

Perceptions of Counselling Services Provided to Abused Children in Lusaka, Zambia.

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Abstract: Child abuse is a significant concern, with profound short and long-term impacts on the mental health and overall well-being of affected children. This study endeavoured to assess the perceptions of the counselling services provided at the Zambia Police Child Protection Unit (CPU) to abused children in the Lusaka District of Zambia. In line with the specific objectives, the study aimed; to assess the counselling services provided by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service to abused children, to find out the perceptions of the counselling environment and services and to find out the challenges facing the Child Protection Unit (CPU) counselling services in promoting child protection by the Zambia Police Service.

A cross-sectional survey design was employed, and a sample of 107 participants, comprising 36 police officers and 71 abused children participated in the study. The officers were selected and traced using purposive sampling, and abused children were selected and traced using stratified random sampling. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data, while the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to analyze it.

The study found that 87.5% of police supervisors disagreed that counselling rooms were suitable for confidentiality ($\chi^2 (1) = 4.5, p = 0.034$), highlighting significant concerns about the confidentiality of the counselling services. Additionally, the findings revealed that CPU's counselling services were moderately effective in mitigating the effects of abuse, with 50% of participants rating the services as average. The benefits of the counselling services reported included emotional support, increased trust, and improved coping mechanisms. However, challenges such as inadequate counselling facilities, limited trained counsellors, and lack of trust hindered the effectiveness of the services. The study concludes that while the CPU provides counselling services, there are significant gaps in the quality and accessibility of these services.

The study recommends enhancing counsellor training, improving counselling facilities, and increasing community awareness to promote trust and cooperation. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on child protection and counselling services in Zambia, providing valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders.

Keywords: Child abuse; Counselling; Protection; Confidentiality

Introduction

This study examines counselling services offered to abused children by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service in Lusaka Province, Zambia. All children have a right to protection, yet many in Zambia experience physical and psychological abuse (Hillies et al., 2016). Child physical abuse is defined as the intentional use of physical force against a child, including hitting, beating, kicking, shaking, biting, scalding, burning, poisoning and suffocating, often under the guise of discipline or punishment (WHO, 2022). Global surveys estimate that nearly one in four adults report having experienced physical abuse during childhood (WHO, 2022). In Zambia, Kapungwe et al. (2017) found that physical and psychological abuse are common, with 63% of children experiencing at least one form of violence in the home, and identified poverty, parental alcohol abuse and parental mental illness as key risk factors (Kapungwe et al., 2017).

Child abuse is a major problem in Zambia, and many cases go unreported because of cultural and social factors (Mwaba, 2018). According to the Victim Support Unit, reported cases rose from 3,443 in 2016 to 4,563 in 2022 (Zambia Police Service, 2022). The prevalence of child abuse shows that one in five girls and one in seven boys report experiencing abuse before the age of 18 (Chitundu et al., 2021). Chitundu et al. (2021) further suggest that for every reported case, there may be ten unreported cases. Underreporting is driven by fear of family and community breakdown, the close relationship between victim and perpetrator, and inadequate service provision by the police (Chitundu et al., 2021). Physical and psychological abuse can have long-term consequences for children's mental and physical well-being and development (Euser et al., 2015). Many abused children develop emotional and behavioural problems, including anxiety, depression, anger, aggression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Banyard & Williams, 2017).

Law enforcement agencies play a critical role in investigating child abuse and supporting victims. Counselling is a key component of this support, as it helps children cope with abuse-related trauma and reduces the risk of further harm. Despite its importance, little research has evaluated counselling services provided by law enforcement agencies such as the Zambia Police Service, and little is known about how clients perceive these services. Child abuse remains a critical concern in Zambia, with media reporting frequent cases of neglect, physical violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Zambian newspapers commonly report child abuse cases, signalling both high incidence and increasing public awareness (Mweemba et al., 2021). Banda (2020) argues that media coverage has been vital in exposing abuse and prompting legal and social responses. Non-governmental organisations, such as Save the Children Zambia, also indicate that the media plays a crucial role in highlighting child protection violations, with new cases reported almost daily (Save the Children Zambia, 2023). However, media reports still fail to capture the full extent of the problem, such as stigma, lack of awareness and fear of retaliation discourage reporting (Phiri & Tembo, 2020).

