

2.14. Individuals targeted by student cults

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For background information on the phenomenon of ‘cultism’ in Nigeria, including the presence of student cults or confraternities across the country, their *modus operandi* and violations committed by these groups see EUAA COI Report – Nigeria Security Situation November 2025.

Several communities in Nigeria have been affected by violent conflict linked to groups such as Black Axe, Eiye Confraternity, and Vikings, among others.724 Originally formed as university-based confraternities, these groups have evolved into complex criminal networks operating well beyond campus environments. Their activities now include extortion, drug trafficking, cybercrime, and politically motivated violence. The South-South and South-West are the main hubs of gang violence in Nigeria. Northcentral states like Benue face violence from groups like Scavengers and Chain, while the North- East and North-West report few gang-related deaths.725

Nigeria Watch reported that, in 2024, cult-related violence resulted in 328 fatalities, marking a slight decline from the 371 deaths recorded in 2023. Anambra State experienced the highest number of cult-related deaths with 88 reported cases, followed by Lagos and Rivers states. Confraternities such as Eiye and Aiye were active in Lagos, while groups including Debam, Deewell, Greenlanders, and Icelanders operated predominantly in the Niger Delta region. In Anambra State, cult activity was concentrated in the capital, Awka. On 31 March 2024, a cult clash in the Okpuno, Eke Akwa, and Obinagu areas of Awka led to the deaths of 13 individuals, including a staff member of the Anambra State Judiciary. Similarly, on 20 October 2024, another confrontation in the Nibo and Nodu-Okpuno communities of Awka South LGA resulted in 13 additional fatalities. Victims of student cults included not only rival cult members but also students and security personnel.726

Gang violence is mainly directed at rival members; however, civilians are often unintentionally affected, typically due to proximity, mistaken identity, or ties to intended targets. According to an analysis by SBM Intel, civilian fatalities represent 4.6 % of the total gang-related deaths between January 2020 and March 2025, indicating an unwritten rule among Nigerian gangs to refrain from killing non-combatants. Gang-related violence against civilians in Nigeria is largely concentrated in the southern region, with Rivers, Edo, and Lagos states being the most affected. 727 According to SBM Intel, most civilian casualties are incidental, rather than the result of deliberate targeting. Some groups, such as the Black Axe (Aiye) and the Icelanders have shown a particularly high rate of civilian fatalities.728

Cult groups typically recruit new members from universities and secondary schools.729 Recruitment of youth and young adults is often driven by peer pressure, group dynamics and through the use of fear-based tactics, especially within educational institutions. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality in Nigeria have created a fertile environment for cult groups to thrive. For many individuals, joining a cult becomes a survival strategy in a society where legitimate pathways to success are limited. 730 Cult groups exploit the vulnerability of unemployed Nigerian and other African youths, who are easily susceptible to peer influence. They reportedly enforce permanent membership, with resistance punished by death.731 For instance, Black Axe exploits vulnerable populations in Nigeria, as well as vulnerable members of the Nigerian diaspora (see also 2.2.6. Men victims of trafficking), particularly young men. It employs young, low-level gang members, known as 'streets', to fight over territory, control illicit markets, and steal oil from pipelines.732

National media sources reported on a rise in the recruitment of children by cult groups during the reference period.733 During a public event that took place in Kwara State in 2024, the Kwara State Commissioner of Police said that a student had been 'recently' killed for refusing to join cultism.734 Groups reportedly use aggressive tactics to recruit students, with an increasingly early age at which they are being drawn into cultism. States such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Ogun, Delta, and Edo have become hotspots for cult-related activities, with secondary schools increasingly serving as breeding grounds for future cult members.735

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