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Batswana offer mixed assessments of police trustworthiness and professionalism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 597 | Mogopodi Lekorwe, Thabo Bogopa, and Tosin Salau

Summary

The 2016 World Internal Security & Police Index ranked the Botswana Police Service as Africa's best (47th worldwide), highlighting low levels of corruption and strong public confidence in the police at the local level (International Police Science Association, 2016). Police officials cited community policing in partnership with local organisations and traditional leaders among their crime-fighting strategies (European Times, 2016).

More recently, however, Botswana's police has made headlines for its use of force, including last year's fatal shooting of nine suspects in a cash-in-transit robbery (Ndebele, 2022) and of two bystanders – along with three suspects – in response to another robbery (Mmegionline, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the police was repeatedly accused of brutalising citizens in the name of enforcing lockdown restrictions (Makwati, 2021). Members of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament have raised concerns about police brutality (Mmegionline, 2021), and President Mokgweetsi Masisi issued a statement condemning police violence and promising accountability (Pindula, 2020).

Critics charge that officers accused of abuse often go unpunished, and an effort to establish an Independent Police Complaints Commission have so far been fruitless (Law on Police Use of Force Worldwide, 2022).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and assessments of police professionalism.

In Botswana, citizens offer mixed assessments of police integrity, trustworthiness, and conduct. While relatively few report having to pay bribes to the police, most say at least some officers are corrupt, and fewer than half say they trust the police. Poor people are particularly likely to see the police as corrupt and untrustworthy.

Majorities think the police at least sometimes use excessive force with criminal suspects and engage in illegal activities themselves, and only a minority say the police generally operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.

Overall, about half of citizens report feeling unsafe during the previous year, and approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has plummeted in the past three years.

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 Botswana, led by Star Awards, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Batswana in July-August 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 Botswana in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- About half of Batswana say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (50%) and feared crime in their home (45%) at least once during the previous year. Urban residents and poor citizens are considerably more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their rural and better-off counterparts.
- About three in 10 citizens (29%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. More (37%) 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, a majority (61%) say it was easy to get the assistance they needed. But 9% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, the same proportion (9%) say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- More than one-third of citizens (36%) say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt – the fourth-worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Fewer than half (46%) of Batswana say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot." Poor citizens are far less likely to trust the police (32%) than those who are economically better off (47%-56%). The share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has almost doubled since 2019.
- Significant proportions of the population say the police "often" or "always" engage in improper practices, including using excessive force in dealing with criminal suspects (41%) and in managing protests (24%), participating in illegal activities (35%), and stopping drivers without good reason (24%).
- Only 38% of respondents say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.
- Only four in 10 citizens (40%) approve of the government's performance on reducing crime, a 29-percentage-point drop since 2019.

Sense of security

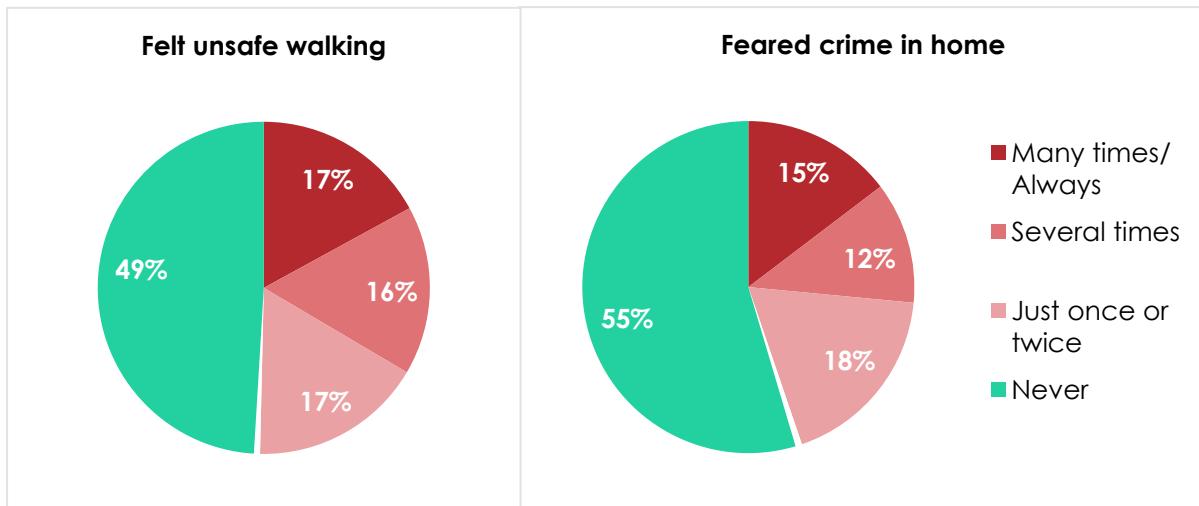
The most basic role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Batswana feel protected?

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Half (50%) of Batswana say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 33% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 1).

Similarly, 45% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 27% who say this happened "several times," "many times," or "always."

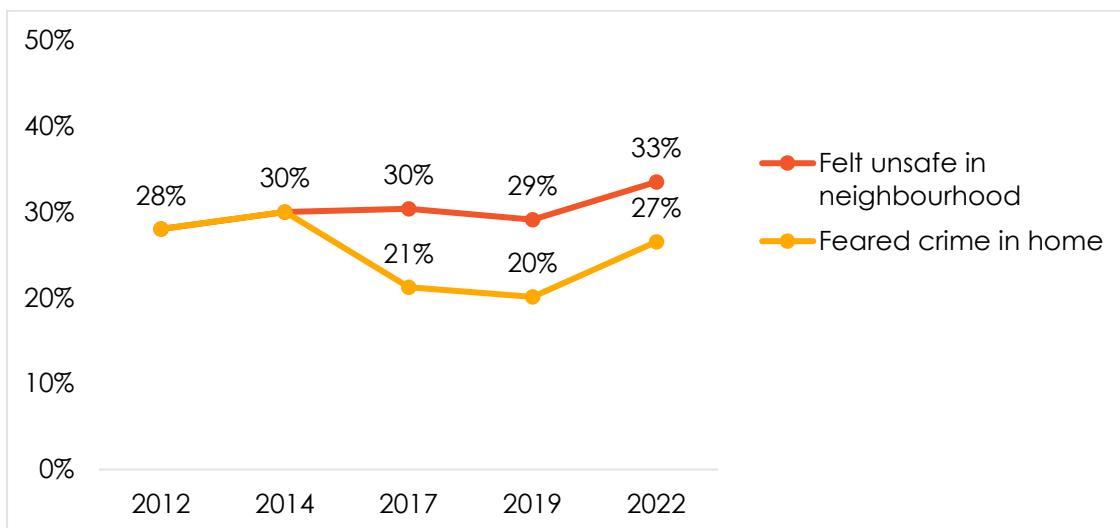
The proportion of Batswana who report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood at least "several times" has increased by 5 percentage points over the past decade, while fear of crime in the home is back to about its 2012 level, losing improvements recorded in 2017 and 2019 surveys (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Botswana | 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 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Botswana | 2012-2022

