



Advison Lesotho



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Basotho cite brutality, lack of professionalism, and corruption among police failings

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 555 | Libuseng Malephane and Tosin Salau

Summary

On 16 June 2022, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service shot a National University of Lesotho student to death during a protest (Sunday Express, 2022) – another in a long line of alleged police abuses that include inhumane treatment of suspects, torture, and unlawful killings (U.S. State Department, 2021; Bertelsmann Foundation, 2022).

Calls for reform have highlighted police brutality as well as corruption and police performance (Post, 2022a). The security sector, including the police, form part of the national reforms agenda launched in 2017. Problems identified through the reforms process include the politicisation of the security agencies, whose leaders are appointed by the prime minister (National Reforms Authority, 2022a). The head of the police service is currently embroiled in court cases challenging his dismissal by the prime minister in 2020 and again in 2022 (Lesotho Times, 2020; Post, 2022b). The 10th Amendment to the Constitution Bill 2022, passed by the National Assembly last month, removes the function of appointing the heads of these agencies from the office of the prime minister in order to address these challenges (National Reforms Authority, 2022b).

Basotho are also concerned about the country's homicide rate, which at 44 per 100,000 population is the sixth-highest in the world and highest in Africa; the global homicide rate is six homicides per 100,000 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019; World Population Review, 2022). It seems that there is no improvement on this issue, as the police recently reported that there were 144 murders during the two-month period of May-June 2022 (Public Eye, 2022), which would average to a homicide rate of 43 per 100,000.

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 Lesotho, citizens express strong reservations about the conduct and competence of the police. Amid a growing sense of insecurity in their neighbourhoods and homes, only one-third of Basotho say they trust the police, who rank high among the country's institutions in perceived corruption.

A majority of Basotho say the police routinely torture or abuse people in their custody, use excessive force in dealing with criminals, and engage in criminal activities. Few think the police operate in a professional manner and respect citizens' rights. And citizens overwhelmingly say the government is doing a bad 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 Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens in February-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 Lesotho in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Half (50%) of Basotho say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year. Close to six in 10 (58%) say they feared crime in their home.
- Nearly nine in 10 Basotho (88%) believe that the homicide rate in the country has increased over the past five years.
- About one in five citizens (21%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. More than twice as many (55%) 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, 70% say it was easy to get the assistance they needed. But 10% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 23% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- More than half (52%) of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt – the third-worst rating among 13 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Only one-third (33%) of Basotho say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot." The share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has climbed by 20 percentage points since 2017.
- Seven in 10 Basotho (71%) say the police "often" or "always" abuse or torture people in their custody.
 - Majorities also say the police routinely engage in illegal activities (58%) and use excessive force with criminals (55%).
 - Almost half (48%) say the police routinely use excessive force in managing protests, while 44% say they "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason.
 - But 79% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- Only one in four citizens (25%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.
- Most citizens give the government poor marks on reducing crime (85%) and addressing or preventing homicides (65%).

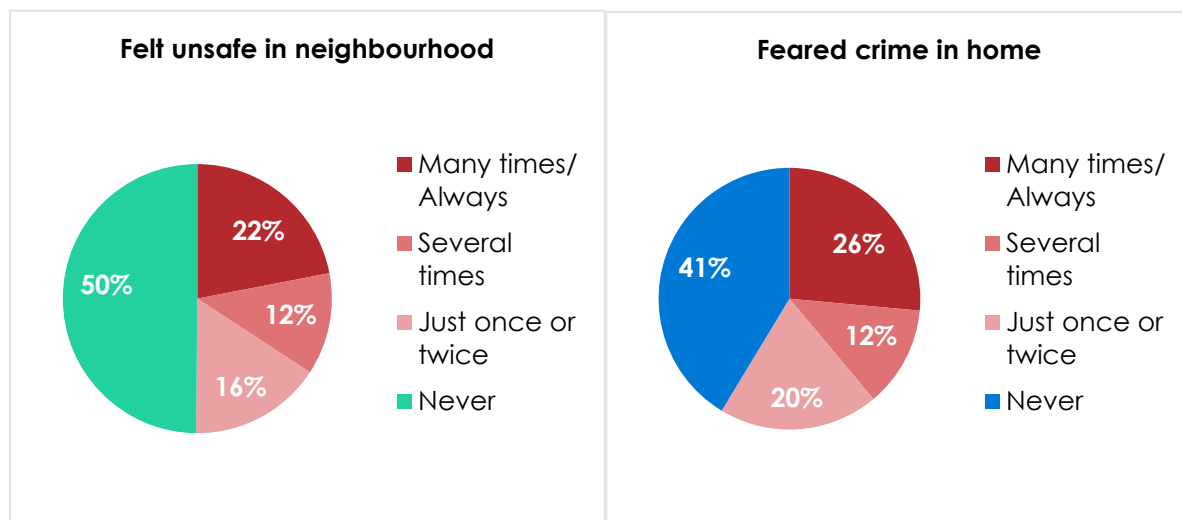
Sense of security

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

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Half (50%) of Basotho say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 34% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).

Similarly, about six in 10 citizens (58%) say they feared crime in their home at least once during the previous year, including 39% who say this happened “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”¹

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Lesotho | 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?

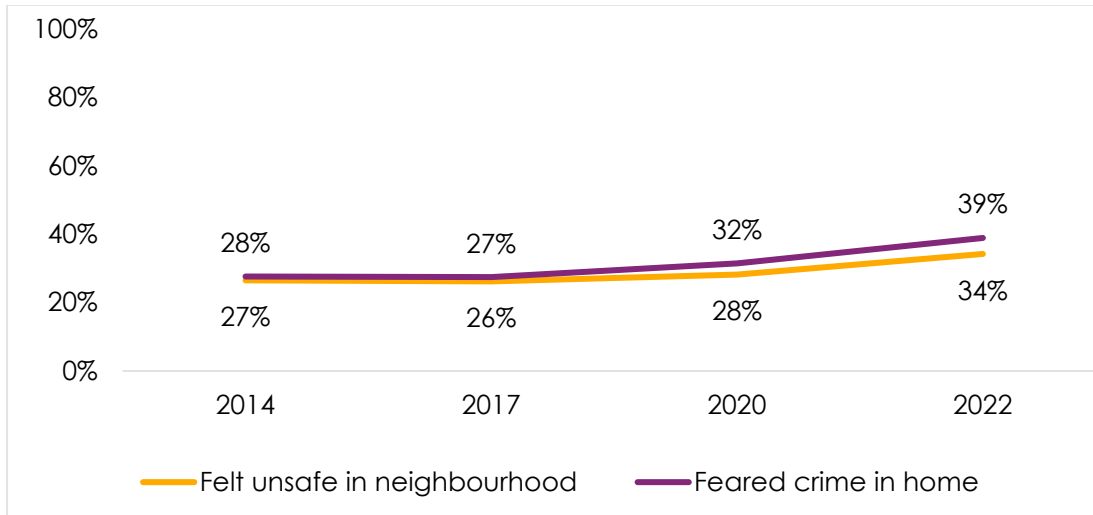
The share of Basotho who report experiencing insecurity at least “several times” during the previous year remained stable between 2014 and 2017 but has increased significantly since then – by 8 percentage points with regard to feeling unsafe while walking in the neighbourhood and by 12 points when it comes to fearing crime in the home (Figure 2).

