



COVID-19 and Substance Abuse

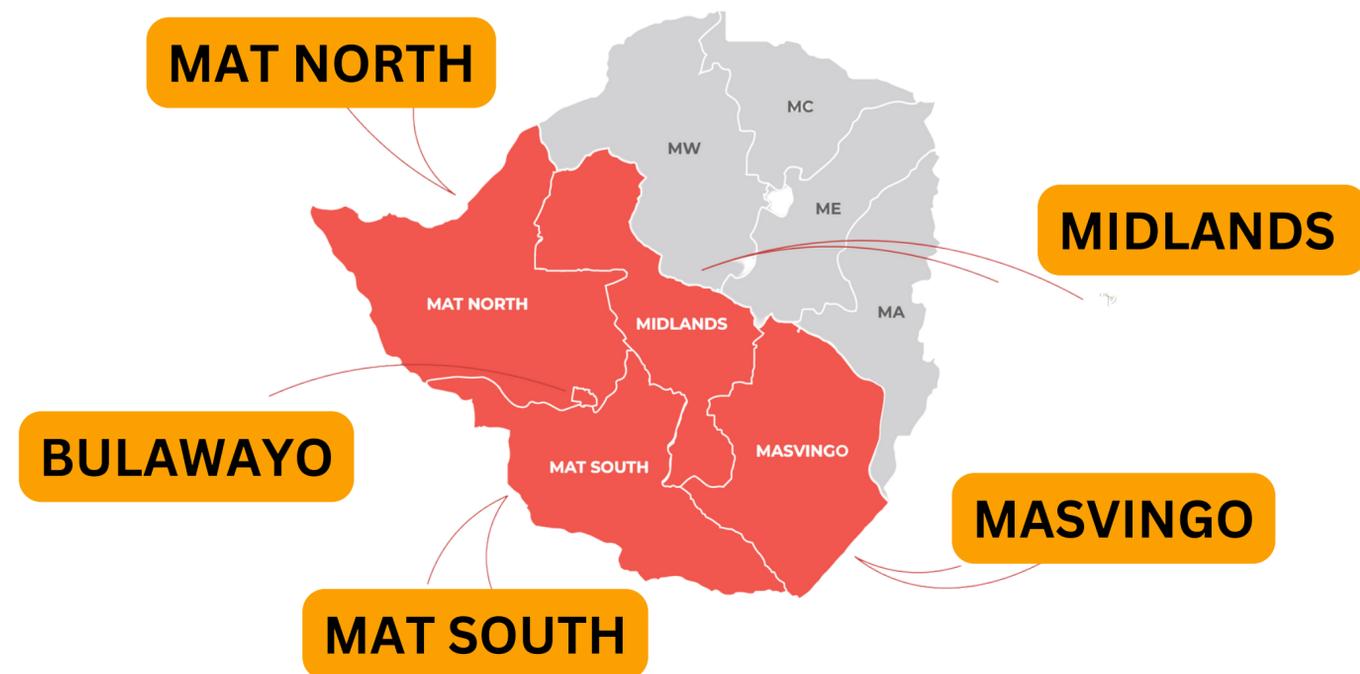
OBJECTIVE

To investigate the impact COVID-19 had on Substance abuse among youths in Zimbabwe.

METHODS

Rooted in Trust 2.0 (RiT 2.0) is a global pandemic information response program funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and implemented by Internews in 13 countries globally to counter the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation on COVID-19, COVID-19 vaccines and other health topics.

