

South Africans support government's COVID-19 response but are critical of corruption and skeptical of vaccines

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 467 | Mikhail Moosa, Asafika Mpako, and Jamy Felton

Summary

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in South Africa was identified on 5 March 2020. Since then, the country has recorded more than 2.3 million cases and at least 70,018 deaths related to the disease (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2021), although the real death toll could be more than twice as high (News24, 2021).

The government instituted one of the world's strictest national lockdowns at the end of March 2020 to limit the spread of the disease, placing severe restrictions on movement, schooling, and trade (Abdool Karim, 2020). By the end of 2020, the economy had contracted by 7%, and the unemployment rate had grown to 32.5% (Smit, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2021).

As of 26 July 2021, more than 6.6 million South Africans had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, with eligibility extended to anyone over the age of 35 (Department of Health, 2021). At the same time, a third wave of COVID-19 is sweeping the country. Thousands of new cases and hundreds of deaths are identified each day.

Against this background, how do ordinary South Africans perceive the pandemic, the lockdown, and COVID-19 vaccines?

Findings from a new Afrobarometer survey show that South Africans consider themselves well-informed about COVID-19, and they are broadly supportive of the lockdown and school closures as necessary steps. But South Africans have struggled to comply with lockdown restrictions, and they believe that resources needed for the pandemic response were misappropriated by corrupt government officials.

Most South Africans do not trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and a majority say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated. Nearly half of respondents believe prayer is more effective at preventing COVID-19 transmission than a vaccine.

For policy makers and civil society, these findings suggest that a successful vaccination campaign will require greater public awareness of the benefits of accepting approved COVID-19 vaccines, and they point to a need for greater accountability in the use of pandemic-related resources.

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 conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples

of 1,200-2,400, which yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

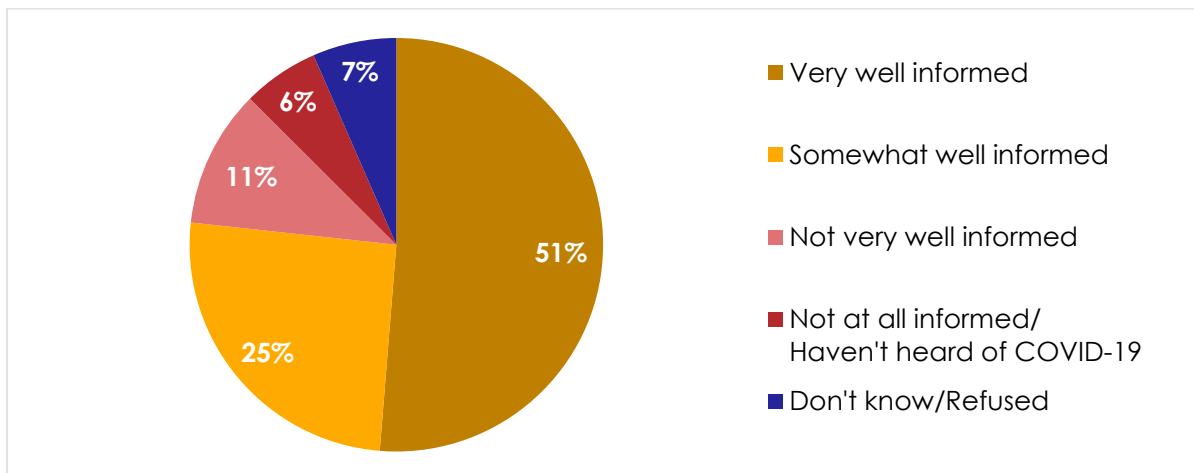
- More than three in four South Africans (77%) say they are “somewhat” or “very” well informed about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it.
- One in five South Africans (19%) report that someone in their household became ill with COVID-19, while more than a third (34%) of households have temporarily or permanently lost a major income source since the onset of the pandemic.
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of South Africans found it difficult to comply with lockdown and curfew restrictions. Despite this, four in five citizens (80%) believe that these measures were necessary to curb the spread of the virus.
- Most South Africans (72%) also support the school closures, though just as many (73%) believe the schools should have reopened sooner.
- Three in 10 citizens (30%) say their household received pandemic-related government assistance. Twice as many (60%) say assistance was distributed unfairly.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of South Africans approve of the government’s performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and almost eight in 10 (78%) say the government has done a good job of keeping the public informed.
 - But only about one-third (36%) say they trust official COVID-19 statistics provided by the government.
 - And almost nine in 10 (85%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were lost to government corruption.
- Fewer than three in 10 South Africans (28%) say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.
- And fewer than half (43%) say they are “somewhat” or “very” likely to try to get vaccinated.
- Close to half (47%) of citizens believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infection.

Awareness and impact of COVID-19

After the first case of COVID-19 was identified in South Africa, the pandemic dominated media coverage. So it is not surprising that more than three in four South Africans (77%) consider themselves well informed about COVID-19, including 51% who say they are “very well informed” (Figure 1). However, almost one-fourth of citizens report that they are “not very well informed” (11%), are “not at all informed” (6%), or “don’t know” or refused to answer the question (7%).

