



RETIRING THE 1994 GENERATION OF PUBLIC SERVANTS

From a Party-State Public Service to one
ready for Multi-party Democracy

n s new south
institute

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STIFTUNG

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

1. **Party-State** – A situation where the dominant political party treats the public administration as an extension of the party itself.
2. **Multi-Party Public Service** – A system where the public service operates autonomously from the political system and serves whichever party is in power faithfully and competently.
3. **Staff Cohort/Dispensation** – Refers to the occupational category a public servant belongs to within a department.
4. **Dispensation** – The rank or level of a public servant, indicating whether they belong to the Senior Management Service, Middle Management Service, or Occupational Specific Dispensation.
5. **Professionalisation** – The process of ensuring that public servants possess both the necessary skills and the appropriate ethical orientation to perform their duties effectively.
6. **Merit-Based Recruitment** – A system where officials are appointed based on their qualifications, competencies, and professional experience rather than political affiliation.
7. **Public Service Act** – Legislation that governs the employment and management of public servants in South Africa, outlining their responsibilities and limitations.
8. **Occupational Specific Dispensation (OSD)** – A framework for categorising and compensating public servants according to their specific professional skills and responsibilities.
9. **PERSAL** – The Personnel and Salary System used by the South African government to manage human resources data for public sector employees.
10. **Director-General (DG)** – The highest-ranking administrative official in a government department responsible for executing policies and overseeing departmental operations.
11. **Learner-Educator Ratio (LER)** – A measure used in the education sector that indicates the number of learners per educator, reflecting resource allocation and teaching conditions.
12. **Austerity Measures** – Economic policies aimed at reducing government spending, which may affect public service employment and operations.
13. **Succession Planning** – The process of identifying and preparing future leaders to replace retiring or outgoing public servants.
14. **Generational Shift** – The transition in the public service workforce as older employees retire and younger employees enter the system.
15. **Administrative Autonomy** – The independence of public service institutions from political interference, ensuring that professional administrators make operational decisions based on merit and policy requirements.
16. **Public Sector Reform** – Policy initiatives aimed at improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of government institutions.
17. **Accountability Mechanisms** – Systems and processes designed to ensure that public servants adhere to legal and ethical standards in their work.
18. **Transformation of the Public Service** – The process of restructuring the public service to align with democratic principles, merit-based appointments, and institutional integrity.
19. **Demographic Change in the Public Service** – The shifting age, gender, and racial composition of government employees over time.
20. **Public Administration vs. Political Office** – The distinction between civil service roles (focused on policy implementation and public management) and political roles (focused on governance and decision-making).

DATA AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED¹ POLICY MAKING

Policy debates about public service reform have tended to happen in the absence of data on the morphology of government departments and entities. As a result, analysis tends to be general and abstract. While important work has been done on necessary actions, the high level of generality is an obstacle to developing concrete strategies and tactics to implement the proposals in question.

The Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Sector sets out a clear vision for reform but could benefit from a stronger emphasis on data-driven insights related to broad social trends in the public service and the morphology of government entities. While it outlines important principles for enhancing professionalism, it does not explicitly incorporate statistical trends on issues such as workforce demographics, vacancy rates or the distribution of skills across different levels of government. Strengthening the use of quantitative data in public service reform could provide a more nuanced understanding of key challenges and opportunities. For example, the Auditor-General's Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) report (AGSA, 2024) has consistently highlighted areas where municipalities struggle with financial and governance challenges, yet such insights are not always integrated into broader discussions on public sector professionalisation. Similarly, while the Public Service Commission (PSC) plays a critical role in promoting ethics and integrity in the public service, there is an opportunity to complement this work with comprehensive workforce data analysis to track trends in recruitment, retention, and capacity-building efforts. In sectors such as education, where Learner-Educator Ratio (LER) statistics indicate

shifts in staffing patterns (Department of Basic Education, 2022), incorporating these trends into planning discussions could enhance workforce development strategies. Strengthening the role of data analytics, demographic forecasting and performance metrics in public sector professionalisation efforts could further support evidence-based decision-making and ensure that reforms are well-aligned with operational realities² (de Jager & du Toit, 2013).

This paper is a first in a series of essays that draws on analysis of anonymised government Human Resources data (PERSAL) to describe salient features of the public service as a whole and of key departments in particular. The series will address questions of the size of departments over the last 15 years, how different staff cohorts have grown or declined, the social profile of officials in terms of age, gender and race, and fluctuations in the geographical footprint of departments.

In this inaugural essay, we argue that the public service is in the midst of a second major transformation. After 1994, public service reform efforts focused on changing the *demographic* character of government departments, especially in leadership roles. This has largely been achieved³. The public service now faces a new *generational* transformation as those public servants who entered government after 1994 are approaching retirement age. Yet, there is currently no new generation to replace them. This makes current reform efforts more urgent. We have to start training and preparing a new generation of public servants now.

1 We are very grateful to the Department of Public Service and Administration, with whom the NSI has a Memorandum of Agreement and who both provided the data analysed here and assisted with some of the analysis. We have relied upon and assumed, without independent verification, the accuracy and completeness of the information provided. Any conclusions or insights should be interpreted with consideration of potential data limitations, including but not limited to errors in data capture, inconsistencies in reporting or changes in underlying assumptions. Users should exercise their own judgement and, where necessary, seek independent verification before making decisions based on this analysis.

2 See Paine Cronin, G. and Sadan, M. (2015). 'Use of evidence in policy making in South Africa: An exploratory study of attitudes of senior government officials', *African Evaluation Journal*, 3(1), a145. Available at: <https://aejonline.org/index.php/aej/article/view/145> (Accessed: 20 March 2025). See too, Korsten, L. (2024) 'Lack of African data causing "policy missteps"', *SciDev.Net*, 17 July. Available at: <https://www.scidev.net/sub-saharan-africa/opinions/lack-of-african-data-causing-policy-missteps/> (Accessed: 20 March 2025).

3 Fernandez, S., & Lee, H. (2016). 'The transformation of the South African Public Service: exploring the impact of racial and gender representation on organisational effectiveness'. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 54(01), 91–116. DOI:10.1017/s0022278x15000816

PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

In 2022, the National School of Government published the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service (hereafter, Framework Document). It was a landmark development that rejuvenated discussion about how to reform government. The document has gone through several iterations and when Acting Minister Thulas Nxesi announced that it had been approved by cabinet in October of that year, its brief had extended to the whole ‘public sector’. At the heart of it lies a basic premise: a capable state needs qualified and competent officials “who know what they are doing”⁴. To the document’s credit, there is much thought about what merit and professionalisation consist of in the South African context. It is not simply about having a qualification, a degree, for example, or even requisite experience. The Constitution requires that public servants perform their jobs according to the norms and principles set out in Section 195. Public servants have to do their jobs within a normative framework, that is.

Professionalising the public service has a double sense in this regard:

- On the one hand, it means making sure that officials appointed have the appropriate skills and experience to do their jobs well.
- On the other hand, it means ensuring that officials have the right ‘attitude’ to do their jobs according to the values of the Constitution.

The framework document emphasises the importance of *training* and *education* in the professionalisation process. It moots the introduction of a minimum entry examination for prospective officials, proposes merit-based examinations for promotions and on verifying qualifications, promoting integrity and assessing competence⁵.

Complementing the professionalisation framework, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) prepared an amendment to the Public Service Act in 2023. It too addressed the question of why public servants were not doing what they were supposed to – yet added a different perspective. Rather than a question of knowledge or ethics, the DPSA addressed a structural constraint in departments. Post-apartheid reforms did not adequately distinguish between the ruling party and government administrations in a one party-dominant political system. Existing legislation gives the political executive too much control over key tasks, including recruitment and operational decisions, leaving directors-general and heads of departments at the mercy of ministers and MECs to get on with their jobs. This is what the amendment to the PSA does: If passed into law, it will rebalance relations in departments, removing administrative powers from politicians and giving them to senior officials.

Taken together, the professionalisation framework and the amendment to the Public Service Bill establish the basis for a progressive reform of government in South Africa in three directions:

- Recruiting officials on the basis of merit.
- Socialising officials according to constitutional norms.
- Establishing the autonomy of the public administration in relation to the political class.

This report draws on an analysis of the government’s PERSAL data to argue that the public service in South Africa is ageing. In many departments, thousands of officials are approaching retirement age. South Africa must move quickly to reform, educate and recruit a new generation of officials because, as it stands now, current efforts are focused on personnel who will soon be exiting.

4 Republic of South Africa (2022). ‘A National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector’. National School of Government: <https://www.thensg.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/NATIONAL-FRAMEWORK-BOOKLET.pdf> (accessed 24 March 2025), p.6.

5 Ngcaweni, Busani (2025). ‘South Africa has a problem with people in the public service lying about their qualifications: what needs to change’. *The Conversation*, https://theconversation.com/south-africa-has-a-problem-with-people-in-the-public-service-lying-about-their-qualifications-what-needs-to-change-244942?utm_medium=article_clipboard_share&utm_source=theconversation.com (accessed 21 March 2025).

A GENERATIONAL SHIFT

South African public servants are ageing and there are too few young people joining and staying in government departments to replace them. This fact explains, in part, the rising costs of the public service. More and more officials, by virtue of their length of service in government, have reached or are reaching the upper limits of their salary brackets. In other words, rising *consumption* costs of the public service are not necessarily evidence of a bloated institution. There are not too many public servants. The opposite is also true. Austerity has not seen a reduction in the size of the state⁶. Rather, the public service in absolute terms has been largely stable over the last decade and a half, with rises in the post-COVID period.

In the analysis below we will focus on the South African Police Service⁷, the Department of Health and the Department of Education. These are the entities that touch the lives of most South Africans directly and on a daily basis. They determine the safety of our neighbourhoods, the quality of healthcare and the education of most children. In addition, their staff make up more than 35% of all public servants. In 2022, the DPSA noted that there were 1,216,675 officials in the public service as a whole. More than 10% of them were nurses and nursing assistants (123 000). Police officers alone (138 000) make up another 10% of government employees and teachers (170 000), a further 15%. We will see, however, that police officers, teachers and nurses are ageing and new, younger cohorts are not coming through the system.

