

# The Top Ten Myths About Smoke Free Indoor Air Laws

## **MYTH #1: Clean indoor air laws kill local businesses.**

**REALITY:** Opponents of clean indoor air laws often fear business losses related to the laws. Because clean indoor air laws are new to these businesses, their fears are understandable, but also unfounded. The tobacco industry has propagated this false fear, especially among hospitality business owners, because these laws cut into their profits. However, scientific studies show that there is no negative impact.

Researchers undertook a comprehensive study of the quality and funding of 97 studies on the economic impact of smoke-free policies in the hospitality industry that were commissioned by the tobacco industry or organizations not associated with the tobacco industry. They concluded that all of the best-designed studies that used objective measures such as sales tax receipts, included data from several years before and after the smoke-free policies were implemented, and controlled for changes in economic conditions found that smoke-free restaurant and bar laws have no impact or a positive impact on sales and employment. Studies concluding that smoke-free policies negatively impacted the hospitality industry were usually based on predictions or estimates of changes and funded by the tobacco industry, and none were published in peer-reviewed journals. The only negative economic impact is on the tobacco industry.

## **MYTH #2: Clean indoor air laws are prohibitionist smoking bans; they infringe on a smoker's right to smoke; and are anti-smoker. They are trying to legislate morals.**

**REALITY:** Smoking is certainly not a constitutional right. However, these laws are about a fundamental right: the right of everyone to breathe clean air without harm to health. These laws do not stop a smoker from smoking when his smoke does not harm others. These laws do not ban smoking in private homes, but are important public health measures for protecting everyone's right to breathe clean air in public places.

These laws are not anti-smoker. Most supporters of clean indoor air laws have family and friends who smoke. We feel for smokers—trapped by a substance as addictive as cocaine and heroin and sold by an industry that puts profits far ahead of the health of its customers. Smokers are still welcome in all public places; it's just their smoke that isn't. We are promoting clean indoor air for everyone—smokers and nonsmokers alike.

## **MYTH #3: Because restaurants and bars belong to the owners, they should be able to use their property with no restrictions.**

**REALITY:** Restaurants, bars, and other facilities are rightly regulated when public health is a concern. The importance and effectiveness of sound public health and safety laws, like restaurant hygiene laws, is well established. Restaurants and bars must already follow rules that protect the public from insects and rodents, employees who refuse to wash their hands before preparing food, unsafe cooking practices that could cause food poisoning, and fire safety problems. Secondhand smoke is just as dangerous. A business would not be allowed to operate if its employees were regularly subjected to asbestos dust. Since secondhand smoke is categorized by the EPA as a Class A carcinogen, the same category as asbestos, it deserves just as stringent regulation.

There are many examples of laws that regulate the use of private property when the use of that property could harm someone else. For example, your car may be your property, but you can't disregard traffic laws simply because you reason that the car is yours and you should be able to use it as you want. Traffic laws are enacted to protect the public from harm. Clean indoor air

laws are also important measures for protecting public health.

**MYTH #4: People choose to work in these places. If they don't like it, they can find another job.**

**REALITY:** Young people and minorities are disproportionately represented among restaurant and bar workers. For them or anyone else to have to choose between endangering their health and supporting themselves and their family is unfair, unacceptable and discriminatory. No one should have to change careers because of exposure to a dangerous air pollutant. Many would find it very difficult to find another type of job even if they tried.

Most office workers, including many who claim restaurant and bar workers should just find another job, currently enjoy a smoke-free working environment. Restaurant and bar workers should not be treated as second-class citizens. They deserve the same protections that most employees have enjoyed for years.

Few, if any, worker protections have come voluntarily from employers. Government has the right, and the responsibility, to protect workers. No business owners should be allowed to jeopardize the health of their employees because they perceive that doing otherwise might hurt business.

**MYTH #5: Ventilation and separate sections can solve the secondhand smoke problem.**

**REALITY:** Non-smoking sections do not protect people from the toxic chemicals in secondhand smoke. In fact, sitting in the non-smoking section of a restaurant for two hours is the equivalent of smoking one and one half cigarettes. According to the latest [Surgeon General's report](#), eliminating smoking in indoor spaces is the ONLY way to fully protect people from secondhand smoke.

