



AlcoholAction
Ireland

Silent Voices - Policy recommendations

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm.

We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in effective advocacy, campaigning and policy research.

Alcohol Action Ireland, together with a pioneering group of founders, established 'Silent Voices' – an advocacy initiative to highlight the hidden harms of parental problem alcohol use (PPAU).

Our strategic plan, Leading Change: a society free from alcohol harm, establishes a vision for our future work across five strategic goals and supporting actions. Our goals: A childhood free from alcohol harm; services for all affected by alcohol harm and the establishment of a state-sponsored Office to lead on alcohol policy, embrace the specific actions required to advance the primary objectives of 'Silent Voices' as set out in this policy document.

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“The hardest part was the never ending repeated sense of crushing disappointment when one of my parents was drunk again. In one way, I came to expect it but it never stopped being disappointing or painful; there’s always a small amount of hope that you cling on to when you have a parent with alcoholism.” SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

Growing up in a home with parental problem alcohol use (PPAU) has been recognised internationally as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) for over 20 years.

Research indicates that parental alcohol problems rarely exist in isolation from other difficulties such as family relationship problems, trauma in the background of one or both parents, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues, bereavement, and financial hardship

Studies have found that there is a serious risk that parents with alcohol problems may neglect their children. Such neglect can have a negative impact on children’s emotional and physical development and education, and put them at risk of physical and sexual abuse.

A UK survey carried out by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa) investigating the problems of adult children of alcoholics found that they were more likely to consider suicide, have eating disorders, drug addiction, and be in trouble with the police, as well as having above average alcohol dependency and mental health problems.

In Ireland, a national strategy known as the Hidden Harm framework seeks to alert professionals already working with children and families to the problem of substance use in the home. However, given the widespread and pervasive nature of this problem – 1 in 6 young people are affected by parental problem alcohol use - and the great harm it can cause, a more coherent cross government approach, as set out in this document is required.

In order to offset the harm caused by PPAU and its impact across the lifespan, Alcohol Action Ireland is calling on government to:

- Adopt a whole-of-government approach to this children's rights issue with an identifiable senior government official who has responsibility to advise, develop and plan appropriate policies and services. This aligns with the objectives of key government policies and programmes such as: Healthy Ireland; Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery; Brighter Outcomes, Better Futures - each of which signal that a whole-of-government needs to be proactively involved in improving the lives of children and families.
- Adequately fund and resource supports for children experiencing PPAU and invest in primary care psychology services to meet the needs of both children and adults. This dovetails with commitments made in government policy documents, Sharing the Vision and Brighter Outcomes Better Futures, that young people should have access to early intervention youth mental health services supports.
- Incentivise services working with children and families – including educational and criminal justice services - to become trauma-informed. This is in line with best practice in other jurisdictions and is a developing concept in Ireland too.
- Collect robust, comprehensive and consistent data in appropriate settings, for example in mental health, child and family, education, homeless and criminal justice settings. This will identify the numbers of children and adults affected by this issue and will help to inform policy and service provision.
- Fund a national trauma-informed service for adult children who have experienced PPAU and
- Develop and support national campaigns targeting the whole population that raise awareness about the impact of PPAU.

1.0 Research background – 1 in 6 children

“When our parents drank, we were left to our own devices. From a very early age, we had to assume total responsibility to feed ourselves, manage finances, manage chaotic parents, get to school.” SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

Parental problem alcohol use damages and disrupts the lives of children and families in all areas of society, spanning all social classes and harming the development of children affected by their parents' problematic drinking.

In Ireland, an estimated 1 in 6 young people suffer the unnecessary impact of alcohol-related harms at home. Therefore it is likely that today more than 200,000 children in Ireland are living with the traumatic circumstances of a childhood where problem alcohol use in the home is a frequent event.

It is further estimated that there are around 400,000 people in Ireland today who are adult children from alcohol-impacted families. This means that approximately 600,000 people across all age ranges in Ireland may be suffering because of the impact of alcohol harm in their family.

Research shows that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can greatly increase the likelihood of poor physical and mental health in later life. The cost of this to Ireland is an estimated €7 billion annually. This makes the case for early intervention and with these children, and indeed adult children, real and urgent. Given the large number of people affected across all sections of society - and the huge cost, human and financial, it is incumbent on the government to act.

“I am 65 years of age and still carry the scars of my childhood surrounded by alcohol.” SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

2.0 Policy context

2.1 International human rights

Protecting children from harm is not just a public health issue but a human rights one. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to survive, to be protected from harm and exploitation, to develop fully and to participate in decisions which affect their wellbeing. Article 24 of the UNCRC recognises children’s right to ‘the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health’. Article 24 further provides that State must ‘strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such healthcare services.’

Children’s individual rights are particularly important when considering the issue of parental alcohol use where the parent does not seek help. In these situations, children are entitled to services and supports regardless of the parent’s situation.

Given that we recognise alcohol as a significant problem in society, yet fail to provide adequate supports and services for young people affected, Ireland falls short of its commitments to upholding children’s rights in this regard.

