Volume 3 Issue 1

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

Vol 3 Issue 1

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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN ADDRESSING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN NIGERIA

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.67007/ijsds-2026-v3_i1_010

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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

ABSTRACT

Substance abuse remains a major social and public health problem affecting individuals, families, and communities. This study examined the role of social workers in addressing substance abuse in Nigeria, with specific attention to prevention and intervention, as well as rehabilitation and recovery support. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a narrative literature review design. Data were obtained from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, research reports and other relevant scholarly materials. The literature was identified through searches on Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and African Journals Online (AJOL), and was analysed thematically. The findings revealed that social workers contribute to the prevention and intervention of substance abuse through community education, counselling, early identification, referral services and collaboration with families, schools, health professionals and community organizations. The findings also indicated that social workers support rehabilitation and recovery through psychosocial support, family counselling, relapse-prevention assistance, follow-up services and social reintegration. However, their practice may be limited by inadequate funding, insufficient professional training, weak organizational support, stigma and difficulties accessing treatment. The study concludes that social workers have important roles in addressing substance abuse by providing support at individual, family and community levels. The study recommends increased professional training, adequate funding and resources, stronger involvement of social workers in community-based prevention programmes, and improved provision of post-treatment recovery services.

Keywords: Social Workers, Substance Abuse, Rehabilitation and Recovery Support

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ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Substance abuse has become a major social and public health concern because of its effects on individuals, families and communities. The use of substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tramadol, codeine and other psychoactive drugs can affect physical health, emotional well-being, family relationships, education, employment and general quality of life. In Nigeria, substance use is a particularly important concern because national evidence has shown a considerable level of drug use among the population. The National Bureau of Statistics (2019) reported that approximately 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 years, representing 14.4% of the population within this age group, had used drugs in the previous year. Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, followed by opioids, including pharmaceutical opioids such as tramadol, and codeine-containing cough syrups. Although this survey remains an important national reference point, its estimates relate to data collected in 2017 and should not be interpreted as the current prevalence rate. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate the scale of the problem and the need for effective prevention, treatment and social support. Recent Nigerian research further demonstrates that substance use affects young people, including secondary school students. Kolawole et al. (2025), in a study involving 800 secondary school students in Lagos State, found that the lifetime prevalence of substance use was 13.6%, while 6.9% of the students reported current substance use. Among the substances reported, tramadol and marijuana were prominent after alcohol. These findings show that substance use is not limited to adults or individuals who have already developed serious substance-related problems. It is also a concern among adolescents, making prevention, early identification and appropriate intervention important. However, because the study was conducted among students in a particular setting in Lagos, its findings should not be taken as a national prevalence estimate.

Beyond the prevalence of substance use, research has also highlighted the social problems associated with it and the difficulties individuals face when seeking treatment. Nelson et al. (2025), in a national study involving interviews with 2,787 key informants across Nigeria's 36 states, identified social, economic, legal, academic, occupational and health problems associated with drug use. The study also reported that access to treatment was affected by the cost of services and shortages of professionals with the necessary specialist skills. These findings suggest that substance abuse is not only a medical problem but also a social issue that can affect family stability, education, employment and community well-being. Albert (2026) similarly highlighted gaps in evidence-based treatment for opioid use disorders in Nigeria, including the limited availability of treatment services and community-based recovery support. Consequently, addressing substance abuse requires approaches that consider both the health needs of affected individuals and the social conditions that may contribute to their difficulties or hinder their recovery.

Substance abuse may be associated with family conflict, unemployment, poverty, social isolation, stigma and problems with the law. These challenges can make it difficult for affected individuals to seek help, complete treatment or maintain recovery. Madisha and Skhosana (2022) examined social workers' preparedness to provide support to people experiencing substance-abuse problems, drawing attention to the importance of professional readiness in responding to the social needs of affected individuals. In the Nigerian context, Nelson et al. (2025) also identified the shortage of skilled professionals and the financial cost of treatment as barriers to accessing appropriate services. These concerns indicate the need for accessible, respectful and continuous support that extends beyond medical treatment to include counselling, family assistance, referrals and community reintegration.

