

South Africans' view of police marred by pervasive corruption, lack of professionalism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 836 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

August 16 marks 12 years since South African police gunned down 34 striking mineworkers in Marikana in the most brutal display of repression of dissent since the country's transition to democracy. Cyril Ramaphosa, then a board member of Lonmin, where the miners were striking, was heavily involved in escalating the confrontation (Munusamy, 2015) but managed to shake off the controversy on his way to becoming president.

Regrettably, scenes of police brutality have continued, notably during the 2015-2016 #FeesMustFall protests and the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown (Amnesty International, 2016; McCain, 2021). The Independent Police Investigative Directorate reported a 32% surge in complaints against police officers during the first 41 days of lockdown compared to the same period in the previous year (Burger, 2020).

Despite budgetary increases in recent years (SA News, 2024a), the South African Police Service has failed to rein in crime. Official statistics show 7,710 homicides in the final three months of 2023 – an increase of 155 compared to the same period the previous year (SA News, 2024b). Over the past two decades, homicides in South Africa have seen a sharp rise, reaching a peak of 45 deaths per 100,000 people in 2023. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and Western Cape provinces recorded 83% of the country's homicides in 2022/2023 (Bruce, 2023).

Moreover, a recent report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime revealed that South Africa saw 10 political killings in the first four months of 2024, just prior to the May election (Matamba & Thobela, 2024) – an average of one assassination every two weeks. Political violence is used as a tool to control dissenting voices, manage the tussle for succession, invade local government, and manipulate political outcomes (Mwareya, 2023).

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to violent crime, including homicide. The latest figures indicate that 18,474 women and 2,281 children were violently assaulted in the last quarter of 2023, while 1,135 women and 285 children were slain during the same period (South African Police Service, 2024). The true extent of violent crimes against women and children is unknown, as many go unreported (Business Tech, 2022).

Statistics South Africa's (2024) Crime Against Children report found that children as young as 6 years are victims of many interpersonal crimes, including rape and assault. Child abduction is also a growing concern, with more than 1,300 cases a month reported to the police (Peterson, 2024). Six-year-old Joslin Smith, who vanished from her home in Saldanha Bay in February, remains missing nearly six months after her disappearance (Swartz, 2024), and she is just one of many (Francke, 2024).

Amid these challenges, how do South Africans see their police? 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.

In South Africa, many citizens express little or no trust in the police and believe that corruption is rife among police officers. Solid majorities say police officers at least “sometimes” engage in criminal activities, stop drivers without good reason, and use excessive force in dealing with criminals and in managing protests. Only one in four citizens say the police generally operate in a professional manner, and only one in 10 think the government is doing a good job of reducing crime.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 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 South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

- Three-quarters (75%) of South Africans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the year preceding the survey. About two-thirds (65%) report fearing crime in their home.
 - Experiences of insecurity are particularly common among poor citizens, urban residents, women, and Black citizens.
- One-third (34%) of South Africans live within easy walking distance of a police station.
- About one in five citizens (21%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Twice as many (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, 45% 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, a quarter (25%) say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- About six in 10 citizens (61%) say “most” or “all” police are corrupt.
- Only about one-third (32%) of South Africans say they trust the police. The share of citizens who say they don’t trust the police “at all” has climbed by 25 percentage points since 2011, to 43%.
- Three-quarters (76%) of citizens say the police engage in illegal activities at least “sometimes,” including 47% who believe this happens “often” or “always.”
- Only about one-quarter (24%) of citizens say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights; three in 10 (31%) assert that such behaviour is rare or unheard of.
 - But 76% consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.

- Assessments of the government's performance on reducing crime are dismal: Nearly nine in 10 South Africans (88%) say the government is doing a poor job of tackling crime, including 73% who say it is performing "very badly."

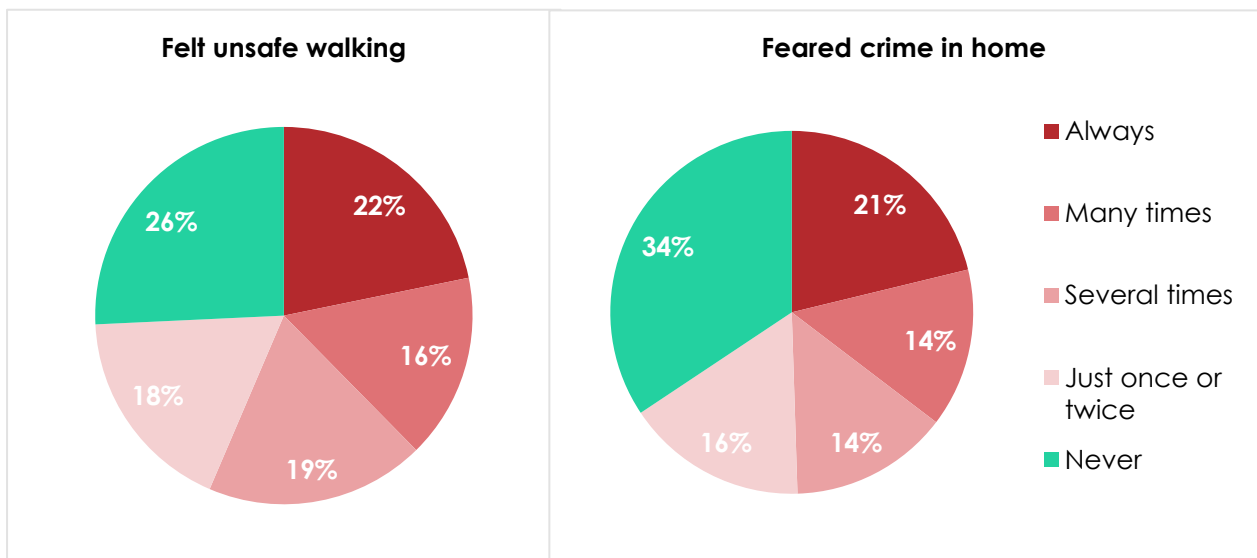
Sense of security

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

Survey responses indicate a significant lack of a sense of personal security. Three-quarters (75%) of South Africans say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including more than half (56%) who report feeling unsafe "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 1).¹

Similarly, about two-thirds (65%) of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including about half (49%) who say this happened "several times," "many times," or "always."

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | South Africa | 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?

The proportion of South Africans who report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood at least "several times" has increased by 15 percentage points over the past decade, to 56% in 2022 (Figure 2). Levels of insecurity in the home are back up to the 2011 peak of 49% after declines registered in the intervening years.