These experiences are more common in peri-urban areas than in urban and rural areas, and among the elderly compared to younger respondents (Figure 3). They increase sharply with respondents’ level of lived poverty²: Compared to citizens experiencing low or no lived poverty, the poorest citizens are roughly twice as likely to feel unsafe walking in their neighbourhood and to fear crime in their home.

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

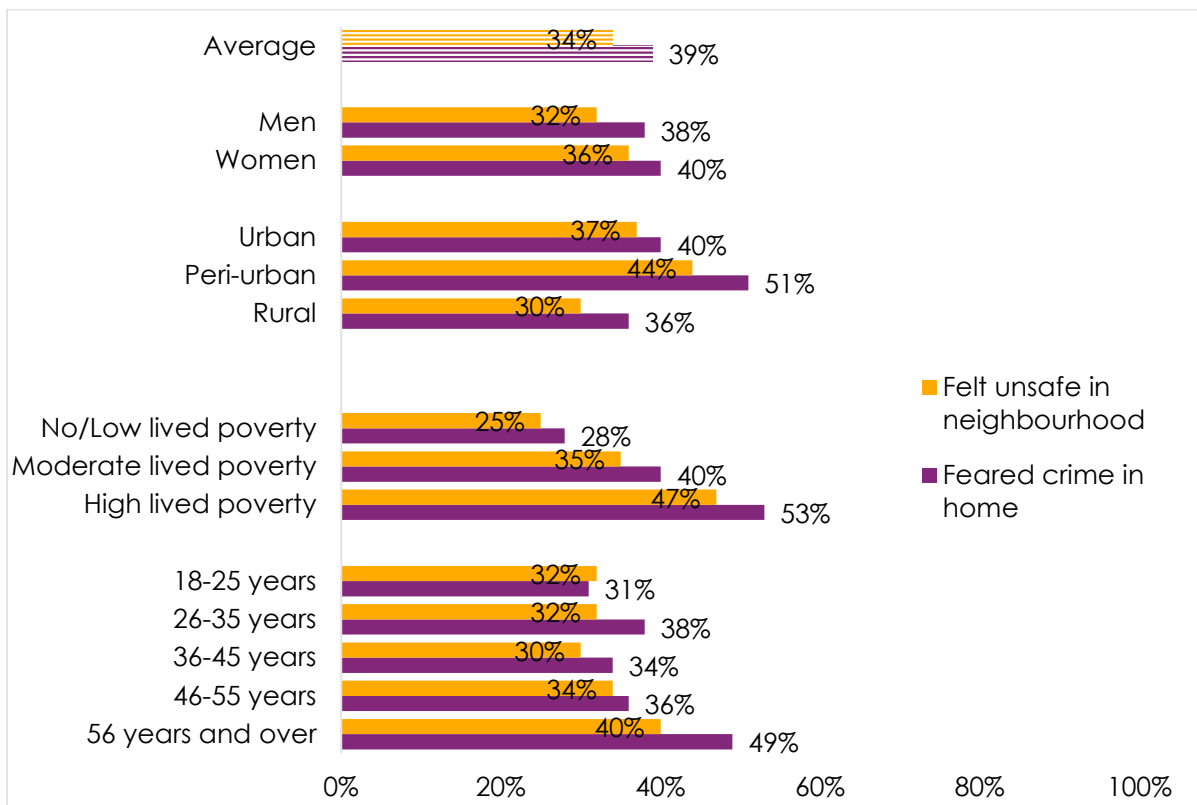
² Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Lesotho | 2014-2022



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

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | by demographic groups | Lesotho | 2022



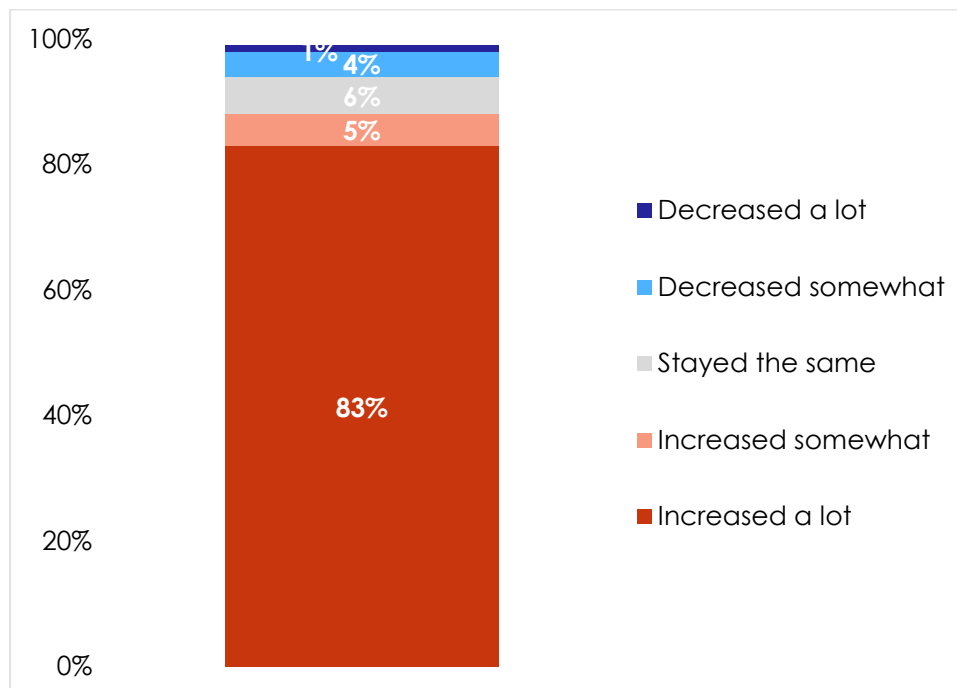
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

Concerns about homicide rates

Citizens' sense of insecurity may also reflect the large number of homicides in the country. Lesotho has the sixth-highest homicide rate in the world, reported as 44 killings per 100,000 population based on 2016 data (World Population Review, 2022).

Nearly nine in 10 respondents (88%) say the murder rate has increased over the past five years, including 83% who say it has "increased a lot" (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Has homicide rate increased or decreased? | Lesotho | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, would you say the rate of murder or killings in this country has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past five years?

