



Review of Drug Abuse in Nigeria: A Socioeconomic Burden and Public Health Threat

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ABSTRACT

Drug abuse represents a critical public health emergency and developmental challenge in Nigeria, with escalating prevalence rates and profound socioeconomic consequences. Recent epidemiological studies suggest Nigeria may be confronting one of Africa's most severe substance abuse crises, though a comprehensive analysis of its multidimensional impact remains inadequately documented in scholarly literature. This systematic review employed secondary data analysis methodology, synthesizing evidence from 45 peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and international databases published between 2015 and 2024. The syndemic nature of drug abuse in Nigeria appears deeply embedded within structural determinants, including poverty (42% prevalence), youth unemployment (53% among graduates), and inadequate mental health infrastructure (fewer than 150 psychiatrists nationwide). These findings suggest that effective interventions must integrate public health approaches with socioeconomic development strategies, addressing underlying determinants rather than merely treating manifestations. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs and economic impact assessments to better inform policy responses. Drug abuse in Nigeria constitutes a complex developmental challenge requiring multisectoral approaches that bridge public health, economic policy, and social welfare domains. Strategic responses should prioritize evidence-based prevention, treatment infrastructure expansion, and addressing structural determinants through poverty reduction and youth empowerment initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The escalating crisis of drug abuse in Nigeria presents a complex public health dilemma with far-reaching socioeconomic implications that demand critical scholarly attention. Recent epidemiological data suggest Nigeria may be confronting one of West Africa's most severe substance abuse emergencies, with prevalence rates increasing disproportionately among youth populations (Abdulkadir & Qulsum, 2023). While substance use disorders historically received limited policy priority, emerging evidence indicates their developmental impact may substantially impede Nigeria's progress toward achieving key sustainable development goals, particularly those related to health, poverty reduction, and economic growth.

The theoretical framing of this analysis draws from both the social ecological model and the political economy of health perspective, which together provide nuanced understanding of the multifactorial determinants driving drug abuse patterns in the Nigerian context. These frameworks facilitate examination of how macro-level structural factors including poverty, unemployment, and governance challenges interact with community, relational, and individual-level influences to create vulnerability to substance abuse (Abdulkadir & Qulsum, 2023). Such conceptual integration appears particularly vital for understanding the Nigerian situation, where historical antecedents including colonial legacies, structural adjustment programs, and persistent governance deficiencies have collectively shaped the contemporary drug landscape.

Historical Context and Evolution

The historical trajectory of drug abuse in Nigeria reflects complex interactions between global drug markets, local socioeconomic conditions, and evolving cultural practices. Whereas traditional societies employed naturally occurring substances primarily for medicinal and ritual purposes, contemporary patterns reveal a disturbing shift toward synthetic drugs and non-medical use of prescription pharmaceuticals (Abdulkadir & Qulsum, 2023). This transition seems to have accelerated following the 1980s economic crises, which exacerbated poverty and diminished legitimate opportunities for youth, creating conditions ripe for substance misuse as both coping mechanism and economic activity.

Within this historical continuum, the profound transformation of Nigeria's position within global drug trafficking networks warrants consideration. From primarily serving as a transit corridor in the 1990s, the country has evolved into a significant consumption market, with local production of certain substances increasingly documented. This shift corresponds with broader socioeconomic transformations including rapid urbanization, declining traditional family structures, and rising youth unemployment all potentially contributing to heightened vulnerability to substance abuse.

Problem Statement

The central problem this review addresses is the escalating burden of drug abuse in Nigeria and its multifarious impacts on public health and socioeconomic development. Current responses appear fragmented and inadequate, often emphasizing law enforcement approaches over public health strategies despite limited evidence of their effectiveness (Uwakwe & Makanjuola, 2020). This analytical review seeks to synthesize available evidence on the societal impact of drug abuse, develop conceptual frameworks for understanding its determinants and consequences, and propose evidence-informed strategies for mitigation.

The scholarly significance of this analysis lies in its systematic integration of disparate evidence streams to present a comprehensive picture of Nigeria's drug abuse crisis. By situating the problem within broader theoretical discussions about development, public health, and social policy, this review contributes to ongoing academic conversations about effective responses to complex health and social challenges in resource-constrained settings.

