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### Substance Abuse and Civic Disengagement: Examining the Influence of Drug Use on Youth Participation in Community and Political Life in Taraba State, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup> Atabor Michael Harry, <sup>2</sup> Justina Ingiaga Denen Reamen

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Adult and Continuing Education, Faculty of Education, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: Atabor Michael Harry

#### Abstract

**Background:** Substance abuse among youth in Nigeria has reached epidemic proportions, yet its consequences for civic and community engagement remain critically understudied. Civic participation—encompassing involvement in community events, social causes, political discourse, and collective action—is fundamental to democratic governance and social cohesion.

**Objective:** This study examined the influence of substance abuse on civic participation among youth aged 15-35 years in Taraba State, Nigeria.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey recruited 353 youth (62.3% male, 37.7% female) across all sixteen Local Government Areas using stratified random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires measuring substance abuse patterns and four dimensions of civic participation: community event participation, involvement in social causes, political discussion engagement, and sense of community connectedness. Simple linear regression and

descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27.

**Results:** Substance abuse demonstrated a significant negative influence on civic participation ( $\beta = -.256$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 6.5% of the variance ( $R^2 = .065$ ,  $F(1,351) = 24.522$ ). Critically, 81.9% of respondents reported reduced political discussion engagement due to substance use, 77.6% reported decreased community activity participation, and 82.5% reported feeling disconnected from community activities. Over 60% reported no active participation in community events.

**Conclusion:** Substance abuse fundamentally severs youths' connection to civic and community life, fostering political alienation and social withdrawal. This erosion of the civic fabric threatens both individual psychosocial wellbeing and the foundations of democratic governance in Taraba State. Targeted interventions must address civic reintegration alongside substance abuse treatment.

**Keywords:** Substance Abuse, Civic Participation, Political Engagement, Community Involvement, Youth, Taraba State, Nigeria

#### 1. Introduction

Civic participation—the active engagement of individuals in community and political life—is fundamental to healthy democratic governance and social cohesion. It encompasses a wide range of actions including voting, volunteering, community meeting attendance, involvement in social causes, and participation in political discourse (Putnam, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup>. For youth, civic engagement provides critical opportunities for identity development, social connection, and the cultivation of democratic values and skills (Vasilenko *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[19]</sup>.

However, civic participation is not equally distributed across populations. Marginalized groups—including those struggling with substance abuse—often experience significant barriers to engagement, with consequences that extend beyond individual wellbeing to threaten the representativeness and legitimacy of democratic institutions (Matos *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. Understanding the relationship between substance abuse and civic participation is therefore essential for both public health and democratic governance.

In Nigeria, substance abuse among youth has reached alarming levels. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (UNODC, 2018) <sup>[18]</sup> revealed that 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15-64 had used psychoactive substances within a year, with youth constituting the largest proportion of users. In Taraba State, located in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone, anecdotal and

emerging data suggest increasing use of codeine, tramadol, cannabis, and methamphetamine ("ice") among youth in both urban and rural areas (Abanyan & Garba, 2022; Isa, Amon, & Madaki, 2023) <sup>[1, 8]</sup>.

Despite growing recognition of the substance abuse crisis, research has focused predominantly on health outcomes, academic consequences, and criminal behavior. The impact on civic participation—how substance use affects youths' connection to community, involvement in social causes, and engagement with political processes—remains critically understudied, particularly in Northern Nigeria.

Theoretical frameworks suggest multiple pathways through which substance abuse may impair civic participation. First, substance abuse consumes the resources essential for civic engagement: time, financial means, and cognitive focus (Katagiri & Kamiya, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>. Second, the lifestyle associated with chronic substance use often leads to social stigma and marginalization, fostering withdrawal from mainstream social activities (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2025) <sup>[7]</sup>. Third, as conventional avenues for belonging are closed, substance-abusing youth may find identity and purpose within alternative, anti-social networks such as cults or criminal gangs (Egwu, Okorie, Uchechukwu, & Etan, 2024) <sup>[5]</sup>. Fourth, the emotional dysregulation and cognitive impairment associated with substance use may directly reduce capacity for sustained engagement in collective activities (Mayanchi, Haruna, & Ekpiwre, 2020) <sup>[12]</sup>.

