



# Trends and patterns of terrorist attacks targeting the police in Nigeria, 2009–2022

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## ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, terrorist attacks targeting police officers and police facilities have continued to gain momentum since 2009. However, in spite of the intensity of the problem, it is yet to command tangible scholarly attention. Against this background, this study investigates the trends and patterns of terrorist attacks targeted against the police in Nigeria between 2009 and 2022. An exploratory research design was adopted, and data were principally sourced through the content analysis of a corpus of two purposively selected Nigerian national newspapers' coverage of the recorded incidents of terrorist attacks that were directed at police officers. The results showed that 455 cases of such attacks were recorded between 2009 and 2022. Incidents of terrorist attacks targeting police officers were recorded in nearly all the states of the federation, with Borno State having the largest share (42.9%). Also, the largest single share of the incidents (29.2%) happened in 2021 with the highest percentage of police fatalities (24.8%) occurring in the same year. The majority of the attacks (51.9%) occurred within police stations. Indigenous People of Biafra (32.1%) and Boko Haram (31.2%) were the terrorist groups responsible for most of the attacks on police officers. Terrorist attacks hold multiple serious deleterious consequences for the Nigeria Police Force. Thus, it is important for the law enforcement agency to develop a functional institutional framework through which police officers can be adequately exposed to professional counter-terrorism training and strategies.

**Key Words** Terrorist attack; police officers; police fatalities; Nigeria Police Force; Boko Haram; IPOB.

## INTRODUCTION

Terrorist attacks targeting police officers and police facilities are a global phenomenon (Collard-Wexler et al., 2014; Gibbs, 2013). The 2014 report of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism indicates that attacks directed at the police accounted for over 13% of the 125,148 terrorist attacks that were globally recorded between 1970 and 2013. In Nigeria, terrorist attacks targeting the police have continued to gain momentum since 2009 with the emergence of Boko Haram and other terrorist organizations engaging in armed struggle against the Nigerian state (Alhassan, 2021; Odogun, 2022; Premium Times, 2021). Consequently, a high rate of police homicides and large-scale destruction of critical police infrastructures and material resources are annually recorded in Nigeria (Egigogo, 2023; Nseyen, 2021).

Generally, all violent attacks targeting the police including those carried out by terrorist organizations hold multiple serious and deleterious consequences for the Nigeria Police

Force as a law enforcement agency. Apart from the high police fatalities that usually characterize such attacks, they also constitute assaults on the government and symbolize a breakdown in the capacity of the formal social control mechanism to effectively maintain law and order. Furthermore, the high rate of police homicides resulting from terrorist attacks is not only aggravating the problem of inadequate police officers currently confronting the Nigeria Police Force (Daily Trust, 2020; Punch, 2020), but it is also capable of dampening the morale and the overall job commitment of law enforcement agents while also negatively impacting the socio-economic well-being of their significant others and dependants. Moreover, armed violent attacks on the police have the tendency to further worsen the existing gap in the police–public relationship, while also placing a huge financial burden and increasing the operational cost of the Nigeria Police Force as a result of the need to constantly rehabilitate, renovate, and replace lost material resources and critical infrastructures.

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Despite the fact that armed violence by terrorist groups against police officers and police facilities is increasingly being recognized as a serious social problem in Nigeria, the issue is yet to command tangible scholarly attention. Consequently, there is a dearth of empirical and factual information on the frequency, magnitude, dimension, and distribution of the recorded incidents. Therefore, this study was conceived to fill this observed gap by investigating the trends and patterns of cases of terrorist attacks targeting the police that were recorded in Nigeria between 2009 and 2022.

