



Dispatch No. 581 | 9 December 2022

Malawians cite lack of professionalism, integrity, responsiveness among police failings

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 581 | Joseph J. Chunga and Chikumbutso Herbert Manthalu

Summary

Demands for a professional and accountable police service in Malawi have led to a number of reforms since the country's democratisation in 1994, reorienting the force from political control to community service (Nyirongo, 2021; Buliyani, 2022; Monjeza, 2021; Masiye, 2021). Mindful that the police played a central role in suppressing human freedoms during 31 years of authoritarian rule, Malawians expect a police service that is consistent with the modern democratic context.

Yet complaints of police brutality and corruption continue. Public protests against the conduct of the 2019 election revealed fractured relations between the police and the citizenry, including accusations of politicisation of the service and use of excessive force; it was left to the Malawian Defence Force to manage the protests (Kuwali, 2022; Kanyongolo, 2022). Charges of corruption have reached the service's highest echelons, as the country's police chief was relieved of his duties and arrested in June on suspicion of involvement in corrupt procurement practices (Chimjeka, 2022). In early December, the arrest and harassment of the director general of the Anti-Corruption Bureau led to allegations of police collaboration with corrupt government officials and drew the anger of many Malawians (Kayuni, 2022).

In April, after Afrobarometer released results of its 2022 survey showing that the police are more widely viewed as corrupt than other key state institutions, the Malawi Police Service (2022) issued a statement acknowledging corruption challenges and indicating that the service has been working to improve its professionalism and image.

This dispatch reports on findings of a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2022) questionnaire to explore Malawians' experiences and assessments of police professionalism.

Overall, citizens are quite critical of the police. Fewer than three in 10 think the police usually operate in a professional manner and respect human rights. A majority say the police stop drivers without good reason, use excessive force, and engage in criminal activities, at least "sometimes." Popular trust in the police is fairly low amid perceptions that many officers are involved in corruption. Many citizens report having to pay bribes to get police assistance or avoid problems with the police.

Amid increasing feelings of insecurity, citizens continue to give the government poor marks on crime reduction.

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 Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in February 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- Almost half (46%) of Malawians say they felt unsafe at least once while walking in their neighbourhood during the previous year, while one-third (32%) say they feared crime in their home at least once. Frequent experiences of insecurity have increased since 2017.
- Among citizens who requested help from the police during the previous year, 62% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 40% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who had other types of encounters with the police, such as during traffic stops or investigations, 43% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Fewer than three in 10 Malawians (28%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect citizens' rights.
- A majority of citizens say the police at least “sometimes” stop drivers without good reason (59%), use excessive force when managing protests (58%) and when dealing with suspected criminals (58%), and engage in criminal activities (58%).
 - But Malawians overwhelmingly (90%) think the police are likely to take reported cases of gender-based violence seriously.
- More than four in 10 citizens (42%) say “most” or “all” police are corrupt, the worst rating among 11 institutions/officials the survey asked about. But perceived police corruption has decreased by 12 percentage points since 2017.
- Fewer than half of Malawians say they trust the police “somewhat” (20%) or “a lot” (25%).
- More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in its efforts to reduce crime, an assessment that has held steady over the past eight years.

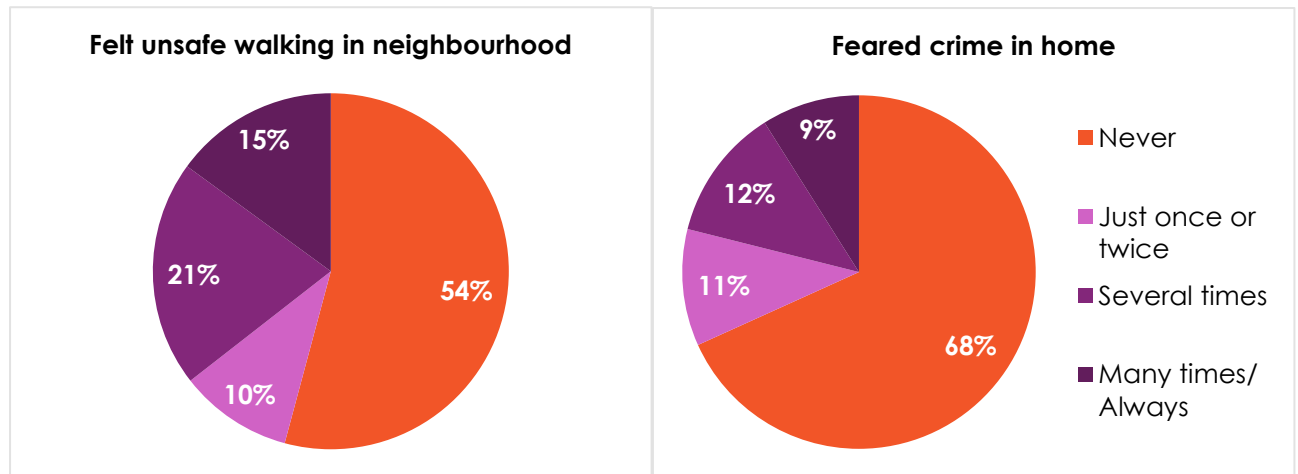
Sense of security

The primary role of the police is to ensure the protection of people and their property. To a great extent, people's sense of security will depend on how effectively the police perform this role.

Survey responses show that nearly half (46%) of Malawians report feeling unsafe at least once while walking in their neighbourhood during the previous year, including 36% who had this experience “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).

