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MONOGRAPH SERIES**

22

**A Socioecological
Approach to
Addressing
Tobacco-Related
Health Disparities**

NCI Tobacco Control Monographs

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Contents

Figures and Tables	vii
Foreword	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Abbreviations	xv

Section I—Overview and Epidemiology

Chapter 1. Introduction and Overview.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Health Disparities.....	3
History of Research on TRHD.....	4
TRHD: A Multilevel Perspective.....	7
About This Monograph.....	9
Monograph Organization and Chapter Overviews	12
Future Directions in TRHD Research.....	15
Conclusion	16
References.....	18
Appendix I: Monograph Terms	20
Chapter 2. The Epidemiology of Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....	23
Introduction.....	27
Youth Tobacco Use Behaviors	32
Cigarette Smoking Prevalence Among Young Adults	43
Menthol Cigarette Smoking Among Youth and Young Adults	45
Adult Tobacco Use Behaviors	46
Secondhand Smoke and Prenatal Tobacco Exposure	59
Tobacco-Related Cancer Incidence and Mortality	61
Methodological Limitations and Challenges in the TRHD Literature.....	67
Chapter Summary	69
References.....	71

Section II—Intrapersonal/Individual Factors Associated With Tobacco-Related Health Disparities

Chapter 3. Genetics, Physiological Processes, and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities	79
Introduction.....	81
Genetic Factors Associated With Nicotine and Smoking.....	83
Genetic Factors Associated With the Risk for Lung Cancers.....	96
Genetics and TRHD: Current Knowledge and Future Directions	103
References.....	110
Chapter 4. Flavored Tobacco and Chemosensory Processes	125
Introduction.....	127
The Menthol Compound.....	128
Brief Review of the Chemical Senses.....	129

Cigarette Smoking and the Chemical Senses.....	130
Characteristics of Flavor Additives and Constituents.....	131
Chemical Senses and Variation	135
Taster Group and Variance Across Populations	137
Smoking Among Taster Groups	137
Chemosensation and TRHD	138
Chapter Summary	139
Research Needs	140
References	141
Chapter 5. Stress-Related Processes and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....	149
Introduction.....	152
Stress Processes and TRHD: Literature and Conceptual Frameworks.....	152
Physiological Stress Processes and Health in Racial/Ethnic and LGBT Groups	156
Perceived Stress and Tobacco Use: Overview.....	159
Racism and Discrimination and Their Relationship to Disparities.....	166
Psychological Disorders and TRHD.....	172
Examining Specific Psychological Stress, Trauma, and Smoking: Women and Intimate Partner Violence	178
Chapter Summary	183
Research Needs	185
References	187
Section III—Interpersonal and Contextual Factors That Contribute to Tobacco-Related Health Disparities	
Chapter 6. Social Relationships and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities	197
Introduction.....	200
Social Relationships and Disparities Across the Tobacco Use Continuum.....	200
Measures of Social Relationships and Tobacco Use	204
Literature Search Strategy.....	206
Social Network Structure and Smoking.....	206
Social Influence, Social Comparison, and Smoking.....	208
Social Control and Smoking	211
Social Support and Smoking.....	213
Discrimination and Smoking	216
Evidence Summary	222
Chapter Summary	224
Research Needs	225
References	227
Chapter 7. Tobacco-Related Health Disparities Among Immigrant Populations.....	235
Introduction.....	237
U.S. Immigration Patterns 1800–2010.....	237
Countries of Origin and Smoking Behavior	238
Impact of Acculturation and Assimilation to the United States	241

Literature Search Strategy.....	242
Acculturation, Immigrant Status, and Smoking Behavior.....	243
Gender, Acculturation, Immigrant Status, and Smoking Behavior/Outcomes.....	258
Socioeconomic Status, Acculturation, Immigrant Status, and Smoking Behavior.....	259
Immigrant Ethnicity and Smoking Behavior.....	260
Chapter Summary.....	261
Research Needs.....	262
References.....	264

Chapter 8. Occupation, the Work Environment, and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....269

Introduction.....	272
Literature Search Strategy.....	273
Disparities Across the Tobacco Use Continuum, by Occupational Characteristics.....	274
Effect of Occupation and Tobacco Smoking on Cancer Risk.....	285
Contributions of the Work Environment to Disparities Along the Tobacco Use Continuum.....	287
Evidence Summary.....	293
Chapter Summary.....	295
Research Needs.....	296
References.....	298

Chapter 9. Socioeconomic Status and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....307

