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Factors Associated with Youth Smoking in Ireland - A Special Analysis of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study on Behalf of the Tobacco Free Ireland Programme

INTRODUCTION

Most smokers start smoking during youth and continue into adulthood. Preventing youth initiation is therefore a key priority for the HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme. Information is limited in Ireland on smoking patterns among adolescents. It was determined that a detailed analysis of smoking patterns would prove valuable, particularly in terms of informing policy and developing initiatives to reduce smoking among adolescents.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of the study was to better inform tobacco control policy and planning in Ireland to tackle smoking initiation in youth through an analysis of smoking patterns among secondary school children in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

The study analysed the 2014 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey. This is a cross-sectional survey undertaken every four years in 44 countries and regions in collaboration with the World Health Organisation. It focuses on young peoples' health, wellbeing, behaviours and their social context. The survey comprised a random stratified sample of 13,611 schoolchildren (aged 9-18). Data was disaggregated by smoking status for all children. A smoker was defined as anyone smoking tobacco monthly or more frequently. The data was analysed in SPSS Version 25 and JMP statistical package. Pearson's Chi-Square and independent t-tests were used to compare smokers and non-smokers in terms of key variables. Multivariate analyses including logistic and ordinal regression modelling were also undertaken using discretionary backward elimination.

RESULTS

A total of 16% of respondents had smoked cigarettes in their lifetime. Almost half of lifetime smokers (48%) had smoked in the previous 30 days. Overall 5.9% of schoolchildren were classified as current smokers (6.6% boys and 5.8% girls). Prevalence is greatest for those 18 or older (20%) and those 15-17 (14%), with 1% under 12 years of age smoking. A larger proportion of smokers are from the lower social classes (14% of smokers versus 12% of non-smokers).

Controlling for age, gender and social class the study found that, compared to non-smokers, smokers were:

- Almost 12 times more likely to have consumed alcohol and almost 39 times more likely to have consumed cannabis in the last month, and almost seven times more likely to have reported ever having had sex
- 1.5 times more likely to report being on a diet and two times more likely to think that they were too fat
- Almost 3.5 times more likely to have reported fair/poor health or not be happy with life
- Almost 2.5 times more likely to have been bullied, 1.5 times more likely to have bullied others in the last month, and 1.5 times more likely to have been in a fight in the last 12 months
- 3.5 times more likely to report disliking school, 0.5 times less likely to report being encouraged to express their views in classes and 1.7 times more likely to report less positive views about students in their class
- Two times more likely to have difficulty speaking to parents in the last month
- Less likely to have good knowledge of the health risks of smoking
- Almost 4 times more likely to agree that smoking looked cool, and were less likely to agree that smoking looked disgusting and that smoking looked boring
- Almost 4 times more likely to report that they had no household smoking restrictions
- Over 2.5 times more likely to find it easy to purchase cigarettes (themselves or getting someone else)

CONCLUSIONS

Children are an important group to target in terms of reducing tobacco consumption in Ireland. The study demonstrates the challenges faced by children who smoke. This requires a broad-base response to meet these childrens' needs, which includes tackling their smoking in conjunction with wider supports.

PRESENTED

As an oral presentation entitled 'The State of Tobacco Control in Ireland' at the Tobacco Free Partners Conference in Farnleigh, Dublin on May 31st, 2018 by Dr. Paul Kavanagh. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/tobaccocontrol/tobaccofreeireland/>

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