

A PROBLEM OF TRUST: YOUNG PEOPLE AND DRUGGING

RESEARCH REPORT



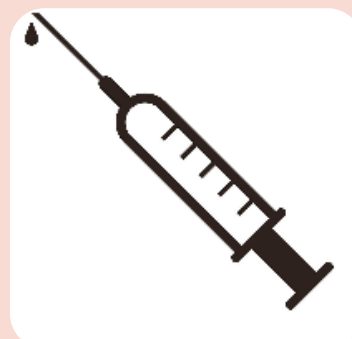
20 hours: median interval between alleged drugging incident and the taking of samples (Hurley, Parker and Wells, 2006)

- *“So you don’t have any background or anything to say: ‘this is the proof, this is what I think happened, this is what I remembered”*



Most commonly reported substances: alcohol (77%), prescription drugs (49%), and recreational drugs (26%) (Hurley, Parker and Wells, 2006)

- *“Have we got all night? Drink spiking, someone grabbing you, being alone outside, being alone on a bus”*



1.4% of surveyed college students admit that they, or someone they know, have drugged someone (Swan et al., 2017)

- *“Yes, there are cases of women spiking drinks but it’s a lot less...”*

Introduction

'Drink spiking is at 'epidemic' levels in the UK', with a rise of 722 reports in 2020 to 1466 reports in 2021 (Weaver, 2022). This problem grabbed the headlines in 2021 when the British press reported cases of 'spiking' by injection (Terry, 2021). This report will show that we need to seriously address the problem of drugging, which is when a victim is administered a psychoactive substance without consenting.

This issue is highly relevant to our local area. The city of Newcastle is renowned for its night-time economy. Being a historically industrial city in a deindustrialised era for the UK, it is a specific and complex location with respect to alcohol-related industries, which have been involved in the 'post-industrial growth' and reclaiming of deindustrialised cities in the UK (Sheard, 2011). This context speaks to the local importance of paying attention to the problem of drink spiking and drugging. This report presents the findings of our research, which focused on the problem drugging and young people in the North East of England.

Methods: What We Did

We conducted qualitative research, using literature reviews of the publications relating to drink spiking, and a focus group with young people living in the North East.

Results: Main findings

Lack of trust: Our focus group and the surveyed literature show that victims of drugging, as well as respondents in a range of focus groups, have little trust that bar staff or authorities such as the police, or emergency services, will take their case seriously. Furthermore, the young people we spoke to have little trust not only in the relevant institutions, but also in strangers around them on a night out. This quote illustrates what our participants thought about reporting a drugging incident to authorities:

"But I think maybe it's just the fact that you don't know if anything can be done about it, like there's not gonna be some kind of, like, consequences usually to that."

Fear of crime: There appears to be an underlying theme of fear of crime in the night-time economy. This relates to the night-time environment itself, as well as a fear of crime relating to drugging and its potential aftermath. The fear of drugging, a crime in of itself, appears to be closely connected to gendered experiences, and to a fear of sexual assault. This is reflected in the fears of the young women in our focus group, as well as in the literature, which often does not distinguish between drugging and drug facilitated sexual assault (DFSA).

"...Being kidnapped, being robbed, house keys, taking phone. Also, if someone is on their own, they're an easier target."

Unequal experiences: Much of the academic literature on drink spiking has focused on the experiences of young, university educated, middle class, urban women. There

are considerable differences in attitudes towards drugging based on gender: the differences can be as far apart as spiking being 'harmless fun', and it being a traumatic experience (Swan et al, 2017). One of the strengths of our research is that we worked with a focus group consisting of a diverse group of young people. Our participants differed in employment and student status, age, gender, and race. The answers of our participants revealed experiences and views shaped by these demographic characteristics.

Interviewer: *Just going out in general, what do young people think about?*

Male, student: *We're going to have fun.*

Female, student: *Yeah.*

Female, unemployed: *Who to contact if I don't feel safe.*

Discussion

Thematic analysis shows that shows that drugging is a real concern for young people in the North East. Our focus groups participants had a palpable lack of trust in people around them, and in the institutions that should support victims of drugging. This lack of trust is shaped by a fear of crime and unequal experiences across demographic characteristics, and particularly by gender. These findings will now be placed in the context of the wider literature.

Drink spiking is an action of a coercive and controlling nature that violates the right of individual consent and autonomy (Swan et al., 2017). Therefore, it is a crime that should be taken seriously. However, there are multi-fold difficulties in establishing empirical evidence of the problem, and spiking is reliably identified in a relatively small number of cases (Quigley et al., 2009). A delay of even 12 hours can impede the detection of substances such as alcohol and GHB (Anderson, Flynn, and Pilgrim, 2017). This has made possible a shift in the public and media perception of the matter into the realm 'urban myth' (Brooks, 2014).

Brooks (2014) suggests that 'a gendered lens, sensitive to the fear and reality of sexual violence' is necessary when looking at DFSA and drink spiking, because young women's concerns about drink spiking are 'clearly situated within a broader spectrum of concerns relating to sexual violence' and utilising this paradigm will help situate the issue in a broader social context.

Recommendations

Businesses, organisations, authorities, and society need to do more to improve trust and safety in the night-time economy. Changing attitudes towards drugging from 'urban myth' and 'harmless fun' to a crime that is taken seriously across society will be crucial in gaining the trust of young people. Reducing self-blame by giving respect and attention to all cases of drugging will help build trust in the involved institutions. This will aid early reporting which is crucial for forensically identifying drugging cases.

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