

# African Migrants, Xenophobia and Urban Violence in Post-apartheid South Africa

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## **Abstract**

The urban space in South Africa is increasingly becoming a troubled terrain of xenophobic violence. In recent years xenophobia has emerged as one of the major contributing factors to urban violence in several African countries and the phenomenon is becoming an urban management challenge that deserves academic inquiry and policy attention. Yet most of the academic research into the incidence and causes of xenophobic violence has not explored the connections between urbanity and xenophobia. This article aims to contribute to the debate by examining the broader relationship between xenophobia and urban violence in South African cities and by pulling together the latest literature into creating a better understanding of xenophobia in urban spaces. This article provides an assessment of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa within the context of the on-going and important debate regarding the extent to which poverty and poor service delivery are determinants of urban violence. In addition, it argues that debates surrounding the complex spaces of deprivation in urban areas, citizenship and belonging should be central to the discourses on violence in South Africa's cities, which in many ways are still struggling to erase the imprint of apartheid. Xenophobic violence in cities is a phenomenon that deserves policy attention and direct intervention by central government, local authorities and community leaders.

**Keywords:** Xenophobia, urban violence, multiculturalism, migrants, South Africa

## **Introduction**

The term xenophobia involves negative social representations and practices that discriminate against immigrants, refugees and migrants (Rydgren 2004; Roemer & Van der Straeten 2007). In recent years xenophobia has emerged as one of the major contributing factors to urban violence in many African countries and the phenomenon is becoming an urban management challenge that deserves academic inquiry and policy attention (Anderson 2002; Crush & Ramachandran 2009; Hassim *et al.* 2008). Xenophobia, and its various forms of intolerance and violence, is a source of concern because it generates rhetoric that at times provides moral justification for the exclusion of non-nationals from accessing basic services that they may be entitled to, such as public health and education, shelter, potable water and sanitation. Also, xenophobia places migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in difficult situations where their human and labour rights are circumscribed by anti-migrant policies (ILO 2004; Taran 2000; Wickramasekera 2008; Lefko- Everett 2007). In his overview of various forms of violence in urban South Africa, Abrahams (2010) provides a useful discussion of xenophobic violence in the country during the post-apartheid era. Several other scholars have engaged in the debate on xenophobia and these include Danso and McDonald (2000), Charman and Piper (2012), Crush (2000), Crush and Pendleton (2004), Morapedi (2007), Hassim *et al.* (2008), Hossay (1996), Misago (2009), Morris (1998), Tshitereke (1999) and Nieftagodien (2008). Various surveys on xenophobia that have been conducted in the country during the past decade reveal two disturbing findings. First, that urban South Africa exhibits high levels of intolerance and hostility to outsiders that is occasionally reflected by xenophobic attacks on migrant communities, their livelihoods and properties. Second, that there has been a hardening of anti-migrant attitudes during the post-apartheid era. The two findings are disturbing because they are at odds with the discourse of the 'New South Africa' and the 'rainbow nation' that conveys a different and inspiring message about inclusiveness and tolerance.

This article aims to contribute to the debate by examining the broader relationship between xenophobia and urban violence in South African cities and by pulling together the latest literature into creating a better understanding of xenophobia in urban spaces. The article focuses on xenophobic violence and does not examine the other forms of urban violence

that have been examined in great detail by scholars such as Hough (2000); Harris (2001); and Palmary *et al.* (2003). Also, the article gives an overview of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa and it argues that debates surrounding the complex spaces of deprivation in urban areas, citizenship and belonging should be central to the discourses on urban violence.

