

Cameroonians see police falling short of professionalism and respect for rights

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 733 | Baba Adou

Summary

The police are supposed to keep Cameroonians safe, but headlines often tell a different story, highlighting police abuses and tensions with the citizens they are paid to serve. In one extreme case in 2021, a police officer in Buea was lynched after he fatally shot a 5-year-old girl when the car she was in failed to stop at a checkpoint (Al Jazeera, 2021). Just weeks later, almost identical circumstances in Bamenda led to the death of a 7-year-old girl, followed by demonstrations against police brutality in which at least one protester was killed (Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, 2021).

More often, critics complain of police harassment and arbitrary arrests – sometimes targeting journalists and political activists – as well as prolonged detention, beatings, and everyday corruption at checkpoints (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2022; Guardian Post, 2023; Forkum, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

To address long-standing abuses, the government created a special police oversight division (known as “the police of the police”) in 2005, but local and international rights groups have criticised it as lacking independence and objectivity (United Nations Committee Against Torture, 2010; Forkum, 2016).

Illustrating strained police-community relations, the police in 2021 complained about a growing number of citizens who refuse police orders and mock or assault the officers – incidents that are often shared in videos on social media (Kindzeka, 2021).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Cameroonians’ experiences and assessments of police professionalism.

Survey findings show that fewer than one-third of Cameroonians say the police generally operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights. Majorities say at least some officers use excessive force with protesters and suspected criminals, stop drivers without good reason, and engage in criminal activities.

Vast majorities of citizens think that “most” or “all” police officers are corrupt, and among those who encountered the police during the previous year, more than half say they had to pay a bribe to get help or avoid problems.

Overall, a majority of Cameroonians 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. 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 Cameroon, led by Cible Etudes & Conseil, interviewed 1,200 Cameroonian adults in April-May 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 carried out in Cameroon in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Cameroonians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, while 43% report fearing crime in their home. Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About one in seven citizens (14%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year, while almost five times as many (65%) 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, 52% say it was difficult to get the assistance they needed, and 63% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 52% say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- More than six in 10 citizens (62%) think “most” or “all” police are corrupt, the second-worst rating among 11 institutions the survey asked about.
- Fewer than half (44%) of Cameroonians say they trust the police “somewhat” (25%) or “a lot” (19%).
- Substantial shares of the population say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force with suspected criminals (55%) and with protesters (47%), stop drivers without good reason (46%), and engage in criminal activities (34%).
- Fewer than one-third (31%) of Cameroonians say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - But most (84%) consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- Four in 10 citizens (40%) say the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of reducing crime, while 59% are critical of the government’s performance on this issue.

Sense of security

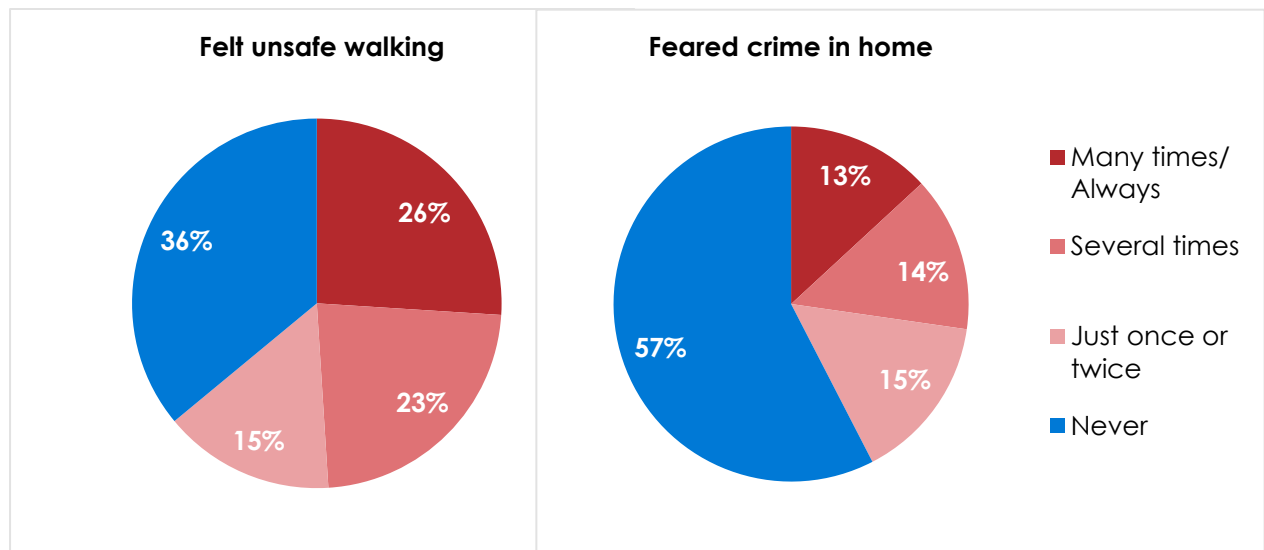
The most basic role of the police is to protect people and their property. Do Cameroonians feel protected?

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Cameroonians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 49% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).

Similarly, 43% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 28% who say this happened “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”¹

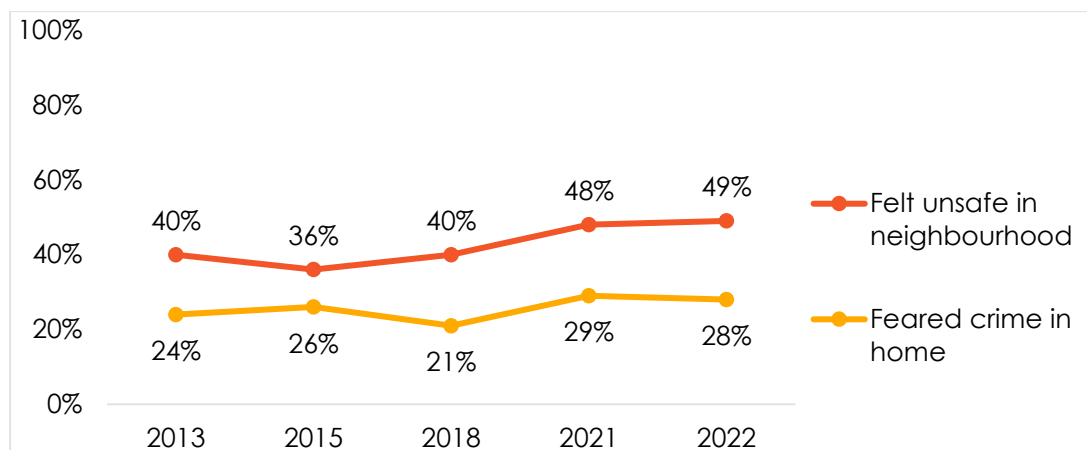
The proportion of Cameroonians who report feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood at least “several times” has increased by 13 percentage points since 2015 (Figure 2). The share of citizens who feared crime in their home has varied less sharply but is now 7 percentage points larger than in 2018.

