

Police in Zimbabwe: Helping hand or iron fist?

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Summary

In response to public protests against a drastic increase in fuel prices in January 2019, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) were joined by the army in a brutal crackdown that resulted in at least 15 deaths, 340 injured, and more than 1,000 arrests (Mwananyanda, 2019; Bearak, 2019).

Just months earlier, the police were found responsible, along with the military, for the deaths of six people in the aftermath of the 2018 election, according to a commission of inquiry (Associated Press, 2018).

Given the ZRP's history as a tool of ruling-party power under former President Robert Mugabe (Hanson, 2008), how do the Zimbabwean people perceive their police?

Previous Afrobarometer analysis has shown that playing a central role in Operation Murambatsvina, the state's brutal 2005 clearing of selected urban areas in a bid to repress independent economic activity and dissent, cost the police dearly in terms of popular legitimacy (Bratton & Masunungure, 2007).

This dispatch, based on Afrobarometer survey data from 1999 through mid-2018, tracks improvements, after the damaging effects of Operation Murambatsvina, in citizens' trust in the police, perceptions of police corruption and performance in reducing crime, and support for the right to enforce the law. The latest Afrobarometer surveys were conducted before the bloody suppression of post-electoral and fuel-hike protests, and we do not contend that attitudes toward the police that prevailed in mid-2018 continue to prevail today. Instead, we raise the question whether observed improvements in public perceptions of the police could be lost through ZRP participation in political repression.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer, a pan-African, non-partisan research network, has conducted public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in Zimbabwe and other African countries since 1999. Afrobarometer employs face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

In 2018, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's core partner for Southern Africa, commissioned two pre-election surveys in Zimbabwe. The Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), Afrobarometer's national partner in Zimbabwe, conducted survey fieldwork (28 April-13 May 2018 and 25 June-6 July 2018). Afrobarometer provided technical support. Each survey interviewed 2,400 adult citizens, yielding country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- As of mid-2018, citizens' trust in the police, perceptions of police corruption and government performance in reducing crime, and support for the right to enforce the law were continuing to improve after recovering from the damaging effects of Operation Murambatsvina in 2005.
- As of 2017, Zimbabweans felt safer at home and in their neighbourhood than at any other time during the previous decade.
- The police remained the first place Zimbabwean citizens would turn in case of a crime. While the fear of being asked to pay a bribe deterred many citizens from going to the police, those who had engaged with the police struggled more with long response times than with corruption.
- In the post-Mugabe era, only about four in 10 Zimbabweans (41%) felt free to criticize the police. But that was significantly more than felt free to criticize President Emmerson Mnangagwa (25%), the army (25%), or traditional leaders (31%).

Institutional legitimacy

The literature on policing, safety, and security emphasizes the importance of trust and supportive relationships between police and the communities they serve and are part of (Shearing, 1996; Shearing & Johnston, 2003). A key reason people support the police is that they view it as a legitimate and necessary institution that delivers the valuable public good of safety and security (Hinds & Murphy, 2007; Kempa, 2016).

Part 3 of Zimbabwe's Constitution explicitly outlines the responsibilities of the ZRP. Including detecting, investigating, and preventing crime; preserving the internal security of Zimbabwe; protecting and securing the lives and property of the people; maintaining law and order; and upholding the Constitution and enforcing the law without fear or favour.

However, the country's police force has frequently been criticized for its involvement, along with the Central Intelligence Organization and the military, in government repression (Baker, 2004; Maringira & Masiya, 2017), which can erode public trust in the institution (Hajek, Giles, Barker, Makoni, & Choi, 2008; Kääriäinen, 2007; García-Ponce & Pasquale, 2015).

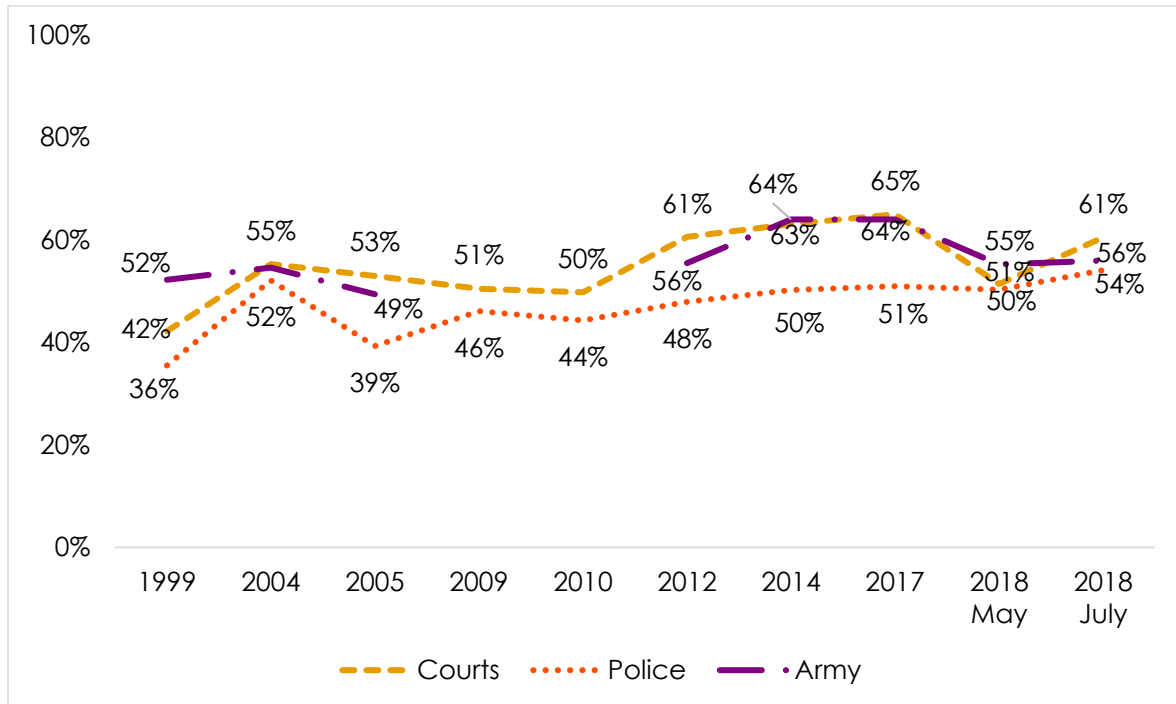
As shown in Figure 1, Zimbabweans' trust ("somewhat" or "a lot") in the country's three institutions that are primarily tasked with maintaining security, law, and order – the police, the courts, and the military – has never exceeded 65%. Over the past 20 years, trust has increased significantly for the ZRP (from 36% in 1999 to 54% in 2018) and the courts (from 42% in 1999 to 61% in 2018). Although trust levels in the three institutions varied substantially in 1999 (a difference of 16 percentage points between the ZRP and the army), there has been a general trend toward increasingly similar levels of trust in all three institutions, leaving just a 7-percentage-point difference between the courts and the police as of July 2018.

