Crime and Violence Trends in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

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General Introduction:

Port Moresby is the capital city of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the biggest country in the Pacific region. The city is infamously known for the high crime rate. The escalating high levels of rape, robbery and murder have unfortunately earned Port Moresby the dubious distinction of being the worst city in live in the world by the Economist magazine for 2002 and 2005. The law and order problem is known in PNG as rascolism. A Raskol is the "*local term used to describe a criminal (usually part of a gang) responsible for the most violent crime against citizens, and has become the source of acute personal insecurity in the country, particularly among women*"[1].

The *Australian Financial Review* 2005, although noting that crime statistics are notoriously unreliable, suggested that the recorded murder rate in PNG as a whole has risen to six times that of Australia. Even more alarmingly, the murder rate in Port Moresby is 42 times that of Sydney. Although the city has over six percent of the country's population it accounts for nearly 40% of all crimes in PNG. Escalating criminal activities especially in the urban centres of the country appalls communities. The business community is also suffering from the bad reputation of Port Moresby. Urban crime regarded as the most significant of all business costs[2].

The impact of crime on the individual, community and the economy cannot be overstated. Residents of the city feel very unsafe; there is a constant reminder of rapes, car theft, personal attacks as well as break and entry in the media on a daily basis. Certain suburbs such as Gerehu, Nine Mile and Bomana are known by the community to be particularly unsafe and even the police are reluctant to respond to calls for help. Widespread crime and violence deters both international and domestic tourists from exploring parts of the city and country to experience the rich culture, history and beautiful coastline of PNG.

Successive governments in PNG have invested enormous resources in addressing crime reduction and control of law and order problems in Port Moresby. It is estimated that over the last decade millions of dollars from the national budget have been invested into the law and order sector. In addition there has been consistent donor agency technical assistance and financial support to address the issue. For example Australia government alone provides $320 million a year largely to improve its health, education, infrastructure and law and justice systems in the country. The international community has provided training, equipment and in some cases personnel to work along the police, judicial system and the prisons to assist PNG manage the law and justice issue in the country.

This paper attempts to provide an overview of the causes and types and crime in Port Moresby. It begins with a brief background information to put the discussion into context and analysis some of the key factors underpinning criminal activities in Port Moresby.

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[1]   Dinnen 2002

[2]   Pitts 2001

Background and Context

Port Moresby is the capital city of Papua New Guinea, and has been in existence since the 1870s when Captain Moresby of the Royal Navy found the port on the island of New Guinea. Shortly after Captain Moresby's contact, physical growth, economic and political significance of this port city increased and it soon it became an administrative centre of the Papua area.

Figure 1: Port Moresby with the national context

Port Moresby is also known as the National Capital District (NCD), which covers an area of 240sq. km. The city has grown in size as a result of numerous functions in the Papua New Guinea economy. As a national capital, it oversees administration of the entire country; consequently head offices of all government departments, ministries and most private organisations are located in the city.

The city's population is estimated to be over 330,000, making it the largest urban centre in Papua New Guinea, having a population twice as big as the second largest urban centre of Lae. Port Moresby has a large migrant population with over 50% of people moving into the city from other provinces. According to the 2000 National Population Census, Port Moresby grew at rate of 3.6% per annum since 1980s as compared to a growth of 2.6% nationally. Much of the in-migration involves young people and young families, so that approximately 35% of the Port Moresby's population is below the age of 15 years and nearly 58% of the population are aged between 16-64 years.

Port Moresby consists primarily of three distinct settlement types: urban villages[3], squatter settlements and the modern urban centre. The Motu Koitabu people (original inhabitants of

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[3] The city's rapid spatial growth has engulfed numerous traditional villages. The engulfed villages are called "urban villages". Since these villages fall outside the city boundary the general lack basic urban infrastructure such as potable water, good sanitation and accessible roads

Port Moresby area) live in villages surrounding the port. In-migrating groups established squatter settlements or approved urban villages around the periphery.

While it is mandatory to seek planning approval before dwelling units are constructed in Port Moresby, this requirement is often not required in squatter settlements. As a result residents of urban villages build and extend their dwelling units as they wish while houses constructed in the urban centre require planning approval. There are about 40 squatter settlements and urban villages in the city; most of these squatter settlements are often located on either government or customary land.

This dominance has triggered rural-urban migration resulting in immigration of people from the over 700 languages group into the city. This phenomenon has created increased social and economic opportunities for migrants, allowing them to break free from cultural traditions and seek employment in secondary and tertiary sectors of the modern economy.