In this regard, social workers have an important role to play in addressing substance abuse. Social work focuses on improving people's well-being and helping individuals, families and communities deal with personal and social difficulties. Social workers can contribute through assessment, counselling, advocacy, referral, case management and follow-up services. They can also help individuals and families understand substance-related problems, identify available treatment options and access appropriate rehabilitation services. Amadasun (2021) discussed the relevance of social work in responding to Nigeria's social problems, supporting the need to strengthen the profession's contribution to social welfare and human well-being. In substance-abuse practice, social workers can help address the personal and environmental factors associated with substance use while supporting affected individuals in accessing the services they need. Another important responsibility of social workers is to reduce stigma and promote respectful treatment of people experiencing substance-related problems. Negative attitudes and discrimination may discourage affected individuals from seeking help or disclosing their difficulties. Social workers can respond by protecting clients' dignity, encouraging family understanding and promoting access to appropriate services without discrimination. Their involvement is particularly important where treatment is difficult to access because of financial limitations, inadequate specialist services or weak community support. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that strengthening

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ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

professional capacity and community-based services is necessary to improve access to treatment and support for people affected by substance use (Nelson et al., 2025).

Social workers also contribute to prevention and early intervention. Through community education, awareness programmes, counselling and collaboration with schools, families, health professionals and community organizations, they can help identify substance-related problems before they become more severe. The findings of Kolawole et al. (2025) reinforce the importance of preventive efforts among young people, while the national evidence presented by Nelson et al. (2025) demonstrates the need to improve access to appropriate services. Social workers can therefore support prevention by educating young people and their families, identifying individuals at risk and connecting affected persons with relevant health and social services. Furthermore, social workers can support rehabilitation and recovery after formal treatment. Individuals recovering from substance abuse may need assistance in rebuilding family relationships, returning to school or employment, accessing social services and developing healthier ways of living. They may also require continued counselling and follow-up support to help them cope with social pressures and reduce the risk of relapse. Ezeakunne and Unterrainer (2025), in their discussion of substance-abuse treatment in Nigeria, emphasized a holistic approach that considers biological, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of recovery. This perspective supports the importance of addressing the wider circumstances of individuals rather than focusing only on stopping substance use.

Therefore, the role of social workers in addressing substance abuse is broad and significant. It extends from prevention and early identification to counselling, intervention, treatment referral, rehabilitation, advocacy and recovery support. Nigerian national statistics and recent empirical studies demonstrate the continuing importance of substance use as a public health and social concern, particularly among young people and individuals facing barriers to treatment. Examining the role of social workers is therefore necessary to understand how professional social support can contribute to prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and the reintegration of individuals affected by substance abuse into their families and communities.

Statement of the Problem

Substance abuse remains a significant social and public health problem in Nigeria, with consequences for individuals, families and communities. The National Bureau of Statistics (2019) reported that approximately 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 years had used drugs in the previous year, representing 14.4% of the population within that age group. Although these figures are based on a survey conducted in 2017, they provide important national evidence of the scale of drug use in Nigeria. More recent research by Nelson et al. (2025), based on interviews with 2,787 key informants across the 36 states, documented drug-related social, economic, academic, occupational and health problems. The study also identified financial barriers and shortages of skilled professionals as challenges affecting access to treatment. These findings demonstrate that addressing substance abuse requires attention not only to treatment but also to the social circumstances of affected individuals and the availability of appropriate support services.

