

Gun Violence in Nigeria: A Focus on Ethno-Religious Conflict in Kano

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ABSTRACT

We investigated small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Africa by reviewing the situation in Nigeria and conducting a small study in one hospital in the country's north. Published reports about SALW in Nigeria suggest that several social, economic, and political factors have caused a marked increase in gun-related violence, including ethno-religious tensions, the response of security forces to criminal activity, and growing economic disparity. In Kano, a northern city that has been the focal point of communal riots between Christians and Muslims, we found that firearm injuries were linked to these riots. We recommend increased outreach to disenfranchised youth, addressing the use of firearms by security forces, and addressing the political and economic disparity between ethnic and religious groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) cause the majority of deaths and injuries in conflicts worldwide. They are especially a problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, where over 100 million weapons circulate, fuelling war, crime and human rights abuses (1,2). Addressing this public health problem requires an understanding of the social, political, and economic factors that encourage and facilitate the use of SALW (3).

Nigeria's population of 133 million accounts for half of West Africa's people, and with over 250 ethnic groups it is the most diverse nation on the continent. As a regional "superpower", and a

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key member of the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), it plays a central role in maintaining stability in West Africa. Nigerian troops have served major peacekeeping roles in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and most recently in Sudan. Through the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), Nigeria has pushed for greater economic liberalization and integration, and its economy is recognized as crucial to the continent.

In this paper we address several factors that have contributed to the problem of SALW in Nigeria. We then focus on ethno-religious conflicts, and use Kano, a city in northern Nigeria, as a case study. We present the findings of a pilot study in Kano, and discuss recommendations for research, policy, and practice relevant to SALW.

UNDERSTANDING SALW IN NIGERIA: EVOLUTION OF A GUN CULTURE

Owing to significant underreporting, accurate statistics on gun violence are rare in Nigeria. The homicide rate, for example, is reported as only 1.5 per 100,000 but is likely many times greater (4). Although 30% of Nigerians report having been a victim of crime in the past year, only 25% of these crimes are reported to the police (4,5). Commentators note a marked increase in gun violence in Nigeria in the last decade, with armed robbery becoming commonplace (6). Injuries due to SALW have increased as much as 10-fold in urban settings (7). Most homicides are committed using SALW (8), and they cause increasing numbers of trauma deaths arriving in emergency departments (9). There has been an enormous growth in private security and many Nigerians have begun to carry SALW for personal protection (10).

Strict laws and penalties to control the spread and use of SALW have proven ineffective in stemming the rise in gun violence. While SALW may only be possessed legally by the police and military, guns are readily available, with an estimated 1.2 million illegal weapons in Nigeria (11). Nigeria is a major destination for SALW, which flow in from conflict zones via porous borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (10). SALW are also brought back to Nigeria by soldiers away on peacekeeping missions. Police may even sell or lease their

weapons to criminals. SALW stolen from legal owners often end up on the black market. Local production of SALW include numerous craft gunsmiths throughout the country, and the Defense Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON), which manufactures products for use by the military, police, and some civilians (12).

There is a contradiction between official positions on SALW and action taken by the government. Internationally, Nigeria is party to the United Nations Programme of Action (UNPoA) on SALW, as well as to the Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons. In 2001, Nigeria established a National Committee with wide representation from relevant government agencies and civil society in accordance with the 1998 ECOWAS Moratorium on SALW. However, little more has been done. Public firearms destruction was carried out in July 2001, but only removed approximately 1,500 SALW from circulation (2,10,13). Little more has been done about this issue, especially regarding the underlying factors that drive gun violence.

GROWTH OF A GUN CULTURE IN NIGERIA

Many factors have contributed to the development of a “gun culture”, where more and more individuals and groups are turning to SALW to achieve their goals. Nigerian society has become “militarized” as social relationships have broken down over the past decade. Addressing these problems is difficult but important, especially when considering any program of prevention.

Military History and Police Presence

A long history of the militarization of society has contributed to the problem of SALW in Nigeria. The military has ruled for the majority of the period following independence from Britain in 1960. During the Biafran Civil War (1967–1970), large numbers of SALW passed into general circulation. Civil–military relations have worsened since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, and most of the population see the armed forces and police as coercive and corrupt (14–16). Many believe that the police are often bribed to release those who use SALW, and the police may themselves be involved in committing

crimes. To maintain order, the Nigerian police and military frequently use SALW, showing little concern about civilian casualties in their actions. The rules governing their use of firearms are extremely permissive (17). Police may use guns in almost any circumstance with impunity. The police motto until early 2005 was “Fire for Fire”, earning them the monikers of “kill and go” and “spray and pray” (14,15,18). Amnesty International and other organizations have consistently called for action to end indiscriminate police use of SALW (15). A 2003 study in Ilorin found that after armed robbery, the police were the second most common cause of injuries due to SALW (19).

