

# Raise Hong Kong tobacco tax to protect youth against lifelong addiction

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Life Education Activity Programme (LEAP) is disappointed to learn that the Financial Secretary has decided not to raise tobacco tax in the 2020-21 Budget.

Research from around the world has shown that tobacco taxation is highly effective in reducing and preventing tobacco use among young people. Raising cigarette prices through higher taxes prevents young people from taking up tobacco use and motivates young smokers to quit, since they have less income and are therefore more price sensitive than adults.

This explains why the same price increase leads to smoking reduction that is two to three times higher in adolescents compared to adults.

There is evidence that tobacco tax increase has been effective in Hong Kong, too. The latest government statistics reveal that past 30-day smoking prevalence among Hong Kong adolescents has decreased significantly from 9.6 per cent in 2003 to 2.5 per cent in 2017.

A recent study published by the Journal of Adolescent Health in 2019 suggested that raising tobacco tax helped to prevent adolescent smoking, and that further tax increase should be implemented in order to protect more youths and achieve a “tobacco endgame” in Hong Kong.



Smoking prevention measures should be targeted at young people in particular, as smokers who start at a younger age are less likely to quit. Photo: Edward Wong

Despite the proven effectiveness of tax measures, the last substantial increase in tobacco tax was more than eight years ago. As a result, cigarettes are even more affordable and accessible to young people today than in the 1990s.

The combination of affordable cigarettes made possible by low taxes and aggressive marketing tactics from the tobacco industry could attract young people to smoking, thereby putting them at great risk of developing smoking-related diseases and lifelong addiction.

LEAP believes that smoking prevention measures should be targeted at young people in particular, since most smokers start smoking during adolescence and evidence has shown that smokers who start at a younger age are less likely to quit. Therefore, we strongly urge the government to strengthen tobacco control and protect our youth by increasing tobacco tax as soon as possible.

Since 1994, LEAP has provided health-based drug prevention programmes to young people in Hong Kong to equip them with the necessary knowledge, as well as the social and emotional skills, to resist the temptations of drugs including tobacco and alcohol.

*Heidi Lau, executive director, LEAP, Lai King*

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