

## **Sexual networking, STDs, and HIV/AIDS transmission among Nigerian police officers\***



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### **Abstract**

**This study examines the sexual behaviour of Nigerian police officers, the number of their sexual partners, relation with commercial sex workers, prevalence of STDs and the use of condoms among them. Three hundred and fifty-eight police officers, randomly sampled from Ondo State Police Command, Akure, responded to an interview guide. Results show that Nigerian police officers belong to the high-risk group and run the risk of being infected by HIV/AIDS. Whilst premarital and extramarital sexual relations were very common among the officers, they also maintained a high level of multiple sexual partners. Most of the police officers' extramarital sexual partners were single girls, mainly students. A number of the police officers also engaged in sexual relations with commercial sex workers in hotels and brothels, particularly when on transfer to new stations. The prevalence of STDs was 23.8 per cent and gonorrhoea was the most reported type of STD. Most of the officers contracted STDs from their woman friends and commercial sex workers. They sought and received treatment from modern doctors. A large proportion of the infected police officers informed their partners, while few of the married ones told their wives. The officers were knowledgeable about the use of condoms and had used condoms in sexual relations.**

Sexually transmitted diseases (STD) are not new in Nigeria, but what may be new is research interest in this area of human health. For instance, the word *atosi* means gonorrhoea but we do not know the equivalent English word for *kusinu-kusode*; this does not mean the absence of this disease among the Yoruba, but the most recognized type of STD among them is gonorrhoea.

Among the Ondo for instance, all other STDs are uncommon. There are two types of gonorrhoea recognized by traditional healers: *atosi eleje* (blood-type gonorrhoea), and *atosi onikun* (milk-type gonorrhoea). The study of the prevalence of STDs in Nigeria began about two decades ago. Osoba (1981) reported the prevalence of gonorrhoea in the general population to be ten per cent and of syphilis about five per cent. Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell (1994) assert that HIV infection has been identified in the last three years, and the number of infected individuals is about one per cent of the general population of Nigeria. HIV prevalence among Nigerian commercial sex workers was found to be 14 per cent in 1990 (Mann, Taratola and Netter 1992); by 1992, this prevalence among commercial sex workers in Lagos was estimated at 20 per cent. Though no reason was given for this sharp

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increase in prevalence within a period of two years, the Minister of Health noted it with great concern. It is an indication that some measures have to be taken to arrest this ugly situation.

To initiate preventive measures, one of the important research efforts is to identify the major transmitters of STDs, the mode of distribution of the disease in the population and how society behaves toward people who have contracted STDs. An in-depth investigation of the sexual behaviour of the potential transmitters of STDs may serve as a good starting point.

Previous studies had identified some high-risk occupational groups as major transmitters because of the prominent roles they play in the spread of STDs. Truck drivers and itinerant market women were identified as high-risk by Tierney (1990) and Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell (1993). Students had also been identified as a high-risk group in the spread of STDs (Nzyuko 1991).

There is, though, no known study identifying police as a high risk occupational group. Personal observation from the author's research interaction with police officers and speculations from the general public suggest that they are potential transmitters of STDs.

This observation was based on several points: first, there is frequent unexpected change of location among Nigerian police officers. It is not always convenient or possible for the police officers to move their family with them to their new locations. This frequent transfer encourages police officers toward extramarital affairs and multiple sexual partners. In this process, STD if contracted, may continue to spread from one location to another as the police officers move. This is more so when such police officers are in stations where adequate medical facilities are not available or within the reach of the officers. Secondly, the nature of the duties of police officers has been reported to place great strain on their marriage (Straton 1975). Most of the police officers are reported to be dissatisfied with their marital life, and this may encourage extramarital sexual affairs. The shifting nature of police work may in part account for the reported dissatisfaction with marital life. In a study of the family relations of Nigerian married nurses (Akinnawo and Ibudeh 1992) many of the nurses said they were not satisfied with their marriage because the shifting nature of their jobs does not allow them to give the necessary attention to their family members and their spouses. Thirdly, police work had been identified as one of the most occupationally stressful professions (Lester 1982). Love-making, especially through extramarital sexual relations, may be one of the coping mechanisms. A preliminary study of the occupational stress in the Nigerian Police Force revealed that many of the police officers use love-making as a coping mechanism to survive the stress in their job (Akinnawo 1993).

It is apparent from these observations that the nature of the job of police officers encourages and sustains extramarital and multiple-sexual-partners relationships. But there is no known study of the sexual behaviour of Nigerian police officers and the likely health effects of their sexual behaviour.

