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EDUCATIONAL STATUS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION AMONG YOUTHS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study examined educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. Education is a central part of human capital, since it equips young people with knowledge and reasoning skills, improves their chances of employment and exposes them to health information, including information about the dangers of drugs. Four objectives, four research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), supported by the Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), provided the theoretical framework. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The population comprised all youths aged 15 to 35 years in Cross River State (approximately 2,203,100). A sample of 400 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula, while 16 key informants were purposively selected for Key Informant Interviews. Data were collected using the Educational Status and Substance Abuse Prevention Questionnaire (ESASAPQ) and a Key Informant Interview guide. The instrument was subjected to face and content validity, and the educational status section had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.77. Out of 400 copies of the questionnaire administered, 380 were properly filled and returned. Data were analysed using simple percentages and Spearman's Rank Order Correlation at 0.05 level of significance with SPSS version 20. The findings showed that 72.4 per cent of the respondents agreed that youths with higher educational attainment are less likely to abuse drugs, while 58.7 per cent agreed that substance abuse is common among school dropouts in their communities. The study found a significant relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths ($r = 0.908$, $p < 0.05$). Qualitative data corroborated this finding, showing that education keeps youths occupied with positive goals, while those with little or no education are easily influenced by peers. The study concluded that educational status plays a critical role in shaping substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State. It was recommended, among others, that government should expand access to quality education and strengthen school retention programmes, including scholarships, second-chance education for school dropouts and school-based drug education and life-skills curricula.

Keywords: Educational Status, Substance Abuse, Substance Abuse Prevention, Youths, Human Capital, Cross River State

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Introduction

Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, abilities and health that people carry with them and which allow them to work, earn a living and take part in the life of their community. Spending on education, training and health is seen as an investment rather than a cost, because it yields returns over the working life of the person (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). Of all the parts of human capital, education is the one most closely tied to the future of young people. It equips them with knowledge and reasoning skills, improves their chances of employment and exposes them to health information, including information about the dangers of drugs. The World Bank (2020) gave the idea of human capital practical meaning through its Human Capital Index, in which Nigeria scored 0.36 in the 2020 update. This means that a child born in Nigeria today will be only about 36 per cent as productive as he or she could have been with complete education and full health. The World Bank also stressed that the human capital of a country depends not only on whether children go to school but also on whether they learn while in school. A young person who drops out of school or who becomes dependent on drugs therefore represents a loss of human capital to the family and to the state.

Substance abuse refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, that is, substances that change the way a person thinks, feels or behaves. The problem is large across the world. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] (2024) reported that 292 million people used drugs in 2022, a rise of 20 per cent in ten years. In Nigeria, the national drug use survey found that 14.4 per cent of people aged 15 to 64 years, about 14.3 million people, had used at least one drug in the year before the survey, which is far above the global average. The survey also showed that the South South zone, where Cross River State is located, recorded a past year prevalence of 16.6 per cent, second only to the South West (UNODC, 2019). A scoping review of Nigerian studies reported drug abuse prevalence rates of 20 to 40 per cent among students and about 21 per cent among youths (Jatau et al., 2021). Across sub-Saharan Africa, a systematic review and meta-analysis of 60 studies found that about one in five young people had used a psychoactive substance in their lifetime (Ebrahim et al., 2024). These figures show that substance use among young people is a regional problem that touches every part of their human capital, because it disrupts schooling and damages physical and mental health (Hjarnaa et al., 2023).

Education is a key component of human capital development that strongly influences youth behaviour. Higher levels of education and school engagement often protect against substance use, while poor academic performance, school dropout and limited access to quality education increase the risk of drug and alcohol abuse. The school provides a daily routine, adult supervision and a network of friends and teachers, and a Dutch study that followed young people over twelve years found that lower education in early adolescence predicted more drinking two years later (Schmengler et al., 2022). The relationship also runs in the other direction. In the United States, high school seniors who had used substances in the past year were 2.71 times more likely to skip school and 1.74 times more likely to have low grades than students who had never used them (Bugbee et al., 2019). In Denmark, higher alcohol intake was linked to lower grades in a dose-dependent way among 65,233 high school students (Hjarnaa et al., 2023). Low attachment to school can lead young people to drugs, and drug use can in turn damage school performance and lead to dropout.

