

Ethiopians trust the police, but see them falling short of professionalism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 936 | Anne Okello and Mulu Teka

Summary

In 2012, the Ethiopian government issued a regulation that defines policing procedures, mandating law enforcement to act professionally, uphold international human-rights standards, and limit the use of force (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2012). The 2020 Ethiopian Police Doctrine aims to demilitarise, depoliticise, democratise, and decentralise the force by promoting community policing and fostering accountability (Interpeace, 2024). In 2022, UNESCO (2022) partnered with the Ethiopian Police University to provide specialised training for police officials to enhance their role in protecting freedom of expression and ensuring the safety of journalists.

Despite these efforts, reports of police misconduct in Ethiopia persist, raising concerns about a lack of professionalism and the disproportionate use of force. In 2019, a widely circulated video showing two police officers assaulting a handcuffed man and an elderly woman sparked public outrage (Woubshet, 2020). In 2023, the police were accused of using excessive force against protesters during demonstrations against the demolition of homes and businesses in Oromia and against opposition leaders and their supporters who were calling for protests against the interim administration in Tigray (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

A 2023 study found that Addis Ababa residents express low levels of trust in local police due to ineffective crime reduction and procedural unfairness (Melkamu & Teshome, 2023), confirming a 2021 Ministry of Peace and Interpeace (2022) survey that revealed that trust had long been the missing link in the police service in Addis Ababa.

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 Ethiopia, survey findings offer mixed perceptions of the police. While a majority of citizens report feeling safe in their neighbourhoods and homes, few approve of the government's performance in reducing crime.

Among citizens who interacted with the police during the previous year, half found it easy to obtain assistance, but more than one-third say they had to pay bribes.

While a majority of Ethiopians express trust in the police, many say the police use excessive force in dealing with criminal suspects and managing public demonstrations. Overall, only one-third of citizens say the police usually operate professionally and respect all 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 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 Ethiopia, led by ABCON – Research and Consulting, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ethiopians in May-June 2023. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ethiopia in 2013 and 2020.

Key findings

- Almost half (46%) of Ethiopians say they felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year. One-third (33%) said they feared crime in their home.
 - Experiences of insecurity are considerably more common among poor citizens.
- One in nine citizens (11%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. Four times 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, half (50%) say it was easy to get assistance, but 35% say they had to pay a bribe.
 - Among those who encountered the police in other situations, 17% report paying a bribe to avoid problems.
- About one-third (32%) of citizens say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt.
- A majority (57%) of Ethiopians say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- Significant proportions say the police “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” use excessive force in dealing with suspected criminals (50%) and in managing protests (43%).
- Only one-third (34%) of citizens say the police “often” or “always” operate professionally and respect all citizens’ rights.
- A majority (58%) of Ethiopians are critical of the government’s performance on reducing crime.

Sense of security

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

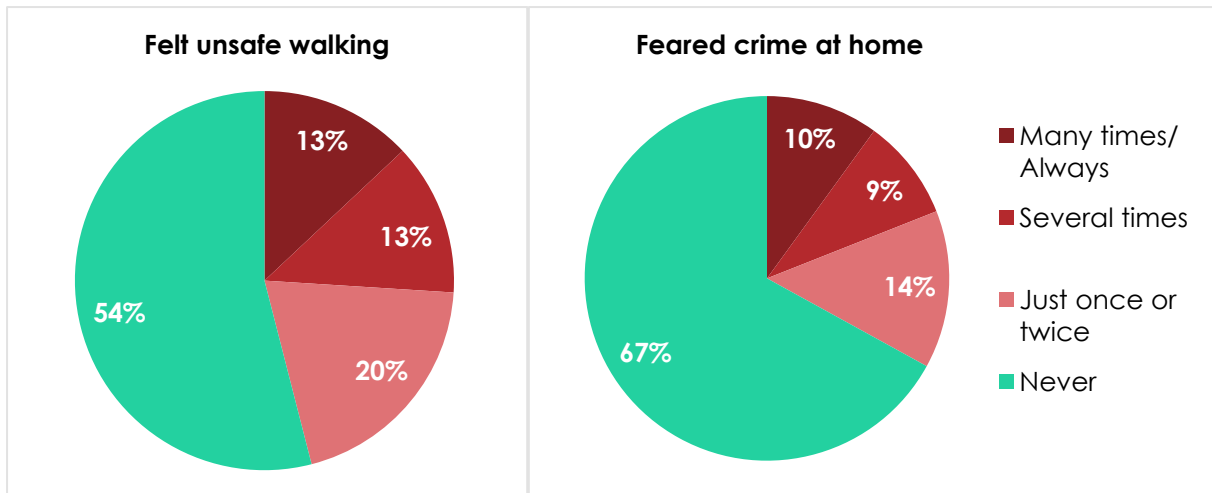
While a majority of Ethiopians say they never felt unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood (54%) and never feared crime in their home (67%) during the previous year, substantial proportions of the population report a different experience (Figure 1). Almost half (46%) say they felt unsafe in their neighbourhood at least once, including 26% who did so “several times,” “many times,” or “always.” One in three (33%) report fearing crime in their home at least once.

Feelings of insecurity in the neighbourhood or at home have increased marginally (by 4 percentage points each) since 2020 (Figure 2).

