

Smoking, children, and young people

Councillor Briefings, July 2022

Key points

- Most people that smoke begin smoking and become addicted when they are children.
- Children are much more likely to smoke if they live in an environment where smoking is normalised, for example if parents or household members smoke.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to grow up around people who smoke and be exposed to secondhand smoke, therefore more likely to start smoking themselves.

How widespread is smoking in children and young people?

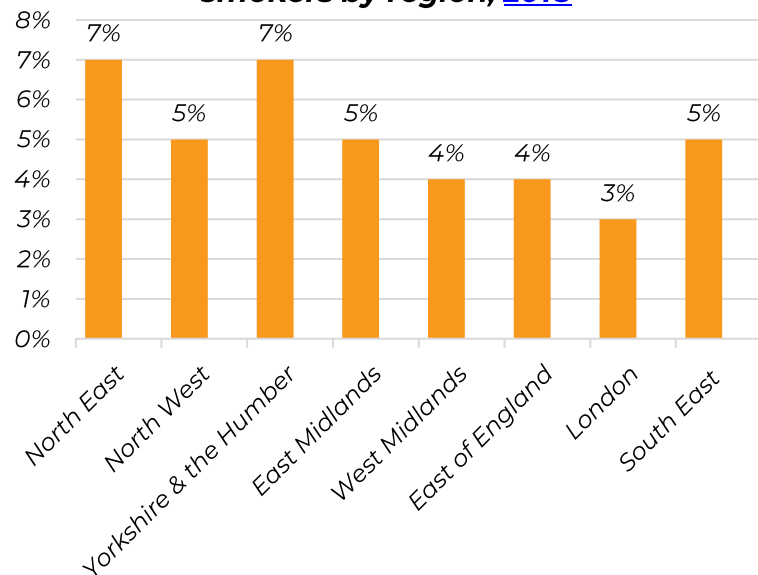
Although the proportion of children who have tried smoking at least once continues to decline and is now at its lowest ever recorded level, [\(16% of 11-15 year olds in 2018 had tried smoking vs 53% in 1982\)](#), an estimated [280 children still start smoking every day](#) in England. In 2018, [5% of all school-aged pupils were current smokers](#).

Smoking is especially harmful to children and young people given their less-developed airways, lungs, and immune systems. It reduces the [rate of lung growth and limits the maximum level of lung function](#) possible.

More worryingly, [two-thirds of people who smoke one cigarette go on to become regular smokers](#). Around [two-thirds of adult smokers](#)

report having taken up smoking before aged 18 and [two-fifths \(40%\) before aged 16](#). Many young people do not realise how addictive smoking is; [US research](#) shows that despite 95% of high-school smokers confident they will have quit smoking by graduation, only 25% do. Preventing smoking experimentation and initiation is thus key to [preventing a new generation of smokers](#).

Proportion of school-aged pupils who are current smokers by region, 2018



Why do children and young people start smoking?

Children and young people start smoking for a variety of reasons including parental and sibling smoking, smoking by friends and peer group members, exposure to tobacco marketing, easy access to cigarettes, and depictions of smoking in films, television, and other media. The tobacco industry historically have [aggressively targeted advertising at young people](#), recognising them as potential lifelong customers.

How does familial smoking affect children and young people?

Growing up in an environment where smoking is normalised is the biggest risk factor for smoking initiation. Children whose parents or main care giver smoke are [twice as likely to have tried a cigarette and 4 times more likely to smoke](#) themselves. Similarly, living with a [sibling who smokes almost doubles a child's likelihood](#) of becoming a smoker. Overall, household smoking is estimated to cause [at least 23,000 young people](#) in England and Wales to start smoking by the age of 15 every year.

What are the harms of secondhand smoke?

Secondhand smoking [increases a child's risk](#) of cot death, glue ear, asthma, and other respiratory disorders in later life and leads to [over 300,000 UK GP consultations and about 9,500 hospital admissions every year](#) (in addition to costing the NHS about £23.3 million annually). There are [significant risks to babies from secondhand smoke exposure in pregnant women](#), including low birth weight, congenital anomalies, smaller head circumferences, and increased risk of still birth.



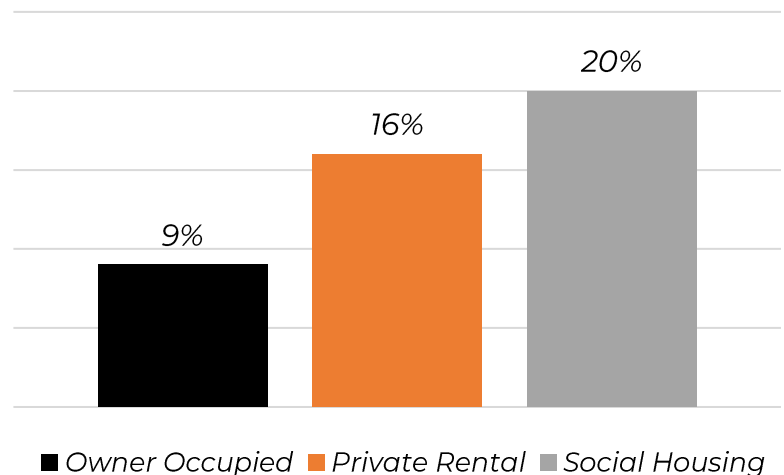
'If you smoke, I smoke' (Department of Health campaign)

Smokefree homes

In the UK, [around 2 million children](#) are estimated to be regularly exposed to secondhand smoke in the home, more than any other environment. In 2018, [55% of school pupils](#) reported being exposed to secondhand smoke at home or in someone else's home in the last year and 1 in 7 reported being exposed every day or on most days.

Disadvantaged children are more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke in the home, exacerbating inequalities and transmitting them across generations by increasing the chances of children growing up to smoke. A 2019 ASH and YouGov survey found that [16% of people in social grade C2DE say that someone smokes in the home most days](#) versus only 9% of people from social grade ABC1. Secondhand smoke exposure is also much higher in social housing, where adult smoking rates are [disproportionately high](#) and smoking related inequalities concentrated.

Inside smoking most days in households with children, England 2022



Actions for local councils

1. **Deliver high-quality comprehensive tobacco control** The best way to protect children and young people from tobacco is to ensure that their parents do not smoke. Doing this requires [comprehensive tobacco control](#) which encourages smokers to quit, helps them stay quit, denormalises tobacco and subsequently prevents young people from smoking.
2. **Tackle the illicit tobacco trade** Because young people are especially price sensitive, the availability of cheap illicit tobacco [facilitates initiation into and experimentation with smoking in young people](#). Collaborating with neighbouring local authorities or working regionally to conduct enforcement activity and to raise awareness about illicit tobacco can effectively and cost-effectively prevent youth smoking at its source.
3. **Address smoking in the home** Working with housing colleagues and local housing providers, as outlined from the ASH and Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) [joint report on Smoking and Social Housing](#) is essential to protecting children and young people in the most disadvantaged groups from secondhand smoke, preventing smoking experimentation and initiation and the resulting transmission of health inequalities between generations.