



XENOPHOBIC DISCRIMINATION IN SOUTH AFRICA:

AN OVERVIEW OF TRENDS, EFFECTS, AND RESPONSES (2022–2024)

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A XENOWATCH BRIEF REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report provides an analysis of xenophobic discrimination incidents in South Africa between 2022 and 2024 (hereinafter the reporting period), based on data collected through the [Xenowatch](#) platform. For the purposes of this report, xenophobic discrimination refers to acts of exclusion, hostility, or violence directed at individuals or groups perceived to be foreign nationals or outsiders, based on nationality, ethnicity, or legal status (Olofinbiyi, 2022). These acts include denied services, eviction, extortion, harassment, health xenophobia, selective enforcement of by-laws, threats, unlawful arrests, verbal abuse, violence, and other forms of harm or intimidation. Xenowatch records these acts as xenophobic when they are motivated by anti-immigrant sentiment, regardless of the legal status of the victim.

This report examines the spatial and temporal patterns of xenophobic discrimination incidents across the country's nine provinces. Findings from the report confirm that xenophobic discrimination remains persistent and widespread, with urban and economically strained areas experiencing recurring incidents. The period under review also saw a marked increase in organised anti-migrant vigilante activity, notably the rise and institutionalisation of movements such as Operation Dudula, which increasingly operate outside legal frameworks and with growing support (Myeni, 2022 and Dratwa, 2024).

One of the most significant shifts in this reporting period was the emergence of KwaZulu-Natal as the most affected province in 2022 and 2024, displacing Gauteng, which had historically recorded the highest number of incidents. KwaZulu-Natal recorded **37** xenophobic discrimination incidents out of **110** in 2022 and **33** xenophobic discrimination incidents out of **83** in 2024. While Gauteng had **29** and **22**, respectively. This change reflects deeper shifts in the geography and dynamics of xenophobic mobilisation in this reporting period. The findings further underscore that xenophobic discrimination is deeply entrenched in South Africa's socio-political fabric.

While its form and geographic concentration may evolve, as the [2021 report](#) shows, not much has changed from the key drivers identified, that include economic insecurity, weak state response, and scapegoating of migrants, which remain persistent. As such, a sustained, coordinated response rooted in political will, accountability, and evidence-based civil society action is urgently required to counter this ongoing challenge of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa (Misago et al., 2021). Without such efforts, xenophobic discrimination incidents will not only persist but likely escalate, further endangering the lives and livelihoods of migrants and undermining the country's social cohesion and rule of law.

Following this introduction, the report provides an overview of the Xenowatch data collection methodology, including the criteria used to categorise incidents recorded as xenophobic discrimination. It also outlines key limitations of the data, such as underreporting, challenges with verification, and uneven access to information in certain areas. The report then examines the spatial and temporal distribution of xenophobic discrimination incidents across South Africa between 2022 and 2024. The report also assesses the effectiveness of responses by the state and civil society, highlighting gaps in accountability and protection. It concludes by summarising the key findings and lessons, offering recommendations for sustained and coordinated action to address xenophobic discrimination in South Africa.

2. Methodology: Xenowatch Data Collection Methods

2.1. Data sources

This report draws from Xenowatch data from the period of 2022- 2024. Xenowatch uses a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to collect data. This data is based on over a decade of research, starting from the mid-2000s, and provides a comprehensive analysis of the nature, causes, and consequences of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa (Misago, et al, 2021). The data is collected through various channels, including the [Xenowatch platform](#), a WhatsApp reporting line, phone calls, and a dedicated reporting email (for more details, visit our [website](#)). Once reports are received, they are verified by reaching out to on-the-ground partners, witnesses, or victims to gather additional details about the incident (whether it happened or it's false information) and assess whether it was motivated by xenophobia, as not all attacks on foreign nationals or outsiders are due to xenophobia. Such details collected during the verification process include: exact location, date and time, a detailed description of the incident, trigger event, profile of victims and perpetrators, and where information is available, responses or interventions if any (Misago et al, 2021). Furthermore, when necessary and possible, the Xenowatch team conducts qualitative research through site visits to the affected area to gather additional details about the incident. These visits help the team to further understand the local dynamics and identify the underlying causes and triggers of the incident.

An incident is considered verified when three or more independent sources confirm the event and provide matching or complementary details that help fill in any gaps in the initial report. Once an incident is verified, the Xenowatch team anonymises the information and records it in an Excel database and on the Xenowatch website. The anonymisation of the data is to ensure the protection of the victims and those reporting, so that they do not face the risk of further victimisation. The recorded details are then made publicly available on the Xenowatch website. In urgent cases where immediate intervention is needed, reports are forwarded to the South African Police Service (SAPS) or partner organisations that can provide protection and humanitarian support, such as shelter, food, or medical assistance for victims in need.

The recorded data is categorised based on the nature and type of the incident. These categories include: violence¹, denied services², health xenophobia³, selective law enforcement of by-laws⁴, eviction⁵, threats⁶, unlawful arrests⁷, harassment⁸, extortion by law enforcement or organised gangs⁹, verbal abuse¹⁰ and forced unlawful repatriation¹¹. Additionally, we investigate the specific types of victimisation that xenophobic discrimination may cause, including i) the number of people killed, physically assaulted, displaced, shops looted, property damaged, or victims of rape.

1 Includes physical attacks or harm (e.g., beatings, stabbings, arson) targeting foreign nationals or their property through looting or vandalism. It is recorded when there is a clear xenophobic motivation behind the violence (e.g., attackers demand foreigners leave or target them explicitly).

2 Denial of access to services and opportunities that immigrants or outsiders are legally entitled to (such as business registration, education, etc.).

3 A term mainly used in civil society circles when denial of or discrimination in healthcare access based on nationality or immigration status takes place. This is usually recorded when healthcare providers refuse treatment or verbally abuse patients believed to be foreign or without documentation, or when vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula prevent foreign nationals from accessing healthcare facility premises.

4 This refers to the application of local laws (e.g., trading permits) in a discriminatory way that disproportionately targets foreign nationals. This is usually recorded when municipal officers or police enforce laws selectively by only targeting migrants and not citizens in a similar situation.

