Dispatch No. 1108 | 9 January 2026

South Africans oppose immigration, express mixed attitudes toward foreigners

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1108 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In South Africa, immigrants often bear the brunt of public anger for the country's high crime rates, economic hardships, and failing public service delivery, despite a lack of credible evidence to support these perceptions (National Planning Commission, 2025).

According to the 2022 census, the Southern African Development Community region contributes 83.5% of the 2.4 million immigrants in the country. The rest of Africa contributes 6.9%, while Europe and Asia supply 4.8% and 3.6%, respectively (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

As the most industrialised economy in Southern Africa, South Africa has long served as the regional hub for economic migration. In the past, cheap male labour from neighbouring countries formed the backbone of in-migration flows, especially in agriculture and mining (Farley, 2019). Over the years, as labour-migration flows to the country have expanded to include sectors such as hospitality, security, transport, and other services, South Africa has emerged as the African country with the most international migrants (Department of Labour and Employment, 2025).

In May 2025, South Africa's Cabinet approved the country's first comprehensive national labour-migration policy, which seeks to regulate labour-migration flows both into and out of the country. The policy aims to attract skilled workers to South Africa while stemming the country's "brain drain" of home-grown professionals (South African Government News Agency, 2025).

This dispatch reports on ordinary South Africans' perspectives on migration.

The most recent Afrobarometer findings reveal that a majority of South Africans oppose the free movement of people across international borders in Southern Africa. Seven in 10 respondents say immigrants have a negative impact on the economy, and even larger majorities want fewer immigrants and refugees, or none whatsoever, to come into the country.

Opposition to immigration prevails alongside mixed attitudes toward foreigners: Half of South Africans say they would like or wouldn't mind living next door to immigrants, but almost as many would not welcome the idea. Fewer than half express tolerance toward refugees.

About one-quarter of South Africans have considered emigrating, mostly for economic reasons. Full-time workers and individuals with degrees are especially likely to have contemplated moving abroad.

Afrobarometer surveys

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(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 surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2022.

Key findings

- Four in 10 South Africans (40%) say people in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries. But a majority (56%) think the government should limit people's cross-border movement.
    - About half (51%) of respondents say that, in practice, crossing international borders is "difficult" or "very difficult."
- Seven in 10 citizens (69%) see immigrants' economic impact on South Africa as negative.
- Half (50%) of survey participants say they would like or wouldn't mind living next door to foreign workers or immigrants. Fewer than half (45%) feel the same about refugees.
- More than eight in 10 South Africans (83%) say the government should reduce the number of foreign job seekers it allows to enter the country (51%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (32%), the highest level recorded across 38 African countries.
    - A similar majority favour reducing (49%) or eliminating (36%) entry by refugees.
- About one-quarter (26%) of respondents say they have considered emigrating.
    - More than one-third of full-time workers (36%) and degree-holders (34%) have thought about moving abroad.
    - The most common reasons offered for potential emigration are economic, led by finding work opportunities (cited by 55% of those who have considered emigrating) and escaping economic hardship (17%).
    - The most popular destinations among potential emigrants are North America (18%), Europe (16%), and Australia (15%), while another 17% would go to an unspecified place outside of Africa.

Freedom of movement and the AfCFTA

Freedom of movement is a basic human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 13 allows for all human beings to travel across borders, while Article 14 provides for anyone to seek refuge from persecution (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). What do South Africans think about the free movement of people in the region?

Four in 10 South Africans (40%) agree that "people living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work in other countries" (Figure 1). But more than half (56%) want the government to "limit the cross-border movement of people and goods."

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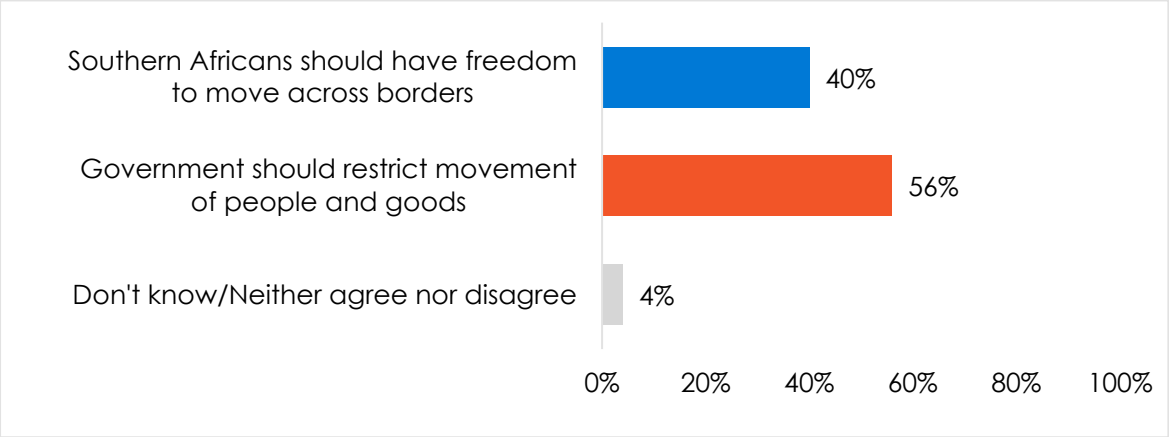
Figure 1: Free cross-border movement of Southern Africans | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
Statement 1: People living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.
Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, the South African government should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

