

It's only a game? Domestic abuse, sporting events and alcohol



information to service providers, policy makers and interested members of the public.

Domestic abuse

There are many definitions of domestic abuse; the Home Office defines it as:

“...any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.”

Introduction

In England and Wales, nearly 20,000 women a week experience at least one incident of domestic abuse.¹ Research shows that reports of domestic abuse can increase during periods when major sporting events are held, perhaps by as much as 40 per cent.² There is no evidence of a direct causal relationship between domestic abuse and alcohol consumption – perpetrators use violence both with and without alcohol.³ However, drinking is known to increase the frequency and seriousness of incidents.⁴

Alcohol consumption is expected to soar in Wales and the rest of the UK during this summer’s football World Cup. The brewer Carlsberg, which is the official sponsor of the England football team, expects an extra 21 million pints to be drunk during the four week tournament.⁵

This paper examines how alcohol consumption and reports of domestic abuse increase during sporting occasions. It makes recommendations for awareness-raising and for continued action to address this issue. It is intended to provide

Domestic abuse is rarely a one-off event, but rather an ongoing pattern of behaviour adopted by one partner, usually male, in an attempt to exert power and control over another partner, usually female. Research shows that it affects one in four women during their lifetime, regardless of their age, social class, race, disability or lifestyle.⁶



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In its recent consultation document on domestic abuse,⁷ the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) acknowledged the links between domestic abuse and substance misuse and the need for services to work together.

It would be wrong to state that alcohol misuse *causes* domestic abuse – the perpetrator is responsible for his (or her) own actions and violent incidents may occur irrespective of the presence of alcohol. Likewise, there is no suggestion that sporting events necessarily cause people to become more violent. However these factors may increase opportunities for perpetrators to be violent or be used as excuses for violence.⁸

Sporting events

The reporting of domestic abuse increases around the time of major sporting events. In 2009, South Wales Police recorded 66 incidents of domestic abuse between 5pm on Saturday 7 February to 3am on Sunday 8 February; the following weekend, when Wales played England at rugby in Cardiff, the offences rose by 79 per cent to 118 incidents.⁹

Increased levels of consumption around the time of sporting events are thought to exacerbate problems. For example, South Wales Police's Swansea Borough Command Unit reported that domestic abuse incidents recorded in June 2006 during the football World Cup were 37 per cent higher than the numbers recorded the same month in 2005.¹⁰ The report indicated that levels of alcohol consumption, together with the emotionally-charged nature of matches, increased the prevalence of incidents.¹¹

Similarly, a study in Cardiff¹² conducted between May 1995 and April 2002 of people requiring emergency medical treatment for assault at the time of international football and rugby matches found that assault-related injury attendances (though not necessarily domestic abuse) were significantly higher on those weekends when matches were played compared to weekends where there were no matches. The researchers concluded that the increased attendances were a result, in part, of the 'celebratory' consumption of alcohol.

Initiatives

The police and other services involved in preventing and responding to incidents of domestic abuse have made good progress in delivering initiatives that seek to raise awareness of the links between sporting events, alcohol consumption and domestic abuse. For example, a Domestic Violence Enforcement Campaign was undertaken by the UK police during the 2006 football World Cup, whilst the Welsh Rugby Union and Wales police forces have run a 'white ribbon' campaign during previous Six Nations tournaments highlighting domestic abuse issues.

The price of alcohol

Evidence from the Competition Commission suggests that £36 million of alcohol was sold below trade price by the four largest grocery retailers during the 2006 football World Cup;¹³ it is likely that a similar amount will be sold during the forthcoming tournament. Violence-related harm has been found to be causally linked to the price of alcohol; at least one study has concluded that

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increasing alcohol prices would result in substantially fewer violent injuries.¹⁴ There is strong and consistent evidence to suggest that price increases have a significant effect in reducing demand for alcohol.¹⁵ Alcohol Concern is therefore calling for a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol, in line with the recommendations of the Chief Medical Officer for Wales. Setting a minimum price would result in a significant reduction in alcohol-related harms, whilst ensuring that alcohol remains affordable for moderate drinkers.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Recent statistics clearly show that reporting of domestic abuse escalates around periods when certain major sporting events take place, and problems can often intensify as a result of increased alcohol consumption. However, a note of caution is needed: the statistics rely on police data which may not capture the presence of alcohol, and health data which may not include whether the violence is domestic in nature. Increased reporting may be, at least in part, a result of successful awareness-raising campaigns encouraging women to report incidents at these times or because sporting events may provide better opportunities to report incidents, for example whilst their partner is attending the event or viewing the event elsewhere, such as at the pub. More rigorous research is needed to further investigate the correlation between alcohol, domestic abuse and sporting events.

- Campaigns and enforcement initiatives during periods when major sporting events take place that raise awareness of domestic abuse issues should be encouraged, and these should be co-ordinated by WAG. Future initiatives could also include other times where studies suggest that instances of domestic abuse may escalate, such as during the Christmas period¹⁶ and hot summers.¹⁷
- Aggressive marketing and discounting of alcohol by the drinks industry during the forthcoming World Cup should be avoided. Drinks producers and retailers need to think carefully about the potential implications of irresponsible promotions that encourage excessive consumption. Any escalation in marketing and discount promotional activities should be matched by the increased promotion of sensible drinking messages, available to all consumers at the point of sale. A minimum price per unit of alcohol will ensure that retailers are unable to sell alcohol below a certain cost, thereby eliminating deep discounting and irresponsible promotions.

Useful resources:

Wales domestic abuse helpline:
0808 8010 800

Wales drug and alcohol helpline:
0800 6335 588

Information on sensible drinking:
www.drinkwisewales.org.uk

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