5 This includes forced removal from housing or land, and it is recorded when landlords or community members evict tenants on the basis of their nationality or pressure them to vacate due to anti-foreigner sentiment.

6 Includes verbal or written warnings of harm intended to coerce migrants into leaving an area or ceasing activity such as trading. It is recorded when threats are explicitly tied to someone's identity as a foreigner or their presence in a community.

7 Is considered when detention or arrest happens without a legal basis, often targeting migrants for documentation checks or public order. It is recorded when arrests occur without due process, often disproportionately affecting foreign nationals.

8 Is persistent or aggressive behavior (verbal or physical) intended to intimidate or humiliate a person perceived as foreign. It is recorded when migrants or perceived non-nationals are followed, threatened, or intimidated in public or at work because of their foreignness.

9 Involves demanding money or goods through coercion, often by community members, local officials, or gangs. It is recorded when migrants are forced to pay bribes or protection fees specifically because of their perceived foreign status.

10 Refers to xenophobic slurs, insults, or hate speech directed at individuals perceived as foreigners. It is recorded when abusive language targets people's accent, origin, or perceived immigration status.

11 Forced Unlawful Repatriation refers to the coerced removal or expulsion of foreign nationals from South Africa, carried out outside legal frameworks and without due process. These acts are typically conducted by non-state actors—such as vigilante groups or community members—or in some cases by state officials acting beyond their lawful authority.

2.2. Data Analysis and Visualisation

For the quantitative data analysis and visualisation, the research adopts a socio-spatial and temporal approach to examine the patterns and distribution of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa between 2022 and 2024. Data was extracted from the Xenowatch Excel database, which documents incident-level details including location (with geographic coordinates), incident type, year, and implication metrics such as displacement, deaths, and property damage. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyse yearly trends, incident types, and provincial distributions. The data was then cleaned and processed using Excel and Python, and visualised using Power BI to produce a series of graphs, bar charts, maps, and heatmaps. These visualisations helped to identify emerging hotspots, temporal shifts, and the evolving nature of xenophobic incidents during the period under review.

2.3. Limitations of the data explanation

The Xenowatch data collection process continues to face two key limitations. The first being underreporting and incomplete incident reports. Underreporting occurs as victims and witnesses of xenophobic discrimination are often reluctant to report incidents due to fear of retaliation, especially when perpetrators live within their communities. Additionally, there is a lack of trust in the police, as many people believe that reporting rarely leads to a response or assistance. This means that many incidents may not be captured on the Xenowatch platform and are therefore excluded from the analysis.

Secondly, incomplete reports also pose a challenge, as some incidents lack detailed information, such as the extent of violence, number of victims affected (e.g, exact figures of persons killed, assaulted, displaced, and shops looted), or specifics like the nationality and gender of those affected. Additionally, crucial quantifiable information, such as the extent of economic damage or loss experienced by victims, is often unavailable. For example, the financial losses incurred by victims whose shops are looted and destroyed during incidents are rarely reported. This missing data is important for understanding not only the impact on local South Africans who rent shops to foreign nationals but also the financial harm suffered by the shop owners themselves.

To address the issues mentioned, Xenowatch has expanded its network of verification partners across the country. A key step in this effort has been working with a team of research assistants who played a crucial role in monitoring all nine provinces, in collaboration with the verification partners on the ground, to ensure thorough data collection. In 2024, the research assistants traveled to all nine provinces to meet with verification partners on the ground, gaining a deeper understanding of local challenges and contextual xenophobia issues. This process allowed the research assistants to verify and record more incidents that had been missed in the past. Additionally, the Xenowatch team continues to receive reports on past incidents and regularly updates the database to ensure it remains as comprehensive as possible. Despite these limitations, Xenowatch data still offers valuable insights into xenophobic discrimination through helping to inform more effective interventions and policy recommendations that are informed by research-based evidence.

3. Trends in Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents (2022–2024)

This section provides an overview and analysis of the nature, temporal, and spatial distribution of xenophobic discrimination incidents over the past three years: 2022, 2023, and 2024.¹² The incidents Xenowatch monitors in this reporting period as mentioned in the previous section include: denied services, eviction, extortion, harassment, health xenophobia, selective enforcement of by-laws, threats, unlawful arrests, verbal abuse and violence.

3.1. Temporal Trends in Xenophobic Discrimination Per Year (2022 - 2024)

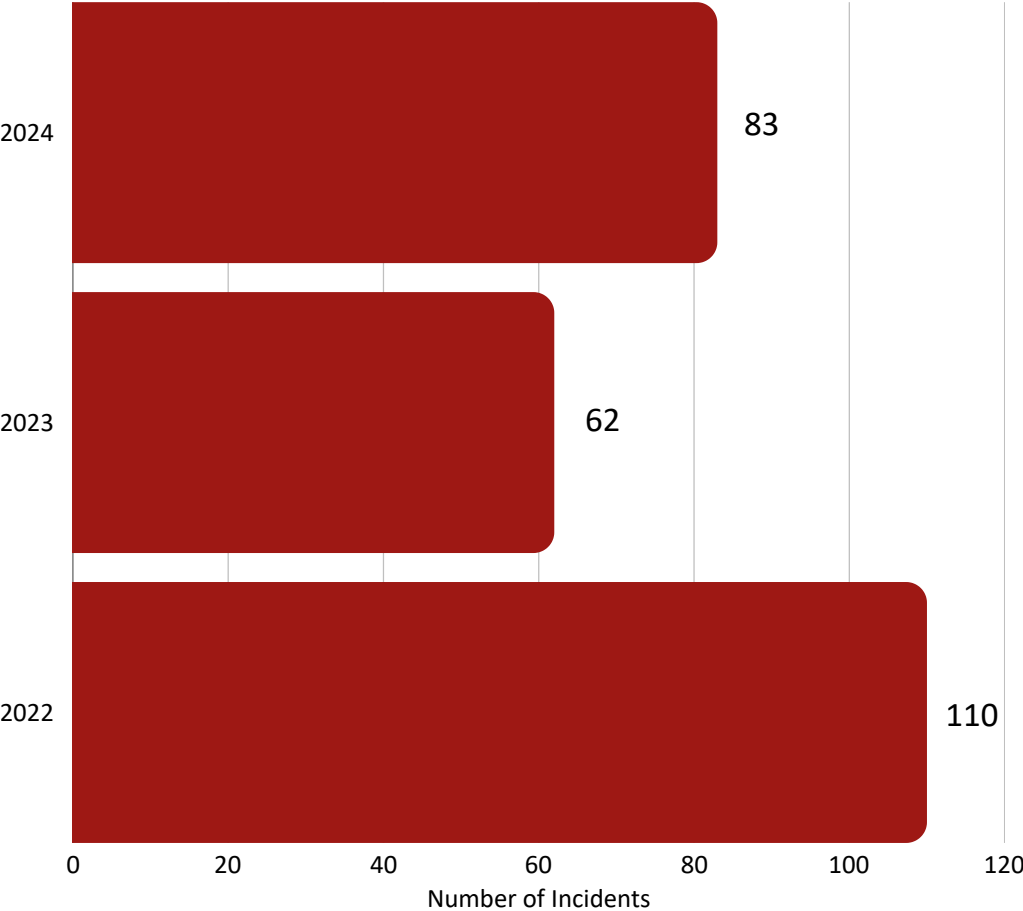
Between 2022 and 2024, a total of **255** xenophobic incidents were recorded, reflecting ongoing discrimination and violence against migrant communities. The trend during this period reveals a cyclical pattern with fluctuations in reported cases. The period of 2022 recorded the highest number of xenophobic discrimination incidents: **110**. However, 2023 saw a sharp decline with **62** xenophobic discrimination incidents, suggesting a temporary reduction in tensions. This decline was short-lived, as 2024 witnessed a resurgence to **83** xenophobic discrimination incidents, indicating that xenophobic violence remains a persistent issue (see yearly trends in *Figure 1* below).

