

Amid increased insecurity, Gambians cite corruption and lack of professionalism among police shortcomings

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 665 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum and Baboucarr Fatty

Summary

As armed robbery, shootings, and a bank heist make headlines in the Gambia, crime is becoming a top-of-mind issue for many citizens (Point, 2021). In a country heavily reliant on tourism, crime/security now ranks fifth among the most important problems that Gambians want their government to address, up from 10th place in 2018 (Afrobarometer, 2023). GlobalEconomy.com's (2022) Security Threats Index ranks the Gambia 81st out of 177 countries.

The government's "Zero Crime" campaign and security-sector reforms, launched in 2017, have received mixed reviews of their efficacy both in fighting crime and in professionalising a police force with a history of human-rights abuses, political repression, and corruption (Barchet & Birchinger, 2022; Drammeh, 2022; Faye, 2023). Reports of police misconduct continue to make headlines as well, with officers rarely facing reprimands or punishment for employing excessive force during public protests and other gatherings (Point, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b). Both the Gambia Center for Victims of Human Rights Violations and the National Human Rights Commission (2022) have condemned the use of excessive force by the police, urging adherence to human-rights protocols (Point, 2022b; Amnesty International, 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 more Gambians are experiencing insecurity in their neighbourhoods and homes, and ratings of the government's performance on reducing crime have plummeted.

Among citizens who encountered the police during the previous year, a substantial minority report that it was difficult to obtain assistance, and bribe-paying was not uncommon.

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

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, and Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 30 August and 19 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 the Gambia in 2018 and 2021.

Key findings

- Security in the Gambia has worsened over the past four years. More than half (53%) of citizens say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the year preceding the survey, and 42% feared crime in their home – both significantly larger proportions than in 2018.
 - Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About one in nine citizens (11%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Five times as many (55%) report encountering 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, 41% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 24% 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.
- Almost half (45%) of Gambians say “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt.
- More than half (52%) of Gambians say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot,” a 7-percentage-point decrease compared to 2021 (59%).
- Four in 10 citizens (41%) say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason. About one-third also complain that the police routinely use excessive force during protests (36%) and in dealing with criminal suspects (33%), while two in 10 (20%) believe they frequently engage in criminal activities.
- Only about three in 10 citizens (29%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - But 83% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of citizens give negative assessments of the government’s performance on reducing crime. Only a quarter (24%) say it is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job, down 30 percentage points since 2018.

Sense of security

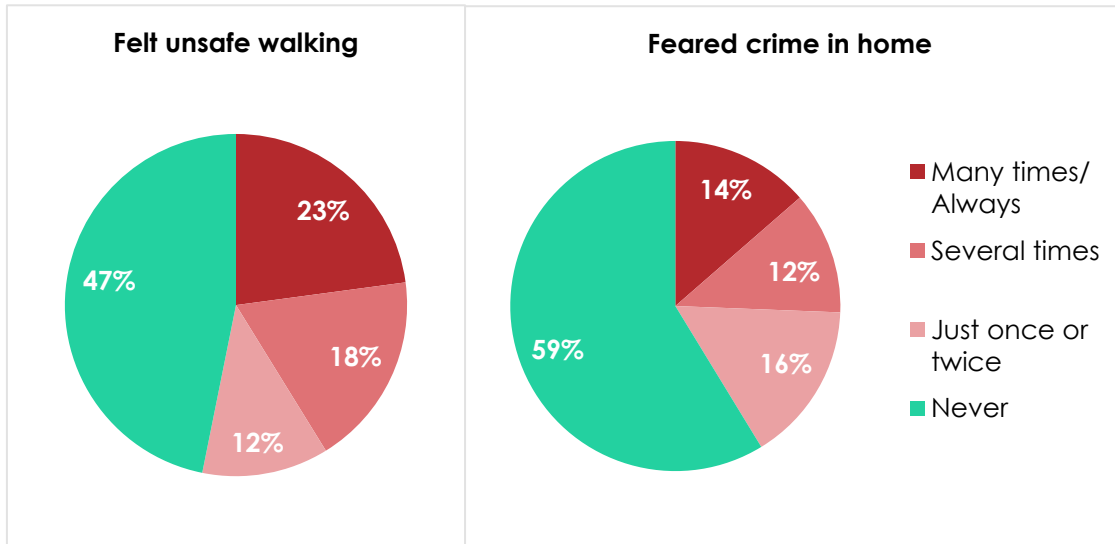
The police are expected to protect people and their property. Do Gambians feel protected?

Survey findings indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. More than half (53%) of Gambians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once

during the previous year, including 41% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1). Similarly, 42% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 26% who say this happened at least several times.

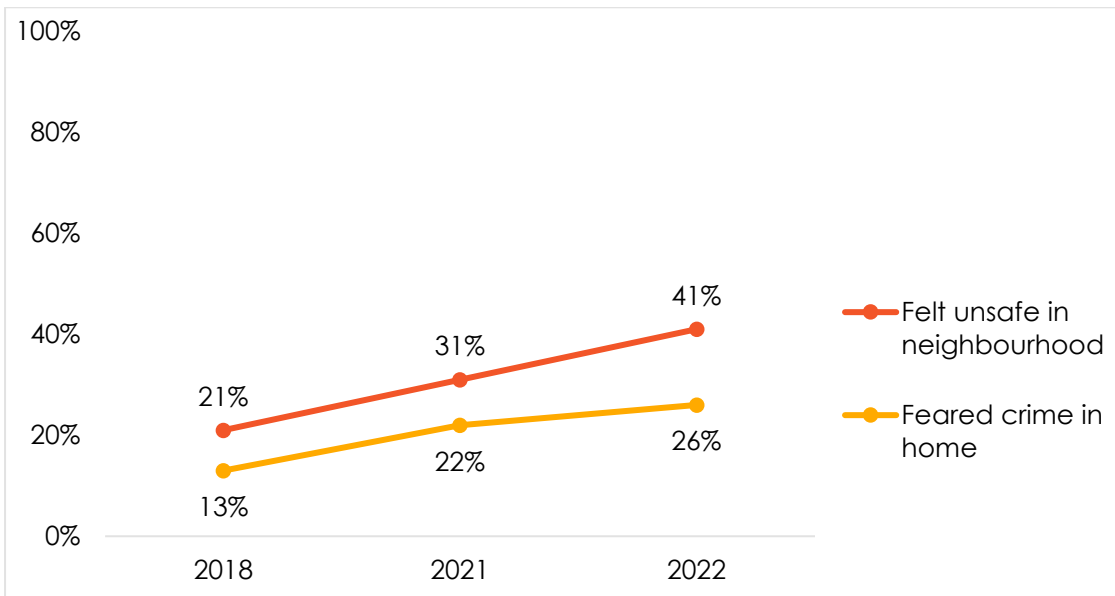
The proportions of Gambians who report feeling unsafe or fearing crime at least several times have doubled over the past four years (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Gambia | 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?

