

Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea Part 4: Trends over Time and Geographic Spread

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In Brief 2017/31

This is the last In Brief in a four-part series that summarises key findings from an analysis of reports of sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV) in national newspaper articles and court cases over a 20-year period (1996–2016). The three previous In Briefs outlined the study and its methodology and highlighted key aspects of, and responses to, reported incidents of SARV. This In Brief presents trends across the 20 years that are apparent in levels of reported incidents, victimisation and arrests.

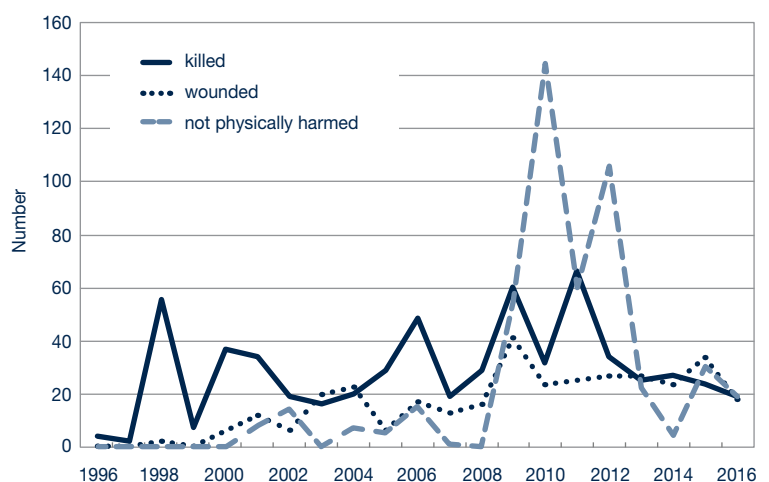
The annual number of reported incidents climbed from two in 1996 to a peak in 2011 of 45. It is important to note that each incident may involve multiple victims (see [In Brief 2017/29](#)). From 2012 to 2016 the annual number varied between 19 and 34 per year, but as yet we are unclear as to the reasons behind these variations. Possible explanations are lead up to elections, public health crises, and reasons related to reach and interest of journalists. Readers are invited to get in touch with the authors to speculate. We are mindful that the cases recorded are far from comprehensive (see [In Brief 2017/28](#)), which makes analysis difficult and potentially misleading. As explained in *In Brief 2017/28*, the intention of the broader project is to analyse these data in conjunction with data obtained from a range of other sources.

During the 20-year period a total of 610 victims were reported as killed, 340 wounded and 493 were not physically harmed but suffered property damage (usually arson) or psychological damage. As Figure 1 shows, 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 the newspaper reports. The trend and variation in those killed each year is less dramatic with the peak years in reported numbers in 1998, 2006, 2009 and 2011. The lowest annual numbers in killings were reported in the first few years (which is likely to be attributable to lack of reporting in newspapers) but also show a decline more recently.

Figure 2 shows the annual number of reported incidents that resulted in a reported arrest. The annual number of reported arrests stayed relatively constant during the 20 years. Generally, where the reported annual number of incidents was high, the arrest rates were lower. A consequence of this was a similar trend evident for the other stages in criminal justice, including charges, convictions and trials. In general, provinces with the higher number of reported incidents also had lower rates of arrests, charges and trials. This suggests that when there is a lot of crime, police work (particularly if already affected by a lack of staff and resources) is less efficient.

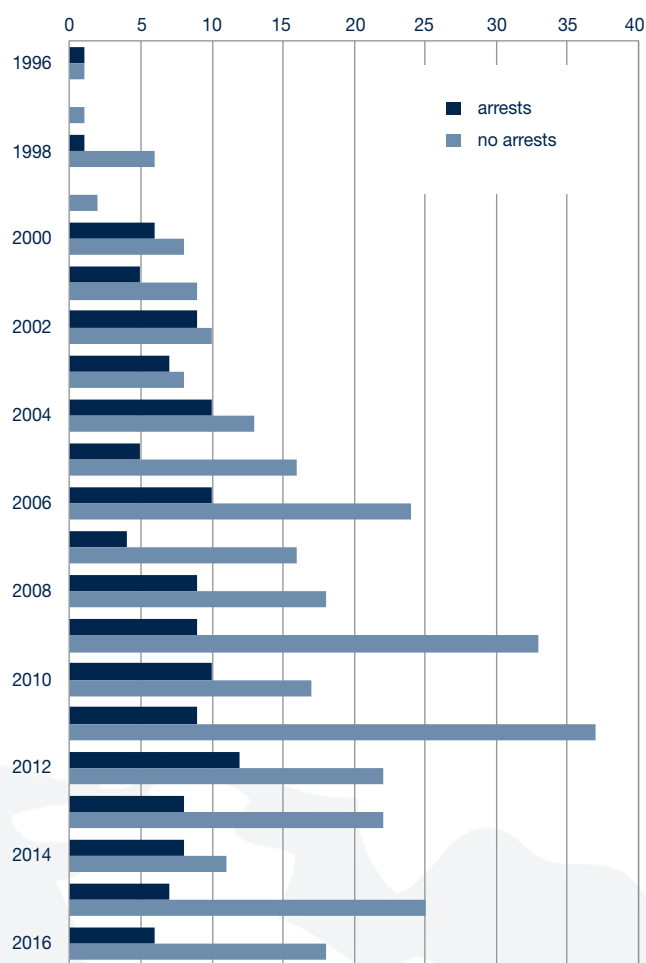
Across the 20 provinces there were stark differences in the number each year of reported incidents and victims (Figure 3). Those with the highest levels for the 20-year period included Morobe (15 per cent of all reported incidents), Chimbu (14 per cent), Eastern Highlands (13 per cent) and Western Highlands (10 per cent). At the other end of the spectrum with less than 1 per cent of reported incidents were Manus and Central Province. These numbers represent an average across 20 years but it should be noted that the

