# Citizens' negative perceptions of police extend well beyond Nigeria's #EndSARS

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 403 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Carolyn Logan**

## Summary

With echoes of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, massive demonstrations against police brutality have recently rocked Nigeria (Busari, 2020; Obaji, 2020). Protests that initially focused on the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) have broadened to demands for systemic police reform (Amnesty International, 2020; Adegoke, 2020).

Although the #EndSARS protests have drawn the greatest international attention, they are only the latest and most visible protests against police abuses in Africa, where protesters have expressed their frustration in countries as diverse as Ghana (BBC, 2020), Kenya (Odula, 2020), and South Africa (Harrisberg, 2020). Long-simmering tensions over the issue have been exacerbated in some countries – Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa among them – by harsh state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The protests in Nigeria and elsewhere have erupted – and continue – against a background of widespread public perceptions and experiences of the police as corrupt, untrustworthy, and unhelpful. These negative views are particularly strong in Nigeria, but importantly, they are common in other African countries as well.

Based on face-to-face interviews in 18 African countries in 2019/2020, Afrobarometer can identify patterns of distrust and high levels of perceived police corruption in many countries. These perceptions are shaped by personal experiences that too often involve unwanted encounters with the police, poor service to the public, and frequent demands for bribes. While Nigeria is one of the worst-afflicted countries, it is by no means the only place where these problems are widespread.

A few countries offer a brighter picture. In Botswana, Namibia, and Cabo Verde, for example, payment of bribes is far less common, and getting assistance from the police is less difficult. While these countries still have room for improvement, their police forces may serve as models for poorly performing countries to examine and emulate.

## 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. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys, completed in 18 countries before being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue in at least 17 more countries in late 2020 and 2021. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch draws on data from 26,777 interviews completed in the first 18 Round 8 countries between July 2019 and April 2020 (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country findings such as regional or Africa-wide averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

## Key findings

- On average across 18 countries, the police are perceived to be the most corrupt among eight government and societal institutions. Almost half (48%) of respondents say "most" or "all" police officials in their country are corrupt.

- Though generally high, perceived corruption among the police varies widely across countries, from just one-fifth (22%) of Cabo Verdeans and Tunisians to more than two-thirds (68%) of Gabonese, Ugandans, and Kenyans who see "most" or "all" police officials as corrupt.

- Fewer than half (45%) of respondents say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot."

- About one in seven citizens (15%) sought assistance from the police in the previous year. Far more (38%) say they encountered the police in other circumstances, such as checkpoints, identity checks, or during investigations. Young, urban, male, and more educated respondents are most likely to have contact with the police.

- Among those who encountered the police, 52% found it difficult to get the assistance they needed, and one in three had to pay a bribe to get help (35%) or avoid problems (33%). The poor are especially likely to be victimized by poor service and demands for bribes.

## Corruption and distrust

Across the continent, citizens consistently give Africa's police forces poor marks for integrity and trustworthiness. The police are, on average, perceived to be the most corrupt among eight key government and societal institutions. Almost half (48%) of respondents say "most" or "all" of the police in their country are corrupt, far outstripping the proportion who perceive widespread corruption among members of Parliament (38%), tax officials (35%), judges and magistrates (35%), and Presidency officials (35%) (Figure 1). Fewer than half (45%) say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot," making them less trusted than presidents and their staff (50%), traditional leaders (57%), and religious leaders (68%).

