Living Conditions, Employment, Trust, Democracy, Corruption, and Safety Perceptions South Africa: An Analysis of the Afro-barometer Survey

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Abstract

This study investigates public perceptions regarding living conditions, employment, trust in leadership, and attitudes toward democracy, corruption, and personal safety in South Africa, drawing on data from four rounds of the Afro-barometer survey conducted between 2016 and 2022. By integrating data from all rounds, the analysis offers a comprehensive perspective on socio-political and economic dynamics over time, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing both descriptive and regression analyses, the study identifies a marked deterioration in perceived living conditions and employment, accompanied by declining trust in leadership and heightened concerns related to democratic governance, corruption, and safety.

The results further indicate that negative perceptions of living conditions are significantly associated with unemployment, lack of personal security, diminished trust in leadership, and skepticism toward democratic institutions. Conversely, employment, trust in leadership, and favorable views of democracy are positively correlated with improved perceptions of well-being. These findings underscore the imperative for governance reforms and targeted policy interventions to address crime and unemployment, thereby fostering public confidence in democratic leadership and institutional effectiveness.

Keywords: Afro-barometer survey, South Africa, Covid-19.

JEL Classification: D63; E24; H11; H12; J08; O55.

Introduction

Over the past decade, South Africa has experienced significant socio-economic and political challenges, including high unemployment, rising crime rates, widespread corruption, and eroding trust in democratic institutions. These challenges have profoundly impacted public perceptions of living conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, with strict lockdowns, job losses, and economic instability intensifying hardships.

This study utilizes data from the Afro-barometer survey collected in four rounds, spanning from 2016 to 2022, with the 2022 round being the most recent. By examining data across these rounds, the study aims to explore

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trends in living conditions, employment, trust in government, and perceptions of democracy, corruption, and personal safety over time. This longitudinal approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of these variables and their relationship to perceived living conditions. The combination of descriptive statistics and regression analysis provides valuable insights into public sentiment and highlights areas requiring urgent intervention, with particular attention to how these issues have evolved up to the most recent survey data in 2022.

1. Literature Review

Previous studies have consistently shown a strong correlation between economic performance and living conditions, particularly in developing countries (Ngubane, Mndebele & Kaseeram, 2023). Economic factors such as unemployment have direct implications for the quality of life of citizens. In South Africa, persistent unemployment, especially among the youth, continues to be one of the most critical challenges, exacerbating socio-economic disparities (Öhlmann, 2022).

Living conditions in South Africa are also closely tied to issues of corruption. Corruption undermines the state's ability to deliver basic services effectively, which often leads to an increase in crime and further insecurity (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024). Corruption remains entrenched within South Africa's governance structures and is widely recognized as a significant barrier to economic development (Rodríguez, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic further magnified these issues, creating opportunities for increased corruption, particularly in the management of emergency relief funds (BBC 2020). Research also suggests that the pandemic worsened living conditions in South Africa, particularly by intensifying the economic and social challenges faced by the population (Omotayo & Ogunniyi, 2024).

In addition to governance failures, structural poverty and inequality have played a key role in driving insecurity and violence. Research indicates that economic deprivation, especially among youth, increases the risk of interpersonal violence, particularly when compounded by social norms that tolerate or justify violent behavior (Lamb & Warton, 2025). These conditions not only affect personal safety but further weaken trust in public institutions and governance structures.

Corruption not only leads to inefficiencies in resource allocation and mismanagement of public services but also erodes trust in public institutions (Levy, 2025). Trust in government is a critical element for democratic stability and effective governance (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016). Previous research has highlighted that poor governance contributes significantly to the socio-economic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa (Steyn-Kotze, 2017), with a marked decline in public trust in political institutions (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016; Mlambo & Masuku, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic only deepened this trend, as strict lockdown measures and economic hardships disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, contributing to growing dissatisfaction with the democratic process (Dlamini & Hull, 2024). Despite a relatively high level of support for democracy in the post-apartheid period, recent studies suggest increasing disillusionment with the country's democratic institutions (Steyn-Kotze, 2017).

While previous research has extensively examined socio-economic challenges in South Africa, this study contributes by analyzing a range of variables, including perceptions of living conditions, employment, trust in leadership, democracy, corruption, and personal safety. The analysis spans a six-year period (2016–2022) and draws on Afro barometer survey data, providing a longitudinal perspective that captures both pre- and post-pandemic trends. The integration of descriptive statistics and regression analysis offers deeper insights into how these variables interact, especially in light of the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on existing socio-economic challenges. This methodology provides valuable information for policymakers seeking to address South Africa's multifaceted challenges.

