



Traumatic Portraits of Marginalized Juveniles: Experiences from Zambia

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ABSTRACT: Marginalized juveniles in Zambia face profound social, economic and psychological challenges that shape their lived experiences in traumatic ways. This study explores the traumatic portraits of disadvantaged youth, focusing on their struggles with poverty, abuse, homelessness, discrimination and limited access to education and healthcare. Using a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, life narratives and ethnographic observations, the study captures the voices of juveniles in correctional facilities, orphanages and street environments. Findings reveal patterns of emotional distress, societal exclusion and systemic failures that contribute to cycles of vulnerability and marginalization. Despite these adversities, the study also uncovers resilience strategies, such as peer support networks, artistic expression and community-based interventions, which provide coping mechanisms. The study brings to the fore the urgent need for inclusive policies, psychosocial support systems and rehabilitative programs that prioritize the well-being and empowerment of marginalized juveniles. Recommendations emphasize multi-sectoral collaboration to address structural inequalities and create sustainable pathways for juvenile reintegration and social justice.

Keywords: Marginalized Youth, Trauma, Juvenile Justice, Social Exclusion, Rehabilitation

1. INTRODUCTION

In Zambia, marginalized juveniles face multiple challenges that shape their lives and contribute to their vulnerability. These juveniles, often found in correctional facilities, orphanages, or on the streets, struggle with issues such as poverty, abuse, homelessness, discrimination and limited access to basic social services like education and healthcare. The compounded effects of these adversities result in a deeply traumatic experience for many of these youth, who are not only deprived of opportunities but also face stigmatization and societal exclusion (Chigunta, 2001; Coleman, 2025; Kreitzinger, 2025).

Studies have shown that marginalized youth are at high risk of developing psychological distress, which can manifest in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and other mental health issues. The societal and institutional failures in addressing these issues contribute to a cycle of vulnerability, making it difficult for these youth to reintegrate into society and live fulfilling lives (Likumbo, Muleya & Simui, 2021; Mpolomoka, 2025). The absence of adequate psychosocial support and rehabilitative interventions worsens their situation, leaving many juveniles with few options for overcoming the trauma they endure.

Nevertheless, in the face of these adversities, some marginalized juveniles demonstrate resilience. Research portrays various coping mechanisms that include peer support networks, artistic expression and community-based interventions, which help these youth navigate their traumatic circumstances and begin the healing process (Chowa, et. al., 2021). These mechanisms provide an essential foundation for the development of programs and policies aimed at improving the well-being of marginalized juveniles. The need for inclusive policies and multi-sectoral collaboration is evident, as addressing structural inequalities and creating sustainable pathways for reintegration is key to breaking the cycle of trauma and marginalization. Interventions must focus on not only providing educational and healthcare opportunities but also offering psychosocial support that recognizes the unique challenges faced by these vulnerable youth (Simabwachi, 2017; Armstrong & Zulu, 2019).

Marginalized juveniles in Zambia face significant socio-economic and psychological hardships that contribute to their exclusion from mainstream society. Many of these youths experience trauma because of factors such as poverty, abuse, homelessness and systemic neglect, which hinder their access to education, healthcare and rehabilitation services (Chigunta, 2001; Coleman, 2025; Kreitzinger, 2025; Simabwachi, 2017; Muvombo, et. al., 2024). Despite existing child protection policies, the implementation of effective support systems remains inadequate, leaving many juveniles vulnerable to cycles of exploitation and criminalization (Likumbo, Muleya & Simui, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of psychosocial interventions exacerbates their mental health struggles, with many developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and associated disorders (Armstrong & Zulu, 2019; Chriwa, et. al., 2024). Even though some juveniles develop resilience through peer networks and community initiatives, the absence of structured rehabilitative programs limits their opportunities for reintegration and empowerment (Chowa, et. al., 2021). This study interrogated the traumatic experiences of marginalized juveniles in Zambia and explore the systemic failures that perpetuate their vulnerability, highlighting the urgent need for multi-sectoral interventions to foster their well-being and social inclusion.

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. establish the challenges faced by marginalized juveniles in Zambia.



