



Kenyan government gets mixed reviews on child welfare, especially from disadvantaged citizens

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 554 | Simon Templer Kodiaga and Alfred Kwadzo Torsu

Summary

Kenya's Constitution enshrines the right of every child to be "protected from abuse, neglect, harmful cultural practices, all forms of violence, inhumane treatment and punishment, and hazardous or exploitative labour" (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

Yet the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection's 2019 Violence Against Children Survey found that about half of the country's girls and boys had experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence – an improvement from its 2010 findings, but still alarmingly high (Republic of Kenya, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

In response, the government launched its 2019-2023 National Prevention and Response Plan on Violence Against Children, supported by a "Spot It, Stop It" publication information campaign (UNICEF, 2019; ReliefWeb, 2020). This year it followed with the Children Act 2022. In seeking to eliminate all forms of violence against children, the act explicitly prohibits corporal punishment as well as "online abuse, harassment or exploitation" (End Violence Against Children, 2022).

How do Kenyan citizens see their country's progress in the protection of children?

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' attitudes and perceptions related to child welfare.

More than half of Kenyans consider it acceptable to use physical force to discipline children, though opposition to corporal punishment is growing and most citizens say this practice is not very common in their community. Majorities also report that child abuse and neglect are infrequent problems in their community.

They say that resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children, children with disability, and children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

Still, only half of Kenyans give their government good marks on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children. Satisfaction with the government's efforts is particularly low among poor citizens and those without formal education, who are more likely to see child abuse/neglect as frequent problems and less likely to report that support services for vulnerable children are available.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Kenya, based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, interviewed 2,400 adult Kenyans in November-December 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2019.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A slim majority (52%) of Kenyans say parents are “sometimes” or “always” justified in using physical force to discipline their children. But opposition to corporal punishment has doubled since 2016, to 48%.
 - The use of physical discipline receives above-average support from men (57%), young people (56%), citizens without formal education (59%), and the wealthy (58%).
- Seven in 10 respondents (70%) say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their community.

Abused, neglected, and out-of-school children:

- Most Kenyans say child abuse and neglect (77%) and out-of-school children (67%) are infrequent problems in their community.
 - Young respondents, urban residents, and economically disadvantaged citizens are more likely than older people, rural residents, and better-off respondents to see child abuse and neglect as widespread problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- About two-thirds of Kenyans say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (67%) and children with disability (63%). A slimmer majority (53%) say children and adults with mental or emotional problems can get help.
 - Citizens who are poor and those who have no formal education are considerably less likely than their more educated and better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

- Half (49%) of Kenyans say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, but about the same proportion disagree.
 - Poor and/or unschooled citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

Disciplining a child

Discipline is an integral part of raising children. But should the use of physical force to discipline children be considered appropriate or abusive?

More than half (52%) of Kenyans believe it is “sometimes justified” (31%) or “always justified” (21%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. But the proportion of Kenyans who say this practice is “never justified” has doubled since 2016, from 24% to 48% (Figure 1).

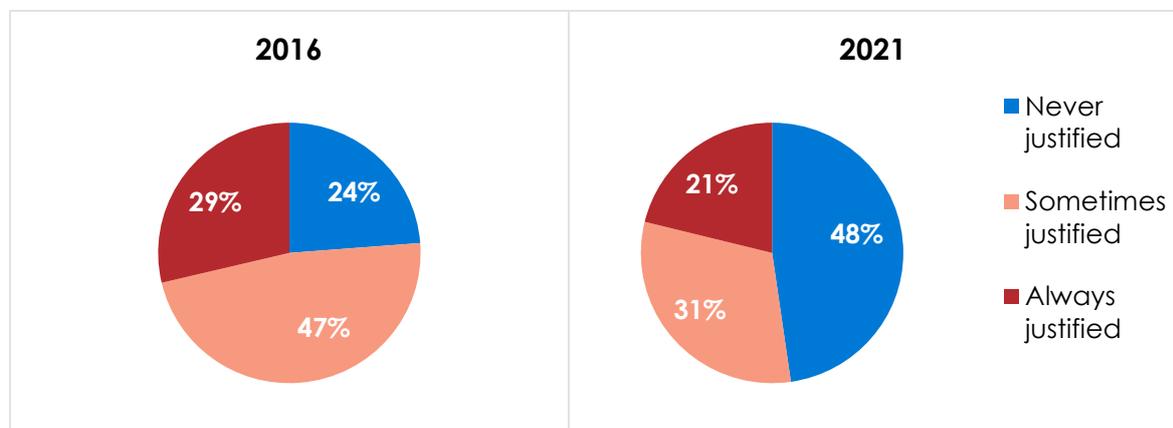
Men are considerably more likely than women to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (57% vs. 47% who say it is at least sometimes justified) (Figure 2). The practice is also more widely accepted among the youngest respondents (56% of 18- to 25-year-olds), among those with no formal education (59%), and among the wealthiest respondents (58% of those with no lived poverty¹) than among their respective counterparts.

