



# Teen Empowerment Movement to Prevent Tobacco Use by North Carolina's Youth

Jim D. Martin, MS, Kurt M. Ribisl, PhD, Delmonte Jefferson, Ann Houston, CH-ES

Tobacco use is the number one preventable cause of premature death and disease in North Carolina and the nation.<sup>1,2</sup> Tobacco use causes more than 14,500 deaths every year in this state (21% of deaths overall).<sup>3</sup> Tobacco use almost always begins during the teens. More than 80% of current adult tobacco users started before they were 18 years old.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore worrisome that the rate of tobacco use by teenagers has increased in North Carolina during the last six years, and that the rates of tobacco use among middle and high school students in North Carolina are higher than national averages (see article by Conlisk and Malek on page 256).<sup>4</sup>

In order to prevent and control tobacco use, North Carolina has recently adopted a comprehensive plan that involves multiple strategies targeted at *both* youth and adults.<sup>5</sup> The Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch of the NC Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with public and private organizations across the state, is implementing the plan, based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) "Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs,"<sup>6</sup> and tailored specifically to this state. The plan's four major goals are to

- ◆ Prevent the initiation and promote the quitting of tobacco use by youths;
- ◆ Eliminate exposure to environmental ("second-hand") tobacco smoke;
- ◆ Promote the quitting of tobacco use by adults;
- ◆ Lessen the health disparities incurred by vulnerable and under-served racial, ethnic, and income groups that are disproportionately affected by tobacco use.

North Carolina is taking a number of steps at the state level to augment existing programs and to provide new resources needed by youth leaders, schools, and communi-

ties. In this article we document North Carolina's efforts to reduce teen tobacco use, focusing specifically on how teen empowerment programs aim to change policies and social norms surrounding the use of tobacco products. The Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch is helping organize and empower young people to work effectively with adults to prevent youth tobacco use in North Carolina. The plan's major policy and program objectives are to

- ◆ Increase the number of North Carolina school districts that are 100% free of tobacco use by all people in all school buildings, on the campus, and at school-related events;
- ◆ Reduce illegal sales of tobacco products to minors at retail stores and vending machines;
- ◆ Increase the number of smoke-free public places, work places, recreational sites, restaurants, and homes.
- ◆ Increase the number of health-promoting cues and messages provided by media.

## The Perspective of Youth Empowerment

In the early 1960s smoking prevention programs aimed at youth listed the negative effects of smoking and gave gruesome portrayals of diseased organs; later efforts focused on improving self-esteem, refusal skills, and resistance to influence from peers, the media, and other social factors.<sup>7,8</sup> Despite the proliferation of such programs, the prevalence of current cigarette smoking among US high school students rose from 27.5% in 1991 to 36.4% in 1999.<sup>9</sup> It seems that traditional curriculum- and classroom-based youth smoking prevention programs are not very effective,<sup>10</sup> and this has led to the active pursuit of alternative approaches.

Mr. Martin is State Advisor on Preventing Teen Tobacco Use for the NC Department Health and Human Services; Dr. Ribisl is with the Department of Health Behavior/Health Education in the UNC School of Public Health; Mr. Jefferson and Ms. Houston are with the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch, NC Department of Health and Human Services. Address correspondence to Mr. Martin at NC-DHHS, Division of Public Health, 1932 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1932.

Youth development and empowerment constitute one of the newest and most promising methods.<sup>7,11</sup> Empowerment means helping people develop skills to become independent problem-solvers and decision-makers. It refers to the process by which individuals gain influence over events and outcomes of importance in their environment.<sup>12</sup> For brevity, we will refer to these programs hereafter as youth empowerment programs. These new programs challenge the tenets of the older programs because they view young people as assets rather than as the sources of the problem, and because they actively engage youth in finding solutions.<sup>7,11</sup> This means youths serve not merely as the target audience, but become actively involved in developing, implementing and evaluating interventions.

Legal settlements with tobacco companies have provided funds allowing states like Mississippi and Florida to branch out from traditional health-class lessons to work actively with youth groups to create social change. Last year, for example, high school students with Mississippi's "Question It" Youth Campaign helped push through the state legislature a bill prohibiting the use of tobacco at school and school-related athletic events. The empowered students testified before committees, talked to lawmakers, and galvanized support state-wide. Florida used its funds to support a statewide program empowering youth to lead community involvement against tobacco.<sup>13</sup> Meaningful youth participation was assured by the stipulation that at least 25% of the members of the state's 67 Community Partnerships be youths, and by convening a Teen Tobacco Summit at which teens created a youth advocacy group called SWAT (Students Working Against Tobacco). Launched in Spring of 1998, SWAT quickly grew from 457 to over 10,000 members by the Fall of 1999.<sup>13,14</sup> Since beginning its tobacco control program in 1998, Florida has had the largest decline in youth smoking seen anywhere in the US over the past two decades.<sup>15</sup> The decline was the result of several factors: increased program funding, increased cigarette prices, and individual programs such as SWAT and other youth cessation efforts.

