

Youth, Drug and Substance Abuse and Policy in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The article takes as its point of entry in youth studies, drug and substance abuse as one of the domineering 'pandemics' in Zimbabwe. Whereas globally scholarly attention on youth and drug and substance abuse is remarkable, in Zimbabwe, lacunae are enduring. Informed by research with, by and for the youth, the article reconnoitres the diverse contextual factors leading to drug and substance abuse among youth, and proffers policy options for addressing the issues. Drug and substance abuse and the requisite policy responses defy brush painting, homogeneity and unilinearity. While the government may take a central and oversight role, effective responses to youth drug and substance abuse demands a multi-stakeholder approach including youth, their representative organisations, families, communities, civil society organisations and the government.

Keywords: youth, drug abuse, substance abuse, social problem, structural disadvantage, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Drug and substance abuse is a persistent immolating pandemic especially among the young generation (Nhapi, 2019; Nhunzvi & Galvan, 2019). The problem has diverse socioeconomic implications to individuals and society (Muwanzi & Mafumbate, 2018). In Zimbabwe, abuse of drugs and substances is a problem of high concern particularly due to escalating prevalence among adolescents and youth (Maraire et al., 2020; Matutu & Mususa, 2019), referred to in this article as the young generation and the socioeconomic consequences. This generation anchors the future of society through both productive and reproductive roles. Accordingly, the decimating effect on this generation is a direct threat to society. Signifying the importance of abating drug and substance abuse among the young generation in Zimbabwe, the theme for the 2022 National Youth Day was 'Alleviate Substance and Drug Abuse by the Youth.' This youth day is held on the 21 February of each year and is hosted by the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation. Regional and global youth frameworks for example, the African Youth Charter and United Nations Youth, 2018, and forums also emphasise the importance of youth to the future of society.

The efforts by the regulatory arms of government and its associated partners (civil society organisations) to curtail drug and substance abuse are futile (Maraire et al., 2020), particularly in a context of flagging economy and predominance of the informal sector (Kabonga et al., 2021; Chipenda, 2017; Matamanda, 2019), steeping poverty and marginalisation (Nhapi & Mathende, 2019; Chidarikire, 2019), and cultural fluidity, and abating social bonds (Jones & Pierce, 2021; Begun et al., 2016). Alcohol, cannabis (*mhanje/marijuana*), crystal meth (*mutoriro*), heroin, glue, *mangemba*, *musombodia*, *maragadu*, codeine, chlorpromazine (known on the streets as Dombo (stone), Blue Diamond and Cane Spirit and cough mixtures such as histalix and broncleer, are the most commonly abused substances in Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2021).

Substance and illicit drug trafficking and use are pervasive problems in other countries (Iratzoqui, 2020; Tyler & Schmitz, 2018; Riva et al., 2018; Page et al., 2020; Bahr, 1993). This leads to deaths, mental disorders, unproductivity, and disintegrated families (Volkow, 2020). The African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) are contending with substance use. For example, in

2013, the AU developed a plan of action on drug control (2013-2017). Global institutions are also grappling with the debilitating impact of substance abuse on sustainable governance and development. Substance abuse and youth development are also principal aspects of the United Nations (UN) programming. The UN International Drug Control Programme focuses on global issues concerning drug abuse, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation (Heikkilä et al., 2020), while the World Health Organisation (WHO) set international standards for drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation (see WHO, 2019). Furthermore, the Interpol targets transnational and global movement of substances (see Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020). National, regional and global frameworks and policies for child and youth protection. Other scholars (see Chibwana, 2020, 2021) emphasise the importance of the rights, protection and empowerment of the young generation.

This paper makes inroads in the field of youth and substance use by prioritising the 15-24 year old population in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, paying particular attention to the social, economic and political contextual factors contributing to adolescent and youth development. This age group falls within the population aged 15-35 years categorised as youth according to Zimbabwe's Youth Policy. The article falls within the remit of youth studies – an area that is often underrepresented in scholarly literature. Instead of researching on youth, the paper is informed by research with and for the youth. The voices of the young generation on contemporary challenges including substance use and sustainable ways of addressing the challenges are paramount to functional futures. In mainstream policy and development responses, these population categories are often subsumed under adults consequently leading to their exclusion. Accordingly, this addresses enduring lacunae on youth voices in literature, and in understanding their situation and developing relevant responses to their diverse situations. The article provides nuanced, latest research and scholarship in this dynamic field for the benefit of various stakeholders – policy makers, researchers, counsellors, educators and so forth.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Scholars may variedly present the methods and materials used for a study. Three sections constitute this section – the study design and participants, data generation, and data analysis and reporting. Fundamental in this section are detailed explanations of and justification for each component.

