



AlcoholAction
Ireland

taskforce
DUN LAOGHAIRE RATHDOWN
DRUG AND ALCOHOL TASK FORCE

HIDDEN HARM AND COVID-19

**Exploring the impacts
and solutions**



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

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.

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 and families experienced during the restrictions.

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.



¹ See: ERSI, The implications of the covid-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people, https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf
See also: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/cases-of-severe-child-neglect-discovered-during-lockdown-1.4460554>. And: <https://alcoholireland.ie/latest-case-reports-child-care-law-reporting-project-highlights-growing-impact-alcohol-harm/>

2.0 PROBLEM PARENTAL ALCOHOL USE

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵



² Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study. *American Journal Preventative Medicine*. 1998; 14: 245-258; Ashton, K., Bellis, M. & Hughes, (2016) Adverse childhood experiences and their association with health-harming behaviours and mental wellbeing in the Welsh adult population: a national cross-sectional survey; Bellis, M. A., Hughes, K., Leckenby, N., Jones, L., Baban, A., Kachaeva, M., Terzic, N. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences and associations with health-harming behaviours in young adults: surveys in eight eastern European countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 92(9), 641-655. doi:10.2471/BLT.13.129247

³ Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., & Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258. Baumeister R.F., Schmeichel B.J., Vohs K.D. (2013) Self-Regulation and the Executive Function: The Self as Controlling Agent. In Kruglanski A., Higgins E.T. *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (2nd ed.) New York: Guilford, pp. 516-539. See also: Cleaver, H., Unell, I., & Aldgate, J. (2011). *Children's needs: Parenting capacity. Child abuse: Parental mental illness, learning disability, substance misuse, and domestic violence.* London, England: Department for Education

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.

3.0 COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS AND ADVERSE EXPERIENCE IN THE HOME

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 licenced 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 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

⁸ See: Alcohol Action statement on sales figures here: <https://alcoholireland.ie/provisional-revenue-receipts-demonstrate-durability-irish-alcohol-market-despite-covid-19-crisis/>

⁹ https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf

¹⁰ <https://alcoholchange.org.uk/blog/2020/covid19-drinking-during-lockdown-headline-findings>
¹¹ <https://nacoa.org.uk/report-new-normal/>

¹² Drinking to Cope During COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of External and Internal Factors in Coping Motive Pathways to Alcohol Use, Solitary Drinking, and Alcohol Problems
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/acer.14425>
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/aug/09/one-in-12-australians-drinking-alcohol-every-day-during-coronavirus-outbreak-survey-finds>

¹³ See: Bottling it up The effects of alcohol misuse on children, parents and families.
<https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/6276/1/3499-3720.pdf>

¹⁴ See: Children affected by Parental Alcohol Problems (ChAPAPs) A report on the research, policy, practice and service development relating to ChAPAPs across Europe. Nacoa, Professor Martin Callingham, Survey of children of alcohol-dependent parents. See also: Sprang, G., Staton-Tindall, M., & Clark, J. (2008). Trauma exposure and the drug endangered child. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 21, 333–339.

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 abuse¹⁷ 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

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.

¹⁶ https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf

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>

¹⁸ See: Usher et al, 2020. Family Violence and COVID19: Increased Vulnerability and Reduced Options for Support. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*. doi: 10.1111/inm.12735; Humphreys K.L., Myint M.T., Zeanah C.H. (2020). Increased risk for family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Pediatrics*; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2020-0982

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.

¹⁹ ERSI, The implications of the covid-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people, https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf Westrupp, Elizabeth, et al. "Child, Parent, and Family Mental Health and Functioning in Australia During COVID-19: Comparison to Pre-pandemic Data." PsyArXiv, 30 Sept. 2020. Web.

²⁰ See: <https://adf.org.au/campaign-kits/not-drinking-alone/>

²¹ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/innovation-fund-open-to-help-children-of-dependent-drinkers>

²² See: <https://www.haringey.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/public-health/insightful-families/insightful-families-referrals> and <https://www.haringey.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/public-health/insightful-families/insightful-families-training>. See also: McGovern R et al, Addressing the impact of nondependent parental substance misuse upon children: A rapid review of the evidence of prevalence, impact and effective interventions 2008

An evaluation of the initiative by the Tavistock Institute,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".

²³ See: <https://www.tavistock.org/projects/evaluation-of-the-children-of-alcohol-dependent-parents-innovation-fund/>

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.

²⁴ Life course health consequences and associated annual costs of adverse childhood experiences across Europe and North America: a systematic review and meta-analysis.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30145-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30145-8/fulltext)

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/>