In Cross River State, substance use among youths, particularly in urban areas such as Calabar, has become a growing problem. Local studies show that drug abuse is associated with absenteeism, poor academic performance and delinquency among secondary school and tertiary

students. In Calabar Municipality, drug abuse among senior secondary students was linked to higher absenteeism and more passive classroom engagement (Ibanga, 2025), and studies of youths in Calabar Metropolis have examined the prevalence and determinants of psychoactive substance use (Umoh & Thomas, 2024). As a coastal and border state with Cameroon, Cross River is a potential transit route for illicit drugs, which increases the availability of substances such as cannabis, tramadol, codeine-based syrups and amphetamines to the local youth population. The educational sector in the state still faces challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, frequent strikes and overcrowded classrooms. These disruptions lead to academic disengagement and push some youths towards negative peer groups where substance use is common. It is not new to see young adults on the streets of Calabar and its environs who have abused substances such as cannabis and Ice and have developed mental health problems. This study, therefore, examined educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

Human capital development plays a crucial role in shaping the productivity, behaviour and overall well-being of young people in society. In Cross River State, however, the growing rate of substance abuse among youths poses a serious threat to this development process. Substance abuse not only undermines the health and social stability of young people but also weakens their ability to contribute meaningfully to economic and social progress. Despite numerous government and community-based interventions, the problem continues to persist, which raises questions about the factors that influence this behaviour. The educational status of young people has been identified as a possible determinant of substance use, as low literacy levels and limited awareness often increase susceptibility to drug experimentation and addiction. Youths who drop out of school or never complete their education often feel frustrated and idle, and many of them spend their time in motor parks, markets and streets where drugs are easily available. In Awka South, Anambra State, 58.2 per cent of out-of-school adolescents were found to be abusing substances (Obi et al., 2024), a figure much higher than the rates usually reported among students in school.

Being in school, however, does not by itself protect a young person. In Ilorin West, Kwara State, current use of alcohol and opiates was higher among adolescents in school than among those out of school (Ogunkunle et al., 2024), and in Ekiti State, drug use was higher among final year students and students in private universities (Soremekun et al., 2021). The relationship between education and substance abuse is therefore not simple, and local evidence is needed to understand it. While existing studies in Nigeria have highlighted the prevalence and associated factors of substance use, few have examined educational status as a strategy for prevention, and none of the studies reviewed was carried out in Cross River State, even though the state lies in the South South zone where past year drug use is high (UNODC, 2019). Even studies that measured educational status, such as the community study carried out in Ilorin West, did so in relation to current drug use rather than prevention. The problem of this study, therefore, is to find out the relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to examine educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. describe the educational status of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria;

2. examine the views of youths on the link between educational status and substance abuse among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria;
3. ascertain the views of youths on substance abuse prevention and investment in the education of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria; and
4. determine the relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the educational status of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?
2. What are the views of youths on the link between educational status and substance abuse among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?
3. What are the views of youths on substance abuse prevention and investment in the education of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?
4. What is the relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?

Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H_{o1}: There is no significant relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Literature review

Concept of educational status

Educational status refers to the level of formal education that a person has attained and to whether he or she is currently in school. It has two sides. The first is educational attainment, which is the highest level of schooling completed, such as no formal education, primary, secondary or tertiary education. The second is enrolment status, which shows whether a young person is in school, has completed school or has dropped out. Education is a central part of human capital, since it equips young people with knowledge and reasoning skills, improves their chances of employment and exposes them to health information, including information about the dangers of drugs. The school also provides a daily routine, adult supervision and a network of friends and teachers. In this study, the term youths refers to young people aged 15 to 35 years. The National Youth Policy of Nigeria defines youths as persons aged 15 to 29 years (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019), but the wider range used in this study takes in the late teenage years when drug use usually begins and the early adult years when the effects of drug use on work and family life become clear.

