

Quantification study to obtain and measure the size and scale of parental alcohol problems in UK and the effect on the family

Introduction

Background

In 1990 a small group of professional people, including a psychologist, a GP and a counsellor at an addiction centre met in recognition of the fact that children of parents who drank too much often experience problems into adulthood. This group initiated the formation of a new charity, The National Association for Children of Alcoholics, which achieved charity status in March, 1992. The objectives of the charity are fourfold: initially to generate awareness of the existence of this problem amongst a wider base of relevant professionals e.g. teachers, nurses, GP's, Probation Officers etc.; secondly, to develop a 'tool-kit' to help professionals deal with the problems; thirdly, to enable counselling of the children (now mostly adults) to take place, and fourthly, but a more long-term objective, to undertake some research into the origins and nature of the issue.

Purpose

To obtain a measure of the size and scale of the problem.

Research objectives

1. To identify the number of adults at a national level who perceive themselves as having a problem.
2. To estimate the likely potential uptake of the use of the charity.
3. To examine structure within the data to identify particular 'hot spots' of the problem, and any relationships that might exist.

Method

Telephone interviews

Sample

A nationally representative sample of UK adults (1,000 at 18+) was contacted by telephone as part of an omnibus survey.

Location

National

Research agency

Nielsen Consumer Research

Main Findings

1. A small minority of people (4.67% i.e. 2.05 million) grew up in families in which one or both of their parents 'drank too much'. Of these, 62% (i.e. 1.26 million people) reckoned that this caused them a problem at the time, or does so now, and of these 38% (0.478 million people) said that a charity specially set up for the adult children of alcoholic parents 'definitely would' or 'might be' of some help. The implication of this latter figure is that over a third of children who experience problems with alcoholic parents carry these problems into their adult life. Of the 1.26 million people who experienced problems due to alcoholic parents, 434,610 said they had 'quite a lot' of problems, which is a similar number of people as said a charity would be of help.
2. Just under one hundred thousand (87,800) said it would 'definitely' be of help to them to have a charity, so this figure would seem to be the best estimate of the number of people significantly affected by alcoholic parents in the population now.
3. Although only a tiny minority of the population is affected (albeit substantial numbers of people), the great majority of the population (76%) – (estimated 33 million people) thinks that the setting up of a charity for the adult children of alcoholics is a 'good idea'.
4. A number of movements in the data would suggest the following:
 - I. Women are more adversely affected by the experience of growing up with an alcoholic parent(s) than are men (or more likely to admit the presence of the problem), as a higher proportion claim to have had experienced the problem (5.37% compared to 3.71% for men), a higher proportion of these claimed that it caused them a problem 'then' or 'now' (71% compared to 50% for men), and a higher proportion of these think that a charity would be of help (40% compared to 33% for men).
 - II. There is an indication of a 'class' effect with 5.67% of those in social class C2DE claiming to have had alcoholic parents compared to 2.93% of those in social class ABC1 (professional). However, the proportion of those who claim to have had a problem 'then' or 'now' or think that a charity would help now, show no consistent variation between the two class groups, suggesting the class effect is not particularly strong.
 - III. The presence of an alcoholic mother (but not an alcoholic father) appears to be more dangerous than having just an alcoholic father or both parents alcoholic, as 78% of people with just an alcoholic mother claimed to have problems 'then' or 'now', compared to 58% of people with an alcoholic father or both parents alcoholic; 44% of those who had problems and had an alcoholic mother thought that a charity would 'definitely' or 'might help', compared with 18% of the people who had problems and had either a father or both parents alcoholic. The implication of this is that people with alcoholic mothers are more likely to carry the problem into adulthood.
 - IV. There is an indication that people who had alcoholic parents are less likely to be in full-time employment. Those currently not working are more likely than those working part-time, who are in turn more likely than those in full-time employment to have had alcoholic parents, a greater proportion of these claim to have problems 'then' or 'now' and a greater proportion think that an appropriate charity would 'definitely' or 'might' help them.

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This could simply be a reflection of the 'women effect' as obviously there is a greater proportion of women not working than in part-time employment and more in part-time employment than in full-time employment. However, as 6.17% of non-working people claim to have had alcoholic parent(s), whilst only 5.37% of women did, this suggests that there is an association between having alcoholic parents and being unemployed over and above the 'women effect'.

- V. There is an indication of a 'divorced effect' as a substantially higher proportion of people who are separated/widowed or divorced (7.23%) claim to have had alcoholic parent(s) than the population which is married or single (4.05%).
- VI. There does not appear to be a consistent effect in the data by region.

The 'effects' described above are based on very small numbers of people and should be taken only as tentative suggestions.