### **Early Teen Empowerment Efforts in North Carolina**

North Carolina's tobacco prevention and control programs have been given a tremendous boost through initiatives that involve youths as leaders. The Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch and its partners have built upon successful youth leadership initiatives of the local American Stop Smoking Intervention Study (ASSIST) coalitions, the Health Action Council of the American Lung Association and American Cancer Society, and the African-American Action Team. These programs have advanced the notion that solving a complex problem like youth tobacco use requires many

partners and a strong peer-led youth movement. The efforts must be sustained by schools and community groups, and by funders and decision makers who understand the need for culturally competent commitment and support. Youth-led initiatives in North Carolina build upon model student-led programs such as Students Warning Against Tobacco from Independence High in Charlotte, Watauga High Against Tobacco, the African-American Action Team program called UJIMA (a principle of Kwanzaa to encourage collective work), and the Smoke-Free Class of 2000 that evolved into Teens Against Tobacco Use, a peer education and youth advocacy program led by the American Lung Association and the American Cancer Society.

### **The Governor's Summit**

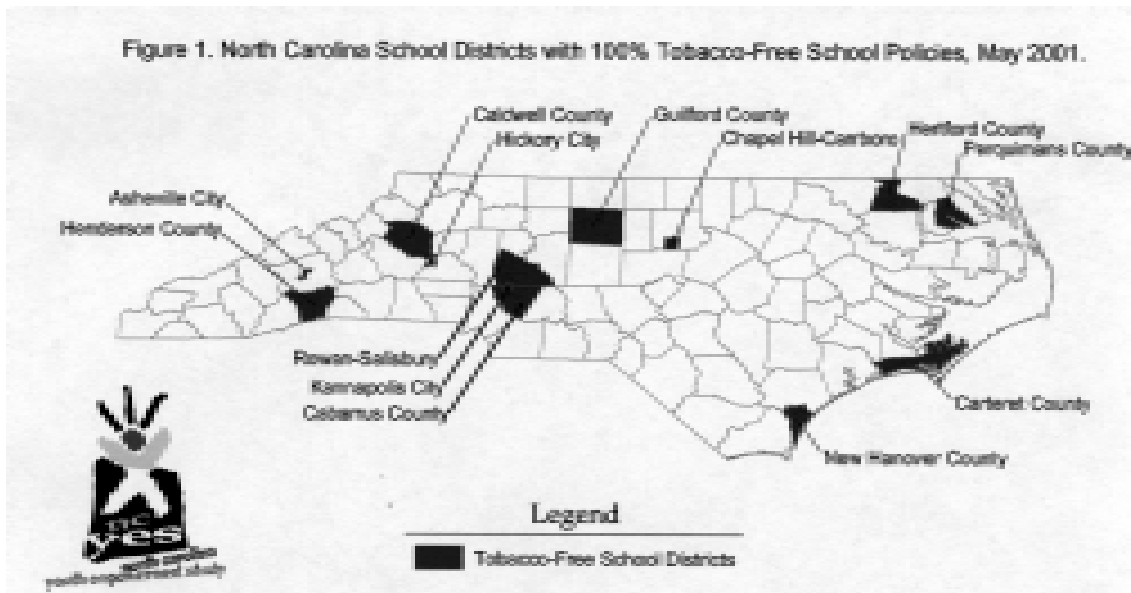
In January 2000, more than 800 students, teachers, and school and public health officials gathered in Charlotte for the state's first Governor's Summit to Prevent Teen Tobacco Use. The Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch was able to convene delegates representing the racial and ethnic populations of North Carolina, nonsmokers and smokers, youth and adult leaders. The Summit created a forum to showcase various youth initiatives, and to focus on goals and strategies to prevent North Carolina teen tobacco use. Youth and adult delegates made it clear that strong action was needed immediately. To communicate an effective message of prevention to young people, North Carolina had to empower one of its most valuable resources in the fight against teen tobacco use—its teenagers. This meeting was the largest public health training event in North Carolina history—quite an accomplishment for a state that is the leading grower and manufacturer of tobacco in the United States.

