

Review Article

Psychosocial Determinants, Prevalence, and Preventive Approaches to Substance Use Among Young People: A Literature Review

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Introduction: Substance use among young people represents a major public health concern worldwide due to its negative impact on physical health, mental well-being, academic performance, and social functioning. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to psychoactive substance use because of developmental, emotional, familial, and social influences.

Aim: This literature review aims to examine the psychosocial determinants, prevalence, and preventive approaches related to substance use among young people at both international and national levels, with particular reference to Albania.

Methodology: The study was conducted using a qualitative and analytical literature review approach. Scientific articles, institutional reports, and international publications from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) published between 2000 and 2024 were analyzed. Sources were selected based on their relevance to youth substance use, prevalence, psychosocial determinants, and prevention strategies.

Results: Findings indicate that substance use among young people is influenced by multiple psychosocial determinants, including emotional disorders, impulsivity, peer pressure, weak parental supervision, family conflict, and socio-economic conditions. International studies show that cannabis remains the most commonly used illicit substance among adolescents and young adults, while alcohol and tobacco use also remain highly prevalent. Albanian studies demonstrate lower prevalence rates compared to several Western European countries; however, an increasing trend has been observed, particularly among young people aged 15–24 years and in urban areas. The review also highlights the

effectiveness of integrated prevention strategies, including school-based educational programs, family involvement, psychological counseling, and evidence-based public policies.

Conclusions: Substance use among young people is a multifactorial and growing phenomenon influenced by the interaction of individual, family, social, and socio-economic factors. Effective prevention requires coordinated interventions involving schools, families, healthcare institutions, and public policies focused on early identification, education, and psychosocial support.

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1. Introduction

The use of psychoactive substances among young people represents one of the most significant public health challenges globally, negatively affecting individuals' physical and mental health, as well as their social development. This phenomenon is complex and influenced by the interaction of individual, familial, social, and socio-economic factors^[1].

According to the World Health Organization, early initiation of substance use significantly increases the risk of developing addiction and long-term health problems^[1]. Furthermore, international reports indicate that adolescents and young people represent the most exposed group to substance use, particularly cannabis and alcohol^[2].

In this context, peer pressure, lack of family support, and emotional factors such as anxiety and depression play a significant role in the initiation and continuation of substance use^[3]. Moreover, epidemiological studies show considerable variation in the prevalence of substance use across countries, reflecting the influence of cultural and socio-economic factors^[4].

In Albania, recent studies indicate a gradual increase in substance use among young people, particularly in urban areas, highlighting the need for structured preventive interventions and effective health policies^[5].

The growing use of substances has notable consequences not only on physical health—such as damage to the nervous system, vital organs, and weakened immunity—but also on mental health. This includes anxiety, depression, loss of concentration, personality disorders, and, in severe cases, the development of long-term mental illnesses. Furthermore, substance use affects interpersonal relationships, academic or professional performance, and young people's potential to build a stable and sustainable future.^[6]

2. Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative and analytical approach, based on a review of scientific literature and international and national strategic documents on psychoactive substance use among young people. The main aim of this methodology is to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the initiation and continuation of substance use, as well as to analyze prevalence and evidence-based preventive interventions.

This approach was selected due to the extensive body of scientific literature addressing individual, familial, social, and socio-economic factors associated with substance use, as well as numerous international reports presenting data on the prevalence and global trends of this phenomenon. Comparing these sources enables the identification of key risk patterns and protective factors, contributing to a better understanding of substance use dynamics among young populations.

The materials were obtained from well-known academic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using keywords such as “substance use in adolescents,” “risk factors for drug abuse,” “youth substance use prevention,” and “drug prevalence studies.” In addition, official documents and reports from the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) were included, focusing on the most recent reports and international guidelines.

Articles published in English between 2000 and 2024 were included based on relevance to youth substance use, psychosocial determinants, prevalence, and prevention strategies.

This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive and evidence-based analysis by integrating scientific data and international practices. It enables the identification of the main factors influencing substance use among young people and supports the development of recommendations for preventive interventions and effective health policies.

