

# Contemporary Patterns and Strategic Responses to Youth Substance Abuse in Zimbabwe

**Susan Shufro**

*Department of Operations Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa*

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*Abstract: Drug and substance abuse is a contemporary problem among the youth and has reached crises levels in the nation of Zimbabwe. The problem has been compounded by acute socio-economic challenges that have characterised the nation for the past decade. Despite efforts to curb the problem, new forms of drug and substance abuse are emerging. This study, which is based on a documentary survey, explored the emerging trends in drug and substance abuse among youths in Zimbabwe, as well as evaluating the current measures to deal with the problem. While marijuana is viewed as the most abused drug, this study reveals some emerging trends such as the abuse of prescription drugs, use of home-made intoxicating substances, infusion of intoxicated people's blood, ingestion of drug laced foods and drinking sodium polyacrylate from boiled diapers. Acute socio-economic challenges, ease of access and porous borders are considered the major contributory factors for drug and substance abuse. Notwithstanding the efforts by the government and law enforcement agents to deal with the scourge, this study reveals that the current measures have not been as effective as expected.*

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**Keywords:** Drug Abuse; Substance Abuse; Youth; Rehabilitation; Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the rate of drug and substance abuse, threatening the moral fabric and development. This spike has been witnessed in almost every part of the globe, cutting across almost all races, religions and nationalities (Anderson-Carpenter et al. 2020; World Drug Report 2020). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates, 3.5% to 5.7% of persons between the ages of 15 and 64 worldwide, or between 155 and 250 million people, used illicit drugs at least once in the year 2013 (Johnston et al. 2014). A World Health Organisation (WHO) report notes that approximately 31 million persons have drug-use disorders throughout the world, and about 11 million are on opiate drugs (WHO 2019). In a related recent report in 2023, the UNODC reported a 23% global increase in people using illicit drugs, from 240 million in 2011 to 296 million in 2023

(UNODC 2023). The prevalence and impacts of the health-risky behaviours commonly associated with drug and substance abuse amongst youths has attracted growing international attention. It is important to note that drug and substance abuse not only affects the individual addicts but also the families, communities and nations at large (Maraire et al. 2020). Whilst drug and substance abuse is a global problem, statistical evidence and research has shown that the problem is on an upward trend in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to other regions of the globe (Muzuva et al. 2023; Donnenfeld et al. 2019; Zivira 2016). The problem is compounded by a host of other socio-economic challenges, including struggling health-delivery systems, thus diminishing the capacity to deal with the drug- and substance-abuse problem (Denya 2024).

While both the adult and the youth population engage in drug and substance abuse, research has shown that the youth are the main abusers (Dube 2023; Maraire et al. 2020). Consequently, the young generation feels the most impacts of drug and substance abuse, yet they are the most productive age group that should play a central role in economic development. The youth in all societies constitute a vital cog in the population, and their roles and activities play a significant role in realising the ultimate goals of communities (Mayanchi et al. 2020). Undoubtedly, the youth are mostly viewed as the strength of a given nation and the treasures of future generations. Ironically, while societies place hope in the youth for future socio-economic development, many young people engage in deviant behaviour—with one of the most serious manifestations of deviance being drug and substance abuse. In contrast to other age groups, the youth are usually more prone to drug and substance abuse due to their high inclination for experimentation, curiosity, susceptibility to peer pressure and low self-esteem (Dzinamarira et al. 2023).

Drug and substance abuse among the youth comes with a host of psychological and other health issues. Drug and substance abuse among the youth has commonly been associated with poor academic performance, development of anti-social behaviours, depression-related health complications, addiction and unsafe sexual behaviours (Mayanchi et al. 2020; Volkow 2020). Drugs such as inhalants result in mental and nervous damage, unexpected death due to cardiac arrhythmia and renal, pulmonary and teratogenic effects (Jakaza and Nyoni 2018). Youths who abuse drugs and other related harmful substances are more likely to report having more sexual partners, not using condoms, engaging in non-consensual activity, getting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), misusing contraceptives and violence against intimate partners (Stidham et al. 2013). Additionally, drug and substance abuse has been linked to unfavourable reproductive outcomes such as unplanned pregnancies, premature births and mother and newborn morbidity and mortality (Dzinamarira et al. 2023). Most drug abusers are known to become hostile towards their families and defiant, turning rebellious and exhibiting irrational anger (Maraire et al. 2020).

