

CHILDREN LIVING WITH PARENTS WHO HAVE A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

AUTHORS

Rachel N. Lipari, Ph.D., and Struther L. Van Horn, M.A.

INTRODUCTION

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are characterized by recurrent use of alcohol or drugs (or both) that results in problems such as being unable to control use of the substance; failing to meet obligations at work, home, or school; having poor health; and spending an increased amount of time getting, using, or recovering from the effects of using the substance. Parent substance use and parent experience of an SUD can have negative effects on children. Children with a parent who has an SUD are more likely than children who do not have a parent with an SUD to have lower socioeconomic status and increased difficulties in academic and social settings and family functioning.¹ Children having a parent with an SUD are at risk of experiencing direct effects, such as parental abuse or neglect, or indirect effects, such as fewer household resources. Previous research indicates that the negative effects of parent SUDs may differ depending on the type of SUD the parent has (i.e., alcohol or illicit drug).^{2,3} Policymakers can use information on the number of children living with parents with an SUD for developing targeted prevention and outreach programs.

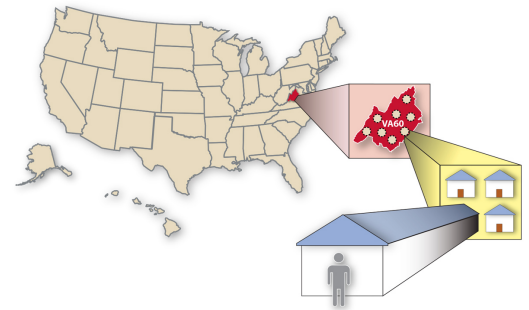
This issue of The CBHSQ Report presents estimates of the number of children aged 17 or younger who lived with a parent with an SUD, alcohol use disorder, or illicit drug use disorder based on combined data from the 2009 to 2014 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs). NSDUH is an annual survey of the U.S. civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 or older. One of NSDUH's strengths is the stability of the survey design, which allows for multiple years of data to be combined to examine substance use and mental health issues in the United States.

NSDUH asks respondents who report using alcohol or illicit drugs in the year before the interview a series of questions designed to measure symptoms of SUD based on criteria specified in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV),⁴ including withdrawal; tolerance; use in dangerous situations; trouble with the law; and interference in major obligations at work, school, or home during the past year. NSDUH also allows for estimating of alcohol use disorder⁵ and illicit drug use disorder separately.⁶ In NSDUH, illicit drugs include marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, and inhalants, as well as the nonmedical use of prescription-type psychotherapeutic drugs. Adults with an SUD may have an alcohol use disorder, an illicit drug use disorder, or both an alcohol and an illicit drug use disorder. All estimates in this report are annual averages from the combined 2009 to 2014 NSDUH data.

The estimate of children with at least one parent who had an SUD is a composite measure. This measure is calculated using information gathered from adult respondents aged 18 or older including the respondent's SUD status; the number of biological, step, adoptive, or foster

children aged 17 or younger living in the respondent's household; and whether another parent is also living in the respondent's household at the time of the interview.

The total number of children residing with at least one parent with an SUD was estimated by determining (1) the number of children who live in a single-parent household with a father who has an SUD; (2) the number of children who live in a single-parent household with a mother who has an SUD; (3) the number of children who live in a two-parent household with a mother who has an SUD; and (4) the number of children who live in a two-parent household with a mother who does not have an SUD but where the other parent has an SUD.



In Brief

- Based on data from the combined 2009 to 2014 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, about 1 in 8 children (8.7 million) aged 17 or younger lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year substance use disorder (SUD). SUDs are characterized by recurrent use of alcohol or other drugs (or both) that results in significant impairment.
- About 1 in 10 children (7.5 million) lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year alcohol use disorder.
- About 1 in 35 children (2.1 million) lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year illicit drug use disorder.

The first three groups are estimated by using the parent's analytic weight multiplied by the number of children aged 17 or younger in the household. The fourth group is estimated by applying a conditional probability⁷ (that in a two-parent household in which the mother does not have an SUD but the other parent does) to the mother respondent's analytic weight multiplied by the number of children aged 17 or younger in the household. The total number of children from these four groups constitutes the number of children residing with at least one parent where at least one parent has an SUD. Statistical comparisons between groups were not made for this report.⁸ The analysis is based on a sample size of 22,200 adults aged 18 or older with at least 1 related child aged 17 or younger residing in the household.

