

Narcotics and Juvenile Delinquency: Exploring The Role of Drugs in The Formation of Youth Criminals in India

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Abstract

The alarming rise in Juvenile Delinquency in India has become a significant concern for policymakers, legal authorities, and social institutions. Among the various contributing factors, narcotic drug abuse has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension influencing the behavioral and criminal trajectories of youth. This study investigates the correlation between narcotics consumption and the development of delinquent tendencies among juveniles in India. Employing a multidisciplinary framework that integrates criminology, psychology, and legal analysis, the research examines socio-economic, familial, and psychological conditions that predispose adolescents to drug use and subsequent criminal behavior. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal mechanisms, including the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, in addressing the nexus between substance abuse and juvenile crime. The findings underscore the necessity of comprehensive intervention strategies encompassing education, community support, and mental health care to mitigate narcotic-induced delinquency. This research contributes to the broader discourse on juvenile justice by offering actionable insights for legal reform, public policy, and youth rehabilitation in India.

Keywords: Juvenile Delinquency, Narcotics, Drug Abuse, NDPS Act, Juvenile Justice Act

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency has long been a subject of concern for lawmakers, social workers, and educators across the globe. In India, the issue has gained increasing urgency due to the growing number of crimes committed by minors. Among the many contributing factors to this troubling trend, the influence of narcotic substances stands out as both a cause and a consequence of youth criminal behavior. The easy availability of drugs, combined with peer pressure, broken families, lack of guidance, and socio-economic instability, creates

an environment where young individuals are more likely to engage in deviant acts¹.

India's geographical position, with its proximity to the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle two of the world's major drug-producing regions further complicates the matter. Narcotics often find their way into urban slums, rural pockets, and even educational institutions, where adolescents are exposed to these substances at an alarmingly young age. The initial use may begin as experimentation but soon spirals into addiction, often pushing juveniles into theft, assault, trafficking, and even violent crimes

to sustain their habits. This paper delves into the critical intersection between drug abuse and juvenile delinquency in India. It seeks to understand how narcotics not only impair judgment and self-control but also entangle young individuals in criminal networks. Through an analysis of recent crime trends, socio-legal frameworks, and case studies, this study aims to unravel the deeper roots of youth crime influenced by drugs and highlight the urgent need for holistic interventions².

Objectives

- To identify the socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors that lead juveniles to substance abuse.
- To examine how drug addiction influences the involvement of youth in criminal activities.
- To study the role of drug trafficking networks in recruiting and exploiting vulnerable juveniles.
- To explore the preventive and rehabilitative measures adopted by government and non-governmental organizations.
- To propose evidence-based recommendations for reducing drug influence and delinquency among Indian youth.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method and descriptive research design to analyze Narcotics and Juvenile Delinquency. It examines existing Reports, Case studies, Legal and Policy, Policy Recommendations. The research relies on secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue.

Scope of Narcotics and Juvenile Delinquency

The increasing prevalence of juvenile involvement in narcotic abuse in India is a deeply disturbing trend with far-reaching social, psychological, and criminal implications. Juvenile drug abuse is not merely a health issue it is intrinsically linked with the rising tide of juvenile delinquency, where addiction

often serves as a gateway to criminal behaviour. The scope of juvenile drug abuse in India today reflects a growing crisis that threatens the nation's youth, security, and developmental progress.

India is home to the world's largest youth population, with more than 253 million adolescents aged 10-19 years, making up a significant portion of the country's demographic dividend. However, this population is increasingly exposed to vulnerabilities such as poverty, peer pressure, broken family systems, and urban stress, making them susceptible to narcotics. Recent studies and reports by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) have shown that a growing number of juveniles are being caught not only consuming drugs but also engaging in trafficking, peddling, and other crimes under the influence of substance abuse. This trend is particularly alarming in urban slums, border areas, and transit cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, and Amritsar. The types of substances abused by juveniles range from soft drugs like marijuana and prescription opioids to hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines. Inhalants such as correction fluids and industrial adhesives are also commonly misused, especially among street children and slum dwellers due to their easy availability and low cost. The age group most affected appears to be between 14 and 18 years. This age bracket is marked by intense psychological, emotional, and social transformation. Adolescents experimenting with identity and social belonging are especially vulnerable to the influence of deviant peer groups³.