Introduction.....	310
Literature Search Strategy.....	317
Educational Attainment and TRHD.....	318
Income and TRHD.....	328
Wealth and TRHD.....	335
Neighborhood SES and TRHD.....	336
Life-Course SES and TRHD.....	341
Evidence Summary.....	342
Chapter Summary.....	348
Research Needs.....	349
References.....	350

Section IV—Societal Level Influences on Tobacco Use

Chapter 10. Communication, Marketing, and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....357

Introduction.....	360
Understanding Communication Inequalities.....	361
Anti-Tobacco Communication, Marketing, and TRHD.....	365
Pro-Tobacco Communication, Marketing, and TRHD.....	391
The News Media and Tobacco Communications.....	406
New Communications Technologies: The Web and Beyond.....	407
Chapter Summary.....	418
Research Needs.....	420
References.....	423

Chapter 11. Federal, State, and Local Tobacco Control Policy and Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.....	443
Introduction.....	445
Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs in States	445
Federal Tobacco Control Policy	452
Youth Access Policies and Gender and Race/Ethnicity	458
Tobacco Tax Policies and Price	462
Smoke-Free Policy.....	474
Tobacco Treatment Policy	482
Chapter Summary	486
References.....	488
Chapter 12. Simulation Modeling of Tobacco-Related Health Disparities: <i>SimSmoke</i>	501
Introduction.....	504
The Modified <i>SimSmoke</i> Model: Methods	505
Predicted Results of the Recommended Policies Compared With the Status Quo.....	514
Conclusions.....	528
References.....	531

Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 1.1	The Socioecological Model: Factors Influencing TRHD Across the Tobacco Use Continuum and Life Course.....	8
Figure 2.1	Percentage of U.S. Current Smokers Who Initiated Regular Smoking After Age 18, by Race/Ethnicity, 1992/1993–2014/2015.....	33
Figure 2.2	Percentage of U.S. Current Smokers Who Initiated Regular Smoking After Age 18, by Poverty Status, 1998/1999–2014/2015	34
Figure 2.3	Percentage of U.S. Current Smokers Who Initiated Regular Smoking After Age 18, by Educational Attainment, 1992/1993–2014/2015	35
Figure 2.4	30-Day Prevalence of Cigarette Use Among U.S. 12th Graders, by Race/Ethnicity, 1991–2016.....	37
Figure 2.5	30-Day Prevalence of Cigarette Use Among 12th Graders, by Parental Educational Attainment, 1991–2016.....	38
Figure 2.6	30-Day Prevalence of Cigarette Use Among 12th Graders, by College Plans, 1991–2016.....	39
Figure 2.7	Ever-Use of Tobacco Products, by Product Type and Sex, 2013-2014.....	40
Figure 2.8	30-Day Prevalence of Tobacco Product Use, by Product Type and Race/Ethnicity, 2013-2014	41
Figure 2.9	Prevalence of Current Smoking of Any Type of Cigar Among U.S. High School Students, by Sex, 1997–2015.....	42
Figure 2.10	Prevalence of Current Smoking of Any Type of Cigar Among U.S. High School Students, by Race/Ethnicity, 1997–2015	42
Figure 2.11	30-Day Prevalence of Cigarette Use Among Adults Ages 18–25, by Poverty Level, 2007–2014.....	44
Figure 2.12	30-day Prevalence of Menthol Cigarette Smoking Among Youth and Young Adults, by Age Group and Sex, 2015	45
Figure 2.13	Current Smoking Among U.S. Adults, by Poverty Status, 1994–2015.....	49
Figure 2.14	Percentage of U.S. Adults Smoking ≤ 10 Cigarettes per Day, by Race/Ethnicity, 1992/1993–2014/2015	50
Figure 2.15	Percentage of U.S. Adult Smokers Whose Usual Cigarette Brand Was Menthol, by Age, 2003–2014/2015.....	52
Figure 2.16	Percentage of U.S. Adult Smokers Whose Usual Cigarette Brand Was Menthol, by Sex, 2003–2014/2015	52
Figure 2.17	Percentage of U.S. Adult Smokers Whose Usual Cigarette Brand Was Menthol, by Race/Ethnicity, 2003–2014/2015.....	53
Figure 2.18	30-day Prevalence of Tobacco Product Use Among U.S. Adults, by Product Type and Race/Ethnicity, 2013-2014.....	54
Figure 2.19	30-Day Prevalence of Cigar Use Among Young Adults Ages 18–25, by Poverty Level, 2005–2014	55
Figure 2.20	NHIS Participants Under Age 65 Who Lacked Health Insurance Coverage at Time of Interview, by Race/Ethnicity, 2009–2015	58
Figure 2.21	State Medicaid Coverage of Tobacco Dependence Treatments, 2008 and 2015	59
Figure 2.22	Age-Adjusted U.S. Incidence of Lung and Bronchus Cancers, by Sex, 1975–2014.....	63

