

Parental Child Neglect: Prevalence and Social Problems Associated with Neglected Children in Selected Secondary Schools of Mufulira District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This paper sought to determine the prevalence of parental child neglect and assess social problems associated with neglected children. The sample comprised 200 randomly selected pupils from two secondary schools of Mufulira District in Zambia. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design. The sample was administered with the Multidimensional neglectful behavioural scale (MNBS) to determine the prevalence of child neglect, while the personal relationships profile (PRP) test was used to document social problems associated with the identified group of neglected children. The results show that the prevalence of the overall child neglect proportion was 25% percent. Three prominent types of neglect identified were: cognitive neglect, supervision and emotional neglect. They correlated with criminal tendencies, antisocial personality behaviour and diminished social integration except physical neglect. In conclusion, the results revealed that prevalence of parental child neglect is quite high in Zambia and the neglected children are associated with social problems.

Keywords: Parental Child neglect, prevalence, nurture, development

INTRODUCTION

Children are moulded by their early life experiences. Positive childhood experiences promote better physical, cognitive, social and emotional development in adulthood (Delaney, 1998). However, the development of most children is adversely affected when they are deprived of the appropriate support, they need to thrive during the formative years due to child neglect. Unfortunately, child neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment and it occurs in many families regardless of the financial status (English, 1998). Most of the available studies on child neglect have been conducted in western countries, and only few involve children in Africa (Clement, Berube and Chamberland, 2016; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van Ijzendoorn, 2012). Nevertheless, child neglect is documented as the most common form of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Most of the studies done in Zambia in relation to child maltreatment focused on physical and sexual abuse (Akani, Hazemba, Imasiku & Paul, 2015; UNICEF, 2001) at the expense of the other important aspects. Mbagaya, Oburu and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2013) conducted a study on child neglect and physical abuse in Zambia, Kenya and Netherlands among university students. In Zambia, there is no evidence indicating that parental child neglect has been studied in secondary schools. Evidence indicating the prevalence of child neglect is lacking and social problems linked to it.

Nature of Child Neglect

The common aspect of any form of child neglect is an act of omission by parents or caregivers (Gough, 2005). Physical and sexual abuse may be incident specific and these forms of child maltreatment require immediate resolution. Unfortunately, child neglect is usually chronic and pervasive (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002), which expose children to harsh situations with debilitating outcomes. Additionally, variations in the definition of child neglect make it difficult to solve this problem. According to Horwath (2005), differences in definitions of child neglect bring about differences in the way children are assessed and the judgment concerning what constitutes good parenting differs greatly.

Cultural Rearing Practices.

The effects of child neglect are exacerbated by a number of factors. Tuwangye (2000) argued that parenting styles differ significantly from one culture to another. What may be regarded as child neglect in one culture could be encouraged by another culture. In other words, there are significant variations in conceptualization of child neglect between urban and urban, and also between Western individualistic societies and more collectivist African cultures (Kaani & Machila, 2022). Tuwangye noted that Ugandan child rearing practices were rooted in traditional culture and are quite different from European way of life. Socioeconomic conditions also affect the concepts of child neglect (Sabri, Hong, Campbell, & Cho, 2013; Zhang, Zhang, & Gao, 2022). For instance, in Zambia, most of the people live on less than a dollar per day (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009), which may affect parents' ability to adequately care for their children. Additionally, in the developing and collectivist societies, children are brought up with the help of the extended family (Lalor, 2008). Therefore, generalization of results on prevalence and nature of child neglect between cultural contexts should be done with some caution.

In patriarchal societies like Zambia, children are treated differently depending on the sex of a child (Messa, 2000). Socio-cultural beliefs promote boys and disadvantage their female counterparts (Kelly, 1999). According to Chanda (2014), wilful neglect was one of the major social issues in Zambia; and people in low-income environments and rural areas had little knowledge concerning what constitutes child neglect. In Ghana, the negative attitude towards girls was displayed openly at birth. When a child was born, it was a common trend to hear men asking, "*Is it a human being (boy) or an animal (girl)?*" This is an exact translation from Akana language (Tanye, 2008).

Factors Determining Prevalence of Parental Child Neglect

There are a number of factors associated parental child neglect at personal and family level. These include: big family sizes due to unplanned pregnancies, low income, substance abuse, poor mental health especially maternal depression as well as insecure attachment during childhood (Evans, 2002). The bioecological theory posits that human development is determined by the interaction between a person and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The immediate surrounding such as family, school, neighbourhood and child care environment has the greatest impact on a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, prevailing factors in the environment a child is raised in may lead to neglect.