The present study is an attempt to investigate the sexual behaviour of Nigerian police officers in this era of AIDS. Specifically, the study investigated their sexual behaviour, sexual partners, relation with commercial sex workers, prevalence of STDs and knowledge and use of condoms.

The study is a preventive approach to the study of STDs, particularly AIDS, a torchlight to intervention programs, and a contribution to the behavioural management of STDs not only among Nigerian police officers but also among other high-risk groups.

## **Methodology**

Three hundred and fifty-eight Nigerian police officers responded to a structured interview guide. Female officers, and male police officers who had not spent more than one year in the service, were excluded from the study.

The questionnaire contained items intended to elicit information on the characteristics of the subjects, their sexual experiences, their sexual partners, their relationship with commercial sex workers, the prevalence and their feelings about STDs, and their knowledge and use of condoms. The study was carried out in Ondo State Police Command. The survey covers almost all the police stations and posts in the state.

The interviews were conducted, through the help of the State Police Public Relations Office, by the author and some trained research assistants, who were also police officers (Inspectors). The involvement of the police officers in the interview made the job easier for the investigator, especially after the approval of the State Police Commissioner and with the co-operation of the State Police Public Relations Officer. Four hundred police officers were selected from whom 358 were successfully interviewed. The findings are reported here.

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of the police officers**

	Frequency	%
Age		
18-20	38	10.6
21-30	172	48.0
31-40	105	29.3
41-50	35	9.8
Above 50	8	2.2
Level of education		
Modern school	37	10.4
Secondary (WASC/GCE)	50	14.0
H.SC/OND/TTC	192	53.6
NCE and above	35	9.8
No response	11	3.1
Religion		
Christianity	277	77.4
Islam	56	15.6
Traditional	5	1.4
Others	2	0.6
None	10	2.8
No response	8	2.2
State of origin		
Eastern States	43	12.0
Western States	214	59.8
Mid Western States	53	14.8
Northern States	48	13.4
Marital status		
Single	144	40.2
Married	213	59.5
Divorced	1	0.3
Age at first marriage		
18-20	34	9.5
21-25	79	22.1
26-30	86	24.0
31-35	10	2.8
No response	5	1.4
Not applicable	144	40.2
Number of wives		
1	168	47.0
2	29	8.1

More than 2	17	4.7
Single	144	40.2
Total	358	100.0

## The data

The characteristics of the 358 police officers interviewed are shown in Table 1. The mean age of the police officers was 31 years.

Most of the police officers had secondary school education, one-quarter of them had less, and one-fifth enlisted in the force with academic qualifications above secondary education.

Most of the subjects were Christians, Yoruba and from the South-western States. The ethnic and religious distribution is due to the recent policy that allows some categories of police officers to move to their state of origin or the nearest state to their home. This exercise was part of the strategies to reduce corruption and enhance the efficiency of the force. The fact that Christianity is the dominant religion in the southwestern part of Nigeria explains why most of the police officers who participated in the study were Christians.

About 60 per cent of the officers were married. The mean age at first marriage was 25 years, while the range is from 18 to 35 years. Nearly 50 per cent were married between 21 and 30 years of age and only 10 per cent were married before the age of 21 years. Out of the 213 police officers reported married, 79 per cent had one wife compared with 48 per cent who reported that their father had only one wife.

The majority of the married officers had between one and four children while most of them reported that their fathers had more than four children. Nearly 50 per cent of the police officers reported their fathers' occupation as farming, and trading as the major occupations of mothers. These occupations correspond with the traditional occupations of males and females in the Southwestern region.

**Table 2**  
**Sexual experience of the police officers**

	Frequency	%
Physiological status at first sexual experience		
Early adolescence	23	6.4
Mid-adolescence 15-16	73	20.4
Late adolescence 17-20	162	45.3
Early adulthood 21-35	53	14.8
Cannot remember	30	8.4
Not applicable/no response	17	4.7
First sexual partner		
Playmate	24	6.7
Girl-friend	253	70.7
Wife	37	10.3
Prostitute	7	2.0
Others (neighbours, househelp etc)	16	4.4
Not applicable/no response	21	5.9
Circumstances that led to the relation		
Playing together	19	5.3
Party	25	7.0
Persuasion	18	5.0
Affection/love	191	53.4
Forced/rape	4	1.1
Starting marital life	20	5.6

Urge	15	4.2
Curiosity	16	4.5
Not applicable	12	3.4
No response	38	11.6
Total	358	100.0

The majority of the officers were recruited into the police force between the ages of 17 and 25. While 131 or 37 per cent were recruited between 17 and 20 years old, and 183 or 51 per cent between 21 and 25 years old, only 43 or 12 per cent were recruited into the force at older ages. More than 80 per cent of the officers were recruited into the force as constables. At the time of this survey, the sample consisted of 100 constables, 68 corporals, 76 sergeants, 51 inspectors, 33 Assistant Superintendents of Police, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner of Police.