Figure 2.23	Age-Adjusted U.S. Mortality from Lung and Bronchus Cancers, by Sex, 1975–2014.....	64
Figure 2.24	Smoking Prevalence in Hawaii, by Ethnicity and Sex, 2008	68
Figure 3.1	Contribution of Genetic Factors to TRHD.....	81
Figure 3.2	Biology of Nicotine Addiction.....	84
Figure 3.3	Phase 1 and Phase 2 Drug-Metabolizing Enzymes	85
Figure 3.4	Relative Contributions of Genetic and Environmental Factors to Smoking Initiation.....	88
Figure 3.5	Genetic Factors Influence Cancer Risk by Modulating Smoking Behaviors, Activity of Carcinogens, and Susceptibility to Damage Caused by Carcinogens	97
Figure 3.6	Types of Biomarkers and -Omics Technologies That Could Help Understanding of TRHD.....	108
Figure 4.1	Cigarette Packs: Spud Menthol Cooled Cigarettes, 1924, and Kool Cigarettes, 1950....	128
Figure 4.2	Chemical Structure of Menthol.....	129
Figure 5.1	Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis	155
Figure 5.2	Relationships Between Biopsychosocial Factors and Tobacco Use Among Racial/Ethnic and LGBT Groups and Their Effects on Health	157
Figure 6.1	Influences of Social Relationships Across the Tobacco Use Continuum.....	203
Figure 6.2	Percentage of Adolescents Who Report Having One or More Friends Who Smoke, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 2013	209
Figure 7.1	Five Source Countries With the Largest Populations in the United States as Percentages of the Total Foreign-Born Population, 2010.....	239
Figure 8.1	Conceptual Model of Stress-Mediated Pathways to Smoking.....	287
Figure 9.1	Current Cigarette Smoking Among Black or African American Women, by Educational Attainment, Selected Years, 1974–2014.....	312
Figure 9.2	Current Cigarette Smoking Among White Women, by Educational Attainment, Selected Years, 1974–2014.....	313
Figure 9.3	Current Cigarette Smoking Among Black or African American Men, by Educational Attainment, Selected Years, 1974–2014.....	314
Figure 9.4	Current Cigarette Smoking Among White Men, by Educational Attainment, Selected Years, 1974–2014.....	315
Figure 10.1	The Structural Influence Model	363
Figure 10.2	Advertising Image, Florida “truth” Campaign, 2001.....	371
Figure 10.3	A “truth” Body Bags Campaign Message, 2000	376
Figure 10.4	A “truth” Singing Cowboy Campaign Message, 2006	377
Figure 10.5	Print Advertisement, EX Campaign, 2007	385
Figure 10.6	EX Advertisement: Image of a Blue-Collar Worker Trying To “Relearn” Drinking Coffee Without Cigarettes, 2007	386
Figure 10.7	Advertising Image, CDC’s <i>Tips From Former Smokers</i> TM	387

Figure 10.8	Advertisement for Salem Menthol Cigarettes, <i>Maxim</i> Magazine, March 2004	396
Figure 10.9	Displays of Tobacco Brand Prices at the Point of Sale, Including Special Discounts, 2011.....	399
Figure 10.10	Distribution of U.S. Cigarette Advertising and Promotional Expenditures, 2014.....	401
Figure 10.11	Distribution of U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Advertising and Promotional Expenditures, 2014	402
Figure 10.12	Salem Menthol Print Advertisement With Coupon, 2003	403
Figure 10.13	Advertisement in <i>OUT</i> Magazine, January 2002.....	404
Figure 10.14	Advertisement from a 1995 Issue of <i>OUT</i> Magazine	405
Figure 10.15	Screenshot from <i>Flavor Monsters</i> Game	413
Figure 11.1	100% Smoke-Free Policies in the United States, 2017.....	475
Figure 11.2	Local Smoke-Free Laws Covering Workplaces, Restaurants, and Bars, 2002–2017	476