The Zambia Police Service established the CPU in 2007, recognising that the police are often the first point of contact in the reporting chain. The Unit's mandate is to prevent and investigate offences against children, provide support to victims and collaborate with stakeholders to uphold children's rights. This initiative aligns with Zambia's obligations under international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is supported by national legislation, including the Anti-Gender-Based Violence Act and the Juveniles Act. The CPU operates in collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare and the Victim Support Unit to provide a comprehensive response to child protection (Government of Zambia, 2016).

Despite these efforts, public perceptions of the Zambia Police Service (ZPS) are often negative, shaped by concerns about corruption, unprofessional conduct and human rights abuses. Reports indicate that torture and ill-treatment remain prevalent within the ZPS, with detainees sometimes subjected to inhumane treatment to obtain confessions (Humanium, 2023).

Afrobarometer (2023) shows that fewer than half of citizens trust the police and that many view them as corrupt. Humanium (2023) further reports that some officers engage in bribery and encourage informal settlements in child sexual abuse cases. These perceptions undermine confidence in the ZPS, especially in sensitive areas such as child protection. When police are perceived as corrupt or abusive, victims and families may hesitate to report abuse, fearing further victimisation or inaction. This lack of trust can contribute to underreporting, delay interventions and weaken support for victims, while informal settlements may perpetuate cycles of abuse and impunity.

In this context, the present study aims to assess the perceptions and effectiveness of counselling services provided by the CPU to abused children. It seeks to examine the outcomes of CPU counselling, identify gaps and areas for improvement and explore client perceptions of these services. The study focuses on Lusaka District, where child abuse cases increased from 1,443 in 2007 to 3,444 in 2023 (Zambia Police Service, 2023). While public debate has largely centred on appropriate punishment for perpetrators, the psychological care of victims has received less attention. Given the importance of counselling in recovery, it is necessary to investigate how counselling is provided, the environment in which it takes place, the competencies and qualifications of counsellors, the types of counselling offered, what happens after counselling and how services are perceived by users.

The general objective of the study is to investigate counselling services offered to abused children by the CPU of the Zambia Police Service in Lusaka District, Zambia. The specific objectives are to assess the counselling services

provided by the CPU to abused children; to explore perceptions of the counselling environment and services; and to identify challenges facing the CPU in providing counselling services for child protection. Accordingly, the research questions address how CPU counselling mitigates the effects of abuse, how the counselling environment and services are perceived and what challenges the CPU faces in providing counselling to promote child protection.

Children constitute a key segment of society, and child abuse threatens not only their psychological well-being but also their overall functioning in multiple life domains. Evidence shows that childhood abuse has long-term adverse effects on emotional-adaptive functioning and mental health (Briggs et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Failure to address physical and psychological consequences may lead to indecisiveness, insecurity, conflict, impulsiveness, criminal behaviour, alcoholism, career confusion and sexual perversion among formerly abused children (Briggs et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). This study is therefore designed to generate information on counselling services provided to abused children by the CPU, which can be used by the Zambia Police Service, government and NGOs to develop policies and recommendations that improve mental-health outcomes for children undergoing counselling. In a context of increasing media attention to mental health in Zambia, it is important to understand how the CPU responds to children's needs.

