
FROM CURIOSITY TO CRISIS: A LEGAL-EMPIRICAL INQUIRY INTO DRUG ABUSE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigates the patterns, causes, and consequences of drug usage among college students in India. Despite an extensive legal regime under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act), and public health efforts, substance abuse among youth persists and is on the rise. The research, based on a non-doctrinal survey of 60 college students, reveals alarming levels of early exposure to drugs, peer-driven initiation, and a limited understanding of long-term risks. The study employs qualitative and quantitative analysis to assess how family background, academic pressure, and media portrayal influence adolescent behaviour. It also evaluates existing national laws, international conventions, and judicial decisions related to substance abuse. The findings suggest gaps in enforcement, lack of targeted counselling, and a strong link between drug usage and dropouts, mental health issues, and gender-based vulnerabilities. Recommendations are made to strengthen both legal and institutional responses. This paper aims to assist lawmakers, educators, and public health officials in framing more effective strategies to combat youth drug abuse through preventive, rehabilitative, and penal measures.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, College Students, NDPS Act, Empirical Research, Substance Use, Peer Pressure, Legal Framework

Introduction

Drug usage among college students has emerged as a significant socio-legal and public health challenge in India. Adolescents and young adults, especially those in the 15 - 25 age group, are particularly vulnerable due to a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. This transitional period often comes with exposure to peer pressure, academic stress, and a desire for experimentation, making youth susceptible to substance abuse. Despite constitutional mandates for the protection of public health and specific statutes such as the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, the incidence of drug use continues to escalate among college-going students.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment¹, in its 2019 report titled Magnitude of Substance Use in India, highlighted that nearly 14.6% of Indians aged 10 - 75 used alcohol, and more than 2.8% used cannabis. Within academic institutions, particularly in urban centres, access to tobacco, alcohol, and prescription drugs is disturbingly easy. As the custodians of India's demographic dividend, the mental and physical health of college students must be safeguarded, and the pathways leading to drug abuse must be critically examined.

This study seeks to fill the gap by empirically investigating the causes, prevalence, and legal implications of substance abuse among college students using non-doctrinal research methodology. It offers grounded recommendations to strengthen institutional mechanisms and policy enforcement.

Literature Review

A Literature review is the summary of the published articles and reports relevant to a topics and survey documented by various researchers and departments;

1. World Drug Report 2020 (UNODC): This global report emphasised the rising use of psychoactive substances among adolescents and suggested that lack of awareness, peer imitation, and socio-economic stress are primary drivers of drug experimentation.²

¹ Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Magnitude of Substance Use in India (2019).

² 2. World Health Organisation, World Drug Report 2020, U.N. Doc. UNODC/WDR/2020.

2. Law Commission of India, 159th Report (1997): Focused on loopholes in the NDPS Act and recommended reformatory approaches over penal ones, especially for first-time offenders and juveniles.³
3. Shekhar Saxena et al., Alcohol and Drug Abuse (2003): Highlighted socio-cultural triggers for drug abuse in India, including media influence, availability, and absence of institutional safeguards.⁴
4. Murthy, Pratima. "Substance Use and Addiction Research in India." Indian Journal of Psychiatry (2015): Offered a systematic review of substance abuse patterns in Indian youth and argued for multi-sectoral involvement in prevention.⁵

Statement of Problem

Despite stringent laws like the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, India continues to witness a disturbing rise in drug usage among college students. This trend reveals a deep disconnect between legislative intent and ground realities, where peer pressure, academic stress, media influence, and lack of institutional awareness mechanisms contribute significantly to adolescent substance abuse. The absence of early intervention, counselling, and effective policy enforcement within educational settings exacerbates the problem, threatening not only the health and well-being of the youth but also the nation's social fabric and future human capital.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesises that the NDPS Act, 1985 is ineffective in deterring student drug use, and that peer pressure, academic stress, and media portrayal significantly influence both initiation and normalisation of substance use among college students.

Research Objectives

1. To understand students' perceptions and awareness levels regarding substance use.
2. To examine the influence of media, peer pressure, and academic stress in initiating

³ Law Comm'n of India, 159th Report on the NDPS Act (July 1997).

⁴ Shekhar Saxena, Alcohol and Drug Abuse (New Age Int'l Pub., 2003).

