



The Impact of “The Real Cost” Media Campaign

FDA’s “The Real Cost” campaign, the nation’s first federally funded youth tobacco education campaign, is aimed at preventing smoking and vaping initiation among at-risk teens (those at risk for tobacco use). The campaign launched in 2014 and focused on educating youth about the health effects of smoking. In 2018, the campaign expanded to educate youth about the potential dangers of using e-cigarettes. Results demonstrate that the campaign resonates with youth, reduces youth tobacco use and is cost-effective.

Mass media campaigns are particularly important because the tobacco industry spends \$8.6 billion annually marketing and advertising its products, and this marketing increases the number of kids who try smoking and become regular smokers.¹ The scientific evidence is clear that one of the best ways to reduce the power of tobacco marketing is an aggressive public education campaign.² Adolescence is a critical period for tobacco prevention efforts. Most adults who smoke begin using them well before the legal age to purchase cigarettes.³

“The Real Cost” successfully reduces tobacco product use among youth.

- A 2019 study estimates that the campaign prevented up to 587,000 youth from starting to smoke and half of these youth could have become long-term adult smokers.⁴
- An earlier study found that 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.⁵
- Results from another study show that “The Real Cost” campaign helped to reduce youth e-cigarette use to its lowest level in a decade. Between 2023 and 2024, the campaign prevented more than 444,000 youth from starting to use e-cigarettes.⁶

“The Real Cost” effectively reaches teens.

- Following its initial launch, nearly 9 out of 10 youth (89%) were aware of at least one campaign ad and awareness was extremely high among two target audiences, susceptible nonsmokers (90.5%) and experimenters (94.6%).⁷
- The campaign continues to be critically important, reaching its intended audience and increasing youth beliefs around the harm of tobacco product use. An evaluation of “The Real Cost” e-cigarette prevention campaign found that 75% of youth were aware of at least one ad. Further, exposure to the campaign increased youth beliefs around the harm of e-cigarettes and the consequences of e-cigarette use.⁸

“The Real Cost” campaign is highly cost-effective.

- “The Real Cost” campaign not only reduces smoking but also saves money by reducing tobacco-related health care costs.
- A 2018 study found that by preventing more than 175,000 youth from becoming established smokers, “The Real Cost” campaign saved \$4 for every \$1 spent to implement the campaign, resulting in a cost-savings of \$1.4 billion.⁹ Preventing more youth from becoming smokers would save even more.

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¹ U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), *Cigarette Report for 2022*, October 2023, https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/ftc_gov/pdf/2022-Cigarette-Report.pdf [data for top 4 manufacturers only]; FTC,

Smokeless Tobacco Report for 2022, October 2023, https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/ftc_gov/pdf/2022-Smokeless-Tobacco-Report.pdf [data for top 5 manufacturers only].

² Flynn, BS, et al., "Mass media and school interventions for cigarette smoking prevention: Effects 2 years after completion," *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)* 84:1148-50, 1994; Wakefield, M et al., "Use of Mass Media Campaigns to Change Health Behaviour," *The Lancet* 376(9748):1261-71, October 9, 2010; See also, National Cancer Institute, *The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use*, Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph No. 19, NIH Pub. No. 07-6242, June 2008; HHS, *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults, A Report of the Surgeon General*, 2012 <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/YouthTobaccoUse/>.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults: A Report of the Surgeon General. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services; 2012.

⁴ Duke JC, et al. Impact of the real cost media campaign on youth smoking initiation. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2019 Nov 1;57(5):645-51.

⁵ Farrelly, Matthew C., et al., "Association Between The Real Cost Media Campaign and Smoking Initiation Among Youths — United States, 2014–2016," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Vol. 66 No. , January 20, 2017.

⁶ MacMonegle A, et al. The Impact of "The Real Cost" on E-cigarette Initiation among US Youth. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2025 Mar 14.

⁷ Duke JC, et al., "Youth's Awareness of and Reactions to The Real Cost National Tobacco Public Education Campaign," *PLoS ONE* 10(12), 2015.

⁸ MacMonegle A, et al. Evaluating the real cost digital and social media campaign: longitudinal effects of campaign exposure on e-cigarette beliefs. *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*. 2024 Feb 1;26(Supplement_1):S19-26.

⁹ MacMonegle AJ, et al. Cost-effectiveness analysis of the real cost campaign's effect on smoking prevention. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2018 Sep 1;55(3):319-25.