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Liberians fault government performance on promoting child welfare

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 614 | Komi Amewunou and Oscar Bloh

Summary

The United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2012 Children's Law anchor Liberia's efforts to safeguard the rights of its children, who make up about half of the country's population.

But despite gains in child survival and development, Liberian children face many barriers to health and well-being (UNICEF, 2016, 2021; World's Children's Prize, 2020). One in 13 children – about 11,000 every year – die before age 5, most often of preventable causes. Only two out of 10 children have access to adequate sanitation facilities. Half of schools lack water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities (UNICEF, 2021). More than a third of adolescents are out of school altogether (USAID, 2020; World's Children's Prize, 2020).

The Liberia Demographic and Health Survey highlights that 32% of children aged 5-17 are engaged in child labour, with 30% working in dangerous conditions (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2021; Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2019). Some 85% of children under age 15 experienced violent discipline during the month before the survey.

While reliable data on sexual and gender-based violence are not available, girls under age 15 bear the heaviest burden (Seagbeh, 2022). Among 15- to 19-year-old women who have heard of female circumcision, 28% have undergone this form of mutilation (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2021).

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 Liberia, survey findings show that a majority of citizens support the use of physical force to discipline children and see this as a common practice in their community.

Most citizens say child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children are frequent 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 most Liberians are dissatisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999, and Round 9 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 August and 7 September 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A majority (59%) of Liberians say parents are "sometimes" or "always" justified in using physical force to discipline their children. But opposition to physical discipline has doubled since 2018, to 41%.
- Two-thirds (65%) of citizens say the use of physical force to discipline children is common in their community.

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

- A majority of Liberians say child abuse and neglect (63%) and out-of-school children (83%) are frequent problems in their community.
 - Young respondents and urban residents are more likely than older people and rural residents to see child abuse and neglect as widespread problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Fewer than four out of 10 Liberians say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (39%), children with disability (38%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (36%).

Government performance on child welfare:

- Most Liberians (83%) say the government is doing a poor job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.
 - Women, urban residents, the poor, and the most educated citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

Disciplining a child

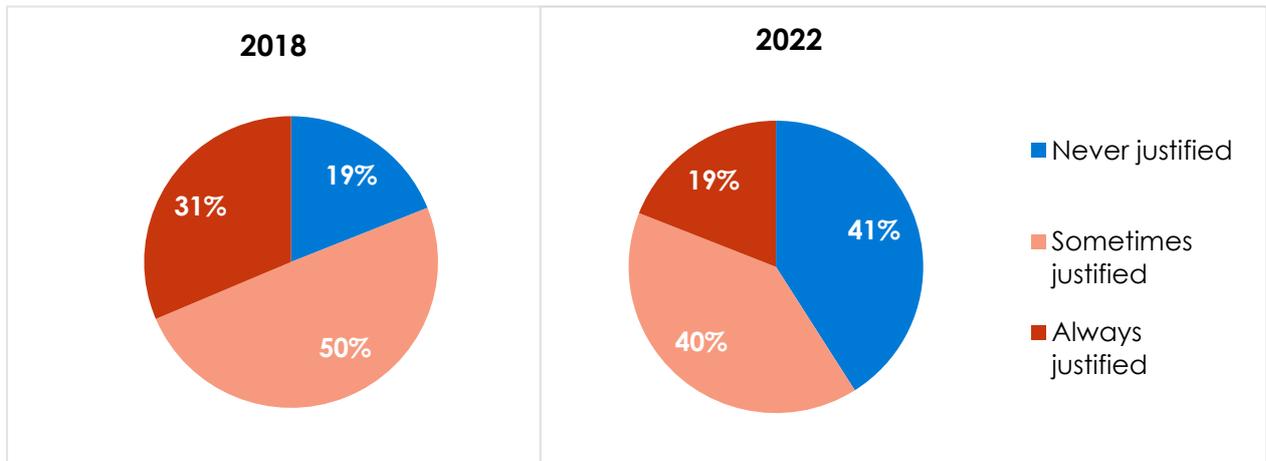
Discipline is an integral part of raising children. But should the use of physical force to discipline children be considered appropriate or abusive?

Nearly six in 10 Liberians (59%) say it is "sometimes justified" (40%) or "always justified" (19%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. But the proportion of Liberians who say this practice is "never justified" has doubled since 2018, from 19% to 41% (Figure 1).

Women are slightly more likely than men to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (61% vs. 57% who say it is at least sometimes justified) (Figure 2). The practice is also more widely accepted among poor respondents (62% of those experiencing high levels of poverty¹) than among their respective counterparts.

