

# Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: An Analysis of Trends, Causal Factors and Responses

A Xenowatch Quinquennial Report

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December 2021

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Reports of past, current or potential xenophobic incidents can be sent through these methods:  
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## 0. SUMMARY

Xenophobic violence generally refers to any acts of violence targeted at foreign nationals or ‘outsiders’<sup>1</sup> due to being foreign or strangers. It is an explicit targeting of foreign nationals or outsiders for violent attacks, despite other material, political, cultural or social forces that might be at play (Dodson, 2010). It is a hate crime, whose logic goes beyond the often accompanying and misleading criminal opportunism. The real motive for the violence, as unambiguously expressed by the perpetrators themselves, is to drive foreign populations out of local communities (Misago, 2017).

This type of violence has become a longstanding feature of post-apartheid South Africa (Landau, 2011), where violent incidents have been recorded since 1994. The violence notoriously peaked in 2008, when at least 150 incidents were reported throughout the country. Since 2008, there have been an average of 59 incidents of xenophobic violence recorded per year. This violence increasingly threatens the lives and livelihoods of those deemed outsiders. Target groups and individuals are regularly killed, assaulted, injured and displaced, and their property and livelihoods assets are looted, destroyed, or appropriated. However, as this report indicates, the consequences of this violence extend far beyond the targeted groups. It has negative socio-economic, political and security implications for all the country’s residents.

This report draws on a more than a decade-long quantitative and qualitative research exploring xenophobic violence in South Africa. Beginning in the mid-2000s, and currently conducted under the [Xenowatch Project](#), the research is a systematic investigation into the nature, causal factors, and implications of xenophobic violence in South Africa. It also explores the nature and effectiveness of state and civil society responses and interventions aimed at addressing the violence or at least mitigating its effects. This report presents the main findings of this research.

### History, nature, and dimensions of xenophobic violence in South Africa

Research has revealed that xenophobic violence is a long-standing feature of democratic South Africa. Violent incidents were recorded since 1994, riddled throughout all of South Africa’s nine provinces. Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape are the worst affected. The violence occurs mostly in locations (informal settlements and townships), considered hotspots, in the periphery of the country’s major cities or metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Tshwane,

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<sup>1</sup>Although xenophobic violence primary targets foreign nationals, citizens deemed ‘outsiders’ i.e., those from other provinces or communities are also occasionally targeted.

Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay. This is not surprising, since for economic reasons these low-income locations are commonly the destination of most domestic and international migrants in the country.

Xenophobic violence in South Africa is generally a collective action (i.e., a type of collective violence) carried out by groups (large or small) of ordinary members of the public, often mobilised by local leaders (formal or informal) and influential groups or individuals to further their own political and economic interests. It is a constant and increasing threat to lives and livelihoods of foreign nationals, and others deemed ‘outsiders’. Target groups and individuals are regularly killed, assaulted, injured, and displaced, and their property and livelihoods assets looted, destroyed, or appropriated. However, as noted, this violence has consequences and implications that extend far beyond the targeted groups. By undermining the country’s socio-economic prosperity, nation building, security and rule of law, xenophobic violence has negative socio-economic, political and security implications for all country residents, foreign and citizens.

### Causal factors

Our analysis reveals that xenophobic violence in South Africa is caused by a complex interplay between underlying conditions, proximate causes and precipitants, and triggers. Underlying conditions include socio-economic deprivation, history of group conflict and violence, and xenophobia. Proximate causes consist of governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship. Precipitants and triggers include violence community protests and mobilisation. This research argues that these determinants or causes interconnect in a complex and value-added process throughout the country, leading to the occurrence of xenophobic violence where the causes discussed herein coalesce.

Underlying conditions create a climate of collective discontent and the psychological raw materials upon which proximate causes and triggers build to produce incidents of xenophobic violence. These proximate causes – specifically, governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship – add a second layer of causality to the occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Governance deficit plays a defining role in the occurrence of xenophobic violence in the country, by providing a favourable political opportunity structure. This research reveals that xenophobic violence mostly occurs in areas where local governance is absent or weak, and is therefore unable to address socio-economic hardships communities face and effectively use available systems of controls to resolve conflict and prevent violence. Weak local governance in particular is characterised by a lack of trusted leadership, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Further to this, official leadership vacuums created by absent or weak institutional governance lead to the emergence of violent alternative governance in the form of powerful informal community leadership structures and interest groups that subsume the local authority of the State in their respective locations. These groups

organise and mobilise communities for xenophobic violence, in order to further for their own political and economic interests.

While macro and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances constitute important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger, and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the mobilisation of this discontent – and not the discontent itself – that triggers collective violent attacks on South Africa’s foreign residents. Mobilisation constitutes the vital connective tissue between discontent and collective violence. As a trigger, mobilisation helps to explain the pathways from collective discontent and/or instrumental motives to collective violent action. Collective discontent requires mobilisation in order to trigger an incident of collective violence in much the same way that dry grass requires only a spark to ignite fire (Gleason, 2011). Instigators of xenophobic violence in South Africa use various mobilisation techniques and processes including ‘haranguing’ and inciting crowds during mass community meetings; social media messages, spreading purposely engineered rumours, appealing to a community’s sense of solidarity and right to self-defence; setting examples and asking community members to join; and hiring unemployed youths to carry out attacks.

## Responses and interventions

The fact that xenophobic violence continues unabated, and that some locations have experienced it multiple times, constitutes clear evidence that no effective preventative and response mechanisms are in place. In other words, a wide range of government and civil society responses and interventions have generally failed to either stop or prevent xenophobic violence in the country. Despite the recently adopted National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the official South African government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been characterised by denialism, lack of political will, and impunity for all actors involved.

Since 2008, in responding to threats and the outbreak of violence, the SAPS have been reluctant to intervene on behalf of victims. Indeed, the SAPS rarely respond to threats and visible warning signs of xenophobic violence. Their response is often late, and ineffective, or unable to prevent or stop the violence (HRW, 2020). Since 2008, this violence has resulted in remarkably few arrests, and even fewer convictions (Misago, 2016b). In the handful of instances where perpetrators have been arrested, they are often released without being charged. Cases opened by victims are rarely followed by thorough investigation, rarely see a formal charge, and infrequently result in any form of consequence or conviction (HRW, 2020).

Well-intentioned, civil society efforts to foster peaceful cohabitation and tolerance through social dialogue and campaigns aimed at changing attitudes have also largely proven ineffective in addressing the violence.

While civil society interventions may have helped increase awareness of xenophobia as a social problem, they have done little to address systemic social and institutional xenophobia and its various manifestations. Indeed, official and public xenophobic pronouncements and attitudes are as pervasive as ever, and the violence against foreign nationals continues unabated (Misago et al. 2015, HSRC, 2020). This is mainly because: i) civil society in general lacks the requisite political muscle to hold government accountable for its failures to protect people’s fundamental rights, or to influence a strong and sustained official response; ii) their interventions are not evidence-based and are, rather, informed by untested theories of change; and iii) many civil society interventions target the wrong sources of conflict, as they are unlikely to reach those behind the violence, and to address its key drivers or causal factors.

Our research indicates that only a sustained State political will, informed by accountability, rule of law and eradication of impunity, together with evidence-based civil society interventions, can help to prevent xenophobic violence, or at least to mitigate its effects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Xenophobic violence generally refers to any acts of violence targeted at foreign nationals or ‘outsiders’ due to being foreign, or a stranger, to a given place. It involves an explicit targeting of foreign nationals or outsiders for violent attacks, despite other material, political, cultural or social forces that might be at play (Dodson, 2010). Xenophobic violence is a hate crime, whose logic lies beyond any concomitant and misleading criminal opportunism. The real motive of such violence, as unambiguously expressed by the perpetrators themselves, is to drive foreign populations out of communities for good (Misago, 2017).

This type of violence has lamentably become a longstanding feature of the post-apartheid South African landscape (Landau, 2011), and increasingly threaten the lives and livelihoods of those deemed outsiders. Targeted groups and individuals are regularly killed, assaulted, injured, or displaced, and their property and livelihoods assets looted, destroyed, or appropriated. However, as this report indicates, the consequences of this extend far beyond the targeted groups, where the violence binds together both foreigner and citizen alike in a quagmire of negative socio-economic, political, and security implications for all the country’s residents.

This report draws on a more than a decade of quantitative and qualitative research exploring xenophobic violence in South Africa. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the research presents a systematic investigation into the nature, causal factors, and implications of xenophobic violence plaguing the country. It also explores the nature and effectiveness of state and civil society responses and interventions aimed at addressing the violence. Currently, the research is conducted under the auspices of the [Xenowatch Project](#). This report provides a temporal, spatial, and causal analysis of the violence, and an analysis of responses and interventions made to stop or prevent this violence. For causal factors and interventions, only a summary discussion is provided. The report refers readers to earlier publications (links or references) for more detailed empirical and theoretical analysis.

