

South Africans dissatisfied with government performance on child well-being

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 748 | Stephen Ndoma and Hangala Siachiwena

Summary

One-third of South Africa's 60 million people are under age 18 (Hall, 2022). Reflecting the country's legacy of racial, spatial, and social inequalities, almost two-thirds (62%) of these children live in low-income households, with high levels of exposure to poverty, hunger, and health and educational disadvantages (Statistics South Africa, 2020; Makoae, Roberts, & Ward, 2012).

Many also face the threat of violence and abuse. UNICEF reports that from April to June 2022, 243 children in South Africa were killed while 1,670 suffered grievous bodily harm (Petla, 2022). Studies show that one-fourth of South African children experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect (Strydom, Schiller, & Orme, 2021).

While childhood death has declined nationally, non-natural deaths among 5- to 9-year-olds have increased, from 24% of all deaths in 2014 to 39% in 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Gruesome cases hit the headlines and social media, such as the mutilation-murder of 4-year-old Bokgabo Poo in late 2022 (Petla, 2022) and the sexual assault and grooming of minor children by their foster parents (Mitchley, 2023).

The state's legal arsenal to protect children includes the Domestic Violence Act (1998), the Children's Act (2005), and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (2007) (Artz et al., 2016). The government also provides income support to vulnerable households; in 2018, 68% of children aged 0-17 years benefited from a child support grant (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

This dispatch reports on a survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore African attitudes and perceptions about child well-being.

In South Africa, findings show that a majority of citizens endorse the use of physical force to discipline children, and about half say the practice is common in their community.

Substantial minorities see child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children as common occurrences in their community.

Slim majorities say that resources are available in their community to help children who are abused or neglected, children with disabilities, and children and adults facing mental or emotional problems, but many disagree.

Poor citizens are particularly likely to endorse the use of physical force, to say that corporal punishment is common, to see child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children as common issues, and to report that support services for vulnerable children are not available in their community.

Overall, fewer than half of South Africans approve of the government's performance in 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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, based at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,580 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A majority (56%) of South Africans say parents are "sometimes" or "always" justified in using physical force to discipline their children.
 - Support for the use of physical discipline increases sharply with respondents' experience of lived poverty.
- About half (49%) of citizens say the use of physical force to discipline children is "somewhat common" or "very common" in their community.

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

- Four in 10 South Africans (39%) say child abuse and neglect are common problems in their community, and almost half (46%) say the same about out-of-school children.
 - Poor citizens are significantly more likely than well-off respondents to report that child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children are frequent problems in their community.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- More than half of South Africans say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (53%), children with disabilities (55%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (52%).
 - Citizens who are poor and those who have primary education or less are considerably less likely than their better-off and more educated counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

- More than half (51%) of South Africans say the government is doing a "fairly bad" or "very bad" job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

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?

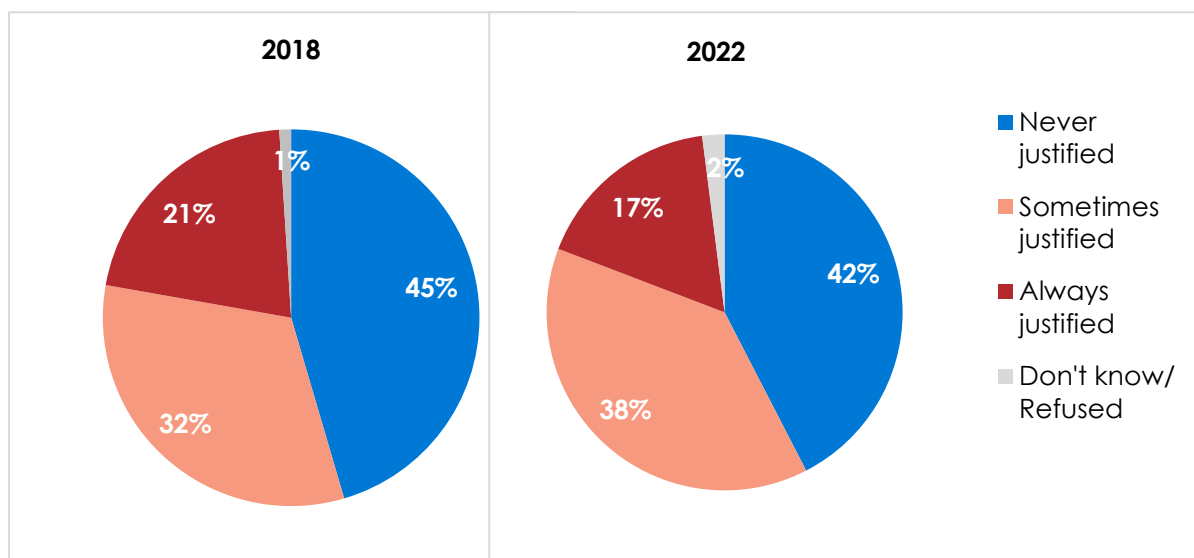
More than half (56%) of South Africans believe it is “sometimes justified” (38%) or “always justified” (17%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.¹ The proportion of South Africans who say this practice is “never justified” has declined marginally since 2018, from 45% to 42% (Figure 1).