This study focuses on the challenge of drug and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe—a Southern African nation that has been considered as having a significant rise in drug and substance abuse (Denya 2024; Maraire and Chethiyar 2020). This study addresses three research questions, namely: (a) what are the emerging trends in drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe? (b) what are the contributory factors to the rise in drug and substance abuse among the Zimbabwean youths? and (c) how effective are the current measures in taming the drug- and substance-abuse problem in the country? This study is based on recent secondary sources that include peer-reviewed journal articles and online news platforms. This study addresses a contemporary social problem in a nation that has of late been characterised by other significant socio-economic challenges, including a struggling health-delivery system (Atieno et al. 2022). Due to the economic challenges, the health sector has been characterised by limited budgetary allocations, reliance on external funding and an acute shortage of medical supplies (Atieno et al. 2022). Given the magnitude of the problem, the governing authorities have described the drug- and substance-abuse problem as a national security threat (Tshili 2023). Zimbabwe’s population is relatively young, with about 67 percent of the population being under the age of 35 (Madzamba 2023), thus making it important to address the scourge of drug and substance abuse among the youth. This study gives context specific information on the magnitude of the drug- and substance-abuse problem—information which is crucial in crafting informed policy prescriptions and response measures. While a lot has been written on the drug- and substance-abuse problem in Zimbabwe, this study is based on secondary evidence that spans from 2020 to 2024, thus giving a nuanced contemporary analysis of the scourge.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach and was based on a documentary survey. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic material (Bowen 2009). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Rapley 2007). The major advantage of a documentary survey, as outlined by Bowen (2009), lies in the ability to draw upon multiple sources of evidence, thus enabling convergence and corroboration. Thus, the use of documents from multiple sources provided rich data for analysis. Notwithstanding the importance of printed material, this study used internet sources. An internet search was conducted on Google Chrome using the following key search phrases: drug and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe; contributory factors to drug and substance abuse by the youth in Zimbabwe; and

measures to combat drug and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe. The search results produced approximately 120 documents. The search results comprised various online media articles, research publications, book chapters and policy documents on drug and substance abuse. This was followed by the data screening phase, in which relevant documents were identified for analysis. The data screening phase also entailed the removal of articles that appeared in multiple media platforms, and, in such instances, only one article considered as more detailed was included.

For an item to be included in the sample, the item was supposed to have been published within the time frame of between 2020 and 2024. This period was considered to be recent enough to reveal the current trends in drug and substance abuse. For journal articles, the abstract had to reveal issues surrounding drug and substance abuse among the youth. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered for analysis. In order to confirm whether the journal article was peer reviewed, the researcher had to visit the journal website. For an online news article to be included, the article had to have drug and substance abuse as part of the title and as the central issue covered by the article. For policy papers, the title and the executive summaries had to have a focus on drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe. A total of 39 documents were considered to be suitable for the paper (see Table 1). The documents were analysed through thematic analysis, and three themes from the three research questions were identified. The themes were: emerging trends in drug and substance abuse; contributory factors to drug and substance abuse; and measures to deal with drug and substance abuse.

Table 1. Sample constituents.

