

Ghanaians lack trust in courts, consider other dispute-resolution avenues

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1095 | Lionel Ossé and Cheetham Nii Shidaa Mingle

Summary

Access to justice is a cornerstone of democracy; without it, citizens cannot fully enjoy their rights. In Ghana, the principle is enshrined in the 1992 Constitution and reinforced by human-rights instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Maputo Protocol. The country ranks seventh of 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa on the World Justice Project's (2025) most recent Rule of Law Index.

Ghana's Legal Aid Commission (LAC) is charged with providing legal-aid services to poor, vulnerable, and marginalised citizens (Nabila, Jengre, Kombian, & Nomo, 2022). Yet for many Ghanaians, justice remains out of reach: Citizens face barriers in the form of cost of legal services, distance to courts, and length of cases. There are fewer than 400 state attorney operating across the country, a number considered grossly inadequate by the attorney general given the volume of cases being heard. This shortage of public legal services contributes to extended delays in the judicial process, especially in rural communities (AdomOnline, 2025). In addition, the LAC's services are concentrated in major cities, limiting access for the poor and vulnerable in remote areas (Donkor, 2019).

Another challenge, according to Appeals Court Judge Angelina Mornah Domakyaareh, is that corruption in the judiciary has undermined public perceptions of the institution (GhanaWeb, 2020). Respect for the judiciary has also been hampered by "frequent 'unanimous' decisions pronounced by the Supreme Court in highly charged political and constitutional matters" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

This dispatch reports findings from a special survey module on access to justice included in Afrobarometer's Round 10 surveys. Findings suggest that for many Ghanaians, access to justice remains more of a wish than a reality.

Fewer than half of citizens express trust in Ghana's courts and are confident that ordinary people can obtain justice in court. Majorities doubt that they could get a court case resolved fairly or timeously – or that they would be able to afford a case in the first place. Only one in five citizens say they are aware of legal-aid services.

Many Ghanaians see corruption and political influence as pervasive in the judicial system, and a majority say people aren't treated equally under the law.

A slim majority of Ghanaians support the death penalty for the most serious crimes.

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. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys

(2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in August 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Ghana in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

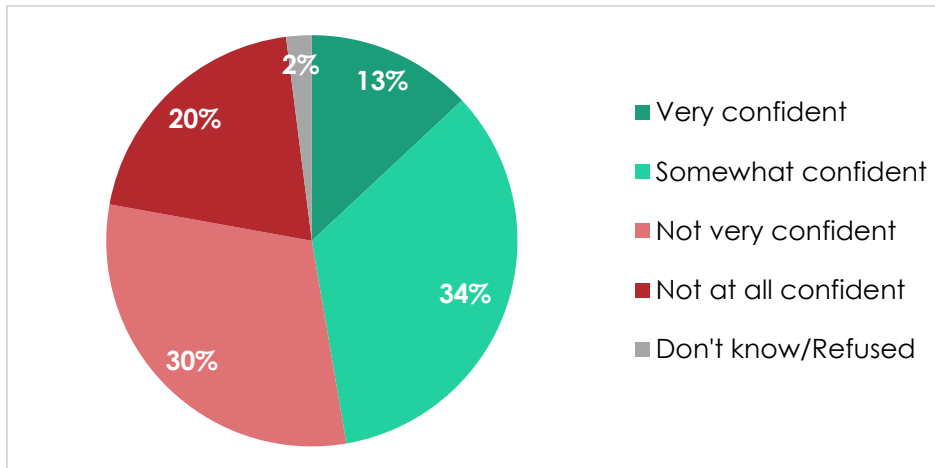
- Half (50%) of Ghanaians say they are “not very confident” or “not at all confident” that ordinary people who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts. Only 47% express faith that citizens can obtain justice.
 - Economically well-off respondents are more confident than their poorer counterparts (54% vs. 42%-51%).
- Fewer than half of respondents say they could probably find legal advice (47%) and afford to take a legal problem to court (37%), if necessary.
 - Minorities think such a case would be resolved fairly (45%) and timeously (38%).
 - Only one-fifth (21%) say they are aware of legal-aid services that are available in their community.
- A mere 3% of citizens say they would turn to a local court to resolve a legal problem. Most would look to other options, including the police (38%), an elder or traditional court or leader (30%), or a family member (9%).
- About one-third (35%) of survey respondents say they trust the courts “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- More than four in 10 Ghanaians (44%) say that “most” or “all” judges and magistrates are corrupt, down by 5 percentage points compared to 2014.
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of citizens say officials who break the law frequently go unpunished.
- A smaller majority (62%) say people are “often” or “always” treated unequally under the law, while the same proportion (62%) believe that judges and magistrates “often” or “always” decide cases based on the influence of powerful people, rather than based on the law.
- Eight in 10 Ghanaians (79%) say the president must always obey the laws and the courts, but fewer than half (47%) think he usually does so.
- More than half (53%) of Ghanaians say the death penalty is a fair punishment for the most serious crimes, while 43% say it is never justified.

Do the courts provide justice?

Providing access to justice requires a legal framework that ordinary people understand, can afford, and trust to apply the law fairly, with legal counsel that is available and affordable (International Commission of Jurists, 2009). Perhaps the fundamental question in evaluating access to justice is whether citizens are confident that they can secure justice within the court system.

In Ghana, fewer than half (47%) say they are “somewhat confident” (34%) or “very confident” (13%) that ordinary people who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts, while 50% express little or no such confidence (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Can people obtain justice in the courts? | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In general, how confident are you that ordinary citizens who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts?*

Confidence that the courts provide justice is stronger among citizens experiencing no lived poverty¹ (54%) than their worse-off counterparts (42%-51%) and among those with no formal education (51%²) than their more-educated peers (44%-49%) (Figure 2).

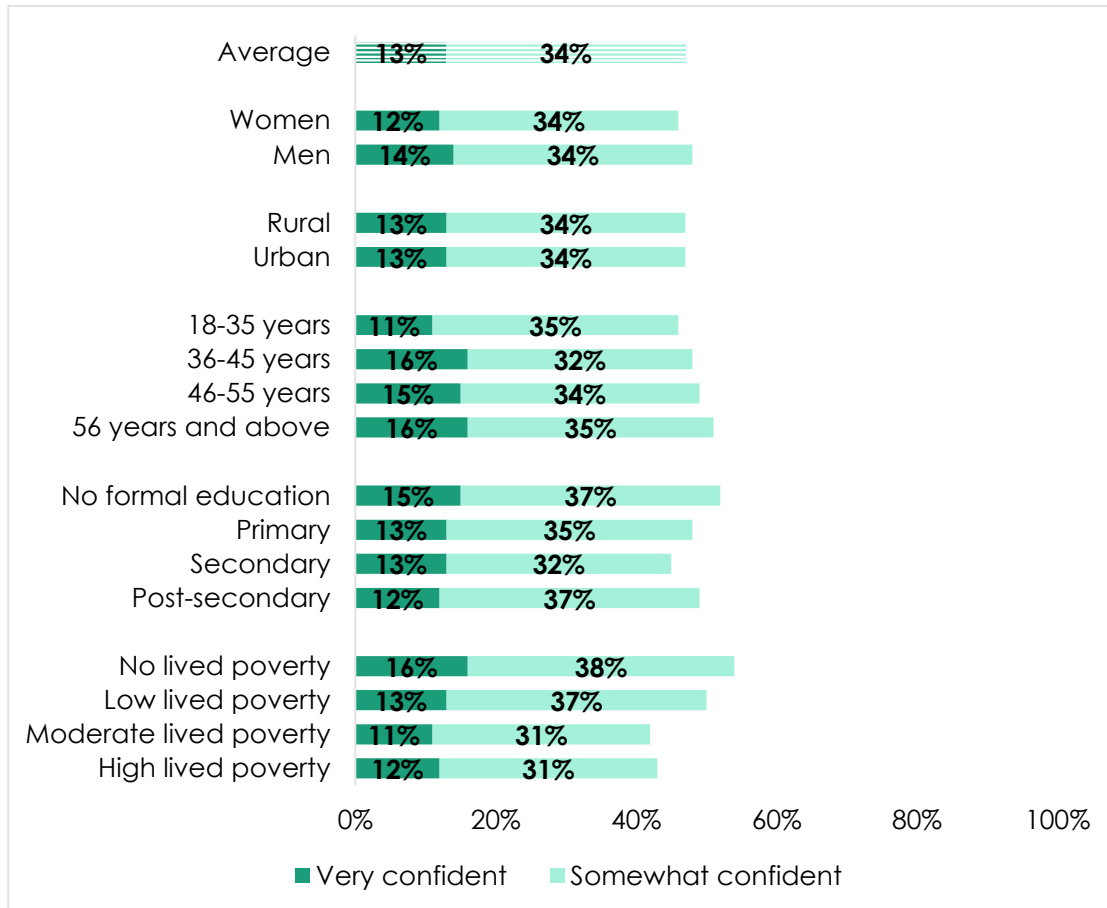
Confidence increases with an increase in age, but varies little according to gender or urban-rural location.

