Liberians cite corruption, lack of professionalism among police failings

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 632 | Kelechi Amakoh and Oscar Bloh

Summary

After a civil war (1999-2003) in which it was factionalised and out of control, the Liberia National Police (LNP) was disbanded, then re-created with the support of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which assumed primary responsibility for internal peace and security for more than a decade (Centre for Public Impact, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2013).

With the departure of UNMIL in 2018, the Liberian government resumed full responsibility for providing the necessary financial and logistical support for the LNP to maintain law and order in the country. But with competing national needs and priorities, this support has fallen short, leaving the police badly understaffed – with about 4,500 officers, far fewer than the 8,000 that UNMIL said were needed – and susceptible to unethical and unprofessional behaviour, including extortion and corruption. In his speech at the 2022 Carl Gershman Democracy Lecture Forum, U.S. Ambassador Michael McCarthy blamed inadequate government funding for breeding police corruption but also noted cases in which police officers have to ask the families of rape victims for gas money in order to do their jobs (Mehnpaine, 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.

Survey findings show that a majority of Liberians think most police officers are corrupt. Among citizens who encountered the police during the previous year, a majority say it was difficult to obtain assistance, and more than three-fourths say they had to pay a bribe.

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 growing number of Liberians 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 (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 August and 7 September 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- About six in 10 citizens say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (62%) and feared crime in their home (59%) at least once during the previous year. Experiences of insecurity have increased sharply over the past two years. Poor citizens are more than twice as likely to feel unsafe and to fear crime as their well-off counterparts.

- Two in 10 respondents (20%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Three times as many (63%) say they 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, 55% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 78% say they had to pay a bribe.
    - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 70% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.

- Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt – the worst rating among 12 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.

- Only one-fourth (26%) of Liberians say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot."

- Substantial proportions of the population say the police "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason (53%), use excessive force during protests (39%) and with suspected criminals (38%), and engage in criminal activities themselves (35%).
    - But three-fourths (74%) consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.

- Only 20% of citizens say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.

- Only 18% of Liberians approve of the government's performance on reducing crime, down 39 percentage points over the past decade.

Sense of security

As is enshrined in their Constitution, Liberians have the right to life and security. To what extent do citizens feel safe in their neighbourhood?

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security among Liberians. More than six in 10 citizens (62%) say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 46% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 1).[1]

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[1] 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. 28% "many times/always" plus 17% "several times" sum to 46% "at least several times").

Similarly, 59% report that they feared crime in their home, including 41% who say this happened at least "several times."
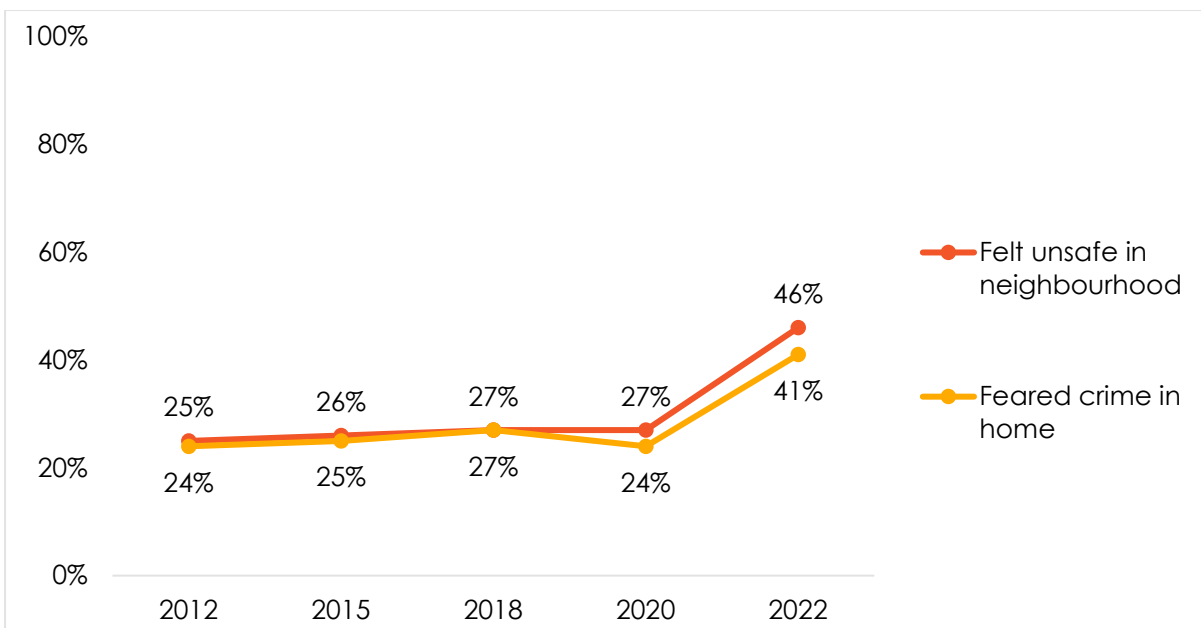
Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Liberia | 2022
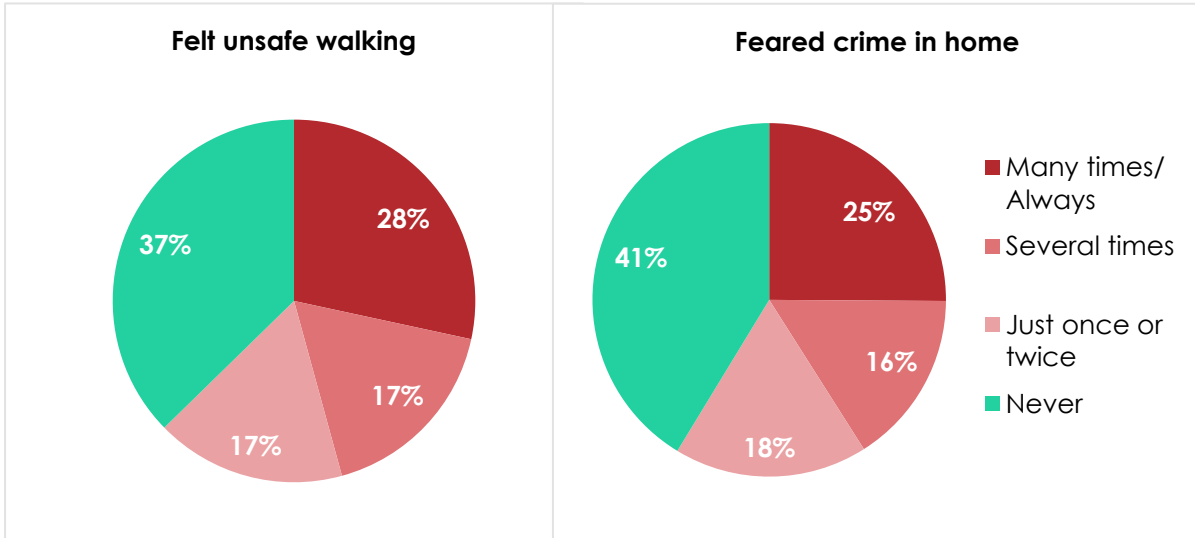
Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home?*