In practice, seven in 10 Kenyans say that adults in their community do “not very frequently” (35%) or “not at all frequently” (35%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3). Three in 10 see this as a “somewhat frequent” (24%) or “very frequent” (6%) occurrence.

Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to report that people in their community use physical force to discipline children (35% vs. 27%) (Figure 4). This perception is also more common among respondents with post-secondary education (41%) than among those with less schooling (25%-34%).

And the youngest respondents (34%) are more likely than their elders (23%-31%) to report that children are frequently disciplined using physical force.

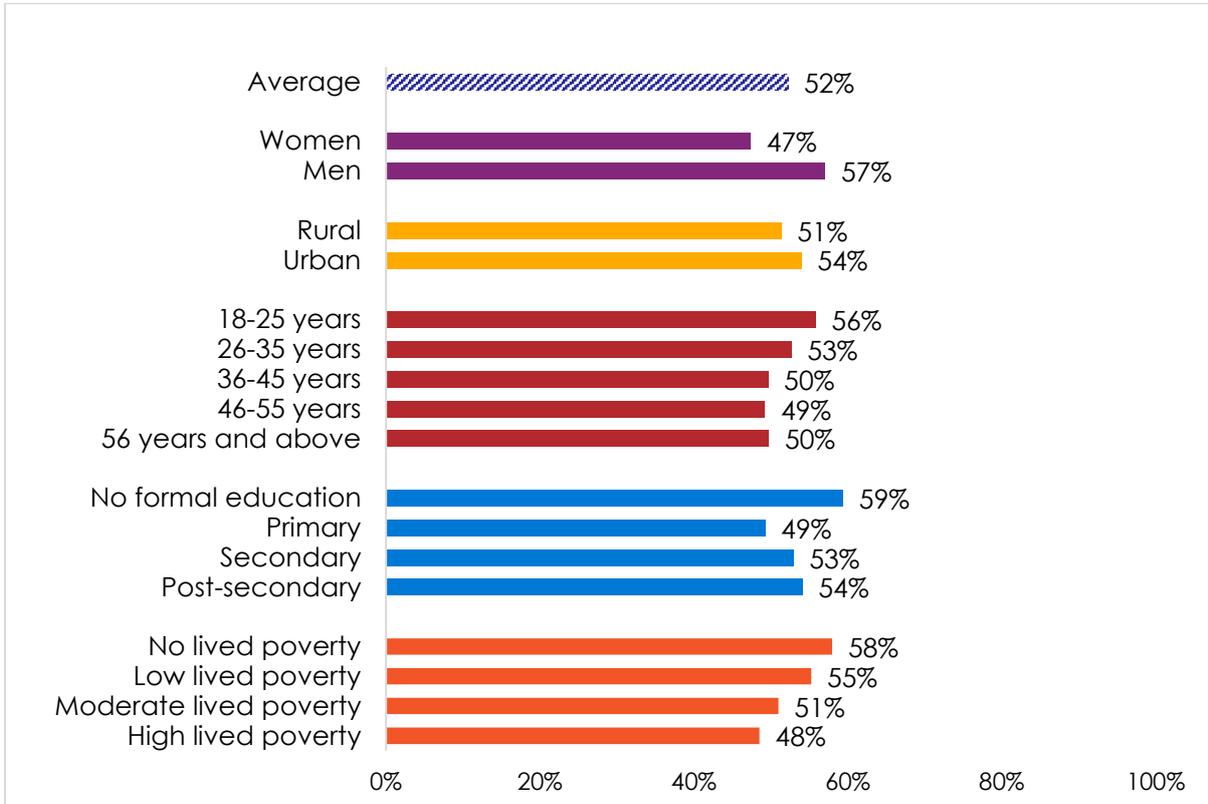
Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Kenya | 2016-2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children?

