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Contradictory Normative Beliefs and Institutional Practices Regarding Youth and Tobacco: A Report from the 2001 Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control

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ABSTRACT

Background: No prior studies have contrasted a representative sample of U.S. adults' support for tobacco control issues that restrict youth access to tobacco to their support for policies that restrict youth exposure ETS and pro-tobacco social influences.

Methods: Data were collected for the Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control via telephone interviews with a simple random sample of U.S. adults. The sample was weighted by race and gender within each census region, based on the 1999 U.S. Census estimates.

Results: Of the households contacted, 3,002 completed the interview and 564 refused to participate (15.8%). Approximately nine out of ten adults believed that 1) that parents should not allow children under 18 to smoke (90.5%), 2) students should not be allowed to smoke in schools (89.6%), 3) stores that sell tobacco to minors should be penalized (94.0%), and 4) that smoke from a parent's cigarette harms their children (95.2%). Support was weaker for restrictions on pro-tobacco social influences; 43.5% of adults believed that it is acceptable for teachers to smoke on school grounds. Although 84.6% of US. adult believed that tobacco advertisement encourage kids to smoke, only about half supported restrictions on advertisements in magazines (42.1%), grocery and convenience stores (46.6%), and sporting events (55.8%).

Conclusions: These results reveal a paradox in the belief patterns of many adults. Despite substantial agreement among adults on tobacco control issues that restricted youth access to tobacco, many adults were reluctant to support policies that would restrict pro-tobacco social influences, as well as reduce youth exposure to ETS in the home and community.

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States, associated with one of every five deaths. Over the last several decades, an impressive body of health research has defined the health impacts of tobacco use on the American population. The life span and quality of life of individuals throughout the country who use tobacco products - as well as non-smokers in environments of second hand smoke - have been substantially decreased (CDC, 1986, 1993).

In addition to the physically harmful effects of tobacco, there are also aspects of the social climate that increase the risk that a person will become a smoker. Numerous studies have demonstrated a significantly increased risk of smoking for adolescents with smoking parents or peers (e.g., Biglan et al., 1995; Flay et al., 1983). Adult and peer smoking models can also suggest the presence of social norms favorable towards tobacco use. A growing body of research demonstrates that practices and polices concerning tobacco use, marketing, and prices also impact people's decisions about tobacco use and shape smoking behaviors (Chapman et al., 1999).

Although the social influences on tobacco use and the deleterious effects of passive smoking on youth are well documented, no prior studies have contrasted US. adults' support for policies that restrict youth access to tobacco to their support for policies that limit youth passive smoking and exposure to pro-tobacco social influences.

METHOD

The Social Climate Survey measures social and environmental indicators within an institutional framework. Specifically, the survey assesses normative beliefs, health knowledge, and practices/policies within each of the following social institutions: family and friendship groups; education; work-place; government and political order; health and medical care; recreation, leisure and sports; and mass culture and communication. Scientists at the SSRC developed many of the items included in the survey. Others were selected from existing measurement instruments with established validity. Specifically, the Social Climate Survey includes items from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, the Current Population Survey - Tobacco Use Supplement, and California Adult Tobacco Surveys.

Data were collected for the 2001 Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control via telephone interviews with a simple random sample of adults. The data were collected in July-September by the Survey Research Unit in the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University. Households were selected using random digit dialing procedures. (This includes households with unlisted numbers.) Within a household the adult to be interviewed was selected by asking to speak with the person in the household who is 18 years of age or older, and who will have the next birthday.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Of the households contacted, 3,002 completed the interview and 564 refused to participate (15.8%). Approximately nine out of ten adults believed that 1) that parents should not allow children under 18 to smoke (90.5%), 2) students should not be allowed to smoke in schools (89.6%), 3) stores that sell tobacco to minors should be penalized (94.0%), and 4) that smoke from a parent's cigarette harms their children (95.2%). Support was weaker for restrictions on pro-tobacco social influences; 43.5% of adults believed that it is acceptable for teachers to smoke on school grounds. Although 84.6% of US. adult believed that tobacco advertisement encourage kids to smoke, only about half supported restrictions on advertisements in magazines (42.1%), grocery and convenience stores (46.6%), and sporting events (55.8%).

