

Nigeriens express trust in police, but highlight corruption and excessive force as failings

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 930 | Richard Kweitsu

Summary

Police officers are perhaps the most visible representatives of state authority at the local level, with the fundamental responsibility of safeguarding lives and property. In times of crisis or uncertainty, citizens often turn first to police stations and officers for assistance. Law enforcement personnel are expected to exemplify the highest standards of professionalism in all public interactions, whether aiding vulnerable individuals or dealing with suspected offenders.

However, Niger's police force has struggled to meet these expectations, facing widespread criticism for its conduct. Allegations of misconduct are varied and serious, ranging from the disproportionate use of force against protesters and suspected criminals to endemic corruption, all compounded by a perceived lack of accountability within the force (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).

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 Niger, survey findings offer mixed perceptions of the police. While a growing number of citizens report feeling unsafe and fearing crime, a majority approve of the government's performance on reducing crime.

Among respondents who interacted with the police during the previous year, a majority found it easy to obtain assistance, but many say they had to pay bribes.

While a majority of Nigeriens say they trust the police at least "somewhat," many also say that officers use excessive force and stop drivers without good reason. Overall, a slim majority say the police usually act professionally and respect citizens' rights.

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 10 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Niger, led by Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Nigeriens in June 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 Niger in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- More than four in 10 Nigeriens (43%) say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, while 32% say they feared crime in their home. Both indicators have worsened sharply over the past decade.
 - Poor citizens are far more likely to be affected by such insecurity than their better-off counterparts.
- About one in 12 citizens (8%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Four times as many (31%) say they 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, 60% say it was easy to get the assistance they needed. But 39% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, about half (49%) say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems.
- An overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents say at least “some” police officers are corrupt, including 26% who say that “most” or “all” of them are involved in graft.
- More than three-fourths (77%) of Nigeriens say they trust the police “somewhat” (17%) or “a lot” (60%).
- Majorities say that the police “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” use excessive force when dealing with suspected criminals (72%) and protesters (65%) and that they at least “sometimes” stop drivers without good reason (55%).
- Even so, more than half (55%) of Nigeriens say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights.
 - More than eight in 10 (82%) consider it likely that the police will take reports of gender-based violence seriously.
- A majority (58%) of respondents think the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of reducing crime.

Sense of security

The most basic role of the police is to safeguard life and property. Do Nigeriens feel protected?

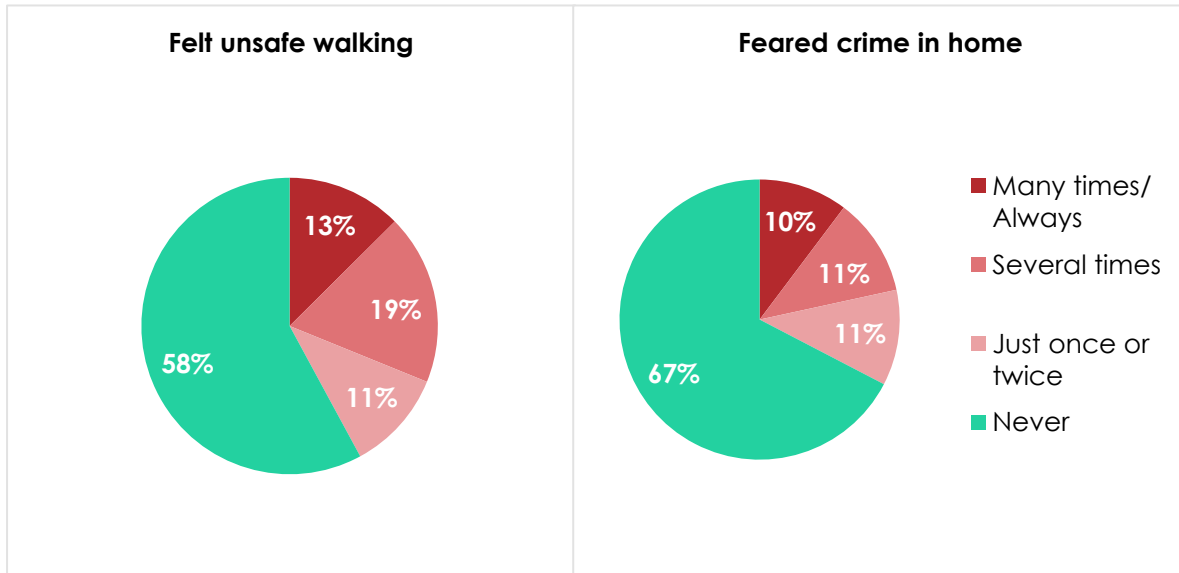
Survey responses indicate a significant a sense of personal insecurity. More than four in 10 Nigeriens (43%) say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, including 32% who report feeling unsafe “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 1).¹

Similarly, 32% of citizens say they feared crime in their home, including 22% who say this happened “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. 13% “many times/always” and 19% “several times” sum to 31%).

