

## South Africans see corruption as worsening during President Ramaphosa's tenure

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 476 | Jaynisha Patel and Preston Govindasamy**

### Summary

Perceptions of pervasive corruption in South Africa have dominated public discourse for the better part of the past decade. In its many forms, corruption undermines the effectiveness of the state, worsens the quality of public services, and ultimately erodes public trust (Fukuyama, 2014). In South Africa, former President Jacob Zuma and some of his allies stand accused of state capture – the use of the state for personal interests that has crippled various compromised institutions (February, 2019). During the latter part of Zuma's tenure, public opinion was largely negative on indicators of service delivery (Nkomo, 2017), trust (Chingwete, 2016), and the responsiveness of democratic institutions (Dryding, 2020).

In 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa's promises to restore government integrity, strengthen democratic institutions, and fast-track development gave South Africans a renewed sense of hope (Hendricks, 2019). To tackle corruption, his administration improved independent oversight and presented an extensive new National Anti-Corruption Strategy that calls on all stakeholders to take responsibility for ethical leadership (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Three years into Ramaphosa's tenure, what impact has his government had on corruption?

Transparency International's (2020) most recent Corruption Perceptions Index scored South Africa at 44 out of 100 points, just a 1-point improvement from 2017. In 2020, the government was accused of misappropriating COVID-19 relief funds (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2020). Evidence of irregularities in the awarding of tenders related to COVID-19 response efforts (McCain, 2021) has engulfed the Department of Health in a scandal that led to the resignation of Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize hours before a cabinet reshuffle (Tandwa, 2021). And corruption again made the news with the recent murder of a whistle-blower in the Gauteng Health Department (Klein, 2021).

New Afrobarometer survey findings from 2021 mirror the headlines: Not only do South Africans believe that corruption is getting worse, but they also see large portions of elected officials and civil servants as involved in corrupt activities. Society says the government is handling the anti-corruption fight badly, while channels to report corruption are increasingly seen as unsafe.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. 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 South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95%

confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

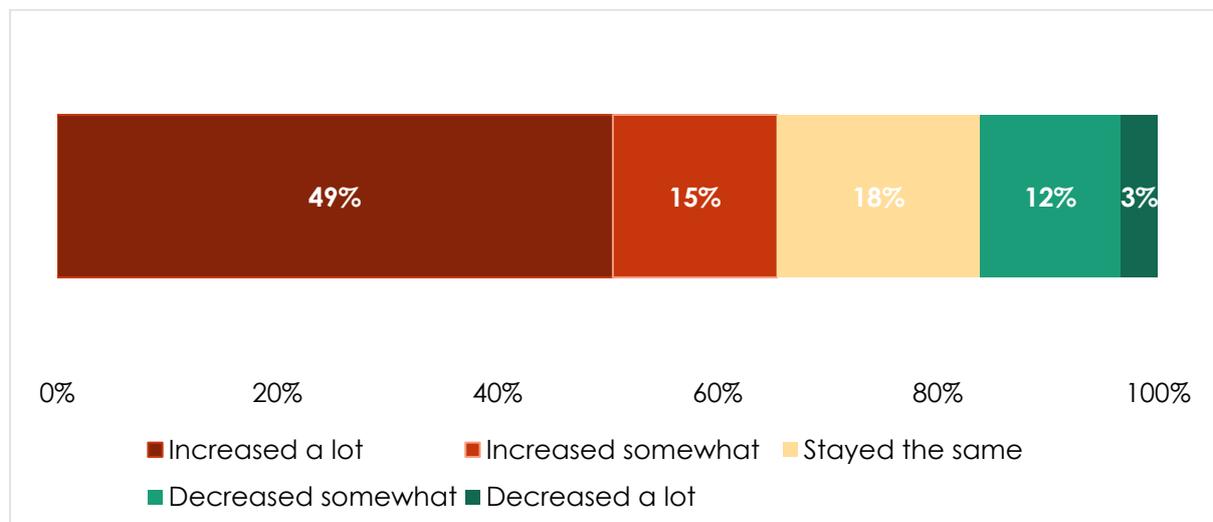
## Key findings

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of South Africans say that corruption increased in the past year, including half (49%) who believe it increased “a lot.”
- State institutions are widely seen as corrupt. Half or more of citizens say “most” or “all” officials are involved in corruption in the police (56%), the president’s office (53%), local government councils (51%), and Parliament (50%). Non-governmental organizations, traditional leaders, and religious leaders are less commonly seen as corrupt.
- Three-fourths (76%) of South Africans say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in the fight against corruption,
- Among citizens who interacted with key public services during the past year, substantial proportions say they had to pay a bribe to avoid a problem with the police (24%) or to obtain a government document (21%), police assistance (15%), public school services (10%), or medical care (8%).
- Three out of four South Africans (76%) say people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption, a 13-percentage-point increase compared to 2018.
- Seven in 10 citizens (71%) believe that officials who break the law “often” or “always” go unpunished, while half (49%) say ordinary people who commit crimes enjoy such impunity.