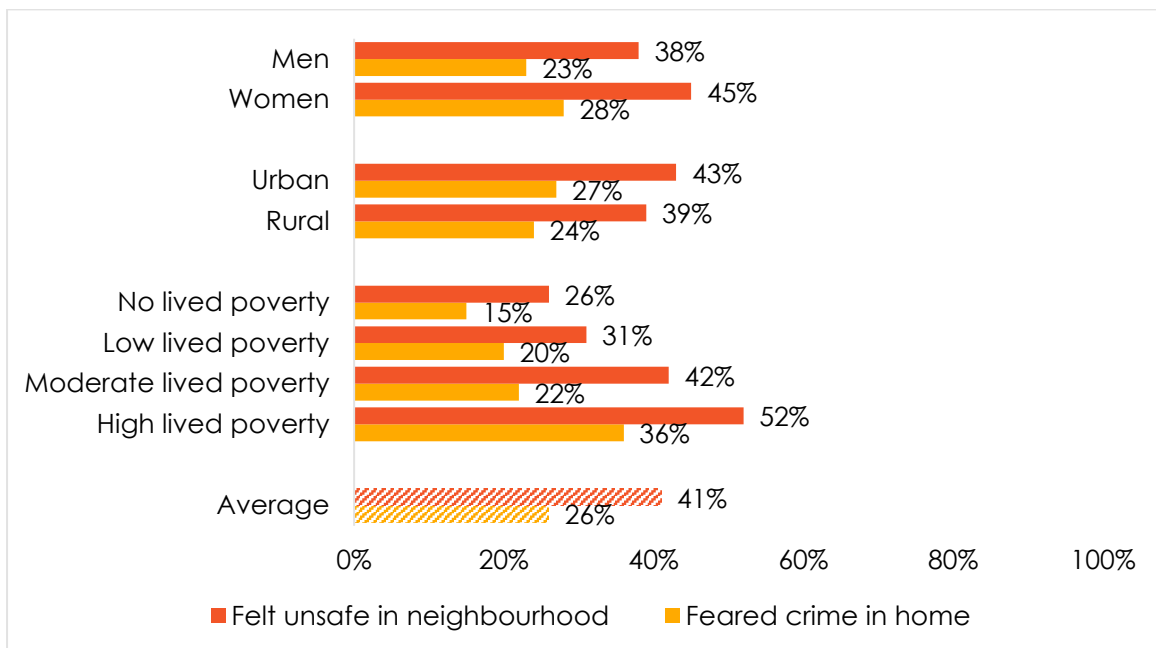
Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’ | Gambia | 2018-2022



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 increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty¹: The poorest citizens are at least twice as likely to feel unsafe and fear crime in their home as the best-off citizens (Figure 3). Insecurity is also slightly higher in cities than in rural areas and among women compared to men.

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

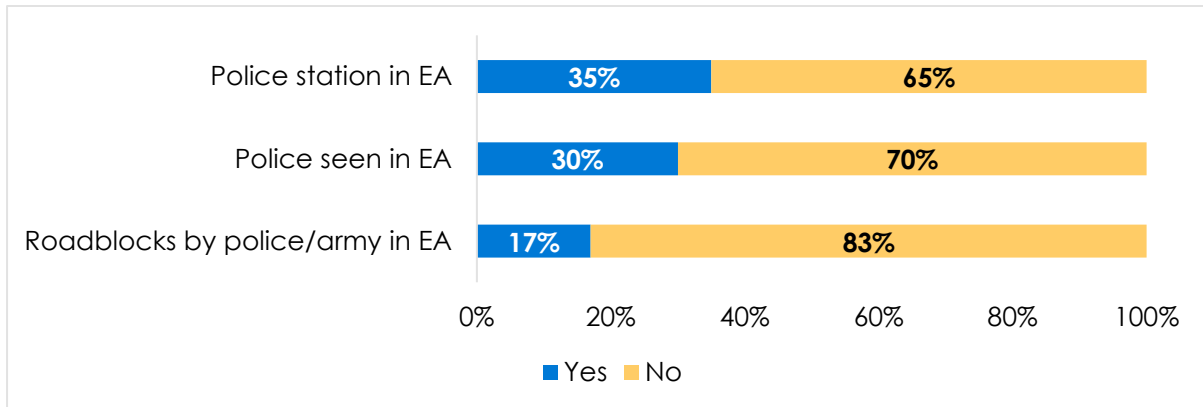
The presence or absence of security forces may have an effect on people's sense of security. As part of their data-collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in the area. 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 the Gambia, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about one-third (35%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 30% of the EAs, and police or army roadblocks in 17% of them. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including presence of soldiers or other military personnel (15%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (7%), and customs checkpoints (4%).

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 and Patel (2022).

