

The “spice” drug crisis in Britain

Anna Mayer
29 August 2018

The drug “spice” is increasingly popular among the most vulnerable groups in Britain—including the young, homeless and imprisoned.

The drug has horrific effects, with users, often homeless, invariably found in a semi-comatose state, slumped in the centre of cities such as Manchester and Sheffield.

Although the drug was designed to be a harmless alternative to cannabis, it is anything but. Known by a multitude of other names such as K2 and fake pot, spice is a mixture of herbs and synthetic cannabinoids, intended to mimic the effects of cannabis.

Effects range from anxiety to paranoia to hallucinations; with users exhibiting violent behaviour and feeling brain-dead, hence the label “zombie drug.” Spice can also raise blood pressure, sometimes leading to heart attacks and even death.

One of the factors contributing to the dangers of spice is the fact that its production does not involve a controlled environment and it is not professionally tested, which means that any potentially harmful effects of the drug are unknown until it is taken. Due to its ever-changing composition, users are often unaware of the chemicals it contains.

Spice is among a multitude of cheap, synthetic drugs that are widely accessible and popular with vulnerable layers. These include the stimulant “monkey dust,” available for as little as £2, that causes severe hallucinations, paranoia and a loss of sense of pain. Emergency services spoke of a monkey dust “epidemic” in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, with users exhibiting dangerous behaviour such as jumping off buildings and running into traffic.

Staffordshire Police report they have taken 950 monkey dust related calls in the last three months alone. Its use has led to several deaths, with one 54-year-old man, Anthony Pepper, found dead by his girlfriend with packets of the drug in his hand. A 35-year-old man, John Rigby, died after he took the drug and climbed over a safety barrier onto the A50 road and was hit by a truck as he tried to weave through oncoming evening traffic.

Although the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 made the production and supply of psychoactive drugs such as spice illegal, manufacturers have gotten around this by changing

ingredients.

A paper, “Adding spice to the porridge,” by researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University noted that 60-90 percent of prisoners were regular spice smokers. Addiction to spice in prison often leads to addicts amassing huge debts to dealers and becomes a source of violence. In an indication of the social crisis, some prisoners are deliberately getting themselves arrested just to smuggle spice back into prison to repay debts or make money.

Interviewed by *Vice* magazine, Andy, who had been released from prison recently, said, “You make sure you are plugged when you go and commit a crime, in case you go straight back in. So you go with spice up your arse for a burglary. You deliberately get yourself arrested or break your license so you can go back in jail and sell spice.”

Users said the drug makes them feel happy and that they experience a “blackout” when taking it. Speaking to *Daily Star* about his spice use Dan Nicholson, a 31-year old homeless man, said, “I did them [legal highs] once when they were legal in shops [before 2016]. I had a really bad experience. I blacked out for six hours. I woke up not knowing who I was, where I was or anything.” He had lost his job, which led to his eviction from his flat.

Another spice user, Jed, who has been homeless for 20 years, said, “Yes I take spice, but who wouldn’t if they were living my life? It makes me feel good, it puts me to sleep, it blocks stuff out. It passes the time, and I have a lot of that.”

Dr. Robert Ralphs, a lecturer and researcher at Manchester Metropolitan University, says that prisoners use the drug to “kill time” and that it provides a “warm blanket” that apparently gives a sense of comfort and security to those experiencing the most insecure conditions.

The prevalence of the drug and the correlation of homelessness with its use highlights that the roots of the spice pandemic are social, not individual—homeless and prison-bound people use the drug to ameliorate the material conditions in which they find themselves.

A 2015 report carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research estimates that around 35,000 young people are homeless at any one time across the UK. Moreover, 26 percent of young people surveyed by the

study said that they had slept rough, constituting the “hidden homeless.”

Last month, a House of Commons briefing on youth unemployment said that 524,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed. Although official statistics show unemployment is decreasing, the number of “hidden” unemployed—those not in education, employment or training (NEETs)—is increasing. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated: “There were 808,000 young people (aged 16 to 24 years) in the UK who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in January to March 2018. The number increased by 14,000 from October to December 2017.”

Not only is unemployment widespread, so is insecure work on low pay. According to the ONS, the number of zero-hour contracts rose by 100,000 to 1.8 million in the UK in 2017, with prevalence among youth, students and women. Zero-hour contracts are those in which the employer is not obliged to provide a minimum number of hours for a worker.

With uncertainty over whether they will be able to provide for themselves, people on zero-hour contracts are 50 percent more likely to have mental health problems.

Last week the *Guardian* reported that, according to NHS figures, 400,000 under-18s were in contact with mental health services. Although these numbers are rising, constant cuts to the NHS mean that less help is available to match the demand. There has been a 30 percent fall in the number of hospital beds for the mentally ill since 2009. Young people must wait for exorbitant amounts of time to access services and, at times, the hardships and pressures upon youth are so great that some decide to end their own lives.

The global capitalist crisis finds youth everywhere struggling to get by, with the resort to drugs, including spice, a desperate attempt at escaping their situation.

The *New York Times* reported that in Brooklyn, 33 people were suspected of overdosing on spice in just one day in July. Witnessing three spice users collapse on his way to work, Brian described the scene to the NYT as something “out of a zombie movie, a horrible scene.”

In the richest country in the world, a health catastrophe is steadily unfolding. In 2016, drug overdoses accounted for 64,070 deaths and more Americans have died from drug use in this century than in all of America’s wars. This disaster likewise has its roots in unemployment and poverty, as the country’s working class has been bled dry by the profit hungry capitalist elites.

In Australia, the drug “ice”—otherwise known as crystal meth—gained popularity, as shown by a study by the *Medical Journal of Australia*, which found that the number of regular ice users aged 15-34 doubled over a five-year period from 2009 to 2014. “These are young people whose

lives are very precarious. We can’t just give them drug treatment ... and then send them on their way,” said Dr. Nathan, a researcher from the University of New South Wales in Australia.

In South Africa, which has the second highest youth unemployment in the world, 80 percent of male youth deaths are alcohol or drug related, according to the SACENDU project. This correlates with the hardships and a lack of future that youth face.

In the bourgeois media, the growth of the use of spice and similar drugs is never linked to the fundamental social problems that underlie any addiction because doing so would mean criticising the system they defend. In typical disdainful fashion, David Nutt of the *Guardian* exclaimed, “Spice ruins lives and costs taxpayers a fortune.” It is undoubtedly the case that the National Health Service and emergency services, already overwhelmed by a chronic lack of funding, are struggling to cope with an influx of spice users.

But such commentary only serves to channel the outrage at the pillaging of the NHS and other services away from its source in the capitalist system, based on the accumulation of vast profits for the owners of the means of production, whilst condemning the producers of the wealth of society—the working class and its future generations—to a life of poverty, disease and ignorance.

For these young people, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality offers the only perspective of ending the exploitation, poverty and misery that is the ultimate source of drug addiction. We fight to build a new revolutionary movement with the aim of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism, a system based on the common ownership and enjoyment of society’s resources.



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