



Research Article

Substance Abuse and its Implications for National Security and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract. Substance abuse has emerged as a multidimensional challenge with significant implications for national security, human security and sustainable development in Nigeria. Beyond its consequences for individual health, the misuse of psychoactive substances can weaken human capital, increase criminality, undermine social cohesion, place pressure on public institutions and contribute to insecurity. This study examines the implications of substance abuse for national security and development in Nigeria. It adopts a qualitative documentary research design and analyses relevant scholarly literature, government reports, international publications and empirical studies on substance use, crime, health, youth vulnerability, treatment capacity and socioeconomic development. Evidence indicates that Nigeria faces a substantial burden of non-medical drug use, particularly involving cannabis, pharmaceutical opioids, tramadol and codeine-containing preparations. The problem is particularly significant among young people, whose health, educational attainment, productivity and future contribution to national development may be affected. The study further argues that substance abuse can interact with poverty, unemployment, criminal networks, violence and weak institutional capacity, creating a reinforcing cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment. The paper concludes that

substance abuse should be treated not merely as a public-health problem but as a national-security and development concern. It recommends integrated prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, intelligence-led drug-control measures, youth employment, community-based interventions and stronger inter-agency coordination.

Keywords: Substance Abuse, National Security, Human Security, National Development, Drug Trafficking, Youth, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse has become an increasingly important public-health, social and security concern in Nigeria. Although drug use is often approached primarily as a medical or criminal-justice problem, its consequences extend into education, employment, family stability, community safety, public order and national development. The problem therefore requires a broader security perspective that recognises the relationship between individual vulnerability and the stability of society. The magnitude of the problem is demonstrated by Nigeria's National Survey on Drug Use. The survey estimated that 14.4% of Nigerians aged 15–64, equivalent to approximately 14.3 million people, had used a drug other than tobacco and alcohol for non-medical purposes during the previous year. Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, while opioids also constituted a major category of non-medical drug use. The issue has also evolved beyond conventional illicit drugs. Pharmaceutical substances such as tramadol and codeine-containing preparations have become important components of Nigeria's substance-use problem. Research on tramadol misuse in the Niger Delta, for example, demonstrates the health and social consequences associated with non-medical use of the substance. More recent scholarship describes opioid misuse in Nigeria as an emerging public-health challenge compounded by limited access to evidence-based treatment. The consequences are particularly important for national development because young people constitute a major proportion of Nigeria's current and future workforce. Studies among Nigerian university students have identified substantial levels of recreational drug use and associations with family and social factors. Research among secondary-school adolescents has similarly identified cannabis and other illicit-drug use as significant concerns. From a national-security perspective, substance abuse may contribute to crime, violence, disorder, risky behaviour and the vulnerability of young people to criminal networks. Recent Nigerian research has explicitly examined the relationship between drug use and criminal behaviour, identifying economic motivation, impaired self-control and psychological effects among factors that can connect substance use with offending.

Consequently, substance abuse should be understood within a broader national-security framework. National security is not limited to protecting territorial integrity or state institutions. It also encompasses the protection of citizens, institutions, economic capacity, social stability and the conditions necessary for sustainable development.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria faces a combination of security and development challenges, including terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, youth unemployment, poverty, trafficking and weak institutional capacity. Within this environment, substance abuse can operate as both a consequence and a contributor to social vulnerability. The problem is complicated by the availability of pharmaceutical opioids, illicit drugs and other psychoactive substances, while treatment and rehabilitation capacity remain inadequate. Research on Nigeria's addiction workforce found that limited numbers of appropriately trained professionals constitute an important barrier to access to treatment services. The development consequences are equally significant. Substance abuse can affect educational participation, cognitive functioning, employability, household income and productivity. Recent Nigerian research on tertiary institutions specifically identifies drug abuse as a threat to students' academic performance, skill acquisition and employability, thereby affecting human-capital development. The central problem addressed by this study is therefore the insufficient integration of substance abuse into Nigeria's national-security and development policy discourse.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the implications of substance abuse for national security and development in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the nature and dimensions of substance abuse in Nigeria.
2. Analyse the relationship between substance abuse and national security.
3. Examine the implications of substance abuse for human security and public safety.
4. Assess the effects of substance abuse on human-capital and socioeconomic development.
5. Examine the relationship between substance abuse, crime and insecurity.
6. Identify major institutional and policy challenges in combating substance abuse.
7. Propose integrated strategies for addressing substance abuse as a national-security and development challenge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Substance Abuse

