

Police corruption in Africa undermines trust, but support for law enforcement remains strong

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 56 | Pauline M. Wambua

Summary

According to the 2013 Global Corruption Report by Transparency International (TI), the police are perceived as the most corrupt institution in Africa. Of 36 countries worldwide where police are seen as the most corrupt institution, 20 are in Africa. According to the report, the police are the most often bribed institution, followed by the judiciary; 31% of people who came into contact with the police report having paid a bribe. Bribery rates of the police were 75% or higher in seven countries, including six African countries.

Such negative perceptions of police integrity are damaging to the credibility and effectiveness of the agency charged with protecting the lives and property of citizens. As Kumssa (2015) observes, police corruption undermines public trust in the institution and impairs effective enforcement of the law.

While the TI report is loud and clear, it does not address how public perceptions of police corruption relate to citizens' trust in the police, support for the police mandate to make people obey the law, and crime victims' decision on whether to report crime. This paper adds the voices of ordinary Africans on these issues, as well as on citizens' first-hand experience of bribing the police, using Afrobarometer surveys carried out in 34 African countries between 2002 and 2013.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014/2015). Twelve countries have been part of the surveys since Round 1 (1999/2001). Subsequent rounds have increased the number of countries to 16 (2002/2003), 18 (2005/2006), 20 (2008/2009), and 34 (2011/2013).

Of the 26 African countries that TI surveyed in 2012/2013, 23 were also part of the 2011/2013 Afrobarometer surveys. TI and Afrobarometer differ in methodology: TI uses computer-assisted telephone interviewing in addition to face-to-face interviews and in some countries samples only urban areas; Afrobarometer uses only face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice, and all samples are nationally representative.

Afrobarometer's samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 adults yield country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% (for 1,200 respondents) or +/-2% (for 2,400 respondents) at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

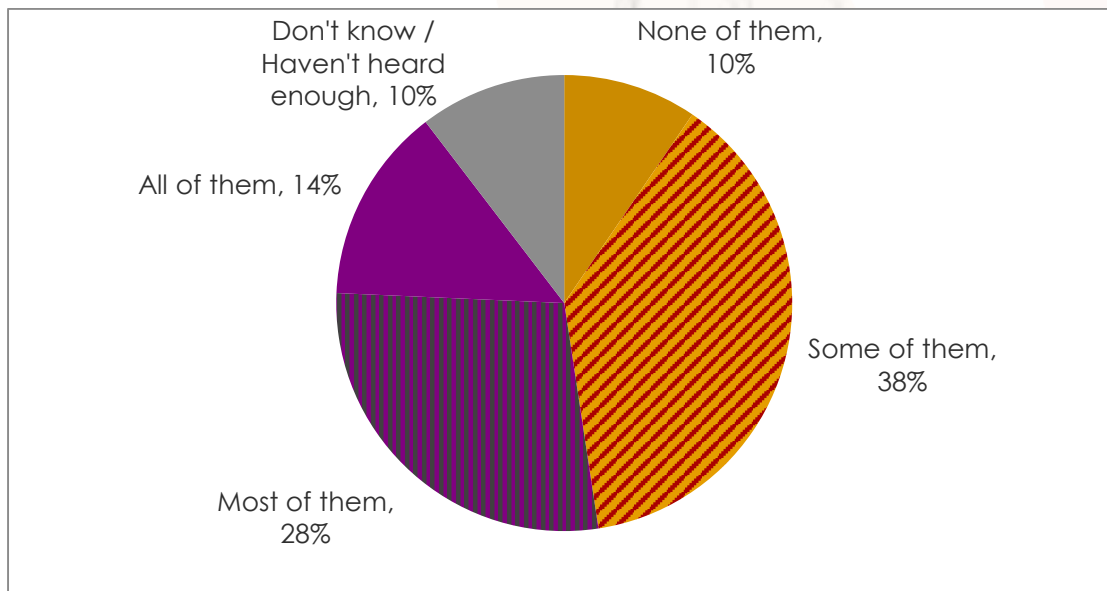
- Across the 34 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, the police are perceived as the most corrupt public institution; on average, 42% of citizens say "most" or "all" police are corrupt.

- Only about half (53%) of citizens say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot.” In the 18 countries tracked since 2005, trust in the police has decreased from 58% in 2005/2006 to 54% in 2011-2013.
- As perceptions of corruption among police have increased, people’s trust in the police has decreased.
- Despite these trends, support for the police mandate to make people obey the law has increased across the 16 countries tracked since 2002/2003, from 73% to 79% in 2011/2013.
- Only half of citizens would go to the police first for assistance if they were victims of crime. The main reasons why victims do not report crimes to the police are concerns about police performance.
- Among the 16 countries tracked since 2002/2003, Zambia is the only country where trust in the police and support for the police mandate have increased while perceived police corruption and the reported payment of bribes to police have decreased.

Perceived corruption among the police

Across 34 countries surveyed in 2011/2013, about four of 10 respondents (42%) say that “most” or “all” of the police are corrupt; only 10% say that “none” of the police are corrupt (Figure 1).

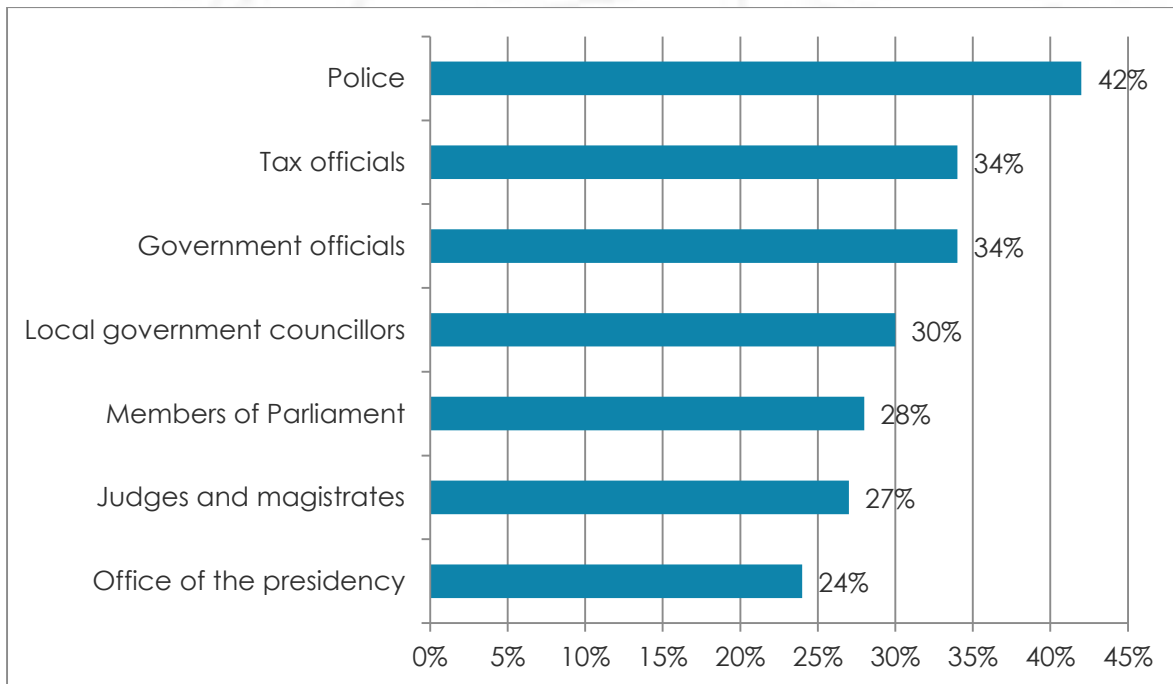
Figure 1: Perceptions of police corruption | 34 countries | 2011/2013



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: Police?*

Citizens perceive the police as their countries' most corrupt public institution (Figure 2). Among the 34 surveyed countries, citizens in only eight countries do not rank the police as the most corrupt institution (Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Namibia, Sudan, Swaziland, and Togo). In these countries, the police are ranked in the top three, among the seven institutions that were compared, except for Algeria, where the police rank sixth.

