

# A few bad apples or a rotten orchard? Ugandans cite brutality and corruption among police failings

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 564 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba**

## Summary

In his 1986 inauguration speech, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni stated, “No regime has a right to kill any citizen of this country, or to beat any citizen at a roadblock” (Monitor, 2018). Yet under his 36-year tenure, the Uganda Police Force has frequently been accused of brutalising the very citizens it is meant to protect.

During the 2021 election campaign, security forces killed at least 54 people, some of them – but not all – protesting the arrest by presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi (better known as Bobi Wine) on allegations of violating COVID-19 guidelines (Amnesty International, 2020a). At least 40 people were killed by security forces during the “Buganda riots” in 2009, nine during the “walk-to-work” protests in 2011, and at least six following Bobi Wine’s first arrest in 2018 (Foreign Policy, 2021).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, security forces were accused of killing and abusing people while purporting to enforce pandemic restrictions (BBC News, 2020; Anadolu Agency, 2021). Even now, the media continues to report numerous cases of police repression, especially against journalists, political activists, and opposition political figures and supporters (Human Rights Watch, 2015). A recent report by the Human Rights Network of Journalists cited the Uganda Police Force and the national army as the leading perpetrators of violence against journalists in Uganda (Kamurungi, 2021).

Often the misdeeds and callous behaviours of men in uniform go unpunished. For example, none of the security personnel implicated in the killings of citizens during the aforementioned protests has been held accountable (Human Rights Watch, 2012, 2016; Nyeko, 2021). And some critics contend that Uganda’s laws on the use of force by police officers are permissive and protect the police (Kiconco, 2018; The Law on Police Use of Force Worldwide, 2021).

Who is to blame? A few police officers or the Uganda Police Force as a whole? What do ordinary Ugandans say about their 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 Uganda, a majority of citizens say that police officers frequently use excessive force when dealing with protesters and suspected criminals and fail to act in a professional manner or respect citizens’ rights. Opposition party supporters and residents in the Central region and Kampala – an opposition stronghold and the center of many political protests – are particularly likely to see police abuses of protesters as a common occurrence.

While the government receives favourable ratings on reducing crime, Uganda's police are widely perceived as corrupt and enjoy relatively weak public trust. Among citizens who encountered the police last year, a majority say they had to pay a bribe to obtain assistance or avoid problems.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 7 and 25 January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12<sup>th</sup> Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

## Key findings

- A majority of Ugandans say the police "often" or "always" use excessive force in managing protests (57%) and in dealing with suspected criminals (54%).
- Only about one in five citizens (22%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; about twice as many (42%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of.
- At least half of Ugandans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (54%) and feared crime in their home (50%) during the previous year, including more than one-third who experienced these fears at least "several times." Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About one in five citizens (19%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. More than twice as many (41%) 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, 53% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 71% say they had to pay a bribe.
  - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 64% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Three-fourths (75%) of citizens say "most" or "all" police are corrupt – by far the worst rating among key government institutions the survey asked about.
- Only four in 10 Ugandans say they trust the police "somewhat" (16%) or "a lot" (25%). The share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has almost quadrupled since 2005.
- Despite these perceived shortcomings in the police, a majority (57%) of Ugandans say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of reducing crime.

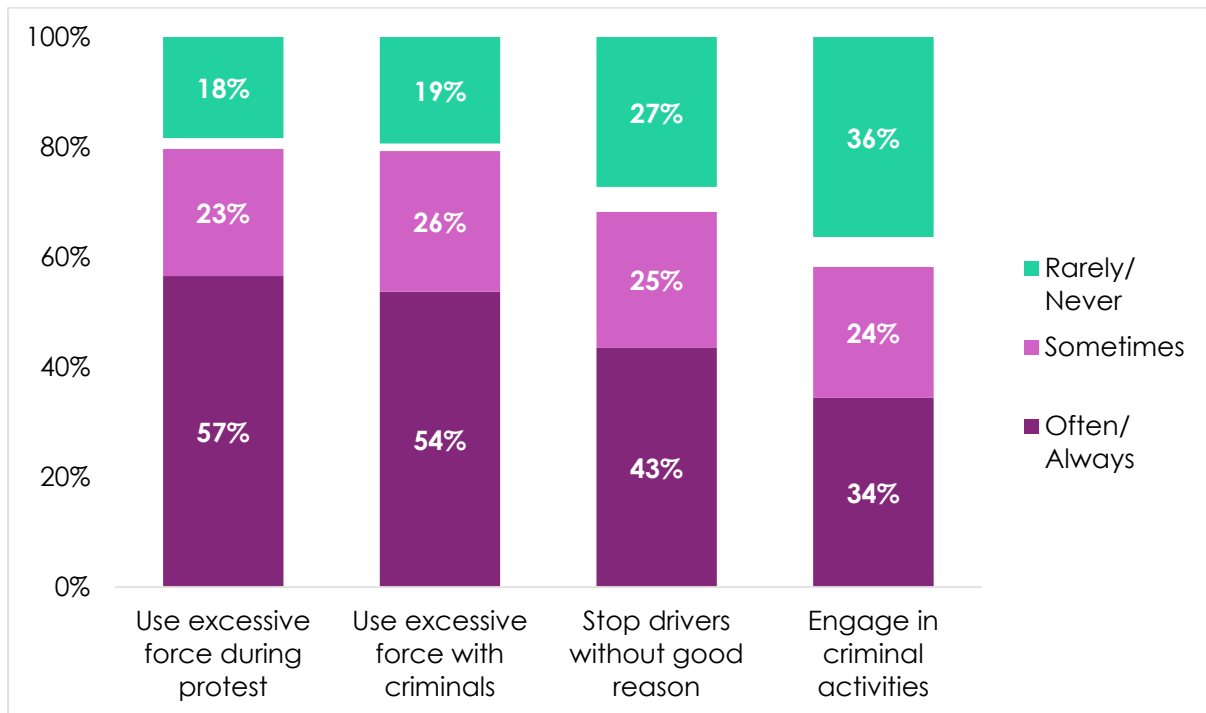
## Police brutality and conduct

Police brutality occurs when law enforcement officers use excessive and unjustified force on an individual or a group of people. It can take many forms, including shootings, beatings, unlawful take-downs, and unwarranted use of tasers. Police brutality not only violates citizens' rights but can also result in serious injury and death.

According to the most recent Afrobarometer findings, a majority of citizens think police brutality is common in Uganda. More than half of Ugandans say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations (57%) and when dealing with suspected criminals (54%), in addition to about one-fourth of respondents who say these abuses happen “sometimes” (Figure 1).

In addition, more than four in 10 citizens (43%) say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason; only 27% say this “rarely” or “never” happens. One-third (34%) of respondents also say the police frequently engage in criminal activities, while about the same proportion (36%) think this is “rarely” or “never” the case.

**Figure 1: Police brutality and improper practices | Uganda | 2022**



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

*Stop drivers without good reason?*

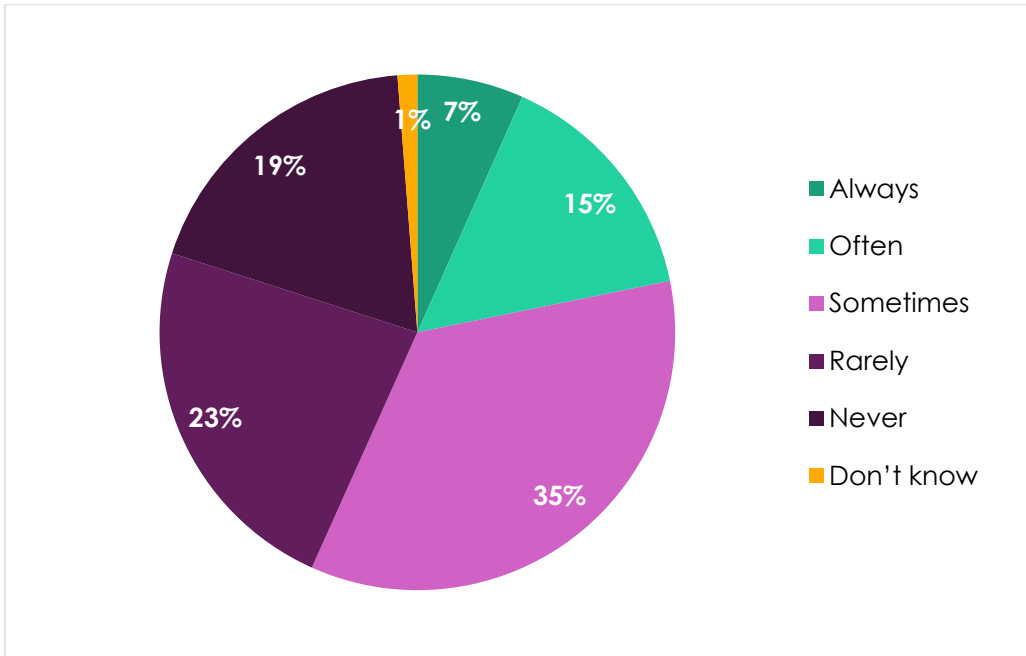
*Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?*

*Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?*

*Engage in criminal activities?*

Overall, only about one in five citizens (22%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; about twice as many (42%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Uganda**  
 | 2022



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

Citizen views on police brutality during protests vary widely across key demographic groups. The largest differences are visible across the political party divide<sup>1</sup> and Uganda's regions (Figure 3).