The share of citizens who felt unsafe or feared crime does not vary greatly based on whether they have a police station in the area.

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Gambia | 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 roadblocks set up by police or army?*

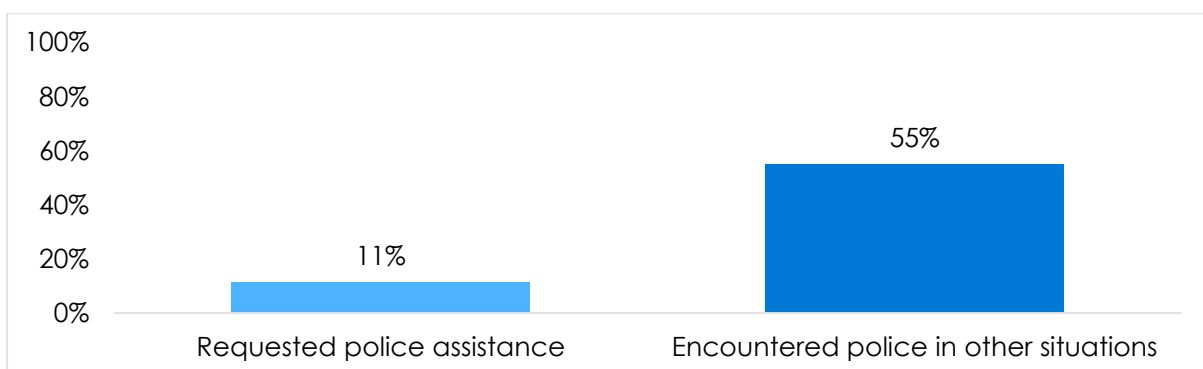
Encounters with the police

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

About one in nine respondents (11%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Five times as many (55%) encountered the police once or more in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

About one in 12 citizens (8%) report police contact of both types during the previous year, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 41% say they did not interact with the police.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Gambia | 2022

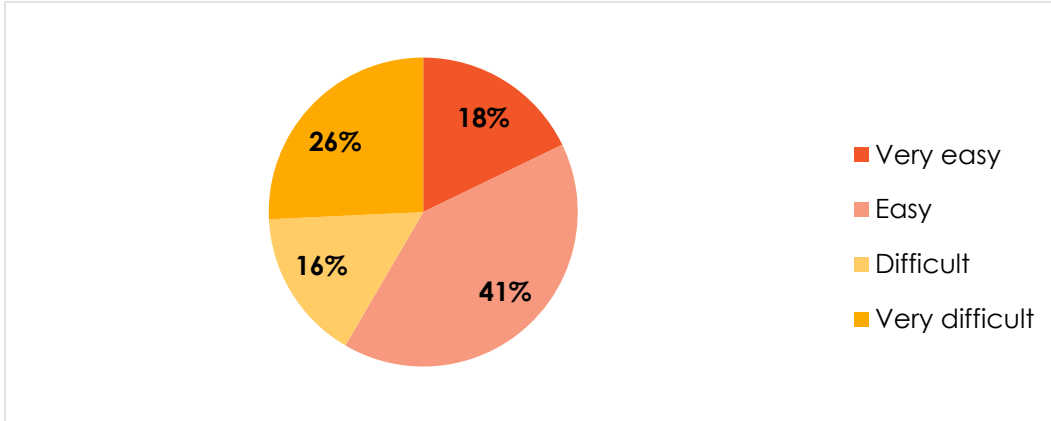


Respondents were asked:

*In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (% "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, a majority (59%) say it was “easy” or “very easy” to get the assistance they needed, while 41%² describe it as difficult (Figure 6).

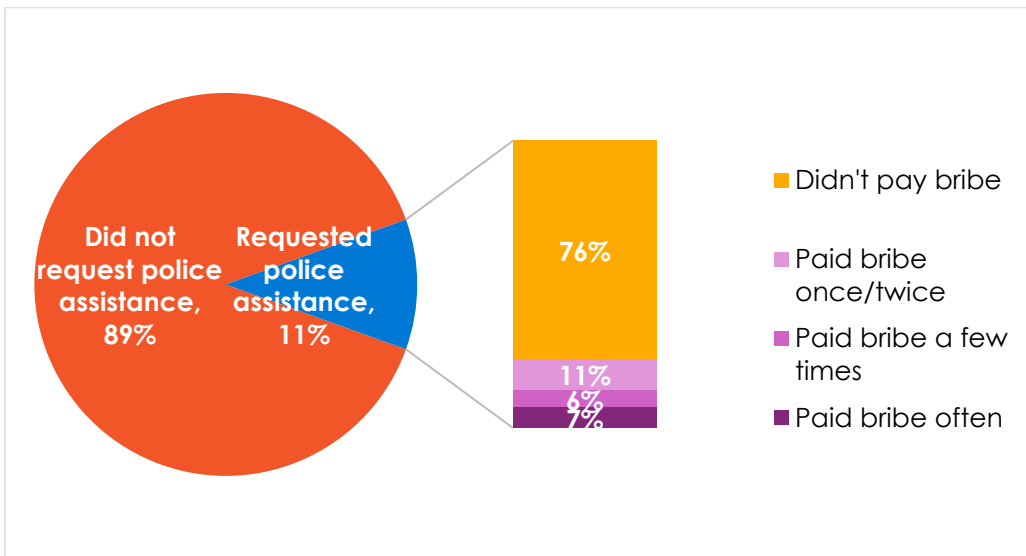
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Gambia | 2022



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 sought police assistance, one in four (24%) 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 help they needed (Figure 7).