⁵ Pratima Murthy, Substance Use and Addiction Research in India, 57(6) INDIAN J. PSYCHIATRY 275 (2015).

drug use.

3. To analyze the impact of drug abuse on education, health, and social life of students.

Research Questions

1. What are the key factors influencing college students to experiment with drugs?
2. How effective is the current legal and institutional framework (NDPS Act, COTPA, etc.) in curbing substance abuse in educational institutions?
3. What is the role of peer groups and media in shaping student behaviour regarding drug use?
4. Are existing interventions—legal, educational, or psychological—adequate for early prevention and rehabilitation?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a doctrinal and empirical research methodology. The primary aim was to gather first-hand data from college students to explore trends in drug usage, influencing factors, and legal awareness and secondary sources like articles, journals, and books have been used for literature review.

Limitation of the Study

The study is geographically limited to college students from a specific area in Chennai, and the findings may not reflect the broader patterns across other regions or educational settings in India.

2. IMPACT OF DRUGS ON THE EDUCATIONAL LIFE OF STUDENTS

The Nexus Between Drug Use and Education

Drug abuse among students is increasingly becoming a national concern, disrupting not only their physical and mental health but also directly affecting academic performance, school retention, and cognitive development. With the age of experimentation often beginning in adolescence or early adulthood, the student population remains one of the

most vulnerable groups. Academic institutions, once viewed as safe and transformative environments, are now challenged with preventing the influx and consequences of substance use.

The rise in cases of drug abuse among college and university students indicates systemic failures—be it in enforcement, campus vigilance, or awareness. This chapter explores the intersection of education and drug abuse through a legal lens, drawing from statutory protections, judicial interpretations, and institutional responsibilities.

Cognitive and Academic Impairments Induced by Drug Use

Drug abuse adversely affects the brain's functioning, particularly in young adults whose cognitive faculties are still maturing. Research consistently links substance abuse with a decline in academic motivation, memory retention, concentration, and problem-solving abilities. Students using narcotics like cannabis, prescription stimulants without medical need are prone to chronic absenteeism and lower grade performance.

The legal implications of drug use in educational contexts extend to academic misconduct proceedings, disciplinary actions, and even criminal prosecution under relevant narcotic laws. Educational institutions, under the University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines, are bound to implement policies that promote drug-free campuses. The failure to do so could result in legal and administrative liability, particularly where negligence leads to student injury or death.

State Responsibility

The Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 47, which mandates the State to improve public health and prohibit the consumption of intoxicating drugs except for medicinal purposes, create a strong legal basis for robust anti-drug measures in educational spaces.

Judicial and Policy-Level Interventions

Indian courts have, on several occasions, intervened in matters involving drug abuse

among students. For instance, the Himachal Pradesh High Court in *State of H.P. v. Rajeev*⁶ emphasised the need for stringent campus-level monitoring mechanisms and reiterated the gravity of NDPS violations. Similarly, PILs filed in High Courts across states like Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala have resulted in court-mandated implementation of awareness campaigns, regular drug testing, and police vigilance in and around educational zones.

In response, various policy documents like the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (2018–2025) have incorporated school and college-level intervention strategies. These include curriculum revisions, mental health counselling, peer mentoring, and teacher training to detect and address early signs of addiction.

3. Legal Framework Governing Drug Usage in Educational Institutions: National and International Perspectives

I. National Legal Framework

The primary legislation regulating the control, prohibition, and penalisation of drug use in India is the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act)⁷. The Act serves as the backbone of India's anti-drug regime and establishes a stringent framework for addressing the production, possession, trafficking, and consumption of narcotic and psychotropic substances.

a) Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985

The NDPS Act criminalises the consumption and possession of narcotics except for medical and scientific purposes. Key provisions relevant to educational institutions include:

- Section 8(c): Prohibits the use of any narcotic drug or psychotropic substance without legal authorisation.⁸
- Section 27: Punishes personal consumption of drugs with imprisonment, which

⁶ *State of H.P. v. Rajeev*, 2005 SCC OnLine HP 13 (India).

⁷ Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, No. 61 of 1985, INDIA CODE (1985).

