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Illicit Drug Use among Student-Athletes in a Nigerian University: Prevalence and Socio-demographics

[*1]Linda N. Chukwurah, [2]Joy O. Okeke-Osondu, [3]Ogar Okpe, [1]Chisom Lynda Ugwuanyi

[1]Department of Human Kinetics and Health, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
[2]PWAN Group, Lagos
[3]Department of Physical and Health Education, College of Education, Oju, Benue State.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: linda.chukwurah@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

The use of illicit drugs is detrimental to the wellbeing of individuals, including student-athletes, and this is capable of negatively affecting their performance in academics and sports. Therefore, the study assessed the prevalence and socio-demographics of illicit drug use among student-athletes in University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. The population consisted of 386 student-athletes, which all completed a validated and reliability tested questionnaire. There was no sampling in the study. Data generated for the research questions were analyzed using frequency and percentages while Chi-square statistics was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The results showed that the student-athletes highly engaged in the use of illicit drug. The most reported illicit drug used by the student-athletes are marijuana (15.8%), tramadol (9.8%) and morphine (4.4%). The most reported factor for illicit drug use is social activities. There was no significant differences in factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender (0.398 > .05), age (0.129 > .05) and year of study (0.075 > .05). The findings proved the need for tertiary institutions to align to the global need to curb the use of illicit drugs among youths, of which the student-athletes are part of. This would be achieved by creating forum such as seminars for periodic education on the ills of illicit drug use on the society in general, health, academic, and sports performance of individuals.

Keywords: Illicit drug use, Student-athlete, University, Prevalence, Socio-demographics

Introduction

Globally, illicit drug use is a major public health issue. The United States of America was found to have citizens who are four times more likely to report using cocaine in their lifetime than the next closest country, New Zealand (165 vs 4%) and marijuana use attained the highest rate at 42.4 per cent compared with 41.9 per cent respectively (Warner, 2018). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022) in a study found that cannabis legalization in parts of the world appears to have accelerated its use and increased the health impacts associated with cannabis

consumption, particularly amongst young adults. According to the report, 284 million people aged 15-64 used drugs worldwide in 2020, a 26 per cent increase over the previous decade.

Over the years in Africa, the use of illicit drugs has increased so high that children have been reported to also partake in the consumption of these substances (Fernades & Mokwena, 2020). (Mavura et al (2022) study reflects a high prevalence of substance use among adolescents in Kilimanjaro of Tanzania with alcohol and cigarette being the most prevalent substance used. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit substance with the highest prevalence of between 5.2% and 13.5% being reported in West and Central Africa (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

Abuse of alcohol among youths in many rural communities in Nigeria particularly hard liquor is also on the increase (Eze et al., 2017). The highest levels of drug use in Nigeria was recorded among people aged 25 and 39, with cannabis being the most widely used drug, and the use of sedatives, heroin, cocaine and the non-medical use of prescription opioids were also noted (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). The abuse of prescription drugs such as tramadol and household products such as paints and superglue are becoming rampant in some rural communities in Nigeria (Dibia et al., 2020).

Illicit drugs are psychoactive substances whose non-medical use has been banned by international drug control treaties as they are believed to pose an unacceptable risk to the health of users (Babor et al., 2018). Illicit drug use is the use of prescription psychotherapeutic or the use of marijuana, cocaine (including crack), heroine, hallucinogens, inhalants or methamphetamine (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2018). It is also the use of substances that are illegally obtained or involve non-medical use of prescription medications, that is, drug use for reasons, for duration, in amounts or with frequency other than prescribed, or use by persons other than the prescribed individual. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [CDC], 2021). Also, illicit drug is the non-medical use of various drugs that are prohibited by international laws, such as amphetamine- type stimulants (ATS), cannabis, cocaine, heroin and other opiods and ecstasy (Degenhardt et al., 2020).

There are different classifications of prevalence. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), prevalence can be classified into two forms: point prevalence and period prevalence. Point prevalence refers to the proportion of people in a population who have a specific health condition at a particular point in time, while period prevalence refers to the proportion of people in a population who have a specific health condition during a specified period of time (CDC, 2022). Point prevalence is the proportion of individuals in a population who have a particular disease or condition at a specific point in time. It is often used in cross-sectional studies to estimate the burden of a disease at a specific moment. Period prevalence is the proportion of individuals in a population who have a particular disease or condition during a specified period, such as a year (Zhang et al., 2021).

