

RESEARCH BRIEF

Understanding the Intersection of COVID-19, 2020's Social Justice Movements, and Menthol and Flavored Tobacco Bans.

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Introduction

Study Background and Summary of Findings

The goal of this study was to understand how support for, and barriers to passing and implementing, comprehensive bans on the sale of menthol tobacco and flavored electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) affect communities of color. The study was conceptualized in the fall of 2019, as many states and municipalities were proposing or enacting bans on flavored vape products in response to the outbreak of lung disease that became known as EVALI. Several communities enacted comprehensive bans on flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes, while many more enacted partial bans.¹ The importance of passing comprehensive bans that include menthol cigarettes became significantly magnified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected communities of color, as well as the growing prominence of the social justice movements in the United States and related concerns around racism, policing and white supremacy.

The results of this research have become even more salient after the announcement in April 2021 that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) would begin banning menthol flavor in cigarettes². Before the FDA can enact this ban, it must navigate a lengthy process of soliciting public comments and extensive rule development. The tobacco industry is already replicating its historically aggressive efforts to oppose the federal menthol ban, and frames bans on menthol tobacco as discriminatory. The findings from this research can inform advocacy and communication strategies to bolster support for the FDA menthol ban, as well as ongoing efforts across the US to enact comprehensive state and local flavored tobacco bans.

Research began in the summer of 2020. NORC undertook a mixed methods research design, which included several in-depth interviews with an advisory panel consisting of researchers, tobacco control practitioners, and menthol policy advocates. The interviews identified priority topics that other national studies have not explored. We conducted four virtual focus groups with youth and young adults across the US, to further explore the priority topics and cognitively test new survey items. In early 2021, we fielded nationally representative surveys of 1,227 youth and 2,642 young adults in the US, over-sampling for respondents who were African-American, LatinX, and tobacco users. The surveys asked about opinions of bans on flavored tobacco products and menthol cigarettes, perceptions about the relationship between policing and the implementation of such bans, exposure to various promotional strategies for flavored tobacco products, and experiences with COVID-19. We also analyzed social media data from Twitter and Reddit, to identify common themes in the online discourse related to bans on flavored tobacco products and menthol cigarettes.

Our findings show that prior to FDA's 2021 policy announcement, there was broad support among youth and young adults for comprehensive flavored tobacco product bans, including menthol cigarettes.

- Over 70% of youth and young adults supported a comprehensive ban on the sale of flavored tobacco, with no differences by race/ethnicity.

- A minority of youth and young adults reported concern about increased policing resulting from flavored vape product or bans of menthol tobacco products, with no significant differences by race/ethnicity.
- Fewer than 20% of youth and 25% of young adults agreed with the statement that tobacco use is a social justice issue, with no differences by race/ethnicity.
- Exposure to tobacco advertising was common among youth and young adults. Regardless of race/ethnicity, respondents reported seeing menthol ads most commonly in pop-culture (i.e., social media, internet, movies/tv/music).
- The social media surveillance showed negligible messaging in support of flavored tobacco bans, juxtaposed by strategic messaging in opposition to such bans, often citing harm reduction and limited government arguments.

Implications of the Research

The findings from this research suggest several opportunities for supporting advocacy and developing communication strategies to bolster support for the FDA menthol ban, and ongoing efforts across the US to enact comprehensive state and local flavored tobacco bans. Given the unfolding evidence that the tobacco industry will again position the menthol ban as discriminatory, it is significant that we found broad support for bans on flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes by all races/ethnicities. The fact that a minority of youth and young adults were concerned about increased policing resulting from such bans is an important benchmark. The tobacco industry is likely to use the prospect of increased policing as a strong argument against the menthol ban. It will be important to continue to monitor public opinion and sentiment related to policing and the bans, in order to assess and counter the impact the industry's efforts.

It was somewhat surprising that so few youth and young adults recognized tobacco use and the promotion of tobacco products as a social justice issue. While researchers and advocates understand very well how the industry's predatory marketing and policy opposition have created and exacerbated disparities in tobacco use and tobacco related disease in communities of color, the fact that this is not well-known among youth and young adults, regardless of race/ethnicity or tobacco use status presents an opportunity for public education and engagement. Further research to better understand how youth and young adults think about tobacco in the context of social justice can better inform both advocacy and communication strategies.