These results reveal a paradox in the belief patterns of many adults. Despite substantial agreement among adults on tobacco control issues that restrict youth access to tobacco, many adults are reluctant to support polices that would restrict pro-tobacco influences, as well as reduce exposure to ETS in the home and in public places.

REFERENCES

Biglan, A., Duncan, T., Ary, D., & Smolkowski, K. (1995). Peer and parental influences on adolescent tobacco use. Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 18, 315-330.
CDC. (1986). The health consequences of involuntary smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General.
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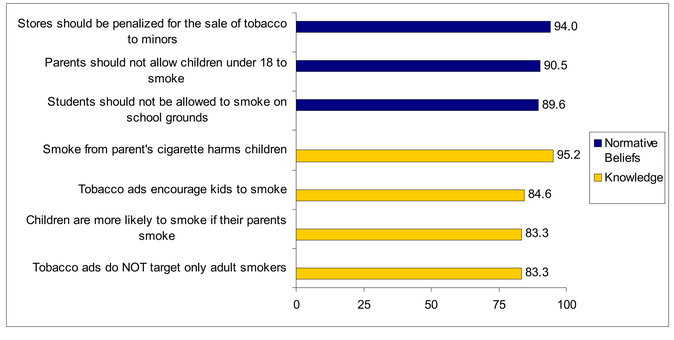
Chapman, S., Borland, R., Hill, D., Owen, N., & Woodward, S. (1990). Why the tobacco industry fears the passive smoking issue. International Journal of Health Service, 20, 417-427.
Flay, B., d'Avernas, J., Best, J., Kersell, M., & Ryan, K. (1983). Cigarette smoking: Why young people do it and ways of preventing it. In P. McGrath 7 p. Firestone (Eds.), Pediatric and adolescent behavioral medicine (pp. 97-127). New York: Springer-Verlag.

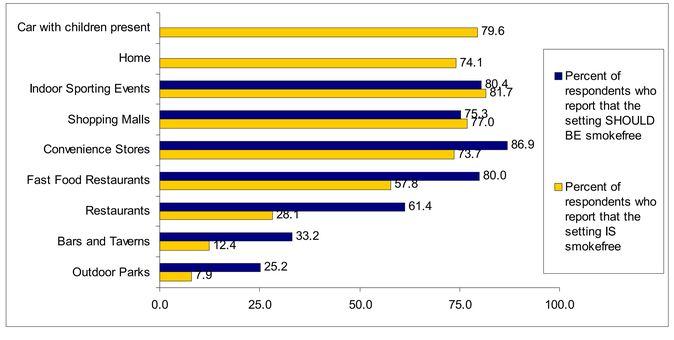
Normative Beliefs and Knowledge about Youth and Tobacco

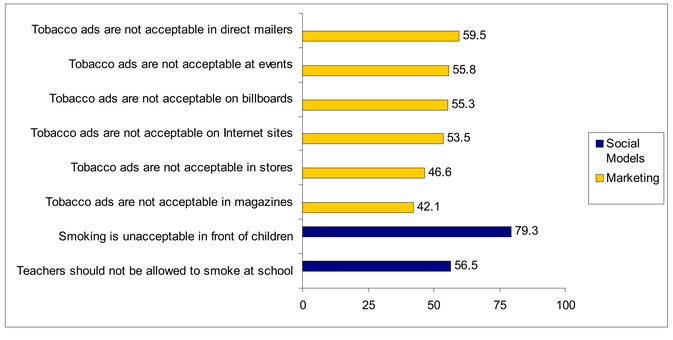
Results indicate that approximately nine of ten adults support restrictions on active smoking by youth, while more than eight of ten adults recognize social influences on youth tobacco use.



Support for Clean Air Policies and Exposure to ETS

Although almost all adults believe that youth should not actively smoke, there is substantially less support for clean air polices that would protect youth form passive smoking.



Support for Restrictions on Marketing and Social Models

Although more than 80% of U.S. adults recognize that tobacco marketing targets youth and that youth are susceptible to adult smoking models, substantially fewer adults support restrictions on these social influences.