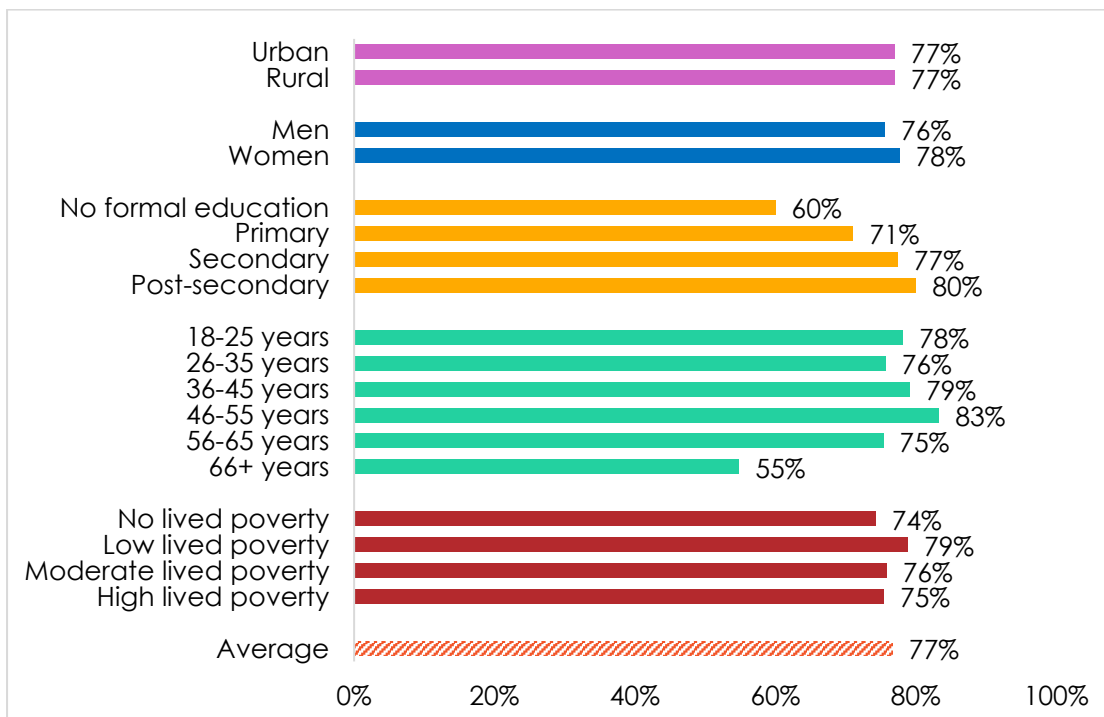
Awareness of the pandemic is equally high in rural and urban areas, among both women and men, and among poor and well-off citizens (Figure 2). Respondents with primary education (71%) or no formal education (60%) are less aware of COVID-19 than those with at least a secondary education (77%-80%), as are the elderly (55% among those above age 65) compared to younger citizens.

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (Note: Due to rounding, totals for combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 51% "very well informed" + 25% "somewhat well informed" combine to 77% "well informed.")

Figure 2: Well informed about COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021

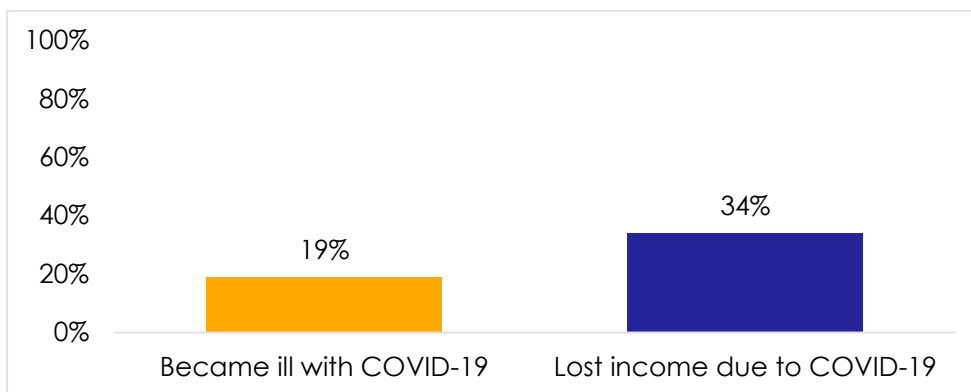


Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "somewhat" or "very" well informed)

The pandemic has caused a severe shock to South Africa's economy and health-care system. About one in five citizens (19%) report that someone in their household became ill with COVID-19, while more than a third (34%) of households have temporarily or permanently lost a job, a business, or a primary source of income since the pandemic began (Figure 3).

