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Drug Availability in Schools and Colleges – A Need for Policy Reform in Pakistan

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Abstract

The weak law enforcement, social pressures, and no gaps in institutional oversight have now turned schools and colleges into places that were once safe spaces to learn but now exposed to illicit substances. The alarming trend is to students' health, performance, and social stability. A recent high profile case, Mustafa AMIR case, has enlightened us about very deep drug networks involved in educational institutions. Policy interventions such as stricter regulations, enhancing surveillance, awareness campaigns should be conducted immediately and there must be better coordination amongst law enforcing agencies, educators and parents. This rising menace must be curbed with immediate reforms to save the future generations of Pakistan.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking in Education, Substance Abuse Policy, Campus Drug Networks, Youth Narcotics Prevention, Pakistan Drug Control Laws Introduction

Introduction

In the past schools and colleges were one of the safest places of learning and character development but today they're one of the key components of spreading illicit substance. Weak institutional policies, weak law enforcement and emergence of organized networks of drug peddling have aggravated the problem by making narcotic of all kinds easily available to the students(The Express Tribune, 2025). Furthermore, the digital platform also improves on the drug distribution by undertaking transactions through encrypted messaging apps, online payment and through courier services. Drug abuse in educational institution is one of the global crises affecting sample both developed and

developing countries not only in Pakistan but also in every part of the world. However, Pakistan's situation is especially alarming given its lack of enforcement of policy, weak institutional oversight and student protection mechanisms (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019). If urgent and adequate measures are not taken, the number of drugs being available in the schools or colleges is going to endanger the future of students in academics and will make the school children vulnerable to drugs and the country will also have to face unsubstantial increase in crime rates.

There has been unrestricted access to drugs, within the academic institution, to the extent of constituting a deep rooted public health and security crisis. More students are dropping out than ever, mental health is declining as are mental health clinics, and even drug related criminal activities are rising all because of the drug epidemic (South Asia Strategic Stability Institute, 2023). Drug consumption in educational institutions is no longer an individual problem of addiction but a problem connected with the failure of schooling, violence in the campuses, and organized crime. However, despite the existence of anti narcotics laws in Pakistan, they have proved to be ineffective and as a result, widening networks of drugs in schools and colleges. The existence of this state of affairs is attributed to the failure of educational institutions to put in place stringent monitoring mechanisms such as involvement in punishment measures and preventive campaigns, hence, providing a ground where the availability of drugs keeps on thriving. However, due to poor surveillance, lack of interagency coordination, and political influences to safeguard the reputations of the powerful people involved in the trade, university administrations, law enforcement agencies and policymakers have been ineffectual in controlling this crisis (Pakistan Narcotics Control Board, 2024). All the above have made students more open to indulging in substance abuse as peer pressure grows in proportion while awareness campaigns are inexistent. With such availability of drugs, a Pakistan that does not address this crisis through comprehensive policy interventions and institutional reforms will see its education system eroded, national security compromised, and long term social and economic viability of the country threatened.

The objective of this study is to determine the scope and reasons of drug distribution in educational institutions of Pakistan, which may affect students, educational environments and society. Initially, it attempts to determine the extent of use of drugs by school and university students with respect to urban-rural and socioeconomic differentiation as well as gender-based tendencies (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001). Existing explanations of drug accessibility are then further explored to reveal the underlying factors, namely institutional failures, digital drug markets, courier based distribution networks and failures of law enforcement. The study illustrates the critical factors to be identified and shows the weaknesses in current policies and loopholes in present legal commands in which drug networks exploit academic institutions. The study aims to

recommend the evidence based policy as a feasible tool that educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers can use to channel a course for the investigation of how educational institutions and law enforcement institutions can reduce the problem of drugs in schools and colleges. This study intends to address the challenges of access to drugs in academic settings through structural, legal and enforcement lens, and help contribute in creation of a healthier, and drug free learning environment for students in Pakistan through its findings.