Prevalence Rates of Parental Child Neglect

Prevalence of parental child neglect varies across the globe, which as stated above may be a function of sociocultural variations (Kaani & Machila, 2022; Kelly, 1999; Messa, 2000). Evidence from one national survey in the USA indicated that 27% of participants were victims of at least one form of neglect, (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore & Runyan, 1998). Clement et al., (2016) investigated the prevalence and risk factors of child neglect in Canada and the findings revealed that 21% of children aged between 10 to 15 years were victims of neglect. The study found no statistically significant differences with reference to

gender. Furthermore, the results revealed that supervision neglect was one of the most common forms of child neglect in all age groups of children and that older children were more susceptible to emotional and cognitive neglect. Additionally, Hilgard and Wolf (2002) found that cognitive neglect was among the common forms of neglect in the USA. Similarly, a nationwide study by Button, Ward, Artz, and Loeschut (2015) on child maltreatment reported a national prevalence rate of 21% in South Africa. On the other hand, the prevalence of neglect seem to be a function of the country's SES (Sabri et al., 2013). Mbagaya et al. (2013) reported rates of 59% and 54% among university students in Kenya and Zambia respectively, while in the Netherlands the rate reported was 42%.

Social Problems Associated with Neglected Children

Child neglect hinders normal social, physical, cognitive and emotional development, especially in the formative years of childhood. Research evidence indicates that abilities children have at birth are dependent on a series of experiences combined with heredity and the health status of the mother (Tutoo & Kudu, 2009). Rutter, Giller, and Hagell (1998) studied 101 Romanian orphans who had experienced lack of nurturing during early childhood in an institutional setting, and were later adopted and began to receive appropriate parental attention, love, and nurturing for four years. The study revealed that children who were adopted at a younger age had a significantly greater improvement in all domains. Bowlby (1969) argued that the quality of care and sensitivity of a parent to the needs of an infant during the first year of life determines the quality of attachment an infant develops, which later on influences future relationships.

Neglected children are prone to sexual abuse, delinquency and criminal behaviour (Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Lazenbatt, 2010; Shore, 2002). A study by Sydney and Brooks (1987) found that people with history of neglect are more likely to be delinquent and also to engage in criminal behaviour such as shoplifting as well as violent criminal behaviour during adolescence.

The Present Study

The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of parental child neglect and the social problems associated with neglected children in the two selected secondary schools of Mufulira District in Zambia. The schools host students from diverse SES backgrounds; School 1 is located in a high SES location, while School 2 is located in a predominantly low-income locality. The critical research questions of this study were: (a) what is the prevalence of neglected children among secondary school pupils in Mufulira District? (b) What social problems are associated with neglected children?

Based on the literature reviewed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bowlby, 1969; Clement et al, 2016; Rutter et al., 1998; Sydney & Brooks, 1987), a significant number of learners are expected to have experienced one form of child neglect or another in the peri-urban than in the urban school because of the debilitating living conditions such as unemployment and low-income. Furthermore, based on literature reviewed ((Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Lazenbatt, 2010; Shore, 2002), it was also envisaged that neglected learners would have higher ratings on social problems except the social integration scale which measures attachment to society and social norms.

METHODS

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The sample comprised 200 pupils drawn from two secondary schools of Mufulira District in Zambia's Copperbelt Province. One school was situated in an urban area and because of its location, most of the learners were enrolled from families of high SES. On the other hand, the second school was located in a peri-urban area and mainly enrolled pupils predominantly from families of low SES. The rationale for selecting

students from the two locations was to find out whether the prevalence of child neglect varied as a function of SES. Stratified random sampling was employed to have an equal representation of participants with regard to gender and grade level (Grade 8-12). The age of learners ranged between 12 and 17 years with an overall mean age of 16.10 years and the standard deviation was 0.24 (Table 1).

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviation of Participants, and Gender Percent Distribution

Grade	Gender		Age (Years)		
	M	F	Total	M	SD
Grade 8	25	15	40	13.83	0.21
Grade 9	16	24	40	15.68	0.21
Grade 10	13	27	40	16.93	0.26
Grade 11	12	28	40	16.85	0.34
Grade 12	23	17	40	17.20	0.18
Total	89	111	200	16.10	0.24

Instrumentation

This study employed two instruments: the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavioural Scale (MNBS) and Personal Relationships Profile (PRP). The first data collection instrument was a multi-dimensional neglectful behavioural scale, (Straus, Kinard, & Williams, 1995). This is a self-administered questionnaire used to identify neglected children. The instrument consists of four sub-scales focusing on four domains; emotional needs, cognitive needs, supervisory needs, and physical needs. It measures the extent to which an individual’s needs were met during childhood. The responses show the number of times the parents did or did not do what they were supposed to do for their children. For example, *My parents did not comfort me when I was upset*. Responses are recorded as follows; 1 = once that year, 2 = twice that year, 3= 3-5 times that year, 4 = 6-10 times that year, 5 = 11-20 times a year, 6 = more than 20 times that year, 7 = cannot remember the year but it happened, 0 = this has never happened.