### **Teen Empowerment Activities**

*Promoting 100% Tobacco-Free Schools.* During the Summit, a group of committed teens developed a petition calling on state and local leaders to support 100% tobacco-free schools. At the time of the Summit, about 5% of school districts in North Carolina were 100% tobacco-free, compared to over 97% of districts in California.<sup>16</sup> The students printed copies of the petition so that all Summit participants could solicit supporting signatures back at their local schools.

As a direct result of the summit, 18 student leaders agreed to serve on the Governor's Youth Advisory Team on Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People. In February 2000, the Youth Advisory Team delivered to then-Governor Jim Hunt a petition with more than 1,800 signatures asking for 100% tobacco-free schools. In response, the Governor sent a letter to every middle and high school principal,

Figure 1. North Carolina School Districts with 100% Tobacco-Free School Policies, May 2001.



superintendent, school board chair, and PTA asking that schools, school grounds, and all school-related events be made 100% tobacco-free. To support these efforts, the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch published a *Grassroots Guide for Tobacco-Free Schools in North Carolina*, which was distributed to all public schools in the state.

In the year after the Summit, the number of school systems that are tobacco-free has doubled. This is exciting progress, but much more needs to be done. Currently, only 13 of 116 school districts have adopted a 100% tobacco-free school policy (Figure 1), but many are in the process of strengthening their current smoking policies. Efforts to promote 100% tobacco free schools continue; on March 14, 2001, Governor Michael F. Easley and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Ward sent a letter to all school districts encouraging them to implement a 100% tobacco-free school policy.

The Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch offers training and technical assistance for the tobacco-free schools model. This includes the components recommended by the CDC for preventing and reducing tobacco use in school populations (such as the 100% tobacco-free policies already discussed) and encourages districts to adopt additional measures such as (1) offering alternatives to suspension for students who violate the school's tobacco use policy; (2) offering cessation programs for students and staff who want to quit; and (3) promoting student-led school-wide programs and activities setting a tobacco-free norm.

**Reducing Youth Access To Tobacco Products.** The Federal Synar Amendment (Section 1926 of the Public Health Service Act) requires states to reduce youth access to tobacco products. The NC Division of Alcohol Law Enforcement (ALE) enforces the state's laws on youth access to tobacco. Active enforcement, combined with merchant education, is the only proven way to reduce youth access to tobacco products.<sup>17</sup> In many North Carolina communities merchant

education is conducted by youth organizations, many of whom have received training through the UJIMA program. Since 1996, the combination of enforcement activities by ALE and merchant education has reduced by 50% the rate at which minors can buy tobacco products in North Carolina. Unfortunately, current lack of funds for active statewide enforcement threatens the State's ability to continue to reduce tobacco sales to minors.

**Promoting Smoke-Free Air.** Secondhand smoke is a known human lung carcinogen and a serious threat to the health of children. Secondhand smoke both causes and exacerbates asthma,<sup>18</sup> a leading cause of school absenteeism. Almost half of NC middle school students (49%) and high school students (46%) live with someone who smokes. North Carolina law (GS 143-595, *Smoking in Public Places*) requires that 20% of the space in state-controlled buildings be set aside for smoking, and prevents local governments from setting more stringent limits. Despite this preemptive law, there has been a 77% increase in North Carolina workers covered by nonsmoking policies, because organizations have passed *voluntary* private policies in response to the increased understanding of the serious health threat from secondhand smoke and a growing demand from employees and customers. The community coalitions funded through the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch have worked effectively with teen leaders to promote voluntary clean indoor air policies for restaurants, worksites, and family-oriented businesses. Meaningful progress in eliminating environmental tobacco smoke requires that teen empowerment efforts be combined with strong state and local community leadership. Furthermore, core funding of state and local collaborative activities is needed to promote adoption of nonsmoking policies in homes, daycare facilities, schools, workplaces, restaurants, and public places.

**Pro-Health Media Messages.** In December 2000, the Tobacco Control and Prevention Branch launched a teen-

focused radio campaign that engaged teen members of the Governor's Youth Advisory Team to tell their stories of successful advocacy. The objectives of the media campaign in North Carolina were to

- ◆ increase the level of youth advocacy in preventing tobacco use;
- ◆ increase credibility of and support for tobacco-free schools;
- ◆ reward young leaders in preventing tobacco use.

