



Families in Lockdown

The effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the family and friends of someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem

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Foreword



In April 2020, 241 people coping with a friend or family member's alcohol, drug or gambling problem responded to an online survey by Adfamⁱ. This survey looked at how some of their daily challenges– fear, domestic abuse, isolation, loneliness and mental stress – might be being further exacerbated by COVID-19 and the lockdown measures imposed from March 2020.

A majority told us that they feel their mental health and emotional wellbeing has deteriorated during lockdown, and some said they feel less safe now. Others are experiencing more verbal and physical abuse.

This is all the more worrying because up and down the country we know that there are very few specialist services to support the millions of usⁱⁱ who are coping with a family member or friends alcohol, drug or gambling problemⁱⁱⁱ.

It is vital that we alleviate the additional burdens that lockdown and COVID-19 is placing on people already coping with life changing situations, many of whom are contributing to society by taking on unpaid and difficult caring roles for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Family members and friends who live with, or care about, someone with alcohol, drug or gambling problems, need and deserve our help now more than ever.

Vivienne Evans,
Adfam Chief Executive

Key Findings

The impact of lockdown on those with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem

- 88% of respondents said the lockdown is negatively impacting on their family member's alcohol, drug or gambling problem.
- Nearly half (42%) said that their family member's alcohol or drug use, or gambling has increased during lockdown.
- Nearly a third (28%) said that their loved one has relapsed, or their recovery is at risk, because of lockdown.
- A fifth (23%) said their loved one was becoming more physically unwell during lockdown.

Lockdown is making it harder for friends and family to cope

- 85% said that the lockdown is making it harder for them to be able to cope with their loved one's alcohol, drug or gambling problem.
- This means 4.25 million of us might be suffering a serious "triple whammy" effect, coping with the impact of COVID-19, the lockdown and a family member's alcohol or drug use, or gambling^{iv}.

Lockdown is having a negative impact on mental health

- Almost two thirds (61%) of survey respondents said that the lockdown is negatively impacting the mental health of their family member.
- Half (50%) said the lockdown has impacted negatively on their own mental health.

Lockdown is making it much harder for people to get support

- Nearly a third (28%) of respondents said their family member is now unable to access support services for their drug, alcohol or gambling problem.
- A quarter (24%) said that the lockdown means they are finding it harder to keep in touch with friends and family that usually support them and 16% can't now access the services that they usually use to cope themselves.

People are experiencing an increase in verbal and physical abuse during lockdown

- Nearly a third (28%) of respondents said that as a result of lockdown they are experiencing more verbal abuse than usual from their family member.
- 4% are experiencing more physical abuse during lockdown.
- 13% of people feel more concerned than usual for their safety.

People need additional support to help them to cope during lockdown

- Just over three-quarters (78%) said additional support would help them to cope during lockdown.
- When asked what kind of support, the most popular answers were: the opportunity to talk to a trained counsellor online (47%), an online forum to talk to people who face similar problems (38%), practical information relating to their specific situation (38%) and a telephone helpline (30%)^v.

Key Recommendations

Summary

1. Increase services to support children and adults affected by a loved one's substance misuse or problem gambling
2. Ensure that family members affected by someone's alcohol, drug or gambling problem are referred to the services that already exist
3. Safeguard vulnerable children in households where there is a person with a severe alcohol, drug or gambling issue and offer specialist support
4. Ensure that the family members of people with drug, alcohol and gambling issues are included in all relevant Parliamentary Inquiries

Policy Implications

1. Increase services to support children and adults affected by a loved one's substance misuse or problem gambling

Most of the five million people affected by a family member's alcohol or drug use are trapped in a deepening crisis right now, and there are precious few people in services receiving support. Likewise, for the 3.5 million dealing with the impact of a family member's gambling problem^{vi}.

Yet, family members are reporting that the lockdown is making an already difficult situation much harder to bear, with issues such as increased isolation, mental health problems and being the victim of more abusive behaviour commonly reported.

