

Big Tobacco Targets the LGBTQ+ Community



While overall smoking rates have declined in recent years, smoking rates remain higher among specific subpopulations, including the LGBTQ+ community. These differences are in large part due to the tobacco industry's targeted marketing through advertising, price discounting and other strategies.ⁱ Every year the tobacco industry spends \$8.4 billion in the United States marketing cigarettes and smokeless tobacco alone, not including their other deadly and addictive products.ⁱⁱ

Tobacco Use in the LGBTQ+ Community

Individuals who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual use tobacco at higher rates than those who are straight and those who are transgender use tobacco at higher rates than cisgender individuals. In 2021, lesbian, gay, or bisexual high school students used tobacco products at nearly double the rate of straight students, 17.4% and 11.4% respectively.ⁱⁱⁱ Further, in 2021, 24.5% of transgender high school students used tobacco products, more than twice the rate as their cisgender peers, 11.7% of whom used tobacco products.^{iv} In 2020 smoking rates among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults in the US were significantly higher than rates for straight adults, 16.1% and 12.3% respectively.^v Over half (54.5%) of lesbian or gay adults who smoke use menthol cigarettes, a higher rate than straight adults who smoke.^{vi} There is limited data available on smoking rates among transgender adults; however, one study found higher smoking rates among transgender adults than cisgender adults.^{vii viii}

Every year tens of thousands of LGBT persons die from tobacco-related diseases.^{xi}

Tobacco Industry Targeting of LGBTQ+ Communities

Big Tobacco has targeted LGBTQ+ communities with a variety of deceptive marketing tactics for decades, and it has paid off in billions of dollars in sales for the tobacco industry while costing thousands of lives. In fact, LGBT adults spend over \$2.6 billion on cigarettes each year.^{ix} Starting in the 1990s Big Tobacco has targeted LGBTQ+ communities by:

- Developing marketing materials targeted at the LGBTQ+ community before most other industries.^x
- Designing advertisements for LGBTQ+ publications that depict tobacco use as a “normal” part of LGBTQ+ life.^{xi}
- In 1995, one tobacco company created a marketing strategy known as “Project SCUM” or subculture urban marketing targeted at gay men and individuals experiencing homelessness in San Francisco.^{xii}
- Using corporate philanthropy to demonstrate support of the LGBTQ+ community, another tobacco company settled a boycott by pledging a large donation to AIDS research, gaining them access to the LGBTQ+ market.^{xiii}
- Hosting promotions including LGBTQ+ bar nights featuring specific cigarette brands.^{xiv}
- Sponsoring events at pride festivals. For example, one cigarette brand sponsored more than a dozen events at San Francisco’s pride festival alone in 2000.^{xv}
- Promoting menthol cigarettes which are easier to use and harder to quit.^{xvi}

“High rates of tobacco use within the LGBT community are due in part to the aggressive marketing by tobacco companies that sponsor events, bar promotions, giveaways, and advertisements.” – *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

Big Tobacco’s Deceptive and Targeted Marketing Costs Lives

Big Tobacco’s deceptive marketing practices, including using flavors such as menthol, continue to incentivize tobacco use among LGBTQ+ communities and other populations, causing these groups to shoulder a disproportionate share of the real cost of tobacco use. Smoking harms nearly every organ in the body and remains the number one cause of preventable death.^{xvii} Smoking is the single largest contributing risk factor to cancer in the United States, increasing the risk of at least 12 cancers.^{xviii}

Smoking causes approximately 30% of cancer deaths.^{xxi}

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- ⁱ The Truth Initiative, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, American Heart Association and American Stroke Association, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Lung Association, Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. A report entitled *Broken Promises to Our Children: A State-By-State Look at the 1998 State Tobacco Settlement 19 Years Later*. December, 2017. Available on-line at: <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/what-we-do/us/statereport>.
- ⁱⁱ U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Cigarette Report for 2020, 2021 <https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/reports/federal-trade-commission-cigarette-report-2020-smokeless-tobacco-report2020/p114508fy20cigarettereport.pdf> [data for top 5 manufacturers only]; FTC, Smokeless Tobacco Report for 2020, 2021, <https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/reports/federal-trade-commission-cigarette-report-2020-smokeless-tobacco-report2020/p114508fy20smokelesstobacco.pdf> [Data for top 5 manufacturers only].
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gentzke AS, Wang TW, Cornelius M, et al. Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students — National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-5):1–29. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7105a1external icon>
- ^{iv} Gentzke AS, Wang TW, Cornelius M, et al. Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students — National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-5):1–29. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7105a1external icon>
- ^v Cornelius ME, Loretan CG, Wang TW, Jamal A, Homa DM. Tobacco Product Use Among Adults — United States, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2022;71:397–405. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7111a1>
- ^{vi} National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2020, 2019-2020, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Data Archive; <https://pdas.samhsa.gov/#/>
- ^{vii} Buchting FO, Emory KT, Scout, Kim Y, Fagan P, Vera LE, Emery S. Transgender Use of Cigarettes, Cigars, and E-cigarettes in a National Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* July 2017.
- ^{viii} FDA. Tobacco Use in the LGBT Community: A Public Health Issue. <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/health-information/tobacco-use-lgbt-community-public-health-issue>
- ^{ix} National LGBT Cancer Network. Outlasting is an Act of Self-Love. A guide to helping you reimagine a smoke-free future. <https://cancer-network.org/outlast-tobacco/>
- ^x American Lung Association. Smoking Out a Deadly Threat: Tobacco Use in the LGBT Community. 2010. <http://www.lung.org/assets/documents/research/lgbt-report.pdf>
- ^{xi} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons and Tobacco Use. Updated February 28, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/disparities/lgbt/index.htm>
- ^{xii} The Truth Initiative. Tobacco Use in LGBT Communities. February 2018. <https://truthinitiative.org/news/tobacco-social-justice-issue-smoking-and-lgbt-communities>. See Also American Lung Association. Smoking Out a Deadly Threat: Tobacco Use in the LGBT Community. 2010. <http://www.lung.org/assets/documents/research/lgbt-report.pdf>
- ^{xiii} The Truth Initiative. Tobacco Use in LGBT Communities. February 2018. <https://truthinitiative.org/news/tobacco-social-justice-issue-smoking-and-lgbt-communities>. See also Ramirez A. Philip Morris to Increase AIDS Donations. *The New York Times*. 05/30/1991, 1991; Company News.
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- ^{xv} The Truth Initiative. One Trend That's Changing Pride Festivals for the Better. 2017. <https://truthinitiative.org/news/one-trend-changing-pride-festivals-better>
- ^{xvi} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons and Tobacco Use. Updated February 28, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/disparities/lgbt/index.htm>
- ^{xvii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Health Effects of Cigarette Smoking. Updated October 29, 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/health_effects/effects_cig_smoking/
- ^{xviii} American Cancer Society. *Cancer Facts and Figures 2022*. Atlanta, Georgia. 2022.