

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 smoke-free 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)

Exposure Inside Airports



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)

Exposure Outside Airports



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)

Recommendations for Improving Smoke-free Policies

- All participants recommended strengthening smoke-free policies in the workplace
- 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 just a single door on the smoking room." (female, post-ban, former smoker)



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

Reducing Outdoor Exposure

"It doesn't seem to be like there's anybody monitoring. When it says 50 feet away from the door, and they're two inches away, there's nobody monitoring that." (female, pre-ban, never smoker)



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