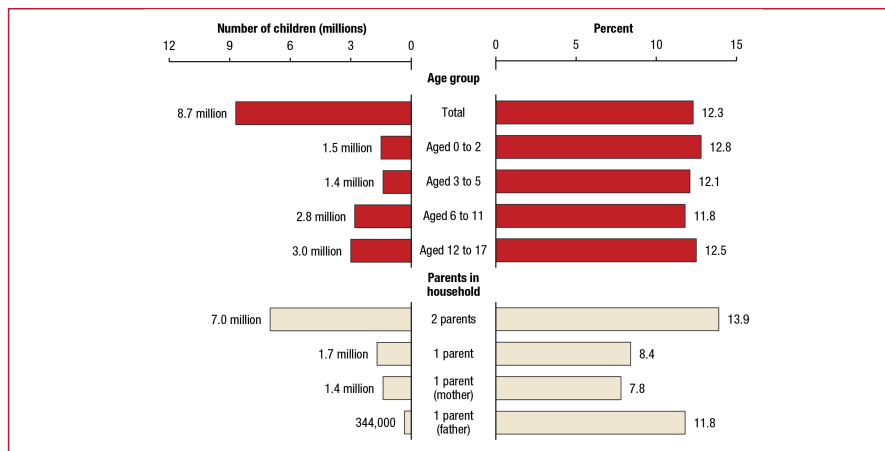
CHILDREN LIVING WITH A PARENT WHO HAD A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

This report presents information on the number of children who are living with at least one parent with an SUD related to their use of alcohol or illicit drugs. Previous research has shown that children of parents with an SUD were found to be of lower socioeconomic status and had more difficulties in academic, social, and family functioning when compared with children of parents who do not have an SUD.¹ These children are also more likely to have higher rates of mental and behavioral disorders.¹ Children who are exposed to a parent with SUDs are more likely to develop SUD symptoms themselves.⁹

Based on combined 2009 to 2014 NSDUH data, an annual average of 8.7 million children aged 17 or younger live in households in the United States with at least one parent who had an SUD (Figure 1). This represents about 12.3 percent of children aged 17 or younger who resided with at least one parent with an SUD. An annual average of 1.5 million children aged 0 to 2 (12.8 percent of this age group), 1.4 million children aged 3 to 5 (12.1 percent of this age group), 2.8 million children aged 6 to 11 (11.8 percent of this age group), and 3.0 million children aged 12 to 17 (12.5 percent of this age group) lived with at least one parent who had an SUD.

Data can also be examined by household composition (i.e., two-parent or single-parent households). It should be noted that, for two-parent households, it is not possible to determine whether both parents in the household had SUD. About 7.0 million children aged 17 or younger resided in a two-parent household with at least one parent who had a past year SUD, and 1.7 million resided in a single-parent household with a parent who had a past year SUD. In other words, 13.9 percent of children residing in two-parent households lived with at least one parent who had a past year SUD, and 8.4 percent of children residing in single-parent households lived with a parent who had an SUD. Among the 1.7 million children residing in single-parent households with a parent who had a past year SUD, about 344,000 lived with their fathers and 1.4 million lived with their mothers. Thus, about 11.8 percent of children residing in father-only households lived with a father who had a past year SUD, and 7.8 percent of children residing in mother-only households lived with a mother who had a past year SUD.

Figure 1. Number and percentage of children aged 17 or younger living with at least one parent with a past year substance use disorder, by age group and household composition: annual average, 2009 to 2014



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2009 to 2014.

