

Estimating the number of children of parents who misuse substances, including alcohol across the communities of the Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force (TDATE) region

Executive Summary

By Karen Galligan and Prof. Catherine Comiskey
Trinity College Dublin

Published by TDATE, 2017
A copy of the full report is available at:
<http://tallaghtdatf.ie/>



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Barnardos
EVERY CHILDHOOD LASTS A LIFETIME



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Executive Summary

*Estimating the
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Tallaght Drug and
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(TDAATF) region*

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Introduction

In March 2015 the Tallaght Drugs and Alcohol Task Force (TDATF), in conjunction with Barnardos Lorien Child and Family Service, commissioned research to collect and collate comprehensive and robust data on the number of children potentially affected by parental substance misuse in the communities served by TDATF. The research was undertaken in an effort to provide a better picture of the hidden harm to children of parental substance misuse, in order to plan for local service provision.

The objectives of the research were:

- **To ascertain the potential scale of ‘hidden harm’ to children whose parents misuse substances;**
- **To deliver a comprehensive and robust snapshot of the number of children possibly impacted in the area, so as to inform the development and implementation of the Tallaght Drugs and Alcohol Task Force strategic plan and broader national policy;**
- **To deliver a comprehensive research findings report; and**
- **To make recommendations to progress this area of work and addressing emerging needs.**

The approach was primarily quantitative, complemented with a qualitative component

The service is a multi-agency partnership responsible for support services across Tallaght (Dublin 24) and Whitechurch areas. The research design was predominantly quantitative in nature, complemented with a qualitative component. The data collected was analysed, with key findings informing a series of recommendations.

The Barnardos Lorien Child and Family Service aims to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of children affected by substance misuse. The services offers a range of individual and group work, including a number of parenting and family support programmes.

The Research Design

Quantitative Research

The quantitative research consisted of secondary data analysis of a number of key data sources, including the 2010/2011 National Advisory Committee on Drugs Drug Use Prevalence Study; 2011 Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census data; and a TDATF audit of drugs response projects. A total of 14 TDATF community projects were invited to take part in the service audit, including 10 of the TDATF community drug response services. In total, 11 responses were received.

Direct estimation and indirect estimation methods were used to analyse the data. For direct estimation the multi-source enumeration method was used. For indirect estimation, the multiplier method was used. The approach created a range from the minimum number of children known to be possibly impacted, to an estimate of a far greater number of children

who are potentially impacted, but are not counted currently. This latter group can be described as being hidden from current service providers. The number is calculated using an enumeration method drawing from the numbers of known children and applying an adult /child multiplier to give an evidenced based estimate of the numbers of hidden children.

Qualitative Research

For the qualitative component, data was collected from the qualitative element of the audit form, in addition to the consultation form disseminated to a range of child and family services. In total, 34 service providers were invited to complete the consultation form, and 14 completed. A further 9 services were unable to complete the survey due to a lack of available data.

The overall response rate was just over 40%. The consultation form gathered data on the key needs of children affected by parental substance misuse, and service delivery needs in this context. The data collected was coded according to key themes and subsequently analysed. The impact of substance misuse on families and children is well established in International and Irish literature. The National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016 identified that children are likely to be at high risk where there is prevalence of substance misuse within their family.

A review on impact of parental substance misuse on children found that those affected are at higher risk of encountering a range of issues (NCADA, 2011).

Where adverse consequences do occur, they are typically multiple and cumulative. They can range from challenges with emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological development to poor school attainment. They can also be subtle and difficult to detect. It is also found that consequences can vary according to the stage of a child's development, with differing responses needed at different ages.

Despite the strong evidence base, there is an information gap in the Irish context in relation to the numbers of children potentially adversely affected by parental substance misuse, and whether this number is changing over time (Horgan 2011).

Corresponding data from the United Kingdom (UK) estimates that between 2-3% of the children under the age of 16 experience parental drug misuse (AMCD, 2003).

There is an information gap in relation to the numbers of children potentially adversely affected by parental substance misuse

UK estimates indicate that 3.6% of children live with a problem drinker who also used drugs (British Crime Survey, 2004; NPMS, 2000). While no comparable data exists in an Irish context, the TDATF has highlighted the needs of 'the next generation', including the group as a priority of work for the strategic plan 2016-2020.

Key Findings:

Quantitative

The National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016 was also instrumental in the formation of the National Hidden Harm steering committee. Subsequently, the North South Alcohol Policy Advisory Group Sub group on Hidden Harm was established in August 2012, leading to the establishment of the national steering group June 2013.

