

It's time for WOMEN to feel SAFE

Years of alarming statistics and reports of frightening crimes have shaken our confidence. But what can we do to improve our personal safety and start to feel more secure?

Although huge strides have been made in women's independence and financial freedoms, one thing we continue to worry about is our safety. We have long been aware of our personal security, whether we're meeting friends at night, travelling home or walking through an unfamiliar environment. We clutch our keys, look over our shoulders and insist our friends text us when they get home.

Feeling vulnerable has a huge impact on our confidence. While serious incidents are rare, they have influenced how women live their lives. The Office for National Statistics reports that 82% of women feel unsafe after dark while out in some public spaces. Undoubtedly, this has an impact on the decisions we make day-to-day. Women often redesign

their social lives so they feel more secure, plot routes home in advance and even stop exercising outside.

Last year, research by London TravelWatch found that nearly half of women in the city were avoiding travelling at night due to safety worries. In places where transport systems aren't as well-served, the lack of reliable public transportation adds to women's feelings of insecurity. Going on foot can provoke safety concerns, too: *The Independent* newspaper found that 63% of women they surveyed felt unsafe when walking alone at night.

Reports of rising cases of crimes such as stalking and drink spiking can't fail to

affect our confidence, too. Crime statistics make sobering reading and add to our already overwhelming feelings of

worry, whether for our own safety or that of our adult children or grandchildren.

In the year to December 2022, stalking and harassment accounted for a third (34%) of all police recorded violence. And in England and Wales, 40,572 women were victims of sexual assault in the year

ending September 2021, an increase of 13% from the previous year. This is the highest number of sexual offences ever recorded within a 12-month period.

Incidents of sexual assault and harassment make disturbing headlines and the horrifying cases of Sarah

Women often plot routes home in advance

Everard and Sabina Nessa in 2021 and Zara Aleena in 2022 stopped society in its tracks. Many of us have watched nervously as faith in the forces who are meant to protect us has dwindled – in 2021, a survey by End Violence Against Women found that almost half of those polled trust police less.

TRAVEL CONCERNS

Michaela-Clare Addison from Victim Support points out how rare random attacks are. 'We tend to worry about the dangers posed by strangers when on nights out or in public places, which is understandable. But women and girls are much more likely to be harmed by men they know.'

It is no secret that women take measures to safeguard themselves when they're out. It may not be right that it is something women should have to do, but it is wise. 'It's common to put the responsibility on women to keep themselves safe, rather than on those who perpetrate these crimes,' says Michaela-Clare. 'We don't live in a perfect world, so travelling in groups when coming home from nights out is definitely safer than travelling alone. I'd also recommend making friends aware of where you're going, when you expect to get there and letting people know you've arrived safely.'

If you're travelling independently, take measures to limit your vulnerability in car parks or while driving at night. Admiral Car Insurance advises: 'Be picky with your car parks. Look out for good security, CCTV cameras and some foot traffic if possible. Park in well-lit, public parking spaces near other cars.'

RISE IN DRINK SPIKING CASES

Drink spiking is often presumed to be something that happens to young people in nightclubs, but experts say this is a misconception:

One in 10 people have had their drink spiked, according to the Alcohol Education Trust, and it's likely the numbers are far higher because cases often go unreported.

Anecdotally, it appears that cases of spiking have risen. But getting a clear picture remains tricky because of the very short window between being spiked and the substance leaving someone's system. However, you should still get tested even if a few hours have elapsed. And you should also report spiking by calling 101.

Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth of the National Police Chiefs' Council explains: 'Spiking is a complex and challenging offence to investigate. Drugs pass through the system quickly and there is often limited evidence to identify offenders. To have the best chance of identifying drugs and bringing offenders to justice, our message to anyone who thinks they have been spiked is to report early and be tested by the police.'

It is not enough to be vigilant in bars and pubs; we need to be watchful at all times, says Helena Conibear, chief executive of the Alcohol Education Trust. 'Twenty-five per cent of cases of spiking we saw were non-alcoholic drinks. We've had cases of spiking at fast-food restaurants and in airports.'