The prominence of messages and accounts on Twitter that oppose any restrictions of flavored tobacco products also presents an opportunity. Engaging in the Twitter discourse to support flavored tobacco bans and counter misinformation and distortions risks significant backlash, but strategic messaging and coalition building could mitigate those risks. On Reddit, menthol user communities seek and provide advice to obtaining or simulating their favorite brands and flavors. Strategic engagement could provide resources for quitting and education about the tobacco industry's history of discriminatory marketing and policy opposition. Ongoing surveillance of

the social media discourse can provide important insight into the industry's strategies to oppose the FDA's menthol ban.

Below, we present more detailed findings across key constructs. NORC also produced an accompanying slide deck with additional detailed results and figures.

Key Takeaways

Tobacco Use

Past 30-Day Prevalence

Our survey (fielded March 4–April 29, 2021) revealed that 21.6% of young adults and 16.0% of youth used any tobacco product in the past 30-days. Most youth (9.2%) and young adults (8.5%) were poly users. For youth, Black non-Hispanic (9.5%) and Hispanic (11.3%) respondents were significantly more likely to be poly users than White non-Hispanic (6.4%) respondents. However, among young adults, White non-Hispanic (10.5%) respondents were more likely to be poly users than Black non-Hispanic (8.8%) or Hispanic (5.0%) respondents.

For additional prevalence rates by race/ethnicity, refer to Slide 2.

Advertisement

Exposure to Tobacco Ads Using Social or Cultural Identity

Approximately 48.5% of youth and 41.6% of young adults reported exposure to tobacco ads that use social or cultural identity in their messaging. We found no significant differences by race/ethnicity in exposure to such ads. This finding is unexpected and unique when considering long-standing evidence indicating the tobacco industry's targeted marketing to communities of color^{3,4}.

More than 75% of youth and young adults agreed with the statement that tobacco companies target young people to start using their products. In focus groups, youth and young adults expressed concern about the influence of promotion on people younger than themselves, but not for themselves.

"I think it's messed up they're taking advantage of younger people. It's not fair to them especially kids don't know what's going on, they just see someone do it and they just go ahead and do it. They don't know what's right and what's wrong. They haven't been taught much about it."

- Current user, 17 years old

For additional focus group and survey results, refer to Slide 3.

Exposure to Menthol Ads

“It’s [marketed] in poor communities, and people of color in different neighborhoods. Where I live in, and it is marketed that way here. If you go to a local convenience store you see nothing but posters for menthol cigarettes.”

- Current user, 15 years old

Our survey found that 37% of youth and 28.3% of young adults indicated seeing menthol cigarette ads in social media, with no significant difference by race/ethnicity. Both groups reported the greatest exposure to menthol cigarette ads in popular culture (i.e., social media, internet, movies/tv/music). Among youth and young adults that reported exposure to menthol cigarette ads on social media, more than 60% of youth and young adults saw posts made

by influencers or celebrities. In focus groups, youth and young adults described seeing celebrities promoting tobacco products. While they noted that tobacco advertising is more prevalent in their communities, they did not view this as targeted at communities of color, but felt this marketing is directed towards low-income communities regardless of race. Only a few acknowledged the intersection between income and race.

Youth and young adults reported lower exposure to menthol cigarette ads in physical locations such as public transportation, magazines/newspapers, bus stops, billboards, or places of purchase. However, Black non-Hispanics and Hispanic respondents reported seeing menthol ads in physical locations more than White non-Hispanic respondents. In addition to the tobacco industry’s historically predatory marketing practices in communities of color and low income communities^{5,6}, differences in exposure to ads for menthol cigarettes between race/ethnicity groups may also be associated with zoning laws, which impact the density, location, or type of tobacco retailers, and thus, the exposure to tobacco marketing⁷⁻⁹.

For additional survey results, refer to Slide 4.

Time Spent on Social Media

Respondents who spent more hours on social media were more likely to have seen menthol ads on social media. Approximately 63% of youth and young adults who spent 1-3 hours on social media saw menthol ads. Our survey revealed that Black non-Hispanic and Hispanic respondents were more likely to spend 3+ hours, compared to White non-Hispanic respondents, on social media, implying greater exposure to menthol ads.

For additional survey results, refer to Slide 4.

