Adolescent smoking decline during California’s tobacco control programme

J P Pierce, M M White, E A Gilpin

Objective: California’s comprehensive tobacco control programme was 13 years old in 2002; by then, children entering adolescence at the start of the programme were young adults. This study examines whether adolescent smoking declined over this period, whether any decline carried through to young adulthood, and whether it was specific to California.

Setting and participants: Most data were from the 1990–2002 California Tobacco Surveys (CTS) (adolescents 12–17 years, > 5000/survey, young adults 18–24 years, > 1000/survey). Additional data were from the national 1992/93–2001/02 Current Population Survey (CPS) (young adults 18–24 years, > 15 000/survey).

Results: Over the 13 year period in California, ever puffing declined by 70% in 12–13 year olds, by 53% in 14–15 year olds from 1992–2002, and by 34% in 16–17 year olds from 1996–2002 (CTS). As noted, the decline commenced progressively later in each older group. Smoking experimentation (1+ cigarettes) and established smoking (> 100 cigarettes in lifetime) showed similar patterns. Compared to 1990, the percentage of California young adults (CTS data) who ever experimented declined by 14%, with half of the decline from 1999–2002. CPS young adult smoking prevalence (established and now smoke everyday or some days) was constant in the rest of the USA over the entire period, but California showed a recent 18% decline from 1998/99 to 2001/02.

Conclusions: California’s comprehensive programme may have kept new adolescent cohorts from experimenting with cigarettes. Low young adolescent experimentation rates at programme start appeared to carry through to young adulthood, resulting in a recent drop in young adult smoking prevalence in California not observed in the rest of the USA.
have had smoke-free policies since 1952; however, enforcement of these policies was likely not rigorous or consistent.

In this article, we present trends for several measures of early smoking behaviour in California adolescents, using data from the successive, cross sectional, population based California Tobacco Surveys (CTS), conducted every three years from 1990 to 2002. We focus on the age window from 12 to 24 years; age 12 years is the youngest age surveyed in the CTS, and age 24 years is identified in tobacco industry documents as the age after which few people initiate smoking.15 The 13 year period for these trends (1990–2002) means that all 12 year olds in 1990 had matured through this initiation window by 2002. Thus, 2002 is the earliest year that we can assess whether the programme not only reduced experimentation among new cohorts of adolescents, but also whether it was associated with a permanent decline in ever smoking in those who had matured through the initiation age window. To identify whether young adult trends were unique to California, we compared California data with data from other states in the USA using the national Current Population Surveys (CPS).

METHODS
Data sources
California Tobacco Surveys (CTS)
The CTS are large cross sectional, random digit dialled, population based household surveys. They were conducted in English or Spanish in 1990, 1992, and every three years between 1993 and 2002, as part of the California Tobacco Control Program evaluation.1 The detailed survey design and methods are described elsewhere.20 A new probability sample is selected every four years from all other states in the USA using the national Current Population Surveys Tobacco Use Supplements (CPS-TUS). The CPS-TUS are continuous surveys (over 56 000 households/month) conducted by the US Bureau of the Census, primarily to monitor labour force indicators for the civilian non-institutionalised US population aged 15 years and older. The complete CPS methodology is published elsewhere.21 Briefly, base weights were computed to account for the probability of household selection. These base weights were then adjusted to population totals (sex, race/ethnicity, education level, and region of the state) to account for non-response.

Current Population Surveys Tobacco Use Supplements (CPS-TUS)
The national CPS are continuous surveys (over 56 000 households/month) conducted by the US Bureau of the Census, primarily to monitor labour force indicators for the civilian non-institutionalised US population aged 15 years and older. The complete CPS methodology is published elsewhere.21 A new probability sample is selected every four months, based on a stratified sampling scheme using clusters of four neighbouring households identified from the most recent decennial census, updated building permits, and other sources. All strata are defined within state boundaries, and the sample is allocated among the states so that state specific estimates can be computed.

The CPS included a Tobacco Use Supplement (TUS) for September, January, and May in 1992/93, 1995/96 and 1998/99, and June, September, and January in 2001/02. Every effort is made to have each household member 15 years of age interview, but adolescent data from the 1993 CTS included all the relevant early smoking behaviour questions.