We were provided with 165 613 997 anonymised PERSAL records for the Department of Health and the Department of Education. Additionally, we were provided with 41 391 373 records for the Department of Cooperative Governance, Police, Home Affairs, Justice and Constitutional Development and Public Service and Administration. In total, the dataset included 208 005 370 records across these seven departments.

After removing duplicate records and excluding data from 1 April 2024 to 30 November 2024, our analysis focused on 192 311 458 records spanning the 15-year period from April 2009 to March 2023 for the Departments of Health, Education and Police. These records correspond to approximately 2 330 764 officials, though some officials may have been employed across multiple departments and analysed separately.

We have taken reasonable steps to promote the integrity of the data, which supports our confidence in the analysis, while acknowledging inherent limitations. These include:

Public Service Ratios:

The Power BI model's ratios were consistent with our understanding of the public sector, including departmental distributions, the proportion of permanent versus temporary employees, and demographic factors such as population groups and gender distribution.

Institution Identification:

Through keyword analysis, we derived institution names from job responsibilities within the Department of Health. Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital had the highest number of officials, which aligns with its status as the largest public hospital in South Africa. Tygerberg, the second-largest public hospital, ranked second in our Power BI model, followed by Charlotte Maxeke, Groote Schuur, and Dr George Mukhari, each recognised as major public hospitals.

Geographic Distribution:

Where locations could be inferred from job responsibilities, the geographic distribution of officials matched expectations, reflecting known population patterns across South Africa.

⁶ Sachs, Michael, Amra, Rashaad, Madonko, Thokozile and Willcox, Owen (2025). *Budget 2025 Preview. Pressures and tensions along the austerity road to fiscal sustainability*. Public Economy Project: Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, Wits University.

⁷ Police officers and other staff of the South African Police Service are part of the public service, though their conditions of employment do not fall under the Public Service Act but the South African Police Service Act of 1995.

Employment Trends:

We analysed the duration of employment for officials within each department by counting unique 'date of data extraction' values per official. The observed trends aligned with our understanding of workforce dynamics in these departments and were consistent with broader patterns identified in our analysis.

The table below reflects an overview per Department:

Department	Officials	Records
Police	282 031	34 443 264
Education	1 356 728	96 463 093
Health	692 005	61 405 101
Total	2 330 764	192 311 458

Age calculations were based on the recorded date of birth, with potential capturing errors that may affect accuracy.

The age of each official was determined by calculating the difference between each extraction date and their date of birth, using total days divided by 365.25. As a result, an official may appear in different age categories throughout the 15-year period.

The age groups were categorised as follows:

- 30 years old or younger.
- 31 to 40 years.
- 41 to 50 years.
- 51 to 65 years.
- Older than 65 years.

In the discussion below, we will focus on each department in turn, considering aggregate dynamics across all staff cohorts and occupations (police officers, for example, and administrators and so on) and dispensations (senior managers, middle managers, those employed on the Occupational Specific Dispensation). We will also discuss regional differences between offices and institutions in the same department; police-stations, for example, or hospitals.

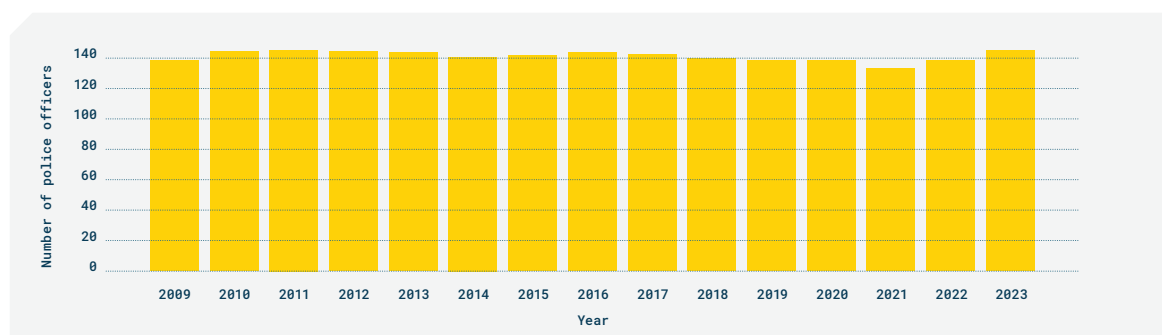
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THE AGEING OF THE POLICE

The SAPS has been largely stable in absolute numbers between 2009 and 2023, increasing slightly from 192 724 to 195 202 in 2023 (1.29%). This statistic includes all occupations, including police officers and other job

categories, like administrative officers, cleaners, human resources personnel and so on. Amongst police officers specifically, there was a slightly more significant rise (4.17%) from 138 377 officers in 2009 to 144 149 in 2023.

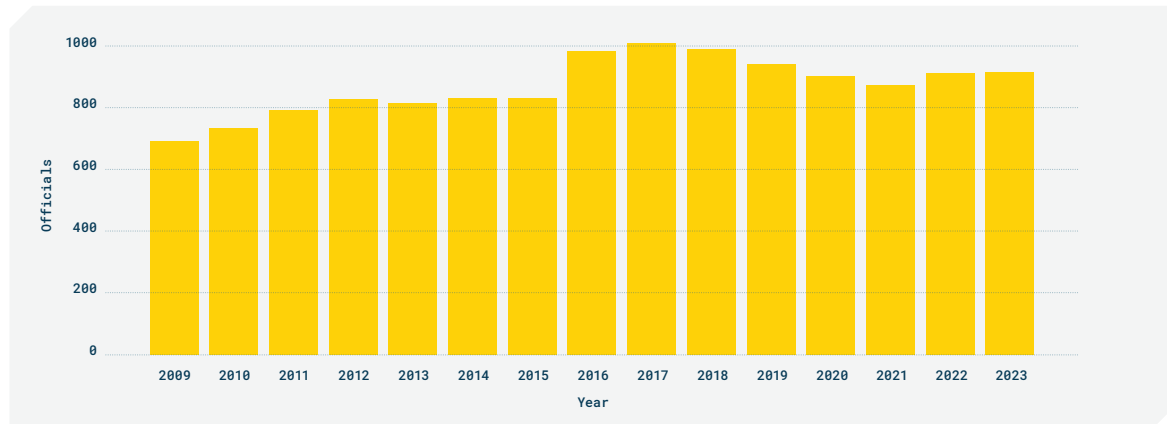
Figure: Number of police officers in the South African Police Service (2009 – 2023)



The police senior management, comprising generals, lieutenant generals, major generals and brigadiers, rose by 19.54% between 2009 and 2012, stabilising at 829 in

2015 before shooting up to 979 and then 1 008 in 2017. It declined over the following years but has started to rise again recently.

Figure: Number of generals, lieutenant generals, major generals and brigadiers in the SAPS (2009 – 2023)



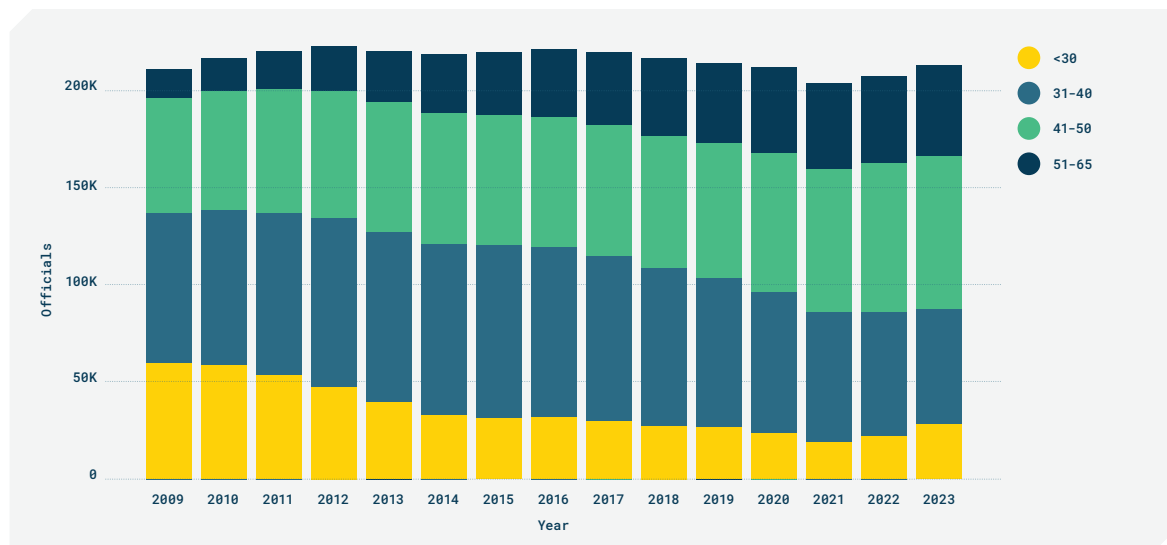
There are striking patterns in the age profiles of SAPS staff as a whole and amongst police officers and senior managers in particular. In the graph below, we have modelled the age of all personnel by year and according to age bracket:

- under 30 years of age.
- between 31 and 40 years.
- between 41 and 50 years.
- 51 to retirement age at 65.
- older than 65.

The analysis shows that there has been a significant

decline of young people in the police. In 2009, there were 58 578 people under the age of 30, whilst 15 years later, that number had halved to 27 817. Similarly, the number of people between 31 to 40 has dropped from around 77 000 in 2009 to just over 59 000 in 2023, a decline of 23.76%. In contrast, the number of SAPS personnel between 41 and 50 has risen from roughly 59 000 people in 2009 to around 78 000 in 2023. Similarly, the age cohort 51 to 65 has grown from around 14 000 in 2009 to around 46 000 in 2023, a spectacular rise of 225.32%. Taken together, these figures mean that 1) personnel in the SAPS are ageing and 2) that the police service is failing to recruit and retain young professionals.

