

## Tobacco Independent Review – Call for Evidence

Briefing on smoking in adolescence, prepared on by the Association for Young People’s Health

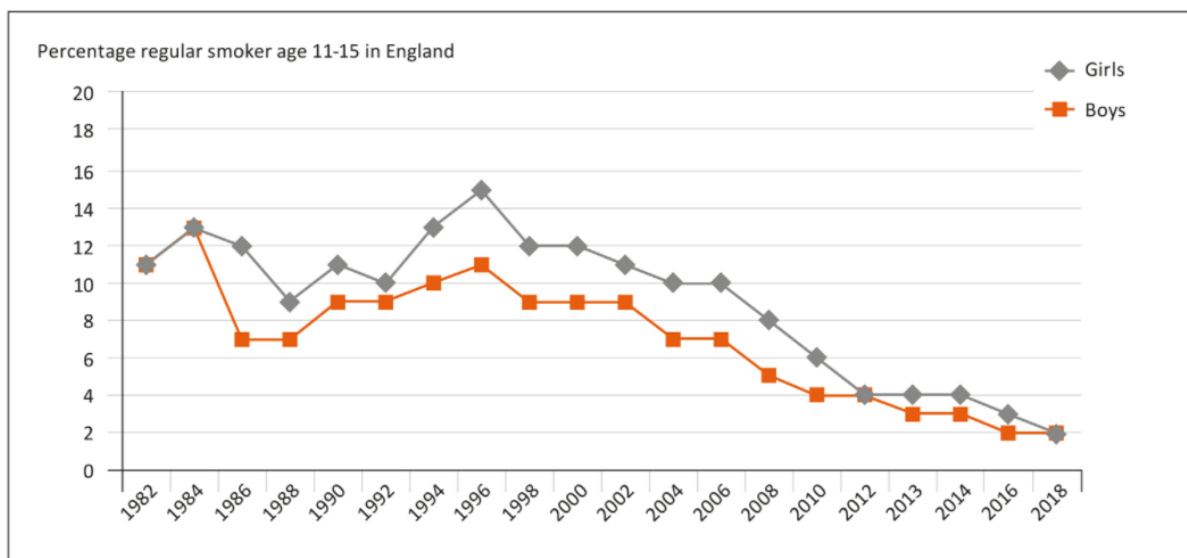
March 2022

### Background: Why do we need to tackle smoking rates in adolescence?

Adolescence is a key period when young people gain increased independence and engage in activities such as drinking and smoking for the first time. Habits formed in this time can potentially stretch out into adulthood, as young people form life long behaviours. It has been estimated that [for every three young smokers only one will go on to quit](#) before adulthood. Unhealthy behaviours can have consequences on young people’s health now, in the present, but also across their lives. There are health dangers associated with smoking, such as [links to cancer and disease, and exacerbation of common long-term conditions such as asthma](#).

### What do the data say about smoking prevalence in adolescence?

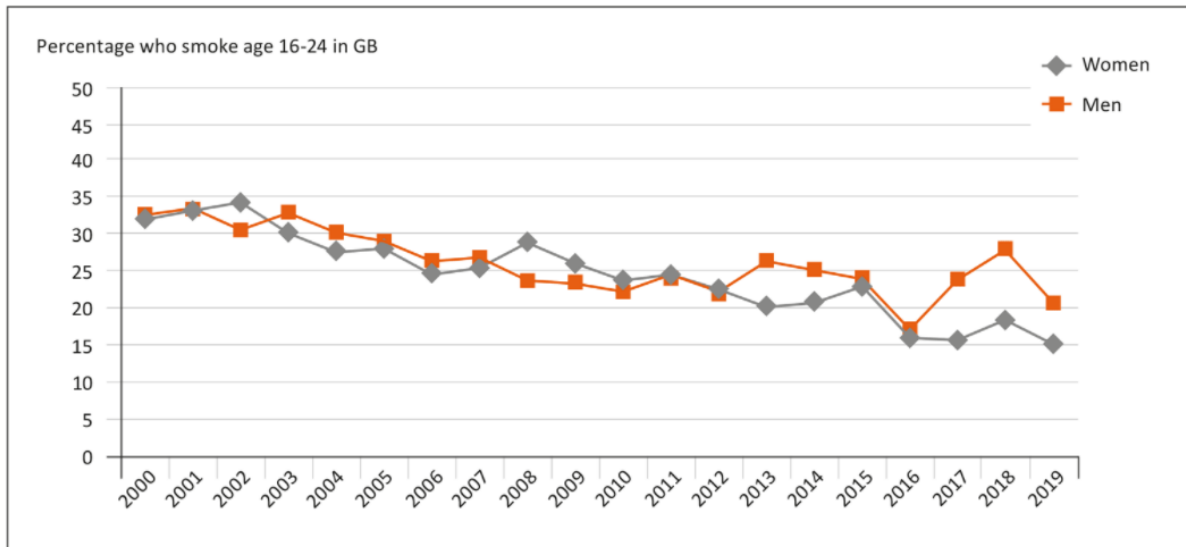
[Key Data](#) provides a snapshot of young people’s health, including the latest data on the uptake of smoking. Trends show declines over time, with fewer numbers of young people reporting smoking on a regular basis in recent years. Current rates of smoking are very low, which is a positive news story that shows young people are developing healthy behaviours. The average rate across the UK is near to the 5% needed to ensure that the UK Government meets its “smoke free” target.