But how easy is cross-border travel in reality? About half (51%) of respondents say it is "difficult" or "very difficult" for people in Southern Africa to enter other countries (Figure 2). Only 36% describe it as easy, while 13% say they "don't know." Reports of difficulty are more common among men (57%) and rural residents (58%) than women (45%) and urbanites (48%).

Majorities of full-time workers (58%) and unemployed citizens (52%) say crossing borders is hard. South Africans who are economically well off (38% of those experiencing no lived poverty[1]), young (43% of 18- to 35-year-olds), or highly educated (47%) are less likely to agree.

Cross-border movement is a central aspect of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its complement, the Free Movement of Persons Protocol. The AfCFTA, signed by 54 African Union (AU) members, seeks to create a "single continental market" and boost trade between African countries by eliminating trade barriers, thereby fostering industrialisation, spurring investment, and creating jobs for millions of Africans.

While the AfCFTA focuses on freer movement of goods and services, the free movement protocol, adopted by AU heads of state in 2018, promotes labour mobility across the continent by, for example, eliminating visa requirements for intra-African travelers (Maungunidze, 2022). However, as of 2025, only four countries have ratified the protocol (Kaledzi, 2025).

The AfCFTA entered into force in 2019, and trade commenced under the banner of the agreement on 1 January 2021. However, the effects of this agreement don't seem to be felt very widely yet: Four years after trading began, only 12% of South Africans had heard of the AfCFTA (Figure 3).

[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

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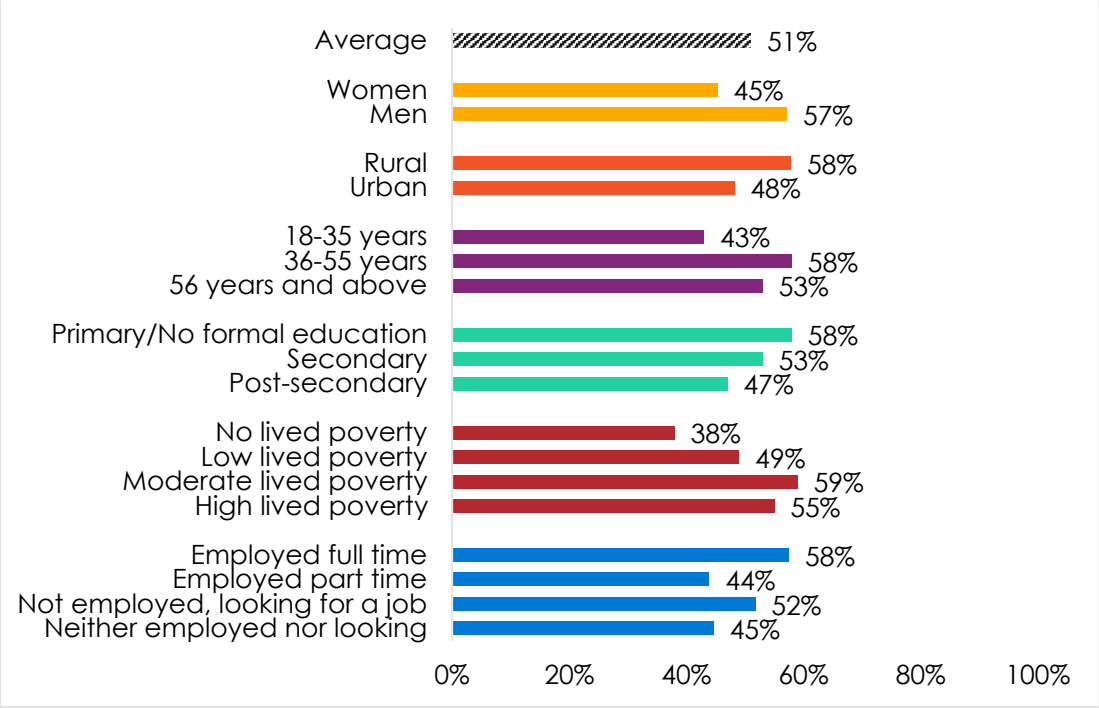
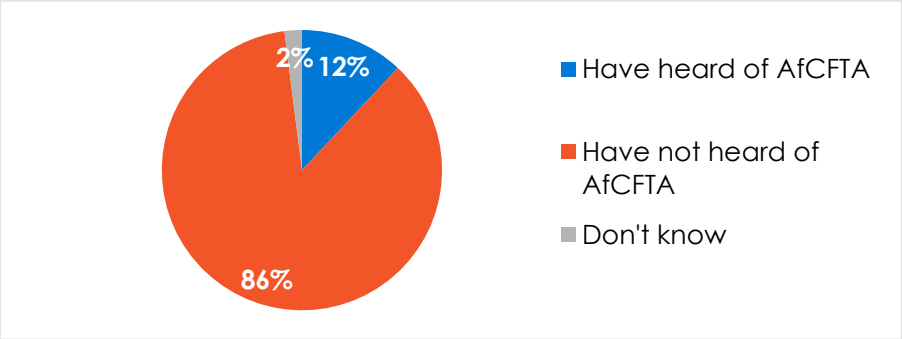
Figure 2: Difficulty in cross-border movement | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult")*

