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'When you are emotionally connected to someone who uses Spice, it is very worrying'.

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Women's secondary vulnerabilities to harms associated with synthetic cannabinoids in prison.

WCCJ Network: Harm across time and place: Exploring women's experiences.

MEET EVERY  
➤ AMBITION

UNIVERSITY OF  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Dr Nki White  
nwhite2@glos.ac.uk



# Spice - Short Overview

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**What is Spice:** synthetic cannabinoid; originally designed to mimic effects of cannabis, but more harmful and unpredictable

**Spice use:** associated with stigma and vulnerability (Alexandrescu and Spicer, 2023)

**Spice use in prison:** very common; approx. 50% of males use Spice (Craft et al., 2023; User Voice, 2016), use linked to desire for escapism from prison pains, to relieve boredom and pain (Ralphs et al., 2017)

**Spice harms to users:** use has led to sometimes severe adverse mental and physical health effects; incl. linked to overdose deaths in prison (Duke et al., 2023)

**Spice harms to others:** perspectives of staff working in men's prisons; focus on perceived and actual risk of smoke inhalation, the risk of harm from violence and adverse mental health effects for officers (Gray & Ralphs, 2021; Kinman & Clements, 2021; Paul et al., 2021; Shafi et al., 2017) .

# Researching Women and Spice Experiences

## **Little attention on women and Spice specifically, but why?**

- Spice use in policy is not considered through a gender-sensitive lens.
- There are legitimate challenges around small sample sizes and reaching marginalised groups (Grace, Lloyd, Parry, 2020; Ralphs and Gray, 2018).

## **Why focus on Women's Secondary Spice Harms:**

important amidst evidence that witnessing an overdose appears to be 'extremely psychologically traumatic', and that factors such as location, situation, drug effects, relationships and wider contexts affect the degree to which witnessing overdose harms are experienced as emotionally harmful to others (Macmadu et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2021).

# Theoretical and empirical lens

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- Recognise that vulnerability to harm emerges through different factors and for different people by operationalising vulnerability to harm in a specific policy and practice context (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017).
- Explore harm and harm production in the criminal justice system by considering ‘symbiotic’ harms, and different groups affected (Condry & Minson, 2021).

**The concept of secondary vulnerabilities to Spice harms:** this is operationalised here as any possibilities to and experiences of women *feeling* vulnerable or describing *being* vulnerable to harm in relation to Spice. This vulnerability may be due to **involuntary Spice encounters**, due to **institutional practices in response to Spice** or due to a combination of a range of factors.

# Women's Secondary Experiences of Vulnerabilities to Spice Harms

## **Aims:**

- to map secondary vulnerabilities to harms for women who do not identify as having used Spice in prison.
- how vulnerabilities to Spice harms emerge from Spice and from the spatial, embodied and relational context in which Spice use occurs.

# About the Study

**Qualitative Research Study:** PhD project (University of Greenwich); data presented from five semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated women (total n=15); transcripts analysed thematically with NVivo using a reflexive approach to coding (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Terry and Hayfield, 2020).

Themes: Secondary vulnerabilities pertaining to (1) prison space, (2) embodied and localised experiences, (3) emotional burdens and (4) relational complexities.

## Can we talk about drugs in prison? Anonymous and confidential.

### Who's doing the research and what is it about?

Hello! My name is Niki and I am doing a PhD at the University of Greenwich. My research is about synthetic drugs (such as spice) and women's experiences with these drugs, while they were in prison.

### Why am I asking you about this?

I would like to know what your experiences (good or bad) with spice in prison have been, whether you took spice yourself or not. Not much is known about spice in women's prisons and your personal input could help change this!

### Do you have to take part?

Your participation would be completely voluntary. I would be so grateful if you considered taking part. Thank you.



### What will happen if you choose to participate?

Your participation would involve a conversation with me. We can chat over the phone or via video call, whichever you prefer. I will use a voice recorder, but after what you said has been written up, your name will not be associated with the recording of the conversation.

