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An Analysis of Poverty in Households Headed by Millennials in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Poverty is a worldwide quandary and despite global efforts to culminate it, progress in this regard has been slow and in some parts of the world, the plight has worsened. Ensuring adequate resource provision for their families and consequently evading poverty proves to be a challenge for some household heads, particularly millennials. This study therefore seeks to analyse the prevalence of poverty in households headed by millennials based on their characteristics. The study employed data from the 2021 General Household Survey of Statistics South Africa with a sample of 2685 millennial heads. The findings reveal that households headed by millennials who are males, African; single, divorced, and unemployed are vulnerable to poverty. Further findings indicate that households where the head had a tertiary qualification and was employed were less vulnerable to poverty. It can therefore be construed that head of household characteristics have a bearing on a household's wellbeing and the future outcomes of the children in their households. Policies enacted by government needs to create realistic opportunities that will enable millennials to sustain themselves and their households.

Keywords: Millennials, Head, Households, Poverty, Poor
JEL Classifications: D1, J1, I3

1. INTRODUCTION

The wellbeing of millennials has been a subject of global scrutiny partly due to the economic challenges that they have faced in their lifetime, such as the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bolognesi et al., 2020). A generation living in a time of the "Gig economy" finds it difficult to be permanently employed with some millennials having no option but to settle for underemployment just to make ends meet (International Monetary Fund, 2017). Mugglestone (2015) argues that millennials with children are under more pressure as they work longer hours, are faced with rising child costs and find it harder to study further compared to their predecessor generation. Childcare Aware America (2019) opines that millennials are the first generation to experience higher poverty levels compared to generations before, where 88% of millennial parents were found to be living below the Federal Poverty Line in 2017. Statistics from the United States (US) Census Bureau revealed that millennials are mostly vulnerable to low wages, rising costs and stagnant employment rates compared to prior generations (Haider, 2021).

Mattingly et al. (2019) found that the poverty rate is high among millennials in the US and that the government's social support programme has become a necessity to keep these financially strapped millennials, especially those with children, above the poverty line. Kurz et al. (2018:31) further deduce that millennials in the US are poorer in terms of assets and liquidity compared to their preceding generations. Rahman (2019), who carried out a study in the United Kingdom (UK), found that the poverty rate of millennials was 3% points higher than that of the baby boomers when they were at the same age. The study further projected that more than one-fifth of the younger millennial generation will be in poverty as they begin to rear their children in their late 20's (Rahman, 2019:15).

According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) (2018), the South African millennial generation accounted for over 35% of the population in 2018 and remains the generation with the highest rate of unemployed graduates in the country (Stats SA, 2020). The Education and Labour Market Outcomes in South Africa report by Stats SA (2018) reveals that approximately half of the millennial generation were either unemployed or were not economically active. In a country where unemployment has been a determining factor of whether one lives below or above the poverty line, millennials in South Africa are susceptible to poverty and so are the individuals living in their households. Haider (2021) postulates that children's own economic conditions cannot be isolated from those who care for them. Therefore, millennials' poor economic conditions are a testimony of their household's situation, including the poor well-being of their children.

This research analyses the incidence of poverty in South African households headed by millennials based on their characteristics. These characteristics include the age, gender, race, education level, marital status, employment status and income. The household size is also a very important variable in this type of analysis and will form part of the variable component. Very little research has been done on millennials in South Africa, let alone how their characteristics may have an impact on the wellbeing of their households. Although literature on millennials is limited, such a study is warranted in that this is a generation of adults who are already having children and therefore it would be interesting to establish how they fair as household heads.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With civilisation and modernisation, it is expected that circumstances of the next generation will be better than that of their predecessors; however, this is not always the case. Rahman (2019) concludes that children born in the 1990s in the US who are now millennials had lower rates (25%) of child poverty and this was partly due to the cash benefits that were extended to households with children. The reduction in such benefits for the working age millennials with children has led to an increase in child poverty with the expectation that the situation is yet to get worse. According to Fry (2017), millennials had the highest number (5.3 million) of households in poverty compared to generation × (4.2 million) and the baby boomers (5 million) in the US. This further asserts the findings by Cramer et al. (2019) that millennial heads of households tend face the economic hardships of raising children and generating reserves for the future compared to the predecessors who were the same age at that time. Rodriguez (2019) argues that at least 22% of millennials are living in relative poverty and that children born to these millennials will also suffer the scourge by the time they turn 2-years-old. Statistics Canada (2020) concludes that the economic status and wellbeing of households headed by younger generations such as millennials are at a financial risk as they mostly depend on a salary to sustain their households where their disposable income is growing at a lower rate of 5% compared to the total debt rate at 6%. Millennials are further vulnerable to financial risk as they may be working in industries that have been hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and most likely may not have any assets or sufficient savings to sustain themselves and their households in times of crises.