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Cameroon | 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’ | Cameroon | 2013-2022

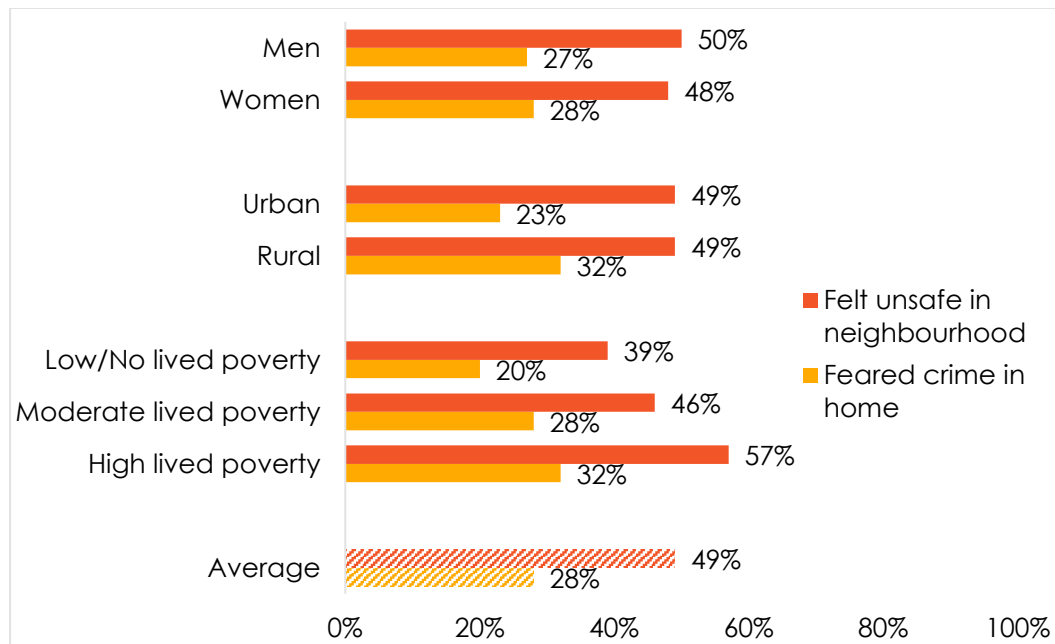


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home? (% who say “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

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. in “Feared crime in home,” 13% “many times/always” and 14% “several times” and 15% “just once or twice” sum to 43%).

While women and men report almost identical levels of insecurity, fearing crime in the home is less common in cities (23%) than in rural areas (32%) (Figure 3). Both types of insecurity are considerably more common among citizens experiencing higher levels of lived poverty.² Compared to the economically well-off, the poorest citizens are 18 percentage points more likely to feel unsafe walking in the neighbourhood and 12 points more likely to fear crime in their home.

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’ | by demographic group | Cameroon | 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”)

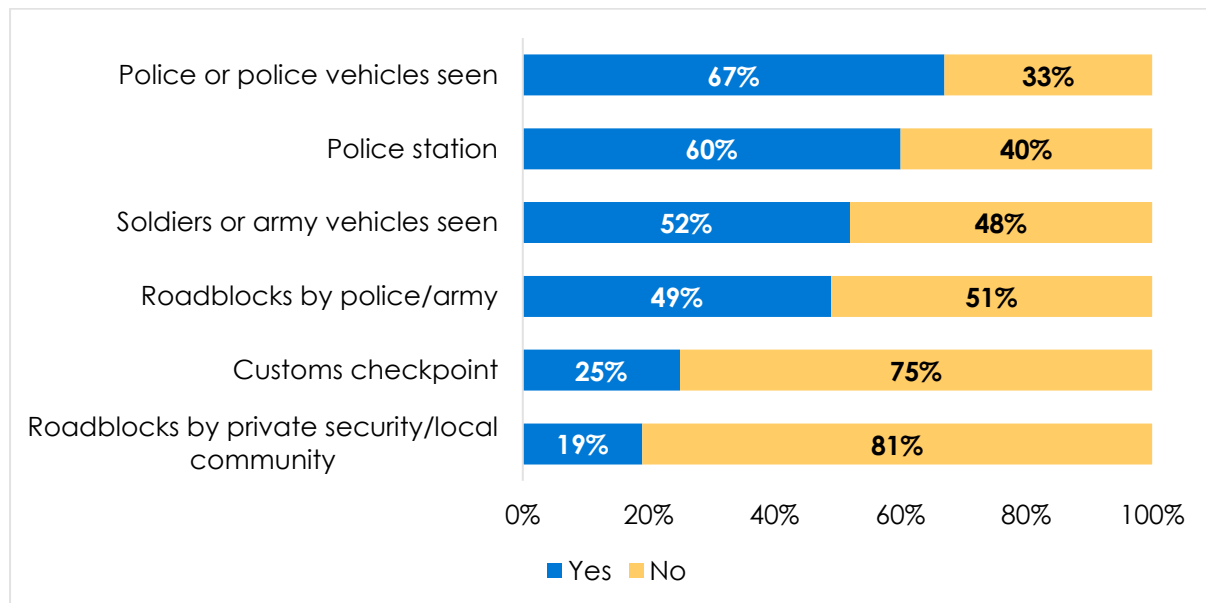
Police/security presence

One factor that might affect people’s sense of security is the presence of security forces. 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 Cameroon, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of nearly two-thirds (60%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 67% of the EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were also common, including soldiers or army vehicles (52%) and roadblocks by the police or army (49%). Less common signs included customs checkpoints (25%) and roadblocks by private security or the local community (19%).

