



REVIEW ARTICLE

Substance Use Among Lawyers and Law Students: A Scoping Review

Kizito AIDAM ¹ , Emefa A. ADAWUDU ²

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Affiliations

¹ Department of Family and Community Health, Fred N. Binka School of Public Health, University of Health and Allied Sciences, Hohoe, Ghana

² University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

 Correspondence

Kizito Aidam

Postal Address: PMB 31, Ho, Volta Region, Ghana

Email: kizito8@gmail.com

History

Received: 18 June 2024

Accepted: 22 October 2024

Published: 10 December 2024

Citation

Aidam K., & Adawudu, E. A. (2024). Substance Use Among Lawyers and Law Students: A Scoping Review. *European Journal of Mental Health*, 19, e0033, 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.5708/EJMH.19.2024.0033>

Introduction: Lawyers are uniquely vulnerable to substance use and disorders due to the use of different substances mainly because of the demanding and adversarial nature of the legal profession. Substance use often begins during law school years.

Aims: This study aims to examine substance use and disorders due to the use of different substances.

Methods: A scoping review was adopted to collect literature from January 2000 to November 2023. The review followed the Arksey and O'Malley framework. Literature was retrieved from CINAHL Complete, PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus. A total of 1,808 studies were retrieved and 14 were included for the final synthesis. The combined sample size was 16,722, comprising 15,150 lawyers and 1,572 law students. Data was extracted into a data matrix and then synthesized into the results.

Results: Many lawyers and law students have experienced substance use disorders or problematic use. Alcohol and tobacco were the most used substances among them. Suicide due to substance use was also detected. Findings reveal the use of illicit substances, demographic disparities in substance use, and unprofessional behavior such as substance use during working hours. The role of support systems in battling substance use was critical among lawyers and law students. Even though few lawyers sought help for substance use related issues, treatment was effective.

Conclusions: Substance use is pervasive in the legal profession. Although various health promotion and education interventions have been carried out to address this problem, the scale of the problems means that stakeholders must do more to effectively tackle the issue.

Keywords: substance use, alcohol drinking, tobacco use, lawyers, legal profession, and law students

Introduction

Substance use refers simply to the act of consuming substances like alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, without implying whether this use is responsible or harmful (Volkow & Blanco, 2023; American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Disorders due to the use of different substances result when substance use becomes harmful, leading to negative outcomes such as health problems, risky behaviors, or neglect of responsibilities (Kalin, 2020; WHO, 2023). Episodes of harmful use occur when an individual struggles to control the use of substances despite experiencing adverse consequences (Volkow & Blanco, 2023; WHO, 2023). The most severe forms of disorders due to the use of different substances are harmful patterns of use and dependence (Volkow & Blanco, 2023; WHO, 2023).

Substance use could potentially lead to severe mental illness (Shegaw et al., 2022). This can be a public health problem even when it does not rise to the level of disorders due to the use of different substances (Shegaw et al., 2022; Volkow & Blanco, 2023).

Almost a quarter of the world's population uses tobacco, resulting in a tobacco epidemic (WHO, 2021). This tobacco epidemic, according to the World Health Organization, is one of the biggest public health challenges in the world (WHO, 2021). Tobacco kills over eight million people a year, with about 75% of this case-specific mortality due to direct tobacco use and 25% of the mortality among non-smokers who are exposed to tobacco smoke (WHO, 2021). According to the World Health Organization, about 35 million people are affected by substance use problems annually (WHO, 2024). Also, three million yearly deaths are attributed to alcohol, implying that alcohol-related disorders account for 5% of deaths across the world (WHO, 2024). A recent study showed that 3.7% of all Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) were associated with alcohol use (Murray et al., 2020). Additionally, 7.9% of all DALYs were attributed to tobacco smoking (Murray et al., 2020). In other words, a total of 11.6% of the global disease burden is associated with alcohol drinking and tobacco smoking (Murray et al., 2020).

Given the ominous global burden of substance use, it is important to examine the problem among segregated, at-risk populations. Certain professionals are known to be more susceptible to problematic substance use than others. A Hungarian study underscored this point by suggesting that law enforcement students averaged a higher incidence of caffeine use disorder than the general population (Erdős, 2023). Attorneys, or lawyers, are one of the at-risk populations for problematic substance use (Rothstein, 2008). This is largely due to the adversarial and “winner-takes-all” nature of lawyering and the stress associated with the work (Rothstein, 2008). Often, the legal profession is a zero-sum game, putting immense pressure on attorneys to deliver results (Rothstein, 2008). In their quest to meet client demands, some attorneys use alcohol and other forms of substances as a coping mechanism (Rothstein, 2008; Wylér et al., 2022).

Lawyers are meant to be custodians of the law, and many of the substances that lawyers use are illegal in many jurisdictions (Rothstein, 2008). This portends a worrying concern – the people tasked with upholding the law break it (Rothstein, 2008). Furthermore, society is at risk of chaos if the mental health and well-being of lawyers spirals out of control (Organ et al., 2016). Lawyers ensure the rule of law, which is a cornerstone of every well-functioning society, including democracies and monarchies alike (Organ et al., 2016). Among others, lawyers defend individual rights, ensure compliance with laws at local, national, and global levels, and advise governments on legislation (Organ et al., 2016). They advise in deal-making, create employment opportunities, and contribute to national GDPs (Organ et al., 2016; Rothstein, 2008). The role of lawyers cannot be overstated.