Funds for the radio campaign were secured from the Advisory Committee for Cancer Coordination and Control and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The interviews focused on 100% tobacco-free school policies and youth-led tobacco prevention activities. Through these ads, teens encouraged their peers to "StepUp" (a term that became the name of the media campaign) and get involved in policies and programs to prevent teen tobacco use. From December 2000 to January 2001, the radio campaign was aired across the state on 15 teen-oriented radio stations at times targeted for youth audiences. The ads also ran as Public Service Announcements during February-March, 2001.

A website, [www.StepUpNC.com](http://www.StepUpNC.com), was activated at the start of the radio campaign. The radio ads directed listeners to the website, which contained both audio files of the commercials and links to webcasts from the participating stations. The site itself has many sections that encourage youth advocacy (such as efforts to promote tobacco-free school policy) and interaction among teens.

## Expanding the Youth Empowerment Movement

As part of the new strategy to empower teen advocates, the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch secured two grants. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded a three-year grant to enhance North Carolina's statewide effort to reduce teen tobacco use by establishing three Tobacco Use Prevention Youth Empowerment Centers. The teens involved with these centers named their initiative the "Y Youth Empowerment Program." Additional funding came in March, 2001 in the form of a three-year grant from the American Legacy Foundation, a national foundation established through the Master Settlement Agreement between the tobacco companies and 46 states. North Carolina and 12 other states received such grants. Funds from these two sources will help expand the State's youth empowerment efforts in local schools and communities, and focus on racial and ethnic groups most affected by tobacco use.

*Y Youth Empowerment Centers.* There are three Y Youth Empowerment Centers located throughout North Carolina, and each is staffed by a Project Coordinator and five to ten skilled youth advocates. Some of those selected for these positions were chosen because they were already in-

involved in tobacco prevention and control, and others because of a desire to change the social acceptability of tobacco use. In addition to the staff involved in tobacco advocacy efforts at the local level, the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch has two youth leaders who staff the Youth Empowerment Project at the state level. The two people in these positions are 18 and 19 years old, and they have been involved in tobacco prevention and control for at least six years. North Carolina has incorporated youth in both its strategic planning and decision-making efforts.

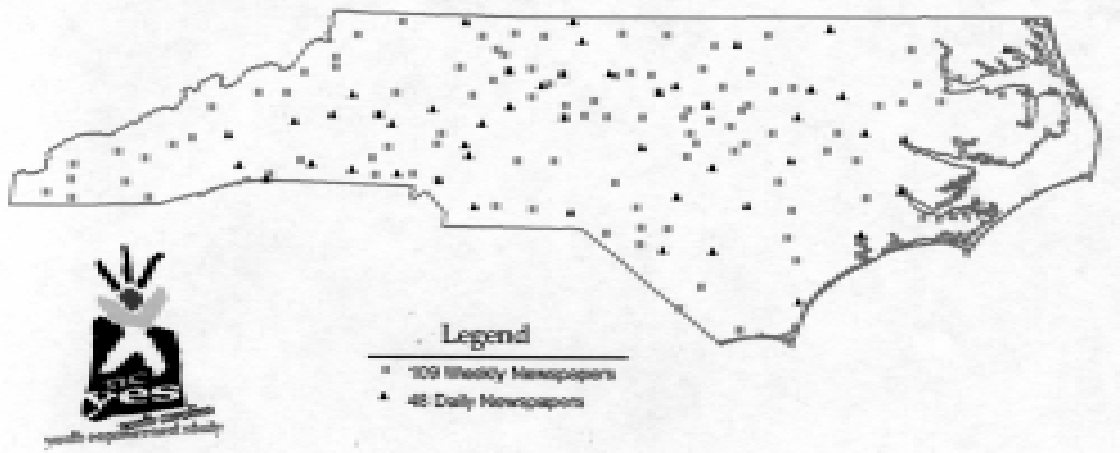
The eastern youth center is located at the Wilmington Health Access for Teens (WHAT) in Wilmington, the central youth center at the Durham Youth Center in Durham, and the western youth center at the Buncombe County Health Department in Asheville. These sites were chosen because of their ability to demonstrate youth advocacy and involvement in changing the social norms of tobacco use through media and community interventions. Each center has a proven track record of working with youth in health-related areas and a strong interest in tobacco use prevention and control. Working with existing Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch coalitions, the centers will use media advocacy and counter-marketing to strengthen involvement and leadership in tobacco use prevention among diverse youth. In collaboration with statewide and community stakeholders, they will use innovative media and policy advocacy strategies to affect policies and social norms surrounding tobacco use.