Figure 2: Perceptions of corruption across institutions | 34 countries | 2011/2013

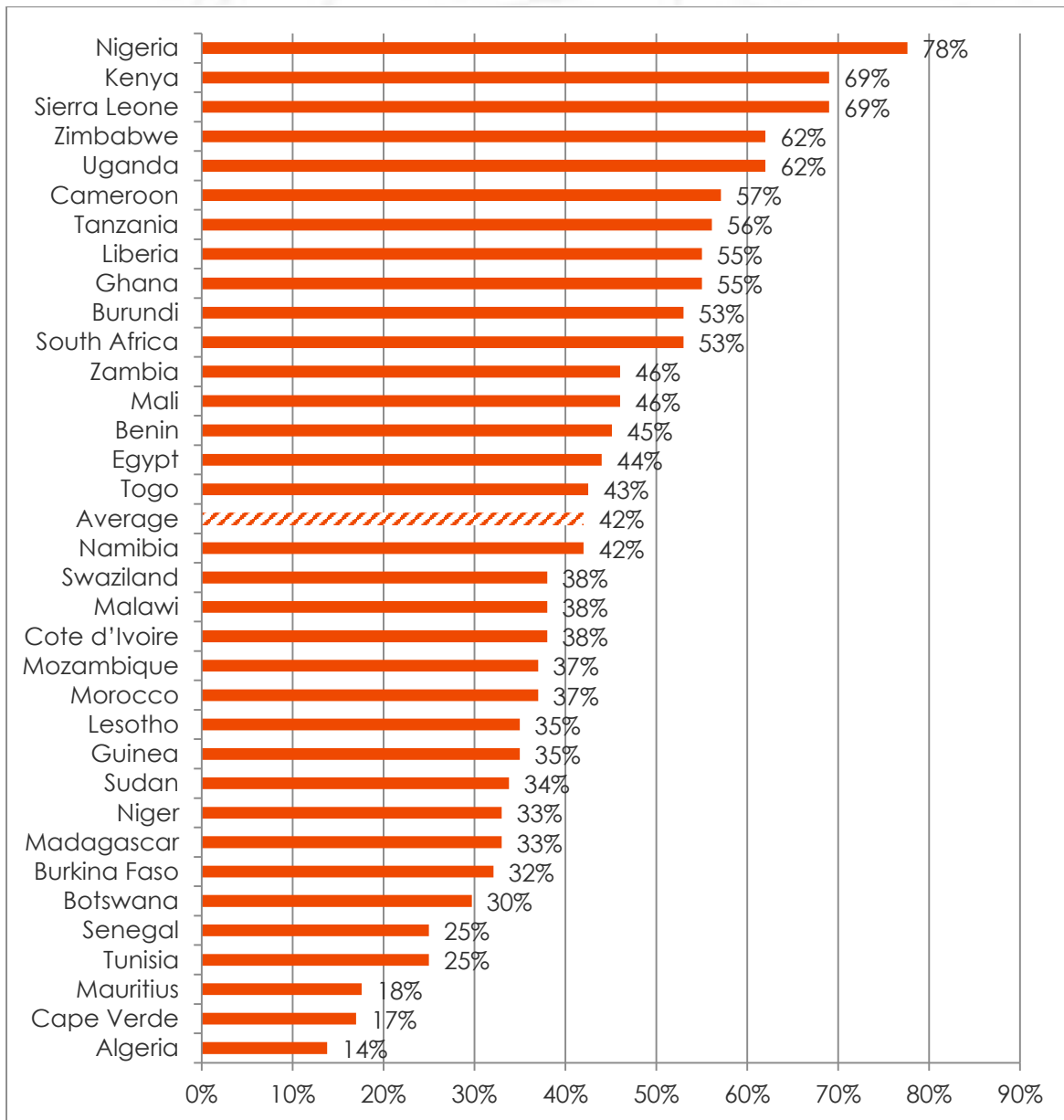


(% who say “all of them” or “most of them”)

Nonetheless, countries vary widely in the proportions of the population who see the police as corrupt. Almost eight of 10 Nigerians (78%) perceive “most” or “all” police to be corrupt, compared to only 17% of Cape Verdeans (where police still rank as the most corrupt institution) and 14% of Algerians (Figure 3).

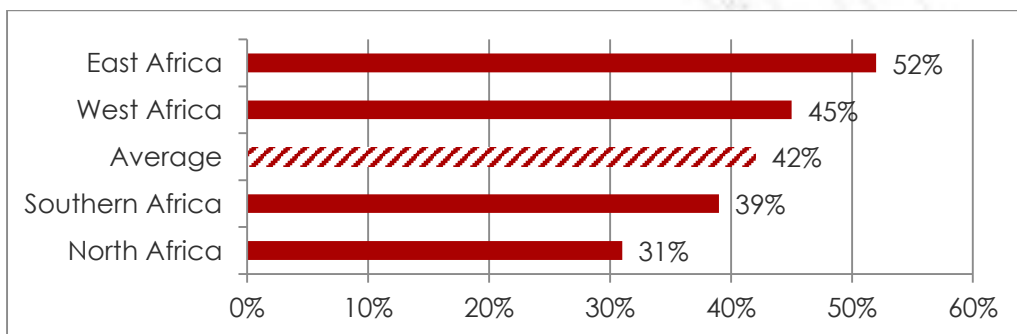
At the regional level, police in East Africa are perceived to be corrupt by the largest proportion of citizens: 52% of East Africans say “most” or “all” of their countries’ police are corrupt, compared to 45% of West Africans, 39% of southern Africans, and 31% of North Africans (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Perceptions of police corruption by country | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(% who say "all of them" or "most of them")

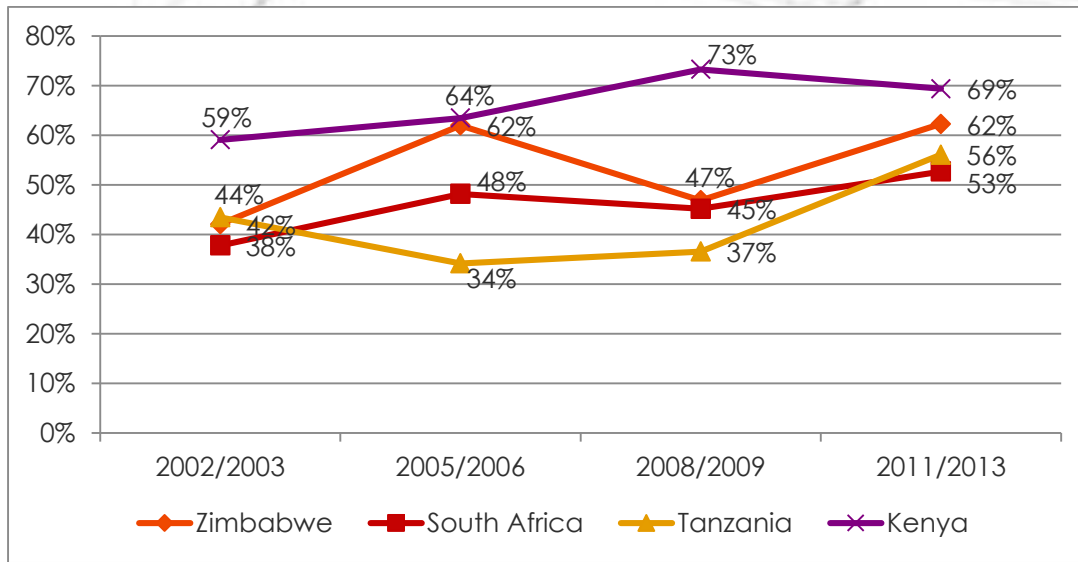
Figure 4: Perceptions of police corruption by region | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(% who say "all of them" or "most of them")

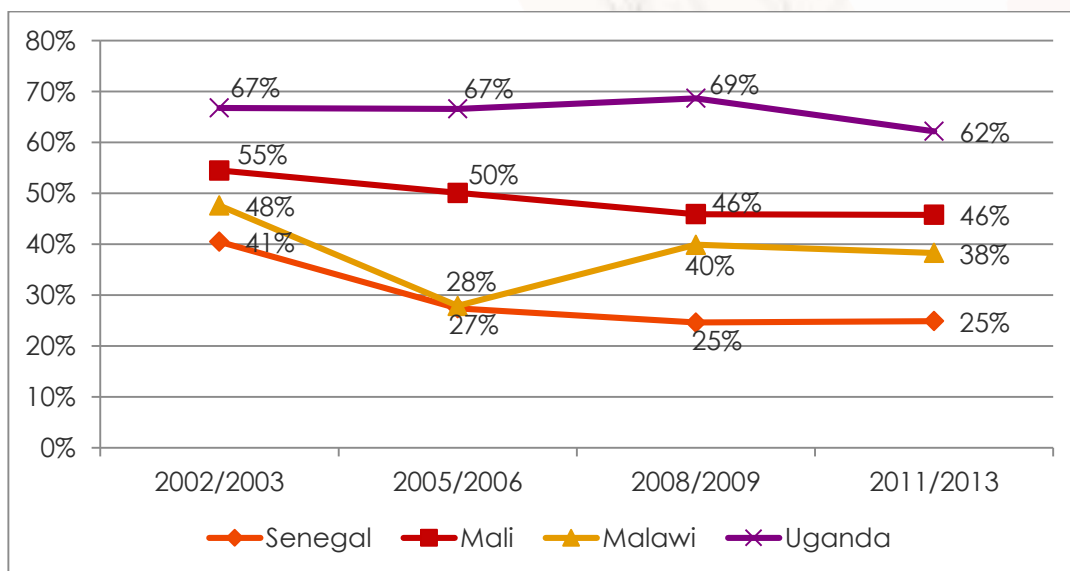
Across the 16 countries tracked since 2002/2003,¹ the proportion of citizens who perceive “most” or “all” police to be corrupt increased from 43% to 47% in 2011/2013. Public perceptions of corruption among the police in Zimbabwe showed the greatest increase, a 20-percentage-point jump (Figure 5), while the greatest decrease was in Senegal, which saw a 16-point decline (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Change in perceptions of police corruption: Countries with greatest increase | 16 countries | 2002-2013



