



## **Kenyans cite criminal activity, lack of respect, and corruption among police failings**

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 552 | Paul Kamau, Gedion Onyango, and Tosin Salau**

### **Summary**

The police are the most visible representatives of the government. In the hour of need or danger, when a citizen does not know what to do or whom to approach, a police station and a police officer are the most appropriate and approachable entities. The police are expected to be the most accessible, interactive, and dynamic organisation in society. They are also expected to uphold the highest standards of professionalism, whether dealing with citizens at their most vulnerable or at their worst.

Critics have long accused Kenya's police of falling well short of these expectations, alleging police abuses ranging from brutal treatment of suspects and protesters to corruption, robbery, and extrajudicial killings, often with impunity (Capital News, 2022; VoA, 2020; Hope, 2015; Onyango, 2022).

While frequent calls for reform have led to some changes, including provisions in the 2010 Constitution for a unified National Police Service and an inspector general, they have more often been stymied by political elites interfering with police operations as an independent body (Mageka, 2015).

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 Kenya, fully half of adults report encounters with the police during the year preceding the survey, either to request assistance or, more often, in situations such as checkpoints or traffic stops. Many of these encounters involve the payment of bribes, and the police are more widely seen as corrupt than any other institution the survey asked about. Only one-third of Kenyans say they trust the police.

Instead, most say the police engage in illegal activities, fail to respect citizens' rights, stop drivers without good reason, and use excessive force in managing public demonstrations and dealing with criminals. Fewer than half of Kenyans say 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 [country], led by [NP], interviewed a nationally representative sample of [1,200/2,400] adult [citizens of this country] in [month year]. A sample of this size

yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 [or +/-2] percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in [country] in [years].

## Key findings

- More than four in 10 Kenyans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (45%) and feared crime in their home (42%) at least once during the previous year, including about one in four who experienced this at least "several times." Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About half (48%) of Kenyans live within easy walking distance of a police station.
- About one in five citizens (19%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. More than twice as many (44%) 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 help from the police, 45% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 52% say they had to pay a bribe.
  - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 56% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt – by far the worst rating among 12 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Only about one in three Kenyans say they trust the police "somewhat" (21%) or "a lot" (13%). The share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has climbed by 12 percentage points since 2014.
- Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say the police engage in illegal activities at least "sometimes," including 38% who believe this happens "often" or "always."
- Fewer than one in five citizens (18%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; fully 60% assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of.
- A majority of citizens say the police "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason (66%) and use excessive force in managing protests (57%) and in dealing with criminals (55%).
  - But 79% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- Assessments of the government's performance in reducing crime are mixed: 46% approve while 54% disapprove. Approval dropped by 11 percentage points between 2019 and 2021.

## Sense of security

The most basic role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Kenyans feel protected?

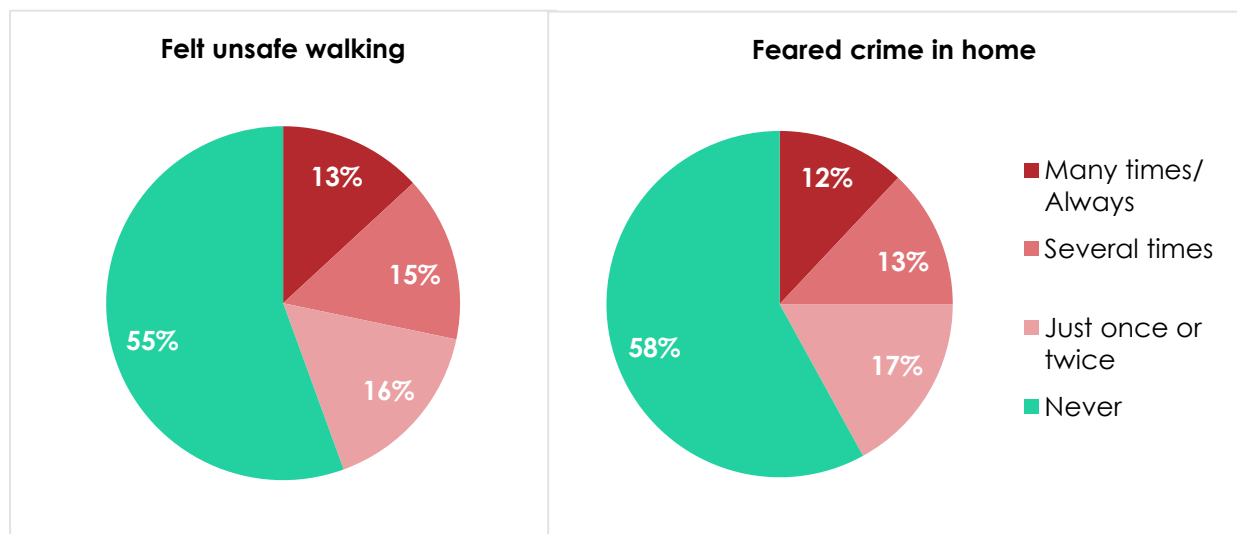
Afrobarometer survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Almost half (45%) of Kenyans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at

least once during the previous year, including 28% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 1).

Similarly, 42% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 25% who say this happened "several times," "many times," or "always."

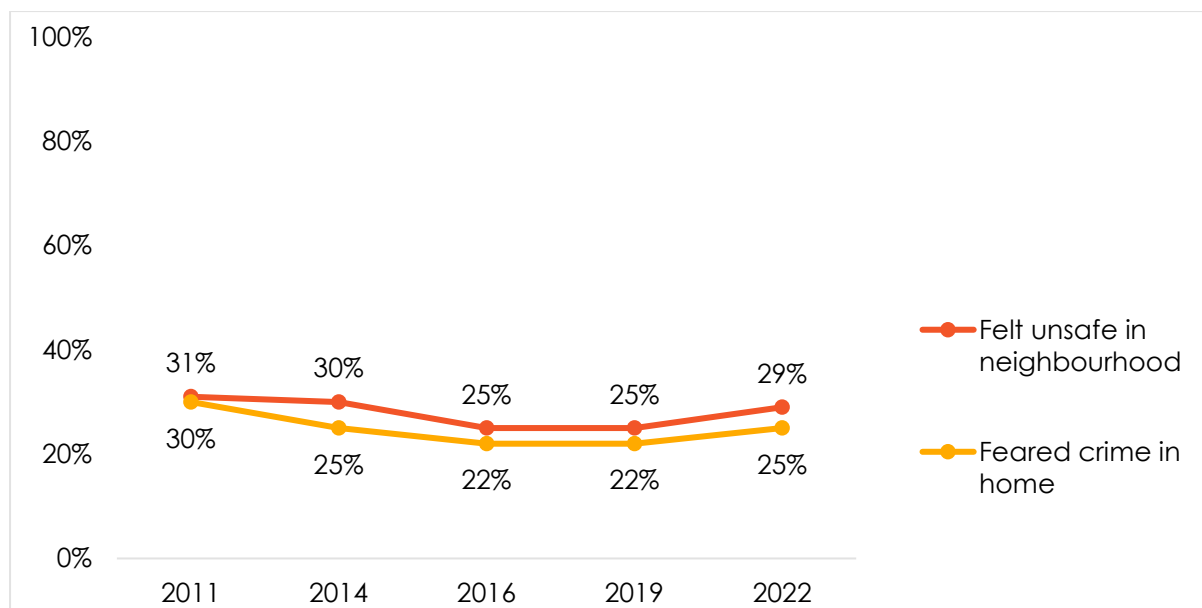
The proportions of Kenyans who report feeling unsafe or fearing crime at least "several times" have varied only modestly over the past decade, losing slight improvements recorded in 2016 and 2019 surveys (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Kenya | 2021**



