

The Adolescent Vaping Crisis in Urban India

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Abstract : Statement of the Problem: Vapes have always been marketed as safer alternatives to traditional cigarettes; however, research suggests that perceived safety of e-cigarettes use may be overstated. While the addictive properties of nicotine have garnered significant scientific interest, the adverse effects of 'inert' ingredients in vapes are being investigated only recently. Seemingly harmless components in vapes such as propylene glycol have been shown to damage astrocytes and oligodendrocytes, and certain flavorings are causatively associated with neuroinflammation. With ease of concealment and varied aromas, vape usage amongst high school students continues unabated in countries like India, which have instituted comprehensive bans on e-cigarettes. With overt government ban, there is paucity of public data on determinants of teenage vaping patterns and parental engagement in curbing this debilitating dependency. Additionally, the large body of peer reviewed studies on vaping have been primarily conducted in Western countries. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors affecting the causes and attitudes towards vaping among adolescents in urban India, as well as the gaps in parental awareness. We posit that this study would lay out a reusable framework for extending the studies across conservative societies where adolescents support vaping behavior even with strong governmental policies. Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Two surveys were used to collect data. Participants from eight private schools in Bangalore completed an online survey. The first survey sampled adolescents aged 14-18, while the second surveyed the parents of children in the same age group from the same schools. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all data collected was anonymous. Results: We find substantial discordance in self-reported vape use by the adolescents and the parents' knowledge of their child's exposure to vaping. Over one fifth of respondents (22.4%) reported using e-cigarettes, while only 5% of parents reported that their children used e-cigarettes. Even though over 70% of adolescents believe that vaping is addictive, only 22.8% of respondents were aware of the components, or the extent of its impact. While peer pressure is often perceived to be the enabling factor, curiosity was reported as the primary reason for the initiation. Adolescents who vape saw regulations on sales and marketing as the most effective deterrent. In contrast, parents and other students leaned on school infrastructure to intervene. There has been a significant increase in vaping and a substantial discordance between parental perceptions and adolescent vaping. Conclusion & Significance: Despite a complete ban, vapes continue to be easily accessible. The data suggests that an open discussion about the adverse health consequences of untested, "seemingly inert" ingredients in these unregulated vape liquids would galvanize the student community by demystifying vaping. While increased regulation against the sale of vapes deters open use, increased parental involvement could enable open dialog with children and assist in reducing the prevalence of vaping. A reduction in vaping could have a considerable impact on the health and educational outcomes for the youth of India.

Keywords : adolescent, e-cigarettes, health consequences, India, parental awareness, vapes

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