**Figure 1: Popular trust and perceived corruption** | 18 countries | 2019/2020
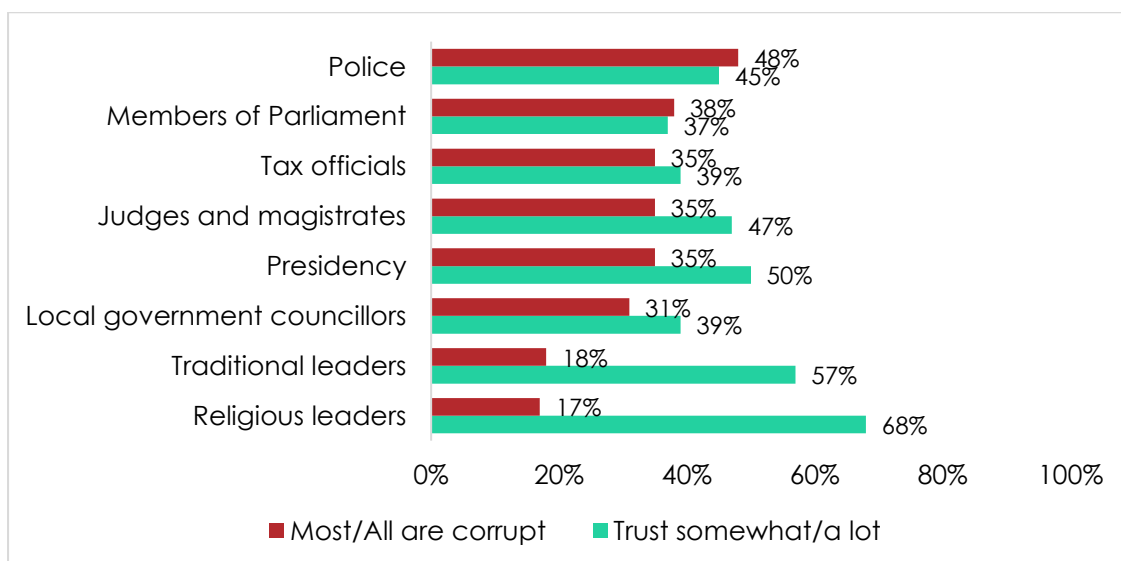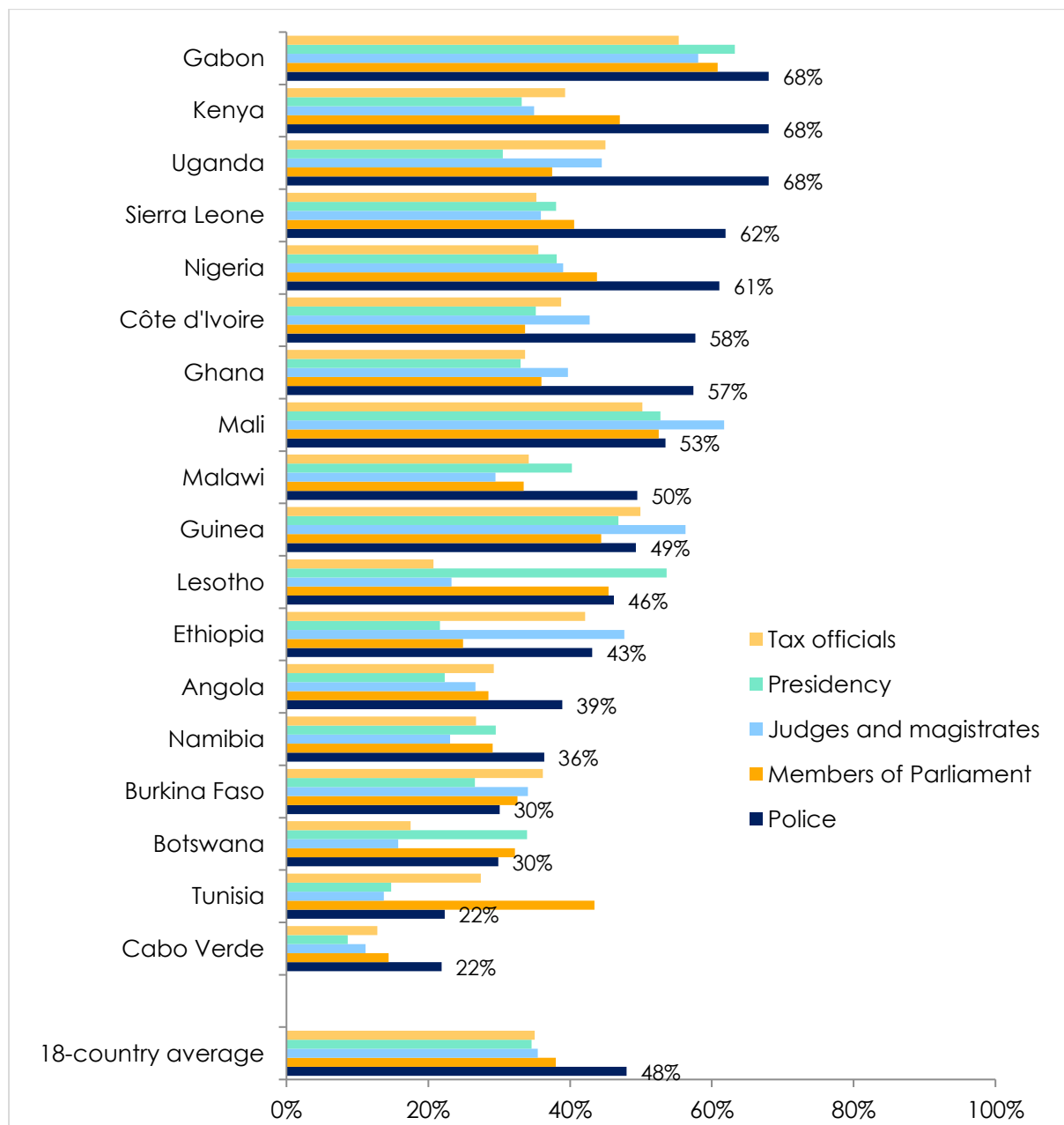


*Respondents were asked:*
  *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*
  *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

Though generally high, perceived corruption among the police varies widely across countries. More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens in Gabon, Kenya, and Uganda see "most" or "all" police officials as corrupt, and more than six in 10 say the same in Nigeria (61%) and Sierra Leone (62%). In contrast, just one in five (22%) share this perception in Cabo Verde and Tunisia (Figure 2).

In 11 of 18 countries, the police are ranked as the most corrupt institution. In several countries, such as Gabon, Mali, and Guinea, perceived corruption is high across many government institutions. But in others, most notably Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana, the police stand out as being far more corrupt than other government institutions, by margins of 15 to 24 percentage points.
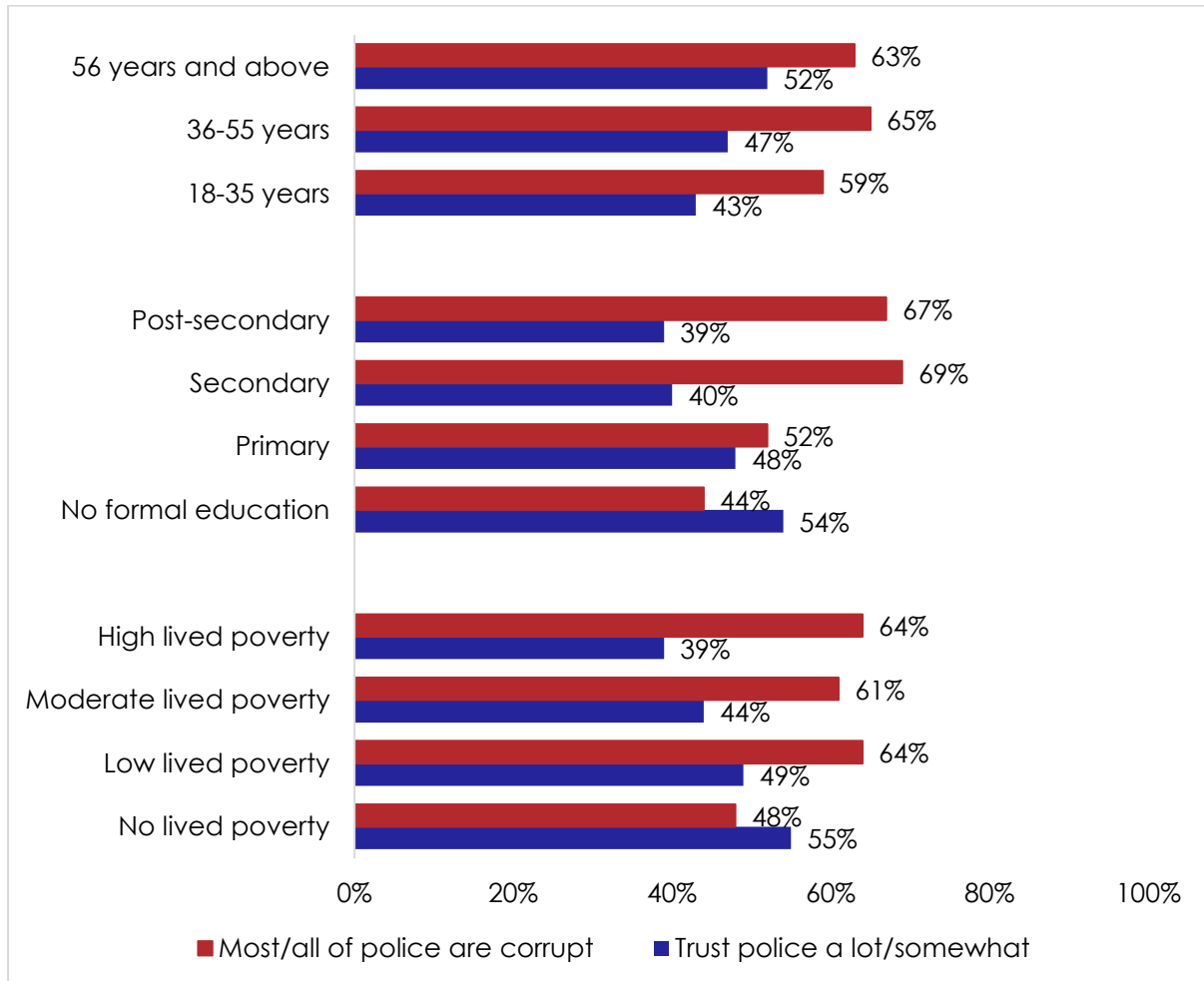
**Figure 2: Perceived corruption among officials | 18 countries | 2019/2020**



