

PREVENTION OF DRUG ABUSE AMONG YOUTHS: A CATALYST TO NATIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Mbamalu, Justina Oby (PhD), Udu, David Agwu (PhD)* & Osuji Chinonso

Department of Science Education, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State;

Email: davidagwuudu@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Drug Abuse is a canker worm which has eaten deep into the fabric of many nations. It is a social menace. Drug abuse brings with it terrible consequences to the health of the individual using it and to the nation generally. A nation that strives to develop socially and economically must curb the tide of Drug Abuse among its youth. This paper examined the causes, effects, and consequences of drug Abuse and the strategies that can be employed to combat it among the youths. It was found that drug abuse has some lethal consequences on the abuser, which can also lead to death. Finally, suggestions on how to prevent the youths from using and abusing drugs were made.

Introduction

The rate at which Nigerian youths abuse and traffic in hard drugs is very alarming. It has become a national problem that requires immediate attention. It is commonly reported in Nigerian print and electronic media that young adults, businessmen and women, the rich and the poor are trafficking in dangerous and illicit drugs, as well as abusing them. Such drugs as marijuana, alcohol, heroin, and cocaine are commonly sold and abused by youths who are ignorant of the side effects and the consequences to their health and to their future social, economic, and cultural lives (Ebigbola et al. 2021).

Youths in any society occupy a delicate and sensitive position within the population structure. The Nigerian law, for example, recognizes that an individual below the age of seven is incapable of committing a crime and an individual between seven and twelve years should be able to know what he ought not to do. Between the ages of twelve and seventeen, a person is regarded as a juvenile, and while he may be held responsible for his acts or omissions, he is treated specially under the law by the Children and Young Persons Act instead of the Criminal Procedure Act (Balogun 2017).

In view of the negative consequences that drug abuse brings to drug abusers, it is necessary to enlighten the youths as well as the adults on what drug abuse is, its causes, and effects. This is necessarily important because the youths are the future leaders, and it will be a tragedy to hand over the mantle of leadership to drug abusers (Kobiowu, 2006).

The Concept of Drug and Drug Abuse

A drug is a substance that affects the function of living cells, used in medicine to diagnose, cure, prevent the occurrence of diseases and disorders, and prolong the life of patients with incurable conditions (Cook et al. 2023).

According to Balogun (2017), a drug is a chemical substance capable of altering the physical and psychological functions of the body. Balogun added that drug abuse can be simply referred to as the use of drugs without a prescription from a physician.

According to Garbar (2019), drug abuse is the self-administration of substances without due regard to medical indications or social norms of a particular drug.

Drug Abuse can also be described as the indiscriminate, persistent use or inconsistent use of drugs with or without a doctor's prescription (Gale 2001).

Drug abuse is seen as the use of drugs by self-prescription, bought from the counter, or from hawkers on self-advice, not on a physician's prescriptions, but because of their palatability and attractiveness (Hoffman 2021).

This paper sees Drug abuse as the excessive, maladaptive, or addictive use of drugs for nonmedical purposes. It also defines a state, emotional and sometimes physical, characterized by a compulsion to take drugs constantly to experience their mental effects. Drug abuse gives rise to drug dependence, both physical and psychological. Dependence gives rise to mental, emotional, biological, physical, social, and economic instability.

The effects of drug abuse on an individual, therefore, form the basis for its cumulative effects on society. This is the major danger of drug abuse (Dyness & Ishino, 2023).

One may be hooked emotionally and psychologically, and may have a physical dependence, where one has a drug addiction problem, whether to a legal or illegal drug; there is a craving for it. The individual wants to use the drug again and again, and if it is stopped, there are usually unpleasant physical reactions (Earl & Weinberg, 2021).

While it is not everyone who uses a drug that becomes addicted, many people do. Drug addiction involves compulsively seeking to use a substance, regardless of the potentially negative social, psychological, and physical consequences. Certain drugs, such as narcotics and cocaine, are more likely to cause physical dependence than are other drugs (Mayo, 2021).

Balogun (2017) noted that hospital statistics have it that the persons involved in the use and abuse of drugs cut across social and economic backgrounds, educational levels, as both the literate and illiterate go for it, and that male youths are more likely to be involved in the abuse of drugs that stimulate than females. According to Balogun, youths in general indulge in taking ethyl alcohol, cannabis (Indian hemp), and amphetamines.