Looking at generational wealth and financial wellbeing, millennial heads in the US aged 25-34 in 2016 were 12% less wealthy compared to their counterparts who were the same age in 1989 (Gale and Harris, 2020). This was particularly the case for blacks or Hispanics, where Gale and Harris (2020) further found that black heads of households have lower incomes compared their white counterparts, irrespective of their education, age or marital status. Another study by Mottola (2014) also found that millennials are struggling more financially compared to preceding generations, where at least 23% of the millennials were found to be spending more than their income compared to only 16% of baby boomers and 14% for the silent generation. At least 31% of millennials had unpaid medical bills compared to only 10% of the silent generation. This signals that millennials are more likely to live beyond their means compared to generations before.

Millennials are said to be the more educated compared to generations before; however, educational attainment does not necessarily guarantee economic success for households headed by millennials, and this may be further exacerbated by location. The geographic location of a household has a significant impact on life outcomes; where those living in rural areas had fewer opportunities compared to the ones living in areas that had better economic opportunities (United States of America Government Accountability Office, 2019). Findings from Stats SA (2018), also reveal that 4.2% of millennial household heads with high incomes had a tertiary qualification, most of whom resided in bigger cities. This is a very small proportion compared to the 61% who had a secondary education and living mostly on minimum wages or government social grants.

Educational attainment does not guarantee secure employment, and this can be seen with millennials as they are by far the most job insecure generation compared to their predecessors (Bialik and Fry, 2019). Results from the Hamilton Survey of 2017 conducted in Hamilton, Ontario, found that only 9% of millennials were in permanent/part-time employment, 32% in precarious employment, 44% in seasonal employment, while 15% were classified to be in the 'other' category (Martin and Lewchuck, 2018). Permanent employment has become scarce with many millennials in precarious employment finding themselves anxious and uncertain about being paid their full salary or how long they will be employed (Hussein et al., 2018; Worth, 2016). Some of these millennials find themselves moving back home to live with their parents or have delayed milestones such as buying their first assets such as a house, a car or even starting a family (Martin and Lewchuck, 2018; Deloitte, 2020; Lee, 2021). These milestones are often delayed by the financial burden carried by millennials such as paying off student loan debts (Ciciora, 2016).

Marriage is one of the common and distinct delayed milestones of millennials that sets them apart from the predecessor generations. Frey (2018) asserts that the median age of marriage has since increased from the "family-friendly 1950s" where women got married at the age of 20 and 22 for men to ages 27 and 29, respectively. Murff (2016) argues that there are certain factors that may cause women to delay getting married, such as outstanding college debt and other financial commitments. Another factor that delays marriage is that there are fewer eligible bachelors. The more educated a woman is, the higher their expectations will be, which then results in women having to adjust their preferences or staying single (Murff, 2016). The United States of America Council of Economic Advisors (2014) also found that millennials who were more educated married later and that a higher proportion of college educated millennials were more likely to get married compared to their counterparts who were around the same age in the 1980s. Child bearing before marriage is a common occurrence among millennials, according to Wang and Wilcox (2017), who found that at least 25% of millennials had children before marriage, while 30% had children and remained unmarried; in contrast, 45% had children after marriage. Similar findings emerged from a study by the Pew Research Center, where 55% of millennials lived in a family with children, which is lower than the proportion of generation × (66%) who were of the same age in 2003, baby boomers at 69% in 1987, and the silent generation at 85% in 1968 (Barroso et al., 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study follows a quantitative method of analysis using secondary data emanating from the latest Stats SA General Household Survey of 2021. The sample for this study comprises of millennial heads of households; these are individuals who were between the ages of 22 years and 41 years in 2021. After filtering and cleaning the data, the total sample size is 2685 millennial households from an initial sample of 9630 that were surveyed.

