

Public Education Campaigns Reduce Tobacco Use



The scientific evidence is substantial and clear: public education campaigns reduce the number of youth who start smoking, increase the number of smokers who quit, and make tobacco industry marketing less effective, saving lives and health care dollars. The 2024 Report of the Surgeon General, *Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disparities and Death: Addressing Disparities*, concluded specifically and unequivocally: mass media campaigns “prevent initiation of tobacco use, increase calls to quitlines, increase smoking cessation, and reduce the prevalence of tobacco use among adults and youth.”¹ The 2014 Surgeon General’s Report, *The Health Consequences of Smoking—50 Years of Progress*, affirms this conclusion and recommends, among other actions, “high impact national media campaigns...at a high frequency level and exposure for 12 months a year for a decade or more.”²

Mass media campaigns are particularly important because the tobacco industry spends \$9.1 billion annually marketing and advertising its products, and this marketing increases the number of kids who try smoking and become regular smokers.³ Tobacco marketing causes kids to start and continue using tobacco products and finds that the scientific evidence “consistently and coherently points to the intentional marketing of tobacco products to youth as being a cause of young people’s tobacco use.”⁴ More than 80% of young smokers smoke one of the three most heavily advertised brands of cigarettes,⁵ which results from a deliberate strategy on the part of tobacco companies to attract the youth market.⁶ The scientific evidence is clear that one of the best ways to reduce the power of tobacco marketing is an aggressive public education campaign.⁷

Mass media campaigns that provide information about how to get help with quitting can be particularly effective in promoting quit attempts. In 2012, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted the first ever federally-funded national media campaign aimed at reducing smoking. The campaign, *Tips From Former Smokers (Tips)*, depicted former smokers coping with devastating diseases and disabilities caused by their tobacco use. Studies demonstrate that the *Tips* campaign is not only effective at reducing tobacco use but is also extremely cost-effective. Between 2012 and 2018, CDC estimates that the *Tips* campaign has motivated more than 16.4 million smokers to make a quit attempt and helped approximately one million smokers to quit for good.⁸ A 2020 cost-effectiveness analysis found that over the same timeframe, *Tips* helped prevent 129,100 smoking-related deaths and saved an estimated \$7.3 billion in smoking-related health care costs.⁹

- *Tips* drives quit attempts. The 2024 Surgeon General’s Report concluded that “the *Tips* campaign is associated with increased quit attempts among specific populations of people who smoke, including African American people, pregnant women, people with mental health conditions, and those with lower educational attainment.”¹⁰
- A 2020 analysis which modeled the impact of anti-tobacco mass media campaigns found that sustained national media campaigns like *Tips* can result in cost savings for all payers (private payers, Medicare and Medicaid) within ten years. Cost savings could occur after just two years for Medicaid and Medicare programs.
 - Based on an estimate that the campaign will produce results similar to *Tips* (a 12% increase in successful quits), researchers estimate that running a sustained media campaign like *Tips* would reduce Medicaid spending by \$3.6 billion, Medicare spending by \$1.37 billion, and private insurer spending by \$180 million over 10 years.¹¹
- Recent research from CDC exemplifies the ongoing positive impact of the *Tips* campaign in promoting evidence-based quitlines.¹² Over the first 12 years of the *Tips* campaign (2012-2023),

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exposure to the *Tips* television advertisements has generated nearly 2.1 million additional calls to 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

- The 2013 *Tips* campaign, which aired on a one week on, one week off basis for the first 12 weeks of the 16 week campaign also had a substantial impact on public health, generating more than 150,000 additional calls to 1800-QUIT-NOW (there were 353,000 total calls) and almost 2.8 million additional unique visitors to www.smokefree.gov. The campaign's pulsing strategy clearly shows that calls to the quitline increased sharply when the campaign was on the air, suggesting that the campaign motivated many smokers to try to quit.¹³ These numbers likely underrepresent the number of people who tried to quit smoking as a result of the campaign because the number of people who seek help quitting is a small fraction of the people who actually make quit attempts. Previous experience from state and local media campaigns that promote quitlines indicate that at least five to six smokers try to quit on their own for every person who calls a quitline.¹⁴

In addition, a 2012 study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that anti-smoking ads which feature highly emotional and graphic content, similar to the themes used in the *Tips* campaign, are very effective at motivating smokers to try to quit. Researchers found that both the amount and type of ads seen by New York State smokers affected their likelihood of quitting, with greater exposure to emotional or graphic ads having the greatest impact on quit attempts. The impact of the ads was similar across income and education levels, as well as for smokers with varying desires to quit.¹⁵ Another more recent study further showed that the *Tips* campaign can also support continued abstinence from cigarette smoking.¹⁶ From evaluating the impact of exposure to the *Tips* campaign from 2014 to 2019 (excluding 2017), higher levels of exposure to *Tips* advertising (as measured by GRPs) was found to be associated with lower odds of smoking relapse among U.S. adult former cigarette smokers.