The scope of juvenile drug abuse also extends to educational institutions. Several studies, including those by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), have documented the growing incidence of substance abuse among school and college students. Hostels, coaching centres, and private accommodations in major educational cities like Kota, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad are increasingly becoming breeding grounds for drug culture. This is often exacerbated by easy online access to drugs, the glamorization of substance uses in media, and

the absence of effective counselling or mental health support within institutions⁴.

Causes of Drug Abuse among Juveniles

Drug abuse among juveniles in India is a multifaceted issue influenced by psychological, social, economic, and environmental factors. Adolescents, due to their developmental stage, are emotionally vulnerable and often face identity confusion, peer pressure, and exposure to external influences. These factors combine to push them toward experimenting with, and potentially becoming dependent on, narcotics paving the way for juvenile delinquency. Peer pressure is one of the most significant contributors. The desire for social acceptance during adolescence often compels juveniles to conform to group norms, even if it involves drug use. In settings where drug use is seen as trendy or rebellious, refusing can result in ridicule or exclusion, driving many into substance use. The family environment also plays a critical role. Children from broken homes, abusive households, or those with parents who abuse substances are more vulnerable.

Psychological distress is another core cause. Many juveniles deal with anxiety, depression, trauma, or low self-worth, which can drive them to self-medicate with drugs. In India, where mental health support for youth is inadequate and stigma is prevalent, many adolescents go untreated, increasing their vulnerability.

Media and internet influence has grown significantly in recent years. Exposure to films, music videos, and influencers that glamorize drug use can desensitize juveniles to its dangers. Moreover, the internet provides easy access to information about substances and where to acquire them, making drugs more accessible than ever before. A lack of drug education and counseling in schools is another major concern. Most Indian schools do not have dedicated programs to educate students about substance abuse. Easy availability of drugs, especially in border and urban areas, also contributes to rising juvenile drug abuse. Moreover, lack of recreational facilities and youth engagement programs leaves

adolescents with idle time and little positive engagement. This can lead to experimentation with drugs out of boredom or curiosity⁵.

Consequences: From Addiction to Crime

Drug abuse among juveniles in India has far-reaching consequences, extending beyond physical health deterioration and social isolation. The use of narcotics among youth disrupts mental stability, education, family life, and eventually leads many down a path of criminal behavior. Addiction significantly alters adolescent behavior and decision-making. Young individuals experience emotional instability, poor impulse control, and reduced judgment. Academic disengagement is typically the first observable consequence; students skip school, perform poorly, and may drop out. This educational disruption diminishes future job prospects and increases the chances of deviant lifestyle adoption.

Drug peddling is a frequent result, particularly in lower-income communities. Traffickers recruit juveniles to distribute drugs in schools and neighborhoods, offering narcotics or money in return. Exploiting the legal protections afforded under the Juvenile Justice Act, such networks groom youth into deeper criminal participation, making recovery increasingly difficult. Gang involvement and violence also stem from addiction. In high-risk neighborhoods, gangs offer protection, money, or a sense of belonging especially to drug-using youth. These gangs often normalize drug use and crime, immersing juveniles in environments where unlawful behavior becomes routine. The psychological toll is equally severe. Drug abuse increases risks of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychosis. Many commit crimes during drug-induced mental episodes or emotional distress. As addiction worsens, it also damages family relationships, often pushing juveniles out of their homes and into the streets making them easy prey for traffickers or criminal groups⁶.

India's lack of adequate rehabilitation facilities and child-friendly support systems exacerbates these issues. De-addiction centers are scarce, especially in rural areas. Stigma, ignorance, and

insufficient public resources mean that early interventions are rare, and juveniles often cycle through the justice system without proper reform or care. Legally, although juvenile offenders are supposed to be treated with reformatory approaches, in practice they often face social exclusion. Labeled as delinquents, many are denied education and employment, leaving crime as the only path forward. Alarming, drug abuse is also linked to sexual exploitation.

Drug abuse among young people significantly elevates their risk of both physical health deterioration and infectious diseases. Substance misuse impairs immune function— affecting natural killer cells, T-cells, macrophages, and cytokine response—making users more vulnerable to infections like HIV, hepatitis B and C, and other opportunistic illnesses. Intravenous drug use, in particular, is a critical pathway for transmission: sharing needles or injection equipment dramatically increases the risk for blood-borne infections, including HIV, HBV, and HCV. Beyond direct transmission, drug-induced intoxication often compromises judgment, increasing engagement in high-risk sexual behaviors that further elevate infection risk.

Moreover, prolonged substance abuse imposes additional burdens on vital organ systems and overall health. Long-term use is linked to cardiovascular disease, respiratory illnesses, cognitive impairment, organ damage, and heightened susceptibility to infections beyond those directly tied to drug use. These health consequences are especially concerning for young individuals, whose developing bodies and immune systems are more susceptible to both immediate and long-term damage⁷.

Why Traffickers Target Juveniles

Juveniles are attractive to drug traffickers for several reasons. First and foremost, under Indian law specifically the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 minors are generally treated more leniently than adults, even for serious offenses. This legal shield creates an opportunity for traffickers to use children as pawns, knowing they

are less likely to face severe penalties. Moreover, the perception that juveniles evoke less suspicion from law enforcement makes them ideal couriers and street-level dealers.

Many juveniles who are recruited into the drug trade come from vulnerable environments poverty-stricken families, dysfunctional households, or conflict-prone regions. For children growing up in slums, border areas, or communities with high unemployment and limited educational opportunities, drug networks often provide what appears to be a viable escape when compared to the children coming from high economic status. The promise of quick money, protection, status, or a sense of belonging draws them in⁸.

Types of Exploitation Involved

The exploitation of juveniles in drug trafficking goes beyond just using them as couriers or dealers. Many are forced into dangerous environments, exposed to violence, and denied access to education and healthcare. They may be used as “mules” to carry drugs across borders or state lines, often hiding substances in their bodies or belongings placing their lives at physical risk. Some girls recruited into drug networks face an additional layer of exploitation, including sexual abuse or being forced into sex work as part of their entrapment. In such cases, the lines between drug trafficking and human trafficking blur, further complicating rescue and rehabilitation efforts⁹.

Legal Framework: The Juvenile Justice Act and NDPS Act

Addressing the issue of juvenile drug abuse and its link to delinquency requires a strong legal foundation that both prevents such behavior and rehabilitates the affected youth. In India, two major legislations address the problems of narcotics and juvenile crime the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act) and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act). Together, these laws attempt to strike a balance between penal action and rehabilitation, particularly for minors involved in drug-related offenses. The

JJ Act, 2015 is the central law that governs children in conflict with the law and children in need of care and protection. It acknowledges that juvenile's individuals below 18 years are in a formative phase of emotional and psychological development. Hence, their involvement in crimes, especially due to addiction, social pressure, or poverty, should be treated through a reformatory rather than purely punitive lens. Under this Act, children caught consuming or even peddling narcotics are classified as Children in Conflict with the Law. Their cases are brought before Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) instead of regular courts. These boards include a judicial magistrate and two social workers (one of whom must be a woman), ensuring a supportive and sensitive environment for hearing cases. The JJB evaluates the child's mental state, background, and circumstances to decide on suitable interventions.

