

Pathology of Deaths from Mob Action in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria A Study of 38 Consecutive Autopsies

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Mob action is posing an undue social and public health problems in Niger Delta region of Nigeria; as victims who were said to have committed crime were violently killed without fair trial by law. There is need to research into the pattern, cause and frequency of deaths from mob action.

AIM: To study the pattern cause and frequency of death from mob action.

SETTING: Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

DESIGN: A ten (1999-2008) consecutive autopsy on victims of mob action.

METHODOLOGY: A thorough autopsy was performed on all the victims following standard method after being severed with the coroner's inquest form by police. Variables considered were the ages and sex, yearly frequency, methods applied in the killing and reasons that motivated the killing. These were obtained from the coroner's inquest forms, police, relations and eye witnesses.

RESULT: A total of thirty eight bodies were examined. Thirty four (89.5%) were males and four (10.5%) females; giving a male to female ratio of 8.5:1. The youngest was 16 years old male while the oldest 72 years old male. Majority 30 (78.9%) of deaths occurred below the age of 50 years. Youths of the age group 20-29 were most involved and the highest frequency 12(21.1%) of death was recorded in 2004. Beating 14(36.8%) was the most common method applied for the killing while political violence 15(39.5%) was the most common circumstances for the killing.

CONCLUSION: Killing by mob action is a social, legal and public health problem in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that requires a swift government intervention to reduce the carnage associated with it. Problems of economic inequality, youth unemployment and corruption should be adequately addressed by the Nigerian Government.

KEY WORDS: Mob action, crime, autopsy, Niger delta region, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Deaths from mob action is a type of homicidal death which occurs when a large crowd of violent people unlawfully pounce on an individual or more, accused of an offence, wounding and killing the victim.^{1,2} This action never regarded the dignity and value for the life of the victim as well as the laws of the land.¹ This obnoxious act is now practiced freely in different parts of the world where little quarrel, religious riots, racial discrimination, political/social violence, armed robbery and other forms of social vices abound.³

In Nigeria, there is paucity of reports on this subject relative to reports elsewhere.^{1,3} However, death from mob action is relatively commoner in Northern Nigeria than Southern Nigeria including the Niger Delta region. Irrespective of the few incidence of occurrence in the South, it is remarkable in the region in which the study is conducted sequel upon political and gang violence, gross unemployment of youths, employers insincerity, ever increasing gap between the rich and poor and phasing out of the bourgeois class.

This study is therefore aimed at elucidating the frequency of deaths from mob action with reference to age, sex and factors motivating the killing, as well as including our findings in the literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An autopsy review of thirty eight consecutive deaths resulting from mob action was carried out by the authors in different locations of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria from 1st January 1999 to 31st December 2008 inclusive.

Variables considered for the study which were extracted from police, coroner's from and relations include the ages, sex, methods of killing and reasons for the killing. Majority of the victims died instantly while few died on there way to the hospital.

In all cases, thorough and full autopsies following standard methods were adopted. The data collated were analyzed using multiway frequency tables.

RESULTS

The authors attended to 38 bodies in which the circumstance of death fit into deaths by mob action. The youngest was a 16 year old male while the eldest was a 72 year old man. Thirty four (89.5%) were males while 4(10.5%) were females; giving a male to female ratio of 8.5:1.

Majority of the death 30 (78.9%) occurred in victims below the age of 50 years with males dominating. The highest frequency of death occurred in the age group 20-29 years which is the most vibrant and economically productive age group. Other details are

Table I Age and Sex distribution of Victims of Mob Action

Age in years	Sex		Table (%)
	M	F	
10 19	5	1	6(15.8)
20 29	8	2	10(26.3)
30 39	8	-	8(21.1)
40 49	5	1	6(15.8)
50 59	4	-	4(10.5)
60 69	3	-	3(7.9)
70 and above	1	-	1(2.6)
Total	34 (89.5%)	4 (10.5%)	38 (100.0)

Table II Analysis of yearly distribution of victims of mob action

Years	Number (%)
1999	1(2.6)
2000	1(2.6)
2001	2(5.3)
2002	3(7.9)
2003	5(13.2)
2004	12(31.6)
2005	6(15.8)
2006	4(10.5)
2007	3 (7.9)
2008	1 (2.6)
Total	38(100.0)

Table III Method of Killing Victims

Method used	Number (%)
Beating	14(36.8)
Beating and Burning	10(26.3)
Stabbing	6(15.8)
Slaughtering/cutting	5(13.2)
Stoning	2(5.3)
Strangulation	1(2.6)
Total	38(100.0)

analyzed in table I.

Table II shows the yearly frequency of deaths from mob action. The highest frequency 8(21.1%) occurred in 2004. Beating was the most common method of killing 14(36.8%) fig.1 which was closely followed by beating and burning 10(26.3%). Other details are given in table III.

Table IV shows the circumstances for the killing. Political violence was foremost 15(39.5%) which was closely followed by gang violence 9(23.7%) fig.2. Other details are expressed in the table.

