

# ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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# Becoming smokefree in 2035

By Junaid Ali Khan

Pakistan has the tools, policies, and international support to become smoke-free within the next decade. The challenge, however, lies in consistent enforcement of the tobacco control laws, political will, and mobilizing communities to embrace a healthier and tobacco-free future.

A number of developed countries have started their journeys towards becoming smokefree – that is smoking prevalence drops below 5%. Though Pakistan has not started this journey, it can over the next ten years become smokefree provided it comes up with a plan and implements it strictly.

Currently, 31.6 million or 19.9% of the population over the age of 15 years uses tobacco in some form. Smoking related illnesses consume 1.4% of the country's GDP every year. That's a huge cost. After two decades of campaigns against smoking, Pakistan has reported an annual death rate from smoking of 91.1 per 100,000 people, notably higher than the averages for South Asia (78.1) and the rest of the world (72.6).

If we briefly look at the benefits of becoming smokefree, we will understand how crucial this journey is for Pakistan. In terms of health, the current impact of smoking is high rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and of course, respiratory illness. A smokefree Pakistan will witness a dramatic reduction in preventable deaths. Pakistan loses billions annually in health-care costs and productivity. If saved, these can be redirected to development. Currently, Pakistan's youth is the main client of the tobacco industry. If the laws and policies regarding tobacco control are effectively implemented, we are looking at healthier and more productive generations.

First, the country needs to have a smokefree vision for 2035.

Under this vision, smoking prevalence will drop below 5%, aligning with global smoke-free benchmarks. This will help to direct healthcare savings to education, infrastructure, and poverty reduction. Once achieved, this vision will lead to a new social norm where tobacco use is stigmatized, and healthier lifestyles are celebrated.

However, we should not lose sight of hurdles. The first hurdle is weak enforcement of existing tobacco control laws. Weak implementation dilutes impact of the laws. There is a cultural acceptance of tobacco and its various uses. This acceptance is hiding the lifelong adverse effects of smoking.



What Pakistan needs to do to bring down the smoking prevalence? First things first, find out the exact number of tobacco users in the country. Since the GATS in 2014, Pakistan has shown little interest in knowing if the number of tobacco users has increased or decreased. Second ensure that smoking cessation services are available across the country at the district, tehsil and union council level. In this regard, the

role of the provincial governments is critical, along with the local governments. Adult smokers who have been unable to quit smoking are the largest chunk of tobacco users. Unless Pakistan helps to come off this habit, the number will continue to increase despite all the successes.

The lack of adequate smoking cessation services in Pakistan is a critical gap in the country's tobacco control efforts. Addressing this issue through targeted interventions and resource allocation can significantly reduce tobacco-related morbidity and mortality while improving public health outcomes.

# Smokers' corner

## Back to smoking

Ahmed, 32, a cook, remembers the day he took his first puff at 16 - a coping mechanism for the loneliness he felt while working as a laborer in Karachi. He soon became habitual and started consuming 20 cigarettes a day. In 2024, he quit smoking for a year after returning to his hometown - Bhattaram - but he relapsed when he moved to Islamabad for work in 2025. "I successfully quit smoking for a year at my wife's request, but unfortunately, gatherings at the workplace led me back to smoking," he told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Islamabad.

With no education and limited options, smoking became Ahmed's escape. He would consume a pack a day until 2023. However, he claimed that he didn't experience any health

issues. "I smoked for almost 16 years, but I didn't face any health-related problems," he said.

In 2024, Ahmed returned to his hometown and was surrounded by a different environment - no smokers in gatherings, and his wife's constant requests and encouragement enabled him to stay smoke-free for a year. After quitting, when cravings hit, he'd sip tea, "It was a trick to manage cravings," he said. Ahmed restarted smoking after moving to Islamabad for work in 2025, albeit at a reduced pace - one or two cigarettes a day. "My colleagues are smokers, so I wasn't able to resist. That's why I restarted smoking."

When asked about the health risks of smoking and effective cessation services, Ahmed said he wasn't aware. "Willpower is the best option to quit," he believes. "I've done it before; I can do it again."