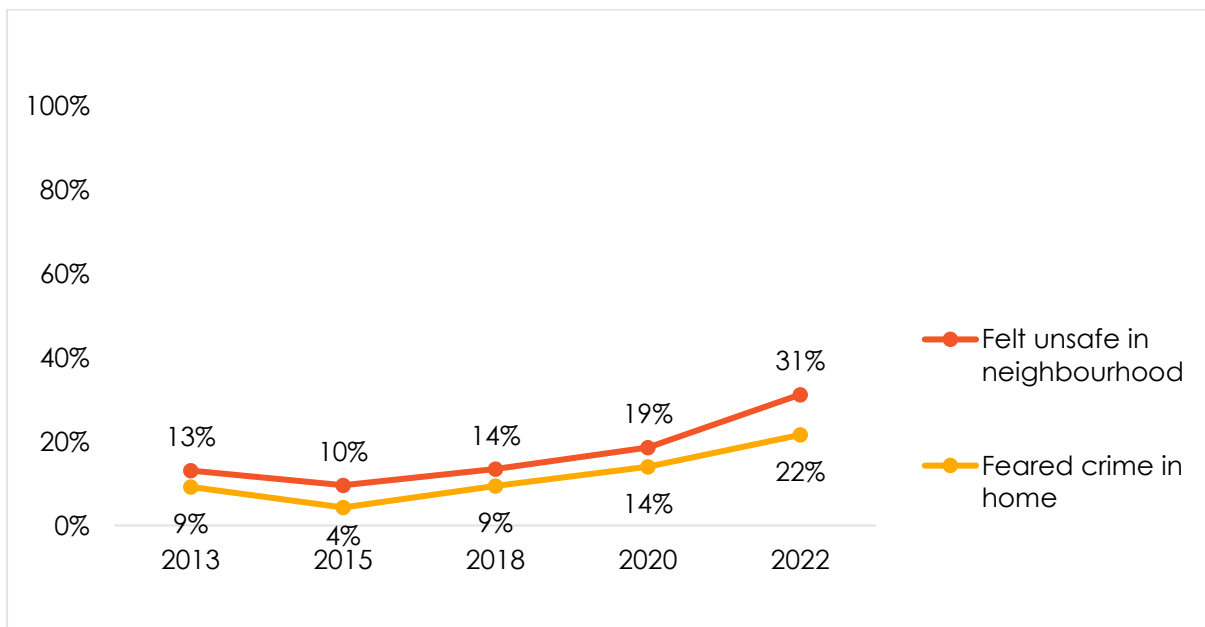
The share of Nigeriens who report feeling unsafe and fearing crime at least “several times” has increased significantly over the past decade, more than doubling between Afrobarometer’s 2013 and 2022 surveys (Figure 2).

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

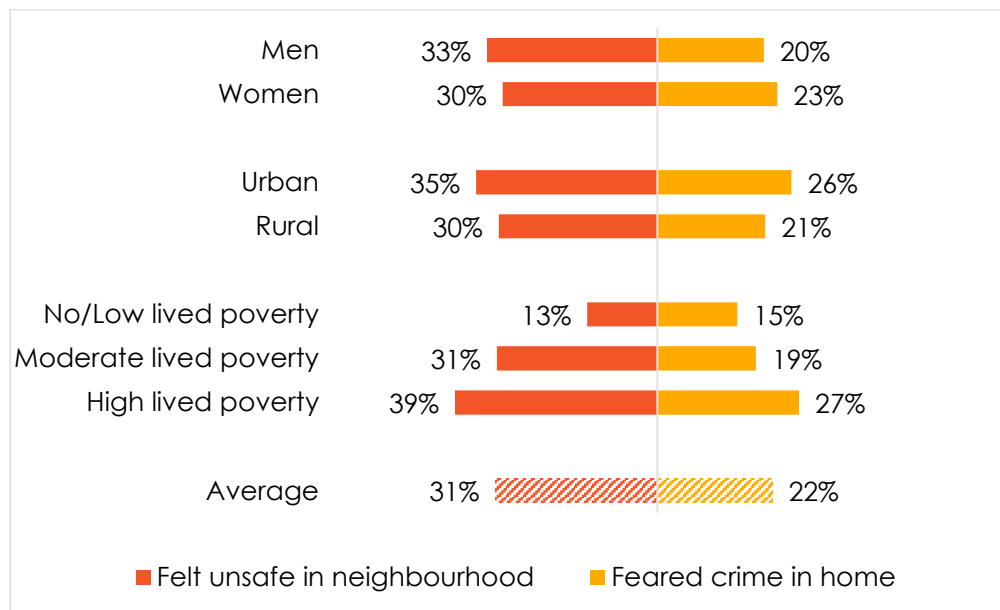
Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’ | Niger | 2013-2022



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”)

These experiences are somewhat more common (by 5 percentage points on both indicators) in cities than in rural areas (Figure 3). They increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty²: The poorest citizens are three times as likely to feel unsafe, and about twice as likely to fear crime in their home, as the best-off citizens.

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

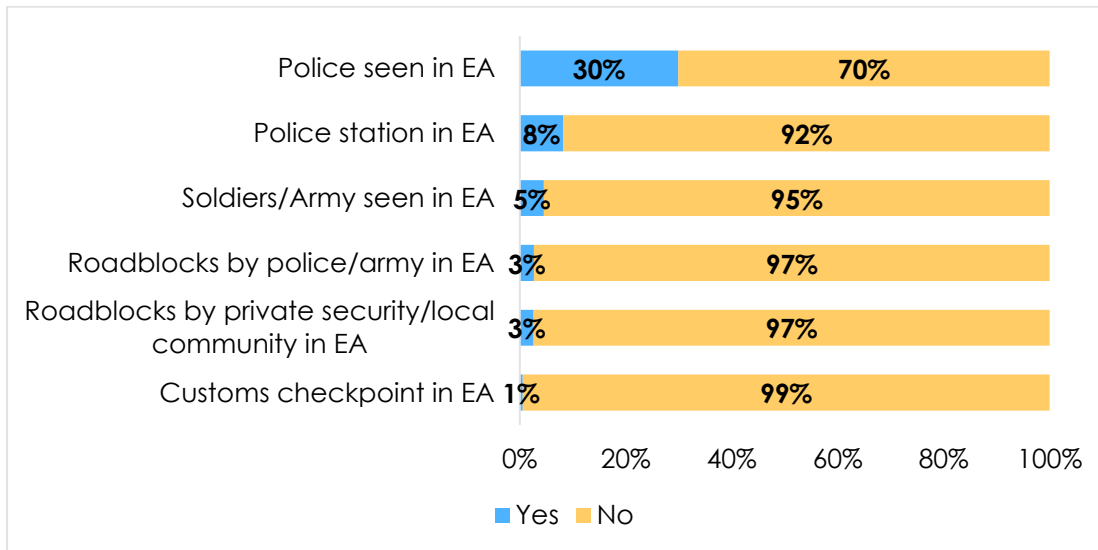
One factor that might affect people's sense of security is the presence of security forces. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in the area. 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 Niger, Afrobarometer field teams saw police officers or police vehicles in 30% of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They found police stations in or within easy walking distance of 8% of EAs. Other signs of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or other military (5%), roadblocks by the police or army (3%), roadblocks by private security or the local community (3%), and customs checkpoints (1%).

