

Vigilantism in Ghana: Trends, Victim Characteristics, and Reported Reasons

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Abstract: Vigilantism is gaining popularity in Africa as a means of self-defence, enacting justice, policing morality, and sanctioning (perceived) wrongdoings. Drawing on content analysis of 172 media reports from 2001 to 2018, this study examined the trends and patterns of vigilantism, characteristics of victims, and reported reasons for recourse to vigilantism within the Ghanaian context. Results showed a considerable increase in reported cases of vigilantism within the 18-year period, with most of the cases reported in urban settings. Theft and robbery emerged as the most frequently suspected crimes for which victims were attacked and, in many cases, killed. The study underscores the implications of vigilantism in terms of disdaining human life and dignity. It calls for the need to revisit the justice administration systems and punishment procedures, as well as resourcing and empowering law enforcers to fight crime, including vigilantism.

Keywords: Ghana; law enforcement; mob justice; vigilantism; violence

At about 10 am on 20 November 2010, a 72-year-old grandmother agonised by a mob in the Greater Accra region of Ghana, ferociously met her death when she was burnt alive after she had been accused of being a witch (Ghanaweb 2010). Similarly, in April 2011 news of a young lady caught by some male students at a public university in Ghana for allegedly stealing a laptop computer and other gadgets belonging to a student, went viral on social media. The students stripped her naked and physically and sexually molested her and recorded the act (Ghanaweb 2011). Recently, on Monday, 29 May 2017, a military officer was lynched in the Central Region of Ghana. According to news reports, the military officer – in

mufti – was lynched when residents saw a gun on him during his routine outdoor jogging workout. Owing to an armed robbery incident the night before, and suspecting him to be one of the purported robbers, some residents raised an alarm, which led to the lynching of the officer (Ghanaweb 2017).

The aforementioned incidents exemplify the phenomenon of vigilantism, which is neither new nor limited to Ghana. The practice originated as a means of deterring and combatting crime in the late 1700s and became linked with racism in the 19th and 20th Centuries, especially in Southern America (Pfeifer 2004). Presently, vigilantism is seen across different nations. In Africa, vigilantism has been gaining popularity as a means of self-defence, enacting justice, policing morality, and sanctioning (perceived) wrongdoings, since the police are perceived to be unable or unwilling to protect citizens from the activities of criminals (Kirsch and Grätz 2010). ‘Necklacing’, a lethal form of vigilantism, in which old car tyres are put around the necks of victims and set ablaze on suspicion of having committed a crime, has been reported in some African countries including South Africa and Nigeria (Harnishchfeger 2003; Minnaar 2001). Amnesty International (2017) recounted an incident of vigilantism caused by over 1,000 Bengali settlers in Bangladesh. Similarly, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2015) indicated that in 2014, several acid attacks were perpetrated against women in the Iranian city of Isfahan for not wearing a *hijab*. Furthermore, in Tanzania, Ng’walali and Kitinya (2006) reported that 1,249 individuals were killed in the city of Dar es Salaam through mob justice from 2000 to 2004.

Although there are considerable variations in conceptualisations of vigilantism, common to most definitions is the notion that vigilantism involves the use of extralegal violence in response to the violation of an established order. For instance, Johnston (1996) described vigilantism as a social movement involving premeditated acts by private citizens with the use or threat of violence in response to the real, perceived, or potential deviation from an established norm by individuals or groups, and aimed at offering public assurance of order. Haas, de Keijser and Bruinsma (2014) also defined vigilantism as: ‘a planned criminal act, carried out by a private citizen in response to (the perceived threat of) a crime committed by a private citizen, targeting the (alleged) perpetrator of that crime’ (p.226). While the notion of planning or premeditation is emphasised in these definitions of vigilantism, there is recognition that vigilante acts may also be spontaneous as in the case of mob justice (Martin 2010; Moncada 2017). Drawing on these conceptualisations, vigilantism can be defined as a premeditated or spontaneous act involving the use or threat of violence by individuals who do not possess official legitimate power in response to an alleged criminal act or a behaviour that violates the norms associated with an institutionalised order (Haas, Keijser and Bruinsma 2012; Moncada 2017; Tankebe 2009). While practices such as hanging, burning, shooting, and stoning are typically considered lethal, practices such as beating, whipping, and torture, which are considered non-lethal (Moncada 2017), can have lethal outcomes depending on severity.

Research suggests that people resort to vigilantism as a means to attain justice (Adinkrah 2005; Tankebe 2009) or to restrain criminal activities in society (Gross 2016; Harnischfeger 2003). In Nigeria, earlier ethnographic studies attributed the rise of vigilante groups, such as the *Bakassi Boys*, to the incapability of state institutions to deal with violent crimes, prompting the need to engage in self-help (for example, Harnischfeger 2003; Meagher 2007). More recently, Agbiboa (2018) noted that threats posed by the terrorist group, *Boko Haram*, and human right abuses perpetrated by the Nigerian security forces underpinned the formation of local vigilante youth groups. Similarly, Goldstein, (2003) observed that, in Bolivia, the perception of police corruption was linked to public mistrust resulting in resistance to police attempts to intervene in stopping the lynching of suspects. A number of studies employing surveys and vignettes have linked public recourse to, or support for, vigilantism to perceived corruption, low responsiveness, mistrust, and ineffectiveness of the police and the justice system (for example, Haas, de Heijser and Bruinsma 2014; Nivette 2006; Tankebe 2009; Tankebe and Asif 2016). For example, Tankebe's (2009) study on vigilante self-help in Ghana found a statistically significant relationship between perception of low police trustworthiness and public support for vigilantism. Similarly, Tankebe and Asif (2016) observed that persons who perceived the police as untrustworthy were more likely to endorse vigilantism.