The unprecedented urban growth experienced in Port Moresby since World War II coupled with the inability of the urban housing market to provide low-income housing and developable land has contributed to the growth and expansion of squatter settlements. Squatter settlements scattered across the accommodate 50% of the city's population. These settlements are also regarded to be havens of criminal activities in the city.

The above-sketched background information about the city's development has to be kept in mind when dealing with crime and violence prevention. In a context of dramatic change and social innovation, adaptation of local values and practices to cope with urban life and its crisis is a crucial factor in the genesis of urban crime and violence, its recognition as a problem and its possible solutions.

Causes of Crime in Port Moresby

The causes of increased crime in Port Moresby are many and varied. But there seems to be a general agreement that crime and violence in PNG are underpinned by:

- a general lack of economic opportunities;
- the drive to acquire material wealth;
- inability of law enforcement institutions to effectively address criminal behaviour in the city;
- a decline of traditional cultural practices;
- abuse of the *Wantok* system; and,
- The impact urbanisation.

Lack of Economic Opportunities

It is estimated that the formal sector provides fewer than 10 percent of jobs in the country. In addition to this, PNG as a country has adopted the laws and regulations of State of Queensland, Australia who was their colonial power. The supplantation of laws and regulations, which are much suited to developed economies, has made it impossible for the informal sector to develop. The strict enforcement of regulations such as public health, building codes and taxation regimes have stifled people to operate business which create jobs and income for those without formal qualifications.

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For example, in most developing countries one can get his car repaired by vehicle mechanic who has not received formal qualifications but has undergone years of on the job training. Garages that often use non-labour intensive technologies provide such services. The same applies in areas such as dressing making, food and the construction industry. Although the strict adherence to such laws and regulations has some obvious merits it also succeeds in stifling the growth and development of the informal sector.

The consequence of this is that there is high employment and underemployment in the city. The bulk of this population are the youth and there resort to crime to enable them to survive in the high cost of living in Port Moresby. The unemployed often chose to while away their time in places such as the vicinity of supermarkets, restaurants, hotels and banks. Residents using these facilities are extra vigilant, as they often become areas of crime in the city.

Another factor that has contributed to a general lack of economic opportunities for residents in the city is the high school drop out rate. It is uncommon to find close to 50% of children of school going age living in areas of low socioeconomic conditions not attending school. Once these children drop out school the have very limited opportunities to go back to school due to the absence of formal programs to encourage them to go back to school. They grow up to become young adults relying on financial handouts from relatives and fiends. After some time 'learn' a few strategies to enable them to live and survive in the city with very limited skills to make them employable.

The Drive for Material Wealth;

Associated with the general lack of economic opportunities is the drive to acquire material wealth is often affirmed by the argument that poverty contributes to crime. The drive to acquire material wealth acts as an "incentive" for perpetuators of crime to amass wealth through participating in petty criminal activities such as bag snatching to bank robbery. Both national government and donor agencies observe that there is a positive correlation between limited economic opportunities and crime (AusAID, 2000, 2003; World Bank 2004). As a result of this millions of dollars have been committed to creating more employment opportunities and income-earning avenues for the unemployed and disenfranchised youth, mostly in the formal economy. However, these investments have failed to create the much-needed diversion from crime since there is a very limited relationship between job creation in the formal economy and *raskolism.*

Like most cities in the developing world, Port Moresby is a city of the 'haves' and the 'have not'. The contract between the conspicuously consumption and urban poverty is quite remarkable. Shops in the city are flooded with imported goods such as the television sets, DVD players, mobile phones and other consumables which both the gainfully employed and unemployed desire. Those who are able to afford these consumables are highly esteemed in the city. The desire to own these goods and to be economically successful no matter how compels people to commit criminal activities in the city. The 'have' therefore become primary targets in the city. It is therefore common to see high to middle residential complexities hiring armed security personnel to protect themselves and their families.

Inability of Law Enforcement Institutions to Address Criminal Behaviour

There is a general perception the city about the inability of law enforcement Institutions to handle criminal cases especially minor delinquency. Since emphasis has been placed on the fight against major crime this has compelled the police to distance themselves from citizens

who have subsequently lost confidence in them. Ignoring petty crime has elsewhere been found to encourage a sense of lawlessness that leads to more major crimes being committed[4].

For example, a US State Department Report (2003) made this observation concerning the Police Department in PNG "*police committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, used excessive force when arresting and interrogating suspects*". As a result of observations such as these, the police are often considered unprofessional and their interventions are considered futile and unresponsive to expressed community needs. Also, police are rarely seen within the squatter settlements, where crime rates are relatively high

The inability of the police for example to deal effectively with law and justice issues in the city appears to be caused by the widespread criminal activities, the lack of modern communication equipment, and vehicles. This is because in 2003, for example there were over 970 police personnel responsible for law enforcement in a population of 254,158 people (UN HABITAT *et al* 2003). This amounts to one police officer for every 261 residents. This is above the UN recommendation of one police officer for every 400 residents, which suggests that the policing problem does not necessarily lie in numbers.

