



# The hidden mixer

Mixing alcohol and cocaine is probably one of the most common drug combinations in modern culture. But is the mix a recipe for violence? **Max Daly** investigates

There is little doubt that excessive alcohol plays a major part in violent behaviour within Britain's night-time drinking scene. You only have to take a stroll down your local high street at chucking out time on Friday night to get a taster of some alcohol-fuelled aggression.

Whether you live in the inner city, affluent suburbia or a country village, a drink-cum-punch-up is an age-old custom on these shores. In Roman Britain, our savage, melee-ridden 'ale house' culture was the talk of the Empire. Alcohol's ability to fuel violent behaviour by altering people's mood is borne out by the latest statistics: a significant proportion of violent offences – 37 per cent of those against the person and 13 per cent of sexual assaults – are associated with alcohol consumption.

Our drinking culture appears to court aggressive behaviour: nearly half of 15 to 29 year old assault victims presenting at A&E on weekend nights had been assaulted inside a pub or nightclub. Almost three-quarters of visits to hospital A&E departments between midnight and 5am are alcohol-related.

In November last year a damning Home Affairs Select Committee report revealed that alcohol-related violence, particularly during weekend evenings, is placing a "heavy burden" on police resources. Under pressure to find ways of stemming continuing high levels of drink-induced violence, police chiefs said their task had been made harder by the government's decision in 2005 to allow extended drinking hours as well as the tit-for-tat cheap drinks promotions offered by pubs, bars and clubs competing for high street trade.

But what of the hidden mixer in this equation? As powder cocaine's reach has extended in less than a generation from a moneyed clique of users to become a socially acceptable part of a night out for a much wider section of the population, so speculation has mounted over the effects of its combination with alcohol.

Is the alcohol-cocaine combination breeding a mob of irritable thugs?

The growth of powder cocaine's popularity is well documented and coincides with a fall in price and an

increase in availability – according to the 2008 British Crime Survey, more than three times as many 16 to 24-year-olds – 634,000 – said they had taken cocaine in the previous 12 months, than they did in 1998. In 1996 there were four deaths from combined cocaine and alcohol poisoning. By 2006 this had risen to 50.

In the 1990s the less alcohol-friendly drug ecstasy was sweeping the nation's clubs and raves – a phenomenon that scared the brewing industry into a complete overhaul of the 'drinking experience'. Now cocaine is snorted everywhere from the Dog and Duck to the swankiest city centre cocktails bar.

The marriage of cocaine and alcohol has been further cemented because the cheap, 30 per cent pure powder bought by the majority of cocaine users today makes a far more palatable partner to eight pints of Stella than the higher purity cocaine which dominated the market in 1990s.

In October last year, after a spate of stabbings in Bolton, Greater Manchester Police's Chief Constable Peter Fahy, told

local reporters: "I am concerned that we seem to be producing a lot of angry young men at the moment. We need to understand why that is and why some of these young men are quite prepared to use extremes of violence over nothing. I think alcohol plays a part, but we are also concerned about the mixture of alcohol and cocaine."

In a bid to reveal the hand being played by cocaine in violent incidents during what is known as the 'night-time economy', Greater Manchester Police has decided to utilise its legal right to drug test offenders they suspect have committed crimes because of drugs.

Under the Home Office's Drug Interventions Programme (DIP), police are only able to routinely drug test offenders who commit so-called 'trigger offences' – crimes linked to heroin and crack cocaine addiction such as shoplifting or burglary in order to channel them towards treatment. But police also have the power, with the permission of an Inspector, to drug test an offender for any offence, if they believe it was carried out because of drugs.

From unpublished figures gathered by Greater Manchester, as well as the Merseyside Police Force, and seen by *Druglink*, police station drug tests show between a quarter and a third of people arrested for violence snorted powder cocaine before fighting.

In Greater Manchester, over the seven months up to March 2008, around 1,000 people arrested for violent assaults were tested for Class A substances using the Inspector's Authority rule. Most were arrested during the evening near drinking venues. As with Merseyside, custody sergeants and inspectors were actively encouraged to carry out tests if they thought violent or aggressive behaviour may have been triggered by cocaine use.

Half tested positive for illegal drugs. Of those, cocaine was by far the most common drug and was found in 86 per cent of arrestees, compared to 38 per cent for heroin. Tests cannot distinguish between crack and powder cocaine, but analysts generally presume that people who test positive for cocaine and opiates are using crack, while those who test positive for cocaine-only have taken powder. While this presumption is not fool proof, high levels of crack and heroin use in the UK make it a fairly reliable indicator. Analysis showed cocaine-only offenders accounted for 62.5 per cent of those who tested positive for drugs.