Lifetime prevalence is the proportion of individuals in a population who have ever had a particular disease or condition during their lifetime. It is commonly used in mental health research to estimate the overall burden of mental health disorders over a person's lifetime. For example, a study conducted in the United States found a lifetime prevalence of 31.9% for any anxiety disorder among adults aged 18 years or older (Kessler et al., 2021). Therefore in this study, lifetime prevalence and point prevalence were considered appropriate as they aim to find

out the prevalence of illicit drug use among student- athletes in the university at a specific point in their life.

According to Luciano et al (2020), student-athletes who perceive high levels of pressure to perform are more likely to use illicit drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with the stress and anxiety that comes with competition. In addition, student-athletes who are highly competitive and have strong desire to win may be more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as drug use in order to gain an edge over their opponents (Petroczi et al., 2017). Social factors also play a role in the use of illicit drugs among student- athletes. Peer pressure is a significant factor, as student athletes may feel pressure to conform to the behaviour of their teammates and peers in order to fit in or be accepted (Luciano et al., 2020).

Socio -demographic variables have been found to be associated with illicit drug use among student-athletes. According to the findings of Veliz et al. (2021), socio- demographic factors such as race/ethnicity, gender and academic achievement were associated with illicit drug use among high school student-athletes. The authors found that non-hispanic white and multiracial student-athletes had higher odds of illicit drug use than hispanic student-athletes. Another study by Yang (2021) examined the prevalence and correlates of illicit drug use among college student-athletes and found that being male, non- white and having a lower socio- economic status were associated with a higher prevalence of illicit drug use among student-athletes. Additionally, the study found that student-athletes who reported higher levels of stress and anxiety were more likely to use illicit drugs.

This study was anchored on social learning theory. The social learning theory as propounded by Psychologist (Bandura, 1977). It is a theory of learning and social behaviour which proposes that new behaviour can be acquired by observing and imitating others (Bandura, 1977). This theory is regarded as a bridge between behaviourist and cognitive learning theories, encompassing attention, memory and motivational processes (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008). It states that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement (Smith, 2012). This theory is relevant to this study as student-athletes may engage in illicit drug because they observe and imitate others who maybe peers, colleagues or model.

Student-athletes are mostly confronted with the challenge of balancing their academic life and their sport life. This is a challenge that can be easily overcome by proper time management and constant training. They are also faced with competition among peers and the urge to be the best and to maintain the position of being the best. Unfortunately, student-athletes appear to depend on illicit drug as a means of relieving stress as a result of pressure of combining both studies and sports, expectations of high performance from sponsors, coaches, families and friends and pressure of living up to an idealized image of a sports hero. Despite measures taken to minimize the use of illicit drugs among athletes at all levels, the problem persists and continues to be a prevalent issue in sports irrespective of the risks involved. Therefore, this study assessed the prevalence and socio-demographics of illicit drug use among student-athletes.

Research Questions

1. What is the proportion of student athletes that use illicit drug in the past?
2. What are the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug?

3. What are the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age?
4. What are the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender?
5. What are the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were postulated to guide this study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. Age is not significantly associated with the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drugs.
2. Gender is not significantly associated with the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug.
3. Year of study is not significantly associated with the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug.

Methods

Study Area

This study was conducted in University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State. It is a Federal University in the State, and has student-athletes that participate in lots of interscholastic sports competitions. The academic stress and demands from coaches may be huge burden of the student-athletes, thus, may predispose them rely on the use of illicit drug to deal with the stress of academics and sports.

Design

Cross-sectional research design was adopted in this study. Simikus (2023) defined the research design as a type of observational study, or descriptive research that involves analyzing information about a population at a specific point in time.

Participants

The population and sample of this study consisted of all student-athletes in the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu state. The student-athletes are 386 comprising of 193 males and 193 females. Being that the entire population was manageable; the entire sample was used in order to ensure representativeness.

Instrument used for Date Collection

Experts validated and reliable researcher-structured questionnaire with coefficient of .79 using split-half method, titled Prevalence and Socio-demographics of illicit Drug Use Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire consisted of items that sought information on socio-demographic characteristics of the students-athletes such as age, gender and year of study, and items on the factors that may predispose students to indulge in the use of illicit drugs. The instrument was structured with response options of Yes or No.

Procedure for Data Collection

Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents directly with the help of three research assistants that were briefed on how to collect valid data from the respondents. The respondents were assured of the privacy of information and their oral consent obtained before the administration of the instrument. Student-athletes that are 16years were considered able to make their decisions since it is the NUC approved age to be admitted into the university, thus, no consent form was obtained. The completed copies of the questionnaire were retrieved on the spot. Where possible, copies not completed on the spot were retrieved on the days that were agreed by the researcher and the respondents. Out of the 386 questionnaires that were administered among student-athletes 366 copies were appropriately completed and used for data analyses.