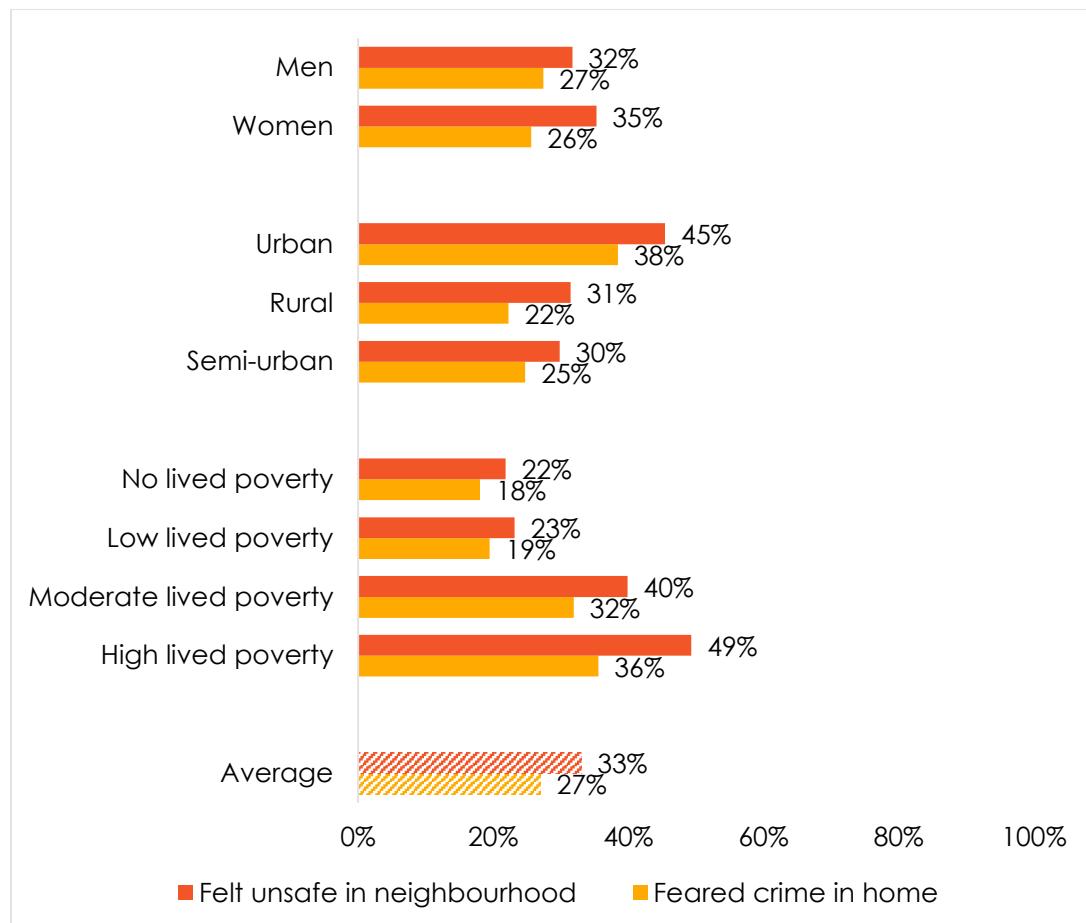


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

These experiences of insecurity are significantly more common in cities than in rural and semi-urban areas (by at least 13 percentage points on both indicators) (Figure 3). They increase

sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty¹: The poorest citizens are at least twice as likely as the best-off respondents to feel unsafe in their neighbourhood (49% vs. 22%) and to fear crime in their home (36% vs. 18%).

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

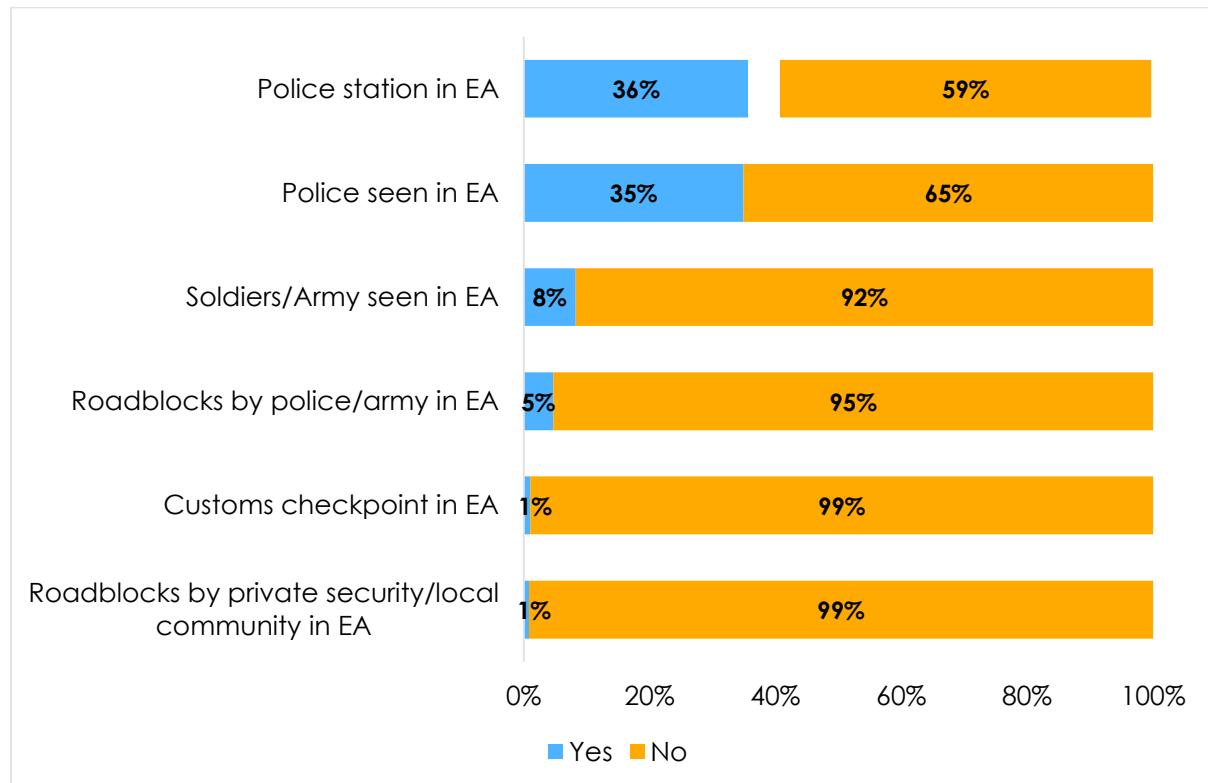
One factor that might affect people's sense of security is the presence of security forces. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in the area. 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.

