



**UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE
AMONG YOUTH IN ZIMBABWE: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW (2016-2024)**

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ABSTRACT

The number of university-aged youth (18-34 years) abusing drugs and substances is continuously increasing, suggesting that current intervention strategies are failing. Research indicates that knowledge and awareness of risks of abusing drugs and substances can lead to behavioural change, but this is not reflected in the ongoing drug abuse crisis. Over 65% of youth with mental health issues are affected by substance abuse, predominantly within tertiary institutions and secondary schools. Despite this, few studies have critically examined Zimbabwean literature on drug and substance abuse to identify gaps and factors hindering reduction efforts. This study analysed Zimbabwean literature from 2016 to 2024 identify gaps and propose effective strategies. The study established that Zimbabwe lacks well-resourced institutions to manage substance abuse disorders, and drug abuse is highly criminalized and stigmatized, stifling open dialogue between users and distributors. Literature reveals that drug use and sales offer a temporary escape from poverty and unemployment for young people. However, those recovering from addiction often relapse when they return to unsupportive environments. To combat this issue, the study recommends involving all relevant parties in intervention efforts, establishing well-resourced mental health facilities, improving the economy, and creating robust support systems for those affected by drug and substance abuse.

Keywords: Rehabilitation, drugs, substances, abuse, intervention, drug trafficking, relapsing.

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of drug and substance abuse among young people in Zimbabwe (ages 18–35) is a growing concern. It appears that current intervention measures are not effectively reducing this problem (Nhapi, 2019; Nhunzvi et al, 2017; Rwafa, 2019). Research indicates that drug misuse is associated with 57% of mental health disorders, and 80% of cases occur in young people (ZCLDN, 2019). This issue is spreading to colleges, where mental health problems are depleting the human capital necessary for the nation's survival. To identify effective strategies, it is crucial to review all previous research studies on drug and substance misuse in Zimbabwe (Anderson et al., 2020). The variation in drug use patterns across different nations is influenced by the social and economic conditions of those involved in substance abuse. This is why it's important to study drug and substance abuse literature specific to Zimbabwe to establish unique approaches tailored to the country's challenges. While no single nation can tackle the epidemic of drug and substance abuse alone, collaboration and information exchange with other nations can be beneficial (NACT, 2021).

According to the 2018 UDOC study, two main concerns lead to substance addiction among young people. Firstly, individuals take drugs recreationally to feel more excited and enjoy themselves (UDOC, 2018). Secondly, young people living in impoverished and challenging environments misuse drugs as a coping mechanism for their difficult situations. Substance misuse is a severe issue in Zimbabwe, encouraged by the country's high unemployment rates and unstable economic climate. Addressing drug and substance addiction should involve targeting not only drug users or sellers but also the entire ecosystem and how multiple stakeholders can work together to address the underlying factors in Zimbabwe's economy. It is against this background that this study seeks to identify gaps affecting the success of the fight against drug and substance abuse by analysing drug and substance abuse literature in Zimbabwe from 2016 to 2024.

Statement of the Problem

The already dire state of Zimbabwe's medical care system is being worsened by mental health issues. It is imperative to develop evidence-based intervention techniques to prevent drug and substance misuse, provide care for those affected by it, and offer workable solutions to the supply and demand for illegal drugs. Hence this analysis of drug and substance abuse literature on Zimbabwe.

Aim of the study

This study analysed Zimbabwean literature on drug abuse from 2016 – 2024 to establish gaps that need to be addressed to proffer workable strategies to address the scourge of drug and substance abuse.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were addressed to attain realistic and precise answers for the study

- What are the most commonly abused illicit drugs and substances among youth in Zimbabwe?
- How have trends in distribution and drug abuse among youth in Zimbabwe evolved from 2016 to 2024?
- What specific circumstances make Zimbabwe an attractive destination for illicit drugs and substances?
- How successful in combating drug and substance abuse are the intervention strategies currently being used among youth in Zimbabwe?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The issue of drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe has significant repercussions for society. The review highlights various factors contributing to drug abuse among young people, including peer pressure, easy access to drugs, unemployment, low self-esteem, poor self-concept, unsupportive home environments, poverty, and lack of accurate knowledge about the consequences of substance abuse. While Zimbabwe has aligned its National Drug Master Plan with international standards set by the World Health Organization (WHO) for drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation, the implementation of these standards faces challenges on the ground. Research studies indicate that rehabilitation services are expensive, making them inaccessible to most addicts who cannot afford them. Additionally, there is a shortage of rehabilitation centres to cater to the number of individuals in need of assistance. Furthermore, there are no support programs in place to help integrate discharged addicts back into the community, leading to a vicious cycle of substance abuse.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 3) calls for the strengthening of prevention and treatment strategies for drug abuse by 2030. However, in Zimbabwe, drug and substance abuse is considered a criminal offense, preventing addicts from seeking help in public health facilities due to the risk of arrest and prosecution. The lack of a rehabilitative approach and the absence of psychosocial support for addicts after serving their sentences contribute to the persistence of drug abuse. Scholars argue that the focus should be on targeting dealers and traffickers, rather than treating victims as criminals. The literature review also highlights the role of Interpol in managing the cross-border movement of drugs. Poverty, corruption, and economic challenges in Zimbabwe contribute to drug trafficking, with unemployed youth viewing drug selling as a form of employment.

