

Alcohol Change UK submission to the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy call for evidence

March 2021



1. Introduction

Alcohol Change UK is a leading UK alcohol charity, formed from the merger of Alcohol Concern and Alcohol Research UK. With a vision of a society that is free from serious alcohol harm, we work towards five key changes: improved knowledge, better policies and regulation, shifted cultural norms, improved drinking behaviours, and more and better support and treatment. We are a research funder, we deliver the annual DryJanuary campaign and we provide training to client-facing professionals through our award-winning Blue Light project. We welcome the opportunity to make representation to the consultation on the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

Research evidence shows clear links between alcohol and violence against women and girls, especially domestic abuse. Although alcohol is not a direct cause, and is never an excuse, it can be an aggravating factor. As well as increasing the risk of violence against women and girls when a perpetrator has been drinking, victims can turn to alcohol to cope with the trauma they have experienced. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen calls to domestic abuse helplines skyrocket. At the same time, previously heavy drinkers have been drinking more during the past year. Support services have had to rapidly adapt, switching to online provision. This has had both benefits and disadvantages.

2. The link between alcohol and violence against women and girls

A 2019 rapid evidence review of the role of alcohol in contributing to violence in intimate relationships, commissioned by Alcohol Change UK, found that there is overall a statistically significant association between alcohol use and intimate partner violence perpetration and victimisation.¹ Alcohol can increase the risk of abuse taking place, increase the severity of that abuse, and increase the risk of experiencing domestic abuse.²

There is a lot of evidence to support this correlation. For example, 20-50% of cases of domestic abuse take place when the perpetrator has been drinking³ and the risk of rape is twice as high in attacks involving offenders who have been drinking.⁴ A review of domestic homicides by the Home Office in 2016 found that substance use was a factor in more than half of intimate partner homicides.⁵ These findings are echoed by frontline workers. Police Sergeant Mick Urwin gave oral evidence to the Commission on Alcohol Harm in which he said that the majority of domestic incidents are alcohol related “with the offender having drunk excessively prior to offending”.⁶

Violence is not only experienced between people in intimate relationships. Evidence shows that parents experience abuse from their children who are drinking⁷ and that other family members can suffer as well. 32% of family members were victims of violence when their loved one had an active addiction, but only 11% when the loved one was in recovery.⁸ Children are also affected by their parents’ drinking. Parental alcohol misuse was found to be a factor in 37% of serious case reviews where a child was killed or seriously injured from 2011 to 2014.⁹

¹ Jones, L., et al. (2020) [Rapid Evidence Review: The role of alcohol in contributing to violence in intimate partner relationships](#)
² Manchester Metropolitan University, Adfam and ACUK (2020) [Briefing: Alcohol and domestic abuse in the context of Covid-19 restrictions](#)
³ Bennett and Bland (2008) [Substance abuse and intimate partner violence](#), National online recourse centre on violence against women
⁴ Brecklin and Ullman (2002) [The Roles of Victim and Offender Alcohol Use in Sexual Assaults: Results from the National Violence against Women Survey](#), Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, Volume 63: Issue 1
⁵ Home Office (2016) [Domestic Homicide Reviews: Key findings from analysis of domestic homicide reviews](#)
⁶ The Commission on Alcohol Harm (2020) [‘It’s everywhere’ – alcohol’s public face and private harm. The report of the Commission on Alcohol Harm](#)
⁷ Adfam and AVA (2012) [Between a rock and a hard place: How parents deal with children who use substances and perpetrate abuse](#)
⁸ Andersson, C. et al. (2018) [Understanding recovery from a family perspective: A survey of life in recovery for families](#)
⁹ Department of Education (2016) [Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014](#)

Inequalities are seen in the links between alcohol and violence as well. The Institute of Alcohol Studies analysed Crime Survey for England and Wales data between 2013/14 and 2017/18 and found that the most disadvantaged groups experience five times the rates of alcohol related violence than the most advantaged – driven by domestic and acquaintance violence.¹⁰

3. Perpetrators and victims

While perpetrators' use of alcohol strongly correlates with levels of abuse and violence, perpetrators also use alcohol to exert control over their victims. This can cause victims to develop problems with alcohol which require treatment. Coercing victims to drink alcohol can make them more vulnerable to abuse.¹¹ Victims may also drink in order to reduce the chance of future abuse. In evidence given to the Commission on Alcohol Harm, Inspector Donald Wade of Northumbria Police said that "the victim is drinking, and they may well be drinking because of the violence and the dreadful circumstances they're in, and they're drinking to try and take the edge off that, or they may well be drinking along with the perpetrator because they think if they drink with them, they're less liable to commit acts of violence on them".

