

COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa highlights unequal access to services

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 358 | Thomas Isbell

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressures on governments, economies, and families, posing what many observers consider the largest global peace-time challenge since the Great Depression a century ago (Goodman, 2020; Rogoff, 2020). In South Africa, the government moved swiftly after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was recorded on 5 March (Mkhize, 2020), turning away arrivals from countries considered high risk (Fabricius & du Plessis, 2020). By 27 March, a national lockdown required South Africans to stay at home except for essential food shopping and medical appointments. Security forces were mobilized to enforce the lockdown (Mahlati, 2020; South African Presidency, 2020).

To date, the South African measures appear to have been successful in slowing the spread of the virus, and have been lauded internationally (Brandt, 2020; Harding, 2020; Nordling, 2020). But they have also highlighted the challenges and costs of a lockdown, especially for the poor (New Humanitarian, 2020).

This dispatch looks at the lived realities of ordinary South Africans in terms of how easily they are able to stay at home and stay safe. Afrobarometer survey findings from 2018 suggest the country entered the COVID-19 era with large disparities in access to essential services, such as water, toilets, markets, and banks. Many citizens, especially the economically disadvantaged, are forced to leave their homes and compounds to access water and toilets, thereby placing themselves and others at risk of contracting or spreading the virus. Many also lack the resources to work from home, stay informed, seek help, and educate their children online.

In principle, South Africans are less supportive of government restrictions on free movement than most other Africans. And in enforcing COVID-19 restrictions, the army faces significant popular distrust and doubts about its professionalism and respect for the rights of all citizens.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys (2019/2020) are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

Key findings

- As of mid-2018, only four in 10 South Africans (43%) believed the government should have the right to impose curfews or set up roadblocks when faced with a threat to public security, the second-lowest level of support for such restrictions across 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018. While these views were recorded well before the COVID-19 crisis, they suggest significant popular resistance to government restrictions on free movement.
- While about half of South Africans have piped water (53%) and toilets (50%) in their homes, many must leave their homes or even their compounds to access these essential services.
- Rural, poor, and black South Africans face particular disadvantages in access to key public services and infrastructure such as water and sewage systems, markets, banks, and cell phone service, making it more difficult for them to quarantine at home.
- A majority (54%) of South African households do not own a computer, making it more difficult to work remotely, engage in online learning, and stay informed.
- While most South Africans (91%) own a mobile phone, only 62% have access to the Internet via their phones, and 36% said they “never” use the Internet, highlighting the importance of using other channels to offer these citizens opportunities and information.
- While members of the South African National Defence Force are being deployed to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown, only about half (53%) of South Africans said they trust the army, and only four in 10 (39%) said the armed forces usually operate professionally and respect the rights of all citizens.

South Africans split on right of government to impose curfews

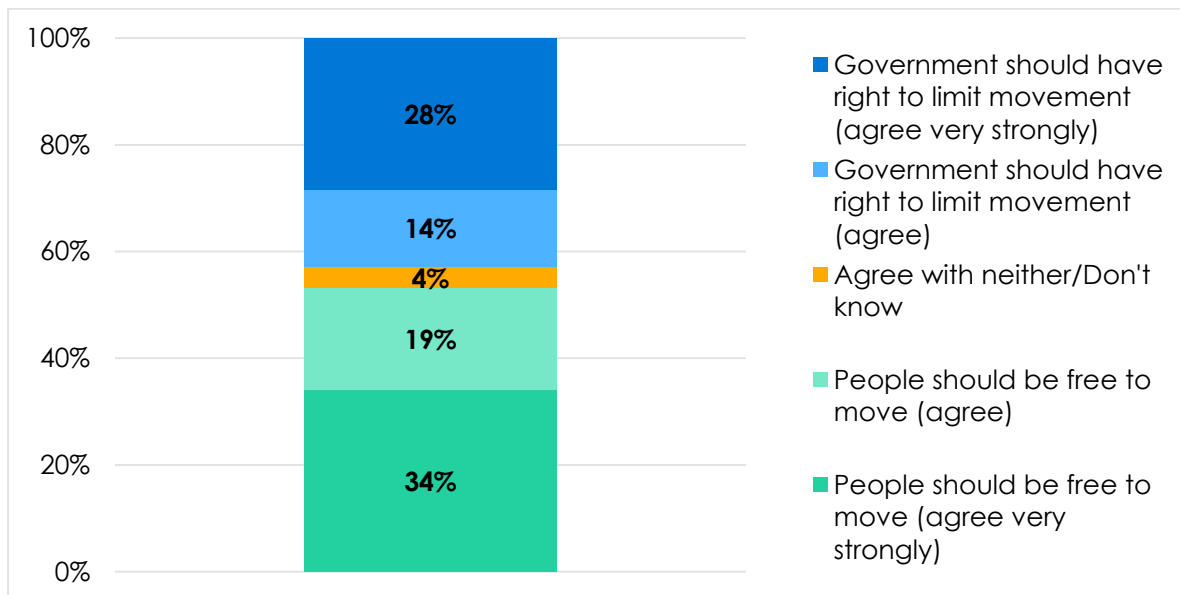
Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, observers have raised concerns about African regimes using the fight against the virus as a pretense to limit civil and political freedoms and consolidate power (Cheeseman & Smith, 2020; Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2020). While each country's case must be scrutinized individually, the data for South Africa suggest considerable popular resistance to government restrictions on people's freedom to move around.

As of September 2018, a majority (53%) of survey respondents said people should be free to move about the country at will even when public security is threatened. Only 43% supported the government's right to impose curfews or set up roadblocks when faced with security threats (Figure 1), the second-lowest level of support (after Zimbabwe) across 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018 (Logan & Penar, 2019).

Freedom of movement, even in the face of security threats, enjoyed stronger support among younger South Africans (56% among 18- to 35-year-olds) and those with higher levels of education (56% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 2). In a comparison of race groups, white South Africans (48%) were least likely to favour freedom of movement over the government's right to impose restrictions.

