

POLICY BRIEF:
**COVID-19 and the Need
for Action on Substance
Abuse in Liberia**

31 AUGUST 2020



SUMMARY

This policy brief assesses the current and long term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on substance abuse in Liberia. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the globe, with over 17,170,446 cases reported, including 687,562 deaths while in Africa over 947,102 cases have been recorded with over 20,011. As of July 31, 2020, Liberia has recorded 1,189 cases and over 2,000 persons under contact tracing. The President of Liberia declared a state of emergency on April 10th, 2020, schools and airports closed; ban on assemblies (church, mosques, entertainment centers; groups larger than 10), and general movements beyond Montserrado and Margibi restricted. On June 5th, 2020, the measures were reviewed with the initial 3 pm movement restriction extended to 9 pm. Lockdown measures eased and the State of Emergency to ended July 21st, 2020 Liberia's population in 2019 was estimated at 4.8 million with over 60% under 35 years old; about 47% of this population lives in Monrovia (now epicenter of COVID-19) and other urban areas. Like many of the general population, young people are dealing with poor access to critical public services such as healthcare, water and sanitation, adequate housing and transportation. A high number of war-affected youths (including child soldiers) missed out on years of education during the Liberian civil war and some never had a chance to catch up, leaving them with inadequate levels of literacy and skills to secure decent work. DPCL's contention is that in order to understand the full extent of the current and future impact of COVID-19 on substance users in Liberia, it is important to make further data collection and analysis on the unique constraints and needs of these young people (At-Risk youth).

Although the COVID-19 crisis is, in the first instance, a physical health crisis, it has the seeds of a major substance abuse crisis as well, if action is not taken. Good drug prevention strategies is critical to the functioning of society at the best of times. It must be front and center of every country's

response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently.

1. Impact of COVID-19 on Substance Users in Liberia

Reliable and sustainable drug rehabilitation program that provides support for substance users in Liberia is seem far from been realized, owing to the fact that there is little or no advocacy around policy formulation, lobbying with key stakeholders and members of the National Legislature, technical support and funding to ensuring that drug laws and policies take into account human rights issues, treatment, care and support for substance users in the country.

The COVID-19 have further increased the undue and harsh living conditions of Disadvantaged/ At-Risk Youth in Liberia. The Government of Liberia has developed a stimulus package that will provide food for poor families and other vulnerable groups, but there is no clear indication of whether substance users will be catered for when in fact, food to be provided are for groups and not individuals. Considering the fact that Disadvantaged/ At-Risk Youth are not organized and living on the streets, they stand a high risk of being left out. Moreover, they are marginalized and neglected during the regular or normal situation and it will be more treble during this health crisis if nothing is done to cater to them.

Female substance users are more victimize during this period according to the Global Action for Sustainable Development. It was also reported during an outreach activity in West Point that Sexual & Gender-Based Violence is on the increase.

2. Impact of Covid-19 on Drug Treatment Services:

Before the pandemic, in Liberia, there was already limited access to quality, affordable drug treatment services. This limited access has now been further diminished due to COVID-19 as the pandemic has disrupted services in Liberia and around the world.

Liberia has only one psychiatric hospital, in Monrovia, the capital, and no rehabilitation centre for drug users. It is called Esther Grant Hospital. The 80-bed hospital is the only government health facility providing treatment services for substance users in Liberia. Patients admitted at the hospital must show obvious signs of psychosis, and must be accompanied by their relatives. People with drug use disorders are not admitted, except if they are already psychotic and violent. When taken there, they are counseled and dismissed¹.

Because of COVID-19, the facility was unable to take in new patients as well as faced with serious support from the government. A high proportion of service users are men.

With the limited support from the government to adequately fund the hospital cope with the COVID-19 challenges, it is very clear that the situation has further deteriorated and needs urgent attention.

