

Drug Awareness and Prevention for Adolescents

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes, during which individuals become increasingly vulnerable to risky behaviors, including drug use. Early exposure to drugs can lead to long-term health complications, academic decline, strained relationships, and increased risk of addiction in adulthood. This paper emphasizes the importance of targeted drug awareness and prevention programs specifically designed for adolescents. By understanding the root causes of drug use—such as peer pressure, mental health challenges, and lack of guidance—educators, parents, and policymakers can develop effective strategies to address these issues. School-based interventions, community outreach, and digital campaigns play a pivotal role in disseminating accurate information and fostering resilience among youth. Furthermore, integrating life skills education and mental health support within school curricula can empower adolescents to make informed decisions. Parental involvement, positive role models, and peer-led initiatives also contribute significantly to successful prevention efforts. It is essential to create safe, supportive environments that promote open dialogue, awareness, and healthy alternatives to substance use. Through a collaborative and holistic approach, society can equip adolescents with the knowledge and resources they need to resist drug use and lead productive, fulfilling lives. Continued research, innovation, and community engagement are crucial in evolving these efforts to meet the changing needs of today's youth.

Keywords: Adolescents, Drug Prevention, Awareness, Education, Youth Empowerment

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Introduction

The adolescent stage is of vital importance because it is characterized by the rapid changes; physical, emotional, and psychological. This is the time when people often experience their identities and social surroundings, trying out for instance the riskiness of drug using. Drug abuse is a problem of growing concern globally with adolescents, as such a large number of adolescents use these substances with global prevalence ranging from 2 – 20%. According to reports by the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), drug use among adolescents is on the rise and particularly so in urban and marginalized communities. Illicit drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, or heroin are not the only type of drugs whose misuse causes this phenomenon; the appetite for prescription medications, synthetic drugs, and inhalants exhibits the same phenomenon. In 2021, the total number of people using drugs globally was around 275 million and approximately 36 million used drugs because they had a disorder, with many individuals initiating their drug use in adolescence. However, these figures are a representation of several other issues that include accessibility, peer pressure, mental health disorders and inadequate preventive education¹.

It is the same situation in India too if not even worse; such a large and varied population living amidst so much social and cultural variance creates the needed conditions for the outbreak. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and other institutions like the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, there is worrying trend among adolescents caught in substance abuse, ranging from cannabis, tobacco, alcohol and synthetic drugs. It has also been reported that youth drug addiction rates are high and it is increasing in states like Punjab, Maharashtra, Delhi and parts of the northeast. Often, kids as young as 13 or 14 have been using narcotics. Peer pressure, absence of parental supervision, stress of academic competition and glamorised depiction of drug use in the media are the contributory factors. In addition, urbanization, fast economic transformation, as well as the opening to global cultural trends, is increasing the exposure of adolescents to drug use either as an escape or to have the status of using drugs. But the problem has only been made worse because drugs are available sometimes even inside school premises or through a digital platform².

¹Greenwald, G. (2009). Drug decriminalization in Portugal: lessons for creating fair and successful drug policies. Cato Institute Whitepaper Series.

² Chakravarthy, B., Shah, S., & Lotfipour, S. (2013). Adolescent drug abuse-Awareness & prevention. Indian Journal of Medical Research, 137(6), 1021-1023.

Problem Statement

Drug use amongst adolescents is not any longer limited to certain class, area or culture but is spread to urban as well as the rural areas. Availability of narcotic substances leads to the increase in the use of narcotic substances (synthetic and prescription drugs) among underage persons. Most adolescents are exposed to substances at an early age and do not immediately comprehend the potential health risks and potential repercussions linked with use of these substances, despite the fact that they are not ready to use these substances in a safe and responsible way. But it becomes very important that what are the teens unaware of the drug laws already in place and their rights under them. Nevertheless, while the growing recipe of substance abuse is obvious, there is no structured legal education or mode of prevention broadcasting from public policy or the school system. Unfortunately, adolescents lack proper legal or rehabilitative protection remain continually subject to compulsions of addiction, peer pressure, and in some cases, criminalization.

