



Dispatch No. 667 | 7 July 2023

# Zambians say vulnerable children lack needed help in the community

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 667 | Edward Chibwili**

## Summary

In 2022, advocates for children's rights celebrated when Zambia passed its Children's Code Act, updating and consolidating the country's laws in line with international child-rights standards. Among its many provisions, the act prohibits corporal punishment, child marriage, and female genital mutilation; requires institutions to implement child-safeguarding procedures; provides for access to justice and services for victims of abuse and neglect; and details children's rights to social protection, health care, education, and parental care (UNICEF, 2022; End Violence Against Children, 2022; Maponga, 2022).

The law establishes a legal bulwark against a reality that in Zambia, as in other countries, includes troubling levels of child abuse and neglect. The 2014 Violence Against Children in Zambia survey found that among 18- to 24-year-olds, 34% of women and 40% of men had experienced physical violence as children (Republic of Zambia, 2018). Among 13- to 17-year-olds, 28% of girls and the same proportion of boys had suffered physical violence in the previous 12 months.

Among the older group, 20% of women and 10% of men had experienced sexual abuse as children. None of the women had received professional services related to their abuse.

The Zambia Police Service (2022) reported 5,301 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) against children in 2021, representing 25.8% of all GBV cases, though many GBV crimes are known to go unreported.

Child marriage is also common in Zambia. According to the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage (2020), 29% of all Zambian women aged 20–24 were married before they were 18, and 5% they were 15.

Against this background, implementation of the new Children's Code Act will be an enormous and long-term challenge. How do ordinary Zambians see their country's progress in the protection of children?

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

In Zambia, where survey fieldwork was underway when the Children's Code Act became law in August 2022, a large majority of citizens consider it acceptable to use physical force to discipline children, though a slim majority say this practice is not very common in their community.

A majority of Zambians also report that child abuse and neglect are infrequent in their community, though out-of-school children are widely considered a common problem.

Overall, a majority of Zambians give their government good marks on its efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children. However, fewer than half 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.

## **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 conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults between 3 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 have been conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

## **Key findings**

### **Disciplining children:**

- More than two-thirds (68%) of Zambians say parents are "sometimes" or "always" justified in using physical force to discipline their children.
  - The use of physical discipline receives above-average levels of support from citizens with primary schooling or less (73%).
- More than half (54%) of Zambians say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their community, but 45% see it as a frequent occurrence.

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

- A majority (58%) of Zambians say child abuse and neglect occur infrequently in their community, but 40% disagree.
- More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say it is common in their community to see school-age children who are not in school.
  - Child abuse/neglect is more commonly perceived as a frequent problem in cities (45%) than in rural areas (35%). In contrast, more rural than urban residents see out-of-school children as a frequent occurrence (66% vs. 60%). Poor citizens are more likely than better-off respondents to see both as frequent problems.

### **Availability of support services for vulnerable children:**

- Only 40% of Zambians say children who are victims of abuse or neglect are generally able to find help in their community. Almost half (48%) say support is available for children living with disability. But only 31% say the same for children and adults with mental or emotional problems.
  - Citizens who are poor are considerably less likely than their better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

**Government performance on child welfare:**

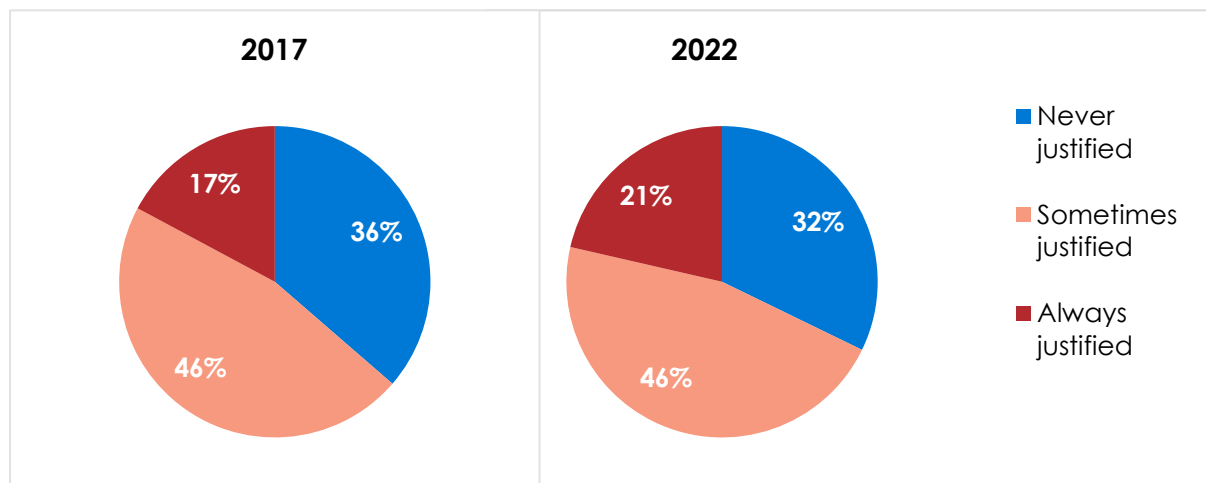
- A majority (61%) of Zambians say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.
  - Poor and/or less educated citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

