

# Children of heavy drinkers are at risk for a wide range of harms

August 5 2021, by Kimberly Flynn

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Consuming alcohol can cause many harms to those other than the drinker.  
Credit: Rutgers Center of Alcohol & Substance Use Studies

The children of parents who drink alcohol heavily have an elevated risk of a number of adverse experiences, including mental health disorders, hospitalizations and criminal behavior, according to a new review in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

"Within the last 10 years, there has been an expansion of research on consequences that extend beyond the drinker," write the researchers. "Although some studies show that harm because of strangers' drinking may be more prevalent, harms caused by close relations, such as household [family members](#) and friends, may be more severe and distressing."

According to lead author Julie Brummer, M.P.H., and colleagues, most research on the harm that drinking can cause to [family](#) members has relied on self-reports. But because adults may underreport harms occurring to children in their own household, surveys could give an incomplete picture. Brummer is based at Aarhus University in Denmark.

Instead, the new report reviewed studies of hospital and other centralized records, so-called register-based studies, to provide a fuller picture of the harm a family member's drinking can cause children. This allowed "more serious, persistent, and rare outcomes" to be addressed, the researchers write. And compared with much of the previous research, Brummer and colleagues were able to look at a wider range of outcomes and ages of children, "from birth through adolescence and beyond."

The report included a review of 91 articles that used register-based studies conducted mostly in Nordic countries.

Children of parents who drank heavily experienced a range of poor outcomes, called "alcohol's harms to others." These included [mental health disorders](#) in childhood and/or adolescence, infant/child mortality and later being convicted of a crime. The [children](#) were also more likely to have a lower [academic achievement](#), experience abuse and/or neglect and have an out-of-home placement (e.g., foster care). Further, they had an elevated risk for hospitalizations for physical illness and injury.

"Registers are able to easily link immediate family members and follow

individuals over extended periods of time to study long-term outcomes," says study co-author Julie Brummer, M.P.H., of Aarhus University in Denmark. "Particularly in the Nordic region, there are register data across many domains, including physical and mental health—areas where we suspect we may see harms to family members."

In an accompanying review, Anne-Marie Laslett, Ph.D., of the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research in Australia, agrees with the conclusion that register-based studies can be a valuable tool in protecting those most at risk from family members' drinking.

"[T]he article by Brummer and associates points toward a wider scope in which register data sets can contribute to documenting, investigating, and prevention planning for harms from others' drinking," she writes.

"Mining them will improve our understanding of how AHTO [alcohol's harms to others] can be reduced."

**More information:** Brummer, J., Hesse, M., Frederiksen, K. S., Karriker-Jaffe, K. J., & Bloomfield, K. (2021). How do register-based studies contribute to our understanding of alcohol's harms to family members? A scoping review of relevant literature. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 82, 445–456. [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2021.82.445](https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2021.82.445)

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