

Amid growing insecurity, Nigerians fault police for corruption and lack of professionalism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 715 | Richard Kweitsu

Summary

As the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria experiences the full range of security concerns, from petty to organised crime and communal conflicts to terrorism and cybercrimes (Duerksen, 2021). The Nigerian Police Service is tasked with addressing these problems while upholding the principles of fairness, accountability, and respect for human rights (Asanebi, Theo-lruo, & Odoh, 2023; Nigerian Tribune, 2022).

By most accounts, the police have long failed to live up to these standards, earning accusations of brutality, extortion, torture, and other human rights violations in their dealings with the citizenry (Aicher, 2010; Salako, 2022).

Public anger came to a head in October 2020, when thousands of mostly young Nigerians protested against the police force's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which was widely believed to arbitrarily arrest, torture, and even kill suspects with impunity. At least 48 protesters died in clashes with security forces (BBC, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021). Although the protests led to the disbanding of the SARS unit, critics say police brutality continues (Salako, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Uwazuruike, 2021).

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 show that growing proportions of Nigerians report feeling insecure or fearful, and few approve of the government's performance against crime.

A majority of citizens who interacted with the police during the past year say they had to pay a bribe to obtain police assistance or avoid problems with the police. Most see the police as corrupt, untrustworthy, and lacking in professionalism, and substantial proportions say the police stop drivers without good reason, use excessive force against protesters and suspected criminals, and engage in criminal activities.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOI Polls, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians in October-November 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence

level. Previous surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- More than half of Nigerians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (61%) and feared crime in their home (51%) at least once during the year preceding the survey. Experiences of insecurity have increased significantly over the past decade and are particularly common among poor citizens.
- About one in 12 Nigerians (8%) say they requested assistance from the police during the previous year, while about eight times as many (62%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation.
 - Among citizens who requested assistance from the police, 51% say it was easy to get the help they needed. But three-fourths (75%) say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 55% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of Nigerians say “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt, the worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about.
- Only 15% of citizens say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- Substantial proportions of respondents say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason (55%), use excessive force on suspected criminals (46%) and protesters (44%), and engage in criminal activities (28%).
- Only 13% of citizens say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - However, 79% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- Only two in 10 Nigerians (21%) say the government is doing a good job of reducing crime.

Sense of security

The fundamental role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Nigerians feel safe in their communities?

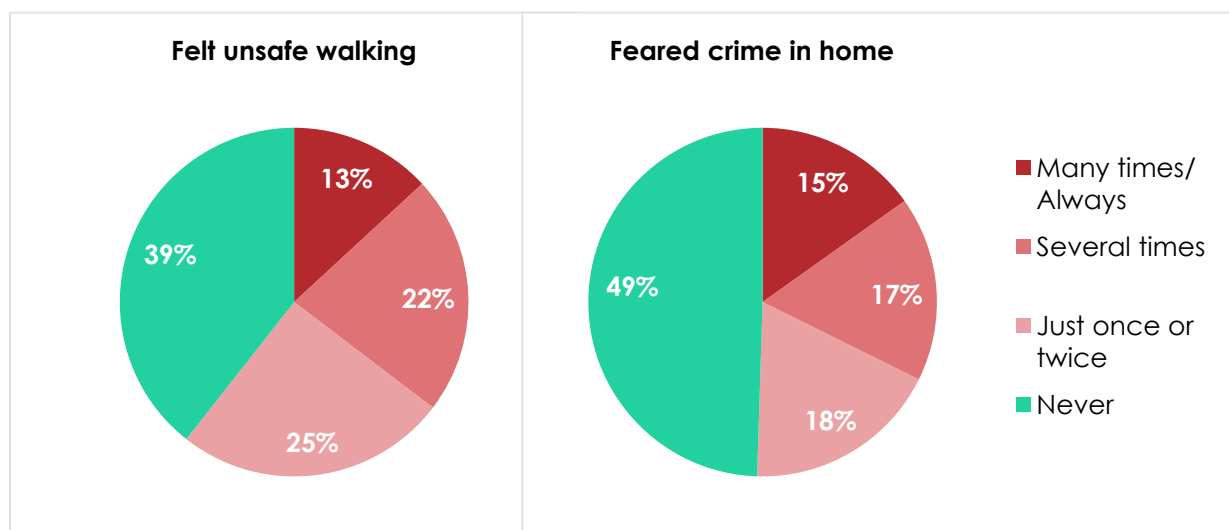
Survey responses show a significant lack of a sense of personal security among citizens. Six in 10 respondents (61%) say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 36% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).¹

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. 13% “many times/always” and 22% “several times” and 25% “just once or twice” sum to 61%).

Similarly, more than half (51%) of respondents say they feared crime in their home at least once, including 32% who say this happened “several times,” “many times,” or “always” in the past year.

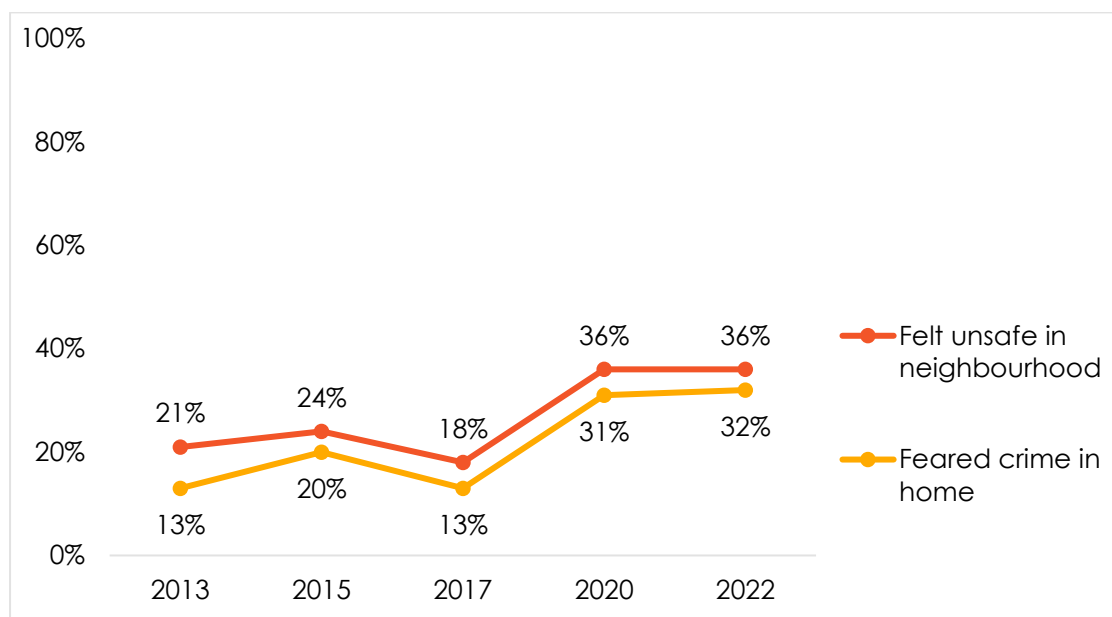
Over the past decade, the proportion who reported feeling unsafe in their communities at least “several times” increased by 15 percentage points (from 21% in 2013) (Figure 2). Similarly, the share who feared crime in their homes at least “several times” has increased by 19 points since 2013.