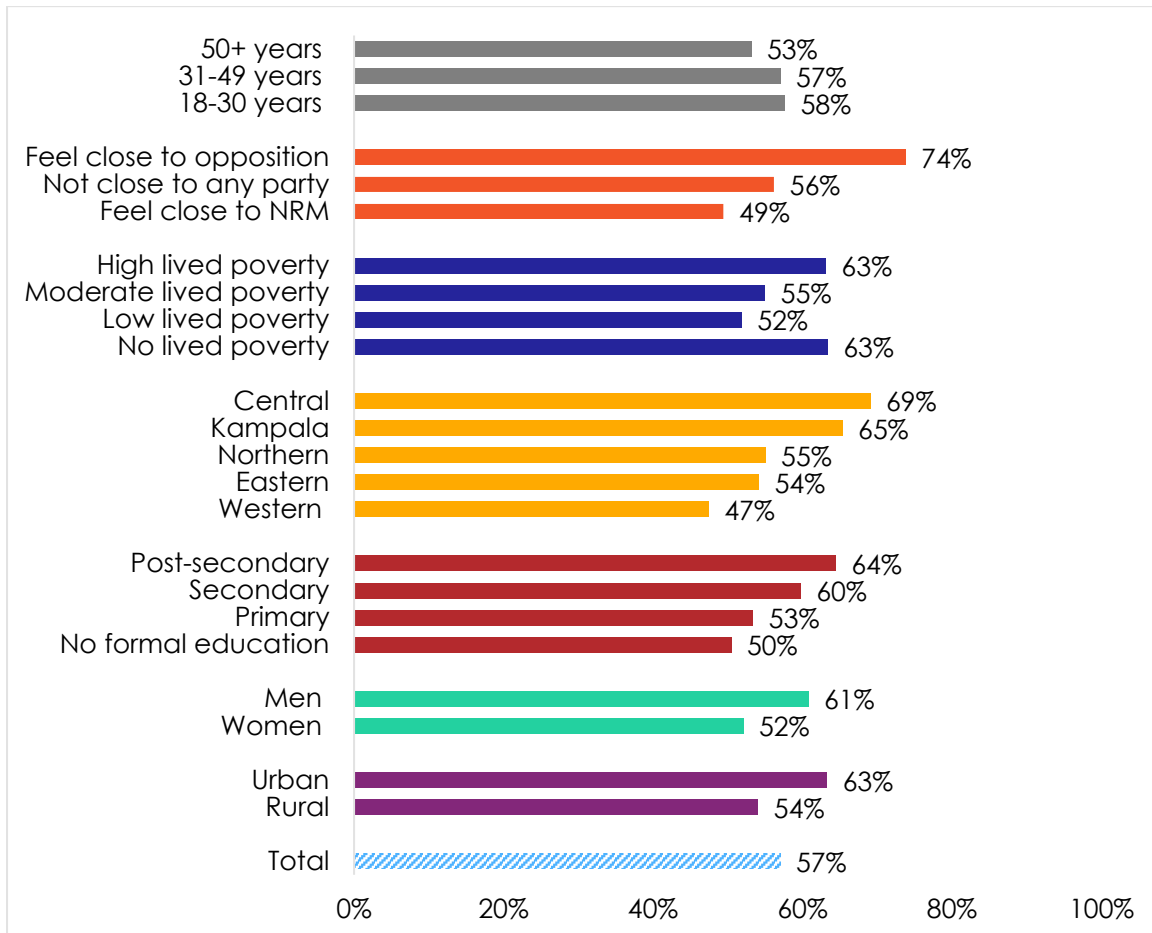
As might be expected, citizens who identify with the political opposition (74%) are most likely to report the excessive use of force during protests, although even among supporters of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), half (49%) agree.

And residents in the Central region (69%) and Kampala (65%) – the country's main stage for political protests – are significantly more likely than their counterparts in other regions (47%-55%) to say police “often” or “always” use excessive force in managing protests.

Perceptions of police brutality are also more prevalent among men (61%) than women (52%) and among urbanities (63%) compared to rural residents (54%). They increase with respondents' education level, ranging from 50% of the unschooled to 64% of those with post-secondary education.

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

**Figure 3: Police often/always use excessive force during protests** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the police in Uganda use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations? (% who say “often” or “always”)

### Consequences of police brutality

When people are subjected to excessive or unjustified force, they may suffer severe, life-altering injuries or even die. Evidence also links exposure to police brutality or violence to a wide range of mental health outcomes, such as psychological distress, depression, psychotic episodes, and suicide attempts (Geller, Fagan, & Tyler, 2017; DeVlyder, Fedina, & Bruce, 2020).

In addition, police brutality is likely to undermine the legitimacy and overall image of the police. A Pearson correlation test shows a negative and statistically significant correlation between citizens’ view of police brutality and their trust in the police<sup>2</sup>: Citizens who say police brutality happens frequently express lower levels of trust in the police.

Police brutality may also inhibit citizens’ enjoyment of their constitutional rights to assemble and demonstrate peacefully and unarmed and to petition the government.

According to the 2022 Afrobarometer survey, three-quarters (75%) of Ugandans say they would “never” participate in a demonstration or protest. This proportion has followed a

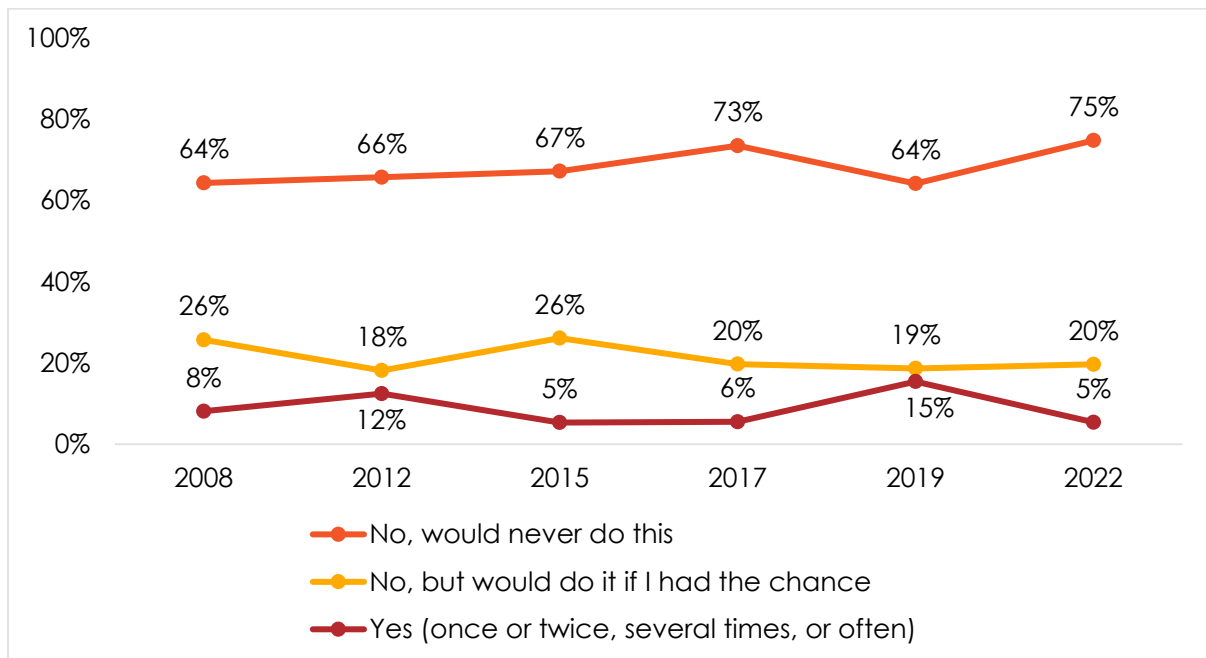
<sup>2</sup> Pearson correlation  $b=-0.226$  ( $p=0.000$ )

generally upward trend since 2008, including an 11-percentage-point increase after a dip in 2019 (Figure 4).

The share of citizens who say they took part in a protest or demonstration during the previous year declined from 15% in 2019 to 5% in 2022, while 20% say that they didn't participate in a protest but would do so if they "had the chance."

In light of these findings, it is plausible that repeated episodes of police brutality and the adoption of the Public Order Management Act of 2013, which granted the police the power to regulate the conduct of any public gathering, may have reduced Ugandans' desire to participate in any type of protest. Critics argue that the police have abused this law to prevent or stop public gatherings organised by opposition politicians and to repress protesters (Amnesty International, 2020b).