There is limited research on counselling services offered by the Zambia Police Service, and this study aims to add to the knowledge base on child abuse and stimulate further academic research on counselling for victims provided by the ZPS. The study is limited in scope to Lusaka and focuses on police supervisors, counsellors and abused children. The theoretical framework is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights multiple, interacting systems that influence child development and well-being, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory is applied to understand counselling at different levels: the microsystem, focusing on child-counsellor interactions, therapeutic relationship quality, techniques and intervention effectiveness; the mesosystem, examining collaboration between the CPU and schools, health facilities and social services; the exosystem, addressing community resources, policies and cultural norms that shape access to and engagement in counselling; and the macrosystem, considering legal frameworks, social attitudes and public awareness campaigns about child abuse and counselling. Using Ecological Systems Theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing counselling interventions, and helps identify strengths, gaps and areas for improvement at each level, thereby guiding policymakers, practitioners and researchers in enhancing support for abused children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Literature Review

This chapter reviews empirical and theoretical literature on the counselling of abused children, focusing on evidence from Zambia, other African countries and the global context. It highlights the effectiveness of police-linked counselling, key modalities, the counselling environment and existing knowledge gaps relevant to the present study.

Zambian Perspective

In Zambia, studies indicate that counselling provided through justice-sector institutions can alleviate psychological distress among abused children. Chomba et al. (2018) found that counselling offered by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) effectively reduced psychological distress in abused children. Munsanje et al. (2020) reported that counselling improved mental health, well-being, social functioning and academic performance and emphasized that counselling is not a one-size-fits-all intervention but should be tailored to each child's needs (Munsanje et al., 2020). Overall, these findings suggest that CPU counselling helps abused children cope with trauma and begin healing, although more research is needed on long-term outcomes and the most effective approaches for the Zambian context. The Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC) has also provided counselling to children who have experienced abuse. Chomba et al. (2018) found that 80% of 50 children who received DEC counselling reported reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, indicating positive mental-health outcomes. Chitundu et al. (2021) showed that children valued the caring and supportive environment at DEC and that counselling helped them process trauma and develop coping strategies. These studies collectively suggest that counselling within DEC can be beneficial for abused children, while underscoring the need for further research on long-term effects

and optimal counselling approaches in Zambia.

African Perspective

Evidence from other African countries supports the effectiveness of police-linked counselling in reducing trauma and psychological distress but also highlights resource and capacity constraints. In Kenya, Mutunga et al. (2018) found that counselling provided by the Kenyan Police reduced trauma among abused children, particularly when delivered by officers with specialised counselling training. Omondi et al. (2019) similarly reported that Kenyan Police counselling reduced psychological distress and that outcomes were enhanced when culturally appropriate techniques were used. Both studies noted that effectiveness was limited by shortages of trained personnel and inadequate facilities and recommended increased government investment in training and resources.

In Ghana, the Ghana Police Service provides counselling to abused children, although evaluations are limited. Osafo et al. (2015), in a study of 200 physically or psychologically abused children, found that police-based counselling reduced psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Younger children, those who experienced more severe abuse and those who experienced physical abuse appeared to benefit more. The authors concluded that the services are helpful but called for additional research to clarify effective interventions for different types of abuse and to assess long-term effects.

In South Africa, the South African Police Service (SAPS) is often the first point of contact for abused children, and counselling forms an important component of the response, although its assessment remains limited (Naidoo & Pillay, 2018). Naidoo and Pillay (2018) examined the effectiveness of SAPS counselling among 30 referred children, using a cognitive-behavioural approach delivered by a SAPS social worker. The study reported reductions in anxiety and depression and noted that children felt more empowered and better able to cope with their experiences. These findings suggest that SAPS counselling can be an effective intervention when integrated into a broader child-protection response. Taken together, African studies show that counselling by police or police-linked services can reduce trauma and psychological distress and support children's coping, while revealing that effectiveness is often constrained by limited training, personnel and facilities.

