

Of Mice and Menthol: Rethinking Well-Intentioned but Insufficient Strategies to Counteract Tobacco Use and Promotion in Minority Populations

Purpose: Banning mentholated cigarettes has become an advocacy issue because they have been disproportionately promoted to African-American and Hispanic consumers for decades. These populations are now the largest consumers of menthol brands. There is an urgent need for clinicians to educate their patients that menthol cigarettes are no less harmful than non-menthol brands.

Background: Although San Francisco banned the sale of menthol cigarettes in 2017, the net impact of opposing menthol has been mostly symbolic. The need to fight for a menthol ban in each locality could have been avoided had it been included in legislation passed in 2009 by Congress to let the Food and Drug Administration regulate tobacco products, but cigarette maker Philip Morris threatened to withdraw its support for the bill.

Methods: Castigating tobacco companies for targeting menthol brands to minorities has overshadowed the public health goal of reducing tobacco use and promotion as a whole. Campaigns that condemned specific cigarette brands marketed to minorities (eg, Uptown, Menthol X, and Kool Mixx) have focused so intensely on the aspect of racial targeting that they insufficiently emphasized the health and economic harm in smoking any brand of cigarettes. Thus little has been accomplished to reduce smoking's health impact by the focus on menthol.

Results: Scant new federal or state legislation on smoking has been proposed or enacted to help reduce smoking in minority communities. Existing programs have largely failed to elucidate the relative impact of smoking on minority communities compared to other emerging health threats such as obesity, drug use, and AIDS. Few minority business leaders have been enlisted in the effort to reduce smoking in minority communities. Groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League continue to accept tobacco industry funds and have not supported aggressive anti-smoking campaigns. Leading black publications such as EBONY continue to accept cigarette advertising and have never published articles on smoking. In 2018, the author curated an exhibition "Of Mice and Menthol: The Targeting of African Americans by the Tobacco Industry" (<https://csts.ua.edu/minorities/>) that explores the frustrating history of this subject.

Conclusion: Rethinking strategies to counteract tobacco use and promotion in minority populations is urgently needed.

Learning Objective #1: Participants will name the two top-selling cigarette brands among African Americans and two national African American civic organizations that have re

Learning Objective #2: Participants will cite three successful efforts to counter tobacco promotions to African Americans.

Learning Objective #3: Participants will list three reasons why a federal ban on menthol is unlikely to happen.