Feelings of insecurity increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty:² The poorest citizens are more than twice as likely to feel unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood and to fear crime in their home as the best-off citizens (Figure 3). Women are more likely than

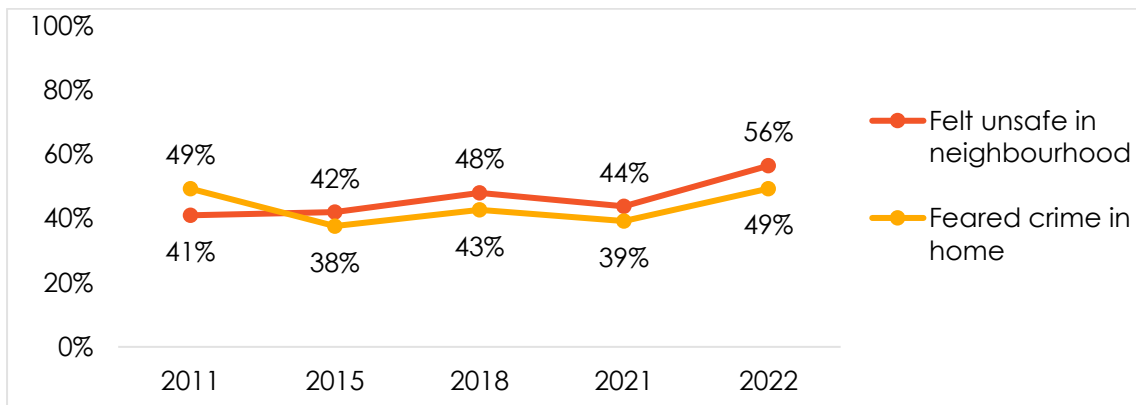
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 22% "always," 16% "many times," and 19% "several times" sum to 56%).

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 past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

men to report experiencing insecurity (by 9 and 8 percentage points on the respective indicators), as are city dwellers compared to rural residents (by 16 and 13 points, respectively).

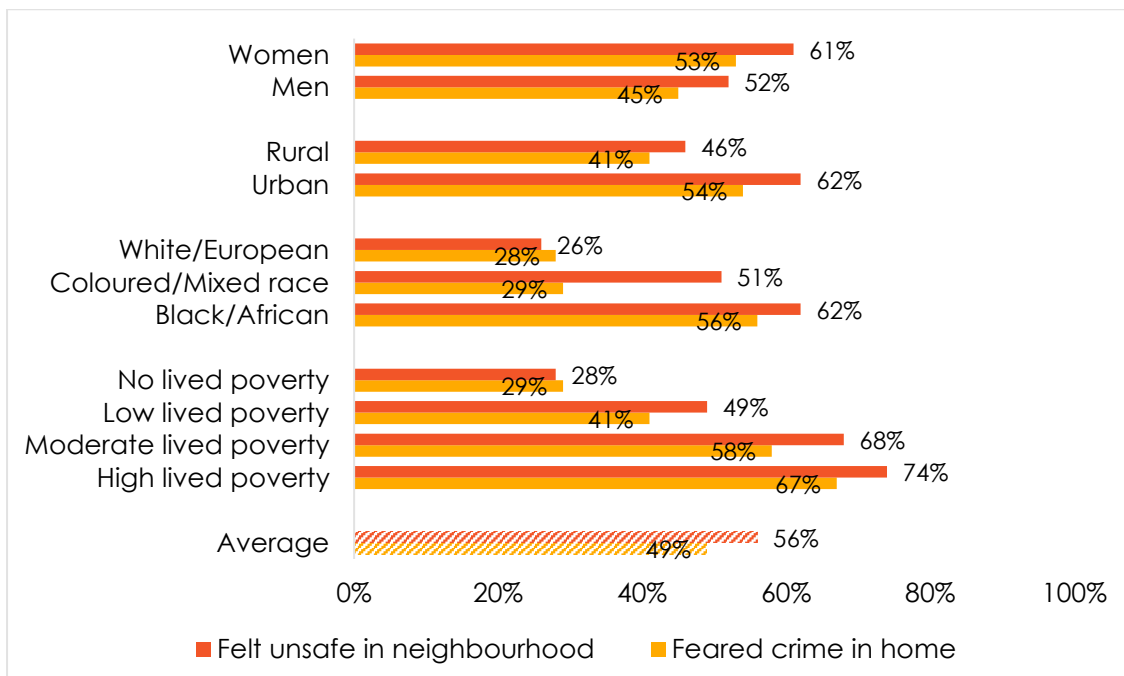
Black South Africans are at least twice as likely as White respondents to report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood (62% vs. 26%) and fearing crime in the home (56% vs. 28%).

Figure 2: Experienced insecurity at least 'several times' | South Africa | 2011-2022



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")

Figure 3: Experienced insecurity at least 'several times' | by demographic group³ | South Africa | 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")

³ Other racial groups are not shown because small sample sizes produce results with large margins of error.