Despite the documented challenges, an important issue concerns the extent to which social work contributes to the prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and recovery of individuals affected by substance abuse. Social workers may provide counselling, family support, community education, advocacy, referrals and assistance with social reintegration. However, the available literature addresses different aspects of these responsibilities, including community-based interventions, treatment access and professional challenges. For instance, Thaddeus and Chukwu (2026) examined community-based approaches to substance abuse among Nigerian youths and highlighted the potential contributions of peer mentoring, family participation and youth empowerment, alongside challenges such as inadequate funding, stigma and shortages of trained facilitators. Similarly, Garuba and Alayande (2025) examined medical social workers' involvement in alcohol and drug abuse control in Osun State and identified inadequate professional recognition and limited support from other professionals as challenges affecting their work. Although these studies provide useful insights, their different contexts and areas of emphasis make it necessary to bring the available evidence together to develop a clearer understanding of the potential and documented roles of social workers in addressing substance abuse. Without such a synthesis, the contributions of social workers to prevention and intervention, as well as rehabilitation and recovery support, may remain scattered across the literature. It may also be difficult to identify the challenges affecting their practice and the areas requiring further research and professional attention.

Therefore, the problem addressed by this narrative literature review is the need to synthesize existing evidence on the role of social workers in addressing substance abuse, particularly their contributions to prevention and intervention, rehabilitation and recovery support. The review seeks to clarify the roles

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EISSN: 3115-6932

documented in the literature, identify the challenges and gaps reported by previous studies, and establish areas where social work practice and research can be strengthened.

Objectives of the Study

Examine the role of social workers in the prevention and intervention of substance abuse.

Assess the role of social workers in the rehabilitation and recovery support from substance abuse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Workers

Social workers are trained professionals who help individuals, families and communities deal with social, emotional and behavioural challenges that affect their well-being. Their work involves understanding the problems people face within their family, social and community environments and helping them find appropriate ways to cope with these challenges. According to Amadasun (2021), social work in Nigeria is concerned with responding to social problems and improving the well-being and functioning of individuals and communities. Social workers perform different roles depending on the needs of their clients. These roles may include counselling, advocacy, assessment, referral, rehabilitation, crisis intervention and community development. In substance-abuse situations, social workers can help individuals understand the effects of substance use, encourage them to seek treatment, support their families and assist them in returning to productive social life. Their role is therefore important because they address not only the immediate problem but also the social and environmental factors that may influence an individual's well-being.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is generally understood as the harmful or inappropriate use of psychoactive substances in ways that negatively affect a person's health, behaviour, relationships and ability to function effectively in society. Psychoactive substances are substances that affect mental processes, including thinking, perception, mood, emotions and consciousness. They include alcohol, cannabis, opioids, tobacco and other drugs that may affect the functioning of the brain and body (World Health Organization, 2024). The term substance abuse is widely used in everyday communication and social work practice. However, contemporary health literature also uses terms such as harmful substance use and substance use disorder to describe different patterns of substance use and their consequences. These terms are related but should not be treated as identical because not every instance of substance use constitutes a disorder.

Substance use becomes particularly concerning when it causes harm to the individual or others, interferes with daily responsibilities or develops into a pattern that is difficult to control. Substance use disorders may involve impaired control over substance use, increasing priority given to substance use over other activities, and continued use despite harmful consequences. Some individuals may also develop tolerance, meaning that they need larger amounts of a substance to achieve the same effect, or experience withdrawal symptoms when they reduce or stop using it (WHO, 2024). Therefore, the concept of substance abuse goes beyond the mere consumption of alcohol or drugs; it also involves examining the pattern of use, the harm experienced and the effect on the person's overall functioning. Substance abuse can involve both legal and illegal substances. Alcohol and certain medications, for example, may be legally available but can still cause harm when used inappropriately. Similarly, the non-medical use of prescription medicines, such as opioids, may expose individuals to dependence, overdose and other health complications. The effects of substance use vary according to the substance involved, the amount consumed, the frequency of use and the individual's circumstances. According to the WHO (2024), alcohol and drug use contribute to a substantial global burden of disease and premature death. These effects demonstrate that substance-related problems require attention from health professionals, families, social welfare agencies and other relevant stakeholders.

