

Exploring factors enabling the use of drugs and alcohol among upper secondary school pupils in Ndola District, Copper-belt Province, Zambia

Authors

* Hope NAMPUTA¹, Katentemuna Catherine MUSONDA² & Mathew NYASHANU³

Affiliations

¹Department of Public Health, Ndola District Health Office, Ndola, Zambia

²Department of Public Health, Ndola District Health Office, Ndola, Zambia

³Department of Health and Allied Professions, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham United Kingdom

* Corresponding author

* Hope NAMPUTA¹

¹Department of Public Health, Ndola District Health Office, Ndola, Zambia

Email: hope.namputa@gmail.com

Submitted on: February 14th, 2025

Published on: June 30th, 2025

ABSTRACT

Drugs and alcohol abuse is a major social and public health concern worldwide. It poses a huge burden on health care systems and affects the educational achievements of young people. Worldwide, the abuse of drugs and alcohol among young people in the general population remains higher than that of older people. In sub-Saharan Africa, substance abuse among young

people has continued to be a serious public health concern. Similarly, in Zambia, the increased cases of drugs and alcohol abuse among school-going children have equally become a major social and public health concern. This study explored factors enabling the use of drugs and alcohol among upper secondary school pupils. A mixed method research design was adopted for this study. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected using structured and semi-structured questionnaires respectively. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic approach. The study revealed that peer pressure, lack of parental guidance, stress, social media influence and accessibility of cheap drugs and alcohol were the major factors enabling the use of drugs and alcohol among pupils. The study underscores the need to engage and raise awareness on the negative impact of drugs and alcohol use among upper secondary pupils in Zambia.

Keywords: *Drugs and alcohol abuse, enablers, upper secondary school*

INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse is a widespread global problem, especially among the youth. According to WHO 2018 World Drug report, drug use among the general population shows that the extent of drug use among young people remains higher than that of older people,

(World drug report 2018). According to the United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2016, 13.8 million young people aged between 15–16 years, equivalent to 5.6 per cent of the population in that age range used cannabis at least once in the previous 12 months. In addition to drug use, adolescent alcohol use has also heightened to worrying levels globally. According to the WHO alcohol and health global status report (2018), worldwide, more than a quarter (26.5%) of all 15–19-year-olds are current drinkers, amounting to 155 million adolescents.

The causes of drug abuse may vary from continent to continent as well as country to country.

A study done by Azuz (2012) in Nepal, South Asia, revealed that the causes of drug abuse were psychological, socio-cultural, peer pressure, school and college stresses, and mass media. In addition to these, learners attributed the abuse of drugs to bad relationship with family, the need to feel relaxed, failing an exam and film stars and idols who are shown on television abusing drugs and alcohol.

In sub-Saharan Africa, substance use among adolescents has continued to be a major public health concern. A systematic review and meta-analysis on substance use among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa by Olawole et al. (2018) revealed that the overall prevalence of any substance use in sub-Saharan Africa was 41.6%, with the highest rate in Central Africa at 55.5%. The causes of drug abuse on the continent are similar

to global causes. Ashikoya and Ali (2005) attributed use of drugs among adolescents to reasons such as curiosity, feeling good, reduction of stress and feeling of being a grown up. These findings are similar to Ondieki and Mokua (2012) who carried out a similar study in Kenya and established that drug abuse could be induced by peer pressure; curiosity; personality traits; age; and accessibility and affordability of drugs.

In Zambia the number of young people abusing drugs and alcohol has risen to alarming levels. A study done by de la Torre-Luque et al. (2021) on the prevalence of addictive behaviors among adolescents from 73 low-and middle-income countries revealed that the prevalence of regular alcohol use was the highest in Zambia but the lowest in Senegal.

In contrast problematic alcohol use was more prevalent in economically developing regions such as the America while the prevalence of regular alcohol use was the highest in Zambia, a country with the highest levels of poverty and inequality globally (The World Bank, 2021).

