



# Growing Drug Issues in Schools in Fiji and the Pacific Region

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**Abstract.** The growing prevalence of drug-related issues in schools and communities poses significant challenges to social stability, health, and education systems. This problem, particularly pronounced in regions like Fiji and the Pacific, has escalated due to factors such as increased accessibility, socio-economic disparities, and insufficient awareness programs. Schools, as pivotal institutions for youth development, are witnessing a rise in incidents of drug possession and abuse, jeopardizing both educational outcomes and student well-being. Simultaneously, communities are grappling with the broader societal impacts, including crime and health crises. This paper explores the contributing factors to drug proliferation, the challenges in addressing these issues, and the importance of community-driven and policy-based interventions. Drawing on case studies from Fiji and the Pacific, it highlights the need for collaborative efforts among governments, schools, and communities to combat this growing menace and ensure a safer, healthier environment for future generations.

**Index Terms-** drugs, mental health, healthy, depression, crime, rehabilitation, awareness  
Peer pressure, anxiety, dose, counselling, awareness, enforcement, substance  
Abuse

## I. Introduction

Drug abuse has emerged as a critical challenge for schools and communities worldwide, undermining educational systems, public health, and societal cohesion. In Fiji and the Pacific region, the issue is compounded by geographical isolation, economic disparities, and limited resources for enforcement and rehabilitation. Schools are increasingly becoming arenas where students encounter and experiment with substances such as marijuana, synthetic drugs, and prescription medications. This not only disrupts learning environments but also fosters long-term health and behavioural consequences for the affected youth.

Communities bear the brunt of the wider societal impacts, with drug-related crimes, health crises, and economic burdens becoming prevalent. In Fiji, reports of drug use in schools during public events and the identification of "red zones" for drug accessibility underline the urgent need for intervention. These challenges highlight the interconnected nature of individual, community, and systemic factors driving drug issues.

Efforts to address the problem require a multi-faceted approach. Policy frameworks must prioritize education, awareness, and enforcement, while



community-driven solutions must actively engage stakeholders, including parents, religious leaders, and local organizations. By integrating these strategies, Fiji and the Pacific can mitigate the impacts of drug abuse and foster healthier, more resilient communities.

The primary focus of school is to provide children and adolescents with a quality education. However, various factors can pose challenges in how students interact with and learn in the education system. Particularly, substance use in schools can lead to educational disruptions and cause emotional trauma for staff and students. Reported substance use among young people declined in 2021 and remained stable in 2022 but overdoses increased. Contemporary societal changes have introduced three complicating factors in tackling substance use in schools, which are mental health challenges, social media utilization and the opioid crisis.

It has been proven that drug use is dangerous. It can harm your brain and body, sometimes permanently. It can hurt the people around you, including friends, families, kids, and unborn babies. Drug use can also lead to addiction.

Drug abuse cases in schools are increasing, says Substance Abuse Advisory Council acting CEO Josua Naisele. Mr Naisele told the Fiji Principals Association Conference and AGM in Suva last week that thousands of cases were recorded last year. "As you are all aware, there are licit and illicit drugs that are currently being used or abused by the students in schools," he said. "Some new trends are currently happening in schools. If you look at alcohol and other drugs cases in 2021 to 2023, 1959 cases were recorded in 2021, 2022 recorded 1643 cases, and in 2023 it went up to 2049. "In secondary schools last year, it went up to 2500. "In primary schools, 1000 cases were recorded. Before we used to have a lot of drug cases in secondary schools, but now primary schools are also coming up. "So, the types of drugs we are dealing with here are hard drugs, marijuana (786), methylated spirit (four), home brew (111). Home brew cases come mostly from maritime schools." Mr Naisele said they also recorded 387 cases of children abusing inhalants, hand sanitizers and premix. Also recorded were 256 cases of alcohol consumption, 2353 cases of suki, 1407 cases of tobacco and 240 cases of kava consumption. Mr Naisele said no methamphetamine use was reported last year, however, two cases were recorded early this year. ('The Fiji Times' dated 6<sup>th</sup> May 2024).

