

Nigerians say their country is unsafe, cite insecurity as top priority for government action

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 604 | Raphael Mbaegbu and Sunday Joseph Duntoye

Summary

In Nigeria, crime and violence are everyday news. From jihadist attacks by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province to herder-farmer conflict to kidnapping-for-ransom by bandits, violence has surged across all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja without much success by government agencies trying to curb insecurity ahead of the 2023 general elections (Nextier, 2022; Daka, 2022).

Recent headlines hardly scratch the surface: a deadly attack on an Abuja-Kaduna train in which 61 people were kidnapped for ransom (Ojiego, 2022); an attack on President Muhammadu Buhari's convoy in his home state (Aytogo, 2022); killings and kidnappings of religious worshipers and clergy (Mwai, 2022; Associated Press, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2022; Premium Times, 2022). Armed bandits killed more than 2,600 civilians in 2021 (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2022), and violence of all kinds only intensified in 2022 (ACLED, 2022; Yusuf, 2022).

The latest Afrobarometer survey in Nigeria shows that people's concern about crime/insecurity also continues to rise, as a growing number rank it as the most important problem their government should address. A majority of citizens report feeling unsafe and describe Nigeria as an unsafe place to live. Most consider abductions a "very serious" problem. Most also distrust the police and give their government a failing grade on fighting crime.

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 Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 5 and 31 March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

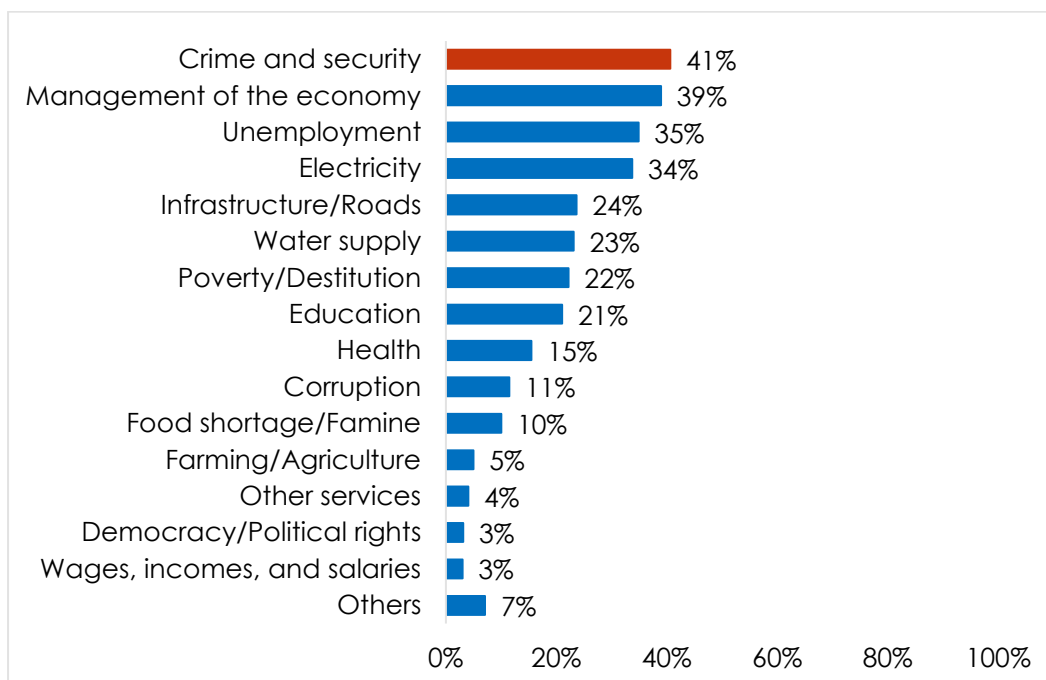
- Crime/insecurity ranks at the top of Nigerians' list of the most important problems that the government should address.
- Majorities of Nigerians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (61%) and feared crime in their home (51%) at least once during the previous year.

- More than three-fourths (77%) of citizens say Nigeria is a “somewhat unsafe” or “very unsafe” country to live in.
- Nigerians consider theft/break-ins, robbery, and kidnapping the most serious threats to their safety and security in their neighbourhoods.
- Most Nigerians consider abductions and kidnappings a serious problem (84%) and believe that their number has increased over the past year (74%).
 - Almost six in 10 respondents (58%) rate the handling of kidnappings and abductions by the police as “fairly bad” or “very bad.”
- When faced with a security concern, only 17% of respondents say they turn first to the police. More cite community or traditional leaders (30%), other family members (26%), or neighbourhood security outfits (18%) as their first point of contact.
- Only 15% of Nigerians say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot,” and 73% say “most” or “all” police are corrupt.
- Almost eight in 10 Nigerians (79%) rate the government’s performance in reducing crime as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” an increase of 32 percentage points since 2017.

Crime/insecurity a top priority for Nigerians

Nigerians are acutely concerned about security. When asked what they consider the most important problems that the government should address, crime/security comes out on top, cited by 41% respondents as one of their three priorities. Management of the economy comes second (39%), followed by unemployment (35%) and electricity (34%) (Figure 1).

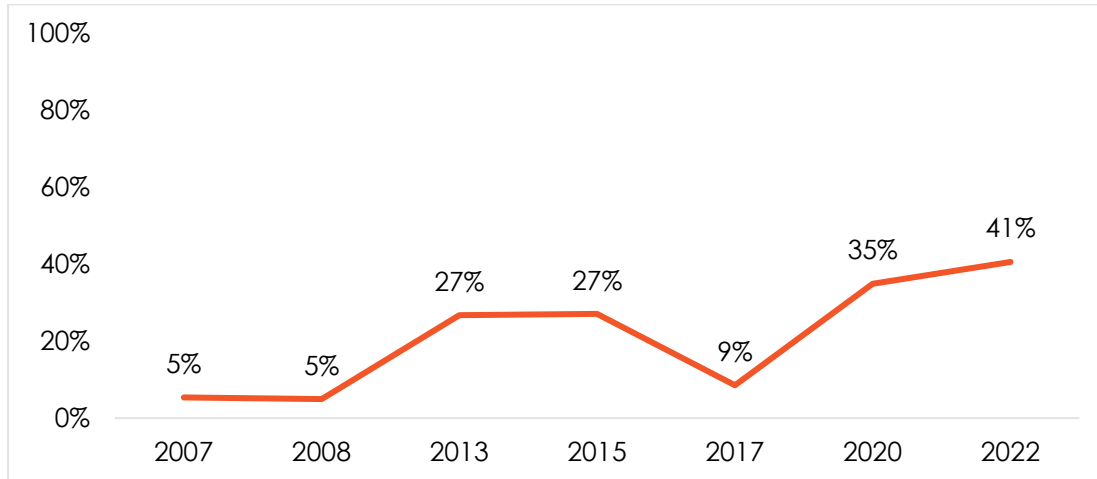
Figure 1: Most important problems | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Figure shows % of respondents who cited each issue as one of up to three important problems.)

