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## Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation in Liberia (Part 1): Results from a Longitudinal Study

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## **Executive Summary**

Policymakers in Liberia face a dearth of evidence to guide their ambitious agenda of security sector reform, strengthening of property rights and the rule of law, and reconciliation. This lack of data is especially acute outside the capital and in areas where UN and police presence is limited.

This report attempts to help fill this gap by exploring levels, patterns and trends in local-level conflict and cooperation in rural Liberia. Researchers from Yale University and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) have been running a longitudinal study of 247 communities across Lofa, Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties for the past two years. Over 10,000 community members and leaders have been interviewed during two rounds of surveys, one in early 2009 and a second in late 2010.

In this report we address three questions in particular:

- 1) What do our data tell us about the prevalence of crime and violence in rural Liberia, and about the prospects for extending the security sector beyond Monrovia and into the counties?
- 2) Where and under what conditions do land disputes occur, what is the risk they will escalate into violence, and how are they usually resolved, if at all?
- 3) To what extent do cleavages exacerbated by 14 years of civil war continue to strain inter-group and interpersonal relationships today? More generally, how are levels of trust and social cohesion evolving over time?

This report is designed to complement a series of Yale and IPA program evaluations on post-conflict peacebuilding, recovery and employment. Unlike these other studies, this report seeks to describe patterns and provide information rather than develop detailed policy recommendations. Our goal is to challenge some of the conventional wisdom that underlies current policymaking in the hope of stimulating new discussion and debate.

### **Findings Relevant to Security Sector Reform**

Overall, levels of crime and violence across these three counties are low and have decreased dramatically over time.

- Petty disputes and non-violent crime are endemic in rural Liberia, but incidents of interpersonal and collective violence—assaults, mob violence, ritual killings—are rare.
- Comparing early 2009 to early 2010, almost all our measures of conflict appear to be decreasing over time, in some cases dramatically.
- Most striking is the fall in interpersonal violence: reports of simple assault, aggravated assault and rape are all down by large percentages. “Ritualistic” violence, such as trials by ordeal, is on the decline as well.

As the prevalence and severity of conflict declines, many rural Liberians express a preference for national providers of security—especially the police—over local or international ones.

- Many say they would feel safer if the police and army carried weapons, and large and striking majorities express optimism that security will improve once UN peacekeepers leave.

Yet preferences for the police coexist with widespread perceptions of corruption and waste in the national government.

- While a majority of respondents prefer national over local or international providers of security, roughly half describe national institutions as corrupt or wasteful, and two-thirds believe they would have to pay a fee for the police to investigate in the event of a crime.
- Perceptions of corruption are especially acute among respondents who have reported incidents of crime or violence to the police, and levels of conflict are higher rather than lower in communities that host a police station or magistrate.
- In contrast, complaints of corruption are much lower for local and international institutions.

### **Findings Relevant to Land Conflict**

Disputes over land use, tenure and inheritance are endemic throughout rural Liberia.

- One-fifth of respondents report involvement in an ongoing land conflict in 2010 alone.
- Many of these disputes are the result of wartime displacement and resettlement patterns, as well as ambiguities between customary and formal property rights.

Unlike many of the other indicators of conflict in our survey, the pervasiveness of land disputes seems to have persisted over time. Many of these land disputes never escalate into violence, but a surprisingly high proportion of them do.

- Among those that experienced any serious (or “heavy”) dispute in 2010, half report some form of escalation, including threats, verbal abuse or destruction of property. More alarming, a third reports an incident of violence.
- The potential for escalation highlights the importance of identifying where and under what conditions land conflicts are most likely to occur. We find that land disputes are especially common among men and among wealthier community members in wealthier towns and villages.
- More surprising, we also find that land conflicts are both more prevalent and more violent among disputants of the same tribe.

While violence may be more common than previously assumed, we also find that rates of resolution are high for the most serious disputes.

- Of those involved in a “heavy” land conflict in 2010, two-thirds report having reached a resolution by the time of data collection.
- Nearly two-thirds stated that they were satisfied with the outcomes of their disputes.

Although many of these conflicts eventually get resolved, “forum-shopping” is widespread.

- We identify at least 18 different forums for land dispute resolution in these three counties.
- A high proportion of respondents report “forum-shopping” in two or more places because they are unsatisfied with the first resolution to their conflict.

### **Findings Relevant to Reconciliation**

While it is unclear how the concept of “reconciliation” will translate into policy, we suggest that reconciliation must, at the very least, mean bridging the divide between individuals on opposite sides of social cleavages opened or exacerbated by war. By this measure, reconciliation remains a distant goal.

- We find that intra-communal cohesion and trust—both important indicators of reconciliation—seem to be deteriorating over time. Community members feel that they get less help, that their rights are less respected, and that their community is less fair or safe in late 2010 than in early 2009.
- Perceptions of fairness and access to justice have deteriorated as well.

Inter-tribal biases and stereotypes remain especially pervasive, perpetuating a sense of inequity among Liberia’s ethnic minorities.

- Two-thirds of respondents express prejudicial and stereotypical views of other tribes. The most common target of these biases is the Mandingo tribe.

Prejudice against perceived “outsiders” is common in these communities as well.

- Most respondents believe that “some people try to act like citizens when they are not” both in Liberia generally and in their own communities.
- These sentiments may help explain why respondents are almost unanimous in their support for a stricter, more regulated notion of Liberian citizenship, including national identification cards.

We observe the lowest levels of social cohesion in communities most affected by wartime violence. We also find that ethnic heterogeneity predicts crime and violence where multiple groups vie for dominance in a single community.

- Tribe and conflict are correlated in complex ways. Both highly homogenous and highly diverse communities have lower levels of conflict. Levels are higher in communities approaching a balance of tribes, or ones in which a single ethnic group has achieved near (but not total) dominance.
- While we find no evidence that other wartime social cleavages are associated with conflict, communities that were most exposed to violence during the war continue to rank among the most conflicted today.

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# 1. Introduction and Background

In the recently-revised Peacebuilding Priority Plan, the Government of Liberia (GoL) and the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) identify three key themes for post-election policymaking: security sector reform, property rights and the rule of law, and reconciliation. In pursuing these goals, the next administration faces a number of daunting tasks: installing regional security hubs around the country; accelerating land reform; creating forums for national reconciliation and dialogue; and bolstering the fledgling justice system.

Policymakers face a dearth of evidence to guide programming for this ambitious agenda. Scant data exists on the levels, patterns and drivers of conflict in Liberia, or on Liberians' perceptions of the security sector, land tenure and post-war reconciliation. Data is especially scarce outside the capital and in areas where UN and police presence is limited.

Over the past two years, a host of studies have begun to fill this gap, including the Berkeley Human Rights Center's (HRC) survey on patterns of conflict and dispute resolution;<sup>1</sup> Landmine Action's (LMA) media analysis on armed violence;<sup>2</sup> the Small Arms Survey's research on insecurity in the counties and LMA's companion survey in Monrovia; an evaluation of the local-level impacts of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);<sup>3</sup> and the International Crisis Group's (ICG) political and institutional analysis on the prospects for ongoing recovery.<sup>4</sup>

This report complements these studies by analyzing recent trends in conflict and cooperation in rural Liberia. Researchers from Yale University and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) have been running a longitudinal study of 247 communities across Lofa, Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties since 2009. Over 10,000 community members and leaders have been interviewed, in a combination of remote and central locations.

The main goal of our research was to evaluate a peace education program implemented by the UNHCR and the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission. Our findings are described in an earlier report, "*Can we teach peace and conflict resolution?*"<sup>5</sup>

In this report we move beyond the purposes of program evaluation to explore trends in conflict and cooperation over time and across counties. This report uses our uniquely fine-grained data to glean insights into three key themes outlined in Liberia's Peacebuilding Priority Plan: security sector reform, land conflict and the rule of law, and reconciliation. We address three questions in particular:

- 1) What do our data tell us about the prevalence of crime and violence in rural Liberia, and about the prospects for extending the state security sector beyond Monrovia and into the counties?

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham, and Tino Kreutzer, "Talking Peace: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes About Security, Dispute Resolution, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Liberia," (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Human Rights Center, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Landmine Action, "Media analysis on armed violence in Liberia, 2008-2011," (Monrovia, Liberia: Landmine Action / Action on Armed Violence, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Mvukiyehe and Cyrus Samii, "Quantitative Impact Evaluation of the United Nations Mission in Liberia: Final Report," (2010).

<sup>4</sup> ICG, "Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?," in *Africa Report 177* (International Crisis Group, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Blattman, Alexandra Hartman, and Robert Blair, "Can we teach peace and conflict resolution? Results from a randomized evaluation of the Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in Liberia " (New Haven, CT: Innovations for Poverty Action, 2011). <http://www.poverty-action.org/project/0139>

- 2) Where and under what conditions do land disputes occur, what is the risk they will escalate into violence, and how are they usually resolved, if at all?<sup>6</sup>
- 3) To what extent do cleavages opened or exacerbated by 14 years of civil war continue to strain inter-group and interpersonal relationships today?

Underlying our answers to these questions is an attempt to identify the individual and community characteristics most associated with the incidence of crime and violence. Many of the variables in our analysis constitute potential risk and protective factors for conflict: poverty; ethnic and tribal polarization; the presence of ex-combatants; quality of roads and other infrastructure; access to the police and UN. Our analysis attempts to identify which, if any, of these variables consistently predicts conflict over time and across communities.

This exercise is especially relevant to the goal of conflict early warning and early response in Liberia. Peacekeepers, government and civil society have expressed a mutual interest in developing an early warning system to prevent the spread of local conflicts into regional or national ones. Such a system would track the risk factors for conflict in order to contain emerging disputes before they spiral out of control.

Before we can attempt early warning, however, we must narrow the number of potential risk factors and begin to analyze which, if any, can be used to forecast conflict. This memo takes a first step in that direction. An upcoming report will address the issue of forecasting in more detail—whether it is possible, and what our longitudinal data can teach us about the risk factors for conflict now and into the future.

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<sup>6</sup> For purposes of this report, we use the word “escalation” to describe the process by which a non-violent conflict becomes violent. We use the word “spread” to describe the process by which an interpersonal conflict becomes a communal, regional or national one. While these two processes often go hand in hand, we treat them as logically independent: a conflict can escalate without spreading, and can spread without escalating.

## 2. Our Research and Methods

### A. Quantitative data collection

Over the course of two years, we collected survey data from 11,373 community members and leaders in 247 towns and villages in Lofa, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh counties. The data were collected as part of an evaluation of the PBF-funded Community Empowerment Program;<sup>7</sup> results from that evaluation are presented in Blattman, Hartman and Blair (2011). Data collection occurred in two rounds:

- Round 1: In March and April of 2009, IPA interviewed a random sample of 20 adults in each of the 247 communities. The team also surveyed four leaders in each community—typically a town chief, a female leader, a youth leader and a minority leader—for a total of 5,632 respondents.
- Round 2: In November and December of 2010, IPA returned to each of the 247 communities and conducted a second round of surveying with a new random sample of 20 adults. The team also attempted to interview the same 4 leaders from Round 1,<sup>8</sup> for a total of 5,741 respondents.

Using these two rounds of surveying, we construct a panel dataset that draws on the same pool of leaders over time and a repeated cross-section of randomly-selected community members, representative of each of these 247 towns and villages.

Our research design allows us to measure conflict and cooperation in two different ways. In each community we asked our 20 randomly-selected respondents to report on events that they themselves experienced; in analyzing this data, we capture the percentage of *individuals* reporting a given event in a given year. We also asked all four leaders in each town or village to report on incidents that occurred anywhere within their communities, allowing us to estimate the percentage of *communities* that experienced a given event in a given year. The availability of these two measures offers us additional leverage in quantifying the prevalence and trends in conflict and cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

### B. Qualitative investigation

Three Liberian staff and one of the lead researchers conducted regular and systematic qualitative interviews in 14 communities to explore the nature and drivers of conflict through respondents' narratives. We conducted 104 interviews between April 2009 and December 2010, totaling around 80 hours of recorded material that is now in the process of being transcribed, organized and analyzed. Additional interviews are

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<sup>7</sup> The CEP centered around a series of small, intensive, eight-day workshops conducted with roughly 10% of all adults in each community, typically over several weeks or months. The aim of the program was to: (i) educate people on their rights, and to respect the rights of others; (ii) encourage community collective action towards shared goals; and (iii) foster non-violent dialogue and conflict resolution. Demand for the training outstripped available funding, and so CEP communities were randomly selected from a larger pool of eligible towns and villages, creating a random treatment and control group for comparison. As part of our evaluation, we surveyed and compared outcomes in the treatment and control communities before and after the program.

