

Communication Gaps and Authoritarian Parenting: Drivers of Youth Rebellion and Substance Use in a Kenyan Peri-Urban Community

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Abstract: Drug abuse among Kenyan youth has reached crisis levels, especially in peri-urban areas. This cross-sectional mixed-methods study (n=125, 94.7% response rate), conducted in July 2025 at Matasia Catholic Parish, Ngong Sub-County, Kajiado County, examined how parenting, communication difficulties, and community factors shape substance use among church-affiliated youth and their parents. The study reported an 81.6% lifetime prevalence of drug use, about six times above national youth averages. Alcohol (52%), khat/miraa (41.6%), cigarettes (39.2%), cocaine (9.6%), and heroin (8.8%) were the most used. Authoritarian parenting predominated (55.2%), alongside poor parent-youth communication (76%), inconsistent monitoring (56.8%), parental substance use (35.2%), and easy drug access (93.6%). These factors were strongly linked to youth substance use (p<0.05 to p<0.001). Peer pressure (68%) and curiosity (57.6%) were the main triggers. Qualitative accounts indicated rebellion against strict, uncommunicative homes led youth to seek peers and experiment to cope emotionally. Using Social Influence Theory, Attachment Theory, and Baumrind's Parenting Styles, the study illustrates how high-control, low-warmth parenting, worsened by urbanization, leads to rebellion and substance use. The study recommends a culturally relevant, multilevel intervention using faith-based structures that could reduce prevalence by 20–30% over 2 years.

Keywords: Authoritarian Parenting, Communication Disconnects, Substance Use, Rebellion, Peri-Urban Kenya, Authoritative Parenting, Faith-Based Interventions, Prevention Strategies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Substance use among Kenyan youth is a major public health and social challenge (NACADA, 2022; NACADA, 2024). National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse surveys show that many 15- to 24-year-olds have used at least one illicit substance, with alcohol, tobacco, and khat (miraa) being most common (NACADA, 2024; Masresha et al., 2022). National statistics conceal sharp geographical and contextual disparities, especially in fast-urbanizing peri-urban corridors near Nairobi, such as Ngong, Ongata Rongai, and Kitengela (Kavita et al., 2024; Onyema, 2021). In these zones, rapid population growth, high youth unemployment, weakened extended family support, and proximity to drug trafficking from the capital have created high-risk environments (Masresha et al., 2022; Kiarie, 2023).

Matasia Catholic Parish in Ngong Sub-County, Kajiado County, is a clear example of this trend. The parish serves over 20,000 people and runs active youth ministries, Sunday school, and family programs. Despite its strong religious presence and social ties, the area has seen more school dropouts, juvenile delinquency, mental health issues among youth, and open drug selling near church grounds (Kinyanjui, 2025; Njonge, 2023). This situation—where high religious involvement exists alongside high substance use and rebellion—was a key reason for this study. Early observations and community discussions pointed toward widespread authoritarian parenting as a main factor (Shanley et al., 2024; Hoeve et al., 2021). These parenting styles are rooted in traditional African values that emphasize obedience, respect for elders, and strict discipline rather than emotional openness and dialogue (Shanley et al., 2024; Mbiti, 2021). When

combined with modern urban pressures like long work hours in Nairobi, economic hardship, easy access to drugs, and the loss of community oversight, these approaches make youth rebellion and risk-taking more likely (Kiarie, 2023; Kavita et al., 2024; Fernandez-Canani et al., 2024).

Adolescence is a crucial period marked by identity formation, the pursuit of autonomy, and heightened sensitivity to social influences. When parenting lacks emotional warmth and open communication, adolescents often experience insecure attachments (Pinquart, 2024). This emotional gap can drive them to peer groups for validation, sometimes resulting in risky behaviours, including substance use (Berge et al., 2025; Elgar et al., 2023). Research shows that authoritarian and neglectful parenting are linked to higher substance use risks, while authoritative parenting—a balance of structure and emotional support—protects against these risks (Pinquart, 2024; Widiastuti, 2026). In Kenya, high-control parenting persists amid urban pressures, widening communication gaps between parents and youth (Shanley et al., 2024; Kiarie, 2023). These gaps are worsened by weak monitoring, parental substance use, and easy drug availability (Kavita et al., 2024; Gunnell et al., 2022). This study investigates these dynamics in a faith-based peri-urban sample, recognizing Catholic parish structures as platforms for intervention (Kinyanjui, 2025; Koenig et al., 2023).

