

PREVALENCE, PERPETRATORS AND PATTERN OF DISCLOSURE OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH- SOUTH, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual abuse among adolescents is a serious public health problem. This study aimed to determine the prevalence, perpetrators and pattern of disclosure of adolescent sexual abuse in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Methodology: This was an analytical cross-sectional comparative study involving 740 public senior secondary in-school adolescent students (14-19 years) from 4 selected schools (3 rural and 1 urban). An adapted, self-administered pre-tested, semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. Data analysis was carried out with Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25 software. Logistic regression analysis was used to determine the predictors of unwanted sexual experiences in adolescents, and statistical significance was taken at $p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$.

Results: The mean age of respondents was 17.0 ± 1.52 years ($p < 0.001$). The prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences from the rural schools was 72.2% compared to 49.7% in urban schools. A higher proportion of respondents in urban compared to rural schools, (28.1%) and (24.9%) had school mate as the commonest reported perpetrators of sexual abuse. ($\chi^2 = 11.65$, $p = 0.040$). Also a slightly higher proportion of respondents in rural schools, (27.3%) compared to (26.5%) from the urban schools mentioned Boyfriend/ Girlfriend as the perpetrators. The majority of respondents in both settings had not disclosed the sexual abuse. There was a slightly higher proportion of disclosure among respondents in the urban (34.3%) compared to (29.4%) ($p = 0.336$). Of the proportion of respondents that had disclosed the abuse, a higher proportion of respondents in the rural 24(51.0%) had disclosed the abuse to family members, compared to 20(34.5%) in the urban ($p = 0.185$). A higher proportion of respondents in the urban 19(32.8%) that disclosed sexual abuse were helped compared to 13 (27.7%) in the rural ($\chi^2 = 12.82$, $p = 0.012$).

Conclusion: This study shows a high prevalence of sexual abuse among the respondents with boyfriend/girlfriend and schoolmate as the commonest perpetrators where the majority in both setting victims had not disclosed nor reported. There is a need for reproductive health education in schools and the establishment of Adolescent Friendly Health Services (AFHS) to cater for the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents in school.

Keywords sexual abuse, unwanted sexual experiences, adolescent, perpetrators

INTRODUCTION: Adolescent sexual abuse is a topical issue of public health importance, a 21st-century reality that remains a cause for concern to parents, teachers, and governments of nations all over the world ¹. Every day, countless children and adolescent students around the world are sexually molested, harassed, exploited and abused, to the extent that sexual abuse is increasingly being recognized as a major social and public health concern globally ². The social, economic and health issues of adolescent students in both rural and urban areas need to be highlighted especially as most often they are a population commonly abused and rarely reported³. Sexual abuse in an adolescent is defined as sexual activity between an adolescent and a person who by age or development is in relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the need of such a person. This act may include but is not limited to the inducement or coercion to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, the exploitative use in prostitution, pornographic performance and materials or other unlawful sexual practices ⁴. Factors such as societal decadence, moral decadence, poor parenting and upbringing, poor educational system, poor judiciary/ legal system have been shown to worsen the problem of sexual abuse among senior secondary school adolescent students ⁵. Sexual abuse can cause many short and long term struggles for victims, offenders, families,

communities and the larger society culminating into immediate psychological reactions like shock, shame, guilt, anger and long term complications such as depression, post- traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, lack of sexual enjoyment and fear ⁶. Adolescent students constitute the greater proportion of people with sexual abuse problems, thus they are considered a high risk group^{6,7}. The WHO reported that 1 in every 5 women has been a victim of sexual assault and globally, 35% of women have experienced either physical and or sexual violence in childhood⁸. The Center for Disease Control and the United States Department of Justice in 2013 conducted a study and reported prevalence of high school boys and girls being forced to have sex at some point of time in their lives to be 11% and 4% respectively⁹. The types of sexual abuse among adolescent students could be penetrative or non-penetrative. The non-penetrative or non-contact form varies from adolescent pornography to all forms of sexual touch while the penetrative or contact include digital and /or object/ penile penetration of the vagina and / or anus as well as oral-genital, genital-genital, vaginal, anal or oral penetration ^{9,10}. The penetrative sexual abuse typically results in straddle injuries which is the most common types of unintentional injury involving the genitalia and arise when soft tissues of the external genitalia are compressed between the object and the pubic bone resulting in haematoma formation of the external structures with visible swelling and some pains in the anterior portion of the external genitalia.¹⁰ Young people face numerous health and sexual challenges during their transition to adulthood. These challenges include, among others, limited access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) information and services. Unmet SRH needs among secondary school adolescent students may contribute to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and unintended pregnancies, abortions and its attendant complications ¹¹. Secondary school adolescent students are the most at risk group for sexual abuse and violence. The data on age of sexual initiation and rates and sexual abuse/ violence make it clear that more adolescent- specific research needs to be conducted to construct and drive- home an evidence base for planning and implementing adolescent-specific SRH programs in Nigeria ¹². The vulnerability of this group is thought in part to be related to low socio-economic status and inexperience in matters of adolescent sexuality as reported in a study by Alokan ¹³. Most adolescents in senior secondary schools in both rural and urban areas are immature on matters concerning sexuality thus, further worsening their vulnerability to sexual abuse ¹⁴. It is worth noting that adolescence is a combination of physical, psychological and social changes that manifest differently in different cultural settings, hence, their SRH needs including