While other Non-profit organizations are providing small scale, non-clinical and limited drug treatment services for substance users in Liberia, COVID-19 is a real challenge for these groups in resource mobilization, material support and feeding for those patients already undergoing treatment remains a serious problem for limited service providers in Liberia.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on Drug Law Enforcement

Liberia is not a significant transit country for illicit narcotics, but the country's weak law-enforcement capacity, porous border controls, and proximity to major drug transit routes leave it vulnerable to becoming one. While Liberia is not a significant producer of illicit narcotics, local drug use, particularly marijuana, is common.

The main body of authority charged with managing drug-related crime in Liberia is the Liberian Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA). The Liberian National Police (LNP) is also involved in combatting drug crime, but both agencies are underfunded, undermanned and generally under-resourced.

Prior to the enactment of the Controlled Drug and Substances Act of 2014, Drug enforcement and regulation was being implemented under the Public Health Law of Liberia;

COVID-19 actually affected the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency in terms of full enforcement of the drug law. LDEA with its limited manpower seconded over 100 of its agents to beef up the man power of the Joint Security Team that was responsible to enforce the State of Emergency. LDEA was also unable to celebrate the 2020 International Drug Day due to COVID-19 for the first time in recent years.²

Due to the COVID-19 and limited man power, LDEA was unable to carry out its regular ghetto raid across Montserrado and other Counties. Due to this situation the issue of drug proliferation increased during the lockdown and continues during the COVID-19. While COVID-19 poses a serious challenge to Liberia Drug Law Enforcement, the real challenge is the weak drug law that continues to undermine the effort of the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency in keeping drug traffickers behind bars.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/e-s-grant-mental-health-hospital-in-liberia-striving-to-help-people-with-mental-illness-get-well>

² Interview with Hon. Macus D. Zeyou, Actg, Director LDEA

4. Impact of COVID-19 on Drug Abuse Prevention

The lack of sustainable drug prevention program in Liberia has contributed immensely to the high rate drug abuse over the years. Local and international organization has tried in the past to carryout awareness and sensitization but this program were for short term and inadequate, especially for a country like Liberia that 70% of the combatants that fought during the civil war were youth and 15% were child soldiers below the age 18. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the context in which Liberian youth use substances as they are at a significant risk due to high rates of childhood and adolescent trauma.³

COVID-19 has further exacerbated the situation of alcohol and drug use among young people in Liberia more especially during the lockdown in Monrovia and its environs.

Due the COVID-19 traditional drug prevention awareness and sensitization programs especially engagement school going children and youths were suspended and information regarding drug prevention were unavailable.

Recommendation for Addressing Substance Abuse during and Post COVID-19 in Liberia

1. Liberia Drug Law Reform:

Reforming the Liberia Drug Law is the critical first step in addressing drug issues in Liberia. The current law mainly focuses on law enforcement and left our many core issues that made it difficult to combat illegal drug trafficking, effective legal prosecution including provision for treatment, care and support for substance users including actions to be taken during

emergency such as the COVID-19. As the world slowly recovers from the shock of the novel corona virus, it is critical and imperative that stakeholders and policy makers make huge investment in programs that will focus on the Liberia Drug Law Reform process.

2. Increase Support for Drug Treatment Services

In order to address substance abuse issues in Liberia, drug treatment services are an integral part of process. Stakeholders and policy makers should now redirect and increase support to existing structures and ensure that new treatment facilities are establish and full supported and have the capabilities to respond and support public health emergencies like the COVID-19.

3. Equip and Strengthen the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency

The Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency remains a strong member of Liberia National Security System (Joint Security) and as such they need the necessary support to enable them to perform their statutory duties and responsibilities especially responding to drug trafficking during time of emergency. The Government and stakeholders should now focus on increasing the man power and providing logistical support to the LDEA.

4. Initiate Community-Based Approach to prevent Drug Abuse

Support towards drug prevention programs during and post COVID-19 now need to involve communities and families as well as religious institutions to prevent drug abuse and create community buy-in.

³<http://www.osiwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Drugs-and-Mental-Health-Gberie-1.pdf>