Insecurity and fear of crime have increased sharply over the past two years. The proportion of Liberians who report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood climbed by 19 percentage points between 2020 (27%) and 2022, while the share who feared crime in their home rose by 17 points (Figure 2).
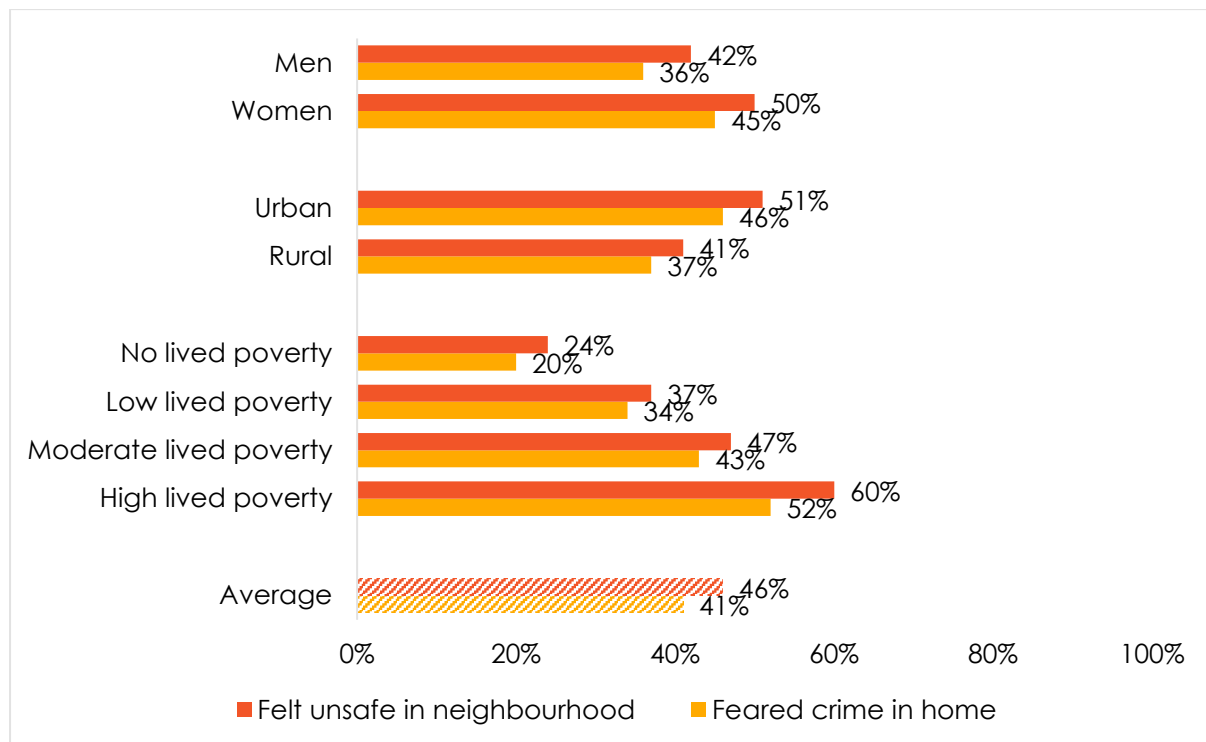
Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Liberia | 2012-2022

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 more common – by 8 percentage points or more – among women than men and in cities than in rural areas (Figure 3). They increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty[2]: The poorest citizens are more than twice as likely to feel unsafe and to fear crime in their home as the best-off respondents.

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Liberia | 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 thing that may affect people's sense of security is the presence of security agencies. 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, these data provide reliable indicators of infrastructure and service availability.

In Liberia, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of 37% of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 29% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including customs checkpoints (10%), roadblocks by the police or army (8%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (6%), and soldiers or other military personnel or vehicles (2%).

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[2] 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).

However, survey findings do not show that a police presence strengthens people's sense of security: Respondents who reside in areas with a police station are actually slightly *more* likely to report feeling unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (48% at least "several times," vs. 44% of those without a nearby police station).

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Liberia | 2022
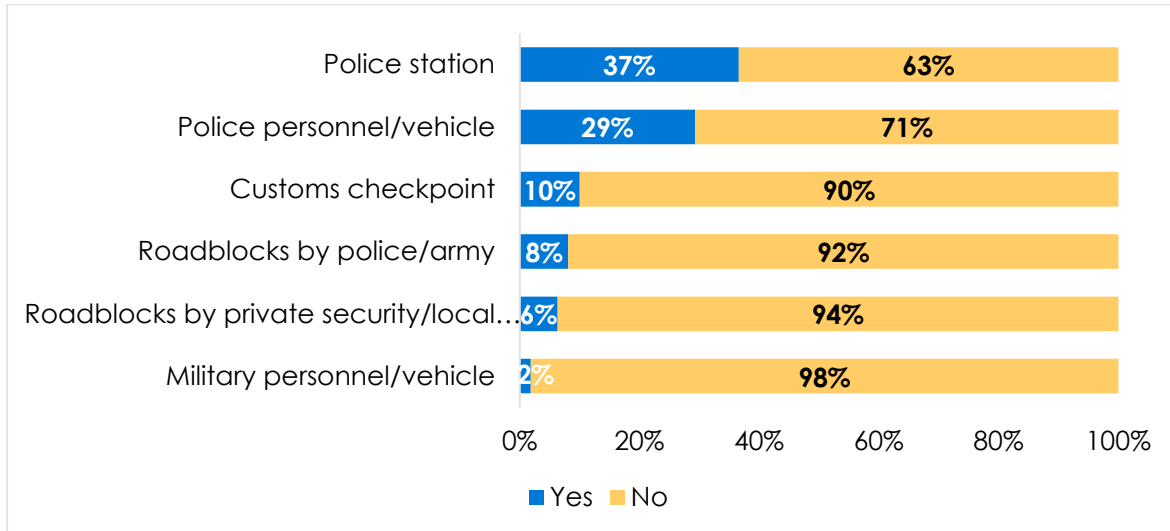
Survey enumerators were asked:
Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit (PSU)/enumeration area (EA) or in easy walking distance: Police station?
In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any 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 Liberians encounter the police in their daily lives?

