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THE IMPACT OF SIT-AT-HOME PROTEST ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS OF ENUGU SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ENUGU STATE

Beatrice Adanna Achilike
&
Agbasiere, Emmanuel Patrick

Abstract

Insecurity and tension generally cause emotional, psychological, and mental imbalances among adolescents. This research paper discussed the impact of the sit-at-home protest in southeast Nigeria on the mental health of secondary school students. A cross-sectional study was conducted among higher secondary school students of Enugu South Local Government Area within the Agbani Education Zone of Enugu State Southeast Nigeria to monitor how these students cope with tensions and rumours of insecurity vis-a-vis mental health in the area. The sample size was calculated to be 2144. The final sample size was estimated to be 1379. Hence, about 1379 students were targeted for data collection. 16 public, private, and mission schools were randomly selected, and all the higher secondary school (SS 2&3) students in that school were enrolled in the study. The Patient Health Questionnaire, The Generalized Anxiety disorder scale and Kessler Psychological Distress scale were used to collect data on depression, anxiety and psychological distress. Data entry and analysis were done using IBM SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics such as mean and percentage were used. Findings from the study indicate that a significant proportion of higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area exhibited elevated levels of mental health symptoms. Approximately 20% of students reported experiencing mild to moderate levels of both depression and anxiety, while a similar percentage reported medium or high levels of psychological distress. These findings suggest a substantial impact of sit-at-home protests on the mental well-being of this population. This research identifies groups that display higher levels of psychological distress and lower overall well-being and connectedness due to the sit-at-home order. It was recommended that government should conduct a thorough assessment of the mental health status of higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area, focusing on symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

Keywords: Sit-at-home protest, Mental health, Higher secondary students, Enugu South Local Government Area, Enugu State.

Introduction

The burden of depression and other mental health conditions is increasing, significantly impacting health, society, human rights, and economies globally. Depression impacts over 300 million people and is the leading cause of disability and a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease (World Health Organisation, 2016). Adolescence is a stressful period due to physical, psychological, and sexual changes, and the presence of psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and stress at this stage of life is a matter of concern
WHO (2022) established that individuals' exposure to unfavourable social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental circumstances – including poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental deprivation – also increases people's risk of experiencing mental health conditions.

Following Nnamdi Kanu's extradition from Kenya, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) instituted a weekly sit-at-home protest on Mondays, demanding his release. This action has had a significant impact on the South East states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, disrupting daily life, commerce, and education. The protest has ignited heated debates among residents in the region and Igbos living abroad, while the rest of Nigeria has observed with a mix of curiosity and concern. Undoubtedly, the sit-at-home has cost the residents of the South East a lot in terms of lives and property. Since it started, several innocent citizens (both average and prominent) have lost their lives in the most gruesome manner, depriving families of their loved ones who are sometimes breadwinners, and truncating the destinies of the dependents left behind while leaving scars that may never heal (Punch News, 2022).

The impact of this emergent security issue in the southeast has been reported to have grave effects on the entire spheres of life of the region as regards recurrent sit-at-home orders by the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (Anyadiegwu &Nzekwe, 2022). The insecurity in southeast Nigeria takes the dimension of enforcing a sit-at-home order by IPOB, a secessionist group agitating for the release of their leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu by ensuring a total shutdown of every human activity including school activities every Monday and other days when Nnamdi Kanu appears in court for trial. The order has affected the economy of the eastern states in diverse ways; the teaching/learning process is inclusive. While many types of school-based security-related activities are implemented in areas affected by armed conflict and violence, it is not clear whether and how the various implementers measure the impact of these interventions on the access to education; the psychosocial well-being of learners and the teaching-learning process.

Anyadiegwu and Nzekwe, (2022) did investigate the impacts of a sit-at-home order by IPOB, a secessionist group on teaching and learning in the southeast region. Their findings established that there are high cases of insecurity around schools and there are no security measures put in place to ensure the security of staff and students. Consequently, teaching and learning processes are hindered when there are incidences of insecurity within the school and nearby. Moreover, attendance at school drops drastically and regularly whenever there is a rumor or threat of insecurity. They also, established that it is only staff and students of government public schools that comply with the sit-at-home order; while staff and students of private and mission and boarding schools carry on school activities in spite of the order. Due to fear insecurity, parents do not allow their children and wards to attend day schools on sit-at-home days. The result of all these is the inability to cover the scheme of work and the attendant poor performance of students in examinations.

