

Availability of cheap tobacco undermining efforts to cut smoking

31 July 2017



A widening gap between the cheapest and most expensive tobacco products is evidence of a wider variety of brands being introduced to cater to some smokers' declining budgets, according to new research from Bath's TCRG. Credit: University of Bath

The effectiveness of price increases as a deterrent to cut smoking is being undermined by the availability of cheap tobacco, including roll-your-own and cartons of factory-made cigarettes, according to new research published in the *Journal Nicotine & Tobacco Research*.

In the study, researchers at King's College London and the University's Tobacco Control Research Group analysed data from over 6,000 [smokers](#) to look at the price UK adults paid for [tobacco](#) between 2002 and 2014. Their study compared buying tobacco from conventional outlets, such as supermarkets, off-licences and convenience stores, with buying from informal sellers, including friends or duty-free sources.

Growing price range

The researchers showed that, by switching brands, smokers could easily and legally obtain tobacco in

conventional stores at the same prices they would have paid in 2002. The price range comparing the cheapest and most expensive tobacco almost doubled over the 12 years. In 2002 there was a 12 pence range between the cheapest and most expensive factory-made cigarettes; by 2014 this had increased to 23 pence.

In 2014, the most expensive available pack of 20 factory-made cigarettes cost around £10.00, whereas the cheapest cost only around £5.33.

They argue that the widening gap between the cheapest and most expensive products is evidence of the tobacco industry introducing a wider variety of brands to cater to some smokers' declining budgets. Thus despite regular tax increases over this period, factory-made cigarettes only increased by an average of 10 pence per cigarette.

Factory-made cigarettes vs. roll-your-own tobacco

The study was also interested in differences between roll-your-own tobacco and factory-made cigarettes. Currently in the UK roll-your-own tobacco is taxed at a lower rate than factory-made cigarettes and considerably cheaper. From 2002 - 2014, smokers using roll-your-own almost doubled, with its use particularly prevalent in younger smokers. The price increase in roll-your-own was even lower than that of factory-made cigarettes. By 2014, the cheapest roll-your-own tobacco could be purchased at around £1.63 for 10 grams, roughly equivalent to 20 cigarettes.

This study provides evidence that marked tax increases have not resulted in price increases large enough to necessarily motivate smokers of cheap products to quit.

Lead author, Dr Timea Partos of the Addictions Department at King's College London, explained: "Increasing tobacco prices is known to be one of

the best deterrents to reduce smoking, but an increase in availability of cheaper products in conventional stores in response to this appears to be thwarting public health campaigns.

"Policy-makers need to focus on regulating tobacco prices so that the tobacco industry is not able to undermine tax increases by offering such a wide range of cigarette prices."

Co-author from the Department for Health's Tobacco Control Research Group, Dr Rosemary Hiscock added: "Our previous research suggests that tobacco companies are able to meet tax requirements and keep cheap products available by markedly increasing prices on premium brands (over-shifting) and thus under-shifting taxes to cheap brands. This pattern has now been observed in various countries."

The authors now suggest that the price of all types of tobacco should be equally high so that smokers are discouraged from simply switching tobacco products to reduce costs.

With disadvantaged smokers more likely to use cheap tobacco, and smoking rates significantly higher among poorer communities, its availability could also be contributing to the widening socio-economic disparities associated with smoking.

Given interest from other countries in raising tobacco levies it is hoped findings from this research can help inform [tobacco control policies](#) both in the UK and internationally.

More information: Timea R. Partos et al. Availability and Use of Cheap Tobacco in the United Kingdom 2002–2014: Findings From the International Tobacco Control Project, *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/ntr/ntx108](https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntx108)

Provided by University of Bath

APA citation: Availability of cheap tobacco undermining efforts to cut smoking (2017, July 31) retrieved 12 August 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-availability-cheap-tobacco-undermining-efforts.html>

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