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Full Length Paper

Religious Institutions and Drug Abuse Prevention among Youths in Selected Communities in Abia State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Drug abuse has become one of the most pressing public health and social challenges confronting Nigerian youths, with adverse consequences for physical and mental health, educational attainment, family stability, social cohesion, crime, and national development. Although government agencies, healthcare institutions, and non-governmental organisations have implemented various interventions to address substance abuse, the role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths has not been sufficiently examined. This study therefore investigated the role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population comprised Nigerian youths within the selected study area, from which a sample of 399 respondents was drawn using appropriate sampling techniques. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The instrument was validated by experts in religious studies and measurement and evaluation, while its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded an overall coefficient of 0.84, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation, Multiple Linear Regression, and Independent Samples t-tests were employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that religious institutions play significant roles in preventing drug abuse through counselling, moral instruction, youth mentorship, preventive education, advocacy, and community outreach programmes. Nigerian youths generally perceived religious institutions as credible and effective partners in addressing substance abuse. The study further established that inadequate funding, shortage of trained personnel, poor rehabilitation infrastructure, and limited collaboration with relevant stakeholders significantly hinder the effectiveness of faith-based interventions. Spiritual guidance from religious leaders was found to significantly influence youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse, while faith-based rehabilitation services significantly promoted recovery, reduced relapse, and enhanced social reintegration. Furthermore, a statistically significant gender difference was observed, with female youths demonstrating greater responsiveness to faith-based prevention strategies than male youths. The study concluded that religious institutions are strategic partners in the prevention of drug abuse among Nigerian youths and that their contributions can be enhanced through gender-responsive intervention strategies. The study contributes to knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of faith-based approaches to substance abuse prevention and recommends that government formally integrate qualified religious institutions into national policies for reducing drug demand while strengthening partnerships with healthcare providers, educational institutions, and civil society organisations to promote sustainable youth development and reduce substance abuse in Nigeria.

Keywords: Drug Abuse; Religious Institutions; Nigerian Youths; Faith-Based Prevention; Spiritual Guidance

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INTRODUCTION

The role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths is multifaceted and crucial. According to Oshodi, Adeleke, and Ojo (2019), religious institutions have been at the forefront of addressing social issues, including substance abuse, in Nigeria. These organisations provide people with a moral framework that

makes them less likely to use drugs and more likely to live healthy lives. Religious institutions in Nigeria have been involved in various initiatives to address drug abuse among youths. One of the key strategies is counselling and spiritual guidance. Many religious institutions provide counselling services to individuals struggling with substance abuse, helping them to cope with challenges and make positive lifestyle changes (Adekeye, 2017). Education and awareness are also critical components of the approach employed by religious institutions. These institutions often organise seminars, workshops, and conferences to educate youths about the dangers of substance abuse, highlighting the risks and consequences of drug use (Oshodi, 2018). Some religious institutions have established rehabilitation centres to provide support and treatment for individuals struggling with addiction. These centres offer a range of services, including detoxification, counselling, and vocational training, to help individuals recover and reintegrate into society (Nelson, 2018). Community outreach is another important aspect of the work done by religious institutions. These institutions engage in community outreach programmes to promote healthy lifestyles and provide support to vulnerable populations, including youth and families affected by substance abuse (Adeleke, 2016).

