

Intervention Strategies for Mitigating Drug and Substance Abuse among Youths in Selected Local Government Areas of Benue State, Nigeria

Professor Joseph Terwase Kerker; and Isaac Ahen Adeyongo

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Benue State University, Makurdi.

Corresponding author: revadeyongoisaac@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigated intervention strategies for reducing drug and substance abuse among youths in selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Benue State, Nigeria. The survey research design was employed in this study and qualitative data collection was made. Both primary and secondary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with key informants, including community leaders, parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals, to obtain qualitative insights into the underlying factors contributing to drug and substance use. The study adopted the qualitative data analysis which involved thematic and content analysis to identify key themes and patterns in the participants' narratives. Thematic and content analysis revealed various contributing factors to drug abuse and the distinct roles of key players in addressing the issue. Tailoring national campaigns to local contexts through domestication emerged as an effective approach, leveraging community engagement, local influencers, and continuous monitoring. The study emphasised the critical roles of the NDLEA, health practitioners, religious and traditional institutions, media, and NGOs in prevention efforts. The study discovers that various key players are identified, showcasing their distinct roles and responsibilities in addressing this pressing issue. The study showed that tailoring national campaigns to local contexts through domestication enhances effectiveness by customizing messages and interventions to the local culture of drug and substance abuse. The study recommended implementing comprehensive prevention programs, advocating for good parenting, strengthening law enforcement, and improving access to mental health services for affected youths. This study underscores the collective responsibility of stakeholders, including governmental agencies, community institutions, religious leaders, educators, parents, NGOs, and youths themselves, in addressing drug abuse among youths in Benue State. The study concludes that the significance of acknowledging drug abuse as a collective concern that requires the involvement of various stakeholders, including governmental agencies, community institutions, religious leaders, educators, parents, NGOs, and youths themselves. The prevalence of drug abuse among youths in the district underscores the need for immediate action and underscores the responsibility of each stakeholder to play a role in prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation efforts towards mitigating drug and substance abuse among youths in Benue State.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, Intervention Strategies, Youths, Benue State, Nigeria, Prevention Programs.

Introduction

Drug abuse among youths has become a social menace with far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities globally. Nigeria, like many other countries, is grappling with the challenges posed by the misuse of drugs and substances among its youth. Benue State, located in the north-central region of Nigeria, has recently witnessed an increase in drug abuse cases among its youth. According to the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) (2021), drug abuse among youths in Nigeria has reached alarming proportions with devastating effects on individuals, families, and society largely. According to Eniojukan and Chichi (2014:48), reports from local authorities and healthcare professionals indicate a rising trend of drug abuse among young people in the state. It is imperative to understand the causes of this menace in order to develop effective preventive measures and interventions to mitigate the rising use of substances.

In recent times, the pervasive issue of drug and substance abuse has emerged as a critical concern, particularly among the youth population. This phenomenon not only poses severe health risks but also undermines the socio-economic fabric of society, impairing the potential and well-being of young individuals. The Benue North-East Senatorial District of Benue State, Nigeria, has not remained immune to this challenge, grappling with the alarming rise in drug and substance misuse among its youth. This paper examines the complex nature of drug and substance abuse within the Benue North-East Senatorial District, to unravel the underlying prevalence, consequences, and most importantly, the strategies available for mitigating this menace. This paper seeks to shed light on effective approaches that can be adopted to curb this trend and secure a healthier and more promising future for the youth in the region. Through a comprehensive analysis of both local and global perspectives, the paper intends to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on countering youth substance abuse in Benue State, thereby fostering a foundation for evidence-based policies and actions to safeguard the well-being and potential of the younger generation. The research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the misuse of drugs and substances prevention and intervention strategies in Nigeria using the Benue State experience. The findings of this study will inform policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators, and community leaders to develop practical intervention strategies to combat drug abuse among youths in the selected LGAs of Benue State, which includes Vandeikya, Konshisha, Ushongo and Katsina-Ala.

Statement of Problems

The research on intervention strategies aimed at reducing drug and substance abuse among youths in selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Benue State, Nigeria, confronts a critical societal challenge with profound implications for the youth population's welfare and prospects. At its core, the escalating prevalence of drug and substance abuse among youths in Benue State is a trend influenced by various socio-economic factors including poverty, unemployment, peer pressure, and the pursuit of social acceptance. These contextual conditions foster an environment conducive to substance misuse,