Crime/security has climbed dramatically in importance, gaining 32 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Crime and security as most important problem | Nigeria | 2007-2022

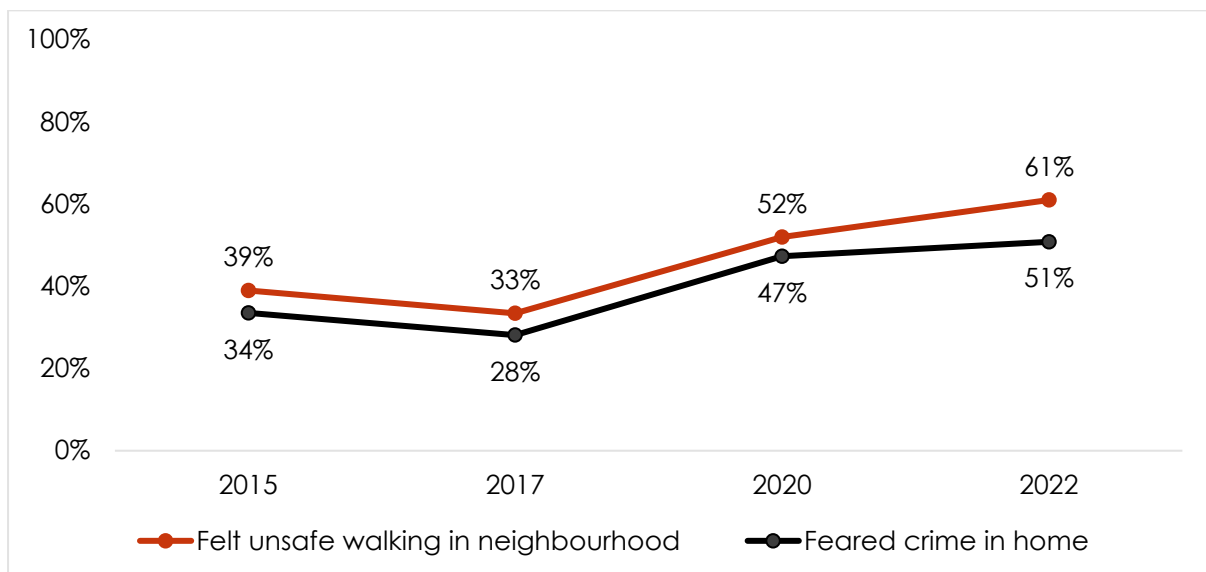


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Figure shows % of respondents who cited crime and security as one of up to three important problems.)

Insecurity and fear of crime

In line with their concern about security, a growing proportion of Nigerians report feeling unsafe (Figure 3). Six in 10 citizens (61%) say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods “once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always” during the previous year, almost twice as many as reported this experience in 2017 (33%). More than half (51%) say they feared crime in their homes at least once during the past year, a 23-percentage-point jump from 2017 (28%).

