

Ensuring children's welfare remains a challenge in Namibia, especially for the poor

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 612 | Christiaan Keulder

Summary

At the end of April 2020, Namibian police, acting on a request for assistance from the Netherlands police, arrested a 51-year-old former Namibian policeman on 75 charges of child abuse, including rape, production of child pornography, and child trafficking (Menges, 2022). This is perhaps the largest such case since independence, and confirms that Namibia is connected to a growing global problem.

Namibia has a comprehensive legal framework regulating children's issues. The country became a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and in 2002 also signed the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

In addition to the Constitution, the Child Care and Protection Act of 2015 is the primary legal instrument protecting Namibian children's rights, safety, and physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being. Laws adopted between 1990 and 2015 address child-related issues in the context of domestic violence, rape, child maintenance, economic exploitation, access to legal services, and protection against neglect.

Despite the comprehensive legal and policy framework, issues pertaining to the safety and protection of children remain prevalent and persistent.

One study (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2012) found that children are more likely to live in poverty than adults and that poverty has a long-term impact on children, especially if it starts at an early age or persists over several years. Stunting, poor educational prospects, and harm to emotional and psychosocial well-being are some of the direct effects of growing up poor.

Problems such as child trafficking, child labour, chronic absenteeism from school, and lack of access to appropriate facilities and services for children living with disabilities often receive media coverage but are difficult to track through formal statistics, in part because they often occur in isolated rural areas where authorities have little capacity. Teenage pregnancies stand out as a particularly serious problem often attributed to insufficient parental monitoring and poverty. According to the Ministry of Health and Social Services, one in four young women become pregnant before turning 20 years of age (Matthys, 2022), and many drop out of school as a result.

The Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACS) in 2019 reported that among 18- to 24-year-olds, 39.6% of women and 45% of men had experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence in childhood (Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, 2020).

First instances of sexual violence for girls and women occur most often in schools, universities, or colleges, according to the report, while for boys and men, they are most common at

home. The problem is compounded by the fact that many victims of sexual violence do not speak to anyone about their experiences. Male victims are even less likely to receive help than female victims.

The 2022 Disrupting Harm survey focusing on online child sexual exploitation and abuse reported that 9% of Internet users aged 12-17 in Namibia were subjected to clear examples of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This amounts to roughly 20,000 children per year. The report also presents findings that most offenders are known to the child (ECPAT, Interpol, and UNICEF, 2022).

Social media platforms feature prominently in cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and victims who do decide to disclose their experiences often prefer to do so via interpersonal networks rather than formal reporting channels. The report also found that law enforcement, justice, and social support systems have insufficient awareness, capacity, and resources to respond appropriately and in a child-friendly manner.

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.

Survey findings show that about half of all adult Namibians report that children not attending school is a frequent problem in their community, while slightly fewer report child abuse and neglect as a common occurrence.

A majority of citizens view using physical force to discipline children as justified, although a similar proportion believe that the use of physical force for discipline does not occur frequently in their community.

More than half of Namibians believe that vulnerable children can find help in their communities, and most are satisfied with the government's efforts to protect the well-being of children in the country.

Overall, these views are shaped by where respondents live, their wealth, and their educational levels.

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 (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed 1,200 adult Namibians in October-November 2021. 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 Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

Disciplining children:

- A majority (58%) of Namibians say parents are "sometimes" or "always" justified in using physical force to discipline their children. Opposition to physical discipline (42%) is practically unchanged since 2017 (44%).
- More than half (52%) of respondents say the use of physical force to discipline children is not very common in their communities.

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

- About half (49%) of Namibians say out-of-school children are a widespread problem in their communities, while 42% report frequent child abuse and neglect.
 - Young respondents, urban residents, and the poor are more likely than older people, rural residents, and the wealthy to see child abuse and out-of-school children as widespread problems in their communities.

Availability of support services for vulnerable children:

- Slightly more than half of Namibians say resources are generally available in their community to help abused and neglected children (55%), children with disability (56%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (53%).
 - Citizens who are poor and those who have no formal education are considerably less likely than their more educated and better-off counterparts to report that support services for vulnerable children are available in their community.

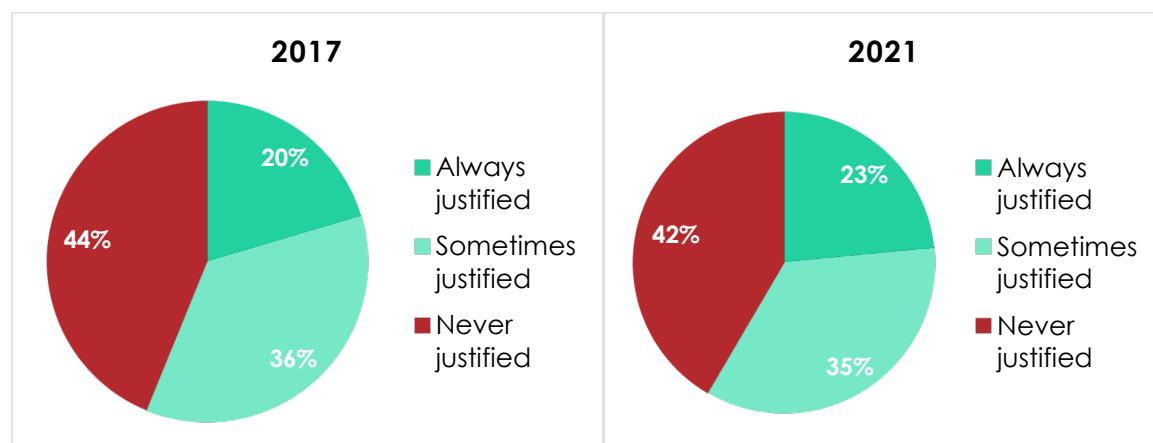
Government performance on child welfare:

- Six in 10 Namibians (61%) say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.
 - Poor and unschooled citizens are least satisfied with the government's performance on child welfare.