From: [AYPH Key Data on Young People’s Health 2021](#)

There is an increase in smoking prevalence as young people head into their late teens and early 20s. Data have found that [1 in 5 young adults aged 16-24 are current smokers](#) – representing 20.7% of young men and 15.2% of young women. This represents a considerable increase in the low prevalence figures we see at age 15. However, we also see a declining trend over time in smoking

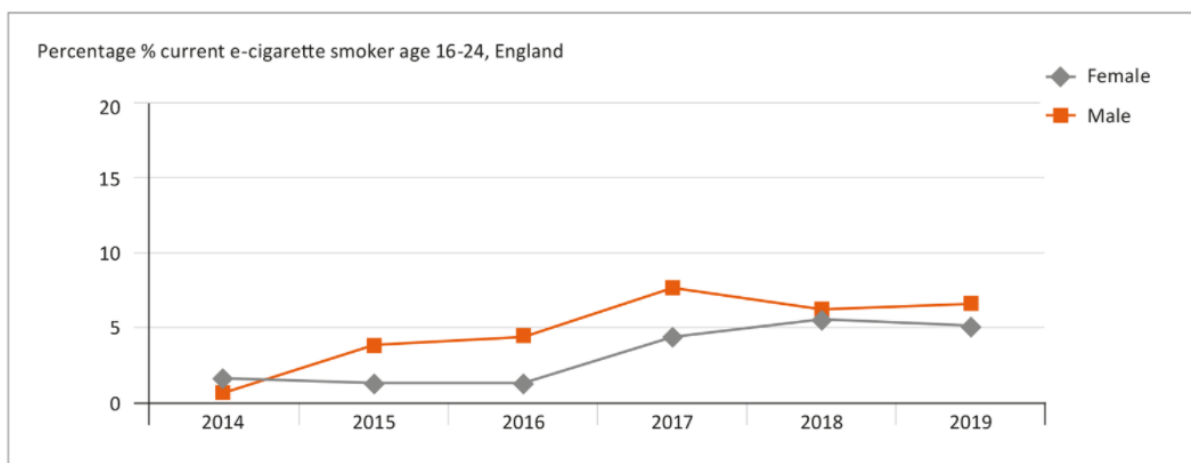
rates for the 16-24 age group although there have been slight increases among young men in recent periods, before declining again most recently. This suggests that interventions to reduce smoking should be focused on this older age group of young people (16-24 years).



From: [AYPH Key Data on Young People's Health 2021](#)

The numbers of young people reporting e-cigarette use is also low, but have been rising in recent years. We are concerned that young people may be particularly susceptible to e-cigarette and vaping promotional materials and use of sweet flavourings. Although there is increasing evidence that e-cigarettes are a safer alternative than traditional tobacco products, we do not support prescribing e-cigarettes to young people under the age of 18 or encouraging their use as an alternative to tobacco as they are not harm-free products.

We are concerned that young people are particularly vulnerable to illegal tobacco markets. Research from England has revealed that nearly [three quarters of smokers aged 14 -15 have been offered illicit tobacco and 55% have bought it](#). Action needs to be taken to reduce illegal tobacco markets in the UK.