Public trust in the police varies significantly by partisan affiliation¹ (Figure 2). Respondents who "feel close to" the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the ruling party since 1980, were considerably more likely to say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" than supporters of the largest opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), with a trust gap ranging from 20 percentage points (in 1999) to 48 percentage points (in 2012). Since 2005, non-partisans have expressed trust levels more similar to those of

¹ Afrobarometer determines partisan affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

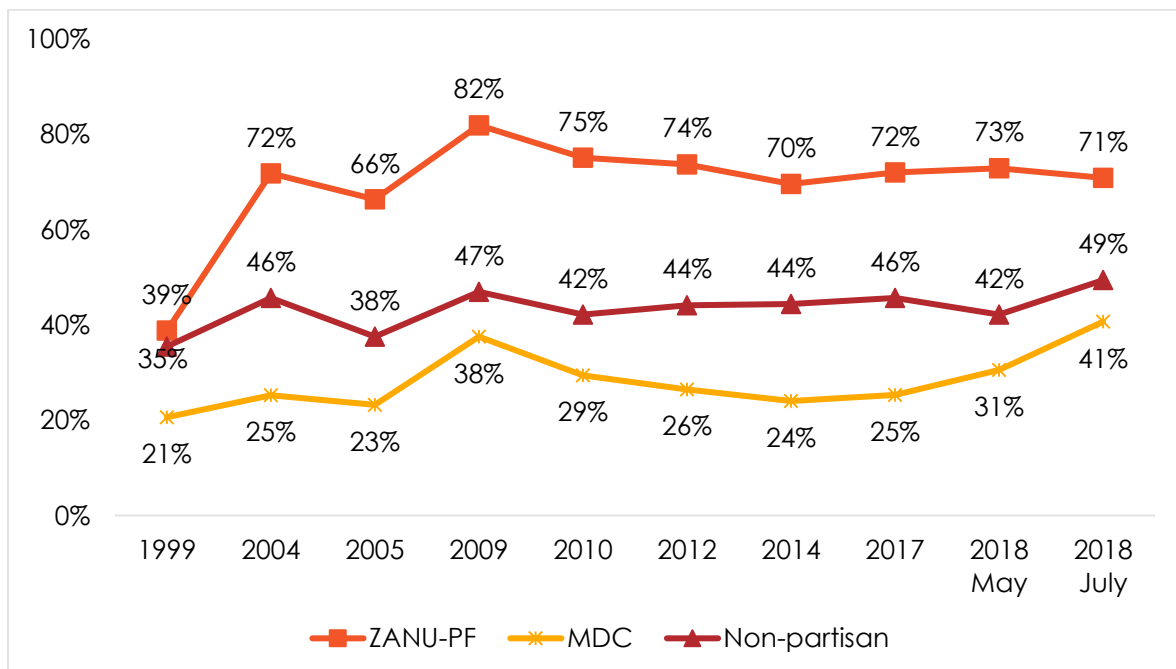
opposition than of ruling-party sympathizers. These findings are in line with the work of Bratton and Masunungure (2018) on Zimbabwe's widening partisan trust gap.

Figure 1: Popular trust in law and order institutions | Zimbabwe | 1999-2018



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

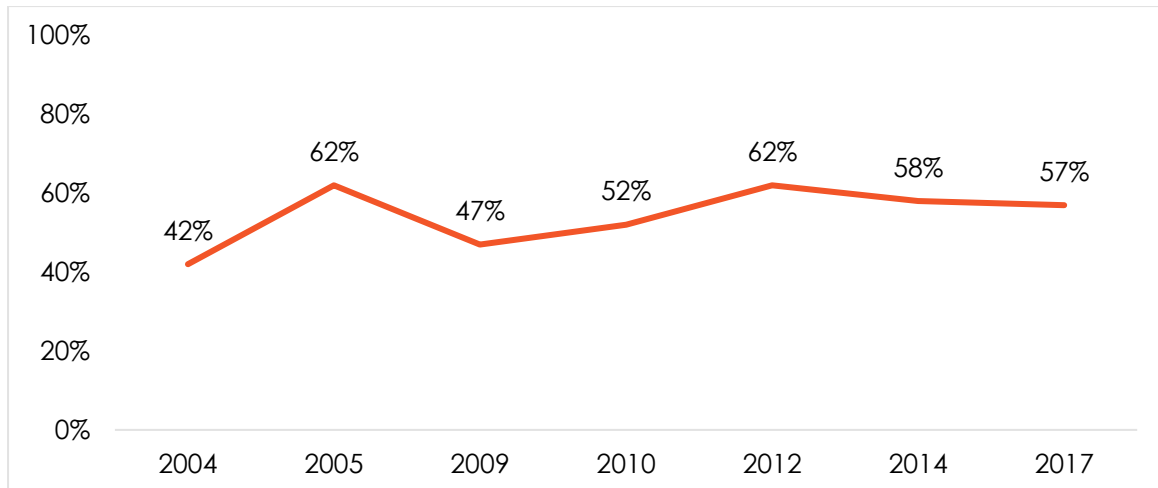
Figure 2: Popular trust in the police | by partisan affiliation | Zimbabwe | 1999-2018



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

One factor that may affect popular trust levels is the perception of corruption. Since 2010, more than half of Zimbabweans have consistently said that “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt (Figure 3). There was a significant increase in the perception of police corruption in 2005, followed by a dip but then a gradual return to about six in 10.

Figure 3: Perceived corruption of police | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017



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? (% who said “most of them” or “all of them”)

The peak in perceived levels of police corruption in 2005 coincides with citizens' most negative judgment of the government's performance in reducing crime, with just 30% of respondents saying the government was doing “fairly well” or “very well” (Figure 4). This may be related to police participation, several months before the 2005 survey, in the Operation Murambatsvina crackdown, which severely discredited the police and other state institutions (Bratton & Masunungure, 2007). In other survey years, assessments were fairly stable and showed improvement between 2012 (41%) and 2017 (54%) in the proportion of citizens who were satisfied with government's performance on crime reduction.

Figure 4: Government performing well on crime reduction | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017



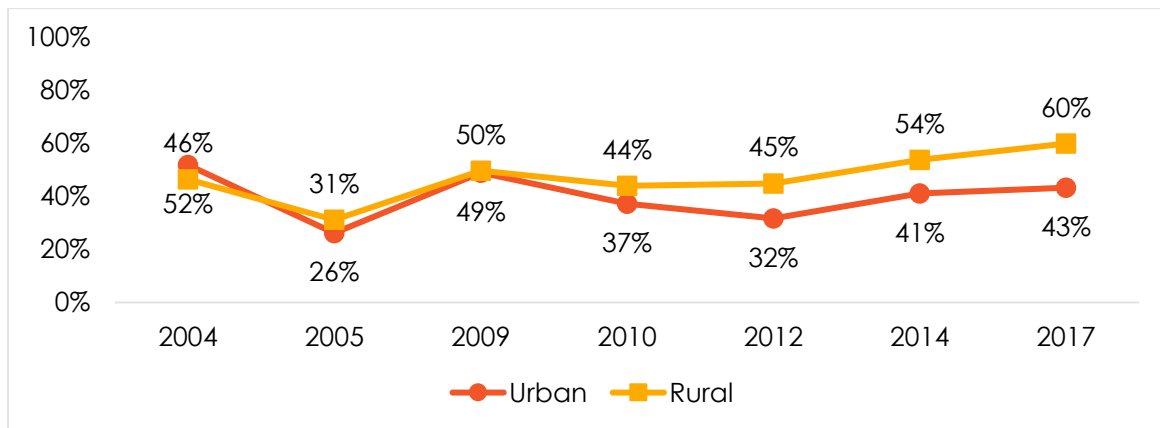
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime? (% who said “fairly well” or “very well”)

Starting in 2010, urban and rural appraisals of the government's ability to handle crime diverged (Figure 5). Both reflected modest improvements in recent years, but rural residents were more likely than their urban counterparts to praise the government's efforts (60% vs. 43% in 2017).