Disciplining a child

Few social issues are as divisive as using physical force to discipline children. A plurality of Namibians (42%) believe that the use of physical force is "never" justified, while almost one-quarter (23%) say it is "always" justified. More than one in three (35%) say that using force is "sometimes" justified. Figure 1 shows that public opinion remained essentially constant between 2017 and 2021.

Figure 1: Should parents physically discipline children? | Namibia | 2017-2021

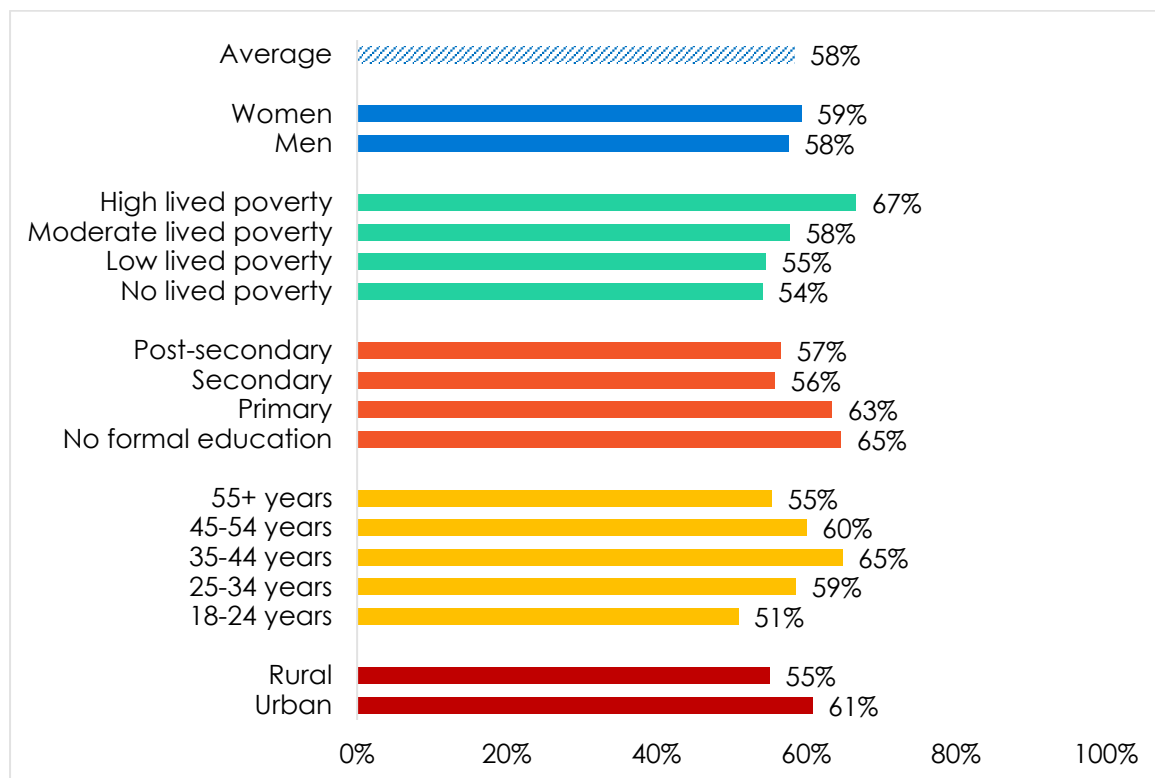


Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children?

Urban residents are more likely to endorse the use of physical force to discipline children (61% vs. 55% of rural residents), while men and women see eye to eye on the issue (Figure 2). Support for the practice is lowest among the youngest respondents (51% of 18- to 24-year-

olds) and highest among 35- to 44-year-olds (65%). Physical disciplining of children is also more widely accepted among the poor (67% of those experiencing high lived poverty¹) and the least educated (65% of those with no formal education) than among their respective counterparts.