Figure 3: Heard of the AfCFTA? | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?*

Attitudes toward immigrants

Alongside their limited support for freedom of movement, South Africans express strong reservations about immigration.

A large majority (69%) of citizens say it is "fairly bad" or "very bad" for the economy "if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years" (Figure 4). Only 17% believe that immigrants are good for South Africa's economy.

More than one-fifth see immigrants as beneficial among those working full time (25%), the wealthiest respondents (23%), and women (21%).

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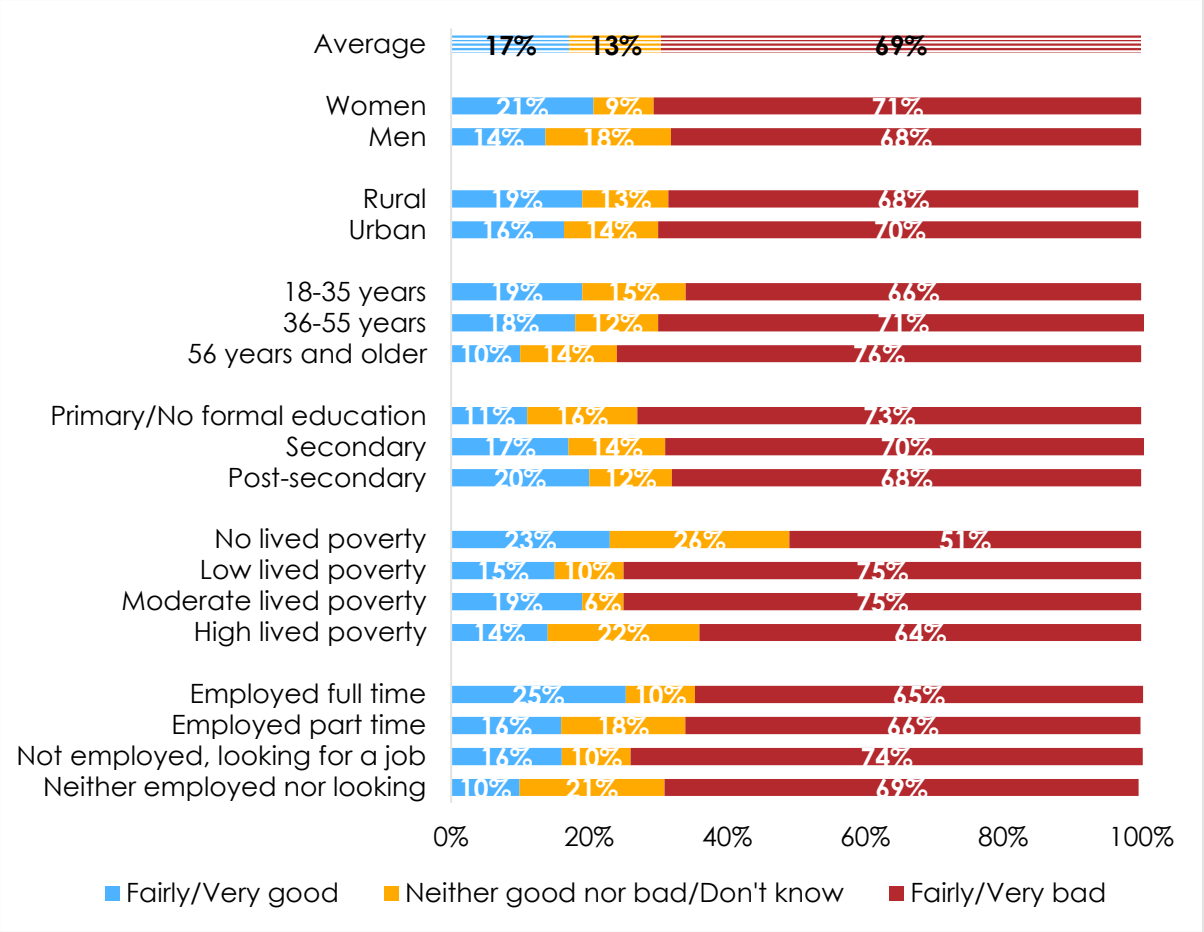
Figure 4: Economic impact of immigration | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Would you say it is generally bad or good for South Africa's economy if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years?*