**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?

In contrast to the country's new Children's Code Act, almost seven in 10 Zambians (68%) believe it is "sometimes justified" (46%) or "always justified" (21%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.<sup>1</sup> The proportion of Zambians who say this practice is "never justified" has decreased since 2017, from 36% to 32% (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Zambia | 2017-2022**

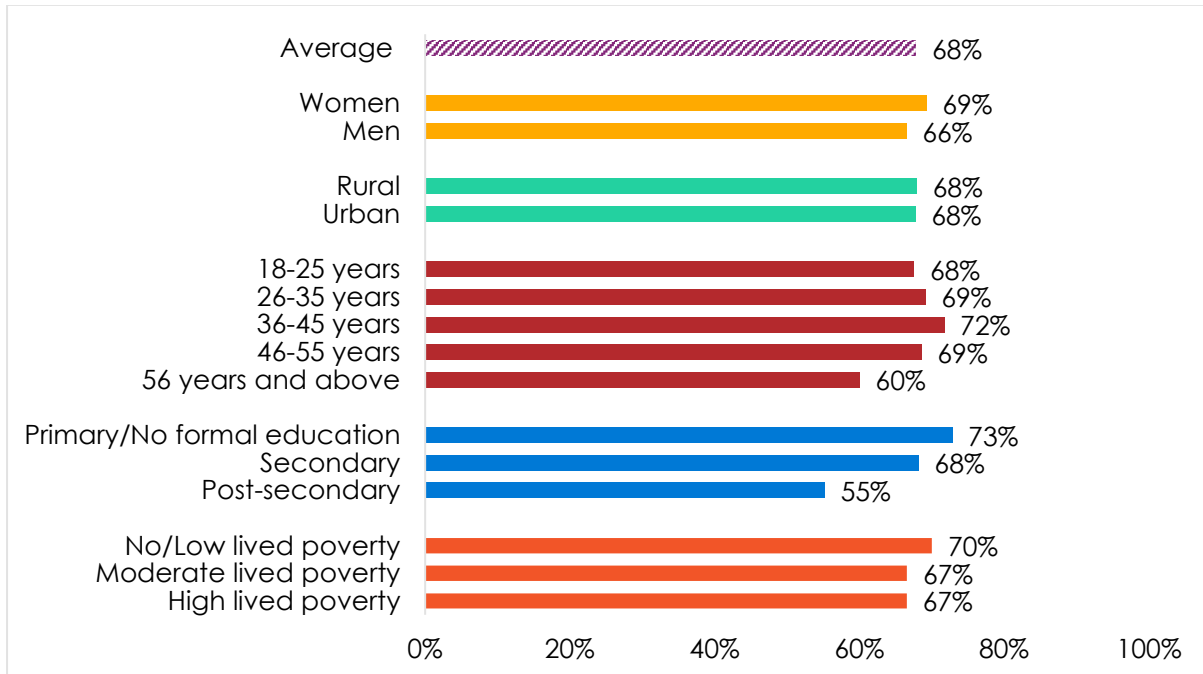


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children?

Support for corporal punishment declines as respondents' education level increases, ranging from 73% among those with primary schooling or less to 55% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 2). Older citizens (60% among those over age 55) are less likely to endorse the practice than younger cohorts (68%-72%).

<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 46% "sometimes justified" and 21% "always justified" sum to 68%).