Adolescent users of drugs have hardly any rehabilitative needs as the focus of the existing legal framework in India, most importantly the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, is limited to the aspect of punishment. Even the law is strong in terms of prohibition and punishment of drugs, the same does not apply when it comes to minors who are found in possession or consumption of drugs. Children often go through adult legal systems or are subjected to measures without legal aid or psychological evaluation. While the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015s provide various mechanisms to deal with children in conflict with law, in reality, when it comes to dealing with drug related cases, the law is not always used as it is prescribed. Thus, law enforcement officers are rarely trained on how to approach a such sensitive situation, which can result in mishandling of a case and additional trauma for the adolescent itself. The lack of concerted work between the judiciary, law enforcement, educational institutions, and health services leaves the system with breaks.

Significance of the Study

The same is true of the policies and laws that are lacking, and of preventive education and policy implementation. National policies on the control of narcotic and protection of children and there are separately implemented without integration. Schools do not have a uniform policy for drug education, legal awareness and providing the psychological support to students because of which these students are not aware of the same extent to which their drug involvement is serious and the protections which are available to them. There are no clear

guidelines of the schools and institutions to use, when the school realizes that the student is in possession of or had used drugs. The result is a network of support fractured in such a way that there is more of a concern for punitive actions over early intervention and support. This challenge is taken up here by analysing the mismatch that exists between laws and implementation of the laws on the ground; the dearth of abstinence within preventive framework; and the need for a teen oriented legal frame. Therefore, it intends to try and understand how the law can be changed so as to promote protection and giving of advice and rehabilitation of at-risk adolescent as opposed to adolescent offenders.

Scope of the Study

Particularly, the adolescents in the range of 13 to 19 years are considered in this study since that may be a very crucial phase of their lifetime, emotionally vulnerable, identify in making and exposed to external influences such as peer pressure, media etc., and they are found to be experiencing changing social environments. However, the research strives to find out their level of awareness, their notions and experiences on drugs and their related laws in particular. Consists the legal frameworks of adolescent drug prevention, level of legal literacy of the youth and the effectiveness of educational and prevention programs. The object of the study is to find out how drug related crime laws are understood by adolescents, what support is available to adolescents and how the legal institutions react (if at all) to adolescents' drug offences. The study aims to focus on this group only so that it can determine the role of law, education and behaviour from the point of view of a formative stage in the life of an individual.

Literature Review

Arrazola et al (2015) Evaluation of efficacy of drug prevention laws at national and local levels mobilizes measures for assessing the level of awareness and understanding adolescents have with applicable law and the consequences of possession and use of low dose and illicit drugs. Unfortunately, many adolescents, especially those in vulnerable or underserved communities, are unaware that there are laws governing drug, exposed to misinformation, and make uninformed — potentially very serious — legal and social decisions. It is the time when adolescents have not completely comprehended the gravity of laws (e.g. as applicable by the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in India and similar

statutes in other countries) pertaining to drug ownership and trafficking or do not feel that juvenile status protects them from serious implications.³

Carliner et al (2017) To propose effective policy recommendations and preventive strategies to achieve adolescent drug use; requires a holistic approach that encompass legal, educational and community-based solutions. Early intervention in the form of school-based mental health programs and standard screening for behaviours that put the youth at risk are recommended as key interventions. Schools should not only implement more comprehensive drug education curricula that incorporate factual information, emotional resilience, decision making skills and direct consequences of drug use, but should remove fear-based tactics in these curricula. In addition, they should review the legal frameworks regarding drug use by adolescents to identify how rehabilitation rather than punishment should be put into focus.⁴

Catalano et al (2012) Therefore, the perceptions and attitudes of the adolescents with regard to the use of the drugs must be investigated in order to understand the deeper social dynamics which drive it. Such opinions have been formulated by adolescents from some sources like part of media, relationships, and cultural narratives. Today, drug use is glamorized or casual as it is portrayed on social media platforms, movies, music and web content which affirms the adolescent's mind to believe that being a drug user is trendy, or rebellious, or a means to escape something. These also normalise substance use and dim the differential between experimentation and addiction. As said, peer influence matters even more in this effect, whereby such adolescents tend to try drugs after seeing their friends doing so or in search of getting social circle validation and acceptance.