This study addresses the gap in literature by investigating the influence of substance abuse on civic participation among youth in Taraba State, Nigeria. Specifically, we examine four dimensions of civic engagement: participation in community events, involvement in social causes, engagement in political discussions, and sense of community connectedness. We hypothesize that substance abuse significantly negatively predicts civic participation across these dimensions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptual Framework

#### 2.1.1 Substance Abuse

Substance abuse refers to the maladaptive pattern of use of alcohol, drugs, or other psychoactive substances that leads to significant impairment or distress. According to the World Health Organization (2016), substance abuse involves the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances for non-medical purposes. Among youths, this behavior often begins during adolescence and can escalate into dependency, with consequences for physical, psychological, and social wellbeing.

In Nigeria, including Taraba State, substance abuse has become a major public health and social concern. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) <sup>[18]</sup> reported that approximately 14.4% of Nigerians between ages 15 and 64 had used drugs, with the majority being under 35 years old. In Northern Nigeria, factors such as unemployment, family disintegration, insurgency, and easy access to drugs contribute significantly to high levels of abuse among youths (Abanyan & Garba, 2022) <sup>[1]</sup>.

From a neurobiological standpoint, substance abuse is conceptualized as a chronic, relapsing disorder of the brain's reward, motivation, and memory systems. Repeated exposure to psychoactive substances disrupts the normal functioning of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, altering the brain's reward circuitry and reinforcing compulsive

patterns of use (Alsubaie, 2023). This neuroadaptation has implications not only for addiction severity but also for social functioning and civic engagement.

#### 2.1.2 Types of Substances Abused by Nigerian Youth

In Taraba State, the most commonly abused substances include:

**Alcohol and Local Brews:** Including burukutu and ogogoro, widely consumed in both urban and rural areas (Abanyan & Garba, 2022) <sup>[1]</sup>.

**Cannabis:** The most prevalent illicit substance, often associated with social gatherings and peer influence (Jatau *et al.*, 2021).

**Opioids:** Tramadol and codeine-based cough syrups are widely misused, particularly among commercial motorcyclists and artisans (Isa *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[8]</sup>.

**Methamphetamine (Ice):** Emerging as a major concern in Jalingo Metropolis, associated with severe social and psychological consequences (Isa *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 2.1.3 Civic Participation

Civic participation refers to the active engagement of individuals in their communities and societies, particularly through political, social, or community-oriented activities. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including voting, volunteering, attending community meetings, participating in social movements, and engaging in political discourse (Putnam, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup>.

##### Dimensions of Civic Participation:

**Community Engagement:** Active involvement in local community activities, events, and organizations. This dimension reflects the individual's connection to their immediate social environment and contributes to social cohesion and collective efficacy (Matos *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>.

**Social Cause Involvement:** Participation in activities aimed at addressing social issues, advocating for change, or supporting marginalized groups. This dimension reflects broader social consciousness and commitment to social justice (Vasilenko *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[19]</sup>.

**Political Engagement:** Involvement in political processes including voting, political discussions, attending rallies, or engaging with political institutions. This dimension is fundamental to democratic citizenship and representation (Putnam, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup>.

**Sense of Community Connectedness:** The subjective feeling of belonging, identification with community, and perceived integration into social networks. This psychological dimension underpins behavioral engagement (Katagiri & Kamiya, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Civic participation is a fundamental element of a healthy democracy, facilitating expression of public opinion, development of collective social responsibility, and promotion of shared community values. For youths, civic participation provides a means to engage with issues affecting their lives, enhancing sense of responsibility, fostering social bonds, and promoting social justice (Vasilenko *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[19]</sup>.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.2.1 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) <sup>[2]</sup> provides a framework for understanding how civic participation—or its absence—is learned through observation and modeling. Just as substance use behaviors can be acquired through observation of peers and family, civic engagement can be learned through exposure to models who participate in

community and political life. Conversely, when youth observe that significant others are disengaged from civic life, they may learn that such participation is unimportant or irrelevant.

The theory's emphasis on reinforcement is also relevant. Civic participation may be reinforced through social approval, sense of efficacy, or tangible community improvements. However, for substance-using youth, the immediate reinforcement provided by drugs may outweigh the often-delayed rewards of civic engagement, leading to progressive disengagement from civic life (Zhu *et al.*, 2020).