The share of citizens who report feeling unsafe at least once is actually larger in areas with a nearby police station than in zones without a police station (51% vs. 38%). The same is true, to a lesser extent, for fear of crime (36% vs. 31%).

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 | Niger | 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?

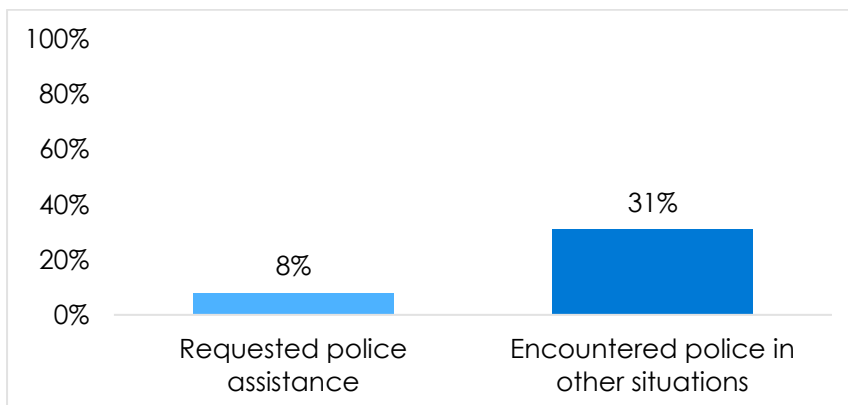
Encounters with the police

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

Only 8% of respondents say they requested police assistance during the previous year. About four times as many (31%) report encountering the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 5).

One in 20 citizens (5%) report police contact of both types, (i.e. requesting police assistance and in other, less voluntary, encounters), while 64% say they did not interact with the police at all during the past year.

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Niger | 2022

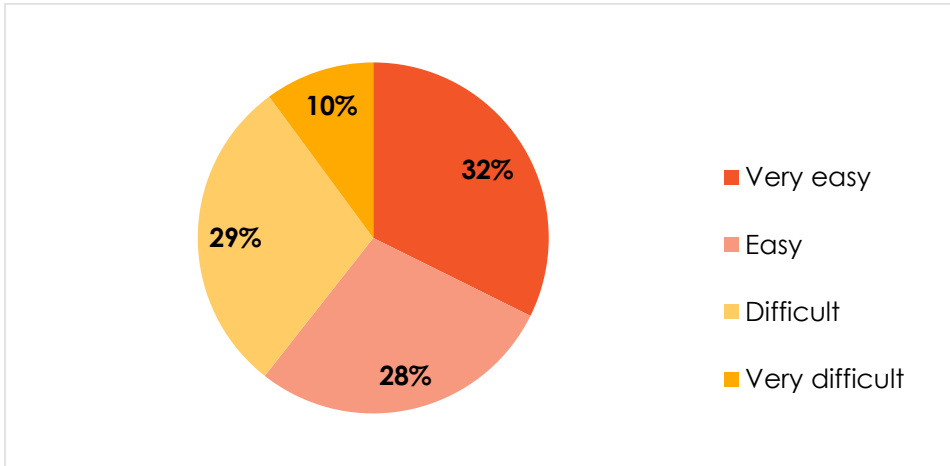


Respondents were asked:

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, six in 10 (60%) say it was “easy” or “very easy” to get the assistance they needed, but almost four in 10 (39%) describe it as difficult (Figure 6).

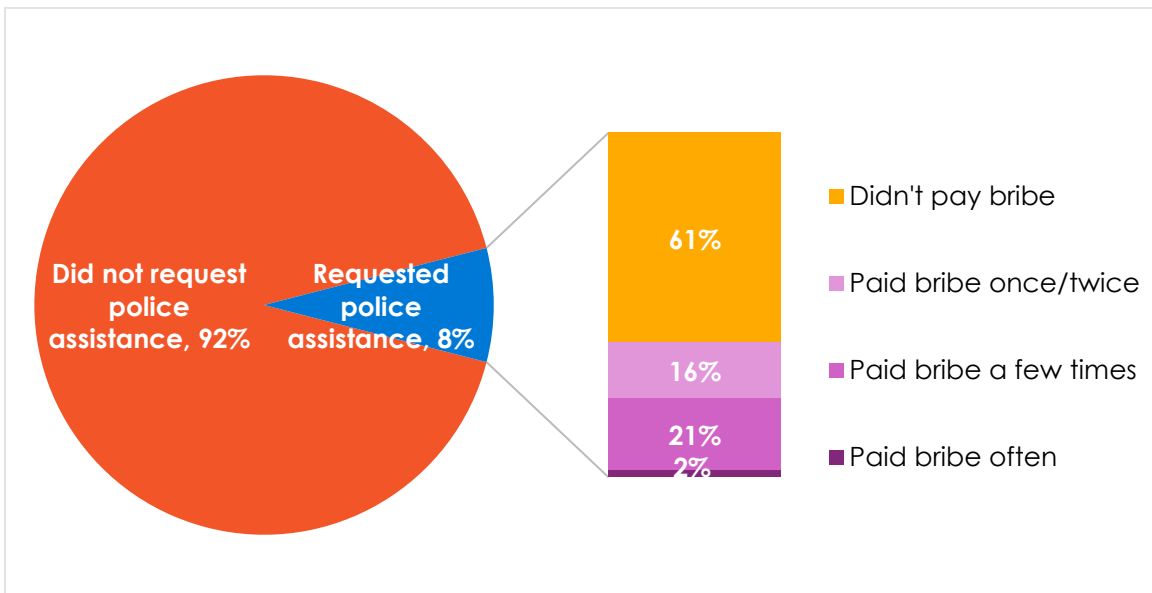
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Niger | 2022



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 one-third (39%) 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 (Figure 7).