After this brief introduction, the report proceeds through five main sections. First, it introduces Xenowatch Project via which our research is currently conducted. Second, it discusses our methods and data sources. Third, it describes the violence temporal and spatial trends. Fourth, it presents an analysis of the violence causal factors. Fifth, it discusses the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of interventions by the State and civil society. The last section presents a conclusion that summarises the research key findings and take-aways from the Report.

## 2. ABOUT XENOWATCH

As noted above, Xenowatch is project that monitors xenophobic threats and violence in South Africa, developed in 2016 by the [African Centre for Migration & Society \(ACMS\)](#) as a response to the lack of reliable information, tools, and effective interventions to address ongoing violence against foreign nationals (and other ‘outsiders’) and promote sustainable social cohesion in the country. It is a non-proprietary platform, an open-source system that tracks, verifies, records, visualises (interactive mapping and graphs), and analyses all incidents of xenophobic violence, as well as responses or interventions by all relevant stakeholders, including Government and civil society. Its main objectives include to:

1. record and analyse: i) xenophobic threats and violence across the country; and ii) interventions by all relevant stakeholders, including government at different levels; civil society at different levels; community-based organisations, as well as community members and their leaders;
2. serve as an early warning system that notifies authorities and civil society about threats, violence, and displacement for appropriate and immediate response;
3. analyse data collected to identify the characteristics of communities at risk and understand the drivers of violence in ways that can inform more effective interventions and encourage greater accountability for perpetrators and mandated institutions; and
4. provide the public with data and analysis to raise its (the public) awareness on the magnitude and implications of xenophobic violence not only for targeted outsiders, but also for all community members.

To achieve these objectives, Xenowatch has established a growing network of partners both countrywide, and abroad. Current partners include [Lawyers for Human Rights \(LHR\)](#), the [Institute for Security Studies \(ISS\)](#), the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data \(ACLED\)](#), [African Diaspora Forum \(ADF\)](#), the [Consortium for Refugees and Migrants South Africa \(CORMSA\)](#), [Refugee Social Services](#), the [Eastern Cape Refugee Centre](#), the [UN Protection Working Group chaired by UNHCR](#) and a national network of verification partners consisting of migrant organisations, community resource and legal advice centres, research institutions, and community and religious leaders. These partners play an integral role in assisting Xenowatch to deliver accurate and reliable data and analysis, advocate for more effective interventions to address the violence. Further to this, it recognises the importance of building inclusive communities, partnering with local

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government authorities (particularly the major cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban)<sup>2</sup> and other stakeholders (including the [Democracy Development Program \(DDP\)](#), and [South Africa Cities Network \(SACN\)](#)) to establish 'local communities of practice' that have started working to promote inclusive governance, social cohesion, and address xenophobic discrimination.

Over the past five years, Xenowatch has developed into a unique and reliable source of information, data and analysis on xenophobia and related violence in South Africa. It continues to provide evidence-based (empirically and theoretically informed) understanding and recommendations for addressing the violence more effectively. Our research and analysis are regularly used by various actors, such as international organisations, civil society, researchers, journalists, and activists, both locally and internationally. Xenowatch [outputs](#) thus far include books, book chapters, journal articles, research reports, policy briefs, factsheets, newsletters, media articles and interviews, presentations, keynote addresses, radio adverts, etc.

Since the beginning of 2021, Xenowatch has been expanding in scope. In addition to monitoring xenophobic violence, the platform now monitors all forms of institutional and communal xenophobic discrimination including, amongst other things, denying immigrants/outside access to services and opportunities to which they are legally are entitled; vilifying pronouncements and verbal abuse; selective enforcement of laws; evictions threats; anti-foreigner social media mobilisation; xenophobic political populism; unlawful detentions, harassment, intimidation; and extortion by law enforcement agents and organised gangs.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the three cities identified to be most affected by xenophobic violence in South Africa.

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

#### 3.1 Approach and data sources

As indicated earlier, this report draws on quantitative and qualitative research, recording and analysing xenophobic violence in South Africa. Quantitative data is collected through the Xenowatch platform described above. Xenowatch collects data and information on xenophobic violence through media reports, research publications, original research, partner organisations and verification partners, and information crowdsourcing. Members of the public report information on xenophobic violence incidents using free sms, WhatsApp/call, email, mobile app and online (see details on [www.xenowatch.ac.za](http://www.xenowatch.ac.za)). Received reports are verified, anonymised, and made publicly available on the website. Where necessary, reports are relayed to the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other relevant authorities and stakeholders for intervention.

All reported incidents go through a rigorous verification process by Xenowatch management team to: i) determine whether the incident did indeed occur and prevent false reports from spreading; ii) ascertain whether it was caused by xenophobia, as not all attacks on foreign nationals or outsiders are xenophobic; and iii) collect further details on the incident (such as exact location, date and time, a detailed description of the incident, trigger event, profile of victims and perpetrators and where information is available, and responses or interventions if any). The verification process involves telephoning or engaging remotely (via email or online meetings) with the reporting individuals, SAPS and local authorities, community-based organisations, on-the-ground verification partners and Xenowatch monitors. These engagements are often complemented by site visits by either the Xenowatch management team or Xenowatch monitors stationed throughout all nine of South Africa's provinces.

In addition to quantitative data, this report also draws on additional qualitative research regularly conducted across the country. The aim of this on-going research is to move beyond quantitative generalisations and correlations, in order to identify specific casual factors, particularly by seeking to explain why violence breaks out in certain areas, and not in others. To achieve this goal, the research adopts the 'most similar systems' approach, by selecting research sites affected by the violence and sites that did not experience the violence despite having similar socio-economic dynamics as the neighbouring violence-affected communities. The approach is informed by the conviction that "no enquiry into riots [in this case xenophobic violence incidents] should fail to account for their absence" (Horowitz 2001: xiv). This 'most similar systems' approach allows the research to identify the most significant distinguishing factors that account for the presence of the violence in certain places, and its absence in others. A study of collective violence proceeds

most fruitfully when it asks those deceptively simple, but critical questions, that illuminate the violent episode: Why here and not there? Why now and not then?

The research therefore uses a qualitative and comparative multi-case study methodological approach to – and a micro-analytical framework of – the drivers of the violence. By privileging an analytical approach that focuses on micro-level relations of power, interests, and structures among actors, these approaches help us move beyond generalisations and correlations (often generating from macro-level, quantitative and ecological analyses) and reveal the most proximate variables and processes that combine to trigger the violence.

At each site, research teams conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews with citizens, foreign nationals, perpetrators and victims of the violence, relevant government officials, community leaders, and representatives of different civil society, faith-based, and community-based organisations operating in those areas. In addition to individual in-depth interviews, the teams conduct focus group discussions (of women, men, and youth) at each research site. Thus far, the research counts 32 case studies conducted across the country, and more than 800 participants. We supplement original empirical data collection with secondary sources that provide additional data, insight, and analysis.

### 3.2 Data analysis and visualisation

For quantitative data analysis and visualisation, the research adopts a socio-spatial approach to understand the spatial distribution and trends in xenophobic violence in South Africa, particularly from 2008 to September 2021. The records in the Xenowatch database contain attribute information about each incident, including the geographic coordinates of the locations where these incidents occurred. We combined a variety of geographic and socio-economic data for the analyses, including: administrative boundaries data on South African Provinces and Municipalities from the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB), data on protests and riots in South Africa from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), sociodemographic and population data from Statistics South Africa, crime data from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), voting data and political perceptions, and participation data from the Independent Electoral Commission and Afrobarometer 2018 survey.

Data analysis involves two stages. First, descriptive statistics are used to summarise the total number of xenophobic incidents by province and by year. Second, using a Geographic Information System, ArcGIS Pro 2.8, we perform cluster, hotspot, and overlay analysis to find statistically significant clusters of high and low counts of xenophobic violence, violent protests, riots, and crime. These analyses provide a useful visual

analysis of the spatial association between recorded rates of xenophobic violence incidents and other variables, such as violent crime and violent community protests. For data visualisation, we use Tableau, Power BI, and ArcGIS software to produce graphs, maps, and interactive dashboards the public can use to create their own analysis and reports.

### 3.3 Limitations

The Xenowatch data collection process faces two main limitations: i) under reporting; ii) and incomplete reports or limited information on violence incidents. Regarding under reporting, we note that victims of - and witnesses to- xenophobic violence hesitate to report incidents particularly due to fear of victimisation, as some of the perpetrators reside within their communities. Another contributing factor is the lack of confidence in the police, as reporting incidents is understood by the public to rarely triggers police response and assistance. Under-reporting means that many xenophobic violence incidents may not have been recorded on the Xenowatch platform and therefore are not included in this report's analysis.

Xenowatch often receives incomplete reports with limited information on violence incidents. This means that detailed information on the extent of the violence and damage or victimisation caused is not always available. For example, exact figures on the number of shops looted; properties damaged; persons killed, assaulted, or displaced; as well as the nationality and gender of victims, are not always easy to determine. The figures provided are sometimes estimates.

To address these limitations, Xenowatch has hired research assistants or Xenowatch monitors in all nine provinces to ensure no violence incidents go unnoticed and detailed information is timeously collected. Their monitoring work is complemented/facilitated by the growing network of Xenowatch verification partners across the country.

