

Drug abuse –a depressed economy and a young Nigerian generation on the hook

¹Abiodun Oyinpreye Jasper, Wilson Edafiadhe, ³Gladys Chidinma Jasper

Abstract: *The first report of drug abuse in Nigeria was made in 1940s, after the Second World War, when the use of cannabis, pethidine, phenobarbitone and amphetamine were observed. Studies done by UNDP in 4 geographical zones in 1998 and 1999 showed that drug abuse was an emerging and growing problem among Nigerian youths with cannabis being the most predominantly used irrespective of the section of the country. Newer drugs of abuse are daily coming on board.* **Discussion** With poverty and unemployment indices rising especially among youths, drug use seems to be on the increase. Global Price of crude oil which is Nigeria's major source of income, has also taken a downward turn in recent years; made worse by the recent Corona virus pandemic. Crime rate is also on the increase; as poverty and crime seem to be inseparable Siamese twins. Despite concerted (Local and international) efforts by WHO, UNODC, NAFDAC and NDLEA over the years, Drugs are becoming more easily accessible and are being used by an increasing number of Nigerian youths. **Summary** Though drug abuse is fast becoming a global epidemic the Nigerian situation needs urgent attention; fuelled by poverty, unemployment and easy access to illicit drugs and medically unprescribed drugs. Access to uncensored information via the internet, strong desire to explore and compete among peers are other issues accelerating this trend. This is taking an alarming dimension among youths in Nigeria that constitute a predominant proportion of the over 200 million population of the country with over 50% unemployment rate. This is a whole generation on the hook. Efforts to reverse this trend must not only be global, but long lasting efforts and structures must be domiciled in Nigeria to save this young generation from this catastrophe.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Addiction, Nigerian Youth, Unemployment, Poverty

Introduction

The first report of drug abuse in Nigeria was made in 1940s, after the Second World War, when the use of cannabis, pethidine, phenobarbitone and amphetamine were observed.¹ This was followed by isolated reports in some psychiatrist hospitals and some community mapping done by Odejide, of rural western communities.²⁻⁶ Other studies were done by UNDP in 4 geographical zones in 1998 and 1999.⁷ These studies showed that drug abuse was an emerging and growing problem among Nigerian youths.

The most commonly abused drug was cannabis, commonly called "igbo" meaning bush in western Nigeria or "weed" as it was called across ethnic.⁸ Another name which was commonly used among youths was "ganga". Famous musical artists like Fela Ransome Kuti and Bob Marley made Cannabis use amongst youths fashionable at that time.

In a previous survey cannabis use was more prevalent in some geopolitical zones with higher incidents in the North East, North Central and South East. The South West and North West showed lower incidents.⁸ Urban rural differences were not elucidated; neither was religious or ethnic differences.

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Crime rate is also on the increase; as poverty and crime seem to be inseparable Siamese twins. This review is a call for action to stem the tide of poverty and unemployment. Which seem to directly influence drug abuse amongst youths in a country already ravaged and overburdened by other public health concerns thereby reducing life expectancy among Nigerian youths.

Discussion

¹Department of Anaesthesia College of Health Sciences Delta State University Abraka Delta State
E mail : aojasper@yahoo.com

²Department of Psychiatry College of Health Sciences Delta State University Abraka Delta State

³Treasurehold Specialist Sapele Delta State

Substance and Drug abuse has been a major public health challenge all over the world for over five decades.⁹ While alcohol abuse accounts for 3.3 million deaths each year, 31 million persons have drug use disorders. Of the 11million persons who use injectable hard drugs, 1.3 million are living with HIV, 5.5 million with hepatitis C and 1 million with both Hepatitis C and HIV (Graph 1).¹⁰ The consequences of mental health disorders, trauma from accidents and violence are some of the backlashes experienced by the average community and family.¹¹

The exposure and use of drugs by youths have taken on a disturbing health related dimension in Nigeria and in other parts of the world.¹² Drug addiction and its associated mental health problems has led to increase in students drop out rate and crime^{13, 14} Drug abuse has been linked to adolescents, who at this age of experimentation try a lot of new things as they move in clusters. This trend is further worsened by lack of employment for university graduates in depressed economies. A situation where the idle mind becomes the devils workshop.¹⁵

