

Child welfare in Ghana: Citizens say government is not doing enough

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 596 | Gildfred Boateng Asiamah and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

In 1990, Ghana became the first country in the world to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A generation later, the country has a full legal and policy arsenal designed to protect children from all forms of violence and neglect, ranging from the Children's Act (1998) and Child and Family Welfare Policy (2015) to the Justice for Children Policy (2015) and the Cybersecurity Act (2020).

But the country faces persistent challenges to the welfare of its children. While citing progress on birth registration and school enrolment, UNICEF (2021) reports that nearly one-fifth of Ghanaian children are victims of severe physical punishment, and the same proportion are engaged in child labour. Close to nine out of 10 suffer psychological aggression, and about three out of four children are considered "multidimensionally poor," meaning they are deprived in multiple aspects of child well-being (e.g. nutrition, health, child protection, etc.)

And inadequate funding prevents local Department of Social Welfare and Community Development staff from fully meeting their charge of providing services to those who are vulnerable and have suffered from abuse, neglect, or exploitation; in 2019, only three of 16 regions had more than half of the minimum required staff (UNICEF, 2020).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' attitudes and perceptions related to child welfare.

In Ghana, survey findings show that while a majority of Ghanaians support the use of physical force to discipline children, opposition to this practice has increased significantly since 2016.

Most citizens say child abuse and neglect are infrequent problems in their community. But fewer than half say that support services are available in their community for abused or neglected children, for children with disability, and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems. And a majority of Ghanaians are not satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare. Poor citizens are particularly unlikely to say that help is available and that the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

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 Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. 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 Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A majority (58%) of Ghanaians say parents are “sometimes” or “always” justified in using physical force to discipline their children. But opposition to physical discipline increased by 12 percentage points between 2016 and 2022 (from 30% to 42%).
- Two-thirds (67%) of respondents say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their community.

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

- Most Ghanaians say child abuse and neglect (81%) and out-of-school children (69%) are infrequent problems in their community.
 - Young respondents and poor citizens are more likely than older and better-off citizens to see child abuse and neglect as widespread problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Fewer than half of Ghanaians say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (43%) and children with disability (42%). Only 36% say children and adults with mental or emotional problems can usually get help.
 - The poor are considerably less likely than better-off citizens to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

- About one-third (36%) of Ghanaians say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, but nearly two-thirds disagree.
 - Poor and/or unschooled citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

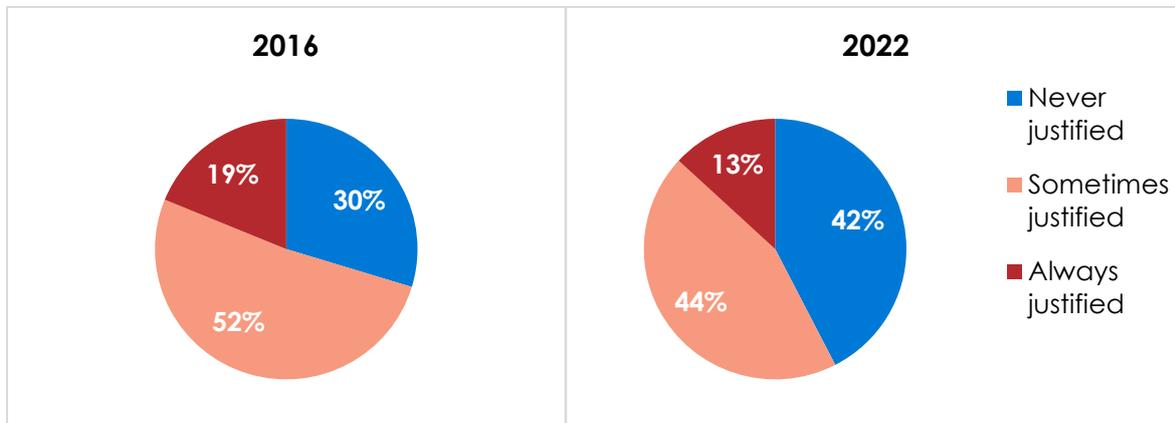
Disciplining a child

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

A majority (58%)¹ of Ghanaians believe it is “sometimes justified” (44%) or “always justified” (13%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. But the proportion of Ghanaians who say this practice is “never justified” increased from 30% in 2016 to 42% in 2022 (Figure 1). This development coincides with the Ministry of Education's 2017 ban on the use of physical force as a disciplinary measure in schools (B&FTonline, 2021).

¹ Note: Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures.