## Unable to quit

Shafaat, 23, a matric-pass laborer, started smoking with friends in 2017, and it quickly became a habit. Six years later, he's consuming 20 cigarettes a day. However, he realised that smoking is bad for health. In 2023, he tried to quit, but gatherings vanished all his efforts. "I failed to quit because gatherings pulled me back," he told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Islamabad.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Pakistan's healthcare system lacks adequate smoking cessation support. Estimates show low quit rates - only 25% of smokers attempt to quit annually, with a success rate of less than 3%.

When Shafaat tried quitting for a month, he diverted his focus

to prayer (namaz) and staying busy at work. "It helped, but gatherings pulled me back," he recalls. Cravings before sleep were his main trigger. Despite being aware of the health risks - heart disease, weakness, and more - Shafaat hasn't faced major issues... yet. "I know it's bad for me, but I can't seem to stop," he admits.

Like most smokers in Pakistan, Shafaat doesn't have any information about smoking cessation methods, clinics, or safer alternatives like e-cigarettes, nicotine replacement therapy, or counseling. It's a tough battle. Unfortunately, Shafaat doesn't want any help in his quitting efforts. "Willpower is the only way to quit; no medical help needed," he believes.

## When fun turns into habit

Ahsan, 36, a matric-pass private-sector employee, took his first puff "just for fun" in 2015. By 2020, his smoking had increased to two to three packs per week. "It was no big deal—I was unaware of the risks," he told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Islamabad. According to estimates, Pakistan has over 31 million tobacco users, with more than 160,000 deaths annually due to tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung diseases. Tobacco use also imposes an economic burden of Rs615 billion on the country. After smoking for five years, Ahsan decided to quit in 2020, without any specific reason,

and successfully gave it up. "I stopped smoking and still don't know why," he said. However, in 2024, he resumed smoking due to renewed desire. "I started smoking for fun, quit for no reason, and then restarted out of desire." Ahsan has little awareness of the health risks associated with smoking, available quit strategies, or smoking cessation services. Moreover, he does not believe he needs any help to quit. "I can quit whenever I want—quitting is no problem," he said confidently. Unfortunately, only 25 percent of smokers in Pakistan attempt to quit each year, and the success rate remains below 3 percent. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Pakistan's healthcare system lacks adequate smoking cessation support.

# Mexico imposes strict jail and fines for vape sales

Mexico's Senate approved legal reforms that could impose up to eight years in prison for producing or selling vapes.

The new rules also include fines of up to 226,000 pesos (\$12,500), marking a major escalation in enforcement.

The reforms passed with support from pro-government senators after clearing by the lower house.

They now await enactment by President Claudia Sheinbaum, who has publicly backed the legislation.

Sheinbaum argued that vapes can be as harmful as traditional cigarettes and should not replace tobacco products.

She emphasized that citizens should avoid smoking and using vapes altogether. Mexico has banned smoking in most public spaces for nearly two decades.

Sheinbaum added that authorities are working with states to prevent illegal markets and organized crime involvement.

However, she did not specify when the new regulations would officially take effect. Opposition Senator Luis Colosio criticized the reforms as "prohibitionist," arguing they avoid proper regulation and monitoring.

He claimed outright bans are an easy way for the government to sidestep responsibilities.

Despite the new measures, vapes and e-cigarettes remain widely available in retail stores across Mexico City.

Authorities have yet to announce how they will address street-level sales or enforce the law.

Residents like Valentina expressed mixed feelings, noting that vapes are cheap and easily accessible.

Some welcomed the ban, while others worried it would push sales into illegal markets.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/1416665/mexico-imposes-strict-jail-and-fines-for-vape-sales/>

# Veterans deserve best cessation support

By Nadiya Bedrychuk

Soldiers give years of their lives to service, which sadly takes a major toll on their mental health. As a result, many wind up picking up smoking—the world’s leading preventable cause of death.

Veterans are around 40% more likely to smoke than the general population. Studies show that during periods of unrest, tobacco use increases across military personnel and the general population alike. It’s often linked to the stress of living in a dangerous environment.