Even without coercion, many victim/survivors turn to alcohol to cope with the trauma. Evidence shows that of the 1 in 20 women who have experienced extensive physical or sexual violence and abuse, one in three have an alcohol problem.¹² This is twice as high compared with women who have little experience of violence and abuse.¹³

4. Emergency services

While violence against women can be experienced in many workplaces, alcohol-related violence is extremely prevalent against emergency service workers and health workers. In a survey by the Institute of Alcohol Studies, 96% of emergency service workers reported being threatened or verbally abused by someone who appeared to be intoxicated, and between a third and a half of front-line service personnel said they had been sexually harassed or abused by intoxicated people.¹⁴ The British Medical Association, in evidence given to the Commission, reported that alcohol is a leading factor in abuse towards NHS staff and that there had been a staggering 56,435 assaults in the year 2016/17. An inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm into the impact of alcohol on emergency services found that 90% of officers expect to be assaulted on a Friday and Saturday night. A staff survey at one police force found that female officers specifically expect sexual assault. The Inquiry heard from a police officer who said that, "I can take my team through a licensed premise, and by the time I take them out the other end, they will have been felt up several times".¹⁵

5. Services and support

5.1. Increases in need due to the pandemic

Both problem drinking and levels of domestic abuse have increased during the past year, driven by the huge changes in day-to-day life as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This increased need will need to be met by both alcohol and domestic abuse services. Alcohol Change UK has commissioned multiple surveys over the past year which show that previously heavy drinkers have increased their drinking levels further during the pandemic. 38% of those who drank heavily before the lockdown (seven or more units of alcohol on each drinking day) said that they had been drinking even more during the lockdown.¹⁶ Public Health England's monitoring of the wider impacts of COVID-19 has recorded similar trends. The prevalence of increasing and higher risk drinking, measured by the AUDIT tool, increased from 10.8% in February 2020 to 19.4% in April 2020. This has stayed high at

¹⁰ Institute of Alcohol Studies (2020) [Inequalities in victimisation: alcohol, violence and anti-social behaviour](#)

¹¹ Women's Aid website [The nature and impact of domestic abuse](#)

¹² The National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage (2019) [Breaking Down the Barriers](#)

¹³ Women's Aid website [the nature and impact of domestic abuse](#)

¹⁴ The Commission on Alcohol Harm (2020) ['It's everywhere' – alcohol's public face and private harm. The report of the Commission on Alcohol Harm](#)

¹⁵ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm (2016) [The Frontline Battle: An Inquiry into the Impact of Alcohol on Emergency Services by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm](#)

¹⁶ Alcohol Change UK (2020) [Research: drinking in the UK during lockdown and beyond](#)

17.3% in January 2021.¹⁷ This level of drinking is more likely experienced by perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse.

At the same time calls to domestic abuse helplines have risen sharply. More than 40,000 calls and contacts were made to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline during the first three months of lockdown, according to Refuge. Between April 2020 and February 2021, calls and contacts were up by 61%, while 72% of the people given support by the helpline were women experiencing abuse.¹⁸

The switch to remote services in both the alcohol and domestic abuse support sectors has led to both opportunities and challenges. The most marginalized groups without access to technology have been left unable to use support and treatment services while some who were previously unlikely to attend face-to-face will have benefitted.

