

Institute for Global Tobacco Control

# Flight Attendants' Perspectives on Secondhand Smoke in the Workplace 25 Years After the In-flight Smoking Ban



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# Background

- Occupational spaces are critical to health. Flight attendants work in a unique position requiring long hours and diverse responsibilities carried out in multiple venues
- Secondhand smoke (SHS) exposure is one harmful and avoidable exposure experienced by flight attendants
- February 2015 marked 25 years since the passage of a ban on smoking in airplanes
- Recent studies indicated elevated levels of SHS exposure in and around airports, both in the U.S. and abroad
- Common exposure sites include areas in and around designated smoking rooms, seating near gates and spaces surrounding airport entrances and exits

#### Methods

- **Study Aims**: 1) Describe flight attendants' experiences with SHS in the workplace and 2) Explore ways to improve workplace smoke-free policies
- Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with 20 U.S. flight attendants
- Eligibility criteria: Employed by a commercial airline and working long-haul (>4 hours), international flights
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 participants by phone, audio-recorded, transcribed, coded using an iterative process
- **Analysis:** Data subjected to thematic analysis and constant comparison to explore similarities and differences in experience by length of tenure (hired prior to in-flight smoking ban vs. those hired after) and smoking status (never vs. former)

### Results

## **Participant Demographics** Characteristic N (%) Gender Male 7 (35) Female 13 (65) Tenure Pre-ban 12 (60) Post-ban 8 (40) **Smoking Status** Never 15 (75) Former 5 (25)

### Overview of Findings

- The majority of participants were female, began working before the ban and had never smoked
- All participants reported occupational exposure to SHS exposure in and around airports
- Never smokers expressed more concern and discomfort associated with SHS exposure
- All participants suggested ways to strengthen smokefree policy, particularly in outdoor spaces
- Three participants suggested making airport premises completely smoke-free

# Secondhand Smoke Exposure in the Workplace

- Participants described SHS exposure in multiple indoor and outdoor venues
- Two themes emerged in never-smokers' accounts: 1) drift from smoking-permitted zones and 2) inability to avoid SHS due to professional obligations (Little distinction between pre- and post-ban status participants)

#### Drift from Smoking-permitted Zones

"It has a motion detector door, so every time somebody walks by, that door opens, whether you were trying to go in there or not. If I was just walking by, going to my gate, it would sense I was walking by and open up, and - poof - all that smoke comes out into the airport." (female, pre-ban, never smoker)

#### Inability to Avoid SHS

"We're required to stand by the gate waiting to board. And if our gate's next to a smoking area, we have to stand there breathing all the grody smell of the secondhand smoke coming out." (female, post-ban, never smoker)

#### Drift from Smoking-Permitted Zones

"They know they aren't supposed to smoke within a certain number of feet of the door, but you can still smell it when you walk out."

(female, pre-ban, never smoker)

#### Inability to Avoid

"To me it's really gross because you finally get out of the airplane and you just want to breathe some fresh air and, if I'm waiting for a ride, or waiting for the crew bus, everybody's out there smoking. You can't get away from it." (female, pre-ban, never smoker)

#### **Exposure Inside Airports**



All participants recommended strengthening smoke-free policies in the workplace

Recommendations for Improving Smoke-free Policies

Recommendations differed by length of tenure and smoking status. Recommendations focusing on indoor SHS exposure were exclusive to post-ban status participants and more common among former smokers. Nearly all participants suggested measures for reducing outdoor exposure

Reducing Indoor Exposure "...perhaps having a double door, instead of

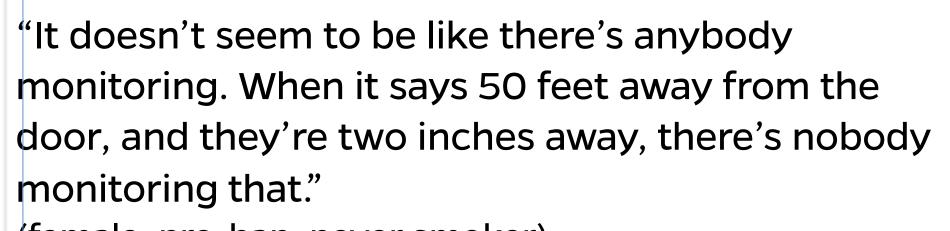


"In terms of a smoke-free workplace, I would definitely not allow smoking indoors." (female, post-ban, never smoker)

just a single door on the smoking

room." (female, post-ban, former smoker)

Reducing Outdoor Exposure

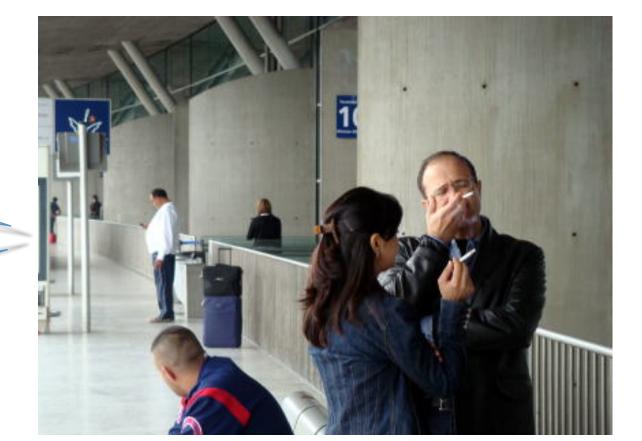


(female, pre-ban, never smoker)

**Smoking** area

#### Conclusions

- Exposure to SHS was a quality of life concern for study participants
- This work builds on a growing literature demonstrating continued occupational SHS exposure among U.S. flight attendants
- Outdoor smoking may represent a gap in existing smoke-free policies. There is need for improved communication and consistency of follow-through in order to strengthen current policies and improve their effectiveness
- When smoking is banned indoors, smokers congregate outdoors; a complete ban on smoking on airport premises would be more effective
- Strengthening restrictions in these areas may improve conditions, not only for flight attendants but for travelers as well



**Exposure Outside Airports**