



# The Association between Parental Substance Abuse and the Development of Mental Illnesses in Children

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## Introduction

- Various studies have recorded and documented the repercussions of parental substance abuse, regarding both alcohol and controlled substances, on the development of children within the households. Research suggests that children raised in such households are more likely to be susceptible to the development of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders (Lander et al. 2013).
- There is a complex relation between the familial aspect of substance abuse and the mental development of adolescents. Studies highlight disrupted attachment patterns as well as inconsistent caregiving among children of substance abusers, factors that are associated with the development of anxiety and depressive behaviors (Solis et al. 2012)
- Issues developed during adolescence can last for decades, well into adulthood as they continue to affect the well-being of the afflicted individuals, long past when the initial trauma was inflicted.

## Methods

### Sample

- Participants who had at least one parent abuse either alcohol or drugs were drawn from the first wave of the National Epidemiologic Study of Alcohol and Related Conditions (n = 9,659).
- NESARC is a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

### Measures

- Parental substance abuse was measured with the questions 1: "Blood/natural mother ever had problems with drugs", 2: "Blood/natural father ever had problems with drugs", 3: "Blood/natural mother ever an alcoholic or problem drinker", and 4: "Blood/natural father ever an alcoholic or problem drinker". These variables were coded into two groups for each response; 1) Yes, 2) No..
- Depression and Anxiety status was measured with the questions "Major depression/Anxiety - lifetime (non-hierarchical)". These variables were separately coded into two groups for each response; 0) No, 1) Yes.

## Research Questions

- Which abused substance has a bigger impact on the development of mental health afflictions in the children of the abuser(s)?
- Does it matter which parent is the abuser in the relationship? Is there a consistent difference in mental health condition depending on which parent is abusing?

## Results

### Univariate

- 9,659 (24% of the survey) participants had at least one parental figure abusing at least one substance.
- 7,893 (18% of the survey) participants exhibited symptoms of lifelong major depression, while 1,938 (4.5% of the survey) participants exhibited symptoms of lifelong major anxiety.

### Bivariate

- Chi-Square analysis showed that, **there is a significant relationship between parental substance abuse and the development of major depression within the related children, though it is slightly more likely that symptoms will develop from parental drug abuse (35.7%) than from parental alcohol abuse (34.4%),  $\chi^2=91.5$ ,  $p<.0001$ .**
- Further Chi-Square analysis showed that **there is also a significant relationship between parental substance abuse and the development of major anxiety within the related children, though contrary to depression symptoms, it is slightly more likely that symptoms will develop from parental alcohol abuse (9.4%) than from parental drug abuse (5.3%)  $\chi^2=16.1$ ,  $p<.025$ .**

### Multivariate

- Both lifelong depression symptoms and lifelong anxiety symptoms were significantly associated with parental substance abuse.
- While there are considerably more recorded cases of the father abusing substances and a higher number of associated mental health afflictions developed as a result, in categories where the mother is the abuser, the percentage of individuals who developed afflictions compared to those who didn't is noticeably higher. The same is true for drug abuse in comparison to alcohol abuse, where alcohol is more prevalent but drugs are more impactful.

Visual Key 1 = Father Alcohol Abuse, 2 = Mother Alcohol Abuse, 3 = Father Drug Abuse, 4 Mother Drug Abuse, 5 = Father Abuse of Both, 6 = Mother Abuse of Both, 7 Parents Both Abuse Alcohol, 8 = Parents Both Abuse Drug

