



Dispatch No. 1068 | 31 October 2025

South African youth see government as failing on job creation, look to public sector for work

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1068 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Youth in South Africa increasingly face the prospect of joblessness. According to Statistics South Africa (2025a), the unemployment rate among 15- to 34-year-olds increased from 36.8% in 2014 to 45.5% in 2024. In total, 43.2% of 15- to 34-year-olds were not in employment, education, or training in 2024, an increase of 5 percentage points compared to a decade earlier.

Dependence on social grants among those aged 15-24 grew more than sevenfold between 2009 (4.8%) and 2024 (35.9%) (Statistics South Africa, 2025b). Over the same period, the share of those aged 25-34 who received social grants rose from 3.7% to 19.2%. In the first quarter of 2025, 2 million of the country's 3.5 million discouraged work-seekers were youth aged 15-34 years.

In 2020, 2.6 million young people (15-34 years) lived in households that experienced hunger. In terms of service provision, 61.6% of youth had waste removed by their local municipality, while 72.9% had access to piped water, 81.9% had access to improved sanitation (i.e. flush toilets or pit toilets with ventilation pipes), and 92.6% had access to electricity connected to the mains. Across these measures, the average young South African's living conditions are marginally lower than the overall population's (National Youth Development Agency, 2022).

The 2023 Global Youth Development Index, which tracks indicators of education, employment and opportunity, health and well-being, equality and inclusion, peace and security, and political and civic participation, ranks South Africa as a medium youth development country (Commonwealth, 2024).

Ahead of Africa Youth Day (1 November), Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey (2025) offers insights into the situation of South Africa's youth (defined here as ages 18-35).

Findings show that while almost all young adults have attended secondary school, they are more likely than their elders to be unemployed.

If given the choice, nearly half of young South Africans say they would like to work for the government or in the public sector, while a majority see investment in job creation as the most important way the government could help young people.

Indeed, youth cite unemployment as their top priority for government action, followed by crime and security, the supply of water, infrastructure, and health. On all of these issues (and more), young citizens give the government negative performance reviews.

Young adults are highly pessimistic about the state of the country: More than eight in 10 see the country as moving in "the wrong direction," and only half as many expect economic conditions to improve in 12 months' time.

Three in 10 have considered emigrating, most often in pursuit of better job opportunities.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult citizens between 28 June and 19 July 2025. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2022.

Key findings

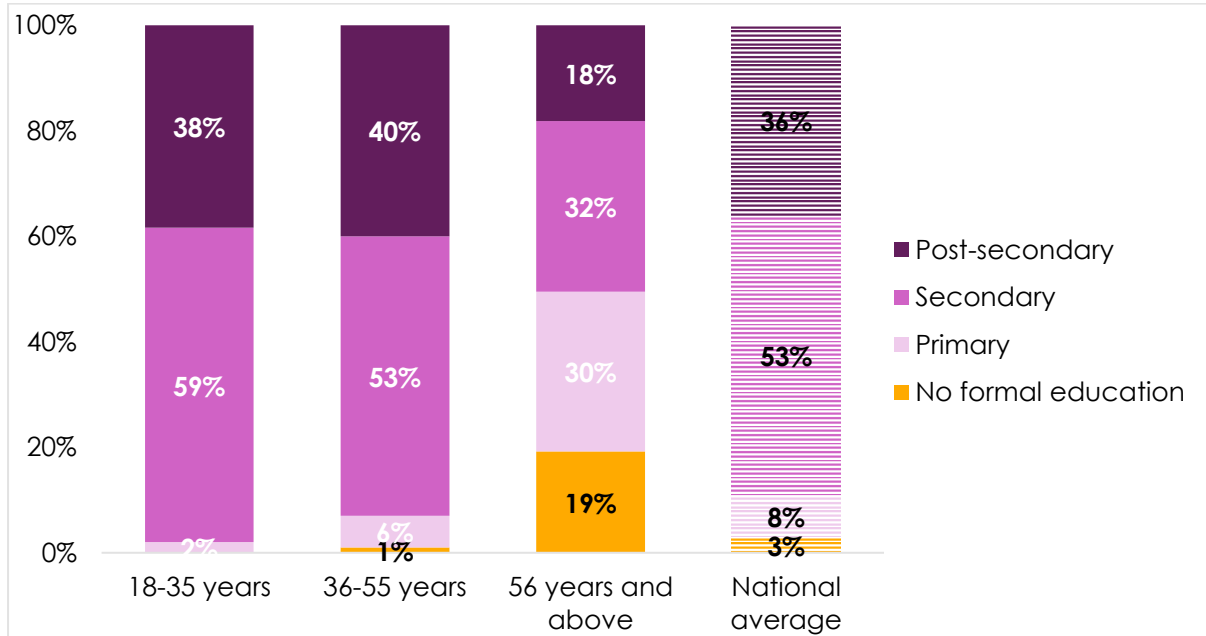
- South African youth (aged 18-35) are almost twice as likely as the elderly (56 years and above) to have secondary or post-secondary education (97% vs. 50%).
- Youth are more likely than older generations to be unemployed: Almost half (47%) say they are not employed and are looking for work, vs. 38% of 36- to-55-year-olds.
 - Aside from general economic conditions, the primary barriers to youth employment, according to young South Africans, are a lack of work experience, insufficient training, and an aversion to certain types of jobs.
- Nearly half (45%) of youth would prefer to work in government or the public sector. Only half as many (23%) would like to start their own business, the second-lowest proportion among 38 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer.
- Job creation is young citizens' top priority for additional government spending to help young people.
- Unemployment ranks as the most important problem that South African youth want their government to address (cited by 63% of young respondents), followed by crime and security (30%), water supply (29%), infrastructure/roads (26%), and health (21%).
- Majorities of youth give the government negative ratings for its performance on their key priorities, including more than nine in 10 who say the government is failing to create jobs (96%), reduce crime (92%), and effectively fight corruption (91%).
- More than eight in 10 youth (84%) believe South Africa is headed in “the wrong direction.”
 - Economic assessments are also pessimistic: Only minorities of youth are satisfied with the country's economic situation (22%) and their personal living conditions (41%).
- Three in 10 youth (30%) have considered moving abroad.
 - Finding better job opportunities tops the list of reasons to move.

Level of education

Almost all South African youth (aged 18-35) have secondary (59%) or post-secondary (38%) education; the share who have attended at least secondary school is roughly double that of

the over-55 generation (97% vs. 50% (Figure 1). Only 2% of young citizens have not gone beyond primary school, while no youth report lacking formal schooling altogether.