Research Questions

This review addresses several interconnected questions:

1. How does drug abuse in Nigeria function as both cause and consequence of socioeconomic disadvantage?
2. What structural factors perpetuate the country's escalating substance abuse crisis despite policy interventions?
3. How might public health approaches be more effectively integrated with development strategies to reduce drug-related harms?

In examining these questions, this analysis adopts a critical perspective that challenges simplistic explanations of drug abuse as merely individual moral failing, instead foregrounding the complex interplay of structural, economic, and historical factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Drug Abuse

The complex etiology of drug abuse necessitates theoretical frameworks that accommodate multiple determinants and their interactions. The social ecological model provides a particularly useful analytical lens for understanding how individual, relationship, community, and societal factors combine to influence drug use patterns (Abdulkadir & Qulsum, 2023). At the individual level, factors including mental health status, genetic predisposition, and personal trauma history may create vulnerability. These individual factors nevertheless remain inextricably embedded within broader social contexts family dysfunction, peer influence, community norms, and availability of substances which collectively shape drug use behaviors (Oshodi & Aina, 2022; Salisu & Owoseni, 2021).

Complementing this perspective, the political economy framework facilitates critical examination of how macroeconomic policies, governance structures, and resource distribution create conditions conducive to drug abuse. In the Nigerian context, this perspective appears particularly relevant given the

country's experience with oil wealth alongside persistent poverty and inequality (Adebowale & Ogunode, 2022). The fundamental tension between Nigeria's substantial natural resource wealth and its limited investment in social services, including healthcare and education, may represent an important structural determinant of the drug abuse crisis. This analytical approach helps explain why certain populations bear disproportionate burdens of substance-related harm, moving beyond individual-level explanations to consider how power relations and economic systems distribute vulnerability unequally across the population (Akani & Nwefoh, 2021).

Epidemiological Patterns and Trends

Recent epidemiological evidence suggests Nigeria faces a rapidly evolving drug abuse crisis with distinctive regional and demographic variations. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2018 National Survey of Drug Use in Nigeria revealed that approximately 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15 - 64 years had used psychoactive substances for non-medical purposes, with cannabis, pharmaceutical opioids, and codeine-containing cough syrups representing the most commonly abused substances. More concerning perhaps is the demographic concentration among youth, with those aged 25 - 39 years showing highest prevalence rates, potentially reflecting intersections with Nigeria's youth unemployment crisis (U.N.O.D.C., 2023).

Emerging data further suggest concerning shifts in substance preference and use patterns, with increasing reports of tramadol misuse, synthetic cannabinoids, and methamphetamine consumption, particularly in urban centers (Babalola & Adelekan, 2020). These epidemiological transitions appear to parallel global trends while maintaining distinctly local characteristics, including the prominent role of prescription pharmaceuticals within the spectrum of abused substances (Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria, 2023). The regional variation in drug use patterns with the North showing higher rates of pharmaceutical opioid misuse while the South reports more cannabis and stimulant use underscores the importance of contextual factors including cultural norms, accessibility, and economic opportunities in shaping local drug landscapes (Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria, 2023).

Socioeconomic Determinants and Consequences

The reciprocal relationship between drug abuse and socioeconomic disadvantage represents a critical focus of scholarly inquiry. On one hand, poverty, unemployment, and limited educational opportunities function as potent risk factors for substance initiation and problematic use. Nigerian studies have consistently demonstrated disproportionate prevalence of drug abuse among unemployed youth (53%), out-of-school adolescents, and those experiencing economic hardship (Abdulkadir & Qulsum, 2023). This association may reflect both the psychological distress of economic exclusion and the limited alternative opportunities for income generation or meaningful social participation.

Conversely, drug abuse appears to exacerbate socioeconomic vulnerability through multiple pathways, including health complications,

reduced productivity, stigma, and diversion of household resources to substance purchase rather than basic needs (Eneh & Ogunlesi, 2019). The economic burden on families includes both direct costs of substance purchase and treatment expenses, alongside indirect costs from lost productivity and caregiving responsibilities. At the macroeconomic level, substance abuse reduces the productive workforce, increases healthcare expenditures, and potentially diminishes human capital development, particularly in a country where over 60% of the population is under 25 years old (Akani & Nwefoh, 2021; Eneh & Ogunlesi, 2019).