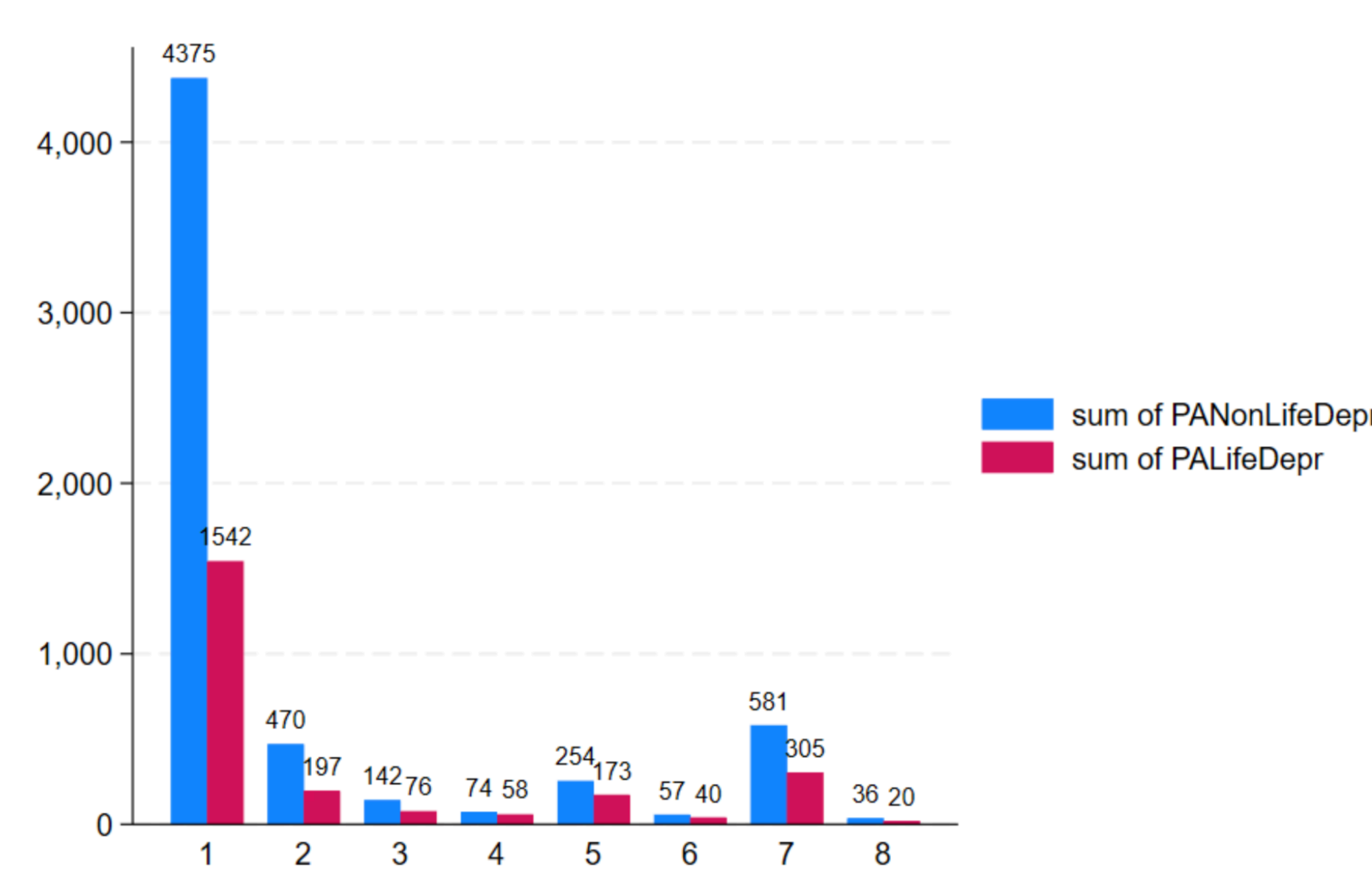


Figure 1. The development of lifelong depression symptoms in offspring of substance abusers.