Substance abuse refers broadly to the harmful, hazardous or inappropriate use of psychoactive substances in ways that produce physical, psychological or social consequences. The concept encompasses the misuse of both illicit substances and legally available substances when they are used outside medically or socially accepted purposes. In the Nigerian context, the problem includes cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and other illicit drugs, as well as the non-medical use of pharmaceutical substances such as tramadol, codeine and other opioids Gureje et al. (2007) provided an important national-level epidemiological assessment of substance use and substance-use disorders in Nigeria, demonstrating that substance use was already an important public-health issue in the early twenty-first century. The

problem has subsequently diversified, particularly through the non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids.

Concept of National Security

National security traditionally refers to the protection of a state from external aggression and internal threats. Contemporary security scholarship, however, adopts a broader approach involving political stability, economic security, public safety, social cohesion, institutional resilience and human wellbeing. Within this perspective, substance abuse becomes relevant to national security because it can undermine the social and human foundations upon which national stability depends. A population suffering extensive substance-related health, behavioral and socioeconomic problems may experience declining productivity, increasing healthcare costs, family disintegration and heightened vulnerability to criminal exploitation.

Concept of Human Security

Human security focuses attention on the protection of individuals and communities from threats to their survival, livelihood and dignity. This approach complements traditional state-centre national security.

Substance abuse affects several dimensions of human security, including:

- ❖ health security
- ❖ economic security
- ❖ security
- ❖ community security
- ❖ food and livelihood security
- ❖ Political and social stability.

The significance of this perspective is that an individual may live in a territorially secure state while remaining insecure because of addiction, violence, unemployment, poverty or inadequate access to treatment.

Concept of National Development

National development involves improvements in the economic, social, political and institutional conditions of a country. It encompasses economic growth, human-capital development, education, employment, healthcare, infrastructure, social welfare and institutional capacity. Substance abuse can negatively affect development by reducing the productive capacity of individuals and imposing direct and indirect costs on families, communities and government. A young person affected by chronic substance misuse may experience reduced educational achievement, unemployment, illness, criminal-justice involvement and social exclusion. Collectively, these outcomes weaken the human-capital foundation of national development.

Substance Abuse and Nigerian Youth

Young people are particularly vulnerable to substance use because of peer influence, experimentation, social pressure, unemployment, stress, family problems and perceptions regarding the benefits of psychoactive substances. A study of

Nigerian secondary-school adolescents found ever-use prevalence of cannabis at 7.5% and ever-use of other drugs at 12%, while parental smoking, permissiveness and positive beliefs about drug use were among significant correlates. Ajayi and Somefun (2020), studying Nigerian university students, reported that 24.5% had ever used drugs recreationally and 17.5% were current users in their sample. Family support and other social factors were associated with lower likelihood of recreational drug use, these findings demonstrate that prevention cannot rely exclusively on law enforcement. Family, educational institutions, religious organisations and communities have important preventive roles.

Pharmaceutical Opioids and Substance Abuse

One of the distinctive features of Nigeria's current drug problem is the increasing misuse of pharmaceutical opioids the national drug-use survey identified opioids as one of the major categories of non-medical drug use, while codeine-containing cough syrups also constituted a significant component. Chinese and Ebonyi (2019) examined tramadol misuse in the Niger Delta and documented its significance as a substance-use concern. Research on trafficking routes has further demonstrated that understanding the movement of tramadol and codeine is important for designing effective drug-control policies. This suggests that Nigeria's drug-control strategy requires not only demand reduction but also supply-chain intelligence.