Figure 3: Sense of insecurity | Nigeria | 2015-2022

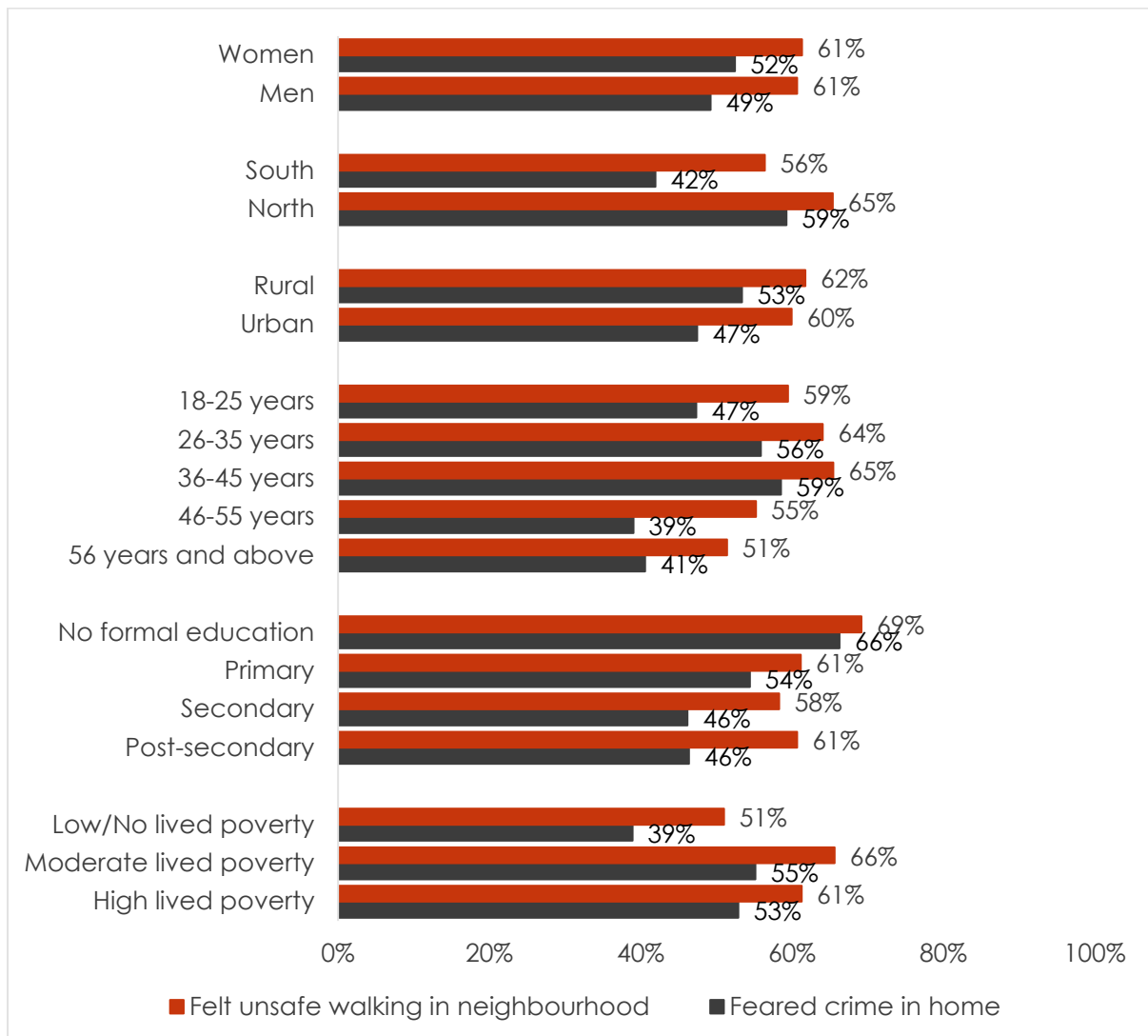


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Men and women are about equally likely to report feeling insecurity and fear (Figure 4). More Northerners than Southerners say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods (65% vs. 56%) and feared crime in their homes (59% vs. 42%). Fear of crime is somewhat more common in rural than in cities (53% vs. 47%).

Younger respondents are more likely to report feelings of insecurity and fear than their elders. And these experiences are more widespread among poor citizens¹ and those with no formal schooling than among better-off citizens and those with secondary or post-secondary education.

Figure 4: Sense of insecurity | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



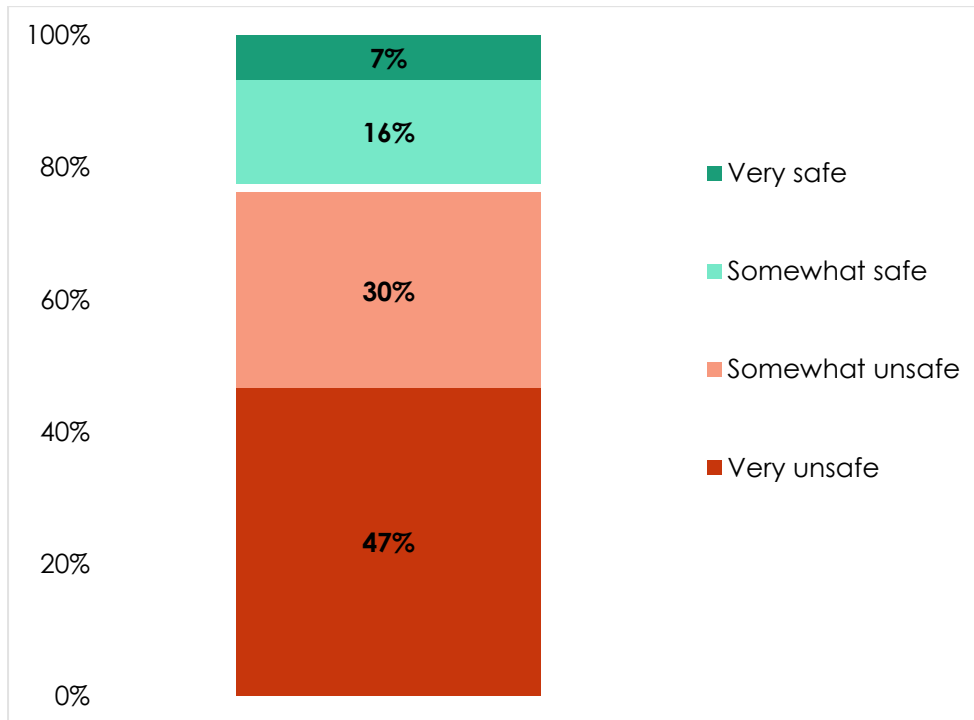
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

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 & Patel (2022).

Given how many people experience feelings of insecurity and fear, it comes as no surprise that more than three-fourths (77%) of respondents say Nigeria is a “somewhat unsafe” (30%) or “very unsafe” (47%) country to live in (Figure 5). Only 23% consider Nigeria to be “somewhat” or “very” safe.

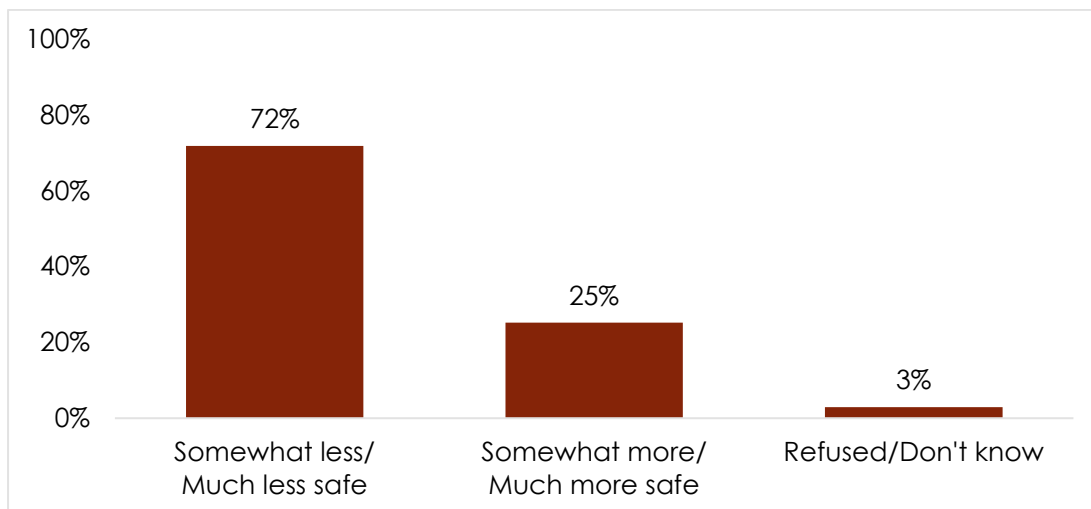
Similarly, a large majority (72%) say the country has become “somewhat less safe” (36%) or “much less safe” (36%) over the past five years (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Is Nigeria safe? | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: In general, would you say Nigeria is a safe or unsafe country to live in?