- 5. The nature of the problem of alcoholic parents was most commonly that of just an alcoholic father (70% of people with alcoholic parents, i.e. 3.3% of total population or 1.45 million people). Just alcoholic mothers occurred for 19% of people with alcoholic parents, i.e. 0.9% of total population or 0.395 million people, and 11% had both parents alcoholic, i.e. 0.5% of total population or 0.211 million people.
- 6. The sorts of problems that people described resulting from having alcoholic parents covered a wide range, but fell into the following categories:
 - I. lack of money
 - II. arguments
 - III. violence to mother and children
 - IV. tension and stress in the home
 - V. fright
 - VI. unstructured and unregulated home life
 - VII. loss of confidence and low self esteem
 - VIII. lack of love and (perhaps) ability to love
 - IX. general emotional problems
 - X. worries that the current partner may become alcoholic and becoming alcoholic oneself.

Conclusions

The survey estimates that there are substantial numbers of people who grew up with alcoholic parents, experienced problems at that time and believe that a charity set up for the purpose of helping them would be of value. The best estimate for the numbers interested in such a charity is about half a million, of which about 100,000 say it would definitely help them. The likelihood is that it is these latter people who have been significantly affected by their childhood. For a number of reasons, these estimates are probably low.

Although the actual number that would benefit is comparatively small, the number in the population who passively support the idea of such a charity is very high.

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It is possible to draw some tentative conclusions which might be better viewed as hypothesis for further work. These are: that women carry the scar of alcoholic parents more than men (or perhaps are more prepared to admit it), that an alcoholic mother is more damaging than an alcoholic father (although fortunately less common) and that the problem is more apparent in the social classes C2DE than ABC1.

There is also the implication (but very weak) that people who had alcoholic parents are more likely to be divorced or separated and to be out of work.

Summary by key numbers of people affected

The survey estimates that the following numbers of people fall into the different categories. These figures are almost certainly underestimates.

Number of people who grew up with alcoholic parents	2.05 million
Number of people who had problems	1.26 million
quite a lot of problems	434,610
some problems	829,711
Number of people who think a charity would help	478,000
definitely help	87,800
might help	390,710

It is notable that the number of people estimated that had 'quite a lot of problems' due to growing up with alcoholic parents is similar to the numbers estimated of saying that a charity would be of help.

This therefore suggests that about half a million people were actually affected into adult life by growing up in an alcoholic family, of which about 100,000 (those who say a charity would 'definitely help') still are, significantly affected.

The evidence in this report is based on very small sample sizes, and therefore must be taken as 'indicative' rather than absolute. However, for all that, there does seem to be quite good consistency in the data and the findings conform to common sense. The actual numbers of people found in the survey in the various categories are given in the Appendix.

Number of people who grew up with alcoholic parents

The survey was put into context by the following statement:

I would like to ask you some questions on behalf of a charity called The National Association for Children of Alcoholics. This charity is concerned with the long-term consequences of a child growing up having one or both parents who are alcoholics.

All the information that we collect is of course confidential, and no-one's name or address will be revealed to anyone.

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The question was asked:

“Did you yourself grow up in a home which either or both of your parents drank too much?”

Only a very small proportion in all (4.7%) claimed to have one or both their parents alcoholic. Mostly the parent was the father (3.3%), less commonly the mother (0.9%) and even less commonly both (0.5%).

By applying the estimated total adult population of the UK to these percentages it is possible to estimate that 395,000 people had an alcoholic mother, 1.45 million had an alcoholic father and 219,000 had both parents alcoholic, a total of 2.05 million people in all affected.

Base: All respondents	1006		Estimated number in the population	
	%			
Alcoholic parents?				
Mother	0.9	= 4.7	395,100	= 2.05 million
Father	3.3		1,448,700	
Both	0.5		219,500	
Neither	94.7		41,573,300	
Refused	0.6		263,400	

Proportion of people who experienced problems due to alcoholic parents then or now

The question was asked:

“And would you say that the excessive drinking of either or both of your parents whilst you were growing up has caused you any problems, either at that time or as an adult?”

Just under 3% (2.88%) of adults claimed that having alcoholic parents caused problems and 0.99% claimed that they had experienced ‘quite a lot’ of problems. Once again by applying the figures for the adult population of the UK it is possible to estimate the number of people in each of these categories. Over a million people (1.26 million) claim that there were problems due to having alcoholic parents of which about half a million (434,610) claimed there were ‘quite a lot of problems’.

Base: All respondents	1006		Estimated number in the population	
	%			
Quite a lot of problems	0.99	= 2.88%	434,610	= 1.26 million
Some problems	1.89		829,711	
None that I know of	0.69	= 1.78%	302,910	= 0.78 million
None at all	1.09		478,510	
Did not have alcoholic parents	95.30			

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Proportion who think a specific charity would help them

Respondents who had parents who drank too much were asked:

“Do you think that a charity specifically set up to help the adult children of alcoholic parents is an organisation that might be of help to you?”