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home?

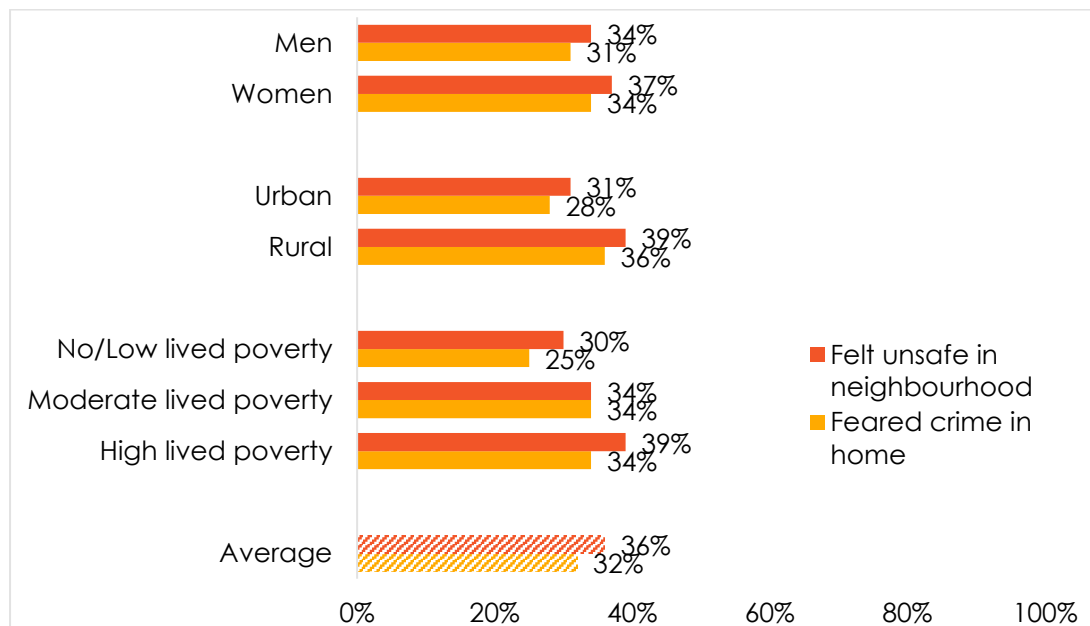
Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’ | Nigeria | 2013-2022



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”)

Citizens experiencing high lived poverty² are more likely than well-off citizens to report feeling unsafe (39% vs. 30%) and fearing crime (34% vs. 25%) (Figure 3). Both types of insecurity are more common in rural areas than in cities (39% vs. 31% for feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood, 36% vs. 28% for fearing crime).

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’
 | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Nigeria | 2022



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

Police/security presence

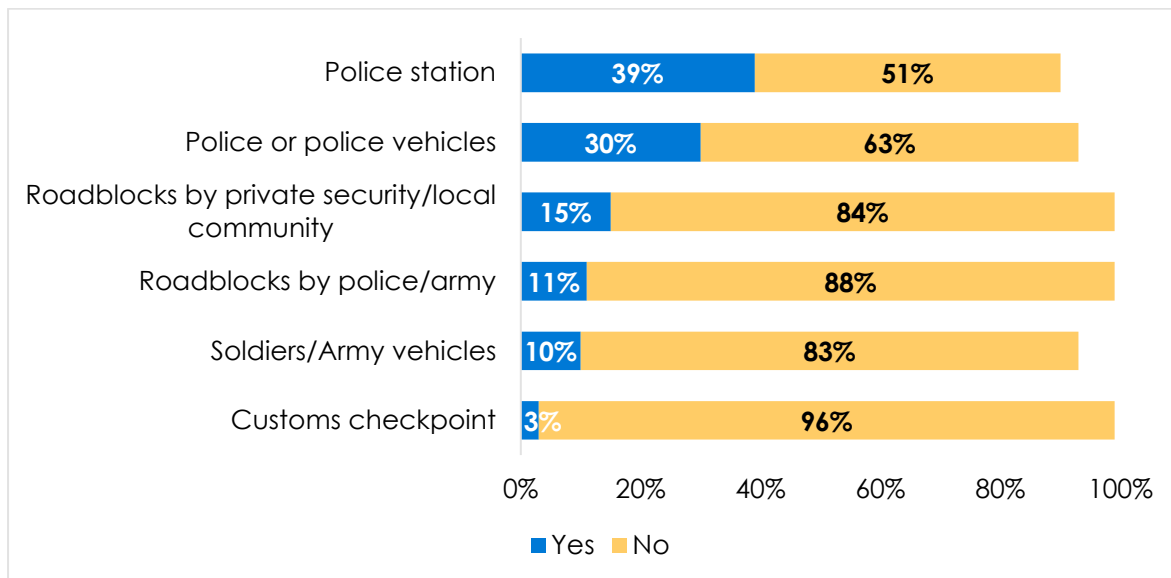
One factor that might affect people's sense of security is the presence of security forces. Nigeria's police strength stands at 370,000, or one officer per roughly 600 citizens, which is well below the United Nations-recommended average of one officer per 450 citizens (Cable Nigeria, 2023).

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 Nigeria, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of 39% of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). In addition, they saw police officers or police vehicles in 30% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including roadblocks by private security companies or local communities (15%), roadblocks by the police or army (11%), soldiers or military vehicles (10%), and customs checkpoints (3%).

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 and Patel (2022).