Table IV Circumstances in which the killing was procured.

Reasons	Number (%)
Political violence	15(39.5)
Gang violence	9(23.7)
Stealing	5(13.2)
Robbery	3(7.9)
Road Traffic accident	3(7.9)
Witchcraftcy	1(2.6)
Religious violence	1(2.6)
Infidelity	1(2.6)
Total	38(100.0)



Fig. 1: Victim of mob action by beating

DISCUSSION

Homicide is an integral part of violent death^{4,5}. It is the killing of one by another with or without malicious aforethought.^{4,5} Homicide is associated with psychological problems in an environment, personal hostility, ultimate deterioration of interpersonal interaction and it is known to be proportional to the level of poverty in a setting.^{6,7}

Homicide by mob action dated back to the biblical era where prostitutes and vocal prophets were publicly stoned to death. Mobbing occurs when a person accused of an offence is gruesomely killed by a group of people without fair trial and conviction by the laws of the land.^{1,7} In Nigeria, killing by mob action is commoner in the Northern region where religious violence occurs almost yearly while politically motivated mob action is commoner in the Southern part of the country including the Niger Delta region. The only recorded case of religious violence was a man who was stabbed to death because he talked against a rival religious group.

In this environment, jobless/unemployed youths of ages 16 years and above were killed as indicated in this study. It is interesting to note that over 78% of the victims were below the age of 50 years with a peak within the age range of 20–29 years. Males were far more involved than females world wide; reason being that, males of ages below 50 years are more likely to get engaged in a risky adventure and unable to withstand the stress of frustration than females⁵. Another reason may be the male sex hormones which makes them more aggressive, competitive and daring than females, hence the likelihood of getting killed in aggressive circumstances.^{2,4,6}

Death by mob action in the Niger Delta region seems to be a male affair. This is corroborated by our study where female deaths constituted only 10.5% and they were victims of circumstance except one. This high proportion of female involvement may be attributed to the sample size.

Two of these women were beaten and burnt by angry youths because, cult boys entered their house and these women were unable to produce them when asked to do so. A pathetic situation was when one woman was beaten to death by a gang because she reported their member to law enforcement agents. The last (fourth) woman was stoned to death by lawless villagers because she was accused of infidelity which was as said to be a taboo by their culture.

Killing by mob action is a yearly event during the last political season in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria

(1999 to 2007). The only case recorded in 2008 was a man whose car accidentally knocked down and killed a child. He was beaten to death by the lawless villagers and the car was set ablaze. The highest frequency of death (31.6%) was recorded in 2004. This was the period when all the party politicians and other political appointees were campaigning to come back for a second tenure.⁸ Politically motivated violence was responsible for 39.5% of death in this study. Majority (23.7%) of this occurred during political rallies and campaigns. The clash was usually between opposing youth wings of political parties which are dominated by cult, unemployed youths, university dropouts and gang members, mirroring the report of a similar study in this setting.⁷

The method of killing, typical of politically motivated mob action were stabbing, beating, burning and by strangulation. A striking situation was when a 69 year old man was stoned to death by cult group because he walked across the path of their leader.⁷ Armed robbery and kidnapping is commonly practice by cult groups, unemployed youths and gang members in the Niger delta region recently; to raise quick money for survival. This is sequel upon the influx of illegal fire arms in the region. Victims accused of stealing and armed robbery were commonly beaten to death or burnt alive after hanging motor tyre round their neck. This was the pattern of death in three cases in this study.

In other instances, mob Killing was necessitated by the fact that, culprits are no longer punished by law enforcement agents or it takes a long time to deliver justice. In many occasions armed robbers who were handed over to the police were left unpunished and released to freely. There is nothing at this point the irate youth can do than to be the prosecutor, judge and the executor similar to a Tanzania report.¹ The other reason is that, the youths no longer trust the legal system and the law enforcement agents. Corruption has eaten deep to the fabrics of the police force and other government law enforcement agencies which made them perverse justice and set culprits of grievous offences free. It has come to the point where law enforcement agencies cannot control the crime rate due to inept corruption.

A well recognized recipe for killing by mob action was when a person is accused of witchcraftcy which is a common practice in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is used as a remote control to kill people. This is a strong belief system in the area of study especially by villagers. The usual method of killing such people was stoning and beating.

Finally, the problem of killing by mob action in the Niger Delta region needs swift government intervention. This they can effect by (-) overhauling the police force and other

law enforcement agencies. (-) Unemployment issue should be seriously handed. (-) The judiciary should be reactivated to punish offenders and violators of the law appropriately, (-) Government should fight corruption in Nigeria generally. (-) Disbanding of cult and gang groups and restricting them from fermenting problems in political rallies and campaigns. (-) Social discrimination and the widening gap between the rich and the poor should be properly and adequately addressed. This can be done by introducing the bourgeois (middle) class to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

In conclusion the aforementioned problems leading to killing by mob action can be controlled if the government can sincerely address the issue of unemployment, bridging the gap between the rich and the poor and fight corruption to a halt.

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