Support for the use of physical force to discipline children declines sharply as respondents’ economic status rises, from 67% among the poorest to 41% among well-off citizens² (Figure 2). Women (54%), urban residents (54%), young respondents (54%), and the most educated citizens (50%) are less likely to endorse the practice than men (57%), rural residents (59%), older respondents (59%), and less educated citizens (54%-60%).

In practice, about half (49%) of South Africans say adults in their community “very frequently” (21%) or “somewhat frequently” (28%) use physical force to discipline children (Figure 3). A similar proportion (45%) see this practice as a “not very frequent” (25%) or “not at all frequent” (20%) occurrence.

Citizens experiencing moderate (58%) or high (63%) levels of lived poverty are more than twice as likely to say that the use of physical force to discipline children is frequent in their community than well-off respondents (26%) (Figure 4). Older respondents (39%) and those with post-secondary education (32%) are considerably less likely to report frequent corporal punishment than their older and less educated counterparts.

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

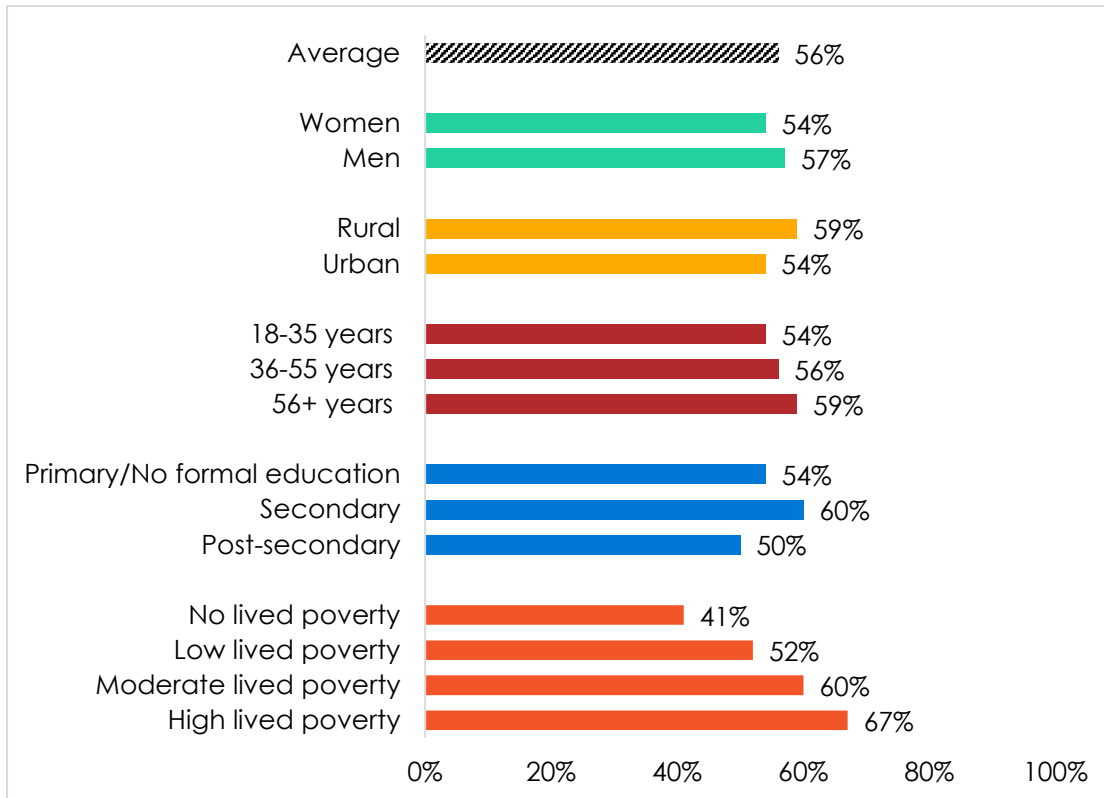


Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children?

