

UK incidence of children living with substance-misusing parents considerably underestimated

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Current figures underestimate the number of children who may be at risk of harm from parental substance use. Researchers writing in the open access journal *BMC Public Health* have generated new estimates using five national surveys which include measures of binge, hazardous and dependent drinking, illicit drug use and mental health.

Previous UK estimates were that 250-350,000 [children](#) live with problem drug users and 780,000 - 1.3 million with problem drinkers. However, the problem, according to the researchers, is that "these estimates are based on [drug users](#) in treatment or derive from problem drinking estimates in other countries". The study, funded by Action on Addiction and the Wates Foundation and conducted by Dr Victoria Manning and colleagues at the National Addiction Centre, entailed a secondary analysis of national household surveys that enabled a focus on parenting and substance use. The new figures indicate that approximately 3.4 million children in the UK live with at least one [binge drinking](#) parent, 2.6 million with a hazardous drinker and around one million with a parent who uses illicit drugs.

Manning said, "In order to meet the needs of both parental substance misusers and their children, we first need to understand the true nature and scale of the problem. Without knowing the number of potentially at-risk families, we are unable to assist them until they come to the attention of agencies at crisis point".

Around 335,000 children were estimated to be living with a drug dependent user, 72,000 with an injecting drug user, and 108,000 with an adult who had overdosed. The authors suggest the risk of harm may increase for the 500,000 children living with parents who have both mental health and substance misuse problems. According to Manning, "Whilst harm from parental substance use is not inevitable, we need to raise awareness of how recreational substance use, and in particular binge episodes, can affect parenting capacity. Substance use affects our judgement, emotions and how we respond to situations. Parental substance misuse can lead to inadequate child monitoring, modelling behaviour and poor standards of child care". The authors encourage the involvement of mainstream services to support vulnerable families by improving access to treatment, family interventions and parenting skills training to minimize the risk of harm.

More information: New estimates of the number of children living with substance misusing parents: results from UK national household surveys, Victoria Manning, David W Best, Nathan Faulkner and Emily Titherington, [BMC Public Health](#) (in press), www.biomedcentral.com/bmcpublichealth/

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