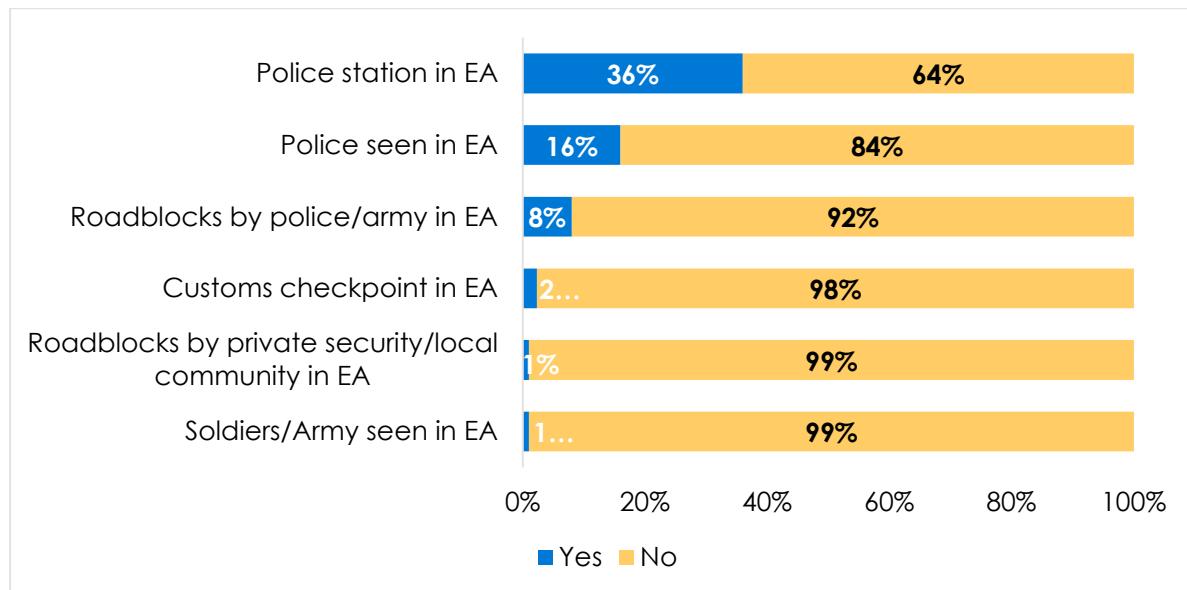
Police/security presence

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

In Lesotho, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about four in 10 (36%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 5). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 16% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including roadblocks by the police or army (8%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (1%), soldiers or other military (1%), and customs checkpoints (2%).

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

Figure 5: Presence of police/security | Lesotho | 2022



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?

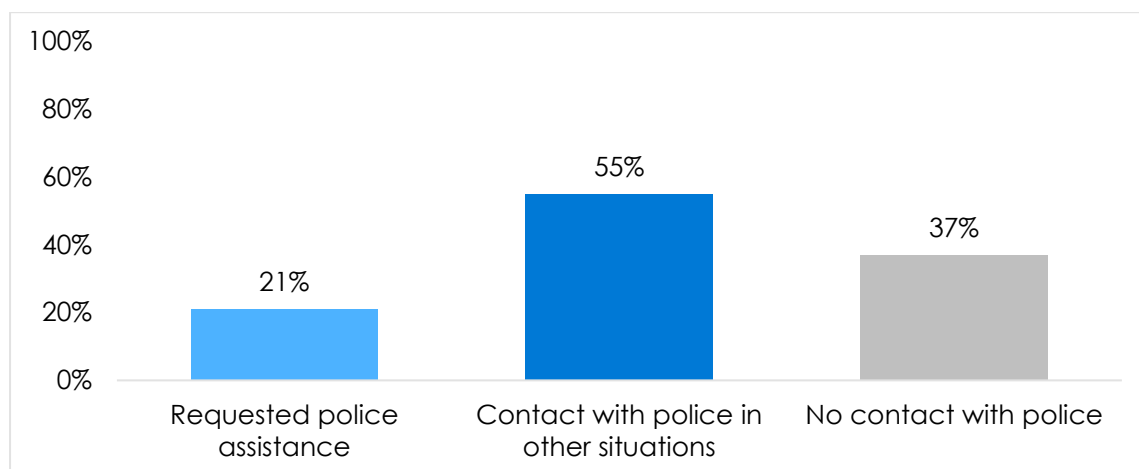
In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? Any customs checkpoints? Any roadblocks or booms set up by private security providers or by the local community?

Encounters with the police

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

More than one in five respondents (21%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Far more (55%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Contact with the police | Lesotho | 2022



Respondents were asked:

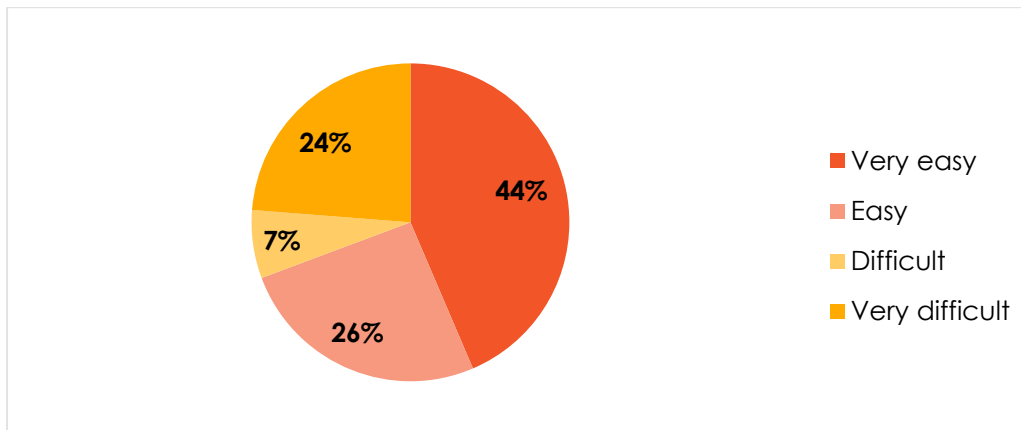
In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police?

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?

About one in seven citizens (14%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 37% say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, almost a third (31%) say it was “difficult” (7%) or “very difficult” (24%) to get the assistance they needed. But the overwhelming majority (70%) say it was “easy” (26%) or “very easy” (44%) (Figure 7).

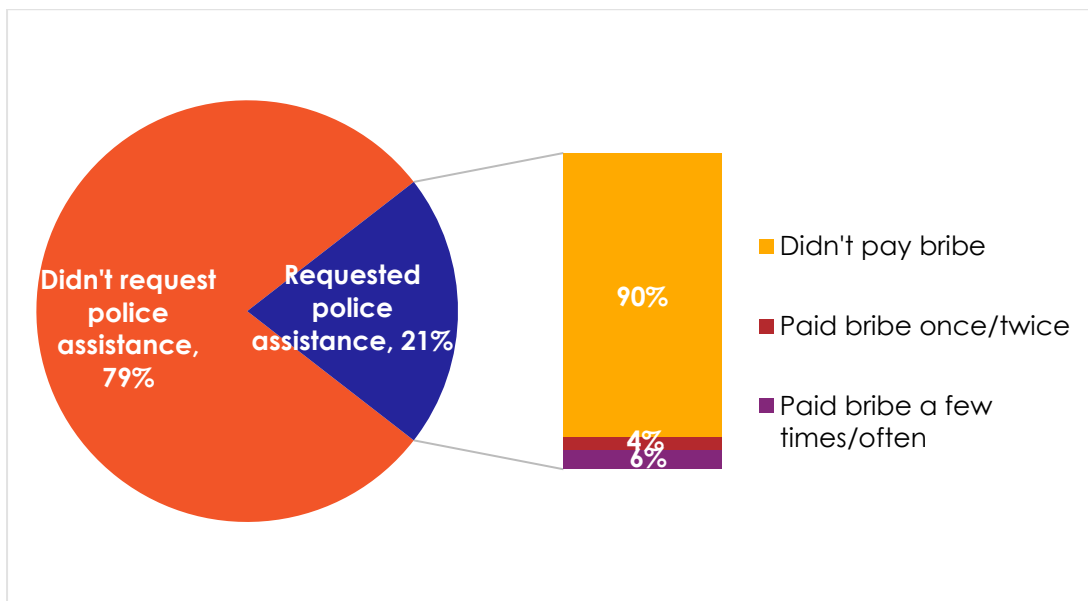
Figure 7: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Lesotho | 2022