A plethora of studies has been undertaken on the relationships between urban poverty, xenophobia and urban violence in both industrialized and developing countries (Rodgers 2010; Moser, 2005; Agostini *et al.* 2007). In southern Africa studies on xenophobia and international migration by Crush and Pendleton (2004), Danso and McDonald (2000), McKnight (2008), and Morapedi (2007), have generated a rich literature on patterns and forms of anti-migrant expressions in the region but the studies have lacked a distinctive urban focus. Some of the literature shows how different urban communities in the country have variously accommodated and assimilated xenophobic patterns through variegated forms and expressions ranging from subtle hostilities to physical attacks on non-nationals (Charman & Piper 2012; HSRC 2008; Crush 2000; Crush 2001; Hunter & Skinner 2003; Misago 2009; Morapedi 2007; Nieftagodien 2008; Hassim *et al.* 2008; Hossay 1996). The literature also reveals that the rise of intolerance and xenophobia has destabilized and undermined the linkages between international migration and human development (De Haas 2010; IOM 2008; 2010; Nyberg-Sorensen *et al.* 2002; Dodson *et al.* 2010). A review report by Crush and Ramachandran (2009) on the linkages between xenophobia, international migration and human development reveals that the increased volume of South-South migration since the late 1990s has resulted in repeated attacks on migrants in the receiving countries, especially in Africa and Asia. Not surprisingly, such xenophobic attacks have contributed to the vulnerability and exploitation of various categories of migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees. Studies by Roemer and Van der Straeten (2007) on the triangular connections between racism, xenophobia and the economy, have contributed to our understanding of how xenophobia and urban violence can be a hindrance to economic and human development. As Roemer and Van der Straeten (2007) further argue, in order to maximize the socio-economic benefits accruable from the international migration process, there is a need to tackle all forms of xenophobia in the economic and social arenas.

## **Migrant Spaces and Entrepreneurship**

South Africa has one of the most robust economies in sub-Saharan Africa and has a long history of recruiting skilled and semi-skilled labour especially from countries in the SADC region with relatively weak economies (e.g. Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) and histories of political instability (e.g. the DRC and Mozambique). Weak national economies and political instability are the main migration triggers that have directed the flow of migrants from their home countries to South Africa (Campbell 2001; Crush 2002; McDonald and Crush 2002; Tevera 2011; Maharaj & Rajkumar 1997; Crush & Tevera 2010; Rusinga *et al.* 2012; Crush *et al.* 2006; Pendleton *et al.* 2006). South Africa is one of the few countries in southern Africa that has historically received more people than it has lost from the migration process and as a result many urban areas reveal strong multiculturalism patterns in the form of languages spoken, religious practices and foods eaten. Post-apartheid labour recruitment has given rise to the emergence of diverse and vibrant African diasporic communities including Zimbabweans, Batswana, Basotho, Swazi, Somalis, Nigerians, Senegalese and Congolese. Among the enduring legacies of the African migrants to the country, has been the growth of vibrant and multicultural urban spaces dominated by a rapidly growing informal street trading sector in the 'deracializing' urban space where national and foreign traders often compete but also collaborate. According to a study done by Hunter and Skinner (2003) there is a strong migrant presence in street trading in central Durban largely because this unregulated activity is outside the purview of direct local government control. However, migrant entrepreneurial spaces are not confined to inner city streets but they also stretch to the former African townships. A study by Grant (2013) reveals that an analysis of the spatial impress of informal entrepreneurship in Soweto re-veals a gendered and local diasporic investment patterns. The limited linkage of the former African townships to the wider urban economy is one of the spatialised legacies of apartheid planning that has stifled economic activities in these areas (Grant 2013; Beall *et al.* 2000; Charman & Piper 2012).

