

Bribery, unprofessionalism, illegal activity: Ghanaians' negative perceptions of their police

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 563 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

In addition to fighting crime, the Ghana Police Service is fighting for its professional reputation. Routinely tagged in news reports as "the most corrupt institution in Ghana," (Ghana News Agency, 2022; GhPage, 2022; Citi Newsroom, 2022), the police also make headlines when communities protest alleged unprofessional conduct and abuse, as after recent middle-of-the-night arrests in the Yagaba-Kubori District, clashes with youth in the Akatsi South municipality, and a crackdown on demonstrating students at the Islamic Senior High School in the Ashanti region (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2022; Alabira, 2022; GhanaWeb, 2022a; Africanews, 2022; Tankebe, 2018; Boadi, 2021).

While the police service's Transformation Programme, launched in 2018, highlights the use of technology to improve police performance (Graphic Online, 2018), perhaps the most sustained public outcry concerns police corruption, reported periodically in research by Afrobarometer and other organisations (Essima & Norviewu, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022).

In response, senior police officials have at times publicly acknowledged corruption challenges and promised to address them by improving discipline and standards (Joy News, 2014). President Nana Akufo-Addo has repeatedly cited Afrobarometer findings on perceived police corruption and has admonished graduating police recruits to eschew corruption (GhanaWeb, 2018).

More recently, police officials have described public opinion research highlighting police corruption as damaging to police morale and legitimacy and have blamed police corruption in part on citizens willing to pay bribes (GhanaWeb, 2022b; allAfrica.com, 2022; Joy News, 2022).

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 Ghana, more than half of respondents report encounters with the police over the past year, either to request assistance or, far 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 a minority of citizens say they trust the police.

In significant numbers, Ghanaians say the police engage in illegal activities, fail to respect citizens' rights, stop drivers without good reason, and use excessive force, both in managing public demonstrations and in dealing with criminals. At the same time, the survey finds

Ghanaians reporting an increasing sense of insecurity and massive disapproval of the government's crime-reduction efforts.

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 Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- Ghanaians' sense of security has deteriorated over the past decade. More than four in 10 Ghanaians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (43%) and feared crime in their home (41%) at least once during the previous year. Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About one-third (35%) of Ghanaians live within easy walking distance of a police station.
- About one in 10 citizens (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Six times as many (49%) report encountering 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, 50% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 45% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 36% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Two-thirds (65%) of Ghanaians say "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt, an 8-percentage-point increase compared to 2019 (57%).
- Fewer than three in 10 Ghanaians (28%) say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot," a 12-percentage-point decrease compared to 2017 (40%).
- A majority (54%) of citizens say the police "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason. Many also complain that the police routinely engage in criminal activities (39%) and use excessive force in dealing with criminals (40%) and protests (33%).
- Only about one in five citizens (22%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.
 - But 86% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.

- Assessments of the government's performance on reducing crime have dropped to their lowest level since Afrobarometer surveys began in 1999: Only 27% say it is doing a "fairly" or "very" good job, down 34 percentage points since 2016.

Sense of security

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

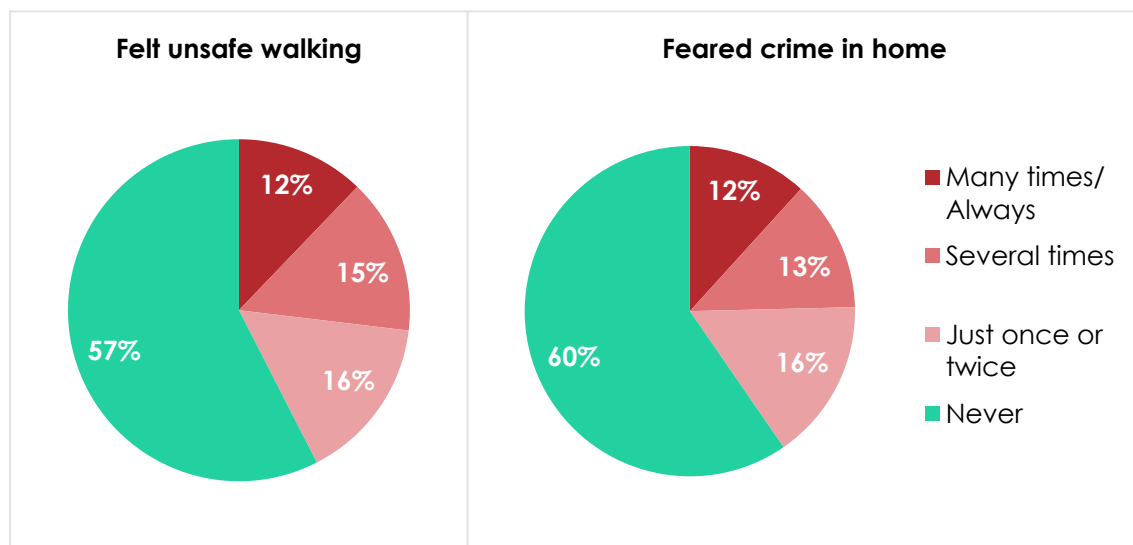
Survey findings indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Almost half (43%) of Ghanaians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 27% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 1).

Similarly, 41% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 25% who say this happened "several times," "many times," or "always."

The proportions of Ghanaians who report feeling unsafe or fearing crime at least "several times" have more than doubled over the past decade, including double-digit increases since 2016 (Figure 2).

These experiences increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty¹: The poorest citizens are more than five times as likely to feel unsafe and fear crime in their home as the best-off citizens (Figure 3).