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | South Africa | 2025

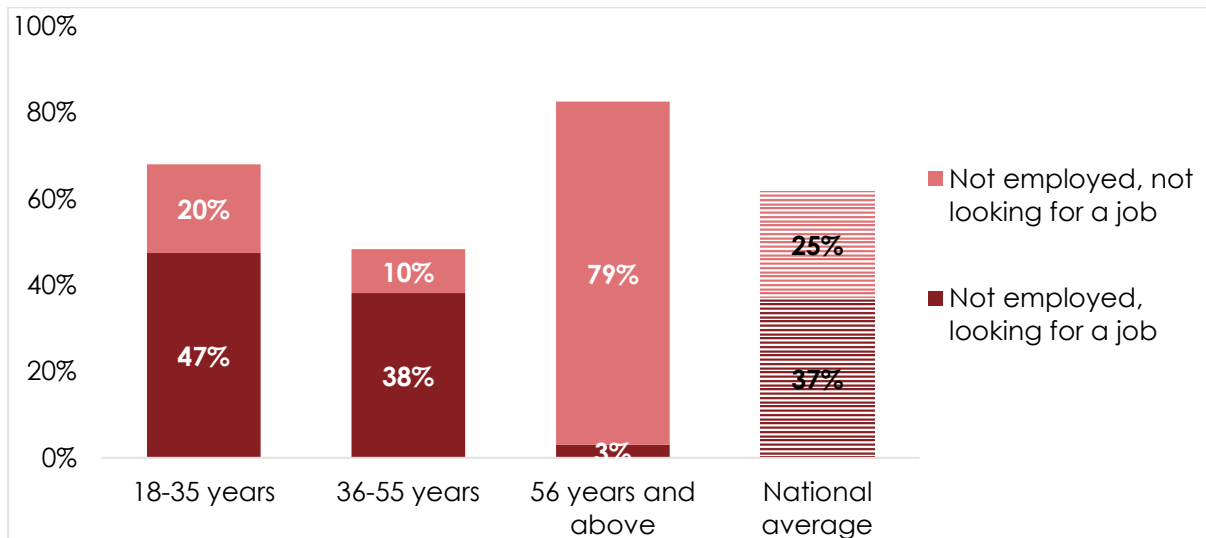


Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Employment status

Despite relatively high levels of education, South Africa's youth are less likely than their elders to be employed: Nearly half (47%) say they are not employed and are actively looking for work, compared to 38% of middle-aged respondents (Figure 2). Another 20% of youth are not employed and not seeking work.

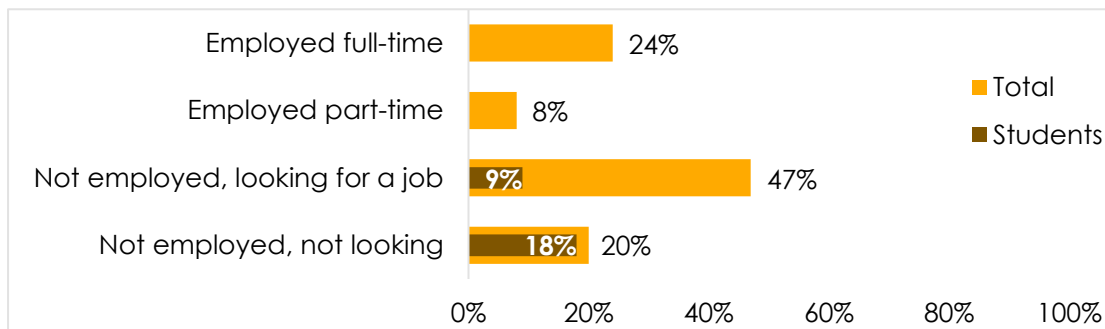
Figure 2: Not employed, looking vs. not looking for a job | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

About one-third of young South Africans report being employed full time (24%) or part time (8%) (Figure 3). An overwhelming majority (89%) of economically inactive youth identify as students (18% of all 18- to 35-year-olds). One in five unemployed youth (20%) are students (9% of the total youth population).

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked:

*Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?
 What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")*

Aside from general economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, South African youth say the main barriers to youth employment are a lack of work experience (35%), a lack of adequate training (25%), and young people's aversion to tough jobs (15%) (Figure 4). Other young respondents cite a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation (13%) and a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (10%).

Elderly respondents offer similar assessments as their younger counterparts, though they are more likely to cite youth unwillingness to take on certain jobs (24% vs. 15%) and less likely to point to a lack of experience (24% vs. 35%).

Compared to older groups, youth show a greater interest in public-sector work: Almost half (45%) of youth say that if they were given a choice, they would prefer to work in government, vs. 28%-32% among older cohorts (Figure 5).

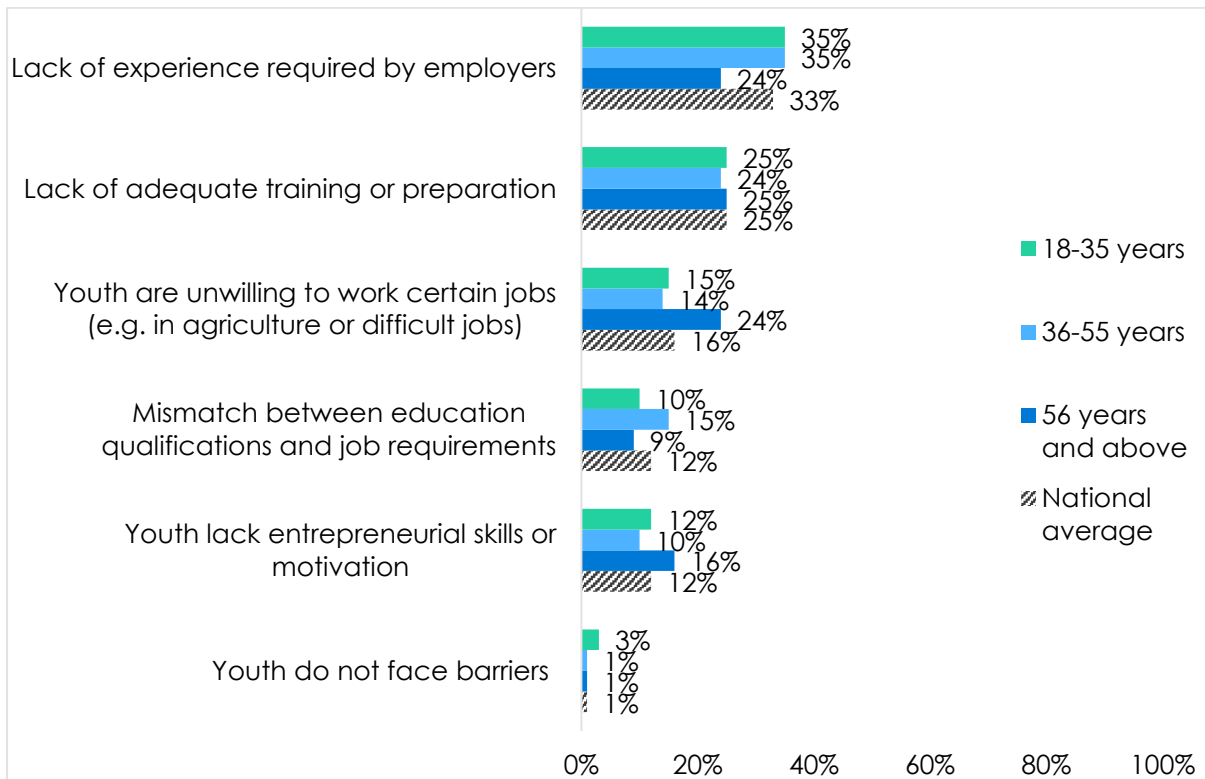
By contrast, youth are less entrepreneurial: Fewer than one-fourth (23%) would like to start their own business, compared to 38% of middle-aged respondents and almost half (47%) of those aged 56 and older.

