

DISCUSSION PAPER 24-002

# Putting Data Around Intergroup Violence and Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea

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## SUMMARY

- The data concerning many forms of violence in PNG are fragmented and incomplete, hampering robust analysis of trends and dynamics.
- Analysis of newspaper reports of intergroup fighting suggests it is mainly clustered in the Highlands region, causes extensive harm, and is systemic in many parts.
- Key drivers of intergroup violence include money politics, the widespread availability of guns and normalization of violence, the erosion of traditional and local forms of leadership and regulation, and public service delivery failures.
- Recent state interventions to contain intergroup violence have been insufficient.
- Analysis of existing data around sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV) suggests that it is geographically widespread, systemic, evolving, and impacts women, men, and children in different ways.
- Women- and community-led peacebuilding is effective in combating violence in PNG, but requires a significant increase in governmental and donor support.
- Developing more robust and long-term systems for generating, analyzing, and publicly sharing violence-related data would provide the foundation necessary to address it.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Violence has long been a scourge on the development of Papua New Guinea (PNG). “The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Strategic Plan for Papua New Guinea” notes “tribal violence, gender-based violence, and sorcery accusation-related violence” as some of PNG’s main challenges.<sup>1</sup> These types of violence cause fatalities, property destruction, and inter-generational trauma. Newspapers regularly carry headlines such as “Guns Becoming a Norm,” “Jimi Cut Off After Fighting Erupts,” and “11 Arrested in Porgera Chaos.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to the cost in human lives and misery, threats of violence undermine social cohesion and economic development, and hinder delivery of public services. But what data exists on violence in PNG?

The answer is—surprisingly little. PNG government agencies lack comprehensive processes for collecting statistics, resulting in an absence of data even for fundamental criminological indicators such as murder rates. Moreover, there is a dearth of information on secondary impacts, such as deaths and displacement, caused by violence. This discussion paper attempts to quantify two categories of violence in PNG: intergroup violence and sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV).

Intergroup violence is a form of collective violence in which group identity is a strong motivating and organizing dynamic. Those groups are often defined along traditional kinship lines, such as subclans, clans, or tribes, but the term also includes fighting between groups from different parts of PNG who live together in urban areas. The term avoids the “othering” often associated with the term “tribal fighting,” which can inadvertently imply a primitive form of violence conducted by individuals acting outside the nation’s moral and legal codes.<sup>3</sup> This implication is wrong—there is increasing entwinement between intergroup violence and the modern PNG state, challenging traditional

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, “The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Strategic Plan for Papua New Guinea,” Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations Remarks and Releases, March 24, 2023, [www.state.gov/the-u-s-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability-10-year-strategic-plan-for-papua-new-guinea/](https://www.state.gov/the-u-s-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability-10-year-strategic-plan-for-papua-new-guinea/).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Nangoi, “Guns Becoming a Norm,” *Post-Courier*, December 1, 2021, 3; “Jimi Cut Off After Fighting Erupts,” *Post-Courier*, October 3, 2022, 8; “11 Arrested in Porgera Chaos,” *Post-Courier*, June 1, 2022, 18.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the literature on Melanesian warfare and its contemporary characteristics, see Miranda Forsyth, “Continuities and Changes in Contemporary Intergroup Conflict in the Papua New Guinea Highlands,” *Oceania* (forthcoming).

perceptions and emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding. This readily becomes apparent from local newspaper reports documenting fighting between supporters of different candidates.<sup>4</sup>

Given the paucity and fragmented nature of state records, researchers and organizations seeking to quantify violence must rely upon three main nonofficial sources of data.<sup>5</sup> The first is national newspapers, print and online. The second is social media accounts. The third involves systematic collection of data by local actors and institutions. All three sources have their limitations and strengths and should be triangulated to produce the most reliable data.

## METHODS

This project is a collaborative effort between researchers at the Australian National University and the PNG National Research Institute. Part One of this paper, which focuses on intergroup violence, is based upon a review of PNG’s two daily newspapers, the *Post-Courier* and *The National*, from 2018 to 2022.<sup>6</sup> Part Two, which focuses on SARV, is based upon the same daily newspapers from 1996, when these cases first began to be reported, to July 2022. We selected these newspapers because they are the only two daily national publications, and their print versions offer a more comprehensive coverage than their online counterparts.

For the SARV research, we searched for cases reported in the media referring to sorcery, witchcraft, and magic. We supplemented this with a database of court judgments involving cases of violence against those believed to be sorcerers by the perpetrators. We have relied upon reports in the publicly available case law database, the Pacific Legal Information Institute (PacLII), and the non-publicly accessible PNG Legal Information Network.<sup>7</sup> In each database, we searched for the term

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Manasseh Makiba, “Violence in Hela Continues,” *The National*, August 4, 2022, 3, [www.thenational.com.pg/violence-in-hela-continues/](http://www.thenational.com.pg/violence-in-hela-continues/).

<sup>5</sup> This lack of comprehensive data extends to various other domains, given there has not been a national census since 2011. Even population estimates fluctuate between 9 million and 17 million inhabitants; see Maholopa Laveil, “PNG Needs a Census, Not More Population Estimates,” *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, January 13, 2023, [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-needs-census-not-more-population-estimates](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-needs-census-not-more-population-estimates).

<sup>6</sup> *Post-Courier*, [www.postcourier.com.pg/](http://www.postcourier.com.pg/); *The National*, [www.thenational.com.pg/](http://www.thenational.com.pg/).

<sup>7</sup> A collaboration with the PNG Judiciary and the Judicial Commission of NSW (Australia) that Miranda Forsyth was kindly granted access to for research purposes.

“sorcerer\*” and looked for references to cases of individuals being prosecuted for violence linked to a belief that the individual victim was a sorcerer.

Keeping up-to-date records of news articles over a long period is necessary to produce robust data, but also proves difficult from a project management and funding perspective. The SARV database updating was initially funded by the Australian aid program, then self-funded by the researchers, and from 2018 to 2022 it was funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).<sup>8</sup> USIP also funded the compilation of the intergroup fighting database from 2018 to 2022.

Limitations arise from having to rely upon newspaper reports for data on violence. To name but a few: (1) the network of reporters is neither large nor evenly spread, with reporters predominantly based in more developed areas, leaving some areas without coverage; (2) reporters often rely upon secondary sources, meaning that misreporting is common, and creating a lag between when events occur and when reports are made, as it takes time for the information to percolate through the system; and (3) reporters are not reporting across a consistent set of variables and will often not record victims’ gender or age, or even how many people were harmed, instead using terms like “a few” or “many.” These limitations highlight the importance of seeing statistics in context and analyzing them in conjunction with other evidence.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, our extensive analysis has enabled us to tell a story that reveals the extent of publicly reported violence and its impacts. Our analysis is sufficient in itself to raise serious alarm bells, even if it represents the tip of the iceberg.

For this paper, we collected data on the nature, impact, and location of intergroup violence, main actors involved, weapons used, triggers for the event, and involvement of police or other state agencies. We identified back editions of the newspapers (noting that some newspapers had pages missing, but not more than about 5 percent of the total), developed a spreadsheet, and started to

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<sup>8</sup> As part of the project discussed here: <https://anu365.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/CAPfilesystem/EUHJf54XddCs6LCAZ0jmkBz8udjf95jX1rnwAp0GBsWw?e=SiOfQ2>. Outputs from the project are available here: [https://anu365.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/CAPfilesystem/Ef4VtVkPiqVNn\\_hBJgaHsewBeN2vYLq6u5acbLACBPOZjA](https://anu365.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/CAPfilesystem/Ef4VtVkPiqVNn_hBJgaHsewBeN2vYLq6u5acbLACBPOZjA).

<sup>9</sup> We did seek to compare our data collection with that of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the other group recently collecting such data on a regular basis. However, as our time span differed and we coded for different factors, the comparison ultimately proved to be less helpful, but at least initiated an ongoing dialogue. See the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/>.

enter details. Where details were missing, we sought to supplement with references to online sources, such as Loop PNG or Sunday Bulletin.<sup>10</sup>

At the first review, we had a surprising realization: many reports of violent incidents *also* reported peacemaking events, such as ceasefires and compensation payments. In fact, there were as many as 50 percent as many peacemaking incidents reported over the period as reported violence incidents—far more than the researchers anticipated. This is consistent with a well-documented fact about PNG: Melanesians are excellent not only in the art of making war, but also in making peace. We decided to also collect data about peacemaking incidents, and which main actors were involved, to gain insights into what prevents or resolves violence.

## **PART 1: INTERGROUP FIGHTING IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: HOW BAD IS IT?**

### **Extent and Categories of Intergroup Fighting**

To investigate the extent of intergroup violence reported in the two newspapers, we coded for unique incidents of intergroup violence, many of which were reported on multiple times as they took place over a number of months. For example, one of the longest incidents was reported upon 18 times over eight months. The main types of collective violence incidents reported upon are shown in Table 1, with a total of 281 unique incidents reported between 2018 and 2022. This number must be understood as the minimum count of such incidents, likely representing a significant underestimation.

We developed these categories based upon descriptions in the reports, with just over 50 percent involving tribal fighting, meaning violence between different tribal groups. The term “tribal fight” is used frequently by reporters, as illustrated by headlines such as: “Two Killed, Three Injured in Enga Tribal Fighting.” A recurrent theme in the reporting is events spiraling out of control: “Leaders Discuss Mendi Mayhem.”

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<sup>10</sup> Loop PNG, [www.looppng.com/](http://www.looppng.com/); The PNG Bulletin, <https://thepngbulletin.com/>.

