

Cash for guns in PNG: smart reform or short-term fix?

by Jack Assa

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Earlier this year, the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, James Marape, [called for a crackdown](#) on the use of illegal firearms in the Highlands region. Following this, the new PNG Police Minister Sir John Pundari announced a government-led [National Firearms Amnesty and Buy-back Scheme](#) which started on 27 February and is planned to [run until 26 August 2026](#). The end date will coincide with National Repentance Day, which Papua New Guineans mark with a public holiday in order to devote time to Christian prayer and ask for forgiveness.

The program is now underway, with Enga Province becoming the first to [launch the initiative](#) and begin firearm collection. Under this amnesty period, individuals who voluntarily surrender firearms will not be prosecuted. This program is also said to offer citizens financial incentives to surrender illegal guns in their possession. It intends to reduce the proliferation of firearms, improve community safety and address law and order challenges, particularly in rural areas prone to tribal conflicts and urban centres experiencing armed robbery.

The development has sparked debate, with [one opposition member of parliament](#) labelling it “cash for criminals” and [a prominent church leader](#) describing it as “not an ideal solution”. Many social media users have [voiced concerns](#) on Facebook and cautioned that offering cash could reward criminal behaviour and fail to tackle the root causes of violence in the country.

The fact is that even a modest reduction of firearms through this program can lower immediate threats and reduce the risk of sudden escalation. The central question, however, is whether this program represents a credible reform strategy or is largely a short-term fix.

Early research on gun buybacks, mostly from the 1990s, largely finds such programs ineffective at curbing gun violence. [One study](#) in the United States found that gun buybacks “have done little to reduce gun crime or firearm-related violence”. [Recent research](#) frames gun buybacks in a somewhat mixed but more favourable light. On their own, buybacks may not be effective if the goal is to use them to

directly reduce violent crime. But the study shows buybacks can help if they're part of a broader effort to reduce gun violence.

So what are the smart reforms that PNG should focus on?

Can PNG learn from other countries? Yes, PNG can learn from its closest neighbours, particularly Australia. Following the 1996 **Port Arthur massacre**, Australia introduced **a compulsory gun buyback** under the National Firearms Agreement. The agreement established strict licensing and registration requirements, banned semi-automatic weapons and **removed roughly one-fifth** of civilian-owned guns. More recently, following the Bondi Beach attack, the Albanese Labor Government established **another gun buyback scheme**. Australia's use of such schemes rests on a strong enforcement framework, effective border control and comprehensive licensing.

New Zealand implemented a similar program after the 2019 Christchurch **mosque attacks**. More than 50,000 firearms **were surrendered**. While the buyback reduced the number of prohibited weapons, compliance was incomplete and its long-term impact continues to depend on sustained enforcement.

In contrast, evidence from the United States suggests that voluntary gun buyback programs have shown **little measurable impact** on reducing firearm homicides or gun-related violence.

Translating these lessons to PNG highlights several challenges. Firearms in PNG are not only tools of criminal activity but also symbols of status and means of self-defence in tribal disputes. Guns have also been used to hijack ballot boxes during elections. Estimates from police commentary suggest firearms are **involved in up to 80% of serious crimes**.

Concerns have **also been raised** that state security agencies might be a source of illegal firearms and ammunition. Then there are concerns about perverse incentives. Paying for guns might only incentivise the entry of more into the supply chain. Despite these concerns, partial reductions in firearm stocks could still offer benefits. They could reduce immediate threats and signal the government's commitment to public safety, potentially gaining momentum for deeper reforms. Australia's experience shows that such programs are most effective when combined with strong reforms.

For PNG, a gun buyback program alone will **not automatically address** the underlying drivers of law and order issues. Lasting impacts are more likely if the government **integrates the program** with wider policy and structural reforms, including reviewing and strengthening regulatory frameworks, building the capacity

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of police and defence forces and consistently enforcing and prosecuting firearm offences and other measures that would instil confidence in the justice and correctional systems.

In addition, experience from Australia highlights the importance of institutions like the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#), which monitors firearm-related trends and outcomes. Similarly, PNG must build systems that continuously generate reliable data on firearm offences and fatalities, while also monitoring the impact of such programs. These measures should underpin any broader firearm reforms rather than relying on a buyback program alone. Without these, a cash-for-guns scheme risks being perceived as a short-term fix strategy and not transformative.

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