understanding the determinants of specific patterns of sexual behavior and practices, predictors, perpetrators and age of onset of sexual activity, life-long impact of sexual behavior on adolescent's physical and psychological health, and the health and psycho-social needs that results from these issues. This study has therefore looked at the prevalence, perpetrator and pattern of disclosure of sexual abuse among public senior secondary school adolescents in urban and rural areas of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

METHODOLOGY

Study setting and design

The study was carried out among 740 participants in 4 selected public senior secondary schools in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. The State is one of the 36 States in Nigeria, and it is situated in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. The geographical area of the State is divided into upland and riverine with thirty-one Local Government Areas (LGAs) categorized into three senatorial districts namely Uyo, Eket and Ikot Ekpene. These schools are located in the three senatorial districts of the state. Using population projection and estimations index of the State Bureau of Statistics, the state 2021 projected population was 6.4 million and estimate of adolescents population aged 10-19years was 928,914 ¹⁵. Attractive tourist centers in the state include Le Meridien and Golf Resort, 30,000 seats sport complex (stadium), Ibom Tropicana and Entertainment center, Ibeno beach and a widespread of viewing centers, Eateries/Bars/Hotels and other Cinema centers where adolescent students may patronize. Nigerian secondary education is organized into two categories: Junior and Senior secondary schools each lasting for 3 years. Adolescents make up about 25% of the general population and a minimum of one out of 3 people in Akwa Ibom lives in some form of urban accommodation with access to an urbanized lifestyle ¹⁶

A cross sectional analytical comparative study was employed in this study.

Study population

The study population comprised of senior secondary school adolescent students (14-19 years) in selected urban and rural areas of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Sample size determinations

The minimum sample size for comparing 2 proportions was calculated using the formular below⁴⁰

$$n = \frac{(Z_{\alpha} + Z_{1-\beta})^2 [P_1(1 - P_1) + P_2(1 - P_2)]}{(P_1 - P_2)^2}$$

Where:

n = Sample size required in each area

P_1 = Prevalence rate from a previous study on high risk sexual behavior among adolescent secondary school students in an urban setting = 69.9%⁸

P_2 = Prevalence rate from a previous study of sexual practices among upper grade public secondary school adolescents in rural setting=59.6%²

Z_{α} =Standard normal deviate corresponding to a level of significance of 5% (1.96)

$Z_{1-\beta}$ = Standard normal deviate corresponding to a power of 80% (0.84)

$P_1 - P_2$ = Difference in prevalence rates between the rural and urban areas

The calculated size was 333 for urban group and 333 for rural group, giving a total of 666

Non- response of 10% was added to give 370

Hence, 370 in each group with a total of 740 for both groups

Sampling technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed in this study.

In the first stage, The LGAs were stratified into rural and urban (seven out of the thirty one local government areas in Akwa Ibom State are classified as urban, the other twenty four are rural). The ratio of urban and rural LGAs was 1: 3

One urban and 3 rural LGAs were selected using simple random sampling technique

Second stage was the selection of schools. A list of approved public senior secondary schools was obtained from AKS Secondary Education Board. From the Urban LGA (Uyo LGA), one school was selected and one school each was selected from the 3 rural LGAs using the simple random sampling technique.

Third stage: Selection of respondents A total of 370 students in the urban and 124 students in each of the three rural schools selected were included in the study. Students for this study were recruited from SS1, SS2, SS3. Proportionate allocation was done to determine the number of students to select from each class in each urban and rural public senior secondary schools.

