

## *Original Paper*

# Perception of Substance Use among In-School Adolescents and Key Informants in Gombe State, Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** Substance use has gradually become a global problem resulting in negative effect on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals. This study aimed to determine the perception of adolescents and key informants on substance and illicit drug use in order to control this menace.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study design employing qualitative method of data collection. Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted. All data generated were collated and analysed using content analysis.

**Results:** The key informants reported that peer influence, male sex and having broken homes were factors that were responsible for substance use. Adolescents also reported that easy access to these substances, the zeal to perform better in school, ability to have more fruitful relationships and ability to confront their parents were some of the reasons they engaged in substance use.

**Conclusion:** This study has therefore implied that adolescents in school have easy access to and engage in substances despite being aware of the complications as it is mostly done to address their social needs.

**Recommendation:** It is therefore recommended that periodic mental health screening should be conducted for adolescents with the support of their parents and guardians in line with school health services in order to identify and manage those with mental problems that could predispose them to use of substances.

**Keywords**

*Adolescents, Substance use, Focused Group discussion (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)*

**1. Introduction**

Substance use has gradually become a global problem resulting in dire Public Health consequences. It is a social problem which starts primarily during the adolescence period and has negative effect on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals. Substance use may result in abuse, dependence or Substance Use Disorder which is defined as a maladaptive pattern of the use of alcohol and all other illicit drugs leading to clinically significant deficiency or stress.(Bacconi et al., 2015; Ritchei, 2018)

In 2016, 164 million people worldwide used psychoactive substances, alcohol accounted for 1.3% while drug use accounted for 85%. Males had twice the prevalence of females (Ritchei, 2018). In 2015, the prevalence of substance use among adolescents between the ages of 10-19 in Europe was 59% for alcohol and 41.2% for other substances. African countries such as Botswana and Ghana had 59.6%, and 48.8% respectively of adolescents using substances (NPopC, 2014; WHO, 2018) While studies in Nigeria have shown that the prevalence of substance use among adolescents is similar in all regions in the country and ranges from 30% to 60% in Port Harcourt, Ebonyi, Osun and Gombe states respectively (Donald, 2017; Anyawu et al., 2016; Fatusi, 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2017).

Adolescents can be classified as those in and out of school due to peculiarities in their needs. The school environment is a formal setting which builds capacity and expectedly resilience to social vices among this group of individuals. Regrettably, the gross enrolment of adolescents in lower and upper secondary school are 46.7% and 41.1% respectively in Nigeria, signifying that less than half of the Nigerian adolescents are in school which may impact negatively on their productivity and social lives and increasing the likelihood of substance use (UNICEF, 2013). Unfortunately, some of those in school engage in substance use which has resulted in school absenteeism and poor school performance leading to an increase the proportion of out of school adolescents. The Public health effect of this is an increase in the proportion of street children, vagrants and juvenile delinquents in the country. This has the potential to increase the economic burden and poverty level among adolescents and their parents. Other social effects include risky sexual practices leading to unwanted pregnancies and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), social withdrawal, poor school performance and SUDs. These are preventable health problems which will further over burden the already weak health systems (WHO, 2018).

The perception of adolescents on substance and illicit drug use provides information from the perspectives of these group of individuals. This is important as a one size fits all intervention may not be successful in controlling substance use disorders in all age groups. Therefore, this study could provide a more in-depth understanding of substance use among in-school adolescents in order to provide targeted interventions to address this problem of major concern.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Study Area*

This study was conducted in Gombe State which is the North-East geo-political zone of Nigeria. The 2020 projected population of adolescents (10-19 years) in the state is 1,089,809 (605,705 males and 484,104 females) (Gombe State, 2020). There are 25 Public and 67 Private day secondary schools with mixed sexes located in Gombe LGA of the state (Gombe State, 2020).

### *2.2 Study Design*

A cross-sectional study design employing qualitative method of data collection.

### *2.3 Study Population*

In-school adolescents in in senior secondary classes (SS1 to SS3) in selected schools.

### *2.4 Sampling Technique*

From the list of secondary schools in Gombe LGA, simple random sampling technique by balloting was used to select four schools for KII (two Public and two Private) and two schools (one Public and one private) for FGD. In each school, the school guidance and counselling teacher played the role of key informants while purposive sampling with technique was used to select 16 study participants from each school for the FGD.

