

Taxpayer film subsidies promote youth smoking

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State governments, including California as well as others in Canada and the United Kingdom, pour hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars into major motion pictures that depict smoking -- leading to thousands of new teen smokers every year, a University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) researcher has found.

According to a survey published in *PLoS Medicine*, those subsidies, along with government inaction on stricter ratings for movies that depict [smoking](#), also promote youth smoking and undermine tobacco control efforts.

In California, approximately 70 percent of all released PG-13 movies subsidized under the state's program depict smoking, researchers have independently found.

"California's state film subsidy program is undermining its longstanding tobacco control efforts," said lead author Stanton Glantz, PhD, UCSF professor of medicine and director of the Smoke Free Movies Project based at UCSF. "These activities never made sense, but are even more remarkable at a time when health and education programs are being slashed."

"In addition to ending subsidies for films that promote smoking, modernizing the rating system to give smoking films an R rating will provide a market incentive for producers to keep smoking out of movies that they market to adolescents."

In the United States, 40 states offer a combined \$1.3 billion in film and video "production incentives" to the film industry, the article reports citing data from 2008. The bulk of the annual funds come from five states: New York, California, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

"These grants, commonly in the form of tax credits, cover 25 percent of Hollywood's day-to-day production costs," the study said. "TV series and undistributed low-budget film also draw from the subsidy pool."

In California, which has provided film subsidies since 2009, a bill currently pending would extend a state subsidy of \$500 million for an additional five years. Health groups and the Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee, which advises California officials on tobacco-related issues, have urged that the bill be amended to make ineligible future film and TV productions with tobacco imagery or branding.

Previous studies have estimated that exposure to on-screen smoking accounts for 44 percent of all adolescent smokers in the United States, with more than one million teens nationwide currently smoking. Almost all of their exposure to smoking comes from films produced by U.S. studios.

About half of movies in the United States with smoking are rated "R" for other reasons, namely because of violent or sexual content or because of graphic language, meaning that they cannot be marketed directly to youth.

In Canada and the United Kingdom, however, most of these movies are re-rated as appropriate for teens or children, largely because of more permissive attitudes toward language and sex. As a result, youths in these countries experience greater exposure to onscreen smoking, suggesting

that more Canadian or British youths may begin to smoke due to smoking in films than youths in the United States, the researchers conclude. In 2010, 45 percent of films with smoking were rated for youth in the [United States](#), 93 percent in the UK, and 82 percent in Canada.

The World Health Organization and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also recommend that in the future films with smoking be given an adult rating (R in the U.S.).

In July, the CDC drew attention to the problem of state subsidies being provided to movies that promote smoking, advising that states harmonize their film subsidies with their public health imperatives by making productions with smoking ineligible for taxpayer subsidies.

More information: Millett C, Polansky JR, Glantz SA (2011) Government Inaction on Ratings and Government Subsidies to the US Film Industry Help Promote Youth Smoking. PLoS Med 8(8): e1001077. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001077

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