While not exhaustive due to the limitations mentioned, Xenowatch data and analysis provide critical insights for a more accurate understanding of xenophobia and related violence in South Africa. Such an understanding is indispensable for designing interventions to effectively address this type of violent discrimination.

## 4. TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL TRENDS OF XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

### 4.1 History and nature of the violence

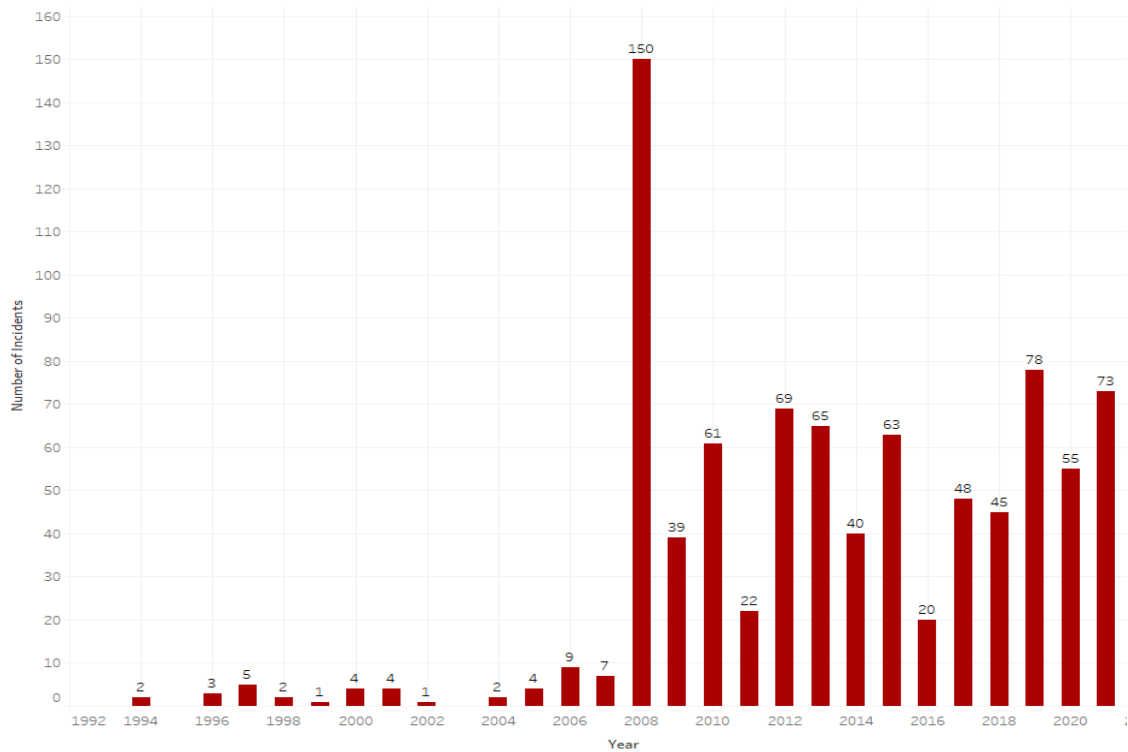
Xenophobic violence has become a regular and increasingly unremarkable feature in democratic South Africa. Foreign nationals are routinely attacked in their residences, workplaces, business premises, when using private and public transport, or simply when walking the streets. Incidents of xenophobic violence have been recorded across the country every year since 1994. Indeed, Xenowatch has recorded at least 873 incidents of xenophobic violence in South Africa between 1994 and November 2021 (details in Table 1 below).

*Table 1: Incidents of xenophobic violence in South Africa by province: 1994 – 30 Nov 2021*

Province	Total number of incidents
Gauteng	347
Western Cape	147
KwaZulu-Natal	124
Eastern Cape	91
Limpopo	44
Mpumalanga	38
Free State	30
North West	28
Northern Cape	15
Unallocated	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>873</b>

As Figure 1 below indicates, the violence peaked in 2008 when at least 150 incidents were recorded.

Figures 1: Incidents of xenophobic violence by year: 1994 - Nov 2021

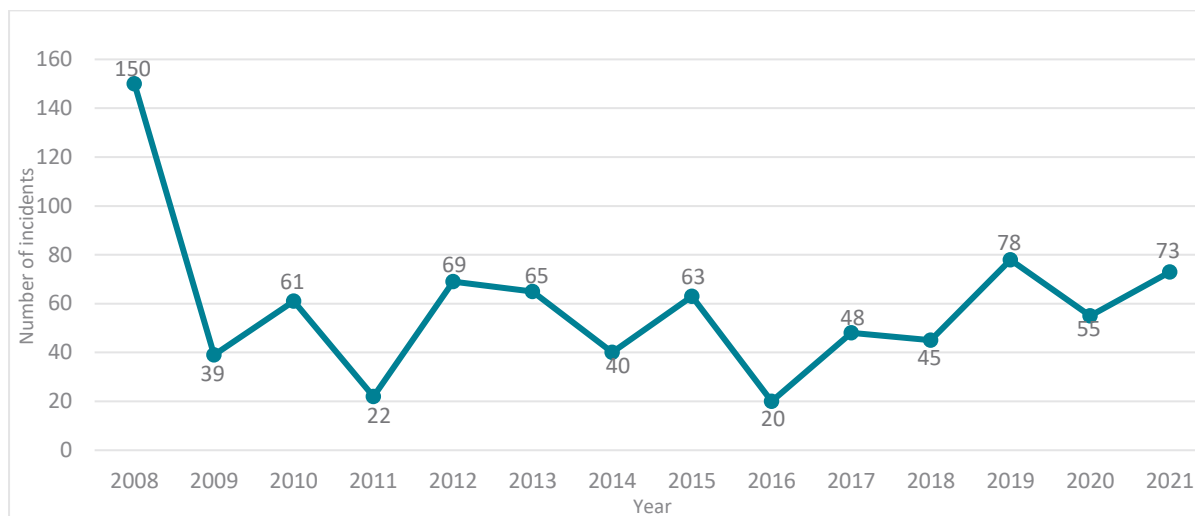


While there were sporadic incidents earlier, it is from 2008 onwards that the violence became more regular, intense, and widespread. It also from this time that the violence attracted more public and scholarly attention in terms of the recording and analysis of incidents. The following provides a detailed descriptive temporal and spatial analysis of xenophobic violence between 2008 and November 2021.

#### 4.2 Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: 2008 - 2021

Between 2008 and November 2021, a total number of 829 incidents were recorded. This means an average of 59 incidents per year. This year (2021), 73 violence incidents have been recorded by 30 November (details in Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Incidents of xenophobic violence by year: 2008-30 Nov 2021



#### 4.2.1 Spatial analysis and mapping of xenophobic violence in South Africa

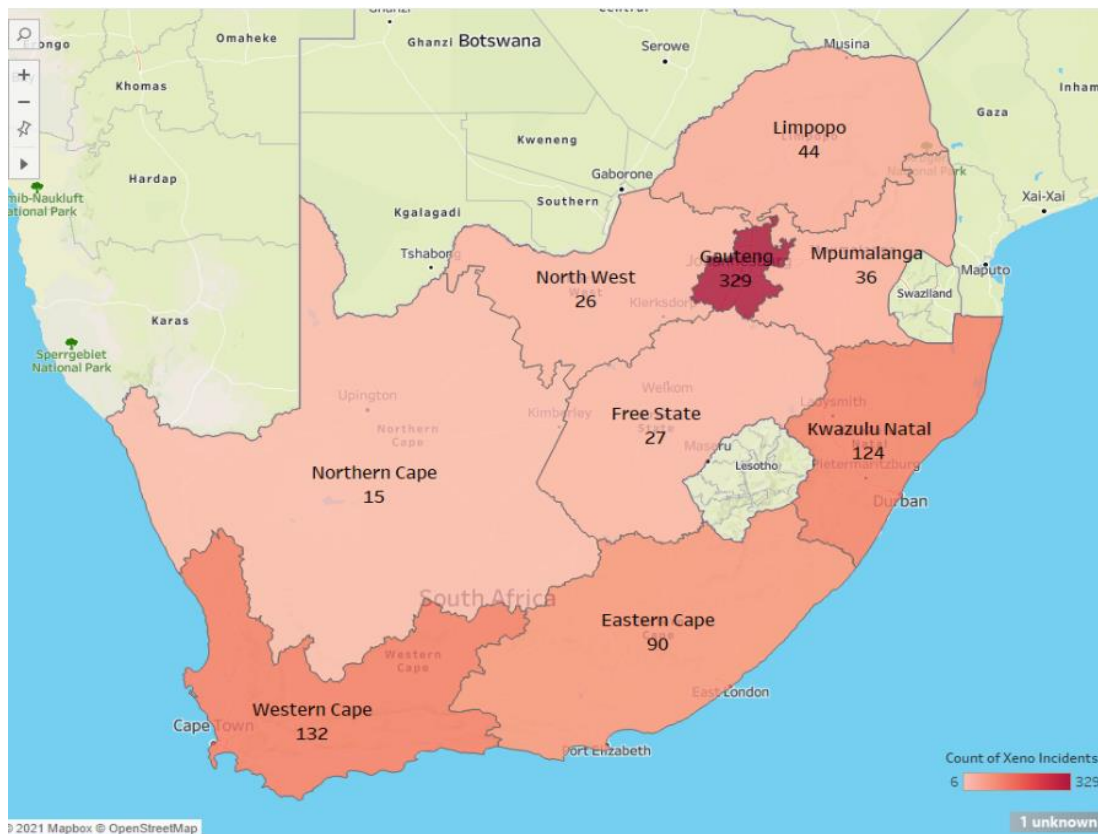
##### *Xenophobic violence incidents by province*

Xenophobic violence occurs in all of South Africa’s nine provinces. Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal are the worst affected. Table 2 provides total numbers of xenophobic violence incidents by province between 2008 and 30 November 2021. Map 1 and Figure 1 visually display these numbers and the percentages for each province.