On a personal level, South Africans express mixed attitudes toward foreigners in their midst: Half (50%) say they would not mind or would "somewhat like" or "strongly like" having foreign workers or immigrants as neighbours, but almost as many (47%[2]) would not welcome the prospect (Figure 5).

The share expressing tolerant attitudes toward refugees is slightly weaker (45%), suggesting that some citizens may accept foreigners conditionally, perhaps based on preconceptions about the likely contributions of foreign workers and refugees.

Immigrants and foreign workers find more tolerant attitudes among the wealthy than the poor (78% vs. 35%), which suggests that at least some opposition to migrants is driven by perceived socioeconomic concerns or economic competition (Figure 6). Indeed, fewer than half (46%) of unemployed South Africans would welcome foreign workers as neighbours, compared to slim majorities among full-time and part-time workers (both 53%).

[2] 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. 21% "somewhat dislike" and 27% "strongly dislike" sum to 47%).

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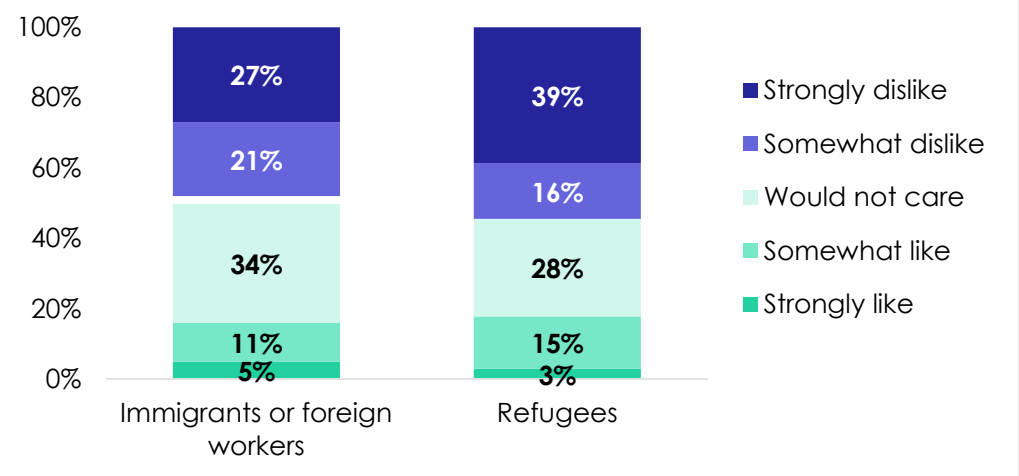
Unemployed citizens looking for work are more likely to accept refugees (49%) than foreign workers (46%), the only key demographic group for which this is true.

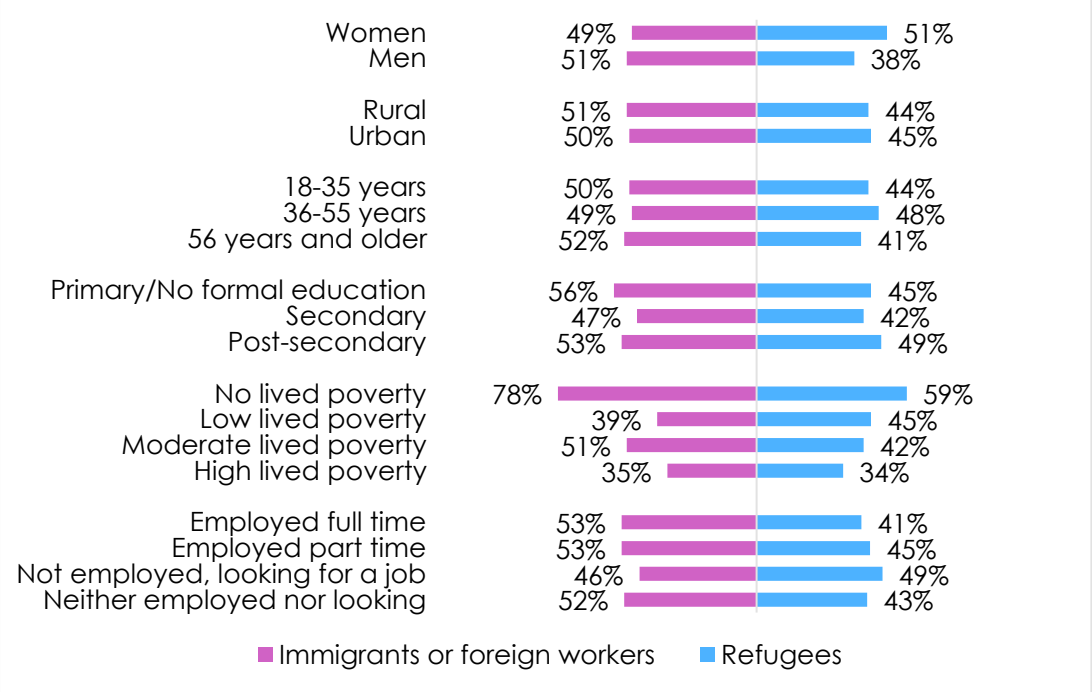
Majorities of the well-off (58%) and women (51%) would welcome refugees, compared to fewer than four in 10 among materially deprived respondents (34%) and men (38%).

