Absenteeism and Labour Precarity

A Quantitative Analysis of a South African Cleaning Services Company

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Abstract

This study investigates absenteeism among cleaners employed by a South African cleaning services company. Despite its economic importance and the challenges faced by its workforce, the cleaning services industry remains understudied, particularly in terms of absenteeism and its impacts on cleaners' livelihoods. To fill this void, a quantitative approach was employed, utilising a dataset of 5109 cleaners to analyse the prevalence and patterns of absenteeism. Results show that Black African females were disproportionately affected, and regions such as Cape Town and the North-West Province displayed the highest prevalence of absenteeism among cleaners. This study contributes to the growing body of research on precarious work and informs policy discussions and interventions on improving labour practices in low-wage sectors.

Keywords: Absenteeism, janitorial services, working hours, quantitative research, South Africa, clinical sociology

1. Introduction

This study explores the patterns of absenteeism among cleaners, also referred to as janitors or custodians, of a national cleaning company in South Africa. In this study, absenteeism refers to instances when employees are absent from their contracted work without valid reasons for an entire day, or when they have been repeatedly absent, thereby affecting the company's productivity (Acosta, 2025:30; Ashraf & Ashraf, 2024:319). Investigating absenteeism among cleaners is important because they render a crucial service to the overall functioning of a workplace. They clean, sweep, mop and vacuum floors inside schools, universities, office buildings, hospitals and shopping malls. They clean restrooms and restock supplies such as toilet paper, soap and hand sanitiser. They wash windows, empty trash bins and tidy up rooms and corridors. Yet, despite their important role in maintaining and keeping buildings safe, clean and hygienic, cleaning work is a low-status and poorly paying job that few people aspire to pursue as a career (Bayron et al., 2024; Perri, 2023; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022). Globally, millions of people are employed as cleaners, the majority of whom are black and female, often from socioeconomically disadvantaged and undereducated backgrounds (Cho, 2019; Flanagan, 2022; Herod & Aguiar, 2006; Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022).

In addition to the physical drudgery of the job and poor working conditions, the cleaning industry is a victim of neoliberal labour market deregulation, re-segmentation and downsizing (Cho, 2019; Rabelo, 2017). In many countries, the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s led to in-house and full-time cleaners being given early retirement packages or retrenched, with their positions filled by cleaners employed by outsourced third-party cleaning companies (Du Toit, 2025). For workers, this means that they are typically employed on non-standard, flexible, short-term and/or fixed-term employment contracts that erode access to proper working conditions, fair treatment, and dignity (Cho, 2019; Herod & Aguiar 2006; Knotter, 2017; Rabelo, 2017; Vidal, 2016; Warren, 2016). Similarly, in South Africa, the cleaning industry employs a large proportion of workers, mostly women from poor socio-economic backgrounds,

on casual and outsourced contracts mirroring international trends (Bezuidenhout & Fakier, 2006; Gow & George, 2011; Ntlokwana, 2016; Ntsie, 2020; Petro, 2014).

International studies on the cleaning industry tend to focus on cleaners' job satisfaction (Rodríguez-Nieto et al., 2018); resilience and coping strategies (Bayron et al., 2024); workload, occupational hazards and health (Bao et al., 2023; Charles et al., 2009), recognition, collective bargaining and union membership (Cho, 2019; Connolly et al., 2017; Eimer, 2024; Flanagan, 2022), among others. Bezuidenhout and Fakier (2006) explored the impact of neoliberalism and workplace restructuring of contract cleaners at a South African university. While their single-participant methodology limits the generalizability of their findings, their work raises important questions about exploitation in outsourced cleaning work that warrant broader empirical investigation More systematic evidence of precarity in South African contract cleaning comes from Gow and George's (2011) study of cleaning companies that demonstrates industry-wide practices of maintaining casual worker pools who lack job security and receive lower wages than permanent staff. Additionally, Ntsie's (2020) study on outsourced cleaners reveals systematic patterns of workplace rights violations, including the denial of paid annual and sick leave, with migrant workers particularly vulnerable to mistreatment, despite formal protections. These studies collectively establish that outsourced cleaning work is characterised by instability and vulnerability.