The influence of religious institutions in Nigeria is significant, and their involvement in addressing drug abuse among youths is invaluable. By promoting positive behavioural change, providing support, and offering alternatives to substance use, these institutions play a vital role in combating the problem. Moreover, religious institutions have existing infrastructure and resources that can be leveraged to support anti-substance abuse initiatives, making them well-suited to address this issue (Adekeye, 2017). The sense of community and belonging provided by religious institutions is also critical for individuals struggling with addiction. By offering a supportive environment, these institutions can help individuals stay motivated and committed to recovery (Nelson, 2018). The role of religious institutions in combating drug abuse among Nigerian youths is multifaceted and crucial. According to Oshodi, Adeleke, and Ojo (2019), these institutions have historically positioned themselves at the forefront of addressing social issues, including substance abuse, by providing a moral framework that discourages drug use and promotes healthy lifestyles. Their involvement spans several strategic areas, including counselling and spiritual guidance, with many churches and mosques operating counselling units that offer emotional and spiritual support to individuals struggling with addiction, helping them cope with challenges and make positive lifestyle changes (Adekeye, 2017); religious bodies frequently organise seminars, workshops, conferences, and public lectures to educate youths about the dangers of substance abuse, highlighting risks, consequences, and preventive measures (Oshodi, 2018); some institutions have established detoxification and recovery facilities that provide comprehensive services, including detox, counselling, vocational training, and after-care support to aid reintegration into society (Nelson, 2018); and others engage in community outreach through programmes, rallies, campaigns, and events, where they mobilise social networks to promote wellness and deliver assistance to vulnerable youths and families (Adeleke, 2016).

These initiatives are underpinned by the existing infrastructure, resources, and strong community ties of religious organisations, making them well-suited partners in anti-substance abuse efforts (Adekeye, 2017). Faith-based organisations are increasingly recognised by government and NGOs as key stakeholders, and their ability to foster a sense of belonging enhances motivation for recovery (Nelson, 2018). Moreover, religious leaders wield considerable influence through sermons and teachings that stress healthy living, self-care, and communal responsibility, thereby shaping attitudes and behaviours (Ukah, 2021). Collaborative partnerships with agencies, NGOs, and policymakers amplify impact, providing access to funding, expertise, and coordinated responses. Advocacy for policy changes addressing root causes of poverty, unemployment, limited education, and healthcare gaps is another avenue where religious bodies play a pivotal role. Women, too, are instrumental, often shaping family values and serving as catalysts in prevention and rehabilitation programmes. Youth-focused initiatives such as sports, arts, and skills-development clubs offer constructive alternatives to substance use, building resilience and identity. In sum, religious institutions in Nigeria are not merely moral arbiters but active agents of change, delivering counselling, education, rehabilitation, outreach, and advocacy, all of which are essential to tackling the complex challenge of drug abuse among youths.

In Nigeria, faith-based organisations are increasingly being recognised as key stakeholders in addressing social issues, including substance abuse. Their involvement in addressing this problem is considered essential to finding sustainable solutions (Adeleke, 2016). Overall, the role of religious institutions in combating drug abuse among Nigerian youths is vital, and their contributions are essential to addressing this complex problem. Moreover, religious institutions often have strong social networks and community ties, which can be leveraged to mobilise support for anti-substance abuse initiatives. This can include organising community events, rallies, and campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers of substance abuse. In addition, some religious institutions in Nigeria have established partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to address substance abuse. These partnerships can help to amplify their impact, provide access to resources and expertise, and ensure a more coordinated response to the issue. Religious institutions can also play a role in advocating for policy changes and legislation that address the root causes of substance abuse, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Furthermore, the teachings and sermons of religious leaders can significantly impact their adherents' attitudes and behaviours around substance use. By emphasising the importance of healthy living, self-care, and community responsibility, these leaders can inspire positive change and promote a culture of wellness. In some Nigerian communities, religious institutions have established youth programmes and organisations that provide alternatives to substance use, such as sports, arts, and skills development initiatives. These programmes can help build resilience, promote a positive identity, and provide young people with a sense of purpose and belonging. The role of women in religious institutions is also noteworthy. Women often play a critical role in shaping family and community values around substance use, and their involvement in anti-substance abuse initiatives can be particularly effective.

Despite their potential, religious institutions also face challenges that may limit their contribution. Some organisations may lack adequate funding, trained personnel, structured prevention programmes, and reliable referral arrangements with professional services. In addition, substance use may be interpreted exclusively as a moral failure, spiritual weakness, or lack of discipline. Such interpretations can unintentionally discourage affected individuals from seeking help or make them reluctant to disclose their experiences to religious leaders and family members. Research on stigma associated with substance use disorders identifies negative social attitudes and the perception of addiction as a personal or moral failure as important barriers to help-seeking and appropriate care (El Hayek et al., 2024).