Public Health Implications

The population health impact of drug abuse in Nigeria extends beyond individual users to families, communities, and the healthcare system more broadly. Substance use disorders significantly contribute to Nigeria's burden of disease, particularly through associations with mental health conditions, infectious diseases, and intentional and unintentional injuries. The comorbid presence of substance use disorders with conditions including depression, psychosis, and HIV/AIDS complicates clinical management and typically worsens health outcomes for both conditions (Gureje & Oladeji, 2022). This syndemic relationship presents challenges in a healthcare system already characterized by limited specialist services with fewer than 150 psychiatrists serving a population exceeding 200 million (Gureje & Oladeji, 2022).

The health system burden includes not only direct treatment costs for substance use disorders but also substantial expenses associated with managing substance-related health complications, including psychosis, liver cirrhosis, injuries, and infectious diseases. This burden falls disproportionately on tertiary healthcare facilities, which often lack specialized addiction treatment capacity (Ibrahim & Pate, 2021). The preventive care gap is particularly concerning, with limited implementation of evidence-based harm reduction strategies such as needle exchange programs or medication-assisted treatment despite their demonstrated effectiveness in other settings. This implementation failure reflects both resource constraints and persistent stigma regarding substance use disorders within healthcare settings (Ibrahim & Pate, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology to synthesize existing evidence on drug abuse in Nigeria, with emphasis on its socioeconomic dimensions and public health implications. The review followed established guidelines for systematic evidence synthesis, including transparent search strategies, explicit inclusion criteria, and systematic data extraction procedures. This methodological approach was selected to comprehensively integrate diverse evidence streams while minimizing bias in study selection and interpretation.

The analytical framework incorporated both quantitative and qualitative evidence, recognizing that the complex phenomena under investigation require an understanding of both statistical patterns and lived experiences. This

methodological pluralism aligns with emerging best practices in health policy research, particularly for addressing complex public health challenges with multifaceted determinants and consequences. The review further adopted a critical interpretive perspective that examines not only what the evidence reveals but also how knowledge production about drug abuse in Nigeria has been shaped by historical, political, and economic factors.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The evidence identification process encompassed multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, African Journals Online, and PsycINFO, supplemented by manual searches of reference lists and consultations with subject matter experts. Search strategies combined relevant keywords, including "drug abuse," "substance use," "Nigeria," "socioeconomic," "public health," and related terms to identify potentially relevant literature. The temporal scope focused primarily on studies published between 2015 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance, though seminal earlier works were included where they provided important historical context or theoretical foundations (Ogundipe & Amadi, 2023).

The inclusion criteria encompassed empirical studies conducted in Nigeria, review articles addressing drug abuse in Nigeria or comparable contexts, government reports, and international organization publications containing relevant data. The exclusion criteria eliminated editorials, commentaries without original data, and studies with methodological limitations that compromised validity. This systematic process yielded 45 primary sources that formed the core evidence base for this review, supplemented by secondary sources providing contextual or theoretical insights.

Analytical Approach

The data analysis incorporated both descriptive and analytical components, beginning with systematic extraction of key information from included studies, followed by thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and conceptual insights. The analytical process gave attention to contextual factors that might explain variations in findings across different settings or populations, recognizing that drug abuse patterns and impacts are necessarily shaped by their social, economic, and cultural contexts.

The integrative synthesis sought to develop conceptual models explaining relationships between drug abuse and socioeconomic factors, with attention to bidirectional pathways and potential moderating variables. These models were subsequently refined through iterative examination of the evidence, with attention to both supporting data and discordant findings that might challenge initial interpretations. This analytic rigor enhances the theoretical contribution of the review while providing a foundation for evidence-informed policy recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prevalence and Patterns of Drug Abuse

The synthesized evidence reveals concerning patterns of drug abuse across Nigeria, with recent estimates suggesting that approximately 14.3% of the adult population engages in non-medical substance use. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit substance with 10.8% prevalence, followed by pharmaceutical opioids (4.7%) and codeine-containing cough syrup (2.4%). These aggregate figures nevertheless mask significant demographic variations, with particularly high rates among young adults aged 25-39 years (25.8%), a demographic cohort that also experiences Nigeria's highest unemployment rates.

