

Distrust, corruption, and favouritism: Mauritians' negative perceptions of their police

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 526 | Louis Amédée Darga and Nazrana Hurroo

Summary

Shocking videos of alleged police brutality and torture have caused an uproar in the Mauritian public in recent days, most notably among lawyers, a number of religious bodies, and civil society organisations (Defimedia.info, 2022).

This is not the first time such videos are being seen on social media. In 2020, a robbery suspect accused the police of subjecting him to different types of torture, including the use of tasers on several parts of his body. In 2018, a man accused of theft reported that the police chained, handcuffed, and tortured him using tasers; he died in 2020 (L'Express.mu, 2022). These scenes continued during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when videos circulating on social media appeared to show police officers torturing two men arrested for damaging a police car (Hansrod, 2020).

Amid these concerns, how do Mauritians see the police? This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and assessments of police professionalism.

In Mauritius, a majority of citizens express little or no trust in the police and believe that corruption is rife among police officers. Almost half say some police engage in illegal activities, and more complain that police sometimes stop drivers without good reason and use excessive force in managing protests and dealing with criminals. Only one in five citizens think the government is doing a good job of reducing crime.

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. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Fewer than half of Mauritians say they trust the police "somewhat" (33%) or "a lot" (13%). This proportion has declined by 13 percentage points since 2014.

- One-quarter (24%) of adults believe that “most” or “all” police are corrupt, while fully two-thirds (67%) say “some of them” are involved in graft.
- Almost half (45%) of citizens say the police engage in criminal activities at least “sometimes,” including 15% who believe this happens “often” or “always.”
- A majority of citizens say the police at least “sometimes” stop drivers without good reason (64%) and use excessive force in managing protests (58%) and in dealing with criminals (63%).
- Only about four in 10 respondents (42%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - More than six in 10 (63%) say the police favour particular people, parties, or interests instead of operating in a neutral manner.
- But 88% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- And more than six in 10 citizens (62%) say the government is justified in using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates during a health emergency.
- One in four citizens (24%) say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year. About one in 10 (11%) report having feared crime in their home.
- Only 9% of citizens say they requested police assistance during the previous year. However, more than half (58%) say they encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation.
 - Among citizens who asked for assistance from the police, three-fourths (76%) say it was easy to get the help they needed, but 3% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 12% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Only 21% of respondents say the government is doing a good job of reducing crime.

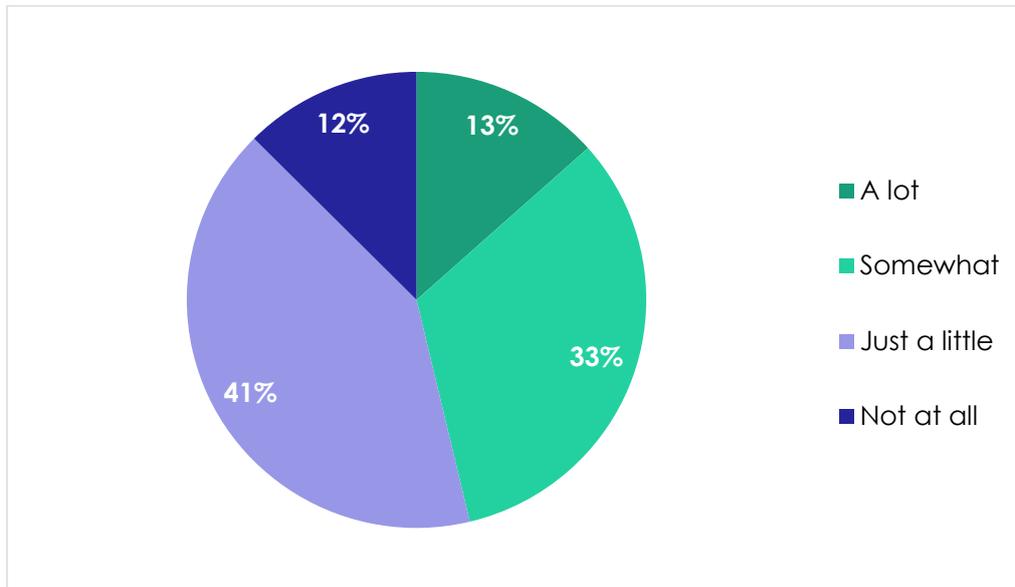
Trust in the police

Fewer than half of Mauritians say they trust the police “somewhat” (33%) or “a lot” (13%). The largest group (41%) express “just a little” trust in the police, while 12% say they don’t trust the police “at all” (Figure 1).

Between 2014 and 2022, the share of respondents who say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot” has declined by 13 percentage points, from 59% to 46% (Figure 2).

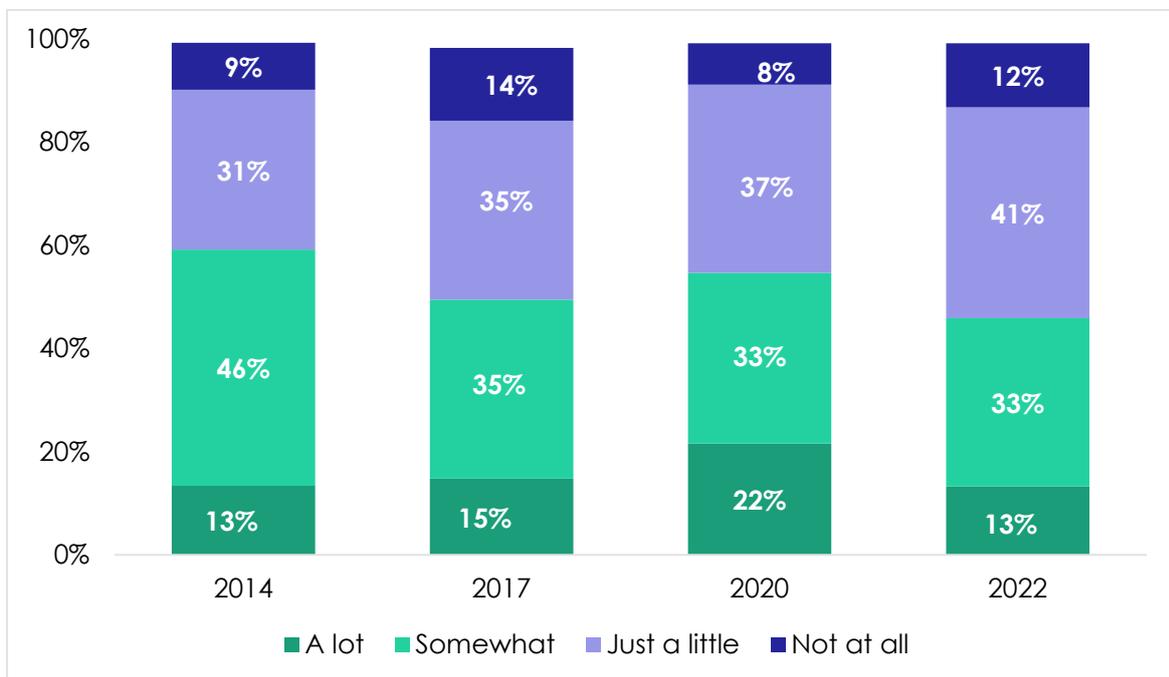
Rural residents (16%) are more likely than their urban counterparts (10%) to say they trust the police “a lot.” Trust decreases as lived poverty increases, ranging from 19% among economically better-off citizens to just 7% among those experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Trust in the police | Mauritius | 2022



