



The Nacoa Helpline

Review of 2001-2015

A report produced for Nacoa by
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**The Queen's Award
for Voluntary Service**

The MBE for volunteer groups

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The Nacoa Helpline 2001-2015: A Review

Introduction

The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa) is a registered charity founded in 1990 to address the needs of children growing up in families where one or both parents suffer from alcoholism or a similar addictive problem. This includes children of all ages, many of whose problems only become apparent in adulthood.

Nacoa has four broad aims:

- 1 To offer information, advice and support to children of alcohol-dependent parents.
- 2 To reach professionals who work with them.
- 3 To raise their profile in the public consciousness.
- 4 To promote research into the problems they face and the prevention of alcoholism developing in this vulnerable group.

To achieve these aims, Nacoa has become a multi-faceted and proactive organisation. Nacoa operates a free national telephone, email and letter helpline, providing a listening ear to children and young people to help them understand what is happening around them and empowering them to make informed and positive choices for themselves. The helpline is also available to concerned others, including family members and professionals. In addition Nacoa collects information regarding other voluntary and statutory agencies and when appropriate, the helpline refers callers to additional sources of support.

In order to provide a confidential service to individuals who find it difficult to ask for help by phone or email, Nacoa re-launched the Nacoa website in 2000, and this was relaunched again in 2013. This has been extremely successful in reaching out to those who perhaps would not have engaged with the helpline service. The website also provides information and support to professionals and others concerned with children's welfare. More recently we have established a presence on social media to supplement the methods by which we can reach people, and for them to learn about Nacoa.

Nacoa produces a range of publications, including leaflets and information packs, to support and inform callers, and maintains strong links with researchers working in the addiction field so that these materials remain accurate and up-to-date. Nacoa has co-ordinated numerous campaigns, such as the annual awareness campaign COA Week, to bring the often hidden issue of parental alcoholism into the open.

Nacoa is a lifeline for many children and others affected by alcohol, and it continues to deliver the message to children that their parent's alcoholism is not their fault and they are not alone.

About this report

The objective of this report is to provide an overview of the activities of the Nacoa helpline service for the last fifteen years. The helpline is at the very heart of Nacoa's activities, and there is no dispute that the helpline is beneficial to those who have used it. However, by the nature of our work we have no information on the outcomes of our help. Nonetheless, it is necessary to periodically consider whether there is anything that can be done to develop and improve the helpline service. We need to consider how the development of other forms of communication, in particular the world wide web and social media, affects the operation and performance of the helpline. The helpline has already evolved and will need to keep evolving to deal with the changes in the way that people communicate. We will have to consider how to ensure that those who seek our help are provided with the most suitable methods to access it.

This report is structured in a way that provides narrative and statistics to reflect who is contacting the helpline, why they do so, and the support they receive as result of it. Information resulting from the contacts are recorded and then stored on a relational database that includes a vast amount of information. There have been a number of reports summarising this information for individual years, which includes references to preceding years and timescales. Now that the database has been in operation for fifteen years, we believe that this is a good time to take a complete overview of this entire period. This should provide a clearer view of any changes that have occurred over time. We therefore provide statistics for the last fifteen years in total, but also provide statistics for the three constituent five year periods, and finally the individual statistics for the last two years, ie 2014 and 2015 covered by this report.

Analysing the Helpline Database

From the year 2000 the recording of the activities of the helpline has been based on the call sheets and report forms completed concurrently at the time of responding to the contacts (whether these be phone or email). The details from these have then been transcribed into a Microsoft Access database, and it is this data which forms the basis for this report. Other technical data to inform the overall total of contacts has been gathered from the telephone billing records, website traffic data, and other computer analysis.

It is important to understand that the helpline reporting process is designed to help us understand who is contacting us, what their concerns are, and how we can help them. We do not elicit information from contacts on their name, place, sex, or any other personal details. On the call sheets we record only that information which is presented by them. It is not designed to generate research data on the issues relating to the children of alcoholics (COAs). The contact reports contain only the information provided by those seeking our help, and we do not elicit information in order to compile profiles or complete questionnaires.