### Table 1: Adolescent (12–17 years) and young adult (18–24 years) sample characteristics from survey data sources

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<td>CTS Adol selected for interview</td>
<td>6604</td>
<td>6892</td>
<td>8778</td>
<td>8069</td>
<td>8796</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adol with complete interviews</td>
<td>5040</td>
<td>5531</td>
<td>6252</td>
<td>6090</td>
<td>5857</td>
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<td>Adol completion rate</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
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<td>1697</td>
<td>3432</td>
<td>3255</td>
<td>10084</td>
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<td>Y adults with complete interviews</td>
<td>3518</td>
<td>1022</td>
<td>2478</td>
<td>2190</td>
<td>5930</td>
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<td>Y adult completion rate</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
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<td>Y adults in households</td>
<td>33039</td>
<td>26624</td>
<td>25463</td>
<td>26620</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y adults completing TUS</td>
<td>22927</td>
<td>16835</td>
<td>15419</td>
<td>16707</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Y adult self response completion rate</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The 1992 CTS was used for young adults 18–24 years old. The much larger 1993 CTS did not include a question on ever smoking in the adult interview, but adolescent data from the 1993 CTS included all the relevant early smoking behaviour questions.
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Adolescent smoking often starts by trying a few puffs on a cigarette, with many puffers transitioning to smoking a whole cigarette within a short time. Some of these experimenters later reach a lifetime consumption level of at least 100 cigarettes that will define them as an adult ever smoker or as having attained an established smoking behaviour. Among those who reach this level, half will smoke for more than 16–20 years.

Adolescent smoking measures

The CTS first asked adolescents, “Have you ever smoked a cigarette?” Those answering “no” were further probed, “Have you ever tried or experimented with cigarette smoking, even a few puffs?” Those answering “yes” to the first question were asked, “Have you smoked at least 100 cigarettes in your life?” We define “puffers” as those who denied smoking a cigarette, but who answered “yes” to the puffing question. “Experimenters” are defined as those who answered “yes” to the first question, but who denied having smoked at least 100 cigarettes. We define “established smokers” as those who indicated that they had smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime. Finally, “current adolescent smokers” are defined as anyone who gave an answer other than “none” to the question, “Think about the last 30 days. On how many of these days did you smoke?”.

Young adults (18–24 years)

None of the CPS and not every CTS sought information on early smoking behaviour, but all the CTS and CPS asked, “Have you smoked at least 100 cigarettes in your entire life?”. Those who answered “yes” were then asked, “Do you now smoke cigarettes every day, some days or not at all?” “Current adult smokers” are those who responded “every-day” or “some days”. While the CPS surveys people 15 or more years of age, the lack of early smoking behaviour measures restricted our analyses to those age 18–24 years.

Statistics

The statistical package SuDaaN was used for variance estimation to allow computation of 95% confidence intervals for all survey estimates. Both the CTS and CPS come with sets of replicate survey weights for use with jackknife procedures. The CTS is structured to use the jackknife-n procedure, and the CPS to use Fay’s method of balanced replication. Because California’s population differs demographically from the population in the rest of the USA and has changed its racial/ethnic composition in recent years, young adult (18–24 years) current smoking prevalence estimates in all years from both the CTS and CPS are standardised to the demographic profile of the 2002 young adult California population (sex, race: non-Hispanic white, Hispanic, other). Preliminary analyses of CTS adolescent data indicated that standardisation was unnecessary, as standardised and simple weighted estimates agreed closely.

RESULTS

Adolescent (12–17 years) smoking trends in California

The top curve in fig 1A shows the percentages of the 12–13 year old age group who had ever puffed on a cigarette across each of the survey years from 1990 to 2002. This includes the puffers, experimenters, and the few established smokers in this age group. The gap between the top and next lower curve represents those who had only puffed, and the gap between the middle and lowest curves represents those who had smoked at least one but fewer than 100 cigarettes in their lifetime. The prevalence of ever puffing was highest in 1990 and declined in each survey year over the period indicated. By 2002, the mean (95% confidence interval) prevalence of ever
puffing was 5.6 (1.1)%, a decline of 70% from the level in 1990 (18.9 (2.7)). The percentage of those ever experimenting (experimenters and established smokers) also declined over this period, from 11.0 (2.7)% in 1990 to 4.1 (1.1)% in 2002, or by 63%. Fewer than 1% of adolescents 12 and 13 years of age were established smokers in any survey year, and this percentage was only 0.1 (0.1)% in 2002.