Study design and the participants

Constructivism suited best the exploration of substance use by the youth and the consequent generation of policy options for addressing this social problem. This is an acknowledgement of the subjective character of human life and the significance of an exploratory design that captures the views and experiences of the youth particularly within a natural setting. Against a backdrop of the dominance of a quantitative flare in substance use research (see Thompson, 2023), in this paper the qualitative aspects were taken to the fore. This facilitated the gathering of the nuances, lived experiences and situated facets of substance use by the young generation. Other scholars (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, 479; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) support the centrality of constructivism, the associated qualitative designs and naturalistic enquiry though not in relation to substance use.

Whereas in Zimbabwe, youth is the population within the 15-35 years age category, the experiences and views of those aged 15-24 years mainly informed the article. The sample included youth who use substances drawn from three (3) high density areas: Mbare (19), Chitungwiza (12), and Highfield (9); street youth in Harare's Central Business District (CBD) who use substances (13); parents and guardians (20), with 12 being those of youth substance users; social workers (2), 1 from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, and 1 from a non-governmental organisation (NGO); Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Culture senior official (1); and representatives of youth development organisations (2). Of the youth using substances, 7 are female.

The substance users were purposively recruited through informal community networks, facilitation by a member of the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network (ZCLDN) who has been working with youth in these areas since 2011 when the organisation was established, and snowballing to attain a large number of youth participants. The significance of these sampling techniques is emphasised by various scholars of research methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The fieldwork plan was to work with 20 youth drug and substance abusers from each of the selected areas. Although this number was achieved, some were lost through attrition. Consistency with the desired agile age group (15-24 years) was achieved through preliminary assessment by the researcher and reported age.

Data generation

Prior and during data generation, ethical decisiveness had to be fulfilled. Two steps were fundamental. Firstly, review of scholarly literature on and frameworks for researching with youth. Secondly, submission of the ethical preconditions and guidelines for data generation to peer and senior researchers, organisations focusing on reduction of substance use, and youth development. These two steps were crucial in eliminating gaps in ethical preconditions, and improving the quality of fieldwork. Fulfilling researching with youth and the quest to understand substance use and the concomitant problems from a ‘youth perspective’ implied fulfilling some prerequisites. While acknowledging the methodological and ethical complexity of such research, youth’s realities could not be attained without putting them at the centre of the exploration. These included gaining access and seeking consent to conduct research, addressing gatekeeping issues, ensuring that the location and context of the study enhanced familiarity, improve youth’s feelings and the level of discussion, youth-friendly language, explanations, questioning, and formal and informal interaction. Youth research and ensuring a conducive environment for such research youth research is gaining momentum in contemporary society (Kabonga et al., 2022; Braithwaite, 2001; Kraft et al., 2001).

Iterative in-depth narrative interviews were crucial in generating data from the youth drug and substance abusers and peddlers. The interviews were essential because they created an opportunity to gather insights from both the drug and substance dealers and abusers. The context, motivations, risks and challenges of trading in and abusing drugs and substances were gathered through these interviews. Observations of the drug abusers complemented in depth interviews. Furthermore, structured interviews were executed with representatives of youth organisations and relevant government ministries and departments, and NGOs. These interviews allowed for generation of data from the other stakeholders in the fight against drug and substance abuse. In other research contexts, the efficacy of interviews, observation and other data collection methods is explored by various scholars (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Data analysis and reporting are fundamental aspects of scholarship (Hess 2019). The qualitative data were analysed using thematic, discourse and content analyses catered for analysis of qualitative data. The themes emerging from the data, the content of and discourse in the interaction and responses provided the bases for analysis in relation to the focal aim of the study. Accordingly, narratives, texts and life histories were essential in reporting qualitative data. The following section focuses on presentation and discussion of findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings are presented and discussed. Various themes could emerge from a study that interrogates drug and substance abuse in relation to youth. However, this section focuses on nine themes. These are youth, socioeconomic challenges and structural disadvantage; youth, poverty, informal sector and substance business as agency; illicit drug and substance trafficking, elites and the law; weak social bonds; drug and substance abuse, socialisation, youth culture and crime; street youth, vulnerability and abuse of

drugs and substances; drug and substance abuse and the associated psychological and behavioural problems; drug and substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour; and youth, substance use and counselling.

