

Crime and Safety in Selected Papua New Guinea Provinces A Pilot Study

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Cover: Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea
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We recognise and applaud how much collaboration and goodwill underpins research, and hope that this pilot study leads to more support for such research into crime and safety in Papua New Guinea.

Abbreviations

ANU	The Australian National University
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DPA	Department of Pacific Affairs
DFV	Domestic and family violence
ENB	East New Britain
FPO	Family protection order
HRD	Human rights defender
IPO	Interim protection order
LLG	Local-level government
NCD	National Capital District
NGO	Non-government organisation
PMV	Public motor vehicle
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SMAP	Smap Consulting
UPNG	University of Papua New Guinea

Executive summary

A crime and safety survey was undertaken in 2024 in four provinces in Papua New Guinea (PNG), mainly in urban locations but also in a number of rural districts. The total number of participants was 2,834 adults, almost equally men and women. This involved a collaboration between researchers and students in three universities — The Australian National University, the University of Papua New Guinea, and the Lutheran University of Papua New Guinea.

The project's objective was to trial an affordable model of undertaking surveys in PNG provinces that can provide timely and useful information to key stakeholders on crime and safety issues.

The purpose of this report, therefore, is twofold. First, it presents the survey findings, and second, the analysis and discussion illustrate how useful such information can be and how crime prevention and justice reforms can be tailored and assessed by survey data, most notably when the surveys are conducted regularly.

The survey found that:

- More than half of respondents felt unsafe or very unsafe in a range of situations, including walking around in the community at night (76.3%), during big occasions and events (72.7%), and when catching a public motor vehicle (PMV) (55.8%). Less than half, 42%, felt safe walking around the community during the day.
- Of the two-thirds of the respondents who said they use social media, more than half felt unsafe or very unsafe (56%) when using it.
- Among eight social groups, teenage girls and women were viewed by respondents as being the least safe, while men and elderly men were viewed as being the most safe.
- Alcohol-fuelled violence, theft, young men out of control, and drug (marijuana etc.) related issues — out of 17 listed categories — were viewed by more than 80% of respondents as very big or big social problems in the village or neighbourhood. A significant minority of the respondents (between 10% and 15%) nominated land disputes, vehicle accidents, use of guns, black magic or sorcery accusations, and cyber-based sexual violence as not a problem at all.
- One-third (27.9%) of respondents said they had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months. The most common crimes were theft, assault, and break and enter. A weapon was involved in the majority of incidents (67.7%). Where a weapon was used, a knife was the most common weapon (75.4%) rather than a gun (24.6%).

- Of those who said they were a victim of crime, more than half (57.9%) did not report it to the police, while 42.0% did. The most common reason for not reporting was 'dealt with it myself' followed by 'could not contact them'. The majority of respondents (64.6%) said that police services, when needed, were 'accessible but facing challenges'.
- Out of six categories, respondents indicated they were most likely to contact police, followed by community leaders, to ask for help to resolve a major disagreement or dispute with someone in their family or community.
- More respondents had contact with the Village Court (19.7%) than the District Court (11.9%) in the previous 12 months. Just over half of those who had contact with either of the courts had done so to make a complaint.
- Knowledge of interim protection orders (IPOs) and/or family protection orders (FPOs) for domestic violence — a recent legal reform — was relatively high among respondents (43.2%), while half of all respondents (53.3%) said they knew 'a little bit' about PNG's laws.
- When asked about changes in policing and government justice services over the past two years, more than half of respondents said they had stayed the same. However, between 20% and 30% indicated the police had become worse over six indicators of police performance including reducing the level of crime in PNG and in keeping communities safe. Similar proportions said that government justice services had stayed the same (53.8%), had worsened (27.7%) or had improved (7.7%).

In a country of considerable diversity it is unsurprising that the pilot survey's results consistently highlighted the significance of location, whether at provincial level or in terms of the district categories: urban, semi-urban and rural. It confirms that multi-district provincial data is required to understand how crime and justice are experienced in different parts of the country.

East New Britain emerged as the province, of those surveyed, where residents were most concerned about crime and social problems; various indicators — such as the use of a gun in crimes that respondents had experienced in the previous 12 months — underlined that this province has experienced a rapid escalation in crime in recent years.

The district category — i.e. urban, semi-urban or rural — was a significant factor in predicting certain kinds of crime victimisation and social problems. For example, respondents in semi-urban districts reported higher rates of victimisation in the previous 12 months, and a larger proportion of recent crime incidents that involved a gun were in rural districts. Access to and contact with the police and District Courts was, as could be expected, more difficult in rural districts.

A range of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, years of residence, and educational, employment and marital status was significant in differentiating levels of crime and

violence victimisation and in feelings of safety. Such characteristics also had a significant impact on help-seeking behaviour, knowledge of laws, and degree of confidence in, and contact with, formal justice services.

Important patterns included gender differences in perceptions of social problems and forms of crime victimisation, although gender was not a statistically valid predictor of overall crime victimisation. Higher educational attainment was associated with greater knowledge of PNG laws and protection orders, feeling safer on social media, and more confidence in accessing services.

Prior victimisation was a strong predictor of perceptions of safety, which confirms that direct experience of crime shapes perceptions of safety more powerfully than demographic characteristics alone. These results highlight the importance of tailoring information and outreach services to meet the needs and attitudes of varying groups in the adult population.

Other key themes that emerged from the survey included:

- The safety crisis given the pervasive feelings of insecurity and the high rates of victimisation
- The perceived vulnerability of certain groups — women, teenage girls and children
- Community safety concerns focused on alcohol, drugs and young men
- Declining confidence in the formal justice sector and the significance of the plural justice landscape and hybrid justice practices, notably in rural areas
- The digital dimension to emerging crime.

Given the significance of location, the pilot study has confirmed that surveys should be done at a provincial level, with a robust sample of districts, to better capture, on the one hand, perceptions of safety and social problems and experience of crime, and on the other hand, contact with and perceptions of justice institutions and community actors that assist with crime and conflict matters.

In conclusion and in terms of the overarching objective of the study, the pilot demonstrates that crime and safety surveys can produce useful information at a provincial level, which should complement official crime and case data from the police and courts. The affordable model that was trialled can be done locally and undertaken by PNG academics. Importantly, survey data can help guide crime prevention and community education initiatives and contribute to assessments of the impact of reforms or changes in funding and resources in the law and justice sector. Such survey data is a necessary addition to the range of information that results in monitoring of crime and perceptions of safety, and evidence-based policies, services and programs, notably in the justice sector.

Introduction

PNG has a reputation, amplified by media reporting, for being an unsafe country with high rates of crime. With a population of more than 10 million, and a landscape comprised of islands and a mountainous hinterland, a wide range of violent and property crimes occurs in both urban and rural locations. High-profile crimes include killings precipitated by clan fighting (Forsyth 2025) or sorcery accusations (Forsyth et al. 2019), and domestic homicides (UNICEF et al. 2020).

Multiple challenges exist in responding to and preventing crime, not least the turbulent and often corrupt political environment and the parlous state of most justice services, including the police. Of late, new laws have sought to address the impact of globalisation and connectivity, with specific legislation on money laundering (Anti-Money and Counter-Terrorist Financing Act 2015) and cybercrime (Cybercrime Code Act 2016), but the nation is ill equipped to act on such laws (APG 2024; Haihuie 3/11/2025, Kabuni and Walton 1/4/2025).

For the majority of the population a key concern is personal and community safety. An unsafe environment and fear of crime affect people's lives and their behaviour, and hamper service delivery and socio-economic activities. At a structural level, the lack of safety impedes good governance and acts to deter investment in the private sector.

A proportion of crime is never reported to the police and we can only estimate how much crime exists based on self-reported victimisation from surveys. These surveys and specific studies also provide insights into the non-state and localised forms of dispute management and crime prevention. PNG has been described as having hybrid or pluralistic justice, with the actual operation of the government justice system inflected by local cultural mores, most notably in policing, and constrained by the limited reach of the police, and district and national courts, outside of urban centres (Dinnen 2022; Harry 2025). The Village Courts were established to incorporate local customary processes and to provide access to justice in mainly rural areas (Goddard 2009). These are complemented by the ward law-and-order committees and various other mechanisms that have flourished in areas and for matters where the formal justice sector is absent or not deemed effective or appropriate (Fairio 2025).

Efforts to measure or estimate the extent and nature of crime, and trends in fear of crime, victimisation and offending and in justice responses, continue to be thwarted by limited data in PNG (see Putt and Dinnen 2020). Significant multi-method studies include the Clifford Report (Clifford et al. 1984) from as far back as 1984 and, more recently, a World Bank study in 2013 (Lakhani and Willman 2014). Both of these drew

on administrative data from the formal justice sector, such as the police and Village Courts, as well as interviews. Crime and safety surveys were conducted in the 2000s, primarily in urban centres (Guthrie 2008), and several major surveys have been commissioned by the Australian law and justice aid program, although these have not been publicly released. These earlier efforts revealed differences in patterns of crime and in fear of crime, largely linked to location and gender. More recently, in Port Moresby, there have been several surveys on crime, safety and justice (Assa et al. 2023; Kakarere and Wamas 4/3/2024).

From a policy perspective, the PNG government has a National Security Policy (2024–29) which identifies seven major threats, including what is termed internal law and order breakdown. At a provincial level, the East New Britain provincial administration recently commissioned its own security strategy with law and order identified as its main priority. A significant focus of the national policy is to respond strategically by reforming police, implementing anti-corruption and governance measures, and by promoting transnational crime prevention and cooperation.

In the past two decades there has been a range of legislative and institutional reforms to address specific forms of crime, notably family and sexual violence. There was the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence (2016–2025) and two new laws, the Lukautim Pikinini Act 2015 and the Family Protection Act 2013. Victim support has improved through specialised justice units and non-government services, such as safe houses, Family Support Centres, a free national telephone counselling line, networks of human rights defenders (HRDs), and advocacy and case management services.

With these and other reforms, multiple international donors and United Nations agencies have assisted the PNG government and civil society by funding initiatives that seek to improve human security in PNG, with Australia being the most significant contributor to policing, and the formal justice sector, to date.

Despite these policy and legislative reforms, and donor support, it remains very difficult to gauge the impact of crime and crime victimisation at a national, provincial or community level.

Objectives

The overarching objective of the project was to develop a provincially led survey of crime and safety that can act as a model or template for other provinces across PNG. The results from such surveys can inform local and national efforts to improve personal and community safety. Given the often-troubled law and order situation and the country's social diversity and fragmented service delivery, having a research instrument that is affordable and easy to use at regular intervals has the potential to

provide important data on trends and patterns in crime victimisation, perceptions of social problems and fear of crime. This data, especially if it is collected annually and biannually by commissioned academics and research teams in PNG, will assist in assessing crime prevention efforts, and the impact of reforms or local initiatives.

Building PNG's capacity to gauge crime patterns and the efficacy of justice reforms and resourcing allocations will provide the necessary data for evidence-based decision-making at a provincial level by local policymakers and aid programs.

Undertaking such surveys may also contribute to a better understanding of emerging areas of crime, such as in the online environment and the public's awareness of e-safety. While cybercrime has been acknowledged as a major threat by the PNG government, their ability to identify and deal with it continues to be a major challenge.

The secondary aim of the study was to collect and analyse data from the survey. Towards this aim, the pilot survey sought to:

- Identify the nature and extent of crime, and feelings of safety, based on adults' perceptions and experiences
- Document pathways of prevention, and the roles and efficacy of local justice actors, based on adults' perceptions and experiences
- Analyse the significance of age, gender and place on adults' perceptions and experiences
- Inform provincial and national investment in policing and justice initiatives, and act as a barometer of how justice and safety is accessed in particular regions.

Methods

Funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Pacific Research Program Phase II, the project involved a collaboration between three universities in PNG and Australia and aimed to trial an affordable way of undertaking crime and safety surveys for provincial and other stakeholders. Key aspects of the pilot that made the survey relatively low-cost were the savings from having academics as project leads: two of them were based in the sampled provinces, providing a network of local researchers and students. Also the support of a freely available platform, SMAP, for data collection, saved money.

The fieldwork was led by Dr Francis Essacu, at the Lutheran University, in Morobe and East New Britain (ENB), and Mr Jack Assa and Ms Minetta Kakerere, at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), in the National Capital District (NCD) and Central Province. There were three research teams comprising academics, graduate students, students and several public servants: six in Morobe, six in NCD and 15 in ENB. In total, 27 people were responsible for administering the survey.

To keep costs down a pragmatic approach was taken to the sampling and data collection. The survey was conducted in three provincial areas: NCD, the urban area of the national capital, along with a number of rural locations in the adjacent Central Province; East

New Britain and its administrative centre Kokopo; and Morobe and its administrative centre Lae.