Figure 5: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution?*

Figure 6: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")*

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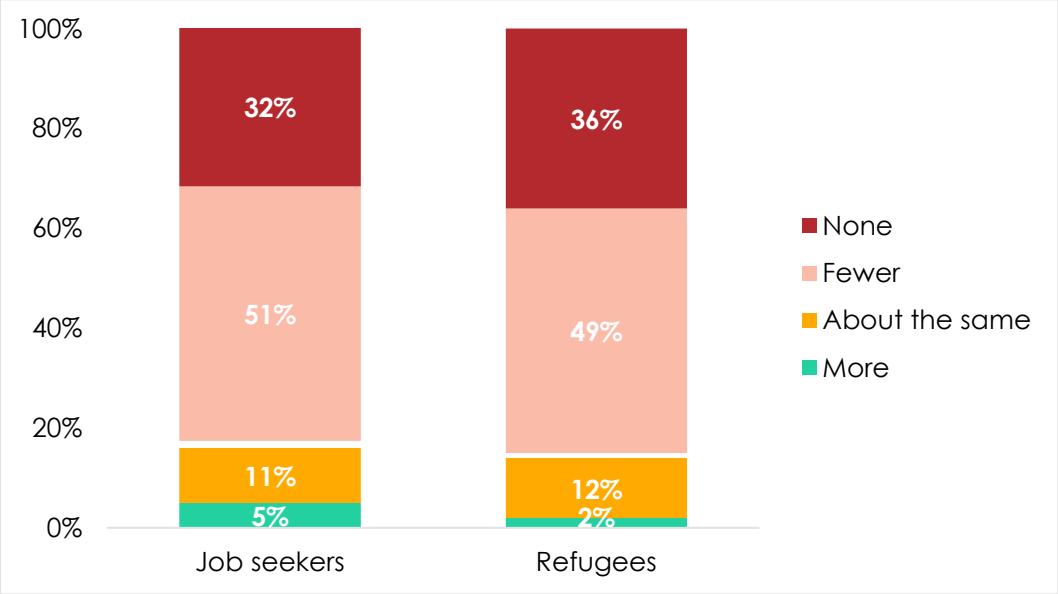
Survey findings show that South Africans are apprehensive about letting migrants into their country: More than eight in 10 (83%) say the government should reduce the number of job seekers it allows to enter (51%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (32%) (Figure 7).

A similar proportion (85%) favour reducing (49%) or eliminating (36%) entry by refugees.

Only very small minorities of respondents would welcome more job seekers (5%) and refugees (2%).

Figure 7: How many immigrants should be allowed into the country? | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked:

Do you think South Africa should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?
Do you think South Africa should allow more or fewer refugees from other countries to come and live in this country?

Across 38 countries where Afrobarometer asked this question in 2024/2025, South Africans tie with Gabonese as the most likely to say that the government should reduce or eliminate the number of job seekers it allows to enter the country (Figure 8).

