# A new generation of smokers

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The worst fears of those who opposed and criticized Republic Act No. 11900 or the Vaporized Nicotine and Non-Nicotine Products Regulation Act have materialized. Instead of reducing the prevalence of smoking, more people have turned to the deadly habit through electronic smoking devices.

A Senate hearing this week found that the country gained 9.5 million new smokers between 2021 and 2023. What’s even more concerning is that around 1 million of them were adolescents, or those aged 10 to 19.

This is alarming considering that cancer is now the third leading cause of death in the country, with lung cancer ranking number one in mortality. Several studies have also found that vaping increases the risk of lung cancer.

Dr. Maria Encarnita Limpin, director general of Action on Smoking and Health Philippines, told the Senate committee on ways and means that electronic smoking devices—aside from illicit cigarettes—have contributed to the spike in new smokers.

“More young [people] being introduced into the smoking addiction means that there will be more people who will eventually get sick and die from tobacco-related diseases,” Limpin said.

“Instead of being able to regulate the use of vape, we ended up enticing the young into vaping, which eventually made them also go into smoking,” she added.

## Collective conscience

The country was winning its fight against smoking based on data from the Department of Science and Technology-Food and Nutrition Research Institute showing that smoking prevalence dropped to 14 percent in 2021 from 18 percent in 2015. However, the trend reversed in 2023 when the rate increased to 18.9 percent.

Supporters of the vape law, passed more than two years ago, touted it as a measure that will regulate the sale and use of e-cigarettes and provide a potentially less harmful alternative for smokers. The measure also imposed restrictions: only those 18 and above could access vape products and that they could not be sold, promoted, or advertised within 100 meters of schools, playgrounds, or other places frequented by minors.

In a privilege speech on July 26, 2022, the day after RA 11900 lapsed into law, Sen. Pia Cayetano called it “harm introduction, not harm reduction.”

“Putting at risk the health of our people and of future generations through this law will haunt our collective conscience down the road. When we wake up to a generation addicted to vapes, that’s on the 18th Congress that passed the vape bill, and on this administration that allowed it to pass,” she said.

## Retrogressive measure

Among those who opposed the vape law were the Department of Health (DOH), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Department of Education, numerous medical associations, and civil society groups. The DOH and FDA even emphasized that the then-vape bill was not a health bill. Critics also called it a retrogressive measure.

The Johns Hopkins Medicine had listed several facts about vaping: 1) it is less harmful than smoking, but it’s still not safe; 2) it is bad for the heart and lungs; 3) e-cigarettes are just as addictive as traditional ones as they also contain nicotine; and 4) e-cigarettes are not the best aid to quit smoking because people who intended to use them to kick the nicotine habit ended up continuing to use traditional and e-cigarettes. It said that these factors have paved the way for a new generation of smokers.

A special report on vaping by the Inquirer published last year noted that vape products, with their colorful packaging and flavors, targeted the young market.

It also cited a study by the Institute for Global Tobacco Control at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health, which found that tobacco products were being sold and advertised at convenience and neighborhood stores within 100 meters of schools, in clear violation of the law.

## Amendments to the vape law

With these damning data, the government must work posthaste to not only ensure strict implementation of the law’s preventive provisions but to undo the harm done by the vape law by amending crucial clauses. These amendments include raising the legal age of vaping from the current 18 to 25 years old, designating FDA as the sole regulator instead of the Department of Trade and Industry, and even removing vape flavors because they cause more harm.

Limpin had earlier pointed out that revenues the government earns from excise taxes on heated tobacco products (HTPs) are pointless if more people get sick or die because of them.

In addition to raising excise taxes to make the use of HTPs more prohibitive, as Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian suggests, lawmakers must prioritize bills pending in the Senate and House of Representatives proposing amendments to the vape law. One such measure, House Bill No. 10897, has the support of the Child Rights Network.

The DOH must also recalibrate its anti-smoking campaign to cover HTPs and remove their “cool” appeal. The public must be reminded that in whatever form, whether traditional cigarettes or the cooler, more modern vapes: smoking kills.