<sup>8</sup> In some cases a leader surveyed in Round 1 had been replaced by the time we returned for Round 2. In these cases, we interviewed whoever had assumed the position of the removed leader.

<sup>9</sup> By way of illustration, consider the example of burglaries. If 1,000 of our (approximately) 5,000 randomly-sampled community members report that they themselves were burglarized, we assume that each of them is reporting a separate incident, and we conclude that 20% of all respondents were burglarized in the past year. In contrast, if all 4 leaders in a given community report a burglary, we assume that they are reporting the *same* event, and we conclude that *at least one* burglary occurred in that community. If the four leaders disagree, we assume that the most common response is the correct one. We err in favor of over- rather than under-estimating the prevalence of conflict—so, for example, if two leaders report that a burglary occurred and two report that it didn't, we assume that it did. If at least two leaders in 50 of these (approximately) 250 communities report that someone was burglarized, we conclude that 20% of communities experienced at least one burglary in the past year.



planned for October and November of this year, focusing on the dynamics of collective violence in Lofa and Nimba counties in particular.

All three lead researchers conducted informal interviews in over a dozen communities both during and between our two rounds of quantitative data collection. In addition, all staff recorded field notes and observations, which we reference occasionally in this report.

### **C. Other relevant research**

As part of a larger research program, IPA and its associates are involved in several other projects that inform and extend our analysis.

- Dr. Christopher Blattman is working with Jeannie Annan (International Rescue Committee) and the NGO Action on Armed Violence (formerly Landmine Action) on a longitudinal evaluation of an ex-combatant reintegration program in rural Liberia.<sup>10</sup>
- Alexandra Hartman is studying patterns of land conflict in rural Liberia independently and with the Norwegian Refugee Council.
- Robert Blair has conducted research for the Small Arms Survey on crime reporting and the relationship between civilians and the Liberian National Police, and is working independently on a comparative study of state-building processes in Liberia, Colombia and Afghanistan.
- Dr. Blattman is also working with Julian Jamison (Harvard Kennedy School and US Federal Reserve) and Dr. Margaret Sheridan (Harvard Medical School) on a longitudinal study of urban street youth reintegration and poverty alleviation in Monrovia, the results of which will be available in early 2012.

### **D. Caveats**

Before proceeding with our analysis, three caveats should be kept in mind:

#### ***Non-random sampling of communities***

The 247 communities that we survey *do not constitute a random sample of towns and villages in rural Liberia*. In each county, political and traditional leaders were asked to nominate “conflict-prone” communities as potential targets for the CEP. Our sample is not nationally representative, and we expect that levels of conflict in these communities may be higher—and levels of cooperation lower—than in the average Liberian community.

We do not believe, however, that our sample is so exceptional as to preclude comparison to other studies. Comparing our results to Berkeley HRC’s nationally-representative survey, we find that our 247 communities are indeed conflicted, but not much more so than the average Liberian town or village. We interpret this as evidence that these communities are at least somewhat representative of Lofa, Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties, and perhaps of rural Liberia more generally.

#### ***Self-reporting***

While rigorous, our research design relies on people’s reports of their own thoughts, beliefs and actions, and is thus necessarily prone to subjectivity. Different respondents may have interpreted the same ques-

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<sup>10</sup> Jeannie Annan and Christopher Blattman, "Reintegrating and employing High Risk Youth in Liberia: Lessons from a randomized evaluation of a Landmine Action agricultural training program for ex-combatants " (New Haven, CT: Innovations for Poverty Action, 2011).

tions in different ways, and some may have felt wary of recounting certain attitudes and events—particularly those involving sensitive cultural issues—in the context of a survey.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, some aspects of conflict and cooperation may be difficult if not impossible to measure with questionnaires and interviews alone. These caveats apply to all survey-based research, and while we subjected our methodology to extensive field testing prior to data collection, ambiguities in the interpretation of our results inevitably remain.

### *Correlation, causation and the difficulty of predicting conflict*

Throughout this memo we examine the risk factors correlated with conflict over time and across communities. Correlation is not causation, however, and the associations we observe do not imply a relationship of cause and effect. Conflict, furthermore, is exceedingly difficult to predict. Despite our fine-grained data, we can explain only a fraction of the variation in most types of crime and violence. This suggests either that we are examining the wrong risk factors or, more likely, that conflict is simply too idiosyncratic to predict in any systematic way. This has important implications for conflict early warning, which we discuss in our next memo. Nevertheless, we do find some strong patterns in the data, and we report them with this caveat in mind.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This point is particularly relevant for our measures of crime and violence. Surveys on crime suffer from a number of well-documented problems, including forgetfulness, “telescoping” (when events from the distant past are remembered as having occurred only recently), and simple dishonesty. In the U.S., for instance, “reverse record check” studies conducted for the National Crime Victimization Survey have found that only one-third to one-half of all assaults are recovered in subsequent interviews, even if the victim reported the incident to the police.

<sup>12</sup> We keep this discussion deliberately non-technical. Our results are preliminary, to be followed by more in-depth analysis in a future policy report. In the meantime, to analyze correlates, we run a linear multivariate regression of each conflict on a set of individual and community characteristics. We use the 5% level of significance to designate statistical significance. We generally report that a result is significant only if it is consistently so within the same family of outcomes. Note that the validity (i.e. lack of bias) of this technique hinges crucially on the assumption that we have not ignored any variable that correlates both with conflict and with any of the other variables included in the model. Our analysis almost certainly violates this assumption. The drivers of conflict are myriad and deeply interconnected; by excluding any one of them, as our simple model unquestionably does, we risk biasing our results. Nevertheless, we have a considerable amount of fine-grained, well-measured data—far more than is usually available—and so we regard these results as useful and strongly suggestive, though never conclusive.

### 3. Key Findings on Security Sector Reform

To contextualize the process of security sector reform, we analyze patterns and trends across various indicators of conflict in rural Liberia. We find that while petty disputes and non-violent crime are endemic, incidents of interpersonal and collective violence—assaults, mob justice, ritual killings—are rare. Furthermore, comparing early 2009 to late 2010, we find that the prevalence of most types of conflict is falling over time, occasionally in dramatic ways.

As the prevalence and severity of conflict declines, we find that many rural Liberians express a preference for national providers of security (especially the police) over local or international ones. Many say they would feel safer if the police and army carried guns, and large and striking majorities express optimism that security will improve once UN peacekeepers depart.

We also find, however, that preferences for the police coexist with widespread perceptions of corruption in the national government. Those perceptions are especially acute among respondents who have reported incidents of crime to the police, and levels of conflict are higher, not lower, in communities that host a police station or magistrate. We consider the implications of these findings for security sector reform in Section F below.

#### A. Small-scale conflicts are pervasive, but large-scale conflicts are rare

Small-scale disputes are pervasive in rural Liberia, but most are petty, interpersonal and non-violent. Table 1 below displays results from our second round of data collection. We find that 18% of community members report a burglary or theft in 2010, and 10% report a “palava” or petty dispute at a water pump or other public facility. Town leaders report that palavas between youth and elders occurred in 11% of communities, palavas over community-wide road maintenance in 33%, and palavas over natural resources in 7%.

While tensions surrounding these disputes may fester, interpersonal violence is in general very rare. Just 1% of community members report an armed robbery in the past year, 1% report a simple (unarmed) assault, and less than 1% report an aggravated (armed) assault. 5% report fights, but only 1% of those fights involved weapons. Capital offenses are more common, but still atypical: town leaders report a rape in 7% of communities in the past year, and a murder in 6%. The exception to this pattern is domestic violence, which remains epidemic across all three counties.

Inter-group or “collective” violence is rare as well. In only 2% of communities do town leaders report a violent strike or protest in the past year, and in just 3% do they report a violent confrontation between tribes.<sup>13</sup> Most of these disputes appear to have been minor, and only one (the violence in Voinjama, Lofa County in February of 2010) resulted in fatalities. While traffic accidents occurred in over half of all communities in the past year, just 2% suffered an episode of mob violence induced by accidents on the roads.

Ritual killings are rarer still. 8% of community members complain that they were accused of witchcraft in the past year, but town leaders report a ritual killing or beating in less than 1% of all communities, suggesting that accusations seldom escalate into violence. Just 3% of communities report a trial by ordeal.<sup>14</sup>

In some cases we are able to measure the same type of conflict using both the community member and leader surveys. That these numbers often conflict with one another is a result of the fact that these surveys

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<sup>13</sup> In Liberia the word “tribes” refers to ethno-linguistic groups.

<sup>14</sup> We define “trials by ordeal” as the use of sassywood or a hot cutlass in the prosecution of a suspected crime.

capture incidents of crime and violence at two different levels of aggregation (the individual and the community levels). Thus, for example, while 18% of community members report that they themselves were burglarized in the past year, burglaries occurred in 45% of all communities. We include additional detail on measurement in Section 2 above.

**Table 1: Prevalence of conflict in 2010**

	All	Lofa	Nimba	Grand Gede
<i>Collective violence</i>				
Violence between tribes (comm.)	3%	3%	1%	4%
Violent strikes or protests (comm.)	2%	2%	3%	0%
Violence after traffic accident (comm.)	2%	1%	3%	0%
<i>Ritual conflict</i>				
Accusations of witchcraft (ind.)	8%	6%	10%	11%
Witch killing or beating (comm.)	0%	0%	1%	0%
Trial by ordeal (comm.)	3%	0%	4%	6%
<i>Violent crime</i>				
Murder (comm.)	6%	6%	5%	6%
Rape (comm.)	7%	6%	6%	8%
Armed robbery (ind.)	1%	0%	1%	2%
Armed robbery (comm.)	1%	0%	1%	0%
Aggravated assault (ind.)	0%	0%	1%	0%
Simple assault (ind.)	1%	1%	1%	1%
Fights without weapons (ind.)	5%	4%	6%	6%
Fights without weapons (comm.)	17%	12%	24%	14%
Fights with weapons (ind.)	1%	0%	2%	1%
Fights with weapons (comm.)	4%	1%	7%	2%
Police brutality (comm.)	2%	1%	1%	4%
Domestic violence (comm.)	19%	15%	23%	19%
<i>Non-violent crime and petty disputes</i>				
Burglaries and theft (ind.)	18%	14%	25%	13%
Burglaries and theft (comm.)	45%	29%	62%	42%
Palavas because of tribe or religion (ind.)	2%	1%	3%	2%
Palavas at drinking water source (ind.)	10%	6%	14%	9%
Palavas over road-brushing (comm.)	33%	40%	33%	21%
Palavas between youth and elders (comm.)	11%	10%	10%	16%
Palavas over natural resources (comm.)	7%	3%	10%	10%
Palavas with another community (comm.)	12%	8%	18%	9%

Note: Variable names followed by (ind.) are measured at the individual level using the community members survey; variable names followed by (comm.) are measured at the community level using the leaders survey.

Our results are broadly consistent with other statistical research on crime and violence in Liberia. The Berkeley HRC survey, for example, finds that interpersonal violence is uncommon: 8% of respondents in Grand Gedeh report having been “beaten” in the past year, compared to 4% in Lofa and 5% in Nimba. Armed violence is especially rare: 4% of respondents in Grand Gedeh, 4% in Lofa and 5% in Nimba report having experienced “violence involving a weapon” in the past year.<sup>15</sup>

The Berkeley HRC study does not measure political or ethnic violence, but data from the Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) and the Liberian National Police (LNP) help confirm the patterns we detect. The CSCW Armed Conflict Location Events Dataset records just four incidents of collective violence nationwide in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Of 7,823 crimes reported to the LNP around the country in 2009, just 48 were coded as riots or mob violence.<sup>17</sup> We conclude that the prevalence of large-scale conflict in rural Liberia is, in general and according to a variety of sources, very low.