Victims of vigilantism often suffer significant bodily harm and, in many cases, even death (Adinkrah 2005). For victims who may be fortunate to survive vigilante violence, the long-term psychological consequences associated with the traumatic experience can be enormous and multifaceted. Moreover, vigilante violence impinges on the rights of victims to fair trial and justice. As noted by Adinkrah (2005): 'in most vigilante episodes, the accused is denied the opportunity to contest the charges. In the frenzied atmosphere of an enraged mob, brutal and excessive violence is visited upon the culprit, with death commonly the result' (p.415). There is evidence that some victims of vigilantism are killed on the basis of mistaken identity or false accusation (Harnischfeger 2003; Silke 2001). It has also been indicated that in certain cases, even after a person accused of wrongdoing has been proven innocent, some mobs still attempt to blame the victim for something else in order to justify their vigilante action (Madienyane 2013). While vigilantism may enable individuals or groups to provide security, seek justice, and 'ensure order' (Nivette 2016), vigilante violence can potentially contribute to anarchy (Adinkrah 2005), and ultimately challenge the legitimacy of formal state institutions of security and justice (Tankebe 2013).

However, only a few studies have focused on the profiles of victims, and findings from these studies suggest that victims of vigilantism are mostly youth between the ages of 20 and 45 years. For example, drawing on media reports on vigilante homicides in Ghana between 1990 and 2000, Adinkrah (2005) reported that victims of vigilante murders were mostly males between the ages of 25 and 45 years. Likewise, Ng'walali and Kitinya (2006) found that most of the victims of mob justice examined through forensic

autopsies were between age 15 and 45 years. They further indicated that theft and murder were the most commonly alleged crimes that elicited mob justice. In a recent study on open-source news reports on vigilante attacks on sex offenders, Cubellis, Evans and Fera (2019) reported that most victims were males and within middle adulthood. Across these studies, the modus operandi involved lethal practices such as burning, gunshots, and stoning.

Although vigilantism has received significant research attention from the Global South, particularly Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, empirical research on the phenomenon in the Ghanaian context is scanty. While Adinkrah's (2005) study in particular provided useful insights into the nature of vigilantism in Ghana, it was limited to only a few major newspapers. Moreover, the years following Adinkrah's study have seen significant expansion in the number of media outlets, particularly online media platforms, thereby giving issues bordering on violent crimes, including vigilantism, a wider coverage than previously. A cursory search of local news portals in Ghana from 2001 to date suggests an increasing trend in reported cases of vigilantism. The most recently published study on vigilantism in Ghana focused on political vigilante groups (Asamoah 2019). Although Asamoah's study provides insights into the emergence of political vigilantism in Ghana's fourth republic, it provides little insights into other forms of vigilantism such as mob justice.

In view of the limited research on the phenomenon of vigilantism in Ghana, the present study examined the trends and patterns of vigilantism, characteristics of victims, and reported reasons for recourse to vigilantism within the Ghanaian context. The study is important for several reasons and to several stakeholders. First, the study contributes to the literature by highlighting the trends of vigilantism in Ghana and the motivating factors giving rise to it. Further, following Adinkrah's (2005) study on the topic, which was published nearly two decades ago, the present study provides updated evidence on the occurrence of vigilantism to advance knowledge on the phenomenon. Thus, findings of the current study contribute to a greater appreciation of issues regarding vigilantism and other matters connected with it, thereby stimulating forward-thinking debate and discourse on the subject for enhanced national development. It also has implications for further research and policy in addressing the problem of vigilantism.

Methods

Research Approach and Data Sources

The study draws on online media reports on vigilantism from the period 2001 to 2018. The study approach was, thus, modelled after the method used in recent studies on some social and criminal issues in Ghana, for example, matricides, gang rape, suicide, and incest, inter alia (for example, Adinkrah 2014, 2018; Quarshie *et al.* 2017, 2018). Data used were drawn mainly from media sources, precisely, the websites of Ghanaian based newspapers (*Daily Graphic*, *Daily Guide*, and the *Ghanaian Times*), FM stations (www.joyfmonline.com, www.citifmonline.com, www.adomfmonline.com,

and www.peacefmonline.com), selected news agencies (Ghanaweb and Ghana News Agency), and digital (online) media houses. All these media sites are key in the Ghanaian media industry (Gadzekpo 2010). Some of these media houses are state-owned (for example, *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*); others, though privately owned, are the most widely used or listened to in terms of radio, for example, Joy FM, Citi FM and Peace FM. Ghanaweb (www.ghanaweb.com) and the Ghana News Agency (www.gna.org.gh) are general news outlets that cover news related to health, business and economics, politics, science, education, and sports (Quarshie *et al.* 2015). The range of media outlets (radio, newspaper, TV, and online news portals) selected enhanced the coverage and sensitivity of the search for potentially eligible news reports to be included in this study. In Ghana, print and online media reports are in the English language.