Comparing the trends from 2020–2021 with 2022–2024, we see a significant escalation in xenophobic incidents. 2020 had the lowest recorded incidents of xenophobic discrimination, **58**, followed by a notable increase in 2021 with **79**, suggesting a growing trend even before the peak in 2022. The surge in 2022 of **110** xenophobic discrimination incidents represents an increase in levels of xenophobic discrimination between the two reporting periods, indicating an intensification of anti-migrant aggression. While 2023 saw a decline of **62** xenophobic discrimination incidents, it mirrored the level of 2020, implying that the temporary dip was not unprecedented but rather part of the cyclical nature of these incidents.

The resurgence in 2024 of **83** xenophobic discrimination incidents places it between the highs of 2022 and the lows of 2023, indicating a sustained level of xenophobic discrimination that has not returned to pre-2021 levels. Furthermore, this suggests that while temporary declines occur, xenophobic discrimination remains persistent.

¹² The author of this report is grateful to Dr. Kabiri Bule for assisting with the data analyses that informed this section and report broadly.

Figure 1: Incidents per Year: Breakdown of reported xenophobic discrimination incidents- year 2022 - 2024



3.2. Spatial Trends: Geographical Distribution of Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents

This section outlines the provinces with the highest number of xenophobic discrimination incidents recorded annually in this reporting period. KwaZulu-Natal emerged as the leading province in both 2022 and 2024, marking a significant shift from earlier trends where Gauteng consistently recorded the highest number of incidents, typically followed by the Western Cape.

3.2.1. Province with the Highest Number of Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents (2022–2024)

In 2022, KwaZulu-Natal recorded the highest number of incidents, accounting for **37** out of a total of **110** cases. It regained this position in 2024, with **33** incidents out of the year’s total of **83**. Gauteng closely followed with **29** incidents in 2022 and **22** in 2024, reinforcing its status as one of the main centres of anti-migrant violence and sentiments during the period under review.

In 2023, Gauteng returned to the top spot with **28** incidents of xenophobic discrimination out of a total of **62**, while KwaZulu-Natal followed with **15** incidents. Notably, the Western Cape experienced a decline over the three years. It ranked third in 2022 and 2023, with **22** and **9** incidents of xenophobic discrimination, respectively, and saw a further drop to just **5** incidents in 2024, marking a significant downward trend in reported xenophobic discrimination incidents in the province (details in *Figure 2* below).

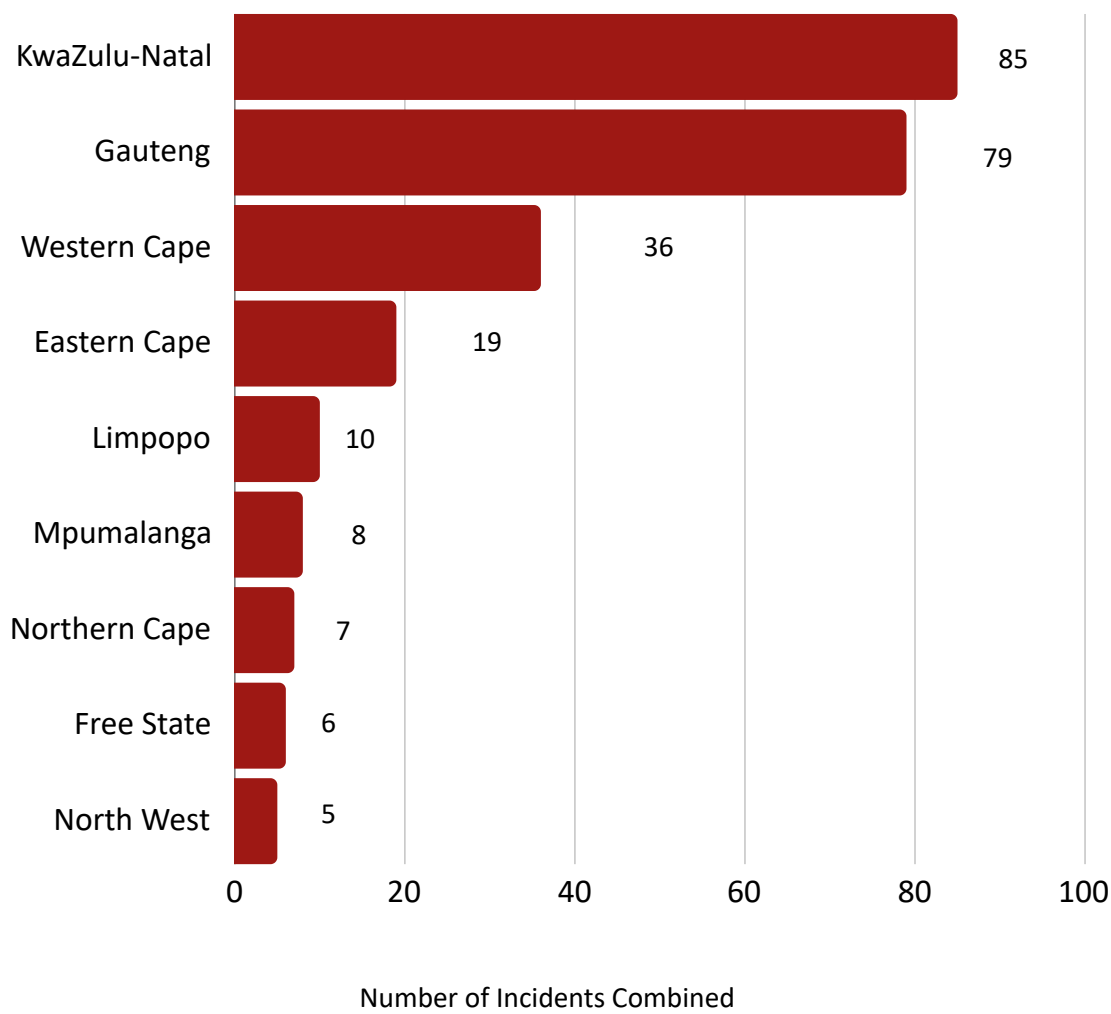
Figure 2: Provincial Breakdown of Reported Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents Per Year (2022–2024)