One-third (32%) of citizens say they feared crime in their home at least once during the previous 12 months, including 21% who did so “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”

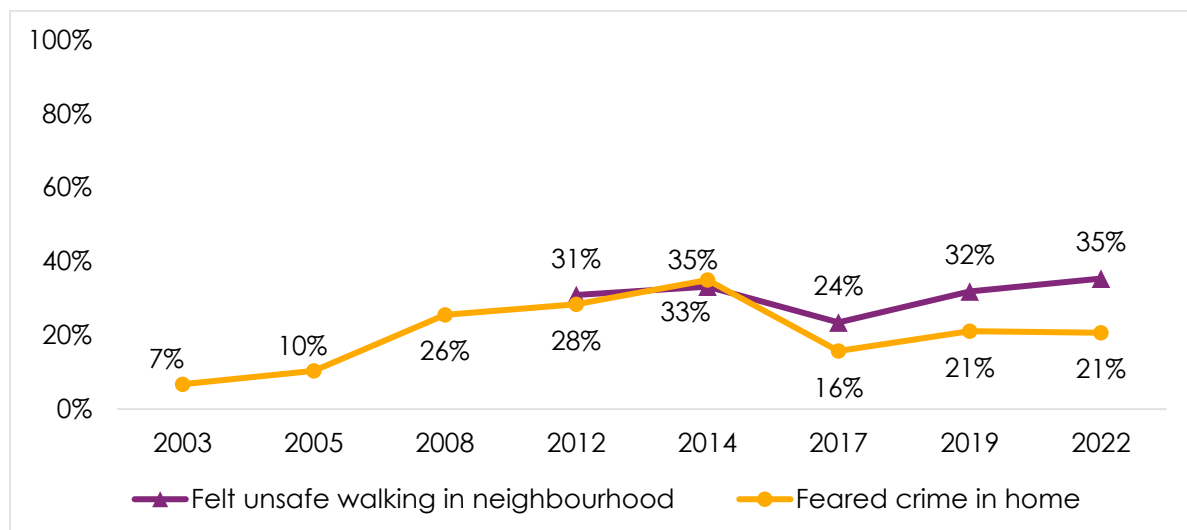
Figure 1: Insecurity in neighbourhood and fear of crime | Malawi | 2022



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?

During the past decade, these feelings of insecurity peaked in 2014, when about one-third of citizens reported feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood (33%) and fearing crime at home (35%) at least “several times” (Figure 2). Both numbers dipped in 2017 (to 24% and 16%, respectively) but have risen again since then.

Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’ | Malawi | 2003-2022

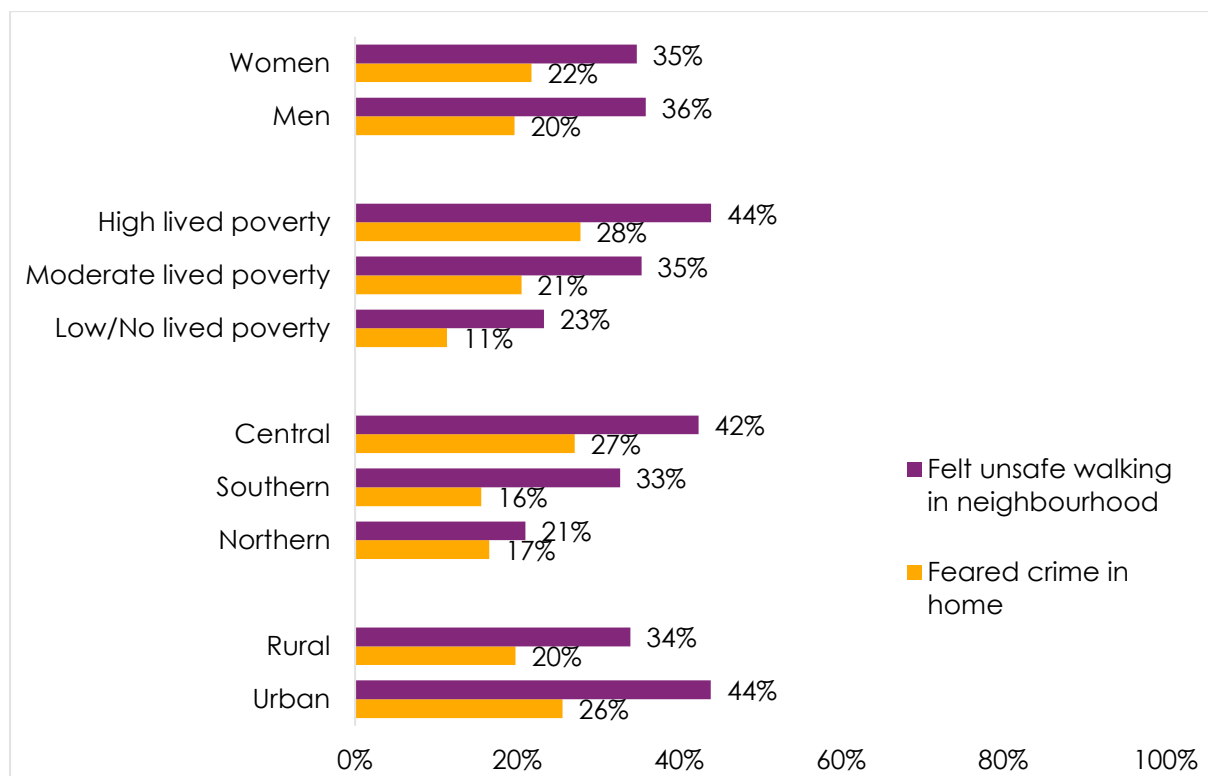


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Men and women are about equally likely to report these experiences of insecurity (Figure 3). But insecurity is considerably higher among poor citizens (44% felt unsafe walking, 28% feared crime) than among their better-off counterparts (23% and 11%, respectively, among those with no or low lived poverty).¹

Urban residents experience greater insecurity than rural dwellers. And the Central Region has higher levels of insecurity than the Southern and Northern regions.