2. Data and Methods

The Afro-barometer Survey is a public opinion initiative that collects data on social, political, and economic conditions across African countries. Established in 1999, the survey covers more than 35 nations across all regions of the African continent. Conducted in periodic "rounds", it employs face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples of adults aged 18 and older. The random sampling process ensures that findings are generalizable to each participating country's broader population.

The survey examines a wide range of topics, including governance, democracy, economic conditions, social issues, security, and public service quality. This study focuses on data from South Africa collected in four rounds (Rounds 6 through the most recent round 9) conducted in 2016, 2018, 2021, and 2022. It analyzes six key variables over time: perceptions of living conditions, employment status, trust in leadership, and perceptions of democracy, corruption, and personal safety. A logistic regression analysis is then conducted using "R" to assess the impact of employment, trust in leadership, and perceptions of democracy, corruption, and personal safety on perceived living conditions in South Africa.

3. Empirical Findings

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Perceived Living Conditions

Figure 1 shows the distribution of perceived living conditions from 2016 to 2022. The percentages reflect the proportion of respondents in each category – '*Very Bad', 'Fairly Bad', 'Neither Good nor Bad', 'Fairly Good'* and *'Very Good',* during the respective survey rounds.

Figure 1: Perceptions of living conditions
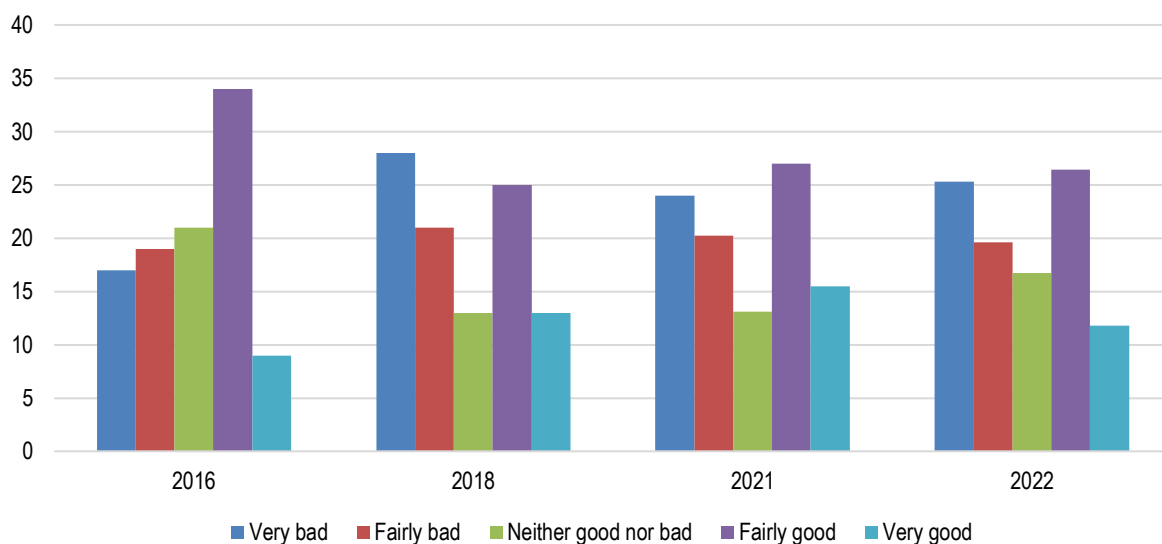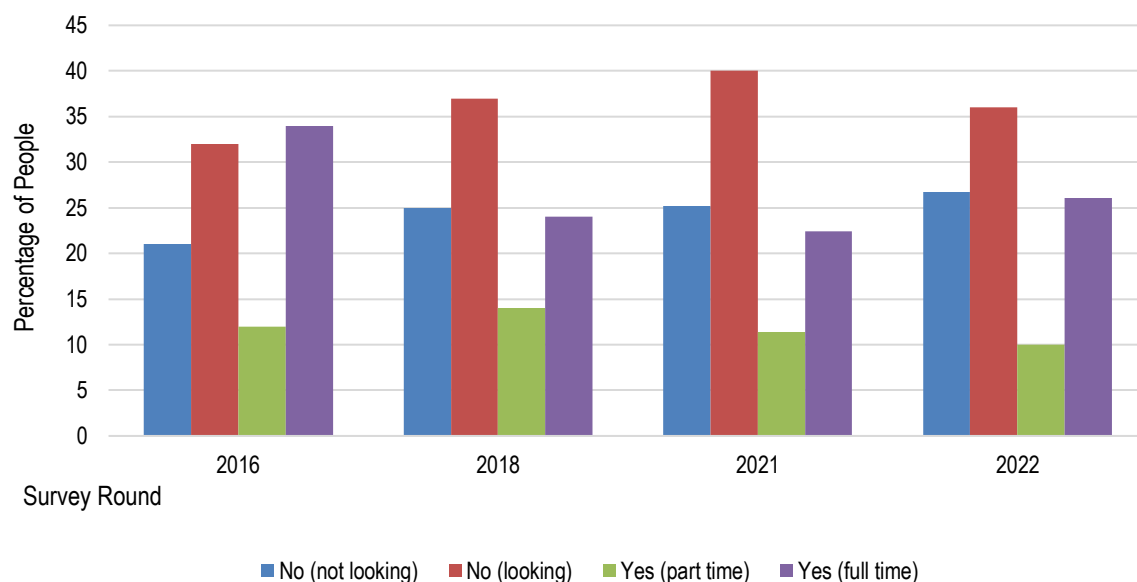