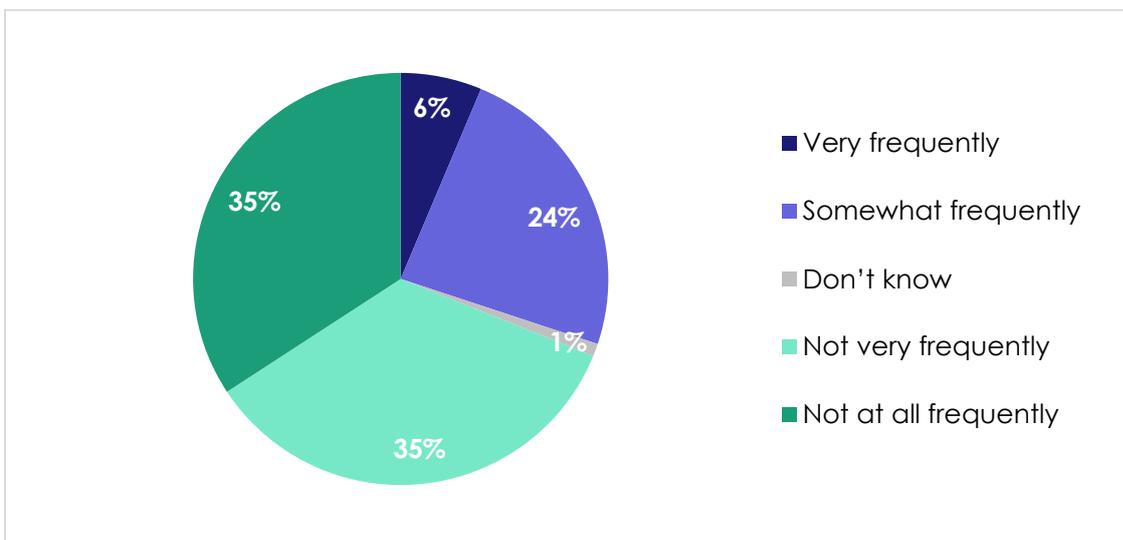
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



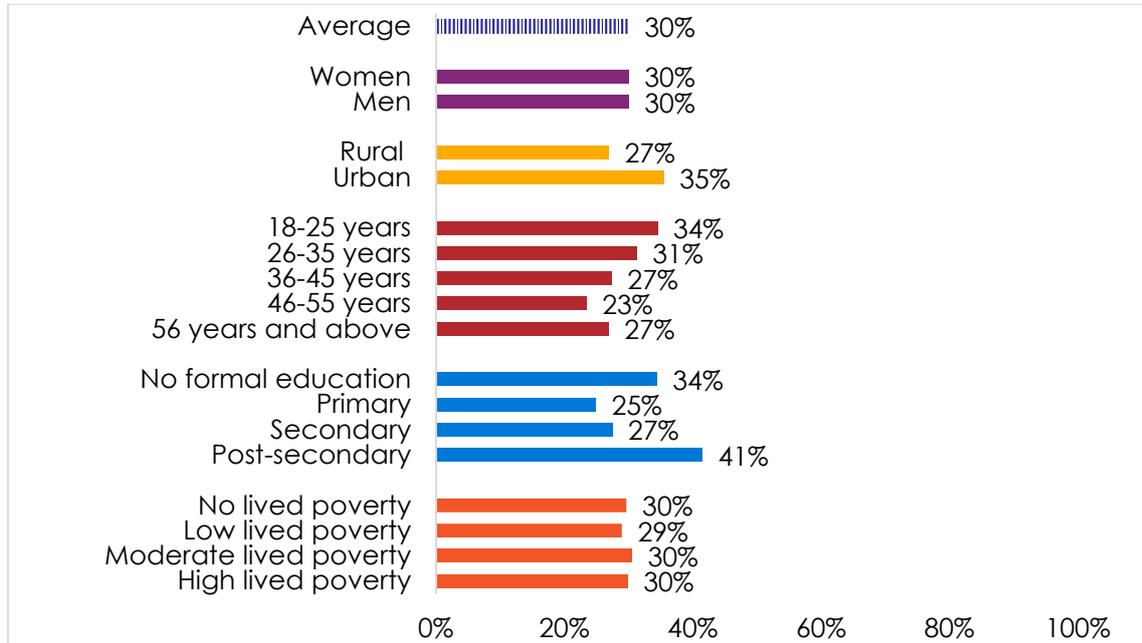
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children? | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Figure 4: Perception that adults frequently use physical force to discipline children
 | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021