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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 Lekalake (2025).

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. for no formal education, 15% “very confident” and 37% “somewhat confident” sum to 51%).

Figure 2: Confidence that people can obtain justice in the courts
 | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In general, how confident are you that ordinary citizens who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts?*

Access to courts and legal services

Responses to Afrobarometer's battery of questions about the judicial system shed some light on why a substantial proportion of Ghanaians lack confidence in their ability to obtain justice in the courts.

Six in 10 respondents (61%) think that if they had a case that needed to go to court, they probably could not afford to pursue the case (Figure 3). And majorities doubt that such a case would be resolved fairly (51%) and within a reasonable time period (58%).

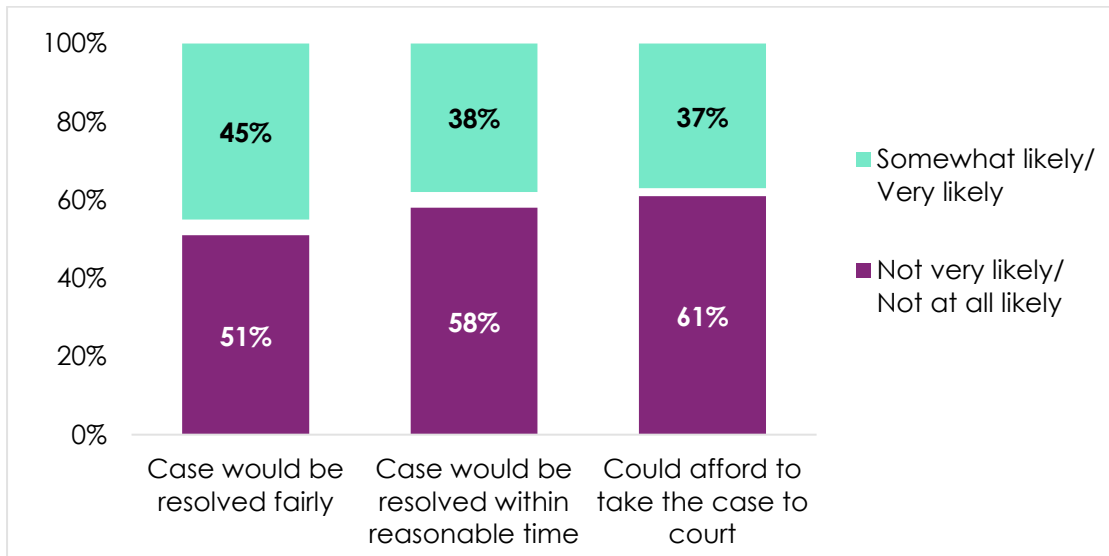
Confidence in the fairness and timeliness of court resolutions shows notable differences across demographic groups.

Citizens with post-secondary education are more likely than those with no formal schooling to say it is "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that they could get a fair resolution in court (50% vs. 39%) (Figure 4). This confidence increases as respondents' economic status rises, ranging from 37% among the poorest to 58% among the well-off.

As for confidence in a timely resolution, poor Ghanaians are again less optimistic than the wealthy (33% vs. 43%).

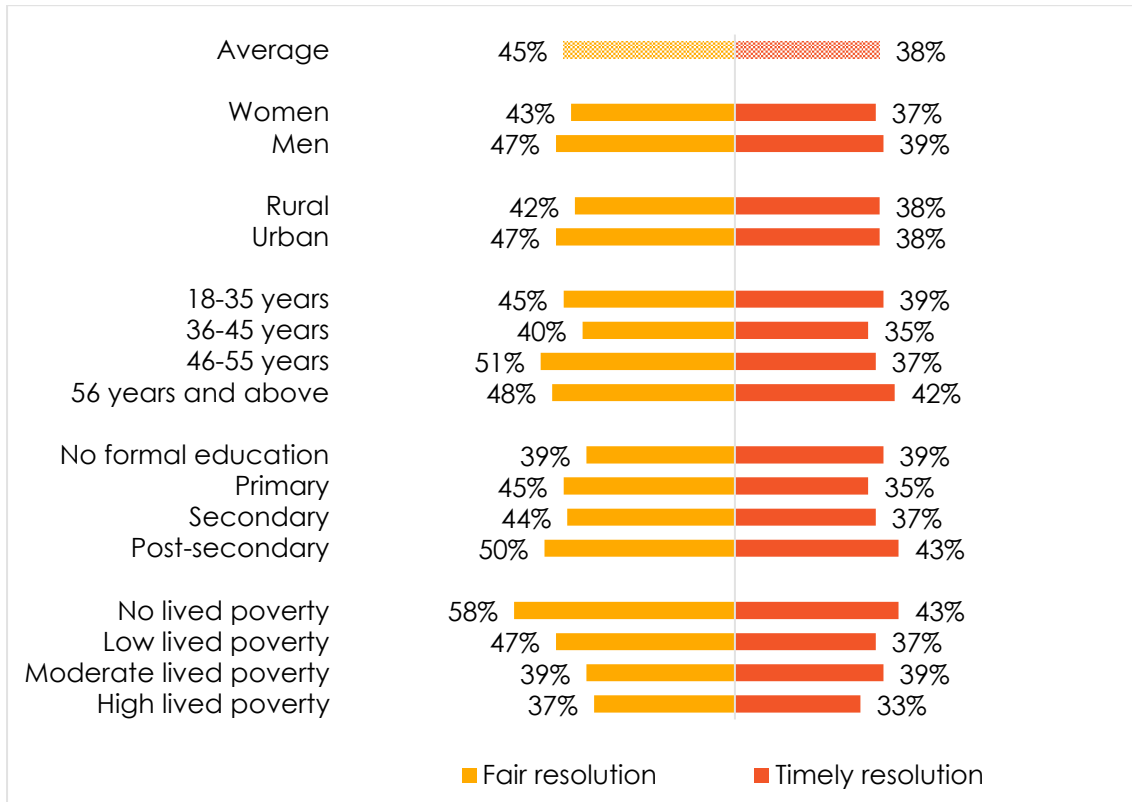
Rural and urban residents are equally likely to express confidence in a timely resolution (both 38%), though urbanites are somewhat more optimistic about fairness (47% vs. 42%).

Figure 3: Expectations regarding a court case | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that: You could afford to take the case to court? The case could be resolved in a reasonable amount of time? You could get a fair resolution in the courts?

