

Community Perceptions of Child Protection Risks in a Disaster Prone Informal Settlement

A Mixed Methods Case Study of Susan's Bay Freetown

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Abstract

Children living in disaster-prone informal settlements face risks that extend beyond physical injury to include family separation, abuse, exploitation, school interruption and psychosocial distress. Yet disaster interventions often rely on externally defined risk categories without examining how residents recognise and prioritise child protection concerns. This study examined community perceptions of child protection risks in Susan's Bay, an informal coastal settlement in Freetown, Sierra Leone. A convergent mixed-methods case study combined a face-to-face survey of 100 adult residents with 20 qualitative interviews involving community and institutional stakeholders. Survey data were analysed descriptively, while interview accounts were coded thematically; the two strands were integrated through comparison of convergence, complementarity and divergence. Ninety per cent of survey respondents considered children more vulnerable than adults during disasters. Frequently identified risks included family separation (86%), child labour (81%), school dropout (79%), emotional trauma (75%) and sexual abuse (68%). Poverty, overcrowding and gender norms shaped how these risks were interpreted, while extended families and religious institutions provided important but often overstretched protection. Reporting remained limited: 64% indicated that abuse was generally not reported, and 55% did not trust formal institutions during disasters. Qualitative accounts showed that stigma, economic necessity and preference for informal settlement of cases could normalise harmful coping practices. The findings demonstrate that recognising risk does not necessarily produce protective action when poverty, gendered expectations and institutional mistrust constrain available choices. Disaster preparedness in Sierra Leone should integrate community-based safeguarding, gender-responsive monitoring, social protection and reliable referral pathways linking informal and formal systems.

Keywords: child protection, disaster risk, community perceptions, informal settlements, mixed methods, Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Disasters alter the social environments in which children are cared for and protected. Floods, fires, displacement and public-health emergencies can separate children from caregivers, interrupt schooling, weaken community monitoring and increase exposure to exploitation, violence and psychosocial distress (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Peek, 2008). These effects are not distributed evenly. Children's risks are shaped by household poverty, gender, disability, housing conditions, caregiving arrangements and the capacity of formal and informal protection systems.

Freetown illustrates the interaction between hazard exposure and structural vulnerability. Rapid urban growth, informal development, inadequate drainage and occupation of flood- and landslide-prone land have increased risks in low-income settlements. The 2017 landslide and floods affected thousands of residents and demonstrated how environmental hazards combine with insecure housing, livelihood precarity and limited services (World Bank, 2018, 2021). Susan's Bay, a densely populated coastal settlement, also experiences recurrent flooding and fire outbreaks that disrupt homes, livelihoods and caregiving networks.

Child protection policy is frequently framed through formal legal and institutional categories. Sierra Leone's Child Right Act 2007 establishes national responsibilities for children's rights and welfare. However, formal rules do not automatically determine how risk is interpreted or how families respond during crises. In Sierra Leone, residents may rely on extended families, religious leaders and community authorities, while distance, cost, mistrust and social norms can discourage engagement with statutory services (Wessells et al., 2012; Wessells, 2015). Practices such as child work, temporary fostering or private settlement of abuse may be understood locally as necessary

responses even when they expose children to harm.

This study therefore examines community perceptions as a critical component of disaster child protection. It asks not only which risks residents identify, but also how socioeconomic pressures, cultural norms and institutional relationships shape recognition, reporting and protective action. By focusing on Susan's Bay, the study contributes evidence from an urban informal settlement where recurrent hazards and chronic deprivation overlap.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The study aimed to examine how residents and stakeholders in Susan's Bay perceive child protection risks associated with disasters and how those perceptions influence community responses. It addressed four research questions:

1. What disaster-related child protection risks are recognised by community members?
2. Which socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions shape perceptions of those risks?
3. How do community perceptions influence preparedness, coping, reporting and protective practices?
4. Where do community understandings diverge from formal child protection and disaster-response frameworks?

