

Show me the data

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As the evidence that exposure to secondhand smoke endangers the health of nonsmokers has accumulated, a number of states and communities in the US over the past decade have eliminated smoking in workplaces and public places.

In 2006, the Surgeon General's landmark report, "The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke," concluded that involuntary exposure to secondhand smoke is a cause of a wide number of diseases, including lung cancer and heart disease, in healthy nonsmokers. The report also found that children of those who smoke compared to the children of nonsmokers have an increased frequency of acute respiratory infections and ear problems, more severe asthma, and smaller rates of increase in lung function as their lungs mature.

Perhaps the most damning conclusion reached by the Surgeon General was that the "scientific evidence indicates that there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke." The report added "separating smokers from nonsmokers, cleaning the air, and ventilating buildings cannot eliminate exposures of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke."

On the heels of momentum generated by the release Surgeon General's report, a majority of Nevada voters approved the Nevada Clean Indoor Air Act (NCIAA), which bans smoking in most public places, including restaurants and those bars which serve food.

Despite considerable opposition to its passage, the act remains one of the most significant, not to mention popular, public health achievements in Nevada history.

Five years later, the NCIAA continues to invite opposition from the casino industry, bar and tavern owners, slot route operators, and convenience store owners, who have attempted to chip away at the smoking ban through the local and state regulatory process, as well as attempts to reverse important provisions in the ban through the legislative process. Those efforts will undoubtedly be ramped up during the current session of the Nevada legislature.

Having lost the public health argument, opponents of clean indoor air increasingly focus on the economic impact, always negative, of the 2006 ban. In particular, they have argued that the ban has negatively affected revenues and jobs – particularly among bars, restaurants, and other sectors of the hospitality industry – as smoking patrons now spend less time in those establishments or seek other venues where they are allowed to smoke.

Some have even argued that sectors of the economy far removed from the hospitality sector – most recently and notably, McCarran Airport operations – have suffered as a result of the smoking ban (these critics apparently haven't gotten the memo that we're in a recession).

Writing in “CA – A Cancer Journal for Clinicians,” Drs. Michael Erikson and Frank Chaloupka reviewed numerous scholarly assessments of the economic impact of local, state, and national smoking bans on restaurants, bars, and tourism. Across a diverse number of communities and states, they conclude that “the vast majority of studies find that there is no negative economic impact of clean indoor air policies, with many finding that there may be some positive effects on local businesses.”

Some of the well-documented “positive effects” to business resulting from smoke-free policies and regulations include reduced medical costs associated with secondhand smoke exposure among employees, reduced absenteeism and improved productivity, lower cleaning and maintenance costs, and lower fire and property insurance premiums. Critics of the smoking ban are typically silent on these matters.

When the so-called “economic” case is being made for reversing provisions of the clean indoor air act, Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights suggest five simple questions that need to be asked to determine whether a tobacco-related economic impact assessment is a legitimate study or one funded and created by the tobacco industry or its allies.

First, what evidence is used in the study? Is the information contained in the study anecdotal or is it based on hard data that identifies who collected the data, as well as how the data was collected and analyzed? Are data sources referenced and thus the analysis capable of being replicated?

Second, was the study conducted over a sufficiently lengthy period to make the data meaningful? As a general rule, research conducted for at least one year, preferably several years, reduces the likelihood that impacts are a result of seasonal variations or other economic forces, such as the current recession which has hammered every sector of the state’s economy.

Third, what kinds of comparisons are being made? Again, for example, are comparisons being made between bars and restaurants affected by the ban and other like businesses in the community? How does this compare with what’s going on the general economy?

Fourth, where was the study published? In particular, was the study published in a “peer reviewed” journal? That is to say, were the merits of the study and its methods independently verified by economists and other researchers with expertise in undertaking such an assessment?

Finally, who really conducted the study? In other words, did a tobacco industry or gaming-industry front group conduct or commission the economic impact study? There’s no better source for answers to this question than the American Nonsmokers’ Rights Foundation’s Tobacco Industry Tacking Database at www.no-smoke.org.

Or, to summarize matters simply, show me the data.

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