

Smoking Initiation Among Youth

Why Family, Friends, and Government Policies Matter

What makes young people (not) initiate smoking?

Early-age smoking is a central challenge for tobacco control efforts. *The earlier in life a cigarette is smoked, the higher the likelihood that individuals will become regular or daily smokers.*

Therefore, to achieve lower smoking prevalence, it is crucial to tackle smoking initiation among young people.

The evidence from previous studies from different countries suggests that **higher taxes** resulting in increased cigarette prices **are effective** in reducing the likelihood of smoking among youth due to specific socioeconomic conditions of this age group, including:

- Lower available disposable income (“cash”).
- Lower smoking addiction because of shorter smoking histories.

According to the literature, other factors that influence tobacco initiation include **parental and friends’ smoking behaviors, tobacco control policies** in public places and in schools, and the extent to which youth are exposed to tobacco control rules and media advertising for and against tobacco.

Why is it critical to address youth smoking in Albania?

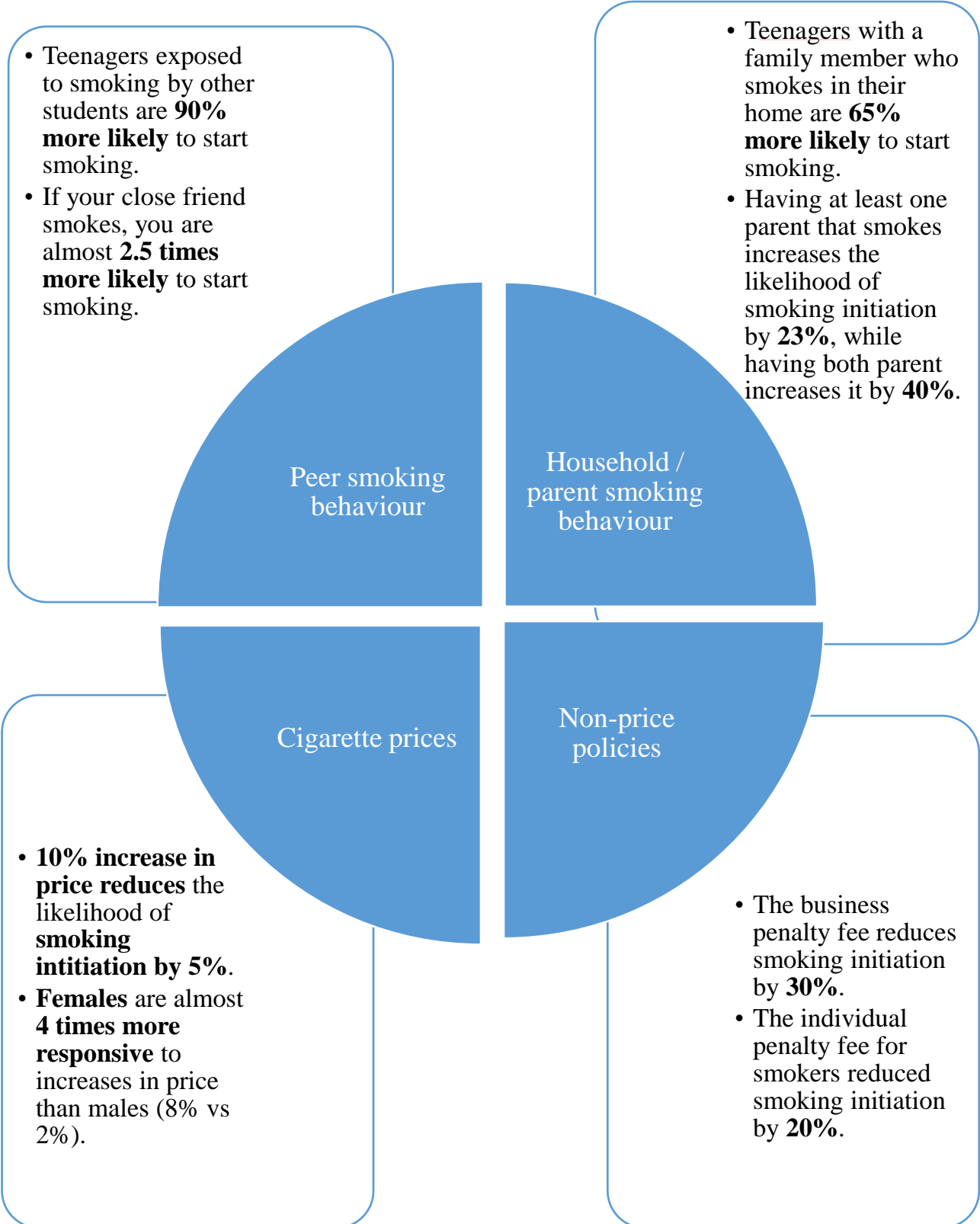
Over the past decade, tobacco consumption in Albania has been decreasing, following increased health awareness and tobacco control policies. However, over **42 percent of males** and 7 percent of females still use tobacco, which is much higher than the global average.