2.2 National policy

"I lived in fear most of my early childhood. Dad could be violent when he drank. I have two younger siblings. I would tell them that everything was going to be ok, while downstairs dad was beating our mum." SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

National policy reinforces the notion that children's rights and health are of paramount importance to their development and well-being. Although the issue of problem parental alcohol use and its effects remains largely hidden in Irish society, in recent years a range of Irish studies, reports and initiatives have begun to recognise the problem, also known as hidden harm.

Clear commitments to early intervention in families with substances use problems are set out in government policy documents Better Outcomes Brighter Futures and First 5, A Whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families, 2019-2028.

Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery: A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017- 2025, also highlights the need for developing and adopting evidence-based family and parenting programmes for high risk families impacted by problematic substance use. The strategy states that awareness of the hidden harm of PPAU with the aim of increasing responsiveness to affected children should be built, and that protocols between addiction services, maternity services and children's health and social care services to facilitate a coordinated response to the needs of children affected by PPAU, should be developed.

These commitments are welcome and should be implemented in full.

3.0 Time for action

"I am 51 years old and I still have not recovered from the trauma of my mother's alcoholism. Mental health services are a 'normal' part of my life." SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

Recognition of the problem of parental substance use and its effect on children in national policy is increasing, but this has not translated into sufficient action for children and families dealing with this problem.

AAI believes that many and significant shortcomings remain when it comes to tackling this problem.

Children and families coping with alcohol harm in the home are often invisible, because of shame, ignorance and stigma and endure the issue behind closed doors, but it is also true that this is a widespread problem in Ireland that all should all be aware of.

That is why everyone working with vulnerable children and adults must have specific training that enables them to recognise this issue and direct people to the most appropriate supports.

The case for action on this issue is timely and compelling. In neighbouring jurisdictions such as Scotland and Wales, an Adverse Childhood Experiences movement is raising awareness about issues like PPAU and trauma-informed services are being implemented.

3.1 Recommendations

"I got myself involved in sports; soccer, hurling and football as another way to escape what I was dealing with at home. I got myself a job that I love, and I am still in to this day. Helping people and trying to make a difference in my community gives me great satisfaction."

SILENT VOICES CONTRIBUTOR

Whole-of-government approach

- Alcohol Action Ireland regards it as essential that there is a designated senior government official who has responsibility to advise, develop and plan appropriate policies and services, and capacity to work across government departments such as: children and youth affairs, health, education and skills, and justice and equality on the issue of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- The role would act as a driving force, and work to embed the concept of trauma-informed services, creating a shared common language and understanding around the issue and greater cohesion between government departments and agencies. It would have resources to implement action – ensure that everyone working with children has specific training on this issue.
- The national Hidden Harm framework requires momentum and urgency—particularly in information campaigns, training and raising awareness with all professionals who work closely with children and families nationally. An action plan should be developed with clear targets and timeframes.

Services & supports

- Properly funded and resourced supports for children experiencing PPAU must be available nationwide and information about them should be available in all public health spaces. Innovative evidence-based programmes must become more widely available in communities around the country. It must also be ensured that children, as an individual right, can access services even where parents are not in treatment for alcohol or other substances.
- Investing in primary care psychology services to meet the needs of both children and adults is urgent and vital given the numbers of both adults and children waiting for services. These delays exacerbate the mental health of those in greatest need.

- Adult alcohol treatment services must also be invested in as severe funding cuts have resulted in a critical shortage of alcohol addiction services. Addressing this gap and shortage is an essential part of the approach to supporting children affected by PPAU. Timely access to treatment for the parent has a significant benefit to the child.
- Schools should seek to strengthen collaboration with services working with children and families to support a child who might be at risk of hidden harm. The UK's Operation Encompass model, an early intervention that allows police to notify schools when a child's family has been involved in a domestic situation where they were called, must be implemented in Ireland.

Training & awareness raising

- Awareness of PPAU and its impact on young and adult children should be raised through information campaigns and training that targets healthcare, social care, early years, child protection, family support, education, and mental health sectors, as well as families and communities. Public health campaigns would not only inform the whole of population about these matters but also reach an adult cohort who perhaps have not yet recognised the underlying cause of their own problems.
- Investment is required so that services and counsellors are trauma-informed in order to recognise and adequately deal with the issues that stem from adversity in childhood and children and adult children affected by PPAU.
- Educators are well placed to identify children experiencing hidden harm. The provision of specific training in relation to ACEs should be examined at teacher training level, and at all levels of professional development – from teachers to principals to education welfare officers. Ireland must work towards a model of trauma-informed schools and communities so that the burden of identifying, and assisting, this cohort does not fall onto any one professional group.
- It is imperative that we gather data on the lives of children and adult children who experience PPAU. We recommend that robust, comprehensive and consistent data be gathered in appropriate settings, for example in mental health, child and family, education, homeless and criminal justice settings. This will identify the numbers of children and adults affected by this issue and will inform policy and service provision.
- Public discourse/debate on the right to a childhood free from alcohol harm should take place, and children should have their voices heard in relation to the impact of alcohol on their lives.