The presence of these migrant groups as shop owners or street traders has not only contributed to the transformation of the landscape of the post-apartheid South African city but has renewed the lifeblood in low-income neighbourhoods as is manifested by the vibrancy of the economic and

social activities in townships such as Alexandra near Centurion, Motherwell in Nelson Mandela Metropolitan, and De Doorns in the Western Cape (Grant 2013; Hunter & Skinner 2003; Morris 1998; Rusinga *et al.* 2012). In the last decade, South African cities have experienced a sharp increase in the number of African and Asian migrants who have opened small shops at the periphery of the central business district (CBD) or have engaged in various street trading activities. The presence of the small shop traders has been, on the one hand, beneficial to low income consumers facing increasing economic hardships and who have come to depend on the low prices. On the other hand, they have become a source of bitterness to local shop owners who feel that they are being pushed out of business and would like to see the government introduce legislation that restricts the operations of foreign traders. A decade ago, Hunter and Skinner (2003) eloquently showed that most African migrants in Durban effectively used the informal sector as the entry point to other entrepreneurial activities in the formal sector. The migrants often find themselves competing with nationals for street space and for the same clientele. This direct competition with locals partly accounts for the often tense relations between nationals involved in street trading and African migrant traders operating in the informal sector as spaza shops owners.

### **Xenophobic Violence in Urban Areas**

Recent surveys on xenophobia in South Africa provide useful data about citizen attitudes towards migrants and refugees (Crush & Pendleton 2004; Campbell & Oucho 2003). A study by McDonald and Jacobs (2005) which analysed media coverage of migration issues showed that xenophobia was pervasive, deep-rooted and structural. In 2001/2002 and 2006, the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) undertook national surveys of the attitudes of the South African population towards foreign nationals residing in the country. For example, SAMP's 2001/2002 National Immigration Policy Survey (NIPS) on attitudes of citizens towards immigration in southern Africa revealed that xenophobia was widespread among diverse communities across urban South Africa and Botswana and often cut across class, employment status, race, and gender lines (Crush & Pendleton 2004). According to the survey, about 50 percent of the respondents in Botswana were willing to participate in actions that would inhibit migrants from

moving into their neighbourhoods; while 46 percent would block foreigners from opening businesses in their localities if they had the capacity to do so; and 38 percent were willing to prevent children from immigrant families from studying in the same schools as their children (Campbell & Oucho 2003; Oucho 2000).

The 2006 SAMP Xenophobia Survey shows that South Africa exhibited increased levels of intolerance and hostility to most categories of foreign migrants. Nearly three-quarters (74%) supported a policy of deporting anyone who was not contributing to the growth of the national economy. Quite extraordinary is the increase in the percentage of respondents who wanted to see the borders with neighbouring countries electrified from 66% in 1999 to 76% in 2006. The SAMP findings also reveal that nationals did not want it to be easier for foreign nationals to engage in street trading or to operate small businesses in South Africa or to obtain South African citizenship. The data from the quantitative survey allowed the SAMP researchers to analyze the state of the national sentiments on immigration, immigrants and refugees in the period immediately prior to the well documented wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa that occurred in 2005 and 2008 in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. The three metropolitan centres dominate the recent literature on xenophobia in South Africa largely because they have been the locus of violent xenophobic protests during the post-apartheid era (HSRC 2008; Rusinga *et al.* 2012; Crush *et al.* 2006; Pendleton *et al.* 2006; Morris 1998; Misago 2009).

The hardening of anti-migrant views between 2002 and 2008 culminated in the May 2008, violent attacks on foreign African nationals which left many migrants homeless and generally in positions of extreme vulnerability (see Table 1). Similarly, in the December 2005 xenophobic attacks on African migrants at Olievenhoutbosch, near Centurion in Gauteng Province, began with local groups chasing away foreign Africans living in the Choba informal settlement from their shacks and business premises. Foreign migrants are generally identifiable on the basis of biocultural factors such as physical appearance and an inability to speak indigenous languages. Reports reveal that several people, mostly migrants, were killed in the burning and rampant looting that followed. Two years later, in 2007, similar attacks on foreign nationals resulted in the deaths of at least 100 Somalis followed by looting and the setting on fire of their businesses and other properties. The

small shop-cum residence has become the archetypical signifier of entrepreneurial Somali migrants who operate small general dealer shops at the periphery of the central business district of urban regions and has become a regular casualty of xenophobic violence in many South African cities.