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

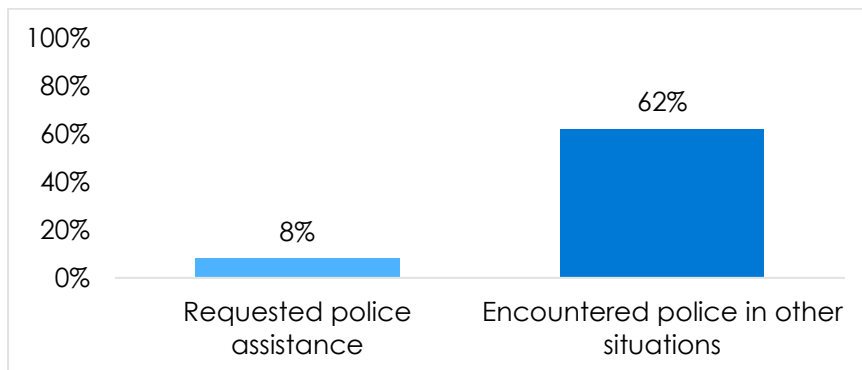
Encounters with the police

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

About one in 12 respondents (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. About eight times as many (62%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

Overall, 63% of citizens report contact of one or both types, i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters, while 37% say they did not interact with the police during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Nigeria | 2022

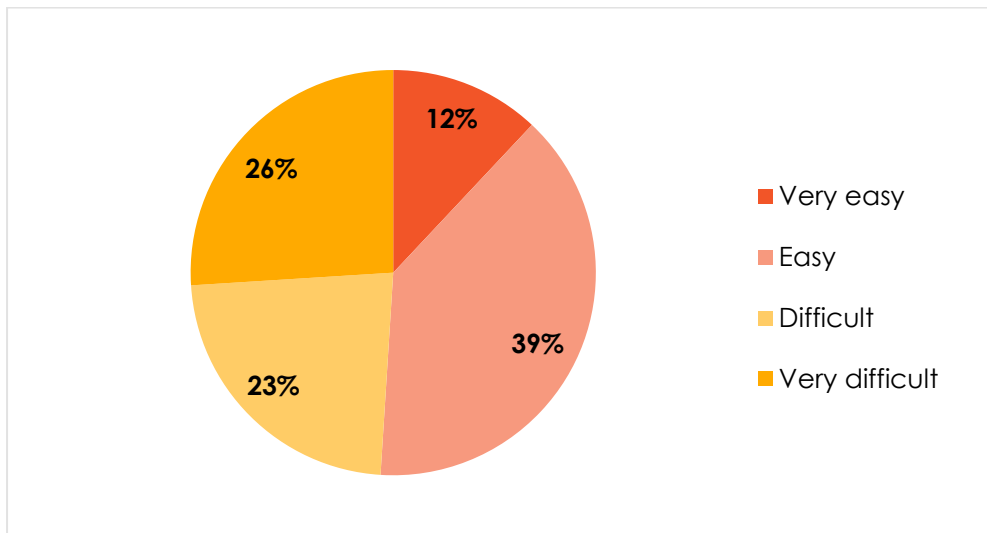


Respondents were asked:

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?

Citizens who asked for assistance from the police are about equally divided as to how easy it was to get the required help: 51% say it was “easy” or “very easy,” while 49% describe it as “difficult” or “very difficult” (Figure 6).

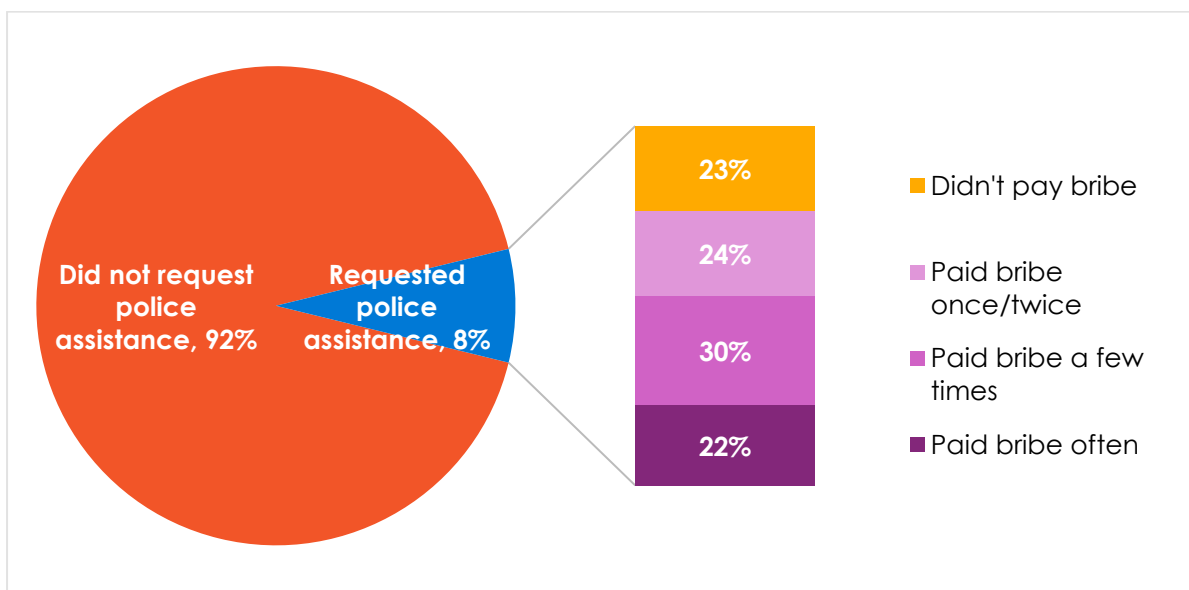
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Nigeria | 2022



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 citizens who requested assistance from the police, three-fourths (75%) 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 51% who say this happened “a few times” or “often” (Figure 7).

