



Dispatch No. 625 | 31 March 2023

Zimbabweans see their police as lacking in integrity, professionalism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 625 | Jonathan Kugarakuripi

Summary

Zimbabweans look to their police to maintain law and order, protect people and their property, prevent crime, reduce fear, and in the process improve the quality of life for all (UNODC, 2004).

But what they see is often less than the envisioned ideal, as officers of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) have frequently been accused of abuses ranging from excessive force and corruption to political partisanship, unresponsiveness, and a lack of professionalism (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Simpson & Krönke, 2019). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media and online independent papers were awash with pictures and videos of citizens being beaten by the police, allegedly for violating lockdown restrictions (Ndoma, 2020; Dube, 2020). More recently, officers have come under fire for their use of mobile spikes to stop vehicles, a dangerous practice that has resulted in several fatalities (Nyanhongo, 2022; Dauramanzi, 2022; Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, 2022).

The Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage has argued that in Zimbabwe's weak economy, the quality of police services has suffered because of budget constraints and inadequate equipment (Shambare, 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 Zimbabwe, survey findings paint a largely unflattering picture of police interaction with the public. Among citizens who encountered the police during the previous year, a majority say it was difficult to obtain assistance, and about one-third say they had to pay a bribe. Majorities see most officers as corrupt and express little or no trust in the ZRP.

Many also complain of unprofessional conduct, saying the police often use excessive force, stop drivers without good reason, engage in criminal activities, and fail to respect citizens' rights.

A majority of Zimbabweans report experiencing insecurity in their neighbourhoods and homes, and most say the government is doing a poor job of reducing crime.

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 are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 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 standard surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

- A majority (58%) of Zimbabweans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 42% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always.” Similarly, 50% of citizens say they feared crime in their home.
 - The poor are more likely to experience such insecurity.
- About one in 12 citizens (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Six times as many (47%) 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, 59% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 37% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 34% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Six in 10 Zimbabweans (60%) say “most” or “all” police are corrupt – by far the worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Only four in 10 citizens (42%) say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- More than four in 10 Zimbabweans say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force against protesters (48%) and suspected criminals (44%) and stop drivers without good reason (42%). One-third (33%) say the police routinely engage in criminal activities.
- Only one-fourth of respondents (26%) think the police “often” or “always” operate professionally and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - But almost eight in 10 (78%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman’s report of gender-based violence seriously.
- Only one in three Zimbabweans (34%) give the government a passing grade on reducing crime.

Sense of security

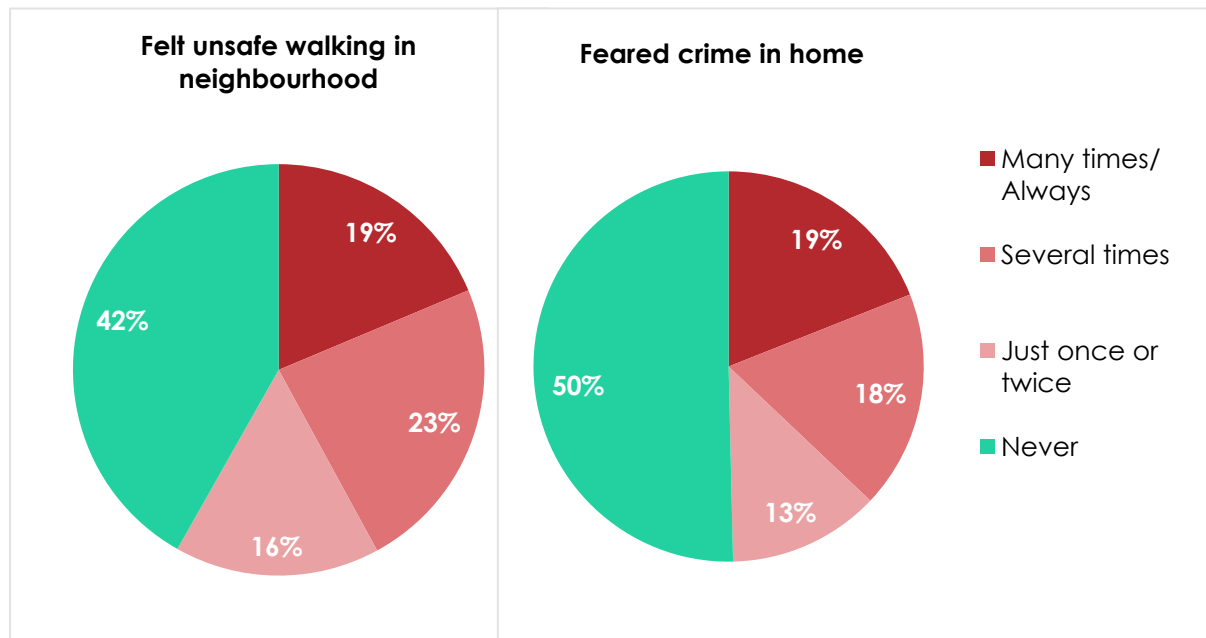
The most basic role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Zimbabweans feel protected?

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. More than half (58%) of Zimbabweans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 42% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).

Similarly, 50% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 37% who say this happened “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”

