

Prevalence of tobacco and e-cigarette use by young people in the WHO European Region

OVERVIEW

Worldwide, at least 37 million young people aged 13–15 years (9.7%) use some form of tobacco. The number in the WHO European Region is 4 million (10.8%) (1)(Fig. 1).

The rate of tobacco use among boys aged 13–15 in the WHO European Region was 11.5% and that among girls was 10.1%, both equivalent to about 2 million. This rate is lower than the global average (12.5%) for boys and above the global average for girls (6.8%) (Fig. 2).

The rates among boys and girls in the Region are similar (11.5% for boys, 10.1% for girls), whereas the average rate of tobacco use among girls in four other WHO regions¹ is 1.5–4 times lower than that among boys.

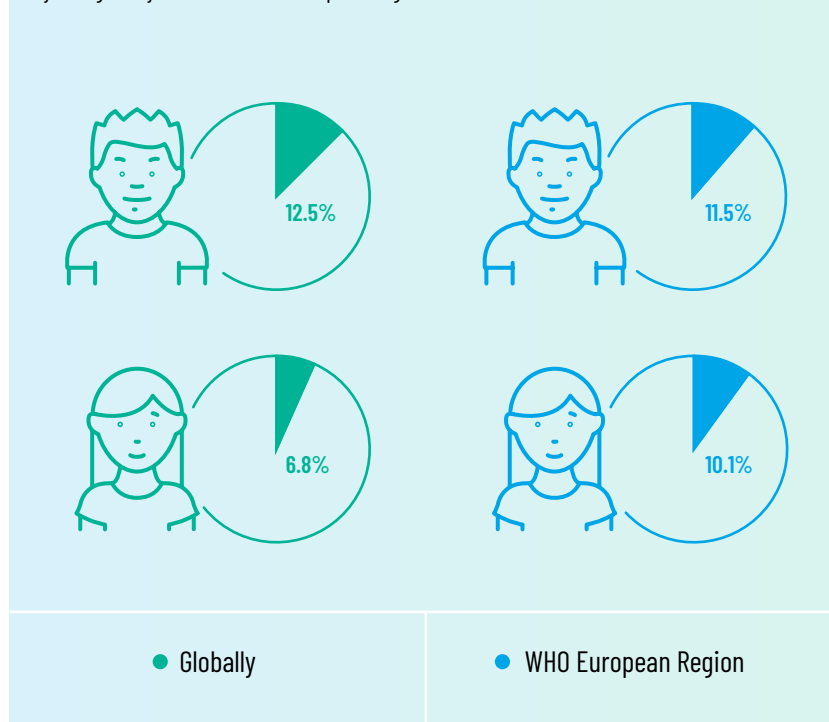
Only about half the countries in the WHO European Region survey young people about their use of smokeless tobacco products. WHO has estimated that, in 2022, 1 million (2%) of the Region's population aged 13–15 years used smokeless tobacco products, which is twice as many as in 2020 (2).

Fig. 1. Estimated numbers of current tobacco users aged 13–15 years, 2022



Source: WHO (1).

Fig. 2. Estimated average prevalence rate among students aged 13–15 years, by sex, globally and in the WHO European Region, 2022



Source: WHO (1).

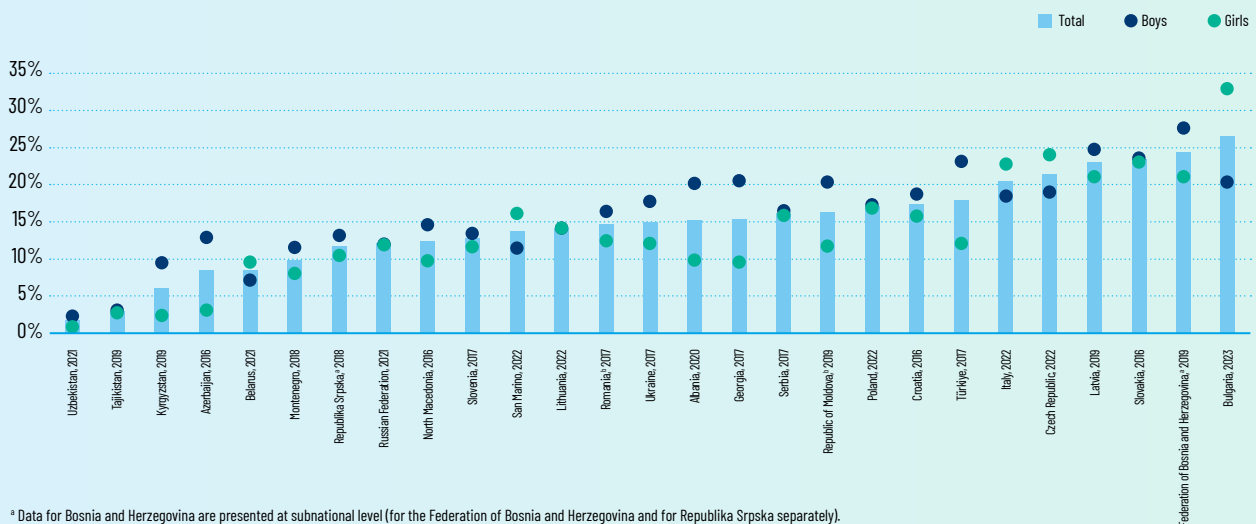


Data on tobacco use by young people is available from school-based surveys, including the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS), the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD) and national surveys.

According to the GYTS, tobacco use by young people aged 13–15 years varies from country to country. The prevalence of use of any tobacco product ranged from 26.6% in Bulgaria (in 2023) to 1.7% in Uzbekistan (in 2021) (Fig. 3).