Adfam makes the following recommendations to improve the support for family members:

- The Government should reverse the sharp decline in support available to people coping with a family member's drug, alcohol or gambling problem, as evidenced in Adfam's State of the Sector report^{vii}. The decline began before COVID-19 and it means millions of people who need help are being ignored. Family members cope with their own set of challenging problems, and need support in their own right, just as much as the person with the alcohol, drug or gambling problem does. Dedicated

support for family members should be provided urgently if we are to function effectively as an equal, healthy and prosperous society.

- Adfam recommends that special attention should be paid to providing virtual services to help families at this difficult time. As an interim measure, virtual services can help to address the current difficulty of providing face-to-face support, both individually and through group sessions.
- On a longer-term basis, a digital legacy from the pandemic provides an opportunity to offer more services to more family members, often at their convenience or at their greatest time of need. Online services might include for instance the opportunity to talk to people in similar situations (like Adfam’s forum^{viii}), one-to-one or group sessions with trained counsellors, and more online guidance on topics such as self-care and wellbeing.

Not only will more support (digitally and otherwise) benefit the families coping with the substance misuse or gambling of a loved one, but it also increases their loved one’s chances of entering and remaining in treatment, maintaining recovery and engaging productively in society.

2. Ensure that family members affected by someone’s alcohol, drug or gambling problem are referred to the services that already exist

Family members deal with many different impacts of their loved one’s drug, alcohol and gambling problem, frequently dealing with stigma, caring responsibilities, trauma, safeguarding issues, financial distress and more.

So it is important that family members are considered a priority group for statutory and voluntary sector services, for instance mental health or domestic abuse. However, all too often, family members can “fall through the cracks” and miss out on support as a result. Family members often don’t self-refer or even recognise the support that they need because they are in crisis and/or focused on their loved one’s recovery. Their needs are often quite complex or hidden, so support needs to be offered proactively.

Adfam recommends that:

- There needs to be highly effective referral pathways and training for those who signpost to, or commission, services where family members may first present, for example at a GP service or foodbank. These should enable the multiple areas of vulnerability for family members to be identified and addressed in their own right, as well as the needs of the person with the drug, alcohol or gambling problem.
- Pathways and referrals need to include an element of crisis planning, because 12% of respondents said they felt more concerned than usual for their safety, 28% said they were experiencing more verbal abuse and 4% more physical abuse.
- There is also a need to take into account the increased need for mental health support - half of all respondents said they are experiencing a negative impact on their mental health themselves as a result of lockdown.

3. Safeguard and support vulnerable children in households where there is a person with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem

15% of survey respondents reported that a family member with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem lives with at least one child. The lockdown has meant that some of these children may have been left without the usual support mechanisms that many rely on. They are coping alone with very difficult family situations, sometimes trapped in abusive or frightening situations, or suffering physical, emotional or medical neglect as a result of their family member's alcohol or drug use, or gambling.

A recent policy briefing from the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, states:

"But there are some children, who before this crisis were already vulnerable or living in precarious situations, who are facing particular hardship. These children have been cut off from many of the sources of support that they might previously have had – schools, children's centres, health visitors, networks of family and friends, home visits from social workers – at the same time as their families are under new stress and strain from lockdown requirements."

Adfam's Kinship Carer's project has been supporting desperately worried grandparents who have been unable to visit or meet grandchildren living in households where at least one family member has a substance use or gambling problem.

Adfam recommends that:

- We welcomed the Government's recent injection of funding through the Children of Alcohol Dependent Parent Innovation Fund – and call on them to extend it further to look at the impacts of lockdown specifically. We recommend in light of the disproportionate impact of the lockdown on vulnerable children, the Government announces similar funds to help children of parents with a drug and/or gambling problem, in addition to alcohol.
- Wider family members outside of the household often play a key role in vulnerable children's lives. This group should be supported during the pandemic, for instance they should be recognised as one of the first priority groups able to meet again. In the longer term, the caring responsibilities that wider family members can offer to children should be recognised as essential, in the same way that the school environment is.