## **B. From early 2009 to late 2010, most measures of conflict declined**

Not only is the prevalence of conflict low in late 2010, but it appears to have fallen since early 2009, in some cases dramatically. Figures 1 through 3 display trends in three categories of conflict over time: collective and “ritual” violence, violent crime, and petty and interpersonal disputes. These trends can be interpreted as changes in the proportion of respondents (or communities) reporting a given type of conflict in a given year. For example, if a conflict occurs in 5 percent of communities in 2009, but just 3 percent in late 2010, we conclude that the prevalence has fallen 2 percentage points—a 40% decline relative to levels in 2009.

The dotted line in each figure represents a statistical confidence interval.<sup>18</sup> The length of the dotted line captures how certain we are in our results, with shorter lines corresponding to greater certainty. If the change in the prevalence of conflict is consistent across communities, then the level of variation will be low, the interval will be narrow, and we can be confident in the trend we detect (i.e., it is “statistically significant”). If the change is unsystematic—increasing in some communities, decreasing in others—then the confidence interval will be wide. If the interval includes zero, then we view the corresponding trend with skepticism (i.e., it is “statistically insignificant”). Note that some results may be statistically insignificant even if they are substantively quite large.

What can we conclude from these figures? Most of the trends we see are negative, suggesting that the prevalence of crime and violence has diminished over time—in some cases, steeply. Most striking is the decline in interpersonal violence: reports of simple assault are down 131% between 2009 and 2010, aggravated assaults are down 103%, and rapes 61%. “Ritual” conflicts have dropped sharply as well—a decline of 57% in accusations of witchcraft, and 74% in trials by ordeal. Collective violence has fallen too, though that trend is not statistically significant.

Of the few categories of conflict that seem to have increased over time, most are petty and interpersonal: palavas at the water pump or between youth and elders, and burglaries and thefts. None of these increases is statistically significant—the margin of error straddles zero and, in some cases, includes negative numbers as well. Witch-killings, murders and fights have also increased, but these results are statistically significant even after controlling for town characteristics.

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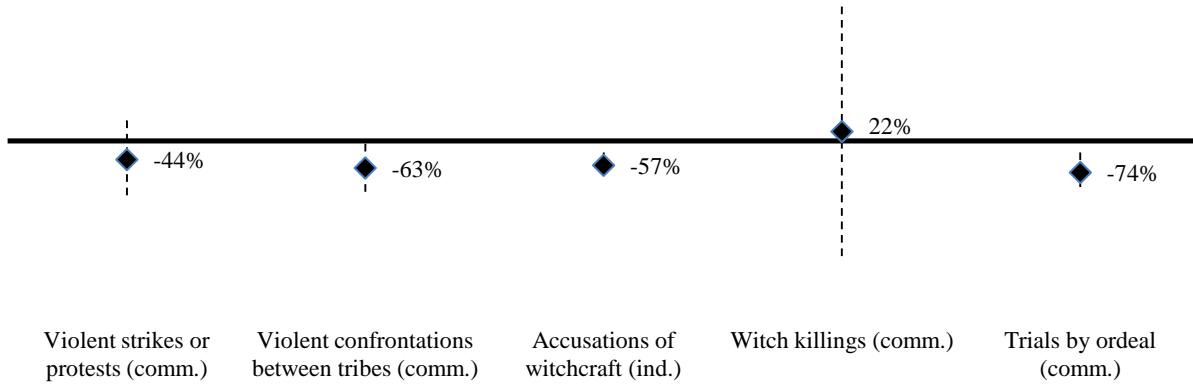
<sup>15</sup> Vinck, Pham, and Kreutzer, “Talking Peace.”

<sup>16</sup> CSCW, *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data*, (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2011).

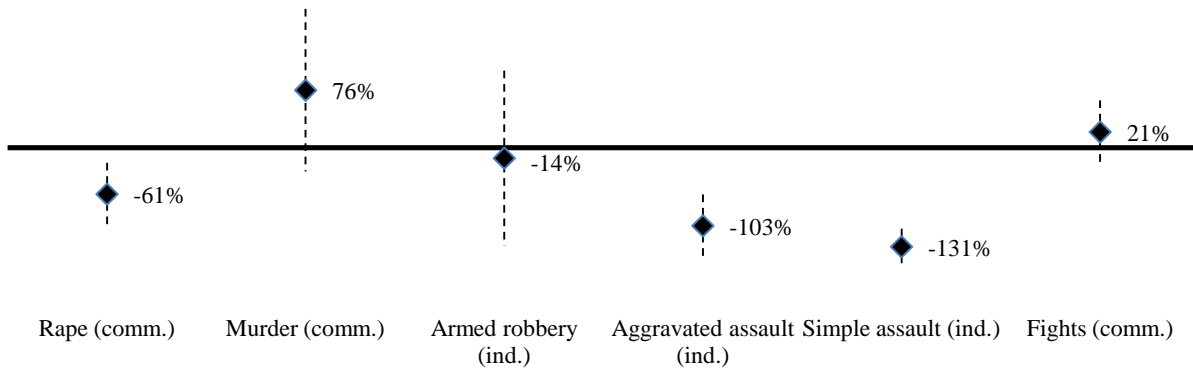
<sup>17</sup> These figures are from LNP administrative records collected by the lead researchers.

<sup>18</sup> We calculate trends by comparing averages in late 2010 to averages in early 2009. Since the respondents who answer the surveys are different in each year, we adjust for those differences in our calculation.

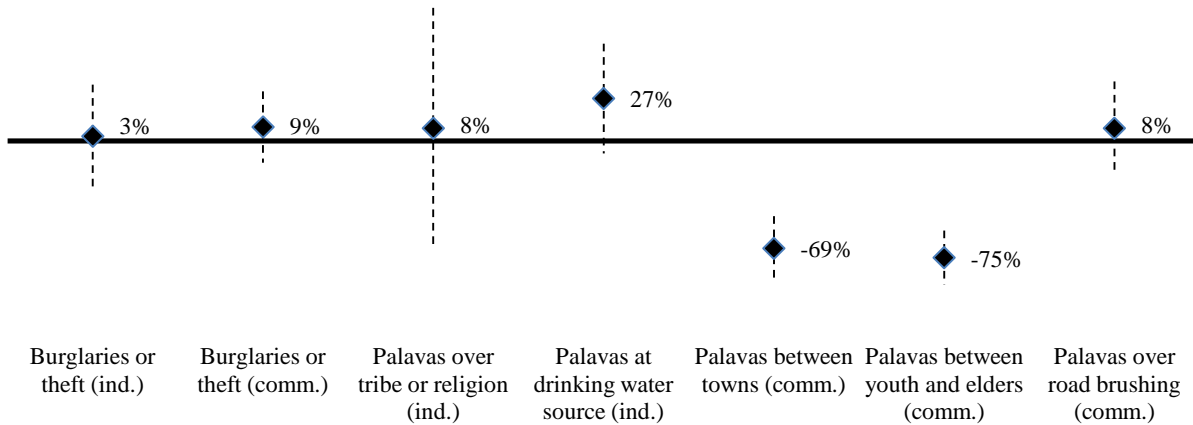
**Figure 1: Trends in collective and "ritual" violence, 2009-2010**



**Figure 2: Trends in violent crime, 2009-2010**



**Figure 3: Trends in petty and domestic disputes, 2009-2010**

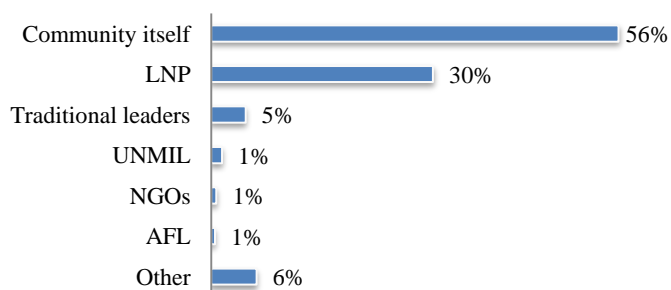


Unfortunately, we are unaware of any other longitudinal survey on crime and violence in Liberia, and so cannot corroborate our findings against other studies. Government sources are limited as well; while the GoL keeps records of all incidents reported to the police, those figures are distorted by low reporting rates and by the LNP’s absence from most rural communities. Again the most comparable data comes from the Centre for the Study of Civil War, which measures collective violence only. Consistent with the trends above, the CSCW finds that the prevalence of collective violence nationwide has declined from 16 incidents in 2008 to nine in 2009 and four in 2010.<sup>19</sup> We conclude that over the last several years, most of these rare events of conflict have become rarer still.

### C. Most rural Liberians feel responsible for their own safety, but prefer national over local or international providers of security

As the prevalence of conflict declines, many rural Liberians have come to hold nuanced and in some ways paradoxical views of the government’s role as purveyor of security. On the one hand, when asked who they believe should be “responsible” for security in their towns and villages, a majority of respondents—56%—answer that communities should provide security for themselves. Just 30% prefer the police, and negligible proportions favor any other institution: 1% each for UNMIL, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), and NGOs.

Figure 4: "Who should be responsible for security in this community?"



On the other hand, when asked about specific instances of crime and violence, most respondents express a preference for the GoL over all other domestic or international providers of security. In order to gauge these preferences, we asked respondents to consider five hypothetical scenarios of conflict at increasing levels of severity.<sup>20</sup> For each scenario, respondents were then asked which of three categories of security providers they would prefer to intervene: national institutions (LNP, AFL or “government people”), local institutions (community watch team, community leaders or “traditional” leaders ) or UNMIL.

In four of the five scenarios, we find that a majority of respondents prefer national institutions—especially the LNP—over local or international ones. In only one scenario (mob violence) did respondents favor local over national institutions, and even here the police rank second only to community leaders. Perhaps more surprising, in *no* scenario did a plurality of respondents express a preference for UNMIL. Except in the case of a rebel land takeover, the proportion favoring UN intervention never exceeds 15%.

<sup>19</sup> CSCW, *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data*.

<sup>20</sup> Incidents included 1) a murder; 2) an outbreak of mob violence; 3) an inter-tribal dispute resulting in at least one death; 4) a land takeover by Liberian ex-combatants; and 5) a land takeover orchestrated by rebels from a neighboring country.

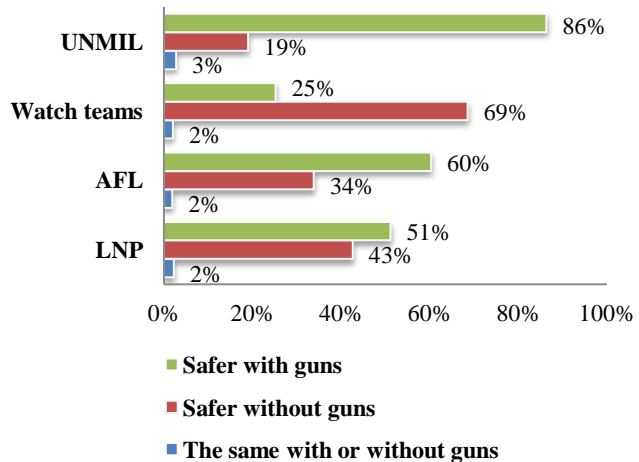
**Table 2: Preferences for providers of security in 2010**

	<b>Murder</b>	<b>Mob violence</b>	<b>Inter-tribal violence</b>	<b>Ex-com land takeover</b>	<b>Rebel land takeover</b>
Prefers LNP	48%	30%	40%	31%	17%
Prefers AFL	0%	0%	0%	1%	5%
Prefers GoL	15%	4%	18%	23%	35%
Prefers UNMIL	11%	6%	11%	15%	28%
Prefers community leaders	21%	49%	25%	25%	10%
Prefers community watch team	2%	5%	2%	2%	0%
Prefers traditional leaders	2%	5%	3%	4%	2%

Most respondents also tend to support the use of force among national institutions but not local ones. When asked how they would feel if the police carried guns, a majority (51%) said they would feel safer than they do now, compared to 43% who would feel less safe and 2% who would feel the same. The majority in favor of force is larger for the military: 60% said they would feel safer if the AFL were armed, compared to 34% who would feel less safe and 2% who would feel the same. In contrast, just 25% would feel safer if community watch teams were armed, compared to 69% who would feel less safe. And while most respondents seem to favor domestic over international providers of security, only a small minority—14%—believes that peacekeepers should be disarmed, compared to an overwhelming majority (81%) that believes they should not.

