

# Small smokers a big concern

It is shocking to know that more primary school students in Hong Kong are smoking. Why do our youngsters pick up this harmful habit, and are the government's anti-smoking measures working?

**S**MOKING is **hazardous** to health. Everyone would agree with this message which has been publicised widely.

In the past decade, the community has become more health-conscious. Coupled with hefty increases in tobacco duty, the number of smokers in the territory's general population has dropped significantly to 10.7 percent, a new low.

Yet the percentage of smokers among primary school students is edging up.

To find out the extent of the problem, the Food and Health Bureau (食物及衛生局) commissioned the School of Public Health of the University of Hong Kong (香港大學公共衛生學院) to conduct a school-based survey on smoking among students between October 2012 and April 2013.

It found that there were 410 current smokers (0.3 percent) among Primary 4 to Primary 6 students, up from 2010-11's 380, or 0.2 percent.

While the number of current primary student smokers may seem small, the percentage increase was 50 percent. The survey also found that over 4,000, or 2.5 percent, of primary school students had tried smoking.

## Smoking status among P4-P6 students

Smoking status	Male		Female		Overall	
	No. of persons	%	No. of persons	%	No. of persons	%
Never	80,740	96.7	76,230	98.3	156,970	97.5
Ever	2,760	3.3	1,290	1.7	4,050	2.5
Experimental	1,960	2.3	980	1.3	2,940	1.8
Ex-occasional	270	0.3	200	0.3	470	0.3
Ex-daily	80	0.1	70	0.1	150	0.1
Occasional	400	0.5	50	0.1	450	0.3
Daily	60	0.1	\$	\$	60	0.0
Current*	380	0.5	\$	\$	410	0.3

Survey conducted during Oct 2012 to Apr 2013

**Notes :** \$ Estimates less than 30 (including zero figures) and related statistics derived from such estimates (eg, percentages and rates) are suppressed in the table due to large sampling errors.

\*Current smoking was defined as any smoking in the past 30 days for those who reported that they smoked daily or smoked occasionally.

**Source:** Thematic Household Survey Report No. 53

## Why do children smoke?

STUDENTS cited various reasons for smoking.

### 1. To satisfy curiosity

The survey showed that 4,050 P4-P6 students had smoked, and 2,940 of them had only tried once or a few times. This kind of 'experimental' smoking was clearly due to **curiosity**.

### 2. Family members smoke

Children might try to **imitate** their parents or other family members who smoke.

### 3. Peer influence

Students may pick up smoking due to the influence of friends, peer pressure, or the thought that smoking gives them a **superior** self-image or makes them stand out among their peers.

### 4. To escape problems

A 2011 survey found that primary school students who have problems in their lives, such as conflicts in the family, were more prone to use drugs or smoke as a way to escape from those problems.

### 5. Misconceptions

Some primary students smoked because they thought smoking would help control weight, or is not harmful to health.

The **seemingly** low percentage of smokers among primary students may be the reason government anti-smoking measures have so far not targeted children.

But as the more recent surveys show more young people smoking, the government is beginning to take action. For example, anti-smoking education may start in kindergartens next year.

## Policy ignores young smokers

THE government is combating smoking mainly through legislation, levying duty and education, as well as services to help people quit smoking.

Law enforcement is, meanwhile, primarily carried out by the Tobacco Control Office (控煙辦公室) of the Department of Health.

Education, promotion of anti-smoking messages and consultation works are the responsibility of the publicly-funded Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health (香港吸煙與健康委員會).

Hong Kong's smoking control laws are generally non-age specific. And the only **statutory** provisions that specifically target young persons are sections 15A and 15B of the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance.

These provisions respectively prohibit the selling or giving of tobacco products to persons under the age of 18, and mandate the display at tobacco selling places of a sign stating, "No cigarettes, cigarette tobacco, cigar or pipe tobacco may be sold to any person under the age of 18 years."

In the prevention of smoking in young people, Hong Kong is apparently relying more on non-legislative means.

However, we must ask whether the present approach – hefty increases in tobacco duty, education and promotion – are effective in arresting the growing trend of smoking among the young.

## Experience in foreign countries

SOME countries have outlawed smoking among young people.

For example, Japan has a law that prohibits "underage" smoking, meaning no person under the age of 20 may smoke. Parents who know that their children smoke but fail to stop them will be fined. Anyone selling tobacco products or related accessories, such as matches and lighters, to a minor faces a maximum fine of 500,000 yen (about HK\$38,000).

In Italy, persons under the age of 16 are not allowed to smoke, and offenders can be fined. The penalty for selling cigarettes to underage persons in Italy is up to a year's imprisonment.

In South Korea, selling tobacco products to persons under 19 carries a fine of 10 million won (about HK\$72,000) and two years' jail.

The law in Hong Kong does not punish parents for allowing their children to smoke. Legal penalties are **reserved** only for those who sell or give tobacco products to persons under 18. The maximum fine is HK\$25,000.

Laws denying access to tobacco products to young people could prevent them from smoking. Yet lax enforcement has made these laws ineffective. Perhaps it is time for the government to reconsider the entire approach to protecting young people from the harms of smoking. 💡

## Key ideas

Due to heightened health consciousness and government anti-smoking measures, the overall percentage of smokers in Hong Kong has continued to drop. But the proportion of young smokers has, however, been going up. It is time to rethink the approach of our anti-smoking policies.

## Did you know?

'Third-hand smoke' means the chemical residual of tobacco smoke contamination that clings to clothing, walls, furniture, carpets, cushions, hair, skin and other materials after the cigarette is extinguished.

## Critical questions

1. Do you know how smoking harms your health?
2. Do you think we should make it illegal for persons under 18 to smoke?

## References

1. Tobacco Control Office  
[www.tco.gov.hk](http://www.tco.gov.hk)
2. Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health  
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3. School-based survey on smoking among students (Thematic Household Survey Report No. 53)  
[www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B11302532013XXXB0100.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B11302532013XXXB0100.pdf)
4. Committee on Youth Smoking Prevention  
[www.ysp.org.hk](http://www.ysp.org.hk)