4. Ensure that the family members of people with drug, alcohol and gambling issues are included in all relevant Parliamentary Inquiries

There is a vast amount of collateral damage surrounding an individual's alcohol, drug and gambling problems.

Much of this collateral damage is borne by the children, siblings, partners, parents and grandparents of someone with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem. The impact is often life changing, and life lasting, and it is impacting on a sizeable proportion of the population – 1 in 10 of us are currently negatively affected by the alcohol or drug use of a loved one^{ix}.

Adfam welcomed the emphasis placed by the recent Health and Social Care Select Committee Inquiry into Drug Policy on how family members are impacted^x.

Adfam recommends that:

- These impacts should be considered as a priority in any Parliamentary investigations into the impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, and all future related policy making.

Findings

Findings

1. Who has been affected during lockdown?

As demonstrated by the table below, a range of family members and friends who are affected responded to the survey, the most common being parents who are affected by their child’s drug or alcohol use, or gambling problem (36%) or partners/ex (29%) of someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem^{xi}.

Child	36%
Partner/ ex	29%
Parent	13%
Sibling	12%
Friend	7%
Aunt/ Uncle	<1%
Niece/Nephew	<1%
Other (including Grandparents)	7%

Figure 1: What relation to you is the person(s) with the drug/alcohol/gambling problem?

Around half (51%) of people responding are currently living with the friend or family member whose alcohol or drug use, or gambling concerns them, and nearly half (44%) were living separately. Adfam has a long history of working with families in both living arrangements, and we know family members in both situations face equally challenging issues.

Survey respondents also told us that 15% of the people with alcohol, drug and gambling problems have at least one person under the age of 18 living with them. The impacts on some children may have been worsening during lockdown – given that the survey shows that 42% of people’s alcohol or drug or gambling is increasing during this time.

Two issues are worth bearing in mind for policy makers when assessing the impact of the lockdown on children living in households where a family member has an alcohol, drug or gambling problem^{xii}.

- The first is that grandparents (and other family members) have been prevented from providing a stabilising force to children by their inability to see them during lockdown.
- The second issue is that both child and adult family members found it much more difficult to “escape” the impact of a family member’s problem with alcohol, drugs or gambling.



It’s affecting me and my children more than usual, as we have nowhere to go to get away from the negativity apart from daily exercise. We are also not making the most of the lockdown experience, we could be having fun, spending quality time as a family but the daily cycle is always the same and revolves around my husband’s cocaine use and moods.

Family survey respondent

2. How people feel their loved one is affected by the lockdown?

We asked people how the lockdown is affecting their loved one, 88% said the lockdown is negatively impacting on their family members drug, Alcohol or gambling problem^{xiii}.

