



Dispatch No. 475 | 9 September 2021

Zimbabweans grapple with water shortage amidst COVID-19 pandemic

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 475 | Jonathan Kugarakuripi

Summary

Zimbabwe's water and sanitation crisis predates COVID-19 by decades. But it appears to be worsening, and bringing additional dangers during the pandemic.

Access to clean water has long been declining, especially in urban areas. Human Rights Watch (2020) reports that while 84% of Zimbabweans had access to safe drinking water in 1988, that proportion had shrunk to 72% by 2000 and to 64% by 2017. More than 2 million people in the greater Harare metropolitan area have no household access to safe water for drinking.

Population growth coupled with neglected water and sanitation infrastructure compounds the problem (World Bank, 2011). Inadequate access to household water has resulted in the sprouting up of community boreholes, where people wait for hours, even if they join the queue at 3 a.m., to fill their buckets (Kingsley & Moyo, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which had killed 4,503 people in Zimbabwe as of 8 September 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021), has exacerbated the situation. Citizens are encouraged to wash their hands frequently, maintain social distance, and avoid unnecessary movement. But facing persistent water shortages as well as pandemic-related restrictions, citizens find themselves in a quandary, risking contracting the deadly virus as they join crowds at boreholes to access water before curfew (Mavhunga, 2020).

Recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that a growing number of Zimbabweans report going without clean water, and most citizens are dissatisfied with the way the government has handled the provision of water and sanitation services. During the pandemic, addressing the water shortage is one of the immediate actions that government can take to help reduce the spread of the deadly virus.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

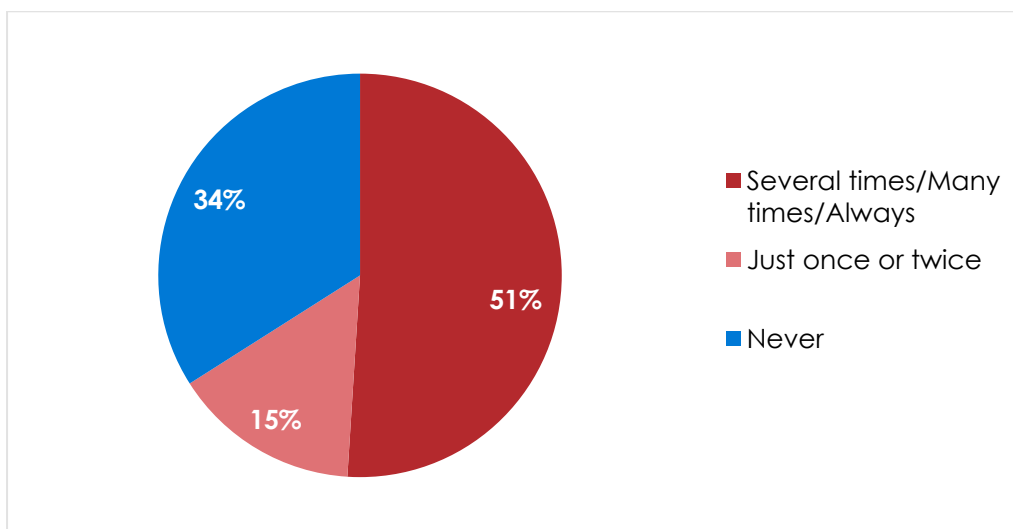
Key findings

- Two-thirds (66%) of Zimbabweans report that they went without enough clean water at least once in the previous 12 months, including half (51%) who did so “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”
 - The proportion of citizens who report going without water at least “several times” during the previous year has increased by 6 percentage points compared to 2017.
 - Shortages of clean water are more common in cities (58%) than in rural areas (39%), and more frequently reported by women (50%) than men (43%).
- More than six in 10 Zimbabweans (62%) say the government is doing a poor job of providing water and sanitation services.
- The most common sources of water for household use in Zimbabwe are tubewells/boreholes (30%), protected wells (22%), and piped water into the dwelling (20%).
 - Piped water in the home is mostly an urban phenomenon (50%, vs. just 2% in rural areas). One in five rural households (21%) use unprotected wells, surface water, or unprotected springs as their main water source.
- More than eight in 10 Zimbabweans (82%) have a toilet or latrine in their home or compound. But one in five rural residents say they do not have access to a toilet or latrine, even outside their compound.