"Although we need more detailed research, the raw data points to a definite and substantial link between

the use of cocaine and violent offending," Chief Inspector David Boon, strategic lead for DIP at Greater Manchester Police told *Druglink*. "It seems a significant proportion of people are consuming beer, cocaine and then committing acts of violence."

## POLICE STATION DRUG TESTS SHOW BETWEEN A QUARTER AND A THIRD OF PEOPLE ARRESTED FOR VIOLENCE SNORTED POWDER COCAINE BEFORE FIGHTING

CI Boon says the decision to start testing violent drinkers for cocaine was made as part of an attempt to get under the skin of drink-related street violence in Manchester. "We suspected the mixing of cocaine and alcohol may have something to do with it because of anecdotal evidence from officers and discussions with drugs workers." He said strategic assessments carried out by police pointed to a link between violence and drug use, particularly cocaine.

A programme of non-trigger offence testing carried out in the Liverpool area between April and August 2008 came up with similar findings. At a custody suite in the city centre, of those tested – mainly men aged under 30 arrested for violent and public order offences – half came up positive for drugs. Of these, 60 per cent were positive for cocaine-only. At a custody suite in the Wirral, 37 per cent were positive, nearly three quarters for cocaine-only. The strategy, carried out in conjunction with the development of stimulant-specific treatment programmes in the area, has now been rolled out across the force.

Superintendent Ngaire Waine, the strategic lead for DIP at Merseyside Police, says although the statistics show cocaine is linked with alcohol and violence, in her opinion it is the legal drug that is the main driver of aggression. "You couldn't say cocaine is a key factor in violent behaviour, but it is certainly a factor, so we will continue to push for the use of Inspector's Authority tests to keep an eye on it.

"Problematic alcohol consumption is more of an issue, and so is someone's personality. But if someone has a violence problem, taking cocaine is not going to help that."

The local data reflects an emerging national picture. In a written answer to

Parliament in April last year, Home Office minister Vernon Coaker revealed a fifth of offenders tested for Class A drugs after committing public order offences had been using powder cocaine.

In January, on Greater Manchester's patch, teenager Leon Ramsden was jailed for life after stabbing a man to death at a Bolton bar following a three day alcohol and cocaine binge and 36 hours without sleep. Along with other forces, Greater Manchester is appealing to the Home Office to push for new laws adding violent crimes to the list of 'trigger' offences. "Mixing alcohol and cocaine can lead to confusion, accidents, aggression and situations that can soon get out of control," says Tony Horrocks, manager of Manchester Stimulant Service's 'Cocaine Nights' project, where people who test positive for cocaine are sent to learn about the dangers of the drug. He sees around 15 arrestees a week over two sessions. Most are male, aged 18-25, who have committed violent offences at the weekend.

He says most people associate 'drugs offences' with crimes, such as burglary or shoplifting, committed in order to get the money to buy drugs. His clients have committed offences because of the effect of drugs. "Alcohol has a disinhibiting effect and cocaine provides adrenaline," says Horrocks. "So when they are faced with aggressive situations, it's usually a case of fight or flight – and the ones who get arrested for violence after mixing cocaine and alcohol usually end up being the fighting types."

Most regular pub, bar and club goers, especially when they take a trip to the toilets, will have first hand evidence of the popularity of cocaine with drinkers. The presence of toilet bouncers, powder residue on cisterns and permanently locked, crammed cubicles make cocaine a noticeable part of life in the Ladies and Gents of drinking venues.

From a behavioural perspective, the fact that cocaine keeps many users awake undoubtedly will enable them to drink longer and more heavily, which in turn may increase the amount of cocaine consumed. There are numerous studies that cement the link between heavy drinking and cocaine use.

A 2006 analysis of 102 alcohol and cocaine users carried out by the UK National Addiction Centre revealed strong links between powder cocaine and long, heavy drinking sessions. Nearly half of regular powder cocaine users said their last heavy drinking episode had lasted more than 12 hours and admitted going on long, sleepless binges on cocaine. More than a third of people in both groups reported their

cocaine-like high, but is more liver toxic and exerts more strain on the heart than either alcohol or cocaine in isolation. A 2003 study, *The pharmacology of cocaethylene in humans following cocaine and ethanol administration*, conducted by scientists at the University of California's Drug Dependence Research Center, found: "The combined use of alcohol and cocaine can produce a sense of increased and prolonged 'euphoria' compared with the use of either substance on its own."

Cocaethylene is well-documented. But the capacity of cocaine, and its mixture with alcohol, to cause violent behaviour, is less researched. Despite numerous claims by a variety of 'experts', research has so far failed to prove a direct link between the chemical properties of cocaine and violence.

