

Scaling-up community self-reporting rate for COVID-19: Implication for assessing the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among residents of Agege local government, Lagos, Nigeria

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Research note

Keywords: Stigmatization, COVID-19, survivors, self-reporting, Nigeria

Posted Date: November 11th, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-43559/v2>

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Abstract

Objective: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an emerging public health problem with over forty-four million confirmed infections globally. Previous studies show that stigma impedes response activities. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among residents of Agege local government, Lagos State, Nigeria. We conducted a cross-sectional survey among 333 consenting residents recruited from Agege local government using a multi-stage sampling technique. An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to collect data on perceived stigmatization. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were done using Chi-square and logistic regression respectively.

Results: The mean age of the respondents was 35.7 ± 13.6 years. The proportion of respondents with poor knowledge was 50.5% and awareness for COVID-19 was 95.2%. Television and radio were the two major sources of awareness for COVID-19. A higher likelihood of perceived stigmatization was found among those aged 25 – 49 years (aOR= 3.1, 95% CI = 1.4 – 6.7), ≥ 50 years (aOR= 2.1, 95% CI = 1.1 – 3.9) and married respondents (aOR= 1.8, 95% CI = 1.1 – 2.9). To reduce the effect of stigmatization, we recommend a holistic response plan designed with basic facts about COVID-19 using programmes targeting married respondents as well as the adults.

Introduction

Many infectious diseases are associated with stigma and this has been found to impede the response activities in the control of the outbreak of such diseases. These diseases include Tuberculosis, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and leprosy. Also, there is a stigma attributed to Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) which is caused by a novel coronavirus, called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). This new virus was first isolated from hospitalized patients who presented with pneumonia-like symptoms in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and it has now become a pandemic affecting many countries globally [1].

When a stigma is attributed to a disease, it demeans and prevents an individual from full social acceptance and integration [2]. Stigma comes in multiple forms such as perceived, internalized, or experienced (discrimination). During the epidemics, people can be discriminated against because of their perceived association with the individuals thought to have come in contact with the virus. The implication is that people with the disease or those at risk of infection may avoid seeking health care, making it much harder for public health authorities to control the disease. Previous studies show that COVID-19 survivors have been stereotyped and experience loss of status in the society because of a perceived link with the cases of COVID-19 [3–5].

In Nigeria, after the report of the first case of COVID-19, the country has experienced a surge in the number of positive cases, with disturbing evidence of community transmission. For example, the total number of cases recorded on the 16th April 2020, 16th May 2020 and 16th June 2020 were 442, 5,621 and 17, 148 respectively [6]. In view of this exponential growth, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) reported that the surge was aided by social stigma against people perceived to have contracted the virus [4,7,8]. After all, there was a gradual increase of cases from the beginning (February 2020) of the outbreak until April 2020 when the community transmission began.

Surprisingly, inspite of the exponential growth in the number of recorded cases and the negative effects of stigmatization on the community self-reporting rate [4,8,9], a lot of efforts have been geared towards the cure for COVID-19 among other non-pharmacologic preventive measures without corresponding measures to dissipate stigmatization in the community. Incidentally, management of COVID-19 cases can only be possible when suspected cases willingly agree to seek medical intervention without which the duration of the pandemic will be prolonged. Hence, this study was designed to assess the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the residents of Lagos State.

Methods

Study location

The study was carried out in Ilobu community, Oko-Oba, Agege local government area (LGA) of Lagos State. Agege LGA was created in 1954 and has 10 political wards with a projected 2019 population of 692,686 using a growth rate of 3.4% and 2006 population figure as the baseline [10]. The LGA is majorly populated by Yoruba ethnic group. The LGA was only served by primary health care facilities and no tertiary health institutions where COVID-19 positive patients can be referred to. The majority of the inhabitants of the communities were artisans with occupation such as welding, trading, barbing and carpentry.

Study design and population

This was a descriptive cross-sectional survey carried out in Oko-Oba area of Agege local government area (LGA) of Lagos State between May and June 2020. The study population included all consenting males and females of 18 years and above who were resident in Ilobu community in Oko-Oba at the time of the study.

Sample size and sampling technique

Based on the previous study on Ebola virus disease-related stigma in Liberia, a prevalence of 63.0% [11] was used and the margin of error was set at 5%. Factoring non-response rate of 10%, a minimum sample size of 394 was arrived at. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. **Stage one:** Oko-Oba was selected from the list of the catchment areas in Agege LGA using ballot technique. **Stage two:** Ilobu community was selected from the list of communities in Oko-Oba area using ballot technique. **In stage three,** a systematic random sampling technique was used to select the eligible respondents from the list of the households retrieved from the office of the National Programme on Immunization (NPI) in Agege LGA. The first household was selected by simple random sampling through a ballot and all the eligible respondents interviewed. Subsequently, every 4th house was selected until the desired sample size was met. If a selected respondent declined, the respondent with next number replaced him/her.

