

# Refugees in the new Johannesburg

by Loren B Landau and Karen Jacobsen

*Unfamiliar with hosting refugees, South Africa is struggling to come to terms with their arrival.*

Most of Africa's refugees live in rural areas and camps but a growing number are heading towards the cities. Since its transition to majority rule in 1994, South Africa has become the destination for tens of thousands of migrants and refugees from across the African continent, mostly settling in the country's urban centres. Their presence is not only changing the country's demography but is also having a visible effect on public attitudes and political rhetoric. While the 1998 Refugees Act demonstrates a strong and progressive commitment to refugee protection in line with international standards<sup>1</sup>, refugees continue to be subject to discrimination, police harassment, and anti-foreigner violence.

In 2002, the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and the Refugees and Forced Migration Program at Tufts University (Boston) initiated a study of refugees' experiences in and influence on Johannesburg. In early 2003, researchers conducted a survey in seven central Johannesburg neighbourhoods with high densities of refugees from some of Africa's main refugee-sending countries: Burundi, Angola, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>2</sup> We also surveyed Ethiopians and people from the Republic of Congo, two groups with a significant presence in Johannesburg. In all, 737 people responded to the survey, of whom 53% (392 people) were South Africans and 47% (345) were migrants and refugees. Of the latter category, 14% were from the DRC, 12% from Angola, 9% from Ethiopia, 8% from Somalia, 2% from the Republic of Congo and 1% from Burundi.<sup>3</sup>

Although not all of those surveyed qualify as 'refugees', 73% of the non-South African sample reported being either a refugee or asylum seeker. These ratios were highest among

Somali and Congolese (DRC) communities, at 93% and 90% respectively. (For ease of reference below, the non-South African sample is referred to as 'migrants' as it comprises both refugees - forced migrants - and those who have become migrants for other reasons.)

## Sample characteristics

Reflecting urbanisation trends worldwide, the migrants in our sample were considerably younger than the host population, with only 5% above the age of 40 compared with 22% of South Africans. They were also predominantly male (71% against 47% for South Africans) and far fewer had children: 64% of migrants reported no children as opposed to 35% of the South Africans.

One of the most striking features of those surveyed was the fact that they are overwhelmingly urban in origin. Just under 80% of all migrants surveyed reported living in cities for most of their lives (95% of Ethiopians) and another 17% spent the greatest part of their lives in towns. Less than 4% claimed rural origins. Although these figures varied dramatically between groups - with only 66% of people from DRC reporting coming from cities as compared to 95.4% of Ethiopians - they suggest that most of the migrants are likely to be relatively well-equipped to manage the challenges of urban living.

In addition, the study suggests that, compared with South Africans, the migrants have higher levels of education and are more skilled. 22% had finished tertiary education or earned a post-graduate degree, compared to 14% for South Africans. Another 47% reported receiving additional training or education, a proportion slightly higher but comparable with South Africans (42%).



### Flight and arrival patterns

There is an assumption on the part of some international organisations and the South African government that most of Johannesburg's migrants qualify as 'irregular movers': people



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who for 'non-compelling reasons' leave their country of first asylum where they have obtained 'effective protection' usually in the form of refugee camps.<sup>5</sup> Many officials also assume that those who make it to South Africa are 'asylum shoppers': people looking for the easiest or most profitable place to make an asylum claim.<sup>6</sup> Preliminary analysis lends some support for this position; most of the migrants in our sample travelled through countries where they could have claimed asylum and 39% reporting staying in another country for more than a week (13% of nearby Angolans against 68% of much more distant Ethiopians). There is also strong evidence to suggest that South Africa was not always the intended destination. On leaving their home countries, half of the migrants (50%) considered going elsewhere than South Africa. Of these, 62% considered going to North America or Europe, some 10% considered going elsewhere in Africa, while about 12% reported "having no plan".

Further analysis does not, however, support the contention that those surveyed are irregular movers or asylum shoppers. To qualify as an irregular mover, they should have applied for and received asylum in another country. Only 6% of those surveyed had ever stayed in a refugee camp or settlement and just over 2% reported receiving aid, suggesting that this is not the case. Moreover, if these people were asylum shoppers, they should be attracted to South Africa by promises of easy refugee status or aid. Given delays and other difficulties associated with getting status (see below) and a generally hostile environment, few are likely to be attracted for these reasons. Instead, the primary motivations for choosing South Africa were work and education (35%) and political, religious or ethnic freedoms (35%). Another 11% indicated that South Africa might enable them to be resettled or allow them to get to a third country but less than 1% said they were in the country in search of assistance.

### Harassment, the police and the Department of Home Affairs<sup>7</sup>

Refugee and migrant advocates in South Africa frequently criticise the police and the Department of Home

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Affairs for their treatment of refugees. The data indicate that such complaints are justified. For almost one-third of those surveyed, the process of obtaining an asylum decision from the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) took at least 18 months rather than the six-month period envisioned by law. Discussions with refugees reveal that cases often take three or more years during which they must actively push their applications. In follow-up interviews, many respondents report having to pay bribes to DHA officials or to private security guards just to enter the city's refugee reception centre. During this time, applicants must navigate Johannesburg's treacherous urban environment with little in the way of identity documents, limited access to employment, and almost no access to social and financial services.

Migrants are far more likely to be victims of crime or police harassment than South Africans. Despite being in the country for a limited period, almost three-quarters (72%) of the migrants surveyed reported that they or someone they live with has been a victim of crime, compared with 43% of South Africans (who have spent most of their lives in the country). Rather than helping to protect foreigners, police appear to be contributing to the problem.

