ANALYZING THE PROPOSED CITY SMOKING BAN

WHAT'S REALLY IN THE AIR

Sun-Times measures how polluted the air is in 25 bars, restaurants and other places around the city

The controversial smoking ban is set for a City Council Health Committee vote on Thursday.

Story by Lori Rackl and Chris Fusco on pages 8-9
HOW POLLUTED IS THE CITY’S

BY LORI RACKL AND CHRIS FUSCO
Staff Reporters

As debate rages over a proposal to ban smoking in bars, restaurants and virtually all indoor public places in the city, the Chicago Sun-Times used an air monitor to find out just how polluted those venues can get.

The newspaper found that workers logging a typical eight-hour shift in 12 of 25 places that allowed smoking breathed in pollution levels that exceeded federal clean-air thresholds.

Pollution was so bad in one room of one tavern, employees would be breathing air the Environmental Protection Agency deems “hazardous” — the EPA’s worst category — that it’s rarely seen these days except in the event of forest fires or volcanic eruptions. There’s nothing illegal about that, however, as the EPA doesn’t regulate indoor air.

Overall, indoor air pollution was on average 39 times higher in venues that permitted smoking than in those that didn’t.

The controversial smoking ban, set for a City Council Health Committee vote on Thursday, is aimed largely at protecting workers.

But a growing body of evidence suggests that even the time it takes to have a beer at a bar can have health consequences.

Research is telling

Studies have shown that fewer than 30 minutes of secondhand smoke exposure can spark potentially dangerous changes in the blood and arteries — changes similar to what’s seen in smokers.

Short-term exposure to tiny particles released by burning cigarettes, among other things, has also been linked to increased hospital stays and emergency room visits among people with asthma and other lung conditions.

These microscopic particles, called PM 2.5, are what the Sun-Times measured at 25 bars, restaurants and other establishments that would be affected by the smoking ban. They’re among the many ingredients in secondhand smoke, which contains at least 350 toxic or cancer-causing chemicals, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some critics of smoking bans dispute the research that labels secondhand smoke a health hazard. The CDC and EPA say the hazards are well documented.

Indoor air: “last frontier”

The EPA keeps a close eye on PM 2.5 — responsible for an estimated 15,000 heart-related and stroke deaths each year in the United States — to make sure levels don’t get too high outdoors.

But the agency has no control over indoor air, the “last frontier” in air pollution, according to Jim Repase, a secondhand-smoke expert who worked in the EPA’s air policy office for 15 years.

“We have laws that have been lowering the air pollution levels from automobile traffic and power plants for a long time,” Repase said. “Indoor air isn’t really regulated or controlled.”

Secondhand smoke is probably the biggest source of air pollution left in the developed world.”

The Sun-Times hired an epidemiologist to help adjust its findings of PM 2.5 levels in Chicago venues to make a fair comparison to EPA’s outdoor standards, which are based on 24 hours of exposure to the tiny particles. The analysis assessed workers logging an 8-hour shift in pollution levels recorded by the air monitor and spent the remaining 16 hours of the day breathing “normal” air.

Half of the 10 tested locations that allowed smoking but didn’t exceed clean-air standards still logged PM 2.5 levels high enough to pose a health hazard to children, seniors and people with heart or lung disease.

One such place was the basement of the University of Chicago’s St. Sabina Catholic Church in Bridgeport, the parish where Mayor Daley grew up. The church hosts twice-weekly bingo games popular with smokers, such as Harriette Florio, 77.

Bingo ladies, bar owners fuming

Florio bristles at the idea of snuffing out smoking at bingo.

Amanda Starcevic, 34, a nonsmoker, blames her chronic lung condition on secondhand smoke. She’s been a bartender and waitress since she was 21.

“We’ve got rights, too,” Florio said, her Vicente cigarettes resting near the bingo ball rack.

And if the city council passes the ban?

“I’ll go somewhere else,” she said.