These disparities aside, that so many respondents endorse the use of force by any state security sector institution is perhaps surprising in and of itself. Given the history of state predation during the civil war, we might expect Liberians to prefer that the LNP and AFL remain disarmed. In our qualitative interviews, several respondents articulated this view: as one of them explained, “the police had guns before, and that was bad. Then they became rebels, and now they are police again. If you give them guns, things will be even worse.” Others, however, seemed to view coercion as essential to law enforcement in a society long-inured to the proliferation of firearms in civilian hands. A respondent in Ganta put the point succinctly: “Liberians are only afraid of man with gun.”

**Figure 5: Perceptions of the use of force**



#### **D. Rural Liberians are optimistic about security after UNMIL withdraws**

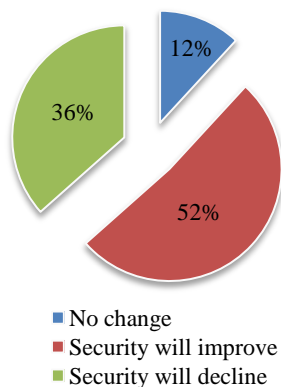
Our finding that most respondents favor the police over peacekeepers is consistent with a more general sense of optimism about the trajectory of conflict once UNMIL withdraws. We find that 52% of respondents believe security will improve in the country after UNMIL’s withdrawal, compared to just 36% who believe security will decline and 12% who believe there will be no change.



This is a striking result. Whatever one may think about UNMIL's performance in Liberia, it is hard to believe that the presence of some 8,000 blue helmets is *detrimental* to security. Yet from Figure 6 below, this is what a majority of respondents seem to believe. How should we interpret this finding?

One possibility is that respondents simply misunderstood the question. To generate results as lopsided as these, however, that misunderstanding would have to have been rampant. This strikes us as unlikely. Another possibility is that these figures reflect frustration with the continued predominance of international over domestic institutions, rather than an expectation that UNMIL's withdrawal will improve security in any direct or immediate way.

**Figure 6: "How will security change in the country after UNMIL withdraws?"**



A third possibility is that respondents believe peacekeepers are unfair in their responses to specific crises. Our qualitative research, for example, found that some residents of Voinjama in Lofa County remain indignant over what they perceive as bias in UNMIL's treatment of Lorma youths during the riots of February, 2010. If this interpretation were correct, however, we would expect disaffection with UNMIL's performance to generate complaints about ethnic bias as well. Yet in Figure 7 below, we find that 91% of respondents believe UNMIL treats all tribes and religions the same—a higher proportion than for any other security sector institution.

A fourth explanation, and perhaps the most plausible, is that respondents do not view UNMIL as a deterrent to "everyday" forms of crime and violence. In qualitative

interviews in Nimba County, several respondents complained that peacekeepers are too aloof or too slow to serve as a bulwark against these day to day conflicts. As one respondent put it, "I don't see the UNMIL people in this place. They don't keep time with us; they can only pass by." Another complained that "most of the time when there is a problem, UNMIL comes in very late, especially when people are fighting, destroying lives and properties. UNMIL will come in when the fight has already ended."

While we cannot adjudicate between these explanations using this data alone, ours is not the first study to have detected skepticism towards peacekeepers among rural Liberians. In particular, our findings coincide with a recent evaluation of UNMIL's local-level impacts, which finds that peacekeepers do not appear to deter crime, nor do Liberians perceive them as fulfilling an economic or humanitarian role in the country.<sup>21</sup> The evaluation also finds, however, that UNMIL is widely credited with preventing renewed civil conflict—a result that seems inconsistent with our respondents' expectation of a more peaceful future in UNMIL's absence.

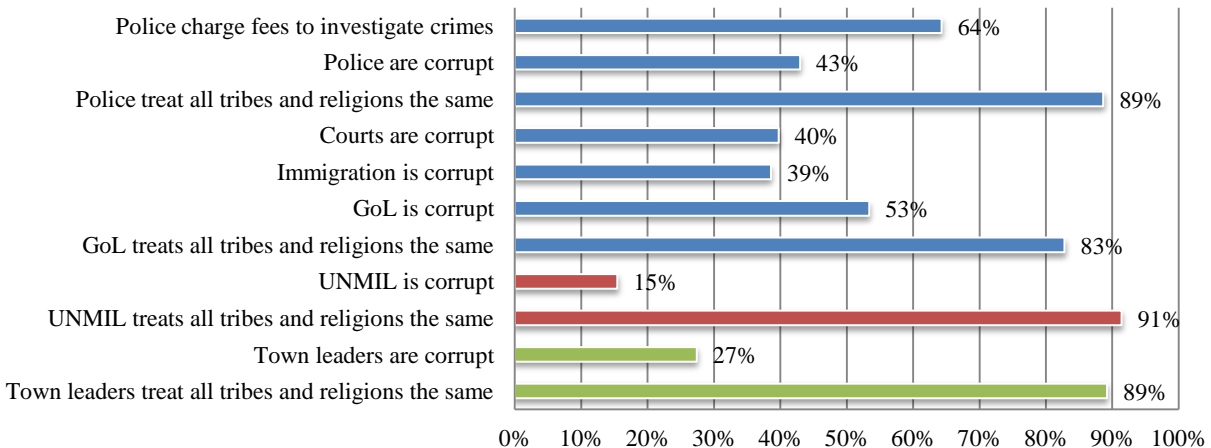
### **E. Crime is most common where the police are present, and perceptions of corruption are endemic in all three counties**

Such widespread confidence in the GoL is surprising given the security sector's legacy of human rights abuses during the civil war and its reputation for corruption today. That reputation remains endemic among our respondents in all three counties. Paradoxically, while a majority prefers national over local or international security providers, 53% describe the GoL as corrupt or wasteful. 39% say the same of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN), 40% of the courts, and 43% of the LNP. 64% believe

<sup>21</sup> Mvukiyehe and Samii, "Quantitative Impact Evaluation of the United Nations Mission in Liberia: Final Report."

they will have to pay a fee for the police to investigate in the event of a crime; as one respondent explained in a qualitative interview, “the police around here take money before they can even work.” Complaints of corruption are much lower for local and international institutions: 27% describe community leaders as corrupt, compared to just 15% for UNMIL.

**Figure 7: Perceptions of corruption in 2010**



Perceptions of corruption are amplified among respondents who have appealed to the police for assistance. We find that just 19% of crime victims report to the LNP, though the numbers diverge dramatically for violent and non-violent crime (67% and 13%, respectively). Those that do report are 4% more likely to describe the LNP as corrupt; 8% more likely to claim that the police charge fees to investigate; and 4% less likely to believe that the LNP treats all tribes and religions equally. At the same time, they are 11% more likely to prefer national over domestic or international providers of security, and 6% more likely to say they would feel safer if the LNP were armed. These numbers are even more pronounced when we consider victims of violent crime alone.

Perceptions of corruption thus coexist with a preference for the police over all other providers of security. What might explain this paradox?

**Table 3: Perceptions and exposure to the police**

	Victim of crime?		Reported crime to police (victims only)?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Police are corrupt	56%	40%	59%	55%
Police charge fees to investigate crimes	71%	63%	77%	69%
Police treat all tribes and religions the same	86%	89%	83%	87%
LNP should be responsible for security	32%	30%	35%	32%
Prefers LNP in hypothetical conflict scenarios	49%	45%	58%	47%
Would feel safer if police had guns	49%	52%	54%	48%
Would feel less safe if police had guns	45%	42%	43%	45%
Would feel same if police had guns	3%	2%	2%	3%

One possibility is that our questions are capturing hypothetical hopes for the future rather than actual preferences today. Security sector reform lies at the heart of the peacebuilding agenda in Liberia. That agenda projects an image of the GoL as a capable and legitimate purveyor of law and order. Rural Liberians may express a hope that the government will someday live up to that image without necessarily believing that it does so today.

We find some evidence for this interpretation in the gap between respondents' stated and revealed preferences. Our finding that only 19% of crime victims report to the police suggests that while rural Liberians may prefer the LNP in the abstract, rarely do they seek police assistance in practice. Respondents who express a hypothetical preference for the LNP may nevertheless approach a chief or elder (or UNMIL, or nobody) when attempting to resolve a conflict of their own.

Another possibility—one that more faithfully takes our respondents at their word—is that perceptions of corruption do not affect rural Liberians' preferences for providers of security. This explanation is consistent with Berkeley HRC's finding that, when asked to rank priorities for the government, respondents in 12 of 15 counties listed "security and safety" as a far more urgent concern than "fighting corruption" or "establishing rule of law."<sup>22</sup> Corruption may not matter to rural Liberians as much as it does to the country's international patrons. When police have no means of transport, little budget for jailing and feeding detainees, and low or irregular pay, fees for service may be interpreted as something more nuanced than mere "corruption."

This point became clear in our qualitative interviews. As one respondent explained, "The police have made us to understand that the government is not sponsoring their activities in this district. Even the vehicles they are using, the government is not giving them gasoline. So whenever we call them to do an arrest, they will ask whoever is making the complaint to pay extra fees to facilitate travel. We know that it is the government's responsibility to sponsor the activities of the police. So if the police ask us for fees, that means either the police are corrupt or the government is not doing its job."

*"We know that it is the government's responsibility to sponsor the activities of the police. So if the police ask us for fees, that means either the police are corrupt or the government is not doing its job."*

As further evidence that the ill-equipped LNP may struggle to deter conflict, we find that both violent and non-violent crimes are more prevalent in communities that host a police station or magistrate. More striking, political and ethnic violence are more common in these communities as well—a result that is both highly statistically significant and persistent over time.

This, of course, is only a correlation, not a relationship of cause and effect. While it may be that the police exacerbate conflict, other explanations are possible. Perhaps respondents are more likely to report crime where the police are present. For this interpretation to be convincing, we would have to believe that victims in LNP-patrolled communities are especially likely to report crime not just to the police, but to civilian survey enumerators as well. This strikes us as improbable. Alternatively, perhaps the police are especially likely to locate in communities that are prone to conflict in the first place. This is more plausible, though it assumes a level of tactical decision-making that may be unrealistic for a severely resource-constrained institution like the LNP. Whatever the explanation, our findings give us pause in attributing the declining trends in Section 1B to the presence of the police, and suggest cause for concern as the LNP expands its presence in the counties via the regional security hubs.

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<sup>22</sup> Vinck, Pham, and Kreutzer, "Talking Peace."

## F. Discussion and implications for security sector reform

*Media and policymakers may be placing too much emphasis on rare events with low likelihoods of escalation or recurrence.*

Certain types of conflict tend to garner an enormous amount of media and NGO attention in Liberia. Reports of ritual killings, mob justice and inter-tribal violence aggravate concerns over Liberia's fragile peace, and the implications of a single incident can resonate for many months after it occurs. Important and politically salient though these incidents may be, their prevalence should not be overestimated. Survey data help put these rare events into perspective.

Among the most frequently-cited sources of instability in Liberia is collective violence catalyzed by political or inter-tribal tensions. In the PBF's 2011 "Peacebuilding Priority Plan," mob violence is described as one of the highest-risk threats to peace in the short term. UNMIL's 21<sup>st</sup> progress report warns that "relatively minor disputes" can easily escalate into "major destabilizing incidents;"<sup>23</sup> UNMIL's 22<sup>nd</sup> report anticipates that the potential for escalation will be even greater in a "highly charged electoral context."<sup>24</sup>

While we should not underestimate the potential consequences of a few destabilizing events, neither should we overestimate their prevalence. We find that leaders report a violent strike or protest in just 2% of communities in the past year, and a violent confrontation between ethnic groups in just 3%. Ritual killings and trials by ordeal—two other oft-mentioned sources of instability—are rare as well. 8% of community members report having been accused of witchcraft in the past year, but leaders report a ritual killing or beating in less than 1% of communities, and a trial by ordeal in under 3%.