Drug abuse among learners in Zambia is caused by several factors, including peer pressure, curiosity, as well as myths and misconceptions that when one takes drugs, they become intelligent and perform better in class (Masiye, Ndlovu & Kasonde, 2012). In another study done by Masiye and Ndlovu (2016) on drug abuse among basic and high school learners in Livingstone revealed that peer pressure, personal and

emotional problems propelled by poor parent-child relationship, and availability of cheap drugs and alcohol in the community were the main causes of drug abuse. The study also established that parents, siblings and other adults served as negative role models for initiation of drug abuse among pupils. Another study by Kangwa (2019) targeting secondary school-going learners in Lusaka Urban established that having parents and family members that drink, lack of parental involvement, poor self-control, having friends that drink, peer pressure, stress and depression were the major contributing factors to drugs and alcohol abuse.

Even though schools have been implementing education and prevention strategies to address the problem of alcohol and drug abuse among school going children, the number of children abusing drugs and alcohol in Ndola has been on the increase. Further, there are limited studies focusing on upper secondary school pupils in Zambia. Therefore, there was need for a study to assess the factors enhancing the use of drugs and alcohol among upper secondary school pupils to inform evidence based interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional mixed method research design to collect, analyze and interpret both quantitative and qualitative data. The design was considered appropriate for the study because a diverse and representative sample can be achieved within a short period of time.

Recruitment and Sample

The study population comprised of upper secondary school pupils and teachers from three (3) randomly selected schools in Ndola. A total number of 166 respondents participated in the study. The number included 150 pupils; 12 guidance teachers, 3 school administrators and 1 Drug enforcement Commissioner officer from the education department.

Simple random sampling procedure was used to select the three (3) secondary schools from which the respondents were selected. The same sampling technique was used to select one class from each chosen grade level (10 to 12). Individual learners were selected using Systematic sampling on the basis of the n th number using the formula (n th = Total population/sample size) to select the n th number from a complete class list which was provided. This technique was chosen because it availed every sample in the study population an equal chance of participating in the study, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers, School managers and DEC officers. This technique was used because these were the providers of preventive education and they possessed information pertaining to the research study. Furthermore, Snowball sampling was employed to select participants who later identified other pupils to be included in the study for focus group discussions. This procedure was adopted on the account of the sensitivity nature of the study.

Research Setting

Ndola district is situated on the Copper-belt province of Zambia and has population of about 2,795,335. In terms of schools, the district has 38 primary schools, 24 secondary schools and 120 community schools. Furthermore, the district has 27451 pupils and 3267 teachers.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The study included all upper secondary school pupils aged between 16 and 18 years who were enrolled in grade 10 to 12 with or without history of drug and alcohol abuse and consented to participate in the study from the three secondary schools namely; Main Masala, Kasenshi and Chifubu secondary schools located in Ndola district of the Copper-belt province.

The study excluded all lower secondary school pupils and some upper secondary school pupils who did not give consent to participate in the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from pupils and teachers and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 to generate tables and percentages. A semi-structured focus group discussion and a face to face interview guide were used to collect qualitative data from the learners, teachers and school managers and the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC) officer from the education department.

A semi-structured focus group discussion guide enabled the researcher to maintain consistency in data which was extracted from the participants as the same questions were asked to all participants. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions to enable the respondents to freely express themselves as they provided their views on the enablers of drug and alcohol use among upper secondary school pupils. The researcher was also able to make follow-up questions to get clarity on the information that the participants were providing. For the learners who were under the age of 18, the guidance teachers sort consent for their participation from the parents through telephone.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is defined as the systematic organization and synthesis of research data, and the testing of research hypotheses using raw data, (Polit and Hungler, 1999).