Literature Review

The availability of drugs in the educational institutions in Pakistan is growing, so much so that now educational institutions are emerging as hotspot of substance abuse and thus posing a fatal danger to the academic career, health and social welfare of the students. An alarming vastly spread drug use has been reported, 50 percent students used drugs in Islamabad's institutions as reported in UNODC report 2019 and Pakistan Narcotics Control Board gets confirmed data on 44 percent used drugs in colleges and universities(Pakistan Narcotics Control Board, 2024). According to the South Asia Strategic Stability Institute, 53 per cent of the students of elite private schools in Pakistan are drug addicts. These figures show that substance abuse does not occur exclusively in certain socio economic classes, and is common in all school settings. The availability of drugs is not always external trafficked but can be attributed to failing to catch up and policy enforcement on processing drugs at academic institutions. Instead of learning institutions, schools, colleges, and universities have been transformed into criminal centers where drug networks operate with impunity. The substances most generally consumed by students in Pakistan's educational institutions are Cannabis (Charas), Heroin, Ecstasy, LSD, Methamphetamine (Ice) (Shadman, 2017), Alcohol, and Sedatives. In fact, these substances are often trafficked by well laid out networks and are delivered within the campuses by student led supply chain, peer to peer mode of transactions and digital platforms. Notably, drug use has become normalized in some academic circles at prominent, elite private school circles, where synthetic drugs like ecstasy and cocaine are more offered at elite parties. In terms of gender based trends, it is shown that the male students and the hostel residents are substantially more at risk of getting involved in substance abuse than the female students and the day scholars(Nessa et al., 2008). There are major centers of drug circulation in environments where students live unsupervised for long periods, and thus it is easy for traffickers and student dealers to introduce illicit drugs in university and college spaces. But, the fact that there is no strict monitoring policies, no accountability of the students nor faculty intervention plays its part in making the use of the narcotics available within these academic institutions.

Drug availability in schools and colleges has been and still is being exacerbated by economic factors. In another way, drug consumption was common to the so called

marginalized youth as before, but there has been a sharp increase in drug consumption as well as drug supplying by middle class and the upper class students to finance their own addiction(Mennis et al., 2016). Therefore, some drug addicted students begin to sell the stuff themselves to take care of the monetary burden, creating distribution channels within the education institutions. This is more prevalent in urban institutions where living cost is high and there is pressure to maintain social lifestyle, hence students involve in illicit trade(Qasim, 2015). Consumption patterns of drugs as well are influenced by economic disparity with wealthier students having access to costly synthetic drugs such as LSD, Ecstasy and cocaine, while those from low economic backgrounds are limited to the cheaper alternatives such as cannabis, Heroin, and methamphetamine (Ice). Synthetic drug are easy and cheap to access and commonly bought through the social media networks and courier services; raising alarmingly high levels of addiction in university students.

Growing the trend of drug abuse in educational institutions is also due to psychological and social factors. Substance use occurs within close social groups and often students begin using substances as a result of peer pressure, social acceptance and curiosity all often under the premise that doing so will enhance social or academic experiences(Palen & Coatsworth, 2007). Seldom do first time drug experiments take place within a clinical setting where the risks and effects of taking the drug are well known and where such experimentation is strictly prohibited; on the contrary the experimentation occurs at a social setting, such as a university party, a concert or an underground gathering where experimenting with drugs is completely permitted and even endorsed. The other key driver of drug use is academic pressure, many students are using drugs to cope with stress, depression and anxiety. Drug legalization is also giving way to bizarre excuses of drug usage, in the sense that it acts as an escape from the intense competition for academic excellence, high parental expectations and societal pressure; which functions as a double edged sword for each student. Substance abuse has been further normalized, moreover, given Western lifestyles and portrayal of drug use as a recreational activity by media, especially to students studying in elite private institutions(Khan, 2016). Drug use has also become normalized, as a result of which, a standard or healthy attitude towards substance use has been lost among certain group of students so that substance abuse has turned into a norm, a cool thing to do.

The availability of drugs in the academic institutions is among critical factors related to institutional negligence. Time and time again, reports emerge of students consuming or distributing drugs that attend universities and schools, and yet, many college and school administrators prefer to do nothing and moreover, they are fearful of hurting their institutions' reputations, which leads to bureaucratic inefficiencies and administrative indifference(Iversen, 2016). Insufficient mandatory drug tests and awareness campaigns as well as no severe

punishment given to drug offenders have made drug networks which were active in schools and universities stronger. In some cases, faculty members or administrative staff are aware of some drug related activities, but deliberately turning a blind eye to it because of pressure from the influential families or fear that such illegal practices might have a negative effect on the institution's reputation. In addition, there is weak collaboration between academic institutions and law enforcement agencies, through which drug dealers are able to take advantage of regulatory loopholes to operate without incurring much harm.