It is possible that these findings are spurious—the result of reporting bias or a skewed sample. Yet this seems unlikely. If anything, our sample selection of "conflict-prone" communities biases us towards finding atypically *high* rates of crime and violence. If the risk of large-scale conflict is as high as the government and media suggest, we would almost certainly expect to detect that risk among these 247 communities. Yet even here, we find that incidents of large-scale violence are rare. Nor is it obvious why respondents would underreport the prevalence of conflict in their communities.<sup>25</sup> The consistency of our findings with nationally representative surveys gives us additional confidence that these results are more than mere anomalies.

Policymakers should keep the risk of large-scale conflict in perspective in order to avoid over-programming around rare events. The flurry of government and NGO activity after the Voinjama riots in February of 2010 is an instructive case in point. The riots—which left four people dead and many more injured—were a tragedy and a threat to stability. Yet the resources devoted to Voinjama in the wake of the violence may have grown disproportionate to the severity of the events themselves and to the likelihood that they would recur. Over-programming around rare events can distract policymakers from other urgent needs, and can divert funding away from under-served communities where the marginal returns to new peacebuilding projects may be much greater.

*Grassroots institutions are no substitute for a diligent, competent and well-equipped police force. As the government expands the police and immigration services, there is a risk that quantity will increase*

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<sup>23</sup> UNSG, "Twenty-First Progress Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia," 11 August 2010.

<sup>24</sup> UNSG, "Twenty-Second Progress Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia," 14 February 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, our qualitative research suggests that respondents may view the arrival of researchers from an international NGO as a precursor to future aid. If this is the case, we might expect respondents to *overstate* the prevalence of conflict in order to make their communities appear more in need of assistance.

*faster than quality. Without reform and careful monitoring and evaluation, the regional security hubs may exacerbate bad relations rather than improve them.*

Corruption within the Liberian security sector is often described as an impediment to good governance and a hindrance to the reestablishment of the rule of law. In its 2011 report on security sector reform in Liberia, Search for Common Ground finds that “corruption and petty bribe seeking is still pervasive among LNP officers, particularly those deployed in the field.”<sup>26</sup> The ICG writes that corruption “remains pervasive at all levels, from the mismanagement of public funds, to magistrates and police demanding bribes before they perform their duties.”<sup>27</sup> Corruption may in some cases be a catalyst for violence as well. 63% of Berkeley HRC’s respondents describe corruption as the single most important cause of the civil war.<sup>28</sup>



**LNP officers at the Ganta station in Nimba County.**

Concerns about corruption will become especially urgent as the GoL expands its presence via the construction of five regional security hubs housing joint deployments of the police and the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN). If the hubs work as proposed, the frequency of contact between rural Liberians and the LNP and BIN will increase dramatically over the next several years, creating new possibilities and new risks for these agencies in repairing their damaged relationships with civilians.

Our results offer reason for both optimism and concern as the security sector expands. We find that victims of crime who report to the police are more likely to view the LNP as corrupt and biased than those who do not. They

are also, however, more likely to favor national over local or international providers of security. We find this same tension among rural Liberians more generally: preferences and heightened expectations for the LNP coexist with pervasive perceptions of corruption and ineptitude.

In our qualitative interviews, a resident of Ganta captured this tension concisely: “If we find people fighting in our community, we would love to go the police for intervention. But the police will always tell us that they are not equipped, so the community is left alone to settle the fight. So most often we take it to the community watch team, or just leave them to fight until they are tired.”

Whether this tension will prove sustainable over the long term is an open question. There is no guarantee that the hubs will improve relations between rural Liberians and the security sector; indeed, it is possible that the hubs will only complicate that relationship further. Expectations for the police are very high, and many Liberians may ultimately prefer an absent security sector to a corrupt or inept one.

Nor is there any guarantee that the hubs will suppress crime and violence. The Search for Common Ground report notes that “the presence of police officers in the counties is considerably low as compared

<sup>26</sup> SFCG, “Security sector reform in Liberia: A case of the Liberian National Police and its capacity to respond to internal threat in the wake of UNMIL drawdown in 2012,” (Search for Common Ground/Talking Drum Studio, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> ICG, “Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?”

<sup>28</sup> Vinck, Pham, and Kreutzer, “Talking Peace.”

to Monrovia,” and argues that the absence of the police makes rural Liberians “vulnerable to threats of violence and insecurity.”<sup>29</sup> We are skeptical of this view. We find that the decline in conflict between early 2009 and late 2010 occurred in communities where the LNP is absent at least as often as in those where the police are present. Furthermore, we find that the prevalence of conflict is *higher*, not lower, in communities hosting a police station or magistrate, even after controlling for community-level demographics. While correlations can be misleading, we view these findings as cause for alarm as the LNP expands into the counties.

The PBF’s Peacebuilding Priority Plan emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluation in gauging the success of the hubs. We urge the government and UN to take this responsibility seriously. Evaluation should not be limited to checklists on the quality of infrastructure or the number of LNP officers trained and dispatched to the hubs. While these are important concerns, impact must be measured through fine-grained, systematic research involving civilians themselves. There exists a real risk that the hubs will be ineffective or even counterproductive in improving perceptions of the police and curbing the prevalence of crime. Careful monitoring and evaluation can help ensure that this does not occur.

We also encourage local and international NGOs to participate in bolstering the capacity of the police. Community-based peacebuilding projects often aim to create new “grass-roots” security sector institutions: community watch teams to monitor crime; peace councils to adjudicate interpersonal disputes; “safety” committees to investigate emerging security threats and concerns. These projects are valuable, but should be designed in collaboration with the GoL so that they serve as complements rather than competitors to the state security sector. Our results suggest that for many rural Liberians, grassroots institutions may be no substitute for a diligent, competent and well-equipped LNP. NGOs can help ensure that the police live up to those high expectations.

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<sup>29</sup> SFCG, “Security sector reform in Liberia.”

## 4. Key Findings on Land Conflict

Disputes over land use, tenure and inheritance are endemic throughout rural Liberia.<sup>30</sup> While most of our other indicators of conflict are on the decline, we find that the prevalence of land disputes remains stubbornly high, and may even have increased from early 2009 to late 2010. While many of these disputes never escalate into violence, a surprisingly high proportion of them do.

The potential for escalation highlights the importance of identifying where and under what conditions land conflicts are most likely to occur. We find that these disputes are especially common among men and among relatively wealthy residents of relatively wealthy communities. More surprising, we also find that land conflicts are both more prevalent and more violent among disputants of the same tribe.

While many of these conflicts eventually get resolved, rural Liberians tend to take their claims to a wide variety of authorities and institutions, and “forum-shopping” is common. We are of two minds in interpreting the implications of this trend. On the one hand, the existence of multiple mechanisms for conflict resolution may increase access to justice, especially for ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged disputants. On the other, the proliferation of forums may prolong the resolution process, draining resources and unfairly advantaging those with the means and knowledge to shop for a favorable resolution.

### A. Land conflicts are ubiquitous and their prevalence has not diminished over time

Of all the conflict indicators that we measure, few are so ubiquitous as disputes over land use, tenure and inheritance. Many of these disputes are consequences of wartime displacement and resettlement patterns, and of persistent ambiguities between customary and formal property rights. As one respondent explained in our qualitative interviews, “the long civil war brought a complete breakdown in the structures that are responsible for dealing with problems in our society.... Land disputes today are the result of what accumulated during the war when there was no institution to decisively deal with the situation.”

One-quarter of all respondents report involvement in an ongoing conflict over land use, tenure or inheritance in 2010. Disputes over boundaries and usage are the most common (13% and 12% of all respondents, respectively), but land conflicts of all types are endemic across these three counties. More than one-third of respondents report a land dispute in Nimba County, compared to 22% in Grand Gedeh and 15% in Lofa.

With the exception of Lofa, these numbers are much higher than those reported in Berkeley HRC’s nationally representative survey. Not including wartime land grabs, 16% of Berkeley HRC respondents in Grand Gedeh report an ongoing land dispute, compared to 15% in Nimba and 14% in Lofa.<sup>31</sup> That our figures are so much higher likely reflects the peculiarities of our sample selection, which was designed to capture the most “conflict-prone” towns and villages. While the communities in our sample do not seem to suffer especially high rates of crime and violence, on the issue of land they are deeply—and atypically—conflicted.

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<sup>30</sup> In this section we use the terms “conflict” and “dispute” interchangeably, and unless otherwise specified, both can be presumed to be non-violent.

<sup>31</sup> Vinck, Pham, and Kreutzer, “Talking Peace.”

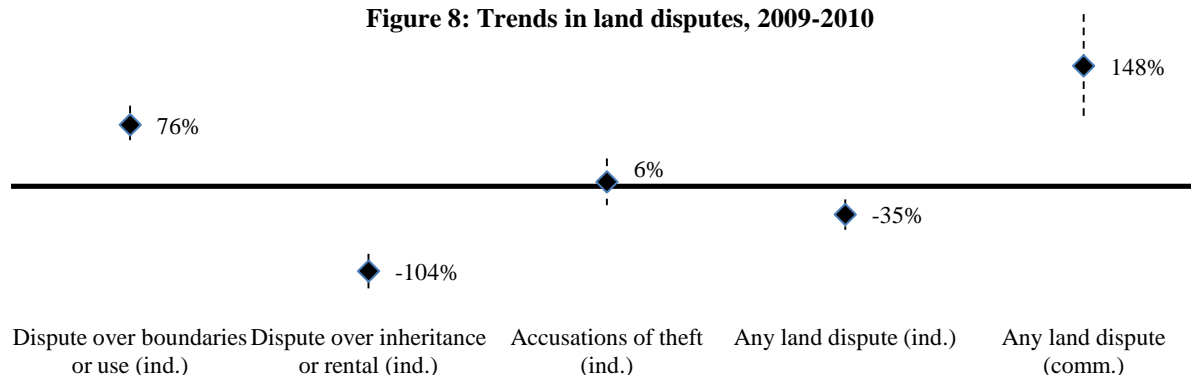
**Table 4: Prevalence of land disputes in 2010**

	All	Lofa	Nimba	Grand Gedeh
<i>Source of dispute</i>				
Land boundaries	13%	8%	21%	8%
Land rental or inheritance	7%	4%	11%	5%
Land use	12%	8%	17%	10%
Accusations of land theft	7%	4%	11%	5%
Any land dispute	25%	15%	36%	22%

More troubling, unlike most of our conflict indicators, we find little evidence that the prevalence of land disputes is falling over time. While respondents report 35% fewer land disputes on average in late 2010 than in early 2009, that average masks divergent trends among the various types of conflict that we measure. Figure 8 displays these trends. Disputes over inheritance and rental have fallen 104% relative to their levels in 2009, but disputes over boundaries have increased 76% and accusations of theft have risen 6% (though this latter finding is not statistically significant).

This drop in disputes over inheritance or rental should be interpreted with caution. In Round 1, we asked respondents to report all land conflicts since the end of the civil war in 2003, including those that were resolved during the six years prior to data collection. In Round 2, we asked only about disputes that persisted in 2010. As a result, our Round 1 data may overestimate the prevalence of ongoing land conflicts in a way that Round 2 does not. This gives us reason to be skeptical of the negative trends in Figure 8, and alarmed by the positive ones.<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 8: Trends in land disputes, 2009-2010**



The questions in our survey of town leaders were identical at Round 1 and Round 2, allowing for a more direct comparison. Our findings here are unambiguous: far more leaders report land conflict in their communities in late 2010 than in early 2009—a statistically significant increase of 148%. This may suggest that some minor disputes are becoming more rare while major ones—those in which town leaders are most likely to intervene—are becoming more common. Alternatively, it may be that leaders have become more comfortable mediating or reporting existing disputes. Regardless of our interpretation, the preva-

<sup>32</sup> See Section 1B for details on how to read these trend figures.



lence of land conflict in rural Liberia remains disquietingly high, and seems not to have declined (and may in fact have increased) over the past two years.

## **B. Most land conflicts occur among men, in wealthier communities, and within rather than between ethnic groups**

While many land conflicts never escalate into violence, we find that a surprisingly high proportion of them do. We asked respondents a battery of questions about their “heaviest” or most serious ongoing land dispute in 2010. Among those that experienced any “heavy” dispute, 16% report destruction of property, 34% report violence, and 26% report threats of violence.