¹ 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. 38% “sometimes justified” and 17% “always justified” sum to 56%).

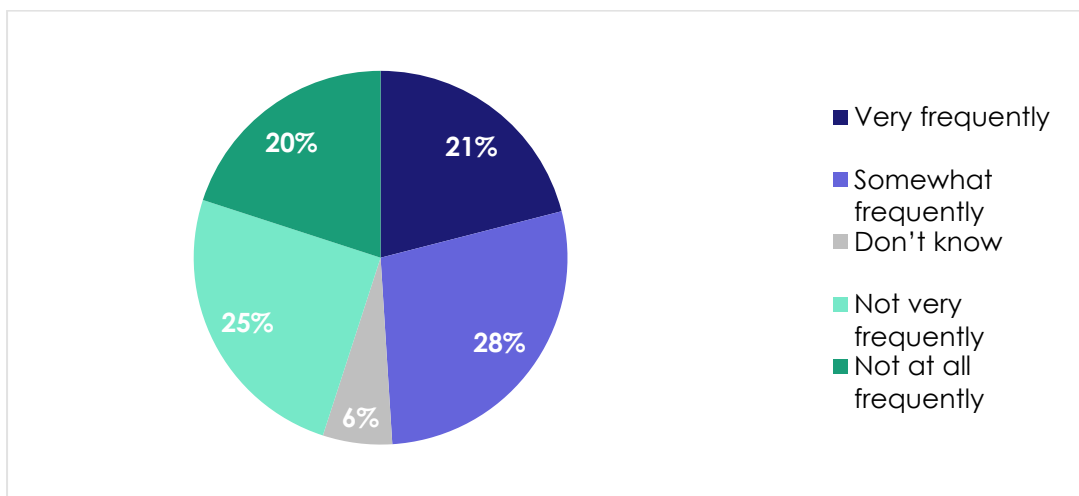
² Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

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



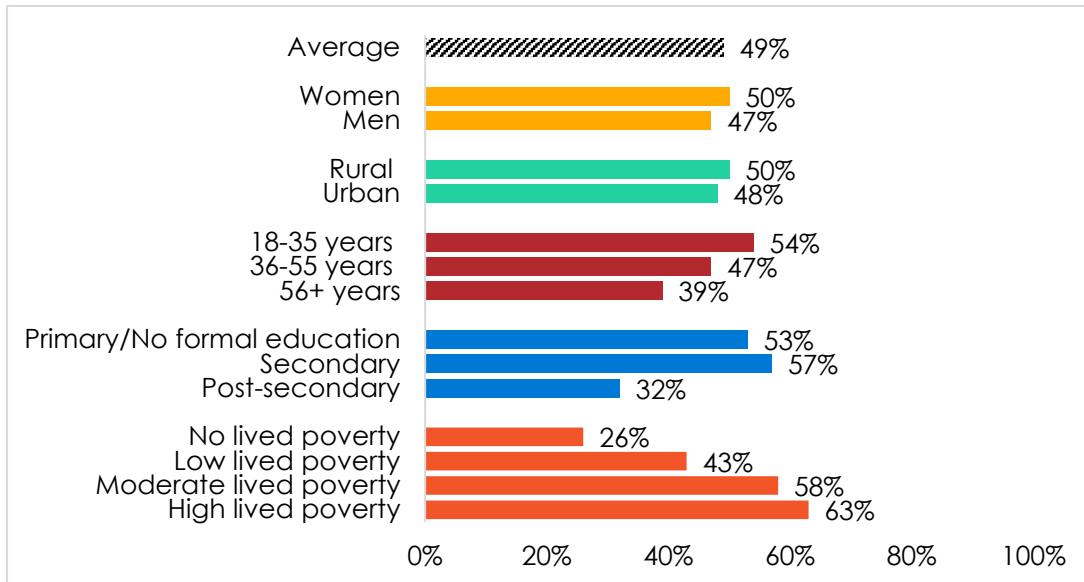
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children? | South Africa | 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?