Substance abuse prevention among youths

Substance abuse prevention refers to the planned actions taken to stop young people from starting to use drugs, to delay the age at which they start, to stop occasional use from becoming regular use and to reduce the harm that drug use causes. Prevention is not a single programme but a set of actions carried out in homes, schools, workplaces, health facilities and communities. It deals with the reasons why young people use drugs while strengthening the things that protect them. Risk factors are conditions that make it more likely that a young person will use drugs, while protective factors are conditions that make it less likely. A systematic review of studies on adolescents grouped these factors under individual, family, peer, school and community levels (Nawi et al., 2021). At the school level, poor attachment to school raises risk, while connection to the school protects. In the United States, students who felt close to people at their school

reported lower lifetime use of marijuana and lower misuse of prescription opioids than students who did not feel connected (Wilkins et al., 2023).

The school based approach to prevention uses the school as a place to reach many young people at once through drug education, life skills training, school policies on drugs and counselling services. Drug education refers to the teaching of facts about drugs, their effects and the ways of avoiding them, while life skills training teaches young people how to make decisions, solve problems, cope with stress, communicate well and resist pressure from friends. Long-term follow-up of students who took part in the Life Skills Training programme in junior high school in the United States showed lower rates of illicit drug use in young adulthood than among students who did not take part (Griffin et al., 2023). Reviews of school based prevention in low and middle income countries show that effective programmes combine several elements, including education, the school environment, counselling, parental involvement and peer engagement (Cadri et al., 2024). In Nigeria, the knowledge of students about drugs is still uneven. Among secondary school students in Nsukka, 80 per cent were aware of substance abuse, but only 52.5 per cent had good knowledge of it, and curiosity was the main reason for using substances (Adibe et al., 2022). Knowledge alone does not always change behaviour, but it is the starting point for informed choices.

Educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths

Many studies have found that higher educational attainment is linked to lower risk of harmful substance use, although the pattern is not the same for all substances or at all ages. Using genetic data from about 780,000 people, Rosoff et al. (2021) found evidence that more years of schooling lead to less binge drinking and fewer drinks per drinking day, and that about three and a half more years of schooling were linked to about half the risk of alcohol dependence. The same study found, however, that people with more education drank more often and drank more wine, which shows that education changes the pattern of drinking rather than removing it. The relationship also changes with age. Schmengler et al. (2022) followed 2,229 young people in the Netherlands from about age 14 to age 26 and found that lower education at about age 14 predicted more drinking at about age 16, but from about age 19 onwards higher education tended to predict more drinking. This means that young people in higher institutions may face their own risks, such as freedom from parental control and a social life built around drinking.

Whether a young person is in school or out of school also affects the risk of substance abuse. Out-of-school youths often lack the supervision, routine and health education that the school provides. In Italy, a study of 450 adolescents who had dropped out of school found that the use of psychotropic drugs was significantly linked to poorer emotional state, lifestyle habits and social well-being, and the authors recommended an educational model that builds on the strengths of young people (Lazzeri et al., 2022). In Gwagwalada, Abuja, the type of school attended was linked to the use of licit substances among 1,196 secondary school adolescents, together with family structure, religion and place of residence (Ekop et al., 2019). In Sokoto, a study that drew on both youths and key informants found that in-school and out-of-school youths used cigarettes, cannabis, alcohol, inhalants, tranquillisers, opiates and hallucinogens, and that social and peer pressure was a major reason for use (Sarkingobir & Dikko, 2020). These studies show that both in-school and out-of-school youths need prevention, but in different forms and through different channels.

Evidence from secondary schools in the South South zone shows why drug education needs to start early. In Obio-Akpor, Rivers State, 9.4 per cent of junior secondary students in a

public school had used a substance in their lifetime, mostly alcohol, and students in the second and third years were more likely to have used substances than those in the first year (Azi & Maduka, 2021). In Sapele, Delta State, 19.4 per cent of secondary school students abused substances, including tramadol and Rohypnol, and peer pressure was the most common influence that led them into drug use (Umukoro et al., 2021). In Edo State, 8.3 per cent of young persons met the criteria for substance abuse, cannabis was the drug most often named, and peer influence accounted for half of the reasons given for using illegal drugs (Uwaibi et al., 2022). These figures suggest that drug use rises as students grow older and spend more time with older peers, and that the junior secondary years are an important window for prevention.