We can of course provide totals for each type of information provided, whether it be sex, age range, location, and other information (there are 80 fields in the main call information database, with many more in related sections dealing with specific issues, such as the relationship and history of the person with alcohol problems). The problem with these details is that the information for each contact is very fragmented, with some areas covered, for example, age, but not location. When it comes to the more complex issues, this is even more fragmented. There is also inevitably replication of those with whom we have multiple contacts.

To minimise the distortion of all these factors, we have designed an analysis that provides a realistic profile of those contacting us. We have been able to apply some algorithms to identify a representative sample for each year. We have identified approximately 300 people from each year's database, selected using an algorithm designed to reduce the impact of duplications of ongoing calls, and looking at those data entries that contain a suitable amount of information to analyse. We believe that this provides the most realistic view of who is contacting us, and enables us to provide some accurate percentages to understand the overall nature of the issues dealt with by the helpline. By sampling the data that is collected, we believe we now have a clear understanding of how the helpline has developed over the years, how it has helped people, and the issues that they face.

How many times has the helpline been contacted?

The helpline database for the years 2001-2015 contains over 225,000 entries when people have sought to contact Nacoa. This figure includes calls made to helpline phone system and is based on the information provided by the call sheets and the phone company plus other records. It also includes other forms of communication such as email and social media. However, there is a small proportion of contacts that are not logged in this way, and together with personal contacts and other indirect methods we can confidently state that the Nacoa helpline has been contacted a quarter of a million times.

	All Years 2001-2015	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
		2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Contacts	226,280	41,059	121,155	83,086	16,572	32,338

This does not take account of the number of people who now utilise the Nacoa website directly instead of contacting Nacoa as before. Reviewing the server reports, we believe that the Nacoa website traffic has been relatively steady throughout the last few years, with currently anywhere between 5,000 to 6,000 visits per month. This equates to approximately three quarters of a million website visits for the past fifteen years.

Therefore we can confidently state that Nacoa has had over **one million** contacts in the last 15 years.

The actual number of specific individuals who have contacted us is more difficult to ascertain. People contact us anonymously, and we do not assign unique identification codes to them. The same person may contact us on a number of occasions over differing periods of time. As they are not identified, and it is likely that anything they require from us may be handled by a different volunteer, they could generate a number of call sheets, and subsequently appear in the database on a number of occasions.

How do people find out about Nacoa?

There are a number of ways that people have found out about Nacoa. There is print and digital content created by Nacoa, referrals by other agencies and schools, and broadcast and social media. What is most clear from the figures below is how important the Nacoa website has become. In 2015 just under 85% of those contacting us found out about Nacoa by searching and accessing its website. This is over six times higher than the percentage it was in between the years 2001 to 2005.

Source of contact	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Drug/alcohol agency	2%	4%	0%	2%	3%	<1%
Support group	1%	2%	<1%	2%	4%	0%
School	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	<1%
Professionals (counsellors, GP, social services etc)	6%	7%	4%	6%	6%	2%
Personal contact (<i>friend, family member, colleague etc</i>)	3%	1%	2%	6%	5%	4%
Nacoa personnel	1%	1%	2%	<1%	0%	<1%
Nacoa literature	14%	22%	16%	5%	4%	4%
Nacoa website	43%	13%	50%	62%	64%	84%
Social media (<i>non-specific internet, facebook, twitter etc</i>)	2%	<1%	0%	4%	4%	2%
Media (<i>non-specified, books, newspapers, television, radio, other broadcasts</i>)	13%	20%	12%	7%	8%	2%
Other (non-specific agencies, helplines etc)	13%	26%	12%	3%	2%	0%

In this analysis the impact of social media appears relatively small. However, we believe that we should consider social media and the Nacoa website as a cohesive whole, in that social media acts as a gateway to the website. Social media is more akin to personal contact, and therefore extremely difficult to quantify in any meaningful way. Due to how all aspects of the internet link together, we can only say that whatever the specific entry point, the internet is now clearly the most important environment for people to find out about Nacoa.

How do we communicate?

