

# CSI 24: Smoking among young people

## Summary

- Smoking declined among young people in England between 1988 and 2014, although further progress is needed to reach government targets
- Rates of smoking are consistently more prevalent in older groups, and girls
- The proportion of young people who have ever tried a cigarette was at its lowest ever in 2014
- Buying cigarettes has become more difficult in the last decade, although a large proportion of young people still reported no difficulty buying cigarettes
- Exposure to passive smoke has reduced steadily over time
- Smoking is more prevalent in young people who receive free school meals, have been excluded from school, and truanted from school

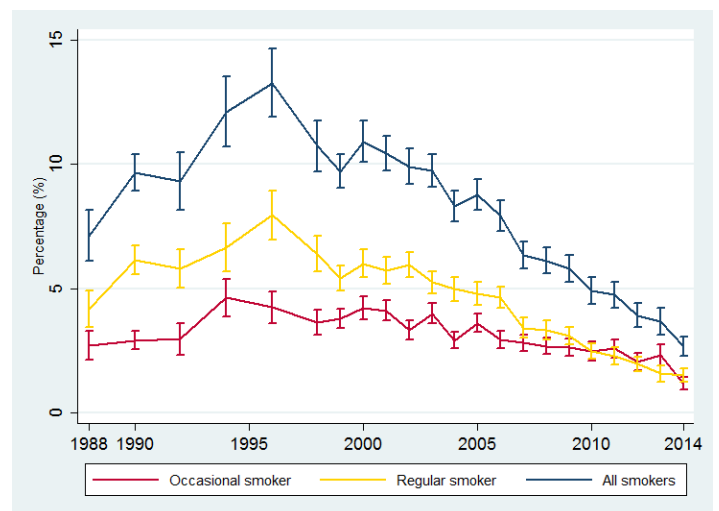
## Introduction

Significant attempts have been made over recent years to reduce smoking among young people. In 2011 it was estimated that 66 per cent of adult smokers in Britain started smoking before 18 years of age, and 40 per cent had started smoking before they were 16<sup>i</sup>. Discouraging smoking among young people might therefore substantially reduce the number of people smoking during adulthood. Smoking at a young age also interferes with the development of lung function<sup>ii</sup> as well as other health problems, both during adolescence and in later life. Reducing smoking in young people therefore has potentially long-term health benefits. To support this aim, several acts of legislation and regulation have been introduced both to discourage young people from starting smoking, and to make tobacco products more difficult to buy.

## How has the number of young people who smoke changed over time?

### Figure 1: Regular and occasional smoking in England declined between 1988 and 2014

In February 2010 the Labour Government committed to reducing smoking to less than one per cent of 11-15 year-olds by 2020<sup>iii</sup>. Figure 1 shows that in 1988, 7.1 per cent of young people in England smoked either regularly (one or more cigarette per week, 4.2 per cent) or occasionally (less than one cigarette per week, 2.7 per cent). Regular and occasional smoking have both declined progressively since the year 2000, particularly rates of regular smoking. Since 2007, rates of regular and occasional smoking have been comparable. In 2014, 2.6 per cent of young people in England smoked either regularly (1.5 per cent) or occasionally (1.2 per cent). There are clearly still improvements to be made to reach the target of less than one per cent of 11-15 year-olds smoking by 2020.



## Technical details

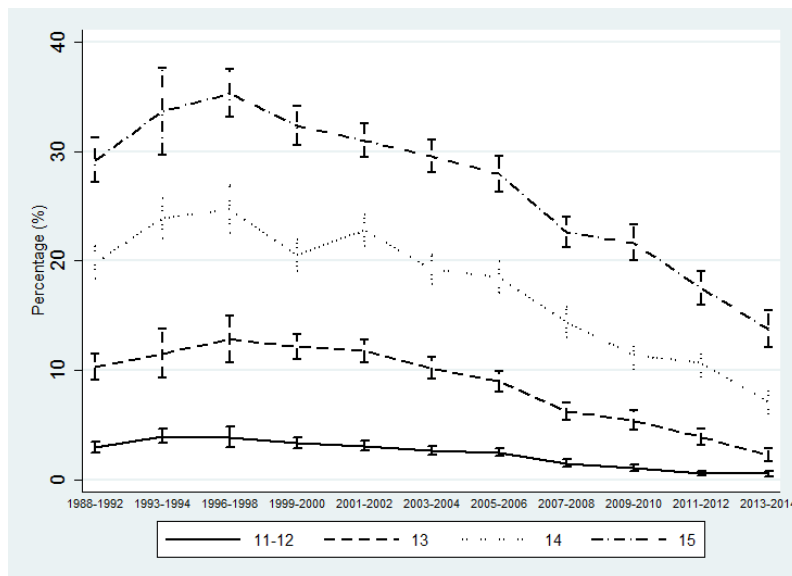
All data included in this briefing note are taken from the Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England survey, an annual survey of secondary school students in England. Data are available from 2008 to 2014. All analyses here are restricted to young people aged 11 to 15