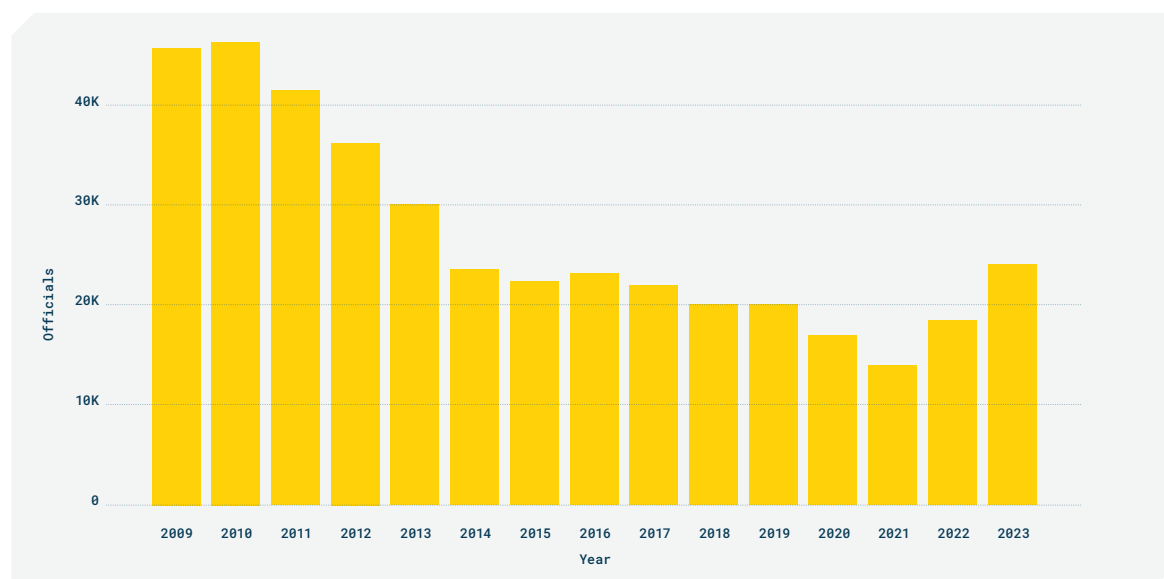
Figure: Age profile of all personnel in the SAPS (2009 – 2023)



These developments are especially stark amongst police officers themselves. The number of officers younger than 30 fell by more than two-thirds between 2009 and 2021,

before rising slightly in the following years. There are still almost half the number of young police officers in 2023 as there were in 2009.

Figure: Number of police officers, 30 years old and below (2009 – 2023)



In contrast, there has been a steady rise in the number of middle age police officers (age-bracket 41 – 50 years of age), and an especially dramatic increase in the proportion of older officers. In 2009, only around 7 700 police officers were over 50 years of age. By 2023, almost 29 000 policemen and women were approaching

retirement age, an increase of almost 300%. Whereas in 2009, young people under the age of 30 made up a third of all police officers, by 2023 this proportion had dropped to less than 17%. In contrast, less than 6% of officers were older than 50 in 2009, whereas by 2023, roughly 20% were.

Figure: Number of police officers between 41 and 50 years of age (2009 – 2023)

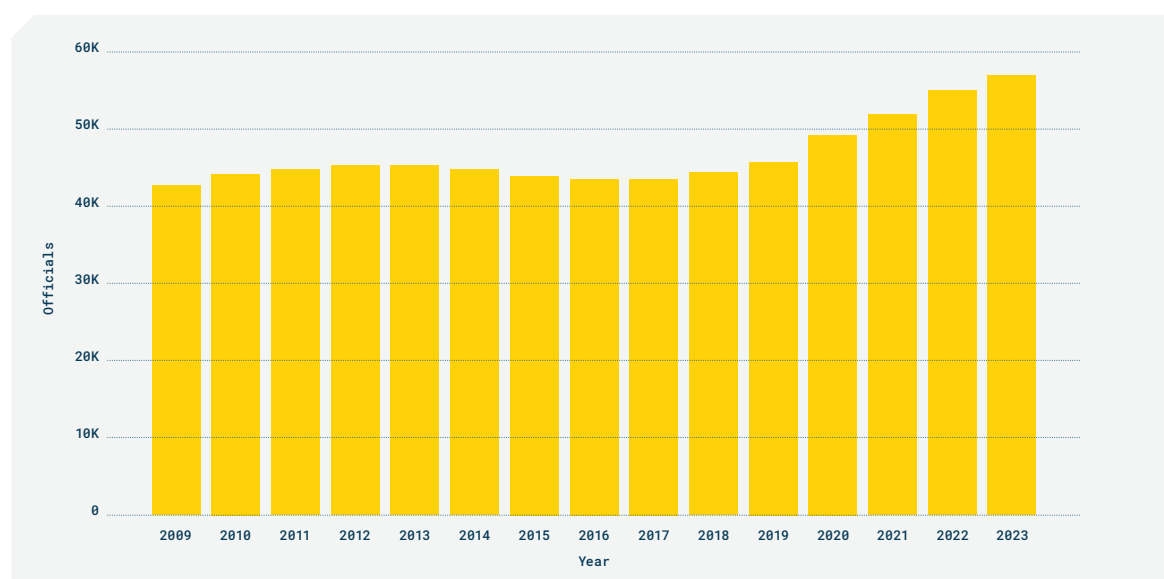
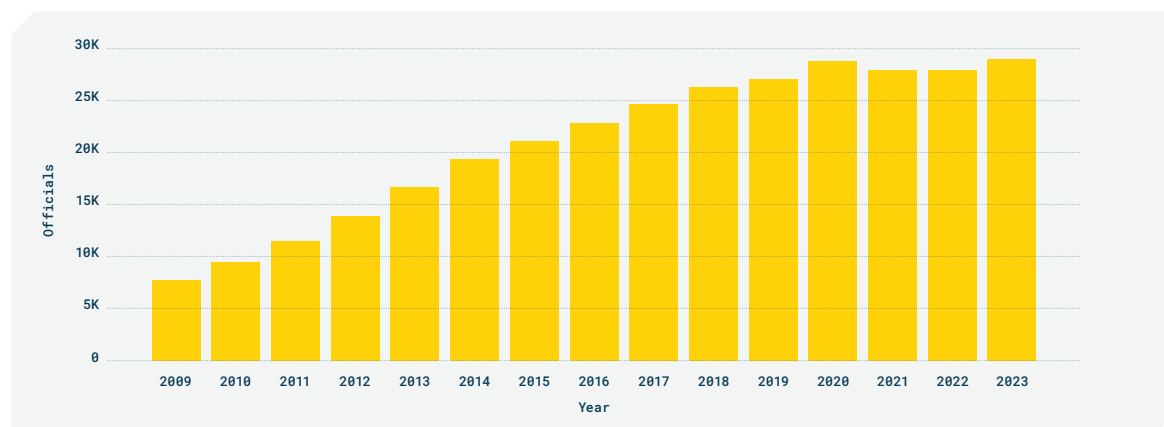


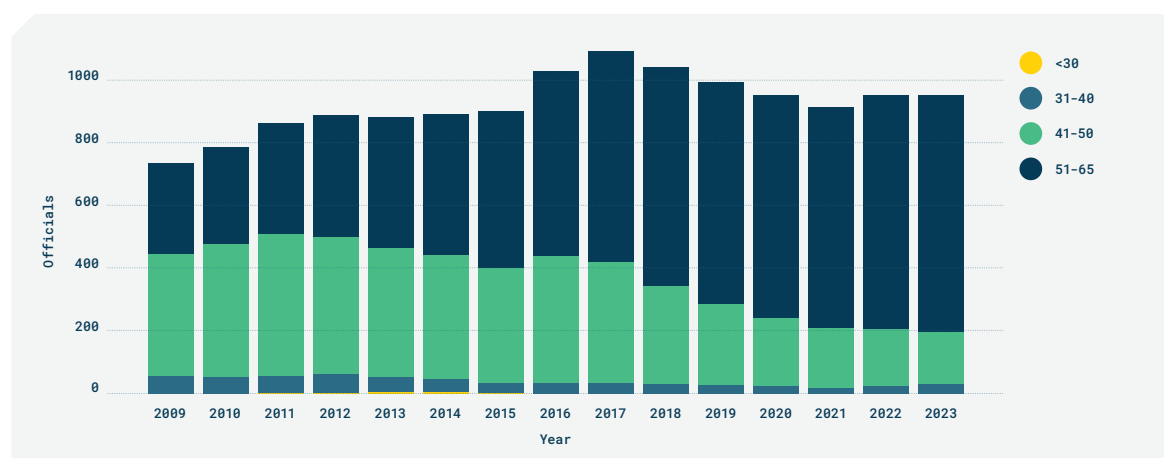
Figure: Number of police officers approaching retirement age



The ageing of the police is most pronounced in senior management. While it is common that senior positions tend to be occupied by people with greater experience and, hence, more seniority in years, the average age of generals and brigadiers has increased dramatically over the last 15

years. In 2009, 60% of senior managers in the police were 50 years of age and below. By 2023 this number had fallen to 20%. Of the 951 senior managers in 2023 now, 756 are between 51 and 65, an astonishing, 80%.

Figure: Senior management of the SAPS by age-bracket (2009 – 2023)



South Africa has a predominantly young population alongside a high crime rate. Many serious crimes, such as murder and robbery, are often committed by individuals in their late teens or early 20s⁸. Since a significant portion of police work involves patrolling and responding to

social emergencies and disorders⁹, it is worth considering whether an ageing police force is optimally positioned in terms of physical endurance and stamina to effectively meet the demands of policing a younger population.

8 Salfati, Gabrielle C., Labuschagne, Gerard N., Horning, Amber M., Sorochinski, Marina and De Wet, Jackie (2014). 'South African Serial Homicide: Offender and Victim Demographics and Crime Scene Actions'. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jip.1425>.