The government's right to impose curfews and roadblocks found its greatest support among respondents in North West (50%) and the Eastern Cape (48%), while only 39% of respondents in Mpumalanga and Free State endorsed such a power (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Support freedom of movement vs. government right to impose curfews
 | South Africa | 2018



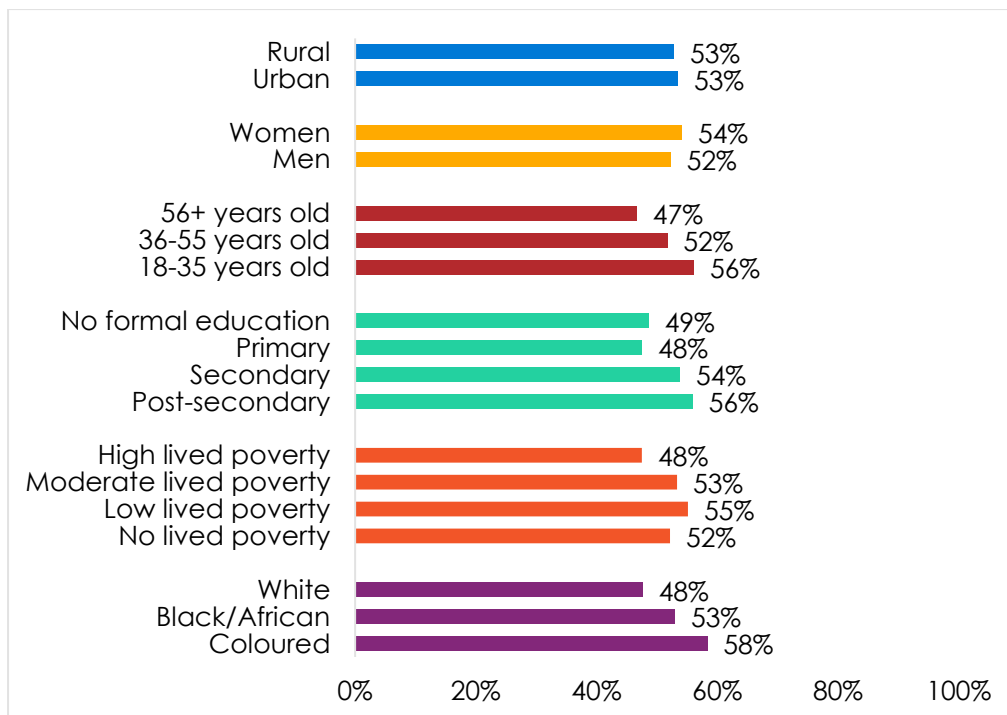
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night.

Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around.

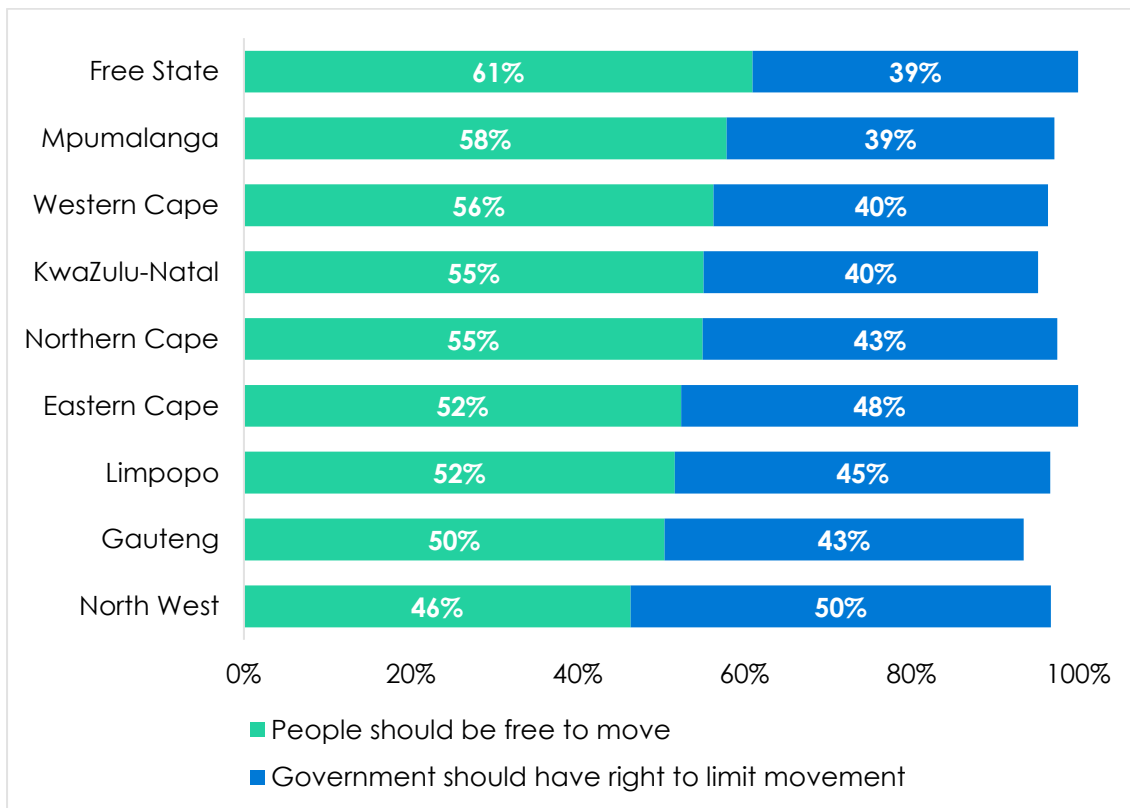
(Note: Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 14% "agree" and 28% "agree very strongly" combine to 43%.)

Figure 2: Support freedom of movement | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" that "even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night")

Figure 3: Support freedom of movement vs. government right to impose curfews
 | by region | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night.

Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with each statement)

Capacity to quarantine

The government's lockdown orders require people to stay home except to buy groceries or seek medical attention. However, in a country of immense inequalities, staying home to stay safe is not equally easy for everyone.