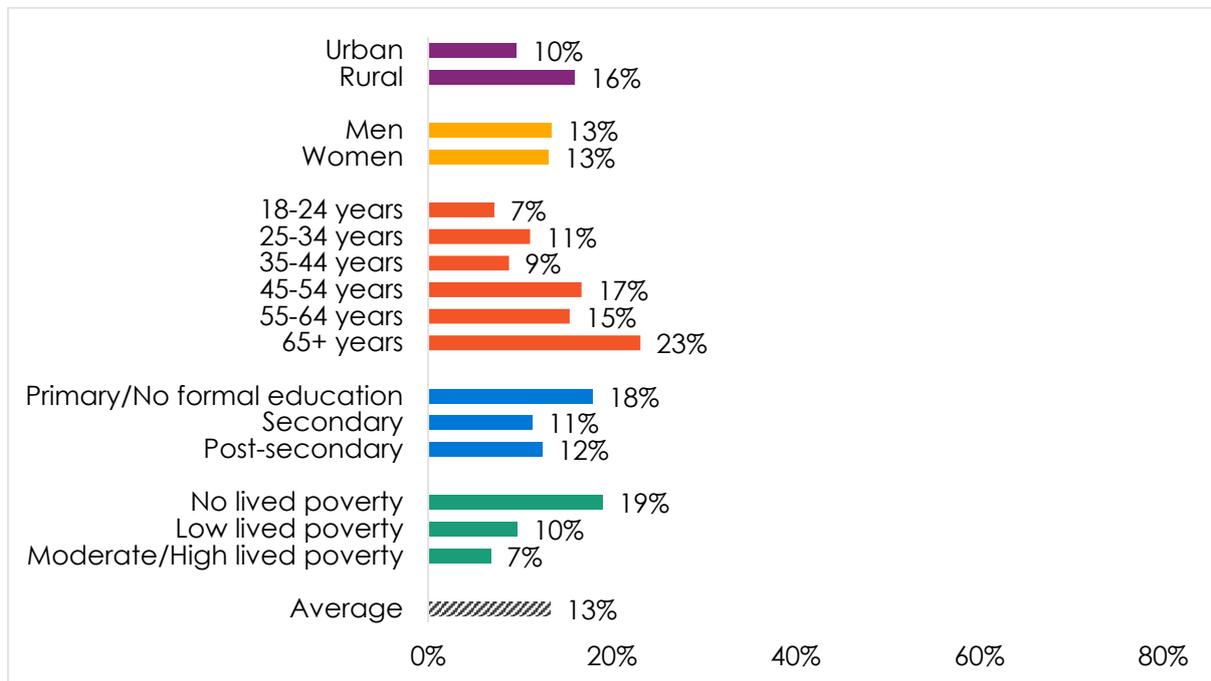
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 2: Trust in the police | Mauritius | 2014-2022



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

Figure 3: Trust the police 'a lot' | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



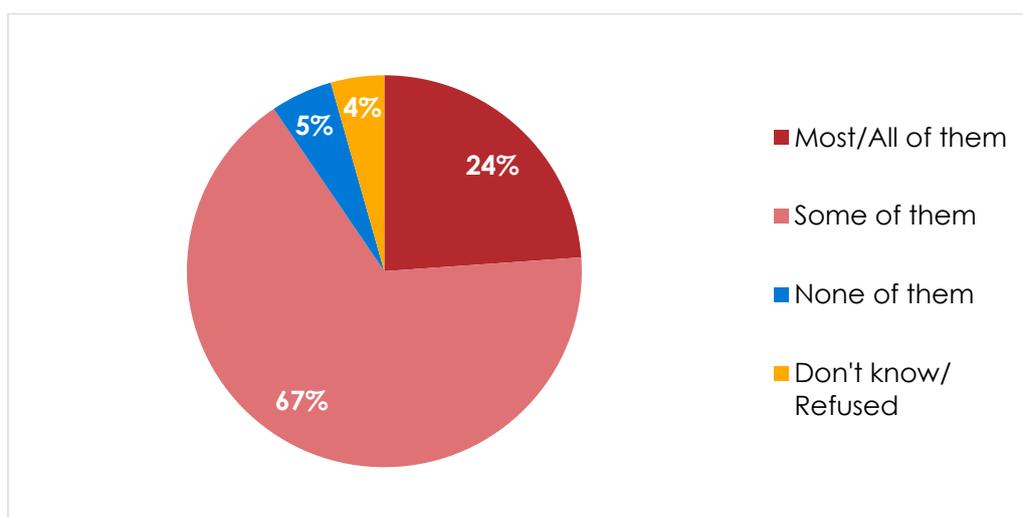
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "a lot")

Police corruption

An overwhelming majority of citizens believe that there is corruption in the police force. One-fourth (24%) of respondents believe that "most" or "all" police are corrupt, while two-thirds (67%) say that "some" police officials are involved in corruption (Figure 4).