Chakravarthy et al (2013) Drug abuse during adolescence is still a significant public health problem and early initiation of substance use is associated with negative outcomes over time ranging from addiction, mental health disorders, poor performance in school, and other high-risk behaviour. This is a very critical issue, and the awareness and prevention of it are common solutions to it, as adolescence is a developmental stage where experimentation and vulnerability to peer influence come into play. To prevent drug abuse, educate young people about the dangers of drugs, help them learn to cope, encourage the sharing of information

³ Arrazola, R. A., Singh, T., Corey, C. G., Husten, C. G., Neff, L. J., Apelberg, B. J., ... & Caraballo, R. S. (2015). Tobacco use among middle and high school students—United States, 2011–2014. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*, 64(14), 381-385.

⁴ Carliner, H., Brown, Q. L., Sarvet, A. L., & Hasin, D. S. (2017). Cannabis use, attitudes, and legal status in the US: A review. *Preventive medicine*, 104, 13-23.

between families, schools, and communities. Effective programs in reducing substance use involve school-based programs in which life skills are built and self-esteem is enhanced and young people are taught to be able to resist peer pressure. In addition, media campaigns, community outreach and parental involvement also contribute towards awareness campaigns as well as to fortifying anti-drug messages.⁵

Legal Framework and Policy Analysis

In addressing adolescent drug awareness and prevention, courts have played a crucial role in interpreting the balance between students' rights and the state's interest in curbing drug use among youth. One landmark case is *Vernonia School District 47J v. Acton*, 515 U.S. 646 (1995), where the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of random drug testing for student-athletes. The Court reasoned that schools act in loco parentis (in place of parents) and have a legitimate interest in deterring drug use among students, particularly in athletic programs where drug influence could pose physical dangers. The Court emphasized that while students do not shed their constitutional rights at the school gate, those rights are balanced against the school's responsibility to maintain a safe and disciplined environment. This case set a precedent for expanding drug testing in schools and reinforced the idea that preventive measures, even those limiting privacy, could be justified if they serve the greater goal of protecting adolescent health and welfare.

Further expanding this framework, in *Board of Education v. Earls*, 536 U.S. 822 (2002), the Supreme Court upheld mandatory drug testing for students participating in any extracurricular activities, not just athletics. The Court maintained that students in such activities have a reduced expectation of privacy and that the school's preventive goals were sufficient to justify the testing policy. These rulings collectively underscore a trend in which courts support proactive strategies that prioritize adolescent safety over absolute individual privacy, especially within educational settings. Additionally, state-level cases such as *In re Juvenile Appeal (85-BC)* have emphasized the importance of early intervention and rehabilitation over punishment for youth caught in drug-related offenses, reflecting a shift in legal philosophy toward preventive education and treatment. These legal interpretations support comprehensive drug prevention programs in schools, including education, counseling, and early intervention, reinforcing that

⁵Chakravarthy, B., Shah, S., & Lotfipour, S. (2013). Adolescent drug abuse-Awareness & prevention. Indian Journal of Medical Research, 137(6), 1021-1023.

the legal system views adolescent drug prevention not only as a disciplinary issue but as a critical component of public health and youth development.

National Laws Related to Drug Use and Adolescents

Overview of the NDPS Act: Key Provisions Affecting Minors

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985 is the cornerstone legislation in India governing the control and regulation of operations relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. While the Act is designed to combat trafficking and consumption of drugs, it does not contain detailed or specific provisions for handling minor or adolescent offenders. Under the NDPS Act, possession, use, or sale of banned substances—even in small quantities—can lead to strict penalties, including imprisonment and fines. Although the law distinguishes between small, intermediate, and commercial quantities, it does not consistently offer protection or diversion mechanisms for juveniles found in possession of drugs. Adolescents, especially first-time or non-violent users, often find themselves subjected to the same criminal procedures as adults, unless the Juvenile Justice Act is correctly invoked. The Act does provide for immunity under Section 64A if the user voluntarily seeks treatment, but this clause is rarely applied to adolescents. In practical terms, minors caught under the NDPS Act are at risk of legal and psychological harm due to insufficient legal safeguards and lack of age-sensitive protocols. This lack of clarity regarding adolescents in the NDPS Act contributes to confusion in implementation and often results in criminalization over rehabilitation⁶.

