



POLICY BRIEF

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Drug Abuse as a Growing Public Health and National Security Crisis in Nigeria: Need for Legislative Actions

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Executive Summary

The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has highlighted drug abuse and trafficking in Nigeria as a growing public health and national security crisis, particularly during the inauguration of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Country Programme for Nigeria 2026–2030. The programme is designed to strengthen Nigeria's capacity to address drug-related crimes, improve justice delivery, and enhance public health responses to substance use disorders. According to the NDLEA Chairman, drug trafficking fuels violent crime, money laundering and undermines national security, while drug dependence imposes significant social, economic, and developmental costs. Recent UNODC data indicates that over three million Nigerians currently live with drug use disorders, with a national prevalence rate of 14.4%, nearly three times the global average. Opioids, including tramadol and codeine-based products, and cannabis remain among the most commonly abused substances.

While the programme reflects a commitment to tackling drug abuse, several policy concerns warrant attention. Nigeria's public health response infrastructure is inadequate, with limited rehabilitation centres, addiction specialists, and community-based treatment programmes. Enforcement efforts, though essential, remain over-emphasised, often at the expense of prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation services. The absence of a comprehensive national drug surveillance system limits reliable data on prevalence, treatment outcomes, and emerging trends, hindering evidence-based policymaking. Socio-economic factors such as youth unemployment, poverty, and social marginalisation exacerbate vulnerability to drug abuse. Furthermore, institutional coordination across health, education, social services, and justice sectors remains sub-optimal, reducing the effectiveness of multi-sectoral interventions.

Given its constitutional oversight responsibilities, the National Assembly has a critical role in ensuring a balanced, evidence-based, and sustainable response to the drug crisis. Legislative engagement is necessary to strengthen institutional capacity and support coordinated strategies that address both enforcement and public health dimensions of drug abuse.

Accordingly, the National Assembly, through its Committees on Health, Drugs and Narcotics, and National Security, may consider the following actions:

- Pass a resolution formally recognising drug abuse and substance use disorders as a public health priority requiring comprehensive interventions beyond enforcement.
- Mandate dedicated budgetary allocations for the establishment and upgrading of rehabilitation centres across all geopolitical zones, including the training and deployment of addiction specialists, counsellors, and psychosocial care workers.



- Require the Federal Ministry of Health and relevant agencies to implement nationwide prevention strategies targeting schools, universities, and high-risk communities, integrating drug education, mental health literacy, and well-being curricula.
- Mandate the development of a national drug surveillance and monitoring system to provide reliable, real-time data on prevalence, patterns, and treatment outcomes to inform policy and resource allocation.
- Encourage the establishment of a coordinated national strategy involving NDLEA, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders to align enforcement, prevention, treatment, and social support services.

Drug abuse in Nigeria constitutes a complex public health and national security challenge, with far-reaching social and economic consequences. While enforcement remains necessary, a holistic, health-centred, and evidence-based approach is urgently needed. Sustained legislative oversight will be essential to ensure that national drug policies are effectively implemented, adequately funded, and capable of delivering measurable improvements in public health and societal well-being.

Background:

In March 2026, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), through its Chairman, described drug abuse and trafficking in Nigeria as a growing public health and national security crisis during the inauguration of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Country Programme for Nigeria 2026–2030¹. The programme is intended to strengthen Nigeria's capacity to address drug-related crimes, enhance public health responses, and improve justice delivery.

The Chairman who delivered a speech highlighted the evolving nature of the drug problem in Nigeria, marked by increasing complexity, scale, and harm to individuals and communities, and emphasised the need for more coordinated, multi-sectoral action. He stated that drug trafficking fuels violent

crime, money laundering, and undermines national security, while the human consequences of drug dependence demand a shift from purely punitive enforcement to a balanced approach emphasising prevention, counselling, and rehabilitation².

These concerns by NDLEA through its Chairman are reinforced by recent findings from the UNODC indicating that more than three million Nigerians are currently living with drug use disorders, and Nigeria's drug prevalence rate (14.4%) is nearly three times the global average³. The organisation also noted that increasing abuse, particularly of opioids such as tramadol and codeine-based products, is not solely a health challenge but also a development and security concern⁴.

