



Family Digest 73

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Substance Abuse Among the Youth

"Substance abuse robs young people of their potential and undermines the future of our country. It fuels violence, weakens families, destroys communities, and places enormous pressure on social services". Sindisiwe Chikunga¹

Substance abuse among the youth in South Africa is a severe and growing public health crisis, with the country having some of the highest alcohol and drug consumption rates in the Southern African region. The Minister in the Presidency responsible for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, Sindisiwe Chikunga, cautioned young people against the growing scourge of substance abuse, warning that it continues to threaten their health, safety, education, and long-term contribution to the socio-economic development of the country. The Minister emphasised that "young people are among the most vulnerable groups, as they are prone to dependence on substances such as alcohol and drugs, particularly in communities affected by poverty, unemployment, inequality, and limited access to recreational and economic opportunities".

<https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/minister-sindisiwe-chikunga-youth-impact-substance-abuse-01-feb-2026>

Many young people use substances to cope with emotional or physical distress. Early and frequent exposure to alcohol and drugs, weak regulation, and social normalisation have contributed to a culture in which substance abuse is common among youth.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/joni/vol5/iss2/8/>

In June 2022, 21 children died at Enyobeni Tavern in Scenery Park, East London, during a 'pens-down' party. The youngest learner was only 13 years old. An enquiry by the South African Human Rights Commission found that the tragedy exposed "critical lapses within South Africa's regulatory and enforcement frameworks regarding alcohol regulation, particularly in safeguarding the rights of children". The Commission also identified systemic deficiencies across multiple sectors, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to protect vulnerable people and uphold human rights.

<https://www.algoafm.co.za/local/enyobeni-families-want-tavern-owners-to-be-prosecuted-for-murder>

<https://www.shaap.org.uk/enyobeni-a-tragedy-of-underage-drinking/>

<https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/ENYOBENI%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

Methamphetamine/tik, commonly called crystal meth, and nyaope² are both highly addictive street drugs commonly used by young people in low-income communities. Both are cheap and incredibly destructive to both physical health and psychological well-being.

<https://www.houghtonhouse.co.za/educational-articles/crystal-meth-tik-drug/>

<https://www.gov.za/Alcoholandsubstanceabuse>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S037907381830481X>

<https://theconversation.com/the-south-african-play-thats-tackling-the-scurge-of-the-street-drug-whoonga-155391>

Addiction can also drive criminal behaviour, as some users turn to theft to fund their drug use. This theft often affects families and local communities, contributing to broken relationships, social stigma, and, in some areas, vigilante responses.

<https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/illegalisation-nyaope-will-curb-crime>

Alcohol intoxication remains a major contributor to domestic violence, gender-based violence (GBV), and fatal road accidents. An estimated 80 per cent of male youth deaths are alcohol-related, while up to 60 per cent of crimes committed nationally are linked to substance use.

<https://safpj.co.za/index.php/safpj/article/view/5302/6854>

<https://www.netcare.co.za/News-Hub/Articles/understanding-substance-abuse-and-addiction>

“Youth in South Africa are particularly vulnerable to the vicious cycle of substance abuse. Faced with the dual burden of staggering unemployment rates and generational poverty, many find solace in substances that promise momentary relief but lead to long-term devastation”.

<https://activatechangedrivers.co.za/drowning-in-despair-south-africas-youth-and-the-crisis-of-substance-abuse-poverty-and-violence>

The **2022 *Status of Youth Report*** paints a grim picture of youth unemployment, which continues to push many young people towards crime, violence, and dependency, further perpetuating a cycle of hopelessness.

Regulations to tighten substance abuse should involve a multi-pronged approach spanning demand reduction (prevention/treatment), supply control (law enforcement/licensing), and workplace and school safety standards. Such measures would restrict availability, punish illegal distribution, and mandate support for rehabilitation. Youth-oriented solutions for substance abuse must combine community-driven rehabilitation, economic empowerment, and accessible mental health support. The last link is to a list of substance abuse helplines

<https://changesrehab.co.za/south-african-helplines/>

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cplo.org.za

¹ <https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/minister-sindisiwe-chikunga-youth-impact-substance-abuse-01-feb-2026>

² It is typically made from low-grade heroin, cannabis, and sometimes antiretroviral (ARV) drugs.