Nearly 70 Million Smokers in Latin America Are at Risk of Tobacco-Related Death and Disease



November 13, 2018 (New York, USA) – Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans continue to die every year from tobacco-related disease, according to the American Cancer Society and Vital Strategies, co-publishers of the Tobacco Atlas, Sixth Edition, now available in Spanish. While the proportion of the population who use tobacco has nearly halved across the region thanks to strong tobacco control policies in some countries, the region is seeing an increase in tobacco-related deaths, to more than 300,000 in 2016. Governments can reduce the associated health, economic, and social burden of tobacco use for generations to come by implementing proven life-saving policies as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

“Every death from tobacco is preventable, and every government has the power to reduce the human and economic toll of the tobacco epidemic,” said Jeffrey Drope, PhD, co-editor and author of The Atlas and Scientific Vice President, Economic and Health Policy Research at the American Cancer Society. “Countries like Brazil and Uruguay have significantly reduced smoking rates, but prevalence is increasing in countries where governments have failed to act. These countries are often among the region’s most economically challenged. Increases in the health and financial burden of smoking will further harm their economies and opportunities for sustainable development. Policymakers need to resist the tobacco industry’s influence and implement strong policies to avoid this fate.”

According to the Tobacco Atlas, only two countries in the region - Argentina and Chile - have implemented tobacco taxes at levels recommended by the World Health Organization, which are proven to be the single most effective way to reduce tobacco use. Tobacco industry tactics, including interfering in policymaking and aggressively promoting flavored tobacco products to hook youth, are impeding greater progress in reducing the burden of tobacco.

“From cultivation to disposal, tobacco causes health and environmental harm at every stage of its life cycle,” said Dr. Neil Schluger, Senior Advisor for Science at Vital Strategies and co-editor and author of The Tobacco Atlas. “It is linked to an ever-increasing list of diseases, burdening health systems and exacerbating poverty. It also harms non-smokers, especially women and children exposed to second-hand smoke, and tobacco workers who risk developing nicotine poisoning caused by skin contact with tobacco leaf. Regional leaders have enacted proven and new strategies to reduce tobacco use, like high taxes, large graphic warnings and bans on additives. We hope their efforts embolden other leaders to follow their example.”

Almost all countries in Latin America are signatories to the World Health Organisation’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the global health treaty which requires them to enact proven measures to reduce tobacco use, but no country in the region has enacted all these measures at the highest level of achievement. Regional leaders and examples of best practices include:

- Uruguay, which nearly halved smoking prevalence from 40% in 2006 to 21.6% in 2017, is a global leader in the adoption of large graphic warnings and limiting tobacco brand variants
- Brazil, which has implemented progressively stronger tobacco control policies to more than halve smoking prevalence since 1980
- Panama, which implemented a model policy to ban tobacco marketing
- Colombia, which implemented and enforced comprehensive smokefree laws *and*
- Argentina and Chile, which are the only countries in the region currently taxing tobacco at the highest level recommended by WHO.

In Colombia, where cigarettes were comparatively cheap, tax increases introduced in 2016 led to a 15 percent reduction in the number of smokers. In Mexico, a recent national health survey found a slight increase in smoking rates in spite of the government implementing a national quitline, cessation resources and large graphic warnings on tobacco packs. This suggests that Mexico needs to adopt a stronger and more comprehensive tobacco control policy.

“Health advocates need to use robust data to rebut industry misinformation and encourage policymakers and the public to support tobacco control,” said Blanca Llorente, Technical Advisor to Colombia’s Fundación Anáas. “A data-focused case for increasing tobacco taxes meant Colombia moved from having the region’s second-lowest tobacco prices, to prices closer to the regional average. We need to build upon that success for additional increases in Colombia and replicate it across other countries where tobacco is too affordable. I recommend The Tobacco Atlas as a key resource for information on issues like tobacco taxes and illicit sales.”