Research instruments and data collection methods

The COVID-19 related stigma was measured by an interviewer-administered questionnaire adapted from the previous studies [12–14]. The questionnaire was used to collect data on perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors. We engaged eleven of the 20 people trained by WHO for active case search (ACS). They were trained for two days, 2 hours daily by the principal investigator on data capturing tools and the techniques for questionnaire administration.

Measurement of main outcome variables

Knowledge score was assessed using questions adapted from the previous studies [15,16]. Each correct response was scored one point while each wrong response was scored zero. The total obtainable score was 7, a score above or equal to the mean score (3.6) was categorized as good knowledge. This scoring system agrees with a study on knowledge of COVID-19 among Chinese residents [17].

Perceived stigmatization was assessed using an adapted HIV-Stigma Index [12]. The Likert scale with five items ranging from strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (5) was used. Responses were scored 5,4,3,2 and 1 in that order to obtain stigmatization score. The stigmatization scale used consists of negative attitude, perceived discrimination and equity (Additional file 3:S3). The sums of the scores for individual respondent were calculated and the mean of all the scores was determined. The mean stigmatization score was 68.8, while the minimum and maximum stigmatization score were 60.0 and 79.0 respectively. The respondents who scored up to or above the mean were categorized as those with perceived stigmatization. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the perceived stigmatization questionnaire was 0.84 in our sample, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25. Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and proportions/percentages. Associations between the stigmatization and other categorical variables were assessed using Chi-square. Adjusted odds ratio and 95% confidence interval were obtained to identify the predictors of the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

The mean age of the respondents was 35.7 ± 13.6 . The proportion of respondents in the 25-49 years age category was 59.8% with a higher proportion (56.8%) of male respondents. Married respondents were 51.7%, 56.0% were Christians and 53% belonged to the Yoruba ethnic group. Nearly half (48.6%) had secondary education, 37.3% engaged in trading/farming and 36.5% had a monthly income of less than the minimum wage of N30,000.00 (Additional file 1: S1)

Awareness of COVID-19 Outbreak among the respondents

The proportion of respondents who were aware of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria was 95.2%. (Additional file 1: S1)

Sources of information about COVID-19 among the respondents

Television (43.5%) and radio (36.9%) were the two main sources of information about COVID-19. Others include internet (29.7%), family/friend (14.8%) and newspapers (3.2%). (Additional file 1: S1)

Knowledge of COVID-19 among the respondents

There was marginally higher proportion of the respondents with poor knowledge (50.5%) than those with good knowledge. (Additional file 1: S1)

Mode of Transmission of COVID-19 among the respondents

Cough and sneezing were commonest (56.0%) mode of transmission followed by contacts (34.0%), rat-bite (4%), I don't know (4%) and mosquito bite (2.0%). (Additional file 1: S1)

Perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the respondents

The proportion of respondents whose behaviour indicated perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors was 47.7%. (Fig. 1) (Additional file 3: S3)

Fig. 1 Perceived stigmatization among residents of Ilobu community, Agege LGA, Lagos State, 2020

Association between the socio-demographic characteristics and perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the respondents

A higher proportion (59.2%) of perceived stigmatization was reported among the respondents in the 25-45 years age category compared with other age categories ($p < 0.001$). The proportion of respondents with the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors was significantly higher among the married respondents compared with other levels of marital statuses ($p < 0.001$). Trading/farming appeared to be the occupation with a significantly higher proportion (42.8%) of respondents with the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors ($p = 0.003$) (Table 1)

Table 1: Association between demographic characteristics and perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the respondents

Variables	Perceived Stigmatization (%)		P value
	Yes	No	
Age (in years)			
< 25	25 (15.7)	51 (29.3)	* < 0.001
25-49	96 (60.4)	103 (59.2)	
≥ 50	38 (23.9)	20 (11.5)	
Sex			
Male	84 (52.8)	105 (60.3)	0.167
Female	75 (42.7)	69 (39.7)	
Marital status			
Single	33 (20.8)	79 (45.4)	** < 0.001
Married	97 (61.0)	75 (43.1)	
Separated	19 (11.9)	6 (3.4)	
Divorced	6 (3.8)	9 (5.2)	
Widowed/Widower	4 (2.5)	5 (2.9)	
Religion			
Christianity	81 (50.9)	107 (61.5)	0.282
Islam	62 (39.0)	54 (31.0)	
Traditionalist	15 (9.4)	12 (6.9)	
Others	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	
Tribe			
Yoruba	79 (49.7)	98 (56.3)	0.188
Hausa/Fulani	19 (11.9)	20 (11.5)	
Igbo	47 (29.6)	36 (20.7)	
Others	14 (8.8)	20 (11.5)	
Highest Education			
Informal	3 (1.9)	10 (5.7)	0.192
Primary	19 (11.9)	27 (15.5)	
Secondary	83 (52.2)	79 (45.4)	
Tertiary	54 (23.8)	72 (43.6)	
Occupation			
Unemployed	27 (17.0)	44 (25.3)	* 0.003
Trading/Farming	61 (38.4)	48 (27.6)	
Government employee	6 (3.8)	10 (5.7)	
Private employee	53 (33.3)	42 (24.1)	
Others	5 (3.1)	22 (12.6)	
Average Monthly Income (n=181)			
< 30,000	28 (32.9)	38 (39.6)	0.354
≥ 30,000	57 (67.1)	58 (60.4)	