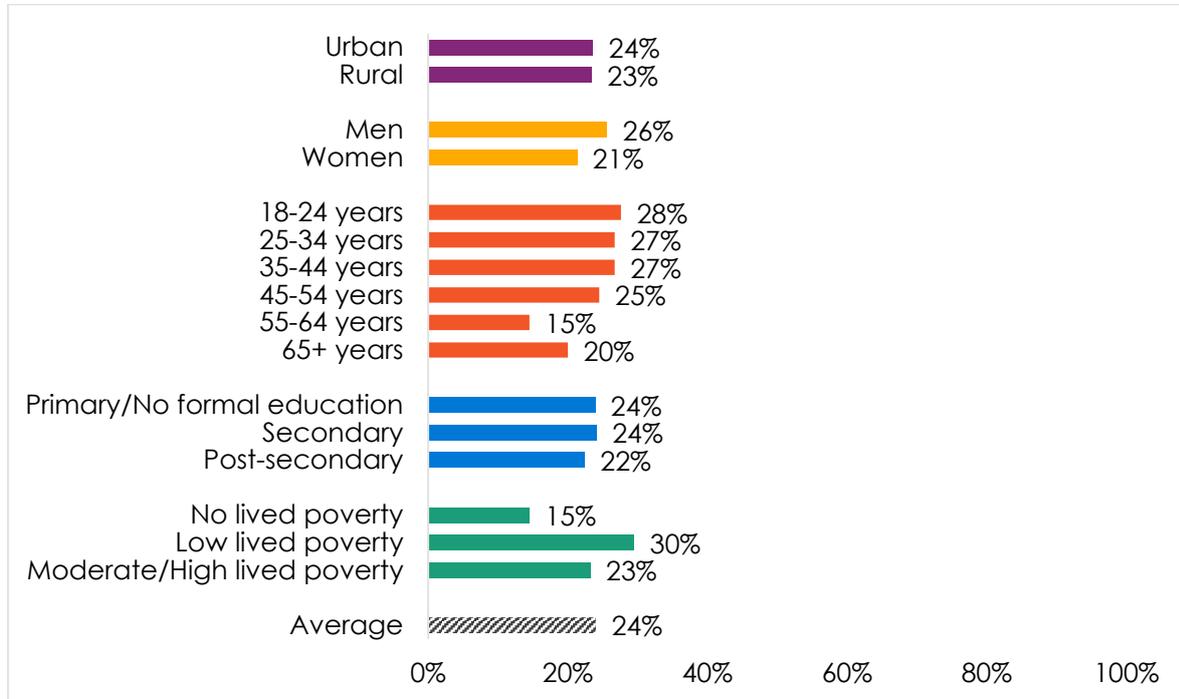
Perceptions that "most" or "all" police are corrupt are more common among men (26%) and those experiencing low lived poverty (30%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Perceived corruption among the police | Mauritius | 2022



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

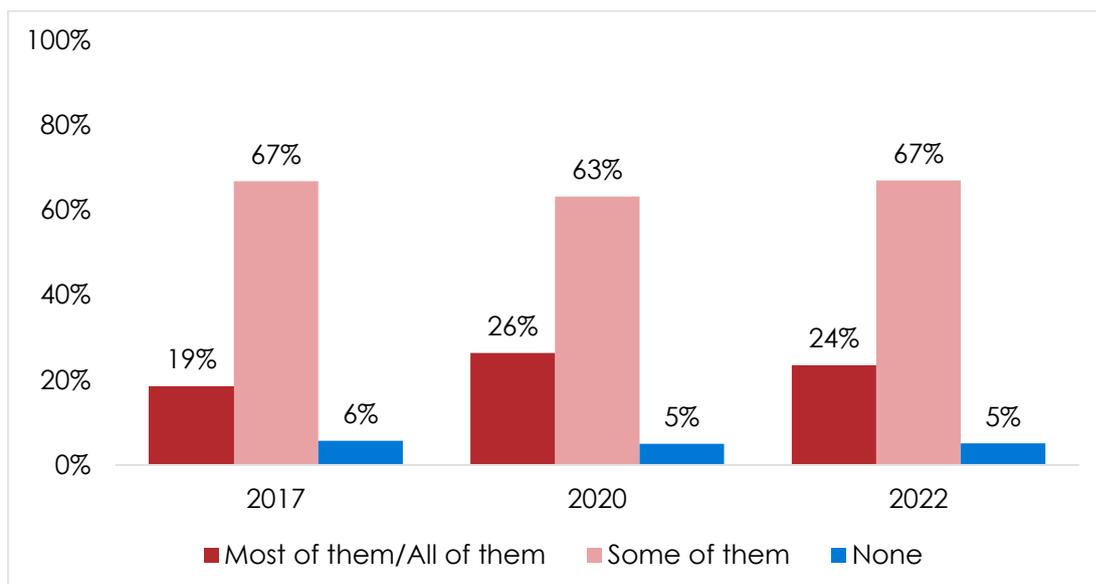
Figure 5: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group
 | Mauritius | 2022



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

Between 2017 and 2022, the proportion of respondents who say "most" or "all" police are corrupt has increased by 5 percentage points, from 19% to 24% (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Perceived police corruption | Mauritius | 2017-2022



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

Police conduct

In addition to expressing significant levels of distrust in the police, a majority of Mauritians say the police engage at least “sometimes” in a variety of improper practices (Figure 7).