The Education Ministry has referred over 3000 cases involving students to the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council in drug-related issues in the past 12 months. Minister Aseri Radrodro revealed this while responding to questions on drugs being found on school premises. Radrodro says they are currently working with other ministries and departments to introduce drug testing kits in schools. He adds this will help mitigate drug issues in schools. "As you know, drugs have been a big topic amongst students in the school system and those that are not in the school system, but I like to reemphasize that we have an existing platform regarding students found with drugs in school. The head of schools needs to follow this policy." Radrodro adds that everyone has a responsibility to monitor and do regular checks on students who behave suspiciously. He also reminded the heads of schools to uphold the policy



regarding drugs in the school system, which is currently a national issue. (FBC New, 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2024).

On the issue of drugs, the Deputy Secretary for Primary/Secondary Education admitted that it is an undeniable fact that drugs are being brought to school by students and also used in school by students as has been highlighted in the media. The social environment students go through every day, the people they meet and the different experiences they go through play a major role in the type of students they become. The drug cases received according to reports from schools highlight that students get drugs from their friends or other adults and not parents as highlighted in the media. If parents are involved as highlighted in the media then Police may have this information through their own investigation.

At least, the Permanent Secretary for Education, Mr Bure stated that the drug issue is perceived as a mental health problem due to the complex socio-economic issues students and parents face every day. “It can be addressed professionally and psychologically through proper mental health support from the parents, guardians, community, faith-based organisations, civil societies and government,” he added. According to Mr Bure, the Ministry of Education with its drug policy and procedures in place, believes that the drug problem is legally and adequately addressed, whether it involves a student being a drug perpetrator or a drug user. “The Ministry of Education is working closely with other stakeholders and government departments in supporting any student and parents who are involved in any drug cases to ensure they recover from the harm,” he added.

Additionally, the Ministry also engages the services of the faith-based leaders, chaplains in guiding students spiritually. Daily devotion is compulsory in every school where students are taught on the importance of spiritual development. School chaplain and faith-based leaders also go through training on child protection, behaviour management, addressing social problems faced by students and basic counselling skills. The Ministry of Education’s counselling and mentoring services are provided by the 4 Divisional Counsellors, 4 SAAC Counsellors, 30 SAAC Mentors, 30 MOE counsellors in schools and other NGOs providing counselling services. These counsellors provide counselling support to students in the 9 education districts through proper coordination and collaboration. The establishment of district counsellors and large school counsellors are in the Ministry plan.

The students involved with drugs, or any disciplinary issues are provided with all necessary support in schools with proper referral, case management and follow up. The spot checks have been found to be very effective in the schools that are doing it to ensure the safety of other students and teachers in schools. The government through the Counter Narcotics Strategy is working closely with partners in addressing the drug issue in Fiji. This involves improved legislations and policies, addressing supply, demand and harm reduction strategy, Drug Court, Drug Rehabilitation centre and effective, efficient professional service providers.

Mr Bure asserted that, “rather than focusing on the problem, we must focus on the resolution to improve our educational systems so that all students access quality



education and no child is left behind.” He added that, “acknowledging these complexities is essential as we strive to create an effective response to this pressing issue and ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed in their educational pursuits.” Collaboration among parents, guardians, community organisations, faith-based groups and government entities is critical to providing the necessary support framework for the children of Fiji.

According to the data provided by Assistant Minister for Education, 8000 people were referred to St Giles Hospital in 2023 due to mental health related issues. He said that recently, students were found to be using and abusing drugs in schools from tobacco, alcohol, marijuana while methamphetamine is now infiltrating schools. The Substance Abuse Advisory Council reported 2900 cases of other drugs in schools in 2022 and 3700 cases in 2023. In all cases the Substance Abuse Advisory Council provided intervention through counselling and mentoring hence the risks are minimized. Police are arresting drug dealers and users nearly every day on either green or white drugs where marijuana related cases in 2022 was 1193 and increased to 1483 cases in 2023.

