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Understanding the fallout of substance abuse on rural Punjab

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Abstract

Punjab is entangled in a continuous cycle of substance abuse, with more and more people falling into addiction each day. Changing cultural values, worsening economic conditions and weaker social ties are major contributor to the problem. The study has been conducted in four districts (Tarn Taran, Patiala, Moga, and Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar) of Punjab state. From eight government drug de-addiction centres, 30 abusers were chosen to make the sample of 240. Study found serious health issues of taking substance abuse, including liver diseases, lung diseases, diarrhea and weakened immunity. Psychological effects included insecurity, stress, and anxiety. They had a conflicting family environment involving abuse and separation and divorce. Sixty three percent were stigmatized and experienced social withdrawal and engaged in anti-social activities of theft and drug peddling. Respondents mortgaged land, material possessions for arranging money. So, there were extensive and destructive impact of substance abuse on the individuals, their families, and society. Comprehensive policies and preventive strategies are required to address this problem.

Keywords: Impact, substance, abuse, rural, physical, psychological, economic, and social

Introduction

Substance abuse has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns of present society, often regarded as both a deviant behavior and a significant social issue (Dumain 2020, Sharma *et al* 2017 and Sahu and Sahu 2012) [4, 17, 15]. Deviance, as outlined by sociologist Merton in 1938 [12], involves a socially unacceptable behavior, and substance abuse is often a visible manifestation of such deviance. It reflects an individual's maladjustment to societal expectations, leading them to engage in behaviour that deviates from accepted norms and values. Substance abuse involves individuals' choices to use substances for non-medical reasons, often leading to significant physical, mental, and social consequences (Buddy 2022 and Murthy *et al* 2010) [2, 13].

The destructive impact of substance abuse on both personal and social well-being of the individuals is far-reaching. The extensive use of substances such as alcohol, opium, and heroin in rural communities has led to a variety of negative outcomes. According to Hindustan Times (2023) [8], substance abuse affects nearly 14.7 per cent of Punjab's population, with alcohol being the most commonly abused substance. The effects of substance abuse on personal well-being include severe health complications, such as liver diseases, mental health disorders like depression and anxiety, and an increased risk of mortality. Rural areas are particularly vulnerable, with a significant number of individuals facing poverty, unemployment, and lack of

access to healthcare, further compounding the impact of substance abuse.

Social consequences of substance abuse are equally disturbing. Families often experience emotional distress, domestic violence, and financial instability as a result of a one's addiction. These social issues are worsened by the stigma surrounding this habit, making it harder for individuals to seek help. The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (2019) [14] revealed that mental health disorders are much more common in rural areas, having a morbidity rate of 15.00 per cent, which is much higher than the national average. Additionally, substance abuse leads to an increased crime rate, as people turn to illegal activities to fund their habit of addiction.

To address the issue of substance abuse in the state urgent intervention at government and community level is needed. So, the present paper is an effort to throw light on the fallout of substance abuse in Punjab state.

Materials and Methods

A sample of 240 respondents was systematically selected from three cultural regions (Majha, Malwa and Doaba) of Punjab. From these regions, four districts *viz.* Tarn Taran, Patiala, Moga, and Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar were purposively chosen. Then from each selected district, two government operated drug de-addiction centres were randomly selected. Thus, eight de-addiction centres were selected for the study. Thirty substance abusers were

randomly taken from each centre to ensure a diverse and representative sample of the affected population. Data collection was conducted through a structured interview schedule.

Results

The impacts of substance abuse on people, families, and society are widespread and complex. Substance abuse represents a significant global public health challenge, with detrimental effects on both individual and societal well-being. It is associated with a range of physical, psychological, and social disorders, including chronic diseases, mental health disorders, and impaired cognitive functioning. The pervasive nature of substance abuse contributes to socioeconomic instability, increases healthcare burdens, and exacerbates criminal activity. Effective prevention, rehabilitation programs, and strict law enforcement are essential actions that are needed to lessen the significant impact of substance.