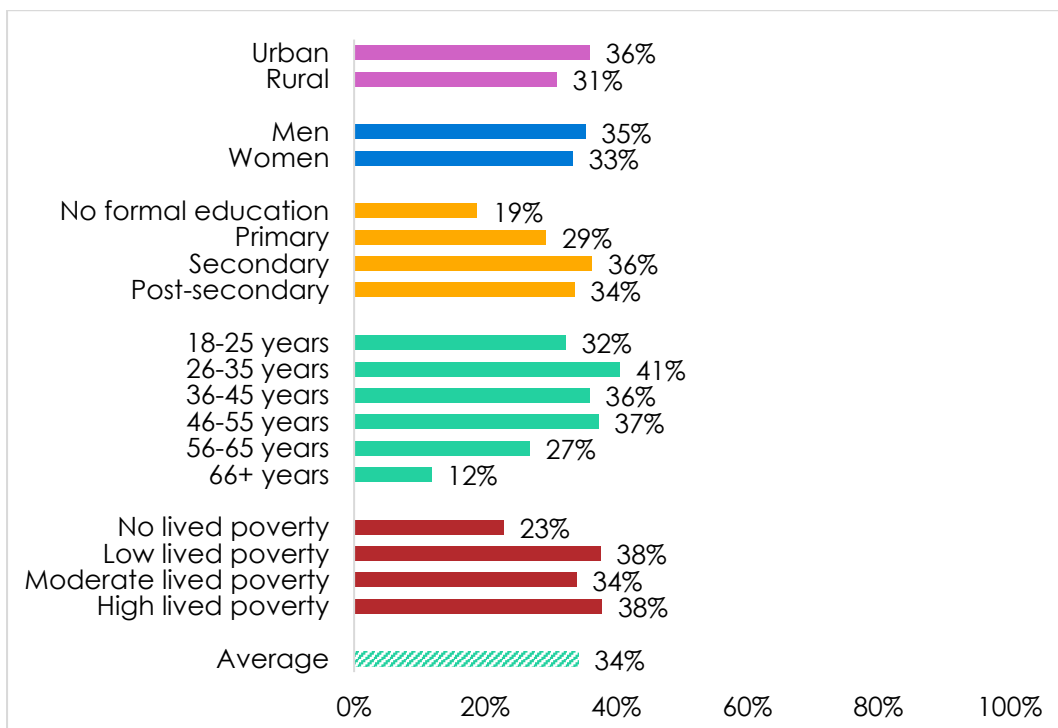
Loss of income was more common in cities (36%) than in rural areas (31%) and among respondents with secondary (36%) or post-secondary education (34%) compared to those with primary (29%) or no formal education (19%) (Figure 4). The economically best-off respondents are least likely to report losing income (23%).

Figure 3: Impacts of COVID-19 | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

Figure 4: Lost income due to the pandemic | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



(% of respondents who say they or a member of their household temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic)

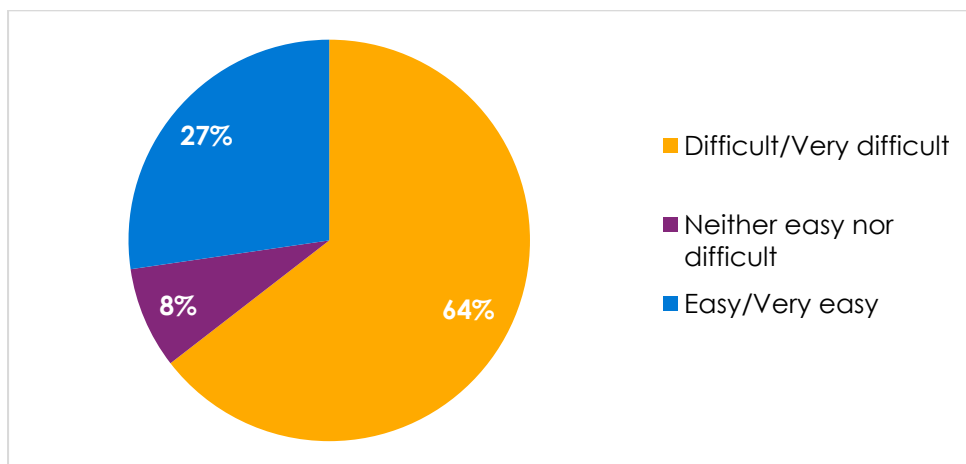
Effects of national lockdown

As part of the national lockdown, nightly curfews were enforced, non-essential businesses were temporarily closed, and goods and services were severely limited.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of South Africans say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with lockdown and curfew restrictions (Figure 5). Only about one-fourth (27%) describe it as easy.

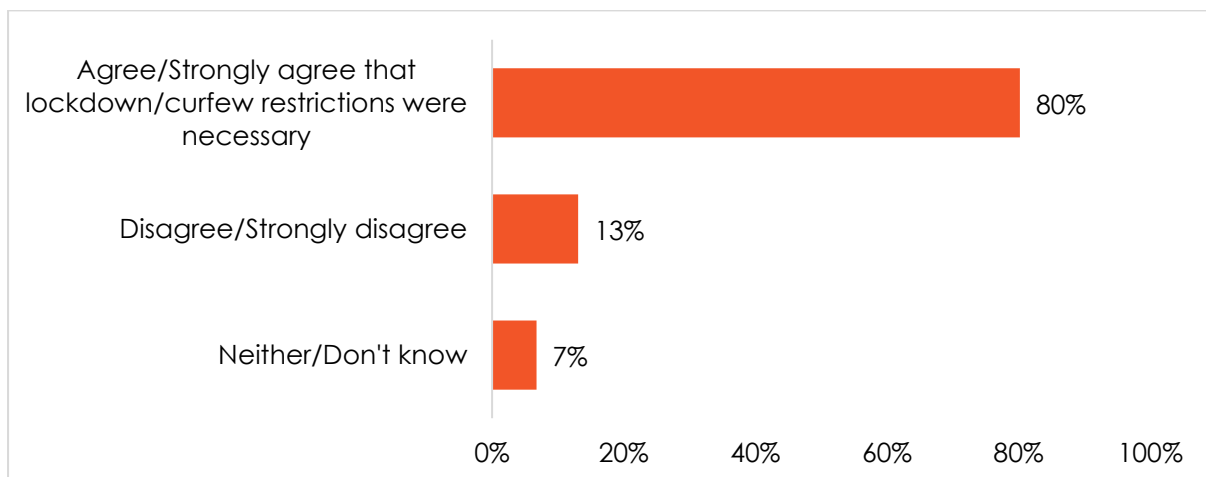
But even though South Africans struggled to comply, an overwhelming majority (80%) say the lockdown/curfew restrictions were necessary to reduce infections (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Difficulty of complying with lockdown | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

