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Authors

Cheryl G. Healton, DrPH
Ella Watson-Stryker, BA
Jennifer Duke, PhD
et al.

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Public Opinion on Strategies to Reduce Youth Exposure to Smoking in the Movies

Results from the American Smoking and Health Survey



The American Legacy Foundation® is dedicated to building a world where young people reject tobacco and anyone can quit. Located in Washington, D.C., the foundation develops programs that address the health effects of tobacco use through research, grants, technical assistance and training, youth activism, strategic partnerships, countermarketing and grassroots marketing campaigns, public relations, and outreach to populations disproportionately affected by the toll of tobacco. The American Legacy Foundation was created as a result of the November 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) reached between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories, and the tobacco industry. Visit www.americanlegacy.org.

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, more than 4,000 youth under age 18 in the United States try a cigarette for the first time, and 2,000 will become daily smokers.¹ About one-third of youth who currently smoke will eventually die from a tobacco-related disease.² The vast majority (80%) of all smokers began smoking before age 18, and prevention efforts targeting youth are essential to reduce future tobacco-related morbidity and mortality in the United States. The benefit of decreased smoking among teens to the American public cannot be overstated; each year smoking-attributable conditions claim more than 400,000 lives and cost more than \$75 billion to treat.³

Research indicates that reducing youth exposure to smoking in movies is an important factor in youth smoking prevention. Unfortunately, studies have shown that youth have high exposure to smoking in movies and on television. In a 2004 survey, 78% of middle school students and 87% of high school students reported seeing actors on television or in movies using tobacco.⁴ Survey data from 2003 show that 50% of teens report frequent exposure to glamorized portrayals of smoking in television and film.⁵ Of concern is the fact that young teens (aged 12 to 14) are more likely to report having seen smoking on television and in movies than are young adults. The act of smoking is routinely glamorized in movies, and research shows that teens with a favorite movie star who smokes are more likely to be open to smoking.^{6,7} Among teen girls, having a favorite movie star who smokes increases the risk of smoking initiation.⁸

Depictions of smoking are extremely prevalent in American movies. A study of first-run movies released in the United States from 1999 to 2003 found that 80% of all films depicted smoking.⁹ Smoking was prevalent among films targeting all ages, including 90% of R-rated films, 79% of PG-13-rated films, and 47% of PG-/G-rated films. Although R-rated movies are most likely to depict smoking, the current movie rating system does not prevent children from seeing smoking in movies. In fact, about 60% of youth exposure to smoking in movies is from G-, PG-, and PG-13-rated movies.

A longitudinal study found that 50% of youth smoking initiation can be traced to exposure to smoking in movies.¹⁰ Children with the highest exposure to smoking in movies were nearly three times more likely to start smoking than those with the least exposure. In addition, smoking in movies had the greatest impact on youth who are normally the least likely to start smoking — those with nonsmoking parents. Indeed, heavy exposure to smoking in movies can actually neutralize the effects of positive parental role modeling on adolescent smoking initiation. Smoking in movies rarely depicts the real, negative consequences of tobacco use.¹¹ Depictions of tobacco use in films and on television not only leave children with positive images of tobacco but also with the idea that smoking is much more prevalent among adults than it really is.¹² Research has shown that teens tend to overestimate the percentage of their peers who smoke and that viewing tobacco use as a normative behavior increases the risk of smoking initiation.¹³

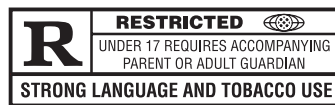


The Smoke Free Movies Principles were developed to address the problem of smoking in movies in a way that will substantively reduce youth's exposure. The American Legacy Foundation (Legacy) endorses these principles along with the World Health Organization (WHO); American Medical Association (AMA); American Academy of Pediatrics; L.A. Department of Health Services; American Heart Association; American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology; and the Society for Adolescent Medicine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has linked high smoking in movies to stagnation in declines in youth smoking and suggested that these policy changes may be necessary to neutralize the effects of smoking in the movies and reduce adolescent smoking.⁴

These Smoke Free Movies Principles are founded on evidence-based approaches to reduce the impact of smoking in movies on youth.

