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Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors on Homicide: The Nigeria Case Study

Obiorah CC[1]*and Atanda AT[2]

[1]Anatomical Pathology Department, University of Port Harcourt, Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
[2]Anatomical Pathology Department, Teaching Hospital Kano, Nigeria

Abstract

Background: Understanding the socio-cultural factors that underlie homicide is central to prevention of such cases. This study was carried out to determine the similarities and differences in the patterns of homicide in two socio-culturally diverse parts of Nigeria.

Materials and Method: Duplicate copies of autopsy reports of homicide victims in Port Harcourt, Rivers State and Kano city, Kano State over 11 and 6 year periods respectively were retrieved and analyzed for age, gender, circumstances of death, mechanisms of death, causes of death and types of weapons used.

Results: show that 1,004 cases (91/year rate) and 113 cases (18/year rate) of homicides were recorded respectively in Port Harcourt and Kano city during the study periods. The predominant age group of victims in the two cities was the 21 to 30 year age group, with male: female ratio of 12:1 and 16:1 for Port Harcourt and Kano city respectively. The top ranking weapons of choice were firearm (68.9%) in Port Harcourt and sharp daggers (44.2%) in Kano city. While armed robbery and cult attacks were common in Port Harcourt, ethno-religious clashes predominated among circumstances surrounding homicides in Kano. While head injuries in the Port Harcourt homicides were mostly from gunshots those in Kano city were mostly due to blunt trauma.

Conclusion: This study has shown that socio-cultural differences in religion, type of weapons available and to which local residents are exposed to during upbringing, gender role, functional rule of law, use of psycho-active substances and increased population and its dynamics are important factors that determine patterns of homicide in Nigeria.

Keywords: Homicide; Firearm; Stab; Trauma; Nigeria; Comparison

Introduction

Homicide has been defined as fatal injuries inflicted by a person against another with intent to injure or kill by any means [1]. Its incidence worldwide shows wide variation with a weighted average of about 9 per 100,000 population [2]. In 2010, more than a third (36%) of the estimated global homicides occurred in Africa [3]. The homicide rate in Nigeria is reported as only 1.5 per 1,00,000 [4] but this is likely an under-estimation due to underreporting. Autopsy studies done in different places in Nigeria indicate homicide rates ranging between 3.1% and 45.3% of medico-legal cases [5-9].

Factors responsible for high levels of homicides in Africa include: economic crisis, food insecurity, weak rule of law, low level of human capital development and high level of income inequality. In the USA, over 25% of homicides have been related to organized crime and the activities of criminal gangs whereas only about 5% are so related in European countries [3].

In spite of the volume of work in the literature, particularly from developed countries, there is a paucity of regional comparative studies of homicides in Nigeria. This study examined the pathology, demographic distribution and circumstances surrounding homicides in two highly populated, economically vibrant states with heterogeneous populations, representing northern and southern parts of Nigeria.

Representing northern Nigeria is Kano state, located in Northwestern Nigeria. Even though it has a heterogeneous population of about 9 million people [10] consisting of virtually all Nigerian ethnic groups, the predominant tribe is Hausa-Fulani and the predominant faith is Islam. Kano city, the capital, is the centre of commerce in the north, thus making trading, the leading occupation. There is low rate of male youth education, and lower still, female education, and high youth unemployment.

About 6 million people [10] on the other hand populate Rivers state, with its capital in Port Harcourt, representing Southern Nigeria. It is dominated by Christians and has over 85 ethnic groups including substantial numbers of foreign expatriate workers. With the operation of many oil companies in the state, majority of the residents are involved in legitimate and illegitimate oil related businesses. There is also high rate of cultism, militancy and protection racketeering.

Against this background, this study was conducted to determine the influence of socio-cultural practices of these two regions on patterns of homicide. Findings from the study will aid in understanding the socio-cultural milieu in which these cases occurred and thus facilitate their prevention.

Materials and Methods

Duplicate copies of autopsy reports for cases of homicide between January, 1998 and December, 2008 in morgues in Port Harcourt and between January, 2003 and December, 2008 in the morgue of Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, Kano were retrieved and analyzed for age, gender, circumstances of death, mechanisms of death and causes of

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death and types of weapons used. The data generated was compared and analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics version 17 (Chicago).