Youth, socioeconomic challenges and structural disadvantage

The study shows that multiple socioeconomic problems and marginalisation are core factors influencing illicit drugs and substances business and abuse among youth. All the youth included in the study emphasised that they are experiencing various structural disadvantages in relation to economic opportunities including employment and business. Such disadvantages are rooted in generational inequalities that accumulated and widened over the years. Moreover, the other stakeholders (representatives of the government, youth organisations, NGOs and other civil society organisations) explored the influence of economic crisis, inequalities and marginalisation on youth's decision to engage in use of substances and abuse of drugs, or peddling in illicit drugs and substances. In other contexts, other scholars explore how economic disadvantage is associated with drugs and substance abuse (Hyder, 2022; Theron, 2020). The implications of these findings and supporting literature is that there is a strong link between youth's decision to engage in illicit drugs and substances business or abuse. Attempts to reduce and/or eliminate these should also incorporate appropriate understanding of socioeconomic challenges and structural disadvantages relating to the economy.

Youth, poverty, informal sector and substance business as agency

The foregoing sub-section has implications for the high distribution of poverty among Zimbabwe's young generation and why they are highly concentrated in the informal sector. The informal sector is diverse (see Gukurume, 2020) and may include prohibited trade in drugs and substances. Moreover, for some youth, substances and drugs peddling is agency in a context of intensifying economic challenges and precarious livelihoods in both the formal and informal sectors. Issues relating to high poverty levels among and engagement in drugs and substances business by youth are interrogated by other scholars (Giddens, 1984; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Overall, in Zimbabwe, analysis shows that poverty intensification in a context of limited approved alternatives may lead youth to illegal activities including drug and substance deals and abuse. Substances business in various forms including hustling evinces agency and self-fashioning (Fast & Moyer, 2018; Jorgensen, 2018) against structural poverty. However, such agency is negative and it creates more problems for youth.

Illicit drug and substance trafficking, elites and the law

The proliferation of illicit drugs and substances business and abuse is due to both internal and external factors. Essential to note in this section are porous borders, unscrupulous elites, corruption, and unregulated capitalism (see Mate 2021), and how these are facilitating the drugs and substances abuse scourge. For instance, porous Beitbridge and Forbes border posts supported by corruption are allowing for unauthorised entry of drugs and substances in Zimbabwe. Some elites are behind the entry and trade of drugs and substances. They use youth to peddle the substances and drugs thereby increasing their vulnerability to abuse of the drugs and substances, and crime, and violation of their human rights (Quinlan et al., 2021). These elites have the capacity to manipulate the legal system to their advantage. Accordingly, in Zimbabwe, substance and drugs business and abuse should be understood in relation to the political economy that is controlled by the economic and political elites.

Flagging social bonds

Social scientists emphasise the importance of social bonds (Giddens, 2012). In addition, this is associated with various social bonds theories. This section is not devoted to social bonds theory but to show that weakening social bonds may cause adolescents and youth to engage in abuse of drugs and substances. For example, in the study, a significant number of youth reiterated that they started or continued to abuse drugs

and substances after parents passed on, or due to abuse by guardians, absence of family or community support. Human existence and growth is intricately associated with social bonds. Crucial to note and infuse in responses to abuse of substances and drugs by youth is the significance of reinvigorating effective social bonds at family and community levels.

Substance use, socialisation, youth culture and crime

Evidence drawn from the study shows that substance and drug abuse is increasingly becoming ‘an occupation’ among Zimbabwean youth. Central to this worrying trend are family and social predictors of substance use, youth culture, and socialisation. Most of the youth who were born of or grew up with substance-abusing parents are also abusing substances and drugs due to association and socialisation. Furthermore, youth who associate with substance peddlers or abusers are introduced to a youth culture of abusing substances and drugs and the associated criminal activities. Other scholars (Nhunzvi & Galvaan, 2020; Shahraki et al., 2019; Straussner, 2015 focusing on other contexts), focus on how youth culture and socialisation changes chances of abusing substances and drugs. These findings therefore point to the importance of understanding and addressing culture and socialisation in attempts to reduce drugs and substances abuse by any stakeholder.