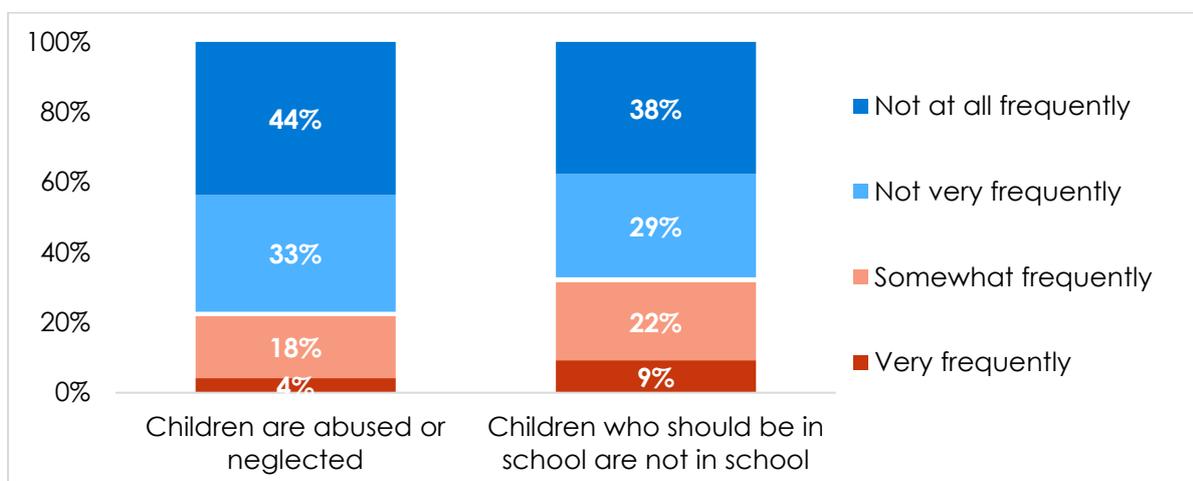


Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently”)

Abuse and neglect

Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, more than three-fourths (77%) of Kenyans say this is “not at all frequent” (44%) or “not very frequent” (33%), while 22% report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” or “very” frequent (Figure 5).

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Kenya | 2021

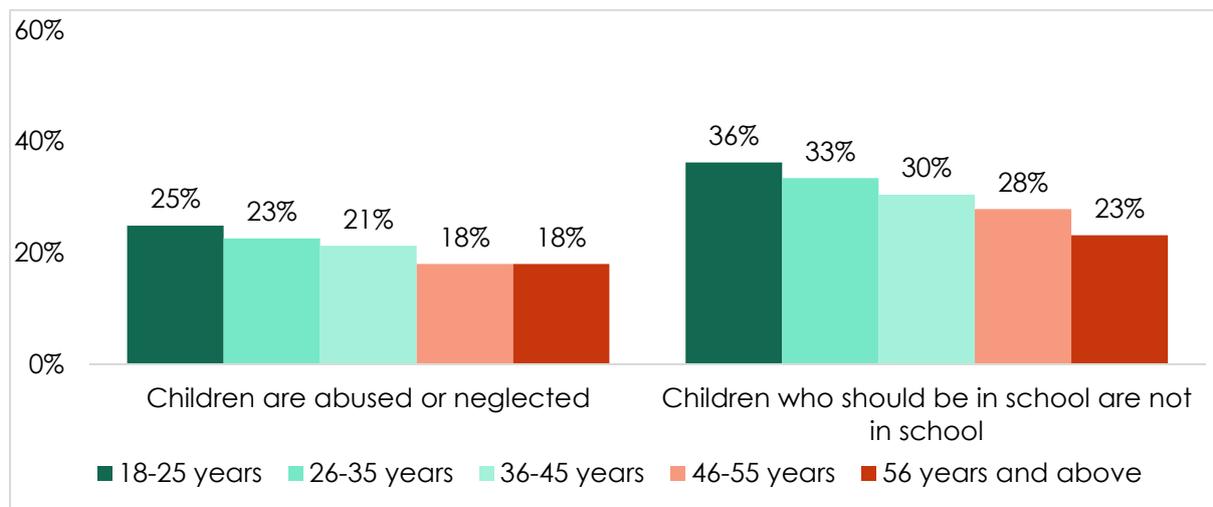


Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

A two-thirds majority (67%) also say it's not common to see school-age children who are not in school, though three in 10 respondents (31%) disagree.

Younger respondents are more likely than their elders to see child abuse and neglect as frequent problems in their community (Figure 6). Among 18- to 25-year-olds, 25% say abuse, mistreatment, and neglect of children are "somewhat" or "very" frequent, compared to 18% of respondents over age 45. Similarly, while only 23% of those over age 55 say children are frequently not in school, 36% of the youngest respondents report this problem.

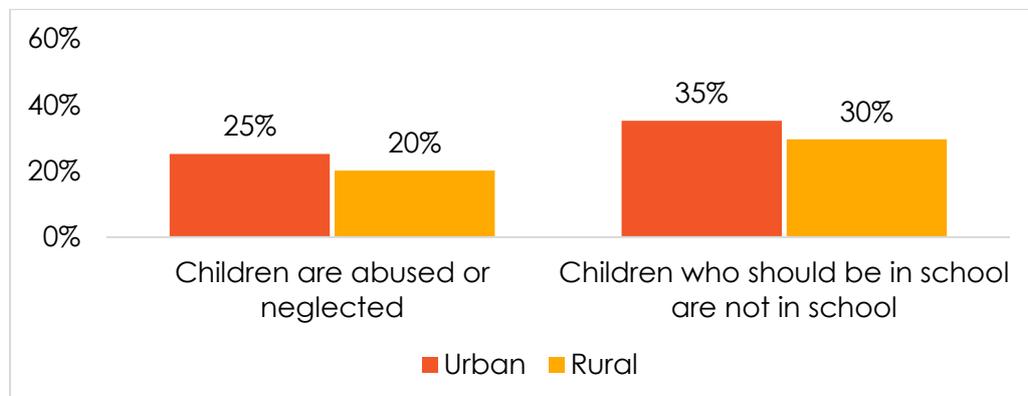
Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Child abuse and neglect are also more commonly reported as a frequent problem in cities (25%) than in rural areas (20%). Concern about out-of-school children shows the same 5-percentage-point gap (Figure 7).

