

Feds: Teen smoking dip may be ending

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Twenty-year-old John Adams takes a long drag from a half-smoked filtered cigarette; then he uses the side of a brick building as an ashtray to snuff it out. The lanky youth tucks the stump behind his ear, hoists his backpack; then breaks into a trot toward a bus stop on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington, D.C.

Perhaps a typical day for Adams, but according to statistics, he is in grave danger. The tiny stick of tobacco behind his ear is a live time bomb that kills 1,200 Americans a day and 450,000 a year, usually by cancer or other lung diseases, according to the Center for Disease Control.

But like many young smokers, cancer is the furthest problem from Adams' mind.

"I smoke to relieve stress, really," he shrugs at a reporter's question. "Looking for a job, my problems, you know, relationships. I want to go back to school in the fall."

Adams is not alone in his apparent indifference about smoking.

New data announced last month by "Monitoring the Future," a University of Michigan project that documents trends of tobacco use among youth, shows that the once-celebrated rapid decline in youth smoking rates may now be coming to a halt.

"Teen smoking had been in steady decline from the recent peak levels of use reached in the mid-1990s through 2004," states the MTF study. "But, the rate of decline in their use of cigarettes has been decelerating over the past several years; and in 2005 the decline halted among eighth graders, who have been the bellwethers of smoking among teens."

The percentage of teen smokers reported by MTF in January 2005 was 25 percent of 12th graders, 16 percent of 10th graders and 9 percent of 8th graders. In comparison, the current rates are 23 percent of 12th graders (two percentage points lower), 15 percent of 10th graders (one percentage point lower), and 9 percent of 8th graders (the same as last year).

The MTF study, paid for by grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, was conducted by an annual survey

of representative samples of approximately 50,000 students around the nation in grades eight, 10th, 11th and 12th, in 400 secondary schools. The survey asks the students if they have smoked within the past 30 days.

Over the past decade, the rates had, for the most part, steadily declined, sometimes leaping as much as four percentage points from one year to the next. But, the gradual slowing of the decline has given anti-tobacco advocates cause for major concern.

"In the 30 years that this study now spans, we have seen some wide fluctuations in the smoking habits of American young people," states Lloyd Johnson, the study's lead researcher. "We are still seeing some residual declines in smoking in the upper grades, as the lower-smoking birth cohorts make their way up the age spectrum... But, even in the upper grades a slowdown is occurring, and we believe the declines are likely to end very soon."

The overall high school smoking rate for Black students is 14 percent, compared to 26 percent for Whites. The CDC reports that the 14 percent for African-Americans is a major reduction from 22 percent six years ago. That's one reason the slowing of the trend is so disappointing to health and anti-tobacco advocates.

The study states that the slowing decline is in large part because of the failure of states to use money provided by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry that's supposed to address youth smoking and help smokers who want to quit.

"Only a handful of states have used this money for its intended purpose," says Cheryl Heaton, president and chief executive of the American Legacy Foundation, the nation's only foundation solely focused on tobacco prevention and cessation.

Heaton also says a clause in the agreement allowed the tobacco industry to stop payments into a National Public Education Fund in 2003, effectively cutting funding for Legacy's "Truth" campaign, the only national youth tobacco-prevention initiative not directed or controlled by the tobacco industry.

The 5-year-old Truth campaign is the largest national youth-smoking-prevention campaign and the only national campaign not directed by the tobacco industry. It exposes inside in-

formation about the tobacco industry, facts about addiction, health effects and social consequences of smoking in order to help teens make informed choices about tobacco use.

"At a time when only four states — Colorado, Delaware, Maine and Mississippi — have allocated tobacco prevention and cessation budgets at recommended CDC levels, the industry

spent \$15.4 billion in 2003, according to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission," Heaton says in a statement in response to the MTF study. "That means that for every (See Smoking, Page 14)

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