Border posts such as Nyamapanda, Chibobo, and Beitbridge are known for drug smuggling, indicating the existence of established networks that need to be disrupted. Effective prevention requires cooperation among law enforcement forces across neighbouring countries to share information and dismantle

distribution networks. A well-resourced Interpol team supported by transparent national police forces could play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of drug abuse.

The commonly misused substances in Zimbabwe are Mutoriro and marijuana, primarily abused by criminals and illegal miners (amakorokoza) engaged in risky mining practices. There is a belief that drug use among troops, artisanal miners, and criminals enhances their bravery and ruthlessness when committing crimes such as murder and illegal mining. Overall, the literature review highlights the challenges faced in implementing international standards for drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation in Zimbabwe. It emphasizes the need for affordable rehabilitation services, support programs for integration into the community, a rehabilitative approach instead of criminalizing addicts, and collaborative efforts among law enforcement forces to tackle drug trafficking networks.

METHODOLOGY

This study analysed twenty – five studies of Zimbabwean literature on drug abuse from 2016 – 2024 to establish gaps that need to be addressed to proffer workable strategies to address the scourge. Studying literature was appropriate as it helped researchers to gather facts and data to inform intervention strategies and recommendations for prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and support for victims of drug and substance abuse. The literature to do with drug abuse and rehabilitation in Zimbabwe was the source of this study.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

How the youth are initiated into drug and substance abuse

Social media plays a significant role in reaching a large number of current and potential users of illicit drugs and substances. Alsulimani (2018) conducted a study that found young adults inviting friends to drug and alcohol parties through social media. Another study from the United States conducted by Nesi, Rothenberg, Husoong, and Jackson (2017) revealed that adolescents exposed to drug and alcohol abuse images on social media were three times more likely to abuse alcohol and four times more likely to abuse marijuana. Research studies have consistently shown a significant correlation between social media usage and drug and substance abuse among young adults (Alsulimani, 2018). This correlation arises from activities such as posting alcohol-related images, selling illicit drugs and substances, facilitating communication between dealers and customers, and advertising parties where drugs are abused (Nesi, Rothenberg, Husoong, & Jackson, 2017).

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, illicit drug markets are expanding (UDOC, 2018). The youth in Zimbabwe are technologically savvy, and drugs are marketed online (UDOC, 2018). Non-prescription drugs, including cough syrups and tablets, are sold on the black market. The strained medical care system in Zimbabwe,

coupled with increasing mental health problems, exacerbates the situation. As a result, the youth are resorting to innovation in producing and manufacturing new psychoactive drugs and substances. Research studies conducted by Ohannessian, Christine McCauley, et al. (2017) also found a significant association between substance use and social media usage. Young adults who spend a considerable amount of time on social media every day are more likely to engage in substance use, particularly among women. Social media usage increases the chances of experiencing depression, anxiety, distress, and loneliness, which may contribute to drug abuse and even thoughts of suicide. On the other hand, social media can also serve as a source of recovery from addiction, as it provides an outlet for emotions and a source of support.

Drugs that are commonly abused by the youth

Research conducted in Harare CBD indicates that young people frequently misuse substances such as glue, broncho-clear, mangemba, cane spirit, marijuana, codeine, and methamphetamine (crystal meth) cocaine (Zimbabwe National Drug Master Plan, 2020; Mukwenha et al., 2021; Muzuva, Gwiza, & Mudangwe, 2024). In Zimbabwe, the most commonly misused drugs among young people are marijuana, alcohol, methamphetamine (locally known as mutoriro), and sex-enhancing substances, excluding mixtures manufactured by young people in the area (Muzuva, Gwiza, & Mudangwe, 2024). Locally cultivated marijuana is easily accessible to young people.

