

A never-ending problem: Ugandans say corruption level has increased, rate government fight against corruption poorly

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 435 | Ronald Makanga Kakumba

Summary

Corruption hinders economic, political, and social development, especially in less-developed countries, and has a disproportionate impact on the poor and most vulnerable, increasing costs and reducing access to services, including health, education, and justice. Corruption worsens poverty and aggravates inequality as resources meant for the poor and the underprivileged are diverted to line the pockets of the corrupt (Addah, Jaitner, Koroma, Miamen, & Nombora, 2012). In his State of the Nation address in 2019, President Yoweri Museveni called corruption “Public Enemy No. 1,” the remaining obstacle to Uganda’s development (State House of Uganda, 2019; Daily Monitor, 2019a).

To tackle endemic corruption, the government has passed a variety of laws, including the Inspectorate of Government Act (2002), the Leadership Code Act (2002), the Public Finance and Accountability Act (2003), the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act (2003), the Access to Information Act (2005), the Audit Act (2008), the Anti-Corruption Act (2009), the Whistle Blowers Protection Act (2010), and the Public Finance Management Act (2013) (Gumisiriza & Mukobi, 2019).

Government agencies have been established to deal with reported corruption, including the Inspectorate of Government (IG), the Office of the Auditor General (OAG), the Directorate for Public Prosecution (DPP), the Directorate for Ethics and Integrity (DEI), the Anti-Corruption Court, and the State House Anti-Corruption Unit.

The president has demonstrated some level of commitment in the fight against corruption. In 2006, he announced a policy of zero tolerance for corruption. In 2016, he vowed to renew the fight against corruption when he took the oath for his fifth term in office. In 2019, he led an anti-corruption walk in Kampala (Xinhuanet, 2019).

But critics dismiss the walk as political theater (VOA, 2019) and say corruption remains widespread in the government. In their view, while agencies have been successful in prosecuting graft involving lower-level officials or private citizens and small amounts of money, they have largely “let the big fish swim” (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Transparency International, 2018).

Reports by the Auditor General’s office state that corruption is getting worse, with more public funds being misappropriated in increasingly sophisticated ways (Inspectorate of Government, 2014). In its Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International (2019) ranks Uganda among the most corrupt countries in the world (137th out of 180). The Ibrahim Index of African Governance rates Uganda worse than average among African countries, better than regional peers Burundi and South Sudan but worse than Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2018).

Afrobarometer survey findings show that a majority of Ugandans think that corruption is getting worse in their country and that their government is doing a bad job of fighting it. Most say ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corruption to the authorities.

Among key public institutions, the Uganda police are most widely seen as corrupt, followed by civil servants and tax officials. Paying bribes is a common part of daily life in Uganda: More than half of respondents who accessed police services say they had to pay a bribe.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

This dispatch draws mainly on findings from a survey in September-October 2019 led by Hatchile Consult, which interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Ugandans. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Ugandans (62%) say corruption in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” during the year preceding the survey, a slight improvement compared to citizens’ perceptions in 2015 and 2017 (69%).
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of Ugandans say the government is performing poorly in its fight against corruption. Dissatisfaction with government efforts to reduce corruption has grown significantly since 2005 (52%).
- More than three-quarters (77%) of Ugandans believe that citizens who report corruption to the authorities risk retaliation or other negative consequences.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens say “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt. Almost half see widespread corruption among civil servants (48%) and tax officials (45%).
 - The proportion of respondents who think that “most” or “all” judges and magistrates are corrupt rose by 15 percentage points between 2012 and 2019.
- Among Ugandans who had contact with key public services during the previous year, three-quarters (75%) say they had to pay bribes to obtain police assistance. Four in 10 say they had to pay bribes to obtain medical care (42%) or to get a government document (40%).