A notable feature of the JJ Act is that juveniles found guilty of minor or first-time offenses, such as drug use or small possession, are not sent to jail. Instead, they are referred to rehabilitation centers, counseling, or community service, depending on the case. The law encourages the development of individual care plans, psychological assessments, and vocational training to promote reintegration into society. Since many juvenile drug users are also victims of addiction, this approach emphasizes medical and emotional support over imprisonment. However, a controversial clause in the JJ Act allows children aged 16 to 18 years, involved in heinous crimes, to be tried as adults after a proper assessment by the JJB. This may include serious drug trafficking offenses linked to organized crime. This provision aims to prevent the misuse of legal protection by repeat or violent offenders, but critics argue it could undermine rehabilitation opportunities for children in complex circumstances¹⁰.

The NDPS Act, 1985, is India's primary law for controlling and regulating narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. It criminalizes the manufacture, possession, sale, and use of banned substances and enforces strict penalties, particularly for large-scale operations. However, when juveniles are involved, the NDPS Act is applied in conjunction

with the JJ Act. This means a child under 18 found in possession of drugs or involved in trafficking is not immediately subjected to the harsh penal provisions of the NDPS Act. Instead, their case is brought before the JJB to determine a rehabilitative course of action. However, this protection is limited in serious or repeated offenses. A crucial addition to the NDPS Act was Section 64A, introduced through an amendment in 2001. This section offers immunity from prosecution to individuals, including juveniles, who voluntarily seek treatment for addiction.

Prevention and Rehabilitation Measures

The rising nexus between narcotics and juvenile delinquency in India is a matter of grave concern. As the youth increasingly fall prey to drug addiction, there is an urgent need to not only curb access to narcotics but also implement holistic prevention and rehabilitation strategies. Tackling the problem requires a multipronged approach involving government institutions, civil society, educational systems, healthcare services, and community participation. Prevention is the first line of defense, while effective rehabilitation ensures that young offenders are reintegrated into society as productive individuals rather than being stigmatized or criminalized.

Early detection of emotional distress, peer pressure, or isolation can allow for timely intervention. Schools, on the other hand, must integrate substance abuse awareness programs into their curricula. Life skills education that includes decision-making, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence helps students build resilience against harmful influences. Many students are either misinformed or unaware of the long-term physiological, psychological, and legal consequences of drug use. Regular workshops, seminars, and interactive sessions conducted by trained professionals, psychologists, and recovering addicts can help dispel myths and create awareness. Peer mentoring systems can also be introduced where older or trained students counsel juniors, making the message more relatable and credible.

Community engagement and outreach programs are equally essential. Local NGOs, youth clubs, religious organizations, and community leaders can create awareness campaigns, promote healthy lifestyles, and organize recreational activities that offer alternatives to drug experimentation. Sports events, arts, music, and volunteerism not only keep youth engaged but also instill discipline and purpose¹¹.

Psychological counseling and therapy are central components of rehabilitation. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), group therapy, family therapy, and motivational interviewing have proven effective in treating addiction. These services should be accessible within juvenile homes, observation centers, and even schools. Family involvement in the recovery process is also crucial. When families participate in counseling, they better understand the child's struggle and are more equipped to support long-term recovery. Vocational training and skill development play a vital role in rehabilitation. Many juveniles engage in drug use and crime due to a lack of opportunities or financial hardship.

By equipping them with practical skills—such as tailoring, carpentry, graphic design, or culinary arts—they gain self-confidence and a sense of purpose. Government schemes like the Skill India Mission should be linked with juvenile justice institutions to promote economic reintegration. Post-rehabilitation support systems are equally important. Without continued guidance, counseling, and employment support, there is a risk of relapse. Juveniles returning to the same toxic environments or peer groups may fall back into substance use and criminal behavior. Therefore, structured after-care programs, halfway homes, and mentorship schemes must be in place. Probation officers, child welfare committees, and NGOs must collaborate to monitor progress and provide emotional and social support¹².

Challenges in Controlling Drug-Related Juvenile Delinquency

Controlling drug-related juvenile delinquency in India presents numerous challenges, rooted in legal, social, institutional, and infrastructural limitations. Despite the existence of robust legislation such as

the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, the practical implementation of these laws often falls short. One of the primary challenges lies in the early identification of at-risk youth. Many children and adolescents begin drug use due to peer pressure, broken family structures, exposure to crime, or lack of proper guidance. However, the absence of effective monitoring in schools, communities, and families often allows this behavior to go undetected until it escalates into criminal activity.