Figure 6: Support for lockdown | South Africa | 2021

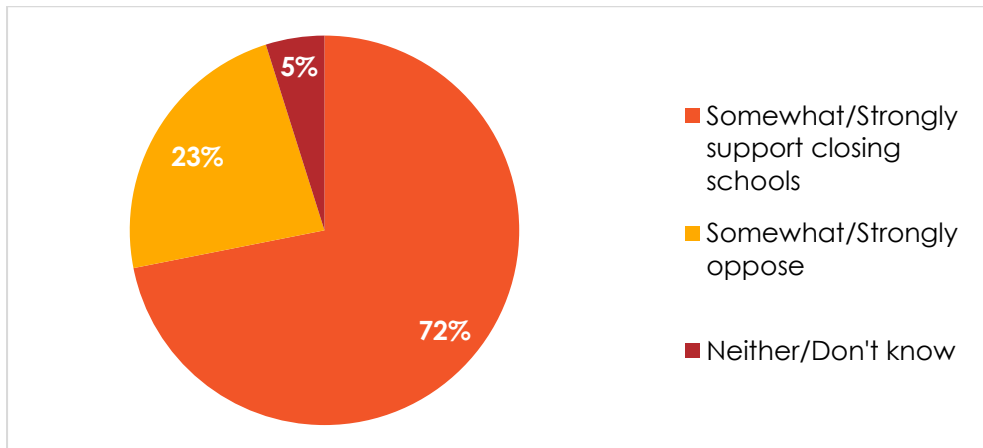


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew has negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

One of the most far-reaching restrictions imposed under South Africa's lockdown was the closure of schools. Millions of children have missed weeks or months of schooling due to the pandemic (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021).

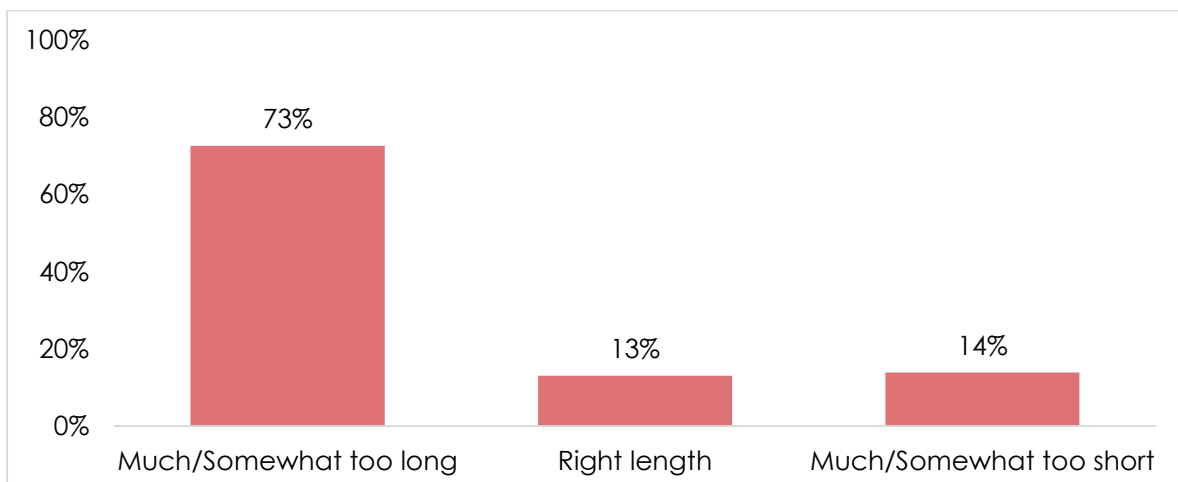
Despite the negative implications of school closures, nearly three-quarters (72%) of South Africans support the decision to close schools (Figure 7). But about the same proportion (73%) say that schools remained closed for too long (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Support for school closures | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Figure 8: Length of school closures | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

Government assistance and performance

To mitigate the economic shock of the pandemic, the government introduced several social-assistance measures, including food aid, a new cash-transfer program for the unemployed, and expanded eligibility for unemployment insurance.

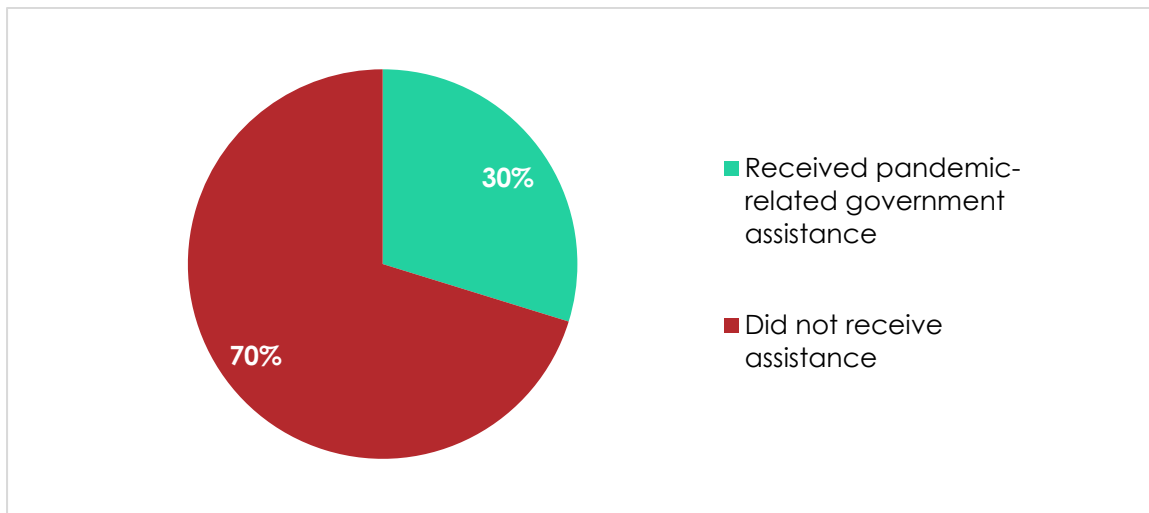
Three in 10 South Africans (30%) say their household received special government assistance during the pandemic, but most (70%) say they did not (Figure 9).