Two in 10 respondents (20%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Three times as many (63%) report having encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Liberia | 2022
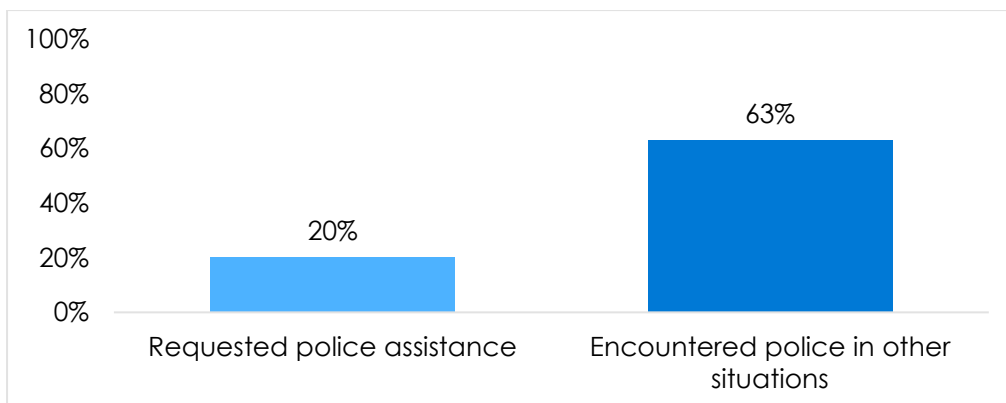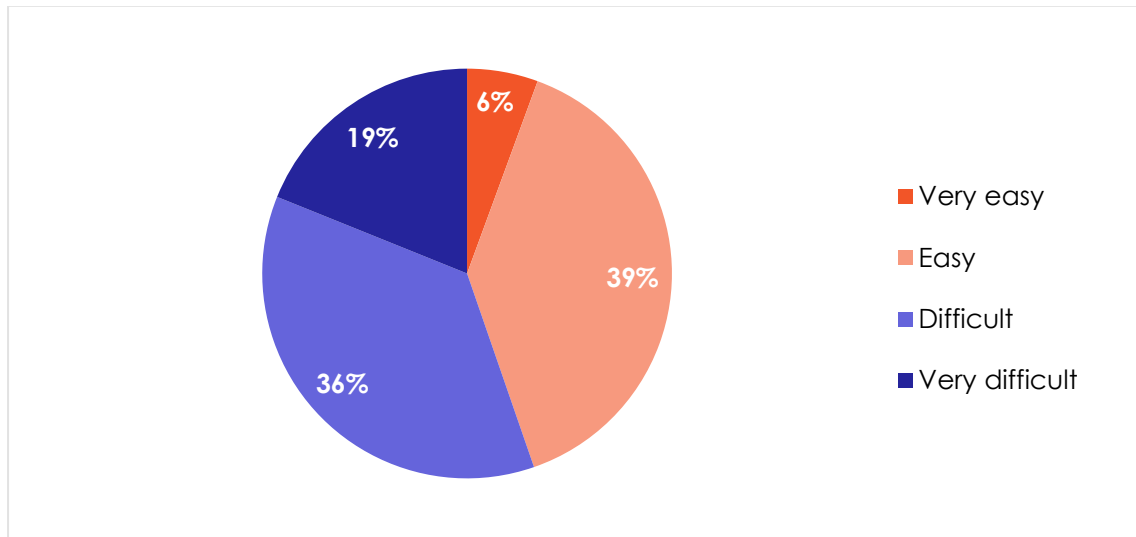

Respondents were asked:
In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police?
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

Almost one in five Liberians (18%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 36% say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, more than half (55%) say it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to get the assistance they needed (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Liberia | 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, more than three-fourths (78%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer to get the assistance they needed, including 30% who say this happened "often" (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Liberia | 2022
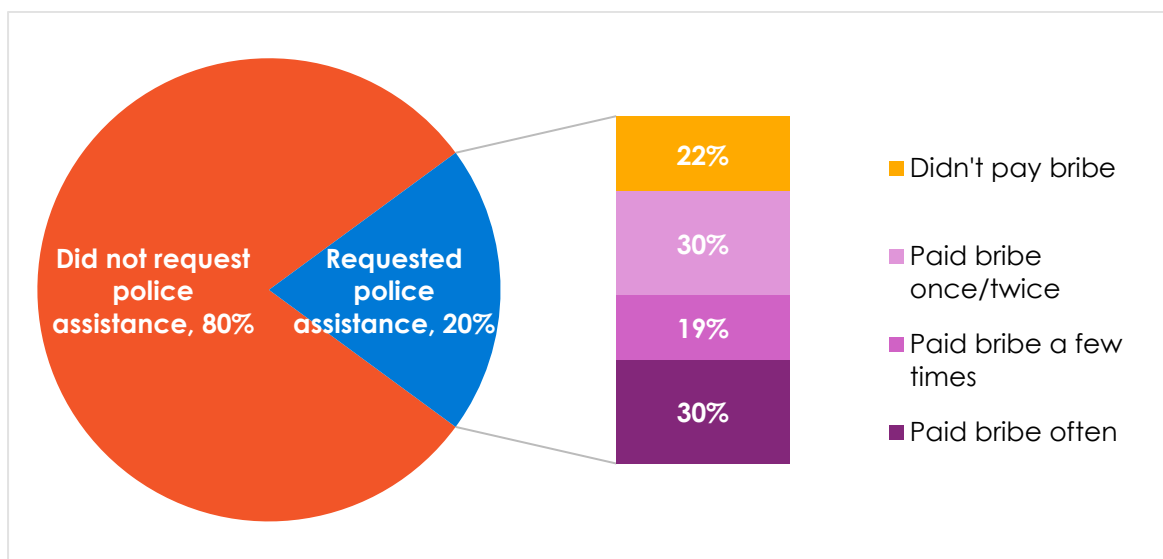
Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (If "yes":) How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Among Liberians who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, 70% say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour at least once to avoid problems, including 22% who say this occurred "often" (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Liberia | 2022
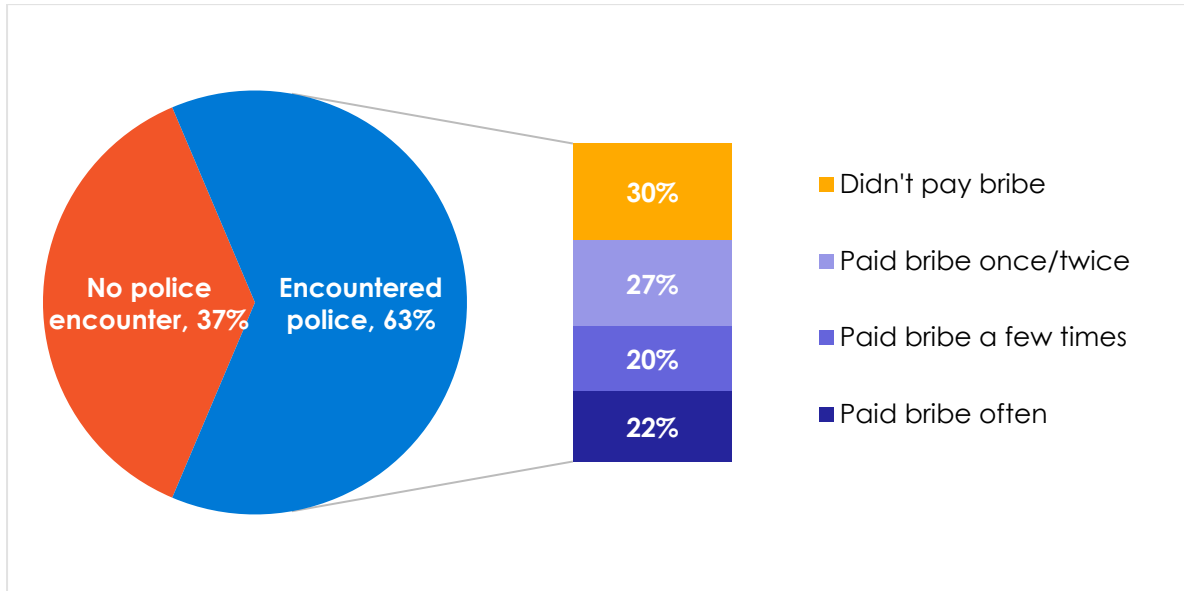
Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If at least once:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?*

