

On-screen Smoking by Movie Stars Leads Young Teens to Smoke, Says Moores UCSD Cancer Center Study

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Teenage girls who have never smoked, never even puffed on a cigarette, are far more likely to start smoking if their favorite movie star smokes in movies, according to a 3-year study published in the July issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, the most-cited public health journal.

The study's authors conclude that on-screen smoking by popular actors is undermining public health efforts to keep children from smoking.

"We've heard for years that big-screen movies influence kids to smoke, and we wanted to know if that is true," said John Pierce, Ph.D., director of the Cancer Prevention and Control Program at the Rebecca and John Moores UCSD Cancer Center. "Our results were very strong, showing that if the movie stars smoke, especially in romance films, they are effectively encouraging young girls to smoke."

As part of the 1996 California Tobacco Survey – a random telephone survey of households in California – the researchers asked approximately 3,000 12-to-15-year-olds who had never smoked to name their favorite male and female screen actors. One-third of those surveyed named actors who smoked in the movies.

The researchers then ranked the top 10 favorite actors separately for male and female adolescents. All the films featuring these stars in the three years before the survey (1994-96) were viewed and classified according to whether or not the star smoked on-screen. Taking a conservative approach, the researchers considered only the films of the most nominated stars, and did not identify a star as smoking on-screen unless the star smoked in two separate movies in the three-year period.

"These criteria would be expected to significantly underestimate exposure levels and to bias the analysis toward finding no effect of on-screen smoking among movie stars," the authors wrote.

Still, girls whose favorite star smoked on-screen were 80 percent more likely to smoke by the time of the follow-up interview than their counterparts whose favorite star did not smoke on-

screen. This finding was reached after researchers accounted for other independent predictors such as peer smoking, tobacco advertising and promotions, and parental disapproval of smoking. After similar analyses to identify independent predictors among boys, the researchers found little change attributable to on-screen smoking.

“The lack of this effect among boys, we believe, is associated with movie genre preferences,” Pierce said. “Girls tend to like romance movies, where smoking is common. Boys prefer action films, which contain lower levels of star smoking.”

Pierce added that the timeframe of the study also might have played a role. In 1996, the period covered by this study, the tobacco marketing strategy of using promotional items was at its peak. Boys in the study proved much more receptive than girls to this marketing practice, which may have overshadowed the influence of on-screen smoking. In 1998, the tobacco industry agreed to discontinue this type of marketing as part of a settlement of lawsuits with State Attorneys General.

Pierce noted that earlier, in the late 1980s, the tobacco industry made another agreement with Congress: It would stop marketing cigarettes in movies (1). Tobacco industry records show that no money was spent on these activities throughout the 1990s, yet smoking in movies increased throughout that time period (2).

“This raises the question of who is responsible for the recent increases in smoking in the movies, and, particularly in light of these new study results, what actions might be necessary to discourage it in the future,” he said.

Co-authors on the study are Janet Distefan, Ph.D., formerly of the Cancer Center’s Cancer Prevention and Control Program, and Elizabeth Gilpin, M.S., currently with the Program. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of California Tobacco Related Disease Research Program funded this study.

Founded in 1979, the Rebecca and John Moores UCSD Cancer Center is one of just 38 centers in the United States to hold a National Cancer Institute (NCI) designation as a Comprehensive Cancer Center. As such, it ranks among the top centers in the nation conducting basic, clinical and population cancer research, providing advanced patient care and serving the community through outreach and education programs.

1.SL Snyder, Movies and product placement: is Hollywood turning films into commercial speech?. *Univ Illinois Law Review* **1** (1992), pp. 301–337

2.Glantz SA, Kacirk KW, McCulloch C. Back to the future: Smoking in movies in 2002 compared with 1950 levels. *AJPH* 2004 94:261-263

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