(% saying “all of them” or “most of them”)

Figure 6: Change in perceptions of police corruption: Countries with greatest decrease | 16 countries | 2002-2013



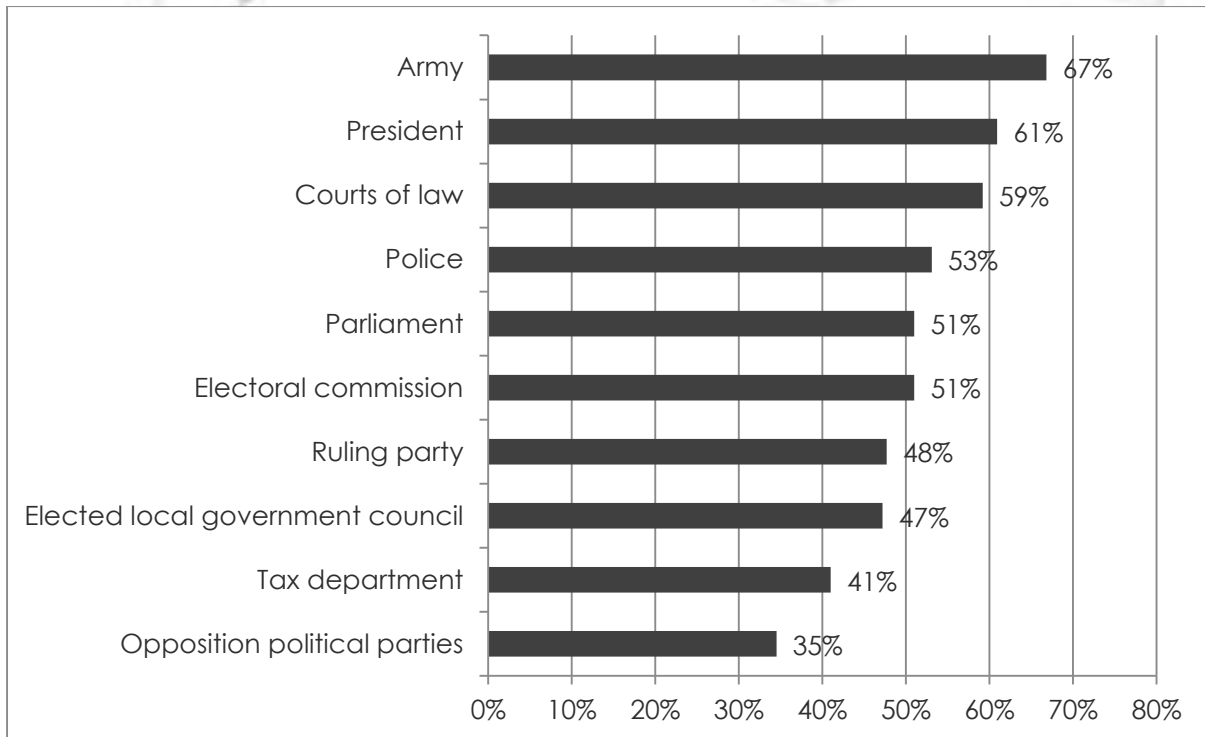
(% saying “all of them” or “most of them”)

¹ The 16 countries tracked since Round 2 in 2002/2003 are Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Trust in the police

Slightly more than half of citizens (53%) say they trust the police “somewhat” or “a lot,” while 44% trust them “not at all” or “just a little.” Still, the police are not among the least-trusted institutions. Citizens trust the army the most and opposition political parties the least (Figure 7). Among the 34 countries, the police are the least-trusted institution in only Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

Figure 7: Trust in institutions | 34 countries | 2011/2013

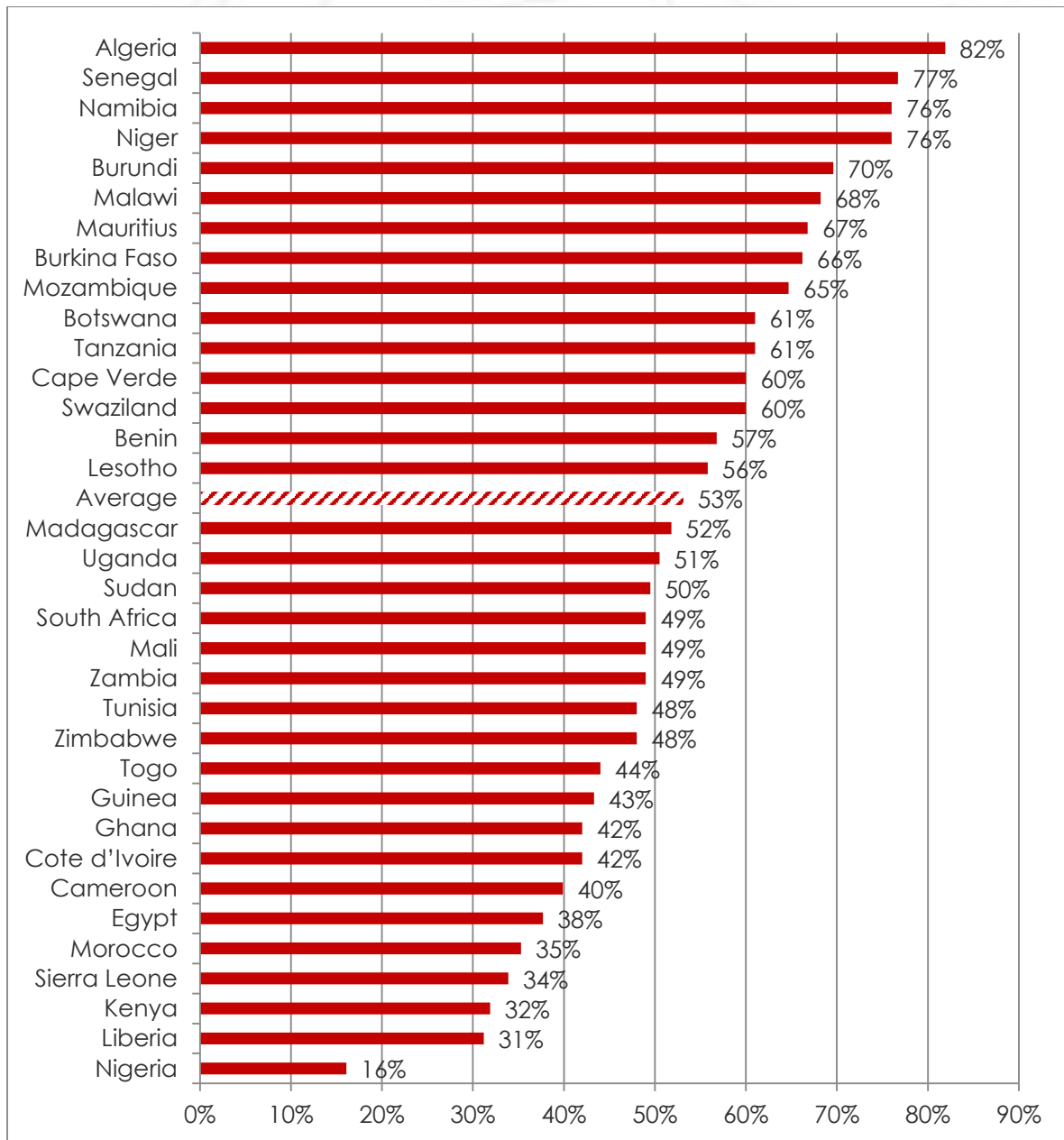


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?
 (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Algerians trust their police the most, with 82% saying they trust them “somewhat” or “a lot,” while Nigerians trust their police the least (16%) (Figure 8).