More youth (25%) than older respondents (6%-18%) would like to work for a private company or business. A mere 3% of young South Africans want to work for a non-governmental organisation.

Across 38 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer since the start of 2024, South African youth are the second-least entrepreneurial, above only Namibians (19%) (Figure 6). On average, more than half (52%) of young Africans would prefer to start their own business.

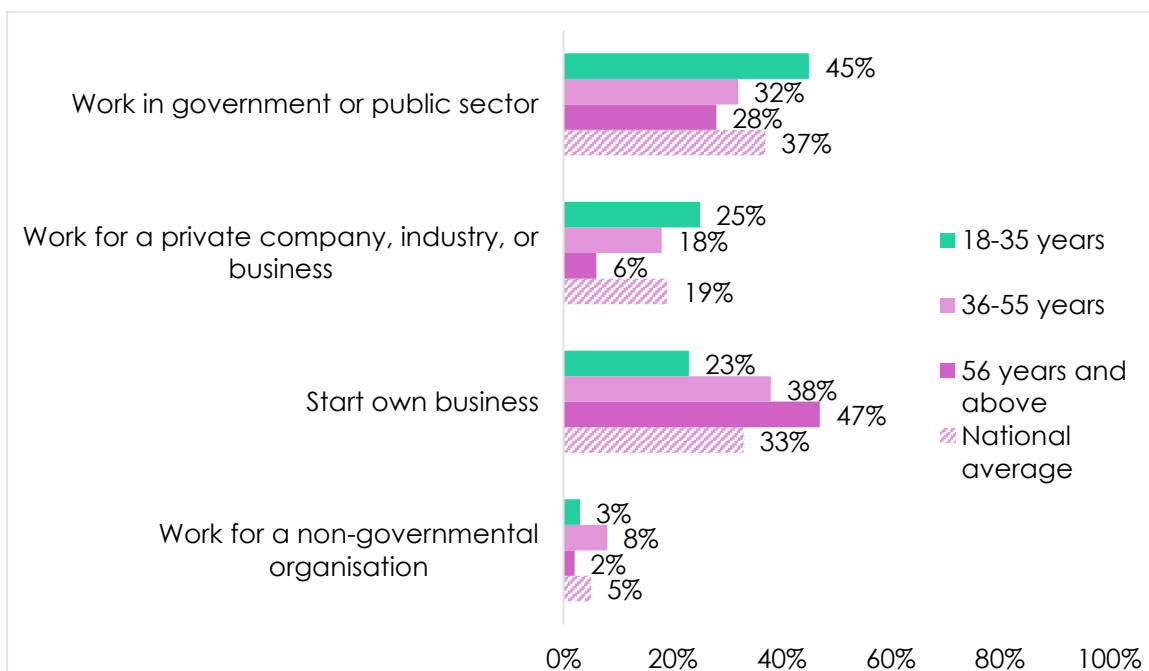
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 for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
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Figure 4: Barriers to youth employment | by age group | South Africa | 2025



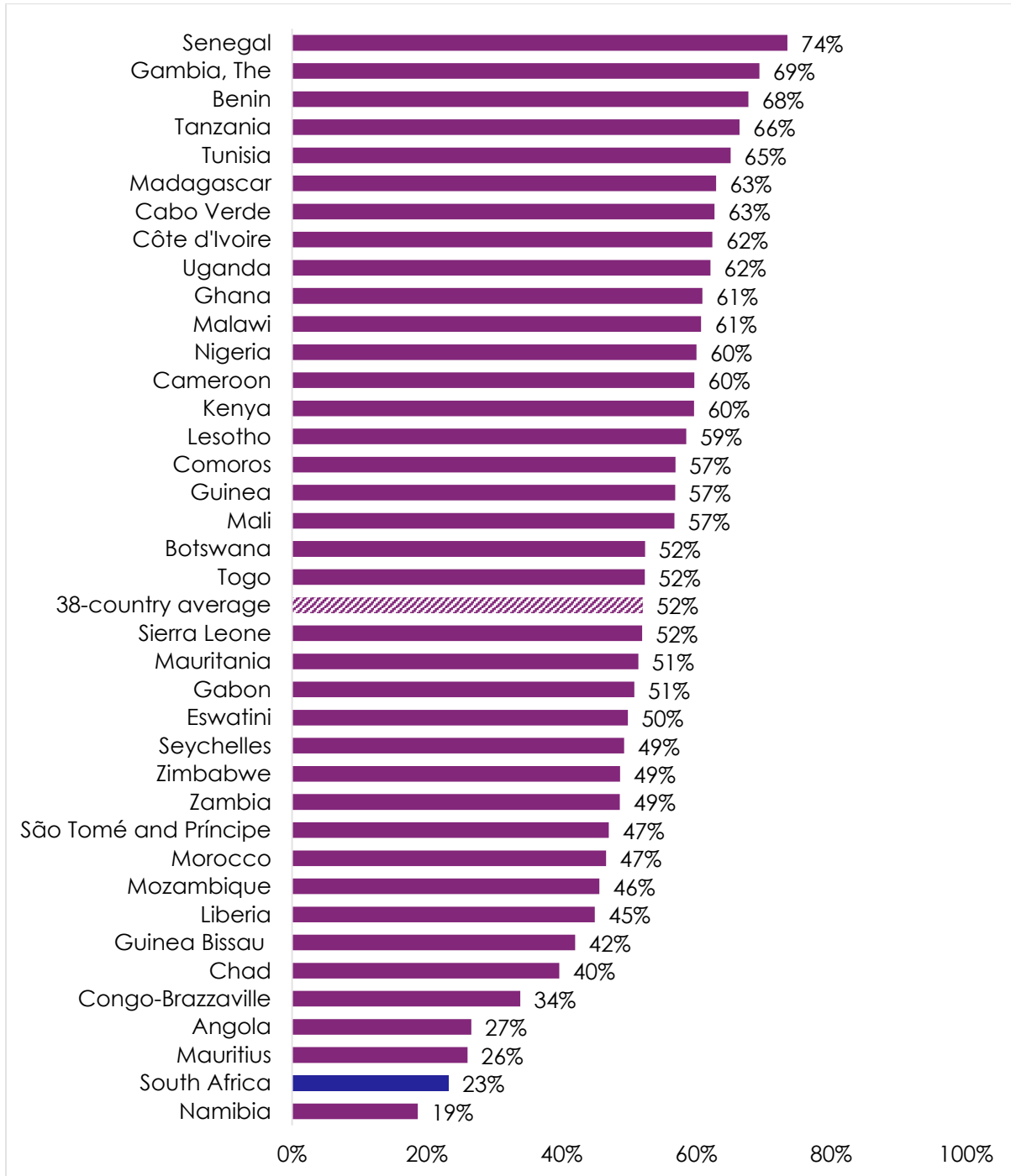
Respondents were asked: Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?

Figure 5: Preferred job sector | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: If you could work in any sector you wanted, which of the following would be your first choice?