- ii. determine resilience strategies such as peer support networks, artistic expression, and community-based interventions that help marginalized juveniles cope with trauma and societal exclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Marginalization and Trauma Among Juveniles

Marginalized juveniles often experience profound trauma due to poverty, abuse, homelessness, and systemic neglect, which significantly impact their psychological and social well-being. Chigunta (2001), Coleman (2025) and Kreitzinger (2025) emphasize that economic hardships push many children into homelessness and informal labor, making them vulnerable to exploitation and crime. Similarly, Simabwachi (2017) found that street children in Lusaka frequently face violence, hunger and inadequate healthcare, exacerbating their trauma and deepening their exclusion from society. Moreover, Likumbo, Muleya & Simui (2021) argue that institutionalized children, particularly those in correctional facilities and orphanages, are at heightened risk of emotional distress due to harsh disciplinary measures and inadequate psychosocial support. These studies collectively indicate that systemic failures contribute to cycles of marginalization, leaving juveniles without the necessary support systems to overcome their traumatic experiences.

Egelund (2017) further critiques the punitive nature of juvenile correctional facilities, stating that instead of rehabilitation, many institutions worsen trauma by subjecting juveniles to harsh conditions, neglect and abuse. The social determinants of health framework, as discussed by Armstrong and Zulu (2019), highlights how societal exclusion reinforces these traumatic experiences, preventing juveniles from accessing essential resources such as education, healthcare and legal representation. Matafwali (2023), who argues that inadequate child protection mechanisms and weak policy implementation continue to expose vulnerable juveniles to exploitation and violence, further reinforces this. Given this context, understanding the root causes of juvenile trauma and intervening systemic failures are critical to breaking the cycles of marginalization and vulnerability.

2.2 Resilience Strategies Among Marginalized Juveniles

Despite the adversities they face, marginalized juveniles develop various resilience strategies that help them cope with trauma and societal exclusion. One of the most significant mechanisms is peer support networks, which provide emotional and material assistance in the absence of formal family structures. Chowa, et. al. (2021) posit ways how peer relationships play a crucial role in mitigating psychological distress among disadvantaged youth, offering companionship, protection and guidance. Jonsson, Mulubwa and Pat (2022), who argue that informal support systems help juveniles navigate the complexities of street life and institutionalization, echo this finding. However, these peer-based resilience strategies often lack stability and do not replace the need for structured interventions, as Likumbo, Muleya & Simui (2021) caution that reliance on peer networks alone may perpetuate cycles of poverty and crime.

Another key resilience strategy is artistic expression, which serves as a therapeutic tool for coping with trauma. Many marginalized juveniles engage in music, dance, and visual arts as a means of self-expression and emotional processing. Jonsson, Mulubwa and Pat (2022) emphasize that creative outlets provide juveniles with a sense of identity and purpose, helping them regain control over their narratives. This aligns with Matafwali (2023), who notes that artistic expression plays a significant role in trauma recovery, particularly for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Additionally, community-based interventions, such as mentorship programs, religious institutions and non-governmental organizations, have been identified as crucial in offering support to marginalized juveniles (Armstrong & Zulu, 2019). However, as Chigunta (2001), Coleman (2025) and Kreitzinger (2025) warns, while these interventions provide short-term relief, long-term solutions require structural changes, including policy reforms and institutional support, to ensure sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, in particular, the narrative inquiry. This helped to explore the traumatic experiences of marginalized juveniles in Zambia.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select juveniles from three key settings: correctional facilities, orphanages and street environments. The selection criteria included juveniles aged between 10 and 18 who had experienced homelessness, abuse, or systemic exclusion. Key informants were social workers, caregivers and rehabilitation officers interviewed to provide additional perspectives.

Data was collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with the juveniles to explore their personal experiences with trauma, discrimination and exclusion. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a safe and confidential setting (Banda, et. al., 2017).

Participants were encouraged to share their life stories in their own words, allowing the study to capture detailed accounts of their struggles, resilience and coping strategies. These narratives were recorded and transcribed for analysis.