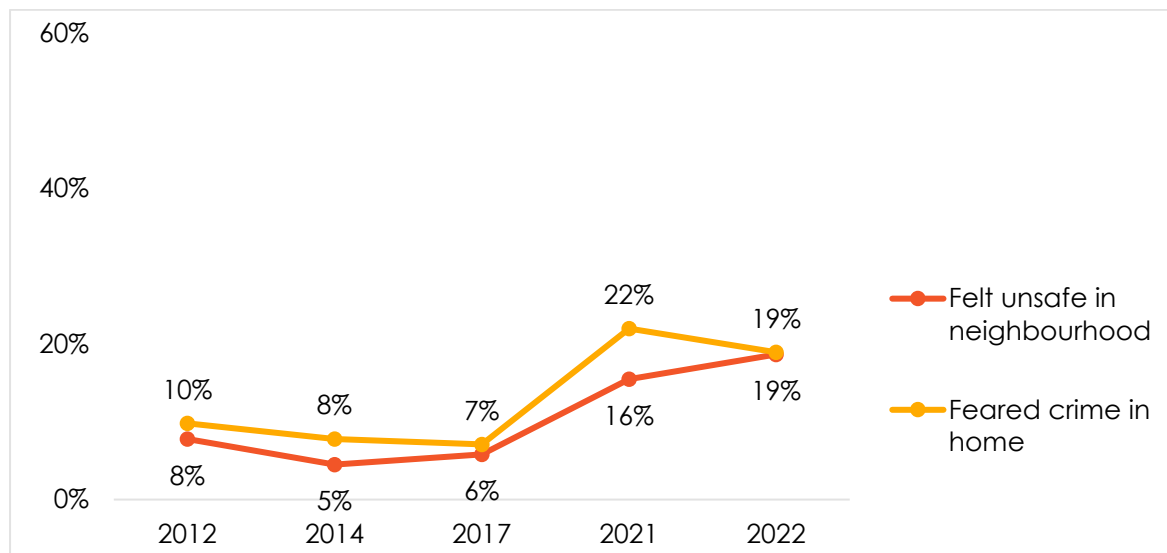
The proportions of Zimbabweans who report feeling unsafe or fearing crime “many times” or “always” have doubled over the past decade, to 19% on each indicator (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Zimbabwe | 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 ‘many times’ or ‘always’ | Zimbabwe | 2012-2022

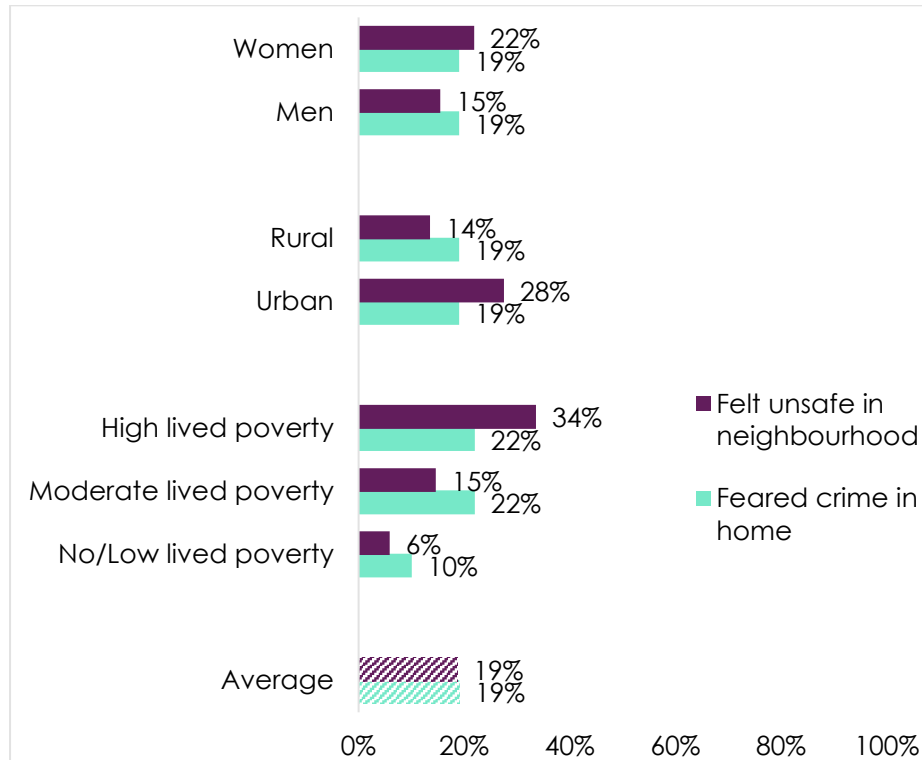


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say “many times” or “always”)

The experience of feeling unsafe walking in the neighbourhood is twice as common in cities as in rural areas (28% vs. 14%) (Figure 3). It also increases sharply with respondents' level of

lived poverty¹: The poorest citizens are more than five times as likely to feel unsafe, and twice as likely to fear crime in the home, compared to those experiencing low or no lived poverty.

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime ‘many times’ or ‘always’
 | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 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 “many times” or “always”)

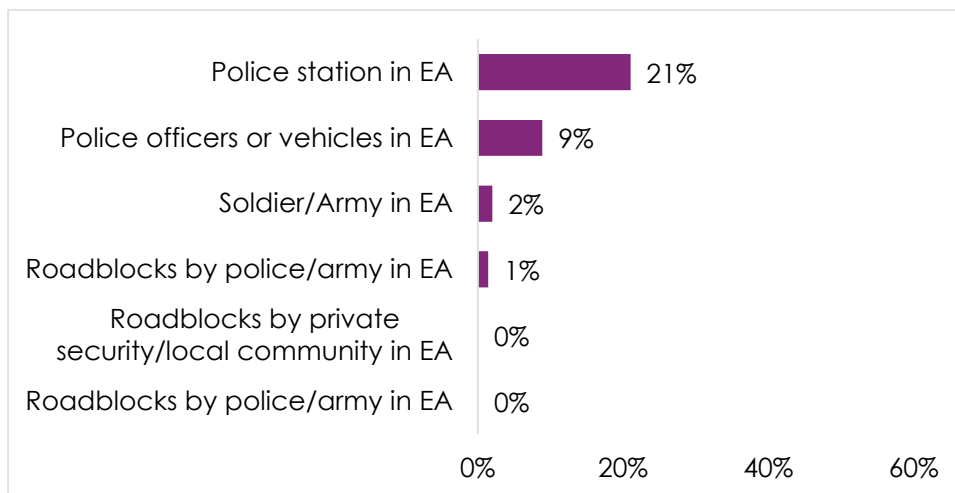
Police/security presence

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 Zimbabwe, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of one in five EAs (21%) (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in only 9% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were even less common, including soldiers or army vehicles (2%) and roadblocks by the police or army (1%).

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).