In Nigeria, substance use is an important concern because it affects different groups, including adolescents and young adults. Kolawole et al. (2025) investigated substance use among 800 secondary school students in Lagos State and reported a lifetime prevalence of 13.6% and a current-use prevalence of 6.9%. The study identified tramadol and marijuana among the substances reported by the students. These findings provide evidence that substance use is present among young people and highlight the importance of prevention, early identification and appropriate support. However, the results relate to the study population and should not be generalized to all Nigerian adolescents without further evidence. The earlier national survey by the National Bureau of Statistics (2019) also estimated that 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 years had used drugs in the previous year. Although the survey data were collected in 2017, the findings remain an important national reference for understanding the scale of drug use in Nigeria. The causes and contributing factors associated with substance

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EISSN: 3115-6932

abuse are complex. They may include peer influence, family relationships, emotional distress, social pressures, availability of substances and wider economic and environmental conditions. These factors do not affect everyone in the same way, and substance-related problems should not be explained by a single cause. Understanding the circumstances surrounding substance use is important because it can help practitioners identify individual needs and develop appropriate preventive and supportive interventions. A person experiencing substance-related problems may also face stigma, family conflict, difficulties at school or work, unemployment and social isolation. Such circumstances can make it more difficult to seek treatment and maintain recovery.

From a social work perspective, substance abuse is therefore both an individual welfare concern and a broader social issue. Its effects may extend beyond the person using the substance to family members, peers and the wider community. Addressing the problem requires an approach that considers health needs alongside family relationships, social support, access to services and opportunities for reintegration. Social workers can contribute through assessment, counselling, prevention education, referral, advocacy, family intervention and follow-up support. This understanding is consistent with a holistic approach to substance-related problems, in which recovery involves not only reducing harmful substance use but also improving personal well-being, social relationships and participation in community life.

Role of Social Workers in the Prevention and Intervention of Substance Abuse

Social workers have an important role in preventing substance abuse because they work closely with individuals, families and communities. Their understanding of people's social environments allows them to identify factors that may increase the risk of substance use and to provide support before the problem becomes severe. Prevention activities may include community education, counselling, awareness campaigns, early identification of substance-use problems and connecting vulnerable individuals with appropriate services. Heijdra Suasnabar and Walters (2020) noted that community-based psychosocial interventions can be useful in addressing substance-use problems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where specialist services may be limited. Such approaches are relevant to social work because they allow interventions to be provided within the communities where people live. At the individual level, social workers can help identify people who are at risk of developing substance-use problems. They may assess the person's family situation, peer relationships, emotional difficulties, economic circumstances and other social factors that may contribute to substance use. Early intervention can then involve counselling, motivational support, referral and continuous monitoring. According to Amadasun (2021), social workers can provide psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, counselling, case management, harm-reduction support and recovery services to people experiencing substance-use problems.

In Nigeria, the prevention of substance abuse is particularly important because social and environmental factors can influence substance use among young people. Adejoh et al. (2020) found that peer and family factors were important in understanding substance abuse among adolescents receiving treatment in Lagos. This suggests that prevention should not focus only on the individual but should also involve parents, peers, schools and communities. Social workers can therefore educate families about the warning signs of substance abuse and encourage supportive relationships that may reduce the likelihood of harmful substance use.

Social workers also contribute through counselling and psychosocial intervention. Individuals who use substances may experience emotional difficulties, family conflict, social rejection and other challenges that make it difficult for them to stop using substances. Counselling can help individuals understand the consequences of their behaviour, develop healthier coping strategies and make informed decisions about treatment. Joseph et al. (2020) identified social workers as important providers of services to people with substance-use problems, particularly because they can address both the individual's personal needs and the social barriers that affect access to treatment. Community intervention is another important aspect of the social worker's role. Social workers can collaborate with schools, health facilities, community leaders, families, non-governmental organizations and other agencies to organize awareness programmes and identify people who need help. Garuba and Alayande (2025) found that medical social workers were actively involved in efforts to control alcohol and drug abuse in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State. However, the study also identified challenges including inadequate recognition, poor remuneration and insufficient support from other professionals.

