Smoking in films encourages teenagers to take a drag

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Ever since the era of silent films, smoking has played a major part in film symbolism.

Think Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany’s or Robert De Niro in Goodfellas.

But iconic scenes such as these could be damaging the health of teenagers, who are more likely to smoke after watching films depicting the habit.

New research from the University of Bristol has revealed that 15-year-olds who saw the most films showing smoking were 73 per cent more likely to have tried a cigarette than those exposed to the least.

They were also almost 50 per cent more likely to be a current smoker than those least exposed.

And even after taking account of alcohol use and smoking among their peers, both of which are known to influence initiation of smoking, these teenagers were still 32 per cent more likely to have tried a cigarette themselves.

The findings have prompted calls for film makers, regulators and politicians to review their policies on film classification for movies which glamorise smoking.

The [UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies](http://ukctcs.org/ukctcs/index.aspx) wants such films to fall under the same stringent rules applied to films showing violence and sex, arguing that children need to be protected from potentially harmful imagery.

The University of Bristol study was led by Dr Andrea Waylen, Dr Sam Leary and Professor Andrew Ness in partnership with [Dartmouth Medical School](http://dms.dartmouth.edu/) in the US.

Research in the US has shown that films depict smoking as an attractive behaviour rather than associating it with negative outcomes, such as ill health, making it similar to aspirational tobacco advertising imagery which is banned in the UK.

Adolescents in the US with high exposure to films showing smoking are two to three times more likely to start smoking than others, even after other factors such as alcohol use and peer pressure are taken into account.

The study, using data collected from the [Children of the 90s](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/) project, looked at 5,166 15-year-olds and asked whether they had seen 50 films which were randomly selected from 366 box office hits released between 2001 and 2005 and compared these findings with whether they had ever tried a cigarette or were current smokers.

Dr Waylen, from the [School of Oral and Dental Sciences](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/dental/), said: “More than half the films shown in the UK that contain smoking are rated UK15 or below, so children and young teenagers are clearly exposed.

“Our results confirm an association between this exposure and youth smoking in this country, indicating that raising the certification to 18 in the UK is likely to lower smoking rates among youth.

“Given that smoking depictions in films are not consistent with the ban on smoking in public places in the UK and that the relationship may be causal, a precautionary principle should be pursued.

Films ought to be rated by exposure to smoking in the same way that they are currently rated by level of violence.

Smoking and its adverse consequences are certainly a larger public health problem.

Such a policy would also make the movie ratings system consistent with the ban on tobacco advertising in all other media.”

The study’s results are cited by the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies in an article published in [*Thorax*](http://thorax.bmj.com/), a International Journal of Respiratory Medicine published by the [British Medical Journal](http://www.bmj.com/).

Its authors, Dr Ailsa Lyons and Professor John Britton, detail their efforts to persuade the national regulator, the [British Board of Film Classification](http://www.bbfc.co.uk/) (BBFC), and the government’s [Department for Culture Media and Sport](http://www.culture.gov.uk/) (DCMS) to reclassify films depicting smoking.

In response to the allegation that current practice in film classification is failing to protect children from “this potential harmful imagery”, the BBFC told the authors that their guidelines were “proportionate; take due account of the available evidence of harm; and reflect the clear wishes of the public”.

**Further information:**

Children of the 90s

Based at the University of Bristol, Children of the 90s (ALSPAC) is known the world over. It is a long-term health research project that enrolled more than 14,000 pregnant women in 1991 and 1992. It has been following the health and development of the mothers and their children in great detail ever since.