

The Nexus between Illegal Immigration and Crime: Public Attitude in the South African Context

Tshimangadzo Oscar Magadze

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1069-8583>

University of South Africa

magadto@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The perceived nexus between illegal immigration and crime in South Africa remains a contentious public discourse. Social media narratives often amplify this relationship by disproportionately associating immigrants with criminal activity. Despite widespread public blame, empirical studies testing this immigration-crime linkage remain scarce in the South African context. This study seeks to test this assumption by examining public attitudes towards the relationship between illegal immigration and crime. A quantitative survey methodology using a structured questionnaire was employed in this study. Data was collected from a broader section of South African society to reflect the general public sentiment on illegal immigration. Quantitative data is useful in making causal connections (inference) between immigration and other key variables/determinants. The data was analysed using statistical software, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Key findings reveal a disconnect between public perception and empirical evidence: 96.3% of respondents believe immigration exacerbates crime, with undocumented status as a primary enabler. However, official data from the Department of Correctional Services indicate that undocumented immigrants account for only 2% of incarcerated offenders, which challenges the dominant narrative. The study also highlights pervasive hate attitudes towards illegal immigrants, fuelled by media sensationalism and socioeconomic anxieties. This study calls for evidence-based policymaking, improved transparency in crime data disaggregation, and community education to counter xenophobic stereotypes.

Keywords: attitude; crime; illegal; immigration; public



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Introduction

The perceived nexus between immigration and crime in South Africa has long dominated public discourse. It is often intensified by sensationalist media narratives and politicised rhetoric. While immigration is a global phenomenon shaped by economic, social, and political forces (Duvenage 2024), South Africa's unique socio-historical context has increased debates around its implications for national security and crime. Although there is a lot of public blame on immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, for crime, there is still not enough empirical evidence to support the idea that there is a "crime-immigration nexus." This study seeks to examine public attitudes about the nexus between illegal immigration and crime in South Africa. This attempt is largely triggered by the way illegal immigration remains one of the most often-discussed subjects in contemporary society. Certainly, different narratives and discourses around what immigration entails and how it should be managed exist across many nations of the world (Dennison 2021).

Globally, migration patterns are increasingly influenced by economic disparities, conflicts, and climate crises, with host nations grappling with integration challenges and xenophobic sentiments (De Haas 2021). Unlike previous decades, we are increasingly witnessing the easy movement of people, goods, and services from one part of the world to another (Appadurai 2011; Kaun 2021). During these earlier decades, the rate of criminal activities was very minimal and localised because there was less movement compared to current conditions. This ease of movement has undoubtedly brought its fair share of benefits and challenges (Sheller 2018). Conversely, due to growing nationalist sentiments in many parts of the world, migration has been met with homophobic and xenophobic attitudes (Freude and Waites 2023), and libelling continues to play its role. This paper is of the view that both homophobic and xenophobic present elements that complement each other, such as discrimination and hatred of strangers. This dark side of migration/immigration has often overshadowed any discussion of what a well-managed immigration approach can bring to society.

The mass media has long played a role in shaping public perceptions of nationalism, migration, and citizenship. But the rise of the internet and social media has amplified this influence and placed the media at the centre of the discourse on migration (Ekman 2019). At the same time, populist politicians, especially in places like the US, have turned anti-immigrant sentiment into a tool. They blame migrants for problems like unemployment or failing systems and paint them as easy targets for society's frustrations (Yilmaz 2012; Cochrane and Nevitte 2014). For example, during Trump's first presidency, immigration was not just a policy issue; it became a symbol of national identity under threat. This rhetoric often spilt into outright hostility towards minorities, with some messages carrying antisemitic or xenophobic undertones (Finley and

Esposito 2020). But it is not just media and politics. When economies struggle, tensions rise, a shaky global economy not only pushes people to move in search of better opportunities, but it also makes locals and immigrants compete harder for jobs, housing, and services (Billiet, Meuleman, and Witte 2014; Van Parijs 2022). These pressures do not just exist side by side; they feed into each other. The resultant effect is harmful stereotypes that lead to conflicts between immigrant and local communities. Together, these intersecting forces (media narratives, populist politics, and economic anxiety) perpetuate harmful stereotypes about immigration and crime.

