

Hoping to clear the air in casinos, workers seek to ban tobacco smoke

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Some casinos continue to allow indoor smoking even as the share of Americans who smoke fell from about 21% in 2005 to 12% in 2021 and smoking is banned in at least some public spaces in 35 states, the District

of Columbia, and U.S. territories. Still, 13 of the 22 states and territories that allow casino gambling permit smoking in at least part of their facilities.

A number of [casino](#) employees, anti-smoking advocates, and [public health experts](#) argue it is long past time to snuff out casino exemptions from smoking bans, given the dangers of [secondhand smoke](#). But they've faced stiff pushback from some gambling industry leaders, including in Missouri, Louisiana, Kentucky, and New Jersey, who argue that smoking bans drive gamblers away—especially in places where patrons can go instead to a casino in a nearby jurisdiction that allows them to light up.

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed this fight and sharpened the arguments on both sides—on the dangers of particulate matter for the anti-smoking side and the vulnerability of revenues for the casino industry, even as the American Gaming Association reported record-breaking revenues in 2022 for in-person casino gambling beyond the growth of sports betting and online gambling.

Casinos were shut down for several months in spring 2020 as part of the nationwide effort to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Rules governing reopening, including masking and physical distancing requirements and bans on smoking, varied by state and, in some cases, by casino operator and community.

After suffering pandemic-era losses, some casino executives, and at least one union representing workers, leaned into a 2021 report commissioned by the Casino Association of New Jersey to combat efforts to ban or restrict smoking at their properties.

Using data from 2019, the report suggests that as many as 2,500 Atlantic City casino workers could lose their jobs and tax revenue could fall by as much as \$44 million in the first year if smoking is banned in New Jersey

but not in neighboring Pennsylvania. Both states considered prohibitions on casino smoking in 2023; New Jersey lawmakers didn't pass their bill and Pennsylvania's remains in limbo.

Brian Christopher, a social media influencer specializing in casinos and gambling, said he has heard the arguments about lost business before—and is unconvinced. "People are not driving or flying to a casino to have a cigarette," he said.

Still, officials in some places are persuaded by arguments about depressed tax revenue. Last spring, Shreveport, Louisiana, officials repealed a 2020 ban on smoking in casinos. Those pushing the repeal said local gambling taxes fell when gamblers left for nearby casinos where they could smoke. The new ordinance allows smoking on 75% of the casino floor.

And Churchill Downs Inc. announced in June it was moving a gambling facility planned for empty mall space in Owensboro, Kentucky, to a location outside the city limits. Though the company declined to comment for this article, the city's mayor told the Messenger-Inquirer newspaper that a primary reason for the move was the city's long-standing voter-approved smoking restrictions, which do not exempt casinos.

Kanika Cunningham, director of the St. Louis County Department of Public Health in Missouri, was part of an effort last year to end a casino loophole in her county's 2011 [indoor smoking](#) ban. But after pushback from the gambling company Penn Entertainment, a compromise was reached allowing smoking on 50% of a casino's floor.

"It's a balance and one that we feel the marketplace should determine, particularly in such a competitive environment with other gaming facilities nearby and in neighboring states," said Jeff Morris, Penn

Entertainment's vice president of public affairs and government relations.

Penn Entertainment employs "state of the art ventilation systems, extremely high ceilings," and "adequate separation of smoking and non-smoking areas," he wrote in an email to KFF Health News.

The problem, Cunningham said, is that secondhand smoke cannot be contained to a single location in a big room.

"There's no safe amount, and trying to restrict it to a certain area isn't going to work," she said.

Filtration systems can remove much of the visible smoke, as well as the odor, from indoor spaces even when lots of people are smoking, creating the impression of clean air. But existing technology does not eliminate the dangerous particulates in [cigarette smoke](#), according to a 2023 report from the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, or ASHRAE.

A study published in 2023 for the National Institutes of Health evaluated particulate matter at eight Las Vegas casinos that allowed smoking and one that did not. In casinos where smoking is allowed, particulate levels were significantly higher—even in areas designated as nonsmoking—than at the nonsmoking casino.

And in ventilated casinos where indoor smoking is allowed, one study showed, workers can have nicotine levels as much as 600% higher than employees exposed to smoking in other workplaces.

Secondhand smoke can cause coronary heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and other diseases. Some studies have shown a link to breast cancer, although more research is needed, according to the National

Cancer Institute.

The pandemic raised awareness of the dangers of airborne particulates, giving smoking bans fresh momentum, said Andrew Klebanow, co-founder of the independent industry consulting group C3 Gaming, which produced a report in 2022 largely refuting the economic risk of casinos going smoke-free.

Indeed, more than 1,000 U.S. casinos and other gambling properties now ban smoking, including more than 140 tribal casinos, according to Americans Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation.

New Mexico's tribal leaders collectively agreed to maintain smoking bans when pandemic restrictions were lifted, said Denis Flöge, chief executive of Acoma Business Enterprises and Sky City Casino in North Acoma Village. Employee health has improved, he said, qualifying the casino for rebates on its insurance premium. Cleaning and replacement costs for carpets and equipment fell, he said, and the tribes "haven't missed a beat" on revenues.

Some guests have grumbled about having to go outside to smoke, Flöge said, but that's about it. "We don't have anybody who jumps up and down, or throws a fit and says, 'I'm leaving and never coming back!'" he said.

Casino executives who oppose smoking restrictions overlook people who want to enjoy the "great food and the great entertainment, but won't step foot in a casino because they get hit by a blast of smoke as soon as they step in," said Pete Naccarelli, a Borgata dealer and one of three co-founders of the advocacy organization Casino Employees Against Smoking's Effects.

He said they founded the group, which has chapters in New Jersey,

Kansas, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia, after his casino put out ashtrays at 12:01 a.m. the day the pandemic-related smoking ban officially ended. Borgata did not answer requests for comment.

The industry-commissioned report on New Jersey suggests that while more nonsmokers might frequent casinos once [smoking](#) is banned, they probably would not make up for the revenue lost if smokers choose other venues or when smokers take breaks from gambling to light up.

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