

Amid successes, Mauritians point to challenges in pursuit of child well-being

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Summary

Mauritius' legal machinery to ensure the protection and healthy development of its children took a leap forward with the Children's Act 2020, which prohibits child marriage, recognises online platforms as a facilitator of child abuse and exploitation, and bans corporal punishment (End Violence Against Children, 2022).

The government's recent steps include earmarking funding for the construction of residential care institutions for children in distress, increasing monthly foster-care allowances, and adding an allowance for children with special needs.

But despite efforts by the Mauritian government, civil society, and other stakeholders, many children still face threats such as poverty, discrimination based on ethnicity or disability, sexual exploitation, and abuse (Humanium, 2021). Last year, the harrowing story of 2-year-old Keyla, who endured unspeakable abuse at the hands of those entrusted with her care (L'Express.mu, 2023), sent shockwaves throughout the island, a powerful reminder of the need to confront deep-rooted issues endangering the welfare of children.

Root causes often revolve around precarity, dropping out of school, unstable family backgrounds, negligence, or sexual trauma (Ombudsperson for Children, 2022). According to Statistics Mauritius (2021), 4,746 cases of child abuse were reported to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare's Child Development Unit in 2021, down from 5,917 in 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 well-being.

In Mauritius, survey findings show that in contrast to the legal prohibition against corporal punishment, a majority of citizens endorse the use of physical force to discipline children, though most say the practice is not widespread in their community.

Majorities also describe child abuse and neglect as infrequent, say that resources to help vulnerable children are available in their community, and approve of the government's performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of children. But economically disadvantaged citizens offer far less rosy assessments of child well-being than their better-off counterparts.

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 Mauritius, led by Straconsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in March 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 Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A slim majority (54%) of Mauritians say it is “sometimes justified” or “always justified” for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.
 - The use of physical discipline receives above-average support from men (58%), the less educated (58%), rural residents (59%), and poor citizens (58%).

Abused and neglected children:

- One-fourth (25%) of Mauritians report that child abuse and neglect are frequent phenomena in their community or neighbourhood, but 72% disagree.
- Urban and poor citizens are more likely to see child abuse and neglect as widespread problems.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- A majority of Mauritians say resources are available in their community to help abused and neglected children (80%), children with disabilities (78%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (78%).
 - Poor citizens are less likely than their wealthy counterparts to say that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

Government performance on child welfare:

- More than half (56%) of Mauritians say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, while 36% express their disapproval.
- Negative assessments of the government's performance on child welfare are more widespread among the poorest citizens.

Disciplining a child

Discipline is a fundamental part of raising children. Should the use of physical force as a disciplinary measure be deemed appropriate or abusive?

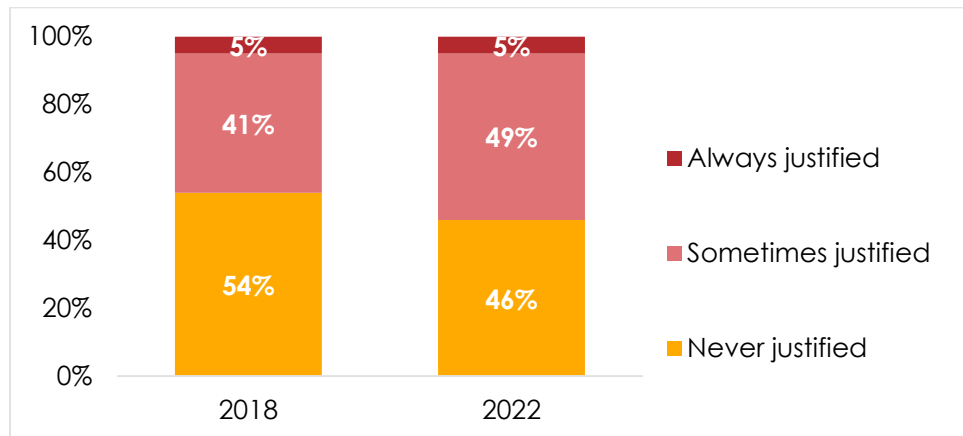
A slim majority (54%) of Mauritians believe it is “sometimes justified” (49%) or “always justified” (5%) for parents to use physical force to discipline their children. The proportion of Mauritians who say this practice is “never justified” has declined by 8 percentage points since 2018, from 54% to 46% (Figure 1).