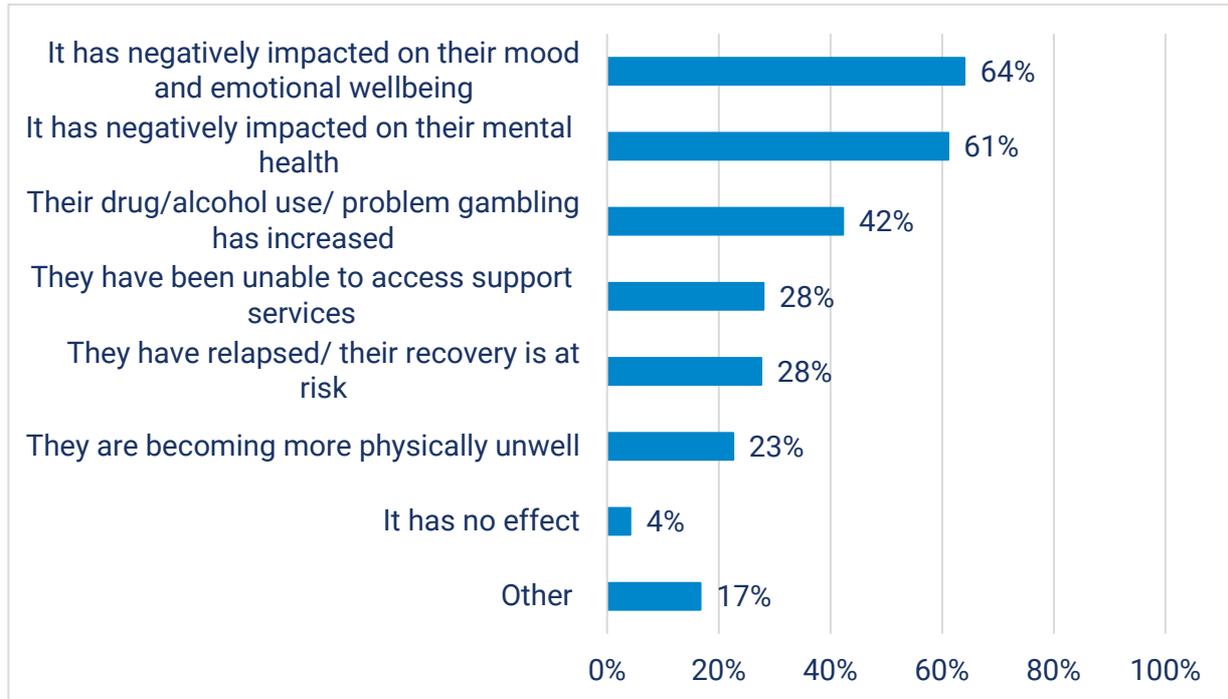


Figure 2: In what ways is the lockdown affecting the person(s) you are concerned about?

Two thirds of people (64%) reported the lockdown had negatively impacted the mood and emotional wellbeing of their family member with the alcohol, drug or gambling problem. Another two thirds (61%) reported a negative impact on their mental health. These were the most commonly reported effects. Nearly half (42%) have reported an increase in their loved one's alcohol or drug use, or gambling.

Perhaps this is unsurprising - many people are experiencing a rollercoaster of emotions dealing with COVID-19 and lockdown. However, it is concerning nonetheless. Owing to the fact that nearly one-third of respondents reported that their loved one is experiencing difficulties accessing support services during lockdown, we could be storing up a ticking time-bomb of unmet need. Family members told us that their loved one is using alcohol and/or drugs more/ gambling more to cope with the increased anxiety and isolation of living alone during COVID-19, with the lack of routine or structure, or with the financial impacts and worries of losing their job.



It's making me extremely hyper vigilant due to the fact that his drug worker has said we just have to try to manage him through this time when face-to-face support might not return for months. I fear my son will die as he has so massivety deteriorated.

Family survey respondent



The person I live with was about to receive help from a local centre the week before lockdown... this has obviously been cancelled and no alternative even via phone or online was offered...I feel helpless and find myself having to accept the behaviour and addiction until this is over...I find evidence weekly of drug abuse and feel there is nothing I can do about it.

Family survey respondent



The anxiety, boredom and loneliness that comes with the lockdown make it harder for my mum to give up alcohol (she was planning to before this) - she has even less connection to people than she used to and can't distract herself in the same ways.

Family survey respondent

4% of respondents said there had been no change in their loved one's alcohol or drug use, or gambling. However, unfortunately the majority of respondents do report that lockdown and additional worries and pressures due to COVID-19 have had a negative impact on their loved one's alcohol or drug use, or gambling.

As well as the negative impacts on physical and mental health of an increase in problem behaviour, alcohol and drug use can make people less able to manage risk. In the open-ended comments, several people said that their loved ones were breaking lockdown social distancing rules to pick up and use drugs and/or alcohol.



The fact that he has to go to the shop multiple times per day to buy alcohol concerns me because of the increased chances of exposure to the virus.

Family survey respondent

3. How is the lockdown impacting on your ability to cope with your loved one’s alcohol, drug or gambling problem?

85% of people reported that lockdown has had a negative impact on their ability to cope with the existing challenge of caring about someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem.