## METHODOLOGY

An exploratory design was employed for this study. The recorded incidents of terrorist attacks targeting the police in Nigeria between 2009 and 2022 constituted the unit of analysis. This timeframe was selected due to the fact that 2009 was the year the problem of terrorism began in Nigeria (Aguwa, 2017). The collection of data lasted for a period of 6 months between October 2022 and March 2023. Data were exclusively sourced through the review and content analyses of the recorded incidents of terrorist attacks that were directed at police officers as reported in two purposively selected national newspapers, namely the Daily Trust and the Vanguard. The choice of these two newspapers stemmed from the fact that they are national in terms of coverage and are also among the Nigerian newspaper outlets that are actively maintaining online presence. More so, the two of them individually have a specially designed online search dialogue box through which current and archived news reports can be virtually sourced and retrieved. The adoption of this method was considered apt and suitable for a study of this nature because it is usually very difficult to access *sensitive* and *intelligence-related* information from the Nigeria Police Force. Furthermore, another merit of this approach lies in the fact that it not only provides the opportunity for comparisons along a spatiotemporal basis but also equally allows an in-depth understanding of the situational and contextual peculiarities involved in the recorded cases of terrorist attacks targeting the police.

Specifically, the procedure employed for data harvesting involved searching for news reports on the subject matter of the research in the designated dialogue boxes that were provided on the websites of each of the selected newspapers. Relevant news reports on the subject matter that were collated from each of the selected news outlets were individually sorted and content analyzed on yearly basis. Afterwards, the incidents reported by the two outlets were carefully read, compared, and sieved to avoid the possibility of duplication of cases. Furthermore, to forestall the possibility of repetition, only one source was taken in all the cases in which a particular incident was observed to have been reported by the two selected news outlets. Thereafter, relevant data harvested were carefully sorted, organized, and arranged according to the sub-themes of the research. At the analysis stage, univariate analyses including charts, frequency distribution, and line graphs were performed.

A major limitation of this research is that the analyzed data were principally sourced through the content analysis of newspaper reports on the subject matter. Thus, there is a possibility of bias and omission in the reportage of some of the

incidents. However, in spite of this limitation, this research yielded tremendous results and foregrounded knowledge on the subject matter.

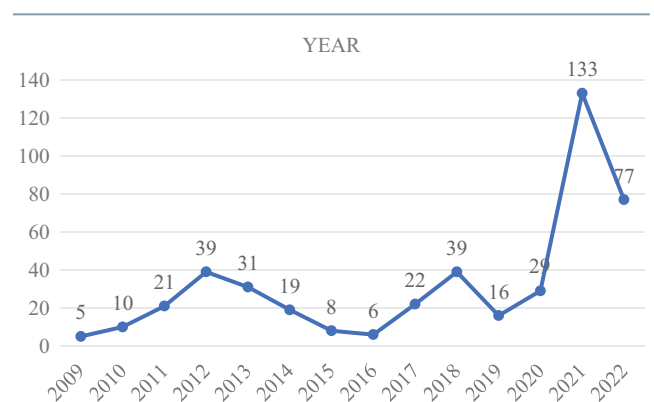
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the key findings that emanated from the analyzed data are presented, discussed, and interpreted.

### Yearly Distribution of Terrorist Attacks Targeting Police Officers in Nigeria

To determine the frequency and patterns of terrorist attacks that were directed at police officers in Nigeria within the timeline considered, the analysis of the yearly distribution of the reported incidents was performed. Figure 1 depicts the result of the analysis.

Findings revealed that terrorist attacks targeting police officers were recorded annually between 2009 and 2022. Out of the 455 cases that were reported within the timeline, the largest single share (133: 29.2%) occurred in 2021, while 2022 also accounted for a significant percentage (77: 16.9%). Also, substantial proportions of terrorist attacks on the police were also recorded in 2018 (39: 8.6%) and 2012 (39: 8.6%). The lowest incidents of terrorist attacks on police officers happened in 2009 (5: 1.1%). It can also be gleaned from this finding that there was a consistent increase in the incidents of terrorist attacks targeting police officers from 2009 to 2014. However, there was a noticeable sharp decline in the occurrence of such attacks in 2015 and 2016. This observed decline was likely to have been informed by the change of government occasioned by the 2015 general elections in Nigeria which resulted in the defeat of the then incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. The new administration under President Muhammadu Buhari embraced a far-reaching counter-terrorism measures against Boko Haram insurgency as part of its cardinal objectives which considerably weakened the capacity of the terror group (Nosiri & Ibekwe, 2021; Onapajo, 2017). Nevertheless, the observed consistent rise in the terrorist attacks targeting police officers as of 2017 can be explained as resulting from the emergence of other forms of terrorist groups and separatist movements operating in different parts of Nigeria.