Figure 6: Prefer to start own business | respondents aged 18-35 | 38 countries
 | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: *If you could work in any sector you wanted, which of the following would be your first choice? (% who say "start own business")*

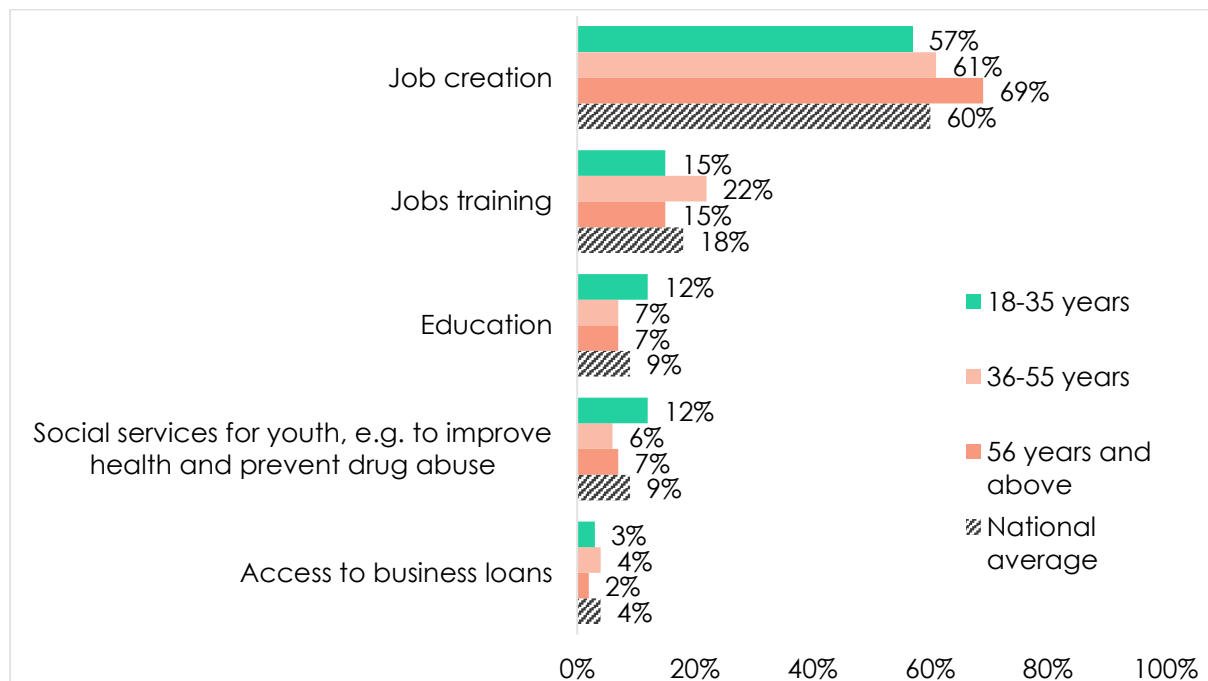
If the government could increase its expenditures to help young people, job creation would be the top priority for youth (cited by 57% of young respondents) (Figure 7). Next in importance would be jobs training (15%), education (12%), and social services for youth (12%).

The prioritisation of job creation increases with age, ranging from 57% among youth to 69% among senior citizens.

Middle-aged respondents are more likely than youth and the elderly to point to jobs training as a priority area (22% vs. 15%).

By contrast, youth are more likely than their elders to identify education (12% vs. 7%) and social services for youth (12% vs. 6%-7%) as important interventions.

Figure 7: Priorities for government spending to help youth | by age group
 | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?*

National challenges

Unemployment tops the list of problems that South African youth say their government should address, cited by 63% of young respondents as one of their top three priorities (Figure 8). Crime and security (30%) comes in a distant second, followed by water supply (29%), infrastructure/roads (26%), and health (21%).

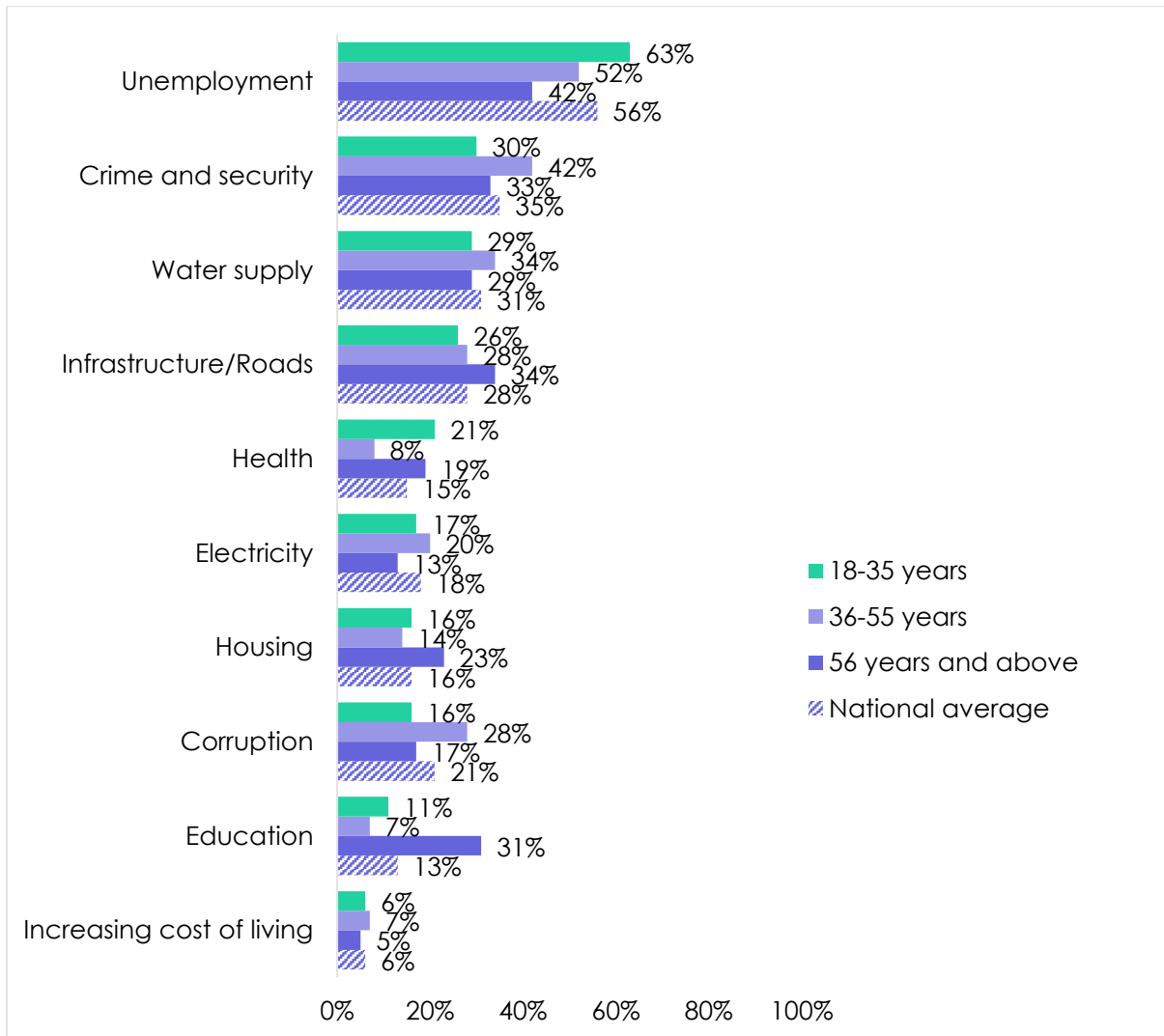
Unemployment is an especially pressing problem for young people: Concerns decline with age, dropping to 42% among senior citizens.