Figure 2: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



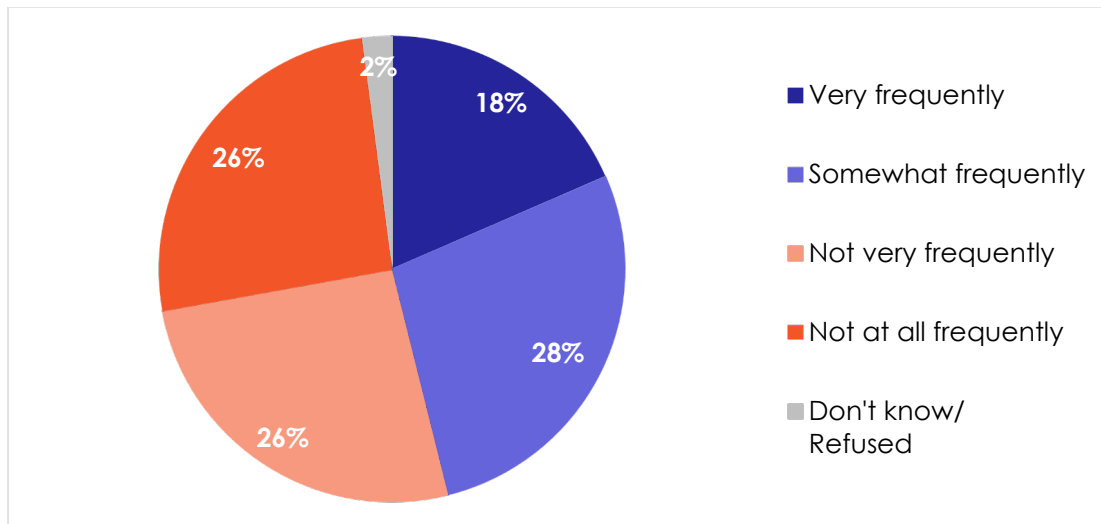
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say “sometimes justified” or “always justified”)

Overall, just more than half of adult Namibians (52%) say that adults in their community do “not very frequently” (26%) or “not at all frequently” (26%) use physical force to discipline children, while close to half (46%) see this as a “somewhat frequent” (28%) or “very frequent” (18%) occurrence (Figure 3).

Urban residents are significantly more likely than their rural counterparts to report that adults in their community use physical force to discipline children (52% vs. 39%) (Figure 4). This perception is also more common among men (49%), the youngest respondents (53%), and the poor (51%) than among their respective counterparts, but is less widespread among those with no formal schooling (41%) than among more educated respondents (45%-50%).

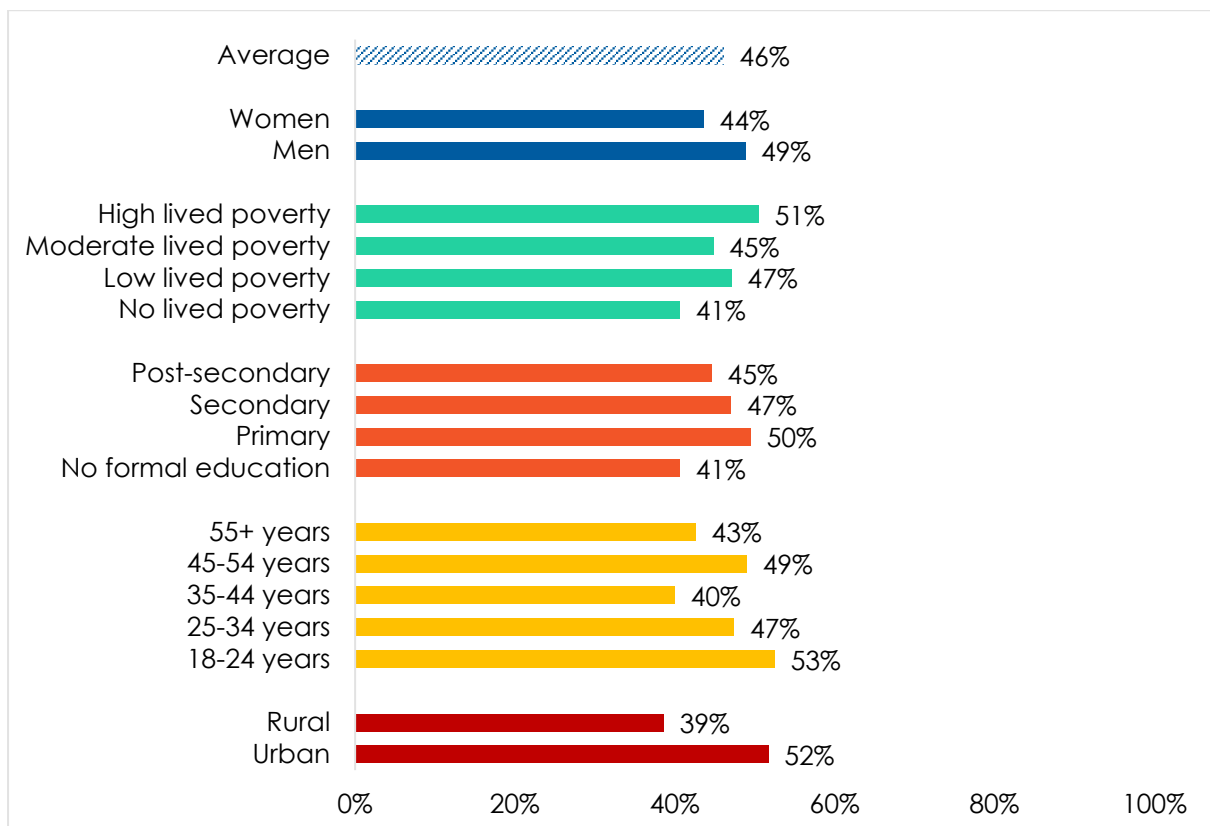
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 3: How frequently do adults use physical force to discipline children?
| Namibia | 2021