To summarise the experience of all Liberian adults during the past year, almost half (46%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.
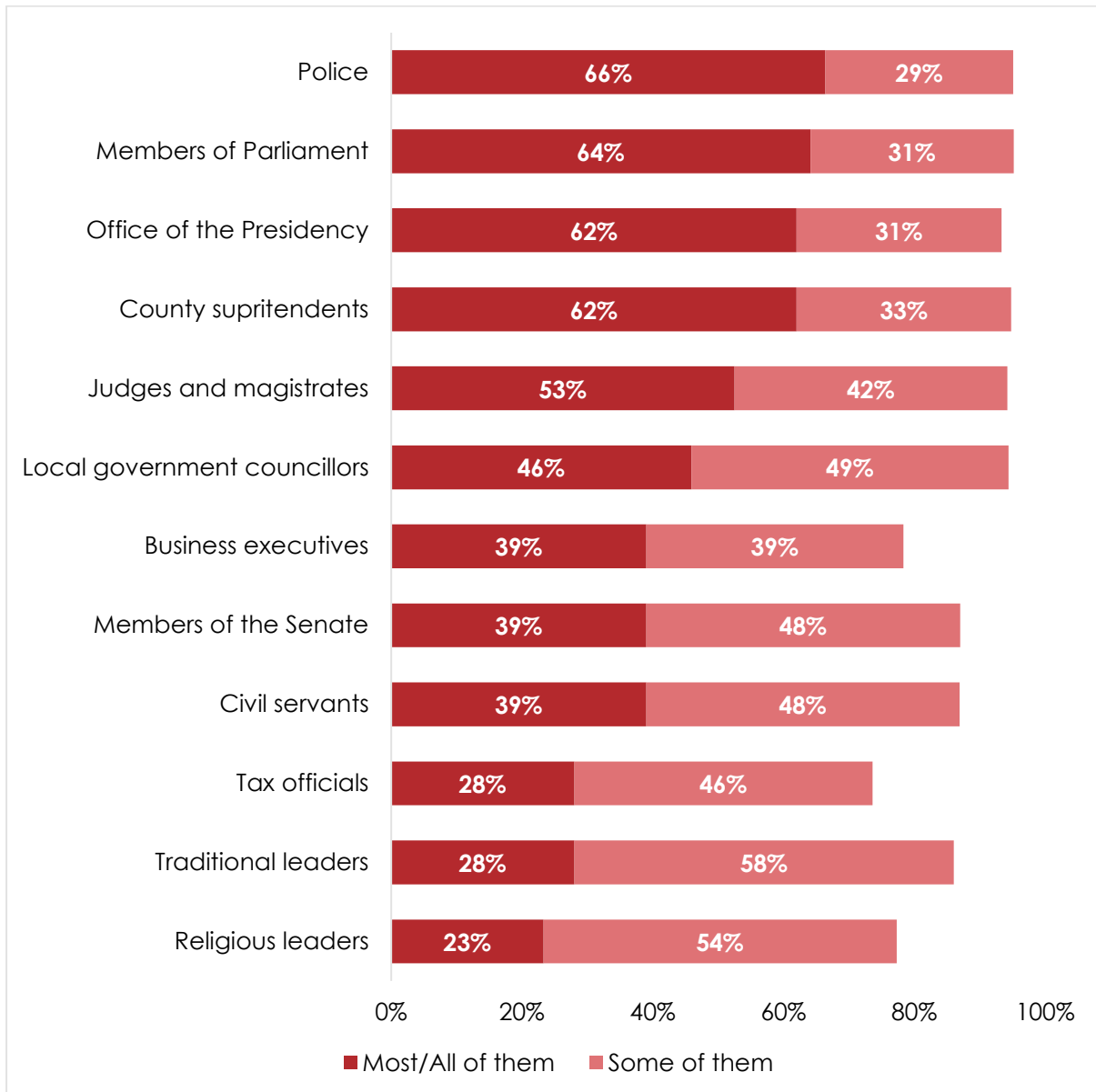
Police corruption

Given the frequency of reported bribe paying, it is not surprising that a large majority (66%) of Liberians say that "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt – the worst rating among all 12 institutions and leaders the survey asked about. In addition, 29% of citizens think that "some" police are corrupt (Figure 9).

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are more common among men (70%, vs. 63% of women) and highly educated citizens (74%, vs. 61%-68% of those with less schooling) (Figure 10). Young citizens (69%-70% of those aged 18-35) are more likely to see the police as largely corrupt than their elders (60%-63%).

Findings also suggest possible links between perceptions of police corruption and interaction with the police. Citizens who "often" encountered police in situations such as checkpoints are significantly more likely to see most/all police as corrupt than are those who had no encounters with police (79% vs. 54%) (Figure 11).