The poorest citizens are considerably more likely to experience both forms of insecurity than their better-off counterparts. Respondents experiencing high lived poverty are more than twice as likely to report feeling unsafe at least “several times” in their neighbourhoods (42%

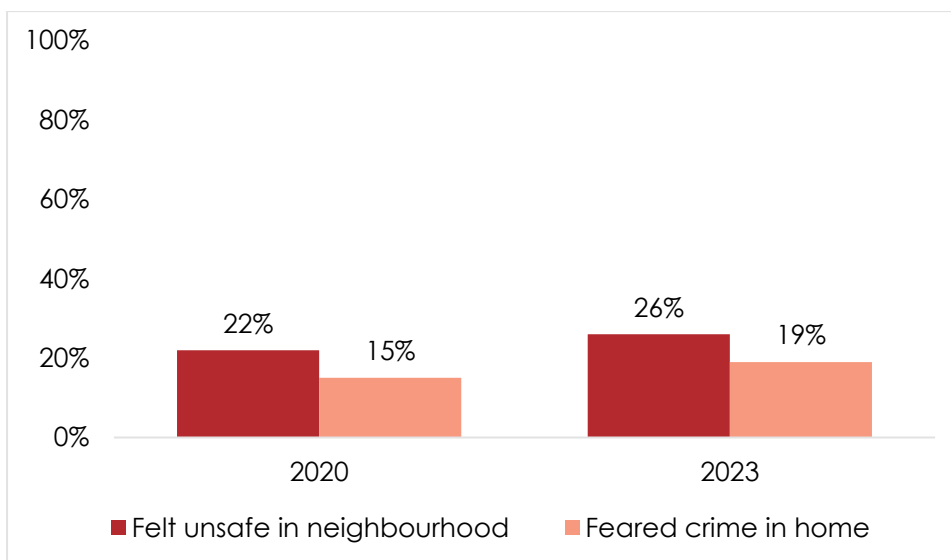
vs. 18% of those with no lived poverty) and to fear crime in their home (35% vs. 14%) (Figure 3).¹ Feelings of insecurity are also more common among men than women (by 6 and 3 percentage points on the respective indicators).

Figure 1: Insecurity and fear of crime | Ethiopia | 2023



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?

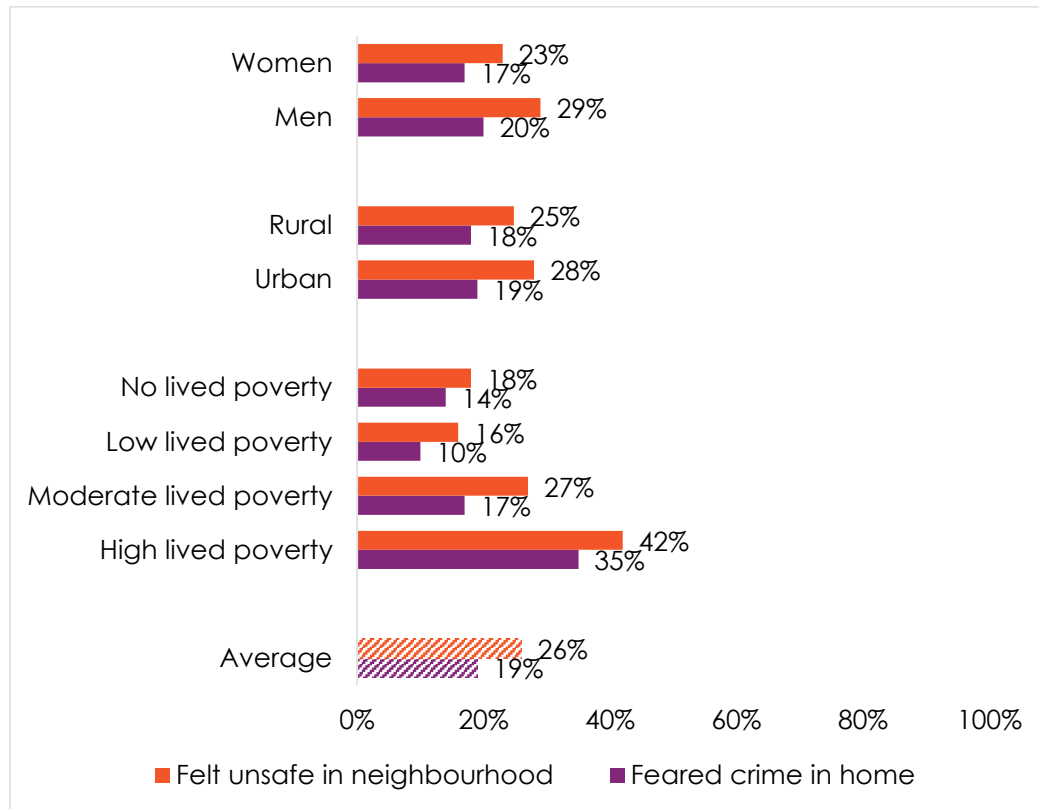
Figure 2: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least 'several times' | Ethiopia | 2020-2023



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 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 3: Experienced insecurity and fear of crime at least ‘several times’
 | by gender, location, and lived poverty | Ethiopia | 2023



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

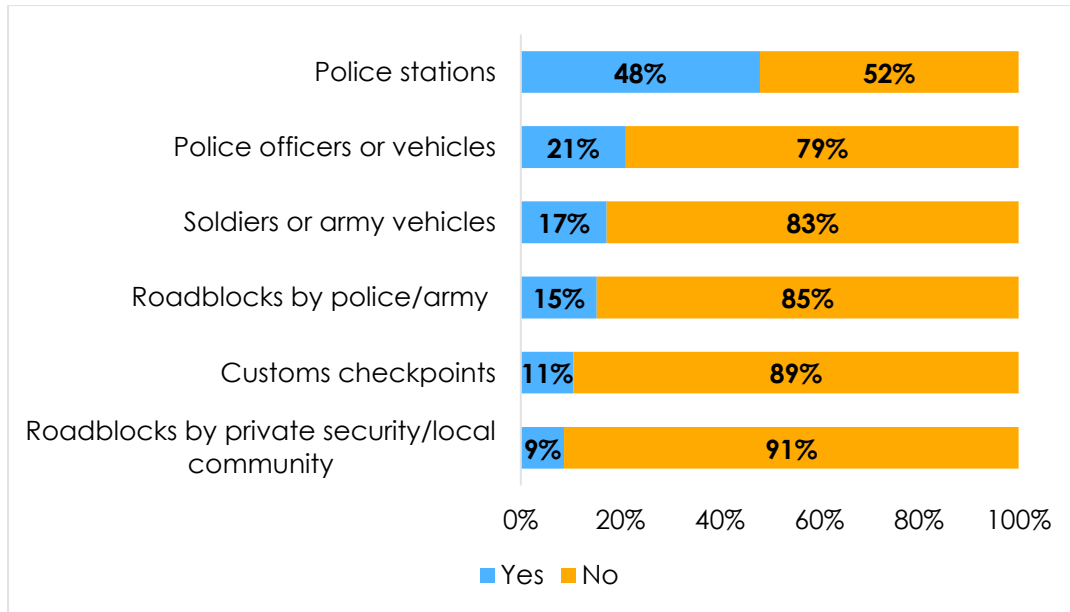
One factor that might affect people’s sense of security is the presence of security forces. As part of their data collection process, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations in each census enumeration area (EA) they visit about services and facilities that are available in the area. 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.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

In Ethiopia, Afrobarometer field teams found police stations in or within easy walking distance of about half (48%) of the EAs they visited (Figure 4). They saw police officers or police vehicles in 21% of the EAs. Other signs

of security-related activity were less common, including soldiers or other military (17%), roadblocks by the police or army (15%), customs checkpoints (11%), and roadblocks by private security or the local community (9%).