Substance Abuse and Crime

The relationship between substance abuse and crime is complex. Drug use does not automatically cause criminal behaviour, but intoxication, impaired judgement, dependence, economic pressure, drug-market participation and association with criminal networks can increase exposure to offending. Recent research in Nigeria found evidence of a relationship between drug use and criminal behaviour among patients receiving addiction treatment. Participants identified economic motivation, impaired self-control and psychological effects as mechanisms connecting drug use and crime. Similarly, qualitative research among Nigerian substance users found that substance misuse may interact with crime and family conditions, while peer and family influences can contribute to patterns of misuse. Therefore, treating substance abuse solely through criminalization may fail to address the underlying social and health mechanisms.

Substance Abuse and Economic Development

Substance abuse imposes both direct and indirect economic costs.

Direct costs include:

- ❖ healthcare expenditure
- ❖ rehabilitation
- ❖ policing
- ❖ prosecution
- ❖ incarceration
- ❖ drug-control operations

- ❖ Indirect costs include
- ❖ lost productivity
- ❖ school dropout
- ❖ unemployment
- ❖ family income losses
- ❖ disability
- ❖ premature mortality
- ❖ Reduced human-capital formation.

The relationship between drug abuse and development is particularly important in Nigeria because the country requires a productive youthful population to drive industrialization, technological development and economic transformation.

Substance Abuse and Human Capital Development

Human capital represents the knowledge, skills, health and productive capabilities of individuals, drug abuse can weaken human capital by affecting concentration, memory, physical health, psychological wellbeing, educational performance and employability, recent research on Nigerian tertiary institutions explicitly links drug abuse with academic performance, cognitive functioning, skill acquisition and employability. Consequently, substance abuse should be incorporated into national human-capital planning.

Substance Abuse and Public Health

Substance abuse produces substantial health consequences. These include dependence, overdose, mental-health problems, neurological disorders, injuries and other chronic health conditions, research among young Nigerian drug users documented drug-related harms including aggression, hallucinations, seizures and other adverse effects. Nigeria also faces challenges in providing adequate treatment. The limited addiction workforce and inadequate treatment infrastructure restrict access to appropriate services.

Substance Abuse, Insecurity and National Stability

Substance abuse and insecurity can reinforce each other, in communities affected by poverty, unemployment, violence and weak governance, substance use may become a coping mechanism. At the same time, drug markets can create financial incentives for organised criminal networks. Recent Nigerian scholarship explicitly conceptualizes the intersection between substance abuse and insecurity as a national challenge.

The security implications therefore include:

1. increased vulnerability of young people;
2. Support for illicit markets;
3. Criminal networking;
4. Community violence;
5. impaired public safety;
6. Pressure on law-enforcement institutions;
7. increased correctional populations;

8. Reduced trust in institutions.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies provide evidence of the multidimensional nature of substance abuse in Nigeria. Guerue et al. (2007) established an important epidemiological foundation for understanding substance use and substance-use disorders in Nigeria. Mehanović et al. (2020) examined cannabis and other illicit drugs among Nigerian secondary-school adolescents and reported substantial levels of lifetime use. Ajayi and Somefun (2020) found significant recreational drug use among university students and identified family support and social factors as important correlates. Olanrewaju et al. (2022), studying undergraduates in southwestern Nigerian universities, found a notable prevalence of substance abuse, with alcohol, cigarettes, codeine-containing syrup and tramadol among substances reported. Chikezie and Ebuenyi (2019) identified tramadol misuse as an important problem in the Niger Delta. Research on treatment services has also highlighted major institutional limitations. Chiaa and Mashika identified shortages in the addiction workforce as a major barrier to treatment access. More recent research suggests that the problem continues to evolve. Research on methamphetamine misuse among young people in southeastern Nigeria has identified consequences including social exclusion, alienation and discrimination.