The largest number of contacts made to the helpline consists of telephone calls, either answerphone messages or live calls with Nacoa volunteers. In addition volunteers provide written responses to emails and other social media contacts, plus distribution of printed and digital content. What cannot be counted is the number of personal contacts that Nacoa volunteers, trustees, and other supporters have had with other people throughout the years, including many contributions to national and local print and broadcast media.

The time taken to respond to each person can vary enormously, from hours on the phone or responding to emails, to just a few minutes to respond to brief enquiries.

Type of contact	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Live call	57%	41%	68%	63%	55%	33%
Answerphone	18%	29%	14%	9%	16%	20%
Email	13%	3%	12%	25%	29%	47%
Fax	0.1%	<1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Letter	1%	2%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Promotional Activities	11%	24%	5%	2%	0%	0%

Over the last few years there has been a distinct change in the pattern of contacting Nacoa. This is due of course to the impact of the internet, which has led to increasing use of Nacoa's website, and in particular much more use of email. Anyone who visits the website and requires further contact will either call or email us, generating more activity.

Looking at the statistics for 2014 and 2015 we can see that calls (live and answerphone) fell from 71% in 2014 to 53% in 2015, while emails rose from 29% to 47%. The increasing popularity of emails has led to an impact on our resources, as it often takes longer to read emails and write a response than it does to answer a query by phone. However it also has advantages, in that emails do not have to be answered immediately and do not depend on having a volunteer answering the phone at a particular time. The changing pattern of social interaction continues to have an impact on how we manage the helpline, and is something that we keep under review.

Who is contacting us?

While we cannot be sure about the number of specific individuals who contact us, we do collect a large amount of information about them. It is important to reiterate that we do not elicit personal information from those who contact us, and only record the information that is volunteered by the person during the course of the interaction. On very rare occasions we might have a more detailed understanding of their circumstances if they wish us to actively intervene on their behalf. Each point of contact is logged and any details emerging from it are recorded and incorporated into the helpline database.

Sex

Since the beginning of the database, just over three quarters of those contacting us have been female, and a quarter male. This has been relatively consistent throughout the years. As we do not elicit or gather information about any other categories of sex and gender, we cannot add any further information on this.

Sex	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Female	76%	76%	74%	77%	76%	79%
Male	24%	24%	26%	23%	24%	21%

Age

We allocate 7 different age ranges. Approximately two thirds of the people contacting Nacoa have been under 35. This has been remarkably consistent throughout the years, and remains the case in 2015.

Age	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
0-11	3%	3%	4%	2%	2%	<1%
12-18	30%	43%	21%	18%	13%	17%
19-35 (early category)	12%	27%	1%	0%	0%	0%
19-24	7%	0%	10%	15%	16%	19%
25-35	14%	0%	24%	25%	16%	30%
36-49	26%	20%	29%	31%	40%	27%
50+	8%	7%	10%	7%	12%	8%

A small percentage, between 1 and 3% per year, has been under the age of 12. We know that the figure under-represents those in this age group who are affected by the problem of parents drinking. This might be because it is very difficult for young people to identify their parents or others as having a drink problem per se, as this requires them to recognise that this behaviour is not the norm. This is another reason why Nacoa is so committed to raising awareness of this issue and for children to have

access to support for themselves. This also illustrates both the problem of using the data generated by the database for research purposes, and the challenge of reaching out to younger children of alcoholics.

Location

We believe that those contacting us reflect a good geographical spread. As one would expect given that Nacoa's offices are based in Bristol, and with the impact of events such as UpFest, the South West is well represented, albeit that in its early years 17% of those contacting us were from the South West (which overall is still the case), but in the last five years has slightly reduced to 13%. Those contacting us from London have also been at similar levels throughout, as has those from overseas. Perhaps the biggest growth is those contacting us from the midlands.