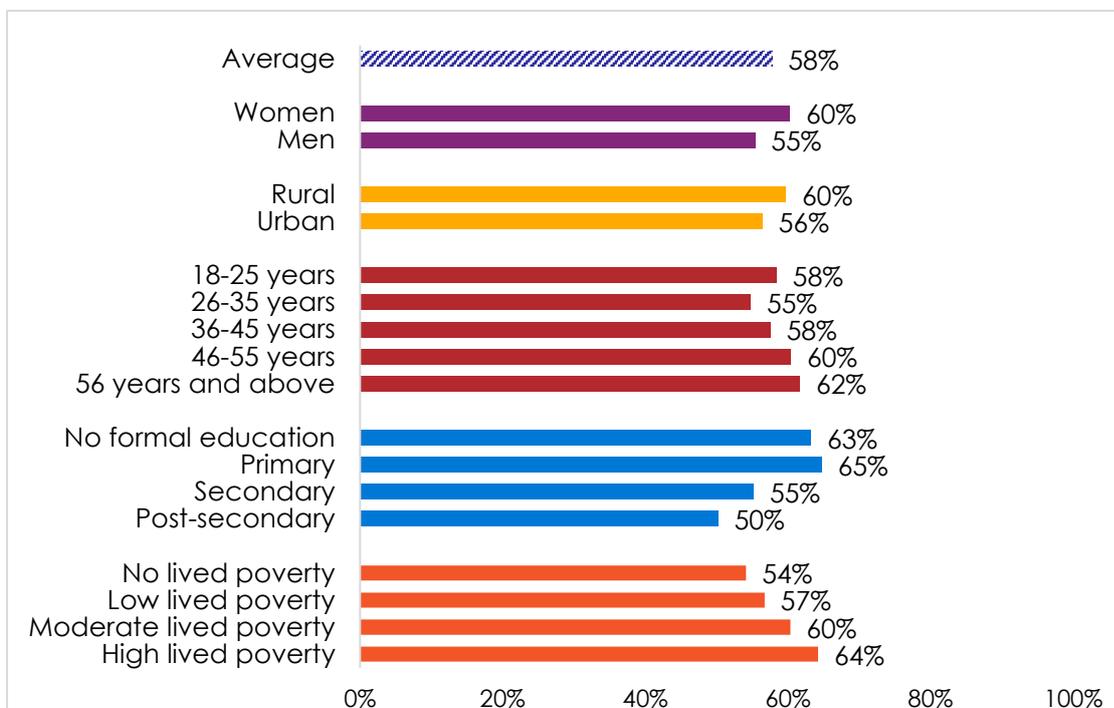
Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Ghana | 2016-2022



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?

Women are somewhat more likely than men to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (60% vs. 55% who say it is at least sometimes justified) (Figure 2). Approval of the practice is also more common among rural residents (60%) and older citizens (62%) than among urban residents (56%) and youth (55%-58%).

Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022

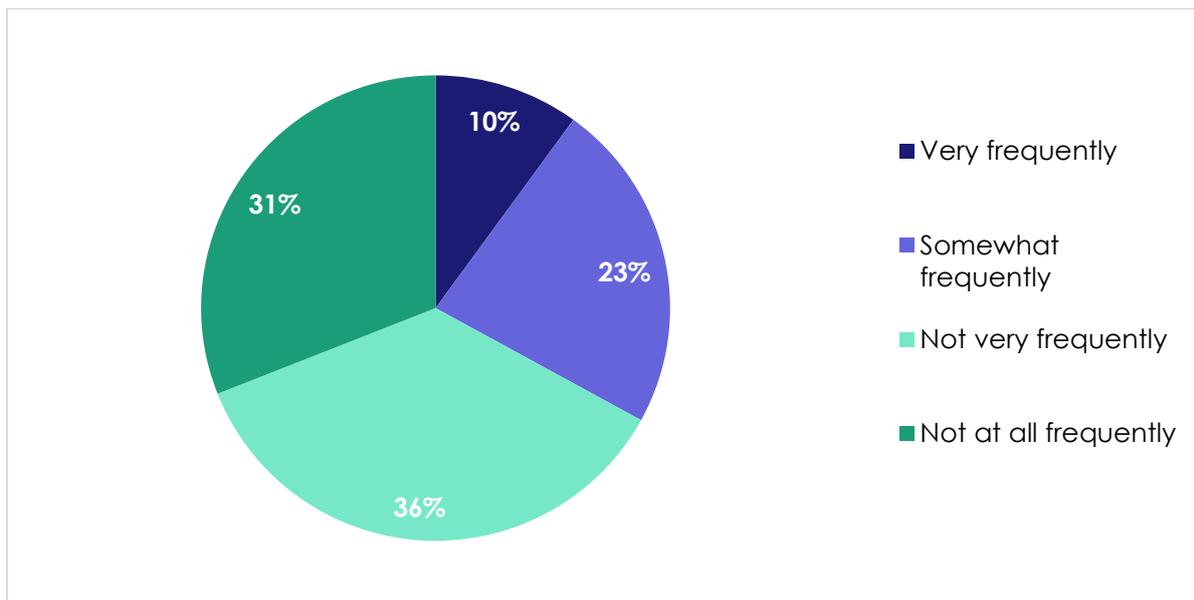


Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

Less educated respondents (63%-65%) are more likely to support physical discipline than those with secondary (55%) or post-secondary (50%) education. Similarly, poor citizens (64%) are more supportive of using physical force to discipline children than their well-off counterparts (54%).²