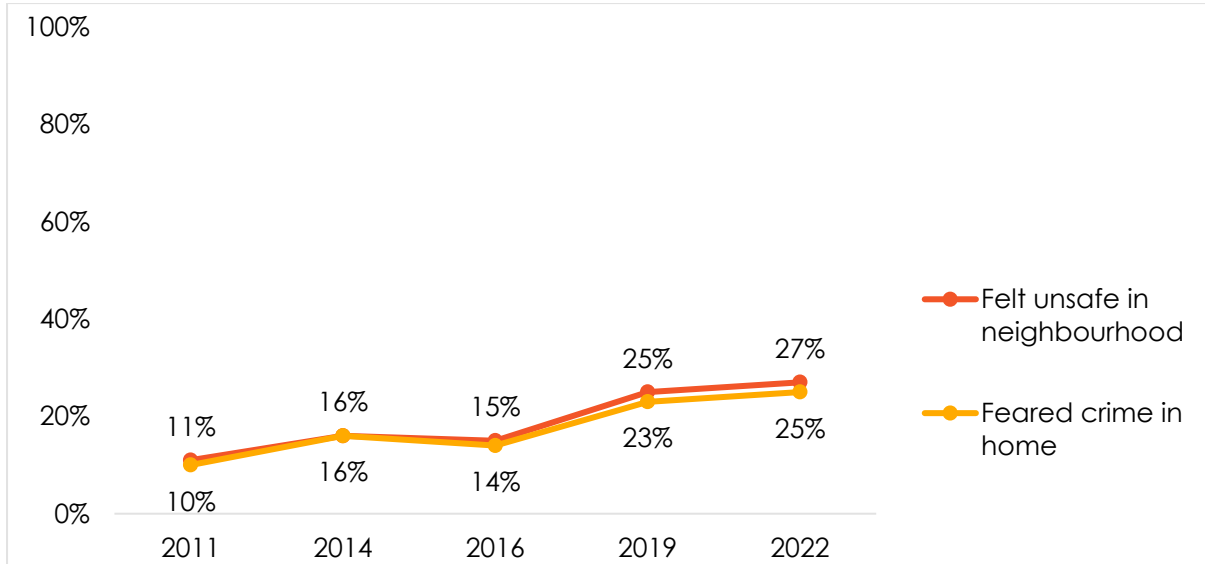
Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Ghana | 2022



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?

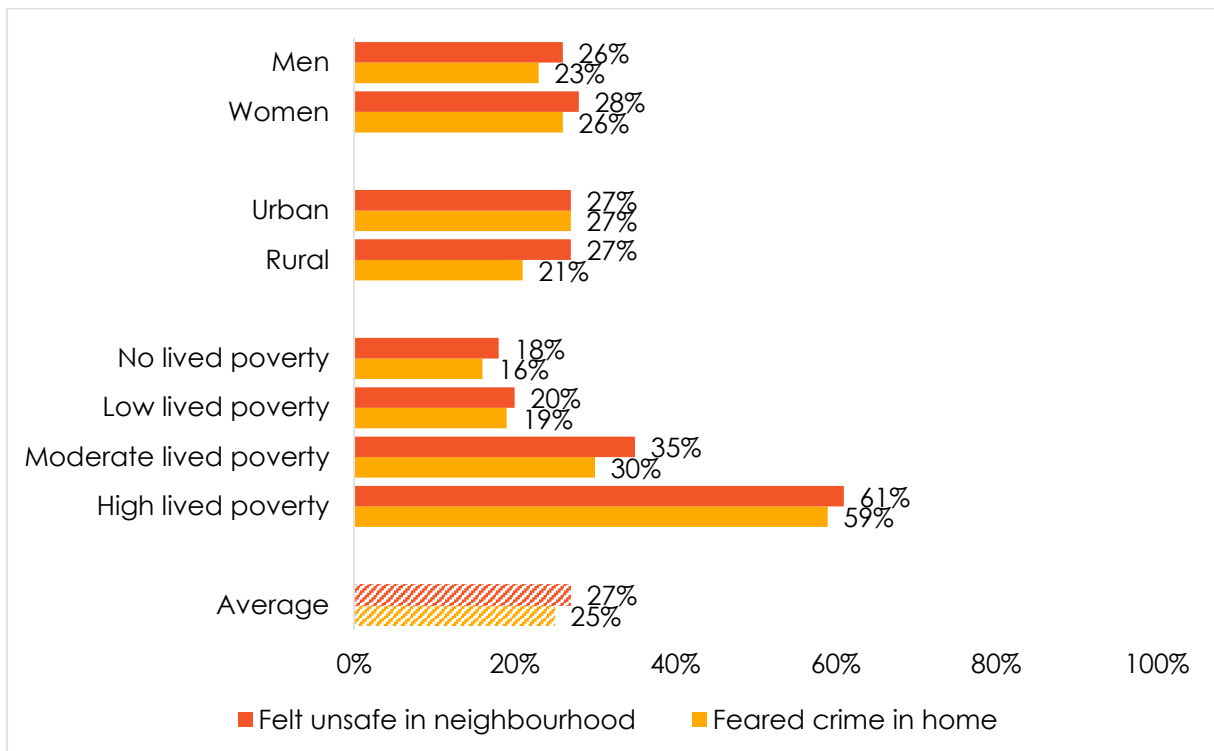
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Ghana
 | 2011-2022



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 gender, location, and lived poverty | Ghana | 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")