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used to analyze quantitative data. Data was first coded by assigning numerical values to responses. There after it was processed using descriptive statistics to obtain frequencies and percentages. Descriptive statistics provided simple summaries about the sample and measures.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze Qualitative data. Verbatim transcription of the data collected was done by an independent qualitative data analyst. Thereafter the steps as given by Braun and Clark (2006) were

followed. The steps include familiarization with the data set which the researcher did through reading the transcriptions thoroughly. Secondly, generation of initial codes was done followed by searching for themes. Once the themes were captured, they were reviewed and analyzed in line with the predetermined themes. This was then followed by defining and naming of the themes. The discussion was done with the inclusion of some of these themes from the original data collected in accordance with the study aims and objectives. Application of direct parts of the transcription under each theme was done in order to represent the voice of the participants and to show that the information given was by the participants and not opinions of the researcher.

Validity and reliability

To ensure validity, questions were clearly constructed to avoid ambiguity. The authors pursued an evaluation process to determine the quality of the study through the pre-testing the research instruments by conducting satisfactory in-depth interviews on a pilot sample. The strength, rationality and dependability of the data instruments were also tested by inquiring the views of the research participants on the data collection tools.

RESULTS

Social Demographic Characteristic

Characteristics	Frequency(n=140)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	74	52.9
Female	66	47.1
Total	140	100
Age		
15	17	12.1
16	40	28.6
17	45	32.1
18	20	14.3
19	14	10
20	4	2.9
Total	140	100
Respondent grade		

10	40	28.6
11	45	32.1
12	55	39.3
Total	140	100
School		
Masala Secondary	50	35.7
Kasenshi Secondary	41	29.3
Chifubu Secondary	49	35
Total	140	100

Factors enabling learners to use drugs and alcohol

This study revealed several factors enabling upper secondary pupils to use drugs and alcohol in selected schools of Ndola district. The enablers are discussed in this section.

1. Peer pressure

Teacher's views

During face to face interview one of the guidance teachers explained the following;

“Some of these learners have ended up using drugs and alcohol because of peer pressure from friends. You see teenage stage is a very critical stage there is a lot of peer pressure amongst young people and some do not know how to resist peer pressure so they end up doing what their friends in a group are doing just to fit in” (Guidance teacher 1)

Learner's views

One male participant confessed the following:

“I smoke and drink because I want to be part of the group. Me am found with a friend who smoke and drink beer all the time so I also want to look cool and I don't want to disappoint my friend.” (grade 12 pupil)

Another female participant explained the following:

“For me I think some pupils especially boys smoke and drink to feel high and good especially if they are at those functions like birthday parties they say you can't enjoy if you are normal unless if you take something. (grade 10 pupil)

DEC officer Views

The DEC officer also expressed his views concerning factors enabling learners to use drugs and alcohol. He mentioned peer pressure as one of the major contributing factors. His views are expressed below;

“One of the biggest contributing factor is peer pressure. Many of the learners have counseled have confessed that they started smoking and drinking because their friends do so and they didn’t want to look different or not to fit in” (DEC Officer)

2. Stress

Learner’s views

During focus group discussions one male respondent explained the following:

“Some drink and smoke because of stress with school especially those who are writing exams like the grade 9 and 12. They feel for them to study well and understand what the teachers are teaching or remember what they are studying they should smoke marijuana or ichamba because they believe smoking ichamba make them intelligent.” (grade 11 pupil)

Another learner explained the following

“Some of my friends who smoke or drink alcohol want to relieve some pressure especially during exams including some girls in school. You see during exams there is a lot of pressure and pupils just want to feel relaxed as they write exams so they end up taking something.” (grade 12 pupil)

Teacher’s views

One of the guidance teacher explained the following during face to face interviews

“During exam time as a guidance teacher I have counseled a number of learners in exam class who been found either smelling alcohol or smoking ichamba (marijuana) and majority of them have openly come out to say they wanted to relieve exam stress or they wanted to sharpen their memory” (Guidance teacher 2)

3. Lack of parental guidance

Head teacher’s views

The Head teachers attributed the use of drugs and alcohol to lack of and poor parental/guardian guidance. One of the Head teachers explained the following in detail:

