



Exploring Public Perception of Substance Use among Adolescents

K. Sathyamurthi*, Nithiya Sree M*, Irene Gracia B*, Aishavrya S*, Priya Dharshini R N*, Janani Gurulakshmi G*, Abdul Raheem M*, Sathyapriya B** & Aswathy Sabastian****

* Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai-8

** PhD FT Research Scholar, Dept of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai-8

*** HOD, Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai-8

ABSTRACT

Substance use within adolescent groups has emerged as a significant public health concern, impacting not only individual behavior but also familial and societal dynamics. This study investigates public opinion on substance use among adolescents aged 14 to 19 a developmental phase characterized by curiosity, risk-taking, and heightened vulnerability to experimenting with drugs and alcohol. The research seeks to understand how the general public perceives adolescent substance use, examining views on contributing factors, potential consequences, and the social and familial impact of this issue. By evaluating public opinion, this study aims to uncover the social and cultural attitudes that influence adolescent behaviors and assess the level of public awareness regarding the risks associated with substance use during these formative years. Findings are expected to offer insight into how communities can strengthen prevention strategies, support at-risk youth, and foster environments that discourage substance abuse. Public perceptions are essential in shaping effective and culturally relevant interventions to address the growing concern of adolescent substance use and to mitigate its long-term impact on individual and societal well-being.

Keywords: Adolescents, Substance Use, Public Opinion, Adolescent Risk Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse, defined as the hazardous consumption of alcohol, illegal narcotics, and other psychoactive substances, can lead to both physical and psychological dependence. It is a critical public health issue with wide-ranging effects on individuals, families, and communities. Adolescents—generally defined as individuals between the ages of 10 and 19—are particularly vulnerable to substance use due to various developmental, social, and psychological factors. During this formative phase, they undergo significant physiological and emotional changes, often accompanied by increased risk-taking behaviors and a heightened curiosity to experiment. The World Health Organization (WHO) has flagged substance use among adolescents as a significant global health challenge, with far-reaching implications on youth development, future productivity, and societal well-being.

Adolescent substance use has become a pressing concern due to its potential to disrupt normal development, affect mental health, and lead to long-term dependency issues. Additionally, the effects of substance use are rarely limited to the individual; they extend to families, peer groups, schools, and communities. This influence can cause disruptions in academic performance, increased incidents of risky behaviors, and strained family dynamics, all of which can ultimately hinder adolescents' potential as future contributors to society.

Understanding public opinion on adolescent substance use is vital for creating effective prevention strategies and policies. Public perception often reflects collective societal attitudes, awareness, and misconceptions, which can either support or hinder initiatives aimed at reducing substance abuse among young people. Recognizing these perceptions provides insights into cultural, social, and environmental factors that may contribute to or mitigate adolescent substance use. This research aims to explore the general public's perspective on adolescent substance use, examining their views on causes, consequences, and potential solutions to this issue.

Through this study, data has been gathered to assess the public's awareness and attitudes toward substance use in adolescents, with the goal of informing future prevention efforts. By addressing public opinion, this study seeks to uncover the societal influences that shape adolescent behavior and to aid in developing interventions that resonate with community values and expectations. Ultimately, tackling adolescent substance use is crucial not only for the health and well-being of individuals but also for the overall progress and stability of society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following are the literature reviewed based on the objectives of the study.

According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment's 2019 report on the "National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use in India," substance use across the nation is widespread. The survey revealed that 16 crore people (14.6%) aged 10 to 75 are current alcohol users, with 5.2% classified as alcohol-dependent. Cannabis use was reported among 3.1 crore individuals (2.8%), with 72 lakh (0.66%) experiencing cannabis-related issues. Additionally, opioid use is prevalent among 2.06% of the population, and nearly 0.55% (60 lakh) require health services for opioid-related problems. Sedative use (non-medical) is reported at 1.08%, with 1.18 crore people actively using sedatives. Notably, inhalant use is more common among children and adolescents, with 1.7% engaging in inhalant use compared to 0.58% of adults; approximately 18 lakh children are estimated to need assistance for inhalant misuse.

Anjali U S. (2018) study, it was found that majority of Institutionalized adolescents were of the age 15 and residing in the institution between 2 to 4 years. It was found that institutionalized adolescents are having a moderate level of emotional, motivational, social, self and psychosocial competence. More than half of the Institutionalized adolescents belong to nuclear family. Among them, 44 percent have moderate level of Self competence, 12 percent have high and 12 percent have low level of Self competence.