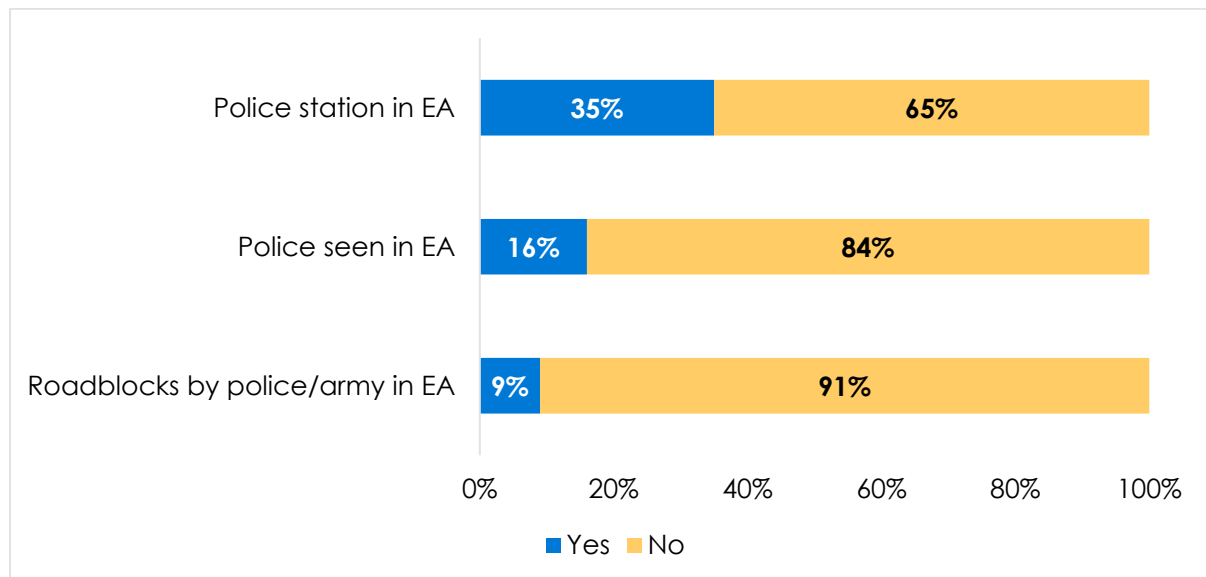
Police/Security presence

People's sense of security may be affected by the presence or absence 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 that are available in the area. 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 Ghana, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about one-third (35%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 16% of the EAs, and police or army roadblocks in 9% of them.

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.

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Ghana | 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 roadblocks set up by police or army?

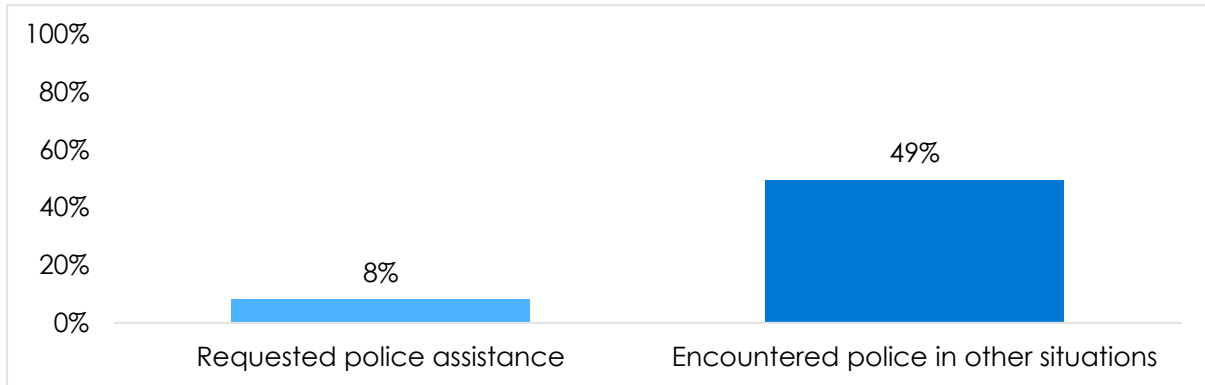
Encounters with the police

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

Fewer than one in 10 respondents (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. About half (49%) encountered the police once or more in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

About one in 20 (6%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while almost half (48%) say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Ghana | 2022



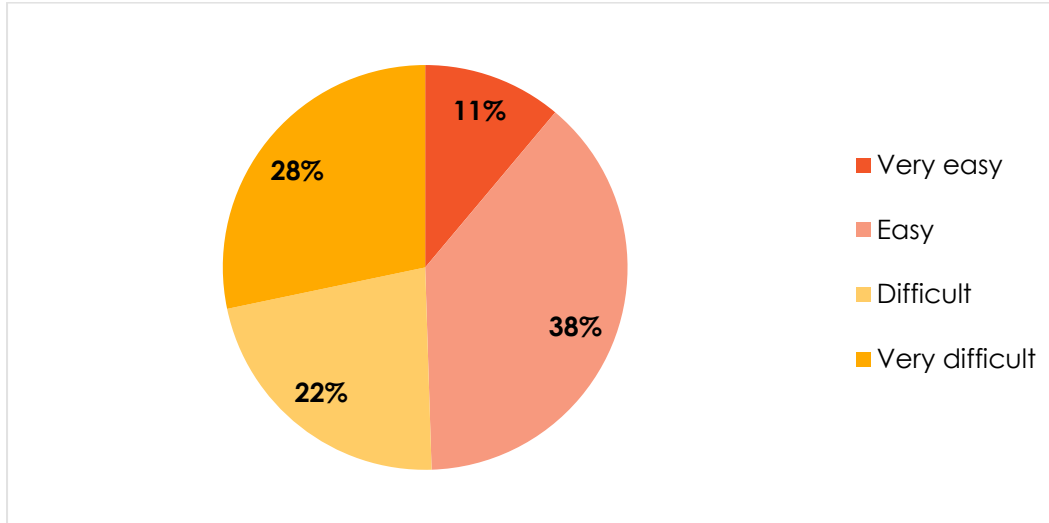
Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (% "yes")

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? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, fully half (50%) say it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to get the assistance they needed (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Ghana | 2022

