



Dispatch No. 458 | 17 June 2021

Zimbabweans endorse government's COVID-19 response but voice concerns about corruption and lack of assistance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 458 | Stephen Ndoma, Simangele Moyo-Nyede, and Jonathan Kugarakuripi

Summary

Zimbabwe has not been spared the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 16 June 2021, the country had recorded 40,077 confirmed cases and 1,635 deaths of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). Lockdowns have threatened many households with destitution and hunger (News24, 2021).

The government pre-emptively declared COVID-19 a national disaster on 17 March 2020, three days before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed, and a week later closed schools until phased reopenings starting in September (Mukeredzi, 2020). A nationwide lockdown in March-April 2020 was followed by slightly relaxed sets of restrictions, then reimposed in January 2021 after a surge in COVID-19 cases. About 1,107,000 vaccine doses have been administered in the country (World Health Organization, 2021).

Enforcement of lockdown restrictions has been harsh, marked by arrests of suspected violators and accusations of human-rights abuses by members of the country's military and police (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020).

A new Afrobarometer survey shows that even though almost half of Zimbabweans say their household lost a primary source of income during the pandemic, most citizens approve of the government's overall management of the pandemic. Most Zimbabweans endorse lockdowns and school closures as painful but necessary.

But very few report receiving pandemic-related assistance from the government, and a majority believe that COVID-19 resources were lost to government corruption. A majority doubt the government's ability to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and fewer than half say they are likely to try to get vaccinated.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey 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. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- Almost seven out of 10 adult Zimbabweans (68%) consider themselves “somewhat” or “very” well informed” about COVID-19 and efforts to fight it.
- About one in 10 (8%) say someone in their household became ill with COVID-19, and almost half (47%) say a household member lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to COVID-19.
- Even though more than three-fourths (77%) of citizens say it was difficult to comply with lockdown/curfew restrictions, most Zimbabweans (81%) support the restrictions as necessary.
- The same majority (81%) agree with the government's decision to close the schools, although most (85%) say they should have reopened sooner.
- Only one in 10 (10%) say their household received pandemic-related assistance from the government, and a plurality (48%) of citizens say such assistance was distributed unfairly.
- More than eight in 10 Zimbabweans approve of the government's performance in managing the pandemic (81%) and keeping the public informed (81%). But a majority (54%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost to government corruption.
- Fewer than half of citizens trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe (45%) and say they are likely to try to get vaccinated (46%).
- Almost three-fourths (72%) of Zimbabweans say the government is justified in using the police or military to enforce public health mandates during a health emergency. But only 43% say a pandemic justifies censorship of the media.
 - And a majority (55%) say they are worried that politicians are using or will use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority.

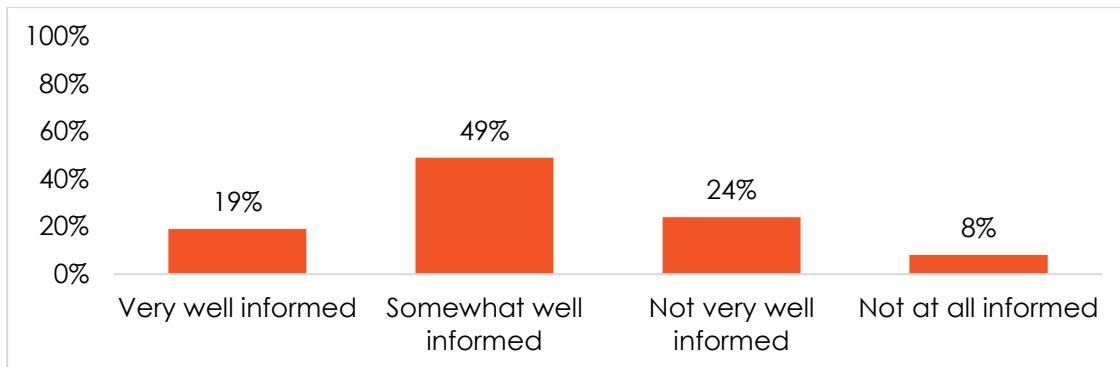
Awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic

Almost seven out of 10 Zimbabweans (68%) consider themselves “somewhat well informed” or “very well informed” about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it, leaving about one-third who say they are “not very well informed” (24%) or “not at all informed” (8%) about the pandemic (Figure 1).

Urban residents (80%) are significantly more likely than rural residents (61%) to say they are well informed about COVID-19, as are men (72%) compared to women (64%) (Figure 2). Awareness of the pandemic is less common among older citizens (52% of those aged 56 and older).

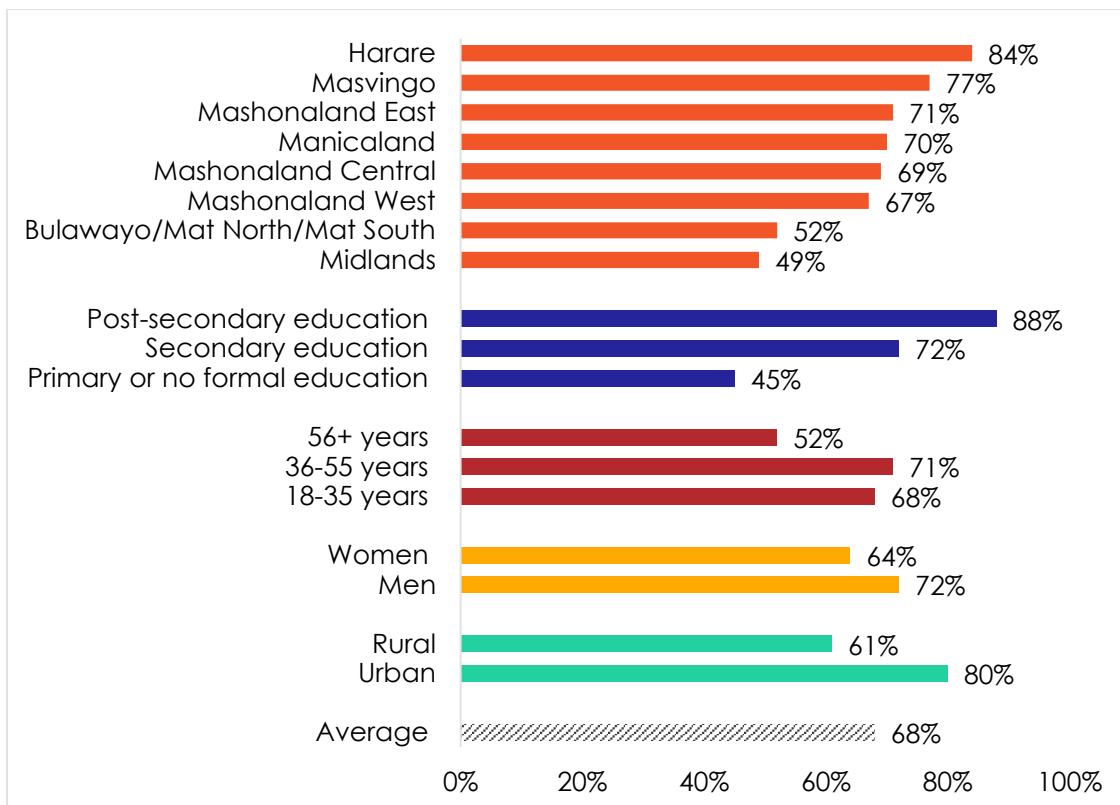
The data suggest a positive relationship between education and awareness of COVID-19; respondents with post-secondary education are almost twice as likely to know about the pandemic as those with less than secondary schooling (88% vs. 45%). Geographically, Most Harare residents (84%) report being aware of the pandemic, but the same is true of only about half of those in Midlands (49%) and Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South (52%).