Tertiary institutions deserve special attention. Students in universities, polytechnics and colleges of education are usually young adults who live away from their parents for the first time, with more freedom, more money of their own and more contact with peers from different backgrounds. In Ekiti State, use of alcohol (35.1 per cent), marijuana (15.7 per cent), heroin (15.3 per cent), tobacco (13.8 per cent) and cocaine (10.2 per cent) was reported among tertiary students, and use was higher in private universities and among final year students (Soremekun et al., 2021). At the University of Lagos, 20 per cent of undergraduates used alcohol and 16 per cent used marijuana or opioids such as tramadol and codeine, and peer pressure (73.7 per cent) was the leading influence on use. The authors recommended whistleblowing on drug use, drug-free student clubs and guidance and counselling services (Adesida et al., 2022). Among undergraduates in Ilorin, cigarettes, alcohol and tobacco were the most common substances, and the students identified low self-esteem, school dropout and social isolation among the consequences of substance abuse (Okesina, 2024). These studies show that attaining a higher level of education does not by itself protect young people, and that tertiary institutions need their own prevention programmes and counselling services.

Education contributes to substance abuse prevention in several further ways. It builds the life skills needed to refuse drugs, it raises the chances of employment and gives young people hope for the future, and it connects them to teachers and counsellors who can notice early signs of drug use and refer them for help. For education to protect youths, however, schools need trained staff, drug education, counselling services and a safe environment. The review shows that most Nigerian studies focused on the prevalence, patterns and causes of substance use among particular groups of students or out-of-school adolescents, and few examined educational status as a strategy for prevention among youths in the community. None of the studies reviewed was carried out in Cross River State. The present study sought to fill this gap.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Human Capital Theory, pioneered by Theodore Schultz and later expanded by Gary Becker. The theory views individuals as productive assets who can generate economic and social value through investment in their education, training and health. Schultz introduced the idea that improving the skills, knowledge and health of people is a form of capital formation, similar to investment in physical capital such as machinery or roads (Schultz, 1961). Becker later argued that individuals and societies invest in human capital because it raises productivity and future earnings, and that education, training and good health increase the capacity of a person to work well, while neglect of these areas leads to low productivity, unemployment and social problems (Becker, 1964, 1993). The theory rests on four main assumptions. The first is that individuals are rational investors in themselves. The second is that education and health improve productivity. The third is that investment in human capital benefits both the individual and society, and the fourth is that the neglect of human capital leads

to social and economic problems, since people whose education, skills and health are ignored become open to poverty, unemployment and deviant behaviour such as substance abuse.

From a human capital point of view, substance abuse represents a loss or depreciation of human capital. When young people engage in substance abuse, they reduce their cognitive ability, physical health and social functioning, all of which lower their productivity and long-term potential (Becker, 1993). Substance abuse is therefore both a symptom and a cause of human capital failure. It is a symptom because it often reflects a lack of educational, health and social investment, and it is a cause because it wears away the human capital that already exists by damaging learning ability, employability and social relationships. In the context of this study, educational status reflects investment in the schooling of youths themselves. The theory treats education as the main form of human capital investment. Education raises the opportunity cost of substance use, because the educated youth has more to lose in future earnings and status. It also increases the knowledge of youths about the long-term consequences of drug use and provides structured time that competes with substance-using peer networks. The theory therefore predicts that higher educational status will be associated with better substance abuse prevention, while low educational attainment and school dropout represent a failure of human capital investment.

The Human Capital Theory has been criticised for its strong focus on economic returns and for giving less attention to social influences such as peers, family bonds and daily routines. For this reason, it is supported in this study by the Social Control Theory of Travis Hirschi. Hirschi argued that people are kept from deviant behaviour by their bonds to society, so that when these bonds are strong a person conforms to social rules, and when they are weak or broken the person is free to engage in deviant behaviour, including drug use (Hirschi, 1969). He identified four elements of the social bond, namely attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Commitment refers to the time and effort a person has invested in conventional goals, such as education and a career, so that a young person who has invested in schooling has more to lose from drug use. Involvement refers to the time spent in conventional activities such as school, which leaves less time for deviant behaviour. Commitment and involvement are therefore directly linked to educational status. Together, the two theories show that education protects young people not only by building their knowledge and skills but also by strengthening their bonds to society.