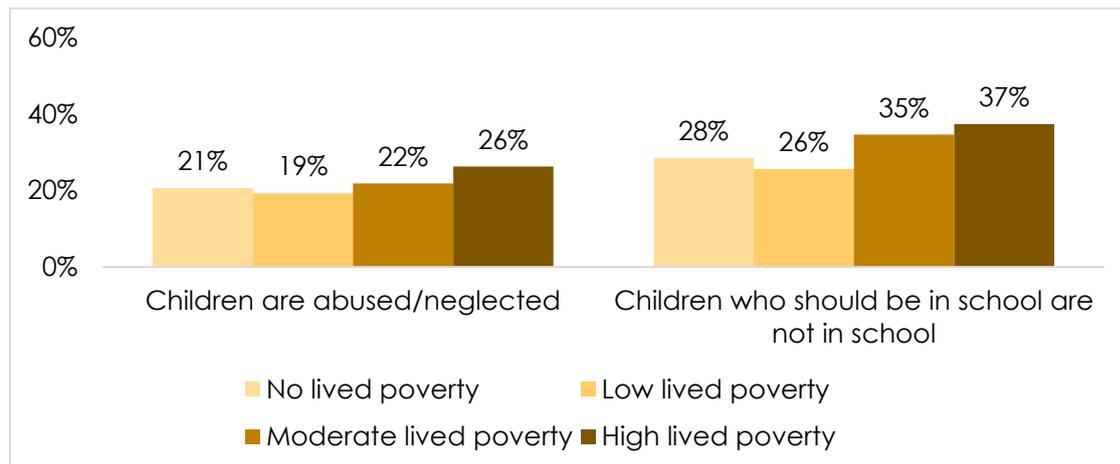
Figure 7: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

The perception of child abuse and neglect as a widespread problem is also higher among poor respondents, ranging from 21% of the wealthy to 26% of those experiencing high lived poverty. A 7-point gap separates the wealthy from the poor when it comes to the issue of out-of-school children (28% vs. 37%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by lived poverty | Kenya | 2021



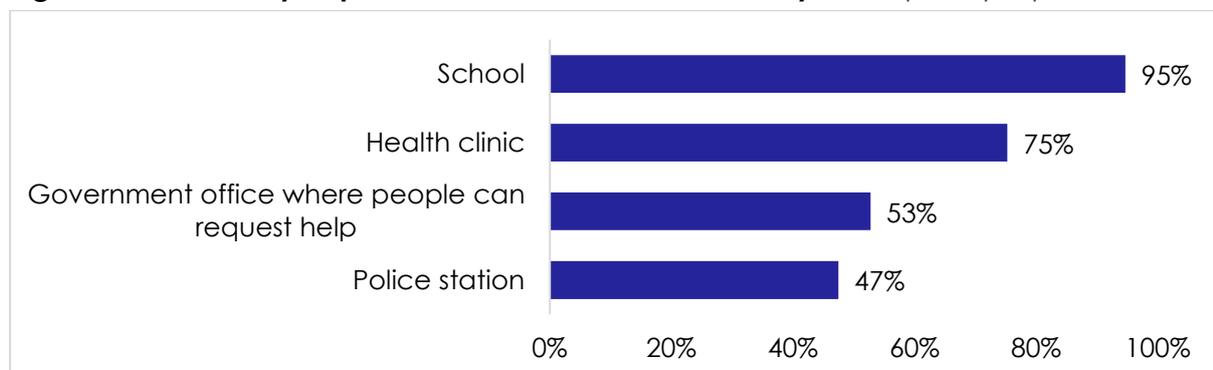
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently”)

Support for vulnerable children

For children facing major challenges, support services can be crucial in preparing them for full, successful lives. To what extent are such services available at the community level?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams’ observations in all enumeration areas they visited, most Kenyans live within walking distance of a school (95%) and a health clinic (75%) (Figure 9). More than half (53%) have a nearby social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems, and not quite half (47%) have a police station in the enumeration area.

