



IGR/Policy Brief 011/ July 2021

Citizen's Feedback on the Application of COVID-19 Emergency Measures in 2020

BACKGROUND

With the increasing number of COVID cases (especially the Delta variant) over the last four weeks and the Government of Sierra Leone's (GoSL) announcement of fresh emergency measures, this report looks back at how the last set of emergency measures were applied in 2020 and how human rights were observed by authorities. Observance of human rights is critical for a government that is keen to gain the wider trust and support of the public in fighting a deadly pandemic in weak health system. This policy brief is part of Irish Aid's support to the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) and the Center for Accountability and the Rule of Law (CARL) to monitor GoSL's efforts in the COVID pandemic. This brief covers the following questions:

- Were citizens stopped and found in violation of any COVID-19 regulations?
- If stopped by security officers for violating COVID-19 regulations, how were they treated? If they had concerns about how they were treated, were they aware of mechanisms to access rights? Did they use those mechanisms?
- Overall, how well did security forces handle the task of enforcing COVID-19 measures? Are there are concerns about extortion and exploitation of citizens?

METHODOLOGY

IGR utilised the SierraPoll facility to collect data in May 2021 across all 16 districts and five regions. Data collection consisted of:

- 1,936 sampled respondents nationwide (384 respondents in each of the five regions)

- 50 / 50 gender split amongst respondents
- 59% rural / 41% urban
- MOE: +/-2.3% for national results and +/- 5% per regional results
- Preliminary results validated at NaCOVER

KEY FINDINGS

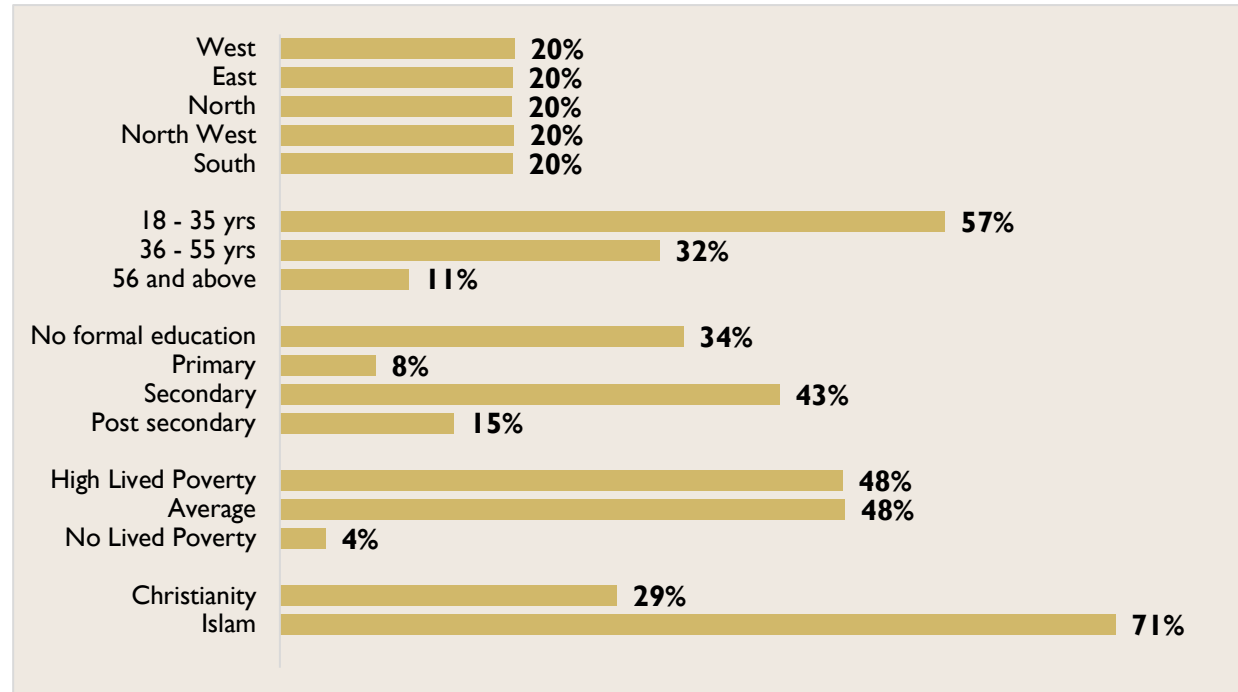
- ❖ 59% of respondents said the COVID emergency measures were either alright or not strict enough.
- ❖ Nationally, 88% of citizens are not aware of complaint mechanisms for violations of rights.
- ❖ The Western Region (27%) followed by the North-West (18%) recorded the highest share of respondents who said they violated COVID emergency measures.
- ❖ More men (61%) were treated well despite violating regulations when compared to women (50%). Freetonians (37%) and residents around Freetown (32%) were most likely to state that they were not treated well by authorities.
- ❖ Nationally, 73% of respondents stated that security forces did well/very well in enforcing COVID measures overall; although, 41% of respondents in the Western Region disapproved of the conduct of the SLP in particular.
- ❖ Nationally, 28% witnessed or heard about security officers taking bribes. 44% of those who violated COVID measures said they witnessed or heard about the taking of bribes.