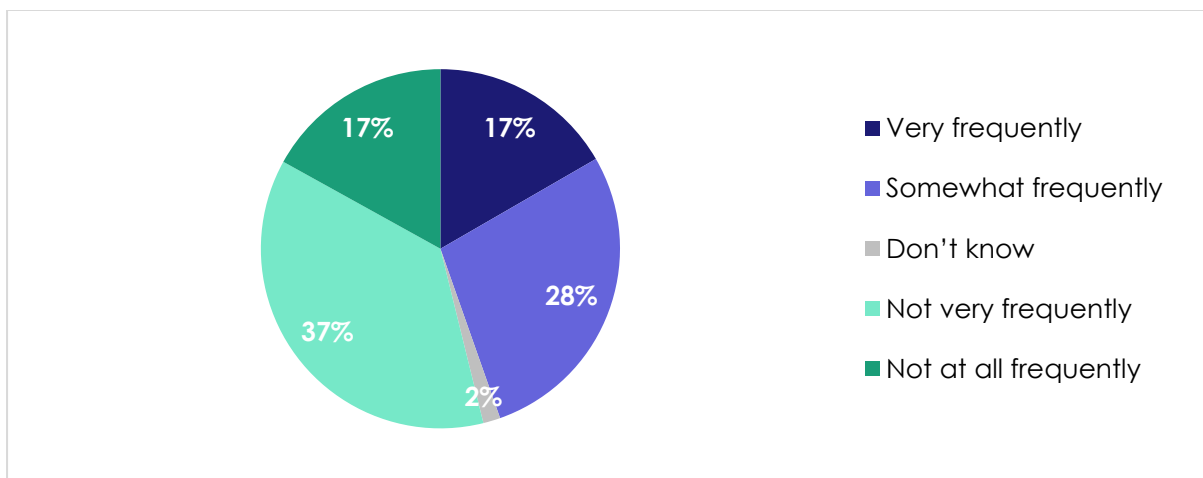
**Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children** | by demographic group | Zambia | 2022



**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”)

In practice, Zambians are divided in how frequently they think adults in their community use physical force to discipline children: More than half (54%) see it as “not very frequent” (37%) or “not at all frequent” (17%), but almost half (45%) say it is a “somewhat frequent” (28%) or “very frequent” (17%) occurrence (Figure 3).

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

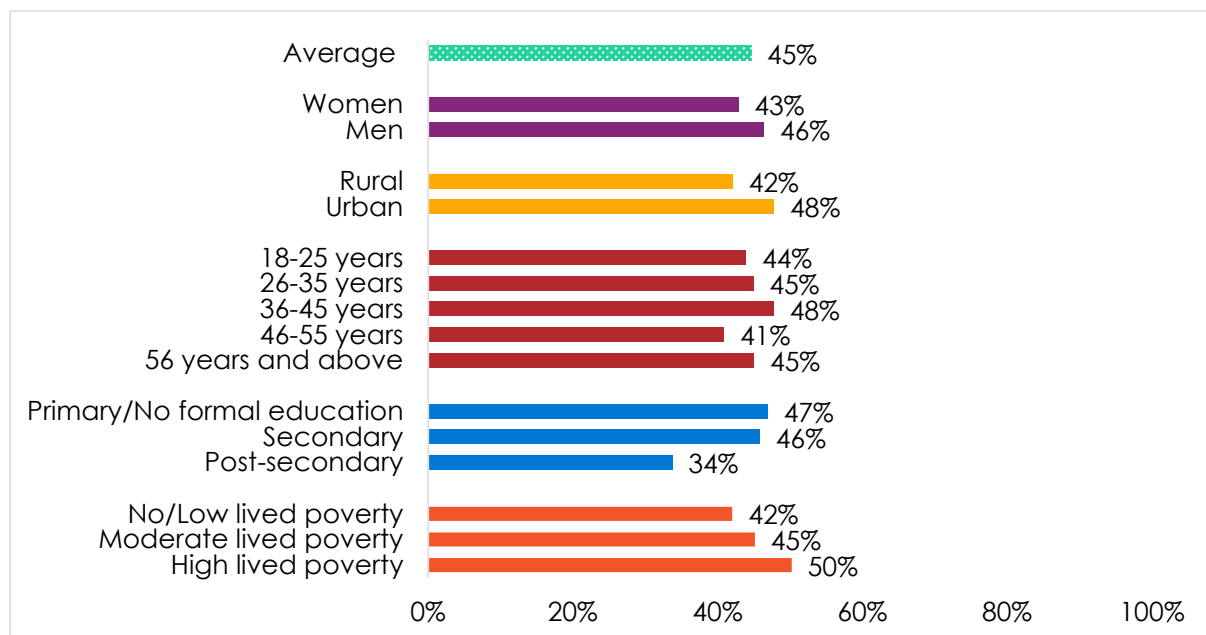


**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to report that people in their community use physical force to discipline children (48% vs. 42%) (Figure 4). This perception is less prevalent among respondents with post-secondary education (34%) than among those with less schooling (46%-47%).