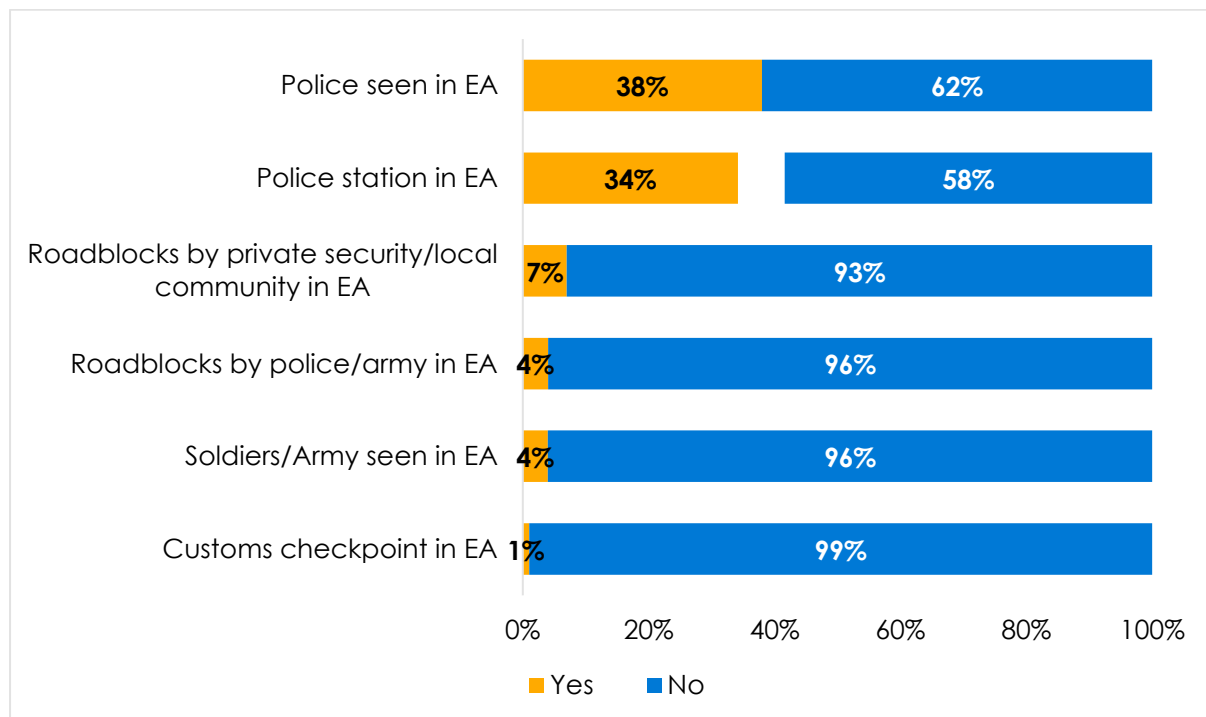
Police/security presence

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 South Africa, Afrobarometer field teams saw police officers or vehicles in 38% of the EAs they visited, and found police stations in or within easy walking distance of 34% of the EAs (Figure 4). Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including roadblocks by private security or the local community (7%), police or military roadblocks (4%), soldiers or other military forces (4%), and customs checkpoints (1%).

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 (not shown).

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | South Africa | 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?

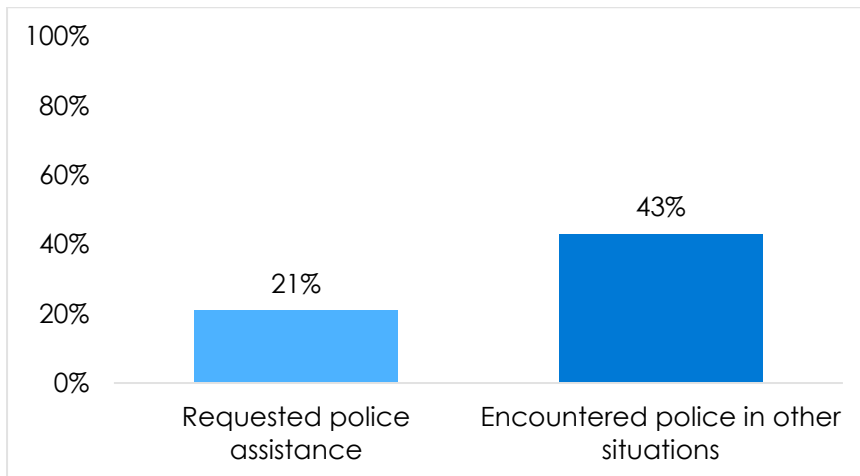
In the PSU/EA, did you (or any of your colleagues) see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? Any customs checkpoints? Any roadblocks or booms set up by private security providers or by the local community?

Encounters with the police

How often do South Africans encounter the police in their daily lives?

One in five respondents (21%) say they requested police assistance during the preceding year (Figure 5). Twice as many (43%) encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked:

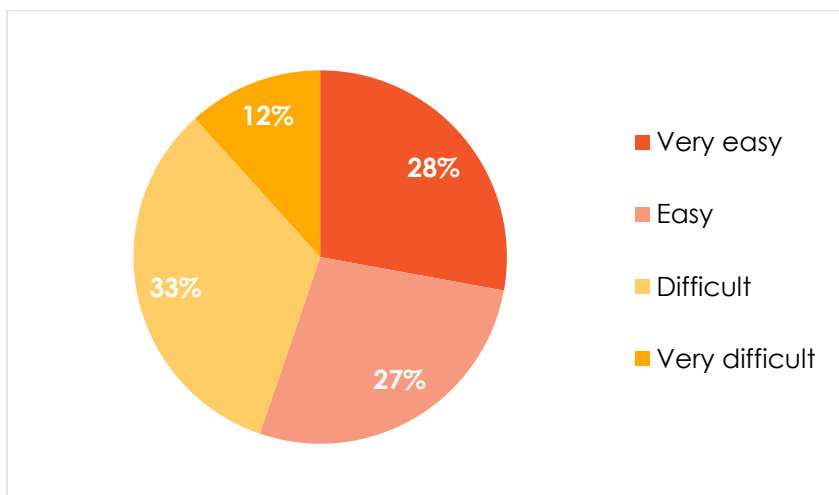
In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police?

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 those who asked for help from the police, almost half (45%) report difficulty in getting the necessary assistance (Figure 6). Nearly one-fifth (18%) say they had to bribe an officer in order to be helped (Figure 7).

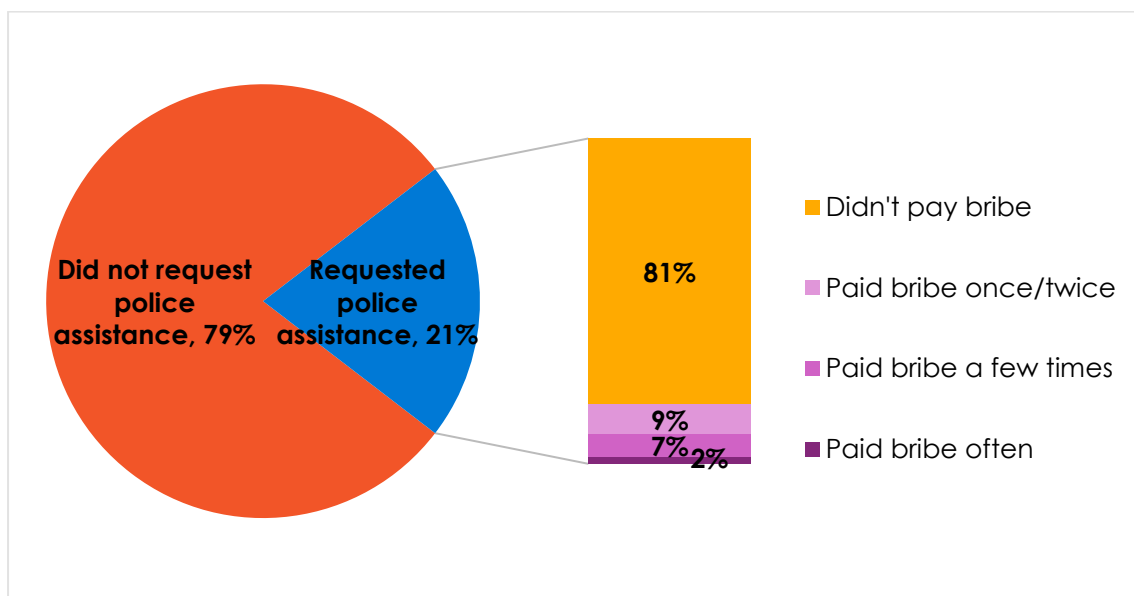
Among South Africans who encountered the police in other types of situations, one-quarter (25%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 3% who say this happened “often” during the previous year (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | South Africa | 2022