South Africa, being among the countries with a competitive global economy, is home to many migrants from the African continent and other parts of the globe (Segatti 2011). According to Enaifoghe et al. (2021), the global competitiveness of the South African economy remains one of the major attractions for those who come to South Africa in search of economic opportunities. Apart from this, South Africa is also home to mostly African migrants who have been victims of political conflict (instability) and forced displacement (Enaifoghe et al. 2021). However, the country's high crime rates and socio-economic inequalities are perceived to fuel narratives that blame immigrants for worsening criminal activity. These narratives, often perpetuated by social media and populist politics, frame immigrants as outsiders who threaten local communities (Ekman 2019). Such rhetoric risks overshadowing the complex realities of migration, including the contributions of immigrants to labour markets and cultural diversity (Nemakonde 2024).

Problem Statement

The influx of illegal immigrants and the increased crime rate in South Africa continue to be the topic of the day. The nexus between immigrants and crime remains largely unknown. Magadze and Netshidzivhani (2024, 1510) indicate that a crucial aspect of this exploration is the so-called crime-immigration nexus, which is often invoked in discussions about immigration in South Africa. The study notes that there are citizens who associate immigration with increased crime rates, which perpetuates a narrative that may not be substantiated by empirical evidence. Only a few research projects, focused more on social issues, such as unemployment, an exhausted healthcare system, etc., were conducted (Nemakonde 2024; Zitha and Jansen van Resnburg 2024). Therefore, this study is of the view that it is paramount to allow every member of the community to share their views on the subject matter. Zitha and Jansen van Resnburg (2024) claim that there is evidence of foreign nationals' involvement in criminal activities in South Africa, according to the official data reported by the South African Police. Susuman and Sithole (2024,12) argue that, since the international literature is conflicted on this topic, it is essential to note that there is no clear evidence that immigrants are the major contributors to crime in South Africa.

Nemakonde (2024, np) outlined Gauteng crime stats by indicating that out of 22,243 arrests made between July and September 2024, 7,202 involved undocumented

foreigners. This paper further argues that as long as the South African Police do not release national crime stats confirming the correlation of crime and immigrants, the gap remains open. However, the Department of Correctional Services continues to reveal the offenders' data, claiming the rise in immigrants' incarceration. McCain (2022, np) is of the view that the number of incarcerated immigrants is too small. She further indicates that, based on data provided by the Department of Justice and Correctional Services, immigrants made up only 8.5% of convicted cases in 2019 and 7% in 2020. Only about 2% of inmates incarcerated per year are undocumented foreigners. Literature failed to depict the existing figures and continued to present contradicting findings without proper directives on the subject. The contradiction of study findings necessitated this current study. Therefore, the main objective of this paper was to examine/assess the nexus between immigration and crime through public attitudes in South Africa. Interestingly, both Masuku and Nkala (2023) are of the view that it is a common trend in the way South African media perceive immigrant groups by associating them with any illegal activities in the country. These stereotypes might give rise to or fuel hatred against the minority.

Theoretical Perspective

This study employs social identity and labelling theories to analyse public attitudes towards illegal immigrants in South Africa. These frameworks are particularly useful for understanding how societal perceptions are shaped by in-group/out-group dynamics and stigmatisation. Social Identity Theory, which was propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1986), posits that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups and foster favouritism towards their in-group (e.g., citizens) and bias against out-groups (e.g., immigrants). Ellemers and Haslam (2012) argue that this classification perpetuates systemic inequalities, as dominant groups may view marginalised groups (like immigrants) as threats to social cohesion. In the South African context, this dynamic fuels xenophobic narratives that blame immigrants for socioeconomic challenges, including crime.

The Labelling Theory (Harwood 2020), on the other hand, complements this by explaining how negative stereotypes become internalised. When immigrants are repeatedly labelled as “criminals” by the media, policymakers, or local communities, this stigma reinforces their marginalisation. Chan (2017) notes that such labels can push immigrants into social or geographic mobility and seek environments where prejudice is less pronounced. However, this mobility may ironically heighten tensions, as relocated immigrants are still perceived as outsiders. While neither theory directly links immigration to criminality, both illustrate how prejudice and stereotyping shape public attitudes. Through the integration of these theories, the study contextualises how systemic biases and structural inequalities perpetuate harmful narratives about immigrants. It is important to highlight that this paper does not dispute the involvement of immigrants in criminal activities. However, it argues against the association of immigration or migrants as automatically linked with criminal activities. Furthermore,

this paper invited the social disorganisation theory to provide a clear understanding of certain communities that hold different views about the subject under study. The interrogation of this theory assisted this study, noting the complement of the other two selected theories. The social disorganisation theory highlighted that there are communities with a lack of community mores together, with a high unemployment rate, who shift their desperation and anger towards immigrants and label them as criminals. The theory purports that every disorganised community tends to possess a high volume of crime as a result of the lack of community norms and values. This theory includes all members of the community (and immigrants) who reside in these areas.

