

THE RESURGENCE OF RITUAL KILLINGS AND BODY PARTS TRADE IN NIGERIA: DRIVERS AND PATTERNS

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Abstract: Ritual killings and the illegal trade in human body parts in Nigeria are examined in this article as a socio-criminal problem shaped by economic strain, cultural belief, and weak enforcement. The study is a qualitative, secondary-source analysis of academic publications, news reports, and government and organisational reports, read through Merton's strain theory. It finds that the drivers most consistently supported by the sources are poverty and youth unemployment, beliefs in the spiritual and financial efficacy of human body parts, the celebration of sudden wealth in popular culture and social media, and an enforcement environment marked by corruption and impunity. The patterns reported in the sources include the targeting of vulnerable people, a concentration in the south and southwest, rural killings feeding urban trading hubs, organised syndicates, and seasonal increases. The most widely repeated count in the sources, more than 150 cases reported by Pulse Nigeria (2025) for July to December 2024, is treated throughout as a single media-source report, not as a verified count or as proof of a trend. The article concludes that no single measure is sufficient, and it recommends law enforcement training and funding with an anticorruption focus, nationwide employment efforts, public

awareness campaigns, and the engagement of traditional and religious leaders and communities.

Keywords: Ritual Killings, Body Parts Trade, Strain Theory, Socioeconomic Drivers, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Ritual killing, understood here as the killing of a person so that body parts can be harvested for supposed supernatural or financial benefit, has a long history in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa. In its contemporary Nigerian form it is most often discussed in connection with what is called money ritual: the belief that occult means can deliver rapid wealth, protection, or status. This article examines the resurgence of that practice and of the trade in body parts that accompanies it. It does so only from published secondary sources. It reports what those sources claim, it attributes contested claims to their sources, and it does not present any media report as a verified count of events.

The sources reviewed describe a troubling picture. Pulse Nigeria (2025) reported more than 150 cases in Nigeria between July and December 2024, and the same report is the source most often repeated in subsequent discussion of the scale of the problem. That figure is used in this article only in that attributed form. It rests on a single media source, it has no independent verification in the sources reviewed, and it cannot by itself prove that the practice is increasing, because no comparative time series is available in the material examined. Reports also describe the targeting of vulnerable people, including children, women, and homeless people, and a climate of fear and mistrust in affected communities (Amnesty International, 2023). Demand for body parts is described as driven by beliefs in rapid wealth, political power, and spiritual protection (Ojewale, 2022), while perpetrators identified in the reports range from traditional healers and religious figures to community leaders (The Papers NG, 2024). One widely reported case involved the arrest of an Ifa priest, an Islamic preacher, and a community leader in Lagos in connection with the exhumation of corpses for ritual purposes (The Papers NG, 2024). A separate news report of a detained person's confession attached monetary values to a

head, a heart, and hands (NewsWireNGR, 2024). That report is cited here only as a single-source account of what one detained person reportedly said; it is not treated as evidence of general market prices.

The causes discussed in the sources are varied. Poverty and unemployment recur as the most consistently cited socioeconomic drivers (Adeniyi, 2023; Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004), alongside the spread of ritual-wealth imagery through social media and popular culture (BBC News, 2023; Ayeni, 2019) and the obstacles facing law enforcement, including corruption, limited forensic capacity, and low public trust (Alemika, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Public discussion has also criticised the celebration of unexplained wealth in society, which, according to reports, encourages young people to pursue ritual means to prosperity (Ayandiji, 2022). The belief that human body parts can secure financial success continues to circulate in the sources reviewed, and it is that combination of blocked lawful routes to wealth, circulating belief, and weak enforcement that this article analyses.

This article pursues three aims, which are stated here as research questions so that the conclusion can answer each of them directly. Research Question 1 asks what drives the resurgence of ritual killings and body parts trading in Nigeria. Research Question 2 asks what patterns the reported cases follow, in terms of victims, geography, organisation, and timing. Research Question 3 asks how effective the countermeasures discussed in the sources are, and what a coherent response would require. The remainder of the article is organised to answer those questions in order: a review of the literature organised by the theoretical framework, a statement of method, a discussion of findings, and a conclusion that returns to each question.