Research has continued to center on global and national insecurity in general with paucity of research on the insecurity situation in southeast Nigeria vis-à-vis the sit-at-home order and its effects on the teaching/learning process let alone the mental health of the students. As noted by Zahra (2019), students' academic success depends largely on their psychological stability. Psychologists have summarized the factors that affect learning into three classes; factors residents in learners, residents in teachers, and residents in the environment. However, insecurity and tension generally cause emotional, psychological, and mental imbalances.

Also, Isaactamson (2022), posited that according to Abraham Maslow's theory, after the fulfillment of man's needs for survival, psychological needs such as the desire for peace, and the need for a secure and safe life among others are the next most basic category of needs. For example, one will not think of how to effectively impact, learn, or achieve something in a situation where feelings of danger, fears of impending doom or threats to life, and anxiety dominate his or her mind.
This implies that education is more effective when both the educator and the educated are in a state of positive feelings that is able to stimulate the interest to learn (or teach) and generate the attention needed for effective learning (or teaching).

According to WHO (2022), mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to

make decisions, build relationships, and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. It is crucial to personal, community, and socio-economic development.

Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. It exists on a complex continuum, which is experienced differently from one person to the next, with varying degrees of difficulty and distress and potentially very different social and clinical outcomes (WHO,2022). Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. People with mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being, but this is not always or necessarily the case.

This research, therefore, addresses the gap in knowledge as regards the implications of the sit-at-home order on mental health of Secondary school students in South-eastern Nigeria along with the main research questions determining the impact of insecurity and the sit-at-home order.

Statement of the Problem

The sit-at-home protests in Enugu State, particularly in the Enugu South Local Government Area, have had a significant impact on the daily lives of residents, including higher secondary students. The prolonged disruptions caused by these protests have raised concerns about the potential negative psychological consequences on this vulnerable population.

This research aims to investigate the specific impact of sit-at-home protests on the mental health of higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area. The study will explore the prevalence of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, among this population and examine the factors contributing to these challenges**.**

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to assess the impact of sit-at-home protests on the mental health of higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area, Enugu State.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. To determine the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and distress among higher secondary school students of Enugu South Local Government Area, Enugu State Southeast Nigeria, and

2. To determine the association between depression, anxiety, and distress in relation to a selected variable which is the insecurity (sit-at-home order).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this survey:

1. What are the various signs of depression among the higher secondary students in the Enugu South Local government area during the sit-at-home?
2. What are the various signs of anxiety among the higher secondary students in the Enugu South Local government area during the sit-at-home?
3. What are the various signs of psychological distress among the higher secondary students in the Enugu South Local government area during the sit-at-home?

Methodology

Study Design and Population

A cross-sectional study was conducted among higher secondary school students (SS2 and SS3) in Enugu South Local Government Area, Enugu State, Nigeria, from March to April 2023. The study focused on students attending public, private, and mission schools within the Agbani Education Zone. These schools were selected based on their higher attendance rates compared to other schools in the area.

Sample Selection

A sample size of 1,379 students was calculated using a design effect of 2.5. Random sampling was employed to select 16 schools from the target population. All eligible students within the selected schools were included in the study, resulting in a total sample of 1,379 participants.

Data Collection

Three standardized measures were used to collect data:

1. **Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9):** Assessed depressive symptoms over the past two weeks.
2. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7):** Evaluated the severity of generalized anxiety disorder symptoms.
3. **Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10):** Measured overall psychological distress.

Questionnaires were distributed to students during the first and last weeks of the study period. Participants were instructed on how to complete the questionnaires, and incomplete submissions were excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were entered and analyzed using IBM SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics (mean and percentage) were calculated, and the chi-square test was used to assess statistical significance (p-value < 0.05).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from school principals, and verbal assent or consent was obtained from students. Confidentiality measures were implemented to protect participant privacy.

Results

The total number of respondents was 1379. About 33 questionnaires were incomplete and hence excluded. Therefore, the total number of valid respondents was 1346, with a response rate of 96.2%. The mean age of the respondents was 17.06 ± 0.68 years with a range of 17–19 years. See table 1.

Table 1: Depression symptom severity as indicated by the PHQ – 9 depression scale

Score category (score range)	95% confidence interval
Minimal (≤ 4)	75.1 (71.6, 78.6)
Mild (5 – 9)	13.6 (10.9, 16.3)
Moderate (10 – 14)	8.0 (6.0, 10.0)
Moderately severe (15 – 19)	2.2 (1.0, 3.5)
Severe (≥20)	1.1 (0.1, 2.1)

Around one out of six (13.6%) had experienced mild depressive symptoms in this time period, and .0% had experienced moderate depressive symptoms. Just 2.2% of respondents received PHQ-9 scores indicating they experienced moderately severe depressive symptoms in the previous two weeks, and only 1.1% received scores indicating severe depressive signs.