Smoking varies between age groups and between boys and girls, so all figures have been adjusted for age and sex. These adjustments also allow comparisons to be made over time.

The vertical error bars show the degree of certainty around each estimate, where larger error bars indicate greater uncertainty. Overlapping error bars indicate that estimates are not significantly different between groups. For some questions, data from two or more years have been combined ('pooled') because of small numbers.

The figures reported here only cover cigarettes, not cigars, pipes or e-cigarettes.

### How does smoking vary by age?



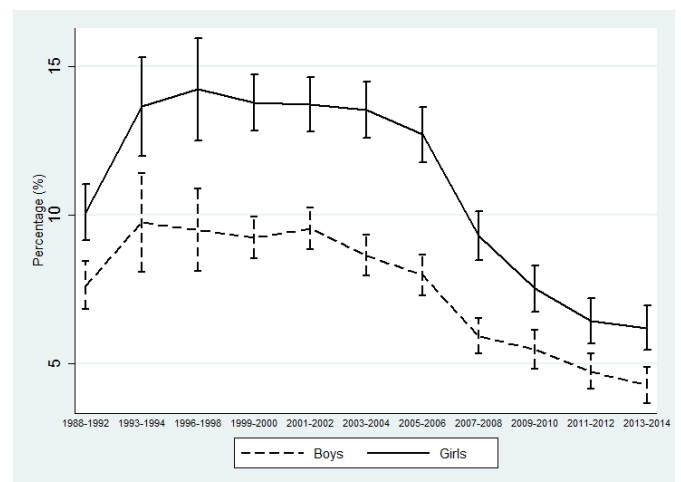
**Figure 2: Smoking is consistently more prevalent at older ages, but this gap has narrowed between 1988-92 and 2013-14** Smoking is more prevalent in older groups, but declined in all groups over this period, as shown in Figure 2. While this decline was larger in absolute terms among the oldest sample members, it was proportionately larger in younger groups. Between 2005-6 and 2007-2008 there was a stark decline in smoking in all groups, which suggests that the increase in the legal minimum age of sale for tobacco products from 16 to 18 in October 2007 did help restrict young people's access to cigarettes. The declining rates of overall smoking were

primarily due to changing levels of regular smoking, while occasional smoking has changed less over time. In 2011, the Coalition Government's Tobacco Control Plan for England aimed to reduce regular smoking in 15-year olds to 12 per cent or less by 2015<sup>iv</sup>. In 2013-2014, 13.8 per cent of 15-year-olds in England smoked either regularly (7.7 per cent) or occasionally (6.0 per cent). While these figures are encouraging, more recent data are not yet available so it is not possible to determine whether this target has been met.

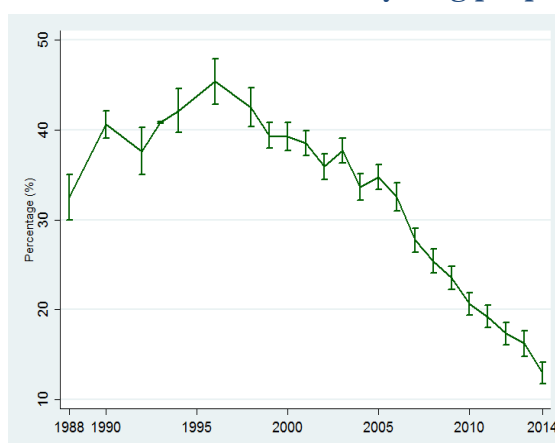
### How does smoking vary between boys and girls?

**Figure 3: Smoking is consistently more prevalent in girls than boys**

Figure 3 shows that smoking is more prevalent in girls than boys: in 2013-2014, 6.2 per cent of girls and 4.3 per cent of boys aged 11-15 reported smoking cigarettes, and these patterns are similar for both regular and occasional smoking. The non-overlapping error bars demonstrate that all differences between boys and girls are significant.



### Has the number of young people who have ever tried smoking changed over time?



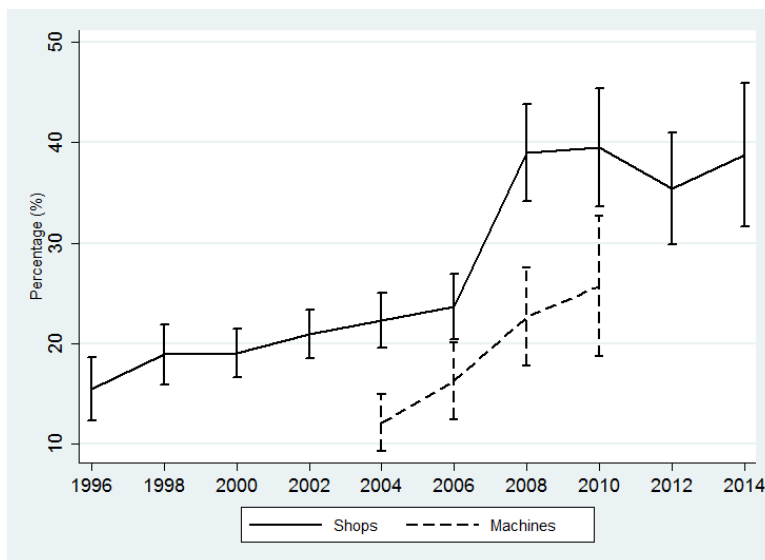
**Figure 4: The proportion of young people who have ever tried smoking increased between 1988 and 1995 and declined progressively since then**

An estimated one third to one half of young people who try smoking will become regular smokers within two years<sup>v</sup>. A key strategy for reducing smoking in young people is therefore to discourage them from ever smoking. Figure 4 shows the proportion of 11-15 year-olds in England who reported ever smoking a cigarette. This increased from 32.5 per cent in 1988 to peak at 45.4 per cent in 1996. Since then the proportion of young people who ever tried smoking has declined progressively, and in 2014 was at its lowest ever (12.9 per cent).

## Has buying cigarettes become more difficult over time?

### Figure 5: Buying cigarettes has become more difficult for young people

Figure 5 shows that the proportion of young people who reported finding it difficult to buy cigarettes in shops increased dramatically from 23.7 per cent in 2006 to 39.0 per cent in 2008, suggesting that raising the legal age for buying tobacco products had a clear effect on cigarette purchasing. Difficulty in buying from vending machines also doubled over this period. It is perhaps worrying that young people did not report even greater difficulty in buying cigarettes, since the sample only includes young people who were below the legal age for buying tobacco products even before the 2007 changes. More therefore needs to be done to ensure compliance among retailers.



## How many young people are exposed to passive smoke?

### Figure 6: Exposure to second-hand smoke in the home declined between 2006 and 2014

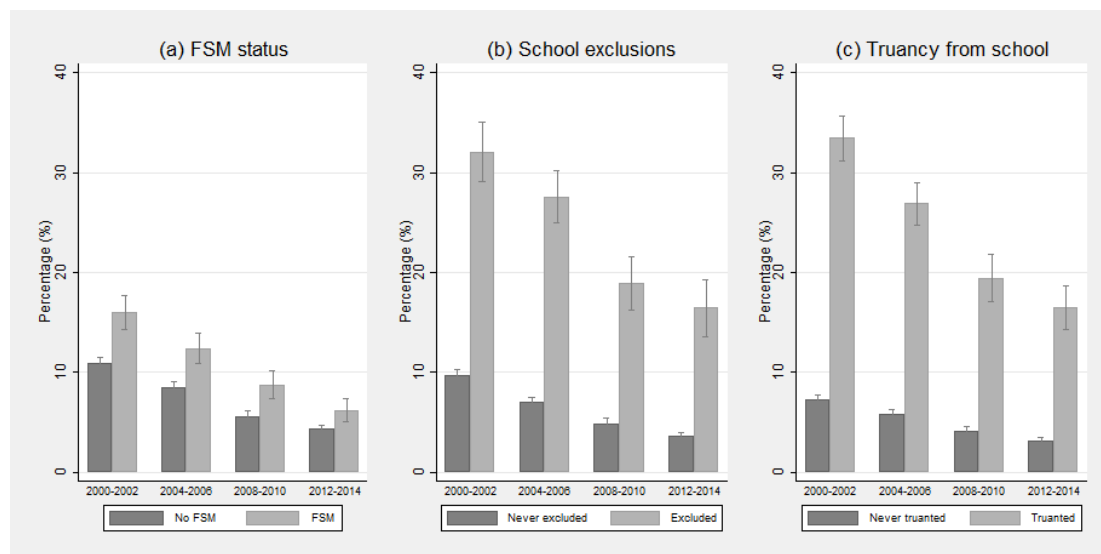
Exposure to passive smoke shows promising trends, as seen in Figure 6. The proportion of young people who said that someone they live with usually smokes inside their home more than halved from 30.4 per cent in 2006 to 12.7 per cent in 2014. Although these figures are encouraging, consistent data on exposure to passive smoke in other locations is not available, so we do not know whether reductions in passive smoking in the home are also matched elsewhere. Furthermore, the term 'usually' is ambiguous and may underestimate the proportion of young people who are exposed to passive smoke.