Location	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Anglia	3%	4%	0%	3%	2%	6%
London	15%	15%	14%	14%	15%	17%
Midlands	5%	3%	0%	11%	14%	16%
N Ireland	<1%	1%	0%	1%	<1%	2%
NE	10%	10%	10%	9%	12%	6%
NW	10%	11%	12%	7%	8%	5%
S Central	11%	13%	12%	8%	8%	11%
Scotland	3%	3%	0%	5%	8%	4%
SE	11%	14%	11%	8%	10%	4%
SW	17%	17%	19%	13%	8%	11%
Wales	6%	7%	7%	4%	4%	5%
Overseas	9%	2%	14%	15%	10%	14%

Finally, there are a significant number of people who contact us from overseas, whether they be UK citizens living abroad, or foreign nationals seeking relevant information for their situation. Again the impact of the internet cannot be underestimated here.

Why are people contacting us?

The specific reasons why people contact Nacoa vary, but are primarily down to the relationship they have to one or more people in their lives who have an alcohol problem. This is best summed up with a few categories, whether they are the child of an alcoholic (COA), a family member, friend, or a professional having to deal with the impact of this problem on family and friends. As can be seen, the percentage of COAs contacting Nacoa has gone up substantially. This might partly be due to the people being less reticent about why they are calling, as the number relating to anonymous contacts has fallen. The percentage of professionals has also gone down, but this might be due to the increasing use of the internet. Professionals have a different type of connection to those affected by the issue of alcoholism, and their needs might be met sufficiently by being able to access structured information on the web.

Who is contacting Nacoa	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Child of alcoholic (COA)	39%	33%	39%	51%	58%	61%
Family member	15%	8%	21%	22%	20%	15%
Friend	2%	2%	3%	3%	1%	4%
Other	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	1%
Anon	25%	36%	20%	8%	7%	9%
Addict	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%
Professional	15%	18%	12%	13%	11%	7%

Who is the problem drinker?

The database includes over 130 categories of people mentioned, but for the purposes of this report we have reclassified them into a smaller number of broader categories. Without doubt most people contacting Nacoa are doing so because they have a parent who has a problem with alcohol. The category mother or father would include anyone taking on a parenting role, whether that be by biology, familial relationship, or adoption.

Problem drinker	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
The caller themselves	8%	14%	8%	6%	3%	7%
Child	4%	4%	5%	4%	4%	2%
Father	33%	52%	25%	29%	33%	42%
Mother	39%	47%	35%	37%	33%	62%
Parent (unspecified)	3%	2%	3%	3%	2%	5%
Siblings	4%	3%	6%	4%	5%	1%
Partner (including ex)	15%	15%	16%	15%	12%	15%
Other family member	9%	8%	9%	8%	9%	6%
Friend or acquaintance	3%	2%	4%	4%	1%	6%

It is important to remember that the percentages above are instances of a contact referring to a particular relationship; because more than one relationship can be mentioned by one contact, the percentages will not add up to 100%, for example between 2001 and 2005 nearly 100% of callers referred to a father or mother, but in total nearly 50% of those calling also referred to other relationships.

What help are they getting from others?

The role of Nacoa is to provide help and information for people to understand the challenges that they face and to support them in making positive choices to respond to them. Often people have told other individuals about what they are facing. Obviously who they talk to depends on who the person is that has the problem, so given that most of the people contacting us has a parent as the drinker, then clearly they will tend to go to other family members for help.

Who has been told	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Father	4%	2%	5%	5%	8%	5%
Mother	8%	6%	9%	10%	13%	10%
Sibling	7%	6%	8%	9%	5%	5%
Spouse/partner	1%	<1%	1%	2%	2%	1%
Other family member	20%	14%	19%	31%	40%	37%
Friend	9%	8%	10%	10%	12%	6%
Teacher	4%	3%	3%	4%	8%	0%
Other	17%	21%	19%	10%	5%	4%
No-one	29%	38%	26%	18%	8%	32%

One of the most consistent findings is that approximately a third of those contacting us have told nobody else about their situation, and this has been a consistent figure throughout the last 15 years. Given that a third of people contacting Nacoa have only told Nacoa, it is probable that a significant number of people who have to deal with this problem do not tell anyone about it.

In addition to other individuals, there are other various agencies that people can approach for help, including social services, the police, and other health and social care agencies.