The drugs are increasingly available in educational institutions for a combination of economic reasons, psychological vulnerabilities, peer influence and institutional failures. If there is no adequate restriction of regulatory measures put in place, the problem will just get worse with thousands of students at risk (Kalsoom et al., 2013). The unchecked spread of the drug networks in schools and colleges signals the immediate requirement of policy reform like mandatory drug screening, strict campus surveillance, strengthening the role of law enforcers, and educational programs for prevention. This issue being left unaddressed would not only compromise the future of the particular students but would also contribute to broader societal instability assuming Pakistan's educational institutions and development of the work force. This is why there is a need for immediate and targeted action, because the future of the country's youth is at stake.

Case Study: The Mustafa Amir Case – A Wake-Up Call for Drug Availability in Schools

The Mustafa Amir case, therefore, is a high profile incident that revealed the growing inroads of the drug networks in the schools of Pakistan especially among the privileged students. In the case, a 23 year old student from an elite academic institution went missing on January 6th, 2025 (The Friday Times, 2025). After a lengthy investigation, his charred body was found 39 days later in Hub, Balochistan, in connection with a web of a well organized drug distribution network running within education institutions. An isolated case of homicide at first later revealed the reaching of school students by traffickers as cases of supply of drugs through digital transactions, courier services as well as friends networks (The Express Tribune, 2025).

The Mustafa Amir case investigation showed how drug networks penetrate schools through the conducting of thorough investigation into the case, it brought more into light how drugs are supplied to students through complicated supply systems. It was also found that school students were linked to the top class drug suppliers operating in big cities, including Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad (The Express Tribune, 2025). The truth that there are connections with the international smuggling of drugs to Pakistan which come from Afghanistan, Europe and synthetic laboratories in Asia was a major revelation. Among elite schools, the existence of cocaine, methamphetamine (Ice), LSD, and ecstasy

showed that they were not just consumers but also being utilized as the intermediaries of drug distribution networks.

One important aspect of the case was also about the use of digital platforms for drug transactions as drug traffickers were able to reach out to students through social media, encrypted messaging applications and digital payments. Dealers were found to use applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Snapchat to communicate with school students and market narcotics as study enhancers, stress relievers and socialising aids(The Friday Times, 2025). Due to the capability of conducting drug transactions remotely and through mobile wallets and cryptocurrencies, authorities within schools and law enforcement agencies were unable to track illicit activities . As a result, traffickers could broaden their networks to school campuses themselves , and students from affluent backgrounds with access to smartphones and digital banking , became an easy prey .

One more alarming discovery was that courier service was used to deliver drugs directly to students and avoid security checks for drugs. The investigation also discovered that ‘narcotics were sometimes delivered to students homes or schools wrapped up in regular parcels’. This method not only allowed students to get drugs without directly dealing with traffickers but also allowed the university administrators and students’ families to ignore their drug abuse(Usman et al., 2017). Instead, the direct-to-student drug delivery model has made the availability of drugs in schools worse , since students now have the ability to order and obtain illicit substances with virtually zero risk of exposure.

The Mustafa Amir case also raised questions on the negligence of school administrations and the rest of the education system to be one of the most critical failures . Although there were multiple reports by teachers, parents, and even law enforcement agencies about increasing rate of drug use among school students , institutions did not adopt preventive measures(South Asia Strategic Stability Institute, 2023). The schools did not have structured anti drug policies, no mandatory drug testing procedures and failing reports of drug use in order to protect their image . Moreover, children of powerful families were protected in such a way that the students who were involved in the drug distribution business couldn’t be held responsible.

There was a widespread concern and outrage shared by many of the public , especially parents, educators, and civil society organizations, in reaction to the Mustafa Amir case. The case has also questioned the positive correlation that people had of drug abuse being a university level issue , and has shown how even school aged children were being targeted by drug networks (Sarkar et al., 2018). They wanted parents and teachers to have greater oversight in schools, stricter security measures, and more regulation by way of drug screenings, and better collaboration between schools and law enforcement agencies. The case also added fuel to the fire of calls to step up the regulation of drug trade by social media and

courier services , which had been ruled to have helped facilitate drug trade between school students.

A crackdown on drug distribution networks operating in and around schools to appease the public ushered in multiple arrests of suppliers and students found distributing narcotics . Nevertheless, efforts were made to curb atrocity crimes, but systemic weaknesses within the law enforcement and justice mechanisms were such that many perpetrators managed to evade the long arm of the law . (Pakistan Narcotics Control Board, 2024) Furthermore, many individuals arrested were connected to influential individuals who used bribes or political connections or were not backed by strong legal evidence to escape punishment. In addition, the lack of accountability demonstrated the challenges involved in effectively dismantling the drug networks targeting school students .

