Mapping Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms in Liberia: Montserrado and Nimba Districts

December 2012
Acknowledgements

The Child Protection in Crisis Network and the Liberia Program Learning Group are very grateful to the residents of Montserrado and Nimba districts, who provided invaluable time and support to the research.

The global secretariat of the Child Protection in Crisis Network (www.cpcnetwork.org) resides at the Program on Forced Migration and Health at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. Professors Neil Boothby and Lindsay Stark, and Mark Canavera offered support and guidance throughout the process. The field teams were trained and research implementation overseen by Kathryn Roberts, of the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity; she was also responsible for data interpretation and presentation in this report. Natalie Rhoads, a graduate student at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, provided valuable support both during analysis, community verification, and drawing preliminary conclusions.

The Child Protection in Crisis Network and the Liberia Program Learning Group are indebted to ChildFund Liberia for hosting the PLG and providing continuous logistical, administrative, and human resource support. Henrietta Tolbert, the Liberia PLG Coordinator, provided essential support for the training and data collection periods, ensuring that the implementation was successful. At the field level highly capable Liberian researchers collected data, James Karwah and Margaret Konneh served as team leaders, and Janet David, Marilyn Domah, Othello Ebenezer Gongor, Jemael Johnson, Rufus Kelly, and Jerilyn Yekeku as field researchers. They worked incredibly hard to reach and support community members while completing this demanding process. They worked incredibly hard to reach and support community members in both rural and urban areas of Montserrado and Nimba while completing this demanding data collection process.

The tools used in data collection are based on the work of the Inter-Agency Initiative on Child Protection Systems and Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms in Sierra Leone coordinated by Save the Children UK. That work has been published in "An Ethnographic Study of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Their Linkage with the National Child Protection System in Sierra Leone" (see the Save the Children resource centre at resourcecenter.savethechildren.se/node/4604). The authors of the original tools were Mike Wessells, Dora King, David Lamin, Kathleen Kosteny, Sarah Lilley, and Lindsay Stark. The Child Frontiers research manual for mapping and analyzing national child protection systems inspired some of the tools.

The work was conducted with the financial support of a generous anonymous donor as well as the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund of the United States Agency for International Development.
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Abbreviations

CBCPM – Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms
CBO - Community-based Organization
CPCN - Care and Protection of Children in Crisis Network
CRC – Convention of the Rights of the Child
FGD - Focus Group Discussion
ILI - Inter-Agency Learning Initiative
NGO - Non-governmental organization
PLG – Program Learning Group
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund
Executive Summary

Child protection mechanisms are the systems that protect children from exploitation, abuse, violence, and neglect and promote children’s well-being. Components of Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs) include the people, groups, and networks that exist in communities to prevent and address child protection concerns and violations. The inherent value of CBCPMs lies in their creation, at the grassroots level, in response to local child protection concerns. However, attempting to strengthen CBCPMs without knowledge of what already exists can duplicate or undermine local systems. In “What Are We Learning About Protecting Children in Communities”, Wessells emphasizes the importance of CBCPMs in building national systems of child protection. As he describes, when CBCPMs connect with and support the national system, then the national system stands a greater chance of effectively improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. When, however, CBCPMs and the wider child protection system have weaker connections, the ability of the national system to reach the grassroots level may be hampered.

The goal of this research was to take a bottom-up approach in examining existing CBCPMs in Nimba and Montserrado counties in Liberia. By understanding how communities define, prevent, and respond to child protection violations and how local systems connect (or do not connect) to formal protection systems, these mechanisms may then be supported, improved, and expanded upon. With appropriate support, CBCPMs may be able to increase coverage and even improve the implementation of locally appropriate strategies. When CBCPMs are strong, communities may be better equipped to care for their own children.

Methodology

This research utilized community mapping to explore local perceptions and experiences of child protection. Data were collected in five sites each in Montserrado and Nimba counties purposively selected due to their population size and diversity. While this research provides insight about CBCPMs in Montserrado and Nimba counties, information herein cannot be extrapolated and applied to children in other areas of the country, or nationally.

The first day in each community was spent conducting preliminary community orientation and mapping, followed by participatory observation. Focus group discussions were conducted in every community, and were segregated by age, gender, and community status. Participatory ranking methodology was used to identify and rank the things that most contribute to making children feel unsafe or insecure. Following this ranking process, the first and second most important issues were isolated and participants worked together to identify the people who usually contribute in responding to the issue, and what that response looks like. Individual interviews were conducted children, adults, government and NGO employees, and community leaders. These interviews provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration of issues raised during observation and focus group discussions.

Key Findings

Participants in interviews and FGDs mentioned each of the child protection concerns listed above as issues that make children feel unsafe or insecure in Montserrado or Nimba counties.

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1 Eynon & Lilley(2010); Wessells (2009).
2 Wessells (2009).
Of the child protection concerns listed above, four main issues emerged during data analysis: teenage pregnancy, child labor, rape, and kidnapping.

**Focus Group Discussion Results**

Male and female respondents mentioned **teenage pregnancy** most frequently, and ranked the issue as most important overall. The issue was the most frequently mentioned in every age sub-group and ranked as the most important issue by female adults, all youth, and boys. **Child labor** was mentioned second most frequently by males, females, and overall, but was ranked second most important by males, fifth most important by females, and second most important overall. Females mentioned **rape** in 14/26 FGDs, compared to males who mentioned it in 9/24 groups; females ranked rape as 4th most important, while males ranked it as tied for 3rd most important. The threat of **kidnapping**, often for sacrifice or organ harvesting, was mentioned by 6/26 female groups and 9/24 male groups, and ranked third most important overall. With the exception of kidnapping, males and females mentioned the same issues in similar numbers of FGDs. Both genders ranked teenage pregnancy as the most important issue, and ranked both kidnapping and rape among the four most important issues.

**Main Child Protection Concerns**

A. **Teenage Pregnancy**

Respondents used age to define ‘teenage pregnancy’, specifically when a girl who is under 18 years old is pregnant. Respondents perceived teenage pregnancy as one of the most significant issues children face in both Montserrado and Nimba Counties, and it seen as frequent as well as significantly impacting children.

Many respondents described girls as likely to be influenced by the behavior of friends who are involved with men, potentially leading to early pregnancy. Once girls have started to have sex it is reportedly more difficult for adults to give them advice about their behavior. Respondents gave details about why a girl might begin to date, specifically to access gifts and money, which girls may not otherwise be able to access. Respondents reported that girls were most likely to engage in this sort of transactional sex if from poorer families.

Respondents explained that transactional sex arose from situations where girls, or their families, lack expendable income and experience peer pressure to purchase things. They may look for a boyfriend who will buy them gifts and may expect sex in return. Respondents reported that girls might engage in explicit transactional sex to earn income if their parents are unable to meet their needs.

Respondents described circumstances where parents unable to meet their children’s needs may ask a relative or friend to care for that child. Such alternative caregivers, often relatives, reportedly may help them attend school. However, respondents identified living with alternative caregivers as increasing children’s vulnerability to teenage pregnancy, especially when this change of homes also includes moving from a rural to an urban area. A girl in Nimba explained “When you are not living with your own people; some parents can take their own child to be more important than you living with them”. According to this child when living away from their parents, children’s wellbeing may not be prioritized, and without the care and protection of an adult, girls are reportedly more likely to get pregnant due to a lack of attention and care from alternative caregivers.

After becoming pregnant, respondents described the normal response to early pregnancy is that once it is discovered, the girl ‘sits down’, or stays home, until she delivers. The majority of respondents described scenarios where the girl will not return to school, most often due to the added expenses and responsibility of caring for an infant; they explained that a girl is
expected to assume the role of a woman, and sometimes a wife, once she bears a child. Many respondents mentioned one of the potential dangers of teenage pregnancy, as girls may not be physically ready to carry and bear a child. Respondents described pregnancy as a threat to girls’ health, and as particularly concerning if a girl needs a Caesarian section, as respondents often viewed the surgery as unsafe.

Once a girl realizes she is pregnant, respondents told researchers that her likely first step is most often to tell a supportive female in her life. Whether the final decision is to abort or continue with the pregnancy, according to respondents, the girl rarely enters into the decision-making process by herself, but instead is supported by a female friend or relative. If the decision is to bear the child, the next step is for the girl’s family to approach the boy’s family to discuss the pregnancy.

Respondents described distinct possibilities when a male is confronted with a girl who claims he is the father of her child: he may accept or deny the pregnancy. If the boy or man agrees that he impregnated her, but does not have the financial means to care for the pregnancy, her parents may care for her. The goal of discussing the case at the family level is to ensure that both the girl and child are cared for, not to take punitive measures against either party.

If a boy or man denies he is the father of a girl’s child, it is possible no one will pursue him for support and he thereby avoids financial responsibility for the pregnancy. The girl’s parents also may continue the matter and to try to have the boy or man held accountable, in which case the authorities might be involved. Respondents described the court system and time in jail as a method to impel the boy and his family to take responsibility for the pregnancy. The boy usually is released from jail once he agrees to support the girl.

According to respondents, a pregnant teenage girl may chose to abort the pregnancy, even though elective abortion is against the law. Some respondents described abortion as an option that might be suggested by a mother, numerous adults spoke about wanting to prevent girls from terminating pregnancies. Despite the potential physical risks and cultural norms that value pregnancy and childbearing, respondents from different counties and backgrounds described abortion as one of the options available to pregnant teenage girls.

B. Child Labor, Carrying Heavy Load

Most respondents defined child labor as work that was too physically demanding for children, or that took up too much of their time and forced them neglect their studies. Respondents believed that the most common reason for child labor was that children worked with, or at the request of, their parents, in order to help support the household. Respondents reported that children of poor families are more likely to work, and that children who work are more vulnerable to child protection violations, therefore poor working children experience heightened vulnerability to such risks.

When considering the reasons why some children may are engaged in child labor rather than others, respondents suggested that living away from one’s biological family might increase this risk. While sending a child to live with an alternative caregiver was listed as a coping mechanism for families unable to meet a child’s basic needs, respondents reported that the possibility of mistreated and child labor are higher.

When discussing child labor, some respondents expressed mixed feelings because they believed that children should do some work in the home, and often had difficulty defining what can be classified as inappropriate work or condemning others for having their children perform chores, when their own children work.
Reported outcomes and consequences of child labor were diverse, ranging from physical injury to school dropout due to lack of time to study or attend classes. Respondents emphasized that when children perform tasks that are inappropriate for their size or maturity levels, they could experience injury, disability, or death. When considering what kinds of work are appropriate for children, and which are not, respondents very often focused on the harm that could come to a child due to such work.

Respondents consistently reported that the vast majority of children in their communities participate in some work inside and around the home, or with their parents ‘making farm’. However, when children are pressured or forced to work outside of the home, it may be because a parent does not have access to another way to earn income. When children must earn income on their own, at the risk of not eating if they do not, respondents reported that those children were more likely to enter into dangerous situations.

When considering how their communities respond to child labor, many respondents shared what they thought could be done, instead of what currently happens; probing revealed that this is because, in the majority of cases, community members may not address child labor because it is common and considered a family matter.

Respondents listed friends, relatives, and religious leaders, as potential sources of support when experiencing child labor. These potential sources of support would then, reportedly work to arrange a discussion with the parents, child, and someone who can mediate or advocate for the child.

Most respondents agreed that children do not have the agency to disagree with their parents about the work they are given, they must have a supportive person who can speak to their parents for them. While community members consistently described speaking to the child’s parents, or perhaps, if they were members of government or an NGO, to report the matter to police, to address an instance of child labor. However, despite what might appear to be few options in addressing the problem, respondents universally identified child labor as something that the community should take part in addressing.

C. Rape and Sexual Abuse
Respondents agreed that rape was inappropriate sexual contact, however, who the involved parties might be and other specifics of the crime varied considerably. Respondents mentioned several scenarios that reportedly can lead to rape, all of which were mentioned in both counties, particularly that children are at risk while working outside of the home, and that community members are often the perpetrators.

Respondents of every age group and gender offered anecdotes about rapes that had occurred in their communities, which may indicate the frequency of the child protection violation, the openness with which the issue is discussed, or the extent to which such stories are shared once they become public. While respondents valued education and school attendance, rape and sexual relationships between teachers and students were reported in both counties and in almost every data collection location. Students reportedly are aware that their peers who have sex with teachers will be given good grades, and, alternatively, other students may be withdrawn from school if parents fear they will be coerced into a similar relationship.

When respondents described circumstances that might put children, most often girls, at risk for rape, they often shared anecdotes about instances where children are outside of the home and unsupervised by parents. Respondents described scenarios where men in the community lured girls and abused them. While rapists were not always caught or punished, respondents reported that their identity seemingly often is known. Groups of young people, particularly
girls, expressed a high degree of sensitivity to the risk of rape in their communities, which supports their assertion that it is something that significantly affects their safety and security.

Many respondents described rape as an isolating experience, where girls were likely to leave school, ‘sit down’ at home, and even leave the community. Many respondents discussed the need to take a child to the hospital following a rape, both for her personal health, and occasionally to aid in future prosecution of the perpetrator.

When respondents discussed community responses to rape, the options presented were to settle the case within the community, to go to a member of the formal child protection system, or not to address the case. Respondents reported that community members were likely to choose one option versus another based on who the perpetrator was, perceptions of the formal system, and whether the family was willing to have the wider community know about the case, which might happen if they reported it.

Reportedly, once the girl decides to tell her parents about the rape, they determine whether to engage the informal or formal child protection systems. According to respondents, the parents of the girl may try to settle the issue with the perpetrator, and if that fails, they will pursue the support of formal child protection mechanisms. However, members of the formal system, such as the town chief or the police, also may attempt to the case. Thus, resolving a rape case within the community can occur in both the formal and informal systems. Respondents were more likely to report that they would involve members of the formal child protection sector in the case of rape than in any other child protection response.

D. Kidnapping

When respondents discussed kidnapping they most often related it to ritual sacrifice, or enrollment in traditional Bush Schools. Respondents in all data collection locations offered similar definitions of kidnapping despite cultural and historical differences between locations. Respondents agreed that kidnappers in Montserrado and Nimba operate for their own gain, or the gain of someone who has hired them, because sacrificing a person can help people reach or maintain power. Unlike many of the other child protection issues discussed during data collection, respondents explained that kidnappers generally come from outside of the community, and tended to be, or be associated with, ‘big men’ or people in positions of power. Children and adults shared stories of kidnapping and sacrifice, as well as kidnapping associated with secret societies, specifically the Sandy for girls. Multiple sources confirmed that girls might be kidnapped and taken to the bush for many months, which precludes their participation in formal education. When considering what makes children vulnerable to kidnapping, the most common reason was a lack of supervision when away from home.

Respondents described kidnapping that resulted in death as that which caused the most fear, as the incidents were described as random, causing fear that oneself or one’s children might be targeted. According to respondents, especially living in rural areas, children are most vulnerable to kidnapping during a long walk to school, and therefore, in order to avoid that risk, the children may cease to attend. Respondents reported that their communities have responded to the threat of kidnapping both through prevention and response. The most frequently mentioned way to prevent kidnapping was to better supervise children and discourage them from travelling alone. However, as this woman shared, while some families have responded by changing how their child travels, others have not done so, leaving them at risk. Changing movement patterns is connected to raising awareness within communities, which also was reported to have aided in how children respond after being kidnapped.

Through community awareness of kidnapping, respondents reported that children are more likely to fight back if they are kidnapped, as they know the potential outcomes. In addition,
because community members are aware of the urgency of a kidnapping, respondents reported that they were very likely to engage both the community and the police to help look for the child. When considering how kidnapping cases could be resolved, respondents almost universally felt that kidnappers should be punished by the formal justice system. However, despite respondents describing community and police willingness to react after a child is kidnapped, apprehending the perpetrators was described as difficult and uncommon.

Discussion

A. Connections between Child Protection Risks

Mappings of community-based child protection mechanisms provide local concepts of child protection, insight into what issues exist, as well as a better understanding of how those issues connect to each other, and where points of prevention or intervention might exist. The diagrams below of other child protection risks that respondents reported may sometimes be associated with other risks. While the connection between these risks is not necessarily causal, during data collection participants reported these associations; exposure to one of the risks may increase a child’s vulnerability to another. Therefore, if these risks are linked, then by reducing issues that precipitate risks, the risks themselves might also be reduced. Understanding the causality between different child protection risks is a complex process, but below is how communities in Nimba and Montserrado understand such connections.

**Teenage Pregnancy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Pregnancy</th>
<th>Effects of Pregnancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Sandy Society) → Early marriage</td>
<td>Early marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>School dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor</td>
<td>Forced out of home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with alternative caregiver</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in school → Sex for grades</td>
<td>Abortion → Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for material things → Boyfriend</td>
<td>Health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional sex</td>
<td>Problems delivering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sex education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout → (Early sex or Early marriage)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

**Prevention and Response Suggestions**

At the completion of interviews and focus group discussions researchers asked participants how teenage pregnancy could be prevented. Respondents focused on the communication between parents and children, and knowledge of and access to family planning. Respondents suggested that education about safer sex and sexuality in schools or through outreach could have benefits, especially because some people consider these topics taboo, and therefore children may receive little or none of this information from their parents.