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 | Namibia | 2021



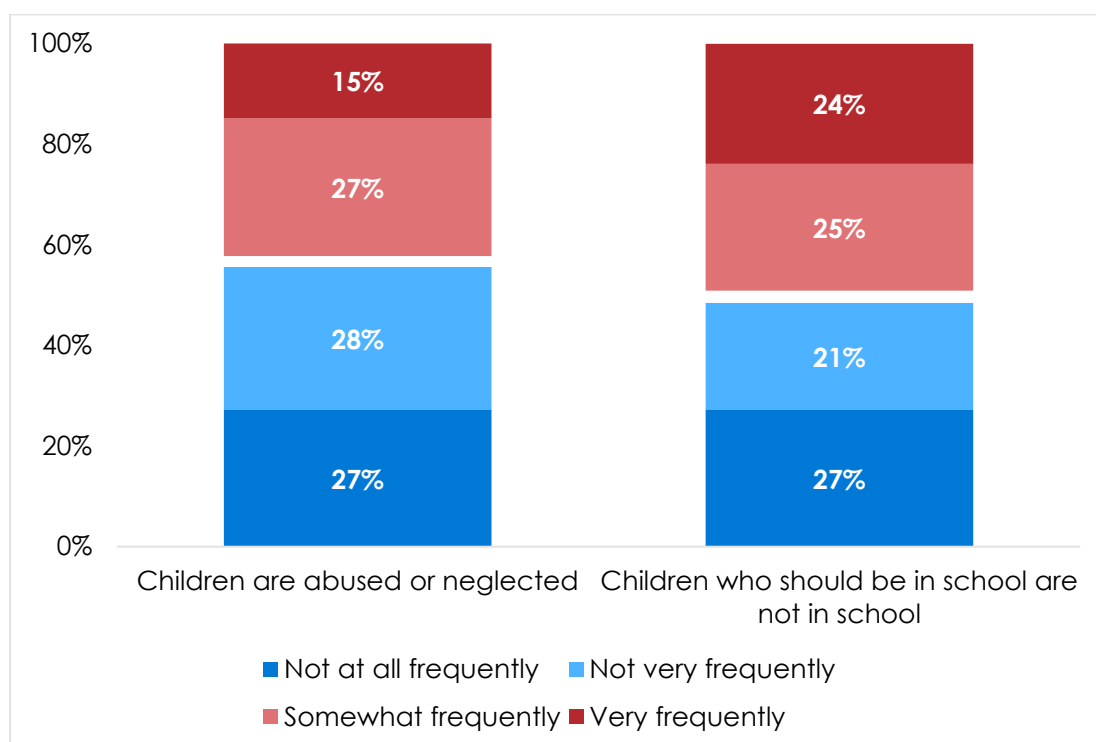
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Abuse and neglect

Asked how often they think children in their community are abused, mistreated, or neglected, more than half (55%) of Namibians say this is “not at all frequent” (27%) or “not very frequent” (28%), while 42% report that abuse and neglect are “somewhat” (27%) or “very” (15%) common (Figure 5).

About half (49%) also say it's common to see school-age children who are not in school in their community.

Figure 5: How often are children abused, mistreated, or neglected? | Namibia
| 2021



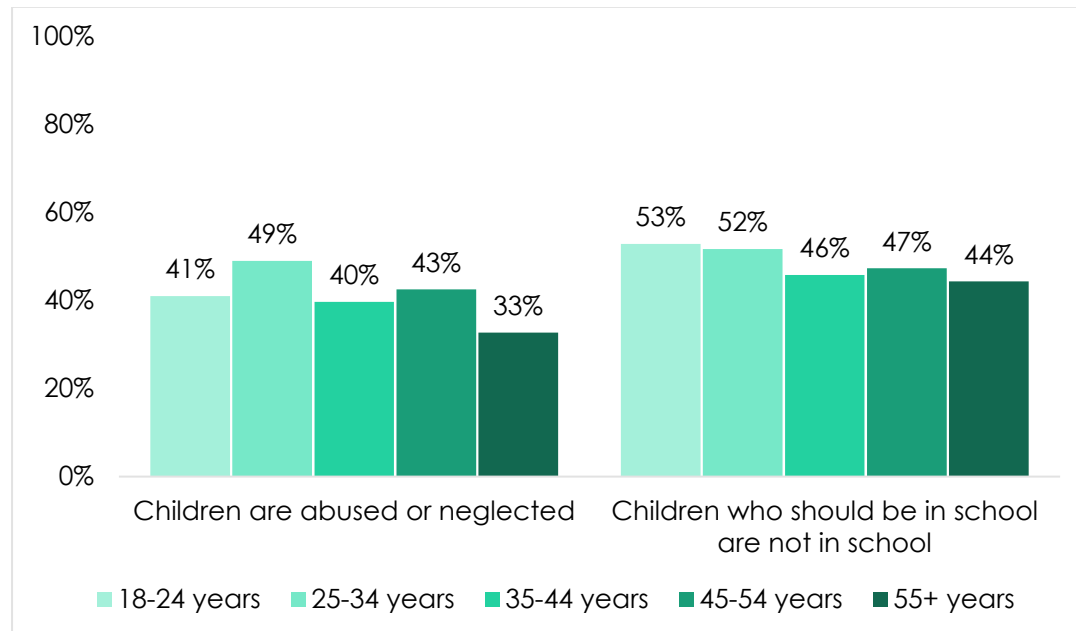
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school?

