

Violent deaths in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Accidental, homicidal and suicidal deaths together form a category of deaths referred to as violent deaths. There is a need to for adequate characterization of these deaths, particularly for control measures.

Method: A retrospective study of violent deaths in Port Harcourt, Nigeria 1995 - 1999.

Results: Five hundred and seventy seven cases were analysed during the period, which makes up 72% of all medicolegal autopsies. Accidental deaths accounted for 63% of violent deaths, homicidal deaths 35.2% and suicidal deaths 1.6%. The majority of the victims (37.2%) were aged 39 years or less. Motorcycle accidents formed the commonest cause of vehicular accidents in Port Harcourt given (55%)

Conclusion: The commonest method of homicidal death is by firearms and the commonest method of suicide is by hanging.

Key words: Violent death, Port Harcourt, suicides, homicides, accidents

Introduction

Accidental, homicidal and suicidal deaths together form a category of deaths referred to as violent deaths.¹ These three classes of deaths are thought to be related, with a common underlying factor namely, self-destructive tendencies.² People have committed suicide by means of motor vehicular accidents,³ and there have been reports of victim-precipitated homicides where the victim provoked the accused so much that he was killed. Although considered as homicide it is in fact a disguised suicide.⁴

Accidents with fatal outcome may occur during dangerous sports like car

racing or jumping from heights. Athletes partake in sports knowing that the chances of perishing are neither zero nor certain. Death resulting from such dangerous adventure therefore could in fact be considered as suicidal. Although controversial, these classes of suicides are referred to as ludic-suicides.^{5,6}

Port Harcourt is a metropolitan city with an international airport and a seaport with many industries and oil companies. The city attracts many people who come to seek for employment, which is usually unavailable. The cost of living in this city, which is one of the highest in Nigeria, coupled with unemployment, provided a fertile ground for various

antisocial behaviours, including violent death.⁷

Materials and Method

This is a five year retrospective study of coroners' autopsies performed at the department of Anatomical Pathology of University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt, Nigeria from January 1995 - December 1999. The filed reports of accidental, suicidal or homicidal deaths have been reviewed.

Results

There were 801 medicolegal autopsies performed during the period of which 577 (72%) were classified as violent deaths (Table 1). These were made up of 365 accidental deaths (63.2% of violent deaths and 45.6% of medicolegal autopsies), 203 homicide deaths (35.2% of violent deaths and 25.3% of medicolegal autopsies) and 9 suicidal deaths (1.6% of violent deaths and 1.6% of medicolegal autopsies).

Accidental deaths comprised 276(75.6%) road traffic accidents 67(18.4%) domestic accidents and 22(6.0%) industrial accidents. Road traffic accidents made up 34.5% of medicolegal autopsies; 245 were males, and 120 females (M: F = 2:1) (Tables 2 and 3).

Homicidal deaths occurred in 203 cases (35.2% of violent deaths and 25.3% of medicolegal autopsies). There were 174 males and 29 females (M: F=6:1). Firearm was used in 53.7% of cases (Tables 4 and 5).

The commonest mode of committing suicide was by hanging (3 victims) followed by firearms (2 victims). Other modes of committing suicide were stabbing, taking poison and jumping from a height. (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 1. Pattern of violent deaths

Type	M	F	Total (%)
Accidental	245	120	365 (63.3)
Homicide	174	29	203 (35.2)
Suicide	7	2	9 (1.6)
Total	426	151	577 (100)

Table 2: Causes of accidental deaths

Circumstances	M	F	Total	%
Motor cycles	101	51	152	41.6
Motor vehicles	65	46	121	33.2
Explosion	14	1	15	4.1
Drowning	13	6	19	5.2
Fall from height	9	3	12	3.3
Fire	8	3	11	3.0
Collapsed building	6	1	7	1.9
Gunshot	5	1	6	1.6
Suffocation by plastic bag	5	3	8	2.2
Electrocution	4	-	4	1.1
Pedal bicycles	3	-	3	0.8
Poisoning	1	2	3	0.8
Aspiration of foreign body	1	2	3	0.8
Overlying	-	1	1	0.3
Total	254	120	365	100

Table 3: Age and sex distribution of accidental deaths

Age (Years)	M	F	Total	%
0-9	12	9	21	5.8
10-91	26	16	42	11.5
20-29	47	11	58	15.9
30-39	53	16	69	18.9
40-49	46	18	64	17.5
50-59	25	21	46	12.6
60-69	23	15	38	10.6
≥70	13	14	27	7.4
Total	254	120	365	100

Table 7: Age and sex distribution of suicide victims

Age (Years)	M	F	Total
0-9	-	-	-
10-19	-	-	-
20-29	1	-	1
30-39	2	-	2
40-49	2	1	3
50-59	1	-	1
60-69	1	1	2
Total	7	2	9

Table 4: Methods employed for homicide

Method	M	F	Total	%
Cutting/ piercing	41	9	50	24.6
Firearms	104	5	109	53.7
Blunt force	27	7	34	16.7
Burns	3	1	4	2.0
Drowning	4	1	5	2.5
Poisoning	-	1	1	0.5
Total	179	24	203	100

