



THE NATIONAL
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

SPOTLIGHT

SORCERY ACCUSATION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN PNG: CHARACTERISTICS OF PERPETRATORS AND THEIR ACCOMPLICES

Miranda Forsyth
Philip Gibbs
Ibolya Losoncz

www.pngnri.org

Volume 14, Issue 11

Key Points

- Data from the study reported in this article reveal that most of the violent incidents caused by sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) are committed by larger groups.
- Sorcery accusation-related violence is often driven by suspicion, fear or concern about misfortunes and high levels of uncertainty.
- Anti-SARV campaigns need to focus on ways to redirect group dynamics, including assisting targeted individuals to be able to refute narratives that place blame for misfortune on sorcery and individuals.
- Persons inciting SARV, in particular diviners/*glasman*, need to have their credibility undermine and to be prosecuted where they have incited violence.

inquire
inform
influence

September 2021



SORCERY ACCUSATION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN PNG: CHARACTERISTICS OF PERPETRATORS AND THEIR ACCOMPLICES

By Miranda Forsyth, Philip Gibbs and
Ibolya Losoncz

This Spotlight presents findings from a multi-year study of sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in four hotspot provinces (Enga, Bougainville, Jiwaka and the National Capital District) over a four and a half year period (January 2016 - June 2020). It summarises what we have learnt about the *characteristics of perpetrators of violent incidents and their accomplices*.

Characteristics of the perpetrators

Most of the violent incidents were committed by larger groups, with 34 percent by groups larger than 20, and 40 percent by groups of five to 20 (Table 1). Large groups were especially manifest in Jiwaka, where 64 percent of violent incidents were committed by groups of 21 to 50 and an additional 17 percent by groups of larger than 50, and in Enga where 26 percent of incidents were committed by groups larger than 50.

In Jiwaka Province, those committing the violence were mostly young men (92%) who are blood related in the family. In Bougainville, young men made up a little more than half (58%) the groups and in Port Moresby young men made up slightly under half (49%) the group. In Enga, smaller groups are more likely to be made up of mostly young men, while larger groups are a mixture of ages and gender.

Table 1. Key characteristics of those who committed violence, percentages* of violent incidents by location, January 2016** - June 2020

	Enga (%)	Bougainville (%)	Port Moresby (%)	Jiwaka (%)	Total (%)
<i>Number of violent incidents with valid data</i>	<i>n=74</i>	<i>n=87</i>	<i>n=94</i>	<i>n=37</i>	<i>n=298</i>
Number of people committing the violence					
1	7	4	22	0	11
Between 2 and 4	6	26	19	3	16
Between 5 and 20	47	45	39	17	40
Between 21 and 50	14	13	11	64	19
More than 50	26	13	8	17	15
Demographics of those committing violence					
Mostly young men	35	58	49	92	54
Mix of ages and gender	63	38	44	6	42
All or some affected by alcohol or drugs***	92	34	40	97	62
Assailants had a gun or guns***	50	24	5	13	22
Relationship between victims and assailants					
Blood related family	27	37	31	91	39
Family through marriage	18	9	24	0	15
Same tribe	31	14	12	9	17
Neighbours	10	4	15	0	8
No special relationship	7	26	9	0	13

Notes: *Percentages are calculated using valid data i.e. excludes data that is missing or not known.

** Start date for Port Moresby data is 1 January 2017 and for Jiwaka March 2019.

*** Both these questions had a high number of missing or don't know values.

Source: SARV project incident dataset, ANU

Characteristics of perpetrators are complex but notably they tend to be family members of the person believed to have been harmed or killed by sorcery. An example from Port Moresby involves a man who looked after his sick uncle at the hospital until he died. After the death of his uncle, the family asked the man and his wife and two sons to travel with the body for burial. He said he could not go because he had no money to purchase tickets, but if the family insisted that he go, they should help purchase his family's tickets. After that he was accused of killing the uncle through sorcery and was killed.

The violence and torture are often done in public. In cases where an attempt was made to extract a confession (82% of all violent incidents), a public display was high in all provinces, with 49 percent occurring in public and 35 percent occurring in both public and private areas.

Overall, 62 percent of the SARV incidents involved some or all of the perpetrators of violence being affected by drugs or alcohol, although the proportion was much higher in Jiwaka (97%) and Enga (92%). Having a gun at the incident was also significantly higher in Enga (48%) than in the other provinces (see Table 1).

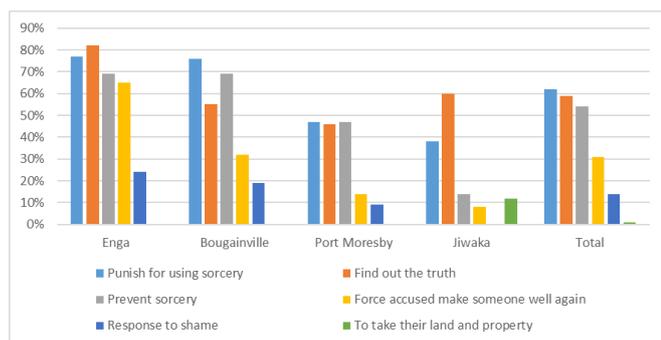
The publicly expressed motive or purpose of perpetrators varies, with many (62%) wanting to punish the accused for using sorcery, and some (59%) wanting to find out the 'truth'. In Enga, finding the truth takes precedence (82%), usually in terms of an attempt to extract a confession through torture. In Enga and Bougainville, preventing the practice of sorcery (69%) is also a common motive (see Figure 1). There were cases where a son has tortured and even killed his own mother, claiming to want to stop sorcery practice within the

family. In another case from Port Moresby, there had been seven deaths in a family within six months and it was said that the people in the community ‘got fed up and retaliated’.