Ethnographic observations were also used to collect data. The researcher spent time in the selected settings, observing interactions, daily routines and coping mechanisms of the juveniles. Field notes were taken to document non-verbal expressions, group dynamics and environmental factors influencing their experiences.

The thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns and key themes emerging from the collected data. Transcripts and field notes were coded to categorize recurring themes such as trauma, resilience, exclusion and systemic failures. Findings were validated through member checking, where selected participants reviewed summaries of their narratives to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent from participants or their guardians where necessary (Mpolomoka, 2024). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process and psychosocial support was arranged for participants who experienced emotional distress during the study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Challenges Faced by Marginalized Juveniles in Zambia

This section presents the challenges faced by marginalized juveniles in Zambia, as captured through in-depth interviews, life narratives and ethnographic observations. The themes that emerged from the data include poverty, abuse, homelessness, discrimination and limited access to education and healthcare. The voices of participants from correctional facilities, orphanages and street environments are highlighted using verbatim quotes, with pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities. Under this objective, findings were presented using both visual representations while maintaining verbatims and through writing of natural coding.

Table 1: Poverty and Survival Struggles

Theme	Description	Verbatim Quote	Participant
Hunger and Starvation	Many juveniles struggle to find food daily, leading to survival tactics such as begging or theft.	<i>Some days, you sleep hungry because no one cares.</i>	Paul, 16, Male, Street Environment
Engagement in Crime	Some juveniles resort to theft as a means of survival.	<i>I stole food from a shop... there was no food at home.</i>	James, 14, Male, Correctional Facility
Limited Institutional Support	Orphanages struggle with financial constraints, limiting their ability to provide for children.	<i>Sometimes there isn't enough food or school materials for everyone.</i>	Caregiver, Female, Orphanage

Table 2: Experiences of Abuse and Exploitation

Type of Abuse	Description	Verbatim Quote	Participant
Sexual Abuse	Street children are at risk of sexual violence from predators.	<i>Some men come and force us to do things... You cannot fight back.</i>	Natasha, 15, Female, Street Environment
Physical Violence	Juveniles in correctional facilities report being beaten by authorities.	<i>They beat us when we don't follow orders.</i>	Michael, 17, Male, Correctional Facility
Neglect and Mistreatment	Orphans experience neglect, with caregivers only acting in the presence of donors.	<i>Some people only care about us when donors come.</i>	Grace, 13, Female, Orphanage



Table 3: Homelessness and Lack of Safe Shelter

Issue	Description	Verbatim Quote	Participant
Unsafe Sleeping Conditions	Street children sleep in open spaces or under bridges, exposing them to danger.	<i>You sleep under a bridge, and sometimes the police chase you away.</i>	Joseph, 12, Male, Street Environment
Overcrowding	Correctional facilities and orphanages are overcrowded, affecting comfort and health.	<i>In our dormitory, we are too many... some of us sleep on the floor.</i>	Lydia, 14, Female, Orphanage

Table 4: Discrimination and Social Stigma

Discrimination Type	Description	Verbatim Quote	Participant
Stereotyping Youth	Street children are often labeled as criminals or thieves.	<i>When people see me, they think I am a thief.</i>	Emmanuel, 16, Male, Street Environment
Family Rejection	Juveniles in correctional facilities face stigma from families.	<i>My own relatives don't want me back.</i>	Peter, 17, Male, Correctional Facility

Table 5: Limited Access to Education and Healthcare

Issue	Description	Verbatim Quote	Participant
Education Exclusion	Many juveniles express a strong desire for education but lack access.	<i>I want to go to school, but who will pay for me?</i>	Tandiwe, 13, Female, Street Environment
Inadequate Schooling in Correctional Facilities	Limited educational support affects reintegration.	<i>We learn a few things, but it's not like a real school.</i>	Brenda, 15, Female, Correctional Facility
Poor Healthcare Access	Juveniles struggle to receive medical attention when needed.	<i>When you are sick, you just have to wait.</i>	Felix, 14, Male, Orphanage