And poor respondents (50%) are more likely than economically well-off respondents (42% of those with no or low lived poverty) to report that children are frequently disciplined using physical force.<sup>2</sup>

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

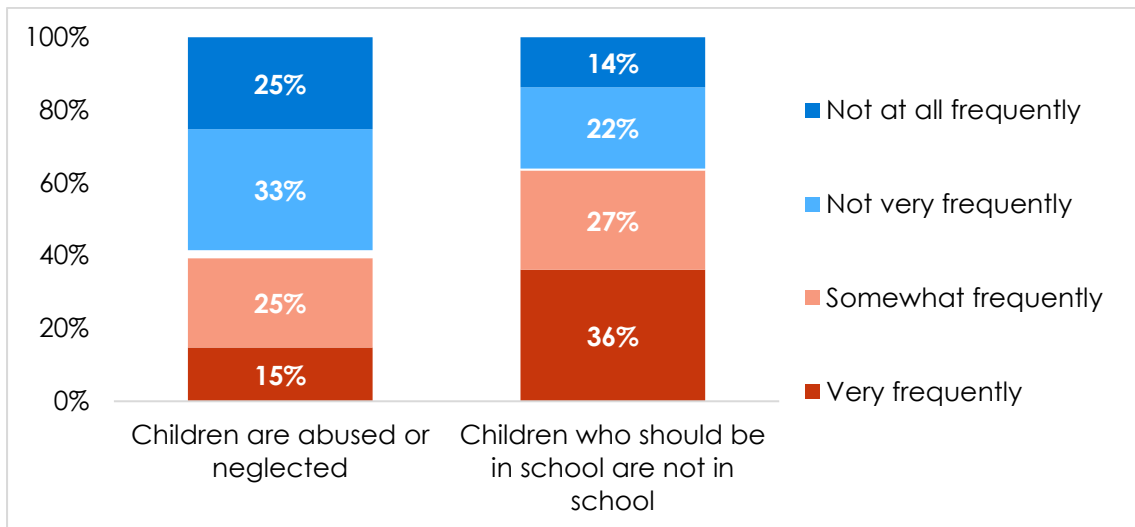
Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, more than half (58%) of Zambians say this is “not at all frequent” (25%) or “not very frequent” (33%), while 40% report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” or “very” frequent (Figure 5).

But a strong majority (63%) say it is common to see school-age children who are not in school.

Older respondents are less likely to say that children are frequently abused/neglected or out of school, but the differences between the other age groups are not significant or consistent (Figure 6).

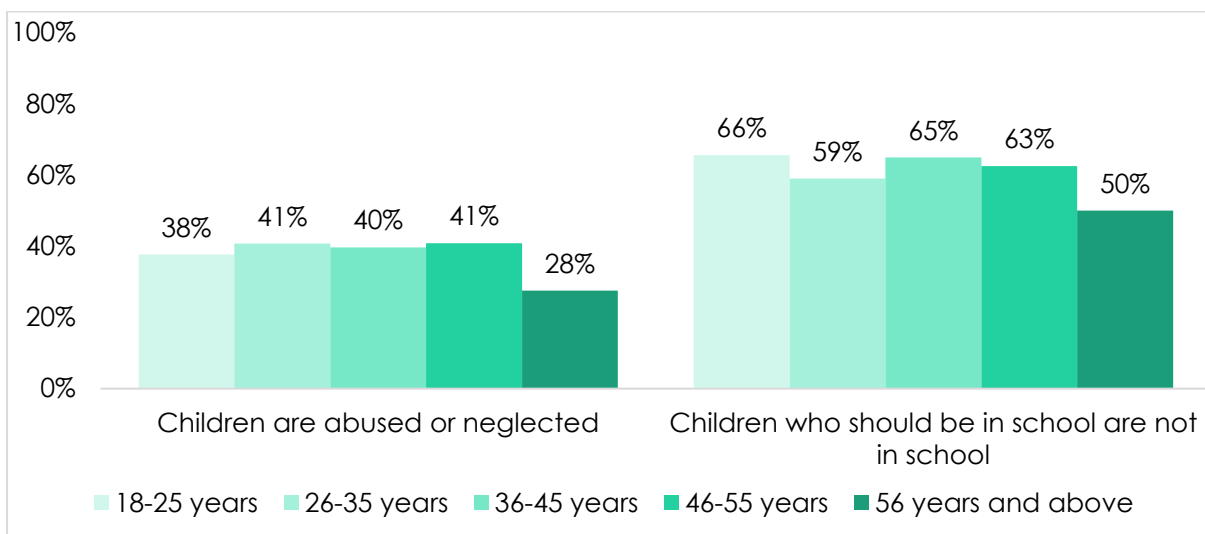
<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

