

Tobacco and
polluting vehicles:
Regulating 
better to curb
consumption 

Équiterre^o

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About Équiterre

Équiterre's mission is to make the necessary collective transitions towards an equitable and environmentally sound future more tangible, accessible and inspiring. As we look toward 2050, Équiterre will seek to develop practical solutions to contribute to the transformation of social norms and public policy; to steer our methods of agriculture, production, consumption, and transportation towards being low carbon and compatible with environmental and social justice and designed at the regional and community level.

Recognized for its credibility and pragmatism, it brings together experts in education, mobilization and public policy. Équiterre seeks to influence public, corporate, and government decision making in an effort to accelerate the transition to a more environmentally responsible, equitable and resilient society. The organization proposes solutions that seek to demonstrate, mobilize and influence towards the desired social transformation. Its expertise, achievements, network, and reach

make it a pivotal actor in the climate and environmental movement. Buoyed by its 30 years of experience, Équiterre is one of the most influential environmental organizations in Quebec and Canada, with over 126,000 followers and 22,500 members.

For several years now, Équiterre has looked at the role of consumption and marketing, with a special focus on gas-powered vehicles, in the environmental crisis. In 2019, the organization launched the research project [Understanding the rise of light-duty trucks in Canada](#), which looked into the auto industry's role and practices.

With its wealth of knowledge and proposed solutions, Équiterre is advancing its efforts as part of the Quebec-wide awareness campaign on the impacts of sport utility vehicles, [Assess what your true needs are](#), and the [Let's reverse the trend](#) coalition, which is calling for stricter regulations on automobile advertising in Canada.

Executive summary

Context

The Quebec and Canadian governments seem to agree on the need to reduce the number of gas-powered vehicles on our roads, and have adopted targets for prohibiting the sale of such vehicles by 2035. But without short-term disincentives, these vehicles will continue to circulate and generate adverse impacts on public health and the environment well after this target date.

The fight against tobacco use proved that governments have the tools and the regulatory powers to curb the consumption of a product hazardous to the public. The policies that grew out of that fight succeeded in restricting tobacco consumption and in mitigating its adverse effects.

Thus, the aim of this report is to examine the public policies that helped reduce tobacco use in Quebec and Canada, as well as the existence of similar mechanisms for gas-powered vehicles. Although these products serve different purposes, our analysis remains relevant to understand the impact of regulations on products deemed harmful to public health.

Methodology

The report conducts a comparative analysis of the policies regulating tobacco consumption and the use of gas-powered vehicles while examining current trends across a review of the literature and news analysis. It also explores automobile policies at the national and international levels, guided by data compiled in Équiterre's 2022 study on the rise of light-duty trucks in Canada.

Observations

The evolution of automobile use can be compared to that of tobacco consumption in the 20th century. The similarities are striking as to their impacts on public health and the environment, in fact. The mass advertising strategies employed by the automobile industry call to mind those of the tobacco industry, with their emphasis on values like freedom and prestige and their promotion of a lifestyle rather than of a simple product. And as is the case with tobacco consumption, automobile use creates a dependence not only through the practical necessity of getting from A to B, but also through a deeply rooted psychological attachment. Infrastructure and land use continue to favour automobile use, reinforcing this dependence. Lastly, both industries are major contributors to air pollution, their products containing similar toxic substances

and impacting the most vulnerable communities in particular. However, **while tobacco consumption has declined thanks to beefed-up regulations, the number of gas-powered vehicles continues to rise, underscoring the need for a similar strengthening of the regulations.**

The evolution of tobacco regulations in Canada, marked by advertising bans, graphic warnings on packaging and tax hikes, led to a significant reduction in the rate of tobacco use: from **50% in 1965 to 10% in 2020**. Conversely, the regulations on polluting vehicles, marked by the introduction of emission and fuel consumption standards and by incentives to purchase ZEVs, did not prevent a steady rise in the number of vehicles on our roads: from **12.6 million in 1990 to 24.3 million in 2020**. As for automobile advertising, despite notices and guidelines, self-regulation remains the order of the day, with no strict legal restrictions, although the *Competition Act* and the *Consumer Protection Act* prohibit deceptive practices, albeit with a limited and general scope. Whereas tobacco advertising has been banned for decades now, automobile advertising remains largely unregulated.

The two industries have used similar tactics to delay regulations, such as disinformation campaigns and the promotion of superficial solutions. The automobile industry, like its tobacco counterparts, has played down the harmful effects of its products and resisted regulations by advancing economic and practical arguments. Our dependence on the automobile, reinforced by dedicated infrastructures and an image of prestige, is comparable to tobacco dependence. And both industries have offloaded responsibility for the adverse impacts onto the consumer while using social responsibility strategies to enhance their image. Voluntary regulations have proven ineffective, as was the case with the tobacco industry. Strict regulations are what is needed to protect public health.

Recommendations

Despite government commitments to climate action and electrification, current measures are insufficient to curb the increase in the number of polluting vehicles and reduce vehicle GHG emissions. Drawing inspiration from the fight against smoking—which has been marked by actions ranging from its recognition as a public health issue to the regulation of advertising and usage locations, and the implementation of fiscal measures—several courses of action can be explored and rapidly deployed to discourage the purchase of gasoline-powered vehicles.

Recommendation	Sub-recommendations
Recognize the rise in the number of polluting vehicles as a public health issue	
Tighten controls on automobile advertising	Create a Canadian code on automobile advertising
	Make it mandatory to display information on environmental and safety impacts and on vehicle prices
	Include messages promoting sustainable mobility
	Publish guidelines on environmental performance
	Institute a monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance with advertising standards
	Phase out advertising on polluting vehicles
Increase the number of low- or zero-emission zones	
Ban events sponsorships and public partnerships	
Reform the automobile tax system	Introduce a more effective feebate system
	Index gasoline taxes
	Implement per-kilometre pricing