Data Analysis

Data from the completed copies questionnaires were coded into the Statistical package for social sciences (IBM-SPSS Version 25, IBM Corporation Armonk, New York). Frequency and percentage were used to analyze and answer all the research questions. Null hypotheses were tested using chi-square test of independence. All the null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance which implies that null hypothesis was rejected when p-value is less than .05, and not rejected when p-value is greater than .05.

Results

Table 1: **Percentage Analysis of Student-Athletes that Used Illicit Drug in the Last 30days. (n=366)**

S/N	ITEM	F	%
1	Cocaine	11	3.0
2	Crack cocaine	5	1.4
3	Methamphetamine	8	2.2
4	Heroine	8	2.2
5	Amphetamine	7	1.9
6	Marijuana	58	15.8
7	Tramadol	36	9.8
8	Morphine	16	4.4
9	Tranquilizer	9	2.5
10	Barbiturates	8	2.2

Results in Table 1 show that the overall percentage of student-athletes that have used illicit drug in the past (30 days) was not too high and marijuana (15.8 %) is the most used illicit drug used by Student-athletes followed by tramadol (9.8%), morphine (4.4%) and cocaine (3.0%).

Table 2: **Percentage Analysis of the Factors that Predisposes Student-Athletes to Indulge in the Use of Illicit Drug (n=366)**

S/N	**Factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in illicit**	**f**	**%**

	drug use		
1	Frustration	43	11.7
2	Peer influence	48	13.1
3	Poor sports performance	23	6.3
4	Academic problems	23	6.3
5	Motivation to play well	39	10.7
6	Social activities like during parties with friends	86	23.5
Overall		25	6.8

Table 2 shows the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit with participating in Social activities such as during parties with friends attaining the highest at (23.5%) followed by Peer influence (13.1%) while poor sports performance and academic problems obtaining the lowest with 6.3 and 6.3 respectively.

Table 3: **Percentage Analysis of the Factors that Predisposes Student-Athletes to Indulge in the Use of Illicit Drug based on Gender (n=366)**

S/N	Factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender	Male		Female	
		f	%	F	%
1	Frustration	37	12.4	6	9.0
2	Peer influence	44	14.7	4	6.0
3	Poor sports performance	20	6.7	3	4.5
4	Academic problems	19	6.4	4	6.0
5	Motivation to play well	31	10.4	8	11.9
6	Social activities like during parties with friends	74	24.7	12	17.9
	Overall	22	7.4	3	4.5

Results in table 3 show the percentage of the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender with 7.4 per cent for male and 4.5 per cent for female, and with social activities being the mostly reported for male (24.7%) and female (17.9%).

Table 4: **Percentage Analysis of the Factors that Predisposes Student-Athletes to Indulge in the Use of Illicit Drug based on Age (n=366)**

S/N	**Factors that predisposes student-**	**16-21 yrs**	**21-25 yrs**	**26-30 yrs**	**30 + yrs**

	athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age	f	%	F	%	f	%	F	%
1	Frustration	11	7.6	23	13.3	9	21.4	0	0.00
2	Peer influence	14	10.3	26	15.0	7	16.7	0	0.00
3	Poor sports performance	5	3.4	11	6.4	7	16.7	0	0.00
4	Academic problems	4	2.8	13	7.5	6	14.3	0	0.00
5	Motivation to play well	11	7.6	20	11.6	8	19.0	0	0.00
6	Social activities like during parties with friends	24	16.6	45	26.0	16	38.1	1	16.7
	Overall	5	3.4	15	8.7	5	11.9	0	0.00

Results in Table 4 show that the overall factor that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age is social activities as follows 16-21 (16.6%), 22-25 (26.0%), 26-30 (38.1%) and 30+ (16.7%).

Table 5**: Percentage Analysis of the Factors that Predisposes Student-Athletes to Indulge in the Use of Illicit Drug based on Year of study (n=366**

S/N	Factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study.	1st yr		2nd yr		3rd yr		4th yr +		
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	Dec
1	Frustration	7	6.6	10	12.8	12	16.0	14	13.1	NF
2	Peer influence	8	7.5	11	14.1	15	20.0	14	13.1	NF
3	Poor sports performance	4	3.8	3	3.8	8	10.7	8	7.5	NF
4	Academic problems	5	4.7	4	5.1	6	8.0	8	7.5	NF
5	Motivation to play well	8	7.5	10	12.8	11	14.7	10	9.3	NF
6	Social activities like during parties with friends	13	12.3	20	25.6	23	30.7	30	28.0	NF
	Overall	2	1.9	5	6.4	8	10.7	10	9.3	NF

Results in Table 5 show the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study was social activities with 3rd year attaining the highest with 30.7 per cent.

