

Drug Trafficking in Nepal: Challenges and Social Impacts

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Abstract

Drug abuse poses serious health, social, and economic risks, and Nepal's vulnerability to trafficking is compounded by limited research, hindering effective policies and interventions. The study aimed to examine the challenges of drug trafficking in Nepal and its social impacts on livelihoods, employment, poverty, and community development. The study used purposive sampling to survey 422 participants in Nuwakot District, assessing drug trafficking patterns and social impacts, with data analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that drug trafficking in Nepal severely impacts education (38.6%), income (34.6%), and employment (32.2%), with 62.8% rating it very negative; while 75.8% knew of community initiatives, stronger law enforcement (75.4%) and awareness (72.3%) were deemed essential. The study implies the need for stronger enforcement, awareness, and rehabilitation to reduce the socio-economic and social impacts of drug trafficking in Nepal.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking, Drug Abuse, Impact, Community Initiatives, Nepal

Introduction

Drug and substance abuse, defined as the excessive use of drugs with or without medical authorization, has become a pressing global concern, encompassing stimulants, hallucinogens, opioids, depressants, and anabolic steroids (Ogundeko & Bassey, 2017). Despite widespread prevalence, the true extent of drug use remains underestimated due to challenges in data collection, particularly for inhalants, hallucinogens, and benzodiazepines (UNODC, 2023). Substance misuse poses significant health, social, and economic risks, affecting individuals, families, and communities worldwide (FAREO, 2012; Moses et al., 2018). The emergence of new psychoactive substances and the expansion of synthetic drug markets have further complicated global drug control efforts, creating serious public health threats despite international regulatory measures (UNDOC, 2016; UNODC, 2023). Additionally, drug trafficking has grown into a highly profitable global industry, challenging law enforcement, governance, and social stability across multiple regions, including Europe and Asia (EMCDDA, 2019; Eurojust, 2021; Europol, 2017).

Nepal, positioned between major drug-producing and consuming countries, faces heightened vulnerability to drug trafficking and substance misuse (Bhandari, Khatiwada, et al., 2021). While previous studies have documented prevalence and enforcement data, limited research has explored trafficking patterns, socio-economic impacts, and community-level perspectives within the Nepalese context (Bhandari, Khatiwada, et al., 2021; Gurung & Xenos, 2016). The lack of in-depth, context-specific evidence hinders the development of effective policies and interventions. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the

dynamics of drug trafficking, its socio-economic and social consequences, and community responses in Nepal, aiming to generate empirical insights that can inform more effective prevention, intervention, and policy strategies to address the growing challenges posed by drug trafficking in Nepalese society.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine patterns and socio-economic impacts of drug trafficking in Nuwakot District, Bagmati Province, Nepal. The study population included community members, law enforcement officials, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and individuals with lived experiences of drug abuse. Purposive sampling was used to select 422 participants based on inclusion criteria (age above 18, residence in Nuwakot, and willingness to participate), with exclusions for those unable to provide informed consent or lacking relevant experience. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data on socio-demographics, prevalence of drug trafficking, patterns of substance use, and knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to drug trafficking.

Data collection followed ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality. After checking for completeness and consistency, data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized patterns and frequencies. Validity and reliability were ensured through careful questionnaire design, pilot testing, and standardized data collection procedures, providing credible insights into the quantitative aspects of drug trafficking in the district.

Result and Discussion

Table 1 Socio-demographic of the respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Age	19-24	179	42.4
	25-29	169	40.0
	30-39	56	13.3
	40 and above	18	4.3
Gender	Male	229	54.3
	Female	193	45.7
Marital status	Married	195	46.2
	Unmarried	145	34.4
	Widowed	24	5.7
	Divorced	47	11.1
	Separated	11	2.6
Ethnicity	Brahmin/Chettri	240	56.9
	Adhibasi/Janajati	61	14.5
	Muslim	12	2.8
	Dalits	80	19.0
	Madhesi	29	6.9
Religion	Hinduism	350	82.9
	Buddhism	46	10.9
	Christianity	14	3.3
	Islamic	12	2.8

Educational Level	Can read and write only	6	1.4
	Basic level [class 1-8]	14	3.3
	Secondary level [class 9-12]	219	51.9
	Bachelor	136	32.2
	Masters and above	47	11.1
Occupation	Community Member	79	18.7
	Law Enforcement Official	16	3.8
	Healthcare Professional	60	14.2
	Policymaker	13	3.1
	Individual with Lived Experience of Drug Abuse/Addiction	71	16.8
	Students	183	43.4

Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, showing that the majority were young adults, with over 80% under 30 years of age (42.4% aged 19–24 and 40% aged 25–29). Males slightly outnumbered females (54.3% vs. 45.7%). Nearly half were married (46.2%), followed by unmarried (34.4%), with smaller proportions of divorced (11.1%), widowed (5.7%), and separated (2.6%) participants. Ethnically, Brahmin/Chettri formed the largest group (56.9%), followed by Dalits (19%), Adhibasi/Janajati (14.5%), Madhesi (6.9%), and Muslims (2.8%). In terms of religion, most respondents were Hindu (82.9%), with minorities practicing Buddhism (10.9%), Christianity (3.3%), and Islam (2.8%). Educationally, over half had completed secondary education (51.9%), while 32.2% held a bachelor's degree and 11.1% a master's degree or higher. Occupation-wise, students constituted the largest group (43.4%), followed by community members (18.7%), individuals with lived experience of drug abuse (16.8%), healthcare professionals (14.2%), law enforcement officials (3.8%), and policymakers (3.1%).

Table 2 Drug Trafficking Dynamics

S. N.	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Familiarity with the drug trafficking dynamics in the Nuwakot district	Not familiar	116	27.5
		Slightly familiar	119	28.2
		Somewhat familiar	102	24.2
		Very familiar	60	14.2
		Extremely familiar	25	5.9
2.	Aware of the primary routes used for drug trafficking within Nepal	Yes	334	79.1
		No	88	20.9
3.	If yes, please specify the routes you are aware of:	Highways	113	26.8
		Remote mountainous trails	76	18.0
		Rivers and waterways	10	2.4
		Border crossings	151	35.8
4.	Changes in drug trafficking activities within Nepal in the past five years	Increase	205	48.6
		Decrease	67	15.9
		No Change	117	27.7

		Unsure	33	7.8
5.	Main factors driving these trends	Economic factors	297	70.4
		Political factors	184	43.6
		Social factors	221	52.4
		International factors	147	34.8
6.	Main actors involved in drug trafficking within Nepal	Yes	329	78.0
		No	93	22.0
7.	If yes, please select the main actors you believe are involved in drug trafficking	Local criminal gangs	120	28.4
		International drug cartels	172	40.8
		Corrupt government officials	121	28.7
		Law enforcement personnel	54	12.8
		Individuals involved in cross-border smuggling	57	13.5
8.	Types of drugs that are most commonly trafficked within Nepal	Heroin	185	43.8
		Marijuana	227	53.8
		Synthetic Drugs (e.g., Methamphetamine, MDMA, LSD)	112	26.5
		Prescription Drugs (e.g., opioids, benzodiazepines)	105	24.9
		Cocaine	96	22.7
9.	Estimation the quantities of drugs trafficked within Nepal	Official government data and reports	172	40.8
		Law enforcement intelligence and seizures	76	18.0
		Media reports and news sources	275	65.2
		Research studies and academic literature	123	29.1
		Anecdotal evidence or personal observations	54	12.8

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of drug trafficking dynamics in Nepal, including familiarity, routes, trends, drivers, actors, drug types, and information sources. Most respondents reported low to moderate familiarity with trafficking patterns, indicating limited detailed knowledge, though 79.1% were aware of major routes such as border crossings, highways, and remote trails. Nearly half (48.6%) perceived an increase in trafficking over the past five years, with economic, social, political, and international factors identified as key drivers. Respondents also recognized multiple actors, including international cartels, corrupt officials, and local criminal groups, highlighting the complex nature of trafficking networks. Marijuana, heroin, and synthetic drugs were commonly reported, while media reports, government data, and academic studies were the main information sources. Overall, the findings suggest general awareness but varied and limited in-depth understanding of drug trafficking dynamics.

Table 3: Socio-Economic Consequences of Drug Trafficking

S. N.	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Perception of the impact of drug trafficking on the socio-economic fabric of Nepalese society	Very Negative	265	62.8
		Negative	92	21.8
		Neutral	43	10.2
		Positive	22	5.2
2.	Socio-economic aspects that are most affected by drug trafficking in Nepal	Employment opportunities	136	32.2
		Household income levels	146	34.6
		Access to education	163	38.6
		Poverty rates	106	25.1
		Access to healthcare	127	30.1
		Social cohesion and community trust	123	29.1
3.	Effect of drug trafficking on your personal or family's socio-economic situation	Significantly negatively affected	42	10.0
		Moderately negatively affected	70	16.6
		Slightly negatively affected	85	20.1
		No effect	195	46.2
		Positive effect	30	7.1
4.	Perception on the long-term effects of drug trafficking on the economic stability of Nepalese communities	Very Negative	244	57.8
		Negative	121	28.7
		Neutral	35	8.3
		Positive	22	5.2