Men are more likely than women to approve of physical discipline (58% vs. 51%), as are rural residents compared to urbanites (59% vs. 48%) (Figure 2).

Economically well-off citizens are less likely than poorer citizens to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children, ranging from 52% of the best-off to 58% of those experiencing

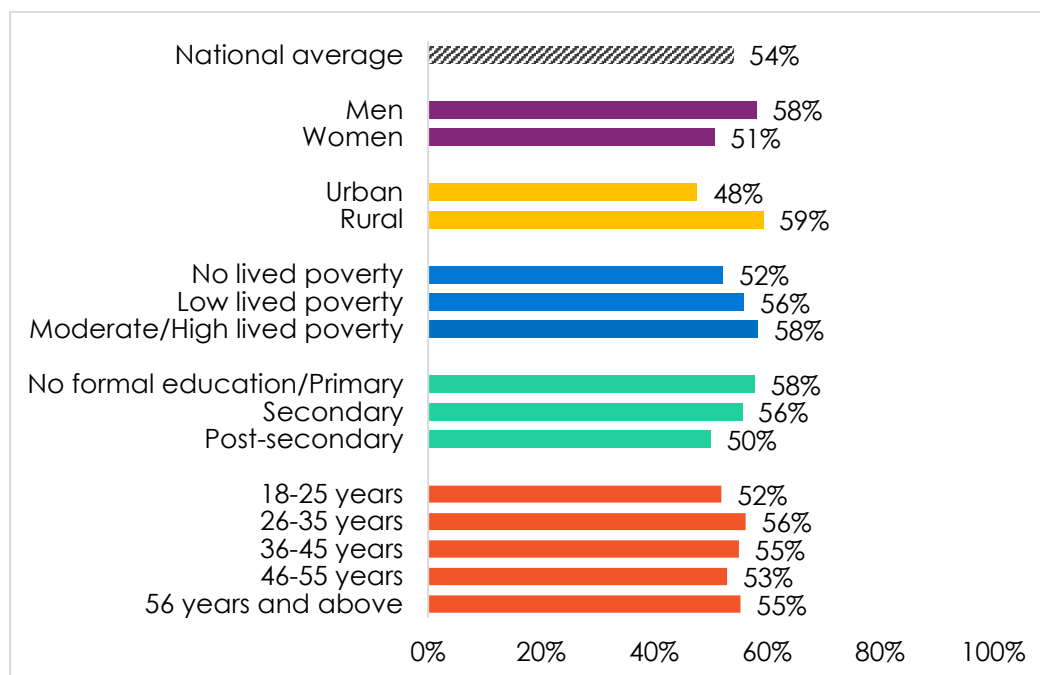
moderate or high lived poverty.¹ Support for physical discipline also declines as education increases, ranging from 58% of citizens with primary or no formal education to 50% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Mauritius | 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 | Mauritius | 2022