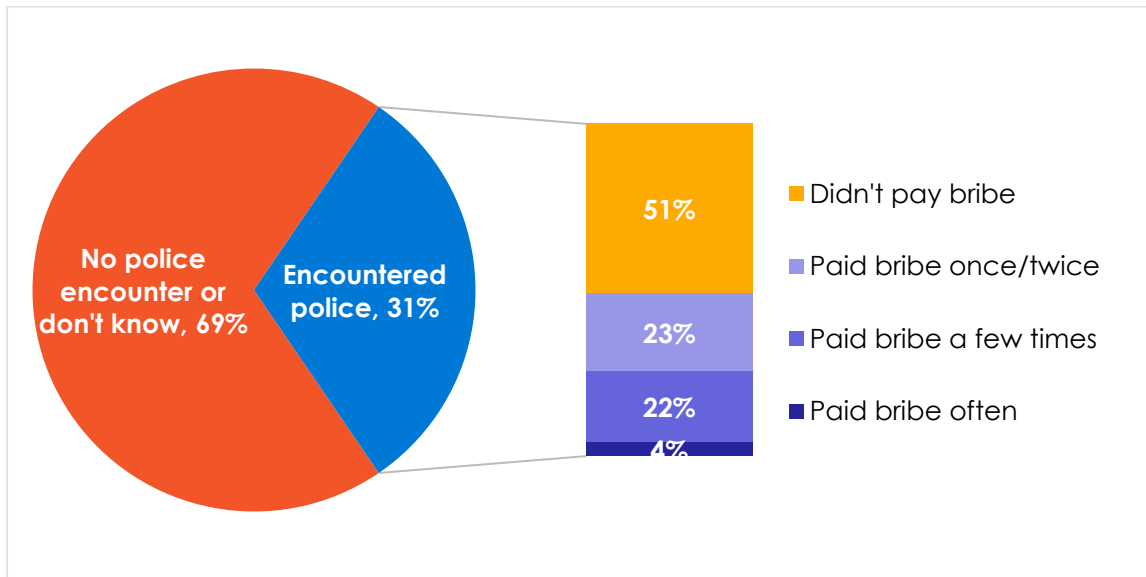
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Niger | 2022



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? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)

Similarly, among Nigeriens who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, about half (49%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems, including 26% who say this happened at least “a few times” during the previous year (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Niger | 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 avoid a problem during one of these encounters? (Respondents who did not encounter the police are excluded.)*

To summarise the experience among all Nigerien adults during the past year, about one in six (16%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

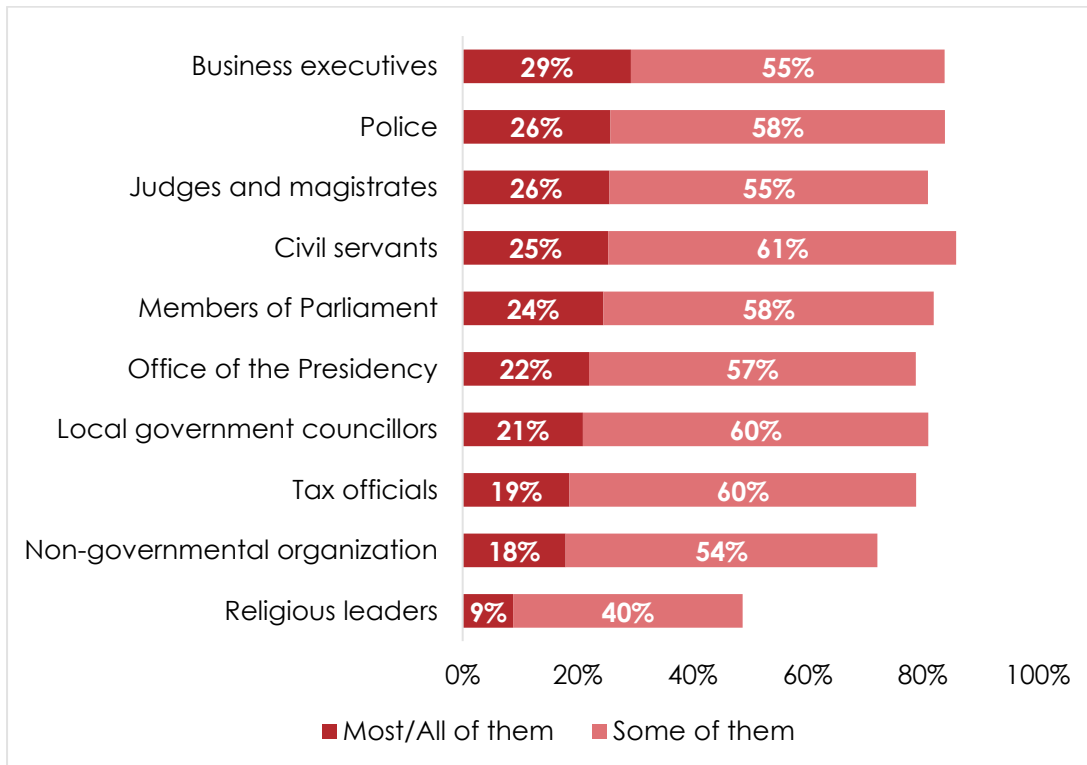
Considering that almost half of the respondents who encountered the police paid a bribe, it is perhaps not surprising that more than eight in 10 Nigeriens (84%) believe that at least “some” police officials are corrupt. That includes 26% who say that “most” or “all” police are involved in corruption, exceeded only by business executives (29%) (Figure 9).