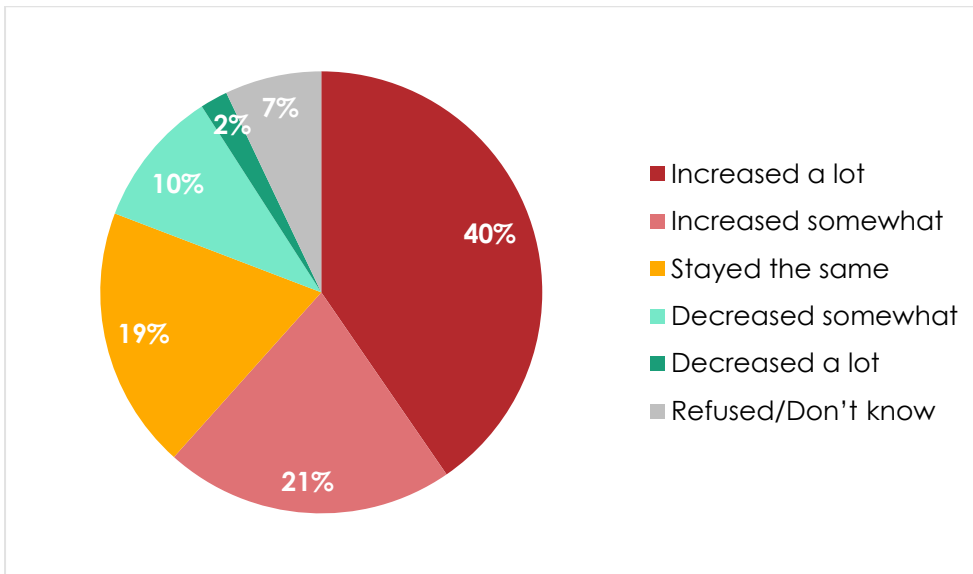
Is corruption increasing or decreasing in Uganda?

Six in 10 Ugandans (62%) say the overall levels of corruption in the country increased during the year preceding the survey, including 40% who believe it “increased a lot” (Figure 1).

This reflects a modest improvement from the 2017 survey (69%), while the proportion who saw no change in corruption levels continued to increase (by 10 percentage points since 2015) (Figure 2).

The perception that corruption levels increased is highest among residents of the Central region (67%), urban residents (67%), the poorest¹ respondents (66%), and men (65%). Across the political-party divide, opposition supporters are far more likely to report increased corruption levels in the country than supporters of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) (79% vs. 55% (Figure 3)).

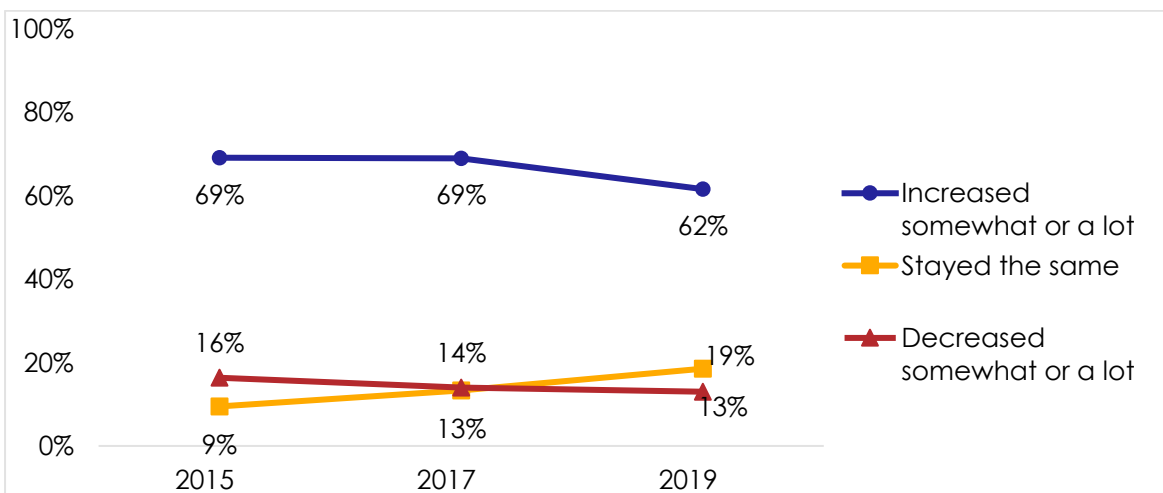
Figure 1: Perceived level of corruption | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Note: Due to rounding, reported totals may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of subtotals.

