
**PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING ON REDUCTION OF DRUGS ABUSE
AMONG YOUTH IN MBEYA DISTRICT COUNCIL, TANZANIA**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined parents' awareness in the reduction of drug abuse among youth in Mbeya District Council, Tanzania. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and document reviews, with quantitative data analyzed using SPSS and qualitative data analyzed thematically. Findings indicated that parents possess a substantial level of awareness regarding youth drug abuse, with 87% identifying cannabis sativa as the most prevalent drug in the area. Respondents perceived youth aged 19–21 years as the most vulnerable group due to unemployment, peer influence and inadequate parental supervision. Parents also demonstrated awareness of behavioral signs of drug involvement and acknowledged their social and economic responsibilities in prevention through supervision, communication and provision of basic needs. The study concludes that although parental awareness was relatively strong; enhanced community education, improved family engagement and coordinated prevention strategies are still needed. The study recommends that strengthened parental training, youth-focused awareness initiatives and collaborative efforts among government institutions, health officials, schools and NGOs to curb rising trends of youth drug abuse in Mbeya District Council.

Parents' Understanding, Drugs Abuse, Youth, Mbeya City Council, Tanzania**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Drug abuse has increasingly become a global public health crisis, affecting people from all socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions. The issue extends beyond individual health, as it disrupts family structures, reduces community stability and places enormous

pressure on national health systems (Schulte & Hser, 2014). Drug abuse contributes to a spectrum of physical problems, including organ damage, cognitive impairment and reduced immunity, while also elevating risks for mental health disorders such as anxiety, psychosis and depression. Furthermore, communities face additional challenges such as increased crime rates, domestic instability and long-term economic burdens due to the treatment and rehabilitation costs associated with drug abuse disorders. These challenges highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the roots and implications of drug abuse, particularly among vulnerable populations, who often lack adequate support systems (Schulte and Hser, 2014).

Globally, the prevalence of drug use continues to rise, particularly among young adults. According to reports, approximately 5.6% of individuals aged between 15 and 64 used drugs at least once in 2016, with a significantly higher proportion being young people (UN, 2008). Young people are more susceptible to experimenting with drugs due to developmental, psychological and environmental influences, including peer pressure, identity exploration and exposure to social trends that glamorize substance use. This age group is particularly vulnerable as they engage in risk-taking behaviours and often lack comprehensive knowledge of the long-term health and social consequences of drug misuse. Such trends underscore the importance of targeted interventions to protect adolescents and young adults from early exposure to harmful substances (UN, 2008).

Across Asia, the situation has also become increasingly alarming, with reports showing a dramatic rise in drug use among males aged between 15 - 30. The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) emphasized that drug abuse contributes significantly to the health burden among young adults, accounting for approximately 14% of the overall disease burden among young men (Degenhardt, 2016). This signals an urgent need for countries in the region to intensify prevention, treatment and early intervention strategies. Cultural factors, rapid urbanization and increased access to illegal substances further fuel the escalating rates of drug misuse. The recognition of this burden highlights the transnational nature of drug-related problems, urging governments to collaborate in addressing the complex social, economic and political determinants contributing to drug dependency (Degenhardt et al., 2016).

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have consistently documented worrying increases in drug usage. The 2021 World Drug Report revealed that around 13.2 million users worldwide engaged in high-risk drug use, indicating an 18% surge from the previous year's estimate (UNODC, 2021). This significant rise reflects a disturbing global pattern in which addiction rates continue climbing despite preventive efforts. The report attributes the increased prevalence to factors such as

stress, economic instability, lack of employment opportunities and the growing availability of synthetic drugs. These global trends reveal that drug abuse remains a multifaceted challenge requiring comprehensive policies, international cooperation and community-based interventions (WHO, 2021; UNODC, 2021).