Figure 4: Presence of police/security | Ethiopia | 2023



Survey enumerators were asked:

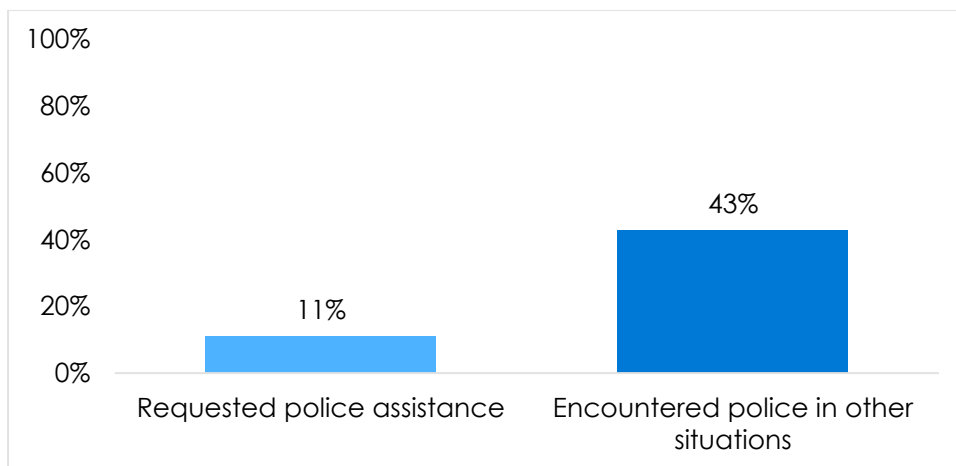
Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit (PSU)/enumeration area (EA) or in easy walking distance: Police station?
 In the PSU/EA, did you or any of your colleagues see: Any police officers or police vehicles? Any soldiers or army vehicles? Any roadblocks set up by police or army? 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 Ethiopians encounter the police in their daily lives?

Only one in nine respondents (11%) say they requested police assistance during the previous year. About four times 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).

Figure 5: Contact with the police | Ethiopia | 2023

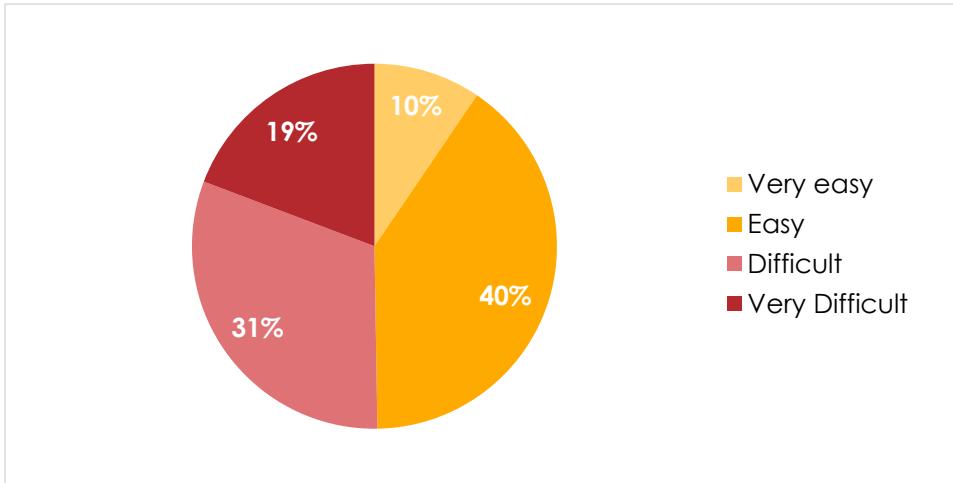


Respondents were asked:

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?

Experience of police support is mixed. Among citizens who asked the police for help, half (50%) say that getting assistance was easy, while the other 50% say it was difficult (Figure 6).

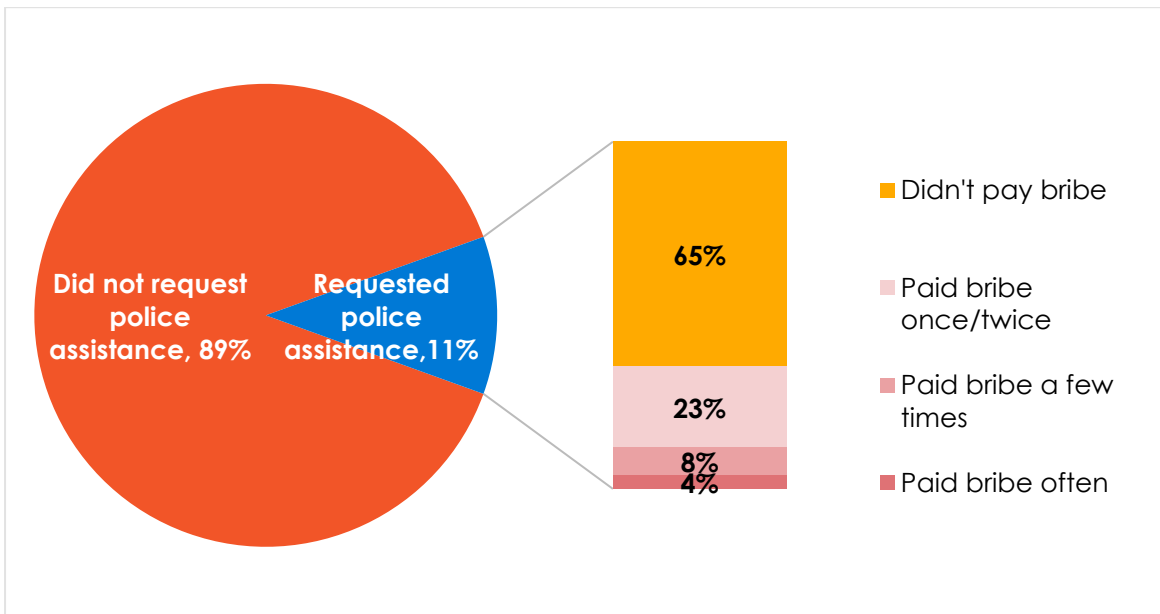
Figure 6: Ease of obtaining police assistance | Ethiopia | 2023



