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Declining visibility of tobacco in prime-time TV dramas linked to drop in smoking rates

PHILADELPHIA – The declining visibility of tobacco products on prime-time U.S. broadcast television shows is linked to a drop in smoking of nearly two packs of cigarettes per adult per year, according to a study published online in the journal *Tobacco Control* on April 3.

The study, the largest-ever of tobacco use on television, found that the drop in portrayals of smoking and tobacco use in prime-time dramas mirrored the national decline in consumption, according to researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania.

Importantly, annual changes in the amount of smoking seen on popular TV dramas also predicted changes in U.S. cigarette consumption.

The finding of a close relationship between smoking in TV dramas and national smoking rates echoes earlier research by APPC showing that smoking trends in top-grossing movies since 1950 paralleled national cigarette consumption. However, the current study was able to not only analyze annual changes in smoking rates on TV but use those changes to predict annual changes in U.S. cigarette consumption. The findings provide stronger evidence suggesting that screen-based media portrayals of smoking have contributed to the U.S. smoking epidemic.

“TV characters who smoke are likely to trigger the urge to smoke in cigarette users, making it harder for them to quit,” said Patrick E. Jamieson, the study’s lead author and director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Adolescent Risk Communication Institute. “Despite the decline since 1961, tobacco use on TV remains a cause for concern.”

Tobacco: A Diminishing Presence On-Screen Since 1961

The study examined 1,838 hours of popular U.S. prime-time dramas shown on broadcast television over 56 years, from 1955 to 2010. The researchers drew their sample from Nielsen’s annual list of the top 30 prime-time network dramas. A team of coders watched the shows and recorded tobacco use such as smoking, purchasing, handling and chewing tobacco products, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and chewing tobacco. Commercials, including cigarette ads, which were banned in 1971, were not part of the sample.

Over the period studied, tobacco use on television declined from a high of 4.96 instances per hour of programming in 1961 to 0.29 instances per hour in 2010. After controlling for changes in cigarette prices and other factors, the study found that an annual change of one tobacco instance per episode hour across two years was associated with an annual change of 38.5 cigarettes, or nearly two packs per U.S. adult.

Most studies of tobacco use on-screen have focused on popular movies and their influence on youth smoking initiation. The Surgeon General's Report in 2012 cited depictions of smoking in the movies as a cause of young people starting to smoke. The current study suggests that tobacco use on television has also influenced adult smoking rates.

"The finding that, since the 1950s, TV tobacco use predicts adult cigarette consumption suggests that TV's influence on smoking may be an under-studied but important focus for tobacco control," said Dan Romer, the study co-author and APPC associate director.

From 'Gunsmoke' to 'Charlie's Angels' to 'CSI: Miami'

The study included such shows as "Dragnet" and "Gunsmoke" (in the '50s); "Perry Mason" and "The Fugitive" ('60s); "Hawaii Five-O" and "Charlie's Angels" ('70s); "Cagney & Lacey" and "Miami Vice" ('80s); "Murder, She Wrote" and "ER" ('90s), and "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" and "House M.D." ('00s). (For the complete list, go to www.youthmediarisk.org.) The TV shows were coded through APPC's Coding of Health and Media Project ([CHAMP](#)), with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The Tobacco Control study examined only broadcast television shows, and the rising influence of cable programs was not part of the study. In fact, the researchers noted that the results for cigarette consumption tracked on-screen portrayals less closely after 1995, with the rise of cable programming and household cable TV penetration.

"The decline in prime-time TV tobacco use is welcome news, but we need to learn more about tobacco portrayal on cable TV, YouTube, and other popular Internet-based sources," said Jamieson.

TV Smoking vs. Cigarette Prices

Increasing the price of tobacco is a well-known means of tobacco control; when prices go up, consumption declines. The present study found that each one-cent increase in cigarette prices since 1955 resulted in a decline of two cigarettes per capita. Nevertheless, the researchers found that declining portrayals of tobacco on prime-time television dramas also predicted a decline in consumption. Indeed, the study estimated that the decline in tobacco use on TV predicted nearly half as much impact on tobacco use as increases in price over the study period. This amounted to 363.5 cigarettes or 18 packs per capita attributed to rising prices and nearly nine packs per capita to the declining TV depictions.

"We now have further evidence that screen-based media are an important factor to consider in continued efforts to reduce the burden of smoking-related illness in the U.S. and around the world," Romer said. "Further research is needed to determine the effects of such media influences around the globe in countries where smoking rates are still rising."

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media's role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.