Drug abuse not only threatens physical health but also generates substantial social, economic and psychological consequences. Individuals who misuse drugs often experience deteriorating family relationships, homelessness, unemployment and poverty, which in turn perpetuate cycles of dependency and social exclusion (UNODC, 2021). The heightened risk of contracting infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis is particularly troubling, as unsafe injecting practices contribute significantly to disease transmission. National healthcare systems face increasing financial constraints due to rising demands for rehabilitation services, emergency care and long-term mental health treatment. These challenges emphasize that drug abuse is not an isolated personal issue but a complex problem with systemic societal impacts (WHO, 2021).

Multiple studies have identified a range of predictors associated with the rise of drug abuse, particularly among youth populations. Key among these are unemployment, peer pressure, mental health challenges and inadequate parental supervision, which collectively create a conducive environment for substance use initiation (UNODC, 2021). Young individuals experiencing emotional or psychological distress may turn to drugs as a coping mechanism, while others, lacking structured activities or employment, may become vulnerable to experimentation. Furthermore, limited access to youth-friendly counselling services and school-based awareness programs exacerbates the problem. These factors highlight the importance of implementing early intervention approaches that strengthen family support, build resilience and create positive youth engagement opportunities (UNODC, 2021).

African countries have also witnessed escalating levels of drug abuse, particularly in densely populated urban centres. Atwoli et al. (2011) explain that unemployment, poverty and exposure to high-risk environments make many African youths susceptible to drug use. Rapid urbanization has created ideal conditions for drug trafficking and distribution networks, further increasing accessibility to drug abuse. Such environments often lack strong social support structures, making youths more vulnerable to peer influence, stress and social pressures. The normalization of drug use in some urban communities, especially through entertainment and street culture, has further contributed to rising consumption trends (Atwoli, et al. 2011).

Similar findings were reported by Onya (2012), who noted that in Nigeria, substances such as *cannabis sativa* and alcohol remain the most widely abused drugs among young people. The author argued that weak parental monitoring, limited youth empowerment programs and insufficient community-based prevention efforts have intensified the problem. Young people in urban and peri-urban regions often lack access to recreational facilities or productive opportunities, making them more inclined to engage in risky behaviours. Additionally, misinformation about the effects of drugs and positive portrayal of substance use in media further encourage rates of experimentation among youth (Onya et al., 2012).

The 2021 World Drug Report also indicates that approximately 28 million people in Africa use illegal substances such as *cannabis Sativa*, heroin and cocaine, with Nigeria identified as having one of the highest cannabis consumption rates globally (UNODC, 2021). In East Africa, Tanzania tops the region with approximately 3.6 million using drugs, followed by Kenya and Uganda. The widespread accessibility of cannabis and other drugs reflects the persistence of trafficking routes and the involvement of youths in drug-related trade. These regional statistics demonstrate that Africa remains significantly affected by drug-related challenges, which threaten the continent's public health and socioeconomic development outcomes (UNODC, 2021).

In Tanzania, drug abuse among the youth has become a growing concern, particularly in urban and coastal regions where accessibility to drugs remains relatively high. Reports by the UNODC (2019) indicate that substances such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine are increasingly used by young individuals, influenced by socioeconomic inequality, widespread unemployment and weak community awareness systems. Studies show that many youths also participate in the cultivation, distribution and trafficking of illegal drugs, especially cannabis, which is grown in regions such as Mara, Arusha, Tanga and Kilimanjaro for both cultural and illegal commercial purposes (Ndumwa *et al.*, 2022). In places such as Mbeya District Council, factors including poverty, social instability, cultural norms, psychological challenges and the easy availability of drugs have amplified the problem. These dynamics underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions to address the multifaceted nature of drug abuse among Tanzanian youth (REPOA, 2020).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

2.1.1 Social Functionalism Theory

Social Functionalism Theory, originally developed by Émile Durkheim and later expanded by Talcott Parsons, views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability and social order. The theory emphasizes that key social institutions such as the family, education and religion perform essential functions that ensure the smooth functioning of society (Durkheim, 1895; Parsons, 1937). Within this perspective, the family is regarded as a primary agent of socialization responsible for instilling norms, values and acceptable behavior among young members of society. When parents effectively perform their roles through supervision, communication and provision of support, they contribute to social stability and prevent deviant behaviors such as drug abuse. Conversely, failure of the family institution to fulfill these functions may result in social disorganization and increased engagement of youths in risky behaviors. Therefore, Social Functionalism provides a relevant framework for understanding how parental roles contribute to the reduction of drug abuse among youths.

