

Namibians see police falling short of professional conduct and respect for citizens' rights

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 635 | Christiaan Keulder

Summary

Namibia has a problematic history of police violence against citizens dating back to the liberation war. Despite expectations that the post-colonial police force would be more professional and less violent in its interactions with citizens, instances of police brutality remain unacceptably high.

For example, the Namibian Police Force's Internal Investigative Unit investigated 118 shooting incidents involving police officers between 2010 and mid-2016. All resulted in criminal charges – 34 charges of murder and 84 charges of attempted murder (Legal Assistance Centre, 2019).

In 2018, President Hage Geingob launched Operation Hornkarnz, which brought together members of the Namibian police, the Namibian Defence Force, the Namibian Correctional Service, and the Windhoek City police to combat increasing crime in the country's major cities more effectively. The inspector-general of police stated, "Criminals should know that it has started and will never end" (Kamwi, 2019). In May 2019, it was replaced by Operation Kalahari Desert.

Both operations have been heavily criticised for alleged abuses. The Legal Assistance Centre (2019) reports that as of November 2019, it was handling 32 such cases, 11 of which are related to Operation Hornkarnz or Operation Kalahari Desert.

Both the frequency of complaints of police brutality and the prolonged duration of the problem point to the endemic nature of police brutality (Legal Assistance Centre, 2019; Namibia Fact Check, 2020; International Human Rights Council, 2020). Most recently the Office of the Ombudsman indicated that it had received 598 complaints of brutality in 2020, and 579 in 2021-2022, from prison inmates and members of the public, making the Namibian police the institution most complained about in the country (Karuumbe, 2023).

Namibia has not avoided the increased international scrutiny of violent police conduct that followed the death of George Floyd in police custody in the United States in May 2020, and many, including judges (Rickard, 2022), have called for substantive operational and behavioural reforms to improve the quality of police officers and to address what has been described as a "national crisis in police-community relations" (Sheehama, 2023).

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.

Findings in Namibia show that feelings of insecurity and fear have risen sharply in recent years, and a majority of citizens say the government needs to do a better job of reducing crime. Among Namibians who interacted with the police during the previous year, a majority say it was easy to get assistance, though about one in five report having to pay a bribe to get help or avoid problems.

About one-third of citizens see most or all police officers as corrupt, a somewhat less negative rating than given the offices of the prime minister and the president, and almost two-thirds say they trust the police.

But a majority of Namibians believe the police at least sometimes engage in illegal activities, fail to respect citizens' rights, stop drivers without good reason, and use excessive force in managing public demonstrations and dealing with criminal suspects.

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 to be 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 Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Namibians in October-November 2021. 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 Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- More than half of Namibians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (59%) and feared crime in their home (52%) at least once during the previous year. Feelings of insecurity and fear have increased sharply over the past decade, and are far more common among urban residents and poor citizens than among their rural and better-off counterparts.
- About three in 10 citizens (29%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Substantially more (43%) 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, 38% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 18% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 19% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- About one-third (32%) of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt, a better rating than those received by the offices of the prime minister (39%) and the president (37%).
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Namibians say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot."
- A majority of Namibians say the police at least "sometimes" employ excessive force when dealing with criminals (73%) and during protests (62%), engage in criminal activities (65%), and stop drivers without good reason (55%).
- Only one-third (33%) of Namibians believe the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights.
- Most citizens (81%) believe that the police are likely to take gender-based violence cases seriously.

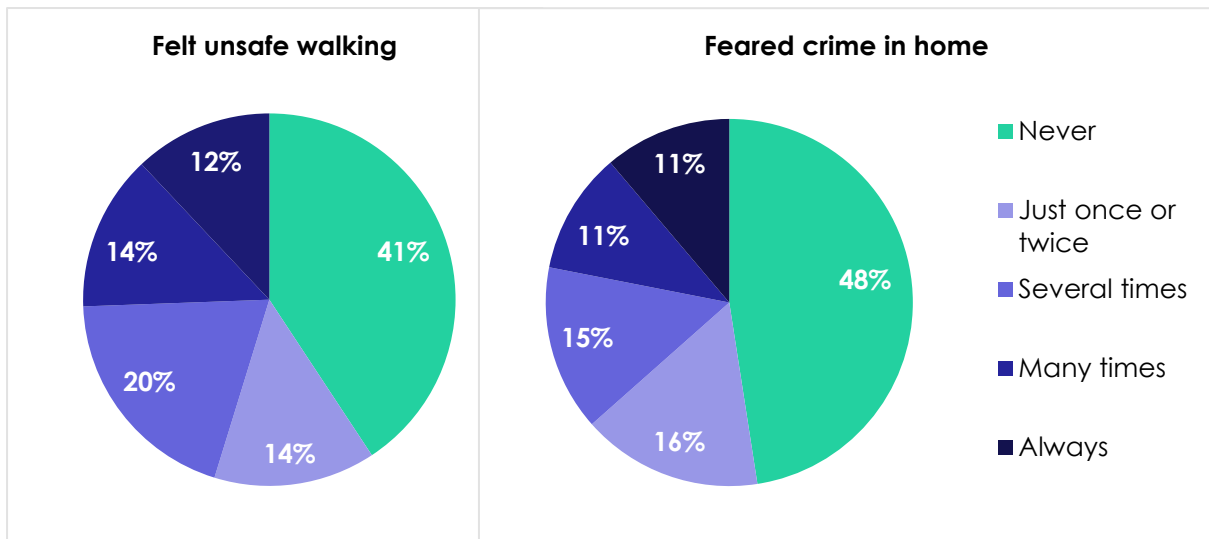
- A majority (57%) of Namibians are critical of the government's performance on reducing crime. Approval has declined consistently between 2008 (61%) and 2021 (42%), a drop of 19 percentage points.

Sense of security

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

Six in 10 Namibians (59%)¹ say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhoods at least once during the previous year, including 45% who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always." More than half (52%) feared crime in their home at least once, including 37% who experienced this at least "several times" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Namibia | 2021



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?