## Is corruption getting worse?

Despite the high visibility of corruption on the national agenda, almost two-thirds (64%) of South Africans say corruption has gotten worse over the past year, including half (49%) who say it has “increased a lot” (Figure 1). Only 15% of people believe it has decreased.

**Figure 1: Change in level of corruption | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

## Who is involved in corruption?

Despite a particular emphasis on anti-corruption efforts focusing on the Presidency, more than half (53%) of South Africans believe that “most” or “all” officials in the Presidency are involved in corruption. Among 10 other institutions that Afrobarometer asked about, only the South African Police Services (SAPS) are more widely seen as corrupt (by 56% of respondents) (Figure 2). In addition, about one-third of citizens see “some” officials in the Presidency (33%) and the SAPS (36%) as corrupt.

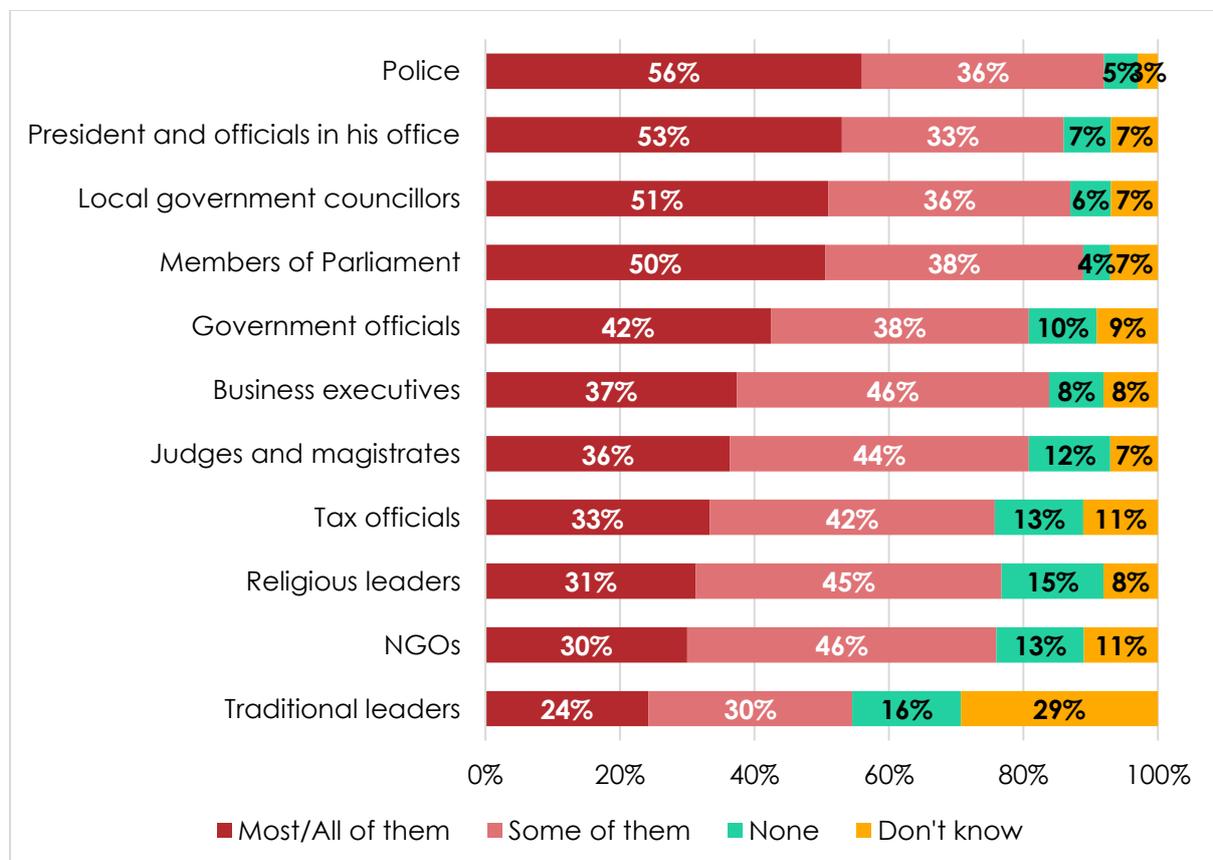
The high level of perceived corruption within the Presidency might be in part attributable to the ongoing and widely publicized Zondo Commission, which is investigating state corruption during Zuma’s tenure but whose proceedings might also impact public perceptions of the current president.