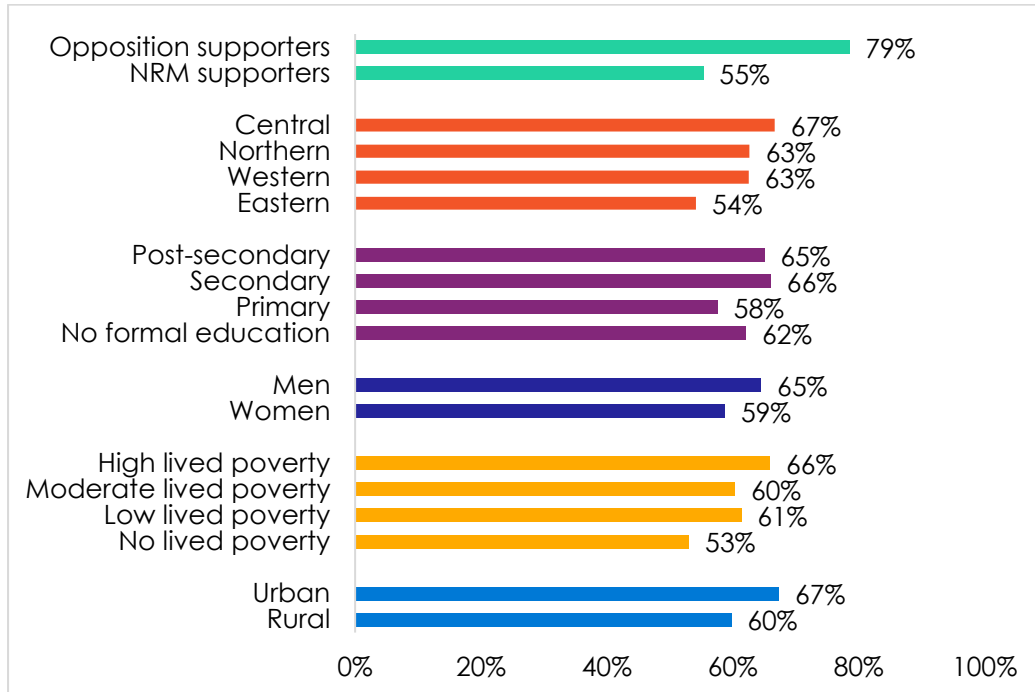
Figure 2: Perceived level of corruption | Uganda | 2015-2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

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).

Figure 3: Perceived level of corruption | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2019

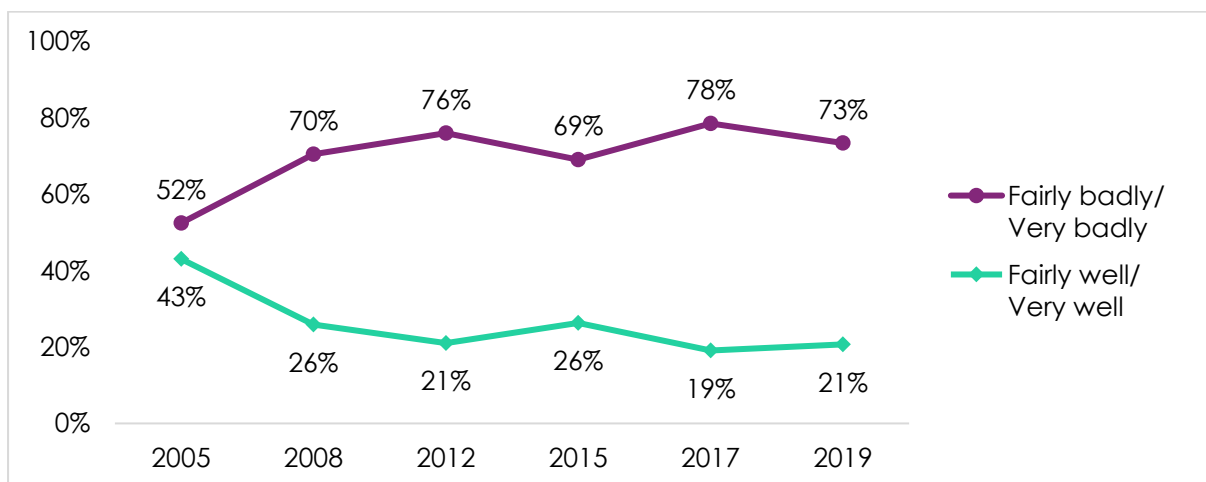


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say "increased somewhat" or "increased a lot")

Government performance in fighting corruption

In line with their perception of increasing graft, a majority (73%) of Ugandans believe the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in its fight against corruption. Dissatisfaction with government efforts to fight corruption climbed by 24 percentage points between 2005 and 2012 and has remained fairly high since then (Figure 4). Only two in 10 Ugandans (21%) say the government is doing a good job on corruption.

