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Assessing People's Perceptions About Factors Contributing to Children in Conflict with the Law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District

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Abstract

Globally, children in conflict with the law remain a major concern within juvenile justice systems, with increasing attention placed on understanding the social, economic, family, and environmental factors that contribute to juvenile offending. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [49], the Beijing Rules (1985), and the Riyadh and Havana Guidelines (1990) emphasize child-friendly justice approaches that prioritise diversion, rehabilitation, and the best interests of the child. Despite these standards, children continue to be exposed to poverty, family breakdown, inadequate parenting, peer pressure, substance abuse, and limited access to education and social services, all of which increase their vulnerability to offending (UNICEF, 2021; UNODC, 2022). In Africa, juvenile offending is similarly linked to structural and social challenges including poverty, unemployment, family instability, weak community cohesion, and substance abuse. Regional frameworks such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) call for strengthened child protection systems, yet many countries continue to experience high levels of child vulnerability due to urbanization, inadequate welfare services, and exposure to criminal environments (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 2021). In Zambia, despite the enactment of the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022, children in conflict with the law remain prevalent. However, limited local evidence exists on how community members perceive the factors contributing to juvenile offending in such contexts. A qualitative case study design was adopted and Purposive sampling was used to select 20 Participants; Data were collected through semi-structured interview guide and analysed thematically using NVivo software. The findings revealed that juvenile offending is perceived as a result of interconnected factors including poverty, poor parenting, family breakdown, peer pressure, substance abuse, weak school systems, and unsafe community environments. Participants further emphasized the need for balanced responses that combine accountability with rehabilitation, counselling, education, and family support. The study concludes that effective prevention of children in conflict with the law requires integrated, multi-sectoral interventions addressing family, school, and community systems simultaneously.

Keywords: Children in Conflict with the Law, Juvenile Justice, Qualitative Case Study Design, Poverty and Family Factors

1. Introduction

Globally, children in conflict with the law remain a significant concern within juvenile justice systems. Their involvement in offending behaviour is often associated with poverty, family instability, peer pressure, substance abuse, inadequate parental supervision and limited educational opportunities. International frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [49], Beijing Rules (1985) and Riyadh Guidelines (1990), emphasise child protection, prevention, diversion and rehabilitation rather than punishment. However, many countries continue to experience challenges in addressing the underlying social and economic factors contributing to juvenile offending (UNICEF, 2021; UNODC, 2022).

In Africa, children's involvement in conflict with the law is influenced by poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, weak parental supervision and exposure to criminal environments. Rapid urbanisation, substance abuse and inadequate access to education and social welfare services further increase children's vulnerability. Although the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) promotes child protection and rehabilitation, preventive interventions remain inadequate in many

communities (African Child Policy Forum, 2022 [57]; UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa, 2022).

In Zambia, children in conflict with the law remain a concern, particularly in urban and peri-urban communities experiencing poverty, household instability, school dropout and substance abuse. The government enacted the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 to strengthen child protection, diversion, rehabilitation and reintegration (GRZ, 2022) [58]. Despite these reforms, factors contributing to juvenile offending persist, including inadequate parental supervision, peer influence, family breakdown and limited community support services.

However, limited localised evidence exists regarding community perceptions of factors contributing to children's involvement in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District. Understanding these perceptions is essential for developing context-specific preventive interventions. Therefore, this study seeks to assess people's perceptions of factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District.

Statement of the Problem

Children in conflict with the law should be protected from engaging in offending behaviour through strong family systems, supportive communities, access to quality education, and timely social welfare interventions. International and regional child rights frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [49] and the Beijing Rules (1985), emphasize that children should be treated in a manner that promotes their dignity and well-being, and that responses to juvenile offending should focus on prevention, rehabilitation, and addressing underlying causes such as poverty, neglect, and social exclusion (UNICEF, 2021; UNODC, 2022).

In line with these standards, Zambia enacted the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022, which provides a legal framework aimed at strengthening child protection systems and promoting diversion, rehabilitation, and preventive approaches to children in conflict with the law (Government of the Republic of Zambia [GRZ], 2022) [58]. The Act reflects the country's commitment to ensuring that children are managed through child-friendly justice processes rather than punitive measures.