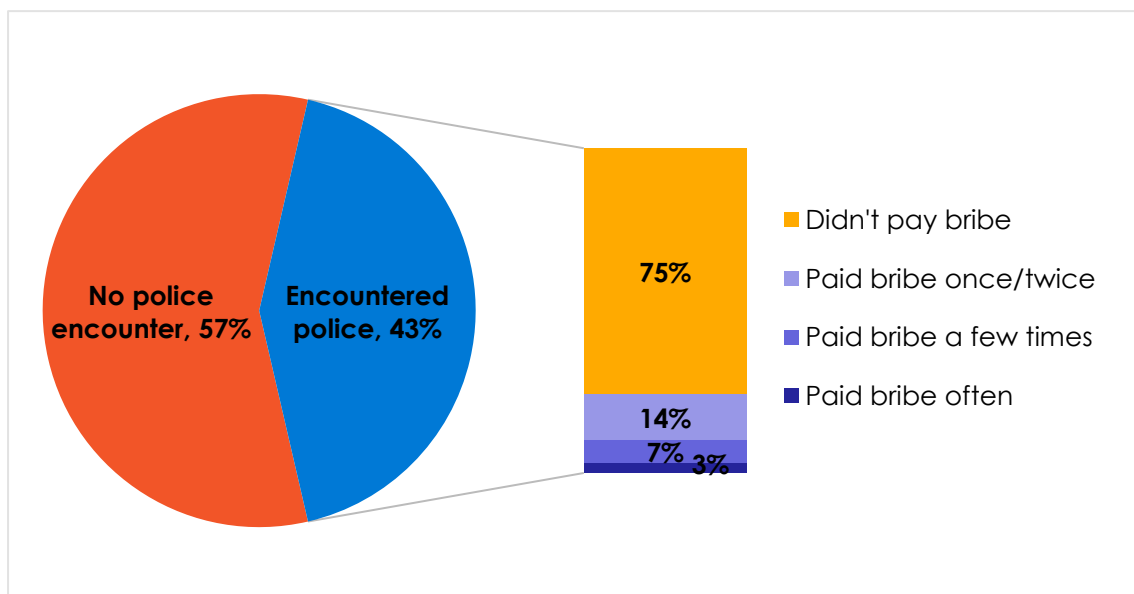
Respondents who requested police assistance during the previous year were asked: *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)*

Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | South Africa | 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?

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | South Africa | 2022

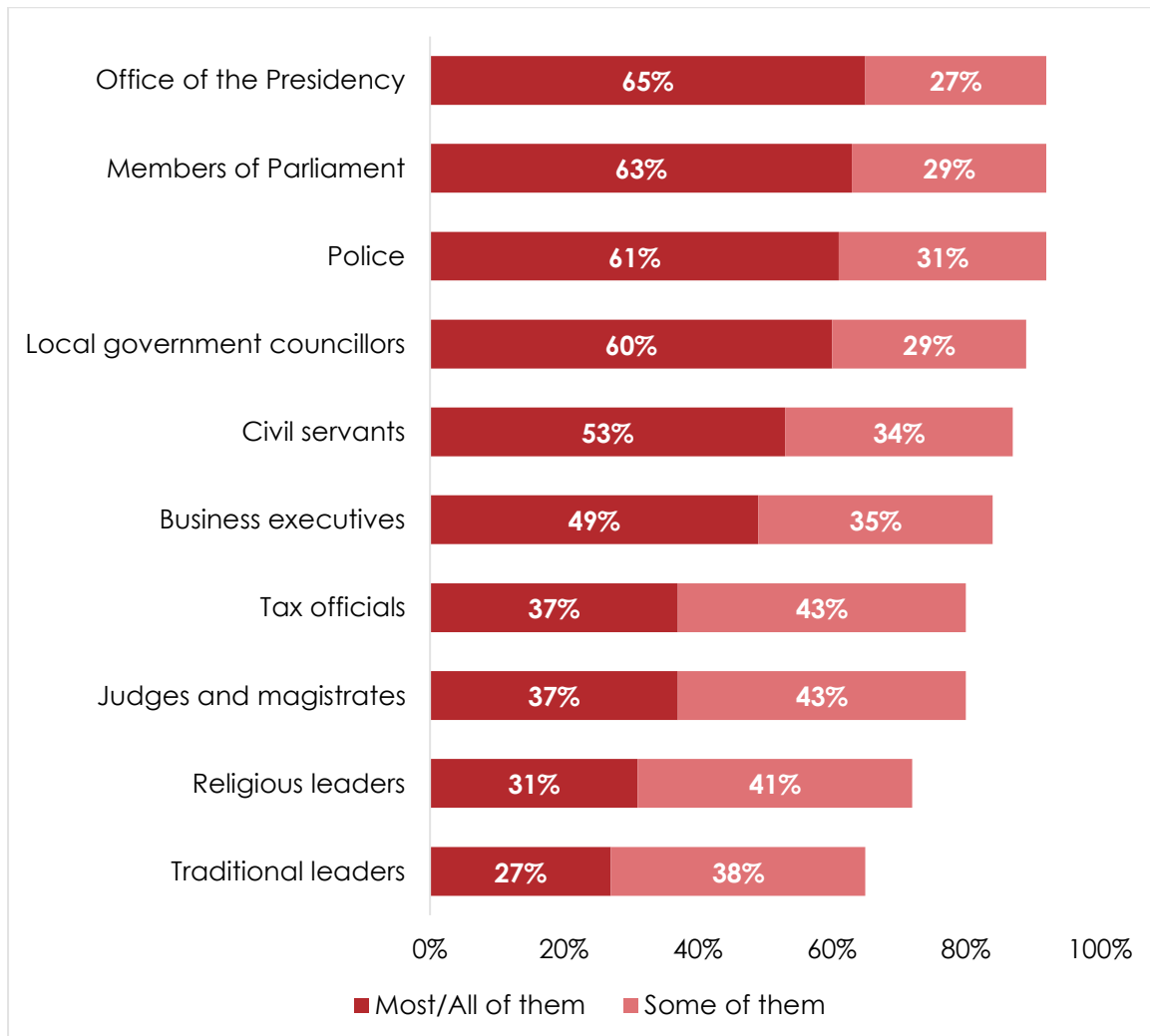


Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

Police corruption

About six in 10 citizens (61%) say that "most" or "all" police are corrupt, comparable to perceptions of widespread corruption in the Presidency (65%), Parliament (63%), and local government (60%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | South Africa | 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?