Lack of jobs unemployment

Unemployment is a major source of concern. As at 2019, the unemployment forecast by international monetary fund for some countries were put at 27.86% for South Africa, 22.10% for Sudan, 12.47% for Algeria. Egypt, Morocco and Cape Verde had 8.61%, 9.23%, and 8.50% respectively. Mauritius and Seychelles had the lowest rates of 6.9% and 3.00% respectively. The number of unemployed youth in Nigeria is on the increase daily and currently above 50% (graph 2).¹⁶ With increased rate of unemployment and increased rate of school dropouts, Youth have resorted to driving “keke” and “okada” bikes as source of livelihood.

There is a disturbing incidence of bike and keke drivers who are engaged in drug abuse on two counts. First the abuse of analgesics for pain relief, and on the second count taking illicit drugs and stimulants. The increased rate of drugs use by bike riders is associated with an increased rate of bike accident amongst this group of the population,¹⁷ being a vital productive asset to the nation, lack of meaningful youth engagement may result in socio-economic, security and political threat to the nation. The fall out is what we are experiencing today, in Militancy, kidnapping, Boko Haram and the one Million Gang boys terrorizing the populace and the Nation at large.¹⁵

World poverty indices.

Africa has experienced a consistently dropping income in the 19th century. In 1820, the average European worker earned thrice what the African did. Today the average worker in Europe earns 20x what his counterpart earns in Africa.¹⁸ Global poverty is increasingly becoming African with population explosion in African countries (like Nigeria with a population of over 200 million); rising from 55% in 2015 to a projected 90% in 2030. Half of Nigeria’s population lives below the poverty line of 2 dollars per day income, according to the 2018 World Bank report. Unemployment is also about 23.1%.¹⁹ With the corona virus pandemic, these figures would definitely be worse due to oil price drop. The COVID-19 pandemic will have a disproportionate impact on the poor, loss of remittances, through job loss, rising prices, and prolonged disruptions in services such as education and health care.²⁰

Nigeria’s initial bright economic fortunes in 2014, with 7.4% growth rate, was short-lived due to the oil price collapse from 2014-2016, when she experienced the first recession in 25years.²¹ For A country with massive oil wealth and huge population to support commercial activity, this level of poverty is unacceptable. Though political instability and ethnic inequality and poor administration of lean available resources

This situation would be further worsened by the global pandemic of covid-19 except the price of crude oil which constitutes more than 90% of Nigerians income, improves from the present effervescent rates ranging from 0 to 40 dollar per barrel to values above the current 2020 budgetary projection of 57 dollars per barrel (picture 1).²²

Drug abuse indices

Drug abuse is not limited to the poor. Some children of the rich indulge in this habits and may also be involved in drug trafficking. With this rising trend, Nigeria like some other countries in South America is fast becoming a drug producing nation. Drug barons engage the services of youth seeking for means of survival, who sometimes are promised a bright future abroad. Some female youths double as agents for drugs and female trafficking.²³

Different classifications

The most commonly used drug in Africa is cannabis which accounts for 34million users. Cocaine is another agent with rising incidence mostly in the urban cities in Africa (pictures 2 &3).

Other drugs that make the list are heroine, pethidine, morphine, diazepam, swinoll, ketamine, tramadol and codeine. The opioids meant for hospital use sometimes get into wrong hands. Sometimes patient who used them prescribe for friends and relation who have similar illnesses.²⁴

Reasons for drug use

Youths may also indulge ignorantly in illicit drugs, including alcohol for social, political educational and work reasons. These include tramadol, caffeine, tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, crack cocaine, morphine, ephedrine, pentazocine, codeine, ketamine and swinoll. Compulsive drug craving behavior has been cited as a consequence of dependence and addiction in a study assessing the perception of drug abuse among undergraduate Nigerian students.²⁵

Some of these drugs are used by students to enhance their ability to read for long hours. In east Africa and Yemen a drug like Khat is used by students for same purpose.²⁶

Crime and drugs

In Nigeria, drug use has been associated with crime in 63% of cases.²⁷ Use of stimulants like cocaine, amphetamines and other hard drugs are classified as substance related crime. In another breath these drugs can be used to aid criminal activities. Users of these drugs are susceptible to arrest by drug law enforcement agencies like NDLEA and NAFDAC. Stimulant use and crime have been shown to have a strong association. Violent crime, unemployment and economic hardship have a strong association among youths in Nigeria^{28, 29}

Sexual enhancement.