For soldiers enduring constant shelling, blackouts, and battlefield stress, smoking often feels like the only way to cope. In reality, it only deepens anxiety, drains energy, and forms dependence. Quitting smoking under such conditions isn’t just a matter of breaking a habit—it’s a psychological transformation that requires support and the right approach. I am the head of Healthy Initiatives, a public health organization that reaches out to this population with compassion and the resources required for someone to quit smoking in a high-stress environment. As a grantee of Global Action to End Smoking, we work in nine countries throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia to train leaders, such as medical providers and military personnel, on the best practices for helping people to move away from cigarettes.

I am especially proud of our recent attention to Ukraine, where years of full-scale war have undone some of the country’s prior progress toward eliminating smoking. In Ukraine, the number of people who smoke has grown by twenty percent since February 2022. Today, one in three Ukrainians smoke, including half of all men. This includes both soldiers and civilians who live in the region. Most of those who smoke do so daily.

At Healthy Initiatives, our programs are based on the science of tobacco harm reduction. If someone who smokes isn’t ready to quit completely, we affirm that reducing harm by switching from combustible cigarettes to vapes, heated tobacco products, or nicotine pouches is a meaningful step toward better health. Our approach is backed by research about harm reduction from the global scientific community as well as our own research specific to smoking cessation in conflict zones.

The conflict in Ukraine presents us with an opportunity to uplift soldiers and veterans of war, to reclaim some of the markers of health that combustible tobacco has taken from them. We can return some of what’s lost through war by helping people who live through it to quit smoking.

<https://globalactiontoendsmoking.org/global-action-community-newsletters/>

## Achieving a smoke-free Pakistan

The Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) and its two partners held meetings with adult smokers, vapers, and tobacco users in Karachi to support smoking cessation and achieve a smoke-free Pakistan.

In December, the Workers Education and Research Organization (WERO) and the Child and Labour Rights Welfare Organization (CLRWO) each conducted a separate session with adult tobacco users in Karachi East and Karachi South, respectively. Smokers, vapers, tobacco users, parents, and representatives of civil society participated in these meetings.

During the meetings, Mir Zulfiqar Ali from WERO and Haider Abbass from CLRWO briefed participants on the prevalence of smoking in Pakistan. They highlighted that cigarette combustion produces over 6,000 toxic chemicals, which cause fatal diseases such as cancer and heart disease. Pakistan currently has over 31 million tobacco users, with more than 160,000 deaths annually attributed to tobacco-induced diseases, including cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung conditions. These diseases impose an annual economic burden of approximately Rs615 billion on the country. Mir Zulfiqar Ali emphasized the need for a Tobacco Harm Reduction (THR) strategy, citing findings from Public Health England that vaping—a THR product—is 95 percent less harmful than smoking and can serve as an effective cessation tool.

Haider Abbass noted that Pakistan ratified the World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004; however, weak implementation has led to a significant increase in smoking prevalence. He stressed that bans alone are rarely effective and urged the government to make cessation services widely available and formally

incorporate THR into national tobacco control initiatives. Sharing their experiences, smokers expressed a strong desire to quit but cited limited access to cessation services as a major obstacle. This gap is one of the key challenges in tobacco control initiatives and contributes to the fact that fewer than three percent of smokers successfully quit each year. ARI and its partners emphasized the importance of listening to smokers’ experiences to devise effective cessation strategies.

Tobacco users reported peer pressure and stress as common reasons for initiating smoking. Most also described adverse health effects, including persistent coughing and shortness of breath. Despite being aware of smoking-related diseases, many had made unsuccessful quit attempts due to a lack of information about cessation services.

ARI and its partners provided guidance on quit-smoking strategies and coping mechanisms for managing withdrawal symptoms after quitting. Handouts highlighting the hazards of smoking, the benefits of quitting, and effective cessation methods—including tobacco harm reduction—were distributed.

The speakers urged the government to ensure access to cessation services and formally incorporate THR into national tobacco control initiatives. They also emphasized the importance of protecting students from the allure of tobacco and educating smokers to help them make informed health decisions. Additionally, they called for the effective implementation of existing laws, including the “Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-Smokers Health Ordinance 2002” to achieve a smoke-free future.



# Ban on vape, e-cigarettes for under-18s on the cards

Islamabad: In a bid to curb the growing trend of vape smoking among youth in the federal capital, the Senate Standing Committee on National Health Services is set to table 'Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (Regulation) Bill' in the House following its approval by the panel.