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



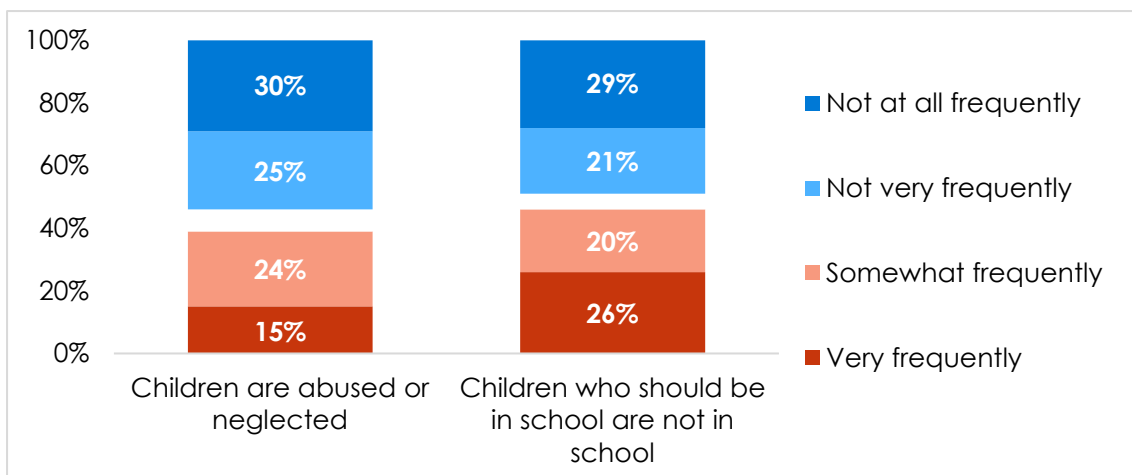
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Abuse and neglect

Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, more than half (55%) of South Africans say this is "not at all frequent" (30%) or "not very frequent" (25%), while 39% report that abuse and neglect are "somewhat" or "very" frequent (Figure 5).

Half (50%) of respondents also say it's not common to see school-age children who are not in school, but nearly as many (46%) disagree.

