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Teen cigarette smoking drops to historic low in 2015

ANN ARBOR—Cigarette smoking among teens in grades 8, 10 and 12 continued a decades-long decline in 2015 and reached the lowest levels recorded since annual tracking began 41 years ago.

The percentage of students saying that they smoked at all in the prior 30 days fell for the three grades combined from 8.0 percent to 7.0 percent—a statistically significant drop.

This finding comes from the 2015 nationwide Monitoring the Future study, which annually tracks trends in substance use among 8th-, 10th- and 12th-graders. The study surveys more than 40,000 students in about 400 secondary schools each year throughout the contiguous United States and is in its 41st continuous year.

"Since the peak year in 1997, the proportion of students currently smoking has dropped by three quarters—an extremely important development for the health and longevity of this generation of Americans," said Lloyd Johnston, the principal investigator of the study.

Such a reduction can translate eventually into preventing hundreds of thousands of premature deaths as well as many serious diseases, he said. More than 400,000 Americans per year are estimated to die prematurely as a result of smoking cigarettes.

Concerted efforts to reduce youth smoking appear to be paying off. These have included increased taxes on tobacco products, restrictions on advertising and promotion, limiting where smoking is permitted, broad-based anti-smoking ad campaigns, educational programs in schools, removal of added flavoring to cigarettes (except menthol), and quit-smoking programs and products becoming more available. Increases in the price of cigarettes charged by manufacturers have also played an important role.

The study found that between 2014 and 2015 the percentage of students reporting any cigarette smoking in the prior 30 days (called 30-day prevalence) has decreased among 8th-graders from 4.0 percent to 3.6 percent, among 10th-graders from 7.2 percent to 6.3 percent, and among 12th-graders from 13.6 percent to 11.4 percent (the decline in 30-day prevalence between 2014 and 2015 is statistically significant for 12th-graders and for all three grades combined; longer-term declines across the past five years are highly statistically significant in all grades).

"While the improvements in the smoking numbers for just this one year are important, of course, the longer-term declines are much more so," Johnston said. "Since teen smoking reached a peak around 1996-1997, the levels of past 30-day smoking have fallen by nearly 80 percent among 8th- and 10th-graders, and by almost 70 percent among 12th-graders. Further, the proportional declines in daily smoking are even larger."

One important cause of these declines in current smoking is that many fewer young people today have ever started to smoke. In 1996, 49 percent of 8th-graders said they had tried cigarettes, but by 2015 only 13 percent said they had done so—a drop of almost three-quarters in smoking initiation over the past two decades.

Perceived Availability. Students in 8th and 10th grades are asked how difficult they think it would be for them to get cigarettes, if they wanted them. This perceived availability has shown a substantial decline since 1996. The 8th-graders have shown the sharpest decline—from 77 percent saying they could get cigarettes "fairly easily" or "very easily" in 1996 to 47 percent by 2015. Perceived availability among 10th-graders fell from about 90 percent to 67 percent over the same interval.

"Although some real progress has been made in reducing the availability of cigarettes to those who are underage—particularly to the youngest teens—it is clear that a substantial portion still think they can get cigarettes fairly easily," Johnston said.

Attitudes and Beliefs about Smoking. Nearly two thirds of 8th-graders and about three-quarters of 10th- and 12th-graders said they see a great risk of harm to the user from pack-a-day smoking.

These figures have increased substantially since the mid-1990s, when perceived risk was at its recent lowest levels. The 2015 figures were the highest ever recorded for 8th- and 10th-grade students. In 12th grade, perceived risk dropped slightly in 2015—it has hovered at around 75 percent for the past decade.

"The fact that perceived risk—an important deterrent of use—is lower among the younger students is unfortunate, since it is in those early teen years that smoking tends to begin," Johnston said.

Other attitudes toward smoking and smokers have changed in important ways, especially during much of the period of decline in cigarette use. These changes include increases in preferring to date nonsmokers (currently between 73 percent and 82 percent of teens report this preference), thinking that becoming a smoker reflects poor judgment, and believing that smoking is a dirty habit. All of these negative attitudes about smoking and smokers rose to high levels by 2007, where they remain or have dropped off slightly since then.

"Youth cigarette smoking is moving in the right direction," Johnston said. "But each new generation that comes of age needs to be warned of the dangers of cigarette smoking, or we risk returning to the high levels of smoking we have seen in the past. Further, the study now finds that many students are smoking tobacco in forms other than cigarettes, such as cigarillos."

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Monitoring the Future has been funded under a series of competing, investigator-initiated research grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, one of the National Institutes of Health. The lead investigators are Lloyd Johnston (principal investigator), Patrick O'Malley, Jerald Bachman, John Schulenberg and Richard Miech—all research professors at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Surveys of nationally representative samples of American high school seniors were begun in 1975, making the class of 2015 the 41st such class surveyed. Surveys of 8th- and 10th-graders were added to the design in 1991, making the 2015 nationally representative samples the 25th such classes surveyed. The 2015 samples total 44,892 students located in 382 secondary schools. The samples are drawn separately at each grade level to be representative of students in that grade in public and private secondary schools across the coterminous United States.

The findings summarized here will be published in January in a forthcoming volume: Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Miech, R.A., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2016). *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2015*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan. The content presented here is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, or the National Institutes of Health.