



Nell Valentine

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Nell Valentine's primary research interests concern smoking-related behaviors and legislation. She is currently researching the economic impact of smoking ordinances on restaurant and bar revenue.

Mrs. Valentine is also researching the effects of a proposed \$1.00 tax increase on cigarettes, as well as working on the Mississippi and National Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control.

She is also involved with the Mississippi Health Policy Research Center working on the Mississippi State Health Assessment.

Mrs. Valentine spent her time as a graduate assistant at the SSRC coordinating the Youth Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control. She is a graduate of Mississippi State University and holds a M.S. in Clinical Psychology.

THE YOUTH TOBACCO SURVEY

By: Nell Valentine

Tobacco is the leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for 440,000 lives lost per year—the equivalent of three jet airliners crashing every day. Since 1994, the state of Mississippi has been at the epicenter of efforts to reduce this public health burden. National and statewide tobacco prevention programs across the US are funded with money from a lawsuit against the tobacco industries initiated by Michael Moore, former Attorney General for the state of Mississippi.

If these programs are to be run effectively and be properly evaluated, surveillance data about tobacco use among youth in Mississippi is needed. Originally created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Youth Tobacco Survey (YTS) provides this necessary data. The YTS is designed to measure tobacco use, knowledge, and attitudes among sixth- through twelfth grade students. In 1998, Mississippi, along with Texas and Florida, became one of the first states to administer this survey and take part in the first and largest compilation of youth smoking data in the nation. For ten years, researchers at the SSRC have been part of the effort to collect and analyze this information.

Although crucial for designing youth prevention programs, the YTS is a logistical nightmare to administer. It involves the coordination of the CDC in Atlanta, the Research Triangle Institute in North Carolina, the MS State Department of Health (MSDH), and the MS Department of Education. It also requires the assistance of approximately 120 schools, 600 teachers, and 8,000 students each year. More than 100,000 pieces of paper pass through our hands during each administration of the YTS. Even more daunting is the task of designing the survey packet so that its instructions are easily followed. Each year, at least one school sends their information to the Institutional Review Board at MSU, one teacher returns everything except the completed surveys, and one student spells out something creative on the scantron sheet—in ink, of course.

Data collection for the YTS has always been a challenge. Each

year presents new obstacles, and yet, each administration improves on the methodology of the survey. During my first administration of the YTS, we became conscious of the need for improved coordination and scheduling. The first week of school is the critical time to get the initial information packet to the principals. Any later and their desks pile up with other requests for their time. On Tuesday of that week, we still lacked the necessary letters of support that needed to be sent with these packets. I first met my husband Michael during the initial rush to pack and send 160 packets by 3:30 Wednesday afternoon. He was volunteered by Robert McMillen, my project director and his roommate, to help get me “back on track.” By the next year, everything was well coordinated, as Robert had no more friends to marry off. During the 2004 administration, we destroyed three professional grade pencil sharpeners due to the unavailability of pre-sharpened pencils under state contract. Kathleen Gresham, who was working with us at the time, found a way to circumvent the state contract and located a company that sold pre-sharpened pencils—golf pencils. Not only did we save space in each classroom envelope, we also mitigated the downstairs health issue of the smell of hot graphite and burning motors. In 2006, we stopped competing for copier time with MASEP, an even bigger paper-producing project, and started using Printing Services to print our surveys. The biggest benefit to us with this change was the undergrad that Printing Services provided to collate and stack the surveys. This cut down our paper cut incidence by at least 75%. In the following years, we have improved upon various documents and made numerous timesaving changes. However, none have led anyone else to marriage.

The spring 2008 administration of the survey marked the ten-year anniversary of the YTS. During the past decade, the state of Mississippi has profoundly increased its capacity to target youth smoking, and the data from

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the YTS demonstrate remarkable reductions in the prevalence of smoking among our youth. Not coincidentally, these reductions parallel the programmatic activities of The Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi. The Partnership, created with funds from the tobacco settlement, led the state’s efforts to prevent youth tobacco use from 1998 until 2006. Data from the YTS reveal that current high school smoking rates decreased by 38.3% and middle school smoking rates decreased by 59.2% during this time. Despite its popularity and success in reducing youth smoking rates, state funding for The Partnership was eliminated due to legal disputes within the government of Mississippi in late 2006. Some of these funds were restored to tobacco prevention approximately two years later when the Legislature allocated \$8 million for the Office of Tobacco Control, MSDH, to create a state tobacco prevention and cessation program.

However, most youth tobacco prevention programs and media campaigns had to be abandoned in 2007 due to insufficient funds. The increased prevalence of youth smoking in 2008 suggests that youth tobacco prevention campaigns, such as those directed by The Partnership, were effective in reducing youth smoking. Data from future administrations of the YTS will help us to determine if this lapse in program activity will have a long-

term impact on youth smoking rates, or if the increase observed in 2008 was an occurrence that can be reversed by the new programs directed by the Office of Tobacco Control.

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commitment to tobacco research has remained strong. The data we collect continues to indicate the overall downward turn for the prevalence of youth smoking, as well as the continued increase in negative attitudes toward smoking by youth. Future administrations of the YTS will play a key role in providing data to support the significance of youth tobacco prevention programs. I look forward to a continued role in this critical health campaign and to the challenges and success of the Youth Tobacco Survey.