The geographical distribution of substance use shows distinct regional patterns, potentially reflecting availability, cultural factors, and economic conditions. The northern states demonstrate higher rates of pharmaceutical opioid misuse, possibly related to proximity to trafficking routes and traditional medical practices that incorporate these substances. Conversely, southern states show a higher prevalence of cannabis and stimulant use, potentially associated with different social contexts and availability patterns. These regional variations underscore the importance of contextualized interventions rather than one-size-fits-all approaches to drug abuse prevention and treatment.

Economic Burden Analysis

The comprehensive economic analysis of drug abuse in Nigeria reveals substantial costs across multiple sectors, with an estimated total economic burden exceeding ₦4.8 trillion (\$5.8 billion) annually (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Productivity losses represent the largest component (₦4.2 trillion), reflecting both reduced workforce participation and impaired productivity among active substance users. Healthcare costs account for approximately ₦650 billion, encompassing both direct treatment expenses and management of substance-related health complications (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These economic estimates likely represent conservative figures given the underreporting of substance-related problems and limited accounting for informal healthcare expenditures.

The distributional impact of these economic costs appears highly inequitable, with poor households experiencing a disproportionate burden relative to income. Low-income families affected by substance abuse spend approximately 28% of household income on substance-related expenses, including both substance purchase and healthcare costs, compared to 9% among higher-income households. This regressive economic impact potentially exacerbates existing inequalities, creating cycles of disadvantage where substance abuse both results from and reinforces poverty.

Public Health Consequences

The population health analysis demonstrates a substantial burden from substance-related disorders, particularly among young adults who experience the highest prevalence rates. Mental health conditions represent the most common comorbidity, with 42.7% of persons with substance use disorders

meeting diagnostic criteria for at least one additional mental health condition. The syndemic relationship between substance abuse and infectious diseases is particularly concerning, with people who inject drugs demonstrating HIV prevalence rates of 9.8% compared to 1.5% in the general population.

The health system impact includes substantial strain on already limited mental health services, with substance-related disorders accounting for approximately 28% of psychiatric admissions nationwide. Specialized treatment capacity remains severely limited, with only 11 dedicated drug treatment facilities serving the entire country, a dramatic inadequacy given treatment demand. The prevention gap is equally concerning, with minimal implementation of evidence-based harm reduction strategies despite their proven effectiveness in comparable settings.

Conceptual Framework of Determinants and Consequences

The integrative analysis supported the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework illustrating the complex pathways linking drug abuse with socioeconomic and health outcomes. This framework positions drug abuse within a complex system of bidirectional relationships with poverty, unemployment, educational disruption, and health consequences. Critical pathways include self-medication of psychological distress resulting from economic hardship, self-perpetuating cycles where substance abuse diminishes employability, and intergenerational transmission through family disruption and childhood trauma.

The conceptual innovation of this framework lies in its integration of individual-level factors with broader structural determinants, including governance deficiencies, economic policies, and global drug markets. This systems perspective helps explain the persistent nature of Nigeria's drug abuse crisis despite periodic interventions, suggesting that effective responses must address multiple system levels simultaneously rather than targeting isolated components.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The synthesized evidence suggests that drug abuse in Nigeria represents not merely a public health concern but a multifaceted developmental challenge with profound implications for human welfare, economic progress, and social stability. The observed prevalence patterns align closely with socioeconomic indicators, including unemployment rates and poverty indices, supporting theoretical propositions about the relationship between structural disadvantage and substance abuse (Akani & Nwefoh, 2021; Nwefoh & Doka, 2020). These patterns nevertheless demonstrate complexity that resists simplistic explanation, with certain regions experiencing high substance abuse despite relative economic advantage, suggesting the importance of additional factors, including cultural norms, availability, and governance.

The economic burden estimates, while necessarily approximate given data limitations, clearly indicate that drug abuse imposes substantial costs on Nigerian society, costs that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations. This regressive economic impact potentially creates vicious cycles

where substance abuse exacerbates the very conditions that contribute to its initiation, including poverty, limited opportunity, and psychological distress (Odejide & Morakinyo, 2019). These findings suggest the need for comprehensive approaches that address both the immediate health consequences of drug abuse and its underlying socioeconomic determinants.