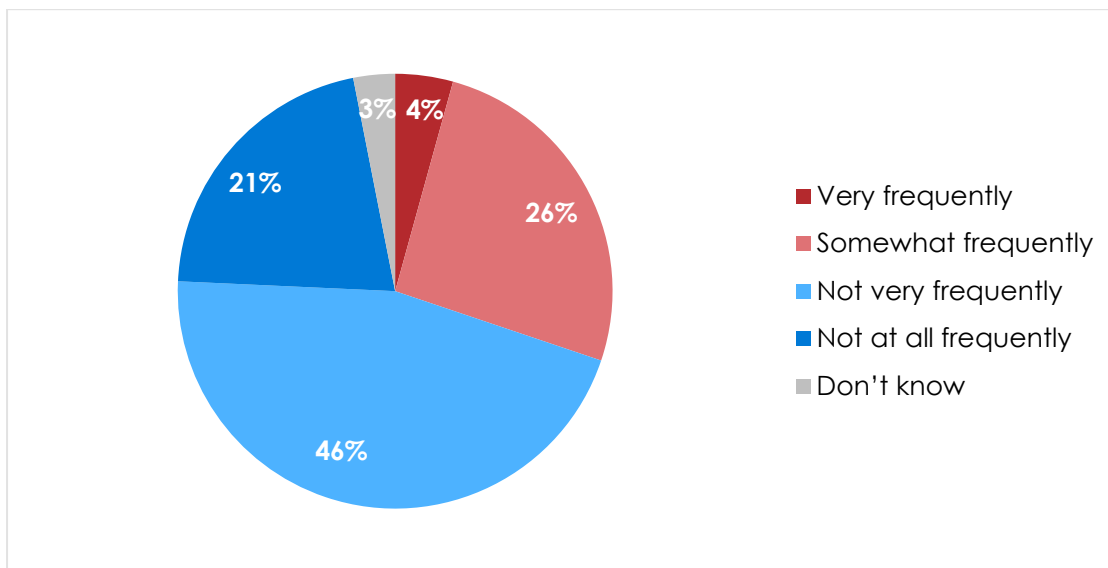
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")

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

In practice, two-thirds (67%) of Mauritians say adults in their community do “not very frequently” (46%) or “not at all frequently” (21%) use physical force to discipline children, while three in 10 (30%) think this is a common occurrence (Figure 3).

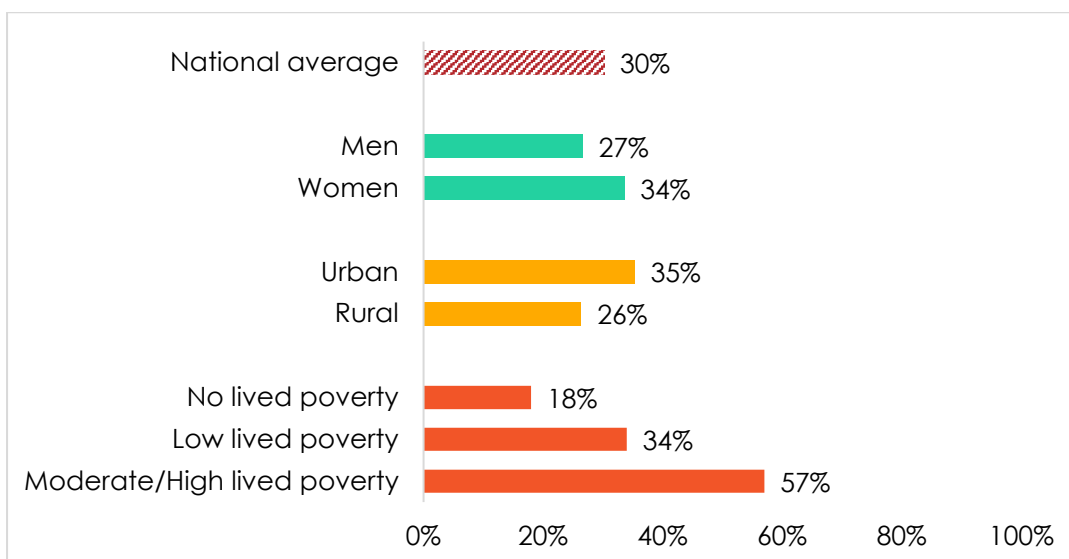
The perception that physical discipline is used frequently is more widespread in cities than in rural areas (35% vs. 26%) and among women compared to men (34% vs. 27%) (Figure 4). Poor citizens are about three times as likely as the economically well-off to say that physical discipline is a frequent occurrence in their communities (57% vs. 18%).