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, one in 10 (10%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often” in order to get the assistance they needed (Figure 8).

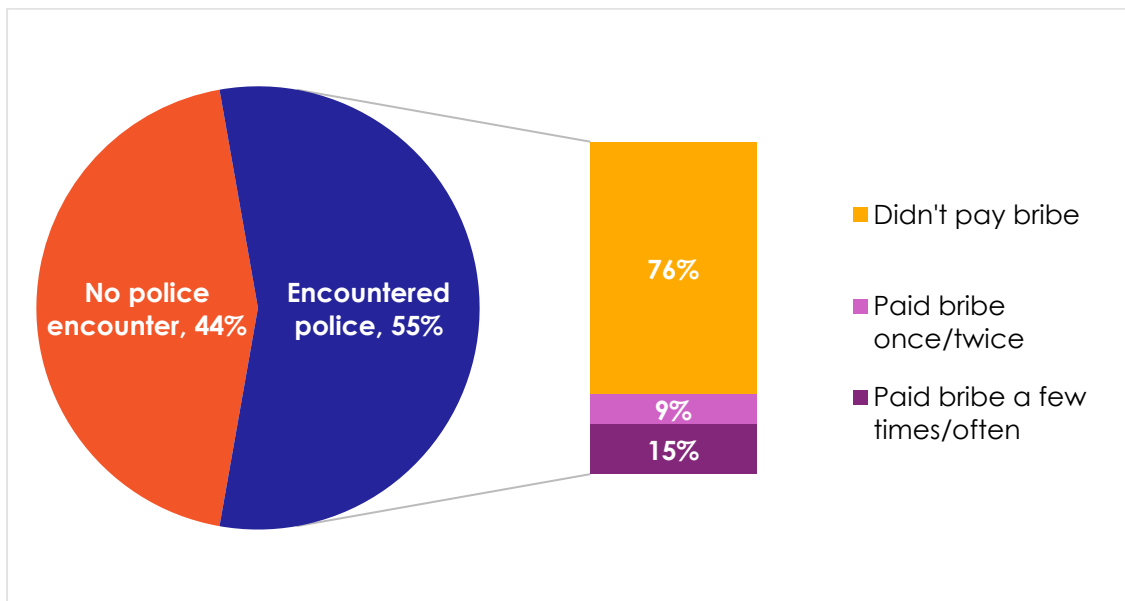
Figure 8: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Lesotho | 2022



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?

Among Basotho who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, about one-fourth (23%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 8% who say this happened “often” during the previous year (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Lesotho | 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?

To summarise the experience among all Basotho adults during the past year, 14% paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

While most citizens who encountered the police say they did not pay bribes, Basotho are nearly unanimous (90%) in believing that at least “some” police officials are corrupt. In fact, more than half (52%) of citizens say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – tied with civil servants but slightly better than members of Parliament (57%) and officials in the prime minister’s office (56%) (Figure 10).

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are more common among urban residents (58%) than rural residents (47%) (Figure 11). They increase along with respondents’ education level, ranging from 38% of those with no formal schooling to 61% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

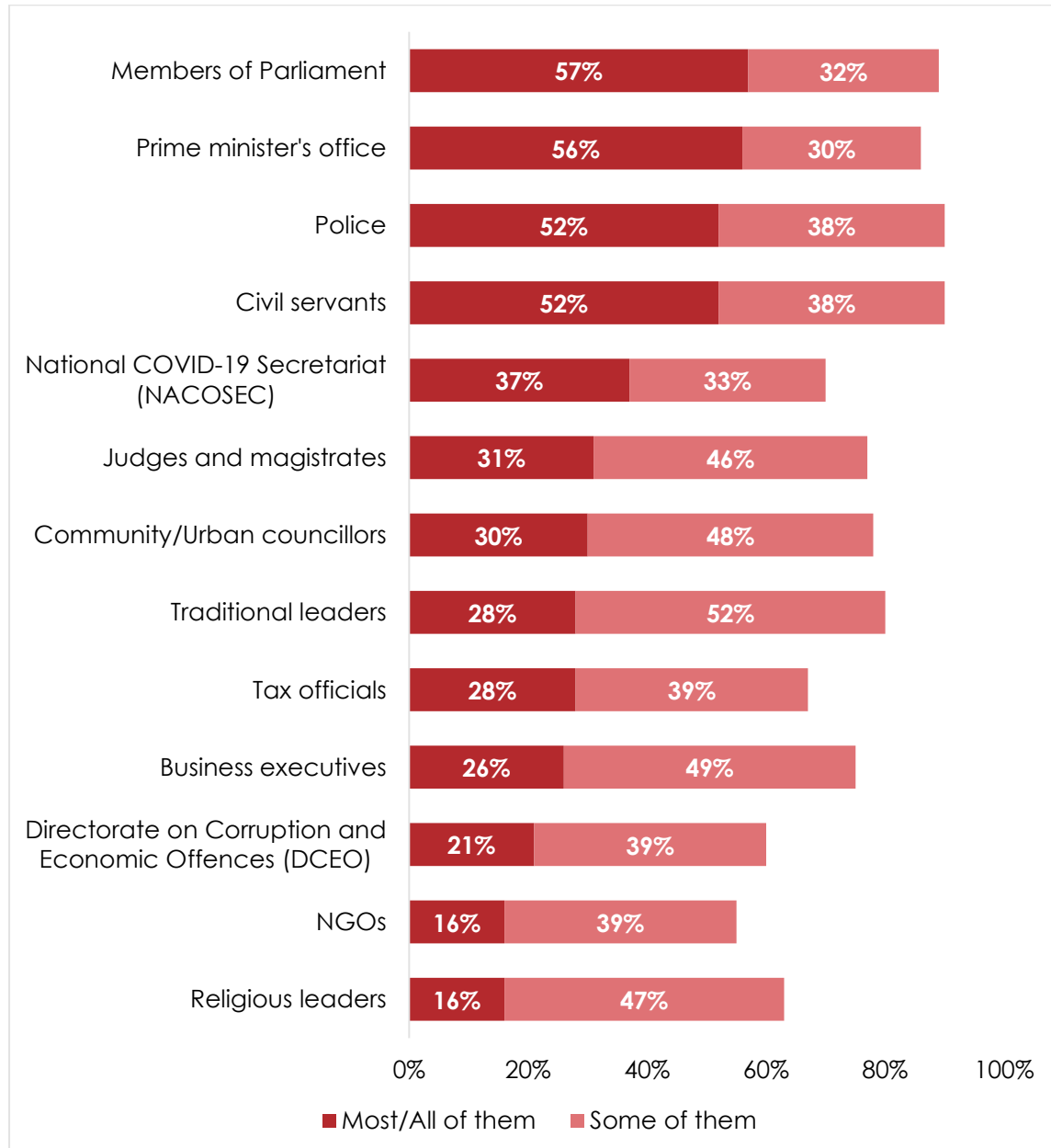
Findings also suggest possible links between perceptions of police corruption and interaction with the police (Figure 12).