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’
 | by gender, lived poverty, and location | Malawi | 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

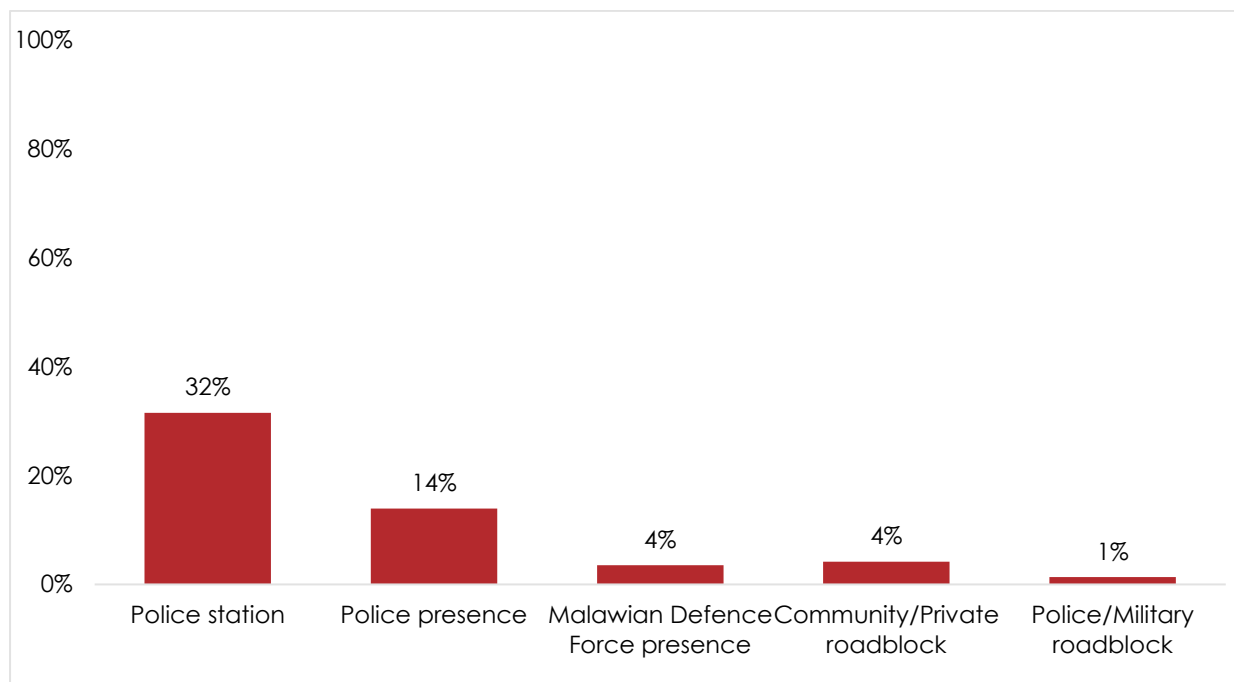
Security installations and the presence of security personnel may affect people’s sense of security. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in 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.

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).

In Malawi, Afrobarometer teams found that about one-third (32%) of EAs had a police station within walking distance, while police personnel or police vehicles were observed in 14% of EAs (Figure 4). Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or military vehicles (4%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (4%), and roadblocks by the police or army (1%).

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

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Malawi | 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

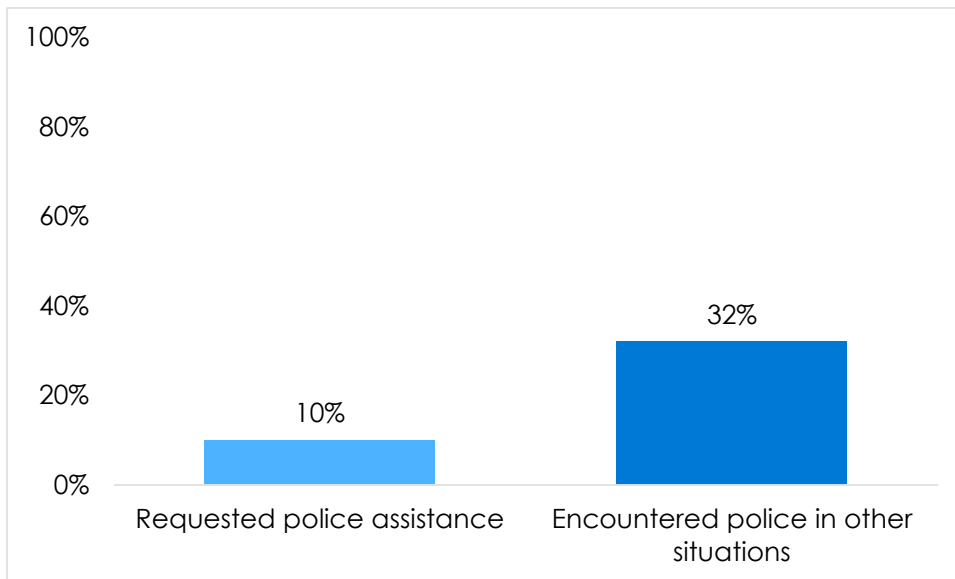
Descriptions of Malawians' encounters with the police shed light on the nature of policing in the country.

