

Discussion on Tobacco Control Effectiveness and Regional Coordination Path from the Perspective of Policy Implementation Gap

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ABSTRACT

Tobacco control is an important issue in the field of public health in China. Since the signing of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2003, a multi-dimensional policy system of "legal regulation + economic regulation + publicity and education" has been formed, which has achieved phased results in reducing the total amount of tobacco consumption and controlling the smoking rate of adolescents. However, from the perspective of policy implementation gap, there are significant differences in the effectiveness of tobacco control among regions, which has become a key bottleneck restricting the realization of the goal of "Healthy China 2030" tobacco control. By using the methods of literature study, data analysis and comparative study, combined with authoritative data such as China Health Statistics Yearbook (2023) and China Report on Global Adult Tobacco Survey (2022), this paper systematically combs the current situation of tobacco control policy implementation in China, analyses the manifestations and causes of the gap in policy implementation, and compares the eastern, central and western regions and urban and rural areas. And explore the path of regional coordination. The results show that in 2022, the adult smoking rate in the eastern region is 6.7 percentage points lower than that in the central and western regions, and the exposure rate of second-hand smoke in indoor public places is 24 percentage points lower than that in the central and western regions. The implementation gap is mainly due to the lack of institutional cohesion, uneven distribution of resources and differences in public awareness. The implementation gap can be effectively narrowed by building a cross-regional coordination mechanism, promoting the balanced allocation of resources and implementing differentiated strategies. This study provides a practical reference for improving the implementation system of tobacco control policy and promoting regional coordination of tobacco control in China, which has both public health value and policy guiding significance.

KEYWORDS

Policy Implementation Gap; Tobacco Control; Regional Coordination; Public Health; Implementation Effectiveness; Healthy China.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is one of the major public health threats facing the world today and is a major contributor to preventable disease, death, and economic loss. As the largest tobacco producer and consumer in the world, the effectiveness of tobacco control in China is directly related to the realization of the strategic goal of "Healthy China 2030". Since the signing of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2003 and its formal entry into force in 2006, the Chinese government has been committed to building a comprehensive tobacco control policy system, taking active measures at the legislative, tax, publicity and education levels, and the adult

smoking rate nationwide has shown a slow downward trend. The public's awareness of tobacco hazards has been improved.

However, a phenomenon that can not be ignored is that the tobacco control policy designed at the top level of the country has produced a significant "policy implementation gap" in the process of transforming into local practice. This gap is highlighted by the serious imbalance in the effectiveness of tobacco control among different regions. There is a huge gap between the eastern coastal developed provinces and the central and western inland areas, as well as between urban and rural areas in terms of smoking rate, second-hand smoke exposure rate, smoke-free environment construction, and tobacco control law enforcement. This unbalanced development among regions not only affects the overall effect of tobacco control, aggravates the unfair distribution of public health resources, but also poses a serious challenge to the realization of the national unified goal of tobacco control [1].

The policy implementation gap theory holds that a perfect policy scheme does not necessarily lead to the expected policy results, and there is a complex transformation process from the policy in the text to the effect in practice, which is restricted by many factors such as the implementation subject, the target group, the resources and environment, and the institutional arrangement. Based on this theoretical perspective, this paper will systematically examine the implementation effect of China's tobacco control policy in the past two decades, focusing on the core performance of regional differences, in-depth analysis of the multi-dimensional causes behind it, and on this basis, try to build a practical path to promote the coordinated development of tobacco control regions [2]. It aims to provide theoretical support and policy reference for bridging the policy implementation gap and improving the overall effectiveness of the national tobacco control governance system.

2. CURRENT SITUATION OF TOBACCO CONTROL POLICY SYSTEM AND IMPLEMENTATION BASIS IN CHINA

China's current tobacco control policy system is a multi-level and comprehensive framework, the core of which is a governance model based on the requirements of the F Convention and the national conditions, which is gradually formed with "law-economy-propaganda" as the three pillars.

2.1. Legal Regulation System

Legal regulation is the most powerful means of tobacco control. At the national level, although there is no national special Regulations on Smoking Control in Public Places, the relevant provisions on smoking control are scattered in many laws, such as the Advertising Law of the People's Republic of China, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors, and the Law of the People's Republic of China on Basic Medical and Health Promotion. Since 2008, Shanghai issued the first provincial-level regulations on smoking control in public places in China, Beijing, Shenzhen, Xi'an, Qingdao and other cities have issued strict 100% smoke-free regulations in indoor public places, which have accumulated valuable experience for national legislation in terms of limiting places, clarifying the main body of responsibility and setting penalty standards.