The tobacco industry and its front groups have been pushing ventilation for years. However, ventilation systems do not work when protecting health is the goal, as even they admit. Adequate ventilation would require hurricane strength winds.

**MYTH #6: I know secondhand smoke is bad, but I don't really breathe that much of it. It would take many years of heavy exposure for me to become really sick.**

**REALITY:** You're breathing more than you think. Katherine Hammond, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, studied how much smoke a nonsmoker would breathe in certain situations and found that while sitting in the nonsmoking section of a restaurant for two hours, you would breathe the equivalent of one and one half cigarettes. Sitting behind someone smoking in a bar for two hours would be the equivalent of smoking six cigarettes. If you worked in a smoker-friendly office for eight hours, you would smoke six cigarettes without even lighting up.

Secondhand smoke can cause serious health problems in a very short period of time. For example, five minutes of exposure stiffens the aorta as much as smoking a cigarette, making the heart work harder to pump blood. After 20 minutes of exposure to secondhand smoke, a nonsmoker's blood platelets become as sticky as a smoker's, reducing the ability of the heart to pump and putting a nonsmoker at an elevated risk of heart attack. Only 30 minutes of secondhand smoke exposure can cause narrowing of blood vessels, restricting the flow of blood and contributing to hardening of the arteries. In that same 30 minutes, changes to your blood boost your risk of building up fat deposits that could lead to heart attacks and strokes. After 120 minutes of exposure, your heart rate variability is reduced, increasing the chance of an irregular heartbeat that can itself be fatal or trigger a heart attack.

The danger is so serious and immediate that the CDC recommends that all doctors tell their patients with heart disease or at risk of heart disease to never go any place that allows indoor

smoking.

**MYTH #7: If we allow them to ban smoking in public places, next they'll ban perfume or fast food.**

**REALITY:** While perfume may be an annoyance, secondhand smoke is a verified health hazard, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans each year. While someone sitting near me in a restaurant eating a hamburger won't harm my family or me, a person smoking will.

**MYTH #8: Regulations can't be enforced and will unnecessarily involve the police.**

**REALITY:** Most people are law abiding and look forward to these laws. Experience shows that the laws are mostly self-enforcing.

"During the legislative battle to enact this law, the tobacco industry predicted an enforcement nightmare for local communities, with 'smoking police' being diverted from tracking down dangerous criminals. In fact, the smoking ban has been almost completely self-enforcing. Once employers were informed about the new law, the vast majority complied with no difficulty." Quote from a November 2002 press statement issued by the League of California Cities.

**MYTH #9: Smoking is an individual choice, and these laws take away the choice to use a legal product.**

**REALITY:** Can the word choice really be used when talking about a substance as addictive as cocaine and marijuana that is targeted to adolescents? Most smokers begin using tobacco as children, and we cannot expect young children to make an informed decision on such a dangerous and addicting product. However, clean indoor air laws do not prevent an individual from smoking when that "choice" does not hurt others. What some call personal freedoms should be restricted when they hurt others.

Alcohol is also a legal product, but when its use endangers the health of others, public officials rightly protect the public's health by, for example, drunk driving laws.

**MYTH #10: No one has proven secondhand smoke is a health hazard.**

**REALITY:** The impressive list of organizations whose research has confirmed that secondhand smoke is a health hazard includes the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Surgeon General, the American Lung Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health, the World Health Organization, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the American Medical Association, and researchers in universities from around the world. Can anyone seriously dispute the research and opinions of all of these organizations?

Unbelievably, some opponents do attack the sizable body of evidence on the dangers of secondhand smoke. When they do so, they usually point to a lawsuit against the EPA's 1992 report on secondhand smoke. In December of 2002, that lawsuit, which, incidentally, was a suit by Big Tobacco, was thrown out of court. The EPA stands by its report, and since then the sizable amount of evidence to confirm and strength the EPA's findings has continued to accumulate.

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has"....Margaret Mead*