Historical epidemiological studies further suggest that Nigeria has long faced high levels of drug abuse. For example, a national

¹ Ariyo, I. (2026, March 28). Drug abuse now public health crisis — Marwa. News Express. <https://newsexpressngr.com/news/301043/drug-abuse-now-public-health-crisis-marwa>

² ibid

³ Opanuga, J. (2025, June 18). Over 3m Nigerians suffer drug disorder — UNODC. *The Guardian*.

<https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria/national/over-3m-nigerians-suffer-drug-disorder-unodc/>

⁴ ibid

drug use survey found that approximately 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 had used illicit drugs, with cannabis and opioids among the most commonly abused substances⁵.

Despite the existence of drug control laws and enforcement actions, the burden of drug abuse remains significant, with limited access to treatment, rehabilitation services, and comprehensive prevention programmes. The crisis is widely acknowledged by public health experts as affecting youth, families, and communities, with broader implications for productivity, mental health and social stability.

Issue:

Despite intensified enforcement efforts by the NDLEA and strategic partnerships such as the UNODC Country Programme, drug abuse in Nigeria continues to present multi-dimensional challenges that require urgent national response beyond law enforcement alone. Key systemic issues include:

1. **Inadequate Public Health Response Infrastructure:** Nigeria's health system currently lacks a robust network of rehabilitation centres, trained addiction specialists, and community-based treatment programmes, which limits access to care for those with substance use disorders.
2. **Over-Reliance on Enforcement Without Balanced Prevention and Care:** Although enforcement remains essential, current policy emphasis often skews towards interdiction at the expense of prevention, early intervention, and long-term recovery support.

3. **Outdated and Fragmented Data Systems:** Reliable, up-to-date surveillance on drug use prevalence, patterns, and treatment outcomes is limited, hindering evidence-based planning and targeted interventions.
4. **Youth Vulnerability and Social Drivers:** Structural socio-economic drivers such as unemployment, poverty, and social marginalisation continue to increase vulnerability to drug abuse among youths and other populations.
5. **Weak Institutional Coordination:** A comprehensive response requires effective collaboration across health, education, social services, and justice sectors, yet coordination remains sub-optimal.

Rationale for Legislative Action:

The National Assembly of Nigeria has constitutional oversight responsibilities to ensure public health, social welfare, and national security. The National Assembly should act to:

- Strengthen institutional frameworks and sustainable funding for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation;
- Ensure a balanced drug control policy that integrates public health and enforcement approaches;
- Promote data-driven interventions and national surveillance systems;
- Support whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategies to address root causes and reduce harm.

Without legislative engagement, responses may remain fragmented, under-funded, and

⁵ Jatau, A. I., Sha'aban, A., Gulma, K. A., Shitu, Z., Khalid, G. M., Isa, A., Wada, A. S., & Mustapha, M. (2021). The Burden of Drug Abuse in Nigeria: A

Scoping Review of Epidemiological Studies and Drug Laws. *Public health reviews*, 42, 1603960. <https://doi.org/10.3389/phrs.2021.1603960>



inadequately focused on the health and socio-economic determinants of drug abuse.

Recommendations to the National Assembly:

The National Assembly, through its Committees on Health, Drugs and Narcotics, and National Security, is respectfully urged to:

1. Pass a resolution formally acknowledging drug abuse and substance use disorders as a public health priority requiring comprehensive policy response beyond law enforcement.
2. Legislatively mandate and provide dedicated budgetary allocations for establishment and upgrade of rehabilitation centres across geopolitical zones to support the training and deployment of addiction specialists, counsellors, and psychosocial care workers.
3. Call on the Federal Ministry of Health and relevant agencies to develop and implement nationwide prevention strategies, particularly targeting schools, universities, and high-risk communities. Drug education, mental health literacy, and well-being curricula should be integrated into the education system.

4. Mandate the development of a national drug surveillance and monitoring system to generate reliable, real-time data on prevalence, trends, and treatment outcomes to guide policymaking and resource allocation.
5. Encourage the establishment of a coordinated national strategy involving NDLEA, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders to align enforcement, prevention, treatment, and social support systems.

Conclusion:

Drug abuse in Nigeria has evolved into a complex public health and security challenge with implications for social wellbeing, economic productivity, and community safety. Enforcement remains necessary, but evidence suggests that a holistic, health-centred approach, including prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and data-driven policy, is urgently needed.

Proactive legislative engagement by the National Assembly is essential to align national drug policy with international best practices, secure appropriate funding, and ensure sustainable, people-centred responses that protect the health and futures of Nigerians.

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