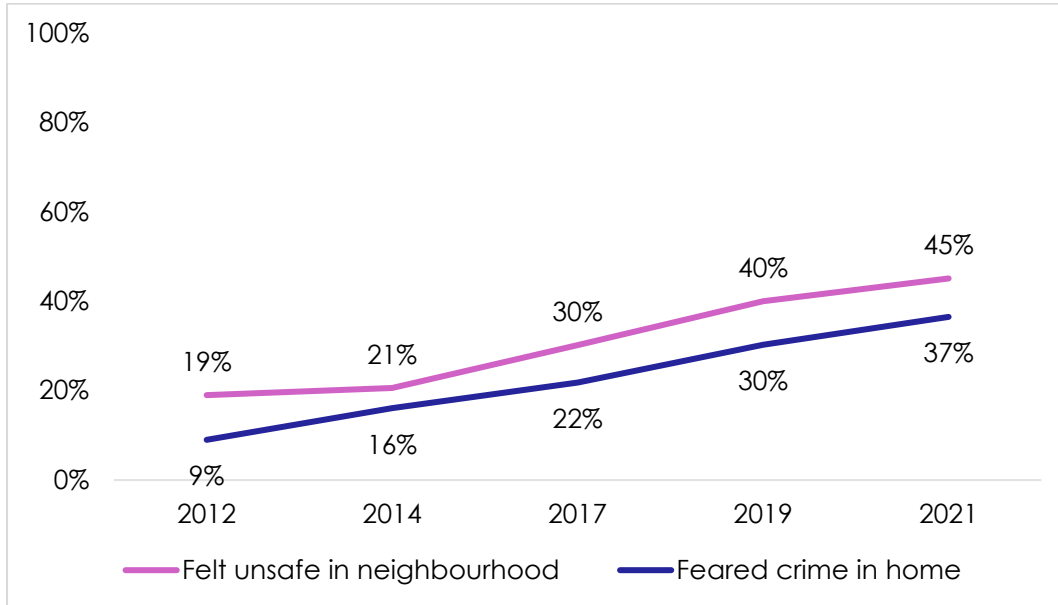
Perceptions of personal safety deteriorated significantly between 2012 and 2021. The proportion of Namibians who felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods at least "several times" more than doubled, from 19% to 45%. Similarly, those who feared crime in their homes increased fourfold, from 9% in 2012 to 37% in 2021 (Figure 2).

These experiences are more common in cities than in rural areas (by at least 23 percentage points on both indicators) (Figure 3). They increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty²: The poorest citizens are roughly three times as likely as the best-off citizens to feel unsafe and to fear crime in their home.

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures.

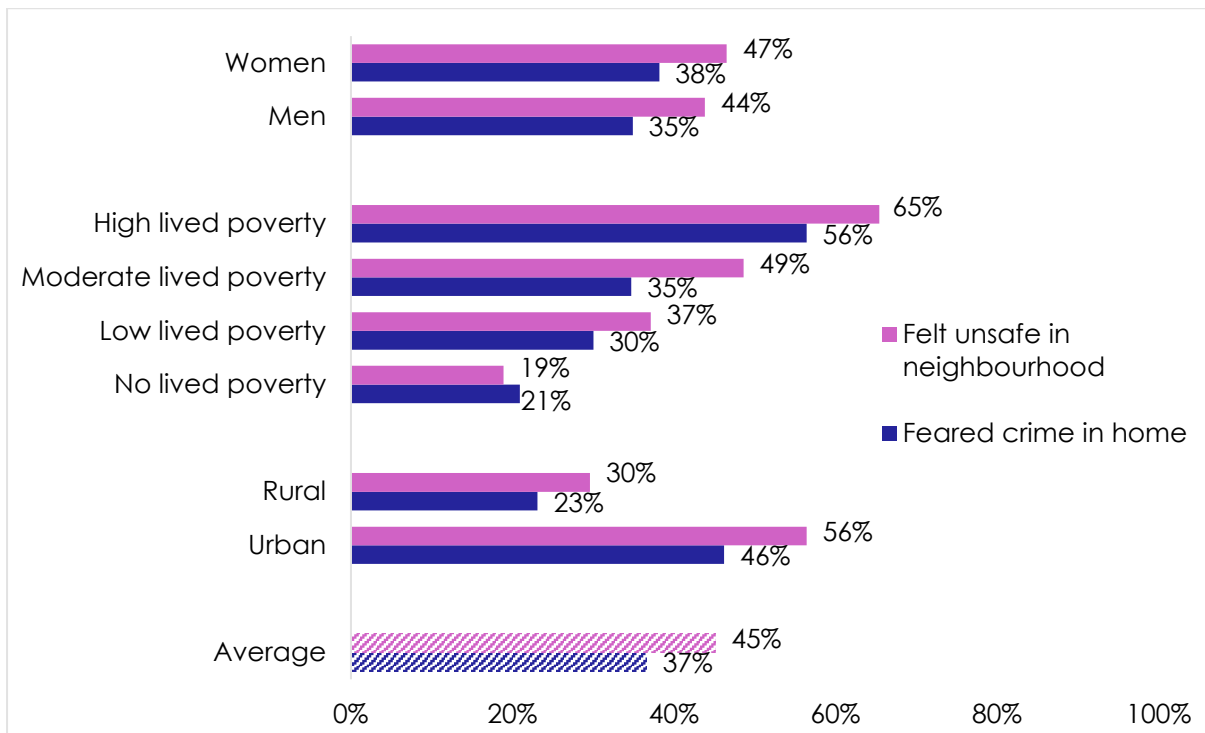
² Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Namibia | 2012-2021



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")

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | by gender, lived poverty, and urban-rural location | Namibia | 2021



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")

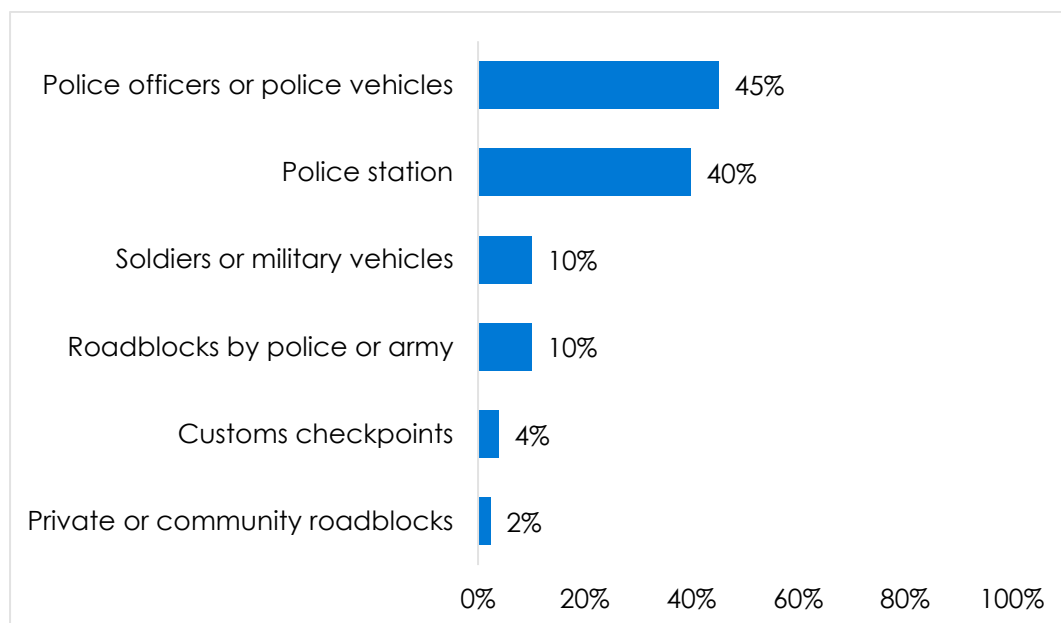
Police/security presence

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 available services and facilities in the area. Since the EAs visited are selected to represent the country's population as a whole, these data provide reliable indicators of infrastructure and service availability.