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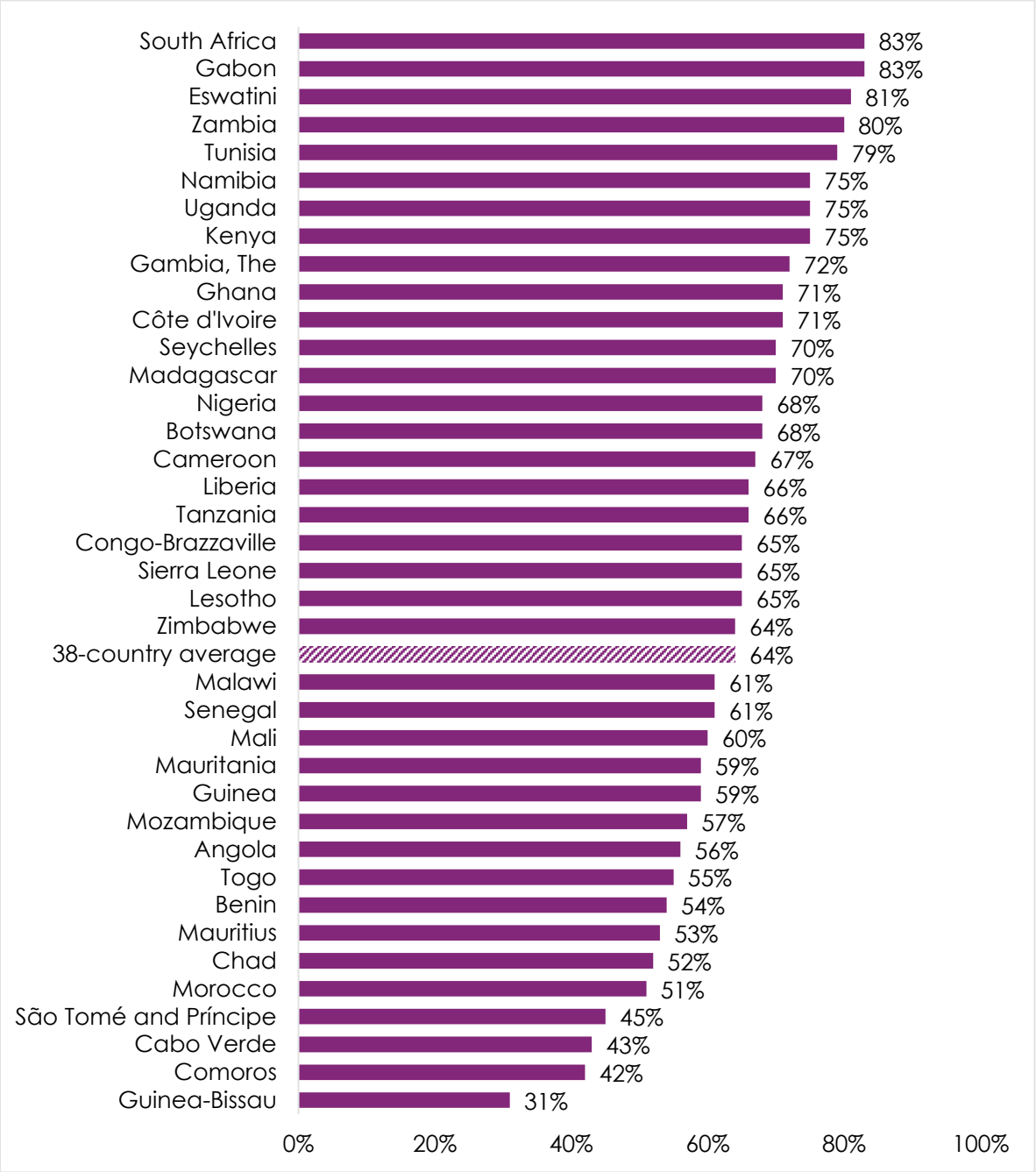
Figure 8: Country should allow fewer/no job seekers to enter | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: *Do you think [country] should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country? (% who say "fewer job seekers" or "no job seekers at all")*

Looking abroad: South Africans' attitudes toward emigration

People leave home for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict or resource scarcity, to avoid discrimination and oppression, to pursue better economic opportunities, or for any one or more of a myriad other reasons. Do South Africans think about emigrating? If so, what propels them to do so?

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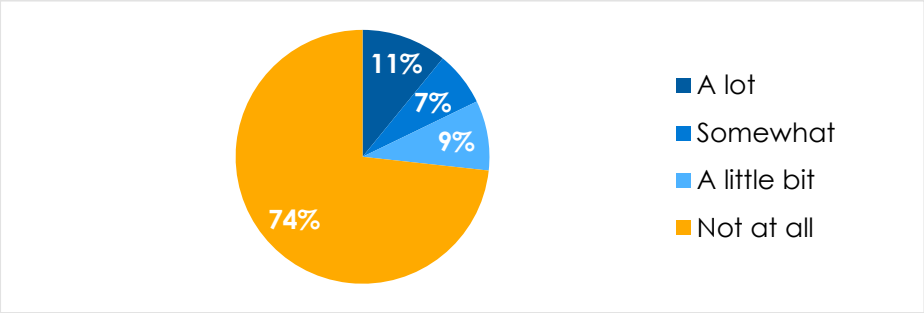
About one-quarter (26%) of South Africans say they have contemplated moving abroad, including 11% who have considered it "a lot" (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Considered emigrating | South Africa | 2025