The need for Sex enhancing has been on the rise amongst the youth. Drugs like tramadol has been increasing used by both male and female. For sexual enhancements, only alcohol seemed to increase sexual desire, both self and partner; and benzodiazepines decreased social inhibition, both self and partner. Consistent with other studies, cocaine was identified as the substance they were most tempted to use to enhance a sexual experience with some ending up in the intensive care units with sequelae of overdose.³⁰

Internet

The world population internet users has grown from 0.4% in 1995 to 55.1% in 2018, with a high youth patronage. The figures are definitely higher in 2020, with the average person spending about 9.4hours weekly online either on smart phones or laptops;³¹ ours of the time is spent at home. There some relationship between internet addiction and drug abuse³²; as some studies have shown a tendency to harm avoidance by students with excessive internet use.³¹ Substance addiction and excessive internet use have also been noted to share similar vulnerable brain regions including orbitofrontal and dorsolateral cortices³³

Students and drug use

Use of drugs without prescription has been noted among adolescent students. In a study done in Iran, sleeping drugs were taken by a third of students, because of availability and lack of parental supervision or control; 70% of whom preferred confiding in others outside their home.³⁴ This points to the need for parental awareness of this risk to drug abuse in this age group as noted by another study in China.³⁵

In another study by 11.1% of high school students had smoking history, 4.3% had drug abuse history, while 12% had an intention to abuse drugs. Prevalence of drug abuse among medical students was 1.3%; 27.6% male students consumed alcohol and 82% abused drugs.³⁶ Peers seem to have strong influence on one another

Job related drug abuse.

Job related links are also known. Youths engaged in hard labour, as loggers in Sawmills. This job is perceived to be very strenuous; and when drug aided, improves the workers output. When politicians engage youths as political thugs, these youths take all sorts of drugs to enhance their activity- ranging from snatching of ballot boxes, maces, and killing of opposing party agents or members.³⁷

Sports

As a result of pressure to maintain and improve sports performance, one of the most common forms of drug use in sports is the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs). The category of PEDs includes: Anabolic steroids, Hormone and metabolic modulators. Others are, Growth hormones, Beta-2 agonists, Glucocorticoids; and not to mention the least, Beta-blockers and Diuretics.³⁸

These agents are used to gain competitive advantage. Sportsmen have recently joined the league; as Nigeria is currently categorised as A in terms of exposure to doping in track and field events.³⁹ It must also be noted that it could be due to many life stressors including injuries and use of un-prescribed or wrong use of analgesics.

Proliferation of cult groups

Peer pressure and use of drugs in clubs is also on the rise. Alcoholism is most times associated with use of other drugs. Cult practices and cult gang attacks being common among the youths. These drugs are used to embolden its users. Recently the governor of Akwa Ibom State, one of the thirty six states in Nigeria; signed into law the prohibition of cult groups, specifically citing the groups and associated penalties. These groups have heightened criminality and loss of lives amongst these their immediate communities, like University campuses. Gang wars and ritual killings, have become commonplace amongst them.⁴⁰ A significant increase in possession of guns tools of combat makes hospital inundated with trauma cases

Use of opioid pain relief across counter

Over the counter drugs, though useful can become injurious to health, if used wrongly. Abuse of over the counter (OTC) drugs has also been a source of abuse and addiction of drugs in the elderly who need for pain relief and patients with chronic illnesses. The result is an increase in the rate of peptic ulcer disease and perforation, and sometimes, outright addiction.⁴¹

Occupational addiction among health care workers Ignorance.

United States have shown that 10%–15% percent of Health Care Professionals will misuse substances during their lifetime. Close monitoring of opioids use in the hospital is essential to prevent this. In spite of close auditing of these prescription drugs, cases of hospital health workers having addiction problems are handled by hospital disciplinary committees from time to time.