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Figure 2: Aware of COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "somewhat well informed" or "very well informed")

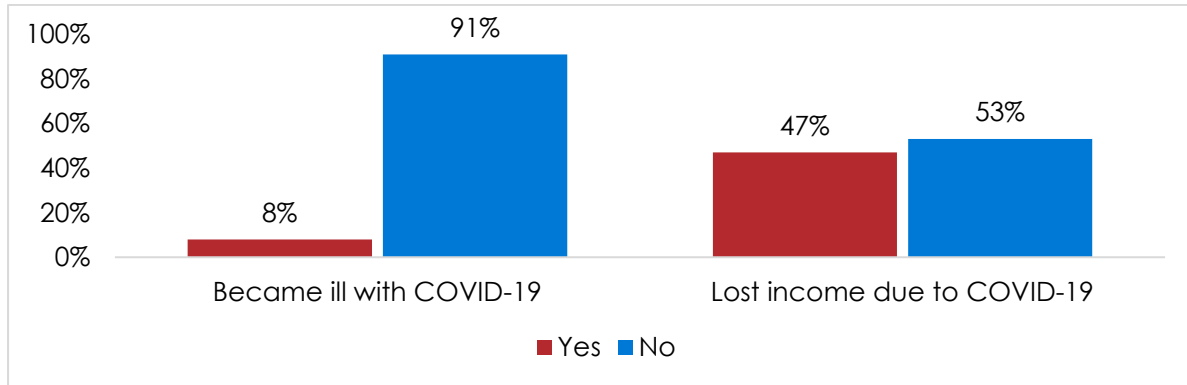
Impact

Almost one in 10 respondents (8%) say they or a member of their households became ill with COVID-19, and almost half (47%) report that a household member lost a job, business, or primary source of income because of the pandemic (Figure 3).

The loss of a primary source of income was more common in cities (57% on average, including 62% in Harare) than in rural areas (40%) (Figure 4). Older respondents (30%) are less likely to have suffered the loss of income than younger citizens (47%-54%).

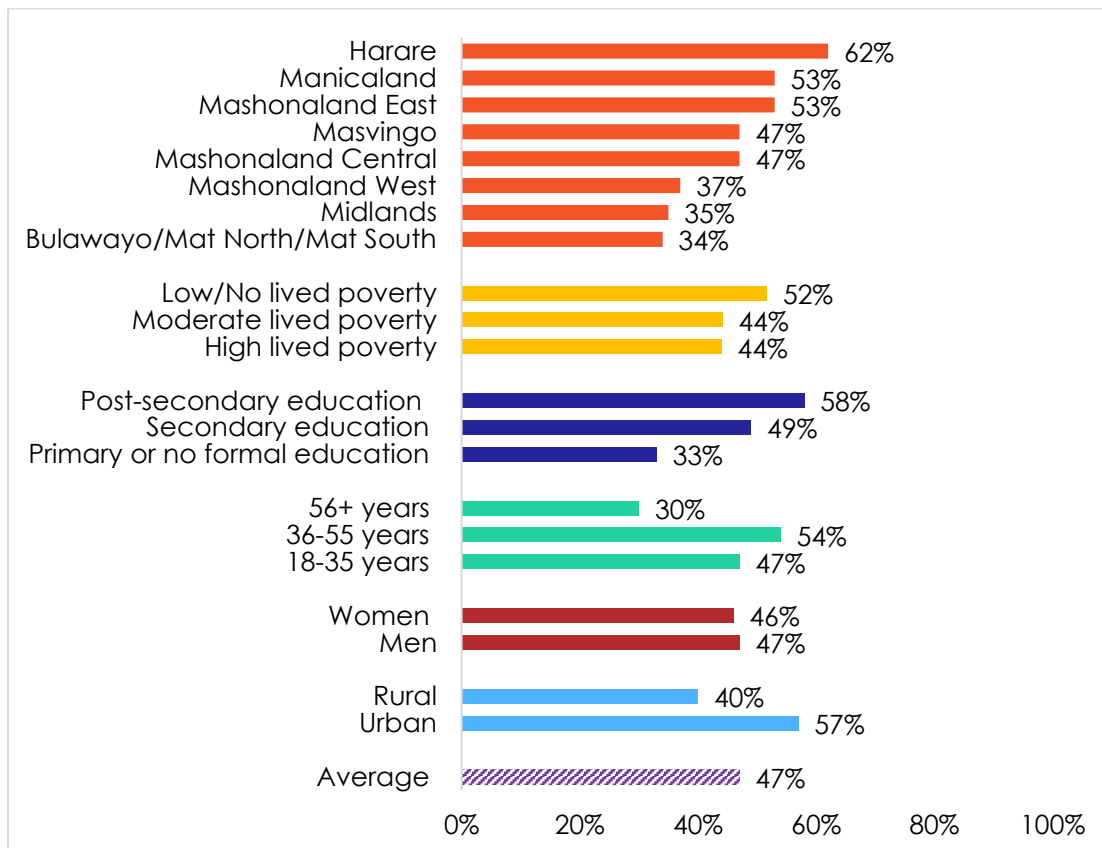
Citizens with post-secondary education (58%) are more likely to report losing an income source than their less educated counterparts (including 33% of those with primary or no formal schooling). Economically well-off citizens (52% of those with no or low lived poverty) are more likely to report losing an income than poorer citizens (44%).