precipitating adverse health outcomes, social disintegration, and familial and communal breakdown. The study interrogated the underlying determinants driving drug abuse within the identified LGAs and to proffer efficacious intervention strategies to combat this urgent concern. Moreover, there exist a conspicuous deficiency in comprehensive data and statistics on drug and substance abuse across certain LGAs within the Benue Northeast Senatorial District. This informational deficit poses a significant obstacle to grasping the issue's full scope and impairs the targeted implementation of remedial measures. Consequently, the study bridged this informational lacuna by conducting extensive interviews with key stakeholders such as community leaders, parents, educators, healthcare providers, and other pertinent actors. Through qualitative inquiry, the research unearthed the fundamental drivers of youth substance abuse in the specified LGAs. Through elucidating and analysing these determinants, the study endeavors to furnish evidence-based recommendations for tailored intervention programs poised to mitigate drug and substance abuse and bolster the overall well-being of youths in Benue State.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study on intervention strategies for mitigating drug and substance abuse among youths in selected Local Government Areas of Benue State, Nigeria, are as follows:

- i. To identify the underlying factors contributing to drug and substance abuse among youths in the selected LGAs of Benue State.
- ii. To assess the prevalence and patterns of drug and substance abuse within the Benue Northeast Senatorial District.
- iii. To explore the impact of socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and peer pressure on drug abuse among youths in the study area.
- iv. To examine the role of key stakeholders, including community leaders, parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals, in addressing drug and substance abuse among youths.
- v. To develop evidence-based intervention strategies and recommendations to combat drug and substance abuse and promote a healthier environment for youths in Benue State.
- vi. To contribute to the existing body of knowledge on drug abuse prevention and intervention strategies in Nigeria, particularly in the context of the Benue State experience.

The Concept of Drugs Abuse

Drugs abuse refers to the consumption of substances that have the potential to distort one's physical or mental wellbeing. Drugs in any context can mean both legal and illegal substances, including prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and illicit substances. Drugs abuse involves the intentional ingestion, inhalation, or injection of these substances for various purposes, such as medical treatment, recreational purposes, or self-

medication. Understanding the concept of drugs abuse is crucial in exploring the factors responsible for the use of drugs and substances among youths in selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Benue State.

Drugs abuse has been a topic of significant research and discourse due to its potential health risks, social consequences, and legal implications. It is important to note that not all drugs consumption is associated with abuse or dependence. Some drugs are used responsibly under medical supervision, providing therapeutic benefits for individuals. However, the misuse or excessive use of drugs can lead to addiction, adverse health effects, and social problems. The concept of drugs abuse also implies both responsible use and the derogatory use of drugs highlighting the need to examine the factors that contribute to the misuse of drugs among youths especially in Benue State.

On the other hand, the concept of the use of substances broadens the scope beyond pharmaceutical drugs to include a wide range of chemical compounds and products that can be injected, inhaled, or applied to the body medical purpose or other purposes respectively. Substances can include alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, herbal supplements, and various recreational drug usages in a manner that negatively influences the psychological state of the user. The use of substances is often influenced by cultural, social, and individual factors. Some substances, such as alcohol and tobacco, are legal and widely accepted in many societies. However, the excessive or harmful use of these substances, leads to addiction or dependence which can have severe health consequences and social repercussions. Critically analysing the concepts of drugs abuse and the use of substances is essential to understand the complexities and nuances associated with these behaviours. It is important to consider the context, individual circumstances, and cultural factors that influence the patterns of drugs abuse among youths. The concept of drugs abuse should not be underrated, as it involves various motivations ranging from personal curiosity to self-medication and or peer pressure (Kelly, Dow, & Westerhoff, (2010: 805). The use of drugs and substances should not be solely viewed through a criminal or deviant lens, but rather as a complex interplay of factors that require comprehensive interventions and support as therapeutic remedy to quell the negative effect it creates for the individual involved.

Evidently, the concepts of drugs abuse and the use of substances are fundamental to understanding the factors responsible for the use of drugs and substances among youths in selected LGAs of Benue State. The concept of drugs abuse encompasses both responsible consequential utilisation of drugs and substances which helps to highlight the need to address factors that contribute to misuse of the drugs and substances. Similarly, the concept of the use of substances acknowledges a broader range of chemical compounds and products.

Drugs and Substance Abuse in Benue State

The use of drugs and substances in Benue State is influenced by socioeconomic factors, including poverty and unemployment. These conditions create a fertile ground for the abuse of drugs and substances as individuals seek temporary relief to escape from their

social and economic challenges (Abdulhameed Umar, 2018: 195). Peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance also contribute to the use of drugs and substances among the youth population in the state. Young individuals often experiment with drugs as a result of curiosity or to fit in with certain social groups (Mimiko & Ademola, 2017: 13427). The consequences of drug abuse in Benue State are far-reaching. Substance use negatively impacts the health and well-being of individuals, leading to physical and mental health issues. Additionally, the use of drugs and substances contributes to social problems, including crime, violence, and the breakdown of family and community structures (National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, 2022). The misuse of prescription medications, such as opioids, is also a growing concern in the state leading to addiction and other associated problems. Efforts to address the use of drugs and substances in Benue State involve a combination of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation approaches. The NDLEA, in collaboration with other government agencies and non-governmental organisations, implements awareness campaigns, counseling services, and rehabilitation programmes to combat the use of drugs and substances (National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, 2022). Community-based initiatives, such as drug-free clubs and support groups, are also established to provide education and support for individuals affected by drug abuse.