Figure 9: Availability of public services at the community level | Kenya | 2021

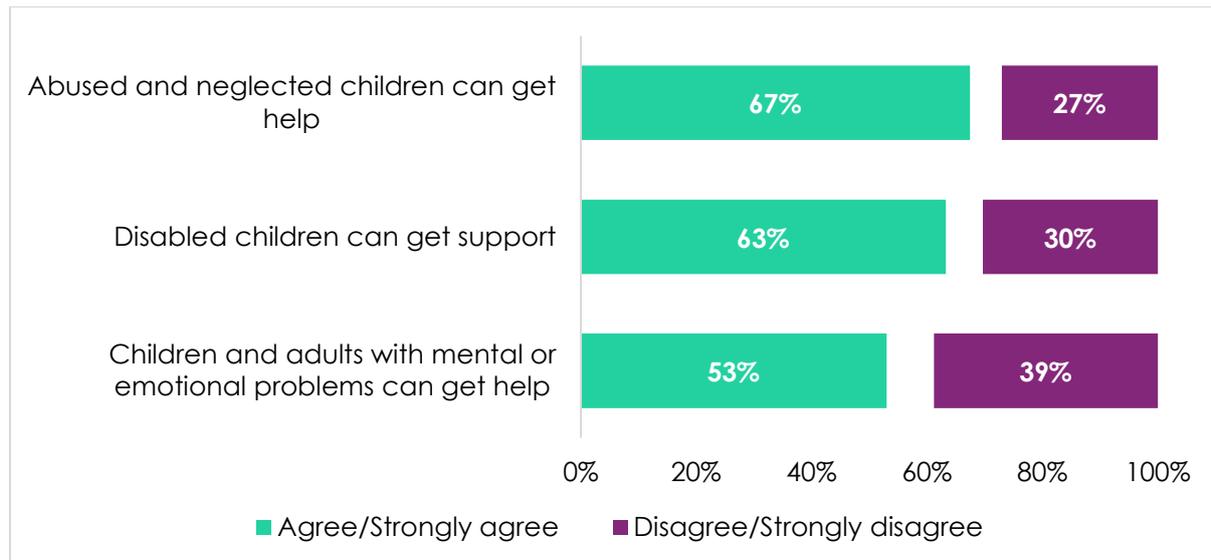


Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Police station? Health clinic (private or public or both)? A social centre, government help centre, or other government office where people can request help with problems? (% “yes”)

A majority of respondents report that more specialised support services are available in the community as well (Figure 10). Two-thirds (67%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected. Similarly, a strong majority (63%) say support is available for children with physical disabilities.

A slimmer majority (53%) say children and adults with mental or emotional problems are able to get help in the community.

Figure 10: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree.

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

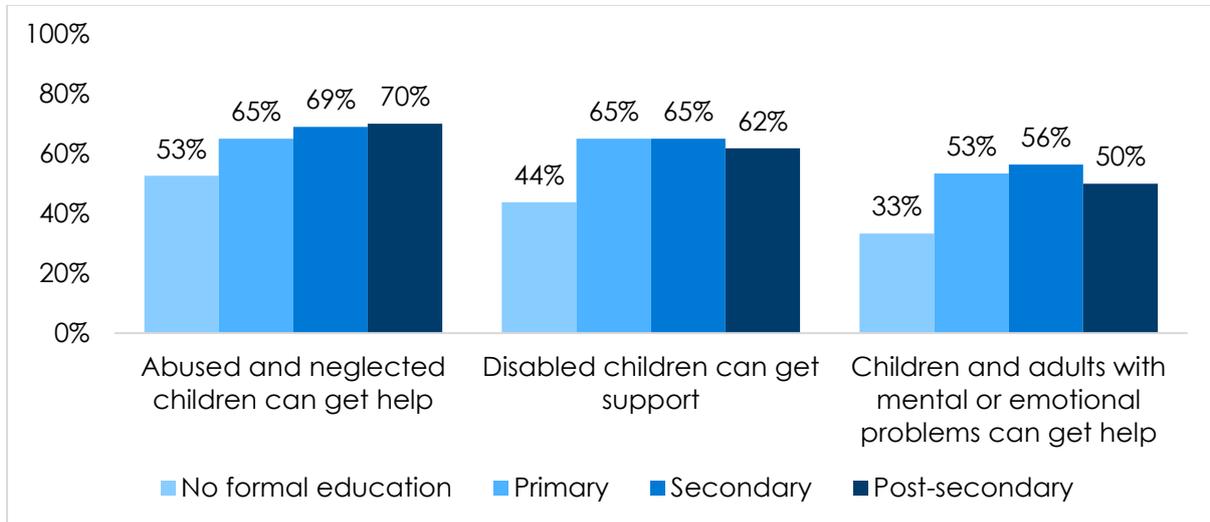
Men and women hold similar views on these questions, as do urban and rural residents. But assessments of the availability of support services differ significantly by respondents' education and economic levels.

Across the board, citizens who have no formal education and those experiencing high lived poverty are less likely than their more educated and better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Gaps of 17-18 percentage points separate respondents with no formal schooling from those with post-secondary education when it comes to saying that help is available in their community for abused and neglected children (53% vs. 70%), disabled children (44% vs. 62%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (33% vs. 50%) (Figure 11). The fact that a majority (58%) of unschooled respondents say help is not available for people with mental or emotional problems suggests a need that is going unmet in some areas.