Households in rural and urban areas are about equally likely to report having received special assistance, as are men and women (Figure 10). Respondents with no lived poverty (18%) are less likely to say they got assistance than those who are economically worse off (29%-33%).

But relatively few older citizens (20% of those aged 56-65, and 13% of those over age 65) received assistance, as did only 18% of those with no formal education.

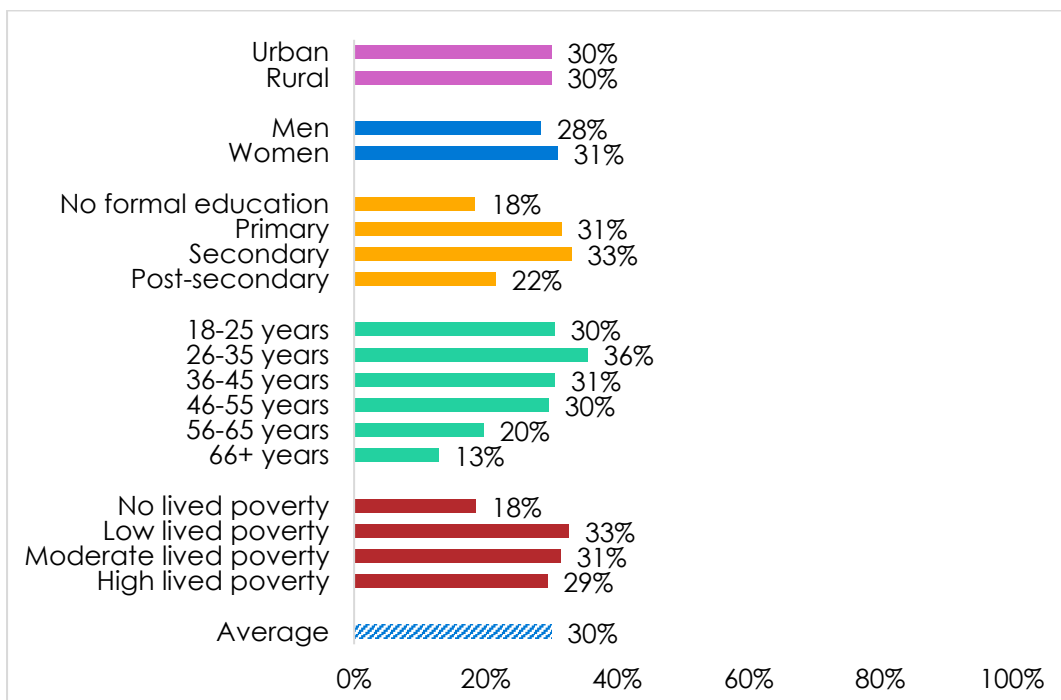
And six in 10 South Africans (60%) say that government assistance during the pandemic was distributed “somewhat unfairly” or “very unfairly” (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Received government assistance | South Africa | 2021



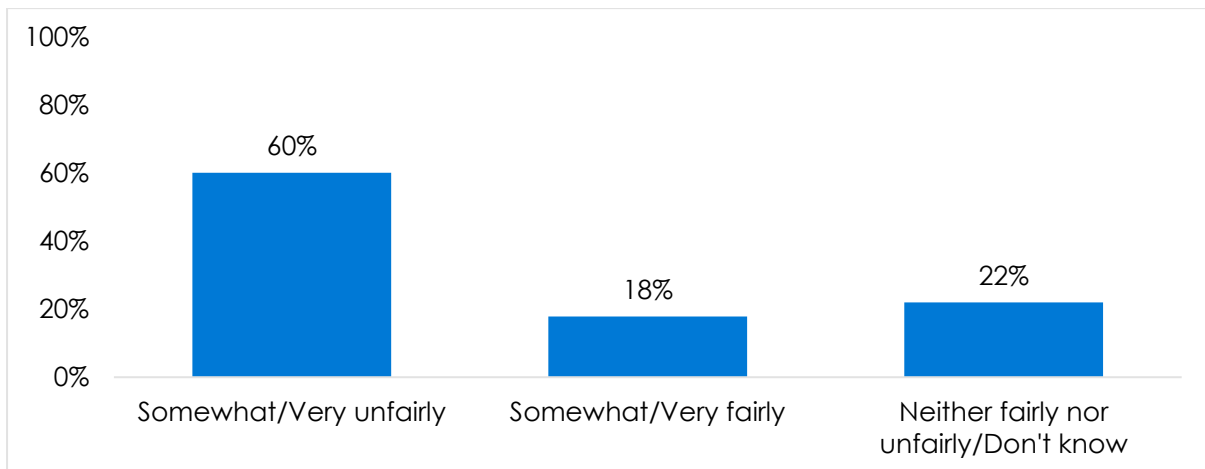
Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