But this urban-rural gap may be an echo of a much larger partisan gap. Respondents affiliated with ZANU-PF (whose strength lies in rural areas) consistently expressed much more favourable assessments of the government's performance on crime, ranging from 50% in 2005 to 69% in 2017 (Figure 6). In contrast, positive appraisals among MDC adherents ranged from just 17% in 2005 to 36% in 2017, with the exception of a 51% spike in 2009, coinciding with the MDC's participation in the Government of National Unity.

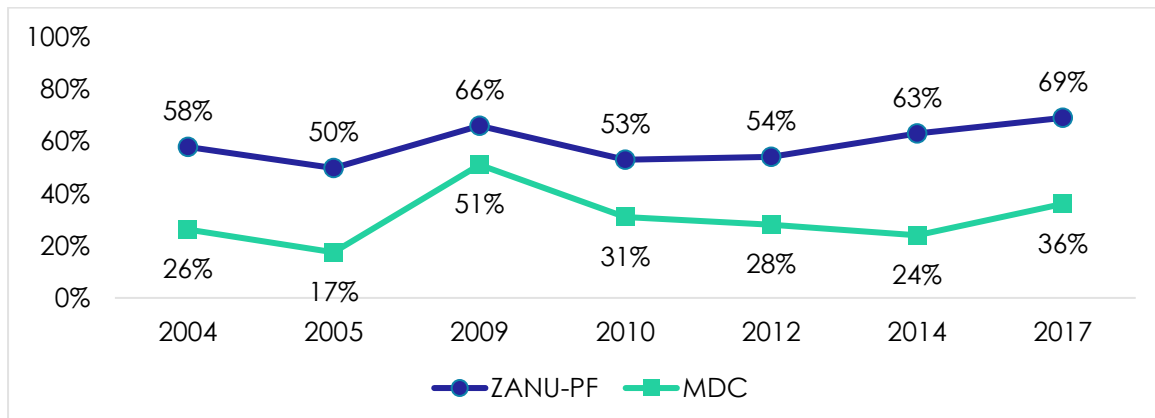
There is a noticeable similarity (though at different levels) in the trend of approval by supporters from the two parties, showing marked drops in 2005, significant improvement in 2009, immediate declines again in 2010, and recovery over the past few years – a pattern similar to that observed for trust in the police (Figure 2).

Figure 5: Government performing well on crime reduction | by urban-rural residency location | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime? (% who said "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 6: Government performing well on crime reduction | by partisan affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017

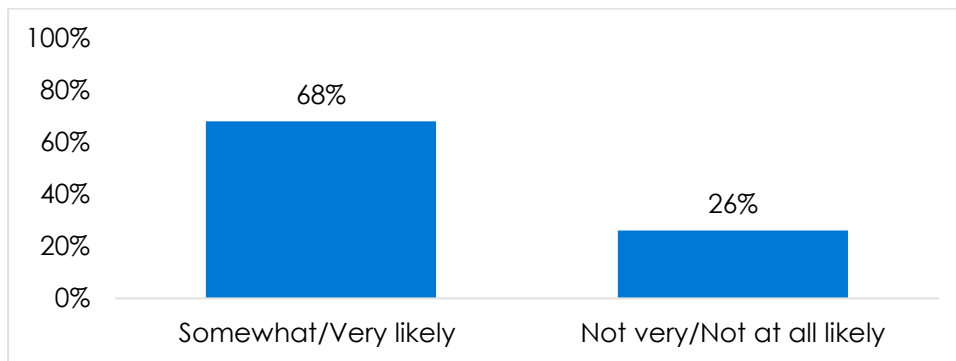


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime? (% who said "fairly well" or "very well")

On two other indicators of police legitimacy, Zimbabweans were fairly confident that the police would respond when they reported a crime, and they strongly asserted that the police have the right to make people obey the law.

Two-thirds (68%) of respondents said it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could get someone to take action if they went to a local police station to report a crime (Figure 7). But poor respondents were less confident that they would get a response. For example, only 38% of Zimbabweans who experienced high levels of economic hardship (lived poverty) expected the police to take action, whereas three-quarters (74%) of citizens who experienced no such deprivation had the same expectation.²

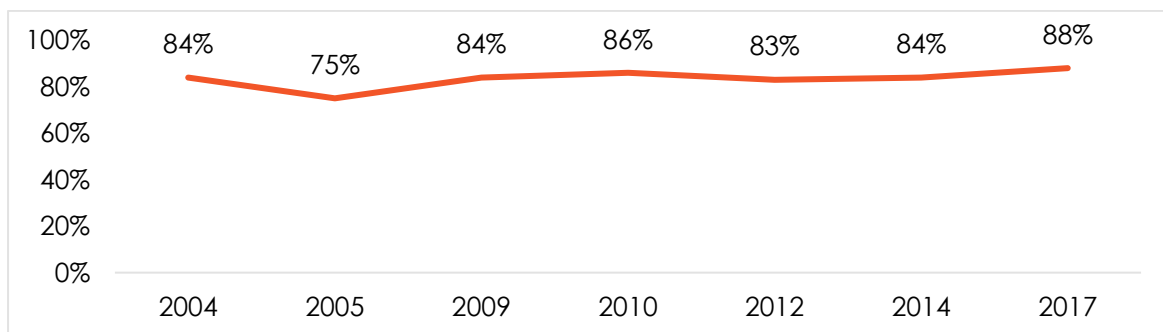
Figure 7: Likelihood that police will act if crime is reported | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to the local police to report a crime?

And almost nine out of 10 respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the ZRP has the right to enforce the law. This affirmation of police legitimacy is strong and consistent across time (Figure 8), except for a 9-percentage-point dip in 2005. This drop, shortly after Operation Murambatsvina, corresponds with the highest perception of police corruption (Figure 3) as well as the lowest confidence in the government’s ability to reduce crime (Figure 4).

Figure 8: Police have the right to enforce the law | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017



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 “agreed” or “strongly agreed”)