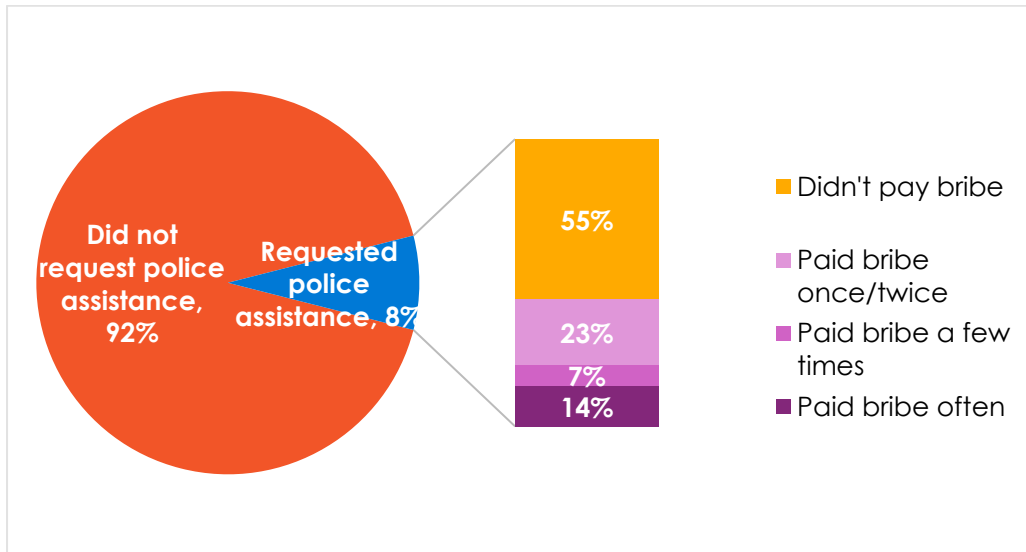


Respondents who requested police assistance during the previous year were asked: *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)*

Among those who sought police assistance, 45% say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the help they needed² (Figure 7). This means that 4% of all Ghanaian adults paid a bribe to get police assistance during the past year.

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 23% "once or twice" plus 7% "a few times" plus 14% "often" equal 45% who paid a bribe at least once).

Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Ghana | 2022

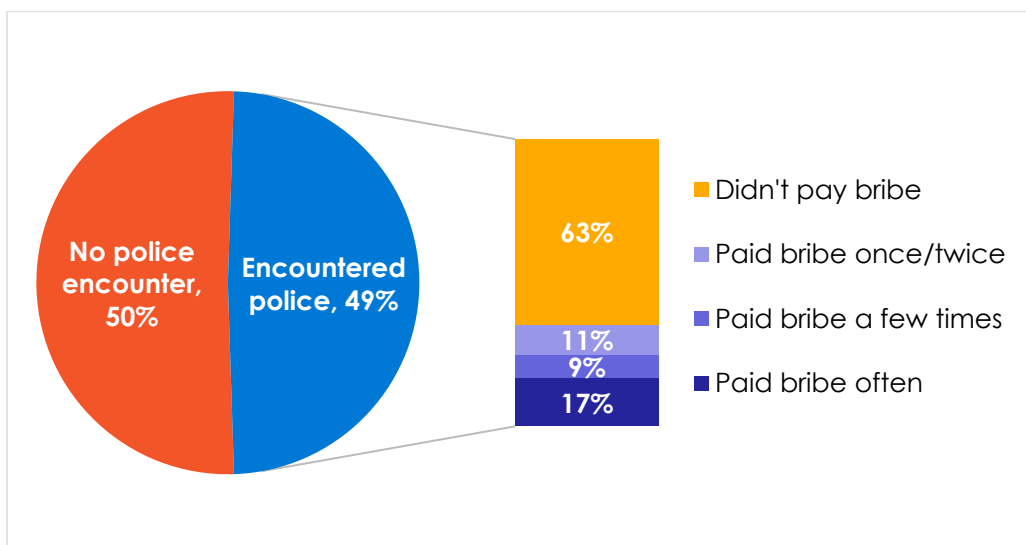


Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If "yes":] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Among Ghanaians who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, 36% say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 17% who say this happened "often" during the previous year (Figure 8).

This translates to almost one in five Ghanaian adults (18%) paying a bribe to avoid problems with the police during the preceding 12 months.

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Ghana | 2022



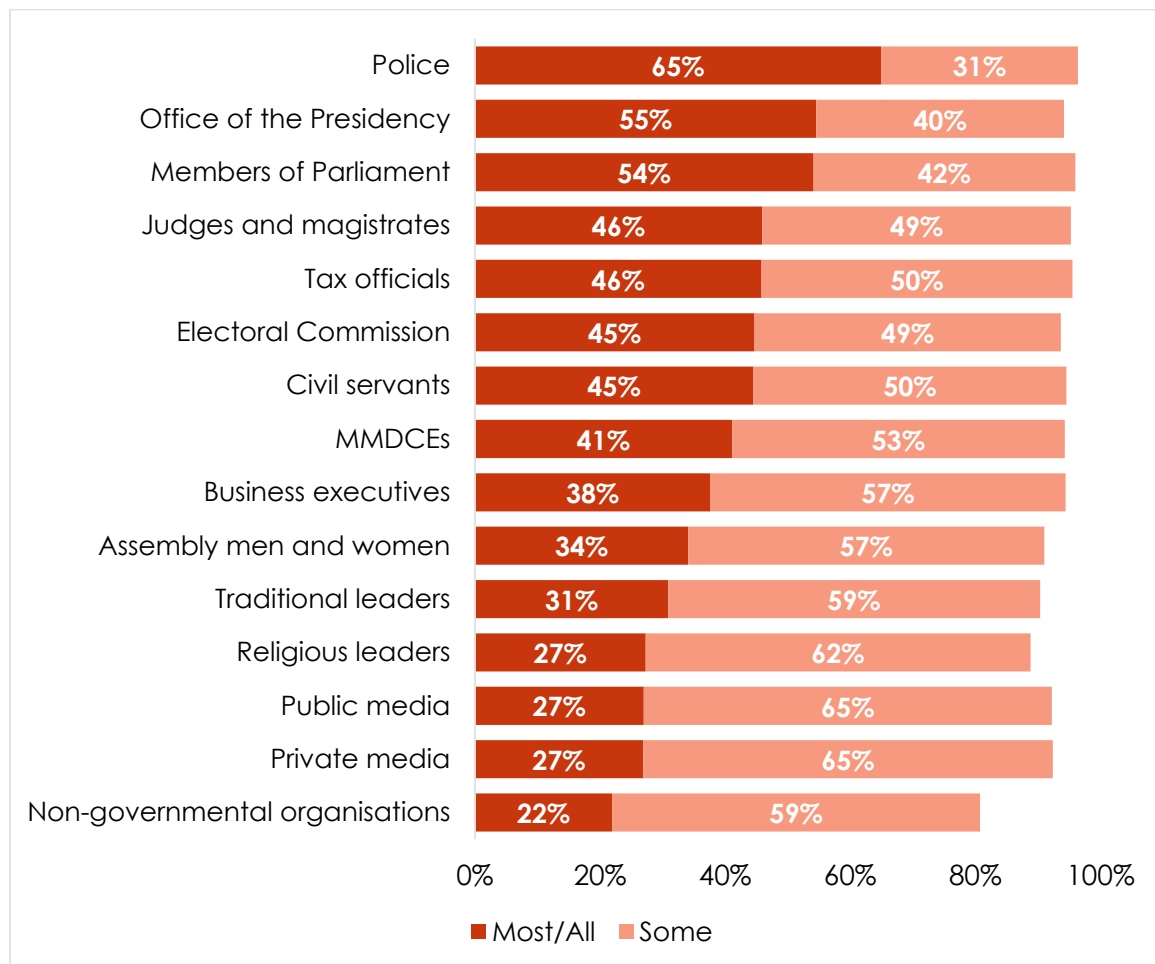
Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police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