Street youth, vulnerability and abuse of drugs and substances

The researcher was also interested in understanding how living on the streets and the associated vulnerability links with the abuse of drugs and substances. This was achieved through exploring the situation of street youth in Harare’s Central Business District (CBD). All the 13 argued that they abuse drugs and substances to seek solace during hard times and as entertainment. Abuse of substances and drugs is therefore a way of life and a temporary opiate in light of the diverse harsh problems they experience. In related studies, young people in Zimbabwe especially those from poor or unstable backgrounds have been identified as the major section of the population likely to live on the streets, and highly vulnerable to temptations to abuse substances and drugs or to engage in substance deals as an escape from life’s troubles. These findings are corroborated by other scholars (Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018; Pufal et al., 2017; Madhombiro et al., 2019).

Drug and substance abuse and the associated psychological and behavioural problems

The youth engaging in drugs and substance abuse, and the other participants explained various psychological and behavioural problems that are caused or intensified by such abuse. This leads to psychosocial problems that require the intervention of psychologists and psychiatrists. In extreme cases, addiction, permanent behavioural changes, brain damage and death may occur. The youth are aware of these detrimental effects but abstaining is now problematic. According to research carried out by the Health Professionals Empowerment Trust in Zimbabwe 50% of admissions to mental institutions have been attributed to substance misuse. The research singled out youth as the most affected group of individuals in the country. In Zimbabwe, over 80% of people admitted to mental institutions due to substance misuse disorders are aged between 16 and 40, and most of these are male. Accordingly, both primary and secondary research show that abuse of drugs and substances result in psychological and behavioural problems that not only affect the youth but also family and community members.

Drug and substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour

Another crucial dimension of the study is the interface of drug and substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour among adolescents and youth. The various categories of the participants reiterated that drug and substances abuse increases susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia and HIV. This dimension is topical in substance and drug abuse literature (Mataure, 2020, Phillips, 2022). Some youth substance abusers opened up to the researcher about their HIV positive

status, and failure to access health care due to affordability constraints or limited access to information on where free services are being provided. Moreover, they were frank on how they are willingly re-infecting themselves and others through engaging in unprotected sex with other persons living on the streets or commercial sex workers. These are critical concerns in public health delivery.

Youth, substance use and counselling

Pertinent to the discussion of youth and substance or drug abuse is the centrality of counselling of the abusers and survivors. The counselling service is also essential in preventing abuse of drugs and substances. While counselling is important in improving their wellbeing, most of the youth substance abusers are not seeking counselling services because they do not want to expose themselves. Public health programmes may not specifically target drug and substance abusers. Furthermore, few counsellors engage in free counselling of abusers of substances and drugs. These findings should be factored in planning and delivery of responses to substance and drug abuse.

Entry Points for Policy: Options, Challenges and Enablers

Substance use by the youth and the allied problems require urgent, concerted and multi-stakeholder responses led by the government. Central to the functioning of the stakeholders is effective multi-pronged policy and investment in reduction of substance use and drug abuse. The regulation of drugs and substances particularly possession, use and trade should be firm, rigorous and impartial. While Zimbabwe has drug laws for example, the Dangerous Drugs Act (see Chapter 15) applied separately or supported by the Criminal and Codification Act, these are insufficient in addressing (mis)use especially pertaining to prevention and treatment. Current contributions on how to address use and treat drug abusers and substance users should be incorporated in revising these laws. The policy should support joint consultations and action in matters of common interest. Border control is a critical substances policy theme. Joint country operations and active involvement of Interpol are worthwhile options for plugging cross border substances business. National and international governance are therefore focal in this regard.

Mandatory and stiff penalties for substance syndicates and traders regardless of political and economic status should accompany review of laws. Selective application of the law, harbouring of substances law offenders in the government, ruling political party (ZANU PF) and law enforcement institutions, and the 'catch and release' strategy of the Zimbabwe Republic Police and Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) should be engrained as grave violation of substances policy. The drugs and substances policy and law must be informed by dependable and large-scale research. This however does not relegate the importance of site-specific research projects and newspaper articles. Accordingly, scholars should research, document and disseminate information on substances, drugs and related issues with the aim of informing policy.