Table 3 presents respondents' perceptions of the socio-economic consequences of drug trafficking in Nepal. A majority (62.8%) viewed its impact as very negative, while 21.8% considered it negative, indicating strong concern about its adverse effects. Key areas affected include education (38.6%), household income (34.6%), employment opportunities (32.2%), healthcare access (30.1%), social cohesion (29.1%), and poverty (25.1%), showing that drug trafficking disrupts multiple dimensions of societal well-being. Regarding personal or family impact, 10% reported being significantly affected, 16.6% moderately affected, and 20.1% slightly affected, while 46.2% experienced no effect and 7.1% perceived a positive effect. In terms of long-term economic stability, 57.8% of respondents rated the impact as very negative and 28.7% as negative. Overall, the findings highlight drug trafficking as a major socio-economic threat affecting both individual lives and broader community development.

Table 4: Community Perspectives on Drug Trafficking and Its Impact

S.N.	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Drug trafficking negatively impacts social cohesion.	1.45	.784
2	Drug trafficking directly affects livelihoods.	1.51	.754
3	Drug trafficking contributes to increased unemployment rates.	1.65	.855
4	Drug trafficking exacerbates poverty levels.	1.77	.910
5	Drug trafficking hinders economic development.	1.78	.902
6	Drug trafficking has led to an increase in drug addiction rates.	1.86	.944
7	Drug trafficking contributes to the spread of other criminal activities.	1.86	.957
8	Drug trafficking affects the mental health and well-being of individuals.	1.83	.948
9	Drug trafficking influences the educational opportunities and outcomes of young people.	1.88	1.058
10	Drug trafficking affects the perception of safety and security within.	1.92	1.052

Table 4 presents community perspectives on the impact of drug trafficking in Nepal using mean scores ranging from 1.45 to 1.92, indicating an overall perception of substantial negative effects. The highest concern was related to safety and security (mean = 1.92), followed by impacts on education, youth opportunities, addiction, crime, and mental health, while social cohesion had the lowest mean (1.45), though still indicating agreement. Economic impacts such as livelihoods, poverty, and development were also widely recognized. Standard deviations (0.754–1.058) suggest moderate variation in responses, particularly regarding education-related effects. Overall, the findings reflect a comprehensive understanding that drug trafficking negatively affects security, health, education, economy, and community well-being.

Table 5: Community-Based Responses and Initiatives

S. N.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Aware about any community-based responses or initiatives addressing drug trafficking in your locality	Yes	320
		No	102
2.	If yes, please select the types of community-based responses or initiatives you are aware of:	Awareness campaigns	115
		Community policing programs	133
		Rehabilitation centers	126
		Support groups for affected individuals	78
		Educational programs for at-risk populations	67
3.		Very Effective	185

	Perception towards effectiveness of the community-based responses or initiatives in addressing drug trafficking challenges	Somewhat Effective	199	47.2
		Not Effective	25	5.9
		Unsure	13	3.1
4.	Measures that you believe should be implemented to mitigate the adverse effects of drug trafficking	Strengthening law enforcement	318	75.4
		Enhancing community awareness and education	305	72.3
		Providing support for rehabilitation and addiction treatment	285	67.5
		Strengthen border control and international cooperation	208	49.3
		Provide alternative livelihood opportunities	118	28.0
		Establish community-based rehabilitation programs	275	65.2
		Invest in research and data collection	103	24.4
5.	In your opinion, main barriers to implementing effective community-based responses or initiatives against drug trafficking	Lack of funding	251	59.5
		Lack of community support	168	39.8
		Limited awareness or understanding of the issue	274	64.9
		Resistance from local authorities	147	34.8

Most respondents were aware of community-based initiatives (75.8%), while 24.2% were not. The commonly identified initiatives were community policing (31.5%), rehabilitation centers (29.9%), and awareness campaigns (27.3%). These initiatives were largely perceived as effective, with 43.8% rating them very effective and 47.2% somewhat effective, while only a few viewed them as ineffective (5.9%) or were unsure (3.1%). Key measures suggested to reduce drug trafficking included strengthening law enforcement (75.4%), increasing awareness and education (72.3%), and improving rehabilitation services (67.5%). Major barriers identified were limited awareness (64.9%) and lack of funding (59.5%), along with weak community support and institutional resistance. Overall, the findings suggest that while community initiatives are effective, improved awareness, resources, and coordination are needed.

