5
Immigrant crime is often unpoliced	9	6.9
Not sure	3	2.3
Not indicated	1	0.8
Total	131	100.0

When asked how immigration impacts crime, data in in Table 3 above shows that 88,5% stated that most immigrants are undocumented, and they easily commit crime, 6,9% believe immigrant crime is often unpoliced, 1,5% think the police are more lenient to immigrants. 2,3% were not sure, and 0,8% did not indicate. These responses strongly suggest that the perceived link between immigration and crime is predominantly attributed to the undocumented status of immigrants, which is believed to facilitate criminal activity.

Figure 5: Belief That Controlled Migration Reduces Crime.

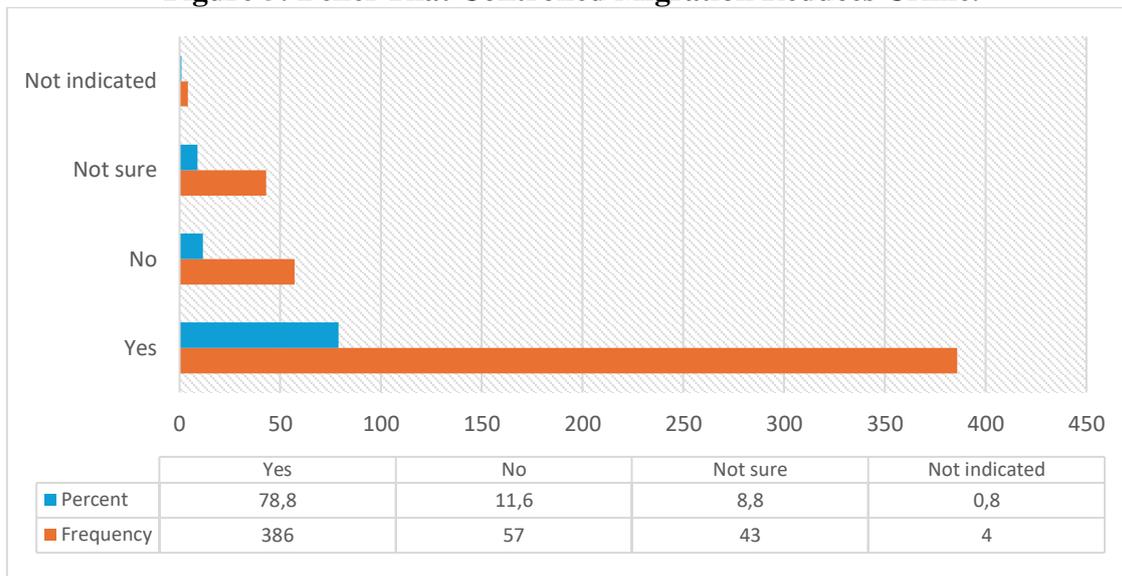


Figure 5 above shows that a significant majority of respondents, 78,8%, believe that if migration is controlled, it will result in less incidences of crime in South Africa. 11,6% disagreed, and 8,8% were Not sure. This indicates a strong public conviction that stricter migration control measures could lead to a reduction in crime rates.

FINDING DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine public perception illegal immigration in South Africa, with particular focus on the perceived relationship between immigration and crime rates. Employing Intergroup Threat Theory as our analytical framework, we conducted a quantitative survey of 131 South African residents to investigate the factors shaping these perceptions and their relationship to concerns about crime. The research was motivated by the critical gap in evidence-based understanding of public sentiment amid ongoing policy debates, particularly as reflected in the current review of South Africa's Immigration Amendment Bill.

The most remarkable finding from our study is the overwhelming consensus among respondents (96,3%) that immigration worsens crime in South Africa. This near-unanimous perception stands in contrast to the limited empirical evidence that links immigration to increased crime rates, as noted by Moyo (2019). This finding resonates with Hiropoulos' (2019) and Sohoni and Sohoni (2014) observation that public perceptions often conflate undocumented immigration with criminal activity, despite a lack of robust evidence supporting this connection. However, our data reveals something even more profound than previous studies have documented – the near-total acceptance of this narrative across our sample. When 96 out of every 100 South Africans surveyed firmly believe that immigrants are making their communities less safe, the implication is that this is more than just a statistical anomaly but a powerful social narrative that has taken root in the collective consciousness (Costelloe et al., 2018; Wang, 2012).

The primary explanation offered by respondents (88,5%) points to the undocumented status of immigrants as facilitating criminal activity. This aligns with the realistic threat dimension of Intergroup Threat Theory, where citizens perceive tangible



dangers to their physical safety and community order. What is particularly telling is how this perception persists despite South Africa's Immigration Act explicitly prohibiting the employment of undocumented persons (Alimohammadi & Muller, 2019). The gap between legal frameworks and public perception reveals how policy implementation failures can shape social attitudes more powerfully than legislative intent.

Evidently, the most interesting contradiction in our findings is the coexistence of overwhelmingly negative perceptions about immigration's impact on crime (96,3%) alongside a general openness to personal interaction with immigrants (64,9% expressing likelihood to develop relationships). This paradox challenges simplistic narratives about xenophobia in South Africa. Our data suggests that while South Africans may harbour abstract fears about immigration's societal impact, their personal experiences often tell a different story. Nearly half of respondents (48,1%) interact with foreign nationals daily, yet maintain the belief that immigration increases crime. This dissonance reflects what Manji et al. (2023) describe as the "politicization of perception" – where macro-level anxieties about immigration persist despite positive micro-level experiences.