Statement of the Problem

Money rituals in Africa have deep historical roots, and in the Nigerian discussion they are often described as a last resort for adults who have exhausted other routes to success, or as a means sought by people pursuing large sums of money, political influence, or religious ends. In recent years, however, reports of ritual killings and of trafficking in human body parts in Nigeria have presented the problem as a threat to social stability, public safety,

and national progress. Law enforcement agencies, religious institutions, and civil society organisations have all attempted responses, yet reports of killings linked to ritual activity continue to appear across the country. The drivers most frequently named in those reports are poverty, illiteracy, inadequate law enforcement, political desperation, and a deeply held belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice for money, power, or protection.

Previous research on ritual killings in Nigeria, including work on teenagers and money ritual in Ogun State (Soluade et al., 2024), on peer pressure and youth involvement in ritual killings in the same state (Oyegbami & Alabi, 2022), and on the upsurge of money ritual among young people and national security (Saka-Olokungboye et al., 2021), has documented the phenomenon without closing three gaps. First, the drivers behind the current resurgence, as distinct from the historical practice, remain only partly explained. Second, the emerging patterns of the trade, including who is targeted, where cases cluster, how networks are organised, and when cases increase, are described in fragments rather than as a coherent picture. Third, the effectiveness of existing legal and policy measures has not been assessed as a whole. This study addresses those gaps by synthesising the available secondary sources through a single theoretical lens, by stating plainly where the evidence is thin or single-sourced, and by assessing countermeasures against the drivers and patterns identified rather than in isolation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is Merton's strain theory, developed by Robert Merton, building on Durkheim, in the classic formulation that society defines culturally valued goals and legitimate means for reaching them, but access to those means is unequally distributed (Merton, 1938). When people cannot reach valued goals through legitimate means, the resulting strain can produce deviant adaptations, including the innovative use of illegitimate means to obtain wealth and status. Agnew (1992) later generalised the account: strain arises not only from blocked goals but also from the loss of valued stimuli and

the presentation of negative stimuli, and it produces deviance most readily when it generates negative emotions such as anger and frustration. Four mechanisms from this tradition are traceable in the sources reviewed here, and they structure the analysis that follows. Mechanism 1 is the cultural valuing of wealth and status as markers of success. Mechanism 2 is the blocking of legitimate means, above all through unemployment and poverty. Mechanism 3 is the emotional response to that blockage, including frustration, anger, and a sense of injustice at the treatment received from others and from institutions. Mechanism 4 is the adoption of an innovative deviant shortcut that promises the valued goal by illegitimate means.

Recent applications of general strain theory support each of those mechanisms as an analytical tool rather than as a complete explanation. Procedural injustice experienced at the hands of institutions has been shown to generate strain of the kind the theory predicts (Liu et al., 2019), which matters here because grievances about policing and justice recur throughout the Nigerian sources. Tests of the theory among institutionalised juveniles confirm that strain is associated with delinquency among young people, while also showing that the association depends on context and on the resources available for coping (Wang et al., 2025). Research on paths from victimisation to deviance through negative emotions provides a bridge from the theory to the victim patterns discussed below: people who experience harmful treatment may respond with emotions that increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour, which means that victimisation and offending cannot always be separated into neat categories (Lee et al., 2021). Work on the reciprocal relations between treatment by others, anger, and antisocial behaviour likewise shows that strain is not a one-way street: hostile treatment generates anger, and anger generates further antisocial behaviour, which in turn invites further hostile treatment (Kondrat & Connolly, 2022). Those scope conditions matter for this study. Strain theory explains part of the motive for ritual killing, namely the pursuit of wealth and status by illegitimate means when legitimate means appear blocked, but it does not by itself explain why particular victims are selected, why cases cluster seasonally, or why networks are organised as they are. Those patterns require the

substantive analysis that follows, and the limits of the theory are returned to in the discussion and in the limitations.

Two classic qualifications are therefore carried through the analysis as scope conditions rather than as decorations. Cohen (1955) argued that delinquent adaptations are often collective and subcultural: young people facing shared strain may develop group solutions and shared justifications, which helps to explain the peer and group dimensions of money ritual recruitment discussed below. Agnew (1992) argued that similar strain does not produce similar outcomes, because coping resources, social support, and the nature of the strain itself differ between people. That qualification is essential here: most young Nigerians facing unemployment and poverty do not commit ritual killings, and any account that implied otherwise would be false. The theory is used in this article to organise the drivers and to test them against the patterns, not to claim that strain determines the outcome.

