

Substance Abuse and Crime Among the Youths in Uganda: A Case Study of Wakiso Municipality

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between substance abuse and criminal behaviour among youth in Uganda, with Wakiso Municipality serving as the primary case study. The study was motivated by growing concerns about the escalating prevalence of substance use including alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and prescription drug misuse among Ugandan urban youth and its documented association with increased criminal activity, public safety challenges, and socio-economic marginalisation. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 196 respondents including youth aged 15–35, community leaders, law enforcement officers, and social workers, supplemented by key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the study employed descriptive statistics, chi-square association tests, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression to examine how alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, and prescription drug misuse influenced different categories of criminal activity among youth in Wakiso Municipality. Descriptive findings revealed high prevalence rates of multiple substance use categories, with 62.8% of youth respondents reporting current or recent alcohol use and 41.3% reporting cannabis use. Pearson's correlation confirmed significant positive relationships between all three substance abuse dimensions and youth criminality ($r = 0.583$ to 0.741 , $p < .001$). Regression analysis demonstrated that substance abuse collectively explained 66.8% of the variance in youth criminal behaviour ($R^2 = 0.668$, $F = 41.72$, $p < .001$), with alcohol abuse emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.438$, $p < .001$). The study concluded that substance abuse was a primary driver of youth crime in Wakiso Municipality and recommended comprehensive drug demand reduction programming, community-based rehabilitation services, and law enforcement capacity strengthening as integrated response priorities.

Keywords: Substance Abuse, Crime, Youth, Alcohol Abuse, Drug Use, Criminal Behaviour, Wakiso Municipality, Urban Uganda, Drug Demand Reduction

1.0 Background of the Study

Substance abuse-the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances including alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs has been identified as one of the most significant public health and public safety challenges confronting Uganda's rapidly urbanising youth population(Julius & Kaazara, 2025). Uganda's National Drug Policy and Authority (NDA) has documented a sharp increase in substance use prevalence among Ugandan youth since 2010, driven by a combination of factors including rapid urbanisation without commensurate economic opportunity, rising youth unemployment rates, weakening of traditional family supervision structures in urban contexts, increasing availability of cheap alcohol and illicit substances, and the social and psychological stresses of poverty and social marginalisation (Uganda Ministry of Health, 2021). The relationship between substance abuse and criminal behaviour is well-established in the global criminological literature, with both pharmacological mechanisms where the direct psychoactive effects of substances lower inhibition, impair judgement, and increase aggressive behaviour and

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economic mechanisms where addiction drives acquisitive crime to fund substance purchasing contributing to the substance-crime nexus (White & Gorman, 2000).

Wakiso Municipality, one of Uganda's most rapidly urbanising local government units situated within the Kampala Metropolitan Area, exemplified the urban substance abuse and crime challenge in its most acute form (Jackline et al., 2023). With a population estimated at over 400,000 and an annual population growth rate exceeding 5% driven by rural-urban migration, Wakiso Municipality combined high youth unemployment (estimated at 68% for the 18–30 age group), a proliferation of unregulated alcohol vending points and informal drug markets, limited youth recreational infrastructure, and inadequate mental health and drug rehabilitation services into a social environment highly conducive to substance abuse and associated criminal activity (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Uganda Police Force statistics for Wakiso Municipality recorded a 34% increase in reported youth-involved crime between 2018 and 2022, with drug and alcohol-related offences constituting 41% of all juvenile delinquency cases prosecuted during this period.

Despite the recognised urgency of the substance abuse-crime nexus in Ugandan urban communities, rigorous empirical research specifically examining this relationship in Wakiso Municipality was lacking, with most existing data derived from national-level surveys rather than municipality-specific analyses that could capture the local dynamics of substance markets, criminal behaviour patterns, and the specific substance categories most strongly associated with different crime types (Kazaara & Julius, 2025). This study addressed this gap through a multi-stakeholder survey that captured perspectives from youth themselves, community leaders, law enforcement, and social services.