Just over one percent (1.09%) said that it ‘definitely’ would help (0.20%) or ‘might’ help (0.89%). These translate to an estimated number in the population of 87,800 and 390,710 respectively, a total of almost half a million (478,000).

Base: All respondents	1006			Estimated number in the population		
	%					
Would a charity help?						
Definitely would help me	0.20			87,800		
Might be of help to me	0.89	= 1.09%		390,710	=478,000	
Probably would not be of help	0.40		= 4.7%	175,600		= 2.05 million
Do not need help	3.00			1,317,000		
Refused	0.20			87,800		
Did not have alcoholic parents	95.30					

General support for the charity

All respondents were asked:

“Do you think that a charity specially set up to help adult children of alcoholic parents is a good idea or not?”

The majority (75.6%) said ‘yes’ to the question, which corresponds to 33.2 million people. Obviously, it costs nothing to give this support, and perhaps it is more interesting to know why the 10 million who said ‘no’ gave this answer – but we did not ask them.

Types of problem that arise with alcoholic parents

Those people who claimed to have alcoholic parents and said that there was ‘quite a lot’ or ‘some’ problems’ were asked:

“Can you describe what those problems are? Anything else?”

The descriptions given fell under a number of different headings:

Lack of money / arguments / violence

“Poverty / no work / general unhappiness. Short of money. Friction between parents. Made mother quick-tempered. Then father went out to drink. Loss of sleep for children, they lose work. Children lose due to money spent in the pub. My father beat us as children. There were always rows at home and no money. Mood swings. Excessive rages.

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Lack of money. Upsetting at the time. Took a lot of money. Fighting. Father drunk money. Daughter noticed it. Single parent. Want more for your own daughter that you had as a child. General worry. Worried if she would end up the same. General arguments in the household. Stress / fright. Father was often drunk. Kicked mother. Daughter put on doorstep. Lot of arguments in the family. My father used to go on binges. Violent to mother but not children. Now I am grown up I am careful about drink but not over concerned. As a child problems with mother drinking / quarrelling with father. I'm the youngest of 3 children."

Family support missing

"Father not being there. Mother arguing with him when he was. No family life. Father's life revolved around pub. Unhappiness at home when growing up, general tension in the home. Father's attitude was illogical. It confused me. Violence to me and mother. I had no proper childhood. Missed out particularly on loving. Having to take role of mother figure. Take lead in family."

Psychological Consequences

"Lack of confidence. Severe lack of confidence / low self-esteem. Complex mental attitude. What you see you never forget. I was physically abused by my father. A lot of emotional problems when I was young. Mental / psychological problems made me turn inwards. Have to fight it to live as an adult. Basically unable to communicate. Worry about safety aspect."

Embarrassment

"Embarrassment. Hid away from him. Nerves or being nervous. I was not allowed to mix with other people at all. I suppose in case I told. Not being able to have friends around."

Fear of drink

"Very concerned when husband has a drink / though no need. Caused myself to drink."

From the descriptions it is possible to draw out a number of themes, these are:

1. Lack of money
2. Arguments
3. Violence towards mother and children
4. Tension and stress in the home
5. Fright
6. Lack of structure in the family
7. Embarrassment
8. Loss of confidence and self-esteem
9. Lack of love and (perhaps) ability to love
10. General emotional problems
11. Worried about current partner drinking and becoming alcoholic oneself.

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The nature of the interviewing would not easily facilitate getting comments of this type, and it is reasonable to suppose that this is just the tip of an iceberg, indicating the horror of family life with an alcoholic parent.

Associations in the data

a) Impact on women

A greater proportion of women (5.37%) than men (3.71%) claim to have had alcoholic parents, and of these a greater proportion of women (71%) than men (50%) claim that this caused problems, and of those who had problems, more women (40%) than men (33%) felt a charity would 'definitely' or 'might' help. Clearly the effect of alcoholic parents is being talked about more by women than men (there is no reason to expect that more women than men would have had alcoholic parents). It follows that either women are more disturbed than men by having alcoholic parents, or more prepared to talk about it, or both.

	Men	Women
Proportion that had alcoholic parents	3.71%	5.37%
Proportion of those with alcoholic parents who perceived a problem	50%	71%
Proportion of those who perceived a problem who felt a charity would help	33%	40%

b) Current working status

There is a systematic movement of data suggesting that the problem is more acute for those people who do not work compared to part-time workers, and that part-timers have more of a problem than full-timers. This effect may be a reflection of the greater number of women who do not work or work part-time.