Addressing the structural basis of poverty, inequality and marginalisation through both social and economic policy has major potential in reducing some of the motivators of substance use by the youth and other groups. This can be enhanced by complementary youth sensitive social policy and economic policy. The achievement of the productive, redistributive, protective, reproductive and social compact tasks of social policy herein referred to as transformative social policy is guaranteed. Approaching social policy this way improves the breadth of the instruments, and chances of effectiveness unlike mere restriction to youth sensitive social protection. Social protection is conceptualised by Save the Children International (2015, 5) as 'the set of public policies, programmes and systems that help poor and vulnerable individuals and households to reduce their economic and social vulnerabilities, improve their ability to cope with risks and shocks, and enhance their human rights and social status'. Other scholars (see Nhapi, 2019) support social assistance to poor youth through social welfare and social work interventions to reduce substance use. Yet, transformative youth policy with its broader instruments and structural focus is a higher order pathway for guaranteeing youth socioeconomic empowerment and their reducing vulnerability.

The school is a principal agent of socialisation. Including substance use and drug abuse in education policy and curricula particularly from educational foundations is a crucial policy option. Zimbabwe can be credited for incorporating these themes in formal education for example, primary and secondary education. In other countries, the importance of the school system in reducing substance use is explored (see Bandason & Rusakaniko, 2010; Ansell, 2004; Pufal et al., 2017). In Zimbabwe and other countries, combating adolescent and youth substance use through curricula ought to be strengthened and complemented with informal education. Cohesive families and communities, and reinvigorating non-formal social policy are important particularly in a context where weakening of family and community bonds is among the major contributors to substance use by the youth. The family is a central social institution globally. Health education and promotion, and youth development should engage and contribute to programmes that inform and educate youth and others on substance and drug issues. Overall, establishing proactive responses for reducing substance use along with policy monitoring, evaluation, learning and control are important. This is corroborated by other scholars as sustainable ways of combating substance use (Nhunzvi et al., 2019; Matunhu & Matunhu, 2015).

LIMITATIONS

The experiences and views of the young generation included in this article are restricted to a particular time and the selected areas. Over time and in other geographical contexts, these could have been different. Focus was on youth aged 15-24 year old therefore the lived experiences and situated meanings reported in this article are particular to this age group therefore may not apply to all youth in Zimbabwe (categorised as the population falling within 15-35 years). Furthermore, while the young generation and adult population were drawn from a similar geographical area, the later was mainly restricted to parents, guardians and service professionals (for example, youth development specialists), particularly because focus was primarily on the former. Including other categories would have broadened the repertoire of the participants and the concomitant responses. The proclivity for agency mainly relates to generating financial benefits or coping with socioeconomic problems through substance use.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental concern of the article was to explore drug and substance use by the youth and tendering policy options for reducing and/or eliminating this social problem. The young generation is broad therefore those aged 15-24 were the prime focus. Fully acknowledging that the issues relating to the young generation and substance use are diverse and that not every data generated in the study could be incorporated, the article is crystallised around nine areas. These are youth, socioeconomic challenges and structural disadvantage; youth, poverty, informal sector and substance business as agency; illicit drug and substance trafficking, elites and the law; weak social bonds; drug and substance abuse, socialisation, youth culture and crime; street youth, vulnerability and abuse of drugs and substances; drug and substance abuse and the associated psychological and behavioural problems; drug and substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour; and youth, substance use and counselling.

The principal motivators of abusing substances and drugs are associated with various aspects. The primary findings corroborated by literature locate both the short- and long-term hemorrhaging impact of drugs and substance abuse among the youth. The future of society deemed to be anchored on the young generation, is therefore under threat. Nevertheless, the adult substance users are also affected. What then should be done to reduce substance use, improve the wellbeing of youth and thus safeguard future of society? Various policy options can be pursued bearing on their relative merits and demerits as was justified in the article. Despite the approach or strategy adopted, stakeholder networking and collaboration is essential to tap on the comparative advantages of each. Scholarly focus on youth and substance use should continue, delving on the pertinent enclaves and feeding into policy. Substance use is a major social problem requiring concerted multi-stakeholder effort. The youth are not passive or mere victims hence, the various stakeholders should

enhance their agency to dislodge drug and substance abuse.

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