Overview of Ritual Killing in Nigeria

Ritual sacrifice in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa predates the colonial period. Pre-colonial communities performed ceremonial sacrifices to deities, and the selection of victims varied with the purpose of the rite and with the norms of the community concerned. Historical accounts describe cases in which violators of curfews declared for ceremonial purposes, or outsiders unaware of such curfews, became victims, and in which selection followed criteria such as social status or physical attributes (Saka-Olokungboye et al., 2021). The contemporary practice discussed in this article differs from that history in one decisive respect: it is organised substantially around the pursuit of money, and it operates as a trade in which body parts are harvested, transported, and sold. Ellis (2016) traces that transformation in a history of Nigerian organised crime, showing how older ritual practices became entangled with modern criminal enterprise.

In the contemporary sources, ritual killing is defined as the murder of a victim in order to harvest body parts for supposed supernatural or financial benefit, and it is most often associated with the belief in money rituals, in which offenders seek rapid fortune through occult means (Alemika & Chukwuma,

2021). Despite industrialisation and urbanisation, superstitious beliefs persist, especially where older religious practices meet current socioeconomic hardship. Reports describe ritual killings as targeting vulnerable people, including children, women, and homeless people, and as often going unreported because of fear of reprisal or lack of trust in law enforcement. That combination of vulnerability and underreporting is itself an analytical finding: the visible cases are unlikely to represent the full extent of the problem, and no count drawn from media reports can be treated as a census of events. The social implications of killings for money ritual among Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria have been examined in detail, with attention to the fear and moral debate they generate within affected communities (Oke, O. P., 2024). Work on teenagers and money ritual in Ogun State similarly shows that young people are present on both sides of the phenomenon, as recruits and as victims, and that school and community institutions are drawn into prevention efforts (Soluede et al., 2024).

Drivers of Ritual Killings

The socioeconomic drivers are the most consistently supported in the sources. Alemika and Chukwuma (2004) identify poverty and unemployment as major factors pushing desperate people towards criminal activity for survival, and that finding is confirmed by a study of youth unemployment and rising crime in Calabar Metropolis (Emmanuel et al., 2023). Governance failure is presented as the structural condition behind that unemployment: where public institutions fail to create lawful livelihoods, young people experience the blockage of legitimate means described by Mechanism 2 of the framework (Ogunbayo, 2022). The framework qualification must be repeated here: these sources establish that unemployment and poverty are associated with crime in general and with ritual killing in particular, but they do not show that every unemployed young person is at risk of involvement, and the analysis below preserves that distinction.

Cultural and religious beliefs form the second driver. The belief that human blood or organs possess spiritual power is maintained in some traditional practices and occult organisations, and ritual killings are described in the

sources as performed to please deities, to gain protection, or to improve commercial success (Ellis, 2016). The persistence of such beliefs despite modernisation is documented in work on occultism and criminality in Nigeria (Igbinovia, 2020) and in research on protective charms, traditional religion, and vigilante authority in Lagos, which shows how charms and spiritual protection are woven into everyday understandings of security and success (Ibrahim, 2023). Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery pose distinctive problems for justice systems, because accusations and counter-accusations operate through social relationships rather than through evidence that courts can easily test, and because the same belief systems that motivate accusations can also motivate violent responses to them (Forsyth, 2022). The symbolic dimension is developed in work on the social implications of killings for money ritual in southwestern Nigeria, which reads the appeal of such rituals through the language of sacrifice and reward that circulates in religious and popular discourse (Oke, O. P., 2024). The absence of adequate education and enlightenment on these questions is noted in reports on education and superstition in rural Nigeria (UNICEF, 2021), although that observation should not be read as a claim that formal schooling alone would dissolve beliefs that are socially embedded.