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

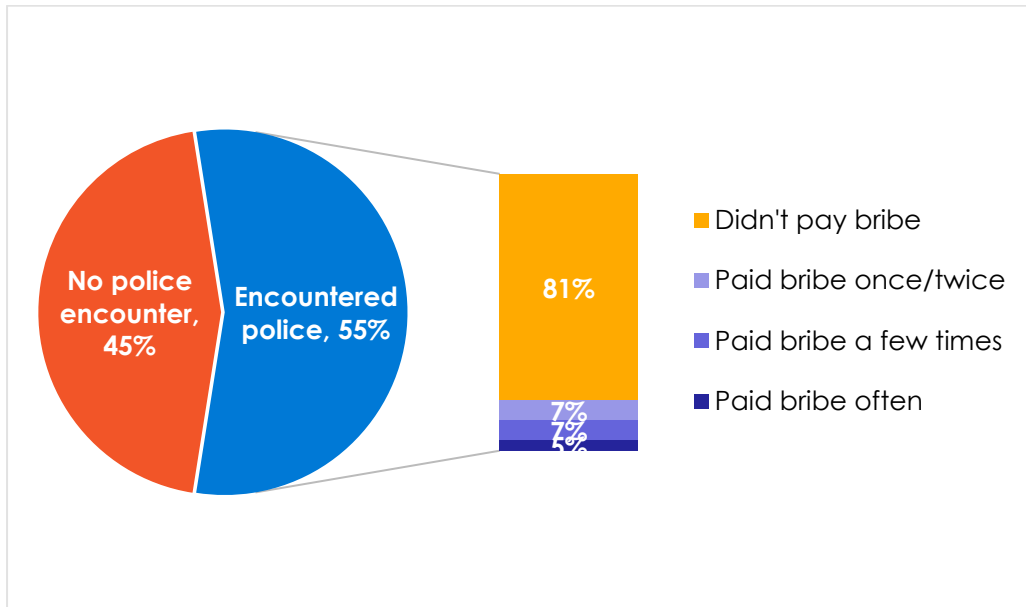


Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If “yes”:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

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. 26% “very difficult” and 16% “difficult” sum to 41%).

Among those who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, one in five (19%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Gambia | 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?*

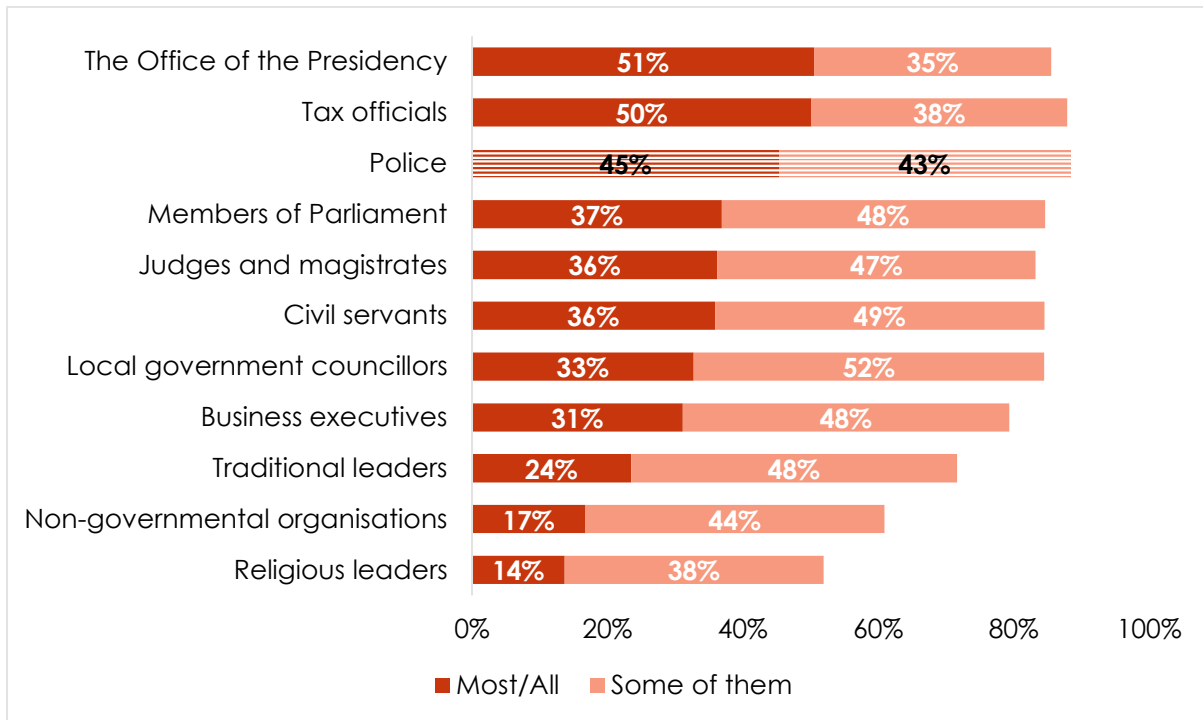
To summarise the experience among all Gambians adults during the past year, one in nine (11%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

Almost half (45%) of Gambians say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – the third-worst rating among 11 key institutions and leaders the survey asked about (Figure 9), and 7 percentage points higher than in 2018 (38%). In addition, 43% of respondents say “some” police officials are corrupt.