2.1.2 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, introduced by Albert Bandura, explains that individuals acquire behaviours through observing, modelling and imitating the actions, attitudes and emotional expressions of others within their environment. According to the theory, learning occurs not only through direct experience but also through vicarious reinforcement, where individuals imitate behaviours that appear rewarded or socially approved. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to these social learning processes, making them more likely to emulate behaviours displayed by parents, peers and community leaders (Bandura, 1977; Crone & Dahl, 2022).

In drug abuse prevention, Social Learning Theory emphasizes the powerful role of environmental influences in shaping youth behaviour. Young people who observe family members or peers engaging in substance use are at higher risk of adopting similar habits, especially when such behaviour is normalized or portrayed as socially desirable. Conversely, exposure to positive role models such as parents who demonstrate healthy coping strategies or openly discuss the dangers of drugs can help adolescents internalize protective behaviours. Community-based mentorship programs further strengthen these learning processes by providing youth with prosocial models who reinforce healthy decision-making (Zimmermann & Sieverding, 2023).

Social Learning Theory is relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding how Tanzanian youth develop attitudes and behaviours related to drug abuse. The theory highlights the central role of parents as key role models responsible for guiding, educating and supervising their children. When parents demonstrate healthy behaviours, establish clear expectations and engage in open communication about drug risks, they create a social environment that discourages drug use. In Tanzanian communities where social bonds, cultural values and parental influence remain strong the imitation and reinforcement processes described by this theory help explain how youth adopt or resist drug-related behaviours (Bandura, 1977; Ndumwa *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.1 Parents' understanding in reduction of drug abuse among youth

Parents play an essential role in shaping the behaviours, values and decision-making patterns of their children, particularly concerning issues of health and well-being. Their awareness of drug-related risks significantly influences the preventive measures they take within the household and community. Knowledgeable parents are better positioned to recognize early warning signs associated with drug experimentation, such as sudden mood changes, declining academic performance, or withdrawal from family activities. When parents understand the nature and consequences of drug use, they can effectively intervene before the behaviour escalates into harmful patterns (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

A growing body of research highlights that parental knowledge about specific drugs, including their effects and modes of consumption, enhances open communication between parents and their children. Smith *et al.* (2022) found that parents with a stronger understanding of substances such as cannabis and opioids were more likely to initiate discussions about drug use and adopt preventive behaviours. These discussions create a safe space for adolescents to ask questions, seek guidance and understand the consequences of substance abuse. Such family dialogue is essential because it builds trust and reduces the likelihood of secretive experimentation (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Parents' awareness also strengthens their capacity to monitor adolescents' social interactions and detect behavioural changes associated with drug use. When parents are informed about the signs and symptoms of substance use such as unusual fatigue, aggressive behaviour, unexplained financial needs, or shifts in social circles they are more capable of taking early action. Brown (2024) suggests that targeted awareness programs, including media campaigns and community education initiatives, are effective in equipping parents with this knowledge.

These initiatives are particularly valuable in both rural and urban areas where information gaps on modern drug trends often persist (Brown, 2024).

Research further shows that parental awareness helps reduce peer influence, which is among the strongest predictors of adolescent drug abuse. Moreno *et al.* (2017) found that parents who remained informed about their children's social environments were more successful in mitigating the risks associated with peers who use drugs. By guiding their children toward positive friendships and structured activities, parents reduce adolescents' exposure to high-risk social groups. This preventive approach helps create a protective buffer against peer pressure, enabling youth to make healthier choices (Moreno et al., 2017).