Methodology and Approach

South Africa serves as a critical case study for examining public attitudes towards immigration and crime. As a regional economic hub, South Africa hosts a diverse migrant population from across Africa and beyond, including Asia and the Middle East (Crush 2022). Most migrants arrive seeking economic opportunities or are fleeing conflict, persecution, and instability in their home countries (Segatti 2011). This diversity underscores South Africa's progressive immigration policies while positioning it as a unique context for studying migration-related issues. South Africa also experiences high crime rates alongside rising immigrant populations, which makes it a focal point for debates on immigration and criminality (Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg 2024). Violent acts against immigrants, frequently referred to as "selective xenophobia," exacerbate these discussions (Neocosmos 2008; Matsinhe 2016). While xenophobic violence occurs elsewhere in Africa, South Africa's visibility and documented cases make it a salient example for analysis. The author's familiarity with South African society further informed the selection of this context.

This study employed a quantitative survey design to generalise findings across South Africa's population. Quantitative methods were chosen to capture public attitudes, identify patterns, and test correlations between variables (e.g., immigration perceptions and socioeconomic factors) (Bahishti 2022; Swarooprani 2022). The snowball sampling method was identified as suitable to reach a large number of participants. The author identified participants who shared or distributed research instruments across either their provinces or social media platforms.

A structured questionnaire ensured consistency in data collection. This enabled statistical analysis of causal relationships (Pandey et al. 2023). The survey was distributed via email and social media platforms to maximise reach across diverse demographic groups. This approach allowed participation from urban and rural areas. It ensured the representation of broader public sentiment (Mohajan 2020). A total of 490 participants completed the questionnaire, with responses filtered to exclude non-South African identities. The reason was to ensure alignment with the study's focus on local attitudes. However, it is important to highlight that this study noted a minor limitation because of the highest number of participants from two provinces, such as Gauteng and Limpopo.

In line with an intersectional framework, the questionnaire addressed criminological, socioeconomic, and demographic factors influencing perceptions of immigration. The topics included crime, unemployment, race, prejudice, antisocial behaviour, and social class. This multidimensional scope enabled analysis of how overlapping identities and systemic inequalities shape attitudes towards immigrants (Samuel and Okey 2025). The collected data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to identify trends and correlations.

Ethical Considerations

This study has taken into consideration that immigration is an emotive subject. However, by conducting this study, the researcher did not foresee any potential harm that the research could cause to potential participants. Ethically, the study was conducted after permission to collect data had been obtained from relevant authorities at the University of South Africa (College of Law RERC Ref #: 1251). Respondents were made aware that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without reprisals. Respondents remained anonymous, and their confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that their identities were not mentioned anywhere in the study. Respondents were not given any monetary incentives for participating in the study.

The questionnaire included questions that would not result in any emotional or physical harm. From the onset, the questionnaire clearly spelt out the purpose of the study, and informed consent was sought from potential participants. Given that issues of immigration in South Africa are handled by the Department of Home Affairs, the research anticipated a possibility that some participants might have had an unpleasant experience in their interactions with the department and any of its officials at some point. This experience could trigger certain emotions upon realising that the research addresses questions around any issue which Home Affairs presides over. In the event this happened, the researcher was prepared to refer participants to appropriate channels where they could receive assistance, although such an incident did not occur.

Results and Discussions

Data analysis in research is the only section aimed at providing answers to the research questions and objectives. This section provides raw or analysed data to draw its conclusions and recommendations. Dawit (2020,1) is of the view that data analysis changes the collected raw data into meaningful facts and ideas to be understood either qualitatively or quantitatively. The following data focus on public attitudes towards the nexus between illegal immigrants and crime in the South African context.