Perceptions that child abuse/neglect and out-of-school children are frequent problems in their community tend to be more widespread among younger respondents (Figure 6). Among those over age 55, only 33% say abuse and neglect are common, and 44% see out-of-school children as a frequent problem.

Child abuse and neglect are also more commonly reported as a frequent problem in cities (47%) than in rural areas (37%). Concern about out-of-school children shows a 7-percentage-point gap (Figure 7).

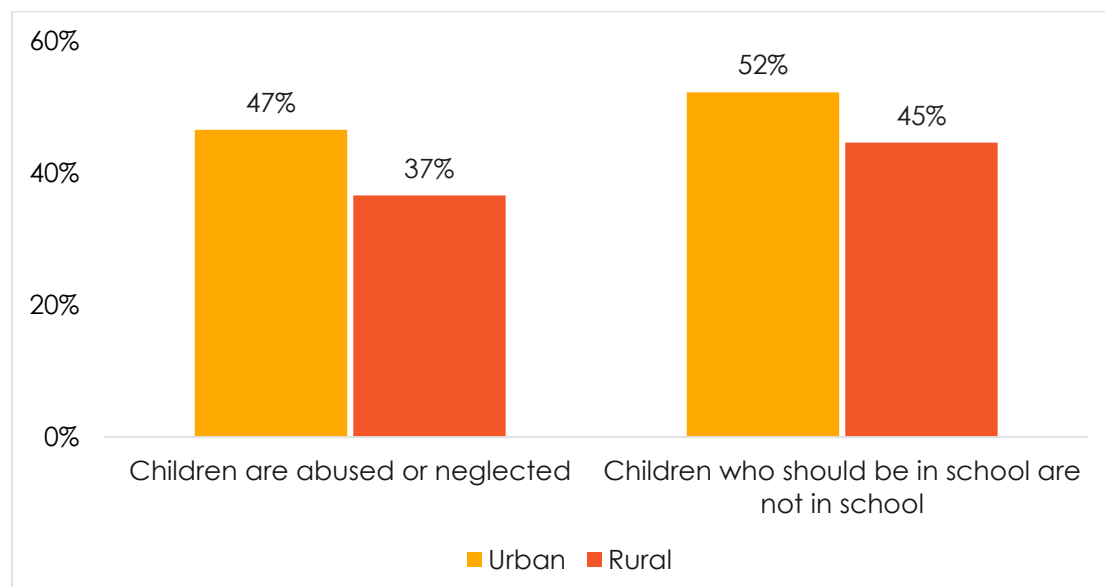
The perception of child abuse and neglect as a widespread problem is higher among poor respondents, ranging from 28% of the best-off to 46% of those experiencing moderate or high lived poverty. A 31-point gap separates the rich from the poor when it comes to perceptions of out-of-school children (33% vs. 64%) (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by age group | Namibia | 2021



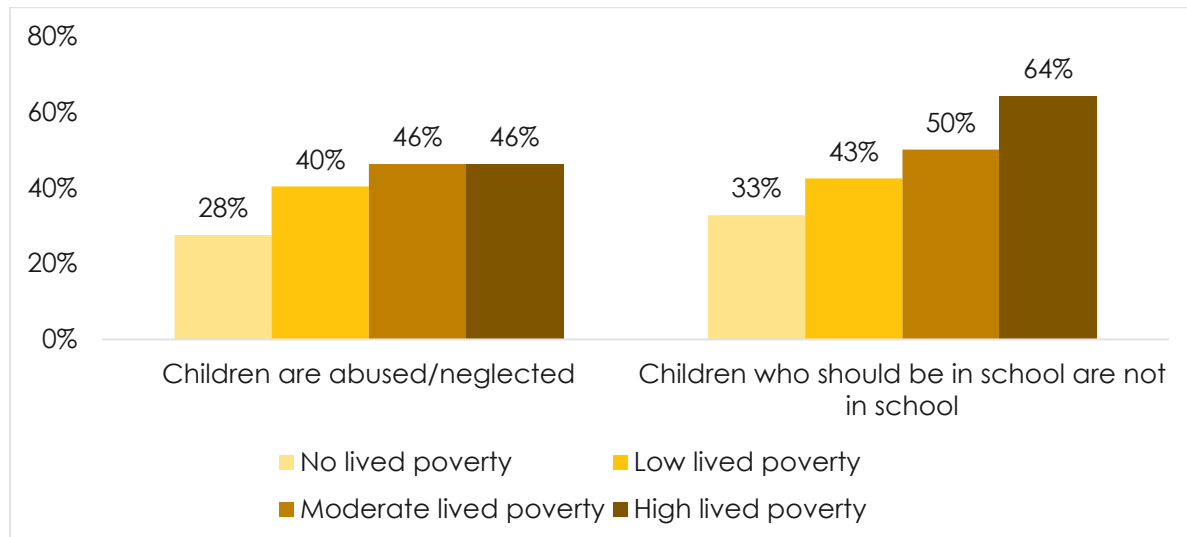
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Figure 7: Perception that children are frequently abused or neglected | by urban-rural location | Namibia | 2021