Aertgeerts and Buntix (2002) stressed that although the use of illicit drugs is not solely an adolescent problem, it is clear that the majority of users are youths during this critical period. In support of this, Ebigbola et al. (2021) remarked that alcohol was the most serious form of drug abuse in Western society, especially among the youth.

Historical Background of Drug Abuse

Drug abuse among adolescents and young adults, which embrace university undergraduates, increased significantly in the United States of America in the late 60s and early 70s (Cameron & Margaret, 2021). Little was known about hard drugs and their usage in Nigeria in the 60s. However, as far back as 1973, an expatriate staff member at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, reported a substance purported to be cocaine, which was used by some students, but the authenticity of the substance was not precisely established. In the late 70s, the usage of cocaine and heroin became significant in Nigeria, although the law enforcement agencies and the government were not aware of the development. It was not until May 1983, when the Guardian Newspaper of Nigeria first narrated the story of the arrival of the drug known variously in the

United States as 'snow' or 'angel-dust', that awareness began to rise. And this reached a crescendo between 1984 and 1985, when the Federal Government of Nigeria promulgated a decree (d.n.20 of 1984), which prescribes the death penalty for possession of hard drugs (Aertgeerts & Buntix, 2002; Haladu, 2003; Balogun, 2017; Udu, 2017).

Types of Drugs Commonly Abused

According to Garbar (2019), several types of drugs are susceptible to abuse by youths. These drugs range from the most common and less expensive, such as cigarettes and alcohol, to expensive and more deadly, such as cocaine and heroin.

The drugs commonly abused, according to Balogun (2017), include;

Cigarettes - these are drugs easily available to the youth. They are classified as drugs because they contain nicotine and it has physical and psychological effects on the body. Cigarettes are addictive, and they cause lung disorders such as cancer.

Alcohol - Beer, wine, brandy, and spirits are in the drug category mainly because of their chemical contents and potential for addiction. Alcohol has a toxic and sedative effect on the body and is available without a prescription. It is a central nervous system depressant, and its consumption can cause several marked changes in behaviour.

Caffeine - This is usually abused through the excessive chewing of cola-nut or concentrated coffee. Caffeine is the active ingredient of coffee, tea, and some bottled beverages.

Marijuana - Also popularly called Indian hemp, is a drug that contains tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which determines its potency, varying from 0.2% to 20%. It is a hallucinogenic stimulant and is usually produced locally.

Hydrocarbons - Glue, gasoline, cleaning solutions, varnish, paint thinners, nail polish remover, and lighter fluids, all distilled from petroleum and natural gas, belong to the class of hydrocarbons. They are usually inhaled or sniffed.

Cocaine - Cocaine is one of the most potent stimulants of natural origin. It is extracted from the leaves of the coca plant grown in the Andean highlands of South America. Illicit cocaine is usually distributed as a white crystalline powder, often diluted by a variety of ingredients. The drug is usually administered by snorting through the nasal passages.

Crack - This is a street name for a chemical derivative of cocaine in hard, crystalline lumps. It is heated and inhaled as a stimulant. Youth usually go for this because it is less expensive than cocaine.

Heroin - Heroin was first synthesized from morphine with a bitter taste. Illicit heroin may vary in both form and colour, from white to dark brown. Heroin is about three times more potent than morphine, and it is readily available in Nigeria.

According to Hoffman (2021), these drugs, which are commonly abused, have been classified by the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, Boston, as;

1 Narcotics: drugs used to relieve pain. e.g., Morphine, Heroin, Codeine, Opium, Cocaine, etc.

2 Stimulants: used to keep alert. e.g., Amphetamine capsules and tablets, Amphetamine Barbiturates, or combinations.

3 Depressants: to depress the central nervous system and relieve anxiety. e.g., Barbiturates, Tranquilizers, and other sedatives such as Valium, caffeine, Xanax.

