



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

*RWJF Retrospective Series*

# Smoking in Movies and Television

**Research Highlights**

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A companion report to  
*The Tobacco Campaigns of the  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
and Collaborators, 1991–2010*

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## *Preface*

Twenty years ago the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation decided to put our name and substantial financial and human resources behind a bold initiative to reduce tobacco use in this country. For two decades, RWJF has been working with partners in government, education, philanthropy and the private sector to make literally the air that we breathe safe to inhale and to free many Americans from a gripping, destructive addiction to which they were seduced in their youth. As this retrospective indicates, our tobacco-control campaigns often have seemed an uphill battle, but they have made significant inroads against the harmful effects of tobacco.

Because of that significant progress, we have scaled back our investments in tobacco control to allow us to focus on new public health challenges. Yet the moral injunction of medicine is “First, do no harm.” As we wound down these investments (though ongoing, we are still providing \$3,589,258 to reduce tobacco use), I was adamant that we needed to monitor the state of tobacco control going forward and to assess the legacy and impact of our body of tobacco-control work.

As we address other critical public health challenges, like the need to roll back the epidemic of childhood obesity, it is important to harvest lessons that can be learned from our tobacco-control work, which has been unique in terms of magnitude, duration, scope and methods. We therefore asked the Center for Public Program Evaluation to conduct an independent assessment to help us and the field understand the results of our efforts, what worked, what didn’t, and what could be adopted or adapted to fulfill our mission to improve and make a demonstrable difference in health and health care for all Americans.

I wish to emphasize our insistence that the center’s work be truly independent. The center’s president, George Grob, is a former Deputy Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who personally took charge of this assessment. Grob asked Henry Aaron, Bruce and Virginia MacLaury, senior fellow and former director of economic studies at the Brookings Institution, and Michael O’Grady, senior fellow at the National Opinion Research Center and principal, O’Grady Health Policy, to provide an additional layer of independent review. Aaron and O’Grady advised on study methods and findings, and reviewed draft reports. The resulting assessment report describes both the significance and limits of RWJF’s contributions and achievements.

I want to thank the many individuals and organizations—often working in collaboration—who conducted the tobacco-control campaigns, and I especially want to thank the many RWJF staff members (and former staff) who have worked with such competence and endurance on reducing Americans’ addiction to tobacco. Among them were: Diane Barker, Michael Beachler, Sallie Petrucci George, Karen Gerlach, Marjorie Gutman, Robert Hughes, Nancy Kaufman, Jim Knickman, Michelle Larkin, Joe Marx, Tracy Orleans, Marjorie Paloma and Steven Schroeder, and many others behind the scenes and too numerous to name.

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# Smoking in Movies and Television

## Research Highlights

**T**his paper provides a brief look at how smoking and tobacco use have been depicted in movies and television over the decades. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has supported a variety of initiatives to reduce the portrayal of smoking in movies and on television, including issuing media awards, supporting pioneers in the field and sponsoring research studies.

### **SMOKING IN THE MOVIES**

The systematic placement of tobacco imagery in films intensified after 1970 and became the subject of congressional attention in 1989, when public officials demanded more details on how much the tobacco companies were spending on product placements. Congress planned to use the data to improve surveillance of cigarette marketing expenditures, which is the purview of the Federal Trade Commission. However, the tobacco industry was not quick with disclosure—some companies denied buying product placements in movies and some did not report ongoing payments to Hollywood agents.

Subsequent efforts by health advocates to educate film industry personnel about the harmful effects of showing tobacco use in movies initially had little effect. But over time, with advocacy groups tracking the portrayals of smoking in the movies and evidence accumulating about the harm of exposing adolescents to smoking in movies, the climate began to change. A combination of advocacy efforts, congressional hearings, policy changes and legal action was involved.<sup>1</sup>

### **Among key developments:**

- In 1998 the Master Settlement Agreement between the states' attorneys general and the five largest American tobacco companies prohibited the industry from tobacco product placements in the entertainment media. This agreement did not cover the companies' overseas subsidiaries.<sup>1</sup>

In 2009 Smoke-Free Movies and other advocacy organizations and professional societies developed and promoted four evidence-based policy recommendations to reduce teen exposure to tobacco imagery in movies.