**Table 1.** Reported Type of Violence Incident by Year

Type of Violence Incident	Year of Incident					Total
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Tribal fight	31	35	36	27	27	156
Interethnic conflict	14	2	0	1	3	20
Lawlessness not related to ethnicity or tribe	19	1	7	15	16	58
School fight <sup>11</sup>	0	0	0	0	1	1
Election-related violence	3	0	0	0	25	28
Retaliatory attack	0	0	4	0	0	4
Other	6	3	4	0	1	14
<b>Total</b>	73	41	51	43	73	281

Some categories of violence show notable differences over the year, as shown in Table 1. For example, election-related violence was significant in 2022, the year of a national election. However, we also coded for the question of whether an incident was related to the election and found that 17.4 percent of all cases of intergroup violence reported related to elections, and that this was an ongoing issue across all the years.

This finding is consistent with scholarship arguing that elections can spark preexisting conflicts and can provide opportunities to settle preexisting scores while security forces are absent.<sup>12</sup> Elections are also about resourcing and generating violence for political ends, and candidates will

<sup>11</sup> The school fight resulted in four dead and 20 injured individuals, the extent of injuries most likely accounting for its reporting in the newspaper as such fights usually go unreported. Rita Peki, “4 Students Die in School Fight,” *Post-Courier*, April 4, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Terence Wood, Maholopa Laveil, and Michael Kabuni, “Troubles and Puzzles: The 2022 General Elections in Papua New Guinea,” *Journal of Pacific History* 58 (4) (2023): 444–66, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00223344.2023.2248008](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00223344.2023.2248008).



often arm supporters before the election.<sup>13</sup> As Main observes in relation to Hela, “political elites sometimes garner support by arming their supporters and assisting them in their disputes.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Where Does Violence Occur?**

Our data indicate that the vast majority of intergroup conflict is happening in the Highlands regions (see Figure 1). As shown in Table 2, Enga, Hela, and Western Highlands provinces receive the most reporting. This may be attributable to a higher frequency of incidents or it may be influenced by other factors, such as the location of journalists. For example, given that the main Highlands town, Mt. Hagen, is in the Western Highlands, it is logical to infer that there is easier access to news, resulting in more reports.

## **What Harm Is Being Caused?**

The most frequently reported form of harm is death. Of course, this prevalence does not necessarily reflect the actual frequency, but rather stems from the tendency to report deaths more extensively. The total reported number of deaths is 1,896, with 190 deaths in 2018, 567 deaths in 2019, 428 deaths in 2020, 480 deaths in 2021, and 231 deaths in 2022.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to deaths and serious injuries, there is widespread destruction of crops, as well as burning of houses, churches, missions, health facilities, and schools. We recorded 201 incidents

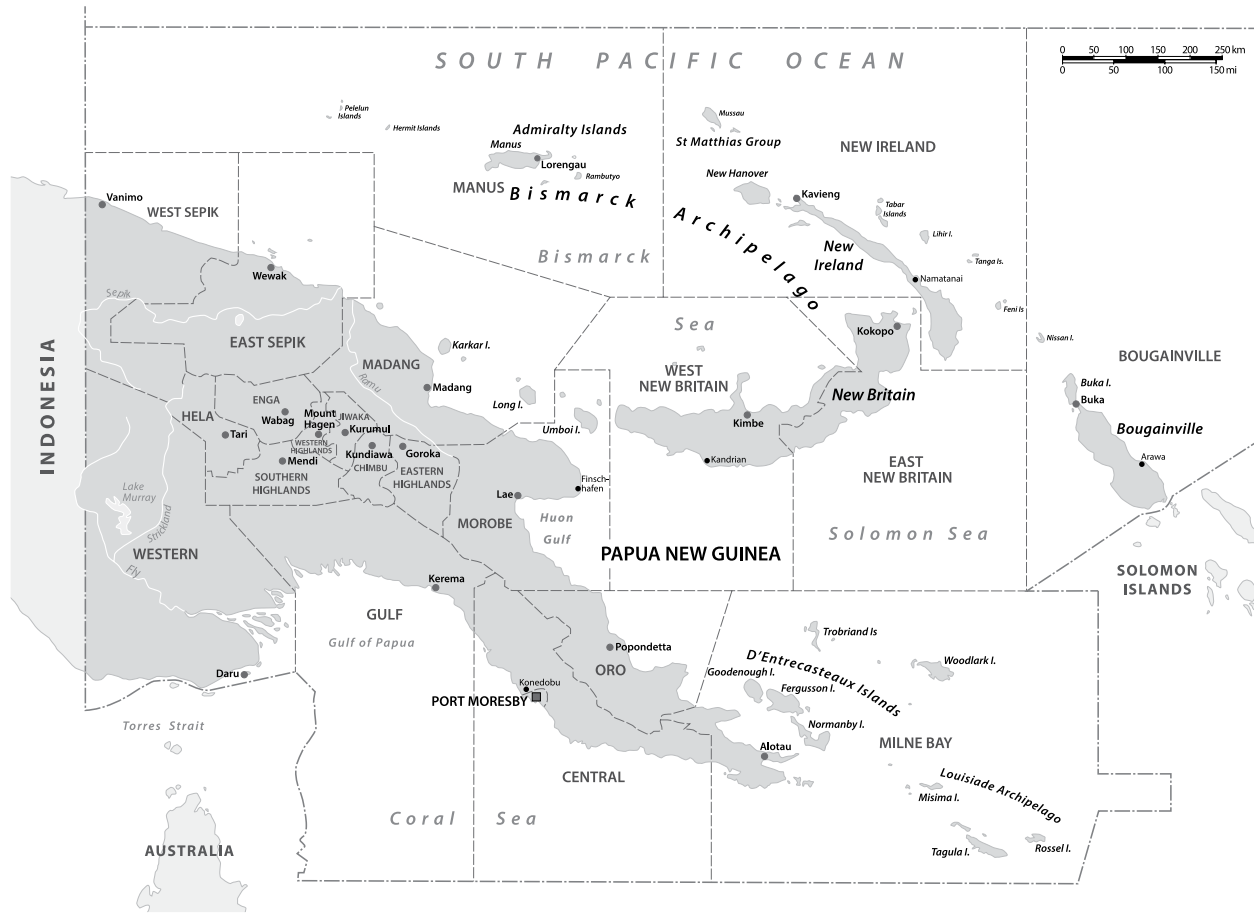
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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Neryl Lewis, “Conflict Vulnerability Assessment of the Southern Highlands Province,” in *Conflict and Resource Development: In The Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, eds. Nicole Haley and Ronald J. May (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 149–64, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h8k4.19](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h8k4.19); Alan Rumsey, “Social Segmentation, Voting, and Violence in Papua New Guinea,” *Contemporary Pacific* 305 (Fall 1999); Nicole Haley and Kerry Zubrinich, “2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections: Election Observation Report,” Australian National University Department of Pacific Affairs, November 2018, [https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/206709/1/png\\_report\\_hi\\_res.pdf](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/206709/1/png_report_hi_res.pdf); Jeremy Goro and Osborne O. Sanida, “The 2022 PNG National General Elections Observation Study Report: The Case of Seven Electorates in the Highlands Region,” National Research Institute PNG, May 2023, [https://pngri.org/images/Publications/Other\\_Pub\\_THE\\_PAPUA\\_NEW\\_GUINEA\\_2022\\_NATIONAL\\_GENERAL\\_ELECTIONS\\_OBSERVATION\\_STUDY\\_REPORT.pdf](https://pngri.org/images/Publications/Other_Pub_THE_PAPUA_NEW_GUINEA_2022_NATIONAL_GENERAL_ELECTIONS_OBSERVATION_STUDY_REPORT.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Main, “Hela,” in “Examining Conflict Dynamics in Papua New Guinea,” ed. Gordon Peake, United States Institute of Peace Discussion Paper 23-003, March 27, 2023, 24, [www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/examining-conflict-dynamics-papua-new-guinea](http://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/examining-conflict-dynamics-papua-new-guinea).

<sup>15</sup> If text said “more than 50,” we coded as 50, etc. If text said “several,” we coded as 3. If text said “many,” we coded as 10. If text said “mass killings,” we coded as 50.

**Figure 1.** Map of Papua New Guinea



Credit: Map by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock.

**Table 2.** Location of Violence Incidents

Province	Number of Violent Incidents	Percentage
Enga	79	28.2
Western Highlands	53	18.9
Hela	50	17.8
Jiwaka	32	11.4
Southern Highlands	31	11
Eastern Highlands	25	8.9
Chimbu	10	3.6
National Capital District	1	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>100.0</b>

where people were reported as having been killed; 109 where people were reported as having been injured; 99 where houses were reported as having been destroyed or burned down; 94 where properties, including food, animals, or food gardens, were reported as destroyed; and 59 where people were reported as having been displaced. As noted above, this reflects only what was recorded in newspapers, and so represents the bare minimum of cases.

Additionally, government services are often withdrawn because of fighting.<sup>16</sup> The number of deaths related to the spread of disease and the absence of public services is often many times greater than those caused by fighting, and secondary deaths are even harder to quantify.

What is the situation for women and girls? Of the 281 violent incidents we recorded, 20 (7 percent) specifically mentioned women and girls being killed, while in an additional 24 (9 percent) incidents, there was specific mention of females being injured or displaced. Again, this is likely to be a gross underestimation, as we know from the literature that women and girls are frequently involved as secondary victims through displacement and destruction of property.

As a result of homelessness, women and girls are at greater risk of rape, forced marriage, and suffering from reproductive health complications, while those nursing infants are particularly vulnerable. *The National* newspaper reported on December 4, 2023, that there were “No Health Workers Left in Bosavi,”<sup>17</sup> noting that all had fled following the kidnapping of 17 girls earlier in the year. The consequences are stark: pregnant women do not get antenatal treatment, mothers are forced to give birth unassisted, and mothers and babies die.