Therefore, the preventive and intervention role of social workers involves more than telling people to stop using substances. It includes understanding the circumstances surrounding substance use, educating individuals and communities, providing counselling, identifying problems early, linking people to treatment and working with families and other professionals. Effective social work intervention can

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help reduce the social conditions that encourage substance abuse while making it easier for affected individuals to seek assistance.

Role of Social Workers in the Rehabilitation and Recovery Support from Substance Abuse

Rehabilitation is an important stage in addressing substance abuse because stopping substance use is only one part of the recovery process. Individuals who have undergone treatment may still face family problems, unemployment, stigma, poor social relationships and difficulties returning to normal community life. Social workers can assist such individuals by providing counselling, psychosocial support, family intervention, advocacy and referrals to appropriate social and economic services. Social workers can also assist individuals in rebuilding relationships with family members and the wider community. Substance abuse may damage trust between individuals and their relatives, making reintegration difficult after treatment. Through family counselling and mediation, social workers can help families understand the recovery process and encourage them to provide appropriate support. They can also help clients develop positive relationships and reconnect with community resources. Another important role is linking individuals to resources. People recovering from substance abuse may need assistance with housing, education, employment, healthcare and other social services. Social workers can assess these needs and connect clients with organizations that can provide assistance. A recent systematic review found that social workers involved in community-based drug rehabilitation commonly perform roles as information providers, resource linkers, and relationship repairers. These roles help individuals navigate treatment systems, rebuild social connections and achieve greater stability during recovery. Social workers also contribute to relapse prevention. Recovery may be threatened when individuals return to environments associated with previous substance use. Social workers can help clients identify situations that may trigger relapse and develop practical strategies for dealing with them. They can also maintain contact with clients after formal treatment and refer them to support groups or other community services when necessary. In this way, social work support can continue beyond the treatment centre and help individuals maintain their recovery. The rehabilitation process can also involve helping clients regain productive roles in society. Social workers may support individuals in returning to school, finding employment, improving family relationships and participating in community activities. Freymüller et al. (2024) reviewed social work practice and outcomes in rehabilitation. commonly includes assessment, counselling and education, with social workers addressing issues related to social environments, finances, employment and participation in society. Although their review covered rehabilitation more broadly rather than substance abuse alone, the findings demonstrate the wider contribution social workers can make to successful rehabilitation.

In Nigeria, Ezeakunne and Unterrainer (2025) argued for a holistic approach to substance-abuse treatment that considers biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. Their work at a Nigerian rehabilitation centre illustrates the importance of addressing the different aspects of an individual's life rather than treating substance abuse as an isolated problem. This approach supports the role of social workers because many of the social and family issues surrounding substance abuse fall directly within the profession's area of practice. However, effective rehabilitation may be limited by inadequate training, insufficient resources and lack of organizational support. Unegbu (2020) found that social workers involved in substance-abuse treatment experienced challenges such as resistant clients, inadequate organizational support and inconsistent training. These challenges can affect the quality and continuity of services provided to individuals seeking recovery.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is anchored on the Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining the role of social workers in addressing substance abuse. The theory explains that people's behaviour and well-being are influenced not only by their personal characteristics but also by the different social environments in which they live. These environments include the family, peer groups, schools, workplaces, communities and wider society. The theory is relevant to substance abuse because individuals do not develop substance-use problems in isolation. Factors such as peer pressure, family relationships, poverty, unemployment, community conditions and social acceptance of substance use can influence an individual's behaviour. Similarly, recovery can be affected by the support or challenges that an individual experiences within these environments. Adejoh et al. (2020) found that family and peer factors were associated with substance abuse among adolescents in Nigeria, supporting the view that social environments can influence substance-related behaviour. The theory also provides a clear explanation for the role of social workers. Social workers can intervene at different levels of an individual's environment by providing counselling, educating families, strengthening social support, connecting clients with community resources and advocating for appropriate services. During rehabilitation and recovery, they can help individuals rebuild family relationships,