Participants' Biographical Information

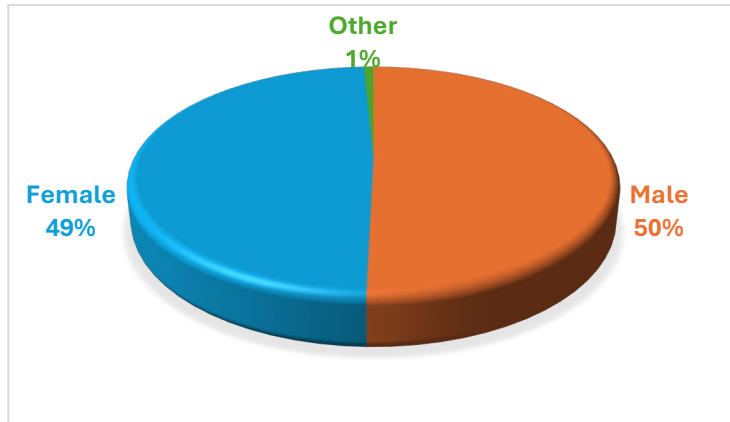


Figure 1: Respondents' responses on gender

It is evident from the above chart that most the participants were male, with 50%, whereas 49% were female. However, only 1% of the participants opted for “other” when answering the questionnaire. This study was not restricted to the gender of the participants. The data provides an unasked question as a social or humanities writing standard.

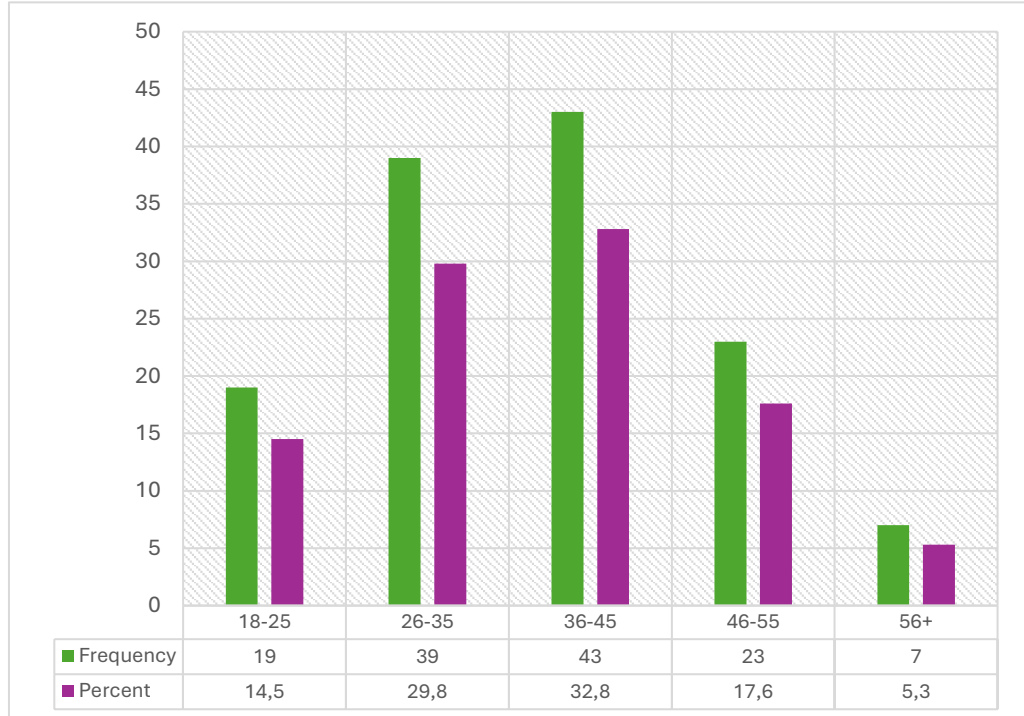


Figure 2: Respondents' responses on age

Figure 2 depicts the age of the participants who were engaged or participated during the data collection. Most participants in this study were between the ages of 26 and 35 and 36 and 45. Horlings (2022,447) indicates that age information is not always a requirement or necessary. However, it is the underlying dimensions that were necessary for inclusion in the dataset, depending on the study area focus. This study has regarded age data as crucial because it gives directives or influences the whole findings, especially when participants can read and write. Most participants in this study are expected to contribute to the South African economy immensely, considering their level of education.