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 in three (35%) 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).

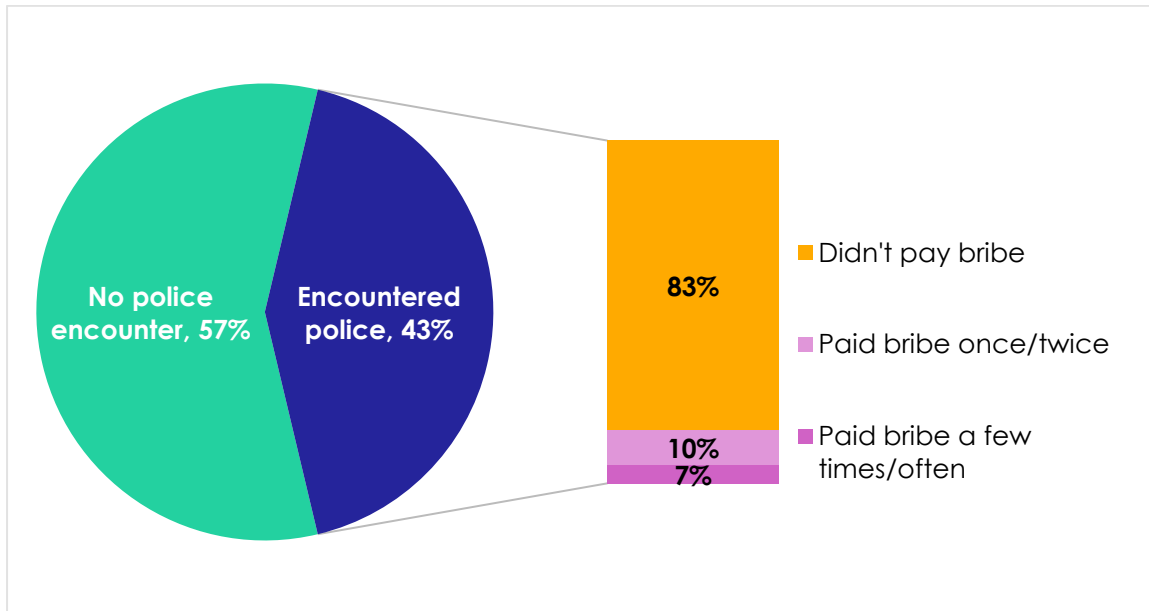
Figure 7: Paid a bribe to obtain police assistance | Ethiopia | 2023



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.)

Among Ethiopians who encountered the police in situations such as checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation, one-sixth (17%) say they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to avoid problems (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Paid a bribe to avoid problems with the police | Ethiopia | 2023



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

To summarise the experience among all Ethiopian adults during the past year, one in 25 (4%) paid a bribe at least once to get police assistance, to avoid a problem with the police, or both.

Police corruption

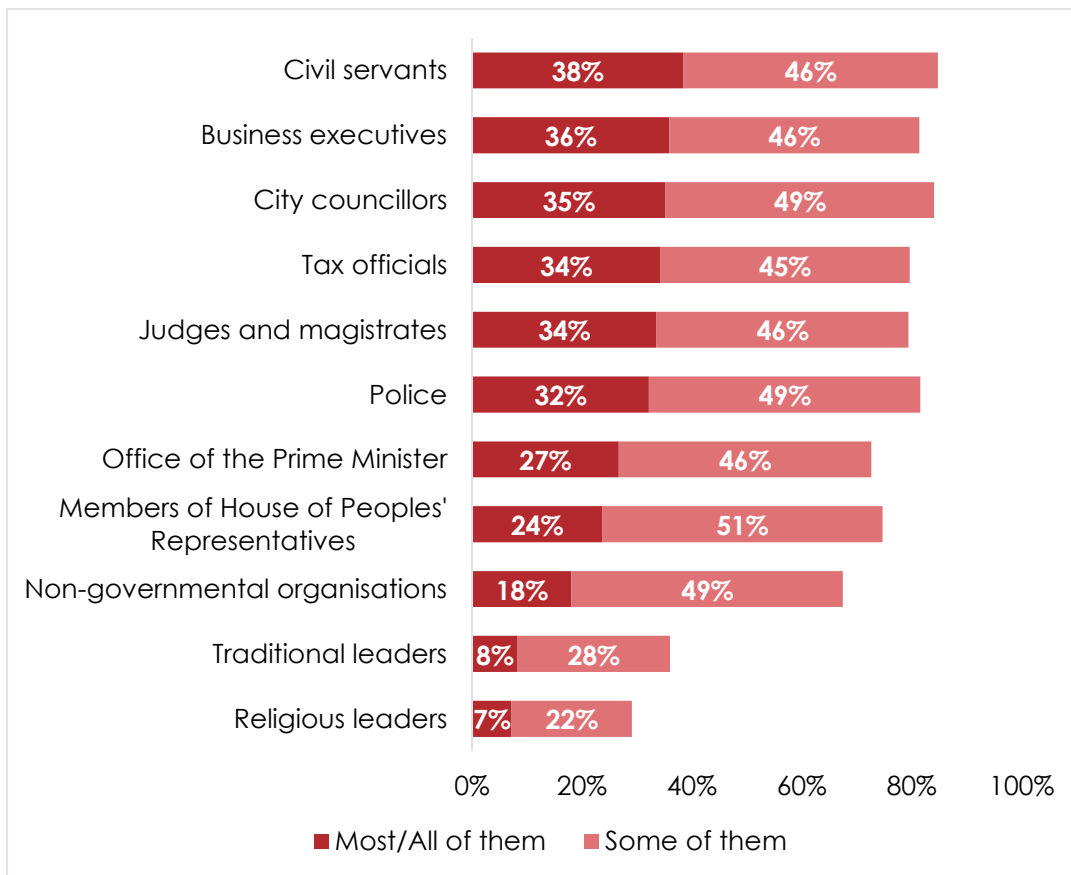
Considering the relatively small proportion of citizens who say they paid bribes to the police, it may be surprising that more than four in five Ethiopians (82%)² believe that at least “some” police officials are corrupt (Figure 9).