Literature Gap

Despite the substantial literature on substance abuse in Nigeria, four important gaps remain.

- 1) First, much of the literature treats substance abuse primarily as a public-health or behavioural problem, with comparatively less emphasis on its implications for national security.
- 2) Second, many studies concentrate on specific populations such as students, adolescents or clinical populations. There remains a need for broader analyses linking substance abuse to national-level security and development.
- 3) Third, studies frequently examine individual health consequences without adequately integrating crime, insecurity, human capital, public safety and economic development into a single analytical framework.
- 4) Fourth, insufficient attention has been given to the interaction between drug markets, youth vulnerability, criminal networks and national-security institutions.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing substance abuse as a multidimensional national-security and development challenge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human Security Theory

This study adopts Human Security Theory as its principal theoretical framework.

Human security shifts the focus of security from the state alone to the safety, dignity and wellbeing of individuals and communities. It recognises that threats to human wellbeing can emerge from poverty, disease, violence, unemployment, social

exclusion and other conditions. The theory is relevant because substance abuse threatens multiple dimensions of human security simultaneously.

➤ Health security

Substance abuse produces addiction, mental-health problems, overdose and other health consequences.

➤ Economic security

Addiction can reduce employability and productivity while increasing household expenditure.

➤ Personal security

Substance misuse can increase exposure to violence, accidents, sexual exploitation and criminal victimisation.

➤ Community security

Drug markets can contribute to social disorder, criminal networks and community instability.

➤ Political and institutional security

High levels of substance abuse increase pressure on law-enforcement, health, correctional and social-welfare institutions

Human Capital Perspective

The Human Capital perspective complements Human Security Theory by explaining how substance abuse undermines the productive capacity of individuals. Education, health, skills and productivity are essential components of human capital. When young people become dependent on psychoactive substances, the country potentially loses educational investment, labour productivity and future professional capacity.

The theoretical relationship can therefore be represented as:

Substance Abuse → Poor Health/Education → Reduced Skills/Productivity → Weak Human Capital → Lower Development Capacity

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design. The design is appropriate because the research seeks to analyse existing evidence concerning substance abuse, national security, human security and development rather than generate primary survey data.

The study draws on:

- ✓ peer-reviewed journal articles
- ✓ books
- ✓ government publications
- ✓ UNODC reports
- ✓ empirical studies
- ✓ policy documents
- ✓ Recent scholarly literature.

Data Collection

Relevant literature was identified through academic and institutional sources, with particular attention to studies focusing on Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa.

The documentary corpus covered literature concerning:

1. Prevalence of substance use
2. Youth and adolescent drug use
3. Opioids and pharmaceutical drugs
4. Crime and violence
5. Treatment and rehabilitation
6. Mental health
7. Human capital
8. National security
9. Socioeconomic development.