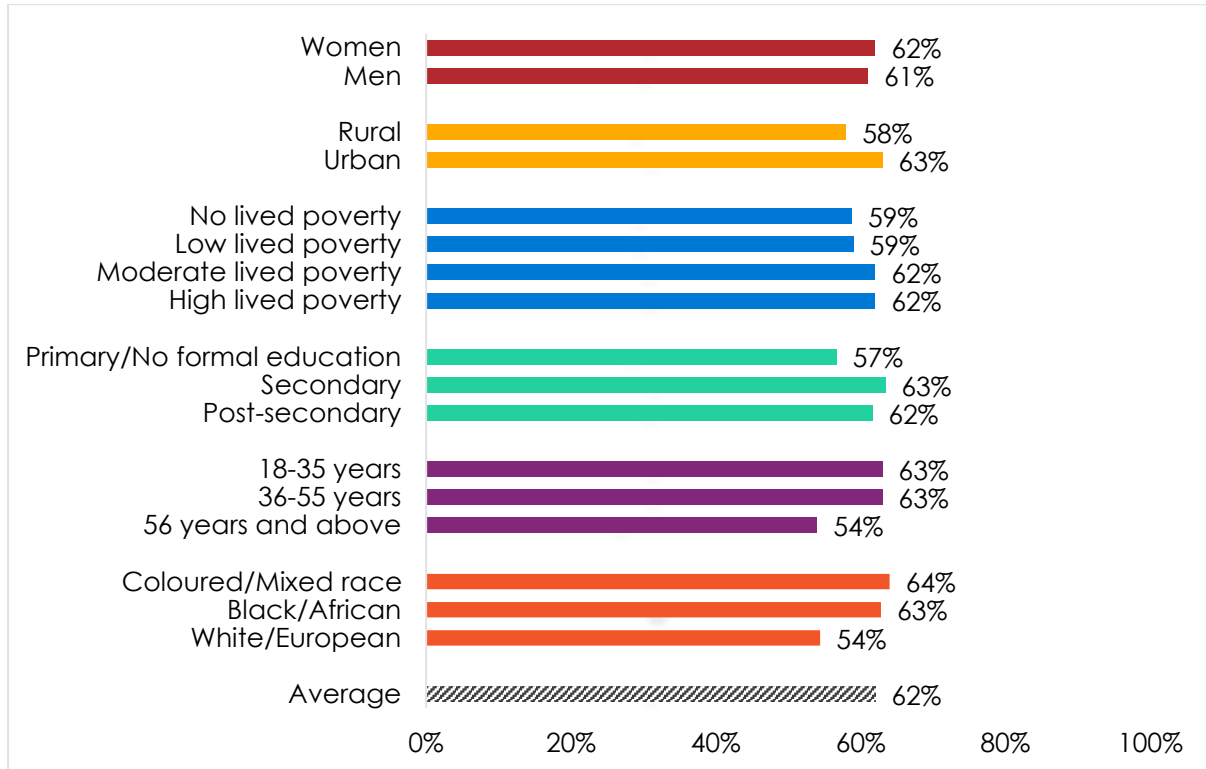
Perceptions that most or all police officers are corrupt are more common among urban than rural residents (63% vs. 58%), and among young and middle-aged respondents (both 63%) than among the elderly (54%) (Figure 10). Less educated citizens (57%) are less likely to perceive widespread police corruption than their more educated counterparts (62%-63%), as are White South Africans (54%) compared to Coloured (64%) and Black (63%) citizens.

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 (65% vs. 60%).

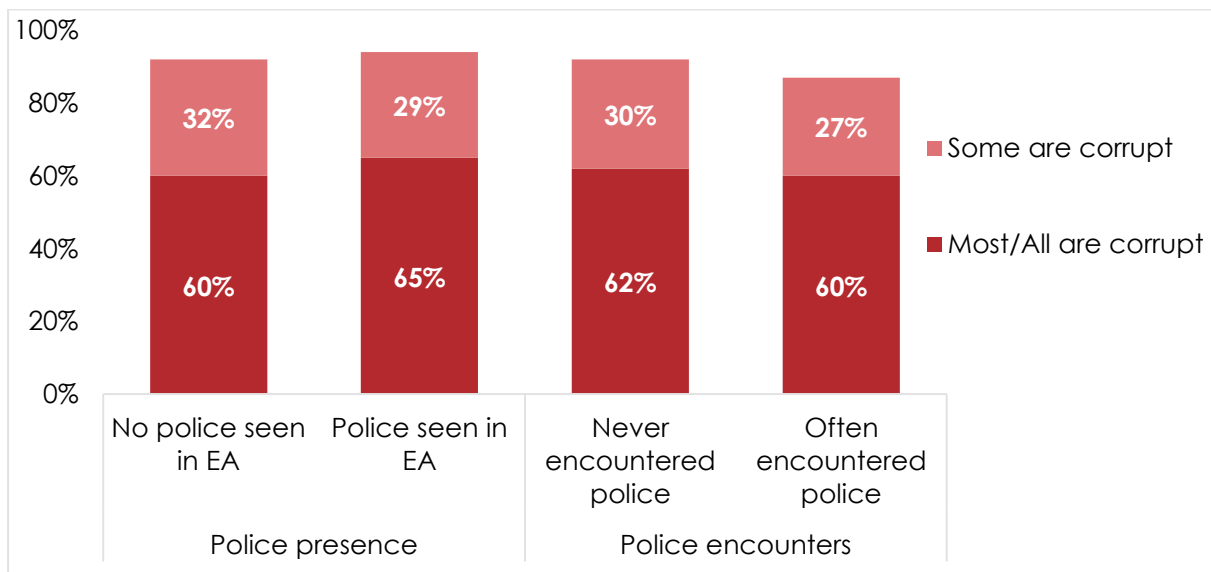
But perceptions that most/all police are corrupt differ little between citizens who "often" encountered the police in other (less voluntary) situations and those who had no encounters with the police (60% vs. 62%).