The autopsies were at the behest of the Coroner and followed standard procedures of thorough external examination and examination of eviscerated contents of the body cavities as applicable and detailed authorized reports were issued to the police while the duplicate copies were archived.

Results

In the 11-year period covered by data from Port Harcourt, one thousand and four (1004) homicides (91/year rate) were recorded while in Kano city 6-year records showed that one hundred and thirteen (113) homicides (18/year rate) were recorded. In the two cities the peak age of homicide victims was in the 21 to 30 year age group while male: female ratios respectively for Port Harcourt and Kano were 12:1 and 16:1.

As shown in Table 1, while in Port Harcourt the three top ranking weapons of choice were firearm, blunt objects and machete, each accounting for 68.9%, 11.4% and 9.5% respectively, the three top ranking weapons of choice in the Kano homicides were sharp daggers, blunt objects and firearm; each accounting for 44.2%, 28.3% and 17.7% respectively. Death by strangulation was equally uncommon in both cities.

Table 2 highlights the differences in circumstances surrounding deaths in the two cities. While armed robbery, ethno-religious clashes and assassinations ranked top three in Port Harcourt, the three top ranking circumstances surrounding homicides in Kano were ethno-religious clashes, armed robbery and fights. Remarkably no deaths were recorded to have followed cult clashes in Kano city, unlike in Port Harcourt where this was the circumstance surrounding 13.5% of deaths; with a similar finding of comparably higher incidences of assassinations in Port Harcourt compared with Kano city.

Major sites of the body most frequently targeted in the homicidal cases in the two cities also showed some degree of disparity (Table 3). Four hundred and ninety (48.8%) of the 1004 Port Harcourt homicides were associated with head injuries; 197 (19.6%) chest injuries; and 105 (10.5%) with limb injuries. Among the Kano homicides, the head was also the primary site targeted in 28.3% of the cases, followed by multiple body sites (26.5% of cases) and chest (13.3% of cases). Even though the head was the primary target by assailants in homicides in the two cities, in Port Harcourt it was mostly from gunshot whereas from Kano records 93.8% of the head injuries were secondary to blunt trauma. The stab wounds were mostly to the chest limbs and neck, and in 43.3% of cases were multiple.

Discussion

This study has highlighted significant similarities and differences in the patterns of homicide between Kano city and Port Harcourt. The similarities include male predominance and age pattern, while the differences are in respect of volume of reported homicide cases, male: female ratio, weapons of choice, circumstances of death and body parts targeted.

The Kano autopsies were for a period of 6 years because before 2003 hardly any were performed as autopsy services were just beginning to be patronized by the populace. This agrees with an impact of the tenets of Islam which does not allow for body preservation as a consequence of which less deaths were studied, unlike in Port Harcourt.

Volume of reported homicides

The first of these differences is the volume of reported homicide cases. Ratio of reported cases between Port Harcourt and Kano is about ratio 9:1. The obvious explanation is that this reflects a lower homicide rate in Kano; however, it may also be a reflection of burial practices and attitudes to post mortem examinations in northern Nigeria. In the northern part of the country, particularly among adherents of the Islamic faith, prompt burial of the dead is the norm and thus a large number of homicides go unreported.

Influence of predominant religion

While the foregoing may be true however, studies [2-11] have shown a lower average homicide rate for Muslim-dominated societies and countries. Greater restrictions and lower rates of psycho-active substance abuse, particularly alcohol, have been credited for this. In the more homogeneous Islamic societies, where the sharia legal system is practiced, the compulsory wealth tax (zakat), a social welfare system, also serves to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, thus reducing poverty levels and crime rates. Such rule of sharia and practice of zakat distribution obtains, albeit in a modified form, in northern Nigeria but not significantly so in southern Nigeria.