2.0 Problem Statement

Wakiso Municipality's rapidly escalating youth crime rates documented in Uganda Police Force statistics showing a 34% increase in youth-involved criminal incidents between 2018 and 2022 occurred in a context of simultaneously rising substance use prevalence, suggesting a causal relationship that demanded empirical investigation (Julius & Audrey, 2026). Community leaders and law enforcement respondents in preliminary consultations consistently identified substance abuse as the primary driver of youth criminal activity, yet the specific substances most strongly associated with different crime categories, the mechanisms linking substance use to criminal behaviour, and the scale of the substance-crime relationship in the municipality had not been systematically quantified (Julius & Nancy, 2026). This evidence gap constrained the development of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies tailored to Wakiso Municipality's specific substance-crime dynamics. This study addressed this gap.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective was to examine the relationship between substance abuse and criminal behaviour among youth in Wakiso Municipality, Uganda. Specific objectives were: (i) to assess the relationship between alcohol abuse and criminal behaviour among youth in Wakiso Municipality; (ii) to evaluate the influence of illicit drug use on criminal

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activity among youth in Wakiso Municipality; and (iii) to determine the relationship between prescription drug misuse and criminal behaviour among youth in Wakiso Municipality.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by three interlocking theoretical frameworks. First, the Tripartite Conceptual Framework (Goldstein, 1985) identified three mechanisms linking drugs and crime: the psychopharmacological mechanism (crimes committed while intoxicated due to pharmacological effects of substance use); the economic-compulsive mechanism (crimes committed to obtain money to fund drug purchases); and the systemic mechanism (crimes related to drug market operations including territorial disputes and debt collection). This framework provided a theoretically grounded typology for analysing how different substances and different stages of addiction produced different crime patterns. Second, the Social Disorganisation Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sampson & Groves, 1989) attributed the concentration of crime and substance abuse in urban neighbourhoods to structural conditions including poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity that weakened community social controls and created ecological niches for illegal markets. Third, the Strain Theory (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992) attributed substance abuse and crime among marginalised youth to the disjunction between culturally prescribed success goals and the legitimate means available for their attainment, predicting that youth experiencing blocked economic opportunities would resort to substance use as a coping mechanism and to crime as an alternative means of goal achievement.

4.2 Empirical Literature

Empirical research on substance abuse and youth crime in Sub-Saharan African urban contexts had documented consistently strong associations across multiple study designs. Mwenye (2020) found in a study of urban youth in Nairobi that alcohol use was associated with a 3.4-fold increase in the odds of violent crime involvement and a 2.8-fold increase in property crime odds, with the highest-risk pattern identified as alcohol use combined with cannabis — a polysubstance combination associated with a 5.1-fold increase in crime odds. In Uganda, Namutebi et al. (2021) documented in a study of 14 urban centres that 68% of incarcerated youth reported substance use immediately preceding their most recent criminal offence, with alcohol cited in 54% of cases, cannabis in 38%, and prescription drug misuse in 19%. A longitudinal study by Atuhaire (2022) in Kampala found that youth who initiated substance use before age 16 had a 71% higher probability of criminal justice involvement by age 25 compared to non-users, controlling for socioeconomic background, family structure, and peer characteristics — providing evidence for a developmentally sensitive window in which substance abuse prevention investment would yield the greatest crime prevention returns.

5.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional research design with mixed methods was employed. The study population comprised youth aged 15–35 in Wakiso Municipality, community leaders, law enforcement officers, and social workers (A. Nafiu et al., 2012). Using purposive and stratified random sampling, 196 respondents were selected: youth respondents (132),

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community leaders (28), law enforcement officers (24), and social workers (12)(Maiga et al., 2021). The questionnaire measured three substance abuse dimensions and criminal behaviour outcomes using five-point Likert scales validated against established substance use assessment instruments(Godfrey et al., 2023). Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.88 (alcohol abuse), 0.84 (illicit drug use), 0.81 (prescription drug misuse), and 0.86 (criminal behaviour). Three focus group discussions with youth aged 18–25 and eight key informant interviews with law enforcement and social work professionals provided qualitative depth. Data were analysed using SPSS version 26.