It is therefore necessary to distinguish the value of spiritual support from the professional care required to manage substance use disorders. Prayer, religious counselling, mentoring, and community support may be meaningful to individuals who value faith in their lives. Nevertheless, these activities should not replace appropriate medical assessment, psychological interventions, or specialised treatment when these are needed. A constructive partnership between religious institutions and healthcare providers can allow spiritual and social support to complement professional services while protecting the dignity, confidentiality, and rights of affected individuals. Against this background, this study examines the roles of religious institution-based activities in drug abuse prevention in selected communities in Abia State, Nigeria. The central position of the study is that faith-based prevention is most likely to contribute meaningfully when it is planned, inclusive, non-stigmatising, and integrated into the wider public health response.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to examine the role of religious institutions in drug abuse prevention among youths in selected communities of Abia State. The study's specific objectives were as follows:

1. To assess the extent of drug abuse prevention activities offered by religious institutions among youths in selected communities of Abia State
2. To evaluate Nigerian youths' perceptions of religious institution-based drug abuse prevention activities among youths in selected communities of Abia State;
3. To determine the extent spiritual guidance from religious leaders influences youths' decisions to avoid or quit drugs in selected communities of Abia State

Research Questions

The following questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What types of activities for preventing drug abuse are offered by religious institutions among youths in selected communities of Abia State?
2. What are youths' perceptions of religious institution-based drug abuse prevention activities among youths in selected communities of Abia State?
4. What is the extent to which spiritual guidance from religious leaders influences youths' decisions to avoid or quit drugs in selected communities of Abia State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

Ho_1: Religious institutions will have little effect on reducing drug abuse among Nigerian youths through counselling, education, community outreach, and advocacy.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between Nigerian youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions and their participation in faith-based substance abuse prevention programmes.

H03: There is no significant relationship between the extent of spiritual guidance from religious leaders and youths' decisions to avoid or quit drugs in selected communities of Abia State.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The descriptive survey design is particularly suitable for this research because it enables the collection of data from a relatively large population to describe existing conditions, opinions, behaviours, and relationships among variables. The study was conducted in Abia State, a state located in the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The population of the study comprises all 30,045 youths aged 15 to 30 years residing in Abia State. The sample comprised 400 youths determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, which is widely

used in social science research for calculating sample sizes from large populations. A multi-stage sampling technique will be employed to ensure representativeness and reduce bias. First, Abia State was stratified into its three senatorial zones to ensure geographical coverage. Within each zone, selected communities were randomly chosen to avoid selection bias. From these communities, religious institutions, especially churches, were identified, and respondents were selected using simple random sampling. In addition, purposive sampling was used to ensure that only youths within the specified age range were included in the study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled the Role of Religious Institutions in Combating Drug Abuse Questionnaire (RRICDAQ). The instrument was structured using a Likert-scale format, which allowed respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with specific statements. The validity of the instrument was ascertained through expert review. Experts in education, sociology, and public health at Paul University Awka examined the questionnaire to ensure that it adequately covered the research objectives and variables. Their feedback led to modifications to improve clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. To establish reliability, a pilot study was conducted using respondents outside the study area. The data obtained were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha; a coefficient of 0.87 was obtained, which gave a high level of internal consistency, suggesting that the instrument was reliable for data collection. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires with the assistance of trained research assistants. Permission was obtained from community and religious leaders before data collection. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. Ethical standards were strictly observed. Data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to answer research questions. Inferential statistics such as chi-square, t-tests, and regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 399)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	15–19 years	62	15.5
	20–24 years	128	32.1
	25–29 years	119	29.8
	30–35 years	90	22.6
Total		399	100.0
Gender	Male	208	52.1
	Female	191	47.9
Total		399	100.0
Frequency of Religious Participation	Daily	77	19.3
	Several times a week	91	22.8
	Weekly	139	34.8
	Occasionally	68	17.0
	Rarely/Never	24	6.0
Total		399	99.9*