Drug and substance abuse is a major social problem in Nigeria, and Benue State is no exception. According to a study conducted by Achor (2015:199), drug use and antisocial behavior are significant correlates of secondary school students' achievement, Benue State. The study found that indiscriminate drug use and antisocial behavior indulged in by both male and female students are strong indices of academic performance by students. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information on drug and substance abuse statistics in some of the local government areas in Benue Northeast Senatorial District. However, a study conducted by Ijoko and Enyi (2023) on the influence of emotional intelligence, attitude, and perception on substance abuse among secondary school students in Benue State found that emotional intelligence positively and significantly influences substance abuse among secondary school students. The study had the primary objective of determining the extent to which emotional intelligence, attitude, and perception influence secondary school students on substance abuse. Drug and substance abuse is a significant problem in Ushongo Local Government Area (Loko & Loko, 2023: 152). Similarly, Burbwa and Kimbi reported that 5 indicated that 60.31% of *okada* riders who reside in the rural than in the 50.23% urban areas abused drugs in Katisna-Ala local government Area. This is not surprising because it is observed that there is more crime, militia, and cattle rustling in the rural areas. While there is insufficient information on drug and substance abuse statistics in the local government areas that constitutes Benue Northeast Senatorial District, studies conducted in other parts of Benue State suggest that indiscriminate drug use and anti-social behavior are strong indices of academic performance by students. It is essential to conduct more research on drug and substance abuse in Benue Northeast Senatorial District to develop effective strategies for curbing this social vice.

Mitigating Use of Drugs and Substances among the Youths in Benue North-East Senatorial District of Benue State

The Benue North-East Senatorial District (also known as Zone A) is one of the three senatorial districts in Benue State, Nigeria. It covers seven local government areas: Katsina-Ala, Logo, Ukum, Konshisha, Vandeikya, Kwande, and Ushongo. The district has a population of about 1.8 million people, mostly belonging to the Tiv ethnic group. The district is known for its rich agricultural resources and cultural heritage. However, the district is also facing several challenges that affect its development and security. One of these challenges is drugs and substances abuse among the youth. According to a report by *The Guardian*, over 11% of the youth population in Benue State take hard drugs like syrup, tramadol, diazepam, cocaine, shisha mix, among others. The report also stated that drugs and substances abuse was one of the factors that fueled the violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in the state (*Guardian News*). Another report by *Premium Times* quoted the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) as saying that 40% of Nigerian youth were deeply involved in drugs and substances abuse, with Benue State being one of the worst affected states (Abah, Aboh, & Ochasi, 2018). Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the problem of drugs and substances abuse among the youth in Benue North-East Senatorial District. The preceding section of this paper examines the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in mitigating drugs and substances abuse among the youth in the district.

Domestication of National Sensitisation Agencies

The domestication of national sensitisation agencies emerges as a potent approach for addressing the rampant drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. In recognition of the pressing need to curb this multifaceted challenge, the concept of domestication involves tailoring national-level campaigns, programmes, and policies to fit the specific local context. By bringing these sensitisation efforts to the grassroots level, the state government aims to enhance their relevance and effectiveness, offering a promising strategy to mitigate the concerning prevalence of drugs and substances abuse among its youth population. In informant, Orgen Manasseh (2023, October 25) observed that domesticating national sensitisation agencies entails customising their messages and interventions to resonate with the local culture, traditions, and language. This localisation ensures that the awareness campaigns and educational programmes directly address the unique challenges and perceptions related to drugs and substances abuse within the Benue North East Senatorial District. This approach recognises that a one-size-fits-all adopted by the Federal Government through the National-level campaigns may not effectively communicate the risks and consequences of drug misuse to the youth in a manner that they can relate to and understand.