Middle-aged respondents are more likely than their younger and older counterparts to worry about crime and security (42% vs. 30%-33%), water supply (34% vs. 29%), electricity (20% vs. 13%-17%), and corruption (28% vs. 16%-17%).

Concern about infrastructure/roads and housing increases with age. About one-fifth of the youngest (21%) and oldest (18%) respondents see health as a pressing concern, compared to only 8% of 36- to 55-year-olds.

Three in 10 senior citizens (31%) perceive education as an important priority, about three or four times as many as among young (7%) and middle-aged (11%) respondents.

Figure 8: Most important problems | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Government performance on youth priorities

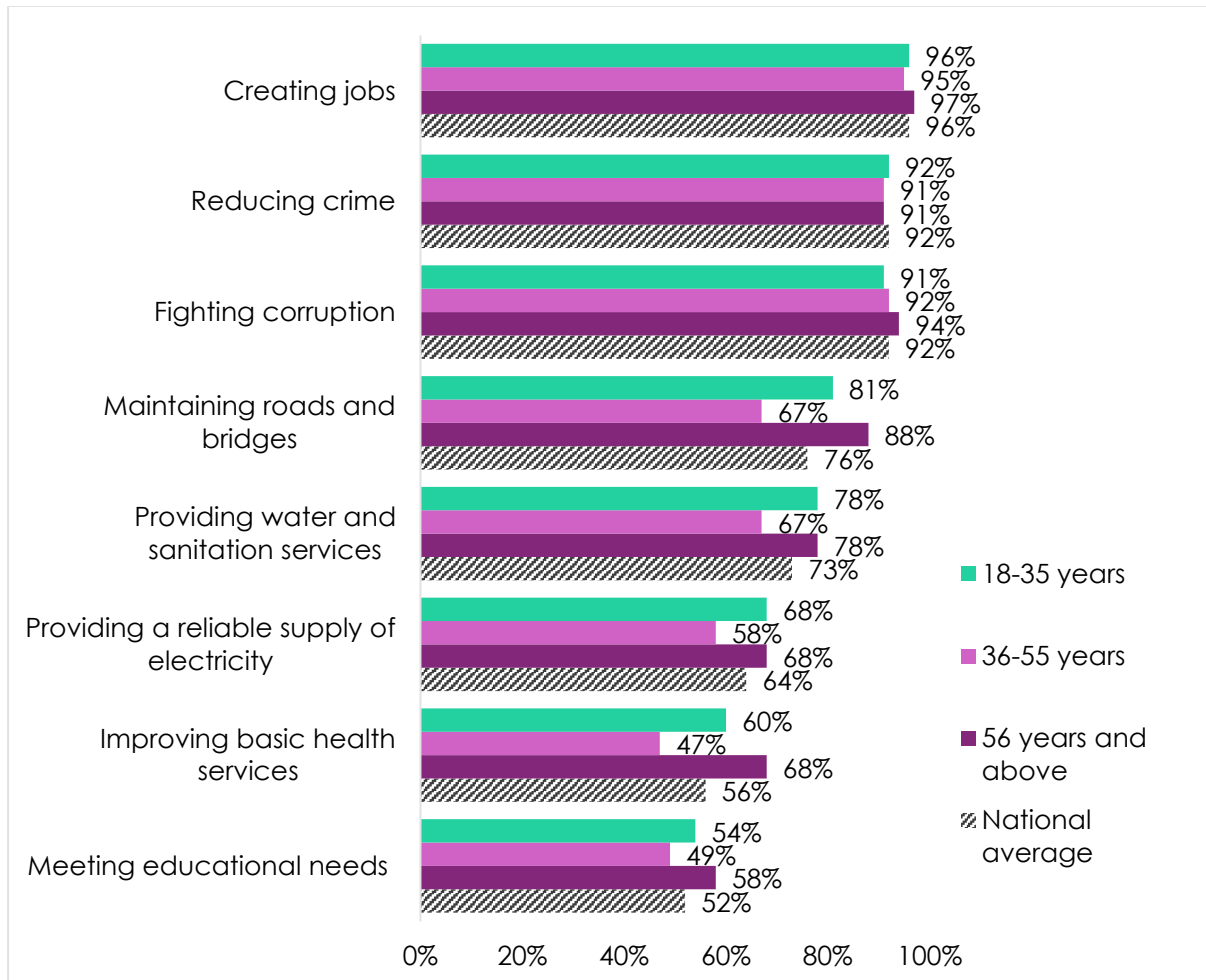
How do youth think the government is faring in dealing with their top concerns?

Most young South Africans say their government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on their priority issues, including more than nine in 10 who disapprove of its efforts on job creation (96%), crime reduction (92%), and fighting corruption (91%) (Figure 9). At least two-thirds of youth give the government negative ratings on maintaining infrastructure (81%), providing water and sanitation (78%), and providing a reliable supply of electricity (68%). More modest majorities disapprove of efforts to improve basic health services (60%) and meet the country’s educational needs (54%).

Youth are about as likely as senior citizens to voice disapproval on these issues, except on maintaining roads and bridges (81% vs. 88%) and improving basic health services (60% vs. 68%).

Middle-aged respondents are less negative in their evaluations than their younger and older peers when it comes to improving basic health services, providing a reliable supply of electricity, providing water and sanitation services, maintaining roads and bridges, and meeting educational needs.

Figure 9: Disapproval of government performance on youth priorities | by age group | South Africa | 2025

