



AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SUBSTANCE USE AMONG YOUTH IN SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Substance use among young people is an important public health and social concern in Meghalaya. This study assessed awareness and attitudes toward substance use among youth aged 18–25 years in Shillong. A descriptive research design was employed using snowball sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire addressing substance use, perceived risk factors, awareness of rehabilitation services, prevention programmes, and attitudes toward government intervention. The results indicate that (21.74%) of respondents reported having used substances and (7.25%) reported regular use. Peer pressure was identified as a major contributing factor by (89.86%), while (56.52%) reported knowing someone in their social circle affected by substance abuse. Although (71.01%) were aware of rehabilitation centres, only (39.13%) considered support services adequate. Most respondents supported increased rehabilitation services (95.65%), stricter drug-related laws (94.20%), and additional school- and college-based awareness programmes (97.10%). Furthermore, 88.41% expressed willingness to participate in prevention programmes. The findings indicate a gap between general awareness and perceived adequacy of prevention and support services. Youth-focused, peer-led, family-based, and institutionally supported interventions may strengthen substance-use prevention in Shillong.

KEYWORDS: Substance Use, Youth, Peer Pressure, Awareness, Rehabilitation, Prevention, Shillong, Meghalaya

INTRODUCTION

Substance use among young people is a major public health and social concern. Adolescence and early adulthood represent important periods for the development of behavioural patterns, social identities, and coping strategies. Early initiation of substance use is associated with increased vulnerability to problematic use and substance use disorders later in life. Recent international evidence also indicates that young people may experience a substantial burden associated with drug use, highlighting the importance of prevention and early intervention.

In India, the National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use reported substantial use of alcohol, cannabis, opioids, and other substances and highlighted the need for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation services (Ambekar et al., 2019). Substance use among youth is influenced by multiple individual, interpersonal, and social factors. Peer relationships are particularly important during adolescence and early adulthood. Saad et al. (2016), in a study conducted in a rehabilitation centre in Kuala Lumpur, found peer influence to be a significant factor associated with youth drug abuse.

Research in India similarly demonstrates the continuing importance of substance use among young people. Raphael et al. (2017), in a study of 402 college students in Central Kerala, reported that 31.8% had used or abused at least one substance during their lifetime and identified age, gender, place of residence, and attitudes toward prohibition as factors associated with substance abuse. Faizi et al. (2021) studied 1,431 adolescents and young adults in Aligarh and found substantial lifetime and current substance use, particularly involving tobacco and alcohol. Stress was reported as the most common

reason for substance use, demonstrating the importance of considering psychosocial factors in prevention.

More recent research among 2,170 college students in Udipi, South India, similarly demonstrates the importance of knowledge and attitudes in understanding substance-use behaviour. Das et al. (2025) found that knowledge and attitudes toward substance use varied according to substance-use experience and other sociodemographic factors. Evidence from Meghalaya also indicates that substance use among young people warrants particular attention. Kurian (2023) examined substance abuse among youth in Umphyrnai village, East Khasi Hills, and identified social and socioeconomic factors associated with the problem. Shillong, as the capital and an important educational and administrative centre of Meghalaya, has a large youth population and numerous educational institutions. Understanding young people's perceptions of substance use, peer influence, awareness programmes, and available support services is therefore important for developing locally relevant prevention strategies.

The present study examined awareness and attitudes toward substance use among youth aged 18–25 years in Shillong, Meghalaya, with particular attention to substance-use experience, peer influence, awareness of rehabilitation facilities, perceived adequacy of support, prevention programmes, and willingness to participate in preventive activities.

OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to:

1. Assess awareness of substance use and its consequences among youth aged 18–25 years in Shillong;
2. Examine attitudes toward substance use and prevention;



3. Identify perceived factors contributing to substance use;
4. Assess awareness and perceptions of rehabilitation and support services; and
5. Examine respondents' support for and willingness to participate in substance-use prevention initiatives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive research design was adopted to examine awareness and attitudes toward substance use among youth in Shillong, Meghalaya. The study targeted young people aged 18–25 years residing in Shillong. Snowball sampling was employed, whereby initial participants referred other eligible respondents through their social networks. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting primarily of closed-ended questions addressing demographic characteristics, substance use, perceived causes, awareness of rehabilitation facilities, exposure to awareness programmes, perceptions of support systems, government intervention, health consequences, and willingness to participate in prevention programmes. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS

Participants characteristics: More than half (55.07%) were aged 21–23 years. Females constituted (76.81%) of the sample. Majority of the respondents were college students (43.48%) or postgraduate students (37.68%).

Substance use and Perceived Harm: (21.74%) of the respondents reported having used substances, while (7.25%) reported regular use. (27.54%) of the respondents indicated that substance use was causing them harm, and (21.74%) expressed a desire to quit.

Awareness and Availability of Support: (71.01%) of the respondents reported awareness of rehabilitation centres. However, only (39.13%) of the respondents perceived sufficient support for young people experiencing substance-use problems, whereas (59.42%) did not.