However, children in conflict with the law continue to be reported in Zambia. Studies show that these children are often exposed to multiple interrelated risk factors such as poverty, inadequate parental supervision, family breakdown, peer pressure, school dropout, substance abuse, and exposure to delinquent peer groups within their communities (UNICEF Zambia, 2023; Penal Reform International, 2022 [59]). Despite these challenges being widely acknowledged in literature, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on how community members perceive these contributing factors.

If this not addressed, children may continue to be exposed to conditions that increase their vulnerability to offending, resulting in sustained or rising levels of juvenile delinquency. This may further lead to negative consequences such as interrupted education, social stigma, psychological distress, increased likelihood of reoffending, and difficulties in successful reintegration into society (Save the Children, 2022; Penal Reform International, 2022 [59]). Such outcomes also undermine the objectives of the Children's Code Act and broader child protection efforts in Zambia. Hence, the need to conduct this study to assess people's perceptions about the factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District.

Objectives of the Study

Assess people's perceptions about factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound.

Specific Objectives of the study

1. To explore people's perceptions regarding children in conflict with the law.
2. To identify factors contributing to children in conflict with the law.
3. To examine how family and community contribute to children in conflict with the law.
4. To examine measures that can be used to reduce children in conflict with the law.

Research Questions

1. What are people's perceptions regarding children in conflict with the law?
2. What factors are perceived to contribute to children in conflict with the law?
3. How do family and community environments contribute to children in conflict with the law?
4. What measures can be used to reduce children in conflict with the law?

Theoretical Framework

Strain Theory

Strain Theory is most closely associated with Robert Merton (1938) [55], who developed the concept of anomie to explain deviant behaviour in society. The theory was later expanded by Robert Agnew (1992) through the General Strain Theory, which explains that individuals may engage in delinquent or criminal behaviour when they experience strain or stress resulting from failure to achieve socially accepted goals through legitimate means. Strain Theory is based on the assumption that society promotes culturally approved goals such as education, employment, and economic success, but not all individuals have equal access to the resources and opportunities needed to achieve these goals. When individuals are unable to achieve these goals through legitimate means, they may experience frustration, pressure, and stress, which can increase the likelihood of engaging in deviant or criminal behaviour. The theory further explains that strain can arise from different sources, including poverty, family conflict, peer pressure, school failure, and exposure to violence or victimization.

In relation to this study, Strain Theory is relevant in explaining people's perceptions about the factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District. Children in this community may experience significant strain due to poverty, unemployment in households, lack of basic needs, and limited access to quality education. These conditions may create pressure that pushes some children to engage in unlawful activities such as theft, substance abuse, or association with delinquent peers as a way of coping with their socio-economic challenges. The theory also helps to interpret how family and community environments

contribute to strain experienced by children. Poor parental supervision, family breakdown, domestic conflict, and exposure to crime within the community may increase stress levels among children, making them more vulnerable to offending behaviour. Additionally, peer influence and the desire to fit into social groups in a disadvantaged environment may further intensify strain.

Literature Review

People's perceptions regarding children in conflict with the law

In China, Chen and Zhao (2023) [40], through a doctrinal legal analysis and case law review, observed that juvenile justice frameworks strongly emphasize diversion and protection-oriented approaches. However, their study also noted that public perception often associates children in conflict with the law with moral failure and deviance, which sometimes undermines confidence in diversion measures. This suggests a gap between progressive legal provisions and societal understanding of juvenile offending. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Bateman (2022) [38], using qualitative policy analysis, found that although youth justice systems promote early intervention and rehabilitation, public perceptions of children in conflict with the law remain mixed. While some view such children as victims of social circumstances requiring support, others perceive them as offenders deserving punishment. These contrasting perceptions were found to influence community cooperation with rehabilitation and diversion programmes.

