

SOCIAL DISTANCE TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS AND HIV-AIDS AMONG NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Introduction: Stigma is a formidable barrier to the treatment and rehabilitation of patients with mental illness or HIV-AIDS, even among young persons. In contrast with HIV-AIDS, efforts by Nigerian policy makers to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness are virtually non-existent. Information on the attitude of school children towards affected individuals is essential in placing the need to combat the stigma associated with these disorders in the right perspective.

Objectives/aim: This study determined the social distance of a sample of secondary school students in Nigeria towards individuals with mental illness, as compared with those with HIV-AIDS.

Method: A cross-sectional comparative survey. Secondary school students (n=170) in Lagos, Nigeria completed the modified Borgadus Social distance Scale.

Results: The respondents were more likely to be socially distant from patients with mental illness than those with HIV/AIDS ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI, 2.56-8.24). About seven out of ten (71.8%) and 20.6% of the participants would be afraid to have a conversation with someone who has mental illness and HIV-AIDS respectively ($p < 0.001$). Those unwilling to be in the same classroom with a student that has mental illness and HIV/AIDS were 74.7% and 17.6% respectively ($p < 0.001$). Less than a tenth (9.4%) could maintain friendship with someone who has mental illness.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that secondary school students in Nigeria desire a higher level of social distance from individuals with mental illness than those with HIV-AIDS. Interventions targeted at reducing the stigma associated with mental illness among school children deserve priority attention.