Workplace absenteeism has received considerable scholarly attention across diverse sectors and national contexts. Research has examined the causes, consequences, and management strategies of employee absence in business settings (Kocakulah et al., 2016), manufacturing (Gutsa & Luke, 2021), construction (Moyo & Smallwood, 2024), and healthcare (Haywood, 2020; Klootwijk et al., 2025). Importantly, some studies have specifically explored how employment precarity and contract type influence absenteeism patterns, demonstrating that workers on non-standard contracts experience different absence dynamics than those on permanent contracts (Restrepo & Salgado, 2013; Kim et al., 2016). Within the

South African context, scholars have identified multiple factors contributing to absenteeism, including poor working conditions, inadequate health and safety provisions, and organisational culture (Gutsa & Luke, 2021; Moyo & Smallwood, 2024). Yet, research on absenteeism in the contract cleaning industry has been overlooked and understudied.

To fill this void, this study draws on a large quantitative dataset comprising records of 5,109 permanently employed employees of a national cleaning company. The data captured for February 2022 includes entries for each of the 5,109 employees, covering age, gender, race, geographic region, hours worked, wages paid, and recorded absences (represented as negative hours paid). The study is guided by the following question: What are the patterns of absenteeism within the cleaning company, and how do they vary across different demographic groups and geographical locations? While our study does not provide insights into the causes of absenteeism among contract workers, its objective is to identify which groups of workers are most at risk of absenteeism and how company managers can address this issue through targeted interventions. Through this analysis, we aim not only to contribute to academic discussions on labour processes and precarious work but also to provide empirical evidence that can inform policy discussions and organisational practices regarding absent working hours. By shedding light on the prevalence and impacts of absenteeism, this study aims to contribute to efforts to improve working conditions in the cleaning services industry and similar low-wage service sectors. In the following sections, we will provide a discussion of the cleaning service industry in South Africa, including possible causes of absenteeism, followed by a description of the methodology and results. The study concludes with implications for policy and practice in the context of South African labour relations and beyond.

2. The Cleaning Industry in South Africa

According to the National Contract Cleaning Association (2025), the cleaning industry in South Africa employs over 100,000 people, with an estimated 1,500 cleaning companies. Established cleaning

companies with branches across South Africa include Bidvest Prestige, Servest, and Tsebo Solutions, alongside emerging medium and small cleaning companies that offer basic and specialised cleaning services to numerous industries, such as education, healthcare, commercial, mining, and industrial sectors (Goscore, 2022). Cleaning is often not considered part of the core function of an organisation or a business's focus. It is therefore most likely to be outsourced to companies specialising in cleaning work.

Market research predicts that the cleaning industry is projected to grow at a rate of 4.38% from 2023 to 2032, with an expected revenue of USD 2 billion in 2032 (Credence Research, 2025). The rise in South Africa's cleaning industry is attributed to the expansion of healthcare infrastructure, the construction of high-rise commercial buildings, and the rapid development of the food and beverage industry, which necessitates professional cleaning services. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened public awareness of hygiene and cleanliness, causing a demand for cleaning services alongside broader sectoral growth (Credence Research, 2025).

The cleaning industry is heavily racialised and gendered, where black African men and women from poor socio-economic backgrounds dominate this industry. This pattern is not accidental, as it reflects deep structural inequality where black people were steered into low-status and precarious jobs during the apartheid era, a trend that remains today. Like paid domestic work (see e.g., Ally, 2010; du Toit & Casanova, 2025), the division of labour is also gendered, where women tend to perform mostly indoor cleaning roles such as office, retail, and hospital cleaning, while men tend to perform outside cleaning roles like window washing, industrial - and waste cleaning (Bezuidenhout & Fakier, 2006; Duffy, 2007; Herod & Aiguir, 2006; SweepSouth, 2025).

Despite the cleaning industry's low status, it is governed by key labour legislations, including the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (LRA), the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1998 (BCEA) and the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 (EEA). Together, they provide guidance to employers and employees regarding fair treatment. However, the unique vulnerabilities of this sector called for an

additional statute. The Sectoral Determination 1 (SD1) was introduced in 1999 and applied to all contract cleaners, regulating and enforcing minimum employment standards for this sector. Consistent with our data from 2022, the SD1 stipulated that cleaners, regardless of being employed on a full-time or fixed-term contract, must receive a minimum wage of R25.52 per hour in major metropolitan areas (Area A), R23.27 per hour in rural and other regions (Area C), with KwaZulu-Natal (Area B) governed by separate bargaining council rates. Their working hours were restricted to 45 hours per week, and they were liable for an annual bonus equivalent to one month's salary. However, casual contract cleaners might miss out on bonuses due to employer non-compliance.