In practice, almost seven in 10 Ghanaians say that adults in their community do “not very frequently” (36%) or “not at all frequently” (31%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3), though more than three in 10 see this as a “somewhat frequent” (23%) or “very frequent” (10%) occurrence.

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children? | Ghana
 | 2022

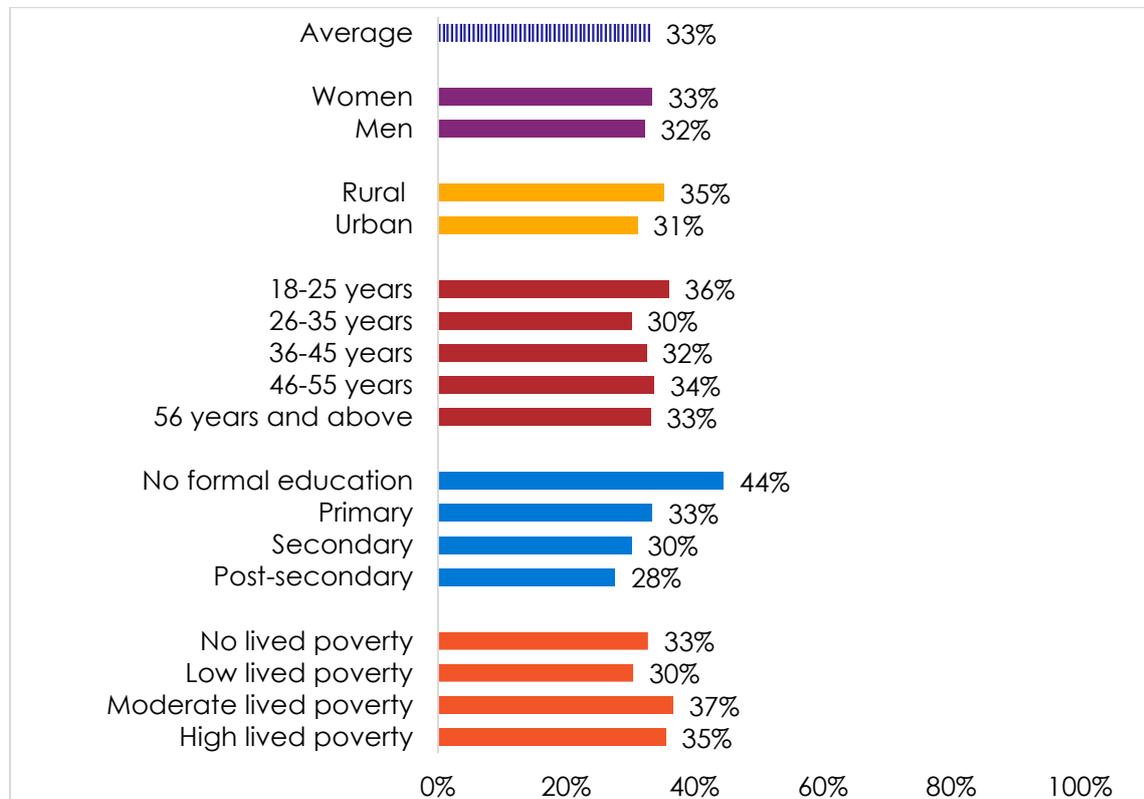


Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Rural residents are slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to report that people in their community use physical force to discipline children (35% vs. 31%) (Figure 4). This perception decreases as respondents' education level rises, ranging from 44% among those with no formal schooling to 28% among those with higher education. Young respondents (36%) are more likely than their elders (30%-34%) to report that children are frequently disciplined using physical force.

² 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 & Patel (2022).

Figure 4: Perception that adults frequently use physical force to discipline children
 | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



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, fully four out of five Ghanaians (81%) say this is “not at all frequent” (41%) or “not very frequent” (40%), while 18% report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” or “very” common (Figure 5).