2.2. Economic Regulation and Control Means

Economic means mainly affect tobacco consumption through tax and price leverage. China implements the tobacco monopoly system, and the tobacco consumption tax is one of the important sources of the central government revenue. In recent years, China has carried out a number of tobacco tax price adjustments, the latest major adjustment was in 2015, aimed at "tax price linkage", by raising the price of tobacco products, especially low-grade tobacco prices, to curb consumption, especially the initial smoking behavior of adolescents. Studies have shown that raising tobacco taxes is one of the most effective ways to reduce tobacco consumption. However, there is still a gap between the proportion of the overall cigarette tax burden to the retail price in China and the international

recommended standard (more than 70%), and the inhibitory effect of the price increase relative to the income growth of residents is different in different income groups.

2.3. Publicity, Education and Health Promotion

Publicity and education are the basic link of tobacco control work, aiming at changing social norms and public awareness [3]. The National Health Commission (and its predecessor, the Ministry of Health) has organized publicity activities on the theme of "World No Tobacco Day" for many years, popularizing knowledge of tobacco hazards through public service advertisements, health lectures, smoke-free schools and smoke-free institutions. In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the construction of smoking cessation service system. Some cities have set up smoking cessation clinics and tried to include smoking cessation services in the payment scope of basic public health service packages or social medical insurance. The 12320 Health Helpline also provides counselling support for smoking cessation. However, the accessibility, standardization and utilization of smoking cessation services vary greatly among regions.

3. THE SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE OF THE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAP IS RELATED TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TOBACCO CONTROL.

According to the data analysis of China Health Statistics Yearbook (2023) and China Report of Global Adult Tobacco Survey (2022), the regional differentiation of tobacco control effectiveness is very obvious. Adult smoking rate is the core index to measure the effect of smoking control. Data from 2022 show that the adult smoking rate in big eastern cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have dropped to less than 20% (for example, 19.9% in Beijing), while the adult smoking rate in some central and western provinces is still higher than 28%, with a difference of 6.7 of more than percentage points. The difference in the smoking rate among adolescents is also shocking. In the counties and towns in the central and western regions where educational resources are relatively weak and supervision is relatively weak, the rate of adolescents trying to smoke and the rate of current smoking are significantly higher than those in the eastern developed cities. Secondhand smoke exposure rate is an important indicator to evaluate the effectiveness of smoke-free environment construction [4]. In public places (such as workplaces, restaurants and public transport) in cities where legislation has been enacted to achieve comprehensive indoor smoke-free, the exposure rate of second-hand smoke is generally less than 30%, while in areas where legislation has not been enacted or is not well enforced, the figure may be as high as 60% -70%, especially in the urban-rural fringe and rural areas.

Gaps in the policy implementation process directly contribute to gaps in health outcomes. First of all, the degree of legislative coverage and strictness is uneven. Many provinces and cities in the eastern region have issued strict 100% smoke-free environmental regulations, while many provinces in the central and western regions are still at the stage of partial smoking ban or only principled provisions, and there are "blank zones" or "relaxed zones" in legislation. Secondly, there is a great disparity between law enforcement and supervision efficiency. In areas where there are laws to abide by, the frequency of law enforcement, the intensity of punishment and the perfection of supervision mechanism vary greatly.

These gaps in implementation make the national unified tobacco control policy objectives produce different practical effects in different regions, forming a pattern of coexistence of "advanced areas" and "lagging areas", which seriously restricts the overall promotion of national tobacco control work.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CAUSES OF THE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAP

The emergence of policy implementation gap is not accidental, it is the result of the complex interaction of many factors, which can be analyzed from the four dimensions of system, resources, cognition and social economy.

4.1. Institutional Factors: Game between Central and Local Governments and Lack of Policy Coordination

Our country implements the administrative system of central unified leadership and local hierarchical management. In the field of tobacco control, the central government sets the overall goal, but the specific implementation power is largely delegated to local governments. This leads to the tension between "policy unification" and "implementation flexibility". Some local governments, especially those whose economic development is highly dependent on the tobacco industry (such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan and other tobacco planting provinces), are facing a huge conflict between the goals of "economic growth" and "public health". When implementing tobacco control policies, there may be insufficient internal incentives, and even negative or selective implementation [5].