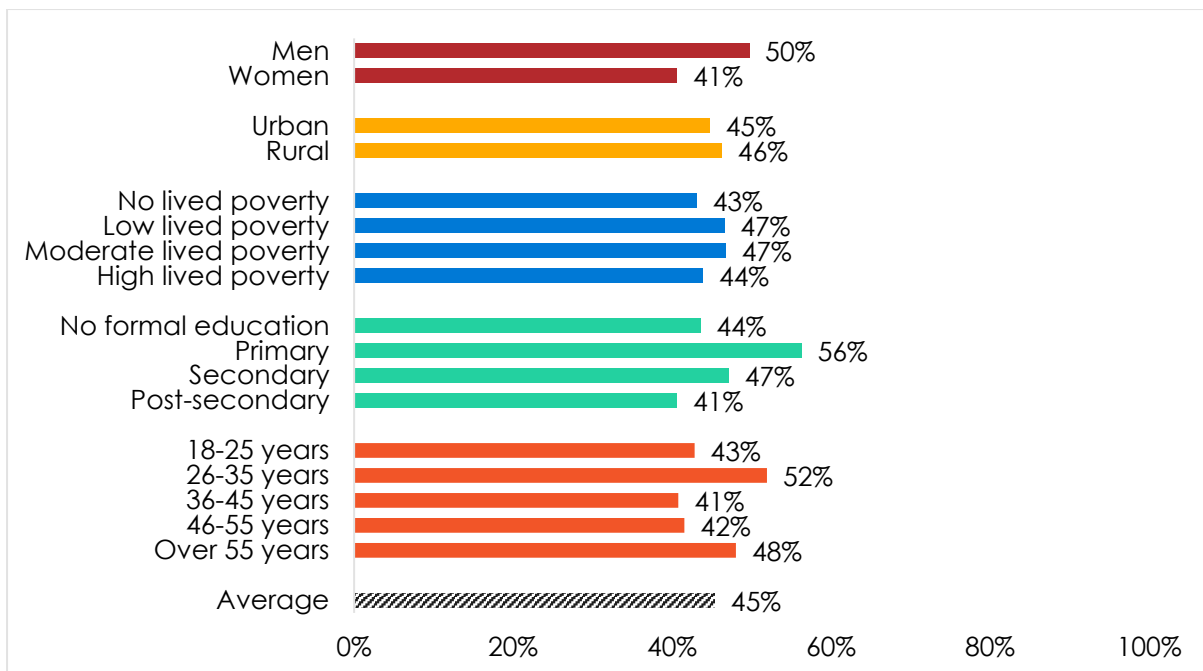
Men are more likely than women to say that most/all police are corrupt (50% vs. 41%). Citizens with post-secondary education are less likely to share this view (41%) than those with less schooling (44%-56%) (Figure 10).

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

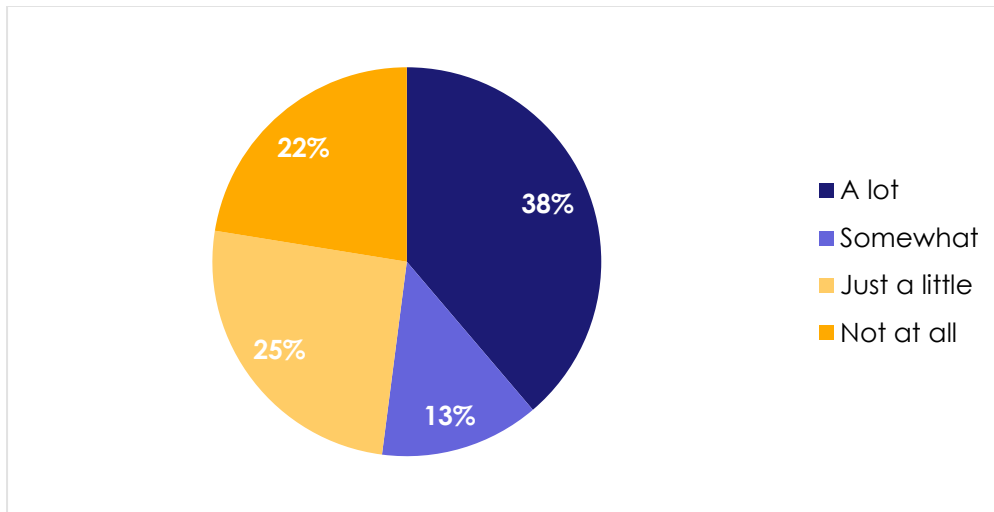


Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Trust in the police

Do Gambians trust the police? More than half (52%) say they trust the police “somewhat” (13%) or “a lot” (38%) (Figure 11), a 7-percentage-point decrease compared to 2021 (59%). Almost half (47%) express little or no trust in the police.

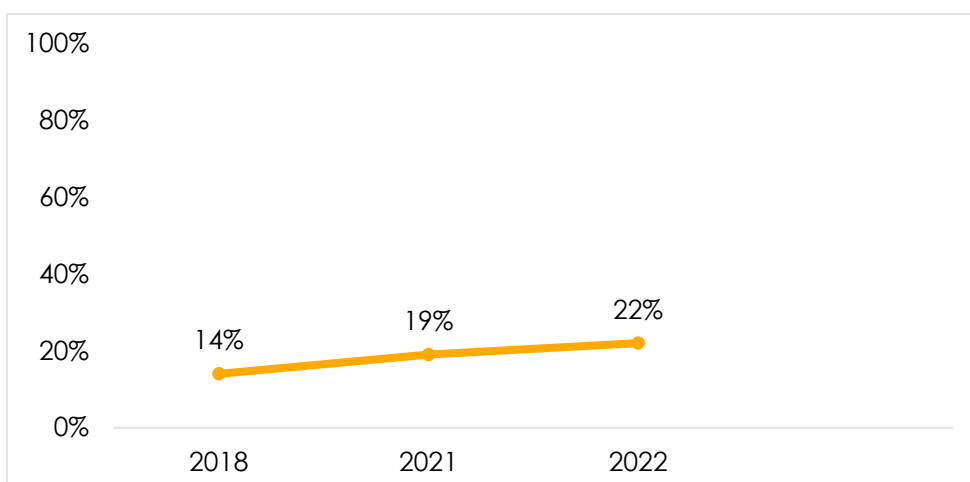
Figure 11: Trust in the police | Gambia | 2022



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

Gambians' trust in the police has weakened somewhat over the past four years. The percentage of respondents who say they don't trust the police “at all” increased by 8 percentage points between 2018 and 2022 (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Gambia | 2018-2022