THE RESPONDENTS

What stands out from the data is that Sierra Leone is a young country with a large youth population (57%), a majority of which are Muslim (71%), a high level of low literacy (42%), and deeply-entrenched poverty (48%).

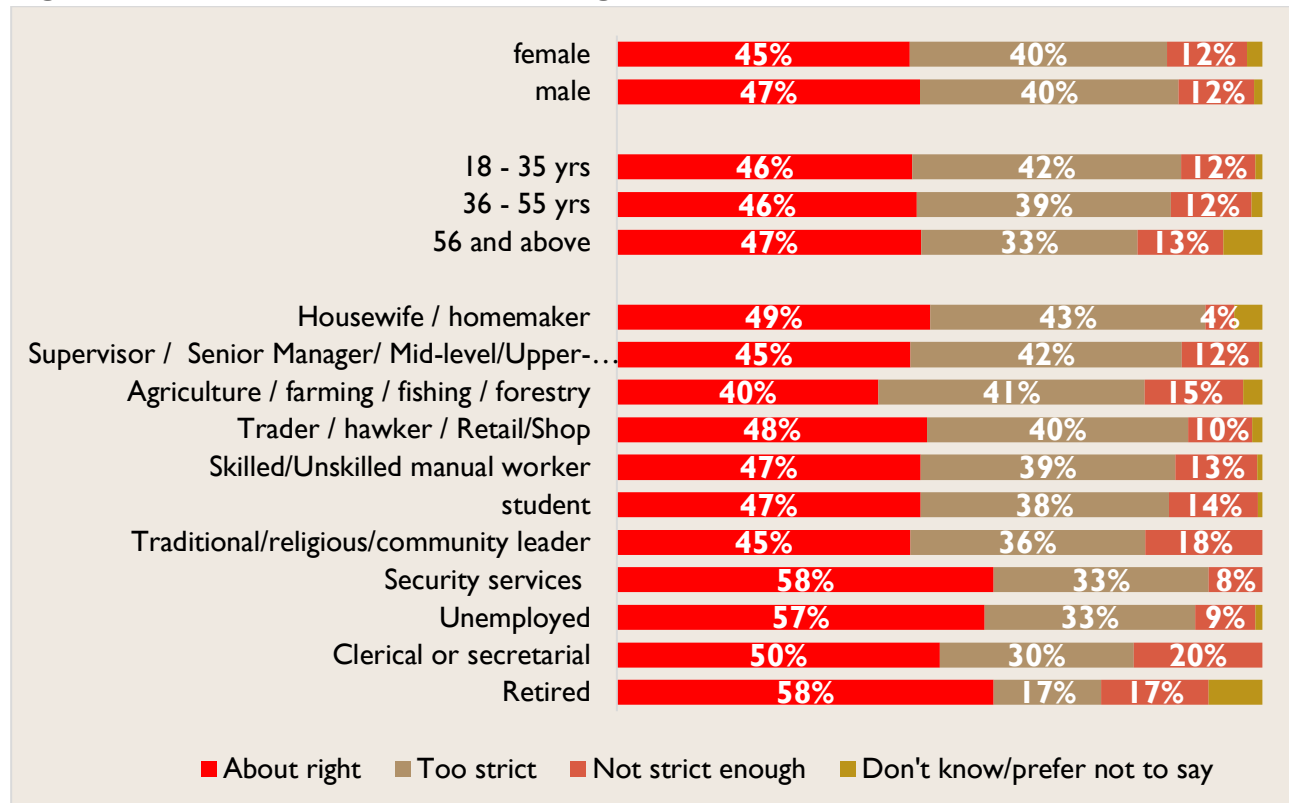
Figure 1: Respondent Characteristics



CITIZEN'S VIEW OF THE EMERGENCY MEASURES

Respondents were asked how they viewed the restrictions put in place by government. Overall, 42% of respondents viewed COVID restrictions as adequate/about right, while 40% believe the measures are too strict, and 12% said they are not strict enough. Homemakers (43%) and professionals (42%) were most likely to see the measures as too strict – as did 42% of the youth population. Administrative professionals like secretaries and those in office settings (20%), traditional, religious and community leaders (18%), and retired respondents (17%) stated that restrictions were not strict enough to adequately address COVID-19.