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 Botswana, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of 36% of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 35% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or other military (8%), roadblocks by the police or army (5%), customs checkpoints (1%), and roadblocks by private security or the local community (1%).

The share of citizens who felt unsafe walking in the neighbourhood does not vary greatly based on whether they have a police station in the area, but those who live near a police station are actually more likely to report having feared crime in their home (50% vs. 41% of those without a nearby police station).

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Botswana | 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?

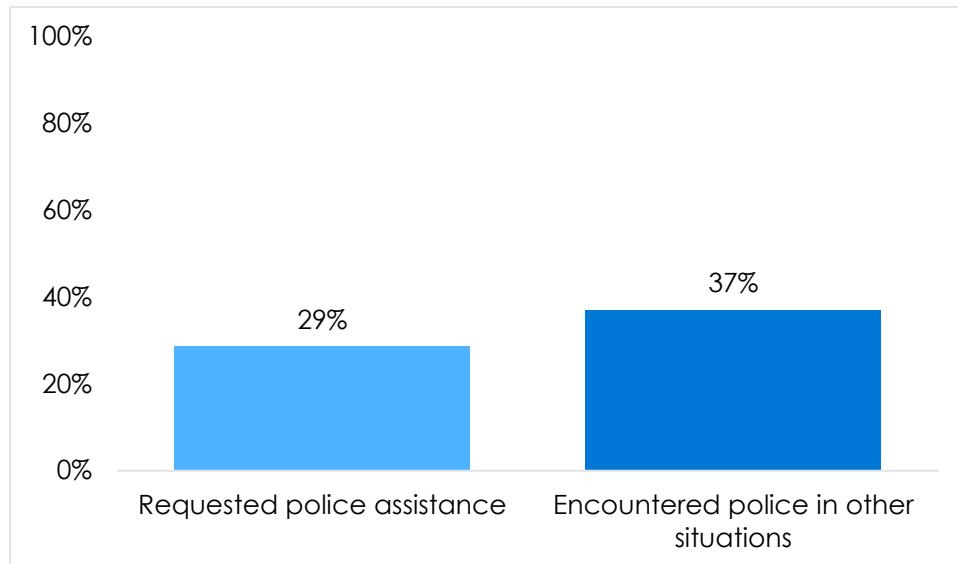
Encounters with the police

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

About three in 10 respondents (29%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Nearly four in 10 (37%) report encountering the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

About one in seven (14%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while half (49%) say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Botswana | 2022



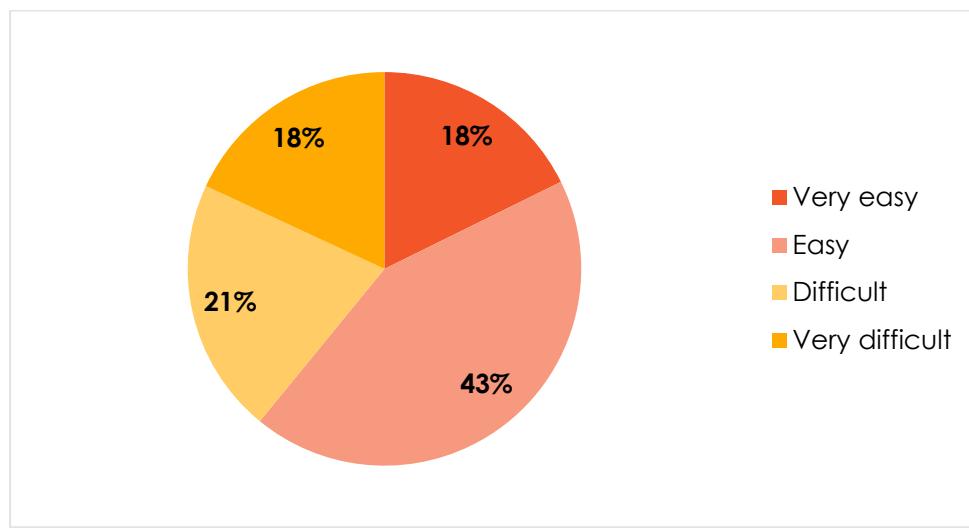
Respondents were asked:

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, a majority say it was "easy" (43%) or "very easy" (18%) to get the assistance they needed. Four in 10 (39%) describe it as difficult to get police assistance (Figure 6).