Figure 4: Government performance in fighting corruption | Uganda | 2019

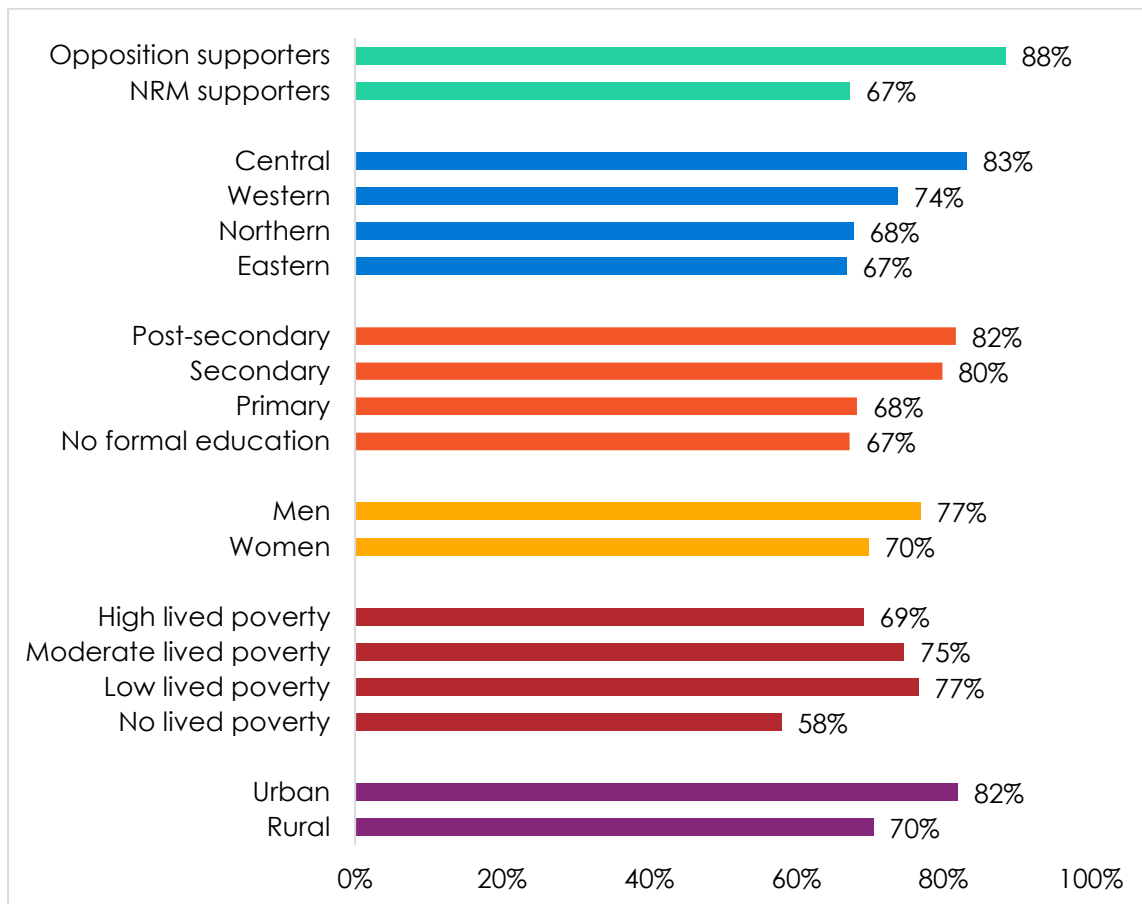


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?

Negative assessments of the government's performance on corruption are most common among residents of the Central region (83%), urban residents (82%), and men (77%), and increase with respondents' education level (from 67% of those with no formal education to 82% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 5).

As might be expected, opposition supporters are overwhelmingly critical (88%), but even among adherents of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), two-thirds (67%) say the government is doing a poor job.