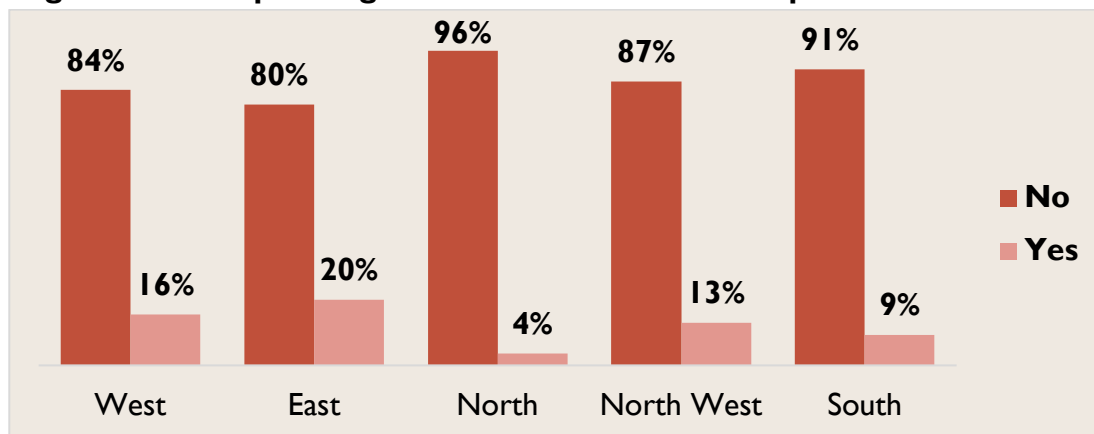
Figure 2: Citizen's Views on COVID Regulations



KNOWLEDGE OF COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Respondents across Sierra Leone were asked if they had to make a complaint during COVID-19, if they knew where to make a complaint, and if so, to whom? 88% of society stated that they do not know where to go or whom to speak with. Only 20% of the East and 16% of citizens in the West could properly identify where to go, or whom to speak with.

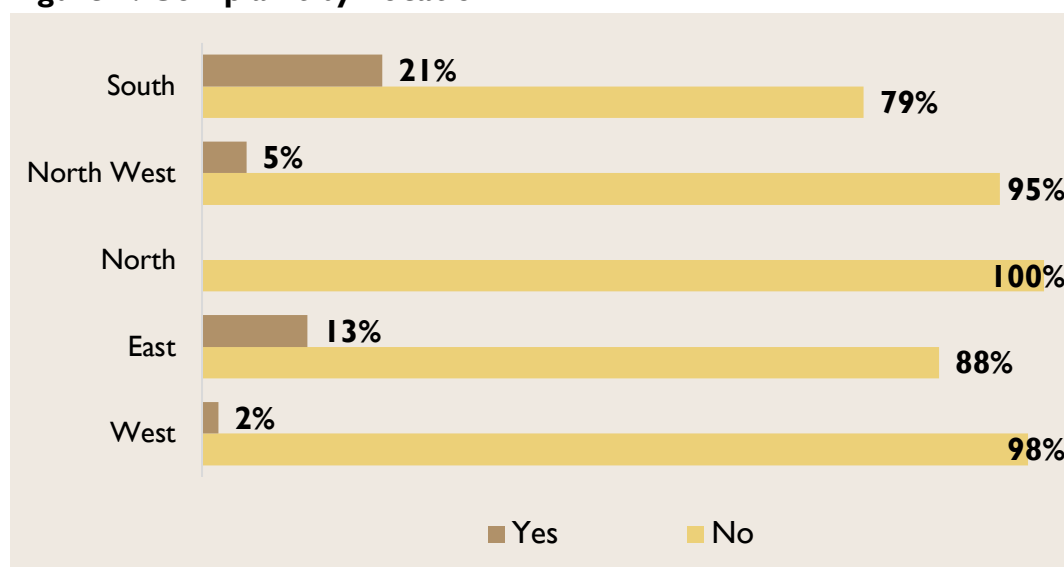
Figure 3: Widespread Ignorance about how to Complain



Respondents were asked if they actually made complaints. Approximately, 21% of southerners made a complaint to authorities. Collected data did not delve into the types of complaints made, which

is a potential issue to look into when reported to the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Center (NaCOVERC).