Women and girls are increasingly also targets in warfare.<sup>18</sup> A local informant from Enga province stated that women and girls were never killed in battles in the past, but are now killed because

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, in many places they were never established in the first place, or have deteriorated over time. Howes et al. found in 2012 that health services were worse than a decade earlier, noting: “If we look at PNG’s primary health care system today we see a system struggling against the odds, and unable to fulfil basic functions.” Stephen Howes et al., “A Lost Decade? Service Delivery and Reforms in Papua New Guinea 2002–2012,” Development Policy Centre, October 2014, ix, [https://devpolicy.org/publications/reports/PEPE/PEPE\\_A\\_lost\\_decade\\_FULL\\_REPORT.pdf](https://devpolicy.org/publications/reports/PEPE/PEPE_A_lost_decade_FULL_REPORT.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Majeleen Yanei, “No Health Workers Left in Bosavi,” *The National*, December 5, 2023, [www.thenational.com.pg/no-health-workers-left-in-bosavi/](http://www.thenational.com.pg/no-health-workers-left-in-bosavi/).

<sup>18</sup> David Capie, “Small Arms, Violence and Gender in Papua New Guinea: Towards a Research Agenda,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 42 (April 11, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2011.01442.x>.

of fear they would give birth to sons who will seek revenge. Intergroup violence also causes significant psychological stress for both women and men, with notes in our database containing phrases such as “During the tribal fighting period, women, girls, and even men lived in fear.”

Some newspaper reports also mention women and girls being raped and abducted. This is consistent with the literature identifying the use of rape in Highlands provinces as a technique to challenge, weaken, and undermine men from opposing ethnic groups, and even to punish groups for assisting authorities in law enforcement activities.<sup>19</sup> These crimes are rarely reported, and even less commonly prosecuted.

## What Weapons Are Being Used?

Small arms and high-powered firearms, both handmade and manufactured, are common throughout PNG, although there is no reliable data on their availability.<sup>20</sup> Gun use has made intergroup violence significantly more fatal.<sup>21</sup> In our database, guns were the most common weapon reported, with firearms being reported in 41 percent of cases reported in the newspapers, compared to spears, arrows,

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<sup>19</sup> A. Kelly-Hanku et al., “Transgressive Women Don’t Deserve Protection: Young Men’s Narratives of Sexual Violence Against Women in Rural Papua New Guinea,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 1207 (April 20, 2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1182216>; Capie, “Small Arms, Violence and Gender in Papua New Guinea,” 48; Miranda Forsyth et al., “How to Address Escalating Violence in PNG,” *DevPolicy* (blog), July 14, 2023, <https://devpolicy.org/how-to-address-escalating-violence-in-png-20230714/>.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Alpers, “Gun-Running in Papua New Guinea: From Arrows to Assault Weapons in the Southern Highlands,” Special Report, June 2005, [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SR05-Papua-New-Guinea.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SR05-Papua-New-Guinea.pdf); Capie, “Small Arms, Violence and Gender in Papua New Guinea”; Polly Wiessner, “From Spears to M16s: Testing the Imbalance of Power Hypothesis Among the Enga,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 165 (2006); Polly Wiessner, “Youths, Elders, and the Wages of War in Enga Province, Papua New Guinea,” State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2010/3, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (2010), [http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2015-12/2010\\_03\\_wiessner\\_0.pdf](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2015-12/2010_03_wiessner_0.pdf); Nicole Haley and Robert Muggah, “The Scourge of the Gun: Armed Violence in Papua New Guinea,” in *Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2006-Chapter-07-EN.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2006-Chapter-07-EN.pdf); Paul Roscoe, “The End of War in Papua New Guinea: ‘Crime’ and ‘Tribal Warfare’ in Post-Colonial States,” *Anthropologica* 327 (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Fraser MacDonald and Jonathan Kirami, “Women, Mobile Phones, and M16s: Contemporary New Guinea Highlands Warfare,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 104 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12175>; Sarah Garap and Jerry Kai, “Case Study 1: Inter-Tribal Conflict and Small Arms in Southern Highlands Province,” in *Silencing Guns: Local Perspectives on Small Arms and Armed Violence in Rural Pacific Islands Communities*, eds. Emile Le Brun and Robert Muggah (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2005).

and bush knives (9.3 percent of reported cases). In many instances (48 percent of incidents), the type of weapon was not reported, perhaps suggesting that use of guns is so commonplace it is not even newsworthy.

### **What Trigger Events Are Catalyzing the Incidents?**

Intergroup conflict in PNG is often sparked by a particular incident, such as theft, adultery, a drunken brawl, or a murder, that then spirals out of control as more parties join the fight.<sup>22</sup> Where this occurs, it is challenging to organize the data from newspapers into quantifiable figures. However, many stories create a discernible pattern. For example, the database entry for “trigger events” recorded details such as the following: “Drunken youths attacked the victim when he was driving to his village. Retaliation attacks followed”; “Supt Nili said fighting over land, pig and women must stop”; “The fight started over a rape incident”; and “A young man from the Wauni tribe was run over by a vehicle driven by someone from the Yandamani tribe.” Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish from the reporting the cases where the trigger incident is an unintended incident, and where it is undertaken strategically to trigger a larger fight.

In one report in the Australian media, journalists detail how a police officer explained the violence:

Commander Koki draws a square in the dirt, with two circles inside. He’s explaining how two tribes begin to fight. As he adds circles outside the square, he describes how more tribes join in the fighting, escalating the violence. “In tribal fights, there’s no winners. There’s always losers.” This conflict began with an ambush at a funeral. A man was found dead in the Lai River, which runs down the mountain through Wabag and the surrounding villages. His tribe blamed the man’s parents-in-law, from another village. At his funeral in

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, “Conflict Vulnerability Assessment of the Southern Highlands Province”; Michael Allan Main, “The Land of Painted Bones: Warfare, Trauma, and History in Papua New Guinea’s Hela Province,” *Anthropological Forum* 31 (2) (2021): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2021.1895070>.

May, attackers killed five people with bush knives and axes. In the months following, tit-for-tat retribution has spiralled out of control, and as more tribes have become involved, many villages have been raided and burnt down.<sup>23</sup>

This pattern of escalation means that effective mechanisms to resolve small problems, and maintaining order at a local level, are essential to preventing larger-scale disorder.

### **How Often Are Police, Military, and Other State Agencies Involved?**

Scholarship on the role of the police and the defense force in relation to intergroup violence is largely negative, emphasizing the state's punitive and reactive nature. Many scholars note the counterproductiveness of brutal policing tactics.<sup>24</sup> Haley concludes: "Ill-conceived, ill-timed and under-resourced interventions are . . . more likely to exacerbate or extend a conflict, rather than diminish it."<sup>25</sup>

Our data show that police or the military are actively involved in the incidents reported in newspapers, with their involvement occurring in between 56 and 88 percent of incidents reported in the press each year. However, incidents are more likely to be reported in newspapers precisely *because* the police are involved. Therefore, this statistic should not be interpreted as meaning that police and military are systematically involved in intergroup violence. It is also important to note that we did not code for negative or positive involvement, as discerning such nuances is often challenging.

The newspaper reports provide qualitative insights into the roles of the police and the military. There are reports noting police or military in negative roles. For example: "A group of police men allegedly set fire to several homes in Kupari village, thus the retaliation"; "A policeman allegedly

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Swanston and Theckla Gunga, "Tribal Fighting in PNG's Highlands Has Escalated into Guerrilla Warfare, Leaving Desperate Villagers with Nowhere to Go," *ABC News*, September 12, 2023, [www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-12/png-tribal-violence-enga-escalates-into-guerilla-warfare/102826764](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-12/png-tribal-violence-enga-escalates-into-guerilla-warfare/102826764).

<sup>24</sup> Alex Golub, "'Restraint Without Control': Law and Order in Porgera and Enga Province, 1950–2015," in *The Absent Presence of State in Large-Scale Resource Extraction Projects*, eds. Nick Bainto and Emilka Skrzypek (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), doi: 10.22459/AP.2021.

<sup>25</sup> Nicole Haley, "The Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea: Conflicts Ignored," in *Diminishing Conflicts in Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't*, eds. Edward Aspinall, Robin Jeffrey, and Anthony J. Regan (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 263.

killed a student at Banz”; and “A police man allegedly used a state owned firearm to shoot and kill a person from a tribe in the North Waghi District of Jiwaka Province.”

Many reports also detail police officers being shot, ambushed, and outnumbered. For example: “Sgt Hewali was shot at close range when he refused to surrender his firearm”; “Policemen from Mobile Squad 9 unit went to Kupari village for a peace ceremony between warring tribes but instead got attacked”; and “Stone throwing clash, the police man sustained head injury while he was trying to stop the fight.”

However, many positive reports highlight police proactively seeking to prevent intergroup conflict.

## **Peacemaking Incidents**

In addition to incidents of violence, many attempts at peacebuilding were reported during the period of our data collection. In total, 145 (51 percent) of all the reports of incidents (284) between 2018 and 2022 mentioned peacemaking.

Peacemaking and mediation in PNG take on various forms, often involving some combination of oratory, compensation payments, and feasting. As Main notes in relation to Hela, “Conflicts are traditionally resolved through a lengthy process of compensation payments mediated by clan ‘big men’ leaders and ‘middlemen’ with no ties to either side in the dispute.”<sup>26</sup> Indigenous reconciliation approaches attempt to “straighten” or rebalance relationships between people and groups.<sup>27</sup>

As illustrated by Table 3, the range is diverse, with some initiatives involving temporary measures and others focused on longer-term peacebuilding. English terms such as “peace agreement” are frequently used in reporting events, but they can be misleading as they do not fully capture the cultural dimensions involved. Sometimes more precise *tok pisin* terms are used: for example,

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<sup>26</sup> Main, “Hela,” 31.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey White and Karen Watson-Gegeo, eds., *Disentangling: Conflict Discourse in Pacific Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Polly Wiessner, “Collective Action for War and for Peace: A Case Study Among the Enga of Papua New Guinea,” *Current Anthropology* 224 (April 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1086/702414>.