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 | Namibia | 2021



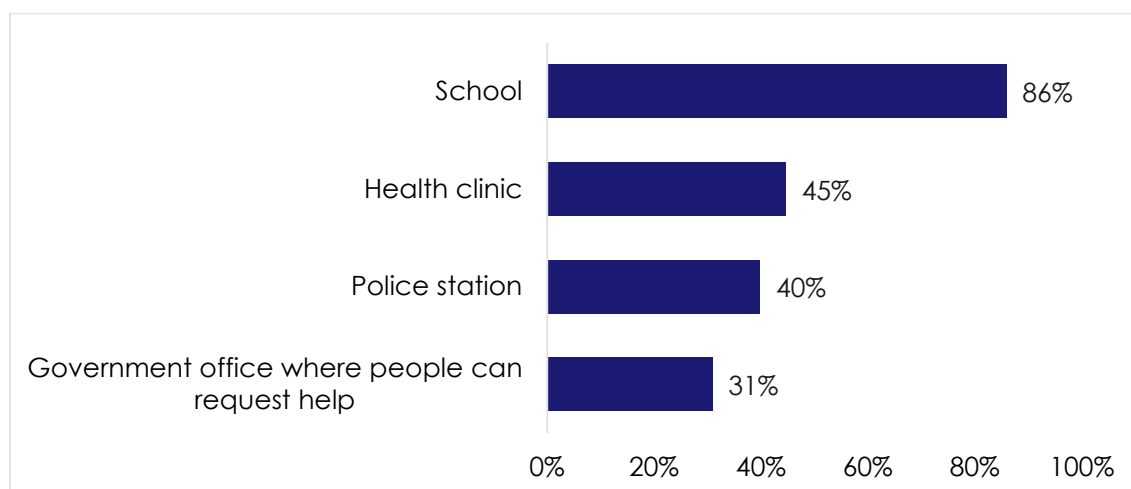
Respondents were asked: How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")

Support for vulnerable children

Support services can be crucial for children facing significant challenges preparing them for whole, 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 Namibians live within walking distance of a school (86%) (Figure 9). Far fewer live within walking distance of a health clinic (45%) or have a nearby police station (40%) or government office or social centre (31%) where people can request help.

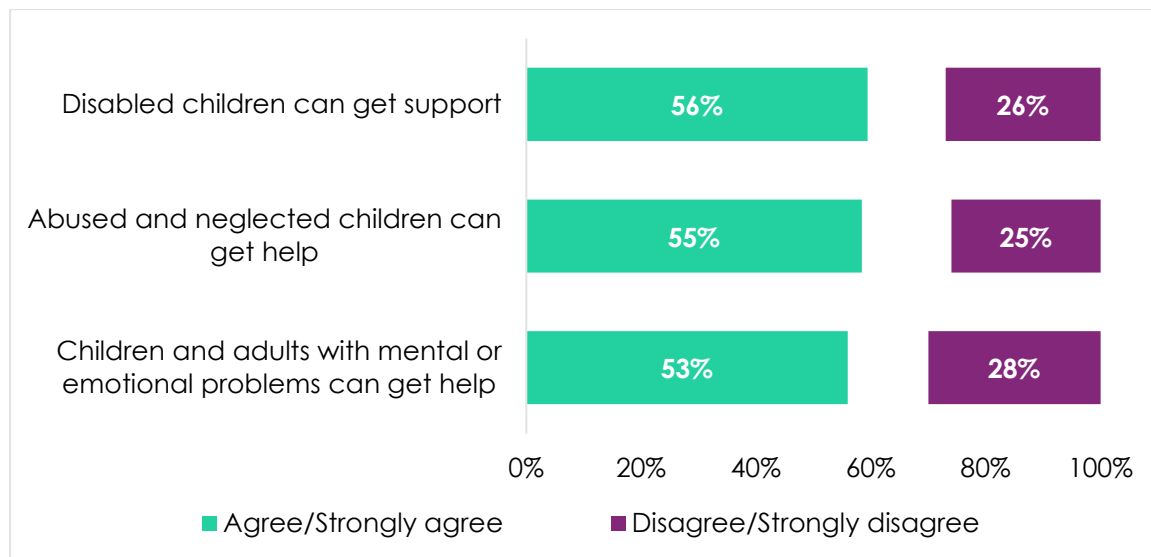
Figure 9: Availability of public services at the community level | Namibia | 2021



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")

A majority of respondents report that more specialised support services are also available in the community (Figure 10). Just more than half (55%) say people in their community are generally able to get help for children who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected. About the same proportion (55%) say support is available for children with physical disabilities, while 53% say children and adults with mental or emotional problems can get help in the community.

Figure 10: Is help available for vulnerable children? | Namibia | 2021



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.