While the NDPS Act, 1985 was primarily designed to control and regulate the operations relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, it lacks explicit procedural safeguards tailored to minors. The Act focuses heavily on punishment and deterrence, with stringent sentencing norms, including minimum mandatory imprisonment for certain offenses. Though this approach may be suitable for adult offenders or drug traffickers, it becomes problematic when applied to adolescents, especially those using substances for the first time or under peer pressure. The Act does not provide clear guidance on how to handle juvenile offenders, which creates ambiguity for law enforcement and the judiciary, especially in cases involving small quantities meant for personal use.

Section 27 of the Act does reduce the punishment for consumption or possession of small quantities for personal use, but it still prescribes imprisonment and fines, with no guarantee of

⁶ Gutierrez, A., & Sher, L. (2015). Alcohol and drug use among adolescents: an educational overview. *International journal of adolescent medicine and health*, 27(2), 207-212.

rehabilitation as the first response. Although Section 64A provides immunity from prosecution if the offender voluntarily seeks treatment, its use remains limited, and many adolescents are either unaware of it or do not have access to treatment centres recognized under the Act. Moreover, minors are rarely in a position to seek treatment without the support of guardians, school authorities, or legal aid—support systems that are not always responsive or informed about these legal options. In practice, many minors are booked under the same procedural steps as adults, especially when caught in high-pressure policing zones or anti-narcotics crackdowns. There is no formal provision within the NDPS Act mandating referral to Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) or collaboration with child welfare authorities. This creates a conflict with the Juvenile Justice Act, which prioritizes reform and protection. Legal scholars and child rights activists have repeatedly called for an amendment to the NDPS Act that incorporates child-specific provisions, ensuring that minors are redirected toward counselling and rehabilitation rather than exposed to the criminal justice system prematurely.

Emerging Legal Reforms and Debates

Decriminalization vs. Rehabilitation Debate in Juvenile Drug Use

One of the most prominent legal debates surrounding adolescent drug use is whether decriminalization offers a better alternative to traditional criminal prosecution. Supporters of decriminalization argue that young users, especially first-time offenders, should not be subjected to harsh penalties or incarceration but instead be directed toward rehabilitation, therapy, or community service. Opponents fear that decriminalization might normalize drug use or reduce the deterrent effect of legal action. In the context of adolescents, however, there is increasing global consensus that punitive responses do more harm than good. Adolescents are still developing judgment, impulse control, and emotional regulation; treating them as criminals for substance use ignores this critical developmental phase. Rehabilitation-focused approaches—emphasizing therapy, education, and family involvement—are seen as more effective in reducing recidivism and promoting long-term recovery. In India, this debate remains unresolved, although the Juvenile Justice Act reflects a rehabilitative philosophy. However, in practice, the NDPS Act is still widely used in ways that criminalize adolescent users. The ongoing debate highlights the need for clear policy direction, legal reforms, and investment in non-penal alternatives. The shift from punishment to rehabilitation isn't just

legal—it reflects a broader understanding of adolescent psychology and a commitment to child-friendly justice⁷.