'Wherever you are, stay with trusted friends; make sure drinks are coming direct from the bar with no opportunity for them to be tampered with. Keep an eye on each other's drinks and never leave your drink unattended.'

As to why perpetrators choose to spike, that is not clear. Helena says: 'The majority of cases are spiking for spiking's sake. It can be misogyny or jealousy or thinking it's funny to watch a sober person lose control and act out of

character. It can also be sexual predation or robbery. In the majority of cases, there isn't a further incident, but what we don't know is how many cases of spiking take place and friends have stepped in before anything else happens.'

STUDENT SAFETY

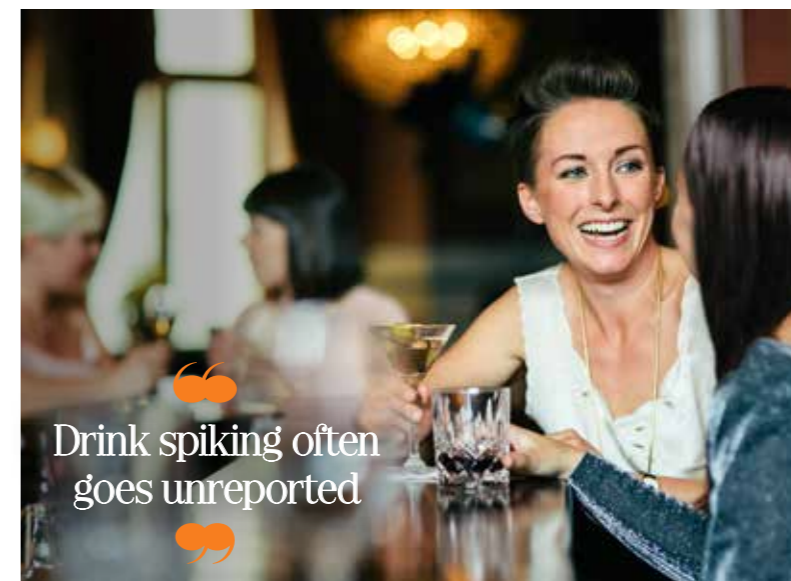
When we consider younger people dipping their toes into nights out or moving to a university city to begin their studies, we might feel anxious. But Helena has some reassuring news: 'Health and wellbeing teams at universities are doing great work. They have students from the years above to look out for freshers; safe spaces for students to use and some unions have invested in their own drink-testing kits.'

Website life-stuff.org is full of information and advice to help young people. And Michaela-Clare from Victim Support reminds us that rather than panic about your teenager's life in a new place, initiate a conversation. 'The best way to prepare children is to have honest, non-judgemental conversations with them about what to expect when they leave home. Let them know that you're there for them and that they will be listened to and supported. It's useful to familiarise yourself with the local services and contact points in case of emergencies. But above all else, this is an exciting new chapter for both you and them to look forward to.'

INCREASING SUPPORT

Loss of trust in the people supposedly designed to protect us has been cited

but police forces across the UK are working to do more to improve women's safety. In West Mercia, Police and Crime Commissioner John Campion has set up self-defence classes for women across Telford and Wrekin, which have proved popular. In July, The Metropolitan Police launched A New Met for London scheme and cited reducing predatory offending as a priority. The force plans to overhaul how offences against women



Drink spiking often goes unreported

Talking point

are recorded, with the aim of tracking down those who pose the greatest risk to women and girls.

In larger cities, safety charters have been designed, such as the scheme spearheaded in London by Mayor Sadiq Khan. There, efforts have been made to inform and educate staff in nighttime venues about women's safety and what to do if a woman appears to be experiencing harassment. Another such place is Greater Manchester, where the city council launched a Night-time Safety Charter earlier this year in response to women feeling unsafe in public places. As part of the Charter, staff at Manchester's nighttime venues are offered training in identifying and reporting incidents. The Charter also aims to educate the public about what is unacceptable behaviour.