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 (56% vs. 51%).

Perceptions of widespread police corruption are also more common among respondents who requested police assistance than among those who did not (59% vs. 50%), as well as

among citizens who encountered police in other (less voluntary) situations compared to those who did not (57% vs. 46%).

Figure 10: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Lesotho | 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?

Figure 11: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group
 | Lesotho | 2022

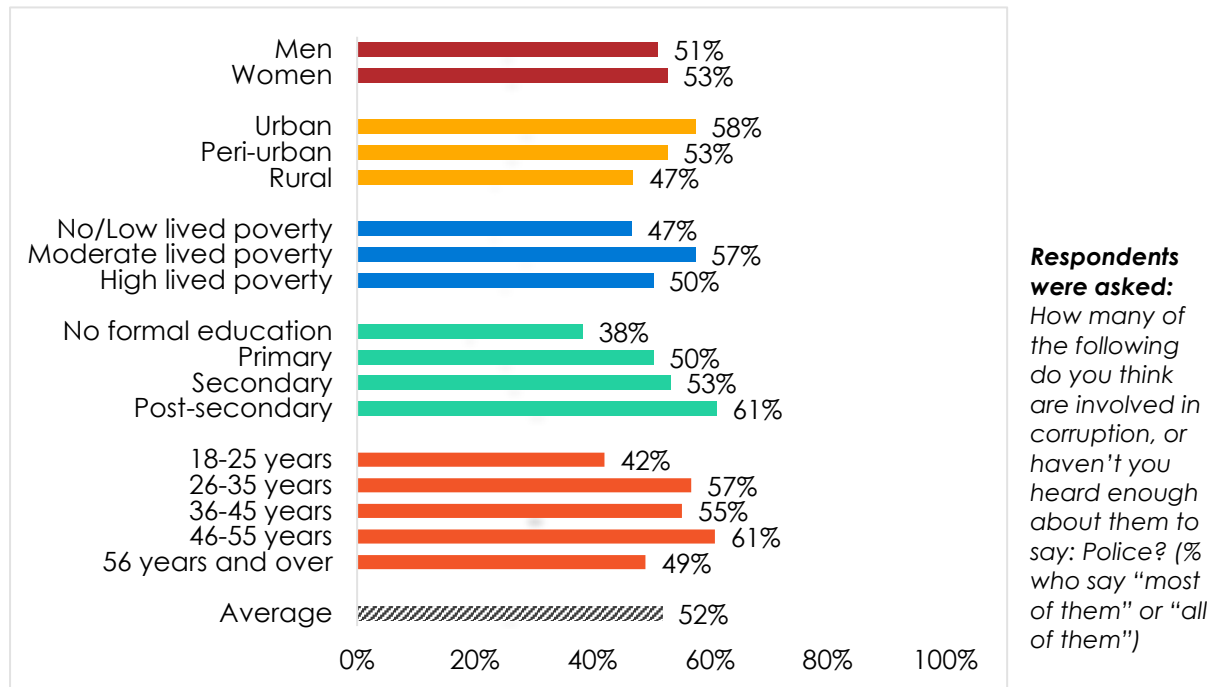
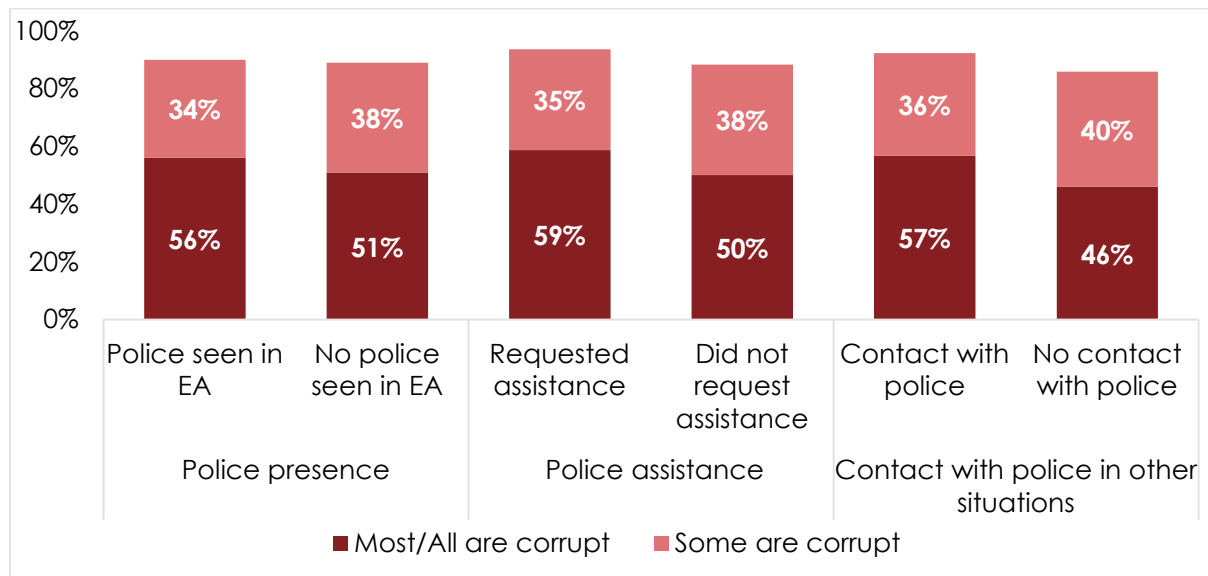


Figure 12: Perceived police corruption | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Lesotho | 2022



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:

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?