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

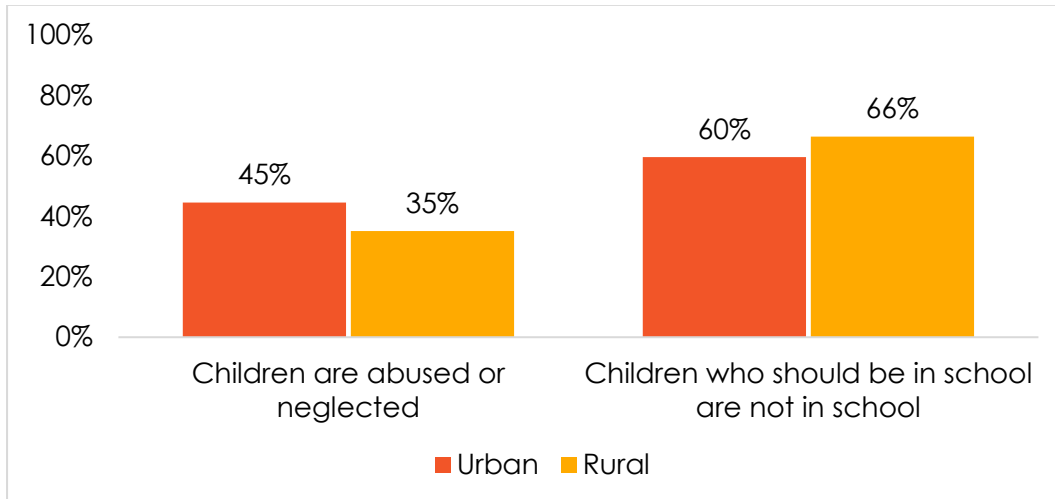


**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Child abuse and neglect are more commonly seen as a frequent problem in cities (45%) than in rural areas (35%). In contrast, concern about out-of-school children is more widespread in rural areas (66%, vs. 60% in cities) (Figure 7).

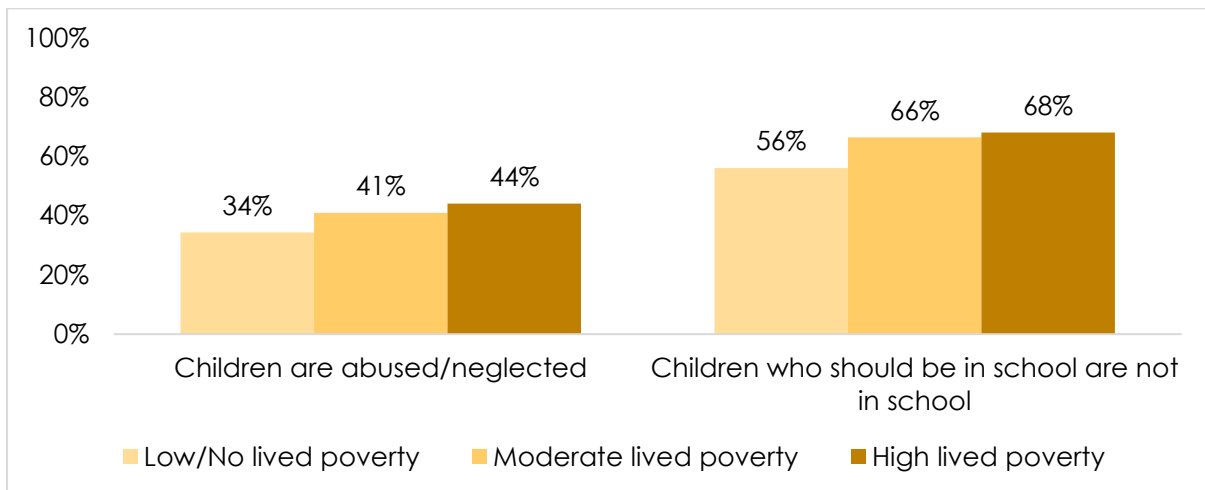
The perception of child abuse and neglect as a frequent problem is more common among poor respondents, ranging from 34% of the better off to 44% of those experiencing high lived poverty. A 12-percentage-point gap separates the wealthy from the poor when it comes to perceptions of out-of-school children (56% vs. 68%) (Figure 8).

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



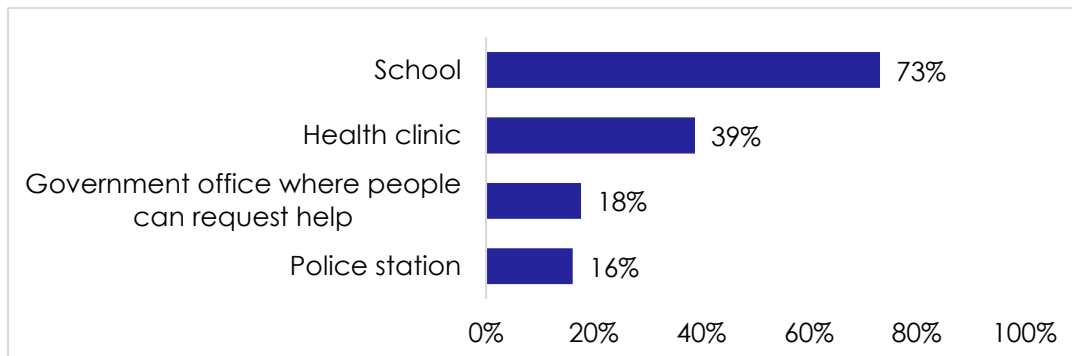
**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