Evidence shows that American lawyers' misuse of different substances does not begin immediately after practicing but starts even before entering the profession (Organ et al., 2016; Wylér et al., 2022). This is likely a direct result of the general population starting to use substances like alcohol and tobacco in adolescence (Organ et al., 2016; Wylér et al., 2022; Volkow & Blanco, 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to determine the prevalence of substance use, such as alcohol, tobacco, and other substances among lawyers and law students. Also, this study explores disorders due to the use of different substances among the same population. The study maps out the extant evidence across the world. Furthermore, the study examines the factors underlying the use of these substances. Common attributes in the legal industry across the world mean that the results of this study can be applied universally.

Methods

A scoping review, also known as a systematic scoping review, was conducted to identify the prevalence of substance use, disorders due to the use of different substances, and their associated factors, among attorneys and

law students (Peters et al., 2015). We deemed the scoping review appropriate for this study because its aim was consistent with the rationale behind scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2015; Stern et al., 2020). The essence of scoping reviews is to broadly understand nascent research subjects (Stern et al., 2020). In this study, a scoping review allowed the researchers to search, retrieve, collect, and synthesize a vast array of literature on substance use and its associated factors among lawyers and law students.

The directories of Prospero, Figshare, and Open Science Framework (OSF) were searched to identify whether any protocol for a similar study existed or was in progress. With no relevant registration, this scoping review was developed following the Arksey and O'Malley framework. This study also conforms with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P) and the latest PRISMA Extension for Scoping Review Checklist (PRISMA ScR), which guided the structure and organization of the review (Tricco et al., 2018).

To ensure the robustness of this study, two frameworks were integrated. Since its inception about twenty years ago, Arksey and O'Malley's has been widely adopted by researchers in conducting scoping reviews (Westphaln et al., 2021). The framework's rigor has been well-established (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Daudt et al., 2013; Westphaln et al., 2021). Even though the framework has six stages, only the first five steps are required. The sixth stage is an extra step which researchers have the discretion to ignore. The other five stages of the Arksey and O'Malley framework are elaborated below. They include identifying the research question, identifying the relevant studies, selecting the studies to be included, charting the data as well as collating, summarizing, and reporting the findings (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

The Arksey and O'Malley framework was complemented by the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Tricco et al., 2021). Just like the Arksey and O'Malley framework, PRISMA-ScR is a template for developing protocols for scoping reviews and meta-analysis (Tricco et al., 2021). Even though similarities exist between the Arksey and O'Malley framework and PRISMA-P, the latter one culminated in a PRISMA Scoping Review Extension Checklist (PRISMA ScR), which is a 27-item worksheet for conducting structured and organized reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Daudt et al., 2013; Tricco et al., 2018; Levac et al., 2010). Following these 27 points enhanced the methodological rigor of this study. The items were integrated into the five stages of the Arksey and O'Malley framework.

Identifying the Research Question

The review question considered in this study was guided by the Population, Concept and Context (PCC) mnemonic (Peters et al., 2015). The population included lawyers and law students. It also included judges, barristers, solicitors, and prosecutors. The concept of interest was substance use, its disorders, its prevalence, its abuse as well as its associated factors. The context was global; the study was not limited to a geographical location. This culminated in the question for this review: "What are the prevalence and factors of substance use and abuse among lawyers and law students"?

Identifying Relevant Studies

The objective of the search strategy was to uncover published literature. A preliminary, restricted search of PsycINFO and PubMed was conducted to produce a general overview of studies on the subject. The key terms in the titles and abstracts of these articles, along with the index terms employed to describe these articles, formed the basis for constructing a comprehensive search plan. Five databases, including CINAHL Complete, PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus, were used for the search. Keywords – "substance use", "alcohol", "drugs", "prevalence", "factors", "law students" and "lawyers" – were composed into a search string. Some MeSH terms and synonyms were used in the final search string. An advanced search, limited to the search title, was conducted. The search was limited to the title of the studies to ensure the precision of the results. Before finalizing the search string and limiting the search to the title of the articles, multiple iterations of the keywords were run in PsycINFO and PubMed. [Table 1](#) shows the database-specific search strings, including Booleans, wildcards, and truncations.

Table 1. Search strings used to retrieve studies from the various databases

Database	Search strings
PsycINFO	TI (amphetamine* OR substance OR alcohol OR tobacco OR cigarette OR drugs OR cannabis OR marijuana OR wee) AND TI (use OR abuse OR prevalence OR factors OR dependence OR addiction) AND TI (attorney* OR lawyer* OR "law student*" OR barrister* OR solicitor* OR judge* OR justice*)
PubMed	((amphetamine* OR substance OR alcohol OR tobacco OR cigarette OR drugs OR cannabis OR marijuana OR wee[Title]) AND (use OR abuse OR prevalence OR factors OR dependence OR addiction[Title])) AND (attorney*[Title] OR lawyer*[Title] OR "law student"*[Title] OR barrister*[Title] OR solicitor*[Title] OR judge*[Title] OR justice*[Title])
Scopus	(amphetamine* OR substance OR alcohol OR tobacco OR cigarette OR drugs OR cannabis OR marijuana OR wee) AND (use OR abuse OR prevalence OR factors OR dependence OR addiction) AND (attorney* OR lawyer* OR "law student*" OR barrister* OR solicitor* OR judge* OR justice*)
CINAHL Complete	TI ((amphetamine* OR substance OR alcohol OR tobacco OR cigarette OR drugs OR cannabis OR marijuana OR wee)) AND TI ((use OR abuse OR prevalence OR factors OR dependence OR addiction)) AND TI ((attorney* OR lawyer* OR "law student*" OR barrister* OR solicitor* OR judge* OR justice*))
Web of Science	TI=((amphetamine* OR substance OR alcohol OR tobacco OR cigarette OR drugs OR cannabis OR marijuana OR wee) AND (use OR abuse OR prevalence OR factors OR dependence OR addiction) AND (attorney* OR lawyer* OR "law student*" OR barrister* OR solicitor* OR judge* OR justice*))