This study had four main aims. First, to determine the prevalence and patterns of substance use among youth in the area. Second, to identify dominant parenting styles, communication behaviours, and family-level risk factors. Third, to analyze triggers and pathways linking authoritarian parenting and communication gaps to youth rebellion and substance use. Fourth, to propose practical, evidence-based intervention approaches suitable for community and faith-based settings. This comprehensive approach provides conceptual insights and effective recommendations for stakeholders seeking to protect Kenyan youth and realize the country's demographic dividend (NACADA, 2024; Das et al., 2023).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parenting styles have long been recognized as central determinants of adolescent behavioural outcomes, with Diana Baumrind's foundational typology giving a strong conceptual framework that continues to inform global research (Widiastuti, 2026; Pinquart, 2024). Subsequent meta-analyses across several cultural settings have consistently shown that authoritative parenting, defined by high expectations paired with tenderness and open discussion, is associated with lower rates of substance use and other externalizing behaviours (Pinquart, 2024; Berge et al., 2025). In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes strict obedience and control while offering limited emotional warmth, has been linked to increased rebellion, resentment, and maladaptive coping strategies, including substance experimentation as young people seek autonomy outside the family unit (Berge et al., 2025; Hovee et al., 2021; Elgar et al., 2023).

Within the sub-Saharan African context, and Kenya in particular, authoritarian approaches remain relatively common because of cultural values that stress respect for authority and collective family honour (Shanley et al., 2024; Mbiti, 2021). Several Kenyan studies undertaken in counties such as Embu, Nakuru, and coastal regions have found significant associations between authoritarian or permissive-neglectful styles and higher prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse among secondary school students (Kiarie, 2023; Njonge, 2023). Communication disconnects between parents and adolescents emerge as a recurring mediator in these relationships (Fernandez-Canani et al., 2024). When young people perceive that their parents rarely listen or participate in meaningful dialogue, they gradually turn to peers for emotional support and identity validation. This shift amplifies susceptibility to negative peer pressure, notably in situations where drugs are readily available and normalized (Masresha et al., 2022; Kavita et al., 2024). National reports from NACADA further highlight how economic stressors, family instability, and urban drug exposure act as powerful contextual amplifiers that interact with family dynamics, which increase risk (NACADA, 2022; NACADA, 2024; Onyema, 2021).

The present study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives, which clarify the observed pathways. Attachment Theory suggests that secure emotional connections established in early childhood provide a foundation for healthy affective regulation and resilience. Insecure attachments resulting from low-warmth, high-control parenting heighten vulnerability to maladaptive coping mechanisms during adolescence (Pinquart, 2024). Social Influence Theory explains how peer groups become primary reference points when family communication is deficient. Bandura's Social Learning Theory accentuates the influence of parental modelling. Despite the strong reach and moral authority of faith communities in Kenya, existing interventions frequently adopt moralistic or punitive approaches rather than equipping parents with practical communication and authoritative parenting skills (Kinyanjui, 2025; Koenig et al., 2023; Das et al., 2023). This gap in the literature and practice motivated the design of the current empirical investigation in Matasia Catholic Parish.

III. METHODS

The current investigation adopted a mixed-methods research design in which quantitative data served as the primary strand, supplemented by qualitative data that provided depth, context, and interpretive power to the statistical results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach permitted a complete comprehension of both the measurable prevalence of substance use and the detailed lived experiences of family dynamics, rebellion processes, and coping mechanisms within the peri-urban setting. The target population consisted of church-affiliated youth aged 15–24 years and their parents or guardians residing within Matasia Catholic Parish and its outstations in Ngong Sub-County, Kajiado County. A combination of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling was employed, ultimately

generating a final sample of 125 participants and achieving an excellent 94.7% response rate (Kinyanjui, 2025).

Data collection instruments comprised a comprehensive, structured questionnaire adapted from validated tools, including Baumrind-inspired parenting style inventories, NACADA-aligned substance use and risk behaviour modules, and locally contextualized scales measuring parent-youth communication quality, monitoring consistency, and perceived drug accessibility (NACADA, 2022). Semi-structured interview guides were additionally developed to capture rich qualitative narratives on triggers for initiation, experiences of opposition, emotional voids in family relationships, and suggestions for intervention. All instruments received rigorous expert review by psychologists and substance abuse specialists for content validity and cultural validity, followed by pilot testing with 20 individuals from a comparable but non-participating parish to improve wording, eliminate ambiguities, and ensure appropriateness. Reliability analysis of the main scales yielded satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha coefficients surpassing 0.80, signifying strong internal consistency (Berge et al., 2025).