Citizens going without water

Fully half (51%) of Zimbabwean citizens say they went without enough clean water for household use “several times,” “many times,” or “always” during the previous year (Figure 1). In addition, 15% report going without enough water “once or twice,” leaving just one in three citizens (34%) who didn’t experience water shortages during the year.

Figure 1: Going without enough water | Zimbabwe | 2021



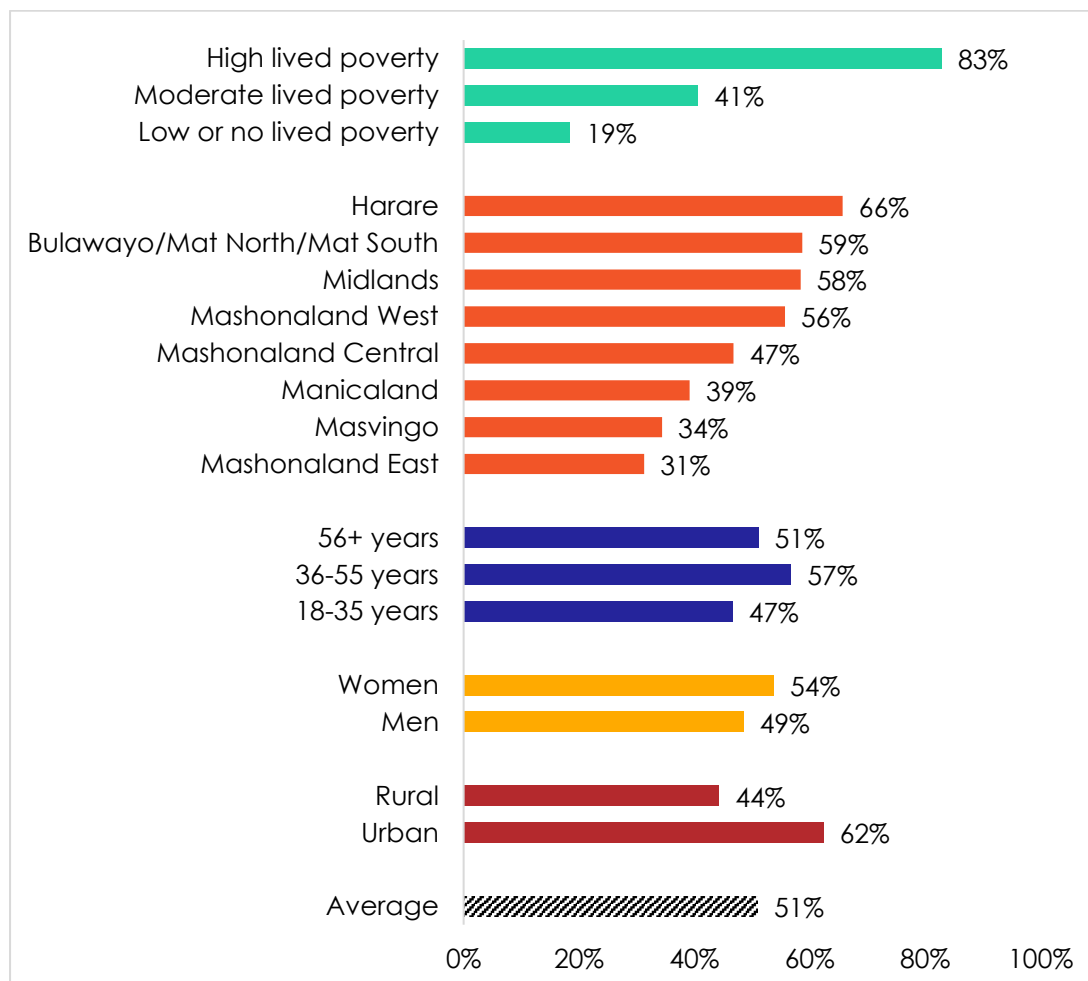
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use?

As might be expected, lack of access to clean water hits the poorest citizens hardest of all. Clean water is one of five basic necessities (in addition to food, medical care, cooking fuel, and a cash income) whose shortages Afrobarometer uses to define “lived poverty,” so an association between lack of clean water and lived poverty is not surprising. Still, it’s notable that people experiencing high lived poverty (83%) are twice as likely as those with moderate lived poverty (41%), and four times as likely as those with low or no lived poverty (19%), to suffer repeated water shortages (Figure 2).

