

Choice of the Nation

# The Patriot

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## Selling cigrretts to underage goes unchecked

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SIALKOT: No shopkeeper or kiosk owner in Sialkot follow a ban on selling cigarettes to underage children. In the same sprit, smokers also violate the ban by smoking at public places and on public transport. "I buy cigarettes without any question from the shopkeeper," said Ahmed, 15, who was buying a pack of cigarettes from a shop at Iqbal Chowk.

He said he only feared that his family members might see him smoke cigarettes. He said his affair with nicotine dated back to one year but not even once, he had been refused cigarettes by any shopkeeper.

Although most of the shopkeepers and kiosk owners display large leaflets highlighting 'the sale of cigarettes to underage people is prohibited', they hardly follow it. "We mean business and not the slogan on the leaflet," said an owner of a kiosk at Allama Iqbal Chowk. He said no government authorities contacted them for violating the ban. Another shopkeeper said that many times people sent their underage children to buy cigarettes, so refusing cigarettes to underage children could hurt their business.

Around 85 percent of smokers taste cigarettes for the first time in their teens, reveals a survey, held by non-government organisations and health authorities. According to research reports by The Network, a consumer protection organisation, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the

Health Department early smokers are at a much higher risk of drug abuse, including hard drugs, than those who did not start smoking at early age.

The survey was conducted over the last two weeks in Sialkot and its surrounding areas on the basis of figures taken from the capital and Punjab based research reports. According to different reports, around 1,200 to 1,500 schoolchildren between the ages of 6 and 16 years take up smoking every day in Pakistan. In the survey, a total of 210 juveniles were interviewed, comprising of 129 non-smokers, 71 smokers and 10 former smokers. All smokers interviewed were males, with a mean age of 17.7 percent and were studying in colleges, whilst the remaining 28 percent were in schools. Around 50 percent consumed tobacco in other forms as well, including 'paan' and 'niswar'.

Seventeen percent took more than 15 cigarettes per day. The mean age at which smoking starts amongst the group was 14-17 years. With many of the respondents coming from non-smoking families, a majority identified peer pressure as the reason they took up smoking and all of them smoked outside their homes to avoid the disapproval of their parents.

According to the survey, former smokers quit due to its hazards, with two of them having been influenced by family members. These juveniles had been smoking an average of six to nine cigarettes per day and most of them had started smoking at 15 years

of age. Almost all of them knew about the hazards of smoking. Among the non-smokers, 87 percent attended school, and most of them acknowledged the potential hazards of smoking along with passive smoking. They also identified the diseases pertaining to the respiratory system, cancer and heart caused by the habit. AIDS was also cited as a consequence of smoking by some of them. Cigarette smoke was the main deterrent for not smoking, whilst price was not considered to be an issue with only a few respondents citing affordability as a cause of not smoking. When asked about the reasons young people take up smoking, peer pressure was the most common. Tobacco advertisements and smokers in the family were the other main reasons. The majority of the respondents amongst non-smokers suggested a ban on tobacco advertising and an increase in the cost of tobacco

products as two possible ways to reduce smoking. Smoking was termed 'hazardous' by 90 percent of smokers interviewed in the survey. Despite the recognition of more than four diseases caused by tobacco consumption, these juveniles continue to smoke an average of six to nine cigarettes per day. Advertisements are also one cause, which attract the youngsters, as tobacco advertisements and promotions are rampant in Pakistan as two of the leading cigarette manufacturers spent millions in their promotional campaigns in this fiscal year.