3. Psychosocial determinants and prevalence of substance use among young people

Substance use represents a significant public health challenge, negatively affecting physical, mental, and social well-being. Substance use can lead to harmful consequences, including impairments in cognitive and academic performance, as well as psychiatric disorders^{[7][8]}. University years represent an important

transitional stage in young people's lives. During this period, students face high academic pressure, stressful situations, separation from parental supervision, autonomous decision-making, cohabitation with unfamiliar individuals, and exposure to new cultures. This environment makes it difficult to balance social responsibilities with academic demands and personal tasks^[9].

As a result of distancing from family values, new social peer groups are formed during adolescence and young adulthood, which often encourage experimentation with substances such as nicotine, tobacco, cannabis, alcohol, and other illicit drugs. Consequently, the likelihood of illicit substance use increases during this stage of life, as students become more vulnerable to substance misuse^[10].

Substance use among young people is increasingly recognized as a major global public health and social concern due to its long-term impact on health, education, employment, and social functioning^{[11][12]}. Adolescence and early adulthood represent critical developmental stages characterized by psychological, emotional, and neurobiological changes that may increase vulnerability to risky behaviors, including experimentation with psychoactive substances. Research has demonstrated that the adolescent brain is particularly sensitive to the effects of psychoactive substances, especially in areas related to decision-making, impulse control, memory, and emotional regulation^[11]. Early exposure to drugs and alcohol may therefore interfere with normal brain development and increase the risk of substance dependence later in life^[12].

In addition to physical and mental health consequences, substance use among young people is associated with reduced academic performance, school dropout, risky sexual behavior, interpersonal violence, traffic accidents, unemployment, and social exclusion^[11]. The negative effects of substance use extend beyond the individual, affecting families, educational institutions, healthcare systems, and society through increased healthcare costs, decreased productivity, and criminal justice involvement^[2].

Recent international reports also indicate an increase in the diversity of substances used by young people, including synthetic drugs, stimulants, and the non-medical use of prescription medications^[3]. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of digital media and social networking platforms has contributed to greater exposure to pro-drug content and the normalization of substance use behaviors among adolescents and young adults^[2].

Despite growing international attention, evidence regarding the psychosocial dimensions and prevalence of substance use among young people in Albania remains limited. Existing national reports suggest a gradual increase in the use of cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, and synthetic substances among Albanian

youth, particularly in urban areas *Institute of Public Health (ISHP, Albania)*. This highlights the importance of reviewing and synthesizing current scientific literature in order to better understand the prevalence, determinants, and preventive approaches related to substance use among young populations.

4. Prevalence of drug use among young people (Data from International and national studies)

In most cultures, drug use among young people, who are considered the most vulnerable group to this phenomenon, is regarded as a serious public health problem. For this reason, extensive research has been conducted on substance use among youth.

- One of the most important studies is the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), which examines the prevalence of drug use among school students aged 15–16. A study conducted in 2011 showed that cannabis is the most commonly used drug among adolescents, and its use varies significantly between countries. The highest prevalence of cannabis use was reported in the Czech Republic (42%), followed by France (39%) and Monaco (37%), while in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina it was 4%^[13]. The use of non-prescribed sedatives was more prevalent than the use of other illicit drugs except cannabis in most countries.
- Another study based on data from 36 countries^[14] also found that cannabis was the most frequently used illicit drug. Countries with high prevalence rates of cannabis use (>15%) included Canada, the United States, Australia, the Czech Republic, and several Western European countries. Studies from South Africa^[15] showed a significant correlation ($r = 0.70$) between the proportion of students using cannabis and the average number of times it was used. Moreover, the proportion of frequent cannabis users (>10 times in lifetime) was strongly correlated ($r = 0.95$) with overall cannabis use prevalence. These differences are partly explained by variations in price and income levels.
- Cannabis and other illicit drug use is higher in countries where adolescents consume alcohol more frequently. Furthermore, comparisons of income data support the hypothesis that higher purchasing power in a country is associated with higher prevalence and frequency of cannabis use.
- Another study showed a significant decline in marijuana use among adolescents aged 15–19 in the United States between 1979 and 1992, followed by an increase until 1998, and then a subsequent declining trend^[16].