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EISSN: 3115-6932

develop positive social networks and reintegrate into their communities. Thus, the ecological perspective encourages social workers to look beyond the individual's substance use and consider the wider social conditions affecting the person's behaviour and recovery. Therefore, Ecological Systems Theory is appropriate for this study because it explains why addressing substance abuse requires interventions at both the individual and community levels. It supports the two objectives of the study by recognizing the importance of social workers in prevention and intervention, as well as rehabilitation and recovery support.

Empirical Review

Muzingili (2026) investigated the experiences and challenges of social workers involved in the management of substance-use disorders within multidisciplinary psychiatric teams at Harare Psychiatric Hospital, Zimbabwe. The researcher adopted a descriptive phenomenological research design and collected data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected social workers. The findings revealed that social workers experienced several challenges, including exclusion from important professional decisions, unclear job responsibilities, inadequate resources, limited professional training and poor communication among members of multidisciplinary teams. These challenges were found to affect effective collaboration and limit the ability of social workers to provide comprehensive psychosocial care to individuals experiencing substance-use disorders. The researcher consequently emphasized the need for institutional support, clearer professional responsibilities, improved training and inclusive decision-making in substance-use treatment services. This study is relevant to the present research because it highlights the professional responsibilities of social workers in substance-abuse intervention and the institutional challenges that may limit their effectiveness in providing rehabilitation and recovery support.

Skhosana and Madisha (2026) examined the role of social workers as the first point of contact for adolescents experiencing substance-use problems in rural communities in South Africa. The researchers adopted an exploratory qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews with seven social workers who had direct experience providing substance-use-related services to adolescents. The study examined the different stages through which affected adolescents accessed social welfare services, including initial contact, screening, assessment, referral, detoxification, rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare. The findings revealed that social workers played an important role in identifying adolescents with substance-use problems and connecting them with appropriate treatment and rehabilitation services. However, the researchers identified several challenges, including inadequate resources, limited training, weak collaboration among service providers, insufficient rehabilitation facilities and the absence of structured aftercare programmes. The study therefore recommended the introduction of standardized screening procedures, improved treatment facilities and comprehensive aftercare services. This study relates to the present research because it demonstrates the importance of social workers in early identification, intervention, referral, rehabilitation and continued recovery support for individuals affected by substance abuse.

Vilakazi and Nkomo (2023) investigated the difficulties encountered by social workers involved in outpatient treatment programmes for persons with substance-use disorders in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The study focused on practitioners who worked directly with individuals undergoing treatment for substance-use problems. The findings revealed that social workers faced several barriers to effective service delivery, including repeated relapse, denial of substance-use difficulties, unwillingness of some clients to engage in treatment, insufficient participation by family members and inadequate support from their organizations. These challenges were found to interfere with the ability of social workers to provide sustained and effective treatment interventions. The researchers consequently advocated for improved organizational support and intervention approaches that promote the active participation of both service users and their families. The study is significant to the present research because it illustrates the intervention responsibilities of social workers as well as the institutional, individual and family-related factors that can limit their effectiveness in addressing substance abuse.

Thaddeus and Chukwu (2026) explored the role of social workers in community-oriented strategies for reducing substance abuse among Nigerian youths. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing quantitative data from 150 youths and qualitative information through interviews with eight key informants across urban and rural communities in Nsukka, Nigeria. The results indicated that interventions involving peer mentoring, family participation, youth empowerment and faith-based initiatives had the potential to prevent and reduce substance abuse among young people. Nevertheless, the implementation of these interventions was constrained by inadequate financial resources, social stigma, difficulties in reaching rural populations and a shortage of adequately trained facilitators. The researchers therefore stressed the importance of greater involvement of social

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workers in developing and sustaining community-led responses to substance abuse. This study relates to the present study as it establishes the relevance of social workers in designing and implementing community-level prevention and intervention strategies for substance abuse.

