



Researchers at AUB: Law banning smoking in closed public areas will improve health and business

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Restaurant workers and patrons in Lebanon are being exposed to hazardous levels of tobacco smoke, thus prompting researchers and business owners at an AUB conference to call for complete smoking bans in closed public areas.

Organized by the AUB Tobacco Control Research Group, the conference, which was recently held in Gefinor-Rotana Hotel, assessed smoke-free policies in indoor areas at four educational institutions, five private offices and companies, and nine food and drink establishments. The conference also presented the findings of a 2008 air quality survey at 28 different venues in Lebanon—including restaurants, pubs, and hospital cafeterias—which was conducted by the National Tobacco Control Program at the Ministry of Health.

"More than 90 percent of the venues surveyed had unhealthy to hazardous air quality," said George Saade, who heads the program. Saade, who is also a cardiologist, said that in several venues, especially in Ramadan tents that fog up with nargileh smoke, the aerosol monitor they were using would lock, indicating that the air pollutant levels were higher than the maximum level it could measure—or 400 times higher than acceptable levels set by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

The aerosol monitor was placed at the venues under study for a minimum of 30 minutes, during peak hours.

With more than 135,000 individuals working in the restaurant business in Lebanon and millions of tourists and locals who are patrons at such venues, immediate action is needed, said Saade.

"Policies and laws that ban secondhand smoke from public areas are an effective strategy to reduce workers' exposure to this toxin," said Saade. "This, in turn, may translate into improved health outcomes for these employees."

Secondhand or passive smoke contains nearly 5000 chemical compounds, at least 172 toxic substances, including 67 known human or animal carcinogens, said Saade, adding: "There is no acceptable exposure level to secondhand smoke."

Assessing smoke-free policies at schools and universities, a team led by assistant research professor Rima Nakkash found that although teenagers are aware of the harms of smoking, they still take up the unhealthy habit. "The solution: to implement smoke-free policies in schools and universities," said Nakkash, also an active member of the Tobacco Control Research Group. In fact, AUB's experience with implementing smoke-free policies has proved rather promising, said Monique Chaaya, associate professor of epidemiology and statistics at AUB and a member of the Tobacco Control Research Group. In the first year after the smoke-free policy was implemented on campus, almost half of staff members and 18 percent of students thought they had reduced their smoking frequency.

Indeed, educational institutions that ban or restrict smoking on their premises noticed a significant health benefit related to smoke-free policies. Currently, more than 60 percent of Lebanese teenagers 13 to 15 years old smoke some kind of tobacco.

Moreover, the 2005 Global Youth Tobacco Survey had shown that smoke-free policies in schools and universities help students and teachers quit smoking and also discourage teenagers from taking up the habit.

The AUB research group also found that private companies had no problem enforcing smoking bans, but researchers recommended that bans be accompanied by smoking cessation programs to help smokers quit.

Meanwhile, a study of nine food and drink establishments found that if a national law that bans smoking in all closed public places is passed, the hospitality sector would willingly comply. "In general, no problems were encountered when an employee at a café or pub would ask a patron to stop smoking in compliance with the establishment's smoke free policy," said Nakkash, citing study results.

Nakkash and others concluded, based on findings, that there is a pressing need for a law that bans smoking in public areas in addition to a body that would ensure the enforcement of the law.

Moreover, studies conducted in the United States, Canada, and Britain have shown food and drink establishments do not lose any business—often even attracting more clients—when they adopt smoke-free policies. Researchers do not find such results surprising, as they note that the majority of any country's population are non-smokers.

According to Hussam Eid, Zaatara wu Zeit's marketing director and a smoker himself, a London study showed "that the only businesses that were substantially affected by smoke-free policies were Laundromats: because people don't need to wash off the stench of tobacco from their clothes the next day."