There is frequent movement of the police officers. Only 24 per cent of the police officers had remained in their original station since joining the force, 13 per cent had been transferred three times, seven per cent had been transferred four times, 15 per cent had been moved between five and ten times, and six per cent had been transferred more than ten times.

The majority of the police officers experienced great difficulties in moving their families with them from one station to another. The difficulties centre around the problem of accommodation, education of children and employment for their spouses. The frequency at which the officers are moved from one station to another, and the difficulties of moving their families with them immediately, encourage extramarital sexual relations and multiple sexual partners among them.

### ***Sexual behaviour***

Nearly all the police officers (96.4%) had experienced sexual relations at the time of the investigation (Table 2). By age 20, 72 per cent had had their first sexual experience. It is significant to note that 27 per cent of them had had their first sexual encounter before reaching the age of 17 years. The mean age of first sexual experience is around 18. This corresponds with what obtains in the general population. While 70 per cent of the police officers reported having enjoyed their first sexual experience, about 26 per cent of them reported not having enjoyed it because of inexperience, fear of being caught, pain or anxiety.

### ***Sexual partners***

One hundred and sixty-one or 76 per cent of the married police officers reported the number of their sexual partners before marriage. The majority of them (72%) reported more than one sexual partner before marriage, while 44 per cent reported more than three sexual partners.

The mean number of their sexual partners before marriage was estimated at six. The pattern is similar to what has been observed among the general population in the region (Orubuloye et al. 1994).

Most of the police officers currently had more than one sexual partner: the mean number of their current sexual partners was four, including wives or fiancées and other women outside marriage. The mean number of sexual partners apart from the wives was 3.2. The police officers were not able to give accurate accounts of their lifetime partners, so the information was excluded from the analysis.

Premarital or extramarital sexual affairs take place between the officers and mostly their woman friends and commercial sex workers.

The ages of the officers' extramarital sexual partners ranged from 12 to 50 years with a mode of 20 years and a mean of 21.3. These extramarital sexual partners were mainly single girls, married and divorced women.

The occupations of these women who have extramarital affairs with the officers cut across all professions: farmers, traders, artisans, civil servants, students and apprentices. Most of them are, however, students or apprentices and traders. The majority of the officers met their married sexual partners before the women got married while some of the officers entered into relations with their sexual partners as married women. Frequency of sexual relations with extramarital partners ranged from daily to monthly and the mode is weekly while some of them had sexual relations at random.

The study reveals that extramarital sexual relations is an open affair. Some of the officers reported that their wives and relations had knowledge of their extramarital sexual partners.

About 35 per cent of the officers reported that their wives knew about their extramarital partners, 62 per cent of them confirmed that their relatives, especially their brothers, sisters, and parents knew their extramarital sexual partners. The responses about the police officers' sexual partners are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Sexual experience before and after marriage**

	Frequency	%
Number of sexual partners before marriage		
1	45	12.5
2	31	8.7
3	14	3.7
More than 3	71	19.8
Cannot estimate	28	7.8
No response/not applicable	168	47.4
Current number of sexual partners		
1	118	33.0
2	67	18.7
3	26	7.3
More than 3	103	28.8
No response	32	8.9
Not applicable	12	3.3
Number of sexual partners besides wives		
1	75	20.9
2	35	9.8
3	20	5.5
More than 3	104	29.1
Not applicable	106	29.6
No response	18	5.0
Physiological status of extra-marital partners		
Early adolescence	6	1.7
Mid-adolescence	30	8.4
Late adolescence	86	24.0
Young adults (21-25 years old)	93	26.0
Adults above 26 years old	34	9.5
Not applicable/no response	109	30.4
Total	358	100.0

### **Relations with commercial sex workers**

Many of the police officers reported sexual affairs with prostitutes in hotels or brothels near their place of work, especially on arrival in new stations. The circumstances that led police

officers to patronize commercial sex workers include sexual urge, spouse absence, the nature of their duties, because their wives were pregnant or breastfeeding, and affection.