In cases of larger groups, the express purpose of violence is more likely to be punishment for using sorcery than in cases of smaller groups. This trend is observable in every province. There were also cases where an accusation may be a response to shame, such as avoiding recognition that a person has died from AIDS. The motive of wanting to take land and property emerges in Jiwaka, though envy or jealousy is mentioned as an issue that serves as a pretext for sorcery accusations in other provinces.

The publicly expressed reason for violence may be different from individual motivations of those involved as perpetrators and bystanders. A sudden death may be the trigger event for accusation and violence, but the accusation may also stem from proximate factors, such as an existing dispute or grievance between the parties, or a desire to gain access to lands or other goods held by the accused person. The group may be influenced by the sorcery narrative as it accords with a commonly held understanding of magical causality (Forsyth and Gibbs, 2021), but also may be influenced by the pronouncement of someone, such as a diviner (*glasman/glasmeri*), wanting to exploit the situation to their own advantage. Our intent here is to draw attention to the public rationale that can open up opportunities to intervene at a group level.

Figure 1: Publicly expressed purpose of violence, percentages of violent incidents by location, January 2016* – June 2020



Notes: * Start date for Port Moresby data is 1 January 2017 and for Jiwaka March 2019.

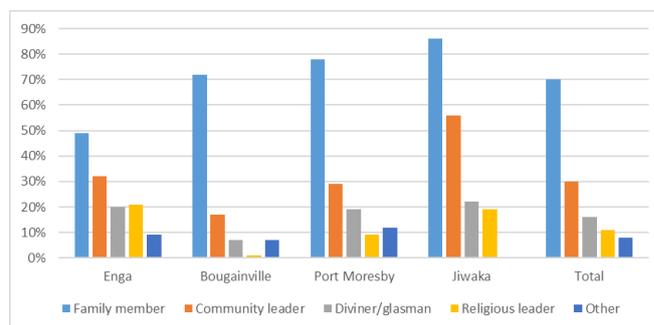
Source: SARV project incident dataset, ANU

In the majority (91%) of the cases, violence was encouraged by others, especially family members (70%) (see Figure 2). Community leaders encouraged violence in some (30%) of the cases but particularly in Jiwaka (56%). Others who encouraged violence included religious leaders (11%) and a diviner (*glasman/glasmeri*) in 16 percent of cases. Larger groups are more likely to seek the assistance of some perceived

expert (often a diviner) – a trend observable at every province, especially Jiwaka and Enga (for further discussion of *glasman* as spreaders of SARV, see Forsyth and Gibbs, 2020).

In the 14 cases of religious leaders encouraging violence, various churches were represented (Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and Seventh-Day Adventist [SDA]), with SDA more frequent in Port Moresby. On one occasion, it was reported that Lutheran Reform Church pastors in Enga said that a person accused was Satan’s angel.

Figure 2. Actor types encouraging the violence, percentages of violent incidents by location, January 2016* – June 2020



Notes: *Start date for Port Moresby data is 1 January 2017 and for Jiwaka March 2019.

Source: SARV project incident dataset, ANU

In terms of whom people using violence sought advice from, a bare majority (57%) took the initiative by themselves and did not seek advice from anybody. A minority (19%) claim to have sought advice from a diviner with the proportion higher in Jiwaka (41%) and Enga (27%). In Port Moresby, a diviner may be referred to as a ‘licensed user’, meaning that he or she is recognised and believed to be legitimate. Almost no one sought advice from Village Court magistrates or police.

Concluding remarks on interventions needed

In sum, we see that the violence in SARV involves groups (often large) where there is a suspicion, fear or concern about misfortunes that have occurred, accompanied by high levels of uncertainty. People are looking for answers for ways forward. Perpetrators tend to be family members of the person believed to have been harmed or killed by sorcery. Crowds that respond can be influenced towards violence through sorcery narratives based in a magical worldview as they attempt to alleviate their doubts and find a plausible explanation through confession by the accused, or attempts to stop the accused’s practice of sorcery. At times, the violence amounts to punishment for perceived wrong-doing.

Anti-SARV campaigns need to work on how to redirect group dynamics, such as through targeted awareness in priming competent and respected individuals ahead of time about what to be alert for, and how to divert public discussions going in a particular direction that risk leading to violence. One such example would be asking a close family member at a funeral to publicly refute sorcery accusations. Such campaigns also need to promote prosecution of those who incite violence, and particularly diviners who promote themselves as being able to identify those who use sorcery. Well-regarded church leaders such as a bishop may have the moral authority to refute such claims.

Finally, researchers and policymakers need to look for explanations as to why people seek advice from diviners, but to date, almost no one has sought advice from Village Court magistrates or police. This points to the need for further research and research-based training for such officials.

References

Forsyth, M and Gibbs, P. (2020). Contagion of violence: the role of narratives, worldviews, mechanisms of transmission and contagion entrepreneurs. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9:37- 59.

Forsyth, M and Gibbs, P. (2021). Causal stories and the role of worldviews in analysing responses to sorcery accusations and related violence. *Found Sci*, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10699-020-09727-4.pdf>.

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea as part of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program.

About the Authors

Miranda Forsyth is an Associate Professor in the School of Governance (RegNet) in the College of Asia and Pacific at Australian National University (ANU). Miranda has been the lead Chief Investigator on the project 'Improving the impact of state and non-state

interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea', research from which has informed this Spotlight.

Philip Gibbs is President of Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea. He is a Primary Investigator in the project 'Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea'.

Ibolya Losoncz is a Fellow at the School of Governance (RegNet) in the College of Asia and Pacific at ANU. Ibolya is a researcher in the project 'Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea'.