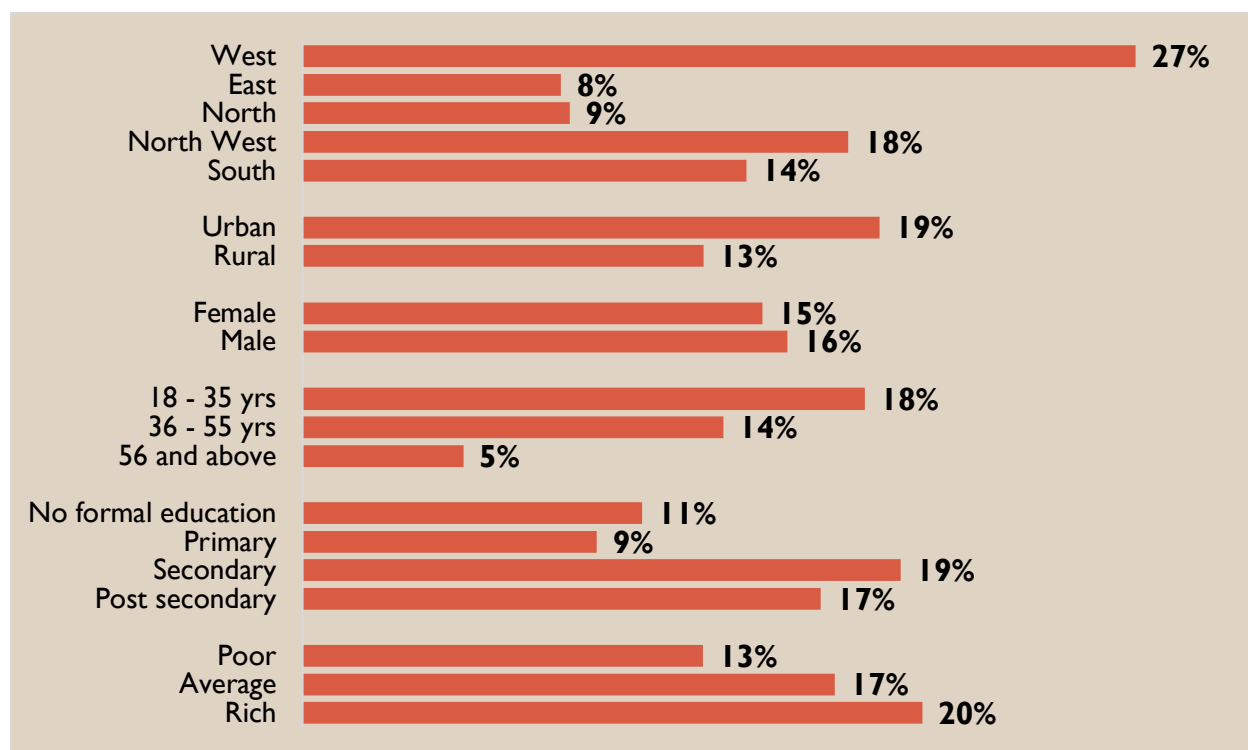
Figure 4: Complaint by Location



VIOLATION OF EMERGENCY MEASURES

When asked if they violated COVID regulations, slightly more males (16%) than females (15%) admitted to violating regulations, but 25% comprised security services followed by manual labourers and students. Of the respondents that stated that they violated COVID-19 regulations, primary violators consisted of the economically well-off and educated westerners and youth around Freetown and general urban settings. Perhaps surprisingly, the educated were almost twice as likely to violate COVID-19 regulations as compared to the most vulnerable, least educated, and elderly population in society.

Figure 5: Citizens found violating COVID Regulations



TREATMENT OF VIOLATORS AND PERCEPTION OF ENFORCEMENT OF COVID MEASURES

When respondents were asked how they were treated by authorities, nearly six (5.6) out of every 10 respondents stated that they were treated well; 61% of which were male as compared to 50% of females. When further disaggregated, 37% of Freetonians and 32% of residents around Freetown stated that they were treated not very well by authorities, while 25% of southerners also stated that they were not treated well.

