

Community Environment and Youth Smoking

Frequently Asked Questions

Attitudes about tobacco and social norms and rules about smoking have changed radically in recent decades. Even so, smoking – especially among young people – continues. Much is known about tobacco use, its effects, and how it can be changed. Other questions remain to be answered fully. Following are some frequently asked questions about tobacco use among young people and how the community environment affects use.

Why is tobacco use still a public health concern?

Cigarette smoking continues to be the leading preventable cause of premature death in the United States, killing over 440,000 people yearly (USDHHS, 2000). Smoking is a major cause of heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and is related to 30% of all cancer deaths and 87% of lung cancer deaths. Moreover, smoking costs \$75.5 billion in excess medical expenditures and \$81.9 billion in mortality-related productivity losses (CDC, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Levy et al., 2000; Lightwood & Glantz, 1997).

How are young people in particular affected?

Beginning smoking at an early age is associated with increased risk for the development of tobacco dependence later in life and approximately 80% of all current adult smokers started smoking before the age of 18 (USDHHS, 1994, 2000). In addition, cigarette smoking during childhood and adolescence produces significant health problems, including increased number and severity of respiratory illnesses and decreased fitness. In addition, early smoking may have an effect on how the lungs of young smokers grow and develop (Arday, Giovino, & Schulman, 1995).

Hasn't smoking decreased among young people?

Despite the fact that the proportion of young people who smoke has declined in recent years, state and national survey results are still cause for alarm. The 2006 National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that approximately 2.6 million children (10.4%) under the age of 18 are current smokers, defined as use in the past month (Johnson et al., 2007). Each day in the United States, approximately 4,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 17 years start cigarette smoking, and an estimated 1,140 become daily cigarette smokers. Moreover, there are some indications that the decreases we have seen have slowed or stopped, particularly among 8th and 10th grade students (Johnson et al., 2007). In a recent survey in California, almost 18% of 7th graders and more than 42% of 11th graders report that they have smoked at least once (Skager & Austin, 2006). Preventing these young people from starting smoking would profoundly reduce the illness and death associated with tobacco use.

Aren't there programs in schools to prevent smoking among young people?

Although traditional school-based circular programs are the most common strategy to prevent or reduce youth tobacco use, their effectiveness is limited (Lantz et al., 2000). This is because young people live in a society where tobacco is readily available (USDHHS, 1994).

What are the ways that communities can create environments to reduce youth smoking?

Strategies aimed at the community environment focus on policy, legal/regulatory changes, media and enforcement with respect to tobacco (Chaloupka, & Wechsler, 1997; Grube & Nygaard, 2001, 2005; Ranson, et al., 2002). The impact of environmental strategies to prevent and reduce youth cigarette use may depend upon the implementation of a comprehensive approach whose effects are synergistic.

Environmental strategies can take a variety of approaches to reducing smoking in general and smoking by young people in particular. Enforcement and other access policies can make it harder for young people to buy alcohol at stores or to get it from other sources (such as older siblings or friends over 18). Price increases, especially through tobacco tax hikes can make smoking more expensive. Other policies restrict where people can smoke. Still others (minor in possession enforcement) may directly deter young people from smoking through the threat of sanctions.

Policies may affect smoking directly through decreased opportunities to obtain cigarettes or to use them. They may also help foster social norms that discourage youth use and lessen the likelihood of adult provision. Although some policies and activities to reduce youth cigarette use originate at the state or national level, others occur at the local and institutional level.

Some examples of environmental strategies appear below:

Retail Access. An important component of comprehensive programs is reducing youth access to cigarettes through implementation and enforcement of policies that target retailers and clerks who sell tobacco products to young people (CDC, 1999; Wakefield & Chaloupka, 2000). In order to reduce what had currently been widespread underage retail availability, Congress enacted P.L. 103-321 in July 1992, which includes what is known as the Synar Amendment (Section 1926) (DiFranza & Brown, 1992; Radecki & Zdunich, 1993). Under the Synar Amendment, all U.S. states must enact and enforce laws prohibiting the sale or distribution of tobacco products to individuals under the age of 18. Studies confirm that retailer compliance rates have increased, and sales to youth decreased, over time. By 2002, the majority of states reported reaching the targeted goal of reducing retail sales to 20% or less (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2006a).

Research has shown positive correlations between decreased youth sales and youth use. For example, after an aggressive compliance and education program, Jason et al. (1991) found a 69% decline in the percentage of 7th and 8th graders who indicated they were regular smokers. In a study of 11 Midwestern communities, DiFranza & Brown (1992) reported a 44% reduction in smoking for those aged 13 and a 41% reduction for those aged 16-17 two years after implementing a less aggressively enforced program.

Social Access. Social sources of cigarettes for youth, include borrowing, stealing, and buying from parents, older siblings and peers, asking a stranger to purchase, and black markets. Croghan et al. (2003) found that 66% of occasional smokers and 25% of regular smokers acquired cigarettes through social channels. Parents and friends are a particularly important source for new smokers (DiFranza & Coleman, 2001).

Even those cigarettes that young people acquire from social sources must have been purchased at some point (Forster et al., 2003 and Pokorny, Jason, and Schoeny 2003, 2006). Therefore, environmental approaches directed at the entire population can be highly effective in reducing access to and use of tobacco by youth (Chaloupka, Levy, & Grossman, 1998). Such policies include taxes, clean air restrictions, mass media campaigns, and other strategies that are aimed at adult, as well as underage, consumers. These policies work in three ways. First, by targeting both adults and youth, they serve to reduce the supply or increase the costs of cigarettes. Second, they decrease the likelihood

adult smokers will act as role models for underage smokers. Third, they reduce the number of adults possessing cigarettes that could serve as a source of youth supply. Such policies may also affect norms about youth smoking or providing tobacco to youth.

Minor In Possession Laws. One way to reduce access to tobacco products is through implementation and enforcement of local minor in possession (MIP) laws. Many states have adopted legislation that penalizes youth who purchase or possess tobacco Jason et al. (1999) reported that youth use declined from 15.5% to 8.1% in three towns with regular enforcement and fines for possession, compared to towns without such interventions. More recently, Jason et al. (2007) found that 15-24% of children fined for possession had quit smoking over a three-year follow-up period.

Clean Air Laws. Research indicates that laws that restrict where individuals can smoke are associated with reduced smoking among youth (Tauras and Chaloupka, 1999). Wasserman et al. (1991) found that increasing state restrictions to the most comprehensive level reduced youth per consumption per smoker by over 40%.