Approximately half of the countries reported a significantly higher prevalence among boys than girls, while another 12 countries reported no significant difference by sex, and two registered a significantly higher prevalence among girls than boys (Italy in 2022 and Bulgaria in 2023).

Fig. 3. Prevalence of current tobacco use among students aged 13–15 years in 27 countries in the WHO European Region, overall and by sex, from the latest available GYTS



* Data for Bosnia and Herzegovina are presented at subnational level (for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and for Republika Srpska separately).
 † Includes heated tobacco products.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (3).

Among older students, aged 15–16 years, the 2019 ESPAD survey found that the prevalence of current cigarette smoking ranged from 10% in Malta and Norway to 32% in Bulgaria and Italy (Fig. 4). The rate of current cigarette smoking among boys varied from 9.5% in Malta to 31% in Italy, and that among girls from 7.1% in Georgia to 36% in Bulgaria (4). In 17 of 28 countries, the rates of use among girls were similar or higher than those among boys.

Fig. 4. Current cigarette smoking among students aged 15–16 years in 28 countries in the WHO European Region, overall and by sex, ESPAD, 2019



Source: WHO (4).



The uptake of electronic cigarettes by young people has increased, and this trend has been reported to be of great public concern in several countries. Information from the Global Tobacco Surveillance System shows that current e-cigarette use by children aged 13–15 years old often exceeds those of older age groups (5).

E-cigarette use among adolescents aged 13–15 years ranged from 0.7% in Uzbekistan (2021) to 23.3% in Bulgaria (2023). In most countries, with the exceptions of Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and San Marino, the prevalence of e-cigarette use was higher among boys than girls (Fig. 5). European countries are also increasingly documenting higher rates of e-cigarette use than of cigarette smoking among young people, some countries observing a difference of two or even three times (3).

Fig. 5. Prevalence of current use of e-cigarettes among students aged 13–15 years in 20 countries in the WHO European Region, overall and by sex, from the latest available GYTS

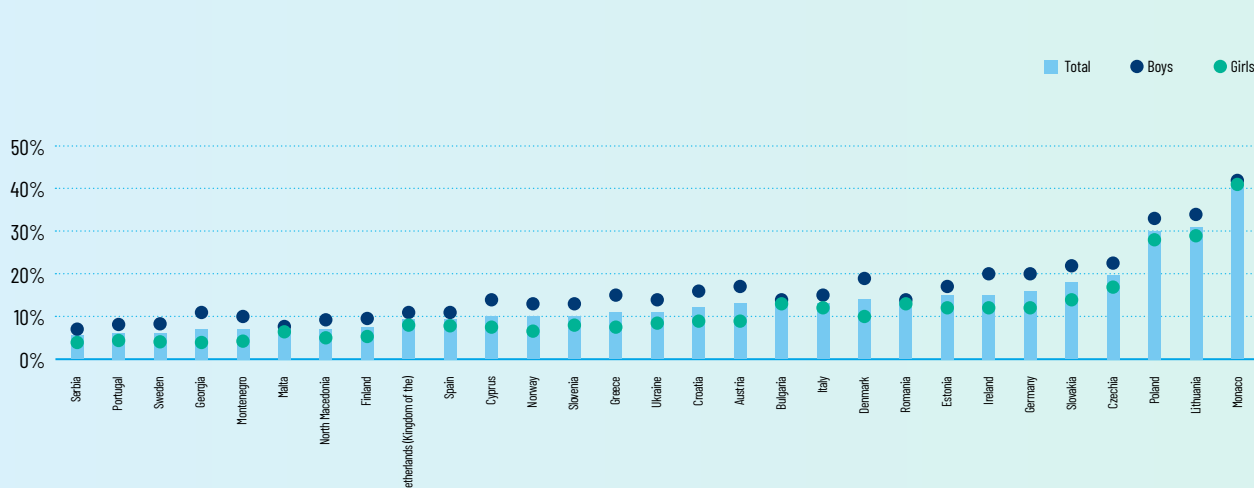


^a Data for Bosnia and Herzegovina are presented at subnational level (for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina separately).

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (3).

Use of e-cigarettes by adolescents aged 15–16 years ranged from 5.5% in Serbia to 41% in Monaco in 2019. According to ESPAD, e-cigarette use in this age group is more common among boys than among girls. Three countries, Lithuania, Monaco and Poland, recorded a prevalence of e-cigarette use of $\geq 30\%$ among 15–16-year-olds (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Current e-cigarette use among students aged 15–16 years in 29 countries in the WHO European Region, overall and by sex, ESPAD 2019



Source: WHO (4).

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

- The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) is a highly effective regulatory framework, but it is underused in the Region. Member States should aim to fully implement all measures within the WHO FCTC.
- Both a comprehensive approach to tobacco control and urgent measures are necessary to prevent uptake of e-cigarettes by young people and to counter nicotine addiction.
- Monitoring of tobacco and nicotine use among young people should be strengthened.

References²

1. WHO global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use 2000–2030. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240088283>).
2. WHO global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use 2000–2025, fourth edition. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/348537>).
3. Global Tobacco Surveillance System Data (GTSSData) [website]. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2024 (<https://nccd.cdc.gov/GTSSDataSurveyResources/Ancillary/DataReports.aspx?CAID=1>).
4. WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, 2023: protect people from tobacco smoke. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240077164>).
5. Technical note: Call to action on electronic cigarettes. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/technical-note-on-call-to-action-on-electronic-cigarettes>).

² Weblinks accessed 10 January 2024.