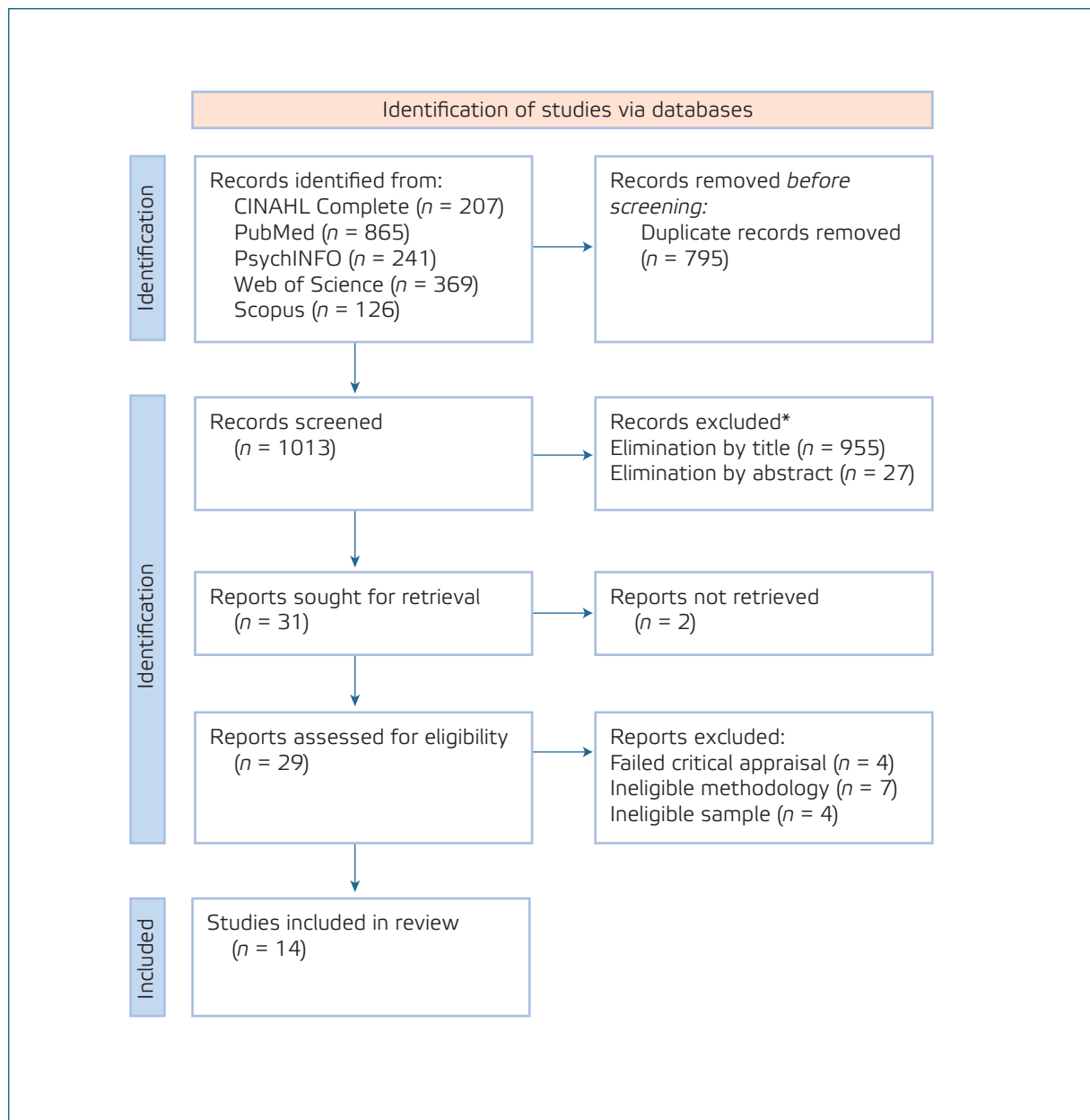
Study Selection

Studies were included in this scoping review if they were published in English. Studies that were published before January 2000 were excluded, while studies from January 2000 to November 2023 were eligible for inclusion. Editorials, narrative reviews, scoping and systematic reviews opinions, perspectives, books and book reviews, and conference abstracts were not included in this scoping review. Likewise, anecdotal and personal accounts were not included in this study. Various types of study designs, both quantitative and qualitative, were considered. Studies were included irrespective of their study site. Geographical locations were not a basis for exclusion because this was a global study.

After the search, all the studies were exported into Mendeley Reference Manager where duplicates were identified and merged. The studies were reviewed first by title, and then by abstracts; that is, studies whose titles and abstracts were not consistent with the purpose of this study were eliminated. The two researchers independently conducted the study selection process and any disagreements regarding whether to include a study were resolved through mutual agreement.

In total, 1,808 studies were retrieved from the five databases. Specifically, 207 were from CINAHL Complete, 865 were from PubMed, 241 were from PsycINFO, 369 were from Web of Science, and 126 were from Scopus. After removing duplicates, 1,013 studies remained. Afterwards, 955 studies were eliminated by title and an additional 27 were eliminated by abstract leaving 31 studies. Two full-text articles were not available. Fourteen studies were included in the final synthesis. [Figure 1](#) is the PRISMA chart that summarizes the search process. Relevant findings from the included studies were extracted into a data matrix according to the author(s) and year of publication; the purpose of the study; methodology; sample; and key findings and recommendations. [Table 2](#) shows the data matrix.