Nath, A. et al (2022) in their systematic review paper has mentioned Substance addiction among adolescents, particularly those aged 12 to 19, has emerged as a widespread issue despite national initiatives focused on supporting youth employment and development. The Research highlighted a variety of psychological risk factors associated with teenage substance abuse, with conduct disorders—such as aggression, impulsivity, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—being frequently linked to increased vulnerability. The study further suggests that family influences, particularly parents' attitudes toward drugs and alcohol, along with academic pressures, peer influence, stress, and concerns about physical appearance, play significant roles in adolescent substance use behaviors.

R. R. Jha et al. (2015) conducted a pre-experimental study to examine the lifetime alcohol consumption patterns among high school students in Bhubaneswar. The study sampled 863 students aged 12 to 17, with a gender distribution of 58.8% boys and 41.2% girls. Results revealed that 8.2% of the students had consumed alcohol at least once in their lifetime, while 43.6% reported current drug use. The study highlighted the significant influence of peers and family members in shaping adolescents' decisions to consume alcohol, underscoring the role of social relationships in early substance use behaviors. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing familial and peer influences in interventions aimed at reducing adolescent substance use.

Sathish Kumar and Sathyamurthi (2018) conducted a study in two distinct areas: an urban slum in Chetpet and a village in Vengal, to examine adolescent vulnerability to substance use. Findings indicate that adolescents in both locations are highly susceptible to substance use due to the widespread availability of substances and various influential factors. The study provides a comparative analysis of the physical, psychological, and social issues related to substance use disorder, highlighting the prevalence and consequences among adolescents in the urban slum versus those in the rural village setting.

Sathyamurthi, K., Agalya, S., and Anjana M (2020) study highlights that the majority (88 per cent) of the respondents was 16 years old when they tried smoking the whole cigarette, Vast majority (92 per cent) of the respondents have smoked cigarettes regularly, Vast majority (92 per cent) of the respondents were 16 years old and started smoking cigarettes regularly, half of the respondents have smoked for the past all 30 days, More than one third (72 per cent) of the respondents, will buy their own cigarette from a nearby shop, More than one third (72 per cent) of the respondents have not shown any proof of age while buying cigarettes, One third (38 per cent) of the respondents use both chew and snuff types of tobacco, More than one third (72 per cent) of the respondents have a habit of consuming alcohol.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The study employed a descriptive research design and collected data through a semi-structured interview schedule and questionnaire, utilizing a purposive sampling method. Public opinion was gathered using both interview schedules and questionnaires to ensure a comprehensive understanding of perspectives on adolescent substance use. The sample size comprised 702 respondents, and the study was conducted in Chennai. The objectives are to identify the factors influencing, to assess the awareness levels of public and to disseminate the information on the effects and risks associated with substance use.

RESULTS

The following are the findings of public based on the objectives of the study

Table 1 Public Perception of Substance Use of Adolescents

SNo	Public Opinion and Perception	Frequency	Percentage	
1	Perception of public of Substance use by the adolescents	Yes	611	87
		No	60	8.5
		Not Aware	31	4.4

Table

2	Opinion about the Government Run Anti-Drug Campaigns in Reducing Adolescent Substance Use	Very Effective	67	9.5
		Not Effective	169	24.1
		Need to improve	390	55.6
		Not aware	68	9.7
		Others	8	1.1
Total			702	100

highlight that a substantial majority of respondents (87%) perceive substance use as a significant problem among adolescents. This high percentage indicates widespread recognition of the issue, reflecting concern among the public. In contrast, a smaller percentage, 8.5%, believe substance abuse is not a significant problem for adolescents, while 4.4% report not being aware of adolescent substance abuse issues. The data reveal a strong public consensus regarding the severity of substance abuse among adolescents, which underscores the importance of addressing this issue through targeted interventions and awareness programs. The minority percentages reflect areas where additional information and education may be needed to improve awareness or change perceptions about substance abuse risks in adolescence.