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



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

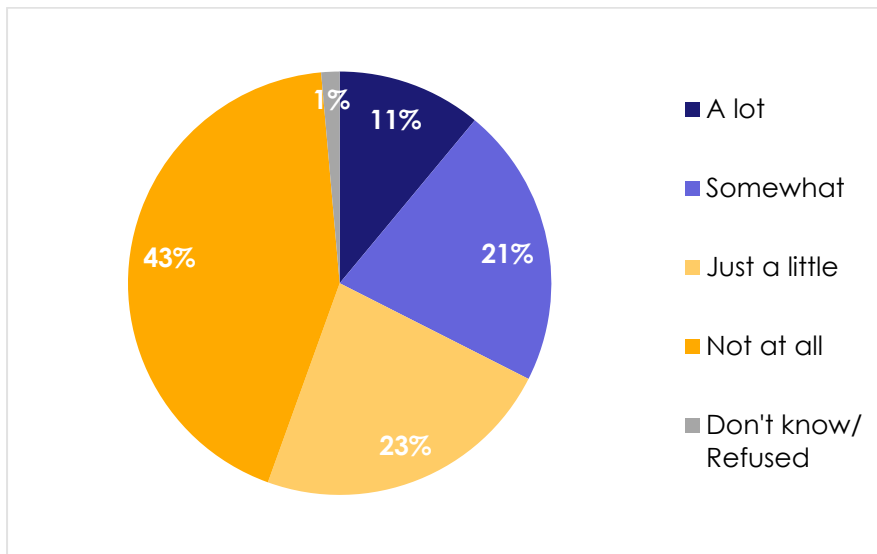
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police?

Trust in the police

Alongside high rates of perceived corruption, South Africa's police suffer from low levels of public trust. Only one-third (32%) of South Africans say they trust the police "somewhat" (21%) or "a lot" (11%) (Figure 12). More than four in 10 (43%) report no trust whatsoever.

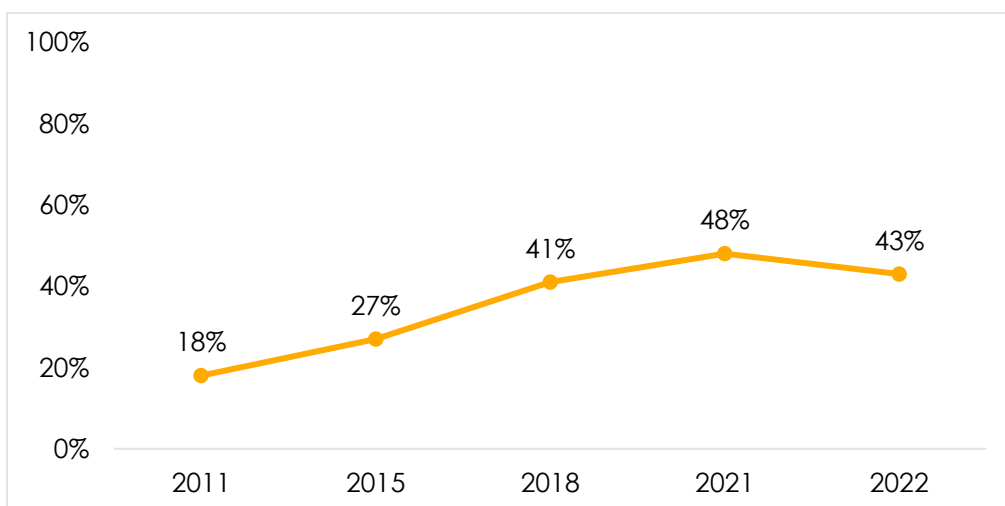
Over time, South Africans have expressed increasing distrust in the police. Between 2011 and 2021, the share of respondents who indicated that they don't trust the police "at all" climbed by 30 percentage points to 48% before declining by 5 points in 2022 (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Popular trust in the police | South Africa | 2022



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

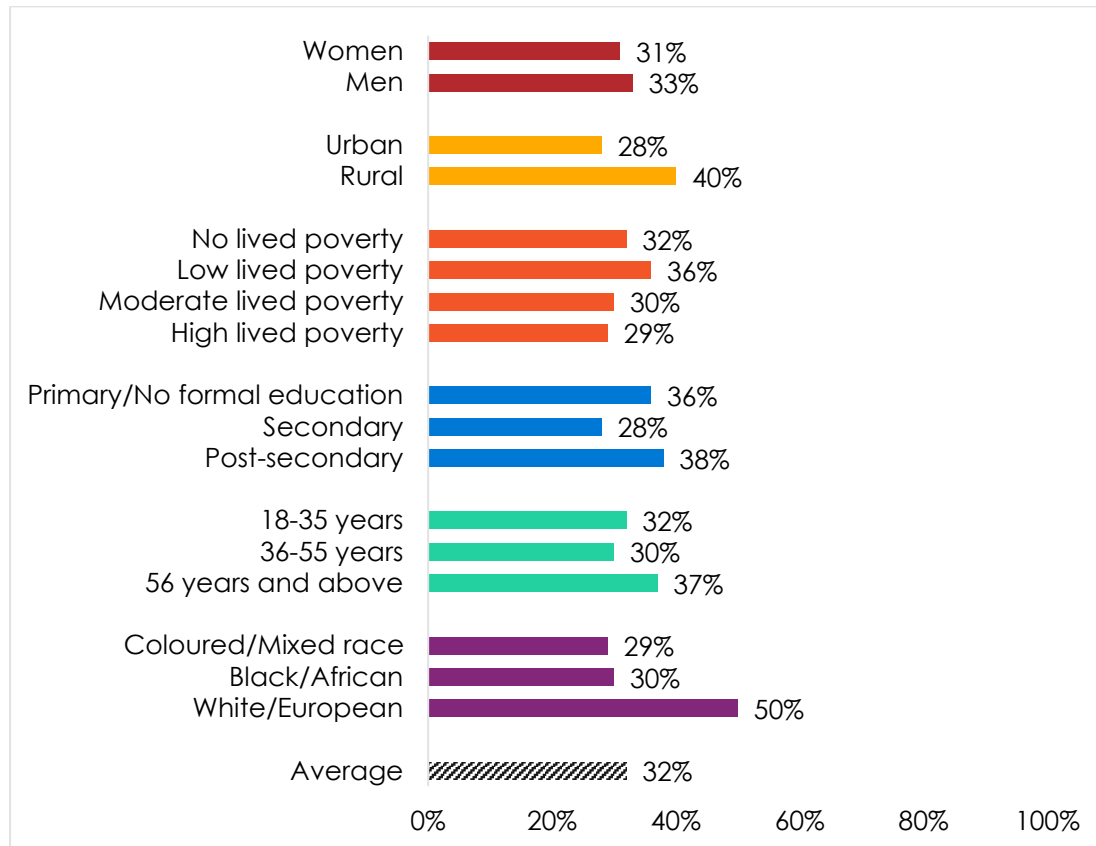
Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | South Africa | 2011-2022



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 (40%) and older respondents (37%) express greater trust in the police than their urban (28%) and younger (30%-32%) counterparts (Figure 14). Trust is far higher among White citizens (50%) than among Coloured (29%) and Black (30%) South Africans.