“Some pupils caught abusing drugs and alcohol have confessed that they do not know when last they sat down with their parents to talk about life issues with them. These children who come from such homes lack parental guidance because their parents do not have time for them.” (Head teacher 1)

DEC officer’s views

On lack of parental guidance, the DEC officer explained the following;

“You see in my department, the education department there are times parents bring their children for counselling and we sit together in the counselling room. There are some parents who openly confess that they have not been there for their children to counsel them concerning drug and alcohol use even if they might notice some signs of drug and alcohol use and before they know it they are called at school to be told that

their child was using drugs or alcohol. All this is because of lack of parental guidance” (DEC officer)

4. Availability of drugs

DEC Officer’s views

The DEC officer cited accessibility of drugs and alcohol as an enabler to drug and alcohol use among pupils. To explain in detail on the accessibility of drugs the following was explained:

“These substances which we are talking about here known as cannabis or alcohol are readily available. Some of the schools the vicinity to bars is very near. What can stop the child at break time quickly have a sip of something and go back to school. Within the 20 minutes of break the boy would have consumed so much.” (DEC officer)

5. Social Media effect

Social media influence is another factor which was mentioned by one of the head teachers interviewed during face to face interview. The following was explained;

“Social media has played a part in influencing young people to use drugs and alcohol. You see nowadays information is easily accessible. Some of these learners are coming from rich families where parents can afford to buy them smart phones which they are using to access all sorts of information on the internet including different types of drugs and how they work and where they can find them. Not only that we have seen some adverts on TV advertising alcohol where

people seem to be happy after drinking so kids are coping from such adverts” (Head teacher 2)

DISCUSSION

The study revealed a number of factors enabling upper secondary school pupils to use drugs and alcohol in Ndola district. The leading drug and alcohol abuse factors mentioned by pupils, guidance teachers, head teachers and Drug enforcement commissioner officer who participated in the study included: Peer pressure, Lack of parental guidance, Stress, Social media effect and the accessibility of cheap drugs and alcohol. The results are discussed in detail in this section.

1. Peer Pressure

Peer pressure was amongst the cited enablers of drug and alcohol use among upper secondary school pupils in Ndola District by the study participants. Peer pressure is common amongst young people and it is very common for young people especially as they attain puberty to be pressurized in engaging in various behaviors including drug and alcohol use. As indicated by one of the participants “teenage stage is a very critical stage where there is a lot of peer pressure amongst young people and some do not know how to resist peer pressure so they end up doing what their friends in a group are doing just to fit in.”

The impact of peer pressure on teenagers’ behavior is well documented in literature and is considered as one of the most influential

factors in substance abuse, (Maziak et al., 2004). Other researchers have found that the power of peers in enforcing the behavior of substance abuse was greater than family's protective role. (Li 2002; United Nations 1992).

A study done by Layla et al. (2015) to "Determine Adolescent's perception of substance use and factors influencing its use," revealed that many factors were believed to increase the risk of substance use among adolescents. These factors included peer pressure, inadequate knowledge of the harmful consequences of drug use, family-related factors (e.g. low monitoring and poor parent-adolescents' relationship), affordability and availability of substances, boredom and affluence. Another research carried out by Prince Kubi Appiah et al. (2017) to determine the prevalence of alcohol consumption and associated factors among the youth in Tokorni-Hohoe Ghana revealed that peer influence and advertisement were the major contributing factors to substance abuse among the youths. In another local research done by Siziya et al. (2007) to estimate the prevalence of current cigarette smoking and associated factors among pupils in Kafue district also revealed that access to some pocket money, having friends or parents who are smokers and being exposed to pro-tobacco advertisements at social gathering were contributing factors to being a current cigarette smoker.