* Significant

** Likelihood Ratio

Association between awareness, source of information, knowledge and perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the respondents

Perceived stigmatization was higher (97.5%) among the respondents who were aware of the COVID-19 pandemic while it was higher among the respondent whose television served as their source of information. The proportion of the respondents who had poor knowledge of COVID-19 was

higher (54.7%) among the respondents with perceived stigmatization. However, all these associations were not statistically significant. (Additional file 1: S1)

Predictors of stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among the respondents

In the multivariate analysis, the age and marital status were the predictors of stigmatization. The respondents in the age categories 25–49 and ≥ 50 years were 3 and 2 times respectively more likely to stigmatize COVID-19 survivors compared with the respondents of less than 25 years of age [(aOR= 3.1, 95% CI = 1.4 – 6.7) and (aOR= 2.1, 95% CI = 1.1 – 3.9)]. The married respondents had about 2 times higher likelihood of stigmatizing COVID-19 survivors compared with other levels of marital statuses (Single/Separated/Divorced/Widowed/Widower). (aOR= 1.8, 95% CI = 1.1 – 2.9) (Table 2)

Table 2: Predictors of perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors among residents of Agege LGA, Lagos State, 2020

Variables	B Coefficient	Odd Ratio	95% Confidence Interval		p-Value
			Lower	Upper	
Age (in years)					
< 25	1				
25 - 49	1.145	3.143	1.482	6.665	*0.003
≥50	0.747	2.111	1.140	3.910	*0.018
Marital status					
Single/Separated/Divorce/Widowed/Widower	1				
Married	0.603	1.827	1.153	2.896	*0.010
Occupation					
Unemployed	1				
Employed	0.203	1.226	0.682	2.203	0.496

* Significant

Discussion

The overall awareness of COVID-19 outbreaks among the respondents was 95.2% with male predominance and this could be attributed to higher educational attainment by the male respondents. The high prevalence of overall awareness could be due to the effectiveness of the strategies deployed to disseminate COVID-19 information by the Government of Nigeria. Mass media, particularly television (43.5%) and radio (36.9%) were found as the major sources of information about COVID-19 and this corroborated findings from previous studies [18–22]. However, it negated the report of Abdelhafiz et al in Egypt where the social media and internet were the major sources of information during this COVID-19 outbreak [13]. In view of this, the media should be intensively used to further expand purpose-driven awareness, most especially on non-pharmacologic prevention.

The study revealed poor knowledge of COVID-19 among the study subjects. This poor knowledge could result from the low tertiary educational status and ‘unstable’ epidemiologic pattern of the virus. This agreed with what was documented in some Nigerian and Bangladesh studies [23–26] but opposed to what was reported in Egyptian and Chinese studies where a higher prevalence of good knowledge of COVID-19 was documented [17,19]. The higher prevalence recorded in these two studies could be due to the recruitment of seemingly educated online study populations.

On the mode of transmission of COVID-19, the majority of the respondents reported cough, sneezing and contacts as the major route of transmission. This lay credence to the yielding efforts of the stakeholders in disseminating correct information about the way the virus spreads. However, efforts should be geared towards scaling-up information dissemination so as to catch-up with the handful proportion of those with incorrect knowledge of the mode of transmission of the virus.

Our study revealed 47.7% of respondents with the perceived stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors and this may lead to difficulties in disease control. Many studies on similar infectious diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), tuberculosis and Ebola corroborated our result by demonstrating the negative effects of stigmatization on the preventive and control efforts [22,27,28]. Stigma against the survivors poses significant barriers and makes access to treatment a Herculean task. Incidentally, this may cause unnecessary delay in seeking care and this could aggravate the suffering of the survivors [29–31]. Consequent upon such delays in treatment is the propensity for the infected individuals to remain undetected in the community. Hence, a vicious cycle of community transmission continues.