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

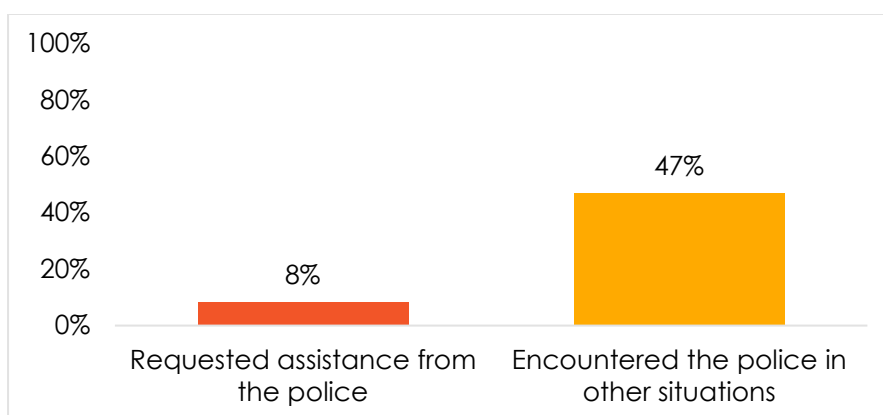
Encounters with the police

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

About one in 12 respondents (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Six times as many (47%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

About one in 13 (7%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 52% say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked:

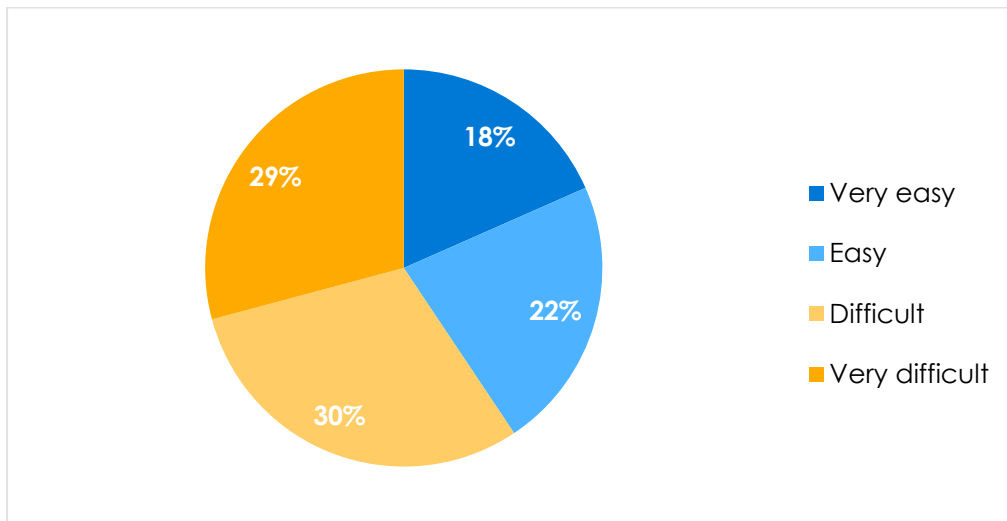
In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (% who say "yes")

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

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, more than half (59%) say it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to get the assistance they needed (Figure 6).

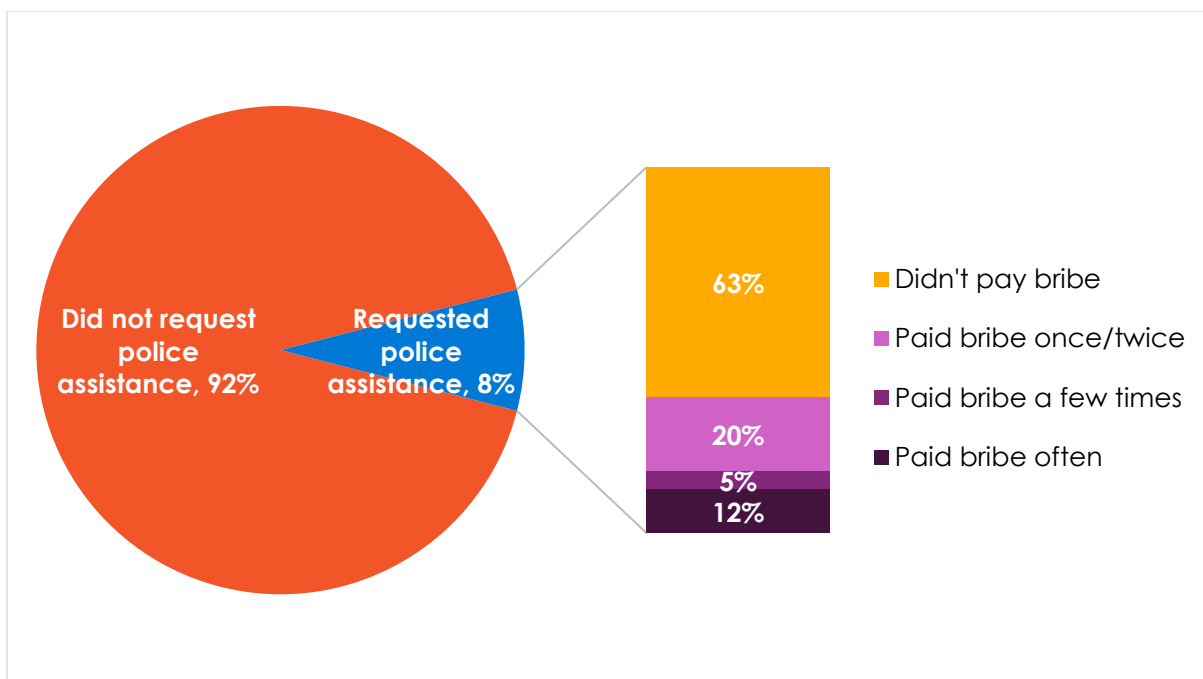
But more than a third (37%) of those who asked for help from the police say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance they needed, including 12% who say this happened “often” (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Zimbabwe | 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.)

