

Review of: "Barriers to quitting smoking – a survey among 1000 adult cigarette smokers in Germany"

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Potential competing interests: The author(s) declared that no potential competing interests exist.

This is an interesting article reporting a detailed survey of a sizable, carefully assembled sample of German smokers as to their motivation to quit as well as barriers to quitting. The findings are important and may well be useful in guiding efforts to increase the frequency of quit attempts or uptake of harm reduction strategies as emphasized in the paper. Other positives include (a) identification of potentially distinct subgroups of smokers such as the “discouraged smokers,” and (b) disclosure of potential sources of conflict of interest such as authors’ employment and the funding of the research.

At the same time, I had a couple of questions or suggestions, including:

1. To help inform interpretation of the representativeness of the sample, it would be useful to know (a) the response rate and (b) the content of any ads/solicitations used in recruiting the sample (e.g., whether anything in the wording might have selected for more vs. less interest in smoking cessation).
2. It was not clear to me what the rationale was for all the exclusion criteria – employees of the tobacco industry makes sense, but why exclude pregnant people or journalists for instance?
3. The article intermingles description of findings and speculation about their applicability quite a bit, consistently pushing the idea that one or another data point argues for more use of e-cigarettes as a harm reduction strategy. That is one possibility, but hardly the only one consistent with these data. Low motivation to quit for instance might instead give rise to an emphasis on widespread deployment of methods for increasing quit attempts (see Nicotine and Tobacco Research special issue edited by Carpenter and Hughes for instance). Alternatively, the top listed motivation for quitting was to save money – could raising cigarette taxes in Germany help? I am not pushing for a particular alternative, just noting that “smokers like cigarettes, and many of them do not want to quit and are poorly informed about what accounts for health effects of smoking” does not automatically mean that persuading them to vape is the best or only option, and more consistently separating description of findings from discussion of possible future directions would be useful.
4. It is a rich dataset, and I realize that within the span of one paper it is not possible to dive into every detail, but I wondered what the authors make of the finding that smokers over 50 reported having made fewer quit attempts than had those under 50. Cohort effect? Survivorship bias in that older smokers who had made lots of attempts are likely to have quit already and therefore be ineligible for the study? Invalid retrospective reports of number of quit attempts?