

POLICE-PUBLIC INTERACTIONS DURING COVID-19: ASSESSING THE EXPERIENCES OF COMMERCIAL VEHICLE DRIVERS IN GHANA

By Dr Justice Tankebe and Dr Kofi E. Boakye

ABSTRACT

How do motorists experience policing during Covid-19 pandemic lockdown? We answer that question through a survey of 300 commercial vehicle ('trotro') drivers in Accra. We found that most drivers believed there was a high risk of being arrested for violation of Covid-19 regulations. They also felt police officers were fair in the enforcement of the regulations. However, the drivers also reported experiences of police corruption, with 62% reporting payment of bribes to avoid arrest.

On 12 March 2020, Ghana reported the first cases of Covid-19. As the number of cases increased, the government introduced a partial lockdown in major cities of Accra, Kumasi and Tema. During this period, a number of measures were introduced; wearing face mask, use of hand sanitizers, social distancing. For motorists, especially commercial vehicle drivers ('trotro'), there were additional requirements to reduce passenger numbers by a half and to ensure passengers boarding vehicles were in face mask.

In this research brief, we report findings from a study that investigated how these drivers perceived and experienced the enforcement of the Covid-19 measures. Between 29 June and 4 July, three research assistants administered a questionnaire to a convenience sample of 300 drivers operating from bus terminals at the Kwame Nkrumah Circle. The questionnaires were administered face-to-face and in accordance with Covid-19 regulations as published by the Ghana Health Service. The findings are reported below.

First, we examined perceptions of the quality of interactions drivers had with police officers enforcing Covid-19 regulations. The drivers were presented with a series of statements and asked to indicate, based on their experiences with the police, how strongly they agreed or disagreed with those statements. As shown in Table 1, a large proportion of the drivers surveyed (76.3%) did not feel police officers were fair in their decisions; only 20% perceived fair police decisions. When asked if they believed police officers listened to drivers – that is, offered drivers an opportunity to 'tell their side of the story' – only 30.6% believed the officers did so; 65% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

A common complaint during police-public interactions in Ghana has often been police disrespectful attitude towards citizens. We found that only 1 in 5 of all drivers surveyed perceived respectful treatment by police; 53% held the view that police officers had been disrespectful while 26% were unsure as to whether officers treat them with respect or not. We also asked the drivers if officers showed care for their wellbeing. This could take the form of providing information about road safety or wishing them safe journeys. Six out of ten drivers (61%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that police officers cared for drivers' wellbeing. Only about a fifth (26%) perceived that officers showed such care.

We asked about the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations: here, the majority of drivers (53.2%) believed police had acted fairly. However, 21.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 25.8% were unsure. Finally, when asked about satisfaction with police work during the lockdown, just

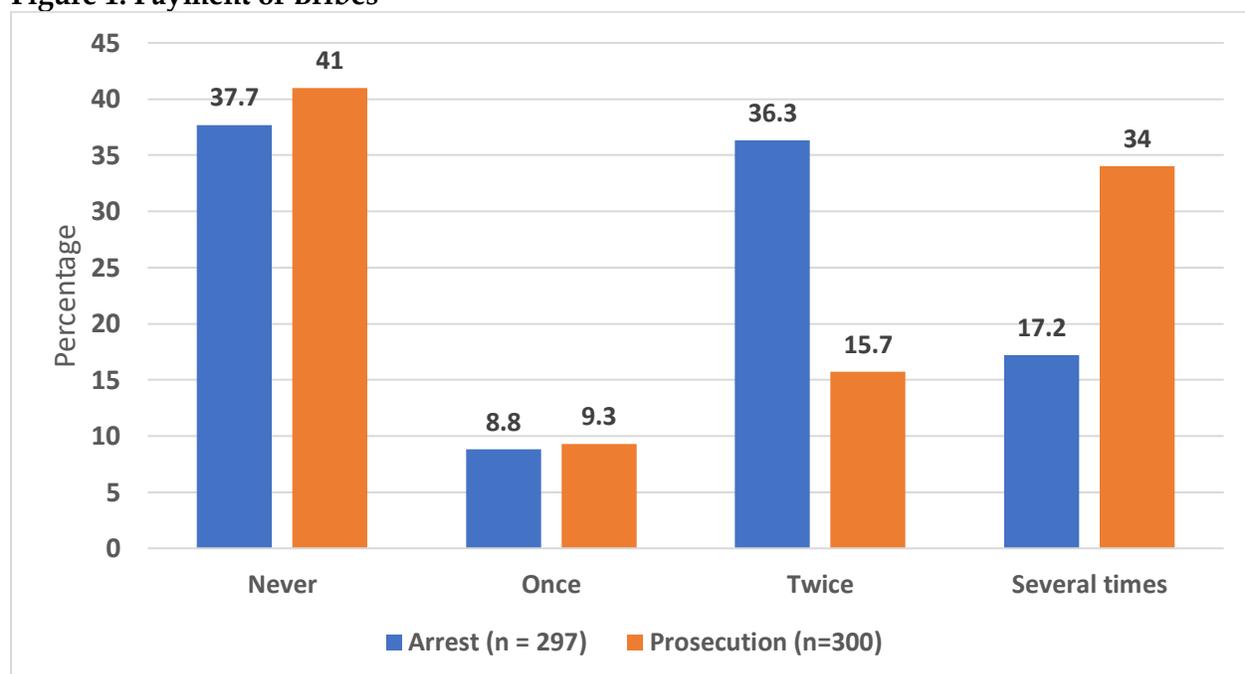
over half of the drivers expressed dissatisfaction (54%) while 23% were unsure; however, 22.3% reported being satisfied with the work of the police.