Table 1: Physical impact of substance abuse Multiple Responses

Physical impact	Frequency	Percentage
Muscle loss	116	48.33
Shivering	151	62.91
Exacerbation of pain	109	45.41
Fits	22	9.17
Insomnia	136	56.67
Dark circles under eyes	111	46.25
Slurred speech	115	47.91
Clumsiness and unsteady gait	110	45.83
Health issues*	116	48.33
Weight fluctuation	127	52.91
Weakened immunity	77	32.08
Stroke	59	24.58
Mouth ulcer	78	32.50
Collapsed veins and blood vessel	46	19.16
Loss of appetite	104	43.33
Liver diseases	165	68.75
Lung disease	97	40.41

*Diarrhea, low/high blood pressure, low/high sugar level etc.

Substance abuse had a profound and widespread impact on the body, affecting nearly every organ system and causing a range of severe physical health problems. During study efforts were made to find out the physical impact of substance abuse on individuals and it was found (Table 1) that the majority of respondents (68.75%) suffered from liver diseases, a severe health consequence, leading to conditions such as Hepatitis B, C cirrhosis, liver failure, or even liver cancer. Body shivering was observed in 62.91 per cent of the respondents, which occurred as withdrawal symptoms as the body struggled to adjust to the absence of substances like alcohol and opioids when they tried to discontinue it. Insomnia was another problem for 56.67 per cent of the respondents, especially for stimulant and alcohol abusers as it disrupted the body's natural sleep cycle. This lack of rest, combined with dehydration and malnutrition, also led to dark circles under the eyes in 46.25 per cent of the respondents, which is a visible physical sign of having substance abuse.

Weight fluctuation was seen in 52.91 per cent of

respondents, where substances either suppressed appetite or triggered cravings, leading to unhealthy weight loss or gain. Loss of appetite was particularly concerning for 43.33 per cent of respondents, it led to malnutrition and weakened the body's ability to recover. Muscle loss was common among 48.33 per cent of respondents, due to poor nutrition, inactivity, and hormonal disruptions caused by long-term substance abuse, resulting in significant weakness. Additionally, exacerbation of pain (45.41%) was frequently experienced, as opioids could worsen existing pain conditions, or long-term use caused new pain due to inflammation or nerve damage. Slurred speech (47.91%) and clumsiness (45.83%) were often common, as alcohol and other depressants impaired neurological and motor functions, making coordination difficult and complicating even basic tasks.

Substance abuse also caused a variety of other health issues (48.33%), such as gastrointestinal problems like diarrhea, irregular blood pressure, and electrolyte imbalances. Lung disease was also a major concern for 40.41 per cent of respondents, especially for smokers or those who inhaled substances like methamphetamine and heroin. Substance abuse weakens the immune system (32.08%) and made people more vulnerable to infections and illnesses. Repeated intravenous drug use led to collapsed veins and blood vessels (19.16%), increasing the risk of infections and scarring which may result to HIV in future. Stroke (24.58%) and mouth ulcers (32.50%) were also common due to poor blood circulation, dehydration, poor hygiene and constant irritation from substance abuse caused painful sores in the mouth. High blood pressure caused by substances led to cardiovascular problems.

Substance abuse causes serious and widespread damage to the body, affecting physical health, strength, and overall well-being. It weakens the immune system, harms vital organs, and makes it difficult for the body to recover even from minor illnesses. The harmful effects build up over time, often going unnoticed until they become severe. This highlights the importance of early intervention, proper medical care, and community support system.