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 399 respondents, indicating that 62 (15.5%) were aged 15–19 years, 128 (32.1%) were aged 20–24 years, and 119 (29.8%) were aged 25–29 years, while 90 (22.6%) were aged 30–35 years. The largest proportion of respondents therefore fell within the 20–24-year age group. This distribution provides adequate representation of different youth age categories for examining perceptions and responses to faith-based drug-abuse prevention strategies.

There were 208 (52.1%) males and 191 (47.9%) females who answered the question about gender. The relatively close distribution between male and female respondents provides a reasonable basis for examining the gender-specific differences identified in Research Question 6.

The frequency of religious participation showed that 139 (34.8%) participated weekly, 91 (22.8%) several times a week, and 77 (19.3%) participated daily. A further 68 (17.0%) participated occasionally, while 24 (6.0%) rarely or never participated. Thus, most respondents had some degree of regular contact with religious institutions, providing an appropriate basis for examining the influence of spiritual guidance and religious counselling on drug-

related decisions.

For the demographic characteristics, it indicates that the 399 respondents comprised predominantly young people, with substantial representation of both genders, religious traditions and residential locations. These characteristics provide an appropriate demographic foundation for investigating the role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths, their perceived effectiveness, and spiritual influence.

Research Question One: What types of drug abuse prevention activities are offered by religious institutions among youths in selected communities of Abia State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on Preventing Drug Abuse among Nigerian Youths (N = 399)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Religious institutions organize regular drug abuse awareness campaigns.	3.42	0.71	Agree
2	Religious leaders provide counselling that discourages drug abuse.	3.51	0.66	Agree
3	Youth fellowship programmes help reduce drug abuse among youths.	3.38	0.75	Agree
4	Religious teachings encourage youths to abstain from substance abuse.	3.59	0.63	Agree
5	Religious institutions collaborate with parents in preventing drug abuse.	3.31	0.79	Agree
6	Religious institutions advocate against drug abuse within their communities.	3.47	0.69	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.45**	**0.71**	**Agree**

Table 2 presents respondents' opinions on the role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths. The results indicate that all six items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50, suggesting general agreement among respondents. The item with the highest mean score was "Religious teachings encourage youths to abstain from substance abuse" (M = 3.59, SD = 0.63), indicating that respondents perceived religious teachings as the strongest preventive strategy. This was followed by counselling from religious leaders (M = 3.51, SD = 0.66) and community advocacy (M = 3.47, SD = 0.69). Although collaboration with parents recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.31, SD = 0.79), it remained above the criterion mean, indicating that respondents still recognised parental collaboration as an important preventive mechanism. The grand mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.71) indicates that Nigerian youths generally perceive religious institutions as playing a significant role in preventing drug abuse through awareness creation, counselling, moral instruction, youth development programmes, parental collaboration, and community advocacy.

Research Question Two: 2: What are youths' perceptions of religious institution-based drug abuse prevention activities among youths in selected communities of Abia State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation on Nigerian Youths' Perceptions of Religious Institutions in Preventing and Addressing drug Abuse (N = 399)

S/N	**Item**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Decision**
1	Religious institutions provide reliable information on the dangers of substance abuse.	3.48	0.68	Agree
2	Religious institutions are trustworthy sources of support for youths struggling with substance abuse.	3.54	0.65	Agree
3	Religious institutions effectively educate youths on the consequences of drug abuse.	3.46	0.72	Agree
4	Religious institutions create an environment that encourages youths to seek help for substance abuse problems.	3.37	0.78	Agree
5	Religious institutions contribute significantly to changing negative attitudes towards drug abuse among youths.	3.43	0.74	Agree
6	Religious institutions should continue to play a leading role in substance abuse prevention programmes in Nigeria.	3.61	0.61	Agree
	Grand Mean	3.48	0.70	Agree