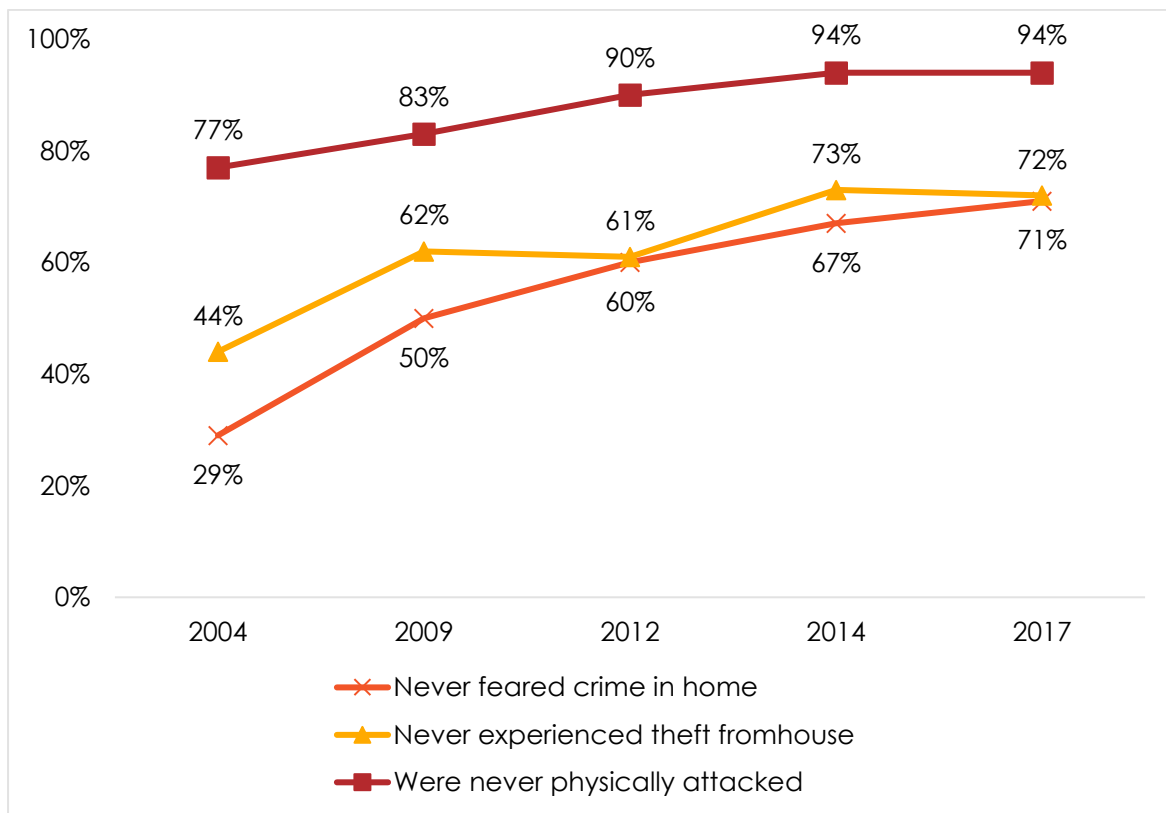
² Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without five basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Personal security

One key area of police work is crime prevention. Judging the ZRP by indicators of citizens' feelings of personal security, survey data indicate substantial improvement over the past 15 years.

The proportion of respondents who said they "never" feared crime in their home during the 12 months preceding the survey increased steadily between 2004 and 2017, from 29% to 71%, a 42-percentage-point improvement (Figure 9). Similarly, the share of respondents who said they did not suffer a theft from their home during the previous year grew from 44% in 2004 to 72% in 2017, and the proportion who said they were not physically attacked rose from 77% to 94%.

Figure 9: Never feared or experienced crime | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017

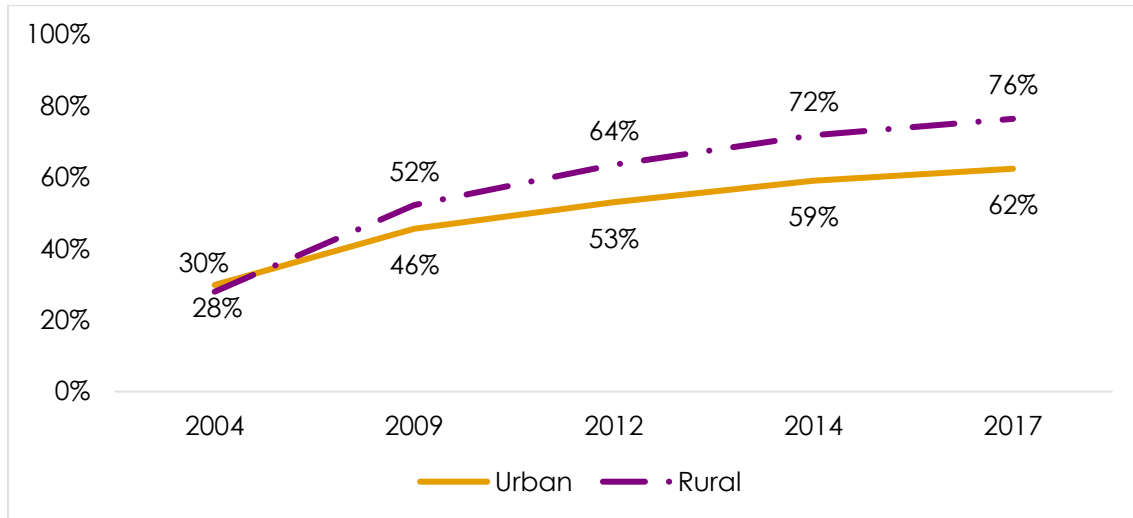


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Feared crime in your own home? Had something stolen from your home? Been physically attacked? (% who said "never")

Both rural and urban respondents became less and less likely to fear crime in their home between 2004 and 2017. The improvement was more dramatic in rural areas, from 28% to 76% who said they "never" feared crime, compared to an increase from 30% to 62% in the cities (Figure 10).

A similar gap separates ZANU-PF and MDC supporters when it comes to fear of crime (not shown), perhaps reflecting rural-urban differences or a general tendency toward less-critical responses among supporters of the ruling party.

Figure 10: Never feared crime in the home | by urban-rural residency location
 | Zimbabwe | 2004-2017



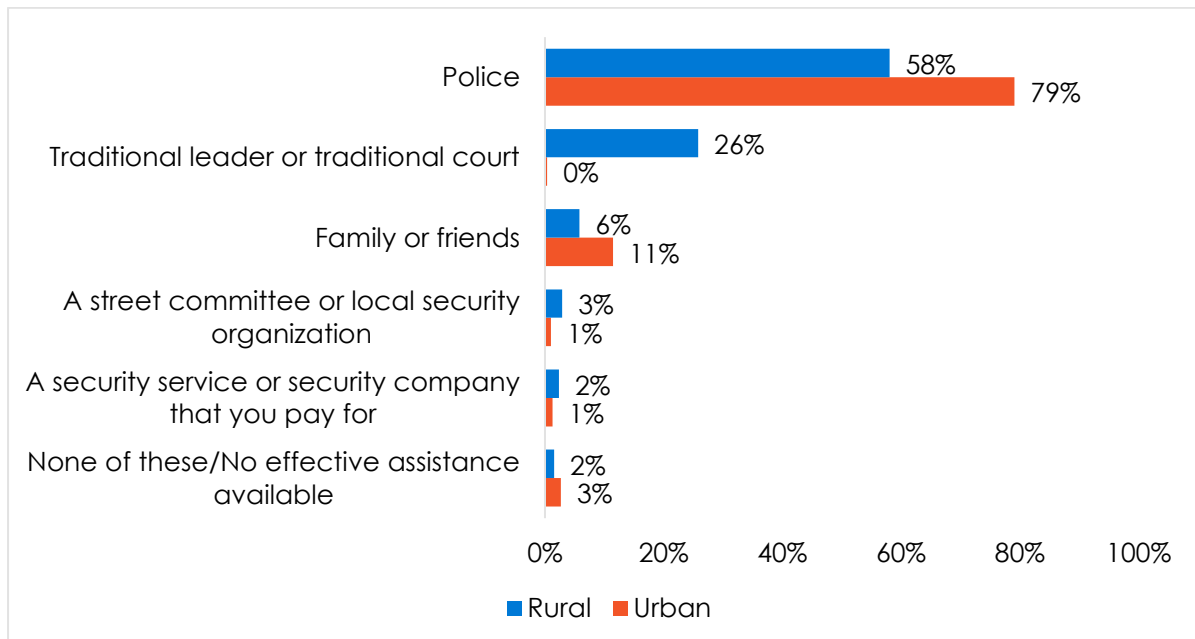
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family feared crime in your own home? (% who said "never")

Response to crime and competence of the police

How approachable is the police? Arguably the police should not only be trusted to act when needed but should also be easily accessible and render its services in a timely manner.

