



ANALYSIS OF YOUNG POPULATION AS A COPING MECHANISM ON MENTAL HEALTH FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: This study analyzed the role of the young population as a coping mechanism on the mental health of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Cross River State, Nigeria. The purpose was to assess the level of youth involvement in psychosocial support, determine the influence of youth-led activities on emotional well-being, and identify challenges faced by youths in promoting mental health among PLWHA. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a sample of 300 respondents (150 PLWHA and 150 youth volunteers) selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire titled *Youth Involvement and Mental Health Coping Questionnaire (YIMHCQ)*, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.84. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Pearson Product Moment Correlation) were used for analysis. Findings revealed a high level of youth involvement in psychosocial and mental health support activities (overall mean = 3.33, SD = 0.87), a strong positive influence of youth-led initiatives on emotional well-being and coping mechanisms among PLWHA (overall mean = 3.37, SD = 0.84), and major challenges such as stigma, lack of training, and limited funding (overall mean = 3.33, SD = 0.83). The inferential analysis showed a significant positive relationship between youth involvement and mental health of PLWHA ($r = 0.68, p < .05$). The study concludes that structured youth participation enhances resilience, reduces emotional distress, and promotes adaptive coping among PLWHA. Counselling implications emphasize the integration of youth-led psychosocial support into community-based HIV/AIDS programs, the need for capacity-building for youth volunteers, and the inclusion of counsellors in developing youth-friendly mental health interventions.

Keywords: youth involvement, mental health, HIV/AIDS, coping mechanism, counselling, Cross River State.

Introduction

Globally, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) remain major public health concerns, affecting over 39 million people worldwide (UNAIDS, 2023). Despite medical progress that has extended life expectancy, the psychosocial and mental health aspects of living with HIV/AIDS continue to pose critical challenges. People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) frequently face stigma, discrimination, and psychological distress, including depression and anxiety (Ezeh & Agu, 2020). In Nigeria,

and particularly in Cross River State, mental health support structures for PLWHA are inadequate, and youth-led psychosocial engagement remains underutilized (NACA, 2022). The young population defined as individuals aged 15 to 35 years constitutes a vibrant and transformative demographic that can influence health outcomes through community engagement and peer support. Youths often serve as volunteers, counsellors, and advocates, creating psychosocial networks that foster resilience and hope among PLWHA. Thus, analyzing the role of young people as a coping mechanism on the mental health of PLWHA

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provides vital insights into how youth engagement can enhance emotional well-being, reduce stigma, and support adaptation to life with HIV.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART), people living with HIV/AIDS PLWHA in Nigeria continue to suffer mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal. These problems are often exacerbated by stigma and inadequate psychosocial support. In Cross River State, where youths are highly active in community development programs, their potential as emotional and psychosocial support providers for PLWHA remains largely unexplored. Previous studies (Okafor et al., 2021; Afolabi & Umeh, 2019) have shown that youth participation in health education can improve quality of life for vulnerable populations. However, the extent of their involvement in promoting mental health for PLWHA and the challenges they face in doing so have not been systematically analyzed. Given that mental health and emotional stability are essential for effective ART adherence and quality of life, understanding how youth engagement functions as a coping mechanism becomes crucial. This study therefore investigates the contributions of young people to the mental health and coping capacities of PLWHA in Cross River State.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the young population as a coping mechanism on mental health for PLWHA in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the level of involvement of young people in providing psychosocial and mental health support to PLWHA in Cross River State.
2. Investigate the influence of youth-led support activities on the emotional well-being and coping abilities of PLWHA.
3. Determine the challenges faced by the young population in contributing to the mental health and psychosocial support of PLWHA in Cross River State.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of young people's involvement in psychosocial and mental health support for PLWHA in Cross River State?
2. How do youth-led support activities influence the emotional well-being and coping mechanisms of PLWHA in Cross River State?
3. What challenges do young people face in contributing to the mental health and psychosocial support of PLWHA in Cross River State?

