HIDDEN HARM AND COVID-19
Exploring the impacts and solutions
This information is important for policy makers and practitioners to be aware of as children and families re-emerge from lockdowns and begin to reengage with services. It is vital that mitigation measures are put in place to address the impact of the pandemic and the issues that young people’s exposure to the increased use of alcohol in the home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global public health crisis. Measures to reduce transmission of the disease resulted in so-called ‘lockdowns’ of various durations and severity, which meant the closure of educational establishments, workplaces, and other outlets for social interaction.

While the full impact of lockdowns will not be known for some time, evidence such as research papers, reports from NGOs and media, are beginning to capture the consequences, such as young people’s exposure to the increased use of alcohol in the home.¹

This briefing will set out evidence collated during 2020 – internationally and in Ireland – around the very likely increase in adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), specifically problem parental substance use, during the pandemic.

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Parental problem alcohol use is a gateway ACE

Research has found that children who grow up in households where there is parental problem alcohol use are more likely to experience additional ACEs.

Growing up in a home with problem parental alcohol use has for over 20 years been recognised internationally as an adverse childhood experience that can give rise to lifelong implications for physical and mental health. Studies have found 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.

It is estimated that 200,000 children in Ireland are living in homes impacted by alcohol use and a further 400,000 are adult children from such homes.

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4 Nacoa, Professor Martin Callingham, Survey of children of alcohol-dependent parents.

5 See: https://alcoholireland.ie/campaigns/silent-voices/ for an overview of the research data.
We also know from NDTRS data that of the 7,546 cases who undertook alcohol treatment in 2019, half (3,812, 50.5%) were recorded as having children under 18. This shows the urgent need for support services for children with a parent in treatment.

While there is recognition of the issue within Ireland’s child protection and prevention and early intervention services, provided by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, it is perhaps seen in terms of child protection rather than something that is prevalent in the general population.

A 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.⁶

However, given the widespread and pervasive nature of this problem – 1 in 6 young people are affected by problem parental alcohol use - and the great harm it can cause; a more coherent cross government approach is required.

Silent Voices, an initiative of Alcohol Action Ireland to raise awareness about the problem, has set out a manifesto that calls 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 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.

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As established evidence around children and parental alcohol misuse in the home outlined above demonstrates, in normal circumstances young people are already at risk of adverse childhood experiences in the home related to alcohol.

This experience has only been heightened during the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In Ireland, we know from alcohol sales data that Ireland’s alcohol users substituted most of their drinking from regulated licence premises to consumption in the home.8 Data from Ireland’s Central Statistics Office found that 27 per cent of those in households with children reporting an increase in alcohol consumption.9 This is not just an Irish phenomenon; In the UK, an Alcohol Change survey found that parental drinking had been raising tensions in some households.10 This is backed up by data released by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa) who reported a 40% increase in contacts in April and May 2020 in comparison to 2019.11 Similarly, evidence from Australia and Canada12 points to comparable issues.

For young people, exposure to this increase in parental home drinking came along with school closures, sporting and social activities being curtailed and lack of access to peer support. Already we know that young people who live with problem parental alcohol use feel isolated from relatives and peers,13 so a new layer of physical isolation can only have heightened this feeling.

Indeed, parental alcohol problems rarely exist in isolation from other difficulties such as family relationship problems, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues, bereavement and financial hardship. Problem parental substance use is a gateway ACE, that can lead to, or simply be present with multiple other adversities.14

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10 https://alcoholchange.org.uk/blog/2020/covid19-drinking-during-lockdown-headline-findings
11 https://nacoa.org.uk/report-new-normal/
A report by Ireland’s Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI) highlighted international evidence indicating that family violence in the home may be increasing during the COVID-19 restrictions.\(^{15}\)

The paper also highlighted that during 2020, many researchers and policy experts noted that combined stressors such as unemployment, difficult relationships, extended isolation perhaps coupled with alcohol or substance misuse, are likely to have an adverse impact on parental mental wellbeing, which is likely, in turn, to affect children’s relationships and outcomes.\(^{16}\)

Children’s exposure to these stressors coupled with increased alcohol consumption and increased levels of domestic abuse\(^ {17}\) paints a bleak picture for the young people and families involved, again reinforcing the need for services to be aware and able to respond.