By 14–15 years of age (fig 1B), many more adolescents have gained smoking experience (note the different scale to the vertical axis). In contrast to the 12–13 year olds, this age group showed a slight increase in the prevalence of ever puffing between 1990 and 1993, with a steady decline thereafter through 2002. From the peak in 1993 (39.3 (3.0)%), the prevalence of ever puffing declined by 53% to its level in 2002 (18.4 (2.2)%). This was about the same as the level for 12–13 year olds in 1990. Both ever experimentation and established smoking showed the same general pattern. Experimentation declined from 24.9 (3.1)% in 1993 to 14.1 (1.8)% in 2002, or 43%. Established smoking declined from 5.4 (1.1)% in 1993 to 1.6 (0.7)% in 2002, or by 70%.

The percentage of the 16–17 year old group with any smoking experience was much higher than in the younger age groups (fig 1C, note the vertical axis has a different scale). The percentage who had ever at least puffed on a cigarette did not change much between 1990 and 1996, but then declined notably by 1999, and again by 2002. From the 1996 level (52.9 (2.6)%), there was a decline of 34% by 2002 (35.0 (1.9)%). A similar pattern occurred for ever experimentation, with a 33% decline from 1996 (46.4 (2.7)%). To 2002 (31.0 (1.9)%). The rate of established smoking was also highest in 1996 (15.0 (1.7)%), with a notable decline from 1999 to 1996 and a smaller decline between 1999 and 2002. By 2002, the rate of established smoking for 16–17 year olds (6.1 (1.0)% was 59% lower than in 1996 (15.0 (1.7)%).

It is to be expected that the trend in 30 day (current) smoking prevalence for 12–17 year old adolescents (fig 2) would follow a pattern similar to the one for established smokers in the oldest age group, as it contributes the largest number of smokers. About 9% were current smokers in both 1990 and 1993. This percentage increased substantially by 1996, before declining equally as substantially by 1999, and again to 5.0 (0.7)% in 2002, a 45% drop from the 1990 level.

**Young adult (18–24 years) smoking trend in California**

Figure 3 shows the trend in ever smoking (1+ cigarettes) prevalence for 18–24 year olds from the CTS. Compared to 1990, the 2002 prevalence of ever smoking was significantly lower by 14%. The decline between 1999 and 2002 was 7.1% or about half the total decline. This is the first evidence to suggest that those who matured through their teen years in the environment of a comprehensive tobacco control programme had a lower rate of ever experimenting with cigarettes (reported as young adults) than those in earlier cohorts.

**California versus the rest of the USA**

Trends in the percentage of current smokers are reported separately for young adult residents of California and for those residing in the remaining US states using CPS data (fig 4). Prevalence among California young adults was much lower in all survey periods than for those in the rest of the USA; the latter remained constant at around 22% over the entire period. California young adult prevalence also remained relatively unchanged (−18%–19%) through the 1990s, and then it declined to 15.5% in 2001/02, a significant reduction of 18% from the 1998/99 level.

**DISCUSSION**

The evaluation plan for the ongoing California Tobacco Control Program included large population based surveys that allowed assessment of whether the programme was associated with a major long term decline of smoking in young people. During the 1990s, California’s youngest adolescents (12–13 years) showed a pronounced decrease in ever experimenting with cigarette smoking (even a few puffs). For the youngest adolescents, this declining trend was evident from the beginning of the surveillance system and continued through the latest survey. Because the start of the decline was delayed in the older groups, we believe that the decline for the youngest group may have started coincidentally with the beginning of the programme. These data suggest that the influences against smoking in California throughout the 1990s may have been mainly effective in preventing new cohorts of adolescents from experimenting as they entered the age window that defines smoking initiation in recent times. The decline in the rate of ever smoking among 18–24 year olds between 1999 and 2002 suggests that people who matured in an era of tobacco control maintained a lower level of smoking initiation into young adulthood. The young adults in 2002 were 6–11 years of age at the start of California’s Tobacco Control Program. Further, the young adult prevalence data from the CPS suggest that these declines were unique to California and were not present in the rest of the USA.