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 (2020).

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Cameroon | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked to record:

Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit (PSU)/enumeration area (EA) or in easy walking distance: Police station?

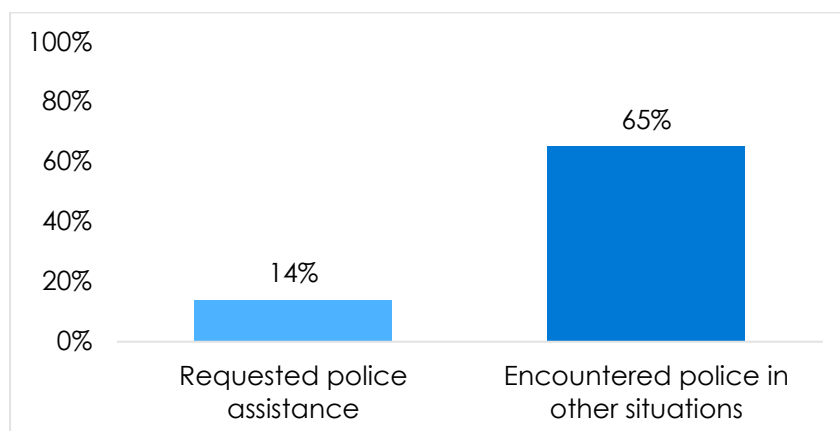
In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? Any customs checkpoints? Any roadblocks or booms set up by private security providers or by the local community?

Encounters with the police

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

About one in seven respondents (14%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Almost five times as many (65%) say they 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 | Cameroon | 2022



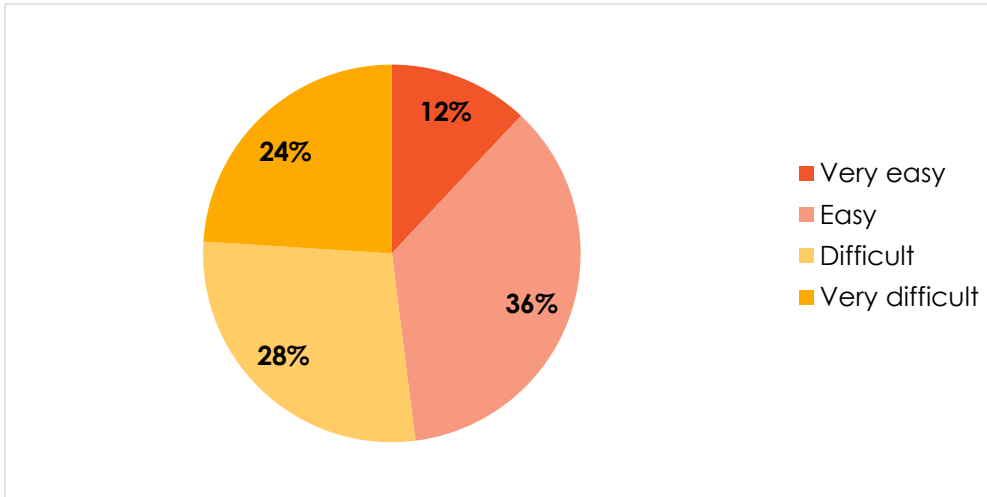
Respondents were asked:

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?

Among citizens who asked for help from the police, more than half (52%) say it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to get the assistance they needed, while 48% say it was easy (Figure 6).

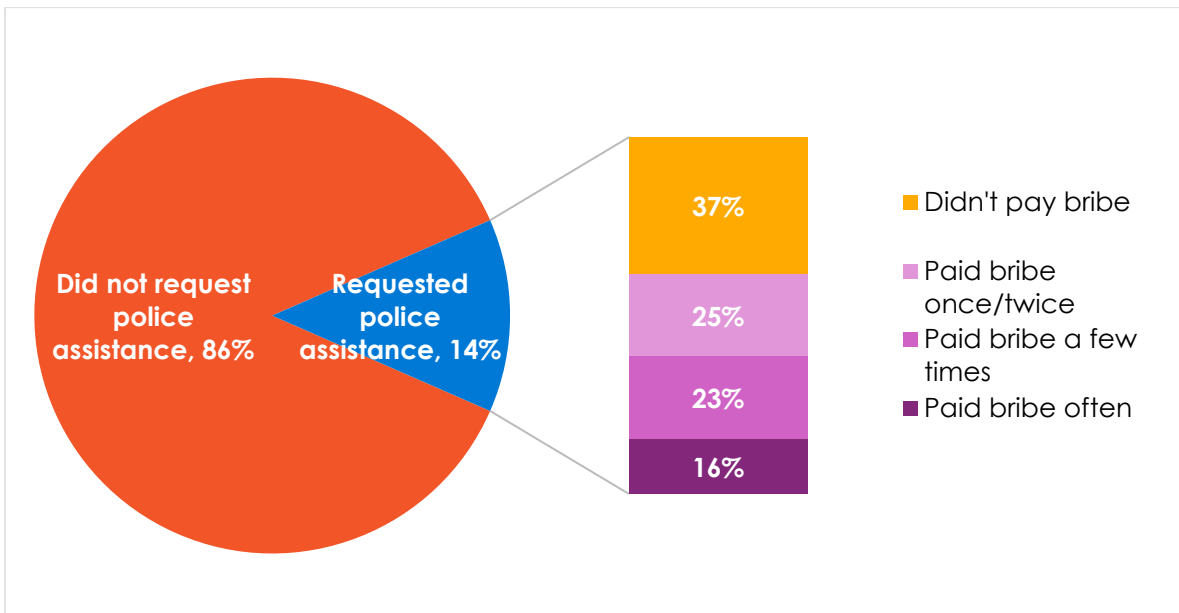
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Cameroon | 2022



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 six in 10 (63%) 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 16% who say this occurred “often” (Figure 7).

