

More than 20 percent of sexual assaults drug-facilitated

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More than 20% of sexual assaults in a sample of 882 victims were drug-facilitated sexual assaults, found a new study published in *CMAJ*.

Victims of drug-facilitated sexual assault were more likely than others to present to a large urban centre and to be employed, and to have consumed over-the-counter medications, street drugs, and alcohol before the assault.

Few studies have systematically measured the occurrence of drug-facilitated sexual assault and little is known about the victim profile, although this type of assault appears to have increased over the past 10 years.

The study, a collaboration between researchers from Women's College Research Institute in Toronto and the Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres, looked at data from 7 of these hospital-based centres. These centres served both rural and urban populations 24 hours, 7 days a week.

According to the self-reported data, 30% of victims had taken prescription drugs or over-the-counter medications (26%) and street drugs (27%) in the previous 72 hours before the assault. Almost 90% had consumed alcohol immediately before. "These types of substances have pharmacologic properties that can alter states of consciousness and lower inhibitions, especially when used simultaneously with alcohol and in their own right may be used to spike drinks," write Dr. Janice Du Mont and coauthors. "As such, victims could have unwittingly ingested a

"date rape drug,"" although the combination of alcohol and drugs could also result in incapacitation.

The largest age group represented was 20-24 years (36%) followed by 16-19 years (23%).

The authors conclude that education and public awareness campaigns regarding the effects of alcohol, especially combined with drugs, is needed to help combat the problem.

In a related commentary (www.cmaj.ca/press/pg493.pdf), Dr. Jan Welch and Dr. Bernadette Butler from King's College Hospital in London, UK write "for clinicians caring for victims of sexual assault, a non-judgemental approach is essential. It is important to recognize the possibility of drug-facilitated sexual assault and provide the necessary therapeutic care while addressing forensic issues when possible, including evidence collection and documentation."

They also urge education for men and women to help them understand potential risks as victims and possible assailants as well as the different biological responses to alcohol and drugs.

More information: <http://www.cmaj.ca/press/pg513.pdf>

Source: Canadian Medical Association Journal

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