Through promotion of girls’ education, respondents described how pregnancy and marriage could be delayed with the support of parents and the community. However, while increasing the number of years girls attend school does not address the social and cultural pressure that girls experience to engage in sexual activity and to bear children, as starting a family often is perceived as associated with adulthood. Working with the community to change perceptions of education as an adult achievement could help encourage young people to delay sex or practice safer sex. Additionally, many girls reportedly see raising a family as the next step after discontinuing their formal education, regardless of their age, however if more economic opportunities were available, young women might be encouraged to delay pregnancy in order to earn money. When working or continuing your education before starting a family is
associated with “doing well” young people may be more likely to prioritize family planning. From education to family planning to livelihoods education, young men should be included to emphasize their role in preventing pregnancy. This will contribute to creating an environment where girls are less likely to need to negotiate the use of family planning and young men may be more likely to take responsibility if an unplanned pregnancy does occur.

**Child Labor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Child Labor</th>
<th>Effects of Child Labor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of financial support</td>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with alternative caregiver</td>
<td>Walking alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Parents → Self-supporting child</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dropout</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of time to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School dropout</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Prevention and Response Suggestions**

Many of the suggested responses to child labor were simply that parents and alternative caregivers should stop overburdening children, however, this ignores that the three main causes of child labor listed by respondents are associated with the household economy, where parents need children to work in order to support their family. Therefore, some of the circumstances that can lead to child labor, such as lack of financial support, could be avoided if parents were able to earn more. Livelihoods interventions for parents, including training and business development, could help increase the household economy, and in turn would reduce the number of children participating in child labor. Community respondents often suggested improved enforcement of child labor laws, that such enforcement could help diminish the number of children participating in child labor, as well as the number of parents likely to overwork children, as they may fear punishment. Respondents suggested that when government tells parents *not* to discipline their children by hitting them or *not* to give children too much work, they should also spend time with parents talking about things that have positive outcomes for children. This type of parent education could address types of work that children can do that are not associated with negative consequences to ensure that community values associated with children learning about hard work are not undermined.

Many respondents suggested conducting awareness raising that presents education as an alternative to child labor. Respondents discussed education as valued by some parents, but not by all, so convincing parents of the importance of education could help keep children in school, which might reduce their risk of overworking. Promoting understanding about what dangerous child labor is, and how it differs from acceptable tasks for children is essential. Many community members, particularly adults, reported negative experiences with child rights education, as they believe it worsened children’s behavior and reduced the ability of adults to teach and discipline them. Ensuring that this same misunderstanding does not occur could entail working with parents to promote children’s safety when they do work, rather than framing the intervention as an effort to stop children from working.

**Rape**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Rape</th>
<th>Effects After Rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor → Meeting Strangers</td>
<td>Pregnancy (see section on pregnancy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Caregivers → Abuse</td>
<td>STI/HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living far from school</td>
<td>Shame/Stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking alone</td>
<td>Health Problems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Prevention and Response Suggestions**

When considering how to reduce the risk of rape, girls often suggested that outsiders could come and stop men from raping. However, beyond identifying men who rape children as “wicked” few children gave concrete suggestions about how to reduce the risk of rape. Working with boys and men to encourage them to think of themselves as protectors of children, and ensuring that they have a role and voice in gender-based violence discussions is critical. In addition, during the wars, rape was used as a weapon and has led to some boys and men to feel entitled to rape women, viewing it both a sexual opportunity and an affirmation of masculinity, and promoting healthy masculinity could help combat this.

Using this same premise to address rape could be successful, if rape were described as unmasculine, this and other similar messages could help increase the social stigma for raping. If perpetrators of rape were viewed more negatively, community members might be more likely to report rapes, rather than settle the case because the perpetrators are friends or family members. Increasing negative stigma around rape could discourage rape, as perpetrators might be more likely to face community sanction or excommunication. Communities have an important role to play in communicating the message that rape is unacceptable, and to wed this message with actions that show they will not allow rapists to go unpunished. Despite awareness raising, some rape cases continue to be resolved locally. The effect of this is that rapists remain in the community, while the child raped may experience significant mental, emotional, and physical consequences. Resolving cases at the local level tells perpetrators that the consequences of rape are unlikely to affect their lives significantly. Low levels of reporting contribute to this impunity, and therefore increasing the proportion of rapes reported to the formal child protection system is an important goal. Increasing enforcement of rape laws and increased sentences could decrease serial rape, as perpetrators would be imprisoned, could increase trust in the legal system, and could help ensure that perpetrators are blamed, rather than survivors. Increased imprisonment also could serve as a deterrent to individuals who might consider committing rape.

By examining the risks associated with rape, it appears that several are associated with family economics. Participating in child labor and living with alternative caregivers are both coping mechanisms to deal with economic adversity, however, respondents reported that both increase vulnerability to rape. Therefore, if parents earned more money, their children might be less likely to experience those risks. In addition, when considering whether to report a rape, specifically by a family member, women may be reluctant to do so, as it often would mean losing their family’s breadwinner. Therefore, if women gained more economic independence, they would be more likely to be able to support themselves and their families, and perhaps less likely to shy away from reporting rape due to economic concerns.

**Kidnapping**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Kidnapping</th>
<th>Effects of Kidnapping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking to school</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child labor</td>
<td>Fear of walking alone</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bush School</td>
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</table>

Respondents expressed difficulty in determining how to prevent and respond to kidnapping, as it is relatively uncommon compared to other issues, and they described targets as being relatively random. Prevention and response suggestions for kidnapping were one in the same,
and involved improving surveillance within communities. By designating community members to watch over the community and watchmen may notice quickly if a child is kidnapped, and therefore respond quickly.

Another suggested prevention measure was to limit the movement of children on their own. Respondents discussed protecting children while they move from place to place within the community, as this was identified as a particularly vulnerable time for both rape and kidnapping. Community leaders and child protection advocates could work with schools and community leaders to encourage all children to travel together. This applies, in particular, to children attending school, as respondents reported that some children are out of school because of fear of kidnapping. Working with the community to discuss how children can travel to school safely is crucial to ensure consistent attendance and achievement. This strategy could be applied whenever children engage in work as well, as agricultural fields may be far from their homes, and respondents reported that traveling through the bush alone puts children at significant risk for abuse and violence.

While respondents mentioned kidnapping in focus group discussions and interviews, they often discussed it with reluctance or mentioned as something secret or taboo within the community. Kidnapping and murder for sacrifice reportedly is associated with multiple secret societies in Liberia, and practitioners of those societies reportedly are involved in organizing or carrying out kidnapping and murder. This issue cannot be addressed without working with practitioners to discuss ways that practices could be changed so that children are not harmed, but the important cultural role of the societies remains.

Kidnapping may be an opportunity for informal and formal child protection systems to work together, as the community is likely to learn of a kidnapping. Police and community leaders could develop responses in the case of a kidnapping, to ensure that community members report the case and authorities have the training and resources to respond.

B. Access to Support and Justice

During data collection, researchers discussed what was needed for a community member to access different types of child protective services, and whether any barriers existed. Due to the rural nature of many areas in Nimba and Montserrado counties, children may travel from their homes to live with relatives or other alternative caregivers to attend school. While this may be positive for their educational achievement, respondents mentioned that these children were at a disadvantage because they were living away from their parents.

Some community members shared that transportation was a determining factor in accessing any services that were based outside the community. A lack of transportation was most common in rural areas, and while some communities reported that in the event of a child protection violation they could obtain a vehicle, this was not universally true. In addition to access to a vehicle, many respondents described a lack of funds to pay for transportation, or for services like healthcare. Respondents explained that formal services, like NGOs or the police, are in place because many families do not have the funds to address child protection violations on their own. Many respondents reported that money is needed to engage the formal legal system; and that without money one cannot access such services.

Respondents considered the quality or reliability of the services to be an influential factor in whether or not they chose to use them. Therefore, if community members believed the police would apprehend or punish a perpetrator, members of the community might be more likely to involve the police or other formal sector members. According to respondents, both members of communities and of the police and courts participate in undermining the formal judicial system, most often by giving or taking bribes.
C. Referrals and Linkages between Informal and Formal Child Protection Systems
In order to better understand how referrals between the informal and formal child protection systems are made, and whether the two are sufficiently linked or if gaps exist, researchers discussed the relationship between the two systems with NGO and government employees, and with community leaders. Respondents shared a wide variety of experiences and attitudes regarding both systems, often reflecting of which system that person was a member.

Community leaders described the complementary roles of the informal and formal child protection systems, where informal systems address issues that have been defined as ‘less serious’ such as beating, whereas the formal system can address issues classified as more severe. Community leaders, in particular, shared that they currently are more open to working with the government than they were in the past, in part due to the government’s willingness to involve them in decision-making. Community leaders explained that when the government includes them in programming, it shows respect for traditional ways and makes local leaders and community members more willing to work with government and NGOs.

However, some community leaders disagreed with the way the government interacts with local leadership, emphasizing that it contradicts traditional practices. Views similar to these were encountered in both Nimba and Montserrado counties and show that, while the formal child protection system has made a positive impression in some communities, there is still work to do to ensure traditional leaders feel heard and respected.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Cross-sectoral Child Protection Members of the Health, Justice, and Education Ministries are more likely to be present in smaller and more rural communities than members of the Ministry of Gender and Development. Therefore, it is essential to engage them to facilitate linkages between the formal and informal systems when necessary.

School Dropout Respondents, indicated that school dropout represents a key turning point in children’s lives. After leaving school they may begin to participate in adult activities, including some that may be harmful to their wellbeing. By concentrating on what leads to school dropout, other child protection risks may be addressed as well.

Livelihoods and Economic Intervention Respondents explained that children from families of lower socio-economic status experience greater risk of child protection violations. Livelihoods interventions targeted at parents could supplement the household economy, enabling parents to relieve children of some of their work, as well as allowing children to remain in school.

Alternative Caregivers Respondents described alternative caregivers as an important coping mechanism for families having trouble meeting the needs of their children however, many respondents also mentioned that living away from biological parents may increase a child’s vulnerability to violations. Additional information should be gathered to explore these reports, and determine whether children living with alternative caregivers are more vulnerable to child protection violations.

Kidnapping Kidnapping reportedly causes significant fear, and can lead to school drop out to avoid long walks; however there is lack of depth in understanding its causes and is a problem that needs to be better understood and addressed.
Introduction

Background and Research Justification

In diverse contexts, child protection mechanisms are the systems that protect children from exploitation, abuse, violence, and neglect and promote children’s well-being. Components of Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs) include the people, groups, and networks that exist in communities, at the local level, to prevent and address child protection concerns and violations. Members of CBCPMs include families, community members, leaders, and groups, religious organizations, locally based government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actors.

Child protection mechanisms exist at local, regional, national, and international levels, and may be composed of formal and informal actors. Defining the line between informal and formal child protection mechanisms can be difficult, as there is often significant interaction and crossover of resources and activities. For the purposes of this report, community members, leaders and groups, local community-based organizations (CBOs) and any other actors engaging in child protection at the local level will be referred to as part of the ‘informal child protection system’. Participants in the ‘formal child protection system’ will include national and international NGOs, government staff and ministries, including health, justice, and education.

Informal child protection mechanisms that exist at the local level have the potential to be more organized, sustainable, and appropriate than formal assistance provided by government or NGOs based outside of the community. The inherent value of CBCPMs lies in their creation, at the grassroots level, in response to local child protection concerns. These responses are conceptualized and implemented by community members according to their existing beliefs and prior experiences in preventing and responding to child protection violations. However, attempting to strengthen CBCPMs without knowledge of what already exists in a given community can duplicate or undermine local systems. A global desk review indicated that when external actors attempt to facilitate child protection at the local level, it often leads to overlapping or parallel systems that lack sustainability, local ownership, and that can have the unintended consequence of weakening CBCPMs already in existence.

The goal of this research was to take a bottom-up approach in examining existing CBCPMs in Nimba and Montserrado counties in Liberia. As the two most populous and demographically diverse counties in the country, they are ideal locations for comparing and contrasting CBCPMs in Liberia. By understanding how communities in Nimba and Montserrado currently define, prevent, and respond to child protection violations and how local systems connect (or do not connect) to formal protection systems, these mechanisms may then be supported, improved, and expanded upon, rather than ignored or undermined. With appropriate support, CBCPMs may be able to increase coverage and efficacy and even improve the implementation of locally appropriate strategies.

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4 Eynon & Lilley(2010); Wessells (2009).
5 The complexity of child protection systems has led to significant debates about appropriate terminology to identify and differentiate various sub-components of the system. While calling those structures based in communities ‘informal’ and those connected to a larger national system ‘formal’ is simplistic, and interpreted by some to undervalue ‘informal’ systems, these terms will be used in this report due to their frequent usage and the broad understanding of these terms.
6 Wessells (2009).
When CBCPMs are strong, communities may be better equipped to care for their own children in the ways that are culturally and contextually appropriate. This is not to say that community mechanisms should resolve all child protection issues on their own, but that with greater knowledge of existing CBCPMs government agencies and NGOs can better appreciate where connections to formal child protection mechanisms exist, and where those linkages are missing. By understanding how communities protect their children, it is possible to support and help strengthen existing capacity, as well as build connections to additional resources from outside the community. This can enable community members to call upon outside actors when issues arise that cannot be addressed at the local level.

Liberian Context

Liberia is a West African country bordering Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, and the Atlantic Ocean. The country emerged from a 14-year civil war following the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which negotiated the end of the war in 2003. An estimated 270,700 people died in the conflict and more than 800,000 Liberians were displaced. The war significantly damaged Liberia’s infrastructure and economy. Although the current Government of Liberia has prioritized rehabilitating the country’s infrastructure, many communities, including some in the capital city of Monrovia, do not have access to electricity, water, sewage, cell phone network coverage, or paved roads.

Liberia has a population of 3.955 million, approximately 49% of which is comprised of children below the age of 18. The country has an annual population growth rate of 2.1, which is high compared to other similar post-conflict African countries. If the population continues to grow at this rate, it will double by 2042, which will put a strain on the already limited public goods and services. With the rapid population growth rate, the wellbeing and security of children and youth is increasingly important, both to ensure the realization of their rights, and to build a healthy and educated workforce as this population ages.

Liberia is a diverse nation, with 16 major ethnic groups or tribes. The majority of the population is Kpelle (20.3%), and other majority groups include: Bassa (13.4%), Grebo (10%), Gio (8%), Mano (7.9%), Kru (6%), Lorma (5.1%), Kissi (4.8%), Gola (4.4%) and other (20.1%). The nation is largely Christian, with 85.6% of Liberians identifying as such, and a smaller proportion (12.2%) identifying as Muslim. Although English is the official language, ethnic group languages, often referred to as mother tongues, are still used, particularly in rural areas.

Fifty-six percent of the population resides in three counties; Montserrado, Nimba, and Bong. Along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, Montserrado County shares borders with Bomi, Bong, and Margibi Counties. Montserrat County is the most populated but

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9 UNDP. (May 2007).
13 LISGIS. (June 2008).
The majority of Liberians residing in greater Monrovia are engaged in trade in the informal economy, while a smaller number hold positions in government ministries and international and national organizations. In the rural areas of Montserrado, most residents participate in farming, particularly of cassava, rice, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, rubber, hot peppers, and plantains. Farmers are not able to produce enough food for household consumption owing to a lack of agricultural education, capital for seeds, tools, and other inputs.

Nimba County is located in the northeast and shares borders with Guinea on the Northwest, Cote d’Ivoire on the Northeast and several counties within Liberia, including Bong, Grand Bassa, River Cess, Sinoe, and Grand Gedeh Counties. Nimba has a population of 462,026, which makes it the second most populous county in Liberia behind Montserrado and it is the county with the largest area of land, which is divided into 17 districts. Nimba has an almost equal gender distribution, with 230,113 males and 231,913 females, more than half of who are of childbearing age between 14 and 49 years old. All of Liberia’s ethnic groups are present in Nimba, but the majority identify as Mano and Gio. Most of the Nimba population is Christian, Muslim, or Baha’i Faith.

Liberians residing in Nimba engage mostly in subsistence farming and in cash crop production of rubber trees, cocoa, sugar cane, and coffee. There is an abundance of natural resources in the county, including iron ore, gold and diamonds. Prior to the war, mining of iron ore provided economic prosperity for the area but production ceased during the war.

Although Liberia is transitioning from post-conflict to a development agenda, the country still contends with low indicators of children’s wellbeing. In 2010 UNICEF reported that Liberia had an under-five mortality rate of 103 per 1,000 live births and high rates of child malnutrition with 15% of under-five years underweight for age. In 2007, children residing in urban areas in Liberia had a 46% school net attendance ratio, while rural areas had less.

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31 UNICEF. (March 2012).
than half of that, a 21% net attendance ratio. Of the population over the age of five in 2008, 42.3% had never attended school.

Child protection indicators can give a glimpse of a nation’s children. In 2007, nationally 38% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union by age 18. Early marriage, or marriage before reaching 18 years, was more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas. In rural areas 49% of young people entered into early marriage compared to 25% in urban areas. Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) lists statehood as a universal right, in 2007 UNICEF reported that only 4% of births in Liberia were registered, creating hardships for children if they migrate, attempt to register for school, or vote.