**Table 5: Dynamics of “heavy” land disputes disaggregated by source in 2010**

	All	Boundaries	Inheritance or rental	Use
Destruction of property	16%	15%	24%	17%
Violence	34%	38%	37%	32%
Threats of violence	26%	27%	27%	27%
Dispute was resolved	72%	73%	68%	70%
Satisfied with resolution	60%	58%	55%	61%

Resolving these more intransigent disputes requires that policymakers understand the conditions under which land conflicts are most likely to occur and most likely to escalate. In our analysis of the correlates of conflict, three patterns emerge.

First, we find that women are much less likely than men to be involved in an ongoing land dispute. This is not surprising. Women may report fewer disputes than men because they are less likely to own land in the first place. Historically, property ownership has been more restricted and less secure among women. That reality persists today despite laws that ostensibly guarantee women’s statutory and inheritance rights to land.

Second, and perhaps more surprising, we find that wealthier community members are more likely to report land disputes—and, indeed, most other types of conflict—than the poor. The wealthy are more likely to be involved in land conflicts of all kinds and to be victims of both simple and aggravated assault, burglaries and theft, and petty “palavas” at the water pump. They are also much more likely to be accused of witchcraft.

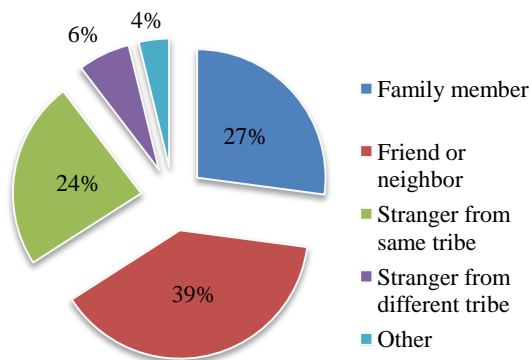
We also find that respondents in wealthier communities are more likely to report land disputes and crime, even after controlling for their own level of wealth. Communal wealth as measured by asset ownership in the average household is positively correlated with all of our individual-level measures of conflict, with just one exception: aggravated assault.

How should we interpret these findings? On the one hand, our results are consistent with the notion that conflict is more likely where there are more resources to dispute. On the other, these findings contradict a conventional wisdom that the poor are less secure, more vulnerable to conflict and more readily dispossessed than the wealthy.

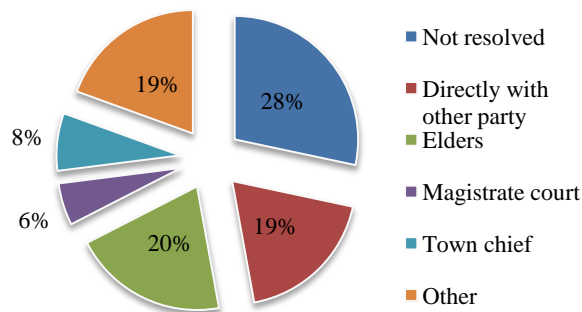
Indeed, our qualitative research confirms that wealthy “big men” and “big women” tend to enjoy easier access to forums for dispute resolution and may be more comfortable reporting their conflicts to an au-

thority, and perhaps to our survey enumerators as well. If this is the case, then the correlation we observe between wealth and conflict may be an artifact of reporting bias. We explore this possibility further in our upcoming report on conflict early warning. These ambiguities notwithstanding, the relationship is robust and highly statistically significant, and we report it with these caveats in mind.

**Figure 9: "Who is your land dispute with?"**



**Figure 10: "How was your dispute resolved?"**



Third, we find that land disputes are more likely to arise within rather than between ethnic groups. This mirrors findings by the ICG that “the dynamics of land disputes are more within families and tribes than between tribes.”<sup>33</sup> Just 6% of “heavy” land conflicts involve members of different ethnic groups, compared to 39% that occur between friends or neighbors of the same tribe and 27% that occur between family members. Violence and threats of violence are more common among disputants of the same tribe as well.

Our findings do not imply, however, that ethnicity plays no role in dispute dynamics. Indeed, while these conflicts tend to be more pervasive and more violent within rather than between tribes, ethnic and religious minorities are disproportionately likely to report land disputes of all types. Section 5 explores this relationship between tribe and conflict in greater detail.

### **C. Many land conflicts eventually get resolved, but “forum shopping” is common**

While land conflicts are pervasive and frequently escalate into violence, the rate of resolution for even the most severe disputes is surprisingly high. Of those who experienced a “heavy” land conflict in 2010, we find that 72% report that the conflict was already resolved by the time of data collection, and 60% express satisfaction with the resolution. The rate of resolution does not appear to vary systematically by type of conflict, but is, in general, very high.

A variety of forums exist for the resolution of land conflicts in rural Liberia, and disputants may seek help from myriad and sometimes competing authorities and institutions. Our results identify at least 18 different forums that are active in resolving land disputes today, ranging from local institutions (e.g., town development committees) to traditional authorities and elders to formal authorities such as the magistrate

<sup>33</sup> ICG, “Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?”

court.<sup>34</sup> With so many mechanisms to choose from, forum-shopping is pervasive. Among respondents involved in a “heavy” land conflict, 42% report seeking help from two or more forums, often because they were unsatisfied with the resolution offered by the first.

Of the 18 forums for dispute resolution that we identify, customary and informal mechanisms were the most widely used. 20% of respondents involved in a “heavy” dispute sought assistance from an elder, and 19% resolved their conflict directly with the other party. Our qualitative interviews corroborate this finding. Respondents often report seeking the assistance of elders and town chiefs first in order to “talk” through their disputes. This is especially true in smaller and more isolated communities, where access to more formal authorities is limited. We also find, however, that one-fifth of disputants use land surveys to demarcate the boundaries of their property, suggesting that formal solutions may sometimes be used in conjunction with more customary mechanisms of dispute resolution.

#### **D. Discussion and implications for land conflict**

*The prevalence of land conflict is high and seems not to be declining over time. As land tenure reform accompanies increasing investment in natural resource extraction, the government should prepare for further spikes in its land dispute caseload.*

In a 2010 report, the Liberian Land Commission warns that “unequal access to and ownership of land and other resources are at the center of the deep sense of isolation and exclusion felt by many Liberians, especially in rural communities,” and that these inequities continue to “fan the fires” that could reignite civil conflict.”<sup>35</sup> While we doubt that most land disputes threaten stability in any direct or immediate way, our findings give us ample reason to take the Land Commission’s warnings seriously.

We find that conflicts over land tenure, use and inheritance remain pervasive in rural Liberia, and that their prevalence has stayed intractably high over time even as other indicators of crime and violence have declined. In our qualitative interviews, most if not all respondents were either involved in a land dispute themselves or had friends and family who were. As one Nimba County respondent put it, “in almost every community there is a massive land conflict.”

We also find that land disputes escalate into violence with alarming frequency. Over one-third of respondents involved in a “heavy” or serious land dispute report at least one incident of violence; 26% report threats of violence, and 16% report destruction of property.



**A Liberian farmer prepares for cassava harvesting in rural Montserrado County.**

These numbers refer to especially severe conflicts in especially conflict-prone communities, and should not be assumed to capture dispute dynamics in the average Liberian town or village. Nevertheless, the frequency of escalation is cause for concern. Incidents of violence may strain the capacity of local or in-

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<sup>34</sup> Other institutions includes circuit courts, county governments, county superintendents, district inspectors, international NGOS, justices of the peace, the land commissioner, town chiefs, paramount chiefs, sectional chiefs, the police, and Zoes.

<sup>35</sup> LCL, “Annual Report: January – December, 2010,” (Monrovia: Land Commission Liberia).

formal mechanisms for dispute resolution, requiring costly coordination across multiple state and civil society organizations. The government should keep these challenges in mind as it develops its new Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) framework for land conflicts. This framework must establish clear, enforceable guidelines for managing disputes that escalate into violence, including regulations to define the responsibilities of both formal and informal institutions when criminal acts occur.

While we find that men and wealthier individuals tend to report land conflict at disproportionately high rates, this does not mean that reform should therefore neglect women and the poor. These individuals may be less likely to get involved in land disputes in the first place, but they may be especially vulnerable to the consequences of those disputes when they occur. They may also be harder for policymakers to reach, as they are less likely to hold positions of power or to have access to forums for dispute resolution. Targeting these groups may be relatively inefficient for reducing the prevalence of land conflict overall, but is essential for mitigating the pernicious effects of conflict among the most disadvantaged.

Finally, policymakers should be aware that as domestic and international companies continue to invest in the extraction of Liberian natural resources, development may reduce the stock of land available for agriculture and intensify pressure on smallholders. This can foment conflict directly by pitting developers against citizens, and indirectly by reducing the availability of arable land. We are optimistic that reforms outlined in the PBF's Peacebuilding Priority Plan will help alleviate conflict by clarifying ambiguities in the current land tenure system, integrating statutory and traditional property rights, and implementing communal forestry regulations. These revised tenure laws, however, may also influence conflict dynamics in unknown and unforeseeable ways. With reform and development accelerating at the same time, the government should prepare for further spikes in its land dispute caseload.

***Many land disputes eventually get resolved, but forum-shopping in search of a favorable resolution is common. Further research is needed to identify the institutions most capable of managing disputes with the highest levels of satisfaction and lowest risk of escalation.***

By the time of data collection in late 2010, almost three-quarters of all land conflicts that respondents reported had already been resolved. Equally if not more important, 60% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of their disputes. These findings give us some confidence in the efficacy of existing mechanisms for dispute resolution, even in places with limited access to the courts or other statutory institutions.

We also find, however, that nearly half of all disputants take their claims to multiple forums in search of a favorable resolution. To what extent is this evidence of forum-shopping a cause for concern? We are of two minds. On the one hand, in the absence of a centralized, universally-accepted forum for managing land conflicts, the existence of competing mechanisms may offer disputants flexibility in finding a fair and competent mediator. One respondent characterized forum-shopping as a symptom of widespread “ignorance of property acquisition procedures, lack of technical skills, greed and political ambitions” among both formal and informal authorities. The proliferation of dispute resolution mechanisms may also increase access to justice for ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups that find themselves the targets of bias in intra-communal land allocations—a topic we address further in Section 5 below.

On the other hand, forum-shopping may delay resolution and exacerbate the risk of violence as frustrations mount and as the issue of jurisdiction becomes a flashpoint for conflict in and of itself. Furthermore, while forum-shopping may offer some leverage to disadvantaged disputants, it may only hamper them further if they lack the resources and information to redirect their claims and to endure a lengthy mediation process.

Adjudicating between these two interpretations will require further research. Where do disputants tend to find the most satisfactory resolutions to their conflicts? Are there particular dispute resolution strategies

that are especially likely to ensure satisfaction? Further research to answer these questions may help government and civil society enhance the performance of new ADR mechanisms as traditional and statutory systems are harmonized. In particular, micro-level analysis of successful land conflict resolutions may yield important insights into the actors and processes most capable of managing disputes with the highest levels of satisfaction and lowest risk of escalation.

## 5. Key Findings on Reconciliation

The PBF’s Peacebuilding Priority Plan describes reconciliation as an indispensable goal for consolidating Liberia’s still-fragile peace. It is unclear, however, what “reconciliation” will mean as a blueprint for policymaking. We suggest that reconciliation must at the very least mean bridging social cleavages opened or exacerbated by civil war: Christians and Muslims, ex-combatants and civilians, citizens and “strangers,” and members of the country’s 16 officially-recognized tribes.<sup>36</sup> This is admittedly a minimalist definition of reconciliation. While more maximalist definitions exist—John Paul Lederach, for example, famously defined reconciliation as the convergence of Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace<sup>37</sup>—these abstract concepts tend to defy empirical measurement. We believe that closing social cleavages is a necessary condition for broader, more ambitious notions of reconciliation. Furthermore, given how salient many of these cleavages remain, we argue that a minimalist definition is the most that policymakers can hope to accommodate in the short term.

Inter-tribal tensions in particular are among the most important barriers to reconciliation in Liberia. We find that ethnic biases and stereotypes remain pervasive, and that minority tribes are often excluded from positions of leadership within their communities. Tribe and conflict are correlated in complex ways, but in general we find that ethnic heterogeneity predicts increasing levels of crime and violence when multiple groups vie for dominance in a single community. While we find no evidence that other wartime social cleavages are associated with conflict, communities that were most exposed to violence during the war continue to rank among the most conflicted today. More generally, we find that community cohesion and trust—both important indicators of reconciliation—seem to be deteriorating over time. In Section E we describe the implications of these findings for reconciliation.