In Namibia, Afrobarometer field teams saw police officers or police vehicles in 45% of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about 40% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or military vehicles (10%), roadblocks by the police or army (10%), customs checkpoints (4%), and roadblocks by private security or the local community (2%)

Citizens who have a police station within walking distance are less likely to report having feared crime in their home "many times" (8%) or "always" (8%) than those who do not live close to a police station (12% and 13%). However, living close to a police station does not show a significant correlation with feeling safe walking in the neighbourhood.

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Namibia | 2021



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?

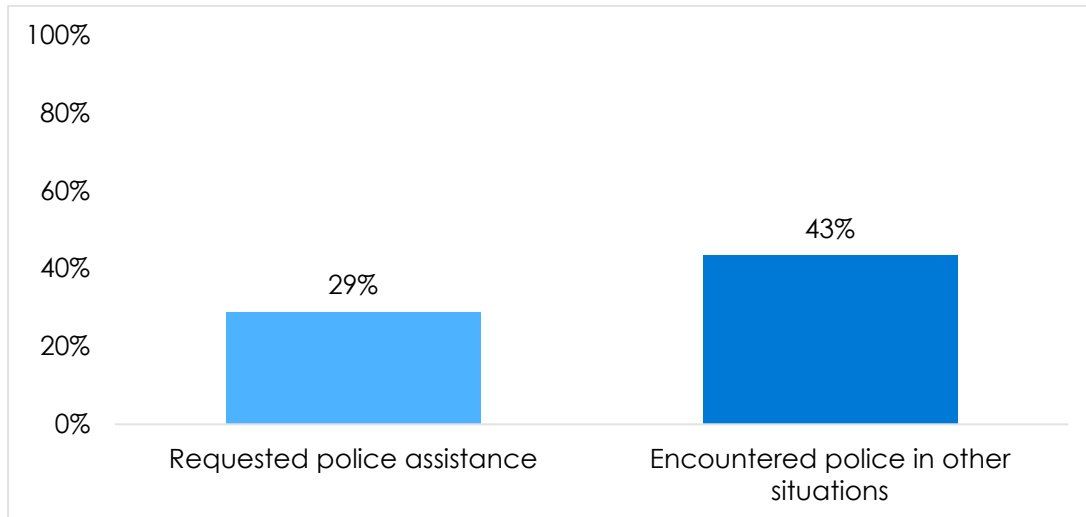
Encounters with the police

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

More than four in 10 of adult Namibians (43%) report having had an unsolicited encounter with the police during the previous year, be it at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation. Substantially fewer (29%) requested police assistance during the past year (Figure 5).

About one in six (17%) report police contact of both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 45% say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Namibia | 2021



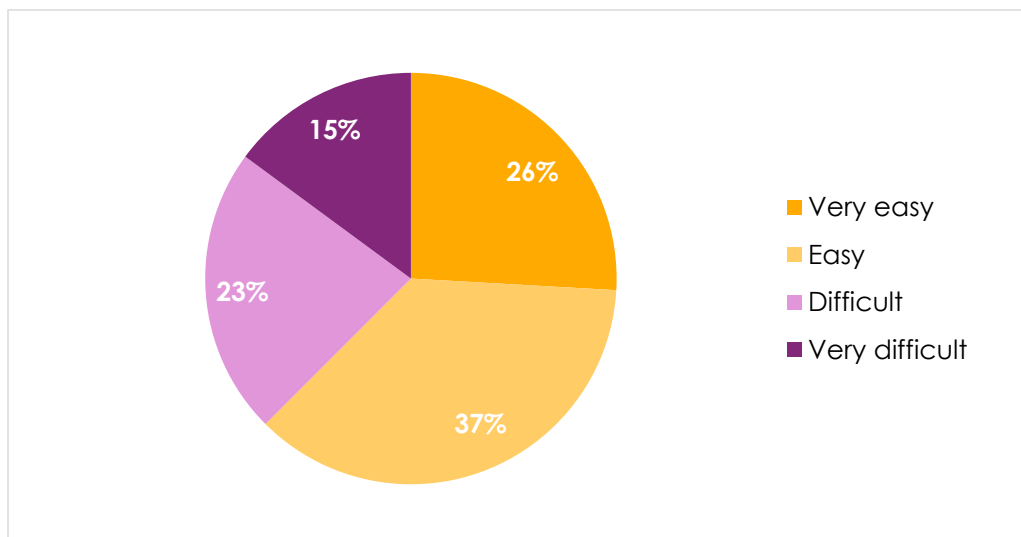
Respondents were asked:

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, nearly two-thirds (63%) say it was “easy” or “very easy” to get the assistance they needed, while 38% found it difficult (Figure 6).

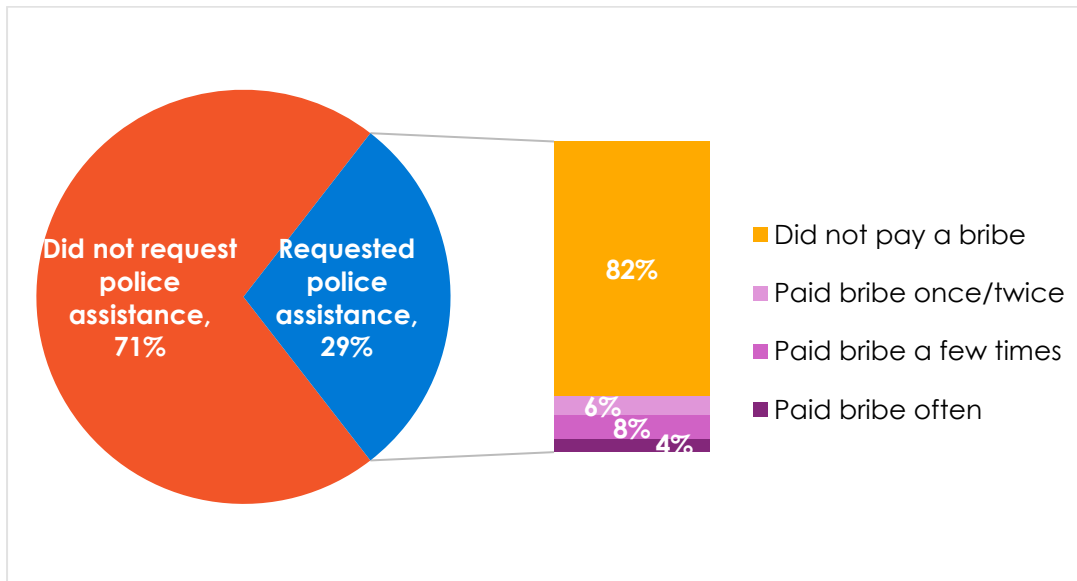
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Namibia | 2021



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, 18% say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer to get the assistance they needed (Figure 7).