Scientific Conclusions on Public Education Campaigns

The evidence that public education campaigns are effective at reducing tobacco use is solid and extensive.

- The **2024 Surgeon General's report** reaffirmed that "[m]ass media campaigns should be well funded and of sufficient ongoing duration and dose to create meaningful population-level decreases in tobacco use initiation and prevalence... Ultimately, implementing these recommendations for mass media campaigns focused on tobacco prevention or cessation has the capacity, when combined with other tobacco control strategies, to improve health outcomes in population groups suffering from tobacco-related health disparities."¹⁷
- The **2012 Surgeon General's report, Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults**, concluded that adequately funded anti-tobacco media campaigns reduce tobacco use among youth, and that there is a dose-response relationship between exposure to antismoking media messages and reduced youth smoking, i.e., the greater the exposure the less likely youth are to smoke. The report also found that teens respond most to ads that evoke strong negative emotions such as those that demonstrate how smoking and secondhand smoke harm health. Further, ads designed for adults can also reduce smoking among young people.¹⁸
- A comprehensive report released in June **2008 by the National Cancer Institute (NCI), The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use**, concluded that anti-tobacco media campaigns are effective in reducing smoking among youth and adults. Particularly, advertisements that evoke strong emotions have the most impact on viewers, and youth also react positively to anti-tobacco advertisements aimed at adults.¹⁹
- A **systematic review of the literature on the impact of mass media campaigns, published in 2012**, concluded that these campaigns can promote quitting among adults and reduce adult smoking rates. Messages that used graphic images and/or testimonials to portray the negative health consequences of smoking were found to be most effective at generating increased knowledge, positive beliefs, and

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quitting behavior. Ads depicting negative health consequences appear to work particularly well with lower socioeconomic smokers. Television was found to be the most effective communication channel in which to reach and influence adult smokers.²⁰

- The **Community Preventive Services Task Force**, an independent expert advisory committee created by CDC, found “strong evidence” that mass-reach media interventions are effective in decreasing tobacco use, increasing cessation and the use of available services like quitlines, and decreasing tobacco use initiation among youth. The evidence also indicates that mass-reach media interventions are cost-effective, and savings from averted healthcare costs exceed intervention costs.²¹
- The **CDC’s Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs** concluded that public education (counter-marketing) campaigns are an integral part of efforts to both prevent initiation of tobacco use and to encourage tobacco cessation.²²
- The **2000 Surgeon General’s report, Reducing Tobacco Use**, suggests that counter-marketing efforts that include pro-health messages and messages about the tobacco industry’s marketing and promotional tactics are required to counter the tobacco industry’s efforts to promote misleading messages and images about tobacco to young people and adults.

Public Education Campaigns Encourage Smokers to Quit and Discourage Nonsmokers from Starting to Smoke

Research demonstrates that tobacco prevention media campaigns are an effective way to encourage smoking cessation and are also effective at preventing initiation.

- A 2017 study of the impact of the Tips campaign from 2012 to 2015 found that exposure to higher levels of Tips TV advertising was associated with increased odds of making a quit attempt in the past three months and increased odds of intending to quit in the next 30 days.²³
- Earlier research found that the quit attempt rate for smokers in media markets with higher doses of the *Tips* campaign was 11 percent higher than that of smokers in standard dose media markets. The higher dose media markets also impacted non-smokers, who had greater knowledge of smoking health risks and were more likely to talk with friends and family about the dangers of smoking.²⁴