Peer relationships are important source of secondary socialization for school going children because they are a group from where

behavior is learnt in addition to the family which is a primary source of socialization. Most of the time young people have the desire to belong and to be appreciated by a peer group and if they do not conform to the requirements of the group young people might have a sense of rejection. Peer pressure is, therefore, associated with the desire to gain total acceptance into the peer group which has certain demands such as alcohol and drug use. Peers tend to exert the most robust influence on their friends, as confessed by one of the participant who indicated that they smoke and drink because they want to be part of the group so that they can look "cool" and not disappoint their friends. Therefore, with the aforementioned it can be concluded that social learning processes play a vital role in modeling individual attitude and behaviors in drug abuse. The quality of the peer group a child joins will determine whether he/she gets positive or negative reinforcement from the social group (Gatonye, 2006)

2. Stress

Stress is the most well-known contributing factor to drug addiction and relapse susceptibility. Academic-related stress can increase substance use among young people. In a survey study of 128 Grade 11 students attending competitive private schools in the United States, students who reported experiencing high ongoing stress, particularly in relation to academic achievement and the tertiary education admissions process, also reported high rates of drug and alcohol use (Leonard et al.,

2015). Youths across the globe are exposed to numerous life challenges that may constitute stress such as academic stress.

In another study done by Mudavanhu and Schenck (2014) to ascertain factors that are responsible for substance use in the youth population in the Western Cape, stress was found as a personal factor that significantly relates to substance use among the respondents. Debnam, Milan, Mullen, Lacey and Bradshaw (2016) as cited in Malebana, M.C., (2018) carried a study on links between stress and substance use among adolescents. They reported higher substance use among male students as a coping strategy for stress-related elements in their smoking populations. The report is in line with one of the teacher's response who said that during exam time as a guidance teacher they have counseled a number of learners in exam class who were found either smelling alcohol or smoking ichamba (marijuana) and majority of them have openly come out to say they wanted to relieve exam stress or they wanted to sharpen their memory. From the findings of this study and other studies by other scholars it can be deduced that stressful experiences such as academic related stress can influence school going children to use drugs and alcohol.

3. Lack of parental guidance

Parents (whether biological or adoptive) are among the most important people in the lives of young children because children depend on them for learning, guidance, protection, care, and

overall well-being (Jacob and Seshadri, 2013). Families can have a powerful influence on shaping the attitudes, values, and behaviour of children (Maithya, 2009). During socialization, parents and family members' direct young people's conduct along desired channels, and in so doing succeed in enforcing conformity to social norms.

School children coming from homes where there is no consistent parental involvement in a child's life, have been found to be more likely to use alcohol. Barnes et al. (1995) states that lack of parental support and monitoring communication have been significantly related to frequency of alcohol abuse among school children. This statement is in line with Mrug, Gains, Su and Windle (2010) who carried out a study in Alabama, USA. The findings of the study were that poor parenting practices (e.g. less nurturance and harsh and inconsistent discipline) was strongly related to school-level alcohol and cigarette use and hence they concluded in line with earlier studies that poor parenting could increase susceptibility to school-level substance use through greater deviant affiliations or impaired ability to withstand negative peer influence (Mrug and Windle, 2009; Simons-Morton, 2002).

The findings of this study is in line with the aforementioned findings where Lack of parental guidance was found to be one of the enablers of drug and alcohol use among school going children. Children who lacked parental guidance were found to be among those who were using drugs and alcohol

because their parents had no time to sit with them to talk about life issues including the effects of substance abuse. This observation is also in line with Shoemaker (2004) who contended that laxity in parental discipline gives birth to delinquency which is invariably associated with drug abuse.

Parents have the biggest influence on the child's life and hence they need to be conscious of their influence and should do their best to model good behaviors. Strengthening family ties, communication, support and understanding are viewed as key protective factors that encourage parent-teenager discussions and disclosure of issues such as substance abuse, (Boyle 2001; Hoffmann 2002; Case 2003) Family values still continue to exert a strong influence not only because most adolescents continue to value their family members as models of behavior, but also because these factors encompass such a wide range of influences.