Solution to drug Abuse intervention measures

International Advocacy, NGO and social group support

WHO has since its founding in 1948 has been in the forefront in supporting countries prevent and reduce the problems of substance abuse. In the Year 2000 the department of substance abuse was merged with the department of mental health to enhance effectiveness in the handling of substance abuse issues. Their mandate on the handling of use of psychoactive substances include, reduction of the demand for nonmedical use of psychoactive substances, prevention in negative social and health consequences of and an advisory role to the United Nations on drug abuse matters.⁴⁴

Also on the international front, there is a strengthening of collaboration between WHO and United Nations office on drugs and crime (UNODC) on issues relating to drug use around the world. Intensive work is presently ongoing in areas of drug dependence treatment and care. Other areas of concerted efforts include, prevention of drug use and drug use disorders, monitoring drug use and its health and social consequences, improving access to medicines under international control and addressing challenges of new psychoactive substances.⁴⁵

Law on drug use and abuse in Nigeria

The Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), is the regulating body in charge of drug control, combating the distribution of drugs and the enforcement of the drug laws in Nigeria

The agency was established by Decree Number 48 of 1989 with visible presence in international airports, seaports and border crossing. Its efforts are also targeted at eradicating growing of **cannabis** by destroying plantings; and arrest and prosecution of the leaders of narcotics and money laundering organizations⁴⁶

UNODC identified Nigeria as one of the largest cannabis growers in Africa, with over 8% of the population using cannabis. Annual cannabis seizures increased from 126 metric tonnes in 2005 to 210 metric tonnes in 2007.⁴⁷

Nigeria has received support and recognition from the United States government over the past 10 to 15 years in its efforts in the anti- drug crusade; and crackdown cannabis cultivators and drug barons with seizures and forfeiture of properties.⁴⁸

⁴⁹

Intervention measures

The following intervention measures have been adopted in combating this scourge.

1. Drug education and health awareness –The need for awareness campaigns in the print, TV and social media on the effects and consequences of drug misuse should be consistently done. This should be taken to primary, secondary and University campuses where there is an increased proximity and propensity for this social ill. Social clubs like the Boys Scout and Girls guide should be re-instituted with continuous engagement of students in sporting activities.

2. Finance

Presently Nigeria's budgetary allocation for health should be increased to the minimum benchmark of 5% as recommended by WHO. Gladly the recent corona virus pandemic has spurred an upward review of the national budget on health to curtail the spread of Covid19. This effort is expected to be sustained to address other burning health issues like

drug addiction and dependence taking on an epidemic status with attendant ripple effects. Financial support should be sort from NGOs to support government efforts

3. Upgrade of treatment Centres

Improvement of treatment outfit facilities to enhance care. Treatment of victims is a primary health care approach as it discourages others from entering the loop of addicts.⁵⁰ The environment where such treatment is given has a psychological impact on the recovery of these patients. A clean, well ventilated outfit, where drugs and equipments are within easy reach. The importance of well oriented and dedicated staff cannot be over-emphasised

4. Manpower development.

Current data in the country suggests inadequate manpower.⁵¹ Efforts should be made to train manpower at different levels in the care of drug addicts; both at graduate and postgraduate levels to address their special needs. This involves administration of weaning agents, treatment of ailments like hepatitis and HIV that are associated with the lifestyles of these individual. A careful follow-up, treatment and reintegration to a normal society or work place

5. Legislation

Effective legislation currently exists on the punishment of persons aiding drug abuse. However the carrot and stick approach of encouraging those who forego the trade and use of illicit drugs may on the long term make this trade unattractive; while stiffer penalties await the unyielding users and barons of the drug trade

6. Empowerment of enforcement agencies like NDLEA by finance, legislation locking of demand and supply chain.⁵²

Restriction of over the counter drugs, monitoring pharmacies and other drug outlets to ensure non availability of addictive drugs, and making sure pharmacists can only dispense with valid prescription by a physician. Efforts should also be made for monitoring of drug prescription and use through a feedback mechanism and audit. ⁵³

Training

37% of the 155 responding countries in a study by UNODC have postgraduate training programmes in treatment of substance abuse disorders.⁵⁴ This figure are quit low compared to the enormity and effect of drug use among youths in our environment. Our Governments in Africa need to scale up efforts in this direction.