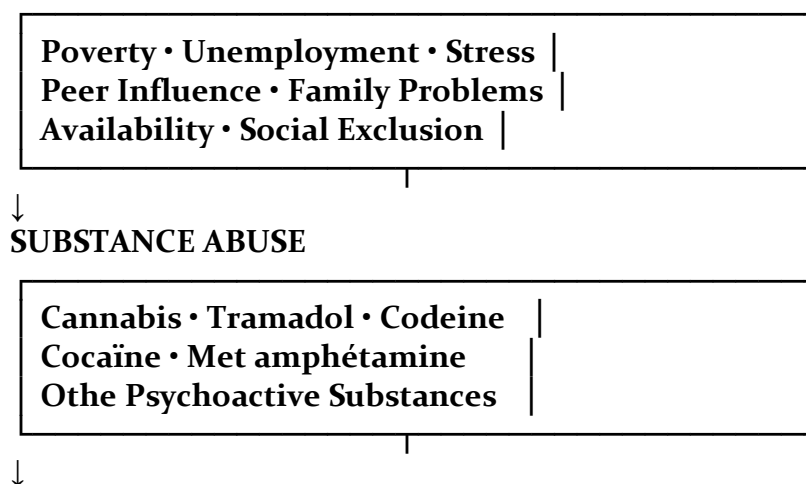
Method of Analysis

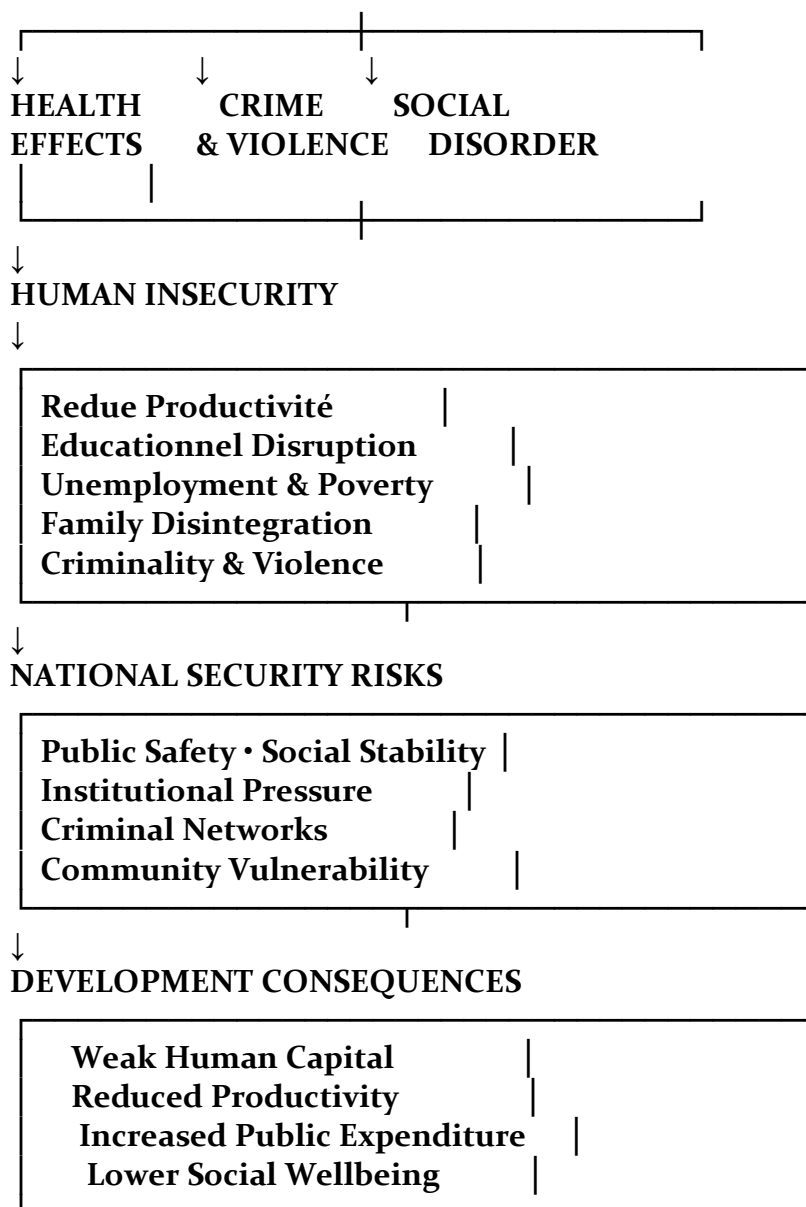
The study uses thematic content analysis. Information was organised into major analytical themes:

- a) prevalence and patterns
- b) health consequences
- c) criminality
- d) human security
- e) national security
- f) economic development
- g) human capital
- h) Institutional response.