**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?

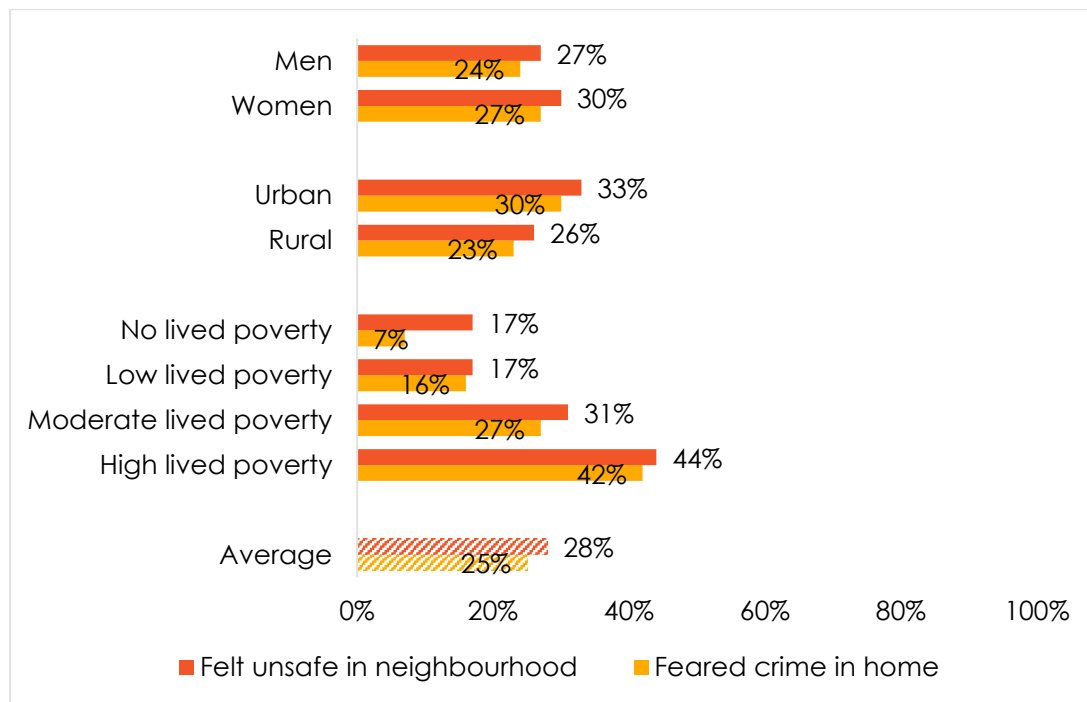
**Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Kenya | 2011-2021**



**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? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

These experiences are more common in cities than in rural areas (by 7 percentage points on both indicators) (Figure 3). They increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty<sup>1</sup>: The poorest citizens are more than twice as likely to feel unsafe and six times as likely to fear crime in their homes as those experiencing no lived poverty.

**Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Kenya | 2011-2021**



**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? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

### Police/security presence

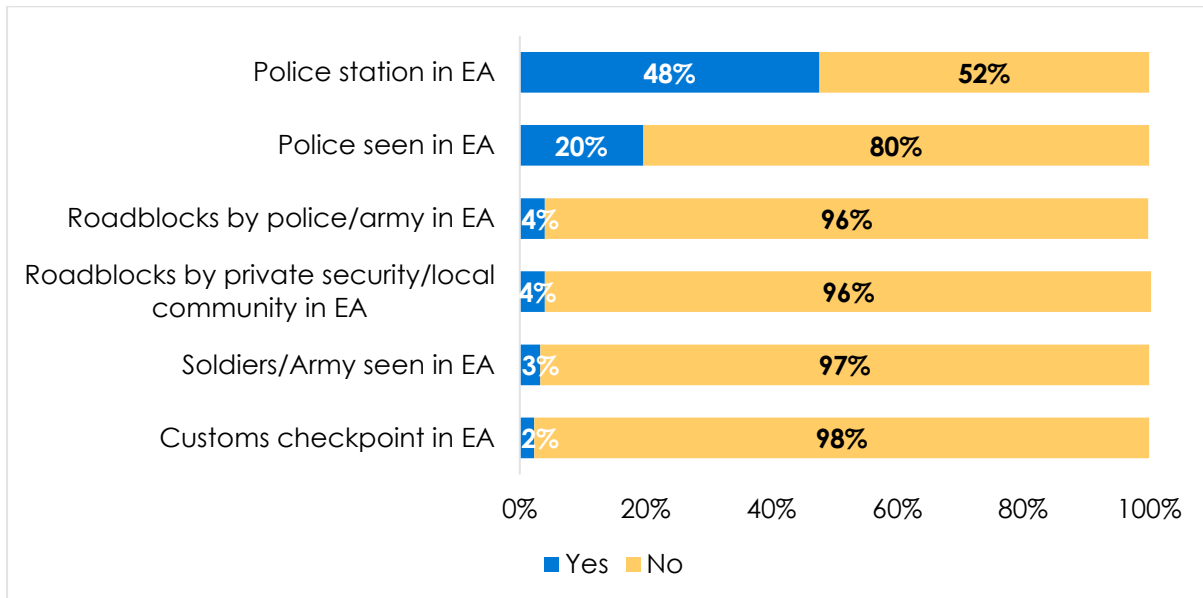
One factor that might affect people's sense of security is the presence of security forces. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities available in the area. Since the EAs visited are selected to represent the country's population as a whole, these data provide reliable indicators of infrastructure and service availability.