So far, each center has been involved in infrastructure development and organizational design as well as community assessment and strategic planning. They are offering mini-grants to other organizations in each region to further the center's goals. The next step will be the implementation of activities to support their goals and objectives, and an ongoing evaluation and refinement of their community model. This youth-led, adult-supported model of advocacy and involvement will set an example for other states to follow.

## Evaluation of Youth Empowerment Efforts

Currently, few published studies have examined whether teen empowerment programs achieve their tobacco control objectives. To stimulate research in teen empowerment, the American Legacy Foundation funded a competitive grant submitted by the UNC Prevention Research Center to evaluate the impact of teen empowerment activities in North Carolina. The project, the North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study (NC YES), uses a participatory evaluation approach, which differs fundamentally from traditional evaluation. NC YES *involves* participants rather than distancing them from program evaluation.<sup>19,20</sup> This new evaluation process complements youth empowerment approaches by actively engaging youth in evaluation. NC YES has established an 18-member Advisory Board comprising equal

Figure 2. Daily and Weekly Newspapers monitored for coverage of youth tobacco issues by the North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study (NC YES)



numbers of teen and adult leaders from across the state. It will actively shape the direction of the evaluation. By involving program participants in evaluation efforts, the youth and adults will develop their own evaluation knowledge and skills and thus become further empowered.

Another innovative component of the NC YES project is that it takes a comprehensive approach to evaluating the impact of teen empowerment programs. The study will examine the impact of teen empowerment activities upon *individual* teen participants, examine whether and how the groups serve as empowering organizations, and assess the impact of the groups on objectively measured community-level indicators such as policy development and media coverage of tobacco issues.

For the policy development component, NC YES will focus on school tobacco use policies. Through telephone interviews with key informants (superintendents, principals, teachers, students, and leaders of teen empowerment programs) in each school district that is 100% tobacco-free, the researchers will assess what role, if any, teen empowerment programs played in getting the policy passed. Aside from documenting the role of the teen empowerment groups, the interviews also assess the process of implementing, and enforcing, school tobacco policies. In the process, NC YES will update a database of all school district tobacco use policies, which was originally collected by the NC Department of Public Instruction.

The goal of the NC YES media tracking study is to assess whether youth empowerment programs in North Carolina garner greater amounts of media coverage in daily newspapers than similar programs in other tobacco-growing states. Media coverage was used as an evaluation indicator in the American Stop Smoking Intervention Study; newspaper stories on tobacco issues in ASSIST states were clipped and analyzed to provide unbiased and non-intrusive indicators of community-level program impact.<sup>21</sup> North Carolina was an

ASSIST state, and showed significant changes in media coverage over the course of the study; pro-health newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor increased from 20% in 1991 to 70% in 1999, while pro-tobacco newspaper coverage decreased from 22% to 5%. To continue these positive changes, youth across NC will be trained in media advocacy techniques by the Tobacco Control and Prevention Branch and the ?Y Youth Empowerment Centers. The NC YES researchers hypothesize that there will be a significant increase in earned media coverage of teen empowerment programs, events and issues. NC YES will not assess paid media coverage (advertising space).

NC YES has hired a service to clip all newspaper articles pertaining to youth empowerment programs in the 157 daily and weekly newspapers published in North Carolina (Figure 2). For comparison, the research project will gather clipped articles from two control tobacco-growing states, Virginia and Georgia. The identified articles will be rated by trained observers using characteristics identified previously<sup>21-23</sup> as important: prominence (front page, column inches, accompanying photo), topic area (youth access, environmental tobacco smoke, advertising or marketing), focus of article (community event, passage of policy), and slant (positive, negative, or neutral portrayal of teen empowerment). The researchers will use time series analyses of the number of articles published monthly over a three year period to test the hypothesis that teen empowerment programs generate more articles in North Carolina than in control states.

## Summary

Strong youth and adult leadership and exemplary policy and program interventions put a unique synergy to work in North Carolina. The state aspires to be a model for the nation in overcoming barriers related to tobacco use prevention by

empowering its greatest resource—youth. New grant funding is building the foundation for youth empowerment programs, and increased and sustained funding is being sought to significantly expand these efforts. Youth speak with a fresh voice, bringing energy and conviction, as well as non-traditional ideas and strategies to the achievement of their goals. By changing public opinion and influencing the actions of leaders in the nation's leading tobacco state, the North Carolina Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch will develop leadership for tobacco use prevention that will serve the entire nation.