Asked where they would go first for assistance in case of a crime, Zimbabweans were most likely to cite the police (65%). But this response was considerably more common in the cities (79%) than in rural areas (58%), where 26% would turn first to a traditional leader or traditional court (Figure 11).

Figure 11: First assistance in case of a crime | Zimbabwe | 2017

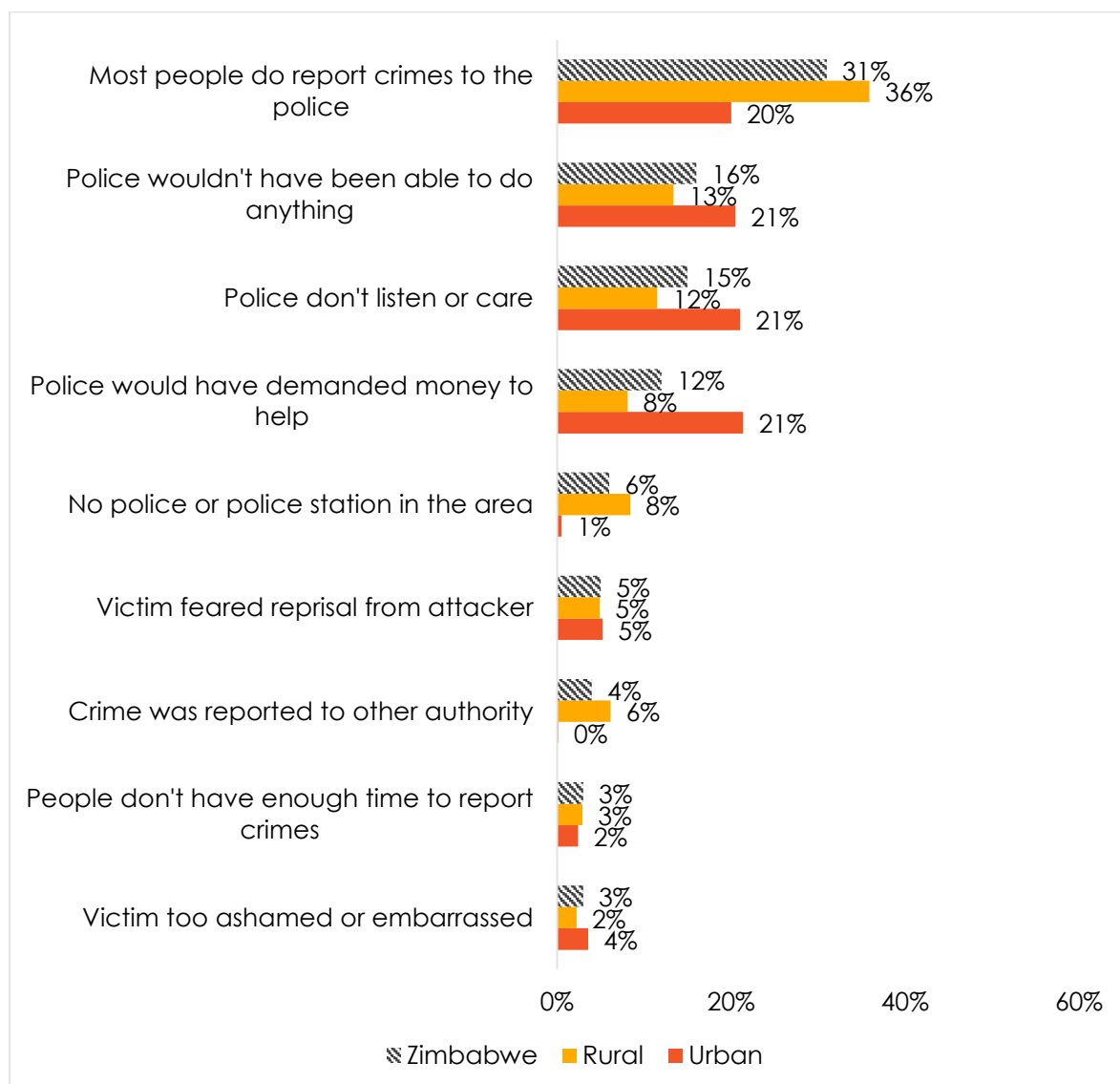


Respondents were asked: If you were a victim of crime in this country, who, if anyone, would you go to first for assistance?

In its 2012 survey, Afrobarometer asked Zimbabweans why they think many crimes are never reported to the police. The most common response was that most people do report crimes to the police (31%), although this assertion was considerably less frequent in cities (20%) than in rural areas (36%) (Figure 12).

The three main reasons given for why people don't report crimes to the police were that the police wouldn't have been able to do anything, would have demanded money or a bribe, and don't listen or care. Each of these responses was offered by 21% of urban residents but significantly fewer rural dwellers (13%, 13%, and 8%, respectively). Rural respondents were more likely than their urban counterparts to say that people don't report crimes because there's no nearby police presence (8% vs. 1%).

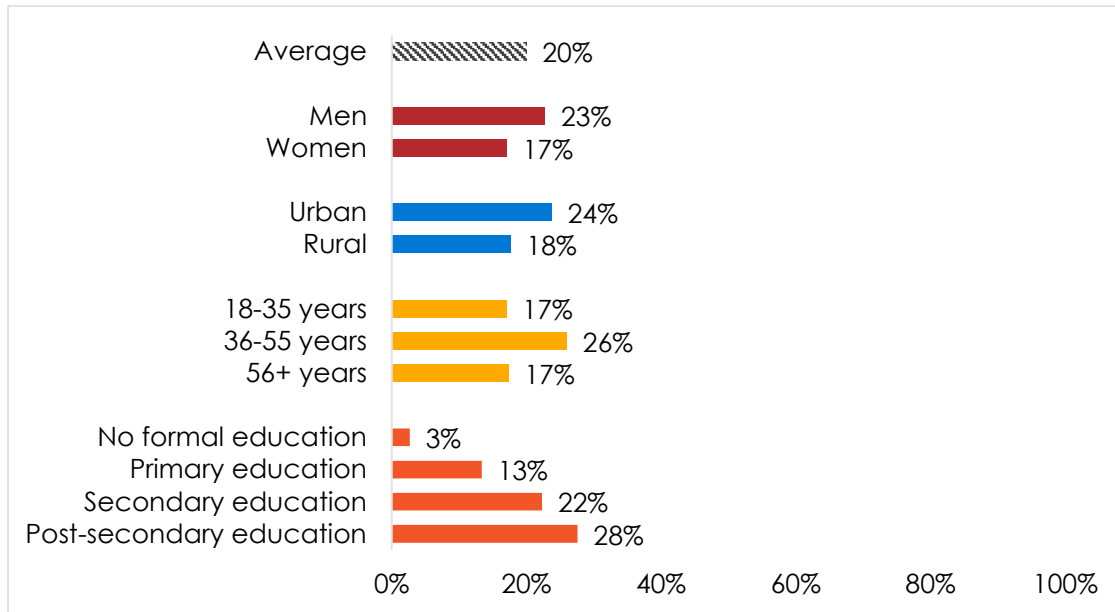
Figure 12: Main reason for not reporting crime to police | by urban-rural residency location | Zimbabwe | 2012



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?