5.2. Issues to consider

It may be difficult for victim/survivors to attend non-specialised alcohol services in their borough, where they may encounter their abuser or other potentially threatening clients. Less than half of local authorities in England and Wales have any women-only provision in their alcohol service. We need gender-specific, trauma-informed alcohol services which are flexible, offering both face-to-face and remote provision. This flexibility is key as women who are suffering from domestic abuse can find it difficult to speak online when the perpetrator is in the same building or room as them, as noted by Changing Lives at the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm's March 2021 meeting on the topic of alcohol and domestic abuse. There is also a lack of services which take childcare into account. Women may also not access both domestic abuse and alcohol services if they fear that their children will be taken into care.

5.3. Recommendations for services

We are calling for more training in alcohol issues for non-alcohol-specialist frontline and statutory workers, particularly those who may contact with those affected by domestic abuse. More and better multi-agency working is needed between alcohol services, domestic abuse services, and mental health services, for both perpetrators and victims. As quoted in Agenda's Breaking Down the Barriers report, "many mental health services won't work with someone who is currently using substances and drug and alcohol services aren't equipped to support someone whose mental health symptoms increase when they stop using".¹⁹ Similarly, a review of London refuges for victims of domestic violence found that only 26% always or often accept women who use alcohol or other drugs.²⁰ King's College London is carrying out a research programme looking at ways to integrate substance misuse treatment with interventions to reduce intimate partner abuse; one of few examples of an integrated approach to addressing co-occurring alcohol problems and domestic abuse.²¹

Alcohol Change UK

March 2021

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

¹⁷ Public Health England (2021) [Wider Impacts of COVID-19 on Health \(WICH\) monitoring tool: Behavioural risk factors](#)

¹⁸ Refuge (2021) [A year of lockdown: Refuge releases new figures showing dramatic increase in activity](#)

¹⁹ The National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage (2019) [Breaking Down the Barriers](#) pg 12-13

²⁰ Against Violence and Abuse (2014) [Case by Case: Refuge provision in London for survivors of domestic violence who use alcohol and other drugs or have mental health problems](#), p. 17

²¹ King's College London website (n.d.) [Research and Innovation: ADVANCE](#)

References

- Adfam and AVA (2012) [Between a rock and a hard place: How parents deal with children who use substances and perpetrate abuse](#)
- Alcohol Change UK (2020) [Research: drinking in the UK during lockdown and beyond](#)
- All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm (2016) [The Frontline Battle: An Inquiry into the Impact of Alcohol on Emergency Services by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alcohol Harm](#)
- Andersson, C. et al. (2018) [Understanding recovery from a family perspective: A survey of life in recovery for families](#)
- AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) (2014) [Case by Case: Refuge provision in London for survivors of domestic violence who use alcohol and other drugs or have mental health problems](#)
- Department of Education (2016) [Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014](#)
- Bennett and Bland (2008) [Substance abuse and intimate partner violence](#), National online recourse centre on violence against women
- Brecklin and Ullman (2002) [The Roles of Victim and Offender Alcohol Use in Sexual Assaults: Results from the National Violence against Women Survey](#), Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, Volume 63: Issue 1
- The Commission on Alcohol Harm (2020) [‘It’s everywhere’ – alcohol’s public face and private harm. The report of the Commission on Alcohol Harm](#)
- Home Office (2016) [Domestic Homicide Reviews: Key findings from analysis of domestic homicide reviews](#)
- Institute of Alcohol Studies (2020) [Inequalities in victimisation: alcohol, violence and anti-social behaviour](#)
- Jones, L., et al. (2020) [Rapid Evidence Review: The role of alcohol in contributing to violence in intimate partner relationships](#)
- King’s College London website (n.d.) [Research and Innovation: ADVANCE](#)
- Manchester Metropolitan University, Adfam and ACUK (2020) [Briefing: Alcohol and domestic abuse in the context of Covid-19 restrictions](#)
- The National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage (2019) [Breaking Down the Barriers](#)
- Public Health England (2021) [Wider Impacts of COVID-19 on Health \(WICH\) monitoring tool: Behavioural risk factors](#)
- Refuge (2021) [A year of lockdown: Refuge releases new figures showing dramatic increase in activity](#)
- Women’s Aid website [The nature and impact of domestic abuse](#)