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Alcohol and sexual violence: key findings from the research

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Sexual violence is a serious public health and criminal justice problem. Many men and women suffer sexual violence, a number of whom experience severe physical injuries or subsequently develop mental health problems. Alcohol is an important dimension in sexual violence – many perpetrators are drinking when they attack their victims or have alcohol abuse problems. Furthermore, many victims have alcohol 'problems'. This report presents the key findings from published UK and international research on the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence. As sexual violence is often committed in the context of intimate partner relationships, this report relates to Findings No. 216 (Finney, 2003a).

Key points

- The British Crime Survey estimates that one in ten women have been sexually victimised since age 16 (Myhill and Allen, 2002).
- Many perpetrators have drunk alcohol immediately prior to the incident and/or have drinking problems (Grubin and Gunn, 1990).
- Perpetrator alcohol consumption is sometimes associated with increased sexual violation and physical aggression (Brecklin and Ullman, 2002).
- The tendency for drinking to be a shared activity, the pharmacological effects of alcohol and beliefs and expectations about the effects of alcohol are important in explaining why sexual violence is frequently committed by or against people who have been drinking (Testa and Parks, 1996; Abbey et al., 2001).
- Many victims develop drinking problems as a response to victimisation and problematic drinking is an early predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder development among victims (Darves-Bornoz et al., 1998).

Sexual violence affects many people's lives profoundly. Among over 48,000 police recorded sexual offences during the 12 months to April 2003, there were more than 11,000 rapes and almost 24,000 indecent assaults against females and over 800 rapes and 4,000 indecent assaults against males (Salisbury, 2003). However, official data considerably underestimate the true extent of sexual violence.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) estimates that less than one in five incidents of female sexual victimisation comes to police attention (Myhill and Allen, 2002). In addition, a study of female rapes coming to police attention in 1996 showed over one-quarter were not subsequently recorded (Harris and Grace, 1999).

The 1998 and 2000 sweeps of the BCS included self-completion questionnaires on sexual victimisation and provide the most recent and reliable figures on the nature and extent of adult sexual violence. (Note: published BCS findings relate to sexual victimisation among women only.)

According to the BCS 2000 (Myhill and Allen, 2002), about one in every 100 women (aged 16–59) had experienced some form of sexual victimisation in the previous year, just under half of whom had experienced rape. This suggests there were an estimated 61,000 female victims of rape in England and Wales in the year preceding the 2000 BCS. One in ten women reported some form of sexual victimisation since the age of 16.

Some findings from the research on sexual violence and rape:

- Sexual violence is undoubtedly perpetrated by and against both men and women (Emmers-Sommer and Allen, 1999 – US).
- However, adult victims are predominantly female (Testa and Parks, 1996 – US).
- Women are most often sexually victimised by a man they know, typically a current or ex-partner (Myhill and Allen, 2002; Harris and Grace, 1999).
- In combined 1998 and 2000 BCS sweeps, 67% of rapes against women were committed by current or ex-partners or ‘dates’. The assailant was a stranger in only 8% of rapes (Myhill and Allen, 2002).
- Attacks by partners and ex-partners are also the incidents most likely to result in victim injury (Myhill and Allen, 2002).

‘Sexual violence’ refers here to any form of physical sexual assault, completed and attempted rape. The focus is on sexual violence against people aged 16 years and over, female victimisation and male perpetration except where stated otherwise. Research from the US is often drawn on as relatively little alcohol-related sexual violence research has been undertaken in the UK. (Where examples of research are given, the country where the research is published is indicated unless the research is from the UK.)

Whilst findings from the US are largely transferable to the UK, beliefs and expectations are sensitive to cultural differences. Therefore, some generalisations should be made cautiously.

Key findings are presented here from national and international research on:

- prevalence of drinking by perpetrator and victim at the time of sexual violence
- the association of alcohol ‘problems’ with such violence

- the characteristics and consequences of alcohol-related sexual violence
- the role of alcohol in sexual violence.

Key research recommendations are also identified.

Prevalence of alcohol-related sexual violence

International research indicates a strong association between alcohol use – both ‘drinking in the event’ and long term drinking patterns – and sexual violence.