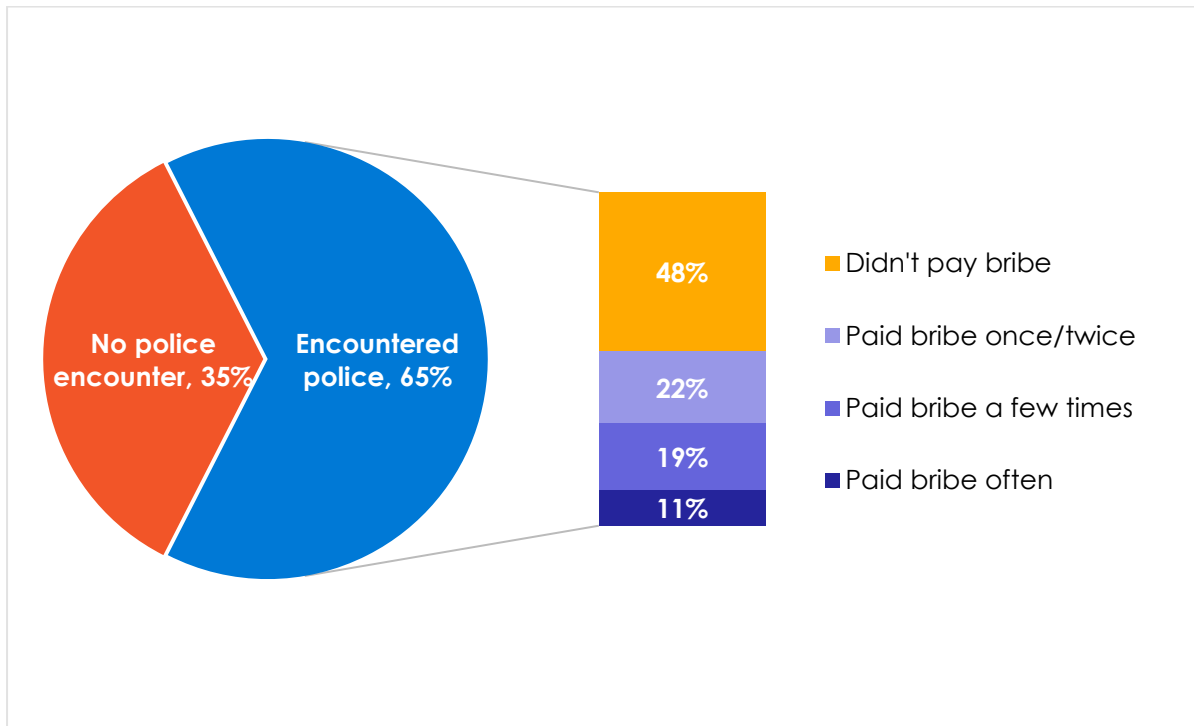
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Cameroon | 2022



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 Cameroonians who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, more than half (52%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 11% who say this happened “often” during the previous year (Figure 8).

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

Police corruption

Considering the frequency of reported bribe paying to the police, it is perhaps not surprising that Cameroonians are nearly unanimous (97%) in believing that at least “some” police officials are corrupt. In fact, 62% of citizens say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – the second-worst rating (after tax officials, 66%) among the 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about (Figure 9).

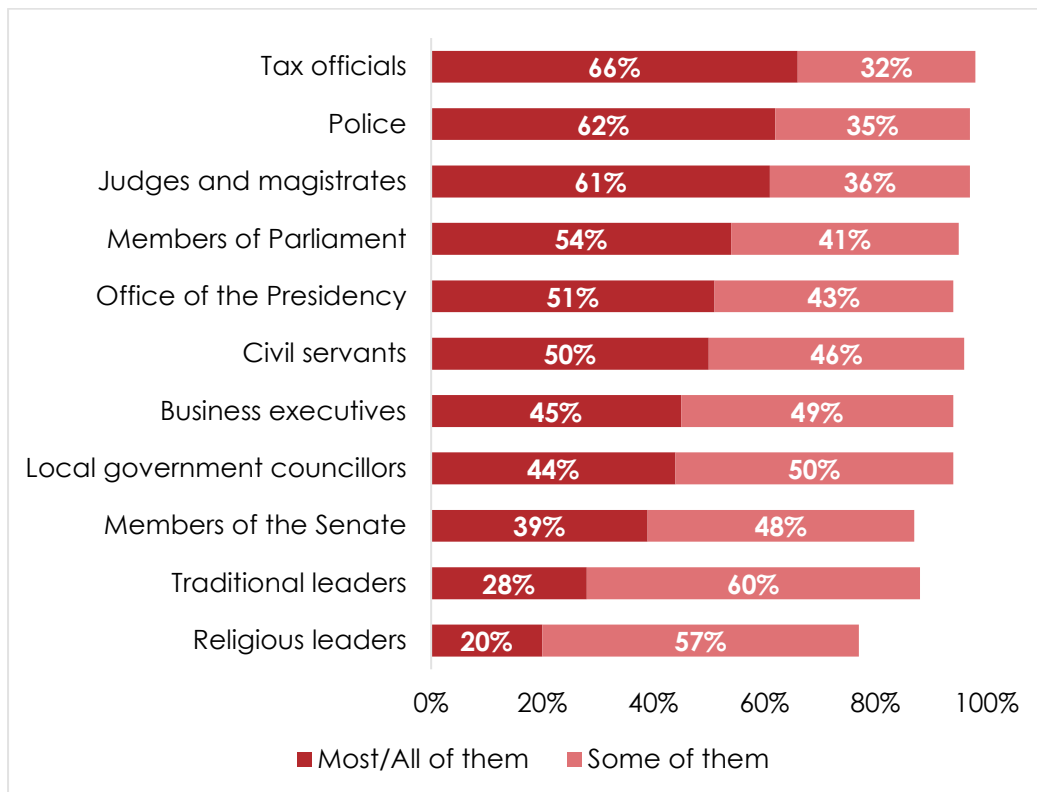
Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are more common among men (65%) and citizens with post-secondary education (65%) than among women (59%) and people with primary or no formal education (56%) (Figure 10).

Findings also suggest possible links between perceptions of police corruption and interaction with the police (Figure 11).

Citizens who live in EAs where field teams saw police officers are somewhat more likely to say that most/all police are corrupt than are their counterparts in EAs where no police presence was observed (64% vs. 59%).