Figure 3: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

Figure 4: Loss of income due to COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



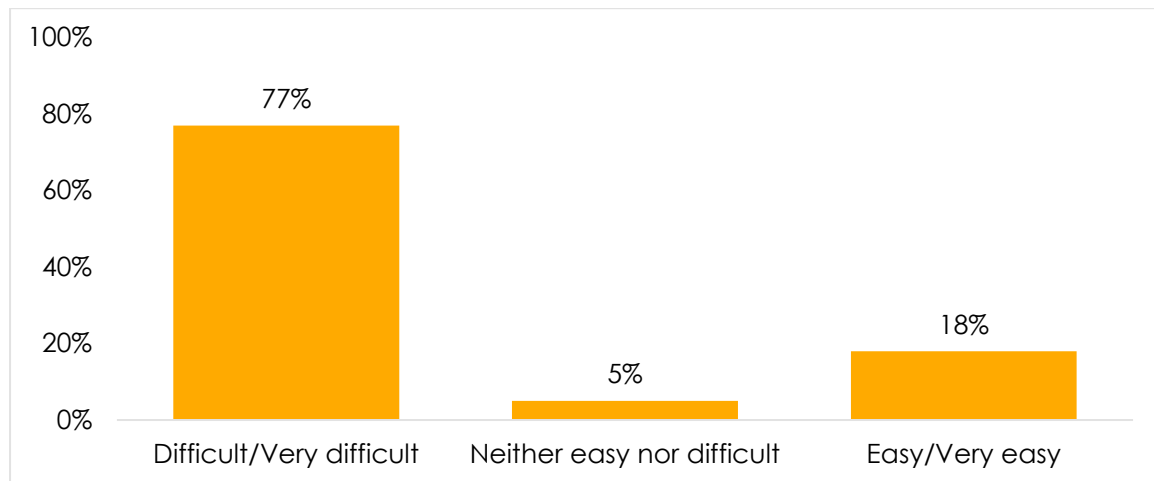
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income? (% who say "yes")

Lockdowns and school closures

More than three-fourths (77%) of Zimbabweans say it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with imposed lockdown or curfew restrictions (Figure 5).

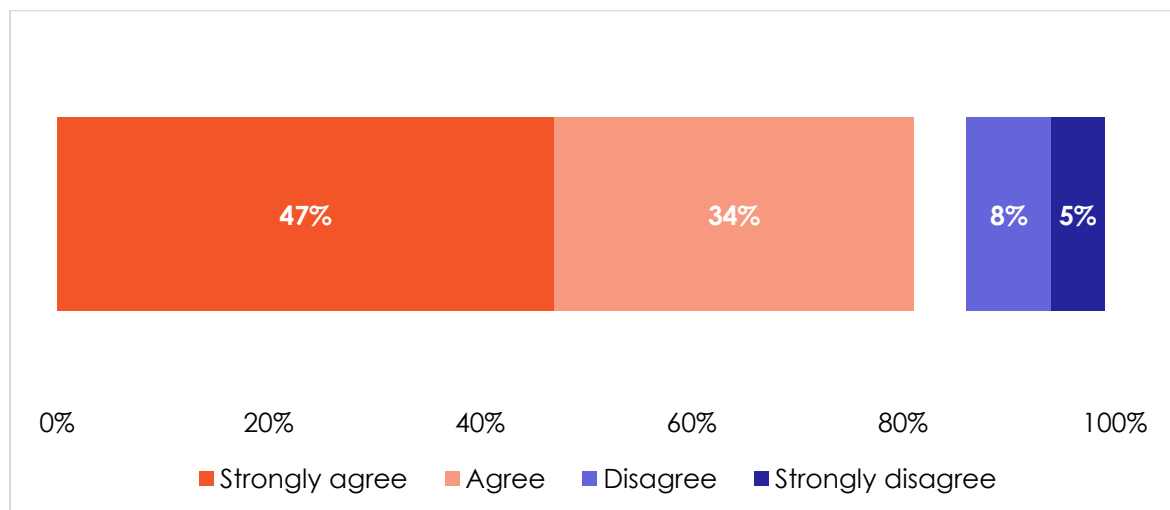
Even so, citizens overwhelmingly (81%) agree that despite their negative impacts on people’s livelihoods, the restrictions were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Ease of compliance with lockdown or curfew restrictions | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

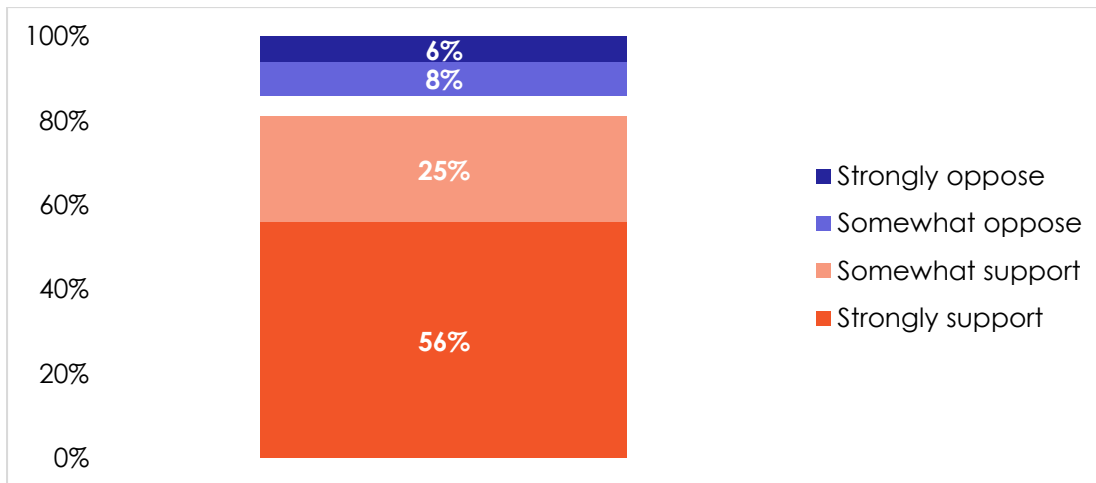
Figure 6: Support for lockdown | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread the spread of COVID-19?

