

Sexual networking, STDs and HIV/AIDS in four urban gaols in Nigeria



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Truck drivers, female hawkers and prostitutes are generally regarded as high-risk groups because they have a high rate of partner change, run abnormally high risks of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV/AIDS, and are capable of transmitting them to the general population who live around them (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1993; Orubuloye 1995). Recent experience has shown that the prison population runs a high risk of being engulfed by AIDS. By late 1992, HIV-positive prisoners had been detected in at least one of the prisons in Nigeria and there was beginning to be concern for the safety of the prison population. Therefore a study of the prison population was planned as part of a larger continuing research program of the Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, on Sexual Networking, STDs and HIV/AIDS Transmission, supported by a grant from the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC).

The aim of the prison study was to investigate the attitudes and activities that are likely to facilitate the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and AIDS; and to develop an intervention program for the prison population and any population that may be in a similar situation.

The prison study

The prison study was undertaken in the last quarter of 1992 and the sample was taken from four gaols in two major cities and two towns in Southwestern Nigeria. Since we made an undertaking not to reveal the identities of the gaols, the locations where the samples were taken therefore will be identified only by the letters A,B,C,D.

A total of 518 prisoners who were willing to take part in the study were interviewed in the four gaols. The respondents are distributed as follows:

Prison A: 203

Prison B: 145

Prison C: 130

Prison D: 40

The subjects posed were discussed at length but the respondents also answered a questionnaire which was completed by the interviewers, usually in English or Yoruba. The co-operation of the prison authorities was obtained to gain access to the prisoners. The prison authorities and the prisoners were assured that research was urgently needed for the improvement of the welfare and health conditions of the inmates and that no attempt would be made to record their names or identify them after the interview.

The research team consisted of both social scientists and doctors. The latter took blood samples. The doctors noticed that a high proportion of the prisoners were suffering from scabies and other minor but uncomfortable complaints; they obtained modest funding from

the research program to procure adequate medication, largely because they felt the need to help and not in order to effect co-operation. The task was made easier because the doctors in the team were already offering voluntary free health services to the prisoners on humanitarian grounds long before the study was undertaken.

The questionnaire was designed to cover the socio-economic characteristics of the prisoners, circumstances surrounding imprisonment and an account of their sexual behaviour before and during imprisonment. Information was also sought on knowledge and experience of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

Table 1
Characteristics of the prisoners

	A (N=230) %	B (N=145) %	C (N=130) %	D (N=40) %
Age				
Under 20 years	16.7	9.0	10.8	-
20-29	49.3	45.5	53.0	27.5
30-39	21.7	32.4	23.8	50.0
40 and above	12.3	13.1	12.4	22.5
Education				
No formal schooling	13.3	20.1	19.2	5.0
Primary only	38.9	42.7	30.6	30.0
Secondary not completed	25.1	13.1	13.8	15.0
Secondary and above	26.7	22.7	30.7	50.0
No response	-	1.4	5.7	-
Religion				
Christianity	81.7	43.4	56.2	72.5
Islam	15.3	55.9	41.5	27.3
Traditional	2.5	-	0.8	-
Others	0.5	0.7	1.5	-
Occupation (before gaol)				
Farming	2.8	11.5	2.5	13.8
Trading/business	22.1	11.5	25.0	8.4
Artisan	26.2	37.7	17.5	55.2
Civil servant	4.9	3.8	10.0	3.4
Professional	22.8	18.5	30.0	10.8
Unemployed	15.2	13.1	2.5	5.9
No response	6.0	3.9	12.5	2.5
Marital status				
Single	46.8	44.8	48.5	30.0
Married	53.2	52.4	50.7	67.5
Divorced/separated	-	1.4	0.8	2.5
No response	-	1.4	-	-

The characteristics of the prisoners

Table 1 shows selected characteristics of the prisoners. All the prisoners interviewed were males. A small number of females in the four gaols were contacted but they did not show any interest in the survey, primarily because they were shy, so they were excluded. The majority of the prisoners are in the age group 20-39 years, more than one-half being 20-24 except in one gaol where the majority were 30-39. Most of the prisoners had some formal education although some did not complete primary or secondary school. The level of education reflects that of the general population of the southwest region with a long tradition of formal education.