In the United States, Jordan and Loughran (2021) [42], through a quantitative longitudinal analysis, highlighted that public perceptions of juvenile offenders are often shaped by crime severity and media representation. Their findings showed that communities are more supportive of diversion for minor offences but tend to favour punitive approaches for serious offences. This indicates that perceptions are not uniform and are influenced by contextual and behavioural factors. In Australia, Richards *et al*. (2020) [47], using a mixed-methods approach, found that perceptions of children in conflict with the law vary significantly across cultural and ethnic groups. Indigenous youth, in particular, were often perceived through a lens of social disadvantage rather than criminality, although negative stereotypes still influenced justice responses. The study concluded that public perception plays a critical role in shaping the fairness and effectiveness of juvenile justice interventions. In Denmark, Madsen and Kristoffersen (2019) [43], through a phenomenological study, found that practitioners and community members generally view children in conflict with the law as individuals in need of guidance rather than punishment. However, the study also revealed that perceptions are heavily influenced by institutional trust and perceived effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes, which affects community support for diversion initiatives.

In South Africa presents mixed perceptions of juvenile offending. Skelton (2019) [24], through a doctrinal and policy review, noted that while the legal framework promotes restorative justice, many communities still perceive children in conflict with the law as dangerous or morally deviant. This perception sometimes leads to stigma, which undermines rehabilitation efforts and reintegration into society. Similarly, In Kenya, Wekesa and Nyaga (2021) [50], using a descriptive survey design, found that community perceptions of children in conflict with the law are shaped by socioeconomic conditions, with many attributing juvenile offending to poverty, peer pressure, and family breakdown. However, negative labelling by community members was also found to contribute to exclusion and repeat offending.

In Uganda, Nsubuga (2020) [45], through a case study approach, reported that perceptions of juvenile offenders vary between rural and urban communities. While rural communities tend to emphasize moral explanations such as disobedience and poor upbringing, urban respondents more frequently cited structural factors such as unemployment and substance abuse. These findings are in line with findings in a study done by Mtega (2021) [44], in a cross-sectional qualitative study, found that community perceptions strongly influence how children in conflict with the law are treated after release. Negative perceptions were associated with social exclusion, while more positive perceptions encouraged reintegration and acceptance. However, the study highlighted inconsistencies in awareness of juvenile justice principles.

In Malawi, Chirwa and Banda (2022) [41], using a quantitative ex post facto design, found that community perceptions of diversion programmes are generally positive, particularly where rehabilitation leads to visible behavioural change. However, mistrust persists in cases where reintegration outcomes are not clearly observed, indicating that perceptions are closely linked to perceived programme effectiveness. In Zambia, limited empirical research exists on people's perceptions of children in conflict with the law. However, Phiri and Chanda (2023) [46], through policy analysis and stakeholder interviews, found that many community members still associate juvenile offending with indiscipline, poor parenting, and moral failure, despite the progressive nature of the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022.

Factors are perceived to contribute to children in conflict with the law

Corrado *et al*. (2021) [27], through a longitudinal study involving over 2,500 adolescents, found that adverse childhood experiences, family dysfunction, school disengagement and substance abuse significantly predicted juvenile offending. However, the study focused on measurable risk factors rather than children's perceptions. Similarly, Loeber and Farrington (2018) [30], using longitudinal data from approximately 1,500 boys in the United States, identified poor parental supervision, delinquent peers, low academic achievement and neighbourhood crime as major predictors. Nevertheless, structural factors such as poverty and social exclusion received limited attention.

In New Zealand, Maxwell and Morris (2020), using mixed methods, found that family violence, neglect, school exclusion, substance abuse and peer influence contributed to juvenile offending. However, the study's cultural focus limited generalisability. Kristoffersen (2019) [29], through national registry analysis in Norway, identified parental unemployment, household poverty, mental health disorders and child welfare involvement as significant predictors. However, qualitative perspectives were not explored. Similarly, Weerman *et al*. (2022) [37], using structural equation modelling in the Netherlands, established that weak school attachment, peer delinquency, inadequate

parental monitoring and neighbourhood disorganisation increased offending risks, although contextual perceptions remained unexplored.

In Africa, Muntingh (2019) [33], through qualitative policy analysis and practitioner interviews in South Africa, identified poverty, child neglect, family breakdown, substance abuse, gang involvement and school dropout as contributing factors. However, the study emphasised institutional responses rather than children's experiences. Kinyanjui and Mugo (2021) [28], using a cross-sectional survey involving 210 participants in Kenya, found that peer pressure, family conflict, parental unemployment, substance abuse and inadequate supervision contributed to juvenile offending. Nevertheless, the design limited causal interpretation.