In the 2017 survey, one in five respondents (20%) said they had requested assistance from the police during the previous 12 months. Men were more likely than women to make such a request (23% vs. 17%). Requests were also more likely from educated, urban, and middle-aged respondents (Figure 13).

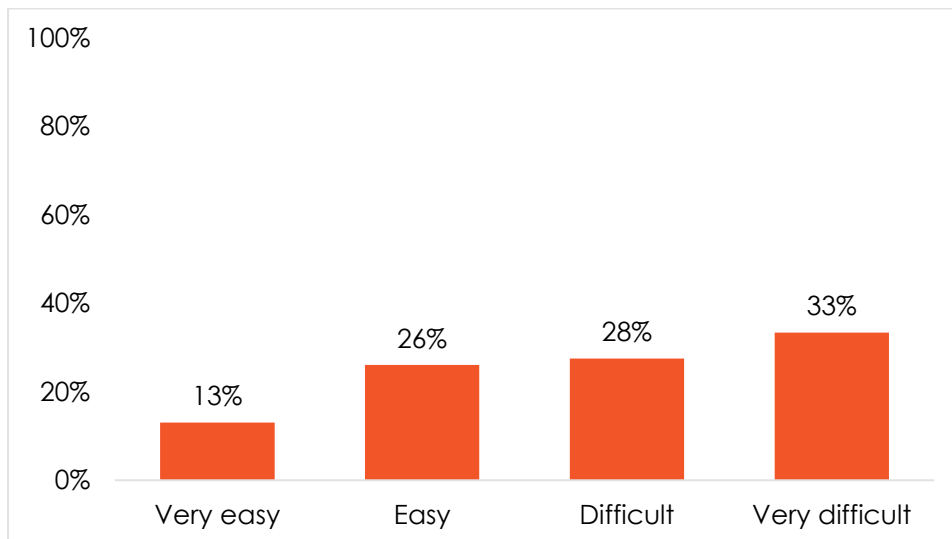
Figure 13: Requests for police assistance | by socio-demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: Now I would like to talk to you about experiences that some people have in accessing certain essential government services. In the past 12 months have you requested assistance from the police?

Among those who requested police assistance, a majority (61%) found it difficult, including 33% who said it was “very difficult,” to get the help they needed (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Difficulty obtaining police assistance | Zimbabwe | 2017

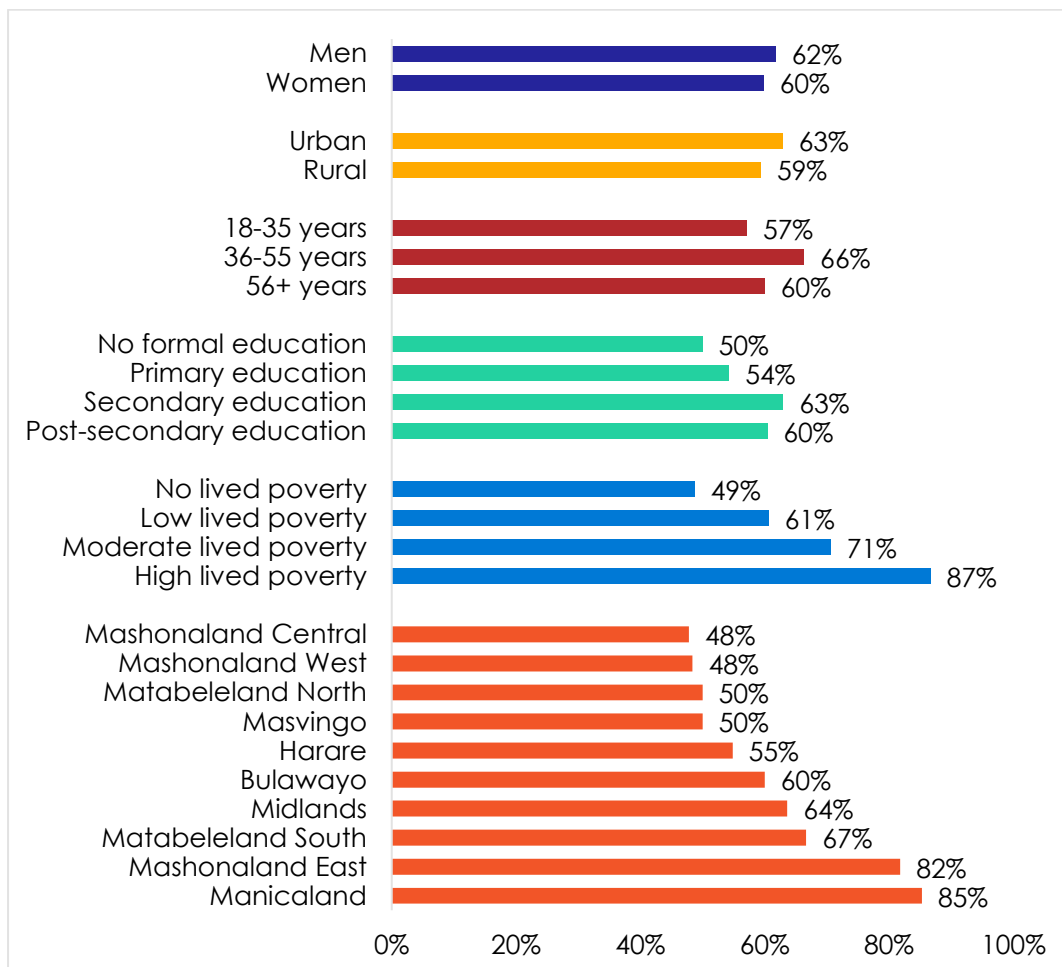


Respondents who said they requested police assistance were asked: How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)

For those who requested police assistance, respondents' gender and residence location seem to make little difference with regard to the difficulty of getting needed help (Figure 15). But economic status makes a big difference: Almost nine out of 10 (87%) of the poorest citizens found it difficult to get help from the police, compared to half (49%) of those who were economically well off. Respondents in the 36-55 age cohort indicated greater difficulty (66%) than younger or older respondents (57%-60%). Those with higher education were more likely to say that getting police assistance is difficult (60%-63%) than their counterparts with primary or no formal schooling (50%-54%).

Respondents from different provinces had very different experiences with obtaining police assistance. Fewer than half of residents of Mashonaland Central (48%) and Mashonaland West (48%) described it as difficult, compared to more than eight in 10 residents of Mashonaland East (82%) and Manicaland (85%).

Figure 15: Difficulty obtaining police assistance | by socio-demographic group and region | Zimbabwe | 2017

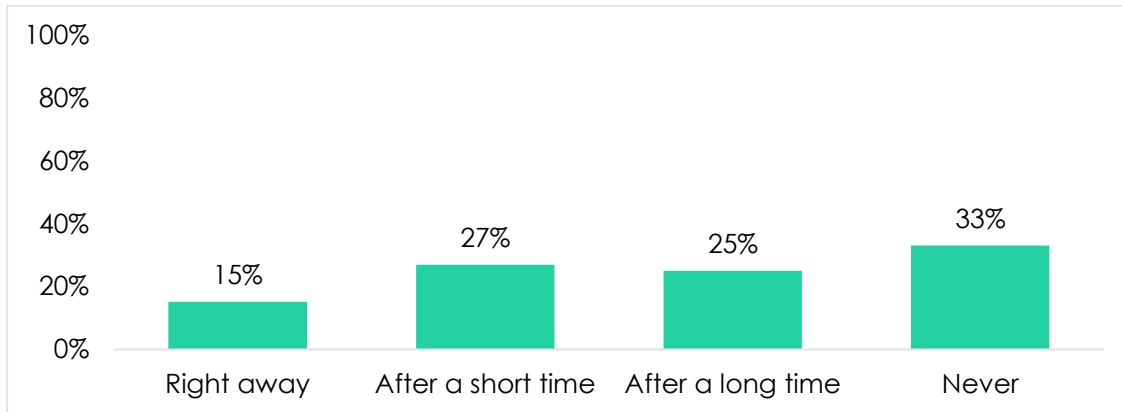


Respondents who said they requested police assistance were asked: How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult") (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)

Another aspect of the quality of police services is the time it takes to receive the service. Among those who requested police assistance during the previous year, only about four in 10 said they received help "right away" (15%) or "after a short time" (27%) (Figure 16). More

respondents said it took “a long time” (25%) or they never received the assistance they requested (33%).