Table 2: Scores on a brief measure of anxiety (CAD – 7)

Score category (score range)	% 95% confidence interval
None (≤ 4)	16.5 (13.2, 19.7)
Mild (5 – 9)	77.0 (73.6, 80.4)
Moderate (10 – 14)	5.3 (2.9, 7.7)
Severe (≥15)	1.2 (0.5, 1.9)

GAD-7 scores indicated that around three-quarters of the students (77.0%) had not experienced anxiety over the previous two weeks. Around one out of six (16.5%) had experienced mild anxiety in this time period, and 5.3% had experienced moderate /anxiety (Table 3). Only 1.2% of respondents received

GAD-7 scores indicating they experienced severe anxiety in the previous two-week period.

Psychological distress

The researchers collected data on the level of psychological distress experienced by respondents in the most recent four weeks, using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002). The K10 is a 10-item scale based on questions about anxiety and depressive symptoms. Scores can range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 50, with low scores indicating low levels of psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002). There are no standardized cut-off scores for the K10, but this research is guided by interpretations of scoring developed by the Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression (CRUfAD), School of Psychiatry, University of New South Wales (NSW) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). These cut-off scores are shown in Table 4.

Table 3: Psychological distress reported among the students from K10

Score category (score range)	% 95% confidence interval
Low or none ($\leq$ 15)	80.0 (76.7, 83.3)
Medium (16-29)	17.7 (144, 21.0)
High ($\geq$30)	2.3 (1.2, 3.3)

Eight out of ten respondents (80.0%) received K10 scores indicating either low or no psychological distress in the previous four weeks. Of the remaining twenty percent, 17.7% received scores indicating medium levels of psychological distress, and 2.3% indicated high levels of psychological distress

Discussion of Findings

The present study found a relatively low prevalence of depression and psychological distress symptoms among higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area. 75.1% of students reported minimal to moderately high symptoms of two out of the three studied disorders within the context of tensions and uncertainties associated with the sit-at-home orders.

However, these findings contrast with other studies. Al-Gelban et al. (2009) reported significantly higher prevalences of depression, anxiety, and stress (41.5%, 66.2%, and 52.5% higher, respectively) among secondary school girls in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Sathish and Brogen (2019) identified a high prevalence of these symptoms (81.6%) among higher secondary students in Manipur, India. Bayram and Bilgel (2008) reported prevalences closer to the current study among university students (51.4%, 66.05%, and 39.4%), while Iqbal et al. (2015) found even lower rates in medical students (51.3%, 33.1%, and 53.0%).

These comparisons suggest that the sit-at-home orders may not have had a severe impact on the students' mental health. Approximately one-third of respondents reported mild to moderately high levels of the three studied disorders.
However, the study did reveal a significant number of students experiencing mild anxiety (77.0% on the GAD-7 scale). This suggests that the security situation caused by the sit-at-home orders may be a source of ongoing low-level anxiety, potentially impacting their studies and overall well-being.
Interestingly, the study found a higher prevalence of mild symptoms among girls compared to boys, which differs from some previous research. Saluja et al. (2004) and Bhasin et al. (2010) reported higher prevalences of mental health issues among girls in their studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to provide information on the mental health of higher secondary school students during the sit-at-home order in Enugu South Local Government Area.
Key Findings:

- High Levels of Psychological Distress: A significant proportion of students reported elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Approximately two in ten students exhibited mild to moderate levels of both depression and anxiety, while a similar percentage experienced medium or high levels of psychological distress.
- Disparities in Well-being: Certain groups, such as female students and those in SS3, displayed higher levels of psychological distress and lower overall well-being and connectedness due to the sit-at-home orders.
- Need for Further Research: Additional studies are recommended to identify the specific factors contributing to these mental health issues among students in the region.

Recommendations

The researchers, following the findings of this research, made the following recommendations:

1. Although the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress was not severe, it is still crucial to identify and address even mild symptoms in this population.
2. Early detection and referral for further evaluation and treatment by qualified mental health professionals is essential to prevent negative impacts on learning and development.
3. Further studies are needed to explore factors beyond insecurity that may contribute to these mental health issues.

4. Government should conduct a thorough assessment of the mental health status of higher secondary students in Enugu South Local Government Area, focusing on symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

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