4 Hallucinogens; these are those drugs capable of producing illusions or hallucinations. e.g. LSD (Lysergsaure Diethylamid, i.e. lysergic acid diethylamide)

The Etiology of Drug Abuse

Man has long sought ways to enhance his pleasure and to ease his discomforts. Curiosity, as one of man's outstanding characteristics, appears early in life and leads to extensive exploratory behavior. It is not surprising, then, that many young people will wish to try certain drugs to determine their effects for themselves. Studies by Aertgeerts and Buntix (2002), Haladu (2003), Hoffman (2021), and Adeniyi (2022) exhibit a plethora of purposes for which youths use drugs. The list includes: curiosity, boldness, and friends-do-it, enjoyment of social gatherings, academic pressure, sound sleep, sexual prowess, and performance in sports.

However, various factors have been identified as the causes of drug abuse among youths. These include:

Parental factor- The youth today are faced with a disturbing situation of meeting varied expectations, especially those of their parents who lay undue emphasis on high academic achievement in school work. Thus, there is a lot of pressure on the young ones, especially those who are less endowed, to achieve academic laurels. Youths who cannot cope with parental pressure usually resort to drug abuse as a last resort. Some parents are themselves drug addicts. Hoffman (2021) stressed that it has been found that the chances of children of an alcoholic parent becoming alcoholics themselves later in life is 50%. Parents who are drug abusers find it difficult to confront their children about the adverse effects of drug abuse since they are not role models.

Urbanization - This is also a cause of drug abuse. Balogun (2017) expressed that the presentday youths are brought up in settings of rapid, disorganized socialization and unplanned urbanization.

Social Environment - Mayo (2021) noted that one of the most important factors that influences the drinking pattern of teenagers is the social environment. Continuing, Mayo emphasized that the first contact with alcohol is usually in the home, and alcohol use is socially accepted by society, and it is often a free use of beer, wine, gin, and various local alcoholic beverages in most social gatherings.

Family problem - This has also been identified as another source of drug abuse. A study by Gale (2001) showed that children from broken homes and those without siblings have a greater risk of becoming problem drinkers. Similarly, Cook et al. (2023) expressed that gross parental and economic deprivation may be a factor in the development of problem drinking among adolescents. Notably, youths derive comfort in drugs, especially when the home environment is tense. Drugs, such as sedatives and antidepressants, give happiness and take away sadness at least temporarily. However, such a temporary relief does not remove the original problem, and as such, youths become dependent on drugs to live "happily".

Influence of friends and colleagues - This is also a factor in drug abuse. The friends and colleagues try to initiate new members into their groups' acts using sweet but unfounded words about the importance of drugs. They may tell the new "comer" that there is a new drug in town that is capable of strengthening his or her ego, one that will make him or her face school or home authorities, one that can make him or her go high, and can energize him or her to face members of the opposite sex with courage required. (Haladu 2003, Adeniyi 2022)

Finally, youth problems such as poor school or academic achievement, low level of tolerance, and inability to face the realities of life can also be a cause of drug abuse among youths.

The Frequency of Drug Abuse

Various Governments in Nigeria expressed deep concern over the alarming rate of drug abuse.

Government's actions range from high term of imprisonment to the execution of drug pushers in 1985 (Haladu 2003). What really seems to be of utmost concern is the involvement of youths in these nefarious activities.

Drug use rate varies greatly by age, but in Nigeria, the greater proportion of abusers (92.3%) were below the age of 25years (Balogun 2017). This finding is related to earlier studies, which indicate that the problem of drug abuse is common among the younger generation of under 25years of age (Aertgeerts & Buntix, 2002). They also discovered that the educational level of abuser parents had a bearing on drug abuse. For instance, 84.5% of abusers had literate fathers and 61.3% had literate mothers. The possible reason for this could be that literate parents devote less time to the supervision of their children, owing to their tight schedule during working hours. They also noted that drug abusers are common among highly educated parents. This then indicated that the problem cuts across socio-economic boundaries, and as such, all hands should be on deck to solve it.

The increase in the number of arrested cocaine pushers, as well as the kilograms of seized cocaine, is a pointer to the fact that drugs are being abused in Nigeria. Ebibola, et al. (2021) reported that before 1984, the amount of heroin seized in Africa was negligible. However, in 1984, the amount seized amounted to 24 kilograms, by the end of 1986, 155 kilograms; and for the first seven months in 1987, the figure stood at 140 kilograms.