## Why might smoking in young people have changed over this period?

Progressive policy measures have aimed at reducing smoking in young people, and smoking in young people has declined progressively in the past 20 years. The rising legal age for buying tobacco from 16 to 18 in 2007 was not accompanied by large changes in smoking behaviours in 11-15 year-olds either overall (Figure 1) or when broken down by age (Figure 2). Likewise, overall reductions in the proportion of young people trying cigarettes did not accelerate during this period (Figure 4). In contrast, trends on some measures suggest that this change did alter supply, as buying cigarettes from shops and machines did become more difficult, albeit by no means impossible (Figure 5). While perhaps disappointing, these observations should not be surprising as this legal change should not have directly influenced young people's ability to buy cigarettes – as this was illegal throughout for the 11-15 year-olds examined here – although it may have interrupted supply from older friends and siblings. These figures show that this policy measure had some positive consequences, but restricting supply alone appears insufficient to prevent smoking in young people.

## How does smoking vary by social background?



**Figure 7:** Smoking is consistently more prevalent in disadvantaged young people. As can be seen in Figure 7(a), smoking is significantly more prevalent in young people receiving Free School Meals (FSM), which is

commonly used as a proxy for poverty when more detailed information is not available. Although smoking has declined over time in both groups, the relative size of this gap between FSM and non-FSM has not narrowed. Figure 7(b) likewise shows that young people who reported having ever been excluded from school were also more likely to report smoking, and this gap narrowed over time. Finally, Figure 7(c) shows that young people who reported having ever truanted from school were also more likely to report smoking, but again this gap narrowed over time. Comparing these charts it is clear that challenging behaviour is a far greater risk factor for smoking among young people than is poverty or FSM status.

### What can we conclude?

Smoking among young people in England shows both encouraging and worrying trends. It is promising that the proportion of young people who smoke continues to decline, especially among those who smoke regularly. The proportion of young people who have ever tried a cigarette is at its lowest ever, and passive smoking in the home halved between 2006 and 2014. Several policies aimed at reducing smoking among young people have also enjoyed some success: reductions in smoking among young people accelerated following the increased minimum age of sale for tobacco products from 16 to 18 in 2007. This was seen in all age groups, suggesting a ‘trickle down’ effect on smoking habits among young people. Buying cigarettes has also become more difficult for young people, although more efforts are needed to restrict young people’s access to cigarettes. However, some less positive patterns remain. Girls remain more likely than boys to smoke cigarettes; likewise young people receiving free school meals and those who have been excluded or truanted from school are also significantly more likely to smoke. Particular attention is therefore needed to reduce smoking among these groups.

**Author:** Elisabeth Garratt

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<sup>i</sup> ONS (2013) Chapter 1 – Smoking. Report on the 2011 General Lifestyle Survey. Available at [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_302558.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_302558.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention (1994) Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People—A Report of the Surgeon General. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/rr/rr4304.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Department of Health (2010) A Smokefree Future. A comprehensive tobacco control strategy for England. Available at [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_111789.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/documents/digitalasset/dh_111789.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> HM Government (2011) Healthy Lives, Healthy People: A Tobacco Control Plan for England. Available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/213757/dh\\_124960.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/213757/dh_124960.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> McNeill, A.D. (1991) The development of dependence on smoking in children, *British Journal of Addiction*, 86, 589-592. Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1360-0443.1991.tb01813.x/pdf>