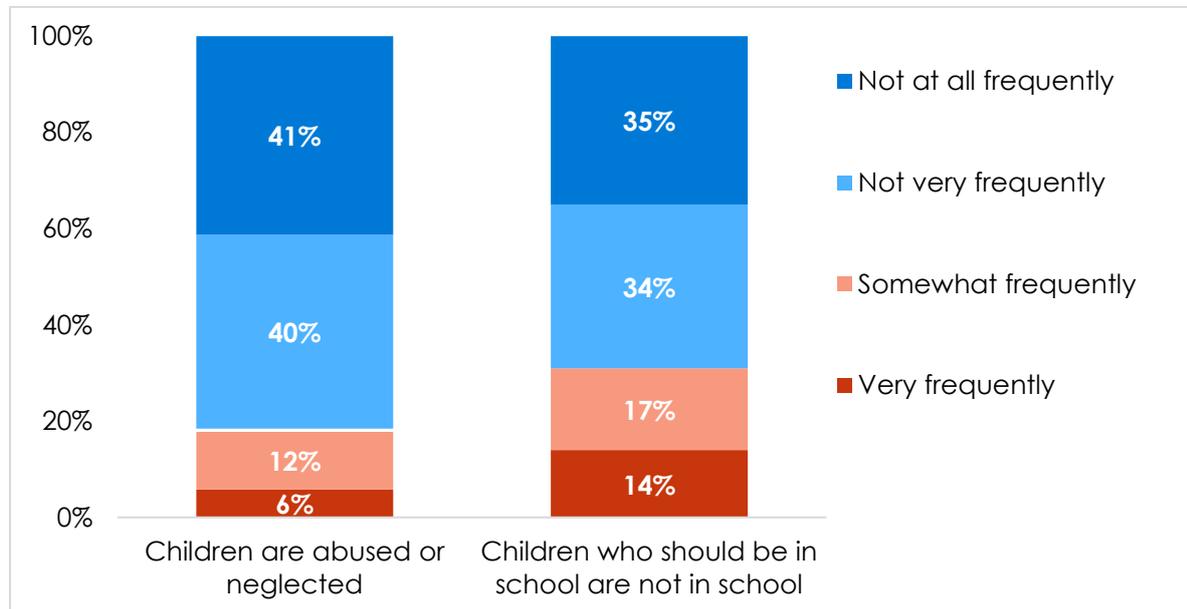
Almost seven in 10 (69%) also say it’s not common to see school-age children who are not in school, though three in 10 respondents (31%) disagree.

The youngest respondents are significantly 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 15% of respondents over age 45. Similarly, while 30% of those over age 35 say children are frequently not in school, 35% of the youngest respondents report this problem.

Residents in cities and rural settlements are about equally likely to report child abuse and neglect as a frequent problem. But concern about out-of-school children is significantly higher in rural settlements (37%) than in cities (26%) (Figure 7).

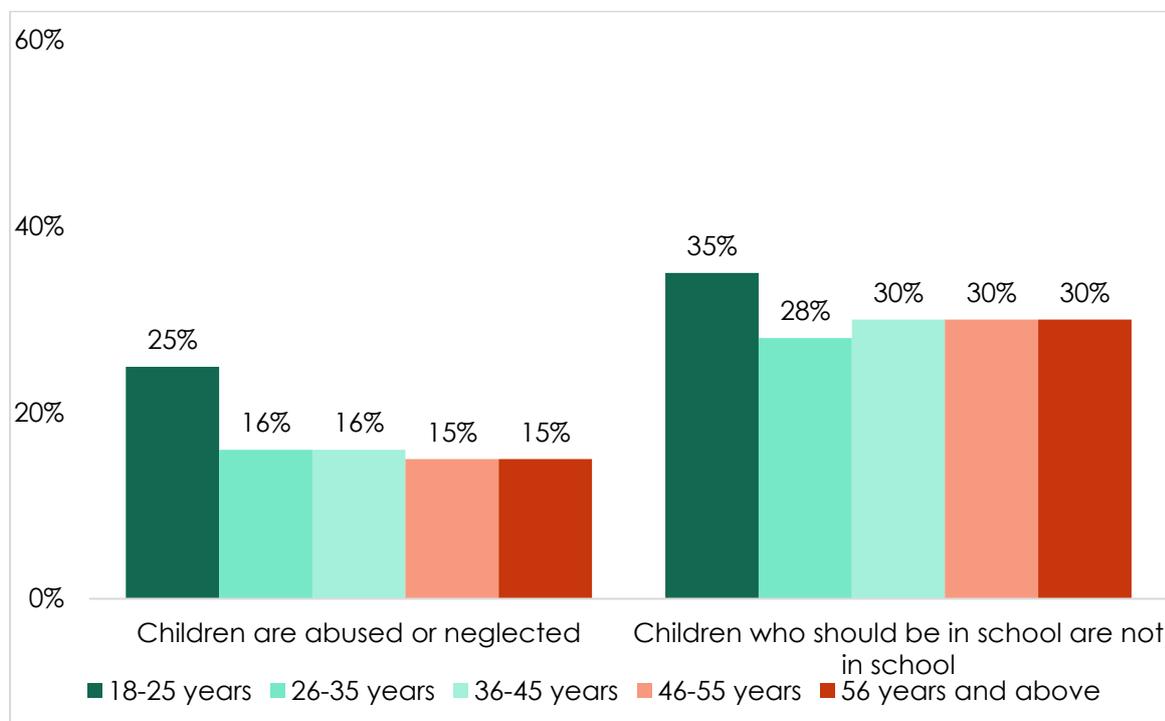
The perception of child abuse and neglect as a widespread problem is also higher among poor respondents, ranging from 14% of the well-off to 27% of those experiencing high lived poverty. A 15-point gap separates the well-off from the poor when it comes to the issue of out-of-school children (32% vs. 47%) (Figure 8).

