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Why Smoking Rates Are at New Lows

By **SOPHIE EGAN**

The smoking rate among adults in the United States has dropped again, an encouraging trend that experts on smoking cessation attribute to public policies like smoke-free air laws and cigarette taxes, as well as media campaigns and less exposure to smoking in movies.

Eighteen percent of American adults were cigarette smokers in 2012, according to a [report](#) released last week by the National Center for Health Statistics, down from 18.9 percent the previous year. From 2009 to 2012, the rate dropped to 18 percent from 20.6 percent, the first statistically significant change over multiple years since the period spanning 1997 to 2005, when the rate fell to 20.9 percent from 24.7 percent.

“The fact that we’re below this theoretical sound barrier of 20 percent is important,” says Stanton A. Glantz, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the university’s Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education. “This data shows that the whole premise that there is this hard-core group, where no matter what you do you can’t get them to quit, is just not true.”

Doctors and researchers who study smoking cessation point to a number of factors that may play a role in the latest drop.

“Now there is a strong evidence base about what works and what doesn’t work,” Dr. Glantz says.

School education programs, for example, don’t appear to be very effective, most likely because schools are difficult places to change social norms and it is hard to do the programs well given all the other demands in the school day, he says. But educating people about the tobacco industry’s marketing efforts can have a big impact. “We now have empirical evidence that people who don’t like the tobacco industry are about five times as likely to quit, and a third to a fifth as likely to start,” he says.

Dr. Richard Hurt, a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., where he directs the Nicotine Dependence Center, says that two public policies have had significant effects on smoking cessation: increasing the price of cigarettes and creating smoke-free workplaces. “They reduce the number of cigarettes that people are smoking, usually between three and five cigarettes less per day for heavier smokers,” he says, and “increase the chances of a smoker stopping smoking.” Since children can’t as easily afford cigarettes and don’t see smoking as the norm when it is banned in so many public places, these policies also “decrease

the chances of your child or grandchild ever starting to smoke,” he says.

“People smoking less is a really important part of the story,” says Dr. Glantz. “The overall pattern we’re seeing, both nationally and in places like California,” where the prevalence of smoking is now down to 12 percent, “is as smoking goes down, the remaining smokers are becoming lighter smokers, intermittent smokers, or not even smoking every day. And as you smoke less and less, it becomes easier to quit.”

He also notes the importance of smoking bans. “When you create smoke-free workplaces, bars, casinos and restaurants, it sends a strong message that smoking is out,” he says. “It also creates environments that make it easier for people to quit smoking.”

Dr. Mary O’Sullivan, director of the Margarita Camche Smoking Cessation Program at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center in Manhattan, said: “In New York, we’ve gotten it down to 14 percent, and one of the big reasons is price. Here it’s \$12 a pack. Even our schizophrenia patients, who are the most addicted, who used to smoke two and three packs a day, even they are smoking less because of the price.” She says that many of her patients who are trying to quit head to city parks, where it’s been illegal to smoke since 2011; people caught smoking in parks face a \$50 fine.

Richard Grucza, an associate professor in psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine who studies tobacco policy, cited the 62-cent-per-pack federal tax increase that took effect in 2009, as well as laws that ban indoor smoking, cigarette vending machines, the sale of packs of fewer than 20 cigarettes and the distribution of free cigarettes, as major contributors to declining smoking rates.

“For cigarette and tobacco taxation, it’s very clear the effects get larger over time,” Dr. Grucza says, noting the same is true for indoor air laws. He argues that such policies are particularly successful because they are a “universal intervention,” something that affects everybody, as opposed to, say, a smokers’ hot line that only certain people might call.

According to these experts, also at play may be increasingly graphic ad campaigns, including the “[Tips From Former Smokers](#)” campaign begun last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and fewer incidents of smoking in popular movies. Research shows that the more times a young person sees smoking in the movies, the [more likely he or she is to take up smoking](#), and from 2005 to 2010, young people saw far less smoking in PG-13 movies. (Many of those youths are now adults and would have been captured by the new report, though smoking in movies has since increased.)

The cigarette smoking rate among young people has been declining slowly but steadily over the last decade, and the latest estimates were 15.8 percent for high school students and 4.3 percent for middle school students.

Dr. Reid Blackwelder, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians, sums up the current confluence of reasons: “It’s harder and harder to avoid the message that smoking is a major health risk. It’s easier and easier to find ways to quit. Finally, it’s just becoming more expensive to keep smoking.”

He says that prescription drugs, along with counseling, can help people quit if the patient is motivated and if the benefits outweigh possible side effects, but he cautions that “we can’t say that those are the reason the rate has declined.”

Instead, he says the reduction has more to do with having a strong relationship with one’s doctor, and being able to have an ongoing conversation about smoking. The C.D.C.’s newest smoking cessation campaign, “Talk With Your Doctor,” is about just that, leveraging the finding that a smoker is more than twice as likely to quit if given advice and support from a doctor.

“I’m going to bring it up every time,” Dr. Blackwelder says. “I’ll ask, ‘What would it take today to prioritize giving up smoking cigarettes?’ Then, I’ll be there when you do make the decision, and I’m going to mobilize resources for you.”