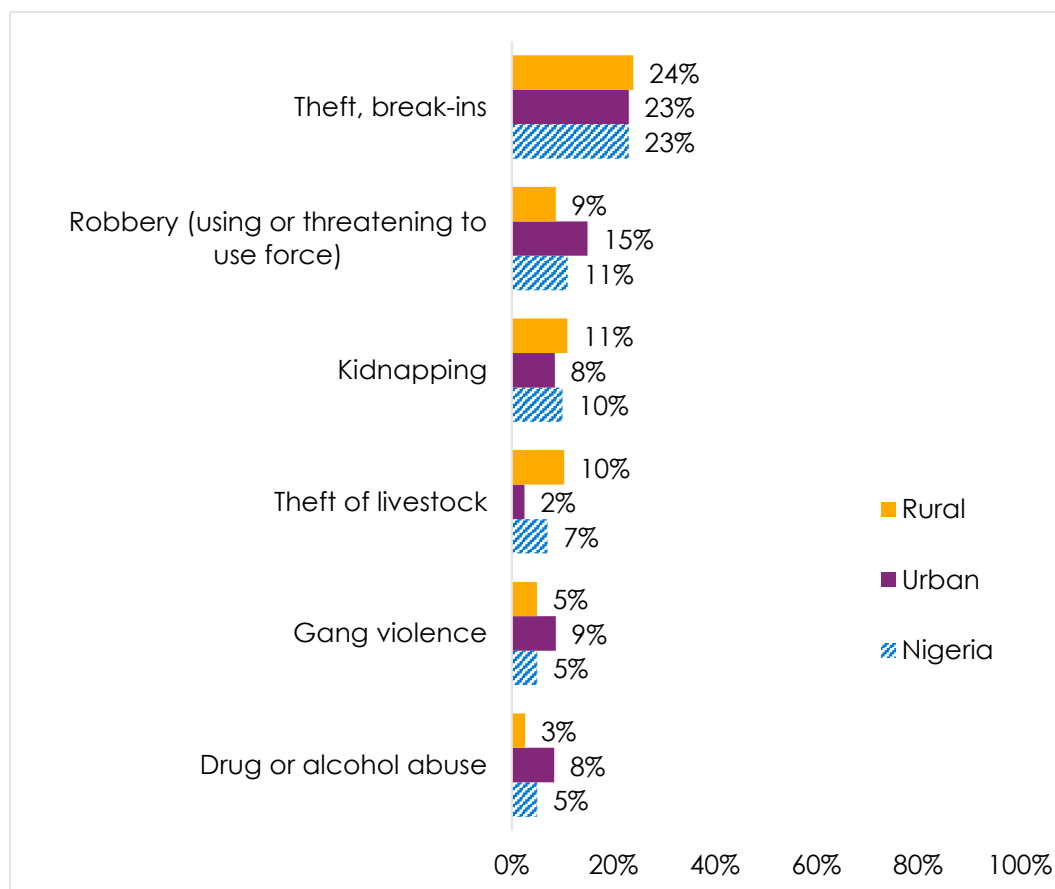
Figure 6: Has Nigeria become safer or less safe? | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking back over the last five years, do you feel that Nigeria has become safer or less safe?

Asked what they consider the most serious threat to safety and security in their neighbourhood, the most common response is theft/break-ins (23%), followed by robbery (11%), kidnapping (10%), theft of livestock (7%), gang violence (7%), and drug or alcohol abuse (5%) (Figure 7). Rural residents are somewhat more likely than urbanites to cite kidnapping (11% vs. 8%) and theft of livestock (10% vs. 2%) as threats, while citizens living in urban areas are more concerned than their rural counterparts about robbery (15% vs. 9%), gang violence (9% vs. 5%), and drug or alcohol abuse (8% vs. 3%).

Figure 7: Most serious threat to safety and security in neighbourhood | by urban-rural location | Nigeria | 2022



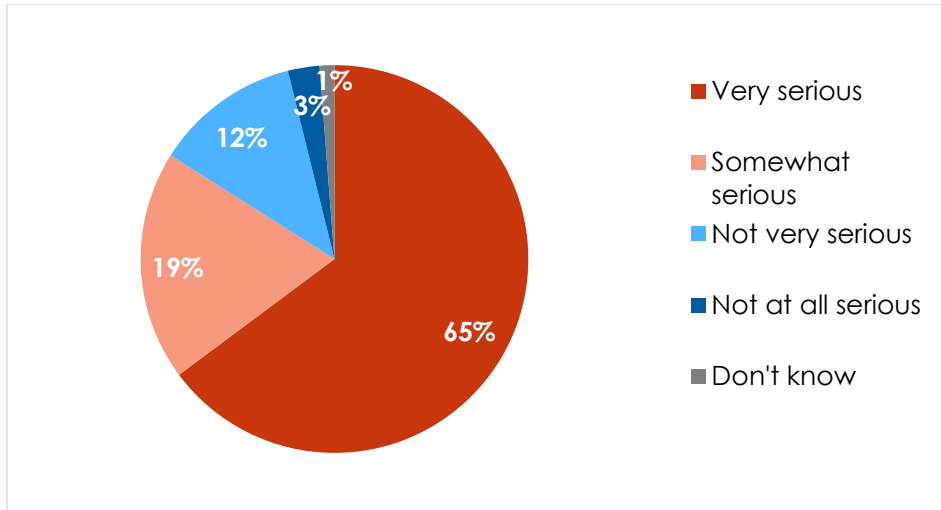
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what is the most serious threat to your safety and security in your neighbourhood?*

Kidnapping in Nigeria

While only one in 10 Nigerians cite kidnapping as the most serious threat in their own neighbourhood, an overwhelming majority (84%) consider abductions and kidnappings a serious problem in their country, including 65% who say they are a “very serious” problem (Figure 8). And three-fourths (74%) say the number of abductions or kidnappings of citizens in the country has increased over the past year (Figure 9).

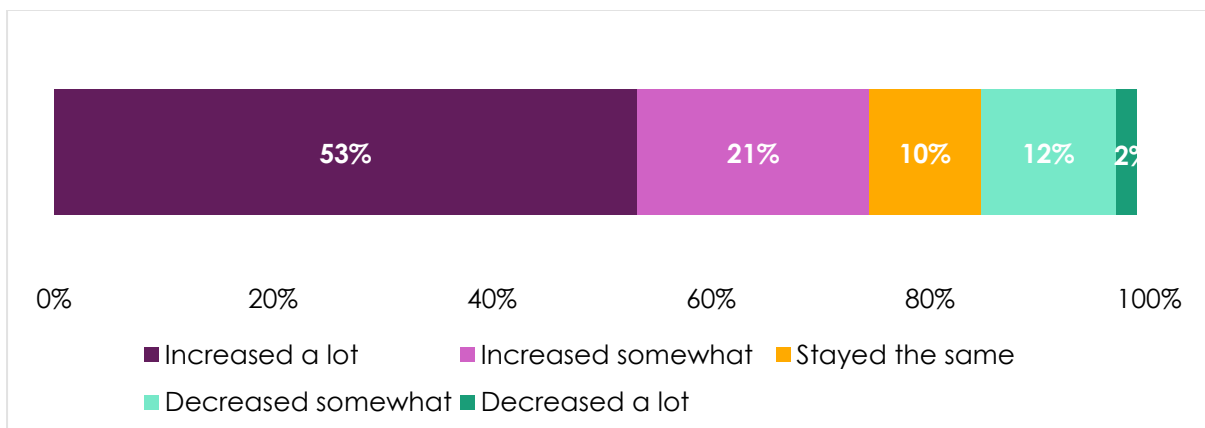
Almost six in 10 citizens (58%) say the police do a “fairly bad” or “very bad” at handling abductions and kidnappings, while only 38% rate their efforts positively (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Abduction and kidnapping: A serious problem? | Nigeria | 2022



