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Mothers Versus Fathers as Single Parents: Examining Differences in Youth Drug Use in Kajiado County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Background: Drug use has been a challenge among the youth in the world and has been shown to have many negative effects to their lives and the society. To address this challenge, it is important to understand factors that may play a role in its development one of which is the family dynamics. This study focused on single-parent families while considering the gender of the primary parent.

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to determine whether there is a significant difference in drug use between youth from single father and single mother families in Kajiado County, Kenya. The study was anchored on the structural family therapy model.

Methodology: The adopted the correlational research design was used for this study. The target population was youth between 10-25 years in Kajiado county. To obtain the sample of 356 participants, a multi-stage sampling method was used. Questionnaires were used to collect data. Data was analyzed using descriptive and non-parametric test, specifically Pearson's chi-square.

Findings: The results indicated that there were significant differences in drug use among youth from single father families and the ones from single mother families with the ones form single father families being the highest users in recent (past one year) and current (past one month) use. The findings indicate the need for counselors, psychologists, NACADA, religious leaders among other stakeholder to develop drug use programs that target the youth from single father families who, seem to be at a high risk of drug use compared to their counterparts from single mother families.

INTRODUCTION

Drug use continues to be a menace in the world. There are about 292 million people currently consuming various types of drugs. This is a 20% increase over the last decade, according to the world drug report (United Nations Office and Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024). The use of these drugs often ends up being fatal to the users. The World health Organization (2024) indicated that over 2.6 million deaths per year were as a result of alcohol consumption while other drugs accounted for 0.6 million deaths. The continuation of use of drugs is a phenomenon that may cause a lot of harm to the human civilization considering societal destabilization and number of deaths.

The problem of drugs use is rampant especially among the youth. Studies around the world show that the youth are taking drugs more aggressively. According to word drug report (UNODC, 2024) young people are more inclined to use synthetic drugs as well as other type of drugs. The report also captures that the youth are more likely to use newer drugs compared to other age groups. In England, Cannabis is the most common drug of choice among the youth where 87% of the ones using reported to have consumed (Office of Health Improvement and Disparities, 2024). In Europe Cannabis is reported as the most commonly used drug among the youth (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 2024). The popularity of cannabis may be attributed to its legalization and change of perception about it. For the youth in substance use disorder treatment, 39% of them indicated that they had challenges with alcohol use and 9% with the use of ecstasy (Office of Health Improvement and Disparities, 2024). Interestingly this report was based on youth between the age 17 and under. This may be an indicator that there is an early onset of drug use.

In Africa, the situation is not any better. According to Donnenfeld et al., (2019), statistical modeling projects there will be about 14 million more people using drugs by 2050. This may have dire consequences on the continents public health systems as well as the general well-being. Nigeria is noted as one of the African countries with the highest cases of drug use, with the most abused drugs being cannabis, tramadol, codeine and heroin (UNODC, 2018). Interestingly, Donnenfeld et al., (2019) indicates that East Africa is projected to have the sharpest increase of people using drugs. This may be an indicator of the challenges that the East African region may struggle with in future.

As an east African country, Kenya seem to be on the path of an increase in drug and substance use. According to the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA) (2024), about 26% of youth from universities were current users of various drugs meaning they had used at least one drug in the last one month. Interestingly, there were more youth from private universities that consumed drugs (35.1%) compared to their counterparts in public universities (22.6%). This could be as a result of easy access of drugs due to their financial ability and probably less control from parents. Furthermore, studies in Kenya indicate that the age of first use seem to be changing as children younger than 5 years have been found using drugs (National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA) and The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), 2019)

With time, these children who have an early onset of drug use are likely to continue the use into addiction. As a result, they are likely to suffer from various consequences associated with the use of various drugs such as, different types of cancers, damages in their brain during the physical maturation process, academic challenges and even dropping out of school, poverty among others (National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2020).

To address the problem of drug use, it is important to understand various factors that may contribute to the use of drugs. Among these factors is the family structure. Within the various types of family structure some dynamics have been found to contribute to the drug use problem among the youth. These factors are like; low socio-economic status, low parental monitoring and control (Svensson, 2003; Becoña, et al., 2013), high levels of parent-child conflict, various types of parenting styles among others. These factors seem to be high in some family structures compared to others.