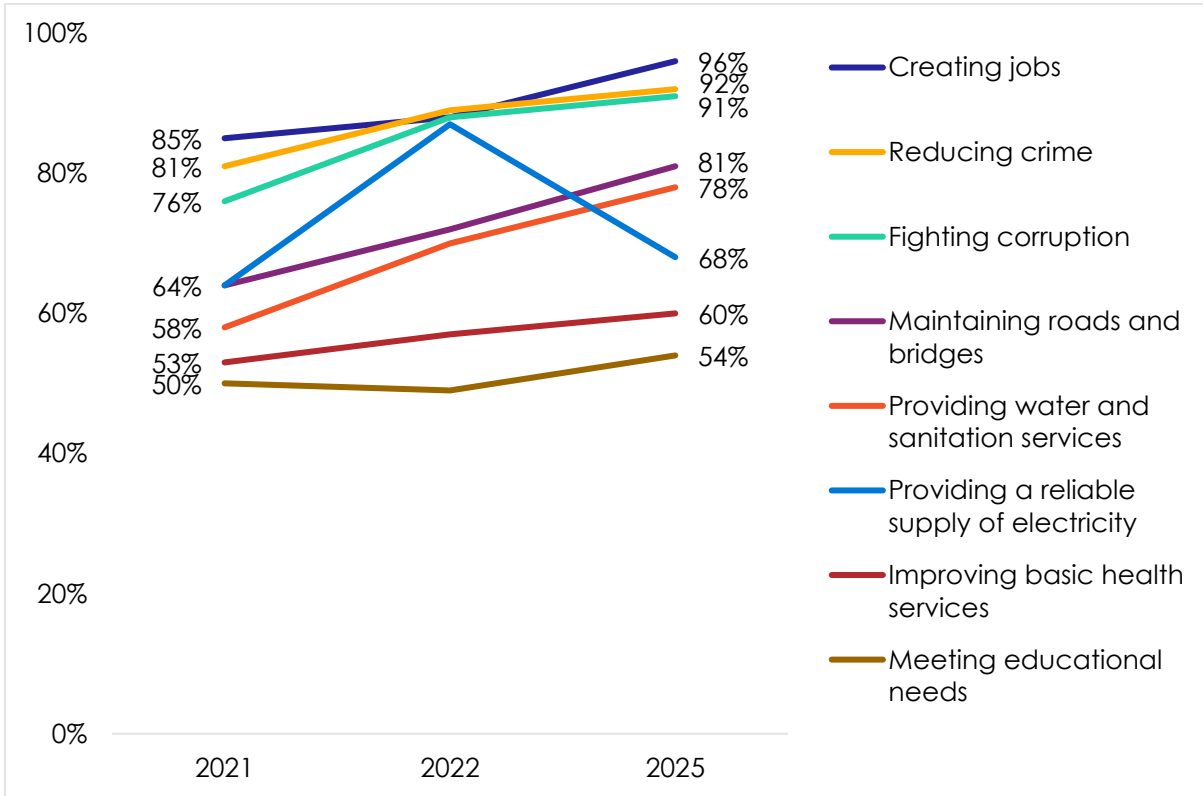


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Youth disapproval of government performance on these key priorities rose between 2021 and 2025 (Figure 10). Spikes in disapproval are particularly large when it comes to providing water and sanitation services (+20 percentage points), maintaining roads and bridges (+17), fighting corruption (+15), reducing crime (+11), and creating jobs (+11).

Negative assessments of the supply of electricity shot up from 64% in 2021 to 87% the following year – the height of the country's load-shedding crisis – before dropping to 68% in the most recent survey.

Figure 10: Disapproval of government performance on youth priorities | respondents aged 18-35 | South Africa | 2021-2025

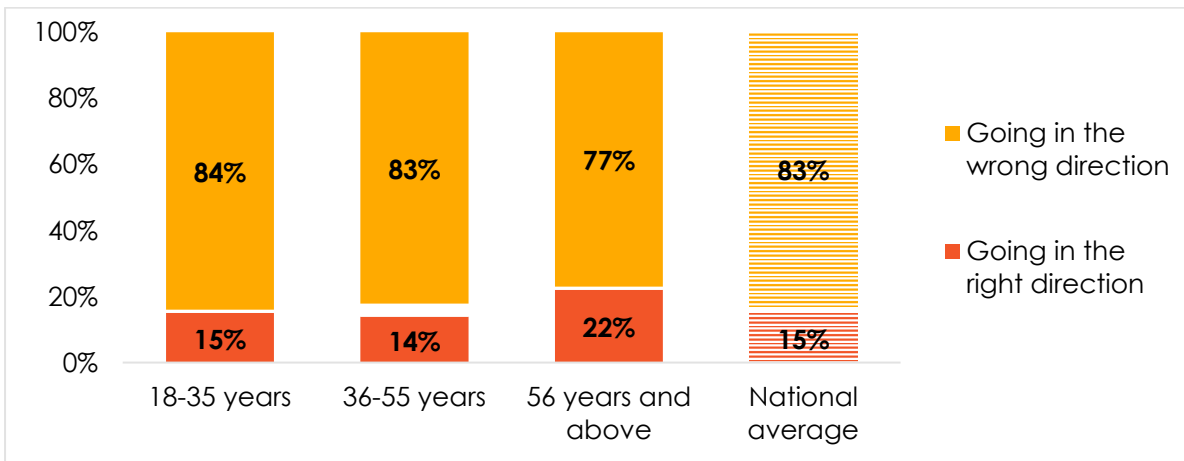


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Country's overall direction and economic conditions

Most South Africans (83%) think the country is headed in "the wrong direction" (Figure 11). Youth (84%) and middle-aged citizens (83%) are more pessimistic than the elderly (77%).

Figure 11: Perceptions of the country's direction | by age group | South Africa | 2025



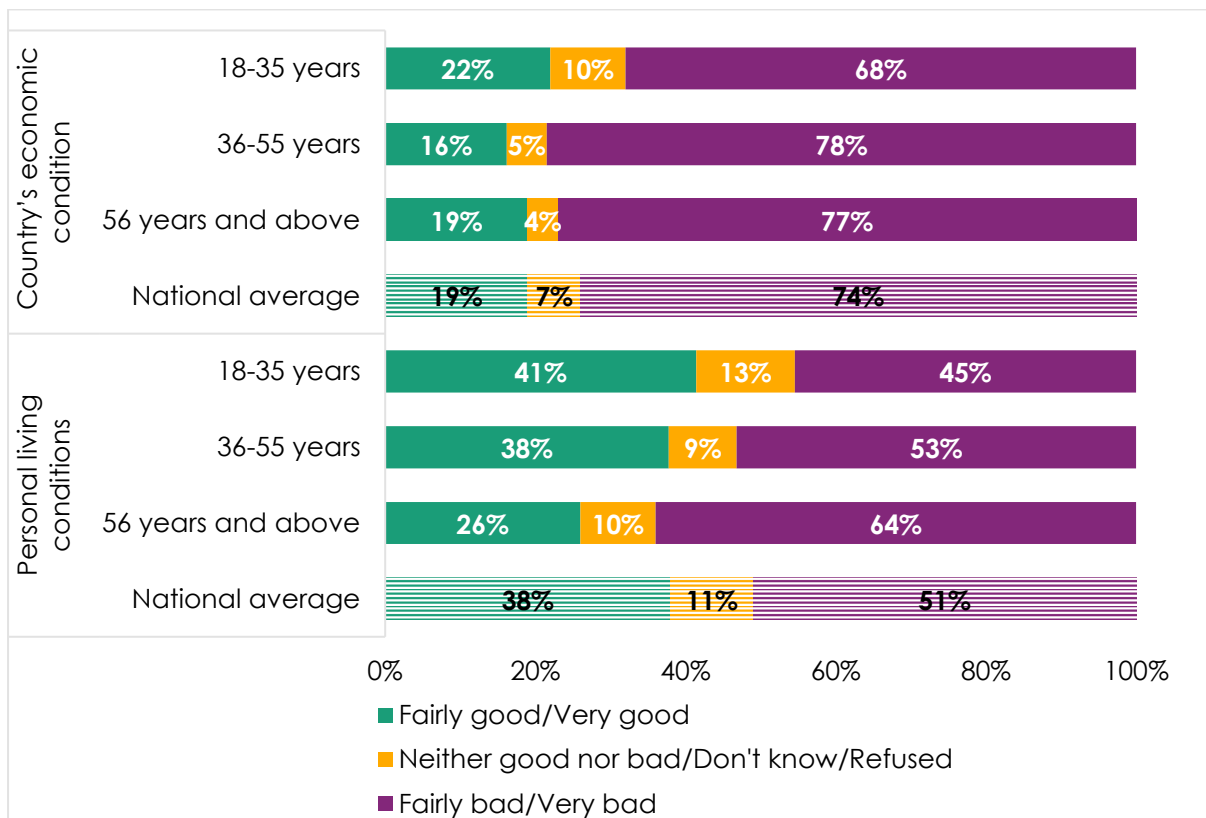
Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Young citizens' negative perceptions of their country's trajectory match their assessments of the national economy: Fewer than one-quarter (22%) describe the country's economic situation as "fairly good" or "very good," while 68% think it is bad (Figure 12).