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 Child Protection Risk in Disasters

Disaster research has established that children experience both immediate and extended effects of emergencies. Alongside death, injury and displacement, disasters may produce caregiver loss, interrupted education, mental distress and increased exposure to abuse or exploitation (Masten & Osofsky, 2010; Peek, 2008). Children with disabilities and those living in resource-constrained households may encounter additional barriers to evacuation, communication and service access (Peek & Stough, 2010). A child protection analysis must therefore move beyond the physical hazard to examine the social relationships and institutions through which vulnerability is produced.

2.2 Community Interpretation and Informal Protection

Risk perception is socially mediated. Communities interpret harm through lived experience, beliefs about childhood, household obligations and judgements about which responses are feasible. In conditions of scarcity, immediate survival may take priority over longer-term protection. Child work or informal placement with relatives may consequently be interpreted as adaptive, even where it increases exposure to exploitation, school dropout or family separation.

Community-based mechanisms can provide accessible and culturally legitimate protection, but they are not uniformly protective. Research in Sierra Leone found a persistent disconnect between mechanisms used locally and the formal child protection system, shaped by access barriers, social norms and negative perceptions of statutory services (Wessells et al., 2012). Bottom-up approaches are strongest when community ownership is connected to accountable formal services rather than treated as a substitute for them (Wessells, 2015).

2.3 Gendered and Structural Vulnerability

Gender influences both exposure and the social meaning assigned to children's activities. Girls may face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, early unions and unpaid care responsibilities, while boys may be expected to undertake hazardous income-generating work. Feminist disaster scholarship cautions that emergencies intensify inequalities already embedded in households, labour arrangements and institutions (Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009). Poverty, insecure housing and weak services intersect with these gendered expectations, limiting the choices available to caregivers and children.

2.4 Sierra Leonean Research Gap

Existing evidence from Sierra Leone has examined disaster governance, urban vulnerability and community-based child protection, but these strands are rarely integrated in research on informal urban settlements. Studies of formal-informal child protection relationships have largely focused on non-disaster or rural settings, while urban disaster assessments primarily emphasise physical damage and recovery. Less is known about how residents of recurrently affected settlements classify child protection risks, which practices they regard as acceptable, and how trust influences reporting. This study addresses that perception-centred gap.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The analysis combines a systems perspective, the ecological model and feminist theory. The systems perspective treats child protection as an outcome of relationships among families, community networks, services and governance institutions. It is used to interpret how disruption in one part of the protection environment, such as livelihood loss or weak emergency coordination, produces effects elsewhere. The ecological model locates children within interacting household, community and institutional environments and explains why risks cannot

be reduced to individual behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Healy, 2014). Feminist theory directs attention to power, gendered expectations and unequal access to resources, enabling analysis of why girls and boys may face different risks and responsibilities (Dominelli, 2002).

Table 1. Relationship between the theoretical framework and the research questions

Research question	Primary theoretical contribution
Risks recognised by residents	Ecological model identifies risks across child, household, community and institutional levels.
Conditions shaping perception	Systems perspective explains interactions among livelihoods, caregiving networks and services.
Influence on practices	Systems and ecological perspectives connect perception to coping, reporting and referral behaviour.
Community formal-system gap	Feminist and systems perspectives expose unequal power, gendered consequences and institutional exclusion.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualises perceived child protection risk as an outcome of interacting conditions rather than a direct reflection of hazard exposure. Disaster exposure can disrupt livelihoods, services and caregiving arrangements. Socioeconomic conditions, community norms and institutional trust then influence which threats are recognised, prioritised, minimised or contested. Perceptions subsequently shape protective action, acceptance of risky coping practices and help-seeking.

