Research Article

Student-Led Community Engagement for Substance Use Prevention: Outcomes of the Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program in Sunder Nagar, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Introduction: Adolescent substance use is a growing public health concern in India, with most school-based prevention programs relying on passive information-delivery models of limited long-term effectiveness. The Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program, a 49-day collaborative initiative of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Sunder Nagar and Crayash Charitable Trust (15 August–2 October 2026), adopted a fundamentally different approach by training school students as active community ambassadors who personally educated every household in their locality. Methods: Seven student ambassadors from seven schools in Sunder Nagar, Himachal Pradesh, India, participated over 49 days, logging daily activities across four structured domains: (1) Know and Commit — obtaining community pledges; (2) Talk and Educate — direct peer and community education; (3) Family and Community outreach; and (4) Act and Inspire — motivational and creative engagement. Data were collected via a structured Google Form and analysed using descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation (SD), median, and coefficient of variation (CV). Results: Ambassadors logged 149 activity-day records. Activity 1 (Know and Commit) generated 68,611 pledges (mean 469.9, SD 397.8, CV 84.7%, participation rate 98.0%). Activity 2 (Talk and Educate) reached 6,008 individuals (mean 50.1, SD 89.5, CV 178.6%). Activity 3 (Family and Community) engaged 2,481 household contacts (mean 22.0, SD 66.8, CV 303.6%). Activity 4 (Act and Inspire) reached 27,612 persons (mean 290.7, SD 332.2, CV 114.3%). Cumulative community reach across all four domains was 104,712 interactions. Discussion and Conclusion: The program achieved a per-ambassador reach of approximately 14,959 interactions over 49 days at near-zero cost, comparing favourably with comparable peer-led initiatives in India and internationally. The four-activity framework is grounded in validated theoretical models including Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model, the Information-Motivation-Behavioural Skills model, and family systems theory. The Nasha Mukt model offers a promising, scalable, and low-cost complement to existing school-based drug prevention frameworks. Rigorous evaluation through controlled studies and integration with state anti-drug policy are recommended as next steps.

Keywords: peer education; drug prevention; student ambassadors; community outreach; Nasha Mukt; adolescent health; Himachal Pradesh; substance use prevention; school-based intervention; India.

1. Introduction

Adolescent substance use is a critical public health challenge in India, with early initiation of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs linked to delayed neurodevelopment, academic failure, and long-term dependence. [1] Despite growing policy attention, the evidence base for effective school-based prevention programs in India remains limited, with most initiatives relying on passive information-delivery models lectures, pamphlets, or digital campaigns that demonstrate limited long-term behavioural impact. [1] The Government of India has launched several national programs, including "I Decide–I Will Not Take Drugs," Project MYTRI, and NAVCHETNA, which have shown short-term gains in knowledge and attitudes but limited sustained effectiveness. [1] The Ministry of Education's 2025 collaboration with CBSE, NCERT, and UNODC to strengthen school-based prevention underscores the policy urgency, yet community-level implementation remains uneven. [2] The Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan (NMBA), launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and evaluated by UNDP in 2024, represents the national framework within which community-level initiatives such as the present program operate. [3] In Himachal Pradesh, the proliferation of synthetic opioids ("chitta") has prompted the state government to launch the Khelo Himachal Chitta Mukt Abhiyan (2026), targeting 50,000 youth through sports-based engagement, [4] and to convene simultaneous anti-drug meetings in 234 panchayats in December 2025, recognising that effective prevention requires grassroots community mobilisation. [5] Adolescent substance use behaviour does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by multiple social ecologies including peers, family, school, and neighbourhood contexts, as articulated by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model and its application to substance use prevention. [6] Peer education leveraging