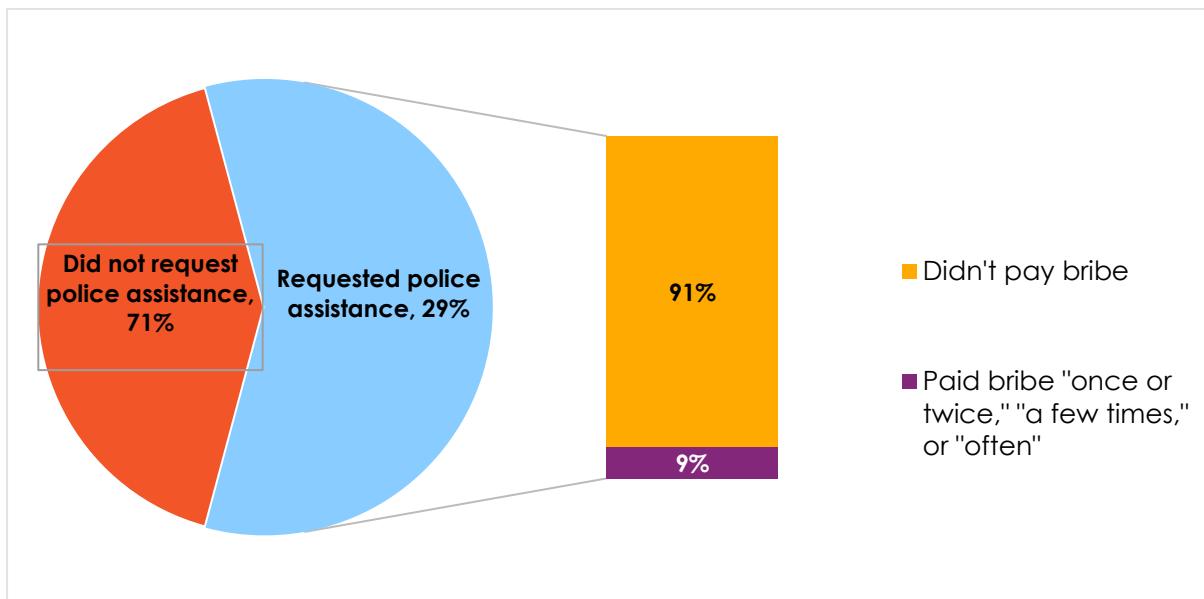
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Botswana | 2022



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.)

Among those who asked for help from the police, about one in 10 (9%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer at least once in order to get the assistance they needed, including 2% who say they did so "often" (Figure 7).

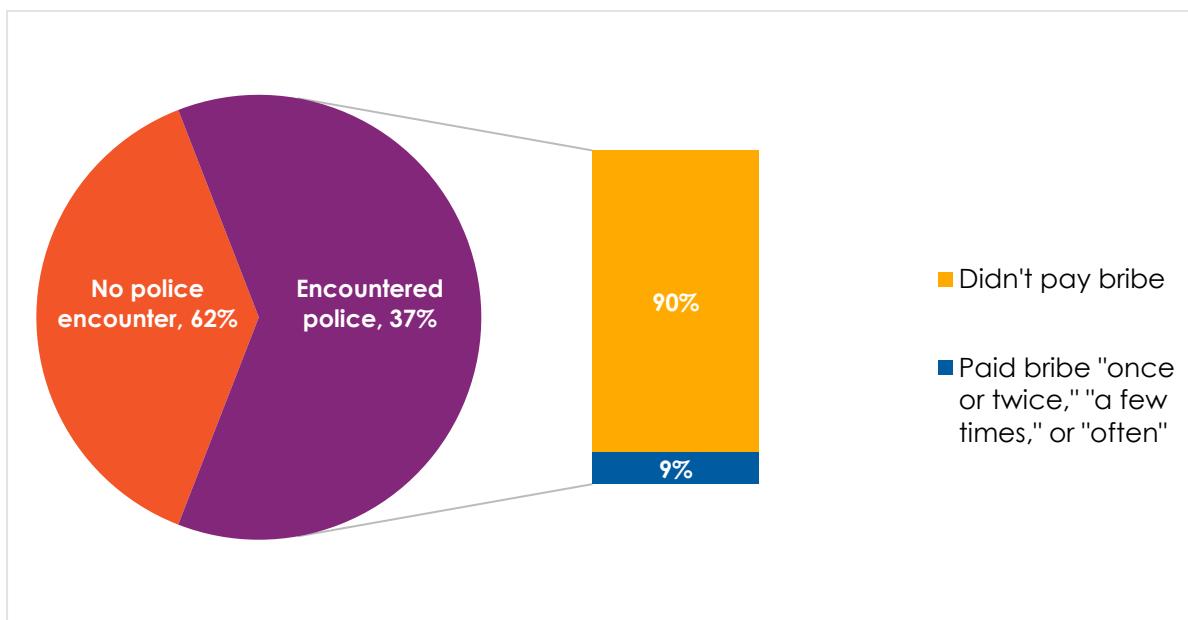
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Botswana | 2022



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 Batswana who encountered the police in other situations, the same proportion (9%) report having to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 3% who say this happened "often" (Figure 8).

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



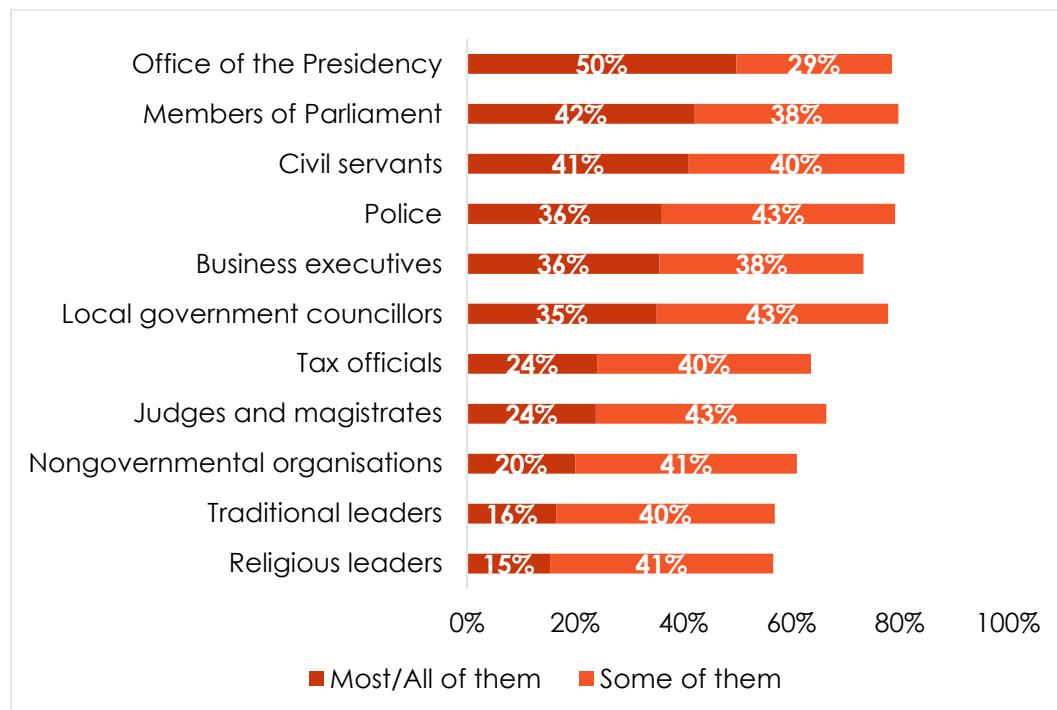
Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police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

To summarise the experience among all adult Batswana during the past year, one in 20 (5%) report having paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

Considering the relatively small proportion of citizens who say they paid bribes to the police, it may be surprising that close to four in five Batswana (79%) believe that at least “some” police officials are corrupt. More than one-third (36%) of citizens say “most” or “all” police are corrupt – the fourth-worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about, though better than the officials in the Presidency (50%), members of Parliament (42%), and civil servants (41%) (Figure 9).

