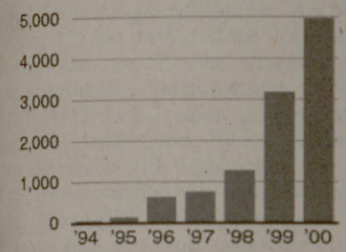


Thursday, October 10, 2002

Date-rape drug detecting coasters may not work

E.R. visits up from GHB usage

The use of an illegal party drug that is also used as a "date-rape" drug has risen in recent years. GHB, or gamma hydroxybutyrate, is a hallucinogen that causes intoxication and incapacitation. Estimated number of visits to U.S. emergency rooms due to GHB/GBL usage*



* Gamma butyrolactone, or GBL, is a derivative of GHB.
SOURCES: Department of Health and Human Services; www.projectghb.org

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Colleges around the country are buying millions of coasters that test for "date-rape" drugs in drinks. But some experts say the coasters are ineffective and could lead to more assaults by creating a false sense of security.

The manufacturers — who also make fake snow and party foam — say the 40-cent paper coasters are 95 percent accurate. The coasters have test spots that are supposed to turn dark blue in about 30 seconds if a splash of alcohol contains drugs often used to incapacitate victims.

In tests at the Michigan State Police Crime Lab, however, the coasters failed to react clearly to drinks spiked with gamma hydroxybutyrate, a major date-rape drug known as GHB, said forensic scientist Anne Gierlowski.

"We tested red wine, cola, whiskey and orange juice and because three out of the four have color already, it was very hard to decipher a color change," she said. "It's a nice idea, but it's probably a nicer idea for the people selling them because they've probably made a lot of money."

Plantation, Fla.-based Drink Safe Technologies Inc. has sold about 50 million of the coasters since March, mostly to colleges and convenience stores, said president Francisco Guerra.

Guerra likens the coasters to condoms: While not 100 percent safe and effective, they are a good prevention tool.

"I've had 100 people say this saved them from getting raped," said Guerra, a former magician. "Before me, there was no way to detect it. It's nice to be able to do something about it."

A federal task force recently estimated that college drinking leads to an estimated 70,000 sexual assaults or rapes annually.

Yasmine Timberlake, a sophomore at San Jose State University, was grateful for the coasters handed out by the YWCA at a bar near campus.

"We're girls, and we've got to be careful," she said, putting a handful in her purse. "That's all we can do."

And students are now openly talking about date rape at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which bought 800 coasters to pass out to freshmen.

"That's the purpose: to educate

them and to make them more aware," said Donnie Jeffrey, who runs St. Mary's alcohol-awareness program.

The coasters' labels promise they will help "identify the presence of illicit drugs in beverages." But in response to questions from The Associated Press, co-inventor Brian Glover, a New York dentist who dabbles in chemistry, acknowledged that the coasters can identify just two of the many date-rape drugs — GHB and ketamine.

"I've had 100 people say this saved them from getting raped."

— Francisco Guerra
president of Drink Safe Technologies Inc.

There are 36 drugs on the street classified as date-rape drugs, too many for police field tests to detect,

said Trinkia Porrata, a retired Los Angeles detective who is an authority on GHB.

"I'm horrified to think people are actually buying it and passing it out. I think it will do more damage than it will ever do good," said Porrata, a board member of Project GHB, a prevention and education organization. "If it was that simple, we could shut down all of our crime labs."

Porrata tested different varieties of drugs on the coasters. Some test spots turned a slight shade of blue within 30 minutes; others did not change color until hours later, she said.

The Drug Enforcement Administration also advises against putting faith in tests that cannot keep up with the constantly changing chemistry of illegal drugs.

"In cases where there are scientific advances, the bad guys get around it faster than the good guys can," DEA spokeswoman Rogene Waite said. "I would urge people to be really, really, really careful. It's so dangerous, I wouldn't want them to rely on one thing."

Census bureau must release adjusted count

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A federal appeals court ruled that the Census Bureau must release its statistically adjusted count for every state, county and neighborhood in the country — a decision that could affect how billions in government money is distributed.

Democrats, big-city politicians and civil rights groups have charged that the 2000 census missed 3.2 million people — most of them minorities and the poor — and that many communities are being short-changed government funding that is distributed by population.

In a unanimous decision filed late Tuesday, a three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the public is entitled under federal open-government law to see the Census Bureau's adjusted figures, which show how many people were probably missed.

The court rejected Census Bureau arguments that releasing the data would expose sensitive internal debates and have a "chilling effect" on future policy discussions at the agency.

Census Bureau officials declined to comment and referred calls to the Justice Department, where spokesman Charles Miller said no decision has been made on whether to appeal to the Supreme Court. He would not comment on the ruling itself.

After census takers and census questionnaires were sent out in 2000, the Census Bureau used mathematical formulas to estimate how many minorities, renters and others might have been missed in inner cities, rural areas and other places. Those figures are often called the "undercount."

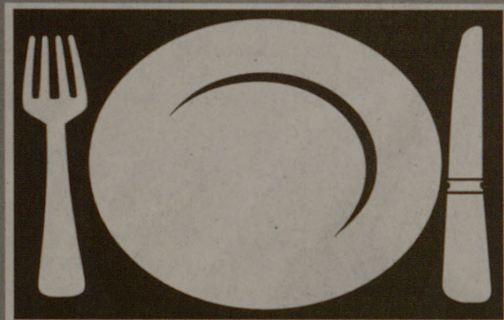
But the Census Bureau refused to release the undercount, contending the adjusted figures are unreliable and would cause political battles over federal funding. The bureau has instead been releasing only the unadjusted population counts arrived at through census takers and questionnaires.

The ruling only mandates that the Census Bureau release the adjusted figures.

It does not actually force the bureau to use those numbers in place of the unadjusted figures that were issued for political redistricting and the distribution of billions in federal funding.

A 1999 U.S. Supreme Court ruling bars the use of adjusted numbers for reapportioning congressional seats.

However, the Census Bureau has left open the possibility of using adjusted data for federal funding in the future. And state and local governments would be free to use the adjusted numbers for redistricting and for distributing tax dollars, unless the laws there say otherwise.



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