

# Youth Appeal of Hookah and Hookah Lounges, and Policy Implications

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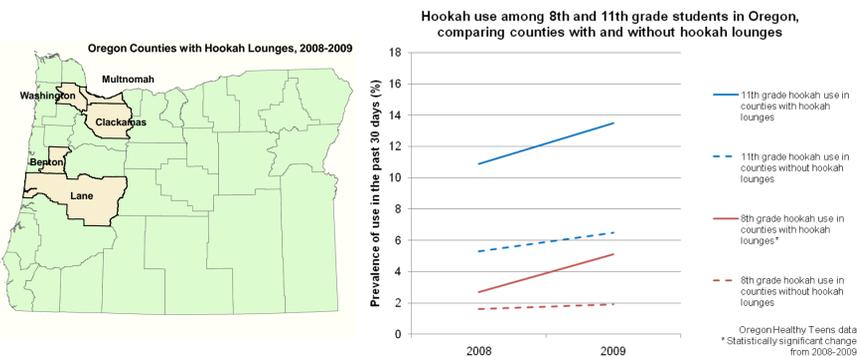


## BACKGROUND

Hookahs are pipes used to smoke shisha, a flavored mixture of tobacco and syrup. The American Lung Association warns that hookah is the first new tobacco trend of the 21st century. Despite widespread misconceptions to the contrary, hookah smoke contains toxins and is associated with many of the same diseases as cigarette smoke. Youth hookah use in Oregon is on the rise, especially in counties containing hookah lounges that operate under a smoke shop exemption in the state's smoke-free workplace law. To inform tobacco control efforts in Oregon, we wanted to know more about the appeal of hookah and hookah lounges to youth and young adults.



## Youth Hookah Tobacco Use and Hookah Lounges



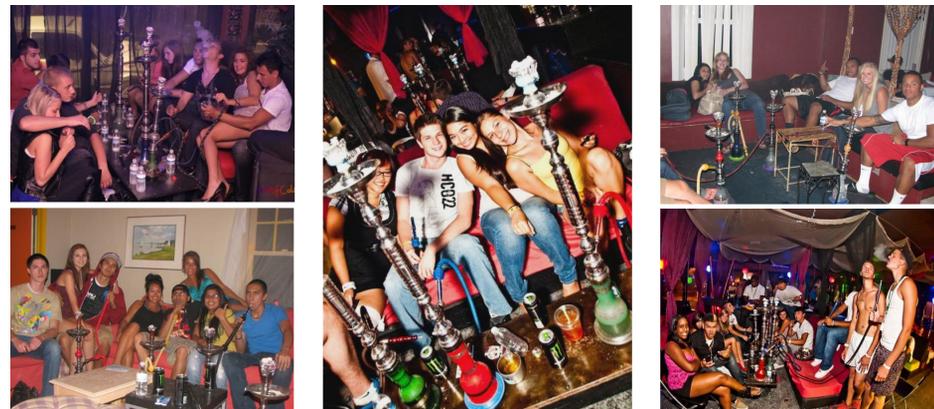
## METHODS

We convened eight focus groups composed of both male and female participants who lived in urban and suburban areas around Portland, Oregon. Four groups were of 16-18 year-olds, two groups were of college-age young adults, and two groups were of parents of 12-18 year-olds.

We conducted observational assessments of 10 hookah lounges operating in Oregon to describe the lounge environment, customer profiles, and promotional activities. We identified hookah lounges through smoke shop certification application records, business name registrations, internet searches, and reports from county tobacco prevention programs.

## Focus Group Findings

- ❖ Widespread peer acceptance of hookah use; no stigma associated with the practice.
- ❖ The primary appeal of hookah smoking to youth and young adults is that it is a social activity; unlike cigarettes where the smoker is alone.
- ❖ Several youth had heard that hookah tobacco contains no nicotine or tar.
- ❖ Youth and young adults perceive hookah as less harmful and addictive compared to cigarettes because it tastes and smells good, because hookah lounges are legal, and because no one has told them it is harmful.
- ❖ Parents were largely unaware of hookah, but were concerned when they learned of the rising use of hookah among youth.



## Observational Assessment Findings

- ❖ The majority of hookah lounge patrons looked to be under the age of 25; some hookah lounges gave discounted prices with a student ID.
- ❖ Lounges offered dozens of flavors of shisha, including candy, fruit, coffee, and cocktail flavors.
- ❖ All shisha varieties contained tobacco; there were no tobacco-free or "herbal" options for sale.
- ❖ Facebook posts (from both hookah lounges and others) inaccurately promote shisha as herbal and safe.

## POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Most tobacco users become addicted during adolescence, so the rise in youth hookah smoking is concerning. A comprehensive approach is required to reduce hookah smoking:

### Flavored Tobacco

Flavors mask the harshness of tobacco and make it easier for new users to start smoking. With the exception of menthol, flavored cigarettes are now banned. Extending the cigarette flavor ban to hookah tobacco would make hookah less appealing, particularly to youth.



Tobacco type	Pack of cigarettes	Small package of shisha
Cost to consumer (in Oregon)	\$5.00	\$2.50
Amount of tobacco	~0.6 ounces of tobacco (20 cigarettes)	1.76 ounces of shisha (enough for 4-5 hours of hookah smoking)
Federal excise tax	\$1.02 (\$1.70 per ounce)	\$0.31 (\$0.17 per ounce)
Oregon excise tax	\$1.18 (\$1.97 per ounce)	\$0.78 (\$0.44 per ounce)
Total tax	\$2.20 (\$3.67 per ounce)	\$1.09 (\$0.61 per ounce)

### Price

The federal tax rate for hookah tobacco is less than the tax rate for cigarette tobacco, making hookah less expensive. Equalizing the federal tax rates between loose pipe (hookah) and loose cigarette tobacco would increase the price of shisha and make hookah smoking less affordable to youth compared to cigarettes.

### Warning Labels & Education

Consistent with research on youth cigarette smoking, studies suggest that youth who do not perceive hookah as harmful are more likely to smoke it than youth who do perceive hookah as harmful. Warning labels on shisha would inform consumers that hookah smoking is not safe and dispel myths that the practice is less harmful than cigarettes.



### Youth Access

Dozens of internet sites sell hookah tobacco for home delivery. Online sales make it easier for youth to access tobacco. The Prevent All Cigarette Tobacco Act (S. 1147) prevents the U.S. Postal Service from shipping cigarettes, roll-your-own tobacco, and smokeless tobacco, but does not prohibit shipping shisha or other pipe tobacco products. Expanding restrictions on shipping and credit processing would make hookah less accessible to youth.



### Smoke-Free Environments

Smoke-free laws help de-normalize smoking, which in turn promotes cessation and discourages youth initiation. Smoke-free laws that prohibit hookah lounges create community norms that discourage hookah smoking.