### 2.2.2 Problem Behavior Theory

Problem Behavior Theory (Jessor, 1991) <sup>[9]</sup> conceptualizes substance abuse and civic disengagement as potentially interrelated components of a broader syndrome of problem behaviors. The theory emphasizes that problem behaviors arise from the interplay of individual characteristics (personality, values), perceived environment (peer norms, social controls), and behavior system (engagement in conventional vs. problem behaviors).

In this framework, civic disengagement may be both a precursor to and consequence of substance abuse. Youth who are disconnected from conventional social institutions (schools, community organizations) may be more vulnerable to substance use, while substance use further alienates youth from these institutions, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of marginalization (Egwu *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### 2.2.3 Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup> provides additional theoretical grounding for understanding the relationship between substance abuse and civic participation. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Civic participation both builds and reflects social capital.

Substance abuse erodes social capital through multiple mechanisms: it consumes time that might otherwise be invested in social networks, it carries stigma that marginalizes users from mainstream social institutions, and it may redirect social energy toward deviant networks (cults, criminal gangs) that undermine rather than build community social capital (Mayanchi *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[12]</sup>.

### 2.2.4 Social Withdrawal Theory

Katagiri and Kamiya (2023) <sup>[10]</sup> propose that substance abuse can lead to a pattern of social withdrawal resembling hikikomori (extreme social isolation). The pharmacological effects of substances may reduce motivation for social interaction, while the lifestyle associated with substance use often involves withdrawal from non-using peers and activities. Over time, this withdrawal becomes self-reinforcing as social skills atrophy and anxiety about social interaction increases.

## 2.3 Empirical Review: Substance Abuse and Civic Participation

Ibrahim and Sambo (2025) <sup>[7]</sup> explored the political attitudes and behaviors of 40 out-of-school youths in "drug hotspots" in Kano, Nigeria. Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach with focus group discussions, the findings revealed a profound sense of political alienation and social detachment. Participants expressed zero trust in political institutions and had no involvement in any formal civic or community processes, viewing such activities as "pointless." The study concluded that the drug-using subculture fosters a complete withdrawal from civic life, replacing it with an

alternative, often criminal, social structure.

Egwu, Okorie, Uchechukwu, and Etan (2024) <sup>[5]</sup> evaluated the relationship between drug abuse and unemployment in Abakaliki Metropolis, Nigeria, using a cross-sectional survey of 400 respondents. The findings revealed that substance abuse was linked to "involvement in antisocial groups like cultism." This finding is a powerful proxy for negative civic participation, demonstrating that substance-abusing youths may not just withdraw from positive civic life but may actively engage in parallel, anti-social structures.

Katagiri and Kamiya (2023) <sup>[10]</sup> investigated the relationship between social withdrawal (hikikomori) and substance use among 1,800 Japanese youths using a large-scale cross-sectional survey. Findings showed a significant positive correlation: youths reporting higher social withdrawal and disengagement from community and school activities also reported higher rates of illicit and prescription drug use. The study concluded that substance use is deeply intertwined with social detachment and apathy.

### 2.3.1 Summary of Empirical Evidence

The limited but growing body of empirical research suggests that substance abuse is associated with profound civic disengagement across diverse contexts. Nigerian studies document political alienation (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2025) <sup>[7]</sup>, involvement in anti-social groups (Egwu *et al.*, 2024; Mayanchi *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[5, 12]</sup>, and breakdown of social order (Abanyan & Garba, 2022) <sup>[1]</sup>. International research confirms associations with social withdrawal (Katagiri & Kamiya, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup> and long-term reductions in civic participation (Vasilenko *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[19]</sup>.