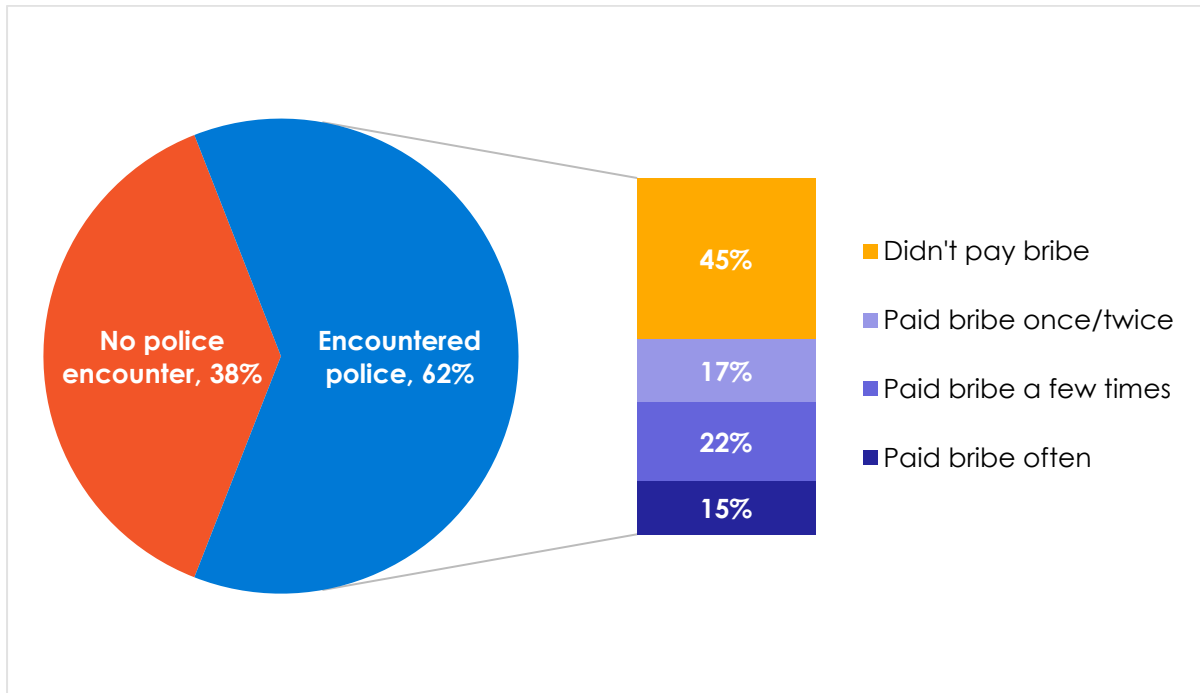
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Nigeria | 2022



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 those who encountered the police in other, less voluntary situations, more than half (55%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 37% who say this happened “a few times” or “often” (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Nigeria | 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 of all Nigerian adults, more than one-third (35%) paid a bribe during the previous year to get police assistance, to avoid problems with the police, or both.

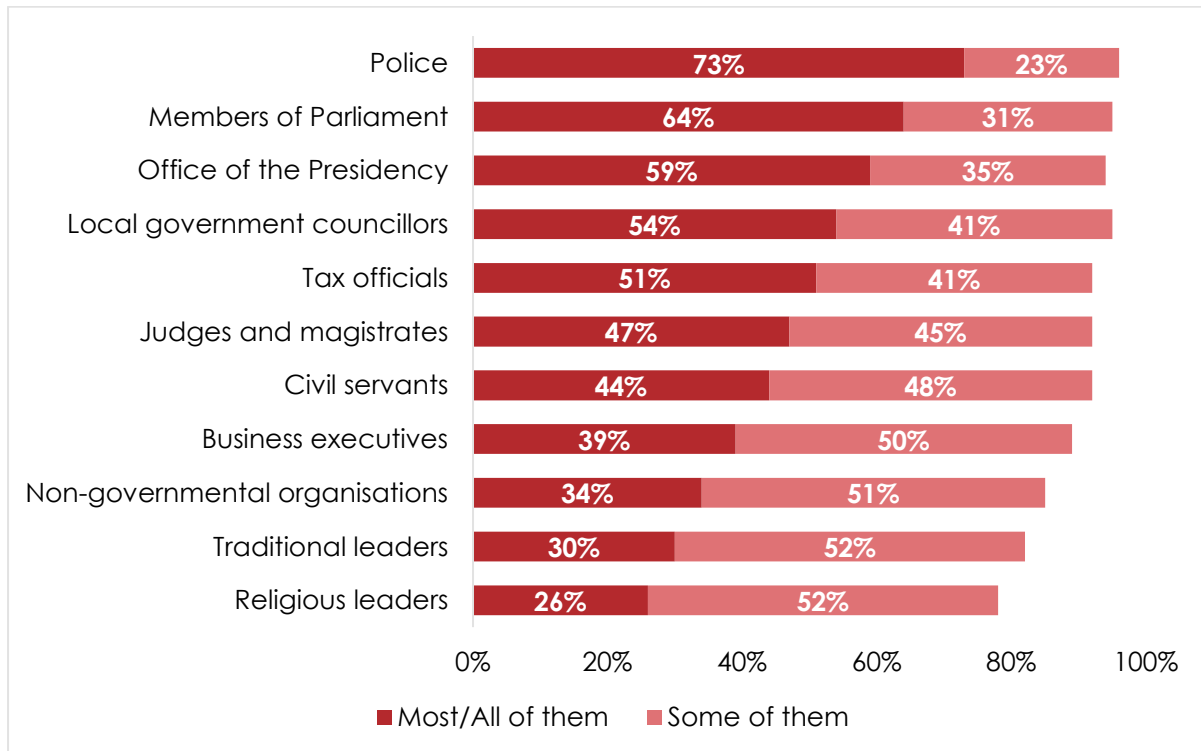
Police corruption

Given the frequency of reported bribe paying, it is little surprise that a large majority (73%) of Nigerians say that “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt – the worst rating among 11 institutions and groups of leaders that the survey asked about (Figure 9). In addition, 23% say that “some” police officials are corrupt, leaving just 2% who say “none” are corrupt and 2% who say they “don’t know.”

Economically worse-off citizens are somewhat more likely to see “most” or “all” police as corrupt (76%) than their better-off counterparts (69%-72%). This perception is less widespread among older respondents (62% of those over age 55) (Figure 10).