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

	Most/All of them	Some of them
Police	66%	29%
Members of Parliament	64%	31%
Office of the Presidency	62%	31%
County supritendents	62%	33%
Judges and magistrates	53%	42%
Local government councillors	46%	49%
Business executives	39%	39%
Members of the Senate	39%	48%
Civil servants	39%	48%
Tax officials	28%	46%
Traditional leaders	28%	58%
Religious leaders	23%	54%

■ Most/All of them ■ Some of them

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?*

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www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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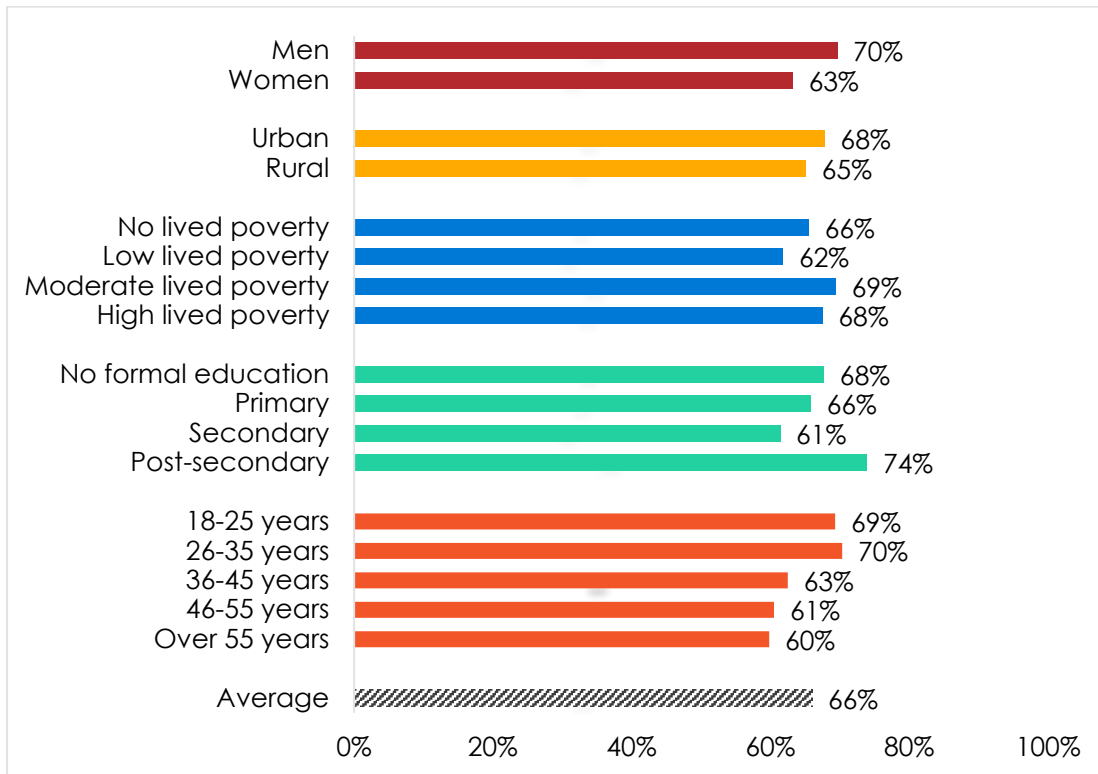

Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Figure 11: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by frequency of interaction with police | Liberia | 2022
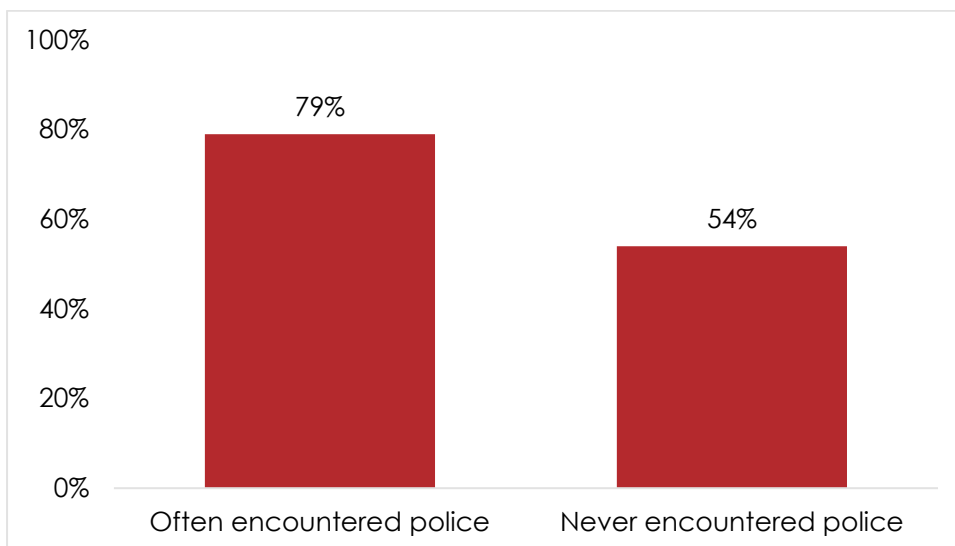
Respondents were asked:
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?
How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Trust in the police

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Liberia's police suffer from low levels of public trust. Only one-fourth (26%) of citizens say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot," while 38% express no trust at all in the police (Figure 12).