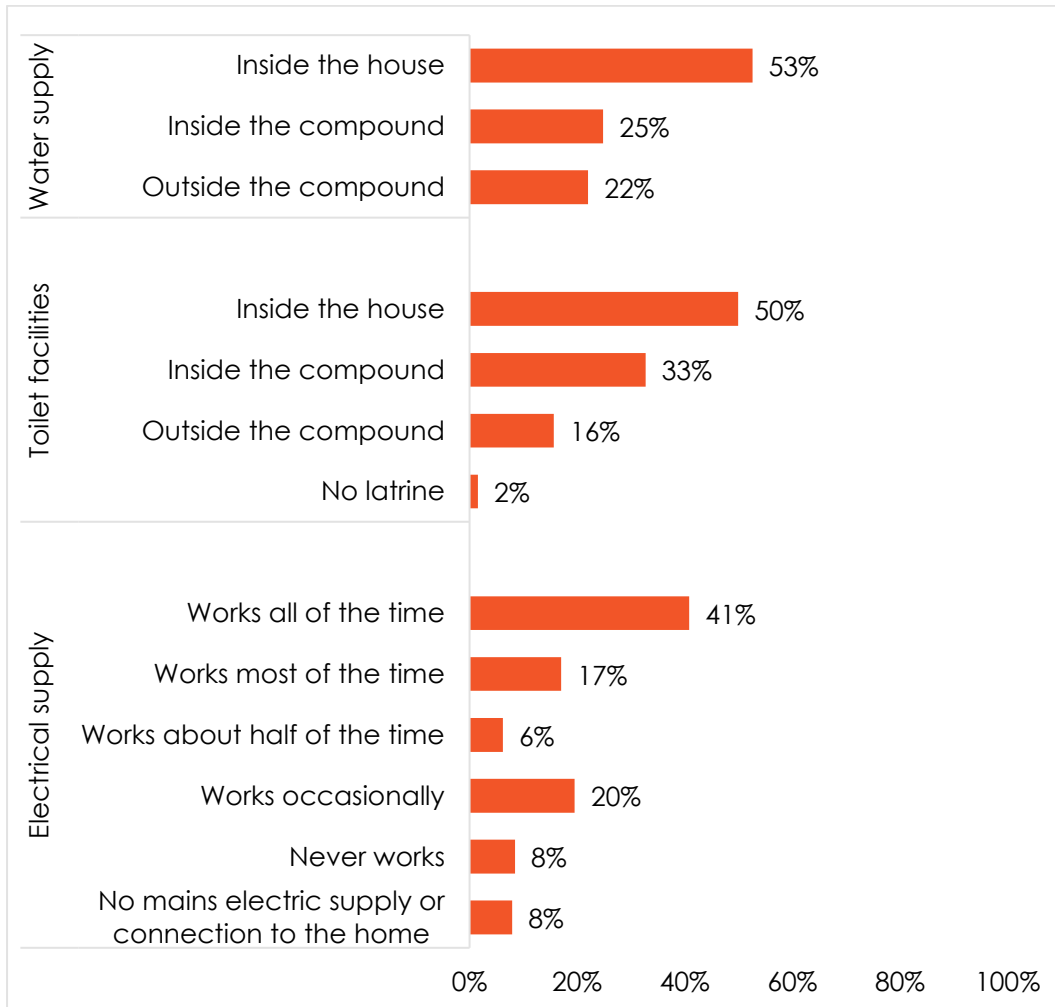
For many, accessing basic services such as water and toilets means leaving the house or even the compound (Figure 4). For example, about half of South Africans do not have piped water (47%) or toilet facilities (51%) in their homes.

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And while people are encouraged to work from home during the lockdown, only 58% enjoy a supply of electricity that works more than half the time.

Access to basic services is unequally distributed among different groups in South Africa. While two in three urban residents (67%) have piped water in their homes, only one in five rural residents (22%) do. In fact, 44% of rural dwellers said they have to leave their compound to access water (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Access to water, toilets, and electricity | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked:

Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use? A toilet or latrine?

Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

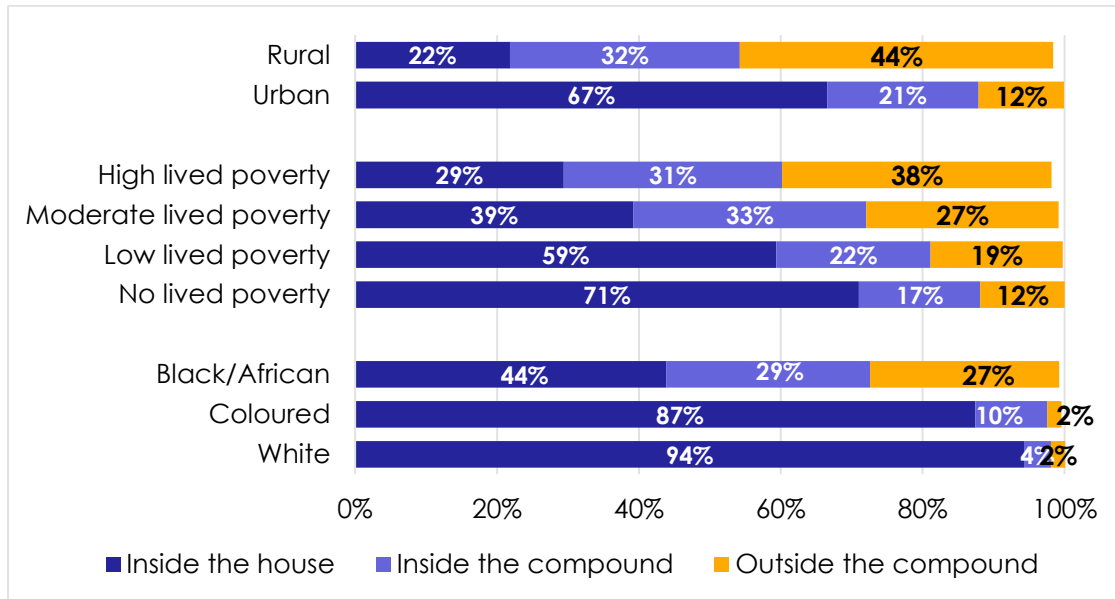
Likewise, poor South Africans are considerably less able to stay at home than those who experience no lived poverty.¹ While 71% of those without experience of poverty have piped water in their homes, among the poorest, only 29% have access to water in their homes, and 38% must leave their compounds to get water.

Similarly, while large majorities of white (94%) and Coloured (87%) South Africans enjoy piped water in their homes, the same is true for fewer than half (44%) of black citizens.

The pattern is similar with respect to access to toilet facilities (not shown).

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Figure 5: Access to water | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

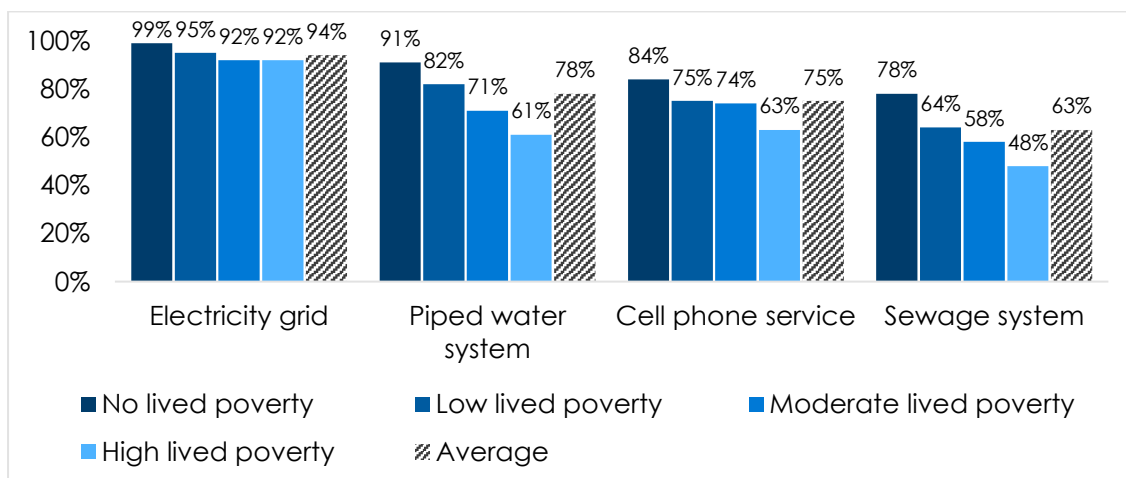


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use?

