

Liberia: How do Attitudes Toward Justice Map onto Subnational Patterns of Violence?

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This brief examines how patterns of wartime violence across Liberia's counties relate to attitudes expressed in statements collected by the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Using data compiled by the [Human Rights Data Analysis Group](#) (HRDAG), the analysis compares the county-level incidence of reported human rights violations with the county-level prevalence of attitudes favoring "Forgive and Forget" or Retribution.

The findings describe variation across counties, not across individuals. In other words, this analysis does not explore whether people who personally experienced violations were more likely to support punishment. Instead, it asks whether counties that experienced more violations collectively expressed different attitudes about justice. Existing studies have examined whether direct victims of atrocities or war-related violence differ from the general population in their support for specific mechanisms, but findings remain mixed.

Overall, findings from this analysis reveal that support for forgiveness predominates across Liberia's counties, with low support for punishment. When disaggregating by violation type, the relationship between violence and retributive attitudes differs: some types of harm are linked with greater demand for punishment, others with less. These results are correlational, not causal. They help illuminate how collective experiences of wartime harm may shape community-level perspectives on justice. Affected communities are not monolithic. Some favor retribution, others lean toward forgiveness. Localized patterns of violations deserve close attention in transitional justice and peacebuilding efforts, especially because recurrence of violence can be highly localized.

Data from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The data come from statements submitted to the TRC and organized by HRDAG into two related datasets:

- Statement-givers dataset: One row per person who provided a statement, including their county and their expressed views on justice or reconciliation. The dataset includes 18,585 statements.
- Violations dataset: One row per reported human rights violation, including its type (for example, killing, abduction, or property destruction) and its location. The dataset includes 163,615 reported violations.

Three main indicators were constructed for this analysis:

Prevalence of "forgive and forget" attitudes: The percentage of statements in each county in which statement-givers expressed views such as 'Forgive and Forget is how reconciliation is achieved' or recommended a policy of Forgive and Forget to the TRC or government.

Prevalence of retribution attitudes: The percentage of statements in each county in which statement-givers expressed views supporting punishment or recommended the TRC or government pursue retributive justice.

Rate of reported human rights violations: The number of violations, by type, per 10,000 county residents, based on 2008 census population figures.

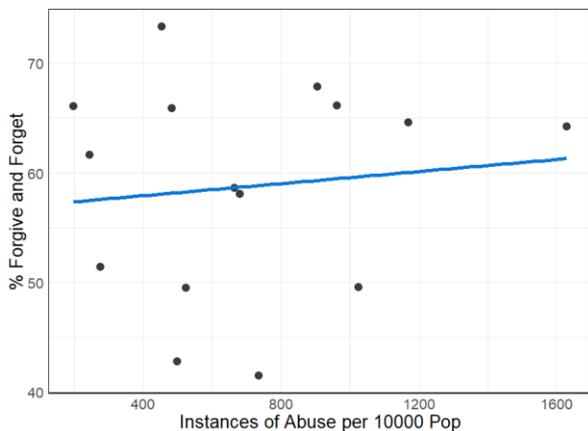
Important considerations:

- The data are not survey-based; statements were given voluntarily to the TRC and are not representative of the full population. Statement-givers were asked about attitudes towards retribution and forgiveness while violent events were identified by coders from statement narratives.
- Location serves as a stand-in for exposure to violence. We use where a statement was given and what was described to have happened there to estimate how much violence affected that area, but we cannot tell whether the person giving the statement was directly victimized.

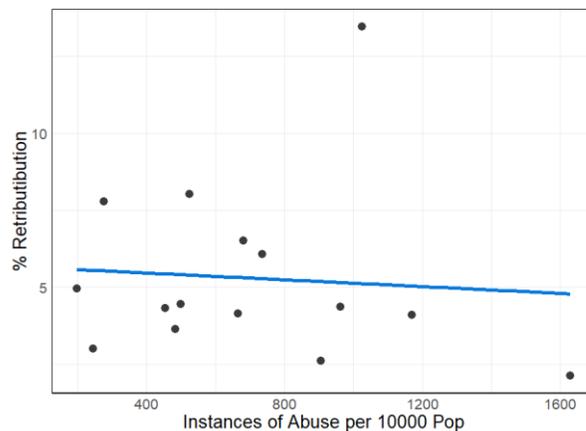
Forgiveness is Prevalent Even Where Violence Was Widespread

Counties with high rates of reported human rights violations (HRVs) still have many statement-givers that support forgiveness rather than punishment. Across counties, “Forgive and Forget” attitudes are far more common than retributive attitudes. All counties show more than 40 percent of local statement-givers expressing forgiveness attitudes while the highest percentage of retributive views is 16 percent in one county, with the remainder below 10 percent. In these figures, the trend line helps visualize the general direction of the relationship. They are nearly flat, which suggests only a weak connection between the overall intensity of violence and justice preferences. Statement-givers from counties with higher violation rates display slightly more forgiveness, though the association is minimal.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HRV INCIDENCE AND ATTITUDE PREVALENCE PER COUNTY



Forgive and Forget



Retribution

Each point in the figures represents one of Liberia's 15 counties. The horizontal axis indicates reported violations per 10,000 residents, and the vertical axis shows the percentage of statement-givers endorsing forgiveness or retribution.

Overall, we see here that attitudes of forgiveness are more prevalent than retribution, and that the rates of violations overall are not strongly related to attitude prevalence. This pattern aligns with [broader research](#) showing that retribution is not always prioritized after conflict. The prevalence of forgiveness may reflect a pragmatic choice to move forward, fatigue from prolonged violence, or a strategy to maintain community peace.