Category of Item	Sample Size
Peer-reviewed journal articles	15
Online news articles	18
Policy documents	6
<b>Total documents reviewed</b>	<b>39</b>

## **OVERVIEW OF THE EMERGING DRUG- AND SUBSTANCE-ABUSE SCOURGE**

There has been a general consensus that illegal drug and substance uptake in Zimbabwe has reached crisis levels, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Banda 2023; Dz-inamarira et al. 2023; Muzuva et al. 2023; Mandura 2023). So dire is the situation that more than half of the youths' population, approximately 57%, in Zimbabwe abuse drugs (Maraire and Chethiyar 2020). Noting the significant impacts of drug and substance abuse on the nation, the problem has since been considered a national security threat (Tshili 2023), culminating in the

setting up of an inter-ministerial committee by the President in 2021 to deal with the problem. In 2023, the drug- and substance-abuse problem was declared a state of national disaster, with the government noting that the problem had reached alarming levels, jeopardising not only the present but also the future (Moyo and Mpofu

2023). There is a general consensus that the drug- and substance-abuse problem can lead to catastrophic results on the country's development agenda if it is not urgently addressed (Chikova 2023; Moyo and Mpofu 2023).

Statistics compiled by the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network revealed that 60% of psychiatry admissions were due to drug abuse, with 80% of those admitted aged 16 to 25 years, including school children (Mandura 2023). Reports in other online media platforms have revealed that public health facilities are struggling to deal with the swelling numbers of hospitalisations due to drug and substance abuse, and, in most cases, patients are being turned away due to shortage of human resources and hospital capacity to accommodate the patients (Gwarisa 2023; Pembere 2021). Reports also reveal that, by the end of 2023, drug rehabilitation centres in Zimbabwe were full and unable to cope with rising demand to accommodate new patients. The centres are estimated to be holding or treating about 5000 people at any time, with tens of thousands of others either not coming forward for or not receiving any assistance (Dzenga 2023). Statistics in early 2024 also revealed that 50% of the new admissions at Ingutsheni Mental Hospital, one of the leading mental health institutions located in Bulawayo, were drug abusers (Gonye and Chikandiwa

2024). Reports of local youths identified to be in a drunken like stupor, colloquially referred to as 'ku sticker' (in reference to the paralytic-like stupor youths high on substances are often found in) are widespread in the media (Marandure et al. 2023; Factsheet 2021). Across the country, especially in urban areas, hardly a day passes without news of loss of life, violence and crime owing to drug abuse (Matsikiti 2023). In an incident that made headlines in Zimbabwe's media outlets, eight schoolgirls were expelled from one of Harare's leading elite girls' high schools over alleged drug abuse in January 2023. Sources close to the school indicated that the girls were caught red-handed using drugs, while other drugs were found packed in their bags (Freddy 2023). This development shows that even young girls are also engaging in drug and substance abuse like their male counterparts.

## **NATURE OF DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

There are various drugs and substances that are abused by the youth. Notwithstanding the challenge of having actual percentages on the extent of the drug abuse problem, cannabis, known in the native language as "mbanje", has

been found to be the most abused drug in Zimbabwe (Matsikiti 2023; Zimbabwe Civil liberties and Drug Network 2022; Maraire and Chethiyar 2020). Cannabis, which is smoked or inhaled, is considered a recreational drug which can enhance excitement and pleasure. The drug is usually readily available and affordable to the youth, especially given that some people grow cannabis in their backyards. Other youths have also turned to harder drugs such as heroin, cocaine and crystal methamphetamine (locally known as mutoriro) (Mandura 2023; Voice of Africa 2022), and these drugs are mainly imported. Apart from imported drugs, locals are also flooding the market with cheap, highly intoxicating substitutes such as musombodiya, a colourless drink made from ethanol, which is mainly manufactured and distributed in high-density suburbs and bus termini (Mandura 2023).

There is also a growing trend towards abuse of cough syrups such as bronclear, commonly known as “bronco”, and histalix (Maraire et al. 2020). These cough syrups contain alcohol and codeine, with codeine being an opiate containing morphine-like substances. These two ingredients are central nervous system stimulants, and they cause drowsiness, apathy and euphoria if they are taken in larger quantities than the prescribed measures (Maraire et al. 2020). Similarly, there has also been reported abuse of diazepam—a prescription drug commonly known as “mangemba” (Makwanise 2023). Diazepam addresses anxiety, seizures and alcohol withdrawal, and, when taken in excess, it results in diminished physical activity and drowsiness (Maraire et al. 2020). Other prescription drugs that have been reportedly abused by the youth include ketamine, pethidine, morphine and fentanyl (Mandura 2023).