Figure 4: Likelihood of fair and timely resolution of a court case | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024

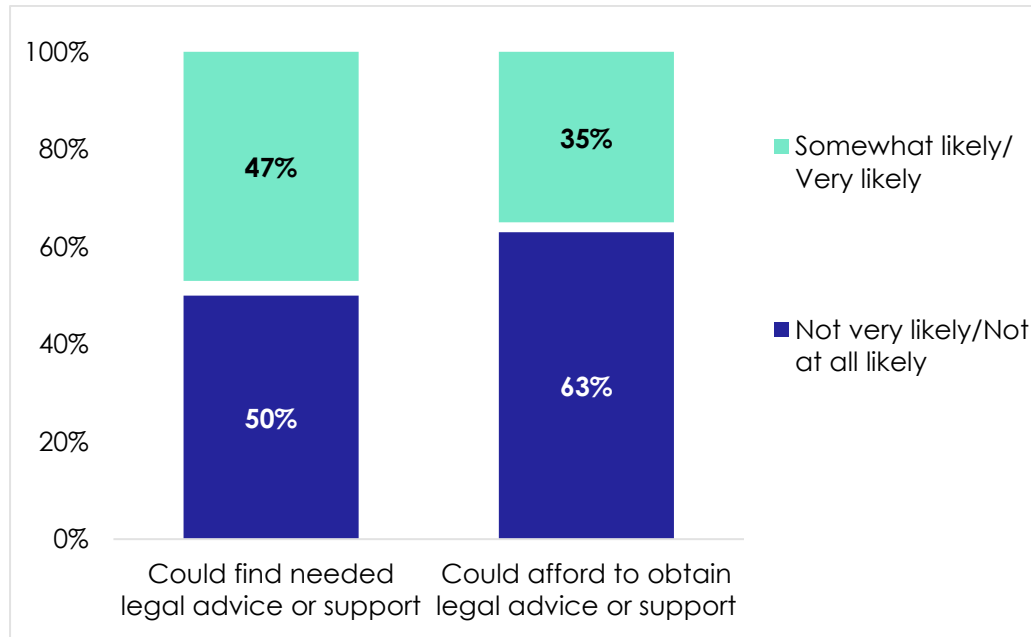


Respondents were asked: If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that: The case could be resolved in a reasonable amount of time? You could get a fair resolution in the courts? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Most people considering taking a case to court will require legal advice or support from lawyers or legal services. Do Ghanaians think they can find and afford such support?

Fewer than half (47%) of survey respondents consider it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could find the legal advice or support they need, and an even smaller minority (35%) say they could afford to obtain it (Figure 5). This means that almost two-thirds (63%) of the population think they could not afford the necessary legal support to pursue a case in court.

Figure 5: Ability to find and afford legal support | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, how likely do you think it is that: You could find the advice or support you need from lawyers or legal services to address or resolve the problem? You could afford to obtain the legal advice or support that you need?*

Citizens with no formal education are particularly likely to doubt they would be able to afford legal support (72%) or court costs (66%). Even among degree-holders, slim majorities say the same (52% for both) (Figure 6).

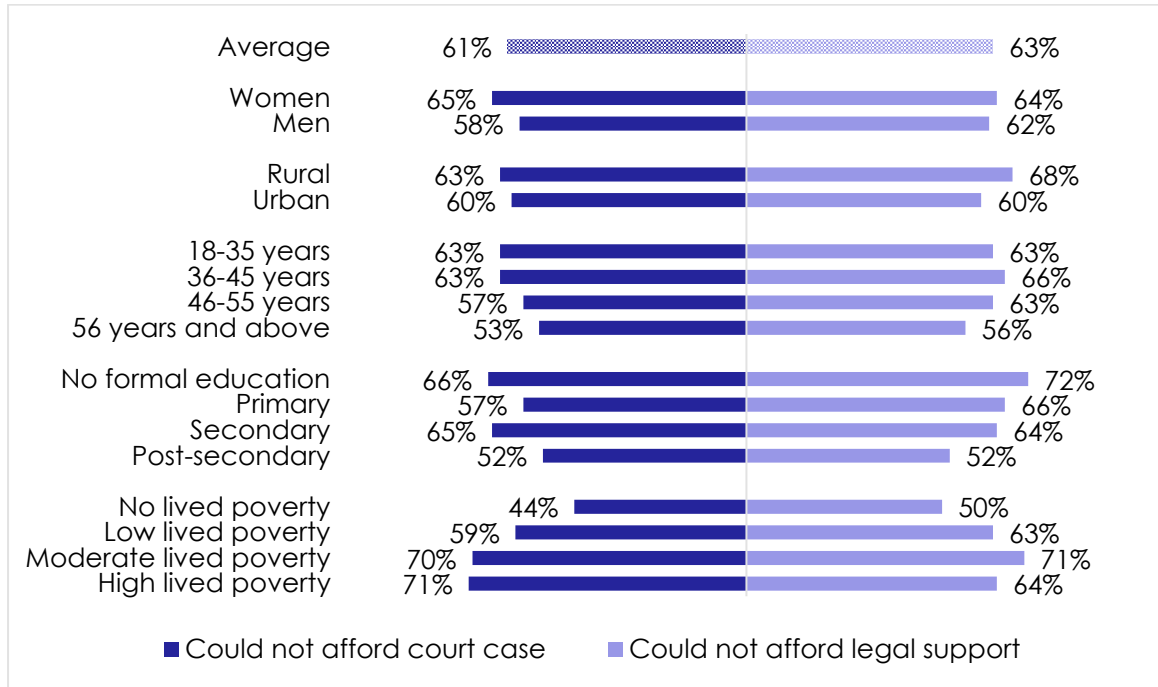
This assessment is more common among rural than urban residents (63% vs. 60% for court costs; 68% vs. 60% for legal support).

Expectations of difficulties with costs are more common among poorer and younger respondents, and more women than men think they probably could not afford to take a case to court.

While legal-aid services might provide free or reduced-price legal services to people who qualify, only two in 10 Ghanaians (21%) say they are aware of such services that are available in their community (Figure 7).

People with no formal education (12%) are especially unlikely to be aware of legal-aid services, while at least one in four know of such services among the wealthy (25%), the elderly (25% of those aged 56 years and older), and highly educated individuals (29%). Fewer women than men are aware of available legal aid.

Figure 6: Could not afford court case and legal support | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



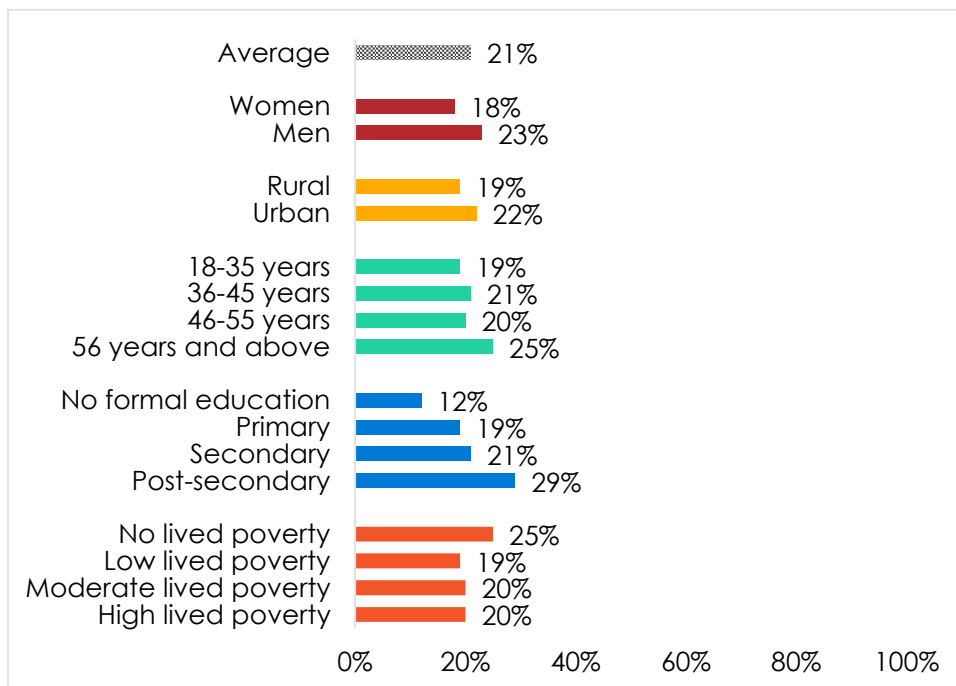
Respondents were asked:

If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, how likely do you think it is that you could afford to obtain the legal advice or support that you need?