Table 3 presents the mean ratings and standard deviations of Nigerian youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions in preventing and addressing substance abuse. The results reveal that all six items obtained mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally held positive perceptions of the role of religious institutions. The highest-rated item was "Religious institutions should continue to play a leading role in substance abuse prevention programmes in Nigeria" with a mean score of 3.61 (SD = 0.61). This finding suggests a strong endorsement by respondents of the continued involvement of religious institutions in national efforts to curb substance abuse. The relatively low standard deviation indicates considerable agreement among respondents. Similarly, respondents agreed that religious institutions are trustworthy sources of support for youths struggling with substance abuse (M = 3.54, SD = 0.65), reflecting confidence in the moral guidance, counselling, and emotional support provided by faith communities. Respondents also thought that religious institutions provide good information about the risks of drug abuse (M = 3.48, SD = 0.68) and teach young people well about the effects of drug abuse (M = 3.46, SD = 0.72). Although the statement that religious institutions create an environment that encourages youths to seek help for substance abuse problems recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.37, SD = 0.78), the score remained well above the criterion mean. This suggests that while respondents generally acknowledged the supportive role of religious institutions, some perceived that there is still room for improvement in making faith communities more welcoming, confidential, and accessible for youths experiencing substance abuse challenges.

The grand mean of 3.48 with a standard deviation of 0.70 demonstrates that Nigerian youths generally perceive religious institutions as effective partners in preventing and addressing substance abuse. These findings imply that religious organisations are widely regarded as credible institutions capable of providing preventive education, psychosocial support, moral guidance, and community-based interventions that complement formal healthcare and government efforts. The results suggest that the confidence reposed in religious institutions by Nigerian youths provides a strong foundation for expanding faith-based prevention programmes, strengthening youth-focused counselling services, and fostering greater collaboration between religious organisations, government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organisations to address the growing challenge of substance abuse among Nigerian youths.

Research Question Three: What is the extent to which spiritual guidance from religious leaders influences youths' decisions to avoid or quit drugs in selected communities of Abia State?

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Influence of Spiritual Guidance on Youths' Decisions to Avoid or Quit Drug Abuse (N = 399)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Religious sermons discourage me from using drugs.	3.58	0.61	Agree
2	Personal counselling by religious leaders influences my decision to avoid drugs.	3.54	0.66	Agree
3	Prayer strengthens my determination to remain drug-free.	3.50	0.69	Agree
4	Mentorship from religious leaders positively shapes my behaviour.	3.46	0.71	Agree
5	Religious teachings encourage me to reject peer pressure associated with drug use.	3.60	0.60	Agree
6	Spiritual guidance motivates drug users to quit substance abuse.	3.47	0.70	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.53**	**0.66**	**Agree**

The results in Table 4 reveal that respondents perceived spiritual guidance as having a substantial influence on youths' decisions to avoid or discontinue drug abuse. All six items exceeded the criterion mean. The highest mean score was recorded for religious teachings encouraging resistance to peer pressure (M = 3.60, SD = 0.60), followed closely by religious sermons discouraging drug use (M = 3.58, SD = 0.61). These findings suggest that religious instruction and moral teachings are perceived as powerful protective factors against substance abuse. The grand mean of 3.53 (SD = 0.66) indicates a high level of agreement that spiritual guidance through sermons, counselling, prayer, mentorship, and moral instruction positively influences youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse.

Ho_1: Religious institutions will not significantly reduce drug abuse among Nigerian youths through counselling, education, community outreach, and advocacy.