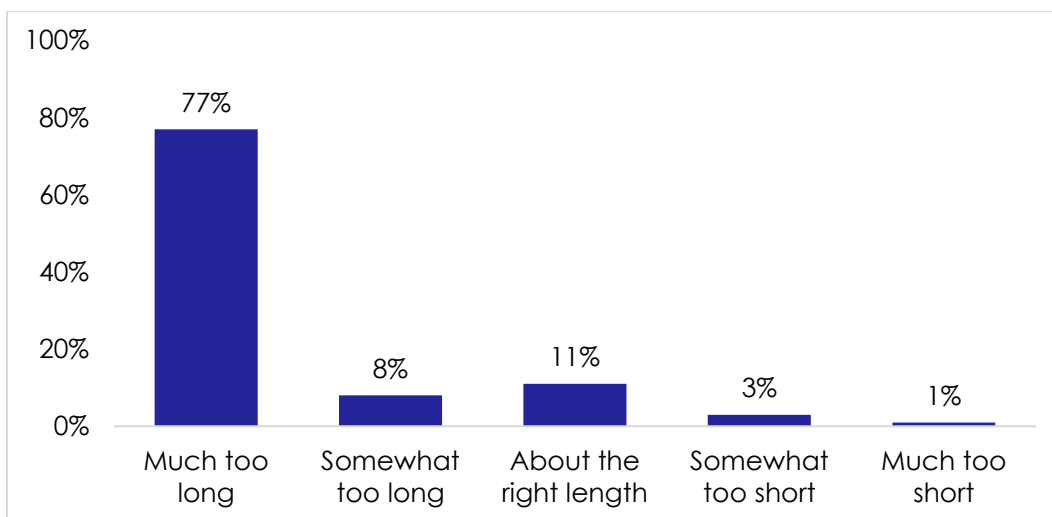
Most citizens (81%) also endorse the government’s decision to close the schools (Figure 7), but a similar majority (85%) think they should have reopened sooner, including 77% who say they remained closed “much too long” (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Support for school closure | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Figure 8: Length of school closure | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

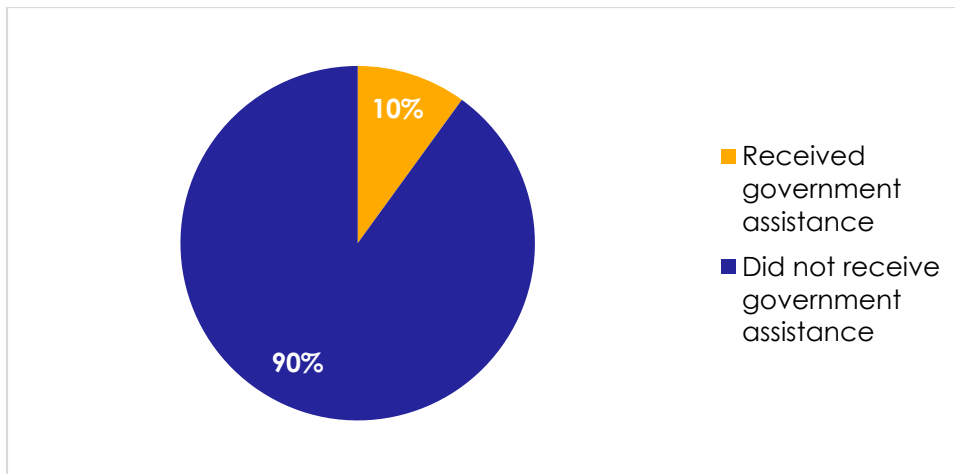
Government assistance and performance

An overwhelming majority (90%) of Zimbabweans say they did not receive any assistance from the government, such as food, cash payments, or relief from bill payments, during the pandemic (Figure 9). Only one in ten (10%) say their household received such assistance, a stark contrast to the 47% of citizens who say they lost a job, business, or primary source of income.

Citizens' economic status made little difference in whether they received government assistance. In fact, the poorest respondents are slightly more likely to have gone without assistance (91%) than their wealthier counterparts (87%) (Figure 10).

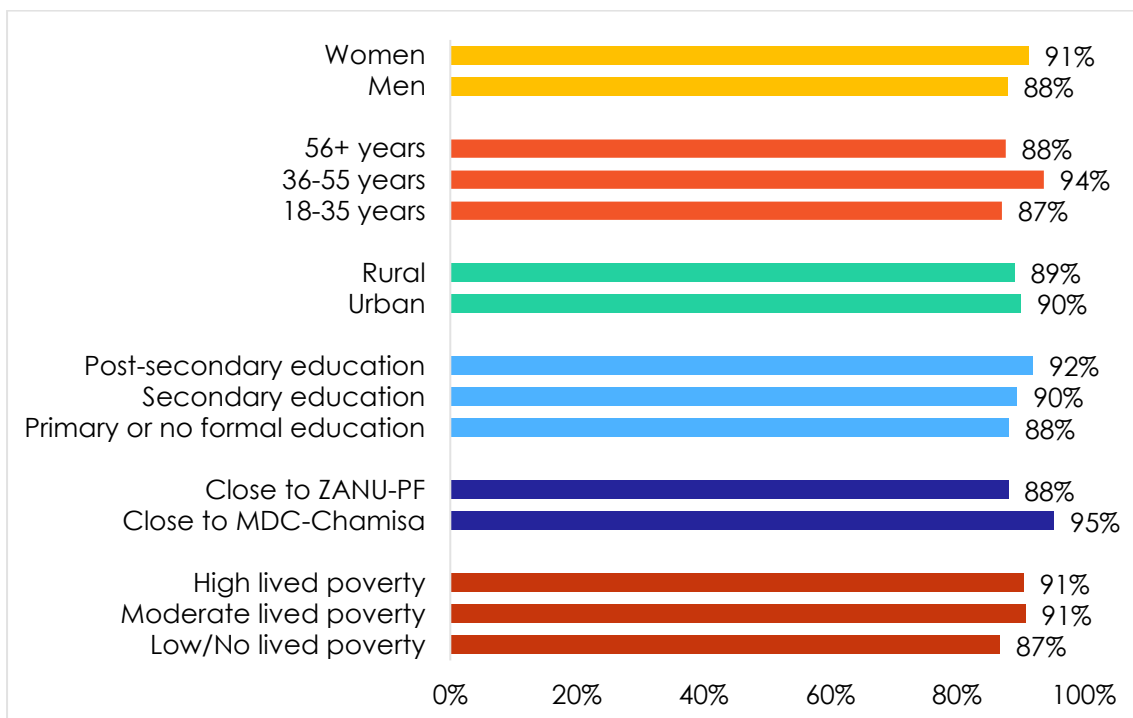
Supporters of the political opposition are slightly more likely to report going without government assistance than those close to the ruling party (95% for MDC-Chamisa supporters vs. 88% of ZANU-PF supporters).