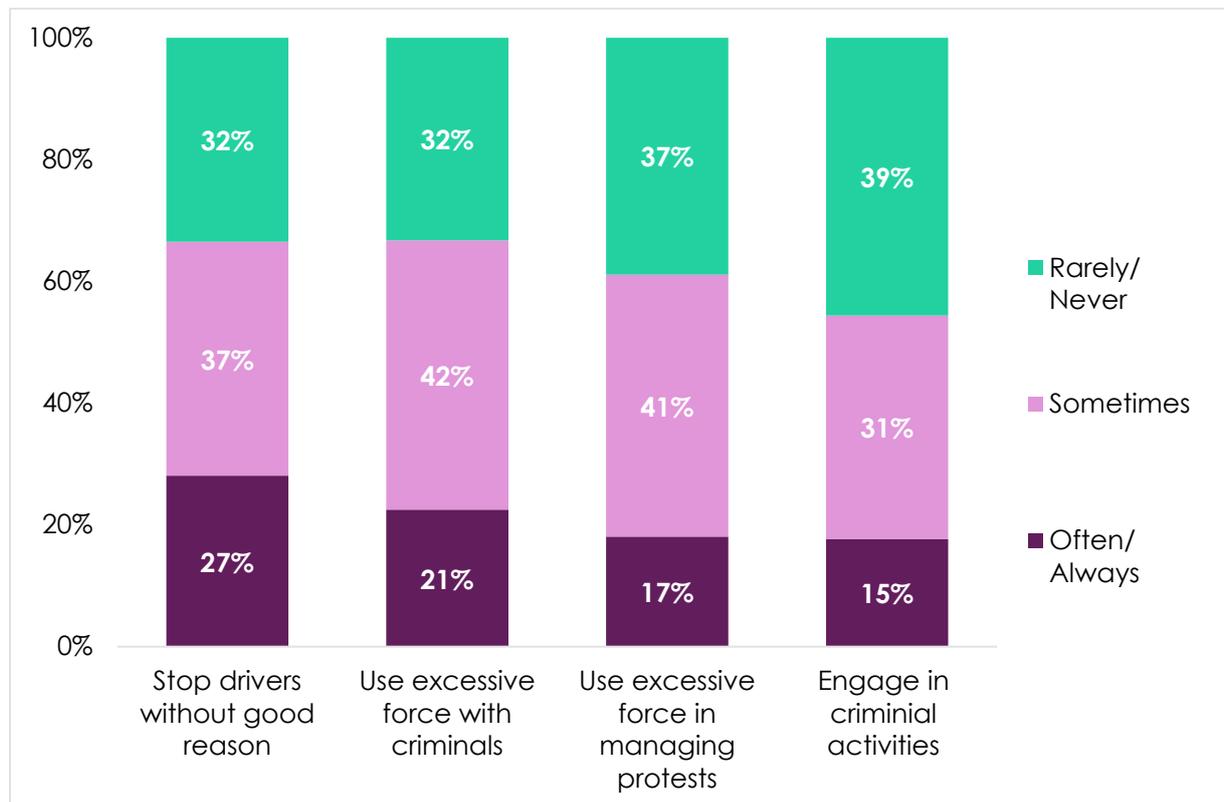
Almost two-thirds of citizens say the police frequently (27% “often” or “always”) or “sometimes” (37%) stop drivers without good reason.

More than six in 10 complain that the police often/always (21%) or “sometimes” (42%) use excessive force in dealing with criminals.

Almost six in 10 say the police routinely (17%) or “sometimes” (41%) use excessive force in managing public protests or demonstrations.

And almost half think the police often/always (15%) or “sometimes” (31%) engage in criminal activities.

Figure 7: Improper police practices | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Mauritius:

Stop drivers without good reason?

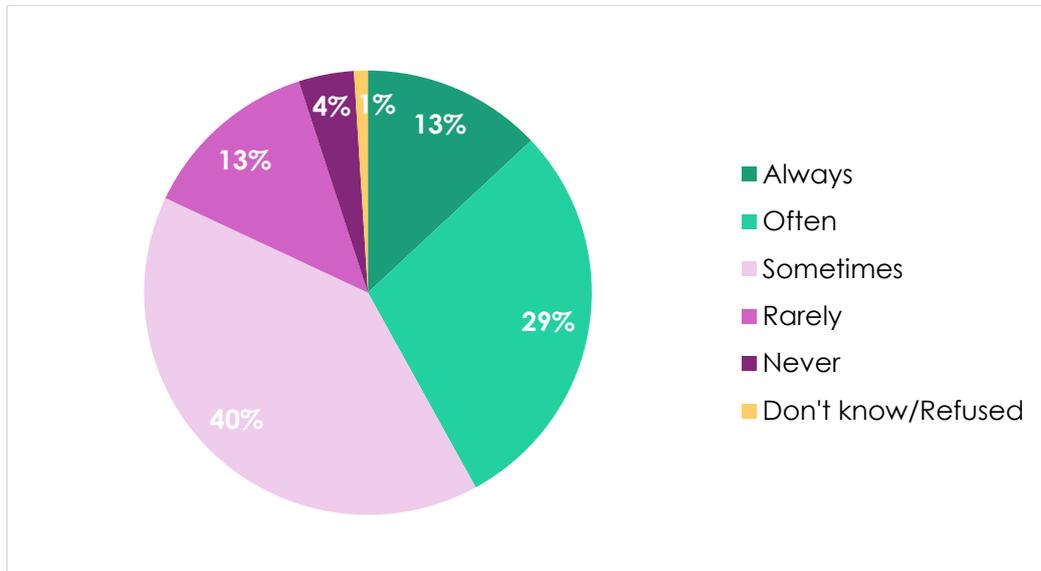
Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?

Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?

Engage in criminal activities?

Only about four in 10 Mauritians say the police “often” (29%) or “always” (13%) operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights. The largest proportion (40%) say this happens “sometimes,” while 17% believe that such conduct is rare or never happens (Figure 8).

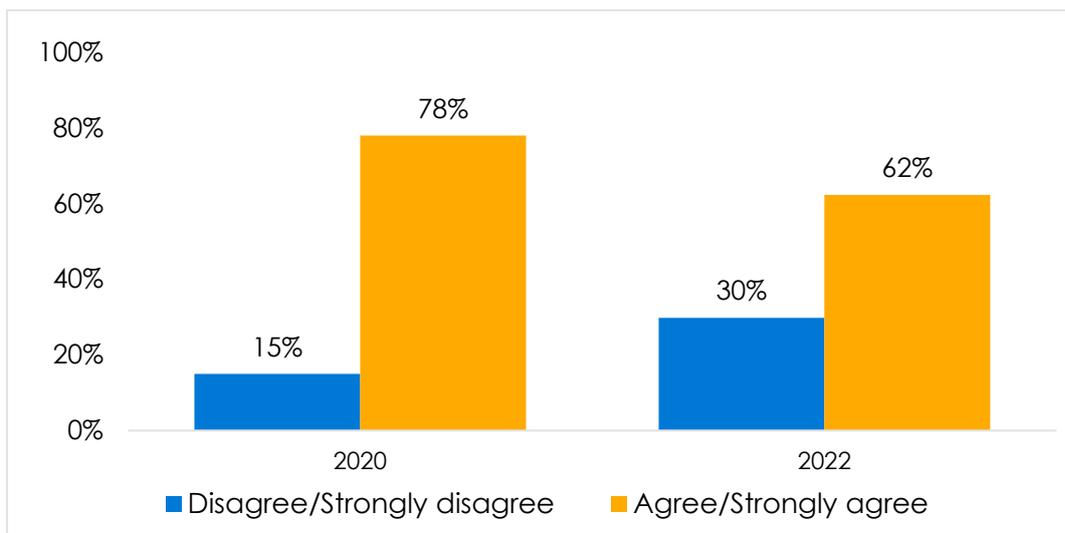
Figure 8: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Mauritius operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