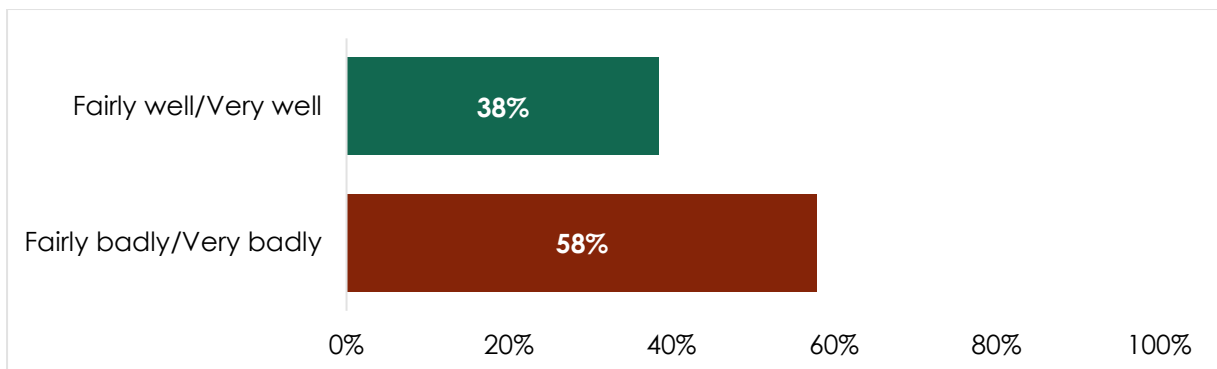
Respondents were asked: How serious of a problem are abductions and kidnapping of citizens in our country today?

Figure 9: Has the number of abductions/kidnappings increased? | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, would you say the cases of abduction or kidnapping in this country have increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Figure 10: Police handling of abduction and kidnapping | Nigeria | 2022



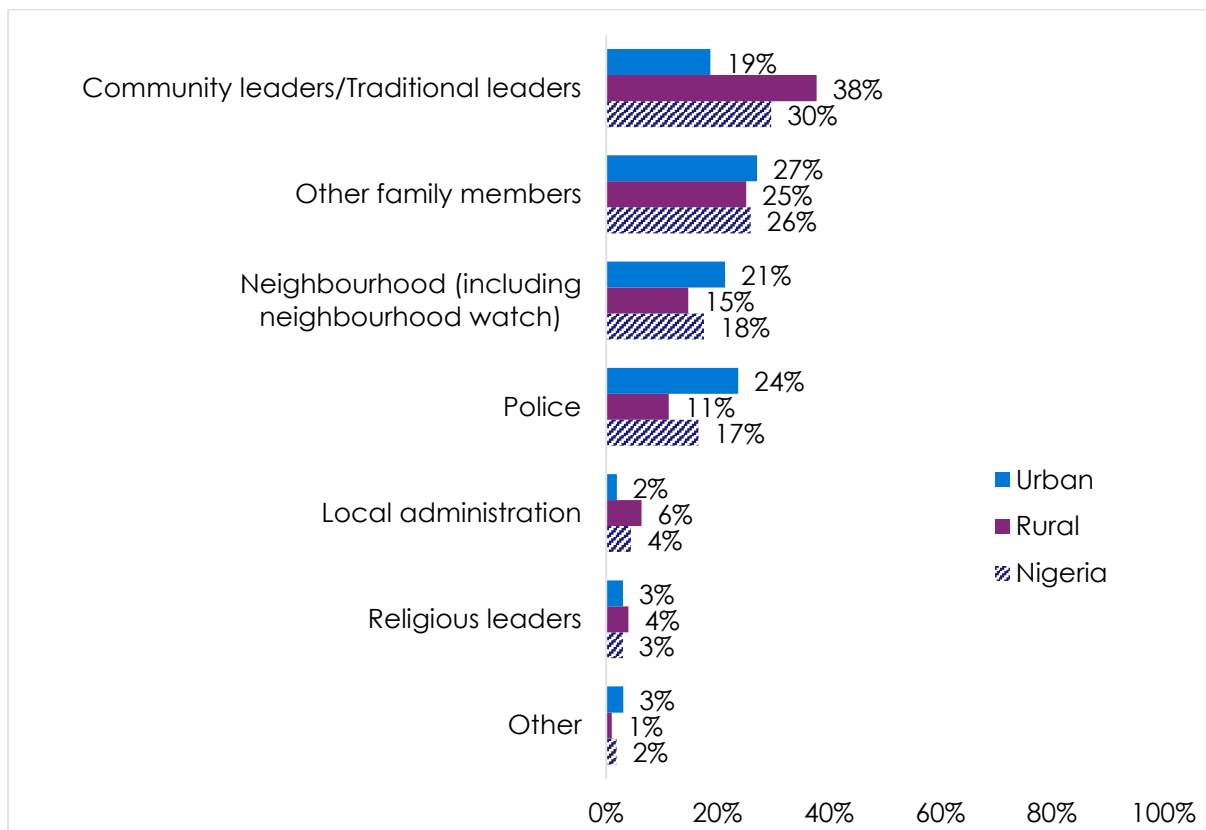
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the police is handling the kidnapping or abduction of Nigerian citizens?

Reporting security concerns

When Nigerians are concerned about their security, to whom do they turn first for assistance? Only 17% cite the police as their first point of contact. More say they look first to community or traditional leaders (30%), other family members (26%), or the neighbourhood, including neighbourhood watch programmes (18%) (Figure 11).

Rural residents are twice as likely as urbanites to say they turn first to community or traditional leaders (38% vs. 19%), and only half as likely to put the police first (11% vs. 24%).

Figure 11: First point of contact for security concerns | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: To whom do you normally go to first for assistance, when you are concerned about your security and the security of your family?