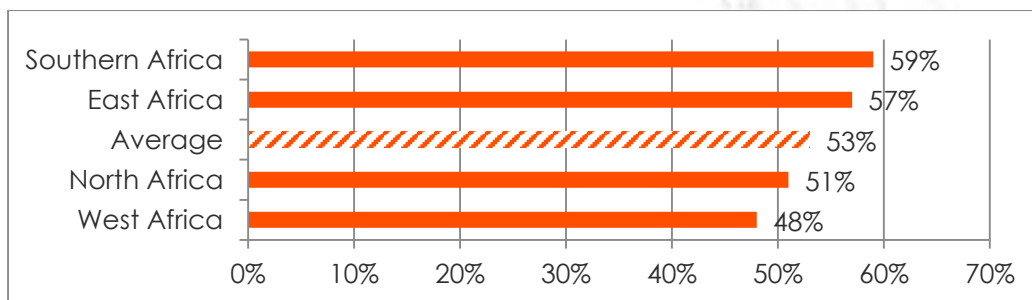
At the regional level, southern Africans (59%) trust their countries' police more than East Africans (57%), North Africans (51%), and West Africans (48%) (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Trust in the police by country | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

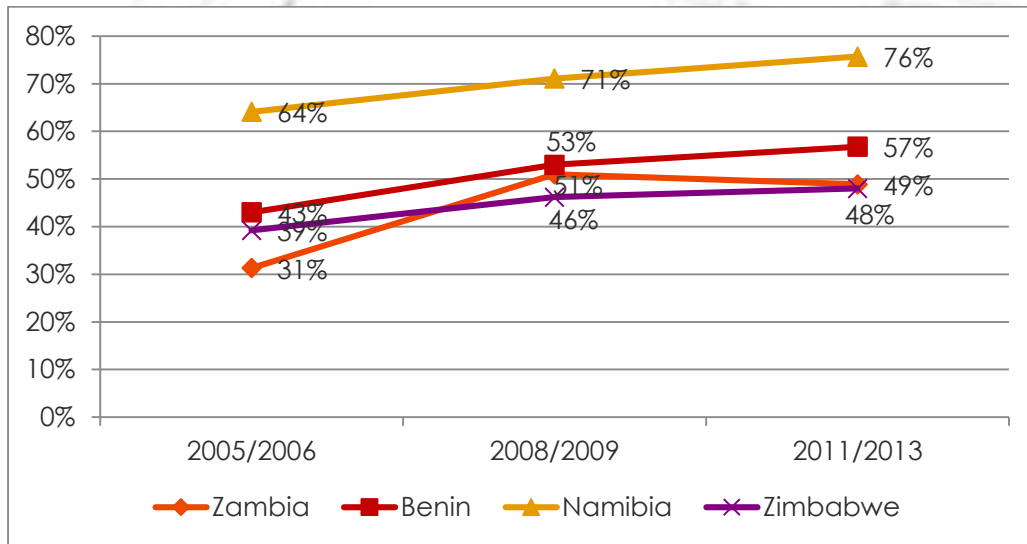
Figure 9: Trust in the police by region | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

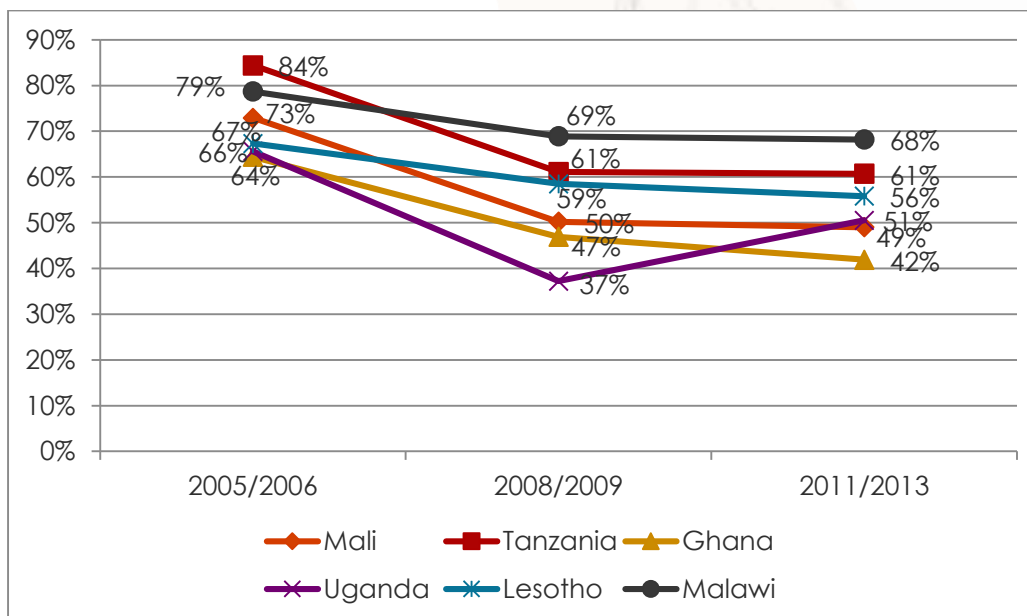
Across the 18 countries tracked since 2005/2006,² trust in the police decreased from 58% to 54% in 2011/2013. Benin, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe show increasing trust levels, most notably an 18-percentage-point increase in Zambia between 2005 and 2013 (Figure 10). Tanzania, Mali, and Ghana show the largest decreases in trust over the period, each with a drop of more than 20 percentage points (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Trust in police: Countries with greatest increase | 18 countries | 2005-2013



(% saying "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 11: Trust in police: Countries with greatest decrease | 18 countries | 2005-2013

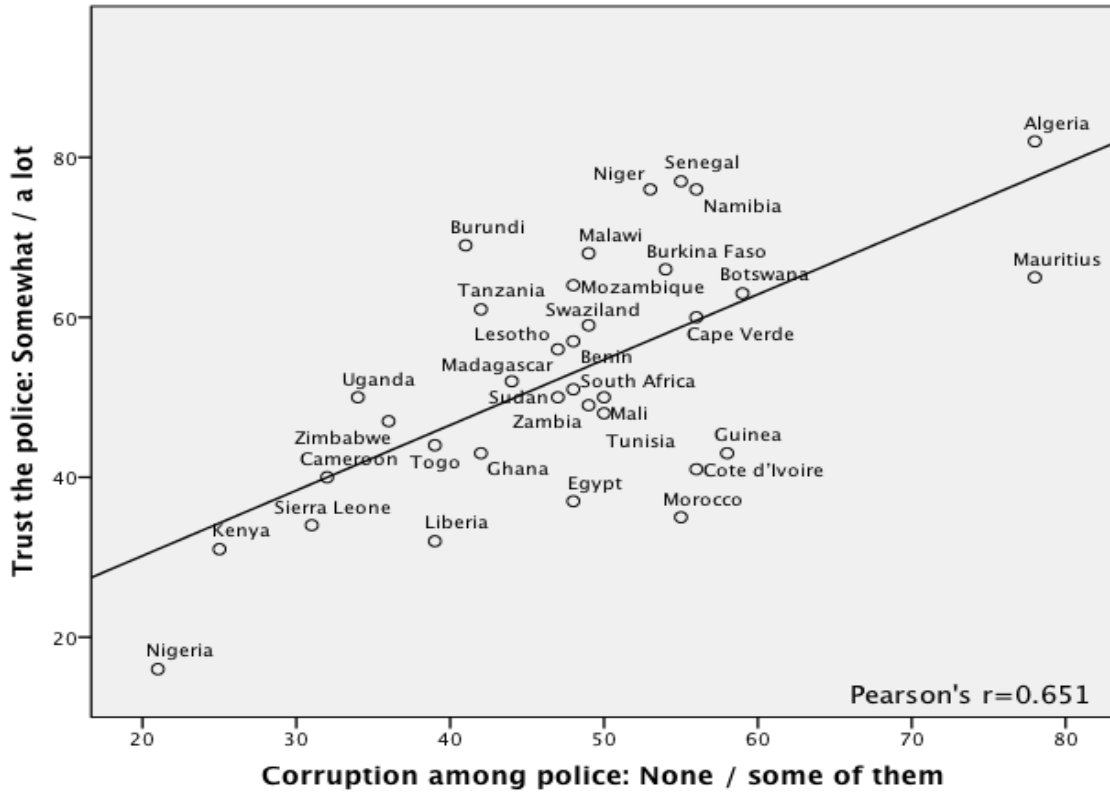


(% saying "somewhat" or "a lot")

² Data on trust in the police exists for 1999/2000 and 2002/2003, but due to small changes in response options, these survey rounds are excluded from this comparison. The 18 countries tracked since 2005/2006 are Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The analysis shows that the less citizens perceive the police as corrupt, the more they trust the police (Figure 12). A Pearson's correlation test shows a strong positive correlation between the two ($r = 0.651$ at 0.01 significance level).