The table highlights public perceptions regarding the effectiveness of government-run anti-drug campaigns in curbing adolescent substance use. A significant portion of respondents (55.6%) believe that government initiatives require improvement to be more effective in reducing substance use among adolescents. This suggests that current campaigns may not be sufficiently impactful or accessible to address the issue fully. 24.1 per cent of respondents feel that these campaigns are not effective, indicating a gap between government efforts and public expectations or actual influence on adolescent behavior. Only 9.5 per cent of respondents view government initiatives as very effective, which underscores the need for strategic enhancements in campaign design, reach, and engagement with adolescents. Additionally 9.7 per cent of respondents reported as being unaware of such campaigns, highlighting a potential lack of visibility or communication about available resources. In summary, while government initiatives are acknowledged, the data suggests a strong call for improvement and broader outreach to enhance the effectiveness and awareness of these campaigns in addressing adolescent substance use.

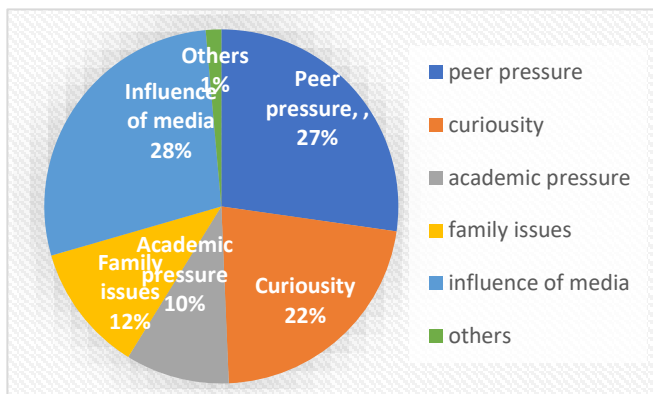


Figure 1 Factors contributing to substance Use

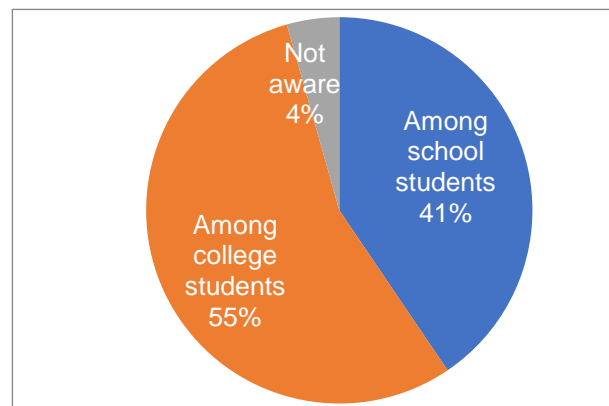


Figure 2 Perceived as Most Prone to Substance Abuse

The above figure 1 shows that 27 percent of the responses think that peer pressure is one of the primary factors contributing to adolescents substance abuse, 22 percent of the respondents think that curiosity is one of the primary factors contributing to adolescents substance abuse, 10 % of the respondents think that Academic Pressure is one of the primary factors contributing to adolescents substance abuse, 12 percent of the respondents think that Family Issues are the primary factor contributing to adolescents substance abuse, and 1 percent is other factors such as contributing to adolescents substance abuse and Easy Availability, Bad Influence, Not enough education and cinema are the other primary factors contributing to adolescents substance abuse.

The above figure 2 reveals that a majority of respondents (55 percent) perceive college students as the age group most susceptible to substance abuse, indicating a significant level of concern for substance use within this demographic. Additionally, 41 percent of respondents believe that school students are more prone to substance abuse, reflecting a noteworthy perception of risk even among younger adolescents. A small portion, 4 percent, reported not being aware of any particular age group at greater risk. This distribution suggests that substance use is largely seen as an escalating issue as adolescents transition into college, where exposure and access might be higher. However, the considerable percentage identifying school students indicates that substance abuse concerns are not limited to older teens, emphasizing the need for early prevention programs across both school and college settings. The small percentage of respondents who were unaware of risk differences among age groups could benefit from further awareness initiatives.