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of identified studies



* Exclusions were manually performed without any automation tool.

Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results

The collating, summarizing, and reporting procedure adhered to the reporting guidelines of the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Peters et al., 2015). A basic descriptive analysis was performed to establish the country setting, sample, and years in which the studies were published. The findings extracted from the data matrix were independently assigned codes. These codes were then compared and deliberated upon to establish an agreement between the researchers. Similar codes were merged into sub-themes, and related sub-themes were grouped into overarching themes, as detailed in the results section.

Table 2. Data matrix of the included studies

No	Author, date	Purpose of the study	Methodology	Sample	Key findings and recommendations
1.	Bogowicz et al., 2018	To establish the prevalence of substance use, including alcohol, among law and medical students in the United Kingdom	Cross-sectional study using standardized questionnaires. Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) scores were used to estimate alcohol abuse and dependence. Alcohol use disorder was identified by an AUDIT score of more than 8	353 law students, including 201 first-year students, 110 second-year students, and 42 third-year students in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The prevalence of smoking was as follows: first year (10.6%), second year (19.0%), and final year (12.5%) Alcohol use disorders was highly prevalent among the law students: first year (67.2%), second year (69.5%), and final year (47.4%) Alcohol dependence was present in about 10% of the first-year and second-year law students Current prevalence of substance use, determined by usage within the past year, was 39.1%, 42.4% and 18.9% among the first-year, second year and third-year law students respectively Cannabis was the most commonly used substance among the law students and this was followed by cocaine and nitrous oxide Overall, law students recorded a higher prevalence of smoking and alcohol use disorder than medical students at all levels
2.	Buick, 2000	To determine the prevalence of substance and its relations with stress and depression among law students	Longitudinal study sampling students using four standard instruments, including the Core Alcohol and Drug Survey	244 law students in private law schools in North-eastern America. The sample comprised of 178 full time students and 66 part time (evening) students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the two weeks preceding the study, 35% of the students had more than five drinks at a sitting Students who had lower scores on the Beck Anxiety Inventory less than five drinks at a sitting and those who recorded higher scores had more than five drinks at a sitting 20% of the students used marijuana at least three times a week Majority of the students started consuming alcohol and marijuana before they turned 18 years. By contrast, majority of the students started using cocaine, amphetamines, sedatives, and hallucinogens after they turned 18 years Students who started using cocaine before their 18th birthday had significantly higher Brief Symptom Inventory scores A significant correlation and a small percentage variance was established between family history of alcohol and drug use and Beck Depression Inventory II
3.	Chrobak-Kasprzyk and Jońska-Ochojska, 2020	To assess risky drinking, harmful drinking and alcohol addiction among Polish lawyers	A cross-sectional study using the AUDIT	206 lawyers—102 women and 104 men in Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3% of the lawyers had problems of alcohol addiction 22.33% of the lawyers were at risk of risk drinking, harmful drinking and alcohol addiction Male lawyers were significantly more likely to consume alcohol than female lawyers Even though the number of work hours did not show a statistically significant relationship with alcohol consumption, alcohol consumption decreases with age Lawyers who were married were significantly less likely to consume alcohol than lawyers who were not married. Likewise, lawyers who had children were significantly less likely to consume alcohol than lawyers who did not have children
4.	Gupta et al., 2019	To determine the prevalence and associated factors of tobacco use among law students in Indore City	A descriptive cross-sectional study	278 law students in India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher proportion of students consumed tobacco by smoking than smokeless tobacco: 32% smoked tobacco and 2.5% consumed smokeless tobacco. 66.5% of the students consumed tobacco under peer pressure Only 6.5% of the students considered smoking tobacco whereas 23.4% of the students indicated that they were not interested in quitting tobacco consumption Male law students were about two times more likely to consume tobacco than female students Students who have a family history of tobacco consumption were three times more likely to consume tobacco than their peer who had no history of tobacco smoking Cigarettes (24.8%) and hookah (5.8%) were the most common tobacco that the students smoked The most commonly used smokeless tobacco were: gutka (0.7%), chewing tobacco (0.4%), dip (0.4%), and betel quid with tobacco (0.4%) Majority of the students started smoking tobacco from ages 14 to 20 The prevalence of alcohol consumption among the students was 26.6%

