

What Factors Impact Young People’s Experiences of Drugging in the North-East of England?

Abstract

Various forms of drugging, such as spiking and injections, continues to prominently endanger young people; perpetrators entrap them in vulnerable situations in which they possibly might not have partaken in if they had a clear conscience. The purpose of this study is to identify possible factors that expose young people to this problematic behaviour. The research was conducted by partnering with a local group passionate for improving the lives of young people and conducting a focus group of young people of different genders between the ages 18-25. Several important themes were identified: lack of trust, gender inequality and nightlife culture – all being influenced by the fear of crime. Significantly, these findings paved the conclusion that the societal attitudes towards drugging and nightlife culture must be reassessed and action against drugging needs to drastically increase.

Introduction

Between October and November 2021, discussions about incidences of drugging had been escalating more than ever following more victims speaking about their experiences of being drugged and the consequences. However, the increase of the number of headlines analysing drink spiking and the newer form of drugging victims through injections does not necessarily imply that incidences of drugging young people is increasing, but instead could be considered the standard nightlife culture simply being acknowledged fully. Drugging young people has been “at ‘epidemic’ levels in the UK” (Weaver, 2022), and this period was no rare occasion. Though, despite the sudden light facing discussions of spiking and possible new forms of drugging, young people in the North-East, particularly young women, do not feel safer. Therefore, a question needed to be asked: what factors impact young people’s experiences of drugging in the North-East of England? These different factors help navigate why one young person’s experience of drugging therefore makes them consider it a significant problem as opposed to another’s experiences leaving them to believe that the problem is simply “exaggerated” and “unwarranted” (Colyer & Weiss, 2018, p.14).

Methodology

	AGE	GENDER	EMPLOYMENT
PARTICIPANT 1	25	Female	Unemployed
PARTICIPANT 2	20	Female	Unemployed
PARTICIPANT 3	21	Male	College student, self-employed
PARTICIPANT 4	20	Female	University student

Figure 1: Table illustrating the demographic of our focus group.

We began our overall approach to our investigation with a qualitative method so we could gain an in-depth view to assist us in achieving our objective of identifying these factors. We chose to move forward with creating a focus group for us to directly hear the experiences of young people from the North-East and to what extent they view drugging as a problem. This qualitative method was the most suitable approach, as no other method of collecting data could allow us to directly hear their views that can be analysed.

One variable that might compromise the data is that our focus group has only one man with a group of young women. Originally, two focus groups were supposed to occur in which one would be mixed gendered and another just being women, however due to a miscommunication this was unable to happen. This might compromise our data as our female participants might not feel comfortable fully sharing their views, similarly the male participant might not be fully honest in fear of being the anomaly.

Results

The factors that we conclusively identified throughout our focus group ultimately supported our previous research on how young people respond to possible drugging and their experiences. Though there were certainly surprises about the extent to which drugging impacts young people's experiences, from not knowing about injections used as a form of drugging to being worried about extreme crimes taking place against them, the focus group primarily identified the following themes as major factors.

Gender Inequality

Throughout our focus group, we found that one significant factor that impacts young people's experiences of drugging is gender inequality. There was a consequential difference between the responses of the one male participant and the female participants, particularly when asked about what they are most concerned about when going on a night out. Female participants were much more concerned about their safety. The idea that women are "sexually provocative" just by existing and are safest at home (Sheard, 2011, p.627) is illustrated in our data as our female participants feared more of being a target of drugging and non-consensual sexual activities as opposed to the male participant that claimed this wasn't their primary concern. Therefore, this implies that gender inequality is present when examining drink spiking and drugging as based on experience women feel much more vulnerable to this danger, ultimately making gender inequality a factor that impacts young people's experiences of drugging in the North-East of England.

Nightlife Culture

Another consequential factor that was identified as impacting young people's experiences of drugging was the idea of nightlife culture. A primary topic of discussion was the idea that reports were not taken as seriously due to the victim not being believed and deemed to be overexaggerating. The idea that victims, particularly women are "unreasonable" when describing their experiences (Colyer & Weiss, 2018, p. 14) or dismissed as just having "too much to drink" (Sheard, 2011, p. 622) is not a new one, and this could be to blame because

of the heavy nightlife culture in the North-East, especially as participants mentioned feeling pressured to consume alcohol. Thus, this could imply that these experiences are just symptoms of nightlife culture and due to this being so integrated into society that speaking out against it is considered dramatic, and the fear of crime extends ultimately to the fear of speaking out. This led to a wider discussion about the heavy role authority figures play in making victims feel comfortable to speak about their experiences without being blamed and ultimately implement further action from letting these actions take place. Therefore, a factor that impacts young people's experiences of drugging is nightlife culture.

Lack of Trust

During the focus group, a frequent topic amongst the participants that ultimately displayed itself as a factor is young people being less trustful due to fear of drugging. Women especially, thus proving the previously established factor of the impact of gender inequality, have adopted tendencies in which to protect them from drugging even if it is not a primary concern. A study found that behaviours such as covering their drink glasses, drinking out of bottles (Brooks, 2014, p.306), and attending non-heterosexual venues (Sheard, 2011, p.620) is common among young people to keep themselves safe from being in a position in which they are vulnerable, and our participants discussed more attentive around strangers and not accepting drinks due to the risk of drugging. A fear of drugging or drink spiking taking place leads young people to take precautions, even self-consciously, to prevent a crime taking place at their expense. Thus, a lack of trust demonstrates itself as a factor that impacts young people's experiences of drugging.

Conclusion

The factors established from our focus group that impact young people's experiences of drugging in the North-East (fear of spiking, gender inequality, nightlife culture and lack of trust) form a clear path of further action that must take place to eradicate these harmful practices continuing to take place. Authorities and organisations must implement further policies to not only stop letting perpetrators carry on their actions but ensure that victims and all other young people are safe and comfortable on a night out – ultimately, letting young people enjoy being young people without risk. There is much further work to be done, but to carry on loudly speaking about these issues and coming together to identify what needs to be done will continue to make nightlife safer for young people.

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