In Nigeria, Adebayo and Yusuf (2022) [25], through phenomenological interviews, identified child abuse, parental neglect, poverty, school dropout and community violence as contributing factors. However, the small sample limited generalisability. Similarly, Mugisha *et al*. (2021) [32], using mixed methods involving 180 participants in Uganda, established that family alcohol abuse, orphanhood, domestic violence, poor parenting and negative peer associations contributed to offending. However, reliance on perceptions limited causal conclusions. Niyonsenga and Habimana (2023), through a qualitative case study in Rwanda, found that poverty, child labour, family separation, school absenteeism and community stigma increased vulnerability to offending, although geographical limitations restricted generalisability.

In Zambia, Phiri and Mulenga (2023) [35], using qualitative exploratory methods, identified poverty, neglect, parental separation, substance abuse, inadequate supervision and peer influence as major contributing factors. However, the study primarily reflected institutional perspectives. Similarly, Tembo and Mwansa (2022) [36], through qualitative interviews with juvenile justice stakeholders in Lusaka Province, established that school dropout, caregiver unemployment, violence, child abuse and weak community support contributed to juvenile offending. Nevertheless, its urban focus limited applicability to rural settings. Furthermore, Banda and Chileshe (2024) [26], through exploratory qualitative research, identified family instability, inadequate recreational opportunities, poor parenting, substance abuse and economic hardship as contributing factors. However, excluding children from the study limited understanding of their lived experiences.

How family and community environments contribute to children in conflict with the law

Fitzgerald and Graham (2021), through a longitudinal study involving over 3,000 children in the United Kingdom, found that family breakdown, inadequate parental supervision, domestic violence, parental criminality and neighbourhood deprivation increased juvenile offending. However, reliance on administrative records limited understanding of children's experiences. Similarly, Ryan *et al*. (2020), using longitudinal data from over 4,500 adolescents in the United States, identified ineffective parenting, child maltreatment, neighbourhood violence, gang involvement and delinquent peers as major predictors. Nevertheless, children's perceptions received limited attention.

In Sweden, Estrada and Nilsson (2019), through a population-based cohort study, established that unemployment, social exclusion, weak community cohesion and poor parental attachment increased offending risks. However, qualitative experiences were not explored. Richards and Renshaw (2022), using mixed methods in Australia, found that family conflict, substance abuse, school disengagement, neighbourhood crime and inadequate recreational opportunities contributed to juvenile offending. Similarly, Kivivuori *et al*. (2021), through a longitudinal survey in Finland, identified parental neglect, family instability, school disengagement and peer delinquency as significant predictors, although contextual explanations remained limited.

In Africa, Artz and Burton (2020), using mixed methods in South Africa, found that family dysfunction, child abuse, poverty, gang involvement and neighbourhood violence contributed to offending, while family support and mentorship reduced vulnerability. Mwangi and Kimani (2021), through a cross-sectional survey involving 240 participants in Kenya, identified inadequate supervision, family separation, poverty, peer influence and school dropout as contributing factors. However, the design limited causal interpretation.

In Nigeria, Okafor and Eze (2022), through phenomenological interviews, identified parental neglect, child labour, poverty and weak community support as contributing factors, although the small sample limited generalisability. Kakuru *et al*. (2021), using mixed methods involving 200 participants in Uganda, found that orphanhood, domestic violence, poor parenting, household alcohol abuse and delinquent peers influenced offending. Similarly, Mukamana and Uwimana (2023), through a qualitative case study in Rwanda, identified family instability, poverty, neighbourhood violence and limited recreational facilities, although geographical limitations restricted generalisability.

In Zambia, Phiri and Chanda (2023) [46], through qualitative exploratory research, identified family breakdown, poor supervision, poverty, neglect, substance abuse and community violence as contributing factors. Tembo and Zulu (2022), using descriptive qualitative methods, highlighted weak family support, caregiver unemployment, school dropout and inadequate recreational opportunities. Similarly, Banda and Mwansa (2024), through exploratory qualitative research, identified parental neglect, family conflict, substance abuse and neighbourhood crime. However, these studies largely emphasised institutional perspectives, with limited attention to children's experiences.