Source: by Author

The data indicate a gradual shift toward more negative perceptions over this period. In 2016, 17% of respondents rated their living conditions as '*Very Bad*,' a figure that rose sharply to 28% in 2018. Although this percentage declined slightly to 24% in 2021, it increased again to 25.3% in 2022, suggesting a persistent sense of economic hardship. Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents rating their conditions as '*Fairly Bad* 'remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 19% and 21%, with no significant changes over time.

Conversely, the proportion of respondents describing their living conditions as 'Fairly Good' declined from 34% in 2016 to 25% in 2018, with a modest recovery to 27% in 2021 and then a slight drop to 26.4% in 2022. While the 'Very Good' category initially rose from 9% in 2016 to a peak of 15.5% in 2021, it declined to 11.8% in 2022. Together, these findings suggest an overall deterioration in perceived living conditions between 2016 and 2022, a trend that indicates growing dissatisfaction with economic and/or social conditions within the surveyed populations.

Employment

Figure 2 shows the distribution of employment from 2016 to 2022. Employment is categorized *as 'Full-Time', 'Part-Time', 'Unemployed but not looking',* and *'Unemployed and actively looking'*. The percentages reflect the proportion of respondents in each category during the respective survey rounds.

Figure 2: Employment

Source: by Author

The data reveals significant trends in employment patterns over the years. Unemployment among individuals actively seeking work ('No, looking') showed a marked increase, rising from 32% in 2016 to a peak of 40% in 2021, before declining slightly to 36% in 2022. At the same time, the percentage of individuals not employed and not actively looking for work ('No, not looking') gradually increased from 21% in 2016 to 26.7% in 2022, reflecting persistent barriers to labor market participation. For those employed, part-time work slightly declined, falling from 12% in 2016 to 10% in 2022, while full-time employment experienced a sharper drop, decreasing from 34% in 2016 to 22.4% in 2021, before recovering modestly to 26.1% in 2022.

These patterns highlight the challenges facing the labor market over this period, including rising unemployment and declining part-time and full-time employment, with only a modest recovery in full-time positions in the latest survey year. These shifts may reflect broader economic conditions, structural challenges in the labor market, and the lingering impacts of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the slight improvement in employment metrics in 2022, the overall trends signal deteriorating labor market conditions compared to 2016, with an increasing share of individuals disengaged from the workforce or unable to secure stable employment.

Trust in Leadership

Figure 3 illustrates trends in public trust in the president from 2016 to 2022, with trust levels categorized as '*Not at all', 'Just a little', 'Somewhat'* and *'A lot'*. The percentages reflect the proportion of respondents in each category during the respective survey rounds.

Over this period, the proportion of respondents expressing no trust in the president (*'Not at all'*) increased significantly, particularly between 2021 and 2022, where it reached its highest level. By 2022, 44% of respondents reported no trust at all in the president, a rise from 39% in 2016, despite a temporary decline to 27% in 2018.