Another unorthodox new method, popularly known as ‘Bluetooth’ entails infusion of an intoxicated person’s blood into an unintoxicated person using syringes (Matsikiti 2023). Apart from the danger of intoxication, this also comes with risks of transmission of other diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). There has also been a trend towards ingestion of confectionary products such as scones, popcorn and muffins laced with drugs (Matsikiti 2023). There have also been reports that young addicts are even dipping diapers and bleach products into boiling water and inhaling the vapours as an intoxicant (Mandura 2023; Manika 2022). Sodium polyacrylate is the absorbent for blood on sanitary pads and urine on diapers and dissolves once boiled. The youth then drink the water after boiling to get intoxicated (Manika 2022). Ironically, most youths prefer used diapers as, having been discarded, they are cheaper to find or procure.

## **CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS TO DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG THE YOUTH**

Anecdotal and empirical evidence also suggests a rise in substance use fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns (Mhizha and Maunganidze 2022; Mutsaka 2022; Factsheet 2021; Mukwenha et al. 2021). The ease of availability of substances, together with a lack of recreational activities for young people during COVID-19-induced lockdowns, have both been cited as potential reasons for the increase in drug and substance abuse (Mukwenha et al. 2021). The significant socio-economic challenges that have been experienced in the nation for over a decade have been regarded as the major contributory factor to drug and substance abuse among Zimbabwean youths (Marandure et al. 2023; Muswerakuenda et al. 2023). The rise in poverty and dwindling economic opportunities have left many young people idle and depressed, only to find solace in illicit substance use. Banda (2023) also contends that poverty intensification in a context of limited approved alternatives may lead the youth to illegal activities, including drug and substance dealing and abuse. Thus, an increasing number of youths are engaging in drug and substance abuse as a form of entertainment in a nation that has been characterised by extremely high unemployment rates, poverty and despair (Dzinamarira et al. 2023; Factsheet 2021). Socio-economic challenges are also linked to increased rates of stress, trauma and mental health challenges, which are all risk factors for substance use (Dube 2023; Kundwei and Mbwirire 2020).

In a country characterised by financial challenges, the low cost of drugs has also been regarded as another contributory factor, with a report by the United Nations International Children's Emergence Fund (UNICEF 2023) indicating that users spend an average of US\$2 to satisfy their needs. The ease of acquiring illicit brews such as musombodhiya and kachasu has also raised the chances of youths engaging in drug and substance abuse, as these cheap illicit brews are easily manufactured in backyards within high-density residential areas (Dzinamarira et al. 2023). Apart from ease of accessibility, lack of supervision, peer influence and having family or relatives who abuse drugs have also been regarded as risk factors for drug and substance abuse by the youth in Zimbabwe (Madzamba 2023).

Porous borders, coupled with corruption at border entry points, have also been touted as the reason for the rise in abuse of prescription drugs such as bonclear (Mukwenha et al. 2021), as these drugs are finding their way illegally into the country in huge volumes. Muswerakuenda et al. (2023) also report that illicit drugs from neighbouring countries are being smuggled through porous entry points and well-organised syndicates at the official border posts. Neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia have emerged as the major sources for both prescription and hard drugs (Mandura 2023). While cannabis is mainly grown locally, research has shown that youths in Harare are

preferring cannabis from Malawi, which has been considered to be stronger than the locally grown cannabis (Mhizha and Maunganidze 2022). Porous borders, coupled with corruption at border posts, could be the possible reason for the proliferation of Malawian cannabis among the youth in Harare.