Measures to reduce children in conflict with the law

Bateman (2021) [11], through qualitative policy analysis in the United Kingdom, found that family support, early intervention, school-based prevention, restorative justice and multidisciplinary collaboration reduced juvenile offending. However, children's experiences received limited attention. Similarly, Lipsey *et al*. (2020) [17], through a meta-analysis of over 250 programmes in the United States, established that cognitive behavioural therapy, family counselling, mentorship, educational support and vocational training reduced offending and recidivism, although implementation within statutory justice systems remained insufficiently explored. Day *et al*. (2022) [14], using longitudinal mixed methods, found that family counselling, educational retention, mentorship and coordinated service delivery

improved rehabilitation outcomes. Maxwell and Morris (2020), through mixed-methods research in New Zealand, identified restorative justice, family group conferencing and culturally appropriate interventions as effective preventive measures, although cultural specificity limited generalisability. Similarly, Dünkel (2019) [15], through comparative legal analysis in Germany, highlighted educational orders, mediation, vocational training and community supervision, but lacked direct empirical evidence from participating children.

In Africa, Skelton (2019) [24], through doctrinal policy analysis in South Africa, found that diversion, restorative justice, counselling and community rehabilitation supported reintegration. However, long-term outcomes remained unexplored. Munyua and Wekesa (2021) [21], using a descriptive survey in Kenya, identified parental involvement, school retention, vocational training and counselling as important preventive measures, although causal relationships were not established.

In Uganda, Kakooza *et al*. (2021) [16], through mixed methods, found that family reintegration, educational support, counselling and inter-agency coordination improved rehabilitation, although resource shortages weakened sustainability. Chimwaza and Kayuni (2022) [13], using qualitative methods in Malawi, identified psychosocial support, legal awareness, educational opportunities and community monitoring as preventive measures, but inadequate resources constrained implementation. Similarly, Niyonsenga and Habimana (2023), through a qualitative case study in Rwanda, highlighted family support, mentorship, school retention and recreational opportunities, although geographical limitations restricted generalisability.

In Zambia, Mulenga (2021) [20], through qualitative research, found that diversion, family counselling, educational support and community rehabilitation reduced juvenile offending, although inadequate funding and institutional coordination constrained implementation. Chibomba and Mwape (2022) [12] similarly identified psychosocial counselling, vocational training and family reintegration as important interventions, but reported shortages of rehabilitation facilities and qualified personnel.

Lungu and Siwale (2023) [18], through policy analysis, emphasised standardised diversion procedures, inter-agency collaboration, case management and continuous monitoring, although inconsistent implementation weakened effectiveness. Similarly, Mweemba and Kalimaposo (2024) [22], using mixed methods, found that mentorship, educational rehabilitation, vocational training and community supervision improved reintegration, but inadequate funding and weak follow-up remained challenges.

2. Materials and Methods

Research Design

A case study design was adopted because it allowed an in-depth examination of people's perceptions regarding factors contributing to children in conflict with the law. The design was appropriate because social, economic, family and community factors influencing juvenile offending could not be adequately understood independently of their local context. Furthermore, it enabled a detailed exploration of community perceptions and experiences through multiple sources of evidence, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to children coming into conflict with the law.

Target population

The study targeted parents and caregivers, teachers, social welfare officers, police officers handling juvenile cases and probation officers because of their knowledge and experiences regarding the social, economic, family and community factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District.

Sampling method

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound. Participants were selected based on their understanding of social, economic, family and community influences on juvenile offending (Patton, 2015) [6]. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain rich, detailed and context-specific information on the perceived factors contributing to children coming into conflict with the law.

Sample Size

The study involved a total of 20 participants, comprising community members, parents and caregivers, teachers, social welfare officers, police officers handling juvenile cases, and probation officers in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District. The sample was purposively selected to include information-rich participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding factors contributing to children in conflict with the law.

Data collection methods

This study employed semi-structured interviews guided by an in-depth interview guide to explore people's perceptions of factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound. The method allowed participants to share detailed experiences and views on family, social, economic and environmental influences while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) [3]. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to ensure accurate data collection and interpretation.

