

Some venue operators turn a blind eye, while others help smokers bend the rules

Many feel free to flout smoke ban

Amy Nip, Austin Chiu, Dan Kadison and Peter So

Patrons of bars and entertainment venues are flouting the ban on smoking in such places a month after it took effect, with some operators saying they can't stop them from doing so and others apparently providing ways for them to bend the rules.

While venues in popular entertainment areas open to the street are mostly smoke-free, the haze gets thicker in upstairs pubs and places away from busy tourist locations.

Operators of traditionally smoke-filled mahjong parlours in particular say they have a tough time persuading customers not to light up.

"We are stuck between the customers and the government. We are the men in the middle," Hui Chak-man, manager of Sham Shui Po Ho Kong Mahjong, said, adding he had given up trying to stop customers smoking after fruitless attempts.

"Now I only remind them about the consequence of smoking and say 'you might want to go to the back alley,'" he said, referring to a fixed fine of HK\$1,500 for people caught smok-

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Hui Chak-man
Manager of a mahjong parlour



Tables protrude into the street from a Lan Kwai Fong bar. Ashtrays are often put on such tables.

ing or carrying a lit cigarette, cigar or pipe in no-smoking areas that will come into effect in September. "If they don't listen, I will just let them be - I have fulfilled my duty."

Of 210 complaints received and 15 summonses issued by the Health Department's Tobacco Control Office since July 1, 112 complaints and 15 summonses related to mahjong parlours. In addition, 20 complaints and four summonses went to designated mahjong rooms in clubs.



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being done
to police
the
smoking
ban?
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The office received 68 complaints and issued three summonses for offences in bars. Massage centres and bathhouses followed, with nine and one complaints respectively.

The manager of the Tung Cheuk Association mahjong parlour in Tsim Sha Tsui, Peter Wong, said he could not afford to lose his customers. "But at the same time I can't do them a favour by offering ashtrays now. What we can do is place a bucket outside our shop in the corridor of the shopping mall. What they do out there is none of our business."

Post reporters found smoking pub-goers in Causeway Bay were moving upstairs to dodge inspectors. They also noticed that the farther away the bars were from the busiest streets and tourist areas, the more customers were breaking the ban.

In Lan Kwai Fong, no customers were seen smoking in bars or clubs on the ground floor. But a table in the front of a bar in Wyndham Street had one end sticking out into the street with an ashtray on it.

Drinkers said they had seen people smoking inside and facing outside and using the ashtray.

At another pub on the same street in Central, once known for its hookahs, or water-pipes, customers were sitting inside the shop smoking a hookah on a table top, half of which was also outdoors. But the operators said they no longer provided the devices and customers had brought the hookah and moved the table themselves.

As the clock ticked past 1am, two men were seen smoking at a bar in SoHo, Central.

When asked why smoking was allowed, the bartender said: "We officially close at 1am. They were the only customers left so I let them smoke. Before 1am, no smoking is allowed."

The smoking customers said they were not worried by the smoking ban and had no intention of refraining from smoking in bars. But they said they usually avoided ground-floor venues and instead visited upstairs bars, where they were less likely to be caught.

A check of the strip of trendy bars along Kowloon Terrace in Tsim Sha Tsui found most people were complying with the ban and lighting up in outdoor seating areas.

Only one person was seen smoking inside. He entered a bar with a lit cigarette and took a quick puff as he made a beeline for the washroom.

Medical sector legislator Leung Ka-lau was not sure if fewer people smoked after the ban. Nevertheless, he reminded smokers that they faced a higher risk than non-smokers of sudden death from heart attack.



The scene in Wyndham Street, SoHo, last night. The farther a bar is from busy tourist areas, the more smokers are tempted to light up. Photos: Ricky Chung

Up to 40 pubs may close, massage and mahjong parlours also suffer

Amy Nip, Austin Chiu and Dan Kadison

More than 30 bars are on the verge of closing as a result of the ban on smoking in entertainment venues, according to the Hong Kong Bar and Club Association. Massage and mahjong parlours have also been hit hard, the industry says.

Business at bars and pubs had dropped 20 per cent to 40 per cent since the smoking ban came into force, the association said.