### *2.5 Data Collection Tools*

An FGD guide, a digital voice recorder, pen and note pad were used to obtain information from the FGD participants on the perception of adolescents on substance use. Also, a key informant guide, a digital voice recorder, pen and note pad were used to obtain information from the key informants on their perception of adolescents using psychoactive substances

### *2.6 Procedure for Data Collection*

Four FGDs consisting of eight adolescents each were conducted among adolescent students in the selected schools. The FGDs were carried out after stratifying the students based on sex (males and females). The FGD was conducted in the school halls of the selected schools. Each FGD was led by the moderator, conducted in English language and lasted for 45 minutes. A digital voice recorder was used to record the discussion, while one of the research assistants took notes on the discussion.

Four key Informant Interviews were conducted in a quiet environment within the school premises. This was done by the moderator in English language. A digital voice recorder was used to record the discussion, while one of the research assistants took notes on the interview.

### *2.7 Data Analysis*

Information obtained from FGDs and KIIs were transferred from the voice recorder, transcription and content analysis were done, recurrent themes were identified on beliefs and perception on substance use obtained from the study participants.

### *2.8 Ethical Consideration*

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was obtained from Gombe State Ministry of Health. In addition, permission was obtained from the Director of Education and secondary school

principals of the selected secondary schools. A written informed consent was obtained from the participants before enrolment into the study. For those below 18 years, a written informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians of the adolescents and assent obtained from the adolescents.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Focused Group Discussion with Adolescents

Adolescents in both public and private schools stated that about 60% to 80% of students in their schools engage in substance use, substances used were cigarette, alcohol, marijuana (also called “morcas never die young”) and a combination of soft drinks with spices (lacasera /coke, maggi cube and tom-tom), those in the public schools added that tramadol and codeine were also commonly used among students in the school.

*“some people mix coke, maggi star and tomtom in school and nobody will even know what they are drinking”.* (female student- Public school)

The students also mentioned that the substances were readily available and affordable.

*“it is very easy to get, we can get it near the motor park close to the university”.* (Male student- Private school)

*“if you have rich friends in your group, they can afford to buy it for you even when you don't have money” “even from our pocket money, we can afford to by lacasera, tom-tom and maggi”.* (female students – Public school).

The reasons for using substances were similar among adolescents in the Public and Private secondary schools. Many of them mentioned that taking substances helped them perform better in school, majority of the boys in the Public schools also stated that it gave them stamina at work after school hours.

*“some people take it so that they will not be tired, I myself is a victim of that, I have to take alcohol so that when I am running on the football pitch I will not get tired”.* (male student- Private school)

They also stated that it helped them have good relationships with their friends/ peers who are already using substances while others stated that it makes them fearless and resist confrontation even from their parents.

*“it makes us feel very high, if you see your father coming, you can abuse him, it gives us confidence like people in movies”.* (male student – Private school)

*“some of us when our parents quarrel us, we think of those that take substances, their parents don't talk to them anyhow, so this makes us want to use the substances”.* (male student- Public school)

Furthermore, some of the female respondents stated that it helped them when they felt depressed.

*“majority take it due to heartbreak and depression”.* (Female student – Private secondary school)

In addition, some students mentioned that they use substances for practical, this is based on what they had been taught in school. Many also stated that they used them because some teachers also use substances.

*“we students believe in practical more than theory, so we need to test what they are teaching us to know if it is true”.* (male student – Public school)

*“we have seen a teacher who taught us about drug abuse in school taking the substances, so we feel discouraged and also want to use them too”.* (male student- Public school)

The students in the public school stated that they don't get caught using these substances because they do it outside the school premises. *“they don't use it in the school but if you just go outside the gate, you see them sitting around and taking different kinds of hard drugs”* while those in the Private schools stated that they take the substances far away from the school premises as those that have been caught were expelled. Majority of the students accepted that substance use had negative consequences and stated that the best way to reduce the prevalence was mostly through increased parental guidance, some also stated that they school guidance and counselling department had a role to play though many believe that it can only be curbed from home.

### *3.2 Key Informant Interview with Guidance and Counselling Teachers*

Key informants in the selected schools were guidance and counselling teachers selected and trained in line with the State Ministry of Education guidelines of having guidance and counselling unit in every secondary school. All the respondents said that drug use was a common social problem among students in their schools although it was on a decline as a result of the activities of the guidance and counselling unit. They reported that the substances, mostly used were Marijuana, alcohol and cigarette. They also said that drug use was more common among male students in the more senior classes. Factors that predisposed some of the students were broken homes and peer group influence especially from students outside the school.

*“substances commonly used are wee-wee (marijuana) and alcohol, some of them even smoke because you can see that their lips are black” we cannot know everything that they take because they are day students. Many times they take it before coming to school, we only smell it on them and see it in their behaviour. Some students put substances in non alcoholic drinks like coke and lacasera bottles and we don't know what they are taking”.* (Counsellor, Private secondary school)

*“most of the students we have caught are from broken homes, we had a particular student who said that his parents were separated for seven years and that was the reason why he engaged in substance use, some children from poor homes also have to work very hard to pay their fees so they tell us that they take the substances to give them more energy to work hard.* (Counsellor, Public secondary school)

The key informants also stated that the effect of substance use among their students were social vices such as fighting, examination malpractice and poor or late school attendance.