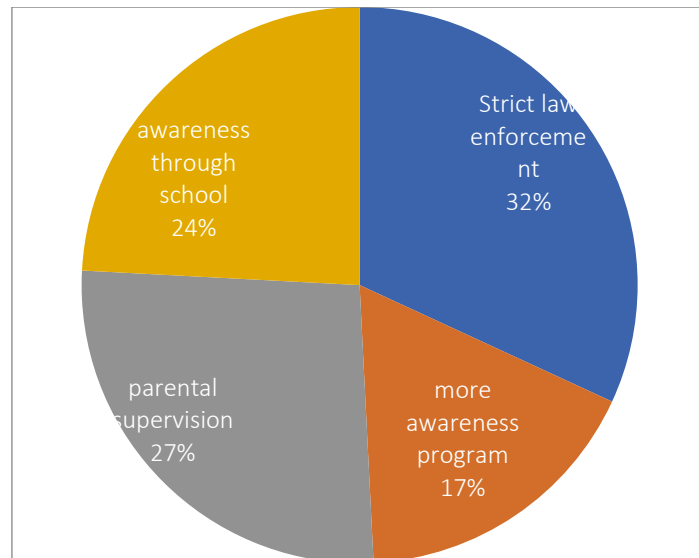


Figure 3 -Perceived Strategies for Preventing Adolescent Substance Use

The figure 3 indicates respondents' views on effective strategies for preventing substance use among adolescents. Key findings include the majority of responses (32%) consider strict law enforcement as an effective preventive measure, indicating the importance of a strong legal framework to deter substance use. Over half of the respondents (27%) believe that parental supervision plays a significant role, highlighting the family's influence in preventing substance use. Awareness programs in general (17%) and specifically within educational institutions (24%) are also recognized as impactful, reflecting the perceived importance of education in addressing substance use. Respondents also pointed to the necessity of making substances less accessible, recommending bans and stringent actions targeting both consumers and suppliers to curb accessibility and distribution.

Major Findings of the study

- **Significance of Adolescent Substance Abuse:**

A large majority (87%) of respondents perceive adolescent substance abuse as a significant problem, underscoring a broad public concern about this issue. The minority (8.5%) who do not view it as significant and the 4.4% who are unaware suggest areas where further education and awareness may be beneficial.

- **Influencing Factors for Substance Use:**

Peer pressure (27%) and curiosity (22%) are identified as primary factors driving substance use among adolescents, followed by family issues (12%) and academic pressure (10%). Additional influences such as easy availability and media (under 'other factors') also play a role, indicating the multifaceted nature of substance use motivations.

- **Age Groups at Higher Risk:**

Substance abuse is seen as more prevalent among college students (55%), reflecting concerns about increased exposure during this stage. A significant portion (41%) of respondents also see school students as vulnerable, suggesting the need for early intervention strategies across both school and college levels.

- **Effective Prevention Strategies:**

Strict law enforcement (32%) and parental supervision (27%) are regarded as primary prevention measures, highlighting the role of both legal deterrents and family involvement. Awareness programs (17%) and institution-specific education (24%) are also seen as impactful, alongside recommendations for reducing the availability of substances through bans and targeted action.

- **Effectiveness of Government Anti-Drug Campaigns:**

Over half (55.6%) of respondents feel that government anti-drug campaigns need improvement to effectively address adolescent substance use, and 24.1% view them as ineffective. A smaller segment (9.5%) considers them very effective, indicating a demand for enhanced campaign strategies. Additionally, 9.7% of respondents report a lack of awareness about these campaigns, pointing to potential gaps in visibility and accessibility.

Conclusion

The public's perception of adolescent substance use underscores the urgency for effective prevention and educational initiatives. The high level of concern among respondents reflects a collective awareness of the significant risks associated with adolescent substance use and the long-term impact it can have on individuals and communities alike. Many recognize that addressing this issue requires not only governmental action but also active community involvement, as community resources and support play a crucial role in fostering healthier, drug-free environments for adolescents.

Despite existing strategies and interventions, challenges remain in implementing effective prevention measures. Respondents highlighted the need for improved and well-coordinated anti-drug campaigns and strict law enforcement as key preventive strategies. This feedback indicates that while efforts are underway, there is room for enhancement in both communication and collaboration across social institutions, healthcare providers, educational systems, and families to effectively address adolescent substance use.

In promoting a healthier future for young people, empowering them to make informed decisions about substance use is essential. Education on the risks and consequences of substance abuse should begin early, with an emphasis on helping adolescents develop resilience and critical thinking skills. Additionally, creating a safe, supportive environment is not just the responsibility of parents but of society as a whole. Both families and communities must prioritize creating secure spaces where adolescents feel valued and guided, reducing their inclination toward substance experimentation. Together, through shared responsibility and sustained effort, we can work toward mitigating the risk of substance abuse among adolescents and building a healthier future.

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