Lack of awareness and stigma further complicate the issue. Both juveniles and their families often hesitate to seek help due to the fear of social rejection or legal consequences. Drug addiction is still seen more as a moral failing than a medical or psychological issue, leading to isolation rather than support. This stigma discourages open conversations and delays access to treatment and rehabilitation services. Moreover, the shortage of juvenile-specific de-addiction centers and mental health professionals means that even when help is sought, it may not be available or suitable for adolescents. Many existing centers cater to adults and lack the sensitive, age-appropriate care that juvenile patients require. Another significant hurdle is the inadequate training of law enforcement personnel and juvenile justice stakeholders. Police officers, probation officers, and even juvenile justice board members sometimes lack the specialized knowledge and empathy needed to handle drug-involved juveniles appropriately. As a result, many children are subjected to criminal trials, detention, or harsh treatment instead of being guided through a reformatory and rehabilitative path. Cases have been documented where juveniles are charged under the stringent provisions of the NDPS Act without considering the more reform-oriented protections of the JJ Act¹³.

The expansion of organized drug networks also poses a major threat. Drug traffickers often exploit vulnerable minors to transport or sell narcotics, knowing that juveniles are likely to receive lighter legal penalties. These children are easily manipulated due to financial needs or emotional instability, and

once caught in this web, find it extremely difficult to escape. Law enforcement agencies struggle to dismantle such networks due to jurisdictional issues, lack of intelligence, and limited technological resources.

Case Studies

One notable case comes from Delhi in 2022, where a 16-year-old boy was arrested for his involvement in a series of mobile snatching incidents. Upon investigation, it was found that the juvenile was addicted to synthetic drugs, including MDMA and LSD, which he sourced through social media platforms and local peddlers. The boy confessed that his criminal activities were aimed at financing his addiction. His parents, both daily wage laborers, were unaware of his drug use and assumed his behavior changes were due to adolescence. The Juvenile Justice Board referred him to a rehabilitation center after determining he had no prior criminal record. This case highlights how substance abuse can push juveniles toward property crimes to sustain their drug habits and shows how social media has become a tool for drug procurement.

Another case involved a group of three minors in Mumbai in 2021, aged between 15 and 17, who were caught trafficking cannabis and tramadol tablets. They were acting as couriers for a local drug syndicate operating near railway stations and bus terminals. The syndicate had intentionally recruited school dropouts from low-income families, exploiting their need for money and lack of awareness about the legal consequences. The Juvenile Justice Board, after a detailed social background report, found that the boys had been victims of exploitation and recommended rehabilitation rather than punishment. This case underlines how juveniles are often used as pawns in larger drug operations, with organized criminals targeting the most vulnerable for high-risk tasks.

In Punjab's border areas, a region plagued by drug smuggling due to its proximity to international borders, several reports have emerged of juveniles acting as "mules" to transport heroin and other substances across districts. One such case involved

a 17-year-old boy from Amritsar who was caught with heroin worth ₹10 lakh. Interrogation revealed that he had been recruited by a known smuggler in the village, and was promised a motorcycle in return for completing the job. With little understanding of the legal risk and desperate for social validation, he agreed. Unfortunately, in this case, the Juvenile Justice Board recommended that he be tried as an adult under the heinous offences clause of the JJ Act due to the commercial value of the drugs. This case showcases the tension between reformative and punitive measures in situations involving serious drug crimes.

Another tragic case from Bengaluru in 2020 involved a 14-year-old boy who died from a drug overdose in a government school toilet. The post-mortem revealed traces of inhalants and sedatives. A subsequent investigation exposed a local paan shop selling narcotic-laced candies and cough syrups to students. The child's parents had approached school authorities earlier about their son's strange behavior, but no action was taken. This case drew attention to the lack of vigilance in educational institutions and the ease with which minors can access harmful substances, even in controlled environments.