For example, in single parent families there seem to be high levels of parent-child conflict, low socio-economic status, low parental monitoring and control compared to in double-parent families (Dargahi, et al., 2018). In addition, single-parent families are likely to experience financial challenges than double-parent families (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Salas-Betsch, 2024). This may indicate that single-parent families have unique dynamics and challenges compared to double-parent families considering there is only one primary parent who is in charge of the family.

Single-parent families can be considered in terms of the gender of the primary parent. There are families headed by a single father and others by a single mother. Some studies suggest that there is a difference in the levels of drug use among the youth depending on the primary parent in single parent families. for example in one of the studies, girls living with the father as the primary parent have a significantly greater risk of drug use compared to the ones living with the mother as the primary parent, while for boys, the gender of the parent did not have a significant difference (Hemovich & Crano, 2009).

Within families, communication of a father or mother may have an effect on the use of drugs. Luk et al., (2010) found that communication between the father and their male youth served as a protective factor against marijuana use while mother communication was protective against smoking cigarettes. However, this was different for the female youth where communication was not a protective actor against substance use. This could mean that there are some gender dynamics that may serve as protective factors among male children. However, it would be interesting to find out if the same results would be found in single-parent families considering that Luk's and colleagues' study was not specific on the family structure.

Families headed by single mothers are tend to be poor. For example, According to Salas-Betsch (2024) single mothers are likely to experience greater economic insecurity than single fathers and married parents (Salas-Betsch, 2024). This suggests that the youth form single mother families are more likely to face one of the risk factors of drug use, namely, low socio-economic status and therefore, they may be more predisposed to drug use than their counterparts in single-father families. With such an observation, it was interesting to know whether youth from mother headed single-parent families were using drugs at a higher rate than their counterparts from father headed single-parent families.

In families where the fathers are absent there is a likelihood that the youth may engage in drug use. Antecol and Bedard (2007) found that when the father remains longer in the family the probability of the youth engaging in deviant behaviors like drug use decreases. However, this does not answer the question on youth drug use and the complete absence of the fathers and the cases where the male parent is the only present parent.

There is a dearth of studies that focus on parents' gender and drug use among the youth not only in Kenya but also in other parts of the world. The current study sought to fill this gap in research by providing data on the difference between levels of drug use among the youth in mother headed and father headed single-parent families. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine whether there are significant differences in drug use between youth from single father and single mother families.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the cross-sectional research design. This was suitable as it allowed the researcher to sample a section of the target population, the youth, to determine the relationship between the two variables under investigation. The study was carried out in Kajiado County where studies have shown that the use drugs among the use was an issue. A study by Ogunde (2009) found that about a third of secondary school students had ever taken alcoholic beverages in Ngong Sub-county. Further, Wangai (2007) found that children as young as 8 and 9 years of age had started using drugs in Ngong sub-county, which is in Kajiado county. This is an indication that the drug use problem is a challenge in the area. It has also been established that single-parent families are among the prevalent family structures in Kajiado county (Wafari, 2015). Thus there was need to study whether there could be significant differences in drug use among the youth depending on the gender of the primary parent in single-parent families.

The target population was youth between 10-25 years. The inclusion of youth aged 10years is because NACADA and KIPPRA found that youth are initiated into drug use from as young as 10 years. As indicated earlier, Wangai (2007) established that children as young as 8 years had began using drugs in Ngong sub-county, Kajiado County. In terms of sampling, a multi-stage approach was used. At stage one, Kajiado County was stratified into

five sub-counties using stratified random sampling. At the second stage, two of these sub-counties were chosen. Each of these sub-counties were further stratified into rural and urban divisions in the third stage to form four divisions. At the fourth stage, the researcher used purposive sampling to choose schools, churches, youth clubs, theatre clubs where the youth are commonly found. Then finally at the fifth stage, simple random sampling was used to sample the participants comprising of 356 youth.

Data was collected using questionnaires. The questionnaire had three sections. The first section sought to collect data on demographic information and family structure (double/single-parent families and the gender of the primary parent (single father or single mother). The second section was the drug use questionnaire which was used to collect data on the type and frequency of drug use among the participants. The drug use questionnaire captured the lifetime (ever use), recent use (past one year), current use (past one month) and daily use. The questionnaires were administered face to face.