4.2. Resource Factors: Uneven Distribution of Financial Input and Human Resources

Policy implementation needs corresponding resource guarantee. In terms of finance, the governments in the eastern developed areas have strong financial resources and can provide sufficient budgetary support for tobacco control publicity, law enforcement supervision and smoking cessation services. However, the central and western regions and grass-roots governments are relatively financially constrained, and tobacco control work is often difficult to carry out in depth due to the shortage of funds, such as the inability to set up a full-time law enforcement team, the inability to carry out large-scale public publicity and so on. In terms of human resources, professional tobacco control management personnel, law enforcement personnel and smoking cessation consultants are mostly concentrated in big cities and developed areas, while underdeveloped areas are facing the dilemma of shortage of professionals. This "Matthew effect" of resource allocation has further exacerbated the implementation gap between regions.

4.3. Cognitive Factors: Difference in Cognitive Level between Leading Cadres and the Public

The awareness and willingness of policy implementers are crucial. Leading cadres in some areas have insufficient understanding of the seriousness of tobacco hazards and the urgency of tobacco control, and fail to truly promote tobacco control to the strategic level of ensuring people's livelihood and promoting sustainable development, resulting in a secondary position in policy ranking and resource allocation. At the same time, there are regional differences in the level of public awareness. Residents in the eastern region have a higher average education level, wider access to information, stronger health awareness and higher support for smoke-free environment, which creates a good social atmosphere for strict law enforcement. However, in some central and western regions and rural areas, the social acceptance of smoking behavior is still high, the understanding of the harm of second-hand smoke is vague, and even smoking is regarded as social etiquette. The public's recognition of tobacco control measures and willingness to comply with them are relatively low, which increases the resistance to law enforcement.

5. COMPARISON OF REGIONAL DIFFERENCES AND INFLUENCING FACTORS OF TOBACCO CONTROL EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of tobacco control in China shows a significant imbalance in geographical space, which is not an accidental phenomenon, but the inevitable result of many factors. From the macro regional pattern, there is a sharp contrast between the eastern coastal developed provinces and the central and western inland areas. Generally speaking, the effect of tobacco control in the eastern region is more significant, which is reflected not only in the lower adult smoking rate, but also in the stricter law enforcement of tobacco control in public places and the more popular construction of smoke-free environment. These areas often take the lead in implementing strict tobacco control laws and regulations, equipped with relatively perfect supervision and implementation mechanism, and the public's awareness of tobacco hazards and acceptance of smoke-free legislation are generally high. On the contrary, in the vast central and western regions, the promotion of tobacco control work is facing more realistic challenges, the smoking rate remains high, and the problem of second-hand smoke exposure is more common in public places, which shows that there is an obvious softening of the implementation of the policy in the landing link.

By analyzing the factors behind these differences, we can see a multi-level dynamic system. The primary factor is the level of socio-economic development in different regions. In areas with higher level of economic development, financial resources are more abundant, which can provide more powerful financial guarantee for tobacco control publicity, law enforcement supervision and smoking cessation services. At the same time, the industrial structure of these areas is more diversified, the dependence on tobacco economy is lower, and the internal economic interest resistance faced by local governments in implementing strict tobacco control policies is relatively small. On the contrary, in areas with relatively backward economic development and closely related to tobacco planting or processing industries, the promotion of tobacco control policies often touches on the core economic interests of the local areas, which makes the government inevitably look ahead and back in its implementation and limit its efforts. The governance capacity and policy determination of local governments are the key variables to produce differences. As a typical public health policy, the effectiveness of tobacco control is highly dependent on the attention of local governors and the implementation efficiency of the administrative system. Those areas that truly incorporate the concept of "health first" into the policy agenda can effectively co-ordinate different departments, form a regulatory synergy, and guide public opinion through sustained public publicity. However, areas with weak governance capacity and low health weight in policy ranking are prone to fall into the dilemma of "multi-management, no one is responsible", which leads to tobacco control laws and regulations only stay at the text level, and it is difficult to translate into practical governance effects.