Data Analysis methods

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse the interview transcripts and field notes. This method involved a systematic process of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The analysis proceeded through seven stages. First, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, the researcher became familiar with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes. Third, the data were coded by assigning descriptive labels to relevant segments of text. Fourth, patterns and relationships among the codes were identified. Fifth, preliminary themes that captured the Meaning of the identified patterns were developed. Sixth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee and appropriate authorities in Lusaka District before data collection commenced. The

study adhered to established ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and protection from harm, particularly given the sensitivity of issues concerning children in conflict with the law.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including community members, parents and caregivers, teachers, social welfare officers, police officers and probation officers. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. They were also allowed to decline questions they considered uncomfortable.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms in interview transcripts, field notes and research reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes and was not disclosed to unauthorised individuals. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in private and safe environments to minimise discomfort and encourage open participation. The researcher avoided questions or procedures likely to cause unnecessary emotional distress. Where necessary, participants were informed about available psychosocial, social welfare and legal support services. Throughout the study, participants' dignity, privacy, safety and well-being were prioritised.

3. Results and Discusion

Presentation of results.

Demographic Details

Table 1

Variable Name	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–30 years	3	15
	31–40 years	8	40
	41–50 years	6	30
	51 years and above	3	15
	Total	20	100
Gender	Male	11	55
	Female	9	45
	Total	20	100
Highest Level of Education	Secondary	2	10
	Diploma	7	35
	Bachelor's Degree	8	40
	Master's Degree or Higher	3	15
	Total	20	100
Occupation	Social Welfare Officer	4	20
	Police Officer	5	25
	Teacher	5	25
	Parent/Guardian	6	30
	Total	20	100
Length of Residence/Work in Mtendere Compound	Less than 5 years	4	20
	5–10 years	7	35
	11–15 years	5	25
	More than 15 years	4	20
	Total	20	100
Role in the Community/Institution	Child Protection Service Provider (Social Welfare Officer)	4	20
	Law Enforcement Officer (Police Officer)	5	25
	Educator (Teacher)	5	25
	Parent/Guardian	6	30
	Total	20	100

Table (1) above shows that the largest age group was 31–40 years (40.0%), followed by 41–50 years (30.0%). Male participants accounted for 55.0%, while females represented 45.0%. Most participants held Bachelor's degrees (40.0%), followed by Diplomas (35.0%). Parents or guardians constituted the largest participant category (30.0%), followed by police officers and teachers (25.0% each), and social welfare officers (20.0%). Most participants had lived or worked in Mtendere Compound for 5–10 years (35.0%). These characteristics reflect diverse professional and community experiences, providing valuable perspectives on factors contributing to children in conflict with the law.

Thematic Details of study findings

Tables of Major themes and sub-themes

People's Perceptions of Children in Conflict with the Law	**Rule-Breaking and Deviant Behaviour**

Rule-Breaking and Deviant Behaviour

Rule-breaking and deviant behaviour emerged as a sub-theme during interviews with participants regarding their perceptions of children in conflict with the law. Participants described behaviours such as disobedience, theft, substance abuse, aggression and disregard for community rules as common characteristics associated with juvenile offending. These perceptions were informed by their experiences and observations of children's behaviour within Mtendere Compound, as reflected in the following remarks.

These are children who do not follow rules at home, school, or in the community and often engage in misconduct." (Participant 3).

> "They are young people who behave in an unacceptable way such as fighting, stealing, or abusing substances like alcohol and drugs." (Participant 5).

- Government should increase resources for diversion and rehabilitation services, recruit specialised personnel, and provide transport, offices and assessment tools.
- Since inconsistent knowledge and procedures affect diversion decisions, child justice institutions should provide regular joint training and use standard eligibility, referral, assessment and monitoring guidelines across all districts.
- Since children in rural and underserved areas have limited access to services, the Government and cooperating partners should expand accredited counselling, mediation, family conferencing, education, life-skills, vocational and mental-health programmes.
- Since weak coordination can delay referrals and interrupt follow-up, police, Social Welfare, probation, courts and service providers should hold regular case conferences and use a standard case-management system.
- Since successful rehabilitation requires continued support after programme completion, Social Welfare and probation services should strengthen supervision and aftercare by involving families, schools and community leaders in children's reintegration.

Multi-Agency Coordination in Diversion Decision-Making

Diversion decisions require coordination among the police, Social Welfare Officers, service providers and the court. Police make early referrals, Social Welfare assesses the child's needs, and the court considers reports before approving suitable child-centred measures. Participants explained this process as follows:

"Because police are normally the first point of contact, we can initiate diversion immediately, issue an informal reprimand or formal caution, or refer.