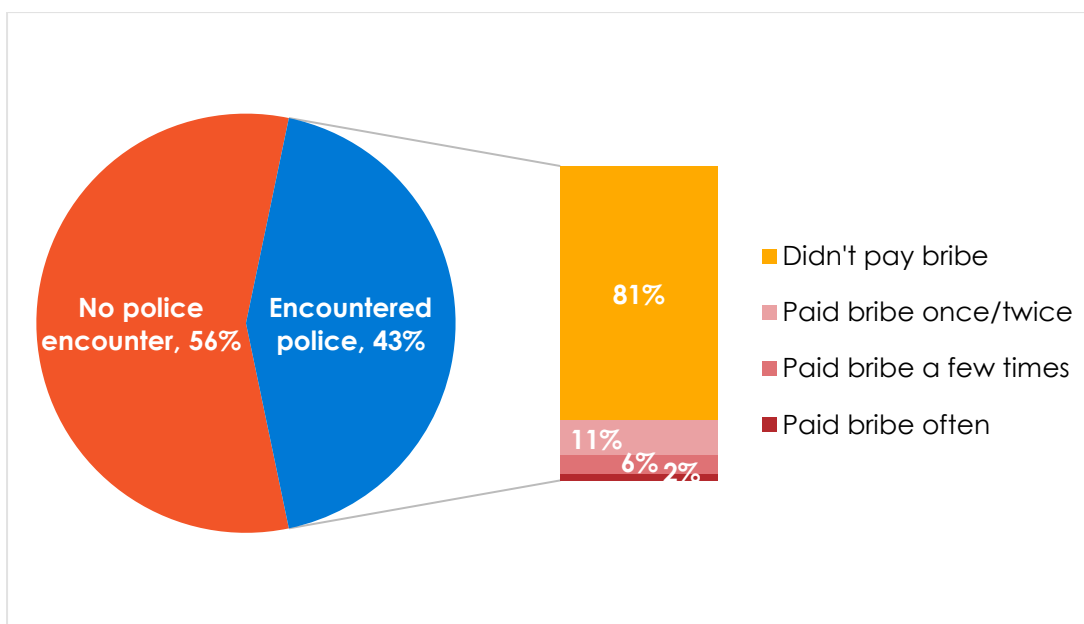
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Namibia | 2021



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 Namibians who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, about the same proportion (19%) report paying a bribe, giving a gift, or doing a favour to avoid problems (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Namibia | 2021



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? (Respondents who did not encounter the police are excluded.)

To summarise the experience among all Namibian adults during the past year, about one in nine (11%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

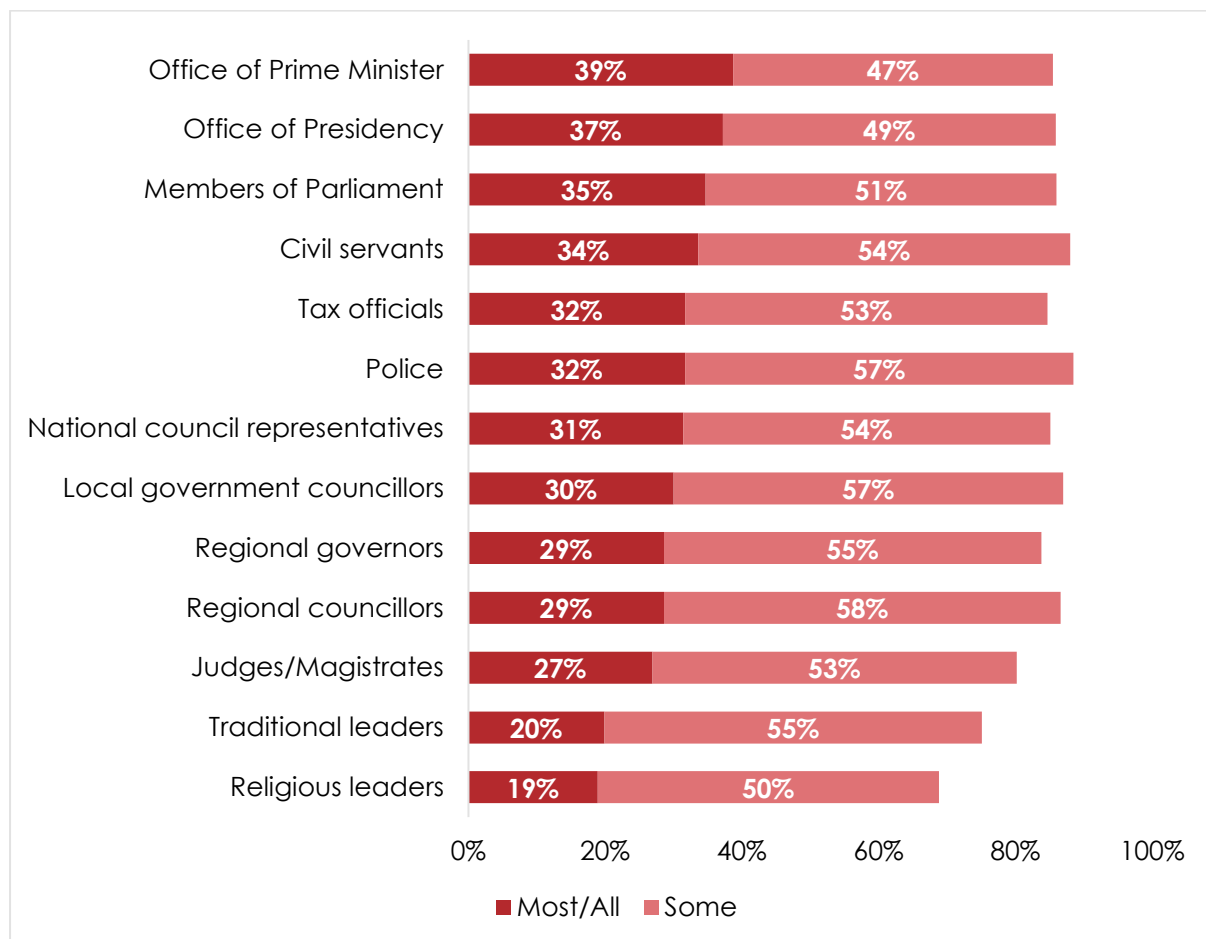
Police corruption

Compared to the offices of senior political leaders such as the prime minister and the president, members of Parliament, and civil servants, the Namibian police are less widely seen as corrupt (Figure 9). About one in three Namibians (32%) say “most” or “all” police officers are corrupt, which is better than the 39% and 37% who see widespread corruption in the offices of the prime minister and the president, respectively. The largest share (57%) think that “some” officers are corrupt; only 9% say the police force is free of corruption.