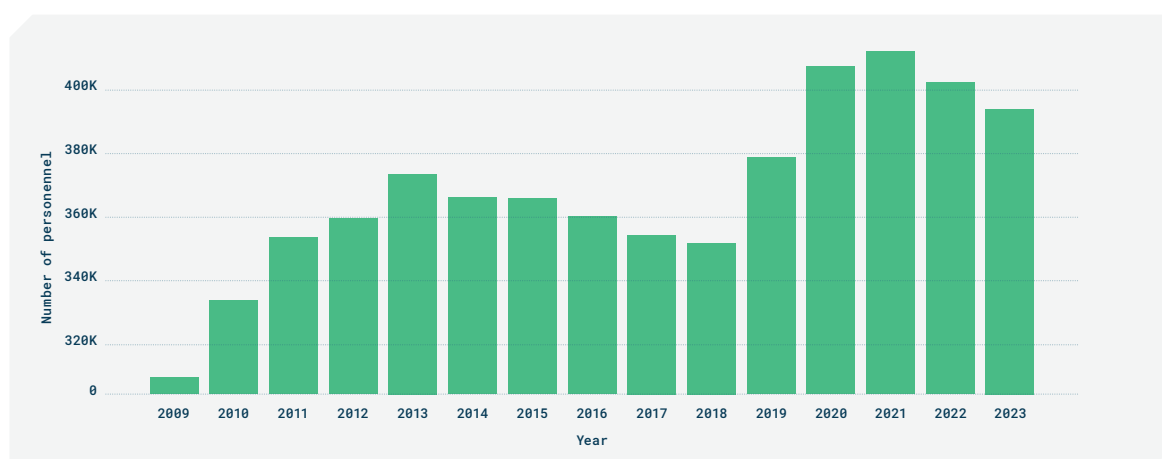
9 Bittner, Egon (1974). 'Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: A theory of the police'. In Herbert Jacob (Ed.), *The Potential for Reform of Criminal Justice*, pp. 17–44. Sage Publications.

THE AGEING OF NURSES

We find similar ageing trends in the Department of Health. The number of personnel in the Department of Health, including the national department and all nine provinces, grew steadily between 2009 and 2013, rising from 309 579

to 373 595. It started to decline at a slower rate, dropping to 35 211 in 2018. Then the COVID epidemic struck and numbers jumped reaching more than 412 000 by 2021. They have started to come down slowly since then.

Figure: Absolute number of personnel in the Department of Health (2009 – 2023)



The number of Professional Nurses in the Department of Health has risen across the time period in question, reaching a high of roughly 87 000 nurses in 2021.

The number of nursing assistants did not keep pace with the growth of professional nurses, declining from 2009 to 2019 before rising again when the COVID epidemic struck.

Figure: The number of professional nurses (2009 – 2023)

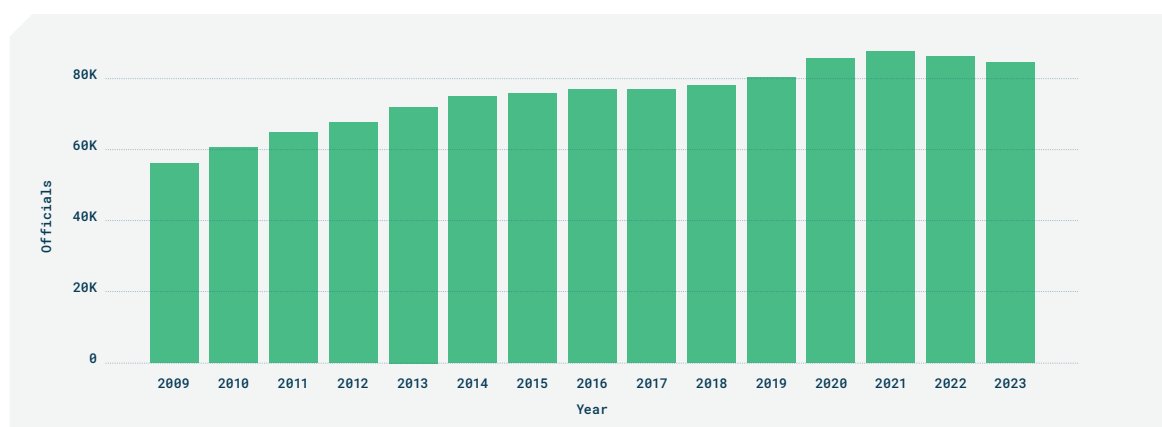
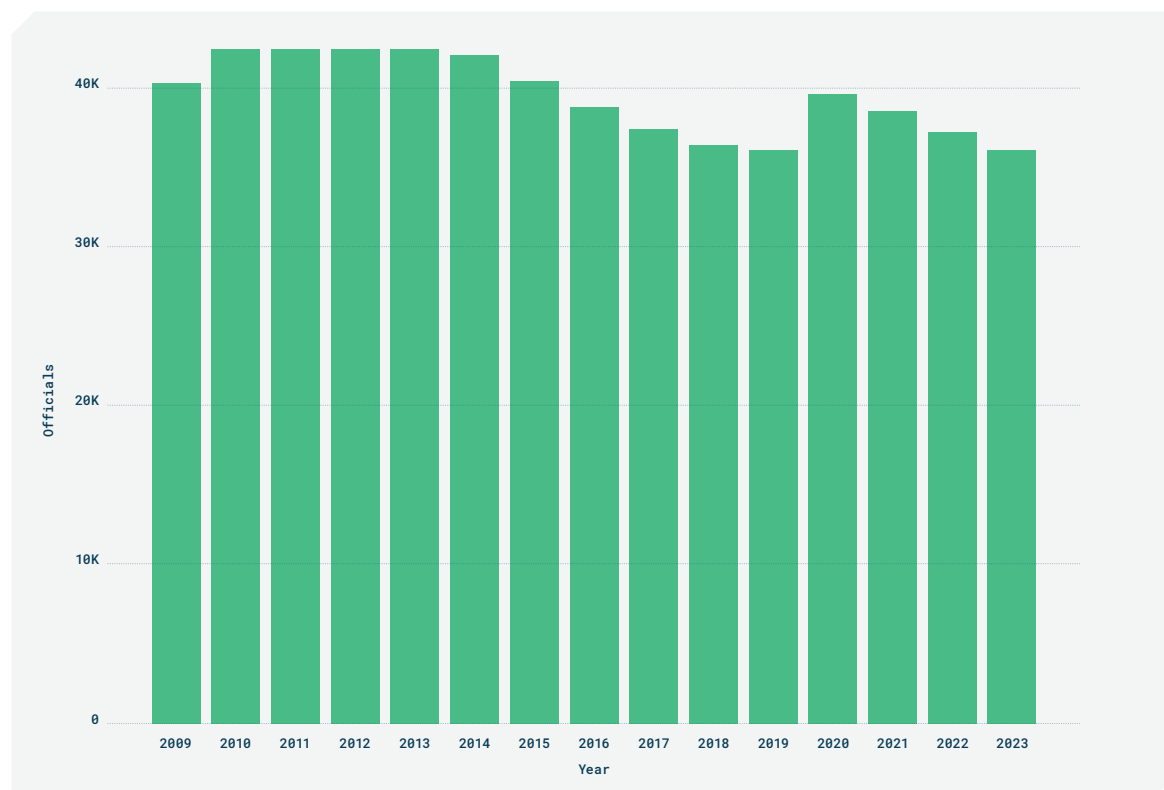


Figure: The number of assistant nurses (2009 – 2023)



Very similar patterns are visible in individual provinces. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, the complement of nursing staff rose from a low of around 13 600 in 2009 to 18 200 in 2014 where it stabilised until 2019. Then it jumped to over 20 400 nurses in 2020, reaching a high of 20 800 the next year. In Gauteng, the number of nurses rose slowly from 2009 to 2017, then it stabilised at around 16 000 personnel. Then there was a sudden upsurge, reaching over 19 000 nurses in 2021. Similarly, in the Western Cape, the number of nurses increased from about 5 000 in 2009 to around 6 200 in 2018. It shot up the following year and in 2021 the province employed nearly 7 000 nursing staff.

According to various studies, ideal nursing complements should be balanced as such:

- Young Nurses (Under 30 years): 20-30%.
- Mid-Career Nurses (30-50 years): 40-50%.
- Senior & Near-Retirement Nurses (50-65 years): 20-30%¹⁰.

As in the police, what is striking in South Africa is that the complement of nurses nationally is ageing, well outside these norms.

Between 2009 and 2023 the number of nurses above 50 and heading towards retirement more than doubled, from 15 463 in 2009 to 30 884 in 2021. More significantly, as a proportion of the total age cohort, they rose from around 28% of all nurses in 2009 to around 37% in 2023. The band of nurses in the prime of their careers (41–50) has also thinned over the last 15 years. Statistically, the cohort has aged into an older bracket, without a younger generation of nurses replacing them. The situation started becoming acute in 2014. The situation in nursing is, nonetheless, better than in the police, where departments continue to bring young nurses into hospitals and clinics. In 2009, nurses under 30 constituted around 10% of all nurses and by 2023, this had risen to 15%.

¹⁰ National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) (2022). *The 2022 National Nursing Workforce Survey*, *Journal of Nursing Regulation*. Available at: <https://www.journalofnursingregulation.com/article/S2155-8256%2823%2900047-9/fulltext> [Accessed 21 March 2025]. See too Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) (2024) *State of the U.S. Health Care Workforce, 2024*. Available at: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/state-of-the-health-workforce-report-2024.pdf> [Accessed 21 March 2025]. The American Nursing Association proposes a similar breakdown. American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2022) *Nursing Shortage Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-data/fact-sheets/nursing-shortage> [Accessed 21 March 2025].