Methodology

The cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for this study. The design allowed the researcher to gather numerical data as well as rich contextual insights on the incidence, distribution and interrelations of social and psychological factors. The area of study is Cross River State, Nigeria, a state in the South South geo-political zone with its capital in Calabar. The state borders Benue State to the north, Ebonyi and Abia States to the west and Akwa Ibom State to the southwest, while its eastern border forms part of the national border with Cameroon. It covers an area of 21,019 km² and has a population projection of 4,406,200 people. The population of the study comprised all youths aged 15 to 35 years, both male and female, in Cross River State. Based on the projected total population of 4,406,200, the youth population is approximately 2,203,100. The sample for the study was 400 respondents, determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, with $e = 0.05$, which gave a minimum sample size of 399.92, approximately 400.

The simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used. Simple random sampling by balloting was used to select two senatorial districts (Central and Southern) out of the three senatorial districts in the state. The same method was applied in the selection of

local government areas and political wards from the two senatorial districts, so as to give each unit an equal chance of selection. Purposive sampling was then used to select 100 respondents from each of the four selected political wards, making a total of 400 respondents. Purposive sampling was also used to select 16 key informants, made up of four youth leaders and four community leaders or stakeholders from each of the two selected senatorial districts. These informants were selected because they have had much experience attending to issues of crime and delinquency that have to do with substance abuse in the study area.

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire titled ducational Status and Substance Abuse Prevention Questionnaire (ESASAPQ), designed by the researcher with the help of two supervisors, and a Key Informant Interview guide. Section A of the questionnaire covered the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while the other sections measured the independent and dependent variables on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). Each variable was measured with five items. Face and content validity of the instrument was established by two experts in the Department of Social Work. A trial test was carried out on 40 respondents in Ebonyi State, which is not part of the study area but shares similar characteristics with it. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were 0.77 for educational status and 0.79 for substance abuse prevention, with an overall coefficient of 0.75. Out of 400 copies of the questionnaire administered, 380 were properly filled and returned, giving a return rate of 95 per cent. Data were analysed with SPSS version 20. Simple percentages were used to answer the research questions, and Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The qualitative data were presented in the words of the informants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained by leaving names off the questionnaire.

Results

Research question one: What is the educational status of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 380)

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Age	15 to 20 years	110	28.9
		21 to 25 years	128	33.7
		26 to 30 years	77	20.3
		31 to 35 years	65	17.1
2	Gender	Male	227	59.7
		Female	153	40.3
3	Educational level	Secondary school	160	42.1
		Diploma/ND/NCE	176	46.3
		B.Sc.	36	9.5
		Postgraduate	8	2.1
4	Marital status	Single	122	32.1
		Married	254	66.8
		Widowed	4	1.1

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
5	Monthly income	Below ₦50,000	266	70.0
		₦51,000 to ₦100,000	67	17.6
		₦101,000 and above	47	12.4

Source: Fieldwork, 2026. Each variable totals 380 (100 per cent).

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Item 3, which is the focus of this research question, shows that out of the 380 respondents, 160 (42.1 per cent) had secondary school education, 176 (46.3 per cent) had a Diploma, ND or NCE, 36 (9.5 per cent) had a B.Sc. degree and 8 (2.1 per cent) had postgraduate degrees. This means that most of the youths in the sample (88.4 per cent) had secondary school education or a Diploma, ND or NCE, while only 11.6 per cent had a university degree or higher. On age, 110 (28.9 per cent) of the respondents were aged 15 to 20 years, 128 (33.7 per cent) were aged 21 to 25 years, 77 (20.3 per cent) were aged 26 to 30 years and 65 (17.1 per cent) were aged 31 to 35 years. A total of 227 (59.7 per cent) were male and 153 (40.3 per cent) were female. On marital status, 122 (32.1 per cent) were single, 254 (66.8 per cent) were married and 4 (1.1 per cent) were widowed. On income, 266 (70.0 per cent) of the respondents earned below ₦50,000 per month, 67 (17.6 per cent) earned ₦51,000 to ₦100,000 and 47 (12.4 per cent) earned ₦101,000 and above. The low level of tertiary education and the low monthly income of most respondents point to limited investment in the human capital of youths in the study area.