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



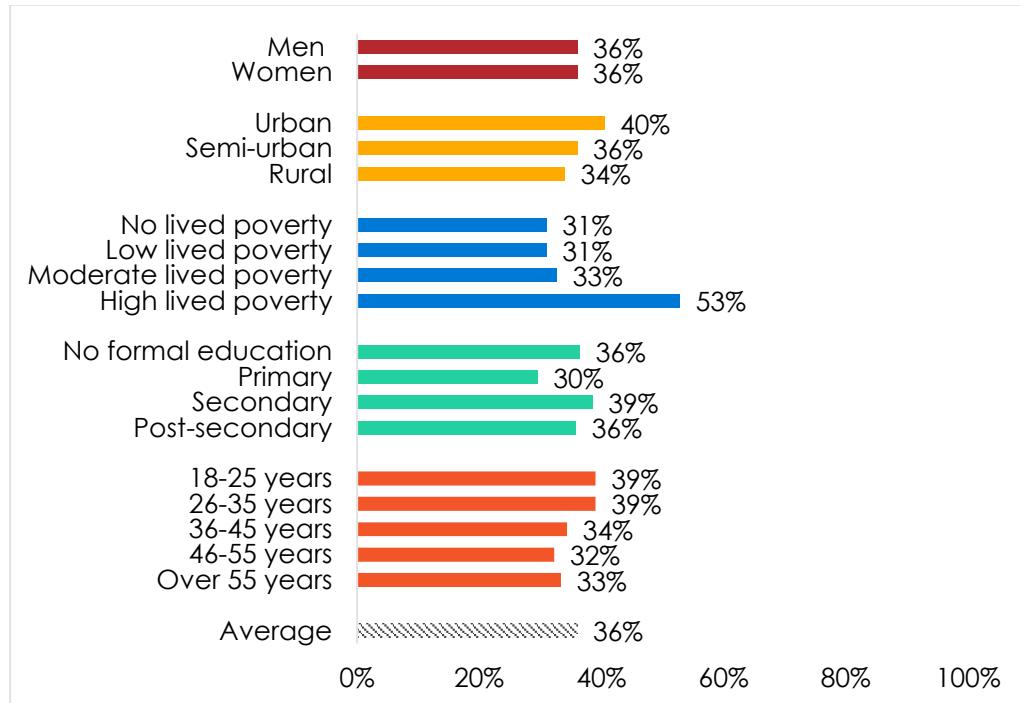
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are far more common among respondents with high lived poverty (53%) than their better-off counterparts (31%-33%) (Figure 10). They are also more widespread in the cities (40%) than in rural areas (34%) and among 18- to 35-year-olds than among their elders (32%-34%).

Does interaction with the police affect people's perceptions of police corruption? Respondents who live in EAs where field teams saw police officers are only slightly more likely to say that at least “some” officers are corrupt than those in zones where no police presence was observed (83% vs. 77%) (Figure 11).

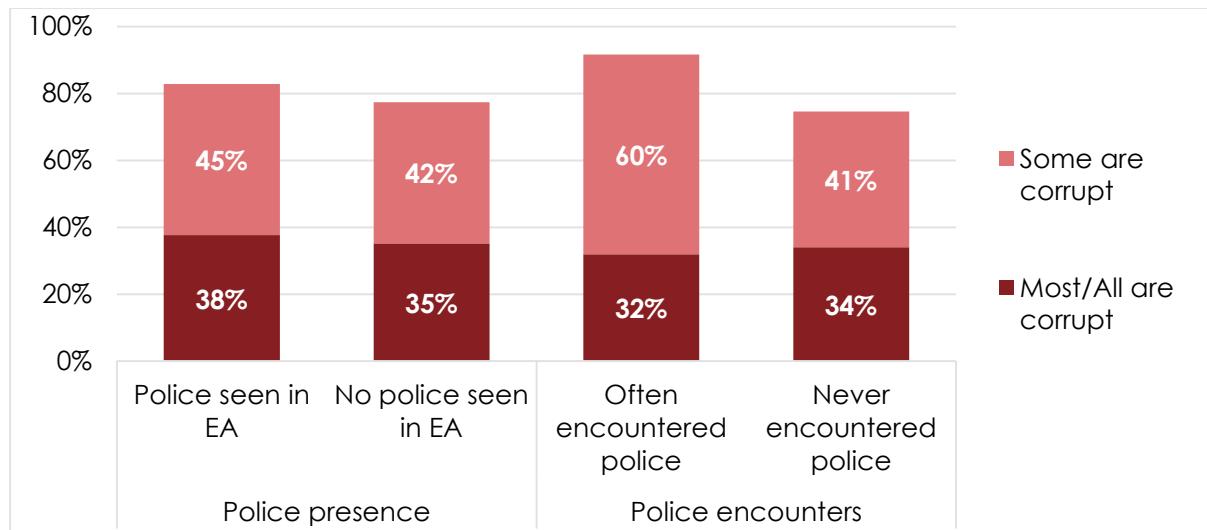
On the other hand, respondents who say they “often” encountered police (in often involuntary situations) are significantly more likely to say that at least “some” police are corrupt than their counterparts who never encountered the police (92% vs. 75%).

Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group | Botswana | 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")

Figure 11: Perceived police corruption | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Botswana | 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, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

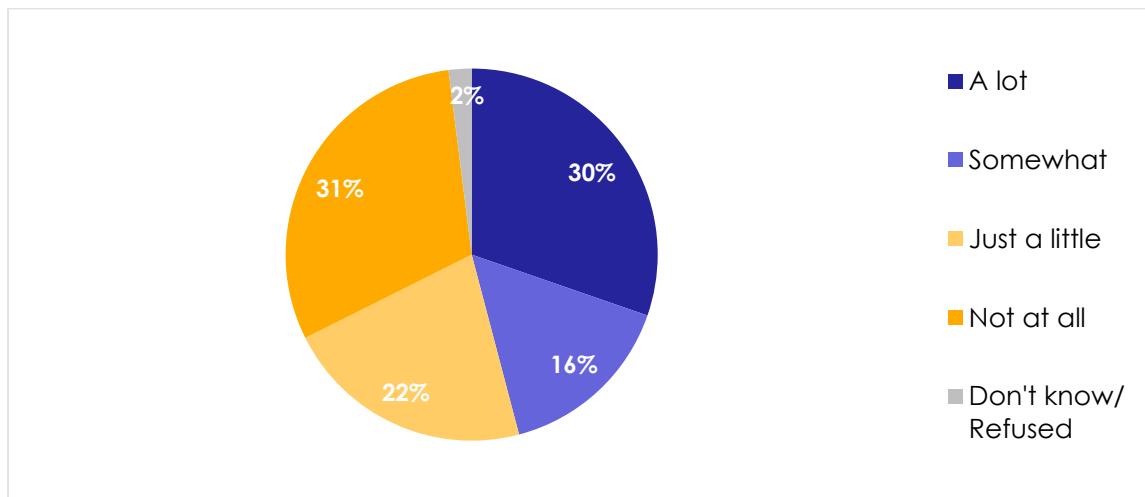
How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police?

Trust in the police

Alongside mixed popular assessments of their integrity, Botswana's police enjoy only mixed levels of public trust. Fewer than half (46%) of Batswana say they trust the police "somewhat" (16%) or "a lot" (30%), while a slim majority (52%) express "just a little" trust (22%) or none at all (31%)² (Figure 12).

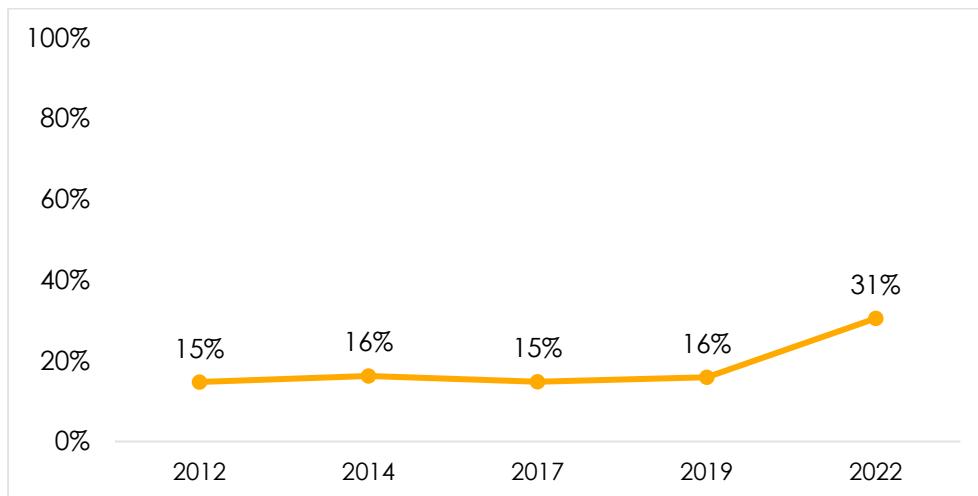
The share of respondents who say they don't trust the police "at all," which remained virtually unchanged between 2012 and 2019, almost doubled between 2019 and 2022 (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Trust in the police | Botswana | 2022



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

Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Botswana | 2012-2022

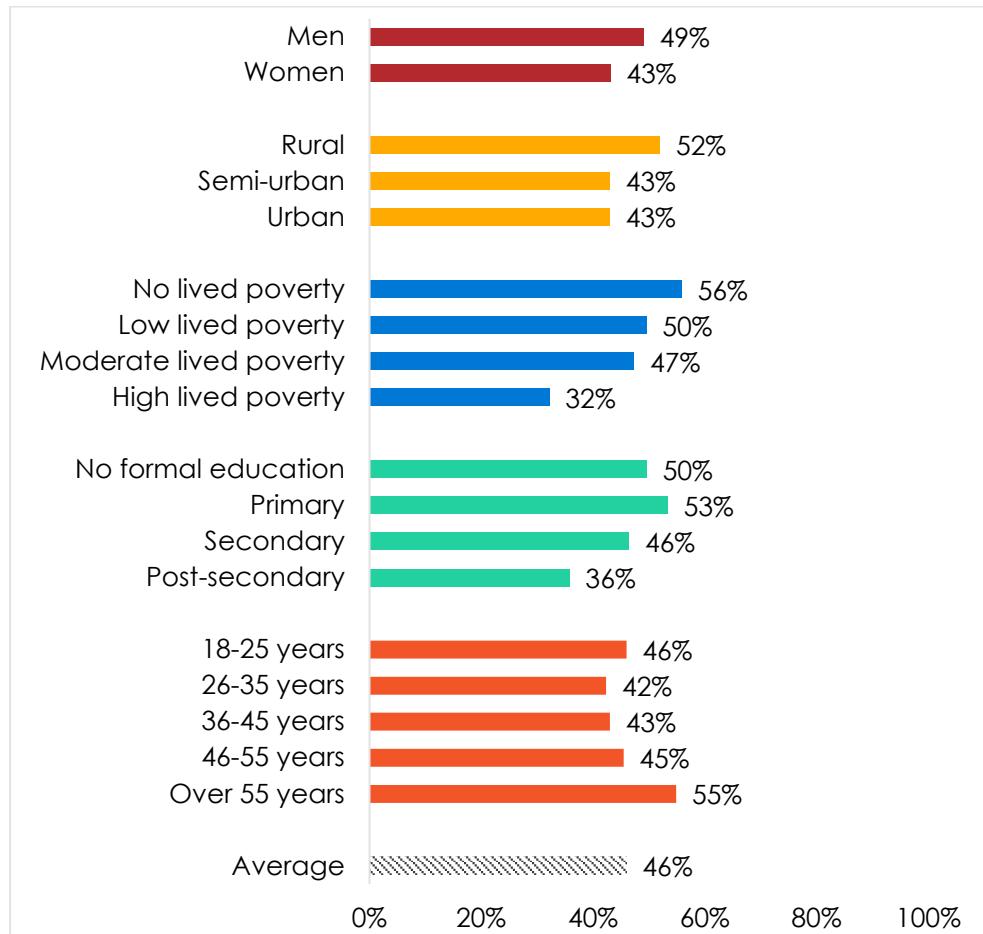


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 22% "just a little" and 31% "not at all" sum to 52%).