Table 2: Incidents of xenophobic violence by province: 2008 – 30 Nov 2021

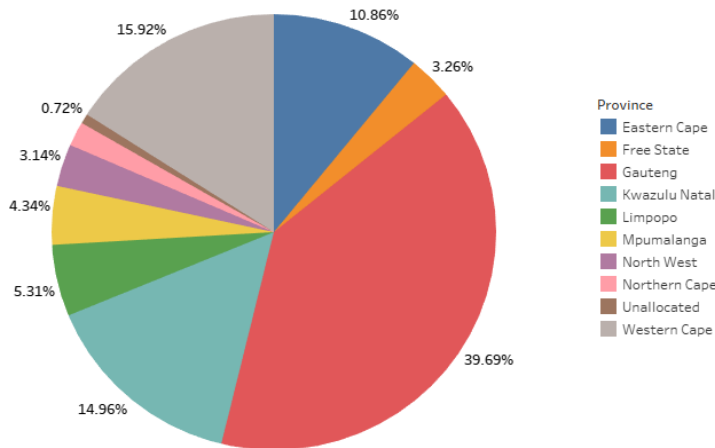
Province	Total number of incidents
Gauteng	329
Western Cape	132
KwaZulu-Natal	124
Eastern Cape	90
Limpopo	44
Mpumalanga	36
Free State	27
North West	26
Northern Cape	15
Unallocated	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>829</b>

*Map 1: Incidents of xenophobic violence by province: 2008 – 30 Nov 2021*



Map 1 above and Figure 3 below clearly show that as the country’s largest metropolis, Gauteng is by far the most affected by the violence. With 329 incidents, it accounts for almost 40% of all incidents recorded in the country.

Figure 3: Incidents of xenophobic violence by province: 2008 – 30 Nov 2021



While, Gauteng, the Western Cape, and Kwazulu-Natal remain the worst affected, there has been a sharp increase in xenophobic violence incidents in Eastern Cape. Indeed, of the total of 90 incidents recorded thus far in the province, 49 were recorded in the last two years (2020 and 2021). In other words, the number of violence incidents has increased by 55% since last year (2020). Further to this, the Eastern Cape was the worst affected province in 2021, counting 33 of the 73 incidents recorded in the country. Kwazulu-Natal has also seen a steady increase in numbers of xenophobic violence incidents in the recent past. Table 3 below provides details.

Table 3: Incidents by province by year: 2008-30 Nov 2021

Province	Date															Gran..
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021		
Gauteng	98	6	21	8	24	20	16	25	11	18	16	48	12	6	329	
Western Cape	27	16	30	3	11	7	4	3	4	9	4	3	5	6	132	
Kwazulu Natal	13	3	1	1	2	5	3	22	3	8	12	19	14	18	124	
Eastern Cape	3	1	2	6	7	15	2	3	1	1			16	33	90	
Limpopo	1	7	1	2	9	5	5	6		6	1	1			44	
Mpumalanga	1	4	5	1	4	5	3	1	1	2	2	5		2	36	
Free State	3	1	1	1	11	4	1	1				1	1	2	27	
North West	3				1	4	6	1		1	8			2	26	
Northern Cape		1						1		2	1		6	4	15	
Unallocated	1							1		1		1	2		6	
Grand Total	150	39	61	22	69	65	40	64	20	48	45	78	55	73	829	

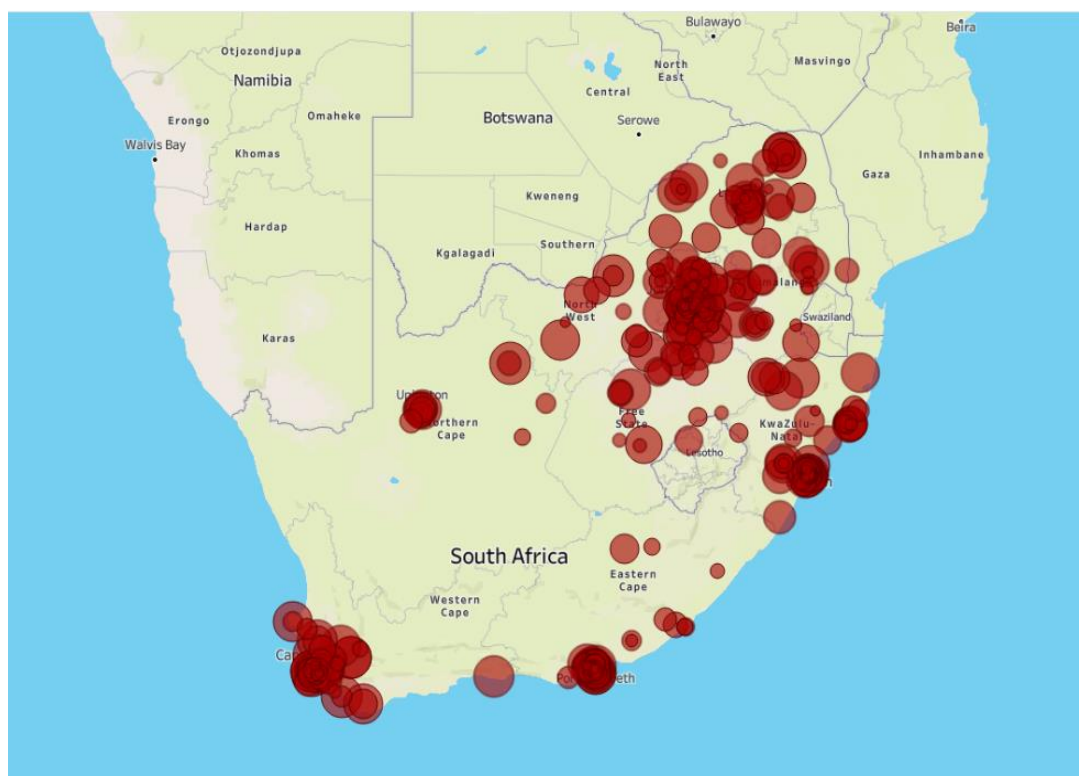
### *Xenophobic violence incidents by location*

While xenophobic violence is spread across the country, it is mainly concentrated in major cities and specific locations within them, particularly informal settlements and poor townships. The worst affected cities are Johannesburg, the Western Cape, Durban, Ekurhuleni, Gqeberha and Tshwane. Tables 4 and Map 2 below show the cities and locations worst affected by xenophobic violence in South Africa.

*Table 4: Cities most affected by xenophobic violence in South Africa: 2008-30Nov 2021*

City	Total number of incidents
Johannesburg (Gauteng)	170
Cape Town (Western Cape)	101
Durban (KwaZulu Natal)	93
Ekurhuleni (Gauteng)	80
Gqeberha (Eastern Cape)	72
Tshwane (Gauteng)	55
Polokwane (Limpopo)	14

*Map 2: Incidents of xenophobic violence in South Africa by location: 2008-30 Nov 2021*



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**FREE SMS:** 44705 | **E-MAIL:** [report@xenowatch.ac.za](mailto:report@xenowatch.ac.za) | **Online:** [xenowatch.ac.za](http://xenowatch.ac.za) | **Mobile app:** Xenowatch  
*All reports should include the location, time and description of the incident.*



## *Xenophobic violence incidents by police precinct*

Mapping xenophobic violence incidents within police precincts across South Africa confirms that this violence occurs mostly in locations (informal settlements and townships) in the periphery of the country's major cities or metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay. It is within these locations that we find hot spots of xenophobic violence across the country. This is hardly surprising, because most domestic and international migrants tend to flock to these locations. Table 5 below lists police precincts, with at least five xenophobic violence incidents between 2008 and September 2021.