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Ghana | 2022



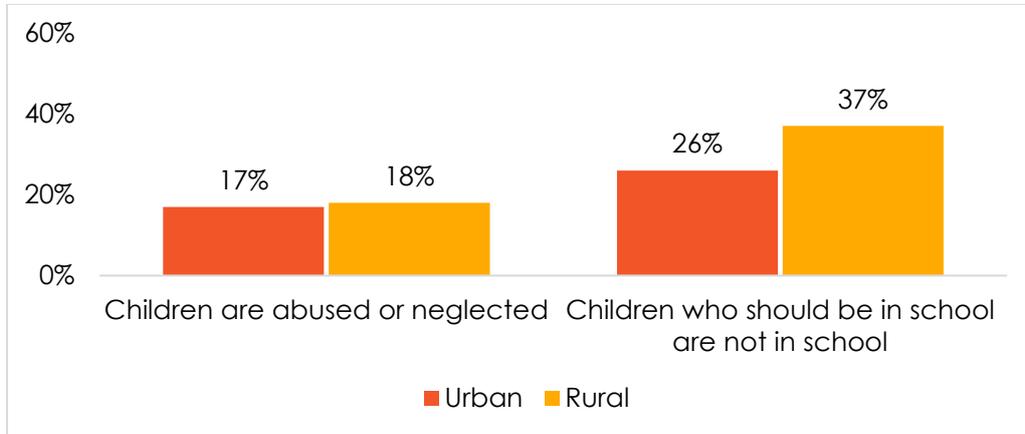
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group | Ghana | 2022



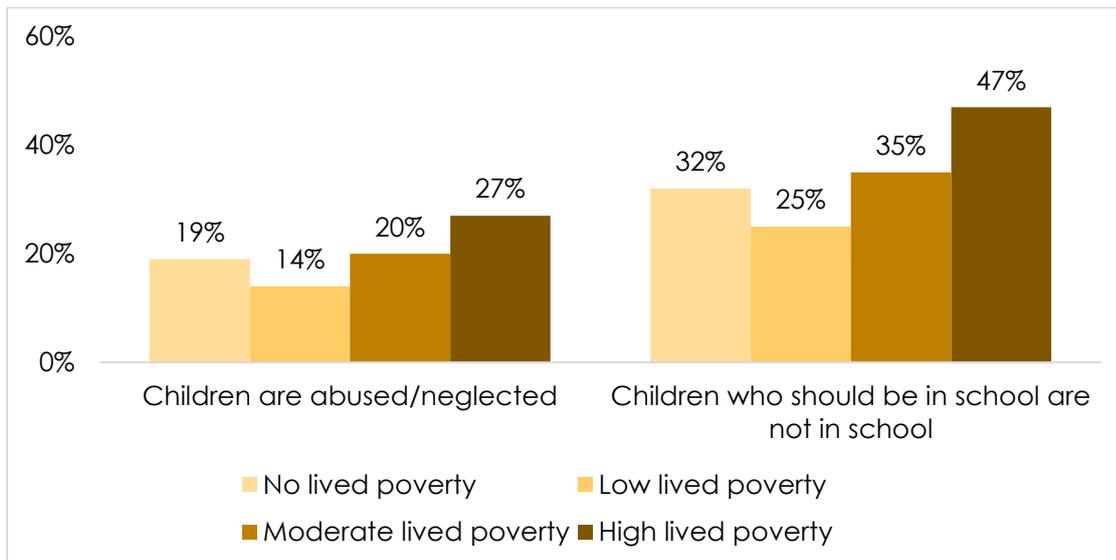
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Figure 7: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Ghana | 2022