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children?
 | Mauritius | 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 | Mauritius | 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”)

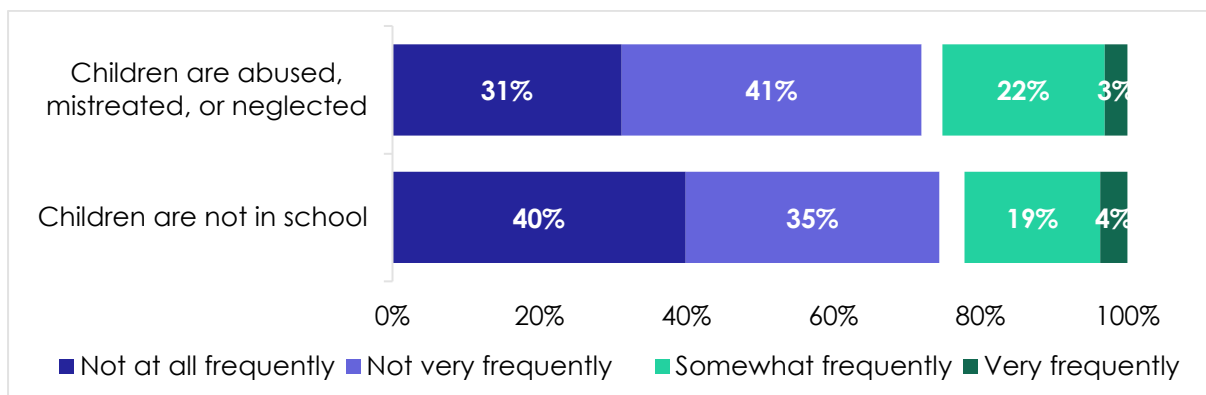
Abuse and neglect

Asked how often they think children in their community or neighbourhood are abused, mistreated, or neglected, more than seven in 10 Mauritians (72%) say this is “not very frequent” (41%) or “not at all frequent” (31%), while 25% report that abuse and neglect are common (Figure 5).

Similarly, three-fourths (75%) of respondents say that out-of-school children are not a frequent problem in their community.

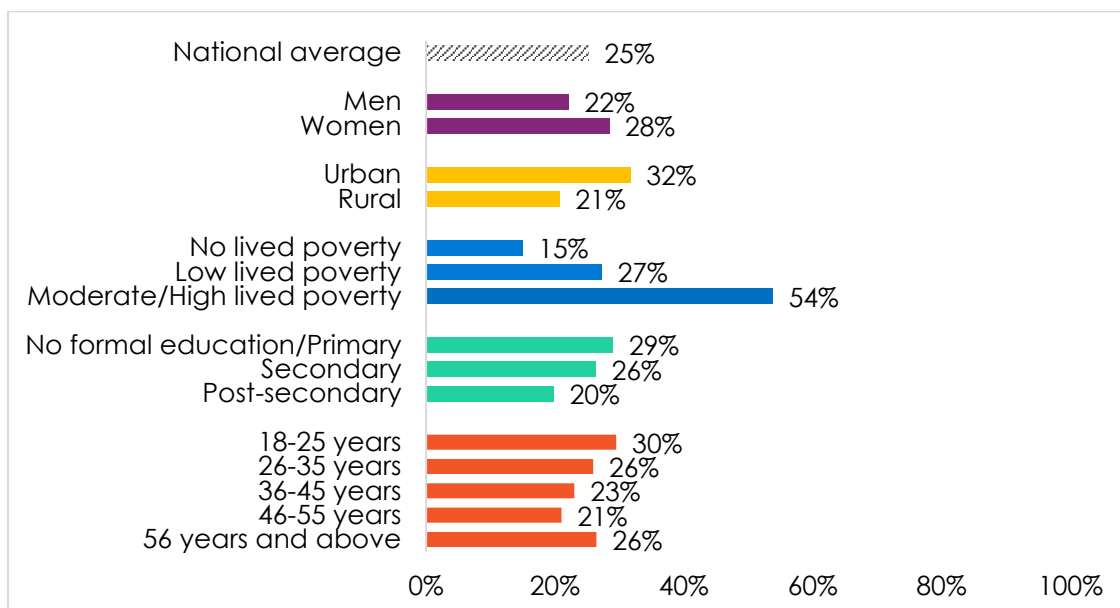
As with the frequency of physical discipline, child abuse and neglect are more commonly reported in cities than in rural areas (32% vs. 21%), among women than men (28% vs. 22%), and among poor respondents than among the well-off (54% vs. 15%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: How often are children abused or neglected? | Mauritius | 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 demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