Here again, the poorest citizens stand out, expressing by far the least trust in the police (32%, compared to 47%-56% for better-off respondents) (Figure 14). Urban and semi-urban residents (both 43%) are less likely to trust the police than rural residents (52%). Trust in the police is also notably low among citizens with post-secondary education (36%), while older respondents express above-average levels of trust (55% of those over age 55).

Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Botswana | 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 a lack of trust in the police, some Batswana say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 15).

Four in 10 respondents (41%) say the police "often" or "always" use excessive force in dealing with suspected criminals, in addition to 24% who say this happens "sometimes."

More than one-third (35%) think the police routinely engage in criminal activities, while one-fourth say they often/always use excessive force in managing protests (24%) and stop drivers without good reason (24%).

Overall, fewer than four in 10 Batswana (38%) say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; 34% assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

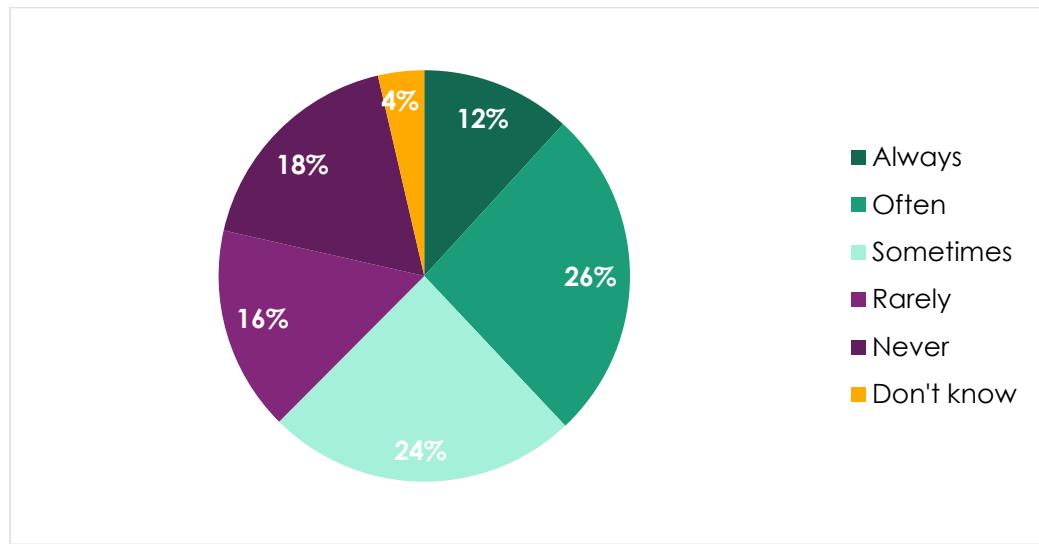
Figure 15: Improper police practices | Botswana | 2022



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

- 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 16: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Botswana | 2022

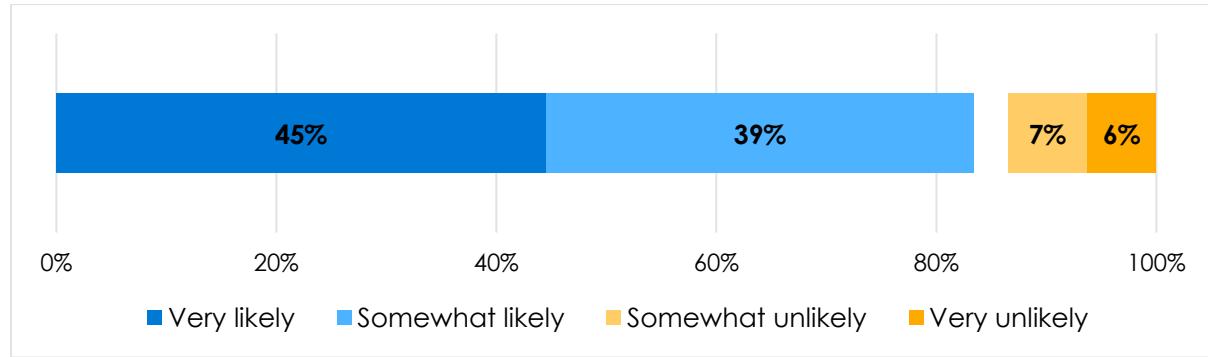


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Botswana operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

One area in which Botswana give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 45% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 17).