### A. Inter-tribal biases are rampant, especially against ethnic minorities

Liberia’s civil war pitted members of the country’s 16 tribes against one another in paroxysms of ethnic and political violence. We find that inter-ethnic prejudice remains pervasive today. 65% of all respondents believe that some tribes are especially prone to violence, and 56% believe that certain ethnicities are “dirty.”

Levels of prejudice are equal across members of minority and majority tribes, though much lower among Muslims than among Christians. The most typical target of these stereotypes is the Mandingo ethnic group—an unsurprising finding given some Liberians’ perceptions of Mandingoes as “outsiders” or foreigners.

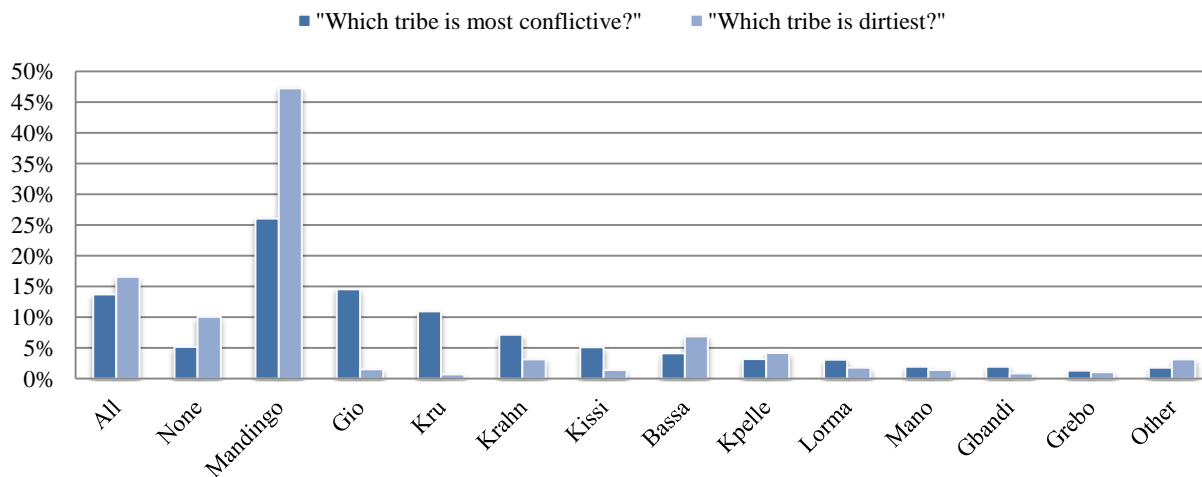
Prejudice against perceived non-citizens is common as well. In Table 6 below, 89% of respondents believe that “some people in Liberia try to act like citizens when they are not,” and 72% believe that the same is true in their own communities. These sentiments may help explain why respondents are almost unanimous in their support for a stricter, more regulated notion of Liberian citizenship. 94% believe that the GoL should issue citizen identification cards, and 86% agree that the government should verify citizenship by visiting residents’ places of birth.

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<sup>36</sup> In political science and sociology, the term “social cleavage” is used to denote a societal dividing line that separates people along some key dimension—for example, race, occupation, or religion.

<sup>37</sup> Lederach, John Paul, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

**Figure 11: Inter-tribal biases and stereotypes**



Likewise, while 91% of respondents believe that minority tribes should be allowed to farm in their communities, only 54% say they should be allowed to own land. Just 46% believe that Muslims should be allowed to hold positions of political power; 94% would allow their sons or daughters to marry outside their tribe, but only 74% would allow them to marry outside their religion. Again, levels of bias are dramatically lower among Muslims than Christians.

Beyond mere prejudice, we find that members of minority tribes are more likely to report conflicts over land inheritance and victimization across several indicators of violent crime, including simple assaults and armed robberies. They are also more likely to complain of “palavas” over tribe or religion in their communities.

**Table 6: Inter-tribal biases and stereotypes**

	All	Minority tribe	Non-minority tribe	Christian	Muslim
Some tribes in Liberia are conflictive	65%	66%	64%	69%	40%
Some tribes in Liberia are dirty	56%	58%	56%	61%	30%
Minority tribe can own land in town	54%	62%	53%	58%	41%
Minority tribe can make farm in town	91%	90%	91%	90%	93%
Muslims can be leaders in town	46%	51%	46%	40%	94%
Son/daughter can marry outside religion	73%	77%	72%	72%	82%
Son/daughter can marry outside tribe	94%	95%	94%	94%	92%
Gov't should issue citizen ID cards	96%	96%	97%	96%	97%
Gov't should verify citizens' birth towns	86%	82%	86%	85%	91%
Some in country act like citizens but are not	89%	91%	89%	92%	76%
Some in town act like citizens but are not	72%	77%	71%	75%	55%

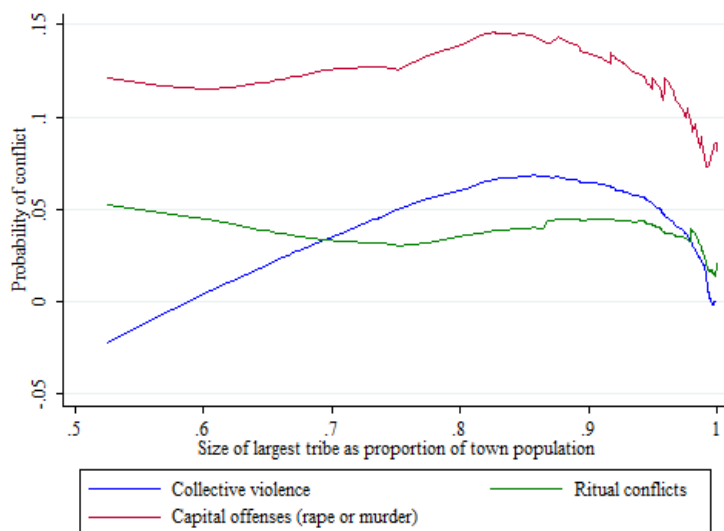
Note: Minority and non-minority refer to respondent's status within community regardless of status in country as a whole.

Our qualitative interviews are consistent with these findings. We find that ethnic minorities are often excluded from leadership positions in their towns and villages, and thus wield little influence over intra-communal land allocations and other redistributive policies. This is especially true in communities governed by “traditional” or customary institutions. Ethnic minorities are often perceived as “strangers,” which, in turn, limits their access to land and relegates them to the margins of community life.

## B. Ethnic heterogeneity correlates with conflict, but other wartime social cleavages do not

Scholars often associate ethnic heterogeneity with low levels of cooperation and high levels of crime and violence. The patterns we detect are consistent with these theories, though our analysis suggests a complex, non-linear relationship between diversity and conflict. The relationship can be visualized as akin to an inverted U, as in Figure 12. The three colored lines are derived from a statistical model that estimates the likelihood of conflict as a function of the size of the largest tribe in town.<sup>38</sup> On the far left-hand side of the figure, the largest tribe constitutes half the population, implying cohabitation by two or more comparably-sized tribes. On the far right-hand side, the largest tribe is the only tribe in town.

**Figure 12: Probability of conflict as a function of tribal heterogeneity**



The inverse U-shaped relationship is most visible for collective violence and capital offenses. Tracing the red and blue lines from left to right, we see that the probability of conflict is lower where two or more ethnic groups cohabit such that the largest tribe constitutes only a slim majority. The likelihood of conflict rises as that majority grows, but declines again as the largest tribe approaches hegemony. The model thus suggests that crime and violence are most pervasive in the “middle ground” between diversity (several comparably-sized tribes) and homogeneity (a single large tribe).

This relationship is nuanced, and will require further research and data analysis to disentangle. Nevertheless, the inverted U shape is consistent across more than half our indicators of crime and violence, and seems to capture an intuitive and theoretically plausible relationship between diversity and conflict. Where multiple tribes cohabit in more or less equal numbers, local-level institutions may be more inclusive and thus better equipped to manage emerging disputes. Furthermore, in the absence of a large majority, each tribe may be unable to target any of the others without fear of proportional reprisals. As the dominance of the majority tribe grows, so too may competition, exclusion and targeting of ethnic minorities. Finally, as the largest tribe approaches homogeneity, the absence of rivals may again suppress conflict. This story is, for now, only a conjecture. We will explore these possibilities further in our third policy report on conflict early warning.

<sup>38</sup> Again keeping the discussion as non-technical as possible, the figure is derived from a “smoothing” function in which separate bivariate regressions are run across many small segments (or “bandwidths”) of the data.



Beyond ethnic heterogeneity, we find no evidence that social cleavages opened or exacerbated by civil war continue to foment conflict. This is surprising, and seems to contradict conventional wisdom about post-war dynamics. In summarizing the motivation for the Liberian Land Commission, the ICG describes “clashes involving a wide range of people, including ex-combatants, returning refugees and displaced persons, many over ownership of lands vacated during the war.”<sup>39</sup> Yet we find no evidence that these social cleavages continue to drive conflict today, at least not in these 247 towns and villages. Communities with large proportions of ex-combatants, former internally displaced persons, and non-citizens are no more likely—and are in some cases *less* likely—to suffer conflict of various types, including land disputes, armed robberies, burglaries, fights, and palavas over road-brushing. Diversity along these social cleavages seems, if anything, to be a deterrent rather than a catalyst of crime and violence.

*“Some of these ex-generals are very understanding. They have influence over their boys.”*

Of course, the fact that social cleavages in general tend not to fuel conflict does not imply that they play no role in specific cases. To cite just one example from our qualitative interviews, the LNP Inspector in Ganta, Nimba County described to us an incident in which a mob of ex-combatants incinerated a car registered to the Ministry of Health after a crash with a motorbike rider. Unable to dispel the crowd, the police appealed to demobilized generals living in the city, whom the Inspector credits with suppressing the riot: “Some of these ex-generals are very understanding. They have influence over their boys.”

In this case, ex-combatants were implicated in both igniting and diffusing a potentially catastrophic incident of mob justice, with ex-generals intervening as mediators and command-and-control structures serving as a bulwark against further escalation. While the presence of ex-combatants may not heighten the risk of conflict in any systematic way, their relationships with civilians—and with one another—remain tenuous. The same is likely true of non-citizens and former IDPs as well.

### **C. Communities affected by wartime violence continue to be conflicted today**

While most wartime social cleavages seem not to predict levels of post-war conflict, exposure to wartime violence does. The more violence that community members report witnessing, experiencing or perpetrating during the war, the higher the prevalence of conflict today across a broad spectrum of indicators: land disputes of all kinds, simple and aggravated assault, armed robbery, burglaries, accusations of witchcraft, fights, and violent confrontations between tribes.

It is possible that this is a relationship of cause and effect. Exposure to wartime violence may diminish social cohesion, or may incite interpersonal or intra-communal disputes that linger long after the fighting stops. Deducing causality from correlation can, however, be misleading. It may be that conflict both today and during the war are driven by “omitted variables”—individual or community characteristics that we failed to measure or include in the model. We attempt to control for this possibility by holding many of these characteristics constant; even then, the relationship remains statistically significant. While we are hesitant to claim causality, it seems that legacies of wartime violence continue to loom in many of these communities.

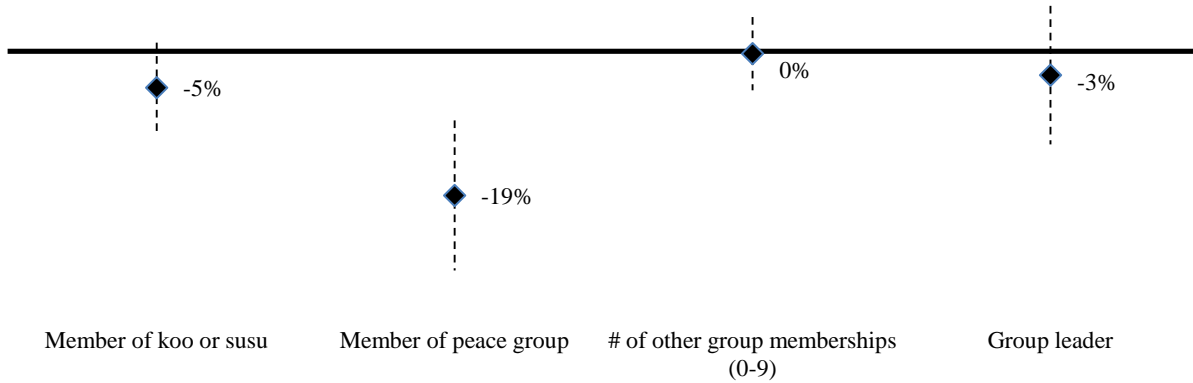
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<sup>39</sup> ICG, “Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?”