Year	Province	Total Incidents
2022	KwaZulu-Natal	37
2022	Gauteng	29
2022	Western Cape	22
2022	Eastern Cape	13
2022	Limpopo	6
2022	Northern Cape	2
2022	North West	1
2022	Subtotal	110
2023	Gauteng	28
2023	KwaZulu-Natal	15
2023	Western Cape	9
2023	Mpumalanga	3
2023	Limpopo	3
2022	Eastern Cape	2
2023	Free State	1
2023	Northern Cape	1
2023	Subtotal	62
2023	KwaZulu-Natal	33
2023	Gauteng	22
2023	Free State	5
2023	Western Cape	5
2023	North West	4
2022	Northern Cape	4
2023	Eastern Cape	4
2023	Limpopo	1
2023	Subtotal	83
Grand Total		255

3.2.2. Province with the Highest Number of Incidents Combined

This section highlights the province with the highest combined number of xenophobic discrimination incidents recorded between 2022 and 2024. As *Figure 3* below shows, KwaZulu Natal recorded the highest number with **85** incidents, followed closely by Gauteng with **79** incidents, making them the two primary provinces with high incident levels for anti-migrant discrimination during this period. Although the Western Cape experienced a drop in the three-year period, it still recorded a total of **36** incidents, reflecting persistent tensions in urban centres such as Cape Town. Other provinces reported lower numbers: the Eastern Cape had **19** incidents, Limpopo recorded **10**, Northern Cape had **7**, Free State had **6**, and the North West recorded **5** incidents.

Figure 3: Provinces with the Highest Number of Incidents Combined

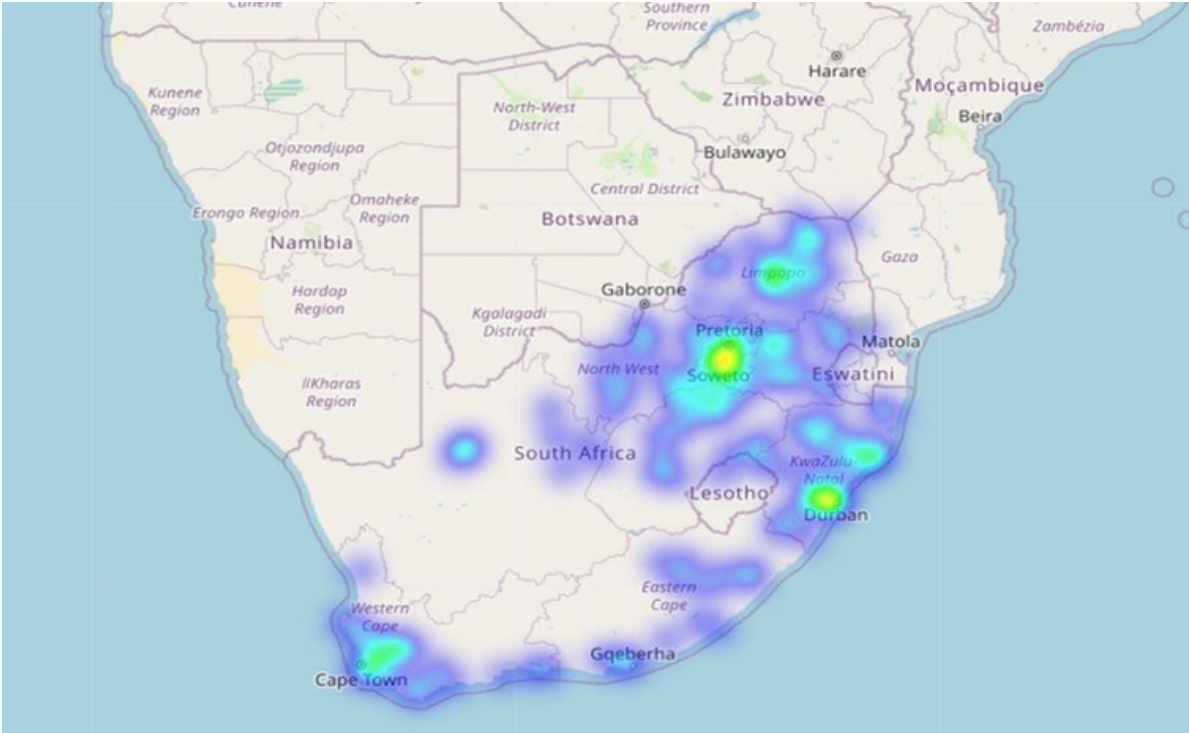


Comparing the above figures with the overall 2022–2024 provincial distribution, we see that KwaZulu-Natal leads in total incidents, reinforcing its position as the province with the highest incidents in this reporting period. Gauteng, despite peaking in 2023, follows closely in overall incidents, suggesting that xenophobic discrimination in the province fluctuates but remains consistently high. Although the Western Cape was not the highest in any single year between 2022 and 2024, it ranks third overall for the period, reflecting a decline from its previous position as the second most affected province during the 2020–2021 period. This pattern highlights that while some provinces experience short-term spikes (e.g., Gauteng in 2023), others like KwaZulu-Natal maintain high levels of incidents recorded in this reporting period.