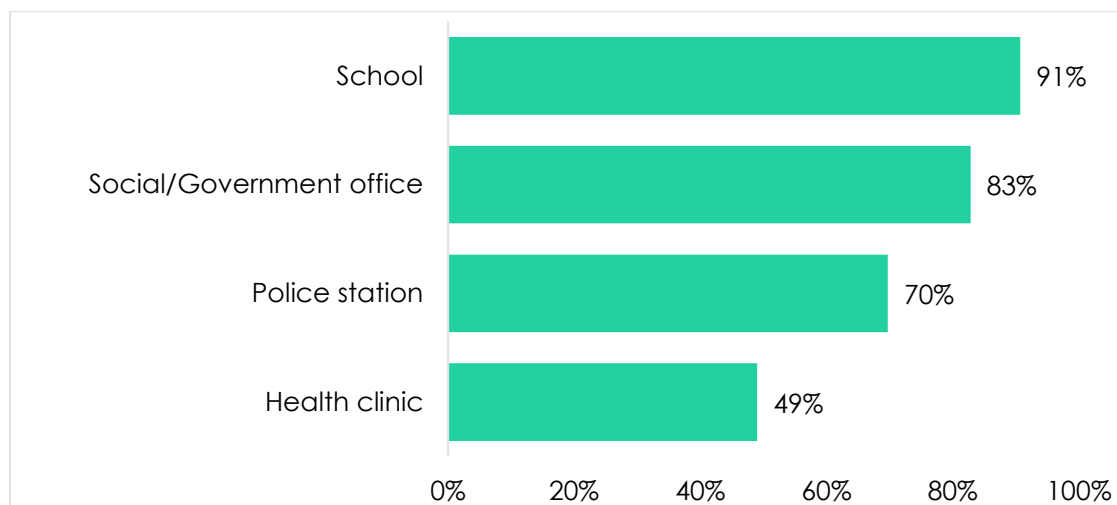
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? (% who say “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently”)

Support for vulnerable children

Support services at the community level play a crucial role in preparing children facing major challenges for a full and successful life. To what extent are these support services available in Mauritius?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all enumeration areas they visited, more than four in five Mauritians (83%) live within walking distance of a social centre or other government office where people can request help with problems, and 70% have a nearby police station. Nine in 10 (91%) live within walking distance of a school, but only about half (49%) have a health clinic in the vicinity (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Availability of public services at the community level | Mauritius | 2022