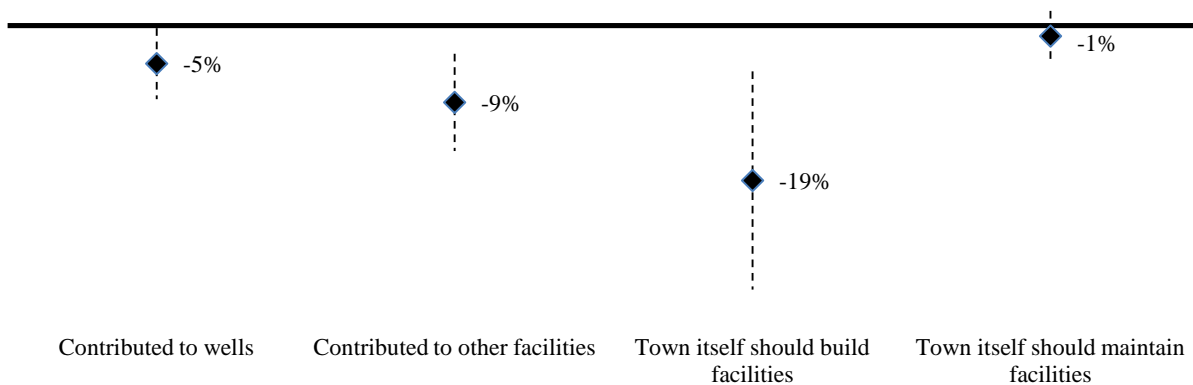
### D. More generally, community cohesion and trust are on the decline

While the prevalence of conflict seems to have declined over time, so too have bonds of intra-communal trust and civility. Respondents feel that they get less help, that their rights are less respected, and that their communities are less safe in late 2010 than in early 2009. The proportion of respondents contributing to the construction or maintenance of wells and other facilities has declined, as has the proportion that believes community members themselves are responsible for the provision of public goods. Most troubling is the rise in the proportion of respondents who believe that others “abuse them” or “step on their rights”—an increase of 76% relative to 2009.<sup>40</sup> Figures 13 through 15 display these trends.

**Figure 13: Trends in group membership, 2009-2010**

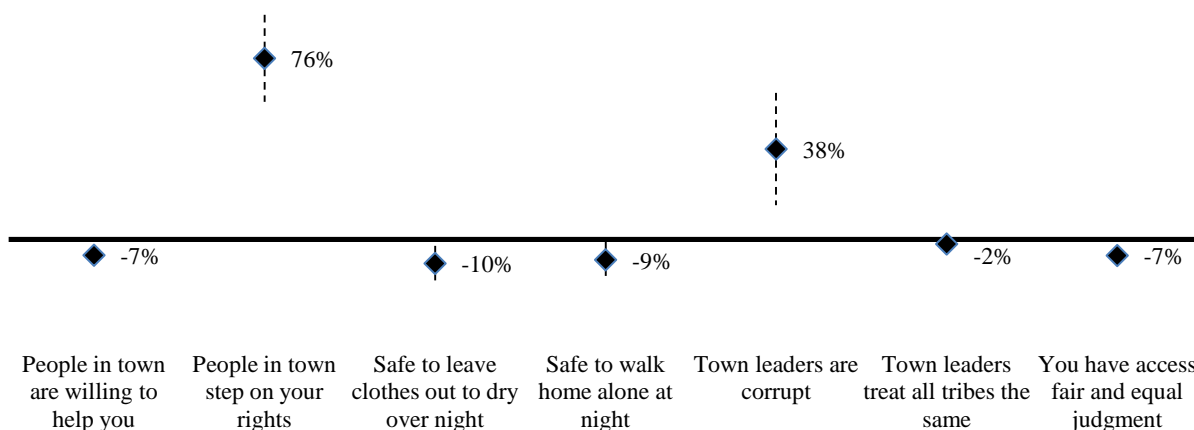


**Figure 14: Trends in contribution to public goods, 2009-2010**



<sup>40</sup> See Section 1B for details on how to read these trend figures.

**Figure 15: Trends in safety, civility and perceptions of leadership, 2009-2010**



Perceptions of fairness and access to justice have deteriorated as well. Respondents are 38% more likely to describe town chiefs as corrupt in 2010 than in 2009; 2% less likely to believe that leaders treat all tribes and religions the same; and 7% less likely to feel they have access to “fair and equal judgment” in their communities. All these trends suggest that perceptions of civility, safety and fairness are diminishing over time, and virtually all are statistically significant.

## E. Discussion and implications for reconciliation

*Many rural Liberians endorse proposed changes to citizenship laws, but national identity may be developing in exclusionary ways. These laws may help resolve Liberia’s “identity crisis,” but may exacerbate inter-tribal tensions in the process.*

In its 2011 report, the ICG laments the persistence of a nationwide “identity crisis” in Liberia—a crisis that manifests itself in ambiguities in the status of Mandingoes, Liberian-born Lebanese and “non-black” residents.<sup>41</sup> The government has proposed several laws to define citizenship more precisely and to resolve this “identity crisis” through regulations promoting a more concrete sense of Liberian national identity.

Our findings suggest that many rural Liberians endorse these policies, but that national identity may be developing in exclusionary ways. Our respondents are almost unanimous in their belief that the government should issue ID cards to identify who is and is not a Liberian citizen; most of them (86%) believe that the government should verify citizenship by visiting individuals’ born towns. These beliefs coincide with endemic inter-tribal biases and stereotypes. 65% of all respondents believe that some tribes are prone to violence; 56% believe that some are dirty. A vast majority (89%) believes that some people in the country act like citizens but are not, and a smaller but still substantial majority (72%) believes that the same is true in their own communities.

Efforts to circumscribe citizenship may only foment these inter-tribal prejudices. Policymakers should be especially wary of this risk around the recent presidential elections. As the ICG notes, in prior elections voters with Muslim names were barred from registration on the grounds that they were Mandingoes and thus “not Liberian.” Opposition candidates continue to intimate that the incumbent Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is Americo-Liberian, and thus not a member of the country’s “native” tribes.<sup>42</sup> Electing leaders and defin-

<sup>41</sup> ICG, “Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?”

<sup>42</sup> ICG, “Liberia: How Sustainable is the Recovery?”

ing citizenship are indispensable tasks in new democracies, but policymakers should be aware of the unintended consequences of these deeply divisive exercises.

Our results also give us pause in interpreting the enthusiasm for “unity” that many Liberians have expressed in other studies. In Berkeley HRC’s survey, 74% of respondents profess a belief that “uniting the tribes” is the single most important precondition for peace.<sup>43</sup> Yet we find that inter-tribal biases are pervasive, that ethnic minorities are often excluded from communal life, and that a vast majority of rural Liberians believe that “some people in the country act like citizens when they are not.” Incompatible though these results may seem, they are consistent with the possibility that, for many Liberians, “uniting the tribes” may not necessarily mean uniting *all* the tribes. As the example of the election-time disenfranchisement of Mandingoes demonstrates, “the tribes” is a contested notion in and of itself. Calls for unity may be much more exclusionary than they seem.

***Ethnic biases and stereotypes will prove difficult if not impossible to change through NGO programming alone.***

UNMIL’s 22<sup>nd</sup> progress report warns that “enduring ethno-religious divides” continue to fuel conflict in Liberia.<sup>44</sup> Our results underscore the urgency of this concern. We find that ethnic fragmentation correlates strongly and consistently with various indicators of conflict, though the relationship is complex.

Many peacebuilding programs in Liberia are designed in part to neutralize these prejudices and diffuse their potential for escalation. Messages of unification are disseminated on a daily basis through media and NGO programming, including radio broadcasts and billboards urging Liberians to bridge inter-tribal divides.



Billboards promoting inter-tribal unity are common in rural Liberia.

While unity is a noble goal, we question whether it can be reached through projects of this sort. In a previous report (Blattman, Hartman and Blair 2011), we assessed the impacts of a community-based peacebuilding program in Lofa, Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties. One of the goals of the program was to encourage participants to “embrace diversity,” and to caution that “differences can create conflict” if they are “feared rather than celebrated.” The training included exercises to demonstrate similarities between groups and highlight the positive aspects of difference, including role playing games and discussions on stereotypes and biases.

In that report, however, we found that even a lengthy, intensive and large-scale program was unable to affect change on most measures of inter-tribal tolerance. This program was unusually ambitious in its scope, and it is unlikely that smaller-scale projects will be any more effective in meeting these goals. We are especially skeptical of radio and billboard campaigns that deliver the message of unification through sound bites. It may be unrealistic to imagine that norms such as these can be transformed through education and information campaigns alone.

<sup>43</sup> Vinck, Pham, and Kreutzer, “Talking Peace.”

<sup>44</sup> UNSG, “Twenty-Second Progress Report.”

## Appendix: A Statistics Primer

We set out to write a report that is free of excessive technical jargon. Whenever possible, we attempt to present our findings using informal language, our prose aided by tables and figures. While we believe that the lessons of the report can be understood without a background in statistics, there are a few concepts that are helpful to review.

### A. Average, mean and median

The average, or mean, is simply the sum of all values for the group divided by the number of people in that group. It is not, however, the only way to measure the central tendency of a group of numbers, or the difference between two groups. Because means can be distorted by extreme values—people who do really well or really poorly—we sometimes report the median, the precise middle value in the group (the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile). Both are common measures of central tendency.

### B. Statistical significance and confidence intervals

When we calculate the effect of a particular variable—say, income—on conflict, that effect may vary dramatically from individual to individual. This implies that any average impact we detect will be measured with error. This error decreases as we increase the number of people in the sample and the precision of measurement. But some uncertainty always remains.

In any study, the default hypothesis is always that there is no effect of a given variable on a given outcome. When we detect an average difference between individuals with different values on that variable—say, relatively rich people compared to relatively poor people—at a minimum we want to know whether or not we can say with confidence that the difference is not zero.

In statistics, a result is called statistically significant if it is unlikely to have occurred by chance, and the amount of evidence required to accept that an event is unlikely to have arisen by chance is known as the significance level. Conventionally, we regard a result as statistically significant if there is a less than 5% risk that it is not zero.

Of course, we are not satisfied to know merely that a result is not zero. We would like to know the possible range of error of our average effect. How high or low could the true value be? One way to evaluate our results is to report confidence intervals. Confidence intervals tell us the range of values that our finding could take with 95% significance. For instance, we might report that every additional dollar of weekly income predicts a 50% increase in the probability of conflict, but because there is some error in this estimate, we would also report that the “true” effect falls somewhere between 30% and 70%, with 95% confidence.

### C. Correlation

Correlation is a single statistic that captures the degree to which two (or more) variables tend to covary with one another. Correlation can be positive or negative, depending on the nature of the relationship between the two variables. If, for example, people with more money also tend to have more years of education, we say that wealth and education are positively correlated—when one variable rises, the other tends to rise as well. In contrast, if people with more money also tend to have fewer children, we say that wealth and number of children are negatively correlated—when one variable rises, the other tends to fall.

Like average effect sizes, correlations can be statistically significant or statistically insignificant. It is important to remember that even a statistically significant correlation does not necessarily constitute a relationship of cause and effect. The possibility that wealth and education might be positively correlated does not necessarily mean that wealth causes people to become more educated—indeed, the opposite may be true: education may cause people to become wealthier. Alternatively, there may be some third variable that causes both wealth and education to rise. It may be that more talented individuals tend to accumulate wealth and also tend to seek more education. In this case, we say that the causal relationship between wealth and education is *spurious*—it is not causal at all.