- A study conducted in Poland found that 10.8% of respondents aged 13–17 had used at least once a psychoactive substance such as cannabis, cocaine, or heroin (Nowak, 2018).
- According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, data from youth studies have in some countries been used as the sole basis for estimating annual drug use prevalence in the general population^[17]. However, data from several European countries show only a moderate correlation ($r = 0.31$) between youth drug use prevalence and general population prevalence. Therefore, data from youth studies should be interpreted cautiously when drawing conclusions about overall population drug use^[13]. Drug use prevalence studies vary significantly over time, showing cycles of increase and decrease that may last for decades or even generations.
- According to the World Drug Report 2023 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), approximately 296 million people worldwide used drugs in 2021—an increase of 23% compared to 2011. Young people (aged 15–34) represent the most affected group, particularly for:
 - Cannabis (most widely used): over 219 million users in 2021
 - Amphetamines and ecstasy: around 36 million users
 - Cocaine: global use increased by 25% over the last decade
 - Opioids (including heroin and fentanyl): responsible for over 70% of all overdose deaths
 - A significant rise in synthetic drugs (especially in Asia and the Americas), due to easier production, low cost, and higher risk
 - Approximately 39.5 million people suffered from drug use disorders in 2021, but only 1 in 5 received treatment^[2].
- According to studies conducted by the Institute of Public Health (ISHP, 2018–2022), 6–10% of Albanian youth have tried cannabis at least once in their lifetime. Alcohol and tobacco use among the 15–18 age group remains high (around 40% for alcohol and 28–30% for tobacco). The use of synthetic substances (ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD) is increasing in urban areas and during social events such as concerts and parties. Cannabis remains the most commonly used drug in Albania, especially among young people aged 15–24 (*Institute of Public Health, ISHP*).
- In a study conducted in 2014 on substance use in Albania with a sample of 3,975 individuals aged 15–64, results showed that cannabis was the most commonly used illicit substance. Approximately 1 in 10 adults aged 15–64 had used cannabis at least once in their lifetime, while about half of them had used it in the past year. Cocaine was the second most commonly used drug, followed by MDMA/ecstasy (4.7% and 1%, respectively). Illicit drug use was more common among young adults: 7.9% of

individuals aged 15–34 reported cannabis use in the past year, and 3.6% reported cocaine use. About 4.1% of respondents in this age group had used cannabis and 1.4% had used cocaine in the past month^[18].

Region / Country	Most prevalent substance	Active users	Highest risk group
Global	Cannabis	219 million	15–34 years
Albana	Cannabis, alcohol, tobacco	~10% youth	15–24 years

Regional / Country Comparison

- Global and national data indicate a continuous increase in substance use, with a particular emphasis on young people.
- Albania follows a similar trend; however, there are limitations in systematic reporting, as well as a significant lack of preventive interventions and addiction treatment services.

5. Prevention and interventions in substance use among young people

Substance use among young people represents a significant public health challenge, requiring integrated approaches and interventions at different levels. Prevention and intervention strategies aim to reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors, thereby directly contributing to the reduction of substance use prevalence^{[19][1][2]}.

5.1. Primary prevention

Primary prevention focuses on preventing the initiation of substance use, particularly at early ages. It includes school-based educational programs aimed at increasing awareness of drug-related risks and developing life skills such as decision-making, stress management, and resistance to peer pressure^{[4][3]}.

Studies show that school-based programs that include interactive and continuous components are more effective in reducing substance use among adolescents^[11]. Furthermore, involving families in these

programs has shown positive outcomes in strengthening parent–child communication and increasing parental monitoring^[20].

5.2. Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention focuses on early identification of individuals at risk and intervention to prevent further deterioration of the situation. This includes screening in school and healthcare settings, as well as providing psychological counseling for young people showing early signs of substance use^{[19][1]}.

Brief interventions based on motivational interviewing have proven effective in reducing alcohol and other substance use among young people^{[21][22]}.

6. Tertiary prevention and treatment

Tertiary prevention includes the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals who have developed substance dependence. Therapeutic approaches include psychological treatment such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, social support, and in some cases pharmacological treatment^{[11][12]}.

Rehabilitation programs that combine psychological support, social reintegration, and vocational/educational training are more effective in reducing relapse rates and improving quality of life^{[19][1]}.

7. Role of institutions and public policies

Health and educational institutions play a key role in implementing prevention strategies. Public policies aimed at restricting access to substances, raising awareness, and providing support services are essential for addressing this phenomenon^{[2][19][1]}.

International organizations such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime emphasize the importance of an integrated approach that includes education, public health, and social policies to reduce substance use among young people^{[19][1][2]}.