When asked how lockdown is impacting their ability to cope with their loved one’s alcohol or drug use, or gambling problem (see graph below), the most commonly reported issue was that it was making them feel more anxious than usual (59%) and has impacted negatively on their mental health (50%).

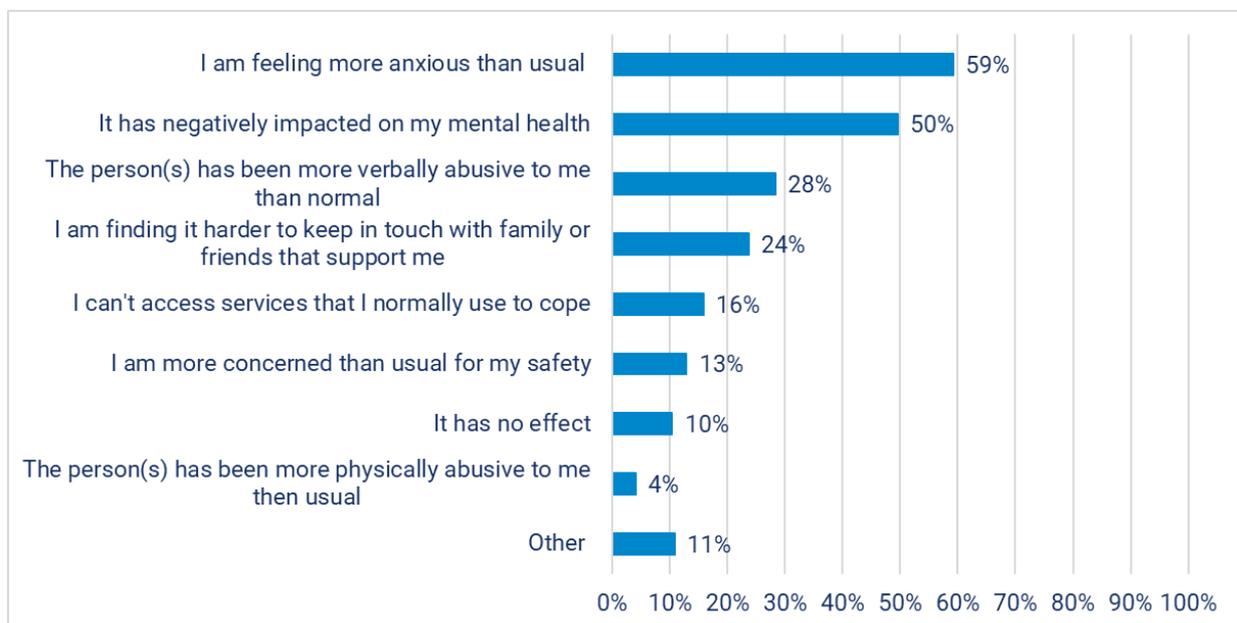


Figure 3: How is the lockdown impacting on your ability to cope with this problem?

Nearly a third (28%) also said that as a result of lockdown they are experiencing more verbal abuse than usual from the person with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem, and 4% are experiencing more physical abuse. 13% of people felt more concerned than usual for their safety.



My son is struggling with alcohol and drugs and is abusive telling me I'm mad. I have to lock myself in my bedroom or bathroom ...I feel like a prisoner in my own home.

Family survey respondent



We are unable to get out and away from my partner so we have to stay in our rooms when he becomes abusive. Also he is unable to leave the house and visit his friends so we don't get any time away from him when we can be together as a family. I'm lucky that I'm a key worker so therefore am still able to go to work and get some time away, in fact I've been working extra shifts so I am able to be out of the house more.

Family survey respondent

The increase in household tension, and in some cases verbal and physical abuse, is clearly of major concern. It is important to realize how much of this is still hidden from the world, and that this verbal and physical abuse might be suffered by grandparents, parents, partners, children, siblings, wider family members, housemates and friends.

People are also receiving less support and help to cope than usual, with 24% saying they were finding it harder to keep in touch with friends and family that usually support them and 16% can't now access services that they usually use to cope.