Christianity is the dominant religion of the prisoners in three of the gaols, while slightly more than one-half reported their religion as Islam in the fourth gaol. The distribution reflects the pattern of the dominant religions in the areas where the gaols are located. One-third of the respondents in two of the gaols reported themselves as Catholics, while traditional religion was hardly reported in any gaols. The majority of the respondents described themselves as traders or artisans before they were sent to gaol; the proportion in white collar occupations is small. More than one-half of the prisoners in three of the gaols and two-thirds in the fourth gaol were married. In all the gaols about one-tenth had contracted more than one marriage, about the same proportion were polygynously married. Between 48 per cent and 70 per cent of them had at least one child at the time of the investigation; of these, between 19 and 25 per cent had more than four children.

The prisoners were products of large families. The majority of them were from polygynous households, while between 80 and 90 per cent of their fathers had more than four children. The proportions of mothers with more than four children range between 58 and 70 per cent. However, they were products of relatively stable marriage. Except in one of the gaols, more than four-fifths of the prisoners' mothers were in their first marriages.

Nearly all the prisoners were mature before their imprisonment. In all the gaols, fewer than one in ten were imprisoned before the age of 18. Most of the group were awaiting trial or merely suspects.

Except in one of the gaols where armed robbery and murder cases account for 40 per cent of the offences, housebreaking, vagrancy, assault and forgery were the major offences committed by the prisoners. The majority of the prisoners were serving terms ranging between six months and five years, while 17-30 per cent were awaiting trial for offences ranging between mere suspicion, vagrancy, housebreaking, armed robbery and murder.

Sexual behaviour

The prisoners in all the four gaols were sexually active; nearly all had had sexual experience before imprisonment. The mean age of first sexual experience is about 18 years, and the majority had had their first sexual experience before reaching the age of 20 years. Between two and ten per cent had their first sexual encounter before the age of ten years (Table 2).

Except in one of the gaols, between one half and two-thirds reported at least one current sexual partner. Since nearly all the prisoners in the gaols were males, and, since males and females are physically separated in the prisons, it is probable that some kind of homosexual intercourse was occurring; in order to avoid trouble or hurt we did not press the matter further. However, some of the prison officers believed that the congestion in the prison cells could facilitate such practices.

The responses to the question on number of lifetime sexual partners indicate that the prisoners had a large variety of sexual partners before they were sent to gaol. Between 35 and

59 per cent had more than one lifetime sexual partner, while about 22 and 40 per cent could not easily remember or estimate the number of their lifetime sexual partners.

Table 2
Age at first sexual experience

	A (N=230) %	B (N=145) %	C (N=130) %	D (N=40) %
Under 10 years	8.4	2.1	2.3	2.5
10-14	18.2	17.2	15.3	15.0
15-19	48.3	42.9	48.5	40.0
20-24	11.4	23.5	17.7	20.0
25 and above	6.5	7.6	5.5	15.0
Other response	7.2	6.7	10.7	7.5

Between 28 and 39 per cent of the prisoners had had sexual relations with prostitutes, usually in hotels, bars and brothels (Table 3). The majority of the prisoners reported that they had sexual relations with prostitutes on several occasions. Altogether, the sexual life of the prisoners is similar to that of the general population and other high-risk groups in the society (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1991, 1993).

Table 3
Sex with prostitutes

	A (N=230) %	B (N=145) %	C (N=130) %	D (N=40) %
Have you ever had sex with commercial sex workers?				
Yes	27.6	37.9	38.5	37.5
No	65.0	54.5	57.7	52.5
No response	7.4	7.6	3.8	10.0
If yes, where?				
Hotel/bar/brothel	21.7	37.2	26.2	32.5
In a house	1.0	-	2.3	-
On a trip	4.4	0.7	10.0	5.0
Not applicable	72.4	61.4	59.2	62.5
No response	0.5	0.7	2.3	-
How many times?				
Once	4.5	8.2	8.4	5.0
More than once	5.5	16.0	14.0	15.0
Too many to remember	17.6	13.8	16.5	17.5
NA/no response	72.4	62.0	61.1	62.5

Sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS

The level of sexually transmitted disease is high: between 28 and 39 per cent reported that they had been infected (Table 4). Nearly all reported gonorrhoea as the major STD, while fewer than three per cent reported syphilis. The majority reported that they caught the disease from their girl friends and prostitutes, while about two per cent in one of the gaols said they had caught it from fellow-prisoners. Nearly all reported the symptoms and discomforts which they experienced as inability to urinate, discharge and itching.