While the SD1 does not explicitly address absenteeism, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) allows employers to deduct wages for unauthorised absences, but only in proportion to the actual hours not worked (BCEA, s.34). However, employers often monitor absenteeism inconsistently and have poor documentation. As a result, workers could lose a full day's pay despite being absent only for part of the day, a practice that breaches SD1's minimum daily payment requirements (SD1, Clause 3).

Moreover, the prevalence of fixed-term, temporary, and casual employment contracts discourages workers from taking sick leave or formally requesting time off (Runciman, 2022). This dynamic might contribute to absenteeism, as workers fear pay penalties or the loss of future shifts (See Barchiesi, 2008). Thus, precarious employment conditions and insecure work dynamics could also lead to absenteeism in the outsourced cleaning industry. A question that arises is: "What factors contribute to absenteeism among contract cleaners?

3. Absenteeism among Contract Cleaners

Multiple factors contribute to absenteeism among low-income workers, such as contract cleaners. Globally, women continue to bear the primary responsibility for household and caregiving duties within their families. For women in low-wage and precarious employment, such as contract cleaning, the lack of institutional and workplace support makes it difficult to reconcile work and

family responsibilities. This imbalance increases the likelihood of absenteeism, as workers are often forced to prioritise urgent care obligations over their work (Karimbil, 2019; Mokomane, 2019).

Occupational hazards, injuries, and related health outcomes among workers employed in the cleaning industry are another factor contributing to absenteeism. Cleaners are exposed to biological waste, hazardous materials such as broken glass and needles, and contaminated surfaces and objects that can lead to a variety of illnesses and allergies (Badubi, 2017; Charles, 2009). Subsequently, low-income workers who lack access to healthcare services are more likely to miss work compared to higher-income employees who can afford timely medical intervention and support. Often, they must rely on over-the-counter medicine for severe health conditions that require professional medical treatment (Wildbret et al., 2023). In addition, demanding workloads, working with heavy equipment, long working hours, and the social stigma linked to cleaning work could lead to poor physical well-being (e.g., back pain, poor physical postures) and mental well-being (e.g., stress, fatigue, and exhaustion) among cleaners (Bao et al., 2023; Charles, 2009; Rabelo, 2017).

Tedious and repetitive tasks, a lack of identification with company goals, boredom and feeling undervalued may cause cleaners to become disconnected and alienated from their job and are, therefore, more likely to be absent (Badubi, 2017). Frequent job transfers between departments or shifts, especially without adequate training or support, can further contribute to absenteeism by disrupting routines and lowering motivation. For example, cleaners who are regularly relocated between buildings, campuses, or work teams may feel unsettled or confused, which can reduce their sense of accountability and belonging in the workplace.

Environmental and logistical barriers are also contributing to absenteeism. Poor weather conditions (e.g., heavy rain, flooding, or storms) can render roads impassable or unsafe, particularly in under-serviced areas. In addition, unreliable public transport or disruptions caused by strikes or crime often prevent low-income workers, such as cleaners, who rely on minibus taxis or trains, from reaching their

workplaces on time or at all. For many, the long distances between their homes and places of employment, combined with high transport costs, further increase the likelihood of absenteeism, especially when wages are low and attendance incentives are lacking (Badubi, 2017). While there are many other possible reasons why people are absent from their work, it is necessary to develop interventions to help low-income workers, such as cleaners, limit the chances of absenteeism and subsequently lower their pay. Based on the dataset obtained, this study investigates which groups of cleaners are statistically more likely to be absent from their jobs. Based on the results, we also provide suggestions for interventions to reduce absenteeism and mitigate subsequent pay cuts.

4. Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional, retrospective, quantitative research design, utilising data from 5,109 employees working for a national cleaning company in February 2022. The dataset contained entries for each employee, including age, gender, race, geographic region, hours worked, wages paid, and recorded absences (reflected as negative hours paid). This study combined statistical modelling and machine learning (ML) approaches to examine patterns of absenteeism. Our analytical framework comprised three stages: (1) data preparation, (2) hierarchical clustering, and (3) predictive modelling with comparative evaluation of statistical and ML methods.

4.1. Data Preparation

We analysed administrative records extracted from monthly payroll and attendance data in Microsoft Excel format. The gender and race distribution of the dataset is shown in Table 1. Data pre-processing and analysis were conducted using Python (v3.8) and standard libraries including pandas, numpy, scikit-learn, and scipy.

Records about employees identified as "White" or "Indian", as well as those from the internal Human Resources Division (HRD), were excluded due to very low representation. Employees were uniquely identified via their employee code. A derived binary variable (AbsenceBinary) was created to indicate whether the employee had

ever recorded an absence during the observation period. Additionally, we calculated the average hourly wage (AvgHourlyRate) as total pay divided by total wage hours. Missing values in wage-related fields were imputed as zero, thereby preserving all employee records for the clustering process. The final dataset incorporated demographic variables (age, gender, race, and region), wage information, and absenteeism indicators.

Table 1. Gender and Race Distribution of the Workforce in the Final Dataset

Race	Male		Female		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Black African	1,194	95,4	3,709	96,2	4,903	96,0
Coloured	54	4,3	138	3,5	192	3,7
Indian	-	-	3	0,1	3	0,1
White	4	0,3	7	0,2	11	0,2
Total	**1,252**	**100**	**3,857**	**100**	**5,109**	**100**

4.2. Hierarchical Clustering

To identify distinct employee groupings, we applied Ward's hierarchical agglomerative clustering method. This approach used both standardised continuous features (Age, AvgHourlyRate) and one-hot encoded categorical variables (Gender, Race, and Region). Scaling and encoding were applied to each feature set. The clustering was implemented using the linkage function from the SciPy cluster hierarchy module, employing Ward's minimum variance criterion to minimise within-cluster variance. A dendrogram was generated to visualise the hierarchical structure of the clusters, and the tree was truncated at nine clusters (k = 9). This cut-off was selected based on a balance between analytical tractability and sociological interpretability. To assess whether the identified clusters captured meaningful differences in absenteeism, we conducted a Chi-squared test of independence between cluster membership (Cluster_H) and absenteeism status (Absence: yes/no). A contingency table

was constructed, and the Chi-squared test returned a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 210.65$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the construct validity of the clusters. We identified two of the nine clusters (Clusters 2 and 9) as 'high-risk', based on their elevated rates of absenteeism.

4.3. Statistical Modelling

For binary absenteeism prediction, we fitted logistic regression models using the statsmodels library. The baseline model included age, gender, race, region, and average hourly rate as predictors. Model performance was evaluated using Area Under the Curve (AUC), accuracy, and pseudo-R^2 values. We also experimented with interaction effects (e.g., Gender × AvgHourlyRate and Age × AvgHourlyRate) to capture potential socio-economic dynamics. To account for potential regional clustering effects, mixed-effects models were fitted with random intercepts for region, using the MixedLM module in the statsmodels package. Assumptions of linearity, independence, residual distribution and multicollinearity were assessed (e.g. VIF scores, Q–Q plots, and residual analysis).

4.4. Machine Learning

To complement the statistical models, we implemented a Random Forest classifier (RF) and a Gradient Boosting classifier (GB) using scikit-learn. The data were split into training (80%) and testing (20%) subsets, with stratification to preserve class balance. Model hyperparameters were optimised using GridSearchCV with 5-fold cross-validation. Performance metrics included AUC, accuracy, precision and recall. To enhance predictive performance, we engineered interaction features (e.g., age × wage), categorical groupings (e.g., wage quintiles, age brackets), and dummy variables for categorical factors. Feature importance was analysed for RF and GB models to identify the most influential predictors.

We compared the predictive performance of statistical models and ML models using a consistent test set. Logistic regression provided interpretability through coefficients and p-values, while ML models offered higher flexibility and the ability to capture non-linear relationships.