**FIGURE 1** Yearly distribution of terrorist attacks targeting police officers in Nigeria

### Situations and Contexts Which Exposed Police Officers to Terrorist Attacks in Nigeria

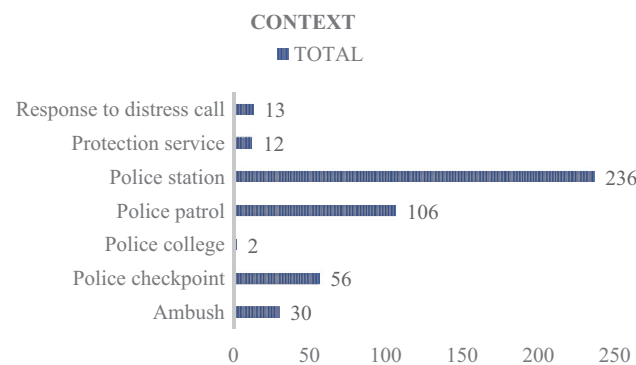
To generate insight into the factors accounting for the increasing vulnerability of police officers to terrorist attacks in the line of duty, information was sought on the situations and contexts that were associated with the recorded incidents. The output of the analysis is as presented in Figure 2.

The majority of the attacks occurred within police stations (236: 51.9%), followed by those that happened during police patrols (106: 23.3%). Also, a considerable proportion (56:12.3%) of the terrorist attacks were recorded at police checkpoints. The distribution of other contexts of terrorist attacks on police officers was ambush (30: 6.6%), attacks on police officers engaging in protection services (12: 2.6%) and attacks targeting police colleges (2: 0.4%). From the distribution of the contexts and locations in which police officers were exposed to terrorist attacks, it is clear that they were not only being intentionally targeted by terrorists, but they were also constantly at the risk of exposure to armed violence by terrorist groups, regardless of their location at any given point in time and irrespective of whether or not they were actively involved in policing operations and law enforcement duties. This result is in tandem with the submission of Gibbs (2013) that police are accessible targets to terrorists and are more vulnerable than all other targets representing government coercive force because they are frequently involved in routine street patrols and are always available to members of the public in their police stations that typically have minimal security arrangements.

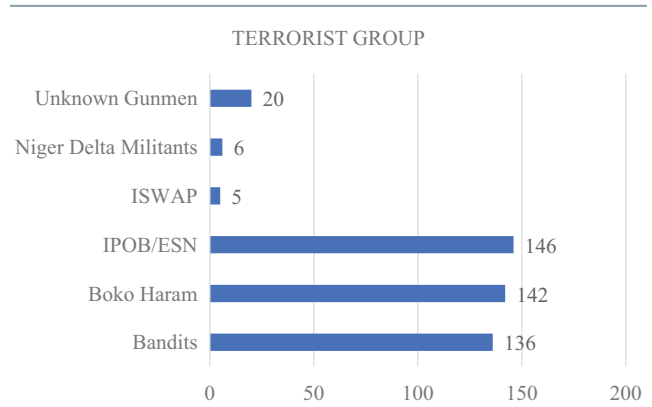
### Terrorist Groups Targeting Police Officers for Violent Attacks in Nigeria

It was also considered imperative to investigate terrorist groups targeting police officers for violent attacks within the timeline considered. Figure 3 shows the outcome of the analysis.

