

Death by Instalment: Occupational health and hazards in Nigeria

Edited by

**Funmi Adewumi
&
Femi Omololu**

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Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria

Death by Instatement:
Occupational Hazards in Nigeria

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First Published 1997

ISBN 978-34306-0-2

Printed by:

Emmi Press,
Samonda, U.I. Road,
Ibadan, Nigeria

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CHAPTER 10

Working in the Shadow of Death: The Case of Night-Guards in Urban Centres in Nigeria

R.A. Okunola

Introduction

One of the major social problems facing urban centres of the world in general and Africa in particular is crime. Generally, the high rates of crime and criminal activities have been a major issue of concern the world over, and especially in Nigeria since the civil war (Tamuno, 1985; 1991). While various governments have not been able to tackle the problem with any degree of success (Third United Nations Crime Survey 1993), research has shown that most of these crimes are urban localized (Owumi, 1994). The preponderance of these crimes in the cities has been attributed to the large proportion of migrants (especially youths in search of jobs) and the attendant social disorganisation. Particularly, rural-urban migration has been on the increase in developing countries either because traditional systems of rural production have disintegrated or because the urban areas offer superior job opportunities.

While one can attribute this higher concern with crime in urban centre as part of the general urban bias in criminological studies (Lopez-Ray 1970), nonetheless area studies in both United States and United Kingdom for example on the sociological approach to crime have shown that there is a correlation between crime and urbanization (Akintola, 1994). A variety of causes, both social and economic, are cited for rising crime in the urban centres. Among them are an erosion of family and religious restraints, the trend toward "permissiveness", increasing anonymity, the civil war and

the general decline in morality. It is far beyond the scope of this chapter to catalogue all the factors involved in the trend toward increasing crime, rather it will concern itself with crime problems in urban centres; and in what can be termed a 'fall-out' from the crime crisis in the urban centres.

That urban centres in Nigeria have become more and more dangerous to live is beyond dispute. Available crime statistics show this clearly. The correlation between economic deterioration and criminal activities (Lopez-Ray 1970) has been made more manifest under the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in Nigeria. Whatever the arguments, the social costs of Adjustments have been very burdensome especially on the vulnerable groups of recipient countries (Isamah, 1994). Thus, very high inflation rates, falling real wages, unemployment, etc, have become quite commonplace phenomena in these societies. The effect of this economic crisis on crime as a form of reaction is fully attested to by the available crime statistics. (See Appendix A) which show a steady increase of crime of all kinds, with the greatest escalation in crimes related to property.

One of the disturbing features of this growing criminality is the aspect of personal and social violence that have tended to occur - especially in the form of violent crimes - most prominent of which is armed robbery. With particular reference to the urban centres, *The Guardian* (1985) wrote:

The Armed Robber. He has become a domineering character in the national scenario, so much so that urban ... Nigerians witness his diabolical acts even now and then. And the most frightening of it all is that he is daily becoming more armed, more sophisticated, more vicious, robbing more and more people of their monies, property and lives.

Headlines such as: 'Robbers on Rampage in Lagos'; 'Robbers go wild in Lagos'; 'Nine-month old escapes robbers' bullets, and 'The

Reign of Terror are common in the Nigeria Press. In spite of the official statistics it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the crime epidemic today in Nigeria.

One of the major central crime prevention institutions in Nigeria - the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has however been described to be inefficient, ineffective and incompetent (Tamuno, 1979 a & b, Oseni 1993, Alemika (nd). To say that the NPF is a total failure will however be incorrect as can be seen from some isolated success stories, but the consensus is that the force has performed below expectation in the area of crime control over the years. While this shortcoming is not really unique, modern policing faces some general problems like shortage of personnel, obsolete equipment and poor morale to mention but few (Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 6:662). The under-development of NPF within the overall security structure in Nigeria is not in doubt (Adekanye, 1993). The problem has been further worsened by some internal problems ranging from corruption to collusion (Tamuno 1979b, Alemika (nd), Oseni 1993).

