

THE ONTARIO UNITÉ TOBACCO DE RECHERCHE RESEARCH SUR LE TABAC UNIT DE L'ONTARIO

# OTRU STUDY UPDATE

AUGUST 2010

## **SMOKING IN OUTDOOR PUBLIC SPACES:** Behaviours and Experiences of Smokers and Nonsmokers

This update highlights findings that were recently published in Kaufman P, Griffin K, Ferrence R, Cohen J, Perkins N. Smoking in Urban Outdoor Public Places: Behaviour, Experiences and Implications for Public Health. *Health and Place* 16: 961-968, 2010.

## BACKGROUND

Smoking bans in Ontario are now in place inside public buildings and within nine metres of entrances to healthcare facilities.<sup>1</sup> As these restrictions have become more established and the dangers associated with secondhand smoke better known, interest in expanding smoking restrictions to other types of outdoor public places is increasing. Some jurisdictions have begun to implement smoke-free municipal properties, playgrounds, parks and beaches.<sup>2,3</sup>

## THE ISSUE

The US Surgeon General has concluded that there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke,<sup>4</sup> yet more than half of Canadians report exposure to smoke at entrances to public buildings.<sup>5</sup> Short term exposure to tobacco smoke is known to be harmful to cardiovascular and respiratory systems,<sup>6,7,8,9</sup> and outdoor exposure can be substantial.<sup>10,11</sup> This Update presents findings from a three-year mixed method study (2004-2007) that used observations and face-to-face interviews with adult smokers and nonsmokers to investigate behaviours and experiences associated with smoking in public outdoor urban spaces.

## **Methods**

More than 10 hours of observations were conducted at 12 outdoor sites over a seven month period. Observations were scheduled in 30 minute sessions during different times of the day and days of the week. Sites included public spaces adjacent to a variety of building types and locations (e.g., hospital, university, government, corporate, and public transit). Two of these sites had legislated outdoor smoking restrictions and four of the sites had voluntary restrictions. Only two of the sites had an outdoor designated smoking area. Observers recorded the location and time people were smoking, social interactions, nonverbal communication, compliance with existing smoking restrictions and littering of cigarette butts. General weather conditions for each session and any extraordinary conditions that could influence behaviour (e.g., special events) were also recorded. Observations were transferred onto scaled digital site plans using Adobe Illustrator<sup>12</sup> to

identify patterns of smoking across the study sites.

In addition, 18 adult smokers and 17 adult nonsmokers were recruited from five of the observation sites for semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked questions about their smoking history and behaviours, smoking related experiences in outdoor public spaces, and perspectives on smoking restrictions, secondhand smoke and cigarette butt littering. Interviews were audio recorded and transferred into NVivo 2.0.<sup>13</sup> Interview data were coded and analysed by topic area.





## **KEY FINDINGS**

#### **Factors that Influenced Where People Smoked**

Smoking was mainly observed near building entrances, sheltered areas, such as under overhangs, areas that were less visible to people passing by (e.g., behind pillars and around side entrances), and cigarette receptacles (see Figure 1, p. 4). Approximately 37% (398/1081) of all observed smokers were within nine metres of building entrances across the sites, and as high as 88% (247/282) at one corporate site. Compliance to existing smoking restrictions was inconsistent and at one hospital site, where smoking was restricted within nine metres of the entrance, significant smoking was observed within the restricted area (see Figure 2, p. 5).

Our interview findings also suggest that, while many smokers said that they felt more comfortable smoking away from nonsmokers, convenience, weather, visibility and the social aspect of smoking, were key factors that influenced where they smoked. One smoker remarked:

"Most of the smokers in this building, at least a lot of the smokers in this building go just outside the front, I guess it would be the side door. There's a receptacle there that we can put our cigarette butts in. There's an overhang there so on snowy, rainy days we're still covered. But quite often, to be honest, that is where I will quickly slip out ....have a couple of drags of a cigarette, or finish a cigarette and go right back upstairs.... it's really a quick cigarette. And I'm very guilty about smoking around the doorways."

Another smoker spoke about smoking where other smokers congregate and the social rewards associated with a smoking break:

"...being part of that huddle- It's kind of funny, but it's like a social thing. Because you're going out there for a reward for the smoking, right? It's sort of like your time to get away from your desk for ten minutes, socialize with your friends that are smoking. Some nonsmokers come out, or they stop as they're coming in....you're going there for a little bit of a chitchat, you're satisfying.... your caffeine too cause you usually go with a coffee and a cigarette."