Figure 3: Perceptions of trust in the President
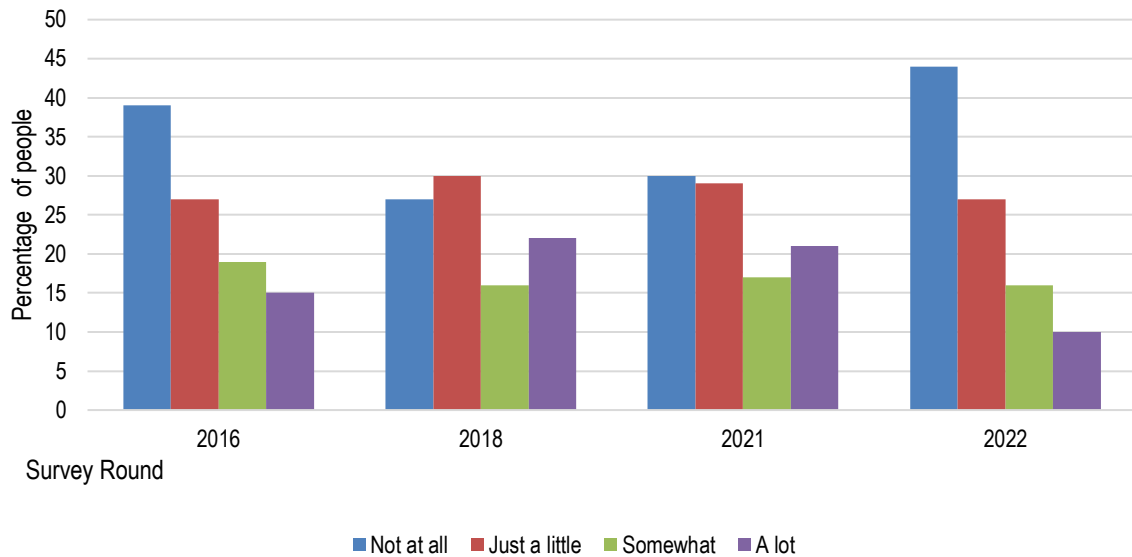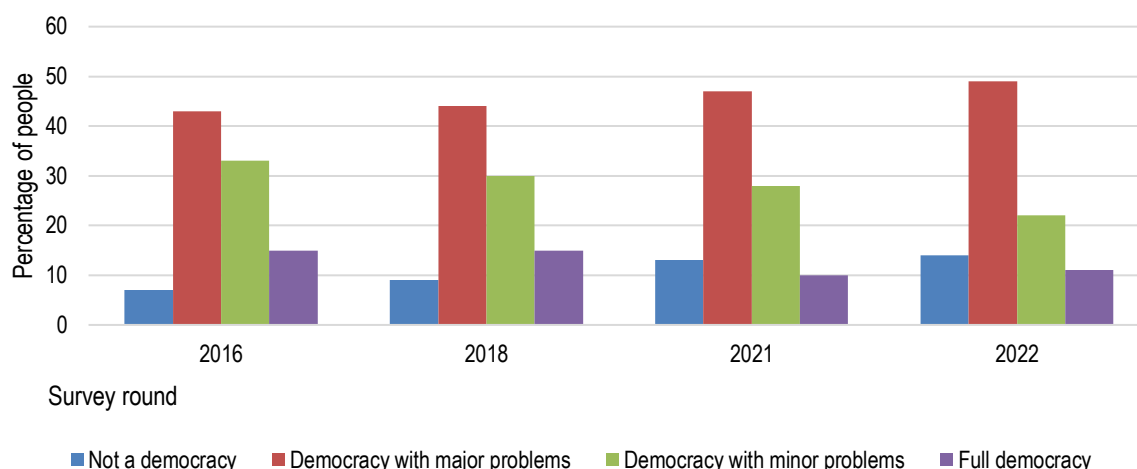

Source: by Author

Meanwhile, trust levels categorized as *'A lot'* showed a dramatic decline, dropping from 15% in 2016 to just 10% in 2022, following an initial increase to 22% in 2018. The middle categories, *'Just a little'* and *'Somewhat,'* exhibited less pronounced changes. Respondents expressing minimal trust (*'Just a little'*) remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 27% and 30% across the survey rounds, indicating a persistent but cautious level of distrust. Similarly, those reporting moderate trust ('*Somewhat*') declined modestly from 19% in 2016 to 16% in 2022. These trends suggest a polarization in public opinion, with fewer respondents expressing moderate or high levels of trust and an increasing share reporting complete distrust in the president.