Yet again, in May 2008 several South African cities witnessed large-scale xenophobic attacks that mostly targeted migrants of African origin (Crush *et al.* 2008). This episode marked the latest development in a long series of violent incidents involving the victimization of migrants and refugees in the urban areas of the country (Crush 2000). Alexandra township, which is located to the north-east of Johannesburg, was the site of one of the first waves of violence against foreign nationals, which later spread to other townships across the country in May 2008 and resulted in the deaths of more than 60 people (including South African nationals and foreign cross-border traders). In addition, more than 500 shops were either looted or burned down and about 100,000 African migrants, refugees and citizens were displaced and many were hospitalised after sustaining physical injuries (IOM 2009; Misago 2009; McKnight 2008; Iggelsden *et al.* 2009; Rusinga *et al.* 2012; Crush & Ramachandran 2009).

A detailed article by Misago (2009) argues that the attacks in the sprawling township of Alexandra were spearheaded by a group of less than 300 residents who were on a crusade against foreign migrants whom they accused of sabotaging national economy and household livelihoods in the townships. In January 2009, an armed group led by a community councillor occupied a building in Durban and began an assault on the foreigners present. Similarly, in November 2009 about 2,500 Zimbabwean migrants at Stofland informal settlement in De Doorns (the Western Cape) took refuge in government buildings after several of their informal dwellings (shacks) were attacked and demolished by local residents who were unhappy that farm owners had been employing Zimbabweans whom they paid lower wages and were not recruiting from the local community (Morris 1998; Misago 2009; Rusinga *et al.* 2012).

## **Factors Accounting for the Hardening of Xenophobic Views and Increased Attacks**

The causes of the hardening of anti-migrant views and the xenophobic

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attacks that have occurred in South African cities during the post-apartheid era are contested. On one hand is a neo-liberal perspective which argues that xenophobic violence in urban areas is fueled by stereotypical negative views of foreign migrants often presented by some sections of the media. On the other hand, there is a more radical perspective which argues that xenophobia studies need greater epistemological reflection. The more radical analyses view urban space as a terrain of contestation over access to services, rights to urban accommodation and general urban citizenship rights.

It has been argued from a neo-liberal perspective that xenophobic violence is fueled by stereotypical negative views of foreign migrants often presented by some sections of the media. The media has also been criticized for fanning the flames of a socio-spatial discourse that is dominated by xenophobic hostilities (McDonald & Jacobs 2010; Hossay 1996; Danso & McDonald 2000). Scholarly analyses of the media in southern Africa by Danso and McDonald (2000) and more recently by Crush & Ramachandran (2009) reveal that it is exacerbating the diffusion and intensity of xenophobic sentiments across the urban landscape through negative profiling of migrants. For example, press coverage on immigration in southern African countries between 2001 and 2003 in newspaper articles frequently used pejorative images of migrants as ‘job-stealers’, ‘carriers of disease’, ‘criminals’ and ‘illegals’ (Crush 2001; Crush & Pendleton 2004; Campbell & Oucho 2003). Newspaper headlines, featuring articles by various writers such as Carnie (2006), Leeman (2001) and Kearney (2001), reveal considerable media interest in issues like ‘foreign migrants stealing jobs’ or ‘foreign migrants being involved in crime and other anti-social behaviour’. In situations of heightened xenophobia, foreign migrants often endure threats of violence and victimization as xenophobia increases their vulnerability by exposing them to regular harassment, intimidation, and abuse by society (Crush & Ramachandran 2009).

Clearly, when migrants are made scapegoats or are demonized for various urban ills, such as crime and unemployment, negative and biased stereotypes are produced and re-produced. A case in point is the physical violence against Somali shopkeepers which has been cited as evidence of xenophobic violence in urban South Africa (Grant 2013). Perhaps, as a result of a recent history of intense economic competition in the *spaza* market in which migrant entrepreneurs have come to dominate, increased levels of

violent crime against migrant shopkeepers have been reported. However, what is not clear is whether this is solely attributable to xenophobia or could it be a reflection of a societal symptom characterized by an emerging violent entrepreneurship whereby business competitors often resort to physically attacking the opponents?