The Children’s Law, passed on 4 February 2012, was an important milestone in protecting the children of Liberia by recognizing their human rights. The Children’s Law covers children’s basic rights, such as the right to education, water, good health care, rest, play, and freedom of thought and religion. The Law also addresses child protection, such as the right to protection from sexual abuse, harmful abuse, marriage before 18 years, and protection from other harmful practices that cause physical or mental pain. With these rights come responsibilities of the children and their parents. The Children’s Law protects parents’ rights to guide their children’s development and in return the parents must raise children equally regardless of sex, not give out discipline that goes against a child’s dignity or negatively affects the child’s physical or mental well being and not commit violence in the household where the child lives. The Law also requires every community or town to create a child welfare committee for children’s rights and a separate children’s representative forum. While this legislation legally strengthens children’s human rights, there are still many obstacles to its implementation, monitoring, and ultimately its impact on children’s well being.

Study Background and Research Objectives

In “What Are We Learning About Protecting Children in Communities”, Wessells emphasizes the importance of CBCPMs in building national systems of child protection. As he describes, when CBCPMs connect with and support the national system, then the national system of child protection stands a greater chance of effectively improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. When, however, CBCPMs and the wider child protection system have weaker connections, the ability of the national system to reach the grassroots level and improve the lives of children and families may be hampered.

Building on this framing paper, the Inter-Agency Initiative on Child Protection Systems and Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms in Sierra Leone coordinated by Save the Children UK developed a methodology to measure these complex systems-based linkages. The original toolkit drew on the Child Frontiers research manual for mapping and analyzing

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32 School net attendance ratio – Number of children attending primary or secondary school who are of official school age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of children of official primary school age. <http://www.childinfo.org/education_netattendance.php>
36 Wessells (2009).
37 "An Ethnographic Study of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Their Linkage with the National Child Protection System in Sierra Leone" (see the Save the Children resource center at resourcecenter.savethechildren.se/node/4604)
national child protection systems. In 2011 the Child Protection in Crisis Network piloted an amended Mapping of Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms in Uganda and Liberia, in association with the Program Learning Groups in each country. These pilots successfully demonstrated the value and feasibility of using the tools developed to document the support systems for children experiencing abuse, exploitation, violence, and neglect. The pilots were conceived of as the first step in a scaling-up process to document and share the community-based child protection practices, and how they are linked to or disconnected from national child protection systems.

Main Objectives
Building on the initial 2011 pilot, the primary objectives of the study were to:
1. Elicit local understandings of pressing child protection concerns in Nimba and Montserrado counties;
2. Identify who children go to in the community to discuss a problem or for support;
3. Understand family and community care practices of vulnerable children.

Proposed Research Questions
The primary research questions that this study sought to answer include the following:
1. What are the main child protection risks or sources of harm to children?
2. What processes or mechanisms do families or communities use to support children who have been affected by various protection threats? What are the outcomes of those mechanisms, and how satisfactory are the outcomes in the eyes of different stakeholders?
3. How do child protection risks and responses vary by...
   a. Gender?
   b. Location? (i.e. Home vs. school vs. community)
   c. Age? (i.e. Very young children vs. school age children vs. adolescents)
   d. Livelihood of parents or socioeconomic status?
4. What informal or traditional mechanisms of child protection exist and how do different groups regard them? Who do they protect? How do they function?
5. What sensitive or complex issues exist in the community? What child protection issues are associated with secrecy and/or shame? How are these issues addressed?
6. How does access to child protection mechanisms differ between community members? What is needed for access? Do some people have ‘more’ or ‘better’ access than others? How so?
7. How do government and NGO actors see their roles and responsibilities in regard to CBCPMs? What are instances where resources and support exist at the national level, but they are not connected or poorly connected to the community level?
8. What are the factors or practices in communities, homes, families, and schools that protect children from or put them at risk for abuse, exploitation, violence, or neglect?

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Methodology

This research utilized a community mapping approach to explore community perceptions and experiences of child protection. This approach allowed the research team to focus on current and former community child protection practices, the ways in which tradition, custom, ethnicity, and religion influence child protection practices, and how and by whom decisions are made when violations occur. This research addresses the different threats and sources of harm that community members and leaders believe affect the safety and wellbeing of their children, as well as the ways in which those challenges are prevented and addressed.

Research Ethics, Consent, and Confidentiality

This research was conducted in a safe, ethical manner that embodied the humanitarian imperative to Do No Harm. In all instances the health, safety, and wellbeing of community members and potential informants were prioritized. This research was approved by the Ethics Review Board at the University of Liberia prior to the start of data collection.

Before the start of data collection, all researchers signed confidentiality agreements detailing their commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of all data, and what to do in the case of a breach of confidentiality. All researchers signed ChildFund’s ‘Child Protection Agreement’, which outlined appropriate interaction with children, and identified the reporting chain if a researcher should witness or learn about a child protection violation committed by another member of the research team. This child protection agreement also released all team members from any previous responsibility as mandatory reporters; as such reporting could compromise the confidentiality of the research. Instead, all child protection violations perpetrated or reported by community members were to be reported to the research coordinator. No violations of either sort occurred during the course of the research.

At the beginning of each interview or focus group, the participant(s) were informed of the confidentiality of the information they shared, that researchers never collected identifiers of any kind, and that researchers could not break confidentiality without the explicit consent of the interlocutor. All respondents were offered contact information for available local service providers offering: health, psychosocial support, legal support, education, and others.

Research Team

The research team was comprised of members of local government and non-governmental organizations, based in both Montserrado and Nimba counties, all of who had experience working with children, collecting data, or both. There was one team of four people in each county, led by a senior team member responsible for coordinating logistics, supervision, and initial transcript review. On each team, at least two of four members were from the district where research was conducted and spoke at least one local language fluently. Each team had members of different genders, skill-sets, geographical, and ethnic backgrounds. The Program Learning Group Coordinator, based in Monrovia, attended the training and provided support throughout data collection. A Senior Associate from the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity was responsible for the implementation of data collection, including adapting tools to the local context, designing a data collection plan, final review of all transcripts, data analysis, and synthesis. A graduate student from Columbia University offered assistance transcript review, data analysis, and drawing initial conclusions. The research team received methodological guidance and oversight from Dr. Lindsay Stark and Mark Canavera, of Columbia University and the Child Protection in Crisis Network Global Secretariat.
Training and Capacity Building of Researchers

In preparation for data collection, all researchers and the PLG Coordinator participated in ten days of training in Monrovia from March 26 to April 6, 2012. The participatory training was designed to further develop researchers’ skills in qualitative data collection, specifically working with children and community members, utilizing probing questions, and addressing any potential methodological or ethical issues that could arise. The training emphasized active engagement of researchers in discussions, role-plays, scenarios, presentations, and practice of skills learned, with each other and in the field.

Specifically, the training covered the following topics:

1. Objectives and purpose of the research
2. Roles and responsibilities of researchers
3. Note-taking and transcription
4. Participant observation skills-building and practice
5. In-depth interviewing skills-building and practice
6. Interviewing children and members of vulnerable groups
7. Conducting focus group discussions with adults and children
8. Participatory ranking methodology
9. Ethics, confidentiality, and consent
10. Child safeguarding policy
11. Mapping communities and resources, including practice
12. Team building and preparation for fieldwork

Capacity building continued throughout data collection, with each team supported by either the PLG Coordinator or international consultant for the first week of data collection, followed by continuous feedback, troubleshooting, and review of issues researchers found difficult.

Research Plan and Tools

As mentioned above, the tools used were based on the work of the Inter-Agency Initiative on Child Protection Systems and Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms in Sierra Leone, coordinated by Save the Children UK. That work has been published as An Ethnographic Study of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Their Linkage with the National Child Protection System in Sierra Leone. The authors of the original tools were Mike Wessells, Dora King, David Lamin, Kathleen Kostenly, Sarah Lilley, and Lindsay Stark. Some interview tools are inspired by the original work of Child Frontiers in Child Protection Systems Mapping in West Africa.

None of the tools were translated into local language because of the variety of languages to be used, and because few of the languages are written frequently. Researchers stressed that they were much more comfortable reading and writing in English. Therefore, key terms were translated into the appropriate language and noted, while notes were taken in English. All tools utilized during data collection are described below and can be found attached to this report in the Appendix.

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39 See the Save the Children resource center at resourcecenter.savethechildren.se/node/4604.
Site Selection and Sampling

Research Sites

Data were collected in ten sites, five sites each in Montserrado and Nimba counties. Researchers spent five days collecting and transcribing data in each location. The pilot of this study was conducted in Gbarpolu County. Montserrado and Nimba counties were purposively selected due to their large populations, as well as the population size and diversity. Montserrado was additionally selected for data collection due to extensive migration of Liberians to the capital during and since the extended conflict. Nimba was chosen due to its conflict experience, both in terms of the Liberian conflict and the current conflict in Cote d’Ivoire, which has resulted in the presence of refugees and an extensive presence of national government and international NGOs. These were also advantageous districts in which to collect data because the Program Learning Group had strong local partners on the ground to help coordinate data collection and community entry. While this research provides insight about CBCPMs in Montserrado and Nimba counties, information herein cannot be extrapolated and applied to children in other areas of the country, or nationally. If similar work were to take place in other districts, it might reveal that children experience differing realities, and distinct CBCPMs exist in response.

Within each district five sites were chosen for data collection, as the research was funded for 25 days of data collection in each district, and this schedule allowed for five days in each location. Locations within each district were chosen purposively to represent the diversity present within each. Members of the research teams led site selection because of their depth of knowledge about the region, with guidance and input from the research coordinator and international consultant. When considering diversity during the site selection process, attention was paid to: ethnicity, national origin, livelihood, proximity to international borders, proximity to major geographical elements, tribe, language, migration experience, conflict experience, availability of government or NGO services, road conditions, and distance from a major city.

Data Sources

Individual interviews were conducted in five locations in each county with children (11 – 18 years), adults, government and NGO employees, and community leaders. Government and NGO employees are all individuals employed to carry out community development and related activities, they include members of the police, health sector, education sector, and other government, as well as any employee of a local NGO or CBO. Community leaders are those who participate in community development and child protection on a volunteer or ad hoc basis such as religious leaders, leaders and members of community-based organizations, elders, and individuals identified by other respondents as leaders within their community.

Community Orientation and Observation

Data were collected for five days in five communities in each county. In each location community leaders in government and local leadership, were contacted so that the research team could describe the research and secure permission to work in the community. The first day in each community was spent conducting preliminary community orientation. Team members first created a physical map of each location, identifying key landmarks like schools and religious centers, community gathering areas, and sites that could contribute to the protection or vulnerability of children. After completing a map, each team member conducted a transect walk, revisiting sites that could be important to child protection as well as visiting
areas off the main road that were missed during the original mapping. During both the mapping and transect walks team members introduced themselves and chatted with members of the community, explaining the research and identifying key informants for future data collection. Maps were updated with information gathered during transect walks, and were used during the data collection process to ensure geographical diversity within the town and identify key locations for observation and meeting key informants.

Over the course of data collection all researchers conducted participatory observation, where they identified and interpreted the interactions between children and community members, and how these interactions might relate to the protection or vulnerability of children. In each location researchers wrote at least two observational transcripts, describing these interactions, which included community members drawing water, visiting the local market, washing clothes, or how communities responded to emergencies such as a kidnapped child or traffic accident. Team members were encouraged to view these events as though they were not from that place, paying particular attention to the roles of children and how people interact.

**Focus Group Discussions**

Focus group discussions were conducted in every community, and were segregated by age, gender, and community status. Focus groups were made up of six to ten people, and age groups included children (11 – 17), youth (18 – 24), and adults (25+). Status was determined by respondents’ self identified roles in their communities, which researchers used to ensure that no participant would feel intimidated or reluctant to speak due to the presence of a local leader, or agency providing services. Focus groups were sometimes organized with the help of a community member, or local leader, but care was paid to also organize some groups independently to avoid possible selection bias, whereby participants would be chosen because they supported or agreed with the organizer.

Two researchers attended each group discussion, one acting as the facilitator and the other taking notes. Each focus group discussion lasted one to one and a half hours, depending on participation. Participatory ranking methodology\(^{41}\) was used to identify the things in that particular community that make children feel unsafe or insecure, or that can affect their development and wellbeing. Once issues were identified, participants were led in voting on which issues were most important in their community. Each issue was defined according to local perceptions and was followed by discussions of why each issue was important. Following this ranking process, the first and second most important issues were isolated and participants worked together to identify the people who usually contribute in responding to the issue, and what that response looks like.

**Key Informant Interviews**

Key informant interviews provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration of issues raised during observation and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted in confidential and semi-private locations chosen by the respondent. They were guided by a semi-structured questionnaire that provided the researchers the latitude to follow the lead of the respondent. Interviewers were trained to ask probing questions to gain further insight into issues raised. Four separate interview guides were used with: children, adults, community leaders, and members of NGOs or government. Interviews lasted from 45 to two hours depending on the experiences and engagement of the respondent.

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Data Capture

Researchers used digital voice recorders during interviews and focus group discussions with the consent of the participants. Recorders, along with handwritten notes, allowed the researchers to create abbreviated transcripts for each activity containing extensive direct quotes. Research team leaders conducted an initial review of each transcript, focusing on ensuring the transcript was complete, as well as offering ongoing feedback and guidance to researchers on ways to improve their data collection techniques. Next, the international consultant reviewed transcripts for any additional improvement or feedback. Once the transcripts were finalized all recordings were deleted. All transcripts were saved in Microsoft Word documents and double-checked for any potential identifiers.

Preliminary Data Analysis

The international consultant and a graduate student at Columbia University, based in Liberia, reviewed all transcripts, reading each multiple times. The transcripts were then entered into Atlas TI and coded according to the issues and themes identified. Atlas TI was used for basic analysis and quote identification, and to identify patterns among codes. Analysis of the FGDs and the functional network matrices was conducted by hand, segregating information by codes and other categories. In addition to looking at the data using these categories, the information was interpreted holistically, looking at what the data showed about the role of the community in child protection, and where linkages or disconnects exist between community child protection and at the county or national level.

Verification and Presentation of Findings

The findings from this research were presented in Nimba and Montserrado counties at verification workshops in July 2012. Sessions were held in each county for community members, and staff of NGOs and government. Research team leaders and the PLG Coordinator shared preliminary findings from the research with these groups via discussion and dramas. Participants were asked to review and give feedback on the findings, as well as contribute to the recommendations on actions going forward, both for the community itself and the Liberia Program Learning Group. The findings of these workshops were then summarized in a short memo, and presented to members of the Liberia PLG, along with research findings. It is intended that the Liberia PLG will use the findings to formulate objectives and plans to implement programmatic and advocacy changes going forward, as well as to influence future activities of the PLG. Key findings will be shared with a wider Liberia audience, with individual PLG members taking responsibility to disseminate findings to their ministries, organizations, partners, and members of other networks to ensure wide readership and knowledge sharing.

Limitations

Similarly to the research conducted in Uganda, the Mapping of CBCPM in Liberia experienced challenges related to time spent in each community, and the number of data collection sites, which were both limited by available resources. Limitations surrounding masking were encountered, as might be expected in any exploration of sensitive topics. For further discussion of these and other limitations, please see Mapping of Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms in Uganda: Arua and Nebbi Districts.42

42 Report available from info@cpclearningnetwork.org.
Interviewers received ten days of rigorous training, however much of the methodology was new to them, and therefore there were many instances during data collection where depth was missing from transcripts. Additionally, oversight in the field was not as stringent as it could have been due to time and funding constraints on the part of the international consultant and PLG coordinator, leading to disparity in numbers and gender-balance of data collection activities in the two counties. This lack of oversight diminished the capacity of the teams to shift target groups or activities based on what they observed, for example targeting children of a particular sub-type that was not anticipated during research design. Without ongoing input and oversight of research leaders some of these opportunities to expand upon expected respondent groups and reach members of hidden or vulnerable groups may have been missed.

Conducting research in rural Liberia was logistically challenging. Some of the communities where data were collected have virtually no mobile phone reception, and no landlines, and only receive outside communication through radio broadcasts, the contents of which are then shared via the town crier. This made it very difficult to alert communities of the upcoming arrival of researchers, and they were therefore unable to plan for participation. Road conditions created challenges, particularly as research was conducted at the beginning of the rainy season, lengthening the time spent traveling, therefore reducing the time spent in each community. The rainy season also caused difficulties for community members traveling to the research verification sessions, as some communities are entirely unreachable if bridges collapse or roads are flooded.

Many community members had significant experience with humanitarian aid, and therefore expected to be paid for their participation in the research. Additionally, many people expected to receive compensation for meeting participation, which limited the number of people at community verification meetings. PLG members committed their staff as researchers, who were paid a per diem. When limitations were discussed, some researchers mentioned that because the per diem was lower than that paid by the Liberian government some researchers may have been reluctant to participate, or spend the time and effort to collect data as taught in the training.
Key Findings

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were held with children (11-16), youth (17 – 24), and adults (25+). All FGDs were segregated by gender, except one, where boys and girls participated in an FGD together. In each data collection location the research team aimed to conduct one FGD with each sub-group, but this was not always possible due to logistical and time constraints, as well as the working schedules of community members.

