

Jumping the Gun

ARMED VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea is a young nation chronically affected by armed violence. It is considered by many to be a fragile state—one with the potential to destabilize peace and security in the western Pacific. While the threats to regional security may well be overstated, the nation's capital—Port Moresby—and its Highlands provinces currently register victimization rates among the highest in the world. This chapter reveals important new evidence on the causes, dynamics, distribution, and symptoms of gun violence in Papua New Guinea.

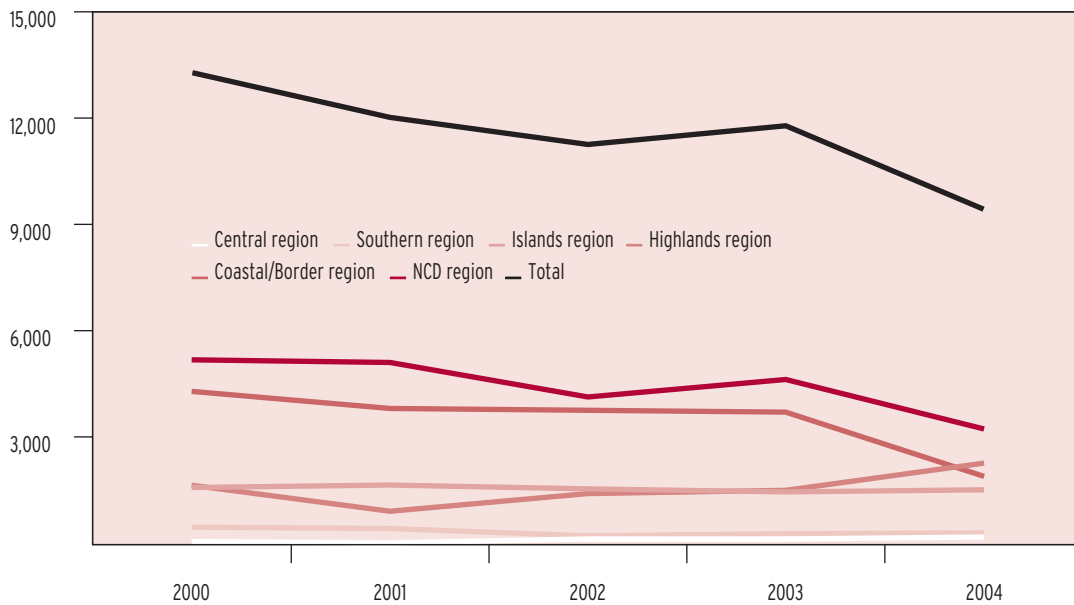
The chapter finds that despite a relatively low civilian firearm ownership rate, weapons (both craft and factory-made) represent a major contributor to real and perceived insecurity, and an obstacle to good governance, improved state security, and sustainable development. Drawing on a combination of research methods, the chapter offers a comprehensive mapping of armed violence in the National Capital District and the Southern Highlands Province, areas generally regarded as suffering from intractable law and order problems. This research finds that although crime is officially declining, less than half of all crime is actually reported to the police.

Armed violence in Papua New Guinea is not evenly distributed, but rather concentrated in particular areas. In fact, Port Moresby—the country's fastest growing urban centre, with a population exceeding 300,000—now accounts for more than 30 per cent of all nationally reported crimes despite registering only 5 per cent of the country's population. Much of the crime is concentrated in Port Moresby's squatter settlements, where unemployment is high and service provision poor. The situation in the Southern Highlands, arguably Papua New Guinea's most troubled province, is equally disconcerting. There, the past decade has witnessed declining service delivery coupled with a dramatic upsurge in armed violence—coinciding for the most part with the advent of large-scale resource extraction activities.



PNG police brandish M-16s as they patrol the streets for raskol gangs in August 2004. © Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images

Figure 7.1 Reported crime incidents, 2000-04



Sources: Gomez (2005); UNDSS (2005)

Specifically, the chapter finds that:

- Victimization rates among households in the National Capital District and the Southern Highlands are higher than previously reported. In mid-2005, more than half of all households surveyed reported on victimization in the previous six months.
- Varied types of weapons are used to victimize residents of the National Capital District and the Southern Highlands. More than 80 per cent of reported victimization events involved the use of a weapon, though not necessarily a firearm.
- Domestic and family violence, including that between co-wives, is the chief cause of victimization and the primary contributor to insecurity across both survey areas, with one in five households reporting an episode of domestic violence that resulted in injury from December 2004 to May 2005.
- Inter-group fighting and criminal violence are key sources of insecurity both in the National Capital District and the Southern Highlands. The common assumptions that link tribal fighting with the Highlands provinces and criminal violence with urban areas must thus be reconsidered.
- The Hela Province issue represents a constant source of potential conflict in the Southern Highlands, with residents arming themselves with the intention of causing widespread civil unrest should their calls for a separate province continue to fall on deaf ears.
- While governance is severely compromised by escalating levels of armed violence, service delivery failure also contributes to armed violence and insecurity since public services are privatizing in response to service delivery failure.
- The demands for compensation—a local form of restitutive justice—are crippling livelihoods and contributing to an escalation of violence. Although compensation arrangements, which are often customarily determined, are vital factors in the promotion of social order, they can also contribute to renewed and ever greater cycles of retribution and violence.
- The demand for firearms is robust in the National Capital District and the Southern Highlands. More than 40 per cent of respondents said that guns make them feel safe, while more than one-third indicated that they would acquire a firearm if they could.
- Ammunition supplies, previously thought to be tight, are in fact comparatively abundant. In addition, ammunition prices are lower than previously reported, and they appear to be declining.
- There has been little support for gun surrenders or weapons reduction initiatives to date in either the National Capital District or the Southern Highlands. Without improvements in law and order people in both areas are generally unwilling to disarm.

This chapter identifies practical entry-points to promote violence reduction and disarmament. It advocates the need for interventions that are designed, implemented, monitored, or evaluated on a sound evidence-based diagnosis of Papua New Guinea's law and order problems region by region, and finds that modest community-level interventions that build upon local capacity and seek to enhance customary governance will most likely prove productive. ■