However, the proportion of people who have alcoholic parents amongst those who are currently not working is 6.17%, which is higher than that for women (5.37%), and therefore the effect cannot simply be explained in terms of the 'women' effect, suggesting a weak but real association between current working status and the presence / absence of alcoholic parents.

	Full-time	Part-time	Not working
Proportion who had alcoholic parents	3.46%	4.10%	6.17%
Proportion of those who had alcoholic parents who perceive a problem	56%	60%	65%
Proportion of those who perceive a problem who felt a charity would help	33%	33%	41%

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c) Divorce effect

Respondents whose parents are divorced, widowed or separated are more likely to have alcoholic parents (7.23%) compared to the rest of the population (4.05%), and of those who do have such parents, a higher proportion (67%) perceive a problem than amongst the rest of the population (60%). However, fewer of those who perceived a problem think that a charity would be of help to them (25%) than the rest of the population (43%).

	Separated / Widowed / Divorced	Rest
Proportion that had alcoholic parents	7.23%	4.05%
Proportion of those who had alcoholic parents who perceive a problem	67%	60%
Proportion of those who perceive a problem who felt a charity would help	25%	43%

d) Social class

There is a suggestion that the problem is more acute down-market (C2DE) as the proportion of C2DE who claim to have alcoholic parents (5.67%) is higher than that of ABC1 (2.93%). However, a smaller proportion of respondents who had alcoholic parents perceived a problem (60%) than ABC1 (79%), and a similar proportion of those who perceived a problem felt that a charity would help (36% of ABC1, 39% of C2DE).

	ABC1	C2DE
Proportion that had alcoholic parents	2.93%	5.67%
Proportion of those who had alcoholic parents who perceive a problem	79%	60%
Proportion of those who perceive a problem who felt a charity would help	36%	39%

e) Impact of an alcoholic mother

The impact of an alcoholic mother appears to be more damaging than that of just a father, or both parents. Hence 78% of respondents who had an alcoholic mother perceived a problem compared to 58% or respondents who had an alcoholic father alone or with an alcoholic mother, and 44% of people with an alcoholic mother who perceived a problem felt that a charity would help compared to 18% of respondents with both parents (or just a father) alcoholic.

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	Alcoholic mother	Alcoholic father alone or with mother
Proportion of those who had alcoholic parents who perceive a problem	78%	58%
Proportion of those who perceive a problem who felt a charity would help	44%	18%

f) Summary

There are implications that alcoholic mothers have a worse impact than alcoholic fathers, and that girls are more adversely affected by having alcoholic parents than boys. The problem is also more apparent with C2DE than ABC1. There is a suggestion that people who have had alcoholic parents are more likely to be separated or divorced and to be out of work.

Groups of people which lay outside the survey

This survey has been conducted on normal home based people by telephone. It will therefore have missed out those groups of people which may well be above averagely likely to have suffered from this problem. These groups are:

1. People in hostels or sheltered accommodation
2. People living rough on the streets
3. People in prison
4. People in psychiatric hospitals
5. People in the army and navy

Estimates of the numbers in each category are available, and are as follows:

Hostels / sheltered accommodation (England only)	60,000
People living rough (England only)	8,000
Psychiatric beds	272,000
Prison	44,000
Army / navy ranks	164,000
Army / navy officers	24,000
TOTAL	573,000

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If the (wholly arbitrary) assumption is made, that these groups have twice the probability of having alcoholic parents, experiencing problems and thinking a charity would help, than the general population has, then some further estimates can be made for the total numbers of people in the country within these groups. As can be seen from the table below, this addition makes little difference.

However, this is working on the assumption that the probability of this problem being present amongst these groups is twice as great as the general population. If it were ten times as great (as it might be), then these groups would contain over 60,000 people who have been affected by alcoholic parents.

	Rate in general population	Numbers in general population		Estimated numbers in institutional population	
Have alcoholic parents	4.67%	2.05 million		53,518	
Perceive a problem due to alcoholic parents	2.88%	1.26 million		16,502	
Think a charity would 'definitely' help them	0.20%	87,800		1,146	
Think a charity 'might' help them	0.89%	390,710	= 478,510	5,099	= 6,245

In 1991-1992, 1.7 million people were receiving treatment as out-patients of psychiatric hospitals. Some of these people would be in sheltered accommodation, or on the streets, whilst the great majority would be in homes, and therefore in principle available to be interviewed in the survey.

Appendix

Actual numbers of people found in the survey:

	All	Have alcoholic parents	Perceived a problem	Charity would be of help
All	1006	47	29	11
Men	485	19	9	3
Women	521	29	20	8
ABC1	477	17	11	4
C2DE	529	30	18	7
Unemployed	421	26	17	2
The rest	585	21	12	9
Separated / Divorced	166	12	8	7
Rest	839	35	21	4

Professor Martin Callingham

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