Figure 10: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% who say “yes”)

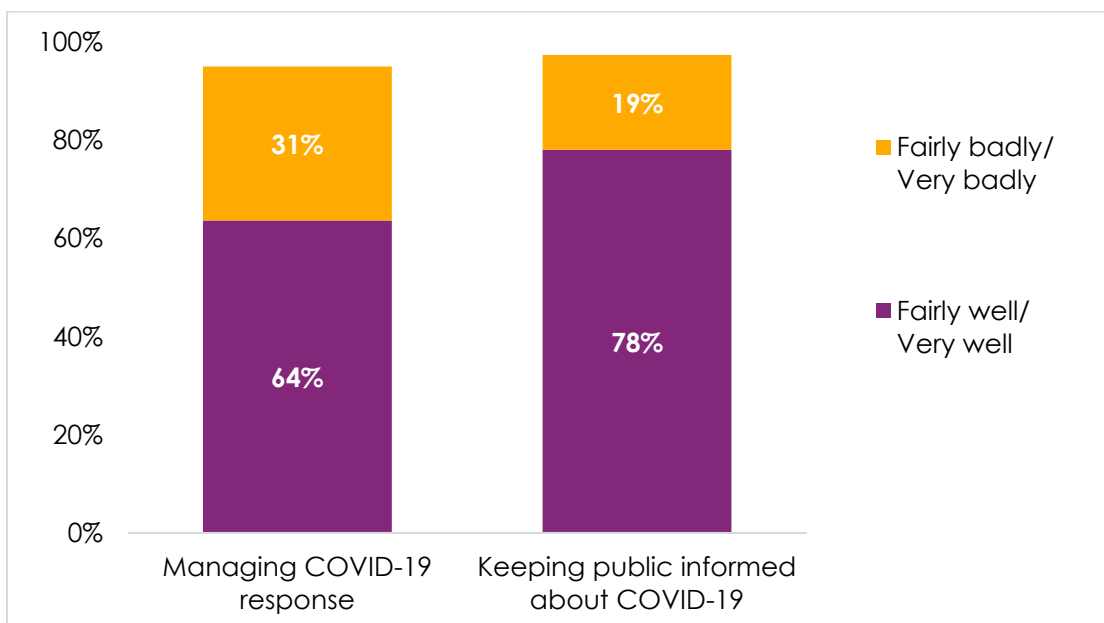
Figure 11: Fairness of government assistance | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favoring certain groups or regions?

Overall, most South Africans say the government has performed “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the COVID-19 pandemic (64%) and in keeping the public informed about the pandemic (78%) (Figure 12).

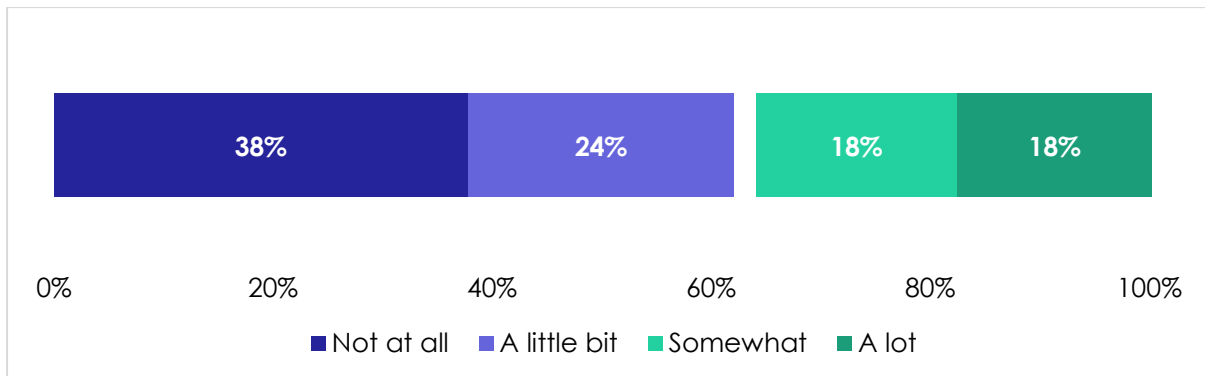
Figure 12: Assessment of government response to COVID-19 | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say?

But despite favourable assessments of the government's performance, only about one-third (36%) of South Africans say they trust official COVID-19 statistics provided by the government “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 13). More than six in ten (62%) say they trust government numbers “a little bit” or “not at all.”

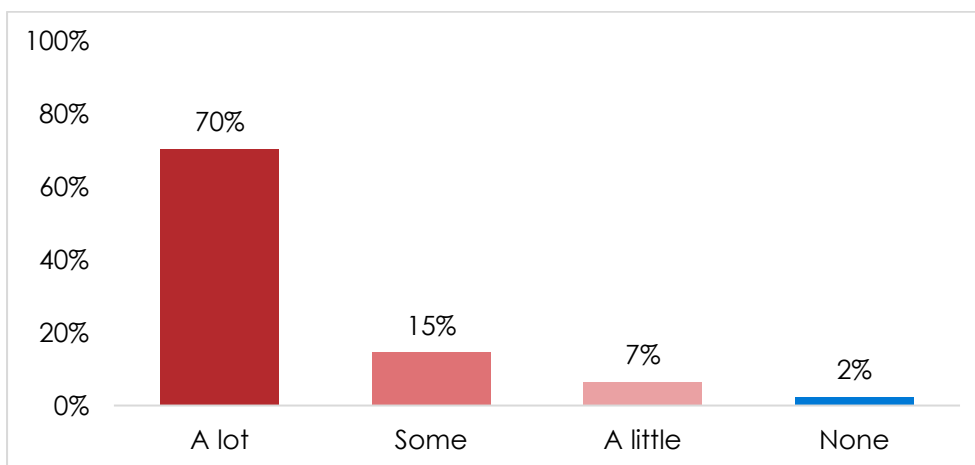
Figure 13: Trust official COVID-19 statistics | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Moreover, an overwhelming majority of South Africans believe that “a lot” (70%) or “some” (15%) of the funds and resources available for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic have been lost to corruption among government officials (Figure 14). Several senior state officials have been accused of profiting from irregular payments relating to COVID-19, notably involving the procurement of personal protective equipment (Payne, 2021; Myburgh, 2021).