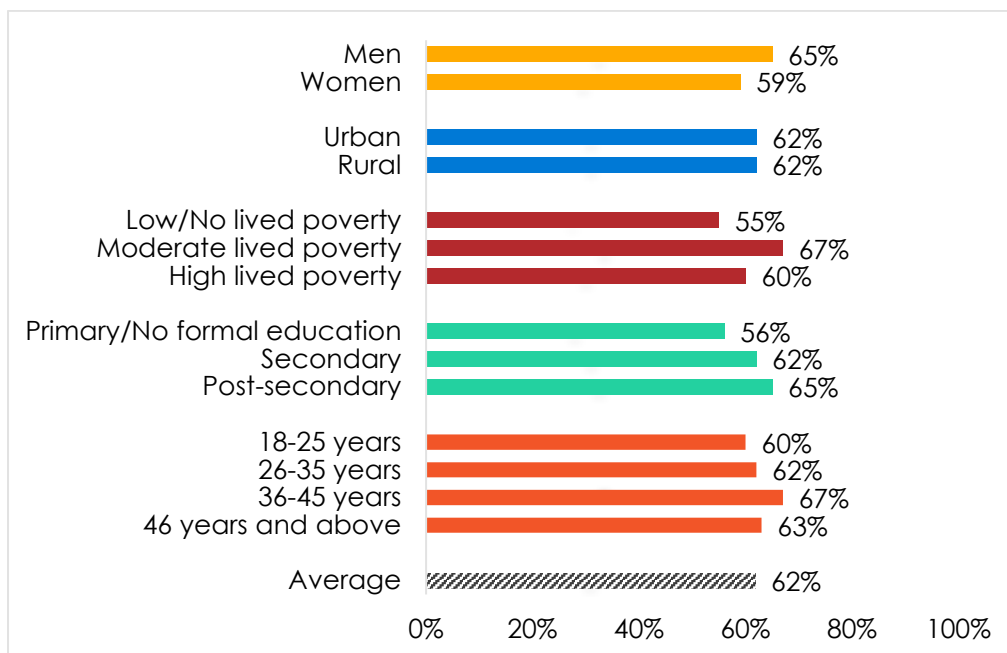
And perceptions of widespread police corruption are considerably more common among respondents who “often” encountered the police (in situations such as checkpoints) than among those who had no encounters with the police during the previous year (74% vs. 54%).

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



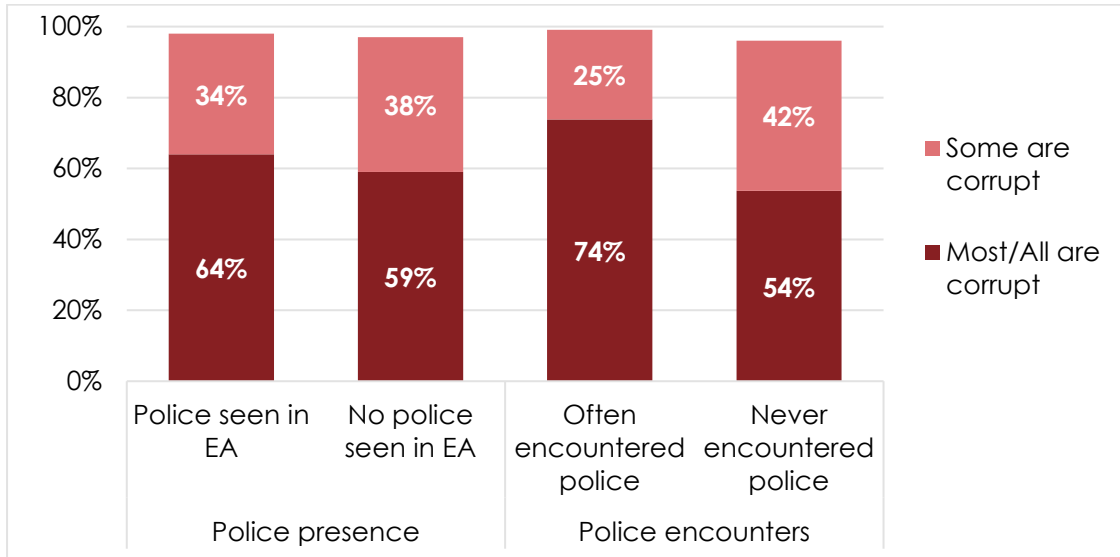
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

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



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

Respondents were asked:

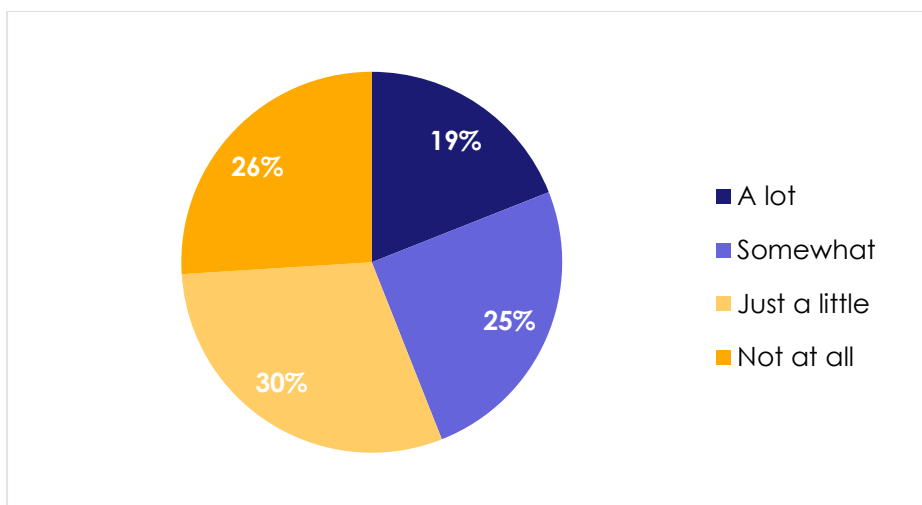
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

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

Alongside high levels of perceived corruption, Cameroon's police suffer from fairly low levels of public trust. Only about one-fifth of Cameroonians say they trust the police "a lot" (19%), while 25% say they trust the institution "somewhat." One-fourth (26%) express no trust at all in the police (Figure 12).