Table 5: Age and sex distribution of homicidal deaths

Age (Years)	M	F	Total	%
0-9	4	1	5	2.5
10-91	17	3	20	9.9
20-29	37	6	43	21.2
30-39	65	4	69	34.0
40-49	25	7	32	15.8
50-59	14	5	19	9.4
60-69	6	2	8	3.9
≥70	6	1	7	3.5
Total	174	29	203	100

Table 6: Methods of suicide

Method	M	F	Total
Hanging	3	-	3
Firearms	2	-	3
Poisoning	-	1	1
Jumping from height	-	1	1
Stumbling	1	-	1
Motor vehicle	1	-	1
Total	7	2	10

Discussion

Violent deaths account for 72% of medicolegal autopsies in Port Harcourt making them the leading cause of death requiring police investigation. This is similar to a report from United States², which noted that violent deaths are the leading causes of death in persons 39 years, or less. Although this observation is understandable from the point of view that persons in that age group are those likely to engage in risky adventures as well as frustrations of adjustment, it is necessary to put measures in place to help stem the tide so as to preserve the most vibrant segment of society from untimely death.

Our observation that accidental deaths are the commonest cause of violent deaths in this study mirrors what was observed in Ife⁷ and Ibadan.⁸ What is striking in this environment however is the large proportion of vehicular accidental deaths resulting from motorcycle accidents (55%). In recent times, injuries and fatalities from motorcycle accidents have reached an almost epidemic proportion. There is an unprecedented increase in the number of commercial motorcycles plying the roads these days, which is brought about by a combination of factors including joblessness and lack of adequate and sufficient number of better means of transportation. To stem this development, governments at all levels need to act

decisively. With the welcome development in Rivers State where a bill to regulate the operations of these motorcycle operators coupled with the provision of many commuter buses by the Government, it is hoped that there will be a reduction in accidental deaths from motorcycles and vehicular accidents generally.

Another factor, which needs to be controlled in towns like Port Harcourt, is street trading. Government should have the strong political will to ban this practice and ensure that all trading is carried out in markets which should be provided at strategic locations. This is because a lot of the accident victims are pedestrians with street traders forming a substantial proportion.

Homicidal deaths accounted for 35.2% of violent deaths and 25.3% of medicolegal autopsies in this study, which is comparable to what was recorded in Uganda in 1957⁹ but much higher than 3.75% in Ife and 3.1% in Ibadan. These figures may give a wrong indication of Port Harcourt as very violent city. The disparity may be due to the difference in attitude of the Yorubas and peoples of the Rivers state regarding autopsies,¹⁰ while in the Western part of the country consent for autopsies is freely given, in Rivers State most autopsies are mandated by the coroner. Perhaps, the same reason could be adduced for Rafindadi's finding of homicides constituting 45.3% of medicolegal autopsies and 50.5% of all violent deaths in Zaria.¹¹ There is no policy in our hospital making autopsy on all deaths within 24 hours of admission mandatory. The result of this therefore will be that many deaths due to natural causes or those deaths, which do not look suspicious, may not come to autopsy. Since these figures stand on their own, it may be necessary to repeat this study in 5 or 10 years to study any changing patterns in the percentages as a measure of increasing or reducing level of violence in Port Harcourt.

Firearms is the commonest method used in committing homicide in this study which is similar to studies in other parts of Nigeria, Africa and U.S.A.¹²⁻¹⁵ Although there are laws regulating the possession of firearms in this country the rate and ease with which persons of questionable and unstable character acquire guns leaves much to be desired and gives the impression that government is failing in the areas of security management. There is therefore an urgent need for enhancement of law enforcement in this country so as to control the homicide rate. The ages of 55% of the victims of homicides fall between 02 and 39 years. This is similar to what was observed in Ife (55%)¹² and Singapore (52%).¹⁶

Suicidal deaths are few in this study and agrees with similar findings in other studies in this country and other parts of Africa.¹⁷ It seems that the factors which cushion Africans from suicidal tendencies namely, extended family system have not been eroded by the intensive economic activities going on in this environment. The commonest method of suicide in this area, hanging is different from what was observed in Ife and Benin City where ingestion of poisons 'Gammalin 20' and 'Otapiapia' respectively were used. 'Gammalin 20' is the trade name of Lindane in Nigeria. This is a pesticide, which is commonly used by farmers for controlling capsid buds (Akate) from cocoa trees in the Western part of the country. 'Otapiapia' is pedaled by local people in most major cities as insecticides, particularly for killing mosquitoes. The composition is unknown. What informed the preferred method is not obvious from the socio-cultural make up of Port Harcourt.

In conclusion, violent deaths constitute the major causes of death requiring police investigation in our environment due to the fact that deaths of natural causes are likely to be brought for autopsy. Accidental deaths form the bulk of cases as in most parts of the world.

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