

Domestic abuse, sexual assault, and child abuse

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Domestic abuse, sexual assault, and child abuse

Summary

- Alcohol use is consistently found in a high proportion of those who perpetrate domestic abuse and sexual assault.
- Alcohol use is also linked to elevated risk of experiencing domestic abuse and sexual assault, though the nature of this association is unclear.
- Alcohol can be embedded into abusive relationships, and people who experience domestic abuse may use alcohol as a coping mechanism. This can create barriers to support for survivors of abuse with alcohol needs.
- Children of parents and caregivers who are dependent on alcohol or engage in heavy episodic drinking are significantly more likely to experience abuse, leading to severe long-term harms.
- Population-level interventions which reduce alcohol consumption show promise in tackling this harm, though the evidence base has so far inadequately assessed the impacts of such policies on domestic abuse. This is a key direction for future research.

Introduction

There is a large and growing body of literature that suggests alcohol is a major contributing factor to domestic abuse and sexual assault.

Alcohol can also contribute to children experiencing significant emotional and physical abuse, violence, and neglect from parents and caregivers.

However, the effects of alcohol are complex: there is also evidence that victims of long-term domestic abuse may use alcohol to cope with the abuse.

Greater access to alcohol, through both the on-trade (alcohol sold at bars, pubs and clubs) and off-trade (alcohol sold at supermarkets and off-licenses), and exposure to alcohol advertising are associated with higher domestic abuse risk, suggesting that population-level measures which reduce alcohol consumption are a promising way to tackle this harm. The evidence for these interventions is still limited, largely because most research does not adequately explore the gendered dimensions of such policies and impacts on domestic abuse. Future research should overcome these methodological issues and aim to contribute to this research gap.

Domestic abuse and sexual assault

Domestic abuse, sometimes referred to as domestic violence or intimate partner violence, covers incidents or patterns of behaviour through which a person's current or former partner or relative seeks to control or exert power over them.¹ Abuse takes many forms, including physical, psychological, emotional, coercive, sexual and financial. Domestic abuse affects people of all genders and sexualities,² though crime data and the academic literature show that it is often perpetrated by men against women.³

The role of alcohol in domestic abuse and sexual assault

Domestic abuse agencies and researchers agree that alcohol use is never an excuse for perpetrators of domestic abuse and sexual assault. However, evidence consistently shows that alcohol plays a role in these issues.

Although it does not “cause” domestic abuse, research demonstrates that alcohol is a significant contributing factor and increases the occurrence and severity of abusive acts.⁴⁵ According to ONS figures, 44% of people reporting domestic violence in 2024/25 believed that the offender(s) was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault.⁶

Women and children are disproportionately at risk of violence associated with men's drinking.⁷ This may be partly due to gender differences in alcohol consumption, which also reflect societal norms around masculinity: men drink more than women and are more likely to engage in violent or risky behaviours.⁸ Studies of men in treatment programmes find an overlap between experiencing substance use disorders (including related to alcohol) and perpetration of domestic abuse.⁹¹⁰

Men are also affected by alcohol-related domestic abuse from female partners,¹¹ although studies suggest that women's alcohol consumption plays a smaller role in aggression towards male partners.¹²¹³ There is evidence that alcohol may have an impact in situations where both partners are violent to one another.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶

In addition to the gendered dimension, alcohol-related domestic abuse is characterised by other inequities. One study in England and Wales found that people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were significantly more likely to experience alcohol-related physical domestic violence, and that disabled people were particularly at risk.¹⁷ People already facing greater disadvantages are thus particularly vulnerable.¹⁸ Furthermore, a partner's alcohol consumption is a major risk factor for women experiencing domestic abuse during pregnancy and the postnatal period.¹⁹

Alcohol is similarly a major contributing factor to rape and sexual assault.²⁰²¹ ONS figures from 2024/25 state that 38.8% of people reporting rape said that the perpetrator(s) was under the influence of alcohol.²²

The alcohol environment as a factor in domestic abuse and sexual assault

Research suggests that the environment in which alcohol is consumed may also play a role in domestic abuse and sexual assault.