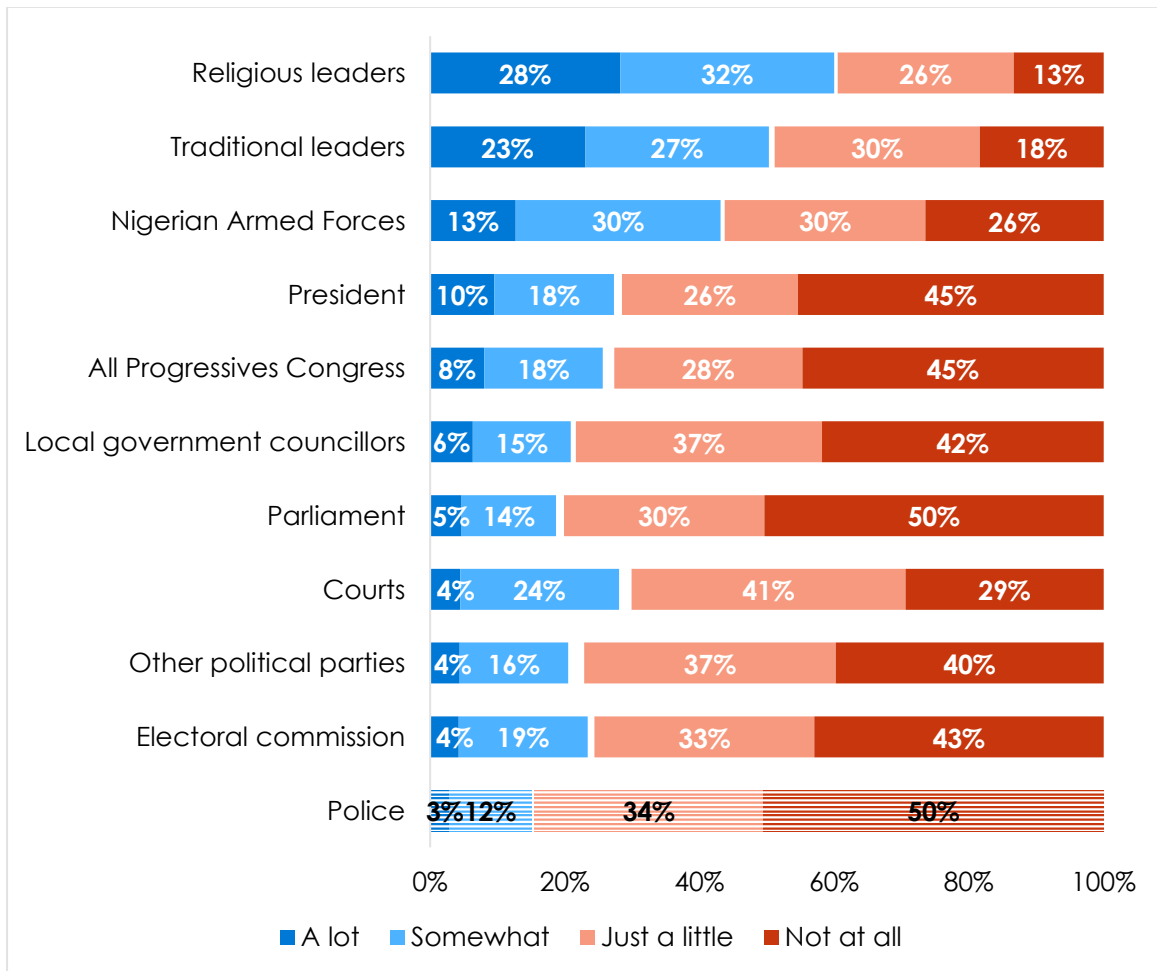
Trust in and perceived corruption among the police

Nigerians generally distrust their police. Only 3% say they trust the police “a lot,” while 12% say they trust them “somewhat” – the lowest trust rating among key public institutions the survey asked about (Figure 12). Trust in the police has never reached 30% over the past two decades, and has declined by 12 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 13).

Southerners (7%) and highly educated citizens (9%) are less likely to trust the police than Northerners (23%) and less educated citizens (23% among those with no formal schooling) (Figure 14).

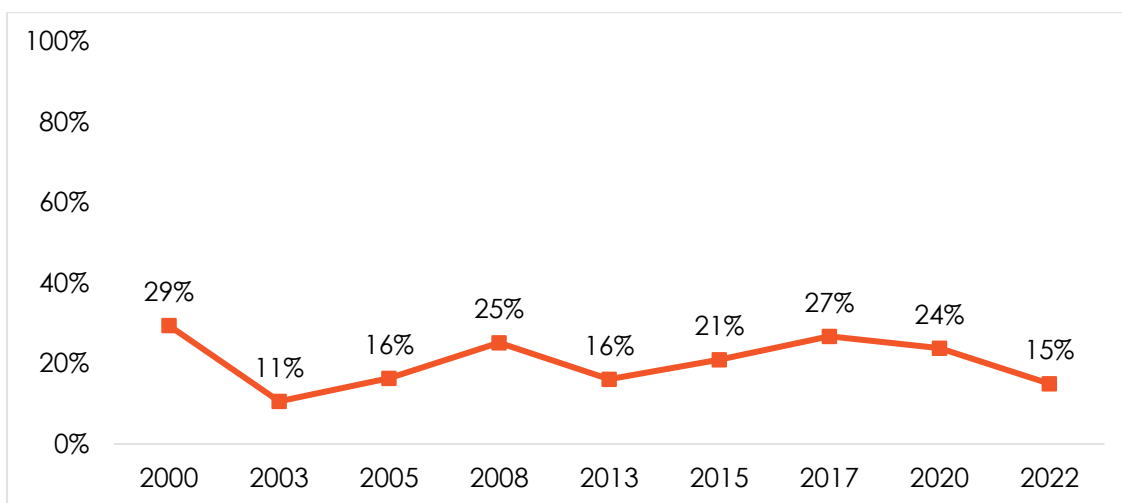
One reason for low public trust in the police may be widespread perceptions that the police are corrupt. Almost three-fourths (73%) of citizens say “most” or “all” police are corrupt, the worst rating among key public officials the survey asked about (Figure 15).