the natural social influence of young people on one another is among the most evidence-supported mechanisms for adolescent health behaviour change. A 2024 systematic review identified ten key mechanisms of school-based peer education interventions, the most prominent being peerness (credibility and relatability of peer educators), a balance between autonomy and support, and informal, personalised delivery. [7] The Community Based Peer-Led Intervention (CPLI) trial, published in The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia, demonstrated significant reductions in substance use risk among school-going adolescents in India through peer-led approaches. [8] Veenstra and Dijkstra (2022) further established that the social embeddedness of peer educators is a key determinant of intervention reach and credibility. [9] A 2026 study in Drug and Alcohol Dependence demonstrated that recovery-positive peer affiliation mediates long-term substance use outcomes among adolescents, with those in peer-supportive environments showing significantly lower odds of drug use disorder (OR = 0.42) and higher odds of abstinence (OR = 2.53). [10] The "Ignite and Engage" program, a mixed-methods evaluation of a peer-led school-based substance use prevention program published in Addiction Science and Clinical Practice (2025), further confirms that peer-led models produce measurable reductions in substance use intentions and improvements in drug-related knowledge. [11] Project VENDA, a youth-led substance use prevention initiative in Kerala, India, recognised by UNODC as a best-practice model for civil societies, has positively impacted over one million children through sports-based interventions and peer leadership, demonstrating the scalability of youth-led approaches in the Indian context. [12] Family involvement is a critical protective factor against adolescent substance use. A systematic review from NIMHANS, Bengaluru (2024), synthesising 41 randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies, found that family interventions are effective in reducing substance use among young adults, with significant reductions in behavioural problems and improvements in family functioning. [13] The UNODC's UNited Family Skills Programme, piloted in Manipur in May 2025, similarly demonstrated that family-based communication interventions strengthen resilience against substance use among adolescents. [14] This Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program, a 49-day collaborative initiative of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Sunder Nagar and Crayash Charitable Trust (15 August–2 October 2026), operationalised this evidence by positioning school students as active community leaders not passive recipients of drug education. Unlike conventional campaigns that rely on apps or one-time school lectures, ambassadors physically visited households, engaged family members, conducted art-based activities, and personally obtained pledges from community members. This study reports the program's design, implementation, and community reach outcomes, and situates them within the international literature on peer-led drug prevention.

2. Methodology

This study employs a prospective, descriptive program-evaluation design. Data were collected continuously during the Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program (15 August–2 October 2026; 49 days) in Sunder Nagar, a semi-urban town (population approximately 25,000) in Mandi district, Himachal Pradesh, India. No control group was used; the study documents reach, participation, and activity patterns of the intervention as implemented. The program was implemented under the administrative oversight of the SDM Sunder Nagar, in partnership with Crayash Charitable Trust, and is aligned with the national Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan framework.

[3] Seven student ambassadors were recruited from seven schools through voluntary participation. Ambassadors were school students (approximate age range 13–18 years). Six were female (85.7%) and one was male (14.3%). Participating institutions were Angel's Public School; DAV Public School; Mahavir Public School; PM SHRI GMSSS (Government school); Paradise Public School; Modern Hi-Tech Model School; and Namdhari Delhi Public School Chamukha. The program structured ambassador activities into four validated domains, aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of adolescent substance use [6] and the peer education mechanisms identified by Widnall et al. (2024): [7]

Activity 1 — Know and Commit: Ambassadors engaged community members in conversations about the harms of drug use and obtained pledges to remain drug-free. This activity operationalises the public commitment mechanism of behaviour change theory, in which a witnessed pledge is a strong predictor of sustained behaviour change. [15]
Activity 2 — Talk and Educate: Ambassadors conducted direct educational interactions explaining the health, social, and legal consequences of substance use. This activity aligns with the Information-Motivation-Behavioural Skills (IMB) model, which identifies accurate information as a necessary precursor to behaviour change and has been applied to substance use prevention among adolescents across diverse settings. [7] [15]

Activity 3 — Family and Community: Ambassadors targeted household-level outreach, visiting homes to engage family members. This activity reflects the family systems approach to adolescent drug prevention, supported by evidence that family interventions significantly reduce substance use and improve family functioning. [13] The UNODC's family-based prevention work in India similarly demonstrates that family communication is a key protective factor. [14]