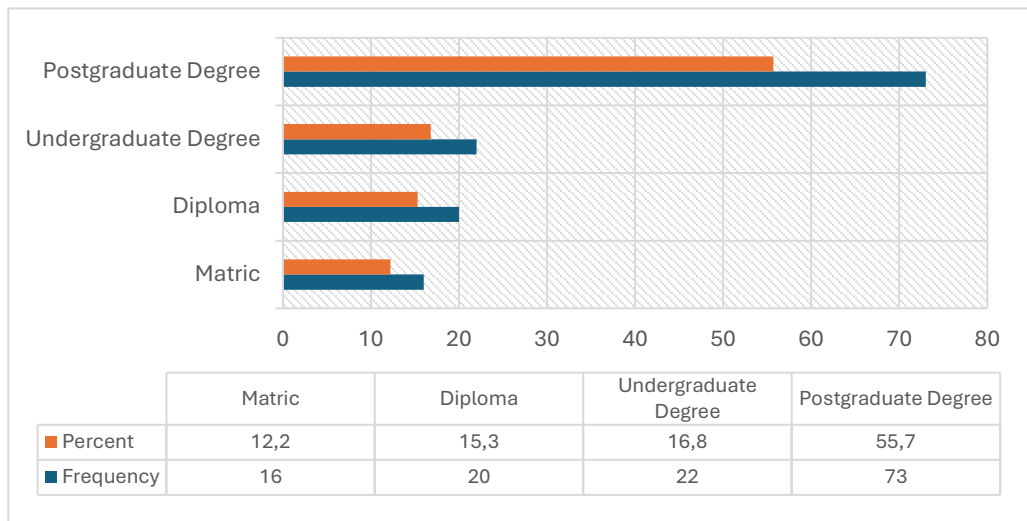


Figure 3: The educational level of the participants

Figure 3 presents the participants' educational level. It is evident from the chart that many participants possess postgraduate degrees, with 55.7%. while the lowest, with 12.2% having Matric or Grade 12. Clearly, all participants can read and write. Sometimes, biographical data, such as educational level, might provide predictive validity for positive findings or future development on the subject matter.

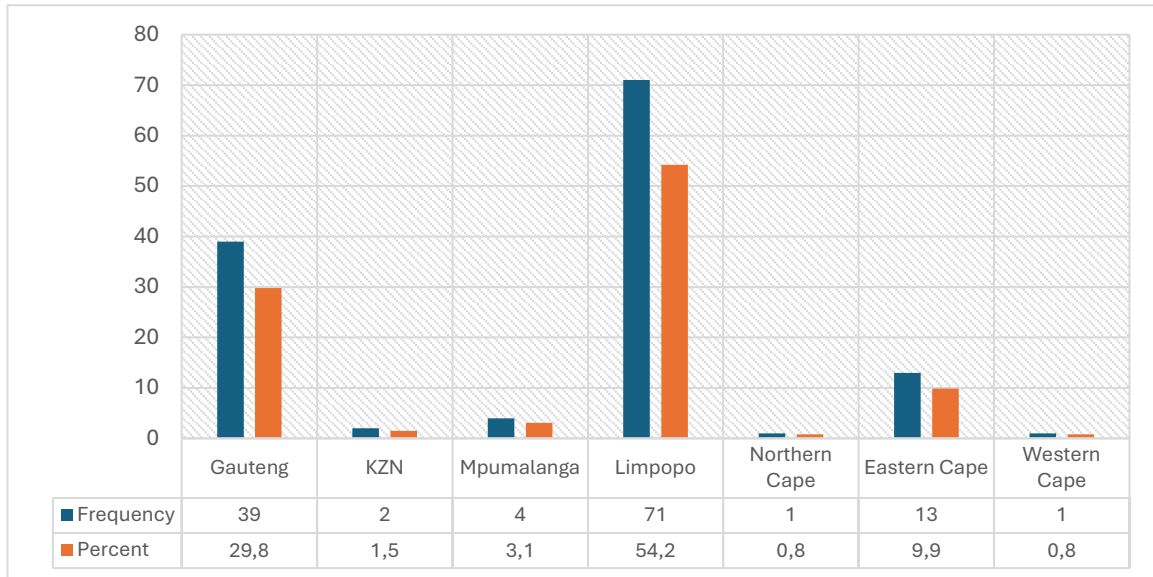


Figure 4: Participants' Geographical Allocation

Only seven out of nine provinces participated in this study, despite its nationwide scope. Figure 4 revealed that many participants in this study are from the Limpopo Province (54.2%), followed by the Gauteng Province (29.8%). The province that recorded the lowest figure is the Western Cape (0.8%). Neither the Free State nor the North West provinces form part of this study. This data reflects and confirms the study area as highlighted above under the problem statement.