6. Treatment intervention

Non-availability or limited quantity of methadone and other drugs like naloxone poses great limitation in the care of addicts. 50% member countries in a UNDOC study have methadone available for maintenance treatment of opioid dependence. ⁵⁵ Increased availability of these drugs should be addressed urgently by the government.

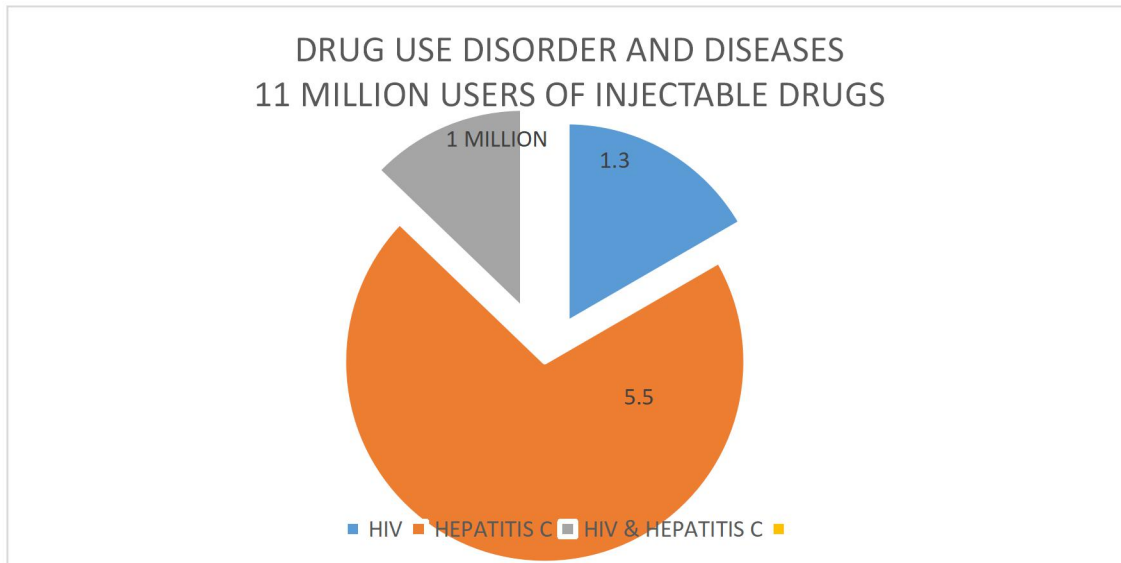
7. Solution to youth unemployment

Over the years the Nigerian governments introduced the National Youth Service Corpse (NYSC), National directorate of employment (NDE), SURE-P, Trader Money and N-Power. All these were geared towards empowering the youths. Effort were also made by government, NGOs and other organisation/ foundations like the Tony Elumelu foundation to promote entrepreneurial spirit among the youths. ²⁸

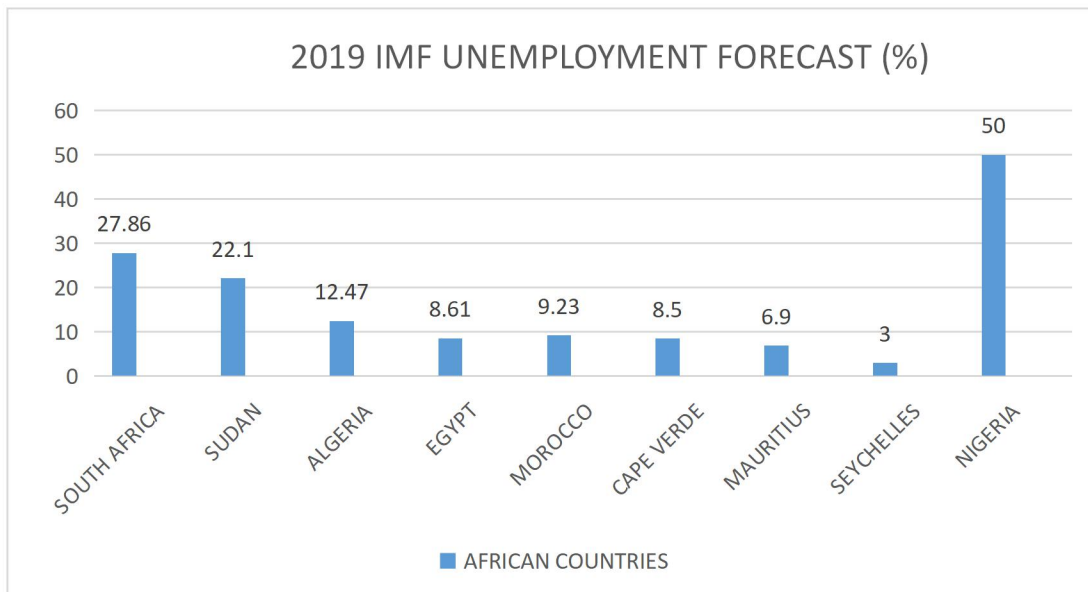
Efforts are also being made to encourage agriculture among the youth since it has the capacity for large scale employment of youths. Youths are also encouraged to develop skills outside their university degrees in order to help them set up businesses of their own for self –sustenance. Youth empowerment and entrepreneurship seem to be the only hope for the youth in an over-populated and fast growing nation with dwindling Oil resources, which forms over 70% of the nation's resources.²¹