In the multivariate analysis, the respondents in the age of 25 years and above were potentially more likely to stigmatize against COVID-19 survivors compared with those who belonged to the age group of less than 25 years. This was not surprising because youths are known for their explorations and knowledge-seeking behaviours compared with the adults. Their penchants for knowledge would have afforded them the

opportunity of understanding the epidemiology of COVID-19, hence, their low predisposition for the perceived stigmatization in this study. This is consistent with the reports of Des Jarlais et al. and Usifoh et al. in the U.S.A and Nigeria respectively [32,33].

The study also revealed that married respondents were more likely to stigmatize the survivors of COVID-19 compared with other forms of marital statuses. Married individuals are found to be more involved in cultural issues and often listen to advice from their families, especially in a crisis situation. Infectious disease-related stigma against individuals in the society was found to be emanating from the families [34,35]. In order to stem this ugly tide, efforts should be geared towards community engagement and raising public awareness on the myths and facts relating to COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

In this study, adults and married women displayed a high level of perceived stigmatization and this was attributable to poor knowledge shown among the respondents. To scale-up self-reporting for COVID-19, we recommend a holistic emergency response plan, packaged with accurate knowledge targeting married respondents as well as the adults.

Study limitation

It was an interviewer-administered questionnaire, therefore, social desirability bias was envisaged and this was reduced by avoiding the leading questions, use of interval questions (i.e. Likert scale) and the clarity of the questions. We might not be able to generalize our findings to the whole country due to the limited number of respondents recruited for the study. However, the findings of our study could be extrapolated to the Southern part of Nigeria because of the semblance in the socio-economic and cultural characteristics. The strengths of this study muscicularly hinged on being the first psychosocial survey to assess the effects of stigmatization in the control of community transmission of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

List Of Abbreviations

LGAs	Local Government Areas
ACS	Active Case Search
WHO	World health Organization
NCDC	Nigeria Centre for Disease Control
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease, 2019
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
EVD	Ebola Virus Disease
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus

Declarations

Ethical approval and consent to participate

We obtained the approval for the study from the Ethical Review Committee, Oyo State Ministry of Health (No: AD13/479/1998). We informed all the respondents about the study protocols and adherence to confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants

Consent for Publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The respondents used to generate this data have not been reported in any other submission by the authors or anyone else. However, upon request, we can offer on-site access to external researchers to the data analyzed at the Oriire Local Government Health Authority, Ikoyi-Ile, Oyo State, Nigeria. To do so, Dr. Olaniyan Akintunde Babatunde should be communicated.

Competing interests

The authors declared no competing interests.

Funding

No financial support was received for this research

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Contributions

OAB conceptualized the study, OSA, STS, AAA, MB, BMY, IMA and MDD contributed to the design, OAB drafted the initial manuscript, OAB, OSA, STS, AAA, MB, BMY, IMA and MDD contributed to the analysis, interpretation of the results and made substantial revision to the initial draft. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Acknowledgements

The authors appreciate the Medical Officer of Health, Agege Local Government Health Authority and the members of the active case search team used for the data collection. We equally appreciate the residents of Ilobu community, Oko-Oba, Agege that participated in the study for their cooperation.

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Figures

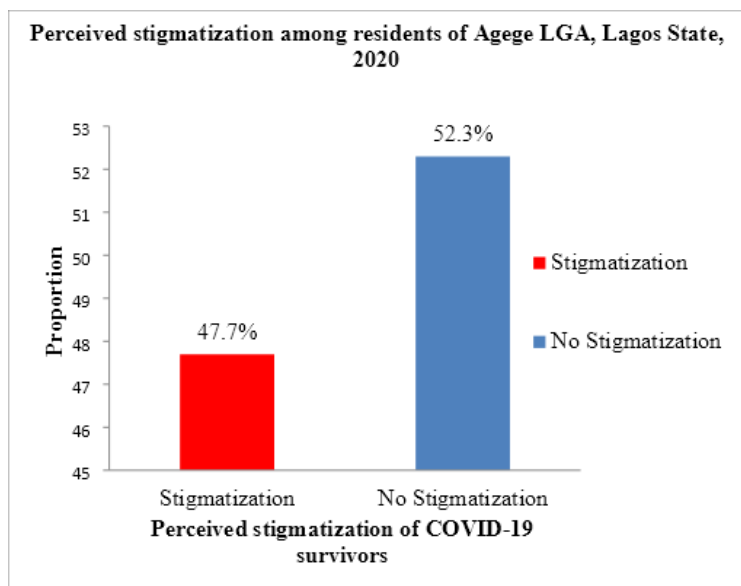


Figure 1

Perceived stigmatization among residents of Ilobu community, Agege LGA, Lagos State, 2020

Supplementary Files

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- [Additionalfile1.pdf](#)
- [Additionalfile2STIGMATIZATION.pdf](#)