In Kenya, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about half (48%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 20% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including roadblocks by the police or army (4%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (4%), soldiers or other military (3%), and customs checkpoints (2%).

The share of citizens who felt unsafe or feared crime does not vary greatly based on whether they have a police station in the area.

<sup>1</sup> 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 (2020).

**Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Kenya | 2021**



**Survey enumerators were asked:**

Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit (PSU)/enumeration area (EA) or in easy walking distance: Police station?  
 In the PSU/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?

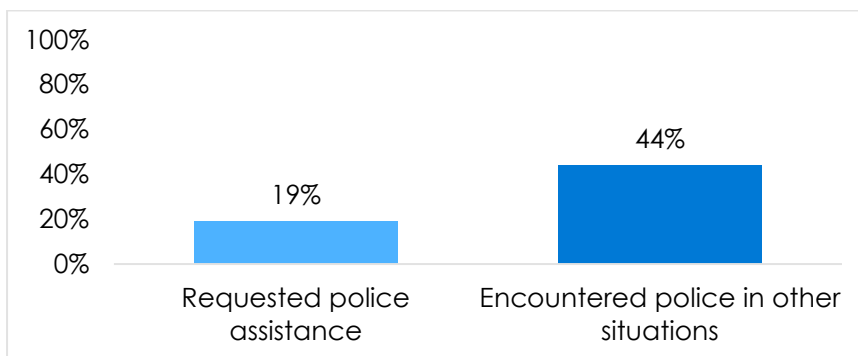
**Encounters with the police**

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

About one in five respondents (19%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. More than twice as many (44%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

About one in eight (12%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary encounters, while half (49%) say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

**Figure 5: Contact with the police | Kenya | 2021**

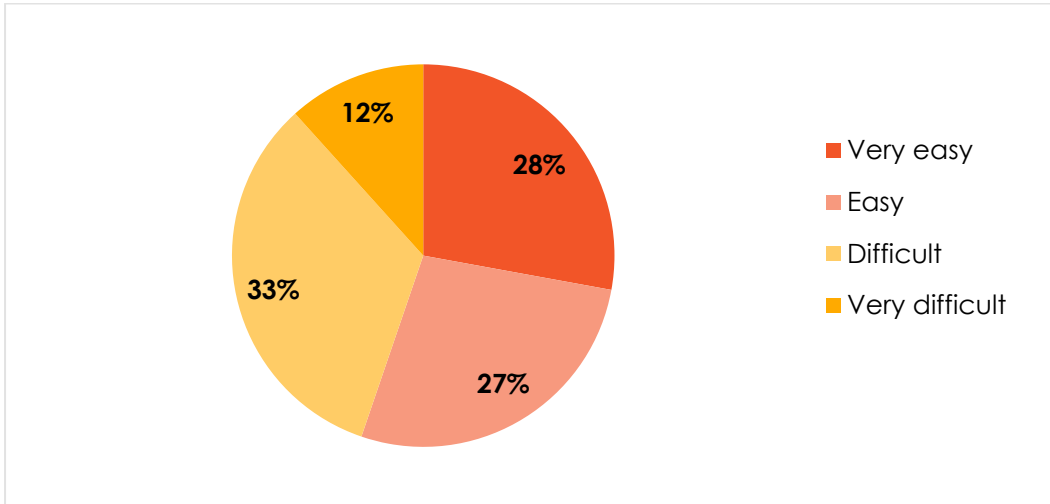


**Respondents were asked:**

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 half (45%) say it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to get the assistance they needed (Figure 6). Only 28% indicate that it was "very easy" to get assistance from police.

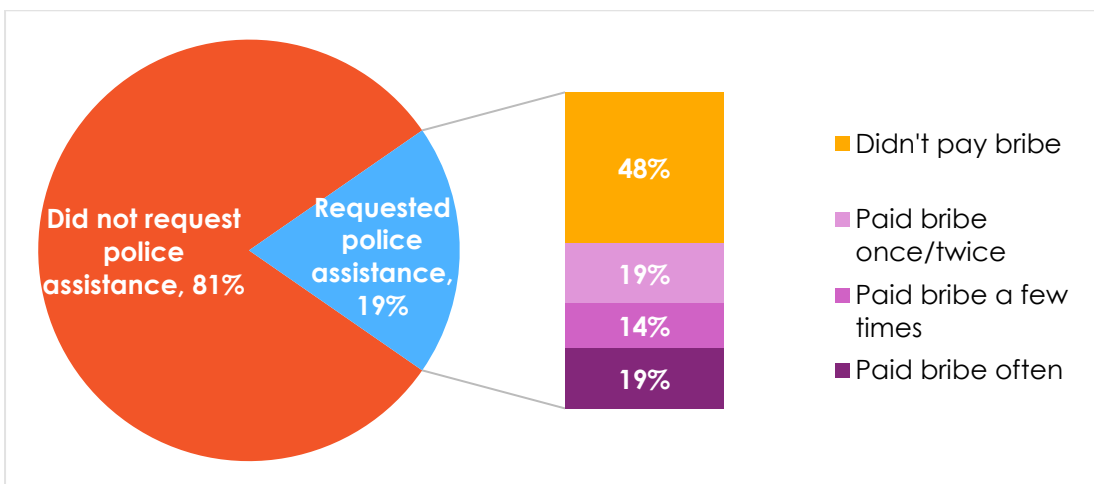
**Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents who requested police assistance during the previous year were asked:** 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, more than half (52%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer to get the assistance they needed (Figure 7). This means that among all Kenyan adults, including those who had no contact with the police, one in 10 (10%) paid a bribe to get police assistance during the past year.

**Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Kenya | 2021**

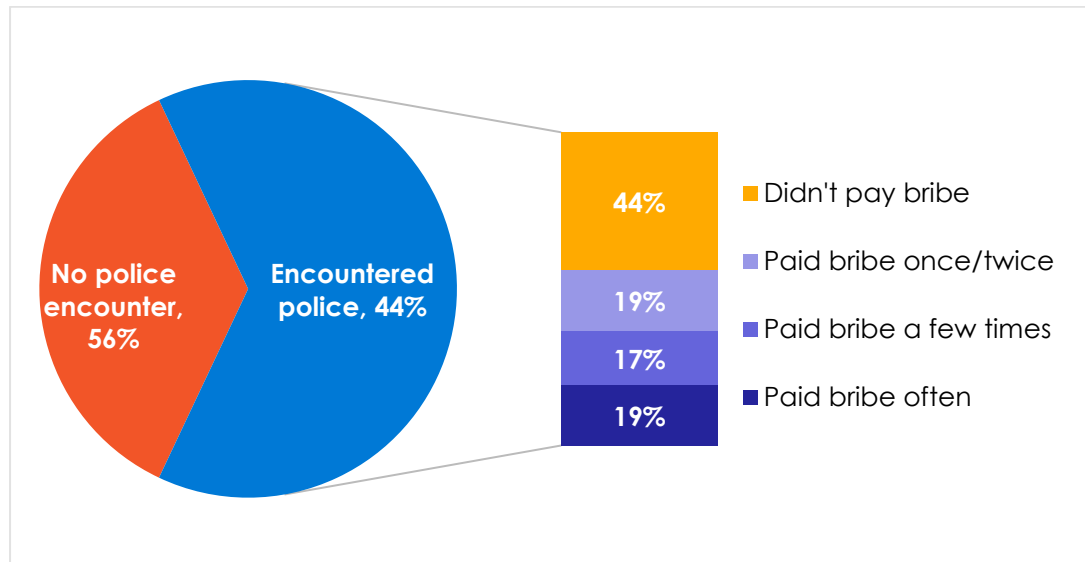


**Respondents were asked:** In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (If "yes":) How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Among Kenyans who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, a majority (56%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 19% who say this

happened "often" during the previous year (Figure 8). This translates to one-fourth (25%) of all Kenyan adults paying a bribe to avoid problems with the police.

**Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Kenya | 2021**



**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?*

To summarise the experience with the police among all Kenyan adults during the past year, about three in 10 (29%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

### Police corruption

Considering the frequency of reported bribe payments to the police, it is perhaps not surprising that Kenyans are nearly unanimous (94%) in believing that at least "some" police officials are corrupt. In fact, more than two-thirds (68%) of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt – by far the worst rating among all 12 institutions and leaders the survey asked about (Figure 9).

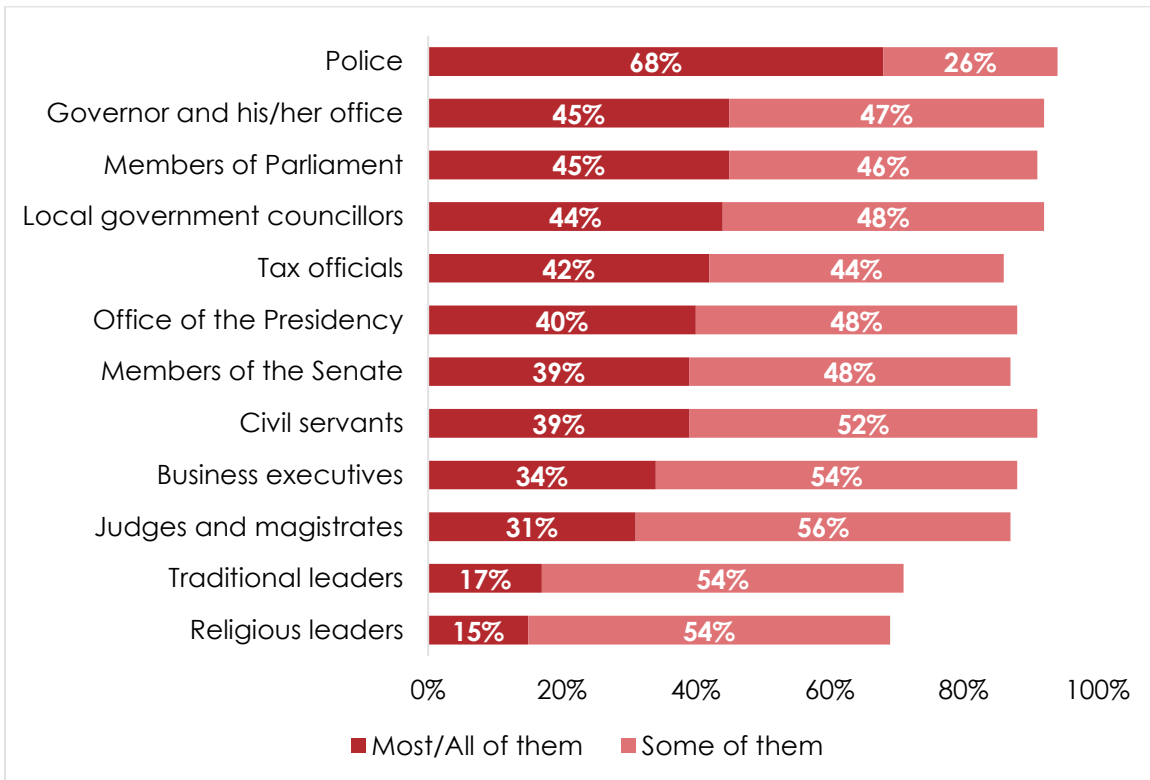
Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are more common among men (73%) and urban residents (74%) than among women (64%) and rural residents (65%) (Figure 10). Economically better-off citizens (60%) are less likely to see the police that way than those experiencing some level of lived poverty (66%-70%).

Findings also suggest possible links between perceptions of police corruption and interaction with the police (Figure 11).

Citizens who live in EAs where field teams saw police officers are somewhat more likely to say that most/all police are corrupt than are their counterparts in EAs where no police presence was observed (74% vs. 67%).