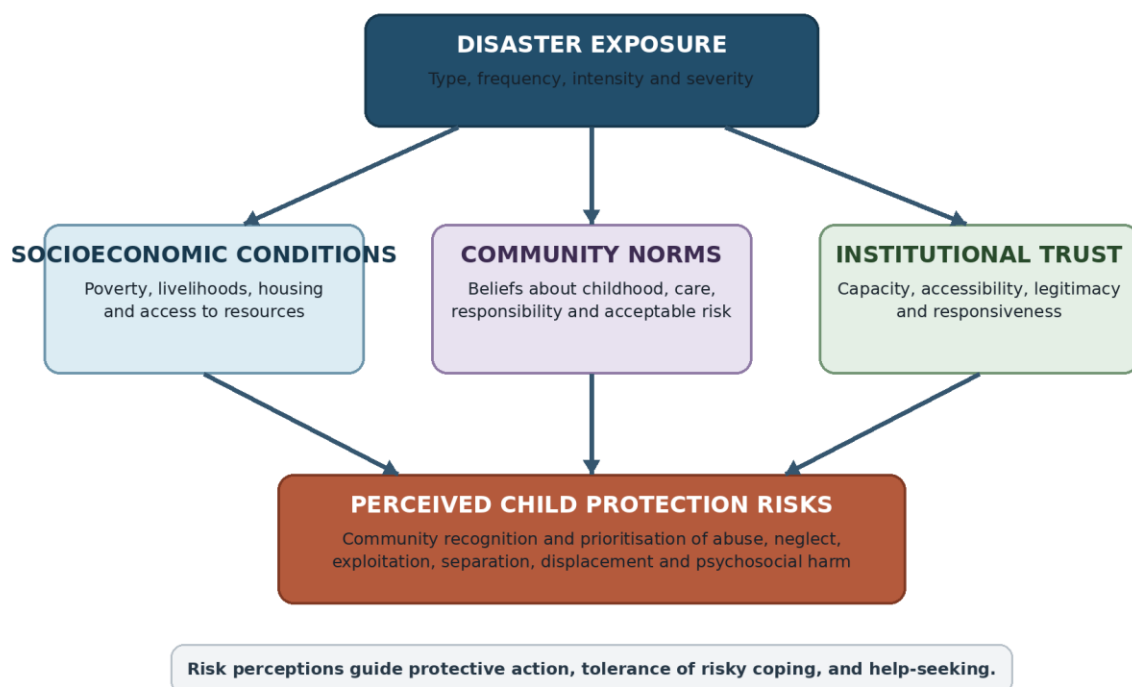


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for community perceptions of child protection risk

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and Setting

A convergent mixed-methods case study design was used to examine patterns in community perceptions while retaining contextual accounts of how those perceptions were formed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same phase, analysed separately and brought together during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The bounded case was Susan's Bay, a densely populated informal coastal settlement in central Freetown that experiences recurrent flooding and fire outbreaks.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study involved 120 adults: 100 residents who completed the survey and 20 participants who completed qualitative interviews. Susan's Bay was selected purposively because of its recurrent disaster exposure. Survey participants were recruited from accessible households within the community, while qualitative participants were selected purposively for their knowledge of disaster experience, caregiving, community protection or institutional response. Eligibility was limited to adults aged 18 years or older with knowledge or experience relevant to the study. Children were not recruited. Because a complete household sampling frame was not available, the survey should be interpreted as a community case sample rather than as statistically representative of all Susan's Bay residents.

3.3 Data Collection

The survey was administered face to face and covered demographic characteristics, disaster experience, perceived child protection risks, structural drivers, responsibility for protection, reporting behaviour and trust in formal systems. The qualitative guide explored how disasters affect children, why particular practices occur, how families and community institutions respond, and where residents encounter formal-system barriers. The questionnaire included multiple-response items; consequently, percentages for those items do not sum to 100%.