## 2.4 Identified Gaps

The literature review reveals several critical gaps:

1. **Contextual Gap:** While some Nigerian studies exist, there is no comprehensive research on substance abuse and civic participation specifically in Taraba State, despite evidence of a growing drug crisis in the region.
2. **Measurement Gap:** Most studies examine negative civic participation (crime, thuggery) rather than measuring withdrawal from positive civic engagement across multiple dimensions (community events, social causes, political discourse, community connectedness).
3. **Population Gap:** Existing research often focuses on specific populations (students, clinical samples) rather than the general youth population including both in-school and out-of-school youth.
4. **Theoretical Integration:** Few studies have systematically applied social learning theory, problem behavior theory, or social capital theory to understand the mechanisms linking substance abuse to civic disengagement.
5. **Quantitative Evidence:** The Nigerian literature is dominated by qualitative studies (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2025 <sup>[7]</sup>; Bot, 2024) that provide rich description but limited generalizability. There is a need for quantitative research establishing the strength of association between substance abuse and civic participation.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Study Design and Setting

This cross-sectional survey was conducted between April and June 2025 across all sixteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Taraba State, Nigeria. The cross-sectional design

was appropriate for examining relationships between variables at a single point in time and for capturing current patterns of civic engagement among youth populations.

Taraba State, located in Nigeria's North-East zone, presents a critical context for this research. The state faces significant developmental challenges including youth unemployment, insecurity, and limited mental health services—factors that heighten vulnerability to both substance abuse and civic disengagement. The state includes diverse urban (Jalingo, Wukari, Bali) and rural communities, providing a comprehensive setting for examining civic participation patterns.

### 3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The target population comprised youth aged 15-35 years resident in Taraba State, consistent with the National Youth Policy (2019) [14] definition. Due to the non-finite population, sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977) [4] formula for unknown populations:  $n = Z^2 p(1-p)/e^2$ , with  $Z = 1.96$  (95% confidence),  $p = 0.5$  (maximum variability), and  $e = 0.05$  (margin of error), yielding a minimum sample of 384.

Stratified random sampling was employed, with each LGA as a stratum. Proportional allocation based on estimated LGA populations determined recruitment numbers. Within each LGA, simple random sampling selected youth from diverse settings (communities, markets, vocational centers, schools) to ensure representation across employment and educational statuses.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire comprised three sections:

*Section A: Demographic Information* – gender, age, educational qualification, employment status, duration of substance use.

*Section B: Civic Participation* – measured using a 4-item scale adapted from the Civic Engagement Scale (Park & Hong, 2025) [15] and previous Nigerian studies (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2025) [7], assessing: community event participation despite substance use, hindrance in social causes, political discussion engagement, decreased community participation, and sense of community disconnection. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). Items were reverse-coded as appropriate to ensure higher scores indicated higher civic participation.

*Section C: Substance Abuse Patterns* – measured using a 4-item scale adapted from the Youth Substance Use Prevention Screening Tool (Metz *et al.*, 2025) [13], assessing: regular use, polysubstance experience, difficulty controlling use, use as coping mechanism, and cravings. Items were rated on the same 4-point Likert scale.

### 3.4 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in psychology, political science, and measurement. Construct validity was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis. Face validity was assessed through review by youth leaders and community development officers in Taraba State.

Reliability was established through pilot testing with 30 youth from non-participating communities. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were: Civic Participation ( $\alpha = 0.801$ ) and Substance Abuse ( $\alpha = 0.812$ ), exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Taber, 2018) [17].

### 3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Trained research assistants administered questionnaires through face-to-face interviews, ensuring comprehension. Participation was voluntary with informed consent obtained from all participants or guardians for minors. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized demographic characteristics and item responses. Simple linear regression analysis tested the hypothesis that substance abuse predicts civic participation. The regression model was: Civic Participation =  $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Substance Abuse}) + \epsilon$ . Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from [institutional review board]. The study adhered to the Helsinki Declaration guidelines. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without consequence.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Sample Characteristics

Of 384 questionnaires administered, 369 were returned (96.1% response rate). After data cleaning, 353 valid questionnaires (93.2%) were analyzed. The sample was predominantly male (62.3%). Students constituted the largest employment group (47.0%), followed by employed (27.8%) and unemployed (25.2%). Critically, 86.7% reported substance use for up to three years, with 50.7% in the 1-3 years category.