Figure 14: Level of COVID-19 corruption | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?

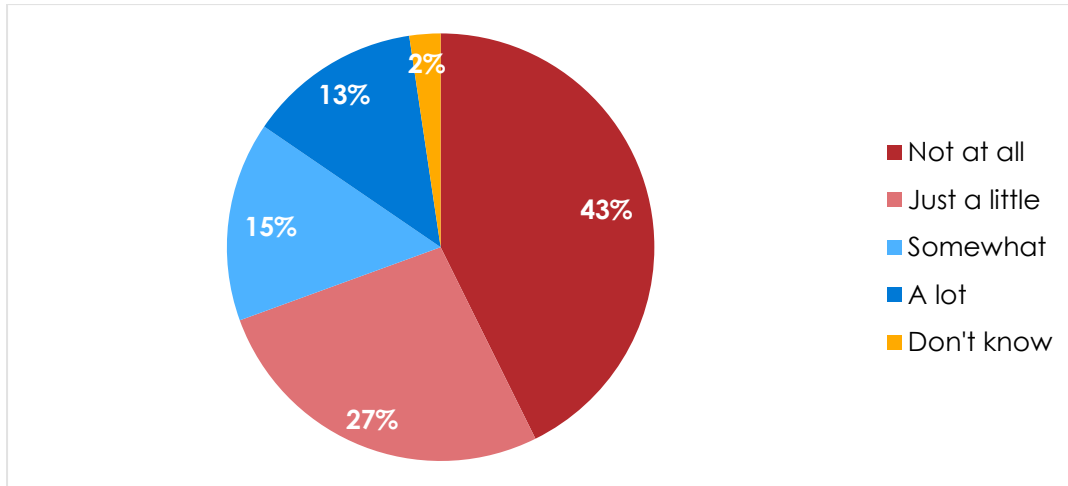
Vaccines

To limit transmission of the coronavirus, the government embarked on a mass vaccination program. Although some studies have reported a high level of confidence in the vaccine (Burger, 2021), Afrobarometer findings show that many South Africans are still unconvinced.

Fewer than three in 10 citizens (28%) say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines offered to the citizenry, while 43% express no such trust at all (Figure 15).

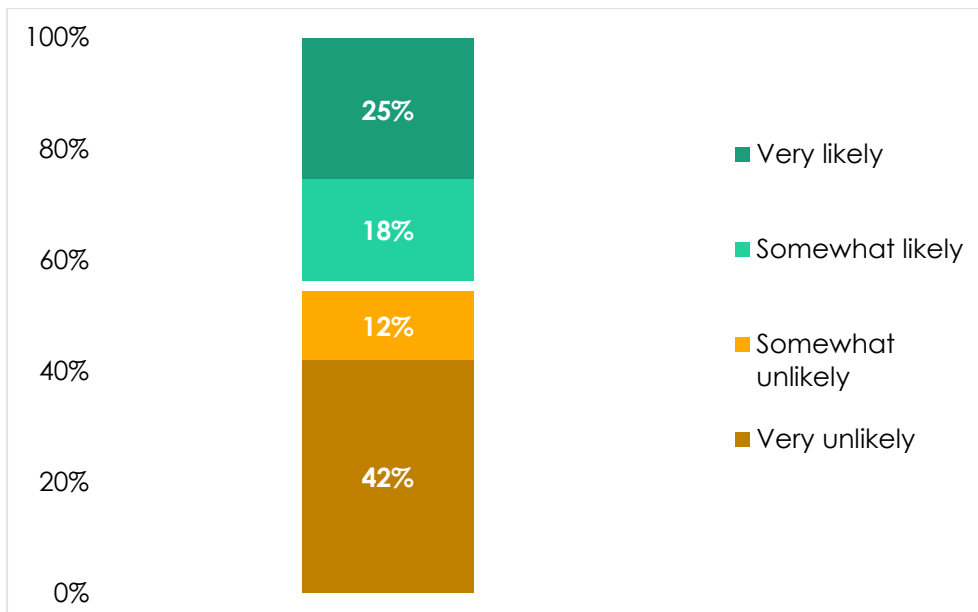
And only about four in 10 (43%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated, while a majority (54%) say it's unlikely (including 42% “very unlikely”) (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Trust government to ensure safety of COVID-19 vaccine | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to South African citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

Figure 16: Likelihood of trying to get COVID-19 vaccination | South Africa | 2021