If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that you could afford to take the case to court?

(% who say "not very likely" or "not at all likely")

Figure 7: Awareness of legal-aid services | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: Are you aware of any legal-aid services available to you and others in your community? (% "yes")

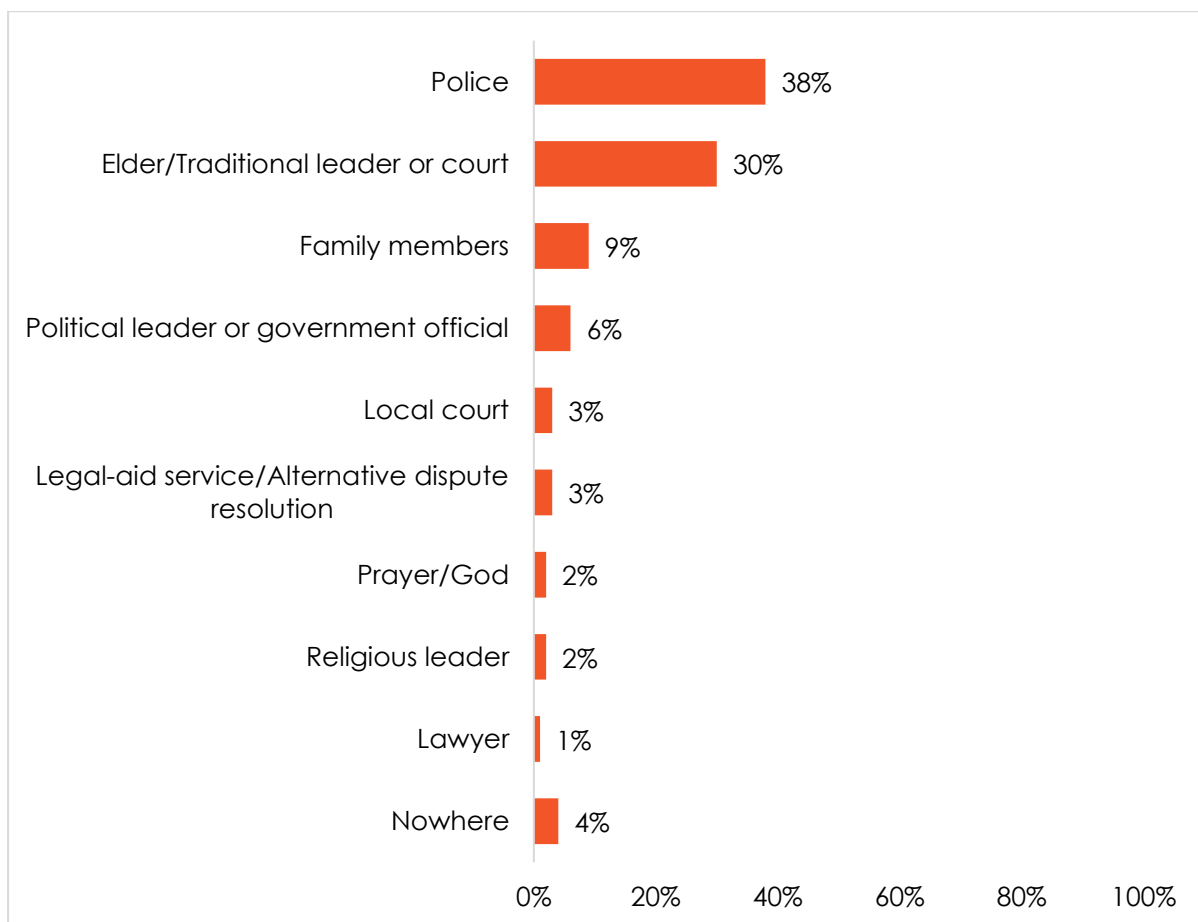
Considering self-reported financial barriers, it may be unsurprising that a vast majority of citizens say they would look elsewhere if they had a legal problem.

Asked where they would be most likely to go to try to find a resolution to a legal problem such as “a serious complaint against a business or member of your community,” nearly four in 10 (38%) say they would turn to the police (Figure 8).

Three in 10 (30%) would look to an elder or traditional leader or court, while more people would approach family members (9%) and political leaders or government officials (6%) than a local court (3%) or a lawyer (1%).

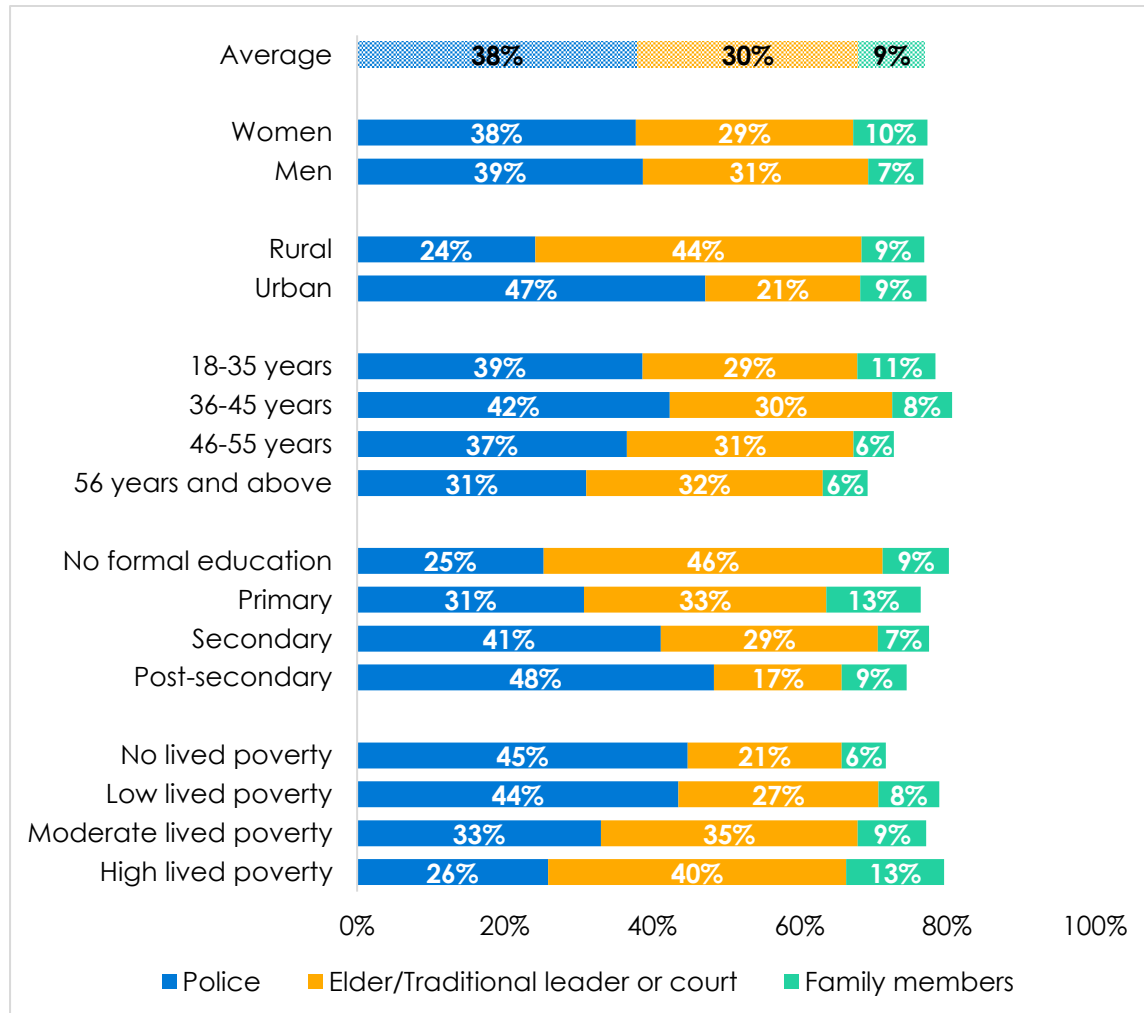
Looking at the top three preferences for where to seek a resolution to a legal problem, women and men show only marginal differences (Figure 9). Both higher educational attainment and economic status are associated with a greater propensity to turn to the police and fewer reports of seeking out an elder or traditional leader or court.