3.2.3. Distribution of Xenophobic Discrimination in South Africa Per Province

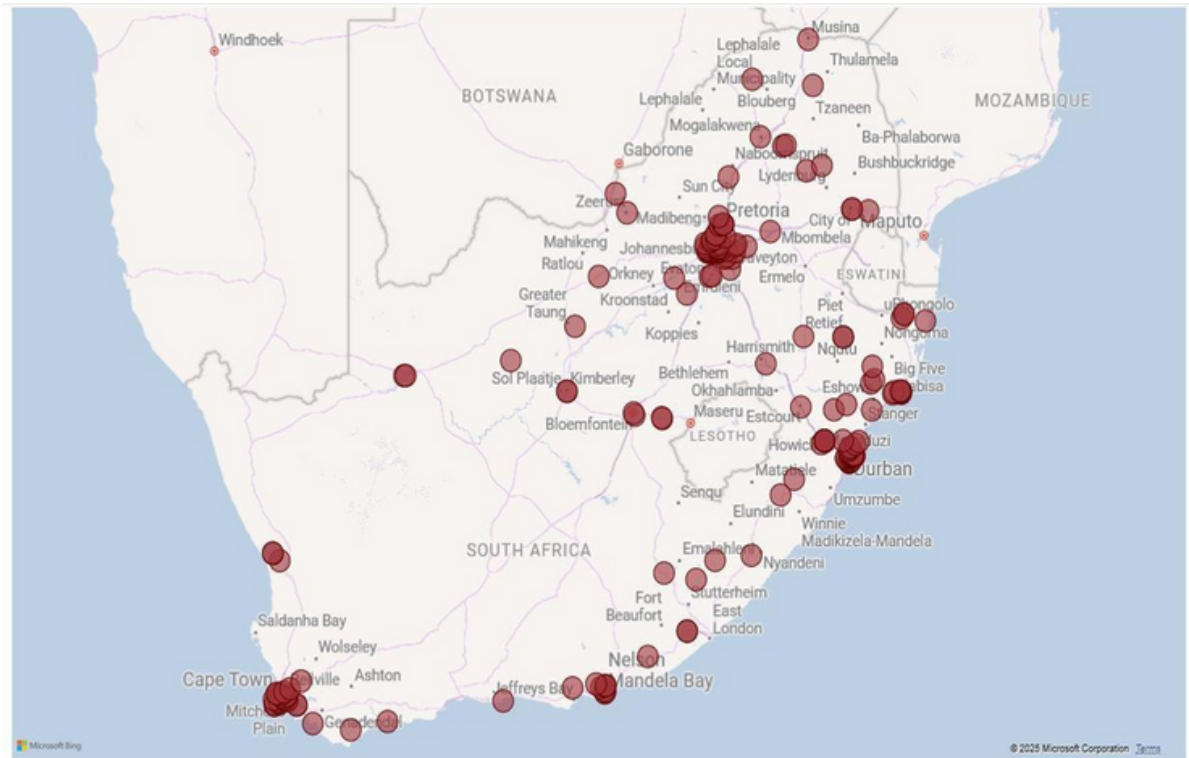
In continuation with the spatial distribution of xenophobic discrimination incidents, the maps below (see *Figures 4 and 5*) provide a visual depiction of these trends. The maps visually depict the distribution and intensity of xenophobic incidents across South Africa from 2022 to 2024. The heatmap highlights areas with high concentrations of incidents, showing significant clusters in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town, and Gqeberha, with some smaller hotspots emerging in other regions.

Figure 4: Heat Map of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa per province



The bubble map below categorises incidents by province, showing that KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and Western Cape remain the most affected regions, while provinces like Northern Cape and Free State have comparatively lower incident counts. Together, these maps emphasise the persistent urban focus of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa.

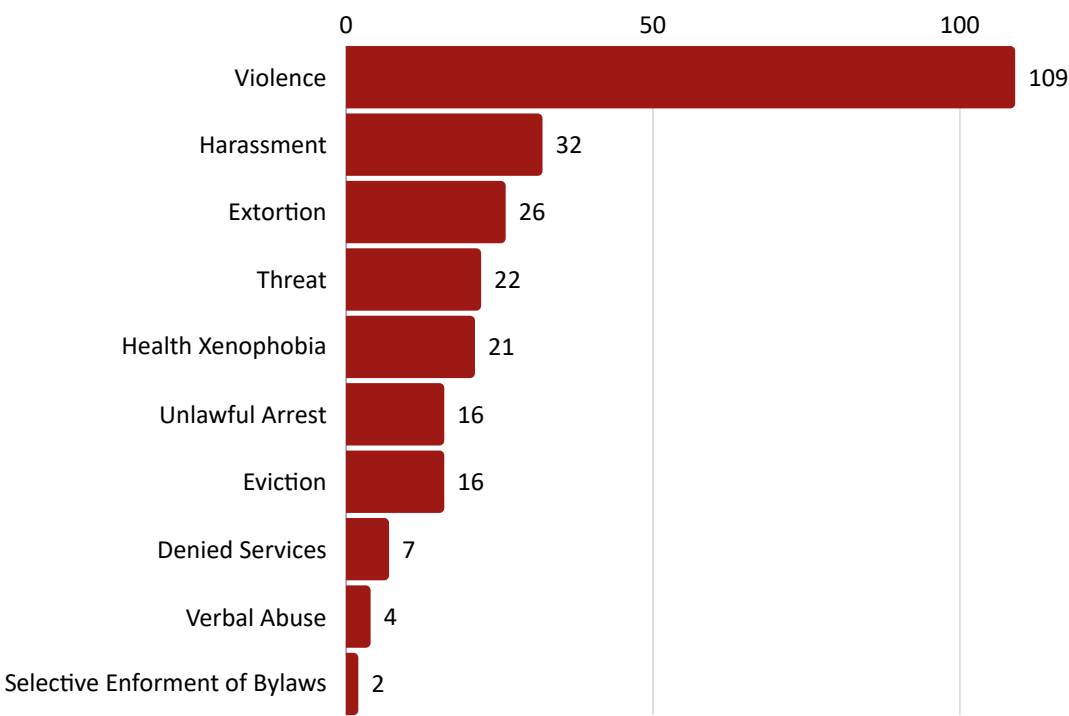
Figure 5: Bubble Map and dot distribution of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa per province