### Are you interested? Great! This is how you can get in touch with me:

Please contact me either via email at [n.j.white@gre.ac.uk](mailto:n.j.white@gre.ac.uk) or via mobile on 07704 411 319.

If you have any questions, please contact me for an informal chat. I look forward to hearing from you!

# Theme 1: Regime Instability and Pains of the Prison

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## **Women felt inadequately protected from Spice**

‘When we came back from association the whole landing was this hot box. We can't even breathe so we have to have our T-shirts over our noses and run for our rooms and open our windows and lock out the smoke’ (Hazel).

## **Curtailed prisoner movement as institutional punishment**

‘When [the officers] realised Spice was on the landing, they used to use that as an excuse to shut down the whole landing just so they could stay in the office and have a chat and a laugh’ (Rose).





# Theme 2: Embodied & localised experiences in the Cell

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## **The cell: a consensual or non-consensual space of Spice localised encounter**

‘She was clearly on it and out of it and she would just slump herself in my room. I had to look out for her, making sure she was OK (Rose)

‘They would come to my room and smoke it in there. I would have to come out of the room and leave them with it’ (Heather)

## **Embodied vulnerability to institutional Strategies**

‘I'm not having a clean record all the time I've been in here and then getting accused of taking Spice as I am being released’ (Violet).

officers ‘were allowed to touch you by feeling all the way down you to make sure you don't have anything that can be detected’ (Violet)

# Theme 3: Disempowered & Trauma of Witnessing Overdose

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## **Women cared deeply, but felt powerless to help and disassociated**

‘I couldn't help them, I tried to help them but I couldn't, they didn't want to hear, they didn't want to know. I tried my best to help but it wasn't good enough’ (Heather).

‘Obviously, it was affecting me because we would have arguments about it...You can't really even help them, because helping them obviously is getting them in trouble’ (Hazel).

## **Witnessing Spice harm as potential ‘overdose traumas’**

‘I did actually talk about it with my key worker, because I was under a mental health tag. She asked me if I was alright. But if you do not have that mental health tag then no, you do not get to talk to anybody really’ (Daisy).

## Theme 4: Lack of Support from Others

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### **Bottling things up instead of sharing with family**

It was hard enough anyway for my family and friends to be there for me throughout my sentence. Much less to explain to them “Oh guess what this was a major issue” (Rose).

### **Rumours instead of education and support from prisons**

‘I heard whispers from prisoners after the incident. I heard about Spice being mentioned and I asked and I said, “What is that?” (Daisy).



# Drawing together key threads of Vulnerability

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- Participants described unstable regimes, sudden loss of prisoner movement, added security checks, loss of purposeful activity and association due to Spice incidents.
- Prison responses to Spice thus aggravated the pains of imprisonment by contributing to poorer treatment and conditions for prisoners overall.
- (in)voluntary Spice encounters frequently occurred in private spaces and this influenced women's perceptions of bodily autonomy and choice.
- Institutional practices, which are embedded in drug policy, created an environment of fear of punishment.
- Women were vulnerable to harm from witnessing overdose experiences and to worry in relationships they had formed with women who use Spice.
- Women were vulnerable to social isolation and did not find it easy to share their experiences with Spice in prison.
- Women were not well informed by prisons about Spice making them vulnerable to harm.

# Conclusions and Contributions of this Research

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- A contribution lays in the identification, conceptualisation and systematic evaluation of secondary vulnerabilities to Spice harms in women's prisons.
- Secondary vulnerabilities to harms were conceived of as possibilities, as well as lived sensory experiences.
- Themes explored secondary vulnerabilities pertaining to (1) prison space, (2) embodied and localised experiences, (3) emotional burdens and (4) relational complexities.
- This analysis demonstrates the value of adopting an empirical, theoretically informed small-scale study approach to vulnerability as it is experienced in a specific policy and practice context.

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