Figure: Trend lines for age cohorts (2009 – 2023)

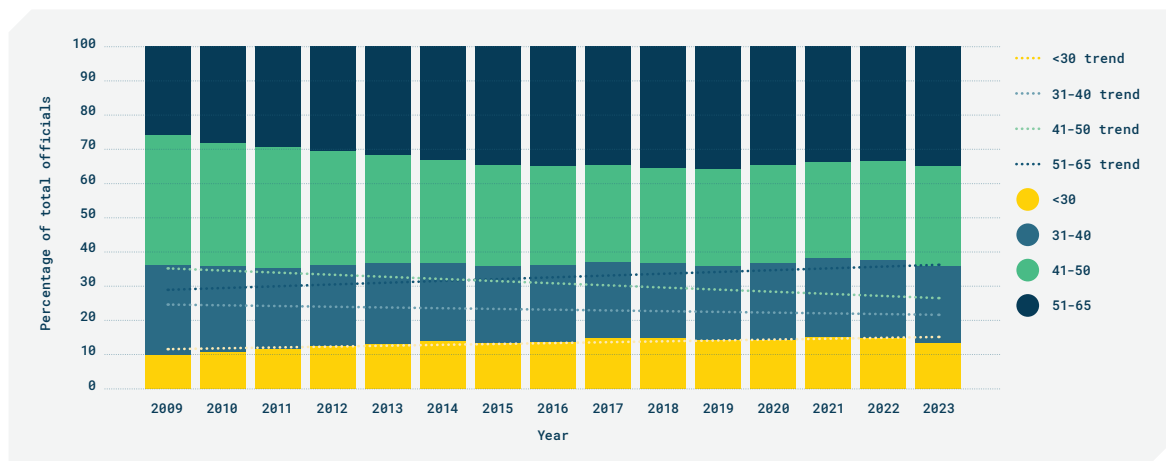


Figure: Nurses by age bracket as a percentage of all nurses (2009 – 2023)

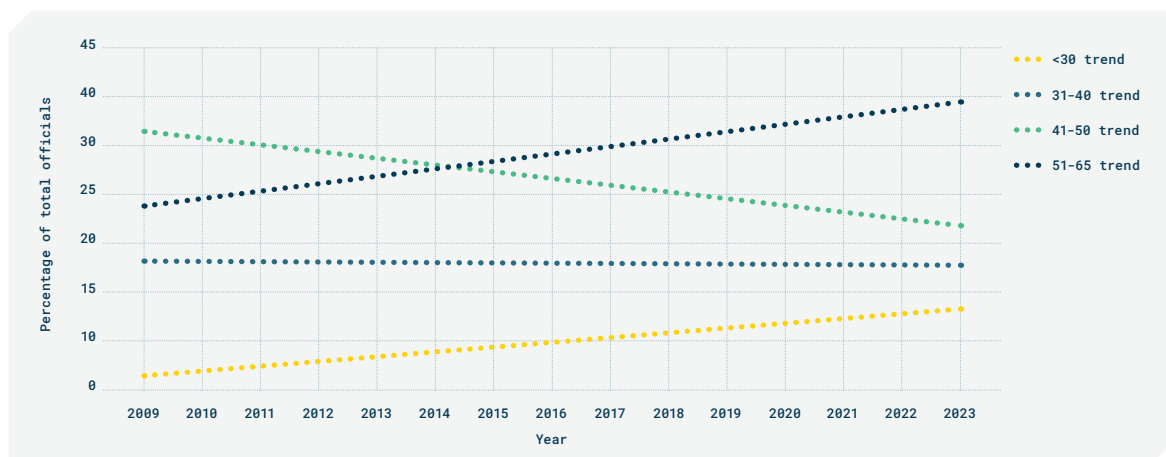
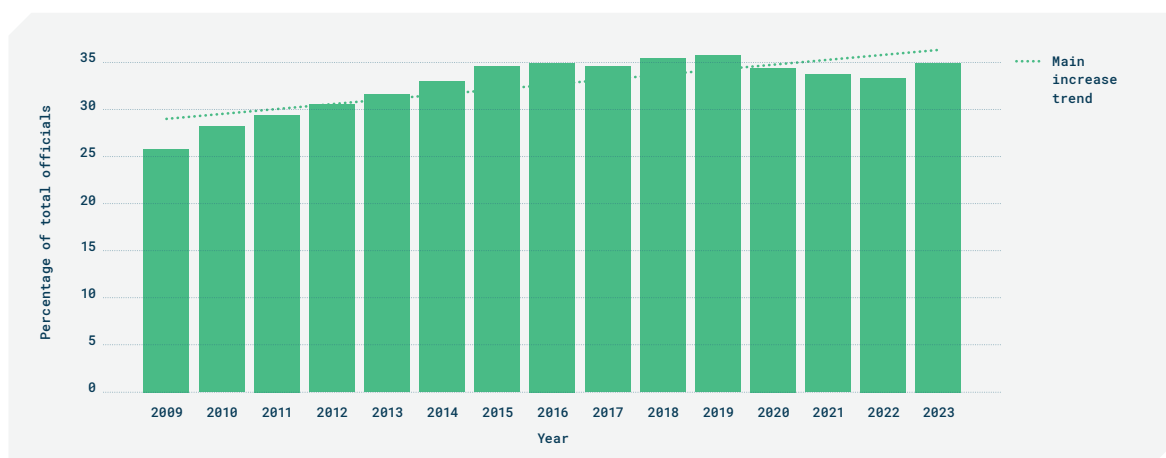


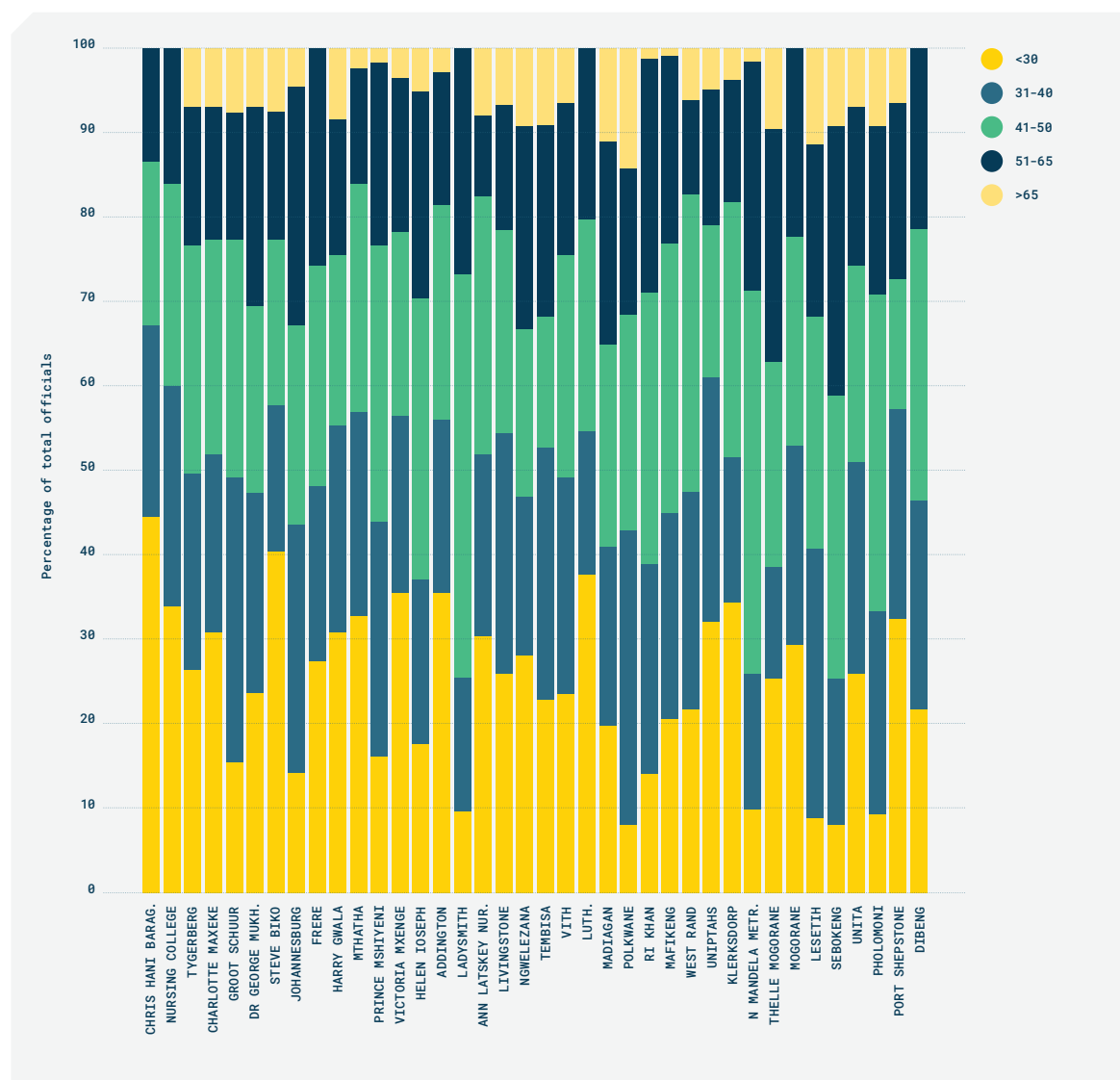
Figure: Number of nurses of 50 years of age as a proportion of the total number of nurses (2009 – 2023)



These patterns vary in individual provinces. Eastern Cape Department of Health has steadily increased the number of young nurses entering the system. There is also a decline of staff above 50 as they take retirement and nurses in the prime of their careers replace them between 2015 and 2023. In contrast, in Limpopo nurses are ageing, as the cohort above 50 years of age predominantly increases and

those below 30 mostly decreases from 2015 to 2023. In the Western Cape, young nurses are entering the system in larger numbers, while the cohort approaching retirement has also grown. Beyond regional dynamics, we have also been able to generate age-profiles for individual hospitals. Some hospitals, like Tygerberg and Mafikeng, are within accepted ranges.

Proportion of age cohorts as a percentage of the total number of teachers



These broad ageing trends are supported by data from the South African Nursing Council, which shows that in 2020 nearly half of registered nurses were above 50, that 26% were in their 40s and 21% in their 30s¹¹.

