

CIGARETTE ADVERTISING AND SMOKING: A COMPARISON OF WHITE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN TEENAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Amid the recent furor over the issue of cigarette smoking by underage youth, the role of cigarette advertising and promotion continues to occupy a central position in this controversy. While smoking among white teens has increased slightly, leveled off, or decreased (depending upon which measure of smoking is used and which years are compared), there remain a huge gap between white and black teenagers, especially between whites of both sexes and black teenage females.

Surveys used to identify smoking rates for black teens draw from a large, predominantly white overall sample. Breakouts of the data from these surveys show that the number of blacks reporting any level of smoking is very small, nearly nonexistent for black teenage females. One major survey in fact based projections to the national population of black females aged 10-14 on a subsample of only three such individuals. Other surveys experience similar measurement problems. With small, statistically unreliable subsamples, it is impossible of course to reliably measure changes in smoking rates for this subgroup -- up or down.

While accurately gauging the "true" rate of smoking among black teens seems unattainable to date, it is clear that black teens are far less likely to smoke than their white counterparts. It is also clear that the majority of black youth live in urban environments where cigarette advertising and promotions are readily visible and have been so for some time. Given the widespread availability of these ads and promotions and the alleged cause and effect connection between such advertising and the smoking behaviors of youth exposed to these messages, one would logically predict that smoking rates among black teens, especially those clustered in urban areas, would have significantly higher rates of smoking than white teens. Clearly, they do not. This badly failed prediction points to the distinct absence of a simplistic cause and effect relationship between cigarette advertising/promotion and the decision to start smoking or to continue smoking. If it's not the advertising/promotion, then what is it?

Recent research with groups of black teenagers points to those environmental factors that help to explain in large part why black teens are not likely to take up smoking. Among black teens living in densely populated urban areas, cultural group norms are strongly opposed to smoking. The role of parents in socializing their children not to smoke is key to success, notably the role of the mother. Moreover, the church is an important influence in discouraging kids from smoking. Study participants reported fear of being socially ostracized by peers or by their church's pastor, in addition to parental rebukes. Smoking is not a part of the culture for most black youth.

The situation with far fewer black teens smoking as compared to white teens suggests the importance of anti-smoking efforts to focus on those factors that influence the decision to smoke and to keep smoking: peers (friends and best friends), older siblings, and parents. Recently reported research from the California anti-smoking initiative shows that parents play one of the most important roles in influencing their children's attitudes toward smoking and their inclination to smoke. This held true for parents who did not smoke and those who did smoke. Intervention efforts need to start in with children at an early age and need to be supported in all major aspects of a child's environment. When this occurs, few children will become smokers as teenagers. Anti-smoking intervention efforts can profit a great deal from paying attention to the social and cultural practices of African American communities who make it socially unacceptable for children and teens to start smoking or to continue beyond experimentation.