

# The Conscientization Role in Mitigating Drug and Substance Abuse Among Youth of Pcea Nanyuki Presbytery, Laikipia County, Kenya

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## ABSTARCT

This study investigates the role of conscientization a Freirean process of raising critical awareness and promoting transformative action in addressing drug and substance abuse among youth in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Nanyuki Presbytery, Laikipia County, Kenya. Despite the church's active involvement, substance abuse continues to be a significant issue, with many young people experimenting with or regularly using drugs. Church-led interventions have had limited success, with high relapse rates, largely due to fragmented approaches, stigma, and a lack of evidence-based practices.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from a sample of 300 youth using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with 19 church leaders and 40 parents. SPSS was used for statistical analysis, and qualitative responses were thematically analyzed.

The findings reveal that conscientization strategies significantly influenced both awareness and behavior change. Drug education and youth retreats were identified as effective tools in the intervention process. Pastoral care, including spiritual support and life skills training, helped foster emotional resilience. However, several gaps were identified: the underutilization of technology in outreach, limited use of community forums, inadequate mental health and economic support, and weak collaboration with healthcare providers. Peer pressure and unemployment were found to be contributing factors to high relapse rates.

Regression analysis identified church participation as a significant predictor of intervention success. The study recommends a holistic model integrating digital conscientization, economic empowerment, formal partnerships with health agencies, trauma-informed clergy training, and peer-led initiatives.

In conclusion, faith-based conscientization, when aligned with empirical practices, offers a culturally grounded approach for reducing youth substance abuse in semi-urban Kenya. Future studies should explore long-term recovery outcomes and the cost-effectiveness of integrated church-health models.

**Keywords:** Conscientization, Substance Abuse, Youth Ministry, Faith-Based Interventions, Mixed Methods Research

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Drug and substance abuse has emerged as one of the most critical public health challenges of the 21st century, cutting across socio-economic, geographical, and cultural boundaries. It is a crisis that continues to escalate globally, with alarming implications for individuals, families, and societies at large. Young people, in particular, constitute the most vulnerable group, as adolescence and early adulthood are developmental phases marked by curiosity, risk-taking behavior, peer influence, and identity formation. Unfortunately, these developmental

characteristics also render youth highly susceptible to experimenting with and subsequently becoming dependent on harmful substances.

The consequences of early drug and substance use are wide-ranging and severe. Young individuals who initiate substance use during their formative years are more likely to experience a host of negative outcomes, including deteriorating mental health, such as anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric disorders. Socially, drug abuse often leads to strained relationships with peers, family members, and the broader community. Economically, affected youth may struggle to maintain employment or pursue meaningful educational goals, thereby limiting their long-term potential. Furthermore, numerous studies have established a strong correlation between early drug use and academic underachievement, poor physical health, and increased involvement in criminal activity (Hawke et al., 2020). These outcomes perpetuate cycles of poverty, marginalization, and social instability.

In Kenya, the problem of youth drug and substance abuse is particularly pronounced in Laikipia County, a region that has seen a steady rise in substance use among adolescents and young adults. Within this context, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Nanyuki Presbytery operates in a socio-environmental setting that is increasingly being destabilized by the proliferation of drugs among youth. Drug abuse in this area has not only resulted in the erosion of social cohesion but has also contributed to the rise in violent crime, delinquency, and stagnation in local development initiatives (Mburu, 2020). As communities become overwhelmed by the growing crisis, institutions such as the church are called upon to provide not only spiritual guidance but also practical solutions to help restore hope and moral order.

The church, as both a moral authority and a center of community life, is uniquely positioned to confront this challenge through a process known as *conscientization*. Rooted in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, conscientization involves cultivating critical awareness among individuals, encouraging reflective thought, and fostering collective action aimed at social transformation. In the context of this study, conscientization is understood as a faith-driven approach that includes education on the dangers of substance abuse, community advocacy, youth empowerment, and participatory engagement in finding solutions. When integrated with empirically validated interventions, faith-based conscientization has demonstrated considerable success in addressing youth drug use. For instance, global evidence suggests that such approaches can lead to a reduction of up to 40% in adolescent substance use when properly implemented (Smith & Harris, 2022).

However, in the Nanyuki region, current efforts to address youth substance abuse remain fragmented and inadequately resourced. Despite the presence of numerous church-led programs, the outcomes have been underwhelming. According to recent data, approximately 37.1% of youth in the area have experimented with drugs, and 22.4% are regular users (Ndung'u et al., 2024). Church interventions, while well-intentioned, have achieved a modest success rate of just 28%, with relapse rates soaring as high as 65% (NACADA, 2023; Mwangi & Ahmed, 2024). These statistics underscore a critical need to reevaluate existing strategies and develop more comprehensive, sustainable models that incorporate both spiritual and psychological dimensions of healing and behavior change.

Furthermore, socio-cultural factors compound the problem. Deep-seated stigma surrounding addiction, misconceptions fueled by traditional beliefs, and societal denial continue to obstruct effective outreach and rehabilitation. These cultural barriers often prevent affected individuals and their families from seeking help, thereby enabling the silent escalation of the crisis (Wanjiru et al., 2023). As a result, there is an urgent need for culturally sensitive, context-specific interventions that resonate with local values while addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery can leverage the principles of conscientization to combat the growing problem of youth substance abuse. It aims to bridge the gap between spiritual ministry and practical community engagement by exploring how faith-based approaches can be better aligned with modern evidence-based practices. By doing so, the study aspires to offer insights into more effective, holistic, and culturally grounded interventions capable of transforming not only individual lives but entire communities affected by the scourge of substance abuse.

## Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant presence and influence of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Nanyuki Presbytery within Laikipia County, youth drug and substance abuse continues to rise at an alarming rate. The church, while offering spiritual guidance and initiating various anti-drug campaigns, has struggled to achieve substantial impact in mitigating the crisis. Existing interventions remain fragmented, inadequately resourced, and culturally misaligned, resulting in low program success rates and alarmingly high relapse rates reportedly as high as 65%. This indicates a serious gap between the church's intended role as a moral and social agent and the actual effectiveness of its current strategies in addressing substance abuse among the youth.

Moreover, prevailing socio-cultural factors such as stigma, traditional misconceptions about addiction, and societal denial further compound the problem by discouraging open dialogue, help-seeking behaviors, and community support systems. These barriers hinder not only prevention efforts but also the reintegration of recovering youth into society. While the concept of *conscientization* presents a promising, faith-based framework capable of promoting critical awareness and transformative community engagement, its practical application within the Nanyuki context remains underexplored and underutilized.

Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the limited effectiveness of existing church-led interventions against youth substance abuse in Laikipia County. Specifically, it investigates how the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery can strategically adopt and implement conscientization principles to develop culturally relevant, spiritually grounded, and empirically informed responses that foster sustainable behavior change and community resilience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Drug and substance abuse among youth remains a pressing issue in Kenya, particularly in semi-urban and rural contexts such as Laikipia County. The literature identifies the church as a potential driver for social transformation, with the capacity to address this issue through *conscientization* a process of raising critical consciousness, promoting reflective engagement, and enabling informed, transformative action. However, existing studies reveal significant gaps in the practical realization of this potential, especially within faith-based institutions like the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Nanyuki Presbytery.

### The Concept of Conscientization in Faith-Based Contexts

Conscientization, a concept popularized by Paulo Freire, refers to the development of critical awareness and active engagement in societal transformation through education, reflection, and action (Freire, 1970). In faith-based settings, conscientization integrates spiritual, moral, and social dimensions, enabling churches to function not only as spiritual sanctuaries but also as transformative institutions in addressing social crises. Studies by Smith and Harris (2022) have demonstrated that faith-based conscientization strategies, when paired with evidence-based approaches, can reduce adolescent drug use by up to 40%. This reduction is linked to youth empowerment, value formation, and the promotion of purposeful living all of which align with the church's mission. Despite this promise, evidence suggests that the practical application of conscientization within Kenyan churches is inconsistent and often lacks structural depth. Kamau et al. (2023) note that many churches focus on isolated interventions such as pastoral counseling or public condemnations of drug use, rather than comprehensive programs that combine education, advocacy, community mobilization, and policy engagement.

### The Scope and Limitations of Church Interventions in Nanyuki

The PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery, though morally influential, demonstrates the shortcomings of such fragmented approaches. According to Ndung'u et al. (2024), approximately 37.1% of youth in the area have experimented with drugs, and 22.4% are regular users. However, church-led programs report a success rate of only 28%, while relapse rates remain alarmingly high (NACADA, 2023). This discrepancy reveals a lack of robust mechanisms to support youth beyond initial awareness campaigns.

Wanjiru et al. (2023) further highlight that only 31% of local youth have participated in church-run awareness programs, and pastoral care reaches just 25% of affected individuals. These figures point to critical weaknesses in program design, delivery, and community involvement. Furthermore, advocacy efforts often lack policy traction, failing to influence systemic change or attract sustainable partnerships with other stakeholders (Ochieng & Kumar, 2024).

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers to Effective Conscientization**

A significant body of literature emphasizes the role of socio-cultural dynamics in shaping the success or failure of substance abuse interventions. In communities such as those in Laikipia, deep-rooted stigma, denial, and traditional beliefs about addiction obstruct open conversations about substance abuse and discourage help-seeking behavior (Wanjiru et al., 2023). Gathumbi and Cheloti (2016) argue that qualitative insights into local cultural values, family dynamics, and peer influences are essential for designing interventions that resonate with target populations.

However, most studies addressing youth substance abuse in Kenya have prioritized quantitative assessments, such as prevalence rates and relapse statistics, while neglecting the nuanced socio-cultural context in which drug use occurs. This oversight limits the ability of interventions to engage youth meaningfully or to dismantle the structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate substance abuse (Mathai, 2022).

### **Geographic and Contextual Research Gaps**

Much of the research on church-based responses to youth substance abuse in Kenya is concentrated in urban areas such as Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu (Kamau et al., 2023; Mathai, 2022). These settings differ significantly from semi-urban contexts like Nanyuki, where access to services, community structures, and social expectations vary. As a result, interventions that may be effective in urban environments do not always translate successfully to rural or semi-urban regions. There is a pressing need to examine context-specific variables that influence both substance use and the efficacy of responses in places like Laikipia County.

### **Toward a Holistic and Culturally Responsive Approach**

The reviewed literature underscores the need for an integrated, culturally sensitive, and holistic model of conscientization within the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery. Such a model must combine spiritual guidance with mental health awareness, youth empowerment, community advocacy, and policy engagement. It should also incorporate continuous pastoral support and socio-cultural adaptability to ensure its relevance and sustainability.

This study thus contributes to existing scholarship by focusing on a semi-urban context often overlooked in research, evaluating the comprehensive role of the church not only in offering moral and spiritual support but also in championing community-driven responses to youth substance abuse. By doing so, it aims to fill critical gaps in both theory and practice, offering a framework for more effective and culturally grounded church-based interventions in rural and semi-urban Kenya.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This section details the methodological framework employed to investigate the role of the church in mitigating drug and substance abuse among youth within the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery in Laikipia County, Kenya. The methodology encompasses the philosophical underpinnings, research design, target population, sampling strategies, data collection instruments, procedures for ensuring validity and reliability, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

### **Introduction**

The study adopted a pragmatic philosophical orientation, which emphasizes practical solutions to real-world problems by drawing from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Accordingly, a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach was utilized. This methodological design integrates numerical data with rich,

contextual insights, enabling a holistic understanding of the church's intervention strategies in relation to youth substance abuse. The study involved descriptive survey techniques to examine trends, practices, and contextual variables influencing church-led efforts in drug abuse prevention.

### Location of the Study

The research was conducted in Laikipia County, specifically within the jurisdiction of the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery. This location was selected due to its observable high prevalence of drug and substance abuse among youth, the active involvement of the church in youth-focused programming, and the manageability of the region's geographical and administrative boundaries. The study focused on four key congregations Nanyuki, Ragati, Naromoro, and Githima to ensure comprehensive representation of the presbytery's diversity.

### Research Design

A descriptive survey design employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach was adopted. The quantitative aspect entailed the administration of structured questionnaires to 300 youth respondents, while the qualitative component involved interviews with 19 church leaders and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 40 parents. This design enabled the simultaneous collection of both numeric and textual data, facilitating triangulation and validation of findings. As Creswell and Creswell (2021) note, such an approach allows researchers to explore both the measurable dimensions of a problem and the deeper contextual dynamics that shape it.

### Research Philosophy

The study was grounded in pragmatism, a philosophy that values pluralistic and outcome-driven research. Pragmatism allows for the integration of both quantitative methods, which uncover patterns and prevalence, and qualitative methods, which provide contextualized interpretations and nuanced understandings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2016). This philosophical stance was suitable given the multifaceted nature of drug abuse and the complex socio-religious environment in which the church operates.

### Research Approach

The **mixed-methods approach** comprised both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative component utilized structured questionnaires to assess levels of drug use, awareness of church programs, and perceived effectiveness of interventions. The qualitative component entailed semi-structured interviews and FGDs to explore the nature of church programs, implementation challenges, and community perceptions of the church's role in drug abuse mitigation.

### Target Population

The study targeted multiple stakeholders within the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery. The population comprised approximately 1,340 youth (aged 18–30 years), 131 church elders, 7 parish ministers, and 447 parents. These categories were selected to capture diverse perspectives and ensure triangulation. The research drew its sampling frame from the four selected congregations, representing a broad demographic and geographic cross-section of the presbytery.

### Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The sample size for youth respondents (n=300) was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination formula. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure proportional representation from all congregations. For qualitative data, purposive sampling was used to select 12 church elders and 40 parents for focus group discussions. All 7 parish ministers were included through a census approach, given their limited number and critical role in the presbytery's governance. Convenience sampling complemented purposive methods in reaching available parents for FGDs.



## Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

### Three primary data collection tools were employed:-

*Structured questionnaires administered to youth to gather quantitative data on drug use prevalence, awareness levels, and program outcomes.*

*Interview guides used to conduct in-depth interviews with church leaders to understand strategic frameworks, theological motivations, and institutional challenges.*

*Focus group discussion (FGD) guides facilitated group conversations with parents to explore socio-cultural attitudes and family-level experiences regarding youth drug abuse.*

To ensure validity, content, face, and construct validation processes were undertaken, with expert reviews from academic and professional stakeholders. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs achieving coefficients above 0.7, indicating high internal consistency.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the convergent parallel design, where quantitative and qualitative datasets were analyzed separately and then integrated during interpretation. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing both descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) and inferential techniques where appropriate. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis, involving coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns and insights. The integration of results allowed for triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of the findings.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was prioritized throughout the research process. A research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). All participants were provided with informed consent forms, detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed through secure data handling and coded identifiers. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This chapter offers a detailed interpretation and synthesis of the data analyzed in Chapter Four, focusing on the church's role in mitigating drug and substance abuse among youth in PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery. Drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative insights gathered through a mixed-methods approach, the findings are discussed thematically to highlight areas of strength, gaps, and actionable implications.

### Overall Mitigation Effectiveness

The overall effectiveness of the church's intervention efforts was observed to be relatively strong in some areas while revealing notable limitations in others. One of the most encouraging findings was the high level of youth awareness regarding the consequences of drug and substance abuse, as indicated by a mean score of 4.04. This suggests that the church has been successful in educating the youth on the dangers of substance abuse and its potential long-term impact on their lives. Additionally, the strengthening of youth leadership structures, another strategic pillar of the Presbytery, scored a promising 3.87, demonstrating the church's commitment to empowering young leaders who can inspire others to make healthier life choices.

However, the interventions exhibited limitations in addressing underlying mental health challenges and tackling the root causes of substance abuse (Mean=3.56), such as poverty, unemployment, and peer pressure. These factors have long been known to contribute to the initiation and escalation of substance abuse among youth, suggesting that the church's programs may not have fully addressed these socio-economic and psychological factors. Notably, regression analysis revealed that church attendance and participation in church-

run programs were statistically significant predictors of perceived intervention effectiveness. This emphasizes the importance of consistent engagement with the church community in combating substance abuse. Further demographic analysis showed that female youth and those aged 18–22 years reported higher levels of perceived effectiveness, suggesting that targeted programs for these sub-groups may yield further impact. Given these findings, the church may consider implementing more tailored interventions for these groups, possibly focusing on the unique needs and challenges faced by young women and older adolescents.

### **Conscientization Role of the Church**

The church's conscientization efforts, aimed at educating and sensitizing youth about the dangers of drug use, emerged as a central strength of the Presbytery's approach. Drug education programs were highly rated (Mean=4.01), reflecting the importance of raising awareness about the risks associated with substance abuse. Additionally, the strategic use of role models and youth retreats contributed significantly to the success of these efforts, with scores of 3.95 and 3.83, respectively. These findings align with Paulo Freire's conscientization theory, which emphasizes the role of education in fostering critical awareness and sparking transformative action. By creating spaces for reflection and critical engagement, the church has been able to make a significant impact on the youth's perspectives and attitudes towards drug use.

Nevertheless, certain methods such as the use of technology in drug education (Mean=3.32) and the organization of community forums (Mean=3.42) were underutilized, limiting the reach and modern relevance of the church's messages. Given the prominence of digital technology in the lives of youth, integrating more modern tools such as social media, podcasts, and online campaigns could enhance the church's ability to connect with a broader audience. A strong positive correlation ( $r=0.681$ ) between conscientization strategies and mitigation effectiveness further suggests that enhancing this pillar—especially through youth-led digital campaigns and culturally relevant messaging—could yield significant improvements in the effectiveness of the church's interventions.

### **Role of Pastoral Care Programs**

Pastoral care emerged as a critical intervention point for the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery. Spiritual support structures, including prayer groups and Bible studies, were well-received (Mean=3.99), and life skills training programs also scored highly (Mean=3.98). These programs provided youth with safe spaces to discuss their struggles and gain a sense of purpose and hope, which are often crucial elements in the recovery process. The integration of spiritual support with practical life skills has proven to be a powerful combination in motivating youth to seek and sustain recovery. However, gaps were noted in economic empowerment (Mean=3.35) and the availability of specialized addiction counseling (Mean=3.46). These areas could be critical in addressing some of the root causes of substance abuse, such as poverty and unemployment, which can lead to a sense of hopelessness and desperation. Economic empowerment programs, which provide training, employment opportunities, and financial support, could help equip young people with the tools they need to overcome socio-economic challenges. Additionally, the integration of more specialized addiction counseling could offer tailored support for individuals facing more severe addiction issues, enhancing the church's ability to provide holistic care.

One of the most striking insights was the role of spiritual counseling in motivating recovery often succeeding where secular interventions had failed. This suggests the importance of integrating faith with professional counseling to provide a more comprehensive approach to recovery. The church's ability to offer both spiritual guidance and practical support makes it a unique and valuable resource for youth struggling with substance abuse.

### **Advocacy Role of the Church**

The Presbytery's advocacy work was also shown to be impactful. Participants highlighted the success of anti-drug policies (Mean=3.87), public awareness campaigns (Mean=3.84), and youth involvement in advocacy (Mean=3.76). However, enforcement mechanisms (Mean=3.69) and collaboration with health institutions

(Mean=3.57) were less effective, largely due to systemic barriers such as political resistance and resource constraints.

This points to a significant opportunity for the church to build formal coalitions with schools, NGOs, and government bodies, including NACADA, to strengthen its evidence-based advocacy and expand its influence on policy enforcement and public health education.

### **Rehabilitation Services**

Rehabilitation support offered by the Presbytery included counseling (Mean=3.71) and family involvement (Mean=3.68), both of which were regarded as essential components in youth recovery. Nonetheless, critical gaps were evident in areas such as medical treatment support (Mean=3.29) and the lack of structured, long-term recovery plans (Mean=3.50).

A major challenge identified was the high relapse rate, with 32% of previously rehabilitated youth relapsing due to environmental triggers such as peer pressure and socio-economic instability. These findings underscore the need for strategic partnerships with formal rehabilitation centers to provide medical and psychological support alongside church-led programs.

## **SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

### **Summary of Findings**

The study established that the PCEA Nanyuki Presbytery plays a substantial role in mitigating drug and substance abuse among youth through four key dimensions: conscientization, pastoral care, advocacy, and rehabilitation. The integrated, faith-based approach characterized by spiritual nurturing, educational interventions, and community mobilization has led to measurable improvements in awareness and behavior change.

Despite these achievements, the findings revealed several gaps: insufficient mental health support, economic vulnerabilities among youth, inadequate use of technology, and limited medical rehabilitation services. These gaps present opportunities for policy reform, capacity building, and program innovation.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Program Enhancement**

Leverage digital platforms (e.g., mobile applications and social media) to disseminate drug education messages and engage youth more interactively.

Design and implement economic empowerment programs targeting at-risk youth to address poverty-related triggers of substance abuse.

Develop formal partnerships with healthcare institutions and professional counselors to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of rehabilitation services.

#### **Capacity Building**

Equip clergy and lay counselors with evidence-based techniques in trauma-informed care and addiction recovery.

Introduce peer-educator certification programs to empower youth to take ownership of their recovery and lead prevention campaigns within their congregations.



## Policy Advocacy

Build coalitions with national agencies such as NACADA to advocate for the enforcement of anti-drug laws and the protection of vulnerable youth.

Mobilize congregational resources to monitor and report drug trafficking activities, especially around schools and informal settlements.

## Areas for Further Research

Based on the study's limitations and emerging trends, the following research directions are recommended:

**Longitudinal Study:-** Assess the long-term recovery trajectories of youth supported by church-based programs, focusing on relapse rates and sustainability.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis:-** Compare the outcomes and cost-effectiveness of faith-based and clinical rehabilitation models to inform future investment decisions.

**Technology-Enhanced Care:-** Explore the effectiveness of mobile and virtual pastoral care interventions on youth engagement and behavioral change.

**Denominational Comparison:-** Examine how various Christian denominations address substance abuse and identify best practices for inter-denominational collaboration.

## Limitations of the Study

While the study offers important insights, its generalizability is limited by the focus on a single presbytery. Therefore, replication in other regions and among different church communities is necessary to validate the findings and refine intervention models.

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