**Table 3.** Peacebuilding Incidents by Type

Type of Peacebuilding Incident	Number of Incidents	Percentage
Peace/reconciliation ceremony or compensation	46	31.7
Belkol or temporary ceasefire	26	17.9
Preliminary peace talks	63	43.4
Other	10	6.9
Total peacebuilding incidents	145	100.0
<b>Total Incidents</b>	284	

**Table 4.** Peacebuilding Leaders by Type

Types of Peacebuilding Leaders Mentioned	Number of Incidents
Police/defense force	120
Community leader/clan leader or elder	85
MPs	54
Church leader	18
Other	16
Peace mediators	13
Provincial administrators	12
District administration	10

*belkol* in tok pisin means to keep the stomach cool and dissipate anger, and refers to an early compensation payment made to achieve a temporary ceasefire.

We were also interested in discovering the main parties behind peacemaking events. Table 4 shows that police or defense personnel were the largest group reported upon, followed by community or clan leaders, and members of Parliament (MPs). Again, these figures must be contextualized: events involving state officials are far more likely to be reported than those involving other actors. Civil society actors and local leaders are often working to ensure peace in ways not publicly known



or celebrated; moreover, they have less access to journalists. In the absence of precise language in the reports analyzed, we do not know what role MPs and other state officials play in peacebuilding events—are they leading them, or are they bystanders?

One hypothesis we sought to test with our data is that peacebuilding is often more successful when multiple actors work together, a factor highlighted in previous fieldwork.<sup>28</sup> In fact, we found that the majority of peacemaking incidents involved only one actor, yet a significant number featured two categories of actor. The most frequent combination was police/defense force with community leader/clan leader or elder (19), followed by MPs with community leader/clan leader or elder (9).

## **Intergroup Violence: A Summary of Sorts**

Although the newspaper reports outlined in Part One only capture the most visible manifestations of violence, the picture they paint is extremely troubling. It is clear that intergroup violence is widespread and systemic across many areas of the Highlands, leading to deaths, injuries, displacement, and trauma for entire communities. It is also clear that the scale and dynamics of conflict have evolved over time: violence has become entangled with politics and elections, and guns and other modern weaponry have proliferated. As a recent report on the Highlands concludes, “The Highlands political system has harnessed new wealth, tribal loyalties, lethal firearms, disenfranchised male youth, and terrified women, creating a potent platform for gaining and maintaining political power.”<sup>29</sup>

In terms of peacemaking, the newspaper reports depict a complex account. We have observed instances where state actors, such as police officers and MPs, are involved in peacemaking efforts, yet are also implicated in violence. The insight is that the line between peace and war is not always clearly defined, and even state actors often assume multiple roles, acting as agents either of violence or of peace in different contexts.

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<sup>28</sup> Miranda Forsyth and Fiona Hukula, “The Potential of Policing Coalitions in PNG,” *DevPolicy* (blog), December 9, 2019, <https://devpolicy.org/the-potential-of-policing-coalitions-in-png-20190909/>.

<sup>29</sup> Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and Voice for Change, “Context-Specific Mapping of Peacebuilding Policies, Initiatives and Actors: Papua New Guinea 2023,” 2023, 29.

We now turn to considering what our newspaper analysis tells us about another highly concerning form of violence in PNG.

## **PART 2: WHAT DO NEWSPAPER REPORTS AND COURT JUDGMENTS REVEAL AND HIDE ABOUT SARV IN PNG?**

When something goes wrong in PNG, instead of asking what happened, people tend to ask: Who did it? And often, someone answers: It was a sorcerer. Initial suspicions will be whispered about, possible culprits identified, gossip and anger escalate, and innocent individuals are targeted, attacked, and often killed. This form of violence is known in PNG as sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV), and by the United Nations as harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks (HPRAWRA).<sup>30</sup>

While it is common knowledge in PNG that SARV is rampant, details about the extent and trends of this extreme form of violence remain unclear. Are cases getting worse? Which is the biggest group of victims? Where are the real hotspots? What is happening to the perpetrators?

SARV is often a hidden crime. As whole communities are frequently involved or complicit, SARV crimes are often not reported to authorities as witnesses fear retribution. In addition, the general lack of crime statistics in PNG means there are no reliable state data sources to understand what types of harm are caused, how often, or where. We can gain partial insights into these questions through two sets of data: reports in the two national newspapers, and reports of cases involving SARV in the national courts.

There have been noticeable, positive changes in the media’s approach to reporting on SARV over the past 15 years or so. The reporting has shown a heightened level of sophistication, with a

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<sup>30</sup> Resolution on the Elimination of Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks, Human Rights Council, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/191/99/pdf/g2119199.pdf>; United Nations General Assembly, “Study on the Situation of the Violations and Abuses of Human Rights in Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks, as Well as Stigmatization,” Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Fifty-Second Session, February 27–April 4, 2023, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/636a707e71e94d4e82623edb/t/640af5d6aec9b87f874dc17f/1678439912805/G2300784.pdf>.

reduction in the use of graphic imagery and an increased emphasis on the harm caused by SARV, in contrast to past reports on the dangers of sorcery. For the past few years, the *Post-Courier* has dedicated a special fortnightly page to “Stop Sorcery Violence,” carrying stories about the work of activists, rescues, and government initiatives, as well as publishing regular opinion pieces and letters discussing the need for change. For example, an article published in December 2023 reflected on the “government’s fight on sorcery violence” throughout the year, acknowledging that it was “extremely done well” compared to previous years.

Of course, change is not linear, and there are still letters to the editor espousing views about the purported dangers of sorcery. For example, in 2022, *The National* carried an opinion piece in which the author opined that “the government has supported supernatural beings by enacting laws that protected them. This is unfair, especially from a biblical and cultural perspective.”<sup>31</sup>

## **What Does Media Analysis Show?**

### ***How Many Incidents Were Reported?***

Our first question was: How many cases of SARV have been reported in the media from 1996 to 2022? Our criterion for counting was whether there was a report of harm, of any kind, linked to an accusation of sorcery.

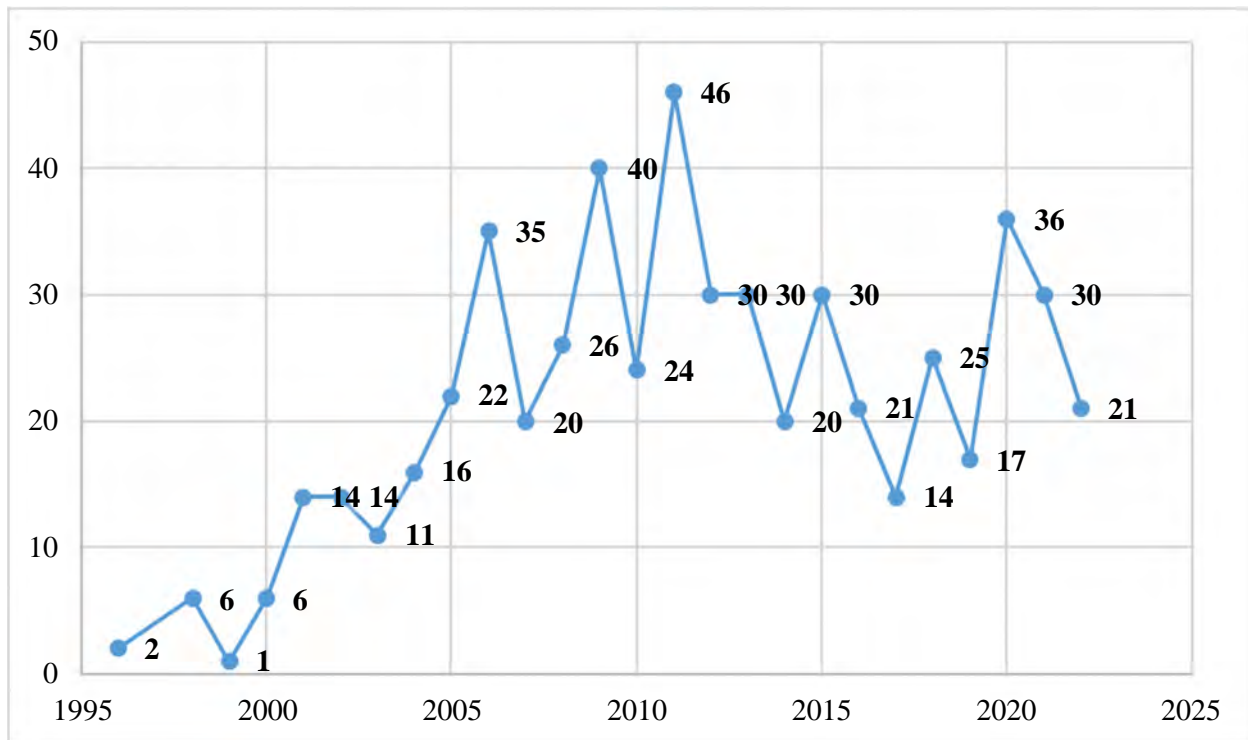
During the span of the 26 years for which we recorded data, a total of 557 SARV incidents were reported.

In understanding these figures, we note that many cases are never reported in the media for a variety of reasons, including remoteness of location, lack of reports to the police, and scarcity of journalists. In 2020, our research team attempted to determine what criminologists refer to as the “dark number,” or the amount of underreporting in national media. We compared reported cases in the media to the cases we had gathered data on through our own local networks in four provinces and found that, on average, only 8 percent of the violent incidents and 17 percent of the incidents

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<sup>31</sup> Petrus Gand, “Document Evidence of Sorcery, Spirits,” *The National*, February 16, 2022.