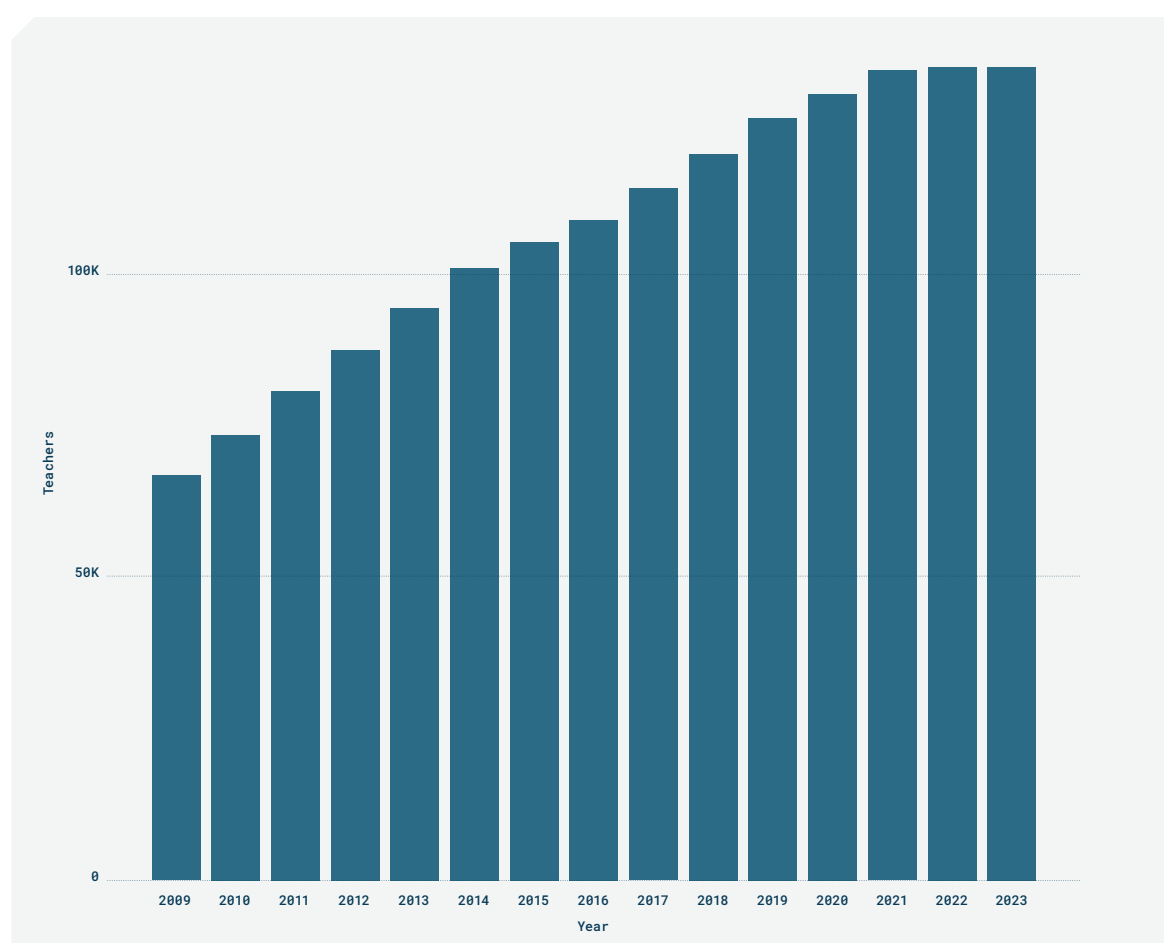
11 South African Nursing Council (SANC) (2020). *Statistics on registered nurses and age distribution*. Available at: <https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/2021/10/07/ageing-nurses-a-crisis-on-the-horizon> [Accessed 21 March 2025].

THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

Teachers in South Africa are employed by provincial governments, not by the National Department of Basic Education. The vast majority of public servants in

education, therefore, are based in the provinces. Like health officials and nurses, in particular, the cohort of teachers across all provinces is ageing.

Figure: Growth in the proportion of teachers older than 50 amongst all teachers in the Department of Basic Education (ages 51 - 65)



In the graphs below we have modelled the two largest departments of education, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. In KwaZulu-Natal the population of teachers over 50 has risen from 11.91% of the total number of educators in 2009 to 32.4% in 2023. Simultaneously, those in their 30s and 40s

as a proportion of the whole have declined from almost 40% of the whole to roughly 33.5%. Similarly, the teachers 30 years and younger declined from 21.05% of the total number of educators in 2009 to 13.59% in 2023.

Figure: KwaZulu-Natal – Proportion of age cohorts as a percentage of the total number of teachers (2009 – 2023)

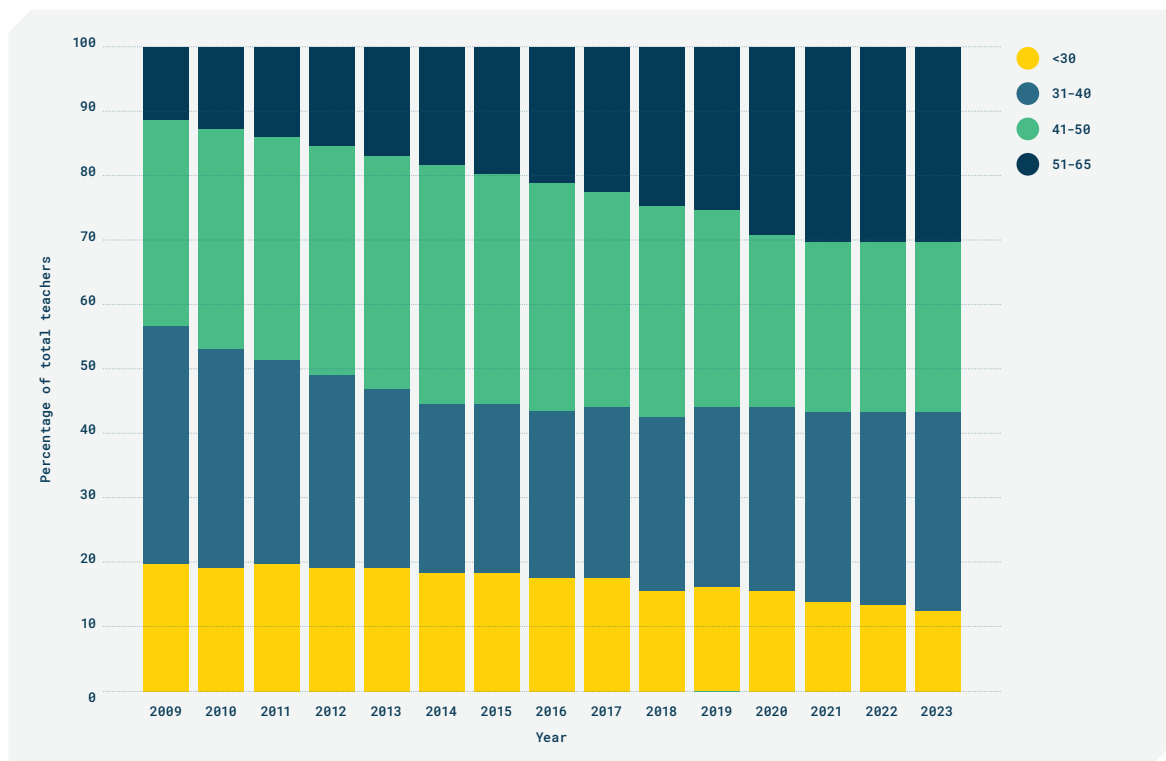
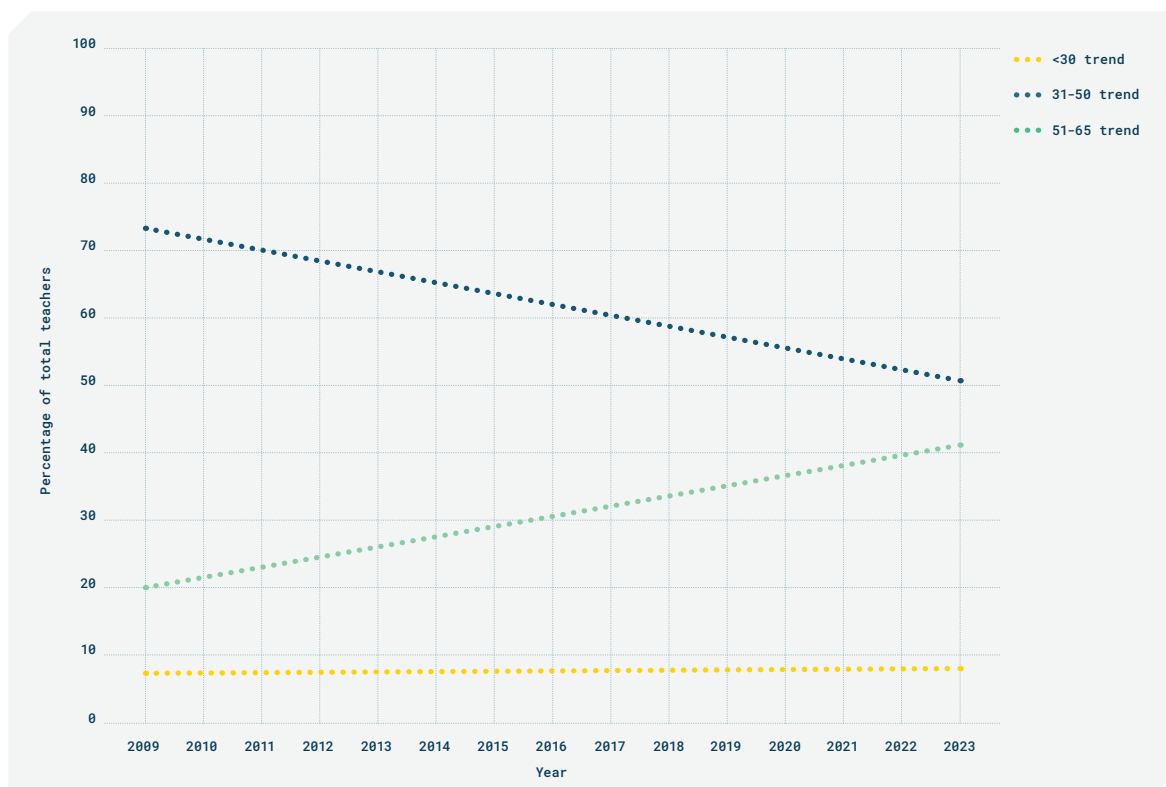


Figure: Trend lines for age cohorts (2009 – 2023)



The situation in Gauteng is similar. There has been a sharp ageing of teachers between 2009 and 2023. The number of teachers over 50 has risen from 21.73% in 2009 to 33.15% of the total in 2023. At the same time, those between 41

and 50 have dropped as a percentage of all teachers from 39.64% in 2009 to 18.3% in 2023. There has been a rise in teachers who are 30 years of age and younger.