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Table 2. continued

No	Author, date	Purpose of the study	Methodology	Sample	Key findings and recommendations
5.	Krill et al., 2016	To examine the use of substance among attorneys	Cross-sectional survey using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test	12,825 licensed and employed attorneys in the United States of America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20.6% of the attorneys had problematic drinking • 36.4% of the attorneys had scores which reflected hazardous drinking or possible abuse or dependence • Attorneys who were younger than 31 years old were more likely to have clinically significant drinking than their older colleagues • Those who have been practicing for more than ten years were less likely to record clinically significant scores than those who have been practicing for less than ten years. • Attorneys who were less than 31 years old were more likely to consume more alcohol than those who were more than 30 years old • Alcohol was the most commonly used substance (84.1%), followed by tobacco (16.9%), sedatives (15.7%), marijuana (10.2%), opioids (5.6%), stimulants (4.8%), and cocaine (0.8%) • 6.8% of the attorneys reported that they previously sought treatment for alcohol and/or drug use. Out of this, 21.8% indicated that they used intervention that are meant for legal professionals • Those who reported using tailored interventions recorded lower AUDIT scores than those who did not use programs tailored to attorneys • 44.2% of those who ever sort treatment and 23.4% of those who never sort treatment reported that confidentiality and privacy were barriers to treatment-seeking behavior
6.	Leignel et al., 2014	To examine the level of substance use among self-employed attorneys. The study also examined the level of substance use among pharmacists as well as mental health and risk factors of psychological distress among self-employed attorneys and pharmacists	Cross-sectional survey using self-reported questionnaires	A total of 1282 self-employed lawyers responded to the survey, out of a sample of 3600 lawyers from the Paris area, France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though the average number of drinks (alcohol) was significantly higher among pharmacists than lawyers, the prevalence of alcohol use was significantly higher among lawyers than pharmacists (53% v 44%) • 16% of the lawyers reported alcohol abuse • 11% of the lawyers reported using drugs (anxiolytic, antidepressants, and hypnotic) • Specifically, 5% used anxiolytic drugs, 4% used antidepressants, and 1% used hypnotic drugs • The prevalence of tobacco smoking among the attorneys was 26%. This was compared to 13% prevalence among pharmacists and the difference was statistically significant • Use of any drug (aOR=2.56), use of anxiolytic drugs (aOR=4.69), use of hypnotic drug (aOR=4.4) and tobacco smoking (aOR= 1.5) predicted poor mental health among the lawyers
7.	Murdoch, 2004	To examine the alcohol and substance use among law students	Cross-sectional study using Drug Abuse Screening Test and Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test	216 completed questionnaires of a sample of 229 law students University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37.2% of the students recorded potential alcohol dependence and abuse • 7.6% reported potential drug abuse and dependence
8.	Reed et al., 2016	To examine, among other things, the level of substance use among law students	A combination of cross-sectional study and longitudinal study with two follow-ups at four months intervals	375 law students in the Midwestern part of the USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prevalence of alcohol consumption within the past 30 days was 84.6% and 90.4% consumed alcohol within the past year • On average, students reported having 4.31 drinks per week, and 51% reported having at least five drinks per week (binge drinking) • 11.7% smoked marijuana, 8.7% used sedatives, 4.8% used prescription drugs without prescription, and 1% used cocaine within the past year • No significant difference were observed in substance use within the law students according to their class groups • There were no changes in the longitudinal data—the level of substance use among 1Ls did not significantly change over their first year of study

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Table 2. continued

No	Author, date	Purpose of the study	Methodology	Sample	Key findings and recommendations
9.	Rosky et al., 2022	To determine the difference in substance use among law students who took "Mindfulness Training" and those who did not it	Non-randomized, quasi-experimental study involving control groups	61 law students in Utah, USA—31 cases and 33 controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The intervention group recorded an average score of 4.9 on the alcohol scale at baseline and the comparison group recorded a score of 3.0 at baseline • At time 2, the average disordered alcohol score for the intervention group was 3.8 and the average score for the comparison group was 3.3 • There were significant differences between the intervention group and the comparison group concerning the disordered alcohol use outcomes. On average, individuals participating in the mindfulness course exhibited more substantial decreases in alcohol misuse behaviors and related problems compared to those in the comparison group. [$F(1, 62) = 6.858, p = .011, d = 0.67$]
10.	Seear, 2023	To reflect on substance use addiction among lawyers	Exploratory qualitative study	48 Australian lawyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addiction is the principal effect of legal strategy • Alcohol use addiction is a "genuine" problem in the legal industry • Alcohol addiction is a major influencer of family violence
11.	Seear, 2017	To explore the experience of lawyers regarding alcohol use	Exploratory qualitative study	23 lawyers from Australia and Canada—7 from Australia and 16 from Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawyers play the role of quasi-expert on alcohol addiction in four main ways • First, they play this role when they decide on which prospective client to accept as a client • Second, they play this role when they advocate for a client in court • Third, they play this role when they settle disputes on behalf of their clients • Fourth, they play this role when in the process of developing cases
12.	Shore, 2001	To establish the linkage between drinking and type of practice	Cross-sectional study	559 attorneys from two midwestern cities in US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The average amount of any kind of alcoholic drink consumed daily was 10.94 ml (0.37 oz of absolute alcohol) • Women were less likely to drink than men [$F(1, 553) = 17.14, p < .001$] • There was no significant relationship between type of practice and alcohol consumption • 31.8% of the participants had drinks while conducting business • The average number of occasions that the participants had drinks while conducting business was 2.7 and the average number of drinks consumed per occasion was 2.32 • Drinking while conducting business according to practice type are also follows: practice group (61.0%), solo (78.6%), government (87.6%), and corporate (80.0%). This difference was statistically significant • 68.9% of the participants drank during social events related to work • The average number of occasions that the participants drank during social events was 4.08 and the average number of drink per occasion was 3.43
13.	Stack & Bowman, 2023	To establish a relationship between suicide among lawyers and substance use	Secondary analysis of 2003 to 2006 data from the CDC's National Violent Death Reporting System	30,570 cases, out of which 132 were lawyers, from 17 US states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15.2% of lawyers who committed suicide had known substance or drug abuse issues. This is compared to 23.7% of nonlawyers who committed suicide with known substance or drug abuse problems, and the difference is statistically significant
14.	Sweeney, 2004	To examine the treatment outcomes of attorneys with substance abuse disorders	Analysis of secondary clinical data from 1994 to 2002	75 cases from Florida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 57% of the attorneys were treated for alcohol abuse, 25% for cocaine abuse, 8% for opiates abuse, 3% each for benzodiazepines, GHB and methamphetamine, and 1% for marijuana • The average length of treatment for substance abuse was 10.6 weeks (one day to nine months as the range) • The overall completion rate of treatment was 64% • A special program, the Recovering Attorneys' Program was instituted in 1999. The completion rate before the program was 47% and the completion rate after the program was 79%

Results

Characteristics of the Study

The combined sample from the 14 included studies was 16,722, comprising 15,150 lawyers and 1,572 law students. Out of the included studies, 7 (50%) were conducted in the USA. One study each was conducted in the UK, Poland, France, India, and Australia. The remaining one study was a multi-country study which sampled participants from Canada and Australia.