This finding differs significantly from Enaifoghe's (2020) and Martiny et al. (2022) works, which suggested that direct contact typically reduces prejudice. Our study indicates that in contexts of high unemployment and strained public services – as is the case in South Africa – the protective impulse of realistic threat may override the moderating effect of personal contact. When basic resources feel scarce, even positive interpersonal experiences may not dismantle broader societal fears about competition for those resources (Bond et al., 2023; Dovidio et al., 2017).

Furthermore, our finding that 46,6% of respondents believe immigrants come primarily to "benefit from social services rather than to provide for their families (35,1%) reveals a troubling narrative that frames immigrants as welfare seekers rather than economic actors. This perception directly feeds into the realistic threat framework, where citizens view immigrants as draining limited public resources. This finding contrasts with Megersa and Tafesse's (2024) continental study, which found that economic opportunity – not welfare access – is the primary driver of migration across Africa. The discrepancy suggests a significant gap between the actual motivations of migrants and how host communities perceive them. In South Africa's context of high unemployment (32,9% as of Q1 2025), this misperception becomes particularly potent that fuels resentment toward immigrants who are seen as "taking" rather than contributing. This misperception can lead to intergroup conflicts (Romano et al., 2022; Sasse et al., 2022). What is especially concerning is how this narrative persists despite South Africa's Immigration Act outlining provisions for promoting economic growth through needed foreign labor (Department of Employment and Labour, 2022). The disconnect between policy intent and public understanding highlights how legal frameworks can become obscured by powerful social narratives.

Findings also shows the strong belief (78,8%) that controlled migration would reduce crime. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for policymakers. On one hand, this perception aligns with the government's recent enforcement surge – deporting 46,898 undocumented immigrants in 2024/25, an 18% increase from the previous year (Department of Home Affairs, 2025). On the other hand, it risks diverting attention from more complex, evidence-based crime prevention strategies. This finding echoes Chabane's (2025) analysis of public submissions to the Immigration Amendment



Bill, where 246 out of 378 submissions supported stronger border controls. However, our study adds crucial context: this support appears rooted in the belief that immigration control equals crime control, regardless of empirical evidence. As Machinya (2022) warns, when policy responses are driven by perception rather than evidence, they may address symptoms while ignoring root causes. The danger here is that by framing immigration as a crime issue rather than a complex socioeconomic phenomenon, we risk implementing policies that satisfy public anxiety without actually enhancing community safety. This aligns with Manji et al.'s (2023) and Komendantova et al. (2023) caution that the lack of precise data on undocumented immigrants creates fertile ground for misinformation and heightened public anxiety."

LIMITATIONS

This study's limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The sample's heavy concentration in Limpopo (54,2%) and high educational attainment (55,7% postgraduate degree) means our results may not represent all South Africans. In particular, the perspectives of less educated citizens or those in other provinces may differ significantly. Furthermore, the convenience sampling method, while practical for an exploratory study, limits generalizability. As Moyo (2021) notes, migration perceptions often vary significantly by socioeconomic status and geographic location – factors our sampling could not fully capture. The timing of our research also matters. Conducted amid escalating conflict in Mozambique and anticipated refugee flows (Stats SA, 2022), the findings reflect perceptions during a period of heightened anxiety about immigration. This context may amplify threat perceptions beyond what might be observed in more stable times.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest several critical implications for immigration policy in South Africa. First, the overwhelming perception linking immigration to crime, despite limited evidence, demands transparent communication from authorities. The government's struggle to provide precise figures on undocumented immigrants (Moyo, 2019) has created a vacuum filled by speculation and political rhetoric. It is necessary to address this data gap through regular, credible reporting. This could help ground public discourse in evidence rather than fear. Second, the Immigration Amendment Bill review process must acknowledge the powerful narrative connecting immigration and crime while providing factual context. As the Department of Home Affairs continues public consultations, they should directly address the misconception that immigration control alone will solve South Africa's complex crime challenges.

Third, our finding that most South Africans are open to personal interaction with immigrants (64.9%) suggests opportunities for community-based integration initiatives. Programs that facilitate structured, positive contact between citizens and immigrants, particularly those highlighting immigrants' economic contributions, might help bridge the gap between abstract fears and lived experiences. Finally, policymakers must recognize that immigration perceptions are extremely intertwined with broader socioeconomic anxieties. As Enaifoghe (2020) reminds us, in contexts of high unemployment and inequality, immigration becomes a convenient scapegoat for systemic failures. It is important that the desire to address the root causes of crime and



unemployment, not just immigration, must remain central to any effective policy response.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a South Africa where the perception of immigration as a crime driver has become nearly universal, despite limited evidence supporting this connection. This finding is not merely academic, rather, it has real consequences for social cohesion, policy direction and the lived experiences of millions of migrants. What emerges clearly is that South Africans are not just expressing opinions about immigration; they are articulating inherent anxieties about security, economic stability, and national identity in a context of limited resources. The challenge for policymakers is not simply to correct misperceptions, but to address the underlying conditions that make these perceptions so compelling.

As the study move forward with this research, it is important to remember that behind these statistics are real people, both citizens and immigrants, navigating complex social landscapes. The path toward more evidence-based, humane immigration policy begins with understanding not just what people believe, but why they believe it. Only then can we build policies that address both genuine security concerns and the human realities of migration in 21st century Africa.

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