Figure: Gauteng – Percentage of teachers in each age cohort relative to total number of teachers in a year (2009 – 2023)

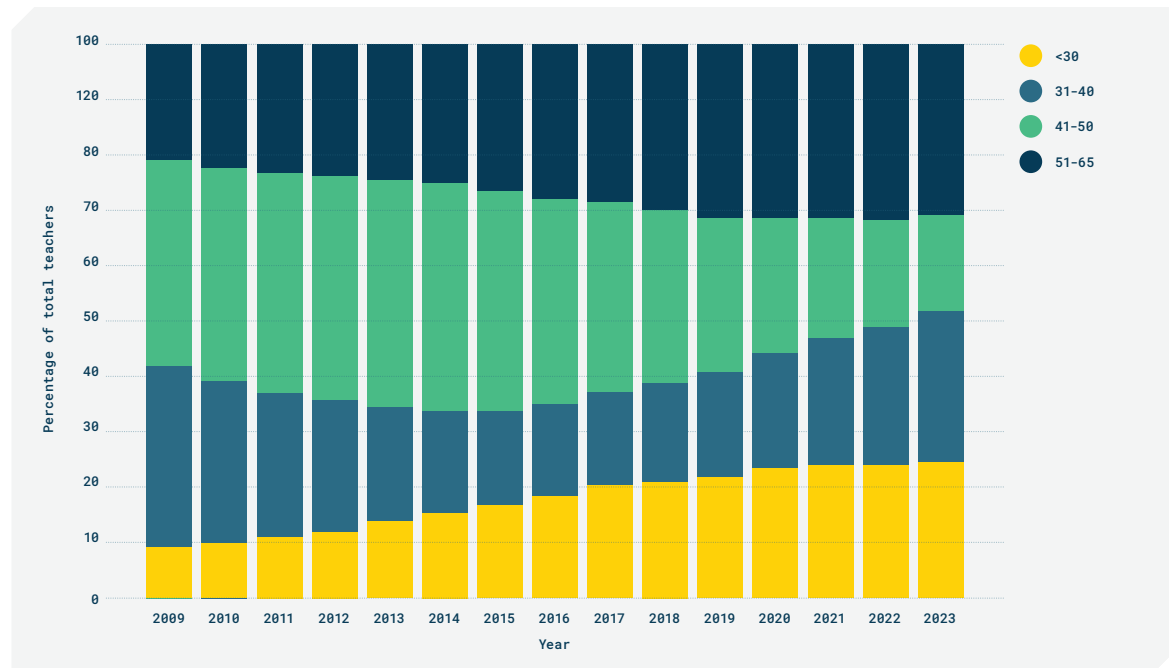
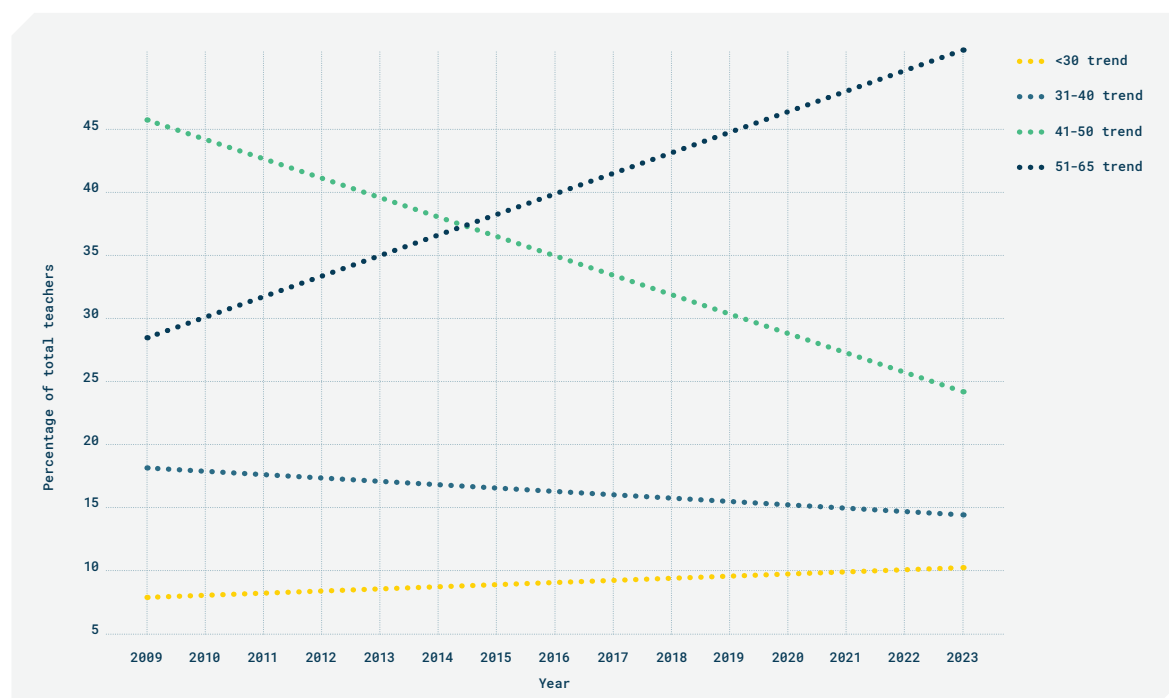


Figure: Gauteng – Trend lines for age cohorts (2009 – 2023)



The same pattern is evident in the Eastern Cape, where there is a sharp rise in the percentage of teachers over 50 years of age, while staff between the ages of 31 and 50 declined proportionally.

Figure: Eastern Cape – Trend lines for teachers age cohorts (2009 – 2023)

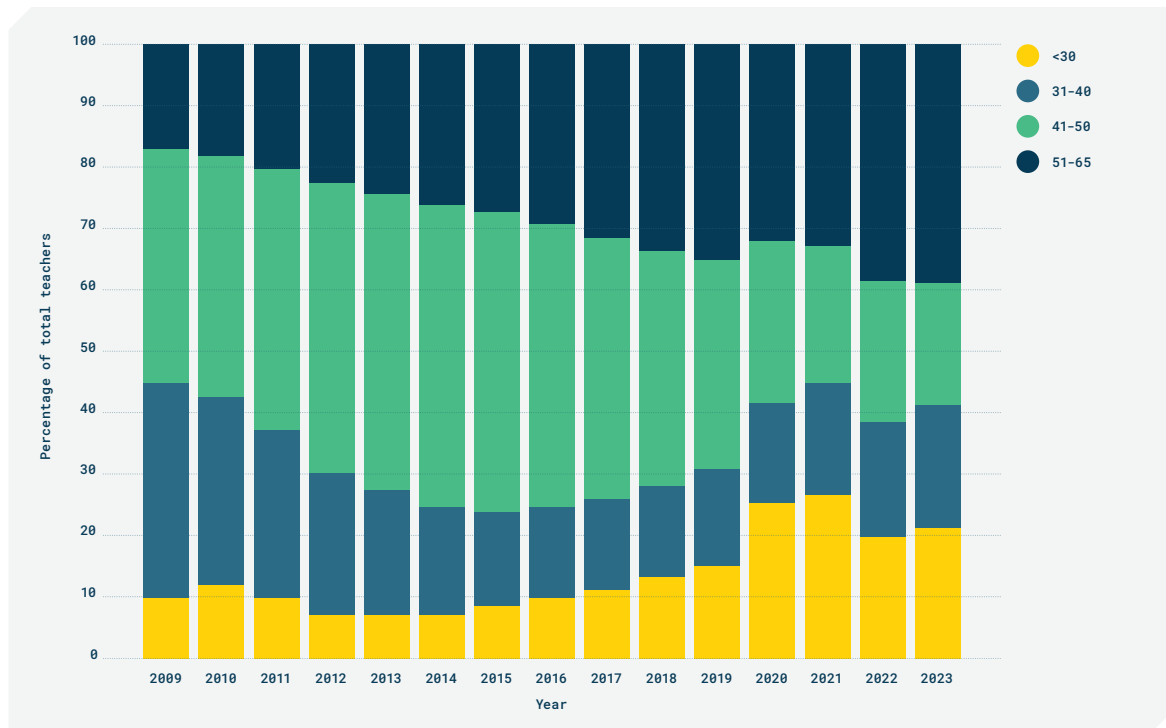
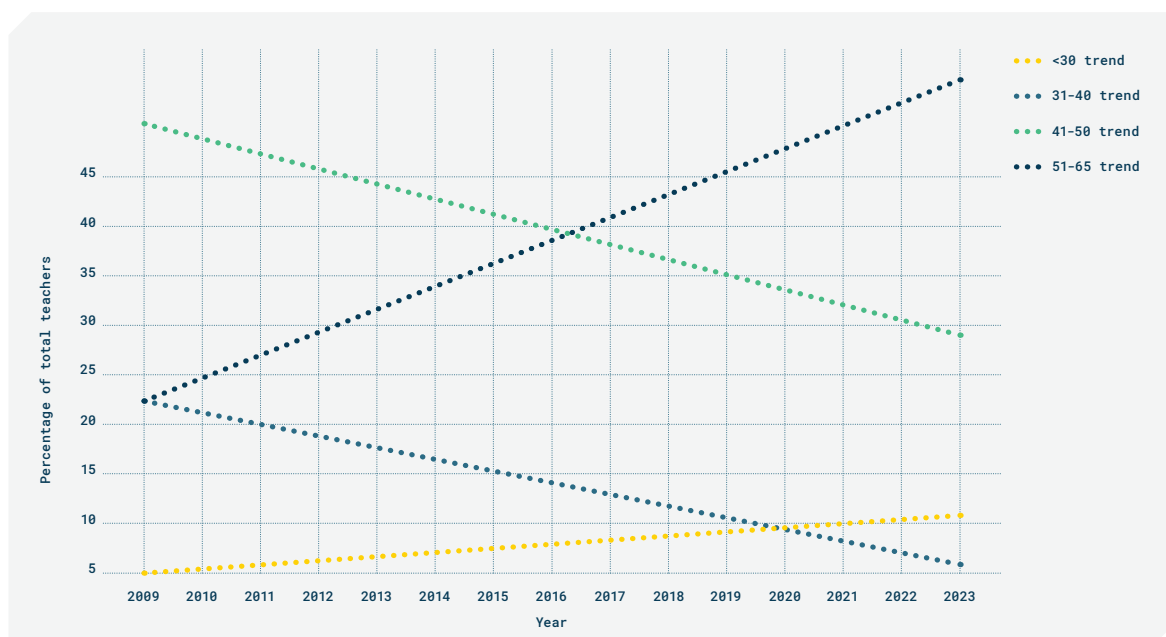