The highest number of included studies was published in 2004, 2016 and 2023. One study each was published in 2000, 2001, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. No studies were published from 2005 to 2013.

Prevalence of Substance Use Among Lawyers and Law Students

Fewer studies investigated the prevalence of alcohol consumption among lawyers than among law students. In France, 53% of lawyers consumed alcohol according to a study by Leignel et al. (2014). The lifetime prevalence of alcohol use among some British law students ranged from 47.4% to 69.5% with final-year law students accounting for the lowest and second-year students accounting for the highest (Bogowicz et al., 2018). Prevalence within the past year was lower among law students; it was as low as 18.9% and as high as 42.4% (Bogowicz et al., 2018). In India, 26.6% of law students consume alcohol (Gupta et al., 2019). A higher lifetime prevalence of alcohol use – 90.4% – was recorded among law students in the midwestern part of the US (Reed et al., 2016). The highest current prevalence of alcohol consumption was recorded among students in the Midwestern United States of America: 84.6% (Reed et al., 2016).

The findings also demonstrated the frequency of alcohol use. The average amount of any kind of alcoholic drink consumed daily by lawyers in two midwestern cities in the United States was 10.94 ml (Shore, 2001). This translated to a daily average of 0.37 oz of absolute alcohol (Shore, 2001). Even though about 32% of these lawyers drank during business hours, most of the drinking, about 70%, occurred during social events (Shore, 2001). Additionally, in Northeastern America, 35% of law students reported that they had more than five drinks per occasion (Buick, 2000). More than half of the law students in another American sample consumed at least five drinks per week (Reed et al., 2016). This, according to the authors, constituted binge drinking (Reed et al., 2016). On average, a lawyer drank about 4 drinks per social occasion (Shore, 2001).

The studies also reported findings on the prevalence of tobacco smoking among law students and lawyers. The prevalence of tobacco smoking among French attorneys was 26% (Leignel et al., 2014). In the United Kingdom, the prevalence of smoking among law students ranges from 10.6% to 19.0% with first-year law students recording the lowest prevalence and second-year law students recording the highest prevalence (Bogowicz et al., 2018). A longitudinal study among law students in the northeastern part of the United States America (USA) found that one out of every five students smoked or consumed marijuana at least three times weekly (Buick, 2000). About one out of every ten French lawyers used drugs such as anxiolytics, antidepressants, and hypnotics (Leignel et al., 2014).

Regarding the onset of substance use, most U.S. law students started using alcohol before they turned 18 years old (Buick, 2000). By contrast, most law students in the same study started using cocaine, amphetamines, sedatives, and hallucinogens after their 18th birthday (Buick, 2000).

Substance Use Problems Among Lawyers and Law Students

A cross-sectional study to screen for alcohol use disorders among U.S. lawyers established that one out of every five participants engaged in problematic drinking (Krill et al., 2016). Additionally, 36.4% of the attorneys exhibited scores that reflected hazardous drinking or possible abuse or dependence (Krill et al., 2016). A similar study conducted among Polish lawyers found that 22.3% of lawyers were at risk of alcohol addiction (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020). According to another study in Poland, 3% of lawyers were battling alcohol addiction (Buick, 2000). Using self-administered questionnaires, researchers observed alcohol abuse among 16% of French lawyers (Leignel et al., 2014).

In Canada, a cross-sectional study using the Drug Abuse Screening Test and Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test revealed that 37.2% of law students registered potential alcohol dependence and abuse (Murdoch, 2004). Also, potential drug abuse was observed in 7.6% of the law students (Murdoch, 2004). In the United Kingdom, clinical levels of alcohol dependence were observed among 10% of law students (Bogowicz et al., 2018).

Commonly Used Substances Among Lawyers and Law Students

Without factoring in alcohol, tobacco was the most used substance among U.S. attorneys (Krill et al., 2016). About 6% of the attorneys used opioids (Krill et al., 2016). Findings from a secondary analysis of clinical data, collected in Florida, revealed that about one in every four lawyers used cocaine (Sweeney et al., 2004). Pertaining to law students, cannabis was the most used substance among British law students (Bogowicz et al., 2018). This was followed by cocaine and nitrous oxide (Bogowicz et al., 2018). Cigarettes were the most used substance among Indian students, and this was followed by hookah (Gupta et al., 2019). Marijuana was the most used substance among some U.S. students (Reed et al., 2016). About 1% of the students used cocaine (Reed et al., 2016).

Factors, Drivers, and Health Effects of Substance Use Among Lawyers and Law Students

Male lawyers were more likely to consume alcohol than female lawyers (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020; Gupta et al., 2019). Alcohol consumption and the likelihood of problematic drinking decreases with age (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020; Krill et al., 2016). The number of hours that attorneys worked did not show a significant relationship with alcohol consumption (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020). Lawyers who were married, and also lawyers who had children, were less likely to consume alcohol (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020).

Family history had a relationship with substance use among law students (Buick, 2000; Gupta et al., 2019). Indian law students who had a family history of tobacco use were three times more likely to use tobacco than those who did not have a family history of substance use (Gupta et al., 2019). Likewise, a family history of substance use was associated with substance use among American law students (Buick, 2000).