As substance abuse continues to plague schools and communities, a heartbreaking case has resurfaced involving a Year 8 student who tragically lost his life after inhaling glue while traveling on a bus to Suva Bus Stand. The incident took a grim turn when the glue tin became stuck to the student’s mouth. Despite efforts to save him, the student was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital. This alarming case was highlighted during the Central Division Drug-Free Awareness Campaign by Vilisimani Rakikau, an Alcohol and Other Drugs Counsellor with the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council. Rakikau also shared another disturbing case involving a Year 10 student who suffered severe intoxication from marijuana and glue abuse. The student’s condition deteriorated to the point of requiring treatment at Saint Giles Hospital, where he was diagnosed with a disorder caused by substance abuse. Tragically, the student sustained permanent brain damage as a result.

Dr. Odille Chang, a psychiatrist in Fiji, highlights that drug-related hospital admissions have seen a near three-fold increase in recent years. She emphasizes the role of community-driven, culturally sensitive strategies in addressing this escalating problem. Local communities, schools, and policymakers are called upon to tackle both licit (alcohol, tobacco) and illicit drugs through education, prevention programs, and targeted interventions.

**Table: 1 Drug Issues in Schools and Communities in Fiji: Data and Observations**

Category	Details	Source
Reported Cases in Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2021: 2,400 cases</li> <li>- 2022: 2,800 cases</li> <li>- 2023: 3,500 cases</li> </ul> <p>Trend shows an annual increase in drug-related incidents among students.</p>	Substance Abuse Advisory Council Fiji Times
Types of Substances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Marijuana and synthetic drugs are the most common.</li> <li>- Students often start with licit substances like tobacco, kava, and alcohol.</li> </ul>	Fiji Times, Advisory Council Fiji Times



Impact on Schools	Disruption of learning environments. - Increased disciplinary cases. - Identification of high-risk "red zones" near schools.	Advisory Council & Fiji Police Reports Fiji Times
Health System Impact	- 300% rise in drug-related hospital admissions in recent years. - Mental health issues linked to drug use on the rise.	Dr. Odille Chang, Psychiatrist Fijivillage
Community Factors	- Accessibility to drugs in red zones. - Influence of socio-economic disparities and peer pressure.	Fiji Times
Prevention Initiatives	Targeted interventions in schools with high drug use. - Community awareness campaigns focused on licit and illicit drugs.	

The rising trend underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts between schools, parents, and government authorities to curb the influence of drugs. Solutions could include enhancing drug education, implementing stronger school monitoring systems, and integrating mental health support services. These measures are essential to mitigate the long-term effects on youth and communities across Fiji.

Teenagers misuse and abuse substances for various reasons, including the desire to feel good, alleviate stress, perform better, curiosity, lack of awareness, and peer pressure. Additionally, a person's age, mental health, life transitions, individual risk factors, genetic predisposition, early life experiences, LGBTQI+ identity, family dynamics, peer influence, school-related risk factors, and community surroundings can serve as underlying reasons for substance abuse.

Among the substances most commonly abused by teens, alcohol takes the top spot, followed closely by marijuana, which is on the rise with the use of alcohol declining. Nicotine, tobacco, and e-cigarettes/vaping also feature prominently, alongside prescription stimulants like Ritalin and Adderall, as well as painkillers such as Vicodin and OxyContin. Other drugs include Spice/K2, heroin, crystal meth, MDMA, hallucinogens, DXM, inhalants, amphetamines, cocaine, opioids, synthetic substances, and central nervous system depressants.

Substance misuse and abuse among students have far-reaching consequences, impacting their physical and psychological well-being and often extending to their relationships and academic performance. Those struggling with substance-use disorders may be fully aware but find it incredibly challenging to quit.

The effects of drug abuse on students can be profound. It can result in poor grades, diminished self-esteem, memory issues, attention deficits, and subpar social skills, all of which make it harder to connect with peers and excel in school. These consequences lead to a higher likelihood of dropping out before graduation. Teen substance abuse can even disrupt neurological development and lead to severe mental health problems, including depression, developmental delays, anxiety, personality disorders, and suicidal thoughts. It also often prompts risky behaviours such as



driving under the influence and unsafe sexual practices. This highlights the urgent need for support and prevention programs in educational settings.