The data highlights a growing public dissatisfaction with presidential leadership from 2016 to 2022. The steep reduction in high trust (*'A lot'*) and the consistent rise in complete distrust (*'Not at all'*) reflect a potential crisis of political trust. These patterns may be influenced by governance performance, economic challenges, corruption, or contentious policy decisions during COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceptions of Democracy

Figure 4 shows the distribution of public opinions about the level of democracy in South Africa from 2016 to 2022, with levels categorized as '*Not a democracy*', '*Democracy with Major Problems*', '*Democracy with Minor Problems*' and '*Full Democracy*'. The percentages reflect the proportion of respondents in each category during the respective survey rounds.

Figure 4: Perceptions of democracy

Source: by Author

Corruption

Figure 5 illustrates trends in public perceptions of corruption within the president's office from 2016 to 2022. The chart tracks changes in the percentages of respondents who believe that 'Most', 'All', 'Some', or 'None' of the individuals in the president's office are corrupt, providing a detailed view of evolving public sentiment over time.

Figure 5: Perceptions of corruption in the President's office
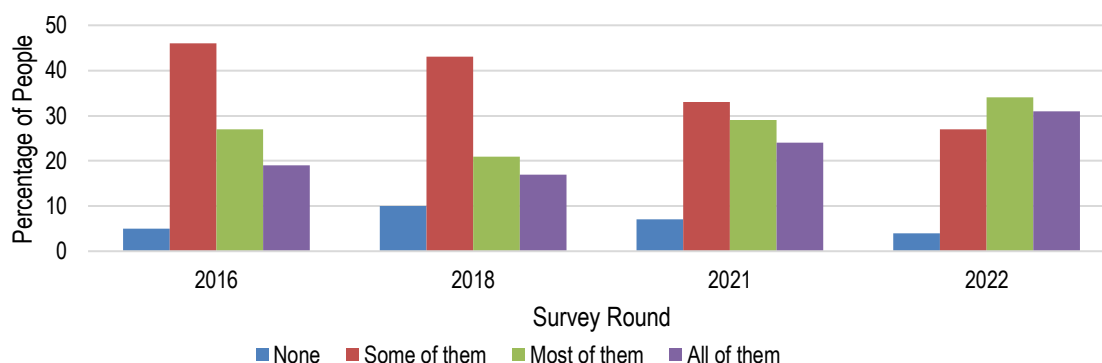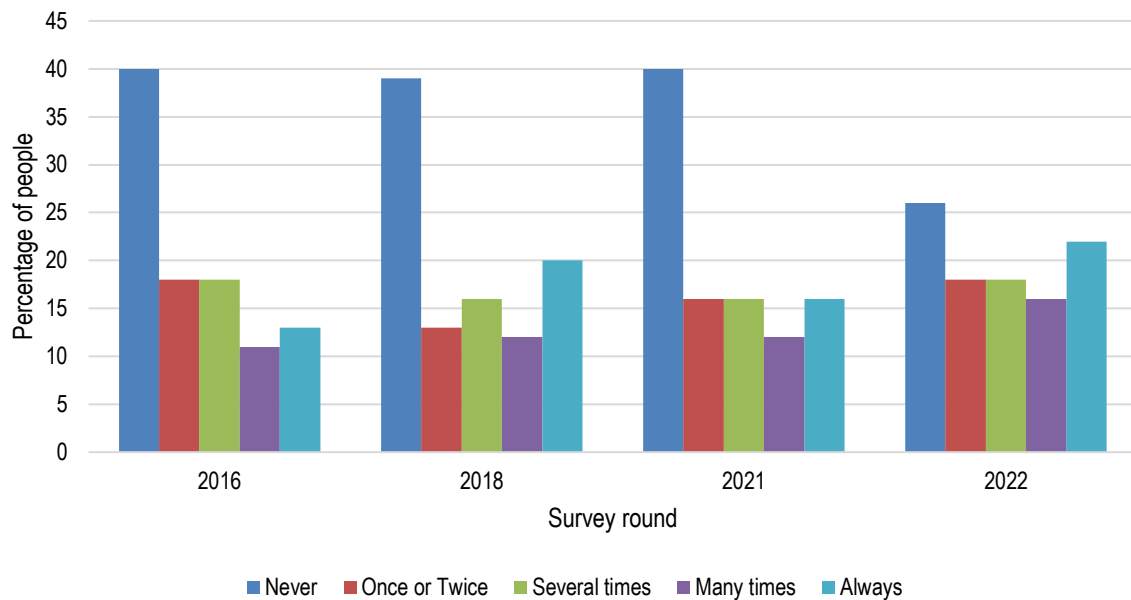

Source: Created by Author

Perceptions of corruption worsened significantly, with many respondents indicating that most or all officials in the president's office are corrupt. The proportion of individuals who think 'Most' or 'All' of the individuals in the president's office are involved in corruption has increased substantially. Those perceiving 'Most' as corrupt rose from 27% in 2016 to 34% in 2022, while the view that 'All' are involved climbed from 19% in 2016 to 31% in 2022. These figures suggest a significant shift toward more negative perceptions of the integrity of the president's office.