Figure 12: Trust in institutions | Nigeria | 2022



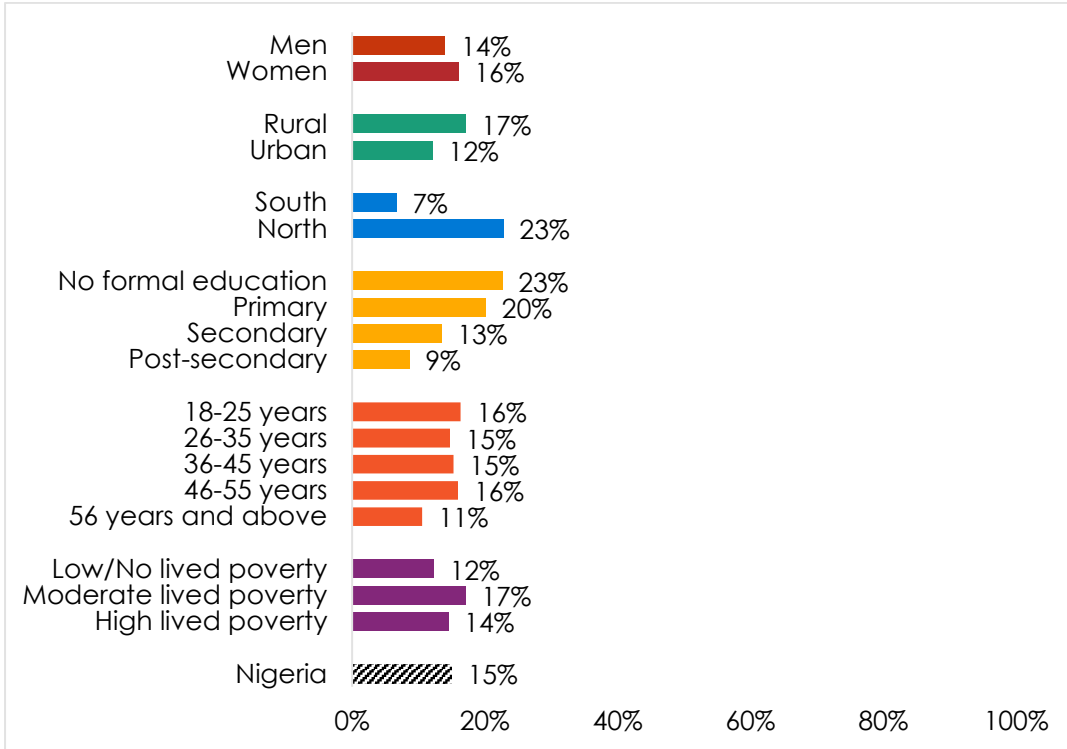
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 13: Trust the police 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | Nigeria | 2000-2022



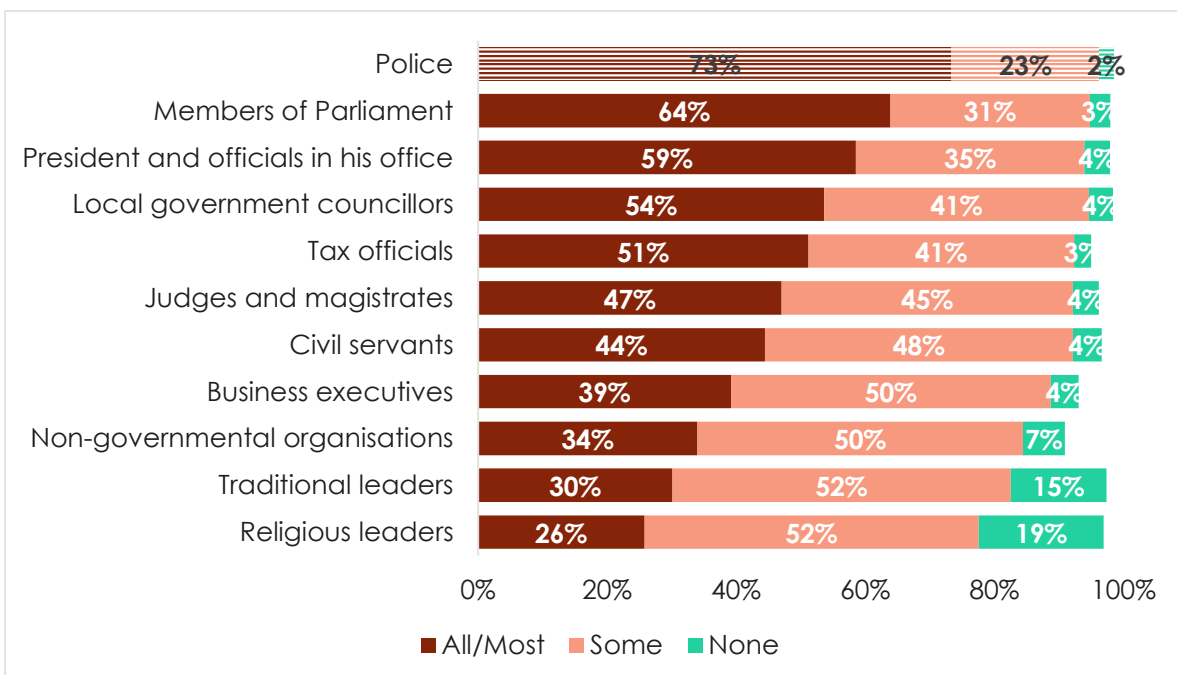
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard about them to say: The police? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 14: Trust the police 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