Law students who had more than five drinks per occasion were more likely to show higher mean scores on the Beck Depression Inventory II than law students who had less than five drinks per occasion (Buick, 2000). The onset of cocaine usage before the age of 18 years increased the clinical symptoms associated with its use (Buick, 2000). These included symptoms of interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, psychoticism, obsessive-compulsive, paranoid ideation and somatization (Buick, 2000). Peer pressure accounted for 66.5% of tobacco use among law students in India (Gupta et al., 2019).

Substance use did not only contribute to sickness among lawyers, but also to death. Substance abuse accounted for 15.2% of suicides among lawyers (Stack & Bowman, 2023). Alcohol addiction among attorneys was attributed to legal strategy (Seear, 2023). Alcohol addiction reflects throughout the legal process (Seear, 2017). Its impact is felt from client intake through the litigation process and other parts of the life cycle of a lawsuit (Seear, 2017, 2023).

Treatment and Interventions

Only about 7% of attorneys sought treatment for their substance use problems (Krill et al., 2016). Treatment and substance use interventions produced results (Rosky et al., 2022; Sweeney et al., 2004). The average duration of treatment for substance use was eleven weeks (Sweeney et al., 2004). Those who sought treatment were less likely to record clinically significant levels of substance use than their peers who did not seek treatment (Krill et al., 2016). Special interventions that are tailored to the substance use needs of lawyers resulted in about a 80% treatment completion rate (Sweeney et al., 2004). By contrast, the completion rate of treatment for substance use among the lawyers before the special intervention was 47% (Sweeney et al., 2004).

Discussion

The lowest prevalence of alcohol among law students was recorded in India (26.6%) and the highest prevalence of alcohol use was observed among midwestern students in the United States (90.4%). Among lawyers, a French study established that the prevalence of alcohol consumption was around 53%. The findings from this study largely differ from findings in previous studies that investigated the prevalence of alcohol use among lawyers and law students. A study in the 1990s found that the lifetime prevalence of alcohol consumption among lawyers and law students was 82% and 75% respectively in the United States (Organ et al., 2016). The prevalence of alcohol consumption within the profession has not substantially changed even though various efforts have been aimed at

reducing the prevalence of alcohol use in the profession indicates that a lot of work remains to be done (Rothstein, 2008). Perhaps the prevalence of alcohol use steadied due to these interventions, but the consensus is that more needs to be done to stem alcohol consumption among lawyers (Organ et al., 2016; Rothstein, 2008).

The difference in alcohol consumption observed among law students in India and the United States is not surprising. Within the general population, patterns of alcohol consumption in India and the United States differ. The prevalence of alcohol consumption in the general population in India is about 60% lower than the prevalence of alcohol consumption in the United States, and these differences likely accounted for the differences among law students too (Sivapuram et al., 2020; NIAAA, 2024). Based on the findings of this study and the findings among the general population of India and the United States, the prevalence of substance use among university students is higher compared to the general population (Sivapuram et al., 2020; NIAAA, 2024; Reed et al., 2016; Gupta et al., 2019). This underscores a unique alcohol use among law students.

The findings on alcohol use-related disorders demonstrate the susceptibility of lawyers and law students to problematic alcohol use. Over 50% of American lawyers engaged in binge drinking, which is more than the prevalence of binge drinking among the general public (Reed et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2015). Predictably, depressive symptoms were common among some American law students who consumed more than five drinks in one sitting (Buick, 2000).

Substance use did not only result in morbidity among some lawyers, but it also contributed to mortality in certain cases. Substance abuse accounted for 15.2% of the suicides among lawyers (Stack & Bowman, 2023). Alcohol addiction among attorneys was attributed to legal strategy (Seear, 2023). Alcohol addiction reflects throughout the legal process (Seear, 2017). Its impact is felt from client intake through the litigation process and other parts of the life cycle of a lawsuit (Seear, 2017, 2023). Various forms of problematic drinking were observed among a substantial proportion of the lawyers (Chrobak-Kasprzyk & Joško-Ochojska, 2020; Krill et al., 2016). The finding on problematic alcohol consumption in the U.S. among lawyers is higher than the prevalence of problematic alcohol drinking among physicians in the U.S., which was recorded at 16.8% (Halsall et al., 2023). Likewise, the proportion of U.S. nurses who engaged in problematic drinking was 27.0% (Halsall et al., 2023). Similarly, the proportion of lawyers engaged in problematic drinking was over three times the proportion of the general American population that was engaged in problematic drinking (NIAAA, 2024; Krill et al., 2016). In sum, the legal profession seems to be confronted with a peculiar, cultural challenge regarding alcohol consumption.

This situation is worrying, especially since our study established that 30% of lawyers drink during business hours (Shore, 2001). The majority of drinking by lawyers is done outside working hours, but there is a risk that drinking during work hours could become a norm. Another worrying observation on substance use among lawyers was that the problem is resulting in deaths. Substance abuse accounted for 15.2% of suicides among lawyers (Stack & Bowman, 2023). This represents a substantial proportion of lawyers who lose their lives due to substance use.

Findings were also made on the prevalence of tobacco smoking among lawyers and law students, which ranged from 10.6% among British law students to 26% among French lawyers (Leignel et al., 2014; Bogowicz et al., 2018). This finding is generally consistent with tobacco smoking among the public, including other professionals. Global and regional studies have demonstrated that the average prevalence of tobacco smoking is about 18% (Cornelius et al., 2022; Nilan et al., 2019; WHO, 2019). It does not appear, therefore, that lawyers and law students have peculiar issues with tobacco use.