The output of the analysis indicates that six major terrorist organizations carried out violent attacks against police officers between 2009 and 2022. Specifically, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) separatist group was responsible for the largest single share of the recorded attacks (146: 32.1%), while the attacks carried out by the Boko Haram terrorist group also accounted for a significant proportion (142: 31.2%) of the recorded incidents. Furthermore, bandit attacks constituted 137 (29.9%), with unknown gunmen responsible for 20 (4.4%) of terrorist attacks targeting police officers. A few



**FIGURE 2** Situations and contexts which exposed police officers to terrorist attacks

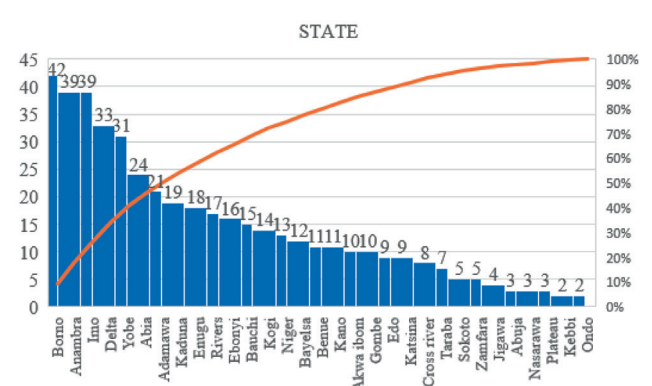


**FIGURE 3** Terrorist groups targeting police officers for violent attacks in Nigeria. IPOB, Indigenous People of Biafra; ISWAP, Islamic State’s West Africa Province

terrorist attacks were also carried out against the police by Niger Delta militants (6: 1.3%) and members of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (5: 1.1%). The Nigerian government officially proclaimed IPOB to be a terrorist organization in September 2017 (Adesomoju, 2018; This Day, 2017), while bandits and unknown gunmen were officially designated as terrorist groups in January 2022 (Ejekwonyilo, 2022; Ochojila, 2022). A major deduction that can be inferred from this result is that terrorist organizations operating in Nigeria irrespective of their agenda usually consider police officers suitable targets for violent attacks in the course of pursuing their terror objectives and ideologies. This finding is in tandem with the position of Freilich and Chermak (2009) that police officers are generally considered attractive for violent attacks by terrorists for the purpose of fulfilling their symbolic, functional, and expressive objectives.

### The Recorded Incidents of Terrorist Attacks Targeting Police Officers by State

Analysis of the recorded incidents of terrorist attacks directed at police officers across the states of the federation was also performed as a way of gauging the intensity and spatial distribution of the problem. The output of the analysis as contained in Figure 4 shows that the problem is pervasive as incidents were recorded in 31 of the 36 states.



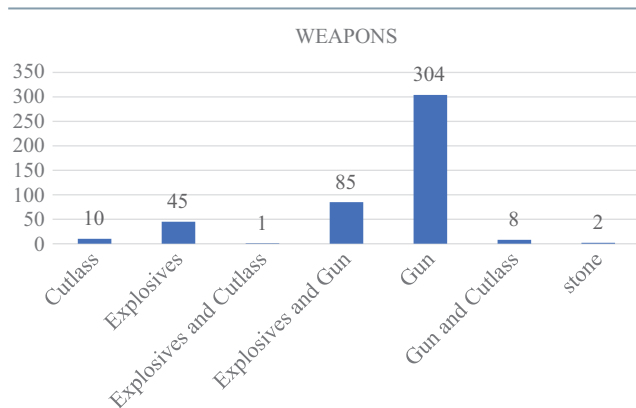
**FIGURE 4** Incidents of terrorist attacks targeting police officers by state

This finding revealed that the highest percentage of the incidents was recorded in Borno State (42: 9%) followed by Anambra State (39: 8.6%), Imo State (39: 8.6%), Delta State (33: 7.3%), Yobe (31: 6.8%), Abia State (24: 5.3%), Adamawa (21: 4.6%) and Kaduna State (19: 4.2%). Furthermore, very few incidents were recorded in Jigawa State (4: 0.9%), Abuja (3: 0.7%), Nasarawa (3: 0.7%), Plateau State (3: 0.7%), Kebbi (2: 0.4%) and Ondo State (2: 0.4%). This result shows that incidents of terrorist attacks targeting police officers have been recorded in nearly all the states of the federation. However, the distribution of the attacks also indicates that police officers serving in the south-western states of the federation were less affected by the problem. The only state that had records of such attacks within the geopolitical zone was Ondo State with only two cases. This spatial distribution can be explained as resulting from the fact that only the south-western region of Nigeria has not experienced the emergence of a terrorist organization or an insurgent organization within its territory. Furthermore, this finding confirms the assertion of Ojedokun (2014) that police homicide in the line of duty in Nigeria is increasingly becoming a national problem due to the annually recorded high number of police killings across the country.