Immigration and Crime

The survey findings reveal a disconnect between public perceptions of immigration and empirical evidence. This issue echoes global debates on the “crime-immigration nexus” (Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg 2024; Nemaakonde 2024). Below is an analysis of key results through the lenses of social identity theory, labelling theory, and empirical studies to contextualise attitudes towards immigration and crime in South Africa.

Table 1: Respondents' responses on public belief in the immigration-crime nexus

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Yes</i>	472	96,3
<i>No</i>	15	3,1
<i>Not indicated</i>	3	0,6
<i>Total</i>	490	100

Table 1 shows that immigration worsens crime in South Africa. The data depict that 96.3% of the participants believe that the current peak of criminal activities is because of the increase in migrants flocking to this country. However, 3.1% of the participants hold different views, indicating that immigration does not worsen crime in South Africa. Furthermore, 0.6% of participants were not sure and decided to opt for the “not indicated” option when answering the questionnaire.

This overwhelming perception aligns with labelling theory, which posits that immigrants are stigmatised as “criminal outsiders” due to systemic prejudice. Media narratives and populist rhetoric (Ekman 2019; Yilmaz 2012) amplify these stereotypes by framing immigrants as threats to national identity and security. Meanwhile, official data from the Department of Correctional Services indicate that undocumented immigrants constitute only 2% of incarcerated offenders (McCain 2022), which directly contradicts public belief. This gap underscores the power of socially constructed narratives over factual reality.

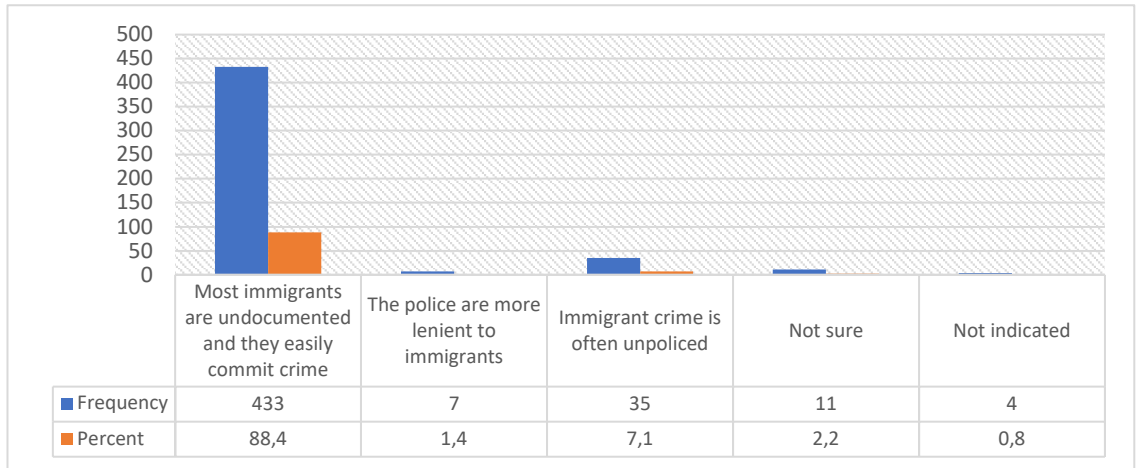


Figure 5: Respondents' responses on the perceived mechanisms linking immigration and crime

88.4% of respondents cited undocumented status as a primary enabler of crime, followed by claims of police leniency (1.4%) and under-policing of immigrant crimes (7.1%). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) explains how in-group favouritism (South African citizens) fuels out-group blame (immigrants), particularly during economic or social crises (Billiet et al. 2014). Undocumented immigrants are scapegoated for systemic failures, such as unemployment and strained public services. Similar patterns emerge in Europe and the US, where immigrants are disproportionately associated with crime despite evidence to the contrary (De Haas 2021; Finley and Esposito 2020).