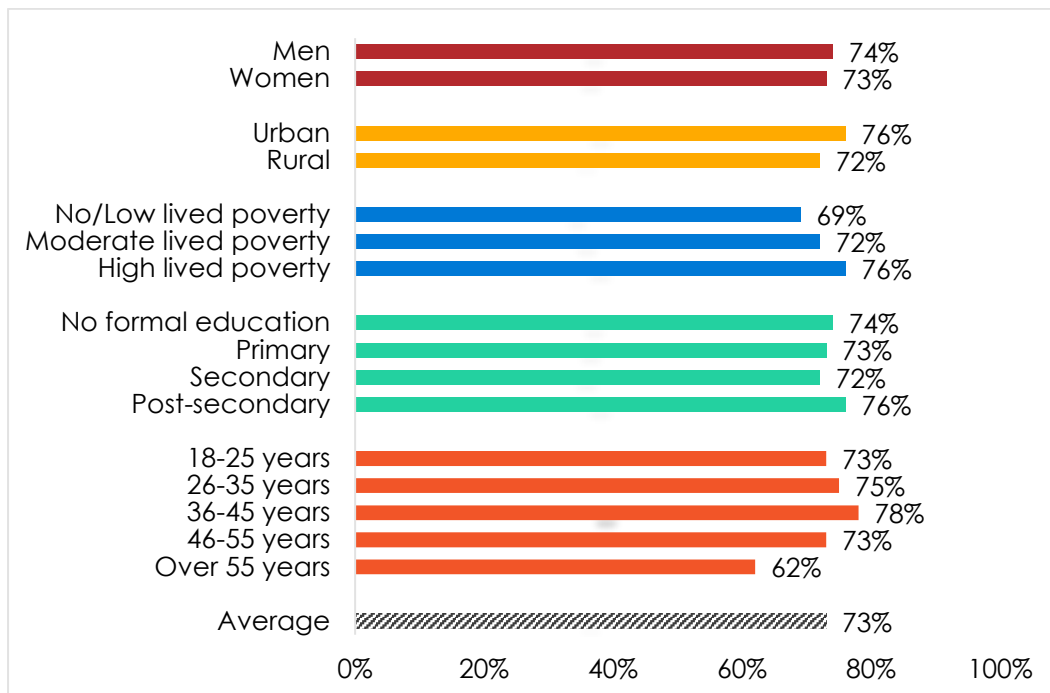
Findings also suggest that perceptions of police corruption are high irrespective of citizens’ interaction with the police. An equal share of respondents in EAs where field teams saw police and in EAs where they saw no police say most/all police are corrupt (73%). And citizens who “often” encountered the police during the previous year are slightly less likely to perceive widespread police corruption (69%) than those who “never” encountered the police (73%) (Figure 11).

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



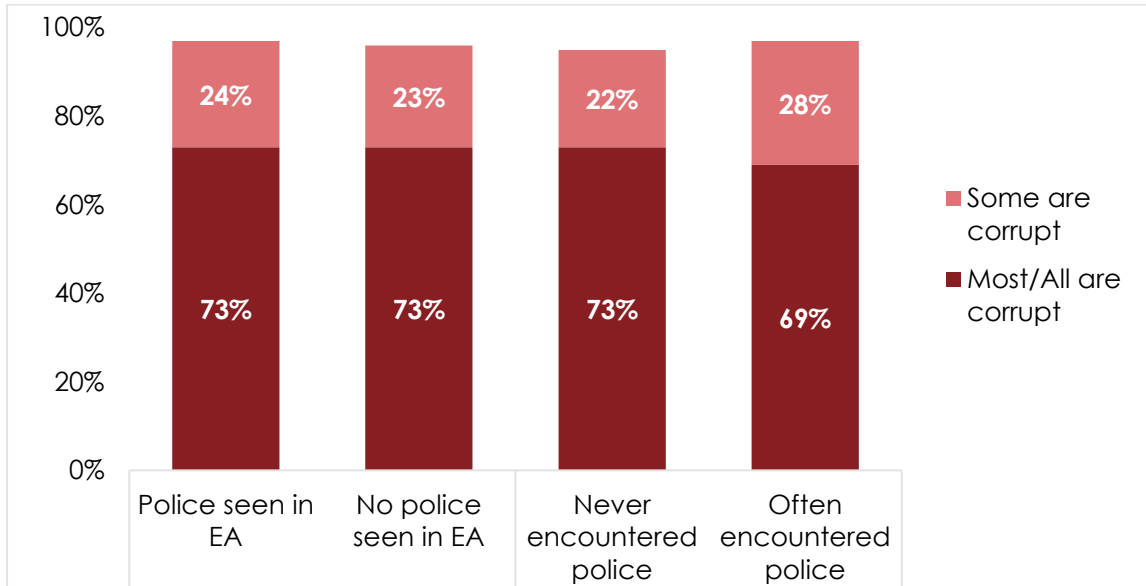
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group | Nigeria | 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: Perceived police corruption | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Nigeria | 2022



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

Respondents were asked:

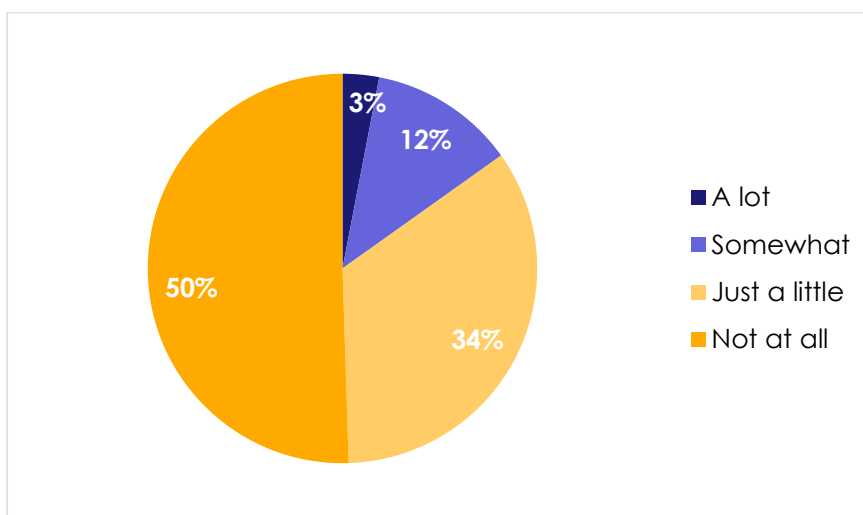
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

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

Trust in the police

In line with widespread perceptions of police corruption, only 15% of Nigerians say they trust the police "somewhat" (12%) or "a lot" (3%), while an overwhelming majority express little or no trust, including fully half (50%) who say they don't trust the police "at all" (Figure 12).