Conceptual Analytical Framework

Figure 1: Substance Abuse, National Security and Development Framework
SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS





Source: Author's conceptualization based on reviewed literature.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Substance Abuse as a National-Security Threat

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that substance abuse should be incorporated into Nigeria's national-security agenda. The traditional security approach focuses on armed conflict, terrorism, border threats and political instability. However, national security also depends upon the strength and resilience of the population. Where a significant proportion of the working-age population is affected by problematic substance use, the consequences can extend beyond individual health to national productivity, public safety and institutional capacity. Nigeria's national survey's estimate of 14.4% past-year drug use among persons aged 15–64 illustrates

the scale of the challenge. The security significance of this problem becomes greater when substance abuse intersects with unemployment, poverty and criminal networks.

Substance Abuse and Public Safety

Public safety can be affected through impaired judgement, aggressive behaviour, accidents, violence and criminal behaviour, recent evidence from Nigeria indicates that drug use and criminal behaviour can intersect through impaired self-control, psychological effects and economic motivations.

However, it is important to avoid assuming that all substance users are criminals. Such an assumption could stigmatize vulnerable populations and undermine treatment the appropriate policy response is therefore a balanced combination of prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and targeted law enforcement.

Substance Abuse and Youth Vulnerability

Young people constitute one of the most important demographic groups for Nigeria's future development.

When substance abuse affects young people, its consequences can become long-term. A young person who experiences addiction may face disrupted education, unemployment, health problems and criminal-justice involvement. Studies among Nigerian students demonstrate significant levels of substance use. The implication is that substance-abuse prevention should be incorporated into national youth policy, education policy and employment policy rather than being treated solely as a law-enforcement issue.

Substance Abuse and Human Capital

The relationship between substance abuse and human capital is particularly important. a country invests substantial resources in educating and training its population. When drug abuse causes school dropout, poor academic performance, illness or unemployment, part of this investment is undermined, recent Nigerian evidence specifically identifies drug abuse as a threat to cognitive functioning, academic achievement, skill acquisition and employability among tertiary students. Therefore, effective drug prevention should be regarded as a component of human-capital development.

Substance Abuse and Economic Development

The economic consequences of substance abuse can be understood through three major mechanisms.

❖ First: productivity losses

Individuals affected by addiction may have reduced capacity to work effectively.

❖ Second: public expenditure

Government must allocate resources to healthcare, policing, treatment, rehabilitation and correctional services.

❖ Third: household vulnerability

Families may experience financial losses associated with healthcare, treatment, unemployment and dependence.

Thus, substance abuse can contribute to a cycle:

Substance abuse → reduced productivity → unemployment/poverty → vulnerability → further substance abuse.

Breaking this cycle requires economic as well as health interventions.

Substance Abuse and Criminal Networks

Drug markets can provide financial incentives for organised criminal activities. The trafficking of tramadol and codeine illustrates how pharmaceutical drugs can move through illicit supply networks. Research into trafficking routes demonstrates the importance of understanding the supply chain for effective control.

This creates an important intelligence dimension.

Nigeria's drug-control institutions should therefore combine

- ❖ community intelligence
- ❖ Financial intelligence
- ❖ border intelligence
- ❖ digital intelligence
- ❖ trafficking-route analysis
- ❖ Pharmaceutical supply-chain monitoring.

Institutional Capacity and Treatment

A major challenge is insufficient treatment capacity. The problem is not simply the number of people using drugs; it is also the country's capacity to provide appropriate treatment and rehabilitation. Research on Nigeria's addiction workforce found that inadequate numbers and insufficient professional training constitute significant barriers to treatment access. Recent research similarly identifies continuing barriers to successful treatment among Nigerian youths.

Consequently, Nigeria requires investment in:

- I. addiction specialists
- II. psychologists
- III. psychiatrists
- IV. social workers
- V. counsellors
- VI. rehabilitation facilities
- VII. community treatment
- VIII. Aftercare programmes.

Integrated National-Security Response

The evidence suggests that no single institution can solve Nigeria's substance-abuse problem.