⁸ Id. § 8(c)

varies depending on the nature of the substance involved.⁹

- Section 32B: Lists factors that aggravate the offence, including committing the crime in or near an educational institution.¹⁰
- Section 64A: Offers immunity from prosecution to addicts who volunteer for de-addiction treatment, allowing rehabilitation over punishment.¹¹

While the NDPS Act does not contain an education-specific clause, courts have construed institutional proximity and student involvement as aggravating factors. This has spurred schools and colleges to adopt internal codes of conduct that mirror legal provisions.

The **University Grants Commission (UGC)**¹² has also issued advisories to universities and colleges to declare campuses as drug-free zones and promote awareness campaigns. Compliance with such directives has become increasingly important, especially in regions witnessing a surge in student drug addiction cases.

II. International Conventions Ratified by India

India is a party to several international treaties that inform and guide its domestic drug control policies. These instruments shape India's obligations toward ensuring educational institutions are protected from narcotic influences.

a) Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 (As Amended in 1972)

This treaty, ratified by India in 1964¹³, aims to limit the production, manufacture, and use of narcotic substances to medical and scientific purposes. Although not education-specific, it obliges member states to take all necessary legislative and administrative actions to prevent drug misuse, including within public institutions.

⁹ Id. § 27.

¹⁰ Id. § 32B(a)(vii)

¹¹ Id. § 64A.

¹² UGC Circular on Drug-Free Campuses, No. F.1-2/2020(CPP-II), UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION (2021)

¹³ Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, Mar. 30, 1961, 520 U.N.T.S. 151 (entered into force Dec. 13, 1964)

b) Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971

India became a signatory to this treaty in 1989¹⁴. It extends the control regime to synthetic drugs such as amphetamines and benzodiazepines, which are increasingly abused by students. The convention encourages preventive education and early detection, providing a framework for school-level interventions.

c) United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 (Vienna Convention)

This treaty obligates signatory countries, including India, to combat illicit drug trafficking through stringent national laws. Under Article 3(4)¹⁵, the Convention recognises the importance of demand reduction, particularly among youth, and promotes educational, social, and public health programs. India's NDPS (Amendment) Act, 1989¹⁶ was enacted partly to fulfil the obligations arising from this Convention.

4. Data Analysis & Interpretation

The following section provides a detailed statistical and visual analysis of data collected from 60 college students through an online survey. The goal is to evaluate their experiences, exposures, and perceptions about drug use, along with social and institutional factors involved.

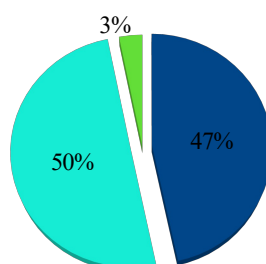
¹⁴ Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971, Feb. 21, 1971, 1019 U.N.T.S. 175 (entered into force Aug. 16, 1976).

¹⁵ United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Dec. 20, 1988, 1582 U.N.T.S. 95, art. 3(4).

¹⁶ Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Amendment) Act, No. 2 of 1989, INDIA CODE (1989)

FIGURE 1

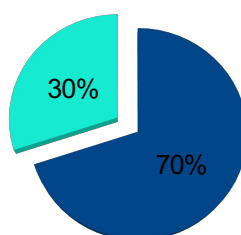
■ Female ■ Male ■ Others



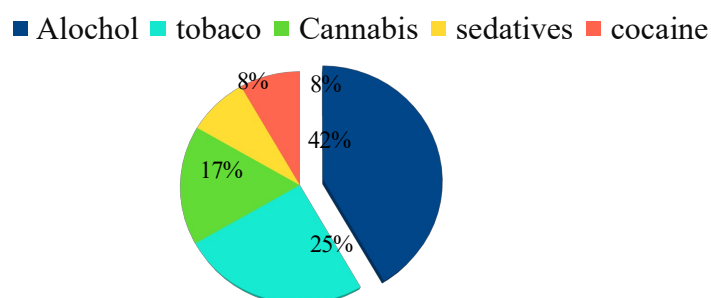
The chart reveals that 50% (30 respondents) were male, 47% (27 respondents) were female, and 3% (3 respondents) identified as 'other'. This near-equal distribution of gender ensures that the responses reflect a balanced gender perspective and helps generalise findings to both male and female student populations.