Table 2: Psychological impact of substance abuse

Psychological Impact	Always	Sometimes	Never	Mean Score	Rank
Stress	113 (55.41)	116 (48.33)	11 (4.58)	2.42	II
Anxiety	105 (43.75)	119 (82.91)	16 (6.66)	2.37	III
Mood swings	104 (43.33)	123 (51.25)	13 (5.41)	2.37	III
Forgetfulness	87 (36.25)	139 (57.91)	14 (5.83)	2.30	IV
Boredom	88 (36.66)	124 (51.66)	28 (11.66)	2.25	VI
Insecurity	125 (52.08)	94 (39.16)	21 (8.75)	2.43	I
Suicidal thoughts	82 (34.16)	90 (37.50)	68 (28.33)	2.05	VII
Distortion of senses	104 (43.33)	95 (39.58)	41 (17.08)	2.26	V

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate percentage

Substance abuse not only harms the physical health but also has a profound psychological impact on individuals. It affects the way individuals think, feel, and manage daily life. Over the time, this mental strain can become overwhelming and make it harder for them to recover. The psychological impact affect individuals in various ways, as shown in Table 2. Insecurity issue remained on top as 52.08 per cent of respondents reported that they always had such feelings. Substance abuse often led to loss of self-esteem and a sense of vulnerability, which contributed to feeling of insecurity. Stress ranked second, affecting 55.41 per cent of the respondents. Stress levels increased, lead heightened emotional and mental strain. Anxiety remained a common issue for 43.75 per cent of respondents, while 82.91 per cent indicated it occurred sometimes. The constant worry and fear associated with substance abuse resulted in anxiety, made it a key psychological concern.

Mood swings ranked third, 43.33 per cent of respondents experienced it always. Mood instability caused by substance abuse was a significant psychological issue, leading to unpredictable emotions, irritability, and difficulties in maintaining balanced relationships. Forgetfulness was also other issue, always faced by 36.25 per cent of the respondents. Memory problem linked to cognitive impairment caused by long-term substance abuse, made it difficult for individuals to concentrate or remember daily tasks. Distortion of senses, such as altered perceptions and

hallucinations were reported by 43.33 per cent of the respondents. This psychological effect was especially prevalent among those who abused hallucinogens or other mind-altering substances. The distorted sense of reality contributed to overall mental confusion associated with substance abuse.

Boredom had been always an issue for 36.66 per cent and more than half felt it sometimes. This feeling of emptiness or lack of purpose was often caused by the isolating nature of substance abuse, led to dissatisfaction and frustration. Suicidal thought was a serious concern for 34.16 per cent respondents. They always carried the feeling of suicide and 37.50 per cent felt so sometimes. These thoughts were often triggered by the deep psychological distress and hopelessness that accompanies substance abuse. They blame themselves for all their condition and wanted to end their life.

The psychological impact of substance abuse were widespread and varied, with insecurity, stress, and anxiety being the most commonly experienced issues. These psychological effects were deeply linked with the physical consequences of substance abuse, emphasizing the importance of addressing mental health concerns during the treatment of addiction.

Table 3: Economic impact of substance abuse

Economic Impact	Frequency	Percentage
Unmet economic family needs	184	76.66
Unable to repay borrowed money	71	29.58
Mortgage household items/ vehicles/ ornaments/ agricultural equipment's/ agricultural land / house	218	90.83
Lost job	76	31.66
Irregular employment	78	32.50
Medical expenses	198	82.50

The economic impact of substance abuse was more destructive, as it led to various financial hardships. Data given in Table 3 show that majority of the respondents (90.83%) mortgaged household items, vehicles, jewellery, farm equipment or agricultural land to arrange the money for substances. This act showed how deeply the issue is affecting them, as they did not give a second thought before selling their belongings just to feed their addiction. This had put them at a significant risk of losing homes, which intensified their financial strain emotional distress and relationships.

High cost of medical care was a significant financial burden on 82.50 per cent respondents which means they struggled with the expenses associated with treatment and managing health conditions related to substance abuse. Substance abusers often had a range of health issues (physical and mental) that required medical assistance. Ongoing medical costs for treating substance abuse related health problems drained their financial resources, contributing to a cycle of debt and financial instability. As a result, these medical expenses not only affected their health and recovery but also

added to the overall economic burden to the family. More than three fourth of the respondents (76.66%) were unable to fulfil the primary economic needs of their families due to all these secondary burdens. Family members suffered a lot in the absence of a lack of essential resources and basic human needs.