Global Perspective

Literature aligns with African findings by demonstrating that counselling is helpful for abused children and highlighting the importance of specialised training for police and allied professionals. Dorsey et al. (2017) and De Vries et al. (2019) report that counselling interventions improve recovery from abuse. McDevitt et al. (2019) found that children counselled by police officers trained in counselling and communication skills displayed fewer PTSD symptoms than those who did not receive such support. Lee et al. (2018) observed that participation in a counselling programme for children exposed to domestic violence led to significant reductions in anxiety, depression and PTSD, with better outcomes when counselling was provided by police officers. Lerner & Slotnick (2019) noted that, despite the critical role of police in responding to child abuse, there is a lack of standardized counselling practices and structured training. They recommended specialised training in counselling and communication to enhance police effectiveness with child victims. Adams & Campbell (2019) found that police officers with specialised training in child abuse response were more knowledgeable about the impact of abuse and more likely to provide appropriate support. Hershkowitz et al. (2018) stressed the need for appropriate counselling and support during police interviews to minimise negative effects and promote accurate testimony. McEachern & Alaggia (2018) highlighted that providing counselling and support to child victims is essential both for minimising harm and for improving the likelihood of successful prosecution. Socolar et al. (2018) similarly emphasised the central role of counselling and support by healthcare and law-enforcement professionals in promoting healing and preventing further abuse. Overall, the global literature suggests that counselling and support provided or facilitated by police are essential in minimising the negative effects of child abuse and strengthening legal responses. Specialised training and inter-professional collaboration emerge as critical for improving outcomes.

Rationale of the Study

The current study investigates counselling services provided to abused children by the Zambia Police Child Protection Unit within a developmental-psychology framework. Developmental psychology underscores the importance of early experiences, including trauma, in shaping emotional, social and cognitive development (Cicchetti, 2016). Research consistently shows that child abuse can lead to severe and long-lasting mental-health problems, including anxiety, depression and PTSD (Kerig, Ludlow, & Wendle, 2013). Given these risks, it is essential to examine the effectiveness and perceived adequacy of counselling services provided to abused children by the CPU to inform evidence-based, context-appropriate interventions.

Historical Background

The origins of counselling can be traced to ancient civilizations, where guidance and support were provided by religious figures, philosophers and healers, with an emphasis on self-understanding and personal growth (Patterson, 1984). Over time, counselling evolved from pastoral care in the Middle Ages to more secular, humanistic approaches in the Renaissance (Kottler & Shepard, 2017). Modern counselling approaches were shaped by psychoanalytic theory (Hansen & Larson, 2007), vocational guidance spearheaded by Frank Parsons (Makinde, 1984), and later humanistic approaches such as Rogers' client-centred therapy (Kottler & Shepard, 2017). In Africa, counselling has long existed in traditional forms through advice and guidance by elders and relatives, even without formal training (Makinde, 1984). In Zambia, counselling for victims of crime developed within broader police reforms. The Zambia Police Reform Programme (ZPRP), launched in 1994, promoted community policing as a partnership between police and citizens to address crime and social disorder (Cater, 2002, cited in Zambia Police, 2014). This shift brought greater attention to the care of victims, including children. Before the establishment of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) and Child Protection Unit (CPU), the police made minimal effort to address victim trauma. The introduction of these units created opportunities for child victims to receive more humane services through counselling (Zambia Police, 2014; Cabinet Office, 2011). NGOs such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) also began offering counselling to sexually abused children in the late 1990s, complementing police-linked services (Chansonso, 2003).

Types of Counselling and Counselling Environment

Counselling may be provided individually or in groups in a range of settings (American Psychological Association, 2017; Southern Africa Trust, 2001). Individual counselling involves one-on-one, face-to-face sessions that focus on the client's specific concerns, with the aim of fostering insight and helping the client pursue realistic solutions (Corey, 2016; American Psychological Association, 2017; Southern Africa Trust, 2001). Group counselling involves one or more therapists working with several clients who share similar issues (Corey & Corey, 2016). Small, relatively homogeneous groups facilitate interaction, and the counsellor may take a directive role, especially in problem-focused groups such as those dealing with sexual or drug abuse (Cabinet Office, 2011; SAT, 2001). Research shows that group counselling can reduce acting-out behaviours and improve adjustment and self-esteem (Brantley & Brantley, 1990; Baur et al., 2000). For abused children, involvement of parents or caregivers is crucial. Parent-child relationships and family functioning influence adjustment after abuse, the support received post-disclosure and resilience (Briere & Elliot, 1993; Hunter, 2006). Supportive parenting helps build a positive self-image and reduces self-blame, thereby contributing to recovery (Mathews, 2009). The counselling environment is central to building trust and promoting disclosure. A conducive, private and confidential space enables children to feel safe (SAT, 2001). In the CPU context, officers' multiple roles in counselling, investigation and court testimony can create ethical challenges and strain confidentiality (Chansonso, 2003). Confidentiality and privacy require that client information be protected and that counselling occur in an appropriate, quiet, well-equipped space (Mathews, 2009).