**Figure 2.** Number of Newspaper Reportings of SARV Incidents, 1996–2022



leading to death were reported in newspapers. There was also considerable variation across provinces.<sup>32</sup>

Each incident may involve multiple victims, as sometimes many individuals are accused. Figure 2 shows that the number of cases rises and falls over time, but that there was a peak from around 2005 to 2011, and subsequently there has been a slight decline. As Figure 2 makes clear, SARV is not limited to isolated incidents, but is a systemic phenomenon. Moreover, it is a contagious phenomenon that is spreading into new areas and involving new classes of victims.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula, and William Kipongi, “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG: Part 5: Incidents and Victims,” *In Brief* 2021/5, [https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-05/sorcery\\_accusation-related\\_violence\\_in\\_png\\_part\\_5\\_incidents\\_and\\_victims\\_dpa\\_in\\_brief\\_2021\\_05\\_miranda\\_forsyth\\_ibolya\\_losoncz\\_philip\\_gibbs\\_fiona\\_hukula\\_william\\_kipongi.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-05/sorcery_accusation-related_violence_in_png_part_5_incidents_and_victims_dpa_in_brief_2021_05_miranda_forsyth_ibolya_losoncz_philip_gibbs_fiona_hukula_william_kipongi.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Miranda Forsyth and Philip Gibbs, “Contagion of Violence: The Role of Narratives, Worldviews, Mechanisms of Transmission and Contagion Entrepreneurs,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9 (2) (2020): 37–59, doi: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v9i2.1217.

### ***What Kinds of Harm Occurred in These Cases?***

During the 26-year period, a total of:

- 694 victims were reported killed,
- 441 wounded,
- 604 were not physically harmed but suffered other damages.

During the four years that had the highest number of reported victims—2009 to 2012—a large proportion of the victims were not physically harmed as far as we can tell from newspaper reports. Common types of nonphysical harm are stigmatization, physical dislocation from home and livelihood, trauma, and destruction of houses and gardens.

### ***Where Were These Incidents Located?***

We can see from Figure 3 that these incidents were reported in many parts of PNG, although the majority were in the Highlands (see Figure 1).

The wide geographic spread of the incidents is noteworthy, as there is a common tendency in PNG to characterize SARV as a Highlands phenomenon. However, Morobe and Madang also had significant numbers of incidents reported, and incidents were reported in island regions, such as Bougainville, New Ireland, and West New Britain. For example, in November 2021, the *Post-Courier* carried the headline “Man Kills Brother Over Suspicions of Practising Sorcery,” and reported that the East New Britain provincial police commander said that sorcery-related killings were becoming a concern there.<sup>34</sup> As shown in Figure 4, there are also many cases reported in the National Capital District, indicating this is not solely a rural phenomenon.

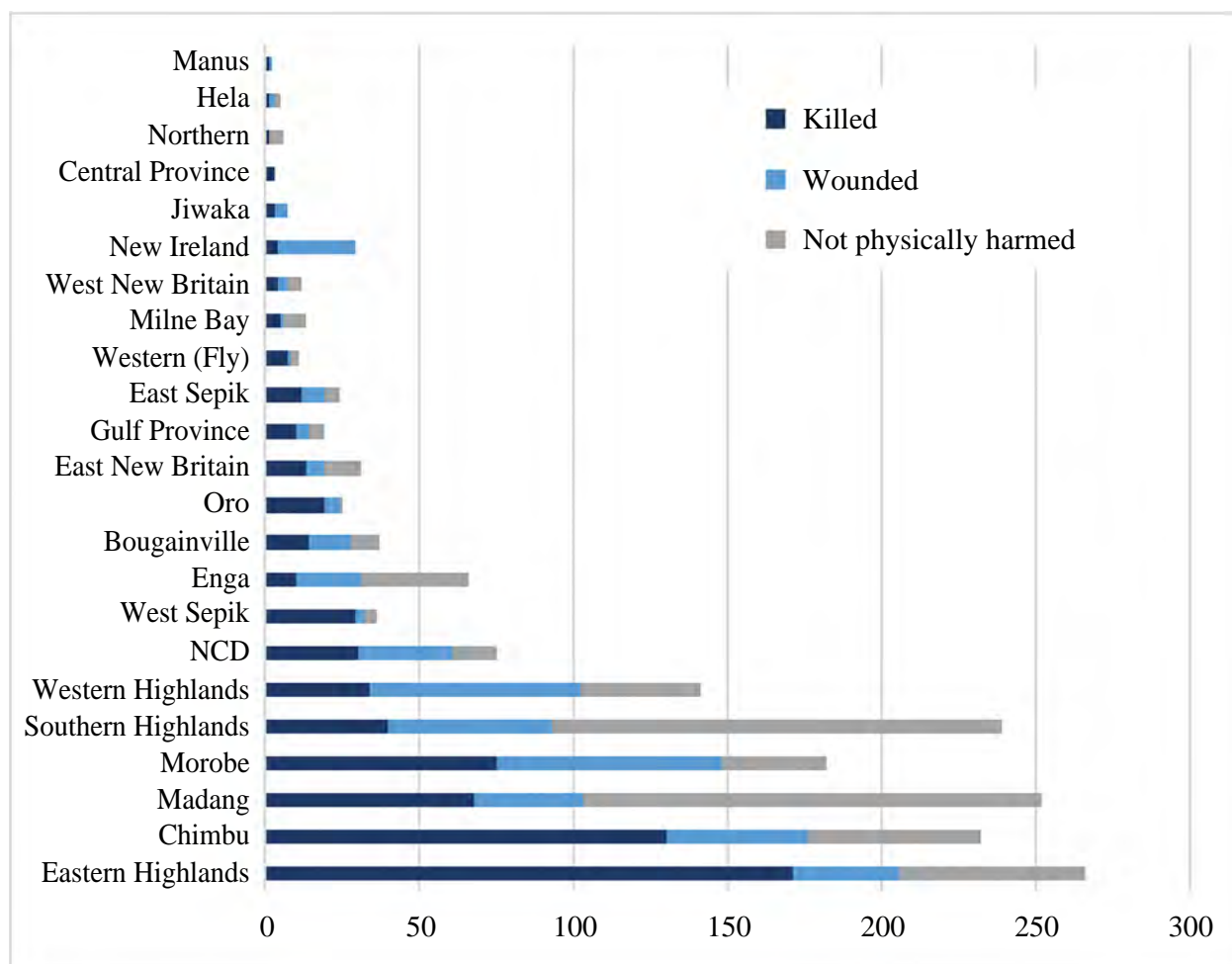
### ***Who Are the Victims of SARV?***

A common assumption made both inside and outside of PNG is that the victims of SARV are mostly women. For example, *Time* magazine reported in 2019 that “Victims are almost exclusively

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<sup>34</sup> Grace Lima, “Man Kills Brother Over Suspicions of Practising Sorcery,” *Post-Courier*, November 12, 2021, 8.

**Figure 3.** Number of Reported Victims by Type of Harm by PNG Province, 1996–2022



vulnerable women: single mothers, widows, the infirm or mentally ill.”<sup>35</sup> In 2022, the *UN News* reported, “While accusations can be levelled at both men and women, most of the victims of violence are women,”<sup>36</sup> a position echoed by the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>37</sup> Gary Bustin, the head of a PNG NGO, Tribal Foundation, stated that “the victims of SARV are almost always vulnerable people, mostly women.”<sup>38</sup>

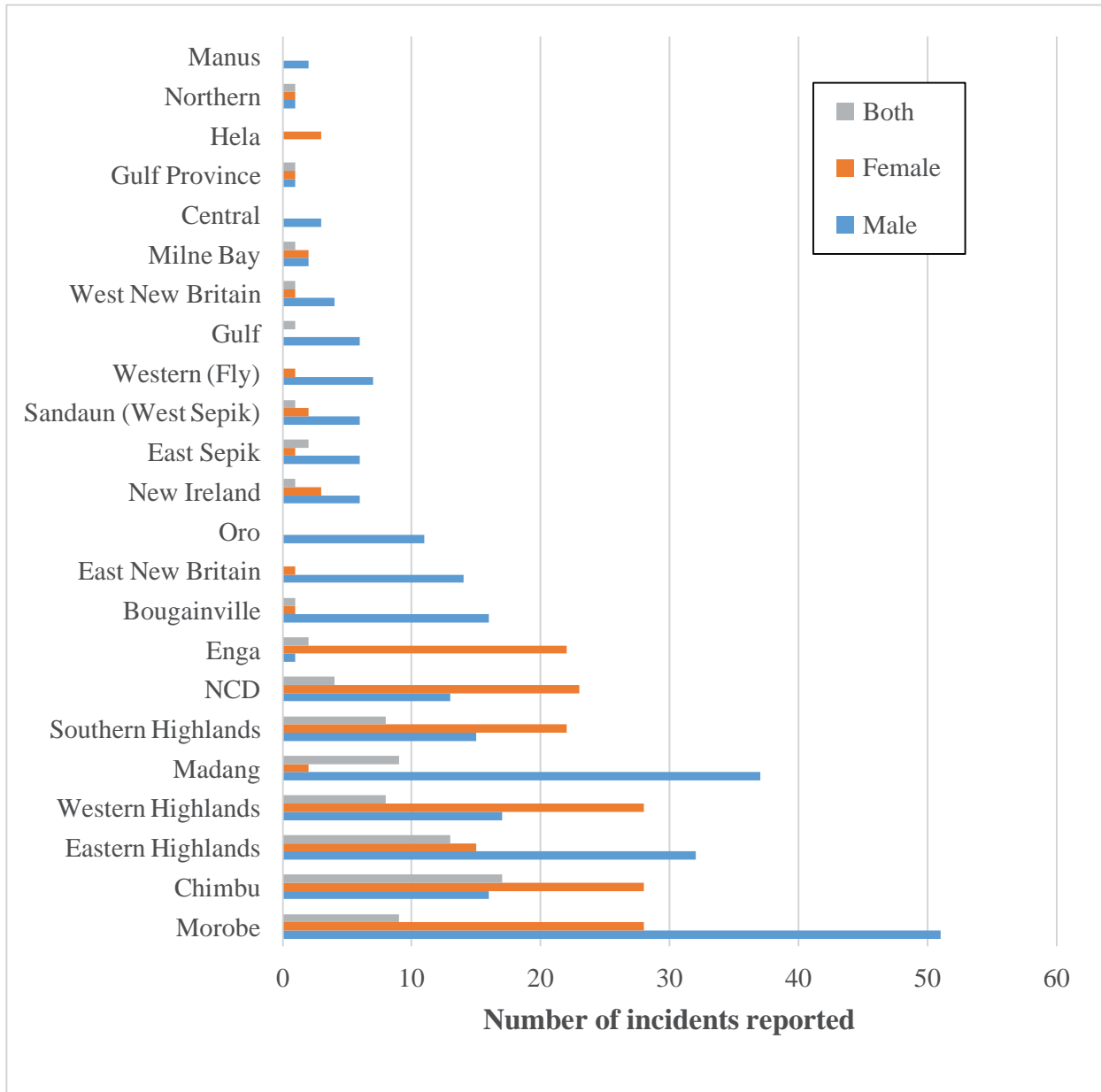
<sup>35</sup> Charlie Campbell, “How a 7-Year-Old Girl Survived Papua New Guinea’s Crucible of Sorcery,” *Time*, July 16, 2019, <https://time.com/longform/papua-new-guinea-witchcraft-justice/>.