The ethics protocol was approved by ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2023/373). Purposive quota sampling was adopted. The minimum number of participants from each of the locations was 500, with equal numbers of men and women, all at least 16 years of age.

The questionnaire drew upon other examples of crime and safety surveys,¹ to ask questions about personal and community safety, social problems, crime victimisation, help seeking, policing and the justice sector. The aim was to keep the questionnaire short, to maximise the number of participants and reduce costs. The questionnaire was piloted with a number of students at UPNG before it was finalised.

Conducted in September and October 2024, the survey involved face-to-face interviews, typically involving both Tok Pisin and English. The fieldwork leaders and teams were careful in the way they approached people, seeking to ensure that they understood the nature and intent of the survey. Often, participants wanted to discuss further the issues canvassed in the questionnaire, and in these cases the researchers documented key points.

The responses were entered via tablets provided by the ANU on to the SMAP tool, a data platform that is freely available to governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and individual researchers.

The analysis of data was conducted for the total sample, and for each provincial collection, and involved basic frequencies, cross-tabulations and logistical or multinomial regression analyses. The original plan was to hold focus groups to discuss the main findings from the survey and to seek stakeholder and public input on priorities and strategies to address crime, and to improve feelings of safety and confidence in the formal justice system. However, due to other commitments and funding limitations, these focus groups have not yet taken place. One of the recommendations from the project is for the results to be presented to key stakeholders in the provinces, and for them to organise workshops that would canvas how best to prevent and reduce crime.

The fieldwork was undertaken over two months. If the project leads had not had to commit to a national research project on service delivery, then the study would have taken six months, and would have included the focus groups and presentations. Given that the follow up qualitative research and engagement with stakeholders did not occur, we were unable to more thoroughly consider and interpret the findings.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

A total of 2,834 people participated in the survey. In the three areas, the distribution of the sample was: NCD/Central 38.6% (n=1,094), ENB 36.3% (n=1,028) and Morobe 25.1% (n=712). In each of the three areas, the participants were mostly from the urban centres,

most notably in NCD/Central (986 and 108 participants respectively). In ENB, 52.9% of participants were from Kokopo, in Morobe 54.6% of participants were from Lae, while 89.9% of the NCD/Central participants were from the three electorates of Port Moresby. In the presentation of results, four provinces are used: NCD, Central, Morobe, and ENB.

In total, 18 districts were included in the survey. There was a better spread across rural districts in ENB and Morobe compared with Central. To better capture the location of participants, the districts were coded as urban, semi-urban and rural. Just under half of the participants (49.3%) were urban residents, while 34.1% were in semi-urban locations and 16.6% rural (see Table 1).

More than one-third of the participants (37.6%) said they originally came from the district that they resided in. Other reasons for residing in the district included work (26.3%) and study (18.5%), while the rest of the participants gave a wide range of reasons. Just over half

of the total sample (52.5%) had lived in the district for more than 15 years. Of the remaining participants, 21.6% had resided in the district for between five and 15 years, and 25.9% had lived there for less than five years.

Of the total sample, 50.2% were male and 49.8% female. Table 2 shows the age distribution of the sample, using seven age categories.

Half of the respondents (51.6%) said they were married, while over a third (35%) were single. The remaining respondents were widowed (4.9%), separated (4.3%), in a de facto relationship (3%) or divorced (1.2%).

Compared with general population estimates, the sample was well-educated and more likely to be employed. In terms of employment status, 35.3% said they were employed, and 14.4% said they were self-employed or a business owner. Over one-fifth (22.9%) were students or trainees and 22.7% were unemployed. The rest were retired (2.5%), volunteers (1.1%) or other (1.1%). The sample was fairly evenly distributed across

Table 1: Number of respondents by province, district, and district category

Province	District	District category — urban, semi-urban, rural	Number of respondents
NCD	Port Moresby South	Urban	262
	Port Moresby North West	Urban	459
	Port Moresby North East	Urban	263
Central	Hiri Koiari	Semi-urban	106
Morobe	Lae	Urban	389
	Nawaeb	Rural	83
	Markham	Rural	32
	Menyamya	Rural	23
	Wau Waria	Rural	9
	Bulolo	Semi-urban	49
	Huon Gulf	Rural	82
	Kabwum	Rural	8
	Tewai Siassi	Rural	18
	Finschhafen	Rural	20
East New Britain	Gazelle	Rural	210
	Kokopo	Urban	544
	Rabaul	Urban	172
	Pomio	Rural	102
Missing			3
TOTAL			2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Table 2: Sample by age category, number and percentage

Age category	Number	Percentage
16–25	622	21.9
26–35	814	28.7
36–45	675	23.8
46–55	472	16.7
56–65	181	6.4
66–75	53	1.9
76+	17	0.6
Total	2,834	100.0

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

the categories for highest education qualifications: 11.2% primary (Gr 1–6), 21.8% junior high school (Gr 7–10), 19.1% secondary (Gr 11–12), 11.5% vocational/technical, 18.3% college and 18.1% university.

Perceptions of safety

Physical environment

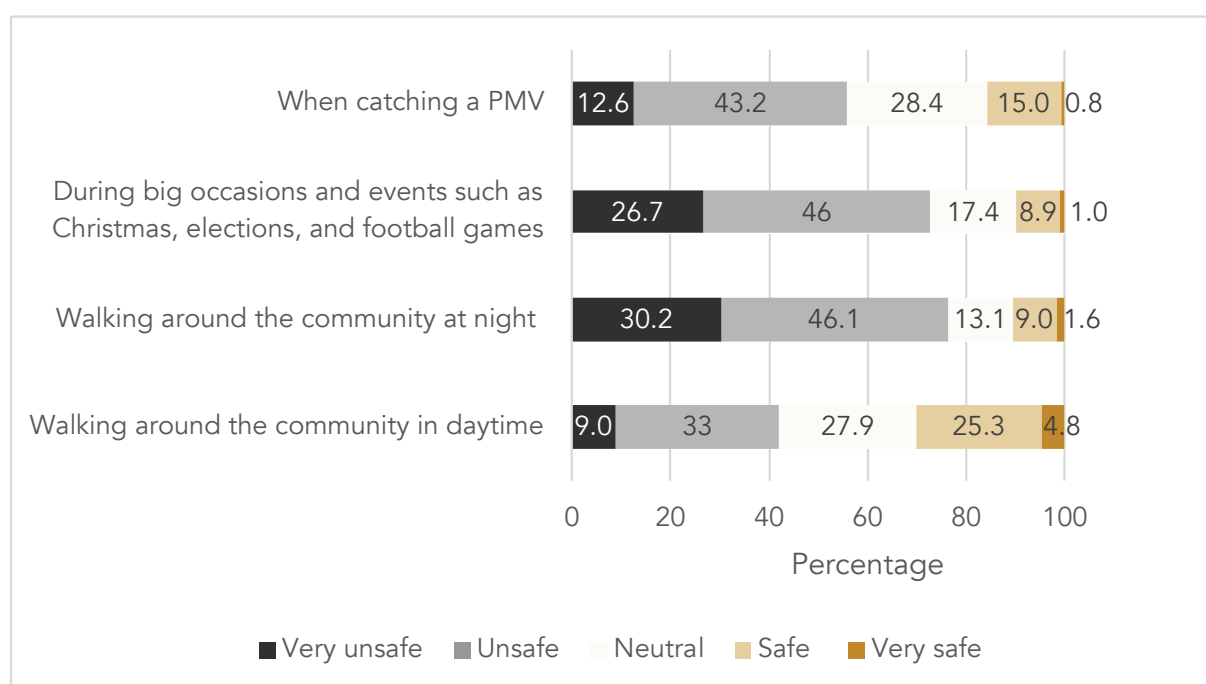
Respondents were asked four questions about how safe they felt in a number of situations in the physical environment. As Figure 1 shows, the participants felt safest walking around the community in the daytime, followed by catching a public motor vehicle (PMV), during big occasions and events, and walking around the community at night. In only one of the four situations did

more than half of the respondents feel safe — when they were walking around the community in the daytime.

When walking around at night the respondents felt either unsafe (46.1%) or very unsafe (30.2%). Figure 2 shows the respondents' perceptions of safety by the four provinces. East New Britain was where the most respondents felt unsafe (51.1%) or very unsafe (38.5%), while Central had the highest proportion of people who felt safe (25%) or very safe (7.4%).

As almost everyone felt unsafe walking around at night, a multinomial regression was undertaken to see what factors most influenced their perceptions of feeling unsafe or very unsafe. The simplest regression (with core predictors) provided the best fit based on

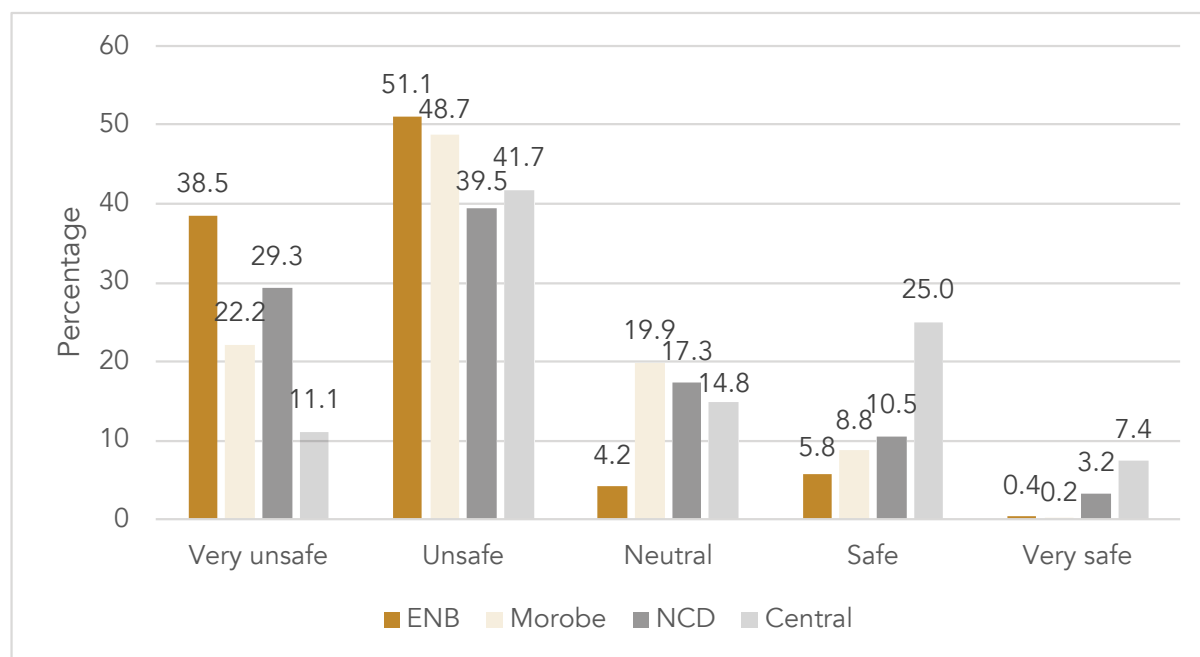
Figure 1: Perceptions of safety in various situations, %



n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 2: Feelings of safety walking around at night, by province, %



n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

the Bayesian Information Criterion and no meaningful improvement in pseudo- R^2 for more complex models. The analysis found that the province had the strongest effect, followed by being a victim of crime in the past year. In summary:

- East New Britain residents are far more likely to feel unsafe
- Victimization in the past year increases perceived risk
- Men, and those in rural/semi-urban areas feel safer.

Employment status had a minor effect, while marital status, educational status and age (as defined in decades) were not significant predictors.

Use and perceptions of safety on social media

Almost three-quarters of the respondents answered that they used social media. Out of those that responded either 'yes' or 'no' (n=2,775), 74.1% said they use social media. Of those that do, more than half either feel unsafe or very unsafe. Very few respondents (1.7%) indicated they felt very safe when using social media (see Figure 3).