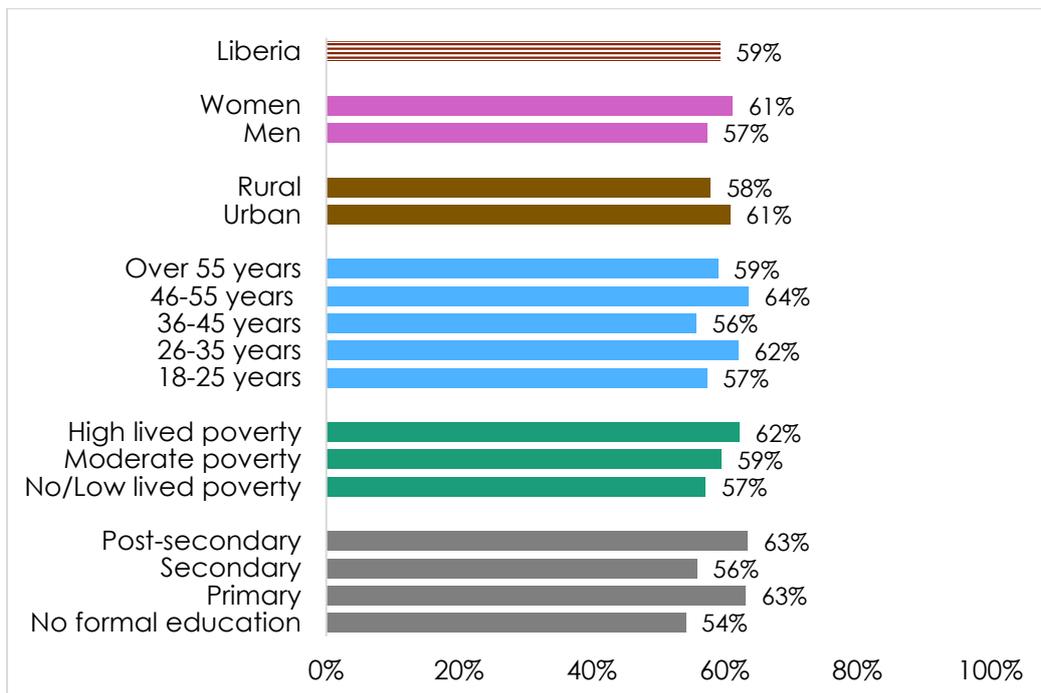
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Liberia | 2018-2022



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?

Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | Liberia | 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")

The use of physical force on children is common in Liberia: Two-thirds (65%) of respondents say that adults in their community "somewhat frequently" (28%) or "very frequently" (37%) discipline children that way (Figure 3). The remaining one-third see this as a "not very frequent" (27%) or "not at all frequent" (8%) occurrence.

The perception of physical discipline as a common practice is more widespread in cities than in rural areas (72% vs. 58%) (Figure 4). It is also more prevalent among the most educated (74%) and economically best-off (70%) respondents than among those with less education (58%-64%) or less wealth (58%-63%). Younger respondents (69% of those aged 18-35) are more likely than their elders (56%-62%) to say that children are frequently disciplined using physical force.