However, some smokers spoke about smoking where they would be less visible, as well as the negative image of smoking. Two smokers explained:

"Nobody smokes at my work except for me and my office manager. So no one has really set out any guidelines pertaining to smoking. Usually just try to be discreet about it, which is what my office manager told me when you go for breaks. Which I usually go for one break a day. And I just go out back on the side of the building. On a stairwell."

"It almost makes me want to hide when ... when I'm smoking. Because I ... see it as something negative. And I think most people ...see it ... as a negative trait if you see someone smoking outside. It doesn't look good upon the person's character."

#### **Smoking at Building Entrances**

For nonsmokers, smoking at building entrances was particularly problematic and difficult to avoid. This is consistent with our observation findings of building entrances as a key location for smoking. Two participants explained:

"...when I'm coming out of the building there's always a group of people there smoking right outside the doorways....when I come outside I smell it but I try to like hold my breath so I don't inhale myself. Like I'd let my breath go after I pass that group of people." (Nonsmoker)

"...what can get to me is the smoking outside of the building, like the doorway. Sometimes I'll be approaching a building and I'll see a number of people outside smoking and ... I'll be like "Ok, what's my strategy for getting in? How am I going to ... how am I going to do this? Am I going to go...take a deep breath and go really fast? Is it crowded at the door?" And then it'll be on my clothes after, and is that going to be enough to give me an attack? .... So if smoking was not allowed around the doors of the building that would be very helpful to me. And if it was enforced." (Nonsmoker with asthma)

#### **Smoker and Nonsmoker Interactions**

While smoking was observed in the presence of nonsmokers, some smokers said they attempted to minimize the impact of their smoking, such as by holding their cigarette down or moving away. The interview data also suggest that some participants, particularly nonsmokers, used strategies to avoid one another.



"... you really got to watch who is coming out and where you're standing.... You got to move constantly.... you see people coming out of one door, so you swing over and move to the other side. And there's another door there.... You move around .... It's like a game." (Smoker)

"... as soon as you walk outside you're trying to find a spot where you can breathe without that smoky... smell.... it makes you feel almost like a prisoner in your own little world. ... I'm trying to find a spot where I can... breathe a breath of fresh air without smelling smoke." (Nonsmoker)

#### **Compliance and Signage**

Smoking in nonsmoking areas was observed at some of the study

sites (e.g., hospital, corporate office building). Interview participants also talked about noncompliance with existing smoking rules, issues related to enforcement, and the importance of signage and guidelines.

"Outside they have signs up saying "Please don't smoke within 30 feet of the front doors". Which most people ignore. So it's discouraged around the main doorway area... It's [signage] up very high actually...the first day I noticed it was quite funny because I noticed the person who was standing smoking, I knew them. And when I



kind of looked above their head...it's [signage] got to be about 7 feet off the ground....It's like "Hey, there's people standing [smoking] right underneath the sign that says "Please don't smoke here"." (Smoker)

"...it would be nice if there was a sign for smokers so that they ... automatically know this is the place that if you want to smoke, there you go." (Nonsmoker)

#### **Cigarette Litter**

Observers noted existing cigarette litter on the sites as well as people discarding cigarette butts on the ground. Interview participants, particularly nonsmokers, viewed cigarette litter very negatively. Further,

the majority of smokers reported littering when an ashtray was unavailable, though a few said they carry their cigarette butt with them until they find a receptacle.

"...is that grass or cigarette butts? Thousands. Thousands of butts....They're probably raking up probably half a million cigarette butts....go around the downtown core and look in the gutters. It's unbelievable. And I think sooner or later they're going to ban it. It's just a mess. It's filthy." (Smoker)

### **C**ONCLUSIONS

Observation and interview findings confirm that smoking at entrances to public buildings is a problem. Since the use of entrances is unavoidable, there is potential for exposure to secondhand smoke on a daily basis for anyone entering and exiting the building. Implementing smoking restrictions at entrances with clear and consistent rules, signage and boundaries may encourage self-enforcement and reduce tobacco exposure. Such restrictions may also reduce the visibility of smoking and change social norms about where smoking is acceptable. Outdoor designated smoking areas, when appropriately designed and placed, may help nonsmokers to avoid tobacco smoke exposure and contain cigarette litter. However, they may not be feasible in high density urban spaces and their impact on smoking behaviour is unknown. Whether to control where smoking occurs in outdoor public spaces by providing designated smoking areas or leave smoking locations to chance are questions that require further discussion.



Figure 1: Location of smoking at a corporate mixed use site with multiple office towers



Sample map of an observation site with red and blue 'dots' representing the location of smoking activity by females and males, respectively.



Figure 2: Location of smoking at a hospital site with smoking prohibited within nine meters of the entrance



Sample map of an observation site with red and blue 'dots' representing the location of smoking activity by females and males, respectively.



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