Popular culture and peer influence form the third driver. Nollywood films and social media are described in the sources as exalting occult activity and presenting ritual killing as a quick route to prosperity (Ayeni, 2019). Social media growth has accelerated the spread of false claims, with dishonest spiritualists promoting supposed miracle solutions that call for human body parts (Akinrefon, 2022), and the BBC has reported on the same mechanism, showing how social media fuels the trade in ritual killings (BBC News, 2023). The aspirational narratives that make such promises credible to young people are analysed in recent work on soccer dreams and blood money imagery in neoliberal Nigeria, where sporting and celebrity success stories are read alongside occult promises of sudden wealth (Ejekwumadu, 2025). Ritualised wealth and the moral spectacle of occult imagery in Nigerian media narratives are examined in the same vein, showing how media representations stage wealth as something that can appear without visible labour (Eze, U. Z., 2025). Peer pressure operates alongside media influence: research on peer pressure

and parental guidance as correlates of youth involvement in ritual killings in Ogun State finds that companions and peer groups are a significant pathway into involvement (Oyegbami & Alabi, 2022). The parallel case of youth engagement in cybercrime, in which young Nigerians pursue quick wealth through online fraud, is instructive here only as a parallel: it shows the same aspiration for sudden wealth and the same peer-group organisation, but it is a different crime with different victims and mechanisms, and it is not treated in this article as evidence about ritual killing itself. The media discussion therefore cannot be reduced to simple imitation: media representations interact with peer groups, beliefs, and blocked opportunities, and the analysis below preserves that interaction rather than attributing outcomes to any single channel.

Weak enforcement and impunity form the fourth driver. Criminals are described as emboldened by the lax implementation of laws against organ trafficking and ritual killings (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Enforcement is described as slack because of corruption, insufficient policing, and cooperation by some community leaders (Alemika, 2020), and influential offenders are described as able to avoid punishment, which fosters a climate of impunity (Transparency International, 2022). Corruption within the Nigeria Police Force has been analysed as a response to a hostile institutional environment, in which officers face pressures that normalise corrupt practice (Oke, C. I., 2022), and research on psychological contract breach and police corruption in Nigeria shows how broken institutional expectations contribute to corrupt behaviour among officers (Balogun et al., 2021). Bureaucracy and corruption in the police and military procurement sectors illustrate the same institutional problem at a different level, showing that corruption is not confined to street-level encounters (Robert & Wilson, 2025). Research on corruption, impunity, and mistrust warns that evidence gathered only through police gatekeepers is systematically partial, because the institutions that control access to information also have an interest in how the problem is described (Van Damme, 2021). That warning applies directly to this study, which relies on secondary sources that themselves rely heavily on police and media accounts, and it is carried into the limitations below.

Globalisation and criminal networks form the fifth driver. The rise of trafficking in body parts has been attributed to international criminal networks (Shelley, 2014), and trafficking networks that work with local ritualists are described in the policing literature (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004). The legal distinction between organ trafficking and human trafficking for organ removal matters here: the two phenomena are governed by different legal frameworks, and conflating them obscures both the consent problem and the commercial problem at the heart of the trade (Gawronska, 2019). The dark web is invoked in the sources as a source of anonymity for illicit networks (Europol, 2022), but that assessment is a global threat assessment, not Nigeria-specific evidence, and it is treated here only as general context for how illicit markets can operate, not as proof of a Nigerian dark web trade. Cross-border movement is discussed in general terms in the trafficking literature (Shelley, 2014; Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004); no Nigeria-specific cross-border smuggling claim is made in this article beyond what those sources support.

The Patterns of Ritual Killings

The patterns reported in the sources can be organised into four groups: victims, geography, organisation, and timing. Each pattern is stated here at the level the sources support, and single-source claims are identified as such. The targeting of vulnerable people is the most consistent pattern. Women, children, and people with mental illness are described as more easily kidnapped or manipulated (UNICEF, 2021), and reports of missing persons, particularly in rural areas, are linked in the sources to ritual activity (Amnesty International, 2023). Anti-child trafficking policy in Nigeria is relevant here because children are identified as a specifically protected group, yet policies and their implementation are described as uneven, which leaves the protective framework weaker than its formal provisions suggest (Olayiwola, 2022). Gendered witchcraft accusations provide a further mechanism for victim selection: patriarchal norms can turn women into targets of accusation, and accusation itself can license violence against them (Kgatla, 2020). Witchcraft accusations in Anglophone Africa are also actionable through defamation law, which shows that legal systems do have tools for responding to accusation-driven harm, even if those tools are

rarely used for the most vulnerable victims (Owusu, 2023). No ranking of parts by demand is asserted, because the sources reviewed do not support one; the parts named in the sourced material discussed in this article are limited to those appearing in the NewsWireNGR confession report and in the general discussion of harvested parts.