Perceptions of corruption among local government councillors (51% “most” or “all”) and members of Parliament (50%) are about equally high. They are followed by government officials (42%), judges and magistrates (36%), and tax officials (33%).

Informal leaders fare somewhat better, with perceptions that “most” or “all” are corrupt totaling 31% for religious leaders, 30% for non-governmental organizations, 27% for business executives, and 24% for traditional leaders.

Traditional leaders elicit far the largest share of “Don’t know” responses (29%) when it comes to their involvement in corruption, likely because only certain segments of the population interact with these authorities.

**Figure 2: Involvement in corruption** | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

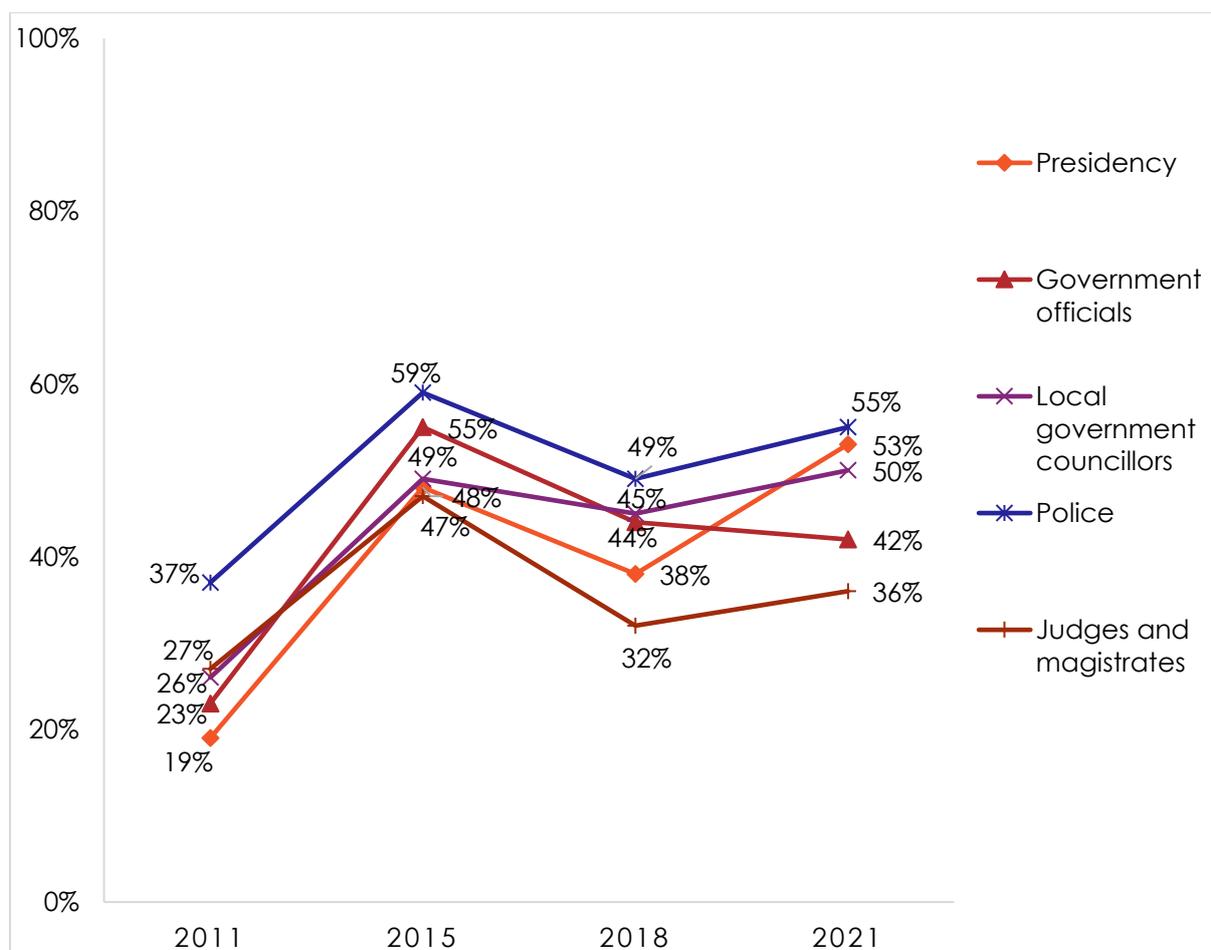
Given that South Africans perceive corruption to be increasing, it is important to understand where the increased corruption is believed to be located. Afrobarometer has fielded two surveys during Zuma's tenure (2011 and 2016) and two during Ramaphosa's tenure (2019 and 2021). Figure 3 shows changes in public perceptions that "most" or "all" officials in five institutions are involved in corruption.