The results indicate a widespread perception of risk associated with social media use. Feelings of safety on social media differed by province, and socio-demographic characteristics were significant – notably age, gender, marital status and employment. The significant factors are very similar to those for feelings of being unsafe at night, with men, younger people, married and employed people and those with higher educational status feeling safer on social media. East New Britain also had the

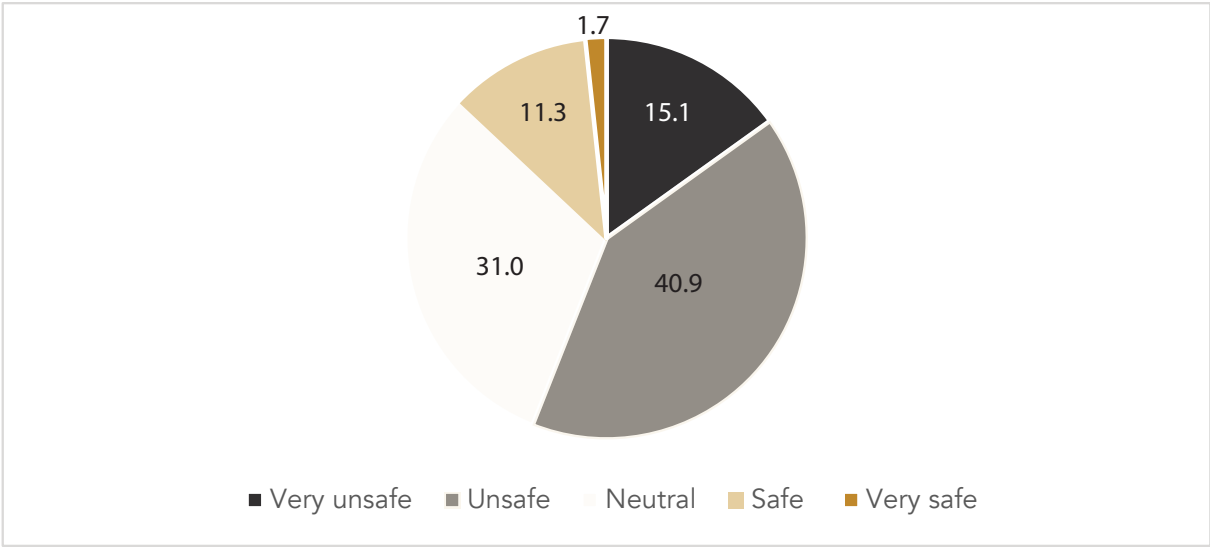
highest levels of feeling unsafe, compared with the other three provinces. In contrast to perceptions of being unsafe at night, which were most pronounced in urban areas, being in an urban location improved perceptions of safety on social media.

Different social groups in the neighbourhood or village

Respondents were asked about how safe they believed different social groups—eight categories in total—were in the neighbourhood or village. As Figure 4 shows, age and gender affect perceptions of the groups' safety. Those that were seen as most safe were men and elderly men, while the least safe were seen as teenage girls and women. The majority, 76.4%, believed teenage girls were either unsafe or very unsafe. In contrast, a total of 41.6% of respondents believed men were either unsafe or very unsafe.

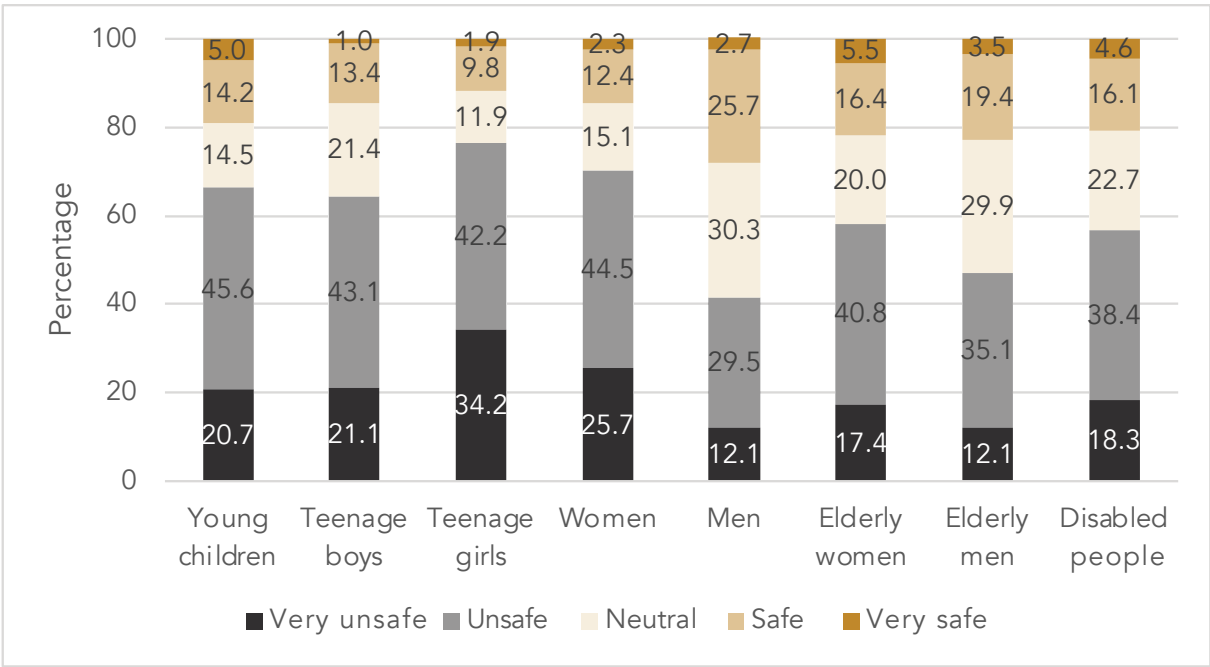
Teenage girls were the social group most likely to be viewed as unsafe. Multinomial regression using this variable as the dependent variable showed that province, district categories and highest educational status were most likely to predict how safe the groups were perceived to be. Overall, men were perceived to be the safest group, and these perceptions were affected by gender and age, as well as province and district categories. Women and middle-aged (36 to 45 years of age) respondents were more likely to see men as unsafe.

Figure 3: Feelings of safety on social media among those that said they use it, %



n=2,061
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 4: Perceptions of how safe different social groups are in the neighbourhood or village, %



n=2,834
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Perceptions of social problems in the village or neighbourhood

For 17 types of crimes or social problems, respondents were asked how much of a problem they were in their village or neighbourhood. A social problem was conceived as activities and behaviours that were

causing concern; asking about how big these problems were did not necessarily reflect how common they were. The categories covered common types of crimes and causes of crime. Table 3 lists the categories, which include various causes or underlying factors that may lead to crime and conflict.

Table 3: Perceptions of the size of social problems in the village or neighbourhood, %

	Very big (%)	Big (%)	Not big (%)	Not a problem at all (%)
Fighting	40.8	30.8	25.7	2.8
Alcohol-fuelled violence	52.1	30.6	16.2	1.2
Domestic violence	31.7	36.5	29.7	2.1
Sexual violence or abuse	26.9	36.0	32.5	4.6
Cyber-based sexual violence	19.1	25.3	36.5	19.1
Use of guns	27.9	25.4	35.4	11.3
Child abuse	24.4	36.0	34.3	5.4
Theft	59.5	27.3	11.8	1.4
Damaging property or gardens	32.6	33.6	27.6	6.2
Black magic or sorcery accusations	33.8	26.7	28.5	10.9
Land disputes	35.5	28.3	24.8	11.4
Vehicle accidents	15.6	26.6	43.7	14.1
Money disputes	40.2	30.6	23.8	5.4
Young men out of control	61.6	25.2	11.7	1.5
Young women out of control	38.1	29.7	27.0	5.2
Adultery-fuelled violence	32.9	36.5	27.0	3.7
Drug (marijuana etc.) related issues	74.9	18.2	5.9	0.9

n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

There were three clusters of problems found in the assessment of the responses to the 17 listed categories:

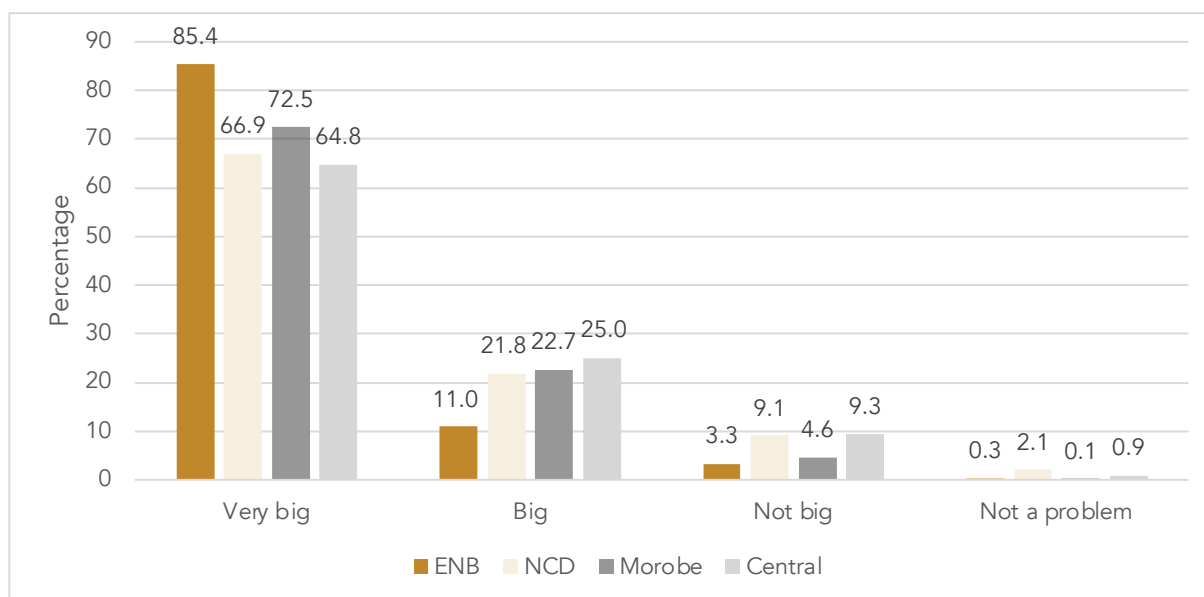
- Seen as big problems: more than 80% of respondents saw alcohol-fuelled violence, theft, young men out of control, and drug (marijuana etc.) related issues as very big or big social problems in the village or neighbourhood.
- Mid-range problem: from 60% to 80% of respondents saw domestic violence, fighting, and adultery-related violence; damaging property or gardens; black magic/sorcery related accusations; land disputes, and young women out of control as very or big social problems.
- Less of a problem: less than 60% of respondents saw sexual violence or abuse, cyber-based sexual violence, use of guns, child abuse, and vehicle accidents as a big or very big problem.
- Not a problem at all: between 10% and 15% of respondents nominated land disputes, vehicle accidents, use of guns, black magic or sorcery accusations, and cyber-based sexual violence as not a problem at all.

A cluster analysis to see where social problems co-occur helps identify problems and places to focus on. The substance abuse/youth violence cluster was where respondents rated one of the following social problems — ‘drug (marijuana etc.) related issues’, ‘young men out

of control’, ‘alcohol-fuelled violence’ and ‘theft’ — as a very big problem and were highly likely to rate the other problems as very big problems too. This cluster was very interconnected (correlation coefficients of 0.62 to 0.74). In the second cluster, gender-based violence, domestic violence, sexual violence and adultery-fuelled violence cluster together (correlation coefficients of 0.51 to 0.68) but less strongly than the first cluster. This suggests somewhat distinct dynamics for each problem. The third cluster, the conflict cluster, was where ‘land disputes’, ‘black magic/sorcery accusations’, and ‘money disputes’ correlated moderately (from 0.45 to 0.53) and are more prominent as social problems in rural/semi-urban areas.

Such social problems vary by time and place. Analysis showed, once again, that East New Britain had higher proportions of respondents compared with the other provinces who saw the most common big problems as very big problems. This was noticeable for ‘young men out of control’, ‘theft’ and ‘drug (marijuana etc.) related issues’, with the latter showing the most pronounced differences between the provinces (see Figure 5). In the past few years, East New Britain, as reported in the media (Arlo 11/9/2024; Kankan 19/4/2025; Wilson 7/6/2024), has experienced a rapid increase in armed hold-ups, fighting and other kinds of violent crime. The Morobe and ENB fieldwork reports provided insights into what the researchers noted as underlying factors

Figure 5: Perceptions of how big a problem drug (marijuana etc.) related issues are in respondent's village or neighbourhood, by province, %



Total n=2,834, ENB = 1,028, NCD = 986, Morobe = 712, Central = 108
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

seen by participants as underpinning the crime wave and decline in personal and community safety. The main themes related to uncertainty and conflict stemming from economic hardship, increased population levels, and ongoing disputes and payback in ENB, and a local boom in a commodity in Morobe (see Box 1).

Gender was not a statistically significant factor to explain differences among perceptions of these social problems, but women were more likely to see all social problems as a very big problem, rather than a big problem, compared with men.

Box 1: Research team fieldwork reports — underlying factors in crime escalation

East New Britain

The team found a shared perception among respondents of being unsafe in their communities due to the declining national economic climate. The increasing population leads to more land boundary disputes. Economic hardships result in frequent money disputes, with cash crop farmers struggling to save and sustain their livelihoods.