Table 1 – Number of Focus Group Discussions by Sub-Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Discussion Sub-Type</th>
<th>Montserrat</th>
<th>Nimba</th>
<th>Total by District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Child</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Co-Ed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Ed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGD # Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People # Total</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total 411 individuals participated in focus group discussions, 258 people in Montserrat, and 153 people in Nimba County.

Key Informant Interviews

This research aimed to collect the experiences and perspectives of diverse respondents, with special attention paid to engaging children, as well as people in communities already addressing child protection, such as community leaders and government or NGO employees.

Table 2 – Number of Interviews by Key Informant Sub-Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Informant Sub-Type</th>
<th>Montserrat</th>
<th>Nimba</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montserrat</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/ gender</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the course of five weeks 161 individuals were interviewed, 91 in Montserrat County and 70 in Nimba County. These 161 respondents included 39 children, 61 adults, 31 government or NGO employees, and 30 community leaders. While attention was paid to gender balance during data collection, researchers interviewed slightly more males (86) than females (75) overall, however this imbalance occurred in the government and NGO, and
community leader categories, rather than with children or adults, where slightly more females than males were interviewed.

**Focus Group Discussion Results**

During Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants free-listed all the issues they could think of that “make children feel unsafe or insecure”. Participants defined each of the issues listed to ensure clarity. Participants then discussed why each issue was important to them and their community, and voted on which issues were most important. “Importance” was defined according to the participants in each FGD; some participants believed that prevalence influenced importance, while others considered the consequences of the issue to be most important. Once the top three most important issues were identified using voting, participants discussed how communities respond to the top one or two issues, depending on time.

In the analysis described below, “frequency of mention” refers to the number of groups where a particular issue was listed, out of the total number of groups. Issues were counted as mentioned if they were ever listed and voted on during a FGD. The goal of calculating the frequency with which a particular issue mentioned is to determine how often participants raised a particular risk, which can show if an issue exists in many communities, and is a concern to many people. Some risks may be frequently mentioned, although rarely ranked highly, if ranked at all, because they are not viewed as the most important, or only a few participants in each group view the issue as a source of harm to children. For example adult women mentioned rape in six out of seven focus group discussion, but ranked rape at 4.17, or least important compared to all other issues that multiple adult women’s FGDs ranked multiple times.

The mean rank is the average number of times an FGD voted that the risk was one of the most important risks to children in the community, with 1 meaning most important, and lower numbers denoting less importance. Issues are only listed here if raised in at least ¼ of FGDs either within a particular sub-group, or overall. The mean rank is important because while an issue may not be listed as often as another, it may be consistently ranked as one of the most important threats to children. For example two male youth FGDs, out of nine groups, mentioned being out of school as a risk, however both of these groups ranked the issue as the most important one children face. For all tables, the total number of groups may be one greater than the number of male groups and the number of female groups, due to researchers conducting one mixed gender group, the results of which are not included in gender-related analysis.

**Table 3 – Community Risks Discussed by All Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Frequency of Mention</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (26)</td>
<td>Male (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage Pregnancy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of School</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartman/Kidnap</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Male and female respondents mentioned teenage pregnancy most frequently, and ranked the issue as most important overall. The issue was the most frequently mentioned in every age sub-group and ranked as the most important issue by female adults, all youth, and boys. Child
labor was mentioned second most frequently by males, females, and overall, but was ranked second most important by males, fifth most important by females, and second most important overall. Females mentioned rape in 14/26 FGDs, compared to males who mentioned it in 9/24 groups, females ranked rape 4th most important; males ranked it as tied for 3rd most important. The threat of kidnapping, often specifically for sacrifice, was mentioned by 6/26 female groups and 9/24 male groups, and ranked third most important overall.

With the exception of kidnapping, males and females mentioned the same issues in similar numbers of FGDs. Both genders ranked teenage pregnancy as the most important issue facing children, and ranked both kidnapping and rape among the four most important issues.

**Table 4 – Community Risks Discussed by Adults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Frequency of Mention</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (7)</td>
<td>Male (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage Pregnancy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartman/Kidnap</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandonment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adult men and women mentioned teenage pregnancy most frequently, and women ranked it as the most important issue children face (2.17), followed by child labor (2.5) and kidnapping (2.5). Although only two men’s FGDs mentioned kidnapping, both ranked it as the most important issue (1.0), followed by child labor (1.83) and teenage pregnancy (2.0). Overall, adults ranked kidnapping as the most important issue children face (1.75), followed by teenage pregnancy (2.08) and child labor (2.1). While only one of seven groups of women mentioned out of school, this group ranked it as the most important issue (1.0), while the three of nine groups of men that mentioned out of school ranked it as 4.0 in each group, or the 6th most important issue overall. Three out of seven women’s FGDs mentioned abandonment by parent(s) as an issue that makes children feel unsafe or insecure, while this issue was never mentioned by more than one FGD in any other age sub-group. Similarly, three of nine men’s FGDs mentioned prostitution as an important risk children face, while it was never mentioned by more than one FGD in any other age sub-group.

Out of 15 FGDs conducted with youth in Montserrado and Nimba counties, teenage pregnancy was the most frequently mentioned issue and highest ranked issue overall, among females and males, tied with beating. Female youth mentioned rape second most frequently (6/9 groups), followed by child labor and out of school (4/9 groups). Female youth ranked child labor as second most important (3.0), behind teenage pregnancy, followed by rape. Male youth mentioned child labor second most frequently (4/6 groups), followed by kidnapping (3/6 groups) and ranked teenage pregnancy and beating as equally important (2.0), followed by rape. Several issues raised were ranked disparately between genders, for

**Table 5 – Community Risks Discussed by Youth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Frequency of Mention</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (9)</td>
<td>Male (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
example beating was mentioned by 6/9 female groups and 2/6 male groups, but was ranked significantly more important by males (2.0), than females (4.3). Youth mentioned child labor with approximately equal frequency, but was ranked as significantly more important by females (2.8) than males (3.75).

Table 6 – Community Risks Discussed by Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Frequency of Mention</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (10)</td>
<td>Male (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage Pregnancy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnap</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Abuse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In FGDs with children, girls listed rape and out of school most frequently as issues facing children in their communities, but ranked rape as most important (1.33). Girls mentioned teenage pregnancy, kidnapping, and beating in 5/10 FGDs, ranking teenage pregnancy as the most important (2.2) followed by kidnapping (2.6), and with beating ranked as least important among the three (3.4). Boys mentioned teenage pregnancy most frequently, and also ranked it as the most important issue (1.17). This was followed by child labor (2.0) and accidents (2.25). After teenage pregnancy, boys mentioned accidents, most often traffic accidents, as the most important issue facing children. Boys and girls mentioned child labor in approximately the same proportion of FGDs, but boys ranked labor as significantly more important (2.0), in comparison to girls (3.5).

Main Child Protection Concerns
Participants in interviews and FGDs mentioned each of the child protection concerns listed above as issues that make children feel unsafe or insecure in Montserrado or Nimba counties. Of the child protection concerns listed above, four main issues emerged during data analysis: teenage pregnancy, child labor, rape, and kidnapping. All speakers are identified only by their gender and age categories in order to protect confidentiality. Please see Appendix ____ for diagrams of how communities respond to several of the risks discussed below.

A. Teenage Pregnancy
Respondents used age to define ‘teenage pregnancy’, specifically when a girl who is under 18 years old is pregnant. According to an adult female in Montserrado County,
Teenage pregnancy is when a girl gets pregnant at early age, like below 18 years. A girl by the age of 14 got pregnant while she was in school; she had to drop because of pregnancy she couldn’t continue her education... Teenage Pregnancy is one of the most things that happen in our community especially the small girls.

As this woman describes, respondents perceived teenage pregnancy as one of the most significant issues children face in both Montserrado and Nimba Counties, and it seen as frequent as well as significantly impacting children.

Causes

When considering teenage pregnancy, respondents described various contributing factors:

Sometime in this community, when you see children who not reach 18 years yet, who not suppose to be having man, you can see them pregnant. When you ask, they can’t tell you anything straight. Sometime no answer, no good advice. Most of them too can’t listen to their parents them. Because they feel say they small and know about man business so they feel say they making their life, not knowing they just starting it.

– Adult Female Nimba

This woman makes clear that one of the challenges associated with teenage pregnancy is that girls do not realize the long-term results and how much it can affect their future.

Many respondents, particularly adults, described that girls are influenced to date and have sex (know man business) by friends engaged in similar activities.

Like for the girls they are involve in the teenage pregnancy because they don’t listen to advice especially when they known man business. Sometimes they do this because of peer pressure following friend’s decision. – Adult Female Montserrado

This woman explains that once girls have started to have sex it is more difficult for adults to give them advice about their behavior. In fact, in this case the female respondent describes girls as likely to be influenced by the behavior of friends who may be involved with men, and potentially experiencing early pregnancy.

Respondents further explored the reasons girls may start to date and engage in early sex, potentially leading to early pregnancy. A reason frequently provided was described in the following way:

Because the girls are looking for man to give them money to buy material things and because of this they get pregnant before their time. – Adult Female Montserrado

This woman gives details about why a girl might begin to date, specifically to access gifts and money, which girls may not otherwise be entitled to. Respondents were most likely to relate this sort of transactional sex to girls from poorer families.

Children who parents do not have money, especially the girls go to look for man who will give them money to buy material things and they can get pregnant in the process. [They want] clothes, want to fix their hair buy slippers and cosmetic. – Adult Female Montserrado

Respondents explained that transactional sex arose from situations where girls, or their families, lack expendable income and experience peer pressure to purchase things. They may look for a boyfriend who will buy them gifts and may expect sex in return. While participants shared that many children experience pressure to compete with their peers, they said that it is those whose parents do not have the resources to purchase things that may be more likely to pursue sexual relationships for gifts, which, in turn, increases their risk of pregnancy.
Respondents reported that girls might engage in explicit transactional sex to earn income if their parents are unable to meet their needs.

*One 13 years old girl living not far from my house, because only her mother she living with no father to support them she started going on the lean [transactional sex] and she later got pregnant, she even know the man she pregnant for now, she home with his ma, they there struggling again.* – Adult Male Montserrado

Girls whose parents struggle to meet their needs are described as more likely to exchange sex for gifts and money, exposing them to the risk of early pregnancy. In this particular case, a man shared that although the girl became pregnant through transactional sex, because she knew who fathered her child, she moved to live with him and his family, a mechanism to cope with early pregnancy.

Respondents described circumstances where, before becoming pregnant, children whose parents are unable to meet their needs, such as food, education, or other necessities, may respond by asking a relative or friend to care for that child. Such alternative caregivers, often relatives, reportedly may help them attend school. Respondents identified living away from biological parents as a factor that may contribute to teenage pregnancy.

*Teenage pregnancy is likely happen to those children who are sent from the village to come and attend school in the city, because they are not with their biological parents.* – Female Government/NGO Montserrado

Here a government or NGO employee identifies living with alternative caregivers as increasing children’s vulnerability to teenage pregnancy, especially when this change of homes also includes moving from a rural to an urban area. A girl in Nimba explained “When you are not living with own people; some parents can take their own child to be more important than you living with them”. According to this child when living away from their parents, children’s wellbeing may not be prioritized, and without the care and protection of an adult, girls are reportedly more likely to get pregnant. According to a female youth in Montserrado, “I have a girl in my community she is staying with her aunty the girl was twelve years when she started having sex.” This young woman describes girls as more likely to experience an unplanned pregnancy even when living with a close family member such as an aunt. Both respondents previously referred to connect a lack of attention and care from alternative caregivers as linked with early sexual activity and therefore early pregnancy.

**Outcomes and Consequences**

During interviews and focus group discussions, respondents expressed concern about the repercussions of early pregnancy in addition to those directly connected with conceiving and bearing a child. After becoming pregnant, respondents described leaving school as the normal next step.

*Like one of my friend daughter she was going to school coming on all right, all for the sudden this little girl go pregnant and now she sitting home until she can have the baby, she is about 14 years.* - Adult Female Montserrado

Here, a woman describes pregnancy as something sudden and unforeseen that happened to a girl, something that is in contrast with a child who is doing well. Additionally, this respondent, along with many others, explains that the normal response to early pregnancy is that once it is discovered, the girl ‘sits down’, or stays home, until she delivers.

*The girl will have the baby and she will stop going to school. When the child has the baby probably she might never go back to school because she wants to take care of...*
The majority of respondents described scenarios where the girl will not return to school, most often due to the added expenses and responsibility of caring for an infant; they explained that a girl is expected to assume the role of a woman, and sometimes a wife, once she bears a child.

_A girl can marry if she is pregnant and her parents will get her to marry, because the parents are in need of money and don’t want to know about her, they will just get her out of school and make her to marry._ – Male Youth Montserrado

This young man describes parents as the decision-makers when considering marriage after a teenage girl becomes pregnant. Like many other respondents, he describes the birth of a child as a financial burden, and that the parents may be eager for their daughter to marry so that the burden will not affect their household negatively. Respondents described different scenarios that can lead to marriage; in some instances, a girl may marry before becoming pregnant.

_A 15 years old girl was taken into the Sandy Society and right after the traditional ceremony of this society, she was forced into marriage with an older man who sponsor the entire ceremony; currently she’s pregnant and very anemic and I am afraid she might not have a safe delivery. So we are trying to refer her to another hospital, because this place is only a health center and we do not perform surgery or C-section._ - Female Government/NGO Montserrado

This government or NGO employee describes one of the potential dangers of teenage pregnancy, as girls may not be physically ready to carry and bear a child. Respondents described pregnancy as a threat to girls’ health, and as particularly concerning if a girl needs a Caesarian section, as respondents often viewed the surgery as unsafe. A male youth from Montserrado explained, “Some of them can be too small to extend when they go to gave birth they can die or sometimes operation”. Respondents believed that teenage girls are more likely than adult women to need surgical interventions when they give birth, and that, without appropriate medical care, could be disabled or die.

Community Responses

When a teenage girl becomes pregnant, the vast majority of respondents shared that the first issue to address is who impregnated the girl, followed by who will be financially responsible for the girl during her pregnancy, and for the child following the birth. According to participants, the most common response to teenage pregnancy is to settle the matter among the families of the pregnant girl and the man or boy who fathered the child.

_They will not go to any higher or local authority because it is just a local issue, not public issue. It is just a community thing, so there will actually not be any support or help from anywhere._ – Adult Female Montserrado

Once a girl realizes she is pregnant, respondents told researchers that her likely first step is most often to tell a supportive female in her life.

_If a girl gets pregnant, she will start to think on what step to take. The girl will go to her friend, mother, and sister-in-law to see how she can manage to keep the pregnancy or do abortion. The girl can also easily go to the boyfriend and the doctor for help. The family will go to the perpetrator house and family to talk about what has happen to their daughter._ – Adult Female Montserrado
Whether the final decision is to abort the pregnancy or continue with the pregnancy, woman above described the usual scenario, where the girl rarely enters into the decision-making process by herself, but instead is supported by a female friend or relative. If the decision is to bear the child, the next step is for the girl’s family to approach the boy’s family to discuss the pregnancy.

If the boy accept the pregnancy the boy’s family will support the girl up to birth if the boy parents don’t have money the support will come from the girl’s parents.
– Adult Female Montserrado

Respondents described distinct possibilities when a male is confronted with a girl who claims he is the father of her child: he may accept or deny the pregnancy. If the boy or man agrees that he impregnated her, but does not have the financial means to care for the girl and the pregnancy, her parents may care for her, but most often the two families will negotiate to ensure that both the girl and the infant will be supported. This discussion may be held between families only, or facilitated by community leaders.

Community will sometimes call on both parents of boy and girl to have a meeting with them, as to what has been the cause of the effects. Normally people will have different reactions, different interpretation, and some people will want intervene differently. Once the boy’s parent accept your daughter everything is okay, or the girl’s parent accept her in the home everything is okay. – Adult Male Nimba

As the interviewee describes above, the goal of discussing the case at the family level is to ensure that both the girl and child are cared for, not to take any sort of punitive measures against either party. In addition, this man describes a girl staying at home with her parents as an option, rather than living with the father of her child. Alternatively, the care of both the girl and the child may be arranged to share the burden between the two families.

Either the family want when the girl delivers or when the baby gets strong they turn the child over to the boys family.
Interviewer: What if the girl doesn’t want her baby to leave?
Than she herself will have stay home and take care of the child until a certain age.
– Adult Female Montserrado

In this case, while the girl’s family may support her during the pregnancy, the boy’s family may raise the child, even if he and the mother of the child do not live together. Respondents often described such flexible responses to pregnancy as the best option, where the families of both the girl and boy offer support.

Apart from the parents of the girl who is pregnant and the boy who impregnated her, respondents told researchers that family members might also support the girl.

If the parents don’t want to take up responsibility they will take the girl to the boy parents to stay. She could go to her aunty or uncle. She could go to the boyfriend who pregnant her. The family would want her to go to the boy parents to stay because they don’t want to be responsible for the pregnancy. – Adult Female Montserrado

Although respondents describe the father of the child as the best person to care for the girl during and after the pregnancy, other members of the girl’s support system can step in to offer assistance, if the pregnant girl’s parents cannot or will not provide for her. However, respondents described different responses by the girl’s family if the boy denies that he impregnated her.

