



Youth Day 50 Years On

1. Introduction

The 16th of June 2026 marked 50 years since the Soweto uprising, when thousands of school children took to the streets to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a compulsory medium of instruction under the apartheid government's system of Bantu Education, and were met with bullets. The deep-seated cause was the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which was designed to deliver highly inferior, restricted education to African children to prepare them for a life of subservience. The Soweto Uprising fundamentally transformed the trajectory of South African politics and in the process altered the history of the country irrevocably.¹ It shattered the illusion of state invincibility, sparked nationwide riots and economic instability, and triggered severe international condemnation and economic sanctions against the apartheid government. It was also a demonstration of the extraordinary agency of youth.

While Youth Day is celebrated by many as a chance to focus on youth-related issues and to empower the young people of South Africa, the reality is often disappointing. South Africa's youth are still struggling decades after 1976. Veteran student activist Khusta Jack warned that those in power today are steadily dismantling the achievements of the liberation struggle.² And Seiso Mohai, Deputy Minister in the Presidency,³ commented that "South Africa's young people are expected to be the torchbearers of the future, yet the future they inherit is often bleak. High unemployment, violence, limited mobility and structural barriers undermine their ambitions".⁴

2. Who Are our Youth?

In South Africa, the official youth age is defined as 14 to 35 years old. This definition is enshrined

in national legislation.⁵ Our youth form a crucial demographic and make up nearly one-third of the population. According to the 2024 Mid-year Population Estimates approximately 21 million young people account for 33.1 per cent of the country's population,⁶ and about half its working-age population (ages 15–64).

South Africa's primary youth development blueprint is the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2030, implemented by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD), and driven operationally by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA). It focuses on economic empowerment, skills development, and digital transformation for youth.⁷ The NYP targets youth at local, provincial, and national levels, addressing both historical injustices and contemporary challenges facing young people, as well as fostering positive youth development. The policy, which is supposed to be regularly updated to ensure the effective implementation of interventions, also emphasises the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society, and the private sector.⁸

Parliament has signed several international and regional treaties that have a direct impact on achieving the rights of young people. These include the African Youth Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. South Africa has also established departments and entities with allocated budgets aimed at empowering and uplifting young people, and Parliament continues to play its oversight role over these entities. However, there have been budget cuts to youth funding. The Basic Education Employment Initiative budget, for example,

dropped from R5.6 billion to R340 million in 2026.⁹ This Initiative places unemployed youth as Education Assistants and General School Assistants in public schools.¹⁰ In the latest phase of the initiative 1.9 million young people applied for just over 200 000 job opportunities – nine people competing for every single place, with over 1.1 million applications submitted in under 24 hours. Young people are desperate to work.

3. Economic and Social Realities

Young South Africans face a compounding crisis of skyrocketing youth unemployment, structural inequality, persistent poverty, severe education inequality, and pervasive social ills. Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the first quarter of this year puts youth unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 at 60.9 per cent, up from 36.9 per cent for the broader 15 to 34 age group a decade ago.¹¹ Disparities between under-resourced public schools and private education severely limit career prospects. Schools in disadvantaged areas often lack resources and qualified teachers, and have poor infrastructure, leading to poor academic outcomes and limited career prospects.

Millions of young people are categorized as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training)¹² and are dealing with the hopelessness and the psychological trauma of joblessness. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) looks at youth unemployment in South Africa through a human development lens. A report developed by UNDP and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) highlights that youth unemployment in South Africa is not merely a problem but a defining development challenge that limits the earning potential of youth, stymies economic growth, threatens social cohesion, and puts pressure on public resources. Accordingly, in addressing youth unemployment, the country would simultaneously be addressing poverty and income inequality. Dealing with youth joblessness is not only sound economics but also a development imperative.¹³