CHILDREN LIVING WITH A PARENT WHO HAD AN ALCOHOL USE DISORDER

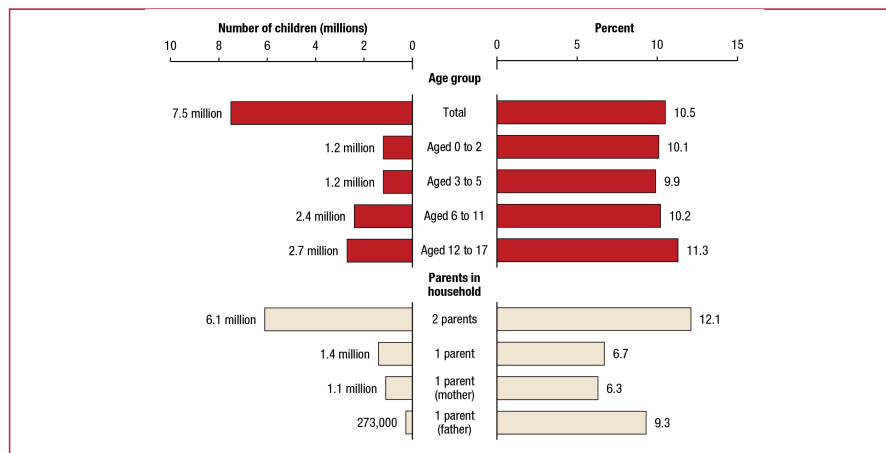
NSDUH data can be used to estimate the number of children who are living with at least one parent with an alcohol use disorder. Alcohol use disorder includes drinking-related behavior that may cause people to physically endanger themselves or others; get into trouble with the law; experience difficulties in relationships or jobs; and fail to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home.⁴ Previous research has found that

children of parents with an alcohol use disorder are at greater risk for depression, anxiety disorders, problems with cognitive and verbal skills, and parental abuse or neglect.² Furthermore, they are 4 times more likely than other children to develop symptoms of an alcohol use disorder themselves.¹⁰

Overall, about 7.5 million (10.5 percent) children aged 17 or younger lived in households with at least one parent who had an alcohol use disorder (Figure 2). An annual average of 1.2 million children aged 0 to 2 (10.1 percent of this age group), 1.2 million children aged 3 to 5 (9.9 percent of this age group), 2.4 million children aged 6 to 11 (10.2 percent of this age group), and 2.7 million children aged 12 to 17 (11.3 percent of this age group) lived with at least one parent who had an alcohol use disorder.

About 6.1 million children aged 17 or younger resided in a two-parent household with at least one parent who had an alcohol use disorder, and 1.4 million children resided in a single-parent household with at least one parent who had an alcohol use disorder. In other words, about 12.1 percent of children residing in two-parent households lived with at least one parent who had a past year alcohol use disorder, and 6.7 percent of children residing in single-parent households lived with a parent who had an alcohol use disorder. Among the 1.4 million children residing in single-parent households with a parent who had an alcohol use disorder, 273,000 lived with their fathers and 1.1 million lived with their mothers. About 9.3 percent of children residing in father-only households lived with a father who had an alcohol use disorder, and 6.3 percent of children residing in mother-only households lived with a mother who had an alcohol use disorder.

Figure 2. Number and percentage of children aged 17 or younger living with at least one parent with a past year alcohol use disorder, by age group and household composition: annual average, 2009 to 2014



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2009 to 2014.

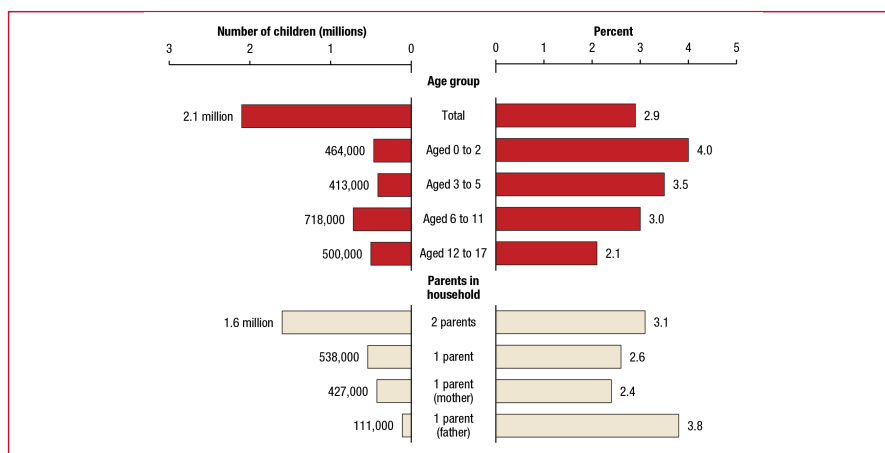
CHILDREN LIVING WITH A PARENT WHO HAD AN ILLICIT DRUG USE DISORDER

NSDUH data can also be used to estimate the number of children who live with at least one parent who has had a past year illicit drug use disorder. Previous research has shown that children of parents who have an illicit drug use disorder are at higher risk for mental and behavioral disorders and functional impairments than children of parents with alcohol use disorder.³ Estimates of the number of children living with at least one parent who had an SUD are needed for adult prevention efforts and programs that support and protect affected children.