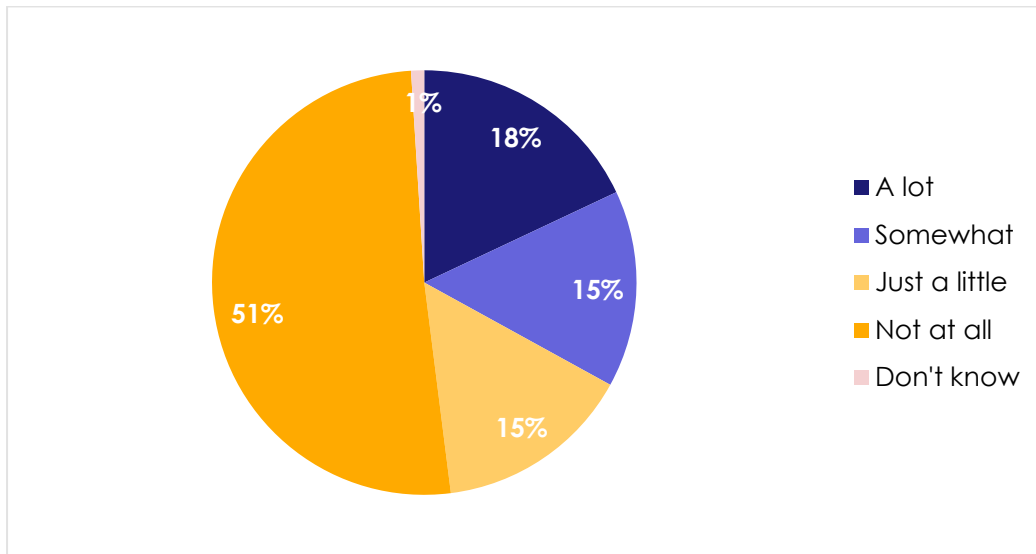
How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police?

Trust in the police

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Lesotho's police suffer from fairly low levels of public trust. Only one-third (33%) of Basotho say they trust the police "somewhat" (15%) or "a lot" (18%). Half of respondents (51%) express no trust at all in the police (Figure 13).

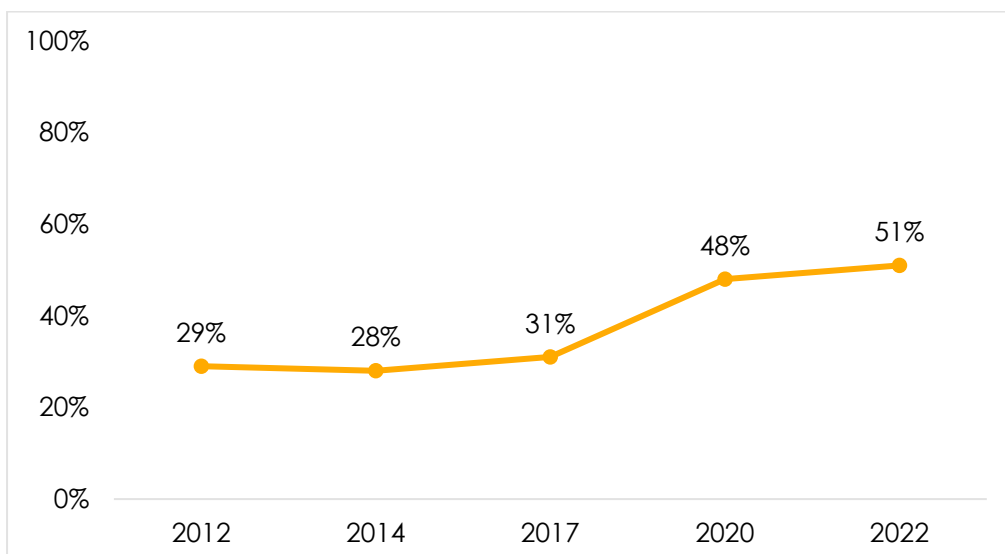
Over time, Basotho have expressed increasing distrust in the police. Between 2017 and 2022, the share of respondents who say they don't trust the police "at all" climbed by 20 percentage points (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Trust in the police | Lesotho | 2022



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

Figure 14: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Lesotho | 2012-2022

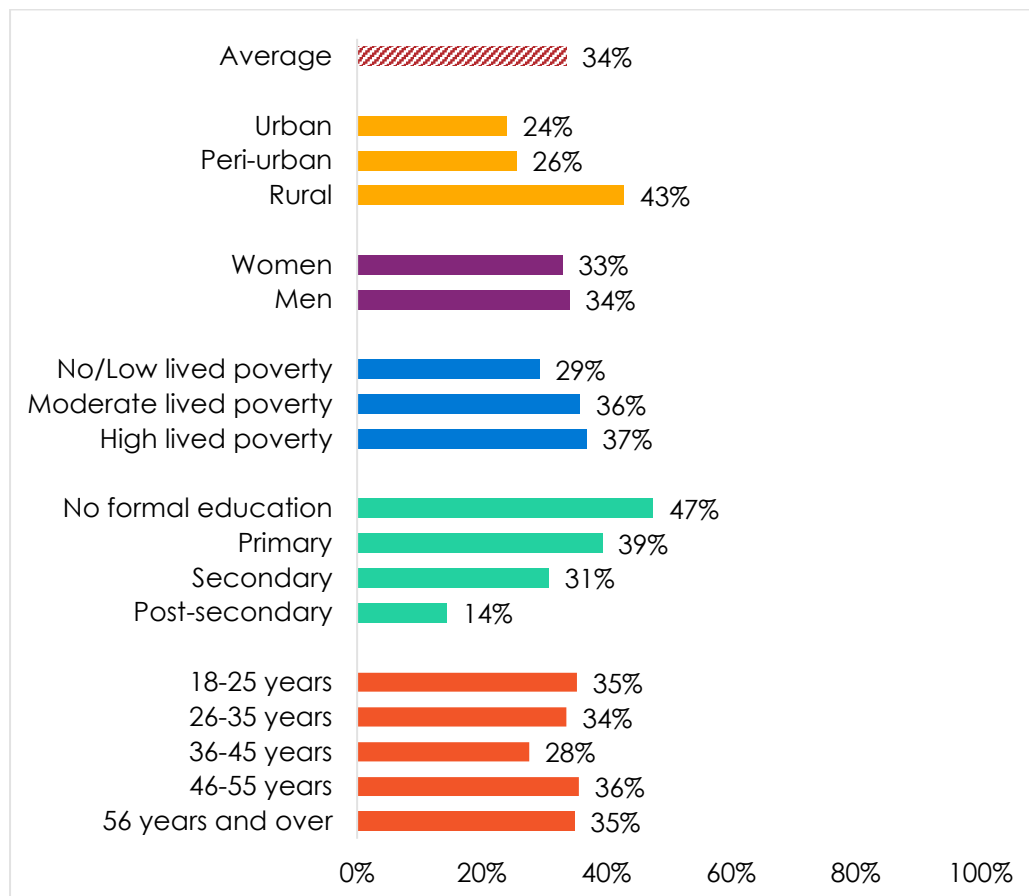


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

Rural residents (43%) express greater trust in the police than their urban cousins (24%). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from 47% among those with no formal school to just 14% among those with post-secondary education (Figure 15).

The economically well-off (29%) are less likely to trust the police than their poorer counterparts (36%-37%).