A girl was attending the public school when she got impregnated. She dropped from the school, few weeks after, when I visited the clinic, I met her there where she went
for treatment. Lastly, I heard that her parents accepted the pregnancy and also heard that boy who impregnated disowned the pregnancy without doing anything to him.
– Male Community Leader Montserrado

This community leader describes what might happen if a boy or man denies that he is the father of a girl’s child – no one may pursue him for support and he thereby avoids financial responsibility for the pregnancy or child. The girl’s parents have the option to continue the matter and to try to have the boy or man held accountable, in which case the authorities might be involved.

Sometimes they [the girl’s parents] go to the police station to carry police on the boy because he denies the pregnancy and when the police investigate and the boy is guilty he goes to jail for sometimes one week.
Interviewer: After one week in jail what next?
He and his parents began to take up their responsibility as the baby’s father.
- Male Government / NGO Montserrado

Above, the respondent describes the court system and time in jail as method to impel the boy and his family to take responsibility for the pregnancy. The boy is released from jail once he agrees to support the girl. Respondents did not describe additional action against a man or boy who refuses to accept a pregnancy.

According to respondents, a pregnant teenage girl may pursue a different response pathway; she may abort the pregnancy, even though elective abortion is against the law. Although participants did not describe the decision process that leads to a girl deciding between bearing a child and seeking an abortion, the latter was listed among the list of options by interviewees of both genders and every age category.

[After learning she is pregnant] Child will go to Ma, friends, boyfriend, and family member. Ma will tell the child to take out the belly or sometime put the child out. Family member will advise you to keep the pregnancy or sometime ask for the belly owner to take care of the child. Community member will only sit down and gossip. People outside the community will do nothing about it. – Adult Female Nimba

While this woman describes abortion as an option that might be suggested by a mother, numerous adults spoke about wanting to prevent girls from terminating pregnancies, as the practice is not only illegal, but also considered socially unacceptable by some people.

My 13 years old daughter is currently pregnant and she has left the house and gone to her friend place. The worse thing, I don’t even know the main friend she gone to and I still checking for her because I don’t want anybody to fool her to abort the pregnancy before she die in the process. – Adult Male Montserrado

This father describes terminating the pregnancy as an unacceptable option for his daughter, describing abortion as the worst thing that could happen. He accounts for this view by explaining the danger of abortion; as such a procedure might be undertaken in a way that could harm his daughter. Respondents exclusively listed female friends and relatives as the people who might assist a girl in deciding to abort a pregnancy or accompanying her to do so.

Some of the girls will tell friends, some of the friends because they don’t want for the girl’s parents to hear that she is pregnant, they will take her to medicine person or give her leaf that she will drink and most often they [the pregnant girl] cannot survive. They can die from it. – Adult Male Nimba

Despite the potential physical risks and cultural norms that value pregnancy and childbearing, respondents from different counties and backgrounds described abortion as one of the options
available to teenage girls who become pregnant.

B. Child Labor, Carrying Heavy Load

Most respondents defined child labor as work that was too physically demanding for children, or that took up too much of their time and forced them neglect their studies. An adult male in Montserrado explained that, to him, child labor is “When a child do any work that is not good for his age or growth, like a child taking a bag of rice that too heavy for him, or any work that might cause the child not to grow healthy.” This man described the consequences of a child performing labor to be the most important negative aspect, that his or her growth or development might be affected, which might then have long-term consequences. It is important to note that many respondents saw children participating in some work as beneficial, both in the short and long term.

[Child labor is] Not important so much, because a child in the home needs to help the parents at all time whenever there is work in the home because it is part of the upbringing of every child and it also helps in making the child to be self reliant in the future. – Male Youth Montserrado

Like this young man, most respondents emphasized that while giving a child work that is too heavy or takes too much time can have a negative effect; children should be helpful to their parents in safe and appropriate situations.

Causes

Respondents shared a variety of reasons why children are involved in work that is inappropriate for them, the most common of which was that children worked with, or at the request of, their parents, in order to support their household. According to a woman in Nimba “...sometimes by economic status because some parents are poor, so they have to send children to sell before eating. So bad people take advantage of them.” Many respondents agreed with her, that children often enter the workforce in order to help support their families, but once they are outside of the care of their parents; they become more vulnerable to other child protection violations. Respondents reported that children of poor families are more likely to work, and that children who work are more vulnerable to child protection violations, therefore poor working children experience heightened vulnerability to such risks. For example, drowning was listed earlier as a risk associated with children working; according to an employee of the government or an NGO, it is poor children who are most likely to do work where drowning is a risk,

They [parents] go in the morning and come late in the evening after selling and some parents can’t afford [basic expenses] so they send their children to go on the beach to work for these Fante people. – Female Government/NGO Montserrado

Of note is that respondents believed that many children come from families where parents were unable to provide their children with necessities although they worked, and that children’s work was needed in order to bolster the household economy.

When considering why some children work too much or too often, children and youth in particular were likely to identify gender as a determining factor, although they were most likely to identify their own gender as doing the most work.

Girls have so much work around the home especially much more than boys. This mean that they work more to help their mothers and have less time to study and are more likely to stop going to school or to go less days each week.

– Girl Montserrado
Boys have so much work around the community especially, more than girls. Meaning that they work more to help their fathers/have lesser time to even study and are likely to even forget about going to school or reduce the five days in school to 2 or 3 in a week. – Youth Male Montserrado

Respondents reported that both boys and girls might be given the most work, as girls are given significant work in the home with their mothers, while boys are sent to help their fathers with work outside the home. Despite the lack of consensus about which gender works most, what both quotes demonstrate is that participating in work can overwhelm a child, reducing the time he or she has to study, and increasing the likelihood that he or she will attend school less frequently, or not at all.

When considering the reasons why some children may be engaged in child labor rather than others, respondents listed living away from one’s biological family, specifically if the alternative caregiver lives outside of the child’s home community.

Yes, it can happen in the home mainly. A neighbor of your community brought a little girl to live with her, she make that little girl work almost whole day by taking heavy gallons to draw water at the pump. – Boy Nimba

While sending a child to live with an alternative caregiver was listed as a coping mechanism for families unable to meet a child’s basic needs, respondents reported that the possibility that the child will be mistreated and participate in child labor are higher if the child is not living with biological parents.

When discussing child labor, some respondents expressed mixed or unclear feelings because they believed that children should do some work in the home, and often had difficulties defining what can be classified as inappropriate work or condemning others for having their children perform chores, when their own children also work.

For child labor, it is very difficult to tell someone. Once the child is your relative child. Sometimes you don’t have the means to take care of your child and you send the child to your brother or any relative, it is hard to talk. Even your own biological child you can used them, especially in the village. – Adult Male Nimba

This man explains that once you are in a situation where you have trouble taking care of your children, and a relative is caring for them, it is hard to criticize how the children are treated. He also refers to children’s economic ‘worth’, that when facing financial difficulties a parent might use his or own children to earn money to help support the family.

Outcomes and Consequences

Outcomes and consequences of child labor were diverse, ranging from physical injury to longer term repercussions such as school dropout due to lack of time to study or attend classes. Respondents emphasized that when children perform tasks that are inappropriate for their size or maturity levels, they may experience immediate effects such as injury, disability, or death. When asked to describe what things happen to a child in his community during this sort of labor, a male youth explained,

They [the risks] can be plenty, they got one thick rope, they will tied that rope on one person wrist very tight and you will go under the sea, when you find one iron... then all of them will put together and haul that rope... until you come on shore. This identical thing is not good for children because they can drown almost every month from it. That iron where they can be bringing on shore, it can be this old, old ship them where can sink and part of it can leave under the water and it can be rusty,
sometime while bringing it on shore, it can cut them and they can get tetanus from it.
– Youth Male Montserrado

When considering what kinds of work are inappropriate for children, respondents very often focused on the harm that could come to a child due to such work. In the instance above the young man describes a scenario where children could drown or otherwise be injured. Drowning was listed as a significant concern among youth and children in Montserrado, according to a female youth there, “This time the big people can’t get in the canoe to go fishing, that the small children they can send and when the sea get rough the whole canoe can turn over and they who can’t swim can get drown.” Drowning was discussed as a concern primarily because many children work, bathe, or play in bodies of water, but cannot swim, and because while they are doing so, they are rarely supervised by adults.

Respondents reported that children could, likewise, be injured while working even if they were not near the sea, and if they were working for their family in agriculture or business rather than for an outside employer.

Most of the time the children here like the boys can make farm or burn coal just to help themselves. Things like this happen because they have no one to help them.
– Adult Female Montserrado

Yes, boys get hurt while brushing. Girls carry heavy load and taking care of the home to cook, draw water etc. Some can be from 11-15 years. Some of them are not staying with their own parents.
– Girl Nimba

Here a woman and child from different counties both report that children can be seriously injured while working. Children participate in tasks such as making farm, burning brush, or drawing water, which was confirmed during observation by researchers, who, additionally, reported that children may perform these tasks without any adult supervision, putting them at risk should anything go wrong.

Respondents consistently reported that the vast majority of children in their communities participate in some work inside and around the home, or with their parents ‘making farm’. However, when children are pressured or forced to work outside of the home, it may be because a parent does not have access to another way to earn income.

In our community most of these women it is their area, they can suffer the children in this community seen they are living on business, they can force the child to go sell if you refuse you will not eat either go to school.
– Youth Female Montserrado

Sometime the boys them that like money business, one may will just say, “come cut my palm, I will pay you” then he climb in the palm tree not knowing snake there, then it bite him.
– Boy Nimba

When children must earn income on their own, at the risk of not eating if they do not, respondents, such as the boy above, reported that they were more likely to enter into dangerous situations, sometimes at the behest of adults. Moreover, if children are consistently overburdened with work, it was reported that they might run away from home in order to avoid that work.

The child could run away to avoid the heavy work, but then the child will have to work and might end up on the street if she is a girl child will become a commercial sexual worker; if he is a boy, he will be a robber.
– Boy Montserrado
Although leaving home may help a child avoid heavy work, most respondents reported that once a child runs away from home, for whatever reason, he or she is reportedly at a higher risk of experiencing child protection violations.

Community Responses

When considering how their community responds to child labor, many respondents shared what they thought could be done, instead of what currently happens; probing revealed that this is because, in the majority of cases, community members may not address child labor because it is common and considered a family matter. However, children shared what a child might do to address the issue on his or her own.

If a child experience child labor he could go to either friend, religious leader or live with [biological] parents. If the child goes to their friend, the friend will tell relatives [of the child being overworked] and relatives will go to parents to inquire what happen and if it is true the child will live with the relatives or the relatives and parents will reconcile the issue or support the child. If the child goes to religious leaders they advise the child or take the child to live with them. If the child goes to [his own, if he is living with alternative caregivers] parents they will accept their child if what the child said it is true... The people outside the community will not do anything about it. The key decision will be made by the parents and relatives of the child. – Child Female Nimba

This girl explained, in detail, all the options she believed were available to a child, including going to friends, relatives, or religious leaders. While each different person reportedly provided a slightly different type of support the result of each situation appears to be arranging a discussion with the parents, child, and someone who can mediate or advocate for the child. Something this girl raised was that a child living with alternative caregivers is assumed to be a child likely to be overworked, but the response to child labor in that case is different, whereby the child may return home to his biological parents. Respondents reported that children staying with alternative caregivers might be at greater risk of engaging in inappropriate work.

But the person [alternative caregiver] he living with will still make him work because he staying with them. He force to do it whether he like it or not because his born [biological] parent [is] not around. He can’t call the police because he scared [is scared]; the person [alternative caregiver] will put him out and he not get nowhere, his people [family] living far off. The community people [it]self must put law down too. If somebody staying with you, you must not treat them bad. You must treat them like you[r] own child. Let them talk it all over the police. – Boy Nimba

This boy describes a common theme echoed by respondents of every age and gender category, that children staying with alternative caregivers have less recourse to protest the work they are given, but rather must do what they are told, unless returning to their biological parents is a possibility. In addition, this boy mentions that while children are aware that the police’s role in the community is to help protect residents, children may not ask for help because they fear the police, although this child did not specify why. Whether staying with alternative caregivers or with biological parents, respondents (both children and adults) consistently expressed the need for an advocate who can help children approach their caregivers and ask for the work given to them to change.

Respondents in Montserrat and Nimba mentioned family and community members who might be willing to help a child who was being overburdened with work, however they also
expressed concern that because children are expected to work, that it was not their place to interfere.


Nobody will go to the police, because they do not see it as matter for the police but community matter, it is just members of the community. – Adult Male Montserrado

A child at the age of 12 years came to our hospital with palm wine to sell. I called him talk to him, to tell his father that he wants to go to school. I took the matter to the police man, he promises to call the attention of the parents. – Female Government or NGO Montserrado

While most community members agreed with the man above, that community members are unlikely to ask anyone outside of the immediate community to address a case of child labor, this was not universally true. Members of government and employees of NGOs were significantly more likely than any other group to tell researchers that they would be willing to involve the police if they observed a child being overworked. Once the police are involved, respondents described them as likely to take a similar course of action as community members might, calling the family and child together to discuss the situation.

The police can call the family of that child to station and require [inquire] what is happening and in return the will talk to the parents by telling child labor is against the child right and they should put stop to it. But if they [the parents] refuse then they [the police] will say they will arrest them and send them to court. – Boy Nimba

Beyond speaking with parents and asking them to give the child more appropriate work, respondents did not share any cases where further steps were taken. Instead, more respondents spoke about different community members who might intervene and speak to the parents on the child’s behalf.

The community member will carry the complaint to the elders, and the elder will call the family of that child to tell them to stop making the child to work hard. It is very easy to contact the elders because they are right in the town everyday. The only help that is given is to advice the parents not to allow the child to work hard or carry heavy load. – Boy Nimba

This child shared the most commonly reported path for addressing child labor, where the parents or caregivers are called and advised by community members or leaders and asked to change the work given to the child. However, if parents did not alter the work the child did, respondents did not mention any further action.

During interviews, participants were asked if there were other available options that would not be used in their community. A man in Montserrado explained why a child could not refuse to do work given to them, even if it was inappropriate or dangerous.

The child will refuse to work for the people/to bring his parents money
Interviewer: Why wouldn’t this option be used?
This is not the child’s decision and if he refuses to work his parents will get him out of the house, so it is better for him to continue working to bring them money.
- Male Adult Montserrado

Most respondents agreed with this man, and told researchers that children do not have the agency to disagree with their parents about the work they are given, they must have a supportive person who can speak to their parents for them, as described above. While community members consistently described speaking to the child’s parents, or perhaps, if they were members of government or an NGO, to report the matter to police, to address an instance of child labor. However, despite what might appear to be few options in addressing
the problem, respondents universally identified child labor as something that the community should take part in addressing.

[Child labor is] Community responsibility, if they want to see child future bright, they need to report such cases to the police, because police has Women and Children Protection Unit. Government should put in monitors in various communities to stop people abusing children, arrest should also be made. – Adult Male Nimba

This respondent describes a sentiment that many other respondents echoed; they felt that while the community should be involved in combating child labor, most members interviewed did not feel well equipped to do so on their own, and expressed willingness to receive outside support.

C. Rape and Sexual Abuse

Respondents varied in their definitions of rape, and therefore during each FGD or interview, any respondent who mentioned the issue was asked to give his/her working definition, and the following discussion used that meaning. All respondents agreed that rape was inappropriate sexual contact, however, who the involved parties might be and other specifics of the crime varied considerably. A woman in Nimba described several different circumstances that respondents listed as rape.

“Sometimes children are force against their will. Sometime when your children in the community, some man can be there without no wife, but they can be calling the children especially girl child, when they come from their working place, giving them recess, gifts and money to child. When it [the man] is used to [familiar with] the child, then you will rape her. [Rape is] Not having choice. Sometime wickedness.

– Adult Female Nimba

Respondents clearly expressed that sexual interaction without mutual consent is rape, as does the woman above. She also mentions several “scenarios” that reportedly can lead to rape, all of which were mentioned in both counties, particularly that children are at risk while working outside of the home, and that community members are often the perpetrators. Additionally, this respondent cites “wickedness” as a reason for rape; this is a term that was widely used when respondents were asked why people might commit child protection violations.

Causes

Respondents of every age group and gender offered anecdotes about rapes that had occurred in their communities, which may indicate the frequency of the child protection violation, the openness with which the issue is discussed, or the extent to which such stories are shared once they become public.

While respondents valued education and school attendance, rape and sexual relationships between teachers and students were reported in both counties and in almost every data collection location.

Student will not respect teachers and will not take lesson serious, because at the end of the day she will love to teacher for grade, and school will have many pregnant students and parents will stop sending their children to school. – Girl Montserrado

According to this girl, in addition to the harm experienced by a student who is sexually pursued by a teacher, the reportedly normative nature of such interaction affects other students. These students reportedly are aware that students who have sex with teachers will
be given good grades, and, alternatively, other students may be withdrawn from school if parents fear they will be coerced into a similar relationship.

When respondents described circumstances that might put children, most often girls, at risk for rape, they often shared anecdotes about instances where children are outside of the home and unsupervised by parents.