Bans and Policy

Support for Bans

Our survey asked respondents about their level of support for the following policies: 1) a ban on the sale of menthol cigarettes, 2) a ban on the sale of menthol-flavored vape products, 3) a ban on the sale of other flavored vape products, and 4) a ban on the sale of all flavored tobacco products. Greater than 70% of youth and 60% of young adults supported these policies, with no significant difference by race/ethnicity. There was no difference in support between respondents who live in areas with comprehensive flavor bans and those with partial or no flavor bans. Our unique findings of youth support for comprehensive bans on the sale of flavored tobacco complements data from research that examined adult support for a policy to ban menthol cigarette sales¹⁰.

In contrast to the survey findings, Twitter data indicated overwhelming opposition to bans led by vaping advocates and tobacco marketing. Many critiqued the ban, while others cited reasons against these policies such as the harm reduction benefits of e-cigarettes and the impact on the economy and small businesses/vape shops. On Reddit, however, users in tobacco communities discussed where they can purchase flavored tobacco products as a result of the ban. The minimal presence of social media messages in support of a ban suggests an opportunity to engage in the social media discourse to raise both awareness and support of bans and counter the anti-ban messaging.

Our study preceded the 2021 FDA menthol ban announcement and revealed that prior to the announcement and related tobacco industry reactions, there was a broad consensus among youth and young adults in support of flavored tobacco bans, including bans on menthol cigarettes.

For additional survey results, refer to Slide 5.

Just reminding @realDonaldTrump @parscale @FDATobacco @CDCgov another 1300 people will die today of cigarette related health issues, meanwhile thousands of small businesses are closing doors over the fault of illegal street drugs. #ivapeivote #VapeBan #flavorban #wevapevote

- Twitter User

In past 3 weeks: -how many jobs lost and bankruptcy filed? -how many businesses closing? -how much tobacco stocks rose and money gained? -how many go back to cigs? -how many died from smoking illness? -how many lives affected and minds changed. Too many. Too much. #WeVapeWeVote

-Twitter User

Effect of Bans

When asked about the anticipated effects of flavored tobacco bans, almost half (47.8%) of youth and young adults believed there would be no change in police interaction with tobacco users or tobacco sellers. Fewer than 30% believed there would be additional consequences such as more use of police interaction, more use of physical force by law enforcement, more criminal penalties or fines for businesses. There was no significant difference by age or by race/ethnicity.

Youth and young adults in the focus groups aligned with the survey results. Many expressed there would be no change, feeling blasé about bans and their effect. One young adult expressed frustration that tobacco companies labeled increased police interaction due to bans a tobacco issue instead of a policing issue. Others described potential unequal application of legislation by the police against communities of color, positioning the issue as a police and racism issue.

“I’m mad they’re making this a tobacco issue and not a police issue... Black people are incarcerated at far higher rates than white people, but they don’t smoke more. Black people don’t smoke more weed than white people, but are incarcerated more than white people. So why are we making it marijuana or tobacco issue rather than a police issue. And we’re not looking at the right problem. Tobacco companies don’t care.”

- Current user, 24 years old

For additional survey results, refer to Slide 6.

COVID-19

Perceptions of Risk for Contracting COVID-19

From our combined sample of youth and young adults, approximately half (46.6%) reported they were extremely or very likely to contract COVID-19, with no significant difference by race/ethnicity or between age groups. Hispanic respondents had higher rates of someone in their household test positive for COVID-19, compared to other groups. Our survey findings illustrate that the race/ethnicity group who are disproportionately afflicted by COVID-19 do not feel at greater risk for contracting the virus.

For additional survey results related to COVID-19, refer to Slide 7.

Tobacco Use during COVID-19

Survey results indicated that youth and young adult tobacco users did not change their habits during COVID-19. Focus groups reflected this finding, where both youth and young adults described minor to no changes in access, product type, and frequency during the pandemic. However, youth indicated easier access and purchasing during the pandemic due to wearing masks as a method of evading getting carded at the time of purchase.

“My friends who can drive, it’s been easier for them. Some of them have started dealing to other friends and it’s easier for us to get them because of the masks. None of them ever get carded or anything. It’s still been pretty easy.”

- Current user, 17 years old

For additional survey results related to COVID-19, refer to Slide 7.

Social Justice

Is Tobacco a Social Justice Issue?