Based on combined 2009 to 2014 NSDUH data, 2.1 million (2.9 percent) children aged 17 or younger lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year illicit drug use disorder (Figure 3). An annual average of 464,000 children aged 0 to 2 (4.0 percent of this age group), 413,000 children aged 3 to 5 (3.5 percent of this age group), 718,000 children aged 6 to 11 (3.0 percent of this age group), and 500,000 children aged 12 to 17 (2.1 percent of this age group) lived with at least one parent with an illicit drug use disorder. Because of the methodology used to calculate the number of children living with a parent with a past year illicit drug use disorder, it is not possible to determine whether there were significant variations by age group.

About 1.6 million children aged 17 or younger resided in a two-parent household with at least one parent who had an illicit drug use disorder, and about 538,000 children resided in a single-parent household with a parent who had an illicit drug use disorder. In other words, about 3.1 percent of children residing in two-parent households lived with at least one parent who had a past year illicit drug use disorder, and 2.6 percent of children residing in single-parent households lived with a parent who had an illicit drug use disorder. Among the 538,000 children residing in single-parent households with a parent who had an illicit drug use disorder, 111,000 lived with their fathers and 427,000 lived with their mothers. About 3.8 percent of children residing in father-only households lived with a father who had an illicit drug use disorder, and 2.4 percent of children residing in mother-only households lived with a mother who had an illicit drug use disorder.

Figure 3. Number and percentage of children aged 17 or younger living with at least one parent with a past year illicit drug use disorder, by age group and household composition: annual average, 2009 to 2014



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2009 to 2014.

DISCUSSION

SUDs can have a profound influence on the lives of people and their families, particularly their children. The data in this report indicate that about 1 in 8 children in the United States aged 17 or younger were residing in homes with at least one parent who had an SUD. The rate of 1 in 8 children having at least one parent with an SUD was consistent across four age groups ranging from younger than 3 years to adolescents aged 12 to 17. Although many children living in households with a substance-using parent will not experience abuse or neglect, they are at increased risk for child maltreatment and child welfare involvement compared with other children.¹¹ In addition, these children are at an increased risk for engaging in substance use themselves.⁷ The consistency of the prevalence across age groups in the percentage of children living with at least one parent with an SUD suggest that prevention and intervention efforts targeting older and younger children may be beneficial for reducing the impact of parent SUDs.

The annual average of 8.7 million children aged 17 or younger living in U.S. households with at least one parent who had an SUD highlights the potential breadth of substance use prevention and treatment needs for the whole family—from substance use treatment for the affected adults to prevention and supportive services for the children. As substance use and SUDs among parents often occur in households that face other challenges (e.g., mental illness, poverty, domestic violence), the recovery process may need to extend beyond substance use treatment to produce the changes in a family that are necessary to ensure a healthy family environment for a child.¹²

According to 2014 NSDUH data, approximately 20.2 million adults aged 18 or older had a past year SUD, including 16.3 million with an alcohol use disorder and 6.2 million with an illicit drug use disorder; however, only 7.6 percent of adults with past year SUD received substance use treatment in the past year (data not shown). The expense of substance use treatment can be a financial barrier for people who need it;¹³ however, the long-term potential impact of parent substance use on their children suggests that substance use treatment intervention for

parents may be essential to the well-being of their children. When a parent has an SUD, the whole family may be part of the recovery process, and each household member may need support. Many resources are available to help children when a parent uses substances or has an SUD. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides information and resources for professionals who work with these families: <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/>.

For additional SAMHSA resources, visit <https://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>.