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

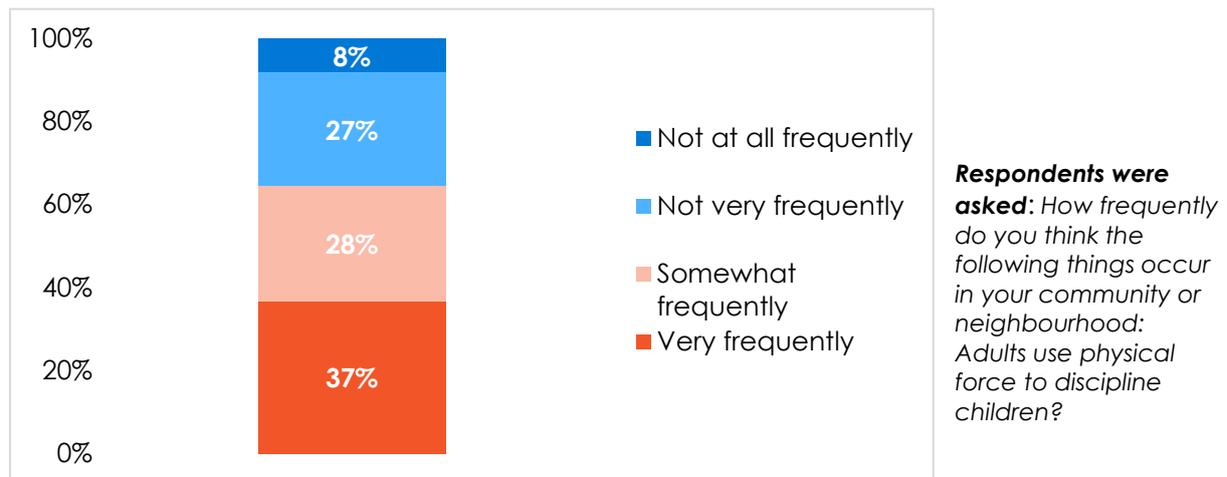
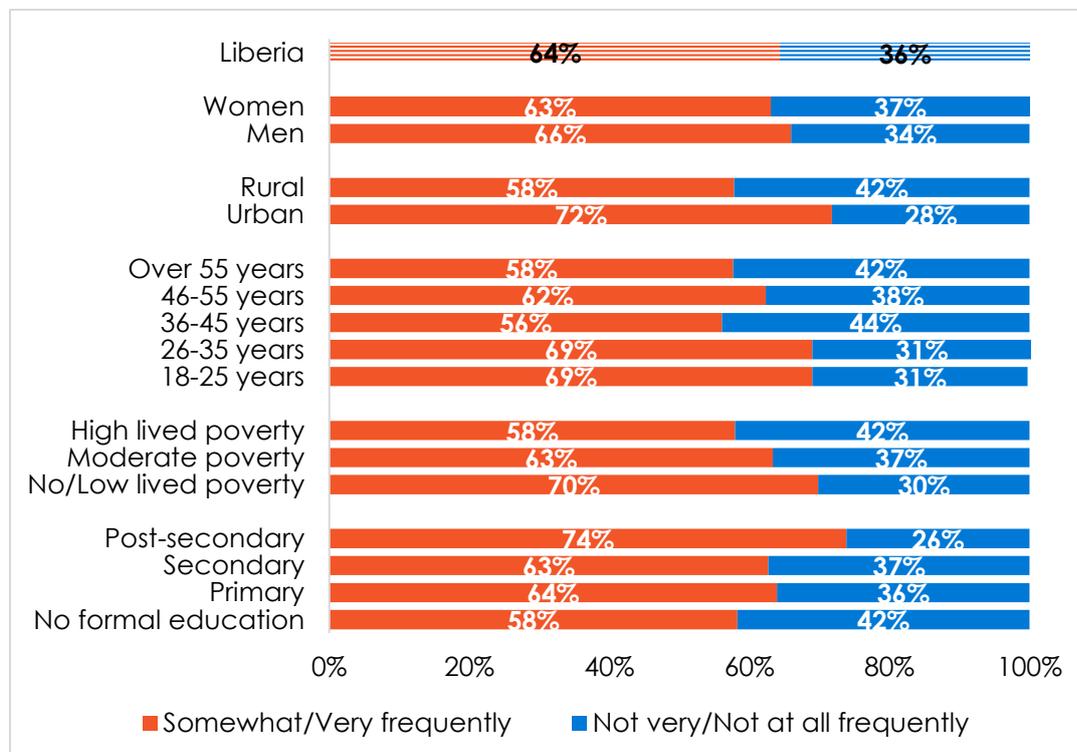


Figure 4: Perception that adults frequently use physical force to discipline children | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022



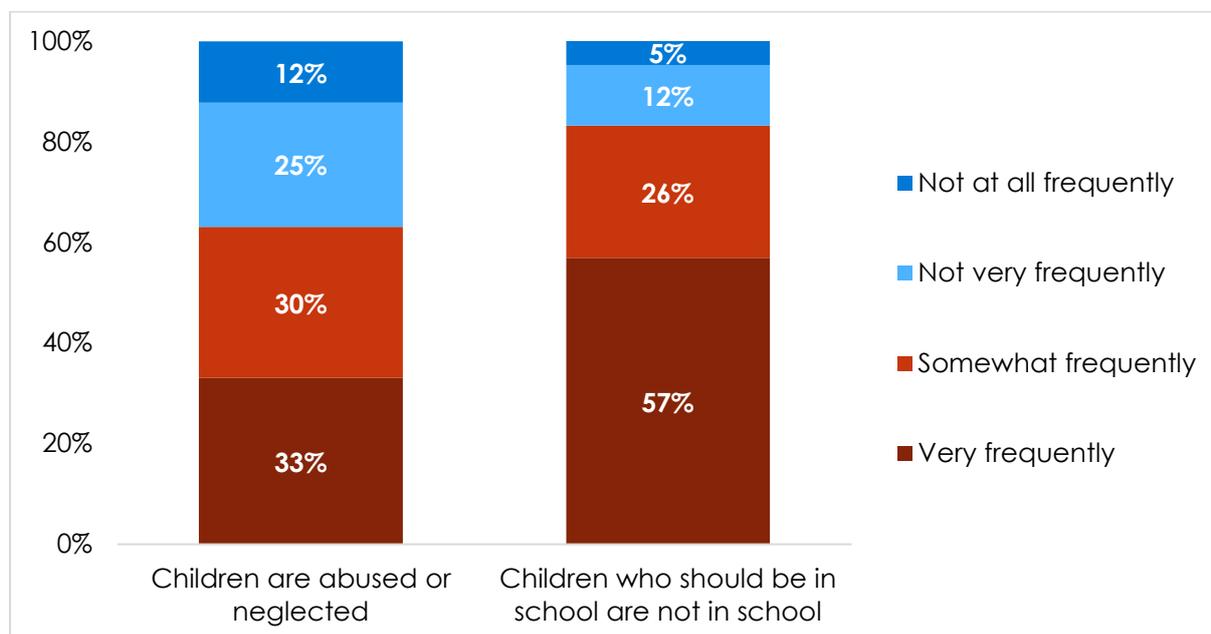
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Abuse and neglect

Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, fewer than four out of 10 Liberians (37%) say this is “not very frequent” (25%) or “not at all frequent” (12%), while a solid majority (63%) report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” (30%) or “very” (33%) frequent (Figure 5).

An overwhelming majority (83%) say it is common to see school-age children who are not in school, while only 17% disagree.

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



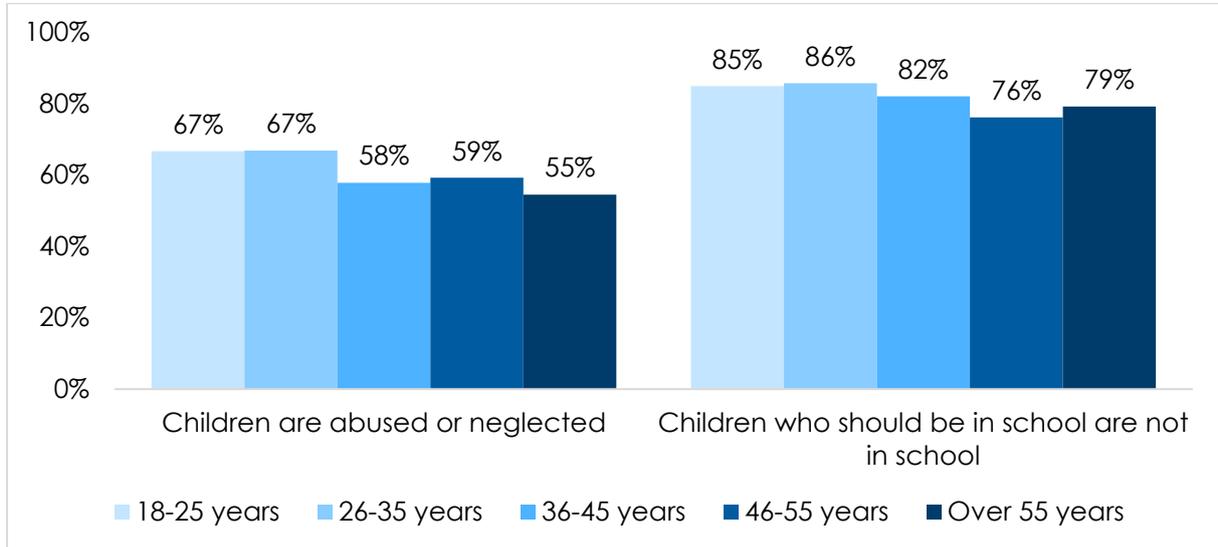
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

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 35-year-olds, 67% say abuse, mistreatment, and neglect of children are “somewhat” or “very” frequent, compared to 55% of respondents over age 55. Similarly, while 79% of those over age 55 say children are frequently not in school, 85% of the youngest respondents report this problem.

Child abuse and neglect are also more commonly reported as a frequent problem in cities (69%) than in rural areas (58%). Concern about out-of-school children shows the same 11-percentage-point gap (Figure 7).