The abuse of drugs in Zimbabwe also depends on the socioeconomic status of the family. Young people from affluent families tend to use hard drugs such as "ecstasy," methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, LSD, and GHB, which are expensive. On the other hand, street kids often rely on inhalants such as glue, which is relatively cheap. It is important to note that almost all youth, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are vulnerable to substance abuse. However, due to the lack of a national monitoring system for substance use in the country, there is no statistical data available from research studies on which substances are most commonly used in Zimbabwe and the extent of substance use disorders (Marandure, Mhizha, Wilson, & Nhunzvi, 2019).

How the youth have access to illicit drugs and substances

The youth in Zimbabwe have easy access to illicit drugs and substances due to various factors. One contributing factor is the prevalence of vending within families, as almost every family in Zimbabwe survives as a vendor. This results in drugs being brought to the doorstep of schools and homes, often in the absence of parents (Zvira, 2024). The youth are frequently left unsupervised, making it easier for them to obtain drugs.

Another factor is the use of social media, which has increased the dissemination and marketing of drugs. Through social media platforms, the circulation and distribution of drugs are facilitated, making them easily accessible to the youth (Zvira, 2024). Unfortunately, the Zimbabwean youth lack knowledge of media literacy skills, and there is limited dialogue on drug and substance abuse, further exacerbating the problem

(Chinangure, 2018).

The youth needs to understand how drug-related abuse is treated in different countries. While drug and substance abuse may be considered personal freedom in some Western countries, in Zimbabwe, it is punishable by law (Zvira, 2024). The lack of media literacy skills and limited dialogue on drug abuse contribute to the youth's lack of awareness about the legal consequences of drug abuse.

The education system in Zimbabwe and parenting styles are also failing to equip young kids with the necessary life skills to navigate the influence of social media (Chinangure, 2018). This further hampers their ability to make informed decisions regarding drug and substance abuse.

Why Zimbabwe is a lucrative destination for illicit drugs and substances

Zimbabwe presents a lucrative destination for illicit drugs and substances due to various reasons. One significant factor is the circumstances that force many families to neglect their guiding role, leaving children without the necessary psychosocial support they need to feel secure (Zvira, 2024). This sense of insecurity and loneliness makes the youth more susceptible to seeking solace in drugs and substances.

How the youth who abuse drugs and substances are treated

When it comes to the treatment of youth who abuse drugs and substances in Zimbabwe, there are significant challenges. Studies have shown that addiction creates collateral damage to social relationships and often leads to family breakdown (UNODC, 2018). In Zimbabwe, there are stigmas associated with drug abuse, and families may find it difficult to tolerate family members who are addicts (Zimoyo, 2020). As a result, family ties are destroyed, and young addicts are often banished and thrown out of their homes. Rehabilitation should be available to every victim of substance abuse, but the cost of treatment is often prohibitive, and only a few individuals have access to rehabilitation centres (Zvira, 2024). The church is one place that has accepted drug and substance abuse victims, providing pastoral counseling and assistance with integration (Chikwanah, 2019). However, the availability of such support is limited.

In other countries, numerous NGOs assist with the rehabilitation, education, training, and counseling of addicts (UNODC, 2018). Unfortunately, in Zimbabwe, only a few NGOs, such as the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network [ZCLDN] and Drugs and Substance Abuse [CASADA], have managed to register and get accreditation to operate in this space (Maraire, Chethiyar, & Jasni, 2020). The Department of Social Services has failed to approve accreditations for most NGOs focused on the treatment of drug and substance abuse, further limiting the availability of affordable services.

How drugs and substances are distributed and actions taken to address this

The distribution of drugs and substances in Zimbabwe involves various channels. Community response plays a crucial role in addressing the issue, but the level of desperation within communities has rendered them somewhat ineffective (UDOC, 2018). One of the worst scenarios is witnessed at border posts, where drug lords have involved ordinary people and even government officials in drug trafficking (Zvira, 2024).

Zimbabwean pharmacists are also complicit in the distribution of drugs and substances. Medications that require prescriptions, such as sedatives, are sold without a prescription or by vendors (Zvira, 2024).