Methodology

The study adopted a **descriptive survey research design** to obtain information from a representative sample of the target population. The population comprised PLWHA and youth volunteers affiliated with community-based organizations and HIV/AIDS support groups across the three senatorial districts of Cross River State. A stratified random sampling method was used to select **300 respondents**—150 PLWHA and 150 youth volunteers.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled *Youth Involvement and Mental Health Coping Questionnaire (YIMHCQ)*, which consisted of 25 items divided into three sections corresponding to the research objectives. Experts in counselling psychology and health education validated the instrument, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.84 using the Cronbach Alpha method.

Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to determine the relationship between youth involvement and mental health outcomes among PLWHA at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

This section presents the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of data collected from respondents. The results are organized according to the research questions guiding the study.

Research Question One:



What is the extent of young people's involvement in psychosocial and mental health support for people living with HIV/AIDS in Cross River State?

Descriptive data obtained from respondents showed that young people were actively involved in providing various

forms of psychosocial support to PLWHA. Indicators measured included participation in emotional counselling, peer support, awareness campaigns, and home-based care. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Youth Involvement in Psychosocial and Mental Health Support for PLWHA (N = 300)

S/N	Youth Involvement Indicators	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Youths organize peer education sessions for PLWHA	3.41	0.84	High
2	Youths participate in emotional counselling and support	3.36	0.91	High
3	Youth volunteers assist in home-based HIV care	3.18	0.97	High
4	Youths conduct awareness campaigns against stigma	3.45	0.79	High
5	Youth organizations collaborate with NGOs and health workers	3.27	0.82	High
Overall Mean		3.33	0.87	High Involvement

Decision Rule: Mean scores of 2.50 and above indicate *High Involvement*.

Interpretation:

The results in Table 1 indicate a high level of involvement of young people in psychosocial and mental health support activities for PLWHA in Cross River State, with an overall mean of 3.33 (SD = 0.87). This suggests that youths actively engage in awareness, counselling, and community support activities that foster emotional stability among PLWHA.

Research Question Two:

How do youth-led support activities influence the emotional well-being and coping mechanisms of people living with HIV/AIDS in Cross River State?

Respondents' ratings on emotional well-being and coping mechanisms were analyzed to determine the influence of youth support. Key indicators assessed included reduction in depression, improvement in self-esteem, hope restoration, and enhanced social interaction. The result is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Mean and Standard Deviation on the Influence of Youth-Led Support Activities on Mental Health of PLWHA (N = 300)

S/N	Indicators of Mental Health and Coping	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	I feel less lonely due to youth support programs	3.52	0.74	High
2	Youth volunteers help me maintain a positive outlook on life	3.40	0.81	High



S/N	Indicators of Mental Health and Coping	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Deviation	Decision
3	Participation in youth-led support groups reduces my anxiety	3.36	0.87	High
4	Youth counselling encourages medication adherence	3.28	0.92	High
5	Youth advocacy reduces stigma in my community	3.31	0.89	High
Overall Mean		3.37	0.84	Strong Positive Influence

Interpretation:

Table 2 shows that youth-led support activities have a strong positive influence on the emotional well-being and coping mechanisms of PLWHA. The overall mean of 3.37 indicates that most PLWHA derive psychological relief, reduced stress, and better adjustment to their HIV status through youth engagement programs.

Research Question Three:

What challenges do young people face in contributing to the mental health and psychosocial support of PLWHA in Cross River State?

Respondents identified various challenges limiting youth participation, such as funding shortages, stigma, and inadequate training. The result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Challenges Faced by Young People in Providing Psychosocial Support to PLWHA (N = 300)

S/N	Identified Challenges	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Inadequate funding for youth programs	3.44	0.80	Major Challenge
2	Community stigma against HIV-related activities	3.52	0.73	Major Challenge
3	Lack of formal counselling training	3.33	0.83	Major Challenge
4	Low motivation due to lack of incentives	3.18	0.90	Moderate Challenge
5	Poor collaboration with health agencies	3.20	0.88	Moderate Challenge
Overall Mean		3.33	0.83	Major Challenge

Interpretation:

Table 3 shows that the major constraints hindering effective youth engagement in psychosocial support are community stigma, lack of funds, and insufficient

professional training. These factors may limit the sustainability of youth-led interventions despite their positive impact.