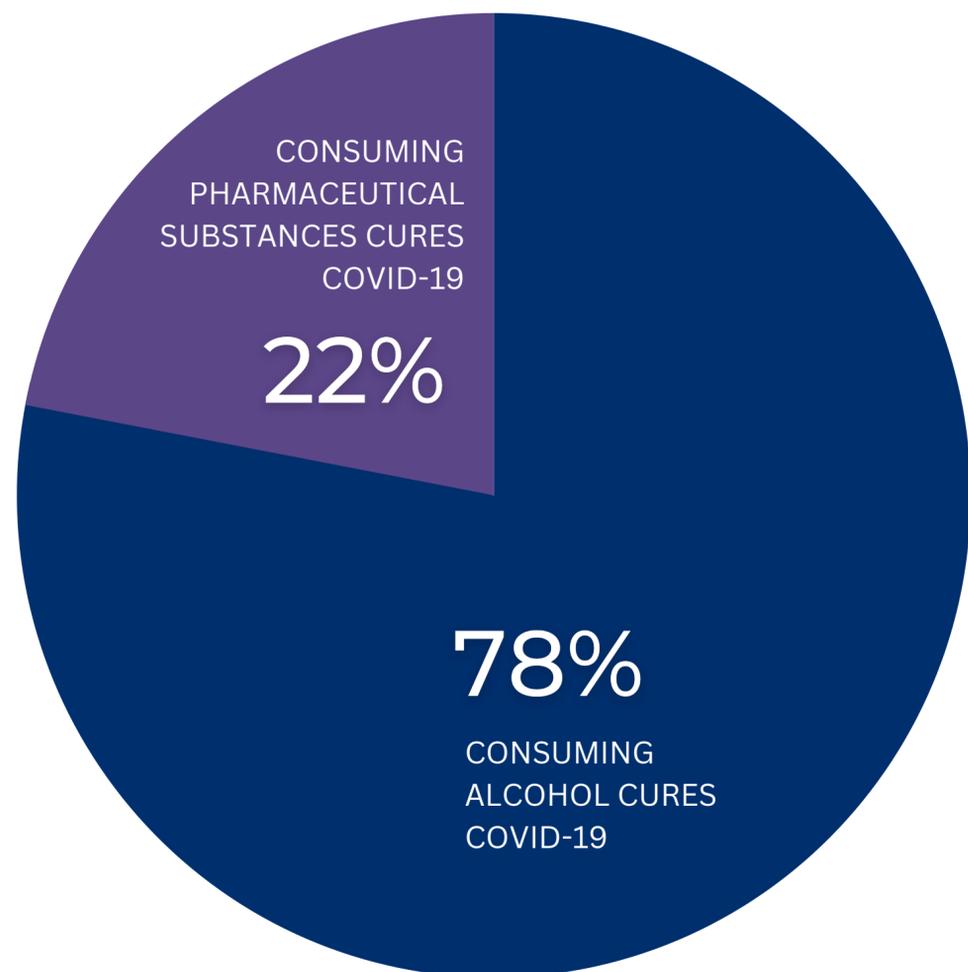
RiT 2.0 in Zimbabwe is working with media, community-based organisations, health and humanitarian actors to build a healthier information ecosystem that is responsive to the needs of vulnerable and migrant communities in the Southern region of the country, particularly in the provinces of Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands, Masvingo and Bulawayo.



CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

While drug abuse has always been prevalent in Zimbabwe's youthful communities, the emergence of the novel COVID-19 virus heightened the substance abuse craze especially with the pronouncement of control measures such as the lockdown which saw schools, and businesses facing disruptions in daily routines. The idleness and economic hardships that came with these developments resulted in youths to engage in drug and substance abuse as a coping mechanism. The World Health Organisation (WHO) also reported that 57% of mental health cases in Zimbabwe are as a result of the increasing rate of drug abuse.]

SUBSTANCE ABUSE RUMOR DISINTEGRATION



Source: Visualisation by Internews: Data by RiT.20 Humanitarian Information Dashboard

At least 97 rumors on substance abuse have been collected since the project launch in January 1, 2022, to date. Of these rumors, 78% are on the consumption of alcohol and 22% on the consumption of pharmaceutical substances as alternative treatments to COVID-19.

Examples of substance abuse and COVID-19 rumors

"OkweCovid kuhlupha lina, mina ngingazizwa ngingani ngingenwa ngokuyiflue engingakuzwisiyi ngihlanganisa ingoma leBenylin ngivuke ngirayithi..sokungincede kanengi" (Ndebele Language: KOBO-Bulawayo, 13/6/2022)

Translation:

"COVID-19 is your headache I personally know how to keep it away, whenever I feel like I'm being attacked by a nasty flu I simply mix Broncleer and Benylin and drink. It has helped me several times."

"Covid 19 pandemic yakakonzeresa drug abuse pandemic" (Shona Language: KOBO-Gweru, 11/7/202)

Translation:

"COVID -19 pandemic led to the drug abuse pandemic."



"Vanhu vese vakabatwa ne covid 19 vaive vasingamwi doro nekuti doro pacharo i sanitizer" (Shona Language: KOBO-Masvingo, 18/07/2022)

Translation:

"Only alcohol non-drinkers caught COVID-19 simply because alcoholics were safe as alcohol in itself is a sanitization agent"

"Ukunatha oNtshengu kuyayitshisa icorona iphele duu" (Ndebele Language: KOBO-Gwanda, 13/6/2022)

Translation:

"Drinking whiskey and cane spirits destroys COVID-19."



DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and disruptive impact on the lives, health and well-being of individuals, families and communities, a situation worsened by widespread poverty and other pre-existing socioeconomic and health challenges.

Parts of the management strategies to contain the spread of the COVID-19 include lockdowns, quarantine and isolation measures that had adverse psychosocial impacts on communities. People responded to these in unique ways depending on their life circumstances. However, many, especially the already marginalised, educated, unemployed and frustrated youths did not have the mental and economic resources to cope in adaptive ways.

