

Tackling drink spiking

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Practice note: Trialling screening tests to understand and tackle drink spiking

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Drink spiking has been around for hundreds of years, originally to steal money and later in relation to committing sexual offences.

In order to respond effectively to reports of drink spiking, we need to understand the problem. An inconsistent police response to spiking has been a barrier to identifying spiking incidents. Spiking reports are usually made after a person's change of behaviour or level of intoxication leads them to believe they have been spiked. Less effective police actions include determining that the person is simply drunk and sending them home or to hospital, or taking a urine sample but not sending this off for forensic analysis.

When it's not verified whether a spiking has taken place, this can cause confusion. It does not support people who are spiked, nor does it help those who mistakenly believe they have been. Speculation about being spiked, circulated on social media, has led to an increased fear of crime, which can seem less remote and more personal because the individual is identifiable through the social media posts.

To address these issues, screening tests for drinks and urine were trialled in Plymouth in 2019. Coupled with a very simple working practice, bars and venues were supplied with drink testing kits. These screening kits test for a range of drug types and provide a result in seconds. In tandem, police officers were supplied with urine testing kits that could test for up to 16 different drug base types, giving results within 10 minutes. It should be noted that the effectiveness of the drink testing kits is due to be checked and independently validated before a decision is made on national recommendations.

After receiving a report of a suspicious drink, venue staff test the drink. If there is a positive result, they secure the drink and advise the police to facilitate an early investigation. After a report of a person being spiked, police attend with a urine testing kit and take a sample from the victim. The

speed and consistency of this approach has provided a much clearer picture of the extent of spiking, and has identified patterns and spiking incidents at a very early stage. It has also reassured people that their report is being taken seriously.

The Plymouth scheme has a number of benefits. For example, it:

- reassures the public that they are being believed and it confirms – or rules out – suspicions at a very early stage, without waiting weeks or months for a result
- assists in effective evidence gathering, which is essential to prosecute successfully
- saves a lot of time when the result is negative, not only for bar staff and door staff but also due to reduced demand on police officers
- ‘target hardens’ evening and night-time economy (ENTE) venues, potentially putting offenders off due to the increased risk of being identified and caught while they are still present in the ENTE
- reduces the number of social media posts claiming that people have been spiked when the test result is negative, thereby reducing the fear of crime
- allows for data gathering to identify factors, including – but not limited to – type of drug used, location of incidents, demographic of victim, method of delivery, date and time of offences, and type of linked offences
- can give a picture of what drugs are generally in circulation for those people voluntarily taking controlled drugs (such as ketamine among the student population)

From 21 August 2021, the trial has been rolled out across the whole of Devon and Cornwall Police's force area, with over 300 venues equipped with the drink testing kits, including all late-night venues. Over the first 12 months, these screening tests have promoted an immediate police interaction, leading to more effective investigations. Several investigations are ongoing with a prospect of prosecution.

Urine testing kits can be used for up to three days after an incident. Due to the timescales for gathering evidence, ENTE venue staff and door staff have regularly become a first reporting point where customers can seek help, which helps to ensure that as many reports as possible are recorded. Our partnership with venue staff is critical and the public have already expressed their confidence in the system, as have operational police officers and the licensing trade. This approach is giving us a fuller picture of the reality of spiking levels and fear of crime, as well as the opportunity to put more effective preventative measures in place.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Constable Gail Fox, City of London Police

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