**Figure 4 : Attended protest or demonstration | Uganda | 2008-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Participated in a demonstration or protest march? [If "no":] Would you do this if you had the chance?

### Sense of security

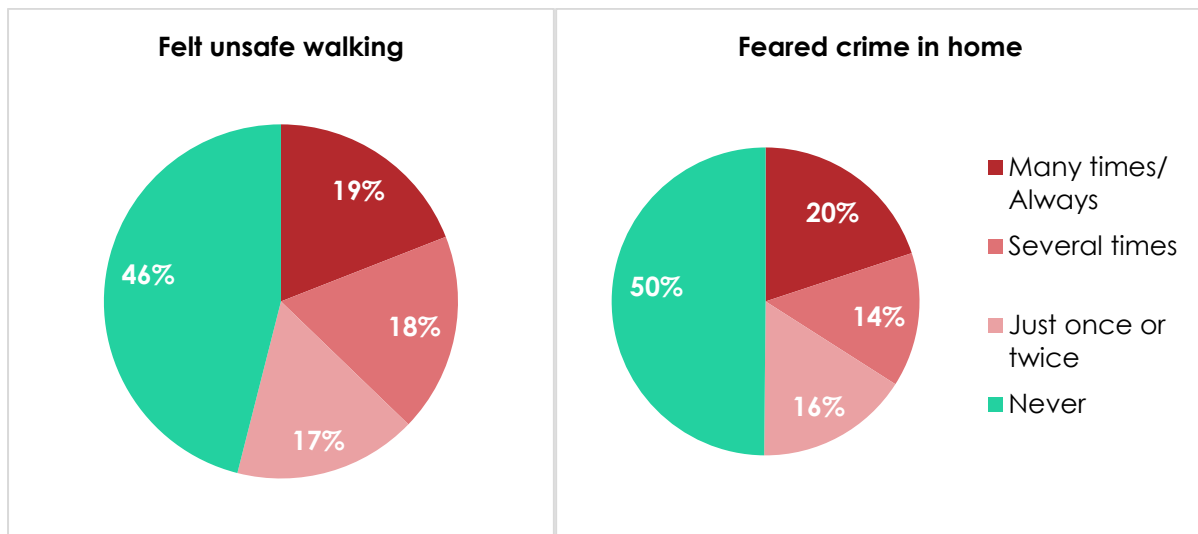
At a more basic level than public protests, the role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Ugandans feel protected?

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. More than half (54%) of Ugandans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 37% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 5).

Similarly, 50% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 34% who say this happened at least "several times."

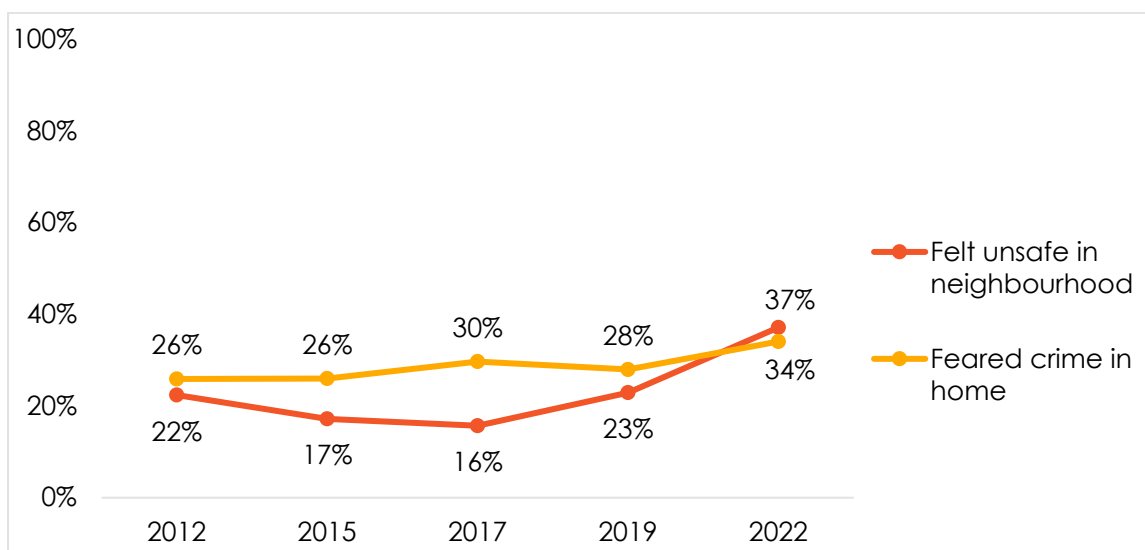
The proportion of Ugandans who report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood at least "several times" has more than doubled since 2017 (16%) after a modest decline between 2012 and 2017 (Figure 6). Fear of crime in the home has risen more modestly, by 8 points since 2012 (26%).

**Figure 5: Insecurity and fear of crime | Uganda | 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?

**Figure 6: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Uganda | 2012-2022**



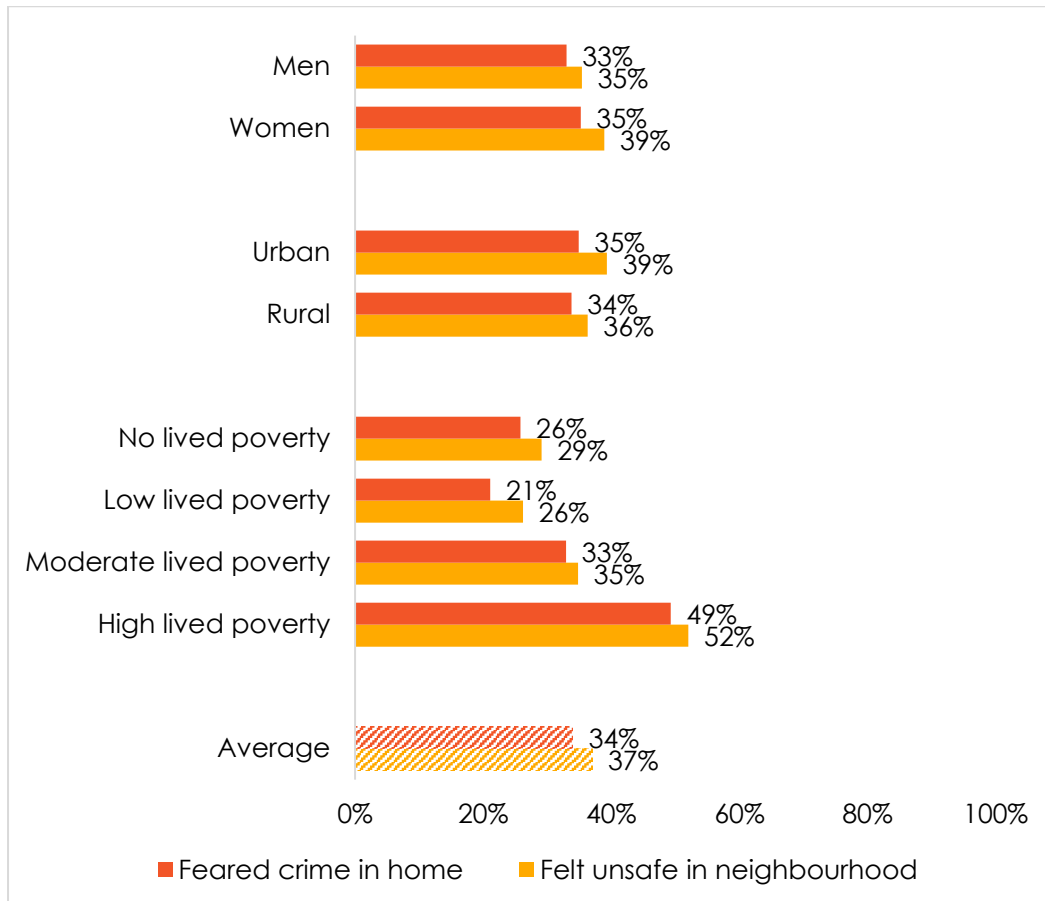
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

These experiences are about equally common among women and men and in rural and urban areas (Figure 7). They increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty<sup>3</sup>: The

<sup>3</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).

poorest citizens are almost twice as likely to feel unsafe (52%) and fear crime in their home (49%) as the best-off citizens.