Study instruments

The study instrument was adapted from: United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) questionnaire measuring violence against children¹⁸ and questionnaire on prevalence of sexual abuse among adolescents in Geneva¹⁹. The instrument was validated and pretested.

Data collection

The data was collected for a period of three months during school session. The different schools were asked to give convenient days and free periods for data collection based on the school's weekly schedule. The self-administered questionnaires were administered to the selected students in their respective classes in each school. To ensure confidentiality and an atmosphere devoid of external influence, the principals and teachers were not present while the students completed the questionnaires. Also, the students were spaced so that they could not interact with one another while filling the questionnaire. The research team was made up of the first author and six research assistants who were resident doctors.

Statistical analyses

Data was fed into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 software to generate frequency tables and percentages. Chi-square test was used to test for significant association between variables that are nominal. The mean age of adolescent sexual abuse was assessed/ measured by determining the number of times the respondents in their life time was sexually abused, the life time period was measured as a continuous variable and then recoded as a categorical variable having three categories: 10 – 14 years as early adolescence, 15 – 17 years as middle adolescence and 18 – 19 years as late adolescence. Adolescent age at first sexual intercourse was measured as a continuous variable and then recoded as a categorical variable having three categories of two-year intervals: ≤ 9 years, 10 – 12 years and 13 – 14 years. The logistic regression analysis was used to determine predictors of adolescent sexual abuse. The cut off for including variables into the logistic model was $p=0.05$. The level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$ at 95% confidence interval.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Health, Research and Ethical Committee of the University of Uyo Teaching Hospital UUTH Uyo, with reference number UUTH/AD/S/96/VOL.XX1/610 and permission to carry out the study was obtained from the

Ministry of Education, State Secondary Education Board, Uyo Akwa Ibom State. The first author obtained permission from the Principals of the selected schools.

A notification letter was sent to the Parent- Teacher Association (PTA) of the selected schools and those participants less than 18 years gave assent while their parent/ guardian provided written consent. Written consent was obtained from those aged 18 years and above. The self- administered questionnaire was completed by the students after adequate explanation of the purpose of the study and the contents of the questionnaire. Privacy was ensured with spacing of the students while filling the questionnaire in the hall. Confidentiality was assured as the students were informed not to write their names on the questionnaire and all the personal identifying information such as phone numbers, address and name of respondents were not captured on the questionnaire nor electronically. Serial numbers and not names of participants were used to ensure confidentiality.

RESULTS

Table 1 Socio-demographics characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Urban(%) n=370	Rural(%) n=370	Total n = 740	χ^2	p-value
Age group					
14-15	110 (29.7)	193 (52.2)	303(40.9)	40.63	<0.001*
16-17	149 (40.3)	114 (30.8)	263(35.6)		
18-19	111 (30.0)	63 (17.0)	174(23.5)		
Mean \pm SD	16.56 \pm 1.52	15.96 \pm 1.19	16.26 \pm 1.36		
Gender					
Male	151 (40.8)	132 (35.7)	283(38.2)	2.07	0.151
Female	219 (59.2)	238 (64.3)	457(61.8)		
Class grade					
SS1	109 (29.5)	184 (49.7)	293(39.6)	71.28	0.001*
SS2	186 (50.3)	177 (47.8)	363(49.1)		
SS3	75(20.2)	9 (2.5)	84(11.3)		

*Statistically significant (p<0.05)

The mean age of respondents from the urban and rural public senior secondary school was 16.56 (± 1.52) and 15.96 (± 1.19) years respectively ($p < 0.001$). A higher proportion of the respondents in rural schools were aged 14-15 years 193 (52.2%) compared to 110 (29.7%) in the urban schools. A higher proportion of the respondents in rural schools were females, 238 (64.3%) compared to 219 (59.2%) in urban schools.

Table 2: Prevalence of Sexual Abuse among the respondents

Variables	Urban(%) N= 370	Rural(%) N= 370	Total n = 740	χ^2	p-value
Unwanted sex related experiences					
Yes	184 (49.7)	267 (72.2)	451(60.9)	39.11	<0.001*
No	186 (50.3)	103 (27.8)	289(39.1)		
Ever had sexual Intercourse					
Yes	169 (45.7)	160 (43.2)	329(44.5)	0.44	0.554
No	201 (54.3)	210 (55.8)	411(55.5)		
	N=169	N=160	N=329		
Age at first Sex					
≤ 9	58 (34.3)	75 (46.9)	133(40.4)	5.70	0.058
10—12	85 (50.3)	68 (42.5)	153(46.5)		
13—16	26 (15.4)	17 (10.6)	43(13.1)		
Willingly Consented					
Yes	50 (29.6)	37 (23.1)	87(26.4)	1.76	0.184