Instances of using illegal substances also occurred. In the United States, some lawyers and law students use contraband substances such as cocaine and cannabis (Bogowicz et al., 2018; Buick, 2000; Krill et al., 2016; Sweeney, 2004). This is a concern as lawyers are meant to be the custodians of the law (Rothstein, 2008). For this reason, the law is a self-regulating profession in many jurisdictions (Rothstein, 2008). Here, the findings showed that not all lawyers, and aspiring lawyers, are accountable to themselves. Some lawyers break the law to suit their cravings. There were likely more lawyers and law students who engaged in the use of illicit substances than those who reported doing so. People are not always candid about subjects like substance use (Aidam & Adawudu, 2023).

This study also highlighted drivers and associated factors of substance use among lawyers and law students. Male lawyers were more likely to consume alcohol than female lawyers. Various mainstream studies have established a relationship between substance use and gender (Cornelius et al., 2022; Degenhardt et al., 2018; Htet et al., 2020; Lorant et al., 2013; Nilan et al., 2019; WHO, 2019). This finding was, therefore, not surprising. Lawyers are a subset of society. It makes sense that certain observations on the association between demographic

characteristics and substance use in the general society were reflected among lawyers. Additionally, this study proved that alcohol consumption and the likelihood of problematic drinking decreases with age. The explanation could be that older lawyers, who are likely more experienced, learn how to manage alcohol consumption over time (Berger & Zhang, 2016; Coulton et al., 2012; Shaw et al., 2012). Reasons such as risk-taking, experimentation, social pressure, positive expectations and inadequate support systems could explain why younger attorneys consume more alcohol than older attorneys (Gray & Brown, 2009; Wild et al., 2001; Veerbeek et al., 2019).

The role of social systems in alcohol use among lawyers was underscored in this study in two respects. First, it was discovered that the marital status of lawyers had a significant relationship with alcohol consumption in the sense that lawyers who were married, and also, lawyers who had children, were less likely to consume alcohol. Second, a family history of substance use increased the likelihood of substance use among law students. These two findings are consistent with the extant literature on the role of social support and family history regarding substance use (Birkeland et al., 2021; Lookatch et al., 2019; Polcin & Korcha, 2017). Social support systems, such as spouses, can make a difference in substance use (Birkeland et al., 2021; López et al., 2021). Also, children can motivate parents to avoid potentially destructive behavior such as substance use (Birkeland et al., 2021; Lookatch et al., 2019; Polcin & Korcha, 2017). Conversely, a family history of substance use encourages people, including law students and lawyers, to do likewise (Beaulieu et al., 2021; Birkeland et al., 2021; Lookatch et al., 2019).

This study also proved that interventions targeting the prevention of substance use are effective. Lawyers who participated in such interventions experienced improvements in their mental health and wellbeing (Sweeney, 2004). This finding supports the established view that substance use problems are not death sentences; they are treatable (Baldwin, 1991; López et al., 2021). Substance use prevention programs, especially vertical programs, were effective in creating awareness among lawyers and law students as well as improving their mental health seeking behavior (Baldwin, 1991; Beaulieu et al., 2021; López et al., 2021). The effectiveness of substance use interventions gives hope to lawyers who are battling any form of problematic substance use.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is the first to investigate substance use among lawyers and law students on a large scale using a rigorous methodology. The study includes literature from different parts of the world, describing various substances. This study is not without limitations. Eliminating a bulk of studies that were initially retrieved because they were not peer-reviewed articles resulted in the relative lack of a high volume of studies on the subject. Also, even though the aim of scoping reviews is to provide an overall overview of the subject rather than a detailed insight into a specific geographical location, the patterns of changes in substance use over time and varying socio-demographic factors make it difficult to compare findings across different geographical locations and timelines. Furthermore, most of the studies used screening tools to collect data in cross-sectional studies. A more accurate source of data would have been a secondary analysis of clinical data. Finally, this study included only studies that were published in English. As a result, certain studies that were published in other languages may have been omitted.

Conclusion, Implications and Future Directions

Substance use has morphed into a cultural and historical problem in the legal profession. Because of the critical role that lawyers play in society, their substance use issues can be consequential for themselves, their families, and even society. A substantial portion of lawyers drink during work hours, which is an indictment of their professionalism. Interventions that are tailored to the needs of lawyers are generally effective. There was a geographical imbalance in the available studies. This scoping review did not include any studies from the Middle East and Africa due to the paucity of literature on the subject in these regions. Also, analytical studies that use secondary data, collected from clinical sources, would present more accurate diagnostic data on substance abuse and disorders among lawyers and law students. Leaders in the legal profession should capitalize on these measures to stem the problem of substance use among lawyers. Some of these measures include lawyer assistance programs to help lawyers struggling with substance use, substance use health promotion and education, and regulating working hours. These interventions should be extended to law students because the problems start even before law students become lawyers.

List of abbreviations

OSF	Open Science Framework
PCC	Population, Concept and Context
UK	United Kingdom
U. S.	United States (of America)
WHO	World Health Organization

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to all the authors whose studies were included in the final synthesis. We are also grateful to Prof. Christmal Dela Christmals for his methodological support.

Author contribution

Kizito AIDAM: conceptualization, design, methodology, investigation, project administration, data management, formal analyses, interpretation, supervision, writing original draft, writing review, and editing.

Emefa A. ADAWUDU: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analyses, interpretation, writing review, and editing.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Ethical statement

This manuscript is the authors' original work.

Data availability statement

All data matrix has been added to the manuscript.

ORCID

Kizito AIDAM  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9464-770X>

Emefa A. ADAWUDU  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6420-7964>

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