Geographically, ritual killings are described as more common in the southern and southwestern areas, where traditional religious practices are strongly embedded (Ellis, 2016), and in the southwest and southeast, where traditional religious institutions such as juju and ogboni cults are reported to have a large influence (Igwe, 2023). No state-by-state ranking is offered in this article, because the sources reviewed do not support one. The rural-urban pattern is better supported: killings themselves are described as usually taking place in remote rural areas to evade detection, while urban centres operate as hubs for the trade, acting as intermediaries between ritualists and purchasers (UNODC, 2022). That pattern is consistent with the general trafficking literature, in which rural recruitment and urban transaction are distinct stages of the same chain. Reports from the north are mentioned in the sources, but no northern pattern is asserted here, because the sources reviewed do not support one beyond general mention. Yoruba elders in the southwest voiced serious concern about these developments in December 2024, particularly about the targeting of women and children, and called for coordinated action by government, religious institutions, and community leaders (Vanguard, 2024). That statement is reported here as a community response, not as evidence of prevalence.

Organisationally, the sources describe syndicates that function similarly to criminal businesses, with recruiters who locate and abduct victims, traffickers who transport and sell body parts, and local practitioners who prescribe human parts (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004; Interpol, 2021). Some syndicates are described as working with dishonest security personnel to avoid arrest (Transparency International, 2022). The legal framing of that organisation matters: organ trafficking and human trafficking for organ removal are distinct legal problems, and the commercial chain described here involves both the recruitment of victims and the sale of parts, which means that responses aimed

only at one stage will miss the other (Gawronska, 2019). Survivor perspectives on trafficking rehabilitation programmes in Nigeria show that exit from such networks is rarely a single event: survivors describe rehabilitation as empowering only when it addresses livelihoods, stigma, and safety together, and as disempowering when it treats them only as witnesses or recipients (Okoli & Idemudia, 2020). Research on exit and post-exit interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa reaches a compatible conclusion, finding that the implementation of such interventions is uneven and that post-exit support is the weakest stage (Knight et al., 2024). Those findings are carried into the recommendations, because a response that disrupts a syndicate without supporting the people it exploited leaves the recruitment pool intact.

Seasonally, the sources describe increases during holidays, elections, or recessions (Ojo, 2018). The general mechanism offered is that important dates are believed to increase the efficacy of rituals, which raises demand around those dates, and that politically exposed people may seek charms during election seasons. No election-season increase is asserted here beyond the general seasonal pattern supported by Ojo (2018). The scale of the reported problem is addressed separately because it is so often misread. Pulse Nigeria (2025) reported more than 150 cases in Nigeria between July and December 2024, and that window is used consistently in this article. There is one report and one count, not two, and the figure is not doubled or extended beyond it. The figure is a media report, not a verified count, and it is not used as evidence that the practice is increasing, because no comparative series is available in the material reviewed. A security specialist cited in the same report attributed the frequency of cases to weak enforcement of existing laws and inadequacies in the criminal justice system, and advocated stronger surveillance, better information collection, and community policing alongside awareness campaigns (Pulse Nigeria, 2025). That advocacy is reported as a recommendation from the source, not as a finding of this study.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research technique, relying solely on secondary sources, to investigate the resurgence of ritual killings and body parts trading in

Nigeria. No interviews, surveys, observations, or other primary data were collected, and no primary finding is claimed. The corpus consists of the sources actually cited in this article: academic publications, news reports, and government and non-governmental organisation reports concerned with ritual killing, money ritual, trafficking, policing, and youth crime in Nigeria and, for comparative and legal context, in Africa more broadly. The analysis was carried out as a thematic content analysis. Sources were read for recurring themes concerning drivers, patterns, and countermeasures; those themes were then mapped against the four strain mechanisms defined in the theoretical framework, so that each driver could be assessed as a goal, a blocked means, an emotional response, or an innovative shortcut, or as falling outside the framework altogether. Claims drawn from a single source are identified as such in the text, and counts drawn from media reports are reported only with their source and window, never as verified totals.