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

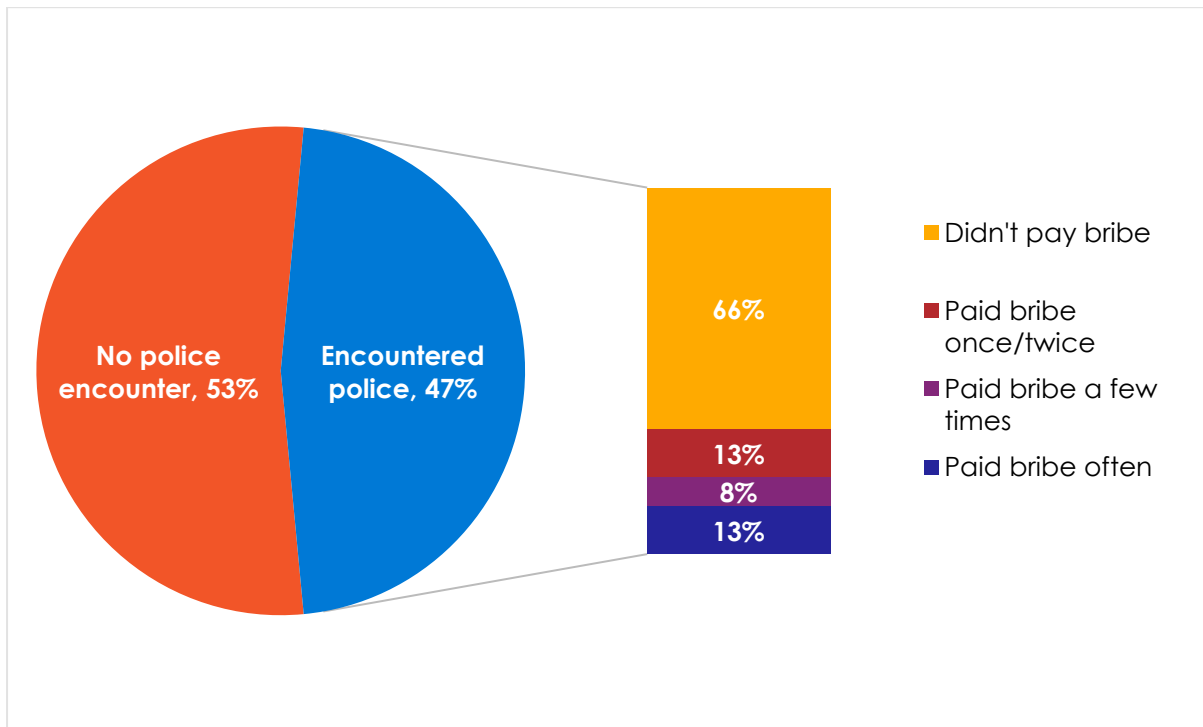


Respondents who requested police assistance during the previous year were asked: How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)

Among Zimbabweans who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, one-third (34%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 13% who say this happened “often” (Figure 8).

This translates to 17% of all Zimbabwean adults paying a bribe to avoid problems with the police during the previous year.

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



Respondents who encountered the police in other situations were asked: 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 avoid a problem during one of these encounters? (Respondents who did not encounter the police are excluded.)

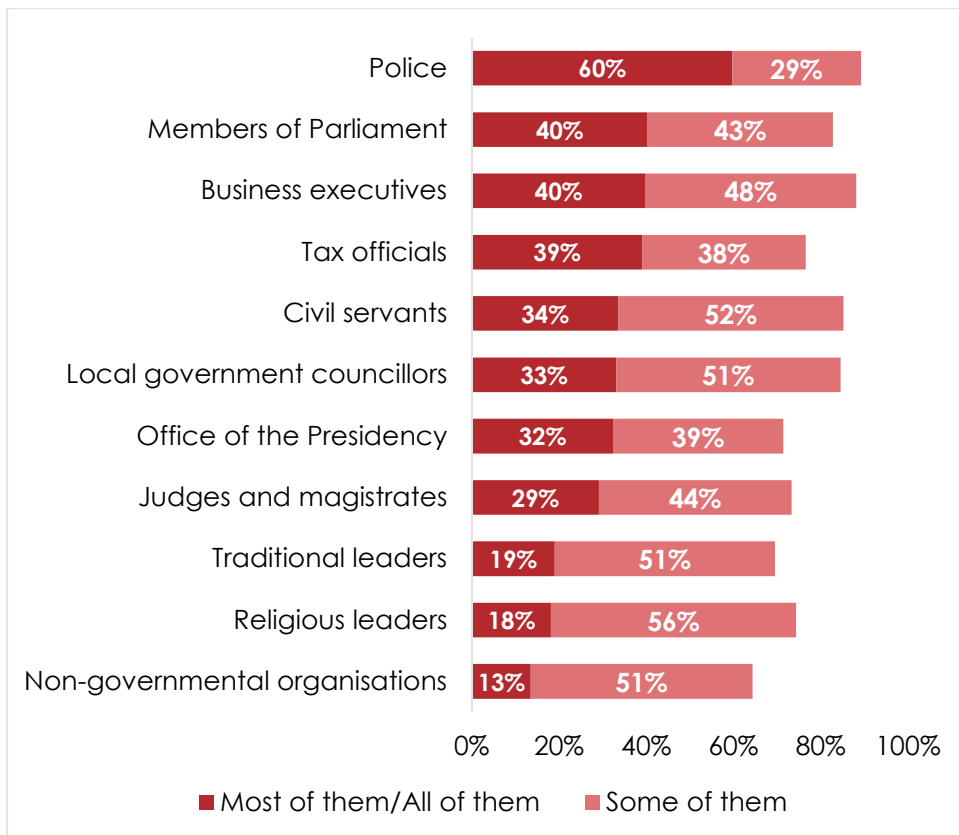
To summarise the experience of all Zimbabwean adults during the past year, 17% paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

Considering the frequency of reported bribe payment to the police, it is perhaps not surprising that Zimbabweans are nearly unanimous (89%) in believing that at least “some” police officials are corrupt. In fact, six in 10 citizens (60%) say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – by far the worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about (Figure 9).