The PRP measures characteristics of individuals and experiences (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1999). It was used to identify social problems. Only three sub-scales of PRP, namely the Criminal tendencies scale, social integration and Anti-social personality scale were used in this study. The antisocial personality scale measures general hostility, irresponsibility, impulsivity and poor social relationships characterised by lack of closeness. Additionally, social integration scale focuses on an individual’s attachment to society and social norms. Whereas the criminal tendencies scale measures an individual’s propensity to commit crime. The participants indicated on a 4-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) to show the extent to which they agreed with the items in the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

The two assessments, i.e., the MNBS and PRP, were combined into one questionnaire which served as a data collection instrument. Participation was voluntary and consent was sought from both participants and parents. Since the instrument is self-administered, the combined questionnaire was administered after lessons to give pupils enough time to answer questions within the premises of their schools.

The filled questionnaires were collected immediately after being completed.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Neglected Children

Data analysis to determine the prevalence of neglected children began with descriptive analyses to determine proportions of children in the peri-urban school and the urban school who scored above the 75th percentile, which was the threshold. Children who scored above the 75th percentile were considered having been neglected. Chi-square (X^2) test of independence analyses were carried out to determine whether the proportions observed between neglected and nurtured children in each school location differed significantly from the expected as a function of school locality based on socio-economic status. The results indicated no statistical significance, ($p > 0.05$).

Overall child neglect results revealed that 50 out of two hundred participants scored above the 75th percentile. Therefore, 25% of the participants were classified as neglected (Table 2). Among the neglected children, 40% were enrolled at the school in the peri-urban area, while the remaining 60% were from the urban school. Additionally, more girls were classified as neglected in the urban school, whereas the peri-urban school recorded no difference with regard to gender.

Table 2: Proportions of Neglected and Nurtured Children in the Two Schools

SCHOOL	CATEGORY	GENDER		TOTAL
Peri-urban	Not neglected	43	37	80
	Neglected	10	10	20
	Total	53	47	100
Urban	Not neglected	26	44	70
	Neglected	10	20	30
	Total	36	64	100
Overall	Not neglected	69	81	150
	Neglected	20	30	50
	Total	89	111	200

Note: LSES: Low Socio-Economic Status, HSES: High Socio-Economic status

Prevalence of the four categories of Child Neglect.

Statistical analyses were also done to determine the prevalence of each of the four categories of child neglect, namely: physical, emotional, supervision and cognitive neglect. The highest proportion of neglect was 33.5% for physical neglect, followed by cognitive neglect with a proportion of 27.5%. Supervision and emotional neglect were placed in third and fourth position with 26% and 25.5% respectively (Table 3). The threshold of neglected children was the 75th percentile indicating the pervasiveness of child neglect (Straus & Kaufman, 2005; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). The differences between these proportions were not statistically significant. There were no significant differences in proportions of the four types of child neglect with regard to the type of school.

Table 3: Prevalence of the Four Categories of Child Neglect

Category	n	%
Physical Neglect	67	33.5%
Cognitive Neglect	55	27.5%

Supervision Neglect	52	26%
Emotional Neglect	51	25.5%

Social Problems Associated with Neglected Children

The Pearson correlational analysis was employed to determine the nature and strength of the relationships between child neglect, on one hand, and criminal tendencies, antisocial personality as well as social integration, on the other. The analysis found statistically significant positive relationship between emotional neglect and criminal tendencies ($r = 0.23, p < 0.01$), although the proportion of the shared variance explained was only 5%. Contrastingly, a statistically significant negative relationship seems to exist between emotional neglect score and social integration score ($r = -0.29, p < 0.01$), with a slightly higher variance explained standing at 8%. Antisocial personality correlated positively with emotional neglect ($r = 0.23, p < 0.01$) with 5% shared variance.