Three gaps in the design of the study must be stated plainly, because they limit what the findings can support. First, no formal corpus list, corpus size, or inclusion and exclusion criteria are stated; the corpus is therefore described only as the set of sources cited, which means that the synthesis cannot claim to be exhaustive. Second, no search window is stated, although the sources cited span from 1938 to 2025; that span is a property of the cited literature, not a declared search period, and it should not be mistaken for one. Third, no coding scheme, reliability check, or ethics discussion is stated. The absence of a coding scheme means that theme identification rests on interpretive reading rather than on a replicable protocol, and the absence of an ethics discussion means that no claim is made here about consent or protection procedures for the people described in media reports. Those reports are treated strictly as published accounts, and no additional personal detail about victims or accused persons is introduced. The limitations arising from these gaps are set out at the end of the discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Drivers, Read Through the Strain Mechanisms

Read through the framework, the drivers form a coherent but incomplete picture. Mechanism 1, the cultural valuing of wealth and status, is visible in the celebration of sudden wealth in popular culture and social media (Ayeni, 2019; Ejekwumadu, 2025; Eze, U. Z., 2025) and in the religious and traditional language of sacrifice and reward that surrounds money ritual (Ibrahim, 2023). Mechanism 2, the blocking of legitimate means, is visible in the unemployment and poverty evidence (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004; Emmanuel et al., 2023; Ogunbayo, 2022) and in the governance failure that leaves those routes blocked (Ogunbayo, 2022). Mechanism 3, the emotional response to blockage, is visible in the frustration and sense of injustice described in the sources, and it is the mechanism that the recent strain literature most clearly supports: strain generated by institutional treatment and by hostile treatment from others produces anger that increases the likelihood of antisocial behaviour, while coping resources determine whether that anger leads to crime (Liu et al., 2019; Kondrat & Connolly, 2022). Mechanism 4, the innovative shortcut, is the ritual killing itself as described in the sources: a drastic, unlawful means adopted where lawful means appear unavailable and where the promised reward is immediate. The application of the theory to ritual killing, proposed with reference to the historical and cultural analysis of the practice (Agbaje, 2017), survives this reading, but only in the qualified form stated in the framework: strain organises the motive, it does not determine the act. The socioeconomic and cultural drivers identified in earlier Nigerian research point in the same direction, emphasising that economic pressure and cultural belief operate together rather than as competing explanations (Wood, 2017).

Two qualifications from the recent literature prevent overreading. First, tests of general strain theory among juveniles show that strain is associated with delinquency but that the association is conditioned by context and coping (Wang et al., 2025), which means that the drivers identified here should be read as risk conditions, not as causes that operate uniformly. Second, victimisation itself can generate the negative emotions that the theory links to deviance (Lee

et al., 2021), which complicates any simple division between victims and offenders in communities where violence is widespread. That complication is relevant to the patterns below, where the same young people who are described as recruits are also described as potential victims, and where women and children appear primarily as victims but also as participants in public debate about the crimes.

Patterns and Their Limits as Evidence

The patterns are best read as reported patterns, not as measured distributions. Victim selection is the strongest pattern, because it is supported by multiple source types: organisational reports on vulnerable people (Amnesty International, 2023; UNICEF, 2021), child protection policy analysis (Olayiwola, 2022), and research on gendered accusation (Kgatla, 2020; Owusu, 2023). Geography is weaker: a southern and southwestern concentration is supported (Igwe, 2023; Ellis, 2016), but no state ranking is supported, and the rural-urban division rests on a single trafficking report (UNODC, 2022). Organisation is moderately supported: syndicate structures are described consistently across policing and trafficking sources (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2004; Interpol, 2021; Gawronska, 2019), but the internal division of labour within any particular network is described only in general terms. Timing is the weakest pattern: a general seasonal association is supported (Ojo, 2018), but the election-specific variant is not, and the scale of the problem rests on a single media report (Pulse Nigeria, 2025). The overall assessment is therefore uneven. The study can say with reasonable confidence what kinds of people are reported as victims and what kinds of organisation are reported, it can say with less confidence where cases cluster beyond a broad regional pattern, and it cannot say from this evidence whether the practice is increasing, because the only count available is a single report without a comparative series.