The Mustafa Amir case is an important lesson for policymakers, school administrations and parents as well as demonstrating how a public health approach with urgent and comprehensive reforms to tackle drug availability in schools is urgently needed . Several key policy measures must be implemented based on the findings of this case.

- Mandatory Drug Prevention Programs in Schools . Schools have to implement drug education programs that will warn their students about the risks of substance abuse, the legal consequence of owning drugs, as well as mental and physical health repercussions . Programs should be integrated in school curricula at very young age so as to educate the students before the encounter with drugs.
- Security measures, including CCTV cameras, random locker inspections and increased security personnel as a consequence, must be introduced in schools to help prevent drug related activities from taking place. Routine screenings for suspected drug abuse of students should also be conducted in schools , and a reporting system set up for students to report confidentially if they have any concern about drug related issues .
- The Use of Social Media and Courier Services for drug trade must be monitored strictly . Authorities should enforce laws on courier service companies that will ask them to do further screening and verification of parcels sending to students (The Express Tribune, 2025). Drug activities also should be held accountable on social media platforms , which also means better regulation of drug related content online.
- Parental involvement and Community action, schools are expected to actively involve parents in their drug prevention efforts , providing support and training programs to enable parents to be able to detect early symptom of drug use in their children . Awareness programmes should be run in the community to break the stigma of discussing drug use, to create a conducive environment in which students feel comfortable having conversations about drugs with their parents/guardians .

- The authorities should also impose the stricter penalties for supplying drugs to school students. Schools should be required to report drug-related offenses instead of handling them internally and influential figures should be unable to escape legal action or remain unaffected by legal action when someone such as a student has been affected by the drug misuse or, in this instance, alcohol use of that influential figure.

The Mustafa Amir case therefore highlights the dire need for nationwide intervention to curb drug abuse from becoming a regular occurrence in schools across Pakistan. Absent immediate reforms and robust mechanisms of enforcement, the growing access to drugs in the educational institutions will carry the risk of threatening students' safety, their academic integrity and their future welfare. Thus, the government, school administrations, law enforcement agencies, and parents must act in unison to develop exhaustive policies oriented at protecting students, reinforcing drug prevention and making the schools safe, drug free space for generations to come.

Existing Policies and Their Limitations

Despite drugs making their way into schools across Pakistan, the policies are failing to curb drug use among students. According to the Control of Narcotics Substances Act (CNSA) 1997, which aims to control drug production, drug trafficking and drug consumption, its enforcement in the educational institutes is weak (Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997). Although the law stipulates harsh fines for possession and distribution, no particular law regards the drug accessibility in the school and it does not observe any programs assigned to prevent the drug taking place in the school's surroundings (Matejovicova et al., 2015). Drug networks have been able to fester among students, without consequence for those being caught on narcotics use or distribution in the school, due to the school's failure at implementing proactive measures like school based interventions, early detection programs, or even something as simple and effective as mandatory drug testing.

The failure of the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF): Pakistan's premier agency tasked with countering drug smuggling to deliver the drug prevention message at the school level. Large scale drug trafficking is still the focus of the ANF, but the ever increasing use of narcotics among the school student population is hardly addressed. In addition, the agency is underfunded, has few personnel, and is corrupt, rendering it incapable of stopping, following, and dismantling the drug networks operating in and near schools (Anti-Narcotics Force [ANF], 2024). The ANF does not collaborate with educational institutions, which makes it impossible to create preventive programs or awareness campaigns for students so that they know the danger of drug usage.

In many schools and colleges, the spread of drugs amongst the students has further been encouraged by institutional shortcomings within the schools and colleges themselves. There is no obligatory drug testing policy, no security checks

and no standard procedures for dealing with cases about drugs in most educational institutions. Schools use a reactive approach instead of a proactive one, covering the issue only once its reported, in contrast to not allowing it to take place in the first place. In addition, there is underreporting in drug cases and a lack of accountability of students involved in drug consumption or distribution, as many schools are afraid to report the cases for fear of damaging their reputation and discouraging the student enrollments.