Only one in 10 citizens (10%) say they requested assistance from the police during the previous 12 months. Three times as many (32%) encountered the police in other (often involuntary) situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

Among respondents who say they asked for help from the police, more than six in 10 (62%) say it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to obtain the assistance they needed, while only 38% found the process easy (Figure 6).

Moreover, four in 10 (40%) of those who sought assistance say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to get the needed service (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Malawi | 2022

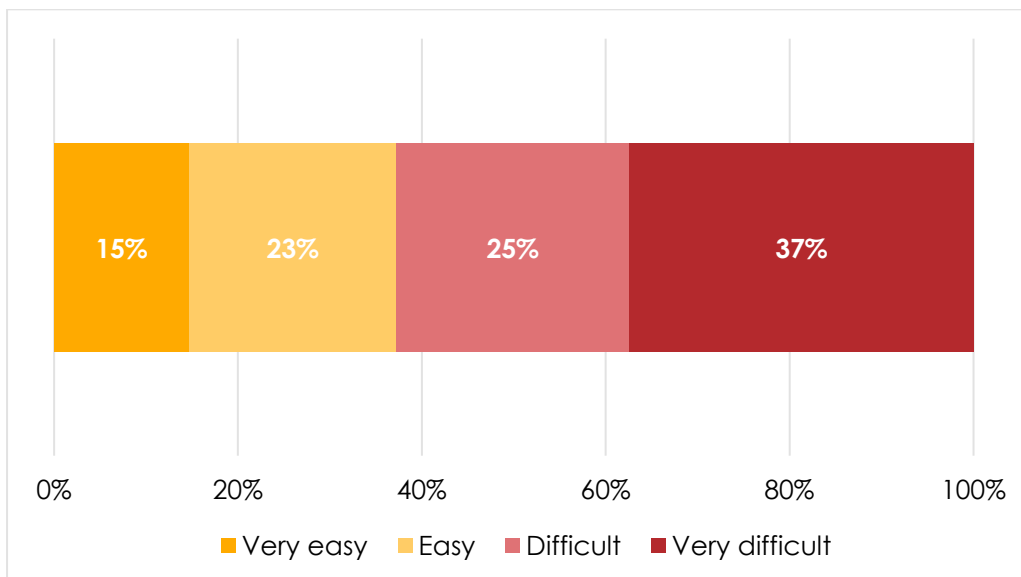


Respondents were asked:

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

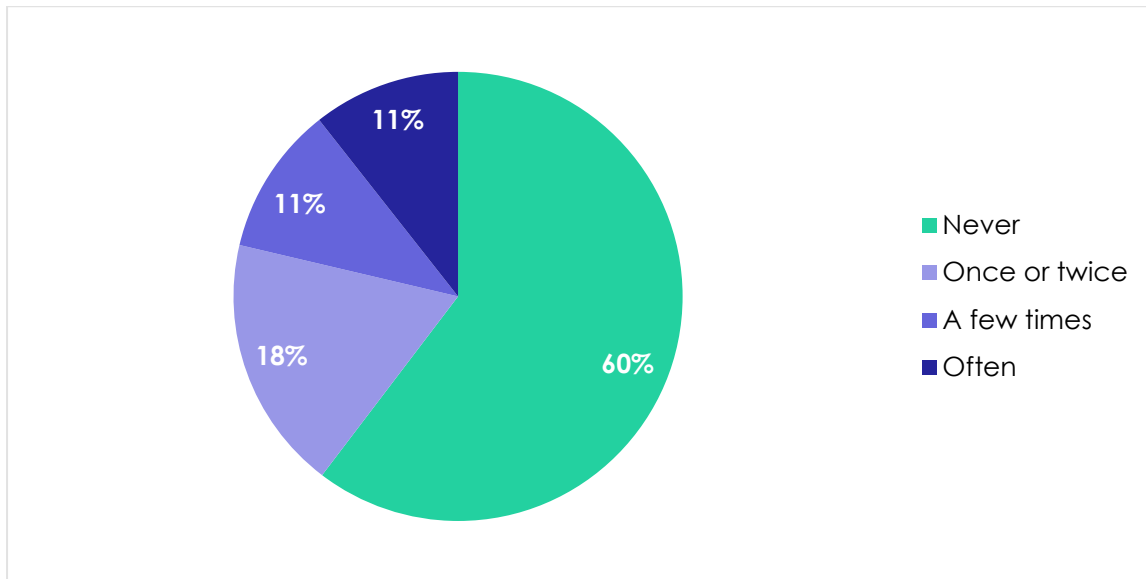
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