Some of the differences in access to basic services are explained by the presence or absence of the infrastructure needed to provide the services. Afrobarometer survey teams capture these data based on their direct observations in the communities they visit. In South Africa, most areas had built electricity infrastructure (94%), piped water systems (78%), and cell phone service (75%), while a smaller majority had sewage systems (63%).

However, poor South Africans were far less likely than their better-off counterparts to live in areas with basic public service infrastructure (Figure 6). For example, while 91% of the best-off respondents lived in areas served by a piped water system, the same was true for just 61% of the poorest respondents. The gap was 84% vs. 63% for cell phone service and 78% vs. 48% for sewage infrastructure.

Figure 6: Access to basic infrastructure | by level of lived poverty | South Africa | 2018

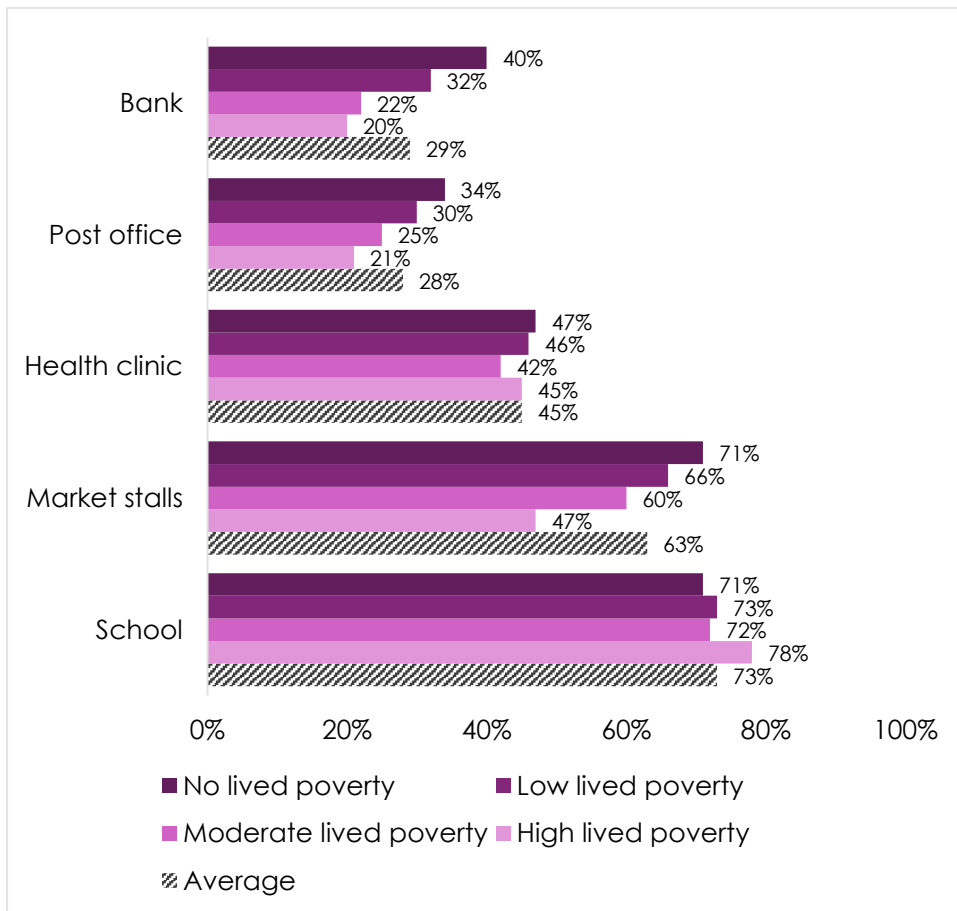


Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access? Piped water system that most houses can access? Sewage system that most houses can access? Mobile phone service? (% "yes")

To help contain the spread of the virus, people must limit their travel as much as possible. However, they cannot go without certain essential services, such as places to buy groceries and in some cases health clinics and banks. Observations by Afrobarometer teams show that almost two-thirds (63%) of surveyed communities had market stalls or shopping facilities, 45% had medical facilities, and 29% had banks – meaning that substantial parts of the population would have to leave their neighborhoods to obtain these services.

Again, disparities by lived poverty level are significant (Figure 7). Only 47% of the poorest South Africans live in areas with market stalls, compared to 71% of the best-off respondents, who are also twice as likely to live in areas with banks than the poorest respondents (40% vs. 20%).

Figure 7: Access to key services | by level of lived poverty | South Africa | 2018



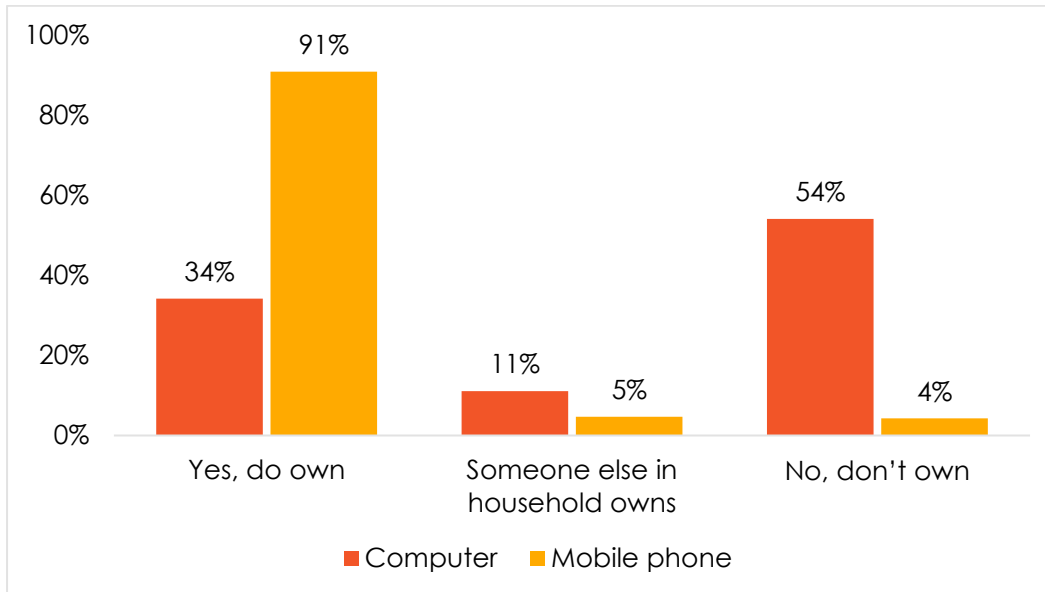
Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area? (% "yes")

Ability to work from home and stay informed

To be able to stay at home for an extended period, people must be able to continue their work or find employment that is compatible with working from home. But while most South Africans (91%) own a mobile phone, fewer than half own a computer (34%) or live in a household where someone else owns one (11%) (Figure 8).