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

Figure 15: Who is corrupt? | Nigeria | 2022

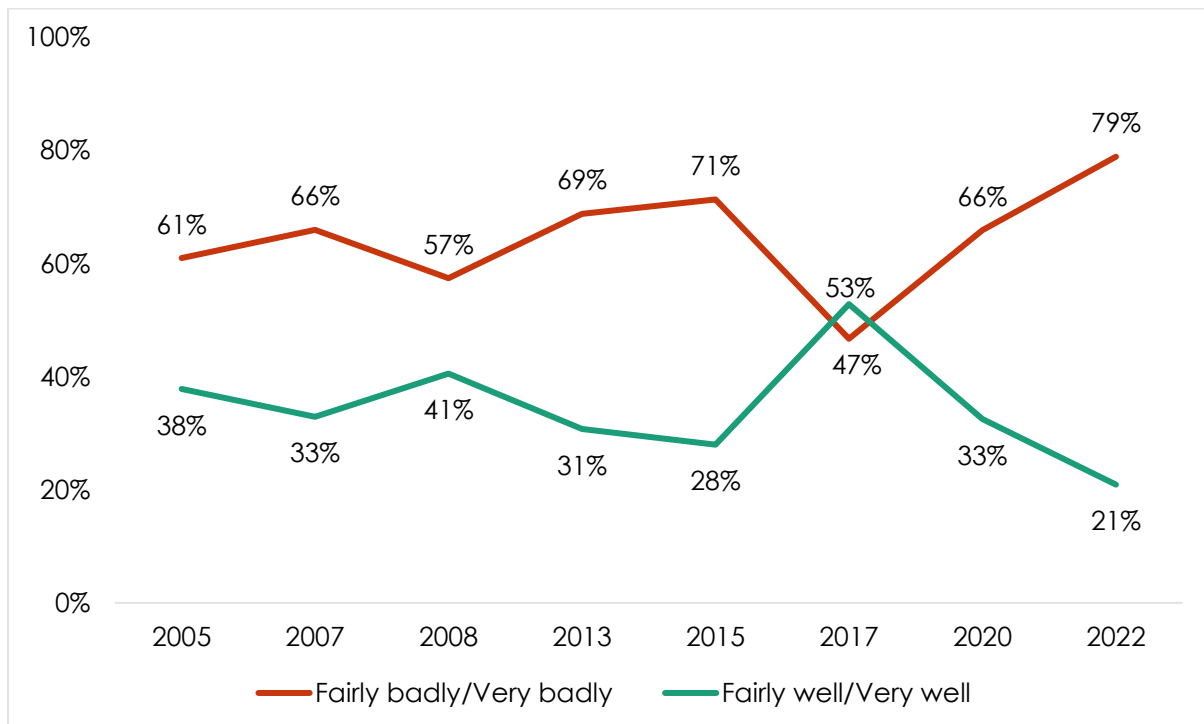


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Government performance in fighting crime

Overall, few Nigerians offer positive assessments of the government's performance on reducing crime. Only two in 10 citizens (21%) say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on this issue, while 79% are critical of the government's efforts (Figure 16). Negative assessments of the government's performance on crime have climbed by 32 percentage points since 2017, when they briefly dipped below half of survey respondents (47%).

Figure 16: Government performance in reducing crime | Nigeria | 2005-2022

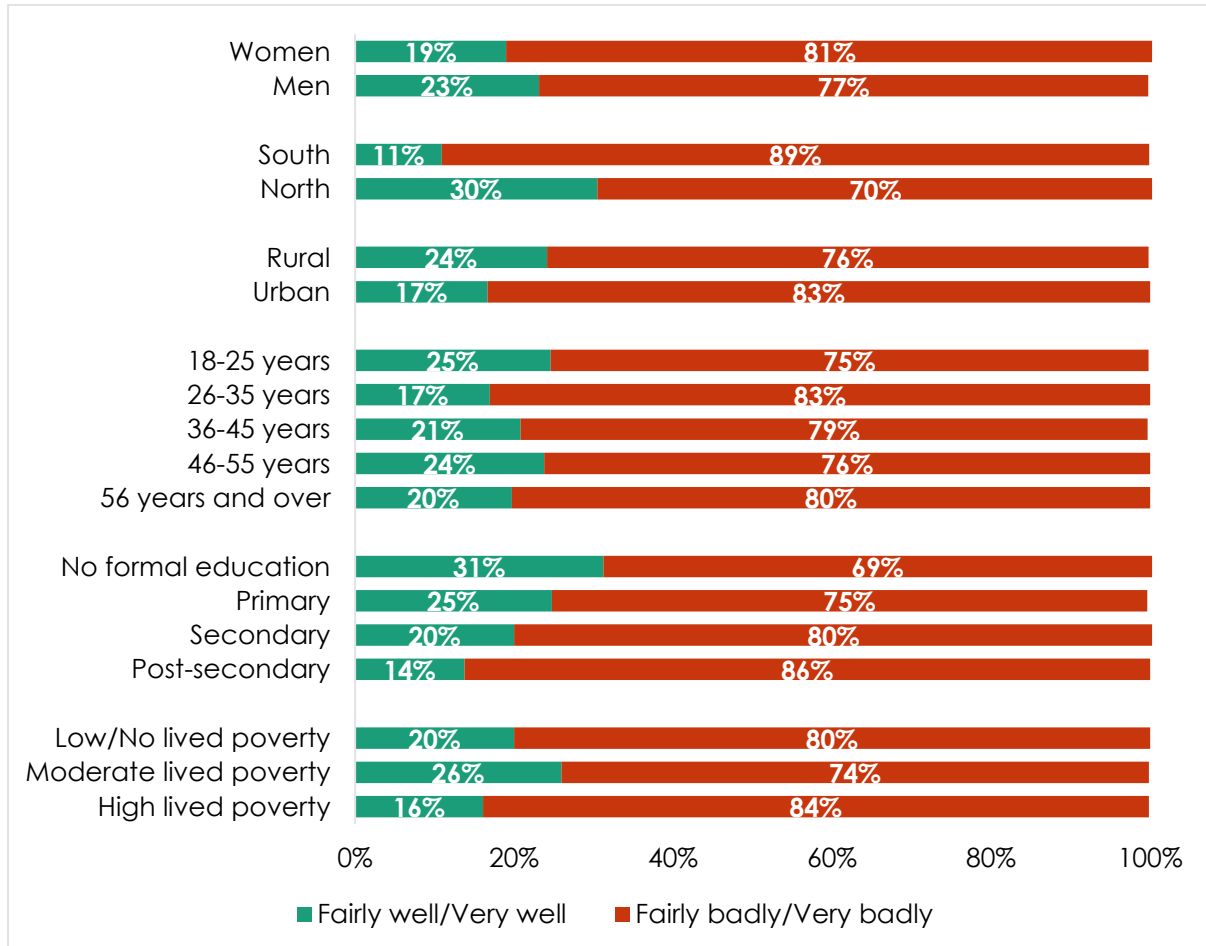


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime?

Southerners are especially critical of the government's anti-crime efforts (89%, vs. 70% of Northerners) (Figure 17). Appraisals are more negative among women than men (81% vs. 77%) and among urban than rural residents (83% vs. 76%). Disapproval increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 69% among those with no formal schooling to 86% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

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Figure 17: Government performance in reducing crime | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime?

Conclusion

Nigerians are deeply concerned about crime and insecurity and consider these a top priority for the government to address. Fear is increasing, to the point where most citizens now consider their country an unsafe place to live.

Addressing economic and social root causes of escalating crime and violence is likely to be a daunting challenge for years to come. In the meantime, the establishment of a trustworthy, respected police force might at least help assuage the citizenry's concerns.

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