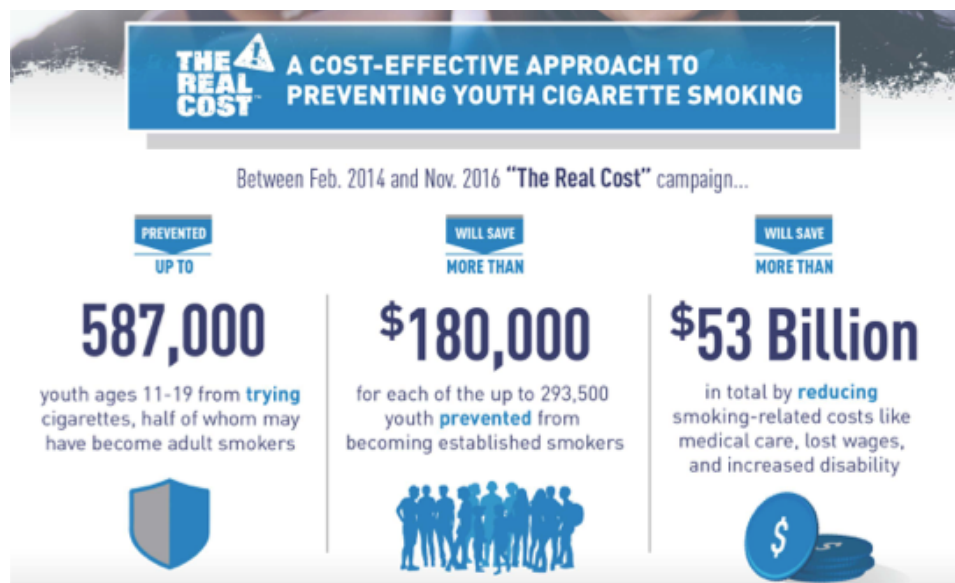
FDA’s “The Real Cost” campaign, the nation’s first federally funded youth tobacco education campaign, is aimed at preventing smoking initiation among at-risk teens (those at risk for smoking or those who have already experimented with smoking). Results demonstrate that the campaign is cost-effective and resonates with youth.

- A 2019 study estimates that The Real Cost campaign prevented up to 587,000 youth from starting to smoke and half of these youth could have become long-term adult smokers.²⁵ An earlier study found that a high level of exposure to the campaign was associated with a 30 percent decrease in the risk of starting to smoke. Recall of campaign ads was associated with greater perceptions of serious health consequences of cigarette smoking and more negative attitudes toward tobacco products.²⁶



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- A 2018 study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that by preventing more than 175,000 youth from becoming established smokers, The Real Cost Campaign resulted in a cost-savings of \$1.4 billion. According to the analysis, the campaign saved \$4 for every \$1 spent to implement the campaign. The cost savings are even higher when costs incurred directly by the smoker are included.²⁷



- The campaign effectively reached youth – nearly 9 out of 10 youth (89%) were aware of at least one campaign ad 6 to 8 months after campaign launch and awareness was extremely high among two target audiences, susceptible nonsmokers (90.5%) and experimenters (94.6%).²⁸
- Building on the success of the campaign's youth smoking prevention effort, in 2018, "The Real Cost" campaign expanded to also educate youth about the potential dangers of using e-cigarettes.²⁹ New research shows that the campaign has helped to reduce youth e-cigarette use to its lowest level in a decade. Results from a study published in March 2025 estimated that the Real Cost campaign prevented more than 444,000 youth from starting to use e-cigarettes between 2023 and 2024.³⁰

A number of states have undertaken public education campaigns as part of comprehensive tobacco prevention and cessation programs. The evidence demonstrates that the public education component is a critical piece driving the success of comprehensive tobacco prevention programs. When implemented with adequate funding, these programs have reduced smoking and other tobacco use, and the public education campaigns have been instrumental in these reductions.

- In 2005, the New York Tobacco Control Program implemented an aggressive anti-smoking media campaign that included graphic images and emotional portrayals to depict the health consequences of smoking and smoking-related suffering. Smokers' exposure to antismoking advertisements increased significantly as a result of this campaign and corresponded with changes in key smoking-related outcomes. For example, among adult smokers, both intentions to quit and quit attempts increased significantly between 2003 and 2009. Additionally, adult smoking among New Yorkers declined 18 percent between 2003 and 2009; nationally, adult smoking declined just 5 percent over this same time period. Researchers suggest that the sustained implementation of New York's media campaign contributed to these changes.³¹
- In 2007, Florida implemented a statewide tobacco prevention and cessation program, Tobacco-Free Florida, which combines a public awareness media campaign with community-based interventions and help and encouragement for smokers to quit. The program's public education campaign uses emotional and graphic advertising to demonstrate the adverse health effects of tobacco use and also offers information about how to get help with quitting. As the program aired Rick Stoddard ads, which deliver a highly emotional message, calls to the program's quitline soared – 19,132 people called the quitline in January 2011 compared to 9,941 in January 2010. In addition, since the program was implemented, Florida has seen an 18.6 percent decline in adult smoking rates and the percentage of smokers who have tried to quit smoking has increased from 44 percent to 57 percent.³²