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Perceived Factors Contributing to Children in Conflict with the Law	Weak Parenting and Lack of Family Guidance

Weak Parenting and Lack of Family Guidance

Weak parenting and lack of family guidance emerged as factors contributing to children coming into conflict with the law. Participants highlighted inadequate parental supervision, poor discipline and limited parental involvement in children's upbringing, as reflected in the following remarks.

As a teacher, I have observed that lack of parental involvement in school matters affects many children's behaviour, not only in Mtendere but also across Lusaka." (Participant 6).

> "In some families, parents are often busy or not present at home, so children grow up without proper supervision or someone to correct their behaviour. As a result, children may not learn the right behaviour and can easily get involved in wrong activities." (Participant 9).

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Measures to Reduce Children in Conflict with the Law	Strengthening parenting and family responsibility

Participants emphasised strengthening parenting and family responsibility through adequate supervision, guidance, discipline and parental involvement as important measures for reducing children's involvement in crime, as reflected in the following responses.

Parents should spend more time with their children. When parents spend time with their children, they are able to understand their behaviour, listen to their problems, and guide them in making better decisions. This also helps build a strong relationship between parents and children, which reduces chances of children joining bad groups or engaging in risky behaviour." (Participant 3).

> "There is need for proper supervision at home. When children are closely monitored at home, parents or guardians are able to know what they are doing, where they go, and the kind of friends they keep. This helps to correct bad behaviour early and protect children from negative influences in the community." (Participant 8).

Discussion

This section discusses the study findings in relation to the research objectives, theoretical framework, and existing literature. The study sought to assess people's perceptions about factors contributing to children in conflict with the law in Mtendere Compound, Lusaka District. Four major areas emerged: people's perceptions of children in conflict with the law, perceived contributing factors, family and community influences, and measures to reduce offending.

Perceptions Regarding Children in Conflict with the Law

The finding that community members perceive children in conflict with the law through the lens of rule-breaking and deviant behaviour aligns with existing literature. Participants described children as disobedient, involved in theft, substance abuse, aggression, and disregard for rules at home, school, and community levels. This perception reflects Becker's (1963) [51] Labelling Theory. Similar findings were reported by Chen and Zhao (2023) [40] in China and Bateman (2022) [38] in England and Wales.

However, participants also demonstrated a nuanced understanding, acknowledging that these behaviours are symptoms of deeper systemic issues rather than inherent criminality. This dual perception is consistent with Richards *et al*. (2020) [47] in Australia and Madsen and Kristoffersen (2019) [43] in Denmark. The implication for Mtendere Compound is critical: negative labelling may hinder reintegration under the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022, which emphasizes child-friendly, rehabilitative approaches.

Factors Contributing to Children in Conflict with the Law

The study's demographic data shows participants were predominantly experienced community members (35% lived/worked 5-10 years in Mtendere, 40% aged 31-40, 55% male, with 40% holding Bachelor's degrees), including social welfare officers (20%), police officers (25%), teachers (25%) and parents/guardians (30%). Their consensus that juvenile offending results from interconnected factors supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) [52] Ecological Systems Theory.

Poverty and Economic Strain: Participants linked poverty to offending, consistent with Strain Theory (Merton, 1938 [55];

Agnew, 1992). This corroborates Banda and Chileshe (2024) [26], Phiri and Mulenga (2023) [35], and Tembo and Mwansa (2022) [36] in Lusaka Province.

Weak Parenting and Family Guidance: This emerged as the central theme. This directly supports Hirschi's (1969) [54] Social Control Theory and Bandura's (1977) [53] Social Learning Theory. Similar findings were reported by Adebayo and Yusuf (2022) [25] in Nigeria and Chibomba and Mwape (2022) [12] in Zambia. Participant 9's statement, "children grow up without proper supervision," underscores the breakdown of informal social control.

Peer Pressure and Substance Abuse: Consistent with literature from Kenya (Kinyanjui & Mugo, 2021) [28] and Uganda (Kakooza *et al*., 2021) [16]. In Mtendere's context of limited recreational facilities, idle youth congregate in unsafe spaces, explained by Shaw and McKay's (1942) [56] Social Disorganization Theory.