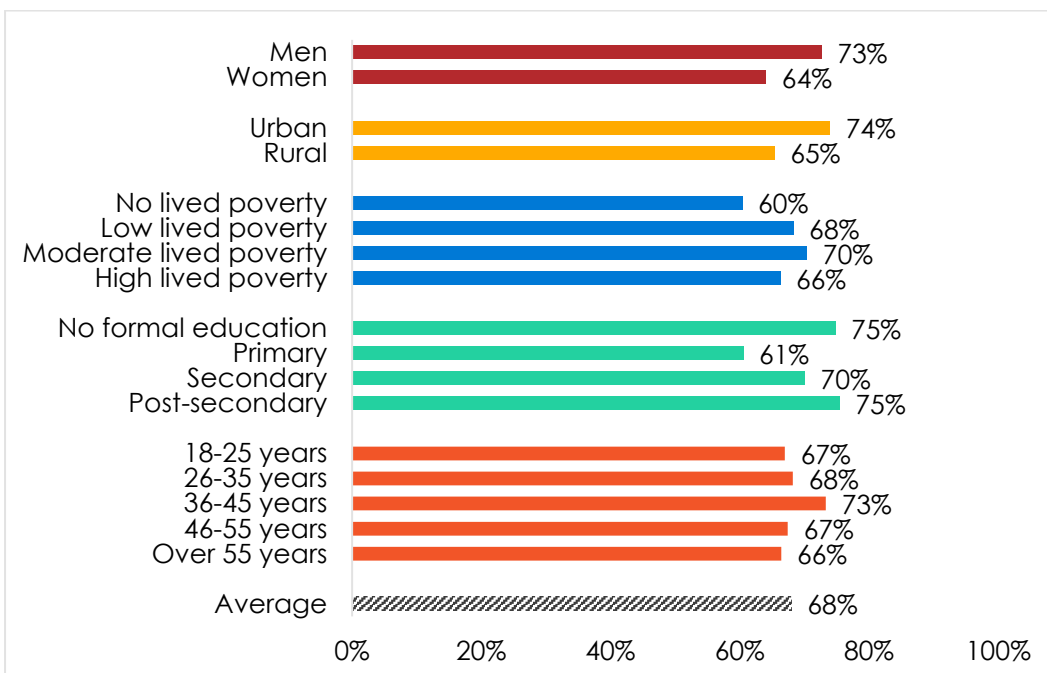
And while respondents who requested police assistance differ little in their perceptions of police corruption from respondents who did not request assistance, citizens who "often" encountered police in other (less voluntary) situations are significantly more likely to see most/all police as corrupt than are those who had no such encounters with police (78% vs. 64%).

**Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Kenya | 2021**



**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?

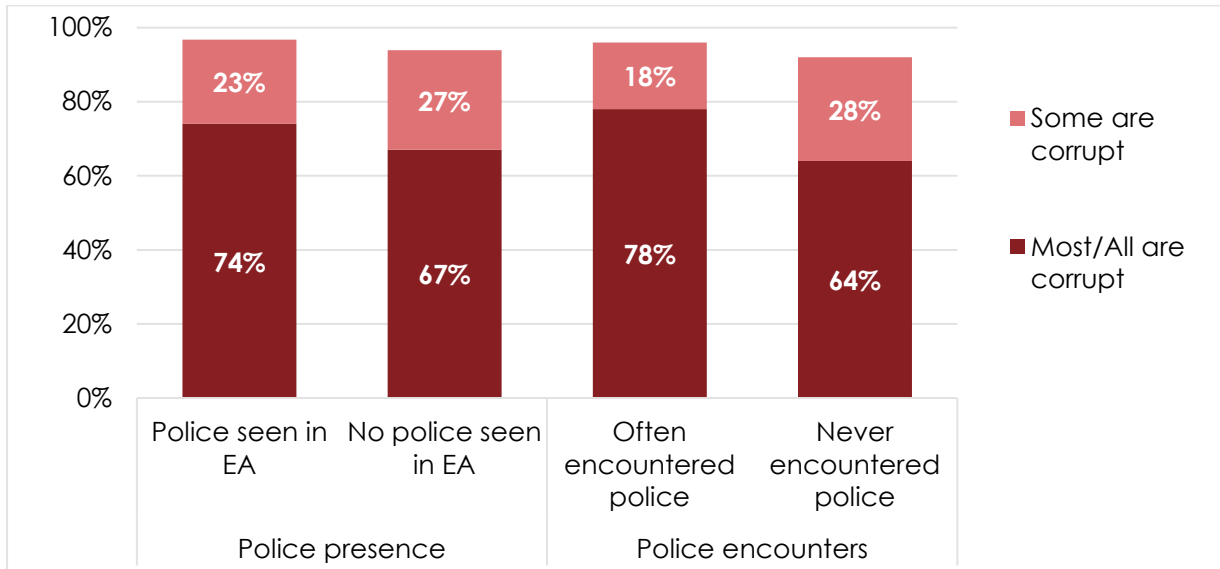
**Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021**



**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")



**Figure 11: Perceived police corruption** | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Kenya | 2021



**Survey enumerators were asked:** In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see any police officers or police vehicles?

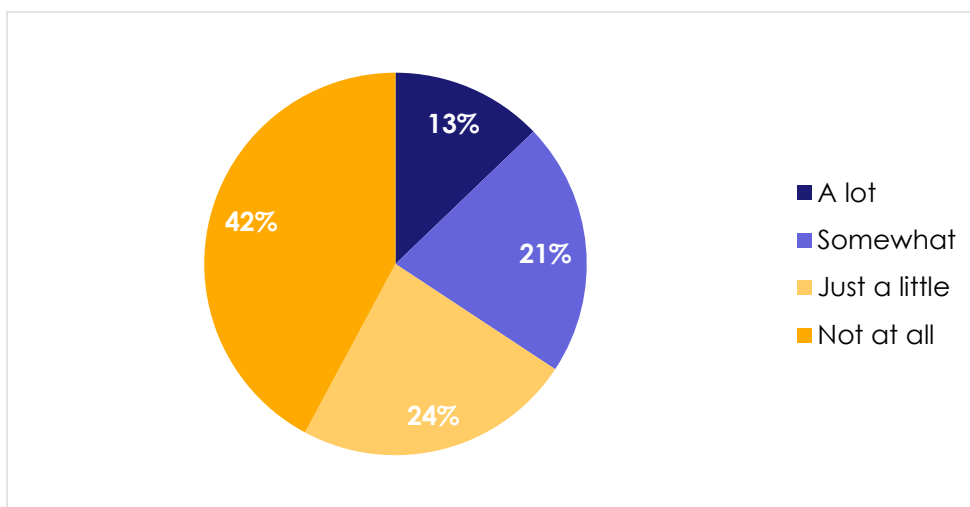
**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police?

### Trust in the police

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Kenya's police suffer from fairly low levels of public trust. Only about one in three Kenyans say they trust the police "somewhat" (21%) or "a lot" (13%). More than four in 10 (42%) express no trust at all in the police (Figure 12).

