

Chemsex-related crime

Published on 7 December 2024 Written by Inspector Allen Davis, Metropolitan Police Service

Chemsex, what it is and how it relates to complex and unique crime both in person and online

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What is chemsex?

The 'chemsex context' refers to environments and conditions in which a person engages in sex with another (or others), both in person and online, using drugs before and/or during sexual activity with the facilitative aim of sustaining, enhancing or disinhibiting sexual experience. Those involved are almost exclusively (a) gay and bisexual men plus trans women (GBT) and (b) men who have sex with men (MSM) (Stuart, 2019).

We talk about the chemsex scene being a 'safe, unsafe space'. On the surface level, it seemingly offers intimacy, the opportunity for connection and an enhanced sexual experience. Those involved don't necessarily see the potential crime-related risk, harm and vulnerability present. Developing a culturally sensitive response is essential to improving trust and confidence in the broader LGBT+ community.

Engagement in chemsex behaviour is facilitated and exacerbated by the use of specific illicit substances. These are predominantly crystal meth and GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate) or GBL (gamma-butyrolactone), often referred to as 'G'.

Crystal meth is a Class A stimulant, used in chemsex behaviour to enhance sexual activity through the release of dopamine and serotonin. Crystal meth overdose can result in psychosis, paranoia (disorientation) and mania (aggression), requiring sedating medication. The street price of crystal meth has dropped markedly in the past 10 years from £260 to between £50 and £80 per gram, increasing its accessibility.

'G' is a Class B sedative used in chemsex behaviour as a muscle relaxant. It is an industrial alloy cleaner that is imported, usually from the Netherlands, with a large mark-up. Physical dependence can occur within as little as seven days of consistent use. An individual can dose with 'G' every few hours, all day and all night. 'G' presents the biggest clinical risk and challenge to healthcare

professionals as acute toxicity can be fatal, as can the withdrawal phase.

Chemsex in a criminal context

The chemsex context creates a setting which can be used for an interaction of multi-layered, unique risk factors and harms. Offenders take advantage of the vulnerabilities present in the chemsex context to commit crimes. These include physical violence, sexual violence, acquisitive crime, murder, internet offending and other offences including blackmail, kidnapping, stalking and arson.

The scale of chemsex-related offences

It is important to understand the scale and prevalence of chemsex-related incidents. In London, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) has identified over 600 individuals in its convicted cohort. HMPPS conducted a research study of 174 offenders convicted of offences in the chemsex context. It identified a high-risk, high-harm group of perpetrators of fatal violence, with 6.5% of the cohort having been convicted of homicide (Shell, 2022).

In addition, the intelligence team in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has identified over 500 networked individuals. In MPS, chemsex-related offences increased from 19 in 2018 to 363 in 2023. There are approximately three suspected chemsex context deaths per month in London alone.

However, chemsex is not just an issue in London. Over 30 forces have sought support from the MPS specialist response to chemsex, with the National Crime Agency Major Crime Investigative Support unit often providing introductions.

Key defining features

Chems

Polydrug use that involves 'G' and crystal meth to both disinhibit and intensify sexual activity. Organised crime is heavily involved in the supply of drugs. The chemsex drugs market is distinct from other drugs markets, with shorter drug supply networks between users and dealers. Those selling the drugs are often involved in the scene.

Participants

Almost exclusively GBT and MSM across a wide range of ages and professions. This affects how we identify and manage crime-related risk, with victims and suspects often aged in their 30s and 40s – or indeed older. It is important to recognise that not all gay men use drugs, nor do those that do use them do so problematically.

Networks

This is a networked activity by nature and a large network of individuals has been identified.

Unique pathways into the chemsex context

The hidden nature of chemsex appeals to those who feel they cannot be open about their sexual preferences. Predators are attracted to it due to barriers to reporting crime and exploitation.

Subcultural dynamics

There is a need to maintain secrecy and there are multiple barriers to disclosing risk and vulnerability. Stigma and shame are key factors that prevent victims reporting offences to the police and therefore, crime data does not reflect the scale of the issue. Sexual health services are often the first point of call for those involved in chemsex.

Crime-related risk and harms associated with chemsex activity are not always clear to participants, or are alternatively minimised. In part, this is because the drugs and the scene itself can be seen by some as socially acceptable.

Technology

‘Hook-up apps’ are weaponised to facilitate offender behaviour and app users are often unaware of the risks present. When a profile is deleted, the data is gone. Sign-up policies are limited, profiles are not verifiable and they can be changed easily with just an email address needed for verification. A wide range of apps are used, which often tailor to particular sexual preferences. Apps are also used to sell the drugs involved.

Offending behaviour

Diversity of offending is present, with over 50 index offences identified, including a high prevalence of homicides and rapes. The duality of position for offenders and victims is unique to this setting. Sharing and viewing indecent images of children (IIOC) is common on some platforms in different chemsex environments.

Risk management

High-risk cases and high harm present in the chemsex context. In the general prison population, reoffending rates are suggested to be around 26%. Within the population of those who engage in the chemsex context, the HMPPS study by Shell (2022) found a 41% incidence of breach, recall and serious further offending while under the care of the Probation Service, indicating significantly low desistance rates.

Fatalities

The risk of death in the chemsex context is high. 'G' use can lead to unconsciousness and can place the user at risk of coma, overdose and death. It is important to stress that while unconscious, we know rape to be a significant risk factor, which often goes unreported. Due to the weaponisation of 'G', it is imperative that such cases are treated with caution.

Responding to chemsex-related incidents

A proportionate and considered response to these incidents is required to:

- encourage chemsex participants to seek appropriate medical support when an overdose occurs
- determine whether there is evidence of a crime and/or whether there are suspicious circumstances to a death

There can be tension between these two aims. This can only be alleviated by having a culturally aware and professionally curious service that understands the complexities present.

As with any emerging (and hidden) trend, it can be challenging to identify that there is an issue and where it lies. Crime data alone is not reliable, especially if the police are not chemsex aware and thus less likely to connect the dots. To ascertain the scale and nature of chemsex and the risk related to it, open-source searches on apps such as Grindr are required, alongside engagement with local sexual health services and specialist LGBT+ third sector organisations.

In 2018, Project Sagamore was established as a joint MPS and HMPPS response to crime-related risk, harm and vulnerability in the chemsex context. Through this, we have developed a robust, evidence-based understanding of both the chemsex context and the strategic threat. The aim is to enhance:

- case identification, case management and support (at every stage of the criminal justice system journey)
- professional awareness of chemsex crime and risk
- risk management for chemsex participants where a crime has been identified (both pre- and post-sentence)
- the proactive response to the chemsex drugs markets, organised crime and predatory offenders, and to enhance the intelligence picture (including network activity)
- the investigative response to deaths that are suspected of having a chemsex context to them

Addressing this complex, multi-faceted and unique issue requires a joined-up national response. Effective partnerships are key. This needs to happen both internally in policing and the broader criminal justice sector, and with key stakeholders in health, academia and specialist LGBT+ voluntary and community sector organisations.

References

Shell (2022) 'HMPPS study on chemsex and crime (Unpublished)

Stuart D. (2019). 'Chemsex: origins of the word, a history of the phenomenon and a respect to the culture'.?Drugs and Alcohol Today,?volume 19(1), pages 3-10

For advice and guidance around policing drugs see our [authorised professional practice](#).

- Peer reviewed by Chief Inspector Lee Broadstock, Greater Manchester Police

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