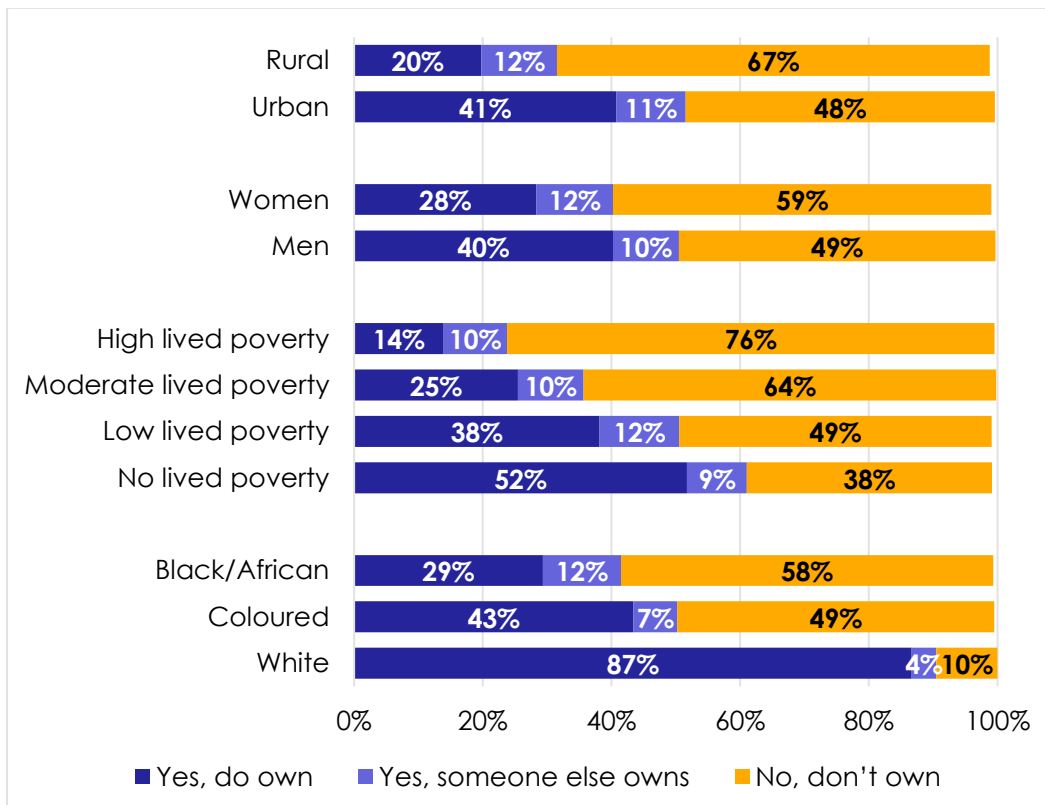
Urban residents (41%) and men (40%) are considerably more likely to own a computer than are rural residents (20%) and women (28%) (Figure 9). As might be expected, well-off South Africans (52%) are almost four times as likely as the poorest (14%) to personally own a computer. Large racial gaps also appear: White South Africans (87%) are about three times as likely to own a computer as black (29%) citizens.

Figure 8: Computer and mobile phone ownership | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own: Computer? Mobile phone? [If no:] Does anyone else in your household own one?

Figure 9: Own a computer | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



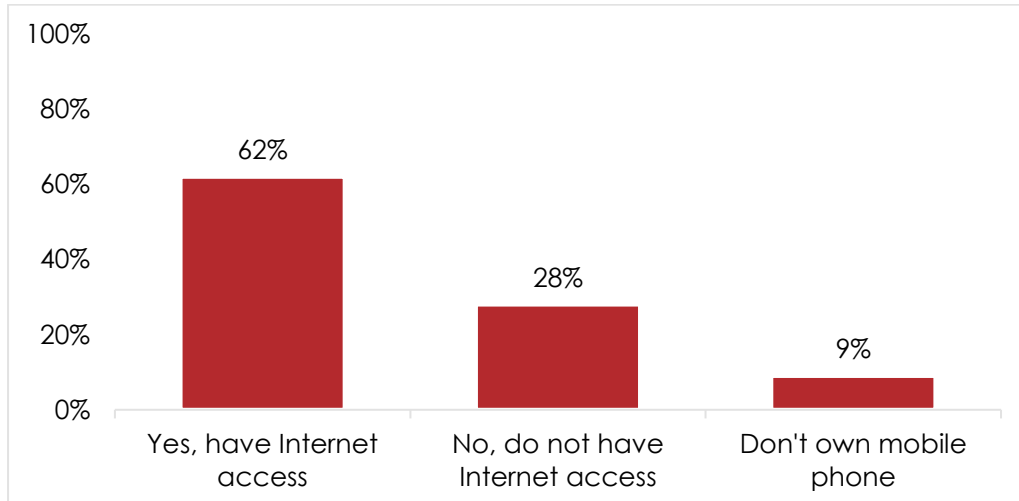
Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own: Computer? [If no:] Does anyone else in your household own one?

Being online is essential for home-based work and education as well as for staying on top of the news, public service announcements, and possibilities for seeking help (Bright, 2020; Nash,

2020). However, while most South Africans own a mobile phone, only about six in 10 (62%) can use it to access the Internet (Figure 10).

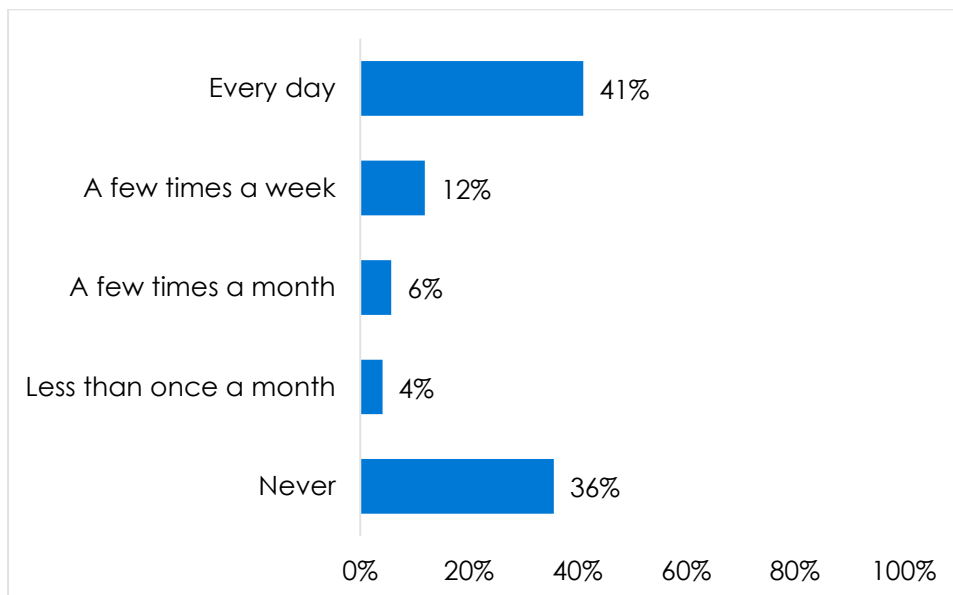
Moreover, while four in 10 South Africans (41%) are daily users of the Internet, almost as many (36%) said they “never” go online (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Mobile phone has Internet access | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: Does your phone have access to the Internet?

