

Marketing Cancer to Youth

The New York City Department of Health estimates that about 7,200 New Yorkers die from smoking-related illnesses every year - more than 19 every day. Besides these deaths, there are the thousands more New Yorkers who suffer from smoking-related strokes, heart attacks, lung disease, and cancers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the 18,000 public high school students living in New York City who currently smoke cigarettes, one-third will die prematurely as a direct result of smoking.

Smoking is the number one cause of preventable death in the United States. Each year an estimated 443,000 people die prematurely from smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke and another 8.6 million live with a serious illness caused by smoking. This is not only devastating to individual smokers and their families. It affects the cost of health care nationwide.

The dangers of smoking are not news to anyone, including the tobacco industry. As more smokers die or quit each day, the tobacco industry needs to cultivate "replacement smokers," the next generation of tobacco consumers, in order to stay in business.

Targeting Youth

In New York State alone, the tobacco industry spends \$1.1 million every day marketing its products to potential smokers. With federal regulations restricting television and print advertising, tobacco companies spend much of this budget on in-store advertising, and they have a specific target in mind: youth.

It is no coincidence that tobacco marketing is more prevalent in stores where teens frequently shop. Another non-coincidence: of the 11,500 tobacco retailers in New York City, 75 percent are located within 1,000 feet of a school. This is a very effective tactic. Studies show that exposure to marketing in stores is a key contributor to youth smoking. Fully 90 percent of regular smokers start before the age of 18.

Thursday, November 17, was the American Cancer Society's 36th annual Great American Smokeout. On this day, smokers were encouraged to give up smoking for 24 hours. The idea is that if smokers can stop for just today, they can start the process of quitting. The Department of Health estimates that there are 964,000 smokers in New York City. For them, this might have been the day they quit for good.

How much advertising does the tobacco industry's \$1.1 million daily budget buy? Just walk down the street and see for yourself. In fact, that was the purpose of the American Lung Association's recent *Take a Walk in our Shoes* Tobacco Advertising Tours.

In partnership with the New York City Coalition for a Smoke-Free City, American Lung Association led policy makers on walking tours in each of the five boroughs to highlight the presence of youth-targeted advertising. Tour participants walked the streets in each of the five boroughs where they encountered what our kids see each and every day: advertising meant to appeal to youth and encourage them to smoke. I saw this first hand on the Manhattan tour: walking out the front door of a lower East Side school, the first store in sight is plastered with tobacco ads, with emphasis on brands that have high appeal with young smokers.

Tobacco Retailer

In particular, the transition of the pharmacy from a health care provider to a tobacco retailer has disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minorities. One study concluded that pharmacies were more likely to sell tobacco products in Census tracts with higher percentages of African American residents. Specifically, for every 10 percent increase in the number of African American residents in a Census tract, pharmacies were 1.34 times more likely to sell tobacco products.

The American Lung Association in New York and the New York City Coalition for a Smoke-Free City hope that the tours inspire further discussion with decision makers on how tobacco marketing can be limited to reduce the damaging effect it has on our youth. Possible solutions the groups are advocating include decreasing the visibility of tobacco marketing in stores, limiting the sale of tobacco near schools, and prohibiting the sale of tobacco at pharmacies.

Smoking is a particular issue in low-income neighborhoods. There is a widening gap in life expectancy between richer and poorer Americans. One reason is that smoking has declined more rapidly among people with higher incomes. In New York City, the number of people hospitalized for cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in low-income neighborhoods is much higher than in other neighborhoods. And it all starts with teenagers targeted by tobacco companies.

Also, we know that secondhand smoke exacerbates the condition of asthma, which often afflicts children of low-income families. Hospitalization rates for asthma in East Harlem are five times higher than the rates for the Upper East Side.

The Great American Smokeout was a day for smokers to get the smoke out of their lives, but it should also be seized upon by parents and policy makers as a reason to rally support for getting the smoke out of places where our kids shop and away from schools.

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