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



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

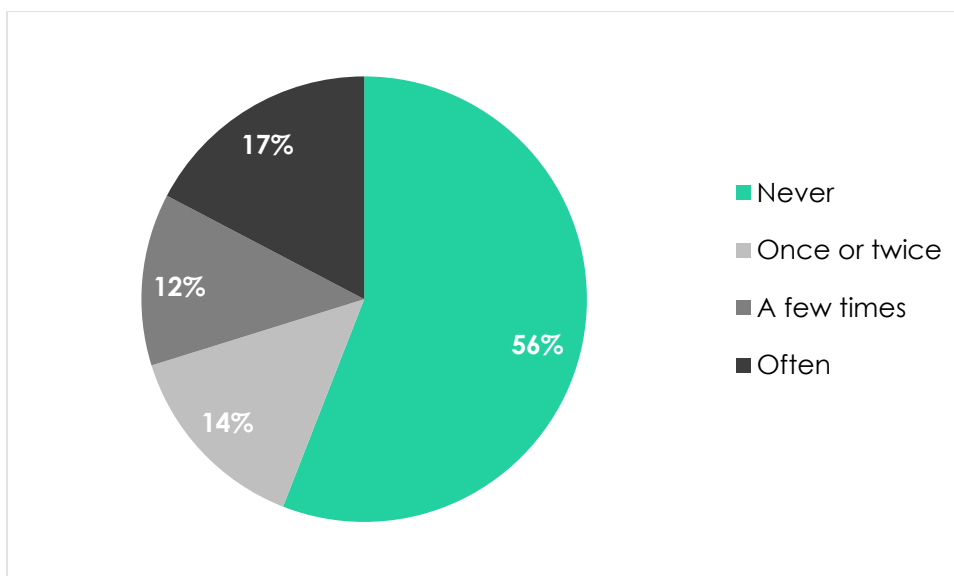
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Malawi | 2022



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

Among citizens who had encounters with the police in other situations, more than four in 10 (43%) say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems, including 17% who say this happened "often" (Figure 8).

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



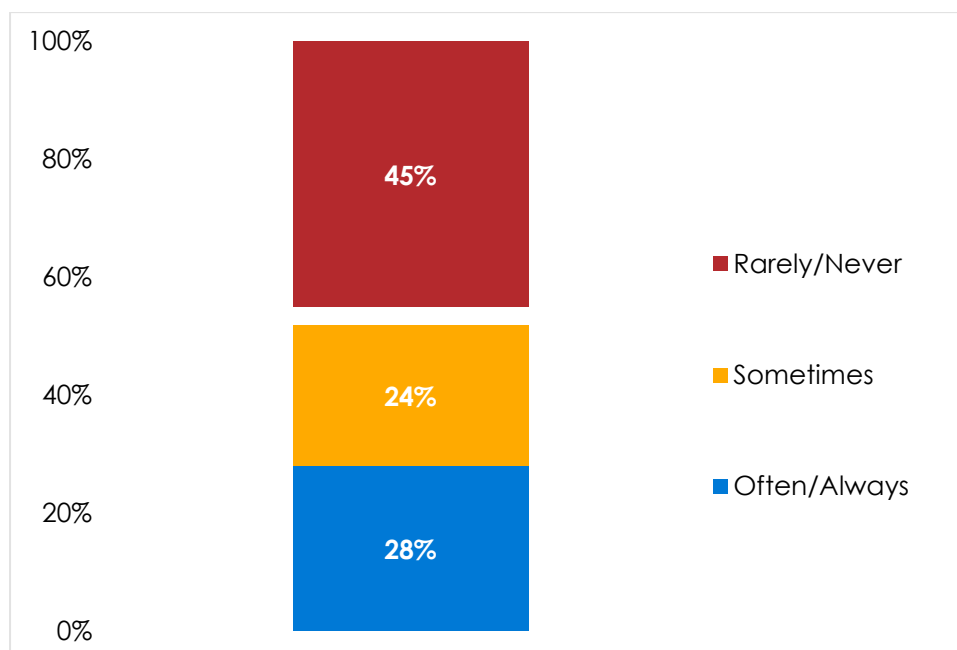
Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If at least once:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not encounter the police in such situations are excluded.)*

To summarise the experience among all Malawian adults during the past year, more than one in six (16%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police conduct

Fewer than three in 10 Malawians (28%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens. Almost half (45%) hold the view that the police “rarely” or “never” operate professionally, while 24% say they “sometimes” do (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens’ rights? | Malawi | 2022



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

With respect to improper police conduct, about six in 10 Malawians assert that the police “sometimes” (18%), “often” (26%), or “always” (14%) stop drivers without good reason (Figure 10).²

Majorities also say the police at least “sometimes” use excessive force during protests (58%), use excessive force when dealing with suspected criminals (58%), and engage in criminal activities (58%), including 33% who believe the police “often” or “always” engage in each of these improper practices. Only about one-third of citizens think these practices are rare or unheard of.

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 26% “often” and 14% “always” sum to 41%).

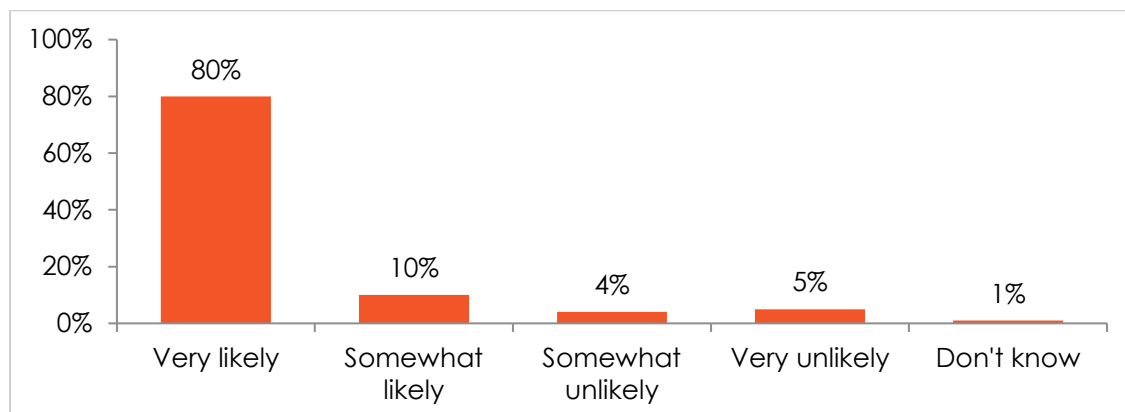
Figure 10: Improper police practices | Malawi | 2022