Countermeasures: What the Evidence Can and Cannot Support

Existing countermeasures discussed in the sources fall into four groups, and their support varies. Enforcement measures, including stronger policing and prosecution, are supported as necessary but insufficient: police corruption is itself part of the problem (Oke, C. I., 2022; Balogun et al., 2021; Robert & Wilson,

2025), and an anticorruption lens on anti-trafficking response is therefore not an optional addition but a condition for enforcement to work (Agwu, 2025). Community policing is supported as a complement to formal enforcement, both in general Nigerian research (Ikenga, 2023; Oikhala, 2021) and in research on the role of community leaders in managing security challenges in rural communities (Famakinwa et al., 2025). Traditional institutions are relevant to that complement, because research on traditional institutions and good governance in Nigeria shows that such institutions already perform governance functions that formal institutions do not reach, although their involvement must be structured rather than assumed (Saka-Olokungboye et al., 2023). Victim support is supported as a distinct requirement: rehabilitation programmes are experienced as empowering only when they address livelihoods, stigma, and safety together (Okoli & Idemudia, 2020), and exit and post-exit interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa are weakest precisely at the post-exit stage (Knight et al., 2024). Awareness campaigns are supported as a way of contesting the beliefs and imagery that make ritual promises credible (Ayeni, 2019; BBC News, 2023; Eze, U. Z., 2025), but no source reviewed evaluates such a campaign, and awareness alone cannot address blocked livelihoods. Employment measures are supported by the driver evidence (Ogunbayo, 2022; Emmanuel et al., 2023), but they operate on a longer timescale than enforcement or awareness, and their effects cannot be assessed from the sources reviewed.

Limitations

The limitations of this study follow directly from its method and from the state of the evidence. First, the study relies entirely on secondary sources, dominated by media reports, and media reports are not verified event data; counts, prices, and case details drawn from them inherit that status. Second, evidence gathered only through police and media gatekeepers is systematically partial, because the institutions that control access to information also have an interest in how the problem is described (Van Damme, 2021). Third, no comparative time series is available, so no trend claim can be supported, and the language of resurgence in the title should be read as a description of reported concern rather than as a measured increase. Fourth, the framework explains motive better than it

explains victim selection, seasonality, or organisation, and those patterns are therefore described rather than derived from the theory. Fifth, claims that rest on unverifiable sources are not repeated here at the level at which they circulate in public discussion; the patterns above are stated only at the level the sources reviewed support. Finally, the study is Nigeria-specific in its evidence, and its findings should not be generalised to other countries without separate evidence, even where the trafficking and strain literatures are comparative.

CONCLUSION

Research Question 1: Drivers. The resurgence is driven by a combination of blocked lawful routes to wealth, above all youth unemployment and poverty; beliefs in the spiritual and financial efficacy of human body parts, sustained by traditional practice, religious language, and popular culture; peer and media influences that present sudden wealth as attainable; and an enforcement environment marked by corruption and impunity. Strain theory organises those drivers coherently: valued goals, blocked means, emotional responses, and innovative shortcuts map onto the themes in the sources, subject to the scope conditions that coping resources differ and that most people facing the same strain do not offend.

Research Question 2: Patterns. The reported patterns are the targeting of vulnerable people, above all women, children, and homeless people; a broad southern and southwestern concentration without a supported state ranking; rural killings feeding urban trading hubs; organised syndicates linking recruiters, transporters, and practitioners; and a general seasonal association with holidays, elections, and recessions, without a supported election-specific variant. The scale most often quoted, more than 150 cases reported by Pulse Nigeria (2025) for July to December 2024, is a single media-source report, not a verified count, and it does not establish a trend.

Research Question 3: Countermeasures. Existing measures are partial. Enforcement is necessary but undermined by the corruption it must address; community policing and the engagement of traditional and religious leaders are supported as complements; victim support is weakest at the post-exit stage;

awareness campaigns can contest beliefs but cannot substitute for livelihoods; and employment measures address the underlying blockage on a longer timescale than the other measures. A coherent response must therefore combine all four groups of measures, sequenced so that enforcement reform and victim support are not treated as afterthoughts to awareness and employment.

The findings point to one aligned set of recommendations, each linked to the findings above and none invented beyond them. Recommendation 1 is to strengthen law enforcement training and funding, with an anticorruption focus, because enforcement is both necessary and itself compromised. Recommendation 2 is to pursue nationwide employment efforts, because unemployment and poverty are the most consistently supported drivers and because employment addresses the blocked means at the centre of the strain account. Recommendation 3 is to conduct public awareness campaigns that contest the belief in ritual wealth and the imagery that sustains it, because media and popular culture are documented channels for that belief. Recommendation 4 is to engage traditional and religious leaders and communities, including through community policing, because those actors already shape the norms and the local governance within which both belief and enforcement operate. Addressing these challenges demands a coordinated strategy that treats drivers, patterns, and countermeasures together, rather than a single intervention aimed at only one part of the problem.

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