**Acknowledgements.** The 2Y Youth Empowerment Centers are supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Jim Martin, Principal Investigator). The North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study (NC YES; Kurt M. Ribisl, Principal Investigator) is supported by a grant from the American Legacy Foundation with collaboration from the CDC Foundation and scientific and technical assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The analyses, interpretations, and conclusions reached in this paper are those of the authors, not the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The America Legacy Foundation, or the CDC foundation, their respective staff, or their respective Board of Directors.

## References

- 1 McGinnis JM, Foege WH. Actual causes of death in the United States. *JAMA* 1993;270:2207-12.
- 2 US Department of Health and Human Services. Preventing tobacco use among young people: A report of the Surgeon General. US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health; 1994.
- 3 North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Public Health, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services; 1999.
- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. State-specific prevalence of current cigarette smoking among adults and the proportion of adults who work in a smoke-free environment: United States, 1999. *MMWR* 2000;49:979-82.
- 5 Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch. Vision 2010: North Carolina's comprehensive plan to prevent and reduce the health effects of tobacco use. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2001.
- 6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Best practices for comprehensive tobacco control programs. Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office of Smoking and Health; August 1999.
- 7 Kim S, Crutchfield C, Williams C, et al. Toward a new paradigm in substance abuse and other problem behavior prevention for youth: Youth development and empowerment approach. *J Drug Educ* 1998;28:1-17.
- 8 Unger JB, Ribisl KM, Cruz TB, et al. Evaluating the effects of tobacco control programs. In: Forst ML, ed. *Planning and Implementing Effective Tobacco Education and Prevention Programs*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1999; 236-62.
- 9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Tobacco use among middle and high school students: United States, 1999. *MMWR* 2000;49:49-53.
- 10 Peterson AV, Jr., Kealey KA, Mann SL, et al. Hutchinson Smoking Prevention Project: long-term randomized trial in school-based tobacco use prevention: results on smoking. *J Natl Cancer Inst* 2000;92:1979-91.
- 11 Chinman MJ, Linney JA. Toward a model of adolescent empowerment: theoretical and empirical evidence. *J Primary Prev* 1998;18(4):393-413.
- 12 Rappaport J. Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: toward a theory for community psychology. *Am J Community Psychol* 1987;15(2):121-48.
- 13 Kershaw JM. Forging new paths: a policy analysis of the youth-focused implementation of the Florida Tobacco Pilot Program. In: Forst ML, ed. *Planning and Implementing Effective Tobacco Education and Prevention Programs*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1999;17-37.
- 14 Zucker D, Hopkins RS, Sly DF, et al. Florida's "truth" campaign: a counter-marketing, anti-tobacco media campaign. *J Public Health Manag Pract* 2000;6:1-6.
- 15 Wakefield M, Chaloupka F. Effectiveness of comprehensive tobacco control programmes in reducing teenage smoking in the USA. *Tob Control* 2000;9:177-86.
- 16 Independent Evaluation Consortium. Final report of the Independent Evaluation of the California Tobacco Control, Prevention and Education Program: Wave 2 Data, 1998; Wave 1 and Wave 2 Data comparison 1996-1998. Rockville, MD: The Gallup Organization; 2000.
- 17 Feighery E, Altman DG, Shaffer G. The effects of combining education and enforcement to reduce tobacco sales to minors: A study of four Northern California communities. *JAMA* 1991;266:3168-71.
- 18 Brownson RC, Eriksen MP, Davis RM, et al. Environmental tobacco smoke: health effects and policies to reduce exposure. *Annu Rev Public Health* 1997;18:163-85.
- 19 Fetterman D, Kaftarian S, Wandersman A, eds. *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Skills for Self-Assessment and Accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.
- 20 George MA, Daniel M, Green LW. Appraising and funding participatory research in health promotion. *Int Q of Community Health Educ* 1999;18:181-97.
- 21 Stillman FA, Cronin KA, Evans DW, et al. Can media advocacy influence newspaper coverage of tobacco: measuring the effectiveness of the American stop smoking intervention (ASSIST) media advocacy strategies. *Tob Control* 2001;10:137-44.
- 22 Menashe CL, Siegel M. The power of a frame: an analysis of newspaper coverage of tobacco issues: United States, 1985-1995. *J of Health Comm* 1998;3:307-25.
- 23 Schooler C, Sundar SS, Flora J. Effects of the Stanford Five-City Project Media Advocacy Program. *Health Educ Q* 1996;23:346-64.