Discussion

The intersection of narcotics and juvenile delinquency is a pressing concern in India's criminal justice and public health landscape. With a growing number of youth falling victim to drug addiction, the consequences are visible not only in deteriorating mental and physical health but also in increased involvement in criminal activities. Adolescents often face peer pressure, emotional instability, family neglect, academic stress, and exposure to toxic environments, making them easy targets for drug use. In many cases, drug consumption begins as an experiment or an escape mechanism, but it gradually leads to dependence. As addiction progresses, it often pushes juveniles toward illegal activities such as theft, drug peddling, assault, or even organized crime to fund their substance use. This establishes a clear link between drug abuse and criminal behavior

among youth. The normalization of drug use in some social circles and the influence of media also contribute to increased narcotic consumption. Online platforms often glamorize substance use, making it appear trendy or rebellious.

From a socio-economic perspective, poverty, unemployment, and lack of educational or recreational facilities are major risk factors. In urban slums and rural areas, where access to quality education and structured support systems is limited, children often grow up in environments marked by crime, addiction, and neglect. Drug mafias and traffickers exploit this vulnerability by recruiting minors for drug transportation and sale, knowing the legal system treats juveniles with leniency. This exploitation transforms young victims into offenders, perpetuating a dangerous cycle of crime and substance abuse. While the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 provide the legislative framework, there is often a lack of clarity in implementation¹⁴.

Juveniles involved in drug cases may be treated either as victims in need of rehabilitation or as offenders deserving punishment, depending on the discretion of authorities. Another major gap is the lack of specialized rehabilitation facilities for juveniles. Most de-addiction centers are designed for adults and are ill-equipped to handle the unique psychological and developmental needs of adolescents. The scarcity of vocational training, aftercare services, and community reintegration programs further exacerbates the problem. Moreover, societal stigma associated with addiction and criminal records discourages families and communities from seeking help.

Drug abuse among juveniles in India is not merely a legal issue but a complex socio-psychological and economic crisis. Effective intervention requires a shift from punitive measures to preventive, rehabilitative, and inclusive strategies. Early identification of at-risk youth, school and community-based awareness programs, trained counselors, and youth-friendly de-addiction facilities are essential. Moreover, a coordinated effort among

law enforcement, healthcare, education, and child welfare agencies is vital to break the cycle of drugs and delinquency. Only then can India truly address the roots of this alarming issue and secure a healthier, safer future for its youth¹⁵.

Conclusion

The growing link between narcotics and juvenile delinquency in India is a critical issue that demands immediate and sustained attention. Drug abuse among adolescents is not merely an individual behavioral issue but a broader social. Adolescents, being in a crucial stage of psychological development, are highly impressionable. The use of narcotics for emotional escape or social acceptance can impair their judgment and increase the chances of becoming involved in criminal activities like theft, drug peddling, or gang violence.

Despite having legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice Act and the NDPS Act, India struggles with effective implementation. Juveniles are often treated punitively rather than rehabilitative, and the lack of dedicated counseling, de-addiction centers, and reintegration programs hampers long-term recovery. Addressing this issue requires a multi-dimensional approach, involving early education, better mental health services, community-based interventions, and legal reforms that focus on rehabilitation over punishment. Collaboration between schools, law enforcement, NGOs, and families is crucial.

Recommendations

While existing laws like the Juvenile Justice Act (2015) and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (1985) provide a foundational framework, the rising involvement of youth in drug-related crimes suggests the need for a more integrated and proactive approach. The following recommendations aim to strengthen prevention, intervention, enforcement, and rehabilitation mechanisms:

- Comprehensive Drug Education in Schools
- Early Intervention through School and Community-Based Programs

- Strengthening Family Support Systems
- Legal Reforms and Enforcement Sensitization
- Improving Access to De-Addiction and Rehabilitation Centers
- Socio-Economic Development Programs
- Strengthening Coordination Between Stakeholders
- Youth Engagement Through Constructive Platforms

Ethical Clearance : NA

Conflict of Interest : NA

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