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Mexico Reports Mixed Progress in Campaign to Reduce Tobacco Usage

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexico's tough anti-smoking campaign and a corresponding increase in federal tobacco taxes have had mixed results in the effort to reduce tobacco-related illnesses in Mexico. The campaign has significantly reduced the level of second-hand smoke in public areas, since smoking is now banned in office buildings, restaurants, taxis, and other sites. But authorities lament that the number of Mexicans who smoke remains relatively high, particularly among youth.

Indoor ban helps reduce second-hand smoke

On May 31, the UN's World No Tobacco Day, the Secretaría de Salud (SSA) provided an update on Mexico's progress in reducing the population's dependence on tobacco. Health Secretary Salomón Chertorivski Woldenberg said Mexico has made great strides in ridding second-hand smoke from public places during the past several years because of legislation approved by Congress in 2008.

The law prohibited smoking in all enclosed areas, although restaurants and bars were allowed to designate special areas for smokers ([SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2008](#)). In addition to protecting the public from second-hand smoke, the law was intended to reduce tobacco-related illnesses in Mexico.

"Today, there are many spaces that are free from smoke," said Chertorivski.

The SSA did not release data comparing the number of smokers before and after the 2008 legislation and the tax increase were approved. Some observers noted that one measure is the decline in the number of cigarettes manufactured in Mexico. In mid-May, the government's statistics office (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, INEGI) said cigarette production declined by more than 27% in just one year. In 2010, tobacco companies produced 2.4 billion cigarette packets, but that number fell to 1.6 billion in 2011.

Still 11 million smokers

The Comisión Nacional Contra las Adicciones (CONADIC) estimates that there are still close to 11 million smokers in Mexico, and the addiction contributes to about 60,000 deaths each year. The statistics show a gender disparity, with men far outnumbering women among smokers in Mexico. About 8 million men smoke, compared with 2.8 million women, said CONADIC.

Chertorivski and other officials acknowledged that smoking remains prevalent among many young people in Mexico. In a recent interview, former Mexico City education secretary Mario Delgado raised concerns that the Mexican capital ranks second in the country, after the city of Toluca, in the number of smokers between the ages of 13 and 15. The data was obtained from a national survey (Encuesta Global de Tabaquismo en Jóvenes).

"We are working on [reducing youth smoking], and the results will be reflected in a few years," said Chertorivski. "[World Health Organization director Margaret Chan], who was in Mexico at the start of April, emphasized that the best way to keep youth from consuming tobacco, besides education, is to increase the cost of a pack of cigarettes."

In 2010, the Congress also moved to increase the cost of tobacco products and raise revenues for the federal Treasury by adding a tax on tobacco products to the federal budget for 2011 ([SourceMex, Nov. 17, 2010](#)).

In addition to banning smoking in enclosed public places and raising the tax on cigarettes, the government has taken other actions to discourage tobacco consumption, including increased controls on imports and exports of tobacco products, stringent regulations on cigarette advertisements and sponsorships, and guidelines for packaging tobacco products.

"I am convinced that with these measures we have planted the seeds for a better future," said Chertorivski.

The Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior* said smoker Patricia del Castillo provides an example of how some consumers have changed their habits because of the prohibitions against smoking in public places and the higher costs of cigarettes. "Sometimes I only buy one cigarette at a time," del Castillo told the newspaper. "This affects my decisions when I go to parties. I never tell people that I carry cigarettes because everyone is going to ask me for one, and they are very expensive."

But *Excélsior* also interviewed other consumers who said they have not changed their habits, even if they are not allowed to smoke in public places and have to pay more for a pack of cigarettes.

A smoker in Mexico spends a total of about 89,000 pesos (US\$6,500), current value, in cigarettes during the average years of consumption, INEGI said in a recent report.

Tobacco lobby fights back

The tobacco companies, which are affiliated with multinational companies, are fighting back to maintain their market. A report put together by the committee assigned to follow up on Mexico's commitment to the World Health Organization (WHO) to reduce tobacco consumption said the tobacco lobby, led by the subsidiaries of British American Tobacco and Philip Morris, has managed to derail 14 initiatives in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate related to tobacco consumption.

"Regrettably, we fell short in our proposals that would have brought us closer to compliance with the WHO's targets," said Erick Antonio Ochoa director of initiatives for control of tobacco at the Mexico chapter of the InterAmerican Heart Foundation (IAHF). "This was in large part because of the actions of a certain group of legislators who put the interests of the tobacco industry ahead of the need to strengthen public policies to protect the health of our nation."

Ochoa provided some examples, including a move by three members of the Chamber of Deputies — Miguel Antonio Osuna Millán of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Rodrigo Reina Liceaga of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and Carlos Alberto Ezeta Saucedo of the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM)—not only to water down a tobacco-related initiative by another legislator but also to approve a measure allowing the marketing of flavored cigarettes. "This was a clear contradiction to the spirit of the commitments made by Mexico to the WHO," said Ochoa.

Chertorivski also acknowledged the need to strengthen anti-tobacco legislation, including closing loopholes that allow some establishments to permit smoking in enclosed locations. He emphasized that Mexico needs to create a set of regulations where the responsibilities of all levels of government are spelled out, both on regulatory matters and on efforts to discourage the use of tobacco. "If we continue with our task of informing the public about the dangers of tobacco, especially the youth,

then we might have a country that is free of tobacco smoke, which is something that other countries have achieved," said the health secretary.

State and local governments also have to address tobacco-control legislation. For example, a measure was introduced in Jalisco state in 2010 to impose severe fines on people who smoke in prohibited areas. The problem is that the initiative had not reached the state legislature for discussion as of mid-June 2012, with several legislators accusing each other of stalling. And Alicia Yolanda Reyes, coordinator of the nongovernmental organization Comunicación, Diálogo y Conciencia (Códice), wonders if the state legislators even want to approve the measure. The deputies are using the business sector's lack of support for the legislation as an excuse not to move forward with the initiative, Reyes told the Guadalajara daily business newspaper *El Informador*.

Other government entities are implementing new regulations unilaterally. In Coahuila state, the state government and the administration of Saltillo Mayor Jericó Abramo Masso have declared all public facilities as cigarette-smoke-free zones. Even though federal and state laws already prohibit smoking in enclosed areas, some public officials have gotten away with smoking. In mid-June, Mayor Abramo Masso said any public official caught smoking indoors would be suspended immediately, following on a similar directive enacted a week earlier by Gov. Rubén Moreira Valdez. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 19, 2012, reported at 13.69 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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