**Figure 7: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Uganda | 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

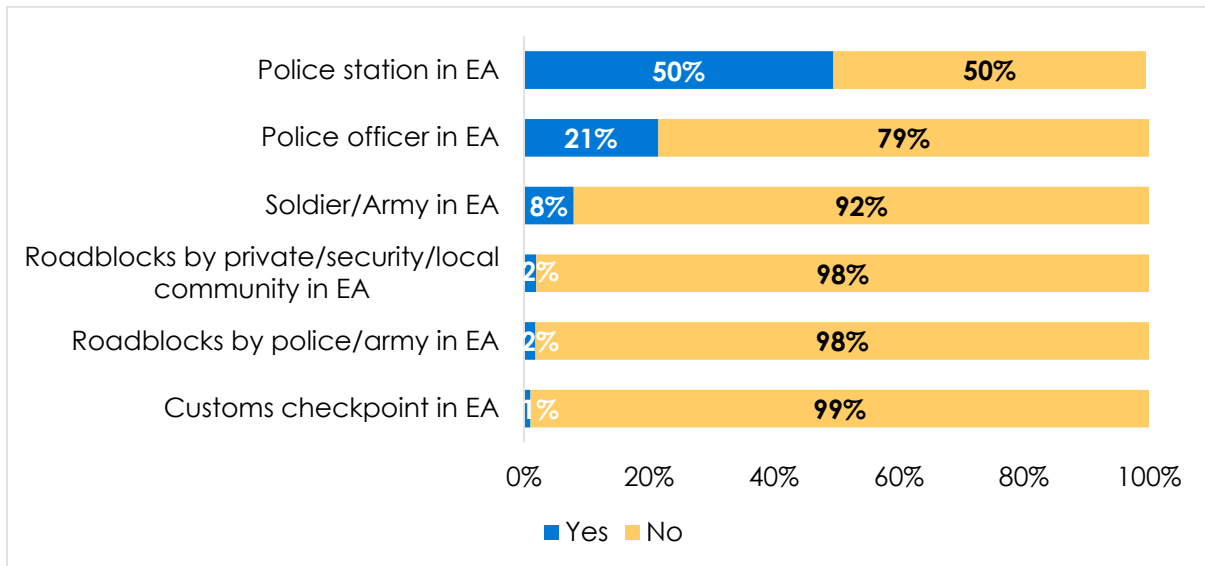
One factor that might affect people's sense of security is the presence of security forces. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in the area. 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 Uganda, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of half (50%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 8). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 21% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or other military (8%), roadblocks by the police or army (2%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (2%), and customs checkpoints (1%).

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 8: Presence of police/security | Uganda | 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?*

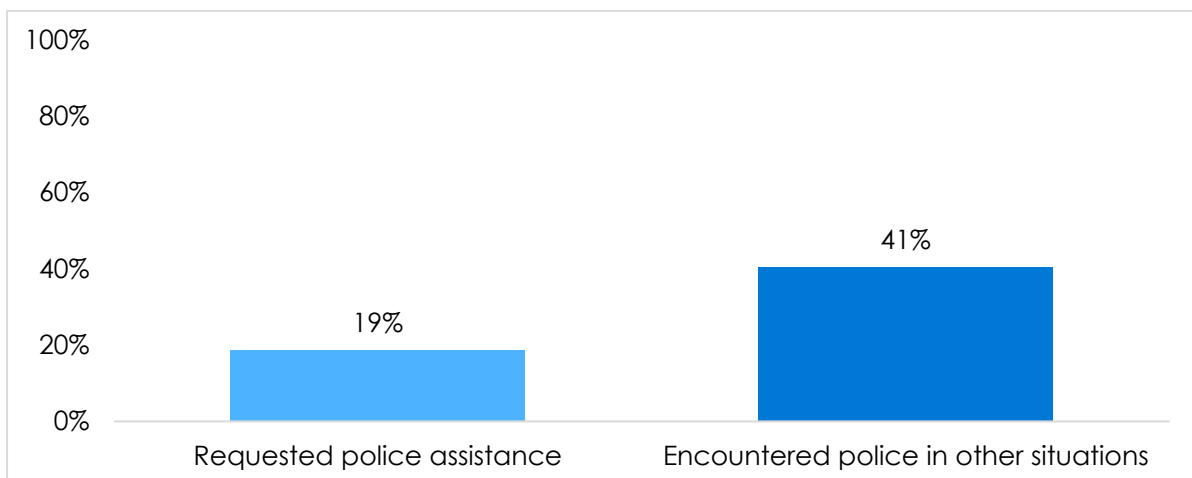
*In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? Any customs checkpoints? Any roadblocks or booms set up by private security providers or by the local community?*

**Encounters with the police**

How often do Ugandans 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 (41%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Contact with the police | Uganda | 2022**



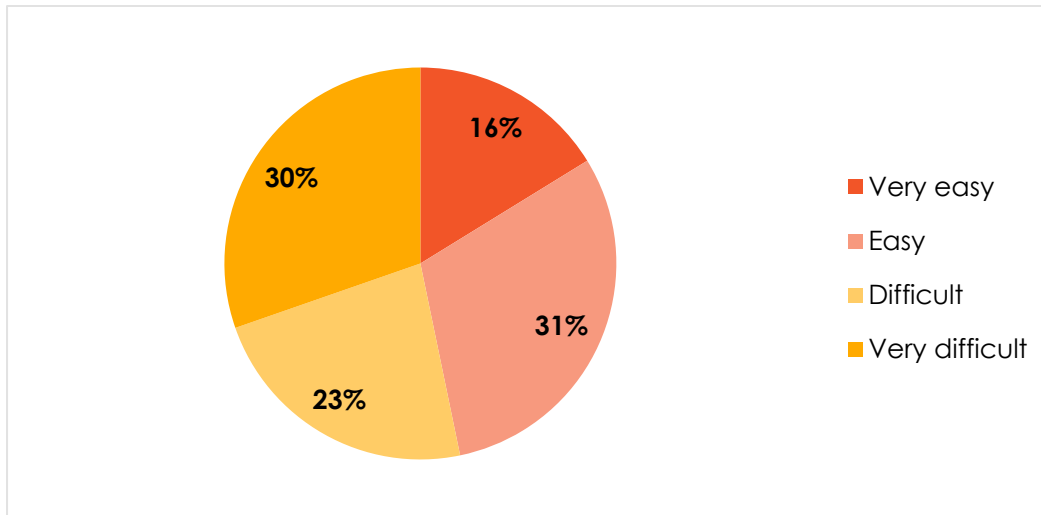
**Respondents were asked:**

*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, more than half (53%) say it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to get the assistance they needed (Figure 10).

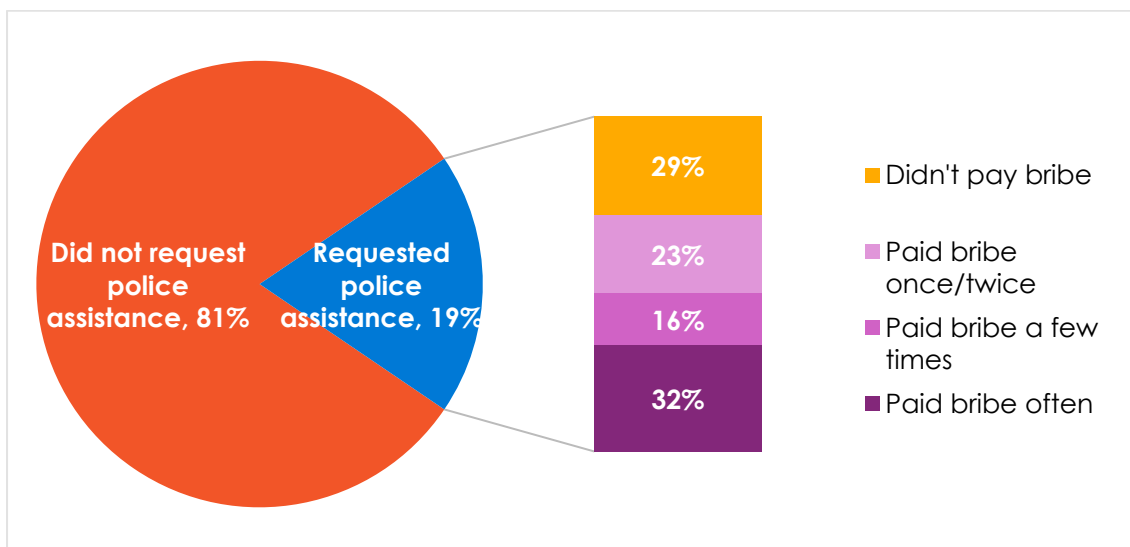
**Figure 10: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Uganda | 2022**



**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, seven in 10 (71%) 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 11). This means that among all Ugandans adults, including those who had no contact with the police, about one in eight (13%) paid a bribe to get police assistance during the past year.