Drinking in the event

Drinking in the event refers to drinking at the time of the incident.

Research indicates a substantial proportion of sexual violence *perpetrators* are drinking at the time of the incident:

- In a UK study of 142 men imprisoned for rape, 58% reported drinking in the six hours prior to the rape. A further 12% had used a combination of alcohol and drugs (Grubin and Gunn, 1990).
- In a survey of 10,000 US State prisoners, 57% of those convicted of rape reported drinking at the time they committed the crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1983; reported in Martin, 1992 – US).
- A national US victimisation survey found offenders had used alcohol and/or drugs in 61% of sexual violence incidents, most (76%) of whom had used alcohol alone (Brecklin and Ullman, 2001 – US).

(Note: in self-report studies there may be a tendency for perpetrators to over-report drinking in the event to minimise personal responsibility.)

Findings on the proportion of sexual violence *victims* who are ‘drinking in the event’ vary widely:

- A review of six North American arrestee studies, mostly using police report data, reported six to 36% of victims consumed alcohol prior to the event (Roizen, 1997 – US).
- In a review of seven US college student sexual victimisation surveys, victims were drinking in between 35% and 81% of incidents (Testa and Parks, 1996 – US).

Problem drinking

There is also evidence that both perpetrators and victims are more likely to be problem drinkers.

Studies indicate many sexual violence *perpetrators* are 'heavy' or 'problem' drinkers:

- Among 142 imprisoned rapists in the UK, researchers deemed 37% were 'alcohol dependent' at the time of interview (Grubin and Gunn, 1990).
- Among a sample of Canadian imprisoned offenders (72 rapists, 34 child molesters and 24 nonsexual violent offenders), almost half (46%) the rapists were 'severe alcohol abusers' compared with 4% of the non-sexual violent offenders. Notably, differences in drug abuse were less pronounced (Abracen et al., 2000 – Canada).

Studies also indicate many sexual violence *victims* are more likely to be 'problem' drinkers:

- A US study of 238 female undergraduate students found those with histories of severe sexual victimisation (attempted or completed rape) reported greater weekly alcohol consumption rates than non-victimised women (Corbin et al., 2001 – US).
- Among 296 male and female Greek college students, men and women with self-report histories of unwanted sexual contact reported heavier alcohol consumption than those without such histories (Larimer et al., 1999 – Greece).
- In a Canadian study of 358 gay and bisexual men, alcohol abuse was almost three times more common among those who reported having experienced non-consensual sex by another man (in childhood, adulthood or both) compared with non-victimised men (Ratner et al., 2003 – Canada).

Characteristics and consequences of alcohol-related sexual violence

Victim-offender relationship

Although most sexual assaults occur between people who know each other, alcohol-related sexual assaults are more likely to occur between people who do not know each other well (Abbey et al., 2001 – US; Testa and Parks, 1996 – US). Koss et al. (1988 – US) examined alcohol involvement in rapes characterised by different victim-offender relationship types in a sample of US college women. Alcohol was consumed by both victim and offender most often in cases of casual dates, and least often in rapes involving spouses or family members.

Situational characteristics

Violence in general commonly occurs in and around licensed premises and alcohol is a factor in many such incidents (see Finney, 2003b). Licensed premises are also associated with greater frequency of sexual attacks (Combs-Lane and Smith, 2002 – US). Alcohol-related sexual violence is more likely to occur in bars and at parties than at either person's home (Abbey et al., 2001).

There is often both offender and victim drinking in incidents of sexual violence (Abbey et al., 2001 – US; Martin, 1992 – US). Using US police report data, Amir (1971 – reported in Roizen, 1997 – US) found two-thirds of alcohol-related rape cases involved both victim and offender drinking. This is likely to reflect the importance of drinking alcohol and of pubs and parties as settings for socialising and strongly relates to the finding that most sexual assaults involve people who know each other.

Rarely, however, is the victim the only person to have been drinking (Abbey et al., 2001 – US; Martin, 1992 – US). For example, Brecklin and Ullman (2002 – US) found that only two out of 859 female victims of sexual assault had been drinking when the offender had not.

