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Smoke-free policies could save landlords up to \$18 million a year in cleaning costs

By Enrique Rivero | August 18, 2011



When apartment tenants light up a cigarette, it's not just their smoking-averse neighbors who suffer. Landlords are also sucking it up — in increased cleaning costs.

But by implementing complete smoke-free rules throughout their properties, owners of California multi-unit rental buildings could save up to \$18 million a year statewide on the cost of cleaning apartments vacated by tenants who smoke, according to a new UCLA study. These policies can also protect their other tenants from the secondhand smoke that seeps between units.

The study was published online Aug. 18 in the American Journal of Public Health and will appear in the journal's October print issue.

Secondhand smoke results in about 4,000 deaths each year from ischemic heart disease and lung cancer, and it is the cause of approximately 31,000 childhood asthma episodes and 4,700 pre-term infant deliveries annually, the UCLA researchers said.

Smoke wafts between units through shared airspaces and ventilation, hallways, cracks in walls and floors, electrical outlets, and plumbing fixtures, or from outside.

"Secondhand smoke is an important cause of morbidity and mortality, and many current policy efforts are focused on encouraging owners and managers of multi-unit housing to implement smoking restrictions," said lead study author Dr. Michael Ong, an assistant professor-in-residence in the division of general internal medicine and health services research at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "California has minimized exposure to secondhand smoke by restricting smoking in multiple public venues, including workplaces, public entryways, public parks and beaches, and vehicles carrying youths.

"However, secondhand exposure in multi-unit housing is a significant contributor to overall secondhand smoke exposure, since Californians spend an average 68 percent of their time at home and over 10 million Californians live in multi-unit housing."

This is the first study to take a systematic measure of smoking-related costs in multi-unit housing, as well as the first study of smoking and multi-unit housing to take into account small-scale multi-unit buildings — those with 15 or fewer units, according to Ong. About 66 percent of California Apartment Association (CAA) members own or manage small-scale buildings.

For the study, the researchers conducted computer-assisted telephone surveys of 343 CAA members to determine landlords' smoking-related costs, the costs they have avoided as a result of having smoke-free policies, and the economic benefits of having completely smoke-free policies.

If a building did not allow smoking anywhere on the property, including within units, it was listed as having a complete smoke-free policy; if smoking was prohibited in only some parts of the property — in common areas, for example — it was said to have a partial smoke-free policy. Smoking-related costs for recently vacated units included cleaning, repairs and maintenance; painting and decorating; trash collection and fire damage; property and fire insurance; and legal, administrative and other operating costs.

The researchers found that nearly half of the multi-unit housing properties owned or managed by CAA members had no smoke-free policies, but the smaller properties had a threefold higher rate of smoke-free policies than the larger ones.

They also found that:

- More than 25 percent of multi-unit housing properties had smoking-related costs in the past year.
- One-third of multi-unit housing properties are currently completely smoke-free.
- For a single multi-unit housing property, the mean smoking-related cost was nearly \$5,000 in the past year and the median cost was \$2,000.
- The likelihood of incurring smoking-related costs was reduced by half with the presence of a complete smoke-free policy.
- Implementing complete smoke-free policies in California multi-unit housing could result in an estimated property savings of \$18 million overall in the short-term.

The researchers caution that the survey response rate — 22.4 percent — was low, though it was similar to other CAA survey response rates. Also, the study was suspended for approximately six months due to the state budget crisis, which may have affected the response rate. In addition, responses to detailed financial questions may have been affected by recall bias, though potential respondents were notified in advance that they would be asked about these costs.

Co-authors of the study included Allison Diamant, Qiong Zhou and Robert Kaplan of UCLA, and Hye-Youn Park of the California Department of Public Health

A contract with the California Department of Public Health's California Tobacco Control Program supported this study. Dr. Ong is chairman of the State of California Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee (TEROC), which oversees programs funded through the increased tobacco taxes mandated by 1988's Proposition 99.

General Internal Medicine and Health Services Research is a division within the department of medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. It provides a unique interactive environment for collaborative efforts between health services researchers and clinical experts with experience in evidence-based work. The division's 100-plus clinicians and researchers are engaged in a wide variety of projects that examine issues related to access to care, quality of care, health measurement, physician education, clinical ethics and doctor-patient communication. The division's researchers have close working relationships with economists, statisticians, social scientists and other specialists throughout UCLA and frequently collaborate with their counterparts at the RAND Corp. and Charles Drew University.

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