Figure 9: Received government assistance | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

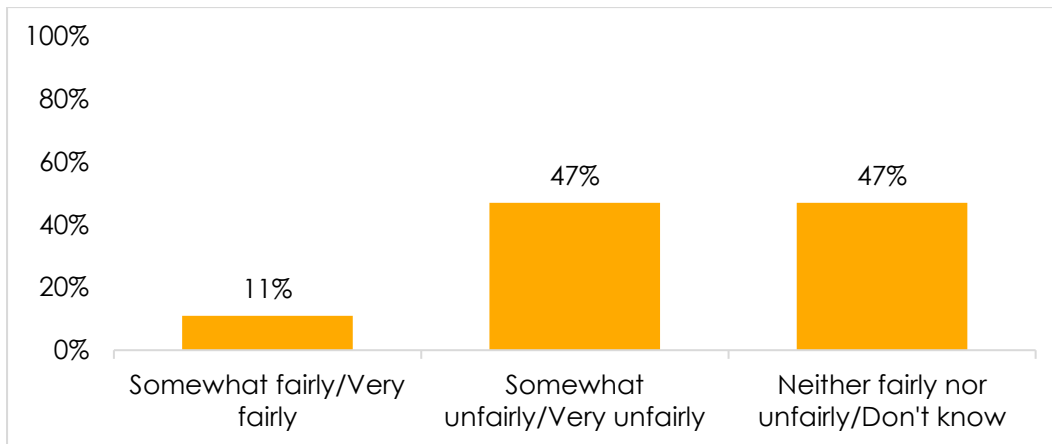
Figure 10: Did not receive government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% who say "no")

Only about one in 10 Zimbabweans (11%) say that government assistance was distributed fairly, while almost half (47%) say benefits were distributed "somewhat unfairly" or "very unfairly" (Figure 11). Another 47% describe the assistance as "neither fair nor unfair" or say they "don't know."

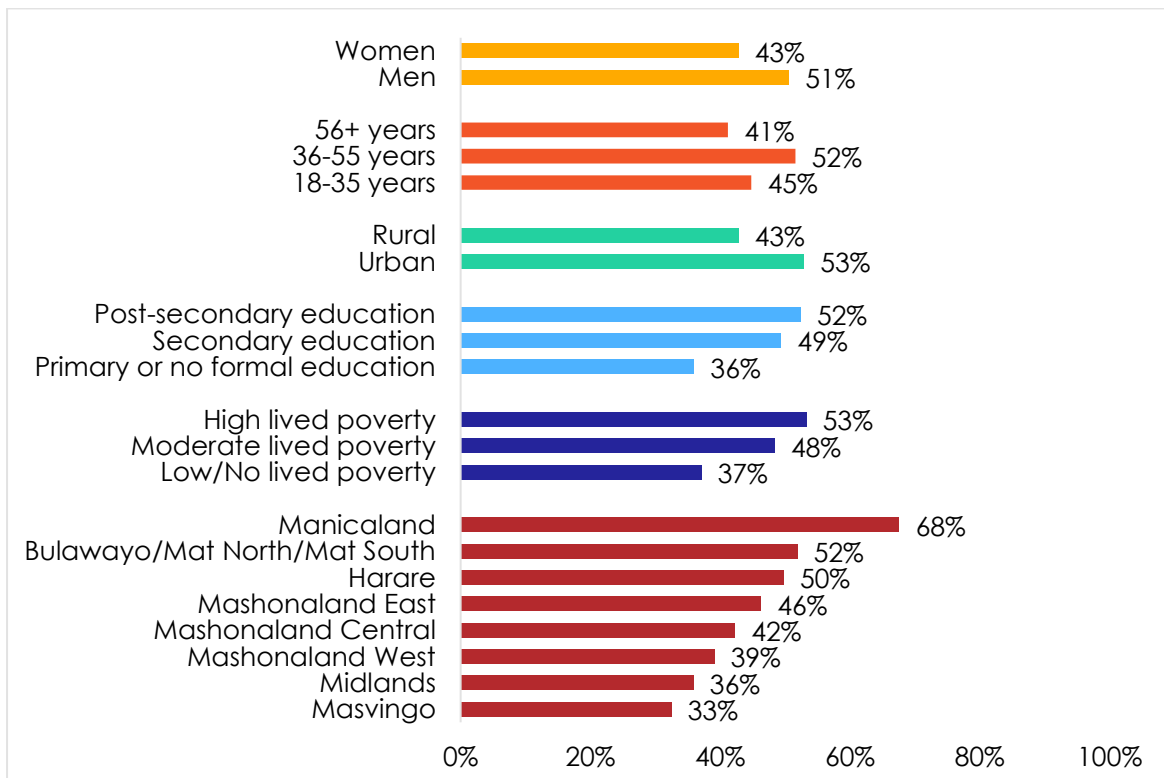
Figure 11: Fairness of government assistance | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favoring certain groups or regions?

More than half of the poorest citizens (53%) are of the view that government assistance was distributed unfairly, compared to about a third (37%) of those who experienced no or low lived poverty (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Government assistance distributed unfairly | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favoring certain groups or regions?