Figure: Eastern Cape – Percentage of teachers in each age cohort relative to total number of teachers in a year (2009 – 2023)



Most age groups of teachers rise in the Western Cape with 31- to 40-year-olds declining then rising again. The largest exception is teachers between the ages of

41 and 50 that have declined as a percentage of all teachers in the province from 41.67% in 2009 to nearly 15% in 2023.

Figure: Western Cape – Trend lines for age cohorts (2009 – 2023)

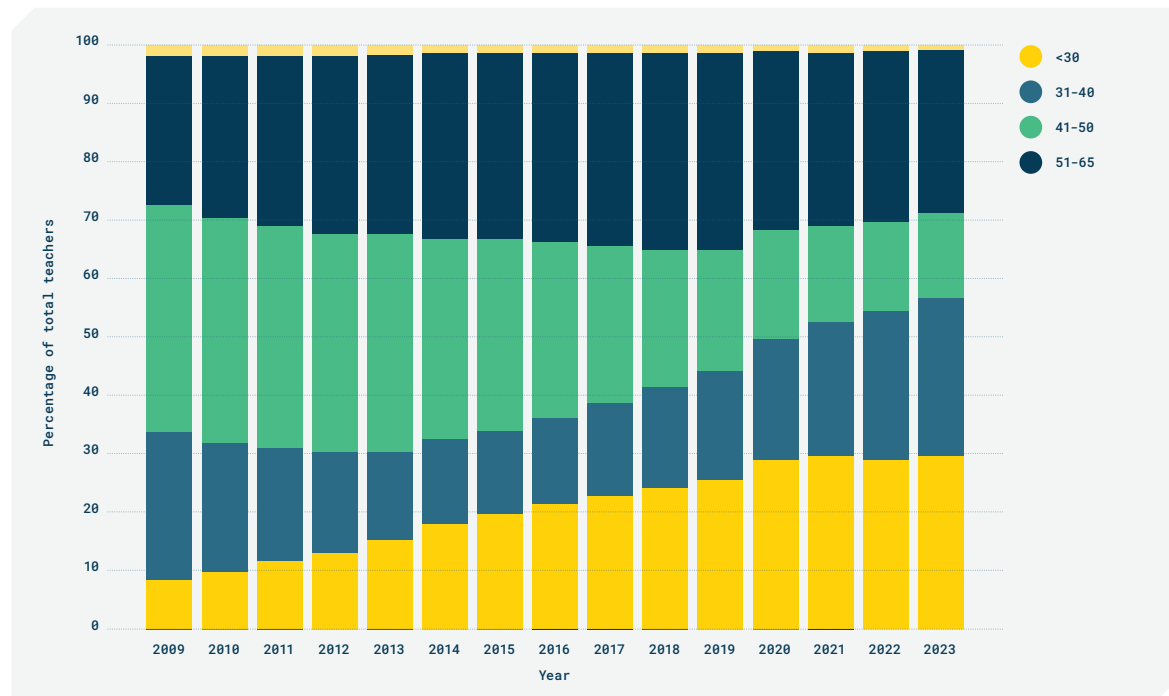
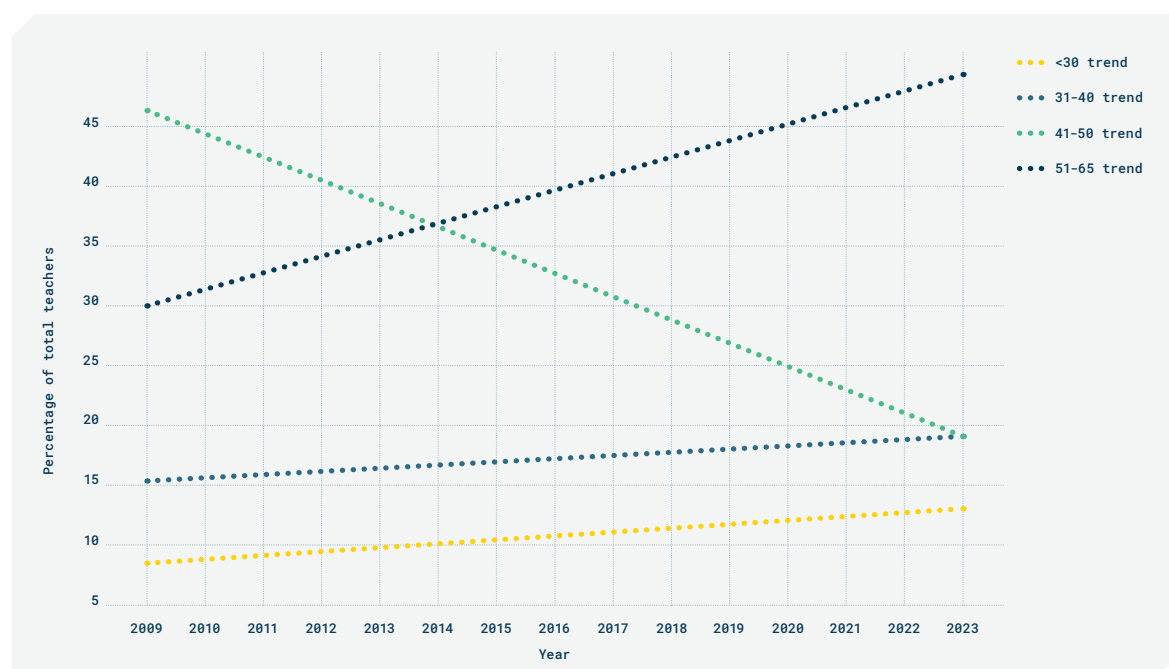


Figure: Western Cape – Percentage of teachers in each age cohort relative to total number of teachers in a year (2009 – 2023)



It is worth noting that the ageing of the teaching population across provinces has not been accompanied by a deterioration in the ratio of learners to educators (LER) – one of the key measures used by the Department of Basic Education to assess the state of schools. The most recent data is from 2016. Below, we have compared LER ratios between 2010 and 2016. In every province the situation has improved and in the Eastern Cape, which recently was credited with having the best matric results in 2024, the ratio has improved from almost 32 students per teacher in 2010 to less than 30.¹²

Learner-Educator Ratio (LER) comparison: 2010 vs 2016

Province	LER 2010	LER 2016
Eastern Cape	31.8	29.7
Free State	29.3	27.5
Gauteng	28.3	28.1
KwaZulu-Natal	32.0	30.5
Limpopo	32.4	29.3
Mpumalanga	31.2	30.0
Northern Cape	32.0	30.5
North West	31.8	29.2
Western Cape	29.8	28.3
South Africa	30.9	29.3

Source: Department of Basic Education.

07

CONCLUSION

In this policy brief, we have explored the age profile of public servants in the three largest departments of government – the police, health and education. What the analysis shows unmistakably is that public servants in South Africa are ageing. This basic fact has been overlooked in public and policy discussions, which tend to be preoccupied with bloating in government or with austerity. What is missed is that the generation of officials that entered government administrations after 1994 has either started to retire or is approaching retirement age, with no prepared generation to succeed them. This presents both a constraint on new efforts to professionalise the public sector and an opportunity.

As we have seen, current professionalisation policies largely focus on improving the qualifications and ethical integrity of existing public servants. Yet it may be too late for the current generation, many of whom have spent their careers in a one party-dominant political

system and who are now counting down the years and months to retirement.

The professionalisation of the public service needs to prepare for a generational change, a post-transition generation of public servants able and prepared to staff accountable and autonomous public administrations serving a robust and multi-party democracy. Many of the legal and regulatory elements are falling into place: better distinguishing between political and administrative office and rebalancing power relations inside public administrations to give Directors-General and heads of departments the powers and functions they need to do their jobs. What is still missing is an effective accountability framework. Now, South Africa has the opportunity to put in place the processes and institutions to create a properly democratic public service whilst recruiting a new generation of officials.

¹² See Department of Basic Education (2012). *Education Statistics in South Africa 2010*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/Education%20Statistics%20in%20South%20Africa%202010.pdf> (Accessed: 22 March 2025). Compare this with the data from Department of Basic Education (2018). *Education Statistics in South Africa 2016*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/Education%20Statistics%20SA%202016.pdf> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

It is worth considering the experience of other African countries. The Ghanaian National Service Scheme mandates a one-year national service for tertiary graduates, placing young people directly into public-sector roles to build skills and provide professional exposure. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Civil Service University provides targeted training and capacity-building programs specifically designed for youth. Its programs prioritize merit, ethics, and good governance principles and are aimed explicitly at preparing a new generation of young professionals for public administration roles. Rwanda, though not a democracy, has pursued public sector reforms that emphasize merit-based recruitment and youth employment quotas. They specifically target younger generations through initiatives like the Rwanda Youth Internship Programme (RYIP), designed to provide structured training, practical experience, and employment entry-points for graduates.

About the authors

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