

Pitt study says black Americans exposed to more tobacco advertising

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By Bill Toland, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Black Americans -- and the neighborhoods they inhabit -- are historically more likely to be targeted by tobacco advertisements than are white men and women, according to a University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine study being published this month.

The report is not earth-shaking, as previous research as well as unearthed tobacco industry documents have shown that blacks and other minorities were increasingly seduced by tobacco ads, especially after the 1970s when smoking rates began to drop among middle-class white populations. It's long been established, for example, that blacks were targeted more aggressively than white smokers by the purveyors of mentholized cigarettes.

The Pitt report sought to enumerate that known advertising strategy by counting the total ads found in a given market, extracting the tobacco-related ads, then correlating that data with the population of that market.

"We were able to quantify it a little bit better," said Dr. Brian Primack, lead author of the report, which contained no original research but instead culled data presented in other peer-review studies.

The data came from markets in California, Illinois, Missouri, South Carolina, Massachusetts and elsewhere.

"Per person, there are 2.6 times as many ads" in black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods, the data showed. That means if a white neighborhood had 1,000 tobacco ads, a black neighborhood would have 2,600.

But what if there were more billboard and display ads overall in black neighborhoods? Pitt accounted for that possibility by counting not just the total number of ads per capita, but also the number of tobacco ads compared with all the others -- for cola, doughnuts, coffee, beef jerky and so on. The proportion of tobacco ads to non-tobacco ads was 70 percent higher in the black neighborhoods.

The glaring hole in the research is the lack of data concerning modern-day advertising techniques, now that tobacco ads have been banned from radio, TV and billboards. Some of the data culled by the Pitt team goes back 20 years, when billboard tobacco ads were still legal.

Today, tobacco marketing has shifted away from billboards and TV and into magazines, the Internet, even bars, where bubbly young women will offer free smokes or merchandise to people willing to give up their names and e-mail addresses.

"That's something that definitely comes out of our article," Dr. Primack said. "We need to start looking at these things."

The Pitt findings are buttressed by anecdotal documents released by the tobacco companies and Congress over the last decade. One 1973 Brown & Williamson document, for example, showed 17 percent of the company's promotional budget for Kools was spent on marketing to blacks, who made up 10 percent of the population, according to a New York Times story.

Kools made a specific effort to market on buses and subways, since blacks disproportionately rely on public transit in most major cities, in hopes that Kool would "cover the top 25 markets in terms of absolute Negroes."

A 1969 report from R.J. Reynolds, detailing buying habits of "ethnic markets," contained similarly anachronistic terminology. The documents were embarrassing to tobacco companies, even though it's true that almost any company with a national advertising budget is likely to use a variety of marketing campaigns targeting specific consumer segments, including black customers.

The Pitt study is being published in the September/October issue of Public Health Reports, a peer-reviewed health journal that often publishes research related to tobacco control.

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