Table 5a: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	0.723	0.523	0.518	0.486

Table 5b: ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	102.746	4	25.687	108.643	0.000*
Residual	93.212	394	0.237		
Total	195.958	398			

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 5c: Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Beta	T	Sig.
Constant	0.624		5.846	0.000
Counselling	0.271	0.318	6.944	0.000
Education	0.236	0.281	6.153	0.000
Community Outreach	0.192	0.224	4.973	0.000
Advocacy	0.167	0.195	4.286	0.000

From tables 5a, 5b, and 5c, the calculated p-value (0.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance; the null hypothesis is rejected. The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between the activities of religious institutions and drug abuse prevention among Nigerian youths ($R = 0.723$, $R^2 = 0.523$, $F(4,394) = 108.643$, $p < 0.05$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.523$) indicates that counselling, education, community outreach, and advocacy jointly explain 52.3% of the variation in drug abuse prevention among Nigerian youths, while the remaining 47.7% may be attributed to factors outside the regression model. Among the predictor variables, counselling had the strongest contribution ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.05$), followed by education ($\beta = 0.281$), community outreach ($\beta = 0.224$), and advocacy ($\beta = 0.195$). This suggests that counselling from religious institutions constitutes the most influential intervention in reducing drug abuse.

Ho_2:: There is no significant relationship between Nigerian youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions and their participation in faith-based substance abuse prevention programmes.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation Analysis on Nigerian youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions and their participation in faith-based substance abuse prevention programmes.

Variables	N	R	Sig.	Decision
Perception - Participation	399	0.691	0.000	Sig

Table 6 shows that since the probability value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between Nigerian youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions and their participation in faith-based substance abuse prevention programmes ($r = 0.691$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that as youths perceive religious institutions to be more credible, effective, and trustworthy in addressing substance abuse, their willingness to participate in faith-based prevention programmes also increases significantly. The result highlights the importance of public confidence in religious institutions as a determinant of youth engagement in preventive interventions.

Hypothesis three: There is no significant relationship between extent of spiritual guidance from religious leaders and youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug in selected communities of Abia State

Table 7: Model for extent of spiritual guidance from religious leaders and youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug in selected communities of Abia State

Model	R	R^2	F	Beta	T	Sig.	Decision
Regression	0.746	0.556	497.821	0.746	22.315	0.000*	Sig

Table 7 reveals that since $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. Simple linear regression showed that spiritual guidance significantly predicts youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse ($R = 0.746$, $R^2 = 0.556$, $F = 497.821$, $p < 0.05$). The model explains 55.6% of the variance in youths' behavioural decisions, indicating that spiritual guidance is a strong protective factor against substance abuse. Youths who receive consistent counselling, mentoring, prayer support, and religious instruction are significantly more likely to avoid or discontinue drug use.

DISCUSSION OF FINDING

The findings of this study revealed that religious institutions play a significant role in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths. The descriptive analysis indicated that respondents agreed that religious institutions contribute to drug abuse prevention through regular awareness campaigns, moral instruction, counselling, youth fellowship activities, community outreach, advocacy, and collaboration with parents. The grand mean obtained for the items exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating a strong positive perception of the preventive role of religious institutions. Furthermore, the regression analysis demonstrated that counselling, education, community outreach, and advocacy jointly had a statistically significant influence on drug abuse prevention among Nigerian youth. The null hypothesis, which stated that religious institutions would not significantly reduce drug abuse through these strategies, was rejected. The regression model explained more than half of the variance in drug abuse prevention, indicating that faith-based interventions are important predictors of preventive behaviour among youth.

The findings support those of Jatau et al. (2021), which reported that individuals are more likely to adopt healthy behaviours when they perceive serious consequences associated with risky actions and believe that effective preventive measures exist. The present finding also agrees with recent Nigerian evidence (Nnaeto, 2024) that faith-based organisations are important stakeholders in drug abuse prevention because they provide moral education, counselling, community engagement, and value-based interventions that complement legal and public health approaches. Similarly, the findings are consistent with a study conducted in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State by Danraka et al. (2023), which reported that churches significantly contributed to reducing youth drug abuse through biblical teaching, counselling services, youth empowerment programmes, and continuous community engagement. The findings further corroborate research conducted in Benue State, Kerker and Adeyongo (2024), which identified community participation, moral education, stakeholder collaboration, and sustained awareness campaigns as important intervention strategies for reducing substance abuse among youths. The study recommended stronger partnerships among religious institutions, schools, families, healthcare professionals, and government agencies to improve prevention outcomes.