Table 6: **Chi-Square test of the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender**

Variable Gender	N=366	Yes O(E)	No O(E)	χ^2value	Df	p-value	Decision
Male	299	22(20.4)	277(278.6)	0.713	1	0.398	Not significant
Female	67	3(4.6)	64(62.4)				
Total	366						

Results in Table 6 show that there is no significant association in the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender (χ^2= 0.713, p-value =0.398) since the p value is greater than .05 level of significance at one degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that gender is not significantly associated with the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drugs is not rejected. This implies that there is no association between male and female athletes in their use of illicit drugs.

Table 7: **Chi-Square test of the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age**

Variable Age	N=366	Yes O(E)	No O(E)	χ^2value	Df	p-value	Decision
16-21 yrs	145	5(9.9)	140(135.1)				
22-25 yrs	173	15(11.8)	158(161.2)	5.666	3	0.129	Not significant
26-30 yrs	42	5(2.9)	37(39.1)				
30+ yrs	6	0(0.4)	6(5.6)				
Total	366						

Results in Table 7 show that age there is no significant association in the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age (χ^2 = 5.666, p-value = 0.129) since the p value is greater than .05 level of significance at three degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that there is age is not significantly associated with the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drugs is not rejected.

This implies that the age range of student-athletes do assert any association in their use of illicit drug.

Table 8: **Chi-Square test of the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study**

Variable **Year of study**	**N=366**	**Yes** **O(E)**	**No** **O(E)**	**χ^2value**	**Df**	**p-value**	**Decision**
1st yr	106	2(7.2)	104(98.8)				
2ndyr	78	5(5.3)	73(72.7)	6.890	3	0.075	Not significant
3rdyear	75	8(5.1)	67(69.9)				
4thyr +	107	10(7.3)	97(99.7)				
Total	366						

Results in table 8 show that there is no significant association in the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study (χ^2value =6.890, p-value = 0.075) since the p value is greater than .05 level of significance at three degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that there year of study is not significantly associated with the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drugs is not rejected. This implies that the different year of study of student-athletes do not differ in their use of illicit drugs.

Discussion

Table 1 showed the not too high prevalence of illicit drug use and also indicated that the most reported illicit drug used in the past (30 days) are marijuana and tramadol. These finding was expected because tramadol is a pharmaceutical drug that is almost sold at every pharmacy for pain relief, and marijuana is very much accessible to anyone that want to use it, and student-athletes are not left out which also make it very accessible. The findings of this study are in line with Houvessou (2020) that revealed Marijuana as the most consumed drug (lifetime: 42.1%; 30-day use: 22.7%), and this implies that Marijuana is the most commonly used drug even among the students. Also, Metuge (2022) found high prevalent of substance use at 89.93% with tobacco, alcohol, tramadol and cannabis as the currently used substances. Also, Idowu et al. (2019) revealed that drugs mostly abused by undergraduate athletes are tramadol, paracetamol, rophynol, alcohol, codeine, marijuana, cigarette, sachet herbal bitters. This is in line with the finding of the present study where marijuana and tramadol are the most reported illicit drugs used by student-athletes.

Findings in Table 2 revealed that the overall percentage of the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug. The most reported factor being social activities like during parties with friends. This finding is so because social activities such as partying with friends create situations that may predispose individuals to the use of illicit drugs, including student-athletes. During social activities, people usually lay down their discipline and morals, engage in activities ordinarily they would not, which may be the reason for this findings. The

finding showed the factor as mostly what predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of these illicit drugs to ease stress. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Idowu et al. (2019) which revealed that many reasons were identified by the respondents as contributing to drug abuse. The reasons were categorized as psychological reasons which are performance enhancement, weight control, frustration, sex performance and to gain confidence among others. The social reasons which are peer pressure, to get high, to feel among while the medical reasons are to relieve pain, to treat malaria, for treatment of pile, to relieve stress among others. This implies that there are indeed various factors that predispose these athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drugs just that the factors listed might not really be the factors that may predispose a particular student to indulge in illicit drug use since everyone has their own peculiar issue or problem. Despite having so many problems or issues irrespective of their individual differences and their different interactions with their environment, two or more factors listed predispose them to indulge in illicit drug use. In another related study, Agubosi (2022) revealed that factors that predisposes in-school adolescent to drug abuse were peer pressure, depression, lack of parental care, low self- esteem, poor academic performances and so many others