Activity 4 — Act and Inspire: Ambassadors engaged in creative and motivational activities art, poster-making, street plays, visits to de-addiction centres and elder-care homes to inspire community members. This activity aligns with the SAMHSA Communities Talk model, which identifies youth-led creative events as among the most impactful community prevention activities, [15] and with Project VENDA's sports and arts-based approach in Kerala. [12]

3. Data Collection

Ambassadors recorded daily activity counts through a structured Google Form capturing timestamp, ambassador name, gender, school name, date of activity, and counts for each of the four activity domains, plus qualitative feedback. Data were collected from 15 August to 2 October 2026, yielding 149 valid activity-day records.

Data Management and Analysis

Data were exported from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel and converted to a SQLite relational database for analysis. Minor name-spelling inconsistencies arising from the digital submission form were identified and resolved by cross-referencing ambassador names, school affiliations, and submission timestamps, yielding seven unique ambassadors from seven schools. Descriptive statistics sum; arithmetic mean, median, standard deviation (SD), minimum, maximum, and coefficient of variation (CV) were computed for daily activity counts per domain. Cumulative totals were computed per ambassador, per school, and per calendar month. Activity participation rates were calculated as the proportion of activity-day records in which each activity type was reported (count greater than zero). All analyses were performed using Python 3.12 and SQLite3. Consistent with the descriptive, program-evaluation nature of the study, no inferential statistics were applied. [7]

Ethical Considerations

This study reports program implementation data collected under government supervision. Participation was voluntary and conducted with the knowledge of school authorities and the SDM office. No, personally sensitive health data were collected. The study is exempt from formal ethics committee review under ICMR guidelines for program evaluation studies; all data handling followed principles of confidentiality and participant respect.

4. Results

Seven student ambassadors from seven schools generated 149 activity-day records over 49 days. Table 1 presents consolidated ambassador profiles and cumulative activity totals after data cleaning.

Table 1. Ambassador Profile and Cumulative Activity Totals, Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program, Sunder Nagar, Aug–Oct 2026

Ambassador	Gender	School	Days (n)	Act 1: Pledges	Act 2: Educated	Act 3: Family	Act 4: Inspired
Aneesh	Male	Angel's Public School	32	23,990	1,946	1,990	17,678
Monal Sharma	Female	DAV Public School	24	17,550	635	92	89
Kanika	Female	Mahavir Public School	38	11,003	851	153	130
Damini	Female	PM SHRI GMSSS	25	8,083	186	34	6,116
Sunidhi Singh	Female	Paradise Public School	21	6,035	2,289	188	3,564
Jahanvi	Female	Modern Hi-Tech Model School	8	1,600	101	24	35
Samixa	Female	Namdhari Delhi Public School	1	350	0	0	0
Total	—	7 schools	149	68,611	6,008	2,481	27,612

Cumulative community reach across all four activity domains was 104,712 interactions. The most active ambassador by days logged was Kanika (n = 38); the highest cumulative pledges were obtained by Aneesh (23,990), followed by Monal Sharma (17,550) and Kanika (11,003).

Descriptive Statistics by Activity Domain

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for daily activity counts. The high coefficient of variation (CV) across all domains reflects the event-driven nature of the program, with large community gatherings interspersed with individual household visits.

Activity Domain	n	Total	Mean (SD)	Median	Min	Max	CV (%)	Participation Rate (%)
Act 1: Know and Commit	146	68,611	469.9 (397.8)	365.0	5	1,550	84.7	98.0
Act 2: Talk and educate	120	6,008	50.1 (89.5)	20.5	2	500	178.6	80.5
Act 3: Family and Community	113	2,481	22.0 (66.8)	8.0	1	500	303.6	75.8
Act 4: Act and inspire	95	27,612	290.7 (332.2)	180.0	1	1,000	114.3	63.8

Note: CV = coefficient of variation (SD/mean x 100). Participation rate = percentage of 149 activity-day records in which the activity was reported (count greater than zero).