Figure 12: Association between perceived corruption and trust in the police
 | 34 countries | 2011/2013

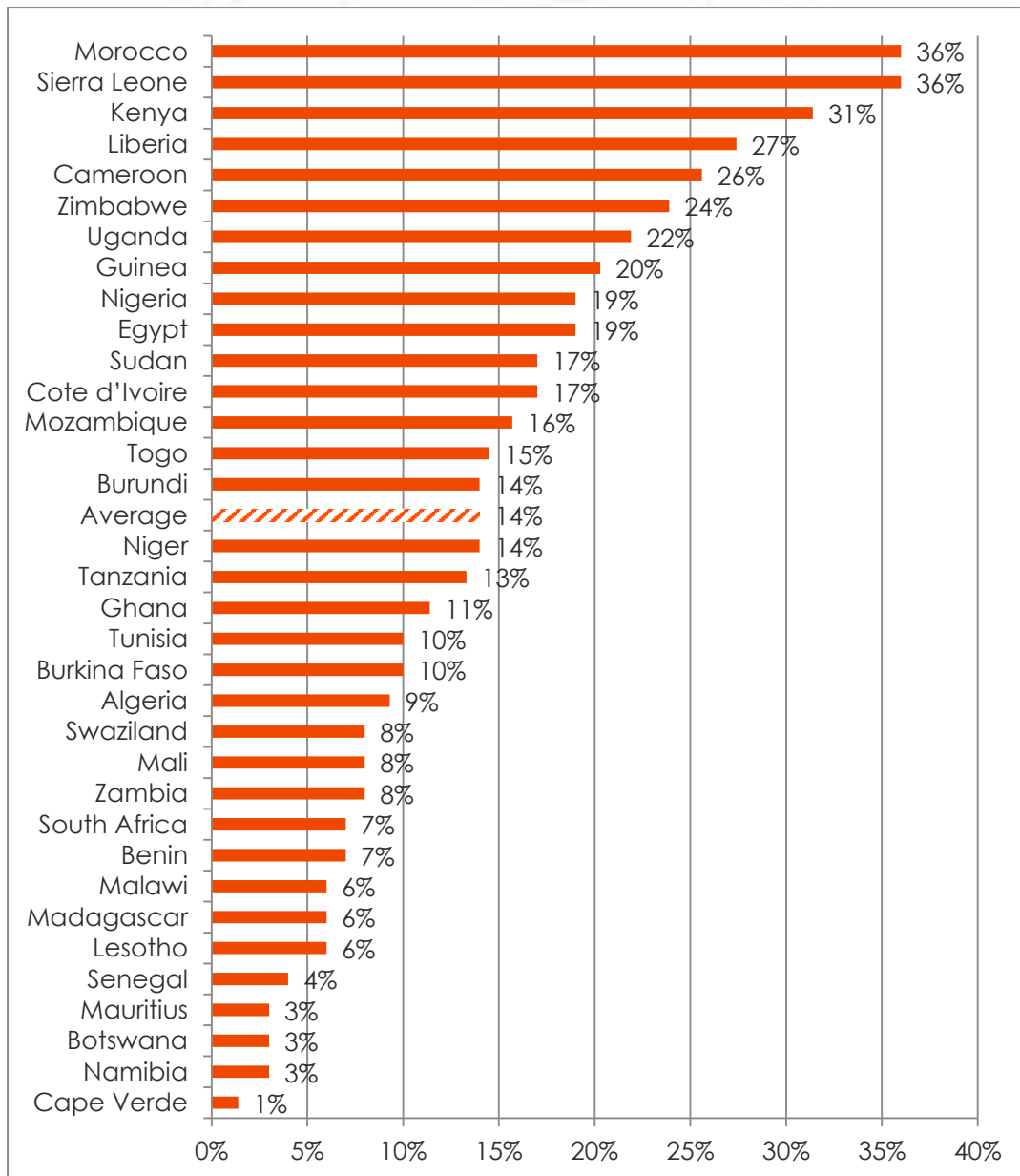


Paying bribes to avoid problems with the police

Across the 34 countries, 14% of survey respondents say they paid bribes during the previous year to avoid problems with the police. Those who paid bribes include respondents who say they paid bribes "once or twice," "a few times," or "often." Morocco (36%), Sierra Leone (36%), and Kenya (31%) had the greatest proportion of citizens who paid bribes. Cape Verde had the smallest proportion (1%), followed by Mauritius, Namibia, and Botswana (3% each) (Figure 13).

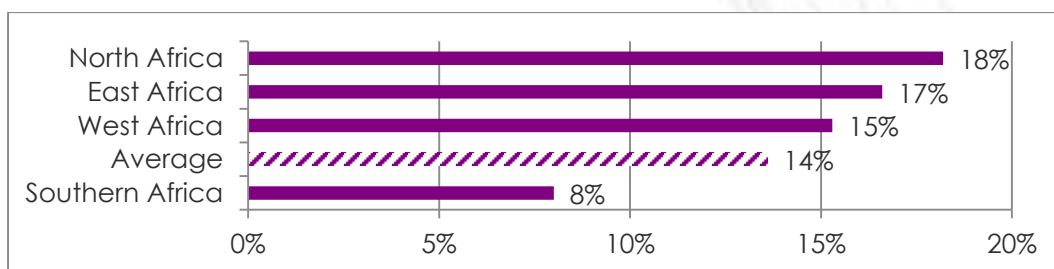
North Africans were more likely to pay bribes (18%) than citizens in East Africa (17%), West Africa (15%), and southern Africa (8%) (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Paid bribes to police in past year, by country | 34 countries | 2011/2013



Respondents were asked: *In the past year, how often, if ever, have you had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to government officials in order to: Avoid a problem with the police, like passing a checkpoint or avoiding a fine or arrest? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")*

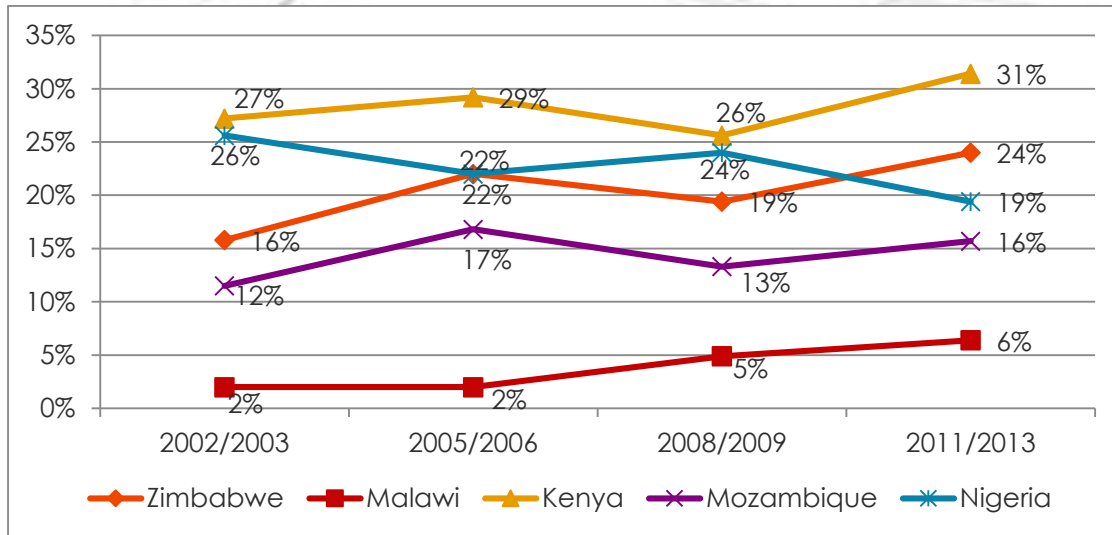
Figure 14: Paid bribes to police in past year, by region | 34 countries | 2011/2013



(% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

In the 16 countries tracked since 2002/2003, 11% report paying a bribe in 2011/2013, and this figure has changed only marginally over time. Payment of bribes increased most in Zimbabwe (8 percentage points) and decreased most in Nigeria (6 percentage points) (Figure 15).

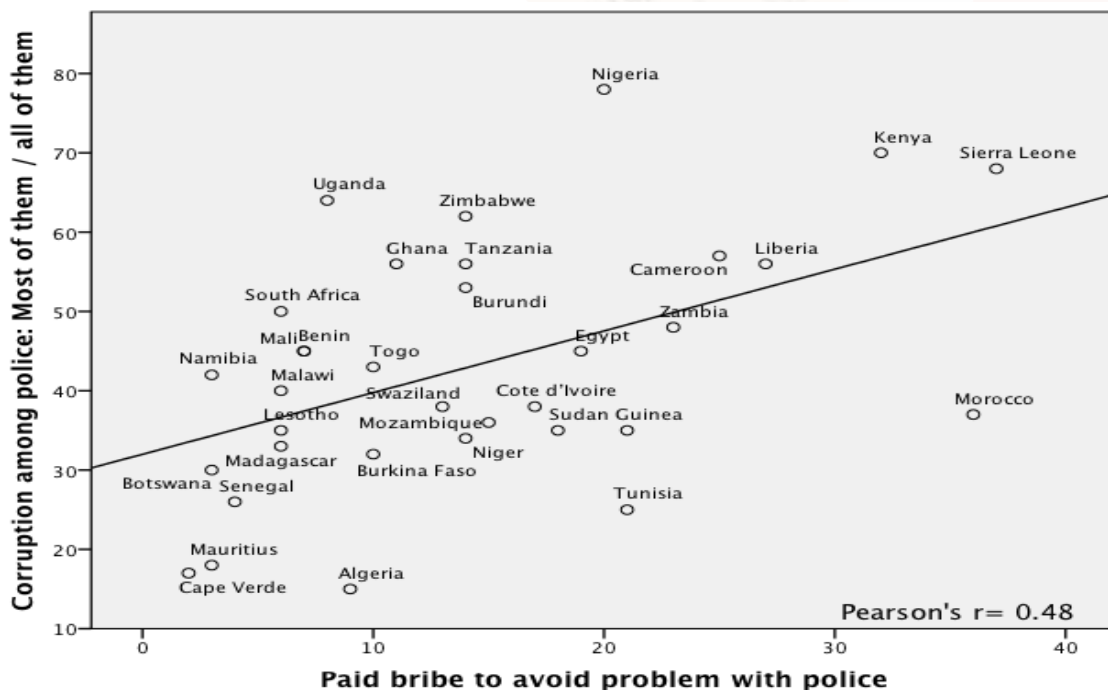
Figure 15: Payment of bribes: Countries with greatest increase or decrease
 | 16 countries | 2002-2013