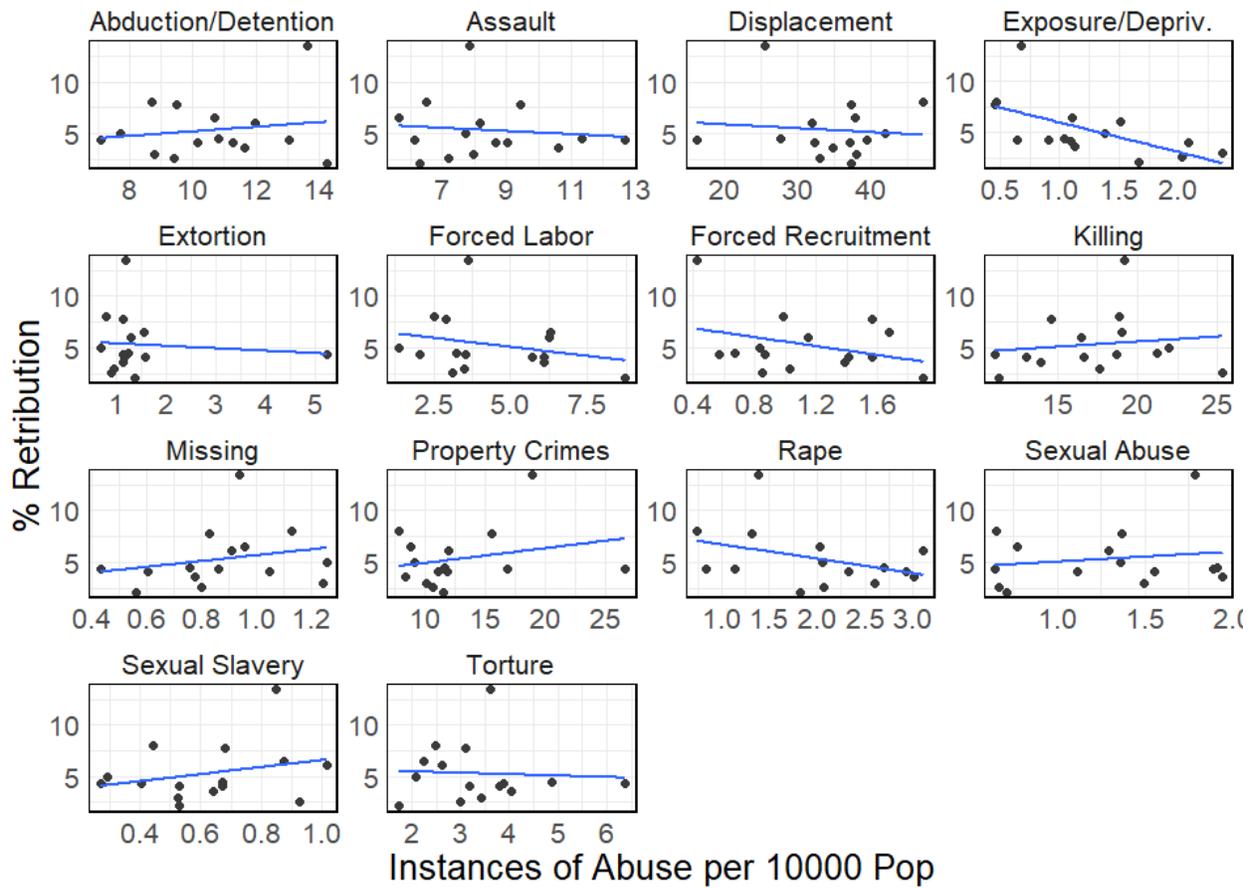
Not All Violence Relates to Justice Attitudes the Same Way

Are there some types of harm that are associated with greater desire to punish those responsible? For 14 types of violations, counties' rates of reported incidents are compared with the share of statement-givers supporting retribution. The results show that this relationship is not uniform across types of harm. Higher rates of some violations, such as property crimes and missing persons, are associated with higher support for retribution.

This particular pattern is surprising because [evidence from other contexts](#) suggests that families of missing persons often focus on discovering what happened to their loved ones. The higher levels of retributive attitudes in counties with more missing-persons cases may therefore reflect a demand for formal investigations that can establish the truth, rather than a simple call for punishment.

For other types of human rights violations, like rape, deprivation, and forced labor, counties with higher violation rates tend to show lower prevalence of retributive attitudes. For several other categories, there is little or no relationship. Overall, the link between preferences for retributive justice and the extent of reported violations varies across types of harm.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPECIFIC HRV INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE OF RETRIBUTION ATTITUDES PER COUNTY



Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Recognize local variation in justice preferences: Preferences for justice differ across communities affected by violence. Policymakers should avoid assuming a universal desire for punishment and instead design approaches that respond to this diversity. Overemphasizing retribution risks alienating much of the population, while focusing too heavily on amnesty or forgiveness may leave some victims, survivors, and their families feeling excluded or abandoned.

Leverage data from justice mechanisms: Data collected through mechanisms like truth commissions offer a unique lens on justice attitudes. Unlike surveys that ask hypothetical questions, these data reflect what people emphasize when directly engaging with a transitional justice body. However, barriers such as non-representativeness, inconsistent data quality, and ethical limits on how testimonies can be used may constrain their utility for broader analysis. Strengthening data collection standards and sharing protocols can help make these data sources more usable for research while safeguarding participants' dignity and confidentiality.

Attitudes can shift over time: The data analyzed here describe attitudes during a specific period in which the Truth Commission was operational (2005-2009). Local politics, population movements, and reconstruction efforts continually reshape how people remember harm and what forms of accountability or reconciliation they see as legitimate. More research is needed to understand how these changing contexts shape justice preferences over time and what this means for the timing and design of transitional justice initiatives.