**Figure 11: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Uganda | 2022**

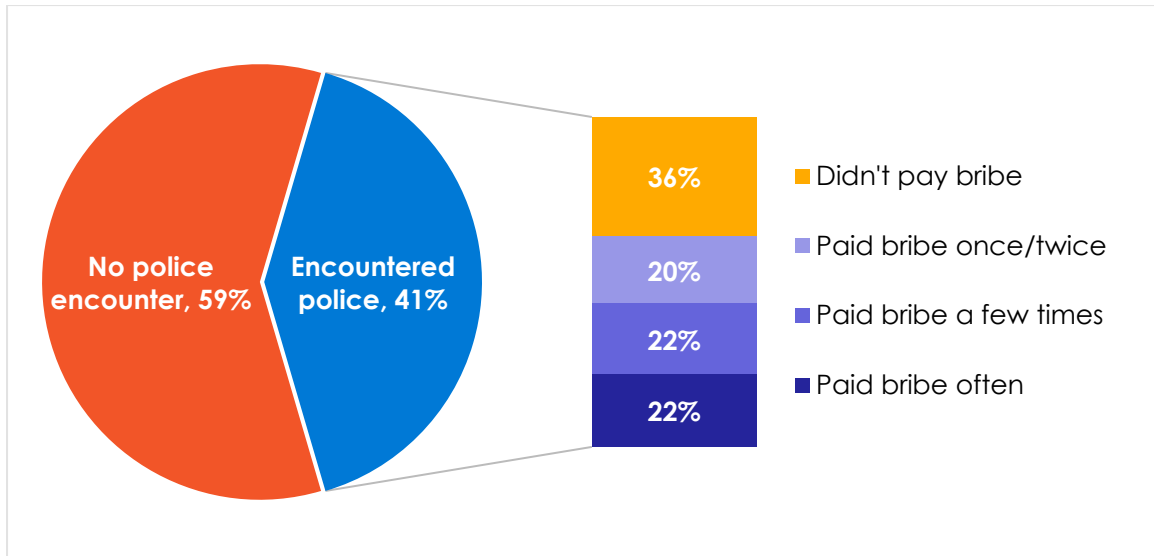


**Respondents were asked:** In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (If “yes”:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Among Ugandans who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, almost two-thirds (64%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 22% who say this happened “often” during the previous year (Figure 12).

This translates to more than one-fourth (26%) of all Ugandan adults paying a bribe to avoid problems with the police.

**Figure 12: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Uganda | 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?*

### Police corruption

Considering the frequency of reported bribery of the police, it is perhaps not surprising that the Uganda police continue to be perceived as the most corrupt among seven key government institutions, as they were in 2019 (Figure 13). Fully three-fourths (75%) of Ugandans say “most” or “all” police are corrupt, a 7-percentage-point increase compared to 2019 (68%).

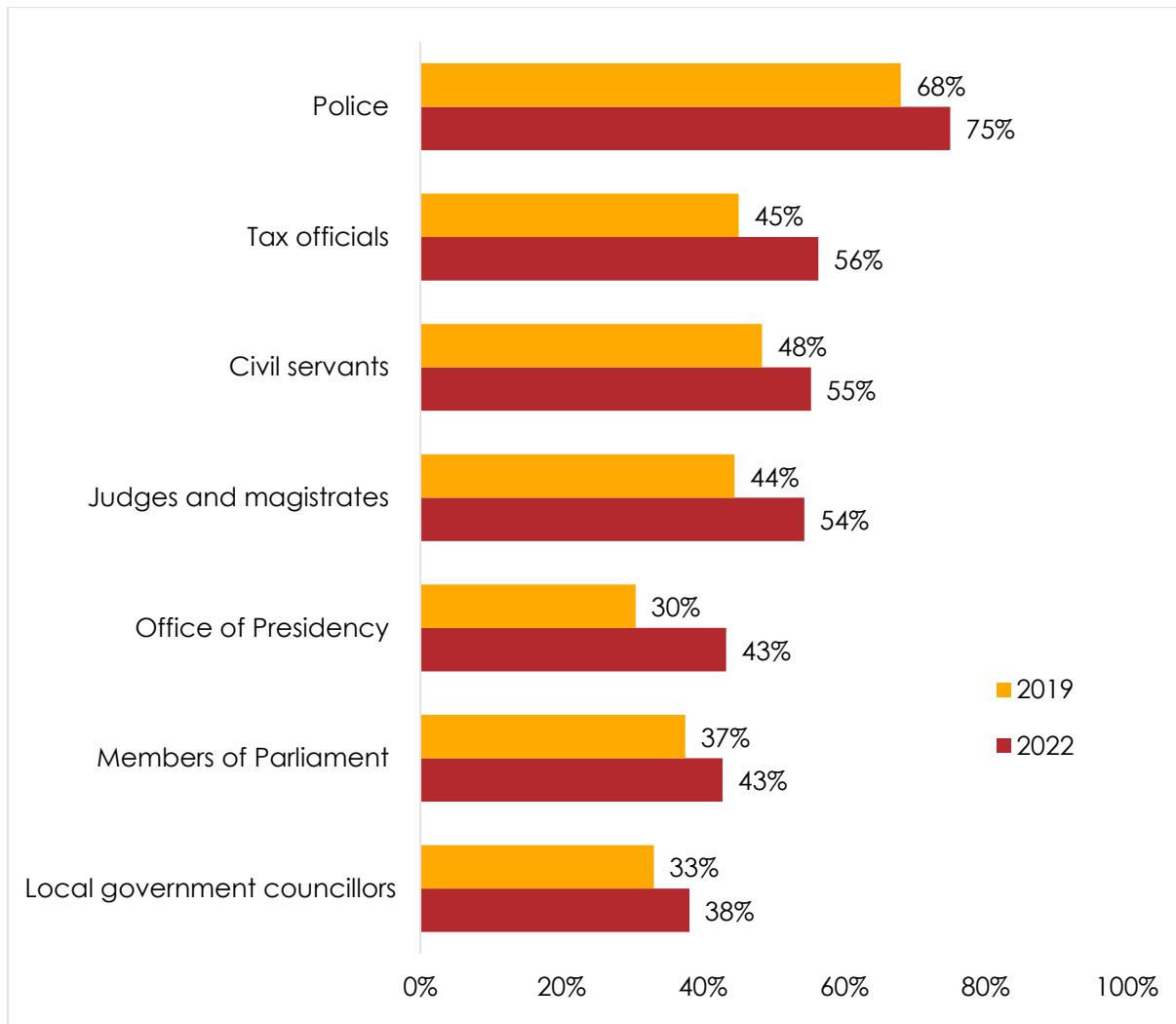
This places the police well ahead, in terms of perceived widespread corruption, of tax officials (56%), civil servants (55%), judges and magistrates (54%), officials in the Presidency (43%), members of Parliament (43%), and local government councillors (38%).

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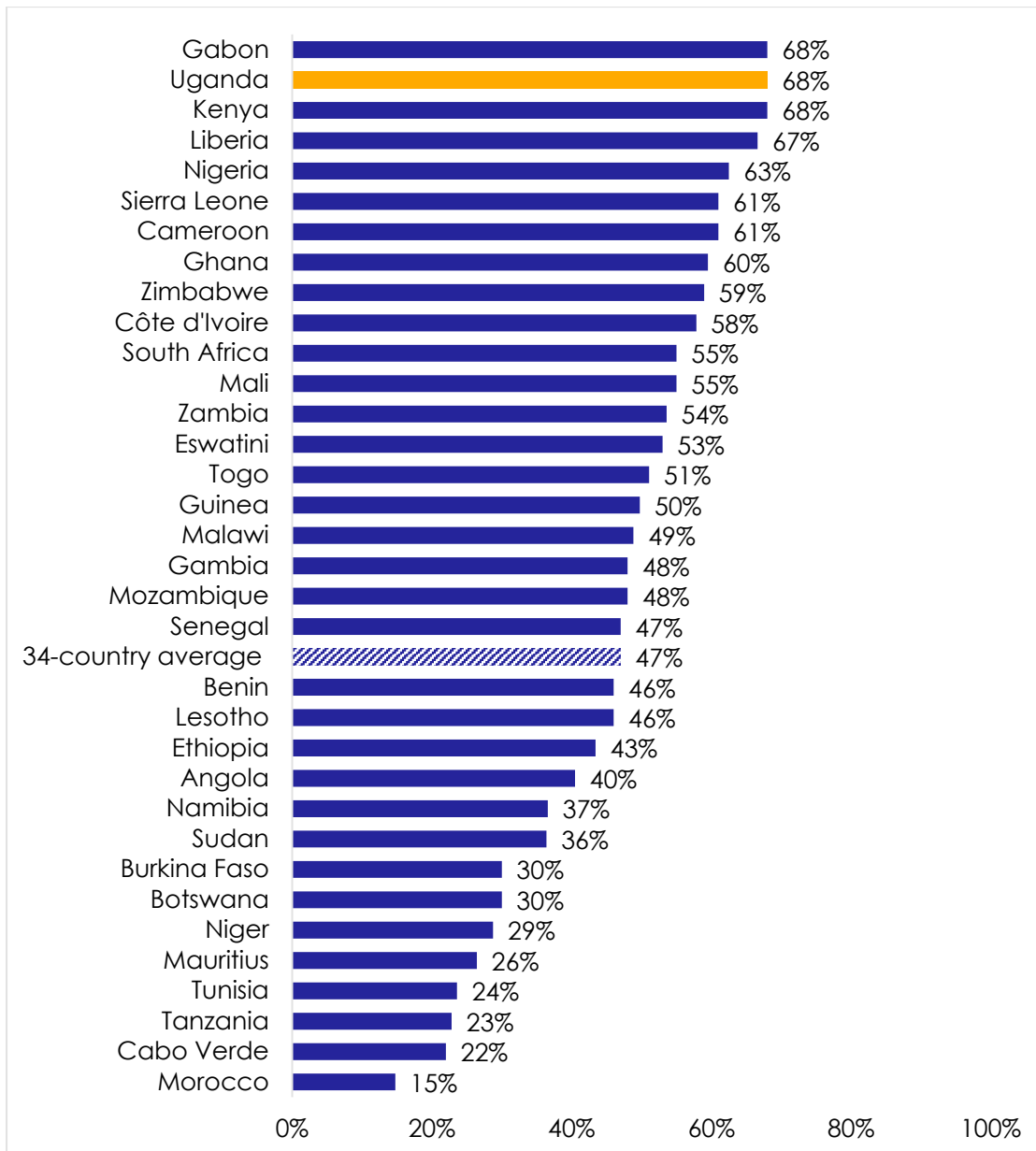
**Figure 13: Perceived corruption among institutions | Uganda | 2019-2022**



