Trends and factors associated with illicit drug use in South Africa: findings from multiple national population-based household surveys

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Acknowledgment and declaration

▪ I acknowledge and thank the South African general population who generously participated in the HIV surveys in which this research was made possible.

▪ The authors declare no conflict-of-interest.
Illicit drug use has substantial ongoing impact on health and wellbeing globally and in sub-Saharan Africa\(^1\).

There is **little data on trends, predictors and outcomes of illicit drug use in South Africa.**

Yet, such data are important for understanding the **potential health impact**, and for **developing strategies to mitigate the consequences of illicit drug use.**

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Aims

• We set out to:

1. **Describe population-level trends** in recent illicit drug use.

2. **Assess predictors** of recent drug use.

3. **Evaluate whether recent illicit drug use is associated with behavioral and health outcomes** in South Africa.
Methods

• We analysed data among respondents aged 15 years or older from 5 different national households surveys conducted over 2002-2017 in South Africa\textsuperscript{1}.

  • Surveys are representative of the entire country.

• Recent drug use was defined as last three-months use of illicit drugs i.e., any use of cannabis, cocaine, stimulants, and/or opioids.

Methods

- Multivariable logistic regression was used to:
  
  - Assess predictors of recent drug use — defined as any past 3-months illicit drug use, excluding alcohol/tobacco.
  
  - Evaluate whether recent drug use predicted behavioral and health outcomes — adjusted for age, sex, race, geographic area, province, education level, employment status, alcohol use and survey year.
Results

• There were 89,113 respondents aged 15+ years from the 5 pooled surveys.

• Drug use increased from 1.5% in 2002 to 10.0% in 2017 (top panel).

  • More than 10-fold increase in the use of opioids and stimulants from 2002-2017, with about 1.7% and 1.4% reported using opiates and stimulants respectively in 2017 (bottom panel).

• The increasing trend in illicit drug use was significant across various socio-demographic characteristics such as age, sex, race, etc.

*Others: Includes cocaine, amphetamine, inhalants, sedatives, hallucinogens, opiates, other drugs; and cannabis with any other drugs
Results

Factors associated with any recent illicit drug use

- Recent illicit drug use was:
  - Negatively associated with being female, older chronological age, living in rural area, and higher education attainment.
  - Positively associated with being of mixed-ancestry race, and unemployment.
  - Prevalence of illicit drug use was very high in some groups
    - 21-33% (depending on race) among young male in urban areas.
Results

HIV outcomes among people who use drugs (PWUD) compared to non-PWUD

- Compared to non-PWUD, people who used drugs (PWUD) were:
  - More likely to have multiple sexual partners, high alcohol intake, earlier sexual debut, experienced psychosocial distress, and perceived high-risk of contracting HIV.
  - Less likely to have ever been tested for HIV.
Conclusions

- Recent illicit drug use has increased substantially in South Africa in the last 15 years; and is associated with numerous risk behaviors.

  - The prevalence of recent drug use in South Africa (10%, 2017) is now double the global average (5.4% in past year, 2018), higher than in Kenya (6% current use, 2016), but possibly lower than Nigeria (14% in the past year, 2018).

- Further research and understanding is required to mitigate the potential impact of illicit drug use in South Africa e.g.,
  
  - How illicit drug use may relate and progress to injecting drug use and the consequences for the HIV epidemic.
  
  - Interventions required to reduce high level of drug use and meet multiple problems faced by people who use drugs
    - Reducing unemployment, problematic alcohol-use, and high-risk sex targeted by age and sex.

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Thank you!

I acknowledge funding from the University of Bristol’s (i) PVC-Research and Enterprise Strategic Research Fund and (ii) QRGCRF Strategy funded by Research England.

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