

Why ending menthol cigarette sales would benefit disproportionately affected groups

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The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) proposal to end the sale of menthol cigarettes has the potential to save millions of lives, including many of disproportionately affected populations.

“The proposed rules [to end menthol cigarettes and flavored cigar sales] would help prevent children from becoming the next generation of smokers and help adult smokers quit. Additionally, the proposed rules represent an important step to advance health equity by significantly reducing tobacco-related health disparities,” [said](#) Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra.

Here are several disproportionately affected populations who will benefit if menthol cigarettes are removed from the market.



African Americans

The tobacco industry has strategically and aggressively targeted the Black community with menthol cigarettes for decades, including placing more advertising in predominantly Black neighborhoods and in publications that are popular

with Black audiences. The industry has also appropriated culture in marketing, including sponsoring events such as jazz and hip-hop festivals. Today, **nearly 9 in 10 Black smokers use menthol cigarettes**.

Black smokers have a harder time quitting smoking and die at higher rates from tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and stroke. The FDA has stated that “324,000 to 654,000 smoking attributable deaths overall (92,000 to 283,000 among African Americans) would be avoided over the course of 40 years.”

Hispanic/Latino Americans

In the 1970s and 1980s, the tobacco industry began to develop interest in the growing Hispanic/Latino population and **launch related marketing initiatives**. Internal documents revealed the industry’s interest in the community was because they deemed the population “lucrative,” “easy to reach,” and “undermarketed.” More recently, the industry has sponsored Hispanic/Latino cultural events, provided scholarships, and made contributions to Hispanic/Latino political action committees – in addition to compensating Hispanic/Latino merchants for displaying advertisements in predominantly Hispanic/Latino communities.

Nearly 1 in 10 Hispanic/Latino adults currently smoke cigarettes. Although this is lower than the national smoking rate of 13.7%, **more than 43,000 Hispanic/Latino Americans** are diagnosed with a tobacco-related cancer each year and more than 18,000 die as a result. From 2008 to 2010, menthol cigarette use among young adult current smokers (ages 18 to 25) was 47.3% among Hispanics. Tobacco use among Hispanic/Latino youth is also cause for concern. **Current use of any tobacco product** was 17.2% among Hispanic middle and high school students in 2020, versus 13.2% for non-Hispanic Black and 10.1% for non-Hispanic students of other races. Studies show significantly reduced rates of quitting among African American and Hispanic menthol smokers compared with non-menthol smokers.

The LGBT community

Since as early as the 1990s, the tobacco industry has used a multitude of methods to **target the LGBT community**, including advertising in LGBT publications, depicting tobacco use as a normal part of LGBT life, using corporate philanthropy as evidence of its support of the LGBT community, participating in giveaways, and hosting community outreach efforts (e.g. “LGBT bar nights” featuring specific cigarette brands). In 1995, the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds created a marketing strategy called “Project SCUM” (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing) to boost cigarette sales by targeting gay men and homeless individuals with advertisements and displays placed in communities and stores.

Today, LGBT smokers are significantly more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes. More than 36% of LGBT smokers report that they usually smoke menthols, which are easier to use and harder to quit, compared to 29% of heterosexual/straight smokers. Current tobacco use among LGB students is 14.2%, compared to 7.9% among heterosexual students, and 18.9% among transgender students, compared to 8.2% among cisgender students. Transgender youth reported using cigarettes at **4x the rate** of cisgender youth. Removing menthol cigarettes could help stop the cycle of addiction among LGBT youth.

Women

The tobacco industry has a long history of targeting women with **menthol cigarettes** and **continues to target women** with cigarette advertising themes related to sex appeal, independence, and stylishness, among others. By the 1960s, tobacco companies began capitalizing on a growing women’s movement by marketing cigarettes with slogans like “It’s a woman thing” and “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

Today in the U.S., 1 in 8 women is a smoker and is nine percent **more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes** (44%) than a man who smokes (35%). Although overall smoking rates have decreased over the years, they have not dropped as quickly for women as for men. Since 2005, smoking rates among women have declined by 25.4%, compared with a 26.8% decline among men. Every year, smoking-related diseases kill more than 200,000 women, making it the largest preventable cause of death among women in the U.S.

People with mental illness

Menthol cigarette smoking is also more prevalent among those with **mental illness**. People with mental health conditions and substance use disorders are **estimated to account for 40%** of cigarettes smoked in the U.S., despite only making up 25% of the population.

The tobacco industry has invested significant resources to connect tobacco with mental health, including giving away cigarettes to psychiatric facilities, supporting research that positions cigarettes as a way to self-medicate, and using stress relief themes in marketing. Tobacco users who currently used menthol-flavored tobacco products reported anxiety and depression at higher prevalence than non-menthol tobacco users. Menthol cigarette use also was correlated with more lifetime psychiatric hospitalizations in a study of young adult smokers with severe mental illness.

Truth Initiative **research** shows most adults (56.4%) support a federal ban on menthol cigarettes, the last remaining flavored cigarette still sold in the U.S. Support was especially strong among African-Americans (60.5%), women (62.5%), and Hispanic/Latinos (69.3%). More than 1 in 4 current menthol smokers (28.5%) favored a ban.

The public comment period for the FDA proposed rules on menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars ended on Aug. 2, 2022. Truth Initiative submitted comments on both rules and joined 103 other organizations in submitting joint comments. Truth Initiative urges the FDA to finalize and implement its regulations expeditiously to turn its decisions into life-saving action.

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