### Analysis of Weapons Used by Terrorists to Attack Police Officers

Lethal weapons have been widely recognized to be among the most favoured operational tools of terrorists (Berman, 2011; Lewis, 2017). Therefore, an investigation was conducted on the weapons of choice of terrorists who launched violent attacks against police officers. Figure 5 depicts the results of the analysis.

As evident in Figure 5, guns were the weapon that was exclusively deployed in the majority (304: 66.8%) of terrorist attacks targeting police officers between 2009 and 2022. Also, explosives and guns were jointly used in a significant proportion of the attacks (85:18.7%). Furthermore, the distribution of the remaining weapons of choice that were deployed by terrorists during attacks targeting police officers was explosive (45: 9.9%), cutlass (10: 2.2%), gun and cutlass (8: 1.8%), stone (2: 0.4%) and explosive and cutlass (1: 0.2%). A major inference that can be drawn from this finding is that there is a high concentration of harmful weapons in the hands of non-state actors in Nigeria. This is evident in the output of the analysis which shows high percentages of guns and explosives as ter-



**FIGURE 5** Weapons used by terrorists to attack police officers

rorists’ weapons of choice. Indeed, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) is among the major challenges that have been contributing to the pervasive problem of armed violence in Nigeria (Onuoha, 2011; Soetan, 2017).

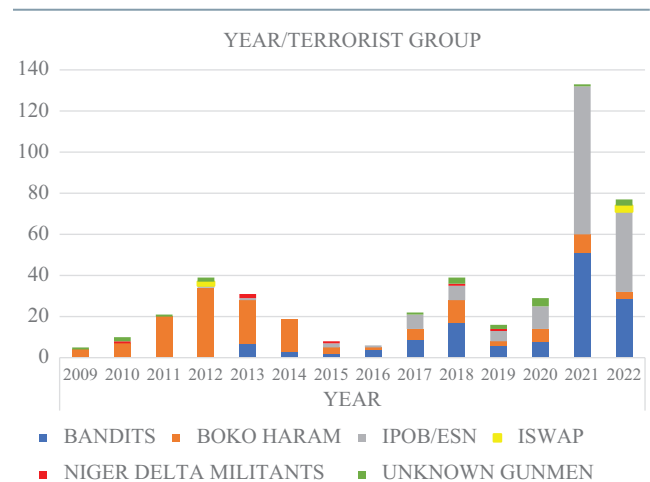
### Yearly Distribution of Violent Attacks on Police Officers by Terrorist Groups

As it was established that there is a spatiotemporal variation in the activeness and activities of terrorist organizations operating in Nigeria, it was considered important to probe into the yearly distribution of the recorded violent attacks that were directed at police officers. The result yielded by the analysis is presented in Figure 6.

As shown in Figure 6, the Boko Haram terrorist group was responsible for the largest share of the incidents of violent attacks targeting police officers from 2009 to 2015 (2009 (4: 80%), 2010 (7: 70%), 2011 (20: 95%), 2012 (34: 87.2%), 2013 (21: 67.7%), 2014 (16: 84.1%) and 2015 (3: 37.5%)), while bandit attacks had a lion share of terrorist attacks on police officers from 2016 to 2019 (2016 (4: 57.1%), 2017 (9: 41%), 2018 (17: 42.5%) and 2019 (6: 35.3%)). Furthermore, the IPOB was responsible for the highest numbers of attacks on police officers from 2020 to 2022 (2020 (11: 35.4%), 2021 (72: 52.6%) and 2022 (39: 48.1%)). This result is indicative of the hydra-headed nature of the problem of terrorism in Nigeria. As evident in the finding, the frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks targeting police officers vary widely in terms of time and space. The implication of this result is that terrorist attacks against police officers may prove to be very difficult to control because of the fluidity of the problem and also due to the fact that multiple terrorist organizations are targeting them for violent attacks. This result also aligns with the submission of Gruenewald et al. (2015) that many terrorist groups attack police officers because they see them as government foot soldiers who are enforcing policies that are inimical to their existence.