Additionally, other substances like ethanol have been used to make musombodia, an alcoholic drug that causes hallucinations and dehydration. To address the distribution of drugs and substances, it is crucial to strengthen community responses (UDOC, 2018). Additionally, stricter enforcement of laws against drug and substance trafficking, use, and abuse is necessary. The Zimbabwean government has proposed the establishment of a Drug and Substance Agency Bill to establish additional security services specializing in drug and substance abuse elimination (Newsday, 2024). Coordinated efforts with other support services and addressing the underlying economic challenges and lack of opportunities for the youth are also vital aspects of tackling this issue effectively.

Distribution of Drugs and Substances

The distribution of drugs and substances can be categorized into two groups: legal distribution and illegal distribution. Many young people visit pharmacies without a prescription to purchase cough syrups and tablets, which they use to create mixtures (Maraire, Chethiyar & Jasni, 2020). Alcohol is readily available in shops and is often bought and taken to private functions organized by young individuals, such as parties involving sex and drug abuse (known as vusi parties). Studies (Maraire, Chethiyar & Jasni, 2020) have revealed that some parents have managed to raise school fees by selling drugs on the streets, implying that children inherit drug use from their families.

The second method of distribution is illegal. Most drugs are contraband and are distributed in specific locations known to addicts (Maraire, Chethiyar & Jasni, 2020). Young people are often referred to as these secret places by their peers. The study also revealed a concerning point: law enforcement agencies are involved in the sale and distribution of illicit substances. Poverty and desperation play a role in drawing the police and law enforcement agencies into this illicit trade. They earn very low salaries, which often fail to meet their basic needs. Interestingly, many of them drive expensive cars. Despite this, no questions are raised about the source of their income, which suggests their involvement in facilitating the drug trade to sustain their livelihoods.

Youth in universities and tertiary institutions are introduced to drug abuse through their peers from the very beginning of their studies. Welcome parties held in clubs often revolve around substance abuse, defining the status of the participants. The role of the police and the church in promoting awareness campaigns in schools has been highlighted by studies. However, most of these initiatives focus on promoting zero tolerance for drugs by law enforcement agencies, which exacerbates fear and stigma. Consequently, open dialogue and debates on substance abuse are hindered, and many victims choose not to seek help due to the fear of punishment and the associated stigma.

Initiatives aimed at promoting peace in war-torn regions of the world can help reduce the demand for illicit drugs. Evidence from other studies indicates that areas affected by war become markets for illicit drugs.

Psychoactive drugs are known to provide soldiers with the courage and resilience required on the front lines. For example, evidence suggests that arresting drug dealers in an environment with limited employment opportunities can deter people from earning a living through drug sales. In Zim Metro News, Kayz (2024) published a story about a woman who was rearrested for selling cocaine just two weeks after being charged with the offense. This scenario further demonstrates that unless the economic situation in Zimbabwe improves, the use of drugs as a source of income for families will persist.

Due to poverty and frustration among the youth, Zimbabwe has become a transit zone for drugs (Mazuru, 2018). On May 1, 2024, the Chronicle reported the arrest of a man at RG Mugabe International Airport for smuggling heroin to India. Another arrest involved the transit of heroin to India, as reported by Zaremba (2022) in the Herald. A Brazilian national was apprehended for smuggling heroin with a street value of USD 46 million, which was intended for distribution through syndicates that were also arrested at RG Mugabe International Airport (Zaremba, 2022). If not managed properly, this situation can have severe mental health consequences for the youth.

According to Zvira (2016), drugs are smuggled into Zimbabwe from Mozambique, Malawi, and South Africa. Zimbabwe serves as a convenient transit corridor for drug trafficking (Mazuru, 2018). Breaking the drug distribution syndicate is extremely challenging due to the involvement of powerful individuals, including politicians, truck drivers, police officers, and ordinary citizens. For instance, News 24 reported that a bus heading to Cape Town was intercepted, and Khat worth R116, 400.00 was discovered. Additionally, a truck registered in Malawi and carrying 4 tons of marijuana was intercepted in Harare (Herald, 2024). Such large quantities cannot be transported across borders without the involvement of powerful individuals. Others claim that they have supported their families by selling drugs. In the most overcrowded older suburbs, young people are initiated into substance abuse at a very young age. If they are sent for rehabilitation, they are often reintegrated into the same environment where they can easily relapse due to continued involvement in drug trading.

To break the chain of drug distribution, it is essential to report any suspicious drug abuse-related activities. According to Nhapi (2019), the fight against drug and substance abuse will never succeed if known drug distribution syndicates are not acted upon. The sale and distribution of substances have generated income for families to pay fees and buy food in a country with limited job opportunities. Therefore, combating illicit drugs requires a multi-sectoral approach that is transparent, efficient, and supportive, providing basic needs for citizens. Unless these social issues are addressed, the problem of substance abuse will worsen.