Some of the more radical analyses have blamed the xenophobic attacks on service delivery challenges in many urban areas and increasing poverty and unemployment levels in recent years which have led to the scapegoating of foreign migrants by frustrated citizens. For example, scholars like, Nieftagodien (2008); Hassim *et al.* (2008) and Hossay (1996) have argued that perceived rather than real economic threats are the major drivers of xenophobic tendencies in South Africa. This argument helps to explain why communities experiencing debilitating economic circumstances have experienced more xenophobic riots and violent attacks than the more economically sound communities. A case in point is Alexandra whose 350 000 residents experience high levels of unemployment, poor accommodation, inadequate infrastructural services, systemic exclusion and deprivation. Here, unemployment and infrastructural challenges are decisive determinants in the reproduction of poverty and deprivation that in turn have generated conditions that are conducive to the emergence of conflict or violence. In Alexandra, as in many former African townships, residents often struggle violently for access to basic infrastructural services, such as decent toilets, clean water and electricity. The 1995 and 2008 xenophobic riots are examples that illustrate how struggles for access to services can rapidly degenerate into urban violence engulfing entire residential areas and often spilling over to adjacent public and private spaces. Nieftagodien (2008) eloquently argues that the Alexandra xenophobic violence could be explained by the local residents daily eking out an existence in the congested squatter camps and dilapidated prison-like hostels. Previously in 1995 the 'Buyelekhaya' (go back home) campaign in Alexandra had driven Malawian, Mozambican and Zimbabwean immigrants to a police station as part of a campaign to rid the township of foreigners whom they blamed for causing crime and unemployment (Rusinga *et al.* 2012).

However, despite the obvious connections between the incidence of xenophobic violence and the high levels of material deprivation in the townships, it is inadequate in explaining why some poor urban communities

have repeatedly engaged in xenophobic violence while other urban communities confronted by similar challenges have remained relatively peaceful. Some scholars have attempted to respond to this question by focusing on the role of community leadership in promoting xenophobic violence. According to Misago (2009), who investigated the immediate causes which led to recent xenophobic violence, the micro-politics of local communities, particularly the lack of institutional structures and trusted leadership in the affected areas were the fundamental causes of the violence. In Atteridgeville and Alexandria, meetings were held by the local community leadership to explore ways to close down all foreign-owned shops. The same pattern was followed in several other communities, such as Cape Town's communities of Delft, Masiphumele, Crossroads, Phillip East, Khayelitsha, Samora Machel and Gugulethu (Rusinga *et al.* 2012).

What this all means is that the rise of xenophobia in the urban areas of South Africa since the 1990s is the result of a combination of complex factors which, however, should not be delinked from the migrant inflows from neighbouring countries, that characterize the post-1994 migrations patterns. Clearly, the xenophobic conflicts are not just about economic struggles between competing local and foreign business people but they are also a vivid manifestation of intolerance of diversity in the growing multicultural cities. It is worth noting that in most urban spaces, foreign migrant communities remain largely unassimilated and excluded and this raises major issues surrounding the notions of belonging and citizenship under conditions of multicultural urbanism. Also, hostility towards foreigners is explained in relation to limited resources, such as housing, education, health care and employment (Morris 1998; Tshitereke 1999).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to contribute to the debate on xenophobia and violence in South Africa's multicultural cities where streets have often become sites of perpetual tension and conflict between local and migrant groups. Studies show that the high levels of anti-migrant rhetoric and general xenophobic attitudes are quite disturbing and do undermine efforts towards the realization of policy goals of promoting urban and national development. Xenophobia poisons social interactions between locals and migrant groups,