### 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 in Zambia?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all enumeration areas they visited, most Zambians (73%) live within walking distance of a school (Figure 9). Far fewer live within walking distance of a health clinic (39%), a social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems (18%), and a police station (16%).

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

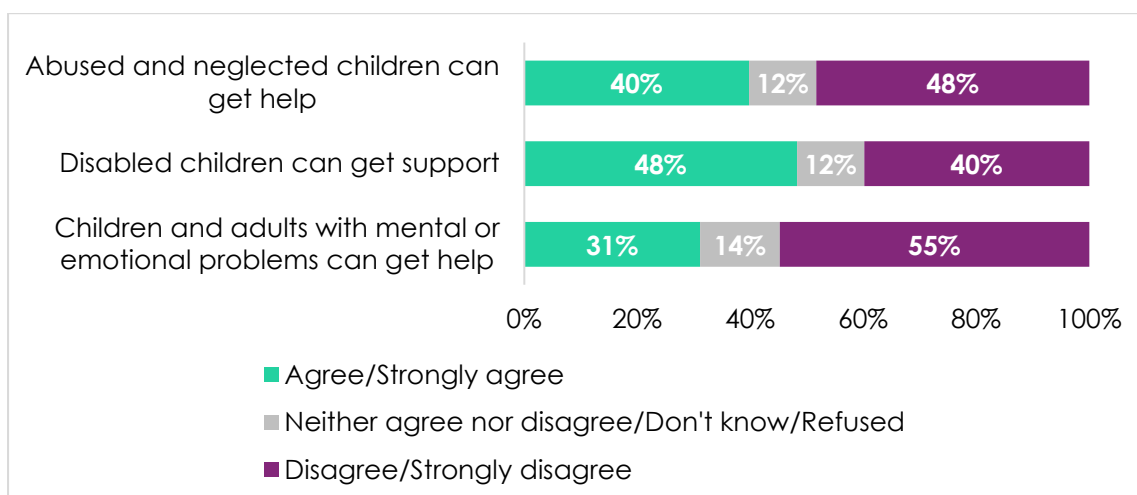


**Survey enumerators were asked to record:** Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Police station? Health clinic (private or public or both)? A social centre, government help centre, or other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

Zambians are divided in their assessments of whether more specialised support services are available in their community (Figure 10). Only four in 10 (40%) say people are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected, while almost half (48%) say such assistance is not available.

Somewhat more (48%) say support is available for children with physical disabilities, though 40% disagree. And only three in 10 citizens (31%) say children and adults with mental or emotional problems are able to get help in the community, while a majority (55%) say such support is not available.

**Figure 10: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Zambia | 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.*