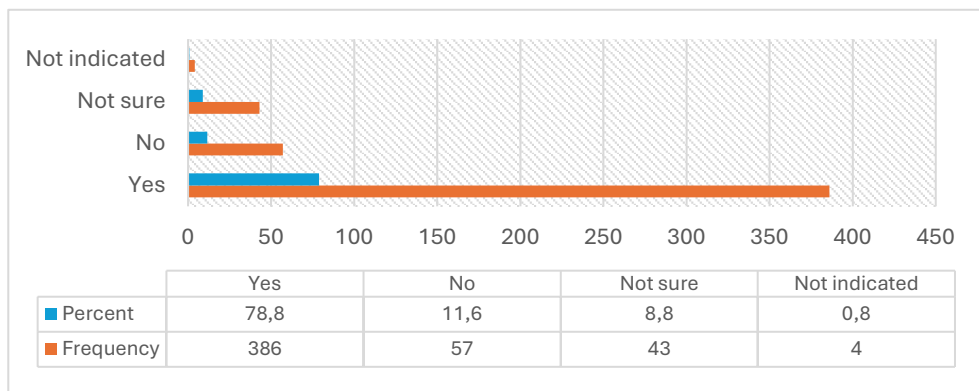


Figure 6: Respondents' responses on the support for immigration control to reduce crime

It is evident from the above chart that a large number of participants believe that if immigration is properly controlled, the incidents of crime in South Africa will decrease. 78.8% indicated that if immigration is controlled, South Africa will experience less crime, versus 11.6% of participants who are of the view that, even if immigration is controlled, crime will never go down. However, 8.8% of participants were undecided or not sure if the crime rate would go down or up after immigration control in South Africa. Surprisingly, 0.8% of participants decided not to indicate or share their views. This sentiment reflects populist anti-immigrant discourse (Cochrane and Nevitte 2014), which conflates border security with crime prevention. However, empirical studies (e.g., Magadze and Netshidzivhani 2024) argue that crime reduction requires addressing structural issues like poverty and inequality—not immigration alone. The belief that controlling immigration will reduce crime intersects with race, class, and xenophobia. For instance, African immigrants face heightened scrutiny compared to non-African migrants (Neocosmos 2008; Matsinhe 2016), reflecting selective xenophobia.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that immigration, particularly illegal migration, remains a polarising issue in South Africa. It is deeply intertwined with socioeconomic anxieties, xenophobic attitudes, and public perceptions of crime. While participants overwhelmingly associate immigration with rising criminal activity (a narrative amplified by media and populist rhetoric), the empirical evidence presented in this research challenges these assumptions. The study shows that 96.3% of respondents linked immigration to crime, with undocumented status cited as a primary enabler. However, official data from the Department of Correctional Services reveals a contradiction: undocumented immigrants account for only 2% of incarcerated offenders, while over 100,000 South African citizens populate correctional facilities. This difference underscores the power of socially constructed narratives over factual evidence. This aligns with labelling theory, which explains how immigrants are stigmatised as “criminal outsiders.”

Furthermore, participants highlighted difficulties in monitoring immigrant-related crime due to gaps in the Department of Home Affairs’ database. This institutional weakness fuels mistrust and reinforces social identity theory dynamics, wherein in-group favouritism (toward citizens) aggravates out-group blame (toward immigrants). Meanwhile, media platforms perpetuate harmful stereotypes as they frame immigrants as threats to jobs, healthcare, and security. This moral panic, compounded by populist rhetoric, intensifies xenophobic violence and selective exclusion, particularly targeting African migrants.

This research contributes to global debates on migration governance by demonstrating how intersectional factors like race and economic insecurity shape attitudes towards immigrants. It also highlights the need to address root causes of migration, such as conflict and poverty, rather than scapegoating vulnerable populations. Finally, while the

study acknowledges migrants' socioeconomic contributions, it cautions against conflating immigration with systemic failures like unemployment or crime. Through the bridging of the gap between perception and reality, this paper advocates for inclusive policies that uphold human dignity, foster social cohesion and prioritise data-driven solutions over divisive rhetoric.

Policy Recommendations

1. There is a need for criminal justice reform. Transparent and disaggregated crime data is essential to remove myths and counteract systemic bias. Regularly publishing statistics on immigrant criminality could reduce stigma and foster evidence-based policymaking.
2. Government and civil society must lead initiatives to challenge xenophobic narratives. These initiatives should emphasise migrants' contributions to economies and communities. This could be done through community education.
3. It is also necessary to ensure media accountability. Encouraging responsible reporting on migration could mitigate sensationalism and promote subtle public discourse.

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