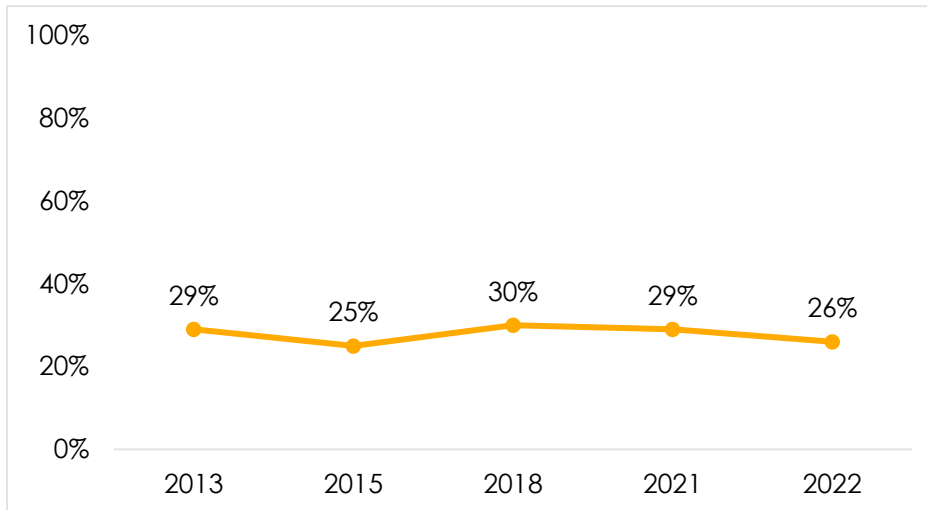
Figure 12: Trust in the police | Cameroon | 2022



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

Levels of distrust in the police have been fairly steady over the past decade, with between 25% and 30% of citizens saying they don't trust the police at all (Figure 13).

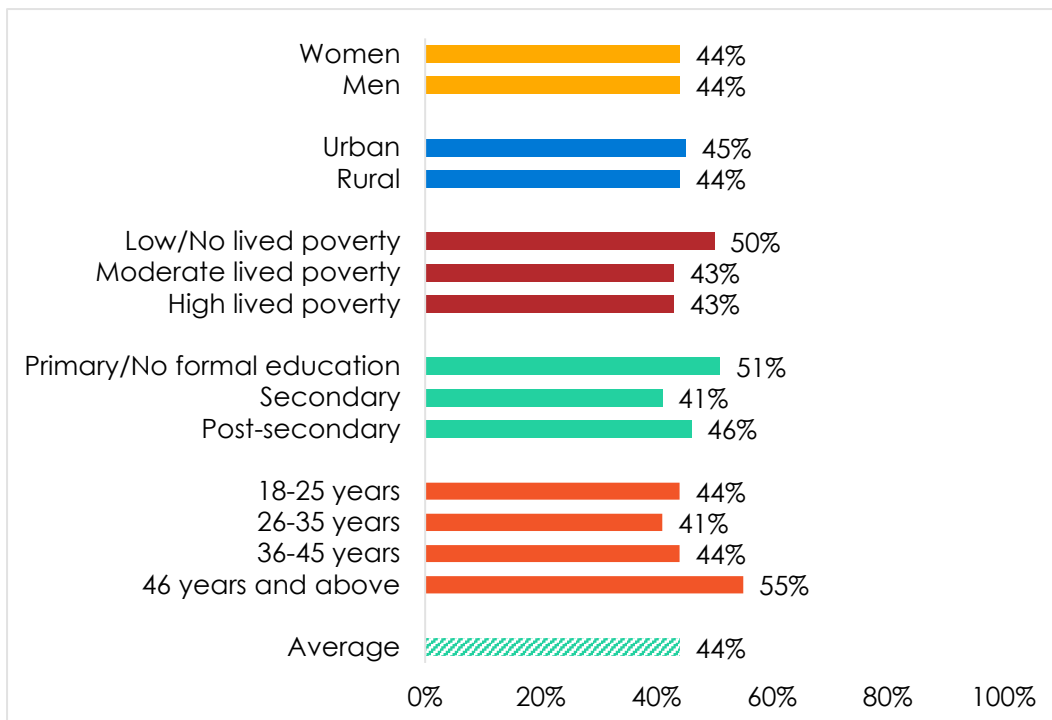
Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Cameroon | 2013-2022



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")

Trust in the police is somewhat stronger than average among citizens with low or no lived poverty (50%), those with primary schooling or less (51%), and older respondents (55%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Cameroon | 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")

