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Teens smoke more, study finds

Tobacco-tax rollback makes habit affordable for students

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OTTAWA – A new study says underage teens are smoking more in the wake of last year's tobacco tax rollback – a finding that contradicts research by Health Canada and may re-ignite debate over the impact of lower taxes.

A third of Grade 7 and 9 Ontario students surveyed said they are smoking more since the federal government and five provinces, including Ontario, dramatically cut tobacco taxes in February, 1994.

Three per cent said they are smoking less and the rest said their habits have not changed, according to a survey of 1,559 Ontario high school students conducted by Ontario and U.S. academics.

"This study and other surveys contradict the findings from Health Canada which suggest that youth smoking has not increased since the tax rollback," according to the authors of *A Study on Youth Smoking*. "In fact, there are several indicators which suggest that the price reduction has led to an increase in smoking among youth."

The study, details of which were released yesterday in Toronto, also raises questions about corporate sponsorship activities of tobacco companies and supports the merits of plain packaging.

Irving Rootman, director of the Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto and one of the lead investigators, said the data support a return to higher tobacco taxes as a weapon to fight youth smoking.

Ottawa and the provinces cut tobacco taxes last year to counter a surge in contraband tobacco – an objective that has largely been achieved. The combined impact of the federal and provincial cuts slashed cigarette prices in half in the five provinces affected, largely eliminating the price gap between the United States and Canada.

The official view in Ottawa – endorsed by the tobacco industry – is that the rollback has had no impact on youth smoking. Health Canada has polled a panel of more than 11,119 Canadians aged 15 or over four times since early 1994 and has found no increase in the prevalence of smoking among youth.

But Josie d'Avernas, project manager for the Ontario survey and a partner in RBJ Health Management Associates of Kitchen-er, Ont., said the much larger Health Canada study is flawed because it did not poll 12- to 14-year-olds and conducted its baseline survey up to four months after the price cut, or after a likely initial uptake in smoking.

"We don't want to discount it, but the national survey has some limitations that have to be remembered," Ms. d'Avernas said.

The Ontario survey also showed teens may be confusing advertisements for events sponsored by tobacco companies with cigarette ads, which are illegal in Canada.

In the study, students were shown a poster about an auto-racing event sponsored by the maker of Player's cigarettes, Imperial Tobacco Ltd. of Montreal. Fifty-three per cent said the poster was about cigarettes, while only 4

per cent recognized it as an ad about auto racing.

"It's obvious they are getting the message that there is a very positive image associated with racing and with smoking," Mr. Rootman said.

Focus-group interviews with selected students, for example, showed that students had positive images about the Player's racing ad, eliciting responses such as, "You don't think about cancer; driving is more exciting" and "Race car drivers are tough."

Among other key findings:

- Students felt plain black and white cigarette packages were a lot less attractive than branded ones. Eighty-six per cent said the packs were more boring and only 5 per cent said "cool kids" would smoke cigarettes from a generic pack.
- However, 71 per cent of students said plain packaging would have no impact on smoking behaviour and only 25 per cent said they would smoke less.
- Nearly half of Grade 7 and 9 students in Ontario have smoked at least once, 40 per cent of those at age 10 or less. Eight per cent of Grade 7s and 28 per cent of Grade 9s smoke regularly.

But Marie-Josée Laposte, spokeswoman for the Canadian Tobacco Manufacturers Council, said the survey is little more than antismoking propaganda masquerading as science and would not stand up to peer review. She said the findings were released even though the final report has not been completed.

The article EM9532 reprinted above is used in Figure 8.6 of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Chapter 4 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Figure 3.3 of the STAT 332 Course Materials.