*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? (% who say "most" or "all")

Perceptions that the police are corrupt are higher among citizens with more education (67%-69% among those with at least secondary education, vs. 44% among those with no formal education) (Figure 3). Africans who experience at least some degree of poverty or deprivation[1] are also significantly more likely to see the police as corrupt (61%-64%) compared to those with no experience of poverty (48%).

**Figure 3: Trust in and perceived corruption among police** | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020
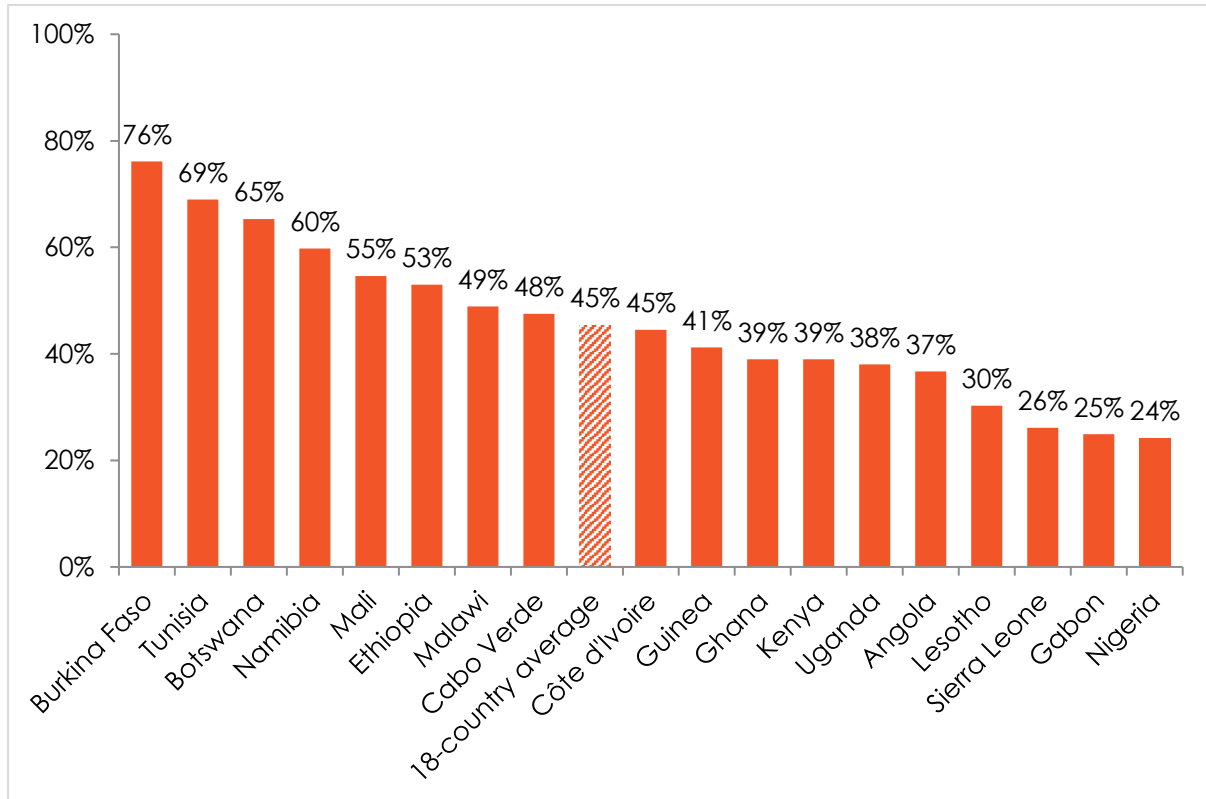


**Respondents were asked:**
*How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*
*How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

Like perceptions of corruption, popular trust in the police varies widely across surveyed countries (Figure 4). Nigerians, Gabonese, and Sierra Leoneans are least trusting of their police; only one in four say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot." In contrast, the police enjoy high popular trust in Burkina Faso (76%), Tunisia (69%), and Botswana (65%).

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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 (2020).

In comparison to other state institutions (i.e. the Presidency, Parliament, local government, courts, and revenue authorities), the police are the least trusted institution in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya, but they are the most trusted in Namibia, Botswana, and Burkina Faso.