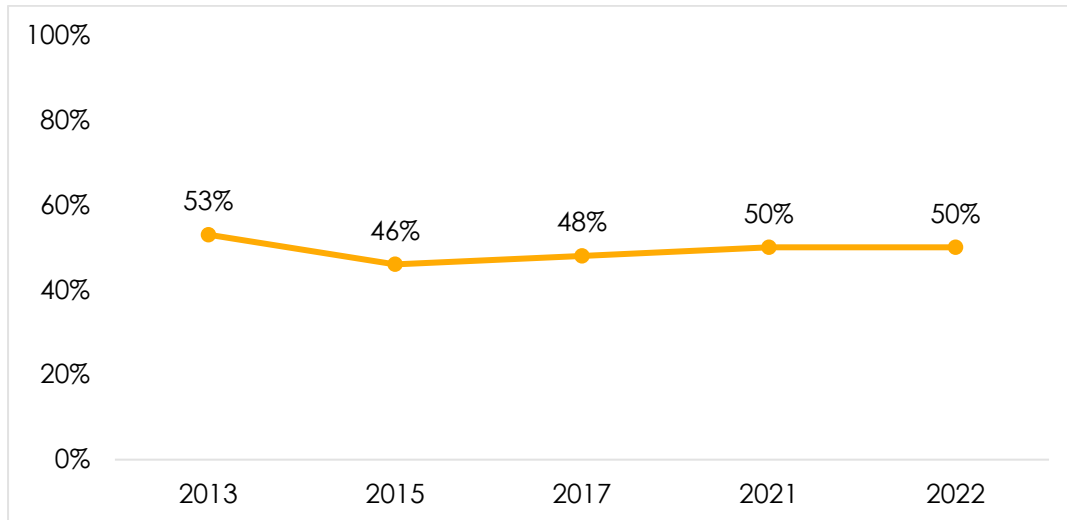
Figure 12: Trust in the police | Nigeria | 2022



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

Over the past decade, the share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has remained close to half, dropping by 7 percentage points between 2013 and 2015 but then climbing back up to 50% (Figure 13).

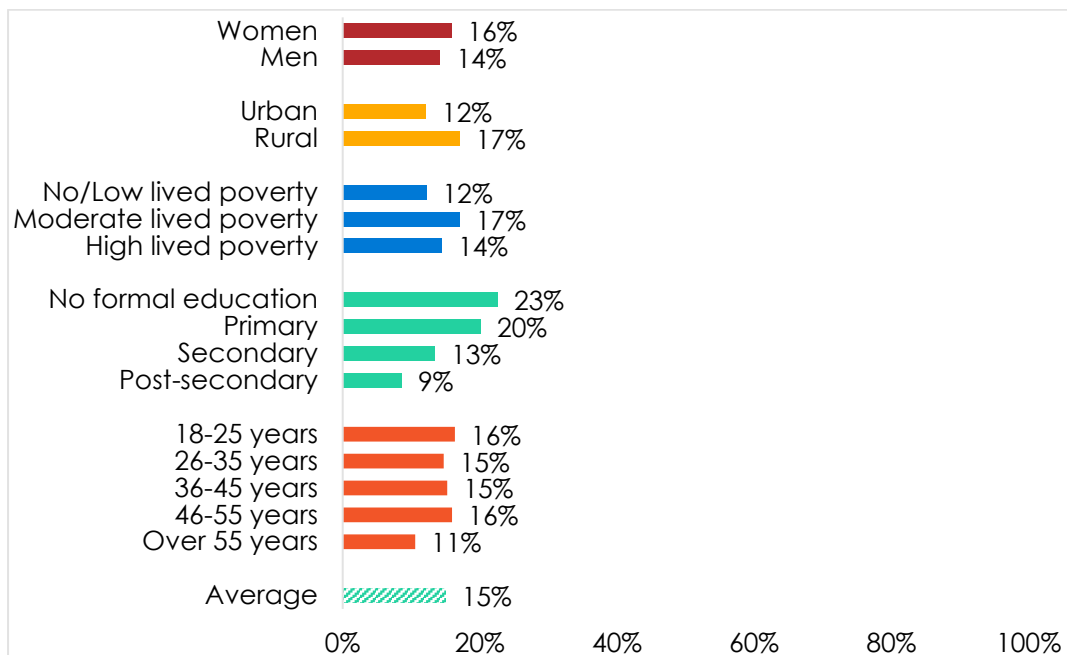
Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Nigeria | 2013-2022



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")

At the other end of the trust spectrum, trusting the police "somewhat" or "a lot" is particularly uncommon among highly educated citizens (9%), older respondents (11%), and urban residents (12%) (Figure 14).

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

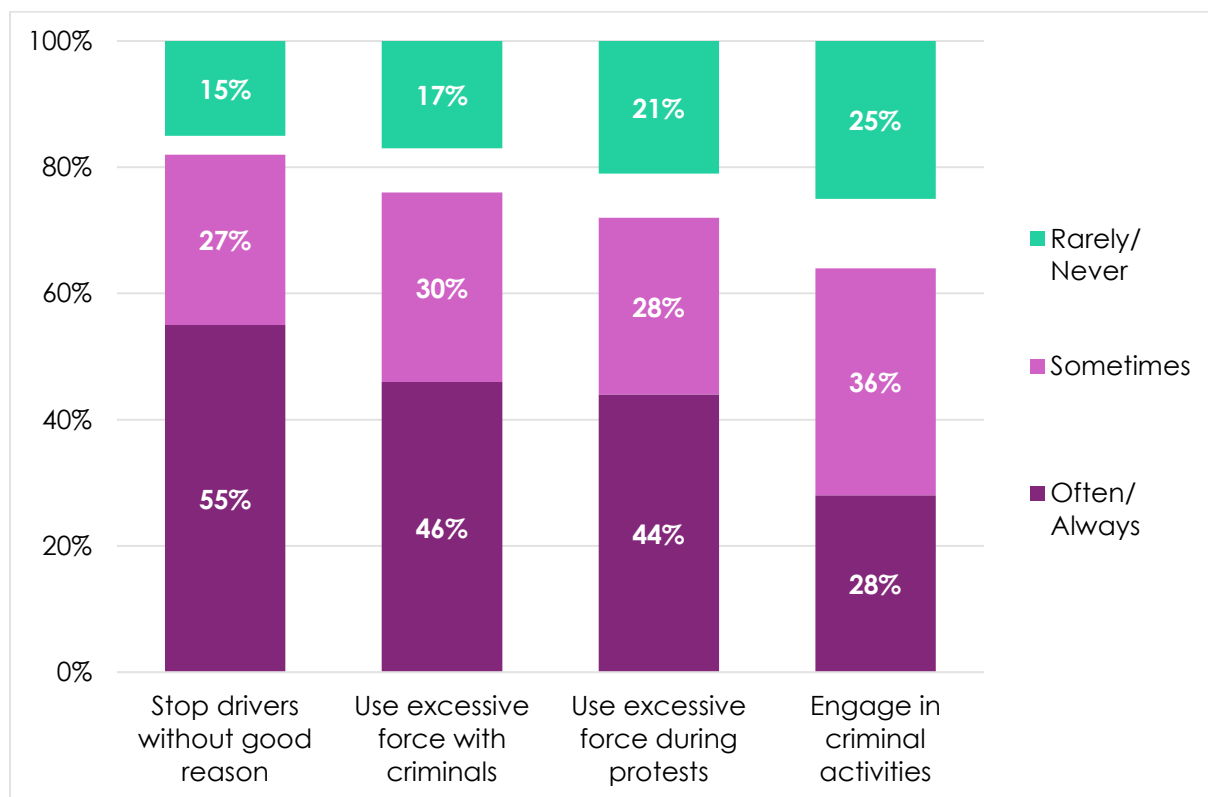
Police conduct

In addition to perceptions of the police as corrupt and untrustworthy, many Nigerians say at least some police officers engage in improper and even illegal activities (Figure 15).