To summarise the experience among all Ghanaians adults during the past year, two in 10 (19%) 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 payment to the police, it is perhaps not surprising that Ghanaians are almost unanimous (96%) in the belief that there is corruption in the police force. Two-thirds (65%) of citizens say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – the worst rating among 15 key institutions and leaders the survey asked about (Figure 9), and 12 percentage points higher than in 2019 (57%). In addition, one-third (31%) of respondents say “some” police officials are corrupt. Only 3% of Ghanaians think “none” of them are corrupt.

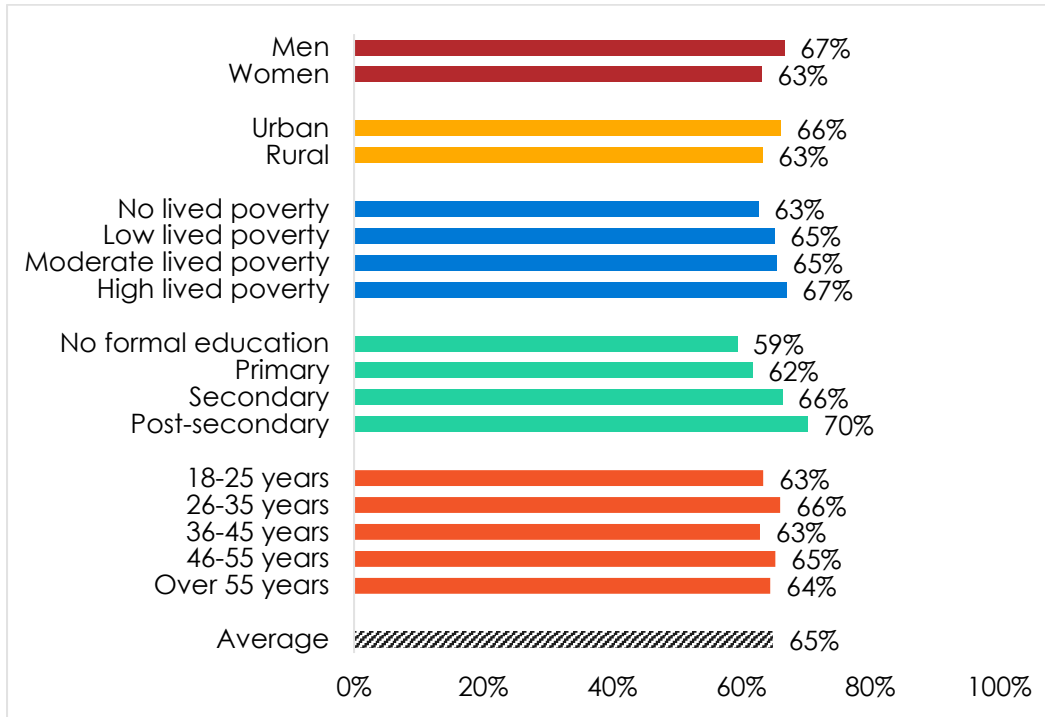
Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Ghana | 2022



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?

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are somewhat more common among men (67%) than among women (63%) and among the poorest citizens (67%) compared to those experiencing no lived poverty (63%) (Figure 10). They increase with respondents' education level, ranging from 59% of those with no formal schooling to 70% of those with post-secondary education.

Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group
 | Ghana | 2022

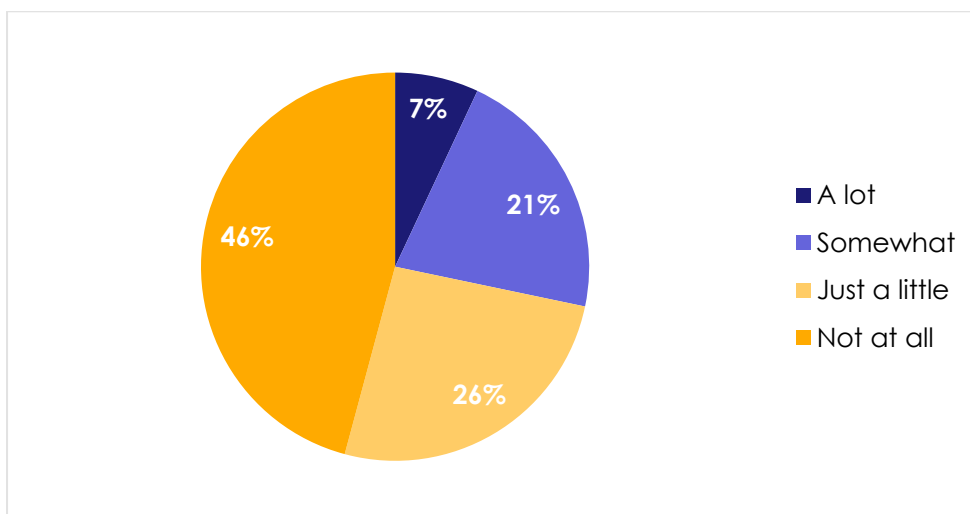


Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Trust in the police

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Ghana's police suffer from low levels of public trust. Fewer than three in 10 Ghanaians say they trust the police "somewhat" (21%) or "a lot" (7%). Almost half (46%) express no trust at all in the police (Figure 11).