Figure 6: Gendered Treatment for Violations

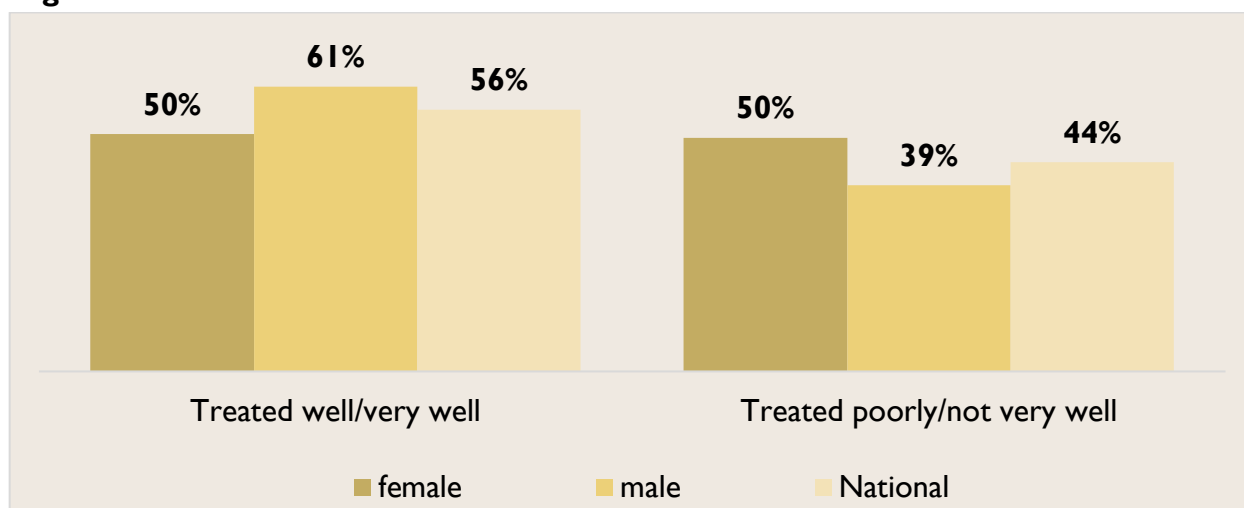
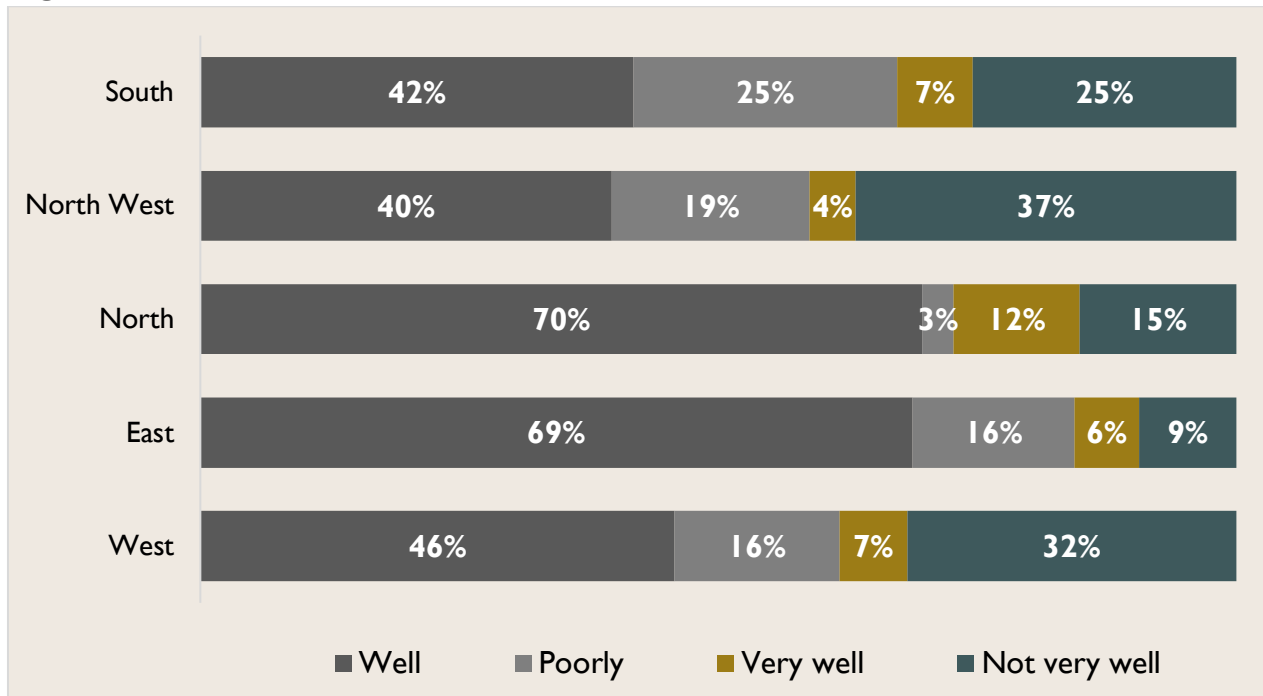