Conversely, the share of respondents who believe corruption is limited to 'Some' of the individuals in the president's office has steadily declined, dropping from 46% in 2016 to 27% in 2022. Similarly, those who believe 'None' of the individuals are corrupt remained consistently low, decreasing slightly from 5% in 2016 to 4% in 2022. These trends reflect growing concerns about systemic corruption and diminishing trust in the president's office, which could have broader implications for public confidence in governance.

Perceptions of Personal Safety

Figure 6 presents trends in public perceptions of personal safety, illustrating how often respondents reported feeling unsafe while walking in their neighborhood over the past year. Responses are categorized as '*Never', 'Once or Twice', 'Several Times', 'Many Times',* and '*Always'*, with percentages reflecting the proportion of respondents in each category during different survey rounds.

Figure 6: Perceptions of Personal Safety

Source: Created by Author

The data reveal a notable decline in the share of respondents who *never* feel unsafe, dropping from 39%-40% 2016, 2018 and 2021 to just 26% in 2022. This decline suggests a growing sense of insecurity in 2022. Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents who reported *always* feeling unsafe rose significantly, from 13% in 2016 to 22% in 2022, pointing to worsening perceptions of personal safety among a substantial segment of the population.

Responses in the intermediate categories, '*Once or Twice'* and '*Several Times'*, remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 13% and 18% across survey years. However, reports of feeling unsafe '*Many Times'* showed a gradual increase, rising from 11% in 2016 to 16% in 2022. Taken together, these trends indicate that an increasing number of people experience frequent feelings of insecurity in their neighborhoods. Whether this reflects an actual rise in crime or heightened perceptions of danger remains uncertain, but the findings may have broader implications for public safety policies and law enforcement effectiveness.

3.2. Regression Analysis

To examine the factors influencing individuals' perceptions of their living conditions, a logistic regression model was estimated. The regression model used in the analysis is specified as follows:

Living Conditions = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$ Employment + β_2 Trust + β_3 Democracy + β_4 Corruption + β_5 Crime + γ_1 Year2018 + γ_2 Year2021 + γ_3 Year2022 + ε

Where the dependent variable, 'living condition' is a binary variable where 1 represents respondents perceiving their living conditions as 'Fairly Good' or 'Very Good', and 0 otherwise (that is 'Very Bad', 'Fairly Bad**'** or *Neither Good nor Bad')*. The independent variables included employment status, trust in the president, perceptions of democracy, perceptions of corruption in the president's office, concerns about personal safety (or concerns about crime), and year-specific effects, as described below:

- *Employment Dummy:* Equals 1 if the respondent is employed, either full-time or part-time, and 0 if the respondent is unemployed (either looking for jobs or not looking for jobs).
- *Trust Dummy: Equals* 1 if the respondent reports moderate to high trust in the president ('Somewhat', 'A lot'), and 0 for low or no trust ('*Just a little'*, '*Not at all'*).
- *Democracy Dummy:* Equals 1 if the respondent perceives the level of democracy as moderate to high ('*Democracy with Minor Problems', 'Full Democracy''*), and 0 for low or very low perceptions of democracy ('*Democracy with Major Problems', 'Not a Democracy''*).
- *Corruption Dummy:* Equals 1 if the respondent perceives high corruption at the president's office ('*Most of them*", '*All of them*"), and 0 if corruption is perceived as low or nonexistent ('*Some of them*', '*None*').
- *Crime Dummy:* Equals 1 if the respondent reports moderate to high concern about personal safety ('*Several Times*", '*Many Times*' and '*Always*'), and 0 if the concern is low or nonexistent ('*Once or Twice*", '*Never*').
- *Year Dummies:* Indicators for survey years 2018, 2021, and 2022 to account for time-specific effects, with 2016 serving as the reference category.