4. Availability of drugs and alcohol

Affordability of substances, especially the licit ones, has been cited in many studies as a risk factor to substance use among adolescents. Al-Marri (2009); Hofler (1999); Kaguthi (2004) and Kilonzo (1996) indicated that availability of drugs and substances, both licit (such as cigarettes and alcohol) and illicit (such as heroin, cocaine and mandrax), has the potential to lead to drug abuse among young people. According to Kaguthi (2004), availability of illegal drugs such as heroin, cocaine and mandrax and legal substances such as cigarettes and alcohol encouraged

drug abuse among the student in secondary schools. In addition, Obiayo, (2003) as cited in Mcheke, Z.I., (2021) stated that the availability of drugs through cheap and local suppliers encourages students to abuse or indulge into drugs abuse.

The aforementioned observations are in line with the findings of this study. During face to face interview, one of the participant indicated that substances known as cannabis or alcohol were readily available and that the vicinity of bars to some schools was very near making it easy for the learners to access them. These observations are also in line with Gitau (2007) as cited in Cheloti, S.K., (2013) who indicated that ease availability of drugs was one of the reasons behind the trend of drug abuse in many schools in Nairobi County in Kenya.

The abuse of drugs leads to social insecurity and wastage of man power in a given community. When these youths mature, they form the core of criminal syndicate, (Refoli and Heweitt, 1994) as cited in (Barasa, M.M., 2013). Therefore, proper implementation of laws that restrict selling of drugs and alcohol to school going children and penalizing shops which do not adhere to the law are essential preventive tools to reduce the consumption of alcohol and drugs to young people who are the future generation.

5. Social media effect

Today's generation of adolescents and young adults are growing up immersed in social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok etc. These social media platforms promote

user-generated content and interactions between users (Lenhart et al. 2005). Social media sites are an environment in which alcohol-related content is frequently created and consumed by adolescents and young adults (Moreno et al. 2009a,b, 2010). Social media exposes teenagers to alcohol-related advertising and substance-related content from their peers. Alcohol taking constantly showcased in the movies, music, video and television programs often entrenches the peer pressure on drug abuse. The popular artists, some of whom are role models for teenagers, do not help them when they appear on alcohol advertisements (Hann, 2012).

The findings of this study were that learners have access to all sorts of information on the internet including different types of drugs and how they work and where they can find them. Not only that they also see adverts on TV advertising alcohol where people seem to be happy after drinking. In addition, learners receive social media posts from peers which may glorify and influence the use of alcohol and drugs. Social media can provide access to valuable information to young people. It can also be a platform that can connect them to who can be of good influence on them. Therefore, school going children should be guided by their parents on the proper use of social media and they need to censor what their children are accessing on the internet as it has been observed that parents who do not abuse drugs have firm stand regarding television, schoolwork, use of alcohol and other drugs, (Chesile 1996).

CONCLUSION

Drug and alcohol use among school going children is a significant public health problem worldwide. The use of illicit drugs is associated with premature illness and death on a global scale. Effectively addressing drug and alcohol use relies on understanding its underlying causes so that the interventions can be specific and tailored towards the identified causes. The identified factors can be utilized by academics, policymakers, and decision-makers to combat the destructive impact of drug and alcohol use on the future generations through multifactorial prevention programs that address social norms, education curriculum and drug and alcohol policies using targeted strategies based on the findings of this study.

RECOMMENDATION

The following are recommendations based on the findings of the study

- i. Parents should maintain open and honest communication with their children in order to listen to their concerns and feelings. This will foster and strengthen parental guidance. Furthermore, parents should set clear rules and consequences for substance use.
- ii. Parents should monitor their children's activities, friends and online behaviour
- iii. Schools should deliver evidence based substance use prevention programs such as life skills training and social emotional learning.

Furthermore, they should monitor learner's behaviour and respond promptly to incidents related to substance use.

- iv. Policy makers should establish and enforce laws and policies that regulate substance accessibility and availability.
- v. Policy makers should continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Gratitude goes to Dr Matthews Nyashanu, and Mrs Catherine Katentemuna Musonda for co-authoring and for helping in analysis and discussion of qualitative and quantitative data. The feedback provided shaped this study and the manuscript.