

Inter-personal violence in Abomey-Calavi (Republic of Benin) 2015-2018

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the epidemiological, forensic and judicial aspects of physical abuse in Abomey-Calavi (Republic of Benin). This retrospective study covered the period from 2015 to 2018. It covered all the cases of voluntary assaults tried in Abomey-Calavi court. The study included a total of 450 physical assault cases. The victims were mostly young men (58.7%) with a mean age of 31 years. The offenders had a similar profile. They were mostly young men with a mean age of 32 years. The assailants were mostly alone (86, 2%) and unarmed (56, 1%). Domestic violence frequency was 8.845%. The most frequent lesions were wound (63.1%) and bruise (51.4%). The mean duration of the total impairment was 5.8 days.

Physical violence is the consequence of permanent tensions in urban area. It reflects a social imbalance. Violence management policies need to focus on prevention.

Keywords: Physical violence, Forensic medicine, Total incapacity to work, Benin republic.

Introduction

Violence management is a real global challenge.¹ It ranks among the top 10 most common causes of death and injury among youth.² Courts occupy an important place in the violence management system, especially in cases of domestic and community violence. In Benin's legal system, acts of physical violence are considered offences except when they are followed by death or severe disability.³ According to the Penal Law, the penalty is proportional to the severity of the injuries caused to the victim. The legal instrument for assessing this severity defined by law in Benin is the duration for work disability or absence from work. This study focused on the profile of victims, aggression (aggressors and circumstances), medical findings and judicial follow-up of cases of deliberate assault in Abomey-Calavi. This city is one of the most populated in Benin with nearly 650.000 inhabitants.

Materials and Methods

We studied all the legal cases relating to a violation of body integrity tried by the Court of First Instance of Abomey-Calavi (TPI-AC). This court is territorially competent to deal with any law-breaking acts that occurred in Abomey-Calavi.

We only took into account the cases relating to prosecution for assault and battery. We include complaints which have been filed and tried between January 2015 and December 2018. Claims related to sexual offenses were excluded.

The data was extracted from various documents constituting the legal file, the main ones being the minutes of complaints, the minutes of hearing of the accused and the medical certificates and the judgment. They were related to the victim, his attacker (s), the context of the assault, the medical findings and the outcome of the trial at first instance. The data was encoded in an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed with the SPSS v25 software. The variables were described in

terms of frequency, mean and standard deviation. Associations between variables were measured using the Chi² test. The threshold of significance was set at 0.05% for all tests. The president of the Court gave us access to files.

Results

In total, 450 files meeting the criteria defined above were retained. The victims' profile. We obtain finally 450 files meeting criteria defined above.

The victims' profile

There were 450 victims of which 58.7% were men. The sex ratio was 1.4 (264 vs 186). The mean age of the victims was 30.8 years (standard deviation = 11 years) with extremes of 8 and 75 years. The 25 to 34 age group was the most represented for both men and women (Table 1). There were almost victims living alone as victims living in a relationship at the time of the crime.

Profile of aggressors and assaults characteristics

In these 450 cases, 526 assailants were prosecuted. Aggression age ranged from 9 to 70 years, with an average of 32 years (standard deviation = 9.9). Men under 34 accounted for 57.8% (Table 2).

Assaults, in which the perpetrator acted alone accounted for 86.2% (n = 388). We counted 54 cases where there were two offenders and 8 cases in which they were more numerous. The maximum number of assailants reported for a single assault was 4.

Domestic violence accounted for 8.45% of all cases of violence. They involved 9 out of 10 women (Table 3). In 43.9% of the cases, the attackers were armed. The weapons were mostly sharp objects or stabs (105 cases). There were 38 cases of stabbing (8.4%), but none with firearms. Violence with a weapon, those involving multiple perpetrators, and those where the victim did not previously know the perpetrator involved men more often than women (Table 3).

Table 1: Victims' Characteristics

	Female (N=186)		Male (N=264)		Total (N=450)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (year)						
[8-19]	7	3.8	7	2.7	14	3.1
[19-25]	32	17.2	38	14.4	70	15.6
[25-35]	75	40.3	105	39.8	180	40.0
[35-45]	47	25.3	68	25.8	115	25.6
[45-55]	17	9.1	33	12.5	50	11.1
[55-65]	3	1.6	11	4.2	14	3.1
≥65	5	2.7	2	0.8	7	1.6
Marital status						
Married	102	54.8	122	46.2	224	49.8
Single	79	42.5	140	53.0	219	48.7
Divorcee	1	0.5	2	0.8	3	0.7
Widow	4	2.2	0	0.0	4	0.9

Table 2: Distribution of perpetrators per age and sex

	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (years)						
[8-19]	3	2.2	5	1.3	8	1.5
[19-25]	15	10.8	86	22.2	101	19.2
[25-35]	71	51.1	169	43.7	240	45.6
[35-45]	35	25.2	73	18.9	108	20.5
[45-55]	13	9.4	44	11.4	57	10.8
[55-65]	2	1.4	5	1.3	7	1.3
≥65	0	0.0	5	1.3	5	1.0
Total	139	100.0	387	100.0	526	100.0

