



An Endgame Strategy: Eliminating Smoking Among African Americans in Wisconsin

In the United States in 2019, 14% of adults smoke cigarettes, according to the National Health Interview Survey. Yet, certain populations smoke at much higher rates than this national average. These populations include those with a GED (35.3%), those with moderate anxiety disorder (27.0%), those on Medicaid (24.9%), those who are uninsured (22.5%), those with a household income of less than \$35K (21.4%), and American Indian/Alaska Natives (20.9%)¹. Overall, in 2019 in the United States, adult smoking rates were similar between people who are Black (14.4%) and White (13.3%)¹.

In Wisconsin, however, adults in the Black community smoke at much higher rates than their White counterparts. The smoking prevalence among Blacks in Wisconsin (30%) is nearly three times more than that of White people in Wisconsin (12%) and Wisconsin as a whole (13%)². This disparity of smoking among Black and White people in Wisconsin represents the widest gap (18%) of any U.S. state. Among neighboring states, Iowa smoking rates among Whites and Blacks is about a 7% difference (14% v. 21%, respectively). Other neighboring states such as Illinois, Minnesota and Michigan have even smaller disparities².

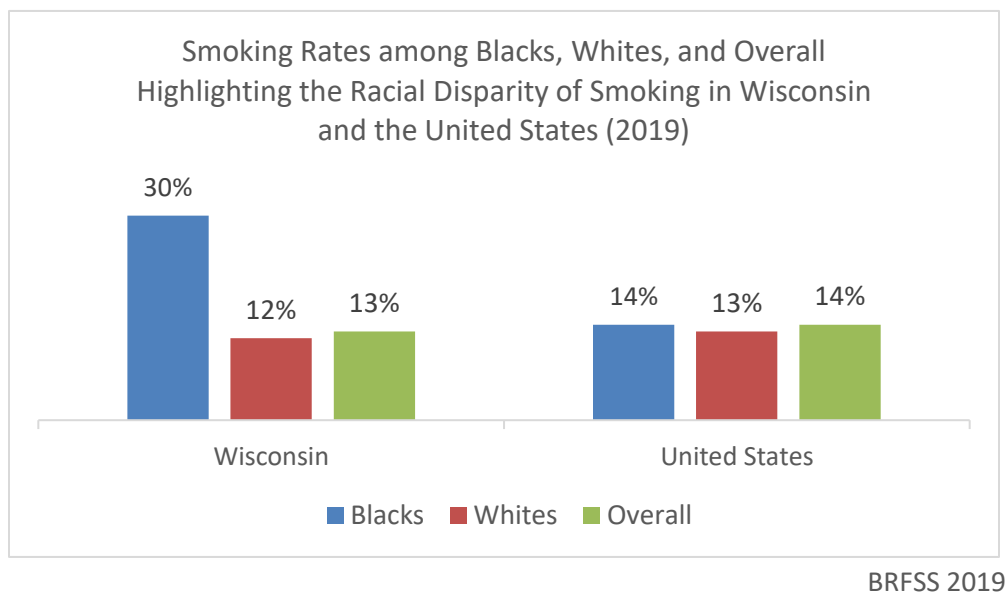
Milwaukee County has more than 240,000 African Americans, representing about 70% of the state's total African American population³. About 40% of the city of Milwaukee's residents are Black and nearly 90% of Wisconsin's Black population lives in six Wisconsin counties: Milwaukee, Dane, Racine, Kenosha, Rock and Waukesha³.

For decades, tobacco industry marketing has targeted African American communities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This marketing has contributed to the high prevalence of tobacco use among African Americans⁴ in these communities. A city of Milwaukee tobacco point-of-sale study found that compared to mostly white neighborhoods, cigarettes in African American neighborhoods are far more likely to be displayed near candy (5% vs 42%) and within three feet of the floor (11% vs 35%)⁵. These tactics are concerning due to the impact it has on children and lower-income populations because it increases the perceived availability and accessibility of tobacco products and encourages impulse purchases of tobacco products, cue cravings, and undermines quit attempts⁶. The Milwaukee point-of-sale study also found that outdoor marketing of menthol cigarette brands are twice as likely in African American neighborhoods than predominantly White neighborhoods (68% vs 34%) and menthol price promotions were also much more common in African American neighborhoods (69%) than White neighborhoods (30%)⁵. This is especially concerning in Wisconsin because nearly 90% of Black adult smokers use menthol products compared to 41% of White adult smokers in Wisconsin⁷. Menthol cigarettes are as dangerous to an individual's health as non-menthol cigarettes, with menthol cigarette smokers just as likely to experience premature morbidity and mortality as non-menthol smokers⁴. Three of the leading causes of death among African Americans – heart disease, cancer, and stroke – all

are directly caused by smoking³. From 2001-2005, 22% of African Americans in Wisconsin died of cancer, 21% from heart disease, and 6% from stroke³.

From 2005 to 2015, the decline in cigarette consumption was less for menthol cigarettes than for non-menthol cigarettes⁴. Evidence has shown that adult menthol smokers are less likely to quit smoking successfully even though they have a greater desire to quit and make more quit attempts⁸.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations currently prohibit flavorants in cigarettes, except for menthol flavorants, although the 2009 federal *Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act* allows for the banning of menthol flavorants as well. For Black people in Wisconsin, the recent FDA announcement to begin the rule-making process to ban menthol as a characterizing flavor in cigarettes and cigars holds promise to significantly reduce disease and death. This proposed menthol standard would help reduce the appeal of cigarettes, making it easier for people to quit using cigarettes, and decrease the likelihood that non-tobacco users would start using menthol cigarettes⁹. Given Wisconsin's dubious distinction as the state with the highest disparity in smoking rates between adult White and Black people, such an action in Wisconsin holds promise to improve health and address a critical racial and social injustice.



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