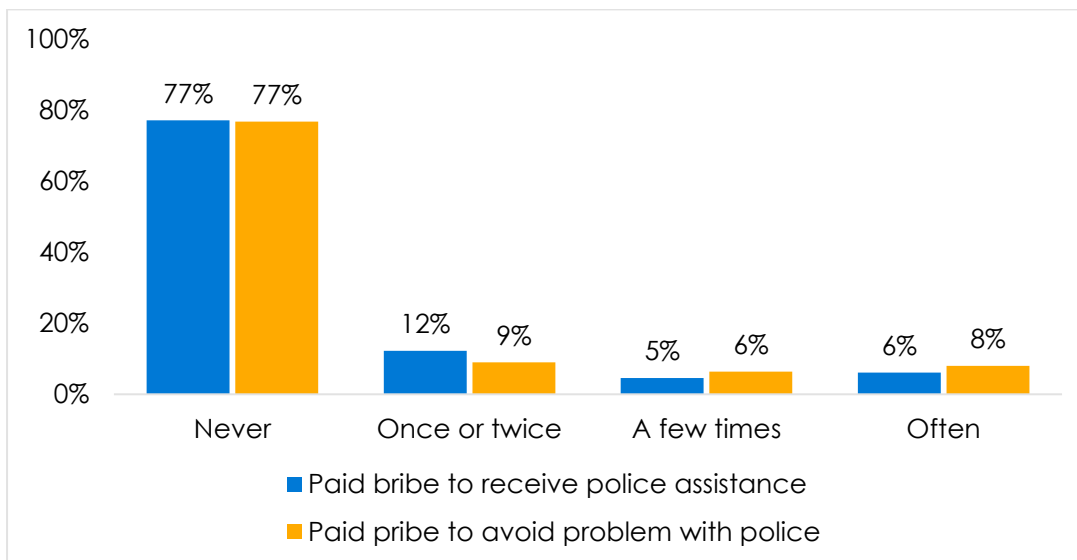
Figure 16: How long did it take to receive police assistance? | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents who said they requested police assistance were asked: How long did it take you to receive the help you needed from the police? (Respondents who did not request police assistance are excluded.)

Among Zimbabweans who requested police assistance, almost one in four (23%) said they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to obtain the help they needed (Figure 17). The same proportion (23%) said they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems with the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints or during an investigation. Bribery rates were similar in urban and rural areas.

Figure 17: Paid bribe to the police | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? (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?

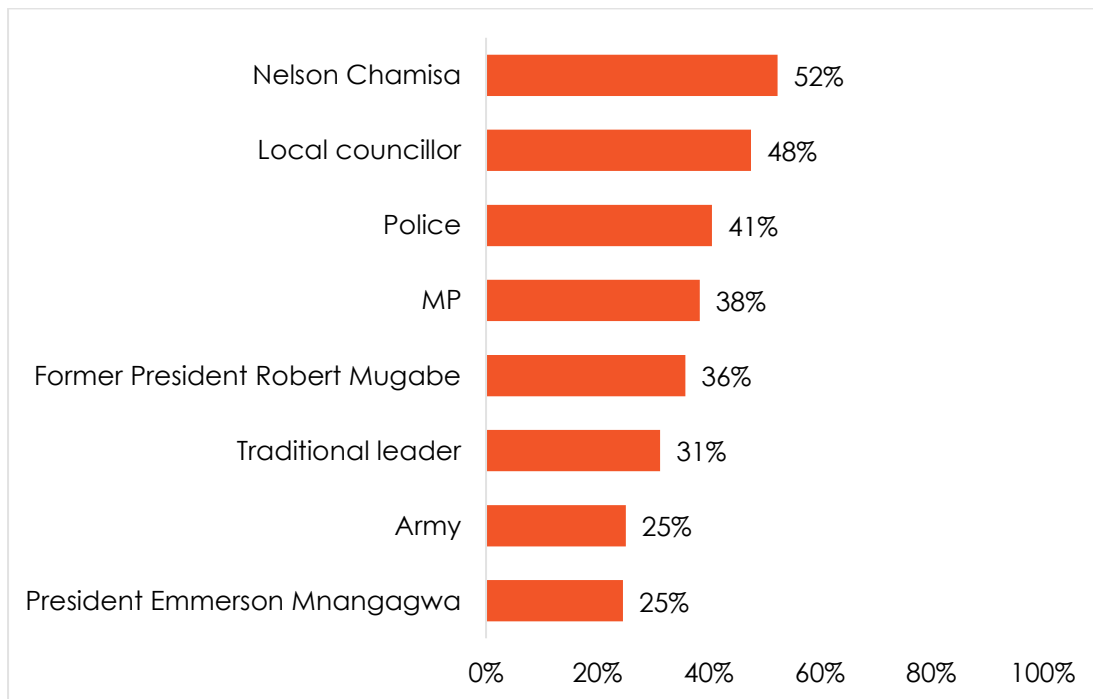
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? (If yes:) How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

Police in the post-coup environment

Many citizens and expert observers hoped that with the end of the Mugabe era in 2017, the new dispensation would open up the political arena and allow citizens to hold their government accountable. However, recent acts of government repression raise doubts about how well-founded such optimism is.

In the post-coup environment, only a minority of citizens felt free to criticize most public institutions and figures, including the police (Figure 18). As of July 2018, while more than half (52%) said they felt “somewhat free” or “completely free” to criticize opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, only half as many (25%) said the same about President Mnangagwa – the same proportion who felt free to criticize the army. Criticizing the police was seen as somewhat less daunting than criticizing the military, with 41% saying they felt free to voice disagreement or displeasure with the police. Again we emphasize that the latest Afrobarometer surveys were conducted before police participation in suppressing post-electoral and fuel-hike protests in 2018 and 2019, which may well affect current attitudes toward the police.