The domestication process promotes community engagement and ownership, as it involves active participation of local leaders, religious institutions, educational institutions, and youth organisations. These stakeholders can provide valuable insights into the

dynamics of drugs and substances abuse within the Benue North East Senatorial District and help shape the sensitisation efforts accordingly. By involving the community in the design and implementation of initiatives, a sense of ownership is cultivated fostering sustained commitment to the cause, creating a more conducive environment for positive behavioural change. One of the primary advantages of domesticating national sensitisation agencies is the ability to develop tailored educational initiatives. These initiatives can encompass various formats, such as workshops, seminars, interactive sessions, and peer-led activities to effectively communicate the dangers of drugs and substances abuse and provide information about available resources for rehabilitation and support. This localised approach ensures that the content of such communications is relatable and resonates with the specific challenges faced by youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District (Aondofa Iorliam, 2023, March 14).

Domestication of national sensitisation agencies also empowers the district to leverage local influencers, such as respected community leaders, artists, and role models, to serve as advocates for the anti-drugs and substances abuse cause. These individuals command respect and attention of the youth and can effectively convey messages about the risks associated with drugs and substances abuse. Their involvement enhances the credibility of the sensitisation efforts and increases the likelihood of positive behavioural change. The domestication process facilitates the establishment and reinforcement of support networks for youths struggling with drugs and substances abuse. Local sensitisation agencies can collaborate with existing community-based organisations, healthcare centers, and rehabilitation facilities to ensure that accessible and effective support systems are in place. This comprehensive approach not only addresses prevention but also offers avenues for recovery and reintegration into society of drugs addicts (Maor Terfa, 2023, July 24). Domestication of national sensitisation agencies allows for continuous monitoring and adaptation of sensitisation efforts based on real-time feedback and evolving trends. By staying attuned to the needs and concerns of the youth, local agencies can adjust their strategies to remain relevant and impactful. This adaptability ensures that the sensitisation campaigns remain effective in addressing the ever-changing phenomena of drugs and substances abuse.

The Role of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency

The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) plays a pivotal role in combating the prevalence of drug and substance abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. Established as a frontline agency to enforce drug laws and regulations, the NDLEA's interventions extend beyond law enforcement to encompass prevention, education, rehabilitation, and community engagement. In this context, exploring the agency's multifaceted contributions offers valuable insights into its significance as a key player in mitigating the challenges of drugs and substances abuse among youths. At its core, the NDLEA is mandated to enforce laws that control the manufacturing, trafficking, and distribution of illicit drugs (Msugh Ngohide, 2023, March

14). By intensifying surveillance, apprehending drug traffickers, and dismantling clandestine drug production facilities, the agency creates an environment of deterrence. The fear of legal consequences serves as a deterrent to potential offenders, thereby reducing the availability of illicit substances within the Benue North East Senatorial District. The NDLEA's efforts extend to intercepting and disrupting drug supply chains, thus curtailing the flow of drugs into the district. This directly impacts the availability of drugs to youths and limits their exposure to drugs and substances abuse. By preventing the influx of drugs and substances, the agency contributes to reducing the initial access points that often entice vulnerable youths into the cycle of substance abuse. Beyond enforcement, the NDLEA engages in robust public awareness and educational campaigns. Through workshops, seminars, and community outreach initiatives, the agency educates youths about the risks associated with drugs and substances abuse. Raising awareness helps to dispel misconceptions, empowers youths with information, and equips them to make informed decisions about their health and well-being (Tyoakula John, 2023, June 25).

The NDLEA's role extends to the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals struggling with substance abuse. By providing counseling, treatment programmes, and vocational training, the agency addresses the needs of those youth who have fallen victim to drug addiction. This approach not only aids recovery of drugs and substances abuse victims but also prevents relapse and facilitates the reintegration of individuals into society as productive citizens. The NDLEA collaborates with various stakeholders, including schools, community organisations, healthcare facilities, and religious institutions. This collaborative approach maximises the agency's reach and impact, allowing for a comprehensive network of support, intervention, and prevention measures. Such partnerships facilitate a unified effort to address drugs and substances abuse holistically. Effective interventions require accurate information (Avine Terhemba, 2023, June 25). The NDLEA engages in intelligence gathering and analysis to identify emerging trends, trafficking routes, and new substances of abuse. This proactive approach enables the agency to adapt its strategies to evolving challenges and stay ahead of those who seek to exploit vulnerable youths.

From the above views, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) holds a pivotal role in mitigating the menace of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District. Its multifaceted approach, spanning law enforcement, public awareness, rehabilitation, and collaboration, presents a comprehensive strategy to address the issue from various angles. By combatting the supply, reducing demand through education, and providing rehabilitation options, the NDLEA contributes significantly to creating a safer and healthier environment for the youths of the district. The agency's commitment to fostering a drug-free society stands as a cornerstone in the collective effort to secure a brighter future for the Benue North East Senatorial District.