A retired nursing sister runs a clinic at her home in a village in Reimber LLG, Gazelle District. She attributes the high crime rates to poverty, noting that victims suffer lifelong trauma, especially from violent crimes. The area is very unsafe; in one instance, a beheading went unaddressed by the police despite her call. She emphasised the need for welfare and sexual violence and child protection services at the ward level. Many cases go unreported due to lack of awareness of sources for help and fear of retaliation.

A female participant at Bitapaka shared her experience that fights around the Bitapaka area related to land disputes and ownership issues.

Fights around the Gelagela resettlements in Kokopo District are related to poor socio-economic status and poverty. Most fights in North Coast areas are based on retaliations linked to arguments and the underlying problem of poverty. Arguments or disagreements lead to fights, violence and property damage. There is also the declining influence of traditional leaders and customary law in controlling youth behaviour and resolving disputes before they escalate.

Morobe

In locations like East Taraka (Lae Urban LLG) there is a rise in crime because of people coming in as refugees from other Highlands provinces to settle. The problem is further worsened by beer/alcohol clubs operated in the area. The 'miles' areas in Lae, Huon and Markham districts are also growing because of people from other provinces buying blocks and settling there. It was noted that settlers from other districts, like Finschhafen, in Lae District (Ahi LLG), especially in the Busu area, were a threat to the general public. The crime rate there (theft, incest, adultery, alcohol consumption etc.) was much higher than among other hotspots in the city.

Economic activities like the cocoa boom in the Markham District are giving rise to crime.

There were also provincial differences in the responses to the social problems that were viewed as less of a problem. However, the results for a number of social problems were likely to be affected by whether respondents lived in rural or urban areas, and the provinces had varying proportions of rural residents. Land disputes, vehicle accidents, black magic/sorcery accusations, and use of guns were most likely to have different responses in urban, semi-urban and rural locations (see Table 4). Unsurprisingly, vehicle accidents were more likely to be viewed as a problem in urban areas, while land disputes and black magic/sorcery accusations were more likely to be seen as a problem in semi-urban and rural areas. The use of guns was more likely to be viewed as a very big problem by semi-urban respondents (40.8%), followed by rural respondents (32.9%) and urban respondents (17.3%).

Asking for help for social problems

Respondents were asked who they would ask for help to resolve a major disagreement/dispute with someone in their family or community. As there may be more than one person or institution they would ask, the respondents were asked to tick all that applied. As a result, there were a total of 6,566 responses.

Respondents indicated they were most likely to contact police (28.7% of responses) followed by community leaders (24.2%) and family members (20.8%), out of six categories (see Figure 6).

An open-text question asked respondents why they chose the people or institutions that they had ticked in the previous question. From the 2,823 respondents who gave an answer, five themes dominated the answers. These were:

- They are trustworthy (n=781)
- It is their role (for example, to maintain law and order) or they are the right person to solve a problem (n=524)
- They are easy to contact or accessible (n=433)
- They will help or are very helpful (n=278)
- They provide better solutions, can resolve the issues (n=275).

Crime victimisation and type of crime

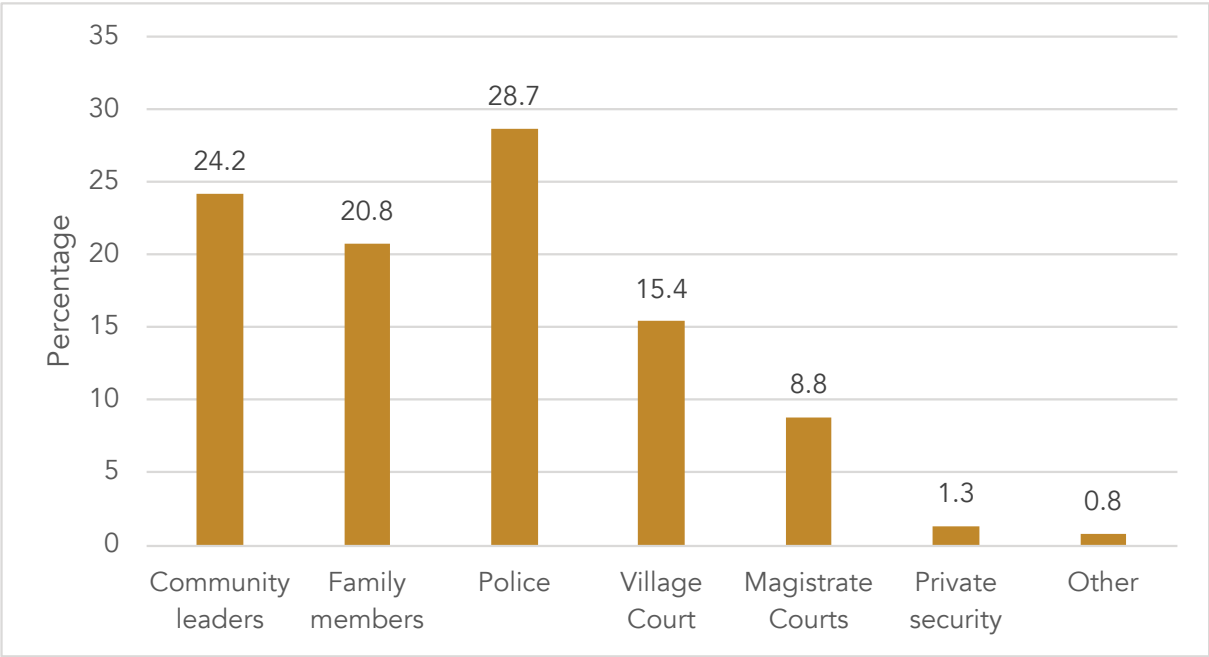
Respondents were asked if they had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months. Over two-thirds (71.1%) said they had not been, and 27.9% (n=792) said they had been. A very small proportion (1%) did not know whether they had been a victim. Figure 7 shows that respondents from East New Britain were more likely to answer that

Table 4: Perceptions of how much of a problem selected social problems are, by district category, number and %

	Very big		Big		Not big		Not a problem	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Vehicle accidents								
Urban	214	25.3	493	35.3	533	38.2	156	11.2
Semi-urban	143	14.7	172	17.8	486	50.2	166	17.2
Rural	84	17.8	90	19.1	219	46.5	78	16.6
Land disputes								
Urban	285	20.4	343	24.6	485	34.7	283	20.3
Semi-urban	505	52.2	287	29.7	147	15.2	29	3.0
Rural	215	45.6	171	36.3	73	15.5	12	2.5
Black magic or sorcery								
Urban	280	20.1	345	24.7	490	35.1	281	20.1
Semi-urban	461	47.7	275	28.3	212	21.9	19	2.0
Rural	218	46.3	138	29.3	106	22.5	9	1.9
Use of guns								
Urban	241	17.3	392	28.1	545	39.0	218	15.6
Semi-urban	395	40.8	208	25.5	292	30.2	72	7.4
Rural	155	32.9	121	25.7	165	35.0	30	6.4

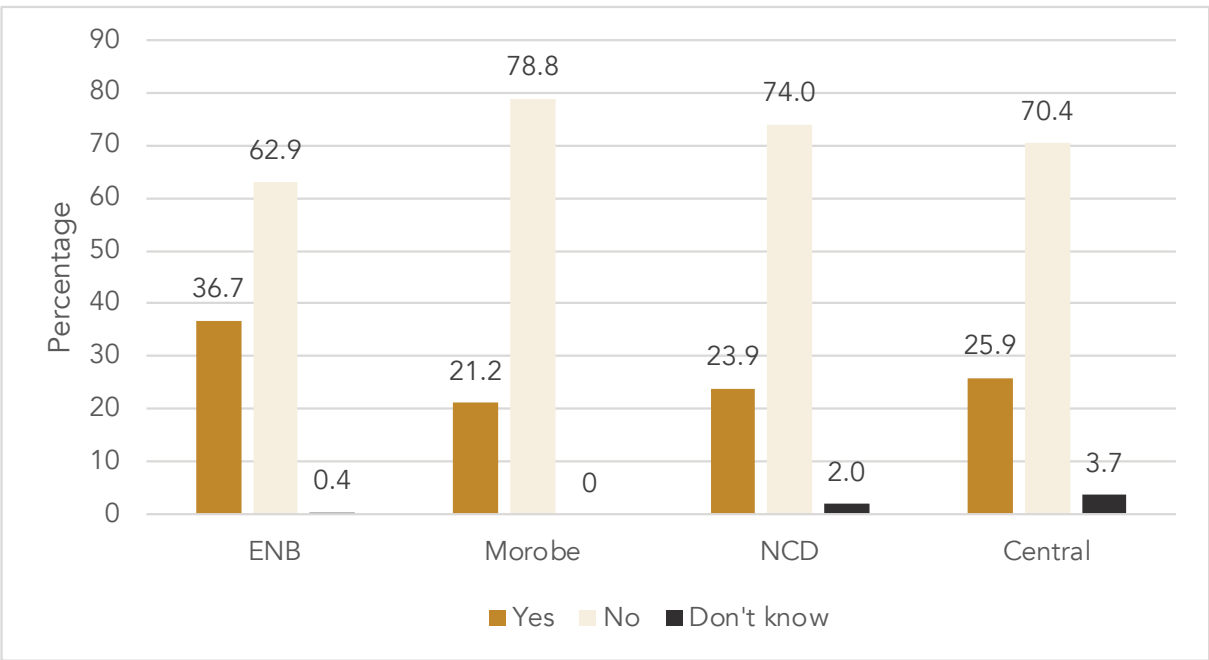
Total n=2,834, Urban =1,396, Semi-urban = 967, Rural = 471
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 6: People or institutions that respondents said they would ask for help to resolve a major disagreement/dispute with someone in their family or community, % of responses



n=6,566 responses (multiple responses), 2,834 respondents
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 7: Been a victim of crime in the past 12 months, by province, %



Total n=2,834, ENB = 1,028, NCD = 986, Morobe = 712, Central = 108
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

they had been a recent victim of crime, with 36.7% saying they had been, compared with 21.2% in Morobe, 23.9% in NCD, and 25.9% in Central.

Logistical regression analysis found that, among a range of factors that might predict the likelihood of

crime victimisation such as gender, age, marital status, and employment, the only factors that were statistically significant were educational status and district category of residence. Half of semi-urban respondents (52.1%) said they had been a victim of crime in the previous

12 months, compared with 31.2% of rural respondents and 22.8% of urban respondents. Having junior high school as the highest educational status attained increased the likelihood of being a victim of crime, with 38.8% of respondents with this status saying they had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months (see Figure 8). Box 2 discusses the non-linear relationship between education and self-reported victimisation and suggests why the education level of junior high school is the peak risk category.

Involvement of weapons

Of the 792 respondents who said they had been a victim of crime, 22.1% said no weapon was involved, 67.7% said that a gun or knife was involved, and 10.2% said 'other'. In the 'other' category, the most common weapons were stones and/or sticks, followed by the use of both guns and knives, of a log or timber, and of screwdrivers. Other implements included hammers, axes, iron bars, bows and arrows, slingshots, setting fire to a house and bottles. Several mentioned fists as weapons. For one incident, the weapons listed were a knife, a firearm, stones, iron rods and axes. In total, a large majority of respondents (77.9%) who had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months had been a victim of a crime where a weapon was involved in the most recent incident.

Of those that said a knife or gun was involved (n=536), the majority (75.4%) said it was a knife, and 24.6% said it was a firearm. As Table 5 shows, East New Britain respondents were more likely to report a gun being used in the most recent crime, while those in Morobe were more likely to report a knife. It should be noted that the numbers for Central are small, with only

Box 2: Of the six educational status categories, why is junior high school the peak risk category for crime victimisation?