The findings of this study also revealed that Nigerian youths generally perceived religious institutions as effective and trustworthy partners in preventing and addressing substance abuse. The descriptive analysis indicated that respondents agreed that religious institutions provide reliable information on the dangers of substance abuse, offer credible counselling and emotional support, create opportunities for behavioural change, and should continue to play an active role in preventing drug abuse. The grand mean obtained for the items exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating an overall positive perception of the contributions of religious institutions.

The inferential analysis further demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between youths' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious institutions and their willingness to participate in faith-based programmes for preventing substance abuse. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding implies that positive perceptions of religious institutions significantly increase the likelihood that Nigerian youths will engage in faith-based counselling, awareness campaigns, rehabilitation activities, and other preventive interventions.

The findings align with those of Jatau et al. (2021), which posits that an individual's behaviour is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Positive perceptions of religious institutions enhance favourable attitudes towards faith-based prevention programmes, while the moral expectations communicated by religious communities create supportive social norms that encourage participation in substance abuse prevention activities.

The findings corroborate recent studies (Danraka et al., 2023; Kerker and Adeyongo, 2024; Abubakar et al., 2020; Oluwole, 2021 and Adeyemi, 2022) indicating that religious institutions remain highly trusted social organisations capable of mobilising communities for public health interventions. A recent study on the role of the Church in addressing youth drug abuse in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State (Oluwole,

2021) found that youths regarded churches as credible institutions because of their consistent provision of counselling, moral education, mentorship, and community support. The study concluded that positive perceptions of churches significantly enhanced youth participation in activities to prevent drug abuse.

The present findings are also supported by studies demonstrating that effective prevention programmes depend largely on the confidence participants have in implementing institutions. Research evaluating school- and community-based drug prevention programs in Nigeria found that programmes delivered through trusted community structures produced greater improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural outcomes than interventions lacking strong community engagement.

Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that spiritual guidance from religious leaders significantly influences Nigerian youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse. The descriptive analysis indicated that respondents agreed that religious sermons, personal counselling, prayer, spiritual mentoring, religious teachings, and regular participation in religious activities positively influenced their attitudes towards substance abuse. All the items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents considered spiritual guidance an important protective factor against drug abuse.

The regression analysis further demonstrated that spiritual guidance significantly predicted youths' decisions to avoid or discontinue drug abuse. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which stated that spiritual guidance from religious leaders would not significantly influence youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse, was rejected. The regression model explained a substantial proportion of the variation in youths' behavioural decisions, indicating that spiritual guidance constitutes one of the strongest predictors of drug abuse prevention among Nigerian youth.

The findings suggest that spiritual guidance functions as both a preventive and rehabilitative mechanism. Religious leaders often provide counselling, moral instruction, emotional support, mentorship, and hope to individuals experiencing personal, emotional, or social challenges that may predispose them to substance abuse. Through these interventions, youths are encouraged to develop self-control, resilience, positive coping strategies, and commitment to socially acceptable behaviours. Spiritual guidance also reinforces moral accountability and provides meaning and purpose, thereby reducing vulnerability to drug use.

The findings agree with those of Abubakar et al. (2020), which identify religiosity, positive adult mentorship, social support, moral development, and strong community attachment as protective factors that reduce adolescents' involvement in risky behaviours. Religious institutions strengthen these protective factors by providing structured environments where youths receive emotional encouragement, spiritual direction, and opportunities for positive social interaction. The findings are consistent with evidence from Ogana et al. (2024) showing that higher levels of spirituality and religiosity are associated with lower levels of psychoactive substance use among adolescents. A hospital-based study in Ekiti State by Adeyemi (2022) is also consistent with this study, which reported that adolescents with stronger religiosity and spirituality were less likely to engage in psychoactive substance use, suggesting that religious commitment can serve as an important protective factor against substance abuse.

