



Cult Violence and Irregular Migration in Edo State: An Assessment (2014-2024)

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Abstract. This study seeks to understand the influence of cult violence on irregular migration from Edo State, Nigeria, between 2014 and 2024, with a focus on the interplay between insecurity, youth vulnerability, and targeted killings, which pushes individuals to adopt irregular migration as a survival mechanism. The study relied on qualitative data which was drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The research however applies the Push and Pull Theory to interpret how unmet security needs trigger irregular migration, as people flee violence to assert individual autonomy. Findings reveal that spikes in cult violence coincide with notable surges in irregular migration, as residents seek to escape from immediate harm and long-term economic marginalization. This study further highlights the role of cult violence as a contributing factor to irregular migration, especially among vulnerable youth. The systemic violence has caused many young people to flee to other places as a result of the climate of fear and instability. The study recommends strengthening law enforcement, dismantling cult networks, addressing youth unemployment, social cohesion programs, judicial and legal reform, and international collaboration on human trafficking and irregular migration.

Keywords: Cult Violence, Survival Strategy, Migration Drivers, Irregular Migration, Insecurity.

1. Introduction

Irregular migration remains a significant challenge for many countries in the Global South, particularly in Nigeria, where Edo State has become a key source of migrants to Europe. The state according to International Organization for Migration (2021) is well known as a place of origin particularly for young people leaving Nigeria. 37% of all returned migrants under the joint EU-IOM initiatives are reported to have come from the state. Scholars and watchers have

attributed socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity to this migration pattern (Ogbanga, 2024). However, cult violence has emerged as a critical but under-examined factor influencing irregular migration. Cult groups have established a strong presence in Edo State's social and political landscape, often accused of destabilizing the region and driving youths toward unlawful migration routes (Osaghae, 2023).

Between January 2021 and December 2023, gang violence in Edo State led to over 180 fatalities, with incidents of increasing violence (Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta, 2024). In December 2023 alone, more than 30 people were killed in rival cult clashes, including a journalist and two vigilante leaders, one in Oredo Local Government Area and the other in Ekosodin in Ovia North East Local Government Area (George, 2024). In 2025, the law-making body of the state condemned the rising tide of cultist activities, highlighting a distressing increase in both fatalities and serious physical injuries across the state (Edo State House of Assembly, 2025).

While many migrants from Edo State seek better opportunities abroad, they often rely on dangerous migration routes and human traffickers, leading to exploitation (Ogbanga, 2024). Cult violence is a significant, yet often overlooked, push factor for migration within the state. They are reported to be involved in organized crime, territorial control, and violent conflicts, all contributing to insecurity (Lime, 2024). These groups, often linked to larger criminal organizations, exacerbate the issue of irregular migration. No special thanks to the socio-economic, cultural, and political environment in Edo State that has fueled an increase in cult violence. The breakdown of traditional social structures and the absence of economic opportunities have rendered youths particularly susceptible to criminal gangs. For many years, cult groups have fought each other with guns

over stolen funds and even sold drugs (Yabagi & Okah, 2025). This violence has made people, particularly the youths within the state to feel less safe, which has led many of them to flee by moving illegally (IOM, 2021).

More disturbing is the work link between cult violence and migrant traffickers. Particularly at a period where traffickers are on the look to lure young people with false promises of better opportunities abroad only to forcefully exploit them through force labour and abuse (Ariyo, 2021). Most agents of these traffickers have been reported to be cult members who act as middlemen between migrants and traffickers, which makes it easier for them to take advantage of people (Healy, Jesrani, Leggett, Socher, Viollaz 2023). This partnership makes it harder to deal with both cult violence and illegal immigration because the two issues are linked.

The link between cult violence and human trafficking is so tight that young people fleeing from such violence take to illegal migration as the best option available to stay alive and have a better life because a lot of young people think that moving is the only way to get away from violence and poverty. This again makes the fight against illegal migration in Edo State in particular even harder. Unemployment, poverty, peer pressure, even societal pressure and lack of education have long been seen as significant causes of illegal migration, but the rise in cult violence has added a new level to the trend. More young people, especially those who live in cities like Benin City, are moving illegally to find better jobs and get away from the violence of criminal gangs alike (IOM, 2021).

The socio-political climate in Edo State, which powerful criminal groups dominate, has made it a key player in West African transnational migration. People leave the state not only because they are poor, but also because they are afraid of violence, coercion, and criminal extortion. It is necessary to learn more about the migratory trends and the causes of those trends because cult violence, human trafficking, and irregular migration coexist simultaneously (Stamping out trafficking in Nigeria, 2020).