Table 3: Characteristics of assault

	Female (N=186)		Male (N=264)		Total (N=450)		p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Characteristics							
Domestic violence	34	18.3	4	1.5	38	8.4	<0,0001
Unknown Offender	8	4.3	86	32.6	94	20.9	<0,0001
Public aggression	59	31.7	103	39.0	162	36.0	0,112
Armed Perpetrator	14	7.5	143	54.2	157	34.9	<0,0001
Bitten victim	31	16.7	39	14.8	70	15.6	0,585
Perpetrator threw objects	11	5.9	34	12.9	45	10.0	0,015
Perpetrators were numerous	9	4.8	53	20.1	62	13.8	<0,0001

Forensic findings

The victims who produced a medical certificate run to 356 (79.1%). None of these certificates were produced on police requisition. The mean time to produce certificates was 2.5 days (standard deviation = 7) with extremes ranging from 1 to 58 days. Nearly 9 out of 10 certificates were produced within seven days after the violence (319 vs 37). The most frequently described lesions on the 356 certificates produced were wounds (63.1%), bruises (51.4%), hematomas (15.2%), fractures (5.1%), burns (3.9%) and dislocations (1.4%).

The preferred location of the lesions were the head (72.2%), the upper limbs (47.8%), the anterior aspect of the thorax (23.3%), the back (21.6%), the abdomen (18.3%), lower limbs (12.6%) and neck (9.3%). Of the 356 certificates, there were 36 where the medical examiner did not identify any lesions of violence (10.1%). Eleven victims (2.4%) were hospitalized. The most extended hospital stay lasted six days.

The mean duration for absence from work or work disability (DWD) was 15.8 days (standard deviation = 13). DWD was less than 21 days in 76.5% of the victims.

Legal answers

A discharge was pronounced by the court in 29 cases (6.4%). In all other cases, the court had sentenced correctional sentences. The defendants were fined 36.7% of the time and sentenced to 53.7%. Conditional sentences of less than six months accounted for 67.4% of the imprisonment cases. In the group of victims who had a total duration for absence from work less than 21 days, the frequency of sentences of more than 6 months was 20.6% compared to 34.4% for those with a duration for work disability of less than 21 days. The difference was statistically significant (p -value = 0.02).

Discussion

In Benin, violence denunciation is not the first choice of the population. Denunciation generally only occurs after the failure of conciliation attempts. This work, which relies on court-based data, is a better reflection of reality than hospital data. In Benin, the majority of medical certificates produced under VCCs are issued in private medical practice offices. Physical violence is a ubiquitous phenomenon. It affects all social categories. We observe, however, that most of the victims are young people. It was also the case in Fianarantsoa.⁴ This can be related to the fact that young people have a more spirited temperament and are less inclined to yield to conciliation attempts. Moreover, young people, because of the digital revolution of recent years, have a better knowledge of their rights and have a stronger tendency to go to the courts than their elders.

Our results concerning the profile of the authors of the physical aggressions are similar to those of the previous studies carried out on the subject. Abusers are more often male and female.⁴⁻⁶ The assailant usually acts alone.^{4,6}

Our series, however, has some peculiarities. Domestic violence accounts for 8.4% of cases. This frequency may seem lower compared to that observed by Raux and al⁵ in France. In black Africa, the issue of domestic violence is still a taboo. Victims who are mostly,⁷⁻¹⁰ women are afraid to have their home at risk by filing a complaint against their spouse. In Cotonou, south of Abomey-Calavi, a previous study had found that less than 1% of cases of domestic violence with physical violence were brought to court.¹¹

When the aggressor is armed, it is mostly a stab. Other authors have made the same observation in Africa.^{12,13} The use of firearms and knives is much rarer. In Benin, people rarely move with weapons in urban environments. Weapons used in assault and battery are usually those that are present in the immediate environment of the protagonists at the time of the outbreak of the violence. Stabs and firearms are mostly used in the context of robbery. Judicially, robbery is considered as a criminal offence. These cases usually go through a long period of investigation, while the intentional assault is judged in the act. These aspects of court proceedings may explain the fact that we have observed only a few cases of gun violence.

According to our results, the head was the part of the body most affected by lesions. In Benin, facial lesions related to physical assault account for 2.3% of trauma cases treated

in¹⁴ hospitals. Most lesions are benign. This explains why the majority of the wounded were treated as outpatients.

In Benin, intentional assault and battery are considered offences regardless of the total duration for work disability.³ This is more like a tool that guides the judge in the choice of the penalty. Thus, according to the provisions of the penal code, when the duration is longer than 21 days the guilty risks a minimum penalty of 6 months, when the duration is less than 21 days the minimum penalty incurred is two months. Our results confirm that this legal provision is respect.

Conclusion

Violence affects all societies. It is a consequence of the permanent tensions in urban environments, and it reflects a social imbalance. Violence management policies need to focus on its prevention.

Source of Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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