**Figure 4: Trust in police** | 18 countries | 2019/2020



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

On average, across the 15 countries where perceptions of the police have been tracked since 2011/2013, the assessment that "all" or "most" police are corrupt has increased only slightly, from 45% to 48%. However, there have been drastic increases in perceived police corruption in Côte d'Ivoire (+20 percentage points), Guinea (+14 points), Malawi (+12 points), and Lesotho (+11 points), with smaller increases in Mali (+7 points), Uganda (+6 points), and Cabo Verde (+5 points) (Figure 5).

Only three countries – Nigeria (-17 points), Sierra Leone (-7 points), and Namibia (-6 points) – show significant improvement over the same period (Figure 6), although this still leaves Nigeria and Sierra Leone reporting some of the highest levels of perceived corruption in 2019/2020.

**Figure 5: Increases in perceived corruption among police** | 7 countries | 2011-2020
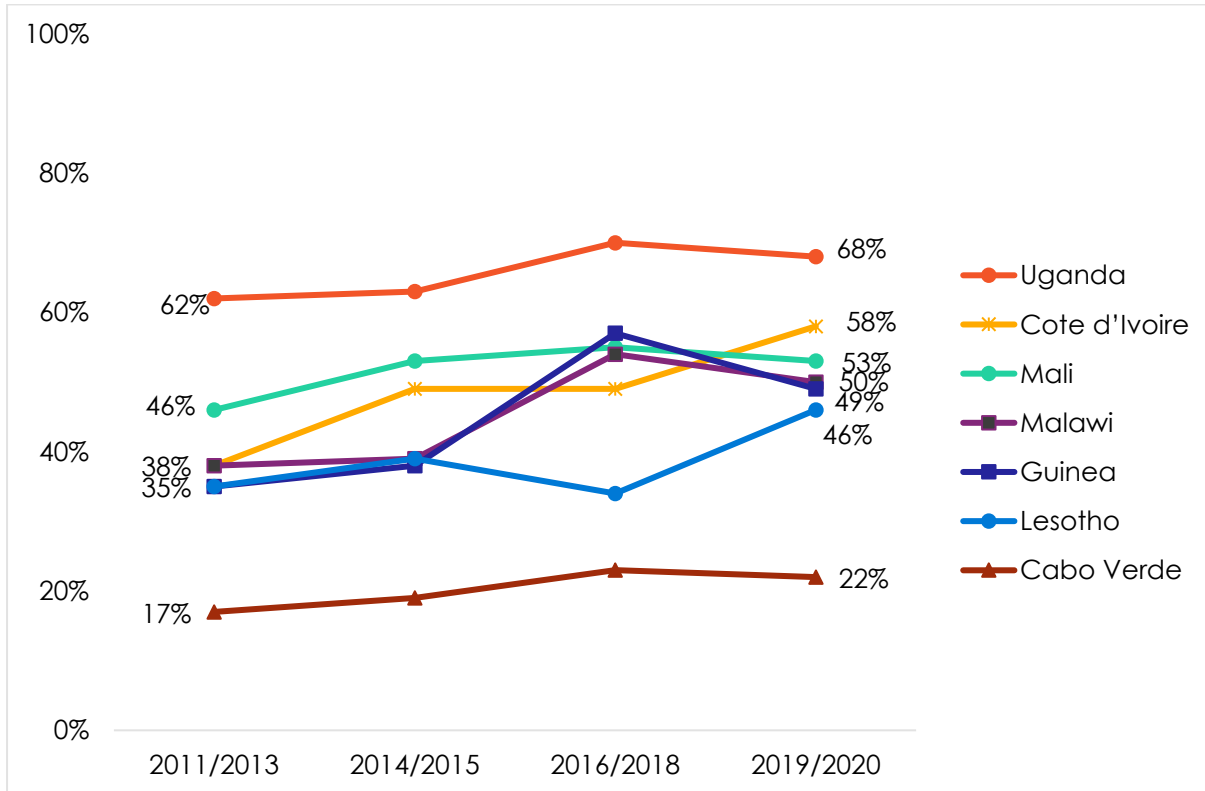


*Respondents were asked:* How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "all" or "most")

**Figure 6: Decreases in perceived corruption among police** | 3 countries | 2011-2020
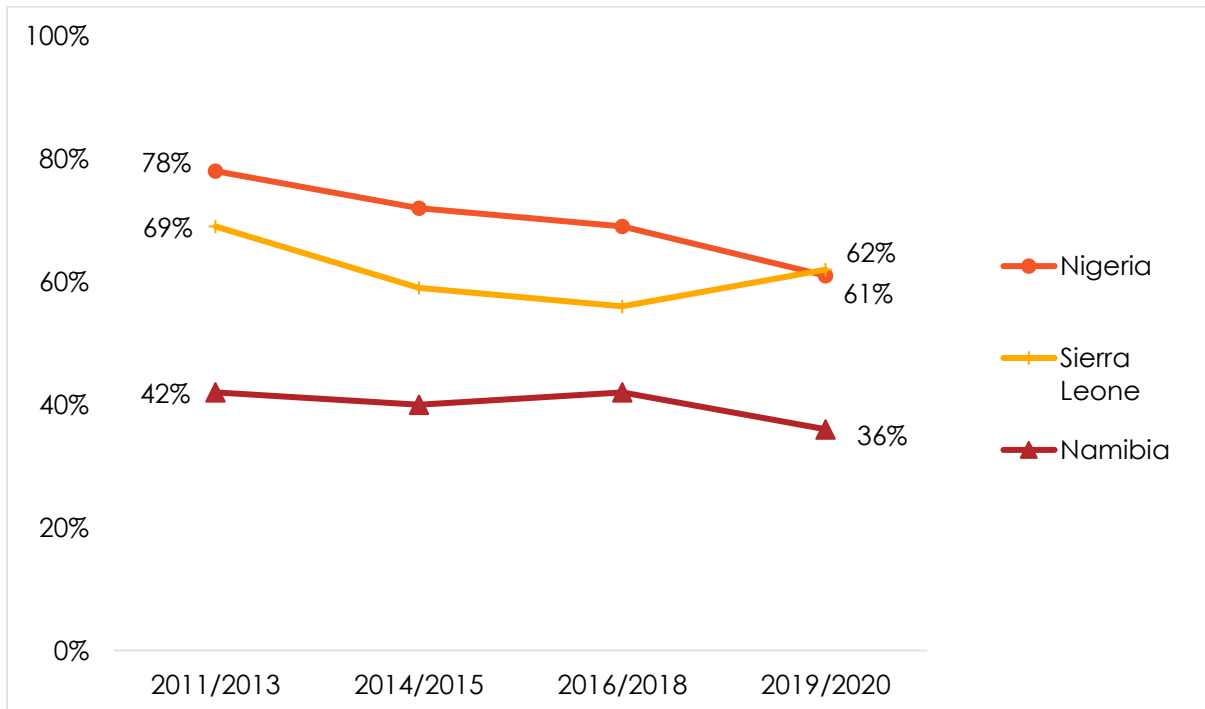


