

Smoking Hits New Low for White California Kids

May 18 2010, By Lisa Esposito

California kids are less likely than ever to start smoking, thanks to the most ambitious, longest-running anti-tobacco program in the world.

Yet, when it comes to their older brothers, Big Tobacco might still be winning the battle.

A new study looks at 15 years' worth of survey data from nearly 35,000 young people and contrasts how many tried cigarettes before and during the ongoing California Tobacco Control Program.

The massive undertaking -- aimed at people of all ages -- was born two decades ago after state voters approved an excise tax on cigarettes, with 5 cents a pack slated to fund a variety of anti-smoking initiatives.

“In 20 years, at \$60 million a year, they’ve put together a lot of programs,” study co-author John Pierce, Ph.D.

Studies showed that the program has made huge strides in curbing adult [smoking](#). Until now, evidence was lacking that children and teens were also reaping its benefits, so this study focused on them.

“A lot of people say expenditures to prevent smoking don’t affect kids. Now we have evidence to say they do,” said Pierce, head of cancer prevention at the Moores Cancer Center at the University of California San Diego.

When the UCSD researchers looked at smoking experimentation starting at six different time points from 1990 to 2005, they found consecutively lower rates for each group.

Before the program, for example, 45 percent of California adolescents between 15 and 17 had tried smoking. By 2005, the rate was down to 10 percent.

Among children 12-14 years of age, the program reduced experimentation by 80 percent among boys and 92 percent among girls by 2005.

For girls, “it seems the program has wiped out smoking in 12 to 15 year olds; they don’t start as [young girls](#),” Pierce said.

However, males in the latest group studied were more likely to try smoking after they became adults. “You can have an effect at 18 and lose it at 21,” Pierce said.

The study, which appears in the July issue of the American Journal of Public Health, “has documented the effectiveness of the program on young people,” said Gary Giovino, Ph.D., who serves on the advisory board of the New York State Tobacco Use and Prevention Program.

The New York program is in earlier stages than the California effort and is still catching up in terms of scope and funding, he said.

“California is doing a fabulous job on adolescents, not on young adults,” Giovino said. “It’s not California’s fault - it’s the fault of industry marketing.”

Both Pierce and Giovino attribute the uptick in smoking among young men to shifts in tobacco industry marketing tactics.

“We were seeing early [pre-program] that 18-and-unders were buying cigarettes with impunity,” Pierce said. “The reason Joe Camel was stopped - that came from the program. We do know that the program was associated with the changes.”

Now, tobacco marketers “have stopped with cartoons,” Pierce said. “They’ve moved into bars and taverns.”

The study points to “distribution of free samples by ‘spokesmodels’ and financial incentives for club owners and staff.”

For the study, researchers only analyzed survey data from non-Hispanic white participants because “the smoking pattern was so different” for other groups like African-American and Mexican-American smokers, Pierce said.

However, he said future surveys would look at factors such as the way acculturation of Hispanic-Americans affects their smoking habits.

More information: Messer K, Pierce JP. Changes in age trajectories of smoking experimentation during the California Tobacco Control Program. Am J Public Health 100(7), 2010.

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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