3.4 Data Analysis and Integration

Survey responses were entered into Microsoft Excel and summarised using frequencies and percentages. Given the case-study sample and non-probability recruitment, no population-level inferential claims were made. Qualitative accounts were reviewed iteratively, coded by substantive meaning and organised into cross-case themes concerning disrupted supervision, economic coping, gendered vulnerability, informal protection, reporting barriers and institutional disconnection. This thematic approach was selected because the analysis sought patterned meanings across a heterogeneous stakeholder sample rather than idiographic interpretation of a small homogeneous group (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Integration occurred after the separate analyses. Survey patterns were compared with qualitative themes to identify convergence, explanatory complementarity and areas of tension. A joint display was then developed to show how narrative evidence explained or qualified the quantitative results. Themes were checked against the four research questions and the full set of reported survey results to reduce selective interpretation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained and participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were informed that they could decline questions or withdraw. Identifying details were excluded from reporting. Because the subject involved abuse and exploitation, the study avoided collecting unnecessary identifying information. No child participants were interviewed.

4. Results

4.1 Participant Characteristics and Disaster Experience

Table 2. Characteristics of survey participants (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–30	26	26
	31–40	38	38
	41–50	22	22
	51 and above	14	14

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	52	52
	Male	48	48
Education	No formal education	20	20
	Primary	28	28
	Secondary	34	34
	Tertiary	18	18
Experienced a disaster	Yes	92	92
	No	8	8

Most survey participants had direct disaster experience (92%). Flooding was the most frequently reported hazard (74%), followed by fire outbreaks (15%), mudslides (7%) and disease outbreaks (4%). The sample was nearly balanced by gender, and educational backgrounds ranged from no formal schooling to tertiary education.

4.2 Recognised Child Protection Risks

Ninety respondents considered children more vulnerable than adults during disasters; six disagreed and four were unsure. A combined 82% agreed or strongly agreed that disasters increase child abuse. Family separation was the most frequently selected risk, followed by child labour, school dropout and emotional trauma.

Table 3. Disaster-related child protection risks identified by survey participants. Multiple responses were permitted

Risk	n	% selecting
Family separation	86	86
Child labour	81	81
School dropout	79	79
Emotional trauma	75	75
Physical injury	72	72
Sexual abuse	68	68
Early marriage	55	55
Trafficking	49	49

Interview accounts explained how movement, crowding and weakened adult supervision increased exposure. One parent described the disruption directly:

“When flood comes, children are everywhere. Some sleep in crowded places, and that is when they become exposed.” (Parent interview)

Participants also associated disaster-related income loss with child labour and school interruption. Girls were

described as facing increased exposure to sexual exploitation and early relationships during displacement, while boys were more often expected to undertake hazardous work.

4.3 Conditions Shaping Risk Perception

Table 4. Perceived structural and social influences on child vulnerability (N = 100)

Statement	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)
Poverty increases child protection risks	88 (88)	12 (12)
Overcrowding increases exposure to abuse	76 (76)	24 (24)
Gender norms affect protection	71 (71)	29 (29)
Extended families protect children	82 (82)	18 (18)

Poverty was the strongest perceived driver. Participants explained that families losing homes, goods or income frequently depended on children's labour. This practice was not always classified locally as exploitation; it could be framed as an expected contribution to family survival. Overcrowding was associated with reduced privacy and supervision, while gender norms shaped the different responsibilities and threats assigned to girls and boys. Extended families were widely regarded as protective, although their capacity declined when a disaster affected many households simultaneously.

4.4 Community Protection and Reporting Practices

Protection was primarily assigned to parents (92%), followed by community leaders (68%), religious leaders (64%), NGOs (59%) and government institutions (54%). These multiple-response findings show that responsibility was distributed across informal and formal actors, but immediate reliance remained concentrated within families and community networks.