Figure 8: Where to go to resolve a legal problem | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution?*

Figure 9: Where to go to resolve a legal problem | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution?*

Integrity, independence, and neutrality of the judiciary

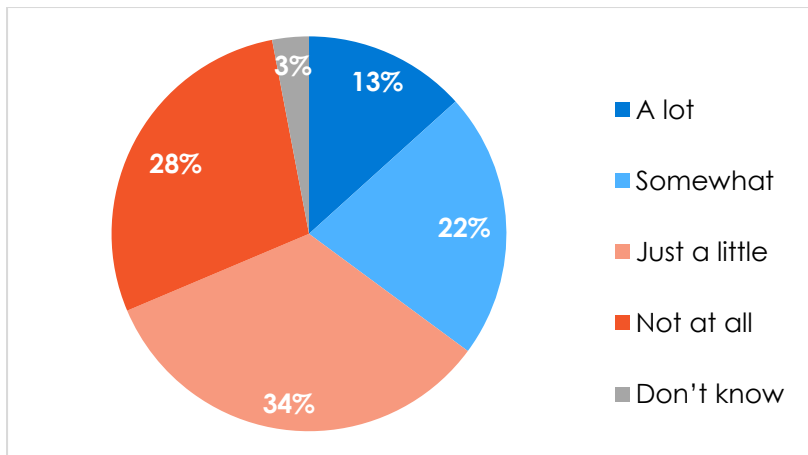
In addition to issues of access, cost, and expectations of a fair and timely resolution, people's trust in the judiciary may influence their willingness to engage with the court system. How confident are Ghanaians in the integrity of the system and the judges they would face?

Trust in the court system

About one-third (35%) of survey respondents say they trust the courts "somewhat" (22%) or "a lot" (13%) (Figure 10). Almost three in 10 (28%) say they don't trust the courts at all.

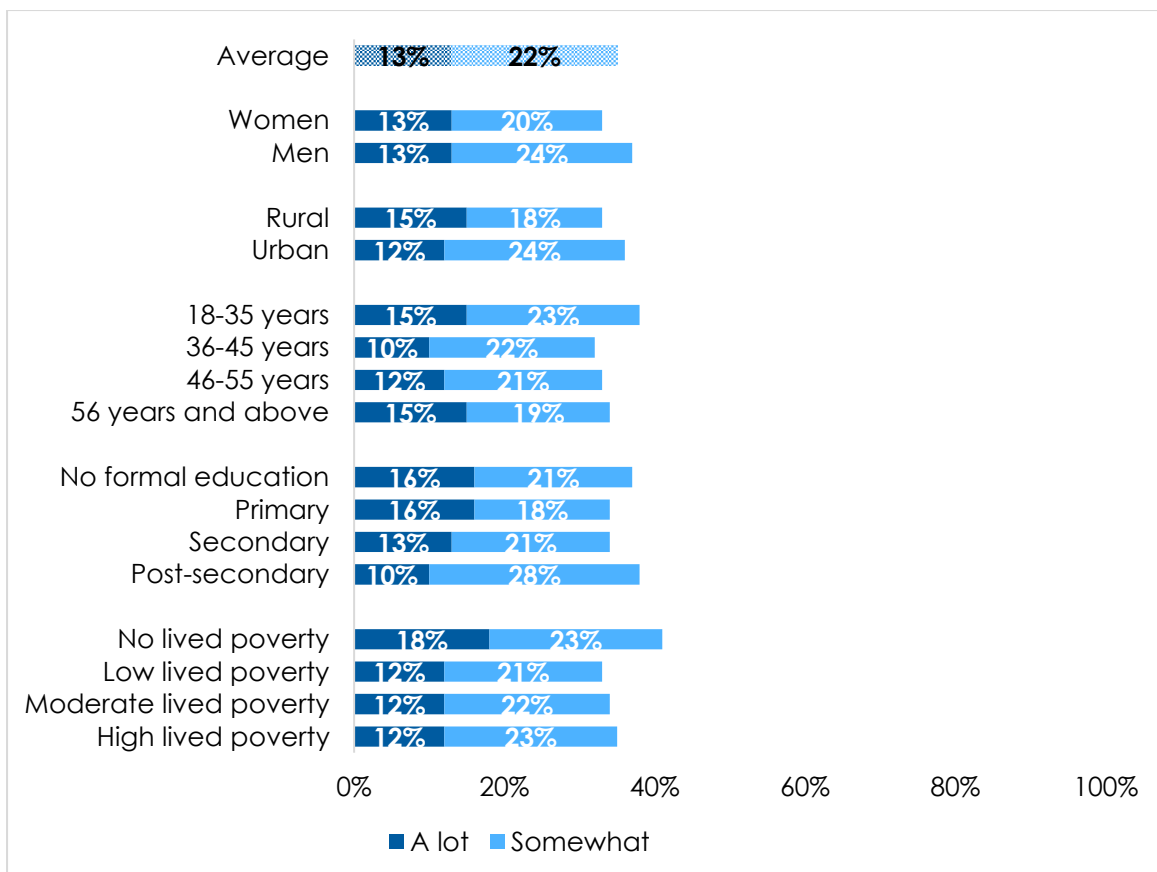
Among key demographic groups, men (37%), young respondents (37%), and well-off individuals (40%) are more likely to trust the judiciary than women (34%), older cohorts (33%-34%) and poorer respondents (33%-34%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Trust in courts of law | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Courts of law?

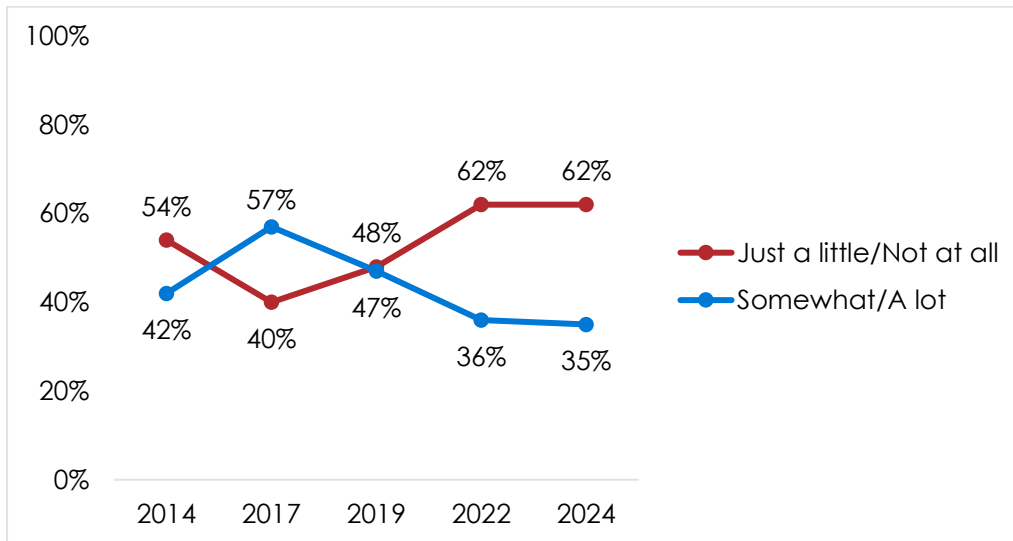
Figure 11: Trust in courts of law | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Courts of law?