*It was this little girl who her parents sent to sell... a man about age 30 years told the girl, ‘come let me offer my friends’, he bought almost [one] hundred dollars worth, then he went in his house and call the girl in, ‘come for your money’ and she did after a while his friend went to check he had rape the girl.*

– Male Government/NGO Montserrado

In this case, the respondent explained that the girl was vulnerable to rape because she was selling goods by herself away from the reported safety of the family home. In addition, in this and other rape cases, respondents described scenarios where men in the community lured girls and abused them. While rapists were not always caught or punished, respondents reported that their identity seemingly often is known. According to a woman in Montserrado, “Rape is anything that penetrates. it is done more especially done with a girl. For example, like a girl in our village was rape by her friend brother.” Neither this woman nor other respondents explained how they came to know about these rapes, but the strongest connection between the circumstances they described was that girls were more vulnerable when alone. No respondent ever described the rape or sexual abuse of a boy, but this was not probed for during data collection due to the sensitive nature of the issue. During a FGD with girls in Nimba, they offered several scenarios during which girls may be vulnerable to rape, and these mirrored the circumstances described in Montserrat. According to girls in this group,

– When [someone] ask you for love [sex] and you say no they can force you;
– Sometime when you are selling, they will take your market [goods] and say let us go to my house for the money and when you follow them they will rape you;
– Sometime when you are bathing in the bathroom and people are not around they [men] will enter and rape you;
– When you are alone coming from school or going on the farm;
– When they [men] smoke or drink liquor, when they see you alone they can rape.

The above examples are not intended to present all situations during which girls may be more vulnerable to rape. Rather, this and other groups of girls expressed a high degree of sensitivity to the risk of rape in their communities, which supports their assertion that it is something that significantly affects the safety and security of children in their communities.

**Outcomes and Consequences**

Rape was discussed in approximately half of FGDs within each age sub-set, however when exploring issues that are sensitive to discuss within communities during individual interviews, rape and sexual abuse were often listed. One important distinction is that while many respondents mentioned rape, members of the government and NGO employees were most likely to discuss the issues in detail, most likely because the interlocutors interviewed often were tasked with addressing child protection violations as part of their jobs. However, regardless of the detail with which rape was discussed, many respondents listed physical, social, and emotional consequences.

*Rape is very important because it damage children for life, it make some of them not to born [bear children]. It can make children to get sick, they suffer from infection.*
Rape can make children get AIDS. It can make children shame to come to school or to sit among their friends. – Youth Male Montserrado

Respondents listed earlier teenage pregnancy as a cause for school dropout, however when that pregnancy is the result of rape, this youth explained that the girl might drop out due to shame, in addition to her added childcare responsibilities. Many respondents described rape as an isolating experience, where girls were likely to leave school, ‘sit down’ at home, and even leave the community.

Either her womb be destroyed that she might never have children in her life. She might get sick from it and be taken to the hospital and will have to leave the community for sometime. – Male NGO/Government Montserrado

Many respondents discussed the need to take a child to the hospital following a rape, both for her personal health, and occasionally to aid in future prosecution of the perpetrator. Subsequently, the girl’s parents may send her to live elsewhere, usually with relatives, to avoid the shame she and her family may experience in the community. Respondents did not discuss when or under what circumstances a girl might return.

Respondents perceived loss of virginity as a significant consequence of rape, which is associated with the social and religious beliefs that women should be virgins when they marry.

Last week Friday, a Fante man send a 15 years old girl to buy him food and the little girl bought the food and brought it, he called the girl enter to carry the food in his room, when the girl enter the room he jump on her and rape her where she lost her virginity. The girl began to yell, people from the community came to her rescue but it was already late. – Adult Male Montserrado

Respondents reported maintaining virginity until marriage and the ability to bear children thereafter to be very important benchmarks in the lives of girls and women, and therefore rape not only violates the bodily rights of girls, but also diminishes her value when she or her parents consider marriage in the future. Similarly, respondents viewed not being able to bear children as an extremely serious consequence of rape, as fertility and childbearing are highly valued in Montserrado and Nimba.

I have already talked about the bad thing, rape is the only or the worse thing for me, I don’t like because the men can spoil our sisters. Their stomach can be hurting, some can get belly [pregnant], some can born [give birth], they say that witchcraft. – Boy Montserrado

This boy’s language is demonstrative about the attitudes towards rape expressed by many community members. Many respondents shared their and their community’s beliefs that once raped a girl is ‘spoiled’, and no longer holds the same place in society. In addition, the boy’s account that a child conceived from rape might be associated with witchcraft is very serious, as fear of and aggression towards anyone associated with witchcraft was apparent in FGD and interview transcripts from every data collection site.

Community Responses

When respondents discussed community responses to rape, the options presented were to settle the case within the community, to go to a member of the formal child protection system, or not to address the case. Respondents reported that community members were
likely to choose one option versus another based on who the perpetrator was, perceptions of
the formal system, and whether the family was willing to have the wider community know
about the case, which might happen if they reported it.

Before a rape can be addressed, however, respondents agreed that the girl must report the
rape. When considering who a girl might choose for support in this circumstance, participants
agreed that a girl was most likely to go to parents, specifically her mother, if she was raped
by someone outside of her home.

*If a girl is rape, she go and tell her parents. The girl could also go and tell her family
member. She could go to her mother for help. The girl could also go to her friends to
tell them. The parents take the child to the police to file in the case. They the parents
can complain to community people, town chiefs, superintendent, and the woman
group. The community can sit together to find solution for the child; sometimes the
parents can get the women group. They will get together and go to meet the
perpetrator for further investigation. The parents make the decision on behalf of their
child. If the situation is like this perpetrator could probably come back to marry the
girl and make this girl his wife because sometimes situation like this can be
compromise by the girl’s parents. – Girl Montserrado*

This girl presented the variety of options available to parents after they find out their daughter
has been raped. Reportedly, once the girl decides to tell her parents about the rape, they
become the primary decision makers, and determine whether to engage the informal or
formal child protection systems.

*[The community] Called the man who do these things, and if no good result [the issue
is not settled] they community people can tell the town chief and the police and they can
settle it by advising the person and tell them not to do it again. Sometime the community
people put money together and gave it to the girl family to help take her to the hospital,
but they not part of no particular group. - Male Community Leader Montserrado*

According to this community leader, the parents of the girl usually will try to settle the issue
with the perpetrator, and if that fails, they will pursue the support of formal child protection
mechanisms. However, according to this account, members of the formal system, such as the
town chief or the police, may also attempt to have the parents and the perpetrator settle the
case. Thus, resolving a rape case informally can occur in both the formal and informal
systems. Additionally, while many respondents explained that the community would not be
involved in a rape case, reportedly they might be casually involved by helping offset the costs
of taking the girl survivor to a health center. Paying for healthcare costs is often an important
element of resolving the case within a community, and according to a man in Montserrado,
may make the difference between resolving the case within the informal system and reporting
it to the police.

*The last time one case happen here, the boy rape one woman daughter, it was not
easy. The girl family got to know about it, by that time the boy na [had] run away and
go hide himself. So his [the boy’s] Pa and Ma went to the girl people to talk it family
way [resolve the case]. The girl Ma say she can do [resolve] it because that her
daughter he hurt, so the only way she will forget it [is if] when they send her daughter
to the hospital and do everything. So the boy Pa them say they na [are not] able, so
the woman say they will go to the Police. Soon the boy Pa them [and his family] hear
that one, they call their son to not come in the community. Before we can make up our
mind na, the man [father] and his woman too run away too. So the case still to the
Police. Any time they [the Police] see them, they will arrest them, because that crime*
they commit. – Adult Male Montserrado

The man explains that if two families attempt to resolve a dispute involving rape, such settlement may be contingent upon the boy or man’s family’s ability to meet the demands of the girl’s family. If they are able to do so, often paying a sum of money to compensate the parents or pay for costs associated with the rape, the boy may be left free. However, in this case, the boy and his parents left the community and ran away in order to avoid legal charges. This action reflects many respondents’ description of rape charges as very serious.

Because they know that this is a state crime so it can be hard, especially if the risk [rape] was done by one of the family member in the community. It will bring disgrace, and forever lasting. [It will bring] Separation between the families if this family member is taken to jail for 10 years so they keep it as a secret. - Adult Male Montserrado

In fact, according to this man, the severity of rape charges may dissuade a rape survivor’s family from pressing charges, due to the severity of the punishment, and the discord it could cause between families in the community. However, when comparing rape to other child protection violations discussed by respondents in Montserrado and Nimba, respondents were more likely that they would involve members of the formal child protection sector in the case of rape than in any other child protection response.

Yes, we can usually refer than to the [NGO] worker, [or] to the police, for cases like rape. The police will arrest that person and take them to police will arrest that person and take them to the station for questioning. If they are guilty they will go to jail. But if they are not found guilty, they will go free. For the [NGO] worker, they will talk to the child by finding out what happen, if there is a need for medical treatment. The will send the child to the clinic or if not they will advice the child to report any cases. – Female Community Leader Nimba

This female community leader describes her role in the referral pathway, whereby, once she becomes aware of a child who has been raped, she will then refer the child to the local branch of an international NGO. This community leader expresses faith in the formal legal system, as did many respondents; stating that she believes that if a person is guilty, he/she will be found guilty and punished. This community leader demonstrates in depth of knowledge about the formal pathway of response in the case of the rape of a child, perhaps indicating a level of familiarity most likely associated with ongoing interaction or participating in awareness raising activities.

Despite respondents ranking rape in half of all focus groups, and the issue being the central topic of numerous in-depth interviews, the issue remains a sensitive one. Although many respondents shared various pathways of response for addressing rape, they also described instances in which rape would not be reported. Both a girl in Montserrado and a government or NGO employee shared that when the rapist is from within the community, reporting the crime can result in backlash, as well as shame for the family of the child.

They [rape cases] are hard to talk about because it brings shame and disgrace to that family, especially [a] family who [is] proud [and] always like good things to happen to their children, who can be boasting about their children. My child is different from other community children they will become doctors, nurses, ministers and you go and see all their girls children get better or been raped by bad men and the child bring shame and disgrace so the person will keep it secret. – Girl Montserrado

This girl infers that once a child is raped, her reputation and that of her family may be compromised, and avoiding those consequences may be prioritized over reporting the
perpetrator or helping the child access medical care. In addition to experiencing shame in the community if the rape becomes public knowledge, this NGO or government employee explained that there may be repercussions from community members, and it could lead to tension or even conflict.

In this community, you can’t, just people talking about their family issue like rape and you come out to stay sent it to the hospital or call the police. You will surely get in trouble with the people sometimes they will say that’s my relative and you are putting him in jail? So we just see these things and pass by without talking, but we are still trying through the health talk at the clinic to tell them rape is not good.

– Male NGO/Government Nimba

This man’s description of the reporting of rape as being ‘against’ the community interest, if the perpetrator is from that place, was not unique, and as this government or NGO employee describes, might prevent referrals to the formal child protection system.

Respondents described incest as always sensitive or taboo, and explained it would almost never be reported to the formal child protection system.

One is rape, another is a father making [a sexual] attempt on daughter, because it cause risk for the child. The child future is at risk. You won’t tell anyone especially father making attempt on daughter. It will only bring confusion on the home.

– Female NGO/Government Nimba

This NGO or government employee describes incest, particularly between a father and daughter, as particularly difficult to address. The likely repercussions, both legally, within the community, and within the immediate family, reportedly could be grave, and this woman did not believe that community members would perceive them as outweighing the needs of the child.

D. Kidnapping

When respondents discussed kidnapping they most often related it to kidnapping for ritual sacrifice, or kidnapping for enrollment in traditional Bush Schools. Respondents referred to this issue using several different terms including kidnapping, heartmen, and harm-men. A girl in Montserrado explained,

Kidnappers [are] unknown persons [who] hide themselves, run after children and adult, catch them, take parts while alive for ritual purpose for either money or big position in government or organization they work with. These heartmen destroy children and adult future because of ritual purpose. – Girl Montserrado

Respondents in all data collection locations offered similar definitions of kidnapping and associated ritual sacrifice, despite cultural and geographical differences between locations.

Causes

Respondents agreed that kidnappers in Montserrado and Nimba operate for their own gain, or the gain of someone who has hired them, because sacrificing a person and in some cases taking their organs, can help people reach or maintain power.

Unknown men can make contact already, they hide in the bush, take the child when he/she is walking alone on the motor road away from the town carry the child in the high bush, kill the person, and extract body parts for ritualistic purposes. To sell body parts to people who are in higher position in government to retain their positions by making sacrifices with the parts extracted from that person’s body.
Unlike many of the other child protection issues discussed during data collection, respondents explained that kidnapping and heartmen generally were from outside of the community, and tended to be, or be associated with, ‘big men’ or people in positions of power. According to a young man in Nimba sacrifice may have multiple purposes.

*Like when you going on the farm, when you not lucky, they can chase you to kill you and take human being part from you. They can make medicine from it. Sometime it can be for the big people in government to get money or to get more power.***

Respondents explained that making medicine and accessing or maintaining power were the two most common reasons for kidnapping that leads to sacrifice. Evidence of such activities was given in multiple communities, where children had been found after such practices were performed.

*A child was kidnapped in this area while he was walking from the bush and was caught. Some part of his body part were removed, his private part, nose, eyes and ears were removed and his body was later found.* – Female Adult Montserrado

Children and adults shared stories of kidnapping and sacrifice, as well as kidnapping associated with secret societies, specifically the Sandy for girls.

*Most of these girls have dropped from school, because they have spent almost four months [in the bush] so they will not be in school this year... the people came grab them from there and carry them. Some children usually come from other villages to school... These women hide themselves in the bush on the wayside, when the children walk closer to them, they jump from the bush and run after them, catch them and take them in the bush. They will only send someone to the child’s parent and tell them that your child went to go spy us, so we catch the child. She is with us, so the parent force to go there.* – Girl Montserrado

During the course of data collection researchers encountered communities where Sandy bush school was ongoing, however, as might be expected, they encountered resistance to discussing associated practices. Multiple sources confirmed that girls might be kidnapped and taken to the bush for many months, which precludes their participation in formal education.

When considering what makes children vulnerable to kidnapping, the most common reason was a lack of supervision when away from home.

*Normal parents don’t even check on children when they come to school. They [children] will walk for distance, no one to guide or protect them on their way to school, so people jump on the girls children beat them and take them along in the Sandy bush and be indicated [initiated]. Because they are looking for more girls, the more they [Sandy leaders] get and initiate, the more they get by request for it from the girl children’s parents or families. We also find out that heartmen are around.* – Male NGO/Government Montserrado

Without going into great detail about the Sandy society itself, respondents explained that while some parents may send their daughters to Bush School to learn traditional and cultural aspects of womanhood, sometimes girls are taken to these schools again their will. This government or NGO employee explains that it is in the Zoe’s (Sandy Bush School leader) best interest to have many students, as parents must pay for their daughters to attend the school, which is reportedly why they kidnap girls and insist upon their enrollment.

*Outcomes and Consequences*
Respondents described kidnapping that resulted in death as that which caused the most fear, as the incidents were described as random, causing fear that oneself or one’s children might be targeted.

*Children are usually killed or die from this. Sometimes if the hideman hear that the police and people are in search of the child and they [the hideman] have not take child far off they, they can leave the child to go. But most of the time when the child come back they can be normal or they can be crazy, because the people can use African sign [charms or spells] on them so they can’t remember to say where they was.* – Female Youth Montserrado

This female youth explains that while most kidnapped children do not return home, there may be lasting consequences even if a child is rescued, as he or she reportedly may appear mentally ill. Kidnapping also can make children feel unsafe or insecure if a parent is taken. According to a girl in Montserrado, “Heartmen make children fatherless and motherless when these adults are chased and raise by the heartmen, parts taken for ritual purpose.”

Respondents reported that death of a parent could have a significant negative impact on children; although this was not one of the risks mentioned most frequently, respondents did discuss it in some FGDs.

Respondents reported that the threat of kidnapping and heartmen creates fear among children and parents in communities that they or their loved ones could become victims. According to an adult man in Montserrado, “It can make children not to move about freely in the community.” While restricting freedom of movement among children could be a protective response to the threat of kidnapping a boy explained an associated consequence,

*Like for example the hideman business can make the other children who living far from this town cannot come to school, they scare maybe when they coming some kind of man will catch them and kill the person.* – Boy Montserrado

According to this boy, and other respondents living in rural areas, children are most vulnerable to kidnapping during a long walk to school, and therefore, in order to avoid that risk, the children may cease to attend.

**Community Responses**

Respondents reported that their communities have responded to the threat of kidnapping both through prevention and response. The most frequently mentioned way to prevent kidnapping was to better supervise children and discourage them from travelling alone.

*Community should tell parents to stop sending their children alone on the bush road and even on the main road that passing through here, because is very quiet, especially when you go further.* - Adult Female Montserrado

However, as this woman shared, while some families have responded to the possibility of kidnapping by changing how their child travels, others have not done so, leaving them at risk. Changing movement patterns is connected to raising awareness within communities, which also was reported to have aided in how children respond after being kidnapped.