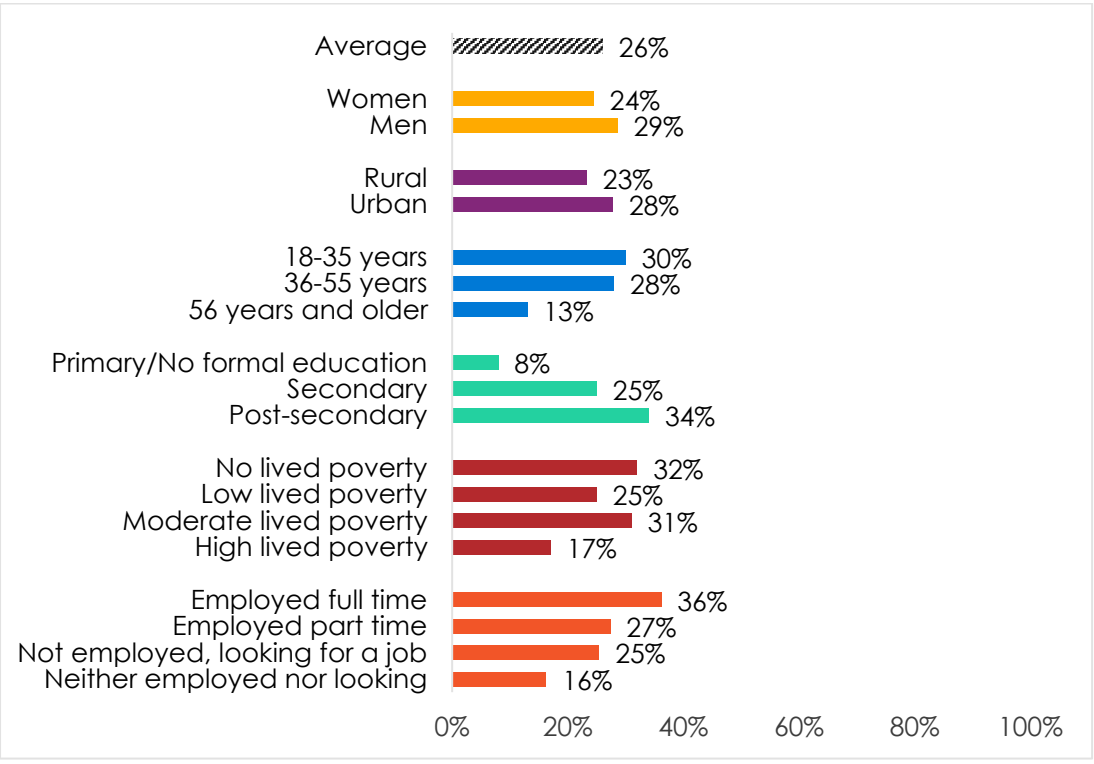


Respondents were asked: *How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?*

Men (29%) are more likely than women (24%) to say they have considered emigrating, as are urbanites (28%) compared to rural residents (23%) (Figure 10). Thoughts about leaving the country increase with greater education, ranging from just 8% among those with primary or no formal schooling to 34% among the most educated, and are most common among citizens holding full-time jobs (36%). The poorest respondents are least likely to consider leaving (17%).

About three in 10 youth (30%) and middle-aged South Africans (28%) have contemplated exiting, more than twice the share among the elderly (13%).

Figure 10: Considered emigrating | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked*: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live? (% who say "a little bit," "somewhat," or "a lot")*