This tragic incident serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to address the growing threat of substance abuse in schools. Collaboration between educators, parents, and students is vital in fostering a safe and drug-free environment. The fight against drugs use and abuse is every individual's responsibility. We can not expect the schools to do every thing for the students. Parents, community and religious leaders, and the government must take a lead role and honest commitment in the fight against drugs anywhere and everywhere. It is sad and frightening to learn that some parents are using their own young and innocent children to transport, sell and deliver drugs for money. It a shameful act on their part. They should be taken to task by law.

### **Scope of the Problem**

#### **Prevalence**

- Studies show that drug use among adolescents is rising, particularly in the form of vaping, cannabis, prescription drugs, and synthetic substances. Schools often serve as environments where peer pressure and experimentation can lead to substance use.
- Communities experiencing economic or social challenges often see higher rates of drug activity, creating a cyclical relationship between poverty, crime, and drug abuse.

#### **Impact on Schools**

- **Academic Performance:** Drug use affects cognitive functions, leading to poor academic performance and higher dropout rates.
- **Behavioural Issues:** Students involved in substance abuse often exhibit disciplinary problems, including aggression, truancy, and defiance.
- **School Safety:** Drug activity increases safety concerns, from fights to the presence of dealers on or near school grounds.

#### **Community Effects**

- **Health Crises:** Communities with high drug prevalence face increased rates of overdoses, addiction, and associated diseases like HIV/AIDS or hepatitis.
- **Crime:** Drug use is linked to theft, violence, and organized crime, destabilizing neighbourhoods.
- **Economic Costs:** Resources are diverted to law enforcement, healthcare, and rehabilitation, impacting community development.

### **Contributing Factors**

#### **Accessibility**

The availability of drugs, including prescription medications, is a key driver. Illegal markets and online platforms have made substances more accessible to young people.

#### **Social and Economic Pressures**

- Poverty, unemployment, and lack of recreational activities contribute to drug use in communities.



- Peer influence and societal normalization of certain substances, like cannabis, exacerbate the issue.

#### **Mental Health**

- Anxiety, depression, and trauma often lead individuals, especially young people, to self-medicate using drugs.

#### **Family Dynamics**

- Dysfunctional family environments, parental substance abuse, or neglect increase the likelihood of drug use among adolescents.

#### **Strategies for Addressing the Issue**

##### **Education and Prevention Programs**

- Implement evidence-based drug education programs in schools, focusing on the risks of drug use and building life skills such as resilience and decision-making.
- Community awareness campaigns targeting parents and caregivers can help mitigate the risk factors at home.

##### **Rehabilitation and Support Services**

- Expand access to counselling, mental health services, and drug rehabilitation centres, especially in underserved areas.
- Schools can partner with community organizations to provide on-site support for at-risk students.

##### **Strengthening Law Enforcement and Policies**

- Governments should focus on disrupting supply chains and penalizing drug dealers rather than criminalizing users, particularly young people.
- Policies should promote a public health approach, emphasizing rehabilitation over incarceration.

##### **Community Engagement and Alternatives**

- Provide recreational and vocational opportunities to keep youth engaged in positive activities.
- Foster community-based initiatives, such as neighbourhood watch programs and support groups, to create safer environments.

#### **Specific Context: Fiji and the Pacific Region**

In Fiji and other Pacific nations, drug issues, particularly with cannabis and methamphetamine, are increasingly affecting youth and communities.

- **Geographical Challenges:** Remote areas often struggle with monitoring and enforcement, making them vulnerable to drug trafficking.
- **Cultural and Traditional Values:** Leveraging local traditions and community leaders in prevention efforts has proven effective in some Pacific communities.
- **Youth Programs:** Expanding access to sports, arts, and vocational training can provide alternatives to drug use.





### Challenges and Contributing Factors

- **Accessibility and Red Zones:** Some areas, termed "red zones," have high accessibility to drugs, increasing the risk for students and young community members. Identification and monitoring of these zones are critical for intervention.
- **Limited Awareness and Education:** A lack of awareness programs in schools and communities hampers efforts to inform youth about the dangers of drug abuse.
- **Societal and Economic Pressures:** Poverty and unemployment often exacerbate drug use, as individuals turn to substances as a coping mechanism.
- **Weak Policy Enforcement:** Despite regulations, enforcement remains inconsistent, allowing the drug trade to flourish in some areas

### Community and Policy Responses

- **Task Forces and Inter-agency Collaboration:** Fiji's government is exploring the establishment of regional inter-agency groups to address the drug epidemic. These groups are expected to coordinate efforts among police, education departments, and community organizations
- **School Initiatives:** Proposed solutions include introducing drug testing kits in schools and enhancing counselling services to identify and support at-risk students
- **Community Engagement:** Religious leaders, parents, and local organizations are being encouraged to join hands in awareness campaigns and rehabilitation efforts.

