

## Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG

### Part 5: Incidents and Victims

Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula & William Kipongi In Brief 2021/5

This is the fifth In Brief in a series presenting findings from a multi-year study of sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). In 2017, the first In Brief of the series described the two main quantitative data collection methods used in the project to estimate the extent of the SARV issue: a SARV Incident Database for four hotspot provinces over a four-and-a-half-year period (January 2016<sup>1</sup>–June 2020) and a national incident and court case dataset (media dataset) over a 24-year period (1996–June 2020). The integration of these quantitative datasets with the qualitative data is described here (Losoncz et al. 2020).

In Briefs 2–4 reported on findings from quantitative analysis of media and case law from 1996–2016. This In Brief and In Briefs 6 and 7 report select further findings from the SARV Incident Database.

The first finding concerns what the SARV Incident Database reveals about the extent to which national newspaper reports cover incidents of SARV. The question of what criminologists refer to as the ‘dark number’, or the amount of underreporting, is important when trying to quantify harm through reliance on media reports.

Our analysis of the overlap between the SARV Incident Database and the media dataset found that, on average, only eight per cent of the *violent* incidents and 17 per cent of the *incidents leading to death* were reported in the newspapers. There was considerable variation across the provinces. We can use this disparity to estimate the number of violent SARV incidents over a 20-year period by making a number of assumptions. For example, if we assume an even distribution, spatially and temporally, of the proportion of incidents reported in the media, we estimate the number of violent SARV incidents between the year 2000 and June 2020 to be over 6000, resulting in an estimated 3000 deaths nationally. Whilst these estimates must be treated with caution given the significant variance across time and geographical location in the cases documented, they indicate an alarming amount of SARV-connected harm.

From the SARV Incident Database, we recorded 1039 accusation incidents involving 1553 accused persons in four

hotspot provinces over a four-and-a-half-year period (January 2016<sup>2</sup>–June 2020). The number of accused is greater than the number of incidents because sometimes multiple people are accused in one incident. Of these incidents, 298 (29 per cent) led to violence<sup>3</sup> and involved 546 victims (see Table 1). Of these victims, 65 were killed, 86 suffered permanent injury<sup>4</sup> and 141 survived other serious harm, such as burning, cutting, tying or being forced into water. In total, in the four provinces over the four-and-a-half year period, 318 people, 57 per cent of them women, either died or survived serious harm. Five per cent of the victims suffering serious harm or death were 18 years old or younger, with two being under the age of 10. (A forthcoming piece<sup>5</sup> will provide further detail on the impact of SARV on children.)

**Table 1: SARV incidents and victims, January 2016\*–June 2020**

| Province     | All accusations |         | Accusations leading to violence |         | Percentage of accusations leading to violence |
|--------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------------------|
|              | Incidents       | Victims | Incidents                       | Victims |                                               |
| Enga         | 196             | 307     | 74                              | 149     | 37.8                                          |
| Bougainville | 426             | 574     | 87                              | 134     | 20.4                                          |
| NCD*         | 336             | 464     | 100                             | 156     | 29.8                                          |
| Jiwaka       | 81              | 208     | 37                              | 107     | 45.7                                          |
| Total        | 1039            | 1553    | 298                             | 546     | 28.7                                          |

\*Start date for the NCD data was 1 January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka. Source: SARV Incident Database.

Just over 70 per cent of the incidents involved the accusation of a single person. The remaining 30 per cent had multiple accused, sometimes as many as four or more (four per cent). The most common connection between multiple accused is immediate family membership (66 per cent), followed by family through marriage (10 per cent). These figures are averages across the four provinces. It should be noted that in Jiwaka, 78 per cent of the cases had multiple victims accused, with nearly all being immediate family members. Part 6 of this series details why and how accused are identified.

**Table 2: Key characteristics of SARV victims of all incidents, percentages\* of victims by location, January 2016\*\*–June 2020**

|                                           | Enga (%) | Bougainville (%) | NCD (%) | Jiwaka (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------------------------------------|----------|------------------|---------|------------|-----------|
| Female                                    | 92.8     | 15.7             | 49.7    | 51.4       | 45.9      |
| Born in the community                     | 44.6     | 91.0             | 37.9    | 75.5       | 64.5      |
| Age                                       |          |                  |         |            |           |
| 0–10 years                                | 0.3      | 0.0              | 0.2     | 13.0       | 1.9       |
| 11–18 years                               | 4.0      | 2.4              | 0.0     | 9.6        | 3.0       |
| 19–40 years                               | 42.3     | 26.7             | 30.5    | 20.7       | 30.1      |
| 41–60 years                               | 47.3     | 49.7             | 55.6    | 25.5       | 47.7      |
| Over 60 years                             | 6.0      | 21.1             | 13.6    | 31.3       | 17.3      |
| Marital status                            |          |                  |         |            |           |
| Married – one wife                        | 44.1     | 74.8             | 66.7    | 65.0       | 65.2      |
| Married – more than one wife (polygyny)   | 23.6     | 1.7              | 10.8    | 3.9        | 8.9       |
| Widow/ widower, separated, divorced       | 25.0     | 8.4              | 11.3    | 5.6        | 12.2      |
| Single                                    | 7.3      | 15.0             | 10.5    | 25.6       | 13.5      |
| No children                               | 31.2     | 15.6             | 22.5    | 58.3       | 26.2      |
| Education                                 |          |                  |         |            |           |
| No schooling                              | 59.4     | 6.1              | 27.4    | 62.9       | 31.0      |
| Started and/or completed primary school   | 36.3     | 57.4             | 51.4    | 32.1       | 47.8      |
| Economic status same as rest of community | 69.1     | 88.6             | 93.6    | 87.0       | 86.3      |
| Accused before                            | 45.6     | 61.8             | 64.5    | 47.2       | 57.0      |

\*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.

We found distinct gendered patterns of accusation in different regions. The gender split of victims of accusation incidents across all provinces borders on even (46 per cent female). However, there is a considerable variation among provinces, ranging from 16 per cent of the accused being female in Bougainville to 93 per cent in Enga.

The age distribution of victims of accusation incidents also varies among provinces. In general, the majority of victims (47 per cent) are 41–60 years old, followed by 19–40 years (30 per cent). Children 10 years of age and below represent two

per cent of those accused. The high proportion of accused children (13 per cent) in Jiwaka relates to the trend of entire families being accused in that province. Most of the victims (86 per cent) have the same economic status as the rest of the community and the majority of victims (57 per cent) have been accused before (see Table 2). Sixty-three per cent of victims with previous accusations were the first accused in an incident. As we discuss in a forthcoming series, the story told by the data of the characteristics of the accused complicates the standard stereotype of accusation victims as older, marginalised women, revealing a wide geographic variation in the typical characteristics of those accused.

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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. The start date for the NCD data was January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka.
3. There is a statistically significant variation in the proportion of accusations leading to violence between the provinces, with Jiwaka having the highest (46 per cent), followed by Enga (38 per cent), National Capital District (30 per cent) and Bougainville (20 per cent).
4. 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.
5. Our research findings will be published as a series of short pieces online in the near future.

### References

Losoncz, I., M. Forsyth and J. Putt 2020. [Innovative Data Collection and Integration to Investigate Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in Papua New Guinea](#). *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 17–18(1):66–74.