Despite these concerns, six in 10 citizens (62%) say the government is justified in using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates during a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the proportion of Mauritians who disapprove of this practice has increased by 15 percentage points since 2020 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Should government use police and security forces to enforce public health mandates? | Mauritius | 2020-2022

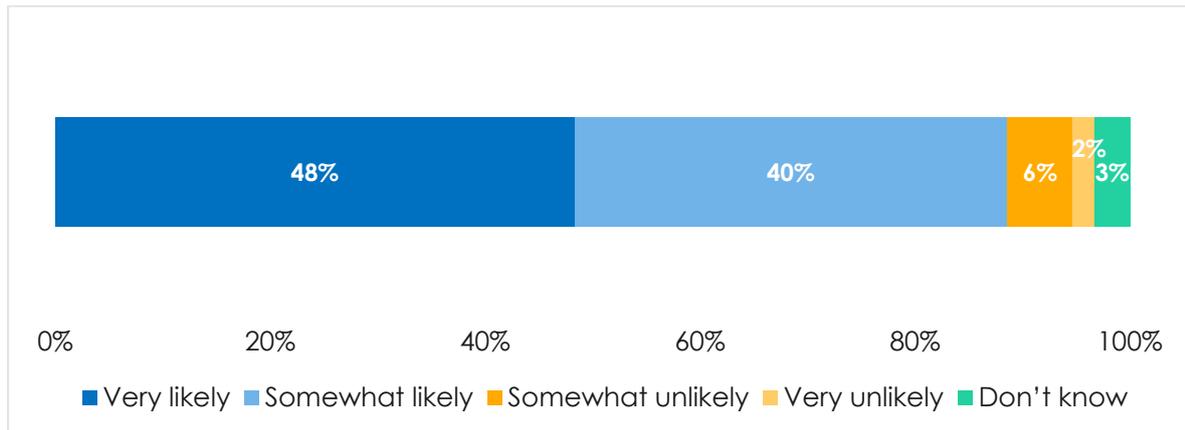


Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures: Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings and wearing face masks?

One area in which most Mauritians trust their police to act responsibly is gender-based violence (GBV): Almost nine out of 10 citizens (88%) say the police are “very likely” (48%) or “somewhat likely” (40%) to take reported cases of rape, domestic abuse, and other GBV seriously (Figure 10).

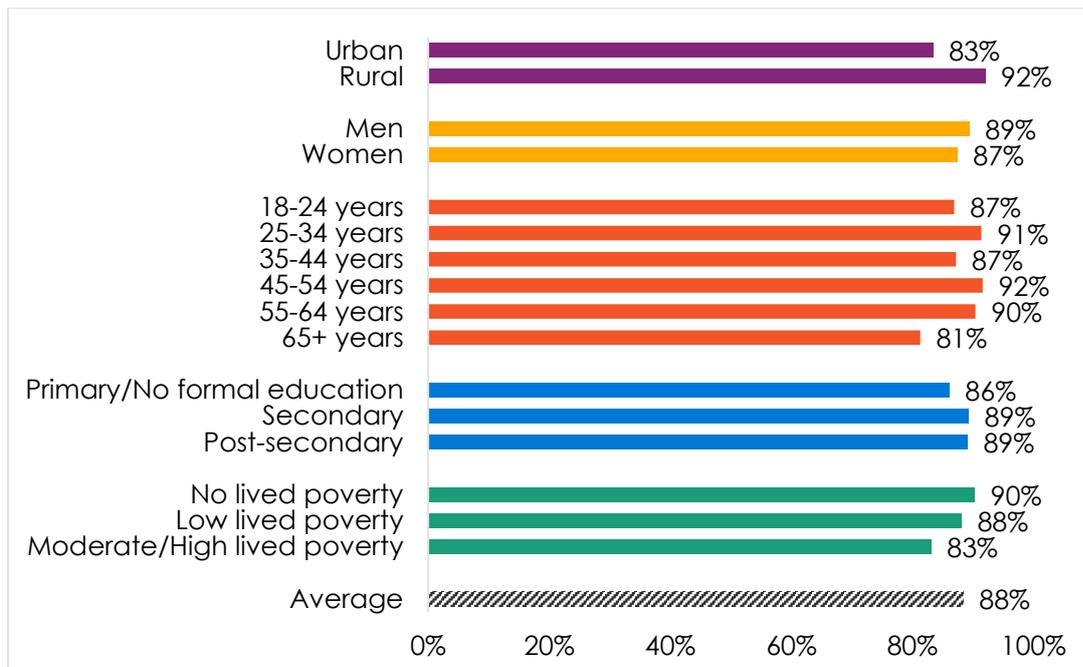
This confidence is high across key demographic groups, though somewhat lower in cities (83%) than in rural areas (92%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Figure 11: Police likely to take gender-based violence seriously | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



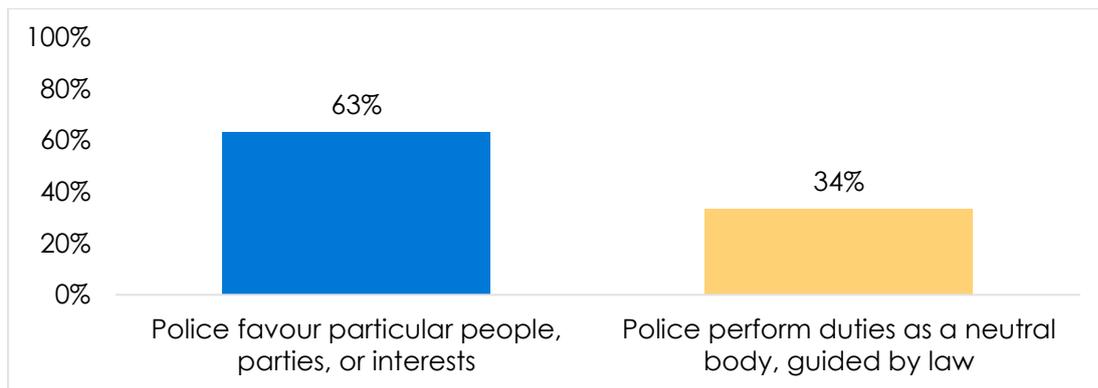
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)*

Favouritism by the police

Mauritians score their police poorly on their autonomy as a neutral body. More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say the police favour particular people, parties, or interests, while only 34% believe that the police perform their duties as a neutral body, guided by law (Figure 12).