Procedure

The study was based on all cases of vigilantism in Ghana that were reported by the selected media outlets from January 2001 to December 2018. Two authors (Millicent Adzimah-Alade and Francis Annor) conducted an archival search of the website of each of the selected media outlets using keywords and phrases such as ‘mob justice’, ‘vigilante violence’, ‘mob action’, ‘instant justice’, ‘witch’, ‘rape’, ‘thief’, ‘land dispute’, ‘election turbulence’, ‘armed robbery’, ‘robber’, ‘burnt alive’, ‘beaten to death’, ‘vigilantism’, ‘street justice’, and ‘lynch’. This allowed for relevant and potentially eligible reported cases of vigilantism to be captured for analysis.

Data retrieved, screened, and included in the final analysis of this study were those media reports related to vigilantism of any kind in Ghana. The extraction of media reports for analysis was guided by the definition of vigilantism stated earlier. Replicated stories or multiple account stories were treated as one; follow up stories were added as additional information to the original versions, but not included as separate story counts. International news stories, media reports on group violence not related to vigilantism, civil/tribal/ethnic strife, and demonstrations were excluded.

Analysis of Data

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) was used to analyse the extracted media reports included in the study, to examine the trends and patterns of vigilantism in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, nature of attack, and reported motivating factors. At the first stage of the analysis, each member of the research team independently iteratively read all reported cases of vigilantism drawn from the selected media sites in order to be acquainted with the reports and note initial potential ‘open codes’. At the second stage, the research team met biweekly to discuss the content of the included media reports more closely, with focus on defining and refining the initial codes and integrating them into themes that help to explain the larger sections of the data. Finally, at the last stage of the analysis, the emerged themes were refined, and selected extracts, which supported and described the themes, were culled from the stories.

Consistent with conventional content analysis procedures (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), pre-existing theories or codes were not used to guide the analysis; deeper immersion and familiarity of the research team with the included stories allowed for the emergence of the codes and themes from the data. To improve validity of the analysis process, codes and themes were thoroughly discussed and agreed upon by the researchers. Cross-validation and group interpretations were done to decrease bias and increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the research findings (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle 2001).

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities at the University of Ghana (ref: ECH 054/17-18). To preserve the ethical position of this study, identifiable information (for example, names of victims, perpetrators, communities, explicit descriptions of locations, etc.) in relevant portions of eligible news reports included to elucidate the findings, were completely anonymised or pseudo-anonymised.

Findings

The search for media reports on vigilantism from January 2001 to December 2018 yielded 391 hits. Following the exclusion of duplicates and stories which did not meet the criteria for inclusion, 172 eligible stories were included in the final analysis. The findings of the content analysis of the 172 included stories were organised around four subheadings: *temporal and spatial distribution of vigilante violence, socio-demographic characteristics of victims, nature and forms of attack, and reported reasons for vigilantism.*

Temporal and Spatial Distribution of Vigilante Violence

As indicated earlier, 172 cases of vigilantism were reported within the 18-year period under review. This indicates an average of approximately ten cases per year. *Figure 1* depicts the distribution of reported cases of vigilantism in Ghana from 2001 to 2018. The figure shows an upward trend in reported cases of vigilantism over the period under study. The reported cases of vigilantism were relatively low in the period from 2001 to 2006, with 21 cases (12.2%) reported within this period. The period from 2007 to 2012 saw a significant increase in cases of vigilantism reported in the media, with 39 cases (22.7%) reported within this period. The highest number of cases was reported in the period from 2014 to 2018 with 112 cases (65.1%) reported within this period. Notably, more than a third of the cases (71, representing 41.3%) of vigilantism were reported within the last three years in the period under review. The year 2017 had the highest number of cases (37, representing 21.5%) compared with any particular year, with nearly as many cases as the years 2007 to 2012 combined. This striking spike in reported cases of vigilantism could be attributed to the lynching of a military officer (see Ghanaweb 2017), which might have attracted increased media reporting of suspected cases.