No	119 (70.4)	123 (76.9)	242(73.6)
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The prevalence of the unwanted sex related experiences was 49.7% in urban compared with 72.2% in rural schools. ($P=0.001$). The prevalence of sexual intercourse among the respondents in the urban schools was 45.7% compared with 43.2% in rural schools. A higher proportion of respondents in the rural schools 75 (46.9%) compared to 58 (34.3%) in the urban schools was ≤ 9 years age at first sex. ($p=0.058$). Out of the 169 respondents that had sexual intercourse in the urban schools, 119(70.4%) did not give consent and out of 160 respondents in rural schools that had sexual intercourse, 123(76.9%) did not give consent ($P=0.184$), the overall prevalence of sexual abuse was 60.9%.

Table 3: Perpetrators of sexual abuse among respondents

Types of perpetrators	Urban(%) N=370	Rural(%) N=370	Total n = 740	χ^2	p-value
School mate	104(28.1)	92(24.9)	196(26.5)	11.65	*0.040
School teacher	26 (7.0)	42 (11.4)	68(9.2)		
Neighbour	50 (13.5)	41 (11.1)	91(12.3)		
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	98(26.5)	101(27.3)	199(26.9)		
Non-teaching staff	52 (14.1)	36 (9.7)	88(11.9)		
**Others	40 (10.8)	58 (15.6)	98(13.2)		

Multiple Responses applied, **Others(brother, sister, father, stepfather, uncle, househelp)

A higher proportion of respondents in urban compared to rural schools, (28.1%) and (24.9%) mentioned school mate as the commonest reported perpetrators of sexual abuse. ($\chi^2=11.65$, $p=0.040$). A slightly higher proportion of respondents in rural schools, (27.3%) compared to (26.5%) from the urban schools mentioned Boyfriend/ Girlfriend.

Table 4: Disclosure of sexual intercourse experience by the respondents

Variables	Urban(%)	Rural(%)	Total	p- χ^2 value	
	N=169	N=160	N = 329		
Disclosure of intercourse	58 (34.3)	47 (29.4)	105(31.9)	0.92	0.336
Who Did you disclose to	N=58	N=47	N=105		
Immediate family members	20 (34.5)	24 (51.0)	44(41.9)	6.19	0.185
Friends	17 (29.3)	11 (23.4)	28(26.7)		
Uncles	8 (13.8)	3 (6.4)	11(10.5)		
Police	5 (8.6)	6 (12.8)	11(10.5)		
Teachers	4 (6.9)	3 (6.4)	7(6.6)		
Others*	4(6.9)	0(0.0)	4(3.8)		
Response to Disclosure					
Was Helped	19 (32.8)	13 (27.7)	32(30.5)	12.82	0.012*
Not believed	16 (27.6)	4 (8.5)	20(19.1)		
Nothing changed	18 (31.0)	15 (31.9)	33(31.4)		
Kept Secret	3 (5.2)	11 (23.4)	14(13.3)		
Punished offender	2 (3.4)	4 (8.5)	6(5.7)		

Others* are distant relations.

On the whole, the majority of respondents in both settings had not disclosed the abuse. Specifically, there was a slightly higher proportion of disclosure among respondents in the urban (34.3%) compared to (29.4%) ($p=0.336$). Of the proportion of respondents that had disclosed the abuse, a higher proportion of respondent in the rural 24(51.0%) had disclosed the abuse to family member, compared to 20(34.5%) in the urban ($p=0.185$). A higher proportion of respondents in the urban 19(32.8%) that disclosed sexual abuse were helped compared to 13 (27.7%) in the rural($\chi^2=12.82$, $p=0.012$).

DISCUSSION

This study determined the prevalence, perpetrators and disclosure of sexual abuse in adolescents in selected schools of the urban and rural areas of Akwa Ibom State.

The study noted that the prevalence of unwanted sex related experiences among respondents from rural schools was significantly higher 72.2% compared to 49.7% in urban schools.