Over the past decade, the share of citizens who don't trust the police "at all" has been fairly stable, returning to near four in 10 after a brief improvement in 2018 (27%) (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Trust in the police | Liberia | 2022
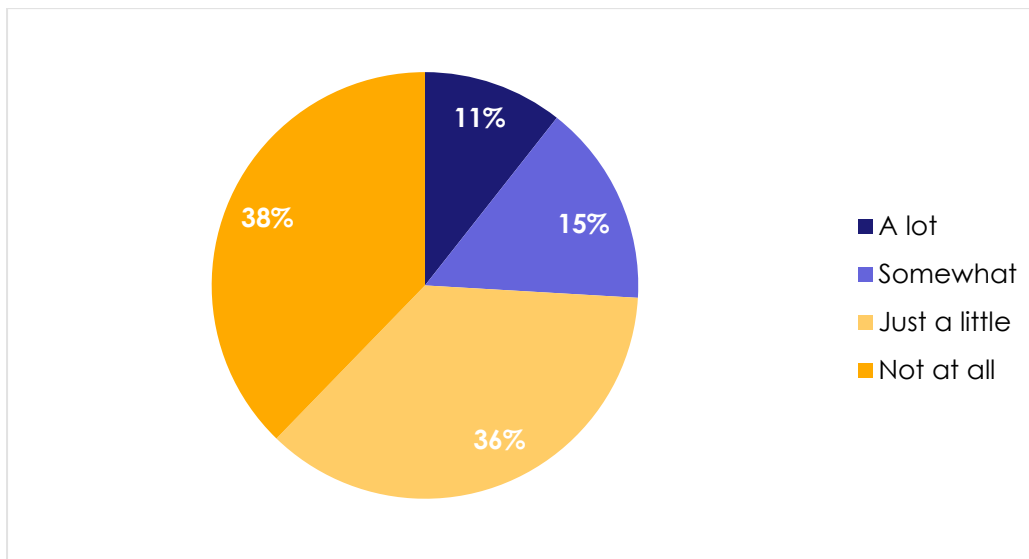
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 13: Don't trust the police at all | Liberia | 2012-2022
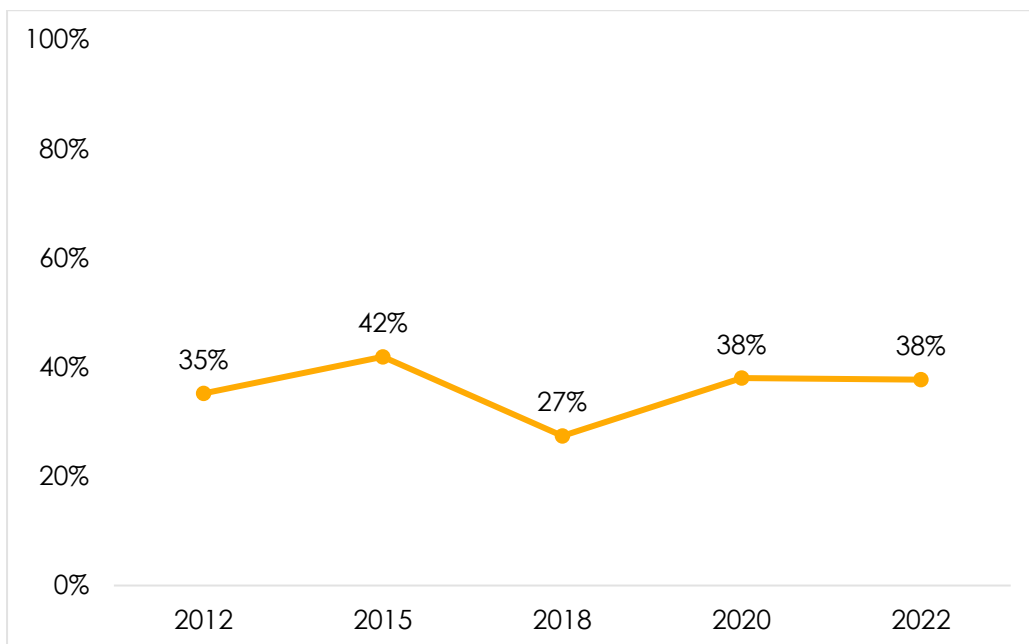
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "not at all")

Rural residents (28%) express slightly greater trust in the police than their urban counterparts (24%). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from just 21% among those with secondary qualifications to 36% among those with no formal schooling. Young respondents are least likely to trust the police (24% of those aged 18-35) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust the police somewhat/a lot | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022
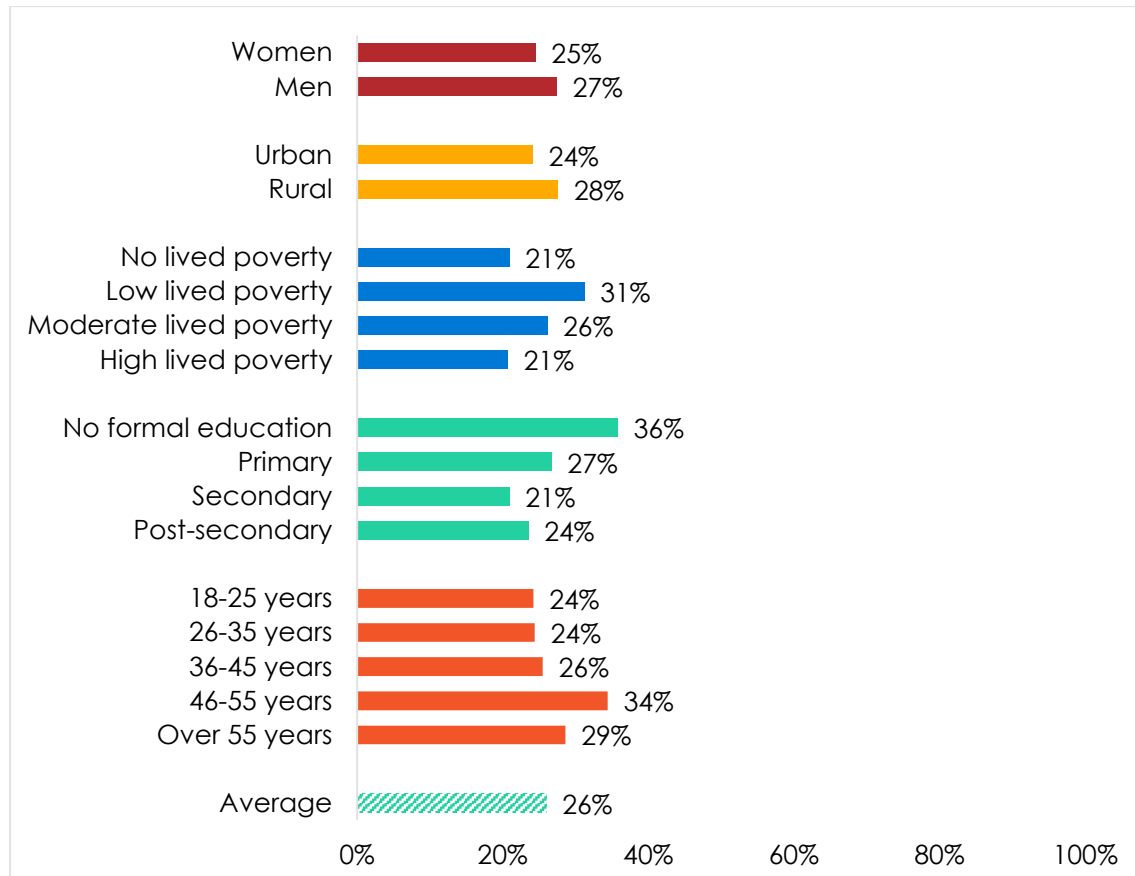
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Police conduct

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

A majority (53%) of respondents say that the police "often" or "always" stop drivers without good reason, while close to four in 10 say they frequently use excessive force during protests (39%) and with suspected criminals (38%) and engage in criminal activities themselves (35%). Fewer than two in 10 citizens say such abuses are rare or unheard of.

