


Social Stigmatization of Drug-Addicted Youths: A Study of Community Attitudes and Responses in Mile 91 Town, Northern, Sierra Leone

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INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Submitted: 30-08-2024, Revised: 27-10-2024, Accepted: 03-02-2025 Available Online: 09-07-2025</p> <p>Copyright ©2024 by Journal of Judikultura (s) This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.</p>  <p>Keywords: Social Stigmatization, Drug Addiction, Youth Marginalization, Community Attitudes</p>	<p><i>This research examines the prevailing community attitudes regarding drug-addicted youth and the immense impact of these perceptions on the victims themselves; it was carried out in Mile 91 Town, Sierra Leone. The study employs semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore insights from drug-addicted youths, community leaders, healthcare providers and family members. Results indicate that severe social stigmatizations are leading to extreme isolation, which limits access to services such as mental health and rehabilitation centers. Such stigmatization is based on a moral blame culture that reinforces the view that addiction is a moral sin. These thoughts, therefore, make these young people’s challenges more complicated while making recovery efforts difficult. This calls for community-led initiatives like awareness creation to change these harmful attitudes in the area into a supporting environment. There are underlying causes of stigmatization that must be handled before Mile 91 can develop an inclusive network that will facilitate recovery and social reintegration, thus ensuring that its community is generally healthier. The broader understanding of how addiction affects society, especially in rural Africa, has been analyzed by this research, and strategic recommendations have been made on what needs to be done moving towards future interventions and policy development.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

It is essential to consider how the general population perceives young people within communities, as these perceptions provide insight into the underlying values and beliefs held within society. Substance abuse among youth in rural regions, including Mile 91 Town, has been on the rise (Brown, 2019; Goodyear & Hill, 2021). Substance use concerns each community’s response, vilifying young people and deviants amongst others. In that response exist both enabling and disabling factors which youths have to contend with (Corrigan & Watson, 2018). The cause Addict creates conditions for abuse, for it does not avail of treatment, legal or social assistance (Avery & Avery, 2019). This research seeks to understand how social stigma of youth violence affects health and the capacity of youth to rehabilitate, particularly empirical relations and structural silences (Harris & Rhodes, 2021).

Community perceptions act as strong determinants as to whether legal provisions, health care and social assistance are to be required, as to how families and institutions give the care (Marmet & Kuntsche, 2022). In addition, describing addiction as a socially constructed moral deficit may also limit the types of rehabilitation services that may be accessible by the user; the users view that society shapes the policies and programs availed to them post-abuse (Fornili, 2020). One needs to

appreciate the impact of addiction on social and mental health welfare issues in order to appreciate the consequences of addiction, which in this case is ostracism and social exclusion for youth drug addicts (Weitzman & Chen, 2018).

It is paramount to foster forgiving settings in order to facilitate rehabilitation and incorporation of the youth within the societies without the risk to be marginalized or blamed for their actions (Fraser & Moore, 2016). According to new statistics, the drug use among the youth in Mile 91 Town is on the rise and a number of social and economic factors support the growth. There are many factors such as unemployment, low level of education and lack of mental health facilities which are detrimental to the upbringing of the youngsters and leads them to abuse drugs (Panchal & Kamal, 2022). Most of the youth in Mile 91 consider that they have no future and that is the most defining reason behind their drug or alcohol use for coping (Crisp & McCarty, 2017; Haines-Saah & Kelly, 2024).

Local surveys' findings confirm that many youth respondents face hurdles like dysfunctional families, violence and unstable living conditions which force them to turn to narcotics (Goodyear & Hill, 2021). An array of efforts to meet the needs that included youth programs, crisis centers, mental health services did not seem to be effective which only aides in worsening the addiction (Sussman & Ames, 2019). By not providing adequate options, youth in need become more and more socially excluded while never ending cycle of substance abuse is encouraged (Lucy, 2024).

Both the individuals and communities, including families and schools at large, bear the consequences of drug abuse.

Consecutively, there is urgency for policy measures seeking to deal with the drug challenge in this area, as well as the negative perceptions associated with the use of drugs (Garland & Howard, 2018). This stigma if not addressed would continue to act as a barrier to accessibility of rehabilitation programs, undermining rehabilitation and isolating these youth even further (Avery & Avery, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Overview of Relevant Literature

Studies on substance use disorder and the stigma that surrounds it appear to be quite broad in scope touching on sociological, psychological and economic aspects of the problem. Substance abuse and drug addicts are looked down upon and socially deselected further denying them meaningful access of service scopes which include but are not limited to health care, education, and work (Marmet & Kuntsche, 2022). In many societies, addiction is perceived as a deficit or loophole in someone's character rather than a health problem, which strengthens prejudices and endorsement stereotypes (Fornili, 2020; Lucy, 2024).