3.3. Types of Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents Recorded (2022–2024)

As outlined below, xenophobic discrimination in South Africa takes many forms, often with severe consequences for those affected. Xenophobic violence remains the most common type of incident. Between 2020–2021 and 2022–2024, xenophobic violence remained the most frequent incident type, with a slight increase in reported cases. However, the nature of xenophobic discrimination appears to be shifting beyond direct physical attacks toward systemic and economic forms. These findings are consistent with our previous data and research, which show that xenophobic violence has been a long-standing and persistent issue in South Africa (Landau, 2011). As the graph below shows, harassment comes in second place with **32** incidents recorded in this reporting period. Based on our qualitative findings from Xenowatch incident reports, harassment is frequently carried out by law enforcement officials and vigilante groups who act outside the bounds of the law.

Figure 6: Most Common Xenophobic Discrimination Incident Types (2022 -2024)



Extortion, particularly by organised gangs, is also on the rise. Extortion is the unlawful use of threats, coercion, or abuse of authority to obtain money, property, or services. It often involves threats of future harm, physical, reputational, or legal, and may include abuse of public office (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Unlike robbery, the victim consents under pressure. The offence is complete once the threat is made, even if nothing is obtained (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). While extortion can target both citizens and non-citizens, it qualifies as a xenophobic discrimination incident when the targeting is based on the victim’s foreign origin or perceived immigration status, and migrants are disproportionately or systematically extorted due to their vulnerability, lack of legal protection, or fear of authorities.

Examples from Xenowatch data show that these forms of extortion include police demanding bribes from migrants; landlords threatening undocumented tenants with eviction unless they pay extra rent, and criminal groups targeting migrant-owned businesses with protection fees, specifically because they believe migrants will not report them.

According to Irish-Qhobosheane (2024a), despite extortion not being new in South Africa, in the past decade, there has been a rapid rise in such practices affecting a wider range of sectors. In a statement by DA MP Cameron Ian in November 2024 (see DA, 2024), citing statistics from the South African Police Service (SAPS), over 6,000 extortion cases were reported between April 2019 and March 2024. However, only 178 convictions followed—reflecting a conviction rate of just **7%** over five years. Although the statistics provided do not state which extortion cases affected foreign nationals in particular, they are still a good indication of how widespread this phenomenon is. Furthermore, based on research conducted by Irish-Qhobosheane (2024b), the city of Cape Town is the host to this shadow economy, with money, services, and goods being extorted from a wide range of businesses, including spaza shops, nightclubs, construction and transport companies, as well as individuals.

Xenowatch data indicates that extortion is not only isolated to Cape Town but is also a widespread phenomenon, as cities such as Durban, Gqeberha, and Johannesburg are also affected. Additionally, Xenowatch has also recorded a number of deaths that have resulted due to the issue of extortion. Among some of the cases recorded is one that happened in January 2025 when a man was fatally shot, and another seriously injured in an extortion-related attack in Samora Machel, Cape Town. This is just one example of many such cases, but due to underreporting driven by fear, the available figures only offer a glimpse into the reality of extortion in South Africa. In the year 2024, a growing trend on the issue of extortion emerged where there were incidents reported of extortionists targeting schools (Libera, 2024) and funerals (Nombembe, Mbi and Mankayi, 2024) to extort money.

Health Xenophobia was another incident type that emerged in this reporting period. While health-related xenophobia may fall under broader categories such as denied services, it warrants its own category due to the pervasive and institutionalised nature of discrimination in the healthcare sector. Health xenophobia refers specifically to the negative attitudes, behaviours, and discriminatory practices by healthcare professionals and staff toward migrants and refugees in clinical or service delivery settings (Crush, 2011). This includes verbal abuse, humiliation, differential treatment, excessive delays, or outright denial of medical care based explicitly or implicitly on a person's nationality, documentation status, or migration background.