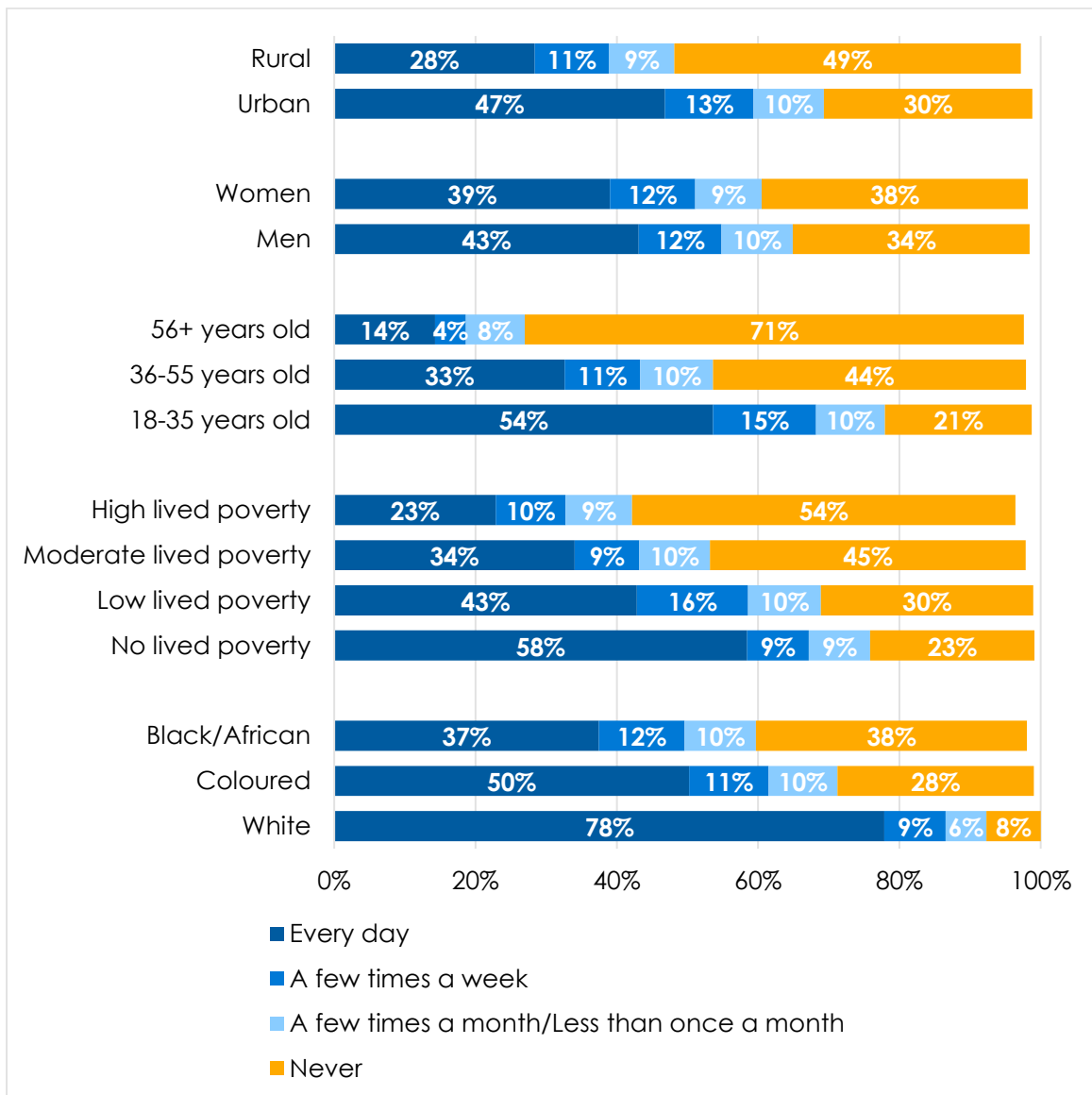
Figure 11: How often use the Internet | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet?

Living completely offline is especially common among rural residents (49%), older respondents (71% among those above age 55), and the poorest citizens (54% among those with high levels of lived poverty), placing them at higher risk of lacking the tools to seek remote employment and keep informed about the current situation (Figure 12). Black South Africans (38%) are more likely to “never” use the Internet than white (8%) and Coloured (28%) citizens.

Figure 12: How often use the Internet | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

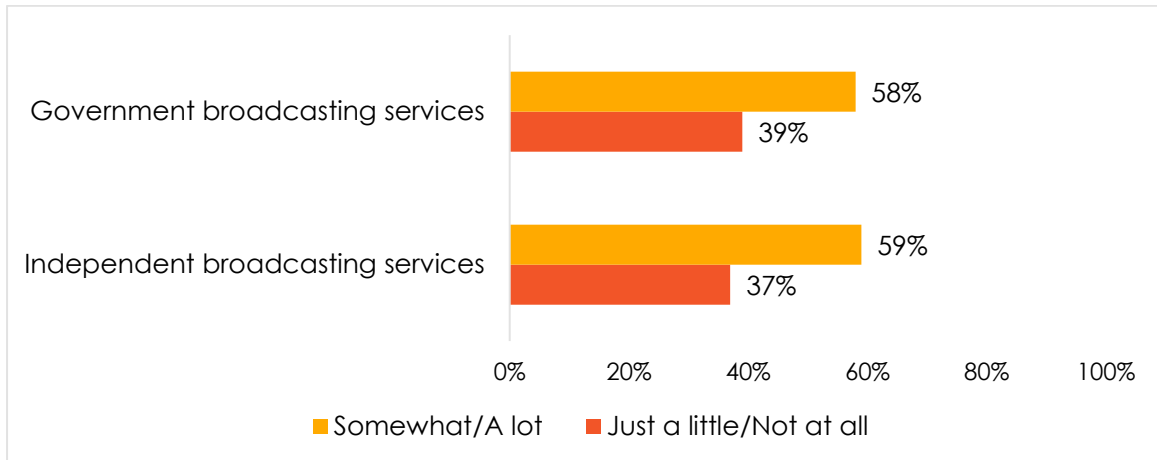


Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet?

Given the evolving pandemic and the unpredictability of its spread, it is crucial that information be disseminated to people quickly and efficiently. Mass media are pivotal in this regard. While a majority of South Africans said they trust both government (58%) and independent media (59%), almost four in 10 said they trust them “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 13).