Stigmatization is not confined to relationships between individuals, but applies to organizational environments which intervene against people with SUD leaving them out of rehabilitation or recovery programs (Harris & Rhodes, 2021). In fact, stigma targeted at individuals is manifested in the form of shame and guilt as well as despair and this may even interfere with recovery as it serves to create further isolation and inhibit help seeking behavior (Sussman & Ames, 2019). In this regard, there is a foundation for further work that does not only refute prejudices but seeks to transform the attitudes to the patients (Goodyear & Hill, 2021).

b. Theories or Conceptual Fundamentals

Interestingly, there are a number of theories dealing with the process of the stigmatization of drug using youths. Goffman's notion of 'spoiled identity' is one of such theories and explains the situation where drug addicts and other deviant individuals are ostracized (Corrigan & Watson, 2018). This theory assists in an understanding of the social problems of the drug-addicted youths in Mile 91 where drug abuse is also coupled with poverty and ostracism from the society (Panchal & Kamal, 2022).

Canadian labeling theory is worth mentioning as well. Labeling theory indicates that when someone is labeled ‘a drug addict’ they persistently find themselves within the definition and enact behaviors which are in accordance with that description (Marmet & Kuntsche, 2022). This process is certainly self-destructive as it aids in self medication by means of substance abuse wherein the label becomes a prison cell (O’Shea & Daly, 2020).

Equally, structural stigma theory stresses how the use of structural arrangements and policies places the people who uses substances use at the margins of society so as to be out of sight (Saunders, 2024). This theory helps to explain how and why in Mile 91 the institutions and the general people policy climate and social outlook are often unfavorable so as to create a self defeating situation where the stigma against addiction is ever present, making recovery and integration in society difficult (Haines-Saah & Kelly, 2024).

c. Gaps or Controversies in the Literature

Although much has been established in the literature regarding both drug addiction and stigma, there remain gaps, misconceptions, and controversies that the current study aims to explore and elucidate. First, the majority of the current literature comes from Western nations and may not adequately reflect the complexities of stigma in rural African societies such as Mile 91 (Garland & Howard, 2018; Crisp & McCarty, 2017). The cultural, social and economic dynamics of such places are markedly different from those of the more developed, hence they require localized study.

Second, while research on youth drug addiction exists, it often focuses on urban areas, leaving rural contexts underexplored. Social patterns and community structures in rural settings create unique challenges for young people, which are not adequately addressed in current research (Fraser & Moore, 2016).

Finally, though the perspectives of healthcare providers and policymakers are valuable, there is limited focus on the experiences and viewpoints of drug-affected youths and their immediate communities (Harris & Rhodes, 2021). This study aims to fill these gaps by adopting a youth-centered approach, focusing on the lived experiences of young people and the societal dynamics influencing their behavior in Mile 91.

METHODS

The research employed a qualitative design to appreciate the perspectives of drug addicts and the social views regarding them in Mile 91. A case study approach was used to conduct an in-depth examination of the community, which included the researcher’s understanding of the younger members of society in terms of their perceptions and experiences of being blackened through the lens of stereotypes.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted with drug-addicted youths, community leaders, healthcare providers, and family members, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words. To capture collective attitudes and beliefs, Focus group discussions were held with various community groups, including youth groups, religious leaders, and local council members. The data collection process was guided by an interview protocol with open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses.

Sample Selection

The sample was selected using purposive sampling, targeting participants who were knowledgeable about or directly affected by drug addiction in Mile 91. The sample included 20 drug-addicted youths, 10 community leaders, 5 healthcare providers, and 10 family members. Additionally, four focus group discussions were conducted with different community groups. Selection criteria such as age, gender, and level of involvement with drug-addicted youths were

used to ensure a diverse and representative sample.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, read thoroughly, and coded. Labels were assigned to data segments related to themes such as "community attitudes," "forms of stigmatization," and "impact on recovery." The emerging main themes were refined to answer the research questions and deepen the understanding of social stigmatization in Mile 91.