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt do not differ significantly by gender, economic status, or urban-rural location. The most educated (38%) and least educated (36%) are more likely to see widespread police corruption than those with primary or secondary schooling (29%-31%) (Figure 10).

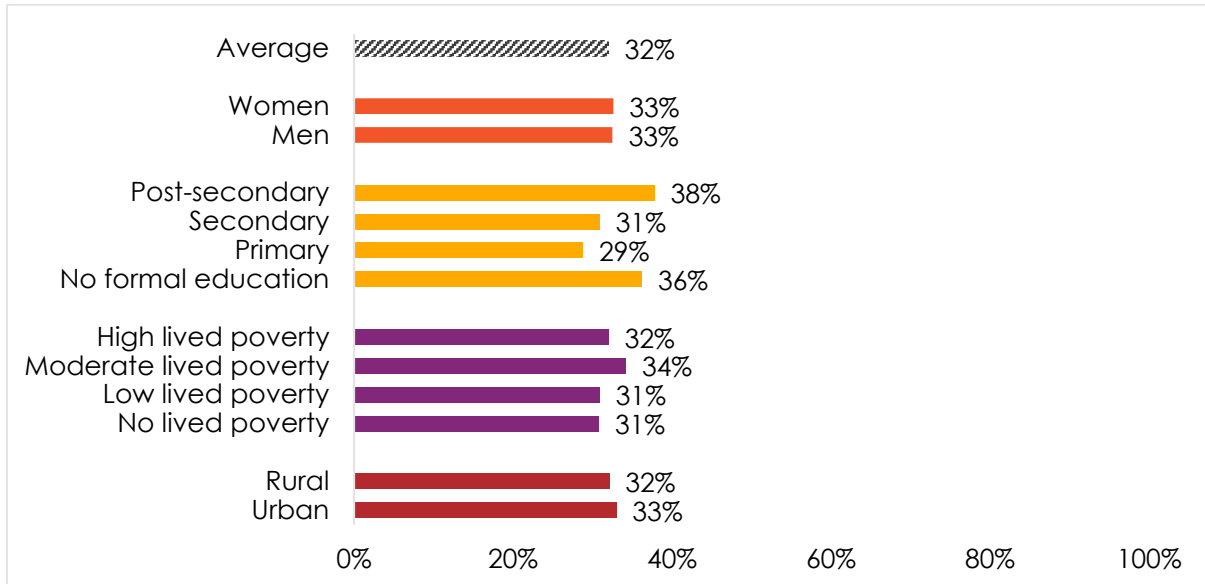
Citizens who had no interaction with the police during the previous year are just as likely to report widespread police corruption as those who had frequent police encounters.

Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Namibia | 2021



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
 | Namibia | 2021



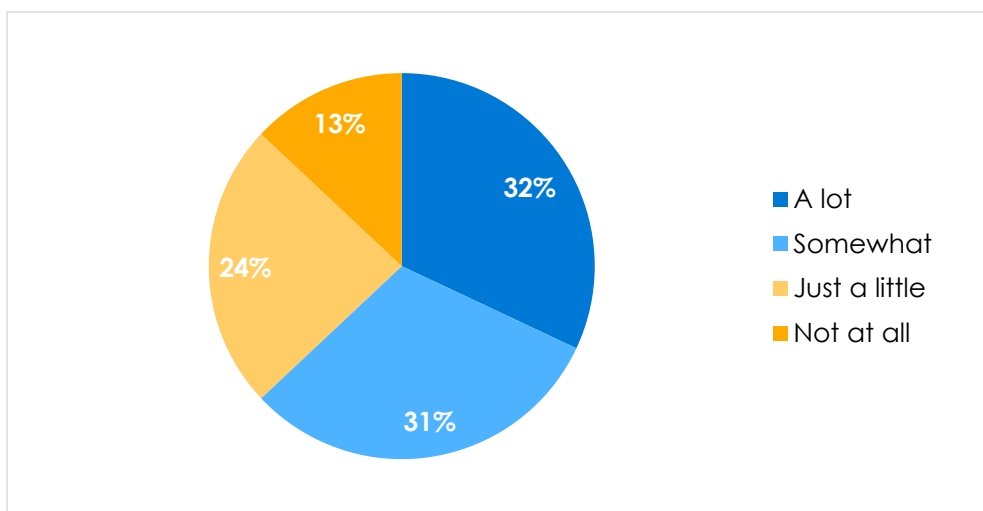
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Trust in the police

Most Namibians (64%) say they trust the police "somewhat" or a "lot." Only 13% of citizens express no trust "at all" in the police, though this is 9 percentage points higher than the 4% recorded in 1999 (Figure 11).

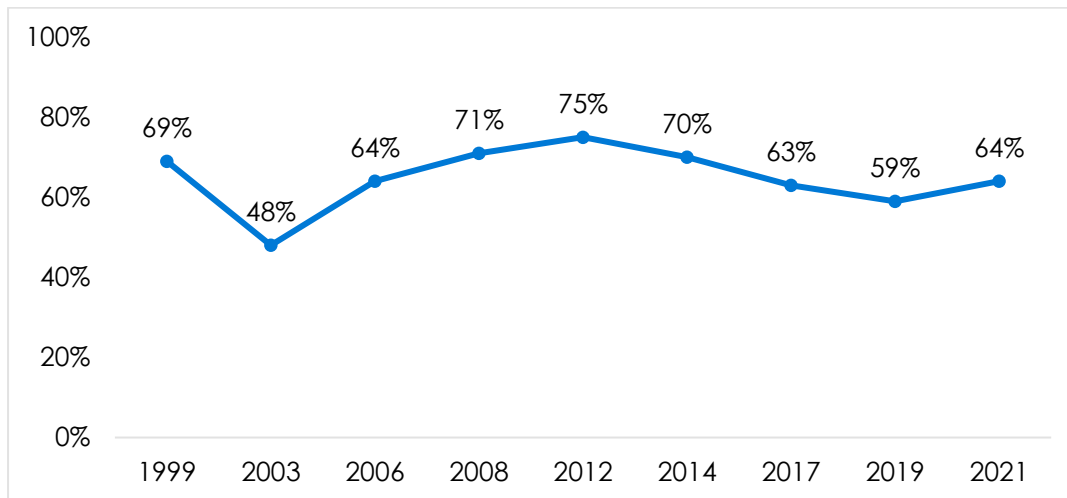
Over the past two decades, popular trust reached a low point in 2003, when fewer than half (48%) of the adult population said they trusted the police "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 12). Since then, trust in the police climbed to a high of 75% in 2012 before declining again to about six in 10.