Popular trust in the judicial system has dropped by 7 percentage points since 2014 (42%) and is down by 22 points since the peak recorded in 2017 (57%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Trust in courts of law | Ghana | 2014-2024

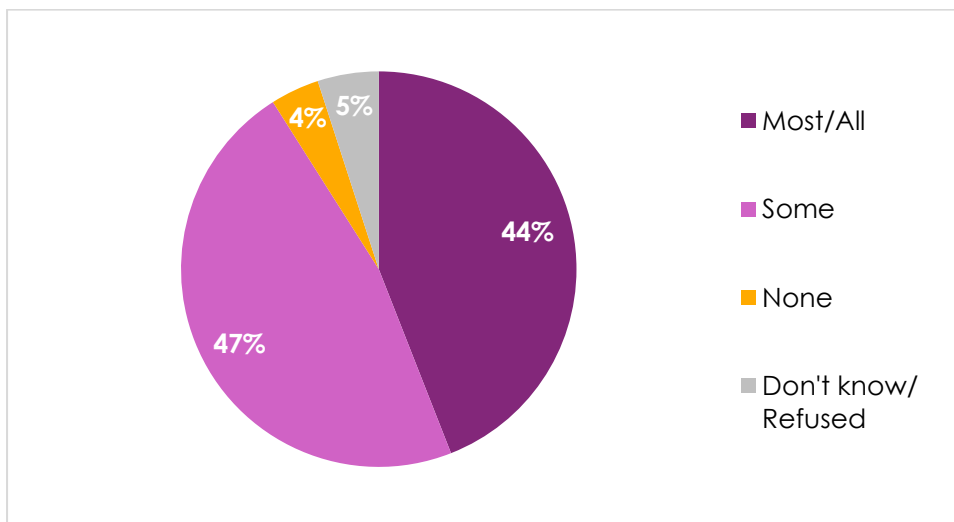


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Courts of law?

Perceived corruption in the courts

One reason for significant public distrust may be perceptions of widespread corruption in the judiciary. More than four in 10 Ghanaians (44%) see "most" or "all" judges and magistrates as corrupt, while a further 47% perceive "some" as corrupt (Figure 13). Only 4% of citizens think there is no corruption in the country's judicial system.

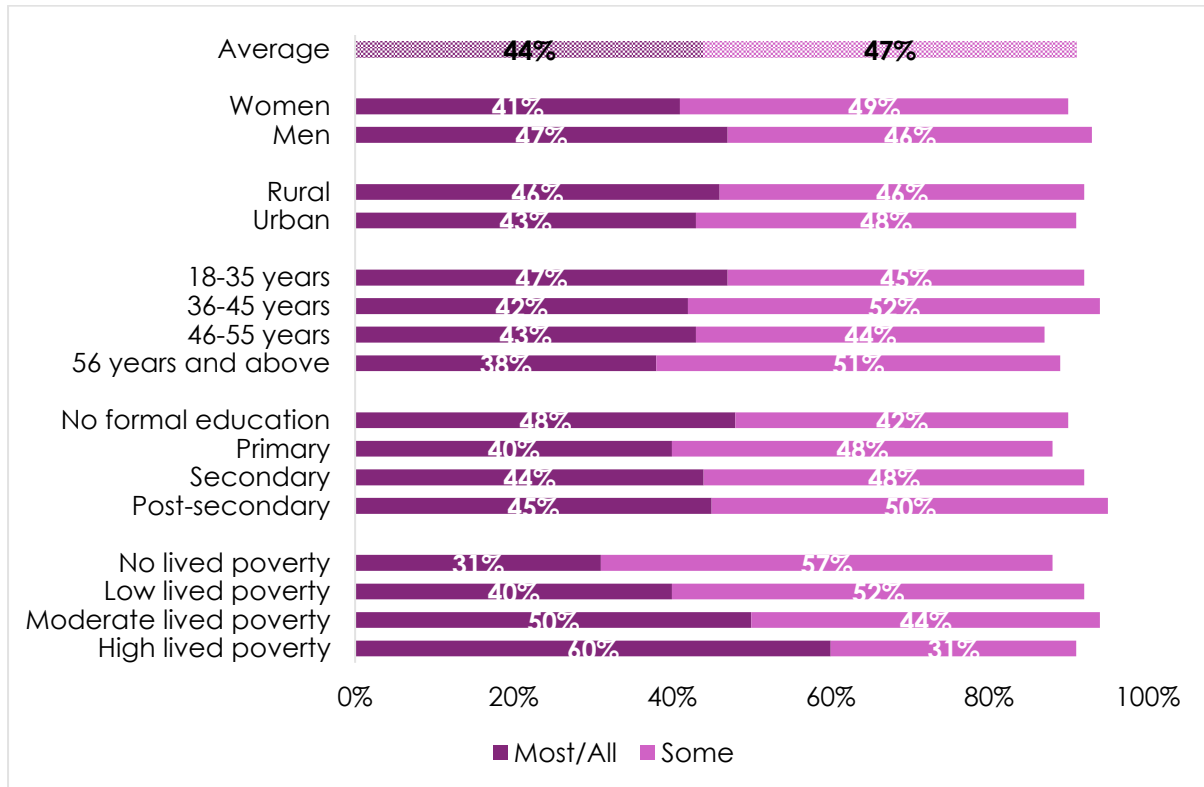
Figure 13: Perceived corruption among judges and magistrates | Ghana | 2024



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

More men (47%) than women (41%) say corruption in the judiciary is pervasive ("most" or "all") (Figure 14). This perception is also more common among young respondents (47%) than their older counterparts (38%-43%), and it grows with an increase in citizens' experience of lived poverty, ranging from 31% among the well-off to twice that (60%) among the poorest.

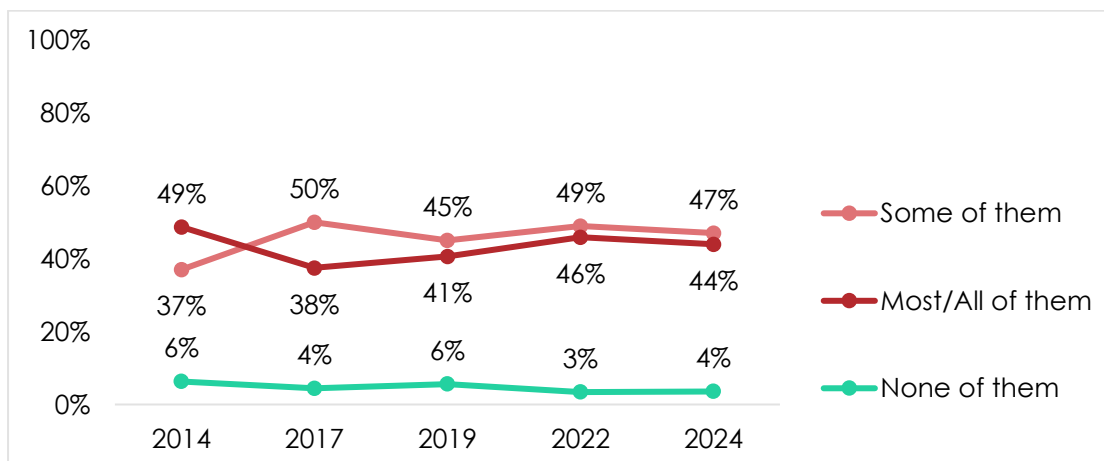
Figure 14: Perceived corruption among judges and magistrates
 | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



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

Perceptions of widespread corruption among judges and magistrates have fallen by 5 percentage points compared to 2014 (49%) (Figure 15). The share who perceive no corruption has remained consistently small (no more than 6%) over the past decade.