Adejoh et al. (2024) examined the experiences of individuals with substance-use disorders during the COVID-19 lockdown in Lagos, Nigeria. The researchers adopted a qualitative approach to investigate how restrictions associated with the pandemic affected access to treatment, professional services and social support among people experiencing substance-use disorders. The findings indicated that the lockdown disrupted established treatment and support systems and significantly affected the social experiences of affected individuals. The study emphasized the need for sustained professional and psychosocial assistance for people experiencing substance-use difficulties, especially during emergencies and other periods of disruption. Its relevance to the present study lies in its demonstration of the need for social workers to provide psychosocial assistance, referrals, advocacy and sustained continuity of care for individuals affected by substance abuse.

Garuba and Alayande (2025) examined the role of medical social workers in controlling alcohol and drug abuse in Olorunda Local Government Area of Osun State, Nigeria. The researchers adopted a qualitative research design and used Key Informant Interviews to obtain information from five participants, including community leaders, medical social workers, officials of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and senior civil servants working in primary healthcare centres. The findings showed that medical social workers contributed to efforts aimed at controlling alcohol and drug abuse in the study area. However, their activities were affected by inadequate professional recognition, poor remuneration and insufficient support from other professionals. The researchers recommended better integration of social workers into the healthcare system and improved welfare packages to strengthen their performance. This study relates to the present study because it provides direct evidence of the involvement of medical social workers in substance-abuse control in Nigeria and identifies some of the institutional challenges that may limit their effectiveness.

Nelson et al. (2025) investigated drug-related problems and treatment services at the community level in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach and obtained information through semi-structured interviews with 2,787 purposively selected key informants, including police officers and health workers, across the 36 states of Nigeria. The findings revealed that drug use was associated with several social, economic, legal, academic, occupational and health problems affecting individuals, their families and communities. The study also found that access to treatment was limited by the financial cost of services and shortages of professionals with the necessary specialist skills. The researchers recommended strengthening community-based services, improving the availability of trained professionals and expanding access to treatment. This study relates to the present research because it highlights the social consequences of substance abuse and the need for skilled professionals, including social workers, to provide accessible treatment, psychosocial support and community-based interventions.

Ilori et al. (2025) examined the relationship between childhood trauma, peer influence, emotional dysregulation and substance abuse among adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. The researchers adopted a quantitative research approach and collected data using structured questionnaires. The instruments assessed participants' experiences of childhood maltreatment, peer-group influence, emotional regulation and substance abuse. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed significant relationships between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional difficulties and substance abuse among the adolescents studied. The researchers therefore highlighted the importance of interventions that address the psychological and social factors associated with substance use. This study relates to the present research because it demonstrates the importance of addressing family experiences, peer relationships and emotional difficulties when developing substance-abuse prevention and intervention programmes. It also supports the need for social workers to provide counselling, family support, early identification and appropriate referrals for young people at risk of substance abuse.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a narrative literature review design to examine the role of social workers in addressing substance abuse. Data were obtained from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, and research reports. Relevant literature was identified through searches conducted on Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and African Journals Online (AJOL), as well as relevant academic journal websites and publications from recognized organizations. The review focused mainly on publications from 2019–2026, while older foundational works were included where necessary. Studies were selected based on their relevance to substance abuse prevention, early