The pattern is the same for views by lived poverty: The poorest citizens are significantly less likely to report available support for abused and neglected children (an 11-point gap), disabled children (22-point gap), and people with mental or emotional problems (20-point gap) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Help is available for vulnerable children | by education level | Kenya | 2021



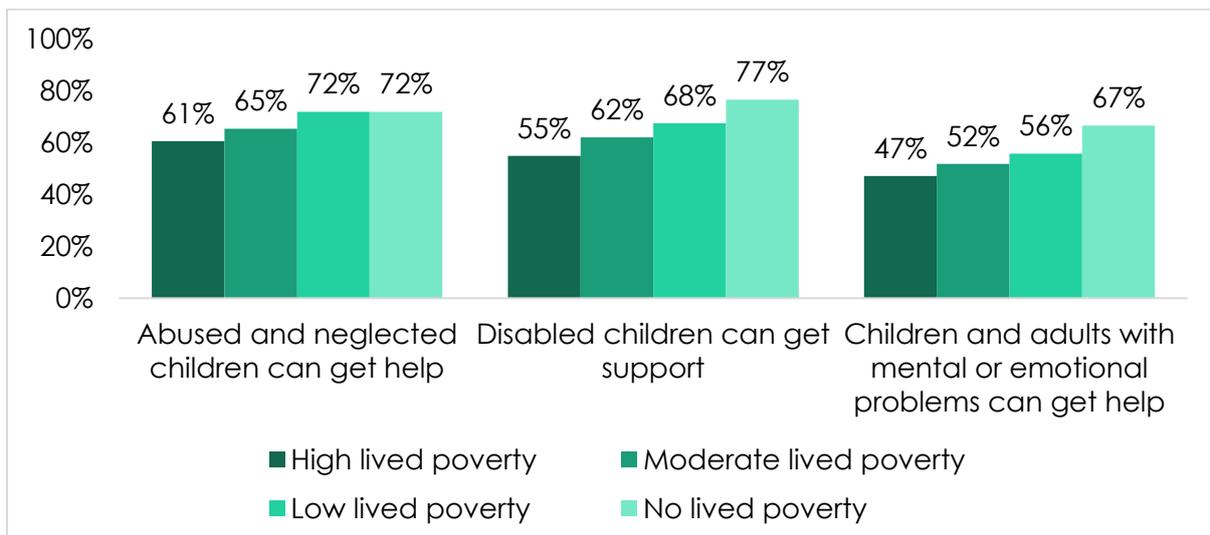
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Figure 12: Help is available for vulnerable children | by lived poverty | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who say “agree” or “agree strongly”)

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

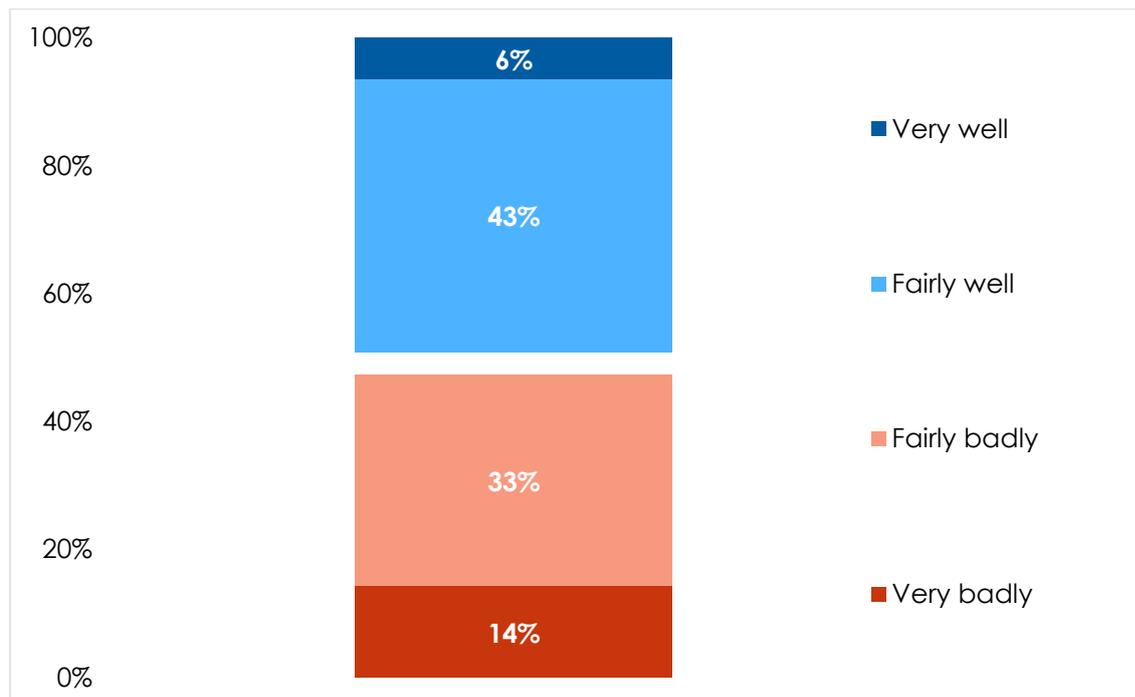
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, Kenyans are evenly divided in their assessments of how well the government is protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 49% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 47% believe it is doing fairly/very badly (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance on child welfare | Kenya | 2021