Poverty and Economic Disparity

Poverty and enormous economic disparity within Nigeria have also been driving factors behind the use of SALW. Although Nigeria is the sixth leading oil producer in the world, few have benefited from this resource. Almost 70% of Nigerians live on less than one dollar a day and the average life expectancy is 48 years. This paradox is epitomized by the Niger delta region, where one of the indigenous groups, the Ogoni people, have struggled to obtain basic social services and to resist the destruction of their local environment (20). Police and soldiers have used SALW to fire on protestors, often armed by major oil companies. Small arms have also been employed by rival gangs to control different parts of the “oil patch”. The gangs often “bunker” oil from pipelines and sell it to suppliers, using the revenue to purchase additional weapons (21). Economic disparity has also fueled the enormous increase in crime in Nigeria, with thousands of unemployed young men turning to armed robbery.

Ethno-Religious Diversity and Conflict

Since the transfer to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has suffered from increasing internal tensions. Ethnic and religious groups compete for political power and control over lucrative resources (6). Group loyalty and discrimination against members from different groups is common, fuelling corruption and political patronage, and sometimes erupting in armed violence. Increasing tensions have split the country along religious lines; the North is predominantly Muslim and the

South, Christian. Claiming the need for self-preservation and citing the ineptitude of the police, many ethnic groups support armed militias as “community defence groups”, some with highly sophisticated military weapons. The O’oduwa Peoples Congress is in the south west, the Egbesu Society in the Niger Delta, the Bakassi Boys in the south east. It is widely recognized that these vigilante groups carry out politically motivated acts of torture, extortion, and extrajudicial murder, sometimes sanctioned by the state (15,22). Certain groups have also employed mercenaries from surrounding countries, usually those who share a common ethnicity or religious identity (23). Student gangs, or “cults”, often based on ethnic identities, have become commonplace on university campuses, and have increased the number of clashes using SALW. Electoral violence is now more common, as politicians support and arm youth wings. Civilians are frequently caught in the cross-fire (24). A Nigerian government report estimates that approximately 53,000 were killed from September 2001 to May 2004 in “communal clashes” (25).

STUDYING SALW: KANO, NORTHERN NIGERIA

As physicians, we often witness the negative impact that SALW have on health and development. We joined International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), to work with colleagues to understand and address this problem (26). The Society of Nigerian Doctors for the Welfare of Mankind (SNDWM), an affiliate of IPPNW, collaborates with other civil society groups to promote a culture of peace. Our campaigns have proposed policy changes to prevent injuries and violence by addressing the proliferation of SALW.

Several of us (IJ, AM, and CAN) have practiced in Kano, a northern city and a site of grave ethnic conflict. The state of Kano’s 7 million people belong to more than one hundred ethnic groups. Islam is the dominant religion, and most Muslim residents are pastoralist cattle herders. The Christian minority group is comprised predominantly of farmers and merchants based in urban centers. This economic and political divide has recently increased tensions. Loss of grazing land to the expanding Sahara Desert aggravates poverty among pastoralists. Diminished central government control following the end of military rule has permitted a power struggle

between ethnic groups (23). This has been exacerbated by the imposition of Shariah law in Kano and other northern states, as it has been perceived as a threat to the Christian minority. Since 1988, major riots have occurred between Muslims and Christians, and in 2001 violent protests followed the United States' invasion of Afghanistan.

In February 2004, 67 Christians were massacred at a church in Yelwa, a city in Plateau State, south of Kano. A massive reprisal by Christian militia killed several hundred Muslims. Plateau State, as a hub for Christian groups in the mostly Muslim north, had previously experienced low-level ethnic tensions. However, in this instance, the violence rapidly spread to Kano, where retaliatory riots led to the displacement of 50,000 people and an unknown number of people killed (23,27–29). For the first time since the beginning of civilian rule, the President instituted a state of emergency. When he was unable to control the violence, the governor of Plateau State was suspended and was replaced by a retired general.

Little has been done to understand the role of SALW in these ethno-religious disputes and the public health implications of the widespread availability of firearms. A study by Mohammed *et al.* (30) in Jos found that most homicides with SALW were tied to communal violence, but no further research has been undertaken. Such investigations could help policy makers and community leaders in preventing more violence.

As surveillance systems for injuries due to SALW are lacking in Kano, we conducted a retrospective chart review of all injuries at the National Orthopaedic Hospital (Dala) in Kano, a 190-bed referral center for the region. We obtained ethical approval from the Medical Director to review records for a 3-month period (April 2004–June 2004), the time of violent conflict between ethnic groups. Seven hundred and thirty one cases were analyzed, and we recorded standard demographics, the external cause of injury, the place and time of injuries, and the region of the body injured.