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")

Figure 8: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by lived poverty level | Ghana | 2022



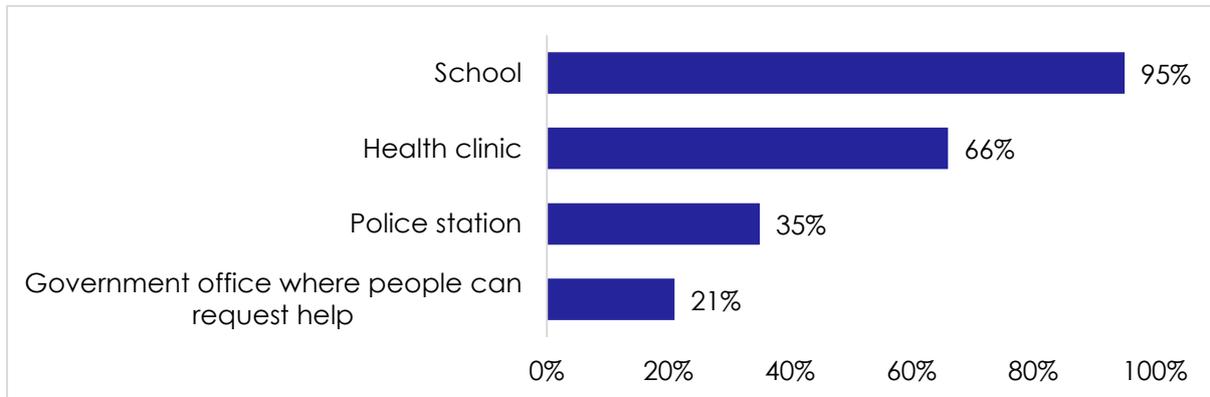
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

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 Ghanaians live within walking distance of a school (95%) and a health clinic (66%) (Figure 9). One-third (35%) have a police station nearby, while only 21% have a nearby social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems.

Figure 9: Availability of public services at the community level | Ghana | 2022

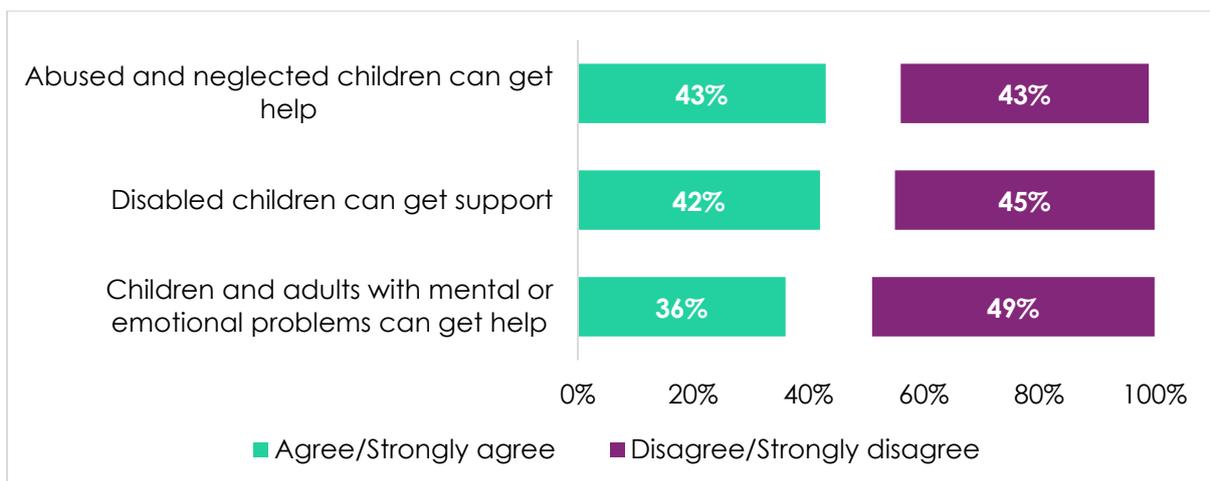


Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Police station? Health clinic (private or public or both)? A social centre, government help centre, or other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

Citizens' assessments are mixed when it comes to the availability of more specialised support services in the community (Figure 10). Fewer than half (43%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected; just as many (43%) say they are not.

Results are similar with regard to support for children with disability: 42% of respondents say support is available, while 45% say it is not. And only about one-third (36%) of citizens say children and adults with mental or emotional problems are able to get help in the community, while 49% say such services are not available.

Figure 10: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Ghana | 2022



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.