3.1. Data Analysis

The millennial head of household characteristics such as the age, gender, marital status, employment status, education level, income and household size form part of the variable component of interest in this study. The study will make use of descriptive statistics and a logistic regression to establish whether the characteristics of a millennial head of household have an impact on the economic well-being of a household. This will be done by employing the three national poverty lines developed by Stats SA namely the Food poverty line (FPL), the lower bound poverty line (LBPL) and the upper bound poverty line (UBPL). The binary logistic regression models will incorporate all three national poverty lines where the FPL only considers the expenditure on food items while the LBPL considers the FPL plus the average expenditure on non-food items where the total expenditure is equal to the FPL. Lastly, the UBPL poverty line considers the food poverty line plus all the other non-food expenditures where the expenditure on food items is equal to the FPL (Stats SA, 2021). The determination of the household poverty statuses based on the three poverty lines will be elaborated on in detail in Section 3.2.

3.2. The Determination of the Household Poverty Status

The calculation of the household poverty statuses is based on the three national poverty lines formulated by Statistics South Africa (2022) as illustrated in Table 1. This was done by way of multiplying the FPL (R624) by the total household size. Should the income of the head of household be less than the household poverty line, then the household is poor. Should the income be higher than the household poverty line, then the household is non-poor. The same formula is applied for the LBPL (R890) and the UBPL (R1 335). Should the income of the head of household be less than both of the household poverty lines, then the household is poor based on both poverty lines. Should the income be higher than both household poverty lines, then the household is non-poor based on both poverty lines. The coding was as follows: 0 for non-poor and 1 for poor.

Table 1: Stats SA national poverty lines

Poverty lines	2021 values
Food poverty line (FPL)	624
Lower bound poverty line (LBPL)	890
Upper bound poverty lines (UBPL)	1335

Source: Statistics South Africa 2022

The household poverty statuses for each poverty line will thus be denoted as follows: FPL: household poverty status 1 (HHPS1), LBPL: household poverty status 2 (HHPS2) and UBPL: household poverty status 3 (HHPS3) after taking the household size and income into account.

Table 1 illustrates the national poverty lines as constructed by Stats SA.

4. MODEL

This subsection presents the model description. The study employs a binary logistic regression model to measure poverty in households headed by millennials. The dependent variable is the household poverty status that will be represented by the three poverty statuses (HHPS1, HHPS2, HHPS2). To determine household poverty status, a dichotomous variable is specified as follows:

$$\frac{p}{p-1} = \beta_0 \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \varepsilon_1 \tag{1}$$

Where $\frac{p}{p-1}$ is the household poverty status. The explanatory variables $X_1 \ldots X_5$ represent the head of household characteristics while β_0, β_1 represents the coefficients. The gender variable (X_1) had two categories namely the male denoted by 0 and 1 for female. The racial group variable (X_2) comprised of four categories namely the African, Coloured, Asian, and White. The marital status variable (X_3) was characterised by four categories, namely the legally married, living together, divorced, widowed, and single. The education level (X_4) had four categories classified as primary school, secondary school, tertiary qualification and "other." Lastly, the employment status represented by X_5 had three categories, namely the employed, unemployed, not economically active.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the profile of millennial heads of households by way of descriptive statistics and a binary logistic regression. The results on the frequencies as illustrated in Table 2 reveal that the sample mainly comprises of males at 61%, while females represent 39% of the sample. The sampled population

Table 2: Categorical variable component

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1637	61
Female	1048	39
Population group		
African/black	2419	90.1
Coloured	130	4.8
Indian/asian	31	1.2
White	105	3.9
Education level		
No schooling	42	1.6
Primary school	195	7.3
Secondary school	2014	75
Tertiary education	346	12.9
Other post-matric qualifications	88	3.3
Marital status		
Legally married	668	24.9
Living together	447	16.6
Divorced	24	0.9
Widowed	34	1.3
Single	1512	56.3
Employment status		
Employed	1697	63.2
Unemployed	582	21.7
Note economically active	406	15.1

Source: Calculations from survey data

was comprised largely of African millennials (90.1%), followed by Coloureds at 4.8% and Whites at 3.9%. The Asian population group was the least represented, making up 1.2% of the sampled population.

The education level variable shows that the majority of millennials had a secondary school level of education (75%) while only 12.9% had a tertiary education level. Pyoria et al. (2017) have alluded to this age cohort as being the most educated however, these findings display a different picture. Looking at the marital status, the results show that more than half of the sampled millennial heads of households are single (56.3%), while 24.9% are legally married. There are a host of possible reasons for this, as more young people are getting married later in their lives and have their focus on establishing their careers while others choose to live together perhaps avoiding the complications that come with a civil marriage (Manning et al., 2019). The results of this study reiterate the choice of cohabiting where 16.6% of millennials have opted to living together with their partners. The results for the employment status show that the majority of the sampled population is employed (63.2%), 21.7% are unemployed, and 11.5% are not economically active. The unemployment situation in South Africa remains a cause for concern, with many young people out of work. According to Statistics South Africa (2022), one of the contributors to the unemployment situation of young people is discouragement and a lack of formal education. Educated graduates have better prospects of securing employment and self-sufficiency.