Figure 5: Government performance in fighting corruption | Uganda | 2019

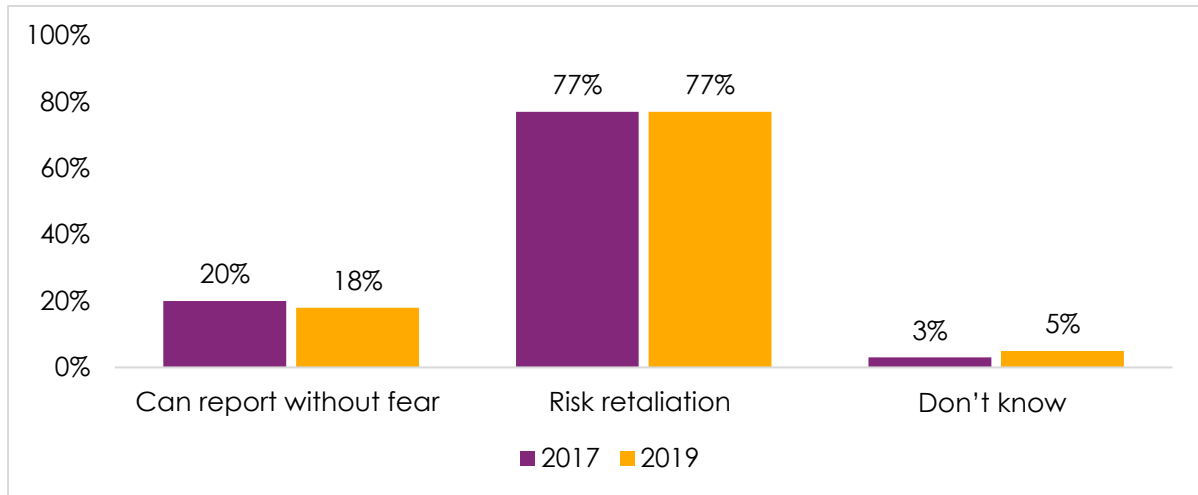


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Can citizens report corruption without fear?

The ability of citizens to report corruption cases to the appropriate authorities is essential to anti-corruption work, yet more than three-quarters (77%) of Ugandans say ordinary people risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they do so. This assessment has not changed since 2017 (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Can people report corruption without fear of retaliation? | Uganda
 | 2017-2019



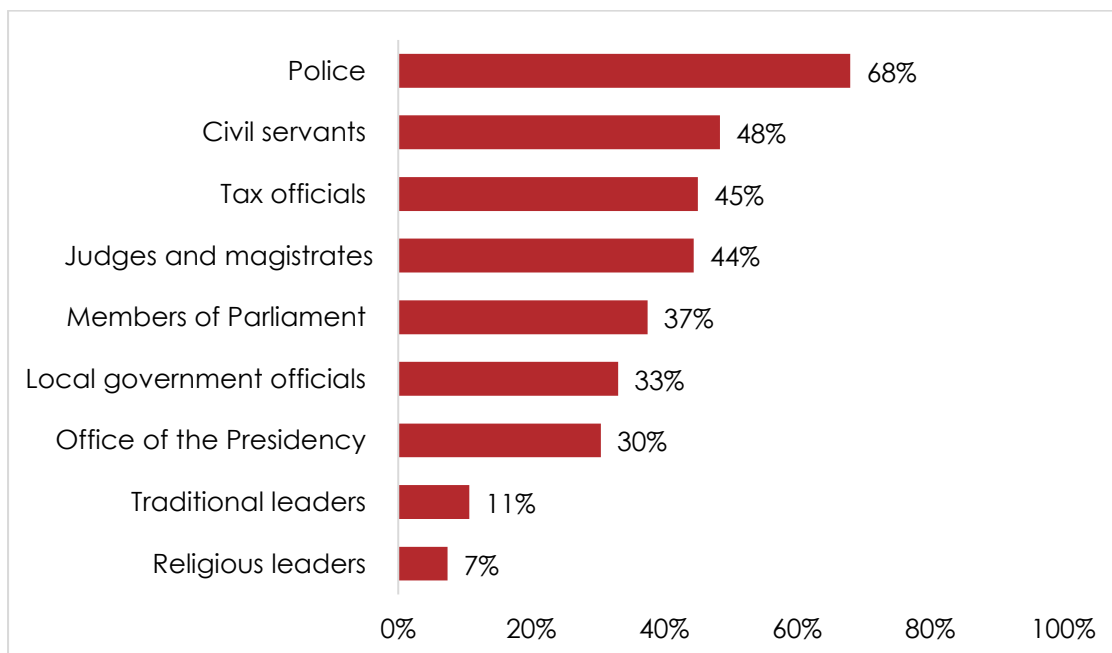
Respondents were asked: In this country, can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?

Who is corrupt?

More than two-thirds (68%) of Ugandans say that “most” or “all” police officials are corrupt – the highest rate among key public officials and leaders. Civil servants (48%), tax officials (45%), and judges and magistrates (44%) are also widely seen as involved in graft (Figure 7).