Existing research on irregular migration from Edo State has focused on socio-economic push factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, but has overlooked the role of cult violence. Previous studies by Ogbanga (2024) and Braimah, Gberevbie, Chodozie, Osimen (2024) focus on broad socio-economic factors driving migration without addressing how local violence, particularly cult-related, directly influences migration decisions. The

IOM (2021) and Healy et al. (2023) discuss criminal networks and human trafficking but do not consider the individual experience of victims who are coerced into migration due to cult violence. Kangiwa (2015) examines the political economy of cult groups but does not link cult violence to irregular migration. Yabagi & Okah's (2025) study fails to capture the recent rise in violence in Edo State. This study provides a localized analysis of the escalating violence in Edo State between 2014 and 2024 and its direct impact on irregular migration patterns.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

History has shown that most Nigerian trafficking victims in Europe have come from Edo State, via Libya route. A development that has been considered to be detrimental to growth of the Nigeria state that has continued to lost her active age to other countries in Europe illegally. This trend has continued despite combined efforts from both the Nigerian state and international organizations like IOM to address the problem particularly for youths who crosses perilous and unlawful paths in search of newer frontiers in other countries. With most scholars concentrating on the traditionally accepted causes of migration like economic deprivation, absence of job opportunities promises of greener pasture, the role of cult violence in Edo State as a push factor have been completely overlooked.

Cult activity a menace that was within the student environment has historically grown to have gained a widespread cutting across of levels of society within Edo State and is posing serious danger to the state's occupants, especially the youth demographic. Violence from these cult activities have gone even worse and is now manifesting as violent confrontations, extortions and killing which have created fear and instability within and around the state. The want to survive has caused many youths within the communities that made up the state have resulted to migration as a way out of the cult violence snare. The majority of these youth resort to illegal migration as it is considered cheaper and free from documentation stress. Hence, migration to many of these youth is not only seen as an economic option, but as a survival strategy as it is the best option to escape the cult snare.

Irregular migration may also be a strategy to avoid forced recruitment, violent revenge, and the economic cost of residing in the regions that are characterised by armed conflicts and crimes. In this regard, irregular migration serves as an effective means for people to restore their livelihoods in safe environments, as

observed in Nigeria and other countries. Although the security problem of cultism has been increasingly recorded in Edo State, there is still a significant gap in the empirical studies of the direct relationship between cult violence and irregular migration.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study primarily aims to examine the impact of cult violence on irregular migration in Edo State between 2014 and 2024. In particular, this study sought to:

- To examine the dynamics of irregular migration out of Edo State.
- To examine how cult violence affects the way people perceive irregular migration.
- Examine the socio-economic implications of cult violence on migration patterns from Edo State.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Push and Pull Theory

When people move from one country to another, they are involved in what is called migration. Over 150,000 years ago, the earliest populations of modern humans began to migrate out of the Africa Continent. Since then, different people have moved out of their original place of origin across the world either been pulled by opportunities or is even been pushed by circumstances within the present environment (Walker, 2019).

As a theory of migration trace to Ernst Georg Ravenstein, the pull and push theory describes the voluntary migration people undertook that is driven by negative push factors at origin and positive pull factors at desired destination. That is, the push factors include variables like poverty, lack of social mobility, generalized violence or even directed persecution that describe why an individual chose to leave his or her home. By contrast, the pull factors like better work opportunities, higher chances of human security and even presence of basic social amenities can pull a person to settle in new location from his or her destination (Bruzzone, n.d.).

Every human has the desire to survive, hence when life is threatened by violence or its kind, man desire to find peace somewhere else. This desire to leave a place of stay is not only controlled by this push factor of threat to life, but is also be determine by the pull in the destination of interest. The Edo State cult violence that has been on the rise as confirmed by the Edo State house of Assembly has thrown many of the young populations into the desire to migrate to stay alive. More so that the Libya route is considered cheap

without documentation procedure, they opted to use the route for greener pasture. For those that can afford the regular migration process, they did all they can to migrate to stay alive.

3. Research Methodology

The research method employed is qualitative research, to explore the impacts of cult violence on irregular migration in Edo State between 2014 and 2024. Data was gathered using the unstructured interviewed method. Sample was however drawn from the study chosen population that includes young people between the ages of 15-35 in Edo State who have been directly or indirectly involved in cult activities or irregular migration under the year of study, International Organization for Migration, Voluntary Humanitarian Return and families of migrants. Respondents were identified using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Besides personal interview, Telephone and Whatsapp call were also used to interview some respondents. Even though some respondents were not comfortable in answering questions posed to them, they were however ready to refer someone that can give the needed data to analyze. Themes were therefore identified in the course of interviewing respondents which were used to analyze data gotten.