The Leiden University study said most research involved "too little human data and a lack of control groups for studies". It concluded, however, that the available research "suggests a major role for alcohol alone", but that the alcohol-cocaine combination "can potentiate the tendency towards violent thoughts and threats, which may lead to an increase of violent behaviours".

Studies have shown, however, that the range of emotions that medium to high doses of cocaine can lead to in individuals – such as over-confidence, depression, anxiety, paranoia and irritability – can lead to the increased likelihood of violent encounters. As with alcohol, users of cocaine may also be extra prone to violent situations because of the context in which the drug is taken, such as late night drinking clubs, dealing houses or football matches.

*Disproportionate lethality in psychiatric patients with concurrent alcohol and cocaine abuse*, published in the US in 1996, found that people using the alcohol-cocaine combination were three times as likely as those who took alcohol only, and five times as likely as those who took cocaine only, to have homicidal ideas or plans. A second US study of 41 depressed alcoholics published two years later found cocaine use made them twice as likely to attempt suicide.

Substance abuse psychiatrist at the University of Michigan, Dr Stephen Chermack, told *Druglink*: "I think there is some emerging evidence that use of cocaine in addition to alcohol may further increase violence risk. It seems to me that there is a link, although we cannot be certain why there is a link." A 2002 study carried out by Dr Chermack of 250 people in drug treatment concluded: "General alcohol and cocaine use patterns, as well as



**Old school mix: In the 19th century – 25 years before Coca-Cola – a fluid extract of the coca leaf was mixed with red wine to create Vin Mariani, a 'tonic' popular all over Europe and America**

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alcohol and cocaine use on the day of the violent incident, were associated with violence severity."

The most recent look at the subject, *Predicting violence among cocaine, cannabis, and alcohol treatment clients*, was carried out by researchers at the Centre for Addictions Research in Canada and published last year. The study looked at 1,000 people in addiction treatment for problems including cocaine, cannabis, alcohol, gambling and smoking. It concluded: "Frequency of cocaine and alcohol use, disrespect for the law, aggressive personality, age and sex were significantly related to violence. The findings point to multi-causal explanations, however, both alcohol and cocaine use appear to play a significant role in explaining violence."

Drug worker Tim Bottomley, who has worked with stimulant users in north west England for 15 years, says he thinks violence is, in the main, caused by "the situation" over any drug taken. But he added: "Common sense would say that the effects of cocaine such as paranoia, greater risk taking decisions and less thought regarding the consequences of your actions, together with the disinhibition related to alcohol – and the capacity to drink vast quantities when on cocaine – might lead to higher levels of violence."

In Bottomley's experience, people with serious cocaine addictions are unlikely to be hanging around pubs all the time. "By the time most users arrive at the point when they approach

services, they are more likely to be using alone at home than out with others drinking – so it's not a sample from which we can learn a great deal." He adds that most people with heavy cocaine problems might avoid violence because it could affect their ability to take more of the drug.

Bottomley says he has seen evidence of a link between the combined use of cocaine and alcohol to risky, predatory, or violent sexual behaviour. "The increased libido that cocaine gives some people, added to the misinterpretation of non-verbal cues, disrespect for relationship boundaries and impaired decision-making can lead to a 'here and now' sex situations, whether consensual or not."

Although cocaine is not singled out in available domestic violence statistics, violence does appear to be more frequent and more severe when the abuser misuses drugs or alcohol. Findings from a review of the British Crime Survey revealed that 44 per cent of domestic violence offenders were under the influence of alcohol and 12 per cent affected by drugs when they committed acts of physical violence. Substance misuse is one of the factors identified as increasing the risk of deaths caused by domestic violence.

Tony D'Agostino, the former head of cocaine charity Coca who now trains drug workers in how to deal with stimulant use, said: "I managed a service with people with a range of drug problems and I can honestly say that nearly all the powder cocaine clients were drinking alcohol. Most of my powder cocaine clients were offered their first line in a pub or party under the influence of alcohol. Anger was a part of a lot of people's lives and coke could make it worse. But the only time I or any members of my team were attacked or abused over a seven year period was when the client was under the influence of alcohol. Even with some of the heavy end coke snorters, when you got beneath the problem, alcohol was really the issue. Some cocaine users came off cocaine, but couldn't even begin to cut down the alcohol intake."

There are common sense links between the mixing of cocaine and alcohol, and the increased chances of violence. It is likely, however that cocaine plays second fiddle to alcohol as the more dominant components of an aggressive encounter. But, as Superintendent Waine points out, the potential of both to cause violence is muscled effortlessly into the background by the key mover and shaker in this equation: personality.