

What do San Diego restaurant professionals think about a smokefree outdoor dining policy?

Responses from interviews with restaurant industry professionals in Council Districts 3 and 9 revealed a variety of perceived benefits and barriers to smokefree patio policies, and that restaurants currently allowing smoking do not feel empowered to go smokefree without local policy intervention.

Background



Smoking leaves behind toxic chemical residue that contains over 25 chemicals listed under California's Prop 65 that are known to be hazardous to human health, such as nicotine and other carcinogens.



Patrons of outdoor restaurant patios can pick up and absorb tobacco smoke residue on their hands by touching tables and surfaces, even after active smoking has stopped.



The City of San Diego is the largest city in the County that allows smoking in outdoor dining patios.

Methods

In 2024, The Policy Research Center for Tobacco and the Environment conducted a series of preliminary questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with eight restaurant industry professionals, including owners, managers, and staff. They were asked about:

- Perceived benefits and barriers to implementing smokefree patios.
- Perspective on a comprehensive smokefree outdoor dining policy in the City of San Diego.
- Knowledge and attitudes (KA) about thirdhand smoke.

Results

5 out of 8



participating restaurants allowed smoking in at least one area of their patio.



3 participants were owners.

4 participants were managers.



1 participant was a staff member.



1 participant currently smokes.



4 participants have quit smoking.



4 participants currently vape.



63% of participants would support a smokefree outdoor dining policy for restaurants in the City of San Diego.



100%

of San Diego restaurant professionals interviewed feel a smokefree policy would not have a negative impact on restaurants, in general.



88%

of San Diego restaurant professionals interviewed personally prefer eating in smokefree outdoor dining patios.



75%

of participants believe tobacco smoke residue...



...contains dangerous chemicals.



...can accumulate in outdoor spaces.



...can make kids sick.

88%

of participants believe tobacco smoke residue sticks to surfaces.



100%

of participants believe tobacco smoke residue is dangerous for pets.



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Perceived Benefits



Better Customer Satisfaction

- "...Better guest enjoyment I'd say."
- "I love not smelling it, makes our food taste better..."
- "...it's pretty ingrained in society at this point that people don't want to eat [and] have smoking."



Health and Safety

- "...Anytime there's not smoking, it's going to be a better, healthier environment."
- "...If you work five days a week and have asthma, you probably would notice a difference if there wasn't smoke nearby all the time."



Employee Protection

- "...If it's not legal [to smoke on the patio], hopefully it'll stop [employee smoking] you know? It's a big thing...you don't get breaks unless you're a smoker or vaper."



Cleanliness

- "It'd definitely be cleaner. I feel like people leave their cigarettes everywhere, they leave the open carts everywhere."



Alignment with Local Culture

- "...Most people assume it's banned on patios all over San Diego."
- "People are surprised...[they] just assume the restaurants in California are no smoking inside or outside."
- "...California, most people don't want to be around it, just in general."

Perceived Barriers



Short-Term Economic Impact

- "Initially? Slightly negative [impact]. Long-term? Not overall, just because at a certain point it eventually balances back out."
- "Short term, I think we would definitely lose people because all the people [who smoke], but long term we might be able to gain more..."



Responsibility for Smokefree Policy

- "I just need a reason to do it that's not on me."
- "There's just no way, honestly, that we could unless...an actual California State law that bans smoking anywhere on the property."
- "...The regulars would understand it. They wouldn't understand it if we banned it without it being law."



Character of Location

- "...Drinking and smoking go really hand-in-hand."
- "...I think just 'cause this place has been around for so long...many people associate it with smoking..."



Personal Choice

- "I would say I would want people to be able to have the choice."



Vaping Challenges

- "...It's a little bit more...unclear how to enforce like, 'You can't vape' on a patio..."
- "The only thing is vaping still...because they're real quick...it's easier to hide it."

Conclusion

- A comprehensive smokefree outdoor dining policy has broad support from San Diegans and Californians generally. **Residents and professionals alike prefer dining in smokefree patios.**
- San Diego's restaurant industry professionals have indicated they are **unlikely to implement smokefree patios on their own**, due to a variety of perceived barriers and underestimation of employee health risks due to second- and thirdhand smoke exposure.
- **Restaurant industry workers are an underserved occupational demographic** that could benefit from targeted resources, education, and messaging. Current smokefree workplace laws do not protect employees who are exposed to secondhand and thirdhand smoke from outdoor dining patios.
- **San Diego City Council could draft policy** that shares enforcement responsibilities and eases economic burden on restaurants, while protecting workers and visitors.

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