Table 4
Sexually transmitted diseases

	A (N=230) %	B (N=145) %	C (N=130) %	D (N=40) %
Have you ever contracted a STD?				
Yes	36.0	39.3	33.8	27.5
No	64.0	57.9	65.4	72.5
No response	-	2.8	0.8	-
If yes, what type?				
Gonorrhoea	35.5	36.6	29.2	25.0
Syphilis	-	1.4	3.1	2.5
Other	0.5	2.1	0.8	-
Don't know	-	0.7	-	-
Not applicable	64.0	59.2	66.9	72.5
Who infected you?				
Girl/woman friend	25.7	22.0	20.0	10.0
Sex workers	8.9	11.0	10.8	17.5
Wife	0.5	-	-	-
Others	-	-	1.5	-
Not applicable/NR	64.9	67.0	67.7	72.5
Did you receive any treatment?				
Yes	33.0	36.6	31.5	27.5
No	2.0	3.4	0.8	-
Not applicable/NR	65.0	60.0	67.7	72.5
Where did you receive treatment?				
Modern hospital	23.2	16.6	14.6	15.0
Chemist/dispensary	1.5	4.8	6.2	7.5
Self medication	2.5	5.5	5.4	5.0
Not applicable/NR	72.8	73.1	73.8	72.5

The majority of prisoners infected with sexually transmitted diseases sought and received treatment from chemists and modern doctors, while a few were treated by traditional doctors and spiritual healers. While a few reported that their partners sought and received treatment from modern doctors, traditional and spiritual healers, the majority were not interested in what happened to their partners.

On the question of whether the prisoners knew anyone ever treated for sexually transmitted diseases, between 43 and 68 per cent reported that they knew of such persons. The majority of these persons were males, friends or workmates of the prisoners, both single and married, and between the ages of 20 and 34 years.

Knowledge of AIDS is widespread: between 65 and 77 per cent of the prisoners had heard of it. Most of the information came from the radio, television and newspapers and magazines in that order. Between two and three per cent knew persons, mainly male friends or workmates, who had been treated for AIDS. The majority of the affected persons were single. Clinical evidence has shown that five out of the 100 cases of blood samples taken in one of the gaols are suspected of being HIV-positive. One hundred and forty five male prisoners out of a total number of 600 inmates in that prison were interviewed. This shows that five per cent of the blood samples taken or 3.5 per cent of the respondents or 0.01 per cent of all the inmates of one of the four gaols were likely to be HIV-positive. This is a very serious matter because 68 per cent of the respondents in the same prison reported at least one current sexual partner. Similarly, about 40 per cent of the respondents in the same prison reported that they had previously contracted sexually transmitted diseases. About three per cent of the respondents in this prison reported that they had used a needle to inject drugs.

A closer look at the background of the five cases shows that they were between 25 and 34 years of age, sexually active, serving long prison terms and convicted for murder or armed robbery. Although blood samples were not taken in three out of the four gaols, Nigerian prisons may well soon be engulfed in STDs and HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion

It is now evident that prisoners belong to the sexually active group. A large proportion had experienced both a high level of partner change and infection with sexually transmitted disease before they were sentenced to prison. They run an abnormally high risk of being infected with HIV/AIDS, and are capable of transmitting it to other inmates in the prisons and to the general population when they are eventually out of gaol.

Three other factors are worthy of note: the congestion in the prison cells which results in an outbreak of scabies in one of the prisons and suspicion that homosexual intercourse was going on in the cells; the sharing of needles and injection of substances believed to be dangerous drugs; and the evidence of HIV-positive cases. Given the nature of the prisons and prison life, it is an explosive situation which requires intervention programs that will focus on eradication of STDs and other infectious diseases in the prison. This will be a pragmatic approach towards minimizing the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission. In addition, screening for HIV of all prison inmates and removal of HIV-positive prisoners will also help to contain the spread of the epidemics.

Finally, there is an urgent need to improve the living conditions of the prisoners. Overcrowding, and poor sanitary and nutritional conditions for which the Nigerian prisons are notorious, could aid the spread of STDs and AIDS.

References

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