Research question two: What are the views of youths on the link between educational status and substance abuse among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Responses on Educational Status and Substance Abuse among Youths (N = 380)

S/N	Statement	SA f (%)	A f (%)	D f (%)	SD f (%)	Total	SA+A (%)
1	Lack of education increases the risk of substance abuse among youths.	49 (12.9)	162 (42.6)	39 (10.3)	130 (34.2)	380	55.5
2	Youths with higher educational attainment are less likely to abuse drugs.	85 (22.4)	190 (50.0)	81 (21.3)	24 (6.3)	380	72.4
3	Substance abuse is common among school dropouts in my community.	57 (15.0)	166 (43.7)	67 (17.6)	90 (23.7)	380	58.7
4	Youths with lower educational attainment are most likely to abuse drugs.	115 (30.3)	92 (24.2)	96 (25.3)	77 (20.3)	380	54.5
5	Illiterate people easily abuse drugs due to lack of knowledge.	77 (20.3)	96 (25.3)	114 (30.0)	93 (24.5)	380	45.5

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; f = frequency.
Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Table 2 shows the responses of youths on educational status and substance abuse. Item 1 shows that 49 (12.9 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that lack of education increases the risk of substance abuse among youths, 162 (42.6 per cent) agreed, 39 (10.3 per cent)

disagreed and 130 (34.2 per cent) strongly disagreed. In all, 55.5 per cent agreed with the statement. Item 2 shows that 85 (22.4 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that youths with higher educational attainment are less likely to abuse drugs, 190 (50.0 per cent) agreed, 81 (21.3 per cent) disagreed and 24 (6.3 per cent) strongly disagreed. This item recorded the highest level of agreement in the table (72.4 per cent). Item 3 shows that 57 (15.0 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that substance abuse is common among school dropouts in their communities, 166 (43.7 per cent) agreed, 67 (17.6 per cent) disagreed and 90 (23.7 per cent) strongly disagreed, giving a total agreement of 58.7 per cent.

Item 4 shows that 115 (30.3 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that youths with lower educational attainment are most likely to abuse drugs, 92 (24.2 per cent) agreed, 96 (25.3 per cent) disagreed and 77 (20.3 per cent) strongly disagreed, giving a total agreement of 54.5 per cent. Item 5 shows that 77 (20.3 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that illiterate people easily abuse drugs due to lack of knowledge, 96 (25.3 per cent) agreed, 114 (30.0 per cent) disagreed and 93 (24.5 per cent) strongly disagreed. This was the only item on which the majority (54.5 per cent) disagreed. On the whole, the table shows that most youths saw higher educational attainment as protective and saw school dropouts and youths with lower education as more likely to abuse drugs. However, a sizeable share of the respondents did not agree that illiteracy alone leads to drug abuse, which suggests that they also see other factors, such as peer influence and idleness, at work.

Research question three: What are the views of youths on substance abuse prevention and investment in the education of youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?

Table 3: Responses on Substance Abuse Prevention and Investment in Education (N = 380)

S/N	Statement	SA f (%)	A f (%)	D f (%)	SD f (%)	Total	SA+A (%)
1	Substance abuse is common among youths in my community.	194 (51.1)	61 (16.1)	41 (10.8)	84 (22.1)	380	67.1
2	Substance abuse can be prevented among youths in my community.	169 (44.5)	52 (13.7)	49 (12.9)	110 (28.9)	380	58.2
3	Investment in the education of the youths can contribute to the prevention of substance abuse among youths.	116 (30.5)	76 (20.0)	177 (46.6)	11 (2.9)	380	50.5

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; f = frequency.
Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Table 3 shows the responses of youths on substance abuse prevention and investment in education. Item 1 shows that 194 (51.1 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that substance abuse is common among youths in their communities, 61 (16.1 per cent) agreed, 41 (10.8 per cent) disagreed and 84 (22.1 per cent) strongly disagreed. This means that about two out of every three respondents (67.1 per cent) saw substance abuse as common in their communities. Item 2 shows that 169 (44.5 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that substance abuse can be prevented among youths in their communities, 52 (13.7 per cent) agreed, 49 (12.9 per cent) disagreed and 110 (28.9 per cent) strongly disagreed, giving a total agreement of 58.2 per cent. Item 3 shows that 116 (30.5 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that investment in the education of youths can contribute to the prevention of substance abuse among

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youths, 76 (20.0 per cent) agreed, 177 (46.6 per cent) disagreed and 11 (2.9 per cent) strongly disagreed. The respondents were almost evenly divided on this item, with 50.5 per cent in agreement and 49.5 per cent in disagreement. The table shows that the youths see substance abuse as a common and preventable problem, but many of them are not yet convinced that investment in education alone will prevent it.