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

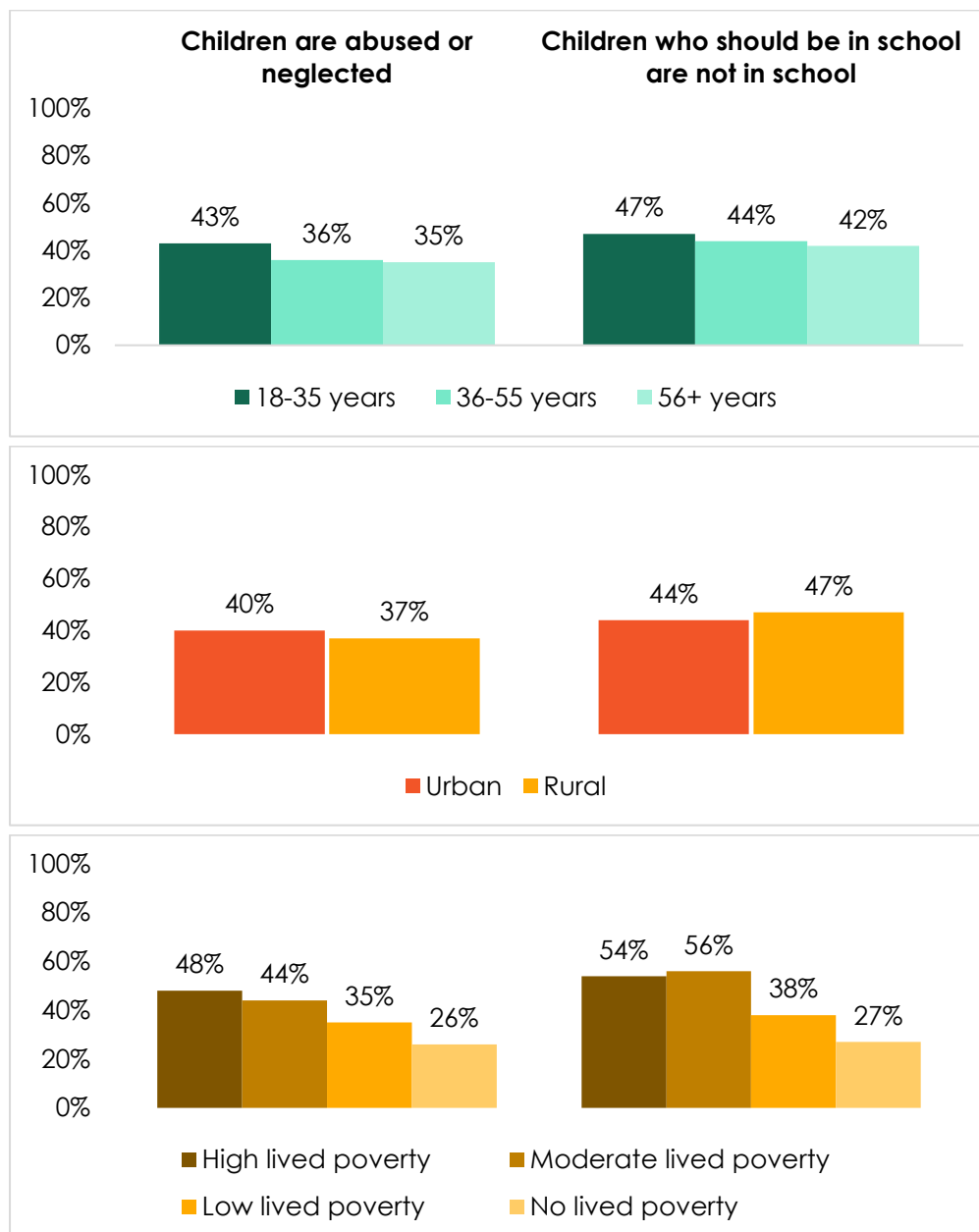


Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

Younger respondents (43%) are more likely than their elders (35%-36%) to see child abuse and neglect as frequent problems in their community (Figure 6). Similarly, 47% of 18- to 35-year-olds say children are frequently not in school, compared to 42%-44% of older respondents.

Perceptions of the frequency of child abuse and out-of-school children differ only marginally by urban vs. rural location, but they differ sharply by respondents' economic status. While only 26% of well-off citizens say children are frequently abused or neglected in their community, 48% of the poorest respondents share this view. And the poor are twice as likely to see out-of-school children as a common problem.

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group, urban-rural location, and lived poverty | South Africa | 2022



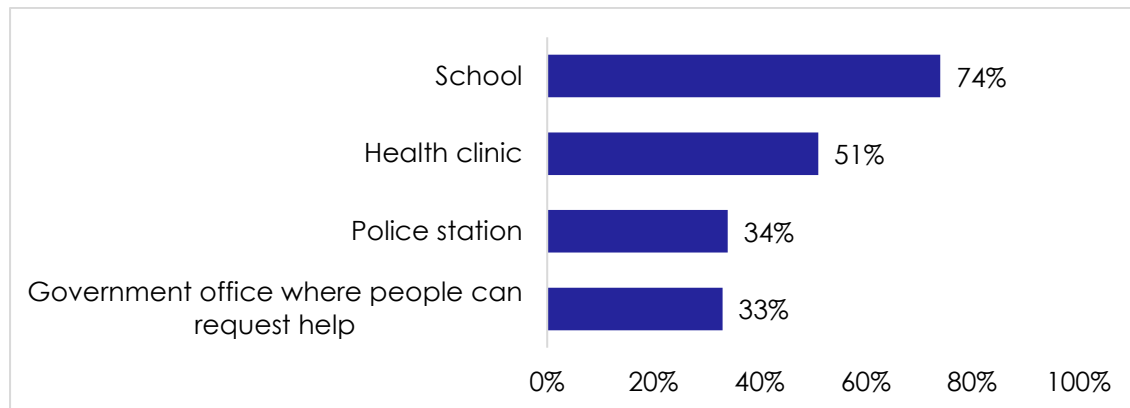
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

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, three-fourths (74%) of South Africans live within walking distance of a school, and half (51%) have a nearby health clinic (Figure 7). One-third live within walking distance of a police station (34%) and a social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems (33%).