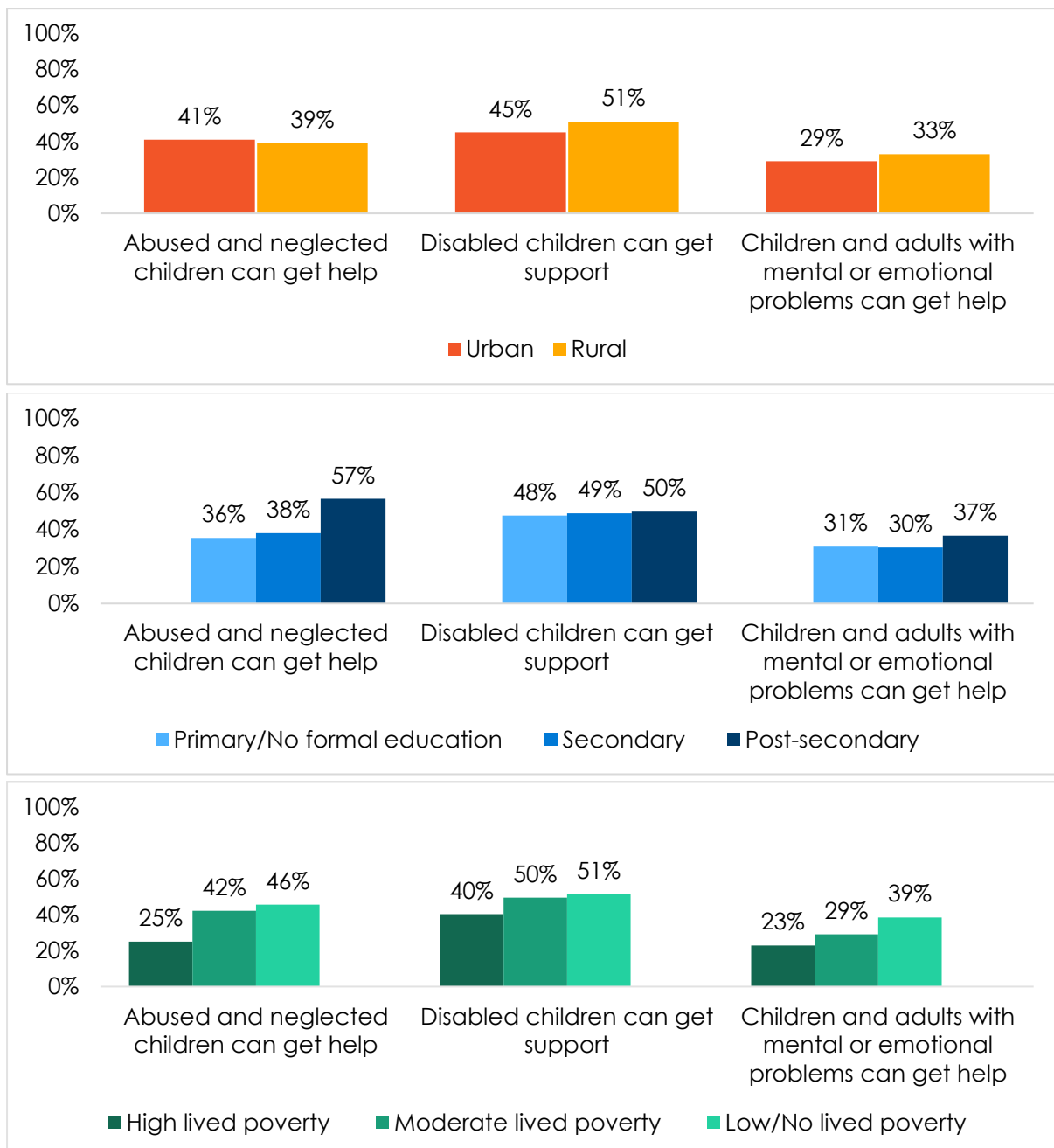
*In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.*



Men and women hold similar views on these questions, and urban and rural residents differ only marginally, with rural residents slightly more likely than urbanites to say that support is available for children with disability (51% vs. 45%) and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (33% vs. 29%) (Figure 11).

But assessments of the availability of support services differ more significantly by respondents' education and economic levels.

**Figure 11: Help is available for vulnerable children** | by urban-rural location, education level, and lived poverty | Zambia | 2022



(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that help and support are available)

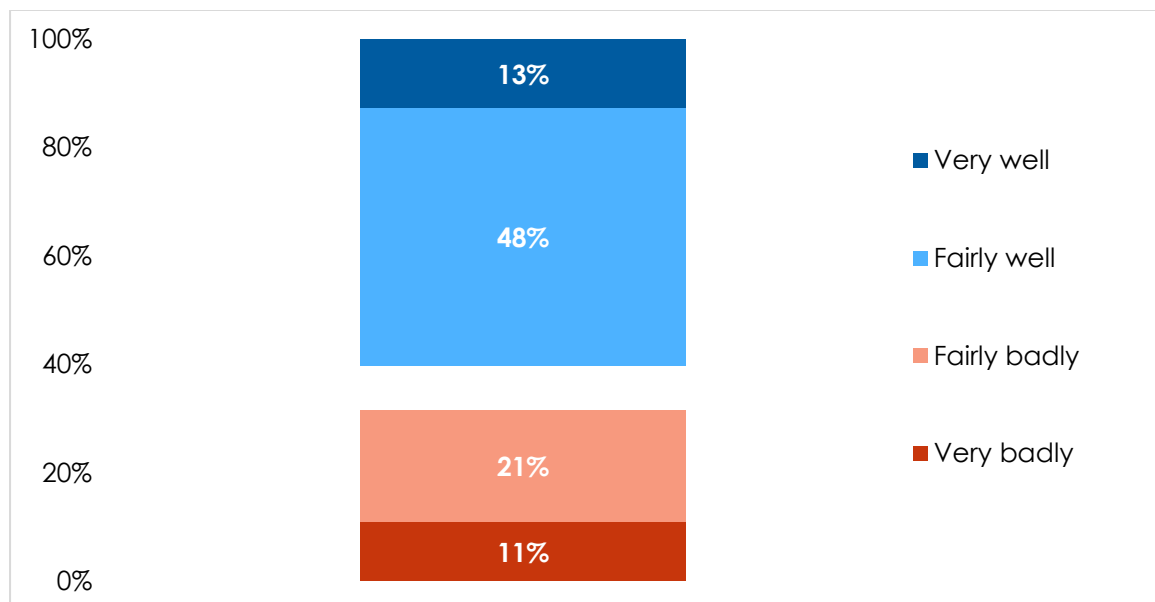
Citizens who have post-secondary education are more likely than their less educated counterparts to report that support services are available in their community for abused or neglected children (57%, vs. 36%-38% for those with less schooling) and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (37% vs. 30%-31%).