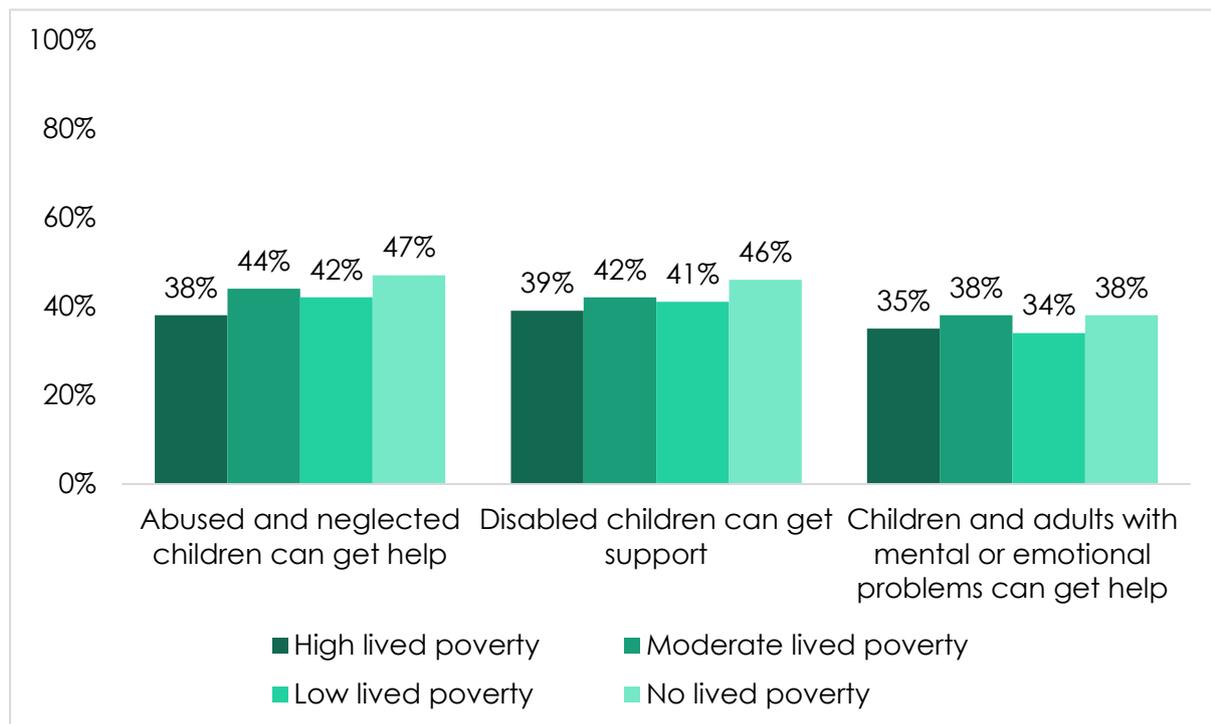
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

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, and assessments of the availability of support services vary only slightly by respondents' education levels.

But poor citizens are less likely than their well-off counterparts to report available support for abused and neglected children (a 9-point gap), disabled children (7 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (3 points) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Help is available for vulnerable children | by lived poverty level | Ghana | 2022



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.

(% who say "agree" or "agree strongly" with each statement)

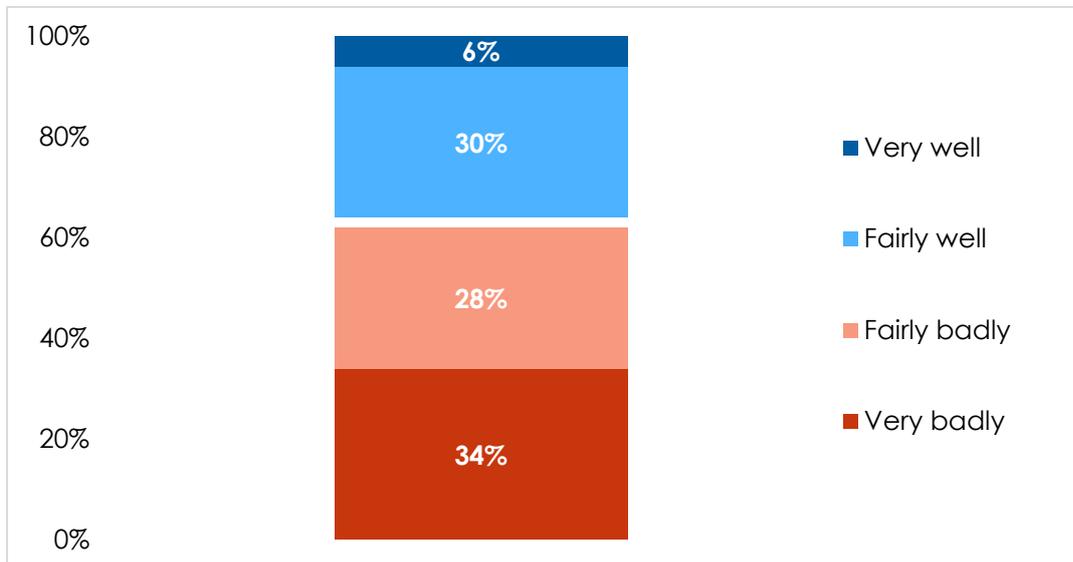
Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority of Ghanaians offer a negative assessment of the government's efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children: 62% say it is doing a "fairly bad" or "very bad" job, while only 36% believe it is doing "fairly well" or "very well" (Figure 12).

