

# Enhancing Tobacco Control Policies Among Youth and College Students: Limitations and Future Directions

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## Abstract

Tobacco use is still a serious issue among youth and college students in the United States. Although the government, especially the Department of Health and Human Services, has made efforts through policies like taxation, smoke-free laws, and advertising bans, these methods have not been effective enough. This paper discusses the main problems of each policy: the tax rate is not high enough to stop students from buying cigarettes, smoke-free policies are not fully enforced especially in outdoor areas, and advertising bans are not strict or complete. To improve the situation, the paper suggests raising the tax on cigarettes nationwide, making all college campuses completely smoke-free (both indoors and outdoors), and banning all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion. These changes could help lower the smoking rate among youth and college students, protect their health, and reduce future harm. Though these contributions may seem small at first, they are necessary steps toward solving a long-term public health problem.

**Keywords:** tobacco control, youth smoking, college students, nicotine addiction, public health

## 1. Introduction

Smoking, which was first invented as a ritual for spiritual enlightenment around 18,000 years ago in ancient Asia, has long been regarded by the public as a harmful and highly addictive behavior [1]. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, smoking remains one of the leading and most preventable causes of death both in the United States and around the world [2]. An even more striking and concerning fact is that approximately 480,000 deaths each year are directly caused by smoking, making it one of the top public health concerns for both the U.S. Government and various national health organizations [3]. Specifically in charge of addressing this issue, the Department of Health and Human Services has been working diligently over the years to introduce and carry out a variety of acts and policies related to tobacco control. As smoking is a habit that most often develops during the early stages of adulthood, especially among young people, controlling tobacco consumption among youth and college students should be viewed as one of the primary goals of any general tobacco control act or initiative. Although, according to Statista, smokers are more commonly found among older citizens, college students still account for approximately 12 to 15 percent of the total smoking population in the United States [4]. That is to say, approximately one out of every seven friends a person has is likely to be a smoker, assuming that the person themselves is a non-smoker.

The Department of Youth Services, under the larger umbrella of the Department of Health and Human Services, in cooperation with other policymakers, has been responsible for enforcing numerous laws and policies aimed at controlling the tobacco consumption rate among youth and college students. Taxation, smoke-free laws, and advertising and promotional bans are three of the major policy approaches currently being implemented in order to reduce the tobacco consumption rate among young people. However, the current tax rate on tobacco products is not high enough to significantly discourage purchases among young consumers; the smoke-free policy is not broadly or uniformly enforced across different campuses and public spaces; the bans on tobacco advertising and promotion are implemented in a loose and inconsistent manner, leaving many loopholes behind. This paper will discuss the reasons why these policies have not been effective enough and propose possible improvements, including increasing the tobacco tax rate, expanding the enforcement of smoke-free policies, and strictly banning all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion.

## 2. Taxation

Imposing an excise tax on tobacco products—which was first proposed by Alexander Hamilton as early as 1794—has become one of the most widely adopted policies in the regulation of tobacco consumption [5]. Rooted in the

basic economic principle that an increase in price can reduce the demand for a product to some extent, taxation is expected to serve as an effective method for controlling tobacco use, especially in the case of youth and college students. Since the majority of youth and college students either do not have a regular income or only earn a small amount, they tend to be more price-sensitive compared to older individuals with stable and higher incomes [6]. However, the actual effectiveness of the taxation policy has turned out to fall below policymakers' original expectations and assumptions. One major problem with this policy is that the current tax rate is not high enough to stop a large number of young people from purchasing tobacco products. Nicotine, which is the main addictive chemical component in cigarettes, damages the brain development of young individuals and causes these smokers to become highly dependent on continued consumption [7]. As a result, these young smokers often perceive the value of cigarettes to be higher than the price level that existing tax policies had originally assumed would be enough to prevent them from smoking [8]. Another issue related to taxation involves the uneven and unfair differences in cigarette tax rates across different states. The fluctuation in tobacco tax rates from state to state creates strong incentives for individuals to smuggle tobacco products from regions with lower taxes to those with higher ones [8]. For example, according to the *STATE System Excise Tax Fact Sheet* published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2024, the average tax for a pack of cigarettes in New York State is \$5.35, whereas in neighboring Pennsylvania, the tax is only \$2.60 per pack [9]. It is easy to imagine that smuggling activities could be quite common in such border areas where the tax gap is significant.