About thirty percent of the respondents (29.58%) were unable to repay the borrowed money, loans and debts taken from different sources. Reasons for being unable to repay debts were low income, no job/work, poor money management etc. Around 31.66 per cent of respondents lost their jobs due to the habit of substance abuse. Physical and mental health issues caused by substance abuse, such as lack of focus, fatigue, and poor decision-making, made it harder for them to do their jobs well. About one third (32.50%) had to face irregular or unstable work/ job. They struggled to find a consistent, stable job and sometimes faced periods of unemployment. This lack of steady work made it difficult for them to earn enough money to cover basic needs of food, housing, and medical expenses.

Table 4: Impact of substance abuse on the families of respondents

Impact on families	Always	Sometimes	Never	Mean Score	Rank
Conflict with spouse- (n=105)					
Routine quarrel	57 (54.29)	42 (40.00)	06 (5.71)	2.48	I
Beating spouse	22 (20.96)	49 (46.67)	34 (32.38)	1.88	IV
Threat of divorce/Separated	56 (53.33)	40 (38.09)	09 (8.57)	2.44	II
Emotional/ Mental abuse	31 (29.52)	62 (59.04)	12 (11.42)	2.18	III
Conflict with parents-(n=190)					
Routine quarrel	93(48.94)	84(44.21)	13(6.84)	2.42	I
Beating	17(8.95)	93(48.95)	80(42.10)	1.66	IV
Verbal abuse	61(32.10)	80(42.10)	49(25.80)	2.06	III
Pressure to give money/ land/house	81(42.63)	46(24.21)	63(33.15)	2.09	II
Conflict with children- (n=95)					
Verbal abuse	31 (32.63)	36 (37.90)	28 (29.47)	2.03	II
Beating	17 (17.90)	28 (29.47)	50 (52.63)	1.67	IV
Delay in school fees	40 (42.10)	33 (34.74)	22 (23.16)	2.18	I
Delaying in children's marriage	07 (7.37)	02 (2.10)	86 (90.53)	1.16	V
Children's mental health	22 (23.16)	26 (27.37)	47 (49.47)	1.73	III

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicate percentage

Data in Table 4 provides a detailed analysis of the conflict faced by respondents with their spouses, parents, and children, highlighting the deep and varied impact on family. Data identified most common conflict was with spouses in the form of arguments and quarrels. Fifty four percent of respondents reported that frequent disagreements and quarrels with their spouses occurred always. These constant quarrels created an environment of emotional strain and tension that led to dissatisfaction and instability in the relationship. Forty percent of them had such arguments sometimes. Threat of divorce was a pertinent issue as revealed by more than fifty percent (53.33%) of respondents. The constant fear and threat of separation contributed adversely to the emotional and psychological health of both the partners.

In terms of emotional and mental abuse, 29.52 per cent of respondents always had such treatment from their spouses. Sixty percent said they experienced emotional abuse sometimes, indicating that substance abuse was not only a constant source of conflict but also caused long lasting emotional harm.

Physical abuse, like being beaten by spouse, was less common but still reported by 20.96 per cent of the respondents, although it was not frequent as verbal or emotional were. Data showed that 6.67 per cent of the respondents were separated from their spouses. Disputed marital relationship, caused a range of conflicts, from frequent arguments to threats of divorce, emotional abuse, physical violence. These issues not only lead to an unhealthy family environment but also contributed to the overall instability and emotional damage to both partners as well as to children. This cycle of conflict highlighted the broader societal and personal costs of substance abuse, particularly on the most intimate aspects of an individual's

life. In these cases, the relationships were irreparably damaged, and the addiction played the central factor in the breakdown. Emotional distress caused by such separations had profound and lasting effects on respondents, left them isolated and further entrenched them to the challenges of addiction.

