

When Smoking is a Matter of Money¹

By Eric Nagourney

Getting people to quit smoking may be hard, but discouraging them from starting, at least when they are young, may be as simple as raising the taxes on cigarettes.

A new study reports a link between the price of a pack of cigarettes and the likelihood that a teenager will start smoking. After surveying a total of 12,000 8th- and 10th-grade students for seven years and taking into account the local price for cigarettes, the researchers concluded that a 10 percent increase in price decreased the odds of teenagers' starting smoking by as much as 10 percent.

The study was conducted by ImpacTeen, a research partnership at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and by researchers from the University of Michigan.

The researchers said the study helped resolve a debate over whether cigarette prices affect the number of teenagers who begin smoking. Previous studies also showed that higher prices did decrease the number of children smoking and the amount they smoked.

The lead author, Dr. John A. Tauras, said the evidence was clear. Indeed, to hear Dr. Tauras tell it, the study says almost less about public health than it does about basic economics: if you charge too much for something, fewer people are likely to buy it. Noting its addictive nature, other experts have doubted that this would hold true for tobacco.

The study also illustrates another fundamental of many teenagers' lives. "Youths have very little disposable income," Dr. Tauras said. "They have certain fixed dollars each month to spend."

¹ Abbreviated from the *New York Times Learning Network*, May 1, 2001.