To better improve the current taxation policy, the Department of Health and Human Services should collaborate with other departments to impose a higher and more uniformly applied tax rate on tobacco products across all states. What these departments need to do is revise the existing tobacco tax law and formally pass new legislation that legitimizes a higher and more consistent tax rate on tobacco products nationwide. Nowadays, the highest cigarette tax in the United States stands at \$5.35 per pack in New York, while the lowest tax rate is only 17 cents per pack in Missouri [9]. It would be very helpful if those departments in charge could raise the average tax rate to more than \$5 per pack across all states. A high-tax policy on tobacco products could compel a significant number of people to quit smoking simply because they can no longer afford the high cost of cigarettes. Imposing high taxes on tobacco products is particularly effective in reducing smoking rates among youth and college students. As statistical data suggests, a 10 percent increase in the price of tobacco products could lead to an 11 to 12 percent decrease in consumption among young adults [10]. Raising cigarette taxes to a level that students simply cannot afford serves as a direct and effective approach to cutting down tobacco consumption [6]. In addition to raising tax rates, uniformity must be enforced through a national equal-tax law. With the implementation of such a law, it would no longer be possible for people to seek out and purchase cigarettes at significantly cheaper prices across state lines. In other words, this would also help prevent smuggling activities that arise from tax differences between states. Imposing higher and consistent taxation on tobacco products in each state is a useful policy tool for controlling tobacco consumption, especially among price-sensitive groups like youth and college students. Government departments need to revise the current laws that allow for low tax rates on tobacco products in certain regions. Furthermore, the government should pass legislation requiring a fair and uniform tobacco product tax to be enforced in every state.

### 3. Smoke-Free Policies

The smoke-free policy has become one important aspect of the broader smoke-control movement in recent years [11]. The basic idea behind this policy is to restrict people from smoking in specifically designated areas. Because individuals are no longer allowed to smoke in these areas as they were before the policy was implemented, they are forced to reduce their tobacco consumption, and over time, they may even give up smoking altogether. One example taken from several workplaces shows that smoke-free laws in the workplace can reduce smoking prevalence by approximately four percent [8]. This policy is regarded as one of the most effective and widely used strategies in tobacco control, but there are still several problems that interfere with its full effectiveness. Although smoking is widely prohibited in all indoor areas across the United States, people can still find numerous other places where smoking is permitted. Most of these remaining smoking spots are public outdoor areas. In the case of youth and college students, this means that although they are not allowed to smoke in enclosed areas such as classrooms and restaurants, they are still free to smoke in outdoor spaces like public walkways and campus pathways. Simply banning indoor smoking is not effective enough to make a real difference. As long as smoking areas remain accessible, not many students will feel the pressure to quit. As of April 2019, approximately only 55 percent of college and university campuses in the United States had implemented smoke-free policies, not to mention that some still allow e-cigarette consumption in certain areas [12]. Without a strong, centralized act from the Department of Health and Human Services, the implementation of uniform tobacco control policies continues to remain fragmented and inconsistent across states and educational institutions.

To improve the effectiveness of smoke-free laws among youth and college students, a comprehensive campus-wide policy that prohibits smoking in both outdoor and indoor areas is urgently needed. By banning smoking not only in indoor locations but also in outdoor areas, students would no longer have access to smoking spaces during school hours. This significant change would compel a large number of students to reduce their tobacco consumption, and in many cases, eventually quit smoking altogether. A successful example can be seen at Indiana University, where statistical data from 2011 suggests that the implementation of a campus-wide smoke-free policy reduced smoking behavior among students by approximately four percent and increased their positive attitudes toward smoking regulations by about six percent [13].

Also, in order to effectively enforce a campus-wide smoke-free policy, clearly visible ground markings and signs should be placed in key areas for students to notice, and positive reinforcement cards and flyers should be distributed to strengthen students' awareness and impression of the policy [14]. In general, the Department of Youth and Human Services should collaborate with the Department of Education to formally legitimize a mandatory campus-wide smoke-free law. These government departments should be responsible for supervising and ensuring that all schools across the United States implement this smoke-free policy consistently. The decision to implement a campus-wide smoke-free policy should no longer be left to the discretion of individual school policymakers, but should instead be established as a strict law that every school is required to obey. Such a strong and comprehensive smoke-free policy could significantly help reduce tobacco consumption and lower the smoking rate among youth and college students to a meaningful degree.

