

# Parental smoking puts nearly half a million UK children into poverty

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

Smoking is not only bad for your health; it also puts 400,000 children in poverty. Smoking places a financial burden on low income families, suggesting that parents are likely to forgo basic household and food necessities in order to fund their addiction, according to UK research published in the open access journal *BMC Public Health*.

This is the first UK study to highlight the extent to which [smoking](#) exacerbates child [poverty](#). The findings are based on national surveys which estimate the number of [children](#) living in poverty by household structure. In 1999, the UK government announced a target to abolish child poverty by 2020, though this target is unlikely to be met. It is therefore crucial to identify avoidable factors that contribute to and worsen child poverty.

"Smoking reduces the income available for families to feed, clothe and otherwise care for their children living in low-income households. This study demonstrates that if our government, and our health services, prioritized treating smoking dependence, it could have a major effect on [child poverty](#) as well as health," says lead author, Dr Tessa Langley from the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies at the University of Nottingham.

Smoking is an expensive habit and one that impoverishes millions of people around the world. In the US, smokers spend less on housing than non-smokers and recent research in India showed that smoking cuts spending on food, education, and entertainment.

This new study estimates that 1.1 million children in the UK, almost half of all children in poverty, were living with at least one parent who smokes. A further 400,000 would be classed as being in poverty if parental tobacco expenditure were subtracted from household income.

In July 2014, the weighted average price of 20 cigarettes in the UK was £7 (GB). Although many smokers save money by opting for budget brands or switching to hand rolling tobacco, the cost of their smoking is still a substantial drain on the budgets of families living on low incomes. "The poverty threshold income level for a two parent household with two children is £392. If both parents are smokers, these households will be spending an average of £50 on tobacco per week, which is a big drain on

an already tight budget," says Tessa Langley.

This is a key opportunity for the UK Government to take action to improve the lives of millions of children. "Tobacco control interventions to encourage low income smokers to quit, would not only improve health but also alleviate poverty," says Tessa Langley. Future studies are needed to determine what families sacrifice to sustain their habit, whether they do without fresh fruit or food in general; heating bills or clothing. This would provide a better picture on the burden of smoking in poor households.

**More information:** Parental smoking and child poverty in the UK: An analysis of national survey data, Charmaine Belvin, John Britton, John Holmes and Tessa Langley, *BMC Public Health* 2015

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