Tables

Table 2.1	Summary of State and National Surveys/Studies on Youth and Adult Tobacco Use Referenced in This Chapter	28
Table 2.2	Prevalence of Current Cigarette Smoking Among U.S. Youth Ages 12 to 17, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2013–2015	36
Table 2.3	Prevalence of Current Cigarette Smoking Among U.S. Young Adults Ages 18–25, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2013–2015	43
Table 2.4	Prevalence of Current Cigarette Smoking Among U.S. Adults Age 18 and Older, by Sex, Race/Ethnicity, Poverty Status, and Educational Attainment, 1994–2015.....	47
Table 2.5	Tobacco-Related Cancers: Estimated New Cases and Deaths in 2017	62
Table 2.6	Tobacco-Related Cancer Incidence per 100,000 People in the United States, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2014.....	65
Table 2.7	Tobacco-Related Cancer Mortality per 100,000 People in the United States, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2014	65
Table 4.1	Sample Characteristics of Taster Types.....	136
Table 5.1	Studies Examining Perceived Stress and Tobacco Use Among Racial/Ethnic and LGBT Groups, 1991–2013	160
Table 5.2	Summary of Studies on Racial Discrimination and Smoking Status Among Racial/Ethnic and LGBT Groups, 2000–2014.....	169
Table 5.3	Studies Examining Stress/Trauma and Tobacco Use Among Racial/Ethnic Groups, 2003–2012.....	174
Table 5.4	Weighted Prevalence of Type of Intimate Partner Violence for Men and Women During Their Lifetimes and in Past 12 Months, 2011	180
Table 5.5	Data Sources on Intimate Partner Violence and Smoking.....	181
Table 6.1	Studies of Social Support Smoking Cessation Interventions Among Specific Populations.....	215
Table 6.2	Studies of Discrimination and Smoking	217
Table 6.3	Summary: Social Relationships, Smoking Behavior, and TRHD	222

Table 7.1	Total and Country-Specific Foreign-Born Populations Living in the United States, 1960–2010.....	239
Table 7.2	Tobacco Use Behaviors and Knowledge Among Adults (%), by Country, 2009	240
Table 7.3	Summary of Reviewed Studies Examining Smoking Behavior Among Immigrants (n = 59).....	244
Table 8.1	Cigarette Use Across the Tobacco Use Continuum, Nationally Representative Data, by Occupational Class.....	275
Table 9.1	Age-Adjusted Percentages and Means for Indicators on the Tobacco Use Continuum Among Adults, by Educational Attainment and Race/Ethnicity, 2010	327
Table 9.2	Age-Adjusted Percentages and Means for Indicators on the Tobacco Use Continuum Among Adults, by Poverty Level and Race/Ethnicity, 2010.....	334
Table 9.3	Summary of Findings on SES Measures, Stage of the Tobacco Use Continuum, and TRHD 2000–2011.....	343
Table 10.1	Summary of Youth-Focused Anti-Tobacco Communication and Marketing Campaigns Reviewed.....	369
Table 10.2	Summary of Adult-Focused Anti-Tobacco Communication and Marketing Campaigns Reviewed.....	379
Table 10.3	Internet Access and Use Patterns in the United States, 2015–2016	409
Table 11.1	FY 2017 Funding for State Tobacco Prevention Programs	446
Table 11.2	Percentage and Number of U.S. High School Students Who Usually Obtained Their Own Cigarettes by Buying Them in a Store or Gas Station, 2001–2015	459
Table 11.3	High School Students’ Usual Source of Tobacco Products in the Past Month, NYTS, 2015	460
Table 11.4	Federal Cigarette Excise Taxes for Selected Dates, 1993–2016	463
Table 11.5	State/Local Cigarette Excise Tax, 2017.....	463
Table 12.1	Policy Inputs and Effect Size for <i>SimSmoke</i> Projection	509
Table 12.2	Smoking Prevalence by Age and Income Quintile, TUS-CPS, 2006-2007 (Percentages).....	514
Table 12.3	Smoking Prevalence by Age and Income Quintile, TUS-CPS, 2010-2011 (Percentages).....	515
Table 12.4	Smoking Prevalence by Income Quintile (Lowest and Second-Lowest) and by Age, Sex, and Year, as Predicted by <i>SimSmoke</i> ’s Status Quo Scenario (Percentages).....	515
Table 12.5	Smoking-Attributable Deaths by Income Quintile (Lowest and Second-Lowest) and by Sex and Year, as Estimated by <i>SimSmoke</i> ’s Status Quo Scenario.....	517
Table 12.6	Comparison of Status Quo Policies With <i>SimSmoke</i> -Recommended Policies: Smoking Prevalence and Percentage Change Among Men Ages 18 to 85, Lowest Income Quintile (Percentages).....	519
Table 12.7	Comparison of Status Quo Policies With <i>SimSmoke</i> -Recommended Policies: Smoking Prevalence and Percentage Change Among Women Ages 18 to 85, Lowest Income Quintile (Percentages).....	520