## **CURRENT PRESCRIPTIVE MEASURES AND ATTENDANT CHALLENGES**

The government of Zimbabwe has taken the leading role in fighting drug and substance abuse, with the major highlight being the launch of the National Drug Control Master Plan (2020–2025) (Kwaramba et al. 2024; Muzuva et al. 2023) as well as the Treatment and Rehabilitation Guidelines of Drug and Substance Abuse Disorder of Zimbabwe (Mandura

2023). The launch was preceded by the setting up of an inter-ministerial committee to deal with the rising cases of drug and substance abuse in Zimbabwe. The National Drug Control Master Plan is underpinned by five pillars: supply reduction; demand reduction; harm reduction treatment and rehabilitation; community reintegration; and media and communications (Kwaramba et al. 2024; UNICEF 2023). In resonance with the master plan, non-governmental organisations and embassies have also been engaged in anti-drug awareness campaigns, with some of them contributing with financial resources (Gonye and Chikandiwa 2024). However, there have been concerns that the progress and achievements made under the plan have not been made public (Mandura 2023), thus calling the efficacy of this noble initiative into question.

The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) have also been instrumental in the fight against drug and substance abuse, mainly through enforcement and awareness campaigns. In early 2023, the ZRP launched a nationwide operation targeting drug peddlers and drug addicts, culminating in the arrest of 1903 drug peddlers and addicts as of February 2023 (Mandura 2023). In October 2023, the government revealed that 468 drug and substance abuse offenders and 36 suppliers had been arrested over the previous few months (Moyo and Mpofu 2023). The police conducted raids, confiscating drugs and destroying a total of four bases in three provinces, “two in Harare Metropolitan (Mbare and Epworth), one in Midlands (Gweru CBD), and one in Mashonaland West (Gwayagwaya Shopping Centre)” (Moyo and Mpofu 2023). Most of the drug abusers were released after paying fines. There have also been plans by the Zimbabwean government to enact legislation for establishing a national drug elimination agency, which will pave the way for the establishment of an additional security service and a specialised drug and substance elimination agency (Xinhua 2024). Enforcement has, however, been hampered by obstacles, chief among them being the involvement of police officers and politicians in the illicit drug and substance trade—a fact which was confirmed by the Minister of Home Affairs in a 2023



media briefing (Mandura 2023). This challenge will make it difficult to stop the supply side for illicit drugs and substances. For it to be effective, law enforcement should also be accompanied by stiffer penalties for drug peddlers, coupled with mandatory jail sentences for repeat offenders. The ZRP also continues to conduct awareness campaigns on the rise of drug and substance abuse, emphasising the need for the youth to refrain from illicit and health-threatening substances (Muzuva et al. 2023).

In addition to the law enforcement efforts, the Zimbabwean government also introduced a toll-free number for assistance with drug- and substance-related issues in November 2023. Citizens are able to report drug-related offences through the toll-free number, and the relevant authorities will also be able to attend to citizens who are facing challenges with substance abuse (Ndlovu 2023). This is crucial in promoting anonymous reporting whenever incidents of drug and substance abuse are suspected or have occurred. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, together with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, are also carrying out drug and substance abuse awareness campaigns (Moyo and Mpofu 2023).

As a response, drug and illicit substance addicts have also been admitted to various health institutions. One major challenge has been the limited capacity of public health institutions to deal with drug and substance abuse, with reports that the available institutions have been overwhelmed. Some patients are now being sent to prison for three months to “cool off” instead of being treated at hospitals, as the relevant institutions do not have capacity for long-term rehabilitation (Nyathi 2022). This usually happens when the drug addicted individuals are repeatedly violent. While there are also some private centres which take in drug and substance abuse patients, the charges are exorbitant (Mutsaka 2022), leaving the patients to scramble for the overstretched public institutions.

Late identification of drug and substance abuse cases has also made it difficult to deal with the problem, with research indicating that community members are not aware of some of the signs and symptoms of drug and substance abuse (Dzinamarira et al. 2023). This scenario is compounded by belief among most African communities that mental illness is associated with witchcraft (Dzinamarira et al. 2023); hence, they would least expect mental illnesses to be drug- and substance-abuse-related. Similarly, there has been limited knowledge on the mechanisms to deal with addiction among the relatives of drug- and substance-addicted individuals (Kwaramba et al. 2024).