The Role of Pharmacists/Doctors/Health Practitioners

Pharmacists, doctors, and other health practitioners play a crucial role in mitigating the rampant issue of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East

Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. Their expertise and position within the healthcare system position them as key influencers in preventing, identifying, and addressing drugs and substances abuse, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being of the youth population. Health practitioners serve as educators, disseminating valuable information about the risks and consequences of drugs and substances abuse to youths and their families. Through schools, community centers, and healthcare facilities, they conduct educational sessions that highlight the physiological and psychological impacts of drug misuse (Terver Iveren, 2023, July 24). By imparting accurate knowledge, health practitioners empower youths to make informed decisions about their health and reject harmful substances.

Health practitioners possess the skills to identify signs of drugs and substances abuse at an early stage. Regular check-ups, medical histories, and interactions with patients allow them to spot behavioural and physical indicators of substance misuse. Early detection enables timely intervention, ensuring that youths receive the support and guidance needed to overcome their struggles before addiction deepens. Pharmacists and doctors are responsible for prescribing and dispensing medications. Their vigilance is essential to prevent the misuse of prescription drugs, which are often abused by youths seeking easy access to substances. Health practitioners should exercise caution when prescribing potentially addictive medications, closely monitor usage, and educate patients and their families about the proper use of prescribed drugs (Aondongu Iorhemba, 2023, April 14).

Health practitioners offer counseling and support to youths and their families affected by drugs and substances abuse. Through one-on-one sessions, they provide a safe space for discussing challenges, providing guidance, and developing strategies to overcome addiction. Additionally, health practitioners connect individuals to appropriate rehabilitation facilities and support networks for long-term recovery. Health practitioners collaborate with educators, community leaders, and law enforcement agencies to create a united front against drugs and substances abuse. By sharing expertise, data, and insights, they contribute to the development of comprehensive strategies that address the issue from multiple angles. This collaboration ensures that interventions are well-rounded and effective (Sesugh Ayasha, 2023, June 25). In cases where addiction has taken hold, health practitioners play a crucial role in designing and overseeing rehabilitation and recovery programmes. They provide medical supervision during detoxification, offer psychosocial support, and prescribe medications to manage withdrawal symptoms. Their involvement ensures that the recovery process is safe and medically proactive.

Proactivities of Responsible Bodies

For the control of drugs and substances abuse to be effective, there must be proactive regulatory bodies. These include:

Parental Responsibility

Parental responsibility is paramount in mitigating the escalating issue of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. Parents serve as primary influencers and guides in children's lives. Their responsibilities range from shaping their values, behaviours, and choices among others. Recognising the significant impact parents have on youth development is systematic. This discussion examines the role that parental responsibility plays in preventing and addressing drugs and substances abuse. Avertse Terver (2023, July 24) posits that parents play a pivotal role in creating a supportive home environment that fosters open communication, trust, and emotional well-being. When youths feel valued, understood, and listened to, they are likely to confide in their parents about their struggles, including any involvement with drugs and substances abuse. This environment provides the foundation for addressing issues early on and guiding youths away from substance misuse.

Parents hold the responsibility of educating their children about the dangers of drugs and substances abuse. Through age-appropriate conversations, they can provide accurate information about the risks, consequences, and societal implications of drugs and substances abuse. These educational discussions empower youths to make informed decisions and resist peer pressure to engage in drugs and substances abuse. Similarly, an informant, Iorhuna Emmanuel (2023, May 12), stressed that clear boundaries and expectations established by parents serve as protective factors against drugs and substances abuse. Setting curfews, monitoring activities, and enforcing rules send a strong message that substance misuse is not tolerated. Consistent reinforcement of these boundaries helps shape responsible behaviour and reduces the likelihood of experimentation with drugs. In a nut shell, parents are influential role models for their children. Their own behaviours, attitudes, and choices regarding drugs and substances abuse send powerful messages to their children. Parents who abstain from drugs and alcohol provide a positive example that encourages their children to follow.

Parental vigilance enables early identification of signs of drugs and substances abuse. Observing changes in behaviour, academic performance, and social interactions allows parents to intervene promptly. Engaging in non-judgmental conversations and seeking professional help when necessary are essential components of supportive parenting that can guide youths back to a healthier path. Parents play a significant role in equipping their children with life skills and coping mechanisms that promote resilience. Effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills enable youths to navigate challenges without resorting to substance abuse. A strong foundation of life skills empowers them to make constructive choices in the face of peer pressure and adversity.

This suggests that parental responsibility stands as a linchpin in the efforts to mitigate drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District. Through creating supportive environments, education, setting boundaries, positive role modeling, early intervention, and skill-building, parents shape the trajectories of their children's lives. The influence of parents extends far beyond the confines of the home, contributing

significantly to the overall mental health, well-being, and future of the youth population. Embracing their role with dedication and commitment, parents hold the power to effect positive change and guide the youth towards a drug-free and promising future.