Looking at the continuous variable component in Table 3, the descriptive statistics for the age variable show that the minimum age of the millennial household heads is 22 years, while the maximum is 41 years. According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2020), millennials are individuals born between the years

Table 3: Continuous variable component

Variable	Sample	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Age	2685	22	41	34.16	5.073
Income	2685	0	80000	4994.59	8426.631
Household Size	2685	1	17	3.03	2.006

Source: Calculations from survey data

1980 and 1999. Therefore, these millennials belonged to the 22-41 age cohort in 2021. The household size variable shows that the minimum size of a millennial household is 1 and the maximum is 17, while the salary ranged from R0 to R80000.

Table 4 illustrates three binary logistic regression models for the three poverty statuses (HHPS1, HHPS2, HHPS3). The results for first categorical variable being racial group reveal that millennial household heads that are African and Coloureds are more likely to be poor based on regression 1 (1.545, 1.321 respectively) and regression 2 (1.738, 1.349 respectively) while their Asian counterparts who were non-poor based on the three regression models (HHPS1-15.068; HHPS2: –0.460; HHPS3 –0.013). The Whites categorical variable was the constant. The results further show that Africans have a higher probability of being poor (0.597) based on regression 3. There could be a variety of reasons for such outcomes such the probable over-indebtedness of millennials and precarious employment. Another possible reason could be due to consequential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that sent shockwaves not only in the South African labour market, but globally resulting in many young people losing their jobs (Barford et al., 2021).

For the second categorical variable which was gender, the female categorical variable took the place of the constant. The results show that male millennial household heads have a lower probability of being poor based on regression 1 (–0.855) and regression 2 (–0.877) models but have a higher probability of being poor based on regression 3 (1.712). A study by the United States of America Government Accountability Office (2019) found that one of the factors inhibiting the financial stability of millennials includes high student debts and low incomes making it difficult to sustain themselves and their households. The results further show that there is a significant relationship between gender and poverty at a 1% level of significance based on the three models.

The third variable was the employment status where the employed variable took the place of the constant. The results indicate that millennials that were unemployed were less likely to be poor based on regression 1 (–22.640) and regression 2 (–22.302) but were more likely to be poor based on regression 3 (074) which then means that they are unable to afford non-food items. These results were expected as the unemployed are often vulnerable to poverty. The results for the not economically active category show that millennial heads in this category have a lower probability of being poor based on regression 2 (–0.071) and regression 3 (–0.030). The results were unexpected as these are individuals who are not employed or involved in any economic activities and could most likely be students.

Table 4: Binary logistic regression models on the millennials head of households' characteristics

Independent variables	Regression 1: HHPS1			Regression 2: HHPS2			Regression 3: HHPS3		
	B	Sig	Exp (B)	B	Sig	Exp (B)	B	Sig	Exp (B)
Racial group		0.072	4.689		0.001	5.688		0.002	
African	1.545	0.010	3.747	1.738	0.001	3.855	0.597	0.043	1.817
Coloured	1.321	0.046	0.000	1.349	0.020	0.631	–0.330	0.405	0.719
Asian	–15.068	0.992	0.425	–0.460	0.689	0.416	–0.013	0.984	0.987
Gender									
Males	–0.855	0.000		–0.877	0.000		1.712	0.000	5.538
Employment status		1.000			1.000			0.000	
Unemployed	–22.640	0.991		–22.302	0.991	0.000	074	0.58	0.558
Not economically active	0.178	1.194		–0.071	1.000	0.931	–0.030	0.848	0.625
Marital status		0.015	0.817		0.002	1.026		0.000	
Living together	–0.202	0.302	0.000	0.026	0.879	0.446	0.026	0.892	1.027
Divorced	–15.638	0.989	0.702	–0.808	0.313	1.333	2.248	0.000	9.468
Widowed	–0.353	0.551	0.568	0.287	0.570	0.622	0.323	0.620	1.381
Single	–0.566	0.001		–0.475	0.001		2.263	0.000	9.609
Education level		0.000	2.762		0.000	1.066		0.085	
Primary school	1.016	0.203	1.207	0.064	0.912	0.492	0.491	0.370	1.635
Secondary School	0.188	0.808	0.358	–0.710	0.195	0.127	0.035	0.946	1.036
Tertiary education	–1.230	0.156	0.670	–2.176	0.001	0.363	–0.019	0.973	0.981
Other post matric qualifications	–0.401	0.762	0.105	–1.013	0.304	0.345	0.288	0.745	1.334
Constant	–2.252	0.023	4.689	–1.065	0.167	5.688	–3.970	0.000	0.019