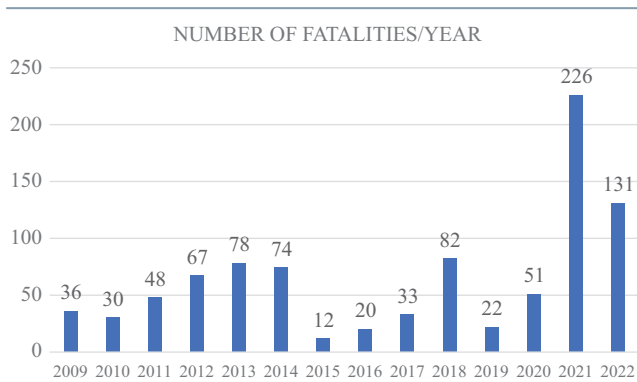
### Yearly Distribution of Police Fatalities Resulting from Terrorist Attacks

Terrorist attacks generally have the tendency of resulting in huge human and material losses (Chermak et al., 2012; Gibbs,



**FIGURE 6** Yearly distribution of violent attacks on police officers by terrorist groups. IPOB, Indigenous People of Biafra; ISWAP, Islamic State’s West Africa Province





**FIGURE 7** Yearly distribution of police fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks

2017; Ojedokun, 2014). Therefore, it was considered imperative to devote attention to the number of police fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks. Figure 7 presents the outcome of the analysis.

The result reveals that police fatalities emanating from terrorist attacks were annually recorded in Nigeria between 2009 and 2022. A total of 930 cases of police homicides were recorded within the timeline. In terms of the distribution, 2021 (226: 24.8%) was the year with the highest number of police killings, followed by 2022 with 131 (14.4%) cases of police homicides resulting from terrorist attacks. Furthermore, police fatalities were also high in 2018 (82: 9.1%), 2013 (78: 8.6%), 2014 (74: 8.1%) and 2012 (67: 7.4%). The recorded cases of police fatalities in the remaining years were 2020 (51: 5.6%), 2009 (36: 4.0%), 2017 (33: 3.6%), 2010 (30: 3.3%), 2019 (22: 2.4%), 2016 (20: 2.2%) and 2015 (12: 1.3%). This finding clearly points out the devastating impacts of terrorist attacks targeting police officers on the Nigeria Police Force in terms of the recorded huge loss in human resources. More so, the prevailing situation also has the tendency to bring about a huge socio-economic burden for the law enforcement agency through the initiation of employee retention programs for officers and by making provision for dependants of murdered police officers. Fridell et al. (2009) have equally stated that armed violence against the police impacts individual law enforcement officers, their families, their colleagues, their departments, and the law enforcement profession as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The high fatalities that typically accompany terrorist attacks against police officers make it a major cause of concern. Therefore, the following recommendations are considered pertinent for the effective management of the problem. First, there is a need for the Nigerian government and relevant stakeholders to make concerted efforts toward combatting the proliferation of SALW in the country by identifying and controlling their pathways of circulation into the country. The successful blockage of terrorist groups' access to illicit arms and ammunition would be crucial for the effective control of their terror activities including the targeting of police officers for violent attacks. Second, it is important for the Nigeria Police Force to develop a functional institutional framework through which police officers can be adequately exposed

to professional counter-terrorism training and strategies. The fact that terrorism and terrorist attacks targeting police officers are relatively recent phenomena in Nigeria makes it very difficult for police managers and police personnel to be professionally knowledgeable and adequately prepared to respond to the novel challenge. Similarly, it is important for the Nigerian government to provide necessary logistics and financial support for the Nigeria Police Force to enable the procurement of essential modern policing equipment and vital organizational resources that are necessary for boosting its terrorism emergency response and surveillance/intelligence gathering capacities.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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