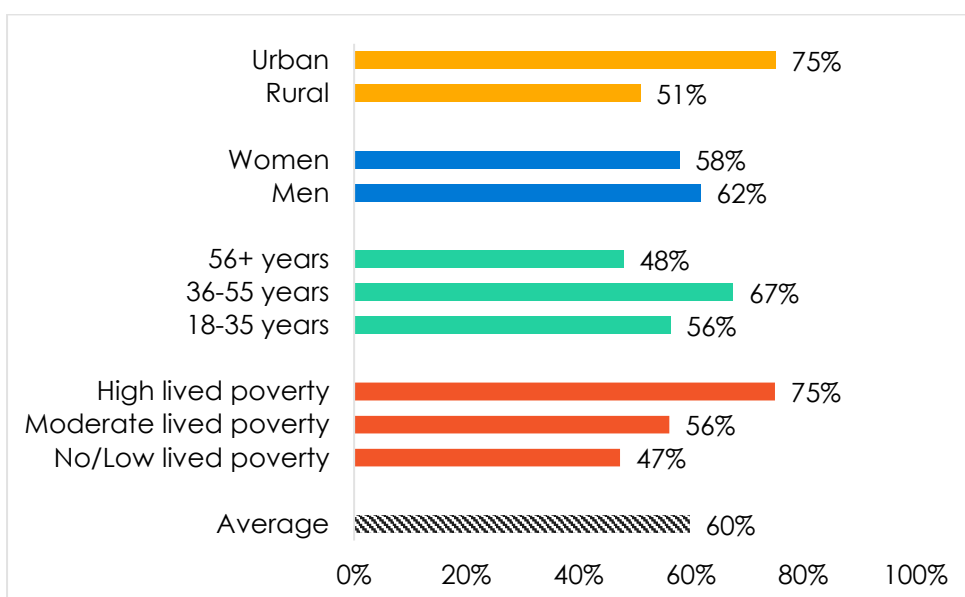
Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are significantly more common in cities than in rural areas (75% vs. 51%), and somewhat more common among men than women (62% vs. 58%) (Figure 10). They increase steeply with citizens' level of lived poverty, ranging from 47% of the best-off to 75% of the poorest respondents.

Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Zimbabwe | 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?

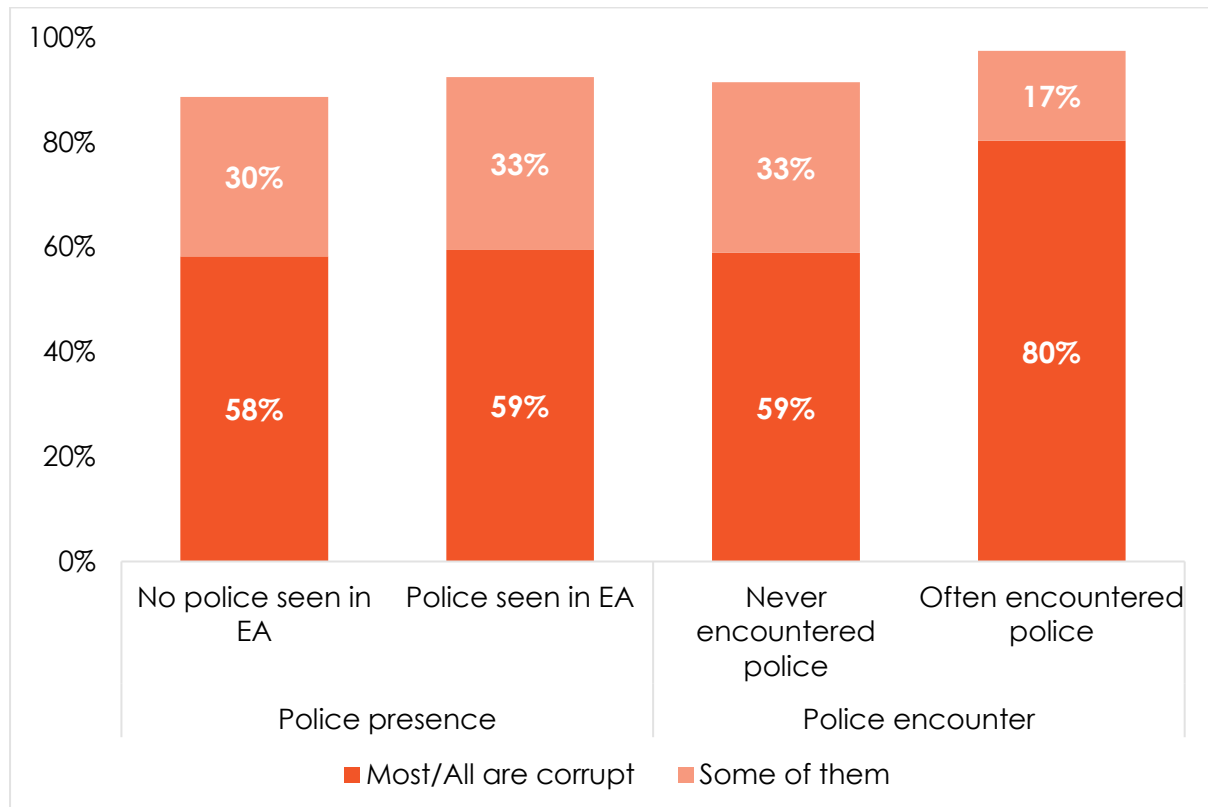
Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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")

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt differ little between respondents who live in EAs where field teams saw police officers or vehicles and those where no police presence was observed. However, citizens who “often” encountered police in involuntary situations (e.g. checkpoints, traffic stops, etc.) are significantly more likely to see most/all police as corrupt than are those who had no encounters with police (80% vs. 59%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Perceived police corruption | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Zimbabwe | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked: In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see any police officers or police vehicles?

Survey 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?