It is against this background of rising crime rate (especially violent crime) and the seeming ineffectiveness of the NPF that the emergence of night-guarding as a phenomenon becomes inevitable. This community-reactive strategy can be traced to the formation of 'vigilante' groups which are often found in urban fringes with relatively less police presence. Legal backings were given to these vigilante groups at different times by different state governments depending on the degree of the crime epidemic. For example, in the case of Oyo State an Edict was enacted by the administration of Colonel, Adetunji Olurin in 1986 which gave legal backing to the formation of vigilante groups through landlords/residents association. Such vigilante groups were later replaced by direct employment of night-guards by such community associations. Thus the evolution of night-guarding constitutes a major community-reactive strategy to the deleterious effect of crime in

the cities. However, a cursory look at the studies conducted in the area of crime within the urban centres shows that nothing has been done (empirically) towards a systematic understanding of the night-guards as a social phenomenon or to study them as a workforce, especially the risks to which they are exposed in the process of guarding others. While some research efforts could be said to have been made in the area of private security firms in the overall crime control strategy, this informal anti-crime work force (the night-guards) is merely mentioned as one of those community initiatives aimed at protecting residents against growing violent crimes in the urban centres. (Obudho & Owuor 1994).

Methodology

This study is based on both observations and interviews conducted between December 1994 and March 1995. In all, a total of 33 night-guards were interviewed in three residential areas in Ibadan (Bodija-isopako, Arometa-Eleyele and Ijokodo). A structured questionnaire which solicited for information about socio-economic background of the group, nature of job and working conditions of respondents was used. Secretaries of the Landlord Associations in each area covered were also interviewed. Primary data gathered were supported by some secondary sources. Data analysis is in both quantitative and qualitative-forms

Night-Guarding: The Occupation

Basically, night-guarding involves the maintenance of surveillance over a defined territory/street(s) or geographical area from dusk to dawn. This is done mainly through patrol. The area covered by a guard or group of guards varied in geographical size population density, character, and terrain. The number of men employed in an area depends on three inter-related factors.

- (a) The degree of perceived or actual threat to lives and property in the area;
- (b) The geographical size/complexity of the residential area and

(c) The available financial resources of the residents' associations (Landlords/Tenants association).

Resumption time, which is flexible begins from about 8.00p.m. when guards are expected to work undercover till later in the night when they are expected to cordon-off their areas of operation. Actual work involves the partial barricade or total lock-up of gates provided on streets or at some strategic points in the residential area. The effective patrol time in most areas is fixed for 12.00 midnight by which time all residents are expected to be in their houses. To guard against the flouting of this curfew, there are often notice boards stating the restriction hours.

With the cordoning over, guards patrol the area of coverage with the aim of preventing criminal activities particularly burglary, theft and armed robbery attacks. While patrolling, guards rap metal bars to warn residents to stay in-door. Each team is independent and has no formal relationship with any other adjoining neighbourhood. Guards take turn to nap in the course of their duty. Guarding generally terminates at about 5.00 a.m. when guards dismantle all barricades and open-up all locked gates.

In the areas covered by this study, the practice is to have unit beat patrol; here sub-sections of the residential areas are shared out for coverage amongst guards. Guards are often equipped with a whistle, night-stick, torch-light, sheeted cutlass, dane gun, knives, etc. The degree of sophistication of these equipment is dependent on the factors earlier mentioned, particularly finance.

Uniforms are not generally provided. Guards often make do with some second-hand windblazers. Footwears consist of simple canvas or in some cases ordinary rubber slippers depending on the resources available to individual guard.

The Hazard

In the main, the job of night-guarding implies mini-police duty and there is no doubt from the brief discussion above that it is risk-prone. Within the objective of this study, the question is; how well prepared or how well do the employers of guards prepare them for this 'anti-terrorist' duty? Issues arising from questions such as this will reveal the hazards associated with the job.

Patrolling requires a lot of stamina and energy and tracking down criminals of the like of armed robbers requires a great deal of skill. How do our respondents fare on this? A brief on the demographic profile of respondents will assist in answering this question.