<sup>36</sup> “The Dangers of Defending Women Accused of Sorcery in Papua New Guinea,” *UN News*, April 9, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115882>.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “UNDP Continues Its Efforts to Support Victims of Sorcery Accusation Related Violence,” *Stories*, December 2, 2022, [www.undp.org/papua-new-guinea/stories/undp-continues-its-efforts-support-victims-sorcery-accusation-related-violence](http://www.undp.org/papua-new-guinea/stories/undp-continues-its-efforts-support-victims-sorcery-accusation-related-violence).

<sup>38</sup> Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula, and William Kipongi, “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG: Part 7: The Harm of SARV,” *In Brief* 2021/7, <https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites>

**Figure 4.** Number of Incidents Reported by Province and Gender of Victims



But is this confirmed by our data? No. In fact, at the national level there is a slightly higher number of media reports mentioning male victims compared to female victims. Fifty percent of reports mention male-only victims, 35 percent female-only victims, and the remaining 15 percent both

[/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-03/sorcery\\_accusation\\_related\\_violence\\_in\\_png\\_part\\_7\\_the\\_harm\\_of\\_sarv\\_dpa\\_in\\_brief\\_2021\\_05\\_miranda\\_forsyth\\_ibolya\\_losoncz\\_philip\\_gibbs\\_fiona\\_hukula\\_william\\_kipongi.pdf](#); Marjorie Finkeo, “Govt Putting Up a Good Fight on Sorcery Violence,” *Post-Courier*, December 29, 2023, [www.postcourier.com.pg/govt-putting-up-a-good-fight-on-sorcery-violence/](http://www.postcourier.com.pg/govt-putting-up-a-good-fight-on-sorcery-violence/).

**Table 5.** Type of Harm by Gender of Victims, PNG, 1996–2022

Type of Harm	Percentage of Incidents with Male-Only Victims	Percentage of Incidents with Female-Only Victims	Percentage of Incidents with Male and Female Victims
Victim killed	74	57	67
Major physical injury	92	90	90
Victim burned	10	39	19
Victim tortured	17	54	26
Victim kept in captivity	13	32	14
Victim raped	0	5	7
Victim undressed	0	13	6
Victim threatened	8	22	17
Minor physical injury	3	4	1

males and females. There appears to be a slight trend in the most recent years toward more women being reported as victims than men. However, ongoing monitoring is necessary to determine if this trend is a sustained pattern. While there is equality of men and women victims reported at a national level, we know from other research we have conducted that there are strong gendered patterns in accusations, which only emerge predominantly at a provincial and even district level.<sup>39</sup> For example, the majority of victims are women in the Highlands province of Enga, whereas in the semi-autonomous region of Bougainville the majority are men, while in Jiwaka accusations tend to target both a husband and wife.<sup>40</sup>

Data from newspapers (Table 5) indicate that while the level of violence between male and female victims is comparable, the type of violence is gendered. The percentage of major physical injury is the same across incidents reporting on male and female victims (around 90 percent), while

<sup>39</sup> Forsyth et al., “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG: Part 5.”

<sup>40</sup> Forsyth et al., “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG: Part 5.”



the percentage of killing is higher for reporting on incidents of male victims (74 percent) than female victims (57 percent). On the other hand, threatening, torturing, burning, raping, undressing, and keeping the victim captive is much higher among reported incidents of female victims.<sup>41</sup>

An example of how this is reported in the newspapers can be seen in the *Post-Courier*'s coverage in July 2023, where it reported that a 34-year-old mother of three from Enga province was “mercilessly tortured with hot iron rods, knives and burning tyre pieces for 10 hours” until “a youth in his early 20s ran out and rescued her.”<sup>42</sup>

There is significant variation in the numbers of individuals accused across the provinces. Figure 4 shows our newspaper data represented in terms of the numbers of accusations made against males and females, broken down by province. This shows that it is the Highlands provinces where the largest numbers of incidents are being reported, with the exception of Morobe. However, this may be partly explained by the fact that there is a large number of people from the Highlands living in Morobe.

It is common for one gender or the other to constitute the majority of victims—at times the vast majority. It is notable that five of the six provinces where women are predominantly accused belong to the Highlands, while the other is the National Capital District (NCD), where there are many communities from the Highlands.

Part of the explanation lies in the high levels of misogyny and discrimination against women in the Highlands.<sup>43</sup> It is likely also related to the fact that women come into communities by marriage, which means that they may not always be seen as a part of that community.<sup>44</sup> In addition, preexisting tensions and narratives that lie behind sorcery accusations tend to differ for men and women.<sup>45</sup> All of these varied drivers require further unpacking.

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<sup>41</sup> Forsyth et al., “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG: Part 7.”

<sup>42</sup> Marjorie Finkeo, “Mother of Three Suffers for 10 Hours,” *Post-Courier*, July 5, 2023, 7.

<sup>43</sup> See Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, “Context-Specific Mapping of Peacebuilding Policies, Initiatives and Actors: Papua New Guinea 2023,” 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Chloe Nahum-Claudiel, “Witchcraft and Patriarchy: Punishment and Speech in Papua New Guinea Witch Hunts,” *Current Anthropology* (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> Forsyth and Gibbs, “Contagion of Violence.”

Another common misconception among donors and NGOs is that victims of SARV are often elderly.<sup>46</sup> In fact, however, there is a broad range of ages in the victims in our dataset. Children under 10 make up 2 percent; youth (10–18) are 6 percent; young adults (19–40) are 20 percent; middle-aged (41–60) are 22 percent; and people over 60 make up 26 percent (the rest of the reports where age was reported had mixed ages reported).

In roughly half the cases the victims' ages are not reported, or are reported in generalized terms such as “elderly man” or “youths,” and so we have had to interpret the reports in order to arrive at these numbers. Like all our numbers, they should not be interpreted as exact, but rather as identifying trends and generalizable patterns.

In the dataset, 14 children (ages 0 to 10) and 27 youths (ages 11 to 18) were reported as injured or killed. Reports of child victims of SARV start around 2005, but coverage is far from complete.<sup>47</sup> Children are sometimes primary victims when they themselves are accused, often as a result of a parent or close relative having been accused. They are also often secondary victims, traumatized and displaced as a result of one or both of their parents being accused. SARV is thus an intergenerational problem, with the stigma associated with accusations passed down through family lines in ways that condemn children to lifetimes of shame and the possibility of accusation. Both boys and girls are victims of SARV.

The dataset suggests that the number of children being accused of using sorcery is increasing, and this is consistent with anecdotal evidence collected by the researchers. There are similar reports of an increase in children being accused of sorcery and witchcraft in many other parts of the world, even in countries (such as PNG) where it was traditionally more common for older adults to be accused. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, large numbers of children are accused

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<sup>46</sup> See Mong Palatino, “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence Continues to Plague Papua New Guinea,” *Global Voices*, April 15, 2022, <https://globalvoices.org/2022/04/15/sorcery-accusation-related-violence-continues-to-plague-papua-new-guinea/>.

<sup>47</sup> See further Miranda Forsyth, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula, William Kipongi, and Ibolya Losoncz, “Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in Papua New Guinea: The Impact of SARV on Children,” Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper no. 97, January 31, 2022, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3958505](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3958505).

and subsequently thrown out onto the streets to fend for themselves.<sup>48</sup> In many parts of Africa, such as Nigeria, contemporary Pentecostal evangelical influences, particularly charismatic pastors, play a significant role in inciting suspicion and violence against children. These pastors claim to exorcise children, often confirming that an accused child is possessed by evil spirits or similar malevolence. Religious leaders have also played a significant role in the United Kingdom in inciting child witchcraft accusation cases.<sup>49</sup> The issue has become so pronounced in the UK that a new category of harm—child abuse linked to faith or belief—has started to be collected in their reports on harms to children.<sup>50</sup> In 2023, 2,140 cases were reported under this category.<sup>51</sup> It is not known what role churches are playing in the rise in children being accused of sorcery in PNG, although there is some scholarship arguing that Pentecostalism is involved in driving accusations of witchcraft more generally.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Who Fueled the Accusations?***

The sorcery accusation process often involves stages: (1) initial suspicion following a trigger event such as a death; (2) gossip to circulate rumors; and (3) crystallization of the suspicion by an authority figure, such as a diviner or a *glasman*.<sup>53</sup> The diviner identifies either the existence of sorcery in

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<sup>48</sup> Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell, “Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC,” *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4 (1) (2020): 1–51; Aleksandra Cimpric, “Children Accused of Witchcraft: An Anthropological Study of Contemporary Practices in Africa,” UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Unite for Children, April 2010, [www.refworld.org/docid/4e97f5902.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/4e97f5902.html).