4.5 Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data provides only a snapshot of a single month (February 2022), which limits our ability to analyse seasonal patterns, longitudinal trends, or any other changes over time regarding cleaners' absenteeism. Second, there may be unobserved variables influencing negative hours and compensation not captured in our dataset. For example, job roles, workload, family responsibility or health status were not captured in the dataset, limiting the explanatory power of the models. Third, while our analyses reveal correlations and associations, they do not establish causal relationships. Lastly, the results are limited to one national cleaning company in South Africa. They cannot be generalised to other cleaning companies that use different labour practices and standards to record absenteeism among their staff.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. All personally identifiable information was removed or anonymised to protect employee privacy. Results are presented in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individual employees. We approached the analysis with impartiality, aiming to present an unbiased view of the company's labour practices. Direct informed consent from employees was not feasible due to the secondary use of administrative data. However, internal company data policies governed access to the data, and all analyses were conducted for legitimate organisational research purposes. We have clearly outlined our methodology and acknowledged limitations to ensure transparency in our research process. The study was designed and executed with neutrality, aiming to inform rather than critique or justify any managerial decisions. The use of multiple methods (statistical and ML approaches) ensured methodological triangulation, and limitations were transparently acknowledged to guard against overinterpretation of findings. Given the sensitive nature of employee absenteeism and its potential misuse in disciplinary contexts, the results are presented in a manner that

avoids stigmatisation. The focus remains on identifying systemic patterns to inform fair, equitable, and supportive HR strategies.

5. Results

The analysis revealed substantial heterogeneity in patterns of absenteeism among workers. Using hierarchical clustering based on age, gender, race, and hourly wage, the study identified ten distinct employee clusters. A Chi-squared test confirmed a statistically significant association between cluster membership and absence rates ($\chi^2 = 210.65$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the segmentation captures meaningful differences in absenteeism vulnerability.

Clusters 2 and 9 emerged as the most at-risk sub-populations. A summary of their demographic and geographic profiles is presented in Table 2. Cluster 2, referred to as the 'Middle-aged Female Workers', constituted 10.5% of the workforce and consisted almost entirely of Black African women earning minimum wage. The average age in this cluster was 43.5 years. This group was geographically split between semi-rural areas in the North West Province and urban Cape Town, with an absence rate of 24.6% and 39.1%, respectively. Cluster 9, which we refer to as the 'Younger Urban Precariat', comprised 12.3% of employees and was composed of a younger, more gender-balanced cohort (mean age: 31 years) who were also predominantly Black African. This group was concentrated in Cape Town and had an absence rate of 27.6%. While both clusters earned similar low wages, their demographic profile and geographic contexts revealed distinct vulnerabilities.

To explore the underlying drivers of absenteeism, traditional and multilevel logistic regression models were applied. Hourly wage and age were modestly protective factors against absence (Table 3), though the effect sizes were small. Being a Male and Coloured were associated with slightly higher odds of being absent, whereas region was not a statistically significant factor in the model. Although the inclusion of a multilevel structure to account for regional clustering improved model fit, the overall explanatory power of the models remained modest, with an area under the curve (AUC) of approximately 0.60. These results suggest that demographic and

Table 2. Demographic and Geographic Profile of High-risk Clusters

	Cluster Name	% of Workforce (N)	Mean Age (± SD)	Gender	Race	Mean Wage (R/hour ± SD)	Region	Absence Rate
2	Middle-aged Female Workers	10.5% (533)	43.5 ± 4.1 (Range 34–52)	98.9% Female	89.3% Black African	R23.16 ± R1.09	52.5% North West (semi-rural); 47.3% Cape Town	24.6% (NW); 39.1% (CT)
9	Younger Urban Precariat	12.3% (627)	31.0 ± 4.4 (Range: 20–43)	58.7% Female 41.3% Male	89.6% Black African	R23.49 ± R0.99	50.4% Cape Town (urban)	27.6%

Table 3. Multilevel Logistic Regression of Absenteeism Predictors*.