- In 2002 the Smoke-Free Movies project at the University of California, San Francisco, began a series of paid advertisements in the West Coast edition of the *New York Times*, *Variety* and other entertainment trade publications stating: “Either people in Hollywood are still on the take, in which case they’re corrupt... or they’re doing Big Tobacco’s dirty work for free—in which case they’re stupid.”<sup>1</sup>
- On May 10, 2007, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) announced a plan to consider smoking as a factor in its movie rating system.<sup>2</sup> According to the new policy, “all smoking will be considered and depictions that glamorize smoking or movies that feature pervasive smoking outside of an historic or other mitigating context may receive a higher rating.”

Three questions were to be considered when rating a film:

- Is the smoking pervasive?
- Does the film glamorize smoking?
- Is there an historic or other mitigating context?

In practice, the MPAA has not actually changed the ratings of films that depict smoking but has added a descriptor, such as “glamorizes smoking” or “pervasive smoking,” in limited-release independent films. Youth-oriented films released by the MPAA’s member studios have generally not been affected.<sup>1</sup>

Six months after the new policy began, the percentage of G-, PG-, or R-rated movies that depicted smoking had not changed compared to the same time period in each of the four previous years.<sup>3</sup>

- Beginning in 2008 the major studios agreed to show anti-tobacco ads on youth-rated DVDs distributed in the United States.
- In 2009 Smoke-Free Movies and other advocacy organizations and professional societies developed and promoted four evidence-based policy recommendations to reduce teen exposure to tobacco imagery in movies.<sup>4</sup> Signatories included the American Public Health Association, American Legacy Foundation, Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and American Academy of Pediatrics.

The recommendations, which were published in a series of print advertisements in *Variety* and other publications, were to:

- Rate future tobacco imagery “R,” except for depictions of tobacco’s dire health consequences or portrayals of actual historical figures who smoked.
- Stop displaying tobacco brands on screen.
- Certify that nobody in the production and distribution chain receives anything of value from a tobacco company, its agents or fronts to include tobacco imagery in a film.
- Run proven anti-tobacco spots before all films with tobacco imagery in all distribution channels.

RWJF has supported a variety of initiatives to reduce the portrayal of smoking in movies and on television, including issuing media awards, supporting pioneers in the field and sponsoring research studies.

- On June 1, 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report, *Smoke-Free Movies: From Evidence to Action*, calling on countries to enact enforceable policies severely restricting the depiction of smoking in movies.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, WHO recommended assigning an adult rating to all movies that have a smoking scene, unless they portray the dangers of tobacco use or show an historical figure who smoked.
- The portrayal of smokers in blockbuster movies has dropped over the past two decades at the same time that the number of teen smokers has fallen. In 1990 the 25 top-grossing films had an average of 3.5 smoking scenes, compared to an average of 0.23 scenes in 2007. However, half these movies still contained scenes showing smoking.<sup>5</sup>

#### SMOKING ON TELEVISION

In the 1940s and 1950s, cigarette companies were among the biggest advertisers on television, sponsoring ads on early hit programs, such as “Topper” and “I Love Lucy.” Commercials often featured the stars of leading television shows and well-known television cartoon characters, such as Fred Flintstone, enjoying a cigarette.<sup>6</sup> Camel cigarettes sponsored the first prime-time television news programs.

All of that changed in the years following the Surgeon General’s 1964 landmark report on the dangers of smoking. In 1967 the Federal Communications Commission required television stations to air anti-smoking ads, at no cost to the ads’ sponsors, to counteract the effect of cigarette commercials.<sup>6</sup> In 1970 Congress passed the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act, which banned cigarette advertising on television and radio the following year.