FIGURE 2

■ Yes ■ No



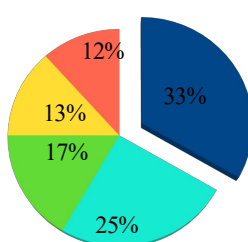
The Figure 2 represents that Out of 60 students, 70% (42 respondents) confirmed they had seen drug usage in their immediate environment, while 30% (18 respondents) had not. This suggests that a significant majority of college students are visually exposed to substance use, even if not directly involved. This environmental exposure may lead to normalisation and reduced sensitivity toward the issue.

FIGURE 3

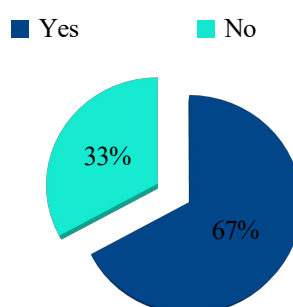
The Figure 3 represents that Alcohol was identified by 42% as the most common drug, followed by 25% for tobacco, 17% for cannabis, and 8% for sedatives and cocaine. This distribution shows that students are mainly exposed to alcohol and tobacco both legally available before experimenting with illegal drugs like cannabis and cocaine.

FIGURE 4

■ curiosity ■ peer pressure ■ media ■ Family Influence ■ Depression



The chart shows the highest percentage 33% cited curiosity, followed by 25% attributing it to peer pressure. Family influence 17%, media exposure 13% and depression or stress 12% also played roles. This shows a mix of psychological, social, and familial factors behind the first instance of substance. Use.

FIGURE 5

The chart shows that 67% (40 students) reported that friends had offered them drugs, while

33% (20) had not. The data highlights the powerful role of peer networks in introducing and influencing drug use behaviour, often outweighing individual hesitation or awareness.

FIGURE 6

■ Severely ■ Moderately ■ Minimally ■ Not sure

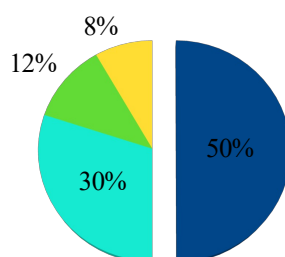
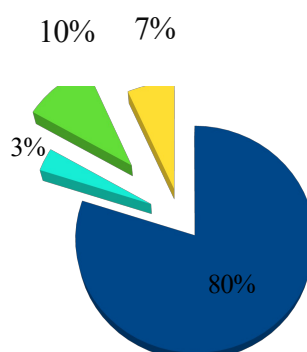


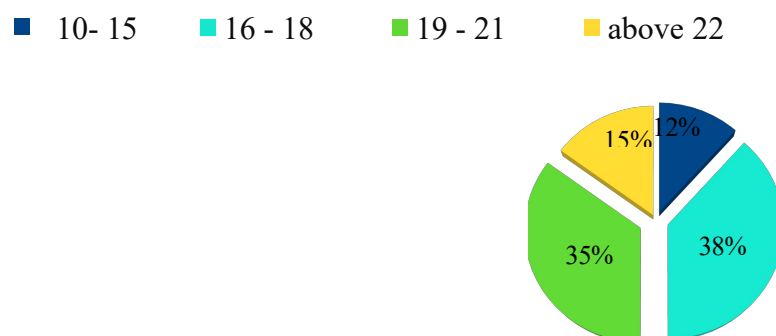
Figure 6 says that 50% (30 students) believed that drug abuse severely affects academics, 30% (18) believed the effect was moderate, 11.7% (7) said the impact was minimal, and 8.3% (5) were unsure. The data shows that a clear majority recognize the harmful effect drugs have on education and learning outcomes.