Overall, we see steep increases in perceptions of corruption across all five institutions during Zuma's tenure (from 2011 to 2016), followed by a dip and then renewed, though more modest, increases under Ramaphosa (from 2019 to 2021) except in the case of government officials.

The Presidency registers the largest increase in perceived corruption between 2019 and 2021, from 38% to 53%. This makes the Presidency the only one of the five institutions for which 2021 levels of perceived corruption exceed those recorded in 2016 (under Zuma).

Changes in perceived corruption among judges and magistrates are of interest, as the courts are at the center of proceedings related to allegations of corruption within other state institutions. Over the past decade, the proportion of citizens who see most/all judges and magistrates as corrupt has increased by 9 percentage points, including a 4-point rise between 2019 and 2021, but compared to 2016, this negative perception has declined from 47% to 36%.

**Figure 3: Perceptions of widespread corruption | South Africa | 2011-2021**



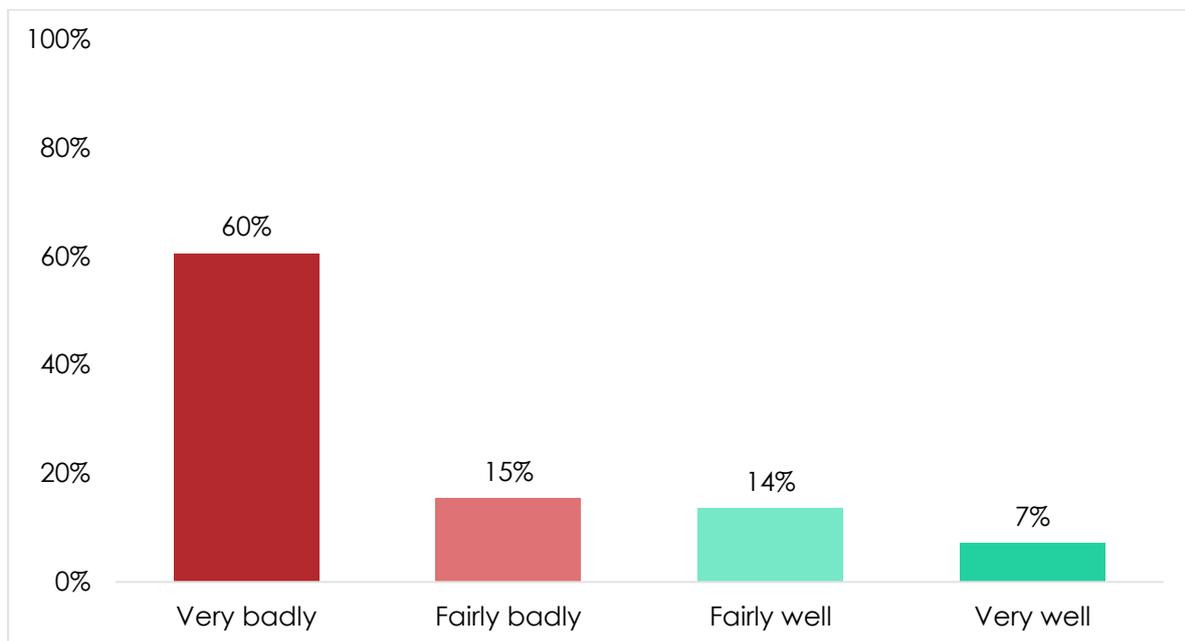
**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most" or "all")

## Government performance in the fight against corruption

Central to anti-corruption efforts is how the government implements the measures it has set in place to deal with and prevent incidents of corruption. In light of South Africans' perceptions that corruption is increasing, it is not surprising that they also believe that the government is not enforcing its anti-corruption measures well.

Three in four respondents (76%) say the government is doing a poor job of fighting corruption, including more than half (60%) who say it is handling the issue "very badly" (Figure 4). Only one in five (21%) say the government is handling corruption "fairly well" or "very well."