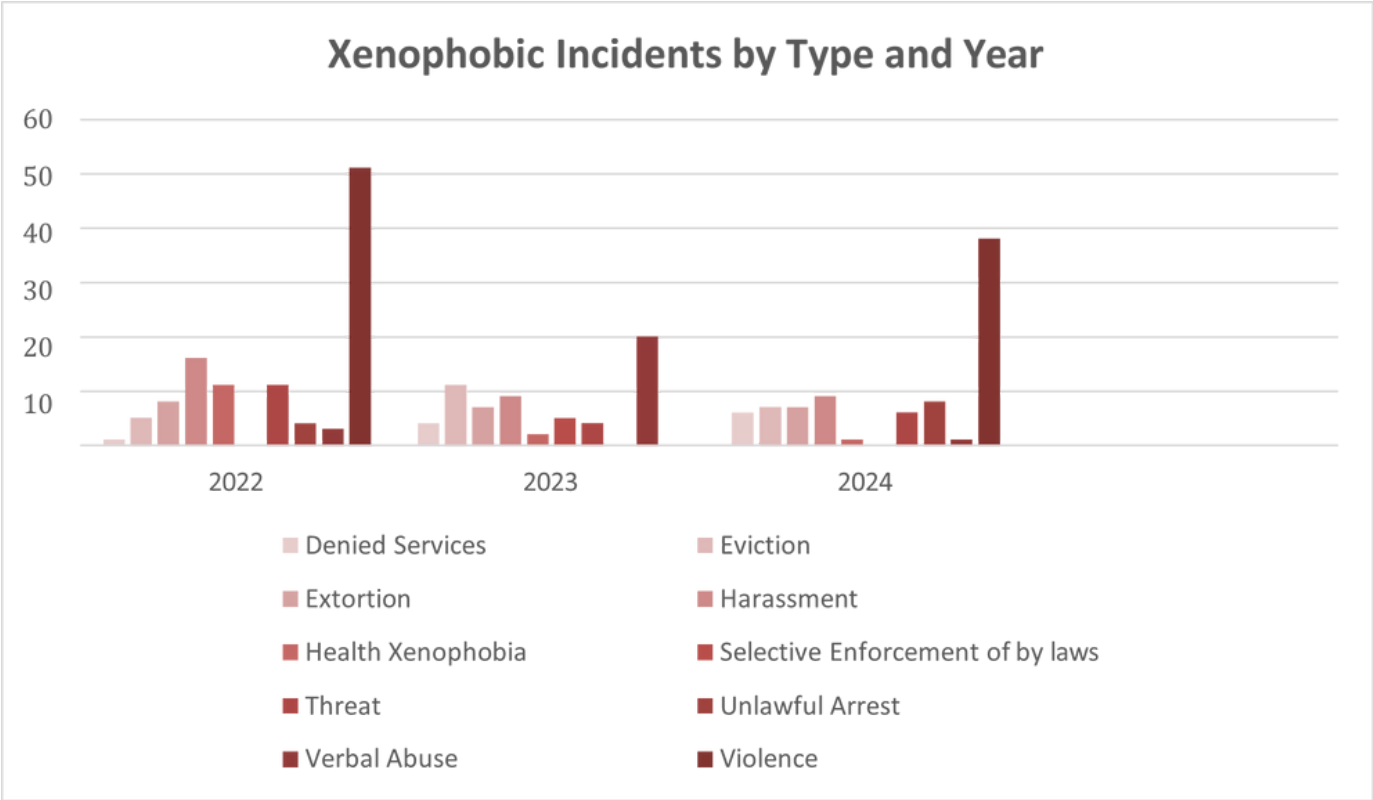
As noted by Sonke Gender Justice (n.d), these actions go beyond individual bias and may involve systemic practices that wrongfully deny medical care, placing migrants' health and lives at risk. Unlike other service denial incidents (e.g., by banks, schools, or municipalities etc), discrimination in health settings carries immediate life-threatening consequences, violates ethical obligations of care, and reflects a widespread and deeply entrenched phenomenon across both public and private health institutions. Given its scale, severity, and distinct context, Xenowatch records health xenophobia as a standalone category to ensure better visibility, targeted advocacy, and more accurate analysis of discrimination trends within South Africa's healthcare system.

The increase in such incidents can also be associated with Operation Dudula, which, since August 2022, has been blocking undocumented migrants from accessing health care services (O'Regan and Banda, 2022). Health xenophobia is also perpetuated by public officials. In September of 2022, a viral video of Dr. Phophi Ramathuba (then MEC of Health in Limpopo province) was circulated of her chastising (Maseko, 2022) a woman who had been in a car accident in neighbouring Zimbabwe but went to South Africa for treatment. These are a few of the examples that show how common the phenomena became in this period. Therefore, the rise in health xenophobia suggests growing barriers to healthcare access for migrants, potentially influenced by vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula, as mentioned.

3.4. Changes in Xenophobic Discrimination Incident Types Over Time

Over the years, there have been changes in xenophobic discrimination incidents. In this reporting period, Xenowatch data shows how different types of xenophobic discrimination incidents have evolved across the three-year period from 2022 to 2024. It highlights key shifts in the frequency and nature of reported incidents, offering insights into the changing dynamics of anti-migrant hostility in South Africa. Violence consistently ranked as the most common form of xenophobic discrimination, peaking in 2022 with **51** incidents before decreasing to **20** in 2023, and then rising again to **38** in 2024. This fluctuation suggests a temporary decline in organised or overtly violent attacks in 2023, followed by a resurgence in 2024.

Figure 7: Changes in Xenophobic Discrimination Incident Types Over Time (2022- 2024)



Harassment and health xenophobia were also significantly reported in 2022 and 2024 and 2022 and 2023, respectively. Other notable trends include a rise in extortion, denied services, and evictions in 2024, suggesting a shift toward more structural and coercive forms of discrimination. These often reflect the increasing normalisation of anti-migrant actions by both informal actors and public service gatekeepers.

Unlawful arrests, verbal abuse, and selective enforcement of by-laws show sporadic but meaningful occurrences across the years, often correlating with targeted policing or municipal operations in areas with high migrant populations. Overall, the graph underscores that xenophobic discrimination is not only persistent but is also evolving, adding institutional and everyday forms of exclusion to overt violence. This reinforces the need for multi-pronged interventions that address both visible attacks and the more subtle, systemic drivers of migrant marginalisation and exclusion.

3.5. Trends of Municipalities Most Affected by Xenophobic Discrimination in South Africa

This section highlights the top **10** municipalities with the highest incident reports from 2022 - 2024, accounting for a total of **183** incidents out of 255 xenophobic discrimination incidents recorded in this period, and are spread across a wide range of locations. The City of Johannesburg led with **58** incidents, including known hotspot areas like Hillbrow, Diepsloot, and Mayfair. eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality followed closely with **49** incidents, notably in areas such as Durban Central and Church Square Market. City of Cape Town reported **28** incidents, spread across locations like Delft, Khayelitsha, and Bellville. Nelson Mandela Bay and Ekurhuleni recorded **10** incidents each. Umhlathuze and Msunduzi had **8** incidents each. Jozini, Mangaung, and City of Tshwane each recorded **4** incidents.