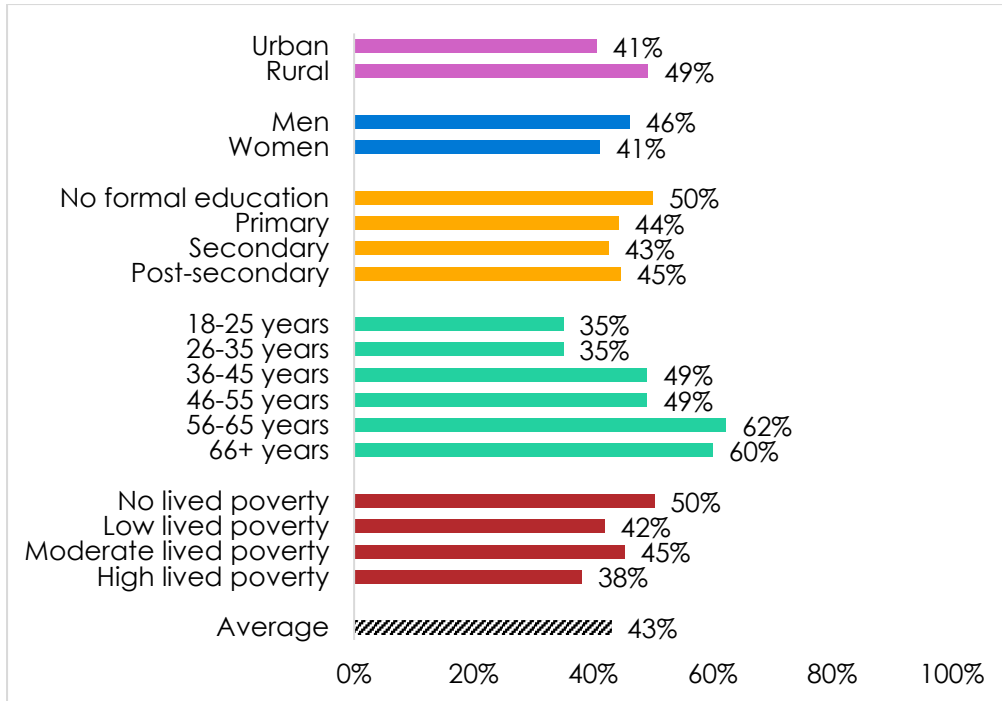


Respondents were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

South Africans living in urban areas (41%) are less likely than rural residents (49%) to indicate a willingness to get vaccinated, as are women (41%) compared to men (46%) (Figure 17). Willingness increases with age, ranging from just one-third (35%) among 18- to 35-year-olds to six in 10 (60%-62%) among those over age 55.

South Africans experiencing high levels of lived poverty are less open to vaccination (38%) than their better-off counterparts (42%-50%). But surprisingly, citizens with no formal schooling (50%) are more inclined to get vaccinated than those with at least a primary education (43%-45%).

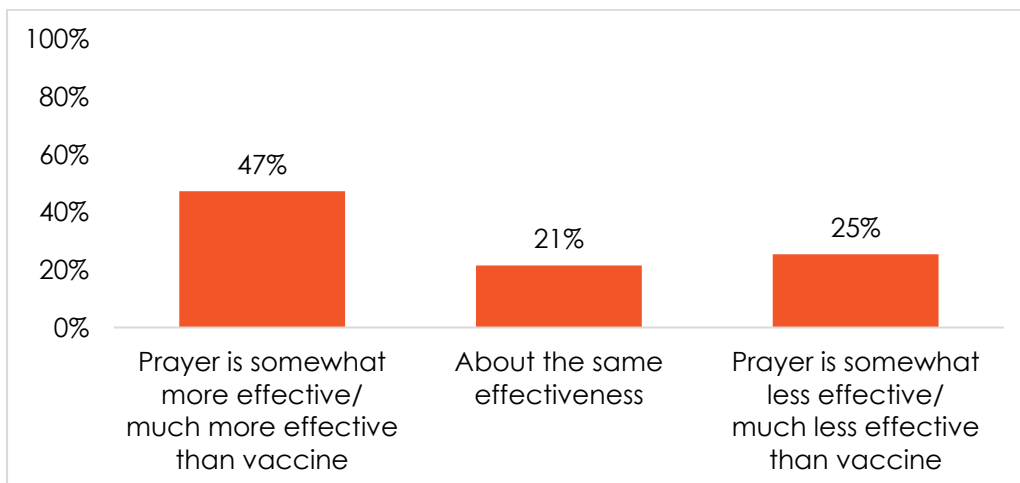
Figure 17: Likely to try to get vaccinated | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Close to half of South Africans (47%) believe that prayer is "somewhat more" or "much more" effective than a vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infection. One in five South Africans (21%) believe that prayer and vaccines are about equally effective, while only a quarter (25%) believe vaccines are more effective (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Is prayer more effective than COVID-19 vaccine? | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: *Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?*

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer survey suggests that South Africans have mixed feelings about their government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, most say the government is doing a good job, and they support the introduction of a national lockdown and the closure of schools.

On the other hand, majorities found it difficult to comply with lockdown restrictions, wish that schools had reopened sooner, believe that assistance was distributed unfairly, suspect that government corruption has hindered the response to the pandemic, and don't trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.

Vaccine hesitancy could pose significant challenges for the government's vaccination program. If the campaign is to succeed in achieving mass coverage, the government, civil society, and the media will have to maximize their efforts to persuade South Africans of the safety and benefits of accepting a COVID-19 vaccine.

The perceptions that relief assistance was distributed unfairly and that some government officials used the pandemic as an opportunity to enrich themselves could damage citizens' trust in state institutions. Officials found guilty of corruption should be swiftly disciplined, in a show of accountability, and state assistance should effectively target the most vulnerable.

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