**Figure 4: Government performance in fighting corruption | South Africa | 2021**



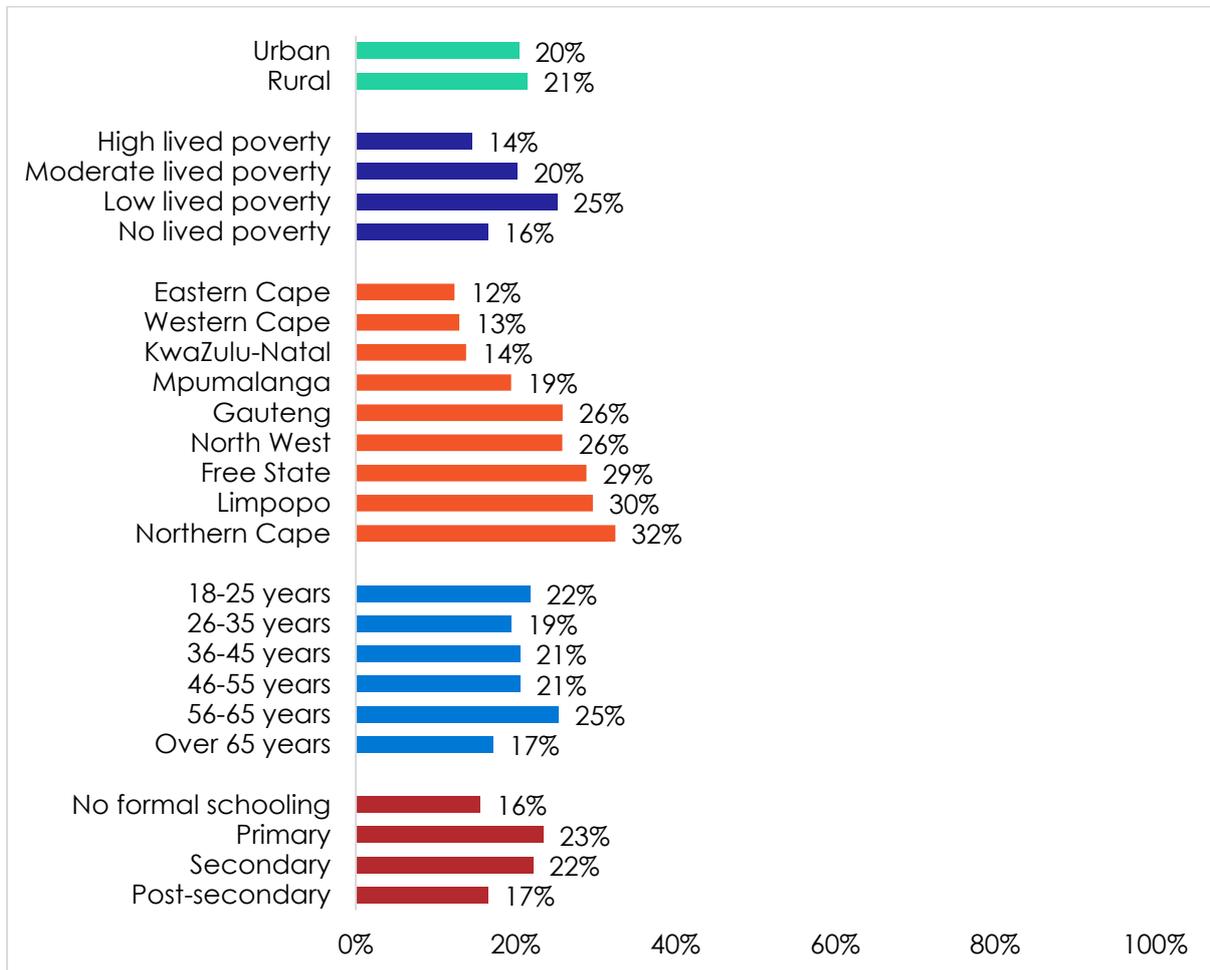
**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

(Note: Due to rounding, the sum of categories may differ slightly from the reported overall total, e.g. 60% "very badly" + 15% "fairly badly" = 76% badly.)

Geographically, people living in the Northern Cape perceive the government's handling of corruption most favourably (32% "fairly well" or "very well"), followed by Limpopo (30%) and the Free State (29%). In contrast, residents in the Eastern Cape (12%), Western Cape (13%), and KwaZulu-Natal (14%) are far less likely to approve of the government's performance on corruption (Figure 5).

Urban and rural residents are equally likely to have a positive outlook on the government's anti-corruption efforts, and breakdowns by lived poverty level, age, and educational level show no clear patterns in their assessments.