1. Rate New Smoking Movies "R" — *Any film that shows or implies tobacco should be rated "R." The only exceptions should be when the presentation of tobacco clearly and unambiguously reflects the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or is necessary to represent smoking of a real historical figure.*

Applying the "R" rating would reduce youth exposure to smoking in movies by more than half.³ In addition, a study of middle school students found that those restricted from watching R-rated movies were significantly less likely to try smoking in the future.¹⁴



2. Certify No Pay Offs — *Producers should post a certificate in the credits at the end of the movie declaring that no one on the production received anything of value (money, free cigarettes or other gifts, free publicity, interest-free loans, or anything else) from anyone in exchange for using or displaying tobacco.*

Internal tobacco industry documents released to the public through the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) show that in the past tobacco companies engaged in paid product placement.¹⁵ Cigarette companies assert that they discontinued product placement voluntarily in 1990, and in 1998, the MSA between the largest tobacco companies and 46 state Attorneys General officially banned the practice.¹⁶ Producers could routinely certify that no one working on a film received anything of value in exchange for depicting tobacco use, in the same way that films certify that animals were not abused during the making of the film.

3. Require Strong Antismoking Ads — *Studios and theaters should require a genuinely strong antismoking ad (not one produced by a tobacco company) to run before any film with any tobacco presence, regardless of its Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating.*

Showing antismoking ads or public service announcements (PSAs) prior to movies with smoking can be an effective way to combat the glamorization of smoking in movies. Research in this area suggests that young people can be "inoculated" against pro-tobacco messages when they view an antismoking advertisement before a movie with smoking. Research shows that teens exposed to an antismoking ad prior to a movie with smoking were less likely to have intentions to smoke in the future compared with teens who did not see the ad.¹⁷ Another study of adolescent girls found that those exposed to an antismoking ad prior to a movie with smoking were more likely to have negative attitudes toward smoking as portrayed in the movie and more likely to report an unwillingness to smoke in the future compared with girls unexposed to the ad.¹⁸

4. Stop Identifying Tobacco Brands — *There should be no tobacco brand identification nor the presence of tobacco brand imagery (such as billboards) in the background of any movie scene.*

The display of tobacco brands is of concern because it is essentially an advertisement, and in cases where an actor or actress is seen using a specific brand, it may be interpreted as a brand endorsement. Tobacco brand presence in movies is fairly prevalent considering that tobacco companies report that it is not paid for.¹⁹ In a study of all first-run movies released between 1988 and 1997, nearly 30%

depicted a tobacco brand.²⁰ Brands were as likely to appear in movies rated for an adolescent audience as they were in movies for adult audiences. In fact, 20% of films rated for children contained a tobacco brand, and surprisingly, the appearance of tobacco brands in movies did not decrease following the voluntary ban on paid product placement in 1990. In addition, four U.S. cigarette brands accounted for 80% of all tobacco brand depictions. Adolescents tend to smoke the historically most heavily advertised brands,^{21,22} and studies have shown that the brands most commonly depicted in movies are also those most smoked by youth.¹⁷

RATING MOVIES WITH SMOKING “R” IS NOT CENSORSHIP

Giving a movie an “R” rating is not government censorship. Directors, producers, writers, and actors would be free to depict smoking, just as they are now free to include harsh language or sex, two items considered by the Board that assigns ratings. Including smoking would be a simple modification to the current voluntary system. To say that integrating smoking into the current ratings system, which is managed by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) for the studios, is censorship would be to accuse the studios of running a system to censor themselves. In fact, the MPAA rating system does not control the content of films; rather, it labels films to allow parents to judge whether they want their children to see specific content. Participation in the movie rating system is voluntary, and the fact that most movies are submitted for rating is a reflection of consumer demand.

Each rating is decided by the MPAA’s Rating Board on the basis of “theme, violence, language, nudity, sensuality, drug abuse, and other elements.” The film

is considered in its entirety, so that the rating is based not merely on content but on how the subject matter is treated by the filmmaker. According to the MPAA, the following elements of a film determine an “R” rating:

*“An R-rated film may include hard language, or tough violence, or nudity within sensual scenes, or drug abuse or other elements, or a combination of some of the above, so that parents are counseled, in advance, to take this advisory rating very seriously.”**

The “R” rating principle would only apply to new movies — older movies would not be retroactively rated “R.” In addition, there are two instances where movies rated by the MPAA would not be subject to an “R” rating: (1) movies that accurately depict a historical figure who smoked and (2) movies where the negative consequences of smoking are accurately portrayed.

* MPAA website: <http://www.mpa.org/movieratings/about/index.htm>.