The water problem is more common in cities (62%) than in rural areas (44%), where more residents have wells and boreholes built as part of their settlements. It is especially serious in Harare (66%). Residents in the capital rely for their water supply on the Harare City Council, which has cited dilapidated infrastructure, foreign currency problems, and population growth as reasons underlying its years-long struggle to provide water and sanitation services (Relief Web, 2019).

Women are somewhat more likely than men to report water shortages (54% vs 49%), as are middle-aged citizens (57%) compared to elders (51%) and youth (47%).

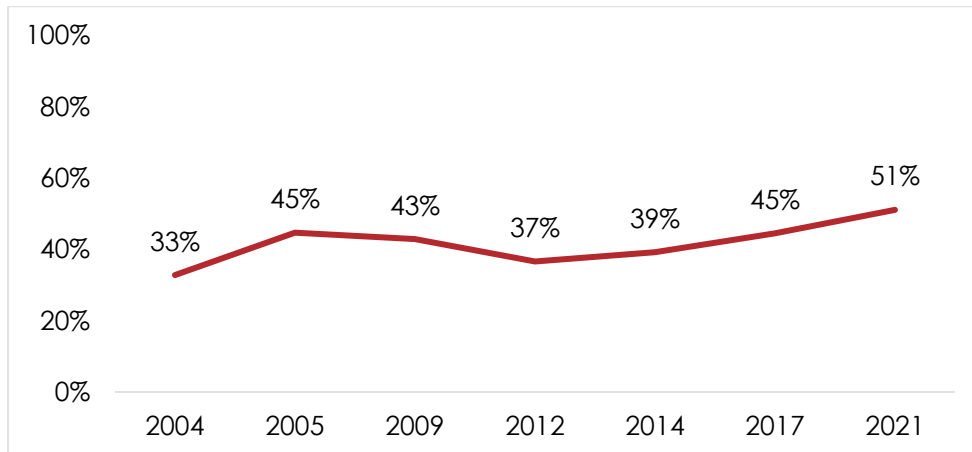
Figure 2: Going without enough water at least ‘several times’ | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use? (% who say “several times” or “many times” or “always”)

Over-time data show that the number of citizens going without enough water “several times,” “many times,” or “always” rose between 2004 (33%) and 2005 (45%), then dipped to 37% in 2012 before climbing to its current level (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Going without enough water at least ‘several times’ | Zimbabwe
 | 2004-2021

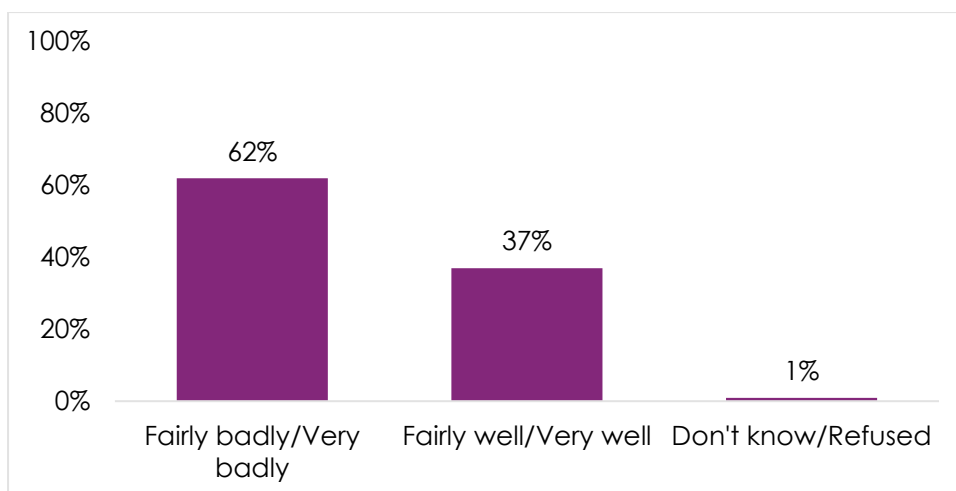


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use? (% who say “several times” or “many times” or “always”)

Government performance on water and sanitation services

More than six in 10 Zimbabweans (62%) say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in terms of providing water and sanitation services, while just 37% praise the government’s efforts (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Government performance on water and sanitation services | Zimbabwe
 | 2021



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: Providing water and sanitation services?