Similarly, there are no training programs for teachers and school administration. However, due to the lack of knowledge or skills, educators are not capable of identifying early drug abuse signs of student or addressing them in a proper way (Anti-Narcotics Force [ANF], 2024). If the students involving drug use are not trained properly, they remain undetected, which motivates drug culture to develop within the school. Teachers and other school officials are often aware of students' use of drugs, but are wary of taking disciplinary measures against them because of lacking clear policies and fear of backlash from powerful families.

Policy Reforms to Address Drug Availability

Stricter Drug Monitoring and Testing

Introducing the mandatory drug testing policies of the educational institution is a critical step in reducing the drug use among the school students. Randomized drug screenings in schools should take place in order to identify at risk students and prevent drug use from becoming escalated. Testing should be done in conjunction with the health care professionals and anti narcotics agencies by rewarding the students caught using drugs to go for counseling and proper intervention instead of just expulsion. (Masood & Sahar, 2014) In addition to this, school staff should be subjected to mandatory drug screening to confirm that none of the faculty members are involved in any drug related activities.

Moreover, there should be strict disciplinary measures for students who are involved in the distribution of drugs. Schools should enact zero tolerance policies, where any student dealing drugs is turned into law enforcement without schools covering up the crimes by protecting this student (Khattak et al., 2012). Therefore, in circumstances where students fall into the category of being addicts, rehabilitation programs should be favoured more than punishment programs as long as there are programs that offer effective support to rehabilitate the affected students without them having to leave the system of education.

Enhanced Surveillance and Law Enforcement

In order to diminish the growing drug problem, measures need to be increased that provide more security and more surveillance within schools. Strategic locations where CCTV cameras should be installed include school gates, cafeterias, restrooms and playgrounds, which are the hot spots for drug related activities (Kalsoom et al., 2013). Student behavior should be monitored by security personnel and suspicious behavior should be detected so there's no exchange of drugs in the school premises.

A second important problem that calls for an utmost solution is the use of courier services for drug transportation. Many of the students receive drugs through parcel delivery services to avoid talking to traffickers(Pakistan Narcotics Control Board, 2024). The courier companies should be mandated to put stricter screening procedures for their packages with priority being placed to those given to schools or student hostels[d] to prevent this growing trend. Furthermore, schools should carry out checks on their students who receive packages so as to ensure that not prohibited substances have been smuggled into schools.

Awareness and Rehabilitation Programs

Awareness campaigns within schools , is one of the biggest gaps in Pakistan's approach to student drug abuse at the moment. In many cases, students are exposed to drugs, with the dangers of them never being made clear to them, which causes them to experiment with them under peer pressure not knowing of the long term effects. Mandatory drug education programs must be introduced in schools which educate the students about the dangers of substance abuse and its effect on academic and private life, legal consequences(Rezahosseini et al., 2014). These programs should start out in a middle school and move to high school, so that students are thoroughly informed about the dangers before the age where the exposures to these drugs become the highest.

Moreover, schools should incorporate rehabilitation programs for students who are addicts to enable such students to seek help in confidence, without fear of being expelled. These aforementioned punitive actions instead of providing counseling services and emotional and mental health assistance, giving students recovery pathways to get students off of drugs(South Asia Strategic Stability Institute, 2023). Moreover, schools should work in collaboration with non governmental organisations (NGOs) and rehabilitation centers to ensure that such students receiving drug addiction who are admitted in schools are properly treated and reintegrated back.

Moreover, media campaigns and the involvement of communities in preventing drug abuse among students are adequately important. Educating parents and communities to detect early onset of drug abuse in children and encouraging parents to acquaint their students with dangers of substance abuse by way of public awareness campaign. One of the strongest deterrent for the students to get engaged in the drug use is the parental involvement, as the children with parent actively involved are less likely to fall in the trap of the addiction.

Conclusion

Weak institutional policies, poor law enforcement and ignorance of these drugs are reasons behind drugs being so freely available in schools. Drug abuse at the school level, that imposes peer pressure and drug networks that go unpunished by current drug control laws. The lack of preventive measure such as drug testing, increased surveillance and rehab programs has made substance abuse to be deeply entrenched within the schools.

For this crisis to be successfully fought against, schools have to implement strict monitoring schemes, cooperate with the law enforcement and introduce structured programs educating the public and rehabilitating youngsters. Unless the reforms are undertaken, students will continue to be on the risk, and Pakistani's education system will get more and more impaired by the increasing influence of drugs on its institutions. A proper, proactive response is needed if the youth of the country and the learning environment of the future, are to be protected and kept as safe and drug free as possible.

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