The pattern of drug abuse has also changed. Earlier reports showed Amphetamines and cannabis as the most commonly abused drugs in Africa, but more recently, cocaine and heroin have taken over from the earlier ones. These changes are reflected both by the new kinds of patients seen and also by Interpol reports concerning seizures of drugs. Similarly, studies in advanced countries showed that the use of alcohol and marijuana formed the earlier pattern of drug abuse among students, but cocaine and heroin followed thereafter (Ebibola et al. 2021).

The Effects / Consequences of Drug Abuse

The main purpose for the usage of a drug should be for curing illness at the prescription of a physician. Any contrary usage is drug abuse, which has a lot of negative results.

According to Bernstein (2005), researchers agreed that cocaine could contribute to the incidence of natural handicap in newborn babies. Similarly, certain factors such as wrong choice of drugs during pregnancy, drug addiction of parents, genetic incompatibility, and indiscriminate use of herbal concoctions could affect newborn babies. The smoking of Indian hemp could lead to brain damage. Other psychological effects include false confidence that makes the user engage in dangerous activities, such as attempting to fly from the top of buildings and criminal activities. Hallucination and delusion may occur in these individuals; they may see horrible visions, hear sounds that may impair their concentration and ability to make effective judgments (Ebibola et al. 2021). Long-time misuse of drugs promotes aggressiveness. The user may see his/her colleagues or friends as enemies. Also, hemp smoking may cause in some individuals loss of motivation, lack of interest in any constructive activity, which may consequently result in poor performance and consequent expulsion from school or dismissal from a job (Aertgeerts & Buntix, 2002; Udu et al. 2020). All these, if properly considered, will result in poor national development (wastage).

Aggressive, violent, and destructive activities are very common among drug abusers. It could threaten the safety of the family, and the individual could perform criminal activities with boldness. Drug abuse could lead to brain damage in youths. Also, those who have a latent psychiatric

disposition may suffer major psychiatric illnesses such as Schizophrenia due to stress posed by the abuse of Indian hemp (Ebigbola et al. 2021, Adeniyi 2022).

Bernstein (2005) stated that involvement in drug use and abuse is a problem not only to the individual but also to society at large. Accordingly, drug abuse has been sources of medical complications such as liver cirrhosis, cardiovascular disorders, mental disorders, which result in associated behavioral changes that in turn could lead to loss of working abilities, unemployment, disturbed social relations resulting in socio-economic loss on the family budget and health, loss of productivity, cost of treatment, and social consequences affecting the wider community (Ebigbola et al. 2021). They stressed that drug abuse also enhances traffic and industrial accidents. Finally, drug abuse can push one to be daring and turn into an armed robber, murderer, or arsonist, which can destroy nations and remove feelings of nationalism and patriotism.

Possible Solutions to Drug Abuse

An adage says, "Prevention is better than cure." Therefore, to eradicate the problem of drug abuse in Nigeria, efforts should be made to prevent those who have not tasted drugs from doing so. Counselors can use reinforcements of different kinds to encourage the youths who do not take drugs.

As for those who are already in it, various ways of handling the problem have been proposed. Bernstein (2005) expressed that there is an urgent need to educate members of the public on the dangers inherent in the use and abuse of drugs. Bernstein added that society should be given accurate and valid information about other sources of pleasure, resort, and ways of coping with their life frustrations and problems.

Cook et al. (2023) noted that group therapy can be used for sharing experiences and discussing issues that relate to common interests. Explaining further, they stated that in dealing with the problem of drug addicts, the therapist can bring them together (if there are many) in groups to discuss their experiences regarding abstaining from drugs. They suggested further that members of the family who are not Drug addicts can be used to aid clients' withdrawal from drug abuse. Aertgeerts and Buntix (2002) expressed that counselors should handle the youths' problems differently from the adults because the youths have less attention span. More importantly, treatment should be carried out at the same time with the aid of peers, school, family, and other important people in the lives of the clients.

There is a need to teach knowledge of drug usage, the implications of misuse, and prevention in the school curricula. The youths spend most of their time in schools, and therefore, the learning experiences will be of benefit to them (Udu 2020; Adeniyi, 2022).

The entire community should be mobilized to see the problem as a national one that must be eliminated. Parents, teachers, and others should be ready to serve as good role models. Youths learn from them; they should therefore desist from behavior or habits that will retard the progress of the nation (Aertgeerts & Buntix, 2002).