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

Contrary to these fairly negative views of police conduct, Malawians have high confidence in the police service's attitude toward reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV). Eight in 10 respondents (80%) say the police are "very likely" to take reports of GBV seriously, in addition to 10% who think they are "somewhat likely" to do so (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Malawi | 2022



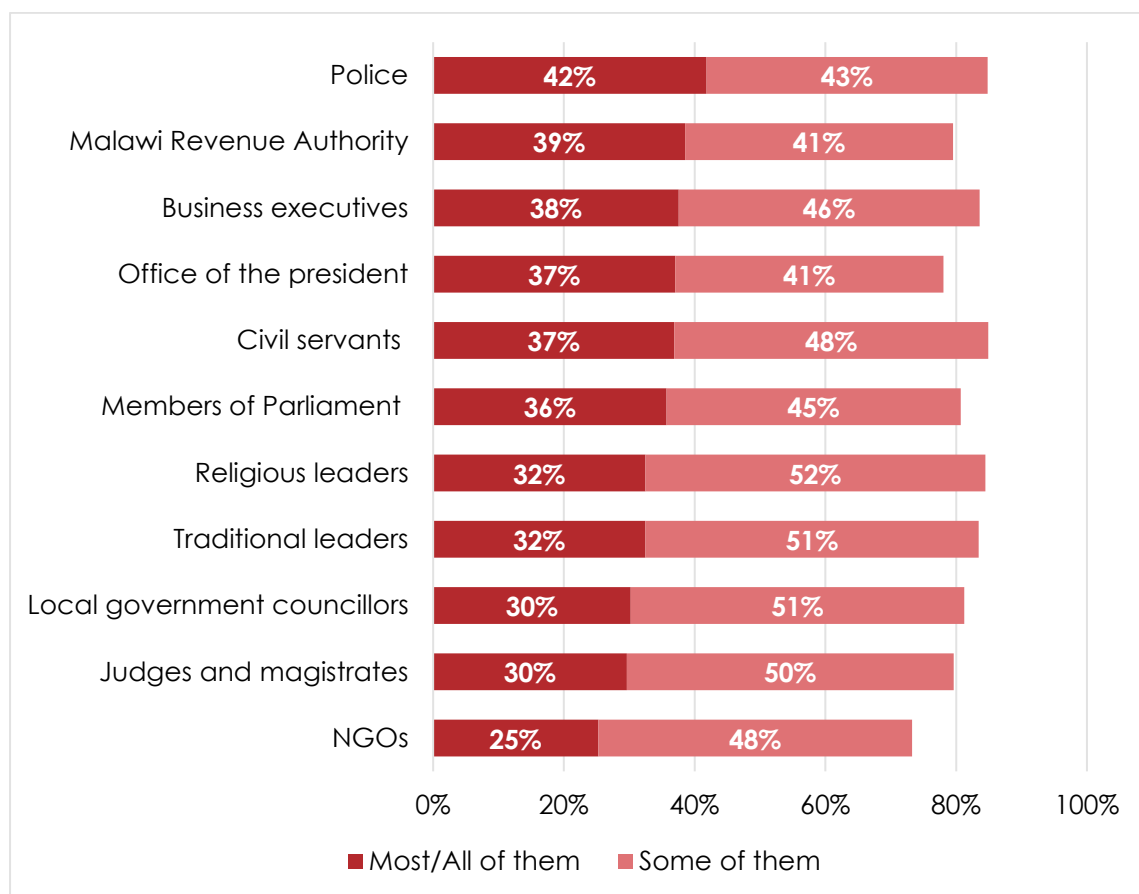
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?

Police corruption

Considering that substantial proportions of the population report having to pay bribes to get police assistance or avoid problems with the police, it is perhaps not surprising that the police are more widely seen as corrupt than 10 other public institutions/officials that the survey asked about.

More than four in 10 citizens (42%) say “most” or “all” police officers are corrupt, outpacing perceived widespread corruption among tax officials (39%), business executives (38%), officials in the Presidency (37%), and civil servants (37%) (Figure 12). In addition, 43% of respondents believe that “some” police officials are corrupt.

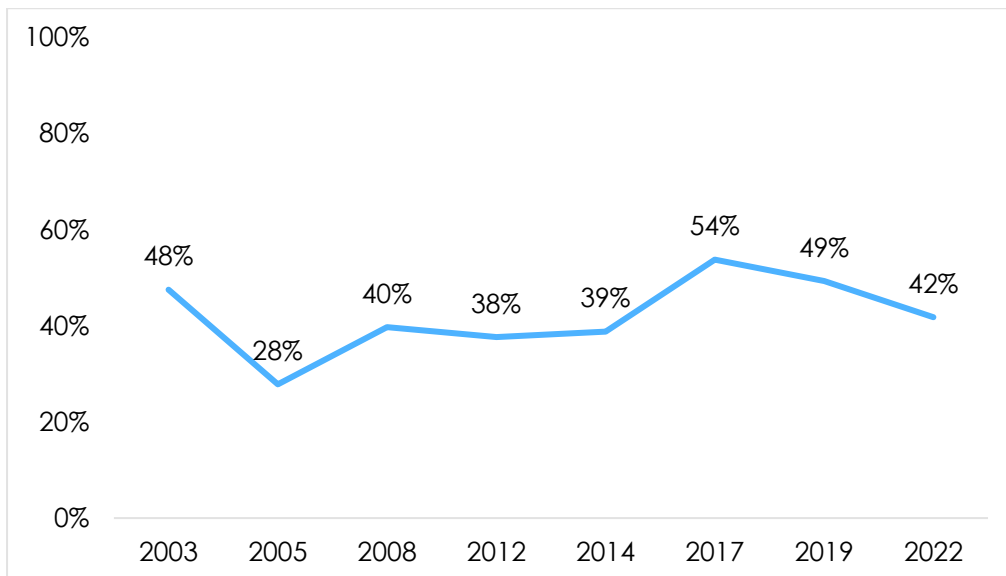
Figure 12: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Malawi | 2022