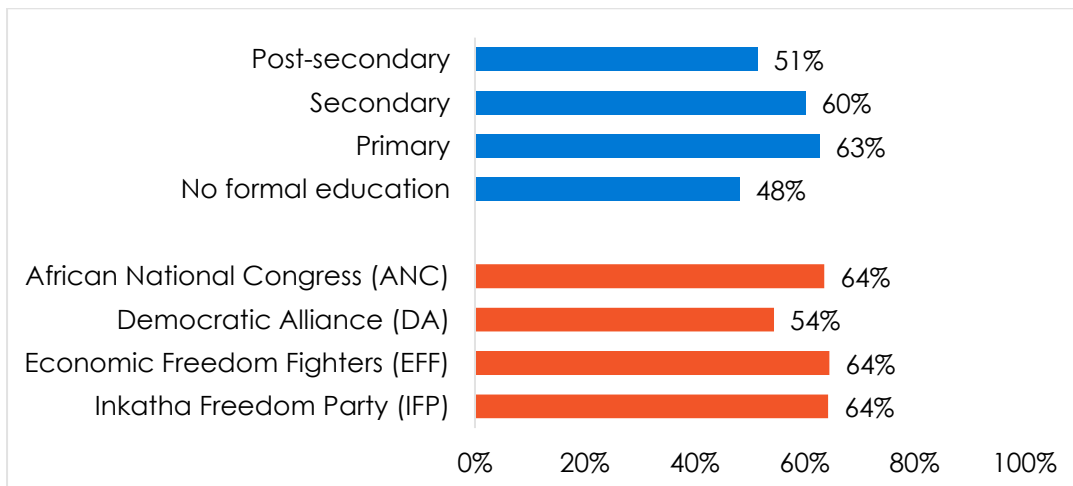
Trust in government broadcasting services is somewhat lower among both the most and least educated (51% and 48%, respectively), as well as among those who feel close to the opposition Democratic Alliance party (54%) (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Trust media | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Government broadcasting services like SABC-TV and radio? Independent broadcasting services like eTV, Radio 702, and community radio stations?

Figure 14: Trust government media 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by level of education and partisanship² | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Government broadcasting services like SABC-TV and radio? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

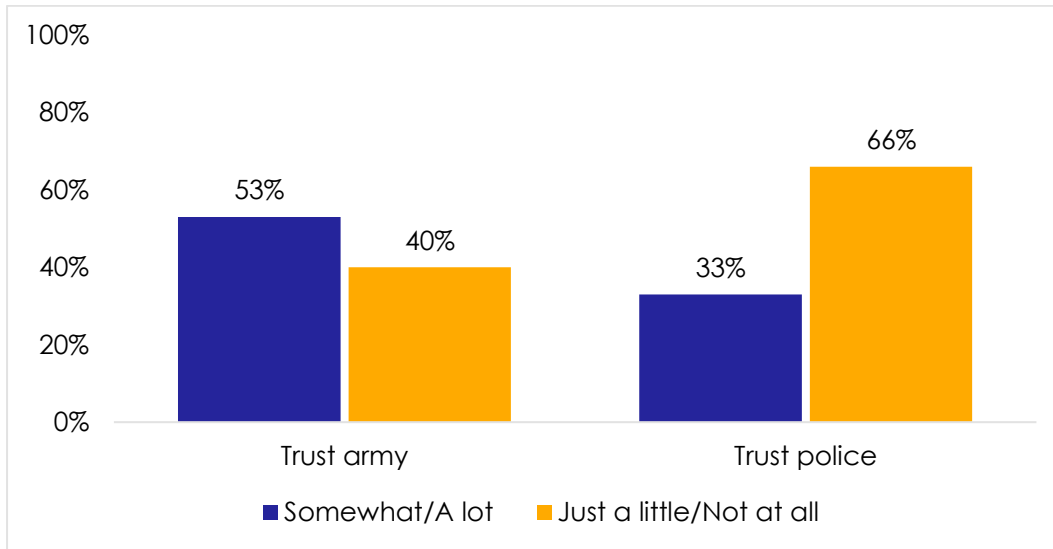
Experience with security forces

To try to ensure that people abide by the lockdown measures and that property is protected from looting, the president deployed 2,820 South African National Defence Force personnel on 23 March and a further 73,180 a month later (Merten, 2020).

Survey results from 2018 suggest that South Africans are more trusting of the army than of the police: 53% said they trust the military "somewhat" or "a lot," vs. just 33% for the police. Still, that leaves four out of 10 citizens (40%) who expressed "just a little" or no trust in the army (vs. 66% for the police) (Figure 15).

² Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 15: Popular trust in the army and police | South Africa | 2018

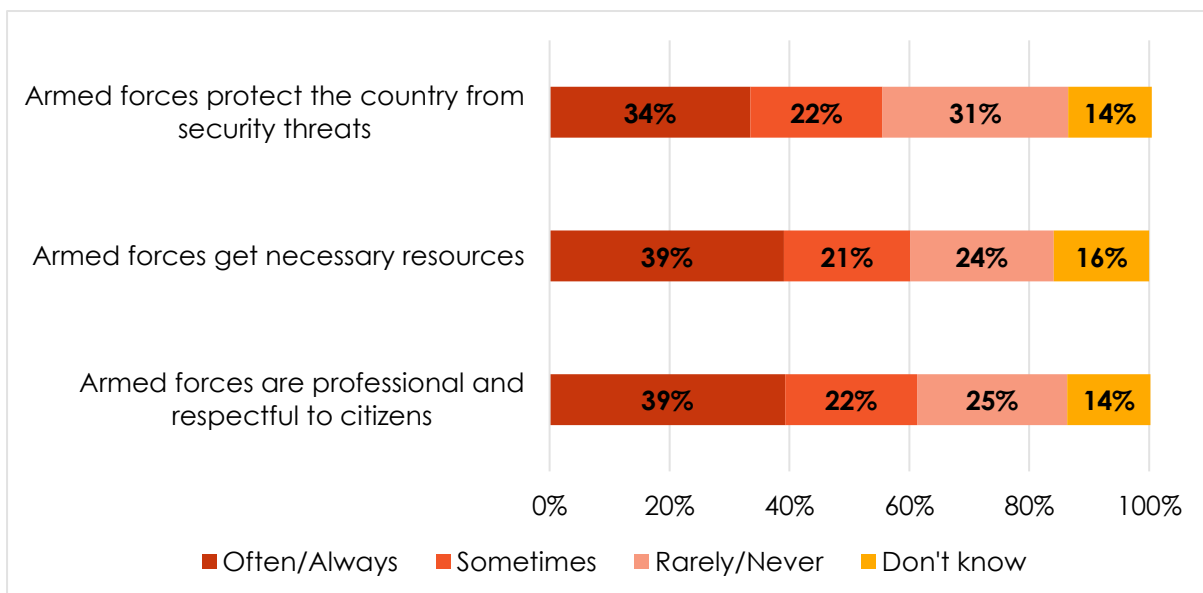


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? The army?