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- An evaluation of California's Tobacco Education and Media Campaign concluded that the campaign contributed to significant reductions in smoking prevalence among both youth and adults. Researchers also found that the campaign encouraged adult smokers to quit and deterred smoking initiation among youth.³³ An earlier study found that California's anti-tobacco media campaign reduced cigarette consumption. In its early years, the California tobacco control program produced a 10-percent to 13-percent decline in cigarette consumption, with about a fifth of the decline caused by the media campaign alone.³⁴
- A 2012 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that greater exposure to state-sponsored anti-tobacco advertisements was associated with less smoking and with current smokers' intention to quit, even when controlling for potential confounding state tobacco control policies. Researchers noted that exposure to state-funded anti-tobacco advertisements was far below the levels recommended by the CDC's Best Practices recommendations and that if states had followed CDC's recommendations, there would be more than 600,000 fewer smokers.³⁵
- A 2005 study published in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* found strong associations between exposure to state-sponsored TV anti-tobacco advertisements and general recall of anti-tobacco advertising, anti-smoking attitudes and beliefs, and smoking prevalence. Specifically, only 19 percent of students with greater exposure to state-sponsored anti-tobacco advertisements reported smoking in the past 30 days, compared to 27 percent of students in markets with no exposure to state-sponsored anti-tobacco ads. Additionally, students that had greater exposure to state-sponsored anti-tobacco ads were significantly less likely to report most or all of their friends were smokers, were less likely to say they would never get addicted to cigarettes, were more likely to perceive the harms of smoking one or more packs a day, and were more likely to report that they definitely would not be smoking in five years, compared to students with less exposure to the ads.³⁶
- A study published in the June 2006 issue of *Health Education Research* found that increased exposure to state sponsored anti-tobacco media campaigns increases smoking cessation rates, even after controlling for other factors that may affect smoking cessation. Specifically, researchers found that the quit rate among adult smokers increased by about ten percent in communities exposed to higher levels of state anti-tobacco advertising (about two additional exposures per person per month).³⁷

A few additional studies regarding the effectiveness of public education campaigns are summarized below.

- A 2009 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that smokers who had greater exposure to anti-smoking ads were more likely to have quit smoking at 24 months follow-up. On average, smokers were exposed to more than 200 anti-smoking ads during a two-year period, and the odds of having quit at follow-up increased by 11 percent with each ten additional ad exposures. The effect was greater among lower and middle socioeconomic populations than among smokers in higher socioeconomic groups.³⁸
- Studies published online in the *American Journal of Prevention Medicine* found that **truth®**, the national youth smoking prevention campaign conducted by the American Legacy Foundation, has been both highly effective and cost-effective in preventing America's youth from starting to smoke. One study found that **truth®** was directly responsible for keeping 450,000 teens from starting to smoke during its first four years, while a second study found that the campaign resulted in savings of between \$1.9 billion and \$5.4 billion in health care costs in just its first two years.³⁹

Research has also shown that the FCC-required antismoking messages during the late 1960s resulted in a decline in per capita cigarette consumption of at least five percent, and a reduction in the prevalence of teenage smoking of three percentage points.⁴⁰ Anti-smoking ads were so effective that tobacco companies agreed to take their own ads off television in order to have these ads removed.

The scientific evidence demonstrates that the most effective public education campaigns include the following characteristics.

- They are grounded in rigorous research on effectiveness and include messages found to be effective with target audience(s)
- They use multiple channels to reach the target audience, including a variety of paid media efforts (television, radio, print, web-based, etc.) and are complimented by earned media (press releases, local events and promotions) and other efforts.
- They are well-funded and sustained so the media component can achieve the reach necessary to be effective.

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