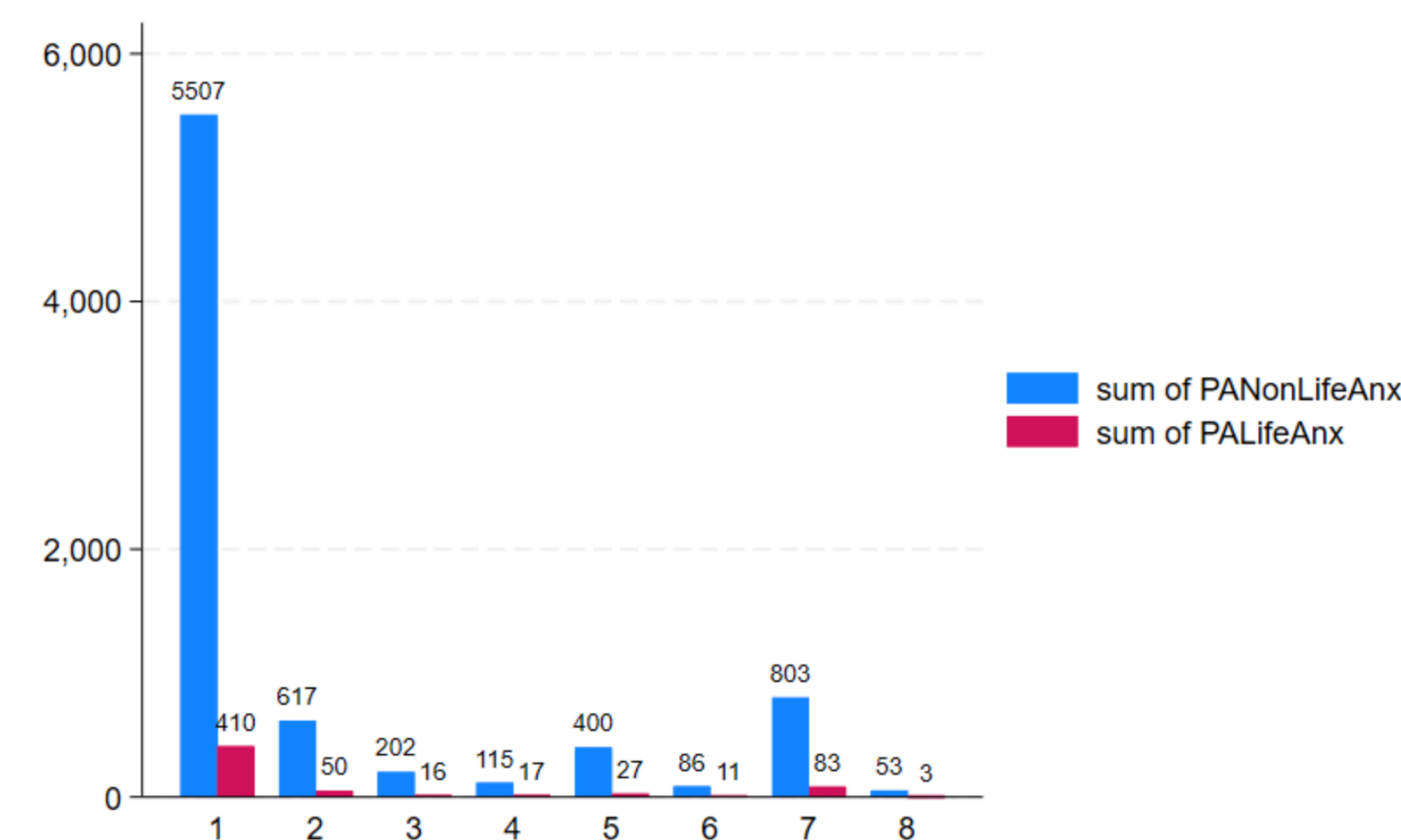


Figure 2. The development of lifelong anxiety symptoms in offspring of substance abusers.