SHOWING SMOKING PREVENTION AND EDUCATION ADS IN THEATERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE AVALON THEATER

In 2003, the American Legacy Foundation (Legacy) began a demonstration project through a grant made to the Avalon Theater, the oldest surviving movie theater in Washington, DC. The historic theater opened in 1923 and was run by many operators over the years, most recently by Loews Cineplex Odeon. In early 2001, Loews Cineplex Odeon declared bankruptcy and not only closed the theater but also stripped it of its seats and projection equipment. Residents living in the neighborhood near the theater and elsewhere in Washington, DC, were successful in obtaining historic landmark status for the exterior of the Avalon, but at that point it was still a long way from being operated as a movie theater. Dedicated residents in the neighborhood organized The Avalon Theatre Project, Inc., a nonprofit corporation, to reopen the theater and were able to raise enough money from individuals, local businesses, the District of Columbia, and several foundations to restore the theater's interior. With the help of Legacy, the Avalon finally reopened in April 2003. The partnership between Legacy and the theater allowed implementation of one of the Smoke Free Movies Principles that could be controlled, showing smoking prevention and education advertisements before movies. This principle is also the one of the four that is most likely to meet resistance from movie-going audiences since the others would not be overtly noticeable.

To better understand the opinions of those living in the community near the theater with respect to smoking in the movies, Legacy conducted two surveys. The first survey, conducted in April 2003, was a random sample telephone survey of 800 adults living in the neighborhoods surrounding the theater. The survey found that people living near the theater did not support the current practice

of showing general advertisements such as car or soda commercials before movies in theaters (16% supported). There was strong support for implementation of three of the four principles:

- About 80% felt that antismoking advertisements should be shown prior to movies with smoking to counter their effect on children. Nearly 50% supported the statement that brief antismoking public service announcements (PSAs) should be required before movies with smoking.
- Most people (80%) opposed paid product placement of cigarettes or smoking in the movies, a practice banned by the Master Settlement Agreement of 1998.
- More than half of respondents (56%) opposed the statement that cigarette brands should be allowed to appear in movies.

Although three of the four principles have high levels of support, there was less of support (24%) for the principle that movies with smoking should be rated "R" by the



Photo: Kenneth Wyner

Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). In July 2003, a similar survey of 220 people attending the theater was conducted to see if their views differed from people in the neighborhood, and results were consistent (see Table 1).

The Avalon Theater project demonstrates that screening antismoking ads before movies in theaters can be implemented with a high level of acceptance from the public. Armed with the knowledge that this principle in action can protect children from the negative consequences of exposure to smoking in movies, national movie theaters should follow suit.

The Smoke Free Movies Principles:

1. *Rate New Smoking Movies "R"* — Any film that shows or implies tobacco should be rated "R." The only exceptions should be when the presentation of tobacco clearly and unambiguously reflects the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or is necessary to represent smoking of a real historical figure.
2. *Certify No Pay Offs* — The producers should post a certificate in the credits at the end of the movie declaring that nobody on the production received anything of value (cash money, free cigarettes or other gifts, free publicity, interest-free loans, or anything else) from anyone in exchange for using or displaying tobacco.
3. *Require Strong Antismoking Ads* — Studios and theaters should require a genuinely strong antismoking ad (not one produced by a tobacco company) to run before any film with any tobacco presence, regardless of its MPAA rating.
4. *Stop Identifying Tobacco Brands* — There should be no tobacco brand identification nor the presence of tobacco brand imagery (such as billboards) in the background of any movie scene.

Table 1. Avalon Community Surveys (April 2003)

Question	Avalon Telephone Survey, N=800			Avalon Theater Attendees Survey, N=219		
	% Support/ Strongly Support	% Oppose/ Strongly Oppose	% Neutral/ Other	% Support/ Strongly Support	% Oppose/ Strongly Oppose	% Neutral
To what degree do you support or oppose commercials (such as car commercials) that are shown before movies in the theater?	16	69	15	5	57	37
To what degree do you support or oppose showing brief public service announcements in theaters to counteract the influence of smoking in movies on children?	80	13	8	75	7	18
Movie producers and actors should be allowed to accept money or other items in exchange for including smoking in movies.	14	80	6	8	75	17
Brief public service announcements should be required before movies that show smoking.	49	43	8	50	28	22
Cigarette brands (names and logos) should be allowed to appear in movies.	33	57	10	23	42	35
As with violence and sex, movies with smoking in them should be rated "R."	24	69	7	16	57	27

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

PUBLIC OPINION FROM THE AMERICAN SMOKING AND HEALTH SURVEY

To measure public attitudes with regard to the four principles at the national level, a series of questions was included in Legacy's *American Smoking and Health Survey* (ASHES). ASHES is a random-digit-dial telephone survey designed to provide a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States. The survey measures tobacco use, cessation, and knowledge about secondhand smoke among adults aged 18 and older. Data from 2,849 respondents were collected between May and September 2003.