Figure 11: Trust in the police | Namibia | 2021



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

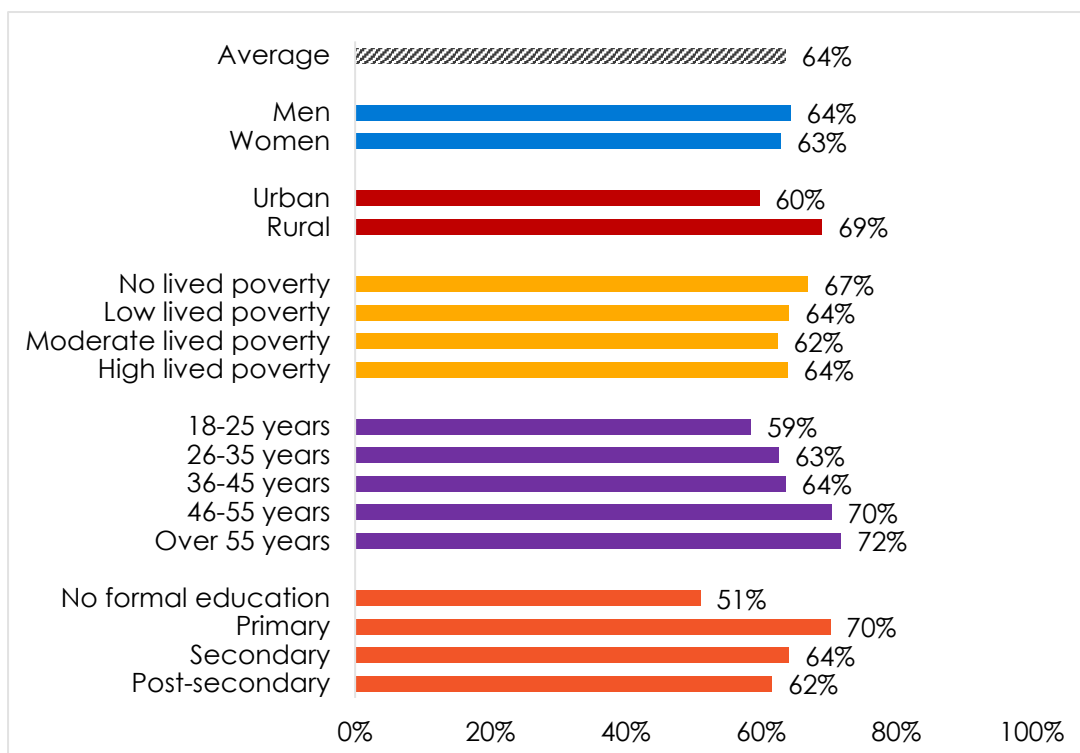
Figure 12: Trust the police 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | Namibia | 1999-2021



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")

Citizens with no formal schooling (51%) trust the police less than with at least primary education (62%-70%) (Figure 13). Age correlates strongly and positively with trust in the police: Citizens older than 55 years (72%) trust the police the most, while 18- to 25-year-olds trust them the least (59%). Rural residents (69%) show greater trust in the police than their urban counterparts (60%).

Figure 13: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



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

A majority of Namibians believe that police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 14).

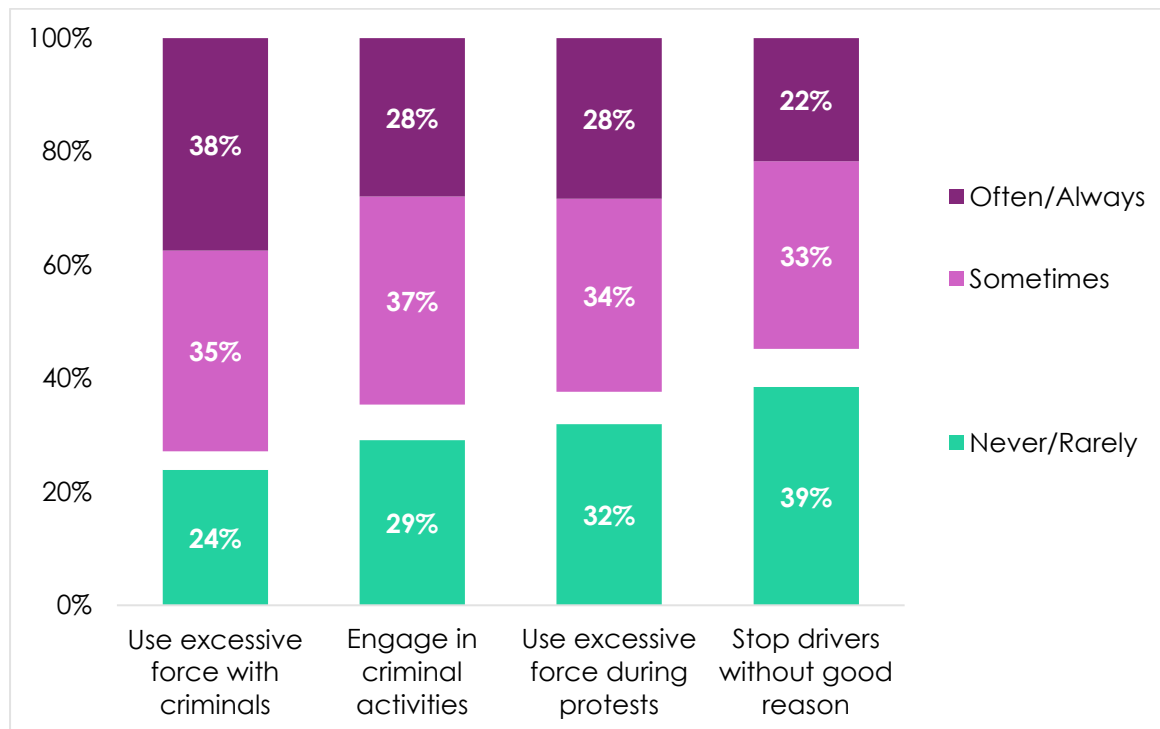
Almost three-fourths (73%) of citizens say the police at least “sometimes” use excessive force when dealing with suspected criminals, including 38% who say this happens “often” or “always.”

Two-thirds (65%) say the police engage in criminal activities, including 28% who think this is a frequent occurrence.

Almost three in 10 (28%) say the police routinely use excessive force in managing protests, in addition to 34% who say this happens “sometimes.”

