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THREE YEARS OF PLAIN PACKAGING FOR TOBACCO PRODUCTS IN AUSTRALIA

Have the Expectations Been Met?

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In December 2012, the Australian Government implemented plain packaging for tobacco products in order to curb smoking. But three years later, governmental data and related research show that neither the rate of smoking, nor tobacco consumption have declined as a result of plain packaging.

The percentage of smokers in the population (i.e., the rate of smoking) is the key smoking-related metric for evaluating plain packaging. The Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) indicates a decline in the rate of smoking from 15.1 in 2010 to 12.8 percent in 2013. Tobacco control researchers have portrayed this decline as evidence of plain packaging's effectiveness. However, the NDSHS data cannot validly be used to evaluate the (potential) plain packaging effect for several reasons. In particular, the data provide information on smoking rates in 2010 and in 2013, but plain packaging was introduced only in late 2012. Unlike the NDSHS, official state-level data enable a comparison of smoking rates right before and after the implementation of plain packaging. These data show no evidence of a plain packaging effect and this finding is in line with existing empirical research.

The amount of tobacco consumed is another important measure of actual smoking behavior. Since cigarette sales (a common indicator of tobacco consumption) are not publicly available, researchers must rely on proxy variables (for example, tobacco clearances and expenditure on tobacco) or survey data (for example, NPPTS). Empirical evidence based on both kinds of data (proxy variables and survey data) suggest that plain packaging has not reduced (legal) tobacco consumption.

Three years after the introduction of plain packaging, publicly available data reveal that plain packaging has **not reduced smoking rates or tobacco consumption**. Even though the data were collected by different organizations, in different states, and in different ways, they tell a consistent story that does not support claims of plain packaging as an effective public health measure.

Given the huge discrepancy between the initial expectations of what plain packaging can achieve and the actual results after three years of experience with the measure, further research on the reasons for the ineffectiveness of plain packaging is needed.

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