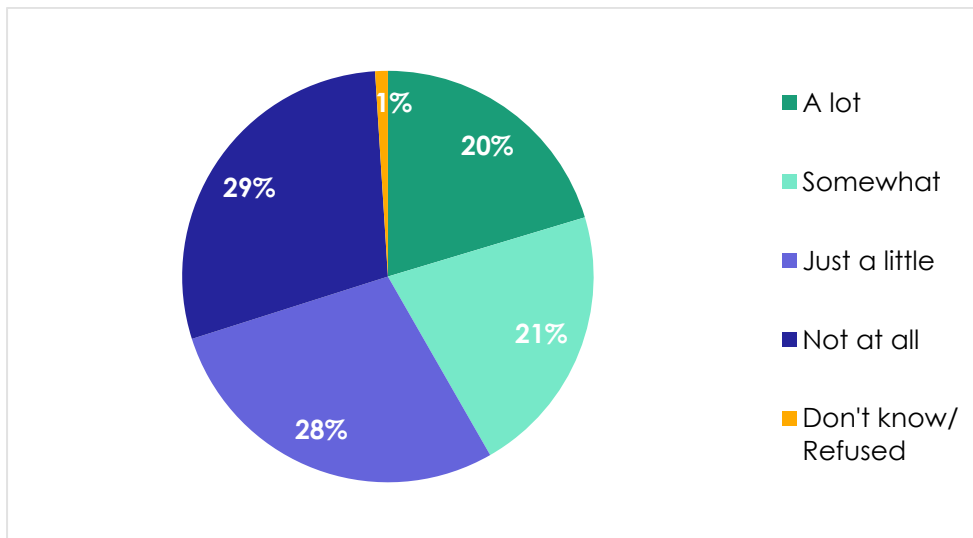
Trust in the police

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Zimbabwe's police suffer from fairly low levels of public trust. Only about four in 10 Zimbabweans (42%) say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot,”² while a majority (57%) express “just a little” (28%) or no trust at all (29%) in the police (Figure 12).

Over the past decade, Zimbabweans have expressed increasing distrust in the police. Between 2014 and 2021, the share of respondents who said they don't trust the police “at all” climbed by 12 percentage points (from 22% to 34%) before declining by 5 points in 2022 (Figure 13).

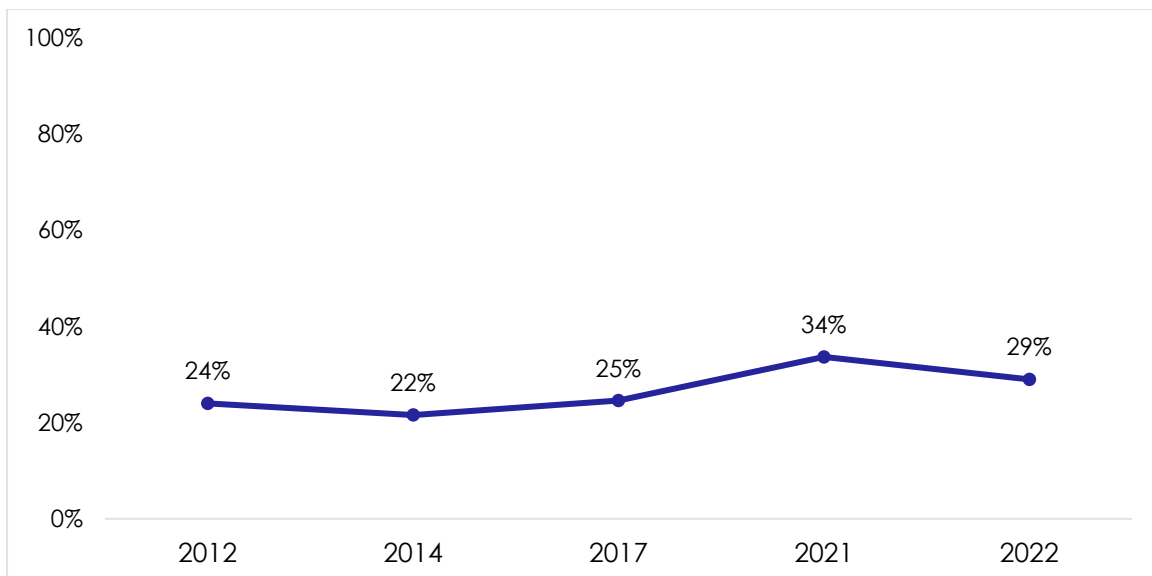
² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. “a lot” (20%) and “somewhat” (21%) sum to 42%).

Figure 12: Trust in the police | Zimbabwe | 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' | Zimbabwe | 2012-2022

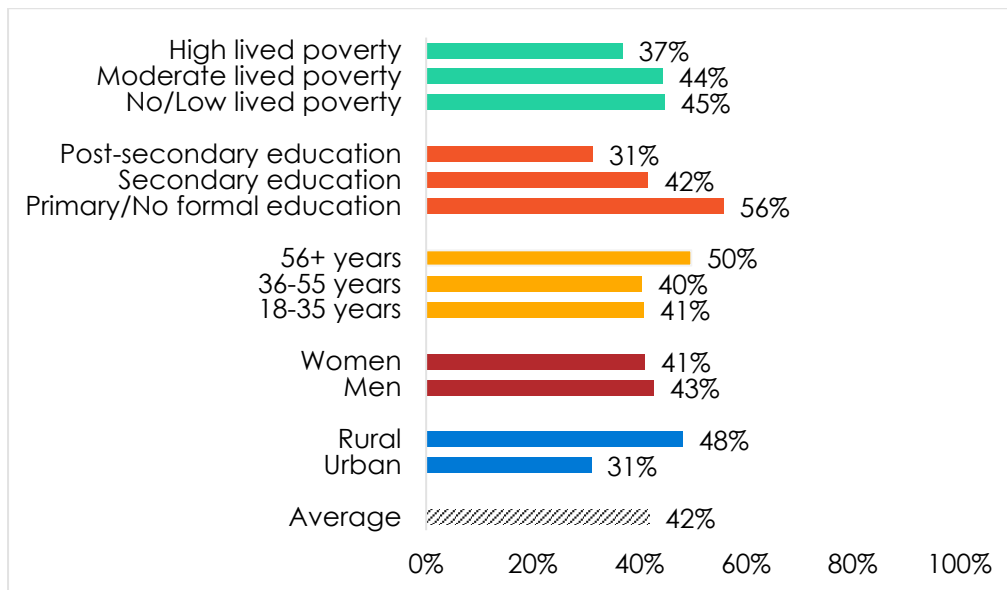


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

Rural residents express greater trust in the police than their urban cousins (48% vs. 31%). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from just 31% among those with post-secondary qualifications to 56% among those with primary or no formal schooling (Figure 14).

Older people (50% among those over age 55) are more likely to trust the police than younger cohorts (40%-41%).

Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022

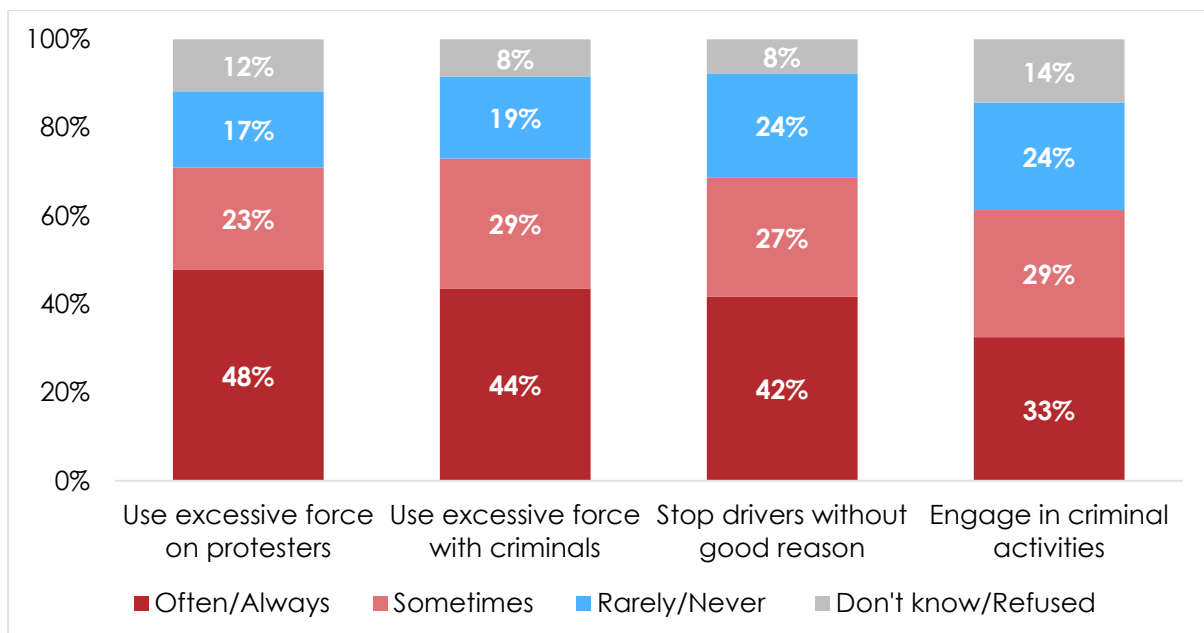


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Police conduct

In addition to expressing considerable general mistrust of the police, many Zimbabweans say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Improper police conduct | Zimbabwe | 2022



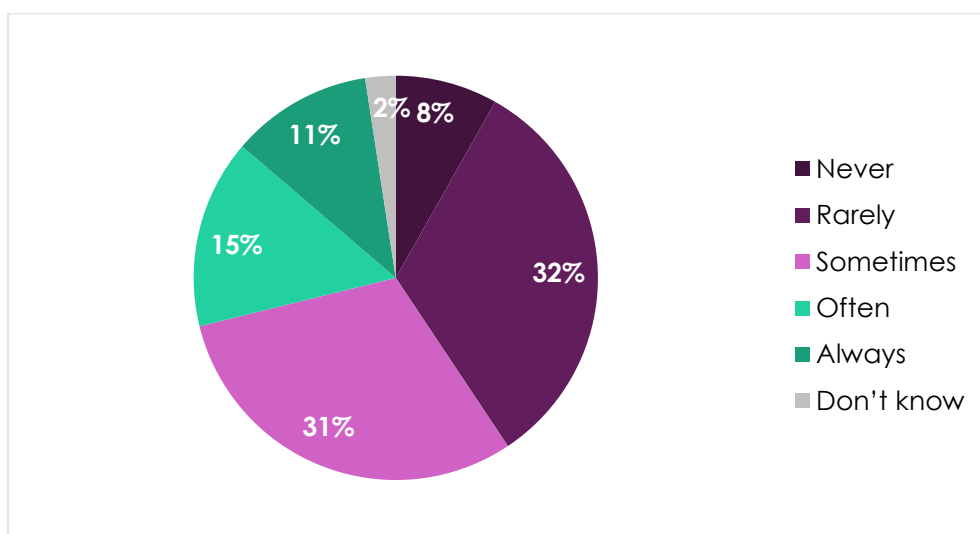
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Zimbabwe:
 Stop drivers without good reason?
 Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?
 Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?
 Engage in criminal activities?

Almost half (48%) of respondents say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force against protesters, in addition to 23% who say they “sometimes” do so.

More than four in 10 think the police routinely use excessive force against suspected criminals (44%) and frequently stop drivers without good reason (42%). One-third (33%) say the police “often” or “always” engage in criminal activities; only 24% think this “rarely” or “never” happens.

Overall, only about one in four citizens (26%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights; 41% assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

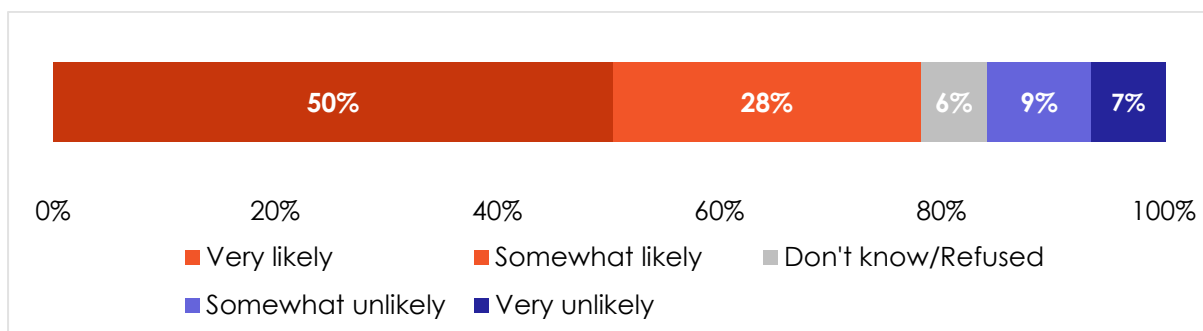
Figure 16: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens’ rights? | Zimbabwe | 2022



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

One area in which Zimbabweans give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. Close to eight in 10 respondents (78%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman’s report of GBV seriously, including 50% who see this as “very likely” (Figure 17).