Figure 7: Availability of public services at the community level | South Africa | 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")

More than half of respondents report that more specialised support services are available in the community as well (Figure 8). A slim majority (53%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected. Similarly, 55% say support is available for children with physical disabilities, and 52% say the same with regard to children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

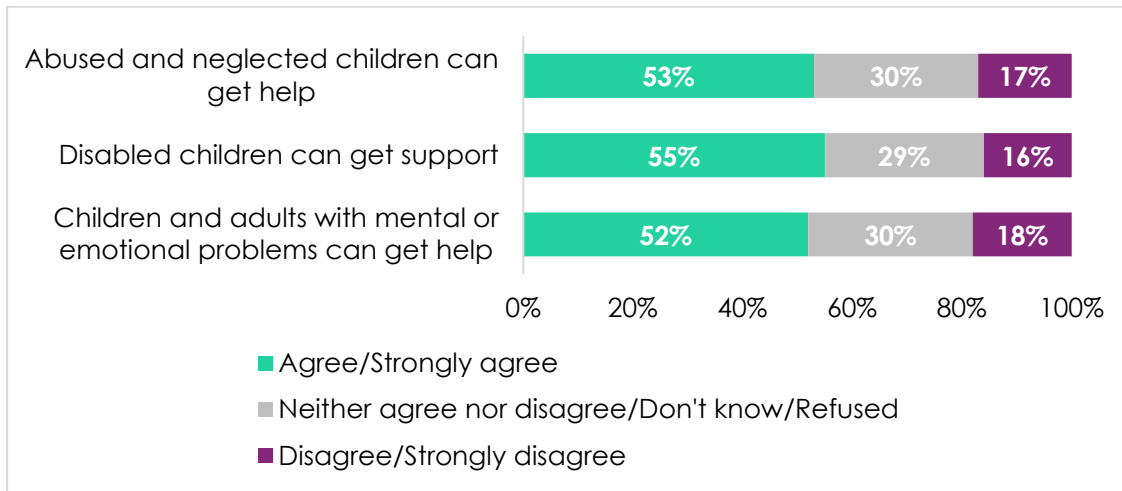
Men and women hold similar views on support for disabled children and children and adults with mental or emotional problems, as do urban and rural residents. Regarding support for abused and neglected children, men (56%) and urban residents (55%) are somewhat more likely to see it as available than women (50%) and rural residents (48%) (not shown).

But assessments of the availability of support services differ more sharply by respondents' education and economic levels. Across the board, citizens who have primary education or less 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 (Figure 9).

Gaps of 14 to 20 percentage points separate respondents with primary education or less from those with post-secondary education when it comes to saying that help is available in their community for abused and neglected children (41% vs. 61%), disabled children (47% vs. 61%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (42% vs. 61%).

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 (a 10-point gap), disabled children (20 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (17 points).