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are somewhat more common among urban than rural residents (31% vs. 24%) (Figure 10). Economically better-off citizens (21%) are less likely to see the police that way than those experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty (26%-27%).

Residents in areas where Afrobarometer teams saw police officers or police vehicles are somewhat more likely to say that most/all police are corrupt than those in areas where no police presence was observed (Figure 11).

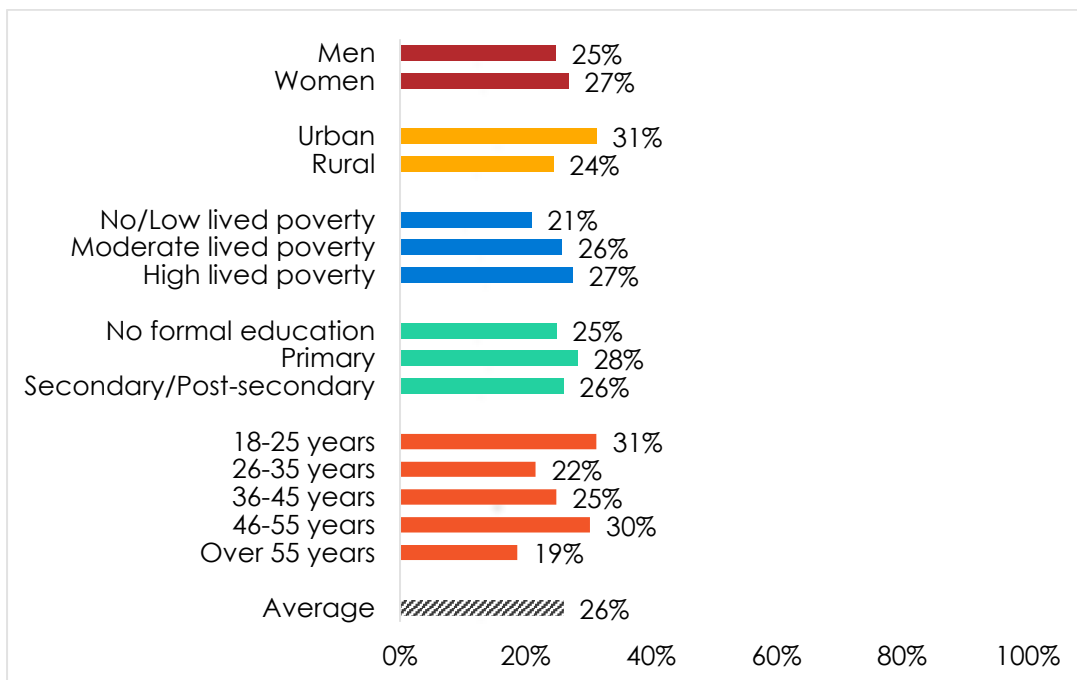
And perceptions of widespread police corruption are higher among respondents who “often” encountered the police than among those who had no police encounters (28% vs. 23%).

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



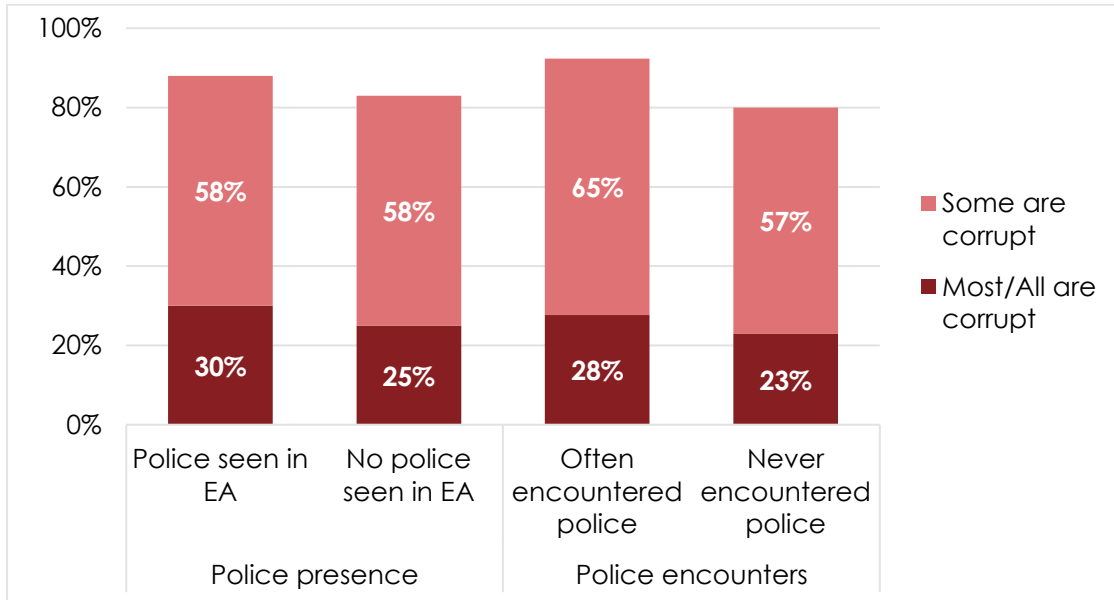
Respondents were asked: How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

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



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

Respondents were asked:

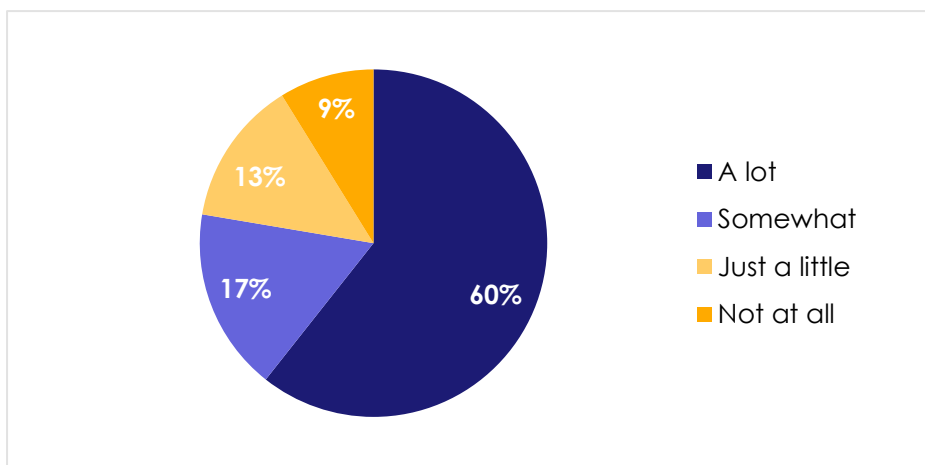
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