Young South Africans hold mixed views on their own situation: 41% say their personal living conditions are good, while slightly more (45%) describe them as bad.

Youth are more positive than older cohorts on both measures.

Figure 12: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions
 | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

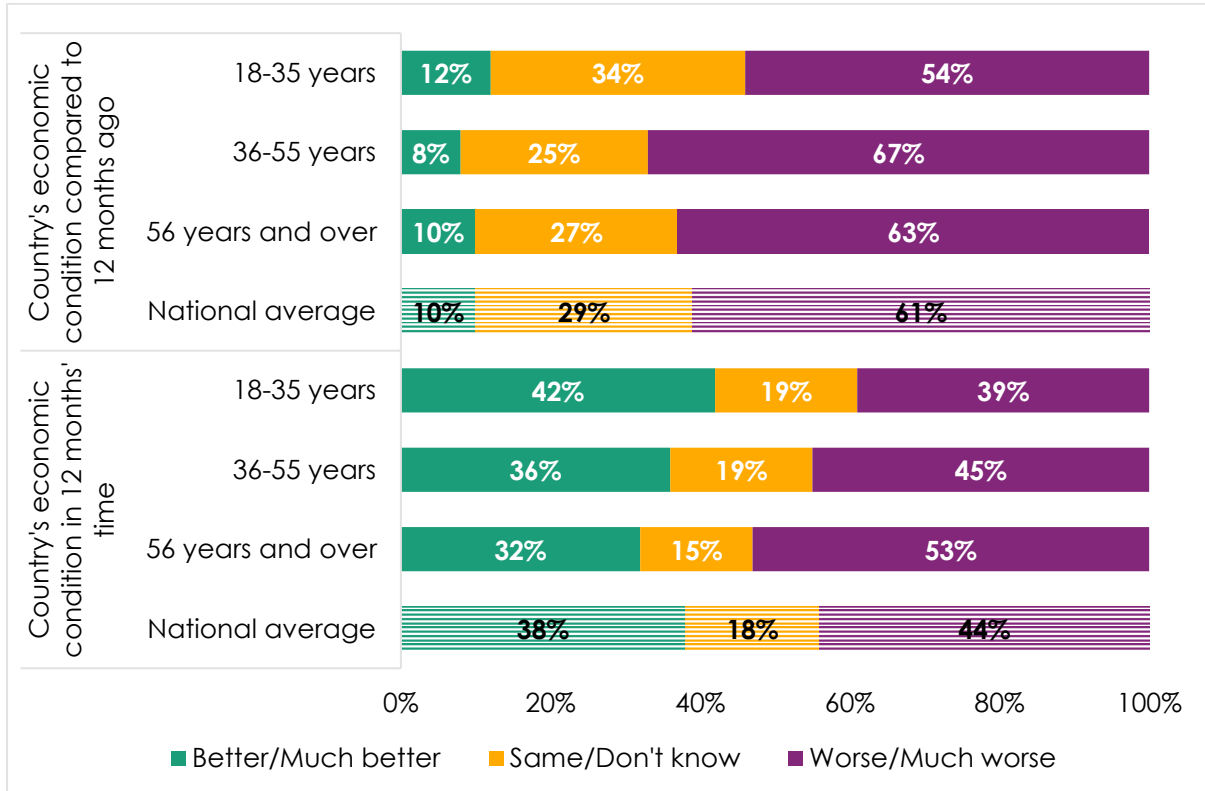
Only about one in 10 youth (12%) say the economy improved over the past 12 months, while more than half (54%) say it worsened (Figure 13). Older respondents are even gloomier in their assessments: 63%-67% say things have deteriorated.

About four in 10 young people (42%) think economic conditions will improve during the coming year, while a similar proportion (39%) think they will worsen. Youth are more optimistic than their elders about the future (by 6-10 percentage points).

These assessments have worsened over the past four years (Figure 14). In 2021, one-quarter (26%) of youth saw economic progress over the previous 12 months, a proportion that dropped by half in 2022 (13%) and has not improved since.

Optimism about the near future shows a different pattern, dropping by 19 percentage points between 2021 and 2022 before partially rebounding in 2025 (+9 points).

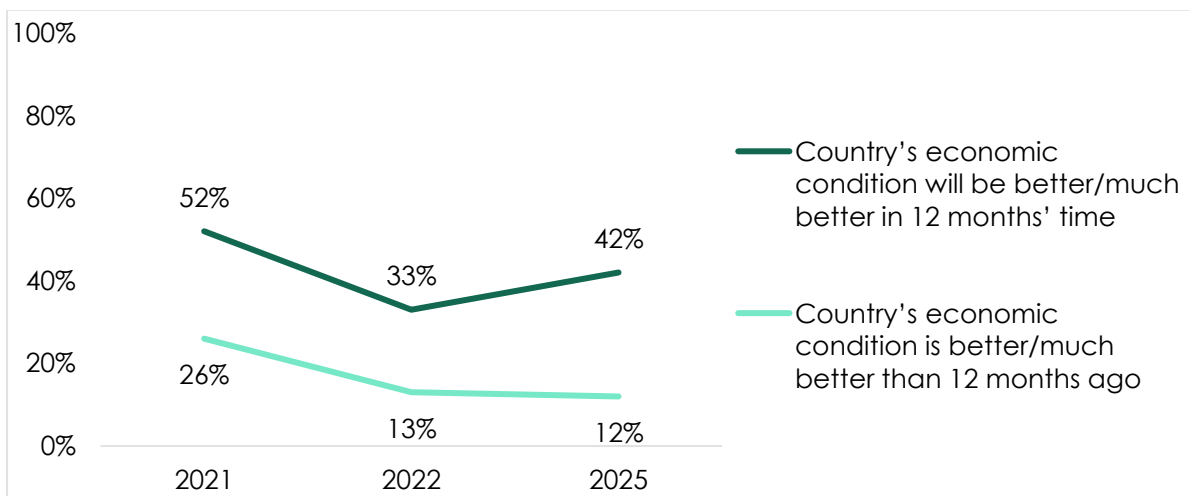
Figure 13: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago and in 12 months' time | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked:

Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
 Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Figure 14: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 | South Africa | 2021-2025



Respondents were asked:

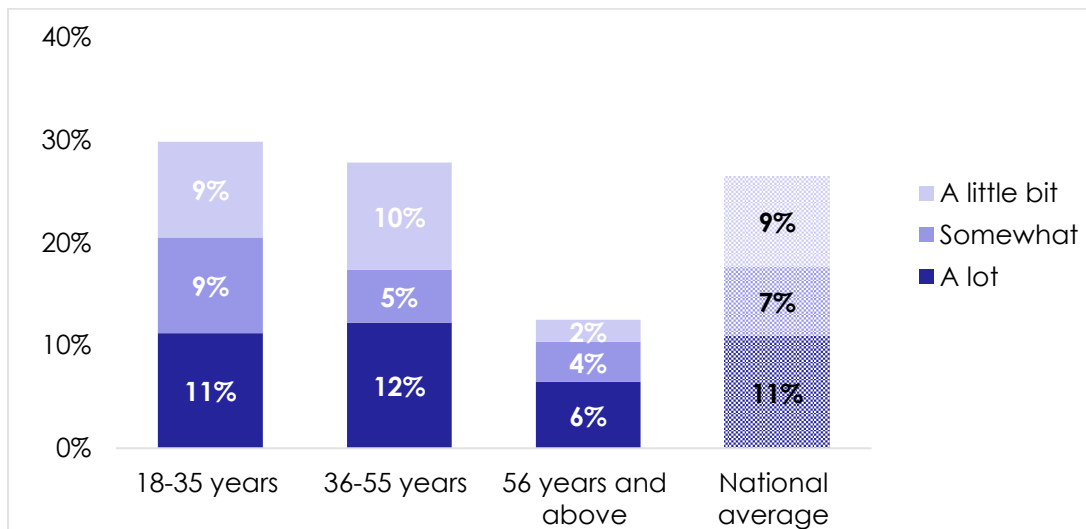
Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
 Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Emigration

Among South African youth, three in 10 (30%¹) say they have given at least “a little bit” of thought to emigrating, including 11% who have considered it “a lot” (Figure 15). A similar proportion of middle-aged respondents (28%) have considered emigrating, but fewer than half as many senior citizens (13%) have done the same.

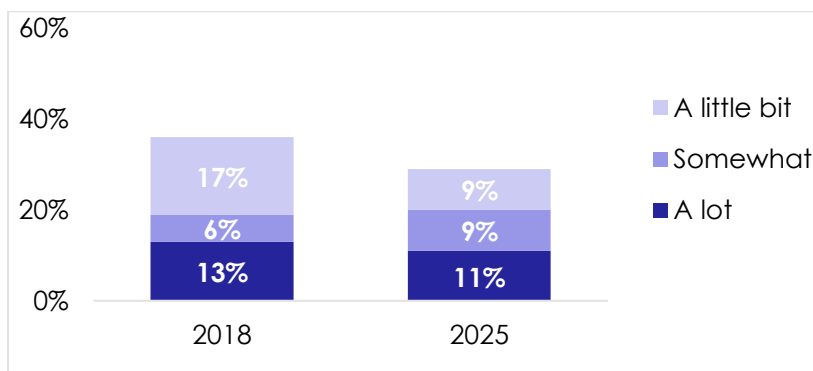
The share of 18- to 35-year-olds who have considered emigration at least “a little bit” has dropped by 5 percentage points since 2018 (35%) (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Considered emigration | by age group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Figure 16: Considered emigration | respondents aged 18-35 | South Africa | 2018-2025



Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

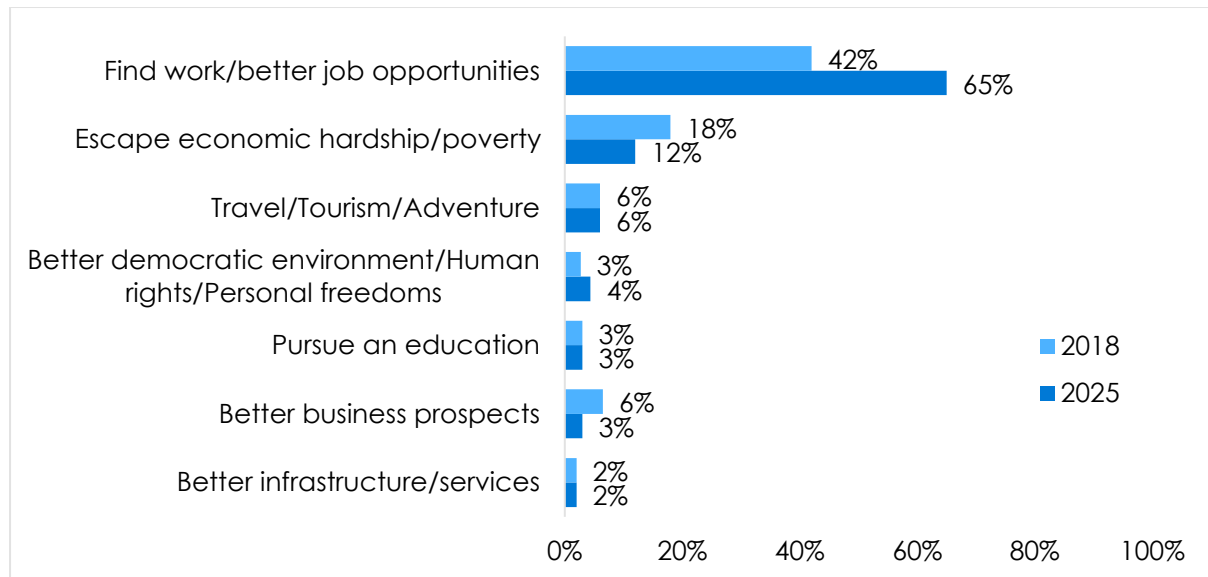
Among youth who have considered emigration, the most common motivation is finding work or better job opportunities (65%), followed by the desire to escape economic hardship or poverty (12%) (Figure 17). Minorities cite travel or tourism (6%), a better democratic

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 9% “a little bit,” 9% “somewhat,” and 11% “a lot” sum to 30%).

environment or personal freedoms (4%), educational pursuits (3%), and improved business prospects (3%).

Compared to 2018, the share who cite better job prospects as a motivating factor has increased by 23 percentage points.

Figure 17: Reasons for considering emigration | respondents aged 18-35
 | South Africa | 2018-2025



Respondents who have considered leaving the country were asked: What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from South Africa? (Respondents who have not considered leaving the country are excluded.)

Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey findings reveal a generation of youth that has been to school but is out of work.

Unemployment tops young people's list of concerns that the government should address, followed by crime, water supply, and infrastructure. Like their elders, youth are overwhelmingly critical of the government's efforts to address these and other issues.

More than eight in 10 young South Africans see the country as headed in the wrong direction, and their assessments of the country's economic conditions are deeply negative. Against this backdrop, three in 10 youth have considered emigrating, primarily in search of better job opportunities abroad.

These findings present a clear challenge to policy makers who want to develop South Africa's human resources by getting young, energetic adults into productive activities.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Obama Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

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