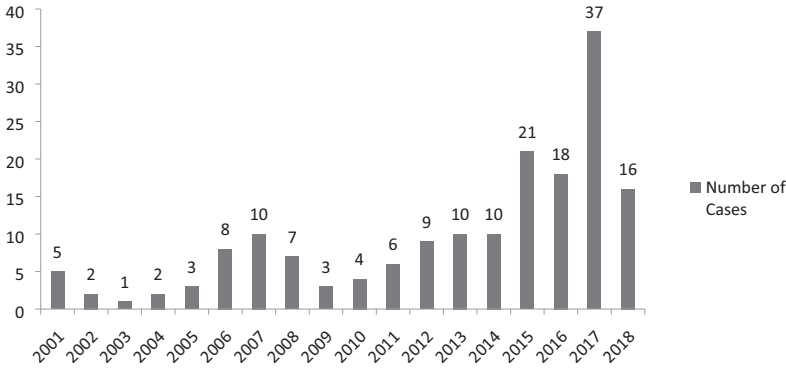


FIGURE 1
 Trends of Media Reports on Vigilantism in Ghana from 2001 to 2018

Table 1 reports the distribution of cases of vigilantism across the ten regions of Ghana. Broadly, the results show that the majority of reported cases (78.5%) occurred within urban areas compared with rural settings (21.5%). The Greater Accra Region accounted for the highest number of cases (46 cases, representing 26.7%), followed by the Ashanti Region accounting for 45 cases, representing 26.2%. Thus, more than half of the cases of vigilantism were reported in these two regions. The least number of cases of vigilantism (four, representing 2.3%) were reported in the Volta Region, followed by the Eastern Region (seven, representing 4.1%).

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Victims

The analysis of the 172 reported cases indicated that a total of 203 individuals were victims of vigilantism. The majority of cases (88.4%) involved

TABLE 1
 Regional Distribution of Cases of Vigilantism

Region	Rural	Urban	Total
Ashanti	10 (5.8)	35 (20.3)	45 (26.2)
Brong-Ahafo	3 (1.7)	6 (3.5)	9 (5.2)
Central	3 (1.7)	10 (5.8)	13 (7.6)
Eastern	0 (0)	7 (4.1)	7 (4.1)
Greater Accra	0 (0)	46 (26.7)	46 (26.7)
Northern	5 (2.9)	10 (5.8)	15 (8.7)
Upper-East	6 (3.5)	6 (3.5)	12 (7.0)
Upper-West	4 (2.3)	5 (2.9)	9 (5.2)
Volta	2 (1.2)	2 (1.2)	4 (2.3)
Western	4 (2.3)	8 (4.7)	12 (7.0)
Total	37 (21.5)	135 (78.5)	172 (100)

(Note: Figures in parenthesis are percentages.)

TABLE 2
Victims' Socio-demographic Characteristics

Characteristics/categories	Frequency	Percentage
Age group (years)		
Not reported	98	48.3
10–19	15	7.4 (14.3)
20–29	41	20.2 (39.0)
30–39	31	15.3 (29.5)
40–49	10	4.9 (9.5)
50+	8	3.9 (7.6)
Gender of victims		
Female	15	7.4 (7.6)
Male	182	89.6 (92.3)
Not reported	6	3.0
Employment status of victims		
Employed	43	21.2 (81.2)
Unemployed	10	4.9 (18.8)
Not reported	150	73.9
Victims' condition after attack		
Alive	62	30.5
Dead	141	69.5

(Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages with 'not reported' cases excluded.)

single victims and the remaining cases (11.6%) each involved multiple victims (see *Table 3*). *Table 2* presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the victims of vigilantism. For the purpose of analysis, age groupings were done to reflect adolescents (10–19 years), young adults (20–29 years), adults (30–39 years), older adults (40–49 years) and the elderly (50 years and above). The ages of 98 victims, representing 48.3%, were not captured in the media reports. Of the victims whose ages were reported, the majority (39.0%) were within the age of 20–29 years, followed by those aged 30–39 years (29.5%), and 10–19 years (14.3%). A few of the victims were aged 40–49 years and 50 years and above. It was also evident (see *Table 2*) that males were more likely to be victims of vigilantism than females. Of the 197 victims whose gender was indicated, 182 (92.3%) were males and 15 (7.6%) were females.

The employment status of the majority of the victims (73.9%) was not reported. Of the few whose employment status was reported, 43 (81.2%) were employed while ten (18.8%) were not employed. Victims employed in the formal sector occupied different positions, including hospital administrator, military personnel, member of parliament, police officer, preacher, political party constituency chairman, and security co-ordinator. Self-employed victims included traders, farmers, mechanics, drivers, truck pushers, small-scale mining operators, and a fetish priest. Three of the victims were reported to be students, but we captured them under unemployed for the purpose of analysis.

TABLE 3
 Incident Level Variables

	Frequency	Percentage
Number of victims		
Single victims	152	88.4
Multiple victims	20	11.6
Forms of attack		
Lynching	78	45.3 (47.3)
Shooting	2	1.2 (1.2)
Burning	10	5.8 (6.1)
Physical assault	61	35.5 (37.0)
Sexual assault	5	2.9 (3.0)
Vandalism	7	4.1 (4.2)
No physical attack	2	1.2 (1.2)
Not reported	7	4.1
Lethality of cases		
Lethal	117	68.0
Non-lethal	55	32.0

(Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages with 'not reported' cases excluded.)

