

THE TOBACCO FREE TIMES



The African Americanization of Menthol Cigarettes

By Jennifer Hill

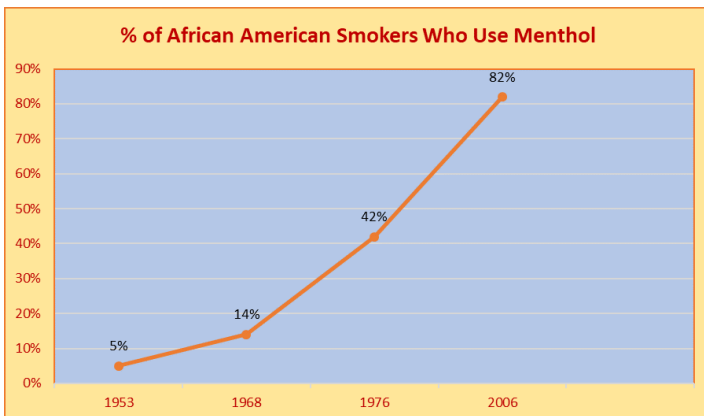
Almost 70 years ago, the tobacco industry launched a marketing strategy that targeted the U.S. Black population as the new smokers of menthol cigarettes. As the graph to the right shows, the overwhelming majority of African American smokers smoke menthol cigarettes, about triple the percentage of white menthol smokers.

For African Americans, the tobacco industry’s success has been deadly. Among the numerous grim outcomes, 45,000 African Americans die annually from preventable, tobacco-related diseases. They die of those diseases at a higher rate than whites despite smoking at a lower rate. Black men, the main target of menthol cigarette ads, have the highest rate of lung cancer of any demographic group.

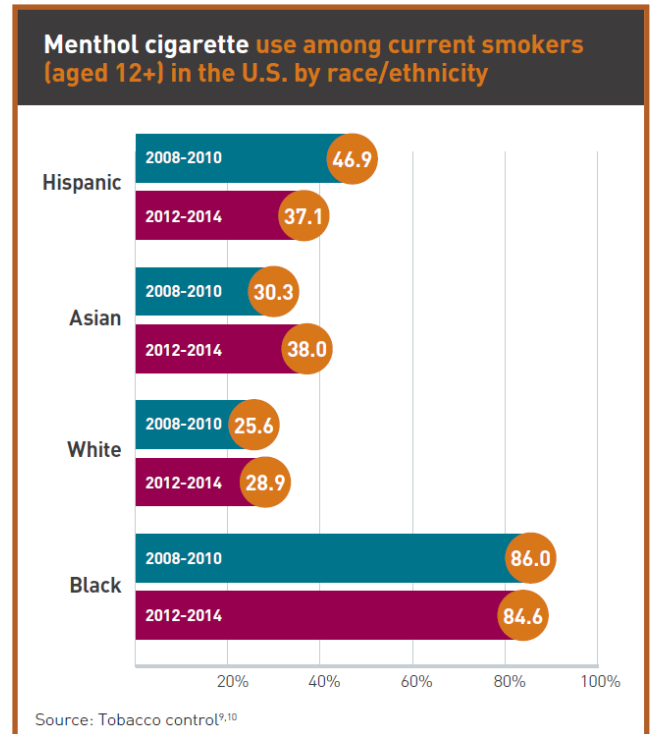
In a 15-minute 2017 documentary, *Black Lives, Black Lungs*, produced by [Truth Initiative](#), a nonprofit that engages young people to end nicotine addiction, behavioral health scientists and young advocates explain how the tobacco industry achieved “the African Americanization of menthol cigarettes.”

In the film, Dr. Phillip Gardiner, an expert on behavioral health and African Americans’ tobacco use, traces the history of the tobacco industry’s marketing campaign. A timeline, replicated below, shows that when the tobacco industry began marketing menthol cigarettes to African Americans in 1953, **only 5%** of African American smokers ages 12 and up smoked menthol. Sixty years later, in 2006, **82% smoked menthol cigarettes.**

Tobacco companies achieved this exponential growth, Gardiner explains, by being among the first white-run businesses to use Black actors and models in menthol cigarette ads and to hire



Source: *Black Lives, Black Lungs*, www.truthinitiative.org



Black people for executive positions, all during the Jim Crowe era.