4. What kind of support would people like to help them to cope during lockdown?

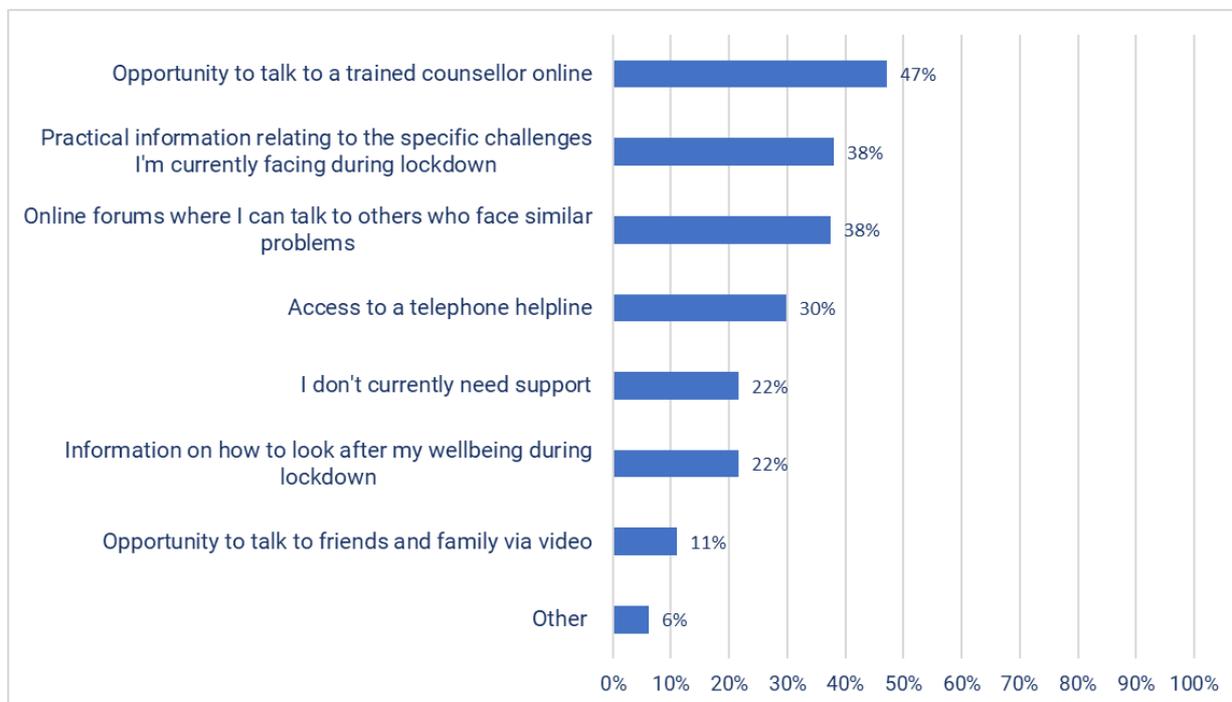


Figure 4: What kind of support would help you to cope during lockdown?

Just 22% of respondents said that they did not currently need support during lockdown. Nearly half of the respondents felt that the opportunity to talk to a trained counsellor online would help, and 38% felt an online forum where they can talk to people with similar problems would be useful.



Just someone to talk to. I am beginning to get broken again by his abuse.

Family survey respondent



I don't know what could help now, but support after lockdown will be appreciated and definitely needed.

Family survey respondent

It is worth noting that some people felt there needed to be crisis services to replace the support they usually offered their family member.



An emergency support service to check my son is ok, if I cannot contact him. I live 150 miles away from him and can no longer go to see if he is ok.

Family survey respondent

Interestingly, some people had seen the benefits of online services with some reporting that their loved ones were finding it easier to access services now they were online, and they were too.