and at the same time it undermines the positive effects of migration on human development. The inevitable result is to increase the social distance between migrant and local populations and this has created challenges with respect to notions of social cohesion, belonging and citizenship. In such settings ethnic tensions, overcrowding and competition for access to scarce resources have provided the spark that has given rise to complex forms of economic and social violence that the media commonly refer to as xenophobic attacks. Also, public spaces in cities have become sites of tension and conflict between local and foreign traders, especially in the low income townships where struggles for basic infrastructural services are perpetual. Violent attacks on foreign African nationals have not only left many migrants in positions of extreme vulnerability, but have also had high economic and social costs due to the destruction of properties and the dislocation of some urban communities. As a result, areas like Alexandra, Atteridgeville and Olievenhoutbosch have become regular sites of xenophobic violence. At the same time, there has been a huge development of 'fortified enclaves' across urban spaces as one of the responses to prevent the possible spread of violence and crime into the traditionally safe neighbourhoods.

The causes of the hardening of anti-migrant views and the xenophobic attacks that have occurred in South African cities during the post-apartheid era are contested. What is evident, however, is that in the urban areas, the stereotypical negative views of foreign migrants presented by some sections of the media; the organizational role of community leadership; and the existence of complex spaces of deprivation, have not only provided a recipe for violent xenophobic outbreaks, but they also helped to explain variations in the incidence and intensity of xenophobic violence within and between cities and neighbourhoods.

What is required, if the development potential and gains of labour migration into the country are not to be undermined by xenophobia, is a more coordinated and systematic effort to understand and manage the phenomenon. The Immigration Act of 2002 commits the government to challenge xenophobia by rooting it out in all social spheres. However, success in this endeavour will require societal changes and intervention by community leaders. In addition, there is need for government and the media to embark on a major public awareness and education campaign to counter

xenophobia. However, any plan to develop tolerance towards foreigners must take place alongside a programme that addresses the crisis of poverty, housing and unemployment in urban areas. One is reminded that, following the 1990s xenophobic attacks and concerns for the safety and well-being of non-nationals, the National Consortium on Refugee Affairs (CoRMSA), the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations launched the Roll Back Xenophobia (RBX) campaign in 1998 with the primary aim of promoting awareness about the legitimate presence of foreign nationals and the need for a harmonious co-existence. The campaign used community radio, television and school programmes and seminars as part of its national public awareness. There is a need to pursue strategies whose objective is to address all forms of xenophobia through socially inclusive dialogue and participatory decision making involving all the stakeholders, including central government, local authorities, community leaders and migrant communities.

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**Table 1: Major Sites of Xenophobic Violence in Post-apartheid South Africa**

<b>Urban Area</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Alexandra township (Johannesburg)	'Buyelekaya' inspired attacks on Malawian, Mozambican and Zimbabwean migrants	1995
Alexandra township (Johannesburg)	Attacks on migrants resulted in over 60 deaths including locals; 342 shops looted, 213 premises burned down, about 100,000 people were temporarily displaced	May 2008
Olievenhoutbosch (Near Centurion in Gauteng)	Attacks on migrants at Choba informal settlement resulted in several deaths; looting and destruction of foreign-owned spaza shops, hair saloons and taverns	December 2005
Olievenhoutbosch (Near Centurion in Gauteng)	Attacks on migrants resulted in several deaths; looting and destruction of shacks and property	2007
Durban	Armed group led by a community councilor led attacks on migrants; 100 Somali owned businesses were looted and over 400 Somalis were displaced	January 2009
De Doorns (Western Cape)	Attacks on Zimbabwean migrants at Stofland informal settlement resulted in looting and destruction of shacks; 3000 foreigners were driven from their shacks	November 2009

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Cape Flats (Western Cape)	Seven migrants were killed following disputes between locals and migrants residing in the area. The violence spread to neighbouring low income areas.	September 2000
Cape Flats (Western Cape)	Attacks on Somali migrants resulted 20-30 killed; looting and destruction of shops; several Somalis were displaced	August 2007

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