Figure 15: Perceived corruption among judges and magistrates | Ghana
 | 2014-2024



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

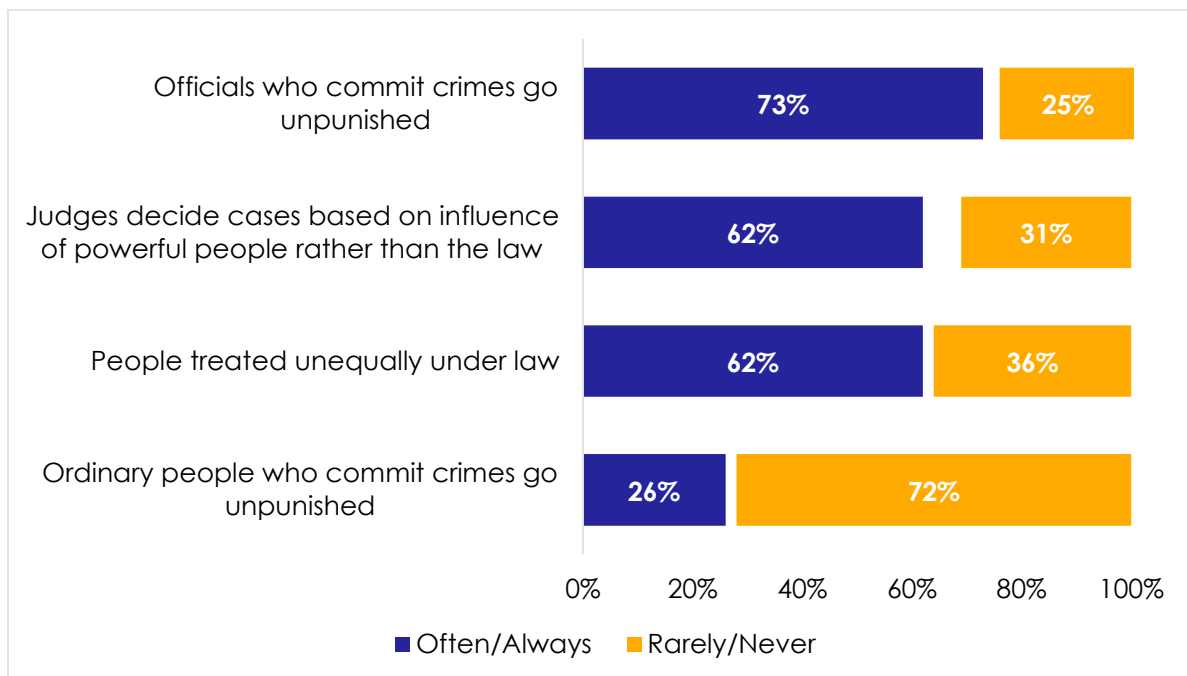
Independence and neutrality of the courts

Ghana's Constitution enshrines the independence of the judiciary and the principle of equality under the law for all persons irrespective of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed, political opinion, or place of origin (Republic of Ghana, 1992).

But survey responses tell a different story on the ground. More than seven in 10 Ghanaians (73%) say officials who commit crimes “often” or “always” go unpunished, while most (72%) say this is “rarely” or “never” the case for ordinary lawbreakers (Figure 16). A large majority (62%) say that people are “often” or “always” treated unequally under the law.

And about six in 10 (62%) say that judges and magistrates “often” or “always” decide cases based on the influence of political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people, rather than based on the law. Fewer than one in three (31%) disagree with this assessment.

Figure 16: Equality under the law | Ghana | 2024



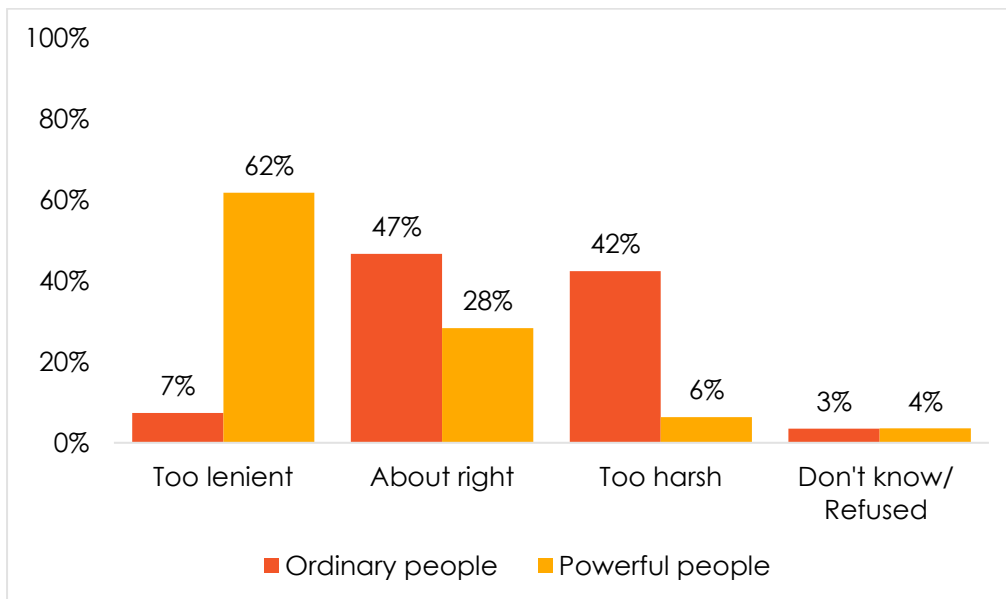
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do judges and magistrates decide cases based on the influence of political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people, rather than based on the law? Are people treated unequally under the law? Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished? Do ordinary people who break the law go unpunished?*

Moreover, citizens see differences between the sentences given to ordinary people who break the law and those applied when political leaders, government officials, and other powerful people are convicted of crimes.

Survey respondents are nine times as likely to see sentences given to the powerful as too lenient (62%, vs. 7% for sentences given to ordinary criminals) (Figure 17). And while only 6% see penalties given to elites as too harsh, seven times as many (42%) say the same about sentences for ordinary lawbreakers.

Fewer than half (47%) say penalties for ordinary wrongdoers are “about right,” and even fewer (28%) agree when it comes to elites.

Figure 17: Severity of penalties for crimes | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked:

In general, when ordinary people are convicted of crimes in this country, do you think that the punishments handed down to them, such as fines or jail or prison sentences, are too harsh, too lenient, or generally about right, or haven't you heard enough to say?

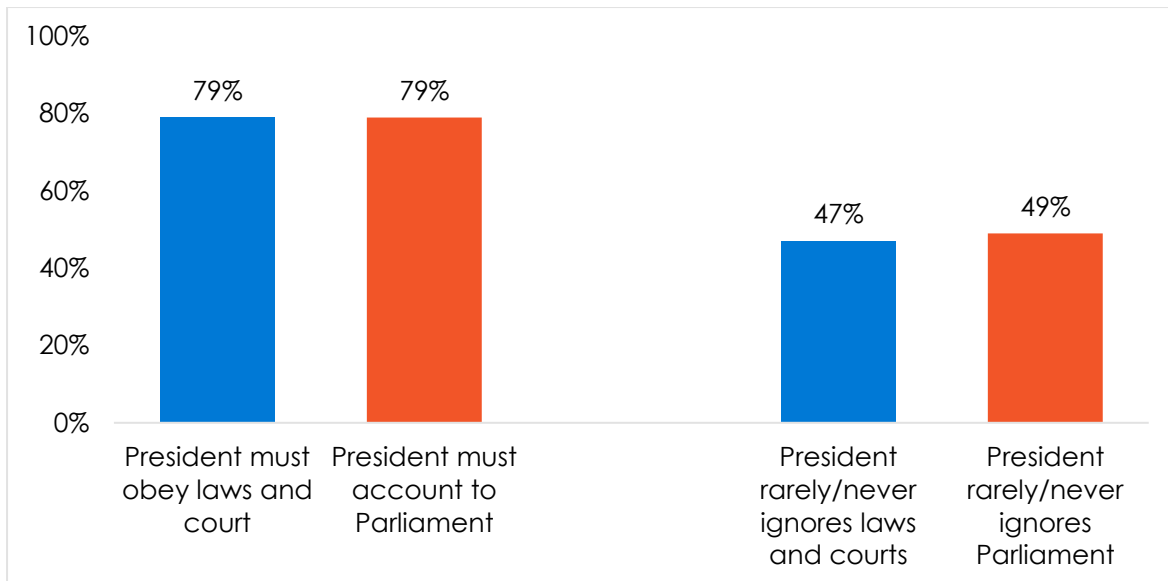
In general, when political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people are convicted of crimes in this country, do you think that the punishments handed down to them, such as fines or jail or prison sentences, are too harsh, too lenient, or generally about right, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Executive respect for the rule of law

Asked about the president's respect for the rule of law, eight in 10 Ghanaians say that the president "must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong" (79%) and that "Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his administration spends taxpayers' money" (79%) (Figure 18).