*There is a nine years old boy living here, onetime his ma sends him to go and buy something on his way, a white jeep with dark windshields stop and the people that was in the jeep got down and grab the boy and put him in the car. While they were leaving, the boy began to shout and cry in the car, and people outside started hearing it and started chasing the car, so they slow down and threw the boy out of the car, and that was how he got saved.* – Boy Montserrado
Through community awareness of kidnapping, respondents reported that children are more likely to fight back if they are kidnapped, as they know the potential outcomes. In addition, because community members are aware of the urgency of a kidnapping, respondents reported that they were very likely to engage both the community and the police to help look for the child.

The parent will put the announcement on radio and will ask the child if he can remember the person face. The uncle will tell the parent about the harm man [if he sees the kidnapping occur]... The friend will spread it all around for other friends to know. The parent could call the police. Maybe because they not living near the police station or the place they living, no police people there. Let the government people them make law that if they catch anybody who can run behind people to kill them, they must put them in jail. – Boy Nimba

When considering how kidnapping cases could be resolved, respondents almost universally felt that kidnappers should be punished by the formal justice system. A boy in Montserrado County shared such a case with researchers,

I feel that they [community, police, and courts] all are working together because anything like rape or kidnapping take place in the community, our leaders like the quarter chief or the town chief can call the police and they [the police] will come right away to take over the case which involved a child in the community.
– Boy Montserrado

However, despite respondents describing community and police willingness to react after a child is kidnapped, apprehending the people who have taken the child was described as difficult and uncommon.

Many people or persons who do kidnapping feel that it is good for them because there is nobody to see them, to have them arrested. There is ignorance about what these people do by kidnapping children, people do not know that they should not kill children for reason best know to them. – Male Adult Montserrado

This man explains that while on one hand, it is difficult to arrest kidnappers, because the crime they commit rarely has witnesses, there must also be awareness raising amongst the public so people know that they should not kill children. Respondents described kidnapping as difficult to address, according to a boy in Montserrado County “The community people and the child parents will go together to look for the child, if they don’t find the person, they will just let it go like that.” Once someone has committed a kidnapping, or another serious crime, respondents shared that fleeing the area was the usual response of the kidnapper, and made that person very difficult for the community or police to apprehend.
Discussion

A. Connections between Child Protection Risks

Mappings of community-based child protection mechanisms provide local concepts of child protection, insight into what issues exist in that community, as well as a better understanding of how those issues connect to each other, and where points of prevention or intervention might exist. Suggested linkages between teenage pregnancy, child labor, rape, kidnapping, and other child protection issues will be discussed below, as well as potential ways to prevent or address them. The diagrams below of other child protection risks that respondents reported may sometimes be associated with other risks. While the connection between these risks is not necessarily causal, during data collection participants reported these associations; exposure to one of the risks may increase a child’s vulnerability to another. Therefore, if these risks are linked, then by reducing issues that precipitate risks, the risks themselves might also be reduced. Understanding the causality between different child protection risks is a complex process, but below is how communities in Nimba and Montserrado understand such connections.

**Teenage Pregnancy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Pregnancy</th>
<th>Effects of Pregnancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Sandy Society) → Early marriage</td>
<td>Early marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>School dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Labor</td>
<td>Forced out of home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with alternative caregiver</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in school → Sex for grades</td>
<td>Abortion → Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for material things → Boyfriend</td>
<td>Health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional sex</td>
<td>Problems delivering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sex education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dropout → (Early sex or Early marriage)</td>
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**Prevention and Response Suggestions**

At the completion of interviews and focus group discussions researchers asked participants for suggestions about how teenage pregnancy could be prevented. Respondents focused on the communication between parents and children, as well as knowledge of and access to family planning. A government or NGO employee described his suggestion:

> The only option is that the mothers should know their children whenever they are getting mature especially the girls. The parents can take them to the nearest clinic for family planning because it is easy to get access to.
> – Male Government or NGO Montserrado

Ensuring access to family planning is essential for pregnancy prevention, because, as the government of NGO staff explains, and high rates of teenage pregnancy demonstrate, many young people in both Montserrado and Nimba counties engage in sexual activity in their teen years. In addition to access to family planning, education about safer sex and sexuality in schools or through outreach could have significant benefits, especially because these topics are considered taboo by some people, and therefore children may receive little or none of this information from their parents.

In addition to advice about health and family planning that adults can give to young people, a woman in Montserrado had a suggestion about how such programming and outreach is planned, she said that “the child should be a part of the decision making” in order to improve
services. This involvement could range from the design of programming to address issues that adolescents are concerned about, to training young people as peer educators.

In addition to directly addressing teenage pregnancy through sex education in schools, a girl explained how parents and the community could help address teenage pregnancy indirectly,

*If there is someone who can help the child/the parents to know that early pregnancy can cause the child to drop from school, than the person should be involved to educate the family on knowing why it is not good for a young girl who have not reach 18 years to get marry because it will lead the child to drop from school and he tell the parents that they should encourage their daughter to go to school in order to learn and when she is out of college or in college she can find a partner at which time she can get pregnant and bear a child or children.* – Girl Montserrado

Through promotion of girls’ education, the child described how pregnancy and marriage could be delayed with the support of parents and the community. However, while increasing the number of years girls attend school does not address the social and cultural pressure that girls experience to engage in sexual activity and to bear children, as starting a family often is perceived as associated with adulthood. Working with the community to change perceptions of education as another kind of adult achievement, rather than something for children, could help encourage young people to delay sex or to practice safer sex. Additionally, many girls reportedly see raising a family as the next step after discontinuing their formal education, regardless of their age, however if more economic opportunities were available, young women might be encouraged to delay pregnancy in order to earn money. When working or continuing your education before starting a family is associated with “doing well” young people may be more likely to prioritize family planning.

Adults discussed the importance of working with parents on both livelihoods and child protection topics.

*Another thing is poverty education create awareness to empower parents and children, [they] should be inform about the various risk into community. Leave number there in case of emergency like rape or other issues facing children. Government also should create job to minimize risk.* – Male Adult Nimba

This man explains that teaching parents and children about poverty reduction, and improving parents’ access to paying jobs is another way to reduce child protection risks. Other adults, especially parents, agreed, explaining that their children must work hard or leave school because the family is financially unable to make ends meet without taking such measures.

From education to family planning to livelihoods education, young men should be included to emphasize their role in preventing pregnancy. This will contribute to creating an environment where girls are less likely to need to negotiate the use of family planning and young men may be more likely to take responsibility if an unplanned pregnancy does occur.

### Child Labor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Child Labor</th>
<th>Effects of Child Labor</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of financial support</td>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with alternative caregiver</td>
<td>Walking alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Parents → Self-supporting child</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dropout</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of time to study</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School dropout</td>
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</table>
**Prevention and Response Suggestions**

Respondents discussed more community-based responses to child labor than for any other risk, perhaps because the immediate cause is relatively easy to identify, caregivers giving children too much work, and therefore direct responses may appear more available.

*I think parents should stop sending in the bush to go and look for snail to cook. The community leader needs to improve the health clinic.* – Girl Nimba

*The community leaders always call parents to tell them to stop their children from taking bath in the sea or looking for iron in the water.*
– Community Leader Male Montserrado

Many of the suggested responses to child labor were simply that parents and alternative caregivers should stop overburdening children, and only give them work that is appropriate for their age and development. However, this ignores that the three main causes of child labor listed by respondents are associated with the household economy, where parents need children to work in order to support their family. Therefore, some of the circumstances that can lead to child labor, such as lack of financial support or living with alternative caregivers due to parents inability to support a child, could be avoided if parents were able to earn more. Livelihoods interventions for parents, including training and business development, could help increase the household economy, and in turn would reduce the number of children participating in child labor. Additionally, given the number of risks associated with participating in child labor, including accidents, rape, kidnapping, and school dropout, it is possible that interventions to address child labor would affect other risks indirectly.

Community respondents often suggested improved enforcement of child labor laws, an adult woman in Nimba suggested that such enforcement could help diminish the number of children participating in child labor, as well as the number of parents likely to overwork children, as they may fear punishment. She explained, “We want for government to send people in various community that will monitor people telling them that beating on child is not good, using children to carry heavy load too and tell us what to do as parents.” This suggestion is also a request, whereby this woman suggests that when government tells parents *not* to discipline their children by hitting them or *not* to give children too much work, they should also spend time with parents talking about things that have positive outcomes for children. This type of parent education could address types of work that children can do that are not associated with negative consequences to ensure that community values associated with children learning about hard work are not undermined.

Many respondents suggested conducting community awareness raising about child labor that presents continuing a child’s education as the alternative. To respond to ongoing child labor, the girl shared that a child or advocate can “talk to the guardians on why they should discontinue child labor until their children are big to do those hard and heavy work.” Then, in order to prevent future child labor, it is important to “Educate the community to make sure that they know why child labor is not good, and telling the community for children to go to school and on time so they can learn more or get themselves doing something meaningful tomorrow.” This girl and many other respondents discussed education as valued by some parents, but not by all, so working to convince parents of the importance of education, could help keep children in school, which might reduce their risk of overworking. As previously mentioned, it is essential that any intervention does not insist that no children should do any work, but rather that they do work that is appropriate for their age and ability, as children often play an important role in ensuring that both household and economic tasks are completed. Promoting understanding among children and parents about what dangerous child
labor is, and how it differs from acceptable tasks for children is essential. Many community members, particularly adults, reported negative experiences with child rights education, as they believe it worsened children’s behavior and reduced the ability of adults to teach and discipline them. Ensuring that this same misunderstanding does not occur could entail working with parents to promote children’s safety when they do work, rather than framing the intervention as an effort to stop children from working.

### Prevention and Response Suggestions

Liberia experienced an extremely high incidence of rape during two civil wars. However, despite the end of the war, rape has continued to be very prevalent, with members of every community visited expressing concern about the safety of children in their communities. While Liberia is making strides in addressing rape, respondents reported that it remains a very real threat, especially to children.

When considering how to reduce the risk of rape for themselves and their peers, girls often suggested that outsiders could come and stop men from raping.

> I want to ask you why NGO or the government can send people here to work with the children so these teachers and other bad men here can stop spoiling the children in this community. – Girl Montserrado

However, beyond identifying men who rape children as “wicked” few children gave concrete suggestions about how to reduce the risk of rape. The idea of addressing the problem by engaging men is what stands out from this girl’s idea, as most suggestions related to how to better protect children, rather than how to stop men from raping. Working with boys and men so that they think of themselves as protectors of children, and ensuring that they have a role and voice in gender-based violence discussions is critical, because just as peer educators for children should be children, the same applies to peer educators for boys and men. In addition, during the wars, rape was used as a weapon and has led to some boys and men feeling entitled to rape women whom they find attractive, viewing it both a sexual opportunity and an affirmation of masculinity, and promoting healthy masculinity could help combat this.

Using this same premise to address rape could be successful, if rape were described as unmasculine, this and other similar messages could help increase the social stigma for raping. If perpetrators of rape were viewed more negatively, community members might be more likely to report rapes, rather than settle the case or protect them because they are friends or family members. In addition, increasing negative stigma around rape could discourage rape, as perpetrators might be more likely to face community sanction or excommunication. Communities have an important role to play in communicating the message that rape is unacceptable, and to wed this message with actions that show they will not allow rapists to go unpunished. Using social stigma to discourage rape could help frame the issue so that
survivors are more likely to be viewed as victims, and the perpetrators as the cause, which, currently, is not always the case.

Respondents themselves discussed this community approach to addressing rape. According to a woman in Montserrado, both adults and children should be engaged in prevention activities,

*The other person that should be involve in the process is the child’s biological parents and some of her intimate family like her mother[‘s] sister, or her brother, or sister. They could also talk to the town people gather them together to tell them about how rape is dangerous to girl children.* – Female Adult Montserrado

This woman suggests that by engaging a wider circle of caretakers, there will be more people informed about the dangers of rape, and in response, there would be more people making an effort to protect them. These community members could discuss ways to better protect their children, specifically by ensuring that all children always walk everywhere in pairs at least, and that young children are always accompanied by older children. While this might appear to be a simple strategy, the lack of such protective measures, some children currently walk alone to work, to school, or to perform chores, and are vulnerable to rape during these journeys, especially in rural areas. Working with communities to remind children and parents about walking together, and asking them to accompany any child they see alone is a positive way to increase child protection, so that communities are given concrete steps they can take to reduce children’s vulnerability to rape and other types of assault.

When discussing community responses to rape, it is evident that there has been considerable awareness raising among community leaders, members of government, and NGOs that rape should not be resolved at the local level. However, behavior has not changed entirely, and cases continue to be resolved locally, often with the perpetrator giving money or goods as punishment. The effect of this is that rapists remain in the community, while the child raped may experience significant shame, which can lead to school dropout or concerns about future marriage prospects. Resolving cases at the local level tells perpetrators that the consequences or rape are financial, and are unlikely to affect their lives significantly. Low levels of reporting contribute to this impunity, and therefore increasing the proportion of rapes reported to the formal child protection system is an important goal. A government or NGO employee identified improving the reporting of rape cases as important both for legal and health reasons.

[Rape can be reduced] *By reporting all cases of rape. If someone rape your eight years daughter and you don’t report it, in case that guy has STIs or HIV, then that child will get affected. It is everyone’s business. Let [us] all report rape cases and get involve in prosecuting the perpetrator.* – Male NGO/Government Nimba

This NGO or government employee urges parents to report the case if their child is raped, both for the health and wellbeing of that girl, as well as to contribute to catching and punishing a rapist. However, other than by encouraging reporting, this respondent did not give specifics on how to increase case reporting. Respondents reported that rape cases were less likely to be reported to formal authorities if the perpetrator was a family member or friend, and even if the child does report the rape to a parent, the parent might choose not to pursue the case. Therefore, it may be necessary to create another point at which children may access the formal child protection system. This could be through schools or health centers, where routine screening for sexual abuse could be implemented. However, this cannot be implemented before communities have the necessary services to assist child survivors who do report rape or abuse.
Increasing enforcement of rape laws and ensuring that those convicted receive harsh sentences could decrease serial rape, as perpetrators would be imprisoned, could increase trust in the legal system, and could help ensure that perpetrators are blamed, rather than survivors. Increased imprisonment also could serve as a deterrent to individuals who might consider committing rape. A woman in Montserrado agreed that increase sentences associated with rape could help protect children.

\[ \text{Government should be putting these people who rape in jail for lifetime... Parent should stop sending their children to places alone, especially when it is at night. Community people should come together and be advising these men who like to rape people, children or men, as a whole, to stop this rape thing.} \]

– Adult Woman Montserrado

Changing perception of rape among males and females is a very important step to deterring rape, increasing reporting, and reducing associated stigma for survivors. By examining the risks associated with rape, it appears that several of them are associated with family economics. Participating in child labor and living with alternative caregivers are both coping mechanisms used by families to deal with economic adversity, however, respondents reported that both increase vulnerability to rape. Therefore, if parents were able to earn more money, their children would be less likely to engage in child labor or live with alternative caregivers. In addition, when considering whether to report a rape, specifically by a family member, women may be reluctant to do so, as it often would mean losing their family’s breadwinner. Therefore, if women gained more economic independence, they would be more likely to be able to support themselves and their families, and therefore less likely to shy away from reporting rape due to economic concerns.

Finally, respondents reported a considerable number of incidents of very young children being raped, with respondents mentioning that children as young as three or four were victims. Secret societies in Liberia are very seldom talked about, but beliefs that are reportedly associated with the male secret society, Poro, or another such organization, may play a role in the rape of young children. Intercourse with infants and young children is reportedly associated with gaining wealth and luck. Discussion of secret societies is extremely taboo, as there are reportedly harsh consequences for doing so, however, given that the they reportedly are linked to both the rape and murder of children (as discussed in the next section), it demands further attention and investigation.

**Kidnapping**

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<tr>
<th>Risks Associated with Kidnapping</th>
<th>Effects of Kidnapping</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking to school</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of walking alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child labor</td>
<td>Poor attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of Child</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Death of Parent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Child labor</td>
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<td>Dropout</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disappearance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bush School</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early marriage</td>
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<td>Rape (see Rape section)</td>
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</table>

Respondents expressed particular difficulty in determining how to prevent and respond to kidnapping, as it is relatively uncommon compared to other issues discussed here, and they described targets as being relatively random. Prevention and response suggestions for kidnapping were one in the same, and involved improving surveillance within communities. According to a woman in Montserrado, the community should “Set up men in the community...”
who will watch over the movement of children and help catch kidnappers.” By designating community members to watch over children and the community, people arriving in unknown vehicles can be identified, and these watchmen may notice quickly, and therefore respond quickly, if a child is kidnapped. This measure, including putting up a barrier at the entrance to a town in order to check all visitors, was in place in a few data collection locations visited, however this suggestion would be much more difficult to implement in an urban area.

Another suggested prevention measure was to limit the movement of children on their own, especially along deserted roads. “Community should tell parents to stop sending their children alone on the bush road and even on the main road that passing through here, because is very quiet, especially when you go further,” explained a woman in Montserrado. However, neither she nor other respondents addressed how to keep children safe from kidnappers, while still traveling long distances to school. Respondents discussed protecting children while they move from place to place within the community, as this was identified as a particularly vulnerable time for both rape and kidnapping. Community leaders and child protection advocates could work with schools and community leaders to encourage all children to travel together. They could encourage community members to discuss the importance of walking in groups, with at least one older child, with both children and adults. This applies, in particular, to children attending school, as respondents reported that some children are out of school because of fear of kidnapping. Working with the community to discuss how children can travel to school safely is crucial to ensure consistent attendance and achievement. This strategy could be applied whenever children engage in work as well, as agricultural fields may be far from their homes, and respondents reported that traveling through the bush alone puts children at significant risk for abuse and violence.