Figure 14: Trust the police | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat/a lot")

Police conduct

In addition to expressing significant levels of distrust in the police, solid majorities of South Africans say the police engage in a variety of improper practices at least "sometimes."

Three-quarters of citizens (76%) say the police engage in criminal activities at least "sometimes," including almost half (47%) who say this happens "often" or "always" (Figure 15).

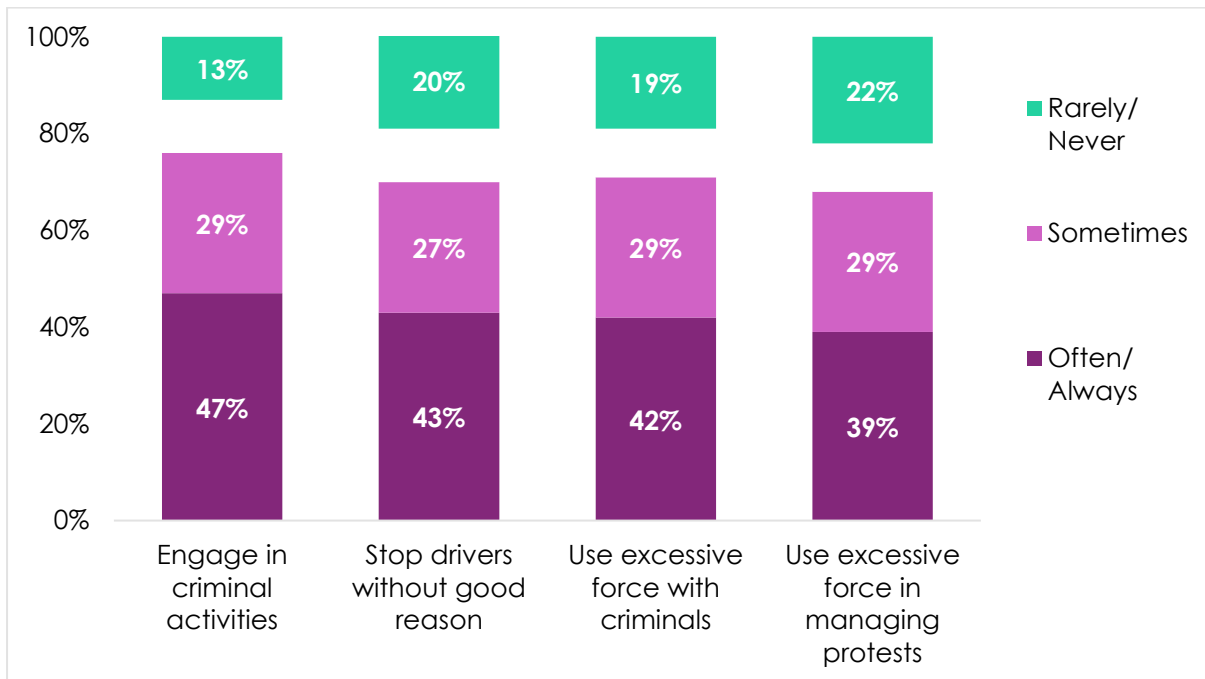
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About seven in 10 complain that the police occasionally or frequently stop drivers without good reason (70%), use excessive force in dealing with criminals (71%), and use excessive force in managing public protests or demonstrations (68%).

Only about one-quarter (24%) of South Africans believe the police "often" (16%) or "always" (8%) operate in a professional

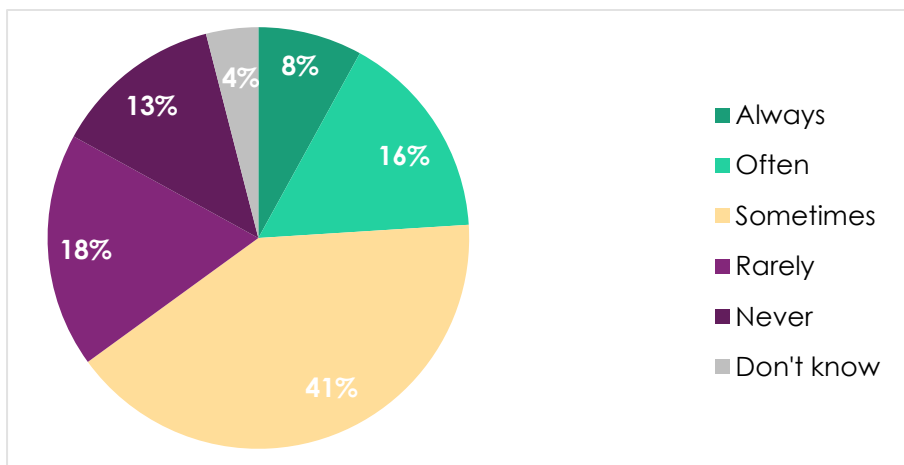
manner and respect all citizens' rights. In contrast, three in 10 (31%) believe that such conduct is rare or non-existent (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Improper police practices | South Africa | 2022



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

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

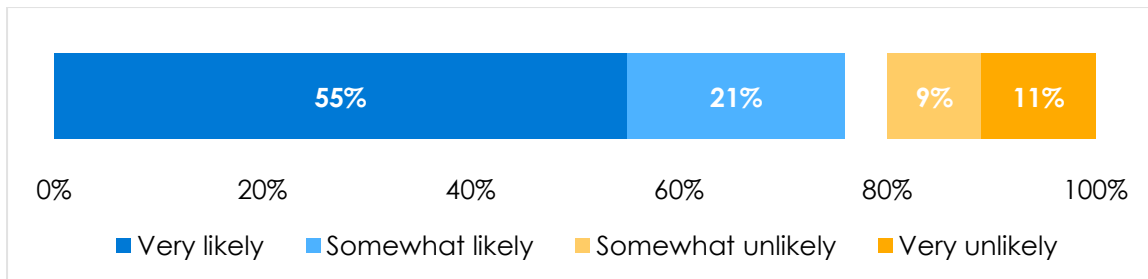


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in South Africa operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

One area in which most South Africans believe their police will act responsibly is gender-based violence (GBV). More than half (55%) of respondents say the police are “very likely” to take reported cases of GBV seriously, while another 21% consider this “somewhat likely.” One-fifth (20%) deem it unlikely that the police will take GBV cases seriously (Figure 17).