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age Group	No	%
36-40	2	6.1
41-45	3	9.1
45-50	6	18.2
51-55	17	51.2
56 and above	05	15.2
Total	33	100.0%

Table 2: Educational Background

Educational Status	No.	%
No formal education	14	42.4
Some Primary	10	30.3
Finished primary	09	27.3
Total	33	100%

Table 3: Training Received

Form of Training	No.	%
Family Vocation	13	39.4
Apprenticeship	12	36.4
	08	24.2
Total	33	100%

If one relates the age distribution of respondents to the nature of the job, there is no doubt that majority faces a great risk when compared with the criminals they have been employed to fight; the armed robbers/burglars are known to be agile and athletic.

The risk becomes greater when we compare them at the level of weapons they carry. As mentioned earlier most guards are armed with matchets, dane guns, knives, iron rods, etc. On the other hand robbers have been known to invade houses with sophisticated weapons like sub-machine guns and pistols. In the words of one of the respondents:

When these robbers come, they sometimes carry pistols and machine guns... and in serious times... they come in large numbers... especially when they come to target a big man.

Aside from the weapons is the issue of kitting. How well are the guards kitted for the adversities of night patrol? From observations on the field, there are no blazers or slacks. There are no provisions for boots. Guards as employees are expected to make individual arrangements. It is thus not unusual to find guards smoking heavily and habitually consuming alcoholic spirits to 'fight' the cold of the night. This improper kitting further exposes guards to health risks and place them at a disadvantage in their anti-terrorist duty.

Reacting to the problem of improper kitting and inadequate weapons, the secretaries of Landlords/Residents Associations interviewed in the three locations blamed it on the level of resources at the disposal of the community associations, they also point to the law on possession and use of firearms, which as one of them puts it "is a serious constraint on the degree of what can be provided". Thus the guards are expected to 'manage' since their job is seen as complementary to that of the Nigeria Police Force. The Secretary of the Isopako Community Association submitted that:

They are more or less serving as obstacles not the major halt... most of the times the police still has to be called in ... or even residents assisting the guards.

However, it is the guards that are first and mainly on the firing-line in the event of robbery attacks. They are under pressure from the residents (their employers) and the robbers. They often face problems from the police, in the form of interrogations and 'reporting at police station' in the event of robbery attacks in their area of operation. In two of the three areas covered by the study, one guard each was said to have been killed on active duty. In Arometa-Eleyele area, a nightguard was slaughtered in 1992; while in Bodija-Isopako area, a night-guard was said to have been killed in 1993. About 10% of the night-guards claimed to have had one form of injury or the other while on duty. Such injuries range from matchet cuts to those resulting from missiles hauled at them by bandits.

Cases as above raise the issue of training in the technicalities of violent crime combating. From table 3 above, the main credentials of the guards is just 'courage' and experience over time. As one of the respondents put it; "guarding is our family occupation." With little or no skill, the guards are literally patrolling or working in the shadow of death. They are simply not a match for the better organised and better equipped robbers.

How well are the employers taking into consideration this high risk in the remuneration of the guards? Table 4 gives the monthly salary of the guards interviewed .

Table 4: Monthly Salary of Night-Guards

Monthly Salary (N)	No	%
750.00 - 1,000.00	5	15.15
1,001.00 - 1,250.00	12	36.35
1,251.00 - 1,500.00	10	30.30
1,501.00 - 1,750.00	6	18.18
Total	33	100%

For the payment of the guards salary each house-hold in the are: covered contribute between N60.00 - N100.00 per month. The accruing fund is administered by a committee on security. Besides, the salary, there are no other minor benefits (as of right) to the night-guards. The work is neither pensionable nor does it attract any gratuity. The rate of increment of salary is not clearly stated. Furthermore, a guard stands the risk of losing his job especially as an after-effect of a 'successful' robbery raid in his area of coverage - guards are often accused of collusion. This instability in employment and the low level of remuneration has prompted all the respondents to maintain dual work. Thus, 19(57.57%) said they farm during the day: 8(24.24%) said they are engaged in one form of craft making or the other; while the remaining 9(18.18%) said they are petty traders. This dual-work regime in itself has health implications for the guards.