"Prolonged joblessness can lead to a lost generation through the erosion of skills and human capital. In this regard, weaning youth from dependence on social grants to productive employment and entrepreneurship is critical to addressing this crisis," said Dr Ayodele Odusolaa, UNDP Resident Representative, South Africa. "Given that knowledge, skills

and expertise are the currencies of the 21st century, continuous investment in these elements is critical to meaningful results."¹⁴ A major cause of youth unemployment in South Africa is the mismatch between what employer's requirements are and the skills that young people actually have. This is mostly characterised by technical under-skilling relative to the expectations of employers. The country's schooling system has failed young people, with many learners going through the basic education system without acquiring the necessary literacy and numeracy skills necessary for a digital world.¹⁵ These barriers limit economic participation and social mobility for millions of young people who are unable to achieve economic independence. The ongoing legacy of historical inequality restricts access to networks, resources, and opportunities for wealth creation.

The unemployment crisis and accompanying desperation contribute to many societal issues, including rising crime rates, substance abuse, gender-based violence (GBV) and mental-health challenges.¹⁶ Youth development practitioner Kenneth Dirole¹⁷ points out that "South Africa's youth continue to face exclusion, now driven by unemployment. Our villages and townships are increasingly becoming graveyards for young talent. They have become ecosystems where alcohol consumption and its related activities are normalised pastimes for young people. We must replace the bottle with opportunity before the social fabric of our communities unravels beyond repair."¹⁸

4. Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Economic disadvantage and persistent racial inequalities in South Africa have long been linked to poor mental health outcomes.¹⁹ Prof Carrie Brooke-Sumner, Specialist Scientist at the South African Medical Research Council's Mental Health, Alcohol, Substance Use and Tobacco Research Unit (MASTRU), emphasises that "young people are navigating a critical phase of human development during which they experience heightened vulnerability to environmental factors that shape their mental health. In South Africa, the environmental forces include exposure to the effects of poverty and violence."²⁰ High rates of poverty, exposure to community violence, and economic anxiety contribute to escalating mental health challenges among young people and feed an

inter-generational cycle of violence, poverty, discrimination, and poor mental health.²¹ Studies show that “youth in low socioeconomic communities suffer significant disturbances in mental and emotional health because of exposure to violence and peer victimisation, manifesting in internalising disorders such as depression, anxiety and traumatic stress”.²²

Drugs and alcohol are used heavily as coping mechanisms for underlying psychological distress and serve as a means of escape from the despair of limited opportunities and systemic marginalization.²³ Widespread substance abuse in South African townships – such as the epidemics of *nyaope* and *whoonga*²⁴ – is deeply rooted in severe poverty, unemployment and intergenerational trauma.²⁵ Kenneth Diole reminds us that “for millions of young people, there is no job to wake up for and no facility to visit. The void left by dilapidated or non-existent recreational centres is being filled by alcohol, which has become the cheapest and most accessible form of ‘escape’ from a harsh economic reality”.²⁶

5. Violence and Gangs

Speaking at the release of the fourth quarter crime statistics in May 2026, the Acting Minister of Police, Prof Firoz Cachalia, said that “alcohol remains a powerful accelerant of violence. In this quarter, 7 267 incidents of assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, rape, attempted murder and murder were linked to alcohol use”.²⁷ The vast majority of these perpetrators are young adult males living in urban, densely populated metropolitan areas.²⁸ Young men in South Africa bear a disproportionate burden of the country’s interpersonal violence epidemic. The homicide rate is approximately 101 per 100 000 population for males aged 15 to 29, ranking it among the highest youth murder rates globally. Men account for roughly 87 to 90 per cent of all murder victims in South Africa.²⁹ Criminologists from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) attribute these high numbers to systemic challenges, including gang territorialism, high youth unemployment, normalized trauma, and the widespread availability of illegal firearms.³⁰

Many youths join gangs because they offer a substitute for what the state often fails to provide. In highly impoverished areas, gangs step in to offer financial assistance, physical protection, and a recognized ‘family’ structure.³¹

