

Youth Surveillance in a Pandemic: Shifting from the School-Based YTS to Virtual Focus Groups

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Introduction

In the Fall of 2020, widespread transmission of COVID-19 severely disrupted Mississippi's public schools. Concerns regarding the overburden of schools led researchers to pursue novel options to gather information regarding vaping without data from the annual Youth Tobacco Survey. Virtual focus groups were conducted with Mississippi high school students to explore perceptions, beliefs, social norms, usage, and access to e-cigarettes and other tobacco products.

Methods

From April to May 2021 a total of 120 Mississippi high school students participated in 26 virtual focus groups using Zoom. The participants were a convenience sample who were paid \$100 for their participation.

Subjects

The sample of 120 high school students consisted of 87 females and 33 males. Of these students, 96 were white, 22 were black, 2, and 2 were of other races. Statewide, 20% of the students attended private schools.

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the cigarette
craze for the new
technological era

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Messaging that is
considered effective
was described as
“ugly, scary, and
informative.”

Results

Participants believe that vaping is currently a widespread trend among teens. However, some students believe that the trend may have peaked a couple of years ago and that those who still vape do so because they are addicted.

Teens consistently reported that they first encountered vapes in middle school (grades 6-8) when they began to see peers and older students vaping. The most frequent exposure to vaping occurred in school bathrooms, in vehicles with friends, and at school sporting events. Importantly, most students encounter vaping among their peers before they receive any anti-vaping education.

Participants agreed that the most impactful anti-tobacco or anti-vaping advertisements are shocking but informative. Other ideas included having social media “influencers” talk about the harmful effects of vaping and having celebrities lead the Truth ads.

Juul, Alto, and Puff Bar are among the most popular brands of vapes. These brands are cheaper, smaller, and easy to conceal.

Participants agreed that flavors play a large part in the overall appeal of vaping. Social exchanges occur where teens introduce each other to new flavors and talk about which ones they like best. Fruit and candy flavors are seen as more popular with younger teens, while older teens who regularly vape prefer mint.

Teens also agree that gaining access to vapes is extremely easy. Vapes are shared by other students at school, bought from “vape dealers” who get vapes for

Results

underage teens and charge them an extra \$10-\$15 buying premium. Vapes can also be easily bought by the teens themselves at “shady” gas stations. Teens know that there are no consequences for trying to buy vapes.

Students know that vaping is addictive. Some teens believe that addiction develops faster with vapes than conventional cigarettes due to the high level nicotine options available with vapes. Participants with more vaping experience described how the “buzz” that is initially felt from vaping wears off after continued use, but by then it can be difficult to stop vaping. Students believe that vaping is causing health problems among their peers, with cheerleaders and other athletes complaining of breathing issues. Participants explained that high school students do not have confidential resources to help them stop vaping.

Conclusion

Virtual focus groups are a useful way to explore perceptions, beliefs, social norms, usage, and access to e-cigarettes and other tobacco products. The ideas expressed by these students are important to help understand the nuances of vaping and to build strong and effective anti-tobacco campaigns.

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