*Table 5: Police Precincts with high frequency of xenophobic violence incidents: 2008-30 Sept 2021*

Province	Municipality	Police precinct	Number of incidents
Gauteng	Johannesburg	Johannesburg Central	27
	Johannesburg	Alexandra	17
	Johannesburg	Jeppe	16
	Johannesburg	Diepsloot	15
	Tshwane	Pretoria Central	16
	Johannesburg	Meadowlands	14
	Ekurhuleni	Benoni	14
	Ekurhuleni	Katlehong	9
	Johannesburg	Moffatview	9
	Tshwane	Atteridgeville	8
	Tshwane	Mamelodi	8
	Ekurhuleni	Tembisa	8
	Ekurhuleni	Thokoza	7
	Ekurhuleni	Germiston	6
	Johannesburg	Dobsonville	6
	Johannesburg	Moroka	6
	Johannesburg	Sophiatown	6
	Johannesburg	Cleveland	5
	Johannesburg	Jabulani	5
	Ekurhuleni	KwaThema	5
Johannesburg	Rabie Ridge	5	
Western cape	Cape Town	Cape Town Central	29
	Cape Town	Lingeletu West (Khayelitsha)	15
	Cape Town	Nyanga	11
	Cape Town	Delft	6
	Cape Town	Ocean View	6
	Cape Town	Malmesbury	5
	Cape Town	Mitchell's Plain	5

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Reports of past, current or potential xenophobic incidents can be sent through these methods:  
FREE SMS: 44705 | E-MAIL: [report@xenowatch.ac.za](mailto:report@xenowatch.ac.za) | Online: [xenowatch.ac.za](http://xenowatch.ac.za) | Mobile app: Xenowatch  
All reports should include the location, time and description of the incident.



KwaZulu-Natal	eThekweni	Durban Central	34
	eThekweni	Ntuzuma	9
	eThekweni	Mayville	5
Eastern Cape	Nelson Mandela Bay	Humewood	15
	Nelson Mandela Bay	Motherwell	12
	Nelson Mandela Bay	Ikamvelihle	10
	Nelson Mandela Bay	Kwazakele	8
	Nelson Mandela Bay	Gelvandale	6
	Nelson Mandela Bay	Bethelsdorp	5
Limpopo	Polokwane	Polokwane	11
Mpumalanga	Lekwa	Morgenzon Transvaal	8
	Emalaheni	Vosman	5
Free State	Tswelopele	Bultfontein	5
North West	Ramotshere Moiloa	Zeerust	6

#### 4.2.2 Characteristics and consequences of xenophobic violence in South Africa

Xenophobic violence in South Africa is generally a collective action (i.e., a type of collective violence) carried out by groups (large or small) of ordinary members of the public, often mobilised by local leaders (formal or informal) and influential groups or individuals in order to further their own political and economic interests (see later discussion on violence entrepreneurship). While the notorious violence of May 2008 targeted almost all foreign nationals and South African ‘outsiders’ within affected areas, recent xenophobic attacks are increasingly targeting specific groups of foreign nationals, particularly those operating community-based small businesses (for example spaza shops, hair saloons); informal traders, and foreign truck drivers. This violence is characterised by gruesome murders (sometimes by setting victims alight), assaults, injuries, mass displacement, looting, destruction and appropriation of foreign-owned property, businesses, and other livelihood assets. Since 2008, the violence has resulted in *at least* 612 deaths, 122 298 persons displaced, 6 306 shops/property looted or damaged (see Table 6 below for details). It is worth noting that due to underreporting discussed above, actual numbers are likely to be higher.

Table 6: Incidents of xenophobic violence and type of victimisation: 1994-30 Nov 2021

Type of Victimization	Total number
Total number of incidents	873
Persons killed	612
Physical assaults	1 184
Persons displaced	122 298
Shops/property looted/damaged	6 306

The consequences of xenophobic violence and exclusion reach far beyond the targeted foreign/outsider groups. It has negative socio-economic, political and security implications for all country residents, foreign and citizens. Citizens’ lives and livelihoods are often lost during the violence. The violence undermines the country’s socio-economic prosperity, nation building, security and rule of law, as well as its international reputation. It is important to note that xenophobic violence is not just about foreign nationals. This violence is a symptom of a dangerous politics of localism and entitlement, and the rationing of access to rights and opportunities, where designated groups or individuals deciding ad hoc who has rights and who does not – including who may live, and who may die. This necessarily undermines the rule of law and puts everyone at risk (see Misago 2021 for a detailed discussion on socio-economic, political and security implications of xenophobic violence in South Africa).

### 4.3 Conclusion

The temporal and spatial analysis above clearly indicates that xenophobic violence is a long-standing feature of democratic South Africa. Violent incidents, although not comprehensively documented, have been on record since 1994. The violence peaked in 2008, when at least 150 incidents were reported across the country. Since then, there has been an average of 59 incidents per year.

Xenophobic violence occurs in all of South Africa’s nine provinces, with Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal and Eastern Cape are the worst affected. While the violence is spread across the country, where the hotspots occur mostly informal settlements and townships in the periphery of the country’s major cities or metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay. This is not surprising, since these locations tend to absorb most domestic and international migrants to the country.

Xenophobic violence in South Africa is generally a collective action (i.e., a type of collective violence) carried out by groups (large or small) of ordinary members of the public often mobilised by local leaders (formal or informal) and influential groups or individuals who seek to further their own political and economic interests. It is a constant and increasing threat to the lives and livelihoods of foreign nationals and others deemed 'outsiders'. Target groups and individuals are regularly killed, assaulted, injured and displaced, and their property and livelihoods assets looted, destroyed, or appropriated.

This violence has consequences and implications that extend far beyond targeted groups. By undermining the country's socio-economic prosperity, nation building, security and rule of law, as well as its international reputation, it has systemic negative socio-economic, political, and security implications for all the country's residents, both foreigners and citizens alike.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF CAUSAL FACTORS

Our research indicates that the drivers of xenophobic violence in South Africa are multiple, and imbedded in a complex interplay between the country's past and present macro and micro-level socio-economic and political factors, that can be understood according to three layers of causality, viz.: underlying conditions, proximate causes, and triggers. Factors in these categories constitute key elements of the xenophobic violence causal chain. The following provides a quick overview of these factors. Detailed empirical and theoretical analysis is available in our earlier publications to which readers are referred herewith throughout.

### 5.1 Underlying conditions: Socio-economic deprivation, history of violence/crime, and xenophobia

#### 5.1.1 Socio-economic deprivation

As indicated earlier, in all provinces, xenophobic violence occurs mostly in poor and economically marginalised informal settlements and townships where citizens, many of whom are themselves internal migrants, and immigrants, who meet amidst intensely challenging living conditions. To varying degrees, residents in areas covered here face severe socio-economic hardship including high rates of unemployment, poor service delivery, poverty and overcrowding, as well as concomitant social ills that include high crime rates, gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, exacerbated by a general lack of livelihood opportunities, particularly for the youth.

The fierce competition for scarce public services, livelihood resources and opportunities driven by these circumstances often leads to tensions and conflicts among individuals and groups. More specifically, competition for jobs, housing, public services such health care and social grants, business space, etc. between citizens and foreign residents, results in resentment and tension between them (Misago, 2016). Where this competition under conditions of scarcity involves foreigners, residents of violence-affected areas perceive it to be unfair and illegitimate, and accuse the former of stealing what is rightly theirs (see also Dodson, 2010). This resentment towards foreign participation in local competition produces as an "ethnicised political economy in which microeconomic friction is displaced into hate-filled nationalism" (Dodson 2010:5).

The research indeed reveals that under such conditions of severe hardship and fierce competition for resources and opportunities, citizens often evoke their sense of entitlement to their spaces and resources held within, as well as an internalised feeling that the competition brought about by the presence of outsiders is 'illegitimate', and therefore should be eliminated or at least minimised by any means necessary

(Misago, 2016; Freedom House, 2017). When as is often the case it is blamed on the presence of outsiders, socio-economic deprivation (real or perceived) provides fertile ground for xenophobic violence. For a detailed discussion of socio-economic deprivation as a driver of xenophobic violence, see [Misago, 2016](#), [Freedom House, 2017](#).

### 5.1.2 History of group conflicts and violence

Almost all communities covered in this research have a relatively extended history of group-based conflicts and violence. This ongoing research documents chronic group conflicts and tensions, mob justice and the normalisation of violence as an effective mechanism to resolve conflicts and restore order. It is therefore not surprising that some residents in these communities use violence to resolve perceived conflicts with outsiders. In particular, links between mob justice and anti-outsider violence are not difficult to establish, given how frequently outsiders are associated with criminality (Freedom House, 2017; Misago, 2016). Common types of group violence in these communities include taxi violence, mob justice, and gangsterism.

*Taxi disputes and deadly violence* are common in many of our research areas, and are usually over lucrative routes and commuters. A Diepsloot respondent expressed views shared by many in other communities: “Sometimes owners disagree on roads ownership, and stop other taxis to operate on that route and if they operate, that’s where they start to fight. The community members, as passengers, come for transport and get killed in the process.” *Mob justice* is another well-documented type of group-based violence in most of our research communities. Residents often rely on this type of collective violence to deal with common challenges, particularly crime. Respondents indicate that mob justice is necessary, given the widespread failure of police and justice system to control the crime to which these communities are subjected. Mob justice is often used in the name of fighting crime, which local residents perceive to be mostly committed by foreign nationals or other outsiders (for a more detailed discussion see [Freedom House, 2017](#)).