Outcome severity

Research suggests that the severity of sexual violence varies with alcohol use. North American studies of official data show alcohol-related rapes involved greater physical force by the offender and greater victim injury compared with incidents in which neither party was drinking (Collins and Messerschmidt, 1993 – US; Hodge, 1993). US survey research suggests that offender drinking increases the likelihood and severity of victim injury (e.g., Brecklin and Ullman, 2002 – US).

Evidence on the effects of alcohol use on the level of sexual violation is mixed:

- Official data suggest sexual humiliation is likely to be greater when the offender has been drinking (Roizen, 1997 – US).
- Other survey-based studies suggest that rape completion is more likely if the offender has been drinking (e.g. Brecklin and Ullman, 2002 – US) while others suggest perpetrator drinking is not related to rape completion at all (e.g., Abbey et al., 2002 – US).
- Using national US victim survey data, Brecklin and Ullman (2001 – US) found rape completion was less likely if the offender had been drinking, relating in part to effective victim resistance.
- Using data from a national sample of college women, Ullman et al. (1999 – US) found offender drinking did not relate directly to severity of sexual violation. However, offender drinking did relate to the level of offender aggression which in turn related to severity of sexual violation.

Contrasting findings may relate to varying methods and definitions employed in different studies.

Increased victim drinking levels are associated with decreased offender aggression, victim resistance and physical injury (e.g., Abbey et al., 2002 – US; Brecklin and Ullman, 2002 – US). They are, however, associated with increased risk of completed, compared with attempted, rapes (Abbey et al., 2002 – US).

The role of alcohol

Any behaviour committed in the context of alcohol consumption, violent or otherwise, results from interaction between factors relating to the individual, to the immediate environment and to the alcohol consumed.

Research indicates that alcohol is best seen as contributing to violent behaviour, rather than causing it (McCord, 1993 – US). Further, the role of alcohol is likely to be multifaceted. Graham et al. (1998 – Canada) describe the alcohol-related factors which may relate directly or indirectly to violence as falling into four groups:

- ‘cultural’ factors, relating to how alcohol and its relation to violence are understood in society
- ‘person’ factors, relating to individuals’ responses to, expectations and beliefs about alcohol
- ‘pharmacological’ factors relating to the psycho-pharmacological properties of alcohol
- ‘context’ factors, relating to the physical and social circumstances in which alcohol is consumed.

A number of theories have been proposed to explain how alcohol contributes to sexual violence, many of which have found support in research. Some of these are discussed below.

Disinhibition

Perpetrator intoxication may disinhibit sexual and physical aggression, and decrease the ability to understand a victim’s non-consensual signals (Collins and Messerschmidt, 1993 – US). Intoxicated victims may be less able to identify assault before it becomes severe or less able to defend themselves effectively, or they may be more likely to enter risky situations (Testa and Parks, 1996 – US). This may relate to the finding that alcohol is more often present in spontaneous sexual acts compared with those which are ‘planned’ (Collins and Messerschmidt, 1993 – US).

Beliefs and expectations

Beliefs and expectations about alcohol appear to be especially important in alcohol-related sexual violence.

There are a number of ways beliefs about drinking can affect behaviour:

- Alcohol is widely believed to increase sexual desire and capacity, and also increase aggressive behaviour, especially in men. This may predispose some men to act sexually and aggressively after drinking alcohol (Abbey et al., 2002).
- Many sexual violence perpetrators blame alcohol for their transgressions and heavy drinkers are especially likely to invoke alcohol as a post-offence excuse (Abbey et al., 2001).
- A US study of college ‘date rapists’ (Kanin, 1984; in Abbey et al., 2001) found most (62%) reported they had committed rape because they had been drinking.
- Additionally, women who drink alcohol are commonly viewed as being more sexually available and promiscuous than women who do not (Abbey et al., 2001 – US). Wild et al. (1998) found perpetrators are blamed less by third parties when the victim is drunk, regardless of perpetrator drinking.
- Also, women who drink in certain contexts may present ‘easier’ targets to sexually aggressive men who perceive them to be more sexually available (Testa and Parks, 1996 – US).