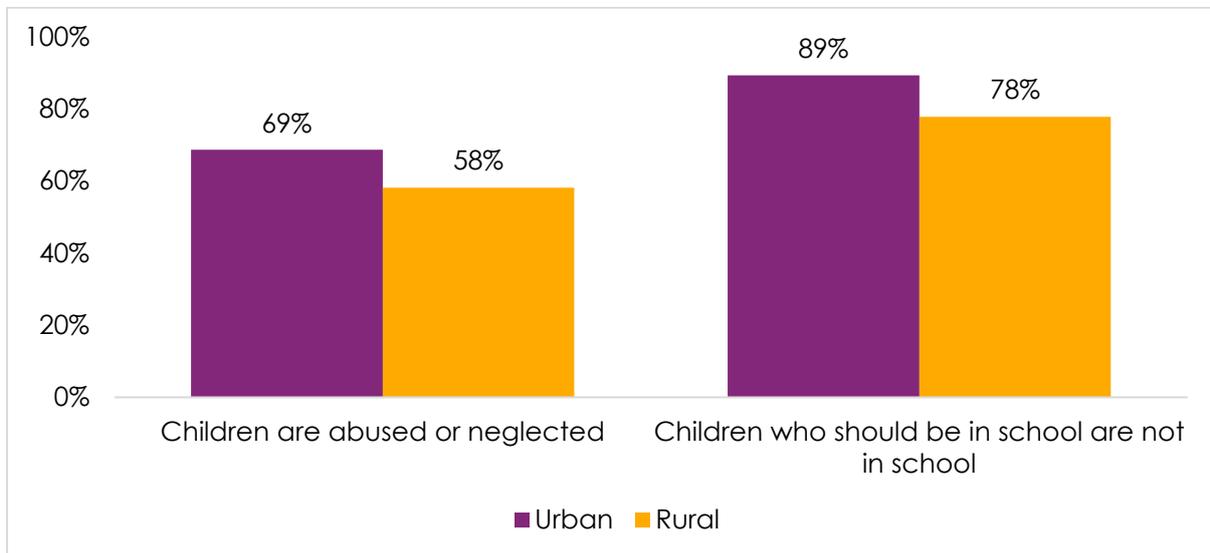
Respondents’ economic status does not significantly influence the perception that cases of neglected or abused children are widespread in the community. On the other hand, a 7-point gap separates the wealthy from the poor when it comes to the issue of out-of-school children (80% of those with low or no lived poverty vs. 87% of those with high lived poverty) (Figure 8).

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



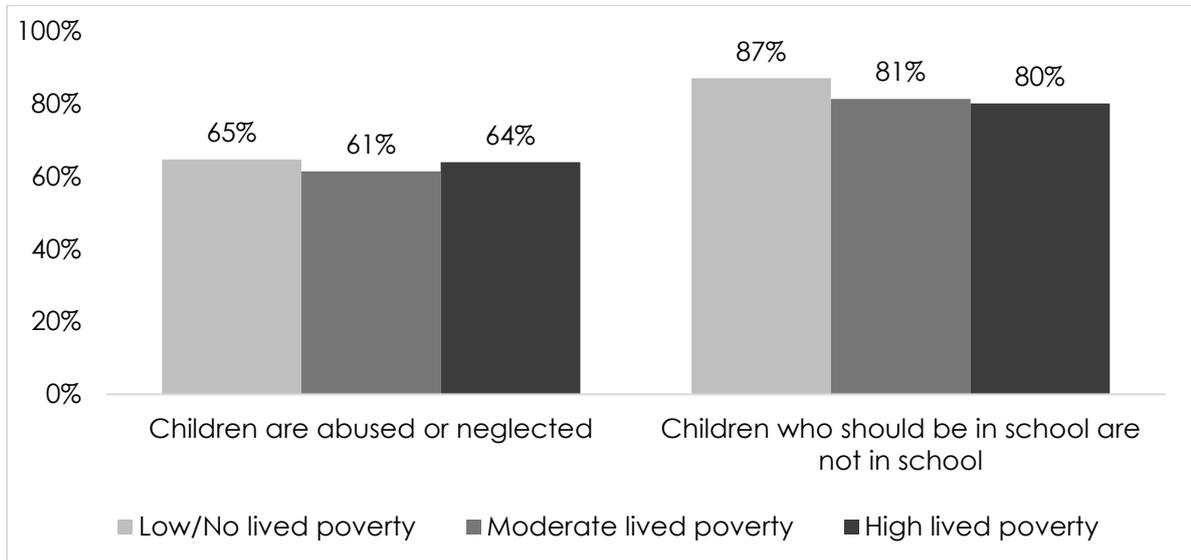
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

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



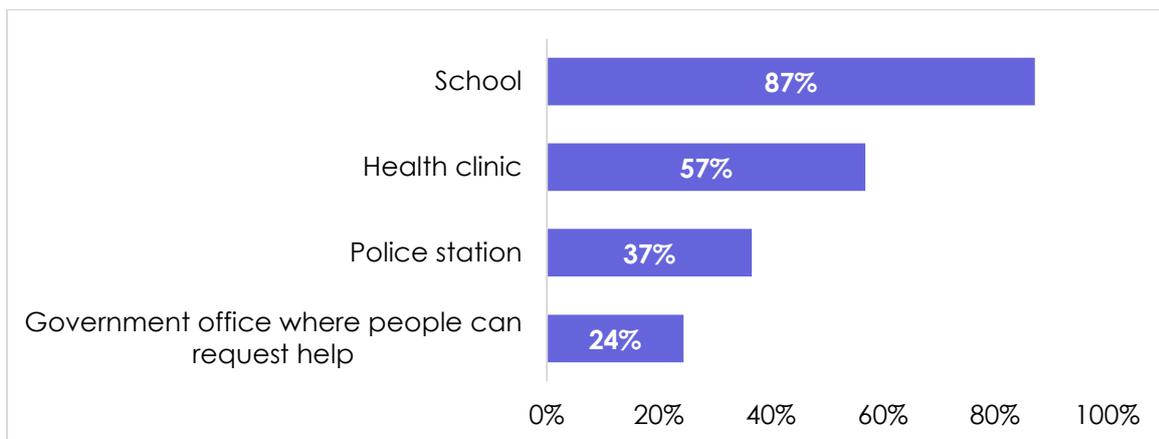
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