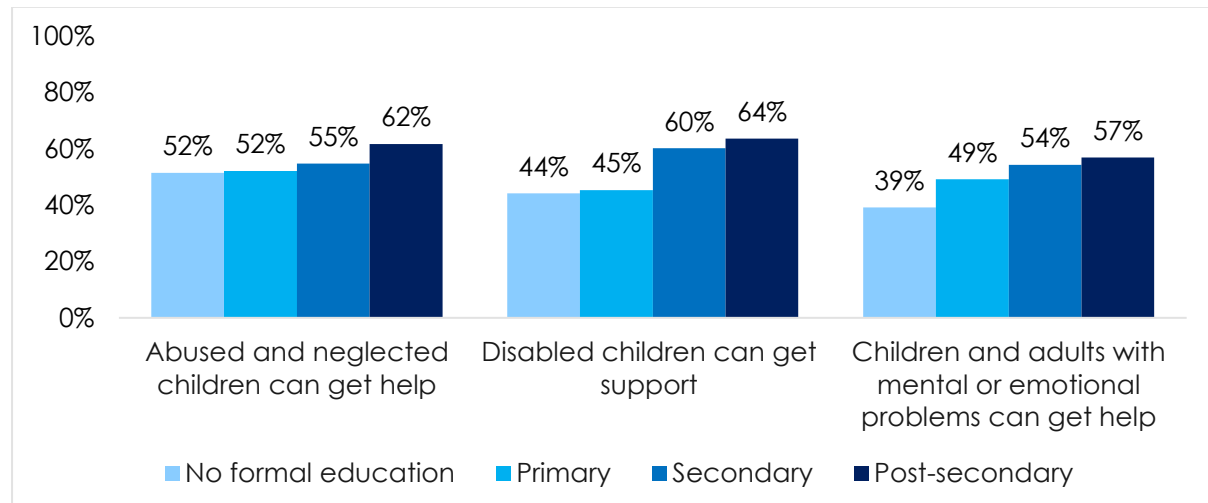
Men and women hold similar views on these questions, as do urban and rural residents. But assessments of the availability of support services differ significantly by respondents' education and economic levels.

Across the board, citizens who have no formal education and those experiencing high levels of 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.

Gaps of 10-20 percentage points separate respondents with no formal schooling from those with post-secondary education when it comes to perceptions that help is available in their community for abused and neglected children (52% vs. 62%), disabled children (44% vs. 64%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (39% vs. 57%) (Figure 11). The fact that a majority of unschooled respondents say help is not available for disabled children (56%) and people with mental or emotional problems (61%) suggests a need that is going unmet in some areas.

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 16-point gap), disabled children (18 points), and people with mental or emotional problems (15 points) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Help is available for vulnerable children | by education level | Namibia
| 2021



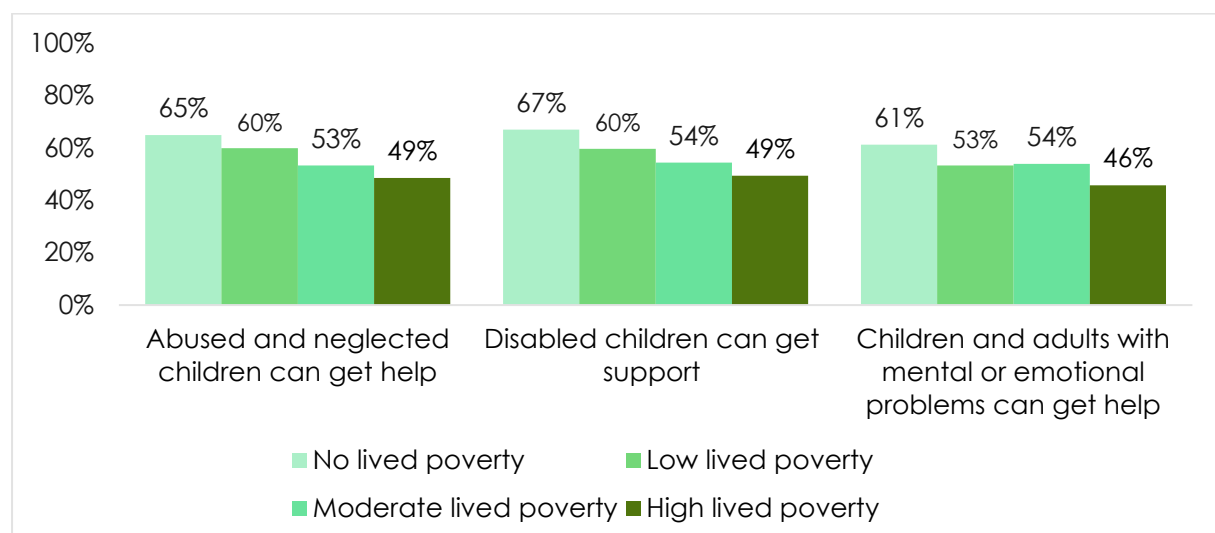
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

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 12: Help is available for vulnerable children | by lived poverty | Namibia
| 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. (% who say "agree" or "agree strongly")