Table 1: Perceived fairness of police and Covid-19 regulations

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Police decisions are fair to all drivers (n=300)	45.3	31.0	3.7	17.3	2.7
2. Listening to drivers (n = 300)	23.7	41.3	4.3	28.3	2.3
3. Respectful treatment of drivers (n = 300)	26.7	26.3	26.0	19.3	1.7
4. Care for wellbeing of drivers (n = 300)	23.0	38.0	13.0	24.3	1.7
5. Fairness of Covid-19 regulations (n = 295)	1.4	19.7	25.8	47.8	5.4
6. Satisfaction with police work (n = 300)	17.7	37.0	23.0	19.3	3.0

Second, we focused on the question of police corruption – specifically, experiences of bribery – which a [previous study](#) suggests contributes to traffic violations by trotro drivers in Ghana. We asked the drivers whether they had paid any bribes to police officers to avoid arrest or prosecution during the lockdown. The results are displayed in Figure 1. As can be seen, the majority of the drivers sampled reported paying a bribe at least once. In the case of bribery to avoid arrest, 36.3% said they had twice paid a bribe, 17.2% had done so several times and 8.8% indicated once. About a third (37.7%) reported no payment of bribes to avoid arrest. In the case of prosecution, 41% reported they had not paid any bribes. However, the majority said they had paid bribes: 34% of drivers said they had done this several times to avoid prosecution; 15.7% reported doing so twice while 9.3% indicated once.

Figure 1: Payment of Bribes



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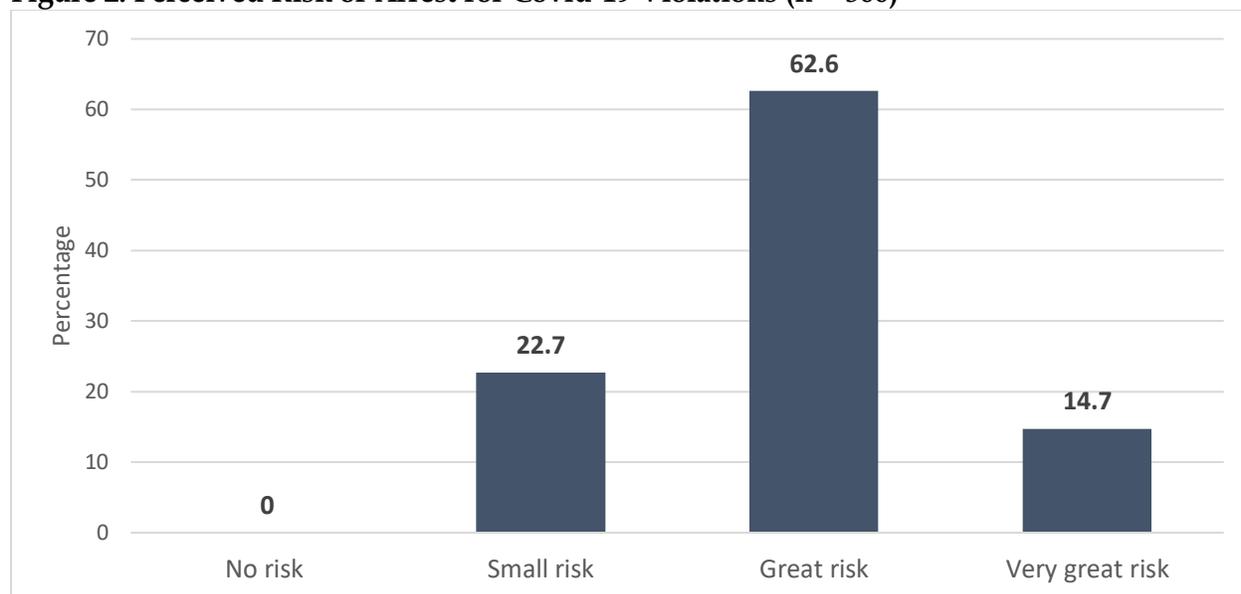
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Evidence from [criminological research](#) shows that compliance with laws often depends on the perceived risk of being apprehended. We asked the drivers to estimate the risk of being arrested if they broke any Covid-19 regulations. As shown in Figure 2, all drivers perceived some risk of arrest. However, they differed in their views of the level of risk: thus, 77.3% perceived the risk to be 'great' or 'very great' while 22.7% perceived a small risk.

Figure 2: Perceived Risk of Arrest for Covid-19 Violations (n = 300)



The quality of police-public interactions matters for multiple reasons. It is a useful indicator of the character of democratic governance. There is also [evidence](#) that experiences with police can affect attitudes to state law and willingness to support the police. This is especially pertinent under Covid-19 pandemic where citizens are required to adhere to various public health measures to minimise infection rate. The findings reported here highlighted three things: first, with the exception of the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations, drivers surveyed perceived negative experiences with the police. Officers were perceived as disrespectful, denying drivers a voice and fair treatment. Second, corruption remains a widespread experience, with 6 out of 10 drivers reporting payment of bribes to police officers. Given [prior evidence](#) on the effects of corruption on confidence in the police, this finding holds an important policy implication: building confidence requires strategies to reduce corruption. Finally, the majority of the drivers believed there was a significant risk of being arrested if they violated Covid-19 regulations.

How far these experiences and perceptions shape the actual compliance with Covid-19 regulations is beyond the scope of this research brief. However, the findings reinforce the need for police reforms to improve police interactions with citizens. Such improvements are inherently desirable given the constitutional obligations of the police. However, they could also help build public confidence in the police and to sustain police legitimacy.



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