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 in Malawi are corrupt spiked in Afrobarometer's 2017 survey, when a majority (54%) expressed this view, and have declined by 12 percentage points since then (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | Malawi | 2003-2022

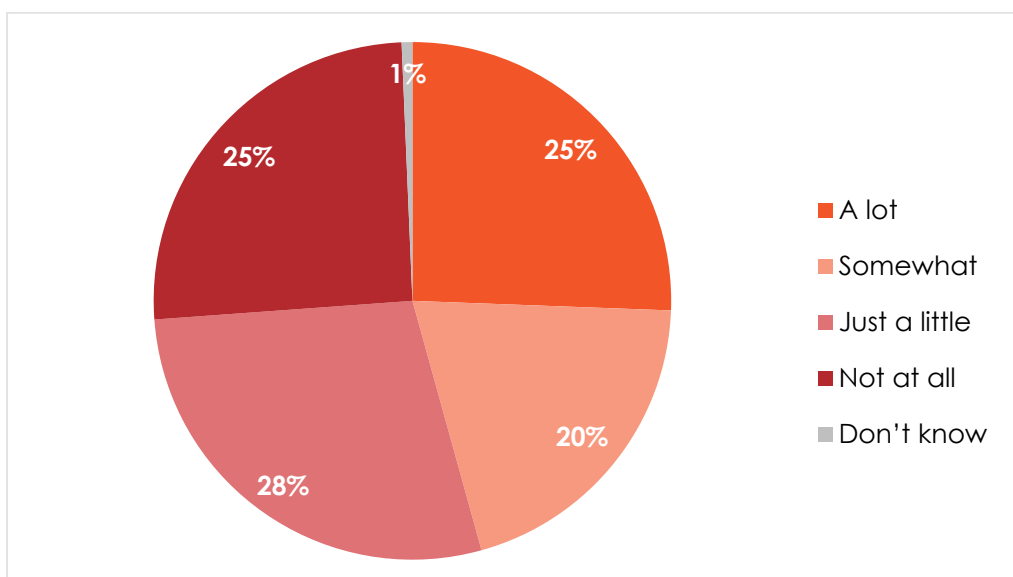


Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Trust in the police

While perceptions of corruption are fairly high, public trust in the Malawian police is relatively low. Fewer than half (46%) of citizens say they trust the police "somewhat" (20%) or "a lot" (25%), while a majority express "just a little" trust (28%) or no trust at all (25%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust in the police | Malawi | 2022

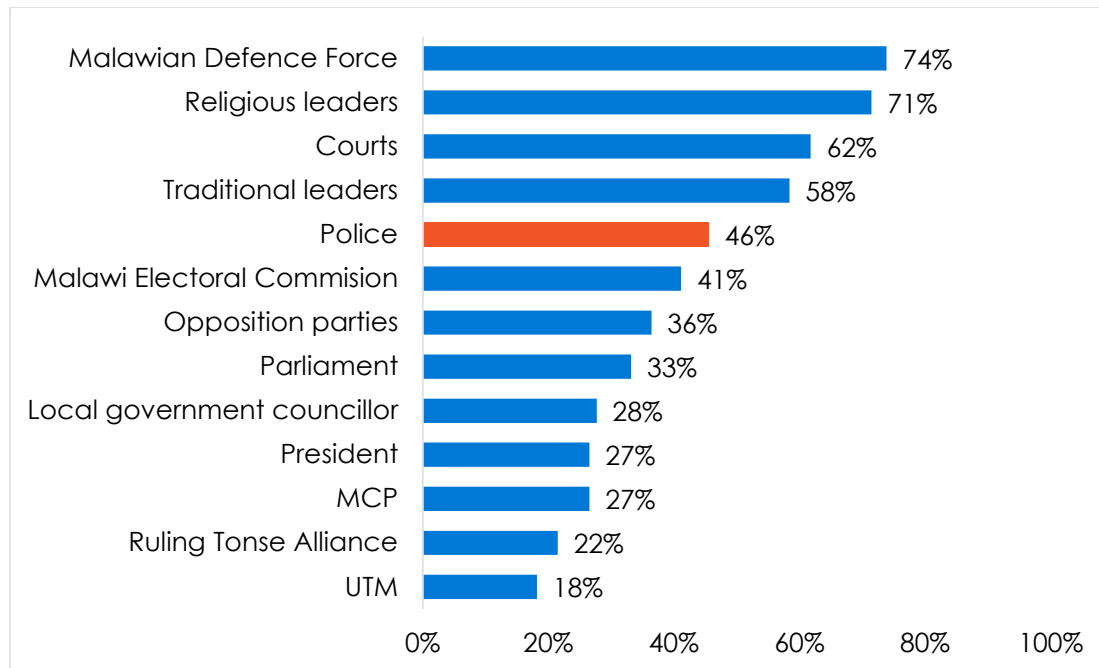


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

This contrasts starkly with the trust citizens express in the Malawian Defence Force (74%), which is the most trusted of the public institutions that survey respondents were asked to

assess (Figure 15). Religious leaders (71%), the courts (62%), and traditional leaders (58%) also outrank the police in popular trust, while the Malawi Electoral Commission and political figures and bodies are less trusted than the police.