Gaps in Knowledge

Despite evidence that counselling can benefit abused children, the literature reviewed reveals limited research on the assessment of perceptions of counselling services provided to abused children by law enforcement agencies in developing countries such as Zambia. Some studies report positive outcomes, while others show negative or less significant results (Mwaba, 2018). This discrepancy highlights the need for further research on how counselling by agencies like the Zambia Police Service is perceived and how it can be improved. Accordingly, the current study

aims to assess perceptions of counselling services provided by the Child Protection Unit of the Zambia Police Service to abused children, identify strengths and weaknesses of the programme and determine how it can be enhanced to better meet the needs of affected children.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to assess perceptions of counselling services provided to abused children by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service in Lusaka District (Creswell, 2014). The design was selected for its suitability in measuring participants' perceptions, attitudes and opinions at a single point in time, its efficiency in collecting quantitative data from a relatively large sample and its potential to generate generalisable findings for similar settings (Creswell, 2014). Standardised questionnaires were used to obtain objective measures of perceptions and reduce researcher bias. The study was conducted in eight police stations in Lusaka District: Chelstone, Kanyama, Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, Mtendere, Woodlands, Kabwata, Lusaka Central and Chawama. These stations served low-, medium- and high-density residential areas, providing a mix of urban and peri-urban contexts and diverse socio-economic profiles, including low, middle and high-income communities (Kapungwe, 2022). Their selection was based on high crime and child-abuse caseloads and the presence of CPU offices, allowing examination of variations in service delivery and partnerships with community organisations.

Study population

The study population comprised abused children aged 8-18 years who had received counselling from the CPU, CPU counsellors and police supervisors (Officer-in-Charge) at the selected stations. The age range of 8-18 years was chosen because it aligns with the WHO definition of childhood and adolescence and represents a critical period of cognitive, emotional and social development (WHO, 2022; Erikson, 1963). Children in this age group are particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse and constitute a core target for CPU services (UNICEF, 2017). Children aged 8 and above can generally provide self-report data, offering valuable insights into their experiences and perceptions (UNICEF, 2017). A combination of purposive and stratified random sampling was used. Purposive sampling was applied to select police supervisors and CPU counsellors directly involved in child-protection and counselling services, ensuring rich, experience-based data (Cresswell, 2014). Stratified random sampling was used to select abused children who had received counselling, stratifying by age, school grade and residential area (high vs low-density) to ensure representation of key subgroups (Cresswell, 2014). Inclusion criteria were abused children aged 8-18 years who had received CPU counselling, CPU counsellors and Officer-in-Charge supervisors stationed at the selected police stations, with CPU offices operating for more than five years. Exclusion criteria were children outside the 8-18 age range, CPU officers not sampled for the study and any individuals unwilling to participate due to the sensitivity of the topic. The initial sample size was calculated using Slovin's formula for an estimated population of 300 and a 0.05 margin of error, yielding a target of 172 participants (Matafwali, 2023). However, due to resource constraints, ethical and logistical challenges in accessing a vulnerable population, the final achieved sample was 107 participants: 71 abused children, 28 CPU counsellors and 8 police supervisors. Ethical priorities, including minimising harm and ensuring informed consent, took precedence over attaining the larger calculated sample (Matafwali, 2023).