In practice, fewer than half of citizens say the president usually respects these mandates, "rarely" or "never" ignoring the country's laws and courts (47%) and Parliament (49%).

Figure 18: Presidential respect for the rule of law | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

(% who agree with Statement 2)

Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

(% who agree with Statement 1)

In your opinion, how often, in this country: Does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country? Does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?

Views on the death penalty

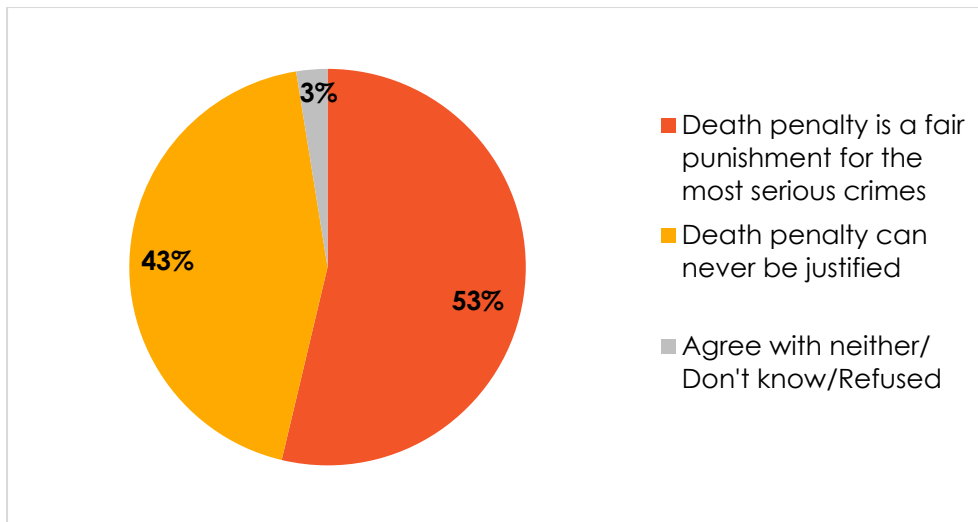
Afrobarometer also asked survey respondents about their views on the death penalty. In July 2023, Ghana's Parliament passed a bill abolishing capital punishment for most crimes, including genocide and piracy. The president assented to the bill the following month (City Newsroom, 2023). And although the death sentence can still be given for acts of high treason, Ghana has not carried out an execution since 1993 (Dehghan, 2023).

However, more than half (53%) of Ghanaians consider the death penalty a fair punishment for people who commit the most serious crimes, such as murder, while 43% say capital punishment is never justified (Figure 19).

Support for the death penalty varies across key demographic groups (Figure 20). More men (57%) than women (50%) endorse capital punishment, while younger citizens (55% of those aged 45 and below) are more supportive than older respondents (46%-50%).

A strong majority (63%) of respondents experiencing high lived poverty say the death penalty is a fair punishment for crimes such as murder, vs. 49%-55% of their better-off compatriots.

Figure 19: Views on the death penalty | Ghana | 2024

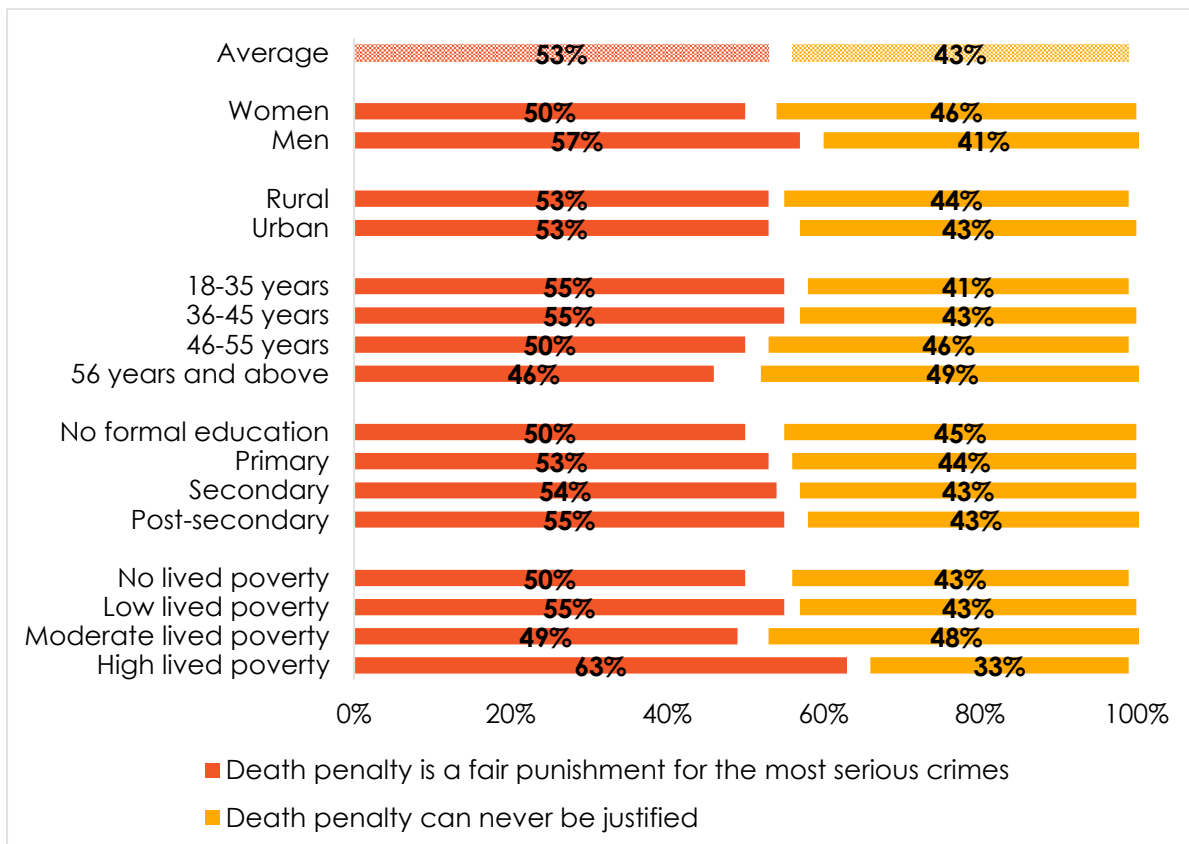


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The death penalty is a fair punishment for people who have committed the most serious crimes, such as murder.

Statement 2: There is no crime for which the death penalty can be justified.

Figure 20: Views on the death penalty | by demographic group | Ghana | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The death penalty is a fair punishment for people who have committed the most serious crimes, such as murder.

Statement 2: There is no crime for which the death penalty can be justified.

Conclusion

Findings show that access to justice remains a pressing concern in Ghana. While about half of citizens express confidence that ordinary people can secure justice in the courts, majorities point to barriers in the form of a lack of affordability, limited legal-aid services, and concerns about fairness.

Trust in the courts has declined over the past decade, while more than four in 10 citizens think that most or all judges are corrupt. In addition, majorities believe that Ghanaians are not treated equally under the law and that judges' rulings are based on the influence of powerful people rather than the law. Most say officials who break the law often go unpunished.

These results should inform debates about fairness and accountability in Ghana's justice system.

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