The LGBT community is disproportionately impacted by tobacco.

20.6% of LGB adults and 35.5% of transgender adults smoke cigarettes, compared to 14.9% of straight adults.

Tobacco companies targeted LGBT youth with a marketing strategy called Project SCUM, which aimed at gay men and homeless individuals. A tobacco industry marketing strategy called Project SCUM targeted gay men and homeless individuals.

Aged 18-24, LGBT young adults are nearly twice as likely to smoke as their straight peers.
**BACKGROUND**

It’s common for LGBT individuals to experience disparities that stem from social stigma and discriminatory treatment. On top of that, there is a different kind of disparity in the LGBT community that is often overlooked: disproportionately high smoking rates.

Overall, lesbian, gay and bisexual adults smoke at rates up to 2.5 times higher than straight adults, due in part to targeted marketing by Big Tobacco. For years the tobacco industry has made efforts to appeal to LGBT consumers through things like targeted advertisements in LGBT press, cigarette giveaways and free tobacco industry merchandise. Today, the LGBT community is among the hardest hit by tobacco.

**SMOKING RATES IN THE LGBT COMMUNITY**

According to a 2011 Institute of Medicine report, researchers “face a number of challenges in understanding the health needs of LGBT populations.” There are limited national data available regarding tobacco use among the LGBT community. Data that are available, however, indicate that the LGBT community is disproportionately impacted by tobacco:

- Overall, 20.6 percent of LGB adults and 35.5 percent of transgender adults smoke cigarettes compared to 14.9 percent of straight adults. Transgender adults are 2.1 times more likely than cisgender adults to smoke.
- Only 11.8 percent of heterosexual young adults indicate that they currently smoke cigarettes, compared to 19 percent of homosexual, 16.9 percent of bisexual and 33.2 percent of transgender young adults.

**2.5 x**

Lesbian, gay and bisexual adults smoke at rates up to 2.5 times higher than straight adults.

- Bisexual women are up to 3.5 times more likely to smoke, try their first cigarette at a younger age and have a higher nicotine dependence than heterosexual women.
- LGBT smokers are significantly more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes: more than 36 percent of LGBT smokers report that they usually smoke menthols, which are easier to use and harder to quit.
- The prevalence of smoking other types of tobacco, including water pipes and cigars, cigarillos, or small cigars, is higher for LGBT adults compared to heterosexual adults.

Even though youth smoking rates overall are down to 6 percent, smoking rates among LGB youth are estimated to be considerably higher than those among youth in general, based on an analysis of data from 1987 to 2000. More than twice as many LGB students in grades nine through 12 have smoked a cigarette before the age of 13, compared to their heterosexual peers. LGB students also smoke more frequently. Digging even deeper, lesbian and bisexual girls are 9.7 times more likely to smoke cigarettes regularly, compared to their heterosexual peers.
BIG TOBACCO’S LONG HISTORY OF TARGETING THE LGBT COMMUNITY

As the LGBT community gained more social and political acceptance, especially in the 1990s, marketers took notice. Industry documents show that tobacco companies were aware of high smoking rates among sexual minorities, and marketing plans show their efforts to take advantage of the emerging LGBT market.

For example, one tobacco industry document in 1997 stated: “A large percentage of Gays and Lesbians are smokers. In order to increase brand share and brand awareness for the Benson & Hedges brand, it is imperative to identify new markets with growth potential.”

Big Tobacco has targeted the LGBT community since at least 1991, when tobacco company Philip Morris settled a boycott by pledging large donations to AIDS research and programs. The boycott, led by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, protested the company’s support of Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., a leading opponent of AIDS funding and LGBT civil rights. Using corporate philanthropy as evidence of its support of the LGBT community, Philip Morris quickly gained access to the market, leading the way for other tobacco companies to follow suit.

Tobacco companies also began to advertise in gay press publications in the early 1990s, often depicting tobacco use as a normal part of LGBT life. Many ads for products other than cigarettes glamorized smoking, and many articles having nothing to do with smoking were shown with tobacco images.

In 1995, the tobacco company, R.J. Reynolds, created a marketing strategy called “Project SCUM” (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing) to boost cigarette sales by targeting gay men and homeless individuals with advertisements and displays placed in communities and stores. On top of donations, giveaways and increased advertising, the tobacco industry made community outreach efforts, such as hosting local promotions like “LGBT bar nights” featuring specific cigarette brands.
REFERENCES


15. PHILIP MORRIS USA; ROBINSON Y. CEM’S GAY AND LESBIAN MARKETING EFFORTS. 1997.


Note: Terminology in this document varies based on the studies that are summarized to accurately reflect original sources. Truth Initiative recognizes that some of these terms are no longer preferred in the LGBT community.