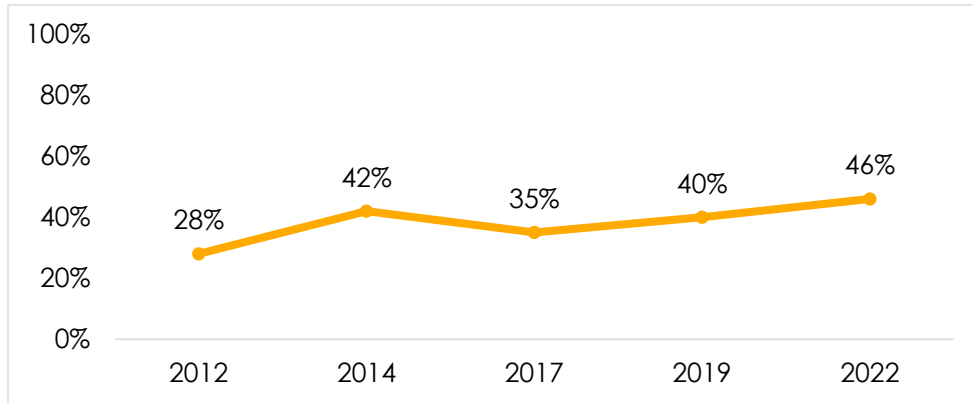
Figure 11: Trust in the police | Ghana | 2022



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

Over time, Ghanaians 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 11 percentage points (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Ghana | 2012-2022

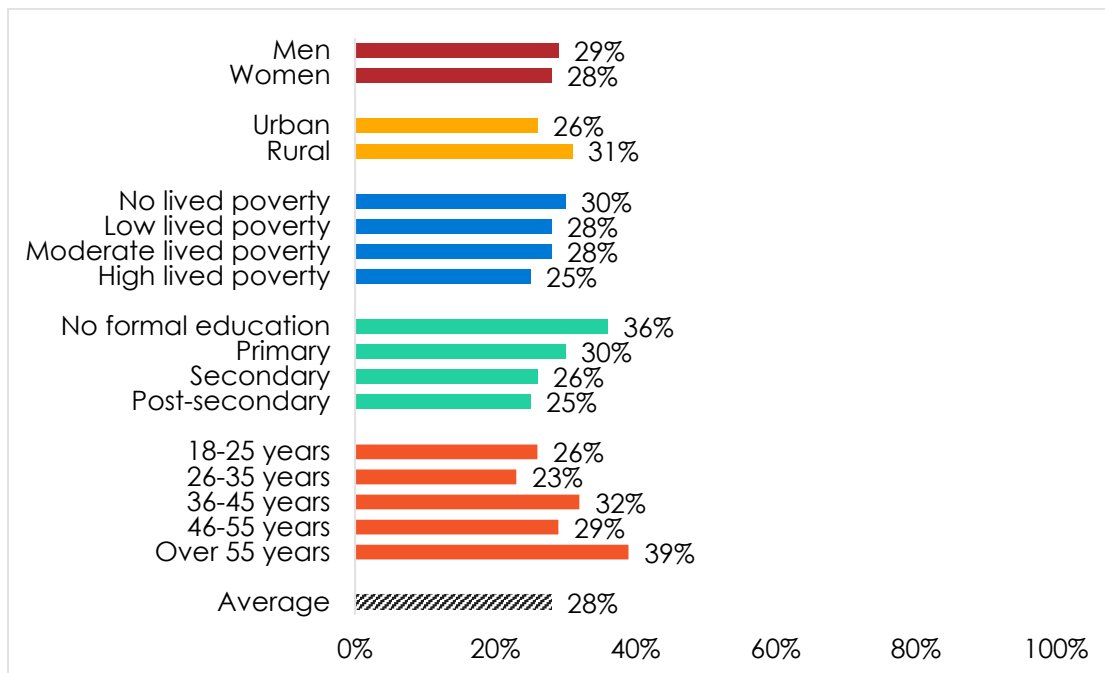


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

Rural residents (31%) are more likely than their urban cousins (26%) to say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 13). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from 36% among those with no formal schooling to just 25% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Young people (23%-26% among those aged 18-35) are less likely to trust the police than their elders (29%-39%).

Figure 13: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Ghana | 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")

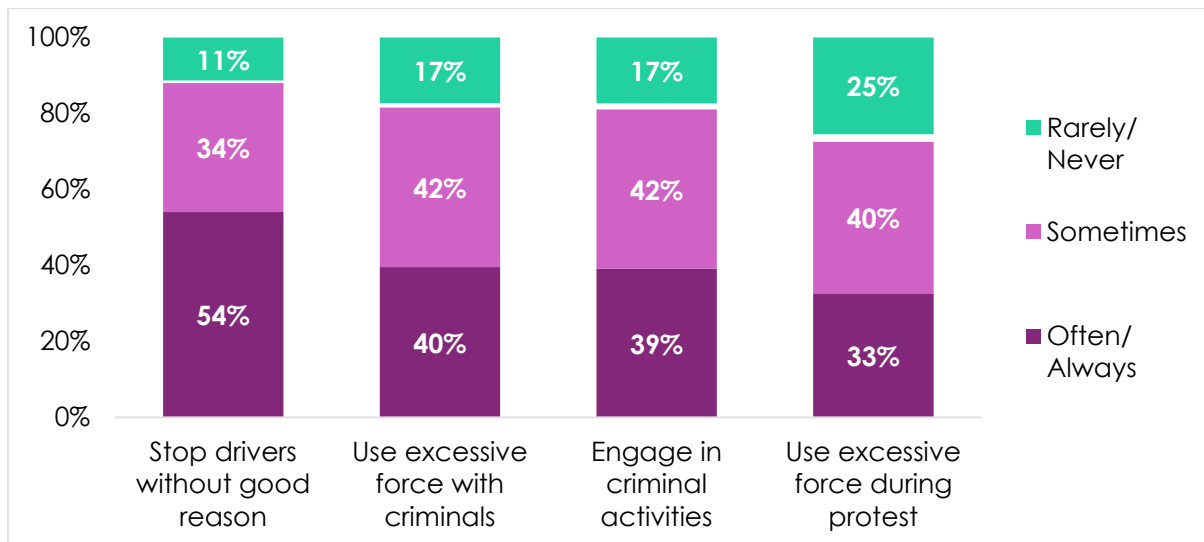
Police conduct

In addition to widespread mistrust in the police, many Ghanaians say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 14).

