

John Harris

Spice: a lethal epidemic fuelled by austerity

The prevalence of this debilitating drug shows that society has reached a precipitous moment of decay

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At first I thought he might be dead. The man was no older than 40, and dressed in a huge beige parka: he had stumbled on to an almost empty town square, wobbled on his feet and then collapsed. For a while, he lay completely motionless, his arms outstretched and his knees folded into his chest. People walked by, showing barely a flicker of interest. He then swayed to his feet, before crashing back down again. This time he hit his head on the concrete, and the hideous crack it made was enough to bring people to his aid, before he seemed to assure them that he would be all right, and uncertainly shuffled away again.

I was in the Yorkshire town of Doncaster – though it could have been any number of places where the street drug known as spice has entered the lives of people living on society's edges, sowing anxiety and fear. Over the summer, stories of the drug and its users seemed to reach a critical point – in Cardiff, Leeds, Sheffield, Wrexham, Hull, Lincoln and Mansfield. At the end of August, a group of Conservative police and crime commissioners said that spice represented the “most severe public health issue we have faced in decades”, and demanded that, three years after it was made illegal, it be moved from class B to class A status, the same as heroin and cocaine. Three weeks ago, the Daily Mirror splashed that Britain “is in the grip of a spice epidemic”.

Spice and the problems it creates have been growing for around four years, exploding most spectacularly in central Manchester but slowly becoming a national issue. The drug is a synthetic cannabinoid: though its active ingredient is sprayed on to broken-up leaves that people can smoke, spice is produced in makeshift labs rather than being extracted from plants. Its essential chemistry is comparable to the principal psychoactive element of marijuana, but its potency and toxicity are of a different order. Spice drastically hits not just the brain but the body: it can cause the shutting-down of people's basic mental faculties and a raised risk of seizures, as well as chronic stomach pains, vomiting, kidney problems and heart palpitations.

And it can kill. In July the Blackpool Gazette reported the death of a homeless woman called Trudy McGregor, whose body had been discovered in the small hours of 30 June. Someone who had known her said: “Trudy got addicted to spice about two or three years ago. She's probably the most well-known person at Blackpool Victoria hospital because they've brought her back to life two or three times, or even more than that. She would cry all the time at the end. She didn't want to be like that. Nobody wants to live that way.”

Woven through such stories are problems spread across a whole host of policy areas, which all highlight the increasingly inescapable sense that Britain cannot go on like this. One of the routes via which spice has entered thousands of lives is the increasingly chaotic and dysfunctional prison system. In May a Royal College of Nursing official said that in one facility alone his members had treated 50 people for spice-related problems in less than a week. Since it was made illegal in 2016, recreational use has plummeted – but spice is now a byword for the homelessness that has rocketed since 2010, and other key manifestations of austerity, such as drastic cuts in support services for rough sleepers and drug users, and pathetically inadequate mental health services.

As well as the lunacy of our continuing prohibition of cannabis (whose liberalisation would kill some of the demand for dangerous alternatives), Spice shines a light on deep social attitudes to poverty and personal breakdown, and the way that at a certain point on the modern social continuum, empathy and care seem to shrink to nothing. In most places, spice users are shorthanded as “zombies” – a term used on that Mirror front page, that chimes with popular stereotypes of drug

users down the ages(witness the famous American book published in the 1920s, *Dope: The Story of the Living Dead*), but also betrays a very modern sense of snobbery and voyeurism.

Certainly, on Facebook and YouTube, phone-videos of spice “zombies” form a grim genre: a nasty, contemptuous kind of entertainment, in which self-evident suffering is there to be giggled at. One Facebook post captures the general idea: “After the success of our first ‘spice zombie’ spotting tour through Grimsby town centre last Saturday ... we plan to bring it to Hull city centre on Saturday 30 June. It’s a great day out for all ages, spotting the spice zombies from the safety of a large, friendly group.”

To anyone with even a vague appreciation of the history of drug use, none of this should be surprising. From time to time, the point at which a society reaches a precipitous moment of decay and decline is highlighted by the prevalence of a certain kind of illegal substance. As stability and security disappear from some people’s lives, an addictive drug – or category of drugs – with strongly sedative effects emerges; in context, the fact that people want to anaesthetise themselves makes an awful kind of sense. At the same time, those who become addicted quickly turn into a new class of untouchables: variously pitied and mocked, but too rarely understood.

It happened in the 1980s with a British heroin epidemic partly triggered by supply lines opened up by the Iranian revolution, but pretty obviously connected to unemployment and deindustrialisation. In the US, there is a sense of something similar in the opioid crisis, that signifier for the predicament of rural and rust-belt communities: the glaring absence of hope, and the way that, as the problem took root, too few people in power seemed to care. In the UK, even if the genesis of the spice problem is very different, it denotes a lot of the same things.

The Conservatives are gathering this weekend in Birmingham, another place where people are regularly seen chasing spice’s grim oblivion, and the summer brought news of seven deaths said to be linked to the drug. If any ministers get the chance, they should leave the security zone and get a sense of a problem that goes straight to the heart of their own failure, and the fact that the collapse of people’s lives has ceased to be merely metaphorical: scores of them are falling to the floor every day, in front of our eyes.