Theoretical Implications

The conceptual frameworks developed through this review contribute to the theoretical understanding of drug abuse in several important ways. First, they challenge individual-focused explanations of substance abuse by demonstrating the powerful role of structural factors, including economic policies, governance quality, and social service availability. Second, they propose reciprocal causality between drug abuse and socioeconomic disadvantage, suggesting that these relationships form complex systems rather than linear pathways. Third, they highlight the importance of contextual mediation, whereby global phenomena like drug abuse manifest distinctly within specific national and local contexts based on historical, cultural, and institutional factors.

These theoretical insights carry important implications for how drug abuse might be conceptualized within broader development discourse. Rather than treating substance abuse as peripheral to development agendas, this analysis suggests it should be recognized as both cause and consequence of development challenges, including poverty, inequality, and weak governance. This conceptual integration could help mobilize broader policy attention and resources for addressing drug abuse within comprehensive development strategies rather than isolated health or law enforcement interventions.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The policy analysis derived from this review suggests that effective responses to Nigeria's drug abuse crisis require integrated approaches that combine public health strategies with socioeconomic interventions. The limited effectiveness of predominantly law enforcement-oriented approaches highlights the need for a paradigm shift toward evidence-based public health strategies that prioritize harm reduction, treatment access, and prevention. These approaches should be complemented by broader initiatives addressing the structural determinants of drug abuse, particularly youth unemployment and educational deficiencies.

Specific policy recommendations emerging from this analysis include:

1. **Health System Strengthening:** Expand substance abuse treatment capacity through integration into primary healthcare, training of non-specialist providers, and task-sharing approaches that maximize limited specialist resources.
2. **Prevention Infrastructure:** Develop comprehensive school-based and community-based prevention programs that address both individual risk factors and environmental conditions contributing to substance initiation.

3. Economic Interventions: Implement targeted economic opportunities for youth, including vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and public works programs that provide alternatives to drug-related activities.
4. Research Capacity: Strengthen local research capacity to generate contextually appropriate evidence, particularly regarding intervention effectiveness, economic impact, and emerging drug trends.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This comprehensive review has demonstrated that drug abuse in Nigeria constitutes a complex public health and developmental challenge with far-reaching implications for population health, economic progress, and social wellbeing. The multidimensional nature of the problem requires integrated approaches that bridge traditional sectoral boundaries, combining public health interventions with socioeconomic initiatives that address underlying determinants. The conceptual frameworks developed through this analysis provide useful heuristics for understanding the complex pathways linking drug abuse with socioeconomic factors, highlighting the need for comprehensive rather than fragmented responses.

The escalating trends in substance abuse, particularly among youth populations, demand urgent policy attention and resource allocation commensurate with the scale of the problem. Effective responses will require political commitment at the highest levels, multi-sectoral coordination, and engagement with affected communities in the development of contextually appropriate solutions. While significant challenges exist, the potential returns on investment, including improved health outcomes, enhanced economic productivity, and greater social stability, justify a substantial commitment to addressing Nigeria's drug abuse crisis through evidence-informed, comprehensive approaches.

FURTHER STUDY

This review acknowledges several methodological limitations that should inform interpretation of its findings. The reliance on secondary data introduces potential biases related to underreporting, measurement variability, and publication trends that may overrepresent certain populations or regions. The evidence base regarding drug abuse in Nigeria remains characterized by significant gaps, particularly regarding intervention effectiveness, economic costs, and long-term outcomes. These limitations necessarily constrain the conclusions that can be drawn while highlighting priorities for future research.

Important research gaps identified through this review include: limited economic costing studies that comprehensively capture societal burdens; insufficient longitudinal research examining developmental trajectories of substance use; minimal implementation science research regarding effective strategies for delivering evidence-based interventions in resource-constrained settings; and inadequate attention to potential protective factors that might inform resilience-focused interventions. Addressing these knowledge gaps would substantially enhance understanding of Nigeria's drug abuse challenge and support the development of more effective responses.

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