About one-third (32%) of citizens say that “most” or “all” police are corrupt – the sixth-worst rating among 11 institutions and leaders the survey asked about, though scoring better than civil servants (38%), business executives (36%), city councillors (35%), tax officials (34%) and judges and magistrates (34%).

Perceptions that most/all police are corrupt are slightly more common among men than women (34% vs. 30%) and among urbanites than rural residents (35% vs. 31%) (Figure 10). Citizens with post-secondary qualifications (40%) are more likely to perceive widespread police corruption than those with less education (29%-33%), as are young adults (33%) compared to those over age 55 (28%).

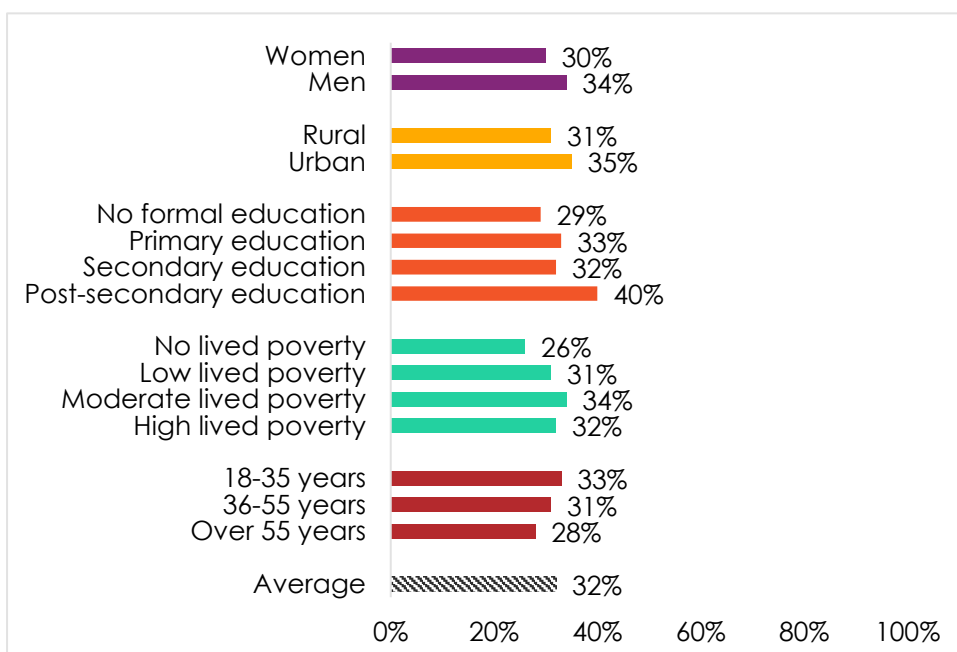
² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 32% “most/all of them” and 49% “some of them” sum to 82%).

Figure 9: Perceived corruption among institutions and leaders | Ethiopia | 2023



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?

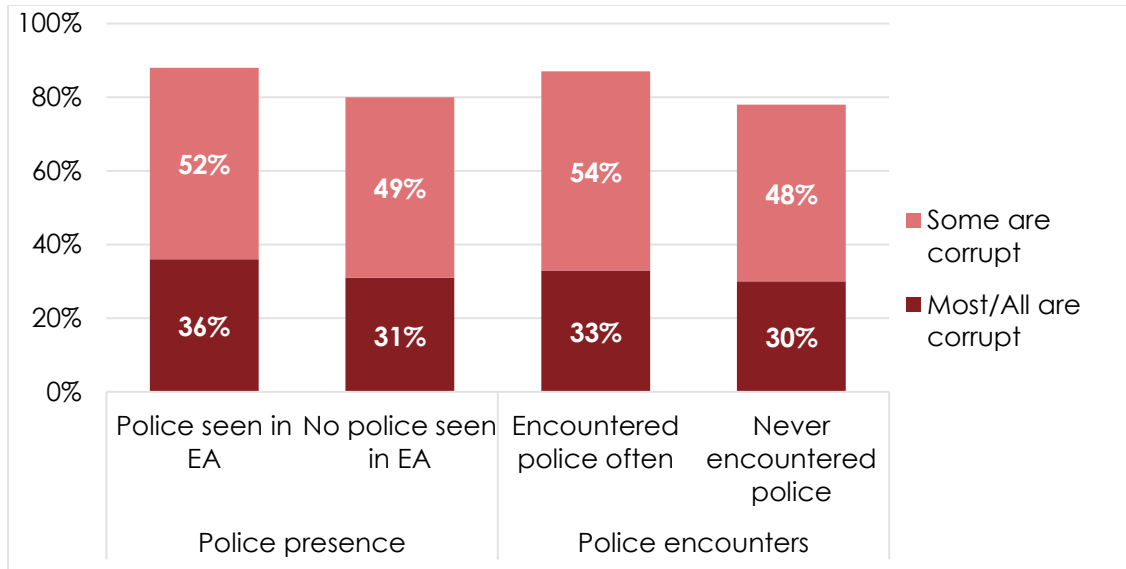
Figure 10: Perception that most/all police are corrupt | by demographic group | Ethiopia | 2023



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")

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 or police vehicles are somewhat more likely to say that most/all police are corrupt than their counterparts (36% vs. 31%). Similarly, citizens who “often” encountered police are slightly more likely to see most/all police as corrupt than those who had no encounters with police (33% vs. 30%).