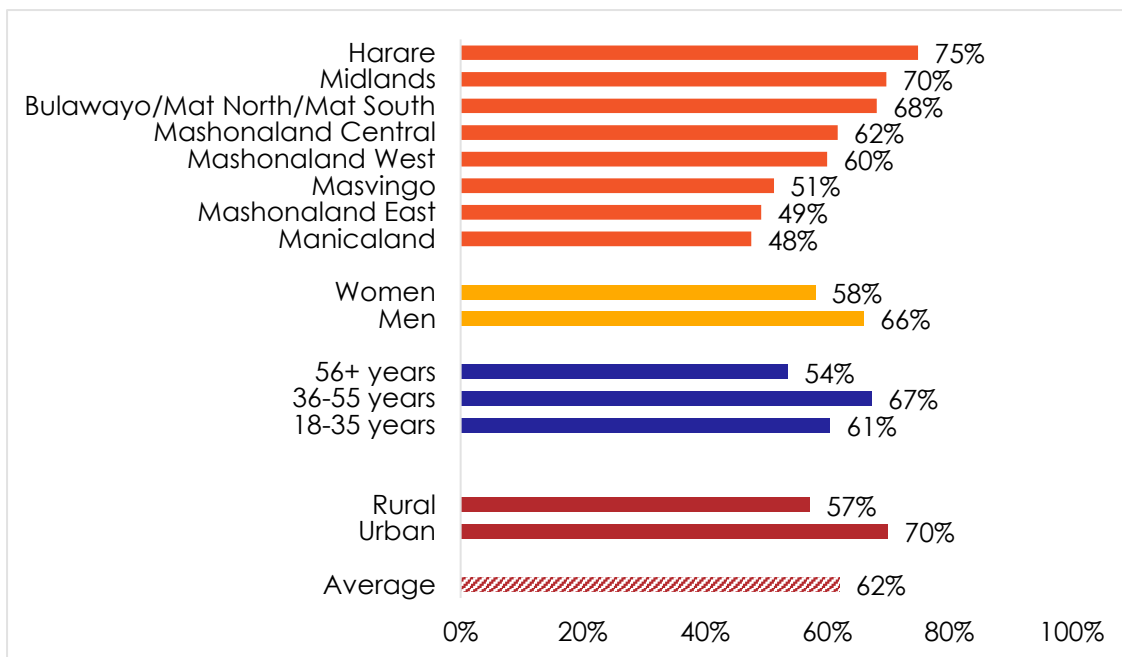
Again, urban residents are more critical than their rural counterparts (70% vs. 57%), as are men compared to women (66% vs. 58%) (Figure 5). Harare residents offer the most negative review of the government’s handling of water and sanitation services: Three-fourths (75%) say

it is doing a poor job in this regard. Appraisals are also overwhelmingly negative in Midlands (70%) and Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South (68%).

Assessments by older citizens are less negative (54%) than those by the middle-aged (67%) and youth (61%).

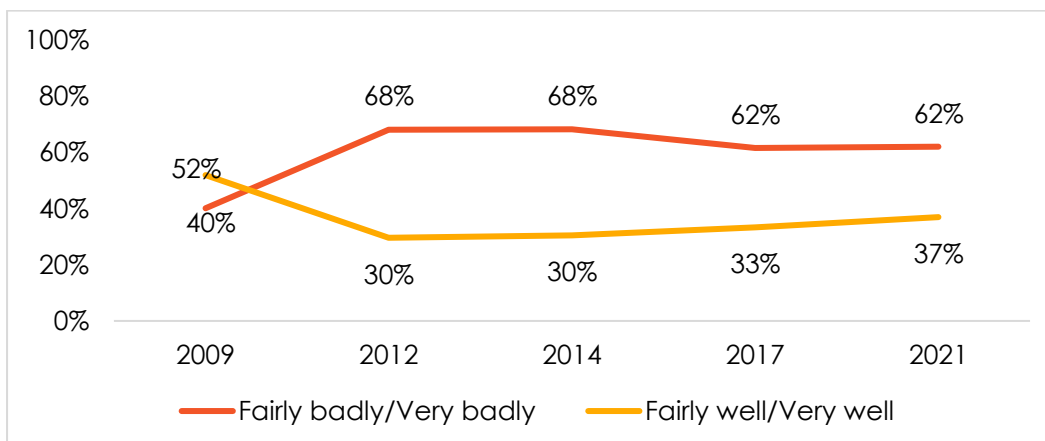
Over time, we see that disapproval of the government's performance on water and sanitation services jumped from just 40% in 2009 to 68% in 2012 and has remained above six in 10 for the past decade (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Government performing badly on water and sanitation | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



