Public Health Solutions

NYC SMOKE-FREE

THE ALLURE OF MENTHOL CIGARETTES

Background

Menthol cigarettes hold a strong appeal because their cooling, minty sensation masks the harshness of tobacco, creating a smoother smoking experience that can be mistakenly perceived as less harmful. This sensory effect makes menthol products more attractive to first-time smokers, particularly youth, and can increase nicotine dependence, making quitting more difficult. These characteristics, combined with decades of targeted marketing toward African American, LGBTQIA2S+, and youth communities, have led to disproportionately high menthol cigarette use among these populations.

Tobacco companies have invested heavily in market research to fine-tune menthol levels, ensuring the product is as appealing as possible to specific target audiences.[1] In addition to product manipulation, they use a range of marketing tactics such as advertisements, giveaways, discounted pricing, lifestyle branding, and event sponsorships to promote menthol products.

Current Menthol Product Use Rates Among Current Smokers by Borough (2023)[2]

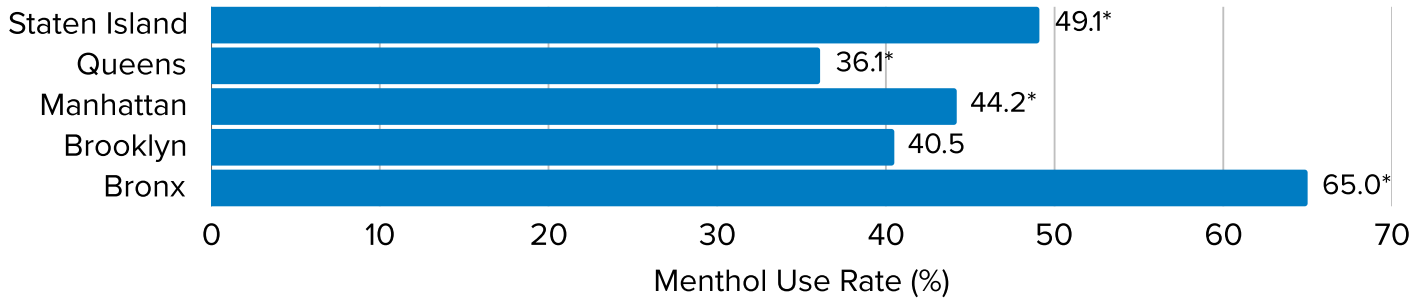


Figure 1. Percentage of current smokers using menthol products by NYC borough in 2023, compared with the citywide average of 47.1%. Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant values.

Menthol Tobacco Products: A Public Health Concern

Public Health Solutions' NYC Smoke-Free program works to prevent menthol cigarette use through education, advocacy, and youth and community engagement, while raising awareness about the serious health risks of these products.

Menthol cigarettes make it harder to quit smoking, as people who smoke menthol tend to become more nicotine-dependent and are less likely to quit successfully, with higher rates of relapse compared to those who smoke non-menthol cigarettes.[3]

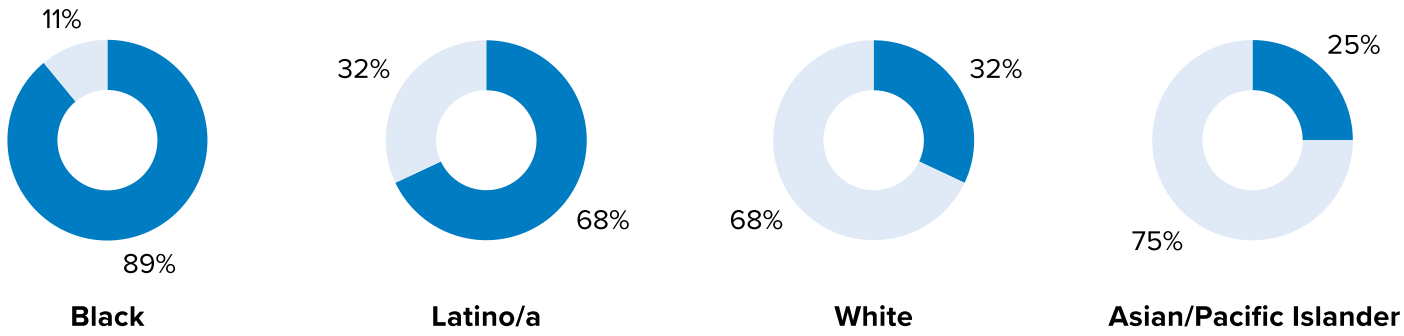
Menthol Tobacco Use and Racial Disparities

Menthol cigarette use is disproportionately high among African American and other communities of color due to decades of targeted marketing and systemic inequities. Nationally, 80.9% of African American adult smokers use menthol cigarettes, compared to 43.4% of adult smokers overall. 77.4% of African American smokers prefer menthol cigarettes, a rate more than three times higher than that of White smokers at 23.0%.[4] These disparities have had devastating consequences. Between 1980 and 2018, menthol cigarettes were responsible for an estimated 1.5 million new smokers, 157,000 smoking related premature deaths, and 1.5 million life years lost among African Americans in the United States.[3]

These patterns are also reflected locally. In 2020, more than half of adults who smoked in New York City typically used menthol cigarettes. Menthol use was especially prevalent among Black and Latino/a adults who smoked, with 89% of Black smokers and 68% of Latino/a smoker's using menthol. This compares to 32% of White smokers and 25% of Asian or Pacific Islander menthol smokers.[5]

These disparities are not the result of individual choice alone but of long standing, intentional tobacco industry practices that have targeted Black and Latino/a communities through marketing, pricing, and product placement. Newport, a leading menthol tobacco brand, offered nearly twice as many price promotions and lower prices in neighborhoods with higher proportions of African American youth[4]. Addressing menthol tobacco use is therefore a matter of health equity and social justice, requiring policy solutions and community led efforts that protect populations who have been disproportionately harmed.

Menthol Cigarette Use Among New Yorkers Who Smoke, by Race/Ethnicity (2020)[5]



Sources:

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Public Health Solutions

Health disparities among New Yorkers are large, persistent, and increasing. Public Health Solutions (PHS) exists to change that trajectory and support underserved New Yorkers and their families to achieve optimal health and build pathways to reach their potential. As the largest public health nonprofit serving New York City, we improve health outcomes and help communities thrive by providing direct services to underserved families, supporting community-based organizations through our long-standing public-private partnerships, and bridging the gap between healthcare and community services.

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