Our survey results revealed that a majority of youth and young adults did not believe tobacco use is a social justice issue. From our survey fewer than 20% of youth and young adults agreed with the statement that tobacco use is a social justice issue. Black non-Hispanic (20.9%) and Hispanic (21.4%) respondents perceived tobacco as a social justice issue more likely than White non-Hispanic (16.1%) respondents, with these differences presenting marginal significance ($p=0.07$). Qualitative survey responses from those that believed that tobacco is a social justice issue revealed reasons related to personal freedoms and choice, predatory tobacco industry marketing, inequities in health and health outcomes, societal or peer pressure, and discrimination of users based on race.

We tested the wording of our questions about social justice in focus groups prior to the surveys and probed youth and young adults’ understandings of social justice in the context of tobacco policy. Despite testing term “social justice,” our findings alluded that researchers’ and adults’ understanding of the term differs than that of youth and young adults. The focus group discussions revealed similar findings to the survey results, where youth and young adults did not recognize tobacco as a social justice issue. One youth described that increased engagement on social media regarding the relationship between tobacco use, tobacco promotion, and social justice is needed before perceiving tobacco as such. While those in the tobacco control community are familiar with the deep-rooted history of industry practices, this presents a space for engagement to bring to the forefront the aggressive tactics towards communities of color and low-income communities.

For additional focus groups and survey results, refer to Slide 8.

“I don’t see it as a social justice issue at all. They’ve been marketing cigarettes for years even before me but it’s something they’ve been doing but it’s more aimed towards kids now. My grandma used to send my mom to the store at 11 or 12 and not get in trouble for it. It has always been going on so it’s not a social justice issue.”

- Current user, 15 years old

Methods

NORC employed a participatory, mixed-methods research design that included stakeholder¹ interviews, consumer focus groups, a nationally representative survey, and social media listening. Twenty thought leaders and tobacco control policy advocates engaged in discussions to inform NORC’s qualitative, quantitative, and social media analyses, as described below.

Qualitative

In-depth interviews with key thought leaders and policy advocates assessed information needs and identified policy priorities, barriers to policy enactment and implementation, and other topics that this research effort could explore, which are not otherwise assessed in national tobacco surveillance surveys. NORC conducted online focus groups with youth and young adults of color to understand their awareness of and perceptions about tobacco policies, tobacco marketing, social justice, and equity. The focus groups also supported limited cognitive testing of potential survey items and general concepts.

Quantitative

Using insights gleaned from the qualitative research, NORC designed a survey fielded to youth and young adults. Our sample drew from the nationally representative AmeriSpeak panel, oversampling for Black and Hispanic Americans and tobacco users. We surveyed a total of 3,870 individuals: 1,227 youth and 2,643 young adults. The web-based survey was fielded over 8 weeks in March and April 2021, and was offered in both English and Spanish.

Social Media

NORC collected social media data from Twitter and Reddit to measure policy advocacy, support and opposition for flavor restrictions around flavored tobacco products and menthol, and policy

¹ At the beginning of the project, we refer to stakeholders as people who are thought leaders, policy advocates, and research partners that we interviewed. We adjusted the language to be more sensitive to equity and inclusion.

proposals and implementation. Through communications with thought leaders, policy advocates and research partners, the social media arm became an environmental scan to showcase findings from the survey and qualitative research.

Definitions

Race-Ethnicity Groups

Some race/ethnicity groups lacked power to conduct in-depth analysis (Table 1). As such, to reveal any differences by race-ethnicity, we conducted analysis on the three groups with the greatest representation in our samples: 1) Hispanic, 2) White, Non-Hispanic, and 3) Black, Non-Hispanic.

Table 1. Number of individuals by race/ethnicity

	Teen	Young Adult	Total
Hispanic	549	1089	1638
White, non-Hispanic	320	661	981
Black, non-Hispanic	294	572	866
Asian, non-Hispanic	21	164	185
Other, non-Hispanic	8	11	19
2+, non-Hispanic	32	146	178
Total	1227	2643	3870

Product Groups

The surveys included questions about respondents' use of seven tobacco products, with some products used by relatively few respondents. We grouped tobacco product use into three categories for analysis: 1) vape only, 2) combustible only, and 3) poly users. Vape only users indicated use of e-cigarettes and/or heat-not-burn (HNB) products. Combustible users indicated use of cigarettes, hookah, cigars, little cigars, and cigarillos (LCCs), loose tobacco, pipe, roll-your-own tobacco (RYO), and/or smokeless tobacco. Poly users indicated use of two or more products.

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