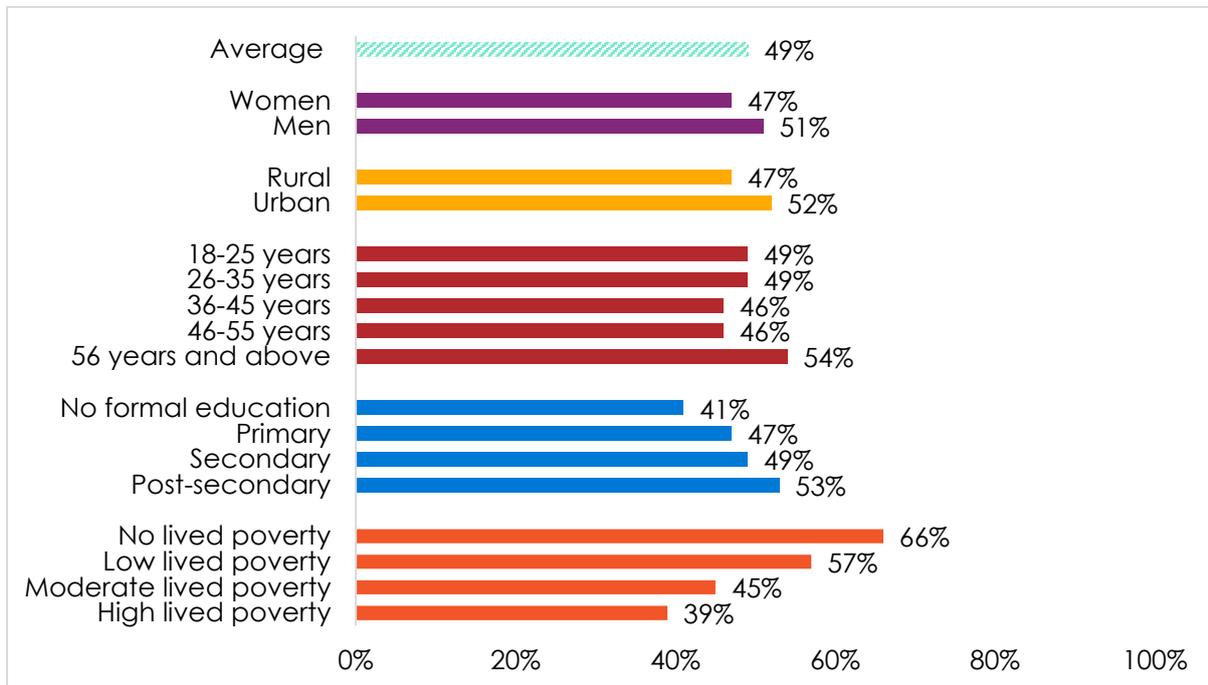
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?

Women (47%) and rural residents (47%) are somewhat less likely to approve of the government's performance on child welfare than are men (51%) and urban dwellers (52%) (Figure 14).

But assessments differ more strongly by respondents' education and economic levels. The poorest citizens (39%) are far less likely than the wealthy (66%) to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting vulnerable children, as are those without formal education (41%) compared to their more educated counterparts (47%-53%).

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Figure 14: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

Despite the government's extensive legal and policy framework for protecting children, thousands of young Kenyans still fall victim to violence, abuse, and neglect each year, suffering lasting damage to their prospects for health and well-being, education, and professional success. As citizens' mixed evaluations of the government's performance indicate, work clearly remains to be done, perhaps both at the policy and funding level and through targeted interventions at the local level.

Survey findings point to a number of potential action points. For one, while a majority of citizens report that abuse, neglect, and out-of-school children are not frequent problems in their community, significant minorities say they are. The same is true for the reported availability of resources to help vulnerable children – a substantial number of citizens (though far from a majority) indicate that these are lacking in their community, especially to support children (and adults) with mental or emotional problems.

Poor and unschooled populations are particularly likely to report that child abuse/neglect are frequent problems and that resources to help vulnerable children are lacking, representing a potential target for needed interventions.

As for corporal punishment, more than half of all adults still consider it acceptable to use physical force to discipline children. But it is notable that opposition to this practice has doubled since 2016.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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