### 5.1.3 Xenophobia and negative attitudes towards outsiders

In all research areas, residents and the local institutions of authority generally harbour strongly negative views towards outsiders, and particularly foreign nationals, who they perceive to be the cause of most problems in their respective locations or communities. They blame foreign nationals for most of the socio-economic ills, and perceive their presence to be a threat to their lives and livelihoods.

These sentiments are common not only held among residents of the research areas in question, but also among South Africa citizens in general. Indeed, research consistently documents xenophobic attitudes or strong negative sentiments and hostility towards immigrants amongst both the general public as well as

government officials (UNHCR 2015). Research shows that these attitudes are widespread and cut across race, class, gender, age, ethnic and religious divides (Nyamnjoh, 2006). A 2020 HSRC survey reveals that 57% of the country's population hold negative attitudes towards immigrants, particularly those of African and Asian origin (HSRC, 2020).

Pervasive strong anti-immigrant sentiments are informed by the perceptions of immigrants as a threat to the national security and to the citizens' lives and livelihoods (Cush, 2008). These perceptions result from – and are in turn reinforced by – constant scapegoating by local political leaders and authorities as an attempt to cover or justify their service delivery failures (UNCHR, 2015). A South African respondent in Diepsloot, for example, stated when asked about the causes of negative attitudes and violence against foreign nationals:

I think the main drivers are politicians. Because they want to rule, they look for different ways of gaining public attention and support and one of the reasons would be blaming outsiders for the problems faced in this community. It is all about power. Politicians will always tell you what you want to hear even if it is not true. We also have to remember that not all of us tolerate foreigners. Some people do not. So, it's most likely that once they hear negative messages from some of these politicians about foreign nationals, they are quick to support them and start violence. The community members will start supporting them when they say foreigners must go. These are the kind of statements that are likely to breed hate and incite violence.

Political scapegoating is a well-documented source of negative attitudes and perceptions towards outsiders. Crush et al. (2009:16) note, for example, that in South Africa, “the failures of the government to deal with endemic poverty, joblessness, lack of shelter and basic services had led to the scapegoating of foreign migrants by frustrated citizens.” In a similar vein, a 2020 Human Rights Watch indicates that many African and Asian foreigners who have been targets of xenophobia, because they are “often scapegoated for economic insecurity and government failures in delivering basic services to its citizens...” (HRW, 2020: 16).

In South Africa, xenophobia manifests in many different ways at both an institutional and public level. Institutional xenophobia is, for example, visible when officials deny immigrants access to services and opportunities to which they are legally entitled. They are also visible through vilifying pronouncements by government officials; selective enforcement of laws; unlawful detentions, harassment, intimidation and extortion by law enforcement agencies. Public manifestations include everyday street-level abuse; dehumanising remarks, extortion by local gangs; threats; evictions from residences and business premises; and collective violence, commonly known as xenophobic violence (Misago, 2021). A 2018 survey reveals that, “More than 1 in 10 adults living in South Africa had not taken part in violent action against foreign

nationals – but would be prepared to do so [...] The results of this study show that millions of ordinary South Africans are prepared to engage in anti-immigrant behaviour” (Gordon, 2019: 2).

In sum, the discussion above indicates that pervasive xenophobic climate in the country certainly constitutes a ‘collective mental state’ and a psychological ‘raw material’, upon which the mobilisation for xenophobic violence builds (Bostock, 2010). By definition, xenophobia is inevitably one of the determinants of xenophobic violence. While xenophobia and other underlying conditions outlined above are common in the country and cannot explain the violence on their own, they create a climate of collective discontent that proximate causes and triggers (discussed below) build upon to produce incidents of xenophobic violence.

## 5.2 Proximate causes: Governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship

### 5.2.1 Governance deficit

The underlying conditions discussed above are evidently common, and shared by many communities in the country, and while important, cannot help to explain why violence occurs in some locations, and not in others. Using the most-similar systems design, our ongoing research identifies local governance as the most significant distinguishing factor explaining the occurrence or absence of xenophobic violence in communities or locations with similar socio-economic conditions. For present purposes, ‘*local governance*’ broadly refers to all formal and informal systems of order in a given locality i.e., the integration of – or interaction between – all localised systems of controls (social, economic, normative, legal, and political) and leadership, authority, and power regimes.

Research evidence indicates that local governance plays a defining role in the occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa, by providing a favourable political opportunity structure and through its use of social and political controls to facilitate violence rather than prevent it. These are clear symptoms of governance deficit. In other words, governance deficit facilitates xenophobic violence, while effective governance prevents it, despite the presence of other violence determinants. Indeed, this research provides detailed evidence that local authority and community leadership are instrumental in preventing xenophobic violence in potentially volatile areas, by not only discouraging potential perpetrators from within, but also, and most importantly, by successfully mobilising communities to stand against actions and influence from outside violent elements (Misago, 2016). Similarly, Monson (2011:189) finds that,

... the spread of [xenophobic] violence appeared to depend on the strength of leadership institutions in the surrounding areas. Arguably, more strongly democratic forms of leadership created firebreaks against the conflagration, while adjacent areas of weakly institutionalised

leadership, or leadership autonomous from the State, presented softer boundaries, more easily penetrated both by political instigators and by the depoliticised spread of recidivism.

This research reveals that xenophobic violence mostly occurs in areas where local governance is either absent, or weak, and therefore unable to address socio-economic hardships communities face, and effectively use available systems of controls to resolve conflicts and prevent violence. Weak local governance is particularly characterised by a lack of trusted leadership and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

This research documents a general lack of community trust in the local authority and community leadership structures including ward councils, street committees, community policing forums (CPF), and political parties. This community distrust is generally informed by the leaders' (perceived) lack of capacity or willingness to address service delivery challenges and their inability to control crime and resolve chronic conflicts in communities. Lack of trusted leadership and authority also means that these places where xenophobic violence regularly occurs lack conflict resolution mechanisms capable of channelling or solving concerns in ways that could diffuse the socio-political tensions inherent in any diverse and dynamic community.

While acknowledging that South Africa's townships have a documented history of using violence as a means of solving problems, communities largely resort to violence, vigilantism, and mob justice when relevant institutions and existing conflict resolution mechanisms have failed to adequately address issues of concern. The words of a respondent in Itireleng are telling in this regard: 'If there are no other ways of resolving these problems even after several meetings, violence seems to be the only voice we have left.' Respondents across all affected areas reported that the members of the community take the law into their own hands because they were not able to trust the local authorities, community leaders, the police, or the criminal justice system. By allowing the public collective discontent and resentment towards foreign nationals in affected areas to fester and mobilisation towards violence to take place and succeed, the lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms presents a favourable opportunity for the occurrence of xenophobic violence (for a detailed discussion on governance as a key determinant of xenophobic violence, see [Misago, 2019a](#)).

### 5.2.2 Violence entrepreneurship: Leadership vacuums and the rise of violence entrepreneurs

Another proximate cause of the xenophobic violence is violence entrepreneurship. The research finds that official leadership vacuums created by absent or weak institutional governance lead to the emergence of violent alternative governance, in the form of powerful informal community leadership structures that take over the authority of the state in their respective locations. These include civic associations, concerned

residents forums, local business associations, local development forums, etc. As Landau (2011) notes, in the absence of formal institutional structures, these other political configurations have emerged to provide protection, services, and avenues for articulating community interests. They occupy a social space that should, constitutionally, belong to local government, and they have come to operate as ‘untouchable’ parallel leadership structures, forging their own laws and regulations (see also Monson, 2011). A respondent narrates how official leadership had lost power and legitimacy in Masiphumelele:

The government has a big role to play, but they are not doing it. They must encourage people, there is no leadership, and the councillor is voiceless. There is lack of leadership, councillors have lost, they have a higher voice but they are silent. They are hardly known by the community, they don’t interact with the community. Then, when there is trouble, it is difficult to address the community because they are not known by the community.

The study finds that, in most areas, violence against foreign nationals is organised by parallel leadership and special interest groups to further their political and economic interests (see [Misago, 2017](#) for details on the political economy of xenophobic violence). Indeed, although the violent attacks on foreign nationals attract mass and relatively voluntary public participation, they are instigated by the above described leadership groups, often referred to as ‘violence entrepreneurs’ (Guichaoua, 2013) or ‘violence specialists’ (Tilly, 2003). This goes against the common assumption attributing the violence to ‘faceless’ or ‘anonymous’ mobs or criminals. Our research indeed finds that behind the masses, there are identifiable groups or individuals who act as instigators of the violence out of private expediency. This confirms the argument forwarded by Monson *et al.* (2011) that the reference to a ‘faceless collective perpetrator’ proves to be a strategy (often by instigators themselves or their complicit local leaders) to erase both agency of the victims and responsibility of key actors behind the violence, shielding the latter from accountability (more on this in [Misago, 2016a, 2017](#); Monson *et al.*, 2011).

In sum, this research identifies governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship as proximate causes that add a second layer of causality in the occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa.