Activity 1 (Know and Commit) demonstrated the highest participation rate (98.0%) and lowest CV (84.7%), indicating consistent daily pledge-gathering across ambassadors. Activity 3 (Family and Community) showed the highest CV (303.6%), reflecting the intensive, episodic nature of household visits.

School-wise and Gender-wise Aggregates

Table 3. School-wise Aggregated Activity Reach, Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program, Sunder Nagar, 2026

School	Days (n)	Act 1: Pledges	Act 2: Educated	Act 3: Family	% of Total Pledges
Angel's Public School	32	23,990	1,946	1,990	35.0
DAV Public School	24	17,550	635	92	25.6
Mahavir Public School	38	11,003	851	153	16.0
PM SHRI GMSSS	25	8,083	186	34	11.8
Paradise Public School	21	6,035	2,289	188	8.8
Modern Hi-Tech Model School	8	1,600	101	24	2.3
Namdhari Delhi Public School	1	350	0	0	0.5

Six of seven ambassadors (85.7%) were female, contributing 117 of 149 activity-day records (78.5%) and 44,621 pledges (65.0% of Act 1 total). The single male ambassador (Aneesh) contributed 23,990 pledges (35.0% of Act 1 total) across 32 days, with a mean daily pledge rate of 749.7 the highest among all ambassadors.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program achieved a cumulative community reach of 104,712 interaction points through seven student ambassadors over 49 days an average of 14,959 interaction points per ambassador, or approximately 2,137 interaction points per ambassador per week. This reach was accomplished without any digital advertising budget, relying entirely on the personal initiative and community embeddedness of student ambassadors.

The program's outcomes compare favourably with comparable peer-led initiatives. The CPLI trial in India demonstrated significant reductions in substance use risk through community-based peer-led intervention, validating the theoretical basis of the ambassador model.

[8] The Nasha Mukt program extends this evidence by demonstrating that student ambassadors can achieve substantial household-level reach in a semi-urban Indian setting with limited institutional resources. The Teen-to-Teen Ambassador Program (Virginia Beach, USA) engaged 80 students across three schools in opioid awareness, [16] while the Nasha Mukt program achieved a 104,712- interaction points reach with only seven ambassadors demonstrating a substantially higher per-ambassador reach.

The mechanisms identified by Widnall et al. (2024) peerness, autonomy, and informal delivery are clearly operative in the Nasha Mukt model. [7] Ambassadors engaged neighbours, family members, and community elders in authentic conversations, drawing on their social credibility as known community members, consistent with Veenstra and Dijkstra's (2022) finding that social embeddedness is a key determinant of peer educator effectiveness. [9] The finding that recovery-positive peer affiliation mediates long-term substance use outcomes (OR = 0.42 for drug use disorder; OR = 2.53 for abstinence) [10] provides a mechanistic basis for the pledge-gathering approach of Activity 1, in which ambassadors actively cultivated drug-free social norms within their communities.

The "Ignite and Engage" peer-led program evaluation (2025) confirms that peer-led models produce measurable reductions in substance use intentions and improvements in drug-related knowledge, [11] supporting the educational rationale of Activity 2 (Talk and Educate). Project VENDA's youth-led approach in Kerala, recognised by UNODC as a best-practice model and reaching over one million children, [12] demonstrates that the Nasha Mukt ambassador model is consistent with internationally validated youth-led prevention frameworks.