A comprehensive approach should involve:

NDLEA + Police + Nigerian Correctional Service + Health Institutions + Education Institutions + Local Governments + Civil Society + Traditional Institutions + Religious Organisations + Communities

The objective should be to move from a predominantly reactive approach toward an integrated prevention-treatment-rehabilitation-security model.

Recent research on integrated services in Nigeria supports stronger coordination between mental health, substance-use and other health services at community level.

Policy Implications

The findings have several policy implications.

1. Treat substance abuse as a national-security issue. Substance abuse should be incorporated into national-security assessments and strategic threat analyses.
2. Strengthen prevention. Schools, universities, religious institutions and communities should receive evidence-based prevention programmes.
3. Expand treatment. Nigeria needs greater investment in addiction treatment, rehabilitation and aftercare.
4. Strengthen youth employment. Youth unemployment and socioeconomic vulnerability should be addressed as part of prevention.
5. Improve drug intelligence. Law-enforcement agencies should strengthen intelligence on trafficking networks and illicit pharmaceutical distribution.
6. Strengthen border control. Cross-border trafficking requires cooperation among Nigerian security agencies and regional partners.
7. Improve correctional rehabilitation. Correctional institutions should provide evidence-based substance-use treatment and reintegration programmes for offenders affected by drug dependence.
8. Promote community-based intervention. Treatment should not be concentrated exclusively in major urban centres.
9. Improve data systems. Nigeria requires regularly updated national drug-use data to guide policy.
10. Reduce stigma. Substance-use disorders should be approached as health and social problems requiring treatment while maintaining appropriate legal responses to trafficking and organised criminal activity.

CONCLUSION

Substance abuse represents a multidimensional challenge to Nigeria's national security and development. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that the problem extends beyond individual health to public safety, crime, youth vulnerability, human capital, productivity, institutional capacity and socioeconomic wellbeing.

Nigeria's national drug-use evidence demonstrates a substantial burden of psychoactive-substance use, while more recent research highlights continuing

concerns regarding pharmaceutical opioids, cannabis, methamphetamine, treatment shortages and the relationship between drug use and criminal behaviour.

The study therefore argues that substance abuse should no longer be treated exclusively as a health or criminal-justice problem. It should be incorporated into the broader architecture of national security and development planning.

The most effective response requires a shift from a predominantly punitive approach toward an integrated model combining prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, intelligence-led enforcement, youth development, employment, community engagement and institutional coordination.

Ultimately, protecting Nigeria from the consequences of substance abuse is also an investment in human security, national resilience and sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. National-security integration: Substance abuse should be explicitly recognized within Nigeria's national-security threat assessment framework.
2. Strengthening NDLEA capacity: The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency should receive increased technical, intelligence and operational capacity.
3. Youth-centre prevention: Government should expand evidence-based drug-prevention programmes in secondary schools, universities and communities.
4. Employment and empowerment: Youth employment, vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes should be integrated into drug-prevention strategies.
5. Treatment infrastructure: Government should establish and strengthen accessible treatment and rehabilitation centres across all geopolitical zones.
6. Professional workforce: More psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, social workers and addiction specialists should be trained.
7. Correctional rehabilitation: Substance-use screening and treatment should become integral components of correctional rehabilitation and reintegration.
8. Community policing and intelligence: Communities should participate in identifying trafficking networks while protecting drug-dependent persons from unnecessary criminalisation.
9. Pharmaceutical regulation: The distribution and sale of tramadol, codeine and other potentially abused medicines should be more effectively monitored.
10. Inter-agency cooperation: NDLEA, Police, Customs, Immigration, Nigerian Correctional Service, health agencies and intelligence institutions should share relevant information.
11. Research and data: Nigeria should conduct regular national drug-use surveys and develop reliable databases for evidence-based policymaking.
12. Regional cooperation: Nigeria should strengthen cooperation with ECOWAS and neighboring countries against transnational drug trafficking.

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