Had I not been able to find Adfam 6 weeks ago I do not think I would have been able to get through this...With Adfam support I was able to set boundaries, have confidence to open up to my family and friends...I fear I would have called time on allowing my husband's worsening drug using behaviour to destroy another 15 years of my life...I accessed the forum and felt so less isolated as the forum helps me realise I am not the only one going through this and other families stories have given me strength.

Family survey respondent

5. Family members' experiences

Adfam asked people several open ended questions to try to allow family members to share their own experiences and concerns. This highlighted a number of important issues and themes, some of which we have expanded on below.

Not able to check in and offer usual level of support to those not living with you

Not living with a family member during lockdown made it more difficult to support them. For instance, grandparents told us they could not support their grandchildren as usual and parents were concerned about not being able to see their adult children with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem. In all situations the lack of face to face contact made caring for that person much more difficult.



Normally I visit my grandson twice a week. He suffers with anxiety and depression, with a habit of smoking weed. He also has a gambling problem that he turns to when seriously depressed. Because of lockdown cannot get to him, so coping by phone and text, but very disturbing when he hangs up and I'm left wondering what he's going to do he cuts himself and talks of suicide.

Family survey respondent

Putting people or themselves at risk

Several people mentioned that they were anxious that their loved one was not respecting the lockdown and is still having contact with other people to get drugs or alcohol. Others told us that their family member or friend is visiting them repeatedly asking for money or food.



My relationship with my son feels at risk. He begs me for money constantly, often shouting, crying and throwing things about. He leaves the house many times a day, sometimes to smoke...sometimes to buy weed and meet friends, so social distancing is a gonner. I don't know how to help him I feel helpless.

Family survey respondent

Concern about the added vulnerability of people they love

Some people are increasingly worried because of the health risks that people with alcohol and drug addictions, or those recovering, may face as a result of weakened immune systems, lack of service support or isolation.



My son has alcohol problems, depression anxiety and is physically unwell as a result of not eating properly or looking after himself. He lives alone and is very isolated. He doesn't engage with health or support services and I think the pressures on services once lockdown finishes will make it even more unlikely that he will get the help he desperately needs.

Family survey respondent

Concern about people in crisis

As well as some people coming and going from the family household to get alcohol and/or drugs, others are still dealing with chaotic lifestyles linked to substance misuse e.g. sofa surfing or rough sleeping.

[Quote to possible be added here]

The survey also highlighted that it was difficult for some people in crisis to manage alcohol and drug addiction. For instance, not able to easily access drugs puts people at risk of dangerous withdrawal (e.g. with prescription drugs like Benzodiazepines). We don't yet know the full impact of this.

The positive benefits of lockdown

Some respondents anecdotally reported that the lockdown has had a positive effect on their loved one's alcohol, drug or gambling problem. For instance, a few people reported that living with their loved one during lockdown has meant they able to keep an eye on them and keep them in a controlled, safe environment. Some specific benefits mentioned by some of those respondents include:

- For alcohol, it was reported that pubs being closed and removal of social influences had helped their loved one to consume alcohol less harmfully.
- For drugs, it was their loved one's removal from a particular social group or influence that had led to a reduction in drug taking
- For gambling, it was mentioned that casinos/betting shops being closed had led to a decrease in their loved one's gambling.

Methodology and Demography

Methodology

Adfam used SurveyMonkey software to run an online poll between 15th April and 4th May 2020. There were a total of 13 closed and open questions. The online poll was promoted online via Adfam's social media channels and shared by partner charities and organisations. 241 people responded to the survey.

Demography

Adfam made the demographic questions optional so some people completed the survey without providing any demographic information.

Geography

The survey is not geographically representative owing to the size of the sample, but there was at least one response from every English region, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the highest amount of responses came from the South East (20%).

Ethnicity

87% of respondents (177) indicated that they were White British. Other ethnic backgrounds included White Irish (3%), White Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Other White Background, White and Black African, White and Asian, Other Multiple Ethnic Background, Indian, Pakistani and Other Ethnic Group (all 1% each) and a proportion chose not to say or answer.