From the overall perspective of results shown in the above tables 1 to 5, the variety of structured way of presenting qualitative findings have been indicated thoroughly. Fortunate enough, the maintaining of the voices of participants in a visually organized manner has been secured. On the other hand, the findings reveal that marginalized juveniles in Zambia endure extreme hardship, including poverty, abuse, homelessness, discrimination and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Discussion of findings postulates the highlighting of the profound impact of poverty, abuse, homelessness, and systemic neglect on marginalized juveniles in Zambia, aligning with existing literature on youth exclusion. Coleman (2025) emphasizes that economic hardships are a major contributor to juvenile delinquency and street life, as young people resort to survival strategies such as begging and petty crime. This study confirms these observations, as many participants recounted how financial struggles pushed them into risky behaviors. Similarly, Simabwachi (2017) found that street children in Lusaka often engage in informal labor or theft to meet basic needs, a pattern evident in this study's findings. Conversely, despite Kreitzinger (2025) suggesting that informal economic activities can provide a temporary means of survival, this study reveals that such activities often expose juveniles to further exploitation and legal consequences, as seen among participants in correctional facilities.

The issue of abuse and exploitation also resonates with prior research on child vulnerability. Likumbo, Muleya & Simui (2021) discuss how children in institutional settings, such as orphanages and correctional facilities, often experience violence and neglect from caregivers and authorities. This study substantiates these claims, with juveniles reporting physical punishments, emotional mistreatment and sexual abuse. Moreover, Egelund (2017) argues that the harsh conditions within



correctional institutions can further traumatize juveniles rather than rehabilitate them. The accounts from participants in this study support this notion, as many described correctional facilities as punitive rather than restorative. Whereas institutions are intended to provide protection and structure, the reality for many juveniles is one of further marginalization and emotional distress, reinforcing the cycle of vulnerability rather than breaking it.

Discrimination and social stigma emerged as key barriers to reintegration for marginalized juveniles, aligning with Armstrong & Zulu's (2019) application of the social determinants of health framework. Their study underscores how societal perceptions of street children and incarcerated youth often lead to exclusion from educational and economic opportunities. Similarly, this study found that juveniles frequently faced rejection from their families and communities, with many being labeled as criminals or delinquents regardless of their circumstances. All the same, Chowa, et. al. (2021) postulate that resilience-building programs, such as peer mentorship and community engagement, can help mitigate the effects of social exclusion. Although some participants in this study demonstrated resilience through peer support networks and artistic expression, the absence of structured rehabilitation programs limits their long-term reintegration prospects.

Despite these adversities, the study also revealed elements of resilience and coping mechanisms among marginalized juveniles, consistent with findings by Jonsson, Mulubwa and Pat (2022), who argue that community-based interventions can play a critical role in youth empowerment. Participants as sources of strength cited artistic expression, peer networks, and informal education. Notwithstanding, Matafwali (2023) cautions that though these coping strategies are valuable, they cannot replace systemic interventions such as improved access to education, healthcare and psychosocial support. This study reinforces that even though juveniles exhibit remarkable resilience, sustainable solutions must come from policy reforms and multi-sectoral collaboration to break the cycles of marginalization and trauma.

4.2 Resilience Strategies Among Marginalized Juveniles

The data collected from in-depth interviews, life narratives and ethnographic observations were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to trauma, marginalization, and resilience among juveniles in Zambia. Using a qualitative approach, responses were transcribed, coded and categorized into themes that emerged from the lived experiences of juveniles in correctional facilities, orphanages and street environments. The thematic analysis focused on both the adversities faced by marginalized juveniles and the coping mechanisms they employed.

One of the dominant themes that emerged was the presence of peer support networks as a crucial resilience strategy. Many juveniles reported relying on their peers for emotional and material support in the absence of family or institutional care. These networks served as informal support systems, helping juveniles navigate the challenges of homelessness, institutionalization and discrimination. Some participants mentioned that peer groups provided not only companionship but also guidance on survival skills, indicating the importance of social bonds in mitigating psychological distress.

Artistic expression was another significant coping mechanism identified in the data. Several juveniles engaged in activities such as music, dance and drawing to express their emotions and cope with trauma. These creative outlets provided a sense of purpose and identity, allowing them to process their experiences in non-verbal ways. Some juveniles in correctional facilities reported that participating in artistic activities helped them feel a sense of normalcy and escape from the harsh realities of their environment. These findings align with studies emphasizing the therapeutic role of creative arts in trauma recovery.