Business at massage parlours had halved, according to associations representing the sector. Most mahjong parlour operators interviewed said their business was down by about a third.

Some 30 or 40 bars, out of a total of 600 in the city, could close in the near future, Hong Kong Bar and Club Association vice-chairman Chin Chun-

wing said. Up to 10 bar owners had sold their businesses recently.

While some smokers said they now preferred going to upstairs pubs - some of which are turning a blind eye to the ban - Mr Chin said others had simply stopped going to bars.

Charlie Chair Sai-sui, a 25-year veteran of the industry and operator of the Schooner Pub & Karaoke in Tsim Sha Tsui, said he was making a loss of about HK\$30,000 a month in an industry that was experiencing a "bloodbath".

At Delaney's Irish pub in Tsim Sha Tsui, general manager Colin Williams said it was too early to judge the smoking ban's effect, as "July is notoriously bad anyway". He estimated receipts had dropped 5 per cent because daytime customers were no longer stopping by for a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

Other patrons, however, were

now bringing their children to the pub and that was helping offset losses. Also, evening customers, mostly overseas visitors, were "used to these [smoking] bars already", he said.

Chow Chun-yu, chief executive of the Hong Kong Licensed Massage Association, said customers would rather go to mainland parlours because they could smoke there.

A supervisor at the Tai Sam Yuen mahjong parlour in Sham Shui Po said the smoking ban had been more damaging to the business than the global economic crisis. It had caused business to fall by a fifth and the parlour could close at any time.

And a general manager at mahjong parlour operator KC City said business at her eight parlours was down 40 per cent compared to July last year. Four-fifths of customers were smokers, she said.

But James Middleton, chairman of Hong Kong-based Clear The Air's anti-tobacco committee, said smoking bans had not hurt the catering industry in other countries.

Overall, till receipts in places that had enforced smoking bans had stayed the same or, in most places, risen by 5 per cent to 12 per cent, he said. Hong Kong had seen "the biggest up" in business, even with a partial ban, of any city, he said.

"Restaurant turnover [in Hong Kong] has increased 29 per cent since before the ban," Mr Middleton said. "And restaurant turnover here includes bars - of 7,000 licensed premises, [only] 1,000 applied for an exemption [from the smoking ban] and were granted an exemption."

One reason for the increase was that Hong Kong families were able to bring their young children to the smoke-free establishments, he said.

'I want to quit one day... but not because of the ban'

Smokers are banned from having a puff inside entertainment venues, but that has not been enough to make them quit the habit.

Smoker Michael Chow said lax implementation of the ban at bars had given him "an excuse" not to stop smoking.

Lighting up a cigarette in a Central bar after midnight, Mr Chow spoke of repeated attempts to quit smoking.

He said he returned to Hong Kong from Canada a few years ago, after that country imposed a smoking ban.

When Hong Kong announced its ban, he said, he felt it was the right time to quit.

"I still want to quit one day... but I would do it for my own benefit, not because of the smoking ban in bars."

Man Cheung, who was also smoking inside a pub, said he was under the impression that staff at the Tobacco Control Office "did not dare go check pubs located upstairs".

"I was in a bar in Causeway Bay last month when a few tobacco control officers arrived. But they did not go into the bar to check out whether there were people smoking. They simply handed out anti-smoking leaflets to the owner," he said.

One patron at Delaney's Irish pub, Mike Galvin, 46, who works in Shenzhen, said he had just found out about the ban this week and was not happy about it.

"All the ban is doing is putting... people out of work," he said. "You're destroying the tourist industry in Hong Kong. And you're making people obviously unhappy. So what's the point?"

In Tsim Sha Tsui, a female smoker was standing outside the Pelican Bay Beachside Bar, an Oberoi's Hotel watering hole close to Kowloon Terrace.

The 33-year-old insurance consultant, who would only identify herself as Wong, said she found it inconvenient to walk outside a bar to have a cigarette, but still did so.

Tobacco Control Office staff had been visiting establishments since June to promote the smoke-free message, an office spokesman said. They had distributed leaflets and stickers to managers and owners so they could help promote the cause.

"All qualified establishments, whether they are situated upstairs, on street level or in the basement, are visited," he said.

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