**Figure 5: Government is handling corruption well** | by socio-demographic group  
 | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

### Bribe-paying and reporting corruption

Corruption occurs not only within state institutions but also between citizens and the state. How willing are South Africans to pay a bribe in order to access state services? And how safe do they feel in reporting corruption?

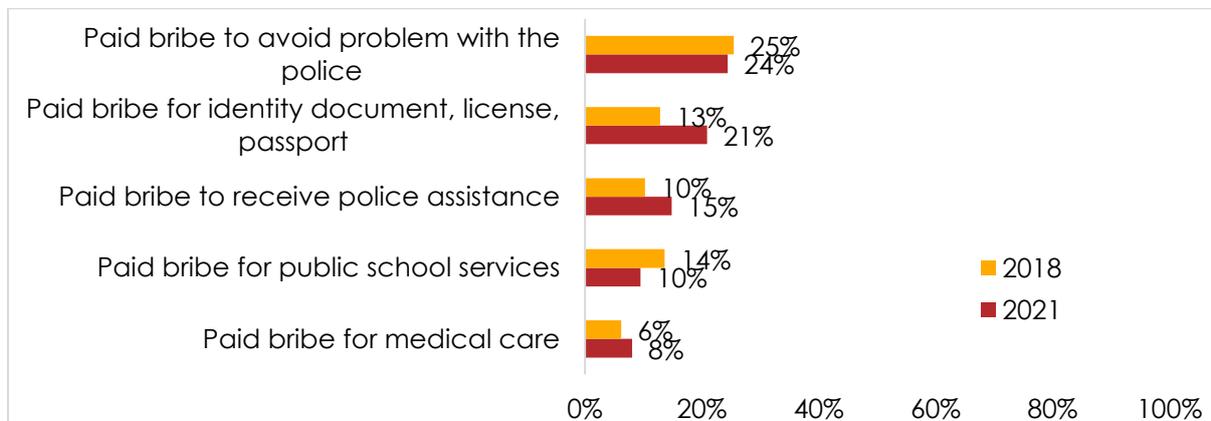
#### Paying a bribe

Among respondents who say they interacted with key public services during the 12 months preceding the survey, one in four (24%) say they paid a bribe "once or twice", "a few times," or "often" to avoid a problem with the police. In addition, 15% say they paid a bribe to obtain police assistance, a 5-percentage-point increase compared to 2018 (Figure 6).

The share of South Africans who paid a bribe to obtain a government document, such as an identity document, a license, or a passport, increased substantially compared to 2018, from 13% to 21%.

About one in 10 respondents report having to pay a bribe to obtain public school services (10%) or medical care (8%).

**Figure 6: Paid a bribe to obtain public services | South Africa | 2018-2021**



**Respondents who say they had contact with key public services during the previous year were asked:** How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [to obtain the needed service]? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

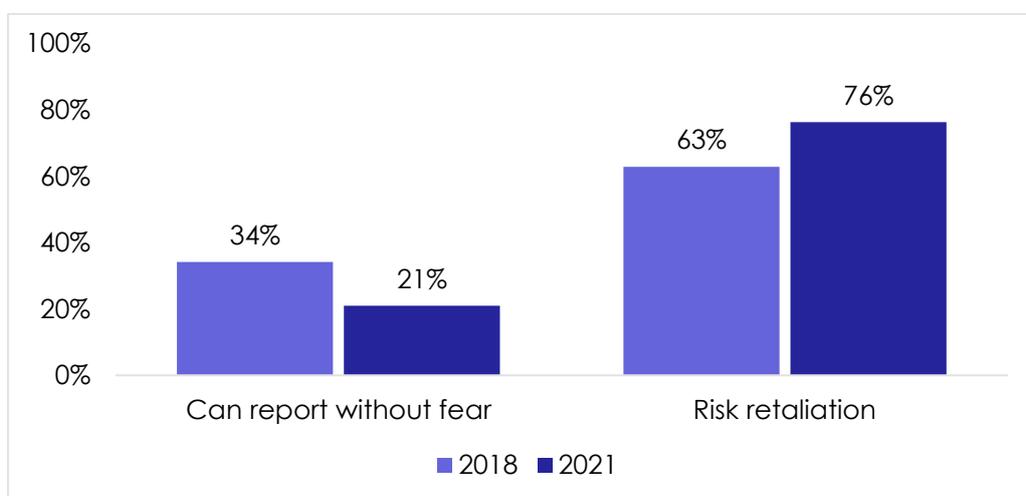
### Reporting corruption

In recent years, state and civil society actors have increasingly encouraged South Africans to report corruption through various platforms, such as Corruptionwatch.org, Whistleblowers.org, and the National Anti-Corruption Hotline (0800 701 701), as an important contribution to the anti-corruption fight. But survey findings show that citizens are increasingly worried about retaliation if they do so.