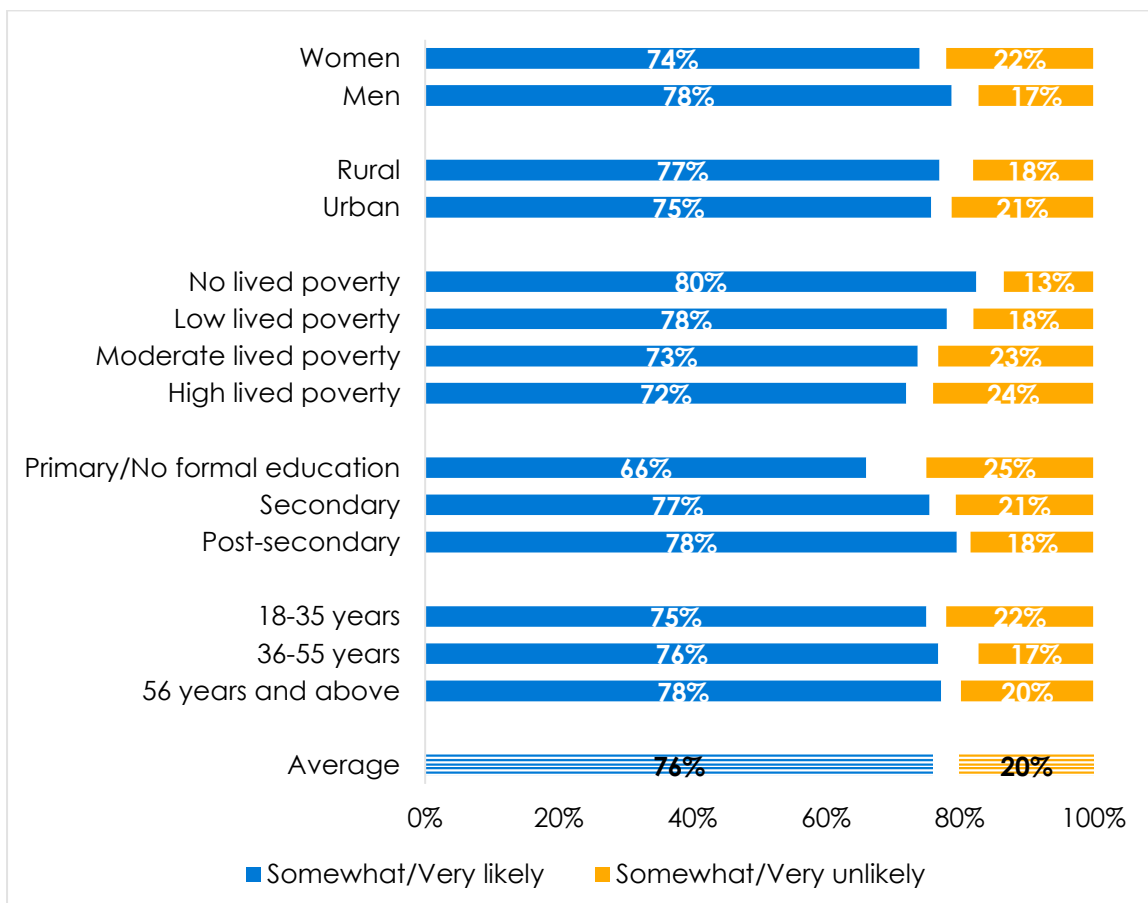
Less educated respondents are least likely to express confidence in the police response to reports of GBV (66% of those with primary education or less) (Figure 18). Lower-than-average rates are also found among poor citizens (72%-73% of those experiencing high or moderate lived poverty) and women (74%).

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



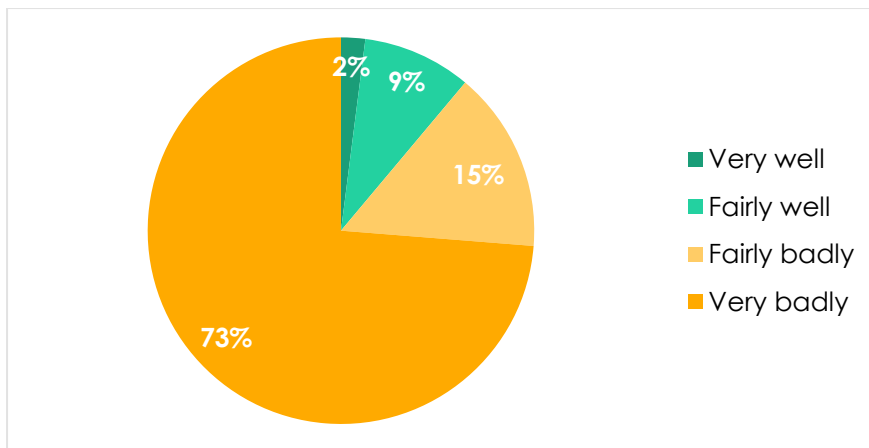
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

In a striking display of disapproval, an overwhelming majority (88%) of South Africans assess their government's performance on crime reduction as poor, including 73% who describe it as "very bad" (Figure 19).

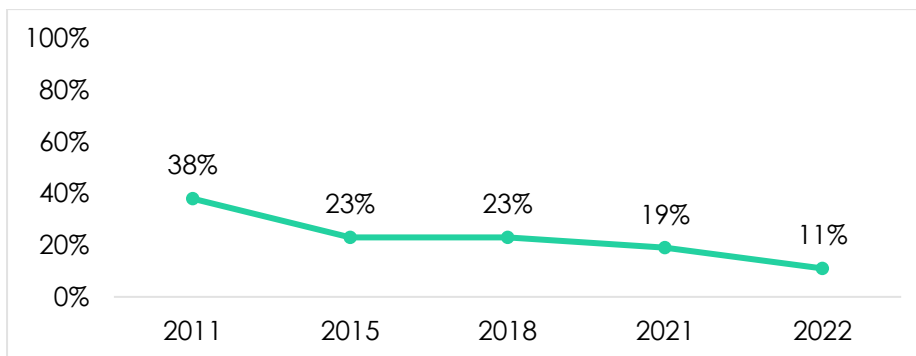
Over the past decade, the government's approval rating on this measure has plummeted by 27 percentage points, from 38% in 2011 to a meagre 11% (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | South Africa | 2022



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

Figure 20: Government performing well on reducing crime | South Africa | 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

Afrobarometer's survey findings indicate widespread concern about the state of the South African Police Service. Majorities of citizens express little or no trust in the police, think most officers are corrupt, and see them as failing to conduct themselves fairly and professionally.

Such negative perceptions are sure to undermine efforts to prevent and reduce crime. Against a backdrop of elevated levels of violent crime, it is unsurprising that the citizen scorecard of the government's performance on crime continues to be so negative.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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