Rehabilitation programs implemented in the prison system have also failed. Prisons have become recognised as schools of crime. They constitute schools for the training and development of criminal networks and have contributed to the increase in crime. Prison sentences appear to contribute to the further development of criminal behaviour: 44%[5] of those who have been incarcerated learn new criminal skills, 49% build criminal networks and 39% believe the incarceration assisted in the furtherance of their criminal career. Only 15% of the young people who have been incarcerated considered that the prison sentence would deter them from committing crimes in the future. For example the Bomana prison in Port Moresby is often referred to as the "university" where inmates enter without any skills and come out armed with skills and contacts with crime.

The *judiciary* is unable to handle the increase in the number of offences. Justice is slow; it is ill suited, overloaded and uses an outdated working methodology such as the Westminster system or a blend of traditional systems. An inefficient judiciary and lack of accountability with respect to offences such as money laundering, organised crime, and involvement in the gangs, corruption and violation of human rights has lead to an increase in crime by generating a feeling of impunity.

There are many institutions involved in the law and justice system, such as the Police, National Capital District Commission (NCDC's) Law and Order committee, the Justice Advisory Group and the Consultative and Implementation Monitoring Council that creates duplication, functional overlaps and gaps. The lack of a common strategy and coordination compounds the problem.

Decline of Traditional Cultural Practices

The city has a rich ethnic diversity, which makes it a melting point for socio-cultural interaction. However, this ethnic diversity has also contributed to a general lack of shared values and standards, which contributes to the breakdown of traditional family values and

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[4]   Gladwell, 2001
[5]   In 2003, the UN-HABITAT in collaboration with United Nations Development Program and the government of Papua New Guinea carried out a diagnosis of local insecurity survey in Port Moresby to analyse factors underpinning crime in Port Moresby

social structures relating to conflict resolution. People in urban areas are losing access to their cultural traditions and modes of conflict resolution[6].

The destruction of traditional institutions such as village courts or councils of elders, which were the embodiment and enforcement of social cultural values, is also a contributory factor to the escalation of crime in the city. The absence of these systems has given way to the flourishing of a gang culture acting as a right of passage for young people to mature in adulthood under the close supervision of 'big men'. In addition to this, replacement of traditional institutions with western models has contributed to the loss of traditional sanctions to address criminal behaviour among the diverse ethnic groups found in PNG.

Community and traditional mechanisms for settling disputes, which were once effective, are now weakening and losing their impact. This is partly due to their lack of recognition from government authorities in terms of the provision of resources, training and complementary access to justice.

As an example, traditional village courts are in operation in most settlements with the help of volunteering elders from the various ethnic groups. The lack of financial and technical assistance and recognition from government, these informal village courts are losing ground.

Abuse of the "Wantok" System

The *wantok* literally means people who speak your language. However it also has some sociocultral responsibilities with the extended family of the Melanesian society, which PNG falls within. Every *wantok* is born with duties to their *wantoks* - within the clan, village and city. Each person can expect to be housed, fed, protected, and to share in the assets of members of the extended family. The *wantok* system could be used to encourage crime and violence but it may also serve to protect individuals.

The declining use of conflict resolution mechanisms in urban areas compels individuals to use their *wantoks* to resolve disputes. It is not uncommon to hear *wantoks* using community justice (the pay back system). Abuse of the *wantok* system has created an environment which breeds ethnic tensions in especially within the squatter settlements and often results in increased violence.

When individuals commit crime it is often difficult to prosecute the perpetuators for fear of retribution from their *wantoks*. When conflicts arise support is usually along family lines factions even though they may acknowledge that the best option may be a peaceful resolution. If the *wantoks* decide the pay back everybody else joins in which often aggravates the situation. On the other hand the *wantok* system is often used as a shield of protection as individuals are scared to commit criminal activities against certain groups of people within the city.

The Impacts of Urbanisation

Like most cities in the pacific and elsewhere, Port Moresby has had its share of urbanisation. The increase in population growth in the city has led to expansion of squatter settlements. However, unlike most cities in the developing world, the urbanisation process in PNG is not regarded as part of the transformation of the space economy for accelerated development. Government policy still views urbanisation as inappropriate for the socioeconomic development of the country. Whilst there are some merits in this policy direction past

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[6]   Shaw, 2002

attempts to discourage rural-urban migration which included urban repatriation has had very limited success.