Table 5. Reporting behaviour and barriers. Barrier items permitted multiple responses

Indicator	n	%
Respondents indicating abuse is not generally reported	64	64
Fear of stigma as a reporting barrier	72	72
Financial constraints as a reporting barrier	63	63
Limited awareness of reporting mechanisms	61	61
Lack of trust in authorities	58	58

Qualitative accounts described a preference for resolving cases within families or through community authorities, particularly where the alleged perpetrator was a relative. A community leader summarised the reputational concern: *"Reporting can bring shame. People try to settle matters quietly."* (Community leader interview)

Residents described temporarily relocating children before or during hazards and relying on religious institutions for shelter and emotional support. These practices provided immediate assistance but were usually informal and short-term.

4.5 Awareness and Trust in Formal Systems

Table 6. Awareness of and trust in formal protection systems (N = 100)

Indicator	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Aware of government child protection policies	48 (48)	52 (52)
Know about the Child Right Act 2007	42 (42)	58 (58)
Trust formal institutions during disasters	45 (45)	55 (55)

Institutional interviewees reported limited operational coordination between disaster-management and child-protection services. Formal mechanisms were described as present in policy but inconsistently incorporated into emergency response. A social welfare officer stated:

“Child protection is discussed at policy level, but during emergencies, focus is mainly on relief distribution.”
(Social welfare officer interview)

4.6 Mixed Methods Integration

Table 7. Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings

Survey pattern	Qualitative explanation	Integrated interpretation
90% perceived greater child vulnerability	Displacement, crowding and weak supervision expose children.	High risk recognition is grounded in lived disaster experience.
88% linked poverty to protection risk	Child work is treated as a household survival contribution.	Recognition of harm coexists with acceptance of economically driven coping.
71% identified gender norms	Boys are directed towards hazardous work; girls face sexual and relationship risks.	Protection risks are differentiated by gendered expectations.
64% indicated abuse is not reported	Shame, kinship ties and preference for private settlement discourage reporting.	Awareness of abuse does not ensure formal help-seeking.
55% did not trust formal institutions	Child protection is perceived as secondary to material relief.	Weak visibility and coordination reduce institutional legitimacy.

The strands were predominantly convergent: qualitative narratives explained why high awareness of risk coexisted with limited reporting and continued reliance on risky coping practices. An important tension was also evident. Extended families were widely viewed as protective, yet participants acknowledged that kinship-based settlement could suppress disclosure and that family networks became overstretched during community-wide emergencies.

5. Discussion

5.1 Recognition of Risk and Disrupted Protection Environments

The first major finding is that residents recognised children’s heightened vulnerability, particularly family separation, child labour, school interruption and psychosocial distress. This supports evidence that disasters affect children through disrupted relationships and services as well as through direct physical exposure (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Peek, 2008). The parent’s account of children dispersed across crowded sleeping spaces demonstrates the ecological character of risk: changes in housing, supervision and community monitoring combine to produce exposure. From a systems perspective, the hazard is therefore a catalyst rather than a complete explanation; the protection outcome depends on how caregiving and institutional systems respond.

5.2 Poverty and the Normalisation of Risky Coping

Poverty was the most consistently identified structural driver. The findings do not suggest that caregivers were unaware of potential harm. Rather, economic loss narrowed the range of feasible responses and made children's labour appear necessary. This distinction is important because awareness campaigns alone cannot change practices rooted in livelihood insecurity. It also illustrates why community perceptions must be interpreted relationally: a practice may be recognised as risky and still be tolerated when immediate household survival is at stake.

5.3 Gendered Vulnerability

Participants differentiated the risks faced by boys and girls. Boys were associated with hazardous physical work, whereas girls were linked to sexual exploitation, early relationships and early marriage. Feminist theory helps interpret these patterns as effects of gendered power and labour expectations rather than inherent differences between children (Dominelli, 2002; Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009). A gender-responsive disaster system must therefore avoid treating children as a homogeneous category and must monitor both sexual exploitation and hazardous labour.