The pattern is more pronounced for views by lived poverty: The poorest citizens are significantly less likely to report available support for abused and neglected children (a 21-point gap), children with disability (11 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (16 points).

### Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a solid majority (60%) of Zambians give the government a positive rating for its efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children, while 32% believe it is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Figure 12).

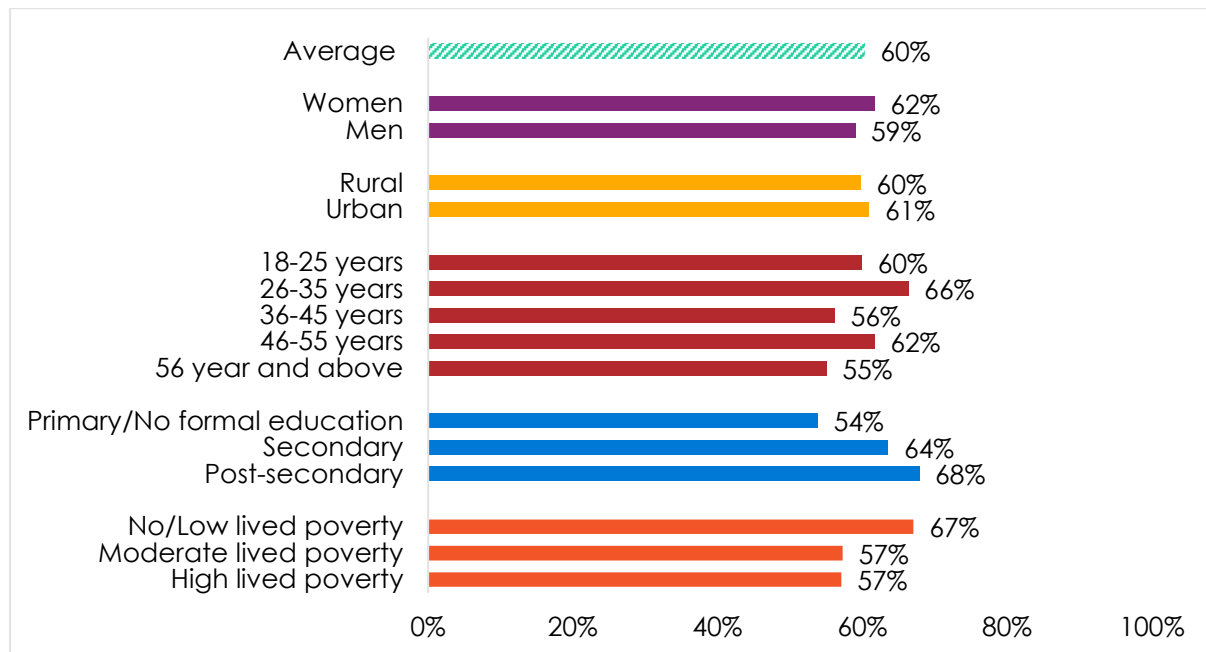
**Figure 12: Government performance on child welfare | Zambia | 2022**



**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?

Evaluations of the government's performance differ by respondents' education and economic levels (Figure 13) The poorest citizens (57%) are considerably less likely than the best-off (67%) to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting vulnerable children, as are those with primary or no formal education (54%) compared to their more educated counterparts (64%-68%).

**Figure 13: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Zambia | 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

While the adoption of the Children's Code Act reflects the Zambian government's commitment to a society where children survive, thrive, and realise their full potential, survey findings point to a number of potential action points.

A majority of citizens say out-of-school children are a common sight in their community, and many say the same about abused and neglected children. And only minorities say that resources are available in their community to support abused and neglected children, children with disability, and children and adults with mental or emotional problems. Economically disadvantaged populations are particularly likely to report that child abuse and neglect are frequent problems and that resources to help vulnerable children are lacking, representing an important target for interventions.

As for corporal punishment, a majority of adults remain to be persuaded by the new law's ban.

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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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