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

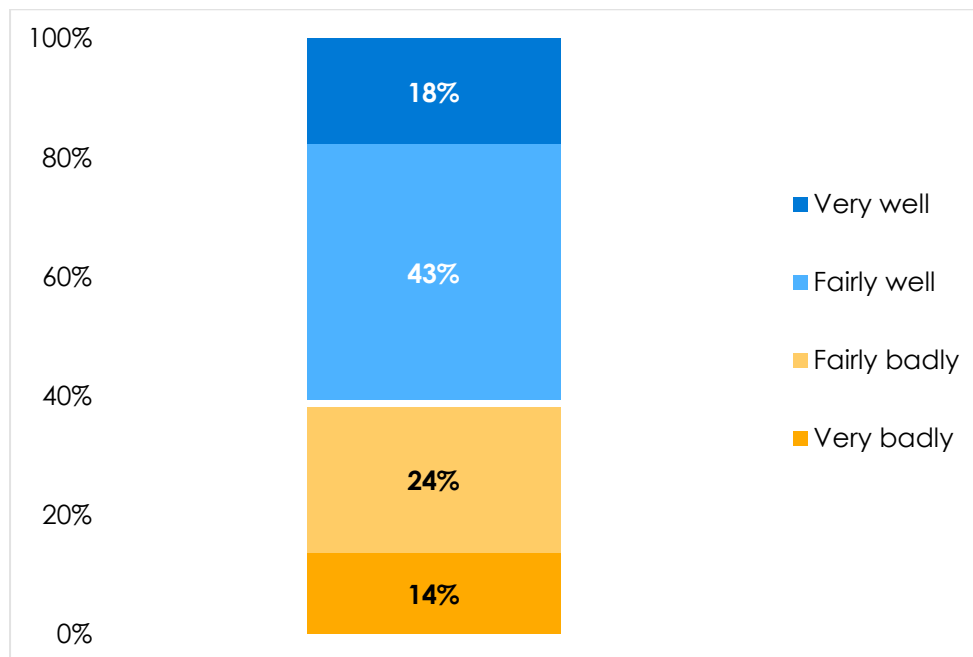
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

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.

Government performance on child welfare

Most Namibians are positive in their assessments of how well the government is protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children: 61% say it is doing “fairly well” (43%) or “very well” (18%). Conversely, 38% believe it is doing fairly/very badly (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance on child welfare | Namibia | 2021



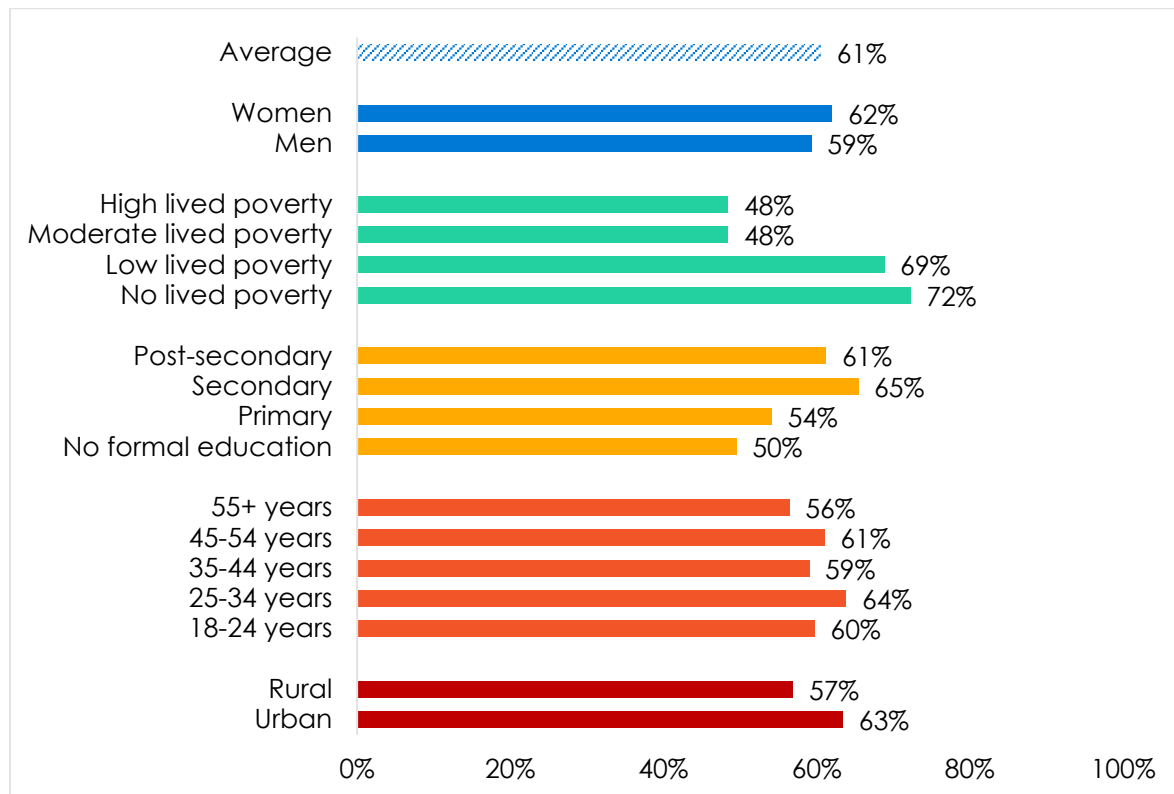
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?

Women (62%) and urban residents (63%) are slightly more likely to approve of the government's performance on child welfare than men (59%) and rural dwellers (57%) (Figure 14).

But assessments differ more strongly by respondents' education and economic levels. The poorest citizens (48%) are far less likely than the wealthy (72%) to say the government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting vulnerable children, as are those without formal education (50%) compared to their more educated counterparts (61%-65%).

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Figure 14: Approval of government performance on child welfare | Namibia | 2021



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

Despite the Namibian government's efforts to develop a comprehensive legal and policy framework, many Namibian citizens report that child abuse and neglect remain frequent and persistent problems in their communities. These problems are observed more frequently in urban areas and in locations that are home to the poor and the least educated, which are also the places where help for vulnerable children is limited.

Although Namibians generally rate the government's efforts favourably, survey findings suggest that disadvantaged communities may be a prime target for stronger child-protection interventions.

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