ENDNOTES

1. Peleg-Oren, N., & Teichman, M. (2006). Young children of parents with substance use disorders (SUD): A review of the literature and implications for social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, 6(1-2), 49-61.
2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2004). *Children of alcoholics: A guide to community action*. Retrieved from <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/MS939/MS939.pdf>

3. Wilens, T. E., Biederman, J., Bredin, E., Haesy, A. L., Abrantes, A., Neft, D., & Spencer, T. J. (2002). A family study of the high-risk children of opioid- and alcohol-dependent parents. *American Journal on Addictions*, 11(1), 41–51.
4. American Psychiatric Association (APA). (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM–IV)* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author. The DSM–IV criteria for SUDs include separate criteria for dependence or abuse. People who met the criteria for abuse for a given substance (e.g., alcohol) did not meet the criteria for dependence for that substance.
5. Alcohol use disorder was defined as meeting DSM–IV criteria (APA, 1994) for alcohol dependence or abuse.
6. Illicit drug use disorder is defined as meeting criteria in the DSM–IV (APA, 1994) for dependence on or abuse of illicit drugs (i.e., marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, methamphetamine, or prescription psychotherapeutic drugs that were misused, which include pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives).
7. This conditional probability was estimated using data from households in which both parents were interviewed. Two–father households are not directly included in the estimates and their inclusion would not be expected to impact the estimates, given rounding.
8. This estimation methodology does not lend itself to variance calculation.
9. Biederman, J., Faraone, S. V., Monuteaux, M. C., & Feighner, J. A. (2000). Patterns of alcohol and drug use in adolescents can be predicted by parental substance use disorders. *Pediatrics*, 106(4), 792–797.
10. Anda, R. F., Whitfield, C. L., Felitti, V. J., Chapman, D., Edwards, V. J., Dube, S. R., & Williamson, D. F. (2002). Adverse childhood experiences, alcoholic parents, and later risk of alcoholism and depression. *Psychiatric Services*, 53(8), 1001–1009.
11. IOM (Institute of Medicine), & NRC (National Research Council). (2014). *New directions in child abuse and neglect research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
12. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). (1999). *Blending perspectives and building common ground: A Report to Congress on substance abuse and child protection*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/blending-perspectives-and-building-common-ground>
13. Park–Lee, E., Lipari, R. N., Hedden, S. L., Copello, E. A. P., & Kroutil, L. A. (2016, September). Receipt of services for substance use and mental health issues among adults: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. NSDUH Data Review. Retrieved from <https://samhsa.gov/data/>

SUGGESTED CITATION

Lipari, R.N. and Van Horn, S.L. Children living with parents who have a substance use disorder. The CBHSQ Report: August 24, 2017. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, MD.

SUMMARY

Background: Parent substance use disorders (SUDs) can have negative impacts on children, including lower socioeconomic status and more difficulties in academic and social settings and family functioning when compared with children living with parents without an SUD. **Method:** This report uses data from the 2009 to 2014 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs) to determine the number of children living with a parent who had an SUD (alcohol use disorder or illicit drug use disorder). The analysis is based on a sample size of 22,200 adults aged 18 or older with at least 1 related child aged 17 or younger residing in the household. **Results:** Based on combined 2009 to 2014 NSDUH data, about 8.7 million (12.3 percent) children aged 17 or younger lived in U.S. households with at least one parent who had an SUD. About 7.5 million (10.5 percent) children lived in households with at least one parent who had an alcohol use disorder, and about 2.1 million (2.9 percent) children lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year illicit drug use disorder. **Conclusion:** The annual average of 8.7 million children aged 17 or younger living in U.S. households with at least one parent who had an SUD highlights the potential breadth of substance use prevention and treatment needs for the whole family—from substance abuse treatment for the affected adults and prevention and supportive services for the children.

Keywords: alcohol use disorder, children, illicit drug use disorder, parent substance use, parents, substance use disorder

AUTHOR INFORMATION

cbhsqrequest@samhsa.hhs.gov

KEYWORDS

Marital Status, Short Report, Population Data, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, Researchers, Substance Abuse, Children of Parents with Alcohol Use or Abuse Problems, Children of Parents with Substance Use or Abuse Problems, Alcohol, Illegal Drugs, All US States Only

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The data used in this report are based on information obtained from 22,200 adults aged 18 or older with at least 1 related child aged 17 or younger residing in the household in the 2009 to 2014 NSDUHs. The Survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NSDUH Report is prepared by The Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ), SAMHSA, and by RTI International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. (RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.)

Information on the NSDUH is available in the following publication:

Center for Behavior Health Statistics and Quality. (2015). Behavioral health trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. (HHS Publication No. SMA 13-4795, NSDUH Series H-50). Rockville, MD : Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available online: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/population-data-nsduh>.