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

The major limitation lies in the methodology of this study, especially given the fact that only Google Chrome search engine was used. It could have been

ideal to use an academic search engine such as Google Scholar. Thus, the considered sources may not have been exhaustive. There is also a possibility of bias in some of the sources, especially those that might be sensationalised to sell papers. Notwithstanding these limitations, Google Chrome necessitated the search for articles in popular newspapers and magazines in Zimbabwe, which would not have been obtained through academic search engines. Another limitation lies in the manual analysis of the documents. It would have been ideal to utilise qualitative data analysis software. However, given the manageable number of the reviewed documents, a robust manual analysis was possible.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown that there is a problem of drug and substance abuse among the youth in Zimbabwe. While marijuana has been considered as the most commonly abused drug, along with other hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin, there is a growing trend towards abuse of prescription medicines such as bronclear, histalix and diazepam. These prescription drugs contain alcohol-like ingredients which result in intoxication if consumed in larger quantities than the recommended doses. Other emerging manifestations of drug and substance abuse include abuse of home-made intoxicating substances; infusion of blood from an intoxicated person into the blood stream of an unintoxicated person; ingesting food laced with drugs and drinking sodium polyacrylate from boiled diapers. The government of Zimbabwe has taken a leading role through the formulation of the National Drug Control Master Plan (2020–2025), as well as the Treatment and Rehabilitation Guidelines of Drug and Substance Abuse Disorder of Zimbabwe, whose focus is on reducing demand, cutting supply, treatment and rehabilitation, as well as awareness. The Zimbabwe Republic Police have also been at the forefront of enforcing the relevant anti-drug laws through arresting drug-addicted individuals and suppliers. Notwithstanding these efforts, the drug- and substance-abuse scourge continues to be on an upward trend, thus calling for more concerted efforts to deal with the scourge.

The problem of drug and substance abuse needs a multipronged approach, starting from the government level down to the ordinary citizen. Given the contributory role played by unemployment and high poverty levels in the drug- and substance-abuse problem, there is need for the government to address these related problems. The government should fund self-help projects for youths in urban and rural communities in order to enhance stable income flows as well as to reduce boredom. These “self-help” projects should be supported by recreational activities such as sports and recreational centres in order to keep the youth busy. This will reduce idleness and the urge to engage in drug and substance abuse. There is also need for investment in more rehabilitation centres so as to

accommodate more addicts. These rehabilitation centres should be manned by trained social workers, who will also be able to impart critical life changing skills to the patients. Moreover, substance abuse patients need a dedicated and robust community follow-up before and after they are discharged from hospital. Thus, trained social workers, together with the broader community, will be able to monitor the patients and ensure that they are reintegrated well back into the society.

While awareness campaigns have been carried out, there is a need for the intensification of these awareness campaigns within the communities, schools and churches. The youth need to be conscientised about the harmful effects of drugs. Moreover, communities need to be conscientised on the signs and symptoms of drug and substance abuse, and they should be urged to take early action once they notice these signs. This will also help in demystifying the belief that mental illnesses are associated with witchcraft. In schools, anti-drug- and substance-abuse awareness should be part of the learning curricula at all levels. This will raise the necessary consciousness among the learners.

Law enforcement efforts also need to be intensified but with more emphasis on the supply side as opposed to the consumption side. Dealing with the supply side resonates with the supply reduction pillar of the Treatment and Rehabilitation Guidelines of Drug and Substance Abuse Disorder of Zimbabwe. Supply reduction should be aimed at disrupting the production, distribution, trafficking and supply of illicit drugs and substances and curtailing illicit financial flows and criminal activities related to drugs (Zimfact 2024). Suppliers of illicit drugs and substances should be arrested, and stringent custodial sentences are essential, especially in light of the magnitude of the damage that the suppliers cause on the nation. Efforts should also be made to address corruption at border posts and to prevent the influx of illicit drugs from neighbouring countries. This can be achieved through joint efforts and operations by all the security establishments of the state, as well as the immigration department.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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