It has been reported that drug trafficking is an avenue for making easy and quick money. The Government should fight this dangerous activity, which will not only tarnish the image of this country but could also retard national growth. Severe and long-lasting punishment should be meted out on those who deal with drugs. This is necessary because drugs not only put the individual who uses them into trouble but also all members of society (Ebigbola et al. 2021).

The Government should also place less emphasis on the manufacture of alcoholic drinks, but should rather promote the production/manufacturing of non-alcoholic drinks, such as malt and minerals, or soft drinks, for continued economic activity (Blalock, 2021).

The Government should improve its information dissemination, i.e., the mass media, to highlight the hazardous effects of drug abuse on the youths through various programs like youth clubs and associations (Dyness & Ishino, 2023).

There is a need to establish youth unemployment centers, as it has been shown that unemployed youths might likely indulge in the abuse of hard drugs to remedy their frustrations (Earl & Weinberg, 2021).

Apart from the above possible ways of curbing drug abuse, there should be a special centre for drug abuse information all over the country. There should also be continued investigation into the measures embarked upon by the government through research to determine the efficiency of each measure regularly. There should be regular workshops organized for the health and social workers to update and sustain their knowledge on drug abuse. The Government should embark on strict measures to eradicate quacks and drug peddlers, especially with respect to illicit drugs.

Conclusion

Nature has tried very much to protect the brain, and messing around with drugs can change the way the brain works naturally. The brain can solve problems, be creative, be logical, make plans, make wise decisions, and do almost anything else one can think of. All parts of the brain work together to keep us healthy, intelligent, and happy (Udu et al. 2020, Adeniyi 2022). When one takes drugs, parts of the brain start to disagree on what to do, and that creates a big problem (Mayo, 2021). The abuser might justify the practice by positing that it helps in lifting mood, induces confidence, and suppresses worries and anxiety. But these feelings are ephemeral, and totally out of tune with reality, and can lead to lethal consequences, in the sense that heart functioning and breathing can be severely depressed, thereby causing death. To really help the situation, the Government should have a well-defined, comprehensive, and realistic policy on the control of drugs. This policy should include establishing a Federal drug control centre, under the auspices of the ministries of health and internal affairs, which will collate information on drug use, and liaise with similar smaller units, to be based in each state. Public education should be targeted at the vulnerable segment of society, such as older children, adolescents, and young adults. Such educational measures should be carefully presented through methods that avoid threats and dramatization. Also, parents and school authorities should carefully warn their children against the destructive effects of these drugs.

Any realistic attempt aimed at dealing with the issue of drug abuse must enjoy adequate multidisciplinary deliberation. Any law, which is designed to control drug abuse behavior, must embrace suggestions from the country's relevant professional bodies such as psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, youth and welfare officers, counselors, educationists, ministry of health officials, and law enforcement agents.

The whole community has it as a task to eradicate the drug abuse problem in Nigeria. The influence of mass media, especially television, radio, and newspaper publications, cannot be overlooked in achieving this role.

The Government law enforcement agents, such as the police, customs, and National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), should be better equipped to check illegal importation and

distribution of drugs. If drugs are scarce, the incidence of drug abuse will decline in our society since most of these drugs and their derivatives are not even produced here in Nigeria.

Having analyzed the problems of drug abuse and its effects on the users, one can conclude that a nation full of drug abusers is a nation that is heading for destruction. Since the youths are the future leaders of any nation, the problem of the youths should become the problem of all, and the welfare of the youths should be the welfare of all.

We must work together to find ways and means of controlling and reducing drug dependence and drug abuse among youths. We also need to ensure that the foundations of our society are not eroded by drug dependence among youths. Nigerian youths are increasingly being misguided into drug misuse/abuse. If joint efforts are not made, we will be forced to enlarge our prisons for prisoners and mental institutions to accommodate the “would-be unfortunate victims” who would have been spared if concerted efforts were made to curtail the problem.

When these youths are prevented from Drug use and Abuse, the nation will be free from all the social vices associated with drug abuse. This will improve national growth and development because the youth are the future leaders of every nation and they constitute the bulk of the workforce.

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