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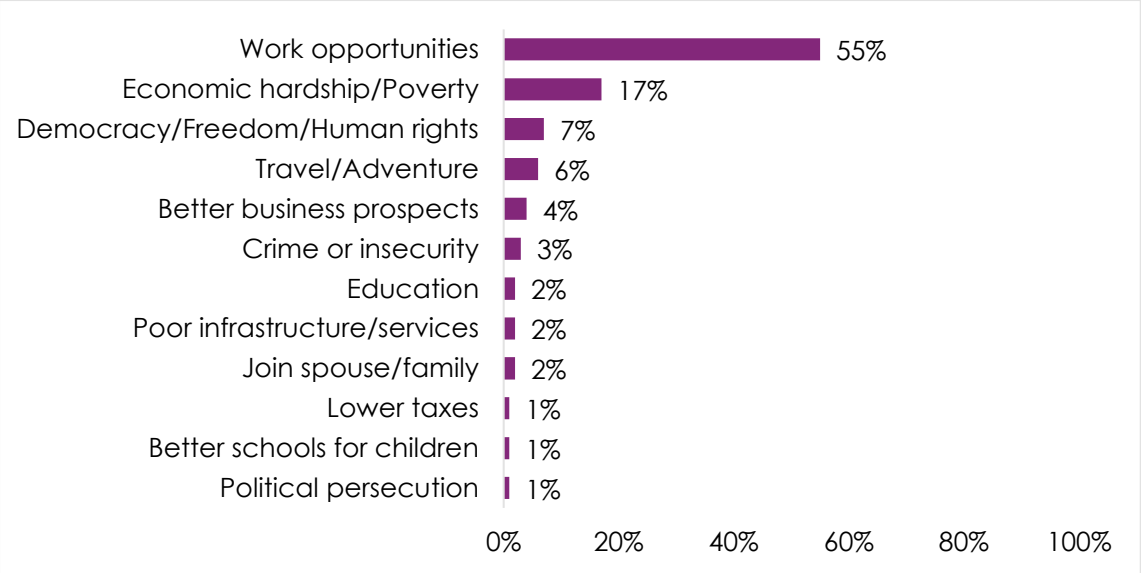
Among those who have considered emigration, the most frequently cited reasons are economic: 55% would leave for work opportunities and 17% to alleviate economic hardship (Figure 11).

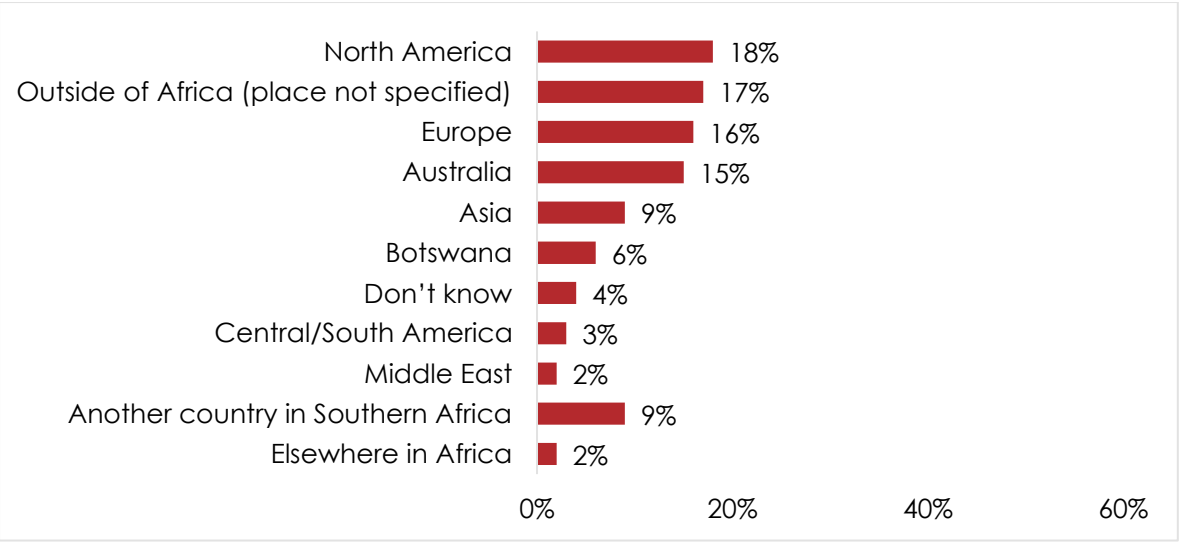
The most popular destinations for potential South African emigrants are North America (18%), Europe (16%), and Australia (15%), while another 17% would head for an unspecified place outside of Africa (Figure 12). About one in seven would opt for Botswana (6%) or another country in Southern Africa (9%), and 9% would go to Asia.

Figure 11: Reasons for emigration | South Africa | 2025



Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked: *There are several reasons why people leave their home to live in another country for an extended period of time. What about you? What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from South Africa? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

Figure 12: Preferred destination for emigration | South Africa | 2025



Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked: *If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

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Conclusion

Migration is an important and multifaceted challenge in South Africa. While four in 10 citizens support freedom of cross-border movement in the region, more than half do not endorse this view. About half perceive cross-border movement to be difficult in practice.

Although citizens express mixed attitudes when it comes to having foreign workers and refugees as neighbours, most report a desire to have fewer immigrants in the country, or even none at all. Indeed, South Africa ranks joint-first among African countries for its aversion to welcoming newcomers. Notably, tolerance toward foreign workers is much higher among wealthy citizens, perhaps underscoring the economic roots of the opposition to immigration.

Survey findings also show that about one-quarter of South Africans are thinking about finding greener pastures abroad. Most who have considered emigration cite economic reasons, suggesting that until South Africa makes progress on deep-seated economic challenges, the desire to leave will likely remain prevalent among its citizens.

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