Peer Influence and Social exposure: Peer pressure was identified as a major perceived contributor to substance abuse by (89.86%) of respondents. Thirty-nine respondents (56.52%) reported knowing someone within their social circle who had experienced substance abuse. These findings indicate that substance use was perceived as closely connected to respondents' social environments.

Awareness Programme and Prevention: (82.61%) of the respondents reported participation in substance-abuse awareness programmes. A large majority (97.10%) supported additional school- and college-based awareness programmes, while (94.20%) believed that parents should have a greater role in educating young people about substance-related risks.

Government Intervention and Social Consequences: Most respondents supported stronger institutional and policy responses. (95.65%) of the respondents supported increased rehabilitation services, while (94.20%) supported stricter laws.

(98.55%) believed that substance abuse could contribute to criminal activities.

Perceived Awareness of Health Consequences: The respondents were almost evenly divided regarding whether young people were adequately aware of the health consequences of substance use. (49.28%) considered youth sufficiently aware, whereas (50.72%) did not. (88.41%) of the respondents expressed willingness to participate in substance-abuse prevention programmes.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that substance use is a relevant concern among the young people. Although the study is descriptive and cannot establish prevalence for Shillong's entire youth population, (21.74%) of respondents reported previous substance use and (7.25%) reported regular use. These findings are broadly consistent with Indian studies demonstrating substance-use behaviour among adolescents and young adults. For example, Faizi et al. (2021) reported substantial lifetime and current substance use among adolescents and young adults in Aligarh, while Raphael et al. (2017) identified substance use among nearly one-third of college students in Central Kerala.

The strongest finding concerns the perceived role of peer pressure. Nearly (90%) of respondents identified peer pressure as a major contributor to substance abuse, and more than half knew someone affected by substance use within their social circle. This is consistent with Saad et al. (2016), whose study identified peer influence as a significant factor associated with youth drug abuse. These findings suggest that prevention strategies in Shillong should address not only individual knowledge but also peer networks and social norms.

The study also identifies an important distinction between awareness of services and perceived adequacy of services. Although (71.01%) knew about rehabilitation centres, only (39.13%) considered available support adequate. This suggests that increasing the visibility of rehabilitation services alone may not be sufficient. Young people may also require accessible counselling, early intervention, referral mechanisms, confidentiality, and sustained psychosocial support. Another important finding is the apparent gap between exposure to awareness programmes and perceived knowledge. Although (82.61%) had participated in awareness programmes, respondents continued to report inadequate awareness among youth and strongly supported additional programmes in educational institutions. This is consistent with evidence that substance-use education needs to extend beyond simple information provision and incorporate behavioural and psychosocial components. Das et al. (2025), for example, demonstrated the importance of knowledge and attitudes in understanding substance-use behaviour among college students.

The strong support for rehabilitation services, parental involvement, educational programmes, and preventive policies demonstrates that respondents perceive substance use as a collective rather than solely individual problem. The willingness of (88.41%) to participate in prevention programmes is particularly encouraging and suggests that youth themselves could be engaged as partners in prevention. However, the findings concerning health awareness warrant



attention. Responses were almost equally divided regarding whether young people were adequately aware of the health consequences of substance use. This suggests that existing awareness initiatives may need to communicate health consequences in more relevant, interactive, and youth-centred ways.

Implication for Social Work and Youth Intervention

The findings have direct implications for social work practice. Substance-use prevention should incorporate individual counselling, family intervention, peer education, community mobilisation, and referral to rehabilitation services. Social workers can contribute by identifying young people at risk, facilitating peer-support programmes, strengthening family communication, coordinating educational campaigns, and linking individuals with treatment and rehabilitation services. Educational institutions can also function as important settings for prevention. Rather than relying exclusively on lectures and information campaigns, programmes could incorporate group discussions, role-play, peer mentoring, life-skills education, counselling, and early identification mechanisms.

Recommendations

1. **Develop interactive prevention programmes** in schools, colleges, and community settings that combine information with life-skills education, coping strategies, and decision-making skills.
2. **Establish peer-led prevention initiatives** that address peer pressure and promote positive peer networks.
3. **Strengthen counselling and referral systems** within educational institutions so that young people can obtain confidential support and timely referral.
4. **Expand accessible rehabilitation services** and improve linkages between educational institutions, social workers, healthcare providers, families, and rehabilitation centres.
5. **Increase parental engagement** through parent-focused awareness and communication programmes.
6. **Promote community-based prevention**, involving youth organisations, community leaders, civil-society organisations, and other relevant stakeholders.
7. **Conduct larger representative studies** across Shillong and Meghalaya to establish more reliable estimates of substance-use patterns and examine associations between substance use and factors such as peer relationships, family environment, socioeconomic status, gender, and educational status.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights important concerns regarding substance use, peer influence, awareness, and support services among youth in Shillong. Peer pressure emerged as the most

frequently identified contributing factor, while the findings also indicate a gap between awareness of rehabilitation services and perceptions of their adequacy. The strong support for additional awareness programmes, rehabilitation services, parental involvement, and preventive policies indicates substantial community potential for prevention. An effective response should therefore combine youth-centred education, peer-led initiatives, family engagement, accessible counselling and rehabilitation, and coordinated community and institutional action.

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