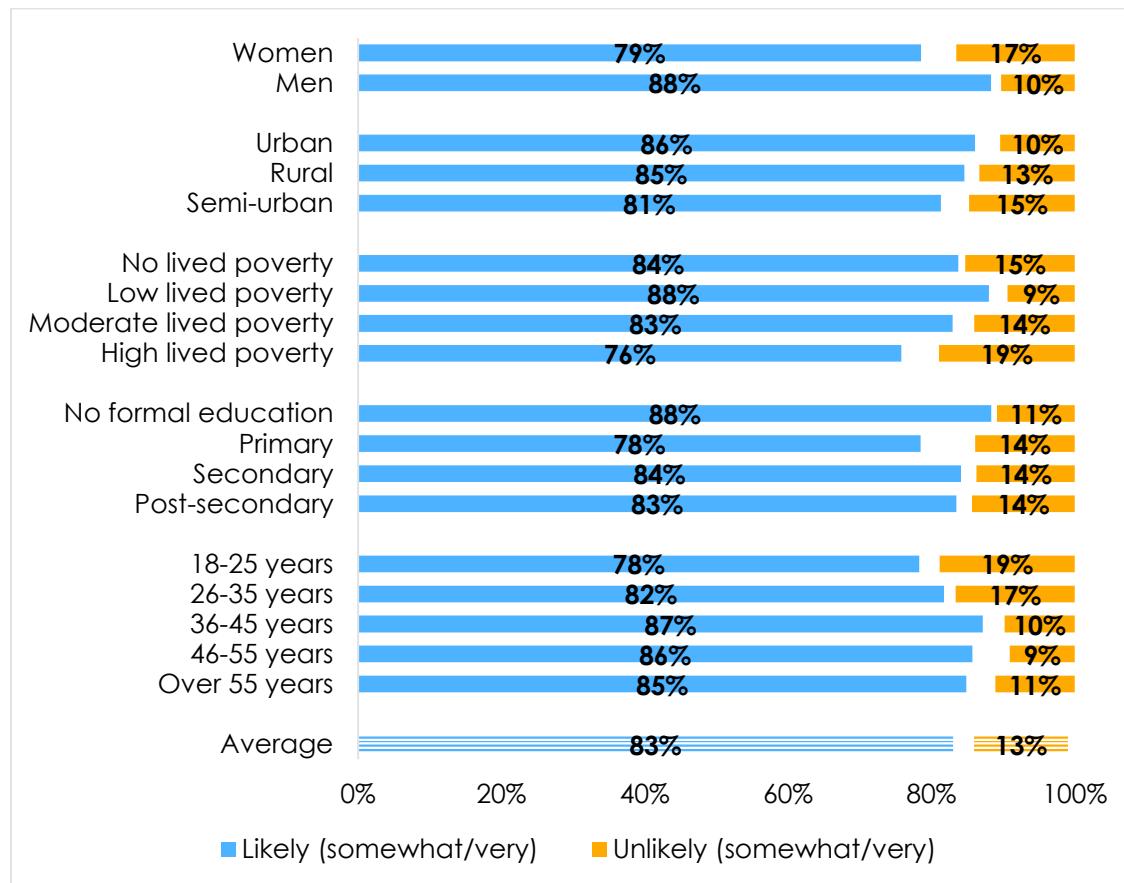
While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is slightly less strong among the poorest citizens (76%), women (79%), semi-urban residents (81%), and the youngest respondents (78%) than among their counterparts (Figure 18).

Figure 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Botswana | 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 18: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Botswana | 2022



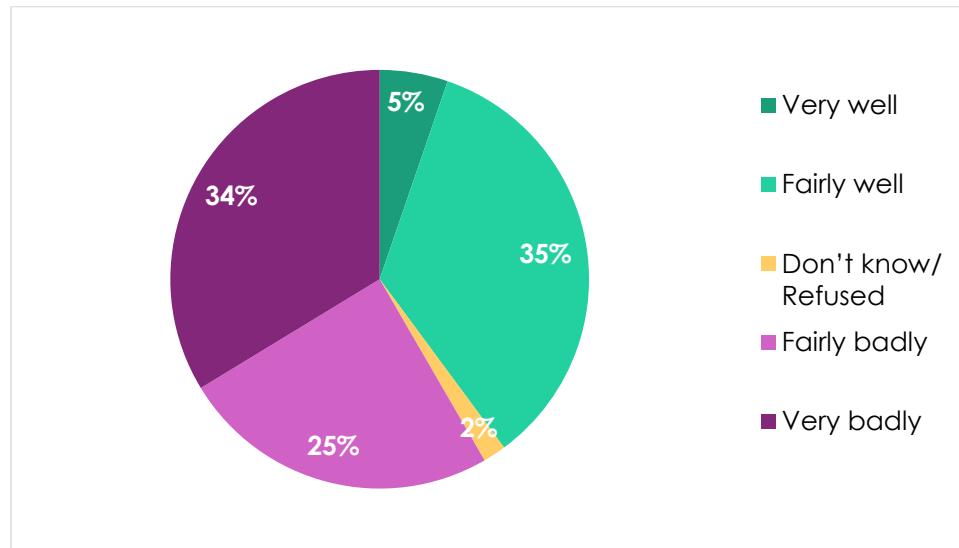
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?

Government performance on reducing crime

In line with shortcomings highlighted by citizens' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and practices, only four in 10 Batswana (40%) say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of reducing crime, while 59% are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 19).

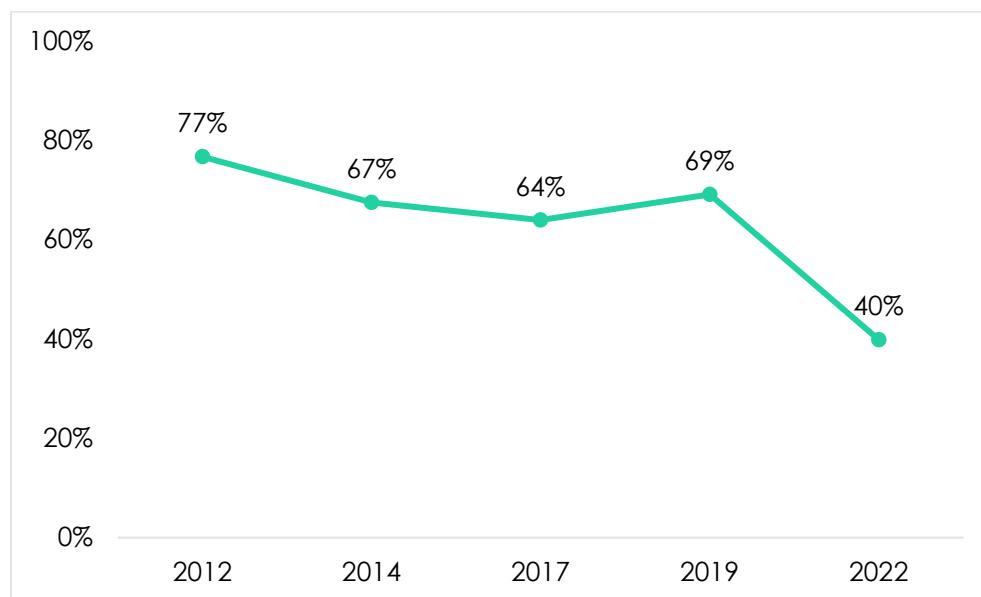
Approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has dropped by 29 percentage points since 2019 (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Botswana | 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 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Botswana | 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

In Botswana, citizens' perceptions of the police are moving in the wrong direction: Public distrust has climbed, and approval of the government's crime-fighting efforts has dropped. Majorities of Batswana think the police at least sometimes use excessive force with criminal suspects and engage in illegal activities themselves, and only a minority say the police usually act professionally and respect citizens' rights. Poor citizens hold particularly negative views of the police. These findings point to serious challenges for a police force intent on partnering with local communities to fight crime.

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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.

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