4. Discussion of Findings

Trends and Patterns of Irregular Migration

The incidence of irregular migration out of Edo State is one concerning trend: the more violent the cult related violence, the more the youths leave the state. To begin with, unemployment, poverty, and insufficient opportunities to promote socially were the leading economic causes that prompted migration out of Edo (Ogbanga, 2024). However, due to increasing cult violence, especially since 2017, the trends of migration have changed. Disappearing under the pressure of violence, the social arrangement of the Edo State began to disintegrate, and cult groups were distributed not only on the university campuses, but also in urban and rural regions, thereby forming an atmosphere of terror that affected the everyday lives devastatingly (Ushe, 2019).

This culture of relentless insecurity made too many youngsters feel confined and that the only way out of this menace of violence was to migrate. The paradigm shift is due to the transition from economic migration to survival migration, where the motivation behind migration has undergone a drastic change. Previously, youngsters might have considered migration as a solution to finding more favorable economic

prospects; towards the end of the 2010s, it instead became a necessity to flee the violent dangers that engulfed them (Pope, 2024).

I rather die in that desert than waiting to be killed for what I know nothing about. I was caught in an unfortunate web, friends I move with threatened someone that feel I was part of the plan to eliminate him. Before I ran away through Libya to Europe, I was shot twice, nobody told me to migrate to stay alive before I left with just five hundred thousand naira with me.

...to me, death threat took me to a better place in life (Respondent)

In Edo State, the period between 2020 and 2022 registered a notably alarming increase in cult violence that was accompanied by an exponential increase in irregular migration. The local and international organisations report that cult-related deaths were registered in the state more than 192 during the period between January 2020 and March 2024. These are just the tip of the violence, and numerous deaths and intimidation are not reported because many are afraid of the repercussions. The growth of violent conflict between competing cult groups, extortion, targeted assassinations, and kidnappings has provided an atmosphere in which young people have found survival to be a more dangerous thing. *“...after our rival cult group killed my younger brother thinking I was the one, my parent had to quickly put money together for me to leave the country”* (Respondent)

Irregular migration, previously regarded as an economic opportunity, is now viewed as a survival necessity (Healy et al., 2023). This highlights the effect of violence on the reasons for moving as dictated by reason. The International Organisation for

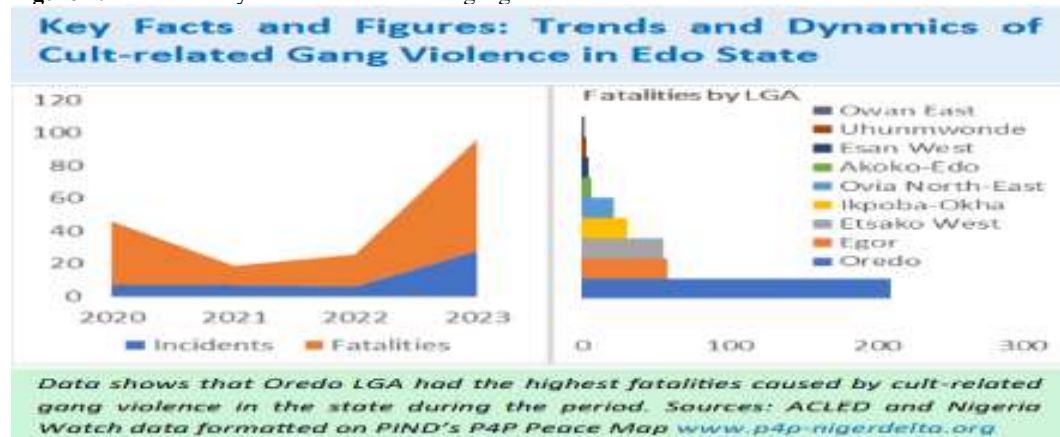
Migration (IOM) has provided numerical evidence that indicates an increase in cult violence and migration in Edo State is directly related to one another. Between 2020 and 2022, when violence was at its worst, more young people tried to cross borders illegally (Pope, 2024). The findings of this study underscore the unequivocal correlation between the rise of cult violence and the increasing trend of irregular migration from Edo State.