Figure 16: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2022



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")

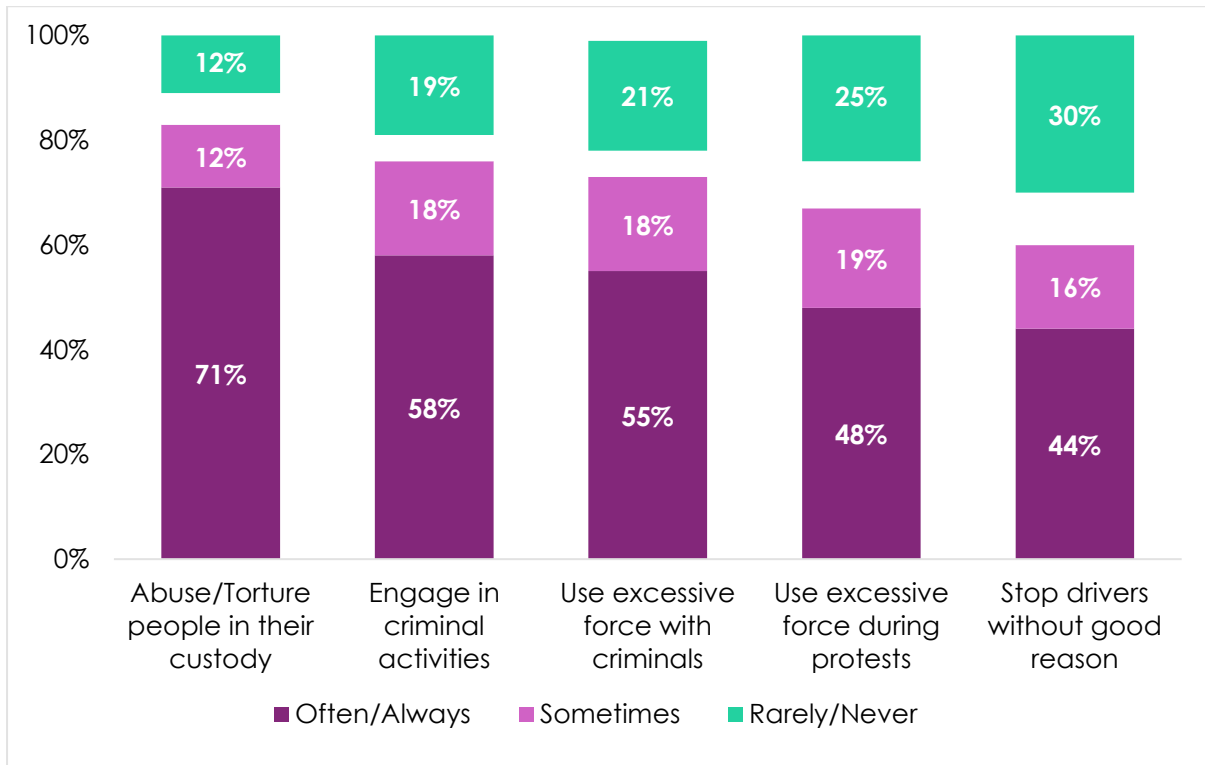
Police conduct

In addition to expressing considerable distrust of the police, a majority of Basotho say police officers "often" or "always" abuse or torture people in their custody (71%), engage in criminal activities (58%), and use excessive force with criminals (55%) (Figure 16).

About half (48%) of respondents say the police routinely use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations, while 44% say they "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason.

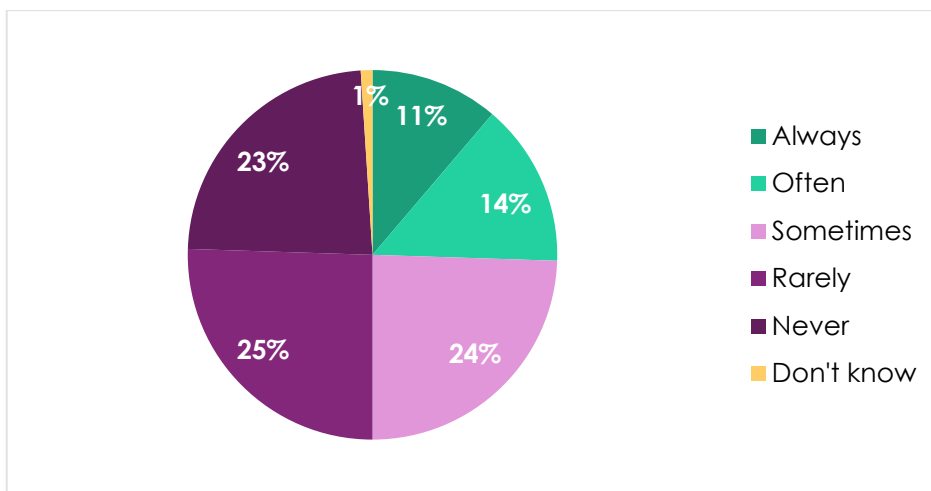
Overall, only a quarter (25%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; about half (48%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Improper police practices | Lesotho | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Lesotho:
 Stop drivers without good reason?
 Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?
 Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?
 Engage in criminal activities?
 Abuse or torture people in their custody?

Figure 17: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Lesotho | 2022

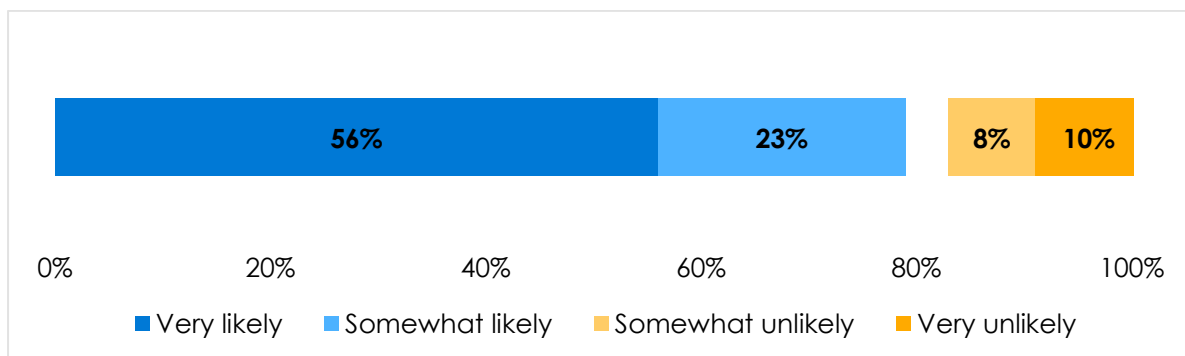


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Lesotho operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

One area in which Basotho 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 56% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 18).