Findings in Table 3 revealed the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender with social activities being the mostly reported for male (24.7%) and female (17.9%). This implies that though social activities/parties are the most predisposing factor to the use of illicit drugs by the athletes, male student-athletes attained the highest percentage. This finding is not surprising because males are mostly regarded as those that engage in the use of drugs during social events more than female counterparts especially, in the area of the study. Males most often perceive themselves as being free to indulge in any activity irrespective of being detrimental to health or not, thus, providing the rationale for the finding. Supporting the present finding, Ajayi and Somefun (2020) in a study reported that male sex was associated with higher odds of recreational drug use. This may also be because females are always attentive to their behaviours outside, and female student-athletes are inclusive. The male athletes may mostly engage on the use illicit drugs due to peer pressure, the desire to be respected among peers and be regarded as a ‘strong man’.

Findings in Table 4 revealed that among the factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age, social activities attained the highest percentage as follows; 16-21 (16.7%), 22-25 (26.0%), 26-30 (38.1%) and 30+ (16.7%). This finding is not expected because it is believed that younger students are easily influenced by their peers during social activities, thus, making them more gullible to engage in illicit drug use unlike the older student-athletes, who are assumed to be more focused, having handled more pressures than younger student-athletes. Moreover, the finding may be attributed to the fact that younger student-athletes are still conscious of the activities they indulge in, probably, because of parental and coaches’ advice. In contrast to the present finding, Rukundo et al. (2017) noted peer pressure as one the prevalent factor influencing substance use among younger population.

Findings in table 5 revealed social activities with friends as the most factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study. Student-athletes in 3rd year attained the highest percentage of 30.7. This finding is not expected because student-athletes who are in their final year (400 level and above) are assumed to be more under the pressure of keeping up with project deadlines and final exams, as well as the fear of the

uncertainty of life after graduation than those in lower academic levels. In addition, the finding shows that sports, academic and possibly, family pressures cut across all students irrespective of their class level, but greater on student-athletes in 300 levels and above. This is however in contrast to a study carried out by Durowande et al. (2021) which showed a higher prevalence of substance use among 400level students, some of whom are in their final year in school.

Findings in Table 6 revealed that there was no significant association in factors that predisposes student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on gender, and that the gender of the respondents did not differ in their response on the factors that could dispose them to indulge in illicit drug. This may be due to the fact that both male and female athletes face similar problems in school, sports and social life. The finding may be as a result of male and female student-athletes being exposed to the same levels of pressures and demands in sports, thus, predisposing them to engage in illicit drug use. Contradicting the present finding, Maidane et al. (2020) reported academic variable to be associated with the recent consumption of cocaine, marijuana, ecstasy and solvents. However, the finding is in tandem with Agubosi (2022) who reported no significant difference in factors that predisposes in-school adolescents to indulge in illicit drug as regards their gender.

Also, no significant difference was recorded in the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on age. This clearly implies that the age range of the athletes did not make significant difference in their response on the predisposing factors to illicit drug use. Age is an important factor in the This finding agrees with that of Papazisis et al. (2017) that reported no association was found with age among the study population in the use of illicit drugs. The findings may be so because student-athletes are passing through the same situation irrespective of their age brackets, and they also share the same school experiences.

Lastly, no significant difference was found in the factors that predispose student-athletes to indulge in the use of illicit drug based on year of study. This implies that the year of study of the student-athletes do not make any form of difference in the respondents as regards the factors that predispose them to engage in illicit drug use. Disagreeing with the present finding, a study by Maidana et al. (2020) reported that among the variables found to be associated with the consumption of cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs, academic level was inclusive. This finding may be so probably because the students even though in different class/academic levels, they have the same, environmental and sports problems. The implication of this is that the year of study differences among the student-athletes did not alter their responses for predisposing factors to illicit drug use.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student-athletes as shown in the study clearly engage in the use of illicit drugs, even when it is a well known fact that these drugs are capable of negatively affecting their general wellbeing, academic and sports performance. This has far reaching implication in practice because more stringent laws are put in place to curb the use of illicit drugs among young population, including athletes in tertiary institutions. The findings that gender, age of the student-athletes and their class levels do not record any association in their factors that predispose them

to use illicit drugs show that these athletes need more guidance from their academic staff advisers and coaches on the effective management of pressures of academics and sports.

Recommendations

Academic adviser and coaches should endeavour to provide support for the student-athletes by mapping out strategies to assist them in the management of pressures of academics, sports training time tables, and family expectations. The sports organizing body of the university should organize mandatory periodic seminars for sports coaches and student-athletes on the ills of illicit drug use. This would further project the need to minimize illicit drug use among young population, in which student-athletes also belong.

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