It took me 8 months to know the where about of my son after he ran away to Libya for fear of been killed. He told me that some cult members were looking for him because of one person killed in our community. Since he left, things have been difficult for him in Libya and he has refuse to return back home. As a mother I want him to stay alive for me, so I don't want him to come back now. (Respondent)

Role of Cult Violence in Shaping Migration Perceptions

The causal connection between violence and migration choices has been studied in different studies. However, little has been directly investigated about violent conditions like those generated by cult groups, which influence the perception of migration as a survival strategy. The literature indicate that the aggression of cult groups substantially revised the world view of most youths and compelled them to consider migration not only as a means of economic improvement, but as a desperate measure that they should save themselves from the violence and unstable environment (Uduji Okolo-Obasi, & Asongu 2023). In other words, the increase in irregular migration is in part necessitated by the surge in cult-related violence in recent times (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trends and dynamics of cult-related gang violence in Edo State



Source: PIND (2024)

As shown in figure 1, an upsurge in cult-related violence was recorded in 2023. As a result, young people started to leave the state not as a voluntary decision to go to a better place, but as a reason to escape violence. Cult groups actively terrorised communities with violent recruitment tactics and forceful indoctrination. The increased number of violent conflicts between opposing cult groups, assassinations, and threats of force towards the members of the community strengthened the idea that living in Edo State was an existential threat. Those against recruitment were brutally retaliated against, and the members of the existing cult were in constant fear of being killed or involved in violent clashes with the opposing groups (Ushe, 2019). The atmosphere of coercion and fear compelled numerous youths to reevaluate their own futures in Edo State, and this made them consider migration as a way of escaping actual danger and also stemmed from the mental pressure of being in a war-like country.

Notably, migration at this time was not solely driven by economic desires, but also by the need to flee in the face of recruitment, retaliation, or the penalty for disobedience towards the mighty cults. Youths who had previously dreamt about working in the cities of Edo, going to schools in their neighbourhoods, were faced with the stark truth of violence, within which there were no guarantees of safety or well-being. Migration was not only an escape option, but a foregone conclusion, leaving was perceived as the only means of avoiding the crossfire of cult violence. *...bros, instead of getting killed I chose to stay alive and marry white woman to raise beautiful children for myself. Over 5 years that I arrived Italy, I have been sleeping with my two eyes closed. No fear of I will be killed by some people* (Respondent).

The Extent to Which Cult Groups Facilitate Irregular Migration

Our clients that are in haste to leave are particularly the ones that are fleeing from something. They are mostly agitated if our date of departure is shifted forward. And many of them are in habit of not having the complete money for our service. But because we have our network everywhere, we particularly not scared that they will pay us our complete money. At best, we make them work and collect the pay in their behalf (Respondent)

Cult groups have expanded in larger urban and rural communities, as well as on college campuses. They are making it easy to migrate as much as they are making it. Cult violence is connected with human trafficking networks, and it has been growing in Edo

State over the last ten years, making it hard to distinguish between victims and offenders (Oyibo, 2020). Ironically, people who escape a violent situation usually end up being at the mercy of those same people who did them harm so that they can escape. By the end of the decade, cults in Edo State had become significantly more influential. They had a far-reaching impact that extended beyond university campuses to the politics, social life, and economies of urban and rural communities (Amanda, 2024). These cult groups started as student confraternities, but they developed into strong criminal organisations that practised illegal acts, such as armed robbery, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. The shifts that occurred between campus-based and community-based criminal networks directly changed the migration patterns (Ushe, 2019). When cult violence escalated, more violent confrontations and extortion were increasingly taking their toll on local communities.

The peculiarity of such a situation is that the migration of cult groups is actively promoted. With the rise in violence, these groups were linked to the human-trafficking activities, which took advantage of the frailty of the escape victims of the violence. They often provided aid to migrants and helped them escape Edo State in exchange for payment, rendering services, or complying with their requests (Ariyo, 2021; Interpol, 2024). In other cases, members of the cult have been involved as intermediaries between the vulnerable migrants and human traffickers or have organised their escape. The fact that cults are associated with trafficking rings reveals that there exists a complex relationship in which individuals who would otherwise prefer to avoid violence are the very individuals who rely on the same organisations that hurt them. This symbiosis relationship facilitated the migration, besides assisting in the exploitation of those who were on the run from violence and were therefore vulnerable to another round of manipulations and mistreatments (Interpol, 2024).

