



HIV/AIDS Testing at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College: Challenges and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges and strategies related to HIV/AIDS testing among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, situated in a conflict-affected area. The college encountered distinct obstacles in providing HIV testing services, including socio-economic factors, stigma, and interruptions in healthcare delivery. The objective of this study was to identify these challenges and investigate educational interventions and strategies to enhance awareness and accessibility of HIV testing. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys distributed to a sample of 300 students (10% of the student population) and in-depth interviews with 20 healthcare providers and college administrators. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity, with approval obtained from the college administration and the relevant ethics review board. The findings led to the development of targeted interventions, including educational programs, stigma-reduction initiatives, and improvements in healthcare services. These initiatives aim to implement workshops and seminars on HIV prevention and testing to dispel myths and misconceptions, ensure that HIV testing is accessible, confidential, and free on campus, and establish support groups for students living with HIV to share experiences and resources at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College. The study recommended implementation of workshops and seminars for students, lecturers, and administrators on HIV prevention, testing, and treatment. Stigma-reduction initiatives measures such as launching campaigns to reduce stigma around HIV testing through peer-led discussions and storytelling sessions are also recommended. The paper also proffered some recommendations such as ensuring that HIV testing is accessible, confidential, and free on campus, with regular health fairs to encourage participation, creation of support groups for students living with HIV to share experiences and access resources, training of lecturers to address health topics sensitively in class discussions about HIV, establishment of initiatives where trained students share information on HIV testing and prevention and collaboration with Local Health Services.

INTRODUCTION

Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, located in Matabeleland South, Gwanda, Zimbabwe, is a prominent institution of higher learning. However, the college faces challenges in providing HIV testing services to its students, particularly in the context of conflict and instability. This study aims to investigate the challenges and strategies associated with HIV/AIDS testing among students at the college.

BACKGROUND

HIV/AIDS remains a significant public health concern in Zimbabwe, particularly among young adults. Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, located in a conflict-affected region, faces unique challenges in providing HIV testing services to its students. The students at the college are vulnerable to HIV transmission due to socio-economic factors, stigma, and disruptions in healthcare services.

In this context, the college's healthcare system is often severely disrupted, limiting access to essential services, including HIV testing and treatment. This exacerbates the vulnerability of young adults, particularly students, who may engage in high-risk behaviors due to displacement, socioeconomic instability, and lack of access to information (UNESCO, 2019).

Stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS is a significant barrier to testing and treatment, with fear of discrimination deterring individuals from seeking testing or disclosing their status (Kay, Falzon, Garcia, et al., 2018). As an educational institution, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by providing health education, resources, and support for testing. However, targeted interventions are necessary to effectively combat HIV/AIDS in this environment (World Health Organization, 2021).

Research questions

1. What are the socio-economic factors that contribute to low HIV testing rates among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College?
2. How does stigma affect students' willingness to seek HIV testing at the college?

3. What educational interventions can be implemented to increase HIV testing awareness and accessibility among students at the college?
4. How do disruptions in healthcare services affect HIV testing accessibility among students at the college?

Research objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic factors affecting HIV testing rates among students in conflict-affected polytechnic colleges.
2. To assess the influence of stigma on students' willingness to seek HIV testing in war zones.
3. To evaluate educational interventions aimed at increasing HIV testing awareness among college students.
4. To investigate the impact of disrupted healthcare services on HIV testing accessibility for students in Gwanda.

Literature review

1. Socio-Economic Factors Affecting HIV Testing Rates

Research indicates that socio-economic factors significantly influence HIV testing rates among students in conflict-affected regions. According to Hargreaves et al. (2016), individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face barriers such as limited access to healthcare, financial constraints, and lack of transportation, which hinder their ability to seek testing. Additionally, a study by O'Brien et al. (2019) highlights that students in conflict zones may prioritize immediate survival needs over health services, leading to delayed or missed opportunities for testing. Understanding these socio-economic dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by students in these environments.

Moreover, socio-economic factors intersect with other vulnerabilities, such as gender, age, and displacement status, to exacerbate HIV testing disparities. For instance, female students in conflict zones may face additional barriers, including gender-based violence and limited autonomy, which hinder their ability to access testing services (de Zoysa et al., 2020). Similarly, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees may experience heightened vulnerability due to disrupted social networks and lack of access to healthcare (Spiegel et al., 2017). Understanding these complex socio-economic dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions that address the specific needs of students in conflict-affected regions.