Table 12.8	Comparison of Status Quo Policies With <i>SimSmoke</i> -Recommended Policies: Smoking Prevalence and Percentage Change Among Men Ages 18 to 85, Second-Lowest Income Quintile (Percentages).....	521
Table 12.9	Comparison of Status Quo Policies With <i>SimSmoke</i> -Recommended Policies: Smoking Prevalence and Percentage Change Among Women Ages 18 to 85, Second-Lowest Income Quintile (Percentages).....	522
Table 12.10	Smoking-Attributable Deaths, from <i>SimSmoke</i> Model, Lowest Income Quintile.....	523
Table 12.11	Smoking-Attributable Deaths, from <i>SimSmoke</i> Model, Second-Lowest Quintile.....	524

A Socioecological Approach to Addressing Tobacco-Related Health Disparities

Foreword

Use of tobacco products remains the leading preventable cause of death and disability for all population groups in the United States. The special effect of tobacco use on minority health and health disparities has received moderate attention over the past 30 years. National Cancer Institute (NCI)–funded programs have led many of these research efforts, and the Master Settlement Agreement energized subsequent public health mobilization efforts. This monograph is a comprehensive report covering cutting edge and state-of-the-art summaries of research on tobacco-related health disparities from the perspectives of epidemiology, individual behavior, biology, cultural context, and societal structures. This multilevel approach reflects the appropriate methodology to address the science of minority health and health disparities research and creates a foundation for future topics that the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities will focus on. In consideration of advancing the field and adding emphasis to specific issues, I will comment on five areas.

The success of tobacco control in the United States over the past 50 years is unprecedented. Smoking rates have been decreased by more than 50% among men, and cardiovascular mortality has decreased across all populations by an even greater proportion. Reductions in secondhand smoke exposure have been found even when using the most sensitive measures of detectable cotinine in children under 5 years, although further reductions in exposure are needed, especially among African Americans and people living in poverty.¹ Despite this remarkable progress, tobacco smoking has been causally linked to about 4 out of 5 lung cancer deaths in the United States.² Fifty years after the landmark Surgeon General’s report *Smoking and Health* of 1964, the 2014 Surgeon General’s report stated that in the United States 83.7% of lung cancer deaths among men and 80.7% of those among women were attributed to tobacco smoking.³ There is potential to further decrease the tobacco epidemic through implementation of evidence-based interventions to prevent uptake and promote cessation. A complementary proposal to require a gradual decrease in nicotine content of manufactured cigarettes over a decade would likely lead to even less tobacco dependence and lower overall use.⁴ Indeed, on July 28, 2017, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb announced that the agency will take a comprehensive approach to regulating nicotine, including an exploration of reducing nicotine in combustible cigarettes to render them minimally or non-addictive.⁵

The approach to smoking cessation for most of the past 30 years has been designed around the nicotine addiction paradigm. However, as has been well documented, nearly half of racial/ethnic minority smokers are either non-daily smokers or very light smokers (NDVL) who consume fewer than 5 cigarettes per day.⁶ The addiction paradigm does not apply to this increasingly prevalent pattern of smoking because these smokers are not dependent on nicotine and do not have classic withdrawal symptoms when they try to quit. The research community has failed to focus on the challenge of how to assist non-daily and very light smokers in quitting, and by doing so, has ignored the most prevalent smoking behavior pattern of minority populations. In fact, eligibility criteria for most smoking cessation trials have included smoking 10 or more cigarettes per day, thus systematically avoiding empirical evidence on what intervention components may work in NDVL smokers. One possible approach would incorporate the availability of underused evidence-based cessation interventions such as quitline advice with clinician referrals and the electronic medical record. Clinician educational interventions have had limited but tangible benefits in promoting cessation using strategies based on the stages of change model and prescribing medication adjuncts.⁷ Referral to a quitline through an electronic consultation platform

is now feasible and would continue to allow clinicians to motivate, advise, and assist with medication. Given that most smokers visit a clinician at least yearly, this approach would potentially expand cessation efforts to reach underserved and minority populations.