Possible explanations for this finding that should be explored further in future research include:

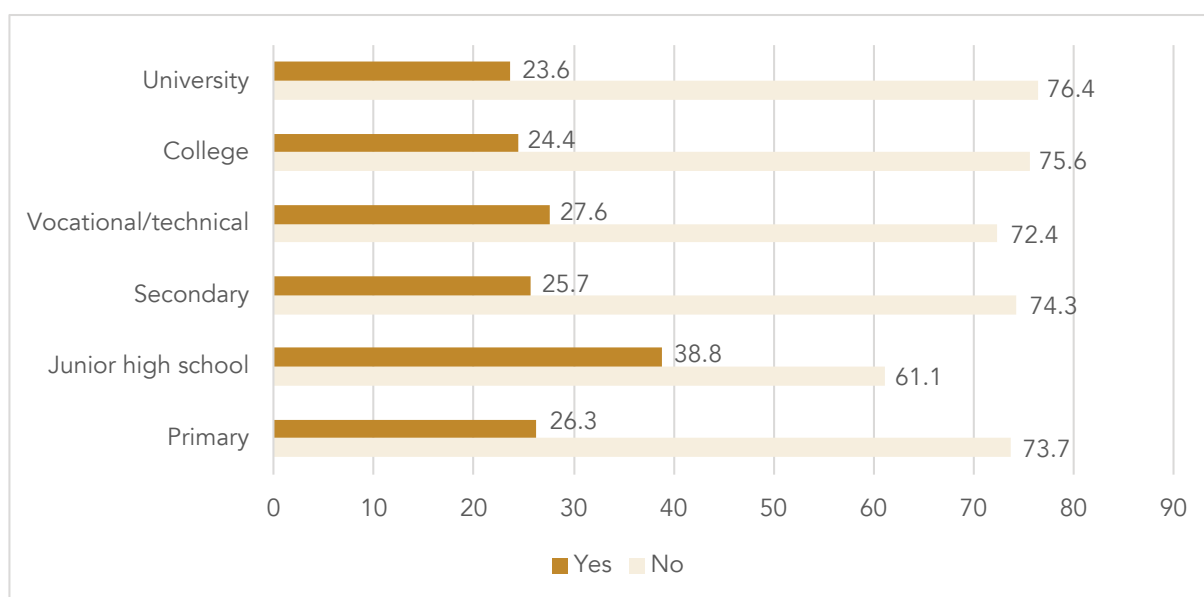
Mobility and exposure: Junior high graduates are old enough to seek work or further education away from home communities, often moving to semi-urban areas or urban centres. They lack:

- The social networks of established urban residents
- The security of the home village
- The resources and knowledge of higher-educated individuals.

Age correlation: Many junior high graduates are in the 18–25 year age bracket, precisely the demographic most involved in street crime, both as perpetrators and victims.

Commuting patterns: Junior high students and graduates often commute to school/work via PMV, a situation rated as unsafe by 55.8% of all respondents. They are on the road more than primary school children, but less able to afford private transport than university graduates.

Figure 8: Been a victim of crime in the past 12 months, by educational status, %



n= 2,806 as 28 that did not know their highest educational status were excluded
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

28 respondents saying they had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months, so the results for this province need to be treated with caution. Use of cross-tabulation with the district category revealed that respondents in rural areas were more likely to say a gun or knife was involved in the crime, and that the weapon was a firearm, compared with urban and semi-urban residents (see Figure 9). There was a consistent proportion in the use of knives across the three district categories, and urban districts were more likely to see the use of a range of weapons, not just a knife or a gun.

Of the 792 respondents who said they were crime victims in the past 12 months, the most recent crime — out of eight categories of which they could select all

that applied — was most likely to have been theft (47%), followed by assault (35.7%), break-ins (26.9%), domestic violence (9.1%) and sexual violence (4.0%). It is well documented that certain kinds of crime, in particular personal crime such as domestic and sexual violence, are less likely to be reported to police and, in some settings, may not be revealed through surveys. This is an issue that should be explored by follow-up qualitative research.

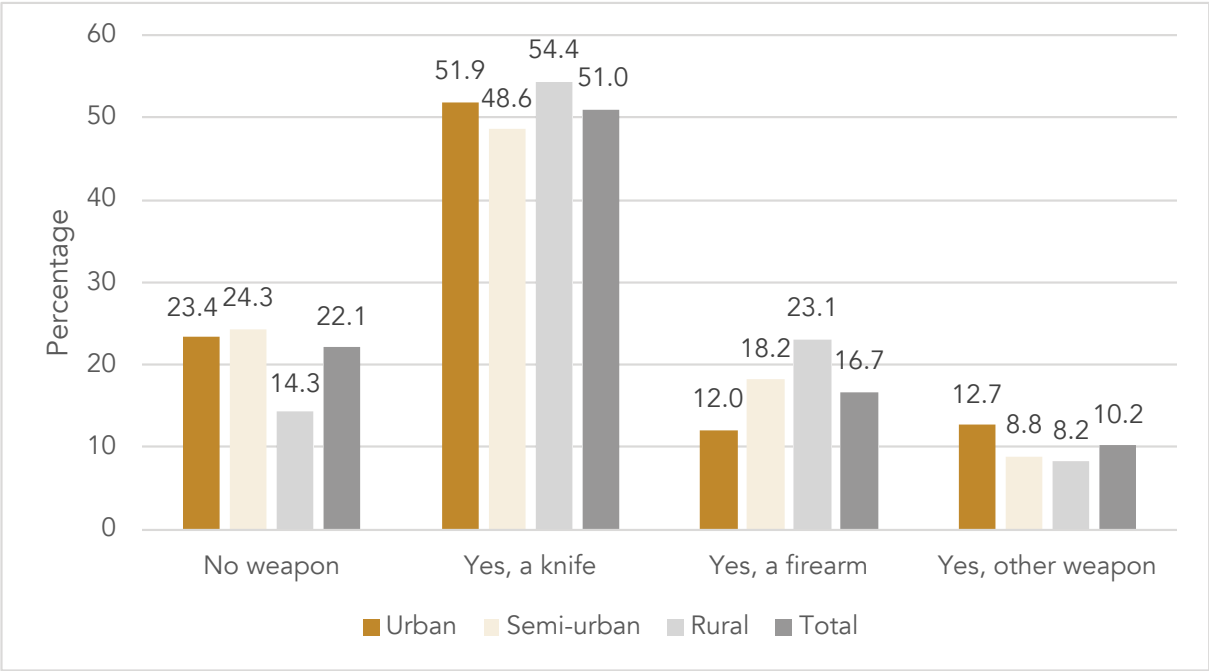
There were gender differences in the most recent crimes. The most noticeable were break-ins, with 32.4% of male crime victims saying this had occurred compared with 20.7% of female victims, and domestic violence, with 5.9% of male victims saying they had experienced it compared with 12.6% of female victims. Females were

Table 5: Whether a weapon was involved in the most recent crime experienced by a victim of crime in the past 12 months, by type of weapon and province, %

Province	No weapon		Yes, a knife		Yes, a firearm		Yes, other		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
East New Britain	77	20.4	184	48.8	81	21.5	35	9.3	377	100
National Capital	60	25.4	117	49.6	26	11.0	33	14.0	236	100
Morobe	28	18.5	90	59.6	25	16.6	8	5.3	151	100
Central	10	35.7	13	46.4	0	0	5	17.9	28	100

Total n=792
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 9: Use of a weapon in most recent crime experienced by those who were victims of crime, by district category, %



Total n=792
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

slightly more likely to report they had experienced theft and sexual violence, while males were more likely to say they had been assaulted (38.8% of male victims compared with 32.3% female victims).

Contact with — and perceptions of — justice services

Reporting to police

Out of the 792 respondents who said they were a victim of crime in the past 12 months, more than half (57.9%) did not report it to the police, while 42.0% said they did report the crime. Only the province appears to be a significant predictor as to whether the crime is reported to the police compared to other variables such as gender, age and district category. East New Britain had the lowest proportion of crime victims that had reported the most recent crime to the police.

Reasons for not reporting

There were 459 respondents who did not report their most recent crime experience to the police. Of the seven options that were provided, the most common response was 'dealt with it myself' followed by 'could not contact them'. Table 6 shows the number of responses (n=580) and the percentage of respondents (n=459) for each of the seven possible reasons.

Reasons for not reporting to the police did vary by crime type. Half of those who were theft or assault victims said they 'dealt with it him/herself', while for victims of domestic violence the most common reason was that reporting 'might make the situation worse'. A common reason for not reporting theft was that the respondents 'could not contact them', while a common reason for both assault and domestic violence victims was that the respondents 'don't trust them'. These responses suggest

that matters are often handled informally, and that police need to build more trust, especially with victims of violence, and be more accessible if reporting levels are to improve. The latter issues seem most pertinent to ENB, which had the highest level of non-reporting by victims of crime, compared with the other three provinces.

Accessibility of police

The majority of respondents (64.6%) said that police services, when needed, were 'accessible but facing challenges'. Figure 10 shows that less than one in 10 said that they were 'inaccessible or can't be accessed'. An equal proportion said the services were 'very easy' to access. A similar proportion of respondents in each of the district categories of urban, semi-urban or rural said that police services were 'accessible but facing challenges'. However, respondents in districts classified as urban were more likely to say it was very easy (13.5%) while at the other extreme, respondents in rural districts were more likely to say they were inaccessible (15.1%) (see Figure 11).

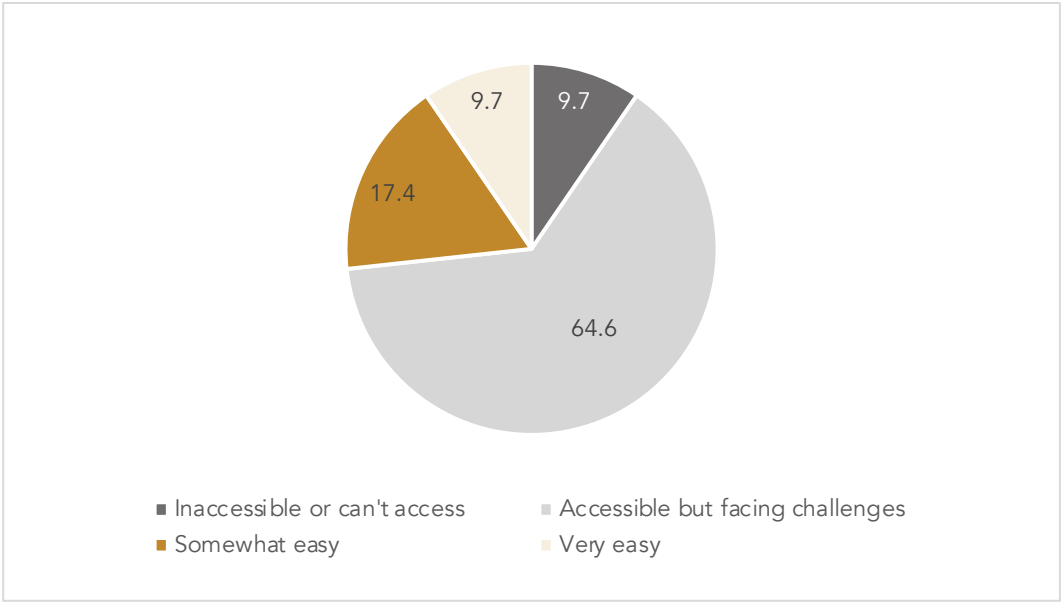
An open-ended question asked what makes it difficult to access police. The 2,821 responses were analysed for common themes. The most common factors that made it difficult were bribery and nepotism, which were mentioned by 41.7% of the respondents. Other factors that caused difficulties, and were referred to by at least 5% of the respondents, were distance, not responding quickly, and what were termed as 'excuses' such as logistics and resources. In terms of factors that made it easy to access police, more than 5% of respondents referred to an emergency toll free number, and being close to a police station. Once again, future qualitative research could explore more in depth the nature of the difficulties that many

Table 6: Reasons for not reporting to police, of those who said they were a victim of crime in the previous 12 months and did not report it to the police, number of responses and % of respondents

Reason	Number of responses	% of respondents
Dealt with it myself	187	40.7
Could not contact them	107	23.3
Don't trust them	79	17.2
Might make the situation worse	68	14.8
Not interested or willing to help	55	12.0
Prefer to contact someone else to help	54	11.8
The crime was not important	30	6.5
Not the right skills or equipment	0	0

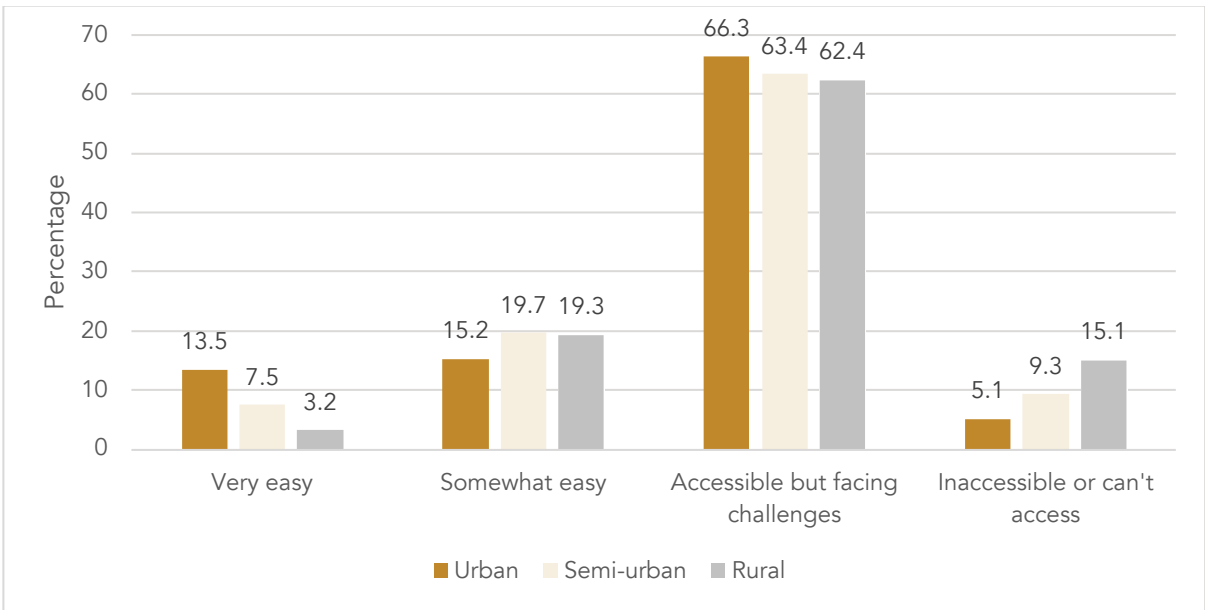
n=580 responses and 459 respondents
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 10: Accessibility of police services when needed, %



Total n= 2,834
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Figure 11: Accessibility of police services when needed, by district category, %



Total n= 2,834, urban n=1396, semi-urban n=967, rural n=471
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

said they experienced, especially in relation to the perceived barriers of bribery and nepotism.