There are a number of possible explanations for the large decline in smoking uptake in California. The 1990s were a time of considerable change in the forces affecting tobacco use. At the start of the decade across the USA, the innovative
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cartoon character Joe Camel advertised smoking to children and youth.27–28 By mid decade, as the effectiveness of the Joe Camel campaign and increased distribution of tobacco promotional items became apparent,29–31 these marketing strategies were restricted by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA).32 The MSA resulted from lawsuits brought by 46 states against the major tobacco companies to recover health care costs resulting from smoking.

In California, after the excise tax increase in 1989 that made its comprehensive tobacco control programme possible, other programme elements were implemented, beginning in 1990. California’s mass media campaign conducted throughout the period targeted less than one third of its anti-tobacco messages to adolescents, including questioning the deceptive practices of the tobacco industry.33 Such campaigns have been shown to be successful in promoting behaviour change in adolescents in various settings.34–36 However, the major portion of the media campaign messages focused on cessation, and educating the public about the dangers of secondhand smoke and the general health consequences of smoking. These other messages may also have led to a change in adolescent smoking behaviour by denormalising tobacco use.

Further, throughout the 1990s California smokers were increasingly restricted regarding where they could smoke. In 1995, smoking was banned in most workplaces (including all high schools); bars and taverns were required to be smoke-free in 1998. Throughout the 1990s, Californians increasingly adopted smoke-free homes,37 probably as a result of their increasing recognition of the health dangers of secondhand smoke as explained by the media campaign. California also passed legislation that made it increasingly difficult for adolescents to purchase cigarettes. These restrictions would be expected to limit the opportunity for adolescent experimentation, as well as reduce the perception that smoking is normative.

While literature suggests that a cigarette price increase could affect adolescent smoking behaviour,38–40 it may be unlikely to influence first experimentation.41–42 The real (inflation adjusted) price of cigarettes stayed fairly stable from the start of the programme in 1990 until 1999. However, in 1999, there was a substantial price increase, both because of an additional $0.50/pack excise tax increase approved by California voters, and as a result of a roughly $0.70/pack industry price increase after the MSA. Given the timing, it is highly unlikely that cigarette price increases were a factor in the decline observed in adolescent experimentation, although they may have played a role in reducing transition to regular smoking or smoking intensity.43–46

There are several potential study limitations. Smoking behaviour is from self report, but such data are generally considered sufficiently valid in population studies of both adolescents47 and adults.48–49 Household surveys, such as the CTS and CPS, are known to provide lower estimates of smoking behaviour than school surveys (for example, Monitoring the Future),50–51 but all surveys compared used the same survey mode, allowing trends to be assessed. The CTS are telephone surveys with declining response rates throughout the 1990s, although the resultant samples do not appear to be biased as a result.52 The smoking behaviour trends in this study are consistent with a comparison of smoking initiation rates in two separate three year longitudinal studies of 12–15 year old California adolescent never smokers at baseline; initiation rates by follow up were higher between 1993 and 1996 than between 1996 and 1999.46 The results are further strengthened by recently-published trends from Monitoring the Future surveys (fig 5), which indicate that in recent years, smoking prevalence among California high school seniors declined more than their counterparts in the rest of the USA.53 In 1995, when prevalence peaked in California’s 12th graders, prevalence in the rest of the USA was 44% higher, but by 1999, it was 71% higher. However, future surveys will be required to further corroborate the trends documented in the present study.

In summary, the comprehensive approach used by the California Tobacco Control Program appears to have significantly reduced the likelihood of future smoking initiation among young adolescents, which has translated into lower smoking rates in later adolescence and young adulthood. The magnitude of this effect over the 13 year period appears larger than any previously reported.34 Future research will be required to assess the health effects of reduced exposure to cigarettes among these younger California birth cohorts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Tobacco Related Disease Research Program grant 12RT-0082 from the University of California. Data for the California Tobacco Surveys were collected under contracts 89-97872 (1990), 92-10601 (1991), 95-23211 (1996), 98-15657 (1999), and 01-16370 (2002) from the California Department of Health Services, Tobacco Control Section, Sacramento, California.

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Competing interests: none declared

REFERENCES
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