When migrants arrive they initially live with relatives within the squatter settlements and eventually build their own 'shelter' in these areas. Since there is a conscious decision not to recognise squatter settlements in the city, residents of these areas lack access to basic infrastructure and sanitation services. City managers and planners do not include the any formal development activities that may impact on their quality of life. There are no local mechanisms for residents to articulate their opinions and needs or to be consulted to inform policymaking

The exclusion of residents in the development process, the failure of policy makers and planners to recognise squatter settlements has created a dislike for authority. Residents in these areas resent these treatments and since most of them do not have skills to compete in the job market for employment result in criminal activities to support their urban lifestyles. In addition to these, as mentioned in section 3.3 the police rarely patrol these areas, which further alienate residents making these areas havens of crime in the city.

Types of Criminal Activities

The main crimes committed by the respondents in Port Moresby in order of frequency are burglary, petty crime, assault, car jacking, drug dealing, property crimes, rape, violence and vandalism. Overall, crimes in Port Moresby involve a high level of violence (48% of crimes) compared to other cities in PNG where violence is used in 25% to 30% of crimes. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents had committed serious crimes involving violence, such as murder, rape and car jacking. Nearly half (47%) of the sample are petty offenders, 21% being property offenders - however the majority (66%) of property crimes involved violence or the threat of violence, 15% were engaged in organised crime (drugs and weapons trade) and 7% of the sample have "dabbled" in multiple forms of crime.

Table 1: Summary of criminal activities committed by sex
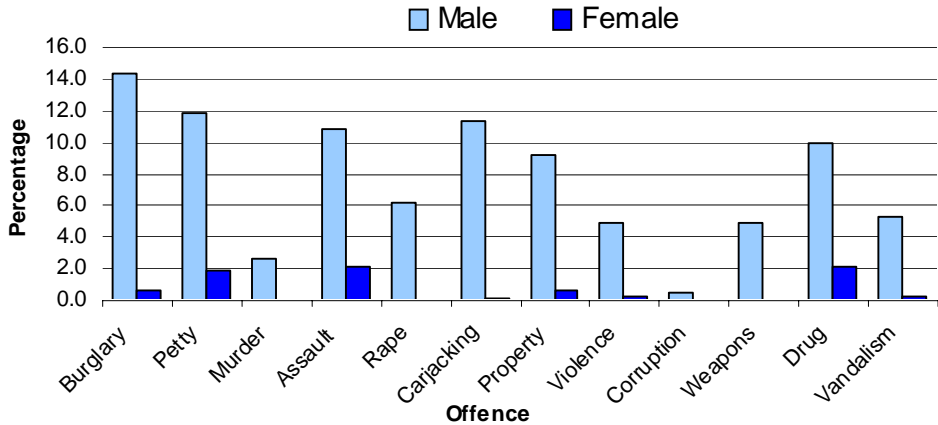
Source: Analysis of Youth and Survey

It can be gleaned from the graphs that most of the first and the relatively serious offences are committed by young males between the ages of 15 and 20. The most common first offence is petty crime (which includes theft, pick pocketing, shoplifting and bag snatching). This

underscores the need to create opportunities for these perpetuators of crime to acquire useful skills to enable them become responsible residents of the city.

Crime and Violence

There is a relationship between crime and violence in Port Moresby it is estimated that 42% of all first offences involves violence. The majority (63%) of the offenders use violence or the threat of violence whilst other commits property crimes. The use of violence in crime creates a feeling of fear among the population. Nearly one quarter of crime committed by young offenders involve use of weapons such as guns, knives, swords or blade. The high incidence of weapons in criminal activities shows the need to tighten and enforce existing legislation governing acquisition and carrying of weapons in the city.

It is uncommon to hear people relating experiences on a daily basis of being assaulted or threatened with weapons during a criminal attack. As a result of this it is very common to see most vulnerable groups such as women, older citizens walking in pairs to provide added security in case of any attack. There is a general uneasy among residents when visiting areas notorious for violent crimes such as banks, public transport stations and shopping centres.

Substance Abuse and Crime

On the issue of substance use and/or abuse (alcohol and drugs – mainly marijuana), young people usually acquire these substances with the proceeds from petty criminal activities, and others steal money so as to acquire drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. It is a common sight on the streets of Port Moresby to see young people smoking cigarettes. Drinking of alcohol is also common especially of pay weekends, when sporting events are held or when special activities are commemorated. Use of illegal drugs is also prevalent...