Gender

The following table shows the gender breakdown:

Female	176 respondents	87.56%
Male	22 respondents	10.95%
Prefer not to say	3 respondents	1.49%

Age

There were respondents in all age categories (except 85+). We asked people under 18 not to fill in the survey. The most common age group to respond was aged 55-64 years old.

The following table shows the age breakdown:

18-24	Six respondents	2.97%
25-34	18 respondents	8.91%
35-44	28 respondents	13.86%
45-54	48 respondents	23.76%
55-64	64 respondents	31.68%
65-74	33 respondents	16.34%
75-84	3 respondents	1.49%

Sexuality

The majority of respondents (183) indicated they were heterosexual (91.50%), but there were also responses that indicated they identified as bisexual, gay man and gay woman and a proportion chose not to say or answer.

About Adfam

Adfam is the only national charity improving life for families and friends affected by the drug, alcohol or gambling habits of a loved one. We do this by:

- empowering families and friends affected by drugs, alcohol or gambling to get the support they need.
- building the confidence, capacity and capability of frontline practitioners to provide effective services.
- influencing decision-makers to understand the needs of thousands of people coping with the effects of a family member or friend mis-using alcohol or drugs, or gambling.

During 2019, we have supported and worked with over 1,000 family members affected by drug or alcohol use; over 900 practitioners who support those families; and 300 strategic partners to affect positive structural change. We want anyone affected by someone else's drug or alcohol use to have the chance to benefit from healthy relationships, be part of a loving and supportive family and enjoy mental and physical wellbeing.

ⁱ Adfam used *SurveyMonkey* software to run an online poll between 15/4/20 and 4/4/20. There were a total of 13 closed and open questions. The online poll was promoted online via Adfam's social media channels and shared by partner charities and organisations. 241 people responded to the survey.

ⁱⁱ Adfam estimates that at least five million people in Great Britain are currently affected by the alcohol or drug problem of a family member or friend. This is the equivalent of 1 in 10 of us in England and Wales. This is based on a *YouGov* poll undertaken in November 2019, the details of which can be found here:

https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/2du5ikijx8/Adfam_results.pdf

New research by *GambleAware* shows that 3.5 million people are negatively affected by a gambling problem of someone else. <https://about.gambleaware.org/media/2185/gambling-treatment-and-support.pdf>

There may be some overlap between people with an alcohol, drug and gambling problem, or the family member may be the same but have family members with different problems, so we choose not to conflate these figures.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: *State of the Sector 2019: Drug and Alcohol Family Support*, Adfam. Available at: <https://adfam.org.uk/files/SOS-Report-2019.pdf>

^{iv} Adfam's *YouGov* survey shows 5 million people are currently affected by a family member or friend alcohol, drug or gambling problem. If we were to extrapolate the findings of our survey, that 85% are finding it harder to cope with their loved one's alcohol, drug or gambling problem, it works out as an estimated 4.25 million people.

^v Please note, respondents could select more than one option.

^{vi} New research by *GambleAware* shows that 3.5 million people are affected by the problem gambling of a family member or loved one. <https://about.gambleaware.org/media/2185/gambling-treatment-and-support.pdf>

^{viii} <https://adfam.org.uk/help-for-families/finding-support/forum>

^{ix} Source: Adfam/*YouGov* 2019: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/2du5ikijx8/Adfam_results.pdf

^x Source: *Health and Social Care Committee 2017 Drugs Policy Enquiry*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/health-and-social-care-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/drugs-policy-inquiry-17-19/>

^{xi} We refer throughout this report to a family member, for the ease of reading. However, as noted here, people can be badly affected, or highly concerned about, the alcohol or drug use, or gambling of a friend and all of the findings and recommendations in this report apply equally to friends as well as family members.

^{xii} These issues have been highlighted via the survey's open questions, and our contact with kinship carers through Adfam services.

^{xiii} Please note, this % has been calculated from the raw data. It has not been calculated from the data in Figure 2.

^{xiv} From the data shown in Figures 2, 3 and 4, survey respondents were able to select more than one option.