The proposed legislation seeks to impose strict controls on the sale, marketing, and use of electronic nicotine delivery systems, commonly known as vapes and e-cigarettes, in Islamabad.

Moved by Senator Sarmad Ali, the bill comes amid rising concern over the increasing use of vaping products among school and college students. It introduces a comprehensive regulatory framework governing the import, distribution, and promotion of these products.

One of the most stringent provisions of the bill is a complete ban on the sale of e-cigarettes within a 50-meter radius of any school, college, or any educational institution, aimed at restricting easy access to flavored nicotine products for students. The legislation also sets a strict age limit, making it illegal to sell vaping products to anyone under the age of 18. Under the proposed law, vaping would be treated at par with traditional tobacco products. If passed, the use of vapes will be prohibited in public transport, government offices, public parks, and other shared community spaces. The bill further enforces a total ban on vape advertising, including promotions on television, social media, and billboards, particularly targeting marketing strategies that appeal to minors.

To ensure consumer safety and quality control, the legislation proposes mandatory standards for all vaping products, including a maximum nicotine concentration of 40 milligrams per milliliter, compulsory child-resistant and tamper-proof packaging, and prominent health warnings on every pack. E-commerce platforms selling vapes will also be legally bound to implement robust age-verification systems before completing any sale.

## Fines and legal prosecution proposed for violations

Offenders breaching age and location restrictions could face an immediate fine of Rs50,000 for the first offense, while repeat violators and those involved in smuggling non-standardized e-liquids may face heavier fines and legal action. During recent deliberations on the draft, officials of the Senate Standing Committee emphasized that although e-cigarettes are often marketed as a safer alternative to traditional smoking, medical evidence suggests they pose serious long-term risks to the respiratory health of young users.

The bill is currently under review by relevant ministries to finalize enforcement mechanisms before its formal presentation in the Senate, as lawmakers push for urgent legislative action to protect youth from the growing public health threat posed by vaping.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2585953/ban-on-vape-e-cigarettes-for-under-18s-on-the-cards>

# Over 1.2m Pakistanis now using vaping devices, survey finds

Islamabad: Gallup Pakistan has released the latest findings from a national survey measuring Pakistanis' awareness, perceptions, and concerns regarding electronic cigarettes (vaping) and chewing tobacco products, including nicotine pouches, zarda, and snus.

The survey reveals that awareness remains limited but significant given these devices have come to Pakistan only recently: 17% of Pakistanis report having heard of electronic cigarettes or vaping.

Awareness of chewing tobacco products such as zarda, snus, and nicotine pouches is marginally higher at 20%, with significantly greater familiarity among urban and wealthier populations.

Despite this low awareness, the study estimates that over 1.2 million Pakistanis currently use vaping devices, indicating a small but rapidly growing segment of users.

Among those who are aware of vaping: A majority (60%) say neither they nor anyone they know uses vaping products. Only 9% personally know a user, and 3% report using these devices themselves.

Many Pakistanis view e-cigarettes/vaping as harmful or equally harmful as conventional cigarettes. 71% of those

aware believe vaping can harm people around the user, similar to the risks associated with second-hand smoke.

Respondents overwhelmingly identify youth as the segment most affected by smoking and related products, including vaping and chewing tobacco: 45% say youth are most impacted. 20% believe the labor class is most affected, followed by students (12%).

The public also perceives several key drivers behind rising vaping use among youth: Fashion and style trends (41%), Experimentation and fun (15%), Peer pressure (8%), Nicotine-related addiction, (9%) and more than half (54%) of those aware of chewing tobacco products believe that flavored varieties actively attract young users.

Gallup Pakistan says this research is based on a nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 and above. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that teenagers and school-going youth may also be using vaping devices and flavored nicotine products, but they are not included in this survey. More targeted research would be required to fully understand usage patterns among minors.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/1430176/over-1-2m-pakistan-is-now-using-vaping-devices-survey/>

Established in 2018, ARI is an initiative aimed at filling gaps in research and advocacy on ending combustible smoking in a generation. Supported by the Global Action to Ending Smoking (GA), ARI established the Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR) in 2019 to promote innovative solutions for smoking cessation.

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