More than half (55%) of respondents say the police “often” or “always” stop drivers without good reason, in addition to 27% who say they “sometimes” do so. More than four in 10 respondents say the police routinely use excessive force with suspected criminals (46%) and with protesters (44%); only 17% and 21%, respectively, think this “rarely” or “never” happens.

More than a quarter (28%) of respondents say the police often/always engage in criminal activities, while 36% say they “sometimes” do so.

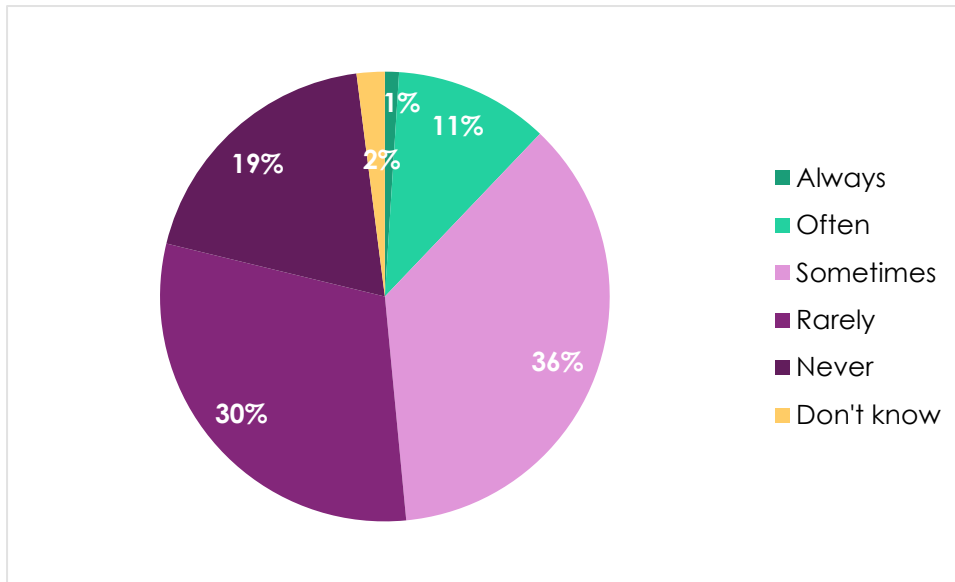
Figure 15: Improper police practices | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the police in Nigeria:*
 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 about one in eight respondents (13%) say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights, while half (49%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

Figure 16: How often do the police act professionally and respect citizens' rights?
 | Nigeria | 2022

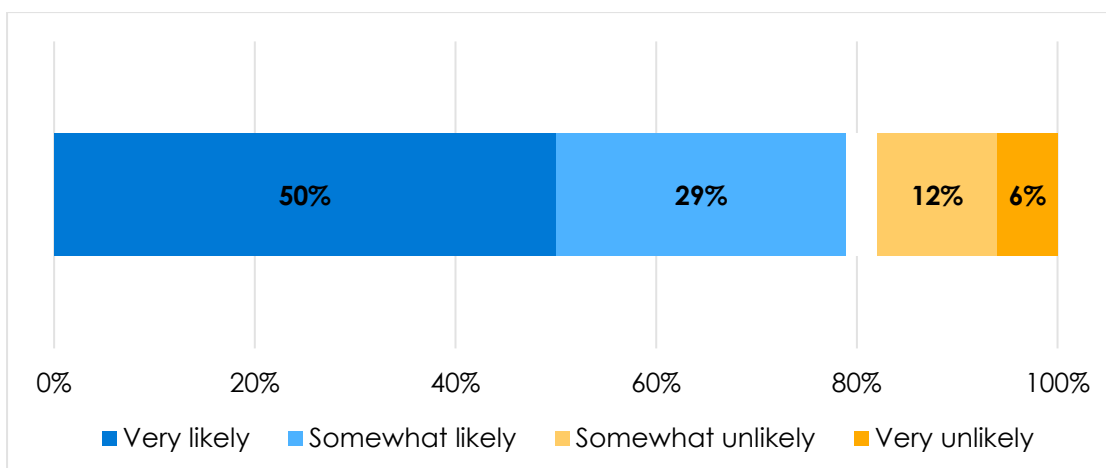


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the police in Nigeria operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?*

One issue on which most Nigerians express confidence in the police concerns their response to gender-based violence (GBV): About eight in 10 respondents say the police are "very likely" (50%) or "somewhat likely" (29%) to take cases of GBV seriously (Figure 17).