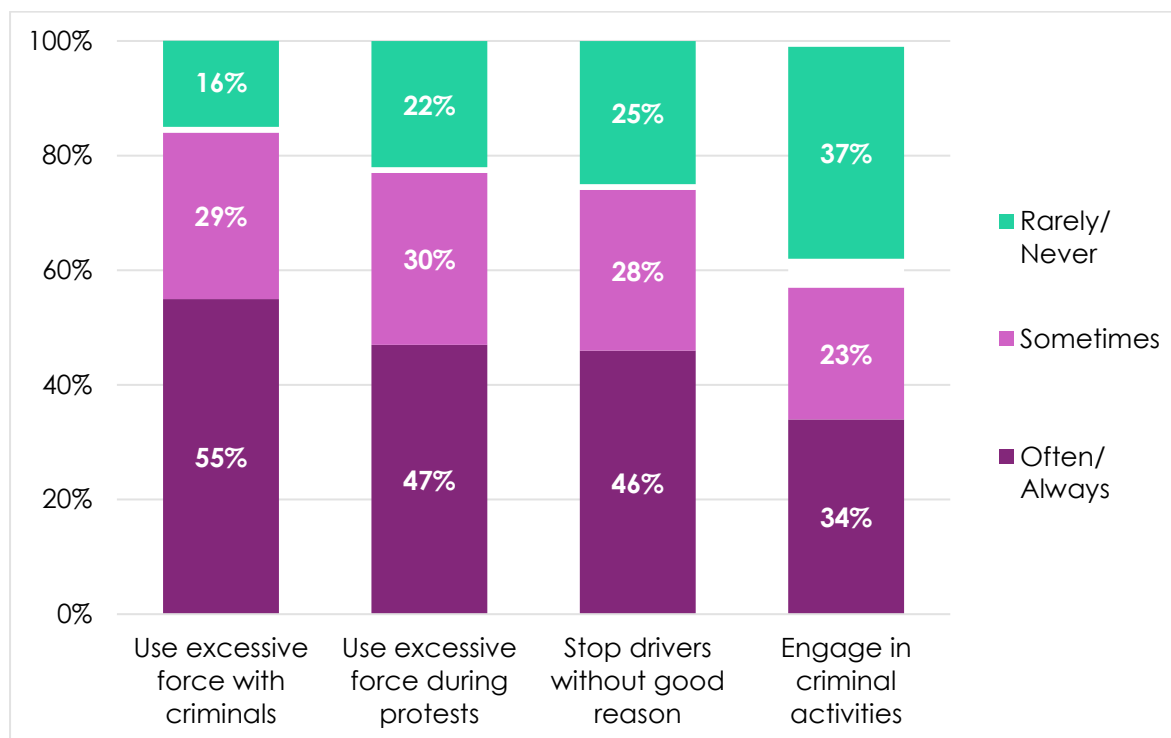
Police conduct

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

A majority (55%) of respondents say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force with suspected criminals, while 47% say the same about officers’ interactions with protesters. And almost half (46%) say the police routinely stop drivers without good reason. In addition, about three in 10 respondents say the police are “sometimes” guilty of these abuses.

One in three citizens (34%) say the police often/always engage in criminal activities, while 23% say they “sometimes” do so and 37% believe this “rarely” or “never” happens.

Figure 15: Improper police practices | Cameroon | 2022

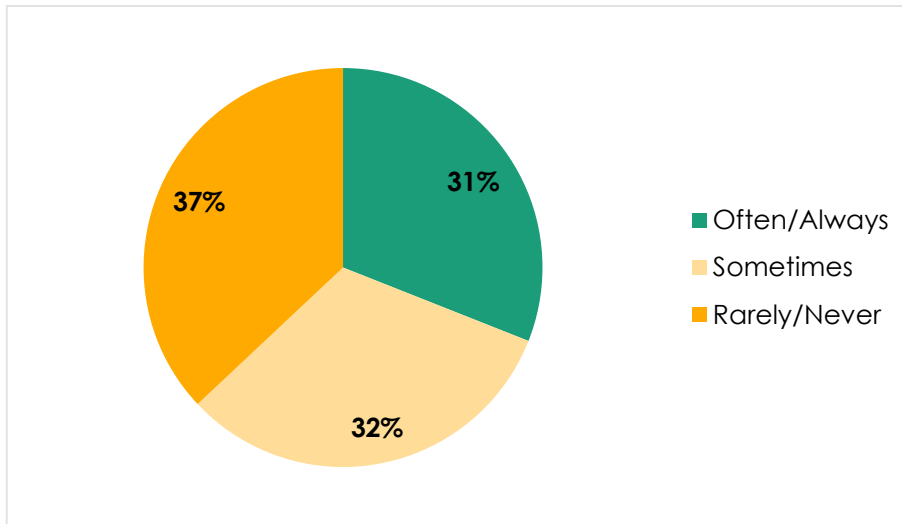


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the police in Cameroon: Stop drivers without good reason? Use excessive force in managing protests or demonstrations? Use excessive force when dealing with criminals? Engage in criminal activities?*

Overall, fewer than one-third (31%) of Cameroonians say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights; a larger share (37%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

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

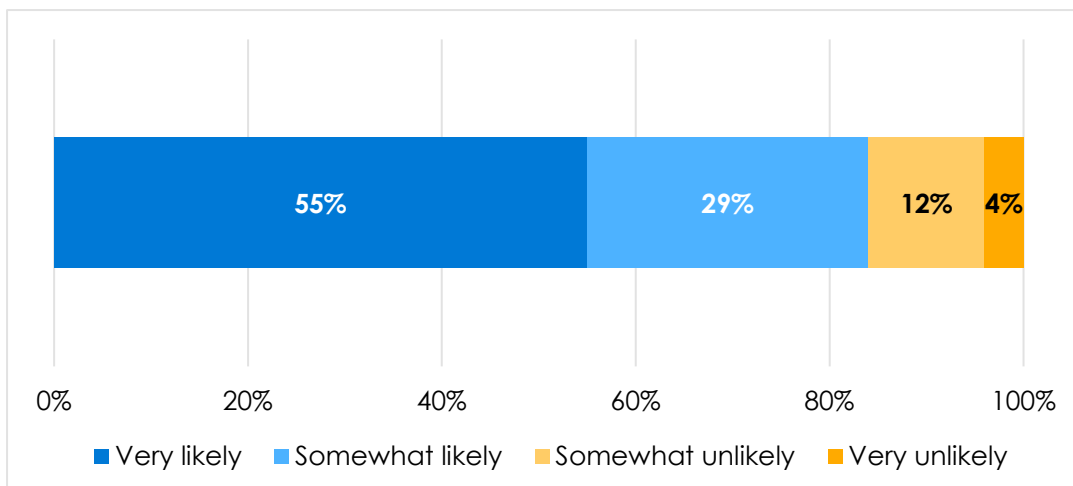


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often do the police in Cameroon operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?*

One area in which Cameroonians give their police better marks is in treating cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as serious offences. More than eight in 10 respondents (84%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 55% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 17).