(% saying "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

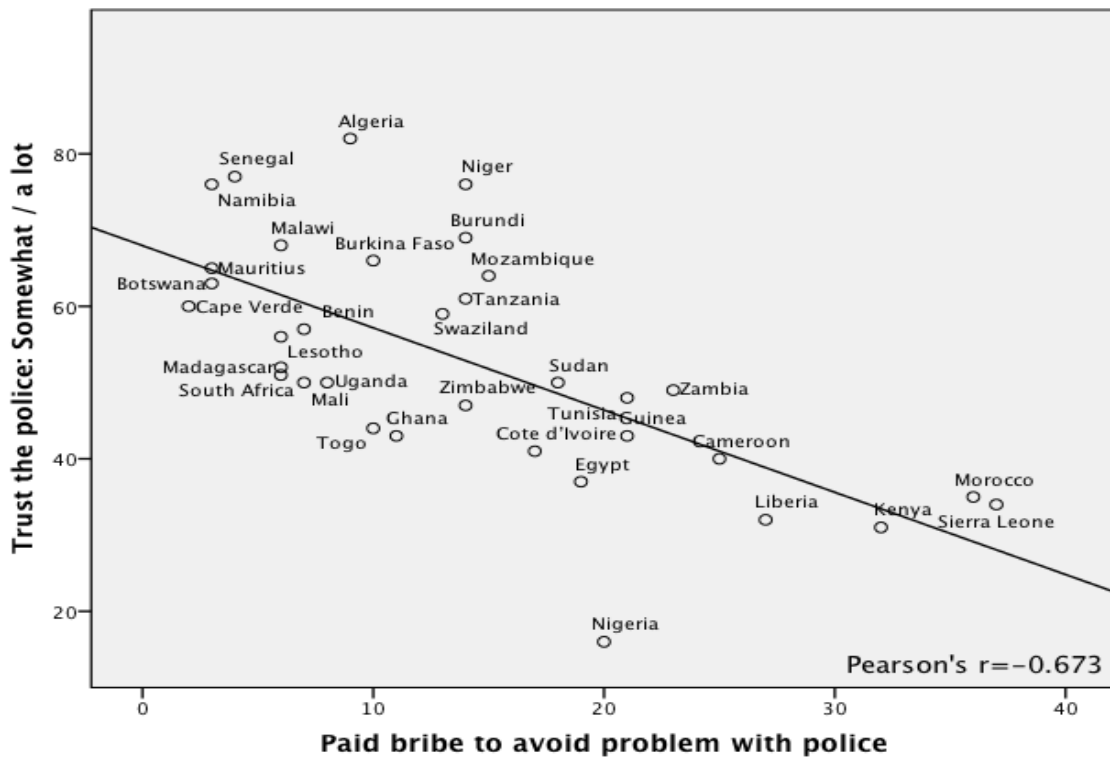
As bribe payments to police increase, so does the perception of police corruption (Pearson's $r = 0.480$ at 0.01 significance level) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Payment of bribe and perceptions of corruption among police
 | 34 countries | 2011/2013



In addition, there is a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.673$ at 0.01 significance level) between the payment of bribes and public trust. The more people pay bribes to avoid problems with the police, the less they trust the police (Figure 17).

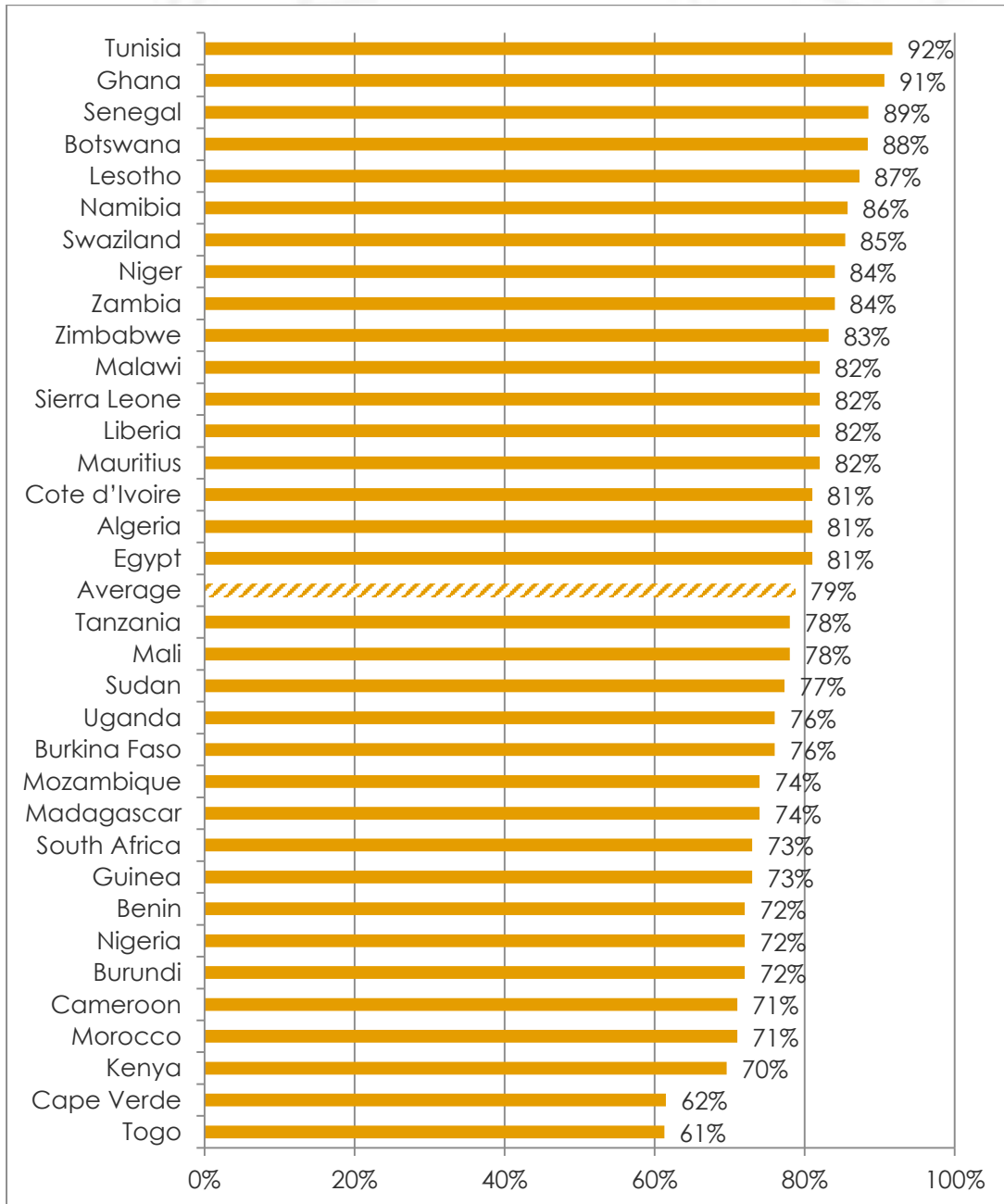
Figure 17: Payment of bribes and trust in the police | 34 countries | 2011/2013



Perceptions of police mandate to make people obey the law

Despite limited trust and widespread perceptions of police corruption, four of five citizens (79%) believe that the police “always have the right to make people obey the law,” suggesting that the institution is perceived as legitimate despite its weaknesses. By country, the proportion of citizens who “agree” or “strongly agree” that the police have the right to make people obey the law ranges from highs in Tunisia (92%), Ghana (91%), and Senegal (89%) to lows in Togo (61%) and Cape Verde (62%) (Figure 18).