Research question four: What is the relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria?

This research question was answered with the test of the null hypothesis and with data from the Key Informant Interviews. The hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was used to test it. The decision rule was that if the calculated r-value is greater than or equal to the critical r-value at 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 4: Spearman's Rank Order Correlation of the Relationship between Educational Status and Substance Abuse Prevention among Youths

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	r-value	Critical r	p	Decision
Educational status	380	2.0289	0.99163	378	0.908**	0.101	< .05	H_0 rejected
Substance abuse prevention among youths	380	1.8868	1.05537					

** Significant at p < .05 (two-tailed). Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Table 4 shows that the calculated r-value of 0.908 is greater than the critical r-value of 0.101 at 0.05 level of significance with 378 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis, which states that there is a significant relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, is accepted. The relationship is positive and very strong, which means that higher educational status goes together with better prevention of substance abuse among youths.

The Key Informant Interviews supported this result. A community stakeholder said:

> "I see a strong connection between educational status and substance abuse among youths. Education helps young people understand the dangers of drugs and alcohol and also keeps them occupied with positive goals. Youths who are in school or have higher education are usually more focused on their future. Those with little or no education often lack this direction and may be easily influenced by peers to abuse substances. This is why educational development projects are important for keeping youths engaged and informed." (Community Stakeholder)

A community leader added:

> "In my view, educational status plays a major role in whether youths get involved in substance abuse or not. Youths who are educated tend to make better decisions because they are exposed to information and guidance that shape their behaviour. On the other hand, youths who drop out of school or never complete their education often feel frustrated and idle, which increases their chances of turning to drugs or alcohol." (Community Leader)

A youth counsellor and social worker also observed:

> "From my experience working with young people, those with lower levels of education are more vulnerable to substance abuse. Many of them lack awareness of the long-term effects of drug use and have limited opportunities for employment or self-development. Educated youths are more likely to have hope for the future and better coping skills." (Youth Counsellor/Social Worker)

The informants agreed that education gives youths information, direction and hope for the future, while school dropout and low education leave them idle, frustrated and open to peer influence. Their views explain the strong positive relationship shown in Table 4.

Discussion of findings

The first finding of this study is that most youths in the sample had secondary school education or a Diploma, ND or NCE, and only 11.6 per cent had a university degree or higher. Most of them also earned below ₦50,000 per month. This profile reflects the low level of human capital in Nigeria described by the World Bank (2020), which found that a child born in Nigeria will be only about 36 per cent as productive as he or she could have been with complete education and full health. It also agrees with the observation that the educational sector in Cross River State faces inadequate infrastructure, frequent strikes and overcrowded classrooms. From the point of view of the Human Capital Theory, limited investment in education leaves youths with fewer skills, lower earnings and less to lose from drug use (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961).

The second finding is that most youths agreed that youths with higher educational attainment are less likely to abuse drugs (72.4 per cent), that substance abuse is common among school dropouts (58.7 per cent) and that lack of education increases the risk of substance abuse (55.5 per cent). This finding is consistent with Obi et al. (2024), who found that 58.2 per cent of out-of-school adolescents in Awka South were abusing substances, and with Lazzeri et al. (2022), who found that drug use was linked to poorer emotional state and social well-being among school dropouts in Italy. It is also consistent with Schmengler et al. (2022), who found that lower education in early adolescence predicted more drinking later, and with Rosoff et al. (2021), who found that more years of schooling were linked to a lower risk of alcohol dependence. The finding that a majority disagreed that illiterate people easily abuse drugs due to lack of knowledge, however, suggests that the youths do not see knowledge alone as the answer. This agrees with Adibe et al. (2022), who found that many students in Nsukka who were aware of substance abuse still used substances, mainly out of curiosity, and with Sarkingobir and Dikko (2020), who found that both in-school and out-of-school youths in Sokoto used a wide range of substances because of social and peer pressure.