That’s precisely what worries some bar owners and the state’s powerful restaurant lobby. A smoking ban would be unhealthy for business.

David Gevercer, owner of the Matchbox, an intimate bar just west of downtown that had some of the highest pollution readings recorded by the air monitor, doesn’t buy the research that concluded tax receipts from New York City restaurants and bars increased one year after that city’s smoking ban took effect.

“It’s a horrible idea,” Gevercer said of Chicago’s proposed ban.

“All of these little taverns would be forced out of business.”

The bad-for-the-bottom-line argument doesn’t sway Amanda Starcevic, who’s worked as a waitress and bartender since she was 21. She’s now 34 and has a chronic lung condition. The nonsmoker from River West chalks up her diagnosis to secondhand smoke.

“It’s ridiculous that people would be willing to put the health of their workers above profits,” said Starcevic, who’s cut back her hours behind the bar to one night a week. “I would love to go back in time and give up half my money to regain my health.”

Pollution 195 times higher

Anti-smoking forces pushed for the ban in Chicago point to health successes elsewhere. In Heiden, Mont., for example, hospital admissions for heart attacks dropped 40 percent during a six-month period when indoor smoking was banned, according to a study published last year in the British Medical Journal. Heart attack rates returned to normal when the courts suspended the ban.

HOW THE TESTS WERE DONE

To test pollution levels, the Sun-Times obtained a TSI SidePak AMS50 air monitor (pictured at right) from Ashstead Technology Rentals in Chicago. The American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago helped show reporters Lori Rackl and Chris Fusco how to use the machine.

At each of the 25 venues the reporters visited, Rackl carried the monitor in her purse, with its intake tube sticking out to continuously suck in air samples. The reporters stayed at least half an hour in each place, following a testing protocol used by researchers who have conducted similar studies.

The monitor measured microscopic pollutants known as PM 2.5, which stands for airborne particulate matter measuring at least 2.5 microns, or 1/250th the width of a human hair. The newspaper measured PM 2.5 because the pollutant is released in large amounts from burning tobacco, making it an accepted marker for secondhand smoke.

The monitor’s readings were downloaded and sent to Mark Travers, an epidemiologist at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., who has extensive experience testing secondhand smoke.

Using the monitor’s minute-by-minute readings of PM 2.5, Travers computed the average amount of pollution the reporters were exposed to at each place.

Lois Jenkins of Chicago holds a cigarette while marking her bingo card at Nativity of Our Lord Parish. Bingo halls would be included in the proposed smoking ordinance. — Scott Stewart/Sun-Times
AIR RESTAURANT AND BAR WORKERS ARE EXPOSED TO

Using a portable air monitor, the Sun-Times went to 25 Chicago bars and restaurants to compare the levels of carbon monoxide and other pollutants. The data shows that even in air near bars and restaurants, the level of PM-2.5 particles can be higher than what is considered healthy.

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<th>NOx</th>
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<td>The Tavern</td>
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*Note: The PM-2.5 levels are measured in micrograms per cubic meter, CO levels in parts per million, and NOx levels in parts per billion. The levels are compared to the federal health standards and guidelines.*

**Sources:** The Sun-Times

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**Respiratory Health in Chicago:**

A study by the American Lung Association found that the levels of PM-2.5 in Chicago are higher than in other major cities. The levels are highest in areas with high traffic and industrial activity. The levels are also higher in low-income and minority neighborhoods.

**Actions:**

1. **Reduce exposure:** Limit time spent in areas with high PM-2.5 levels.
2. **Use air purifiers:** Consider using air purifiers in your home.
3. **Support clean-air policies:** Advocate for policies that reduce emissions from cars and industries.

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**Epidemiologist’s Note:**

PM-2.5 particles are small enough to penetrate deep into the lungs and cause respiratory and cardiovascular problems. Long-term exposure can lead to chronic health issues.

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**Environmental Justice:**

Low-income and minority communities are disproportionately affected by air pollution. This highlights the need for a more just and equitable approach to environmental policies.