Other agencies involved	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Social Services	13%	15%	13%	9%	7%	6%
Police	2%	0%	0%	5%	2%	3%
Counsellor	3%	0%	0%	9%	9%	8%
School	2%	0%	0%	7%	9%	2%
GP	8%	0%	0%	23%	29%	27%
Drug/Alcohol agency	3%	0%	0%	8%	10%	4%
Other professionals	20%	24%	33%	7%	5%	7%
Self-help/fellowship	22%	44%	9%	8%	11%	8%
None	26%	17%	45%	23%	18%	36%

The number of GPs being involved has risen; this may be due to a Nacoa campaign to inform them of the issues. For each of these categories it would be useful to see which age group, sex, and region access the different sources of help, and we intend to do this in the future.

How the Helpline responds

The Nacoa helpline is there to provide support in various forms to help COAs deal with the challenges they face. The role of the helpline volunteer is to listen to what people are telling us. This is supportive listening; we listen to what people say, and acknowledge and reflect their experience. Contacts often remark that discussing the issue can prompt further insights into their situation that they might not have arrived at on their own.

There are other practical ways Nacoa helps, which is to guide contacts towards different sources of information, including Nacoa's own website, finding information on specific resources which may help them, and sending them out information by post or email.

Actions	All Years	5 Year Periods			Recent Years	
	2001-2015	2001-05	2006-10	2011-15	2014	2015
Non-Professionals						
Listening	83%	75%	86%	86%	89%	88%
Website	3%	<1%	2%	7%	7%	7%
Find resources	7%	11%	7%	5%	3%	3%
Sending Literature	6%	14%	6%	2%	<1%	1%
Professionals						
Listening	15%	5%	30%	29%	53%	52%
Website	2%	<1%	2%	8%	23%	8%
Find resources	4%	3%	5%	8%	6%	9%
Sending Literature	80%	92%	63%	55%	19%	32%

As outlined earlier, a significant number of those contacting Nacoa are professionals (approximately 15% in the last fifteen years). Over the years we appear to be sending out less literature to professionals, but spending more time listening to them and pointing them to sources of information. Clearly the impact of the web has had a significant impact on what they require from us.

Future developments

Nacoa is an organisation where people in different roles, staff, volunteers, and other stakeholders work together to produce an extremely effective body which exists on extremely limited funds. Nacoa has the support of a large number of people, and the gratitude of countless more. There is no doubt that Nacoa is impressive for its size, and a model of good practice. This is supported by the many awards it has received over the years and the feedback from the users of the helpline.

In September 2016 the first meeting for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children of Alcoholics took place. This was chaired by Member of Parliament and Nacoa patron, the Right Honourable Liam Byrne. Nacoa has been central to the creation of the Parliamentary Group which aims to 'champion the cause of children of dependent and hazardous drinkers'. Its first session brought Nacoa together with other charities and alcohol specialists to collate information for the first ever *Manifesto for Children of Alcoholics*.

Nacoa is committed to continuing to work to raise the profile of COAs and their needs in the public consciousness. Nacoa will continue to provide a much valued and confidential helpline service to COAs by phone, email and through its website and social media presence. Nacoa provides information and support to COAs, their families, professionals, and concerned others when they may have no other means of support. We will seek to improve the helpline and adapt to changes in the way people communicate.

We will record as much information as possible from those who contact us, while maintaining their confidentiality. This information is comprehensively recorded on our helpline database. We will continue to analyse the database as each new year of data is added. With our sampling system we are able to be more accurate in identifying areas that might help the future development of the helpline. For example, we aim to analyse how sex and age impact on the overall results in more detail. In addition the database includes many more related sections where details of different facets of people's experience with alcoholics are recorded, including mental wellbeing, abuse, and bereavement. We will review these parts of the database to see if any further insights can be obtained. We will monitor how the trends identified in this report continue to develop, and to consider ways in which the recording of the contacts can be improved.

The Nacoa helpline has evolved over the years, and will do so in the future. Nacoa is a lifeline for many children and others affected by alcohol, and it continues to deliver the message to children that their parent's alcoholism is not their fault and they are not alone.