### 4.2 Substance Abuse Patterns

**Table 1:** Substance Abuse Characteristics (N=353)

| Statement                                                                                              | SA<br>(Strongly Agree) | A<br>(Agree)   | D<br>(Disagree) | SD<br>(Strongly Disagree) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| I regularly use substances such as alcohol, cannabis, or prescription drugs                            | 105<br>(29.7%)         | 182<br>(51.6%) | 36<br>(10.2%)   | 30 (8.5%)                 |
| I have tried different types of substances (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, opioids) at some point in my life | 123<br>(34.8%)         | 174<br>(49.3%) | 28 (7.9%)       | 28 (7.9%)                 |
| I find it difficult to reduce or control my substance use even if I want to                            | 119<br>(33.7%)         | 168<br>(47.6%) | 37<br>(10.5%)   | 29 (8.2%)                 |
| Substance use helps me cope with stress or emotional pain                                              | 112<br>(31.7%)         | 175<br>(49.6%) | 34 (9.6%)       | 32 (9.1%)                 |
| I experience cravings or strong urges to use substances                                                | 115<br>(32.6%)         | 166<br>(47.0%) | 34 (9.6%)       | 38 (10.8%)                |

Source: Field Survey, 2026

High prevalence of regular use (81.3%) and polysubstance experience (84.1%) was observed. Notably, 81.3% reported difficulty controlling use, suggesting dependency features. The functional role of substances as coping mechanisms was endorsed by 81.3%, and 79.6% experienced cravings.



### 4.3 Civic Participation Outcomes

**Table 3:** Civic Participation Indicators (N=353)

| Statement                                                                         | SA<br>(Strongly<br>Agree) | A<br>(Agree) | D<br>(Disagree) | SD<br>(Strongly<br>Disagree) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| I actively participate in community events despite substance use                  | 0 (0.0%)                  | 140 (39.7%)  | 107 (30.3%)     | 106 (30.0%)                  |
| Substance abuse has hindered my involvement in social causes                      | 39 (11.0%)                | 35 (9.9%)    | 153 (43.3%)     | 126 (35.7%)                  |
| I engage less in political discussions due to substance use                       | 131 (37.1%)               | 158 (44.8%)  | 33 (9.3%)       | 31 (8.8%)                    |
| My participation in community activities has decreased because of substance abuse | 111 (31.4%)               | 163 (46.2%)  | 48 (13.6%)      | 31 (8.8%)                    |
| I feel disconnected from community activities due to substance abuse              | 145 (41.1%)               | 146 (41.4%)  | 38 (10.8%)      | 24 (6.8%)                    |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data revealed profound civic disengagement. Over 60% (30.0% Strongly Disagree + 30.3% Disagree) reported no active participation in community events. While 79.0% disagreed that substance abuse had hindered involvement in social causes, the phrasing suggests these respondents were likely not engaged in social causes to begin with—indicating baseline disengagement rather than protection from substance-related hindrance.

Political disengagement was particularly pronounced, with 81.9% reporting reduced political discussion engagement due to substance use. Decreased community activity participation was reported by 77.6%, and 82.5% reported feeling disconnected from community activities due to substance abuse.

### 4.4 Regression Analysis

**Table 4:** Simple Linear Regression Results for Substance Abuse Predicting Civic Participation

| Variable        | B      | SE    | $\beta$ | T      | p      | 95% CI           |
|-----------------|--------|-------|---------|--------|--------|------------------|
| Constant        | 1.664  | 0.473 |         | -3.517 | <0.001 | (0.735, 2.593)   |
| Substance Abuse | -0.268 | 0.054 | -0.256  | -4.952 | <0.001 | (-0.374, -0.162) |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Model Summary:  $R = 0.256$ ,  $R^2 = 0.065$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.063$ ,  $F(1,351) = 24.522$ ,  $p < 0.001$

The regression model was statistically significant ( $F(1,351) = 24.522$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with substance abuse explaining 6.5% of the variance in civic participation. The negative standardized coefficient ( $\beta = -0.256$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicates that higher levels of substance abuse are associated with significantly lower civic participation.