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

Despite widespread perceptions of police corruption, Niger's law enforcement officers enjoy relatively high levels of public trust. More than three-fourths (77%) of Nigeriens say they trust the police at least "somewhat," including 60% who express "a lot" of trust (Figure 12). About two in 10 respondents (22%) say they trust the police "just a little" or "not at all."

Figure 12: Trust in the police | Niger | 2022

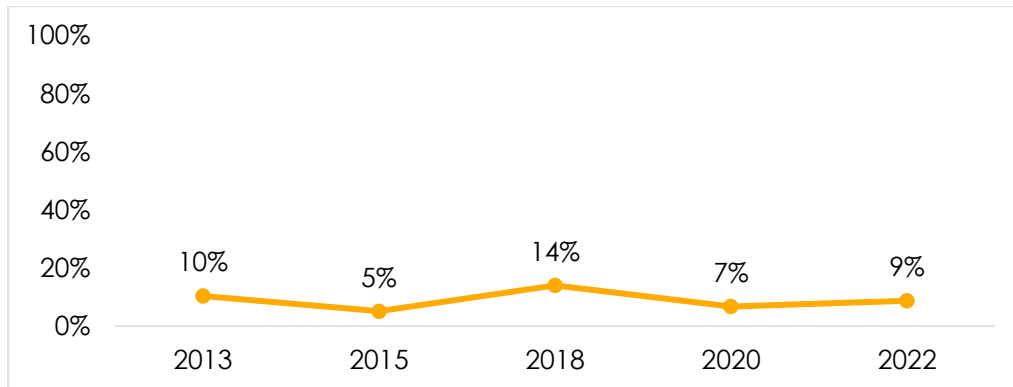


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the police, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Over time, the share of Nigeriens who say they do not trust the police “at all” has fluctuated between 5% and 14% (Figure 13).

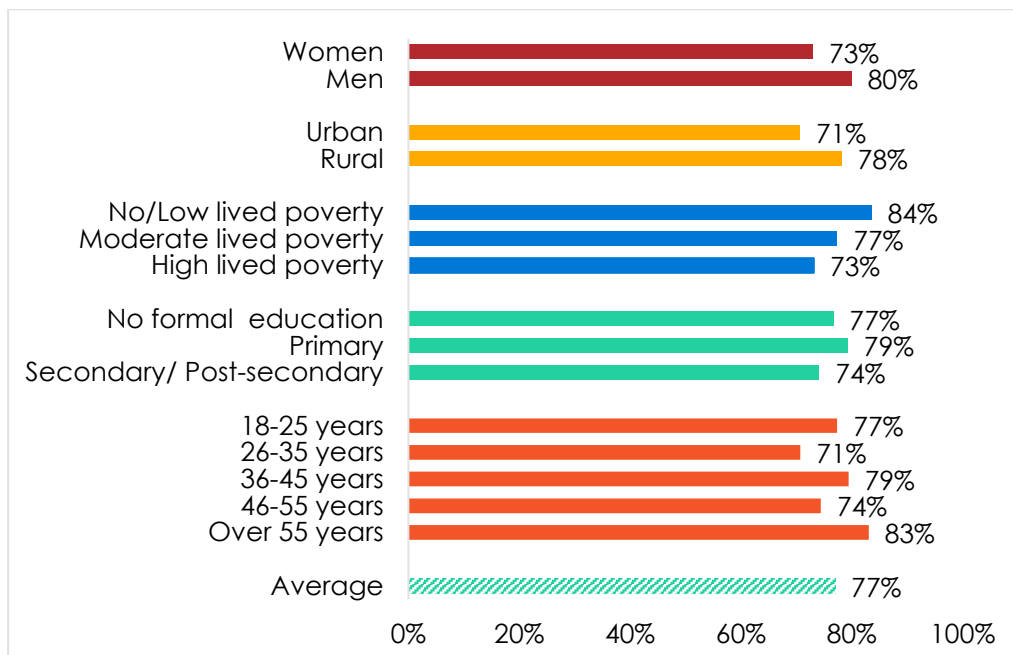
Trust in the police is more widespread among men than women (80% vs. 73%) and in rural areas than in cities (78% vs. 71%) (Figure 14). Trust increases with respondents’ economic status, ranging from 73% among the poorest to 84% among the best-off citizens.

Figure 13: Don’t trust the police ‘at all’ | Niger | 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”)

Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Niger | 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

Despite fairly high levels of trust in the police, many Nigeriens say officers engage in unprofessional and abusive activities (Figure 15).