Women (34%) and rural residents (34%) are slightly less likely to approve of the government's performance on child welfare than are men (38%) and urban dwellers (37%) (Figure 13).

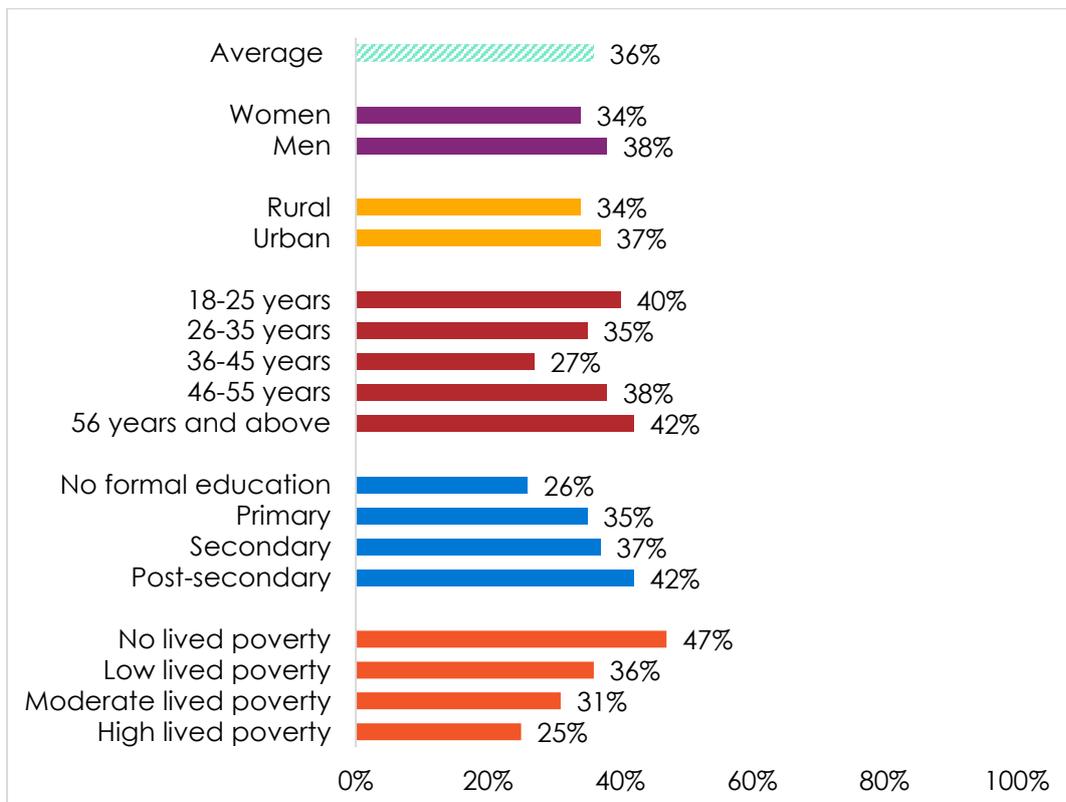
But the poorest Ghanaians (25%) and the least educated citizens (26%) are far less likely than better-off and more educated respondents to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the welfare of vulnerable children.

Figure 12: Government performance on child welfare | Ghana | 2022



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?

Figure 13: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Ghana | 2022



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

Even within Ghana's strong legal and policy framework, ensuring children's welfare remains a challenge. Some citizens describe child abuse and neglect as frequent occurrences in their community, but even where they are uncommon, these constitute a problem.

Survey findings suggest that support services for vulnerable children are inadequate. A majority of Ghanaians expect their government to do more to protect and promote children's well-being, which might include dedicating more human and financial resources to appropriate state agencies. Others clearly have a role to play as well, including civil society, the media, and trusted local stakeholders such as chiefs and religious leaders (Sanny & Asiamah, 2020).

Poor citizens are particularly likely to say that abuse and neglect are common occurrences, that help for vulnerable children is not available, and that the government must do more, suggesting that disadvantaged communities may be a prime target for stronger child-protection interventions.

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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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