Discussion

The findings show that respondents have general awareness of drug trafficking routes in Nepal but limited in-depth knowledge, consistent with recent research indicating rising narcotic use and trafficking despite strict prohibitions in Nepal's context (Dhungel, 2023). Because Nepal shares long, largely open borders with neighboring countries, traffickers exploit these porous frontiers and transportation networks including border crossings, highways, and informal trails to move illicit drugs through the country, making

Nepal a vulnerable transit point in regional drug trafficking dynamics (Government of Nepal, 2025). The perceived increase in trafficking corresponds with broader accessibility and enforcement challenges, where socio-economic and availability factors have been linked to substance use and illicit drug flow (Bhandari, Khatiwada, et al., 2021). The recognition of multiple actors, including organized crime networks facilitated by open borders, further underscores the complexity of trafficking dynamics in Nepal (Bhat, 2024).

The findings on Socio-Economic Consequences of Drug Trafficking show that drug trafficking is widely perceived as having serious negative socio-economic impacts in Nepal, consistent with existing literature on illicit drug markets and their broader harms (UNODC, 2023; World Bank, 2013). Research indicates that drug trafficking undermines legitimate economic activity, reduces workforce productivity, and places substantial strain on public services such as healthcare and law enforcement (UNODC, 2023). Although many respondents reported no direct personal impact, the strong perception of long-term economic harm reflects broader community-level consequences, including increased social instability and weakened social cohesion (World Bank, 2013). The small proportion of respondents noting potential short-term economic gains may reflect the limited and informal income opportunities associated with illicit drug markets; however, overall findings confirm that drug trafficking is largely viewed as a significant socio-economic threat with widespread adverse implications for society.

The findings on Community Perspectives on Drug Trafficking and Its Impact show strong community agreement that drug trafficking has significant negative impacts across social, economic, and personal dimensions, consistent with existing literature. Concerns about safety and security align with global evidence from the UNODC World Drug Report 2022, which links drug trafficking and illicit drug markets to increased crime, insecurity, and social instability (The world Bank, 2022). Perceived effects on livelihoods, poverty, and economic development are supported by research showing that narcotic trafficking contributes to economic instability, reduces workforce productivity, and increases public expenditures on law enforcement (Dhir & Jeet, 2024). The recognition of addiction and mental health issues is consistent with studies documenting the burden of substance use disorders and associated psychological and social harms in Nepal (Sharma et al., 2024). Concerns about educational disruption and youth opportunities align with findings on psychoactive substance use among adolescents in Nepal, which highlight its adverse effects on schooling and youth development (Paudel et al., 2021). Overall, the results confirm that drug trafficking is widely viewed as a multidimensional threat affecting security, health, economy, and community well-being.

The findings on Community-Based Responses and Initiatives show that such responses are widely recognized and generally perceived as effective, consistent with existing literature. The prominence of initiatives such as community policing, rehabilitation programs, and awareness campaigns aligns with the UNODC World Drug Report 2023, which emphasizes community engagement, prevention strategies, and multi-sectoral approaches as key components in addressing drug-related issues (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023)). The positive perception of effectiveness is further supported by the UNODC and WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention, which highlight the importance of local participation, schools, families, and community-level interventions in improving prevention and response outcomes (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2018). The prioritization of strengthening law enforcement, awareness, and rehabilitation corresponds with the World Bank World Development Report on Conflict, Security, and Development, which underscores the need for strong institutions, coordinated responses, and integrated approaches to address challenges linked to illicit

activities (World Bank, 2011). Reported barriers such as limited awareness, funding constraints, and weak institutional support reflect challenges identified in global drug control reports, which note that gaps in resources, institutional capacity, and implementation often hinder effective intervention (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2019). Overall, the findings indicate that although community initiatives are valued, their effectiveness depends on improved resources, increased awareness, and stronger coordination among stakeholders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals that respondents, predominantly young adults, possess general awareness of drug trafficking dynamics in Nepal but lack detailed understanding of its patterns, actors, and operational mechanisms. While major trafficking routes such as border crossings and highways are widely recognized, perceptions indicate an increasing trend in trafficking driven by economic and social factors, alongside the involvement of complex networks including international cartels and local actors. Drug trafficking is widely perceived as having substantial negative socio-economic impacts, particularly on education, income, employment, healthcare, social cohesion, and overall community well-being, with both individual and long-term economic consequences. Community-level perspectives further confirm that drug trafficking affects safety, health, and development, while community-based initiatives such as policing, rehabilitation, and awareness programs are generally viewed as effective. However, challenges such as limited awareness, insufficient funding, and weak institutional support constrain their effectiveness. Overall, the findings highlight drug trafficking as a multidimensional issue requiring coordinated efforts; therefore, strengthening community awareness, enhancing law enforcement, expanding rehabilitation services, and improving inter-agency and community coordination are recommended to mitigate its impact.

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