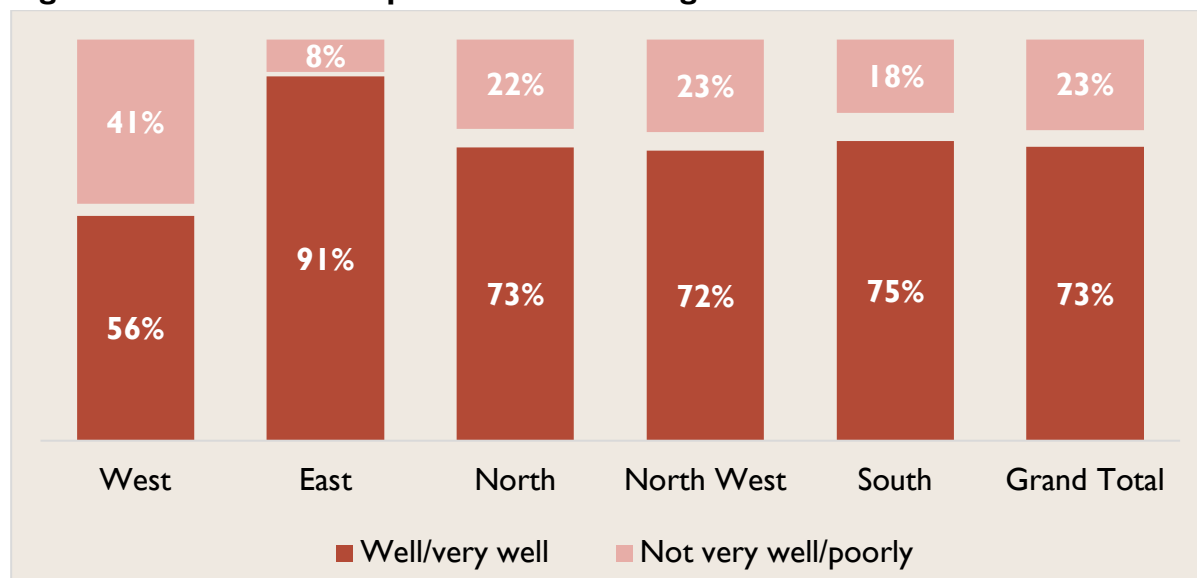
Figure 7: Treatment for COVID Violations



It is useful to note that the security sector is an integrated unit under emergency operation that comprises the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Correctional Service personnel and Fire Force. As a result of the integrated nature of the sector, citizens interact not only with the SLP but other forces such as the RSLAF. This brief therefore assesses the activities of all security personnel.

Respondents were asked how they would rate their treatment by these institutions. Nationally, 73% of respondents stated that the forces did well/very well in enforcing national COVID measures overall, but 41% of respondents in the Western Region disapproved of the conduct of the SLP in particular. Respondents were not asked to identify how they were maltreated or what they identify as maltreatment. Outside of the western region, approximately 77% of respondents stated that they were treated well or very well by the security services such as the SLP and RSLAF. Again, when the western region is removed, approximately 19% of respondents believe that they were not treated well/poorly treated.

Figure 8: Citizen's Perception on COVID Regulation Enforcement



COMPLAINTS ABOUT EXTORTION AND PAYMENT OF BRIBES

Bribery among COVID emergency responders has been cited as a cause of concern among institutions monitoring the response. Respondents were asked about witnessing or hearing about incidences of the security services personnel engaging in illegal activities. 28% of respondents said they witnessed or heard about payment of bribes to personnel. Of particular interest, of the respondents who are identified as wealthy or have no-lived poverty, 52% reported either witnessing or hearing that the SLP were engaging in bribes. In addition, it is the most-educated in society that comprise 15% of all respondents, and 41% state witnessing or hearing that security forces were taking bribes during COVID-19. Men (32%) were more likely to state that they witnessed or heard about these activities taking place than women (24%). However, when the data was further analysed, it should be noted that respondents that were most likely to report seeing or hearing about bribery were admitted violators of COVID-19 restrictions. Approximately 44% individuals were self-identified violators as compared to the 25% of society that identified as non-violators.

