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Youth Drug Exposure Fuels Robberies, Violates Human Rights

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In Punjab, Pakistan, increasing numbers of minors exposed to drug addiction are being driven to commit crimes such as robbery, raising serious concerns about violations of their fundamental human rights. Current drug policies and limited access to rehabilitation services contribute to a cycle of addiction and criminality, depriving vulnerable youth of protection, dignity, and opportunity. Urgent reforms are needed to address these issues and support affected children.

Across urban and rural areas of Punjab, children as young as 12 are reported to fall victim to drug addiction, often coerced or compelled to engage in petty crimes to sustain their habits. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), approximately 300 million people worldwide use illicit drugs, with youth

disproportionately affected. In Pakistan, factors such as insufficient law enforcement and easy access to narcotics worsen the problem. Dr. Ayesha Khan, a Lahore-based child rights advocate, has noted that drug dealers exploit the poverty and vulnerability of children, many of whom come from marginalized communities and lack adequate protection under international human rights standards.

The juvenile justice system in Punjab faces significant challenges in addressing this issue. Research indicates that a large percentage of minors in detention were under the influence of drugs at the time of their offenses, yet only a small proportion receive necessary treatment. The Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center reports that criminalizing drug use among youth without providing rehabilitation perpetuates cycles of incarceration and social stigma, undermining their right to health. A 2023 Amnesty International report highlights that punitive drug policies contribute to pushing vulnerable children into criminal activities such as robberies and burglaries as they seek funds to support their addiction.

Government efforts, including the establishment of juvenile drug courts, have so far been insufficient due to limited resources and lack of comprehensive care programs. Families affected by these issues, such as that of a 15-year-old boy arrested for theft in Faisalabad, have expressed concern that rehabilitation, rather than punishment, is needed to help these children.

To better protect minors' rights, policymakers should consider decriminalizing personal drug use among youth and significantly expand access to rehabilitation and social support services. Evidence-based interventions, including treatment, education, and community engagement, are essential to breaking the cycle of addiction and crime and ensuring vulnerable children in Punjab can have a safe and healthy future.