Roughly one-third of citizens say “most” or “all” members of Parliament (MPs) (37%), local government councillors (33%), and officials of the Presidency (30%) are corrupt. Religious leaders (7%) and traditional leaders (11%) are least likely to be considered corrupt.

Figure 7: Perceived corruption among public officials and leaders | Uganda | 2019

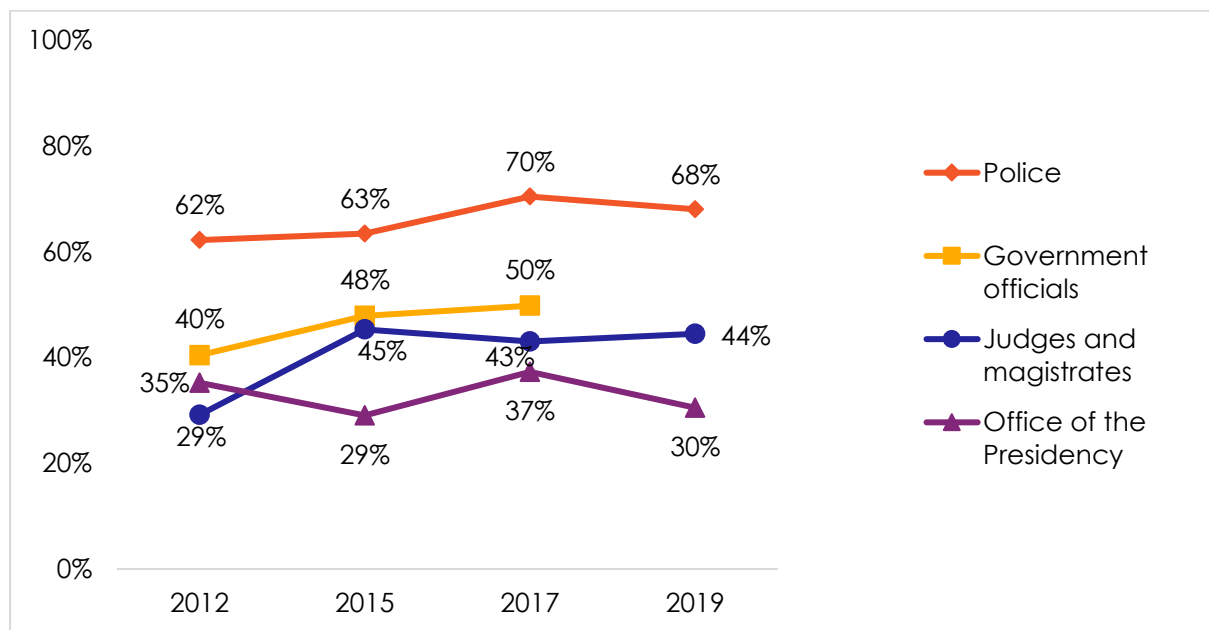


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “most” or “all”)

The proportion of Ugandans who say that “most” or “all” judges and magistrates are corrupt rose by 15 percentage points between 2012 and 2019, while perceptions of widespread corruption among government officials and police increased by 10 and 6 percentage points, respectively, compared to 2012 (Figure 8).

