

Winning the war against teen smoking

Here's a breathtaking statistic: Teen smoking has plummeted by half or more in just five years. Half!

More teens than ever are wising up to the dangers of tobacco and shunning cigarettes, according to the latest survey from the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future study.

The just-released government-sponsored survey found that 1.3 percent of eighth-graders report smoking cigarettes daily, down from 2.9 percent five years ago, while 3 percent of 10th graders smoked, down from 6.6 percent five years ago. The same pattern held for 12th graders: 5.5 percent smoke regularly, a spectacular decline from 10.7 percent in 2010.

Researchers are quick to note that this isn't all good news, that some kids have switched from cigarettes to vaping — e-cigarettes — over the past few years. But even with that worrisome rise, these numbers show that the nationwide campaign to make smoking less cool in every way continues to gain momentum.

How did this happen?

Raising prices on cigarettes helps keep them out of the hands of youngsters. Teens in surveys say cigarettes are increasingly hard to get.

Bans on smoking in restaurants, stadiums, even parks and beaches, cut teen opportunities to light up.

Public education campaigns that level with teens also seem to help. One San Francisco 17-year-old told *The Wall Street Journal*: "It seems stupid to do something that could give you cancer. It has a stigma." Cigarettes, once the epitome of cool, now demoted in the fickle eyes of America's teens? What better evidence to conclude that America is winning this war against teen smoking?

[The scourge of secondhand smoke](#)

Note the tense, however: *is winning*. Not: *has won*.

"In 41 years of study, this is the lowest it has ever been, we're in uncharted waters here," University of Michigan Institute for Social Research professor Richard Miech, tells us. "I don't think anyone knows how low it could go."

Let's find out.



Parents, educators, public health advocates are still waging this war, school by school, class by class, puff by puff. Too many teens still light up every year. Too many start down a path that will bring a lifetime of addiction and, at the end of it, likely a premature death.

Chilling statistic from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: "If smoking continues at the current rate among youth in this country, 5.6 million of today's Americans younger than 18 will die early from a smoking-related illness. That's about 1 of every 13 Americans aged 17 years or younger alive today."

Miech, who is a co-investigator for the Monitoring the Future study, reminds us that a continued steady decline in the

smoking rate among teens isn't a foregone conclusion: Back in the early 1990s, after years of decline, the smoking rate suddenly began to trend upward again, year after year. Researchers call that period the "1990s drug relapse" because adolescent use of almost all drugs increased.

Smoking rate falls but still high among poor and less educated

Researchers speculate that the smoking surge in the 1990s happened because of "generational forgetting," in which people got complacent after a long, slow decline in drug use. There was "false confidence that programs and policies targeted at reducing drug use were no longer necessary," Miech tells us.

They were. The anti-smoking trends reversed course with tougher policies around 2000.

With e-cigarettes gaining momentum, some researchers worry that another "relapse" could be near, as teens take up the nicotine habit in greater numbers. All the more reason to ratchet up the anti-smoking pressure. One idea to consider: Hike the age that people can legally buy cigarettes to 21. Studies suggest that would put cigarettes out of reach of more kids.

In 1997, nearly 25 percent of 12th-graders smoked, according to the Michigan survey. Today, that number is 5 percent. Target: Zero. Keep up the pressure.