*Respondents were asked:* How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "all" or "most")
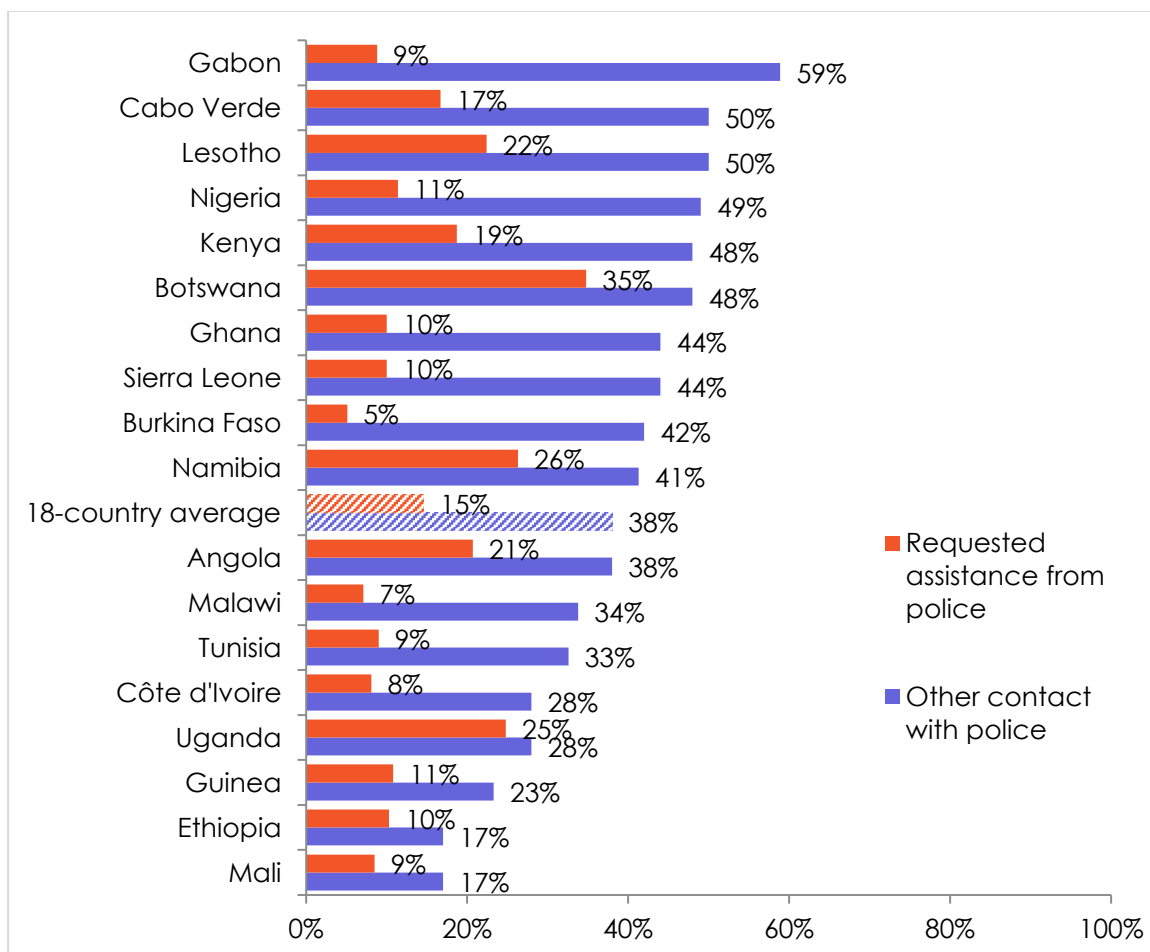
## Encounters with the police

These perceptions of the police may be based, at least in part, on personal experience and exposure. While about one in seven citizens (15%) say they went to the police during the previous year to request assistance, many more (38%) say they encountered the police in other circumstances, such as at checkpoints or identity checks or during investigations (Figure 7).

High trust in the police in Botswana (65%, Figure 4) may be reflected in the fact that more than one in three Batswana (35%) approached the police for assistance at least once during the previous year. More than one in five also had voluntary contact with the police in Namibia (26%), Uganda (25%), Lesotho (22%), and Angola (21%). However, in nine of the 18 countries, one in 10 or fewer sought out police assistance.

Contact with the police under other circumstances was higher in all countries. In Gabon, a remarkable 59% report encountering the police via checkpoints, identity checks, or investigations, and the same is true for half of Basotho (50%), Cabo Verdeans (50%), Nigerians (49%), and Kenyans (49%). Fewer than one in five experienced similar encounters in Ethiopia and Mali (17% each).

### Figure 7: Contact with police | 18 countries | 2019/2020



*Respondents were asked:*
*In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (% who say "yes")*
*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? (% who say "often," "a few times," or "once or twice")*

Not all citizens face the same likelihood of having to deal with the police under "other" circumstances. Younger citizens, urban residents, and men are more likely to face these encounters than elders, rural residents, and women (Figure 8). Perhaps surprisingly, income appears to have little impact on the likelihood of an encounter, whereas education shows a strong association: Those with secondary education and above are nearly twice as likely to encounter the police, reflecting in part the strong association between higher levels of education and urban residence, where encounters with the police are much more likely.

