



Hearing on the Role of Social Sciences in Public Health  
Committee on Science and Technology  
U.S. House of Representatives

Statement

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at the American Legacy Foundation®

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There is strong evidence that half of all preventable deaths in the U.S. can be attributed to behavioral factors such as smoking, poor diet, overeating, and physical inactivity. In addition, behavioral and social factors contribute to the staggering costs of preventable morbidity and mortality.

Even with the dramatic contributions that behavioral and social sciences research has made to date, much more needs to be done to understand the role of behavioral and social factors in disease and, in turn, to use that knowledge to improve the nation's health.

Behavioral and social sciences research is critical to improving public health overall, but is especially important in addressing youth smoking prevention and adult tobacco cessation. Tobacco use is the single most avoidable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States. Eighty percent of all smokers have their first cigarette before age 18 and 90 percent start smoking before age 20. Within days or weeks of smoking your first cigarette, symptoms of nicotine dependence may appear. Although nearly half of all smokers attempt to quit each year, less than 5% are successful, with the majority going back to smoking within just seven days.

As we examine how to reverse the tobacco epidemic in this country, we must pay special attention to the role of behavior change. Young people are especially vulnerable to the advertising tactics of the tobacco industry and their power to affect behavior is undeniable.

Last month, a new report from the National Institutes of Health, Monograph 19: *The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use*, concluded that much tobacco advertising targets the psychological needs of adolescents, such as popularity, peer acceptance and positive self-image. Advertising creates the perception that smoking will satisfy these needs.

The report also concludes that mass media campaigns can reduce smoking, especially when combined with other tobacco control strategies, lending further credibility to existing media campaigns that have been proven to curb youth smoking, such as the American Legacy Foundation's award-winning **truth**® campaign. In its first two years, **truth**® was credited with 22 percent of the overall decline in youth smoking, but the annual budget for **truth**® is less than the \$36 million our competitors in the tobacco industry spend in just 24 hours to market their deadly products to consumers in the U.S.

Behavioral and Social Sciences have also provided effective smoking cessation treatments for tobacco dependence as well as for other addictions and mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. The national smoking cessation campaign called **EX**® is geared to taking what we

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know and reaching the 45 million current smokers – the majority of whom want to quit, but have not accessed the available effective resources in previous quit attempts. Despite the concerns of the obesity epidemic and the escalating costs of health care, we should not forget that tobacco use is still the single biggest preventable cause of death, suffering and excess cost to our society.

Investments in behavioral and social sciences have paid off. We have contributed to child health and human development, to improving quality of life as we age, and we have cut HIV-AIDS incidence in half in less than 20 years, and many other examples, using principles and practices of Behavioral and Social Science. We know a great deal about how to reverse the type 2 Diabetes epidemic. However, putting what we know into practice and policy has fallen far short of what is needed and could be achieved to improve our nation's health. If we put all of what we know in behavioral and social sciences into practice and policy at every level of health care and public health delivery, we could dramatically reduce chronic disease burden, disability, death and huge preventable expenses to our nation. We can do this with what we know today.

Despite considerable success over the past decade in tobacco control, tobacco use still accounts for nearly one-third of cancer deaths in the US and worldwide, and tobacco-attributable mortality is predicted to increase in the coming decades if current smoking patterns continue. Tobacco use is also a major contributor to heart disease, pulmonary disease and it complicates and makes worse almost any other disease. If this trend is to be reversed, an in-depth understanding of the behavioral and social factors that underlie tobacco use as well as effective prevention and treatment efforts must inform the debate and guide the way to effective policy changes. Behavior change is at the center of the translation of new discoveries in the biomedical, socio-behavioral, and population sciences into practices and policies to improve our nation's health.

*The Steven A Schroeder National Institute for Tobacco Research and Policy Studies at the American Legacy Foundation® advances the science behind social marketing, smoking cessation and tobacco control policy to facilitate the translation of empirical findings to practical public health interventions. The American Legacy Foundation is dedicated to building a world where young people reject tobacco and anyone can quit. Located in Washington, D.C., the foundation develops programs that address the health effects of tobacco use, especially among vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by the toll of tobacco, through grants, technical assistance and training, partnerships, youth activism, and counter-marketing and grassroots marketing campaigns. The foundation's programs include **truth**®, a national youth smoking prevention campaign that has been cited as contributing to significant declines in youth smoking; **EX**®, an innovative public health program designed to speak to smokers in their own language and change the way they approach quitting; research initiatives exploring the causes, consequences and approaches to reducing tobacco use; and a nationally-renowned program of outreach to priority populations. The American Legacy Foundation was created as a result of the November 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) reached between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry. Visit [www.americanlegacy.org](http://www.americanlegacy.org).*

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