### 5.3 Precipitants and triggers: Violent community protests and mobilisation

#### 5.3.1 Violent service delivery, community protests

The research identifies violent service delivery and community protests as precipitants of xenophobic violence in many of our case study communities. As von Holdt *et al.* (2011:6) note:



political tool, or an effective mechanism to attract (local or national) government’s attention and responses to their otherwise neglected socio-economic grievances (Freedom House, 2017). Protesters believe that attacking foreigners, in addition to the usual violent service delivery protests, is an effective mechanism to attract Government attention. One Mamelodi resident, for example, stated: “the government only pays attention to our problems when we loot, burn property and attack foreigners.” It is ‘the smoke that calls’ as Von Holdt et al. (2011) observes.

Attacks on, and looting of, foreign-owned businesses are also an effective protest strategy used by protest leaders to attract crowds of participants because looting offers immediate material reward (Gastrow, 2021). As Landau and Misago (2016:1) observe, “if we understand protesters as infantry working for local leaders, looting sustains a mercenary army [...], local leaders need protests to maintain their power and legitimacy. And the protesters need to be fed. Looting is a way of doing so.” Indeed, a protest leader in Mamelodi admitted, “We need the protesters to make our point, but when they are hungry, they go and get food from shops to eat or take home to cook; and if shops here are closed they go to shops in other locations” (ibid.).

### 5.3.2 Mobilisation as a trigger of xenophobic violence

The research identifies mobilisation as an immediate trigger of xenophobic violence, which is often a collective violent action as discussed earlier. By looking for answers to the question “what triggers xenophobic violence?”, this study identifies an often-missed empirical factor and key element in the xenophobic violence causal chain: mobilisation. For present purposes, mobilisation broadly refers to all activities, interactions and processes aimed at recruiting and persuading individuals and groups to participate in a collective action. It focuses on instigators of the violence and their ability to assemble individuals and get them to participate in a collective action for a seemingly common/collective goal (see details in Misago, 2019b).

The study shows that that, while macro and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances are important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the mobilisation of this discontent – and not the discontent itself – that triggers collective violent attacks on South Africa’s foreign residents. Mobilisation constitutes the vital connective tissue between discontent and collective violence. As a trigger, mobilisation helps to explain the pathways from collective discontent and/or instrumental motives to collective violent action (Misago, 2016). Collective discontent requires mobilisation to trigger a collective violence incident in the same way that dry grass only needs a spark to ignite fire (Gleason, 2011).

Instigators of xenophobic violence in South Africa use various mobilisation techniques and processes, including ‘haranguing’ their target; inciting crowds during mass community meetings; posting social media messages; spreading purposely engineered rumours; appealing to community’s sense of solidarity and right to self-defence; setting examples and asking community members to join; and hiring unemployed youths to carry out the attacks. A detailed empirical and theoretical analysis of mobilisation as a trigger of xenophobic violence in South Africa is available in [Misago \(2016\)](#) and [Misago \(2019b\)](#).

#### 5.4 Conclusion

The research reveals that xenophobic violence in South Africa is caused by a complex interplay between underlying conditions, proximate causes, and precipitants and triggers. Underlying conditions include socio-economic deprivation, history and group conflict, and violence and xenophobia. Proximate causes consist of governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship. Precipitants and triggers include violence community protests and mobilisation. The research argues that these determinants or causes interconnect in a complex and value-added process leading to the occurrence of xenophobic violence (Misago, 2016).

## 6. RESPONSES AND INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

That xenophobic violence continues unabated, and that some locations have experienced it multiple times, is clear evidence that no effective preventative or response mechanisms are in place. In other words, a wide range of government and civil society responses and interventions have generally failed to stop or prevent xenophobic violence in the country. Despite the recently adopted National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the official South African government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been characterised by denialism, lack of political will and impunity for all actors involved. Although well-intentioned civil society efforts to foster peaceful cohabitation and tolerance through social dialogue and campaigns aimed at changing attitudes have also largely proven ineffective in addressing the violence. The following provides a summary of our analysis of responses and interventions the state and civil society have undertaken to address xenophobic violence in the country (a detailed analysis is available in [UNHCR, 2015](#) and [Misago, 2016b](#)).

### 6.1 South African Government response to xenophobic violence

Despite the recent NAP, the official South African government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been characterised by a lack of political will, denialism, and impunity for all actors involved (UNHCR, 2015).

During the outbreak of major xenophobic violence (such as those in 2008, 2015 and 2019), the government creates specialised units, ad-hoc committees and task teams in parliament, ministries, the police and provincial and local governments to address the problem. However, once the acute violence subsides, all these disappear without concrete propositions or tangible outcomes (Misago, 2016b). This, together with impunity discussed below, points to a lack of sustained governmental political will to address xenophobic violence in the country.

Denialism is rooted in a discourse which labels all xenophobic violence as 'merely a crime, and not xenophobia', a categorisation that ultimately demands few specific interventions or policy changes (Misago, 2016b; Crush & Ramachandran, 2009:19). Denialism has not only led to inaction in terms of adopting a comprehensive and coordinated national level response, but also to an endemic culture of impunity with regard to both the perpetrators and instigators of xenophobic violence. Foreign nationals have been repeatedly attacked in South Africa since 1994, but few of the attackers have been charged and still fewer convicted. Perpetrators are rarely arrested, and where a handful of arrests are made, suspects are routinely released *without charges* (Misago, 2016). Furthermore, repeated government promises to set up 'special

courts' to deal swiftly with xenophobia-related crimes have never materialised.<sup>3</sup> The inability or unwillingness of state organs of control to hold perpetrators and instigators accountable perpetuates a perceived sense of impunity that, in turn, encourages the continuation spread of the violence. As (Monson (2011:46) notes, with “brutality greeted by impunity, and impunity greeted by indifference”, the lack of accountability in terms of prosecution and restorative justice (i.e. impunity) provides a favourable opportunity structure for violent attacks on foreign nationals.

Similarly, there have been no efforts to hold mandated institutions such as the police and special intelligence accountable for their failure to prevent and bring a stop violence, despite visible warning signs. These institutions are mandated to protect all residents of South Africa from physical harm, but xenophobic violence continues to claim lives and livelihood assets, due to their inaction or complicity (Misago, 2019c). Amnesty International observes that the police have often expressed ambivalence towards the rights and welfare of outsiders, or been actively hostile and complicit with violence against them (AI, 2014, see also Bornman, 2019). After the xenophobic violence outbreak in September 2019, government officials (including Defence and Police ministers) acknowledged crime intelligence failures to pre-empt the violence.<sup>4</sup> As in the past, no official has been held accountable for these failures in the country's security system.

Launched in 2019, the NAP was welcomed by many as a positive development. However, the plan is yet to implemented, due to a lack of concrete implementation measures and resources (ISS, 2021). As Human Rights Watch (HRW) notes, despite the March 2019 adoption of a government action plan to combat xenophobia, the government has done very little to ensure that attacks on foreign nationals are prevented, or at least investigated, and those responsible held accountable (HRW, 2020). This means that there are still no concrete measures in place to prevent xenophobic violence from taking place.

## 6.2 South African Police (SAPS) response to xenophobic violence

Since 2008, in responding to the threats and outbreaks of violence, the SAPS have been reluctant to intervene on behalf of victims. In some cases, this is because they share the community's negative and hostile attitudes towards foreign nationals. In others, they fear losing legitimacy if they are seen as defending unpopular groups (IOM, 2009). A May 2021 research report by the African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF) indicates that the lack of empathy, compassion, urgency, and response on the part of SAPS members to distress calls on the part of non-nationals when under violent attack

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-04-24-dedicated-courts-appointed-to-deal-with-xenophobic-cases>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-09-10-bheki-cele-admits-spooks-slip/>

“relates to biases and anti-foreigner attitudes among SAPS members, with the presence of xenophobic attitudes within the organisation’s ranks identified as a contributing factor to poor levels of service delivery to non-nationals, and to a lack of responsiveness to incidents of xenophobic violence. [...] This challenge has been acknowledged by the SAPS, which has cautioned that, in the context of xenophobia within the ranks of the Service, ‘[m]embers must be vigilant and guard themselves against being influenced in the performance of their functions and duties by the prejudices and dislikes prevailing in the community they come from’” (APCOF, 2021:15).

The SAPS rarely respond to threats or visible warning signs of xenophobic violence. Their response is often late and ineffectual, or they are unable to prevent or stop the violence (HRW, 2020). There have been many instances where the police stood by, while violent attacks on foreign nationals were taking place (Bornman, 2019). In most cases, the late response of the SAPS consists of evacuating foreign nationals from communities to places of safety, instead of protecting them and their livelihoods in situ (UNHCR, 2015, Misago, 2016b). After an evacuation, foreign nationals’ livelihood assets are most often left without protection and are subsequently looted, vandalised, or burned.

Since 2008, xenophobic violence has resulted in few arrests and even fewer convictions (Misago, 2016b). As an example, none of the perpetrators of the November 2020 and March 2021 attacks in Durban (KwaZulu-Natal) have been arrested, despite the fact that the attacks were carried out by a well-known group calling themselves the Umkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA).<sup>5</sup> In those few instances where perpetrators are arrested, they are often released without charge. Cases opened by victims are rarely followed by thorough investigation, formal charges, or convictions (HRW, 2020). It is for this reason that most victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa no longer bother reporting or opening criminal cases against the perpetrators (APCOF, 2021). As discussed earlier, instigators of the xenophobic violence are well known in their respective communities, but the de facto impunity they enjoy only means that they are likely – as they have in many cases – to strike again.