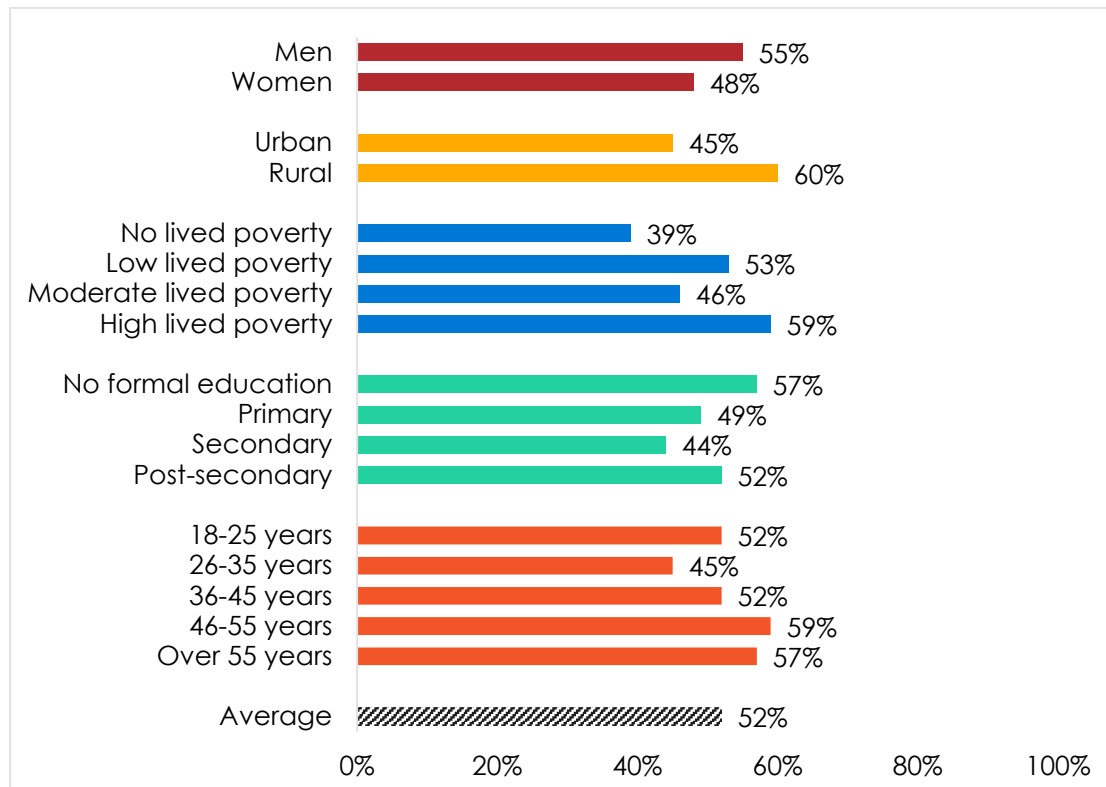


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “not at all”)

Rural residents (60%) and the poorest citizens (59%) are more likely than their urban (45%) and best-off (39%) counterparts to say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 13). More men (55%) than women (48%) express trust in the police.

Gambians with no formal education (57%) are more likely to trust the police than those with at least primary schooling (44%-52%), as are older citizens (57%-59%) compared to younger age groups (45%-52%).

Figure 13: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Gambia | 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”)

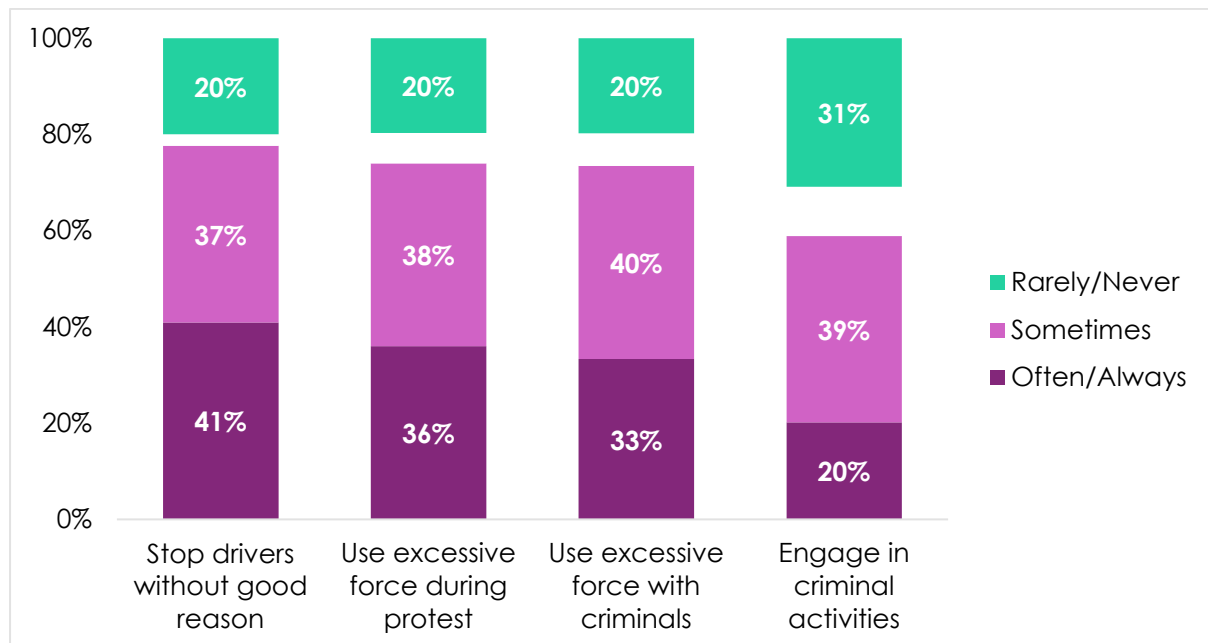
Police conduct

In addition to significant mistrust in the police, many Gambians say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 14).