In response to COVID-19 communities, mostly youths, had much to say to justify drug abuse as a COVID-19 management, treatment plan. This led to a huge increase in drug abuse prevalence in the country. In rumors collected both online and offline by the RiT 2.0 project, alcohol and drug abuse is rumored to treat and manage COVID-19. This was derived from the WHO prevention measures that alcohol-based sanitisers are effective in preventing COVID-19 infections. According to expert sources, far from offering protection, alcohol misuse makes the body more susceptible to viral infections and can worsen the prognosis. Alcohol in the body at the time of exposure to a pathogen tends to impair the body's immediate immune response to the pathogen, making it easier for an infection to develop. Longer term, excessive alcohol consumption impairs immune cell functions in the lungs, making the body's immune response less effective. Excessive alcohol use also damages the cells that line the lung surface, and this damage can go undetected until an infection occurs in the lungs. Before COVID-19, people were already battling an upsurge in substance abuse among youths and young adults.

According to a 2018 WHO report, Zimbabwe had the highest number of 15 to 19-year-olds in Africa who engaged in heavy "episodic drinking", at 70.7 per cent among males and 55.5 percent among females. Many of these youths are employed in the informal sector as commuter omnibus touts and conductors.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, youths were active and productive with some engagement to organise their lives around. COVID-19 disrupted their lives, taking away the little that they had. Due to stress related to dealing with the effects of COVID-19, many youths resorted to drugs as a coping strategy leading to a significant increase in illicit substance abuse. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Zimbabwe supports the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) and has a Mbare Adolescents' Sexual And Reproductive Health Project in Mbare (ASRH) Project (Mbare and Epworth) since 2016. According to MSF, the number of mental health consultations in the ASRH project increased from 2018 – 2021. the most common condition is substance abuse (43%) then acute stress (15%) and behavior disorder (9%) two third of their consultation are female adolescents. One fourth to one third of consultations are for follow-up and the majority are for an initial visit.

Commonly used substances in Zimbabwe include glue, broncleer cough syrup, mangemba, cane sprit, marijuana, codeine, and methamphetamine (crystal meth). Porous borders have seen broncleer cough syrup (containing codeine) finding its way illegally into the country in huge volumes. Porous borders have resulted in drugs such as broncleer (containing codeine) finding their way illegally into the country in huge volumes and sold in the high-density suburbs of Zimbabwe. Mbare high density suburb has been cited as a major supplier of these illicit substances. To further compound this, local production of drugs such as Musombodia, a colorless highly intoxicating drink made from ethanol and emblems powder is now rampant. Musombodia is illegally manufactured and distributed throughout Zimbabwe, and the illicit drug is preferred over other alcoholic beverages as it is sold at USD\$1.50 for 200ml and USD\$7.00 for a 750ml bottle. Local research posits that broncleer cough syrup is also among substances mostly abused in Zimbabwe during COVID-19. Those with substance use disorders in many instances, also have depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges, evidenced by an approximate 60% of patients admitted in mental health institutions recorded as suffering from drug related problems.

- In response to the rising substance abuse, Zimbabwe launched a National Drug Master Plan to try and curb the substance abuse set to run from 2020-2025. According to a report by the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZIMVAC), 'the Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare Ministry are involved in rehabilitating survivors of drug abuse, and they have conducted 32 drug and substance abuse campaigns. In their report they revealed that 1,058 people have been arrested since January and drugs valued at \$24,7 million have been recovered.
- In implementing this plan, the government is using the carrot and stick method which, when used alone without rehab will not achieve desired results.
- The failure by government to construct affordable rehabilitation centres leads to home detoxification treatments which are not as effective compared to rehab treatments as patients are in serious troubles of relapsing.



CONCLUSION

The issue of drug and substance abuse remains complex and inconclusive. Like any other social phenomenon, drug and substance abuse is always evolving from time to time, place to place, and generation to generation. COVID-19 exacerbated an already substance abusing community especially the unemployed youths.



RECOMMENDATIONS



- **There is need for multi-stakeholder** strategic approach for community awareness.
- **Media and humanitarian organisations can partner with** health workers to facilitate community dialogues as well as produce and distribute information and education materials aimed at combating drug abuse.
- **Journalists and media organisations** can scale up production of media content that spotlights the problem of drug abuse in the country together with support services that youths and adults can adopt to avert the problem.
- **Humanitarian organisations can** support the implementation of the National drug master plan by offering rehabilitation services to youths that are using drugs as a coping mechanism.
- **Actors working with youths can partner with Zimbabwe Republic** Police to offer psychosocial support services to the youths that would have been found using illicit drugs and substances. This can be done through prison rehabilitation programs.
- **Community health workers can share drug abuse** prevention information materials with communities as they go around their daily duties.
- **Organisations involved in drug abuse prevention can engage the** youth in collaboration with youth organisations such as Active Youth in Zimbabwe, National Youth Development Trust (NYDT) and Youth Dot.com, to facilitate community dialogues and understand youths' perceptions on COVID-19 prevention protocols and share correct and accurate information through edutainment.