

Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG Part 7: The Harm of SARV

Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula & William Kipongi In Brief 2021/7

This is the seventh In Brief in a series presenting findings from a multi-year study of sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). This In Brief reports on the various dimensions of harm that SARV creates for individuals, their families, their community and the nation. The research covers the four provinces of Enga, Bougainville, National Capital District (NCD) and Jiwaka, where quantitative data was collected over a four-and-a-half-year period (January 2016¹–June 2020). During this time, 298 incidents of violent accusations were recorded involving 546 victims. Of these victims, 65 were killed, 86 suffered permanent injury² and 141 survived other serious harm, such as burning, cutting, tying or being forced into water. In total, we recorded 318 people having either died or survived serious harm as a result of SARV.

There is significant variation among the four provinces in the proportion of accusation incidents that lead to violence against the accused. The proportion of violent incidents was highest in Jiwaka (46 per cent), followed by Enga (38 per cent), NCD (30 per cent) and Bougainville (20 per cent). Where accusations do not lead to physical violence, they may nonetheless effectively be a life sentence for an individual and their family, leading to a life of social ostracisation and stigmatisation.

Types of violence

On average, the most frequent types of violence during SARV incidents are property damage (50 per cent) and threats (49 per cent), followed by minor and major personal physical violence (44 per cent and 42 per cent).

Extremely violent acts are also frequent, including torture (32 per cent), burning (22 per cent) and killing (15 per cent). There is a significant regional variation (see Table 1). Notably, in Enga, a much higher proportion of incidents include exceptionally violating acts, such as torture (64 per cent), major physical violence (60 per cent), removing clothing (59 per cent), burning the accused (54 per cent), forced imprisonment (36 per cent) and killing (33 per cent). In Jiwaka, property damage is significantly higher (92 per cent) than in other provinces. In NCD, violent incidents tend to contain a lower proportion of violence and violating acts, such as torture, burning, removing clothing or property

damage. Torture is also significantly lower in Jiwaka. Burning or removing the clothing of the accused is also significantly lower in Bougainville. This is likely related to the gendered dimension of violence, which, together with other region-specific dimensions of the violence, is discussed further in a forthcoming series.

Table 1: Types of violence in SARV incidents, percentages* of violent incidents by location, January 2016–June 2020**

	Enga (%)	Bougainville (%)	NCD (%)	Jiwaka (%)	Total (%)
	n=73	n=87	n=97	n=37	n=294
Property damage	49.3	64.4	21.6	91.9	50.0
Threats	58.9	52.9	51.5	13.5	49.0
Minor physical violence	42.5	40.2	52.6	32.4	43.9
Major physical violence	60.3	33.3	33.0	48.6	41.8
Torture	64.4	35.6	12.4	8.1	31.6
Emotional harm	35.6	28.7	24.7	0.0	25.5
Burning	53.5	5.7	10.3	29.7	21.9
Clothing removed	58.6	3.4	5.2	18.9	19.2
Banishment	25.0	27.6	4.1	8.1	16.7
Killing	32.9	9.2	6.2	16.2	15.0
Forced imprisonment	35.6	5.7	2.1	2.7	11.6
Sexual violation	7.1	0.0	1.0	0.0	2.1
Tribal fight	2.9	0.0	2.1	0.0	1.4

*Percentages are calculated using valid data, i.e. exclude data that is missing or not known.

**The start date for the NCD data was January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka.

Source: SARV Incident Database, *violent incidents*.

Impacts of violence

The considerable impacts of SARV on the victims are listed in Table 2. More than half (54 per cent) of the victims of violent accusations have either died or survived serious harm, with figures ranging between 77 per cent in Enga and 38 per cent in the NCD. There is also significant regional variation in the severity of the harm. In Enga, 25 per cent of victims of violent

incidents were killed, compared to about seven per cent in the other three provinces. Permanent physical injury was significantly higher in Bougainville and Enga (28 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively) than in the NCD (eight per cent) and Jiwaka (only one case).

A notable finding is the considerable number of victims who had either died (n=6) or sustained permanent physical injury (n=12) by the time of the interviews, leading to them being recorded in our dataset (i.e. within a maximum of a few years), even though the documented accusation did not lead to violence at the time. This is likely due to the ongoing increased precarity of life following an accusation of sorcery, which some have described as a birthmark that can never be removed.

Additional impacts of SARV on victims include the high level of social isolation and stigma (46 per cent of victims) that accompanies an accusation, continuing threats against the victim (37 per cent), forced relocation (34 per cent) and the loss livelihood and property (25 per cent). Forced relocation was especially high in Jiwaka (60 per cent), while Bougainville had the highest levels of social isolation and stigma (80 per cent), continuing threats (74 per cent) and loss livelihood and property (37 per cent).

In addition to the direct impact on those accused, SARV also has a range of impacts on the children of those accused, other family members and communities, as will be discussed in detail in a forthcoming series. These impacts include ongoing displacement, fear, stigmatisation and cycles of counter-accusation and violence.

Table 2: Impacts of SARV on the victims as known at time of recording data, percentages* of victims by location, January 2016–June 2020**

	Enga (%) n=149	Bougainville (%) n=134	NCD (%) n=156	Jiwaka (%) n=107	Total (%) n=546
Still live in the village	36.2	60.4	66.0	35.5	50.5
Live elsewhere	32.2	31.3	21.2	57.9	33.9
Are dead***	24.8	7.5	7.1	6.5	11.9
Are permanently injured physically****	23.5	28.4	7.7	0.9	15.8
Serious physical harm (excluding death and permanent physical injury)	26.8	20.9	23.1	34.6	25.8
Face stigma/ social isolation	46.3	79.9	46.2	4.7	46.3
Face continuing threats	38.9	73.9	29.5	0.0	37.2
Have lost property/livelihood	27.5	37.3	12.2	26.2	25.3

*Percentages are calculated using valid data, i.e. exclude data that is missing or not known.

**The start date for the NCD data was January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka.

***An additional six victims (four in Bougainville and two in NCD) had died by the time of the interview, even though the documented accusation did not lead to violence at the time.

****An additional 12 victims (eight in Enga and four in Bougainville) had sustained permanent physical injury at the time of the interview, even though the documented accusation did not lead to violence at the time

Source: SARV Incident Database, *violent* incidents.

In conclusion, the extent of the harm associated with SARV revealed in this data is significant, widespread and ongoing. Moreover, in a global context, PNG is unfortunately not alone in experiencing such high levels of violence associated with beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery. Globally, a desk-based review of credible online accounts documented at least 22,000 victims across 50 countries over a 10-year period ([WHRIN 2020](#)). These facts are surely an additional reason to redouble efforts to eradicate SARV.

For further discussion on the role of narratives in SARV, see the *Devpolicy* blogs [part one](#) and [two](#).

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Author notes

Dr Miranda Forsyth is an associate professor at ANU. Dr Ibolya Losoncz is a researcher at ANU. Professor Philip Gibbs is the vice chancellor of Divine Word University. Dr Fiona Hukula is a senior research fellow at the PNG National Research Institute. William Kipongi is a research assistant at the PNG National Research Institute.

Endnotes

1. The start date for the NCD data was January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka.
2. An additional six victims had died and 12 had sustained permanent physical injuries *at the time of the interview*, even though the documented accusation did not lead to violence at the time.

References

WHRIN (Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Networks) 2020. [Concept Note and Preliminary Data: In Support of Advocacy for the Elimination of Harmful Practices: Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks](#).