The widespread substance abuse especially among the youth often contributes to increases in criminal activities and street brawls. This is because when people come under the influence of alcohol[7] they become easily aggressive and increases the desire to callously attack residents in the city. Since some of these perpetuators of criminal activity are often under the influence of drugs they have been cases when their victims have been their on relatives or close associates. This further exacerbates the criminal problem as the victims and their associates also organise themselves to seek revenge. The pay back system is deeply entrenched in Papua New Guinea in general and pursued with passion in Port Moresby because of unfortunate widespread criminal activities.

High Incidence of Domestic Violence

Violence against women is escalating in Port Moresby. However most communities view domestic violence as a private matter and therefore very few victims report them. As a result of this even though domestic violence is regarded as a crime in PNG very few cases are prosecuted. Gang rape, assault on women and domestic violence is on the increase. This often occur when spouse usually the men are under the influence of alcohol and there is a disagreement in the household. Since it is unfortunately generally "accepted" by married woman that domestic violence is part of married, often time women are unwilling to report these cases. When victims of domestic violence report assault to relatives it is usually frown up and the victim does not usually receive any sympathy from relatives our friends.

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[7]   Alcohol is in famously called the white man poison because alcohol is widely believed to have been introduced with the arrival of Europeans

In addition, some ethnic groups living in Port Moresby still practice polygyny, which also contributes to violence committed against women by other women, which are often associated with domestic disputes. In 2003, it was reported that nearly 65 percent of women in prison were there for attacking or killing another woman[8].

There is prevalent child abuse sexual abuse and inequalities between men and women based on traditional role models that conflict with modern influences and the social and economic pressures of urbanisation.

Criminal Gangs

Historically these gangs acquired recognition and status in their communities. Although gangs have now become a nuisance and a threat to law and order in contemporary Port Moresby, the urban culture that has emerged still supports criminal behaviour and views it as a respected way of acquiring status and recognition, particularly amongst young males.

These gangs provide *rights of passage* for their members through crime and violence in the city. The demographic structure and the number of men who migrate to Port Moresby partly contribute to the high number of men involved in criminal activities in the city. When these men move into Port Moresby they affiliate with gangs usually along ethnic lines. These gangs play a dual role of assisting the recently arrived migrant to settle into the city. Most of these migrants arrive from a rural economy, which is sustained by a quasi-cash economy an urban cash economy.

Conclusions and Priorities for Action

Port Moresby's law and justice issue has been created by a number of issues, which are intertwined to make it an intractable problem to address. The discussion so far has highlighted another of key areas that attract priority action lay the foundation for a systematic and coordinated intervention. So of the main areas include:

5.1 Improving the range of economic opportunities in the city and by extension the country. There is need to re think how that informal sector can be fully integrated into the urban economy to encourage more participation. The government of PNG and the National Capital District Commission have set up a committee to develop strategies to encourage the development of the informal sector. This is a commendable initiative which will assist in creating more employment opportunities for the under and unemployed in the city.

5.2 The international donor community especially Australia and New Zealand governments are working in close collaboration with various government departments in Port Moresby to improve the level of professionalism, transparency, and public confidence in the police and criminal justice system, as well as most other public institutions through community policing.

5.3 The government is also re-focusing its attention and resources on crime prevention and restorative justice, including police training and equipment provision, the introduction of alternative punishments to imprisonment, supported by the re-socialisation and rehabilitation of offenders.

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[8]   US AID, 2003

5.4   In addition to these initiatives there are a number of priority actions underway in the city to address some of the underlying causes of crime. These include

- Promote social cohesion in the city through programmes aimed at maintaining social harmony;

- Functionally educate communities on the benefits of crime reduction; and

- Encourage mediation and conflict resolution at the family level.

- The recently created urbanisation commission although in its infancy is examining policy options to encourage maintain a healthy balance between the provision of infrastructure services in squatter settlement areas and a rural development strategy to reduce the influx of people to Port Moresby.

- Include squatter settlements in planning and management, including a review of various land tenure opportunities that would benefit both landowner and occupier; and

- Strengthen the participatory and coordination capacity of urban managers and planners.

Addressing the law and justice issue in Port Moresby will require a concerted effort from all the key players such as the government, the private sector, social groups in the country, the employed, unemployed and the international donor community to carefully discuss all the issues within a holistic framework. Previous approaches have been and at best ad hocish and very disappointing. The city has very has enormous potential to develop and its residents are keen to find a lasting solution to the law and justice problem in the city. This is essential to improve the safety and security situation in Port Moresby, which will enhance the quality of life of residents and visitors alike and most importantly restore investor confidence and enable tourists to visit this beautiful island country in the Pacific.

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