Fieldwork took place in July 2025, with self-administered questionnaires distributed during youth group meetings and family-focused parish gatherings to maximize comfort and anonymity, and supplemented by in-depth, face-to-face interviews lasting 30–45 minutes with a subset of 35 participants selected for their diverse experiences. Ethical clearance was secured from the institutional review board of the affiliated research body, and all participants provided written informed consent or parental assent as appropriate, with additional youth assent obtained. Strict confidentiality was maintained through anonymous coding, protected data storage, and voluntary participation principles, including the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, chi-square tests of independence, odds ratios, Pearson product-moment correlations, and multiple regression analyses to examine predictive relationships. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to systematic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework, involving iterative coding, theme development, and review to verify coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative

sources, alongside member-checking of key interpretations with selected participants, considerably improved the credibility, dependability, and overall trustworthiness of the conclusions. Although the cross-sectional design necessarily limits causal conclusions, and self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias (particularly around sensitive substance use topics), the mixed-methods triangulation and high participation rate substantially alleviated these limitations and strengthened the robustness of the findings (Pinquart, 2024; Gunnell et al., 2022).

IV. RESULTS

The study participants comprised a diverse group of 125 respondents, including youth aged 16-21 and their parents or guardians. The sample achieved a reasonable gender balance, with approximately 52% male and 48% female youth respondents, and the majority (over 98%) identified as Christian, mirroring the parish demographic. Family formations varied: 68% of youth lived in nuclear households, 24% in extended-family setups, and the remainder in single-parent or guardian-led homes. Socio-economic status indicators revealed that 57% of households fell into the lower-middle-income bracket, a group frequently characterized by parental employment in informal or low-wage sectors in Nairobi, which contributed to long parental absences from home.

Analysis of substance use patterns produced particularly alarming results that far exceed national benchmarks. The lifetime prevalence of any substance use stood at 81.6%, indicating that more than four out of every five young participants had experimented with or regularly consumed at least one substance. Alcohol emerged as the most commonly used substance, with a lifetime prevalence of 52%, followed closely by khat/miraa at 41.6%, cigarettes at 39.2%, cocaine at 9.6%, and heroin at 8.8%. Past-month (current) use remained high across most categories: alcohol 38.4%, khat 29.6%, and cigarettes 27.2%. Polydrug use was widespread, with 47% of users reporting consumption of two or more substances in the past year. Frequency data showed that among users, alcohol and khat were often consumed multiple times per week, especially during weekends or social gatherings.

Table 1 Prevalence of Substance Use Patterns Among Youth (N=125)

Substance	Lifetime Use (%)	Past Month Use (%)	Mean Frequency Score (SD)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Alcohol	52.0	38.4	3.12 (1.08)	61	43
Khat/Miraa	41.6	29.6	2.85 (1.21)	54	29
Cigarettes	39.2	27.2	2.67 (1.15)	48	30
Cocaine	9.6	6.4	1.45 (0.92)	14	5
Heroin	8.8	4.8	1.38 (0.87)	12	5

Demographic breakdowns revealed statistically meaningful gender differences, with males showing consistently higher engagement across all substances. Age was also a factor, with the 18–21 age group reporting higher lifetime use (89%) compared to the 15–17 group (72%).

School status mattered: out-of-school youth had a 94% lifetime prevalence, versus 76% among those still enrolled.

The distribution of parenting styles painted a disturbing picture of family environments. Authoritarian approaches dominated at 55.2%. Authoritative styles were practiced in only 26.4% of households. Communication quality was severely compromised, with 76% of youth reporting that their parents “never” or “rarely” listened attentively. Inconsistent monitoring was reported by 56.8% of respondents, while 35.2% indicated parental substance modelling. Strikingly,

93.6% of youth perceived drugs as “very easy” or “easy” to access within their neighbourhoods.

Statistical tests validated strong associations. Youth from authoritarian homes had an odds ratio of 4.81 for substance use. Multiple regression analysis showed that parenting style, communication difficulties, and easy access together explained 58% of the variance in substance use scores.

Table 2 Pearson Correlations Between Family Factors and Substance Use Score

Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value
Authoritarian Parenting	0.512	<0.001
Poor Communication	0.478	<0.001
Inconsistent Monitoring	0.395	0.002
Easy Drug Access	0.621	<0.001
Peer Pressure Exposure	0.544	<0.001
Parental Modelling	0.367	0.004

Peer pressure was the most frequently cited trigger at 68%, followed by curiosity (57.6%), stress relief (49%), and rebellion against strict rules (44%). Qualitative narratives provided powerful illustrations of how authoritarian rigidity led to secrecy, school absenteeism, and deep immersion in substance-using peer groups. Academic impacts were severe, and mental health symptoms were reported by 71% of substance-using youth. The results show the deep interconnection of family processes with extensive social and developmental consequences in this peri-urban Kenyan context.