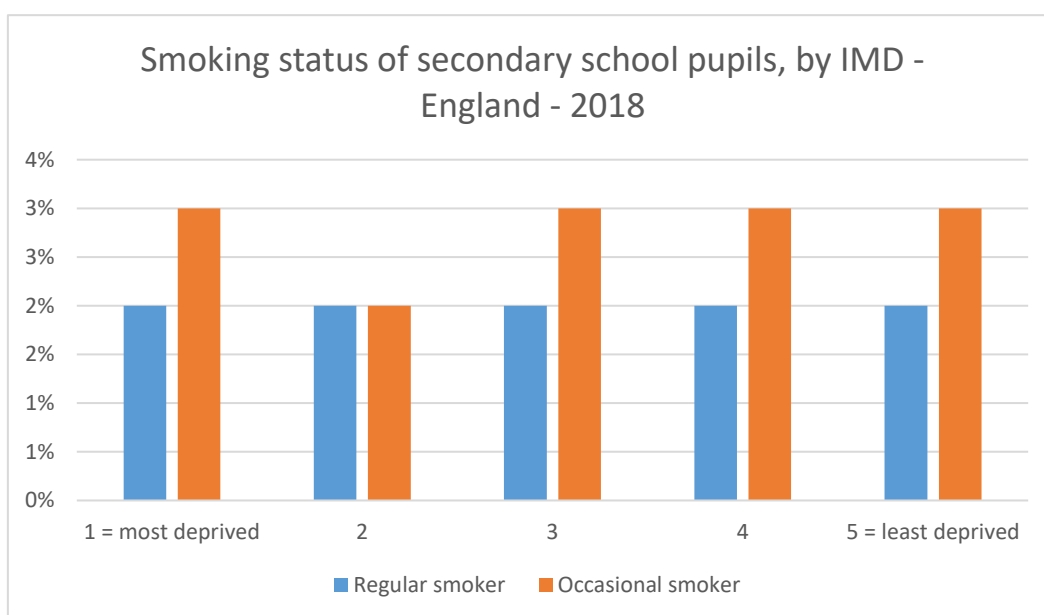


From: [AYPH Key Data on Young People's Health 2021](#)

## Do health inequalities exist in young people’s smoking rates?

Research has found that [young people who grow up in houses where there is an adult smoker are more likely to go on to smoke themselves](#), compared to those who grow up in smoke-free households.

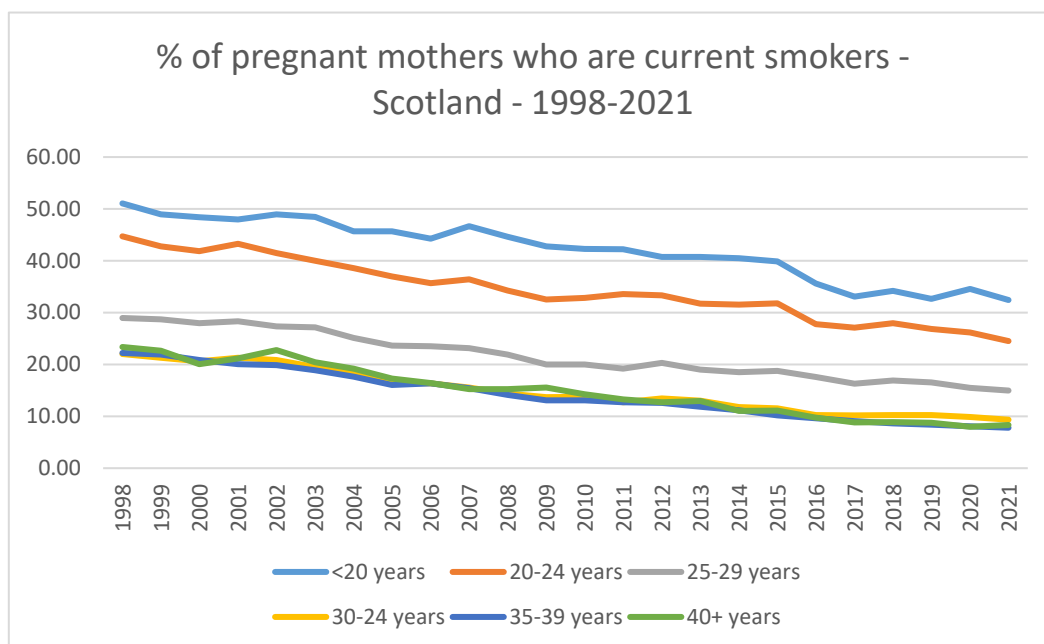
When we look at data available from England on young people’s smoking prevalence against the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), we do not see a clear link between the two. The [smoking prevalence rates are similar, if not the same, for young people in both the most and least deprived areas](#). This data suggests that inequalities in smoking rates in young people are not necessarily connected to affluence or deprivation, and may be caused by other contextual factors.