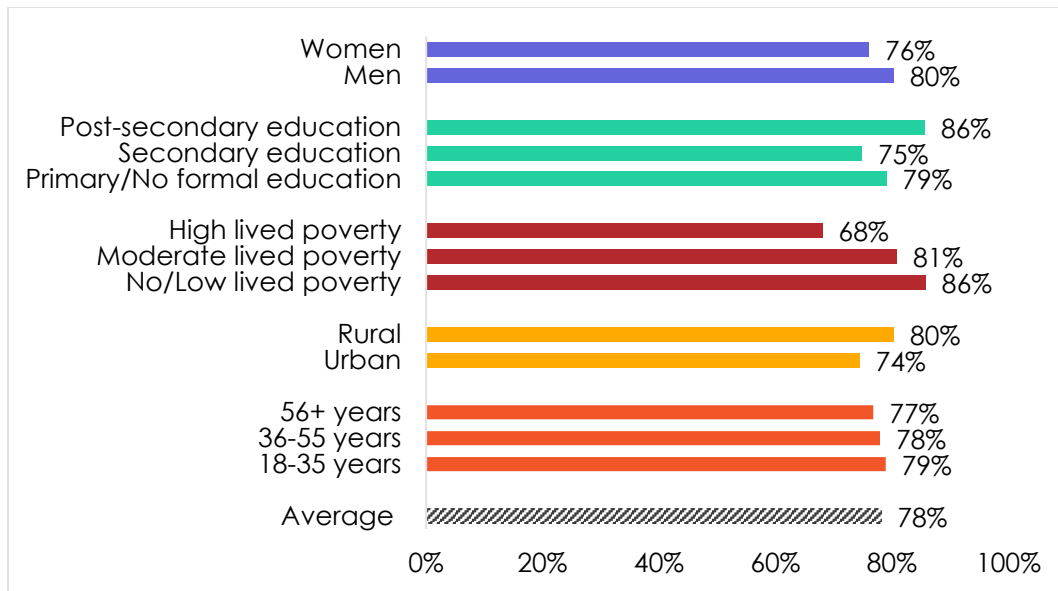
Figure 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 shared across key demographic groups, confidence is less strong among women (76%), urban residents (74%), and those experiencing high lived poverty (68%) than among their counterparts (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Police take gender-based violence seriously | by demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | 2022

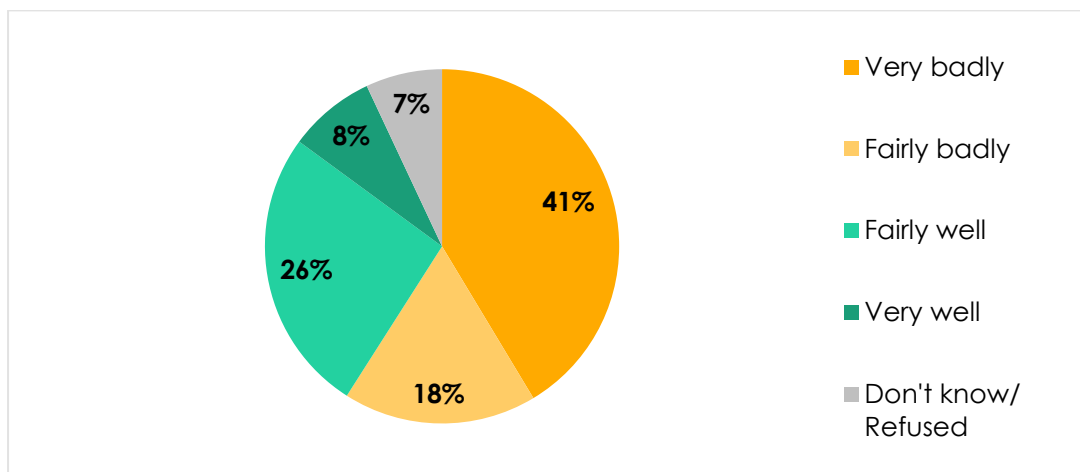


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police? (% who say "somewhat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

Government performance on reducing crime

Only one-third (34%) of citizens say the government is performing "fairly well" (26%) or "very well" (8%) at reducing crime, while six in 10 (59%) are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 19).

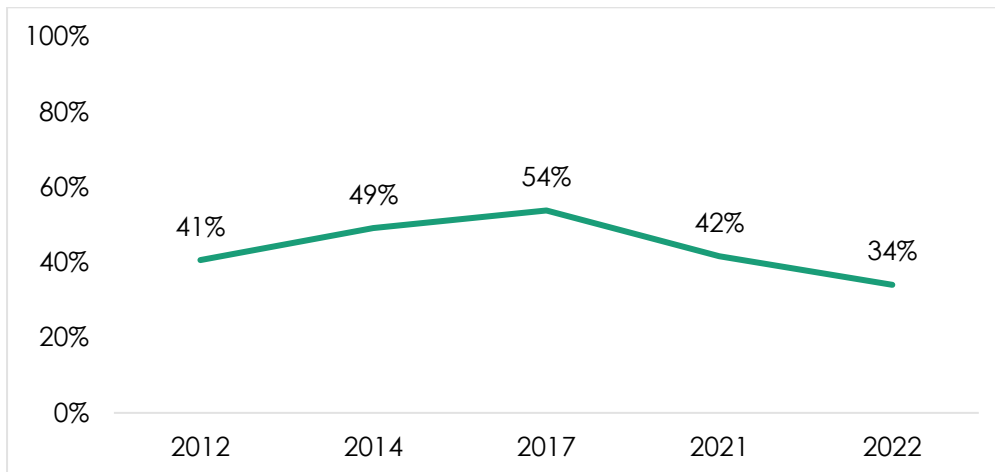
Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 has dropped by 20 percentage points since 2017, from 54% to 34% in 2022 (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Zimbabwe | 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

Many Zimbabweans continue to see their police as corrupt, untrustworthy, prone to using excessive force – in short, unprofessional. And a majority are dissatisfied with the government's performance in fighting crime. While broader economic issues underlie some weaknesses in police performance, these survey findings highlight internal challenges confronting the Zimbabwe Republic Police if it hopes to win the citizenry's trust and respect.

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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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