

Drug Use Among University Students in Pakistan: A Public Health Concern

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Abstract: Drug abuse has emerged as a pressing concern worldwide and is increasingly affecting developing countries like Pakistan, particularly their university students. Stress and peer pressure are major driving factors, further exacerbated by limited awareness and inadequate counseling services. In a country where the majority of the population comprises young people, this surge is a serious public concern that requires urgent and coordinated action from policymakers. Although efforts are being made to address this issue, there remains a significant need for improvements, especially in prevention, early intervention, and student support mechanisms. This article highlights the need for strengthened initiatives and support systems to guide and counsel students, addressing this growing concern.

Keywords: drug abuse, substance abuse, awareness, counseling, youth, university students, public health, Pakistan, risk factors

Introduction

According to a report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), approximately 316 million people used drugs worldwide in 2023, reflecting a substantial increase from 246 million users in 2013.¹ Drug use among university students in low- and middle-income countries has become a growing public health concern. Across the globe, substance abuse in academic institutions has been recognized as a significant issue, with university students considered a vulnerable group due to transitional stress, peer influence, academic pressure, and newfound independence.²

In Pakistan, a survey suggests that around 6.7 million individuals have used drugs, though data distinguishing experimentation, occasional use, and problematic misuse or abuse remain limited.³ This situation is compounded by socio-economic challenges, gaps in policy implementation, stigma around mental health, and limited access to support services. Pakistan maintains strict regulations regarding drugs and narcotics. It prohibits the cultivation, production, sales, purchase, transportation, storage, and use of any narcotic or psychotropic substance, except for medical and scientific purposes.⁴

This article aims to describe the prevalence, associated risk factors, and consequences of drug use among university students in low- and middle-income countries with a particular focus on Pakistan, and to provide recommendations for prevention and early intervention.

Prevalence and Scope of Problem

A national survey conducted in 2012–13 jointly by the Ministry of Narcotics Control, Government of Pakistan, U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that 6% of population (9% of adult male and 2.9% of adult female population) had used drugs other than alcohol and tobacco in Pakistan in 2012.³ Reports reveal that drug use is not only confined to marginalized groups but has also infiltrated educational institutions. University-specific data, although limited and variable, suggest that exposure to drugs among students may be higher than national averages. An awareness session arranged by a Pakistani university in collaboration with the Ministry of Narcotics Control and Anti-Narcotic Force

reported that up to 44% of university students had used drugs at least once, including cannabis, opioids, and stimulants, with higher use among male (53%) compared to female students (31%).⁵

A survey on Pakistani medical students showed that the prevalent use of drugs is often under peer influence, academic stress, and out of curiosity.⁶ Academic institutions, which should ideally serve as hubs of intellectual growth, are now becoming a source for drug abuse.

Comparatively, student drug use prevalence in Pakistan appears far higher than reports from countries like Egypt, where a study in 2018 reported the lifetime prevalence of drug abuse as 22.5%,² while in the USA, 51.2% of the population had used drugs at least once in their lifetime.⁷ These comparisons are limited by differences in methodology and definitions, but provide useful context for understanding the issue.

Risk Factors for The Problem

Several studies have tried to identify the causes underlying drug abuse in students in Pakistan. A research article on drug abuse highlighted the prevalence of narcotic and psychotropic drug use among students, mainly due to factors such as academic and societal stress, dysfunctional family environments, easy availability via drug dealers, and ineffective government policies.⁸ Another Pakistan-based study indicated gender differences in drug use, with male students more frequently engaging in the consumption of illicit substances (e.g., heroin, charas), while women in legal or prescription drugs like sedatives and tranquilizers, reflecting social restrictions and availability patterns.⁹ A notable gap is the limited monitoring and absence of nationally standardized data collection systems for student drug abuse. There appears to be an insufficient awareness, despite surveys and independent studies pointing to a rise in addiction rates.

Consequences

The social and academic consequences are significant. Drug abuse is linked to declining academic performance, absenteeism, strained family relationships, and, in severe cases, criminal involvement.¹⁰ Students who fall into addiction often face stigma and a lack of rehabilitation opportunities, further perpetuating the cycle. In some cases, involvement in a high-risk environment and legal consequences may occur. A study published in *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* emphasized that Pakistani students' perceptions toward drugs were disturbingly permissive, underscoring the need for targeted awareness campaigns.⁶ However, there remains limited data available on the long-term health and economic consequences of this problem.

Way Forward

While the situation is urgent, it is not irreversible. Evidence-based strategies from both regional and global experiences offer hope. Firstly, awareness campaigns in universities must be strengthened to educate students on the health, academic, and social hazards of drug use. Studies from countries like Egypt suggest that addressing peer influence and building resilience are effective preventive approaches.² Secondly, universities should establish on-campus counseling and rehabilitation facilities to identify at-risk students early and provide them with mental health support. Thirdly, stricter monitoring mechanisms must be implemented to curb the easy availability of narcotics on campuses. Collaboration between academic institutions, law enforcement agencies, and health departments is crucial in this regard.

Moreover, family involvement should not be overlooked. Research consistently highlights that parental support and supervision serve as protective factors against drug abuse.⁹ Parents must be encouraged to engage more actively in their children's academic and social lives, ensuring that early signs of addiction do not go unnoticed. Lastly, policy reforms at the governmental level are urgently required. Pakistan needs a comprehensive national policy on campus drug prevention, integrating health promotion, law enforcement, and rehabilitation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, drug abuse among university students in low- and middle-income countries like Pakistan is no longer a peripheral issue but an important public health concern. Several reports suggest that a significant proportion of students may have been exposed to drugs at least once, which may have serious implications for their mental health and academic performance. Policymakers, educators, parents, and healthcare professionals must act collectively to address this growing

concern. Delay or negligence will not only affect individual lives but also potentially compromise the socioeconomic progress of the countries.

Declaration of Use of Generative Ai

During the writing process, the author used the Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer to improve readability in some sentences. After writing, the authors reviewed the article thoroughly.

Ethical Declaration

This article does not involve human or animal species; therefore, no ethical review or informed consent is needed.

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