In addition to communication and monitoring, parental awareness plays a crucial role in creating supportive family environments that discourage drug use. Households in which parents show warmth, consistency and open engagement are less likely to produce adolescents who engage in substance use. Parents who understand the factors that trigger drug involvement such as stress, curiosity, or low self-esteem can provide emotional support and coping strategies. Such environments foster resilience among youth and reduce the likelihood of turning to drugs as a coping mechanism (Brown, 2024).

Parents' awareness is also essential in contexts where misinformation about drugs is widespread. Many communities hold misconceptions about certain substances, particularly those considered "traditional" or locally grown, such as *cannabis sativa*. When parents receive accurate information through training sessions, public seminars, or school-based programs, they gain the ability to correct myths and guide their children with evidence-based knowledge. The dissemination of accurate information helps strengthen community-wide efforts to combat drug abuse (Smith et al., 2022).

Furthermore, parental involvement enhances community-level prevention efforts. Parents who understand drug abuse challenges are more likely to participate in neighbourhood watch programs, anti-drug campaigns and collaborative events with schools and health institutions. These activities create shared responsibility and collective vigilance within the community. Brown (2024) argues that when parents actively collaborate with schools and local organizations, the overall effectiveness of drug prevention programs significantly increases (Brown, 2024).

2.2.2 Types of drugs that exist in the study area

The availability of different types of drugs within a community greatly influences youth involvement in substance abuse. Studies show that when drugs are easily accessible, affordable and distributed by local suppliers, adolescents are more likely to experiment with

them. Mcheka (2021) found that communities with high drug availability tend to report increased cases of youth drug involvement because young people often encounter drugs at social gatherings, markets, or through peers already engaged in substance use (Mcheka, 2021).

Cannabis *sativa*, heroin and cocaine are among the most prevalent illegal drugs identified in many regions across East Africa. Kaguthi (2024) revealed that the availability of these substances encourages drug experimentation among youth, especially in areas where law enforcement is weak or where drug trafficking networks operate openly. The presence of these substances creates an enabling environment for adolescent drug use, making prevention efforts more challenging. The study suggests that reducing supply should be a central strategy in addressing youth drug abuse (Kaguthi, 2024).

Similarly, research conducted in Kenya supports the view that the ease of access to drugs directly contributes to rising cases of substance abuse among youth. Cheloti (2013) concluded that drugs circulating in school environments or nearby communities often lead to experimentation among secondary school students. The study emphasized the need for stronger policies regulating the sale and distribution of drugs, particularly around educational institutions. Cheloti recommended strict enforcement of laws targeting drug dealers who exploit vulnerable youth populations (Cheloti, 2013).

The issue of availability is worsened by affordability. Layla et al. (2015) reported that the low cost of certain illicit drugs increases their attractiveness among adolescents who lack financial independence. Cheap substances such as locally produced cannabis sativa or adulterated heroin become the preferred options for experimentation. This affordability factor, combined with weak parental supervision and community awareness, creates a high-risk environment for youth involvement in drug use. The researchers highlighted the need for economic and policy interventions to address these affordability challenges (Layla et al., 2015).

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Mbeya District Council, Mbeya Region, Tanzania, specifically in Nsalala and Utengule-Usongwé Wards, selected due to high prevalence of youth drug abuse and proximity to major transit routes facilitating drug circulation. The district has 128 wards, 140 villages and a population of 371,259 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), making it suitable for examining parental roles in drug abuse prevention.

3.2 Research Approach

A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative strategies was employed to capture both numerical data and detailed insights into parents' awareness, attitudes and experiences. A descriptive cross-sectional design was used to collect data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the research problem efficiently and cost-effectively (Orodho and Kombo, 2002; Creswell, 2015;).