A majority (54%) of respondents say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason, in addition to 34% who say they “sometimes” do this. Many also believe that the police routinely use excessive force in dealing with criminals (40%) and in managing protests or demonstrations (33%). Four in 10 citizens (39%) say the police routinely engage in illegal activities. Only 17% think this “rarely” or “never” happens.

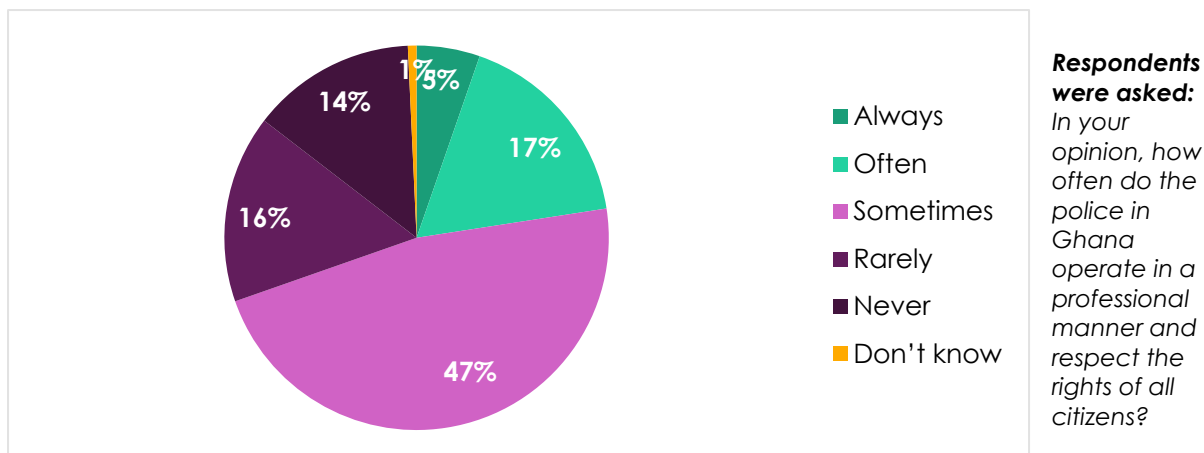
Overall, only about one in five citizens (22%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights; the largest proportion (47%) say this happens “sometimes,” while 30% assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Improper police practices | Ghana | 2022



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?

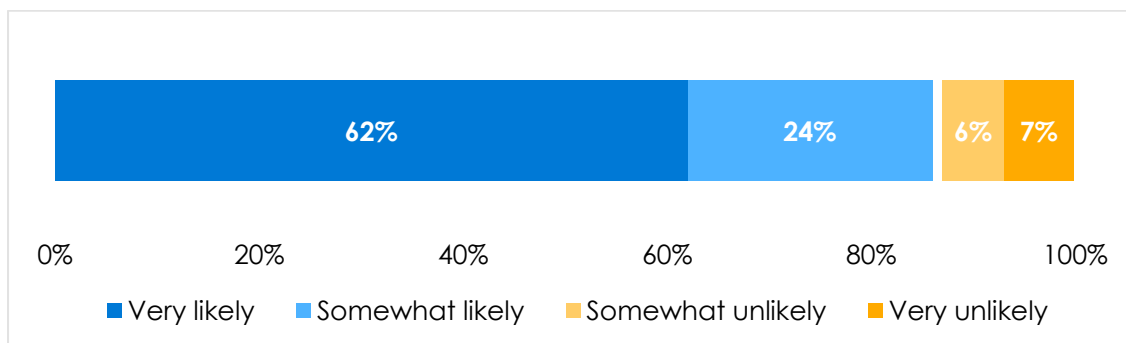
Figure 15: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens’ rights? | Ghana | 2022



One area in which Ghanaians rate their police positively is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. Almost nine in 10 respondents (86%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 62% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 16).

