Public Opinion on Smoke-Free Restaurants and Experience of Exposure to Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS) in Restaurants

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Introduction

In Hong Kong, the Government has enacted legislation to ban smoking in public transport, cinemas, and some public places but progress on the control of smoking in restaurants is slow. At present, restaurants are only required to display a sign stating whether or not they have a no-smoking area. The reasons why stronger control measures have not been enacted probably include:

- Lack of specific data on public demands and experience of problems with ETS.
- Objections from restaurant owners concerned about upsetting customers and losing business.

Reliable estimates of public opinion on smoke-free restaurants are essential for the Government in formulating policy and for restaurant owners to make their business decisions with confidence.

This report describes the results of a telephone survey of randomly selected subjects from households using random digit dialing during the period from November 1994 to March 1995. A total of 1,662 eligible households were contacted and 1,032 Chinese speaking respondents, aged 15 years and over, were interviewed. The response rate was 61.2%. The sampling error of any point estimate (%) was 3% or less.

Attitudes towards smoke-free restaurants and restaurants with no-smoking areas

1. Strong support for legislation for smoke-free restaurants was found. More than three-quarters (77%) of the respondents supported a proposal that the Government should enact legislation which designates all the seats in restaurants as no-smoking areas. More respondents supported that half of the seats in restaurants should be designated as no-smoking areas. (It should be noted that some respondents who objected to the proposal that half of the seats should be no-smoking actually supported the alternative choice that all seats should be no-smoking.) When the two proposals were analysed together, 96% supported either proposal or both and less than 4% objected to further legislation to ban smoking (partially or totally) in restaurants (Figure 1).

2. Almost all (92%) respondents took the view that the legislation to designate no-smoking areas in restaurants was aimed to protect the citizens’ health. Only 17% of the respondents believed that the rights of citizens would be infringed by such legislation and 64% did not agree with this suggestion (Figure 1).

Choice of smoke-free restaurants and restaurants with no-smoking areas

Most respondents (70%) would choose a restaurant with a no-smoking area if there were two restaurants with the same type of service (Figure 3). Twenty three to twenty five percent did, or would, choose to go more often to restaurants with a no-smoking area and fewer did or would go less often (2-7%) if smoking restrictions were in place. Hence the net attraction to customers would be 16-23% (Figure 3).

If choice was available, most respondents (65%) would choose the restaurants with all seats smoke-free when they were accompanied by children (Figure 3).
2. Opinion on and practice in avoiding exposure to ETS: When exposed to ETS in restaurants, most respondents often or sometimes felt that the tobacco smoke smell bad or that the odour stayed on their clothes or hair. Also most respondents would finish the meal faster and leave that restaurant, or had considered finding another seat. About one-third of the respondents often or sometimes had negative feelings towards that restaurant and considered going to another restaurant at the time of exposure or avoiding it in the future (Figure 5).

Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke in restaurants and its influence

1. Prevalence: The prevalence of exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) in restaurants in the past one month was very high; 45% were often exposed, 33% were sometimes exposed, 16% were seldom exposed and 6% were never exposed (Figure 4).

Experience of discomfort and health problems due to exposure to ETS in restaurants in the past one month: About one in four respondents often experienced at least one of the seven types of discomfort or health problems asked about. More than half (52%) of the respondents often or sometimes experienced any one of these discomforts or health problems. The most commonly experienced problems were difficulty in breathing freely, cough, phlegm and throat irritation (Figure 6).
Conclusions

1. There is strong support (94% in favour) for the Government to enact legislation to ban smoking in half or all of the seats in restaurants in order to protect the health of the public.

2. There is a clear preference among the public for restaurants with no-smoking areas. The introduction of no-smoking areas is likely to attract customers.

3. Exposure of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) or secondhand smoking is common in restaurants; 44% of the respondents to this survey were often and 33% were sometimes exposed.

4. ETS is a nuisance and it causes discomfort and health problems to many people.

Recommendations

1. The Government should proceed to legislate for bans on smoking in restaurants.

2. Restaurants should set up no-smoking areas to attract more customers and protect their patrons.

3. The public should avoid exposure to ETS in restaurants and elsewhere so as to protect themselves from either discomfort or the risk of health problems.

4. Health education about the hazards of smoking, particularly passive smoking, is needed to address the gaps in knowledge in the community.

5. People who are concerned about health promotion and the protection of non-smokers, particularly children, should actively contribute to the advocacy for a smoke-free society in Hong Kong.

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References