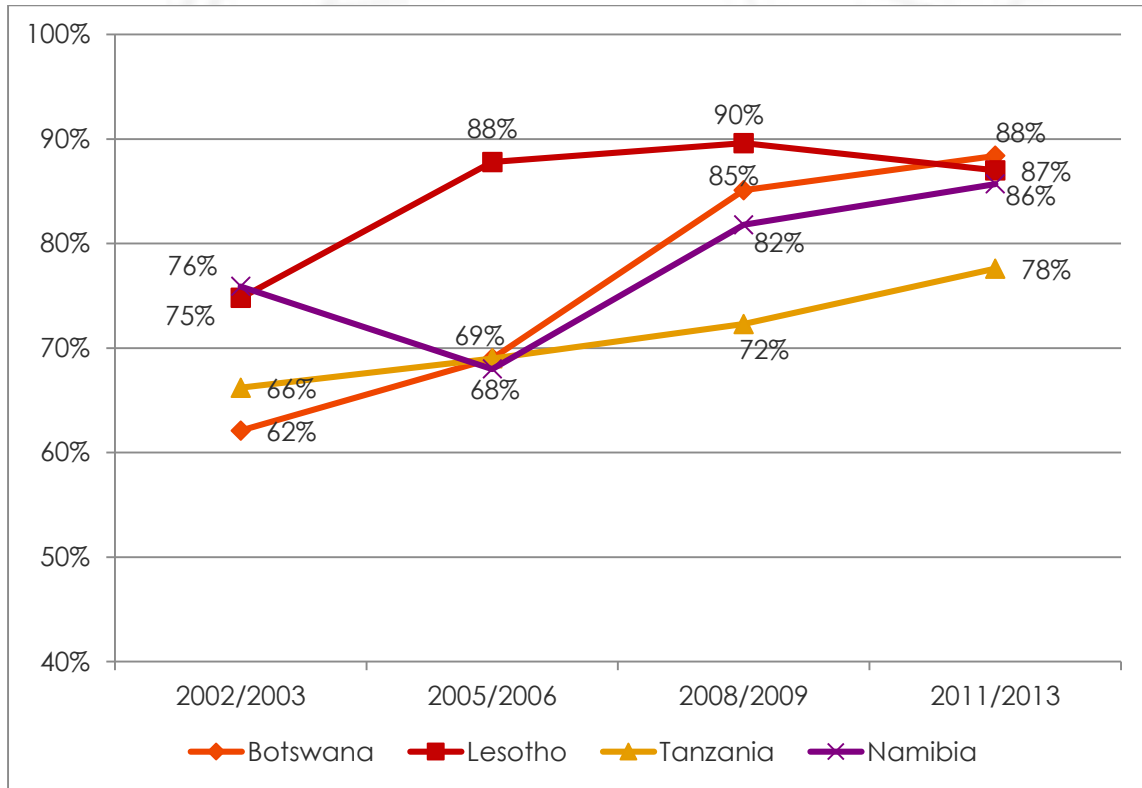
Figure 18: Support for the right of police to make people obey the law
 34 countries | 2011/2013



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The police always have the right to make people obey the law? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

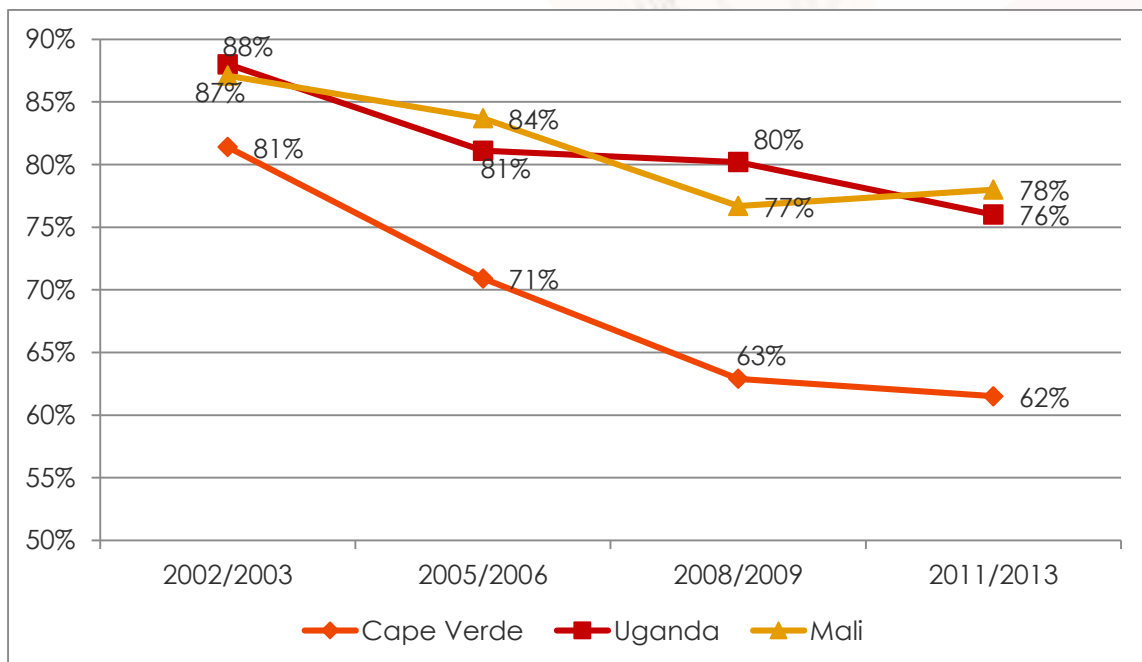
In the 16 countries tracked since 2002/2003, support for this police mandate increased, from 76% to 80% in 2011/2013. Botswana had the greatest increase in support (26 percentage points) (Figure 19), while Cape Verde recorded the largest decrease in support (20 percentage points) (Figure 20). The only other countries where support for the police mandate to make people obey the law decreased over time are Mali and Uganda.

Figure 19: Change in support of the right of police to make people obey the law: Countries with the greatest increase | 16 countries | 2002-2013



(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 20: Change in support of the right of police to make people obey the law: Countries with decrease | 16 countries | 2002-2013

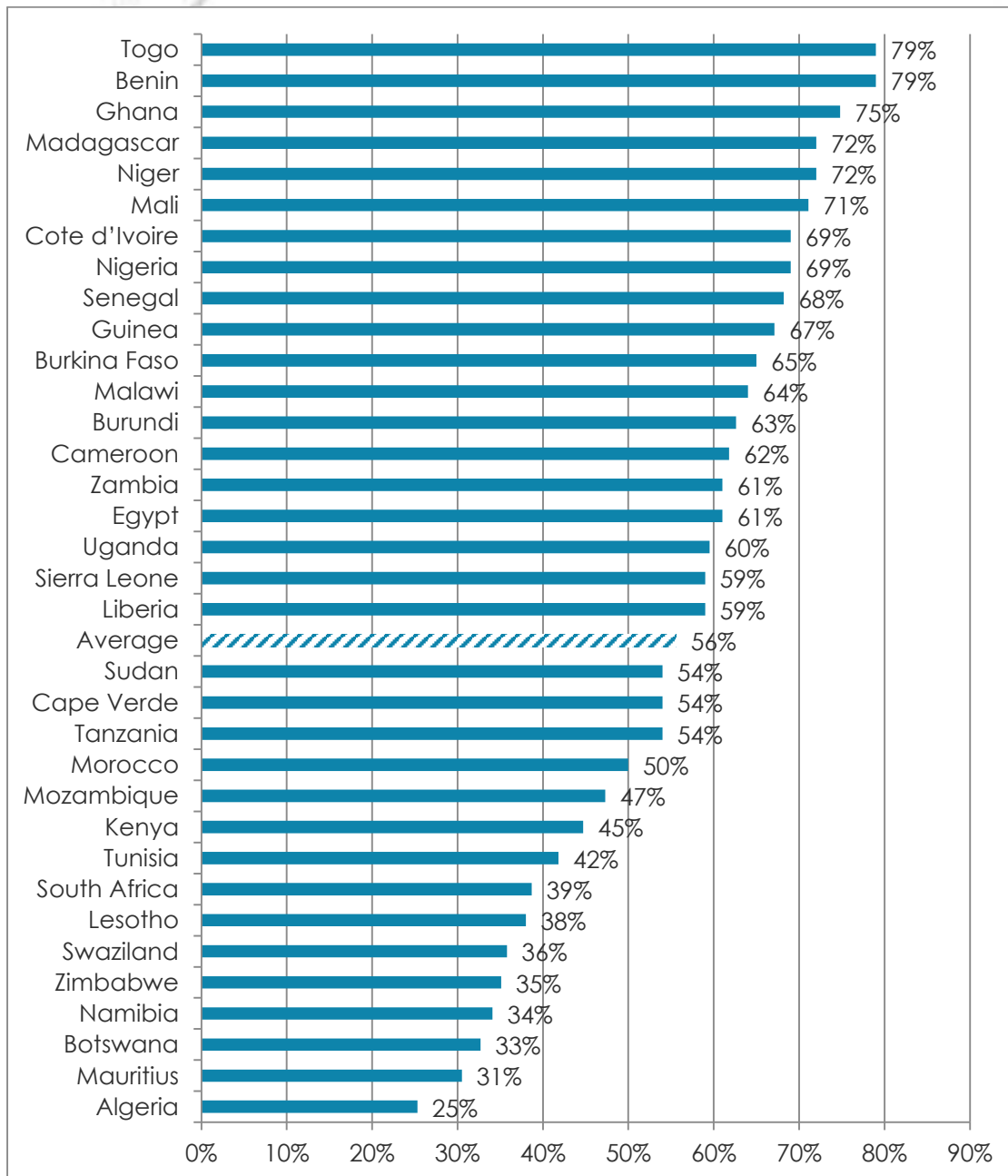


(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Reporting crime to the police