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: Providing water and sanitation services? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Figure 6: Government performing badly on water and sanitation | Zimbabwe | 2009-2021



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: Providing water and sanitation services?

Sources of water

Zimbabweans' most common sources of water for household use are tubewells or boreholes (30%) and protected wells (22%). Only one-fifth (20%) of households have piped water inside the dwelling, while another 7% have piped water in their yard, plot, or compound (Table 1).

Piped water in the home is far more common in cities (50%, vs. just 2% in rural areas). One in five rural households (21%) use unprotected wells, surface water, or unprotected springs as their main water source.

Boreholes and public taps, which combine to supply 26% of urbanites and 45% of rural residents, also represent a potential source of infection. For instance, in 2020, more than 1,800 residents in Bulawayo fell victim to a diarrhea outbreak, including eight who died (Africanews, 2020). In 2008-2009, Harare was hit by a cholera crisis blamed on shortages of clean water. Even piped water, though provided by the local government and presumed to have been treated, may not be safe for drinking and cooking (Mukeredzi, 2018).

Table1: Sources of water | Zimbabwe | 2020

	Average	Urban	Rural
Tubewell or borehole	30%	12%	41%
Protected dug well	22%	14%	27%
Piped water into dwelling	20%	50%	2%
Public tap or standpipe	7%	14%	4%
Piped water into yard, plot, or compound	7%	10%	5%
Unprotected dug well	6%	0%	10%
Surface water, like a river, dam, lake, pond, stream, canal, or irrigation channel	4%	0%	7%
Unprotected spring	3%	0%	4%
Protected spring	1%	0%	1%
Other	1%	0%	1%

Respondents were asked: *What is your main source of water for household use?*

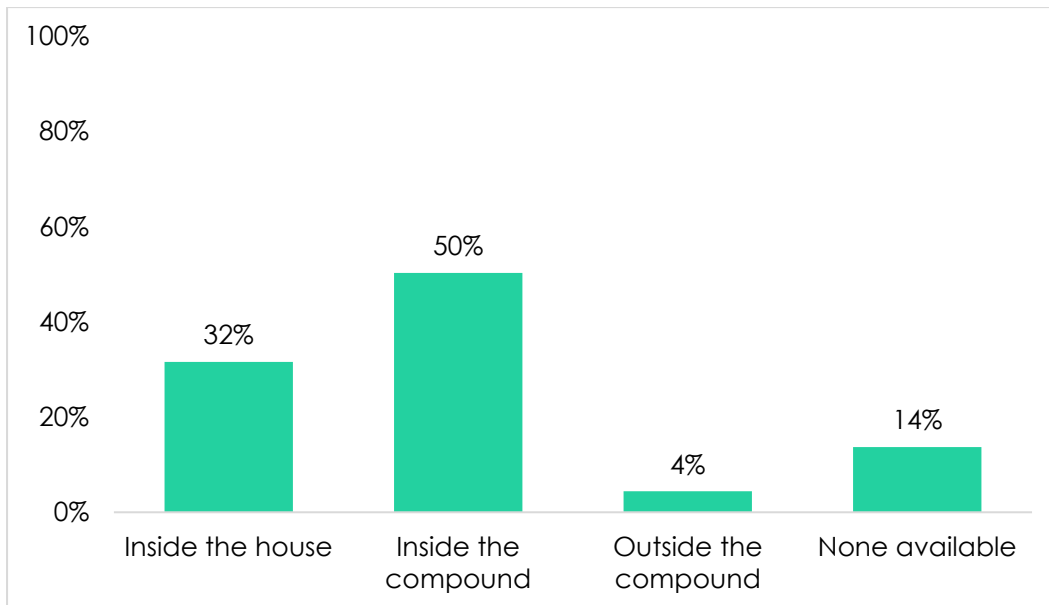
Access to sanitation

One-third (32%) of Zimbabweans say they have a toilet or latrine inside their house, while half (50%) have one inside their compound but outside the house (Figure 7). But about one in seven (14%) say they do not have access to a toilet or a latrine, even outside their compound – a risk factor for the spread of infectious diseases such as cholera.