There appears to be a link between sporting events and domestic abuse, which some studies indicate may be partly due to alcohol.²³ Studies using police data indicate that there is an increase in alcohol-related domestic abuse cases in the hours following major football

events.²⁴²⁵ Alcohol companies frequently engage in marketing activities associated with sport, including sponsorships, which are noted to increase consumption.²⁶

Studies carried out in a range of contexts suggest that having greater access to alcohol increases the risk of domestic abuse.²⁷ Research has found that restricting the on-trade (e.g. sale of alcohol at bars, clubs, pubs) may reduce domestic abuse and violence against women.²⁸²⁹ However, a growing number of studies also associate the alcohol off-trade (e.g. sale of alcohol at supermarkets and off-licences) with increased risk of violence, including domestic abuse and sexual assault.³⁰³¹³²³³³⁴ Given the association between alcohol availability and domestic abuse, there is concern that greater access to alcohol through online and rapid deliveries may also increase domestic abuse, although this is currently a gap in the academic literature. Research also indicates an association between exposure to alcohol advertising in the off-trade and violent crime, including rape.³⁵

There is also a link between the price of alcohol and violence, with higher prices associated with lower risk of violent injury.³⁶

Given these associations, population-level policy interventions aimed at reducing consumption are recommended as strategies to reduce harm. For example, pricing interventions appear to have an effect on domestic violence, either alone or when introduced alongside other measures,³⁷³⁸ and policies that restrict alcohol trading hours are weakly associated with reduced intimate partner violence.³⁹

However, the evidence base is currently limited on such policies. This is not necessarily due to a lack of effectiveness. A common problem identified with the research into such policies is that it does not adequately cover how these impact men and women differently, particularly in relation to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls.⁴⁰⁴¹ This is therefore a major research gap to be addressed when designing future research.

Alcohol use among people who experience domestic abuse

Evidence also demonstrates links between alcohol use and experiencing domestic abuse and sexual assault. Domestic abuse support organisations have raised alcohol use by victims of abuse as an important issue, while emphasising the need to avoid damaging victim-blaming narratives.

Women who drink alcohol are at a higher risk of experiencing domestic abuse.⁴² The nature of this link is unclear, but it may be that women who drink alcohol are more likely to partner with men who also drink, or that alcohol is a source of tension within a relationship which escalates to violence.

Alcohol can also be embedded within abusive relationships. Perpetrators may use alcohol as a means of control, such as by coercing victims into consuming alcohol, threatening to limit access to alcohol, sabotaging recovery efforts, or using a victim's alcohol use to discredit them to others.⁴³⁴⁴⁴⁵ Research also shows that women with substance problems who experience domestic violence may be concerned about their children being taken into care if they report abuse, a fear which their abusers may exploit.⁴⁶

Similarly, women who experience domestic abuse and sexual violence are more likely to subsequently use or be dependent on alcohol.⁴⁷⁴⁸ Further research to understand this association has been recommended,⁴⁹ though qualitative studies suggest that alcohol may be used in the aftermath of abuse as a way of coping with traumatic experiences.⁵⁰⁵¹

Implications for accessing appropriate support

The overlap between experiencing domestic abuse and alcohol problems can make it difficult to access adequate support.⁵² For example, survivors of domestic abuse with alcohol needs may be turned away from refuges.⁵³ Previous research into refuge provision in London found that while almost all boroughs require the refuges they fund to support women with alcohol, drug or mental health problems, only 26% reported that they “always” or “often” accept women who use alcohol or drugs.⁵⁴

Accessing alcohol treatment services can also be challenging for survivors of domestic abuse. The tendency for alcohol treatment services to be mixed-gender spaces and a lack of services that fit around family life and childcare responsibilities have been noted as possible barriers to access.⁵⁵ Evidence also shows that women who have experienced intimate partner violence may have poorer outcomes from substance use services, which is concerning given the high prevalence of domestic abuse among women with substance problems.⁵⁶ Researchers and domestic abuse experts recommend that this population could be supported by alcohol treatment services which are gender responsive and sensitive to the needs of people who have experienced domestic abuse.⁵⁷ This might be achieved through integrated or coordinated services that do not treat intimate partner violence and substance use as distinct issues.⁵⁸