*“Before now our school was open without a fence, we have five schools around us and students from these schools used to come to our school premises and take substances with our students, they also engage them in fights in the course of using substances”. (Counsellor, Public secondary school)*

*“About two years ago, we had serious problems resulting from substance use among our students, the rate of fighting, bullying, examination malpractice was high. The students were not performing well in school; we knew it was because of the substances that they were taking”. (Counsellor, Private secondary school).*

The form of disciplinary action taken by all the schools is mostly counselling and involvement of parents,

*“when they are caught, we inform the parents and involve them in the counselling sessions. Suspending them does not solve the problem because they will go and meet their peers and continue using the substances”. (Counsellor, Public secondary school).*

#### **4. Discussion**

The perceived prevalence of substance use in this study was relatively high among adolescents in both private and public secondary schools. The implications of these findings could suggest the high proportion of adolescents who are expected to become economically productive having increased health and social risk. This finding is similar to findings from studies conducted in United States of America and Osun state which showed that 66.6% (Swendson et al., 2012) and 66% (Anyawu et al., 2016) respectively of students used substances. Further highlighting increased risk for developing SUDs, Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension, depression, suicidal tendencies and social problems such as fighting, school drop out and teenage pregnancy as stated by some of the key informants (Vidourek et al., 2017; WHO, 2018)

The type of substances used by adolescents is greatly influenced by their environment, it also depends of availability and accessibility of these substances. Majority of the respondents mentioned that having access to substances such as alcohol, cigarette and marijuana was not challenging for people of their age group. Having easier access to these substances may also contribute to the high prevalence of its use as observed in this study. These substances used by respondents in this study were similar to studies conducted in India (Reddy et al., 2014), Botswana (Onyenko et al., 2018) and Abakaliki (Fatusi, 2016) which showed that depressants in the form of alcohol was most prevalently used compared to opioids and inhalants. This supports the opinion that adolescents have many similarities with regards to experimentation and exposure to substance use irrespective of their location (Gotsang et al., 2017).

Furthermore, majority of the respondents mentioned that having a close friend who used substances significantly influenced its use thus signifying the role of peer influence on health behaviour. More so, its use is perceived to be more common among day students as stated by some respondents which could be as a result of the extra time day students spend at home with peers in uncontrolled environment. This

could also be related to the experimental and curious nature of adolescents as shown in a study conducted in Rio de Janeiro where adolescents explained that substance use was due to experimentation and permissiveness of some families on its use (Lopes et al., 2014). This finding reiterates the need for collaboration between the parents/ caregivers and the school authority to curb the problem, as stated by key informants in both Public and Private schools, although they mentioned that collaboration is done only when the student is caught using substances, it can be extended to identify adolescents with such tendencies. They also believed that lack of parental attention and excessive pocket money and affluence increased the likelihood of substance use. Other reasons for substance use in adolescence period observed in this study and studies in Nnsukka and Gombe include the believe that it is a remedy for depression, it enables students to perform better in school, it boosts confidence and relieves fatigue from work and exercise (Ibrahim et al., 2017; Haruna et al., 2015). These reasons may also be influenced by neglect of adolescents' health needs and unavailability of adolescent health services which is to provide them with correct, consistent information and medical and social services. Adolescents in this study were aware of the effects of substance use similar to a study in Botswana. Some participants agreed that drug use increased the likelihood of social vices such as stealing and fighting and loss of attention and love from family members yet still engaged in its use (Lopes et al., 2014). Signifying that there could be other triggers which influence its use among these group of individuals. Therefore, engaging adolescents in more productive activities, use of positive peer influence and increasing their learning capacity could increase their resilience and reduce health risks. This should be a collective effort in school, at home and other places of secondary socialization as suggested by some adolescents in this study.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has shown the likelihood of a high proportion of in- school adolescents engaged in substance use and similarities in types of substances used irrespective of their location. It has also shown that peer pressure and lack of parental care contribute significantly to the use of substances which makes them more vulnerable to social vices and school misconduct. It is therefore recommended that periodic mental health screening should be conducted for adolescents with the support of their parents and guardians in line with school health services in order to identify and manage those with mental problems that could predispose them to use of substances. School clubs should target creating platforms for positive peer influence and the educational system should develop a system to improve learning capabilities and understanding of students in order to improve their examination outcome.

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