They did more than just advertise, though. “[T]he tobacco industry strategically and successfully infiltrated [Black] communities,” says Lincoln Monday, who created the film when he interned for Truth Initiative. It sent representatives into Black communities to establish close relationships with respected Black organizations, institutions, churches, and leaders, and importantly, poured money into otherwise empty coffers. In the 1970s, tobacco company vans drove into predominantly African American neighborhoods and passed out free menthol cigarettes.

Those historical ties and funding of prominent Black organizations, including those leading the Civil Rights movement, have remained.

“Unfortunately, [about] 90% of all civil, religious, political, social organizations take money from the tobacco industry,” Gardiner says.

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The African Americanization of menthol cigarettes has had a devastating impact on Black people because menthol makes it easier to start smoking and harder to quit than non-flavored cigarettes. Menthol's minty flavor masks the harsh taste of tobacco, making it more appealing to new smokers. The anesthetic effect of menthol also allows smokers to inhale more deeply and hold the smoke in the lungs longer. As a result, menthol smokers increase their exposure to dangerous chemicals in smoke and become more highly addicted to nicotine than non-menthol smokers, making smoking more deadly and more difficult to quit.

It's no wonder that scientific studies show significantly reduced rates of quitting among African-Americans compared with other racial and ethnic groups who are more likely to smoke non-flavored cigarettes. That lower rate is de-

spite a higher percentage of African Americans (72.8%) than of whites (67.5%) reporting they want to quit smoking. And that has meant a larger rate of African Americans are dying from tobacco use than other racial and ethnic groups.

In the era of Black Lives Matter, the tobacco industry's disproportionate marketing of menthol tobacco products to African Americans has become a social justice issue, especially for Black teenagers and young adults. Mondy decided to make *Black Lives*, *Black Lungs*, so he could channel his anger into fighting the tobacco companies. Another student activist in the film, Julie Osagie, compared it to police violence against Black people.

"Black Lives Matter. Hands up, don't shoot. I can't breathe. I think we're all asking the same question," she said. "What is the worth of a black body in the United States of America?"

Pandemic Offers Opportunity for Youth to Quit Vaping

By Christopher Bradley

Young people's use of e-cigarettes has reached alarming highs. Popular products such as Juul received nationwide coverage, with slick youth-oriented designs, desirable flavors and high levels of fast-acting nicotine. New York State's 2018 Youth Tobacco Survey found that [27% of high school students reported current use of e-cigarettes and similar devices, a 160% increase from the 2014 prevalence of 10.4%](#). In September 2018, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration declared youth use of electronic cigarettes to be a national epidemic.

Ironically, the biggest threat to community health in 100 years, the COVID pandemic, has offered an opportunity to reduce the potentially large threat to community health posed by the e-cigarette epidemic. Researchers at Stanford University and the University of California San Francisco captured self-reported vaping habits of [2,167 teen and young-adult e-cigarette users](#) in May 2020, two months after the national emergency was declared. Over half of the respondents reported changing their use of vaping products, with 68 percent of those reporting that they had reduced their use or quit. One reason was the inability to purchase the products.

Another factor for reduced use may likely may be tobacco users' perception that e-cigarette use increases susceptibility to COVID-19. In fact, a recent [Stanford](#) University study showed a COVID-19 diagnosis was five times more likely for those using only e-cigarettes and seven times more likely for users of both e-cigarettes and cigarettes than for those using neither e-cigarettes nor traditional cigarettes.

Youth have undergone dramatic changes in their learning structure and have been challenged to adapt to distanced learning for almost a year. The change in learning structure has had an immediate yet understudied effect on middle and high school students' use of e-cigarette products. Although these studies' findings are preliminary, they point to potential barriers for students obtaining e-cigarettes in the remote learning environment as well as students perceiving the higher risk of contracting COVID-19 if they use them.



New York State offers free help to teens and young adults (ages 13-24) to quit vaping. They simply text "**DROPTHEVAPE**" to [88709](#) to join *This Is Quitting*, a free texting support program.

Reality Check, a youth-led, adult-supported program of Tobacco Free Communities of Delaware, Otsego & Schoharie, can also aid parents and youth leaders in this effort. Contact Youth Engagement Coordinator Christopher Bradley at 518-944-0773 or christopher.bradley@sphp.com