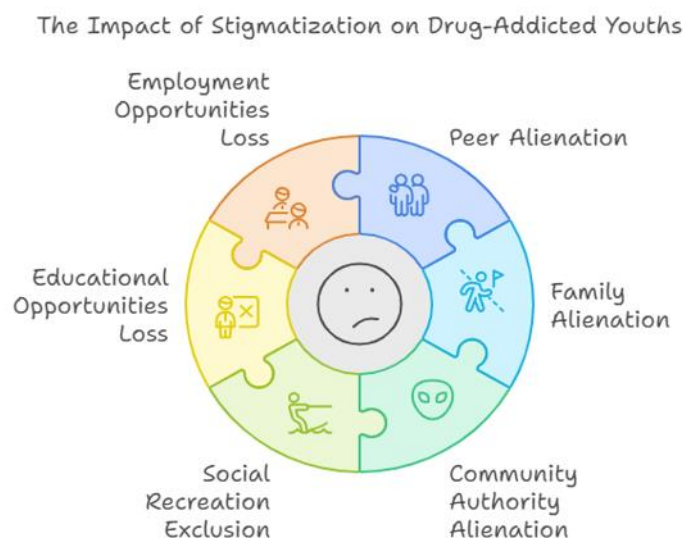
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the course of assessing community reactions to drug-addicted youths among the people of Mile 91 Town, some critical social processes have emerged on the issue of social stigma and its impact on the affected and on society as a whole. It is also evident from the findings that stigma prevents or exacerbates the vulnerability of these youths in that it facilitates their exclusion from crucial services such as mental health care and rehabilitation. However, such a more global view of stigma and its consequences, mainly on the community, should be well conceptualized in order to find the most effective remedy at the base level.

Exclusion aggravation of drug-dependence and drug-abusing youth

This academic paper has established the level to which stigmatization further isolates and marginalizes drug-addicted youths in the Drug Addict Rehabilitation Centre in Mile 91; stigma remains, unfortunately, pervasive in Mile 91 (Harris & Rhodes, 2021; Lucy, 2024). The data shows that these individuals are often alienated not only by peers and family members but also by community authorities who are supposed to shelter them (Avery & Avery, 2019). Such isolated exclusion manifests itself in being cut off from social recreation, community events, education, and employment opportunities (Sussman & Ames, 2019). The youths reported feeling as though they were cast out as lepers, intensifying their lack of hope and despondency (Garland & Howard, 2018). Such exclusion undermines their chances of trying to help themselves and their motivation to recover, as they believe they will never be reintegrated into the community despite their efforts to change (Goodyear & Hill, 2021; O'Shea & Daly, 2020).

Figure 1. The Impact of Stigmatization on Drug-Addicted Youths

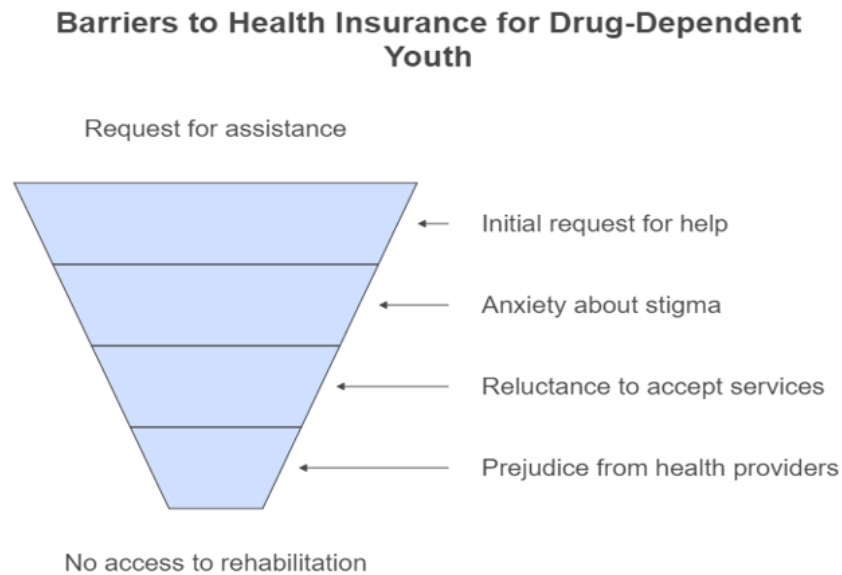


Health Insurance as a Barrier

Although there have been attempts to educate the community on drug addiction and on how and why rehabilitation is crucial, specifically among the youths in Mile 91, there appear to be some challenges still. The investigation concluded that many problem drug users ask for assistance but

only to the point of boredom, out of anxiety about how others will look at them. If services are offered, people's bias of being called 'Alakey', simply put, 'a drug user', hinders them from taking the services. To make matters worse, there are health providers in the community who are prejudiced, and this turns young people away from seeking the help they need. The data highlights the warning that if the stigma is not addressed, all attempts to provide focused assistance and rehabilitation will be seriously undermined.