While respondents mentioned kidnapping in focus group discussions and interviews, they often discussed it with reluctance or mentioned as something secret or taboo within the community. Kidnapping and murder for sacrifice reportedly is associated with multiple secret societies in Liberia, and practitioners of those societies reportedly are involved in organizing or carrying out kidnapping and murder. This issue cannot be addressed without working with practitioners to discuss ways that practices could be changed so that children are not harmed, but the important cultural role of the societies remains. This could be an extremely sensitive and complex process, as demonstrated by death threats received by a Liberian activist working to change female genital cutting practices in bush schools associated with secret societies.43

Kidnapping may be an opportunity for informal and formal child protection systems to work together, as the community is most likely to learn of a kidnapping, but the formal system has resources and wider networks of actors that could be involved following a kidnapping. Police and community leaders could work together to develop response plans in the case of a kidnapping, to ensure that community members report the case to authorities, and authorities, in turn, have the training and resources to respond. President Johnson Sirleaf has spoken out against kidnapping and ritual sacrifice,44 however, many respondents expressed disbelief that the government would take action to enforce existing laws, as they believed people in power, including government, were involved.

B. Access to Support and Justice

Although understanding the causes and consequences of experiencing child protection risks is essential, learning about ways the existing formal and informal child protection systems function is vital, so that opportunities for intervention can be identified.

During data collection, researchers discussed what was needed for a community member to access different types of child protective services, and whether any barriers existed. This question was discussed most explicitly during interviews with government and NGO employees, and therefore their views are heavily represented below. While most respondents identified and discussed barriers to accessing services, like poverty or lack of transportation, a few said no such barriers existed.

Some community members shared that transportation was a determining factor in accessing any services that were located outside the community.

*They [community members] ask for resources that are needed for the type of risk that child will be face with. Some can be in the community and some outside the community, for example a vehicle is [located] out of the community, but people [can] request for it from other NGO.* – Adult Female Montserrado

*Money, because if the child experience risk, you have to pay money before [you] go for medication outside the community like transportation.* - Female NGO/Government

A lack of transportation was most common in rural areas, and while some communities reported that in the event of a child protection violation they could obtain a vehicle, this was not universally true, and some respondents reported lack of transportation as a significant barrier to access. In addition to physical access to a vehicle, many respondents described a lack of funds to pay for transportation, or for services like healthcare. A girl in Nimba explained,

*There are so many services here like an NGO, [or] the police. There is a reason [for these services], because most of the family cannot deal with the risk that happen to their child, because of lack of money.*

This girl explained that services in the formal sector, like NGOs or the police, are in place because many families do not have the funds to address child protection violations on their own. However, not everyone agreed that all services in the formal sector were free of cost,

*I will say for me the two groups [formal and informal] are working together to help solve protection problem that children are faced with. When the problem cannot be handle by the community leaders... the police receive it and send the people to court, but on the other hand, people are afraid to go to the police because of the too much money spend at the station.* – Boy Montserrado

This boy, along with many other respondents, reported that money is needed to engage the formal legal system; and that without money one cannot access such services. A government or NGO employee from Nimba County agreed that some children face barriers to care, “Some children are like no biological parent. Sometime no money to continue all these can affect child.” Without funds to pay for care, or without an adult to advocate for the child, respondents explained that it would be more difficult to access formal services. According to another government or NGO employee in Nimba County, children living away from their biological parents are most likely to experience difficulty accessing formal services, he explained, “Some children are not with their parents because they came to school. It will affect the child because the child is small to be living from their parents.” Due to the rural nature of many areas in Nimba and Montserrado counties, children may travel from their
homes to live with relatives or other alternative caregivers to attend school, and while this may be positive for their educational achievement, respondents mentioned that these children were at a disadvantage because they were living away from their parents. Respondents considered the quality or reliability of the services they needed to access to be an influential factor in whether or not they chose to use them. One specific frustration that respondents expressed was that “Only the police people here, they can come and carry the person to jail, after 3 days you see that person passing around the community,” according to a girl. Respondents explained that they might be the subjects of criticism from other community members if they accessed the formal child protection system, “If the family just carry the problem to Gender-based Violence task force member, the community will look at them ugly,” explained a female NGO or government employee in Nimba. Therefore, if community members believed the police would apprehend or punish a perpetrator, members of the community might be more likely to involve the police or other formal sector members. According to a female community leader in Montserrado, “The thing they [the police] can do, that can make us vex [angry] when they arrest and jail the criminal, [then] after two days you will see that same criminal passing around the community.” Respondents shared this and other observations about dishonesty within the judicial and community systems; a female government or NGO worker in Montserrado explained, “The court should have a good judiciary system anyone found guilty should bear the penalty accord to the law, but [one] family should not bribe any [other] family... for such act [child protection violation] should be punished”. According to these and other respondents, both members of communities and of the police and courts participate in undermining the formal judicial system, most often by giving or taking bribes.

C. Referrals and Linkages between Informal and Formal Child Protection Systems

In order to better understand how referrals between the informal and formal child protection systems are made, and whether the two are sufficiently linked or if gaps exist, researchers discussed the relationship between the two systems with NGO and government employees and with community leaders. Respondents shared a wide variety of experiences and attitudes regarding both systems, often reflecting of which system that person was a member.

The government and NGOs involve traditional and community leaders in almost all the program and services that involve this area by having meeting and other giving suggestions. If this not done the community and traditional leaders will advice their children not to partake in any activities that will take place and in this community children can listen to traditional leaders. – Female Community Leader Nimba

In some data collection locations, respondents explained that community leaders maintain a strong influence over decision-making and without their approval the activities of government or NGOs might not be successful.

Before the traditional leaders never use to involve government in whatsoever decision they were bringing in the community, but now they have agreed to work with the government. – Female Community Leader Montserrado

Community leaders, in particular, shared that they currently are more open to working with the government than they were in the past, in part due to the government’s involvement of them in decision-making.

The both of them work together for the protection of the child, because for everything there is meeting or awareness by the government the traditional people are always
invited and they can be represented by their leader and can give their advice or suggestions too. – Female Community Leader Nimba

The community leader above shared the most common reason given by community leaders for working with government, which is to benefit their community and the children living there. Community leaders explained that when the government actively includes them in programming, it shows respect for traditional ways of doing things, and makes local leaders and community members more willing to work with outside government and NGOs.

A community leader in Nimba explained how, in addition to working together on some things, informal and formal child protection mechanisms can address different needs and issues.

There are cases that come to us that actually we don’t judge it, but serve as liaison and send it over to NGO, police, or court, like child abuse and rape. We don’t have legal means to judge it. Other case like severe punishment or beating on child, we advice parents and if they continue we sometimes make them afraid that we will carry them to proper authority. – Community Leader Male Nimba

This community leader describes the complementary roles of the informal and formal child protection systems, where informal systems address issues that have been defined as ‘less serious’ such as beating, whereas the formal system can address issues classified as more severe. However, conversely, a government or NGO employee reported that members of the formal child protection system sometimes encounter resistance when trying to work with community members.

When the Police or the Social Workers wants to forward or take action on rape cases they do not get cooperation from family members or children. Most of these children cohere by their family members to denied this issue or sometimes the family members take children to unknown destination where nobody will see them until the whole case go down. – Male NGO/Government Montserrado

This respondent shares an important element in coordinating linkages between the informal and formal systems, which is that community members must participate in order for these to be successful, if they do not want to pursue formal pathways of response, there is sometimes little community leaders, or government or NGO workers can do. A Nimba community leader explained that further training of local residents, in addition to community leaders, could help address this issue.

The relationship between traditional leader and government, NGOs and the community leaders are very good in child protection system, but the NGOs and government and the people need to train more people of this community to be involved in to this issue, because after setting most of those NGOs, workers can leave place. – Female Community Leader Nimba

Many respondents identified engaging diverse community members and training them as informal actors of the child protection system as ways to strengthen responses, as well as to ensure sustainability, as many smaller towns do not have permanent formal actors.

One significant conflict between the goals of communities and their leaders and employees of government and NGOs was the teaching and implementation of a child rights framework.

Government services, like human right or child right, is opposing traditional ways of protecting children. Because before then, we use to train our children, beat them when they are wrong or refuse to do work, but now child right is making children ruder on parents. – Female Community Leader Nimba
When discussing the work of NGOs and the government community leaders shared their dissatisfaction with the teaching of children’s rights, explaining that it led children to misbehave, and parents were left without a way to teach them how to behave. A female community leader in Nimba explained, “The relationship [between government and community] in the past was much better, this time everything change. Child right business, why they don’t have parents’ right?” Many respondents shared the view that child rights and protection programming benefit children, but not parents or communities. In addition, some community leaders disagreed with the way the government interacts with local leadership,

*Government does not regard traditional ways of doing things. They say traditional ways of handling cases are not good.* – Male Community Leader Nimba

*They [government and community leaders] are two distinct groups. The traditional leaders will like to carry it to some extent like Sandy or Poro societies to train children, but government deal with law. The only relationship is that when traditional leader are unable, that when traditional leader are unable to solve it government will come in. Tradition can’t do anything good in government eye, they always condemning.* – Male Community Leader Nimba

These perspectives from two community leaders in Nimba differ markedly from those shared earlier that described positive relationships between traditional and government leadership. Views similar to these were encountered in both Nimba and Montserrado counties and show that, while the formal child protection system has made a positive impression in some communities, there is still work to do to ensure traditional leaders feel heard and respected, and therefore, perhaps, more willing to collaborate to strengthen child protection prevention and response.
Key Findings and Recommendations

Cross-Sectoral Child Protection

While Liberia has a Ministry of Gender and Development dedicated to addressing child protection concerns, most communities do not have representatives of that Ministry on the ground. Members of the Health, Justice, and Education Ministries are much more likely to be present in smaller and more rural communities. Therefore, it is essential to engage them as representatives of the formal child protection system, who can act to facilitate linkages between the formal and informal systems when necessary.

School Dropout

Although school dropout was not most frequently mentioned or highest ranked by respondents, their responses indicate that school dropout represents a key turning point in children’s lives. After leaving school they reportedly begin to participate in adult activities, including some that may be harmful to their wellbeing including heavy labor, unplanned pregnancy, or marriage, among others. By concentrating on what leads to school dropout, many other child protection risks may be addressed as well.

Livelihoods and Economic Intervention

Respondents explained that children from families of lower socio-economic status experience greater risk of child protection violations, including teenage pregnancy, child labor, rape, and kidnapping, as they are more likely to travel alone to work, and less likely to be in school. Livelihoods interventions targeted at parents could supplement the household economy, enabling parents to relieve children of some of their work, as well as allowing children to remain in school. Such interventions could be coupled with parenting skills classes, as many parents reported wanting to do what is best for their children, but were unsure what that entailed. Economic interventions that work particularly with children and teens could help encourage them to engage in safe types of work, as well as help them learn skills in order to supplement their own income to pay for school and other necessities.

Men’s Participation

Although women tend to be the primary caretakers of children in much of the country, men have a very important role to play in preventing and responding to child protection violations. Programming that encourages solidarity among men to act as protectors of women and children may help to create social pressure that condemns rape, or encourages men to insist on using birth control. In addition, respondents described each risk as heightened when a child comes from a family experiencing financial difficulty, therefore, as men are most likely to work outside the home, engaging them in incoming generating activities may indirectly decrease their children’s vulnerability to child protection violations.

Reporting and Screening

Respondents discussed a desire to increase reporting of cases of rape and kidnapping in order to leverage the resources of the formal child protection sector. Increasing opportunities for reporting is essential, and screening for cases, particularly of rape and abuse, might allow
child protection practitioners to gauge the magnitude and nature of these child protection violations, and therefore better respond.

**Alternative Caregivers**

Respondents described alternative caregivers as a very important coping mechanism for families having trouble meeting the needs of their children due to financial difficulties, a death in the family, or other complex circumstances. However, many respondents also mentioned that living away from one’s biological parents may increase a child’s risk of neglect, child labor, and school dropout, among other risks. Therefore, additional information should be gathered to explore these reports, and if children living with alternative caregivers are more vulnerable to child protection violations, such living arrangements should be monitored.

**School as a Safe Space**

Schools can act as central points in communities, especially for children, where they can feel safe and experience normalcy in time of personal or political turmoil. However, reports of teachers abusing students sexually and physically diminishes schools’ capacity to serve as safe spaces, leaving some children without access to safety and security, if they do not experience it in their homes. Addressing abuse in schools may be an essential part of increasing enrollment, attainment, and achievement. Screening for physical and sexual abuse through child friendly discussions, and giving children ample opportunity to report such cases to people with whom they feel comfortable is essential to identifying people in schools who pose a threat to children.

**Kidnapping**

Respondents of every age group reported kidnapping as a concern, however, in comparison to other risks to children, they offered many less strategies to address the problem. Kidnapping and sacrifice are extremely sensitive issues, however if they are causing the level of fear reported, and even leading children to drop out of school to avoid long walks on isolated roads, it is a problem that needs to be better understood and addressed. Working with traditional healers is essential given that these practices tend to occur in secret. Finding a balance between limiting harmful traditional practices while maintaining positive traditional aspects is difficult, and best practices used to address other such practices may be used as a guide.

**Right-based Education**

Adults and community leaders expressed doubt about the value of rights-based education for the children in their communities, however several employees of government NGOs recommended expanding such education, based on the belief that children who know their rights are less likely to suffer abuse. The rights-based education program may need to be re-conceived in order to incorporate children’s responsibilities, as well as to engage adults and community leaders about their own rights, and their responsibilities to children.
References


Children may approach one or more than one of the resources above. Parents may pursue more than one of the options presented, for example sending a girl away after the trial, or approaching the police if a settlement cannot be reached at the community level.
Teenage Pregnancy

- Run Away
  - Care for self and not return

- Friend
  - Advise girl to have abortion
  - Success
  - Fail
  - Death
  - Kickout out of house
  - Nothing
  - If discovered

- Mother
  - Play Mother
  - Advise girl to keep pregnancy
  - Inform girl's parents
  - Go to boy's house to talk to his parents
  - Nothing happens
  - Denies
  - Accepts
  - If boy's family is poor
  - Boy's family supports girl until birth
  - Nothing happens
  - Not Guilty
  - Guilty
  - Given strong warning
  - Jail
  - Released from jail once he takes responsibility for pregnancy

- Play Mother
  - Advise girl to have abortion
  - Success
  - Fail
  - Death
  - Kickout out of house
  - Nothing
  - If discovered

- Aunt
  - Advise girl to keep pregnancy
  - Inform girl's parents
  - Take her to clinic to verify pregnancy
  - Go to community leader
  - Ensure girl gets support for pregnancy
  - Go to boy's house to talk to his parents
  - Nothing happens
  - Denies
  - Accepts
  - If boy's family is poor
  - Boy's family supports girl until birth
  - Nothing happens
  - Not Guilty
  - Guilty
  - Given strong warning
  - Jail
  - Released from jail once he takes responsibility for pregnancy

- Sister in law
  - Girl drops out of school
  - Nothing
  - Inform girl's parents
  - Take her to clinic to verify pregnancy
  - Go to community leader
  - Ensure girl gets support for pregnancy
  - Go to boy's house to talk to his parents
  - Nothing happens
  - Denies
  - Accepts
  - If boy's family is poor
  - Boy's family supports girl until birth
  - Nothing happens
  - Not Guilty
  - Guilty
  - Given strong warning
  - Jail
  - Released from jail once he takes responsibility for pregnancy

- Boyfriend
  - Advise girl to have abortion
  - Success
  - Fail
  - Death
  - Kickout out of house
  - Nothing
  - If discovered

- Girl's family
  - Go to police
  - Arrest boy
  - Guilty
  - Not Guilty
  - Given strong warning
  - Jail
  - Released from jail once he takes responsibility for pregnancy

- Girl may live with boy's family

- May marry

- More children

- Girl's parents support pregnancy

- Girl goes to live with a relative

- Accepts

- Denies

- Nothing happens

- Given strong warning

- Jail

- Released from jail once he takes responsibility for pregnancy

- Care for self and not return
Kidnapping Responses

If child is kidnapped by Zoe and taken to Sandy Bush

Zoe will demand money from parents to pay for Sandy Society

Parents advise children not to walk alone

School dropout or poor attendance due to fear

Someone notices child is missing

Searching by parents, community, teachers, family, police

Pastor prays for child

Someone hears child yelling

Community members force perp. to release child

Alternative caregiver sells child to heartman

Child is saved

Alternative caregiver punished

Child return to biological parents

Pastor prays for child

Child is mentally ill because of ‘charms’ used to make them forget things

Child is not found

Child is found deceased

Report to police

Child is found alive

Take for medical treatment

No further action

Child is all right

Community members reportedly may do nothing after a kidnapping because of fear of the big men, who they believe are the heartmen, kidnappers, or paid the kidnappers.