Furthermore, the lack of positive male role models and recreational facilities pushes marginalized youth toward gangs to find identity and significance.³² Gangs often rely on the youth for both the distribution and consumption of illegal drugs, leading to widespread substance abuse and addiction. Furthermore, young men in gangs are frequently socialized into toxic definitions of masculinity and power, which heightens rates of GBV and other violent crime.³³

6. Participating in Democracy

South Africa is a participatory democracy where those over the age of eighteen are eligible to vote. Over 8.6 million young people under the age of 35 are registered to vote, but this represents a major youth voter registration crisis, as roughly 70 per cent of eligible young South Africans remain unregistered. The latest data from the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) and Statistics South Africa highlights a stark divide between registered and unregistered youth ahead of the 2026 local government elections. Approximately 14 million citizens under the age of 35 have not registered to vote.³⁴ A 2026 study by the civil society organisation Democracy Development Program (DDP), reported by the Daily Maverick, found that external factors such as inaccessible voting stations and low civic literacy contributed to these high numbers.³⁵ A 2025/2026 IEC Voter Participation survey conducted by the HSRC found that 76 per cent of young people aged 16-24 agreed with the statement that political parties give too little attention to the concerns and needs of youth.³⁶ The grassroots anti-immigrant civic group *March and March* draws significant participation from young South Africans who cite concerns over high youth unemployment, competition for limited job and school placements, and strained public services.³⁷

There is widespread disillusionment in the political process. Many disaffected young citizens feel that voting does not change their daily realities after years of unmet election promises, crumbling infrastructure and lack of service delivery. There is a lack of youth representation in Parliament, with many feeling that the current political leadership is ageing and completely out of touch with modern youth’s struggles. In the National Assembly there are only 33 parliamentarians under the age of 35 out of 400 members – a mere 8.5 per cent.³⁸

7. The Role of Corruption

Fifty years after the June 16th uprising, South Africa has become the most economically unequal society on earth. The historical legacy of apartheid continues to severely impact education, employment outcomes and spatial segregation. The HSRC points out that corruption is widely experienced and increasingly normalised in South Africa.³⁹ Trade union federation COSATU emphasizes that corruption drives severe unemployment by crippling economic growth, discouraging foreign investment and draining public funds. Embezzlement and state capture divert billions away from infrastructure and essential services into private hands, destroying existing jobs and preventing the creation of new ones.⁴⁰ COSATU puts it thus: “We have seen parastatals, major private sector companies, ministries and local government officials run amok by corruption by *tenderpreneurs* and *Covidpreneurs*, who have no

shame to feed on the plight of the poor; from food parcels to fixing tenders, from abusing resources for development needs of the poor to collapsing job creating projects”.⁴¹

8. Conclusion

Efforts to address youth unemployment require a comprehensive approach encompassing education reform, skills development initiatives, and targeted employment programmes. Collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society is essential to create an enabling environment for youth employment. Moreover, policies promoting entrepreneurship and small business development can empower young people to create their own opportunities.⁴² “Addressing youth unemployment not only contributes to economic growth but also fosters social cohesion and reduces inequality, laying the foundation for a more inclusive and prosperous society”.⁴³

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¹ <https://sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>

² Daily Maverick – Defend Truth

³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2026-03-10-why-social-cohesion-remains-south-africas-most-urgent-project/?d>

⁴ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2026-03-10-why-social-cohesion-remains-south-africas-most-urgent-project/?d>

⁵ National Youth Development Agency Act No. 54 of 2008.