Proposals and Conclusion

The problem of growing violent crimes in the urban centres, and the seeming failure of the NPF has forced residents to take community initiatives to protect their lives and property. It is against this background that the evolution of night-guards becomes

imperative. In the main the work of a night-guard involves the prevention as well as apprehension of criminals - most of which are violent.

As evident from the study, this work force is ill-equipped and underpaid. Thus the low level and quality of labour the job attracts, yet these workers face greater risks to their persons and lives in the course of carrying out their duties.

As an immediate measure, one will suggest that something be done about the remuneration of this group of workers. After all, they stay awake in order that residents may sleep peacefully. They are the people that dare the night, the cold and most importantly the criminals. Much as the employers are constrained by the law as regards the use of gun, a lot can still be done to give some comfort and protection to Night-guards. Most of them are dying instalmentally from the effects of drug use such as the spirits and alcohol consumed. Security committees in residential areas can look into the provision of protective boots, wind blazers, et.c., for the night-guards. Their pay can equally be improved upon.

Finally, it is suggested that the central labour union should as a matter of urgency show interest in the working conditions of this group of workers with a view to giving them the needed backing. This will in turn increase their bargaining power. But perhaps the best assistance that can be given to them is to ensure, to a reasonable extent, the overall safety of lives and property. This will reduce the hazards faced by Night-guards in their employment.

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Appendix A

*Breakdown Of Crimes By Category 1980 - 1984 . (Nigerian)

Offences	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Against Person	55,875	64,346	77,982	197,527	75,261
Against Property+	104,780	91,856	93,856	91,492	138,801
Against Local Acts	32,076	37,598	76,538	2,848,798	143,883
Other Offences	18,177	16,917	29,058	21,856	14,650
Total	210,908	210,713	277,434	3,159,673	372,595

*Breakdown Of Crimes By Category 1985 - 1989 . (Nigerian)

Offences	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Against Person	66,647	77,842	72,517	83,618	102,616
Against Property+	83,532	120,428	205,147	166,408	675,485
Against Local Acts	27,769	20,862	13,338	8,213	1,311
Other Offences	125,442	64,485	63,393	73,214	40,133
Total	303,390	283,617	354,395	331,453	819,545

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***Breakdown Of Crimes By Category 1990 - 1993 . (Nigerian)**

Offences	1990	1991	1992	1993
Against Person	98,371	94, 418	93,027	90,151
Against Property	186,682	166,322	78,527	76,443
Against Local Acts	5,922	6,598	4,733	5,880
Other Offences	16,226	15,828	32,433	31,548
Total	307,201	283,156	208,730	204,022

Sources: (a) Annual Reports of the Nigerian Police Force (Several)

(b) Federal Office of Statistics, Lagos (Facts and Figures about Nigerian) several editorial

(c) Igbo E.U.V. (1992)

(d) Alemika, E.E. (n.d).

* City specific crime rates were not available as the time of this presentation. But given the concentration of police control posts and activities in urban centres and major towns, the bulk of these figures will necessarily be from such centres.

+Robbery is classified under this category.

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*Breakdown Of Crimes By Category 1987 - 1989 (Nigerian)

Offences	1987	1988	1989
Against Person	52,877	64,346	77,983
Against Property	104,788	91,850	63,856
Against Local Acts	11,076	17,208	24,887
Other Offences	18,777	16,919	21,854
Total	110,908	110,313	116,580

*Breakdown Of Crimes By Category 1982 - 1986 (Nigerian)

Offences	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Against Person	66,647	77,845	77,845	77,845	77,845
Against Property	83,532	100,428	100,428	100,428	100,428
Against Local Acts	27,769	13,138	13,138	13,138	13,138
Other Offences	122,112	67,762	67,762	67,762	67,762
Total	200,060	259,173	259,173	259,173	259,173