



## **A Smoking Ban for Better Health**

By David R. Jones  
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There is a widening gap in life expectancy between richer and poorer Americans. One reason is the number of uninsured. In New York State, about 30 percent of Latino adults do not have health insurance. Another reason for the gap in life expectancy is that smoking has declined more rapidly among people with higher incomes.

Tobacco kills more New Yorkers each year than drugs, AIDS, homicide, and suicide combined. Besides the 7,500 deaths caused by tobacco annually, there are the thousands more New Yorkers who suffer from smoking-related strokes, heart attacks, lung disease, and cancers.

In New York City, the number of people hospitalized for cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in low-income neighborhoods is much higher than in other neighborhoods. Hospitalization rates for heart disease in eight low-income neighborhoods are twice the citywide rate.

About one in six Latino adults smoke, a population estimated to be about 250,000 people. Secondhand smoke exacerbates the condition of asthma. We know from a great deal of research that asthma often afflicts children of low-income families. Hospitalization rates for asthma in East Harlem are five times higher than the rates for the Upper East Side.

Secondhand smoke also takes a toll of New Yorkers' health. Even with years of smoking bans in office buildings, restaurants, and stores, more than half of non-smoking New Yorkers have elevated levels of toxic residues in their bodies caused by secondhand smoke. A person near an outdoor smoker could inhale many times more toxic material than found in normal levels of air pollution.

Legislation has been introduced in the City Council that would outlaw smoking in city parks, pedestrian plazas, and on city beaches. This is an issue of great importance, effecting the health and well-being of communities of color, especially low-income communities.

A city survey of parks, playgrounds, and beaches conducted last summer found that 75 percent of the litter on New York City beaches was cigarette butts. Cigarette butts are toxic and slow to decompose. The Parks Department's Enforcement Patrol can enforce a smoking ban on city beaches and in parks. Smoking is already banned in the city's playgrounds.

Other places, large and small, have successfully banned smoking in outdoor recreational areas. Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle have laws that make their parks and beaches smoke-free. In New York State, 10 counties have bans on smoking at beaches and 34 counties ban smoking in parks.

The legislation (Intro 0332-2010) to prohibit smoking in parks, pedestrian plazas, and on beaches has the support of Mayor Bloomberg and Council President Christine Quinn as well as a dozen Council members. The bill also is supported by the NYC Coalition for a Smoke-Free City. The Coalition is composed of 24 organizations in the city – including the Community Service Society - trained to conduct community education outreach and counseling for those who face barriers to accessing health care and resources to quit smoking. The Coalition’s initiative is funded in part by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A 2009 survey showed that 65 percent of city residents support a ban on smoking at outdoor recreational places. The Council should pass this legislation. It can help alleviate some of the health problems that afflict low-income New Yorkers.

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