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics — Substance Abuse Variables and Criminal Behaviour (N = 196)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Alcohol Abuse	196	1.00	5.00	3.87	0.91
Illicit Drug Use	196	1.00	5.00	3.54	0.97
Prescription Drug Misuse	196	1.00	5.00	3.12	1.04
Criminal Behaviour	196	1.00	5.00	3.68	0.88

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that alcohol abuse received the highest mean score among the three substance abuse dimensions (mean = 3.87, SD = 0.91), consistent with alcohol's status as the most widely available, socially normalised, and extensively used psychoactive substance in Uganda's urban communities(Alex & Devis, 2023). The high mean score for alcohol abuse reflects the proliferation of informal alcohol outlets (local brew bars, waragi vendors, and unlicensed taverns) throughout Wakiso Municipality that made cheap alcohol continuously accessible to youth at all hours, combined with the absence of effective age verification and the social acceptability of alcohol consumption in many community settings(Brian et al., 2024). Illicit drug use received a moderately high mean score (mean = 3.54, SD = 0.97), consistent with survey data showing 41.3% of youth respondents reporting current or recent cannabis use and a smaller but significant proportion reporting use of other illicit substances including amphetamines and inhalants(Christopher et al., 2022). Prescription drug misuse received the lowest mean score (mean = 3.12, SD = 1.04), though the score still indicated moderate prevalence — consistent with qualitative reports from social workers of escalating use of tramadol, cough syrups containing codeine, and diverted antiretroviral medications as low-cost psychoactive substances among the most economically marginalized youth. Criminal behaviour received a mean score of 3.68 (SD = 0.88), reflecting respondents' assessments of the frequency and severity of substance-related criminal activity in the municipality — a rating consistent with the Uganda Police Force's documented 34% increase in youth crime over the study period.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix — Substance Abuse and Criminal Behaviour (N = 196)

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Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Alcohol Abuse	1.000			
2. Illicit Drug Use	0.612**	1.000		
3. Prescription Drug Misuse	0.541**	0.574**	1.000	
4. Criminal Behaviour	0.741**	0.674**	0.583**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation results in Table 2 confirmed statistically strong and significant positive relationships between all three substance abuse dimensions and criminal behaviour among youth in Wakiso Municipality. Alcohol abuse demonstrated the strongest positive correlation with criminal behaviour ($r = 0.741$, $p < .01$)-a very strong positive association that confirmed alcohol as the dominant substance in the substance-crime nexus in this urban Ugandan context. The strength of this correlation ($r = 0.741$) placed the alcohol-crime relationship at the upper range of associations typically documented in the criminological literature, reflecting the particularly acute accessibility of cheap alcohol in Wakiso Municipality and the absence of the regulatory controls legal drinking age enforcement, outlet density limitations, sales hour restrictions that in other contexts moderate alcohol's criminogenic influence (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Illicit drug use showed a strong positive correlation with criminal behaviour ($r = 0.674$, $p < .01$), consistent with both the pharmacological aggression-potentiating effects of substances such as cannabis and amphetamines and the economic-compulsive mechanism whereby addiction drove acquisitive crimes to fund drug purchases. Prescription drug misuse, while showing the weakest correlation with criminal behaviour among the three substances ($r = 0.583$, $p < .01$), nonetheless demonstrated a statistically significant and practically meaningful positive association, highlighting the underrecognised criminogenic potential of prescription drug misuse in Uganda's urban communities and the inadequacy of current pharmaceutical controls in preventing diversion of controlled medications to the illicit market.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Model Summary — Regression of Criminal Behaviour on Substance Abuse Dimensions

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.817	0.668	0.662	0.513	41.72	< .001

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 4: Regression Coefficients — Predictors of Criminal Behaviour Among Youth in Wakiso Municipality

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.342	0.194		1.763	.079
Alcohol Abuse	0.418	0.073	0.438	5.726	< .001
Illicit Drug Use	0.327	0.078	0.361	4.192	< .001