Regression Analysis Results

To better understand the determinants of individuals' perceptions of their living conditions, we conducted a logistic regression analysis using several explanatory variables reflecting socioeconomic status, political attitudes, and contextual factors. The dependent variable measures whether respondents perceive their living conditions as 'Fairly Good' or 'Very Good.' The independent variables include employment status, trust in political leadership, satisfaction with democratic governance, perceptions of corruption and crime, as well as year-specific effects to capture temporal shifts in perception. These variables were selected based on their theoretical relevance and prior empirical findings suggesting their influence on subjective well-being. The regression results provide insights into how these factors shape individuals' assessments of their living standards over time. A detailed presentation of the regression coefficients is provided in Appendix 1, with corresponding odds ratios summarized in Appendix 2.

- *Employment*: The coefficient for the employment dummy (0.604, $p < 0.001$) indicates that employed respondents are significantly more likely to perceive their living conditions as better. The odds ratio (1.829) suggests that employment increases the odds of perceiving better living conditions by approximately 82.9%.
- *Trust*: Respondents reporting moderate to high trust in the president are significantly more likely to perceive better living conditions (coefficient = 0.195, $p < 0.001$). The odds ratio (1.215) indicates a 21.5% increase in odds.
- *Democracy*: Positive perceptions of democracy are associated with higher likelihoods of perceiving better living conditions (coefficient = 0.231, $p < 0.001$). The odds ratio (1.260) reflects a 26% increase in odds.
- *Corruption*: Perceptions of moderate to high corruption reduce the likelihood of better living condition perceptions, but the results are only borderline significant at 5% significance level (coefficient = -0.086, $p = 0.0533$). The odds ratio (0.918) indicates an 8.2% decrease in odds.
- *Crime*: High levels of concern about personal safety also significantly reduce the likelihood of perceiving better living conditions (coefficient = -0.57201, $p < 0.001$). The odds ratio (0.563) suggests a 43.7% decrease in odds.
- *Year Effects:* The 2018 dummy is negative and significant (coefficient = -0.518 $p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents in 2018 were less likely to report better living conditions compared to 2016. The 2021 and 2022 dummies are also negative and significant (coefficient = -0.245, $p < 0.001$ and coefficient = -0.350, $p < 0.001$, respectively), suggesting a persistent decline in perceived living conditions compared to the baseline year. The odds ratio for 2018, 2021 and 2022 (0.596, 0.783 and 0.705, respectively) suggest a

reduction of approximately 40.4%, 21.7% and 29.5% in perceived living conditions compared to the baseline year of 2016.

4. Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-political and economic conditions in South Africa over the six-year period between 2016 and 2022, highlighting the intertwined challenges of governance, economic instability, and public safety. The findings reveal a significant deterioration in living conditions, trust in government, perceptions of corruption, perceptions of democracy and perceptions of personal safety, despite modest improvements in employment during the most recent survey period. These results underscore the urgent need for governance reforms, economic recovery programs, and public safety initiatives to address South Africa's deep-seated challenges.

Socio-Economic and Political Factors

Employment status emerged as a critical determinant of perceived living conditions. The regression analysis indicates that employed individuals, either working full-time or part-time, are significantly more likely to report better living conditions, with an odds ratio of 1.829. This finding highlights the centrality of stable employment in fostering economic security and improving quality of life. However, the descriptive analysis reveals troubling trends in South Africa's labor market, including rising unemployment and declining employment between 2016 and 2021, with only a modest recovery in 2022. These patterns reflect structural challenges and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated job losses and economic vulnerabilities.

Trust in institutions also plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Respondents with moderate to high trust in the president are 21.5% more likely to perceive their living conditions as favorable, reflecting the importance of effective governance and accountability. Conversely, concerns about crime and safety significantly reduce the likelihood of reporting better living conditions. Respondents with moderate to high concerns about personal safety are 43.7%% less likely to perceive their living conditions as favorable. These findings are consistent with existing literature that links systemic insecurity to diminished quality of life.

Perceptions of democracy further illuminate the relationship between governance and public sentiment. Respondents who view democracy as functioning well are 26% more likely to report better living conditions, underscoring the role of democratic governance in fostering stability and progress. However, the descriptive analysis reveals growing public disillusionment with South Africa's democratic institutions over the study period, with an increasing proportion of respondents perceiving the country as a democracy with major problems or as lacking democracy altogether. These trends highlight the need for meaningful reforms to restore public faith in democratic processes.

The role of corruption perceptions in shaping views on living conditions is more nuanced. While higher perceived corruption is associated with lower odds of reporting better living conditions, the effect is relatively small (8.2% decrease in odds) and only borderline significant ($p = 0.0533$). This suggests that while corruption remains a concern, its direct influence on perceived well-being may be weaker than other factors such as employment and personal safety. Future research could explore whether corruption's impact on public perceptions operates indirectly through trust in institutions and governance effectiveness.