Young viewers are now much less likely to see smoking on television than in movies, but characters on TV shows continue to smoke. A review of 168 episodes of top-rated television dramas and comedies broadcast in 1998–1999 found that tobacco was used in 19 percent of these episodes.<sup>3</sup> The impact is clear from a 2002 study published in *Pediatrics*, which showed that smoking among U.S. adolescents had increased over the previous decade, and that television had an impact—young people who watched five or more hours of TV daily were six times more likely to smoke than those who watched less than two hours.<sup>6</sup>

Recent studies of the portrayal of smoking on television do not appear to be available, but the Parents Television Council said in 2008 that “smoking is much rarer on television and with very few exceptions is done only by unsympathetic or disreputable characters.” A year earlier, after the MPAA announced that smoking would be a factor in its ratings, the Hallmark and Disney cable channels announced that they would stop showing smoking in their films.<sup>6</sup>

#### RWJF ACTIVITIES

RWJF has supported a variety of initiatives to reduce the portrayal of smoking in movies and on television, including issuing media awards, supporting pioneers in the field and sponsoring research studies. Its grantmaking activities include:

- The PRISM Awards™, designed to encourage the accurate depiction of alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse and addiction in feature films, television, music, comics and other entertainment media. The Entertainment Industries Council and the National Institute on Drug Abuse give out the awards annually. RWJF supported the PRISM Awards with more than \$8 million between 1998 and 2005.

- An *Innovators Combating Substance Abuse* award was made to Stanton Glantz, Ph.D., of the University of California, San Francisco. Glantz used his award to educate the entertainment industry about the harm caused by depicting smoking in movies. His Smoke-Free Movies project includes a website (<http://smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/>) that showcases tobacco ads and describes the influence of Hollywood's portrayal of smoking on audiences. Glantz also authored several journal articles about smoking featured in movies.
- Research studies were conducted on how portrayals of tobacco use in the media influence youth smoking, including:
  - An assessment of preschoolers' attitudes, expectations and perceptions of tobacco and alcohol use and a comparison of their observations with parent surveys on their own alcohol and tobacco use and their children's movie viewing.<sup>7</sup>
  - A review of 40 studies on the impact of smoking in movies on adolescent smoking.<sup>8</sup>
  - A meta-analysis of 51 published studies on the impact of exposure to tobacco marketing on smoking in children, funded through RWJF's *Substance Abuse Policy Research Program*.<sup>9</sup>

### *Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. *Smoke-Free Movies: From Evidence to Action*. Available [online](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). "Smoking in Movies to Affect Ratings: MPAA responds to criticism." *Variety*, May 10, 2007. Available [online](#).
- <sup>3</sup> National Cancer Institute. *The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use*. Available [online](#).
- <sup>4</sup> American Public Health Association. *Smoking in the Movies*. Available [online](#). See also: American Legacy Foundation, *Hollywood's Response*.
- <sup>5</sup> CNNhealth.com. *As Movies Portray Fewer Smokers, Fewer Teens Light Up*. Available [online](#). See also: American Legacy Foundation. *Trends in Top Box Office Movie Tobacco Use, 1996–2004*.
- <sup>6</sup> Gildemeister C. *TV Stubs Out Smoking*. Available [online](#).
- <sup>7</sup> Dalton MA, Bernhardt AM, Gibson JJ, Sargent JD, Beach ML, Adachi-Mejia AM, Titus-Ernstoff LT and Heatherton TF. "Use of Cigarettes and Alcohol by Preschoolers While Role-Playing as Adults: 'Honey, Have Some Smokes.'" *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 159(9): 854–859, 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> Charlesworth A and Glantz SA. "Smoking in the Movies Increases Adolescent Smoking: A Review." *Pediatrics*, 116(6): 1516–1528, 2005.
- <sup>9</sup> Wellman RJ, Sugarman DB, DiFranza JR and Winickoff JP. "The Extent to Which Tobacco Marketing and Tobacco Use in Films Contribute to Children's Use of Tobacco: A Meta-Analysis." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 160(12): 1285–1296, 2006.