6. CONSTRUCTION OF PRACTICAL PATH FOR REGIONAL COORDINATION OF TOBACCO CONTROL

In order to effectively bridge the gap of policy implementation in the field of tobacco control and promote the coordinated development of tobacco control among regions, a systematic and multi-level practice path must be constructed from the perspective of combining top-level design with grass-roots innovation. The core of this path is to solve the fundamental problems of system, resources, cognition and interests that lead to the gap, and the key is to shift from the traditional "one-size-fits-all" model to a new governance paradigm with more precision and synergy. Specifically, the construction of this path should start from the following aspects.

The most important thing is to strengthen the top-level design and legislative leadership at the national level. At present, the biggest institutional obstacle to tobacco control is the lack of an authoritative national law on smoking control in public places. We should actively promote the promulgation of the relevant implementation rules of the Regulations on Smoking Control in Public Places or the

Basic Medical and Health Promotion Law at the national level, so as to provide a unified, clear and compulsory legal criterion for the enforcement of tobacco control law nationwide. This national law should clarify the principle of a comprehensive ban on smoking in indoor public places, workplaces and public transport, set minimum penalties, and clarify the regulatory responsibilities of relevant departments. This can not only fill the legal gaps in many regions, but also provide a solid basis for the implementation of the upper law, so as to avoid the fear of local legislation due to conflicts of laws or excessive standards.

Secondly, it is essential to establish a scientific and effective mechanism for regional coordination and balance of interests. When setting a unified national tobacco control target, the central government should take full account of the different development stages, resource endowments and practical difficulties of different regions, and implement differentiated performance appraisal and financial transfer payment policies. For areas with high economic dependence on tobacco, the central government should help them cultivate alternative industries by means of special transfer payments, ecological compensation or industrial transformation support funds, so as to alleviate the short-term financial pressure and employment pains caused by tobacco control, in exchange for firmer implementation of tobacco control policies by local governments. We can explore the establishment of "East-West cooperation" mechanism to encourage the eastern region with remarkable tobacco control results to provide counterpart support to the central and western regions in terms of technology, talent and management experience, such as assisting in training law enforcement teams, sharing experience in the construction of smoking cessation service network, and cooperating in health education activities.

Finally, the implementation of precise propaganda guidance and social mobilization is a long-term strategy to build consensus. Tobacco control propaganda should not stay in the simple slogan dissemination, but should be based on the characteristics of different regions and different groups (such as teenagers, women, farmers, blue-collar workers, etc.) To carry out precise information customization and channel delivery. On the basis of traditional media propaganda, we should attach great importance to the communication efficiency of social media, short video platforms and other young generation gathering places, and create more attractive and convincing new media content. At the same time, we should actively mobilize social organizations, volunteers, experts and scholars, public figures and other social forces to participate in tobacco control, encourage the public to supervise and report illegal smoking, and create a good atmosphere of "social co-governance". Through continuous efforts, the ultimate goal is to create a new social fashion that generally does not accept, encourage and tolerate smoking, and to lay the deepest social and psychological foundation for the smooth implementation of various tobacco control policies.

7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, looking at China's tobacco control work from the perspective of policy implementation gap, we can clearly see that while overall positive progress has been made, the severe regional imbalance has become an obvious shortcoming restricting the realization of the strategic goal of "Healthy China 2030". This implementation gap is embodied in key indicators such as adult smoking rate, second-hand smoke exposure rate and smoke-free environment construction, which is the result of multiple complex factors such as deep-seated lack of institutional cohesion, uneven distribution of resources, differences in public awareness and the fetters of tobacco economic interests. In the future, China's tobacco control cause must adhere to the established direction, at the same time, bridge the gap of policy implementation and promote regional coordinated development to a more central strategic position. The way out is to move from "one-size-fits-all" simplified management to modern governance with precise coordination as the core. By building a cross-regional coordination mechanism, promoting the balanced allocation of resources and implementing targeted publicity and guidance strategies, we can gradually narrow or even eliminate the growing regional disparities, so

as to comprehensively enhance the overall effectiveness of the national tobacco control and governance system, and ultimately effectively protect the health rights and interests of all the people, and realize the grand blueprint of "Healthy China 2030" on schedule. This road of regional coordination is not only a test of the ability of national governance, but also a profound practice of the concept of people's health-centered development.

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