

Early Exposure to Harmful Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Executive Summary

Research shows that children in families with harmful parental or carer substance use are at greater risk of a range of adverse developmental outcomes.¹ Living in a household where harmful use of alcohol and other drugs occurs may increase the likelihood of children being harmful substance users themselves, and being involved in the juvenile justice system.² There is a strong relationship between harmful substance use and mental ill-health.³ Co-occurrence of substance misuse and mental issues is common; affected families often have multiple, complex needs.⁴

The direct effects of childhood exposure to harmful alcohol and other drug use may include:

- development of neurodevelopmental disorders, such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders ('FASD');
- maltreatment;
- modelling of poor drinking and substance using behaviours;
- inadequate supervision;
- separation from parents due to incarceration and hospitalisation; and
- neglect, emotional and physical abuse.⁵

Separation of children from parents and caregivers through parental imprisonment for drug-related offences may result in a child remaining with the other parent, ending up in informal kinship care, or being placed in out-of-home care ('OOHC') by care and protection authorities.⁶ Parental incarceration and experiences of OOHC are themselves factors which may increase the likelihood of a person coming into contact with the criminal justice system.*

The potential relevance of evidence of early exposure to harmful alcohol and other drug use in sentencing proceedings includes an assessment of *moral culpability*; moderating the weight to be given to *general deterrence*; and determining the weight to be given to *specific deterrence and protection of the community*. There may also be issues relating to the likelihood of *hardship in custody*, a finding of *special circumstances* and the shaping of conditions to enhance prospects of *rehabilitation*.

¹ Adam Tomison, *Child Maltreatment and Substance Abuse* (Policy and Practice Paper, Australian Institute of Family Studies ('AIFS'), September 1996); Anne-Marie Laslett et al, *The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol's Harm to Others* (Report, AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Eastern Health, 2010); Sharon Dawe, Paul Harnett, and Sally Frye, *Improving Outcomes for Children Living in Families with Parental Substance Misuse: What Do We Know and What Should We Do* (AIFS Policy and Practice Paper, September 2008); Ann Roche et al, *From Policy to Implementation: Child and Family Sensitive Practice in the Alcohol and Other Drugs Sector* (Research Paper 28, Australian National Council on Drugs ('ANCD'), October 2013) 1; Anne-Marie Laslett et al, *The Hidden Harm: Alcohol's Impact on Children and Families* (Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education ('FARE') Report, February 2015) 1; McLean Sara, *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): An Update on Policy and Practice in Australia* (Policy and Practice Paper, Australian Institute of Family Studies ('AIFS') February 2022).

² Department for Child Protection (SA), [*Alcohol and Other Drugs \(AOD\) in Child Protection*](#) (Practice Paper, October 2023); Delyse Hutchinson et al, ‘[*The Impact of Alcohol Use Disorders on Family Life: A Review of the Empirical Literature*](#)’ (National Drug And Alcohol Research Centre (‘NDARC’) Technical Report No 325, 2014) 49.

³ Productivity Commission, [*Mental Health*](#) (Inquiry Report, 30 June 2020) 643.

* See Bugmy Bar Book chapter, ‘[*Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders \(FASD\)*](#)’.

⁴ Matthew Sunderland et al., ‘Co-Occurring Mental and Substance Use Disorders in Australia 2020–2022: Prevalence, Patterns, Conditional Probabilities and Correlates in the General Population’ (2024) 59(6) *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 522.

⁵ Productivity Commission, *Mental Health* (n 3); Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [*National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children Indicators*](#) (Web report updated 15 Jun 2022); Carol Bower et al, ‘[*Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Youth Justice: A Prevalence Study Among Young People Sentenced to Detention in Western Australia*](#)’ (2018) 8(2) *BMJ Open* 1.

⁶ See, eg, Frank Ainsworth, ‘[*Drug Use by Parents: The Challenge for Child Protection and Drug and Alcohol Services*](#)’ (2004) 29(3) *Children Australia* 4, 7.

* See also Bugmy Bar Book chapters ‘[*Impacts of Imprisonment*](#)’ and ‘[*Out-of-Home Care*](#)’.