Temporal Trends and Implications

The year-specific effects captured in the regression analysis provide valuable insights into broader socio-economic and political trends. The significant decline in perceived living conditions in 2018 compared to 2016 suggests that respondents experienced worsening economic or governance-related hardships that year. In contrast, the declines in 2021 and 2022, while still significant, were less pronounced than in 2018. Given the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing governance challenges, it is unsurprising that perceptions remained negative in these years. However, the smaller decline in 2021 and 2022 compared to 2018

could indicate some stabilization in public sentiment, potentially due to early recovery efforts or adjusted expectations in response to prolonged economic and political difficulties

The findings emphasize the need for targeted policy interventions. Strengthening employment opportunities, improving public safety, and enhancing governance transparency could help address the decline in perceived living conditions. Additionally, while corruption remains a relevant issue, its borderline significance suggests that broader governance reforms, particularly in economic management and public service delivery, should take precedence in shaping public perceptions of well-being.

Conclusion

This study offers a longitudinal perspective on the socio-political and economic conditions in South Africa, integrating descriptive and regression analyses to uncover key trends and relationships. The findings emphasize the urgent need for governance reforms, economic recovery programs, and public safety initiatives to address the country's deep-seated challenges.

This study provides valuable insights into the factors shaping public perceptions of living conditions in South Africa, offering both a longitudinal perspective and a detailed analysis of key socio-economic and political variables. The findings underscore the critical importance of employment, trust, and democratic governance in fostering positive perceptions, while highlighting the detrimental impact of personal insecurity and corruption. These results not only reflect the lived realities of South Africans during a turbulent period but also offer actionable insights for policymakers.

To address the challenges revealed in this study, South Africa's policymakers must prioritize job creation, strengthen governance and institutional accountability. Efforts to enhance public safety and reduce crime must also be intensified, particularly in vulnerable communities disproportionately affected by insecurity. Additionally, restoring public trust in democratic institutions will require meaningful reforms, improved service delivery, and greater citizen engagement.

The findings also highlight the compounded impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and deepened public dissatisfaction. As South Africa continues its recovery, policymakers must adopt a multi-faceted approach to tackle these intertwined challenges, ensuring that economic growth, social stability, and democratic governance are prioritized in tandem.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

The author contributed to all aspects of this research. Specifically, all conceptualization, study design, methodology selection, data collection, and formal analysis were carried out by the author.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Call:
glm(formula = living_conditions_dummy ~ employment_dummy + trust_dummy +
    democracy_dummy + corruption_dummy + crime_dummy + year_2018 +
    year_2021 + year_2022, family = binomial(link = "logit"),
    data = combined_data)

Coefficients:
                  Estimate Std. Error z value Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)        0.49578    0.06966   7.117 1.10e-12 ***
employment_dummy   0.60377    0.05223  11.560  < 2e-16 ***
trust_dummy        0.19470    0.05584   3.486 0.000489 ***
democracy_dummy    0.23123    0.05298   4.365 1.27e-05 ***
corruption_dummy  -0.08601    0.05333  -1.613 0.106808
crime_dummy       -0.57440    0.05118 -11.224  < 2e-16 ***
year_2018         -0.51821    0.06790  -7.632 2.32e-14 ***
year_2021         -0.24456    0.07165  -3.413 0.000642 ***
year_2022         -0.34952    0.07141  -4.894 9.87e-07 ***
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Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

(Dispersion parameter for binomial family taken to be 1)

    Null deviance: 9240.2  on 6796  degrees of freedom
Residual deviance: 8827.3  on 6788  degrees of freedom
  (613 observations deleted due to missingness)
AIC: 8845.3

Number of Fisher Scoring iterations: 4
```

Source: Created by R.

```
> data.frame(Odds_Ratio = exp_coefficients, conf_intervals)
                  Odds_Ratio     X2.5..    X97.5..
(Intercept)        1.6417860  1.4326585  1.8825626
employment_dummy   1.8290061  1.6513669  2.0265742
trust_dummy        1.2149424  1.0891036  1.3556470
democracy_dummy    1.2601485  1.1359391  1.3981448
corruption_dummy   0.9175860  0.8265040  1.0186962
crime_dummy        0.5630402  0.5092522  0.6223930
year_2018          0.5955875  0.5212971  0.6802936
year_2021          0.7830484  0.6804737  0.9011778
year_2022          0.7050263  0.6129223  0.8109523
```

Source: Created by R