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, a majority of Liberians live within walking distance of a school (87%) and a health clinic (57%) (Figure 9). Fewer have a nearby police station (37%) or social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems (24%).

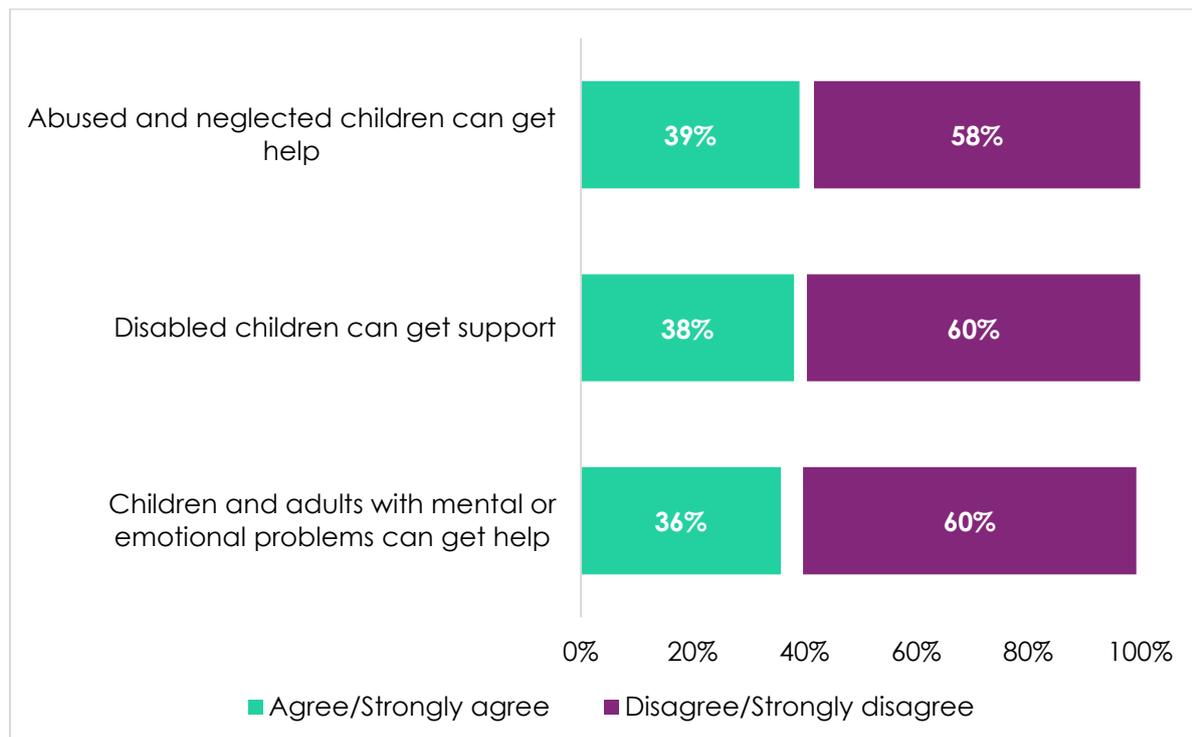
Figure 9: Availability of public services at the community level | Liberia | 2022



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")

Only minorities report that more specialised support services are available in the community as well (Figure 10). Fewer than four out of 10 citizens say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected (39%), for children with physical disabilities (38%), and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (36%).