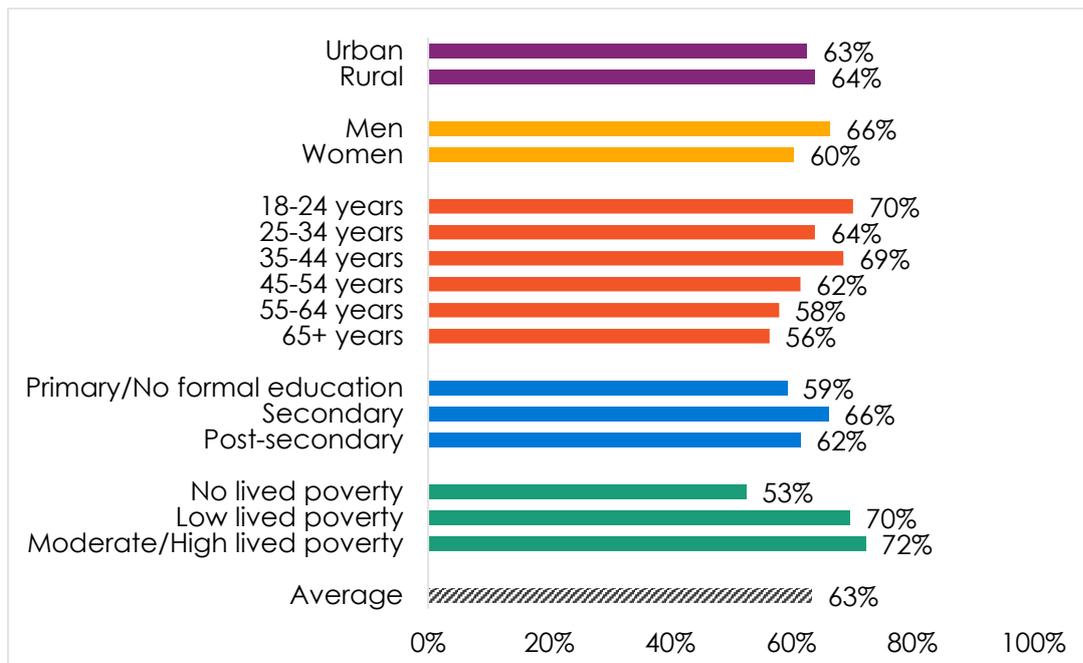
Men (66%) and poorer citizens (72%) are more likely than women (60%) and economically well-off citizens (53%) to say that the police engage in favouritism (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Perceived favouritism by the police | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you think it performs its duties as a neutral body guided by law, or would you say it makes decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests, or haven't you heard enough to say: The police?

Figure 13: Perceived favouritism by the police | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



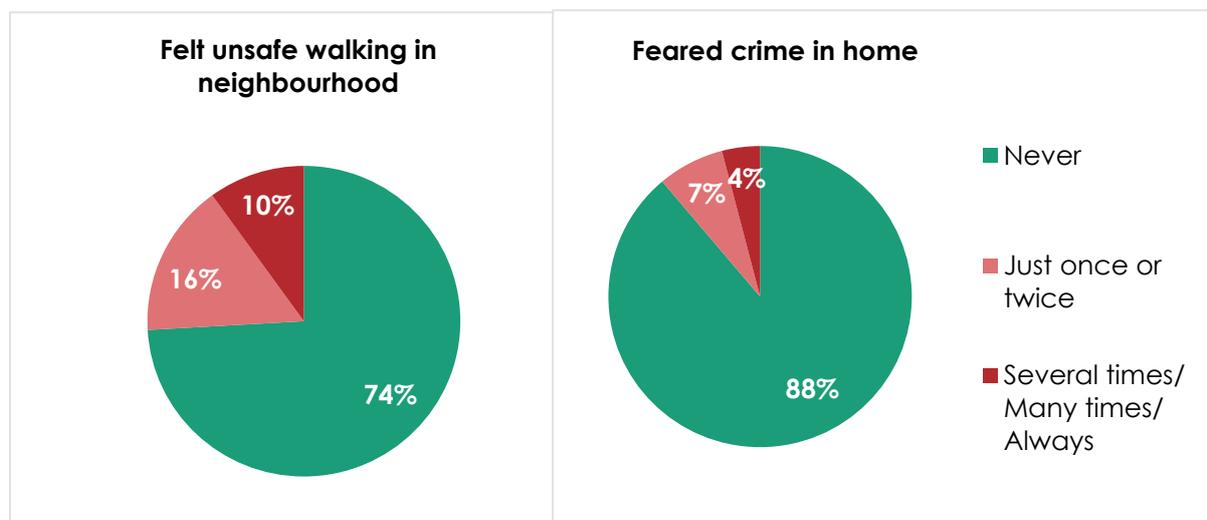
Respondents were asked: For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you think it performs its duties as a neutral body guided by law, or would you say it makes decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests, or haven't you heard enough to say: The police? (% who say the police "favour particular people, parties, or interests")

Sense of security

Despite concerns about the police, survey responses indicate that most citizens do feel safe in their country (Figure 14). Three-fourths (74%) of Mauritians say they did not feel unsafe walking in their neighbourhood during the previous year, while one in four say they experienced such insecurity “just once or twice” (16%) or more often (10%).

About one in 10 respondents (11%) say they feared crime in their home at least once during the previous year, while 88% say they did not.