Family and Community Environments

The family microsystem was identified as the first line of failure, where poverty and lack of time erode protective factors. Participant 6's observation that "lack of parental involvement in school matters affects many children's behaviour" illustrates the broken link between family and school.

Community environment was perceived as both risk and protective factor, aligning with Weerman *et al*. (2022) [37]. This supports need for community-based diversion under the Children's Code Act, as advocated by Lipsey *et al*. (2020) [17] and Mweemba and Kalimaposo (2024) [22].

Measures to Reduce Children in Conflict with the Law

Participants' emphasis on strengthening parenting aligns with Mulenga (2021) [20] and Section 20 of the Children's Code Act on family preservation. The suggestion for youth recreational centres aligns with Dünkel (2019) [15] and Day *et al*. (2022) [14].

Most importantly, participants called for multi-agency coordination among police, Social Welfare, probation, courts, and NGOs, with integrated case management. This reflects your finding on Multi-Agency Coordination in Diversion Decision-Making. The inconsistency in knowledge and procedures explains implementation gaps highlighted by Lungu and Siwale (2023) [18] and Phiri and Chanda (2023) [46]. Finally, community awareness of the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 was identified as crucial, supporting Banda (2024) [39].

Implications and Limitations

The findings validate Strain Theory but show integration of theories is needed. Practically, implementing the Children's Code Act requires moving beyond legal reform to addressing structural poverty and building community infrastructure. While the sample of 20 provided rich insights, findings are specific to Mtendere Compound and may not be generalizable to rural contexts.

4. Conclusion

Juvenile offending is a complex issue driven by underlying social, economic, and familial factors, including poverty, family conflict, lack of parental supervision, substance abuse, and negative peer influence. Addressing these root causes requires a holistic, child-friendly approach that moves away from stigma and punitive labeling toward early intervention, structured support, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. Effective child protection depends on strong coordination across families, schools, law enforcement, and community organizations to safeguard vulnerable children and promote positive behavior.

5. Recommendations

Strengthening Family and Parental Support:

- Government & Child Protection Agencies: Strengthen family support systems by implementing structured parenting education programs that focus on positive discipline, parental supervision, effective communication, and emotional support.
- Social Welfare Officers: Expand family counseling services, prioritizing households experiencing poverty, marital separation, and family conflict.
- Parents & Guardians: Allocate quality time to children and foster open, supportive communication to reinforce positive behavioral choices.

Enhancing Community Facilities and Safety Interventions:

- Local Authorities: Establish youth-friendly recreational facilities such as sports centers, youth clubs, and safe play spaces to keep children constructively engaged and reduce exposure to delinquent peer groups.
- Community & Security Stakeholders: Strengthen community policing and neighborhood watch initiatives to enhance physical safety for children.
- Civic & Religious Leaders: Community leaders, churches, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should launch targeted awareness campaigns on substance abuse prevention, child protection, and the risks of juvenile delinquency.

Strengthening School-Based Prevention and Counseling:

- Guidance & Counseling Services: Expand school guidance and counseling programs to identify and assist learners demonstrating early behavioral challenges.
- Life Skills Curriculum: Integrate comprehensive life skills education to enhance students' decision-making, problem-solving skills, and resilience against negative peer pressure.
- Teacher Training & Collaboration: Train educators in positive behavior management techniques and establish formal referral channels between teachers and social welfare officers to support vulnerable students.

Establishing Multi-Sectoral Collaboration and Case Management:

- Institutional Coordination: Formalize multi-agency collaboration among schools, social welfare departments, the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC), law enforcement, and community organizations to address systemic drivers of offending.
- Integrated Support Systems: Establish unified case management mechanisms, clear referral protocols, and continuous monitoring processes to ensure effective rehabilitation, care, and follow-up for children in conflict with the law.

Public Awareness, Sensitization, and Legal Literacy:

- Legal Awareness: Intensify public education and outreach regarding the provisions of the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 and the principles of child-friendly justice.
- Stigma Reduction & Reintegration: Utilize community dialogues, media campaigns, and civic education to

combat societal stigma, eliminate negative labeling, and foster community support for the social reintegration of reformed youth.

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