Changes in the effectiveness of policing practices

When asked about whether police had changed in relation to six areas of responsibility compared to two years earlier, a similar distribution of responses occurred

for each question (see Table 7 and Figure 12). Just over half the respondents indicated that the indicators of police effectiveness had stayed the same. Less than half of respondents (46.8%) said that the impact on reducing the level of crime in PNG had stayed the same. There was, however, a higher proportion (30.6%) compared with the results for other measures who indicated that the situation had worsened.

Table 7: Changes in police practices compared to two years earlier, %

Practice	Have improved (%)	Stayed the same (%)	Have worsened (%)	Don't know (%)
Reducing the level of crime in PNG	16.9	46.8	30.6	5.7
Keeping communities safe	13.5	57.0	24.9	4.6
Community interaction with police	11.0	53.0	28.6	7.4
Meeting the needs of the community	10.4	57.2	25.7	6.7
Providing appropriate services to victims of domestic/family violence	13.4	57.4	20.7	8.4
Providing appropriate services to victims of sexual violence or abuse	13.4	57.4	20.7	8.4

n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey.

Figure 12: Changes in police practices compared to two years earlier, %



Total n= 2,834

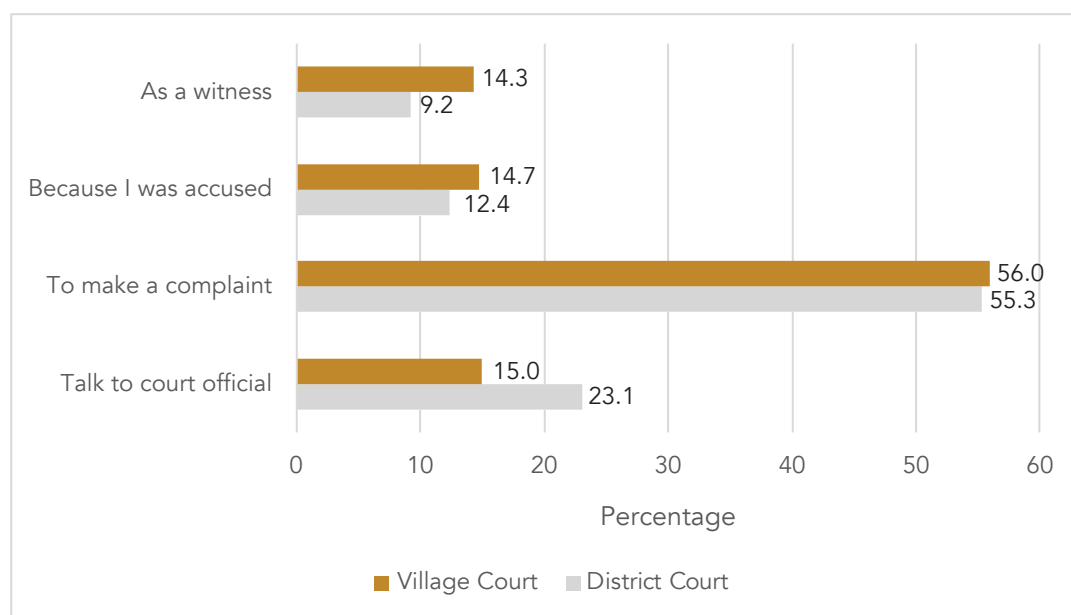
Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Contact with the District Court and with the Village Court

A higher proportion of respondents (19.7%) had contact in the previous 12 months with the Village Court compared with the District Court (11.9%). Those that had contact with the Village Court rather than the District Court were more likely to be in the lower education category, live in rural or semi-urban areas, have been in the neighbourhood or village longer, and be married.

Of those that said they had contact with these courts, the most common kind of contact (out of four categories) for both courts was 'to make a complaint' (56.0% Village Courts, 55.3% District Courts). Figure 13 shows that the respondents were more likely to be a witness for the Village Courts compared with District Courts, while a higher proportion had contact with a District Court because they had talked with a court official.

Figure 13: Reasons for contact with District Court and Village Court in the past 12 months, %



Village Court n=559, District Court n=338

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Changes in government justice services in PNG compared with two years ago

Similar to the responses about changes in police practices and their effectiveness, just over half (53.8%) of respondents indicated that government justice services had stayed the same (see Box 3 for a discussion of this response). However, more than a quarter (27.7%) said they had worsened, while a small proportion (7.7%) said they had improved. One in ten (10.8%) did not know. Given that a minority of respondents had direct contact with the courts in the previous year, future qualitative research should probe what factors influence respondents' perceptions of the government justice sector.

Interim protection orders and family protection orders

Of the 2,834 respondents, 43.2% had heard about interim protection orders (IPOs) or family protection orders (FPOs), 47.0% had not, with 9.8% who did not know (see Figure 14). This is significantly higher than what was found in an earlier, larger scale survey, which found that 19.8% of respondents had heard of IPOs or FPOs (Sustineo 2018).

Knowledge of IPOs/FPOs varied significantly. The strongest predictors, based on logistical regression results, were educational status, years in district, province and age. Contrary to expectations, gender had no significant effect. Respondents who were university educated, urban residents or living in ENB were more likely to be aware of IPOs/FPOs. The ENB research

Box 3: Interpreting the 'stayed the same' response

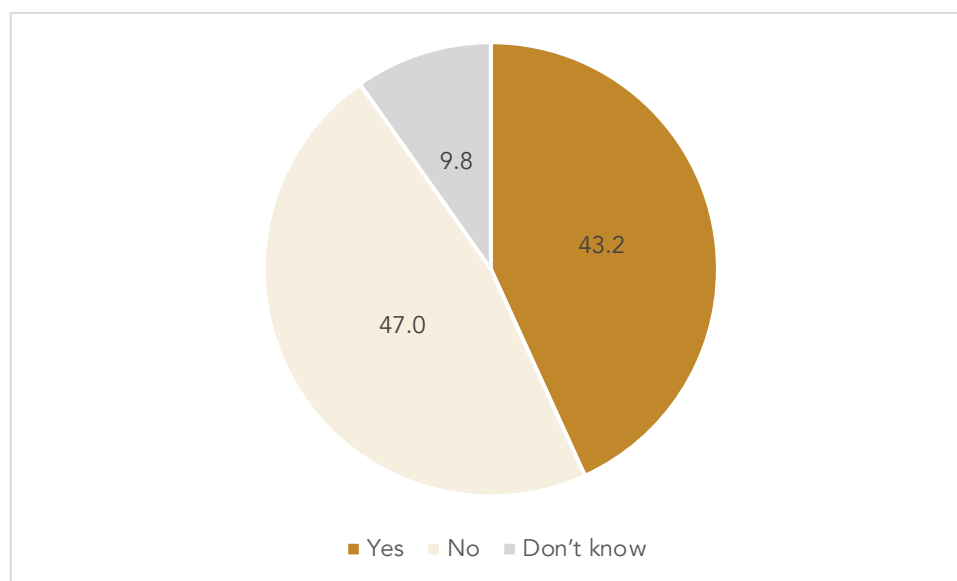
For both performance measures for the police (53% to 57%) and for justice services (53.8%), the most common response was 'stayed the same' over past two years. Possible interpretations include:

1. Stability in poor performance: Services were inadequate two years ago and remain so.
2. Lack of knowledge: Respondents do not have enough contact to assess changes.
3. Mixed signals: Some aspects improved, others worsened, with a net effect of the same.
4. Cautious response: Cultural tendency toward moderate responses.

Those who said 'stayed the same' for police effectiveness also tended to rate police as 'accessible but facing challenges' (78.3%), have had no contact with police in past year (68.2%), and live in rural areas where police presence is limited but stable.

For most respondents, 'stayed the same' is likely to signal persistent inadequacy rather than acceptable performance. The high proportions saying 'worsened' (21% to 31% for police measures) indicate deterioration for a significant minority, particularly in ENB.

Figure 14: Heard about interim protection orders or family protection orders, %



n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

team made several notes about local knowledge of protection orders (see Box 4).

Box 4: ENB Research team report — local knowledge of IPOs or FPOs

Many residents, particularly in Burit Ward, are unaware of the IPO and its provisions, highlighting the need for more legal awareness. Illiteracy about laws contributes to unpunished crimes.

A woman from Central Gazelle LLG shared her experience of marital rape and the lack of awareness about legal protection orders like the IPO.

People are unaware of the IPO in the rural communities.

PNG laws

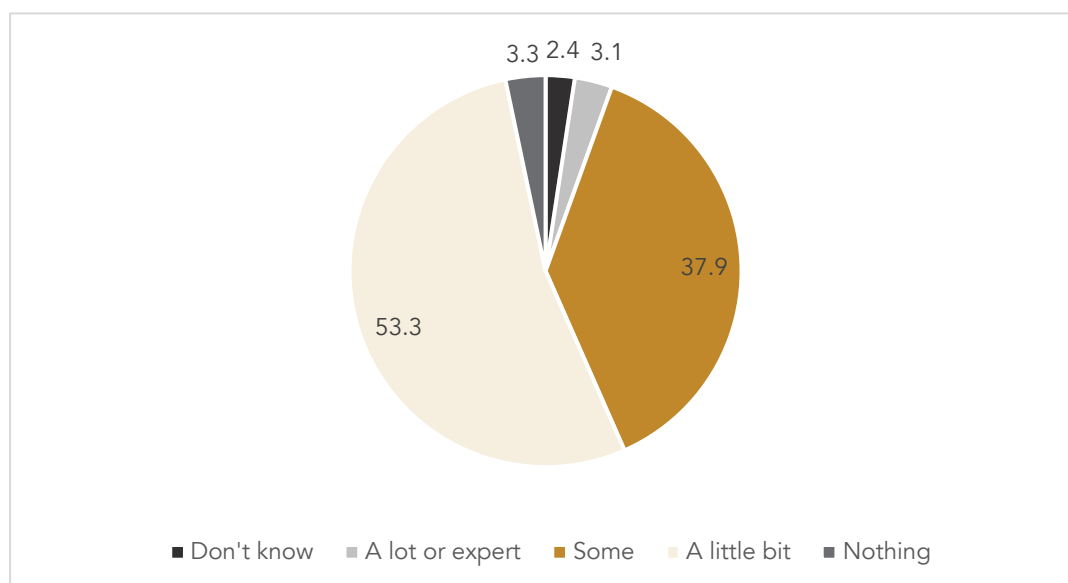
Just over a half of the respondents (53.3%) said they knew 'a little bit' and 37.9% said they knew 'some' about the laws of PNG (see Figure 15). The most significant factors that affect knowledge of PNG law were employment and education, age and province.

What should be done

Respondents were not directly asked, in the survey, about their views of important ways to address crime and improve safety. However, respondents did often provide comments on the topic, and research teams did note down what was said to them. Box 5 gives examples of some of the suggestions that respondents gave to the ENB research team, and Box 6 reproduces what the ENB team leader recommended should be done based on the surveys. Recurring recommendations heard across the research sites related to:

- Improving trust in and resources for the police
- More funding and support for Village Courts
- Improving access to victim support services, notably in rural districts
- Introducing or expanding locally led initiatives such as curfews, by-laws and community policing
- Improving understanding and knowledge of the law, e.g. domestic violence and IPOs
- Tackling underlying causes of conflict and violence, related to land, money and family divisions and discord
- Finding employment and educational opportunities for young men.