FIGURE 7

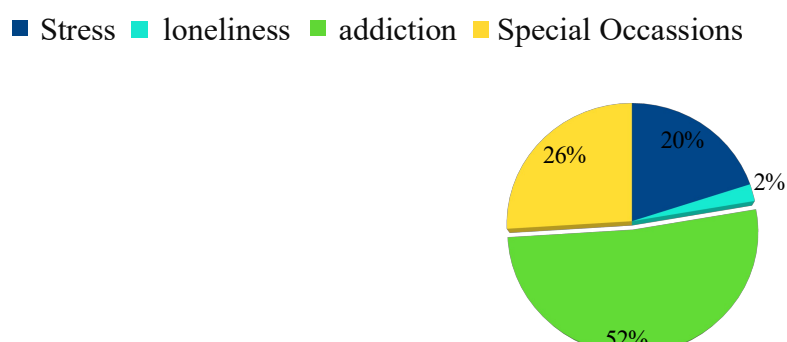
■ Friends ■ Family ■ Neighbours Shops ■ nearby colleges



The pie chart illustrates the sources through which students gain access to drugs. A significant majority, 80%, reported obtaining drugs through friends. Another 10% identified neighbours as the source, while 7% indicated local shops near colleges. A smaller portion, 3%, admitted to access through family members.

FIGURE 8

The pie chart depicts the age at which students began using drugs. It reveals that 38% of students- initiated drug use between the ages of 10 and 15 years, while 35% began between 16 and 18 years. Additionally, 15% reported starting between 19 and 21 years, and the remaining 12% began after the age of 22.

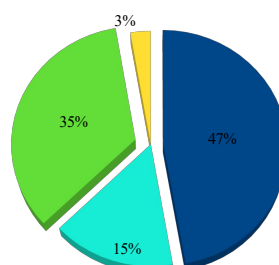
FIGURE 9

The pie chart presents student responses regarding the reasons for drug usage. According to the data, 52% attributed their usage to addiction, while 26% reported consuming drugs during special occasions. Additionally, 20% cited stress as the primary reason, and a small fraction, 2%, identified loneliness as the cause.

FIGURE 10

■ De addiction Counselling ■ Awareness Programs

■ Strict Enforcement measures ■ 24*7 Helpline



The chart illustrates student opinions on effective measures to reduce drug addiction among adolescents. A majority, 47%, suggested the need for de-addiction counselling services, while 35% emphasized the importance of strict enforcement measures. Additionally, 15% advocated for awareness programs, and 3% recommended the establishment of a 24×7 helpline to provide continuous support.

Discussion

The study reveals that despite being aware of the harmful effects of illicit drugs and psychotropic substances, students reported widespread usage within their surroundings, highlighting both the accessibility and normalization of such substances. Media and digital platforms significantly influence student behavior, with many respondents disapproving of how drugs are portrayed. Peer pressure, curiosity, family background, lack of awareness, and self-control were identified as major reasons for drug initiation, with peer group influence being the most prominent trigger. A gender disparity was observed, as male respondents were more likely to be offered drugs, reflecting societal norms around masculinity. Additionally, drug abuse was found to contribute directly to gender-based violence, with respondents linking it to increased instances of domestic violence, neglect, and sexual assault against women. The findings underscore the urgent need for intervention, as controlling drug use is critical to promoting public health and ensuring a safer, more equitable environment—particularly for women.

Conclusion

While India has a dense legal framework on paper, The findings of this study reveal a deeply

concerning trend: drug use is increasingly normalized within Indian colleges, representing both a public health emergency and a significant challenge to legal enforcement. While robust statutes such as the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS Act) and the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) exist to combat substance use, their effectiveness is often undermined by inconsistent implementation particularly within academic settings that shape youth behavior and attitudes.

Evidence gathered in this study clearly indicates that punitive legal approaches on their own are insufficient to address the multifaceted problem of substance abuse among students. The complexity of the issue demands a coordinated response, encompassing legal, educational, medical, and psychological strategies. Laws and penalties must be supported by sustained preventive and rehabilitative programs to produce lasting change.

To make a meaningful impact, educational institutions should embrace comprehensive prevention models that include:

- Peer-driven awareness campaigns to foster dialogue and break the stigma associated with seeking help.
- Family counseling and support networks to address underlying causes and improve resilience among students.
- Digital detox interventions to combat online influences that glamorize or trivialize drug use.
- Health education programs woven into the academic curriculum to ensure all students receive accurate information.

Beyond being a public health imperative, addressing drug use among youth is a constitutional obligation. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution upholds the Right to Life, which encompasses the protection of student welfare and safe educational environments. Article 47 further places a duty on the State to strive for improvements in public health, affirming that tackling substance abuse is not merely a policy preference but a mandated responsibility.