The researcher ensured that the questionnaire was valid. To enhance construct validity, the variables being studied, gender of the primary parent and drug use, were operationally defined in harmony with the existing descriptions in literature. The researcher also ensured that items in the questionnaire were relevant to the variables in the present study. In addition, expert opinion was sought to ensure suitability of the items in the questionnaire as recommended by Warren (2000).

To ensure reliability, test-retest method was used to measure the reliability of the instruments. The researcher administered the instruments to ten respondents similar to the target population at two different points in time. The questionnaires were administered to the same participants twice, within an interval of 14 days. The 14-day period was important in reducing the recall effects. This period was also important as it ensured that there were reduced chances of the behavior under study to change. A correlation coefficient index was computed to compare the two sets of scores and an index of 0.75 was established. This was considered good enough as suggested by Rosner (1995). The results of from the pilot phase were not included in the final sample.

In terms of data analysis, the researcher used descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages. In addition, a non-parametric test, specifically the Pearson's chi square, was used to determine whether there were significant differences in drug use between youth from male headed single-parent families and the ones from female headed single-parent families.

Results

The researcher obtained 371 filled questionnaires from the participants. However, 17 of those questionnaires were not fully answered, missing important information. For this reason, they were excluded from the final data. Therefore, the analysis only involved data from 356 participants.

According to the data obtained, majority of the youth were between the ages 10 and 15 and the females accounted for the majority of the participants at 59.4%. Most of the participants had a secondary/high school education and only a few of them had either diploma or university degree (13.8 %). From the 356 participants, a bulk of them came from double-parent families at 63.2% while the 36.8% were from single-parent families. The researcher further analyzed data obtained from the youth from single-parent families. The findings on parental gender and drug use among the youth will be presented in the following section.

Gender of Parent and Lifetime (ever) Use of drugs

To find out whether there are any differences in lifetime drug use between the youth from single father and single mother families, data was analyzed. The results are as presented on table 1.

Table 1

Gender of the Parent by Lifetime (ever) Use of Drugs

Gender of the Parent	Yes (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	No (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	Total	Total Percentage (%)
Single Father (n=29)	22	75.9%	7	24.1%	29	100%
Single Mother (n=102)	68	66.7%	34	33.3%	102	100%

According to table 1 drug use was higher among youth from single father families at about 76%, compared to the ones from single mother families at about 67% in lifetime (ever) use.

To test the hypothesis that there are no significant differences in lifetime (ever) drug use prevalence between youth from single father and those from single mother families, Pearson's chi square was used. The obtained results show that, $\chi^2(2, n = 132) = .888, p=.641$. Since the p value was greater than .05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences in the prevalence of drug use between youth from single father and mother families.

Gender of Parent and Recent (Past One Year) Use of drugs

To establish whether there were differences in recent (past one year) use of drugs among the youth from single father and single mother families, data was analyzed. Table 2 shows the findings.

Table 2

Gender of Primary Parent and Lifetime (ever) drug use among the youth

Gender of the Parent	Yes (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	No (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	Total	Total Percentage (%)
Single father (n=29)	21	72.4%	8	27.6%	29	100%
Single mother (n=102)	61	58.8%	42	41.2%	102	100%

Table 2 indicates that youth from single-father families recorded a higher drug use prevalence at about 72% compared to their counterparts from single mother, who recorded a drug use prevalence of about 59% of them being recent (past one year) users.

To test the hypothesis there are no significant differences in recent (past one year) use prevalence between youth from single father and those from single mothers, Pearson's chi-square test was conducted. The results are as presented in table 2.

According to table two, the differences were significant, $\chi^2(2, n = 132) = 12.731, p = .002$. Since the p value was less than .05, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis that there are significant differences in recent (past one year) drug use between youth from single father families and those from single mother families.

Gender of Parent and Current (past One Month) Use of drugs

A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to ascertain whether there are differences in prevalence of drug use among youth from single father and Single mother families. The findings are as shown on table 3.