South Africans are similarly divided on the army's performance: One in three (34%) said the military "often" or "always" protects the country from external and internal security threats, while 22% said it does so only "sometimes" and 31% said it "rarely" or "never" protects the country (Figure 16). Only four in 10 respondents (39%) said they believe the military usually gets the training and equipment it needs to be effective.

And in what might be an important factor in how South Africans respond to military efforts to enforce COVID-19 restrictions, only four in 10 respondents (39%) said the army "often" or "always" acts in a professional manner and respects the rights of all citizens.

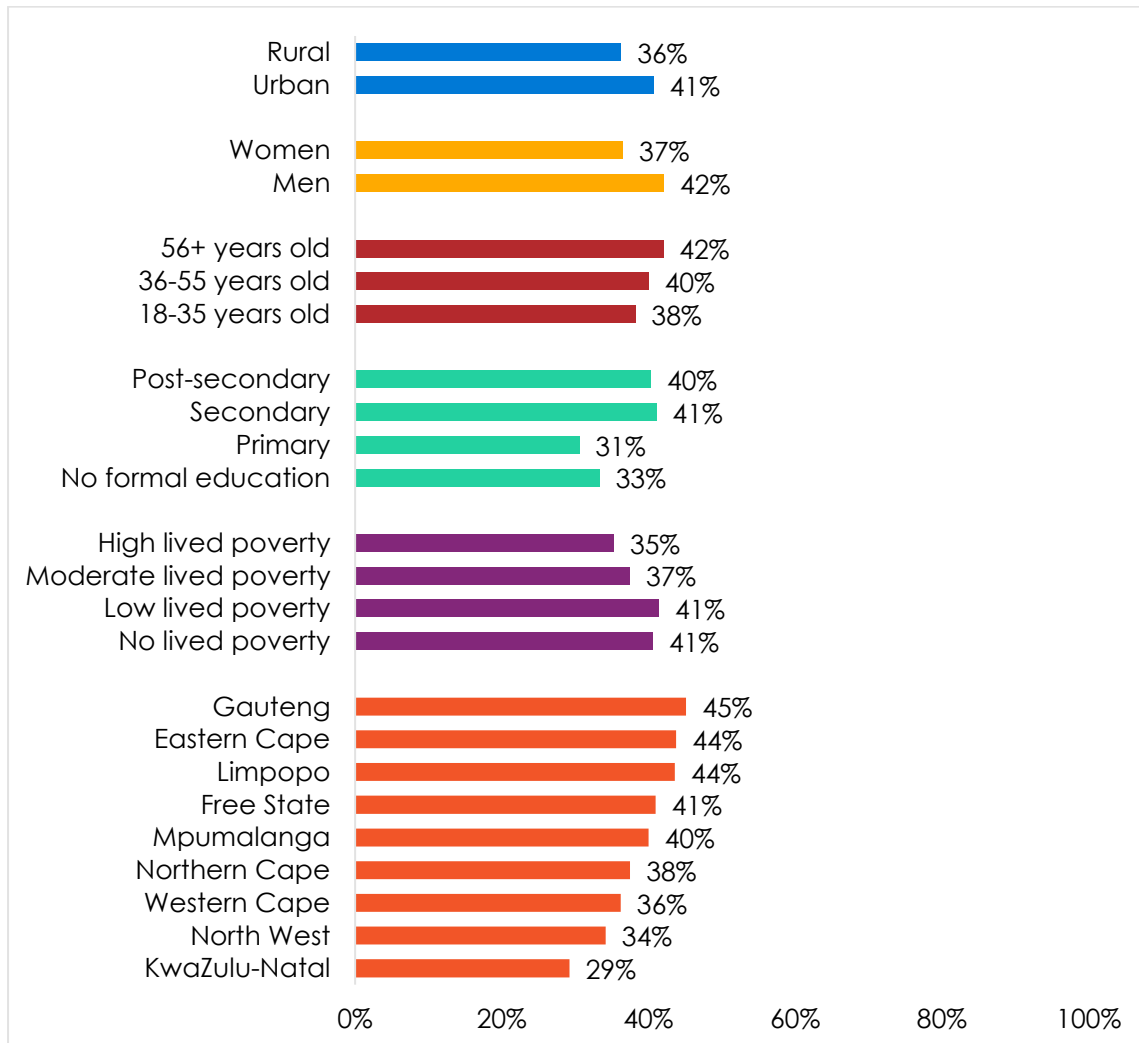
Figure 16: Perceptions and experiences of the armed forces | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country:
 Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?
 Get the training and equipment needed to be effective?
 Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

The perception that the army usually acts professionally and respects citizens' rights is particularly weak among rural residents (36%), women (37%), youth (38%), less-educated citizens (31%-33% among those with primary or no formal education), the poorest citizens (35%), and residents of KwaZulu-Natal (29%) and the North West region (34%) (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Armed forces are professional and respect citizens' rights | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens? (% who said "often" or "always")

Conclusion

The battle against the new coronavirus will likely go on throughout 2020 and beyond. While epidemiological forecasts vary and shift, governments around the world have acknowledged that some forms of social distancing will continue to be core components of slowing the spread and lightening the burden on health care systems.

Against the background of South Africa's lockdown, Afrobarometer survey data suggest that many citizens, especially the poorest and those who live in rural areas, lack access to the most basic services, such as water and sanitation, that would allow them to comply with stay-at-home rules. While this lack cannot be addressed easily or quickly, measures should be taken to ensure that leaving the safety of their homes to access such necessary services does not come at the risk of contracting or spreading the virus.

Many South Africans are dependent on regular employment and have little in the way of savings to help them during the lockdown and the economic downturn that will likely follow. For those who can, working from home allows them to stay gainfully employed. However, many South Africans do not own a computer and enjoy only irregular electricity supply. In fact, one in three South Africans say they never use the Internet.

To reach these citizens, information and assistance will have to rely on off-line channels. Public information campaigns and education materials for pupils and students must accommodate South Africans who do not use the Internet as well as those who do. At the same time, efforts are needed to expand access to the Internet to ensure inclusive opportunities for all South Africans to work remotely, search for remote employment, access education materials, and stay informed about the virus.

Finally, should continued or renewed lockdowns prove necessary, the government must engage with vulnerable communities to identify workable solutions if it expects widespread compliance. In principle, as of 2018, a majority of South Africans were opposed to state restrictions on free movement, even in the face of threats to public security. While many may see things differently when it comes to COVID-19, popular resistance to government restrictions is clearly stronger in South Africa than in most other African countries.

Moreover, large minorities of South Africans distrust the army and have doubts about its professionalism and respect for citizens' rights. If lockdown measures enforced by the military are part of the lives of South Africans in the future, building a positive rapport between civilians and the armed forces will be crucial to winning the "hearts and minds" of ordinary South Africans and ensuring that the lockdown succeeds in beating the coronavirus.

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Thomas Isbell is a PhD student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Email: tisbell@afrobarometer.org.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 358 | 28 April 2020