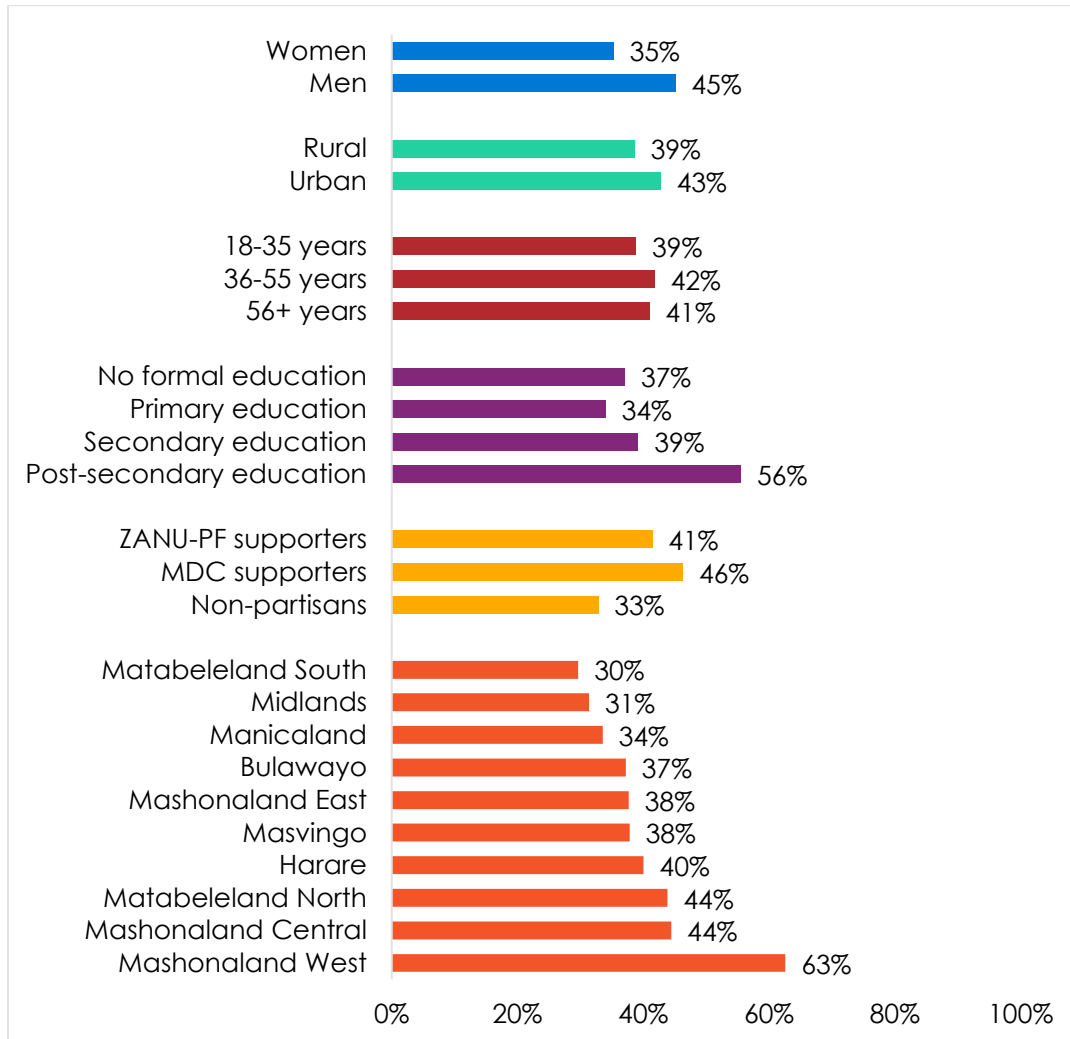
Figure 18: Free to criticize | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following? (% who said “somewhat” or “completely” free)*

Men (45%), urban residents (43%), and citizens with post-secondary education (56%) were more likely than women (35%), rural residents (39%), and less-educated respondents (34%-39%) to feel free to criticize the police (Figure 19). MDC supporters (46%) more often felt free to be critical of the police than did ZANU-PF supporters (41%) or non-partisans (33%). Mashonaland West (63%) stands out as the only province where a majority said they felt free to criticize the police; fewer than one in three residents agreed in Matabeleland South (30%) and Midlands (31%).

Figure 19: Free to criticize police | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe
 | July 2018



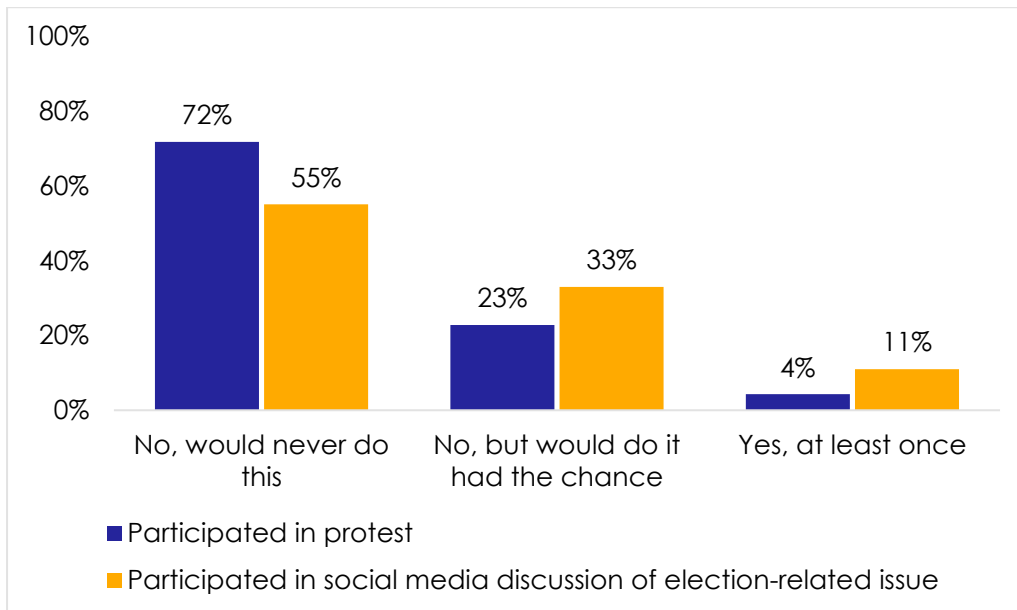
Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the police? (% who said "somewhat" or "completely" free)*

Fewer Zimbabweans would voice their displeasure by participating in a protest or a social media discussion. Only 4% of respondents said in July 2018 that they had participated in a protest at least once in 2018, while 23% said they had not but would do so if they "had the chance" and 72% said they would "never" participate in a protest demonstration (Figure 20).

Almost three times as many (11%) said they had taken part in a social media discussion of election-related issues, while 33% said they would if the opportunity arose and 55% said they would never do so.

As might be expected, citizens who did not feel free to criticize the police were more likely to say they would never participate in a protest demonstration than those who felt free to criticize the police (76% vs 66%).

Figure 20: Citizen engagement | Zimbabwe | July 2018



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during 2018. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Participated in a protest demonstration?

Participated in a social media discussion of an election-related issue?

Conclusion

Over-time analysis suggests that as of mid-2018 – before the bloody suppression of post-electoral and fuel-hike protests – Zimbabwean citizens' trust in the police and perceptions of police integrity and performance were gradually recovering from low points following the brutal Operation Murambatsvina crackdown in 2005. People felt safer in their homes and neighbourhoods than in the past, and support for the police role of making people obey the law was at a high. Problems still abounded: More than half of Zimbabweans saw police corruption as common and said it is difficult to obtain police assistance when they need it. But most said they would turn first to the police in case of a crime, and most expected that the police would respond. If Operation Murambatsvina highlighted the damaging effects of police engagement in political repression, these findings suggest that when the ZRP operates within its community safety and security mandate, improvements are both perceived and appreciated by the citizenry.

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.

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Nicholas Simpson is a post-doctoral research fellow in the Global Risk Governance Programme and the Environmental and Geographical Science Department at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Email: nick.simpson@uct.ac.za.

Matthias Krönke is a PhD student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Email: mkroenke@afrobarometer.org.

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