Figure 8: Is help available for vulnerable children? | South Africa | 2022



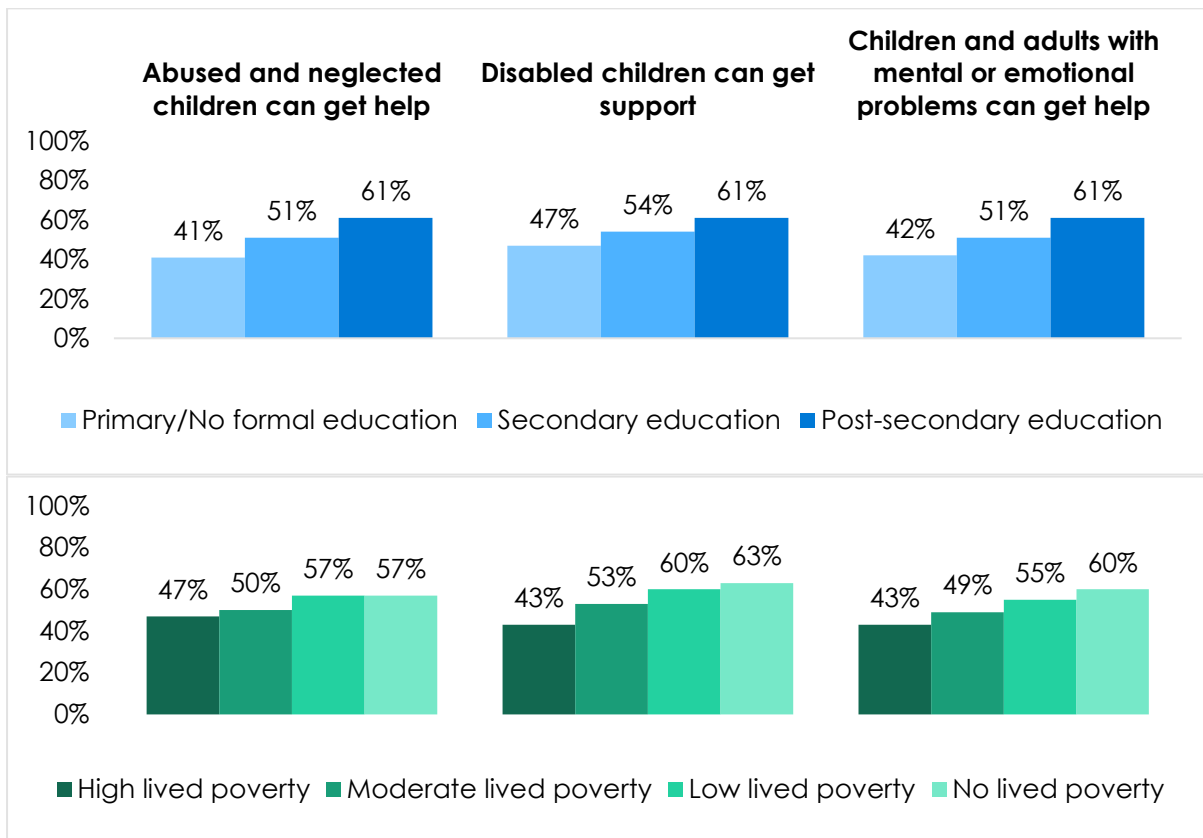
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree.

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.

Figure 9: Help is available for vulnerable children | by education and lived poverty level | South Africa | 2022

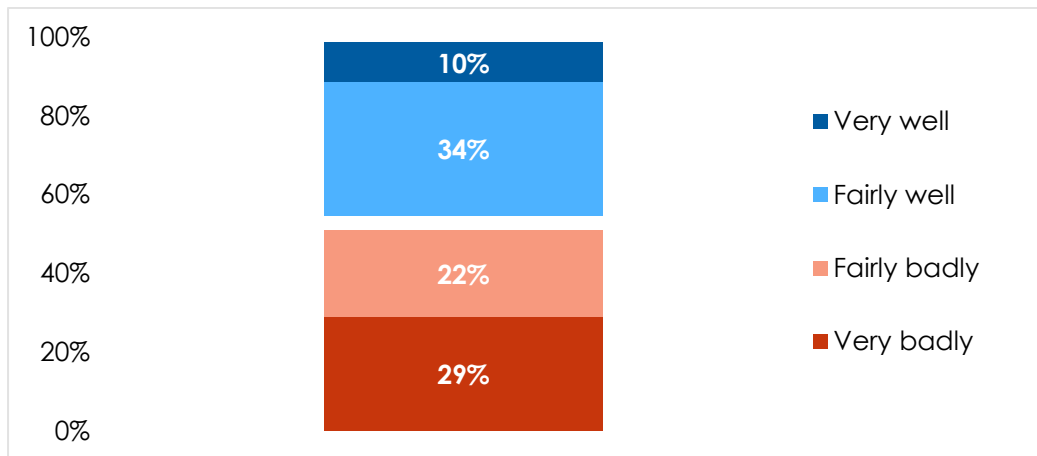


Government performance on child welfare

Overall, the majority of South Africans are not satisfied with government's performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 44% say it is doing "fairly well" or "very well," while 51% believe it is doing fairly/very badly (Figure 10).