Similar kind of issues were found among respondents and their parents. Routine quarrels was reported by 48.94 per cent of the respondents. Forty two percent of the respondents said they pressurized their parents for money and property. This pressure was likely a result of the financial strain of addiction, leading individuals to seek financial support from parents. It put significant emotional and financial burden on both the parties. Verbal abuse towards parents was reported by one-third of the respondents (32.10%). It involved insult, shouting, and foul language, damaging the child-parent ties.

For kids, witnessing one parent into slavery of substances can be distressing and puzzling. They felt isolated and lonely in their own family, and faced some kind of assault too by the abusers. Delayed school fees was reported by 42.10 per cent of respondents. Verbal abuse towards children was reported by nearly one-third (32.63%) of respondents. It included shouting, and harsh language, often stems from the emotional instability. The constant tension and frustration led parents to lash out at their children, damaging their emotional development and the parent-child bond. Physical violence, though less prevalent, was still a concerning issue for 17.90 per cent of the respondents as they always engaged in physical violence with their children. This included hitting or physically punishing children, which left long lasting prints on their soul. The fear and trauma from such incidents contributed to long-term psychological issues of anxiety, depression, and a lack of trust in father.

Substance abuse had profound effect on the family lives of respondents, causing regular conflict with spouses, parents, and children. Marital relations were particularly strained, with constant arguments, emotional and physical abuse. Addiction often led to frustration and anger, towards family members.

Table 5: Social impact of substance abuse on the respondents

Social Impact	Always	Sometimes	Never	Mean Score	Rank
Social withdrawal	136 (56.66)	86 (35.83)	18 (7.50)	2.52	II
Unmet family needs	21 (8.75)	64 (26.66)	28 (11.66)	1.93	V
Problem with friends	70 (29.17)	105 (43.75)	65 (27.08)	2.02	IV
Imbalance between home / academics/ job	116 (48.33)	66 (27.50)	58 (24.16)	2.24	III
Problems with boss/ colleagues	57 (23.75)	33 (13.75)	150 (62.50)	1.61	VII
Problems with neighbour	30 (12.50)	57 (23.75)	153 (63.75)	1.48	VIII
Conflict with sarpanch/ panch/ any local leader	30 (12.50)	44 (18.3)	166 (69.16)	1.43	IX
Anti- social activities	92 (38.33)	17 (7.08)	131 (54.58)	1.83	VI
Stigmatized by society	153 (63.75)	75 (31.25)	12 (5.00)	2.58	I

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicate percentage

Substance abuse had a significant social impact on the respondents, affecting various aspects of their lives. Social stigma imposed by society on them emerged as a major challenge for them to overcome (Table 5). Sixty three percent of respondents reported that society always stigmatized them as *Nasedi*, *Druggie*, *Junkie* etc., while 31.25 per cent sometimes experienced such type of stigma. They encountered judgments, discrimination, and exclusion from social circles which left them embarrassed and lonelier. This stigma had made it difficult for them to reintegrate into society, reinforcing the cycle of addiction and isolation.

Data revealed that social withdrawal was another problem faced by 56.66 per cent of respondents, as they feel isolated, disconnected from social activities. The withdrawal was not only by family and friends but it was also from broader community engagements, further exacerbated their dependence on substances as a form of escape. There were 48.33 per cent of respondents who always had difficulties in balancing their home, academic, and work responsibilities and 27.50 per cent of them faced it sometimes. They had difficulties in managing different spheres of lives that affect their productivity, relationships, and health. Substance abuse also led to problems with friends as divulged by 29.17 per cent of respondents, that they always faced difficulties with their peer group, and 43.75 per cent experienced such issues sometimes. Overt misunderstandings between peer group lead to eventual breakdown of friendships, which made them feel more lonely and isolated. Challenges at work place were also common for them. Problems with colleagues and bosses were reported by 23.75 per cent of the respondents. These conflicts were linked to lack of focus, mood swings, and erratic behavior.