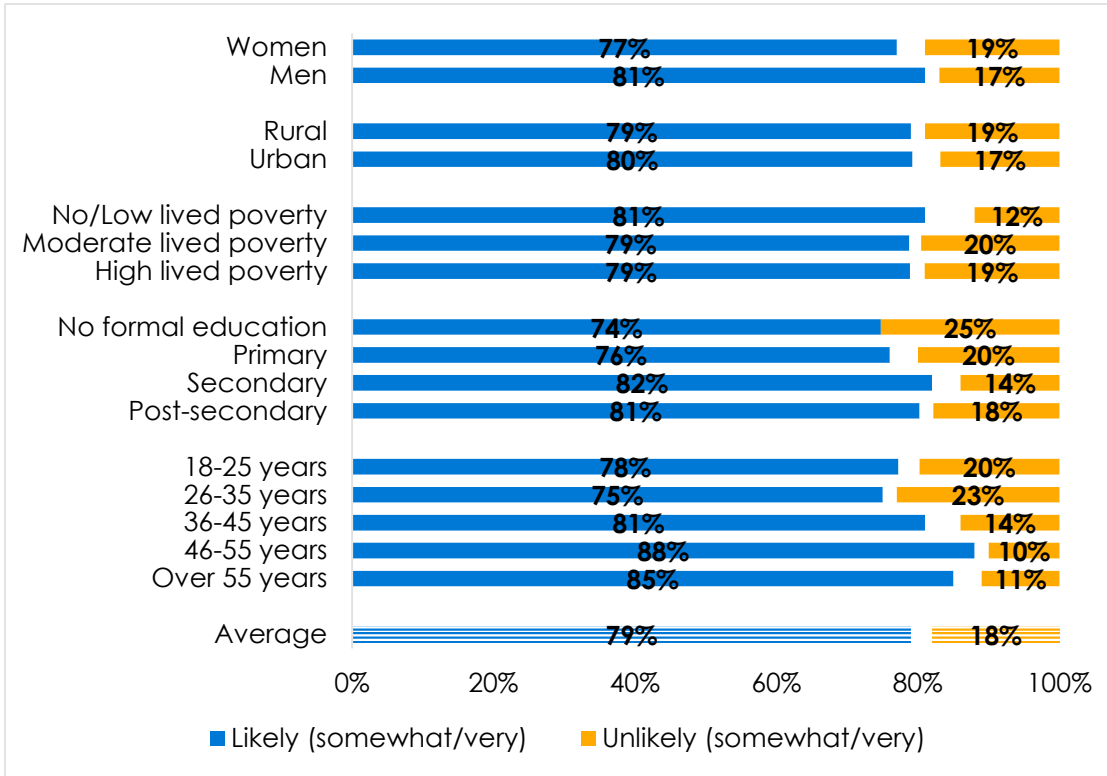
Confidence in the police response to GBV is high across key demographic groups, though somewhat lower among less educated respondents (74%-76%) than among their counterparts with higher education (81%-82%) (Figure 18).

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

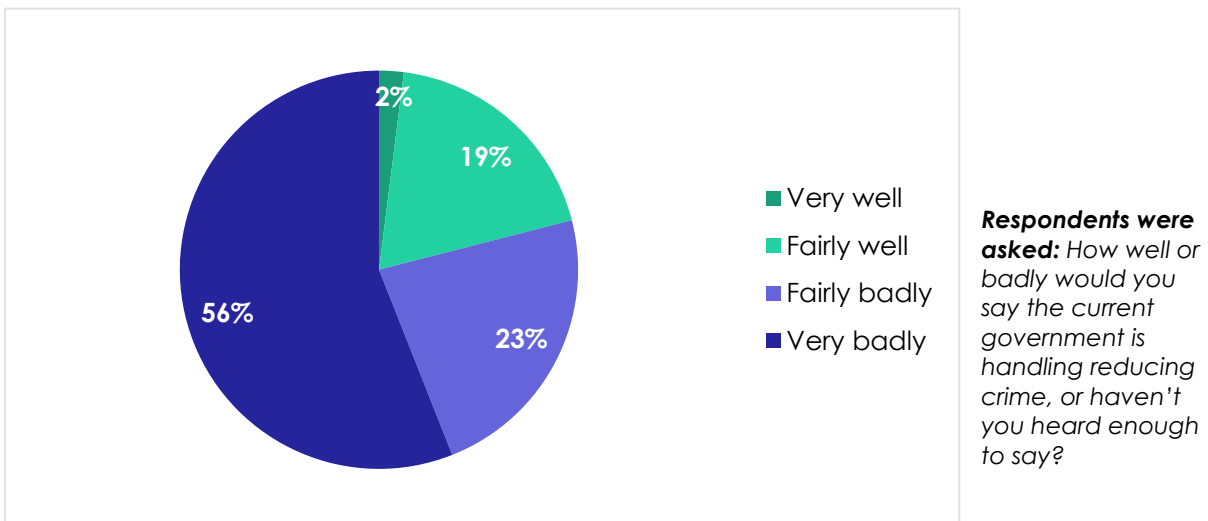


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

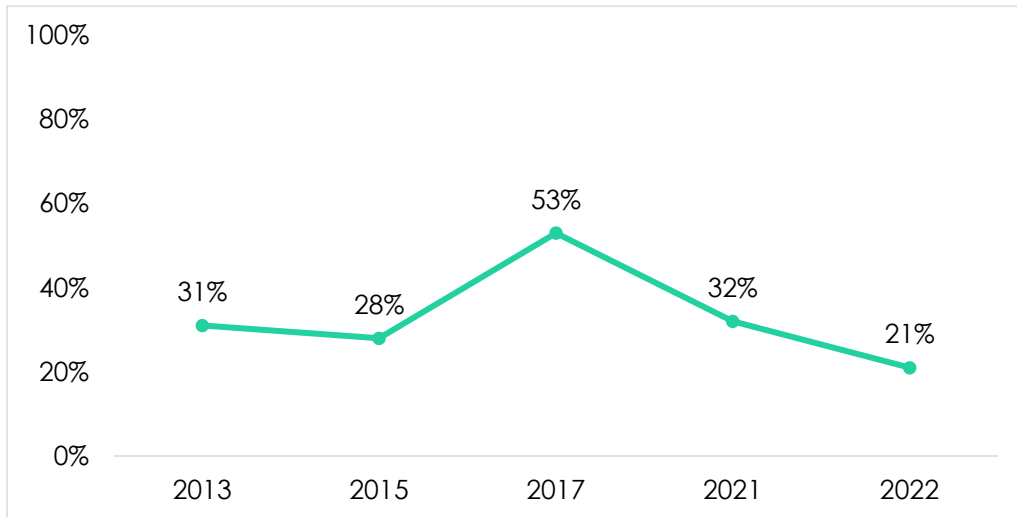
Overall, only about two in 10 Nigerians (21%) say the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of reducing crime, while 79% are critical of the government’s performance on this issue, including 56% who say it is doing “very badly” (Figure 19).

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



Over the past decade, approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts shot up from 28% in 2015 to 53% in 2017 but has since plummeted by 32 percentage points (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Government performing well on crime reduction | Nigeria | 2013-2022



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

Survey findings show a growing sense of insecurity among Nigerians, who overwhelmingly disapprove of the government's performance on crime.

Citizens' assessments of their police are negative: Most see officers as largely corrupt, untrustworthy, and lacking in professionalism. Fully three-fourths of those who sought police assistance during the past year say they had to pay a bribe, and majorities say the police at least sometimes stop drivers without good reason, use excessive force against protesters and suspected criminals, and engage in criminal activities.

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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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