Male: Female ratio

The higher male: female ratio (16:1) for homicide cases in Kano compared to 12:1 in Port Harcourt may also be a reflection of the social system operational in the Muslim north where fewer females are involved in out-of-the-home economic activities that may expose them to danger. In the Kano data, 5 out of the 7 homicides targeting females were within the home, secondary to marital violence. Kellerman and Mercy [12] also noted similar propensity for female homicide victims to be closely related to their assailant. If these were honor killings (perpetrated by a relative of the victim for perceived un-Islamic

Age	Firearm		Matchet		Stab (sharp objects)		Blunt objects/fists		Strangulation		Total	
	PH	KN	PH	KN	PH	KN	PH	KN	PH	KN	PH	KN
0--10	14	-	1	-	-	-	5	4	3	-	23	4
11-20	107	2	8	1	22	12	18	5	2	1	157	21
21-30	647	8	52	4	53	24	38	10	2	2	494	48
31-40	105	6	18	-	14	8	16	6	1	1	154	21
41-50	62	3	7	2	3	3	15	4	1	-	88	12
51—60	26	1	5	-	-	1	7	2	1	-	39	4
61—70	19	-	3	-	-	2	10	1	1	-	33	3
>70	10	-	1	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	16	-
Total	692	20	95	7	92	50	114	32	11	4	1004	113

PH= Port Harcourt; KN= Kano

Table 1: Age distribution of Homicide victims and Types of weapons used by assailants.

Circumstances Surrounding Death	Port Harcourt		Kano	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Armed robberies	533	(53.1)	35	(31.0)
Ethno-Religious clashes	189	(18.8)	47	(41.6)
Assassinations	147	(14.6)	3	(2.7)
Cult attacks	135	(13.5)	-	
Fights	-		20	(17.7)
Others	-		8	(7.0)
Total	**1004**		**113**	**(100)**

Table 2: Shows circumstances surrounding the Homicides.

Body site	PH		KN		Predominant type of injury to body site	
	No	%	No.	%	(%)	
Head	490	48.8	32	28.3	Blunt injury	(93.8%)
Chest	197	19.6	15	13.3	Stab injury	(93.3%)
Limbs	105	10.4	2	1.8	Stab injury	(100%)
Abdomen	97	9.7	12	10.6	Gunshot	(91.7%)
Neck	79	7.9	21	18.6	Stab injury	(80.9%)
Spinal Cord	2	0.2	-	-	-	
Groin	15	1.5	1	0.9	Stab injury	(100%)
Multiple	19	1.9	30	26.5	Stab injury	(43.3%)
Total	**1004**	**100**	**113**	**100**		

Table 3: Shows body parts targeted by assailants.

sexual behavior), as Phyllis [13] has shown to be common in Muslim countries, we could not ascertain from our data. In contrast, from the Port Harcourt data, almost one out of every five females was a victim of gunshot-related homicides.

Weapons of choice

Different weapons are used to commit homicides and the trend shows variation from one country and period to another. In America, homicide is more than three and a half times more likely to be perpetrated with firearm than sharp objects whereas in Europe knives and other sharp objects are more than twice as likely to be used as murder weapons [3]. With respect to periodic changes analysis of homicides in South Africa indicate that in the past two decades, knives and other stabbing weapons were used in the vast majority of colored people's murders, whereas currently, firearms are as likely to be used as knives [3]. In Nigeria most studies reported firearms as the most common weapon used in homicides [5-7,14-16], while others reported sharp piercing objects [17-19].

The weapon of choice in 68.9% of homicides in Port Harcourt was firearm, while in contrast, in majority of homicides in Kano, sharp stabbing weapons (44.2%), particularly double edged daggers, were the weapons of choice, and is consistent with similar observations made by Mohammed et al. [17] and others [20] about the propensity for use of sharp weapons in homicides in Northern Nigeria. When guns were used in Kano homicides, it was in the circumstance of armed robberies ($X^2=51.3$; p-value < 0.0001); while in Port Harcourt, it included for interpersonal fights, assassinations as well as in cult-related attacks. The choice of weapons has been shown to be influenced by several factors as noted by Kendall [21], as well as Wrights and Rossi [22]. The predominant factor being ready availability of that type of weapon. The ready availability of firearms in Port Harcourt is mostly due to proliferation of armed resistance in the bid for oil resource control in the Niger-Delta as well as due to protection racketeering, political intimidation and cultism. The choice of weapon may also be due to types of weapons children are exposed to during their upbringing [23].