### **Knowledge of STDs**

About 24 per cent of the police officers reported having contracted STDs, including gonorrhoea, syphilis and others not specified. The level and pattern of STDs correspond with what obtains in the general population. The experienced symptoms include inability to urinate, milky discharge, itching, irritating discharge, and a combination of two or more of the symptoms (Table 4). Most of the police officers contacted STDs from their girl friends and sex workers.

**Table 4**  
**Experience with sexually transmitted diseases**

	Frequency	%
Ever treated for STD		
Yes	85	23.8
No	228	63.7
No response	45	12.5
Type of STD treated		
Gonorrhoea	63	17.5
Syphilis	11	2.9
Others	11	2.9
Not applicable	273	76.2
Experienced symptom		
Burning sensation	4	1.1
Milky discharge	18	5.0
Inability to urinate	33	9.2
Swollen gland	8	2.2
Irritating discharge	1	0.3
Combination of 2 or more of above symptoms	16	4.5
Not applicable	273	76.2
	358	100.0

Most of the officers did not keep their experience to themselves, they informed their significant others, especially their friends, doctors and relatives, and a few of them informed their wives. Most of the officers sought treatment and were actually treated. They were treated by modern doctors, traditional healers, pharmacists or dispensers, through self-medication and by spiritual healers. The majority of the infected police officers informed those who infected them. Some of the officers, however, did not inform their partners because they were not able to identify them or because they felt ashamed and they did not want to hurt them. Most of the infected police officers reported that their partners received treatment from hospitals, herbal homes or chemists, after they informed them, while some of the infected officers did not know whether their partners received any treatment.

The majority of the infected police officers reported that their wives have the right to refuse to have sexual relations with them during the period of their infection. In general, 70

per cent of the police officers reported that wives have the right to refuse to have sexual relations with an infected husband.

### **Knowledge and use of condoms**

More than 80 per cent of the police officers reported that they have seen condoms before. However, only 39 per cent of them reported that they actually used them in sexual relations. They used condoms during sexual relations with sex workers, women friends, strangers and their wives during the postpartum period. The major reasons for using condoms include protection against STDs and protection against unwanted pregnancies. Fifty-eight per cent of the police officers planned to use condoms during future extramarital sexual relations while a few (1.1%) were not sure whether they would use condoms during such relations and said that the prevailing circumstances would determine their actions. About 18 per cent reported that they would not use condoms during their future extramarital sexual relations.

Police officers who planned to use condoms would do so to avoid being infected with STDs and to protect their partners against unwanted pregnancies. The officers who reported that they would not use condoms under any circumstance would not do so because they disliked condoms, because they trust their extramarital partners, and because their religion forbids the use of condoms.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

Police Officers belong to the group generally referred to as high-risk groups. They experienced high levels of premarital and extramarital sexual relations and maintained multiple sexual partners outside marriage. Their way of life could be likened to that of truck drivers.

Most of the police officers' extramarital sexual partners were single girls, particularly students, apprentices and sex workers.

The prevalence of STDs among the police officers was 23.8 per cent and gonorrhoea was the commonest. Most of the officers who had contracted STDs were infected by their girlfriends and sex workers. A majority of the infected police officers sought and received treatment by modern doctors and informed their partners; some of them did not inform their partners for personal and cultural reasons.

Nigerian police officers seemed to be knowledgeable about the use of condoms. A significant proportion had used condoms during extramarital relations to protect themselves against STDs and to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Frequent transfer of police officers has become an inevitable hazard to the officers and their families. Quite often adequate preparations are not made for the officers on transfer to enable them to have their families with them immediately. Hence many married officers are separated from their spouses for a considerable length of time. Many resort to taking another wife in the new station or simply engage in extramarital sexual relations.

The high levels of STDs and extramarital sexual relations reported by the officers pose a serious danger to the officers, their spouses and the community with which they have close interaction. There is urgent need for the education of the officers on the consequences of their way of life. The police college, public health authorities and the doctors need to teach the officers about STDs and HIV/AIDS.

The campaign against AIDS and promotion of condom use, which is currently under way along the major highways in Nigeria, should urgently be extended to the barracks as part of the intervention program on AIDS. A combination of efforts between the National AIDS control program and the various family planning organizations will minimize STDs, unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS among this highly mobile group.

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