Cognitive neglect correlated positively with the criminal tendencies ($r = 0.21, p < 0.01$) and antisocial personality ($r = 0.16, p < 0.05$), with much smaller shared variances of 4% and 3% respectively. On the other hand, cognitive neglect correlated negatively with the social integration ($r = -0.33, p < 0.01$), with a shared variance of eleven percent. Similarly, there was a statistically significant positive relationships between supervision neglect and antisocial personality ($r = 0.16, p < 0.05$), as well as criminal tendencies scale ($r = 0.14, p < 0.05$). Antisocial personality and criminal tendencies had 3% and 2% shared variances with supervision neglect respectively. Additionally, there was a statistically significant, but negative relationship ($r = -0.31, p < 0.01$) between supervision neglect and social integration with a shared variance of 10%. However, the associations between physical neglect and social integration, antisocial personality as well as criminal tendencies were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Social Functioning of Neglected and Nurtured Children

The rating of nurtured learners was lower than neglected children on scales measuring antisocial personality and criminal tendencies. Furthermore, the rating of nurtured learners was higher on social integration as indicated by group means (Table 4). With ANOVA, neglected and nurtured children were compared on how they functioned socially. The only significant difference was based on the Social integration scale, $F(1, 198) = 12.12, p = 0.001$ (Table 4). This finding highlights the importance of nurturing children to curb social problems; neglected children tend to struggle significantly in the process of adapting to their environments.

Table 4: Correlations between Child Neglect and Social problems, Means and Standard Deviations of Neglected and Nurtured Children on Scales Measuring Social Problems and p-Values showing ANOVA results

Var	1.	2.	3.	4.	5	6	7	8	M N	SD	School 2		p-V
											M N	SD	
1. E N	1.00												
2. CN	0.44**	1.00											
3. SN	0.18**	0.42**	1.00										
4. PN	0.18**	0.38**	0.60**	1.00									
5. CT	0.23**	0.21**	0.14*	-0.00	1.00				12.30	3.86	11.32	4.21	0.17
6. SI	-0.29**	-0.33**	-0.31**	-0.10	-0.58**	1.00			27.66	3.61	30.13	4.57	0.001
7. ASP	0.23**	0.16*	0.14*	-0.02	0.57**	-0.55**	1.00		17.24	4.39	15.79	5.40	0.087
8. LD	-0.20**	-0.17*	-0.13	-0.09	-0.37**	0.41**	-0.35**	1.00	34.12	4.87	35.62	5.10	.070

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Note: EN = Emotional Neglect; CN = Cognitive Neglect; SN = Supervision neglect, PN = Physical Neglect; CT = Criminal Tendency; SI = Social Integration; ASP = Antisocial Personality; LD = Limited Disclosure; NG = Neglected; N = Nurtured; p-V = p-Values

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Prevalence of Neglected Children

This study sought to determine the prevalence of parental child neglect and the social problems associated with neglected children in the two selected secondary schools of Mufulira District in Zambia. The findings showed that the overall prevalence of child neglect was rated at 25%. This finding is almost consistent with the rate of child neglect in South Africa (21.3%), in a nationwide survey among adolescents (Button et al., 2015). The prevalence of child neglect in this study is slightly higher than the reported rate among South African adolescents, but significantly lower than the reported rates among university students from Zambia, Kenya and Netherlands, with prevalence rates of 54%, 59% and 44% respectively (Mbagaya et al., 2013). The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that the sample in Mbagaya and colleagues' study involved more mature students, therefore, they could tell if the treatment they received from parents was neglectful or not. Adolescents reported what their parents failed to do for them over a period of twelve months; thus the children could easily remember what happened to them in one year (Straus & Kaufman, 2005).

In western developed countries, the different rates of child neglect have been reported in a number of studies. In America, surveys conducted from general population show annual prevalence rates of child neglect which range between one percent and twenty percent (Straus et al., 1998). The higher prevalence in Zambia could be attributed to lack of awareness regarding the consequences of child neglect especially in rural communities and among the uneducated societies, as well as high poverty levels among parents making it difficult to provide adequately for their children (Chanda, 2014; UNICEF, 2001). Although there have been deliberate and consented efforts to create awareness and prevent abuse of children, parents still get away with the vices because of poor legislative reinforcement by law enforcement agencies. In addition, Zambian traditional communities have entrenched cultural beliefs that are at variance with law on child protection.

Additionally, prevalence and nature of child neglect seem to be a function of SES (Zhang et al., 2022). The findings show a significantly high number of neglected children in the urban school, although it enrolls mostly learners from relatively high SES families, where 60% of the total number of neglected learners were reportedly coming from. This implies that the remaining 40% were from the peri-urban school. Additionally, more girls than boys were reportedly neglected in the urban school whereas in the peri-urban school the proportion of neglected learners was the same with reference to gender. The mean difference between the two schools was not statistically significant, thus does not corroborate the Bronfenbrenner's theory that surmise that the interactive effect of poverty with other factors such as lack of education, substance abuse would contribute to a high number of neglected children in the peri-urban area (Sabri et al., 2013).