3.3 Target Population

The target population included parents of youths, local leaders and health professionals who had experience with youth drug issues. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants, while simple random sampling was employed to select parents for questionnaires. A total of 98 parents participated, determined using Slovin's formula with a 10% margin of error.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data collection involved questionnaires, in-depth interviews and document reviews, ensuring triangulation and reliability. Data were analysed using SPSS for quantitative responses and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Validity was ensured through careful instrument design and triangulation, while reliability was confirmed via a pilot study. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality and institutional approval from the University of Iringa and Mbeya District Council, were strictly observed throughout the study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Parent's understanding in Reduction of Drug Abuse among Youth

Drug abuse among youth is a growing social and public health concern that affects young people's well-being, academic performance and future opportunities. Parents play a central role in preventing and reducing this problem, as they provide guidance, supervision, emotional support and early detection of risky behaviours. Their awareness of different types of drugs, the signs of substance use and the factors that expose youth to drug abuse such as peer pressure and social influences is crucial in safeguarding their children. However, in many communities, including those in Tanzania, parents often lack adequate knowledge to identify or respond effectively to early signs of drug involvement. Understanding parents' awareness levels is therefore essential for strengthening family-based interventions, informing community education programs and developing appropriate strategies to reduce youth drug abuse. This study examines parents' awareness of drug abuse among youth and explores how this awareness influences their ability to protect and support young people.

4.2 Awareness on the Types of Drugs that Exist in the Community

Respondents were asked to mention the common types of drugs that are found in their communities. The findings are summarized in Figure 1, The most common type of drug that existed in the study area was cannabis sativa.

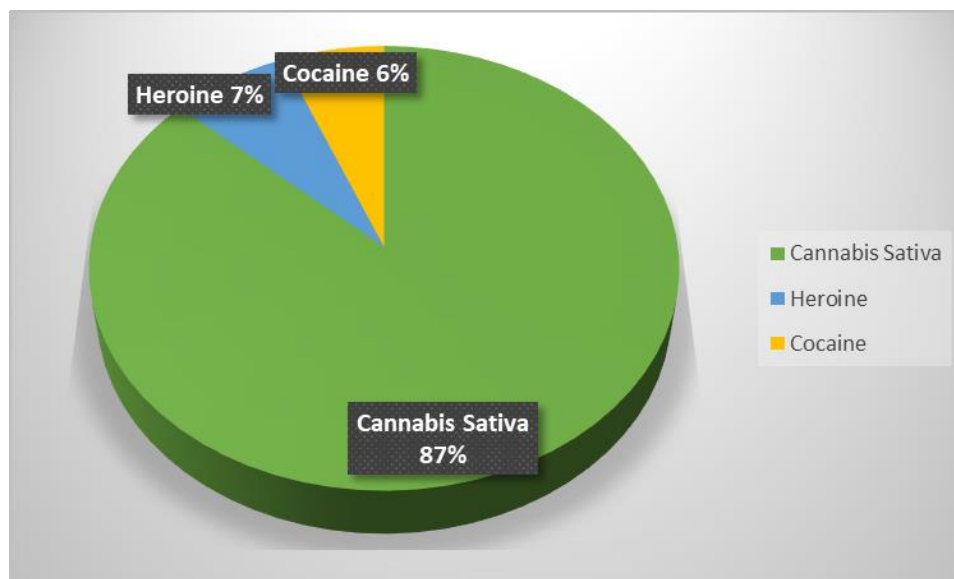


Figure 1: Types of Drugs that Commonly Exist in the Community.

Source: Field data, 2025

This was also suggested by 87% of the respondents in the study area. Other respondents (7%) said heroin was the drug that existed in the area while cocaine was suggested by 6% of the respondents. These results imply that cannabis sativa commonly known as marijuana was the most common drug that existed in the community. These findings are in line with those of Ndumwa *et al.* (2022) and REPOA (2020) whose reports indicated that in regions like Mbeya, Dar es Salaam and Arusha, Cannabis Sativa was the most common type of drug that exists. This also supported by one respondent who reported that:

In this area from my experience the common drug type that exist is *cannabis sativa* which seen to be easier accessible and affordable to users while Cocaine and heroin are also available and abused more with the people of high income. The low-income earner gets from the rich person, poor people like me how I can afford to go outside the country to buy cocaine and heroin? (Face-to-Face Interview with village Executive officer at Mshikamo Village at Nsalala Ward: August, 2025).