The third finding is that most youths saw substance abuse as common in their communities (67.1 per cent) and as preventable (58.2 per cent), but they were almost evenly divided on whether investment in education alone can prevent it (50.5 per cent agreed). The high level of perceived substance abuse is in line with the national survey, which placed the South South zone second only to the South West in past year drug use (UNODC, 2019), and with local evidence of drug abuse among secondary school students in Calabar Municipality (Ibanga, 2025). The divided view on investment in education is consistent with studies showing that being in school does not by itself protect young people. Ogunkunle et al. (2024) found that current use of alcohol and opiates was higher among in-school adolescents in Ilorin West, and Soremekun et al. (2021) found higher drug use among final year students in Ekiti State. These studies suggest that the gains of education depend on the quality of the school experience, including drug

education, counselling and school connectedness, and not on enrolment alone (Cadri et al., 2024; Wilkins et al., 2023).

The fourth finding is that there is a significant, strong and positive relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State ($r = 0.908$, $p < 0.05$). This finding is consistent with Nawi et al. (2021), whose systematic review identified school factors among the risk and protective factors for drug abuse among adolescents. It is also consistent with Bugbee et al. (2019), who found that past year substance users had 2.71 greater odds of skipping school and 1.74 greater odds of having low grades than lifetime non-users, and with Hjarnaa et al. (2023), who found that higher alcohol intake was linked to lower grades among Danish high school students. It further agrees with Griffin et al. (2023), who showed that school based life skills training reduced illicit drug use into young adulthood. The present finding is, however, not in line with the more nuanced results of Schmengler et al. (2022), who found that from about age 19 onwards higher education tended to predict more drinking, and of Rosoff et al. (2021), who found that people with more education drank more often. These differences suggest that the protective effect of education is not the same across all ages and all substances, and that in the present Cross River State sample the protective association is the stronger one.

The Human Capital Theory explains this finding directly. Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) treat education as the main human capital investment. It builds cognitive and technical skills, raises future earnings and builds the knowledge, life skills and future orientation that reduce the tendency to engage in risky behaviour. The finding that higher educational status is associated with greater substance abuse prevention is therefore what the theory predicts. Education raises the opportunity cost of substance use, increases the information that youths have about the long-term consequences of drug use and provides the structured time and school connection that compete with substance-using peer networks. On the other hand, low educational attainment and school dropout represent a failure of human capital investment, and the theory predicts that this failure will show as idleness, frustration, limited employability and greater vulnerability to substance use, which is exactly the pattern reported by the informants. The Social Control Theory adds that youths who have invested time and effort in schooling have a commitment to conventional goals that keeps them away from drugs (Hirschi, 1969). The finding therefore supports the view that educational investment is a substance abuse prevention strategy and not merely an economic policy.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that educational status plays a critical role in shaping substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. The study established a strong and statistically significant relationship between educational status and substance abuse prevention among youths. Education provides awareness, structure, future orientation and life skills that reduce susceptibility to substance abuse. Youths with lower levels of education or those who drop out of school are more likely to experience frustration, idleness and peer pressure, which may increase their likelihood of engaging in substance use. However, the youths did not see knowledge or enrolment alone as enough, which shows that the quality of education, including drug education, counselling and a supportive school environment, matters as much as access to schooling. The study concludes that substance abuse prevention among youths in Cross River State is not merely an individual behavioural problem but a systemic issue linked to educational access and the human capital development of the state.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government, through the Ministry of Education and relevant agencies, should expand access to quality education and strengthen school retention programmes, including scholarships and bursaries for youths from poor homes, so that fewer youths drop out of school.
2. Second-chance education and skill acquisition programmes should be provided for school dropouts and out-of-school youths in Cross River State, so that those who have left school are not left idle and exposed to drugs.
3. School-based drug education and life-skills curricula should be introduced and strengthened in secondary schools and tertiary institutions, starting from the junior secondary years, and should cover misused medicines such as tramadol and codeine as well as alcohol and illegal drugs.
4. Tertiary institutions in the state should provide guidance and counselling services, drug-free student clubs and orientation on substance abuse at the start of each academic session, especially for new and final year students.
5. Government should address the infrastructure problems, frequent strikes and overcrowded classrooms in the educational sector of the state, since disruptions to schooling lead to academic disengagement and push some youths towards negative peer groups where substance use is common.

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