This could be due to shifts in values and practices, cultural practices and socio-economic hardships, the desire to live an affluent lifestyle, poor religiosity, poor exposure to modern development, decay morale and poor parental upbringing. Other predisposing factors in rural schools could be cramped living conditions in the rural area, large number of household members which limits privacy, as parents are often forced to share sleeping space with children, thus exposing children to sexual activity early in life ²². Furthermore, exposure to parental sexual activity may weaken adult control over their children's sexual behaviour. Background poverty may also force young people to move out of parental homes to their dwellings prematurely, providing them with opportunities to engage in risky behaviour away from parental supervision.

Generally, rural lifestyles, poor exposure and sexual ignorance stimulate higher stress levels in the daily lives of parents/guardians in the rural population making them to have less time to monitor their children. This may be responsible for the unwanted sexual experiences and the higher prevalence rate recorded in rural schools compared to urban schools. The occurrence of sexual abuse in rural and urban schools is a pointer to the need to pay adequate attention to protection of the sexual rights of all adolescents at all times.

Previous studies in Nigeria showed that the prevalence of adolescent sexual abuse ranged from 2.1% to 77.7% ^{23, 24}. The prevalence of adolescent sexual abuse in other parts of Africa varied between 16% in Cameroun, 23% in Sierra Leone, 34.4% in Ethiopia, 49% in Ghana to 65.6% in Zimbabwe, and 67% in Botswana ²⁵⁻²⁸. The prevalence of sexual abuse in the present study also falls within this range.

However, lower prevalence rates were found in studies where parents had to give information about sexual abuse of their adolescents as seen in studies conducted in south western Nigeria with prevalence of 2.1% and 2.7% ^{29,30}. This low prevalence could have been due to withheld information by parents or because affected adolescents did not disclose their experiences to their parents.

Lower prevalence rates have also been reported in Europe (9.2%), America (10.1%) and Asia (23.9%) probably due to the high socioeconomic status and social support, good legal system, good educational system enjoyed by their citizens ³⁰.

Respondents who were forced to watch pornographic pictures/ videos were about 33% in urban schools compared to about 25% in rural schools. This finding was similar to the result of an urban study at South East Nigeria where 36% of respondents had watched pornographic pictures ^{3, 34}. This finding also agreed with a study conducted in Enugu Nigeria. The adolescents are probably exposed to pornography to arouse them so they easily yield to intercourse. Concerning pattern of disclosure of sexual abuse in both settings, 70.6% of rural schools respondents did not disclose their sexual abuse compared to 65.7% of respondents in urban schools. This difference in proportion was however not statistically significant. This study finding was similar with a study conducted in Maiduguri among adolescents who were sexually abused and two-third had not reported the abuse ³⁰ Fear of parents and the lack of parent child connectedness may have been responsible for the relatively low level of disclosure. Among those who reported, only about a tenth in both rural and urban schools reported to the police.

The low reporting rates show that sexual abuse as a hideous crime is done in secrecy coupled with poor legal system to sanction the perpetrators of the act. This study finding was similar to a result in a study conducted in Edo state, Nigeria that reported that only 7.1% of respondents legally report sexual abuse ³¹ In a study in Calabar Cross Rivers state none of the victims that was sexually abused reported legally ³¹. Interestingly, the low prevalence of legal reporting of adolescent sexual abuse victims has also been documented in developed countries³¹. However, the rates are even much lower in African setting. This is not surprising as the cultural practice in most African settings extols the virtue of a virgin bride and a court case would thus publicize the victim's violation and bring shame.

CONCLUSION

There was a high prevalence of sexual abuse among the respondents; with rural respondents having a significantly higher proportion of sexual abuse compared to the urban.

Majority of respondents in both urban and rural schools had not disclosed the abuse. Sexual abuse as a topical issue of public health importance is a developmental stressor that has pervaded the fabric of the society and whose high burden has remained a cause for concern to parents, teachers, and governments of nations all over the world.

Limitations of study

The result of this study is generalizable among the public senior secondary school students in the State. Further studies are needed to unravel the findings in private, special, vocational schools in the state. The issue of self-reporting which was subjective was a limitation since the conclusions that were drawn from the study depended solely on the information given by the respondents. It was hoped that anonymity encouraged truthful and vivid answers from the respondents and the findings gave the true picture of the prevalence, pattern and factors associated with sexual abuse among in-school adolescents.

The possibility of under-reporting was a limitation also as some respondents had a problem recalling the sexual abuse they ever had, the timing, the year and the duration of the acts. The abuses were perceived as a taboo, especially in the environment culminating in social desirability bias as the respondents were reluctant to be fully honest about their actual experiences and the unwillingness to give correct information may underestimate the magnitude of the problem.

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Declarations: The authors declare no competing interest.

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