Other respondent added that:

Cannabis in this community is the most common type of drug that exist and abuse by people especially youths and some of the community members are cultivating in the middle of their farms found far from where they cultivate other crops like maize, beans and Irish potatoes, I have experience from some members being caught by police by involving in cultivating two hectares of cannabis at the middle of the forest at Mkwajuni Road (Face-to-Face Interview with Ward Executive officer at Utengule-usongwe ward: August, 2025).

Also another key informant added that:

Myself from my experience I know '*cannabis sativa*' as the one among of drug abuse which mostly available and abuse by people especially youths and also some of community members are cultivating in a confidential way for black market, so the common type of drug in our community from my knowledge is 'bongi' or marijuana (cannabis). (Face-to-Face Interview with village Executive officer at Mbalizi village from utengule-usongwe ward: August, 2025).

The findings indicate that *cannabis sativa* (*cannabis sativa*) is the most prevalent drug in the study area, reported by 87% of respondents, while heroin and cocaine were mentioned by 7% and 6% of respondents, respectively. This suggests that cannabis is widely accessible, affordable and commonly abused, particularly among youths, whereas heroin and cocaine are mostly used by higher-income individuals. Interviews with key informants further confirmed these patterns, with reports highlighting that cannabis is often cultivated covertly in farms and forests for both personal use and black-market sales. These results align with previous studies conducted in regions such as Mbeya, Dar es Salaam and Arusha, which similarly identified cannabis as the dominant drug in the community (Ndumwa et al., 2022; REPOA, 2020). Overall, the data underscore cannabis as the primary substance driving youth drug abuse in the study area.

4.3 Knowledge about the Most Affected Age Group by Drug Abuse in the Area

In the literature review it was noted that among other age groups, a group of youth is in a serious danger of being affected by drug abuse. In order to verify the truth of such argument, respondents were asked to state their views regarding the age group that is commonly at higher risk for drug abuse than others. The findings in Figure 2 reveal that, majority of the respondents 40% reported that youths in the age group of 19-21 were at high risk of being dragged into drug abuse. The age group of older than 21 years made up the second largest group as it was suggested by 32% of all respondents who participated in this study. The age group of 13-15 years was suggested by 13% of the respondents while 11% respondents reported that the group which is mostly at risk of drug abuse was that of 16-18 years. One

respondent (1%) said youths of the age of 13-15 was at higher risk of drug abuse. These findings concur with those of Drugs UN and Bernan, (2008) and Ritchie and Roser, (2019) that adolescents particularly at the age from the age of 15 years are at higher risk of being affected with drug abuse.