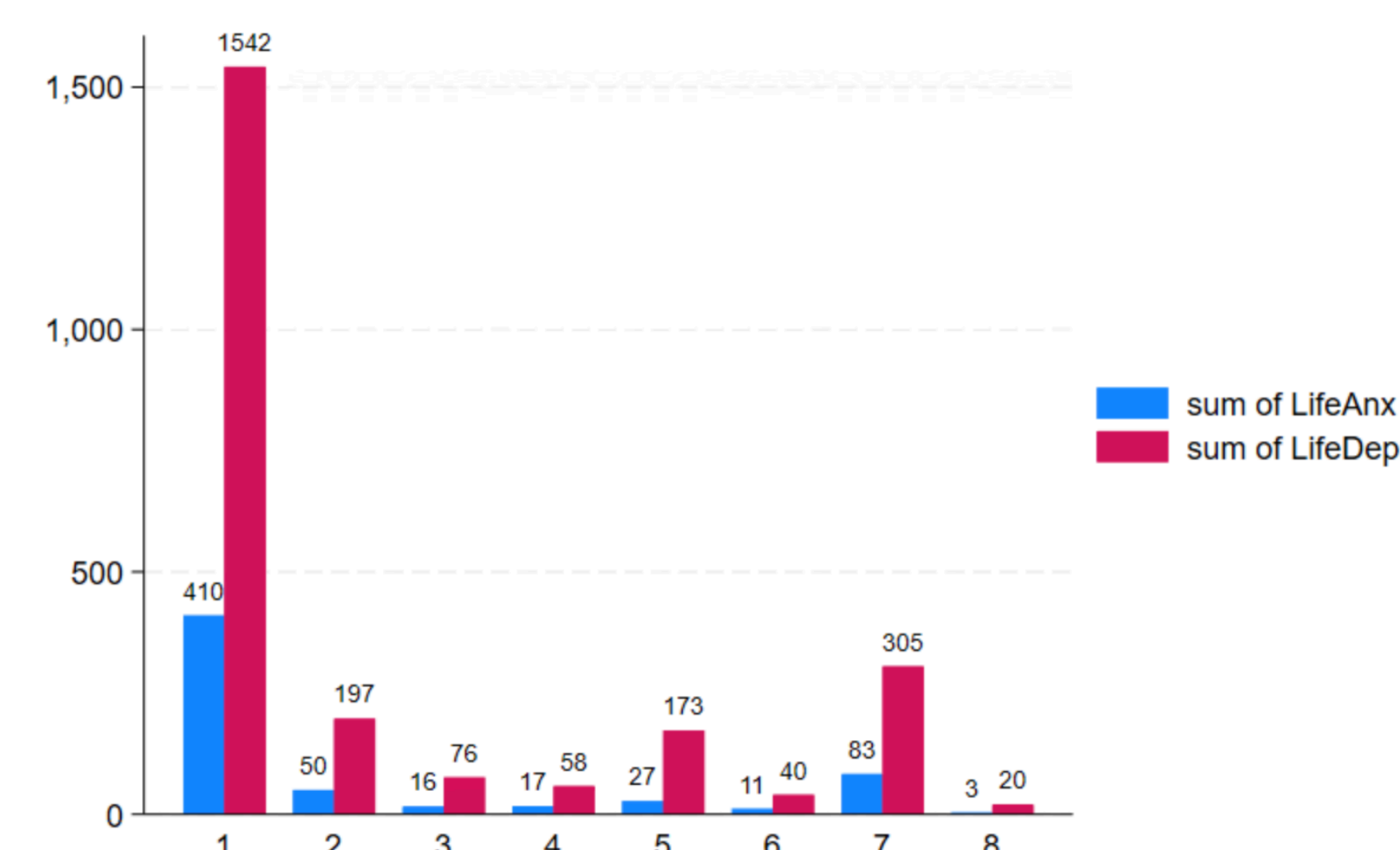


Figure 3: The contrast between the development of lifelong anxiety compared to lifelong depression in the children of substance abusers

## Discussion

- While alcohol abuse was more prevalent, drug abuse had a more significant impact on the development of mental health afflictions.
- While father related substance abuse was more prevalent, mother related substance abuse had a more significant impact on the development of mental health afflictions.
- The role of the abusing parent and the child's exposure to them in the household may shed additional light onto the reasoning behind the development of mental health afflictions.
- Information on deeper family history, such as history of addictions or disorders that may indicate individuals being genetically predisposed to inherit such tendencies could confound the relationships established in this study.
- The current findings are not inclusive of degrees of mental health affliction, rather they are just based upon whether or not the observed sample participant has exhibited symptoms throughout their life.
- Further research defining variables could include socio-economic class, religious background, parent occupation, and other factors that can help establish a narrative behind the observed trends.

Solis, J. M., Shadur, J. M., Burns, A. R., & Hussong, A. M. (2012, June 5). Understanding the diverse needs of children whose parents abuse substances. Current drug abuse reviews. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3676900/>

Lander, L., Howsare, J., & Byrne, M. (2013, July 17). The impact of Substance Use Disorders on families and children: From theory to practice. Social work in public health. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3725219/>