Figure 15: Trust in institutions | Malawi | 2022

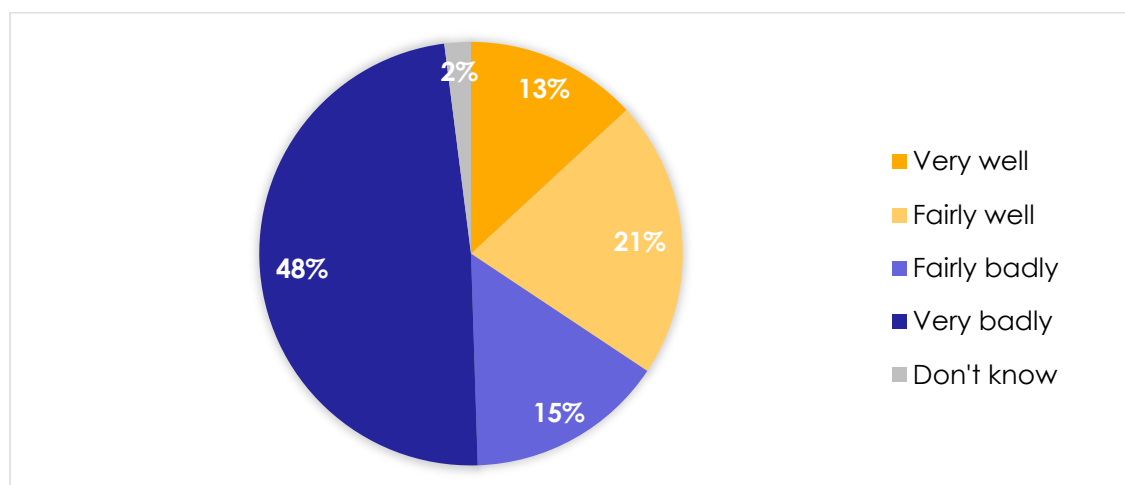


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Government performance on reducing crime

More than six in 10 Malawians (63%) say the government is faring "fairly badly" or "very badly" in its efforts to reduce crime. Only one-third (34%) think the government is doing a good job on crime (Figure 16).

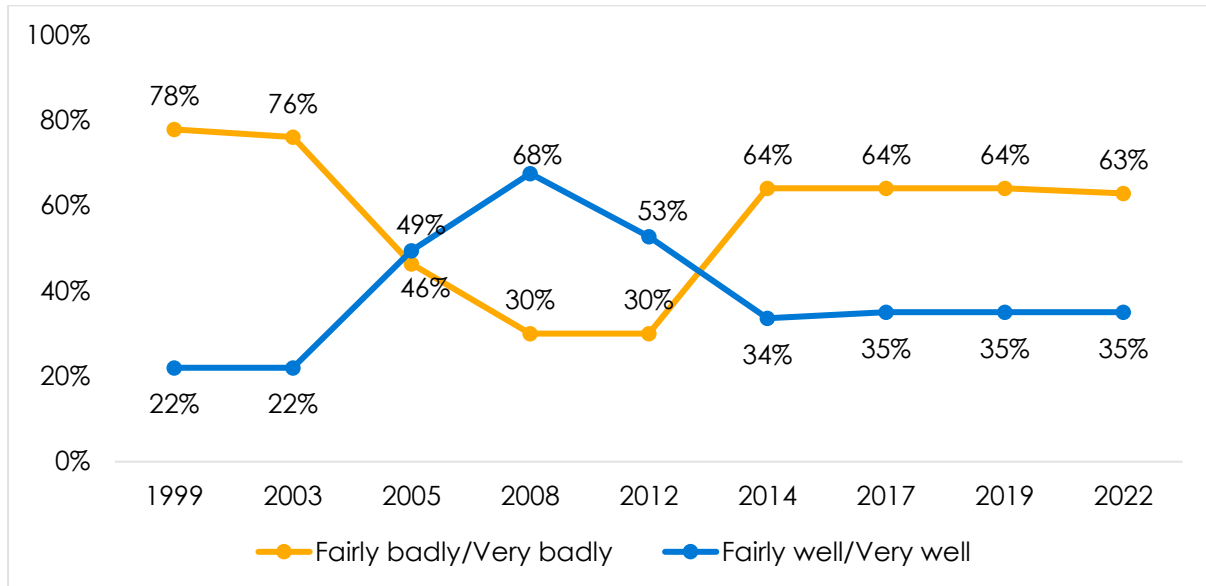
Figure 16: Government performance on reducing crime | Malawi | 2022



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?

Assessments of the government's performance on reducing crime have been stable since 2014, after dropping from a high point (68% approval) in 2008 (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Government performance on reducing crime | Malawi | 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

This survey establishes that a majority of Malawians don't think their police operate professionally and respect citizens' rights. Too widely, the police are seen as neither trustworthy nor particularly effective: Many citizens find it difficult to get police assistance, have to pay bribes, and are dissatisfied with the government's performance on crime reduction.

Negative views of the police have serious implications. Lack of trust and perceived unprofessionalism and abusive practices are threats to public compliance with the law and may contribute to cases of people taking the law into their own hands. A climate of insecurity is a threat to well-being and economic development. These findings suggest that the agenda of police reforms has not yet been completed.

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 for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
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