And more than half (55%) say the police “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” stop drivers without good reason.

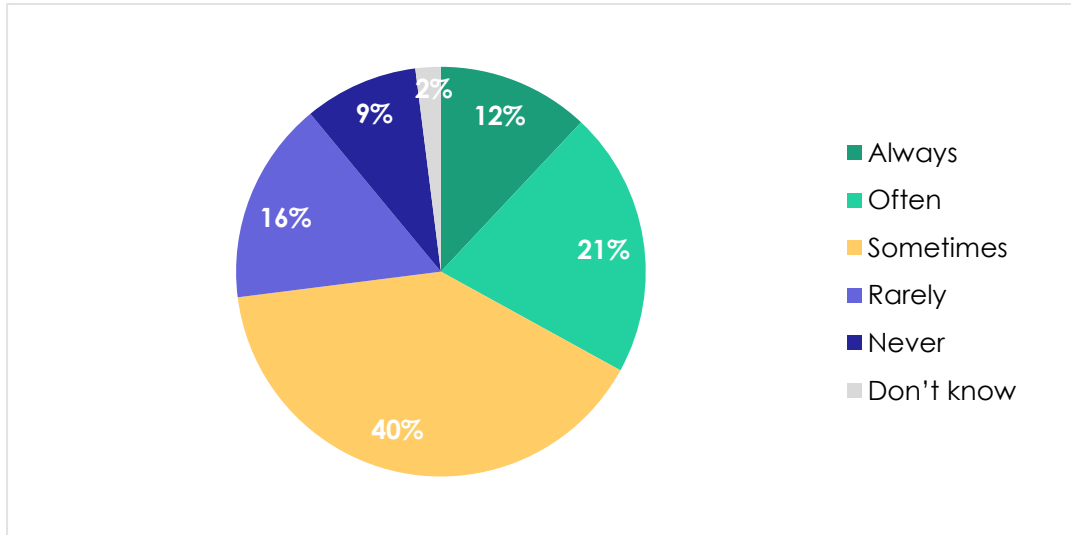
Figure 14: Improper police practices | Namibia | 2021



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

Overall, only one-third (33%) of Namibians say the police “often” or “always” operate professionally and respect the rights of all citizens. The largest share (40%) say they “sometimes” do, while one-fourth (25%) say they “rarely” or “never” meet this standard (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Namibia | 2021

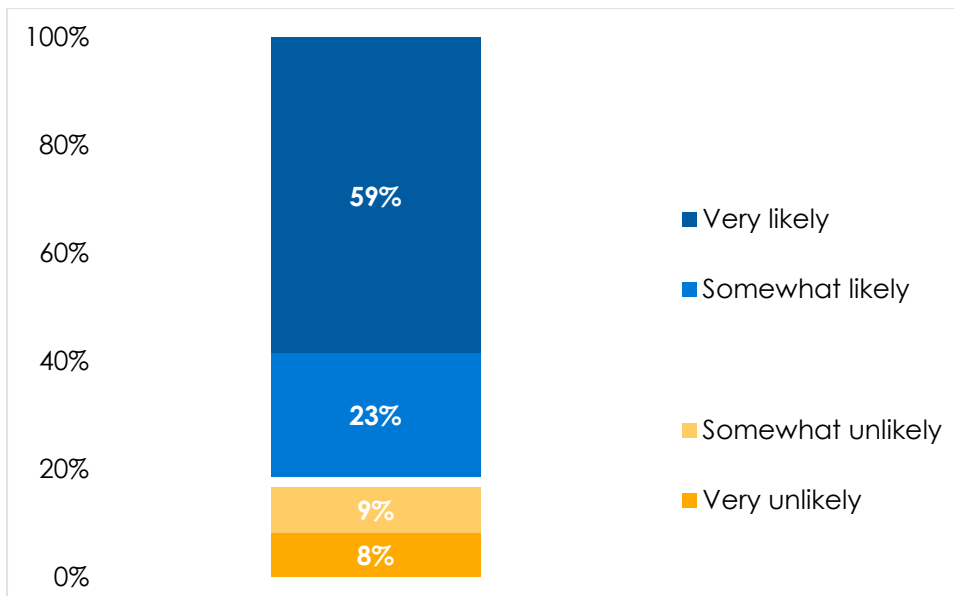


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the police in Namibia operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?*

Namibians show great faith in the police's handling of gender-based violence (GBV) cases. More than four in five respondents (81%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 59% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 16).

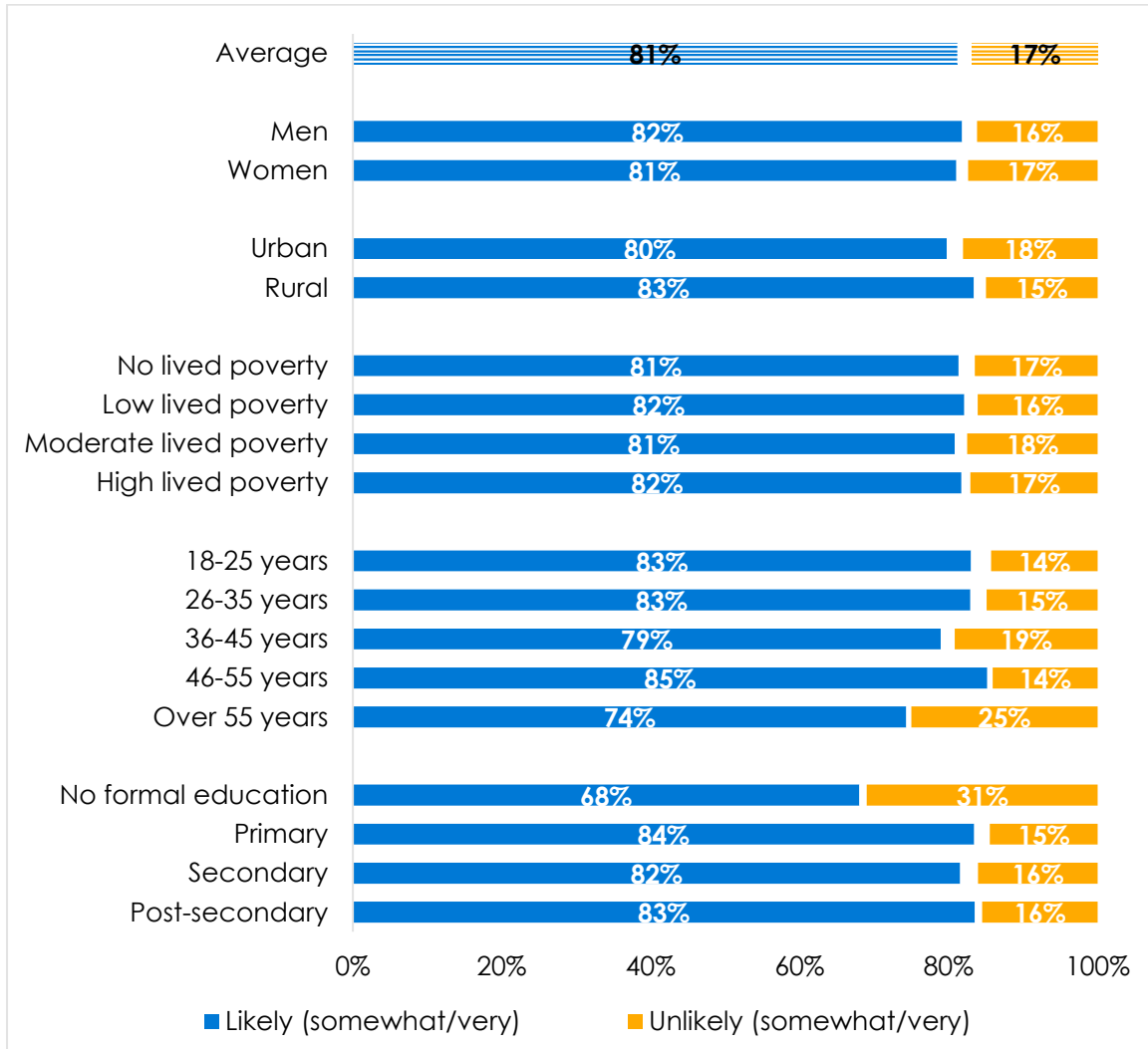
While this assessment is shared across demographic groups, including by women, confidence is less strong among Namibians with no formal education (68%) and those 55 years and older (74%) (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Namibia | 2021