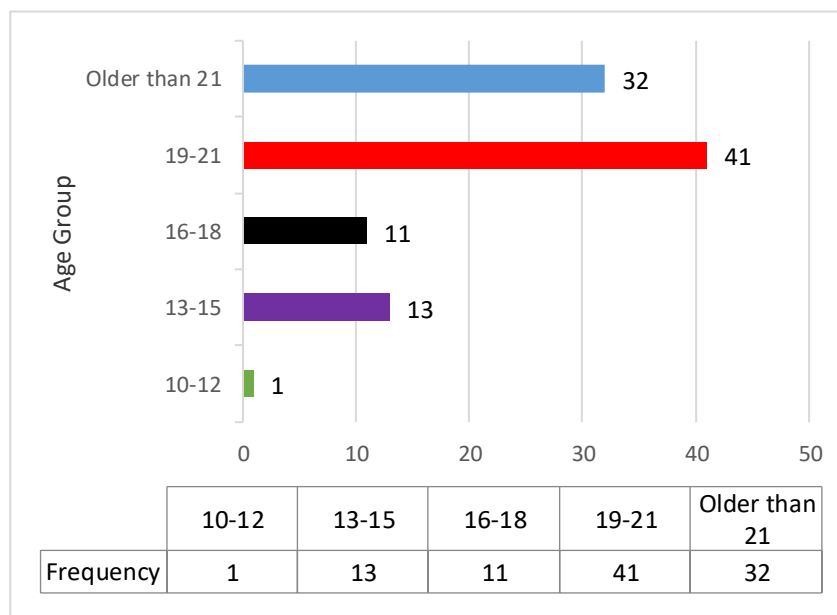


Figure 2: Age Group at Higher Risk of Drug Abuse.

Source: Field data, (2025). This was supported by one of the key informants from Mbalizi village at utengule-usongwe ward:

The age group that seen to be most affected by drug abuse are those who are yet completed and those who are not completed secondary school aged from 18 years and above and stayed with no job and even not engaging in any other economic activities which could keep them away from abusing drugs, also those who still living to their parents. (Face-to-Face Interview with village Executive officer at Mbalizi Village from utengule-usongwe Ward: August, 2025).

This also supported by another respondent who added that:

The most affected with drugs are youths who comes from the family with lack of parental care, no time for socialization between parents and children and with low economic level who also are dropping from school, disrespect their parents and most of the time spending with their peer groups. (Face-to-Face Interview with clinical officer at Nsalala Health Facility: August, 2025).

The findings indicated that youths aged 19-21 years are the most at risk of drug abuse, as reported by 40% of respondents, followed by those older than 21 years (32%). Adolescents aged 13–15 and 16–18 years accounted for 13% and 11%, respectively, while a very small proportion (1%) identified younger adolescents as at higher risk. Key informants explained that older youths who have not completed secondary education, lack employment, or come from families with limited parental supervision are particularly vulnerable. Additional risk factors include low economic status, school dropouts, peer influence and weak parental engagement. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting adolescence and early adulthood as critical periods for drug vulnerability (UN and Bernan, 2008; Ritchie and Roser, 2019). Overall, the results suggest that interventions should prioritize older adolescents and young adults while addressing family and socio-economic factors that increase susceptibility to drug abuse.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that parents in Mbeya District Council possess a considerable level of awareness regarding drug abuse among youths and clearly recognize it as a serious social, health and community problem. Parents demonstrated a strong understanding of the major causes and risk factors leading to youth drug involvement particularly peer pressure, which was widely acknowledged as the dominant driver. They were also knowledgeable about the types of drugs commonly abused, especially cannabis, which emerged as the most prevalent substance in the area. Parents' ability to identify behavioural and emotional signs of drug misuse further highlights their readiness to intervene early. Additionally, the findings show that parents play a significant social role by supervising their children, engaging in open communication, participating in community awareness programs and building supportive networks with other caregivers. Economically, parents contribute by meeting their children's essential needs and financing health and psychosocial services where necessary, thereby reducing vulnerability and promoting recovery among affected youths.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the study recommends that government institutions, health workers, community leaders and schools strengthen awareness programs targeting both parents and youths to enhance knowledge on the causes, effects and prevention of drug abuse. Parents are encouraged to maintain open communication with their children, create time for social interaction, attend community seminars on drug abuse and collaborate with other parents in

monitoring youth behaviour. Health professionals should intensify outreach programs in schools and communities, while rehabilitated drug users can be supported to serve as ambassadors in anti-drug campaigns. Furthermore, parents, government agencies and community stakeholders should work together to provide youths with basic needs, access to medical care and psychosocial support services to minimize risk factors linked to poverty, neglect and social isolation. Finally, the study proposes further research focusing on youths' perceptions of the rising problem of drug abuse and recommends that future studies employ qualitative designs to generate deeper insights into parental roles in preventing substance abuse.

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