Nature and Forms of Attack

The results showed that incidents of vigilantism reported in the media were mostly lethal. As shown in *Table 2*, 141 out of the 203 victims (representing 69.5%) of vigilantism died through the attack while 62 victims (representing 30.5%) survived the violence. Defining lethality based on the outcome of the attack (that is, whether it involved death or not), 68.0% of the cases involved lethal attacks while the remaining were non-lethal, as shown in *Table 3*. Different forms of attacks were reported for the cases of vigilantism. These attacks include burning, vandalism, lynching, shootings, physical assault, and sexual assault. Some victims experienced a combination of these attacks. It was noted that the most dominant form of attack was lynching, representing 47.3% of all cases reported. Physical assault was the next frequent form of attack, which represented 37.0% of the reported cases. Victims who suffered this attack were brutalised, beaten or nearly lynched. Some victims (5.8%) were also burnt or set ablaze, while in seven cases, the nature of the attack was not stated. In two cases, the victims did not suffer any form of physical attack due to the timely intervention of others (for example, security personnel, chief, etc.). The remaining forms of attack reported were vandalism (4.2%), shooting (1.2%) and sexual assault (3.0%). Often, female victims suffered sexual assault; in addition to being beaten, they were stripped naked, with perpetrators touching and inserting objects into their private parts.

Reported Reasons for Vigilantism

Most of the reasons given for the cases of vigilantism reported in the media were obtained by journalists from eyewitness accounts. Four broad themes were deduced from the analysis of the reviewed media

reports: (i) suspected criminality; (ii) infraction of religio-moral codes; (iii) political hooliganism; and (iv) perceived ineffectiveness of the justice delivery system.

Suspected criminality

The most frequently cited reasons for the reported cases of vigilantism were allegations of different forms of crime perpetrated by the victim, which included thefts/robberies and homicides. Most of the reported vigilante acts occurred in response to theft or robberies within communities. Specifically, theft and robbery were cited as the underlying reasons for the majority ($n = 117$) of the reported cases of vigilantism. In most cases, the victims were alleged to have been involved in attempted theft or robbery, or caught in these offences. In a few cases, victims were reported to have been attacked following suspicions that they were thieves or armed robbers, which turned out to be false. The following extracts illustrate attributions made to theft and robbery as reasons for engaging in vigilantism:

The deceased, who is in a critical condition and one other now at large, were alleged to have tried to snatch a bag containing a laptop from a student at around 4:30 am at gun point. . . . The victim was alleged to have raised an alarm, which attracted residents to the scene who chased the suspected robbers. . . . The residents, who claimed to have had enough of armed robbery in the area, gave them a hot chase. . . . Luck eluded the two as they were caught by the residents and beaten up mercilessly after which kerosene was poured on them and set ablaze. (Case No. 2, graphiconline.com, 2015)

Some male students arrested Amina at about 3:00am for allegedly stealing a laptop and other gadgets belonging to a female student of the hall. Instead of handing her over to the University police, the students many of whom are males stripped her naked and physically abused her and recorded the act. (Case No. 62, ghanaweb.com, 2011)

Homicide was found to be a notable reason for the occurrence of vigilante acts. In a few of the reported cases ($n = 10$), acts of vigilantism were attributed to murder or suspected murder by the victim. In all cases attributed to murder, the victims were suspected or accused of being involved in the murder or attempted murder of another person. The following accounts illustrate this point:

An irate mob on Saturday morning butchered a 25-year-old farmer to death at [a village] in the Asante Akim South District after he had murdered a colleague farmer. The deceased . . . was said to have slashed [his colleague] to death with a sharp machete and was attacked by the mob when he attempted to flee the community. (Case No. 135, ghanaweb.com, 2013)

In a related incident, the victim was alleged to have accidentally knocked down another road user (a motor cyclist), and thereby attracted the anger of some youth in the community, who physically assaulted and rendered him unconscious in the process. The extract below depicts this case:

[A taxi driver] accidentally knocked down a motor rider, who was treated and discharged same day at the . . . Hospital. But the mob chased the taxi driver to a

gas station and subjected him to severe beating until he became unconscious on January 8, 2017. A video recording of the assault received public condemnation after it went viral on social media. (Case No. 39, myjoyonline.com, 2017)

Infraction of religio-moral codes

This theme borders on the idea that victims were perceived as having flouted certain norms governing religious and moral conduct. Two key issues were noted under this theme: allegations of witchcraft and perception of non-heterosexual behaviour. In some of the cases ($n = 9$), the victims were accused of engaging in witchcraft, with most of the victims being aged persons. The following extracts demonstrate allegations of witchcraft as a reason for resorting to vigilante violence:

A 67-year-old woman accused to be a witch has been stoned to death by the people of a town in the Upper East region. Despite the woman denying being a witch, the community went ahead to kill her by stoning. The people of the community accused the old lady of visiting them in their dreams at night and said she was the cause of several misfortunes in their life. Before the Chief could sit on the matter a mob whisked the old lady and meted instant justice to her by stoning her to death. (Case No. 87, citifmonline.com, 2017)

An elderly woman aged 72, also met her untimely death at Tema when she was accused of witchcraft by some neighbours of her vicinity. She was beaten and set ablaze. (Case No. 12, ghanaweb.com, 2010)

In a few cases ($n = 4$), the reason for vigilante violence was related to the victims' perceived sexual orientation. Specifically, victims of vigilante violence in these cases were reportedly accused of, or caught engaging in, acts of homosexuality. In Ghana, homosexuality is not only illegal, but also considered to be at variance with cultural and religious codes on appropriate sexual conduct (Dai-Kosi, Asamani and Adomako 2016; Oppong 2018). Thus, individuals found, or perceived to engage, in such acts are seen to be morally reprehensible. Below are some extracts:

Irate youth brutally assaulted a man suspected to be a homosexual at . . . a suburb of Accra. The victim was captured in a video footage showing some youth assaulting him while accusing him of being a homosexual in the sprawling Accra suburb. (Case No. 45, peacefmonline.com, 2015)

A young man in his early thirties was nearly lynched, . . . when he was caught in the act with his gay partner. The wife upon seeing the two in the act, raised an alarm for neighbours to come clutching cudgels only to realize that one of the men in the act was a respectable member of the society and [the] other a total stranger who was believed to be a student. They were physically assaulted but managed to escape. (Case No. 72, *The Herald*, 2014)

Political hooliganism

In a number of cases ($n = 10$), the reported vigilante acts were linked to various political vigilante groups in the country. The presence of political vigilante groups, typically consisting of youth and political party foot soldiers in Ghana, is acknowledged in both media reports and schol-

arly publications (Asamoah 2019; Ghanaweb 2019; Gyampo, Graham and Asare 2017). Political vigilantes engage in various activities to promote the interests of political parties, especially, in securing electoral victory. The connection of these vigilante groups to the political elite seems to create in the former a false sense of entitlement to state resources believed to be controlled by the latter (Asamoah 2019; Gyampo, Graham and Asare 2017). For political vigilantes, this sense of entitlement not only creates an illusion of control over who can benefit from the ‘spoils’ of electoral victory, but has the tendency to result in violent confrontations when their expectations are not fulfilled by the political elite. The following extracts illustrate the occurrence of vigilante violence in the form of political hooliganism:

The *Invisible Forces*, in June 2017, assaulted both drivers and passengers of a bus terminal, . . . on reason that their party is in power and have been asked to take over management of the lorry station. (Case No. 31, adomonline.com, 2017)

More than 200 members of a self-styled security force have attacked the Ashanti Regional Security Coordinator late Friday morning to physically hound him out of office. . . . The group known as *Delta Force* says it cannot work with the coordinator because he was ‘not part of the struggle’ to wrestle power from the NDC [previous government] during the December 2016 general elections. (Case No. 33, myjoyonline.com, 2017)

Perceived ineffectiveness of the justice delivery system

The perception that key actors in the criminal justice delivery system, including the police and the judiciary, were ineffective was identified as a contributory factor for recourse to vigilantism. In some of the reported cases (n = 15), police officers witnessed the vigilante acts, but could not stop the mob from attacking the victims and there was no indication of an arrest afterwards. Perhaps, the police feel powerless in such situations, as they may be perceived as being defensive of the supposed transgressor, if they attempt to ‘disrupt’ acts of vigilantism. Thus, while the police would be fulfilling their official obligations by intervening to stop vigilante acts, such actions could heighten people’s view of the police as being corrupt and instigate violence against them (cf. Goldstein 2003). For example:

The Administrator of [a] . . . Government Hospital was on Easter Sunday murdered in cold blood by a group of young men on suspicion that he was part of a criminal gang involved in alleged serial murders in the area. The deceased’s attempt to explain to his attackers that he was an innocent person rather inflamed their passions, particularly so when they spotted a corpse in his vehicle. . . . A policeman who tried to save [the victim’s] life was also clubbed and rushed to a nearby clinic. But that was after he had managed to rescue three other persons in the car – a Catholic nun, the wife of the deceased and a nurse – and rushed them to a local police station. (Case No. 48, modernghana.com, 2007)

Youth of a town in the . . . Brong-Ahafo Region, on Friday, vandalised the town’s police station and burnt alive a fetish priest who was in police custody. In what looked like a movie scene, police personnel had to run for their lives until reinforcement arrived from nearby towns. (Case No. 94, kessbenfm.com, 2015)

The above extracts also point to an underlying strained relationship between the public and the police, which may stem from a lack of trust in the ability of the police to deal with suspected criminals. The apparent tension seems to underscore the violent confrontations between the public and the police as shown in both extracts. Consequently, police officers may see interference during the administration of mob justice as posing high risks to their personal safety, thus dissuading them from interfering in vigilante acts, even when they are present at the scene of the violence (Bruce and Komane 1999).

Alongside the police, the judiciary was perceived as being lenient with criminal offenders. A few of the reported cases of vigilantism involved reprisal attacks on suspicion that the victims, mostly previously convicted offenders, had been given sentences that were not commensurate with their offences. While these cases seem to indicate a lack of understanding of how the justice system operates, it signifies a lack of trust or confidence in key actors in the system (that is, the police and judiciary). For example:

According to the police, one of the ex-convicts . . . had recently been sentenced to nine months in prison for stealing by a Magistrate's Court. . . [He] appealed against the sentence and it was commuted to a fine which he duly paid. Some few days later, he was spotted moving about freely in the town, a development the people did not understand. The police said the decision did not go down well with the people, who decided to visit instant justice on all suspected criminals and ex-convicts in the town. (Case No. 8, graphiconline.com, 2015)