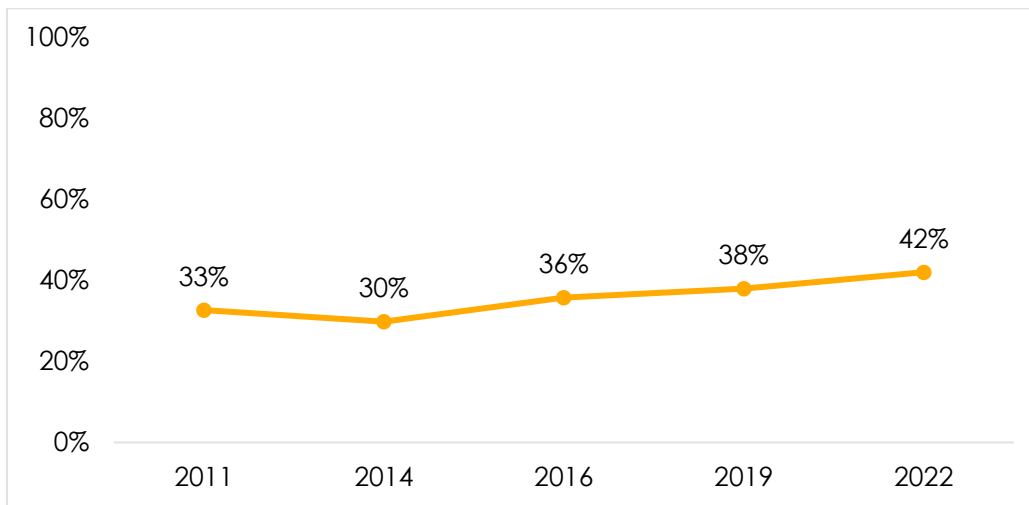
Over time, Kenyans have expressed increasing distrust in the police. Between 2014 and 2022, the share of respondents who say they don't trust the police "at all" climbed by 12 percentage points (Figure 13).

**Figure 12: Trust in the police** | Kenya | 2021



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

**Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Kenya | 2011-2021**

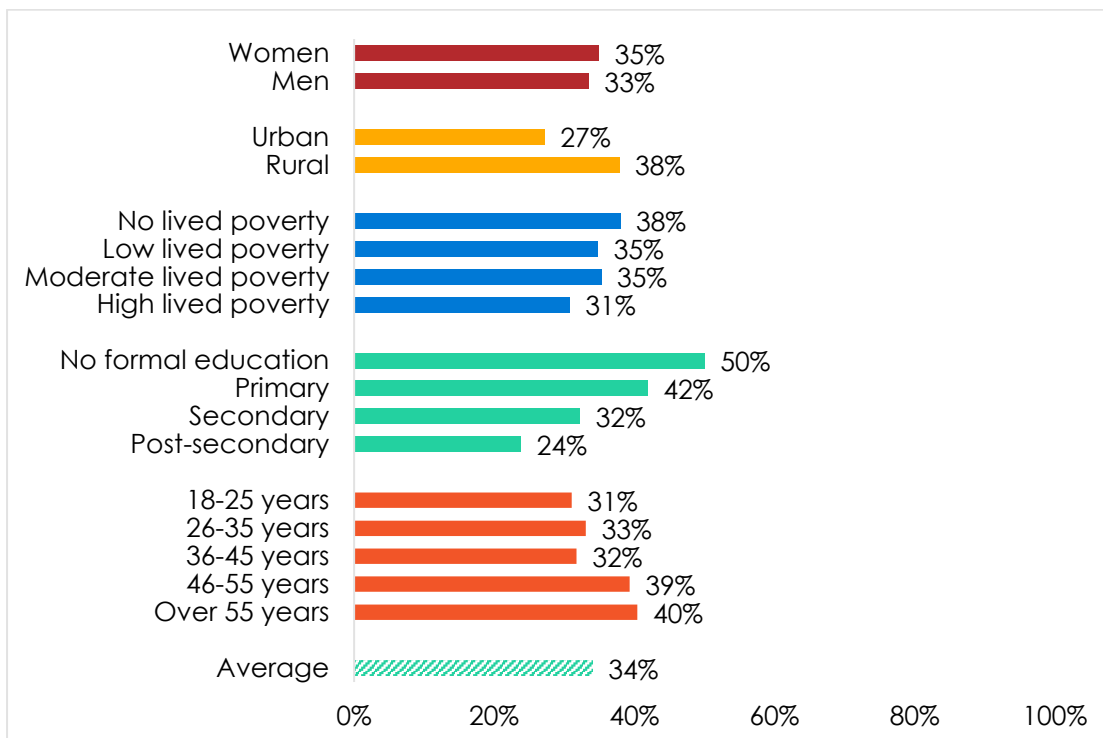


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

Rural residents (38%) express greater trust in the police than their urban counterparts (27%). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from just 24% among those with post-secondary qualifications to 50% among those with formal schooling (Figure 14).

Young people express less trust in the police than their elders, ranging from 31% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 40% among those over age 55.

**Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021**



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

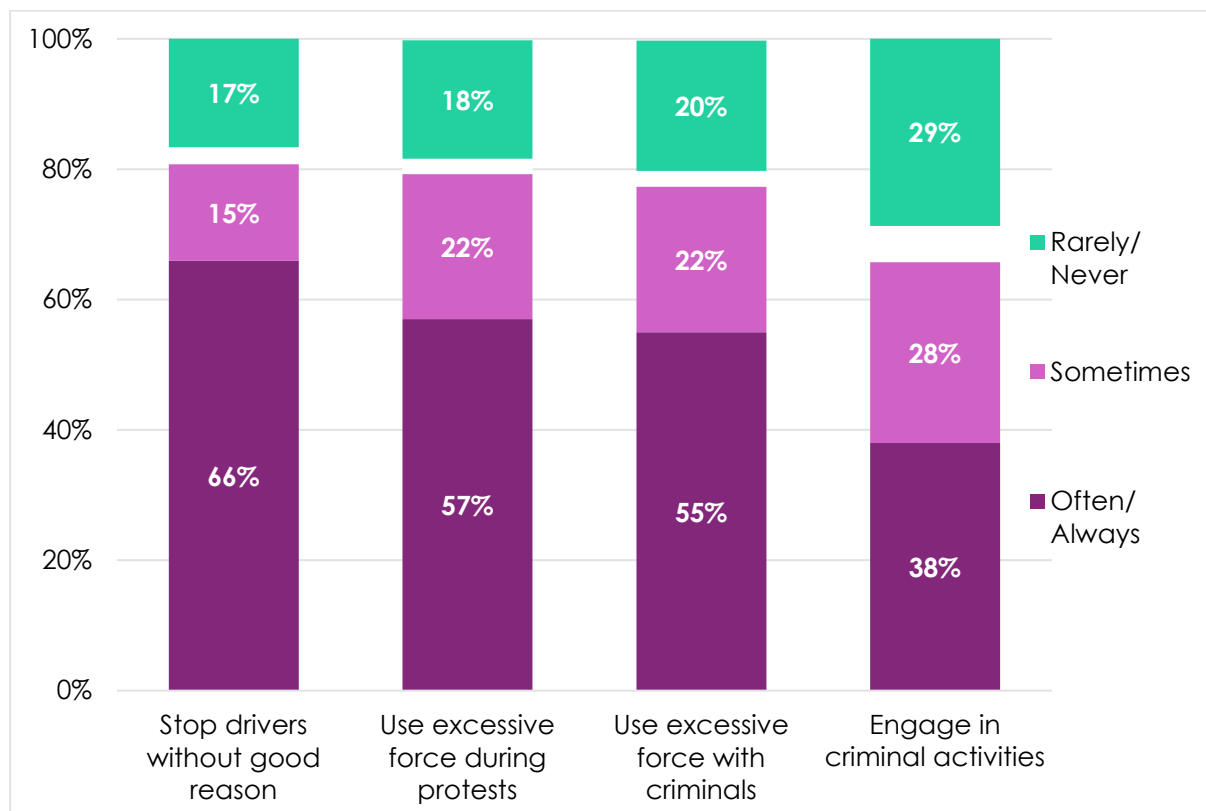
## Police conduct

In addition to expressing considerable general mistrust in the police, many Kenyans say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 15).

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents say the police "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason. Majorities also believe that the police routinely use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations (57%) and in dealing with criminals (55%).

Moreover, 38% say the police routinely engage in illegal activities; only 29% think this "rarely" or "never" happens.

**Figure 15: Improper police practices | Kenya | 2021**



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

*Stop drivers without good reason?*

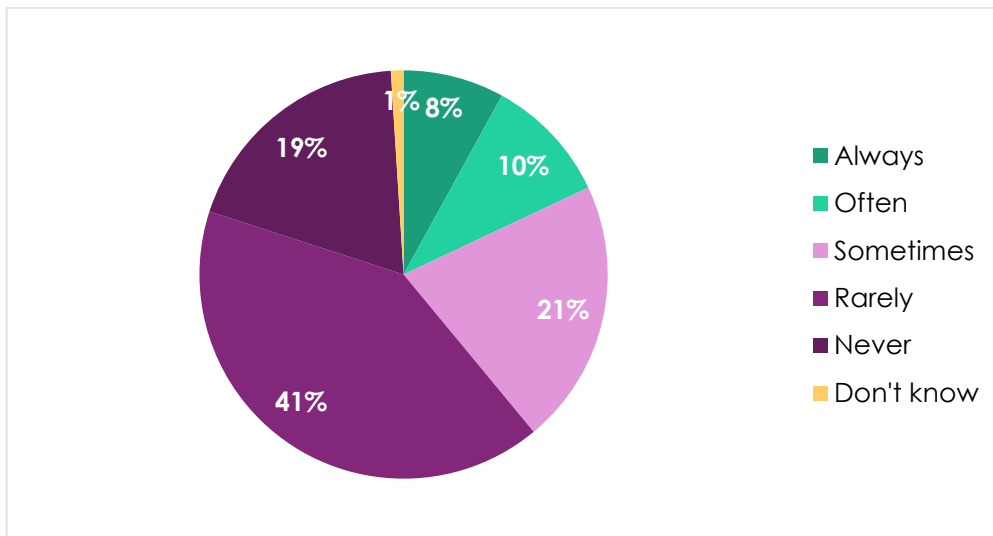
*Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?*

*Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?*

*Engage in criminal activities?*

Overall, only about one in five citizens (18%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; fully 60% assert that such behavior is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Kenya | 2021**

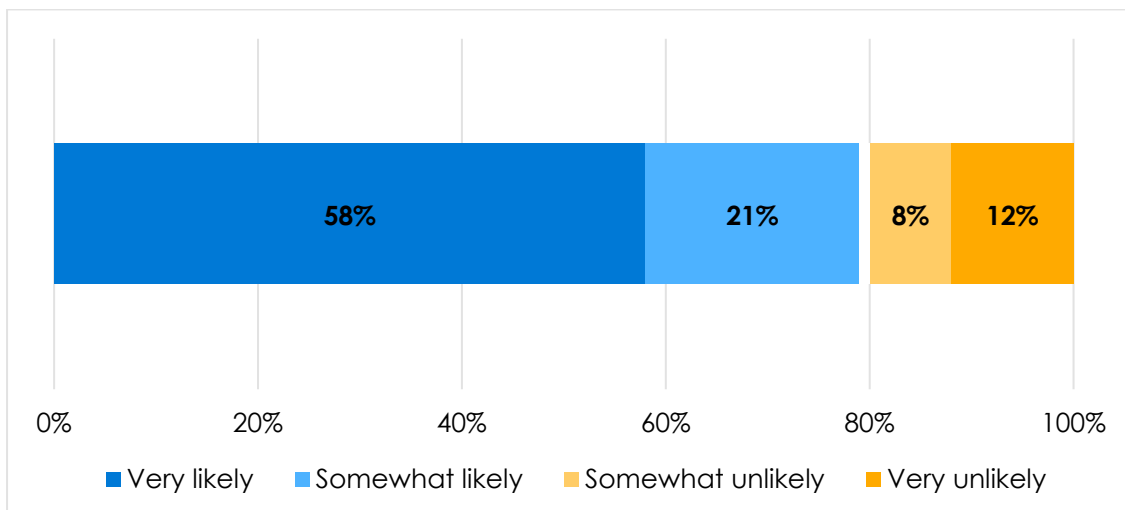


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the police in Kenya operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

One area in which Kenyans give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. About eight in 10 respondents (79%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 58% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 17).