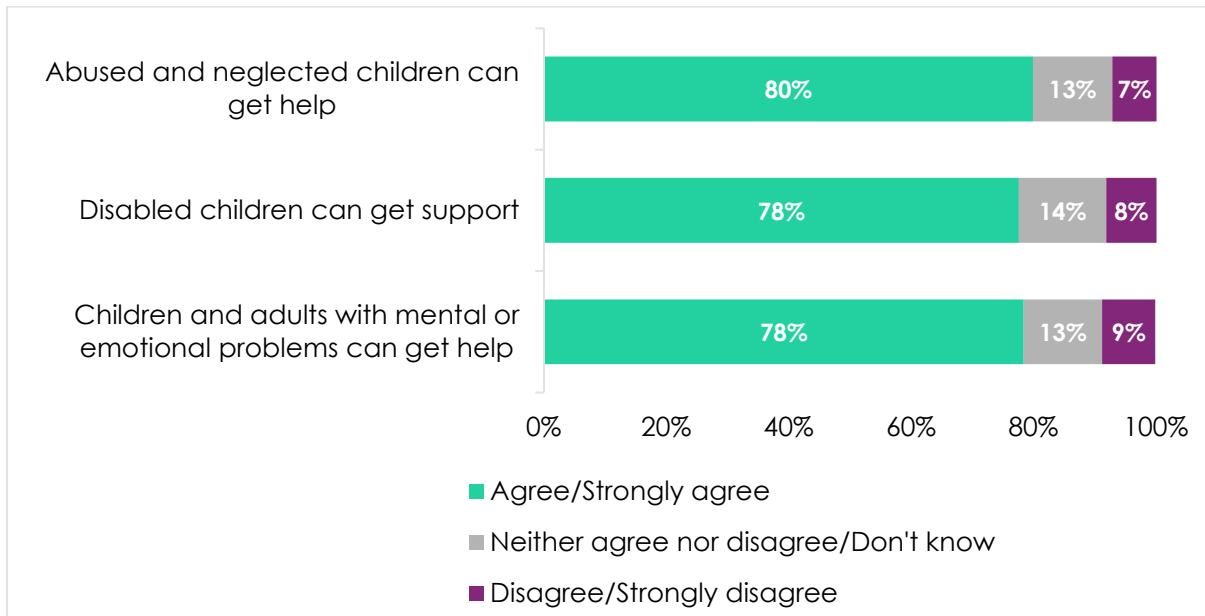
Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Police station? Health clinic (private or public or both)? A social centre, government help centre, or other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

As for more specialised support services, large majorities report that people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected (80%), for children with physical disabilities (78%), as well as for those experiencing mental or emotional problems (78%) (Figure 8).

Citizens experiencing no lived poverty are more likely than the poor to say support services are available for vulnerable children (Figure 9).

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



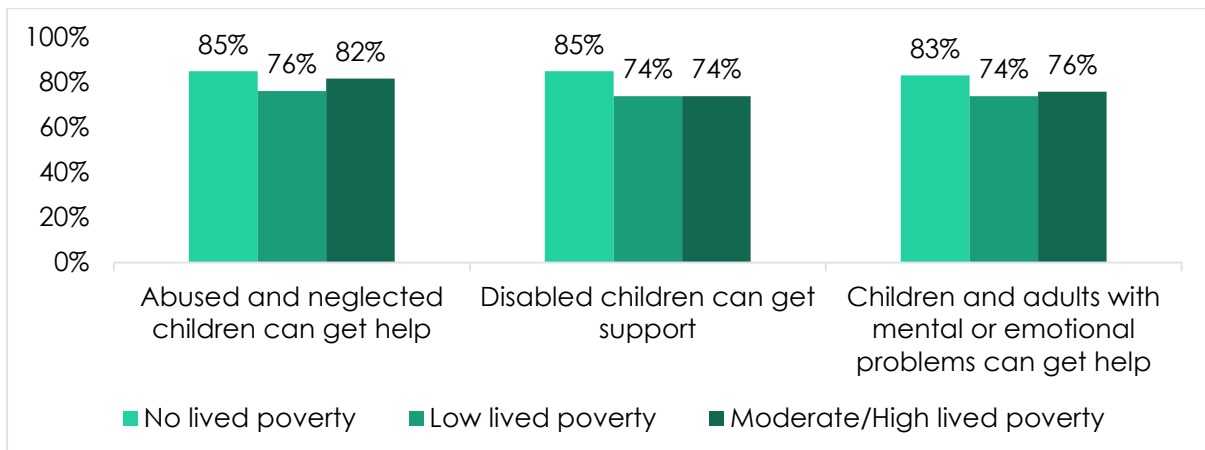
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree.

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 lived poverty | Mauritius | 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.