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to explore the trends and patterns of vigilantism, characteristics of victims, and reported reasons for recourse to vigilante violence in Ghana. The study points to an increase in cases of vigilantism reported in the media in Ghana. As opposed to 46 cases of vigilantism reported in Adinkrah's (2005) study, a total of 172 cases were recorded in this present study. Additionally, the results suggest an upward trend in reported cases of vigilantism over the 18-year period with a sharp rise occurring over the last five years. This suggests that vigilantism may be gaining popularity as a self-help approach to obtaining justice and righting perceived wrongdoing. The rise in vigilantism may be a consequence of widespread lawlessness underpinned by factors such as desperate economic circumstances, political polarisation, and lack of law enforcement. These circumstances may be eroding confidence in the state's ability to protect citizens. However, the rising trend could also reflect an increasing attention to issues related to vigilantism in the media, perhaps due to the increased media presence over the past decade. Regardless, the finding implies that 'state monopoly over the legitimate use of force' is being threatened in the Ghanaian context (Haas, de Keijser and Bruinsma 2014, p.226), possibly due to the presence of an environment that disinhibits citizens from taking the laws into their own hands (Tankebe 2009).

The study suggests important geographical differences in the occurrence of vigilantism. The predominance of vigilante cases in urban settings may be related to the relatively higher levels of crime in urban areas (Bruinsma 2007; Salzani 2007; Sampson and Groves 1989), which have been attributed to lower levels of social cohesion and informal social control (Krivo and Peterson 1996; Salzani 2007). The higher crime rates in urban areas would then mean that greater chances exist for vigilantism to occur in these areas, as vigilantism is both a response to, and a form of self-help against, crime. However, it is also the case that media presence is more pronounced in urban areas; increased reporting might not necessarily mean increased incidents of crimes. Similar to trends reported in extant research (for example, Harnischfeger 2003; Minnaar 2001; Ng'walali and Kitinya 2006), vigilantism was also noted to have occurred in various forms, such as burning, vandalism, lynching, shootings, physical assault, and sexual assault.

In line with prior research (for example, Adinkrah 2005), the present study suggests that victims of vigilantism reported in the media were mostly males and within the ages of 20 to 39 years. This could be due to the fact that society may either be lenient with female offenders, or that females are less likely to have engaged in criminal activities (De Coster, Heimer and Wittrock 2006; Newburn and Stanko 1994). The observation of lesser female involvement in crime is evidenced in the literature (Heimer and De Coster 2001; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). As vigilantism is perpetrated primarily in response to crime, males become more likely to suffer such violence compared with females (De Coster, Heimer and Wittrock 2006). Similarly, the trend of more young people suffering vigilantism could be linked to the incidence of higher youth involvement in crime, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the 'age crime curve' (Rocque, Posick and Hoyle 2015). However, the present study's finding on age distribution of victims of vigilantism should be interpreted with caution, as ages of victims were not reported in nearly half of the cases of vigilantism reviewed.

Extant research on vigilantism suggests that people resort to vigilantism in response to crime and for community protection (Harnischfeger 2003; Minnaar 2001; Ng'walali and Kitinya 2006; Outwater, Mgaya and Campbell 2013). In line with this body of research, the present study shows suspected criminality as the most frequent attribution to public recourse to vigilantism. In a recent study on patterns of crime in Ghana from 1980 to 2010 using police data and media reports, Oteng-Ababio *et al.* (2016) reported a surge in violent crimes such as armed robbery in the period 1999 to 2010, compared with the previous decades. It has been noted that prevalence of violent crimes, fear of crime, and crime victimisation may trigger punitive responses as a means of deterring future crimes (Nivette 2016). In this regard, vigilantism, with death as its most likely consequence, may be considered a more punitive action against criminals.

The link between the exposure to violent crime and public recourse to vigilantism seems to be heightened by the perception that the justice delivery system in Ghana is ineffective in dealing with crime and providing justice. The police and the judiciary were perceived as being corrupt,

untrustworthy, and overly lenient in dealing with criminals, which corroborates suggestions from previous studies that lack of procedural justice, trust, and confidence in the criminal justice institutions underpin public support for vigilante violence (for example, Adinkrah 2005; Haas, de Keijser and Bruinsma 2014; Nivette 2016; Tankebe 2009; Tankebe and Asif 2016). The attribution of vigilante violence to unfairness, corruption, and ineffectiveness of criminal justice agencies echoes the view that 'vigilantism acts as a moral complaint against state inadequacy, challenging state legitimacy and redefining ideas about justice, citizenship, and law in the process' (Goldstein 2003, p.22).

Additionally, the media reports suggest that infraction of religio-moral codes was an underlying factor that influences public recourse to vigilantism. In particular, the study showed that some victims of vigilantism, mostly elderly women, were suspected or accused of possessing witchcraft. Victims accused of witchcraft were alleged to have been using it to harm others or rob others of their blessings. It is generally believed that witches have supernatural powers they employ in causing harm, knowingly or unknowingly, to other people, or for their own personal benefit (Nukunya 2003). According to Schnoebelen (2009), the accusation of witchcraft is a weapon of control against women in some cultures. Anthropological studies from Africa (for example, Evans-Pritchard 1937) have indicated that witches are believed to harm others by virtue of an inherent ability they possess. In Ghana, witchcraft is generally believed to harm people and cause destruction in a person, and as such constitutes a danger to society (Nukunya 2003).

