

Health and Health Behaviour among Young People

Reported Smoking among School Children in Europe and North America

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The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (HBSC) is a collaborative survey conducted by the European office of the World Health Organization. Since the study's initiation in 1982, the researchers have collected data every four years in an increasing number of countries from 11, 13 and 15 year-old school children.

Information is collected on a wide variety of health behaviours, attitudes and associated psychosocial factors. The last survey took place over the school year 1997/98. The International Report detailing the findings from over 120,000 students in Europe and North America "Health and Health Behaviour Among Young people" was launched in February 2000. It is the first report in the new WHO Policy Series: Health Policy for Children and Adolescents.

The countries represented in the report comprise: Israel, Greenland, Lithuania, Northern Ireland, France, Poland, Germany, Portugal, Scotland, England, Slovakia, USA, Canada, Wales, Latvia, Ireland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Belgium (Flemish), Norway, Austria, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden. The international coordinator is Dr. Candace Currie of the University of Edinburgh and the databank managers are Drs. Bente Wold and Oddrun Samdal of the University of Bergen.

Pupils in all countries were asked the same questions about tobacco use; whether they had ever smoked tobacco, how often they currently smoked tobacco and how many cigarettes they usually

smoked in a week. Responses varied substantially by age group, gender and country. Older pupils and boys were more likely to have smoked before.

Results of the study

The rates for tobacco experimentation were lowest for the 11 year-olds and, in most countries, less than 20% of children in this age group had ever tried cigarettes. This rose to between 40 – 50% for 13 year-olds and 60 – 70% for 15 year-olds. Consistent differences between countries emerged. For example, Greece, Flemish-speaking Belgium and Portugal have the lowest rates of experimentation at age 11 (4%, 11% and 11%) and at age 13 (22%, 30% and 30%), while being three of the lowest four at age 15 (46%, 53% and 53%). On the other hand, Greenland and the Slovak Republic have the two highest rates at age 11 (39% and 38%), and they are both in the top three at age 13 (73% and 58%) and 15 (86% and 75%).

Regular smoking also increased substantially across age groups. No country exceeded a daily smoking rate of 2% for 11 year-olds, while most countries were under 10% at age 13 and 30% at age 15. Large increases were found in every country between age 13 and 15, but in some countries this was also the case between ages 11 and 13. For example, both Northern Irish and Welsh data illustrate a 1% rate at age 11, a 9% rate at age 13 and a 23% rate at age 15. These daily smoking data also illustrate inter-country differences. This is most striking amongst 15 year-old girls, where the rates range between 6% in Lithuania to 56% in Greenland. Greenland is of particular concern, where smoking rates are exceptionally high: 24% at age 13 and 50% at age 15. Interestingly, girls in Greenland

report more daily smoking than boys in all three age groups. Girls are also reporting higher rates of daily smoking than boys in a number of other countries. This is clearest among the 15 year-old students, where more than half of the countries are in this position.

Although the numbers reporting regular consumption of tobacco are of concern, the median number of cigarettes smoked as reported by those who said that they currently smoked were relatively low. At age 11, most countries reported medians of one or two cigarettes per week, while Israel was the highest at five. Similarly, the rates for 13 year-olds were moderate, where most reported smoking five or fewer per week, and only two countries report medians over 10 (Wales and Greenland). Reported consumption was higher among 15 year-olds, where rates vary from eight in France to 30 in Greece, Greenland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The previous International HBSC study took place over the school year 1993/94 and thus trend data can be examined for the 22 countries who took part in both studies. Only a few changes have been identified in the data of 11 year-olds who have tried smoking: the rates decreased in Finland and Sweden but increased in Israel, Lithuania and Wales. However, no countries showed a decrease in weekly smoking and, when the data on both genders were combined, a substantial increase was found in regular smoking in 12 of the 22 countries with no apparent trend in the remaining 10 countries.

Full details of the HBSC study, the data collected and the International Report can be found at www.ruhbc.ed.ac.uk/hbsc (smoking section page 96–105).