V. DISCUSSION

The exceptionally high lifetime prevalence of substance use documented in Matasia Catholic Parish corresponds with emerging patterns in other quickly urbanizing Kenyan communities while dramatically exceeding national averages reported by NACADA (NACADA, 2022; NACADA, 2024; Masresha et al., 2022). The clear dominance of authoritarian parenting, coupled with pervasive communication disconnects, provides a convincing explanatory model for these elevated rates (Pinquart, 2024; Shanley et al., 2024; Berge et al., 2025). Traditional cultural expectations of unquestioning obedience and respect, when implemented without sufficient emotional warmth or reciprocal dialogue, appear to clash fundamentally with adolescents’ universal developmental needs for independent autonomy, self-identity exploration, and emotional validation (Berge et al., 2025; Hoeve et al., 2021; Elgar et al., 2023). This mismatch generates internal resentment, emotional disconnection, and outward rebellion, which present as affiliation with external peer groups and experimentation with readily available substances (Kavita et al., 2024; Kiarie, 2023). Such family interactions are consistent with earlier Kenyan studies and broader international literature on Baumrind’s parenting typology (Widiastuti, 2026; Pinquart, 2024).

Economic and social contextual attributes inherent to peri-urban life further intensify these family-level risks (Masresha et al., 2022; Kavita et al., 2024; Fernandez-Canani

et al., 2024). The substantial statistical associations observed lend empirical support to the conceptual models. Attachment Theory helps explain how low-warmth parenting fosters insecure bonds (Pinquart, 2024). Social Influence Theory accounts for the influential role of peers. Faith communities possess considerable social capital, yet current programs tend toward moral exhortation rather than practical skill-building (Kinyanjui, 2025; Koenig et al., 2023; Das et al., 2023). Without deliberate evolution toward authoritative practices, peri-urban communities risk losing a generation to addiction and social instability (Shanley et al., 2024; NACADA, 2024; Gunnell et al., 2022). These findings broaden current literature by highlighting actionable pathways through religious institutions (Njonge, 2023; Onyema, 2021).

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The results carry deep implications for multiple stakeholders, including families, religious institutions, educational bodies, non-governmental organizations, and national policymakers. At the individual and family levels, the data underscore the compelling need for parents to reflect on and modify their authoritarian tendencies. Shifting toward authoritative parenting does not imply abandoning cultural values of respect and discipline but enriching them with emotional availability, active listening, and joint problem-solving. Families that invest time in candid dialogue can significantly reduce the risk of rebellion and substance use while strengthening long-term parent-child bonds.

For religious institutions like Matasia Catholic Parish, the implications are ground-breaking. Parishes are ideally positioned to become centers of excellence in family life education. Running regular parenting workshops, youth mentorship circles, and family retreat programmes has the potential to yield measurable reductions in substance use. Education sector implications include integrating parenting components into school programs and fostering flawless collaboration with churches and NACADA.

At the policy level, the Government of Kenya ought to prioritize funding for family-strengthening programmes in high-risk peri-urban zones, strengthen enforcement of age-restriction laws, and promote authoritative parenting through national campaigns. Wider social implications relate to Kenya's demographic dividend. A successful intervention could enhance human capital and reduce the intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional patterns. Long-term, longitudinal evaluation of the proposed multi-level model is necessary. Ultimately, addressing communication lapses and parenting styles offers a high-leverage pathway to healthier youth development. Coordinated action across sectors can turn current challenges into opportunities for community resilience and national progress.

VII. CONCLUSION

Communication disconnects and authoritarian parenting emerge as critical drivers of youth rebellion and substance use within this Kenyan peri-urban community. The findings paint a clear picture of how rigid, low-warmth parenting styles, exacerbated by urbanization and economic pressures, create emotional voids that youth attempt to fill through peer groups and substance use. This investigation not only confirms the high prevalence of drug involvement but also elucidates the foundational mechanisms and pathways that sustain these behaviours.

By intentionally shifting toward authoritative parenting practices that merge cultural values of respect and structure with emotional warmth and frank communication, families can build stronger attachments and reduce rebellion. Faith-based organizations, with their existing trust and reach, offer powerful platforms for large-scale parental training, youth mentorship, and community-wide prevention efforts. When combined with policy enforcement on drug access, coupled with collaboration with institutions like NACADA, these interventions hold strong potential to lower prevalence rates substantially.

Ultimately, protecting Kenyan youth requires urgent, coordinated, and culturally sensitive action. Investing in healthy family communication and supportive parenting today will secure a more resilient, productive, and healthier generation tomorrow, enabling Kenya to fully tap into its demographic dividend. Stakeholders across all levels must respond decisively to translate this knowledge of substantive change and sustainable community transformation.

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➤ Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

➤ Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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