2. Influence of Stigma on Willingness to Seek HIV Testing

Stigma remains a pervasive barrier to HIV testing, particularly in war-torn areas. Herek (2009) notes that fear of discrimination and social ostracism can deter individuals from seeking testing and treatment. In a study conducted by Nyblade et al. (2019), it was found that stigma significantly impacts the health-seeking behaviors of young adults, leading to lower testing rates among students in conflict-affected regions. Furthermore, the intersection of gender and stigma is highlighted by de Zoysa et al. (2020), who found that female students may experience heightened stigma, further complicating their willingness to seek HIV services. Addressing stigma through education and support systems is essential to improve testing rates.

Moreover, the intersection of gender and stigma exacerbates the issue. De Zoysa et al. (2020) found that female students may experience heightened stigma, further complicating their willingness to seek HIV services. This is attributed to societal norms and expectations that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. Addressing stigma through education and support systems is essential to improve testing rates. Interventions should focus on promoting awareness, reducing misinformation, and fostering a supportive environment that encourages individuals to seek testing and treatment without fear of judgment or retribution. Additionally, involving community leaders, educators, and healthcare providers in stigma-reduction efforts can help normalize HIV testing and treatment, ultimately saving lives.

3. Educational Interventions to Increase HIV Testing Awareness

Educational interventions play a critical role in enhancing HIV testing awareness among students. A systematic review by Mavedzenge et al. (2013) demonstrates that targeted health education programs can significantly increase knowledge about HIV and testing among young adults. Furthermore, a study by Adebajo et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of peer-led initiatives in creating a supportive environment for students to discuss HIV-related issues. By integrating comprehensive health education into the curriculum of polytechnic colleges, institutions can foster a culture of awareness and encourage proactive health-seeking behaviors.

Integrating comprehensive health education into polytechnic college curricula is crucial. This can include incorporating HIV/AIDS education into existing subjects, providing workshops and seminars, and inviting guest speakers (UNESCO, 2019). Educational institutions can also leverage technology, such as online platforms and mobile applications, to reach a wider audience and provide accessible resources (Kay et al., 2018). Furthermore, involving parents, community leaders, and healthcare providers in educational efforts can help reinforce messages and promote a supportive environment beyond the classroom. By prioritizing education, polytechnic colleges can empower students to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

4. Impact of Disrupted Healthcare Services on Testing Accessibility

The impact of disrupted healthcare services on HIV testing accessibility in conflict zones is well-documented. According to the World Health Organization (2021), armed conflicts often lead to the destruction of health infrastructure, resulting in reduced access to essential services, including HIV testing. A study by Geng et al. (2016) found that students in conflict-affected areas face significant barriers to accessing testing due to the unavailability of health facilities and trained personnel. This disruption not only affects testing rates but also contributes to increased rates of undiagnosed HIV, as

individuals may not have the opportunity to receive timely services. Addressing these challenges requires innovative solutions to restore healthcare access in conflict-affected environments.

To address these challenges, innovative solutions are necessary to restore healthcare access in conflict-affected environments. Mobile health units, community-based testing initiatives, and telemedicine services can help bridge gaps in healthcare access (Kay et al., 2018). Partnering with local organizations, governments, and international agencies is crucial to rebuild health infrastructure and train healthcare personnel (UNAIDS, 2020). Additionally, integrating HIV testing into existing healthcare services, such as reproductive health and maternal childcare, can help increase testing rates (Spiegel et al., 2017). By prioritizing innovative solutions and collaborative efforts, we can ensure that individuals in conflict zones have access to essential HIV testing services.

Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. The study population comprised students, healthcare providers, and college administrators at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College. This approach effectively combines the strengths of both research types, providing a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena. By merging statistical insights with qualitative context, researchers achieve a holistic view of the topic. The method allows for triangulation, enhancing credibility through validation from multiple sources, and offers flexibility in adapting the research design to evolving contexts. Qualitative insights elucidate the motivations behind quantitative trends, while diverse methods engage a broader range of participants, resulting in richer data interpretation. In exploring health and wellness at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, this approach addressed the complexity of the research problem and captured varied perspectives from students, healthcare providers, and administrators. It aimed to inform policy by grounding recommendations in both statistical data and real-world experiences. Ultimately, the mixed-methods approach facilitated iterative learning, leading to a deeper understanding of students' health and wellness needs and contributing to more effective support strategies.