Source: Stats SA survey data

The results for the marital status variable, where the married categorical variable took the place of the coefficient reveal that millennials that were divorced and single had a lower probability of being poor based on regression 1 (–15.638; –0.566 respectively) and regression 2 (–0.808; –0.475 respectively) but had a higher probability of being poor based on regression 3 (2.248; 2.263 respectively). These results further allow for the assumption that these heads of households may be unemployed and dependent on assistance from relatives or social security grants from the state. Lu et al. (2019) also acknowledge that the incidence of poverty is greatly experienced in households headed by a single parent (mostly females). Although the incidence of divorce as a cause of poverty has not been widely researched as opined by Hogendoorn et al. (2020), the absence of combined incomes and the increased burden of childcare for households with children may lead to poverty. The results further show that there is a significant relationship between the household poverty status (HHPS3) and the divorced categorical at a 1% significance level. Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between the single categorical variable and the household poverty status based on the three regression models at a 1% level of significance. Millennial heads in the "living together" category had a higher probability of being poor based on regression 2 (0.879) and regression 3 (0.026) models respectively. These results where unexpected considering the benefits of shared financial responsibilities that can be derived from living with a partner. A study by Antonelli and De Bonis (2021) also found that the joint income accentuates the benefits of economies of scale as the shared financial obligations in a household reduce the burden on the head of the household, which in turn reduces the likelihood of falling into poverty for the household.

The final variable for observation is the education level. The 'no education" categorical variable took the place of the constant. Millennial heads with only a primary school level of education had a higher probability of being poor across all three regression models (regression 1: 1.096; regression 2: 0.912; regression 3: 0.491) while those with a secondary level of education had a lower probability of being poor based on the second regression model (–0.710) and a higher probability based on the third regression model (0.035). This was expected as the assumption is that the lower the level of education, the higher the probability of being poor. Millennials with a tertiary level of education had a low probability of poor based on all the regression models (regression 1: –1.230; regression 2: –2.176; regression 3: –0.019). These results where expected as the assumption is that individuals with a higher education have better livelihoods compared to those without a tertiary education as the prospect of finding employment increases the more educated an individual becomes. These results also concur with the assertion that millennials are a generally well-educated generation (United States of America Council of Economic Advisors, 2014).

Millennials with other post matric qualifications had a lower probability of being poor based on regression 1 (–0.401) and regression 2 (–1.013) models but had a higher probability of being poor based on regression 3 (0.288). It can be assumed that these millennial heads of households are in lower paying employment, underemployed or unemployed.

6. CONCLUSION

The study reviewed and analysed the millennial head of household characteristics and how these can potentially impact on a household's wellbeing. The data used to conduct this study which comprised of 2685 millennial household heads emanated from the General household survey of 2021 conducted by Statistics South Africa. The study followed a cross-sectional method of analysis where descriptive statistics and logistic regression models were analysed. The findings from the descriptive statistics indicate that the majority of the millennial household heads were African (90.1%) and males (61%). Furthermore, the results reveal that the majority of these millennials had a secondary school level of education and with more than half of them being single (56%). From the results of the regression, it can be deduced that millennials that are Male, African, and coloured; with either a primary school or a secondary school level of education and were unemployed have a higher probability of being poor irrespective of their marital status.

These results are not only a reflection of the dire and desperate economic situation of millions of poor and unemployed South Africans but a reflection of the South African youth. The South African youth unemployment rate is the highest in the word (±61.4% in July 2022) which is quite alarming. The findings of this study warrant the much-needed policy reform and policy intervention to address the desperate situation of millennials in South Africa, some of whom have dependants and other financial responsibilities. Millennial household heads need to be empowered and afforded more opportunities to not only sustain themselves and their households, but to also be afforded the opportunity to contribute towards the South African economy that has been struggling for several years. More opportunities also need to be created for that segment of millennial household heads with lower levels of education in the form of employment, training or funding to start businesses. This will in turn quell the high unemployment rate and the increased dependence on the state for social grants.

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