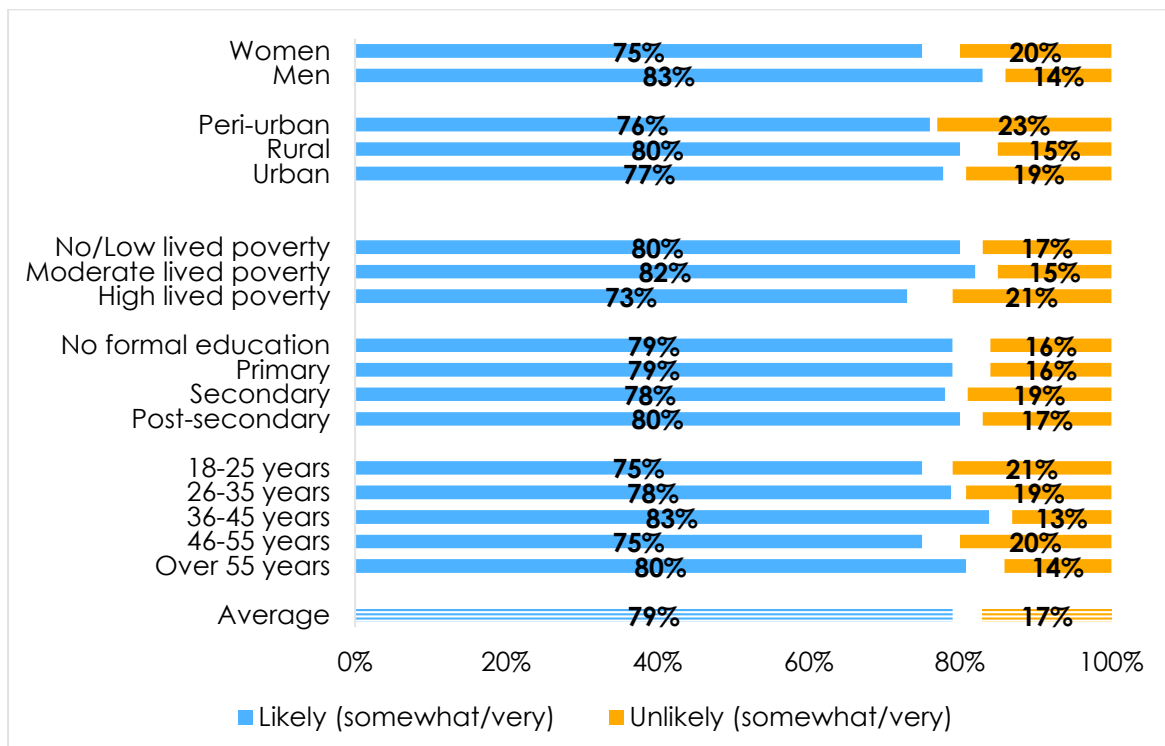
While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is somewhat less strong among women (75%, vs. 83% of men) and among citizens experiencing high lived poverty (73%, vs. 80%-82% of their better-off counterparts (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Lesotho | 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 19: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Lesotho | 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?*

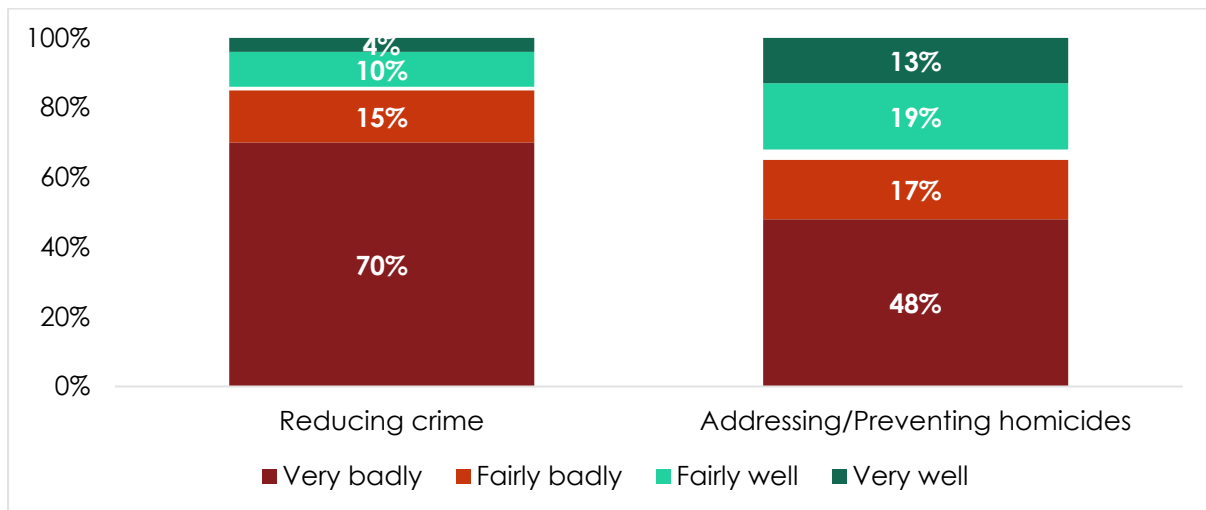
Government performance on reducing crime and murders

In line with shortcomings highlighted by citizens' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and conduct, more than eight in 10 Basotho (85%) say the government is doing a poor job of reducing crime, including 70% who say it is performing "very badly" on this issue. Only 14% give the government passing marks on crime reduction (Figure 20).

On the specific issue of homicides, two-thirds (65%) say security services are not addressing this problem well, including 48% who say they are doing "very badly."

Over the past decade, approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts increased by 22 percentage points between 2014 and 2017, only to plummet by 53 percentage points between 2017 and 2022 (Figure 21).

Figure 20: Government performance on fighting crime/homicides | Lesotho | 2022

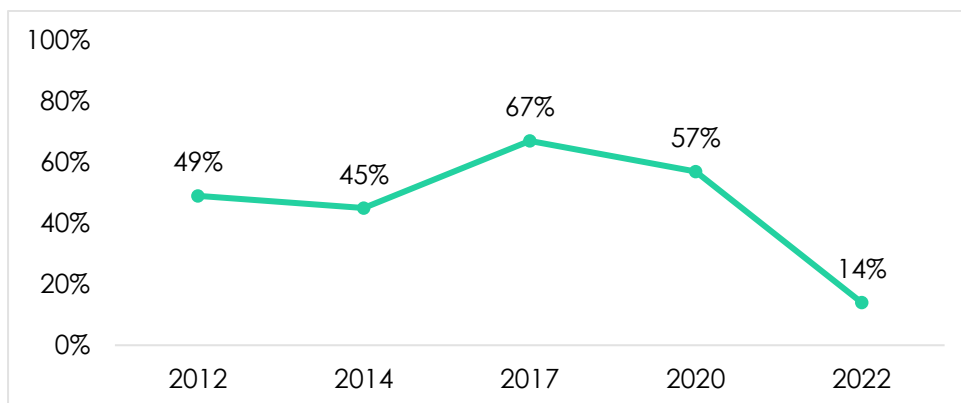


Respondents were asked:

How well or badly would you say the current government is handling reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say?

How well or badly would you say the security services are doing to address or prevent the problem of murders or killings, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 21: Government performing well on crime reduction | Lesotho | 2012-2022



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

Basotho do not feel safe and secure in their communities. They are far from satisfied with the work of the Lesotho Mounted Police Service, which they perceive as riddled by corruption, brutality, and lack of professionalism.

These findings call on the LMPS to make a concerted effort at reform in order to build a professional force, regain citizens' trust, and live up to its motto: *"Police officer, helper and friend."*

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