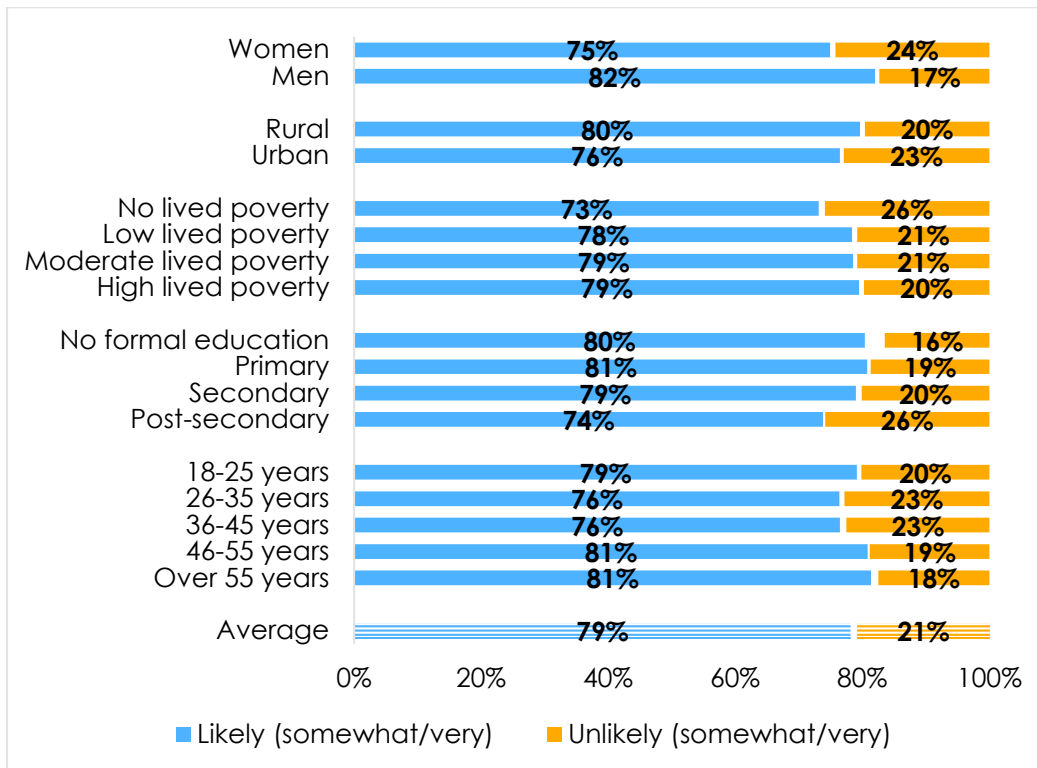
While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is slightly less strong among women (75%), urban residents (76%), and the most educated citizens (74%) than among their counterparts (Figure 18).

**Figure 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Kenya | 2021**



**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 18: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously?** | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021

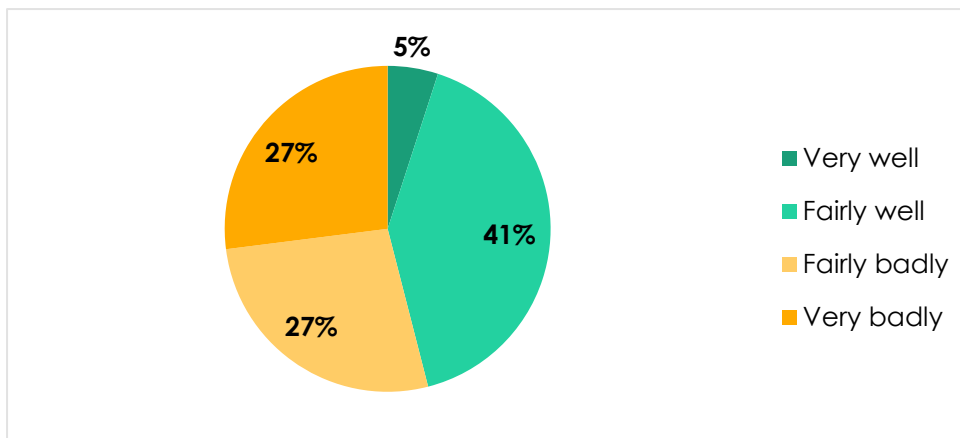


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

### Government performance in reducing crime

Despite the shortcomings highlighted by Kenyans' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and practices, almost half (46%) of citizens say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of reducing crime, while 54% are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 19).

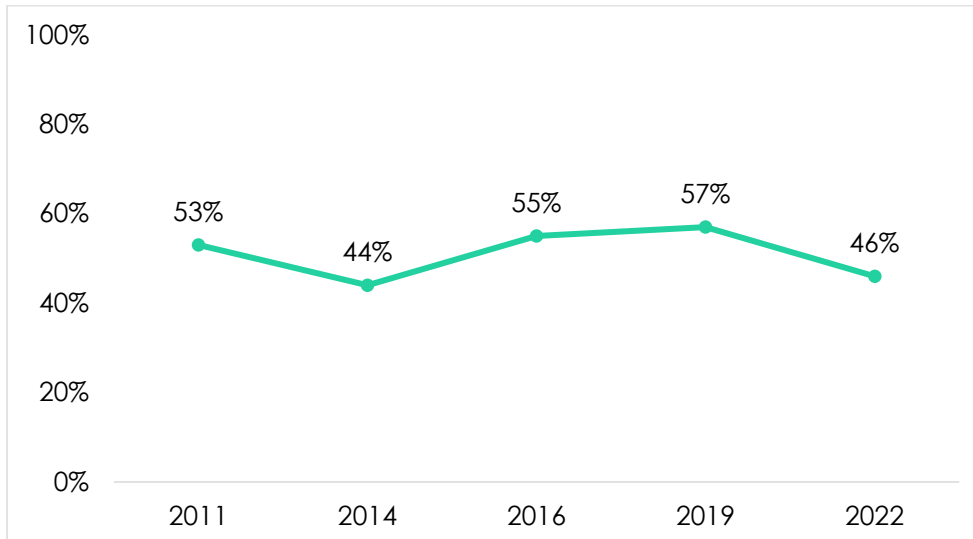
**Figure 19: Government performance in reducing crime** | Kenya | 2021



**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?*

Over the past decade, approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has fluctuated between 44% and 57%, dropping by 11 percentage points between 2019 and 2022 (Figure 20).

**Figure 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Kenya | 2021**



**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

Survey findings confirm persistent predatory practices and long-standing governance challenges in Kenya's police. They might even serve as the beginnings of a checklist of citizens' concerns that will need to be addressed to earn the public's trust and respect.

Corruption, brutality, and criminal activities point to systemic problems that will require more than *ad hoc* responses. Better pay and rule-of-law training for police may be needed, but so will an end to impunity for rogue officers. Leaders might also look to other African countries where citizens are considerably prouder of their police (Sanny, Logan, & Katenda, 2022) as they reframe police work within a culture of service delivery for client-citizens.

The task is daunting, but the citizens' call to action could hardly be clearer.

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