Four in 10 citizens (41%) say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason, in addition to 37% who say they “sometimes” do this. About one-third also believe that the police routinely use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations (36%) and in dealing with criminal suspects (33%). One-fifth (20%) say the police routinely engage in illegal activities, while 31% think this “rarely” or “never” happens.

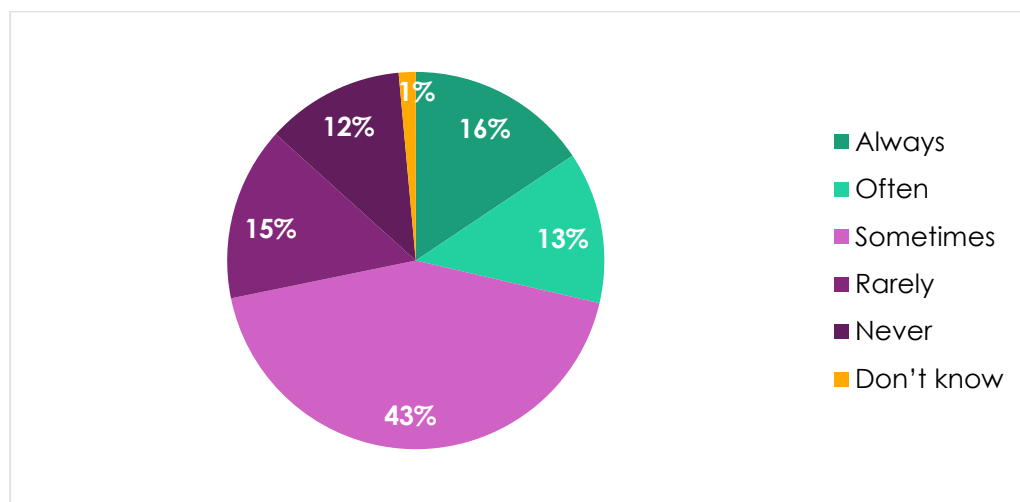
Overall, only about three in 10 citizens (29%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights; the largest proportion (43%) say this happens “sometimes,” while 27% assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Improper police practices | Gambia | 2022



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

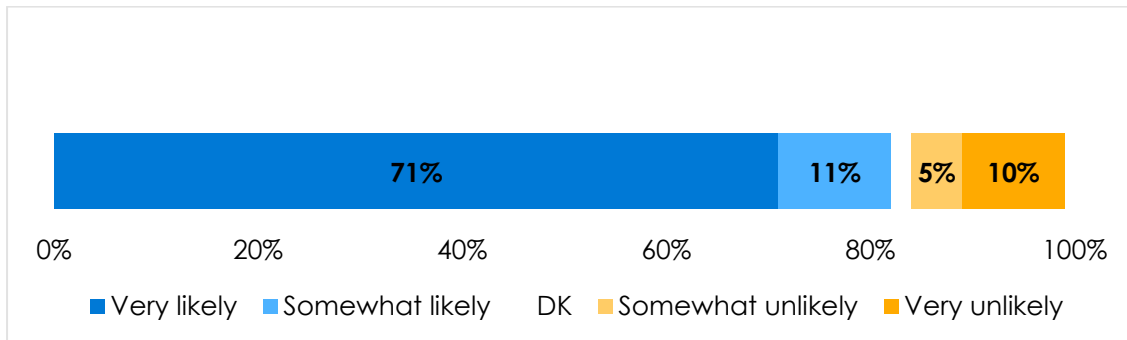
Figure 15: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights? | Gambia | 2022



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

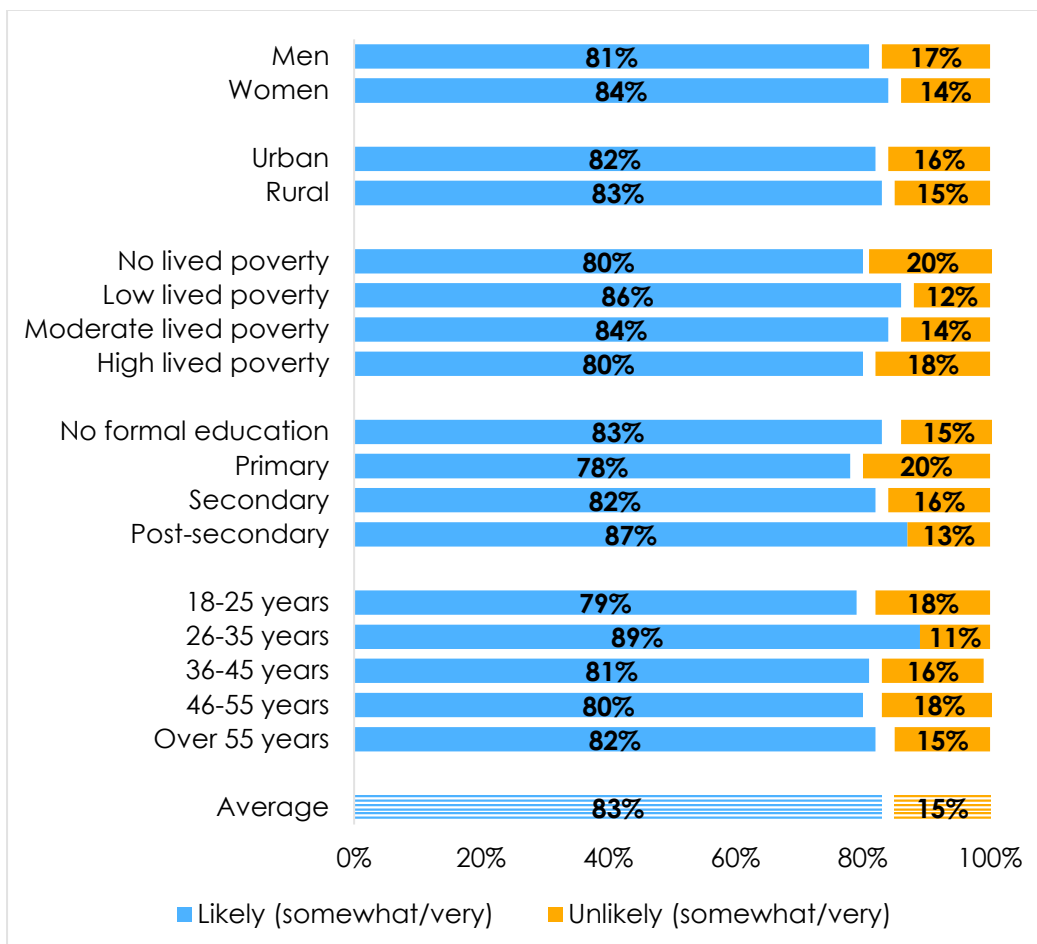
One area in which Gambians rate their police positively is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 71% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 16). This assessment is consistent across key demographic groups (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Gambia | 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 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | by demographic group | Gambia | 2022