Figure 8: Municipalities Most Affected by Xenophobic Discrimination in South Africa

Municipality	Incident Count
City of Johannesburg	58
eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality	49
City of Cape Town	28
Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality	10
Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality	10
Msunduzi Local Municipality	8
Umhlathuze Local Municipality	8
Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality	4
City of Tshwane	4
Jozini Local Municipality	4
Grand Total	183

4. Effects of Xenophobic Discrimination Over Three Years (2022 -2024)

The figure below depicts the total effects of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa over the last three years (2022–2024). These effects refer to the human and material toll resulting from xenophobic discrimination incidents recorded during this period. As illustrated in the graph below, the figures account for the total incidents of xenophobic discrimination, the number of people killed, displaced, and shops looted due to xenophobic discrimination attacks. As *Figure 9* below shows, the humanitarian effect has been significant, with the displacement of **6,134** individuals. Additionally, **57** deaths were recorded, underscoring the fatal consequences of these attacks.

Economic targeting remains evident, with the looting of **810** shops indicating that migrants who own businesses continue to be a primary focus of xenophobic violence. While other forms of xenophobic discrimination, such as denial of services, harassment, and selective enforcement of by laws, are more difficult to quantify, they are equally significant. Taken together, these effects highlight that xenophobic discrimination continues to pose a serious threat to the lives, livelihoods, and well-being of migrants, as well as those perceived as outsiders in South Africa.

Figure 9: Total Effects of Xenophobic Discrimination over Three Years



5. Official Responses to Xenophobic Discrimination Incidents (2022– 2024)

As with the trends identified in the 2021 report, xenophobia in South Africa remains persistent and largely unaddressed by effective responses, particularly from the state. Instead of taking decisive action, government institutions have increasingly adopted restrictive, anti-migrant policies that further marginalise foreign nationals. Since the adoption of the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been marked by denialism, a lack of political will, and widespread impunity for perpetrators (Misago et al., 2021). These issues have continued into the current reporting period, with vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula openly violating the rights of migrants and taking the law into their own hands without facing accountability or legal consequences.

In terms of law enforcement, the South African Police Service (SAPS)' response to xenophobic incidents remains weak, inconsistent, and often complicit (Freeman et al., 2022). Many victims do not report incidents due to a lack of trust in the police, fearing that their grievances will be ignored or mishandled (Freeman et al., 2022). In some cases recorded by Xenowatch, law enforcement officers have themselves been implicated in the harassment and extortion of migrants, including through unlawful arrests, further eroding public confidence and exacerbating migrants' vulnerability. Moreover, research has shown that the police fail to act on warning signs that violence is about to take place, and that, where there is indeed a response, it is slow and reactive (Edwards and Freeman, 2021). In some instances, police do investigate xenophobic discrimination cases, but these investigations rarely result in convictions. This trend is evident in our data, as out of the **255** reported xenophobic discrimination incidents during the review period, only one case in 2022 led to a conviction. The details of that incident are outlined below:

In a rare case of accountability, an Operation Dudula organiser was convicted in August 2023 for inciting xenophobic violence through a viral WhatsApp voice note sent in March 2022 that threatened attacks on migrants in Durban. The message, which led to heightened tensions and subsequent attacks in Pietermaritzburg, resulted in his conviction under Section 14 of the Cybercrimes Act and a sentence of a R10,000 fine or three years' imprisonment, half of which was suspended for five years (Xenowatch data, 2022).

Civil society has played an important role in advocating for migrant rights, often turning to litigation and strategic advocacy to protect non-nationals. For instance, court cases related to the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit (ZEP) championed by the Consortium for Migrant Rights in South Africa (CORMSA) and the Helen Suzman Foundation (HSF) (Moosa, 2024) have highlighted the role of legal challenges in resisting harmful state policies. However, while some legal victories have been achieved, they are often undermined by poor implementation or state non-compliance. Moreover, recent research by the African Centre for Migration & Society (Ritcher and Walker, 2025) has pointed to internal fragmentation within the Migrant Sector itself. Many organisations operate in silos, with limited coordination and occasional turf wars that hinder a unified response to migrant-related challenges. Although there is some collaboration within the sector on particular issues, it still lacks a unified, long-term strategy to drive structural change. As a result, efforts often remain reactive rather than proactive. Therefore, there is an urgent need to shift toward sustained, strategic approaches that tackle the root causes of xenophobia and promote meaningful, systemic transformation. Achieving this, however, depends on the State demonstrating consistent political will through accountability, respect for the rule of law, and the elimination of impunity alongside evidence-based and practically grounded interventions by civil society (Misago et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

This report presents a summary of research conducted by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) through an analysis of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa, based on data gathered via the Xenowatch project between 2022 and 2024. The findings underscore that xenophobic discrimination remains deeply embedded in South Africa's social and political landscape, manifesting in persistent and recurring patterns of violence, harassment, and exclusion targeting foreign nationals.

Moreover, xenophobic violence continues to be the most prevalent form of victimisation, with a noticeable rise in incidents of extortion, often involving organised criminal networks and, in some cases, facilitated or ignored by law enforcement. In particular, this period also saw a shift in geographical patterns, with KwaZulu-Natal overtaking Gauteng as the province with the highest number of recorded incidents, marking a significant change from previous years.

Beyond the statistics, the report highlights concerning trends contributing to a hostile environment for migrants. These include the growing visibility and activity of anti-migrant vigilante groups, the increased use of social media to mobilise hate, and the mainstreaming of xenophobic rhetoric within political discourse. These developments have collectively reinforced negative stereotypes and normalised discrimination, further endangering the safety and dignity of migrants across the country.

Despite these challenges, responses from both the state and broader society remain fragmented, inconsistent, and largely reactive. While civil society continues to play a critical role in advocacy and legal challenges, there is still a lack of coordinated, long-term strategies to address the root causes of xenophobia and ensure accountability. The absence of strong political will and a comprehensive national response framework continues to hinder meaningful progress.

In conclusion, xenophobic discrimination in South Africa is not merely a series of isolated incidents but a systemic issue that requires sustained, multi-layered interventions. Combating it effectively demands a unified approach that includes proactive governance, stronger legal enforcement, targeted public education, and well-resourced civil society collaboration. Without urgent and committed action, xenophobic discrimination will remain a recurring crisis undermining social cohesion, human rights, and regional integration efforts.

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

Free SMS: 44705
Email: report@xenowatch.ac.za
Online: xenowatch.ac.za
Mobile app: Xenowatch

All reports should include the location, time and description of the event.