

An Exploration of the Relationship Between Psychological Distress and Risky Sexual Behavior Among Black Women

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Introduction

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) pose a significant public health threat. Black women disproportionately represented the number of new STD and STI cases (CDC, 2020).

Existing studies that investigate the relationship between sexual health and mental health fail to include Black women. ; therefore, to add to the knowledge base, the study explored the associations between psychological distress and variables contextualizing risky sexual behavior. The secondary analysis used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).

Methods

The study was exclusive to Black women. The sample size included 2,761 Black women.

The variables in the dataset were age, risky sexual behavior, and psychological distress. Psychological distress was measured using an item on suicidal ideation. Respondents were asked if they had considered committing suicide within the past 12 months. Responses were coded as yes (1) or no (0). Risky sexual behavior was measured using four items. Respondents were asked whether they: 1) had sex as a minor (i.e., 17 years and/or younger); 2) had sex without a condom within the past 12 months; 3) had a STD/STI in the past 12 months (self-reported); and (4) had been diagnosed by a physician with a STD/STI in the past 12 months. Responses were coded as yes (1) or no (0).

The data analysis was conducted using the Pearson's chi-square statistic and SPSS.

Results

Psychological distress was not associated with risky sexual behavior. The rate of STD/STI self-diagnosis was the only risky sexual behavior associated with psychological distress. The other sexual behaviors of sex as a minor, sex without a condom in the past 12 months, and STD/STI diagnosis by a physician were not associated with psychological distress.

Table 1. Frequencies of variables contextualizing psychological distress and risky sexual behavior among Black women, N=2,761. Note that all survey items do not have the same total N due to missing data and required survey skip patterns.

Variables	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Psychological Distress		
Suicidal ideation in the past 12 mos, N=2755, Missing=6	189 (6.9)	2566 (93.1)
Risky Sexual Behavior		
Sex as a minor, N=2602	1789 (68.8)	813 (31.2)
Sex without a condom within the past 12 mos, N=2334, Missing=427	1130 (48.4)	1204 (51.6)
STD/STI in the past 12 months (self-reported), N=2715, Missing=46	1774 (65.3)	941 (34.7)
Diagnosed by a professional with a STD/STI in the past 12 mos, N=940, Missing=46	550 (58.5)	390 (41.5)

Table 2. Chi-square results for associations between psychological distress and risky sexual behaviors.

	Suicidal ideation in the past 12 months?	
	Yesn (%)	Non (%)
Sex as a minor, N=2755	X²=7.553, p=0.006	
Yes	140 (74.1)	1647 (64.2)
No	49 (25.9)	919 (35.8)
Sex without a condom within the past 12 mos, N=2331	X²=0.035, p=0.852	
Yes	84 (50.9)	1047 (48.3)
No	81 (49.1)	1119 (51.7)
STD/STI in the past 12 months (self-reported), N=2712	X²=6.769, p=0.009	
Yes	107 (56.6)	1664 (66.0)
No	82 (43.4)	859 (34.0)
Diagnosed by a professional with a STD/STI in the past 12 mos, N=940	X²=1.967, p=0.161	
Yes	42 (51.2)	350 (40.8)
No	40 (48.8)	508 (59.2)

Discussion & Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that there is no association between psychological distress and risky sexual behaviors among Black women. Comprehensive sex education programs targeting Black women would help decrease their exacerbated STD/STI rates.