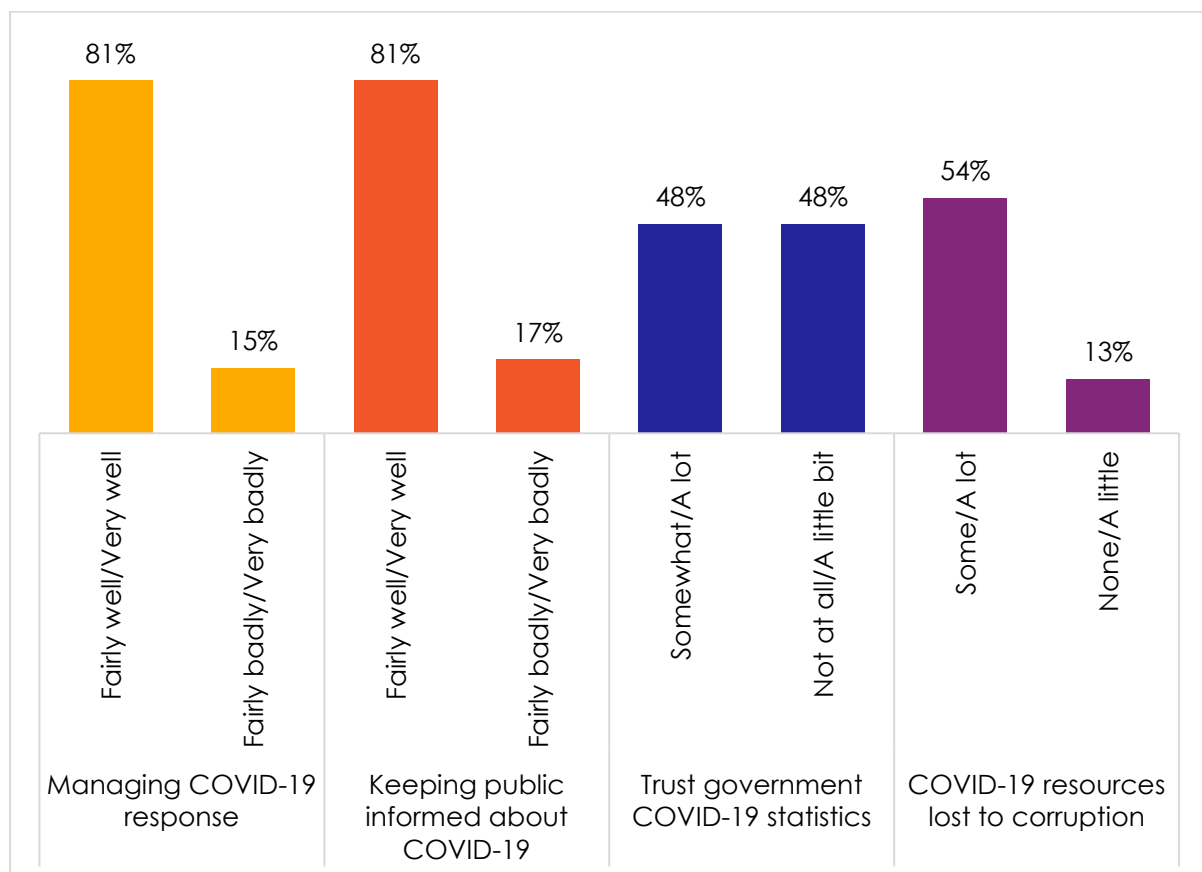
The perception that government assistance was distributed unfairly is also more common among men (51%) and urban residents (53%) than among women (43%) and rural dwellers (43%). More than half (52%) of middle-aged citizens complain of unfair distribution, compared to 45% of youth and 41% of the older generation.

Manicaland province has the largest proportion of residents (68%) who see the distribution of assistance as unfair, a sentiment shared by only 33% of Masvingo residents,

Overall, however, more than eight in 10 Zimbabweans say the government has performed “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the response to COVID-19 (81%) and in keeping the public informed about the pandemic (81%) (Figure 13).

At the same time, they are evenly divided on whether government statistics on COVID-19 are trustworthy (48% say yes, 48% no), and a majority (54%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to government corruption.

Figure 13: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic | Zimbabwe
 | 2021



Respondents were asked:

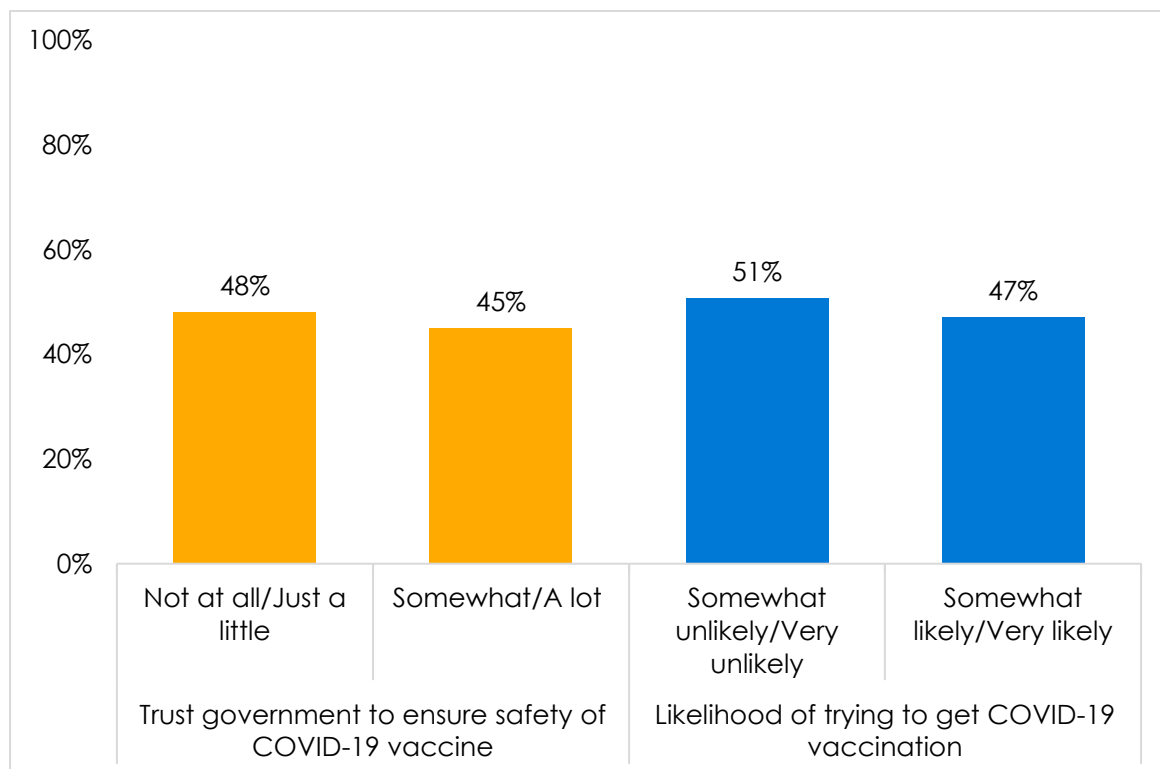
*How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Keeping the public informed about COVID-19?
 How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?*

Vaccines

Zimbabweans are sharply divided in their attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines (Figure 14). Only about four in 10 (45%) trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that vaccines are safe, while 48% express little or no such trust.

Similarly, fewer than half (47%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated.

Figure 14: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked:

*How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Zimbabwean citizens is safe before it is used in this country?
 If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?*

Remarkably, hesitancy about getting vaccinated is highest among the most educated citizens: Only 32% of those with post-secondary qualifications say they are “somewhat” or “very” likely to try to get the vaccine, compared to about half of those with less education (Figure 15). Similarly, urban residents (37%) are less likely to try to get vaccinated than their rural counterparts (52%).