Overall, only one-fifth (20%) of Liberians say the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights. Most citizens (61%) say this is only "sometimes" the case (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Improper police practices | Liberia | 2022
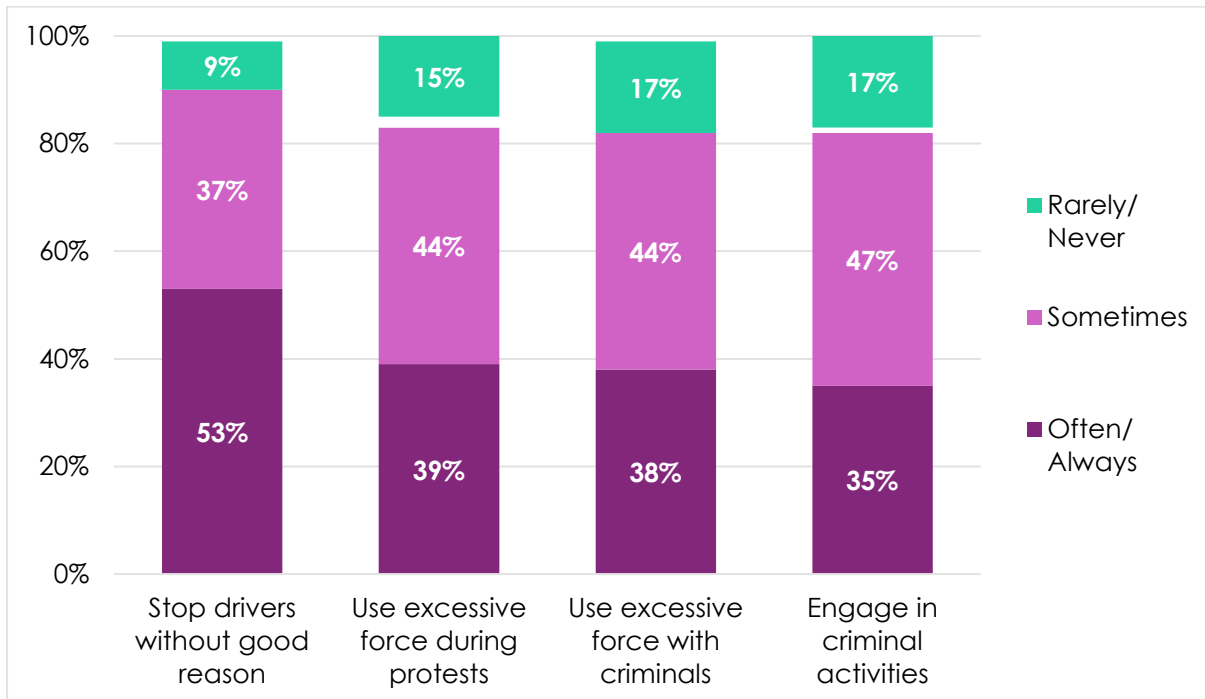
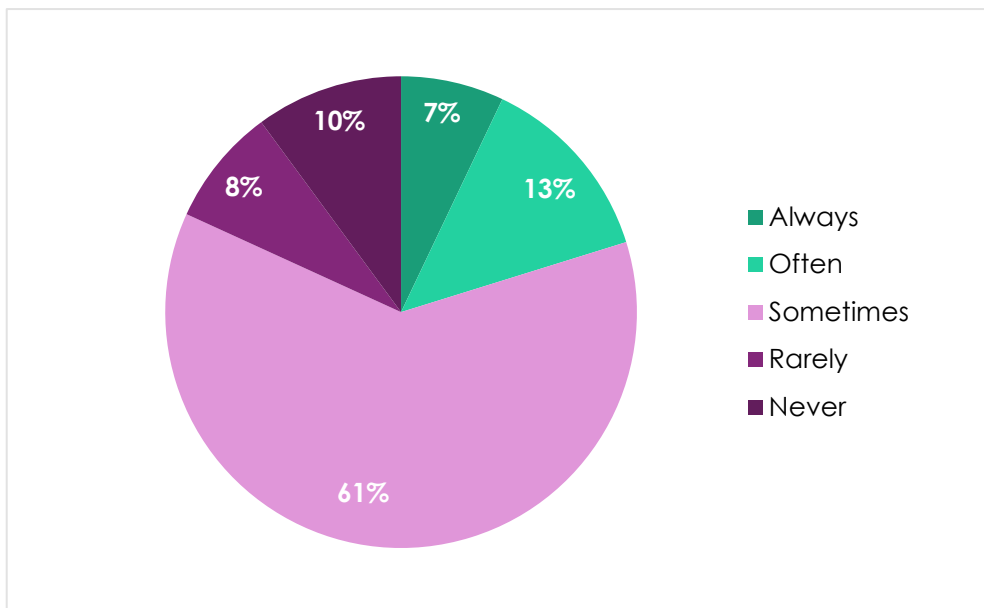*Respondents were asked*: In your opinion, how often do the police in Kenya:
   Stop drivers without good reason?
   Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations?
   Use excessive force when dealing with criminals?
   Engage in criminal activities?

**Figure 16: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights?** | Liberia | 2022

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

One area in which Liberians give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. More than eight in 10 respondents (89%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 74% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 17).

While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is slightly less strong among respondents with no formal education (81%), and is somewhat weaker in rural areas than in cities (85% vs. 93%) (Figure 18).

**Figure 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously?** | Liberia | 2022
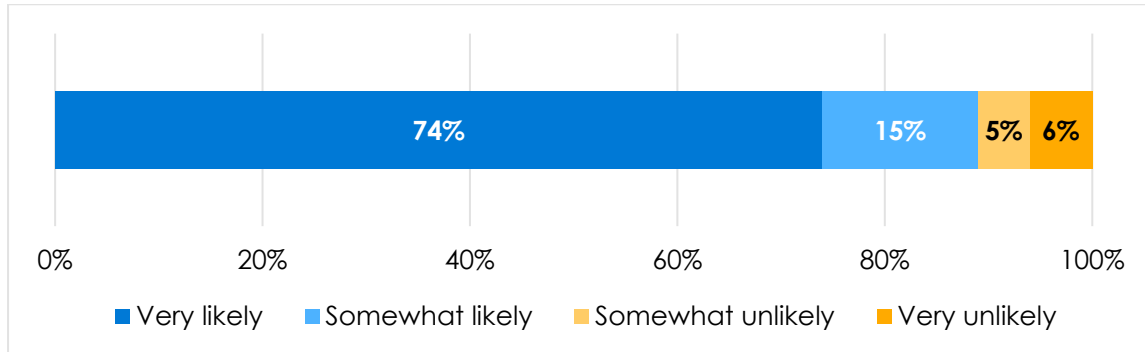
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?