Context

The relationship between alcohol and sexual violence is likely, in some cases, to reflect the contexts in which people often meet, socialise and consume alcohol. Increased risk of sexual violence at bars and parties may relate to greater exposure to potential assailants (Combs-Lane and Smith, 2002 – US) or because people commonly expect other people within drinking settings to be receptive to sexual advances (Abbey et al., 2001 – US).

Strategy

Alcohol may be used as a strategy for perpetrating rape (Brecklin and Ullman, 2001 – US), perhaps because people believe alcohol has incapacitating, courage-building or aphrodisiac qualities (Abbey et al., 2001 – US). Many ‘date rapists’ report deliberately getting a woman drunk in order to have sexual intercourse with her (Abbey et al., 2001 – US). Testa and Parks (1996 – US) suggest acquaintances or strangers may find it easier to act aggressively when the victim is intoxicated. Conversely, perpetrators of sexual violence against intimate partners may be better able to coerce, rather than force their victims, by employing powers of authority, fear or persuasion as alternative strategies.

Alcohol and the role of victimisation

The development of alcohol problems among victims may be a result of the experience of sexual violence rather than contributing to sexual victimisation. Alcohol use is a common response in times of psychological stress and US research supports suggestions that sexually assaulted women consume alcohol partly to self-medicate (Miranda et al., 2002 – US). Alcohol abuse is an early predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder in sexual violence victims (Darves-Bornoz et al., 1998 – Europe). Acierno et al. (1999 – US) also suggest that alcohol abuse is associated with an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder following rape. The precise process in the development of alcohol problems is, however, likely to be complex. Abbey et al. (2001 – US) suggest that drinking during sexual encounters can help past victims cope with negative feelings about sex but doing so puts them at greater risk of future violation.

Conclusions

Alcohol use in the event is common in incidents of sexual violence and perpetrator and victim drinking is common. This may be a function of the situation in which sexual violence occurs, or the influence of alcohol-related pharmacological and expectancy effects on sexual behaviour. Alcohol use is more likely in incidents of sexual violence between people who do not know each other well than intimates and the presence of alcohol has implications for the severity of sexual violence outcomes. Alcohol problems are common among male perpetrators of sexual violence. Alcohol problems are also common among sexual violence victims, which in many cases develop following victimisation. Alcohol relates to sexual violence via a number of direct and indirect pathways.

Research gaps and recommendations

UK research on alcohol-related sexual violence is sparse. Research is needed to identify what types of sexual crimes are committed by which type of people, under what circumstances, and the roles alcohol plays in the commission of these crimes.

The following are key knowledge gaps.

- The prevalence of alcohol involvement in a variety of sexual violence types.
- The type of drinking (intoxication in the event; chronic drinking) implicated in sexual violence.

- The influence of person-related factors (such as aggressive disposition; beliefs and expectancies) on alcohol-related sexual violence.
- The relative role of alcohol in sexual violence characterised by different combinations of victim-offender relationships and settings (domestic; social settings).
- The role of alcohol in potentially high risk and marginalised groups, for example, young people, specific ethnic or cultural groups, students, homeless people, dependent drinkers and victims of domestic violence.
- The role of alcohol in non-reporting by sexual violence victims.

Finally, theories of the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence need to be developed and tested.

However, sexual violence is undoubtedly a difficult and sensitive subject to research, fraught with ethical and practical dilemmas. Studies need to look at the multitude of factors potentially related to alcohol in sexual violence and their interrelations (Abbey et al., 2001 – US). Research findings can vary quite substantially depending on who is asked about sexual violence and alcohol use (offender, victim or officials). Research, therefore, needs to use multiple approaches to strengthen knowledge and validate findings.

Reporting rates for sexual offences are low and alcohol use compounds this outcome (Fisher et al., 2003 – US). This suggests official data should not be relied upon alone. Experiences of sexual violence are not always interpreted as transgressions by victims and offenders (Koss et al., 1988 – US). It is therefore necessary to carefully construct definitions of sexual violence. Brecklin and Ullman (2002 – US) suggest conducting surveys presented, for example, as surveys on personal safety with a focus on interpersonal violence rather than as 'crime' surveys. Additionally, however, victims who have been drinking may be less likely to realise or recall they have been sexually assaulted (Abbey et al., 2001 – US). This needs to be acknowledged when interpreting research findings.

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