Figure 11: Perceived police corruption | by police presence and frequency of interaction with police | Ethiopia | 2023



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:

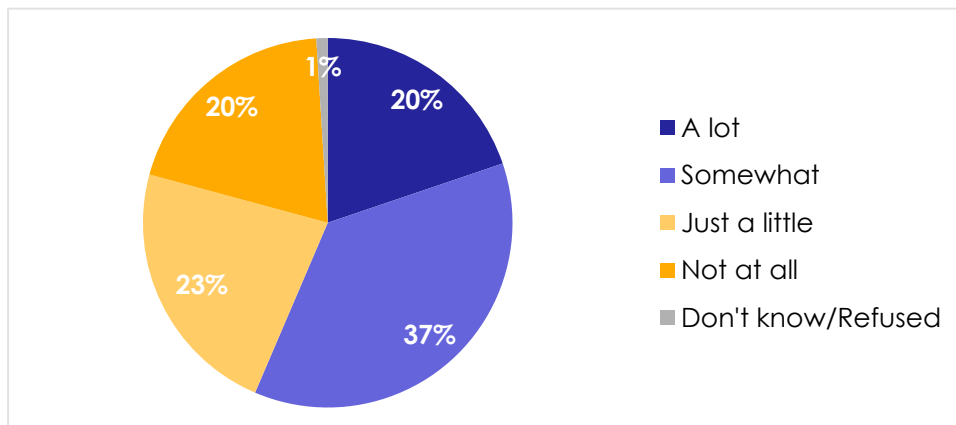
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation?

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

More than half of citizens say they trust the police “somewhat” (37%) or “a lot” (20%), while 43% express little or no trust in the police (Figure 12).

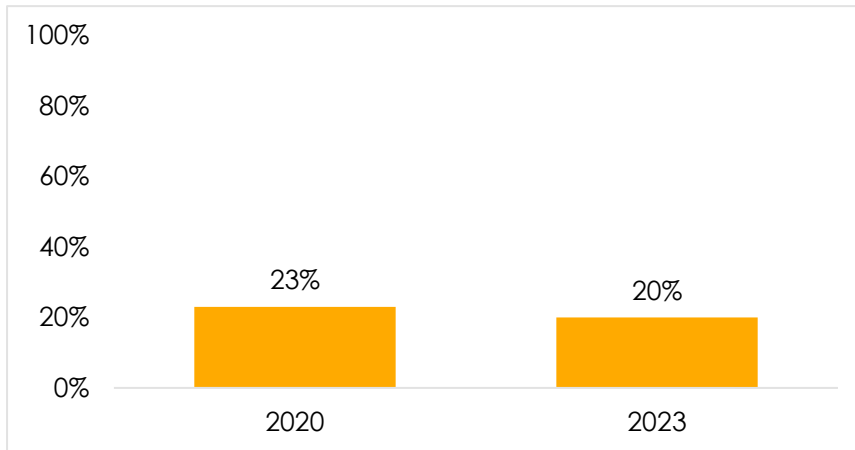
Figure 12: Trust in the police | Ethiopia | 2023



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

The share of citizens who say they don't trust the police "at all" has dropped by 3 percentage points since 2020 (Figure 13).

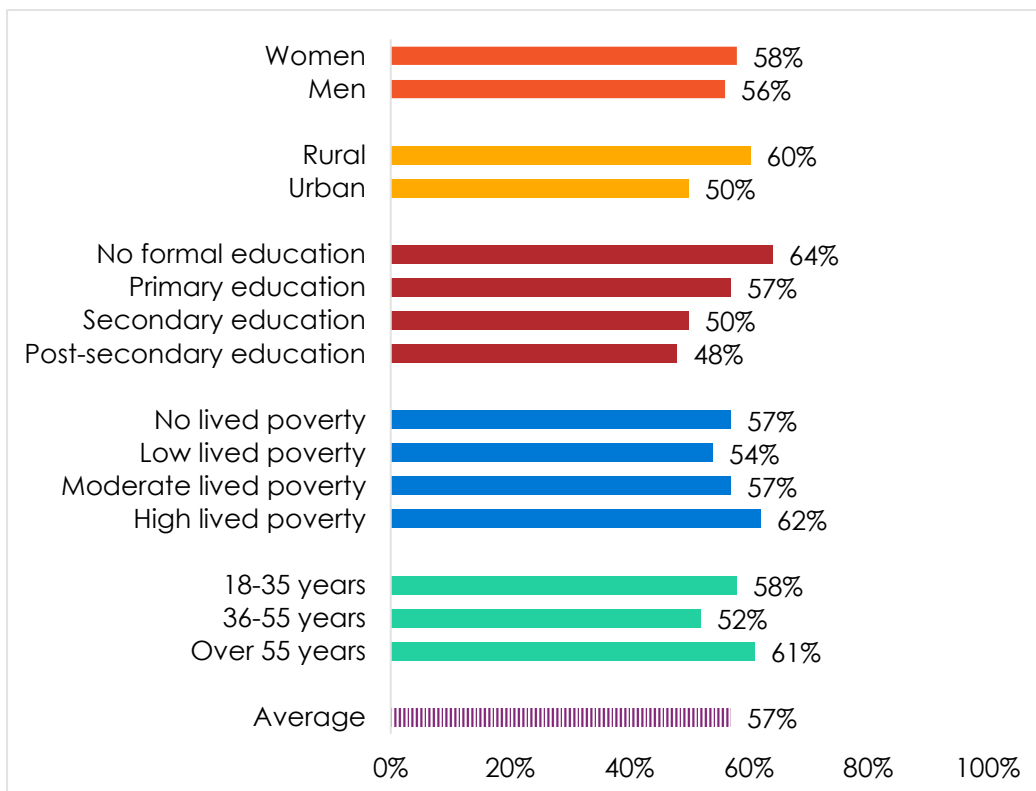
Figure 13: Don't trust the police 'at all' | Ethiopia | 2020-2023



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

Rural residents (60%) express greater trust in the police than their urban counterparts (50%). Trust declines as education levels increase, ranging from just 48% among those with post-secondary qualifications to 64% among those with no formal schooling (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust in the police | by demographic group | Ethiopia | 2023



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

Ethiopians offer mixed reviews of police conduct (Figure 15). Half (50%) of respondents say the police at least “sometimes” use excessive force with suspected criminals, including 25% who say they do this “often” or “always.” A significant proportion think the police at least sometimes use excessive force against protesters (43%).