### Case Studies and Regional Insights

The Pacific's approach to drug issues emphasizes the importance of community-based interventions. For example, in Fiji, the education minister has underscored the role of parents and community leaders in supporting schools' efforts. Regular forums and meetings are being held to discuss local development needs, including addressing drug abuse among youth

The growing drug problem in schools and communities calls for a multi-pronged strategy, including stricter law enforcement, targeted education, and robust support networks. Effective collaboration between government agencies and community stakeholders will be crucial in reversing this trend and protecting future generations.

### Ways to Prevent Drug Abuse in Schools

Schools and families play a pivotal role in the protection of students from drug abuse. Here are some ways to prevent drug abuse in schools:

- Teach accurate, up-to-date scientific information about substances and substance-use disorders and communicate drug awareness for students.
- Foster a strong support system, aiding in resisting the pressure of peers.
- Incorporate substance abuse education into the curriculum.
- Arrange guest speakers and workshops.
- Establish clear drug-free school policies with consequences for violations, communicating these to families.





- Foster peer mentorship and student-led initiatives.
- Educate school staff through training that helps identify “at-risk” students and how to best support them.
- Educate families by providing them with information on how to discuss substance abuse with their children and recognize the warning signs.
- Form partnerships with the community.
- Create “exit plans”, offering solutions to peer pressure scenarios.
- Offer a range of support systems, including after-school programs, life-skills training, and counselling services.
- Educators should model appropriate substance use outside of school.

## II. Conclusion

The growing issue of drug abuse in schools and communities is a multifaceted challenge that demands urgent, comprehensive action. In regions like Fiji and the Pacific, the problem has been exacerbated by unique socio-economic and geographic factors, such as the ease of access to drugs in certain "red zones," insufficient awareness programs, and limited resources for law enforcement and rehabilitation. Schools, as foundational institutions, face the dual burden of addressing substance abuse among students while fostering safe and productive learning environments. Communities, on the other hand, are grappling with the wider repercussions of drug-related issues, including crime, health crises, and economic instability.

The root causes of this crisis are deeply embedded in broader societal dynamics. Socio-economic disparities, the normalization of certain substances, and a lack of alternative opportunities for youth have all contributed to the proliferation of drug abuse. Compounding this issue is the stigma surrounding addiction, which often prevents individuals and families from seeking the help they need. Moreover, insufficient collaboration among key stakeholders—government agencies, schools, parents, and community organizations—has hindered the development and implementation of effective solutions.

Addressing this issue requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach. Schools must be equipped with resources to educate students about the risks of substance abuse and to provide counselling services for those at risk. Community-driven initiatives, including youth engagement programs, recreational opportunities, and support networks, can serve as preventative measures. Law enforcement must also play a critical role by targeting drug supply chains and holding traffickers accountable, while avoiding punitive measures that criminalize users, particularly young people, who need rehabilitation rather than punishment.

At the policy level, governments must prioritize investment in education and healthcare to address the root causes of drug abuse. In Fiji and the Pacific, cultural and traditional values can be leveraged to create locally resonant interventions. Regional collaboration, such as inter-agency task forces and shared resources, is also vital for tackling cross-border trafficking and fostering a unified approach to drug control.



Ultimately, the battle against drug abuse in schools and communities is not just a matter of law enforcement or policy but a collective societal effort. By fostering collaboration among educators, policymakers, law enforcement, and community members, it is possible to create a safer, healthier environment that empowers individuals and strengthens communities. A sustained commitment to prevention, education, and rehabilitation will ensure that future generations are shielded from the devastating effects of substance abuse, laying the foundation for a more resilient society.

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