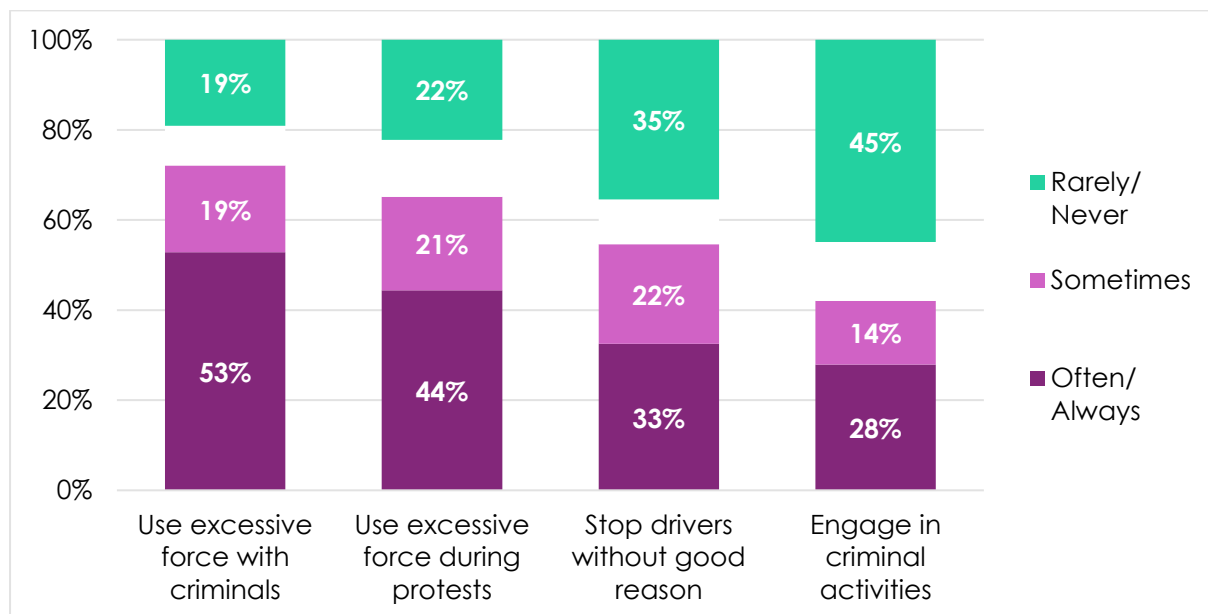
More than half (53%) of respondents say the police “often” or “always” use excessive force when dealing with criminal suspects, in addition to 19% who say they “sometimes” do so.

Two-thirds (65%) also say they at least “sometimes” use excessive force with protesters, including 44% who say this happens “often” or “always.”

More than half (55%) complain that the police at least “sometimes” stop drivers without good reason. And while LASDEL has no evidence that the police engage in criminal activities, 42% of respondents say they do so at least “sometimes.”

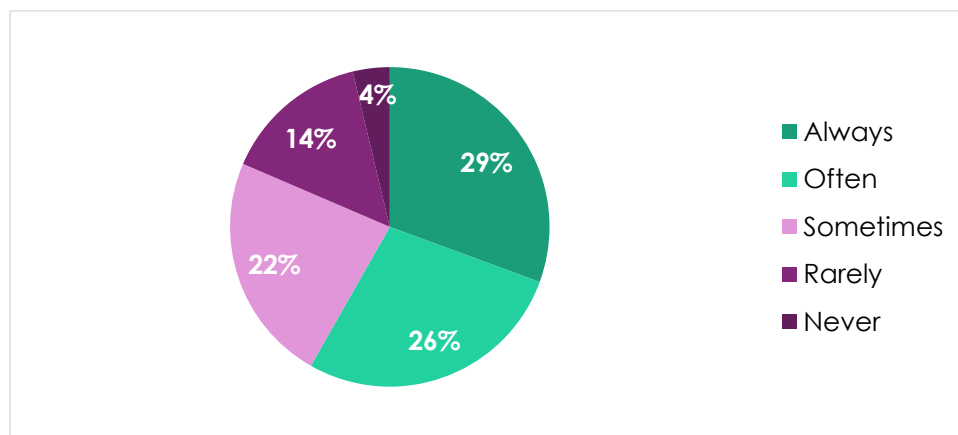
Despite these critical observations, more than half (55%) of Nigeriens say the police “often” or “always” operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights, though four in 10 say this is only “sometimes” (22%), “rarely” (14%), or “never” (4%) the case (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Improper police practices | Niger | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Niger:
 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 16: Do the police act professionally and respect citizens’ rights? | Niger | 2022

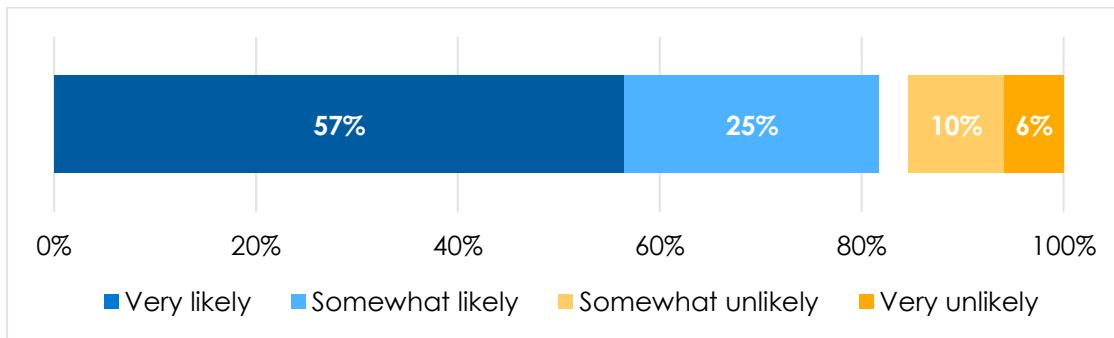


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Niger operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

Most Nigeriens give their police passing marks on their treatment of cases of gender-based violence (GBV): More than eight in 10 (82%) consider it likely that the police will take a woman's report of GBV seriously, including 58% who see this as "very likely" (Figure 17).