<sup>49</sup> See Katie Mark, “UCKG: Church Pastor Tells Boy ‘Evil Spirit’ Hides in Him,” *BBC News*, December 11, 2023, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-67592961](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-67592961).

<sup>50</sup> See Department for Education (UK), “Children in Need Census: Additional Guide on the Factors Identified at the End of the Assessment,” April 2021, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60743257d3bf7f401659fd90/CIN\\_Additional\\_guide\\_on\\_the\\_factors\\_identified\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_assessment.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60743257d3bf7f401659fd90/CIN_Additional_guide_on_the_factors_identified_at_the_end_of_assessment.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> See “Explore Education Statistics: Create Your Own Tables,” *Gov.UK*, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables>. Go to “Choose a Publication,” and in “Select a Theme,” choose “Children’s Social Care.” Then go to “Select a Publication,” and check “Children in Need.” Click “Next Step.” On the page that appears, see Table C3, “Factors Identified at the End of Assessment by Local Authority” and create table. This will take you to “Choose Your Filters”; see first indicator listed, “Abuse linked to faith or belief.”

<sup>52</sup> See Deborah Van Heekeren, “Hiding Behind the Church: Towards an Understanding of Sorcery in Christian Papua New Guinea,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 17 (1) (2016): 1–16, doi: 10.1080/14442213.2015.1119187; Hans Reithofer, “Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea: A Review Essay,” *Anthropos* 106 (2011): 196–200, [www.jstor.org/stable/23031814](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23031814).

<sup>53</sup> Miranda Forsyth, William Kipongi, Anton Lutz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula, and Ibolya Losoncz, “Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea: The Role of *Glasman/Glasmeri* as Catalysts of Accusation and Violence,” National Research Institute Papua New Guinea, Issues Paper 36, July 2021, [https://pngnri.org/images/Publications/Issues\\_Paper\\_No\\_36.pdf](https://pngnri.org/images/Publications/Issues_Paper_No_36.pdf).

relation to an incident, or a specific individual as having used magic. Sometimes the diviner’s role includes trying to reverse the effects of that magic, such as claiming to cure individuals of illness.

There is a degree of overlap in PNG between the operation of *glasman* and other individuals (often termed “faith healers” or “prayer warriors”) associated with various branches of Christianity who claim to have visions and healing abilities. As observed from our data, *glasman* draw their power and legitimacy from customary roots, although many appear to also seek added legitimacy through their Christian identity, and include praying in divination. While there is a long history of divination as a form of specialist knowledge in PNG,<sup>54</sup> the case of the *glasman* who is paid to identify sorcerers/witches appears to be a more modern phenomenon. In PNG, there are growing concerns that these figures are significant catalysts of SARV. For example, the *Post-Courier* reported in 2023 that a Catholic bishop had spoken out against the practice of prayer warriors “using the name of the church, name of God” to practice being a *glasman* or *glasmeri*. He was speaking following an incident where a prayer warrior woman allegedly accused a mother of five of sorcery, which resulted in the burning of her house and her torture and murder, witnessed by her children and husband.<sup>55</sup>

There appears to have been a rise in reports of the involvement of *glasman* in 2022, with 20 percent of cases reported as having involved a *glasman* compared to a much lower percentage in previous years.

### ***Was Anyone Arrested as a Result of These Crimes?***

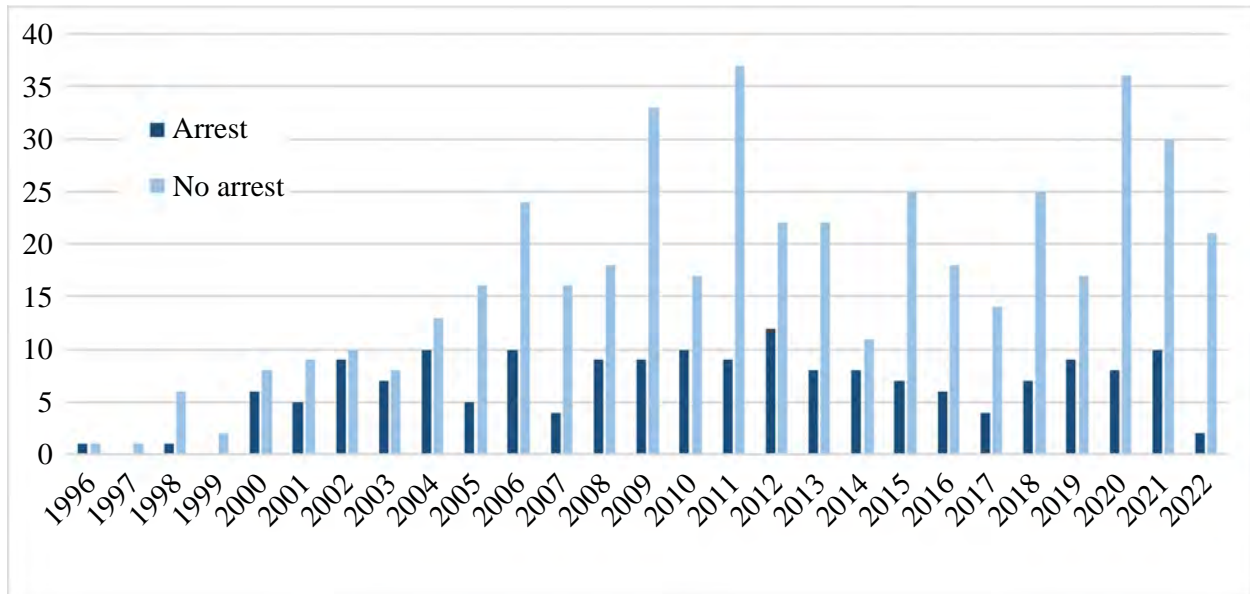
To investigate accountability for SARV, we recorded incidents in which an arrest was mentioned in our database, as shown in Figure 6. The number of cases with a reported arrest (150) is much lower than the number of cases where no arrest was recorded (408). Further, the annual number of reported arrests stayed relatively constant during the period for which we collected data, despite the varying numbers of incidents, suggesting there is a lack of capacity to increase policing resources when incidents increase.

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, F. L. S. Bell, “The Divination of Sorcery in Melanesia,” *Man* 35 (1935): 84–86.

<sup>55</sup> Marjorie Finkeo, “Bishop Condemns ‘Prayer Warriors,’” *Post-Courier*, October 11, 2023, 7.

**Figure 5.** Number of Reported Incidents in PNG Where at Least One Suspect Was Arrested or No Arrest Was Recorded, 1996–2022



### What Can Analysis of Reported Cases Teach Us?

This section discusses the discerned trends in numbers of convictions and sentences, the gender of the victims in the cases that get to court, and some emerging challenges in the judicial system’s approach to SARV. PNG’s justice system follows a typical common law framework and consists of two higher courts, the Supreme Court and the National Court, and a range of lower-level courts. The lowest level of court is the village courts, which often deal with sorcery-related incidents in their initial stages.<sup>56</sup> Cases of homicide are most commonly tried in the National Court, and appeals go to the Supreme Court, while less serious criminal offenses can also be tried in District Courts.

Overall, our analysis revealed mounting frustration among higher courts regarding the persistence of these crimes, shown by the imposition of progressively severe sentences and in sentencing comments. For instance, in *State v. Gerard*, PGNC 254, 2022, the judge stated, “These types of mostly unjustified killing of both men and women on suspicion that they are sorcerers has become a huge problem in PNG. Something needs to be done to deter further acts of violence and killings of

<sup>56</sup> See William Kipongi and Miranda Forsyth, “Addressing Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in the Village Court System of Papua New Guinea,” National Research Institute Papua New Guinea Spotlight, 2024 (forthcoming), <https://pngnri.org/index.php/our-research/home>.

innocent victims based on speculation, rumours deliberately spread by malicious enemies of the victim or by so called glassman and glassmeris.”

However, there also exists a degree of ambivalence and confusion in lower courts about how to handle such cases, and even whether it is SARV that is the problem. The case of *Wawae v. Auwowe*, PGDC 243, 2021, involved the District Court judging a SARV case where the assailant himself was a village court magistrate. Such confusion is even apparent occasionally in higher courts. For example, in *State v. Songua*, PGNC 86, 2022, the judge spoke about the Sorcery Act, but seemed unaware that it was repealed in 2013.

### ***How Many Cases of SARV Are Prosecuted?***

There is a perception among commentators on SARV that prosecutions almost never occur. In 2021, the head of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence, Chairman Hon. Charles Abel, stated: “I am extremely concerned that SARV cases are increasing around the country and no action is ever seen to be taken against the perpetrators.”<sup>57</sup>

However, a more nuanced view can be seen by examining the extent of SARV prosecutions from 1974, when PNG attained independence, to 2023. While impunity is prevalent, there were more prosecutions than expected, given the widespread narrative about perpetrators never facing accountability.

There were 118 criminal cases of SARV, and 354 individuals had been convicted over the period, with a significant fluctuation in the rate of prosecutions over time. As shown in Figure 6, the number of cases started to increase around 2003.