Conclusion

Drug abuse is fast becoming a global epidemic; increasingly fuelled by poverty, unemployment and easy access to illicit drugs and medically un-prescribed drugs. Access to uncensored information via the internet, strong desire to explore and compete among peers are other issues accelerating this trend. This is taking an alarming dimension among youths in Nigeria that constitute a predominant proportion of the population of the country with over 50% unemployment rate. This is a whole generation on the hook. Efforts to reverse this trend must not only be global, but long lasting efforts and structures must be domiciled in Nigeria to save this generation from this catastrophe.



GRAPH 1



GRAPH 2

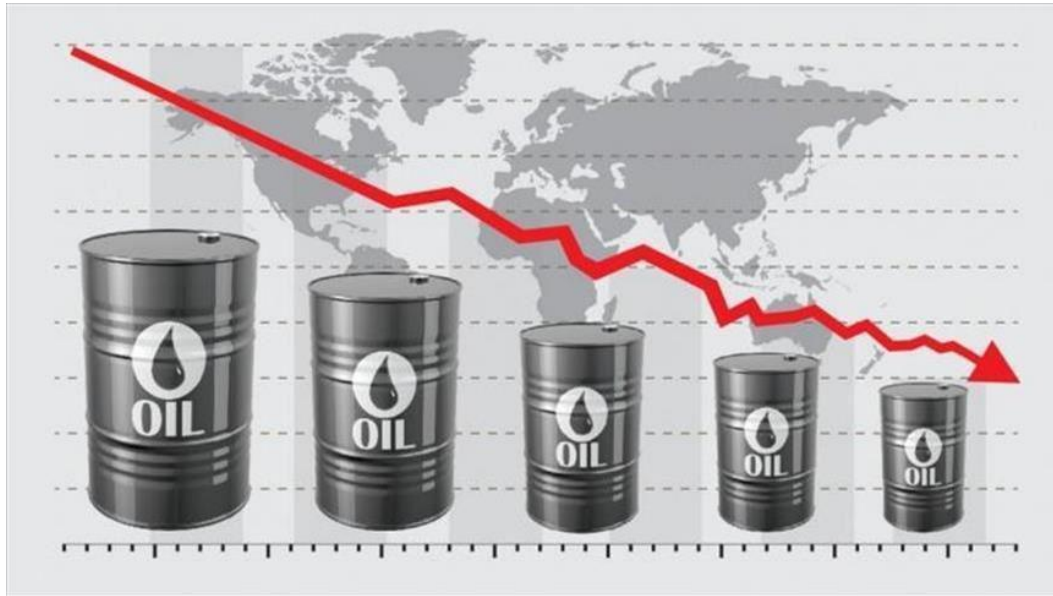


Photo credit: aa.com.tr

PICTURE 1



Photo credit: Nigeria health watch

PICTURE 2



Photo credit: guardian.ng

PICTURE 3

Abbreviations

WHO: World Health organisation

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

NDLEA: National Drug Law Enforcement Agency

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drug Control

NAFDAC: Nigerian Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control

NGO: Non-governmental Organisation

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