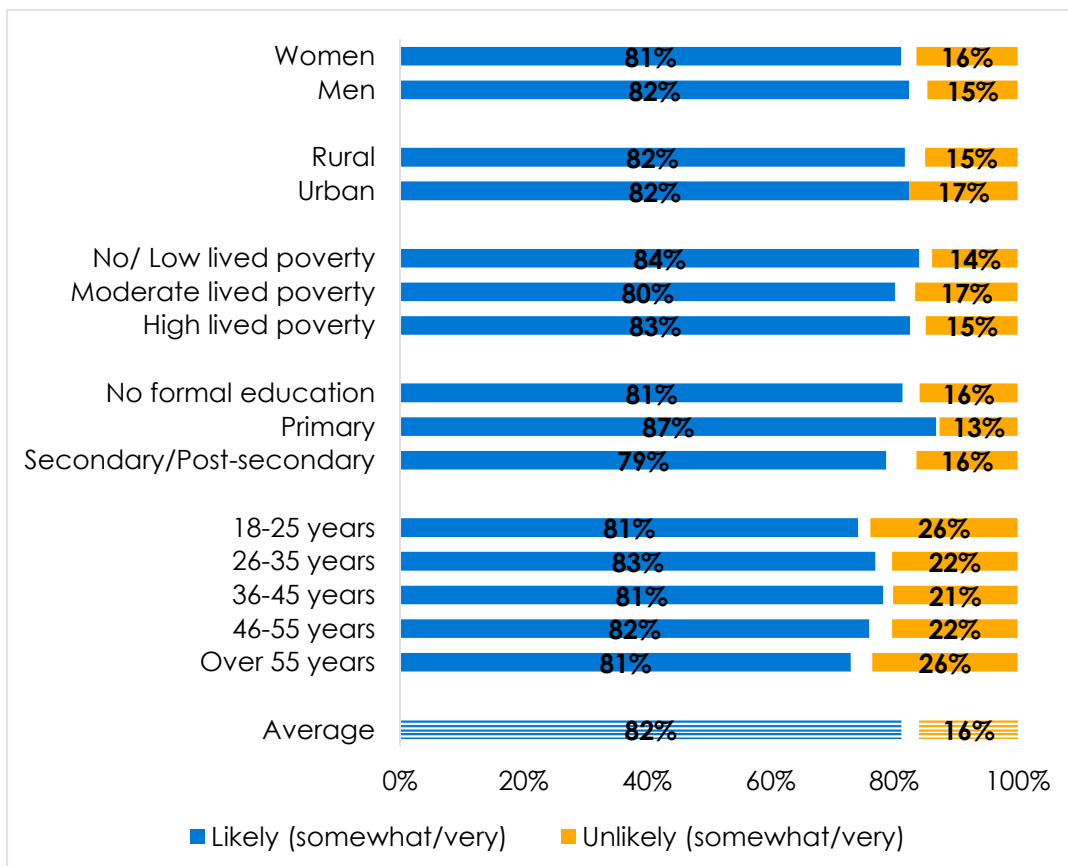
This assessment is fairly consistent across key demographic groups (Figure 18).

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



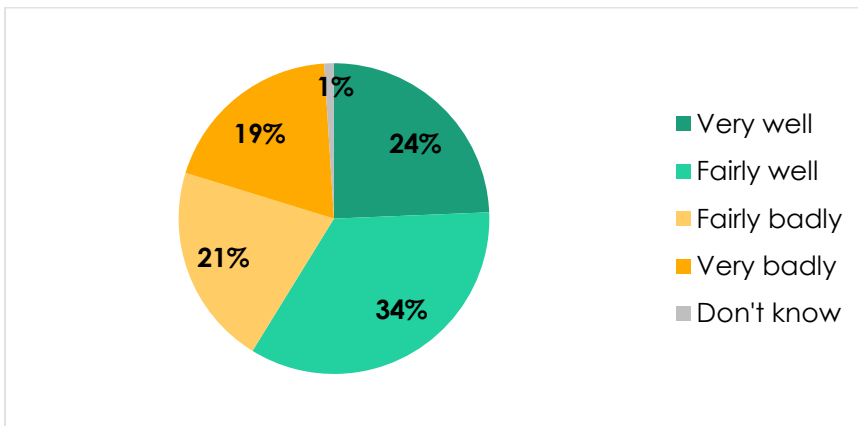
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

Overall, a majority (58%) of Nigeriens say the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of reducing crime, while 40% are critical of the government’s performance on this issue (Figure 19).

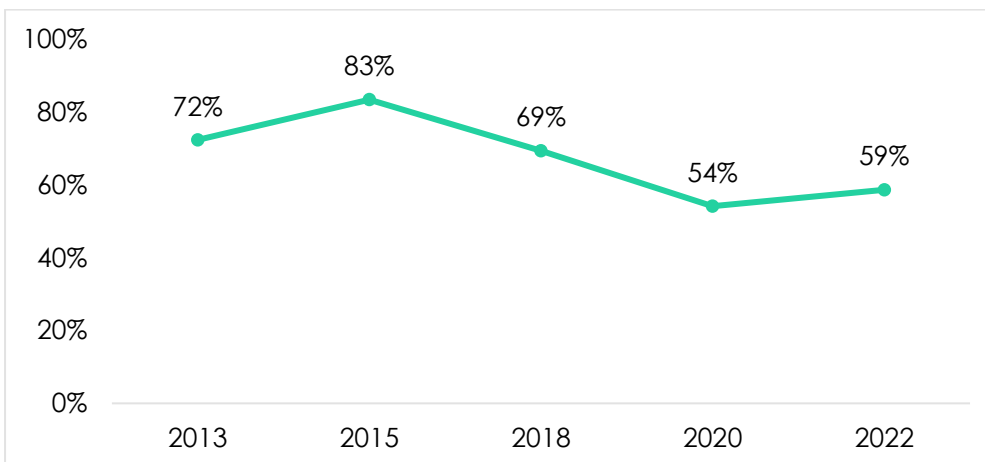
That reflects a 5-percentage-point increase compared to 2021 but is down by 24 points since 2016 (83%) (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Niger | 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 crime reduction | Niger | 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 paint a mixed public image of Niger's police, highlighted by majority trust and, to a lesser extent, perceptions of professionalism and effectiveness in reducing crime. At the same time, widespread experiences and perceptions of brutality and corruption point to persistent challenges that call for determined attention.

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