Another attribution given for vigilantism relates to victim's real or perceived non-heterosexual orientation, specifically being a gay or lesbian. The Ghanaian culture frowns on homosexuality or any kind of sexual attraction between persons of the same sex; any form of non-heterosexual behaviour is deemed a transgression of the moral code and as such tabooed (Sarpong 2006). Thus, the public may assault anyone caught engaging in any form of homosexuality. Perceptions towards homosexuality have been one of total ambivalence in times past, to agitation and condemnation in more recent times. Several studies indicate that the greatest opponents of male homosexuality are people with high religious inclinations and who attend service regularly; they generally adhere to conservative religious dogma and ideology (Alston 1974; Bhugra 2010; Cameron and Ross 1981; Herek 1984; Nyberg and Alston 1977). People with anti-homosexual tendencies consider themselves to be better off and think of homosexuals as sick people (Lumby 1976; Osei 2011).

A few of the reported cases of vigilantism in the media were linked to political hooliganism. Ghana has experienced several years of military rule after independence. With the exception of Nkrumah, who experienced six years of uninterrupted republican rule (1960–66), most other republics only lasted for up to three years, after which they were overthrown in a *coup d'état*. The close to a decade of quasi-military rule by the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) gave way to the adoption of

a republican constitution in 1992, and a return to multiparty democracy in 1993. Ghana has since held seven successful multiparty elections. Indeed, Ghana's democratic transition and journey can be considered as one of Africa's political success stories (Gyimah-Boadi 2008). That notwithstanding, the search for political power by the nation's political parties has led to the existence of some violence in parts of the country, often perpetrated by youth groups attached to some major political parties (Gyampo, Graham and Asare 2017). Vigilante groups such as the *Invincible Forces*, *Delta Force*, *Azorika Boys*, and *Bolga Bull Dogs*, which are known to be affiliated to some major political parties, have been associated with one form of violence or another (Asamoah 2019; Ghanaweb 2019). It is worth noting that the activities of political vigilante groups in Ghana pose a threat to not only the well-being of citizens but also the total peace and security of the country. For example, it has been noted that vigilante groups of Brazzaville, Congo, were formed by frustrated youth groups, which then metamorphosed into urban defence groups, and later armed militias who fought in the civil wars of the 1990s (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999).

The present study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study relied mainly on news items reported by online news portals. In spite of the wide coverage in the number of news portals searched, it is acknowledged that not every act of vigilantism may be reported in these media outlets. Thus, the actual number of vigilantism cases may be more than what the present study indicates. Second, journalists often relied on eyewitness accounts of the reasons for resorting to vigilante violence, which may not necessarily represent the views of the perpetrators. Future studies focusing on identified perpetrators of vigilante violence would enhance our understanding of some of the real motives that informed their recourse to vigilantism. Third, the methodology used in this study did not allow the researchers to explore vigilantism from the perspective of the victims who survived the attack. This would have provided an avenue to understand victims' experiences of the act, its impact on their well-being, as well as coping mechanisms they employ following their exposure to the violence.

In spite of the above limitations, the present study has implications for policy and practice. Our findings suggest the need to intensify public education on the legal ramifications of recourse to vigilantism, and on more appropriate avenues for seeking legal redress. However, such efforts are unlikely to yield meaningful results without corresponding attempts at addressing concerns with the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. As rightly noted by Tankebe (2009), the public may not readily accept the notion of state monopoly in the exercise of force when criminal justice agencies fail to protect citizens' rights and ensure safety. Thus, there is a need to strengthen the work of law enforcers and the justice delivery system to enhance their legitimacy. This would require implementation of mechanisms aimed at ensuring that criminal justice agencies are responsive to citizens' safety needs and demonstrate respect for citizens' dignity and civil liberties (Tankebe 2009). Criminal justice agencies, including the police and the judiciary, should also direct substantial effort into

explaining their responses to crime and reasoning for punishment meted out to offenders. As noted by Haas, de Keijser and Bruinsma (2014): ‘even if someone has a generally high level of confidence in the criminal justice system, he may resort to vigilantism when he perceives the authorities to have failed in their response to a specific crime situation’ (p.237).

Last, the exploration of the appropriateness or otherwise of the choice of language used in reporting vigilantism in the Ghanaian media is beyond the focus of the present study. However, drawing on the reports analysed in this study, we strongly recommend that media practitioners refrain from the use of sensationalistic and graphic depiction, and the use of excusatory or condemnatory language in reporting vigilantism. Such crude portrayal has the potential of fostering the behaviour in vulnerable groups and stigmatising victims and their families.

In conclusion, our study suggests that public recourse to vigilantism may be on the rise in Ghana as a means of obtaining justice and ‘righting’ perceived ‘wrongs’ in society. The findings underscore the significant impact of vigilante violence in terms of loss of human capital and loss to families and society. The lethality of the violence unleashed on (potentially innocent) victims should necessitate an immediate concerted response from relevant state institutions to avert possible escalation and prevent further loss of human capital. The reasons attributed to recourse to vigilantism are varied requiring a multifaceted approach to dealing with the menace.

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