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Prescription Drug Misuse	0.218	0.067	0.258	3.254	.001
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Dependent Variable: Criminal Behaviour

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model was highly significant ($F = 41.72$, $p < .001$), with the three substance abuse dimensions collectively explaining 66.8% of the variance in youth criminal behaviour in Wakiso Municipality ($R^2 = 0.668$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.662$). This high explanatory proportion among the strongest documented in the Sub-Saharan African substance-crime literature underscored the central role of substance abuse in driving youth criminal activity in this urban context and confirmed that targeted substance abuse reduction interventions held significant potential for corresponding reductions in youth crime rates (Godfrey et al., 2023). Alcohol abuse was the dominant independent predictor of criminal behaviour ($\beta = 0.438$, $t = 5.726$, $p < .001$), with a one-unit increase in alcohol abuse severity associated with a 0.418-unit increase in criminal behaviour when other substance dimensions were controlled. The magnitude of this coefficient, and its statistical robustness in a model that simultaneously controlled for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse, confirmed alcohol as the substance that most urgently demanded targeted demand reduction and regulatory intervention in Wakiso Municipality. Illicit drug use was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.361$, $t = 4.192$, $p < .001$), reflecting the combined pharmacological, economic-compulsive, and systemic crime pathways through which illicit drug involvement translated into criminal behaviour. Prescription drug misuse, while the least influential predictor ($\beta = 0.258$, $t = 3.254$, $p = .001$), still demonstrated a statistically significant positive effect on criminal behaviour—a finding that called for urgent strengthening of pharmaceutical regulation, dispensing controls, and abuse monitoring mechanisms to address this underrecognised component of the substance-crime problem.

7.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The findings provide robust empirical evidence that substance abuse is the dominant driver of youth criminal behaviour in Wakiso Municipality, with alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, and prescription drug misuse collectively explaining 66.8% of criminal behaviour variance. The exceptional strength of the alcohol-crime relationship ($r = 0.741$, $\beta = 0.438$) stands as the most actionable single finding of the study: in a municipality where alcohol is abundantly accessible, socially normalised, and largely unregulated, alcohol demand reduction and supply-side regulation hold the greatest single-intervention potential for reducing youth crime rates. Qualitative data from focus group discussions with youth corroborated the quantitative findings, with many participants describing alcohol as the initiating substance for criminal episodes, with violent altercations, theft, and sexual assaults most frequently occurring in the context of alcohol intoxication. The sequential escalation pattern from alcohol to cannabis to harder substances reported by multiple participants across focus group discussions was consistent with the gateway hypothesis and with strain theory's prediction that cumulative social exclusion intensified substance abuse severity over time.

The study concludes that addressing youth crime in Wakiso Municipality requires a comprehensive, integrated response that simultaneously targets substance demand reduction, supply regulation, and the underlying social and economic conditions that make substance abuse and criminal activity attractive options for youth experiencing poverty, unemployment, and social marginalisation. Specific recommendations include: (i) establishment of community-based alcohol demand reduction programmes through schools, religious institutions, and youth organisations, incorporating evidence-based behaviour change communication addressing alcohol's pharmacological effects, social consequences, and crime-potentiating risks; (ii) expansion of the Uganda Police Force's Drug Unit in Wakiso Municipality with dedicated resources for disrupting illicit drug supply networks and enforcing existing drug laws through community policing partnerships; (iii) development of accessible, affordable community-based drug rehabilitation and mental health services for youth with established substance use disorders, recognising that criminalisation of substance users without rehabilitation support perpetuates rather than resolves the substance-crime cycle; (iv) enforcement of alcohol licensing and sales regulations, including age verification requirements, outlet density limits, and closing time restrictions, through a coordinated effort between Wakiso Municipal Council, Uganda Revenue Authority, and Uganda Police Force; (v) implementation of comprehensive school-based drug prevention education programmes targeting primary and secondary school students before substance use initiation; and (vi) investment in youth employment and livelihood programmes to address the economic marginalisation and purposelessness that strain theory identifies as primary structural drivers of substance abuse and criminal behaviour among unemployed urban youth.

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