As many as 15% of children in the community are at risk of being impacted by illegal drug misuse

In June 2015, the Hidden Harm National Steering group, produced a Hidden Harm Strategic document “Seeing through Hidden Harm to Brighter Futures”. This statement aims to frame and acknowledge in policy and practice, the primacy of the safeguarding, protection and support of children affected by parental problem alcohol and other drug use, their family and communities

The study found that for every one service user of the Tallaght Drugs and Alcohol Task Force services, there was just under one child possibly impacted, with an exact ratio of 0.88 children to every 1 service user. This means that the study found that, at a minimum, almost one child is known to be potentially affected for every person engaged with the service. Multi-source enumeration of the TDAATF services approximates a minimum estimate of

prevalence at 751, or 3.7% of children in the area at risk of being impacted by substance misuse. The multiplier method, the estimate grew to 3,033, or 15% of children potentially affected by illegal drug use in the area. The South West Regional Drug Task Force figures were also analysed which provided an estimate of 4766 children or 24% of children potentially impacted by illegal drug use. Looking at findings in relation to alcohol, the study predicted that 14-37% of children are potentially impacted by alcohol dependency in the area which equates to between 2870 and 7382 children in the area. Notably, the difference between the percentage of children with parents known to be attending services in Tallaght (3.7%) versus the possible estimate of 15% -24% of children who have a parent using illegal drug(s) in the area, demonstrates that there may be 4-6 times the number of children affected by parental substance misuse not linked to services. These children represent potential hidden harm.

Almost one child is known to be potentially affected for every problem drug user

Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force

Qualitative Findings

The child and family services, and community drug services highlighted a range of themes in their feedback that they believe need to be addressed to help remove barriers to access to services for children and their families. Needs identified included:

- **Resources or funding to fully meet the needs of their service users;**
- **Specific services or programmes for service users' children in treatment services;**
- **Improved inter-agency and inter-disciplinary communication;**
- **Training for service providers in relation to responding to the needs of children affected by parental substance misuse; and**
- **Improved quality of information.**

Recommendations

The research undertaken has met a need to establish the number of children affected by parental substance misuse in the TDATF communities. The research has also shed light on the needs of services in achieving positive outcomes for children and families in the area. The significance of this research cannot be underestimated.

The results have the potential to inform the strategic direction of service provision and contribute to policy development at a local and national level in relation to substance misuse. In supporting service providers to make decisions about how to run their services and allocate funding, the information contained in this report will directly benefit service users at a local level. A number of recommendations have been identified:

- **The needs of children and families with parental substance misuse issues should be prioritised at a local and national policy level.**
- **Service providers should also encourage organisational commitment to the provision of family-focused services.**
- **Where possible, services should ensure they work towards a model of co-production, where families feel engaged and perceive themselves to be working towards common goals.**
- **Practitioners and professionals working in this context would benefit from ongoing supervision and support with their work.**
- **The ongoing and systematic collection of information on the children of service-users should be prioritised at all levels, from local to national. This should be done in adherence with ethical principles, privacy and confidentiality.**

The information contained in this report will directly benefit service users at a local level

Implementing the Findings

An outline implementation plan for the recommendations was discussed and the following proposed:

- **Tallaght is currently a learning site for the development of Hidden Harm practice guidelines.**

The work of the practice learning sites will be to assist the National Steering Group on Hidden Harm, complementing the existing practice sites in the North West (Donegal) and the Midlands.

The local Task Force has been proactive in this regard, taking a role in leading the way in family-focused approaches.

- **The establishment of a multi-service working group addressing the study has the potential to support the process of implementing the research recommendations.**

- **The organisation of a seminar or conference, with the theme of “supporting the next generation” would support dissemination of the research messages and foster dialogue with a wider audience.**

In addition, it has the potential to support Tallaght’s work as a learning site, while promoting links with partner services and structures (including the Tallaght Children and Young Peoples’s Service Committee (CYPSC)).

- **The findings highlight the benefits of good data. With this in mind, additional exploratory research on hard to reach and seldom heard families in the context of substance misuse would support the development of best practice models in this area.**
- **A training needs scoping exercise could support capacity building and the provision of additional training in this area.**
- **Local services should consider what more could be done to establish links with other services working with children, supporting partnership working and influencing change more broadly.**
- **Similarly, the TDATAF could support a consensus agreement by services to work together following certain agreed guidelines, as demonstrated in the information-sharing protocols employed in other settings.**

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the potential scale of ‘hidden harm’ to children of parental substance misuse, with a view to informing the development and implementation of the Tallaght Drugs and Alcohol Task Force strategic plan and broader national policy; and to make recommendations on how this can be achieved.

The data collected highlights the extent to which children in the communities served by the TDATAF may potentially be affected by parental substance misuse and in doing so, provides the evidence and impetus to prioritise their needs in the strategic direction of Task Force. The research is both timely and topical and will support the ongoing work of the TDATAF in this context.

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