Figure 9: Witness or Heard about Bribes

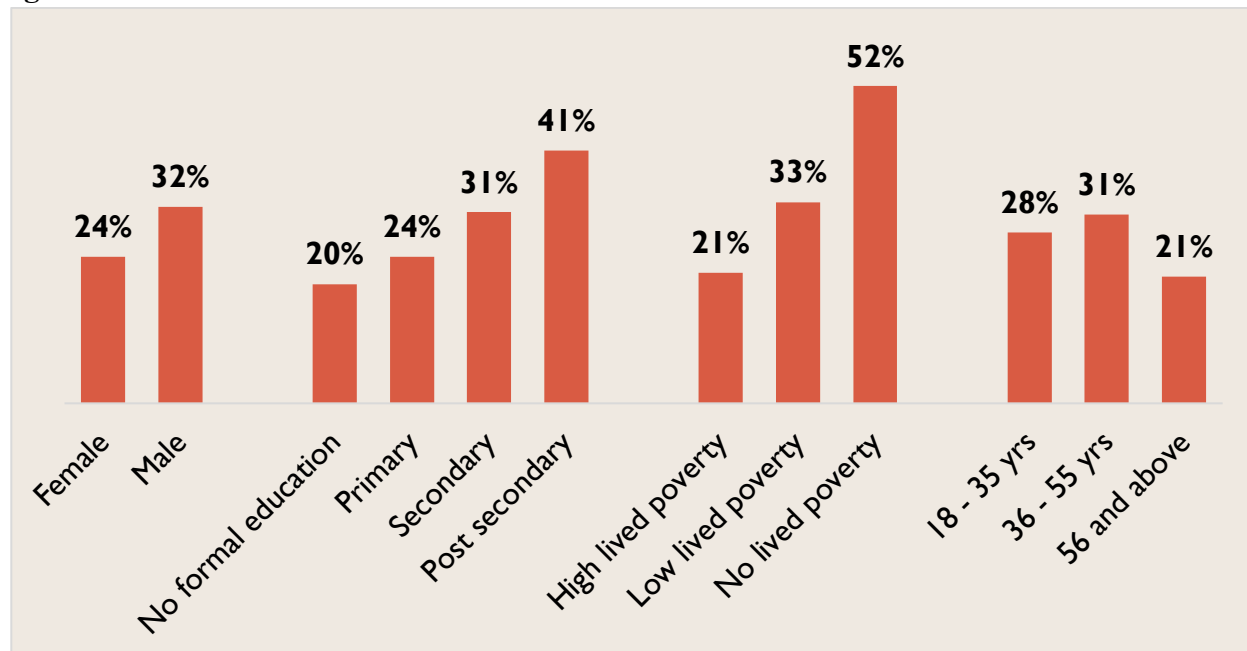
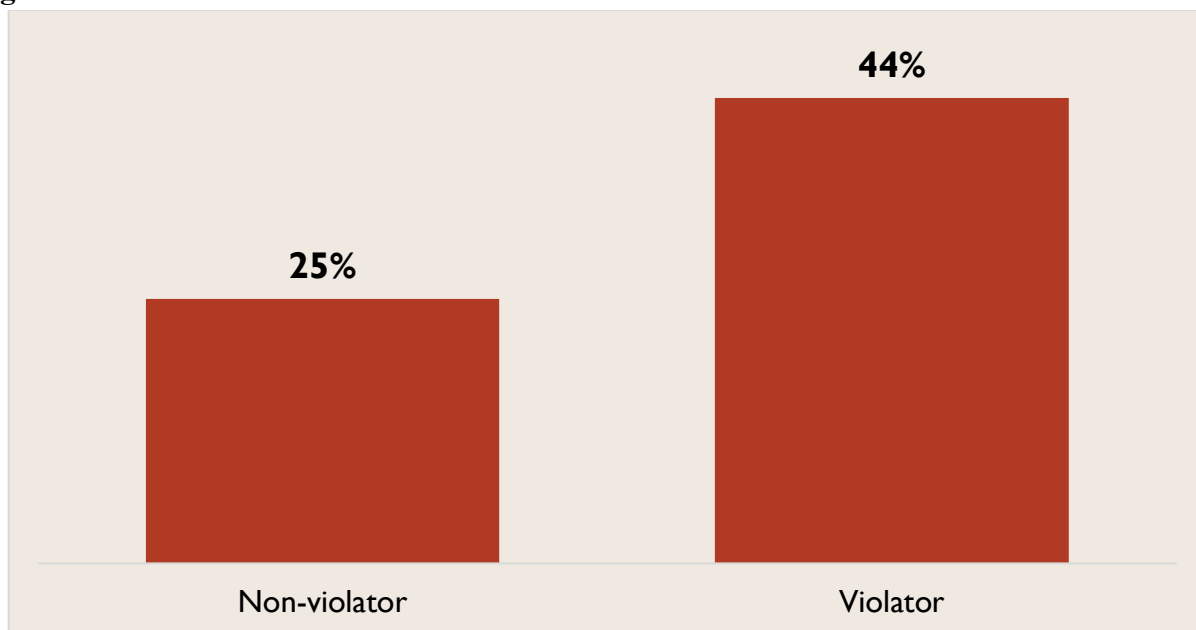
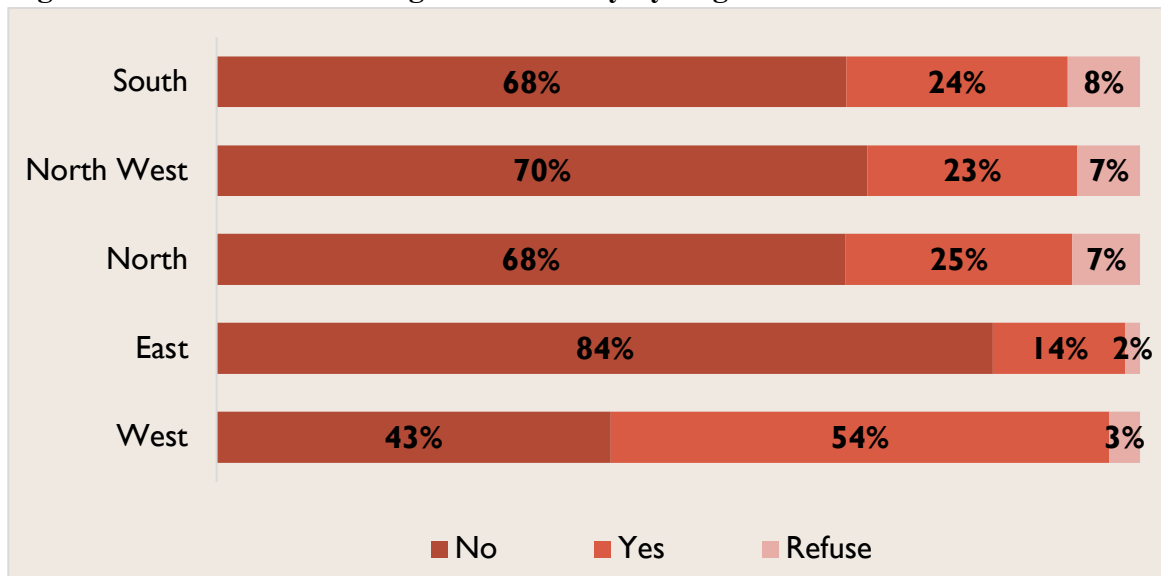


