

Socioeconomic status and smokers' number of smoking friends: Findings from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey

Hitchman, S.C., Fong, G.T., Zanna, M.P., Thrasher, J.F., Chung-Hall, J., Siahpush, M.

Abstract

BACKGROUND: Smoking rates are higher among low socioeconomic (SES) groups, and there is evidence that inequalities in smoking are widening over time in many countries. Low SES smokers may be more likely to smoke and less likely to quit because smoking is heavily concentrated in their social contexts. This study investigated whether low SES smokers (1) have more smoking friends, and (2) are more likely to gain and less likely to lose smoking friends over time. Correlates of having more smoking friends and gaining or losing smoking friends were also considered.

METHOD: Respondents included 6321 adult current smokers (at recruitment) from Wave 1 (2002) and Wave 2 (2003) of the International Tobacco Control Project (ITC) Four Country Survey, a nationally representative longitudinal cohort survey of smokers in Australia, Canada, UK, and US.

RESULTS: Low SES smokers reported more smoking friends than moderate and high SES smokers. Low SES smokers were also more likely to gain smoking friends over time compared with high SES smokers. Smokers who were male, younger, and lived with other smokers reported more smoking friends, and were also more likely to gain and less likely to lose smoking friends. Smoking behaviours, such as higher nicotine dependence were related to reporting more smoking friends, but not to losing or gain smoking friends.

CONCLUSIONS: Smoking is highly concentrated in the social networks of lower SES smokers and this concentration may be increasing over time. Cessation interventions should consider how the structure of low SES smokers' social networks affects quitting.

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