Participants and instruments

Of the 71 abused children (aged 8-18 years), 26 were male and 45 females. Twenty-eight CPU counsellors (4 males, 24 females) aged 25-50 years and eight male supervisors aged 43-52 years participated. Participants were drawn from all eight stations, with a total gender distribution of 69 females and 38 males. Most child participants resided in high-density areas, with a smaller proportion from low-density areas. Children's ages and school grades ranged from lower primary to upper secondary. Data was collected using structured, self-administered questionnaires for all participant groups. Abused children completed an adapted questionnaire and the Perception of Police Officers Scale (POPS) (Schuck et al., 2005), a validated measure of perceptions of police (Johnson et al., 2011). Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree", with reported high internal consistency (0.79-0.98) and strong test-retest reliability (Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005). Questionnaires were administered in English, Nyanja and Bemba and included demographic items. Counsellors

and supervisors completed self-administered questionnaires adapted from existing literature (Brewer et al., 2016; Cresswell, 2014), focusing on their experiences, perceptions and challenges in providing counselling. Self-administered tools were chosen for their efficiency and ability to collect data from multiple respondents within limited time and resources (Cresswell, 2014).

Data collection

Data collection took place at the selected police stations and CPU offices. Questionnaires and scales were distributed to participants identified through purposive sampling, and children completed them anonymously, with assistance in Nyanja or Bemba where needed. This approach was intended to enhance honesty and reduce social desirability bias (Babbie, 2016; Patton, 2015). Necessary approvals included a letter of introduction from the University of Zambia, institutional clearance from the Zambia Police Service and written permission from station authorities. A research assistant was trained on study objectives, instruments, informed consent procedures and confidentiality. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia Ethics Committee (HSSRC IRB No. 00006464). Participation was voluntary, based on informed consent (and assent for children), with participants informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits of the study (Oladipo et al., 2015). No names or identifying details were collected, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were free to withdraw at any time without penalty, and debriefing was provided after participation.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were used to summarise participant characteristics and key outcomes (Field, 2018). Inferential statistics (t-tests) were employed to examine statistically significant differences in children's perceptions of counselling services and service providers (Cresswell, 2014). Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to explore relationships between predictor variables (for example, demographic characteristics) and outcome variables such as perceived effectiveness of counselling while controlling for potential confounders (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The significance level was set at 0.05. This quantitative approach enabled objective assessment and supported cautious generalisation of findings to similar contexts.

Results

Children's perceptions and outcomes

Seventy-one abused children completed questionnaires and the Perception of Police Officers Scale (POP). Most children described police counsellors' attitudes positively: 38 (53.5%) rated them as "very friendly" and 28 (39.4%) as "friendly", while 5 (7.0%) reported counsellors as "not friendly". The majority (50, 70.4%) reported that counsellors were "not intimidating", although 18 (25.4%) found them "a little intimidating" and 3 (4.2%) found them intimidating to varying degrees. With respect to the physical setting, 43 children (60.6%) felt counselling rooms were "not spacious", and 38 (53.5%) rated them "unsuitable" for confidentiality. Only small proportions rated the rooms as "spacious/very spacious" or "suitable/very suitable". Despite these environmental limitations, children's ratings of the counselling itself were highly positive: 44 (62.0%) rated it "very effective", 22 (31.0%) "effective", and only 5 (7.0%) as "average" or "ineffective". Similarly, 52 (73.2%) rated the counselling as "very beneficial" and 18 (25.4%) as "beneficial", with just 1 child (1.4%) viewing it as "less beneficial". Analysis of POP factor scores showed that, for factor one (Children's Perception of Police Officers), there was a small but statistically significant gender difference when equal variances were not assumed ($t = 2.03$, $df = 32.36$, $p = 0.05$), with males scoring slightly higher on average. For factor two (Fear of Police), no significant gender difference emerged ($t = -0.04$, $df = 69$, $p = 0.97$), but a comparison between 8- and 17-year-olds showed a significant age difference ($t = -1.72$, $df = 14$, $p = 0.04$), indicating higher fear scores for one age group. For factor three (Anxiety of interacting with Police Officers), there was no significant gender difference ($t = -0.72$, $df = 69$, $p = 0.48$). Regression analysis showed no significant relationship between gender and perceived effectiveness of counselling ($p = 0.551$), and the model relating age to perceived effectiveness was not significant at the model level ($p = 0.866$), despite a reported p-value of 0.029 for one coefficient in the text. A separate regression examining the relationship between family involvement and comfort during counselling reported a p-value of 0.015, indicating a significant association between higher family involvement and greater comfort during sessions.