In Kano, there is an age-long tradition of carrying daggers; daggers are freely used in public especially among sellers of Suya, a local marinated roasted meat readily available in markets. It is also used as decorative ornaments both on walls in most homes as well as for ceremonial purposes. Concealed carriage of daggers is fashionable among most of the unemployed Kano youths because of peer pressure to carry weapons as means of offence and defense, and this may explain its ready availability for causing harm.

Circumstance of homicide

Another significant difference in the Kano-Port Harcourt socio-cultural milieu in which the homicides occurred is in the circumstances surrounding the deaths. While communal strife in the form of ethno-religious fights was the predominant circumstance in Kano city, armed robbery was the predominant circumstance in Port Harcourt representing the scenario in southern Nigeria. The high rate of Kano homicides secondary to ethno-religious clashes may be hinged on interplay of low levels of education among the youths and higher concomitant poverty level in this age group [24]. Armed with a deep perception that non-indigenes, who, incidentally, are generally better educated and employed in better paying jobs, are the cause of their position in the social ladder, seize any available opportunity to attack the non-indigenous population. Port Harcourt, on the other hand, is characterized by more brazen display of wealth in a setting of educated but unemployed university graduates, a social setting which emphasizes wealth and thus encourages robberies.

In addition to the foregoing, robberies also require a higher degree of preparedness and planning to execute than fights which are usually spontaneous reactions. Such levels of sophistication and planning required are more likely with educated people such as may obtain among Port Harcourt youths. This may also explain the choice of firearms in Port Harcourt because it requires, as noted by Cook [23], less contact with victims and a quick getaway. In consonance with findings reported by John et al [20], close contact homicides, as in ethno-religious fights in Kano, are usually associated with sharp weapons and blunt instruments such as cudgels and, as documented in most of these cases, associated with multiple stab wounds.

Body part targeted

While head injuries were mostly associated with firearm robberies in Port Harcourt, head injuries were mostly associated with blunt trauma in the Kano homicides ($X^2 = 89.71$; p-value <0.001). The gunshot injuries in the Kano homicides were mostly to the chest and abdomen or multiple sites; implying less training and versatility with firearms compared to predominance of headshots in Port Harcourt gunshot homicides, which would imply some degree of training.

Similarities

Population density: Kano and Port Harcourt both have high population density; a scenario noted encouraging increased probability of interpersonal conflicts. In addition to this, large populations provide good hiding places after commitment of crime as well as higher likelihood of unemployment.

Age influence: Youths in the age bracket 15 to 29 are not only perpetrators but also the major victims as evidenced by our findings and others [14]. Thus, the higher the populations in this age group in the society the higher the homicide rate. Kano city and Port Harcourt share this similarity as well based on 2006 national census figures [10].

Urbanization: Rural-urban migration and high unemployment rates and attendant poverty with income inequality [25].

Use of psychoactive substances: This is quite common in the two cities. A study [26] from Port Harcourt showed that roughly 2 out of every 100 students in a study among senior secondary school students in the city had abused intravenous psychoactive drugs at one time or the other [26], while Salaam [24] in a study in Kano city among "Yandaba"(street boys), identified multiple psycho-active drug use in 83.8% with reasons for the substance abuse including: strategic intoxication ("to get the job done"), for sense of belonging, and association with politicians.

Governance and rule of law: Homicides thrive in countries where the rule of law is not fully entrenched and punitive laws are not fully implemented as deterrent to others. This is the situation not only in Kano and Port Harcourt this is manifested in Kano city by the relatively low rate of homicide reportage and in Port Harcourt by the proliferation of protection racketeering and ethnic "vigilante" groups.

Conclusion

This study has shown that socio-cultural differences in religion, type of weapons available, type of weapon exposed to during upbringing, gender role, functional rule of law, use of psycho-active substances and increased population and its dynamics are important factors that determine patterns of homicide in Nigeria. There is need for government to strengthen and enforce laws that regulate possession of arms, ensure the entrenchment of the rule of law, reduce unemployment, and facilitate education of the youths. Parents and religious leaders should also be encouraged to teach children the value of ethno-religious tolerance.

Contributors

CCO designed the study and analyzed Port Harcourt data, while AAT analyzed Kano data. Both authors interpreted the data and wrote and edited the manuscript.

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