



HIV Prevention in China: Understanding the Role of HIV-Related Stigma

China, home to one-fourth of the world's population, is experiencing HIV and STD epidemics that have already reached the phase of logarithmic growth. With an estimated 650,000 people infected, the implementation of effective intervention strategies is essential to protect the nation's population of 1.4 billion from this rapidly emerging epidemic.

Barriers to Adoption of HIV Prevention Strategies

One of the major barriers to broad adoption of HIV prevention strategies is the stigma associated with HIV, which can cause people to repudiate risk, refuse testing, delay treatment, hide HIV status and refrain from seeking public assistance. In the United States, where AIDS stigma decreased throughout the 1990s, a 1999 study showed that one out of five American adults surveyed still feared persons with AIDS, and more than one third of those surveyed said that concerns about AIDS stigma would deter them from being tested for HIV.



developing countries than in the U.S. In order to begin understanding and addressing the impact of HIV-related stigma on the prevention, testing and treatment of HIV/AIDS in China, researchers assessed the level of HIV-related stigma among market workers in a large, eastern coastal Chinese city with high reported STD rates. The results support earlier anecdotal reports of HIV-related stigma in China and correspond with existing studies reporting high levels of stigma toward the mentally ill and those with STDs.



Data were collected as part of the NIMH Collaborative HIV/STD Prevention trial, with researchers from University of California Los Angeles, Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and Fujian Institute of Health Education including four HIV-related-stigma questions in a study of risk behavior and HIV/STD prevalence. The study focused on 209 market vendors of both genders, aged 18-49. Multivariate analyses examined how participants' perceptions of stigma were associated with different socio-demographic and HIV-related variables. ●

HIV-related stigma is thought to be even greater in



Results

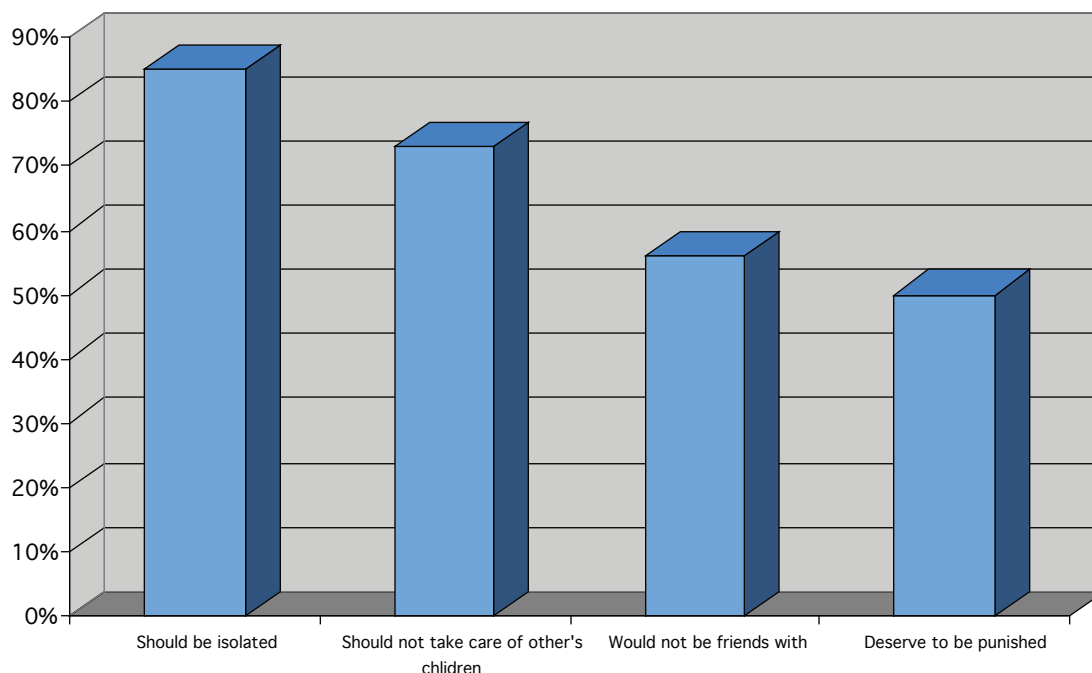
Researchers studied four perceptions of HIV-related stigma: belief that people living with HIV deserve punishment, willingness to be friends with an HIV-infected person, belief that people living with HIV should be isolated, and belief that HIV-infected individuals should not take care of other people's children.

The study found that one half (50%) of the participants believed punishment was an appropriate response toward HIV-infected individuals, and over half (56%) were unwilling to be friends with such individuals. The majority (73%) thought that those living with HIV should be isolated, and an even greater number (85%) agreed that persons living with HIV should not take care of other people's children. All four of these attitudes were significantly correlated with each other.

Key Components

The view that HIV-infected persons deserve punishment was higher in participants who were male, older, less educated and had more life-time sexual partners, while it was lower among those who were female, younger, more educated and single. Those who were more willing to be tested for HIV and had more lifetime sexual partners were also less likely to say that HIV-infected persons deserved punishment.

Below: Perceptions of Stigma



The view that HIV-infected persons should be isolated was related only to age, with younger participants less likely to agree. This view was not significantly related to other variables. The other two perceptions of stigma – the safety of HIV-infected persons taking care of other people's children and willingness to be friends with them – were not significantly correlated with any other variables.

These results suggest that levels of HIV/AIDS stigma vary with both age, gender, and education. Younger participants were less conservative than older ones, and women had more liberal attitudes than men. Those with higher levels of education and those who were more sexually active were also significantly less conservative towards persons living with AIDS.

Future Research

Since promotion of HIV testing is one of the CDC's prominent new strategies for controlling the spread of HIV, it would be fruitful for future research to explore the relationship between willingness to be tested for HIV and the prevalence of HIV stigma. It may be that by increasing the willingness of individuals to be tested for HIV, we may be able to not only help control the spread of HIV, but simultaneously reduce levels of stigma and increase tolerance of persons living with AIDS. Conversely, by reducing levels of HIV stigma we may help to increase people's willingness to be tested for HIV and thus increase the success of HIV testing as an HIV prevention strategy. ●



Conclusion

This study was admittedly limited by the fact that it utilized only four measures of stigma. Nonetheless, the perceptions of stigma and correlations discovered should be of use in future efforts to develop more comprehensive and culturally sensitive measures of HIV stigma among China's urban population. Such research will help in implementing effective intervention programs and slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS in China. ●



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