Figure 2. Barriers to health Insurance for Drug-Dependent Youth

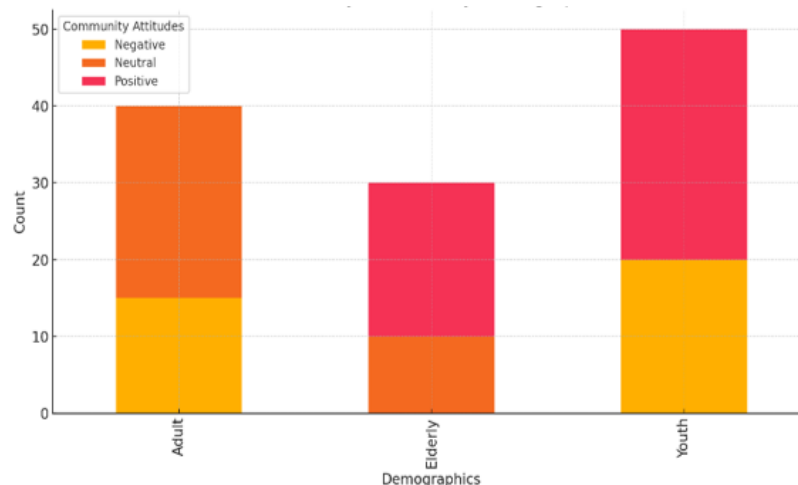


The Role of Community Attitudes in Stigma Sustenance

The research further demonstrates that community attitudes are factors that aid in the continuation of stigma. The general attitude in Mile 91 views drug addiction more as a moral weakness; it is associated with weak willpower on the part of an individual. This misconception is further fuelled by socio-cultural and religious perspectives, which consider addiction as a vice that can be resolved by a strong will and moral superiority. Such ideas construct a blame culture where the person with the addiction is blamed for their condition as one who deserves this situation instead of being given any support. This blame culture extends to families, and even the extended family as individuals will blame the addict and feel shame and guilt by association.

Hence, many families cut off ties with their addicted family members, even increasing the isolation of the youths.

Figure 3. The Isolation of The Youths



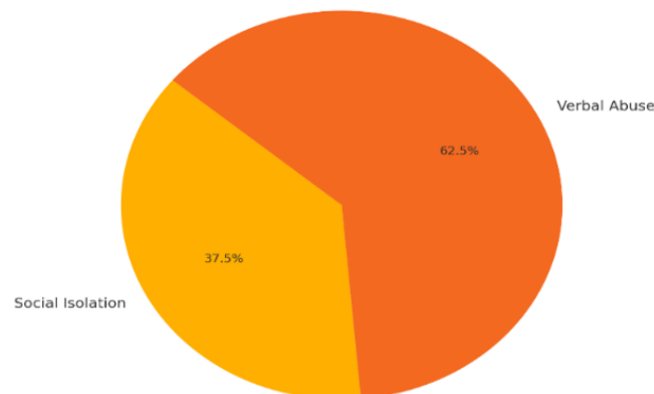
The Need for Community Awareness and Education

Given the persistent stigma already observed in the community, the research highlights the importance of creating community education programs targeted towards the populace concerning the inherent issues of addiction. The existing situation where the issue of addiction is described in terms of blame and not sympathy requires to be changed. Educational campaigns may play an important role in changing the prevailing attitudes and misconceptions that promote stigma. In particular, they help alleviate stereotypes by addressing some of the core misconceptions at the forefront of public stigmatization of addiction.

Creating Compassionate and Caring Attachments within the Community.

The results of the survey also highlight how it is essential to encourage the development of empathy and support suitable for drug-addicted youths in the concern and at the level of communities. Imbuing the community with ideas through personal narratives highlighting the stories of the addicted helps by eliminating the addiction as a choice approach and treating it as a condition that can be helped. Such support can be provided by persuading the communities and schools through family connection programs that promote dialogues and activities. Such as Those who tend to rescue the needy rather than stigmatize them. Liberal programs and others have existed and imply the foundation of these programs within the recession. It is clear from the analogy that it is possible to focus the table supporting the community to focus on healing and integration without the stigma and construction of the outer world by proper orientation of the one-reason obligation.