Table 3

Gender of the parent by Current (Past One Month) Use of Drugs

Gender of the Parent	Yes (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	No (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	Total	Total Percentage (%)
Single father (n=29)	20	69.0%	9	31.0%	29	100%
Single Mother (n=102)	56	54.9%	46	45.1%	102	100%

According to table 3 more than two-thirds of the respondents of both single-parent families were current users. The ones from single father families had a higher prevalence in use of drugs at 69% compared to the ones from single mother families at about 55%.

Pearson's chi-square was used to test the hypothesis that there are no significant differences in current (past one month) drug use prevalence between youth from single father families and those from single mother families. The analysis indicated that differences were strongly significant; $\chi^2(2, n = 132) = 16.117, p = .000$. Because p value was less than .05, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis that there are significant differences in current (past one month) drug use between youth from single father families and those from single-mother families.

Gender of Parent and Daily Use of Drugs

To compare daily drug use across youth from single father families and the ones from single mother families, cross tabulation statistics were conducted. The results are as shown in table 4

Table 4

Gender of Parent by Daily Use of Drugs

Gender of the Parent	Yes (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	No (Frequency)	Percentage (%)	Total	Total Percentage (%)
Single Father (n=29)	7	24.1%	22	75.9%	29	100%
Single Mother (n=102)	16	15.7%	86	84.3%	102	100%

From table 4 a greater majority of youth from single-parent families headed by both genders did not use drugs on a daily basis. However, it is important to note that the youth from single mother families had a higher prevalence of daily use of drugs (24%) than the ones from single father families (15.7%).

To test the hypothesis that there are no significant differences in daily drug use prevalence between youth from single father families and those from single mother families, Pearson's chi square was used. The obtained results are as follows, $\chi^2(2, n = 132) = 5.998, p = .050$. Since p value is equal to .05, we reject null hypothesis in favor of the alternative hypothesis that there are significant differences in daily drug use prevalence between youth from single father families and those from single mother families.

Discussion

The results indicate that when the father is the only parent, the youth are at a higher risk of engaging in drug use. The study seems to suggest that there are some protective factors that are found in female headed families that may be absent in male headed families hence the lower numbers of youth engaging in drugs compared to their counterparts. Some of the protective factors could be that mothers offer higher nurturance to their children and spend more time with them as Karega (2012) notes. It is also possible that the male parents are likely to use drugs compared to the female parent (Gao, et al., 2023). Through modeling, the youth are likely to engage in similar behavior. Furthermore, if the male parent abuses drugs too, the father-child relationship may be negatively affected (Caponnetto, Triscari, & Maglia, 2020) causing more stress to the youth which may lead them to the use of drugs as a coping mechanism and emotional self-medication. While there are hardly studies that compare drug use among youth in single-parent families headed by male and female in terms of recent, current and daily use, the current study shows that the youth in male headed single-parent families are at a higher risk of drug use, in terms of recent, current and daily use.

In terms of daily use, the youth from single mother families had a higher prevalence compared to the ones from single mother families. This could be because single mother families tend to experience more challenges in areas like finances (Affandy, 2023), stigma (Mbithi, 2019) among others. These challenges affect the youth too and as a way of coping, they may use various drugs.

Hardly do we find a comparison of the prevalence of drug use among youth from single father and single mother families. For instance, the study by Brown and Rinelli (2010) that was conducted in the US, only studied youth from single-mother headed families and left out those from single-father headed families. They found higher use of cigarettes and alcohol among youth from mother headed SPF compared to the ones from married families (double-parent families). Thus, there is need for more of studies on the unique dynamics within single-parent families such as the interaction between gender and youth drug use.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study sought to establish whether there are significant differences in drug use among youth from single parent families headed by male parents and the ones headed by female parents in Kajiado County, Kenya. The results indicate that the youth for male headed single-parent families were at a higher risk of drug use than the ones from female headed single-parent families. Thus, there is need for counselors, psychologists, religious leaders together with NACADA among other partners focused on drug use, to develop drug use prevention programs that target youth who are at risk of drug use such as those from male headed single-parent families who appear to be at a higher risk of drug use. In addition, other drug use prevention programs may target the single-parents especially the male primary parents who are the solely responsible for the youth in their families to assist them enhance their drug prevention strategies in their parenting. This approach will assist in reinforcing the drug prevention message both at home and in the society.

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