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

Across the continent, citizens vary widely in how corrupt they perceive their police officers to be, but Ugandans offer some of the most negative assessments. In the most recent completed Afrobarometer survey round (2019/2021), Uganda tied with Gabon and Kenya (each 68%) to lead the 34 surveyed countries in perceptions of widespread police corruption (Figure 14). In contrast, far fewer Moroccans (15%), Cabo Verdeans (22%), Tanzanians (23%), Tunisians (24%), and Mauritians (26%) saw "most" or "all" of their police as corrupt.

**Figure 14: Most/All police perceived as corrupt | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



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

### Trust in the police

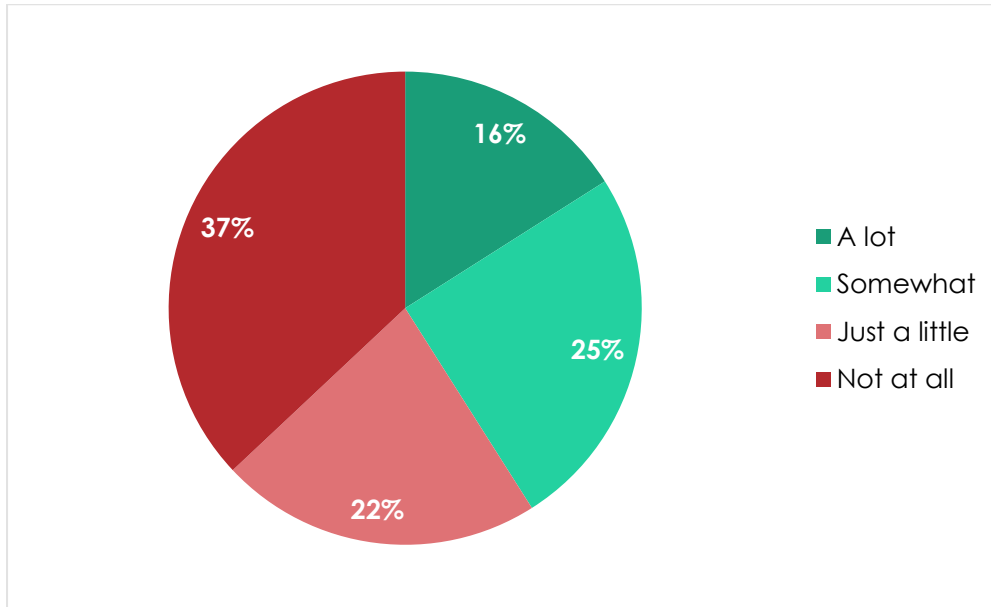
Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Uganda's police suffer from fairly low levels of public trust. Only four in 10 Ugandans (41%) say they trust the police "somewhat" (16%) or "a lot" (25%). More than one-third (37%) express no trust at all in the police (Figure 15).

This negative evaluation is not an anomaly, however. Rather, it is the continuation of a trend that has emerged over the past two decades. The proportion of respondents who say they don't trust the police "at all" has almost quadrupled since 2005, from 10% to 37% (Figure 16).

Among seven key public institutions that the survey asked about, the police and the National Electoral Commission (trusted "somewhat" or "a lot" by 42% of respondents) bring up the rear

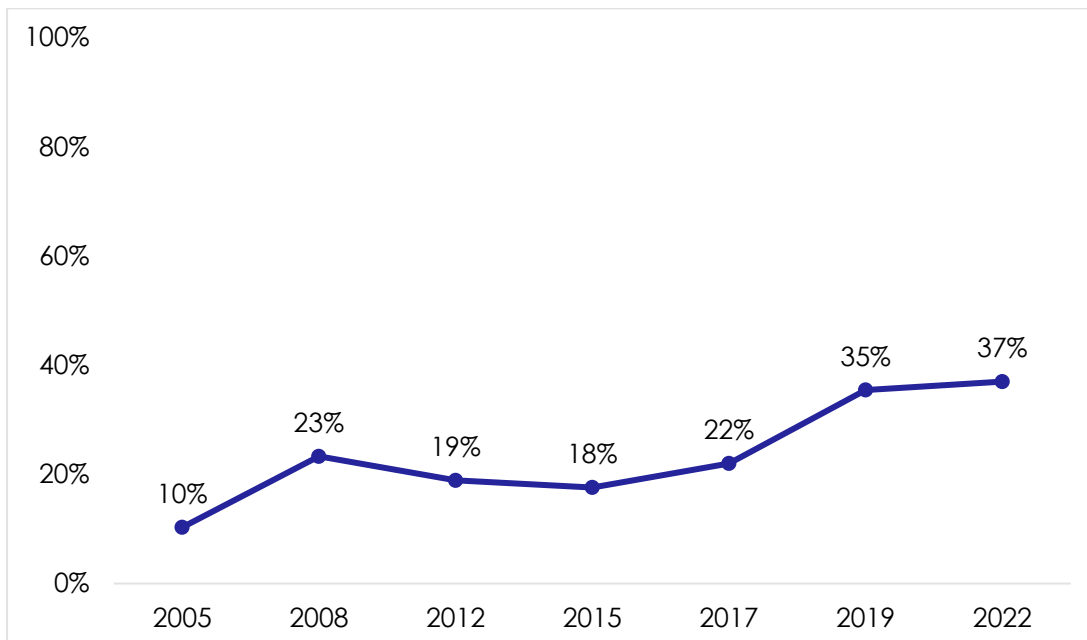
in public confidence (Figure 17). In contrast, citizens express considerably more faith in other arms of the executive branch, including the president (62%) and the army (62%).

**Figure 15: Trust in the police | Uganda | 2022**



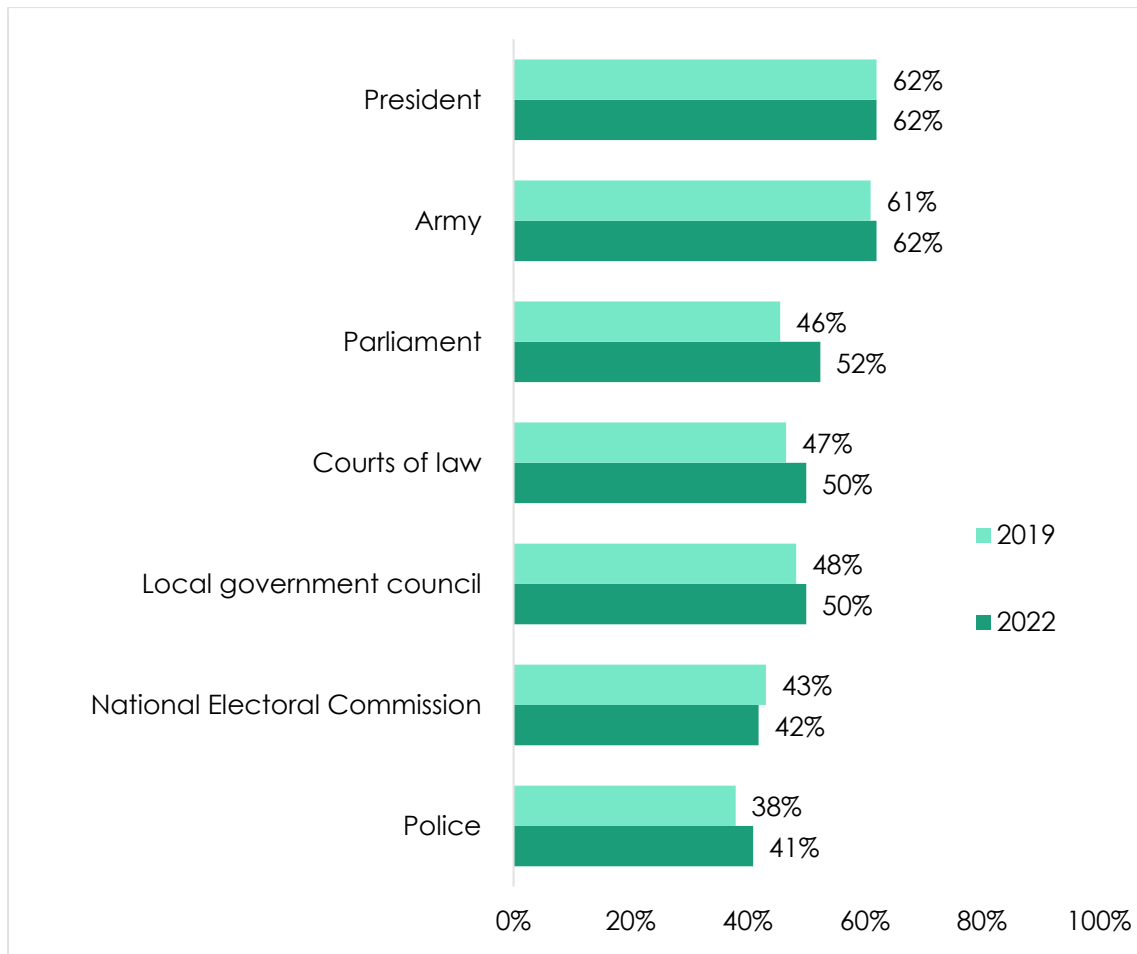
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police?