Figure 1: Trends in reported harm to victims, PNG, 1996–2016



Source: Newspaper and judgment database, ANU SARV project.

Figure 2: Number of reported incidents where at least one suspect was arrested or no arrest was recorded, PNG, 1996–2016



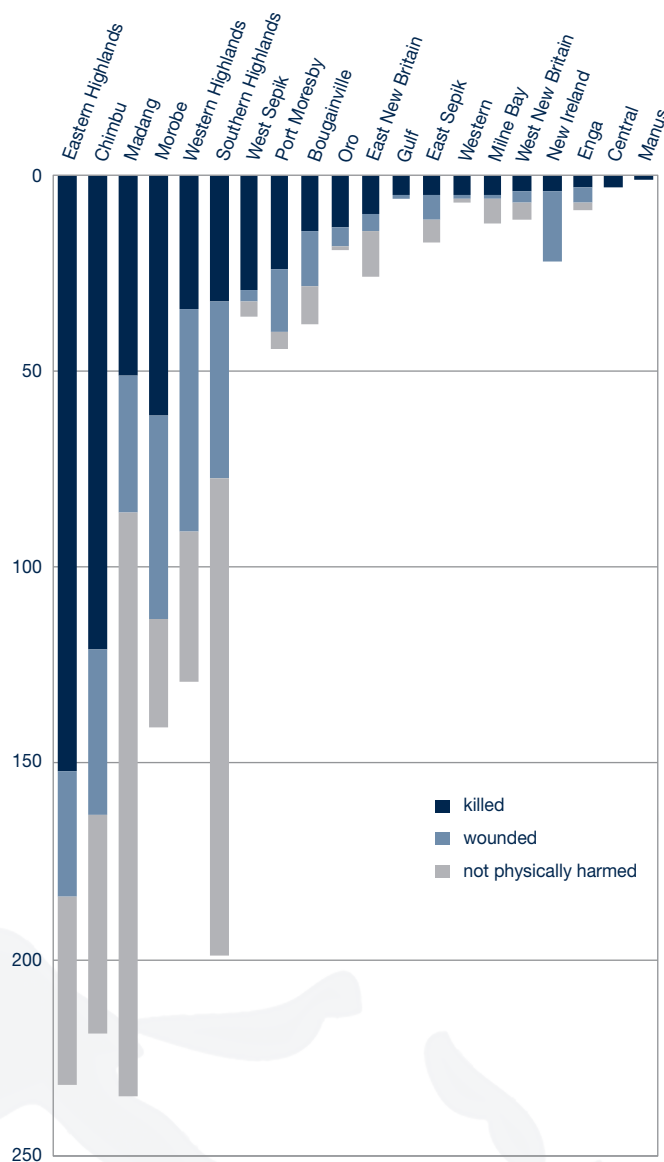
Source: Newspaper and judgment database, ANU SARV project.

rates vary greatly across the years (some with big spikes) and individual trends per province will be reported on elsewhere, together with more granular reporting at district level where possible. As already mentioned, there is likely to be significant under-reporting and the rates of under-reporting are likely to vary by province; therefore, all these figures say is that there were 'at least' this many cases in these provinces.

There is significant variation in population across provinces and so we also analysed rates of victimisation based on per head of population, using population estimates for each province for every year from 1998 to 2016 based on the 2000 census. This analysis found notable differences in the trends in rates across provinces. The provinces with the highest rates of victimisation were Chimbu, Eastern Highlands and Morobe.

The newspaper and case law reports suggest a variable upward trend in SARV over the past 20 years, with a peak in 2011 and a relative decline subsequently. There are clear

Figure 3: Number of reported victims by type of harm by province, PNG, 1996–2016



Source: Newspaper and judgment database, ANU SARV project.

provincial 'hot spots' based on the dataset analysis — Chimbu, Eastern Highlands and Morobe — but each province has different patterns and trends over time that require further investigation. The data also show a consistent trend in failure of the criminal justice system to arrest suspects involved in SARV, particularly in circumstances of high numbers of incidents.

Author Notes

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