School Management Responsibility

The role of school management in mitigating drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria, is instrumental in creating a safe and conducive learning environment. Schools are not only centers of education but also platforms for fostering holistic development, including prevention efforts against drugs and substances abuse. Schools serve as hubs for imparting knowledge and shaping young minds. School management plays a critical role in integrating drugs and substances abuse prevention education into the curriculum (Msugh Ngohide, 2023, March 14). By providing age-appropriate information about the risks and consequences of drugs and substances abuse, schools empower students to make informed decisions and resist peer pressure to engage in drugs and substances abuse.

School management is responsible for establishing and enforcing clear policies and codes of conduct that explicitly prohibit drugs and substances abuse on school premises. This proactive approach sends a strong message that drug use is not tolerated and sets the foundation for maintaining a safe and drug-free learning environment. Tyough Msaan (2023, March 14) opined in an interview that school management can organise peer support and mentorship programmes. Peer support and mentorship programmes organised by school management provide avenues for positive social interactions and relationships among students. These programmes foster a sense of belonging and provide an opportunity for older students to guide and mentor their younger peers, steering them away from the pitfalls of drugs and substances abuse. This infers that school management plays a pivotal role in early identification of signs of drugs and substances abuse among students. By training teachers and staff to recognise behavioural changes and academic decline, schools can intervene promptly and connect students with appropriate support services, preventing the escalation of drugs and substances abuse.

Schools should create safe and confidential spaces where students can report instances of drugs and substances abuse or express concerns about their peers. School management's commitment to maintaining confidentiality encourages students to come forward without fear of repercussions, enabling timely interventions and support. Effective mitigation of drugs and substances abuse requires a collaborative effort between schools, parents, and the community. School management plays a pivotal role in fostering these partnerships by organizing workshops, seminars, and community engagement initiatives that educate parents about the signs of drugs and substances abuse and the importance of prevention.

Religious Institutions

Religious institutions play a vital role in mitigating the pervasive issue of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State,

Nigeria. As pillars of moral and spiritual guidance within the community, religious institutions possess a unique platform to influence behaviour and foster values that discourage drugs and substances abuse. Religious institutions provide moral and ethical teachings that guide individuals' behaviours and decisions. By emphasising values such as self-discipline, self-control, and respect for the society, these institutions deter youths from engaging in drugs and substances abuse. The alignment of these teachings with religious beliefs creates a powerful foundation for fostering a drug-free lifestyle.

Religious institutions focus on spiritual development and inner growth. This emphasis on holistic well-being encourages youths to seek fulfillment and purpose through spiritual practices rather than resorting to substances. Spiritual fulfillment can serve as a protective factor against the allure of drugs, promoting a healthier sense of self-worth. Religious institutions foster a sense of community and belonging. Religious activities provide a supportive network of peers and mentors who share common values. This sense of belonging reduces the youth's susceptibility to peer pressure and offers a constructive environment that encourages positive choices (Terngu Sekav, 2023, March 14).

Religious institutions have the ability to disseminate prevention education and awareness about the risks of drugs and substances abuse. Through sermons, workshops, and educational programmes, they can provide youths with the knowledge and understanding needed to resist drugs and substances abuse. Religious leaders can leverage their influence to reinforce the importance of making informed and responsible choices. Religious institutions often offer counseling and support to individuals struggling with various challenges, including drugs and substances abuse. Pastoral counseling and spiritual guidance can complement professional interventions, providing emotional and moral support to youths seeking help from drugs related activities (Niyiyongo Kater, 2023, May 12). These institutions also play a role in connecting individuals to rehabilitation resources and recovery programmes. Religious institutions hold a position of influence within the community. They leverage this influence to advocate against drugs and substances abuse on a broader scale, participating in community awareness campaigns and initiatives. Their collective voice raises public consciousness and galvanise efforts to combat the issue in the Benue North East Senatorial District.

Role of the Traditional Institutions

The traditional institutions in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria, hold a significant role in mitigating drugs and substances abuse among youths. These institutions, deeply rooted in local culture and values, have hitherto played a vital role in guiding the behaviours and actions of community members. Traditional institutions are the custodians of cultural values, norms, and traditions. They possess the authority to shape and influence social behaviours, including drugs and substances abuse. By reinforcing the importance of healthy living and abstinence from drugs and substances abuse, traditional leaders promote a cultural environment that discourages drugs and substances abuse among the youths. An informant, Kende Tsue (2023, May 15) is of the opinion that the moral

and ethical guidance provided by traditional leaders is vital in steering youths away from drugs and substances abuse. These leaders often hold respected positions within the community and are role models. Their counsel and teachings can instill a sense of responsibility, honour, and integrity that counteracts drugs and substances abuse. Traditional institutions have the ability to mobilise the community and advocate against drugs and substances abuse. Through community activities like festivals, and events, traditional leaders can initiate conversations about the dangers of drugs and substances abuse. Their influence can rally community members to take collective stand against this menace, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