Figure 10: Self-Identification of Witnesses



So where did these alleged bribes occur? The majority of alleged illegal bribes (54%) occurred in the western region in and around Freetown. Across the eastern region, 84% of respondents reported that they did not witness or hear of any bribery or extortion of citizens, while 70% of north westerners reported the same, followed by 68% of northerners and southerners.

Figure 11: Witness or Hearing about Bribery by Region



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief highlights three broad policy issues COVID responders should be aware of:

- First, a large (88%) majority of citizens do not know how and where to access their rights and entitlements when there is a violation. An increased citizen's understanding and use of the complaints mechanism GoSL has put in place will be crucial for NaCOVERC and partners who are seeking to inspire public support and confidence in the response. A thorough education of citizens, especially Freetown, about rights and pathways to seek redress is strongly recommended. This point is worth emphasising because of the weakness of Sierra Leone's health system which could find it difficult to cope with the COVID Delta variant. NaCOVERC social mobilization team should take deliberate steps to bring community level ownership and solutions to the growing threat the country faces.
- Secondly, although citizens appear more than willing to comply with GoSL and NaCOVERC regulations, the Western Region, which is coincidentally the epicentre of COVID infections, recorded the highest degree of non-compliance among citizens and experienced the highest incidence of payment of bribes for those violations. This worrying trend could be even more troubling as pandemic fatigue sets in and concerns about livelihoods take pre-eminence over preventive behaviours. Professionalism of security forces is critical for frontline responders to continue to enjoy citizens trust and respect the measures they enforce.
- Third, that more men (61%) were treated well despite violating regulations when compared to women (50%); and more housewives/homemakers (43%) complained that the measures are too strict, suggests that Sierra Leone should adopt a more inclusive approach in developing and enforcing the measures. Greater inclusion of women in the planning and execution of pandemic policies will help bring the priorities of excluded groups on the table.