Figure 18: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022
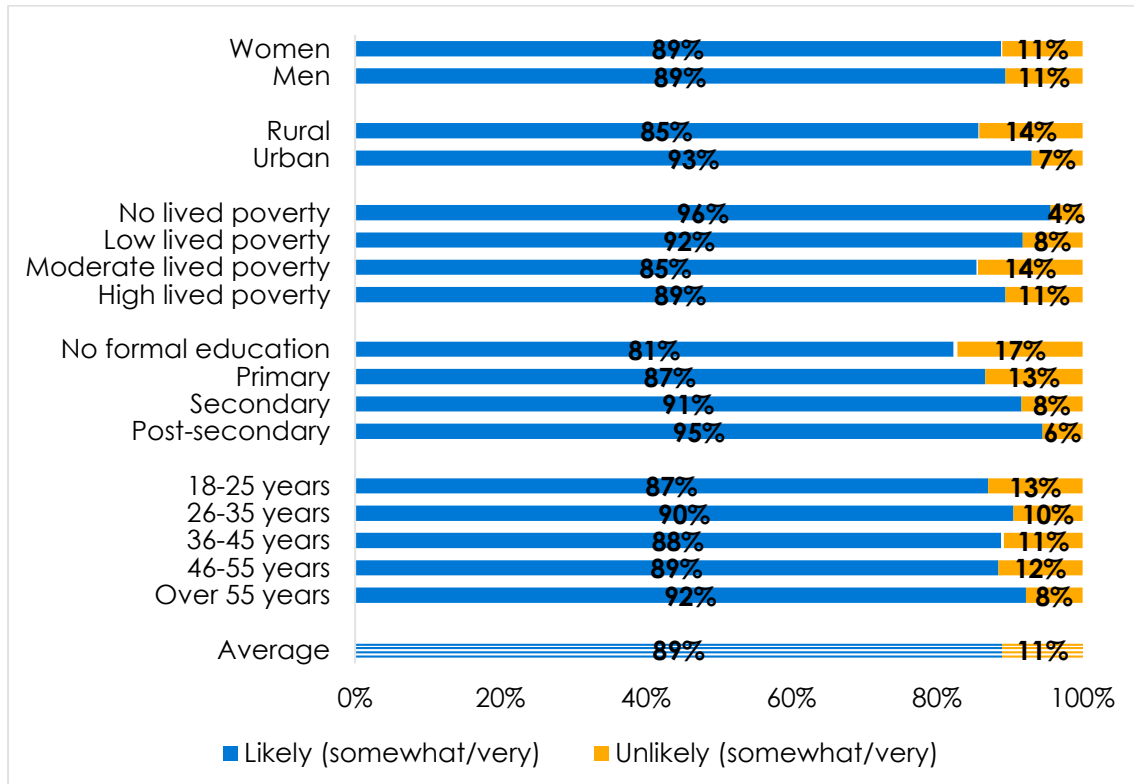
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?

Government performance on reducing crime

Liberians overwhelmingly (82%) say the government is doing a poor job of reducing crime, including 64% who say it is handling this issue "very badly" (Figure 19).

Public approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has plummeted over the past decade, dropping by 39 percentage points between 2012 and 2022 (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Liberia | 2022
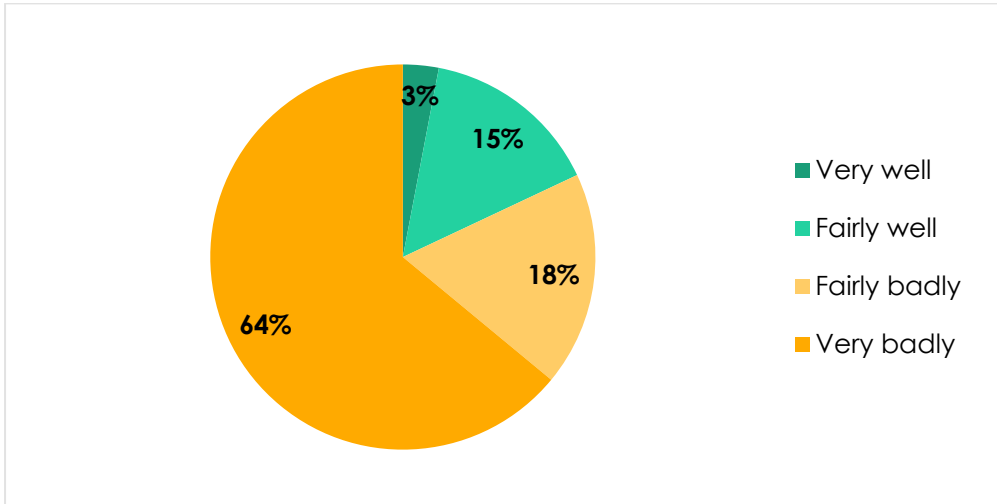
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Liberia | 2012-2022
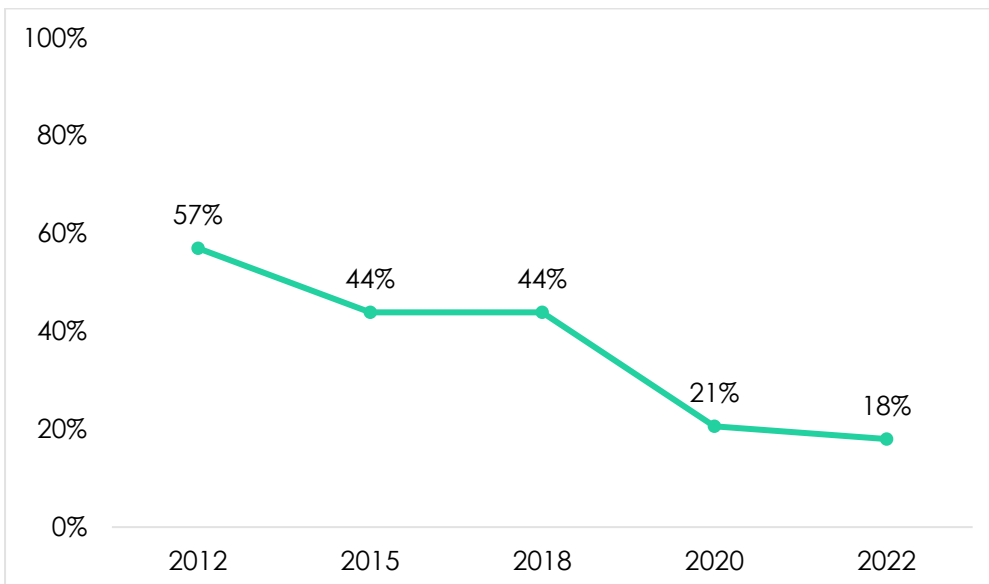
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

The Liberia National Police face a crisis in public confidence. Despite legal, policy, and institutional reforms under UNMIL guidance, barriers and constraints continue to undermine

the LNP's ability to serve citizens in an effective and efficient manner. Barriers such as weak institutional capacity, inadequate logistics, limited operational funds, and poor working conditions create an environment in which police officers are reduced to requesting money from justice seekers to address their grievances. This contributes to a lack of public trust and confidence in the LNP and the perception that the police are one of the most corrupt state institutions, further weakening its effectiveness in fighting crime.

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