There could have been other reasons for a high number of neglected learners in the urban school. Learners could have been more assertive and they felt that their parents were not meeting their needs according to their expectations (Sabri et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, they felt neglected and feel that they have the right to speak out. On the other hand, learners in the peri-urban school might have accepted their living standards, knowing that their parents could not afford to meet all their needs. This might have led to a low number of learners who were feeling neglected. Additionally, considering that rural areas follow collectivist cultures of conformity to prevailing conditions, peri-urban children may feel more constrained to rebel against the society for fear of reprisals from cultural gate-keepers (Matsumoto & Jiang, 2013).

In a patriarchal nation like Zambia, male children are more preferred and given more leeway to express themselves than girls (Kaani, 2021; Messa, 2007). Consequently, more girls were expected to feel neglected than their male counterparts. Thus, the discrepancy in the proportion of girls feeling neglected as indicated by the 60% to 40% gap between the gender divide. There are parallels between our study and Messa's (2007) findings which reported that socio-cultural beliefs promote boys' welfare and disadvantage girls. On the contrary, most studies done in western countries show no significant gender differences in the prevalence of child neglect (Clement et al., 2016; Stoltenborgh et al., 2012).

Prevalence according to the Four Categories of Child Neglect

Physical neglect is the most common type of child neglect with 33.5%, followed by cognitive neglect (27.5%). Supervisory neglect is third with (26%), while emotional neglect had the lowest proportion of 25.5%. These findings are consistent with Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) who also found that physical neglect and educational neglect comprised common cases of neglect. Straus and colleagues (1998), who documented neglect over a period of one year in the USA, noted that 27% of children were victims of at least one form of neglect or another which correspond to the findings of this study.

Social Problems Associated with Neglected Children

Social problems associated with neglected children mainly include criminal tendencies, antisocial personality, and diminished social integration. There was a significant statistical relationship between overall neglect score and all the three categories of social problems. However, there were few variations when each type of neglect was correlated with the social problems mentioned above. The three types of neglect had positive statistically significant relationships with children's criminal tendencies and antisocial personality. These findings seem to support Shore's (2002) argument that neglected children are socially isolated and prone to antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, people with a history of neglect in childhood are prone to delinquency, adult criminal behaviour, and violent criminal behaviour (Maxfield & Widom, 1996). Contrastingly, these three forms of child neglect (emotional, cognitive and supervision) are negatively correlated to social integration, which corroborated Sydney and Brooks' (1987) study. This study shows that a number of adolescents tend to externalize their reactions to maltreatment by engaging in physical aggression, shoplifting or committing other crimes and some even attempt to commit suicide.

Furthermore, there was no statistically significant relationship between physical neglect and social problems such as criminal tendencies and antisocial behaviour. Similarly, the relationship between physical neglect and social integration was not statistically significant. Unfortunately, this finding has no prior research precedent anywhere. One assumption and possible explanation for this unexpected finding could be related to children's resilience to the effects of poverty in Zambia as it becomes their way of life. Physical neglect entails depriving children of the much-needed basic requirements of life such as food and shelter. Being a developing nation, most people live below \$1 per day, thus living in substandard conditions is not uncommon in Zambia (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009). In previous studies, physical neglect was associated with impaired social development (Lazenbatt, 2010; Shore, 2002).

Social Functioning of Neglected and Nurtured Children

On scales measuring criminal tendencies and antisocial personality, the rating of nurtured learners was lower than those who were neglected. Additionally, the rating of nurtured children was high on social integration as indicated by means. The significant difference between nurtured and neglected children was based on social integration. Therefore, nurtured children are more attached to society and social norms. This is consistent with findings by James (1994), which revealed that neglected children are prone to antisocial and criminal behaviour unlike nurtured children.

In the Zambian context, there is lack of nationwide prevalence data of neglected children from schools. This study though with a very small sample of secondary school pupils in Mufulira District, has revealed that parental child neglect is prevalent and it also provides preliminary results suggesting that child neglect a big problem. Additionally, neglected children are associated with social problems. A nationwide study is needed to accurately determine the prevalence of parental child neglect. It is important to have a sample which is representative of Zambian population. This study was based on a small sample of one District (Mufulira). Therefore, findings should be generalized with caution. Lastly, longitudinal studies are required to effectively ascertain social problems associated with neglected children.

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