Tobacco use in Albania is especially high among young people, with **more than half of males aged 25 to 34** smoking tobacco products, and with most daily smokers starting smoking daily before 18 years old¹.

Study approach

This policy brief is based on a study on youth smoking behaviors in Albania, exploring the effects of price (reflecting fiscal policies), non-fiscal tobacco control policies, and other important factors on smoking initiation.

The study analyzes individual-level data from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) implemented in Albania during 2004, 2009, 2015 and 2020. The GYTS is a nation-wide school-based survey on the use of tobacco products among school children aged 11 to 17 - the sample size of the four surveys is 19,513. The data were analyzed applying appropriate cutting-edge statistical analyses based on previous research.



Results

Many children start smoking at an early age. The average age of smoking initiation is 13 for both males and females. Half of the smokers-initiated smoking before age 13, and 90 percent before age 15 years old.

The risk of initiation increases substantially following the age of 13 for both males and females.

Incidence of smoking (initiation) among females is much lower. Males are almost 50 percent more likely to initiate smoking than females.

Price has a strong impact on the decision to initiate smoking among teenagers. An increase of price by 10 percent reduces the likelihood of smoking initiation by five percent.

Females are more sensitive to price. An increase in cigarette prices reduces the likelihood of smoking initiation for females much more than for males, as females are almost four times more responsive to increases in price than males.

Peer smoking is important. Teenagers who are exposed to smoking by peers are 90 percent more likely to start smoking. When **close friends** smoke, the likelihood to initiate smoking is almost 2.5 times higher.

Youngsters who are exposed to cigarette smoking at home are more likely to smoke. Teenagers who have a family member that smokes in their home premises are 65 percent more at risk than teenagers who are not exposed to smoking in their home.

Children with smoking parents have a higher risk of smoking initiation. Having at least one parent that smokes increase the likelihood of smoking initiation by 23 percent, while having both parents that

smoke, increases likelihood of initiation by 40 percent.

Policies related to tobacco control have a strong effect in reducing smoking initiation in young people. Policies introduced from 2013–2014 resulted in significant reduction of smoking initiation. Namely, following the introduction of business penalty fees and later individual penalty fees for smokers for violations of smoke free laws, smoking initiation declined by 30 percent and 20 percent respectively.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study findings suggest that **tobacco tax increases** that raise prices likely contribute to a **decline in smoking prevalence** through more **smokers quitting** and **the decrease of smoking initiation in general, but especially among youth**, which is likely to have positive health effects by lowering long-term smoking.

The empirical evidence presented suggests that in addition to cigarette price, other variables including sex, smoking at home, and smoking status of parents and friends (e.g., classmates and close friends) affect smoking initiation significantly. **Education** and **awareness** messages are suggested to address parents and peers, by pointing to the importance of role models for children in preventing smoking onset.

The results of the study showed that the implementation of laws to control the consumption of tobacco in public environments had a significant effect in reducing the initiation of smoking among youths. Intensive policies introduced to protect youth from tobacco and promoting smoke free environments are significantly important for reducing tobacco initiation and promoting anti-smoking norms in the future.

A combination of increasing taxes, strengthening enforcement of laws to control tobacco use in public spaces, and public health mass media campaigns to educate about the problems and the solutions could prove effective in reducing smoking onset.

Because illicit tobacco is generally less expensive and therefore more accessible to young people, efforts by the Government of Albania to ratify the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products and implement its key provisions will benefit future cohorts.

Acknowledgments

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ⁱ Gjika, A., Gjika I., Zhllima, E., & Imami, D. (2020). *Smoking uptake, prevalence, and cessation in Albania*. Development Solutions Associates. <https://tobacconomics.org/research/smoking-uptake-prevalence-and-cessation-in-albania-report/>