

# Tobacco Road: African Americans and menthol cigarettes

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With more than 45,000 African Americans dying each year of smoking-related diseases, the African American community should be outraged at the long history of targeted manipulation waged by the American tobacco industry.

Smoking-related illnesses are the number one cause of death among African Americans. Death from smoking-caused disease is higher among African Americans than Whites, despite the fact that African Americans typically smoke less. However, these facts are rather ironic.

Even though African Americans usually smoke less, 23 percent are current smokers, which is higher than the national rate of smoking at 20.8 percent. What's more interesting is that smoking among African American men is significantly higher than among African American women (27.6 percent compared to 19.2 percent). What are some possible contributing factors to these disparities?

We know that the harmful effects of mentholated tobacco-use on the health of African Americans are well-documented. Research confirms that menthol cigarettes do have higher levels of [cotinine](#) (the most common chemical produced by the body from nicotine) in the smoker's bloodstream than non-menthol smokers.

Seventy-five percent of African American smokers smoke menthol cigarettes, compared to 23 percent of White smokers. African Americans may have lower cessation rates than Whites because African Americans generally have higher levels of nicotine dependence, as a consequence of high cotinine levels in mentholated cigarettes. So how are the effects of menthol impacting the health of African Americans?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the years of potential death expectancy before the age of 65 is two times higher in Black smokers than White smokers. The question to ponder is why African Americans choose to smoke mentholated tobacco.

The American tobacco industry has now spent more than 30 years aggressively targeting the African American community, which has resulted in profitable financial outcomes at the expense of African American smokers.

More interior and exterior tobacco advertising in retail outlets within low-income communities and communities with larger African American populations exist, while total expenditures for magazine advertising of mentholated cigarettes increased from 13 percent in 1998 to 49 percent in 2005. So why should African Americans be concerned about targeted marketing?

According to a 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, nearly 80 percent of all smokers start before age 18, and not surprisingly, the vast majority of kids smoke the three most heavily advertised brands. Of these brands, Newport is one of the leading cigarettes smoked by African American youth in the United States. Eight out of every ten African American youth smoke Newport cigarettes, while 42 percent of African American adults smoke this same brand.

The House of Representatives is currently considering a vote on the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, H.R 1108. While this pending legislation bans candy, fruit and spice-flavored cigarettes, aimed at children and teens, it specifically exempts menthol.

The current bill is heavily backed by Philip Morris, the leading tobacco company in America. It is believed that Philip Morris actively lobbied Congress to include the menthol exemption, which is financially critical to the American tobacco industry's profit margin. Despite an effort to ensure a menthol exemption, the good news is that prevention initiatives aim to counter the initiation of smoking and improve greater access to cessation services for African American tobacco users.

The National African American Tobacco Education Network ([NAATEN](#)) is working to discourage our young people from smoking, and offering proven tobacco prevention tools for those who use tobacco.

Our Be Free Indeed Tobacco Prevention program guides pastors and church leaders on how to present a historical perspective of the relationship between African Americans and tobacco, the health risks of smoking, the dangers of secondhand smoke, the benefits of quitting, and why church leaders should actively be involved in this important social justice issue.

In addition, NAATEN completed a quitline assessment project, which assists quitline service providers with outreach efforts to African American smokers while seeking to accomplish greater quit-rates for African American smokers across the country.

The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, in its current form, fails to ban menthol. But this debate must remind African Americans that the tobacco industry continues, after nearly a century, to enslave our community in many creative ways.

NAATEN urges the African American community and all communities nationwide to oppose tobacco use that impacts children and adults. We must not be complacent about the number one preventable cause of death in our community.

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