From: [NHS Digital – Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England](#)

In order to effectively tackle youth smoking, there needs to be a focus on the experiences of different groups of young people, especially those from different ethnic backgrounds. Data from Wales HBSC survey of young people show emerging health inequalities in smoking rates by ethnicity. In 2017/18, 31% of White Gypsy / Traveller young people report smoking on a weekly basis, compared to just 3% of White British young people. The low average rates hide these potentially high rates for some groups of young people and we must support them with specific interventions.

We are also concerned about the high prevalence of young women aged 24 and under who report smoking during their pregnancy. Data from Scotland shows that for mothers whose smoking status was recorded, [mothers under the age of 20 or between 20-24 years old are more likely than older mothers to report being current smokers](#).



From: [Public Health Scotland - Births in Scottish Hospitals](#)

### Impact of Covid-19 on young people’s smoking habits

We do not know yet what the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown periods have been on young people’s relationship with smoking. Social events have been limited, with bans on nightclubs and festivals, which may have reduced uptake. On the other hand, at AYPH we carried out engagement work with young people experiencing inequality during the first Covid-19 lockdown, which suggested that [some young people used alcohol, smoking and drugs as coping mechanisms](#) during lockdown periods.

### Our recommendations for policy and practice to reduce the prevalence of smoking among young people

Consult with young people directly to hear their experiences of smoking and alcohol consumption. Work with them to develop interventions and solutions.
Implementation in full of the prevention green paper ' <a href="#">Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020's</a> '. The green paper includes specific commitments to provide a 'smoke free' society by 2030.
Develop and implement effective school based interventions for the reduction of smoking such as, the <a href="#">ASSIST programme</a> .
There is also evidence that <a href="#">school nurses can play an important role in encouraging behaviour change and reducing smoking rates</a> among young people. The number of school nurses have decreased in recent years and funding should be made available to increase numbers within state-funded secondary schools.
Implement <a href="#">NICE guidance on the prevention of smoking</a> .

Prohibit the advertising, marketing and promotion of tobacco products at children and young people. We are particularly concerned about the promotion of e-cigarettes and vaping products targeted at young people through the use of sweet flavours and specific branding.

E-cigarettes should not be prescribed to young people under the age of 18 as a method of smoking cessation, as they are not harm-free products and we do not have a complete evidence base on their impact on later smoking/drug related behaviours.

Smoking bans within areas where there is a high footfall of children and young people.

Targeted interventions for specific groups of young people, including: 16-24 year olds, young women who are pregnant, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people, and young people who grow up in households with an adult smoker.

UK Government to maintain the legal age of sales of tobacco products at age 18. Changes to the age of sale should be decided in consultation with young adults aged 16-24 about the most effective methods of preventing young people from smoking. Any changes should also be informed by research into the potential impacts of raising the legal age of sale for young people.

Improve capabilities for healthcare professionals to better record patient data on smoking rates, which includes functionality to report data by age and other important demographic features (e.g. ethnicity and deprivation status). Better data collection and reporting on young people who are smoking will ensure interventions can be targeted and effective.

**Links to relevant sources of information from AYPH:**

- [Youth health data hub](#) – collation of latest data and trends on young people’s health, including smoking prevalence
- Recent blog post on health inequalities in [smoking and drinking prevalence in adolescence](#)
- AYPH [policy consultation responses](#)

**Links to data on smoking rates in adolescence:**

- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health – [State of Child Health](#)
- NHS Digital – [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England](#)
- Scottish Government – [SALUS](#)
- [Health Behaviour in School Children](#) – surveys in England, Scotland and Wales
- Northern Ireland [Young People’s Behaviour and Attitudes Survey](#)
- NHS Digital - [Health Survey for England](#)
- ONS – [Adult smoking habits in Great Britain](#)

**Association for Young People's Health**

AYPH is the leading independent voice for young people's health in the UK. To find out more about our work visit: [www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk](http://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk)

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