Social problems faced by respondents also extended to issues with neighbors and local leaders. It was found that 12.50 per cent of respondents were always in conflicts with their neighbors, and same percentage with local leaders, such as the sarpanch or *panch*. These behaviors caused disruptions in the local community and strained relationships with those around them. Further, it was found that 38.33 per cent of respondents engaged in antisocial activities such as theft, snatching and drug peddling, showcasing their disruptive and harmful behavior. Involvement in such crimes had made them criminals from substance abusers. The emotional and psychological toll of addiction was evident in the disruptions to daily life, relationships, and social functioning, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of substance abuse on individual's social life.

Discussion

The impact of substance abuse on individuals, families, and society is widespread and complex. Substance abuse lead to severe consequences, including declining physical and mental health, increased anxiety and depression, cognitive decline, and a reduced ability to live a fulfilling life. Similar findings were reported by Sahu and Sahu (2012) ^[15], Gopiram and Kishore (2014) ^[7], and Aryal (2021) ^[11], who concluded that respondents experienced emotional fluctuation, mental health issues. These emotional and psychological instabilities also affect families and other relations. Families of substance abusers had marital

instability, broken households, and strained relationships due to emotional turmoil, financial difficulties, and domestic violence. Children are particularly affected, as they witness the abuse and often develop behavioral issues as they grow up.

Durkheim's anomie theory (1893) ^[5] explains that substance abuse often result from breakdown of societal norms, lack of social integration, and economic challenges. Individuals feel disconnected from traditional values, took the path of substances to cope with stress and alienation. Theory suggests that reinforcing social bonds and creating effective value systems can guide individuals toward healthier coping mechanisms.

Kaur and Gupta (2015) ^[109] found similar results, emphasizing the trauma faced by families of individuals struggling with addiction. They faced domestic violence, neglect, and breakdown in trust and communication. Children of substance abusers are especially vulnerable, often facing emotional struggles and developmental challenges. Sharma *et al* (2017) ^[17] also highlighted the emotional and financial toll on family members, especially spouses and children, who suffered from neglect or abuse by the addicted individual.

Studies by Dhillon (2016) ^[3], Kaur (2017) ^[9], Maan *et al* (2018) ^[11], and Sharma and Joshi (2022) ^[16] found that families of substance abusers experienced a decline in social status, while crime rates such as sexual harassment, assaults, and murders rose. Stigma surrounding addiction further discouraged individuals from seeking treatment, thus perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Ghuman *et al* (2024) ^[6] revealed 35.61 per cent of respondents spent over Rs. 800 daily on substances, often mortgaging their land, homes, household items, and jewelry to cover the costs. As they failed to repay the loans, their debt grew, leading them to engage in illegal activities, including drug trafficking etc. Substance abuse increases poverty and social inequality by contributing in to crime, social instability, higher healthcare costs, and reduced productivity. they lost their sense of self-worth due to substance abuse and felt increasingly isolated from society.

Substance abuse resulted in a range of social, economic, psychological, and physical consequences, abandonment, fear, anxiety, and guilt, loss of trust. It also contributes to mental stress, poor decision-making, financial problems, and social isolation.

Conclusion

Substance abuse has become a serious problem, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. It causes major damage to a person's body, mind, and overall health, leading to many short and long-term health issues. This is not just a personal issue, it affects families, communities, and the entire social system. To tackle this problem, there is a need for well-planned approaches that include raising public awareness, building strong support systems, offering easy access to treatment, and taking firm action from both the government and society. Important steps should include better healthcare and rehab services, educating people, especially the youth, about the risks of substance abuse, and promoting mental health. These efforts can help reduce the personal and social costs of substance abuse and improve the overall quality of life in rural Punjab.

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