Figure 14: Insecurity and fear of crime | Mauritius | 2022



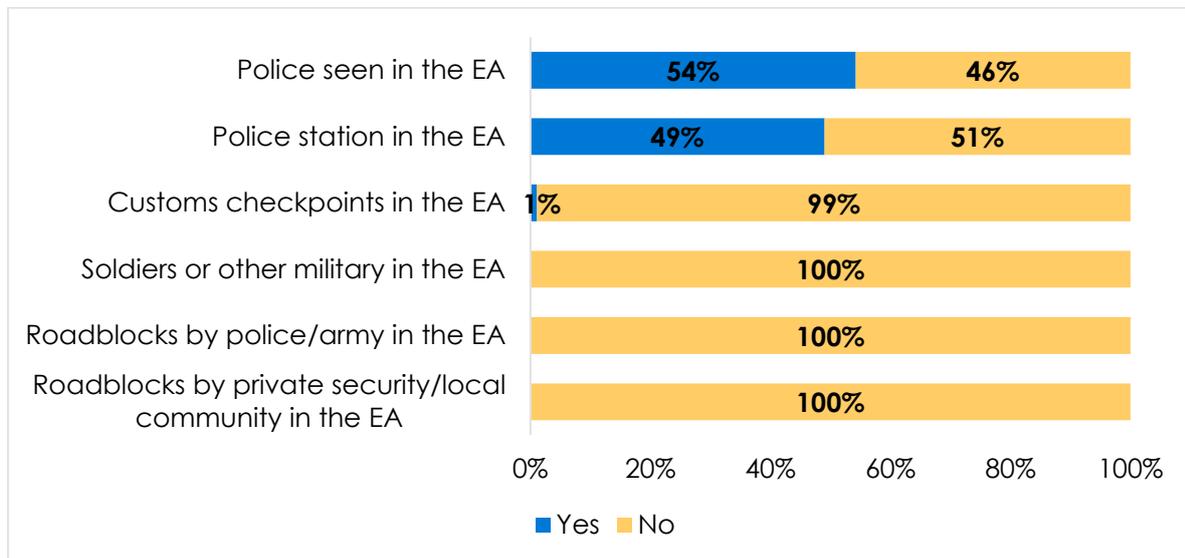
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home?

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Police/security presence

In Mauritius, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about half (49%) of the enumeration areas (EAs) they visited (Figure 15). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 54% of the EAs. They found customs checkpoints in just 1% of visited EAs, and other signs of security-related activity were not found at all, including soldiers or other military, roadblocks by the police or army, and roadblocks by private security or the local community.

Figure 15: Presence of police/security | Mauritius | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked:

Are the following facilities present in the enumeration area (EA) or in easy walking distance: Police station?

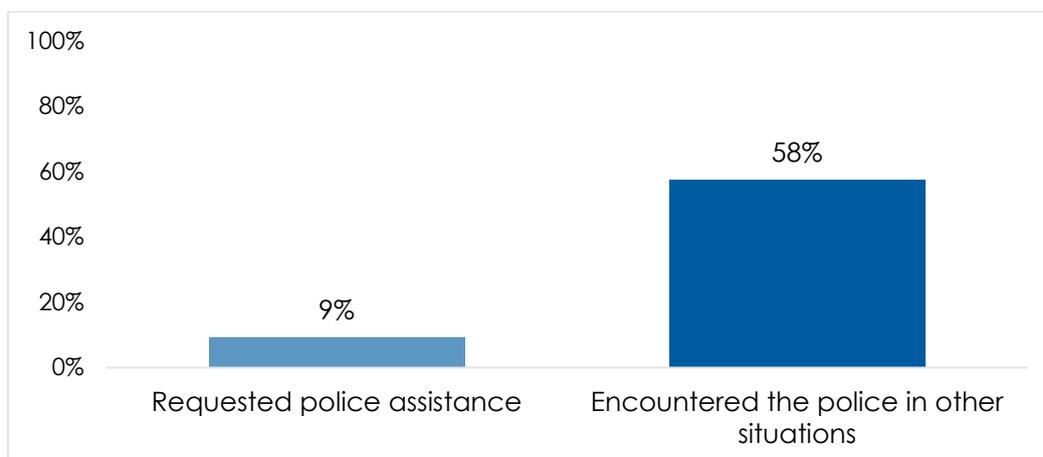
In the EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? Any customs checkpoints? Any roadblocks or booms set up by private security providers or by the local community?

Encounters with the police

How often do Mauritians encounter the police in their daily lives?

Only about one in 10 respondents (9%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year, while more than six times as many (58%) say they encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Contact with the police | Mauritius | 2022



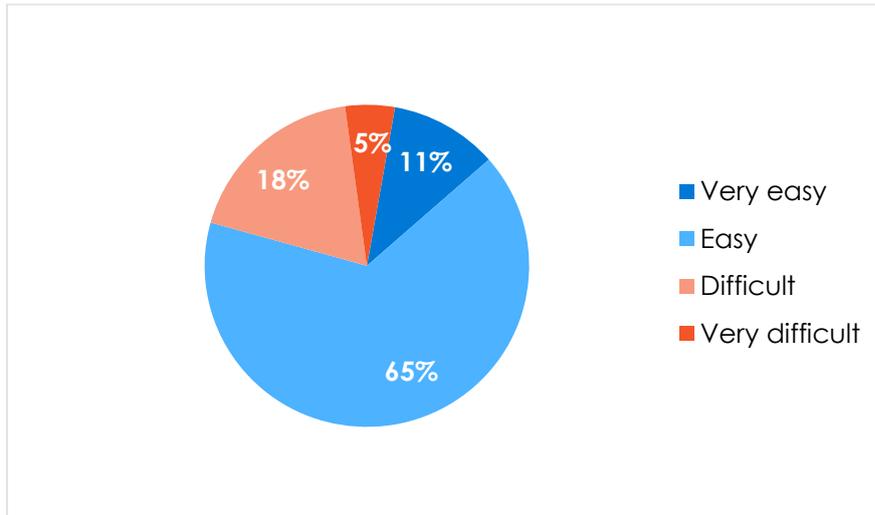
Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police?

In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, almost a quarter (23%) say it was “difficult” (18%) or “very difficult” (5%) to get the assistance they needed. But the overwhelming majority say it was “easy” (65%) or “very easy” (11%) (Figure 17).