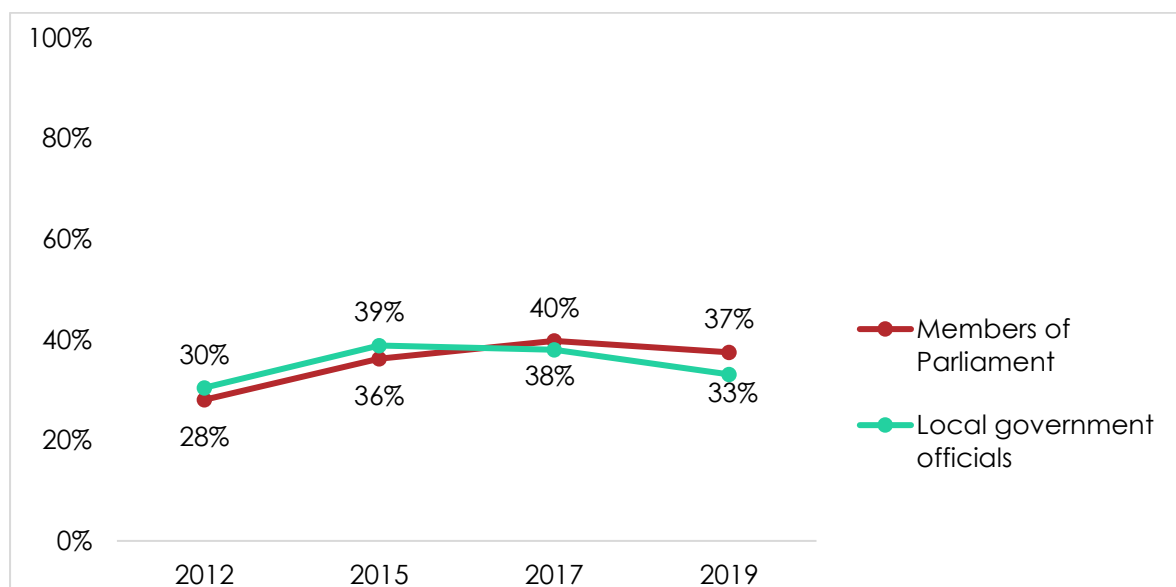
Similarly, perceptions of widespread corruption among MPs climbed by 9 percentage points between 2012 and 2019. For local government councillors, this perception increased by 9 percentage points between 2012 and 2015 but has declined modestly since then (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Perceived corruption among public officials | Uganda | 2012-2019



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”)

Figure 9: Perceived corruption among elected leaders | Uganda | 2012-2019



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”)

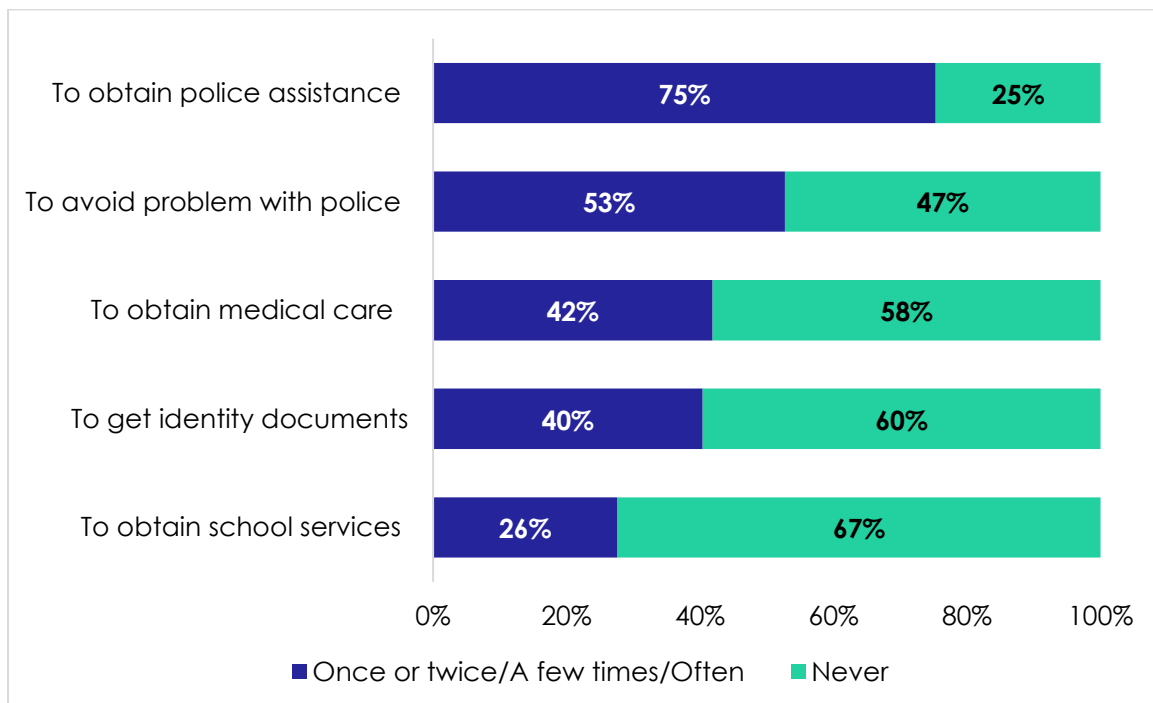
Citizens' experience with corruption

Afrobarometer asks citizens whether they had contact with certain public services during the previous year and, if so, whether they had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor to obtain the services they needed.