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 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



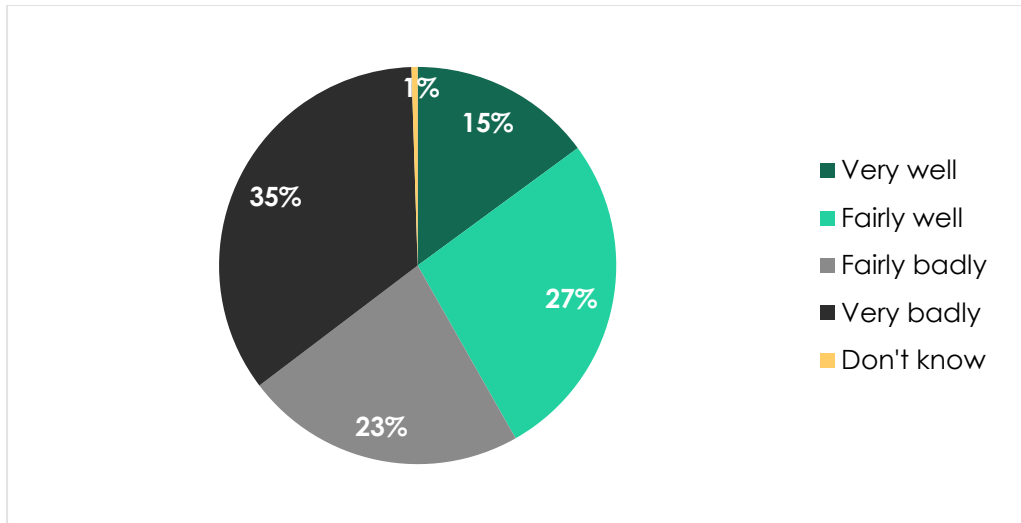
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance in reducing crime

A majority (57%) of Namibians report dissatisfaction with the government's performance on reducing crime. Only about four in 10 (42%) believe the government is doing "fairly well" (27%) or "very well" (15%) on this issue (Figure 18).

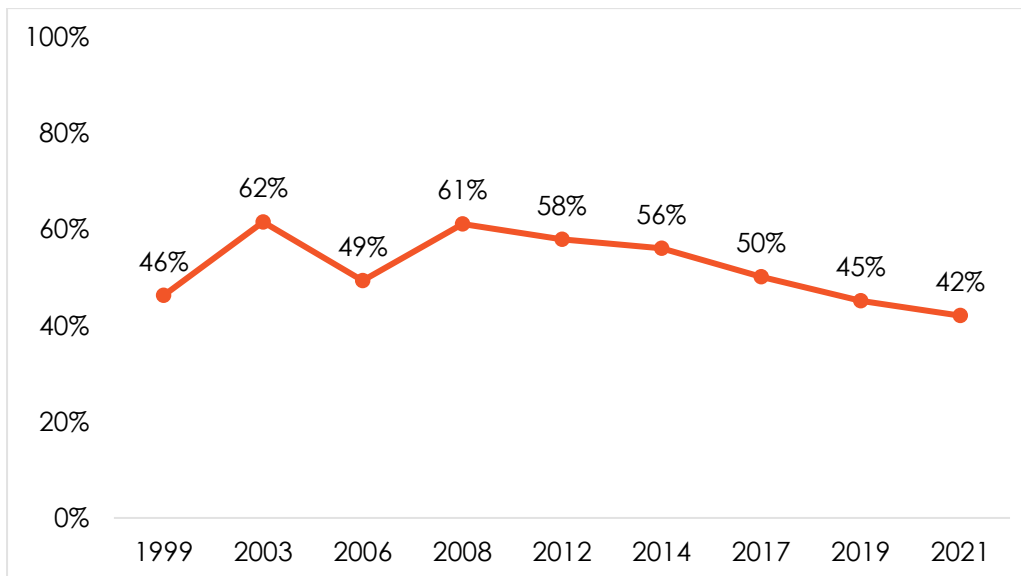
As shown in Figure 19, public approval of the government's performance on reducing crime has dropped by 19 percentage points since 2008 (61%), and is at its lowest level in more than two decades of surveys.

Figure 18: Government performance on reducing crime | Namibia | 2021



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 19: Government performing well on crime reduction | Namibia | 1999-2021



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

A growing number of Namibians feel unsafe in their homes and neighbourhoods, and think the government needs to do a better job of reducing crime.

The police receive mixed reviews. Among citizens who interacted with them, a majority say assistance was easy to obtain, while about one in five say they had to pay a bribe or give a gift. A substantial minority of Namibians consider corruption endemic in the police force, though other state institutions fare worse.

Most citizens express trust in the police and are confident that they take reports of gender-based violence seriously. But majorities are also critical of police conduct, including their

perceived participation – at least “sometimes” – in criminal activities and their use of excessive force in dealing with protesters and suspected criminals. Overall, the fact that only a minority think the police generally operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens suggests remaining challenges for a force intent on enforcing – and modelling – respect for law and order.

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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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