Fewer citizens say the police stop drivers without good reason (38%) or engage in criminal activities (33%).

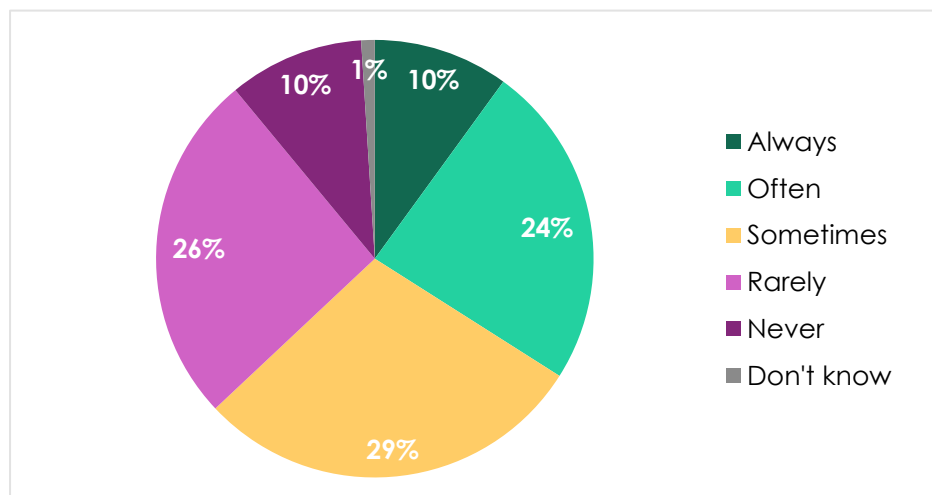
Overall, only about one-third (34%) of citizens say the police “often” (24%) or “always” (10%) operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens’ rights. Three in 10 (29%) say they “sometimes” do so, while 36% say such conduct is rare or unheard of (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Improper police practices | Ethiopia | 2023



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Ethiopia:
 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? | Ethiopia | 2023

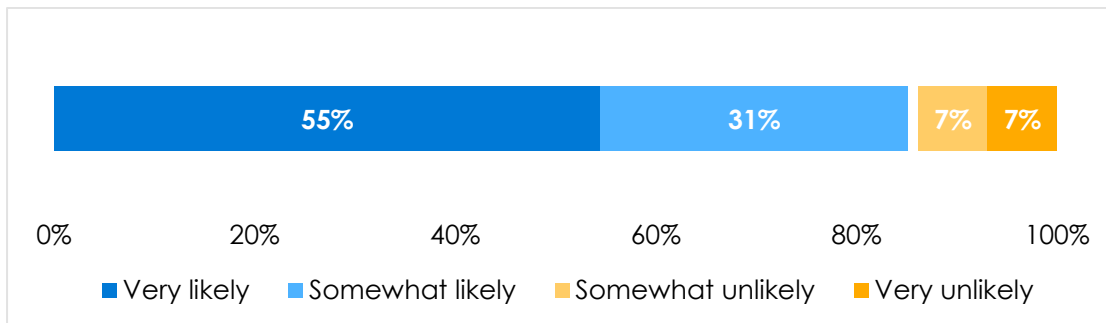


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the police in Ethiopia operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

Most Ethiopians show faith in the police's handling of gender-based violence (GBV) cases. More than eight in 10 respondents (86%) 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).

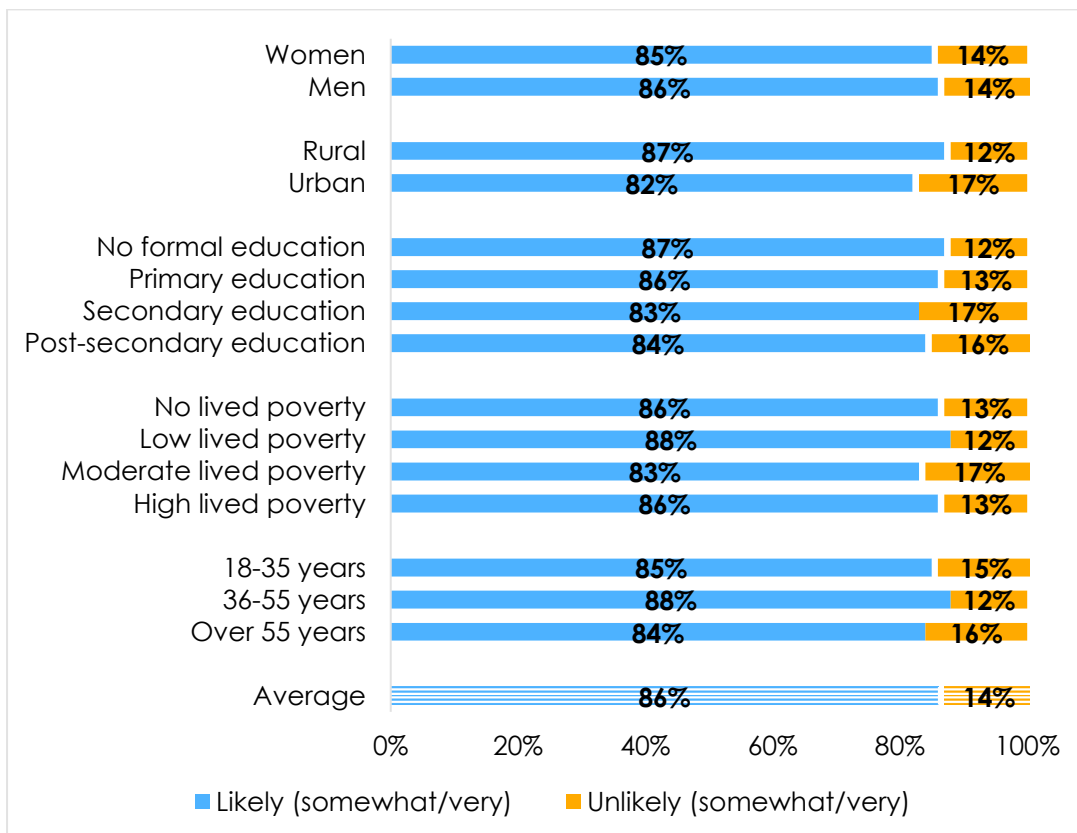
While this assessment is shared across key demographic groups, confidence is slightly less strong among urban residents (82%) and those with secondary or post-secondary education (83%-84%) than among their counterparts (Figure 18).