### 6.3 Civil Society Response

Since 2008, xenophobic violence has elicited a range of responses from local and international civil society organisations. Many have been involved in providing humanitarian assistance to the victims of the violence. Others have launched interventions aimed at preventing the reoccurrence of such a violent conflict by

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<sup>5</sup> See

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-03-11-durban-xenophobic-foreign-traders-tormented-by-violence-vandals-and-fear/>

promoting ‘social cohesion.’ The Nelson Mandela Foundation, for example, organised [social cohesion community conversations](#) in violence affected communities across the country. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) initiated the ‘[ONE](#)’ Movement, a social change campaign that seeks to reverse attitudes that result in discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and tribalism. This was intended to use media campaigns, community conversations, youth mobilisation, curriculum interventions, and human rights training with a wide range of civil society partners to promote a culture of tolerance, human dignity, and unity in diversity across South and Southern Africa (IOM, 2009).

While civil society interventions may have helped to increase awareness of xenophobia as a social problem, they have done little to address social and institutional xenophobia and its various manifestations. Indeed, official and public xenophobic pronouncements and attitudes are as pervasive as ever, and the violence against foreign nationals continues unabated (Misago et al. 2015, HSRC, 2020). Our analysis identifies three main reasons why these civil society interventions have not yielded desired outcomes.

First, civil society generally lacks a much needed political muscle to hold government accountable for its failures to protect people’s fundamental rights or to influence strong and sustained official response to xenophobia and related violence. Pugh (2014:1) rightly notes that “much civil society response tended to be humanitarian in nature, rather than presenting any sustained political challenge that would address the underlying structural causes of such violence.” In trying to address xenophobia and its different manifestations in South Africa, civil society has almost exclusively targeted affected communities with awareness campaigns and moral appeals for tolerance, but has largely failed to mobilize government responses to address the institutional xenophobia that fuels anti-foreigner attitudes and behaviour among the public. With a focus on communities, interventions often overlook the broader institutional structures that help reinforce perceptions and practices that disadvantage and threaten lives and livelihoods of many foreign nationals living in the country. As Misago et al. (2015) note, the root causes of intolerance and discrimination in South Africa are located in mutually reinforcing social and institutional configurations at both local and national level.

Second, civil society organisations often base their interventions on shaky foundations and untested theories of change. For one, they have focused almost exclusively on ‘attitudes’, neglecting other factors and motivations that trigger violent behaviour towards foreigners. The emphasis on attitudes overlooks the importance of political mobilisation of xenophobic discourses or institutional configurations – formal or informal – that help to differentiate and divide populations based on race, ethnicity, nationality, legal status or any other of the factors that might become fulcra for xenophobic discrimination (Landau 2011). Political

entrepreneurs and local leaders often deliberately capitalise on distrustful climates and make political or economic gains from discrimination against and violent exclusion of those deemed to be ‘outsiders’ (Misago, 2016b). By overlooking these instigators and their motivations, interventions are unlikely to succeed.

Third, many civil society interventions target the wrong sources of conflict. Assumptions that events like community dialogues, or cultural and sport festivals that bring different groups together will help achieve peaceful coexistence among groups, for example, ignore the fact that these initiatives are unlikely to reach those behind the violence. While there is potential value in bringing people together who otherwise might not engage, such interventions do little to address the political economy of violence within South African communities. Indeed, as discussed earlier in the research, the micro-politics and the political economy of violence are the key drivers of violent attacks on foreign nationals in affected areas (Misago, 2011; Misago, 2016b).

In sum, the analysis above indicates that a sustained state political will, informed by accountability, rule of law and eradication of impunity, together with evidence-based civil society interventions can help prevent xenophobic violence or at least mitigate its effects.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This report provides a summary of ACMS research and analysis of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Currently conducted through the Xenowatch programme, the research indicates that xenophobic violence is a long-standing feature of democratic South Africa. Violence incidents were recorded since 1994 and occur in all South Africa's nine provinces. Gauteng, the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape are the worst affected. The violence occurs mostly in locations (informal settlements and townships) in the periphery of the country's major cities or metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay. It is within these locations that we find hot spots of xenophobic violence across the country. This is not surprising, since these locations are the preferred destinations for most domestic and international migrants in the country.

Xenophobic violence in South Africa is generally a collective action (i.e., a type of collective violence) carried out by groups (large or small) of ordinary members of the public often mobilised by local leaders (formal or informal) and influential groups or individuals to further their own political and economic interests. It is a constant and increasing threat to the lives and livelihoods of foreign nationals and others deemed 'outsiders'. Target groups and individuals are regularly killed, assaulted, injured, displaced, and their property and assets looted, destroyed, or appropriated. The report places focus on the fact that this violence has consequences and implications that reach far beyond the targeted groups. By undermining the country's socio-economic prosperity, nation building, security and rule of law as well as its international reputation, it has negative socio-economic, political and security implications for all country residents, foreign and citizens.

Our analysis reveals that xenophobic violence in South Africa is caused by a complex interplay between underlying conditions, proximate causes, and precipitants and triggers. Underlying conditions include socio-economic deprivation, history and group conflict and violence, and xenophobia. Proximate causes consist of governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship. Precipitants and triggers include violence community protests and mobilisation. The research argues that these determinants or causes interconnect in a complex and value-added process leading up to the occurrence for the occurrence of xenophobic violence in locations where it occurs.

Underlying conditions create a climate of collective discontent and psychological raw materials that proximate causes and triggers build on to produce incidents of xenophobic violence. More specifically, proximate causes (governance deficit and violence entrepreneurship) add a second layer of causality in the occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Governance deficit plays a defining role in the

occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa, by providing a favourable political opportunity structure. This research reveals that xenophobic violence mostly occurs in areas where local governance is absent or weak, and therefore unable to address socio-economic hardships communities face and effectively use available systems of controls to resolve conflicts and prevent violence. Weak local governance is particularly characterised by a lack of trusted leadership and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Further to this, official leadership vacuums created by absent or weak institutional governance lead to the emergence of violent alternative governance in the form of powerful informal community leadership structures and interest groups that take over the authority of the state in their respective locations. These groups organise and mobilise communities for xenophobic violence to further for their own political and economic interests.

While macro- and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances are important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the *mobilisation of this discontent* – and not the discontent itself – that triggers collective violent attacks on South Africa’s foreign residents. Mobilisation is the vital connective tissue between discontent and collective violence. As a trigger, mobilisation helps explain the pathways from collective discontent and/or instrumental motives to collective violent action. Collective discontent requires mobilisation to trigger a collective violence incidents in the same way dry grass awaits a spark to ignite fire (Gleason, 2011). Instigators of xenophobic violence in South Africa use various mobilisation techniques and processes including ‘haranguing’ and inciting crowds during mass community meetings; social media messages, spreading purposely engineered rumours, appeals to community’s sense of solidarity and right to self-defence; setting examples and asking community members to join; and hiring unemployed youths to carry out the attacks.

That xenophobic violence continues unabated, and that some locations have experienced it multiple times over, is clear evidence that no effective preventive and response mechanisms are in place. In other words, a wide range of government and civil society responses and interventions have generally failed to stop or prevent xenophobic violence in the country. Despite the recently adopted National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the official South African government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been characterised by denialism, lack of political will and impunity for all actors involved.

Since 2008, in responding to the threats and outbreaks of violence, the SAPS have been reluctant to intervene on behalf of victims. The SAPS rarely respond to threats and visible warning signs of xenophobic violence. Their response is often late and ineffective, or unable to prevent or stop the violence (HRW, 2020).

Since 2008, xenophobic violence has resulted in few arrests and even fewer convictions (Misago, 2016b). In few instances where perpetrators are arrested, they are often released without charge. Cases opened by victims are rarely followed by thorough investigations, formal charges or and convictions (HRW, 2020).

Although well-intentioned, civil society efforts to foster peaceful cohabitation and tolerance through social dialogues and campaigns aimed at changing attitudes have also largely proven ineffective in addressing the violence. While civil society interventions may have helped increase awareness of xenophobia as a social problem, they have done little to address social and institutional xenophobia and its various manifestations. Indeed, official and public xenophobic pronouncements and attitudes are as pervasive as ever and violence against foreign nationals continues unabated (Misago et al. 2015, HSRC, 2020). This is mainly because: i) civil society in general lacks a much needed political muscle to hold government accountable for its failures to protect people’s fundamental rights or to influence strong and sustained official response; ii) their interventions are not evidence-based and are rather informed by untested theories of change; and iii) many civil society interventions target the wrong sources of conflict as they are unlikely to reach those behind the violence and address its key drivers or causal factors.

In conclusion, the analysis above indicates that only a sustained state political will, informed by accountability, rule of law, and eradication of impunity, together with evidence-based civil society interventions can help prevent xenophobic violence, or at least to mitigate its effects.

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