Figure 4. Development of Empathy and Appropriate Support for Adolescents Struggling with Drug Addiction



Building Inclusive Support Systems

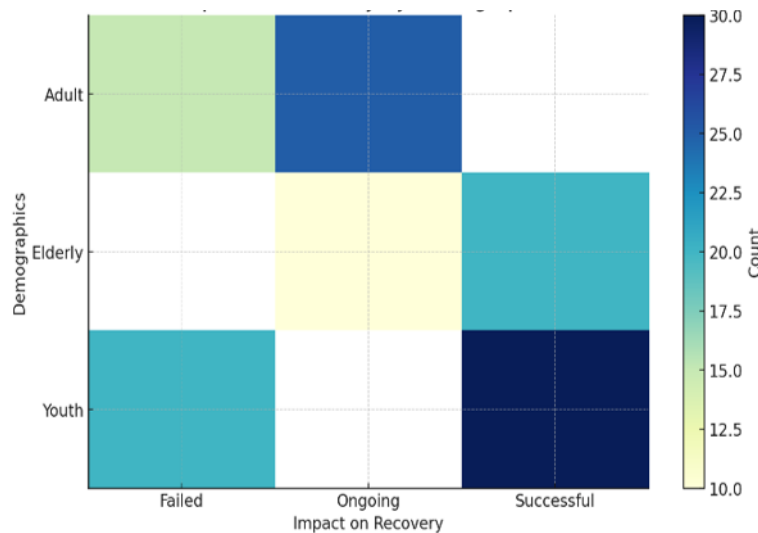
The study recommends the adoption of comprehensive support systems for all residents in Mile 91, especially those with addiction problems. Their walls are not like the aforementioned institutions' walls, which exclude the 'bad' members of society. Such actions may include making mental health care services more user-friendly, enhancing the provision of retraining programs, and eliminating negative images associated with these services. It means taking into consideration the opinions of different members of society: religious representatives, teachers and doctors, and local authorities, and acknowledging that they all have the responsibility to prevent drug dependence. The community can, therefore, devise a more effective and holistic support system that accommodates all members of society.

Enhancing Resilience of Communities in Difficulties

At last, the researchers are able to demonstrate that raising awareness and reducing stigma is key to creating inclusive support services that contribute to the overall resilience of the community in

Mile 91. In contrast, a community that responds to drug addictions in the likes of drugs with love, support, and care is termed to be a progressive society. To achieve this vision, it is important to reduce prejudice and create inclusive aspects of Mile 91 so that everybody regardless of their condition of addiction can flourish in society. This development exists not just for the individuals who are victims of adding addiction, but it enhances the fabric and status of the community as a whole as well.

Figure 5. Raising Awareness and Reducing Stigma



Recommendations for Action

To address the problem of stigma and help the drug-dependent youths in Mile 91, the study gives several recommendations. To begin with, it is important first to implement community campaigns that sensitize the public on addiction and how it can be tackled. Secondly, it would require the widening of sources of mental health, including rehabilitation services that ought to be available without stigmatization. Thirdly, dialogues and outreach modules should involve local organizations, schools and family units to foster a more positive and nurturing community. Lastly, ongoing monitoring and evaluation should be carried out to recommend the effectiveness or otherwise of these initiatives and appropriate measures. Instead of these, Mile 91 is set to take a step further in promoting positive health and integration for all who seek rehabilitation and support in the various modes possible.

Even as Mile 91 Town’s drug-addicted youths’ social stigmatization implementation research reveals the inescapable changes brought about by stigma, the critical need for interventions at the community level also stands out. If the causes of stigmatization are systematically and comprehensively tackled and inclusive systems of support are developed, it will be possible to make the members of the community more resilient and supportive of one another. This will not only alleviate the plight of Kagendo ‘s peers but will also promote health of the whole community.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the implications of social stigmatization on drug-addicted youths in Mile 91 Town reveals profound insights into community dynamics and the challenges faced by these individuals. The study highlights how entrenched negative perceptions not only exacerbate the struggles of youths grappling with addiction but also hinder efforts for successful rehabilitation and social reintegration. By examining the community attitudes underpinning this stigmatization, it becomes evident that there is a critical need for targeted interventions to change perceptions and foster a more supportive environment. This research contributes significantly to the existing literature by illuminating these community challenges and proposing pathways for future engagement strategies that promote understanding and acceptance. Furthermore, insights garnered from this study should encourage further inquiries into effective stigma reduction methods and explore

additional factors that influence community responses to addiction, thereby enhancing the discourse surrounding mental health and social justice.

Abbreviations

SUD	Substance Use Disorder
MHCS	Mental Health Care Services
SAI	Stigma and Addiction Intervention
SR	Social Reintegration
FGD	Focus Group Discussions

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Data Availability

The data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no funding or external influences have compromised the integrity of the findings or the conclusions presented in this study.

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