Factor	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Change in Predictor	Effect on Absence
Age	−0.003	< 0.001	+10 years	3% decrease
Hourly wage	−0.004	< 0.001	+R10/hour	4% decrease
Race: Coloured	+0.061	0.036	Coloured (vs Black)	0.6% increase
Gender: Male	+0.026	0.031	Male (vs Female)	2.6% increase
Region	+0.010	0.120	—	Not statistically significant

* Coefficients are from a multilevel logistic regression model with random intercepts by region.

wage characteristics, although relevant, are insufficient to fully explain patterns of absenteeism in this context, highlighting the need for more flexible modelling approaches capable of capturing complex, non-linear relationships.

Negative coefficients indicate a protective effect (lower odds of absence), while positive coefficients indicate increased risk. Age and hourly wage were both statistically significant protective factors, while being male and identifying as Coloured were associated with slightly higher odds of absenteeism. Regional variation was not statistically significant in the fixed effects but was included in the model to account for clustering. To this end, machine learning methods were employed and benchmarked against the statistical models (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative Performance of Selected Models Predicting Absenteeism

Model	AUC	Accuracy
Random Forest	0.743	0.74
Gradient Boosting	0.768	0.85
Mixed-Effects Linear Model	0.600	0.83

Both Random Forest (RF) and Gradient Boosting (GB) classifiers outperformed logistic regression in terms of predictive accuracy and AUC (Table 4). For example, the Random Forest model achieved an AUC of 0.698 and an accuracy of 75.0%, representing a clear improvement over the statistical model. Moreover, the machine learning models enabled analysis of variable importance, providing insight into which predictors most influenced the model outputs.

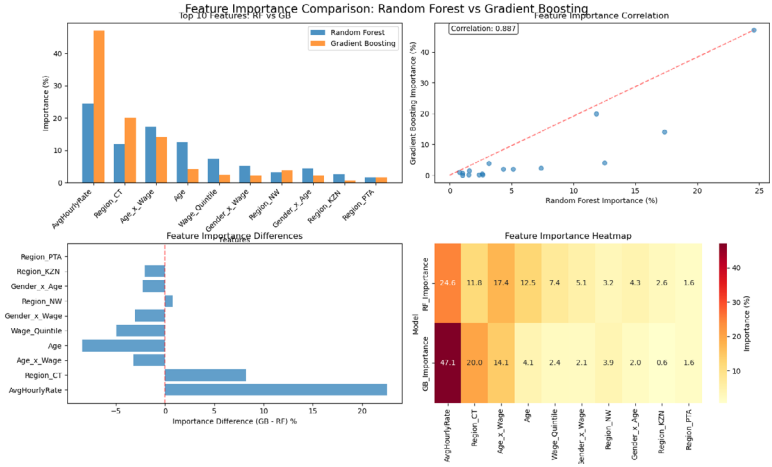

Figure 1: Feature importance in Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models predicting absenteeism

The top predictors of employee absenteeism, based on feature importance scores derived from Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models, are shown. As illustrated in Figure 1, economic factors dominated the feature importance rankings in both the RF and GB models. The hourly wage emerged as the most influential predictor, accounting for 24.6% of the importance in the Random Forest model and 47.1% in the Gradient Boosting model. The interaction between age and wage also featured prominently, as did geographic location, particularly in the Cape Town region. These findings highlight the centrality of economic vulnerability and urban context in shaping absenteeism risk, suggesting that these dimensions carry more predictive weight than demographic identity alone.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Building on these modelling results, we identified three priority groups for potential intervention. The first priority group comprised middle-aged women, aged between 34 and 52 years, in Cape Town, whose exceptionally high absence rate (39.1%) may reflect compounded vulnerabilities arising from gender, age, wage stagnation, and urban precarity. The second group consisted of younger urban workers,

both male and female, aged 20 to 34 years, who were concentrated in low-wage positions with an elevated risk of absence. The third group consisted of middle-aged women based in the North West Province, who similarly exhibited high rates of absence, but in a more semi-rural setting. The reasons for absenteeism among these three groups are unclear, as the dataset did not include any information on this topic. An investigation of the root causes of absenteeism is beyond the scope of this study, given the limited data available. Nonetheless, our results narrow the focus of possible interventions that could target vulnerable groups.

