Smokefree signage at railway stations: a survey of 54 stations in 11 local government areas

Nick Wilson, George Thomson

As with a growing number of nations, New Zealand has adopted a national smokefree goal. Achieving this goal is likely to require multiple strategies, including the expansion of outdoor smokefree areas. There has been some progress with expanding such areas, but gaps in coverage and processes still exist. For example, we identified only two reports on smoking in New Zealand public transportation settings. Data from a 2008 survey on non-smokers' exposure at bus stops and railway stations found 11.9% of respondents reported secondhand smoke exposure in the last month. Other research on health and nuisance concerns by train users reported that smoking at transport waiting areas was a problem for breathing, example to youth, and the smell on clothes. Indeed, some waiting passengers felt they were forced to move from seating because of the smoking. Given this background and international evidence around smoking at railway stations, we aimed to identify the extent and nature of outdoor smokefree signage at a sample of such stations in a region of New Zealand.

Methods

We surveyed all 54 passenger railway stations in the lower half of the North Island of New Zealand (from National Park in the middle of the island, south to Wellington). This was 47% (54/114) of all such stations in the country. Field observations were conducted between November 2017 and January 2018 by both authors. Any smokefree signage was photographed and measured. From the collected photographs we examined qualitative issues (e.g., evidence of vandalism), along with selected aspects of sign design and content. The latter built on what is known about size and issues around clutter from research on tobacco and alcohol warning labels (for further details, see online Report).

Results

Station descriptions

The 54 surveyed railway stations provided passenger services on seven different train lines. These stations were run by two different train companies and the stations were located in 11 different local government jurisdictions (territorial authorities) in the southern half of the North Island.

Station use of smokefree signage

At the studied stations there were a total of 301 outdoor smokefree signs, and 77.8% (42/54) of the stations had some smokefree signage (although 18.5% [10/54] had only one sign for the whole station). The median number of signs per station was 2.0, but the range was up to a very large total of 192 (Wellington station, which had nine platforms). The Capital Connection Line had the most such stations with no signs within the surveyed area for five stations, followed by the Northern Explorer Line at four stations. Each of the seven train lines had at least one station with no smokefree signs.

When considering separate platforms, 76.4% (55/72) of these had some smokefree signage. The median number of signs per platform was also 2.0 (range: 0 to 21.3).
There were no smokefree signs at the 186 pedestrian entrances to all the platforms (ie, 0/159 for well-defined entrances and 0/27 for more general areas where pedestrians could access the platform). Most signage was attached to the outside of platform structures at 88.1% (37/42), the rest being on just poles (4.8%, 2/42) or a mix of both (7.1%, 3/42) (eg, see figures in the online Report).10

Sign characteristics
There were 10 different types of smokefree sign observed.10 The median number of sign types per station was one, but it ranged up to eight different types (Wellington station). Smokefree signage was often part of other signage (eg, prohibiting skateboarding and cycling) and was also located near to other types of signs. The smokefree signs were also sometimes positioned quite high off the ground (ie, requiring a person to look upward to see it).10 There was no smokefree signage painted on the actual platform or entrance surface, in contrast to a sign banning alcohol.10

Sign size was relatively modest overall (median = 300cm² similar to “A4” size) and ranged from 50cm² to a very large 18,000cm². Vandalism levels were relatively high for the signs that were just small stickers (at 63% [10/16]) but were extremely low for all the other signs (0.4%, 1/285). None of the signs found had wording that indicated that railway staff could or would enforce the outdoor smokefree policy. There were also no references to any legislation that would empower staff to require non-smoking behaviour in outdoor areas.

Discussion
The results for this survey of railway stations indicate highly diverse, but generally poor levels of smokefree signage at both stations and at the platform level. Particularly problematic was that there were no such signs at any of the 186 pedestrian entrances to the platforms—which means that train users could easily miss seeing those smokefree signs that did exist, typically on the platform buildings. Added to this were the problems that some of the signs were placed high up on buildings or poles above eye level, and were sometimes very small (ie, only 5x10cm).

So overall this situation suggests substantial scope for improvements to smokefree signage by relevant agencies (transport authorities, local or central government) in these particular settings. Such improvements could specifically include: (i) Ensuring that all railway station platforms have at least some smokefree signage; (ii) Ensuring that the signage is frequent enough to be readily visible for people arriving via the main entrances to the platform (ie, improving on the current level of zero entrances with signage found in this study); (iii) Considering ways to reduce the visual clutter of signage; (iv) Considering ways to improve signage visibility by lowering sign height; and (v) A national standard for the minimum size and legibility of smokefree signs in all outdoor settings. Policy options to achieve more complete smokefree status of such settings include an upgraded central government law, or use of bylaws by local governments.
REFERENCES:


