
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LAGOS, NIGERIA

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Introduction: Sexual abuse of children and adolescents is a public health problem with potentially dire mental health consequences. Studies suggest that the first sexual experience of one out of three girls in sub-Saharan Africa is forced. However the relationship between sexual abuse and mental health problems among children and adolescents is grossly under-researched in Nigeria.

Objectives/Aim: This study determined the association between sexual abuse and mental health problems in a sample of adolescents attending secondary school in Lagos, Nigeria.

Method: A cross-sectional study of 230 secondary school students in Lagos, Nigeria. Participants completed a socio-demographic questionnaire, Global School-based Health Survey Questionnaire, Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, Suicidality module of the Mini International Neuro-Psychiatric Interview and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale.

Results: The mean age of the participants was 15.9 (\pm 1.3) years, and 58.7% were males. A fifth (21.9%) of the respondents had experienced sexual abuse in the past year. Less than a tenth of the victims reported the abuse, and none had accessed mental health service. On regression analysis, being a victim of sexual abuse was independently predictive of depression ($p=0.041$), anxiety ($p=0.007$), peer problems ($p=0.014$), emotional problems ($p=0.005$) and suicidal ideation ($p=0.014$).

Conclusion: Exposure to sexual abuse is under-reported and un-detected among Nigerian school children, despite its association with several mental health problems. There is need for interventions targeted at facilitating the access of victimised children to timely supportive care and appropriate mental health intervention. Furthermore, efforts to protect children from sexual abuse must be intensified.