Figure 15: Knowledge of PNG's laws, %



n=2,834

Source: PNG crime and safety pilot survey 2024.

Box 5: Notes from ENB fieldwork report — what should be done

A community leader in Kokopo-Vunamami LLG emphasised the need for more education and income-generating opportunities for youth. While sports activities are beneficial, they do not provide a sustainable income. Lawlessness is seen as part of a broader issue linked to the failing economic climate, which affects economic growth, business investments and government services. Drug (marijuana etc.) related issues among disengaged youths are a growing concern.

A community in the Toma Vunadidir LLG was a safe community encountered during the research. A couple of senior citizens interviewed whispered that they thought the fear of sorcery retaliation for wrongdoing kept the Toma people in check. The community hall is home to the local Varkurai — a valued traditional institution for maintaining peace and resolving conflict.

Women in a village, Kokopo, Raluana LLG, believe that reviewing family laws would make the biggest

change in reducing crime. They emphasised that crimes come from various angles, but the family is the breeding ground for crime. They suggested implementing tough laws on families, such as jailing parents if a child is not well looked after and preventing unemployed men from having children. They compared this to treating malaria by removing the parasite from the liver, suggesting that crime should be eradicated at the family level. They also think that justice services are not effective in preventing crimes. With the crime rate escalating each year, they are looking at the root cause, identifying the breeding place for crime as within the family unit.

Gazelle District — Reimber LLG, Vunakainalama Ward: Ward assistants help enforce village by-laws created by the villagers and their leaders. One key by-law is the night curfew: the first bell at 10 pm, the second at 11 pm, and the third at 12 am, by which time everyone must be home. These by-laws, whether written or verbal, aim to ensure safety. Ward assistants ensure compliance, and violators face punishment by the local *tubuan*, a traditional law enforcer.

Box 6: Recommendations from the ENB research team leader

- ✓ Establish police posts/substations in hotspot areas
- ✓ Enhance police resources, including manpower, transport, firepower and community policing
- ✓ Implement sector patrols with station police cars
- ✓ Provide opportunities for youths through community engagement, education, sports and employment
- ✓ Set up a toll-free number for reporting crimes
- ✓ Revitalise communication between communities and police
- ✓ Encourage collective efforts from business houses, government departments and local people
- ✓ Incentivise reporting of criminals
- ✓ Conduct more awareness campaigns on lawlessness.

Implications of the survey results

As a pilot study, this research demonstrates the value of systemic and regular crime and safety surveys in PNG. Conducted across four provinces with 2,834 adult participants, the survey reveals critical insights into personal and community safety, crime patterns, and justice system effectiveness that can inform evidence-based policy and practice.

Key themes

Key themes that emerged are discussed below.

The safety crisis: Pervasive feelings of insecurity

The findings paint a concerning picture of widespread insecurity across PNG. More than three-quarters of respondents (76.3%) felt unsafe or very unsafe walking around their community at night, while nearly three-quarters (72.7%) felt unsafe during big occasions and events. Even during daytime, more than half (58%) felt unsafe walking in their communities. This pervasive sense of insecurity extends into the digital realm, where 56% of social media users reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe online.

These results align with, and extend, previous research in Port Moresby (Assa et al. 2023; Kakerere and Wamas 4/3/2024), demonstrating that feelings of insecurity are not limited to the national capital but pervade urban, semi-urban and rural areas across multiple provinces. The consistency of these findings across diverse locations suggests that improving public safety must be a national priority, with province-specific strategies that address local contexts.

Crime victimisation: High rates and underreporting

The finding that more than one-quarter of respondents (27.9%) had been a victim of crime in the previous 12 months represents a substantial level of crime. This rate is considerably higher than countries in the Pacific region (for example, Vanuatu — see Putt and Dinnen 2023) and comparable to some South American countries (Bisca et al. 2024). It underscores the urgent need for effective crime prevention strategies.

The most common crimes experienced were theft (47%), assault (35.7%), and break-ins (26.9%). Particularly concerning is that weapons were involved in more than two-thirds (67.7%) of incidents, with knives being the predominant weapon (75.4% of weapon incidents), though guns featured in nearly one-quarter (24.6%) of weapon-related crimes.

The high rate of non-reporting to police (57.9% of victims did not report) reveals a significant gap between actual crime and police-recorded crime. The primary reason given — ‘dealt with it myself’ (40.7%) — suggests that the crime was minor or that many people lack confidence in police effectiveness and/or prefer traditional dispute resolution processes. This finding highlights the importance of PNG’s hybrid justice landscape and the continued relevance of community-based responses to crime and conflict.

The second most common reason for not reporting — ‘could not contact them’ (23.3%) — points to accessibility challenges, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where police presence is limited. This is reinforced by the finding that while 64.6% of respondents said police services were ‘accessible but facing challenges’, rural residents were more likely (15.1%) to say police were completely inaccessible.

Social problems: Alcohol, youth and drugs drive concerns

The survey identified four dominant social problems that more than 80% of respondents rated as ‘very big’ or ‘big’ problems: drug (marijuana etc.) related issues (93.1%), young men out of control (86.8%), alcohol-fuelled violence (82.7%), and theft (86.8%). These findings indicate clear targets for crime prevention initiatives.

The prominence of substance abuse (both alcohol and drugs) as drivers of crime and violence suggests that effective responses must address these underlying factors. The concern about ‘young men out of control’ (61.6% rated this as a ‘very big’ problem) indicates a need for youth engagement programs, employment opportunities, and mentoring initiatives that can provide positive pathways for young men who may currently be marginalised or involved in antisocial behaviour.

Interestingly, while domestic violence (68.2%) and sexual violence (62.9%) were also rated as significant problems by a majority of respondents, they received somewhat lower ratings than substance-related issues and youth crime. However, gender analysis reveals important nuances: women were more likely than men to rate all social problems, including violence against women, as ‘very big’ problems.

Geographic variation: The East New Britain crisis

Among the four provinces, East New Britain consistently emerged as the location with the most severe crime and safety challenges. ENB residents were:

- Most likely to feel unsafe walking at night (89.6% unsafe or very unsafe)
- Most likely to have been a victim of crime (36.7% in past 12 months)
- Most likely to report gun use in crimes (21.5% of weapons incidents, compared to 11.0% in NCD and 16.6% in Morobe)
- Most likely to rate drug/marijuana issues as a very big problem (87.5%, compared to 66.5% in NCD)
- Least likely to report crimes to police (suggesting poor police–community relations and inadequate police resources).

This clustering of indicators points to a province experiencing a rapid deterioration in law and order. Media reports and the ENB fieldwork team's observations corroborate these survey findings, noting an escalation in armed hold-ups, fighting, and violent crime in recent years. The ENB provincial administration's commissioning of its own security strategy, with law and order identified as the main priority, reflects this crisis.

The ENB situation demonstrates that crime problems can escalate quickly in particular locations and require urgent, coordinated responses that combine policing, justice system strengthening, and community-based crime prevention. It also highlights the value of regular surveys that can detect emerging hotspots before they reach crisis levels.

Urban–rural divides: Different challenges, different needs

The survey reveals significant differences between urban, semi-urban, and rural areas that have important implications for service delivery and crime prevention.

Semi-urban areas emerged as particularly high-risk locations, with 52.1% of residents reporting crime victimisation in the past 12 months — substantially higher than urban (22.8%) or rural areas (31.2%). Semi-urban or peri-urban areas often combine the worst of both worlds: increased population density and anonymity that facilitate crime, combined with limited police presence and weak social controls. These areas deserve special attention in crime prevention planning. Box 7 speculates on why these areas are often high-risk locations.

Rural areas face distinct challenges related to accessibility. Rural residents were most likely to say police were inaccessible (15.1%), and they reported higher rates of gun use relative to population. Land disputes, sorcery accusations and black magic-related problems were rated as more severe in rural and semi-urban areas compared to urban centres. These findings underscore the importance of the Village Courts and community-based justice processes in areas where formal police and courts have limited reach.

Urban areas, while having lower victimisation rates than semi-urban locations, face different challenges. Urban residents reported higher rates of vehicle accidents as problems and were more likely to report feeling unsafe when catching PMVs. Urban respondents also felt safer on social media than rural residents, possibly reflecting greater digital literacy or access to support services.

Box 7: High crime rates in semi-urban areas — possible reasons

The finding that semi-urban residents had the highest crime victimisation rate (52.1%) compared to urban (22.8%) and rural (31.2%) residents could be attributed to a range of overlapping explanations. These include:

Service gaps: Semi-urban areas may fall into a service delivery gap; too far from urban police stations and access to basic services, yet lacking the traditional social controls and local modes of dispute resolution that exist in rural villages. Analysis shows:

- 17.2% of semi-urban residents said police were completely inaccessible (versus 11.2% urban and 16.6% rural).
- Semi-urban respondents rated 'young men out of control' as the most severe problem.

Population mixing and anonymity: Semi-urban settlements often mix people from different provinces and areas, which may reduce social cohesion and informal controls, and result in multiple cultural groups without shared dispute resolution norms.

- Only 31.2% of semi-urban respondents were from their district of residence (versus 42.5% urban and 48.9% rural).
- 37.8% had lived there less than five years.

Economic transition zone: Semi-urban areas combine cash economy pressures with limited employment:

- Proximity to urban opportunities may create expectations that cannot be met. In addition, there may be more property worth stealing than in rural locations, but less security than urban centres.
- Higher rates of 'unemployed' status among semi-urban youth.

Crime prevention strategies could specifically target semi-urban zones with enhanced police presence through sub-stations or mobile patrols, community policing, youth employment programs, and settlement planning that builds social infrastructure.

Vulnerable groups: Women, teenage girls, and children at risk

The survey highlights concerning disparities in perceived safety among different social groups. Teenage girls (76.4% viewed as unsafe or very unsafe) and women (70.2%) were seen as the least safe groups in communities, while men (41.6%) and elderly men (47.2%) were perceived as the most safe. This gender gap in perceived safety reflects broader patterns of gender-based violence documented in PNG (UNICEF et al. 2020).

Female survey respondents were more likely than males to:

- Report feeling unsafe in most situations
- Rate social problems, particularly violence against women, as more severe
- Report experiencing domestic violence (12.6% of female victims versus 5.9% of male victims)
- Report sexual violence (slightly higher than males).

These findings reinforce the need for gender-sensitive crime prevention and justice responses. The relatively high awareness of IPOs and FPOs (43.2% of respondents had heard of them) is encouraging and suggests that legal reforms and awareness campaigns have had some impact. However, significant work remains to ensure these orders are accessible and effective, particularly in rural areas (see Putt and Kanan 2021).

Justice system performance: Mixed perceptions, declining confidence

Respondents' assessments of police and justice services reveal concerning trends. When asked about changes over the past two years, only 10% to 17% of respondents said police had improved on various performance measures, while 21% to 31% said police had worsened. The largest proportion of dissatisfaction related to reducing the level of crime in PNG, where 30.6% said police had worsened. Just 13.5% believed police were keeping communities safer than two years earlier.

Similarly, only 7.7% said government justice services overall had improved, while 27.7% said they had worsened. The majority (53.8%) believed services had stayed the same; given the baseline of limited accessibility and effectiveness, this is not a positive assessment.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. When asked who they would contact to resolve a major dispute, respondents most frequently nominated police (28.7% of responses), followed by community leaders (24.2%). This suggests that despite concerns about police effectiveness, they remain a key point of contact for help. The reasons respondents gave for choosing particular people or institutions — trust, accessibility, helpfulness, ability to resolve issue — provide a framework for strengthening both formal and informal justice responses.

The plural and hybrid justice landscape: Village Courts and community leaders

The survey provides valuable insights into PNG's pluralistic and hybrid justice landscape (Craig et al. 2016). More respondents had contact with Village Courts (19.7%) than District Courts (11.9%) in the previous year, confirming the Village Courts' importance as the most accessible formal justice mechanism for many Papua New Guineans, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas (Goddard 2009).

The prominence of community leaders in dispute resolution (24.2% of responses) alongside police and Village Courts reflects the continued importance of customary and informal justice mechanisms. These plurality and hybrid processes, far from being a weakness, may be PNG's greatest asset in achieving justice at scale. Supporting and strengthening Village Courts, while recognising the legitimate role of community-based dispute resolution, should be central to justice sector reform.