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



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

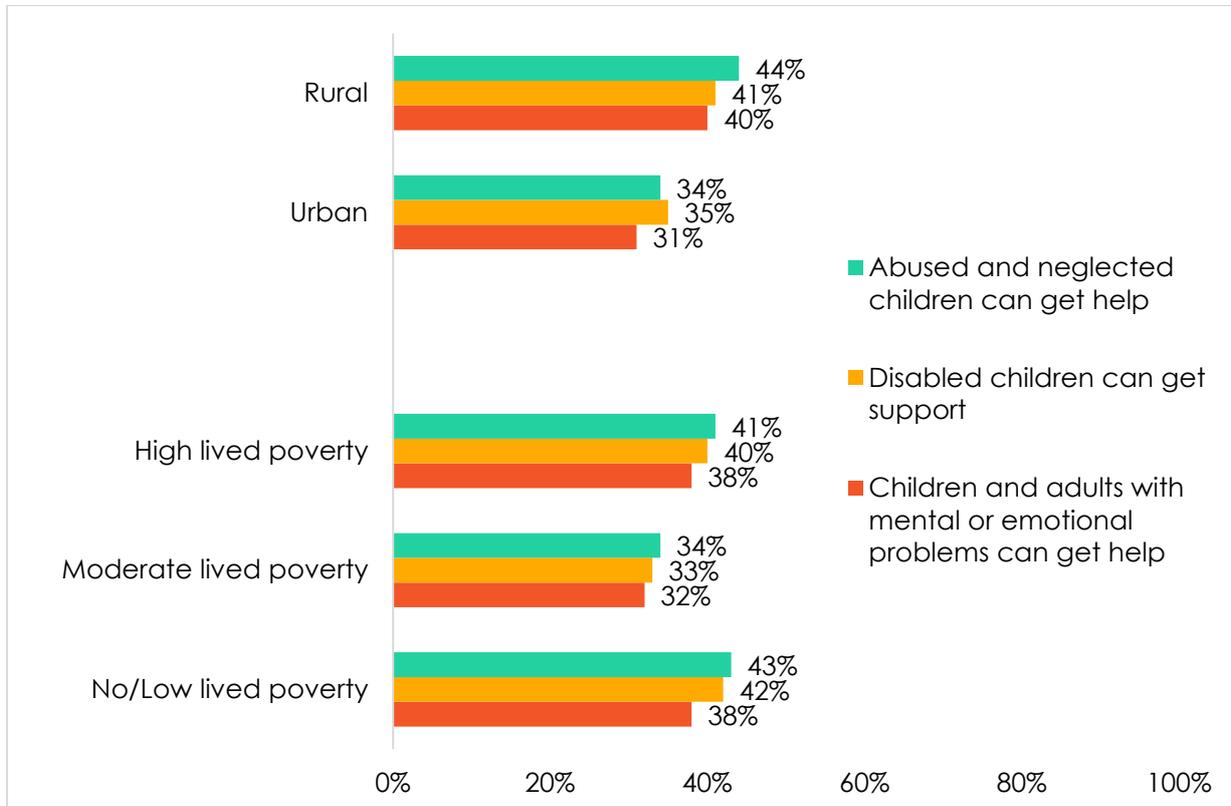
In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

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.

Perhaps surprisingly, rural residents are more likely than urbanites to report that help is available for abused, neglected, or mistreated children (44% vs. 34%), children with physical disabilities (41% vs. 35%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (40% vs. 31%) (Figure 11). Perceptions that help is available are somewhat more common among the poorest and the best-off respondents than among those experiencing moderate lived poverty.

Figure 11: Is help available for vulnerable children? | by lived poverty and urban-rural residence | Liberia | 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 "agree" or "strongly agree")

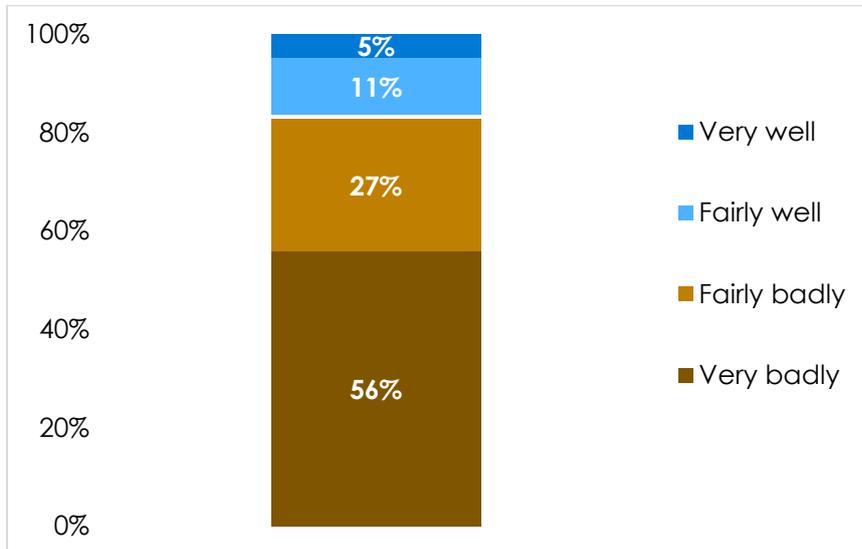
Government performance on child welfare

Liberians overwhelmingly disapprove of their government's performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children. More than eight in 10 (83%) say it is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly," while only 16% believe it is doing a good job (Figure 12).