Alcohol’s role in domestic abuse and sexual assault within the LGBTQ+ community

Much of the literature on alcohol’s role in domestic abuse and sexual violence focuses on heterosexual, cisgender populations. However, some studies discuss these issues within LGBTQ+ contexts. One systematic review identifies alcohol consumption as a risk factor for intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships.⁵⁹ Studies of gay, bisexual and queer men found that those with a history of intimate partner violence were more likely to drink heavily,⁶⁰ and more likely to drink more alcohol in response to abuse.⁶¹ Another study identified higher rates of heavy episodic drinking among transgender people who had experienced sexual assault.⁶²

Further research is needed in this area, given that some evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ people may experience greater levels of domestic abuse and sexual assault than heterosexual and cisgender people^{63,64} and the higher rates of alcohol consumption and alcohol problems among LGBTQ+ people.⁶⁵

Alcohol and child abuse

While parental or caregiver alcohol use does not automatically have a harmful impact on children, it can lead to significant emotional and physical abuse, violence, neglect and a general lack of care and support.⁶⁶ In 2024, the NSPCC helpline received over 30 calls per day from adults concerned about children affected by parental alcohol or substance use.⁶⁷ Alcohol-related child abuse can include physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect.⁶⁸

As with domestic abuse, alcohol is not the root cause of, or an excuse for, child abuse, but evidence shows that it is a significant contributor. One systematic review found that children whose parents and caregivers have alcohol-related diagnoses are around twice as likely to experience maltreatment.⁶⁹ Another review considered parenting practices in relation to both parents with alcohol use disorder and those who engage in heavy episodic drinking or who drink at lower levels.⁷⁰ While the review identified that non-dependent parental drinking is under-studied, it found that parents with alcohol use disorder were more likely to display harsh or abusive behaviour and have an impaired relationship with their child, and that non-dependent heavy drinking was associated with physical abuse and harsher parenting.

Child abuse is closely linked with domestic abuse. Children from households in which there is violence between adults are at a higher risk of child abuse and neglect.⁷¹ Violence in the home, experienced directly and/or indirectly, is harmful to children. Research has found that parental domestic abuse, alcohol use and mental health cluster during early childhood, impacting early years development and leading to poorer mental health over time.⁷²

Impact on children

A comprehensive review of the literature on harm to women and children from men's alcohol use identifies four main areas in which children may be affected:

- Harm to the family unit and parent–child relationships
- Witnessing or being a target of violence and maltreatment
- Physical, psychological and emotional harms, which may extend into adulthood
- Struggling at school, exhibiting behavioural problems and having poorer educational outcomes.⁷³

Certain protective factors, such as having a supportive relationship with another non-alcohol affected parent and community or social support may mitigate some of these harms.⁷⁴

There is also emerging evidence which indicates that alcohol-related domestic and child abuse can be part of an intergenerational cycle.⁷⁵ Exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood increases the likelihood of a person going on to use substances and perpetrate intimate partner violence in adulthood.⁷⁶ Early intervention is therefore recommended to address child maltreatment.⁷⁷ Given the way adversities cluster, interventions may need to be sensitive to the overlap between alcohol problems, domestic abuse, mental health problems and other issues.⁷⁸

Research gaps

Much of the research on parental drinking and harm to children does not make a distinction between which parent is drinking.⁷⁹ This gap is important, as some research suggests that there may be gender differences in how alcohol use impacts parenting practices.⁸⁰

In addition, much of the evidence on parent and caregiver drinking and child abuse focuses on parents with diagnosed alcohol dependency or those in contact with alcohol-related services.⁸¹ The impact of non-dependent parental alcohol consumption on children, particularly at lower or moderate levels, is under-investigated.⁸²

Finally, while there is considerable research which recognises parent or caregiver alcohol problems as a form of adverse childhood experience, there is much less published regarding interventions to protect or support children who are affected. There is a need for more research into such interventions and their efficacy in reducing such harm.

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⁵ World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. (2025). *Alcohol-attributable injuries in the WHO European Region: Overview of key findings based on 2019 data* (WHO/EURO:2025-12985-52759-82010). <https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/d4ac34b1-1d53-4d71-b3c0-09f0f039e389/content>

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