### 4.5 Comparative Analysis Across Demographic Groups

**Table 5:** Mean Civic Participation Scores by Demographic Characteristics

| Characteristic  | Category   | Mean (SD)   | t/F        | p     |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------|
| Gender          | Male       | 2.38 (0.97) | $t = 1.89$ | 0.059 |
|                 | Female     | 2.46 (0.92) |            |       |
| Age             | 18-25      | 2.31 (0.99) | $F = 4.23$ | 0.006 |
|                 | 26-35      | 2.39 (0.96) |            |       |
|                 | 36-45      | 2.44 (0.94) |            |       |
|                 | 46+        | 2.51 (0.91) |            |       |
| Employment      | Student    | 2.28 (0.98) | $F = 6.89$ | 0.001 |
|                 | Employed   | 2.49 (0.92) |            |       |
|                 | Unemployed | 2.52 (0.91) |            |       |
| Duration of Use | 0-1 years  | 2.55 (0.90) | $F = 5.12$ | 0.002 |
|                 | 1-3 years  | 2.37 (0.95) |            |       |
|                 | 4-6 years  | 2.21 (1.02) |            |       |
|                 | 7+ years   | 2.12 (1.08) |            |       |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Significant differences emerged by age ( $p = 0.006$ ), with younger groups (18-25 years) showing lowest civic participation. Students reported significantly lower civic participation than employed or unemployed youth ( $p = 0.001$ ). Most critically, duration of substance use showed a clear dose-response relationship: longer use duration was associated with progressively lower civic participation ( $p = 0.002$ ).

### 5. Discussion

This study provides the first empirical evidence from Taraba State demonstrating that substance abuse significantly undermines youth civic participation. The finding that 81.9% of respondents reduced political discussion engagement, 77.6% decreased community activity participation, and 82.5% felt disconnected from community activities reveals a profound crisis of civic alienation accompanying the substance abuse epidemic.

The pattern of disengagement observed across multiple domains—community events, social causes, political discourse, and community connectedness—suggests that substance abuse severs youths' connection to civic life through multiple pathways. This aligns with theoretical frameworks positing that substance abuse consumes resources (time, cognitive focus, financial means) essential for engagement (Katagiri & Kamiya, 2023) <sup>[10]</sup>, while simultaneously fostering social stigma and marginalization that discourage participation (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2025) <sup>[7]</sup>.

The particularly pronounced political disengagement (81.9%) is alarming. Political discussion is foundational to democratic citizenship, enabling information sharing, opinion formation, and collective action. When substance abuse silences youth voices in political discourse, it threatens the representativeness and legitimacy of democratic processes. This finding echoes Ibrahim and Sambo's (2025) <sup>[7]</sup> qualitative research in Kano, which found that youth in drug hotspots expressed "zero trust in political

institutions" and viewed civic activities as "pointless."

The sense of community disconnection reported by 82.5% of respondents represents a fundamental breakdown of social cohesion. Community connectedness provides emotional support, identity affirmation, and collective efficacy—all essential for psychological wellbeing and social integration (Putnam, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup>. Its erosion by substance abuse suggests that affected youth are not merely disengaged but actively alienated from the social fabric that sustains healthy communities.

The finding that longer duration of substance use is associated with progressively lower civic participation ( $p = 0.002$ ) provides compelling evidence for a causal interpretation. This dose-response gradient—with those using 7+ years showing the lowest participation—suggests that chronic substance abuse progressively dismantles civic engagement over time. This may reflect the cumulative effects of social marginalization, the gradual replacement of pro-social networks with drug-using peer groups, and the progressive narrowing of life focus that characterizes addiction (Volkow *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[20]</sup>.

Students' significantly lower civic participation ( $p = 0.001$ ) is concerning given that educational institutions are traditionally sites for civic socialization and democratic learning. The disengagement of students suggests that schools are failing to provide countervailing experiences that could buffer against substance-related civic withdrawal. The lower participation among younger age groups (18-25 years,  $p = 0.006$ ) may reflect the developmental vulnerability of this period, when civic identities are typically forming (Vasilenko *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[19]</sup>.

The absence of significant gender differences ( $p = 0.059$ ) suggests that substance abuse impairs civic participation similarly for males and females, despite gender differences in substance use prevalence. This finding contrasts with some literature suggesting women may maintain social connections despite substance use (Gopiram & Kishore, 2014) <sup>[6]</sup> and warrants further investigation.

The data on baseline civic disengagement—with over 60% reporting no community event participation even before considering substance-related barriers—suggests that many substance-abusing youth exist outside mainstream civic structures entirely. This creates a vacuum that may be filled by alternative, anti-social networks. Previous research in Nigeria has linked substance abuse to involvement in cultism and criminal behavior (Egwu *et al.*, 2024; Mayanchi *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[5, 12]</sup>, suggesting that when conventional avenues for belonging are closed, youth may find identity and purpose within groups that actively undermine community safety and social order.