The first group of cleaners who are statistically at risk of absenteeism is middle-aged female cleaners aged between 34 and 52 years, living in Cape Town. With limited information available from the dataset, qualitative focus groups with a group of women in this age group in Cape Town could provide valuable insights into why they are a high-risk group for absenteeism and inform the development of targeted interventions. For example, the company could collaborate with these women to develop solutions and adapt policies on working hours, flexibility, childcare, and absenteeism.

However, we do not know where cleaners reside in Cape Town, the city is characterised for its stark social and spatial inequality, where low-income people typically live in townships outside Cape Town's CBD region (HSRC, 2023). Townships are Khayelitsha, Langa, and Mitchell's Plain are known for its poor infrastructure, dangerous streets, and dirty sanitation facilities which pose a severe health risk to its residents. For middle-aged women, who often carry the double burden of income generation and caregiving for children, living in a community with limited access to proper healthcare facilities, unreliable public transport, and exposure to gang violence could significantly affect their overall health and well-being. Notably, during the data collection period in February and March 2022, extended taxi violence in Cape Town left thousands of commuters stranded, compounding the challenges faced by working mothers who depend on public transport to balance their employment and childcare responsibilities. Thus, interventions could focus not only on improving the infrastructure of these communities, but also

on investing in community-based projects that target community clean-ups to improve residents' right to dignity and a liveable environment. Cleaning companies could establish partnerships with local clinics to offer discounted healthcare access and alternative transportation providers (e.g., Uber, Bolt) during emergencies for their cleaners.

Interventions could also target caregiving of this at-risk group. While we do not know if this group have children or grandchildren, trends suggest that Black African women from poor socio-economic backgrounds tend to have children at a young age and subsequently, become grandparents at a younger age (Anakpo, & Kollamparambil, 2021). Statistics show that roughly 6,7 million grandparents, the majority being grandmothers, reside and care for children aged 0 to 17 years (StasSA, 2023). Caregiving responsibilities may interfere with work duties and lead to absenteeism. Thus, interventions could focus on childcare support for this group, assisting mothers and grandmothers with childcare duties, and offering them financial assistance to outsource childcare to others.

The second group at risk of absenteeism is the "younger urban workers", who might struggle with job satisfaction or identifying with company goals. Incentives such as Employee of the Month or financial bonuses for good performance could motivate this group of workers to commit to their work schedules and reduce potential absenteeism. Creating a culture of care by acknowledging good work through incentives is linked to employee loyalty and commitment to the organisation (du Toit, 2012, 2013, 2025; Yuliani & Suryani, 2025). Today's digital era also makes it possible to communicate with employees digitally through personalised WhatsApp messages, which could improve commitment and a sense of belonging, thereby reducing absenteeism among a tech-savvy group of workers.

The third group of at-risk workers of absenteeism is the middle-aged women in North-West Province, a semi-rural area in South Africa, where towns and villages are spread out (Motatsa & Mokwena, 2014). Interventions could focus on support systems and organisational presence to reduce isolation. For example, planned social gatherings attended by women cleaners, senior personnel, and

mentors from the cleaning company could improve identification with the company, build solidarity among women, and develop specific coping strategies to reduce absenteeism. Interventions could also focus on solving transportation problems. For example, the company could subsidise shuttle services or partner with local transport providers to help women going to and coming from their workplaces, making commuting safer and more affordable for them.

In conclusion, this study highlights various individual, social and workplace vulnerabilities of cleaners in urban and semi-urban areas in South Africa. Absenteeism not only disrupts the organisation of the company, but it also impacts the individual who is penalised by pay cuts. This deepens poverty and inequality among vulnerable groups of people. Rather than blaming workers for absenteeism, there is a crucial need to advocate for wage adjustments and preventive strategies, such as healthcare support, improved transportation infrastructure and networks, and workplace flexibility, to help vulnerable low-income workers navigate daily challenges and reduce absenteeism, ultimately leading to higher wages.

Future studies could pilot the interventions suggested in this study to investigate their sustainability in reducing absenteeism among cleaners. Participatory action research is also necessary. Researchers could involve workers in developing interventions and solving problems. This study shows that absenteeism is not only a human resource management issue, but a symptom of deeper structural, racial and gender inequalities in South Africa's labour market. Addressing these root causes and solving the problems can support a healthier, more committed, and more resilient cleaning workforce, benefiting both workers and employers alike.

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