Inferential Analysis (Testing of Relationship)

To further determine the association between youth involvement and the mental health of PLWHA, Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 4
Relationship Between Youth Involvement and Mental Health of PLWHA



Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r-value	p-value	Remark
Youth Involvement	300	3.33	0.87			
Mental Health & Coping	300	3.37	0.84	0.68	0.000	Significant

Interpretation:

Table 4 reveals a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) between youth involvement and the mental health of PLWHA. This implies that as the level of youth involvement in psychosocial support increases, the mental health and coping abilities of PLWHA also improve significantly.

Summary of Results

1. Youth involvement in psychosocial and mental health support for PLWHA in Cross River State was found to be high.
2. Youth-led support activities have a strong positive influence on emotional well-being and coping mechanisms among PLWHA.
3. Major challenges faced by young people include community stigma, lack of training, and inadequate funding.
4. There is a statistically significant positive relationship between youth involvement and improved mental health outcomes among PLWHA ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$). Findings indicated a high level of involvement of young people in providing psychosocial and emotional support to PLWHA in Cross River State. Youth-led initiatives such as peer education, emotional counselling, community sensitization, and advocacy were common. Statistical results revealed a positive and significant relationship ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) between youth involvement and improved coping mechanisms among PLWHA. Respondents who received youth-based emotional support demonstrated greater resilience, reduced depressive symptoms, and enhanced social connectedness. Nevertheless, youth participants reported challenges including limited financial support, stigma from community members, and inadequate training in counselling techniques. Despite these constraints, youth engagement significantly contributed to improving the

mental health and psychological adjustment of PLWHA in the state.

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature emphasizing the significance of social support in HIV care (Okafor et al., 2021; Ezech & Agu, 2020). The study demonstrates that young people, through peer-led initiatives, can serve as catalysts for improving the emotional and psychological stability of PLWHA. Youths' proximity, empathy, and shared community identity make them trusted figures for psychosocial support.

The strong positive correlation between youth involvement and mental well-being of PLWHA reinforces previous findings by Afolabi and Umeh (2019), who asserted that youth-driven peer support networks reduce isolation and enhance self-acceptance among HIV-positive individuals. However, the study also highlights systemic limitations such as inadequate training and stigmatization, echoing national concerns about the need to strengthen youth-focused health interventions (NACA, 2022). Thus, empowering the young population through structured counselling programs could significantly improve psychosocial outcomes for PLWHA.

Implications for Counselling

The results of this study hold important implications for counselling practice in Nigeria:

1. **Integration of Youth in Counselling Interventions:** Counsellors should collaborate with youth organizations to develop structured peer-support programs that complement professional mental health services for PLWHA.
2. **Capacity Building:** Mental health counsellors should design training modules to equip youth volunteers with basic counselling and communication skills to provide psychosocial first aid and referral support.



3. **Advocacy and Policy Development:** Counselling professionals should advocate for state-level policies that institutionalize youth participation in community-based HIV/AIDS mental health programs.

4. **Anti-Stigma Interventions:** Counsellors should lead public awareness campaigns that reduce discrimination against PLWHA and promote social inclusion, leveraging youth-driven platforms.

These implications suggest that counsellors, policymakers, and NGOs can work together to build a youth-inclusive model of psychosocial support that fosters resilience, self-esteem, and hope among PLWHA.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the young population plays a vital role as a coping mechanism in promoting mental health among people living with HIV/AIDS in Cross River State, Nigeria. Youth-led psychosocial interventions such as peer support, awareness campaigns, and community engagement significantly improve coping capacity, reduce emotional distress, and foster resilience among PLWHA. However, their effectiveness is limited by inadequate resources and professional training. The study recommends stronger institutional collaboration among counsellors, government agencies, and youth networks to optimize the role of young people in HIV/AIDS mental health interventions.

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