POLICY AND INTERVENTION ANALYSIS

The issue of drug and substance abuse has received significant attention from policymakers and various stakeholders. However, there are concerns regarding policy implementation. For example, the Zimbabwe National Drug Master Plan, created in 2020, was not effectively implemented due to insufficient funding (Unicef, 2023). Adequate financial resources are crucial for the success of any efforts to combat drug abuse.

The government of Zimbabwe has overlooked the fact that individuals who abuse substances and drugs deserve recognition under human rights laws. These individuals are being denied their human rights as they are treated as criminals (Muguti, 2023). Instead of assisting them in their recovery, they are being punished and given jail sentences. The Dangerous Drugs Act and the Criminal Code Ch.9: 23 s157 criminalize the use of substances, even in small quantities for personal use. Consequently, many substance abusers go into hiding to avoid punishment, hindering productive dialogue to address this issue. Section 76 (1) of the Zimbabwean constitution stipulates that all citizens have the right to healthcare. Unfortunately, youth who abuse drugs and substances are unable to access treatment. Despite the constitutional rights to treatment and rehabilitation for drug addicts, these youth face stigma and discrimination, leading to relapse and deterioration due to the lack of proper treatment.

CONCLUSION

The interconnectedness of individuals through social media and the internet has facilitated the drug and substance abuse business. Poor socio-economic conditions and corruption have given rise to criminal networks that facilitate the drug trade, generating revenue. Impoverished and war-torn countries often serve as transit routes for the distribution of illicit drugs to global markets. In Zimbabwe, drug abuse is driven not only by choice but also by desperation, stress, loneliness, and a lack of opportunities. Most individuals involved in drug abuse would have avoided it if given the choice, to evade prosecution. Parents need the skills to effectively communicate with young children about identifying signs of substance and drug abuse and to engage in discussions about drugs. However, many parents lack technological proficiency, as most drug-related information is disseminated through the internet. It is essential to use local languages to package drug awareness messages, catering to the linguistic diversity of indigenous language speakers. Additionally, research has shown that some indigenous languages lack standardized writing systems, which hinders their inclusion in drug awareness campaigns.

The deteriorating Zimbabwean economy poses a significant challenge. With an unemployment rate of over 90%, citizens have become vulnerable to illicit means of survival. The trafficking of Zimbabwe's mineral resources, lack of means of production, a broken law and order system, and corruption have created an environment where resource management, opportunity creation, and transparent policing systems are neglected. It is only a matter of time before drug lords, corrupt officials, and rogue businesspeople exploit the nation's potential and undermine its ability to support its citizens. Unemployment, particularly among

the youth, has driven them toward drug and substance abuse. In a struggling economy, selling illicit drugs becomes the only viable option. Fighting drug and substance abuse cannot succeed without addressing the root causes of this situation. Evidence indicates the involvement of key individuals such as politicians, police, and government officials in drug distribution networks.

The study concludes that arresting drug traffickers, dealers, and abusers is not the most effective strategy for reducing drug and substance abuse. The problem of drug abuse is a symptom of serious challenges in the country that must be addressed. A forward-thinking approach is necessary to tackle the underlying causes that force citizens into desperation, leading them to believe that selling and marketing illicit drugs is the solution to their economic hardships. By focusing on addressing the ailing economy, social issues associated with a shrinking economy, such as drug and substance abuse, can naturally be alleviated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce a curriculum that covers drug and substance abuse to raise awareness among students from an early age about the dangers of substance abuse.
- Establish parenting groups in communities to provide education on parenting practices that address the challenges of the 21st century.
- Continue to involve the church in integrating individuals who have undergone rehabilitation into society.
- Revitalize and strengthen the public health system, ensuring the availability of adequate facilities and affordable services to effectively combat drug abuse. Increase the number of counsellors in prisons and rehabilitation centres in Zimbabwe to cater to a larger population.
- Encourage the establishment of rehabilitation centres on church premises, where individuals can receive support and treatment without fear of prosecution, as the church is generally accepting of everyone and promotes social integration and repentance.
- Propose the initiation of hands-on skills development projects to assist former addicts in starting their own enterprises.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Further research is needed to establish statistical evidence on the most abused drugs among university students and the sources from which they obtain them. Such evidence would help focus interventions on the drugs and substances that have the most detrimental impact on students' mental health.

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