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Smoking in cars carrying children: monitoring public attitudes

Executive summary



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Introduction

The issue of smoking in cars carrying children has been a consistent theme in recent Annual Reports from the former Chief Medical Officer for Wales, where concern has been raised about the potential health hazards of second-hand smoke for children. Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of second hand smoke, which is associated with a multitude of child health problems including sudden infant death, lower respiratory infection, middle ear disease, asthma and meningitis. Research in Wales suggests that childhood exposure to smoking in cars is not uncommon, while evidence elsewhere indicates support for restricting smoking in cars carrying children.

The aim of the research presented in this report was to explore public attitudes to restricting smoking in cars carrying children in the Welsh adult population to inform policy development in this area. Key findings are presented from three waves of data collection conducted between September 2011 and November 2012.

Methods

Questions were included in Beaufort Research Ltd's adult omnibus survey, which is designed to be representative of the adult population resident in Wales aged 16 and over. Interlocking demographic quota controls of age and social class within sex are employed in each sampling point for the selection of respondents, these quotas being set to reflect the individual demographic profile of each selected point. Interviews are conducted face to face in the homes of respondents utilising Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technology. Fieldwork was conducted during September 2011, March 2012 and November 2012, with 1018, 1007 and 1009 interviews, respectively. Findings are presented for all respondents and by sub-group: gender; age; whether there are children in the household; socio-economic status; geographical region; and smoking status.

Results

Smoking behaviour in cars

Of those respondents with access to a car, some three quarters reported that smoking was not allowed in their main car, increasing from 71% in September 2011 to 78% in November 2012. Women, older people, those in professional/skilled occupational groups and non-smokers were more likely to ban smoking in their main car.

Attitudes towards smoking and smoking in cars

The vast majority of respondents, around 90%, agreed that second-hand smoke can harm health, that parental smoking can harm health and that parents shouldn't smoke in front of their children. Two thirds (68% in November 2012) agreed that second-hand smoke can be harmful for up to two hours after smoking a cigarette in a car. Fewer than one in ten agreed that it was okay to smoke in a car carrying non-smokers, children or children with a window open, although the figures were slightly higher for current smokers.

Attitudes towards restricting smoking in cars

Just under half of respondents agreed that smoking should be banned in cars across the three time points (48% in November 2012), rising to four in five for cars carrying children (82% in November 2012). However, around seven in ten agreed that it was an individual's right to smoke in their car and in a car when carrying children (72% and 67%, respectively, in November 2012). Non-smokers were more likely to agree with a ban on smoking in cars, as were women, older respondents and those in professional occupations.

Likely impact of, and compliance with, restricting smoking in cars carrying children

Of those with access to a car, the vast majority (more than 90% in all three waves of data collection) reported that a ban on smoking in cars carrying children would not affect them in any way (94% of non-smokers and 85% of smokers in November 2012). Around four in five smokers (82% in November 2012) reported that they would likely comply with a ban if introduced.

Likelihood of restrictions being enforced

In November 2012, two in five respondents (40%) reported that they thought it likely that a ban on smoking in cars carrying children would be enforced, down slightly from September 2011 (45%). This figure was slightly higher for smokers than non-smokers (e.g. 47% and 38%, respectively, in November 2012).

Discussion

The research provides valuable insights into recent trends in public attitudes and behaviours in relation to smoking in cars and specifically smoking in cars when carrying children. The data suggest that the majority of adults with access to a car do not allow smoking at anytime, with evidence of a slight increase across the three waves of data collection. Differences by socio-demographic factors and smoking status can be seen, suggesting that future messaging of public health campaign work, such as Fresh Start Wales, should continue to focus on specific groups within the wider population.

The case for not smoking in cars would appear to be accepted among most adults in Wales, among non-smokers and smokers, with very few respondents agreeing that it is okay to smoke in cars with non-smokers or with children. Similarly, in terms of potential policy options, the findings indicate that just under half of respondents agreed that smoking should be banned in cars, rising to four in five when children were in the car, although it is important to note the apparent contradiction that a majority of respondents also agreed that it is an individual's right to choose whether they smoke in their own car, whether carrying children or not. While the evidence suggests that people think it should be their decision, most appear to be supportive of the rationale for taking action and already choose to restrict smoking in their car.

Issues around compliance and enforcement are critical when considering future policy options and around four in five smokers reported that they would comply were a ban on smoking in cars carrying children to be introduced. In contrast, around two in five of all respondents thought it likely that

enforcement would be feasible, the figure being higher among smokers. It is suggested that such findings can be explained through social norms, with individuals agreeing that they would likely comply but perhaps others may not do so.

Monitoring public attitudes and behaviours will continue with further waves of data collection, supported by ongoing synthesis of work undertaken elsewhere, as well as building on previously published research into young people's exposure to second-hand smoke.