Three in four respondents (76%) say people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption, a 13-percentage-point increase compared to 2018 (Figure 7). Only one in five (21%) say they can report corruption without fear. The recent murder of a whistle-blower in the Gauteng Department of Health may only exacerbate such fears.

The perception that reporting corruption carries a high risk is consistent – and increasing – across key demographic groups, with very little variation no matter the respondent's gender, age, education level, urban-rural residence, and lived-poverty level.

**Figure 7: Can citizens report corruption without fear? | South Africa | 2018-2021**



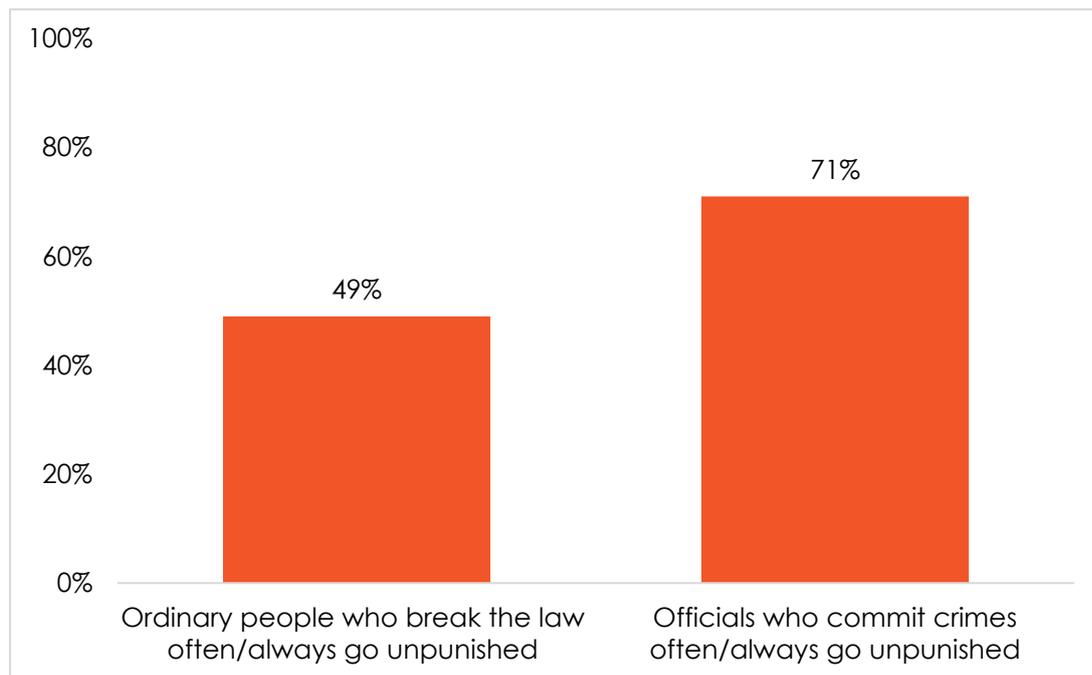
**Respondents were asked:** In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?

## Breaking the law goes unpunished

Punishing corruption is an indispensable part of an anti-corruption strategy. Where impunity is the norm, deterrence as a means of prevention is undermined.

In South Africa, seven in 10 citizens (71%) say that officials who break the law “often” or “always” go unpunished (Figure 8). Even ordinary people who commit crimes routinely go unpunished, according to half (49%) of South Africans.

**Figure 8: How often does crime goes unpunished? | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished? Do ordinary people who break the law go unpunished?

Understanding where perceptions of impunity are most common can orient efforts to reassert the integrity of the law. Impunity for officials is most widely perceived in Mpumalanga (81%),