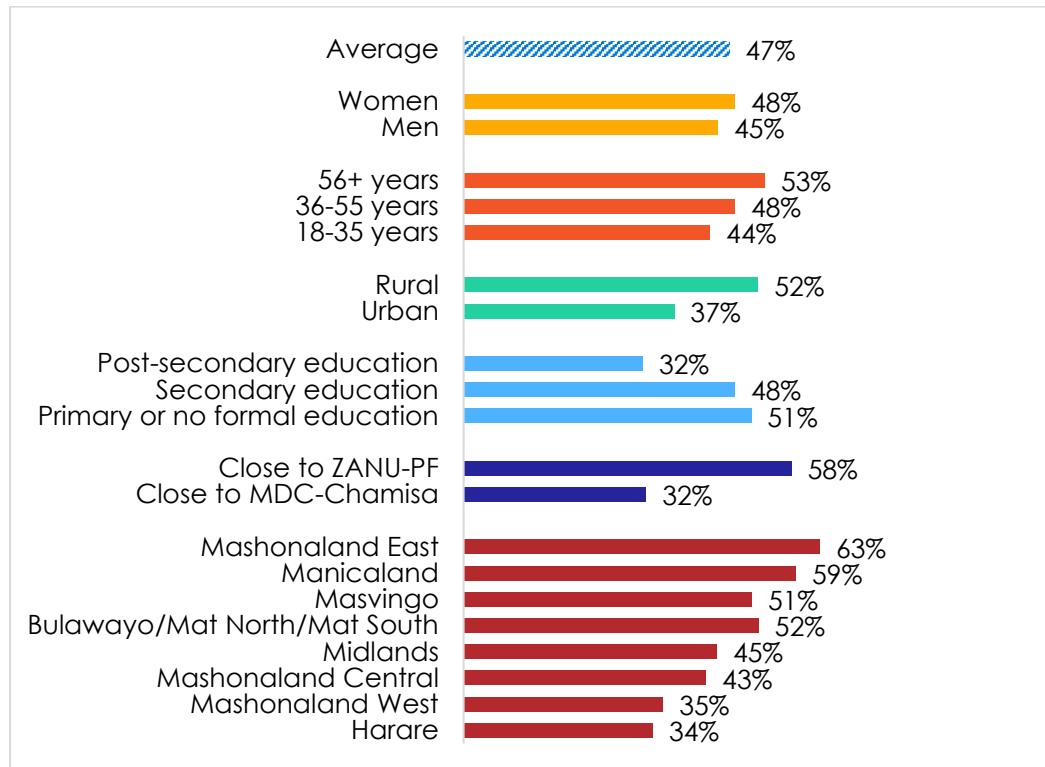
Young Zimbabweans are more hesitant than their elders: Only 44% of 18- to 35-year-olds say it’s likely they’ll try to get vaccinated, compared to 48%-53% among older respondents.

And supporters of the opposition MDC-Chamisa (32%) are considerably less likely to seek vaccination than ZANU-PF supporter (58%).

When asked which they think is more effective in preventing COVID-19 infection, prayer or a vaccine, Zimbabweans offer divergent responses. While more than one-third (37%) think prayer is “somewhat” or “much” more effective than a vaccine, a similar proportion (34%)

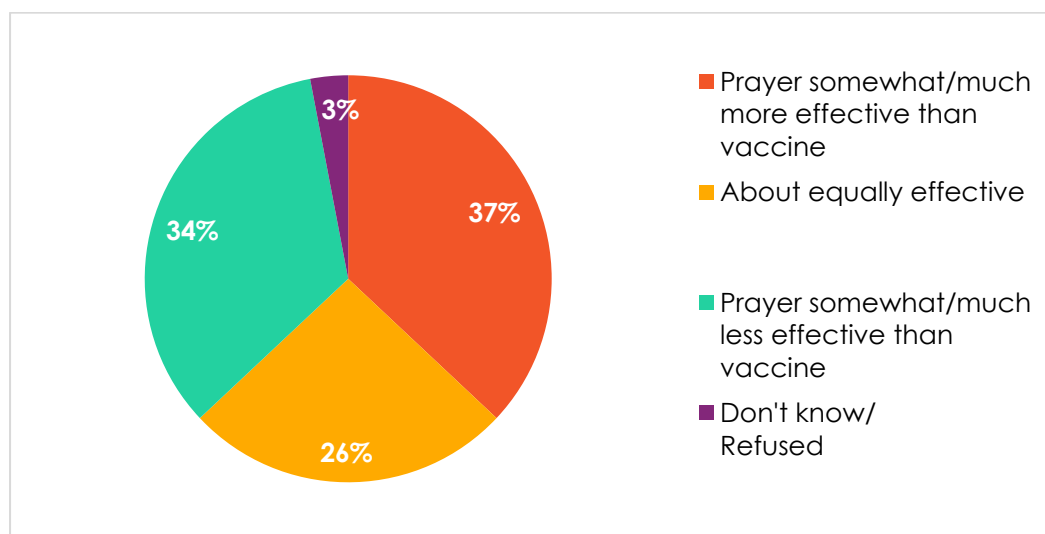
see prayer as less effective, and one-fourth (26%) think the two are about equally effective (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Likely to try to get vaccinated | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Figure 16: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective? | Zimbabwe | 2021



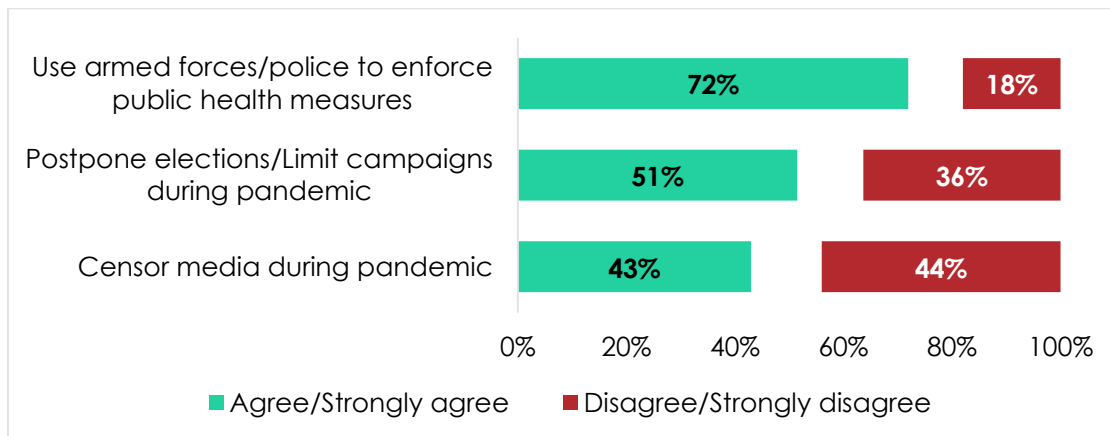
Respondents were asked: Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

Restrictions on freedoms and democracy

Almost three-fourths (72%) of Zimbabweans say the government is justified in using the police or military to enforce public health mandates, such as lockdown orders, mask requirements, and restrictions on public gatherings, during a health emergency (Figure 17).