8. Discussion

The findings of this literature review demonstrate that substance use among young people is a multifactorial and complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of psychosocial, familial, environmental, and socio-economic determinants. The evidence reviewed confirms that adolescence and

early adulthood represent critical developmental periods during which young people become more vulnerable to experimentation with psychoactive substances due to emotional instability, social influence, and behavioral risk-taking tendencies.

One of the main findings of this review is the strong influence of individual psychological factors on substance use initiation and continuation. Emotional disorders such as anxiety, depression, impulsivity, low self-esteem, and sensation-seeking behavior were consistently identified as important predictors of substance use among adolescents and young adults. International studies emphasize that early initiation of substance use significantly increases the likelihood of developing substance dependence and long-term mental health problems later in life. These findings support the concept that psychoactive substance use is closely linked to emotional regulation difficulties and maladaptive coping strategies.

Family-related determinants also emerged as highly influential factors. Supportive family environments, effective communication, and parental monitoring were identified as protective factors against substance use. In contrast, family conflict, neglect, weak emotional support, and low parental supervision increase the risk of risky behaviors and drug experimentation. These findings are consistent with previous international studies showing that adolescents exposed to unstable family dynamics are more likely to engage in substance use and other deviant behaviors.

Social influences represent another important dimension of this phenomenon. Peer pressure, the desire for social acceptance, and exposure to substance-using social groups significantly contribute to experimentation and continued use of psychoactive substances among young people. Furthermore, social media and digital environments increasingly normalize substance-related behaviors, potentially influencing adolescents' perceptions and attitudes toward drug use.

From a socio-economic perspective, the review indicates that substance use affects young people across different social and economic backgrounds. However, low educational achievement, limited future opportunities, unemployment, and social inequality may increase vulnerability to substance use. Educational engagement and long-term personal goals appear to function as important protective factors that reduce risky behaviors among adolescents and young adults.

The findings related to prevalence demonstrate that cannabis remains the most commonly used illicit substance worldwide among young people, followed by alcohol, tobacco, and synthetic drugs. Although Albania reports lower prevalence rates compared to several Western European countries, available national data indicate a gradual increase in substance use among young people, particularly in urban

areas and among individuals aged 15–24 years. This trend reflects the growing need for effective prevention and intervention strategies within the Albanian context.^{[2][5]}

In terms of prevention, the literature strongly supports integrated approaches combining primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies. School-based educational programs, family involvement, early psychological support, and community-based interventions were identified as the most effective evidence-based approaches for reducing substance use and associated harms among young people. In addition, strengthening mental health services and improving access to counseling and rehabilitation programs are essential components of comprehensive prevention policies.

Overall, this review highlights the importance of coordinated public health policies and inter-institutional collaboration involving schools, families, healthcare systems, and community organizations. Addressing substance use among young people requires not only treatment-focused interventions but also long-term preventive strategies targeting psychosocial determinants and promoting healthy developmental environments.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, multi-faceted and coordinated interventions are recommended for the prevention and reduction of substance use among young people:

1. Strengthening school-based prevention programs

- Implementation of structured educational programs on the risks of substance use starting from lower and upper secondary education.
- Inclusion of interactive methods based on life skills development, such as decision-making, emotional regulation, and resistance to peer pressure.
- Integration of mental health education into the school curriculum.

2. Enhancing the role of the family

- Development of programs that strengthen parent–child communication and increase parental awareness of early signs of substance use.
- Training for parents on effective monitoring and emotional support of adolescents.
- Inclusion of families in school-based prevention programs.

3. Early identification and timely intervention

- Implementation of routine screening in schools and health centers to identify at-risk adolescents.
- Provision of psychological counseling and brief interventions for early cases of substance use.
- Strengthening mental health services for young people.

4. Improving treatment and rehabilitation services

- Development of specialized centers for addiction treatment among young people.
- Implementation of rehabilitation programs combining psychological therapy, social support, and educational/vocational reintegration.
- Reducing the stigma of individuals seeking treatment.

5. Strengthening public policies and institutional cooperation

- Development and implementation of integrated national policies for substance use prevention.
- Close collaboration between the education, health, social services sectors, and non-governmental organizations.
- Increased monitoring of the substance market and restriction of access for young people.

6. Raising public awareness

- Awareness campaigns in media and social networks about the risks of substance use.
- Promotion of positive role models and healthy lifestyles.
- Active involvement of young people in prevention campaigns as key actors.

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Declarations

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