The family outreach component (Activity 3) is supported by the NIMHANS systematic review (2024), which found that family interventions significantly reduce substance use and improve family functioning across 41 controlled studies. [13] The UNODC's UN-ited Family Skills Programme in Manipur (2025) similarly demonstrated that family-based communication interventions strengthen resilience against substance use. [14] The Nasha Mukt program's household visits operationalise these evidence-based principles in a low-resource, community-embedded format.
The integrated school-to-community model described by Biswas and Dasgupta (2026) for Plan International India provides a useful conceptual parallel, emphasising that effective adolescent substance use prevention must bridge the school and community spheres. [14] The Nasha Mukt program operationalises this bridge through its four-activity framework, which systematically moves ambassadors from self-commitment (Activity 1) through peer education (Activity 2), household outreach (Activity 3), and community inspiration (Activity 4). The NMBA assessment report (UNDP, 2024) confirms that community-level engagement and positive partnership with educational institutions are key pillars of effective national drug prevention campaigns in India. [3]
The high CV values for Activity 2 (178.6%) and Activity 3 (303.6%) indicate substantial day-to-day variability, reflecting the episodic nature of educational and household outreach activities. The low CV for Activity 1 (84.7%) and its 98.0% participation rate confirm that pledge-gathering became a consistent daily practice a hallmark of effective habit formation in community health programs. [15]

6. Strengths and Limitations

The program's primary strength is its genuine community embeddedness: unlike digital campaigns or school-based lectures, ambassadors physically entered community spaces and engaged real people in real conversations. The daily data collection enabled real-time monitoring and provides a granular record of program reach. Limitations include: (1) self-reported daily counts subject to social desirability bias; (2) absence of a control group precluding causal attribution; (3) measurement of reach rather than impact (knowledge, attitude, or behaviour change); (4) small ambassador cohort (n = 7) limiting generalisability; and (5) minor data entry inconsistencies requiring post-hoc deduplication, highlighting the need for improved data entry validation in future programs.

Key Achievements

The Nasha Mukt Ambassadors Program achieved the following documented outcomes over 49 days:
68,611 community pledges to remain drug-free (Activity 1)
6,008 individuals directly educated on substance use harms (Activity 2)
2,481 household contacts made through family outreach (Activity 3)
27,612 persons reached through creative and inspirational activities (Activity 4)
Seven schools engaged across government and private sectors

100% of participating schools represented by at least one active ambassador
Highest individual reach: Aneesh — 23,990 pledges, 1,946 persons educated, 1,990 family contacts, 17,678 inspired
Program delivered at near-zero cost, relying entirely on student volunteerism and administrative partnership
Suggestions for Future Programs
Based on the program's outcomes and the evidence base, the following recommendations are offered:
Scale the ambassador cohort: Recruiting 20–30 ambassadors per town would distribute the reach burden more equitably. Future programs should target a minimum of three ambassadors per school, consistent with the multi-school model validated by the CPLI trial. [8]
Implement pre-post impact measurement: Future iterations should incorporate validated instruments such as the Drug Attitude Scale or the Adolescent Drug Involvement Scale to measure knowledge, attitude, and behaviour change rather than reach alone, enabling rigorous evaluation consistent with the peer education literature. [7] [11]
Strengthen data entry protocols: A structured mobile application with mandatory field validation, unique ambassador IDs, and real-time coordinator dashboards would eliminate the name-spelling inconsistencies identified in this study and enable more robust longitudinal tracking.

Ensure gender balance: The predominance of female ambassadors (85.7%) reflects the willingness of young women to engage in community service. Future programs should actively recruit male ambassadors to reach male-dominated community spaces more effectively, consistent with Project VENDA's gender-sensitive approach. [12]
Integrate with state anti-drug policy: The program should be formally integrated with the Himachal Pradesh government's Khelo Himachal Chitta Mukt Abhiyan [4] and the panchayat-level Drug De-addiction Committees [5] to leverage existing administrative infrastructure and achieve statewide scale.

Conduct a controlled evaluation: A cluster-randomised controlled trial comparing schools with and without the ambassador program would provide the highest-quality evidence for the model's effectiveness and support national policy adoption, consistent with the NIMHANS systematic review methodology. [13]

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