Among Ugandans who had contact with the police during the previous year, three-quarters (75%) say they had to pay a bribe at least once to obtain police assistance, while more than half (53%) say they had to pay a bribe to avoid problems with the police (Figure 10).

Four in 10 say they paid bribes to obtain medical care (42%) or to get a government identification document, such as a birth certificate, driver's license, passport, voter's card, or permit (40%). One in four (26%) report paying a bribe to obtain services at a public school.

Figure 10: Paid bribe to obtain public services | Uganda | 2019



Respondents who said they had contact with key public services were asked: How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor for:

A police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

A police officer in order to avoid a problem?

A health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?

A government official in order to get the document you needed?

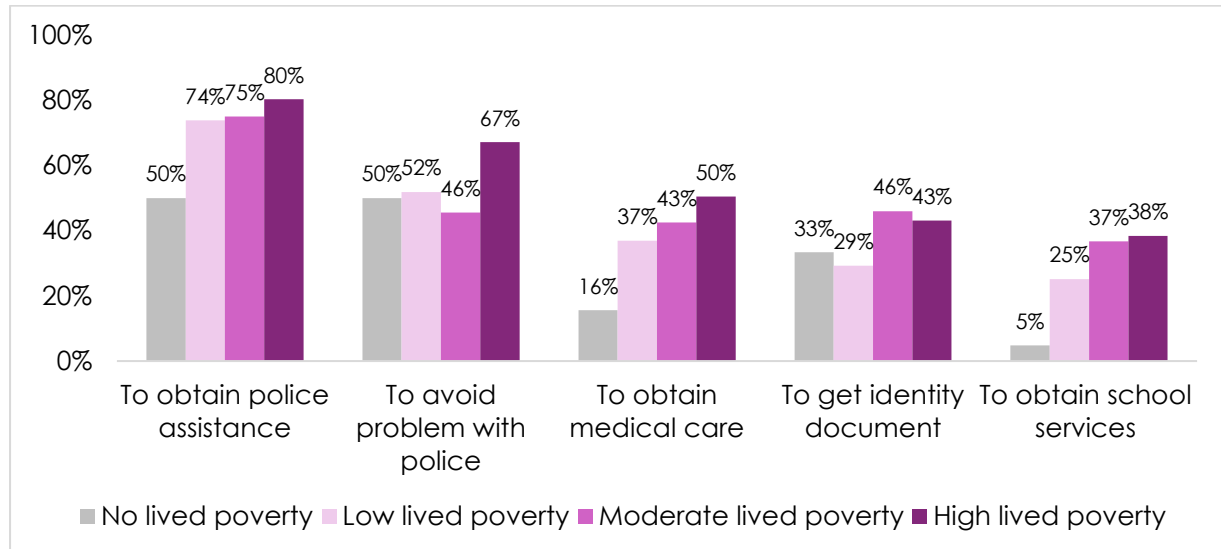
A teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?

(Note: Respondents who said they had no contact with these services during the previous year are excluded.)

The survey findings show that citizens living in poverty are more vulnerable to demands for bribes than wealthy citizens. For example, while 50% of the economically best-off citizens who sought police assistance had to pay a bribe, the same was true for 80% in the poorest group (Figure 11).

Similarly, to obtain medical care, 50% of the poorest citizens had to pay a bribe, vs. 16% of the wealthiest. The same correlation between economic status and bribe-paying is visible with regard to each of the public services that Afrobarometer asked about.

Figure 11: Paid bribe to obtain public services | by level of lived poverty | Uganda | 2019



Respondents who said they had contact with key public services were asked: How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favor [to obtain the needed services]? (% who say “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Conclusion

Despite Uganda's many laws and agencies to deal with corruption, survey findings show that corruption remains a common problem in the country. A majority of citizens say that corruption is getting worse, that their government is doing a bad job of fighting it, and that ordinary people risk retaliation if they report it. Those charged with enforcing the law, the police, are most widely seen and experienced as corrupt.

Citizens living in poverty are especially vulnerable to demands for bribes, as they may have less power than the wealthy to stand up to corrupt public officials, as well as fewer options (e.g. in the private sector) to obtain the services they need.

For the government, civil-society actors, and other stakeholders, these findings point to a need for more concentrated efforts to implement existing laws and put anti-corruption commitments into action. Mechanisms to collect citizens' complaints and stronger whistleblower protections will be needed to enable citizens to engage effectively in this fight.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
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