Traditional leaders are often involved in conflict resolution and mediation within the community. They can extend this role to address issues related to drugs and substances abuse, facilitating dialogue between affected parties and offering support to families dealing with drugs and substances abuse. Their involvement creates a compassionate and empathetic approach to resolving such challenges. Traditional institutions use their knowledge of indigenous healing practices to address drugs and substances abuse. Integrating these practices into prevention and rehabilitation efforts offer culturally sensitive alternatives to addressing addiction, bridging the gap between modern interventions and traditional beliefs. Traditional leaders can engage in youth mentorship and guidance programmes, providing youths with opportunities to learn from their wisdom and experiences (Awua Terundu, 2023, May 15). By fostering connections between generations, these institutions empower youths to make informed decisions, build resilience, and reject harmful behaviours. The role of traditional institutions in mitigating drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District is pivotal. Through the preservation of cultural values, moral guidance, community mobilisation, and youth mentorship, these institutions contribute significantly to creating a healthier and drug-free environment for the youth.

The Role of the Media

The media wields significant influence in mitigating the rampant issue of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. As a powerful platform for information dissemination, awareness-raising, and shaping public perceptions, the media plays a crucial role in educating, informing, and engaging the community on the dangers of drugs and substances abuse. The media serves as a primary source of public awareness and education. Through various mediums such as television, radio, newspapers, and digital platforms, it disseminates information about the risks, consequences, and prevention of drugs and substances abuse. Educational campaigns and informative content help youths and their families understand the gravity of the issue and make informed choices. The media possesses the ability to advocate against drugs and substances abuse by amplifying the voices of stakeholders, including governmental agencies, NGOs, and community leaders. Through news reports, feature articles, and opinion pieces, it can highlight success stories, challenges, and best practices

in combating drugs and substances abuse. This advocacy creates a sense of collective responsibility and encourages community mobilisation. The media can showcase positive role models and success stories of individuals who have overcome drugs and substances abuse. By sharing these narratives, the media inspires hope and demonstrates that recovery from drugs and substances abuse is possible. These stories serve as a source of motivation for youths, illustrating the transformative power of making positive choices. The media has the capacity to challenge stigma and dispel myths surrounding drugs and substances abuse. By presenting accurate and evidence-based information, it can correct misconceptions and create an informed public discourse. This contributes to reducing the stigma associated with seeking help and encourages those struggling with addiction to come forward. The media can involve youths in its efforts to mitigate drugs and substances abuse by providing platforms for their voices to be heard. Youth-focused programmes, talk shows, and social media campaigns can empower youths to share their perspectives, experiences, and insights. This involvement fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment in the fight against drugs and substances abuse. The media can collaborate with schools, community organizations, healthcare facilities, and law enforcement agencies to create comprehensive anti-drugs and substances abuse initiatives. By leveraging its reach and resources, the media can promote events, programmes, and campaigns that address drugs and substances abuse from multiple angles.

The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) play a crucial role in mitigating the pervasive issue of drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. With their approach, community engagement, and specialized expertise, NGOs contribute significantly to preventive measures, awareness campaigns, rehabilitation efforts, and policy advocacy. Member Yina (2023, July 5) posits that NGOs are at the forefront of preventive education and awareness campaigns. Through workshops, seminars, and community outreach programmes, they disseminate information about the dangers of drugs and substances abuse to youths, parents, and community members. By fostering understanding and awareness, NGOs empower individuals to recognise signs of drug misuse and make informed choices. NGOs often design and implement targeted interventions that cater to the unique needs and challenges of the Benue North East Senatorial District. These interventions encompass school-based programmes, peer support initiatives, and community mobilisation efforts that address drugs and substances abuse from various angles. Their localised approach ensures that interventions are culturally sensitive and relevant.