5.4 Informal Protection and the Reporting Paradox

Families, religious institutions and community leaders were the most immediate sources of support, confirming the accessibility and legitimacy of community-based protection. However, the same networks could discourage formal reporting when disclosure threatened family reputation or community relationships. This finding closely corresponds with Sierra Leonean research documenting the disconnect between locally used protection mechanisms and formal services (Wessells et al., 2012). It also supports Wessells' (2015) argument that effective systems require collaboration between community-owned mechanisms and accountable statutory services. Informal mechanisms should be strengthened, but not romanticised or used to replace legal and professional safeguards.

5.5 Institutional Trust and Formal Response

Limited policy awareness and institutional trust indicate that formal protection mechanisms lack visibility and practical credibility during emergencies. The social welfare officer's account suggests that relief distribution can crowd out protection and psychosocial work. The conceptual framework explains this pattern: institutional capacity affects not only service delivery but also whether residents consider formal reporting worthwhile. Greater presence of trained social workers, predictable referral procedures and feedback to complainants may therefore be as important as public information about the law.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings support four implications. First, disaster preparedness should include safeguarding as a core function, with procedures for family tracing, safe temporary care, confidential reporting and monitoring in shelters. Second, child protection must be connected to emergency social protection because income loss contributes directly to harmful coping. Third, interventions should be gender-responsive and address both sexual exploitation affecting girls and hazardous labour affecting boys. Fourth, formal services should work through recognised community structures while establishing clear limits: serious abuse should not be privately mediated, and community actors need referral training, supervision and accessible professional support.

7. Evidence Linked Recommendations

Table 8. Recommendations derived directly from the study findings

Empirical evidence	Recommended action	Lead actors
Family separation was identified by 86%; interviews described displacement and weak supervision.	Include child registration, family tracing, safe temporary care and supervision plans in local emergency protocols.	NDMA, Ministry of Social Welfare, local councils, NGOs
Poverty was linked to risk by 88%; child labour was reported by 81%.	Provide rapid cash or livelihood assistance to affected households and monitor child labour and school return.	Social protection agencies, NGOs, schools
Gender norms influenced	Use gender-specific risk assessments, safe spaces	Social welfare, health

Empirical evidence	Recommended action	Lead actors
protection for 71%.	and monitoring for sexual exploitation and hazardous work.	services, schools, community groups
64% indicated non-reporting; stigma was the most frequently selected barrier.	Establish confidential reporting channels and sustained community dialogue on disclosure, referral and survivor-centred response.	Police Family Support Unit, social welfare, community and religious leaders
55% lacked trust in formal institutions; interviews identified weak coordination.	Deploy visible social welfare focal points during emergencies and formalise referral pathways among disaster, police, health and protection actors.	NDMA, social welfare, police, health services

8. Strengths and Limitations

The study's main strength is the integration of survey patterns with contextual accounts from a disaster-prone settlement. The design made it possible to distinguish recognition of risk from the constraints affecting action. Several limitations should guide interpretation. Susan's Bay is a single case, and the non-probability survey sample does not support statistical generalisation to all residents or other communities. Findings are based on self-report and may be affected by recall and social-desirability bias. The study did not include children's direct perspectives, and the available qualitative quotations were limited. Cross-sectional data also cannot establish causal relationships between disaster exposure and protection outcomes. Future research should include ethically designed child-participatory methods, comparative communities and longitudinal follow-up across preparedness, response and recovery phases.

9. Conclusion

Community members in Susan's Bay clearly recognised that disasters increase risks to children, but recognition did not consistently translate into reporting or sustained protection. Poverty, gendered expectations, overcrowding and institutional mistrust shaped which practices were accepted and which services were used. Extended families, religious institutions and community leaders provided essential support, yet these mechanisms could become overstretched and could also favour private settlement of protection concerns.

Effective disaster child protection therefore requires more than additional awareness. It requires emergency social protection, gender-responsive safeguarding, confidential reporting and working relationships that connect trusted community actors with visible and accountable formal services. The study's central contribution is to show that community perception is neither a simple knowledge deficit nor an automatic protective resource; it is produced within the material and institutional constraints of disaster-prone urban life.

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