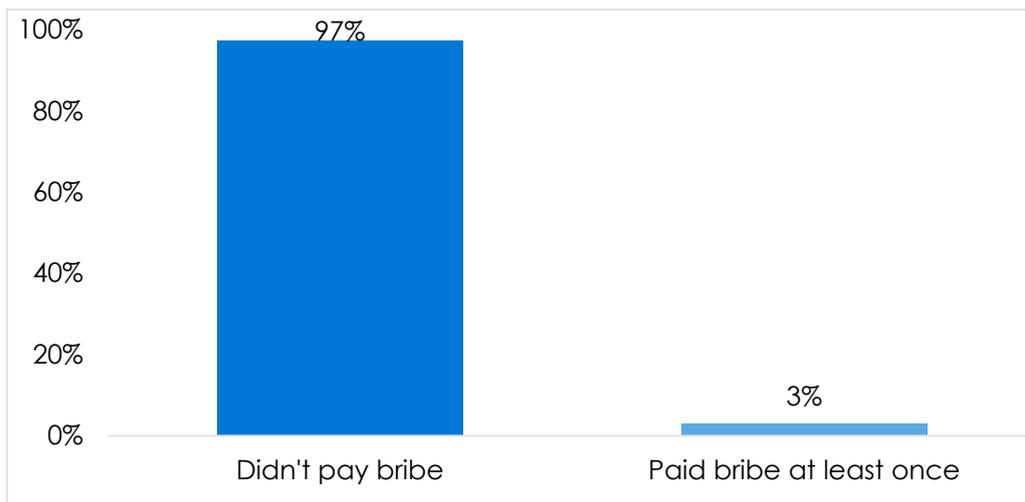
Figure 17: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)*

Among those who asked for help from the police, 3% say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance they needed (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Mauritius | 2022

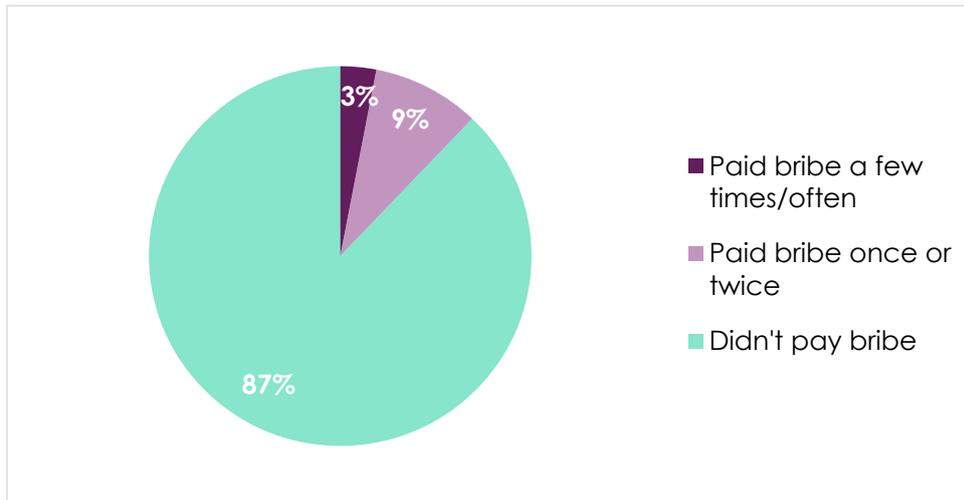


Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If “yes”:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance during the previous year are excluded.)*

Bribe payment was more common among those who encountered the police in other situations, such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an

investigation: 3% say they paid a bribe "a few times" or "often," and 9% say they did so "once or twice" (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Mauritius | 2022

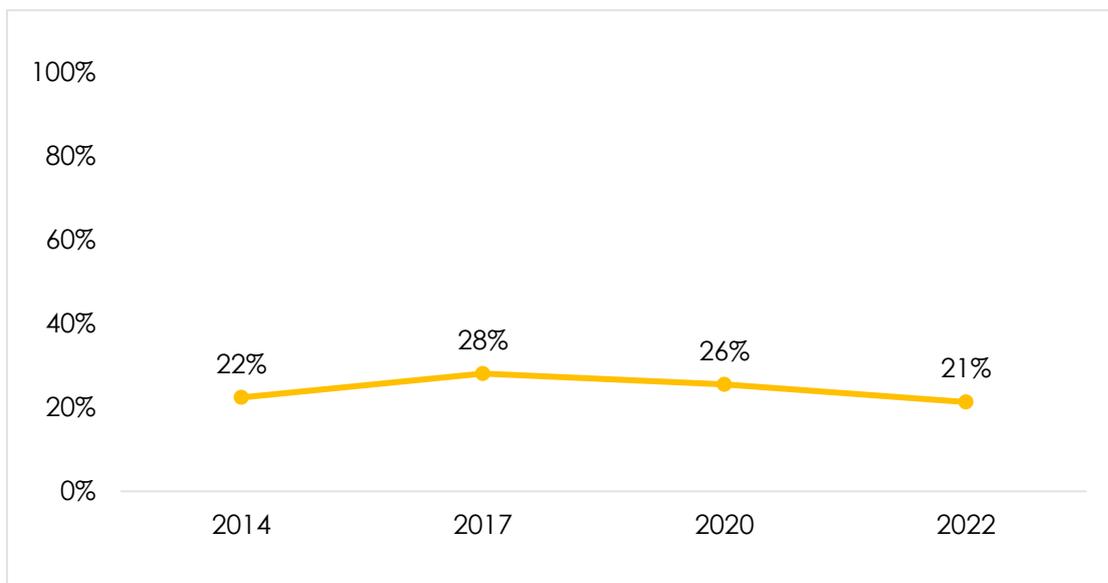


Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Government performance on reducing crime

Even if most Mauritians generally feel safe, only one in five (21%) think the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" at reducing crime, while 78% say it's doing a poor job. Public approval of the government's anti-crime efforts has been consistently low and has declined by 7 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Mauritius | 2014-2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

When news reports and social media allege police abuses, the Mauritian police do not have a large reservoir of public trust and goodwill to draw on. Too many citizens express little or no trust, think police officers are corrupt, and see them as failing to operate professionally and evenhandedly.

This represents a major challenge for the government, whose performance rating on reducing crime continues to be abysmal.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, and GIZ.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 526 | 17 June 2022