Additionally, community-based interventions played a vital role in supporting marginalized juveniles. Some participants shared their experiences with local organizations that provided food, temporary shelter and educational programs. Others mentioned religious institutions that offered mentorship and guidance. However, period when these interventions were helpful, many juveniles expressed the need for more structured and long-term support systems, including psychosocial services and inclusive policies that prioritize their well-being. The findings indicate the urgency of developing rehabilitative programs that go beyond immediate relief, focusing on sustainable reintegration into society.

Coming to the perspective of discussion, the findings of this study underscore the significance of peer support networks as a key resilience strategy among marginalized juveniles. Many participants relied on their peers for emotional support, guidance and protection, particularly in correctional facilities and on the streets. This finding aligns with Chowa, et. al. (2021), who argue that informal peer networks serve as vital social capital for vulnerable youth, providing a sense of belonging and reducing psychological distress. Nevertheless, even though peer networks offer short-term relief, they do not replace the need for structured rehabilitation programs. As noted by Likumbo, Muleya & Simui (2021), the lack of institutional support often forces marginalized juveniles to depend on one another, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability rather than breaking them.

With many juveniles using creative activities such as music, drawing and dance to process trauma made the artistic expression to be brought forth. This finding resonates with Jonsson, Mulubwa, and Pat (2022), who highlight the role of creative expression in fostering resilience among youth in marginalized communities. Artistic engagement provides an outlet for self-expression, allowing juveniles to narrate their experiences in non-verbal ways. However, Matafwali (2023) cautions that even though such strategies are beneficial, they remain largely informal and lack institutional backing. Without integration into



formal psychosocial programs, artistic expression alone may not be sufficient to address the deep-seated emotional distress faced by these juveniles.

Community-based interventions were also identified as crucial in supporting marginalized juveniles, particularly through the provision of food, temporary shelter and educational opportunities. Armstrong & Zulu (2019) argue that local organizations and religious institutions play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of social exclusion. This study supports that claim, as many juveniles cited positive experiences with community support systems. Even so, the findings also reveal limitations in these interventions, as many programs focus on immediate relief rather than long-term reintegration. This is consistent with Coleman (2025) and Kreitzinger (2025), who warns that short-term assistance without sustainable policy frameworks does little to break cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Despite the resilience displayed by marginalized juveniles, the study shows the urgent need for inclusive policies and structured rehabilitation programs. Egelund (2017) emphasizes that correctional institutions should prioritize rehabilitation rather than punishment, a perspective echoed in this study's findings. Many juveniles reported that the lack of psychosocial support within correctional facilities contributed to their trauma rather than addressing its root causes. This underscores the need for a multi-sectoral approach, where government agencies, non-profits and community organizations collaborate to create sustainable pathways for juvenile reintegration and social justice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound challenges faced by marginalized juveniles in Zambia, including poverty, abuse, homelessness, discrimination and limited access to education and healthcare. The findings reveal patterns of emotional distress and systemic failures that perpetuate cycles of vulnerability. Yet, resilience strategies such as peer support networks, artistic expression and community-based interventions serve as crucial coping mechanisms. Despite these efforts, the absence of structured rehabilitation programs and inclusive policies remains a major barrier to sustainable reintegration. These challenges require a multi-sectoral approach that prioritizes psychosocial support, rehabilitation and long-term social justice initiatives for marginalized juveniles.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Government, organizations and activists should develop trauma-informed counseling, mentorship programs and social work services within juvenile correctional facilities, orphanages and street rehabilitation centers.
2. The government agencies, non-profits, community organizations and educational institutions should work together to address structural inequalities and create sustainable pathways for juvenile reintegration and social justice.
3. Stakeholders should advocate for stronger policies that protect marginalized juveniles from exploitation and abuse, at the same time promoting access to quality education, healthcare and legal support.
4. Institutions should establish structured vocational training, educational support and life skills development initiatives to facilitate reintegration into society and reduce recidivism.

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