Our study identified 28 victims of the Kano ethno-religious riots. Of these, only seven had injuries due to SALW, while 17 were assaulted with blunt instruments or cutting blades, and four suffered injuries while fleeing the riots (three were in road traffic accidents and one fell from a height). Among the larger number of patients who were not injured during the riots, there were only five injuries

due to SALW. Four were victims of armed robberies and one was a robber shot by the police. No deaths occurred among the 12 patients injured by SALW, but many were left with disabilities (66%). As with other studies, most victims of SALW were males (7,19). Their median hospital stay was 21 days. Riot victims who suffered other forms of injury had fewer permanent disabilities (24%) and had a median stay of only seven days.

Our modest study was limited by the small number of cases of SALW. The incidence of injuries due to SALW that we report is almost surely an underestimate, as in other studies (31,32). Victims of SALW are more likely to have severe or fatal injuries and are less likely to present to hospital for care, perhaps because it is seen as futile. Many would die before reaching hospital due to the lack of a public ambulance system and triage protocol. Muslim victims would likely be buried immediately after they are confirmed dead, as dictated by custom and religion. No mortuary data was available and deaths are not regularly reported to the police or health authorities. Poor record keeping, incorrect coding, and incomplete files would have further decreased the reported incidence. We reviewed only one hospital, and victims may have sought care elsewhere in Kano.

Owing to the relatively small numbers, it is challenging to draw conclusions. However, it does appear that the number of injuries and deaths due to SALW were increased by sectarian violence. A previous study in Kano, looking at May 2000–June 2001, noted that all of the homicides committed with SALW were in the context of robberies (33). Our results correspond to media reports that placed the number of deaths at 36–40 (29,34).

Most media did not report that the rioters were armed with SALW, and rather reported that most of the deaths due to these weapons were victims of police shooting. The police, the only group bearing arms openly, were given “shoot on sight” orders (25,34–39). Further, after these riots, Amnesty International urged the Nigerian police to demonstrate restraint and abide by the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials (35). Human Rights Watch echoed this sentiment and reported on an instance where witnesses saw the police fire into a crowd, leaving 40 dead (36,37).

In summary, communal violence probably increases deaths and injuries due to SALW, but other weapons remain more common.

In addition, the police are the likely cause of many injuries and deaths, secondary to riot control and the indiscriminate use of SALW.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LIMIT SALW IN NIGERIA

There are a number of recommendations we can make based on this work, to improve policy and research about SALW. Within Kano, better injury surveillance is needed, as well as prospective studies, including household surveys, to understand the epidemiology and etiology of armed violence (40,41). Other Nigerian cities, and two government hospitals in Kano have begun surveillance programs. However, the information collected will provide an incomplete picture of gun violence without accurate data from police, military, and other organizations.

Ethno-religious tensions underlie the violence in Kano, and addressing this is crucial to preventing further clashes. Health professionals can assist in mediation between different groups, and SNDWM can play a role in this area using “Peace through Health” principles (42). Primary prevention should consist of building trust and demonstrating that health is a universal goal for all parties. Specific examples of this can be found in several post-conflict situations (43–45).

However, as Stewart notes, “there is a tendency to attribute wars to ‘primordial’ ethnic passions, which makes them seem intractable. This view is not correct, however, and diverts attention from important underlying economic and political factors” (46). Within Nigeria and all of sub-Saharan Africa, societal inequalities are interlinked with gun violence, driving young men, who are the major perpetrators and victims of SALW globally, to become involved in gangs, cults, and organized crime. Can we address issues of poverty, inaccessible education, and unemployment, all of which drive young men to become involved in cults, gangs, and crime? Health professionals should play a role in advocating for such solutions, as they are important social determinants of health (47). Policy makers must consider social security and the distribution of the wealth of society, as key to the prevention of further violence. Broad coalitions of civil society organizations, including those that work directly with youth, will be required to put sufficient pressure on local and national governments to address these factors (1).

Force alone will not work to disarm groups and individuals. The Mop Up the Arms Campaign (MAC), led by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the Niger delta, should be followed closely as a non-violent response to police brutality (48). A government commission should address the use of firearms by the police, and prosecute those who abuse their positions and endanger civilians.

Many citizens in Kano are justifiably concerned about SALW (24). Unfortunately, the government response has been to arm police and continue the “fire for fire” ideology. Recent reports indicate that the Nigerian police have purchased 80,000 new weapons in anticipation of the 2007 National elections, including AK-47s, K2 rifles, and Beretta pistols, plus 3.2 million rounds of ammunition (49). The ammunition will likely end up in the hands of the general public, as government supplies are the only reliable source in Nigeria (10). As a minimum, issuing plastic bullets rather than live ammunition may prevent a number of deaths and serious injuries (19).

CONCLUSION

SALW will continue to be a challenge for Nigerians for many years to come, and play a role in crime, police brutality, and ethno-religious tension – issues interdependent with daunting social factors: poverty and corruption. Health professionals can help by collecting and presenting the evidence, working to improve patient care for the victims and by working with other organizations in strong coalitions to address this issue at its roots. While many obstacles to the goal of a violence-free society persist, we are encouraged by the work occurring globally on this issue and the power of civil society and the public to create such a world.

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