Ask for Angela is an initiative from Nottinghamshire Constabulary that is now used nationwide. Designed to assist women who feel unsafe, 'Angela' is a codeword women can use in venues if they feel under threat or unsafe. The

theory is that a trained staff member will then assist them by helping them to safety or contacting the relevant services.

Apps such as WalkSafe are another way women can feel more secure when out and about. WalkSafe is designed to keep users (who are predominantly female) informed. It uses up-to-date police data to allow users to plot routes avoiding crime hotspots. Select friends and family can also view the route and are given an estimated arrival time.

Relying on tech is one option, but Helena points out that we must safeguard phone battery, especially if we take lots of pictures or videos on a night out. She says, 'Keep your phone fully charged; if you have a maps app open, your phone quickly loses charge.'

While being prepared, we also need to remember that instances of violence and crime are rare. For the majority of us, an evening out will be incident-free. But by arming ourselves with the latest advice, perhaps we can approach nights out or unfamiliar places with more confidence – and reclaim our social lives.

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

● **VICTIM SUPPORT** Charity for those impacted by crime and traumatic incidents in England and Wales. **Web** victimsupport.org.uk
Call 08 08 16 89 111

● **SUZY LAMPLUGH TRUST**
The UK's first personal safety charity specialising in advice about stalking and harassment. Set up in 1986 following the disappearance of Suzy. **Web** suzylamplugh.org
Call The National Stalking Helpline can be reached on 0808 802 0300

● **DRINKAWARE** Alcohol information and advice.
Web drinkaware.co.uk
Call 0300 123 1110

● **ALCOHOL EDUCATION TRUST**
UK charity that aims to keep young people informed about the dangers misusing alcohol and other substances.
Web alcoholeducationtrust.org
Call 01305 259142

'I have felt very angry'

Nikki Garnett, 56, collapsed in Newcastle last year and is certain she was spiked. Nikki is a retail consultant and writes style blog Midlifechic. She lives in Cumbria with husband Mal, 52, and they have three sons, who are 19, 21 and 26.



'Following Christmas 2021, when I caught Covid and the country was still under lots of restrictions, my husband and I went

to Newcastle for a couple of nights. Covid rules had lifted by then, so we could visit pubs and bars.

We had eaten a takeaway in our apartment then walked into the city centre. I had a couple of glasses of wine and we headed back to where we were staying. We ended up passing a bar, the Manchester version is where we had got together years previously. For a laugh we said, let's have a drink and a boogie.

I ordered a vodka and Diet Coke; Mal had a beer. The bar was almost empty and when a song came on, we left our drinks and had a dance. What happened next occurred so fast. We finished our drinks, stepped out of the bar and then, as we were crossing the

road, I collapsed. I went down like a pillar, my legs crumbled underneath me, and I ended up hurting my back.

I don't remember anything after that. Mal sat with me in a doorway for about half an hour, I was unconscious. He says every now and again I would come round but I was speaking gibberish, trying to articulate something.

He slowly helped me back to the apartment, but we had to keep stopping. When we got in, I went to bed. Mal kept checking on me. I woke up at 8am, drank loads of water, then woke up again at 2pm. A horrible feeling of shame crept over me. I was full of anxiety and ashamed for losing control.

I felt traumatised as I pieced together what must have happened. I have never been in a situation like that. A normal night out for me is going for dinner and sharing a bottle of wine in a restaurant. After bruising

my coccyx when I fell, I was left in pain for a couple of weeks. I had some bruises on my legs, too. I kept calling myself an idiot for leaving my drink. I went back to the bar and asked to see CCTV but without police evidence I couldn't view it. And too much time had elapsed for me to be tested for a spiking substance.

The experience has made me more careful. When I told my sons what had happened, they said I had to speak out, so I did on Instagram. I expected five or six people to respond but over 200 did. Dame Diana Johnson MP contacted me and asked me to give evidence to Parliament, which I did. It's very disappointing that the legislation to make spiking a specific offence wasn't passed. I have felt very angry and frustrated at how cruel people can be anonymously. It's depressing how spiking isn't taken seriously.' □

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