The immigrant paradox continues to present a perplexing observation that most scientists try to explain by endorsing the concept that as immigrants acculturate, behaviors will change and disease rates will go up. Among Asian and Latino immigrants to the United States, increasing acculturation among women is strongly associated with greater use of tobacco, although the patterns are either absent or reversed among men. Despite this, and the fact that over half of Latinos were born in the United States, overall smoking rates among Latina and Asian women are below 10%.⁸ Although overall smoking rates are lower for both Latinos and Asians, much higher smoking rates have been found in some demographic subgroups, such as Cuban and Puerto Rican men and women and Vietnamese men. In considering the influence of acculturation on behavior, scientists need to take socioeconomic status into account in an integral way. Acculturation is not a linear process; it often results in a bicultural individual and is strongly influenced by the social class background of the immigrant family and the change in status and social mobility they experience in the United States.⁹ This complex interaction has not been well studied and will require greater attention when evaluating tobacco-related health disparities.

Much discussion in the past has focused on the relative importance of race/ethnicity and social class in influencing health outcomes. Tobacco use behavior is an excellent example of how these factors interact, how they explain mutually independent variance and assist scientists and public health leaders in determining approaches. In tobacco-related health disparities, some demographic groups stand out as needing special emphasis in the future. First, people with co-incident chronic and severe mental disorders (SMD) smoke at exceedingly high rates,¹⁰ and only recently have programs been developed to provide greater cessation assistance. Similarly, individuals with other substance use problems have excess smoking rates, and like those with SMD, suffer from societal marginalization and stigmatization that affect their quantity and quality of life. Second, the social class gradient in smoking behavior is quite striking as measured by smoking rates that approach 40% among persons with 9 to 11 years of education or even among those with general education diplomas (GEDs), compared to less than 5% among college graduates.⁸ This disparity cuts across racial/ethnic groups but is most accentuated among poor whites. Finally, sexual and gender minorities (SGM) have higher smoking rates,¹¹ suffer from structural discrimination, and have not been well studied for long-term health outcomes; only recently have public health researchers begun to abandon the “Don’t ask, don’t know” mantra.

My last comment is to reflect on the importance of multilevel approaches that incorporate biological pathways. There is unequivocal evidence of the causal effect of tobacco smoking on lung cancer, even if not fully quantified in all population groups. The incidence of lung cancer does not completely mirror smoking behavior even after accounting for at least a 10-year lag time. An observation made in the Multi-Ethnic Cohort Study highlights the unknown factors in this causal pathway.¹² In that observational study of African Americans, Native Hawaiians, whites, Latinos, and Japanese participants, the relative risk of the 1,749 cases of lung cancer identified was calculated by level of cigarette smoking intensity. For a similar level of smoking, Latino, white, and Japanese participants had a 30% to 75% lower risk of lung cancer compared with African Americans and Native Hawaiians. It was not until a smoking intensity of 30 cigarettes per day was reached that the differences in relative risk became non-significant.¹² Multiple possible explanations may be considered, including greater use of mentholated brands by African Americans, nicotine metabolism differences influencing smoking behavior, genetic markers linked to ancestry that have not been discovered, gene–environment interactions that have not

been studied, and smoking topography. Although this is one smoking-related example, the underlying principle is that studying different racial/ethnic groups provides opportunities for scientific discovery that otherwise would not be available.

Minority health and health disparities research has been predominantly framed in a context of social disadvantage and social determinants of health. Without discounting these factors, this NCI monograph is an outstanding example of where the field needs to move to advance the science—that is, toward multilevel discovery that incorporates advances in behavioral, social, clinical, population, and biological sciences in addressing the determinants of health outcomes in minorities and other disparity populations. This tobacco-related health disparities monograph is an excellent illustration of this pathway.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation/Acronym	Definition
Add Health	National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health
ASSIST	American Stop-Smoking Intervention Study
BRFSS	Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System
CARDIA Study	Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COPD	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
CPD	Number of cigarettes smoked per day
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
GED	General educational development diploma
HINTS	Health Information National Trends Survey
MSA	Master Settlement Agreement
MTF	Monitoring the Future study
NATS	National Adult Tobacco Survey
NCI	National Cancer Institute
NHANES	National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey
NHIS	National Health Interview Survey
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NSDUH	National Survey on Drug Use and Health
NYTS	National Youth Tobacco Survey
PATH	Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health
POS	Point of sale
PRAMS	Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SEER	Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results program
SEM	Socioecological model
SES	Socioeconomic status
SHS	Secondhand smoke
TRHD	Tobacco-related health disparities
TUS-CPS	Tobacco Use Supplement to the Current Population Survey
YRBS	Youth Risk Behavior Survey