Men (19%), rural residents (20%), and the oldest respondents (27%) are more likely to approve of the government's performance on child welfare than are women (14%), urban residents (13%), and younger respondents (12%-19%) (Figure 13).

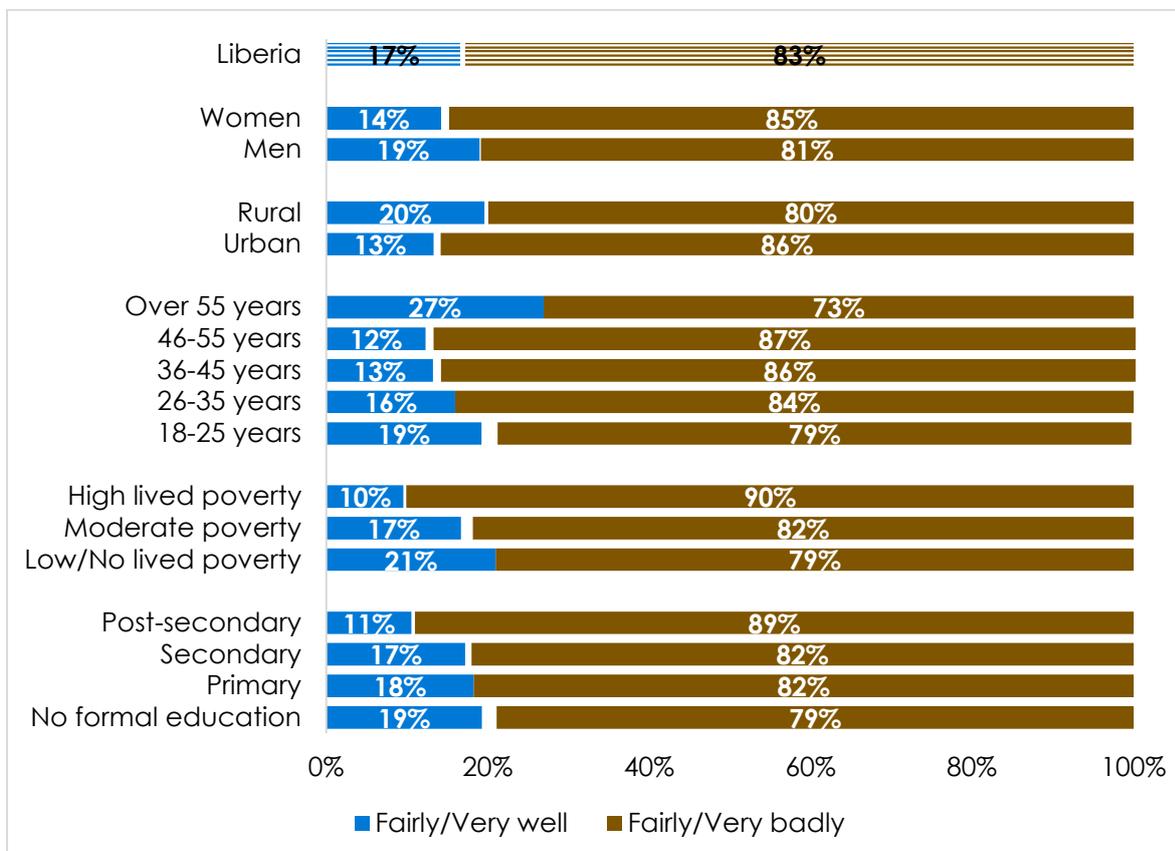
Assessments also differ by respondents' education and economic levels. The poorest citizens (10%) are only half as likely as the wealthy (21%) to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting vulnerable children, and approval is significantly lower among more educated respondents (11%) compared to their counterparts with less schooling (17%-19%).

Figure 12: Government performance on child welfare | Liberia | 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 | Liberia | 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?

Conclusion

The protection of the rights of children remains a major challenge in Liberia despite ratifying several international legal instruments. Children experience forms of abuse and exploitation from complex factors. This is why interventions need to be rooted in laws, policies, and programs by different government institutions and international development partners that are well coordinated. Collaboration in the implementation of programs should also be done in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs) and communities including child welfare committees (CWCs) that have been established in some areas across the country. This will ensure local ownership. One major challenge is that social programs are not sufficient to address the scale of the problem in the country.

Programs in child justice should also be expanded in order to prevent children coming in conflict with the law but to equally support those who come in conflict with the law through rehabilitation activities at community level. Finally, physical discipline of children is deeply entrenched in Liberian culture and there should also be programs that work with communities to shift traditional values, attitudes and behaviors so that a new culture of respecting and protecting the rights of children can evolve.

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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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