**Figure 16 : Don't trust the police 'at all' | Uganda | 2005-2022**



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

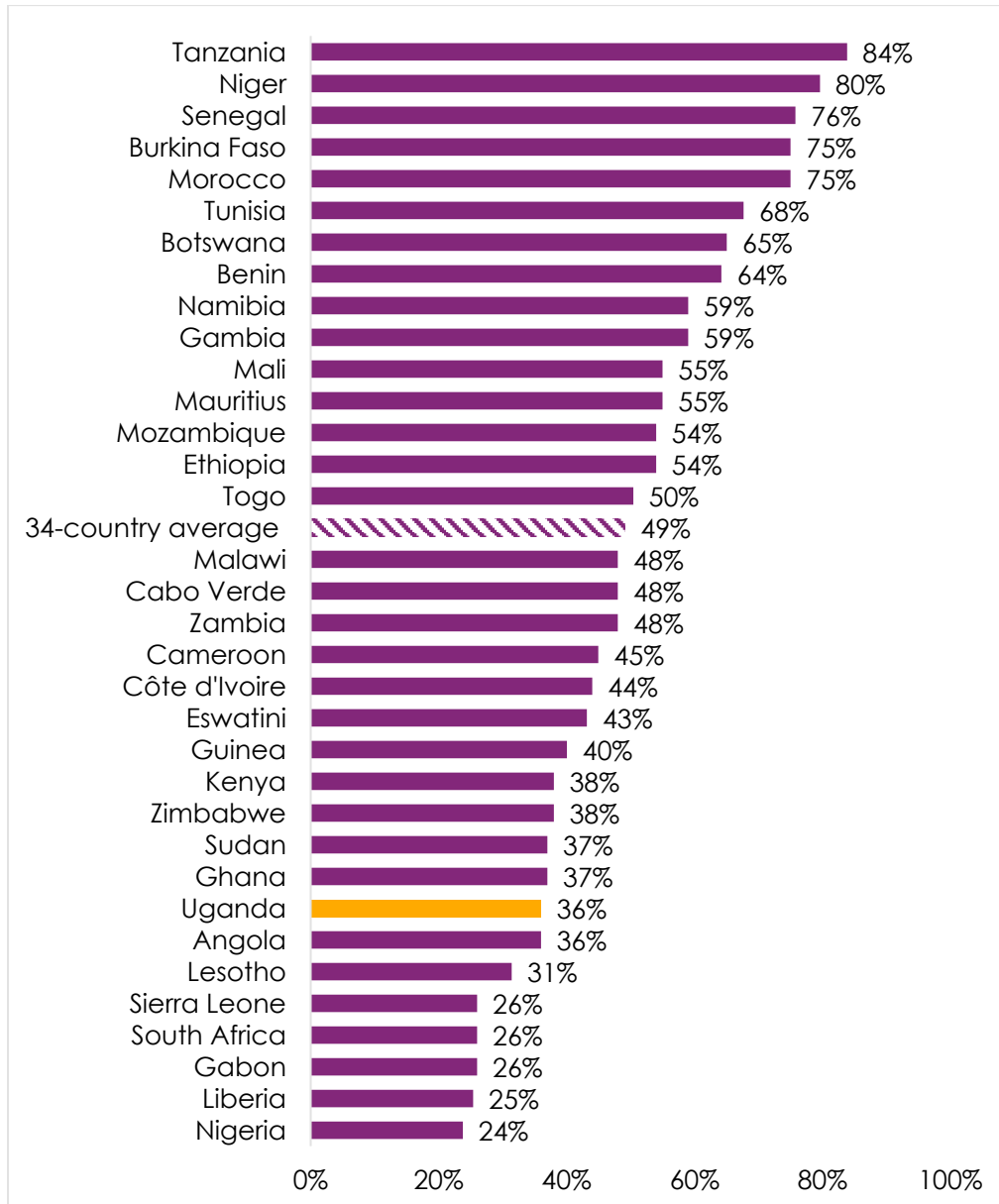
**Figure 17: Trust in institutions | Uganda | 2019-2022**



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

A comparison with the other 33 countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2019/2021 only reinforces the Ugandan Police Force's poor standing in the public eye, as its Round 8 trust rating of 36% placed it well below the 34-country average of 49%. More than twice as many citizens said they trust their police "somewhat" or "a lot" in Tanzania (84%), Niger (80%), Senegal (76%), Burkina Faso (75%), and Morocco (75%). Only six countries expressed less trust in their police than Uganda: Nigeria (24%), Liberia (25%), Gabon (26%), South Africa (26%), Sierra Leone (26%), and Lesotho (31%) (Figure 18).

**Figure 18: Trust in the police** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



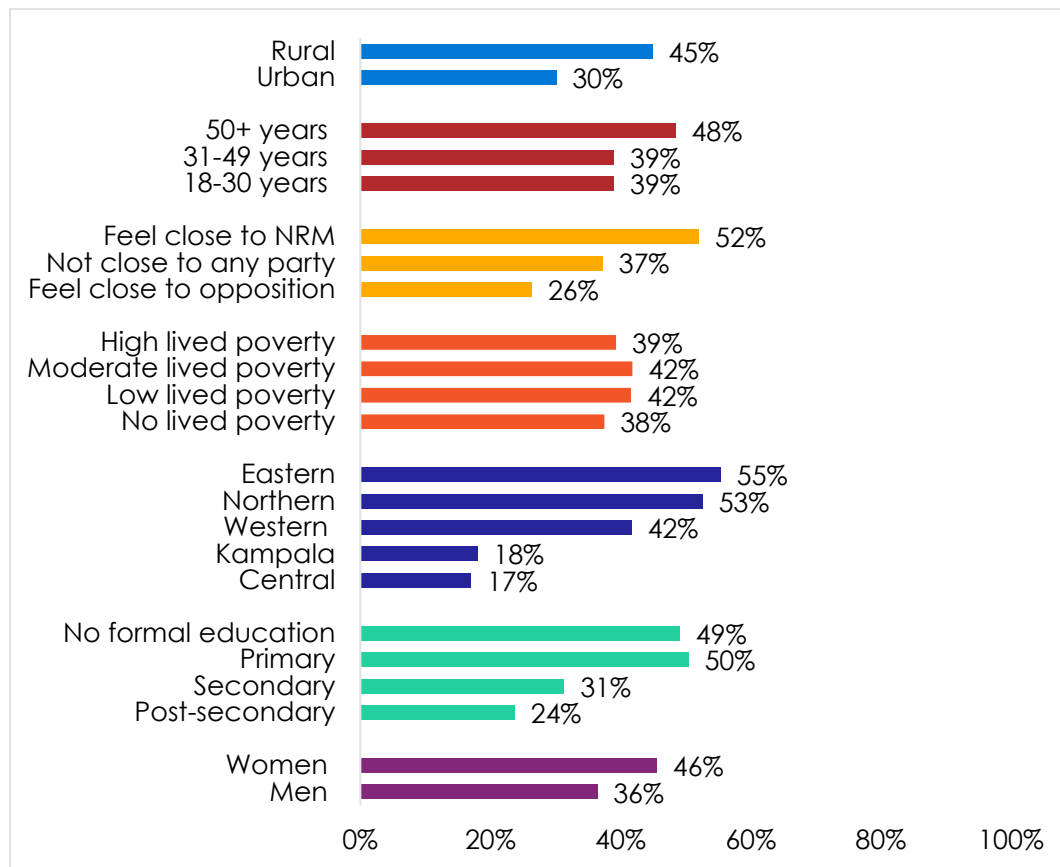
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

As it does across countries, public trust in the police varies widely across different demographic groups within Uganda (Figure 19). Trust in the police is higher among older people (48%) than among middle-aged and young adults (39%), among women (46%) than among men (36%), and among the unschooled (49%) and those with primary education (50%) than among those with secondary (31%) or post-secondary education (24%).