Counsellors' and supervisors' assessments

Twenty-eight CPU counsellors participated. Most (20, 71.4%) reported having received in-service counselling training, and 25 (89.3%) indicated that they mainly provided individual counselling, with only 3 (10.7%) offering group counselling. Just 5 counsellors (17.9%) rated counselling rooms as “very adequate” and 1 (3.6%) as “adequate”, while 16 (57.2%) collectively rated availability and suitability of rooms as “inadequate/very inadequate” or “unsuitable/very unsuitable”. Only 7 counsellors (25.0%) agreed that counselling materials were available; 21 (75.0%) disagreed. Counsellors reported that children face “moderate” or “average” levels of challenges in accessing and receiving counselling (96.4% combined) and that they themselves encounter “average” to “severe” challenges linked to limited resources and facilities. Eight police supervisors (Officer-in-Charges) also provided data. Five (62.5%) reported not having received in-service counselling training. Most (7, 87.5%) stated that CPU mainly provides individual counselling. Seven supervisors (87.5%) reported a shortage of counselling rooms and rated existing rooms as unsuitable for confidentiality, and half rated availability of counselling materials as only “average”. Regarding effectiveness of CPU counselling, 2 (25.0%) described it as “very effective”, 4 (50.0%) as “average” and 2 (25.0%) as “ineffective”. Supervisors further reported that children face “moderate” to “severe” challenges in accessing counselling, and that counsellors also face notable challenges, primarily rated as “average” in severity.

Overall, children perceived CPU counsellors as friendly, non-intimidating and providing counselling that was both effective and beneficial, despite substantial limitations in counselling infrastructure and materials. Counsellors and supervisors confirmed these structural constraints and reported moderate to severe challenges for both service users and providers. Differences by gender and age on specific POP factors were small and inconsistent, while family involvement appeared to enhance children’s comfort during counselling.

Discussion

This study investigated counselling services provided to abused children by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service in Lusaka District, focusing on effectiveness, perceptions of the counselling environment and key challenges. Overall, the findings reveal largely positive perceptions of counsellors and counselling outcomes among children, alongside significant structural and resource constraints that limit service quality. Regarding effectiveness, most children perceived police counsellors as friendly and approachable, which is critical for establishing safety, trust and secure attachment in abused children (Cicchetti, 2016). This aligns with attachment theory and social learning theory, which emphasize the importance of supportive interactions with caregivers and authority figures for emotional development and prosocial behaviour (Van der Kolk, 2014). The overwhelmingly positive ratings of counselling as “very effective” or “effective” and “very beneficial” or “beneficial” are consistent with research highlighting the value of evidence-based, trauma-informed counselling in mitigating the effects of abuse and fostering resilience (Cohen et al., 2012; Kliethermes et al., 2018; Van der Kolk, 2014). These results suggest that CPU counselling generally reflects key principles of trauma-informed care and supportive therapeutic relationships (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). At the same time, a small proportion of children rated counselling as average or ineffective, underscoring the need to understand individual cases where needs may not be fully met and to triangulate children’s perspectives with those of parents and counsellors (Cicchetti, 2016; Herman, 2015). With respect to the counselling environment and services, children reported that counsellors were mostly “not intimidating”, supporting literature on the importance of safe, non-threatening settings for abused children (Kliethermes et al., 2018; Cicchetti, 2016; Herman, 2015). However, the majority rated counselling rooms as “not spacious” and “unsuitable” for confidentiality, and supervisors overwhelmingly confirmed unsuitability for confidential work. This is at odds with recommended standards for privacy and confidentiality in child counselling (Hill et al., 2016; Norcross & Lambert, 2018; APA, 2017) and echoes prior findings on inadequate rooms and lack of privacy in similar contexts (Matafwali et al., 2020). These physical constraints likely undermine efforts to create a fully safe and supportive environment (Hill et al., 2016). The finding of some gender differences in perceived counsellor self-efficacy, and no gender differences in fear or anxiety, indicates that perceptions of police counsellors are broadly similar across boys and girls, though gender and context-specific nuances warrant attention (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Gould et al., 2012; Cicchetti, 2016). In terms of challenges, the CPU relies predominantly on individual counselling, with limited group counselling, which is consistent with recommendations for addressing individual trauma histories but may miss opportunities