Views are more divided on whether a pandemic justifies postponing elections or limiting political campaigning: Half (51%) of Zimbabweans say yes, while 36% disagree. And citizens are evenly split on censorship of the media during a pandemic: 43% say such restrictions are justified, but 44% disagree.

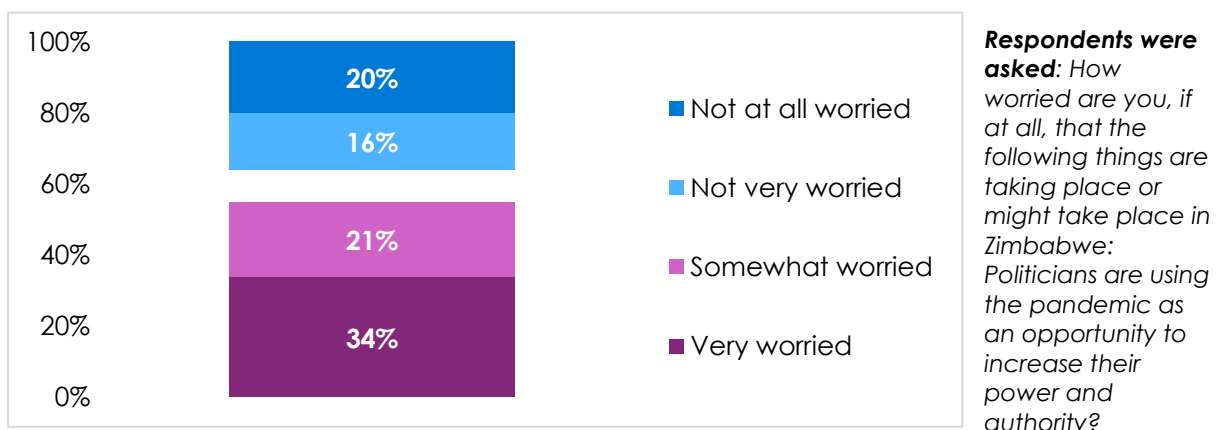
Figure 17: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures: Censoring media reporting? Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings? Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

Despite significant popular support for restrictions during a health crisis, Zimbabweans also express concern that the COVID-19 pandemic might provide cover for politicians seeking to advance their own agendas. A majority (55%) say they are worried, including 34% who are “very worried,” that politicians are using or will use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Worried about politicians’ intentions | Zimbabwe | 2021

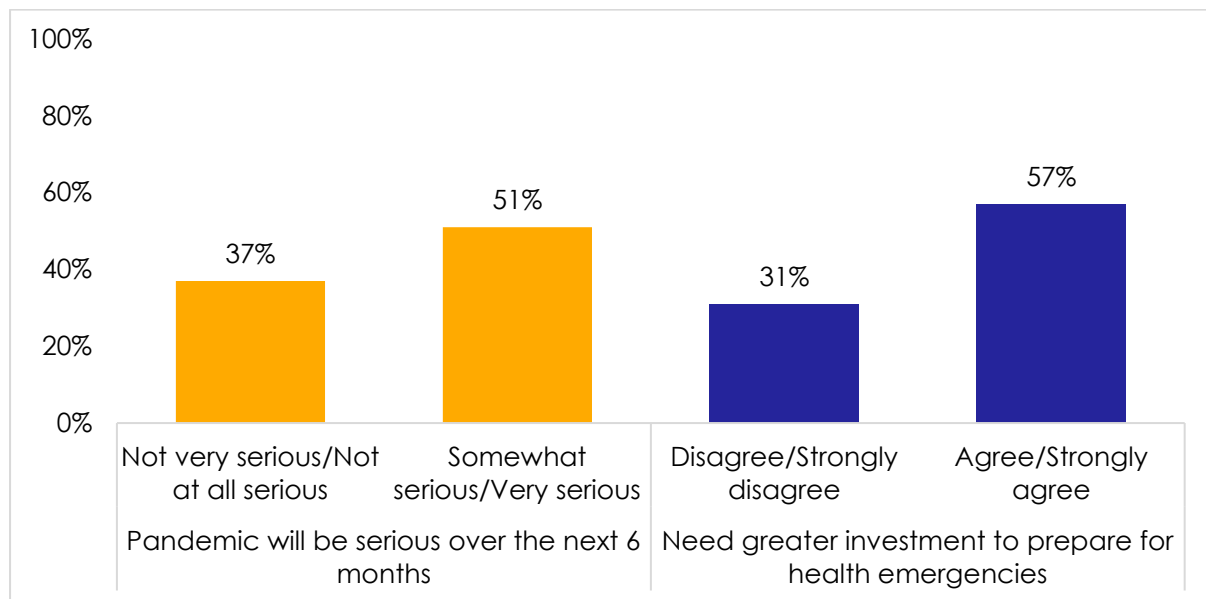


Looking ahead

More than half (51%) of Zimbabweans believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem for the country over the next six months, while 37% think it will not (Figure 19).

A somewhat larger majority (57%) say the government should invest more in special preparations for health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means that fewer resources would be available for other health services.

Figure 19: Future impacts of COVID-19 | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Liberia over the next six months?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services?

Conclusion

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwe's families has been severe: Almost half of citizens say their households lost a primary source of income, and very few report receiving government assistance to help tide them over.

Even so, most respondents approve of the government's overall response to the pandemic, including difficult lockdowns and school closures and the use of security forces to enforce restrictions.

Shortcomings in the government-led response are highlighted in widespread perceptions that corrupt officials stole at least “some” COVID-19 resources, that pandemic assistance was not distributed fairly, that politicians might use the pandemic as cover for their personal agendas, and that the government is unable to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.

Given that fewer than half of Zimbabweans say they are likely to try to get vaccinated, a countrywide vaccination campaign will require considerable public education and persuasion if it is to succeed.

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