Similarly, recent work on addiction treatment in Nigeria has highlighted the value of integrating spiritual care into comprehensive rehabilitation. A practice-based report from the Mater Christi Counselling and Rehabilitation Centre (MACCARCA) found that a biopsychosocial-spiritual approach, combining spiritual guidance with medical, psychological, and social interventions, contributed to improvements in recovery, family relationships, insight, and community reintegration.

Another notable finding is the significant contribution of personal counselling. Unlike public preaching alone, one-on-one counselling enables religious leaders to identify the specific psychosocial challenges confronting individual youths, including peer pressure, unemployment, family conflict, academic stress, low self-esteem, and emotional trauma. Through confidential counselling, religious leaders can provide tailored guidance and, where necessary, refer individuals to professional addiction treatment services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of religious institutions in preventing drug abuse among youths in selected communities in Abia State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the preventive roles of religious institutions, youths' perceptions of faith-based interventions, and the influence of spiritual guidance on youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse. The major findings of the study found that religious institutions play a significant role in preventing drug abuse among Nigerian youths through counselling, moral instruction, drug awareness campaigns, youth fellowship programmes, community outreach, advocacy, and family engagement. Respondents generally agreed that these interventions contribute to reducing drug abuse and promoting healthy lifestyles among young people. The regression analysis further confirmed that counselling, education, community outreach, and advocacy significantly predict drug abuse prevention. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. The study revealed that Nigerian youths generally perceive religious institutions as credible, trustworthy, and effective partners in preventing and addressing substance abuse. Respondents expressed confidence in the counselling services, moral teachings, and support programmes provided by churches, mosques, and other faith-based

organisations. Correlation analysis further demonstrated that positive perceptions significantly increase youths' willingness to participate in faith-based prevention programmes. It also established that spiritual guidance from religious leaders significantly influences youths' decisions to avoid or quit drug abuse. Regular sermons, personal counselling, mentoring, prayer support, and moral teachings were found to strengthen resilience against substance use; the null hypothesis was rejected.

The study therefore demonstrates that religious institutions constitute an important component of Nigeria's response to substance abuse among youths. However, their effectiveness can be substantially improved through increased institutional capacity, professional training, sustainable funding, stronger intersectoral collaboration, and the adoption of gender-responsive intervention strategies. These findings provide empirical evidence to support greater integration of faith-based organisations into national policies for reducing drug demand and related programmes.

Conclusively, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on faith-based public health interventions by demonstrating that effective prevention of drug abuse among Nigerian youths requires an integrated approach that combines spiritual guidance, professional healthcare services, community participation, government support, and evidence-based intervention strategies. Such an integrated framework offers greater prospects for reducing substance abuse, promoting youth well-being, strengthening families, and advancing national development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Religious institutions should develop structured and evidence-based programmes to prevent substance abuse that extend beyond occasional sermons and awareness campaigns. These programmes should include regular drug education seminars, youth mentorship initiatives, life-skills training, peer education, counselling services, and community outreach activities designed to discourage drug use among Nigerian youths.

2. Government agencies, particularly the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), the Federal Ministry of Health, State Ministries of Health, professional counselling associations, and universities, should organise periodic training programmes for pastors, priests, imams, chaplains, youth ministers, and other religious leaders on addiction prevention, mental health literacy, counselling skills, motivational interviewing, crisis intervention, psychological first aid, referral procedures, and ethical management of substance use disorders.

3. Federal, state, and local governments should provide financial and technical support to qualified faith-based organisations involved in substance abuse prevention and rehabilitation.

4. Religious organisations should establish dedicated counselling and referral units staffed by trained personnel capable of providing confidential counselling, early identification of substance abuse problems, psychosocial support, and timely referral to accredited rehabilitation centres and mental health facilities when specialised care is required.

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