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EISSN: 3115-6932

identification, counselling, intervention, rehabilitation, recovery support, relapse prevention, and the role of social workers in Nigeria, Africa, and other relevant contexts. The selected literature was analysed thematically. The review synthesized evidence across the selected studies to identify common findings, implementation challenges, and gaps in the existing literature concerning the contribution of social workers to addressing substance abuse.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that addressing substance abuse requires more than providing treatment or rehabilitation services. The synthesis identified two major areas of social workers' involvement: prevention and intervention, as well as rehabilitation and recovery support. In prevention and intervention, social workers contribute through community education, counselling, early identification, referral services and collaboration with families, schools, health professionals and community organizations. These activities help individuals understand the dangers of substance abuse and provide support for those at risk. The findings suggest that prevention becomes more effective when it addresses not only individual behaviour but also the family, peer and community factors that may contribute to substance abuse. This supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that human behaviour is influenced by interactions within different social environments. The findings further show that social workers play an important role in rehabilitation and recovery by providing psychosocial support, family counselling, relapse-prevention assistance, follow-up services and support for social reintegration. Recovery from substance abuse involves more than stopping the use of drugs; it also requires addressing family difficulties, social stigma, isolation and other challenges that may affect an individual's progress. Social workers can help individuals rebuild relationships, develop coping strategies and reconnect with their families and communities. This reinforces the ecological perspective by emphasizing the importance of supportive relationships and positive social environments in the recovery process. However, the effectiveness of these interventions may be limited when individuals lack access to treatment, family support and continuous professional assistance.

The findings also reveal that social workers face several challenges in carrying out their responsibilities, including inadequate funding and resources, insufficient professional training, weak organizational support, stigma, limited treatment facilities and poor coordination among relevant agencies. These challenges can reduce the availability and effectiveness of prevention, intervention and rehabilitation services. The findings therefore have implications for social work practice and substance abuse policy in Nigeria. Social workers should be more actively integrated into community-based prevention programmes, treatment centres and rehabilitation services. Government and relevant organizations should also strengthen funding, provide continuous professional training, improve access to treatment and encourage collaboration among social workers, families, health professionals and community organizations. Such measures could improve the contribution of social workers to preventing substance abuse and supporting the recovery and reintegration of affected individuals.

CONCLUSION

This review highlights the important role of social workers in addressing substance abuse in Nigeria through prevention and intervention, as well as rehabilitation and recovery support. The thematic synthesis identified community education, counselling, early identification, referral services and collaboration with families, schools, health professionals and community organizations as important approaches to preventing and addressing substance abuse. The reviewed evidence also shows that rehabilitation and recovery require more than stopping substance use. They involve psychosocial support, family counselling, relapse-prevention assistance, follow-up services and social reintegration. Within this context, social workers have relevant professional skills and responsibilities that can help address the personal, family and community challenges associated with substance abuse.

The reviewed evidence suggests that strengthening the involvement of professional social workers in substance-abuse prevention, treatment and rehabilitation services could improve the support available to affected individuals and their families. However, inadequate funding, insufficient professional training, weak organizational support, stigma and limited access to treatment remain important challenges. In conclusion, addressing substance abuse effectively requires stronger community-based prevention programmes, improved access to treatment, continuous professional support and better coordination among social workers, families, health professionals and relevant organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Social workers should become more actively involved in community-based substance-abuse prevention programmes. They should organize regular awareness campaigns, counselling sessions and educational programmes in schools, families and communities to educate people about the dangers of substance abuse and identify individuals who may be at risk at an early stage. Government agencies and social work

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EISSN: 3115-6932

organizations should also provide adequate training and resources to enable social workers to develop effective prevention and intervention skills.

Treatment centres and social welfare agencies should strengthen the involvement of social workers in post-treatment services. Social workers should provide continuous counselling, family support, relapse-prevention assistance and follow-up services to individuals after treatment. They should also assist recovering individuals in accessing education, employment and other community resources that can support their reintegration into society. Government and relevant organizations should provide adequate funding, professional support and working facilities to enable social workers to provide effective and continuous rehabilitation and recovery services.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Department of Social Work

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

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