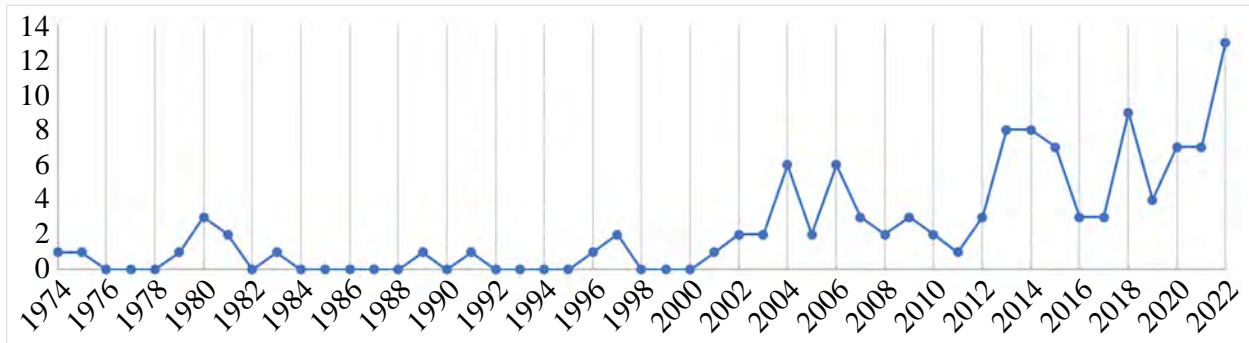
While this figure falls well below a satisfactory number, it is an important corrective to the popular narrative that prosecutions do not occur at all.<sup>58</sup> If we just count cases from 2001 to 2022,

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<sup>57</sup> Charmaine Rodrigues, “Parliamentary Committee Chair Abel Wants Action to Address Sorcery Accusation Related Violence,” PNG Parliamentary Coalition to End Gender-Based Violence, July 12, 2021, [www.unitedforequalitypng.com/post/parliamentary-committee-chair-abel-wants-action-to-address-sorcery-accusation-related-violence](http://www.unitedforequalitypng.com/post/parliamentary-committee-chair-abel-wants-action-to-address-sorcery-accusation-related-violence).

<sup>58</sup> A longer discussion of these issues can be found in Miranda Forsyth, “Prosecution of Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in PNG: What More Is Required?,” Policy Brief 21, Development Policy Centre, August 2021, [https://devpolicy.org/publications/policy\\_briefs/PB21-Prosecution-of-SARV-in-PNG-Aug-2021.pdf](https://devpolicy.org/publications/policy_briefs/PB21-Prosecution-of-SARV-in-PNG-Aug-2021.pdf). This USIP discussion paper updates the data provided in that 2021 article.

Figure 6. Number of Sentences per Year, 1974–2022



there were 307 defendants, making for an average of 14.6 individuals convicted each year for the past 21 years. For cases that reach court, there is a high conviction rate, with only 7 percent of defendants found not guilty.

As noted previously, SARV involves a wide range of harmful behavior. However, the vast majority of cases that go through the courts involve charges of murder (30 percent) and willful murder (44 percent).

There was only one decision that appeared in our dataset where the defendant was charged under Section 299A of the Criminal Code—willful murder on account of sorcery accusation. That provision was introduced in 2013 to make clear to the public that the government considers killing people believed to be sorcerers to be a severe criminal offense.<sup>59</sup>

Despite men and women being roughly equally represented as victims, our case law database shows that an incredible 85 percent of cases before the courts between 1974 and 2023 involved male victims of SARV. The fact that cases of SARV involving male victims are more likely to proceed through the criminal justice system than those where the victims are women indicates the serious gendered barriers to justice in the PNG criminal justice system.

In our research elsewhere, we discovered that SARV often manifests as a collective form of violence, with many cases involving numerous defendants. However, it was frequently evident that

<sup>59</sup> Miranda Forsyth, “A Pluralist Response to the Regulation of Sorcery and Witchcraft in Melanesia,” in *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, eds. Miranda Forsyth and Richard Eves (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015): 213–40.

only a fraction of the perpetrators were apprehended and prosecuted.<sup>60</sup> Overall, we found that two-thirds of the cases in our database involved three or more defendants.

Over the past few years, there have been some provisionally positive trends emerging in prosecutions. In criminal cases, there appears to be a greater variety of charges being filed, particularly evidenced by the eight arson charges associated with SARV. There were also a few cases where a glasman was prosecuted, although as yet no cases have involved use of the new provisions introduced in 2022 that created special offenses related to glasman.<sup>61</sup> Notably, the average sentence for SARV was 26 years imprisonment.<sup>62</sup> It is helpful to reflect on the economic costs of SARV to the state, particularly the costs associated with imprisonment. Since 2001, there have been 309 individuals convicted of SARV, sentenced to an average of 26 years imprisonment. In total, SARV is costing the PNG government 8,034 times the cost of imprisoning an individual for a year. This is a massive drain on PNG's correctional services budget, and should provide a significant economic incentive to the state to engage in more preventative work to stop such cases happening in the first place.

We also investigated how long it takes for cases to be prosecuted, finding that the average time between the commission of an offense and the court decision was three years. Gary Bustin of the Tribal Foundation noted that a case can take four to nine years to go through the courts, stating that, "Justice delayed is not justice at all."<sup>63</sup> Delays lead to overcrowded prisons and increase the likelihood of evidence being lost, witnesses withdrawing, and defendants escaping from jail.<sup>64</sup>

Civil cases brought by individuals for damages, as opposed to criminal cases initiated by the state, have increased. Overall, we counted 15 civil lawsuits in our database. For example, there are more defamation cases being brought in District Courts by those who have been accused. As an illustration, in *Willie v. Jokate*, PGDC 242, 2021, the complainant brought charges against her in-laws

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<sup>60</sup> Miranda Forsyth, Philip Gibbs, and Ibolya Losoncz, "Sorcery-Accusation Related Violence in PNG: Characteristics of Perpetrators and Their Accomplices," National Research Institute Papua New Guinea, *Spotlight* 14 (11) (September 2021), [https://pngnri.org/images/Publications/Spotlight\\_Vol\\_14\\_Issue\\_11\\_.pdf](https://pngnri.org/images/Publications/Spotlight_Vol_14_Issue_11_.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Criminal Code (Amendment) Act 2022, no. 14 of 2022, [www.parliament.gov.pg/uploads/acts/22A\\_14.pdf](http://www.parliament.gov.pg/uploads/acts/22A_14.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Findings of not guilty, suspended sentence, and sentences not stated are excluded. Life imprisonment was allocated 55 years and death sentence 60 years.

<sup>63</sup> Finkeo, "Govt Putting Up a Good Fight on Sorcery Violence."

<sup>64</sup> If time was less than a year, 0.5 year was allocated. If time was 10 or more years, 10 years was allocated.



who had claimed they saw a fruit bat fly out of her body. The court awarded the complainant 3,000 kina (\$1,000) compensation. This case was also unusually speedy—the complainant was defamed in February and the judgment was made in May.

Another positive example is apparent in the case of *So-or v. Kim*, PGDC 23, 2021, which involved a family who had fled from their home community following allegations of sorcery some years previously to live in the Pewi Settlement in Vanimo. Unfortunately, they continued to be threatened and harassed in their new community, and brought charges for defamation and threats. The court took the unusual step of including a warning to the whole community in its orders, ordering them to refrain from “spreading of rumors and implicating [the complainant] and his family in allegations of practicing sorcery.”

Moreover, in the past year, the first civil case for damages due to assault resulting from SARV was successfully litigated. Additionally, there has been a claim for a restraining order to prevent further accusations. These cases display a positive direction in the use of civil action to seek protection or compensation.

However, survivors and organizations that support them often complain of roadblocks in navigating both PNG’s criminal justice and civil law systems. One manager of a victim-support center we spoke with told us of the dead ends she constantly ran into in trying to help her clients. Her most recent case concerned a woman running from her attackers who went to report her case to a police officer, who was so drunk he fell asleep while taking her statement. Now the “half case” is lodged at that police station and cannot be relodged elsewhere, but no action is being taken as it is incomplete. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that there are no paralegal services or NGOs that specialize in providing legal assistance for SARV cases, highlighting the need for community-based legal information and paralegal support services for SARV victims.

## CONCLUSION

This discussion paper has sought to collect and interpret data around two different, but interconnected, forms of violence in PNG: intergroup violence and SARV.

Our databases make it clear that both are frequent and systemic. Both result in many victims, including primary victims and many times more secondary victims, who are often traumatized and displaced. Victims include all genders and age groups, and often multiple generations are affected. While our research has demonstrated that many incidents are reported, countless incidents are not.

It is clear from the data that both forms of violence have mutated to fit contemporary conditions in ways that make them very dangerous. While they may have some roots in cultural beliefs and practices, the forms that violence takes today differ markedly from a few decades ago.

The data also show that many narratives about these forms of violence, such as the gender of SARV victims, or that intergroup violence is disconnected from the state, are misconceptions. It is essential to move beyond stereotypes and develop more accurate understandings of violence in PNG if interventions are going to be successful.

Overall, we conclude that both types of violence are fueled by five key drivers—PNG’s prevailing political economy, with its monetized and violent elections; uneven and faltering development and the lack of economic opportunities, especially for youth; the widespread availability of guns and normalization of violence; the erosion of traditional and local forms of leadership and regulation; and the failures of government services, such as health, education, and law and justice.

While the PNG government has slowly made progress in addressing SARV, and awareness has increased over the past decade, this has not halted the tsunami of violence.

The problems of intergroup violence have been formally recognized for longer than SARV, but little action has been taken to address it. In fact, this type of violence has adapted so well to the current political economy of PNG that the treatments useful to contain it in the past, such as strong customary leadership, are often unable to do so today. While the government is currently promoting a militarized response, the track record of such interventions shows they cause more harm than good.<sup>65</sup> Slow and steady peacebuilding efforts led largely by women and community leaders offer a

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<sup>65</sup> Sinclair Dinnen and Miranda Forsyth, “Foreign Officers Are Not the Answer to PNG’s Policing Problems,” *DevPolicy* (blog), November 2, 2023, <https://devpolicy.org/foreign-officers-are-not-the-answer-to-pngs-policing-problems-20231102/>.

much surer pathway to ending violence, but they require significant additional support from the PNG government and donors, as well as coalition building with state authorities.

This discussion paper has also demonstrated a need to develop robust and long-term systems for generating, analyzing, and making publicly accessible data related to violence in PNG. Developing tools for integrating and analyzing varied data sources will provide the foundation necessary to address multiple forms of violence in PNG.