for peer support (Cohen et al., 2012; Cicchetti, 2016; Lambert & Ogles, 2013; Kenny & McEachern, 2017). Both counsellors and supervisors reported moderate to severe constraints, including inadequate counselling rooms and materials, high caseloads, and uneven training coverage. Most counsellors reported lack of counselling materials, and a majority of supervisors indicated inadequate or only average availability, contradicting best-practice guidance that emphasizes adequate resourcing and specialised training for work with traumatised children (Kenny & McEachern, 2017; Cohen et al., 2012; Cicchetti, 2016; Kliethermes et al., 2018; Lambert & Ogles, 2013). The limited in-service counselling training among supervisors further raises concerns about leadership capacity to support and oversee services effectively. Collectively, these findings highlight systemic and structural barriers, physical space, materials, staffing, training and supervisory support, that may compromise otherwise promising counselling relationships and approaches. In summary, the study shows that CPU counselling is perceived by abused children as friendly, non-intimidating, effective and beneficial, in line with developmental and trauma-informed principles (Cicchetti, 2016; Cohen et al., 2012; Kliethermes et al., 2018). However, serious gaps in infrastructure, resources and training limit confidentiality, consistency and quality. Addressing these gaps through investment in counsellor and supervisor training, improvement of counselling spaces and provision of appropriate materials is essential for strengthening the CPU's role in promoting child protection and recovery. The study's limitations, including modest sample size, single-district focus and reliance on self-report, point to the need for further research on long-term outcomes, cultural factors and evidence-based intervention models for abused children in Zambia.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study assessed counselling services provided by the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service to abused children in Lusaka District. It revealed that, although children generally held positive perceptions of the counsellors and the support they received, there were notable gaps in resources and infrastructure. These findings point to a clear need for targeted improvements to enhance both the effectiveness and the accessibility of the services. One key recommendation is to strengthen counsellor training. Regular capacity-building programmes for CPU counsellors would help deepen their skills in trauma-informed care and better equip them to respond to the complex needs of abused children. Closely related to this is the need to improve counselling facilities.

Upgrading rooms to ensure confidentiality, comfort and safety, through soundproofing, more spacious layouts and child-friendly features that promote relaxation and free expression, would provide a more conducive therapeutic environment. The study also highlights the importance of improving resource provision. Increasing the availability of appropriate counselling materials and incorporating child-friendly approaches such as play therapy and art therapy can help reduce anxiety and support recovery. Furthermore, community engagement is essential. Public sensitisation and awareness campaigns can foster trust and cooperation between the community and the CPU, while partnerships with external organisations can supplement existing services and support the development of community-based counselling closer to where children and families live.

Finally, the findings emphasise the need to strengthen monitoring and privacy. Establishing strict confidentiality safeguards and, instituting routine evaluation of CPU counselling services would help identify weaknesses and guide ongoing improvement. Together, these recommendations support the provision of child-centred, trauma-informed care that responds to the specific needs of abused children. Future research should build on this work through nationwide studies with larger, more diverse samples to inform policy and practice across Zambia.

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