Rural residents are far more likely to lack access to a toilet or latrine than their urban counterparts (22% vs. 1%), while toilets inside the dwelling are considerably more common in cities (77% vs. 4% in rural areas) (Figure 8).

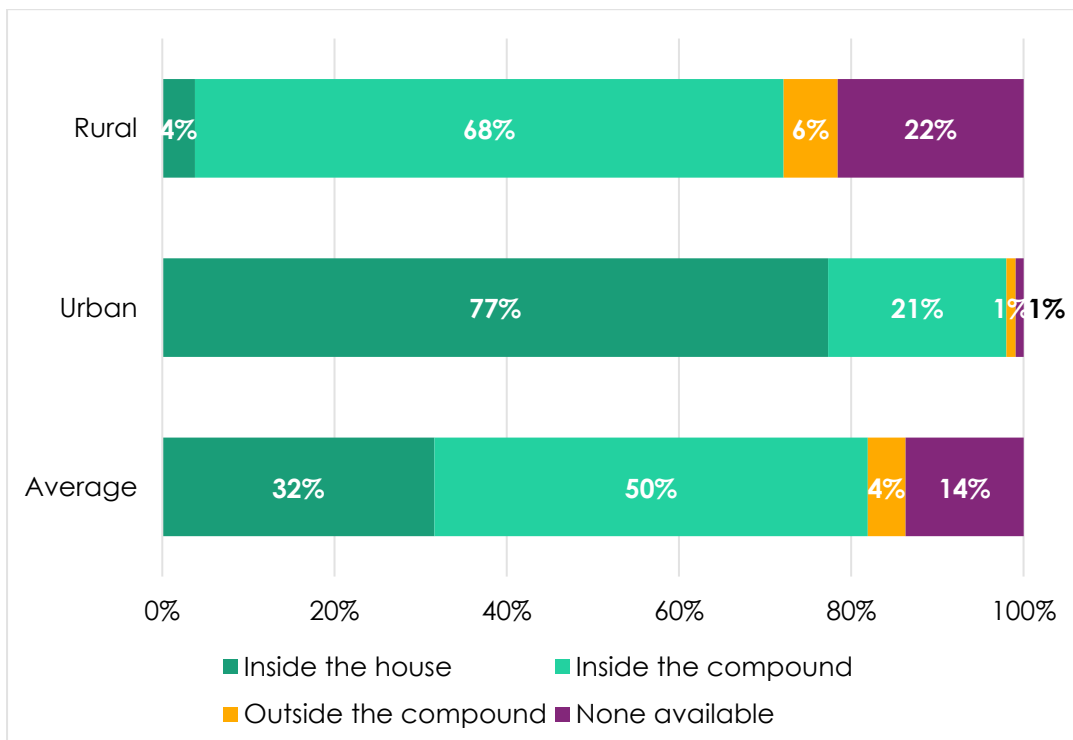
Between independence in 1980 and 2000, sanitation coverage in Zimbabwe rose from 28% to 55%, including more than 90% in urban areas, but coverage has declined since then (World Bank, 2011).

Figure 7: Access to toilet or latrine | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you have a toilet, water closet, or latrine available for your use? [If yes:] Is it inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound?

Figure 8: Access to toilet or latrine | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you have a toilet, water closet, or latrine available for your use? [If yes:] Is it inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound?

Conclusion

Water and sanitation problems have plagued Zimbabweans for a long time, and they appear to be getting worse. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a particular conundrum as citizens risk infection and curfew violations just to fetch water. But even in the best of times, citizens expect their government to do a better job of providing clean water and sanitation services.

Access to clean water is particularly limited in urban areas, while sanitation is a particular problem in rural areas. Both need lasting solutions to protect the population from epidemics and improve their quality of life.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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