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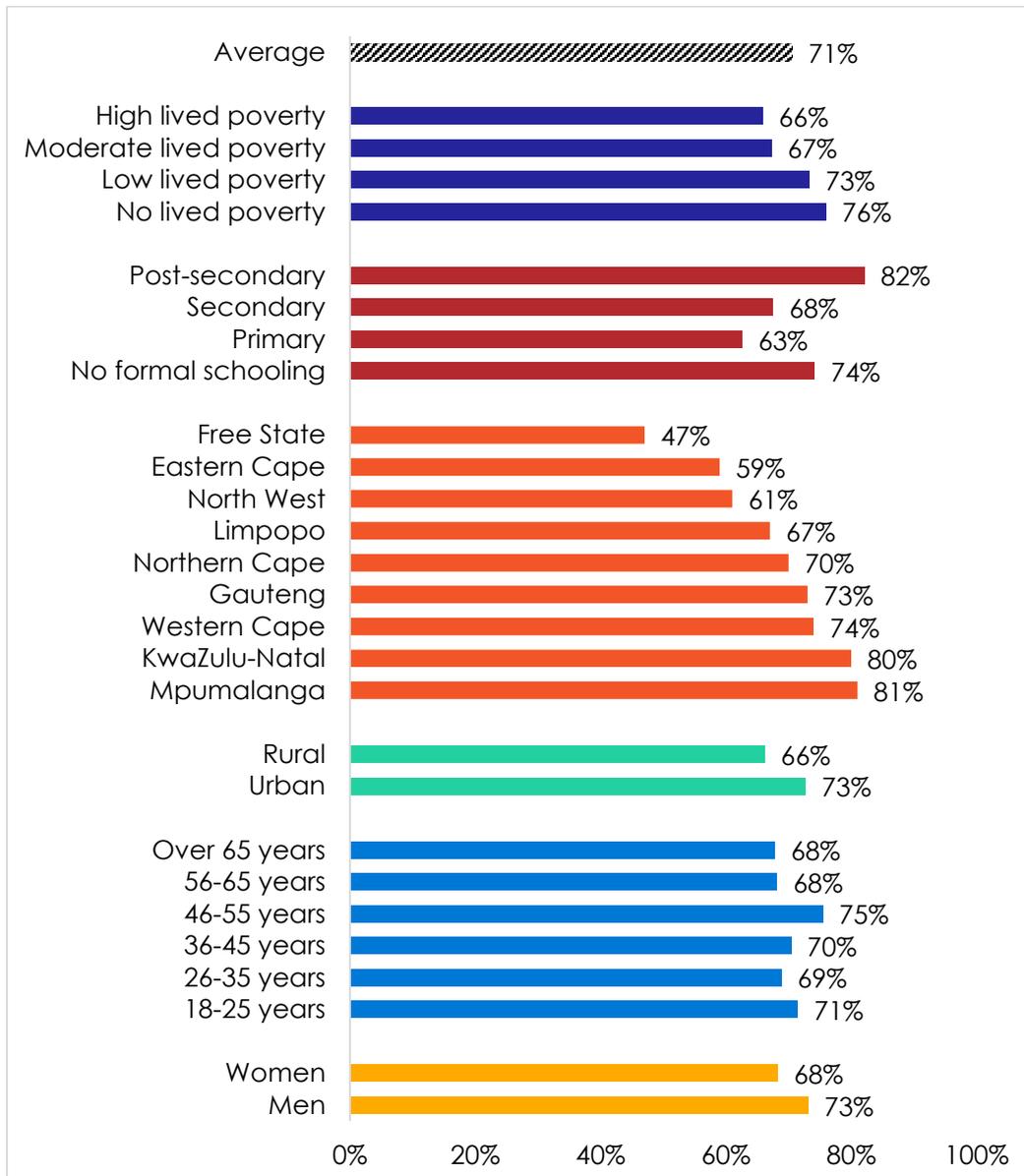
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KwaZulu-Natal (80%), Western Cape (74%), and Gauteng (73%). Interestingly, the Free State (a province known for widely publicized state corruption scandals) has the smallest proportion (47%) of people who say officials can break the law with impunity (Figure 10).

The perception of official impunity is most widespread among the wealthiest (76%) and most educated (82%) citizens, and is somewhat more common among men (73%) and urbanites (73%) than among women (68%) and rural residents (66%).

**Figure 10: Officials who commit crimes go unpunished** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?

### Conclusion

Positioning himself as an anti-corruption leader, President Ramaphosa signaled that his administration would represent a clean break with state-capture allegations that marked his predecessor's tenure. But Afrobarometer survey findings show that South Africans perceive corruption as increasing under Ramaphosa – even in the Office of the Presidency itself.

Most citizens are dissatisfied with the way the government is handling the fight against corruption, suggesting that the National Anti-Corruption Strategy and other efforts to strengthen independent oversight have not yet had their desired impact.

Equally worrying are the growing number of people who fear retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities and the widespread belief that people who break the law – and

especially officials who break the law – often go unpunished. These public perceptions undermine trust in state institutions and reduce the likelihood that corrupt behaviour will be deterred.

Progress in the anti-corruption fight will require political will, more assertive independent oversight, and safe reporting channels for both whistle-blowers and ordinary citizens. Without these, it appears that South Africans will remain unconvinced that change has come.

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