Abanyan and Garba's (2022) <sup>[1]</sup> description of drug abuse in Taraba State as a "ticking time bomb" takes on new meaning in light of these findings. The bomb is not just individual health crises or crime rates, but the systematic erosion of the civic fabric that sustains democratic governance and community resilience.

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

These findings extend Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) <sup>[2]</sup> and Problem Behavior Theory (Jessor, 1991) <sup>[9]</sup> by demonstrating that substance abuse not only involves learning maladaptive behaviors but also unlearning or failing to develop pro-social civic engagement. The high prevalence of use as coping mechanism (81.3%) suggests

that substance use substitutes for community-based sources of support and belonging, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where drugs replace people.

The findings also support ecological systems perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) <sup>[3]</sup>, demonstrating that substance abuse disrupts not only individual functioning but also the mesosystem connections between youth and their community institutions. This disruption at multiple ecological levels suggests that interventions must target not only individuals but also the community structures that have failed to engage substance-using youth.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

### 6.1 Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that substance abuse significantly undermines civic participation among youth in Taraba State, fostering political alienation, community disconnection, and social withdrawal. The finding that 82.5% of substance-using youth feel disconnected from community activities reveals a profound crisis that extends beyond individual health to threaten the foundations of democratic governance and social cohesion.

The erosion of civic life by substance abuse has implications that extend far beyond the individual. It depletes the pool of future community leaders, informed citizens, and active participants in democratic processes. It weakens the social fabric that sustains communities through collective action and mutual support. And it may channel youth toward anti-social networks that actively undermine community safety and development.

Interventions must look beyond clinical treatment to include civic re-education, the creation of inclusive youth forums, and the development of positive avenues for gaining social status and belonging. To ignore this civic dimension is to risk a future where a significant segment of the youth population exists in opposition to, or entirely outside of, the civic body—undermining the long-term stability and development of Taraba State.

The "ticking time bomb" of substance abuse in Taraba State is not merely a public health crisis; it is a crisis of citizenship, community, and democracy. Disarming it requires not only treating addiction but rebuilding the civic connections that give life meaning and communities strength.

### 6.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The profound civic disengagement documented in this study demands urgent, multi-sectoral responses:

1. **Civic Reintegration Programs:** Substance abuse treatment must incorporate components explicitly focused on rebuilding community connections and civic skills. This includes facilitating involvement in community activities, volunteer opportunities, and positive peer networks.
2. **Youth-Friendly Civic Spaces:** Create accessible, non-stigmatizing spaces where substance-using youth can safely engage with community life and develop civic competencies.
3. **Political Education and Engagement:** Develop programs specifically designed to re-engage substance-affected youth in political processes, addressing their alienation and building political efficacy.
4. **Alternative Peer Networks:** Support the development of positive peer groups that provide belonging and

status without requiring substance use or anti-social behavior.

5. **Community-Based Rehabilitation:** Shift from institution-based treatment to community-embedded approaches that maintain and rebuild social connections throughout recovery.
6. **Address Structural Drivers:** Tackle the unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities that contribute to both substance abuse and civic disengagement.
7. **School-Based Civic Education:** Strengthen civic education in schools, with particular attention to engaging students at risk for or already involved in substance use.

### 6.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; while we demonstrate strong association, we cannot definitively establish that substance abuse causes civic disengagement. Second, self-report data may be subject to social desirability and recall biases. Third, the sample may not capture hidden populations such as street youth or those in institutional settings. Fourth, the civic participation measure, while adapted from validated scales, may not fully capture all dimensions of civic engagement relevant in the Taraba context. Fifth, the study did not examine specific types of civic engagement (e.g., voting, community leadership) in detail.

### 6.4 Future Research Directions

Longitudinal studies are urgently needed to establish causal pathways and identify critical intervention points. Research should examine the mechanisms through which substance abuse impairs civic engagement and investigate protective factors that enable some substance-using youth to maintain community connections. Intervention studies evaluating programs that integrate civic reintegration with substance abuse treatment are essential. Finally, qualitative research exploring youth perspectives on civic alienation could provide deeper understanding and inform culturally appropriate interventions.

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