NGOs contribute to rehabilitation and support services for individuals struggling with drugs and substances abuse. They provide counseling, therapy, and access to treatment facilities, aiding in the recovery process. NGOs extend a lifeline to youths by offering a safe space for seeking help and rebuilding their lives after substance misuse. NGOs empower youths by equipping them with life skills, leadership training, and vocational opportunities. These

programmes enhance youths' resilience, self-esteem, and ability to make positive life choices. By focusing on empowerment, NGOs prevent drugs and substances abuse by addressing underlying factors that contribute to vulnerability. Additionally, an informant, Terkimbi Uyah (2023, July 5) notes that NGOs engage in advocacy efforts aimed at policy change and improved regulation of drugs and substance-related issues. Through research, data collection, and collaboration with governmental agencies, NGOs can influence policies that support prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. Their collective voice amplifies the urgency of addressing drugs and substances abuse at a systemic level. NGOs facilitate community engagement and partnership by bringing together various stakeholders, including parents, educators, healthcare professionals, law enforcement, and religious leaders. This collaborative approach harnesses collective expertise and resources to create a united front against drugs and substances abuse.

Conclusion

This study delves into the critical issue of mitigating drug and substance abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria. Through a comprehensive analysis, numerous key findings have emerged, illuminating the intricate nature of youth drug abuse in Vandeikya, Konshisha, and Ushongo LGAs. The study underscores the pressing need for a collaborative and comprehensive approach to tackle this multifaceted problem. These findings shed light on the complex interplay of factors contributing to youth drug and substance abuse, while also offering potential solutions for creating a healthier, drug-free environment. The study underscores the significance of recognizing drug and substance abuse as a collective concern requiring the engagement of various stakeholders, including governmental agencies, community institutions, religious leaders, educators, parents, NGOs, and young individuals themselves. The high prevalence of drug and substance abuse among youths in the district underscores the urgency of immediate action and the shared responsibility of all stakeholders in prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation efforts. The study places a strong emphasis on prevention education, stressing its pivotal role in equipping youths with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions regarding drug and substance abuse. It highlights the importance of engaging youths through relevant programs that address their specific concerns and challenges. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the value of creating a supportive environment within schools, families, and communities that fosters open communication, trust, and the sharing of information about drug and substance abuse. Traditional institutions, religious organizations, and NGOs are recognised for their critical role in guiding and supporting youths away from substance misuse, leveraging their influence to promote values, beliefs, and practices that discourage drug and substance abuse, and offering avenues for rehabilitation and recovery. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of collaboration among all stakeholders, as their united efforts can implement preventive measures, awareness campaigns, treatment options, and policy changes that collectively contribute to mitigating drug and substance abuse among youths

in the Benue North East Senatorial District. It highlights the urgency of addressing this issue as a top priority, and the recommendations outlined in the study provide a clear roadmap for effective intervention and prevention strategies. With a united front, the district can create an environment that nurtures the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of its youths, ensuring a brighter and drug-free future for generations to come.

Recommendations

The study on mitigating drugs and substances abuse among youths in the Benue North East Senatorial District, Benue State, Nigeria, has unearthed recommendations to effectively address this critical issue. These recommendations are rooted in a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration between governmental agencies, community institutions, NGOs, families, and youths themselves. By implementing these recommendations, the senatorial district can work towards creating a safer and healthier environment for its youth population:

- i. **Strengthening Prevention Education:** Collaboration with schools, religious institutions, NGOs, and community leaders to develop and implement age-appropriate prevention education programmes. These programmes need to focus on raising awareness about the risks and consequences of drugs and substances abuse, equipping youths with refusal skills, and promoting positive decision-making.
- ii. **Community-Based Support Networks:** Establishment of community-based support networks that involve parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and local leaders. These networks can provide a platform for open communication, sharing resources, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility in preventing drugs and substances abuse.
- iii. **Enhanced Law Enforcement:** Strengthening law enforcement efforts to crack down on drug trafficking and distribution within the district. Collaboration with the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to intensify surveillance, intercept drug supply chains, and apprehend traffickers is essential.
- iv. **Parental and Family Involvement:** Promotion of parental responsibility by offering parenting workshops and support groups that emphasize communication, setting boundaries, and fostering healthy relationships with their children. Empower parents to be proactive in identifying signs of drugs and substances abuse and seeking help when needed.
- v. **School-Based Interventions:** Schools need to integrate drugs and substances abuse prevention education into their curricula and establish peer mentorship programmes. School management need to create a safe space where students can report instances of drugs and substances abuse without fear of retaliation.
- vi. **Religious and Traditional Institutions:** Collaboration with religious and traditional leaders to incorporate anti-drugs and substances abuse messages into their

teachings and leverage their influence to raise awareness, challenge stigma, and promote values that discourage substance misuse.

- vii. **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** Government needs to support and empower NGOs that focus on drugs and substances abuse prevention, rehabilitation and community engagement to collaborate with these organisations to extend their reach, share resources, and implement targeted interventions.
- viii. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch public awareness campaigns that utilise various media platforms to disseminate information about the risks of drugs and substances abuse and available resources for help. These campaigns should also challenge societal perceptions and myths about substance misuse.

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