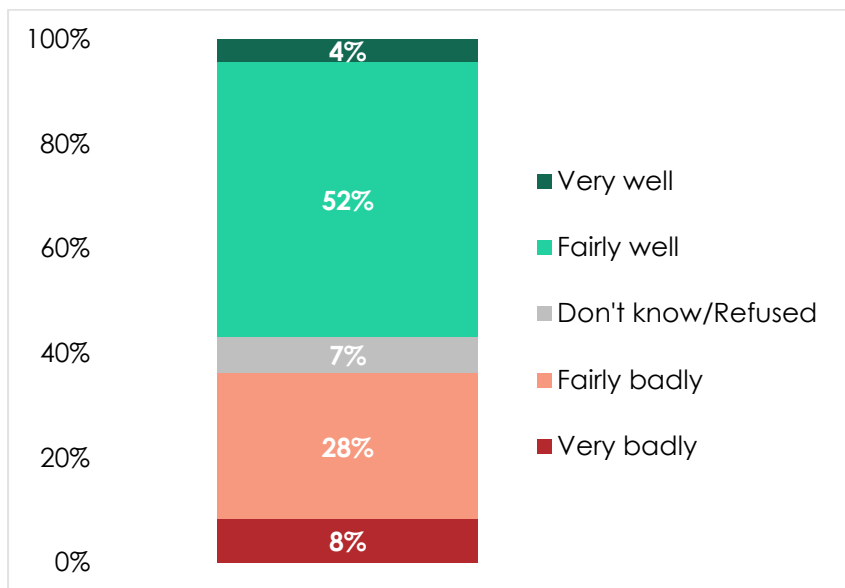
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Government performance on child welfare

Overall, a majority of Mauritians believe that the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 56% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 36% believe it is doing badly (Figure 10).

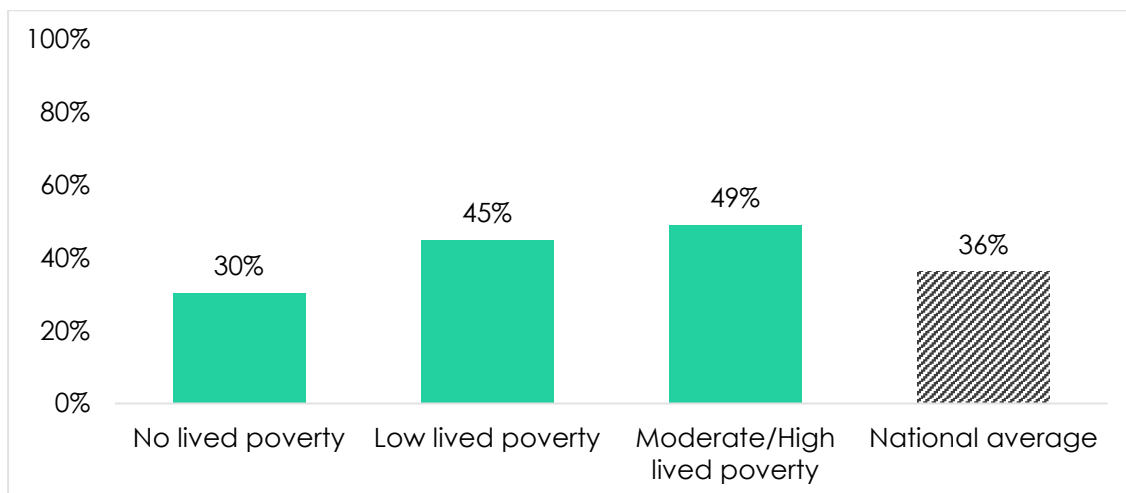
But assessments of the government’s performance differ strongly by respondents’ economic status: The poorest citizens (49%) are far more likely than the wealthy (30%) to be critical of the government’s efforts to protect vulnerable children (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Government performance on child welfare | Mauritius | 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: Disapproval of government performance on child welfare | by lived poverty | Mauritius | 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 badly” or “very badly”)

Conclusion

Most Mauritians offer fairly positive assessments of child well-being in their country, reporting that abuse and neglect are rare, that resources to help vulnerable children are available at the community level, and that the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the welfare of its children.

But survey findings also point to a need for intensified interventions, particularly targeting economically disadvantaged communities, where far more citizens see abuse and neglect as frequent problems and far fewer are satisfied with the government's efforts.

Despite Mauritius' new law against corporal punishment, a slim majority of citizens still endorse the practice, though most say it is not used frequently in their community.

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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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