Indeed, as has been noted by researchers, findings of studies carried out during the pandemic may not reveal the true picture as some children may not be in circumstances where they have an opportunity to seek help or can do so safely.

“Opportunities to spot signs or hear about children’s experiences have diminished, compounded by the lack of outside oversight in terms of access to professionals such as teachers, general practitioners, health visitors, and social and youth workers.”\(^ {18}\)

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\(^{15}\) This trend is associated with a number of interlinked factors, including economic stress, difficult relationships and reduced or non-existent support structures (Usher et al., 2020). Usher, K., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Gyamfi, N., Jackson, D. (2020). Family Violence and COVID19: Increased Vulnerability and Reduced Options for Support. International Journal of Mental Health Nursing. DOI: 10.1111/inm.12735.


\(^{17}\) In 2020 there was an 88% increase in the number of domestic violence cases dealt with by the DPP. See: https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/88-increase-in-domestic-violence-cases-in-2020-1078617.html

4.0 RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Responses on the ground

As this paper has outlined, since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, research and evidence from around the world has demonstrated increased exposure to parental alcohol use and associated adverse childhood experiences.¹⁹

Some innovative campaigns have attempted to tackle the issue through public awareness and others have discovered new ways of working with their client base.

For example, an Australian campaign from the Alcohol and Drug Foundation has developed the ‘You Haven’t Been Drinking Alone’ community health initiative to draw attention to the issue of increased drinking amongst parents of school-age children during lockdown.²⁰ It also aims to encourage parents to evaluate and adjust their own drinking behaviours.

In the UK, a Public Health England initiative – the Children of Alcohol Dependent Parents Innovation Fund,²¹ already in place to fund supports for families and children affected by alcohol dependency and parental conflict, reported that it has found new ways of working during the pandemic.

In the UK, professionals are being trained to better identify and support families affected by parental alcohol use.²²

Training consisted of conferences where professionals working with children and families had the opportunity to listen to and interact with expert speakers on the issue of parental alcohol use. Following this, projects could invite a trainer to come and speak to their team, and or access free materials so that people could run their own workshops. The training is a specific toolkit developed for parental alcohol misuse.

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An evaluation of the initiative by the Tavistock Institute,\(^\text{23}\) found that lockdown has facilitated new ways of working, for example services switched to delivering their services online as a way of keeping in touch with families. The evaluation noted:

“[Group meetings] are still being attended over Zoom – they are better attended in fact. Doing this electronically has been a quick win”.

One immediate advantage of this has been that staff now can work with more people each day as they spend less time travelling to visit families or delivery sites. In some cases, parents have also found it easier to access the support they need – as they can do this from their own home, without the need for travel or having to arrange care for their children.

Some young people also preferred talking online rather than face-to-face or keeping in touch via text or other forms of direct messaging. This mode of contact was something several services hoped to keep using even after lockdown as it is seen as a good way to keep in touch on a more regular basis.

On the flip side, it was noted that some families have limited access to the internet or cannot find a safe space in their own home to talk about issues they are facing. Therapists also said that delivering support by phone or online does not work for all clients: “it is hard to read how things really are when you’re not face-to-face”.

4.2 Recommendations for government and services

It is now established that preventing ACEs can improve health across the whole life course, enhancing wellbeing and productivity while reducing pressures and costs on systems.²⁴

Given the very likely increase in adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) during the coronavirus pandemic as outlined in this paper, it is vital that mitigation measures are put in place to address issues that have caused young people distress. This will help to offset the human costs – and also the health, social, criminal justice and educational costs – associated with adverse experiences.

This paper recommends that:

- A whole-of-government approach to substance misuse and childhood adversity should tackle this as a children’s rights issue with an identifiable senior government official who has responsibility to advise, develop and plan appropriate policies and services.

- The 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.

- Drug and alcohol taskforces should be assigned dedicated funding to support trauma-informed services to support children and families affected by problem parental substance use, not only when parents are in treatment but as a prevention and early intervention activity.

- 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 Encompass²⁵ 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.

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²⁵ Operation Encompass directly connects the police with schools to ensure support for children living with domestic abuse in their homes when there has been a police attended incident of domestic abuse the night before. Rapid provision of support within the school environment means children are better safeguarded against the short-, medium- and long-term effects of domestic abuse. For more information see https://www.operationencompass.org/