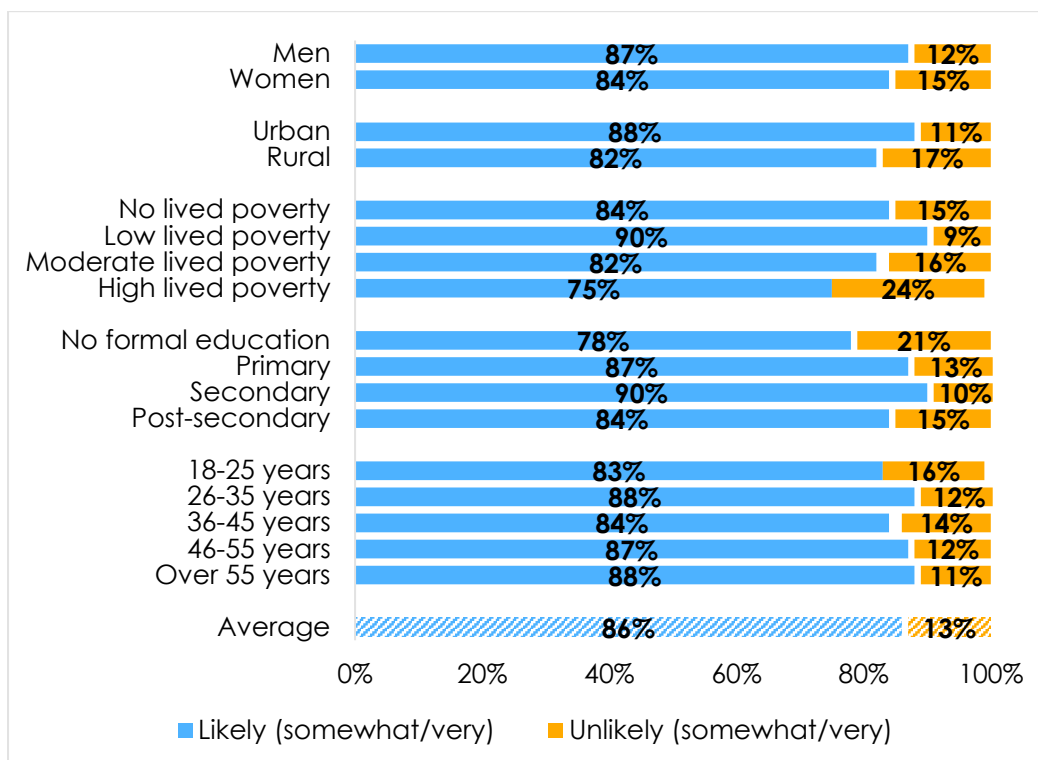
While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is somewhat less strong among women (84%), rural residents (82%), the poor (75%), those with no formal education (78%), and the youngest respondents (83%) (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Ghana | 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 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



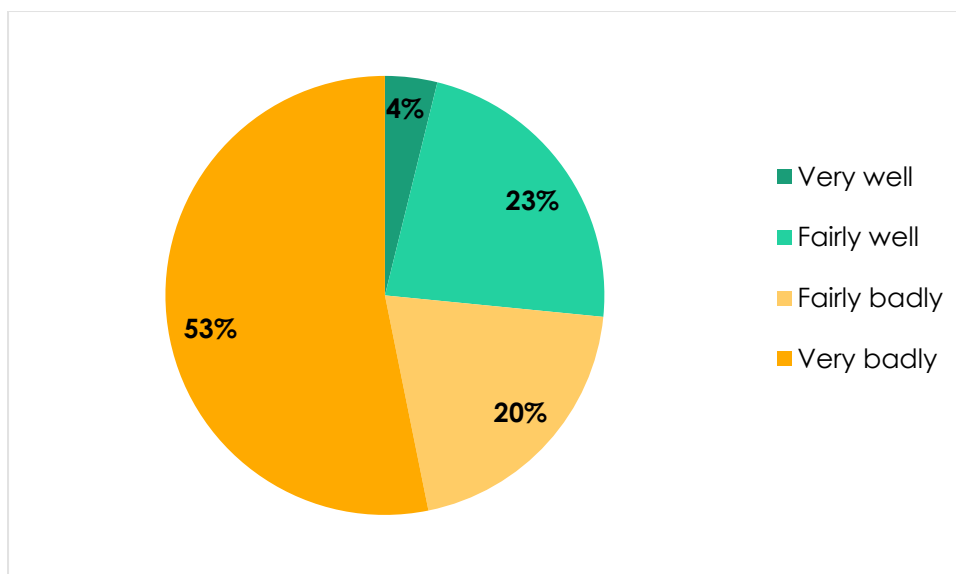
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

In addition to shortcomings highlighted by Ghanaians' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and conduct, fewer than three in 10 citizens (27%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" at reducing crime, while 73% are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 18).

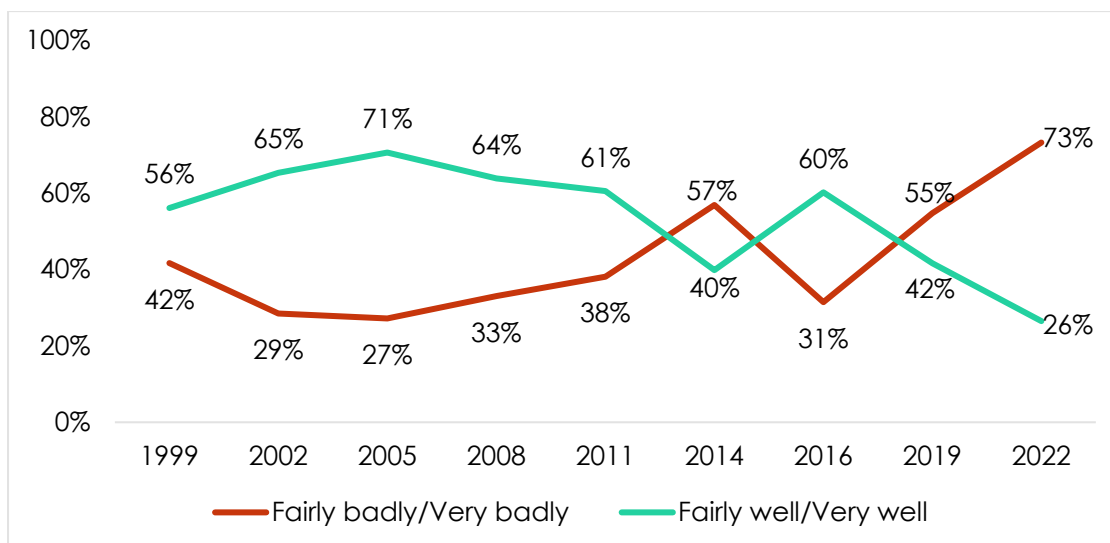
Approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has dropped by 34 percentage points since 2016, to the worst rating ever recorded in more than two decades of Afrobarometer surveys in Ghana (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Government performance on reducing crime | Ghana | 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?

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Ghana | 1999-2022



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?

Conclusion

The Ghanaian police continue to work under a cloud of public mistrust. Large proportions of the population think its officers are corrupt and unprofessional in discharging their duties. Meanwhile, growing numbers of citizens report experiencing fear in their neighbourhoods and give the government poor marks on reducing crime. These findings highlight the police service's challenge of rebuilding public confidence, both in its competence and its conduct.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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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