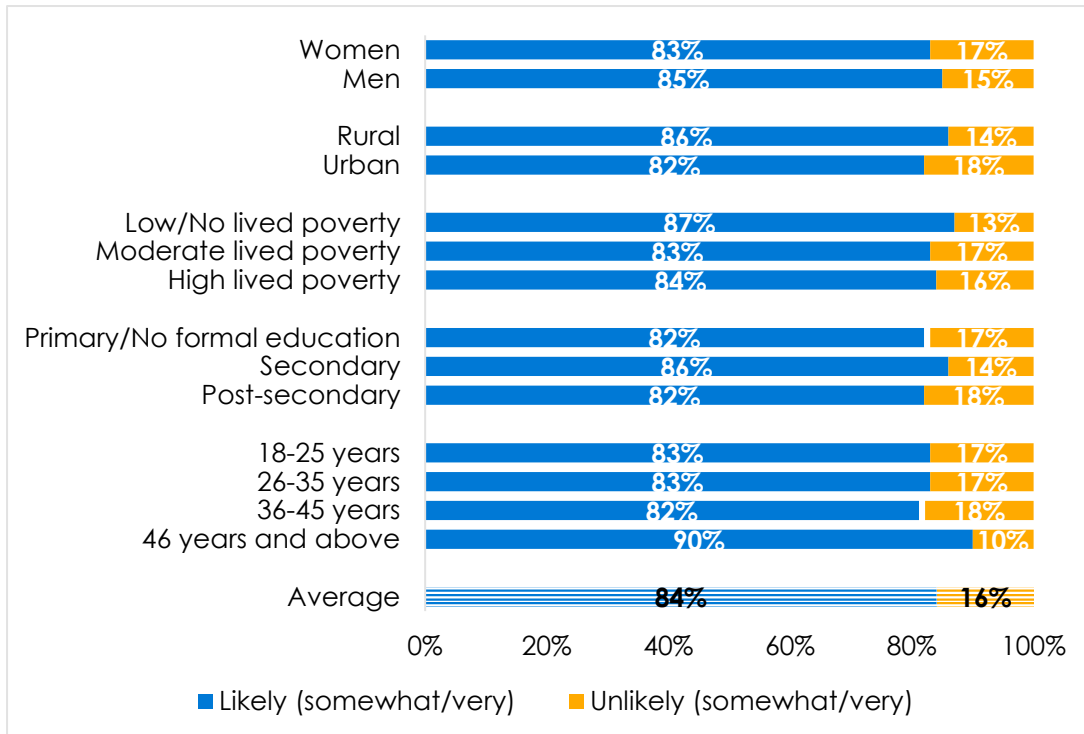
Confidence in the police response is high (above 80%) across key demographic groups, reaching 90% among citizens aged 46 and above (Figure 18).

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

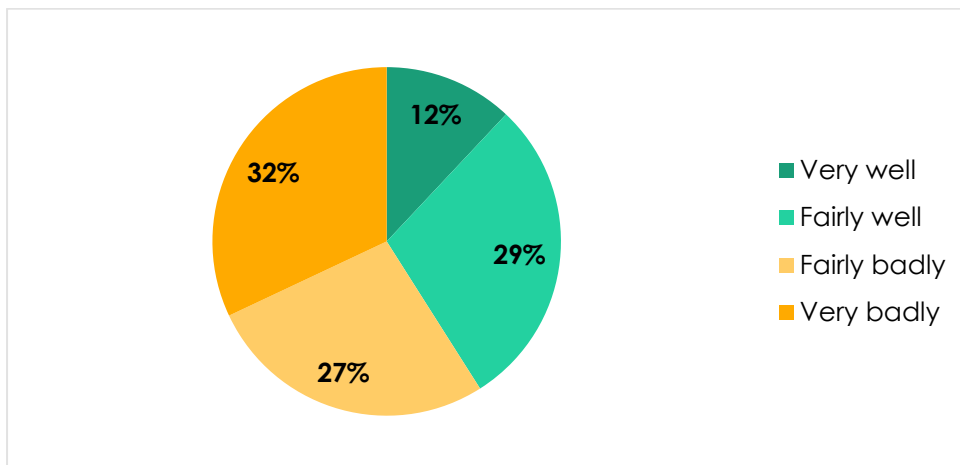


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

Despite the shortcomings highlighted by Cameroonians' assessments of police corruption, trustworthiness, and practices, four in 10 citizens (40%) say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of reducing crime, while 59% are critical of the government's performance on this issue (Figure 19).

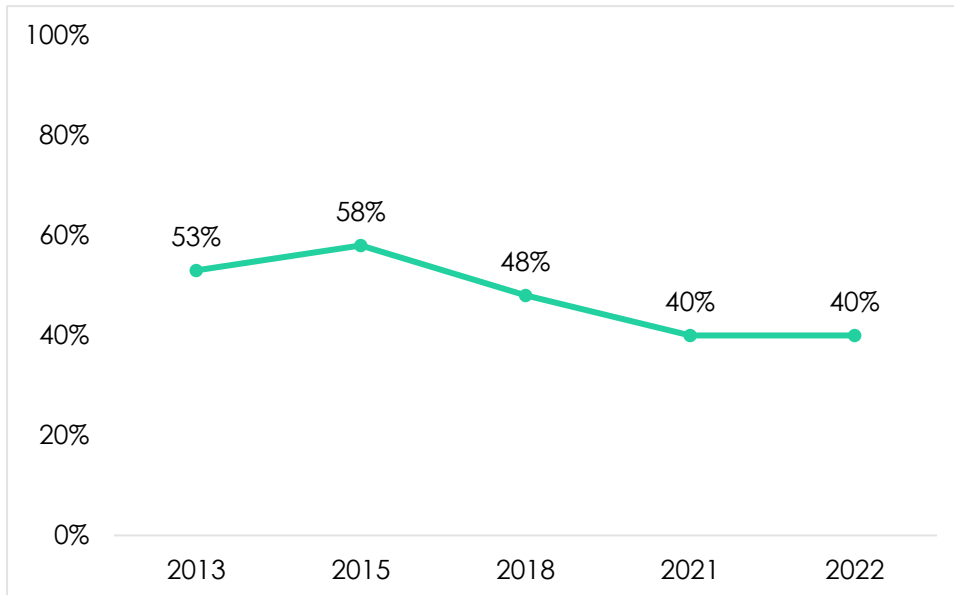
Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Cameroon | 2022



Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling reducing crime, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has declined by 18 percentage points since 2015 (58%) (Figure 20).

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

Police in Cameroon are falling well short of public expectations: Fewer than a third of citizens see officers as usually operating in a professional manner and respecting people's rights. In substantial numbers, Cameroonians say the police use excessive force with protesters and suspected criminals and stop drivers without good reason.

A majority of citizens say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt, and many report personal experience of having to pay bribes to get assistance or avoid problems.

These findings highlight some of the challenges that Cameroon's police face if they want to earn the citizenry's respect and cooperation.

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