#### **4. Advertising and Promotional Bans**

Back in the old days, tobacco companies used to be one of the major forms of television advertising. However, since the introduction of advertising and promotion bans on tobacco products in 1969, tobacco advertising has been removed from television broadcasts [5]. As widely recognized by the general public and confirmed by experts from the World Health Organization, tobacco advertising can “attract non-smokers to smoke,” “increase the amount of tobacco consumption among current smokers,” “reduce a smoker’s willingness to quit,” and “encourage former smokers to smoke again” [15]. In this sense, advertising and promotion bans do help reduce smoking behavior and overall tobacco consumption. However, these bans are still not comprehensive enough in their current form. In other words, not all forms of tobacco product advertising and promotion—such as those involving cigarettes—are fully prohibited. As a group especially vulnerable to marketing influence, youth and college students are still exposed to a large amount of tobacco promotion in various forms. In fact, research shows that out of approximately 210 countries worldwide, only 39—such as EU member states, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Thailand—have enacted laws that restrict all forms of tobacco advertising [16].

In order to further reduce the smoking rate and overall tobacco consumption among youth and college students in the United States, a comprehensive ban on all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion is urgently needed. What the U.S. government should do is strictly ban all forms of tobacco advertising across all areas and platforms. The government should not only establish laws that ban traditional forms of tobacco advertisements, such as those on television and radio, but also prohibit less regulated forms like cigarette flyers and tobacco sponsorships. In addition, government departments should enforce strong penalties against any illegal advertisements and promotional activities related to tobacco products. As shown by studies [17], tobacco advertising causes young people to overestimate the prevalence of smoking in society and distorts their understanding of social norms. This misconception leads young people to believe that smoking is socially “desirable,” which increases the likelihood that they will start smoking and purchase tobacco products [18]. By blocking all types of tobacco advertising and promotion, the smoking rate has been shown to decrease by approximately six percent [19]. A comparative study involving students from two schools—one in Finland, where tobacco advertising is completely banned, and one in the United States, where it is only partially banned—concluded that there is a significant positive correlation between exposure to tobacco advertisements and smoking prevalence [18]. All of these facts and examples suggest that the government must not only block explicit forms of tobacco advertising, but also prohibit more implicit forms such as sponsorships of concerts, festivals, and sporting events. A strong push for comprehensive bans on all tobacco advertising and promotion is expected from both the Department of Health and Human Services and the federal government as a whole.

#### **5. Implications and Conclusions**

Tobacco products harm both physical and mental health, and they have particularly strong negative impacts on youth and college students. The Department of Health and Human Services should cooperate with other policy-making departments to further improve the acts and regulations related to the tobacco control movement. More intensive and equitable taxation policies, comprehensive smoke-free laws covering both indoor and outdoor spaces,

and complete bans on all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion are the essential first steps that need to be taken to further reduce smoking and tobacco consumption rates, especially among youth and college students. In addition, refinement and revision of other existing tobacco-related policies and laws should also be carefully considered.

Teenagers and young adults are a vital part of the country's future development. Reducing smoking and tobacco consumption among them is a way to improve their overall physical and mental performance. Statistical data shows that lung cancer has been the most common type of cancer worldwide for several decades [20]. Smoking, which increases the likelihood of developing lung cancer by about 15 times compared to non-smokers, is responsible for one-eighth of all cancer-related deaths worldwide [20] [21]. Controlling and reducing tobacco consumption and smoking rates is ultimately an act of saving lives. From an economic perspective, reducing tobacco consumption would eventually lead to a decrease in tobacco production, allowing resources and labor to be redirected toward the production of more beneficial and socially valuable goods. In the long run, lowering tobacco consumption would contribute to a more efficient and sustainable economic system. Even though this contribution may not seem particularly remarkable at first, it could still bring meaningful improvements to the society. Controlling and reducing tobacco consumption, especially among youth and college students, is an important mission that the Department of Health and Human Services and other related agencies should actively pursue. To achieve this goal, these departments need to improve their current policies and devote greater energy and effort throughout the entire process.

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