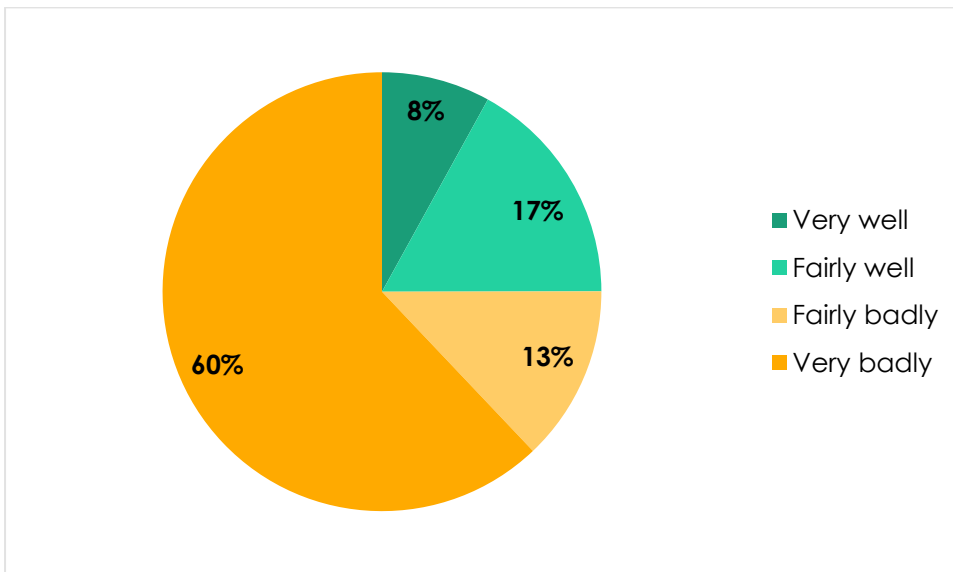
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

Almost three-fourths (73%) of Gambians say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at reducing crime, while only a quarter (25%) endorse the government’s performance on this issue (Figure 18).

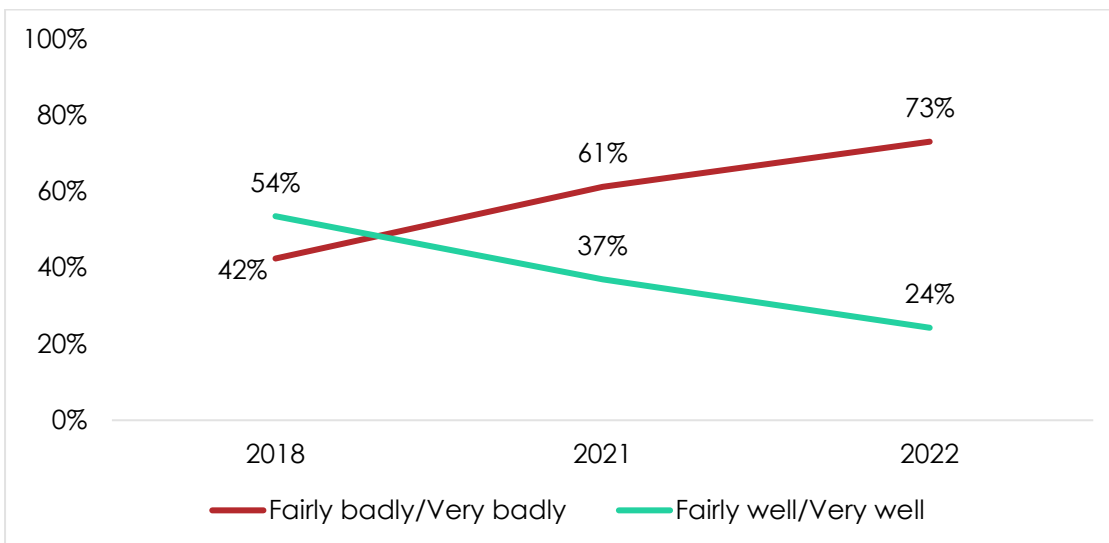
Approval of the government’s crime-reduction efforts has dropped by 30 percentage points since 2018 (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Government performance on reducing crime | Gambia | 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 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Gambia | 2018-2022



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?

Conclusion

Survey findings show that growing numbers of Gambians feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods and homes and think the government is doing a poor job of fighting crime. Public perceptions of the police are decidedly mixed, with significant proportions – though still minorities – reporting that assistance is difficult to obtain and that bribes must be paid to get help or avoid problems.

Many citizens also say that police officers use excessive force with protesters and suspected criminals, stop drivers without good reason, and engage in illegal activities. Overall, fewer than one-third of Gambians say the police usually operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights – a clear call to action for a government seeking to build a professional force.

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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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