Meanwhile, demarcations have been eroded between perpetrators and victims in the differences between cult violence and irregular migration. This role became more contradictory because the cult groups contributed to the migration with their ties to the trafficking connections. Cult violence, on the one hand, was the primary motive of the migration since individuals desired to eliminate the imminent threat of recruitment, violence, and murder. While on the other hand, cults, by their connection to the traffickers, performed the functions of migrants as the enabling mechanisms, often exploiting the vulnerabilities of the migrants to their homicidal predilections. This kind of

relationship forms a vicious cycle of exploitation wherein the migrants become involved in a system that only feeds the same situation that they were already trying to escape. “...I was running from law enforcement agency as a suspect; my only option was Italy through the desert” Respondent

The connection between cult organisations and human-trafficking rings is a salient revelation of this study. Cults, which are characterised by violent methods and domination over local groups, often work with or as intermediaries of trafficking syndicates. Local and transnational networks also exploit the desperation and vulnerability of the people as they flee the cult violence, promising them a way out of Edo State for several payments. The importance of cult groups in trafficking activities has a profound impact on understanding migration trends in Edo State, as it suggests that the movement is not driven by violence but rather by a criminal syndicate (Oyibo, 2020).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper examines the role of cult violence in contributing to irregular migration in Edo State between 2014 and 2024, with the aim of identifying the factors that promote such tendencies. Findings indicate that cult violence is the cause and contributing factor to irregular migration, especially among vulnerable youth. The migration out of the state of Edo has long been considered a reaction to the desperate economic state there. The increase in violence in cults, however, transformed the concept of migration from a matter of free will to a necessity, as per this research. The systemic violence has caused many young people to flee to other places as a result of the climate of fear and instability, which is characterised by several incidents of extortion, kidnapping and targeted assassinations, among others. The study indicates that these groups not only increase the socio-economic susceptibility, but also the direct source of sustainability of the irregular migration is their affiliations to human trafficking networks. Some victims of cult violence are easy to manipulate and fall into the hands of the traffickers, who can provide them with an opportunity to escape the situation of violence in Edo State. These findings also provide the broader socio-political implications of cult violence that has destabilised the trust of the people in the institutionalisation of government and law enforcement, and also that it is the cause of further migration to escape the perceived state failure.

5.1 Recommendations

Strengthening law enforcement and dismantling cult networks: The first recommendation is that the reinforcement of the law enforcement agencies would assist in combating cult violence within Edo State. This entails the formation of specialised anti-cult units that do not rely on politics and corruption. The idea behind such units is to deconstruct cult networks, prosecute the offenders, and hold law enforcement processes transparent and responsible. Intimate collaboration among local and international security forces is indispensable to track and dispel the human trafficking networks that exploit the people who are already vulnerable to leave their homes to evade the cult violence.

Addressing youth unemployment and the provision of alternative livelihood: Unemployment among youth is a significant reason for cult violence and irregular migration. Consequently, vocational training programmes should be strengthened to ensure that young people acquire requisite skills. The government can also establish programmes to assist youths in establishing businesses by providing them with microloans, mentors, and other resources. This will help them become independent and deter them from joining cult to achieve financial benefits.

Community-based prevention of conflict and social cohesion programmes: Programs for preventing conflict and building social cohesion in the community: To stop cult violence from spreading and bring people together, community-based interventions should be given top priority. Another opportunity is that programs that engage young people and efforts to bring people together will be crucial in rebuilding trust and strengthening the community. Reforming cults with programs like restorative justice that help former members reintegrate into society and find new ways to live will also stop more people from joining cults in the future. Moreover, through community sensitisation programmes, society can be informed about the harm of cultism and how social solidarity can be used to combat violence.

Judicial and legal reform: Since corruption and inefficiency are factors that contribute to the continued perpetuation of cult violence, there must be judicial reform. Improving the judicial system to prosecute cult-related crimes more rapidly, enforce anti-cult laws consistently, and increase transparency in the judicial process will rebuild trust in the law enforcement system among the population. Citizens should be educated on their rights and the legal framework available to combat the cult through a public awareness campaign.

Comprehensive migration management strategies:

The migration policies of Edo State and Nigeria need to change to accommodate the security-driven irregular migration. Although border control and reintegration programmes have a place, they should be supplemented by policies that address the factors that have caused migration. This involves the identification of the role of violence in migration choices and protection given to cult-fleece. Migrant support services, including legal aid, counselling, and safe housing, should be increased in quantity to cover vulnerabilities in Nigeria and in the countries receiving the migrants.

International collaboration on human trafficking and irregular migration:

Since irregular migration and trafficking networks are cross-border, it is essential to jointly work with international organisations, including the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). International cooperation could help implement anti-trafficking laws, support victims of migration, and establish long-term systems for managing migration effectively. Edo State will be able to work with other states to find a more complete and humane way to deal with irregular migration by finding a way to fight both trafficking and violence at the same time.

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