**Figure 8: Who encounters police** | 18 countries | 2019/2020
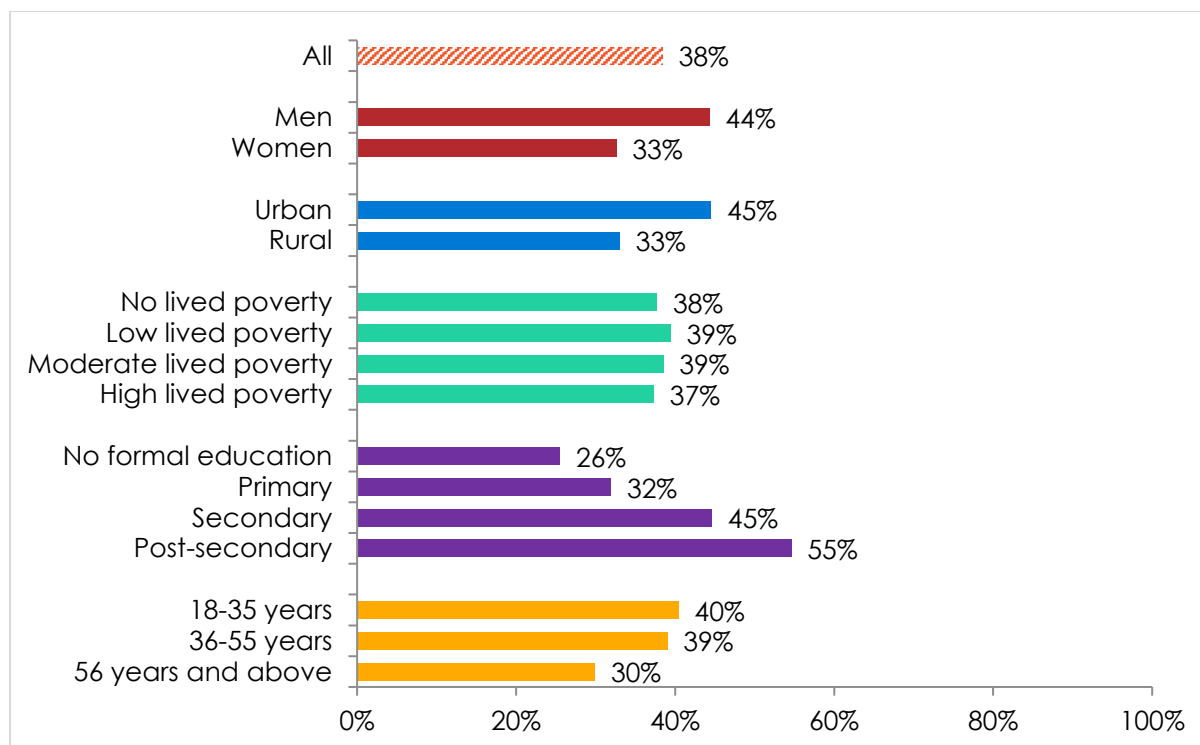


***Respondents were asked:*** *In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? (% who say "often," "a few times," or "once or twice")*
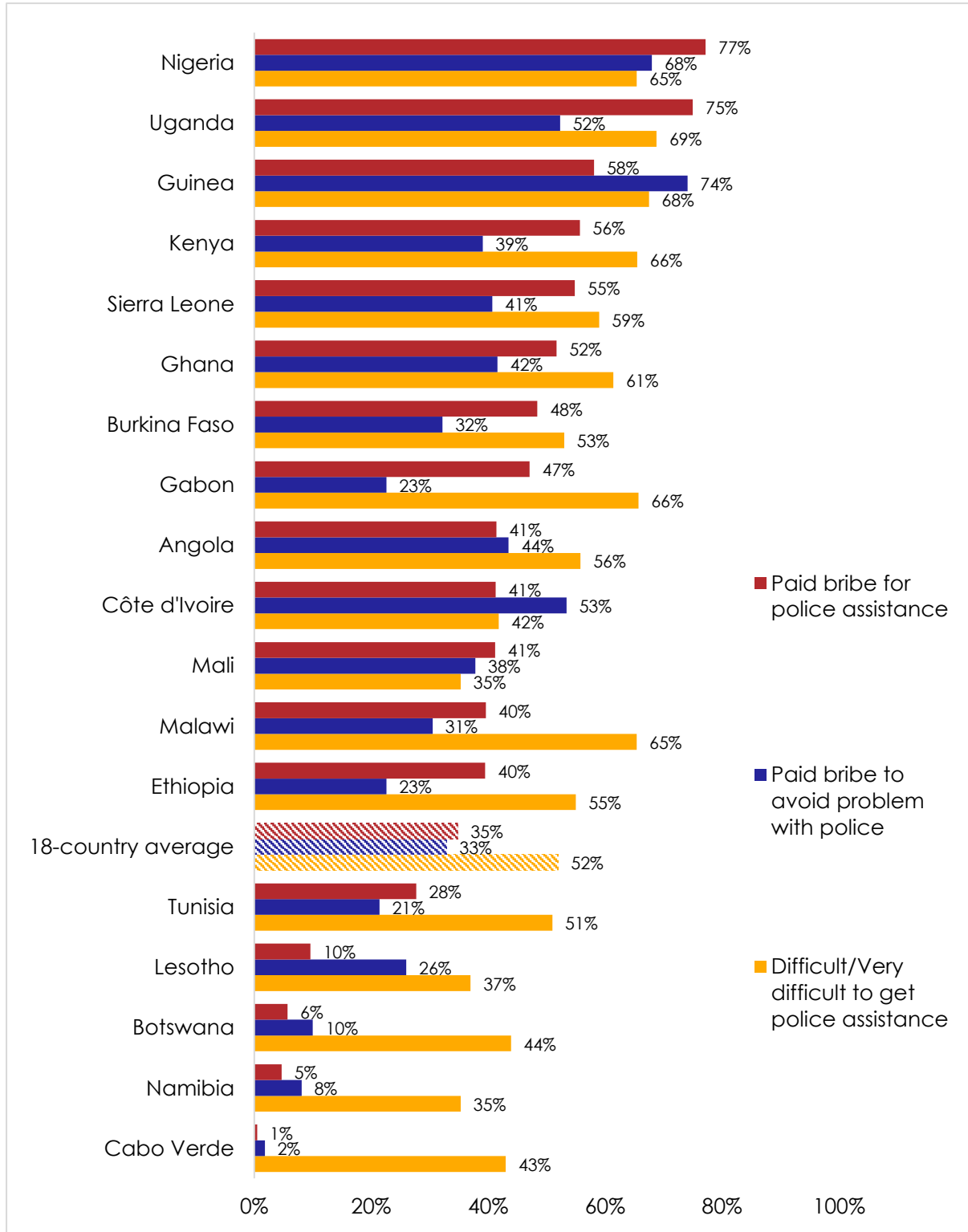
Among those who contacted the police for assistance, more than half (52%) report that it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to get the help they needed. As many as two-thirds found it difficult in Uganda (69%), Guinea (68%), Kenya (66%), Gabon (66%), Nigeria (65%), and Malawi (65%), and even among the best-performing countries – Namibia (35%), Mali (37%), and Lesotho (37%) – more than one in three experienced challenges (Figure 9).