Respondents were asked the extent to which they supported or opposed the following statements regarding the smoking principles:

1. To what degree do you support or oppose commercials (such as car commercials) that are shown before movies in the theater?
2. To what degree do you support or oppose showing brief PSAs in theaters to counteract the influence of smoking in movies on children?
3. Brief PSAs should be required before movies that show smoking.

4. Movie producers and actors should be allowed to accept money or other items in exchange for including smoking in movies.
5. Cigarette brands (names and logos) should be allowed to appear in movies.
6. As with violence and sex, movies with smoking in them should be rated "R."

Survey results demonstrated generally high levels of support for the Smoke Free Movies Principles. Although respondents were not supportive of other types of advertising before movies (36%), they were supportive of anti-smoking PSAs (74%), and 65% supported requiring anti-smoking PSAs. Nearly half (46%) of survey respondents supported rating movies with smoking "R." Most people (84%) were not in support of allowing producers and actors to accept money or other items in exchange for putting smoking in movies. Only 24% supported allowing cigarette brands to appear in movies, whereas 76% opposed this practice.

Table 2. American Smoking and Health Survey (ASHES) May-September 2003 (N= 2849)

Question	% Support/ Strongly Support	% Oppose/ Strongly Oppose
To what degree do you support or oppose commercials (such as car commercials) that are shown before movies in the theater?	36	61
To what degree do you support or oppose showing brief public service announcements in theaters to counteract the influence of smoking in movies on children?	74	26
Movie producers and actors should be allowed to accept money or other items in exchange for including smoking in movies.	16	84
Brief public service announcements should be required before movies that show smoking.	65	35
Cigarette brands (names and logos) should be allowed to appear in movies.	24	76
As with violence and sex, movies with smoking in them should be rated "R."	46	54

CONCLUSION

Exposure to smoking in movies poses a significant threat to the health of children in the United States. However, the four principles create achievable methods to reduce and even prevent children's exposure. This report highlights the steps that can be taken to protect children from glamorized portrayals of smoking that increase the likelihood that they will begin to smoke. The case study of the Avalon Theater in Washington, DC, shows that the principle of showing antismoking advertisements before movies with smoking can be implemented in a real-world setting. There is significant public support for this principle, and this may be the easiest of the four principles to achieve in the short term. Given that advertisements are already shown prior to movies, an antismoking PSA selected for relevancy to the audience of each movie could be included.

However, some barriers remain to the implementation of this strategy. The most important barrier is that purchasing advertising before movies is expensive and generally not likely to be possible for public health organizations to fund for extensive periods of time. In addition to the significant financial barriers, technological barriers can also impede implementation. Most ads are created in a different format from movies, which requires the ads to be transferred to film or requires the projectionist to switch to film after showing the antismoking ad. One solution would be for movie studios to voluntarily include anti-smoking ads on the distribution reels of all movies they produce that depict smoking.

Another barrier to implementation is developing a mechanism to determine which movies contain

smoking. A selected group would need to prescreen all new movies to determine whether they contained smoking and therefore whether they required an antismoking ad. Should the MPAA decide to give movies with smoking an "R" rating, this problem would be resolved because the "R" rating would be accompanied by an explanation that there was smoking in the movie. In the absence of the "R" rating, theater owners, and especially large chain theaters, should offer advertising space at no cost to public health groups to show effective strong smoking prevention and education advertisements. Given the significant amount of public support, these simple steps could be used as a public relations strategy for the motion picture industry. Not only would these steps be voluntary actions taken at virtually no cost, they would help protect the health of children in the United States. Teens live in an environment filled with positive images of smoking. To the degree that the movie industry can work together with the public health community to reduce exposure to smoking in the movies, we can have a lasting positive impact on the health of our nation's youth.



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FOLLOWING PEOPLE IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:**

Cheryl Heaton, DrPH^{*,**}

Ella Watson-Stryker, BA^{**}

Jennifer Duke, PhD^{**}

Stanton Glantz, PhD[†]

Molly Green, MPH^{**}

Andrew Jessup[‡]

Susan Murchie, MA[‡]

^{*}Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University

^{**}American Legacy Foundation

[†]University of California, San Francisco

[‡]RTI International