One-fourth (25%) of respondents say they were victims of theft from their homes during the preceding year, and 8% say they were suffered physical attacks. Among those who report being victims of crime in the 34 countries, only 43% say they reported the crime, while 56% did not. Citizens of Togo and Benin are least likely to report crime to police (79% of victims did not report the crime to police), while Algerians are most likely to report crime (only 25% did not) (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Did not report crime to police | 34 countries | 2011/2013

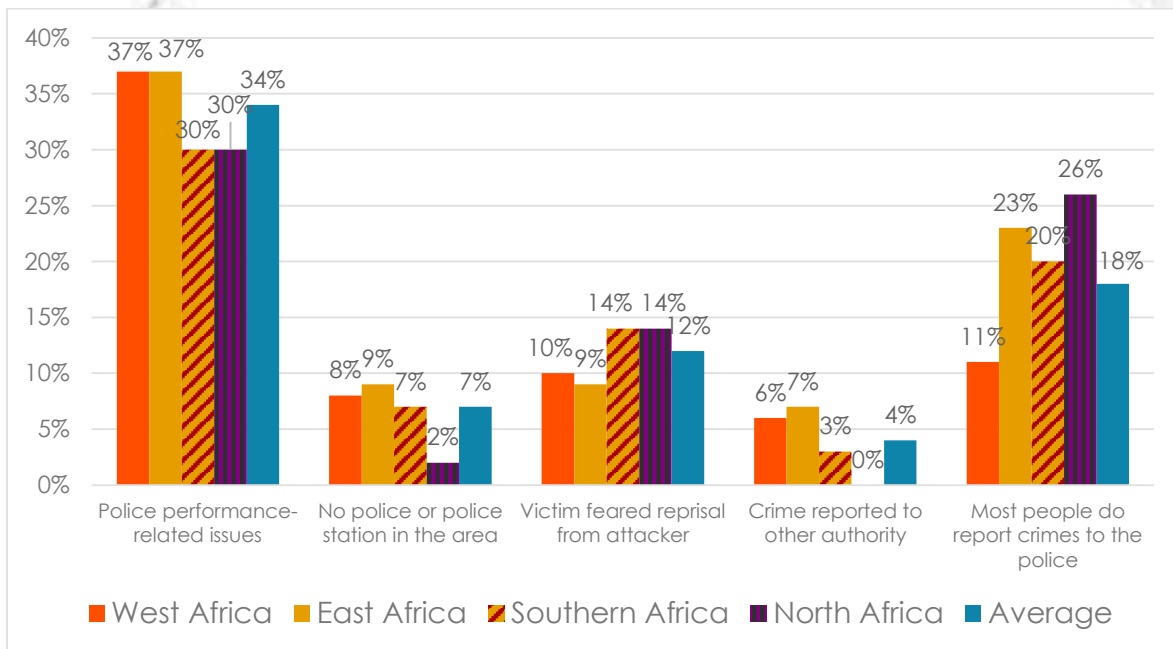


Respondents who reported being victims of crime during the previous year were asked: Was such an incident reported to the police? (% who say "no")

Note: The figures are percentages of self-reported crime victims who did not report the crime to the police. Sample sizes are smaller than national samples, and margins of uncertainty are therefore larger.

The main reasons why victims do not report crimes to the police, according to survey respondents, are issues related to police performance: Police don't listen or care (cited by 14% of respondents), police would have demanded a bribe (10%), police would not have been able to do anything (8%), and police may be involved in the theft or assault (2%). Together, these police-performance-related issues are cited by 34% of respondents across the 34 countries (Figure 22). Other reasons that were cited include that there is no police station in the area, that victims fear reprisal from the attacker, and that the crime was reported to another authority. About one in five respondents (18%) say that most people do report crime to the police.

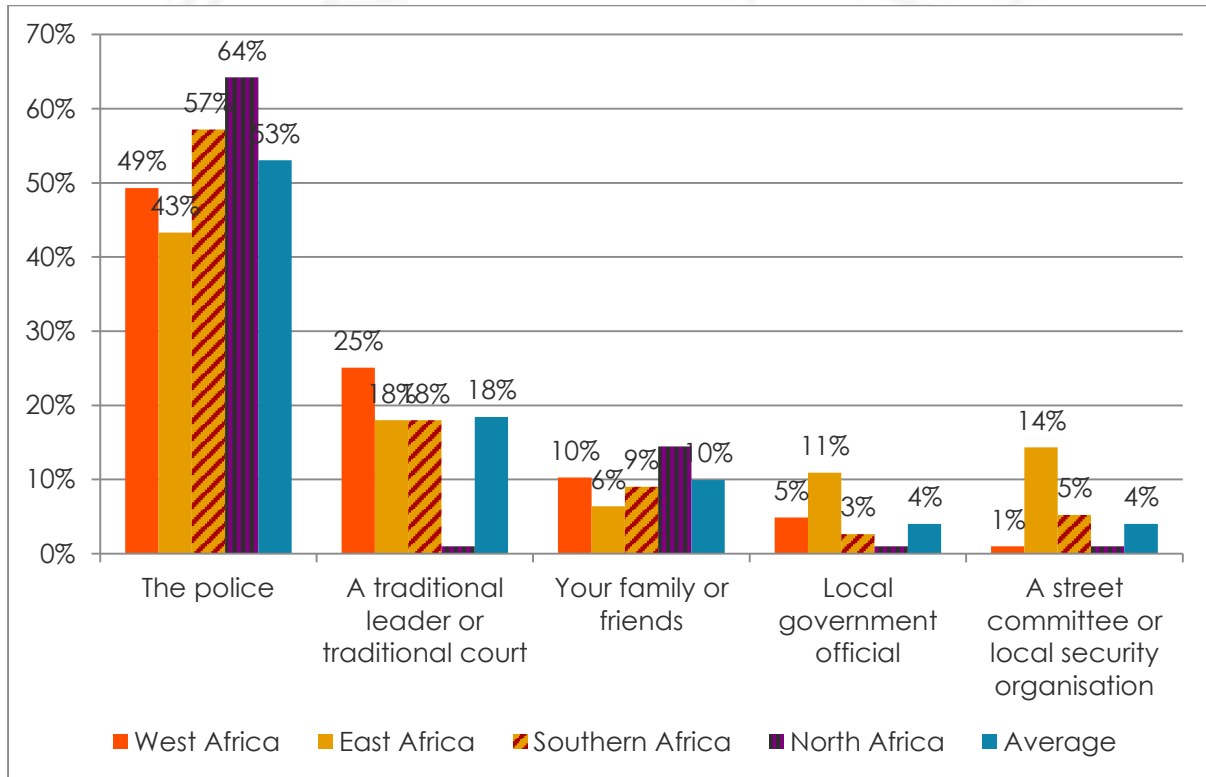
Figure 22: Reasons why crimes are not reported to the police | by region
 | 2011/2013



Respondents were asked: *Some people say that many crimes are never reported to the police. Based on your experience, what do you think is the main reason that many people do not report crimes like thefts or attacks to the police when they occur?*

Across 34 countries, about half (53%) of citizens say they would seek assistance first from the police, rather than from other people or organisations, if they were victims of a crime. North Africans are most likely to go to the police first for assistance (64%), while East Africans (43%) are least likely to seek police assistance first (Figure 23). Other frequently cited places for crime victims to go first for assistance include traditional leaders or courts, family and friends, local government officials, and street committees or local security organisations.

Figure 23: First person/organisation to go to for assistance after a crime | by region
 | 2011/2013



Respondents were asked: *If you were a victim of crime in this country, who, if anyone, would you go to first for assistance?*

Conclusion

This analysis confirms Transparency International's finding that the police are perceived as the most corrupt public institution in most African countries and suggests that this perception reduces public trust in the police. A majority of crime victims do not report the crimes to the police, mainly due to issues related to police performance, according to survey respondents. Nonetheless, support for the police mandate to enforce the law remains strong. Future research might further clarify how perceptions of police corruption affect police performance and effectiveness.

Since 2002, Zambia is the only surveyed country where there has been a positive change in the four indicators reported in this paper: Public trust in the police has increased (from 31% to 49%), the proportion of citizens who do not see "all" or "most" of the police as corrupt has increased (from 44% to 49%), the proportion of citizens who paid bribes to avoid police trouble has declined (from 11% to 8%), and support for police enforcement of the law has increased (from 78% to 83%). Further research might clarify reasons for this positive change and provide lessons that can be shared with other countries.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

Kumssa, A. (2015). Police corruption: A perspective on its nature and control. *Dannish Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 1(1), 1-8.

<http://dennishjournals.org/djpsir/pdf/2015/march/Asfaw-Kumssa.pdf>.

Transparency International (2013). Report on the transparency global corruption barometer 2013. www.transparency.org/gcb2013/report.

Pauline M. Wambua is a MasterCard scholar pursuing a master's degree in public policy in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: wambuapa@msu.edu

Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 56 | 2 November 2015