Having to pay bribes was a common problem in both types of encounters with the police. More than one in three citizens (35%) who contacted the police for assistance report paying a bribe to get the help they needed, and 33% of those who encountered the police in other situations paid bribes to avoid problems.

The differences in bribe paying across the continent are stark. Three-quarters of Nigerians (77%) and Ugandans (75%) who sought police assistance paid a bribe, as did three in four Guineans (74%) who encountered the police in other situations. In contrast, one in 10 or fewer Batswana, Namibians, and Cabo Verdeans paid a bribe.

Average levels of bribe paying to the police are high compared to demand for bribes in exchange for other key public services, such as the delivery of identity documents (25%), medical care (20%), and public school services (19%) (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Problems in encounters with the police** | 18 countries | 2019/2020

| Country | Paid bribe for police assistance | Paid bribe to avoid problem with police | Difficult/Very difficult to get police assistance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nigeria | 77% | 68% | 65% |
| Uganda | 75% | 52% | 69% |
| Guinea | 58% | 74% | 68% |
| Kenya | 56% | 39% | 66% |
| Sierra Leone | 55% | 41% | 59% |
| Ghana | 52% | 42% | 61% |
| Burkina Faso | 48% | 32% | 53% |
| Gabon | 47% | 23% | 66% |
| Angola | 41% | 44% | 56% |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 41% | 53% | 42% |
| Mali | 41% | 38% | 35% |
| Malawi | 40% | 31% | 65% |
| Ethiopia | 40% | 23% | 55% |
| 18-country average | 35% | 33% | 52% |
| Tunisia | 28% | 21% | 51% |
| Lesotho | 10% | 26% | 37% |
| Botswana | 6% | 10% | 44% |
| Namibia | 5% | 8% | 35% |
| Cabo Verde | 1% | 2% | 43% |

*Respondents who tried to get police assistance or encountered the police in other situations during the previous 12 months were asked:*
> *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (% "difficult" or "very difficult")*
> *And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [in order to get the needed assistance or avoid problems]? (% who say "once or twice", "a few times" or "often")*
*(Note: Respondents who had no contact with the police are excluded.)*

**Figure 10: Paying bribes to access public services** | 18 countries | 2019/2020
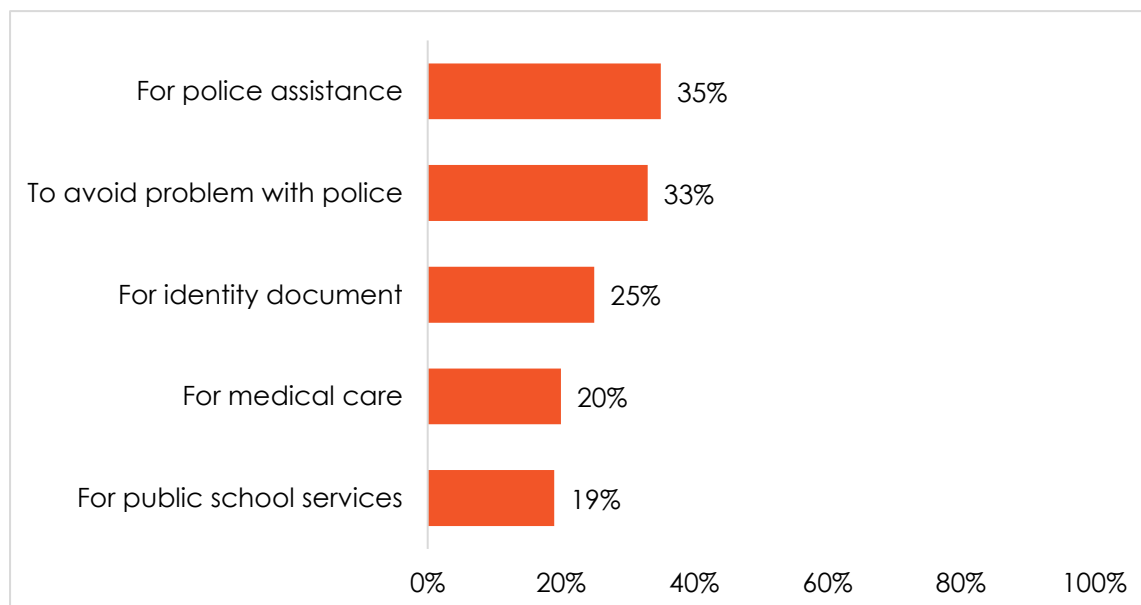


*Respondents who had contact with key public services during the previous year were asked:* *And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [for a public official to obtain the needed assistance or avoid problems]? (Note: Respondents who had no contact with the police are excluded.)*

We reviewed above (Figure 8) the profile of those most likely to encounter the police: those who are younger, more urban, more educated, and/or male. But once contact is made, who is most likely to encounter problems in their dealings with the police, either in terms of finding it difficult to get help or having to pay a bribe?

Men are again more likely than women to experience these problems. But in other ways, the profiles for contact and for encountering problems are quite different. While urbanites are more likely to have contact with the police, rural inhabitants face more demands for bribes once contact has occurred. Similarly, the young are more likely to have to pay bribes, but all age groups find it equally difficult to get the help they seek (Figure 11).

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The most striking differences relate to poverty level. Whereas all income levels are roughly equally likely to encounter the police, the poor are far more likely to be victimized by poor service and demands for bribes. "Only" 20%-22% of the wealthiest respondents had to pay bribes to the police, compared to more than twice as many – 41%-46% – of the poorest respondents. And a 26-percentage-point gap separates the poorest and the wealthiest groups with respect to the difficulty of securing assistance. Education, which is strongly associated with contact, is less of a factor when it comes to experiencing problems in the encounter, although those with no education are more likely to have to pay bribes.

**Figure 11: Who experiences problems in encounters with the police?** | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020
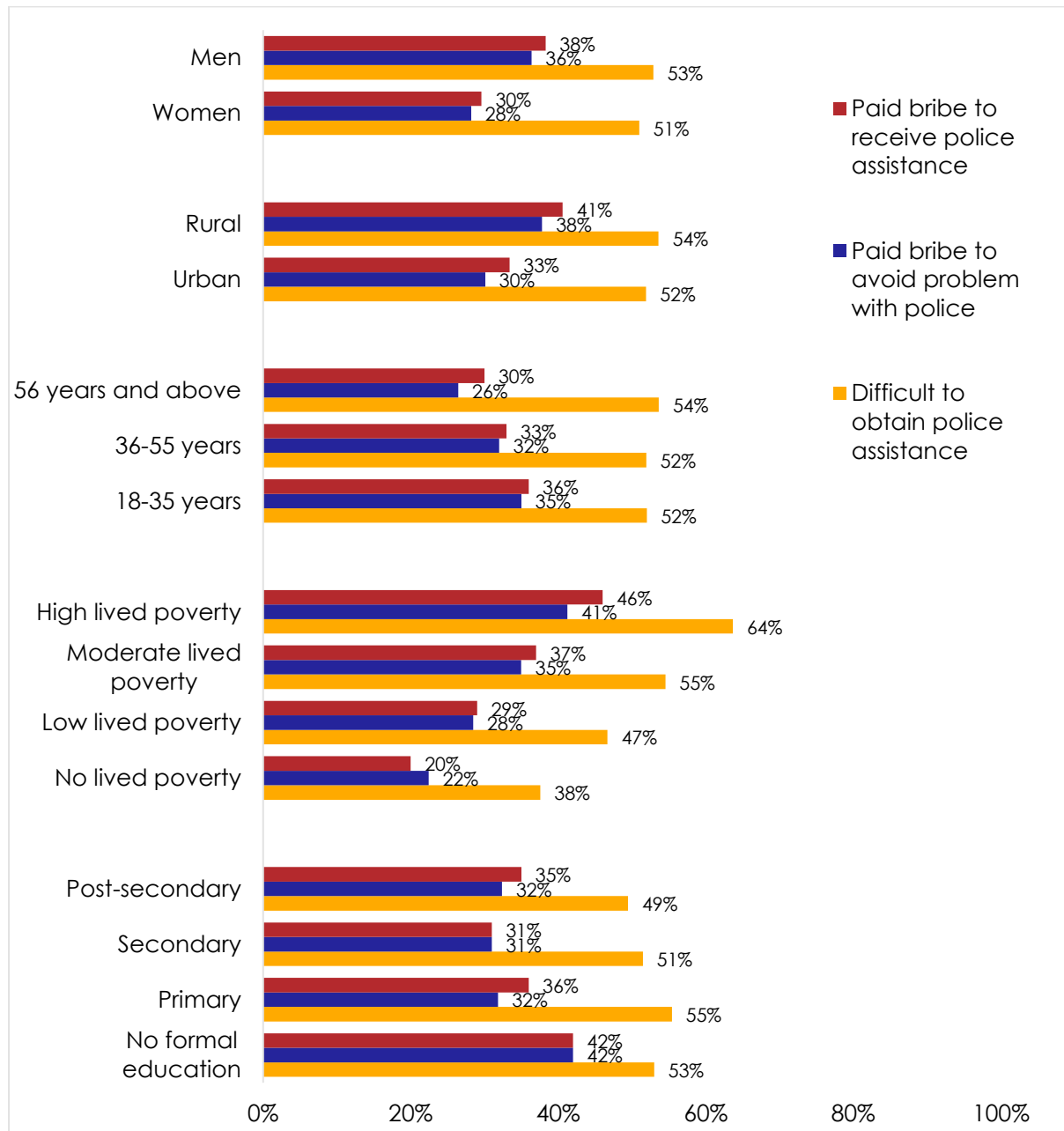


*Respondents who tried to get police assistance or encountered the police in other situations during the previous 12 months were asked:*

*How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult")*

*And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [in order to get the needed assistance or avoid problems]? (% who say "often," "a few times," or "once or twice")*

*(Note: Respondents who had no contact with the police are excluded.)*

## Conclusion

Popular perceptions and experiences of the police as corrupt, untrustworthy, and unhelpful provide fertile soil for protests in Nigeria and other African countries. Even without high-profile reports of police brutality that send protesters into the streets, poor police service and

demands for bribes make everyday victims of citizens from all walks of life, especially the poor. Countries plagued by predatory police practices may find inspiration in better performers such as Botswana, Namibia, and Cabo Verde, where the officer's hand is more likely to offer help and less likely to demand a bribe.

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## Appendix

**Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds**

| Country | Months when Round 8 fieldwork was conducted | Previous survey rounds |
|---|---|---|
| Angola | Nov-Dec 2019 | - |
| Botswana | July-Aug 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Burkina Faso | Dec 2019 | 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017 |
| Cabo Verde | Dec 2019 | 2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Nov 2019 | 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Ethiopia | Dec 2019-Jan 2020 | 2013 |
| Gabon | Feb 2020 | 2015, 2017 |
| Ghana | Sept-Oct 2019 | 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Guinea | Nov-Dec 2019 | 2013, 2015, 2017 |
| Kenya | Aug-Sept 2019 | 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016 |
| Lesotho | Feb-March 2020 | 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Malawi | Nov-Dec 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Mali | March-April 2020 | 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017 |
| Namibia | Aug 2019 | 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017 |
| Nigeria | Jan-Feb 2020 | 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017 |
| Sierra Leone | March 2020 | 2012, 2015, 2018 |
| Tunisia | Feb-March 2020 | 2013, 2015, 2018 |
| Uganda | Sept-Oct 2019 | 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017 |

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