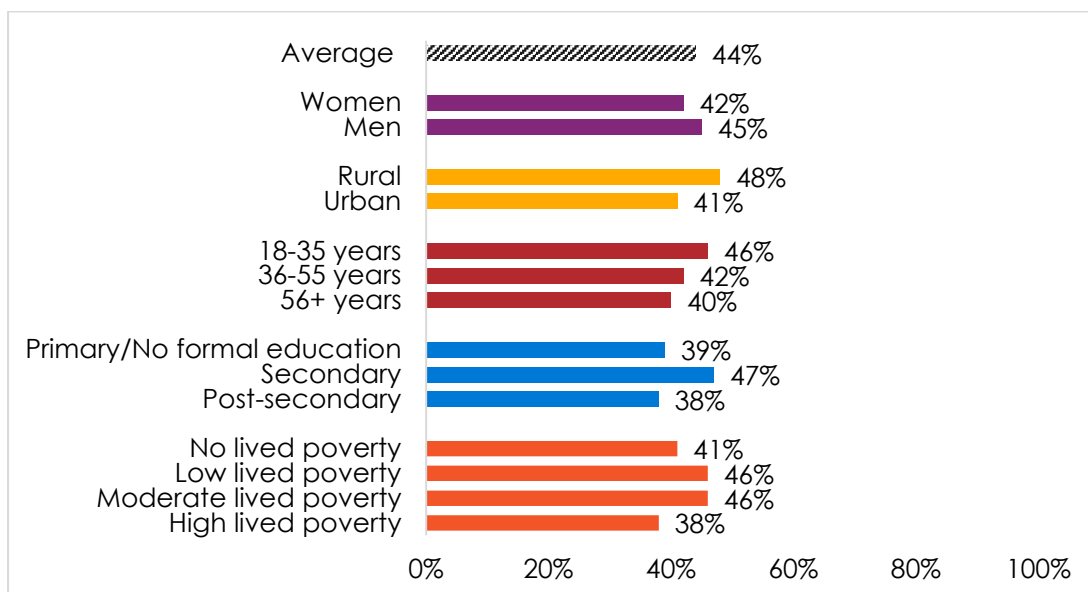
Women (42%) and urban residents (41%) are somewhat less likely to approve of the government's performance on child well-being than men (45%) and rural dwellers (48%) (Figure 11). So are the oldest (40%) and poorest (38%) respondents compared to their younger and better-off counterparts.

Figure 10: Government performance on child welfare | South Africa | 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 11: Approval of government performance on child welfare | South Africa | 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

Survey findings show that the use of physical force to discipline children has majority support and is fairly widespread in South Africa.

While slim majorities report that child abuse and neglect and out-of-school children are infrequent problems, substantial shares of the population disagree. Similarly, large minorities say that resources to help vulnerable children are not available at the local level. And the government receives mediocre performance ratings on its efforts to protect vulnerable children.

Poor citizens' relatively bleak assessments of the frequency of corporal punishment, child abuse/neglect, and out-of-school children and of the unavailability of support services are particularly troubling, suggesting that economically disadvantaged communities may be one priority target for intensified efforts to promote the well-being of vulnerable children.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

- Artz, L., Burton, P., Ward, C., Leoschut, L., Phyfer, J., Lloyd, S., Kassangee, R., & Mottee, C. (2016). Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa. Report for the Optimus Foundation.
- Hall, K. (2022). Statistics on children in South Africa. Children Count.
- Makoa, M., Roberts, H., & Ward, C. (2012). Child maltreatment prevention readiness assessment: South Africa. Report submitted to the World Health Organization Department of Violence and Infant Prevention and Disability, Geneva.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.
- Mitchley, A. (2023). Court sentences family of six for neglect and sexual assault of minor children. News24. 16 February.
- Petla, V. (2022). There is a war on children in SA, statistics show. IOL News. 1 November.
- Statistics South Africa (2020). Education series volume VII: Children's education and well-being in South Africa, 2018.
- Strydom, M., Schiller, J., & Orme, J. (2020). The current landscape of children protection services in South Africa: A systematic review. *Social Work* 56(4), 383-402.

Stephen Ndoma is Afrobarometer assistant project manager for Southern Africa. Email: ndomashe@gmail.com.

Hangala Siachiwena is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa at the University of Cape Town and a research assistant for Afrobarometer's data management team. Email: hangala@afrobarometer.org.

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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 748 | 18 December 2023