Figure 17: Do the police take gender-based violence seriously? | Ethiopia | 2023



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 | Ethiopia | 2023



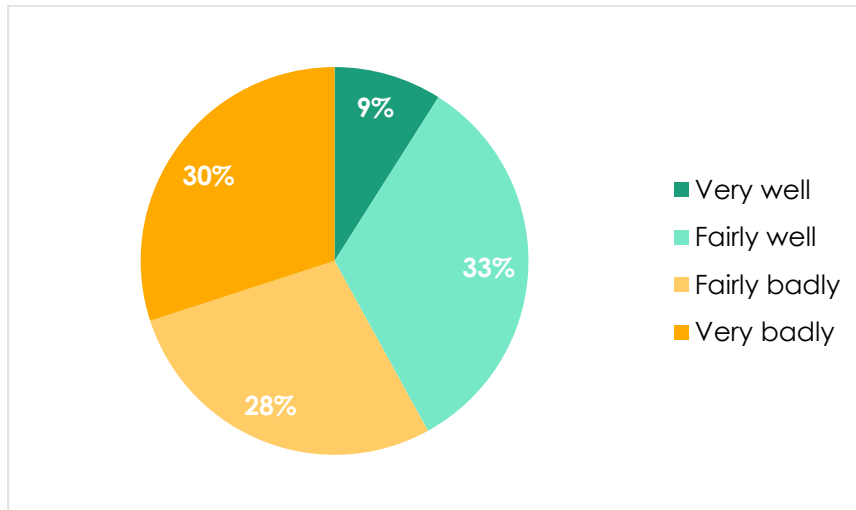
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Government performance on reducing crime

Overall, a majority (58%) of citizens are critical of the government's performance on reducing crime (Figure 19). Only 42% assess the government's anti-crime efforts positively.

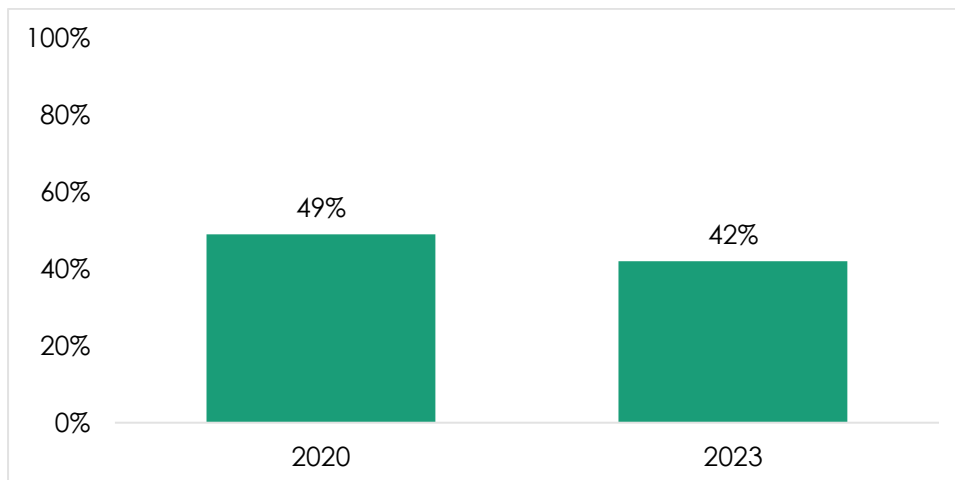
Approval of the government's crime-reduction efforts has dropped by 7 percentage points since 2020 (Figure 20).

Figure 19: Government performance on reducing crime | Ethiopia | 2023



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 | Ethiopia | 2020-2023



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

The police are supposed to act professionally and ethically while enforcing the law. But in the eyes of many Ethiopians, the police do not live up to this expectation. Survey findings reveal that about one-third of citizens consider the police thoroughly corrupt, and many report having to pay bribes to get help or avoid problems. Many say the police often use excessive

force against suspected criminals and protesters, while only one-third believe that the police usually operate professionally and respect citizens' rights.

These findings highlight challenges in implementing Ethiopia's police doctrine. If the leadership wants to build a professional and modern police force, it will have to address these shortcomings.

References

- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2012). Regulation No. 268/12. Federal Negarit Gazette, 19th Year, No. 1.
- Human Rights Watch. (2024). Ethiopia: Events of 2023.
- Interpeace. (2022). Building trust between communities and the police in Ethiopia.
- Interpeace. (2024). Strengthening collaborative security management in Ethiopia: Lessons learned from piloting the Ethiopian police doctrine in Addis Ababa. Paper No. 10.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 84.
- Melkamu, T. W., & Teshome, W. (2023). Public trust in the police: Investigating the influence of police performance, procedural fairness, and police-community relations in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9, 2199559.
- UNESCO. (2022). Ethiopian police officers trained in fostering freedom of expression.
- Woubshet, A. (2020). Our 'protectors' in blue: Police brutality and misconduct in Ethiopia. Ethiopia Insight. 14 August.

Anne Okello is Afrobarometer assistant project manager for Eastern Africa, based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi. Email: aokello@afrobarometer.org.

Mulu Teka is principal researcher and director at ABCON – Research & Consulting, the Afrobarometer national partner in Ethiopia. Email: mulu.mtg@gmail.com.

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 (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a donation to Afrobarometer. To make an online donation, kindly follow this [link](#) or this [link](#). To discuss institutional funding, contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org).

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 936 | 14 January 2025