“Mexico is making progress in the fight against the tobacco epidemic, but we need to do much more to protect our people, especially our youth,” said Erick Antonio Ochoa, Erick Antonio Ochoa, Director of Initiatives for Tobacco Control, InterAmerican Heart Foundation Mexico. “The Tobacco Atlas shows the benefits we could realize from fully comprehensive and strongly enforced national smoke-free laws and implementing significant, above-inflation increases in tobacco taxes to deter smoking initiation among youth and reduce consumption among current smokers. It’s time to act.”

Tobacco use is increasing in countries that have not adopted strong tobacco control policies, which will lead to future increases in tobacco-related disease and premature death, and related costs. The tobacco industry continues to aggressively target the region, especially its youth. Urgent action is needed in countries where youth smoking is increasing, like Suriname, where youth smoking increased from 13.5% in 1990 to 20.3% in 2015 and Guatemala, where youth smoking increased from 7.6% in 1990 to 11.2% in 2015.

American Cancer Society and Vital Strategies urge all countries in the region to use The Tobacco Atlas to help accelerate the implementation and enforcement of best practice, life-saving tobacco control policies.

About the Tobacco Atlas: Sixth Edition

The Tobacco Atlas compiles, validates and interprets global- and country-level data from multiple sources to present the best and most recent evidence, and build a holistic and accurate picture of the tobacco industry’s activities, tobacco use and tobacco control across the globe. In print and online at tobaccoatlas.org - where policy makers, public health practitioners, advocates and journalists may interact with the data - The Tobacco Atlas graphically details the scale of the tobacco epidemic, progress that has been made in tobacco control, and the latest products and tactics being deployed by the tobacco industry to grow its profits and delay or derail tobacco control efforts. The Tobacco Atlas clearly explains the policy tools and other interventions that have been proven to help reduce the tobacco epidemic. In addition to addressing major developments across all topic areas, new for the Sixth Edition are chapters on regulating novel products, partnerships, tobacco industry tactics and countering the industry. Tobaccoatlas.org features a more graphic-rich interface and new functionality to enable users to hone in on the data points contained within the graphics.

About the Authors

The authors of The Tobacco Atlas bring a deep knowledge of the tobacco epidemic and its solutions. The work of a team of global experts is led by two editor-authors. **Jeffrey Drope, PhD**, is Vice President, Economic and Health Policy Research at the American Cancer Society in Atlanta, Georgia and Professor in Residence of Global Public Health at Marquette University. His research focuses on the nexus of public health (including tobacco control, nutrition, physical activity, alcohol misuse and access to care) and economic policymaking, especially trade, investment and taxation. **Neil W. Schluger, MD**, is Senior Advisor for Science for Vital Strategies as well as Professor of Medicine, Epidemiology and Environmental Health Science and Chief of the Division of Pulmonary, Allergy and Critical Care Medicine at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. He is also a founder and director of the East Africa Training Initiative, a Vital Strategies- sponsored project to train pulmonary physicians in Ethiopia. This program is the first of its kind in East Africa.

About the American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society is a global grassroots force of 1.5 million volunteers dedicated to saving lives, celebrating lives, and leading the fight for a world without cancer. From breakthrough research to free lodging near treatment, a 24/7/365 live helpline, free rides to treatment, and convening powerful activists to create awareness and impact, the Society is attacking cancer from every angle. The ACS publishes books on cancer that support patients, caregivers, and families dealing with a cancer diagnosis, as well as books on nutrition and

healthy eating. For more information, go to www.cancer.org.

About Vital Strategies

Vital Strategies, headquartered in New York City, is an international public health organization. Our programs strengthen public health systems and address the world's leading causes of illness, injury and death. We currently work in 73 countries, supporting data-driven decision making in government, advancing evidence-based public health policies and mounting strategic communication campaigns. Vital Strategies' priorities are driven by the greatest potential to improve and save lives. They include non-communicable disease prevention, cardiovascular health promotion, tobacco control, road safety, obesity prevention, epidemic prevention, environmental health, vital statistics systems building and Multi-drug resistant tuberculosis treatment research. Our programs are concentrated in low- and middle-income countries and cities in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific. Please visit our website at www.vitalstrategies.org to find out more about our work.