

Chris Rickert: Smoking ban bias cuts both ways

CHRIS RICKERT

I know smokers are a shunned lot and the businesses that cater to them have been driven to near pariah-like depths.

But if you're going to study the economic effects of government smoking bans, at least give them a fair shake. Even the devil deserves his due, right?

So it was with pronounced eye-rolling that I read the [latest study](#) by the UW-Madison Carbone Comprehensive Cancer Center. Funded in part by the state Tobacco Prevention and Control Program and Smoke Free Wisconsin, the study's author, David Ahrens, looked at antismoking ordinances in seven Wisconsin cities and found they did not eliminate hospitality industry jobs or cause bars and restaurants to close.

Of course they didn't. To find otherwise would be like a tobacco industry study finding its products kill you.

Or like one referred to me by the Tavern League of Wisconsin [published last year by the libertarian Cato Institute](#). It used data on tickets for violating Ohio's smoking ban to conclude the ban had hurt the state's hospitality industry, specifically bars and clubs like veterans organizations.

That study's author's past work, however, had been underwritten by the tobacco industry, spurring the website [Sourcewatch](#) to essentially label him a tobacco industry spin artist. The Sourcewatch entry, though, was underwritten by the [American Legacy Foundation](#), an antismoking advocacy group (although the foundation itself was created with money from tobacco companies through a 1998 multibillion-dollar settlement between states and the tobacco industry). And of course, governments at all levels continue to collect billions in taxes on cigarette sales even as they warn people not to smoke them.

Sometimes it seems like everybody's got a horse in the race.

"All research is biased," said Norman Fost, a UW-Madison professor and expert on research ethics. "Bias is always present."

Which is not to say it can't also be reliable.

Fost said the Carbone study acknowledged its sponsors and limitations and appeared "very thorough and well thought-out."

Indicators of reliability include praise from other researchers not connected to the study, replication of existing findings, and publication in a peer-reviewed journal, he said. Indeed, there are a bevy of studies showing smoking bans don't cause economic harm — so many, in fact, that Ahrens didn't think it was worth submitting his to a journal. There wasn't enough that was new, he said.

Meanwhile, Tavern League executive director Pete Madland told me he gets phone calls "every day" about taverns that are suffering since this state's smoking ban went into effect last June.

But anecdote is not research, and well-done research — even with its biases — is about the best we can do in describing reality.

Besides, Ahrens said he's got a smoking-related study coming out in a couple weeks — he wouldn't disclose its findings — that will probably be far less pleasing to his antismoking funders. If so, that's probably a better indicator of his work than any.

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