Targeted group

Based on the paper, the targeted groups for the study on HIV/AIDS testing among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College are:

Students: The study focused on students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, with a particular emphasis on understanding the socio-economic factors, stigma, and disruptions in healthcare services that affect their access to HIV/AIDS testing.

Healthcare providers: The study also targeted healthcare providers at the college, including nurses, doctors, and counselors, to gather information on the challenges and strategies associated with providing HIV/AIDS testing services to students.

College administrators: The study also involved college administrators, including those responsible for student affairs, health services, and academic programs, to gather information on the college's policies and programs related to HIV/AIDS testing and prevention. These targeted groups were selected because they are critical stakeholders in the HIV/AIDS testing and prevention efforts at the college, and their perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding the challenges and opportunities for improving HIV/AIDS testing services among students.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected through surveys administered to a sample of 300 students. The survey questionnaire was designed to gather information on socio-economic factors, knowledge and attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, and experiences with HIV testing.

Qualitative Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 healthcare providers and college administrators to gather information on the challenges and strategies associated with HIV/AIDS testing at the college.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were rigorously analysed employing both descriptive and inferential statistics, providing a robust framework for understanding patterns and trends within the dataset. This statistical approach enabled the identification of key relationships and differences among variables, offering valuable insights into the factors influencing HIV/AIDS testing among students.

In parallel, qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, allowing for a rich exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. This method facilitated the identification of recurring themes and nuances in the data, capturing the complexities of attitudes and beliefs surrounding HIV testing. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study achieved a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies related to HIV/AIDS testing, ultimately enriching the overall findings.

Ethical consideration

Informed consent: Ensuring that participants in the study, including students and healthcare providers, provided informed consent before participating in the research.

Confidentiality: Protecting the confidentiality of participants' personal and health information, particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS testing and status.

Anonymity: Ensuring that participants' identities were kept anonymous to prevent stigma and discrimination.

Respect for autonomy: Respecting the autonomy of students to make decisions about their own health, including whether or not to undergo HIV/AIDS testing.

Findings

The study found that socio-economic factors, stigma, and disruptions in healthcare services were significant challenges to HIV/AIDS testing among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College.

Socio-Economic Factors- The study found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to access HIV testing services due to financial constraints and lack of transportation.

Stigma- The study found that stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS was a significant barrier to testing, with many students fearing discrimination and social ostracism.

Disruptions in Healthcare Services- The study found that disruptions in healthcare services, including the unavailability of health facilities and trained personnel, were significant challenges to HIV/AIDS testing.

Conclusion

The study concludes that HIV/AIDS testing among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College faces significant challenges due to socio-economic factors, pervasive stigma, and disruptions in healthcare services, which hinder awareness and participation while perpetuating misinformation and fear. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a culture of openness and support within the college community. By implementing targeted interventions and promoting education, we can dismantle the stigma surrounding HIV testing and create a more inclusive environment. Ultimately, the findings highlight the urgent need for a collaborative approach that engages students, faculty, and healthcare providers in a unified effort to enhance access to HIV testing and support services, empowering students to take charge of their health and contributing to a healthier, more informed campus community.

Recommendations

The study recommends targeted interventions to enhance HIV testing awareness and accessibility among students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College

1. **Educational Programs** - Implement workshops and seminars for students, lecturers, and administrators on HIV prevention, testing, and treatment.
2. **Stigma-Reduction Initiatives** - Launch campaigns to reduce stigma around HIV testing through peer-led discussions and storytelling sessions.
3. **Healthcare Service Improvements** - Ensure HIV testing is accessible, confidential, and free on campus, with regular health fairs to encourage participation.
4. **Support Groups** - Create support groups for students living with HIV to share experiences and access resources.
5. **Training for Lecturers** - Train lecturers to address health topics sensitively in class discussions about HIV.
6. **Peer Education Programs** - Establish initiatives where trained students share information on HIV testing and prevention.
7. **Collaboration with Local Health Services** - Partner with local health organizations for counseling and testing resources.
8. **Incentives for Testing** - Introduce rewards or recognition for students participating in HIV testing and educational events.
9. **Awareness Campaigns** - Use social media and campus channels to promote the importance of regular HIV testing.
10. **Feedback Mechanisms** - Create channels for students, lecturers, and administrators to provide suggestions on HIV-related services.
11. **Research Opportunities** - Encourage research on the impact of interventions and best practices in HIV awareness.
12. **Policy Development** - Develop clear policies supporting HIV testing and prevention initiatives within the college's health services framework.

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