When asked if the police had ever stopped them, 71% of migrants responded affirmatively compared with fewer than 30% of South Africans. Most of the time, police stop people to check immigration and identity documents but forced migrants report having their papers taken and even destroyed by the police. In follow-up interviews, many spoke of paying bribes to avoid arrest and possible deportation. Although South Africans are likely to support such activities - of the 70% of South Africans who thought crime in the city was increasing, almost three-quarters said that immigrants were among the primary reasons - there is little to justify continued police harassment. The South African Police Service's Hillbrow Police Station - located at the geographic centre of numerous migrant communities - reported that Johannesburg's foreigners are overwhelmingly the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of crime.<sup>8</sup>

### Livelihoods: obstacles and achievements

Given the formal and *de facto* restrictions on forced migrants' opportunities to pursue livelihoods – including prohibitions on work, lack of identity documents or papers demonstrating professional qualifications and discriminatory hiring practices – it is surprising that an almost equal number of South Africans and migrants report being unemployed: 42% and 39% respectively. A more careful look at employment profiles, however, reveals forced migrants' tenuous economic position.

In the sample, one third (32%) of South Africans report working full time in either the formal or informal sector, compared with only 7% of migrants. Over a quarter (28%) of the working migrants claimed to be self-employed compared with 6% of South Africans with petty trading and hawking combining to make up forced migrants' most significant occupation (21% against less than 1% for South Africans). Another 8% report owning small businesses, compared with just over 5% for South Africans. Not only does the income from such activities tend to be limited and unpredictable but street trading also exposes forced migrants to theft, violence and police harassment. The migrants' economic position is further compromised by the fact that, despite having smaller families, they often pay more for accommodation (48% pay more than R800/month – approx. \$125 – as opposed to 30% of South Africans).

One of the most significant economic problems facing refugees is their inability to access banking services (either savings or credit): 24% of migrants report having bank accounts in Johannesburg compared with 71% of South Africans. Inability to access formal financial services means that entrepreneurs have nowhere safe to keep their money, thus making them known targets for mugging and theft. Lack of credit is a serious constraint on migrants' economic activities, limiting the contribution they could make to Johannesburg if permitted to pursue entrepreneurial initiatives.

While there are widespread fears that immigrants are taking South Africans' jobs, there are good reasons to believe that migrants could make a much

stronger contribution to the city's economy. On aggregate, more than 15% of all migrants surveyed (28% of Ethiopians and 26% of Somalis) report owning businesses in their country of origin, and presumably have the skills and entrepreneurial spirit to do so again in South Africa. Another 9% report having worked in a professional position (e.g. doctor, lawyer, accountant) before coming to Johannesburg. Their presence could help fill the acute skills gap facing the inner city. Indeed, even with the restrictions placed on them, forced migrants are already creating jobs. While just 20% of South Africans report having paid someone to do work for them, 34% of forced migrants surveyed had. Even more significantly, more than two-thirds (67%) of those hired by migrants were South Africans.

### Policy implications

South Africa has much to gain from the migrant communities included in the sample but South Africans will only benefit from their resources if the country's leaders and urban communities welcome them:

- The city's social service agencies and businesses need to enforce South Africa's own laws, including a recent provision allowing asylum seekers the right to work and study.
- Inefficiency and corruption need to be rooted out in the Department of Home Affairs: refugees and asylum seekers require full and appropriate documentation.
- Access by migrants to preventive health care and educational opportunities needs to be improved.
- Access by migrants to bank accounts and credit also needs to be facilitated so that nationals and refugees can equally capitalise on their entrepreneurial skills for the benefit of all.
- Police and other law enforcement agencies should be urged to treat refugees and asylum seekers with the respect due to all of South Africa's residents.

### Conclusion

This piece of research was one of the first formal attempts to survey urban refugees in Africa, and it encountered

many problems. While imperfect, however, it will enable us to identify and compare trends and patterns across different cities in future research; the project is currently being expanded to Maputo (Mozambique) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). Replicating the survey over time will reveal the changing experience of refugees in African cities. Generating data on a wide range of socio-economic and political variables will also provide opportunities for other researchers to situate their studies within a larger comparative project. Perhaps most importantly, empirical data from this project can be useful in countering unfounded accusations and rhetoric aimed at refugees, ultimately promoting a more positive policy environment.

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For more on this research project and links to other relevant sites, please visit [www.wits.ac.za/fmsp/ujp](http://www.wits.ac.za/fmsp/ujp)

1. See: [www.sahrc.org.za/regulations\\_to\\_the\\_south\\_african\\_refugees\\_act.PDF](http://www.sahrc.org.za/regulations_to_the_south_african_refugees_act.PDF)
2. See UNHCR Statistical Yearbook (2001:20).
3. For more on the project's sampling strategy and logistical challenges, see K Jacobsen and L Landau 'The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration', *Disasters*, Vol. 27 (3): 185-206, 2003.
4. We recognise that these are self-reported claims with possibly exaggerated education levels but this bias is equally likely to apply to South Africans.
5. See Bruno Geddo's 'Durable Solutions to the Refugee Problem: UNHCR'S Regional Strategy for Southern Africa' [www.lhr.org.za/refugee/publics/perspect/geddo.htm](http://www.lhr.org.za/refugee/publics/perspect/geddo.htm)
6. At a special session of the Migration Dialogue for Southern Africa (MIDSA) focusing on forced migration, government representatives from countries throughout the region regularly spoke of the 'widespread practice of asylum shopping' (Lusaka, Zambia, 27-29 October 2003).
7. The agency responsible for immigration and refugees.
8. Director Louw cited a recently completed review of policy statistics during an interview with Loren Landau at the Hillbrow Police Station in Johannesburg on 18 July 2003.