

26 Oct 2009  
The Gazette

## **Contraband cigarettes are a menace to our kids**

The unchecked proliferation of contraband cigarettes in Canada is undermining government efforts to curb smoking, especially among youngsters.

A study made public this month said contraband cigarettes are gaining rapidly in popularity, at the expense of regular taxed cigarettes, among high-school students in Ontario and Quebec.

No wonder. The illicit ones are cheaper, and there's no pesky enforcement of age limits.

This study was, it's true, financed by two groups which are losing money to contraband: big tobacco firms and dépanneur owners. But that doesn't disprove the findings, such as that almost half of butts found on or near Quebec school grounds come from contraband smokes.

This black and grey market urgently needs to be brought under control, and not only because of the problem of sales to kids. Lost tax revenue, to Ottawa and the two provinces, totals about \$1.6 billion a year.

There's also the problem of systematic disrespect for the law.

But the most urgent problem, we think, involves young people. Research says that the younger a person is when he or she starts smoking, the more likely tobacco addiction becomes, with everything that implies about long-term health concerns.

Tobacco-related illness costs Canada more than \$4 billion a year. We don't need a new generation of smokers to add to an already grim toll of disease and early, preventable death.

In recent years, governments have worked to make it as difficult as possible for minors to get their hands on cigarettes. Store-owners are liable to hefty fines if they are found selling tobacco to anyone under 18.

Ratcheting up the price through taxes is another weapon governments have used to stop youngsters from smoking. It's a tactic that worked like a charm – until contraband tobacco flooded the market.

Last year in Quebec, a carton of 200 legal cigarettes cost \$80. At that price, most kids would find it difficult to smoke. But when a carton of contraband tobacco out of Kahnawake last year cost as little as \$8, the deterrent vanishes.

In the brief, halcyon period when Canada cracked down hard on illicit cigarettes, between 1982 and 1992, smoking among minors plunged by an impressive 60 per cent. It took a 500-per-cent jump in taxes to put cigarettes out of kids' financial reach. But in 1994, Canada dropped tobacco taxes in an effort to stop the illicit tobacco trade. Consumption went right back up, and the damage to a generation rose with it, in lockstep with medical costs to the public treasury.

High taxes do not automatically lead to a jump in contraband tobacco use, according to Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada. The western provinces had the highest provincial tobacco taxes in 2008, and the lowest percentage of contraband cigarettes. That's because Western Canada has less access than we do to sources of cheap contraband smokes. Quebec and Ontario's tobacco taxes were far lower, but contraband took up a far bigger slice of the pie.

The solution is the same as it has always been: enforcement. All that's missing is political will.