Rural residents trust the police more than their urban counterparts (45% vs. 30%), and residents in the Eastern (55%) and Northern (53%) regions are three times as likely as those who live in Kampala (18%) and the Central region (17%) to trust the police. Supporters of the ruling party are twice as likely to trust the police as opposition party supporters (52% vs. 26%).



**Figure 19: Trust in the police** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022

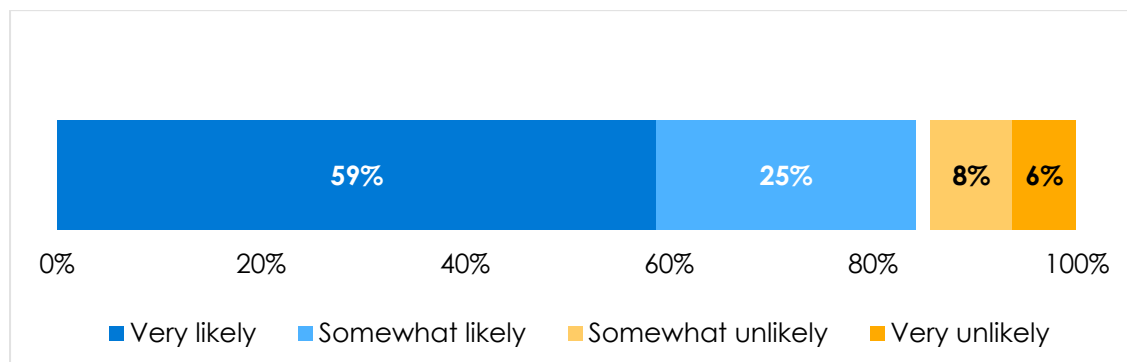


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Reporting gender-based violence to the police

One area in which Uganda give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. More than eight in 10 citizens (84%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 59% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 20).

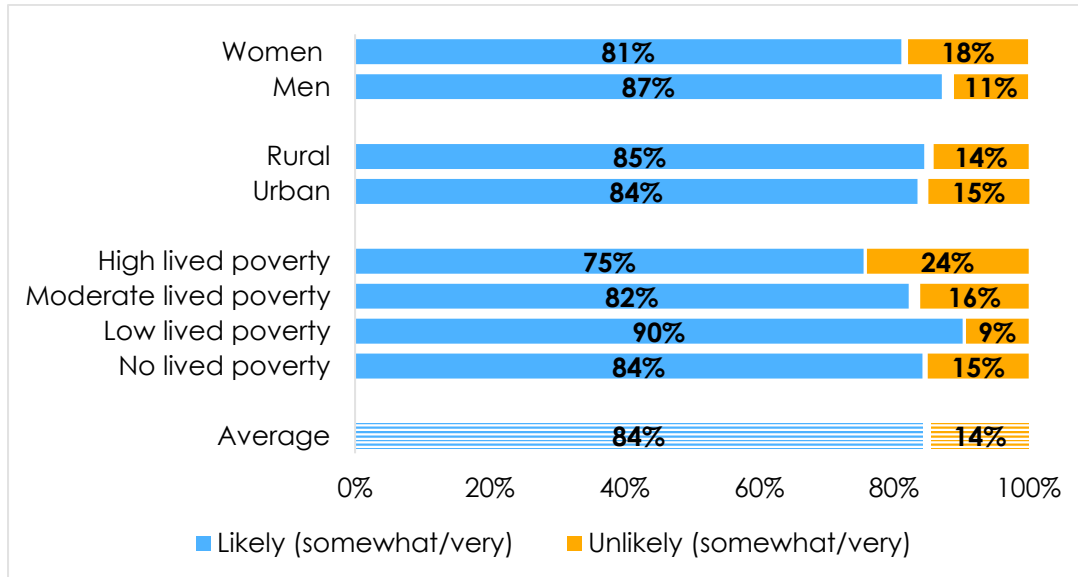
**Figure 20: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously?** | Uganda | 2022



**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?

While this assessment is quite similar across the urban-rural divide, confidence is somewhat less strong among women (81%) and the poorest citizens (75%) than among their counterparts (Figure 21).

**Figure 21: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously?** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022

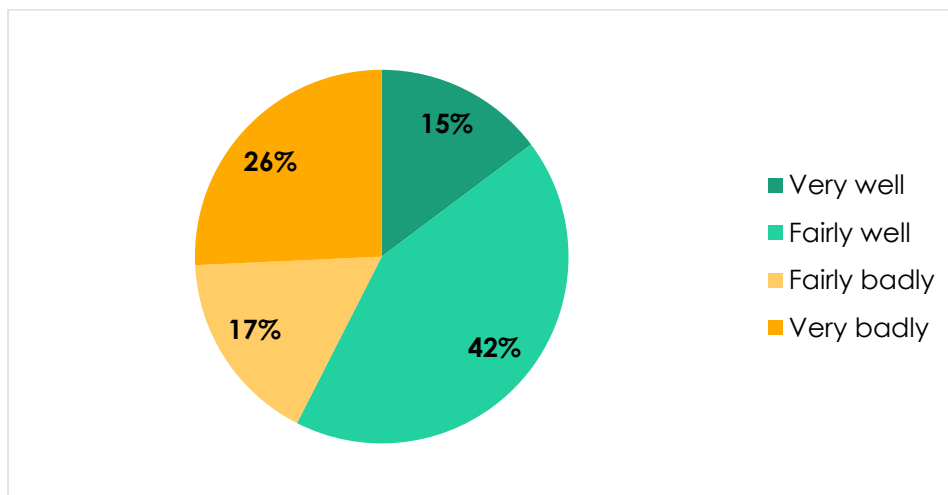


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

### Government performance on reducing crime

Despite the shortcomings highlighted by Ugandans' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and practices, more than half (57%) of citizens say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of reducing crime, while 43% are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 22).

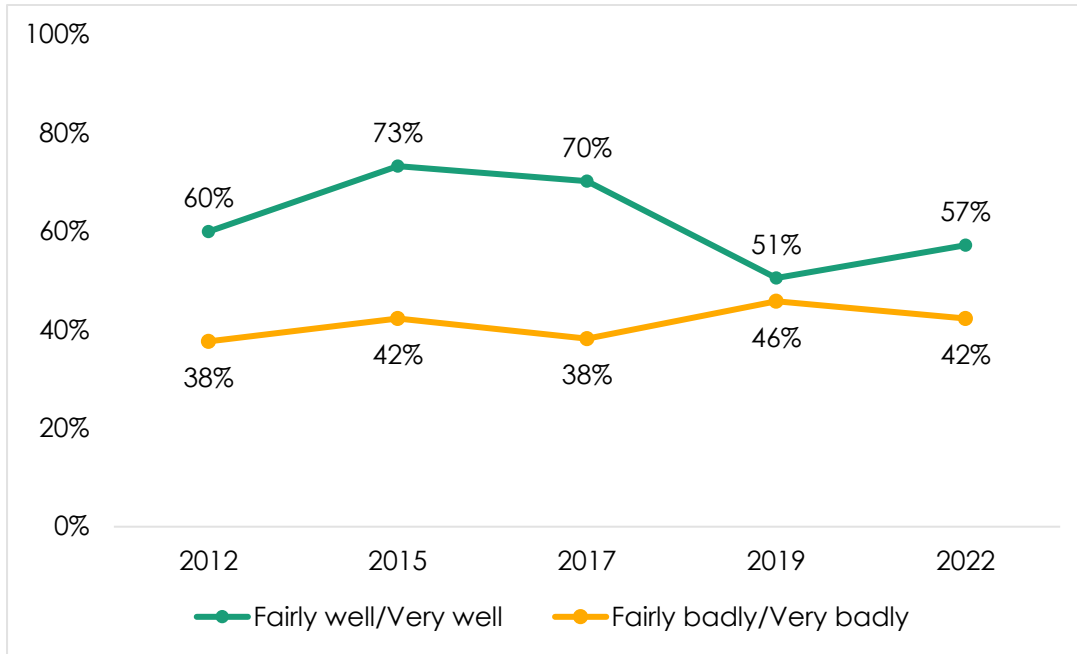
**Figure 22: Government performance on reducing crime** | Uganda | 2022



**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?*

Approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts increased by 6 percentage points compared to 2019, though it remains well below satisfaction levels in 2015 (73%) and 2017 (70%) (Figure 23).

**Figure 23: Government performance on reducing crime | Uganda | 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

Ugandans' perceptions of their police are not improving, and in some cases are getting worse. Brutality, lack of respect for people's rights, unprofessionalism, and corruption are among the failings with which a majority of citizens charge the police. The Uganda Police Force also earns poor citizen ratings in comparison to other key public institutions and policing institutions across the continent.

Even if reported misconduct and unethical behaviour are the fault of "a few bad apples," they call into question the integrity of "the whole orchard," damaging its public image and undermining its legitimacy. The steep increase in the share of Ugandans who say they don't trust the police "at all" is particularly telling.

Efforts to improve police oversight and accountability will have to go hand in hand with stronger laws on police use of force to improve public trust and support for those charged with protecting and serving Ugandans.

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