Socio-demographic factors: Education, employment, and prior victimisation

The regression analyses revealed several important predictors of safety perceptions and crime experiences:

Education emerged as the most consistent predictor across multiple outcomes. Higher educational attainment was associated with:

- Greater knowledge of laws and protection orders
- Feeling safer on social media.

However, surprisingly, having junior high school as the highest qualification increased likelihood of crime victimisation (38.8% victimisation rate).

The latter finding may reflect that those with some secondary education are more mobile, working or studying away from home communities, and therefore more exposed to crime opportunities, particularly in semi-urban areas. Again, as highlighted with other findings, future research needs to examine in further depth our speculative explanations.

Prior victimisation was a strong predictor of feeling unsafe at night, confirming that direct experience of crime shapes perceptions of safety more than demographic factors alone.

Gender had complex effects. While men generally felt safer than women in most situations, gender was not a significant predictor of crime victimisation overall when controlling for other factors. However, women and men experienced different types of crime, with women more likely to report domestic and sexual violence.

Employment and marital status showed some predictive power, with employed and married respondents generally feeling safer and being more knowledgeable about laws and services. This may reflect greater social integration and access to resources.

Age had relatively minor effects in most models, though middle-aged respondents (36–45 years old) were more likely to view men as unsafe,

possibly reflecting life experience and awareness of conflict dynamics.

Length of time of residence in a district was positively associated with knowledge of protection orders. Those who had lived in their district for 5–15 years were most likely to be aware of IPOs and FPOs, suggesting that community education reaches established residents more effectively than recent arrivals.

These socio-demographic patterns have important implications for tailoring crime prevention and justice interventions. Vulnerable groups — including women and teenage girls, those with intermediate education levels working in semi-urban areas, unemployed youth, and recent arrivals to districts — require targeted support and protection. At the same time, community education efforts should leverage the knowledge and social capital of more established, educated residents while ensuring that information reaches all segments of the population.

Emerging crime challenges: The digital dimension

The finding that 74.1% of respondents use social media, with 56% feeling unsafe when doing so, highlights an emerging crime frontier. Cybercrime, including cyber-based sexual violence and online harassment, was rated as a problem by 44.4% of respondents, though 19.1% said it was not a problem at all, the highest ‘not a problem’ rating for any category.

This disparity likely reflects both the relative newness of digital crime and varying exposure to online platforms. The PNG government has enacted cybercrime legislation (Cybercrime Code Act 2016), but implementation and enforcement remain weak (APG 2024; Haihuie 3/11/2025). As internet and mobile phone penetration increases, particularly among young people, the potential for online crime and exploitation will grow.

The value of provincial and regular surveys

Beyond the substantive findings, this pilot study demonstrates the feasibility and value of regular crime and safety surveys in PNG. The affordable, locally led model can be replicated in other provinces, providing:

- **Trend data:** Repeated surveys track whether crime and safety are improving or deteriorating, and whether reforms are having intended effects.
- **Impact assessment:** Surveys can evaluate the impact of specific interventions, such as increased police presence, new legislation, or community programs.
- **Early warning:** Regular monitoring can detect emerging problems (like the ENB crime escalation) before they reach crisis levels.
- **Evidence base:** Survey data provides objective evidence to guide resource allocation and policy priorities, moving beyond anecdotes and media reports.
- **Local ownership:** PNG academic-led research builds local capacity, ensures cultural appropriateness, and promotes local ownership of findings and responses.

- **Comparative analysis:** Using standardised questions allows comparison across provinces and with other countries, identifying best practices and lessons learned.

The significant provincial variation, particularly the crisis in East New Britain which emerges from this survey, demonstrates that national approaches alone are insufficient. Provinces need tailored crime prevention strategies based on local crime patterns, social problems, and available resources. District Service Improvement Programs and provincial funding should prioritise evidence-based crime prevention and community safety initiatives.

The significant geographic variation and clustering of problems in specific areas (like semi-urban zones) suggests that problem-oriented, place-based strategies would be effective. This involves:

- Analysing crime patterns and hot spots at the local level
- Engaging communities in identifying solutions
- Coordinating multiple actors (police, courts, community leaders, NGOs)
- Adapting responses to specific local contexts and problems.

Study limitations and future directions

While this pilot provides valuable information, several limitations should be noted (see Box 8 for how future surveys could improve on the pilot survey):

- **Sampling:** The purposive quota sampling, while pragmatic and cost-effective, means results cannot be generalised to entire provinces with statistical confidence. Future surveys should aim for more representative sampling within budget constraints.
- **Urban bias:** The sample was weighted toward urban and semi-urban areas, with only 16.6% rural respondents. Given that most Papua New Guineans live in rural areas, future surveys should ensure better rural representation.
- **Self-report limitations:** Crime victimisation and perceptions are self-reported and subject to recall bias, interpretation differences, and social desirability effects. Where possible, surveys should be complemented by official crime statistics and qualitative research.
- **Missing qualitative data:** The original plan to conduct focus groups to discuss findings was not implemented due to resource constraints. Future research should incorporate qualitative methods to deepen understanding of the ‘why’ behind survey responses and ascertain local people’s priorities for action.
- **Cross-sectional design:** This one-time survey provides a snapshot but cannot track trends or causality. Regular repetition is essential to understand changes over time.

Box 8: Recommendations for future surveys

1. Add questions on:
 - o Specific police interactions (stops, arrests, assistance received)
 - o Court outcomes satisfaction
 - o Informal justice processes used
 - o Frequency and types of social media crime experienced.
2. Improve measurement of:
 - o Household income/wealth (current employment status insufficient)
 - o Social capital (community ties, trust networks)
 - o Repeat victimisation (how many times victimised, not just yes/no)
 - o Substance abuse patterns (use vs dependency, types of drugs).
3. Disaggregate further by:
 - o Age groups (5-year bands rather than 10-year)
 - o Crime location (home, street, market etc.)
 - o Time of day for incidents
 - o Relationship to offender (stranger, acquaintance, family).
4. Add qualitative components:
 - o Focus groups with high-risk groups (young men aged 18–25, semi-urban residents)
 - o Key informant interviews with Village Court magistrates, police, community leaders
 - o Case studies of communities with lower crime rates to identify protective factors.
5. Methodological improvements:
 - o Ensure adequate rural representation (target 40% rural to match demographics)
 - o Use stratified random sampling within provinces where feasible
 - o Increase sample size in smaller provinces
 - o Conduct surveys on the same month each year for trend.

Conclusion

The findings reveal widespread feelings of insecurity, high crime victimisation rates, significant underreporting to police, and declining confidence in justice services. They also highlight significant geographic variation, with East New Britain in particular experiencing a crisis, and important differences between urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts.

The survey identifies clear priorities for action: strengthening police resources and community relations, supporting the Village Court system, addressing substance abuse and youth engagement, enhancing responses to gender-based violence, and developing place-based crime prevention strategies. Importantly, it demonstrates that with modest resources and strong local leadership, PNG can build the evidence base needed for effective, contextually appropriate responses to crime and safety challenges.

The path forward requires commitment to regular data collection, willingness to act on findings, and coordination among government, civil society, and communities. This pilot study shows that surveys and data collection can be done. The question now is whether stakeholders will seize this opportunity to build a safer PNG based on evidence, local knowledge, and collaborative action.

Endnote

1. The questionnaires that were reviewed and informed the development of our survey included the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS), the Vanuatu–Australia Policing and Justice Study (Putt and Dinnen 2023) and the PNG Community Perceptions of Crime and Safety (Sustineo 2018). For this pilot study, the development of the questionnaire was informed by the knowledge of PNG and its law and justice sector of two of the authors, Dr Essacu and Mr Assa, and Emeritus Professor Sinclair Dinnen at ANU.

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Appendix: Questionnaire given to participants

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANT

1. What province do you currently live in?

ENB, NCD, Central, Morobe, Other (please specify)

2. What district area do you live in?

[Open ended – text response]

3. What brought you here to this district?

Work, visit, study, other

4. How long have you lived in this district area?

<1 year, 1<5 years, 5<10, 10<15, 15+

5. Gender?

Male, Female, Prefer not to say

6. Age?

16–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, 66–75, 76+

7. Current marital status?

married, defacto, single, widowed, separated, divorced

8. Employment status?

Employed, unemployed, self-employed/business owner, student/trainee, retired, volunteer, other (please specify)

9. What is your highest education qualification?

Primary (Gr 1–6)	Junior High (Gr 7–10)	Secondary (Gr 11–12)	Vocational/ technical	College	University

PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

10. How safe do you feel when you walk around in your community in the daytime?

Very safe, safe, not safe, not at all safe, don't know

11. How safe do you feel when you walk around in your community at night time?

Very safe, safe, not safe, not at all safe, don't know

12. How safe do you feel during big occasions and events such as Christmas, elections, and football games?

Very safe, safe, not safe, not at all safe, don't know

13. How safe do you feel when you catch a PMV?

Very safe, safe, not safe, not at all safe, don't know

14. How safe do you feel these different groups are in your neighbourhood or village?

Group	Very safe	Safe	Not safe	Not safe at all
Young children				
Teenage boys				
Teenage girls				
Women				
Men				
Elderly women				
Elderly men				
Disabled people				

15. Do you use social media?

Y/N/DK

16. When you use social media, how safe do you feel?

Very safe, safe, not safe, not at all safe, don't know

17. If not safe, what makes you feel unsafe and why?

[Open ended — text response]

COMMUNITY/NEIGHBOURHOOD PROBLEMS AND HELP-SEEKING

18. How big of a problem are the following in your village or neighbourhood?

Problems	Rating Scale			
	Very big	Big	Not big	Not a problem at all
Fights				
Alcohol-fuelled violence				
Domestic violence				
Sexual violence or abuse				
Cyber-based sexual violence				
Use of guns				
Child abuse				
Theft				
Damaging property or gardens				
Black magic accusations				
Land disputes				
Vehicle accidents				
Money disputes				
Young men out of control				
Young women out of control				
Adultery fuel violence				
Drug (marijuana etc.) related issues				

19. If you had a major disagreement/dispute with someone in your family or community, who would you ask to help you resolve it? [tick all that apply]

Person or Institution	Tick all that apply
Community leader	
Family member	
Police	
Village Court	
Church member	
Magistrate's courts	
Private security	
Other (please specify)	

20. Why did you choose these people or institutions?

(Open ended — text response)

21. Have you heard about Interim Protection Orders (IPOs) or Family Protection Orders?

Y/N/DK

CRIME AND POLICING

22. Compared to 2 years ago, do you think the police have improved, stayed the same or are worse at;

Policy Activity	Have improved	Stayed the same	Have worsened
Reducing the level of crime in PNG			
Keeping communities safe			
Interacting with communities			
Meeting the needs of the community			
Provide appropriate services to victims of domestic/family violence			
Provide appropriate services to victims of sexual violence/abuse			

23. How easy or hard is it for you to access police services when you need them?

Very easy, somewhat easy, accessible but facing challenges, inaccessible (can't access)

24. What makes it easy or difficult to access police?

(Open ended — text response)

25. Have you been a victim of crime in the last 12 months?

Y/N/DK

26. If yes, was a weapon involved in the most recent crime?

No

Yes, a knife

Yes, a firearm

Yes, other (please specify)

27. If yes, what was the most recent crime?

Crime	Give a tick for the most recent crime
Theft	
Break in	
Assault	
Domestic violence	
Sexual violence (rape, incest, unlawful sexual intercourse, act of indecency)	
Property damage	
Criminal trespass	
Other (please specify)	

28. If yes, did you report this crime to the police? Y/N

29. If you did not report it or make a statement to the police, please indicate the main reasons why not?
[tick all that apply]

Reasons for not reporting	Choose one
don't trust them	
could not contact them	
they are not interested or willing to help	
they don't have the right skills or equipment	
they might make the situation worse	
prefer to contact someone else for help	
the crime was not important	
dealt with it myself	
other (please specify)	

JUSTICE SERVICES

30. Overall, how satisfied are you with how the government justice services (this needs to be interpreted into pidgin for PNG) of PNG in your community?

Very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not satisfied, not at all satisfied, don't know.

31. Overall, do you think that the government justice services in PNG have improved, got worse, or stayed the same in the last two years?

Improved, stayed the same, got worse, don't know

32. Have you had any contact with the District Court or Village Court in the last 12 months?

District Court Y/N/DK

Village Court Y/N/DK.

33. If yes, what kind of contact have you had?

Contact option	DC	VC
Talk to court official		
To make complaint		
Because I was accused		
As a witness		

34. How much do you know about PNG's laws?

Nothing, a little bit, some, a lot/expert, don't know



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