Proposed Amendments to the NDPS Act Regarding Minors

In recent years, there has been growing demand for revisions to the NDPS Act to make it more sensitive to the needs of minors. Critics argue that the Act, though strong in combating trafficking and large-scale drug crimes, is overly rigid when applied to adolescents caught using or possessing small quantities for personal use. One of the key suggestions is to introduce a separate provision within the Act that explicitly outlines procedures and protections for minors, similar to how the Juvenile Justice Act differentiates juvenile offenders from adults. This could include mandatory screening by child welfare experts, diversion to counselling programs, or automatic referral to Juvenile Justice Boards instead of regular courts. Another proposed amendment is to expand the application of Section 64A—which currently allows immunity from prosecution for those seeking treatment—to apply more effectively to adolescents. Legal experts also recommend integrating rehabilitation as a first-line response rather than an optional outcome. While there is no formal bill introduced yet, multiple civil society organizations, legal scholars, and child rights activists continue to press for these amendments. If passed, such reforms could bring India's drug laws closer to global best practices and better align enforcement with child protection principles⁸.

Adolescent Awareness and Prevention Programs

Adolescence is a critical stage of human development marked by physical, emotional, and social changes that can make individuals more vulnerable to risky behaviors, including substance abuse. In response, awareness and prevention programs aimed at adolescents have become a cornerstone of public health and education strategies worldwide. These programs are designed to educate young people about the dangers of drug use, promote healthy lifestyle choices, and equip them with the skills to resist peer pressure. The importance of early intervention cannot be overstated, as habits and decisions formed during adolescence often shape future behavior. Through school-based curricula, community outreach, media campaigns, and peer-led initiatives, prevention programs aim to foster resilience, self-awareness, and informed decision-making among adolescents.

⁷ Kreit, A. (2009). Beyond the Prohibition Debate: Thoughts on Federal Drug Laws in an Age of State Reforms. Chap. L. Rev., 13, 555.

⁸ Nicholls, J. (2024). Liberal moralities and drug policy reform. Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy, 1-9.

Effective adolescent awareness and prevention programs are rooted in a multi-faceted approach that involves families, schools, healthcare providers, and communities. They focus not only on educating youth about the harmful effects of drugs but also on building supportive environments that discourage drug use. Programs such as Life Skills Training (LST), D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), and peer mentoring initiatives have been implemented with varying degrees of success. While these initiatives play a crucial role in reducing substance use, their success often depends on cultural relevance, consistency, and community engagement. Moreover, prevention strategies are increasingly integrating technology and social media to reach adolescents in a more engaging and relatable manner. The evolving nature of drug trends and adolescent behavior highlights the need for adaptable, research-based programs that address not just substance abuse, but also mental health, family dynamics, and social influences. By creating awareness and empowering young individuals with knowledge and coping strategies, these programs serve as a preventive shield against the long-term consequences of drug misuse and contribute to building a healthier, more informed generation.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the complex relationship between adolescent drug use, legal awareness, and prevention efforts within the Indian context, while drawing from global practices for comparison and inspiration. The findings point to a critical gap between the legal frameworks intended to protect adolescents and the way these laws are applied or understood at the ground level. Laws such as the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act aim to control drug abuse and offer rehabilitation-based responses for minors. However, in practice, adolescents are often unaware of these laws and their rights under them. Moreover, the systems meant to protect them—schools, families, legal institutions, and law enforcement—often act in silos, failing to provide cohesive or youth-sensitive interventions. Many adolescents who engage with drugs, even for the first time, are subjected to punitive procedures rather than supported through awareness, counselling, or rehabilitation. This discrepancy not only increases their risk of repeat offenses but also marginalizes them from educational and social opportunities.

The research also highlights the limited integration of legal literacy in school education, which significantly contributes to the lack of informed decision-making among adolescents. While some schools do conduct occasional awareness programs, these are often health-focused, with

minimal emphasis on legal consequences or rights. Most students rely on peers or media to understand drug-related issues, leading to the spread of misconceptions and a sense of false immunity from legal repercussions. Interviews and survey data show that adolescents generally lack understanding of critical aspects such as the difference between substance use and abuse, the role of rehabilitation, and the functioning of juvenile justice boards. In this vacuum, fear, misinformation, and stigma take root—discouraging open conversations or help-seeking behaviour. Programs that do exist, especially those run by NGOs, are often localized and underfunded. Although they show promising results, their impact is limited by scale and sustainability. Without systematic integration into mainstream institutions like schools and community centres, their reach remains insufficient to meet the national scale of adolescent vulnerability to drug use.

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