⁶ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18083>

⁷ https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202007/nypdraft-2030-28-july-2020.pdf

⁸ https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/parliament-statement-youth-day_2

⁹ <https://youthcapital.co.za/>

¹⁰ <https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/BEEI.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-15-what-the-youth-are-marching-for-in-our-32-year-old-democracy/>

¹² <https://jefjournal.org.za/index.php/jef/article/view/899/1777>

¹³ <https://www.undp.org/south-africa/press-releases/undp-south-africas-national-human-development-report-highlights-key-challenges-and-new-strategies-youth-employment-21st>

¹⁴ <https://www.undp.org/south-africa/press-releases/undp-south-africas-national-human-development-report-highlights-key-challenges-and-new-strategies-youth-employment-21st>

¹⁵ <https://theconversation.com/millions-of-young-south-africans-are-jobless-study-finds-that-giving-them-soft-skills-like-networking-helps-their-prospects-202969>

¹⁶ https://www.psa.co.za/docs/default-source/psa-documents/media-statements/youth-day-2025---empowering-next-generations-amidst-ongoing-socio-economic-challenges.pdf?sfvrsn=3e4d1f7d_4

- ¹⁷ Kenneth Dirole is a co-founder of YT Consulting Africa, a boutique research and advisory firm focusing on youth development in Africa.
- ¹⁸ https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-01-21-hitting-the-bottle-alcohol-is-destroying-the-future-of-sas-young-people/?utm_campaign=Post-667&utm_medium=email&utm_source=CMS-5
- ¹⁹ https://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/media/2025_08_28_MentalHealth.pdf
- ²⁰ <https://health-e.org.za/2025/10/10/south-africas-youth-face-a-mental-health-crisis/>
- ²¹ <https://sahr.hst.org.za/article/142241-putting-child-and-adolescent-mental-health-at-the-centre-building-an-ecosystem-of-support>
- ²² <https://sajp.org.za/index.php/sajp/article/view/2311/3561>
- ²³ <https://health-e.org.za/2025/10/10/south-africas-youth-face-a-mental-health-crisis/>
- ²⁴ Nyaope (or whoonga) is a highly addictive street cocktail primarily composed of low-grade heroin, cannabis, and sometimes antiretroviral (ARV) drugs.
- ²⁵ <https://jcmsa.org.za/index.php/jcmsa/article/view/129/600>
- ²⁶ https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-01-21-hitting-the-bottle-alcohol-is-destroying-the-future-of-sas-young-people/?utm_campaign=Post-667&utm_medium=email&utm_source=CMS-
- ²⁷ <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/acting%C2%A0minister-firoz-cachalia-fourth%C2%A0quarter%C2%A0crime%C2%A0statistics-22-may-2026>
- ²⁸ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12620>
- ²⁹ <https://sajs.co.za/en/article/view/18875>
- ³⁰ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-south-africa-s-crime-problem-turning-around>
- ³¹ https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0037-80542021000100009
- ³² <https://cge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CGE-Gangs-Report-Web.pdf>
- ³³ <https://cge.org.za/the-persistence-of-male-gangs-in-south-africa/>
- ³⁴ https://web.facebook.com/IECSouthAfrica/posts/did-you-know-stats-sa-reports-14-million-unregistered-youth-18-35-in-south-afric/716584170503674/?_rdc=1&_rdr
- ³⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-04-young-people-dont-vote-we-asked-what-would-get-them-to-the-polls/>
- ³⁶ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-04-young-people-dont-vote-we-asked-what-would-get-them-to-the-polls/>
- ³⁷ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-15-what-the-youth-are-marching-for-in-our-32-year-old-democracy/>
- ³⁸ <https://www.parlimeter.org.za/post/youth-in-parliament-2025>
- ³⁹ <https://hsrc.ac.za/news/review/normalised-misconduct-how-south-africans-feel-about-and-experience-corruption/>
- ⁴⁰ <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CORRUPTION-LEAD-TO-MORE-JOB-LOSSES.pdf>
- ⁴¹ <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CORRUPTION-LEAD-TO-MORE-JOB-LOSSES.pdf>
- ⁴² <https://www.gov.za/blog/creating-work-and-opportunities-young-people>
- ⁴³ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266>