

At risk. In the last one month, police in Kampala have recorded more than 1,000 cases of drug-related offences, particularly involving teenagers and youth aged between 13 and 24 years.

Kampala battling teenage drug abuse

Report. Police say many of the teenagers and youth arrested over crime have been influenced by drugs.

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KAMPALA. Juma Matovu was a week ago lynched after he reportedly stabbed three people with a knife at Biina in Mutungo, Kampala. The 17-year-old had reportedly developed a sudden mental illness due to drugs.

Nakawa Division mayor Ronald Balimwezo, says Matovu had been reported for having started using drugs a few days before his death. He says they were in the process of taking him to a rehabilitation centre.

"He (Juma Matovu) had just lost his mental stability because of drugs. He had been brought to our attention but unfortunately, he was lynched because they did not know his status. People close to him had informed us how he had become mentally ill," Mr Balimwezo explains.

Matovu is part of the statistics of teenagers, who have fallen victim to drug abuse in Kampala.

Mr Frank Mwesigwa, the Kampala Metropolitan police commander, says many teenagers they arrest over crime are mainly driven by drugs.

"Our biggest challenge is Kisenyi since it is a shummy area and it has all sorts of people. Its set-up makes children and youth access drugs cheaply and they hide in corridors and abuse drugs. They afterwards engage in various crimes such as theft and pickpocketing," Mr Mwesigwa explains.

In the last one month, police in Kampala have recorded more than 1,000 cases of drug-related offences, particularly involving teenagers and youth aged between 13 and 24 years.

Kampala Central, Katwe Division, Kalerwe and Kawempe police stations and Nansana Municipality Division Police recorded the highest number of cases related to drug abuse last month.

Kalerwe Police Post, Nansana Divi-

ston Police, and Kampala CPS arrest more than 10 suspects every time they conduct operations against drug abusers and dealers.

Early this year, Kalerwe police arrested more than 100 teenagers and youth over drug abuse and involvement in crime such as theft.

Mr Balimwezo says the situation is not different in Nakawa as they arrest more than 30 teenagers every time they conduct a crackdown on drug abusers in areas of Kitintale, Luzira, Biina, Kasokoso and Mutungo. The drug suspects, he says, are usually picked in cinema halls and bars late in the night or in the morning hours smoking drugs, sleeping on verandas and roadside.

"There are many juveniles, who have started abusing drugs because of curiosity or bad peers. Once they get intoxicated, they don't fear anyone," Mr Balimwezo says.

Police operations

Last week, Kampala CPS police arrested 45 suspected drug smokers and dealers in a bid to fight crimes related to drugs. Most of the victims who were picked from corridors and rooftops were aged between 16 and 25 years. During the operation, several exhibits ranging from marijuana, khati, cocaine and shisha were recovered.

A week earlier, police in Nakulabye conducted an operation in which more than 200 suspected criminals, mostly teenagers were arrested for terrorising residents of Nakulabye and surrounding areas. The crackdown came after several residents had complained of teenagers smoking drugs in their areas, in addition to breaking into their homes and shops.

Nansana Division police commander Bernard Katwalo says cases of children engaging in drug abuse are on the rise in Nansana Municipality, especially in areas of Kibulooka and Nansana East II Zone. The culprits are aged between 13 and 14 years and have often been arrested for burglary and theft.

"Drugs are very cheap in this area. They are sold at Shs500 and Shs1,000. Every time we conduct a crackdown

on drug abusers, we get very many teenagers. We usually counsel them but also engage their parents," Mr Katwalo says.

The Nansana East II A and Nansana East II B LCI chairman, Mr Richard Luggya, says some children have resorted to taking drugs inside houses to avoid arrest.

"These children are known to our faces and they are always on alert. They take off once they see us. But we have tried to talk to parents for the children we know. We also have very many children who have come to this area and their origin is not known," Mr Luggya says.

Mr Mwesigwa adds that Kakiri in

KEY ISSUES

Records. Statistics at Police Narcotics department indicate that by the end of 2016, police had arrested 2,163 drug users and traffickers. The traffickers included 10 Nigerians, four South Africans, three Kenyans, and eight Ugandans. The age range for those arrested was between 14 and 35 years and 95 per cent of them were arrested in Kampala.

Causes. This is attributed to parental negligence and unemployment. It is reported that parents have become reluctant on their roles and have left children to do anything they want.

Rehabilitate. Police also say that for cases of children arrested over abusing drugs or criminality, they engage parents but those without parents are often taken to rehabilitation centres.

Street children. According to African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect, there are more than 10,000 children living on Kampala streets.

Wakiso District has been identified as one of the closest sources of drugs sold to teenagers and youth in Kampala.

A recent report by Harm Reduction Uganda (HRU) indicates that Mpigi, Butambala and Buikwe districts are sources of drugs such as khati (marijuana) and Cannabis (Injaga) used by most teenagers and youths in Kampala. In the report, most vulnerable areas include Kampala's suburbs of Kabalagala, Kisenyi, Bwaise, Katwe, Kasokoso, Namuwongo, Bakuli, Ndeeba and Kawempe.

Mr Mwesigwa adds that it is challenging to fight drug abuse since it is usually concealed in transportation. He says they only rely on operations in suspected areas and vigilance of local residents on people dealing in drugs.

NGO survey

Mr Gracious Atwine, the HRU coordinator, says during their study, a total of 425 respondents were interviewed in Kampala City.

"Of these, 17 per cent were in Kampala injecting drugs whereas 50 per cent used non-injecting drugs," HRU report reads in part.

Mr Atwine adds that the survey was conducted to show that drug use is a public health issue and not a criminal justice matter. To him, the statistics could be used to address drugs abuse in urban areas.

"Drug abuse is cumulative because victims are handled as criminals instead of directing them to recover. Police usually arrest, detain and indict them instead of helping them to separate from the problem," Mr Atwine adds.

According to the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Control) Act (NDPSA) 2016, drug traffickers can be imprisoned for up to 20 years while those found in possession of drugs can be handed a sentence of up to 10 years or payment of a fine of not less than Shs10 million.

The same law provides for a fine of Shs480,000 to drug abusers and a one to five year jail term which Mr Mwesigwa is optimistic shall help reduce drugs.