

Letters

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The decline in child abuse cases is good news, but there's need to look closer

When children disappear, suffer abuse or grow up neglected, the long-term impact extends far beyond individual households. It affects education outcomes, mental health, crime levels, productivity and social stability. A country that fails to protect its children weakens its own future.

Uganda's latest annual crime report has been widely welcomed for showing a decline in offences against children from 13,489 reported cases in 2022 to 8,064 in 2025. These numbers appear to suggest progress. But Uganda should be careful not to celebrate too early.

As someone working in the child protection sector, I worry that the country risks becoming comfortable with statistics while ignoring the reality that many children continue to face daily.

And this is because the annual crime report shows statistics on only the reported cases, which can be misleading, as many children, communities and actors may not have the means to report due to cultural, systemic and technological limitations.

Yes, the figures are dropping. Cases of child neglect, abuse, desertion and abduction have reduced over the last four years. Domestic violence cases have also declined. Government agencies, civil society organisations and communities deserve recognition for the awareness campaigns and protection interventions that have contributed to this trend.

But numbers alone do not tell the full story. In 2025 alone, more than 8,000 child-related offences were reported to the police. That translates to thousands of Ugandan children neglected, abandoned, abused, trafficked or missing within a single year. This is not a small problem. It is a national crisis that has slowly become normalised.

Even more concerning is what happens after these cases are reported. Out of the 8,064 child-related offences registered in 2025, only 848 reached court. Only 176 secured convictions.

Meanwhile, 3,486 cases were not proceeded with, and another 3,730 remain under inquiry.

That means the majority of affected children are still waiting for justice or may never receive it at all. This should alarm every Ugandan.

A country cannot claim progress in child protection when thousands of cases remain unresolved. Falling crime statistics mean little if survivors continue to face weak investigations, delayed justice and overwhelmed protection systems.

The report also exposes another uncomfortable truth. Child neglect remains the highest reported offence in Uganda.

This is not simply a policing issue. It reflects growing social and economic pressure on families. Poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, family breakdown and mental health struggles are increasingly affecting caregiving across the country. Many parents are exhausted. Some households are collapsing under economic strain.

The districts and regions with the highest cases should especially concern policymakers. North Kyoga, Busia, Mitinya and other high-burden areas continue to record alarming numbers of neglect, desertion and abuse. Yet conversations about child protection rarely dominate national political debate with the urgency they deserve. Uganda speaks passionately about infrastructure, elections and economic growth. But far less attention is given to the condition of the country's children. That silence is dangerous.

Uganda, therefore, needs more than awareness campaigns and annual reports. It needs stronger investment in social welfare systems, community parenting support, child protection services and faster access to justice. Child protection must stop being treated as charity work done by Non-Governmental Organisations and become a serious national development priority.

The decline in reported cases is welcome. But Uganda should not confuse reduced numbers with resolved problems. Thousands of children are still unsafe, and that should disturb all of us.

Clinton Twena Tumanyo,
Communications Officer
The AfriChild Centre