Reducing Cancer and Cancer Disparities: Lessons From a Youth-Generated Diabetes Prevention Campaign

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Adolescence and young adulthood, a period essential for determining exposures over the life-course, is an ideal time to intervene to lower cancer risk. This demographic group can be viewed as both the target audience and generator of messages for cancer prevention, such as skin cancer, obesity-, tobacco-, and human papillomavirus–related cancers. The purpose of this paper is to encourage innovative health communications that target youth; youth behavior; and the structural, environmental, and social determinants of youth behavior as critical areas of focus for cancer prevention and disparities reduction. The authors describe the rationale, processes, products, and early impacts of an award-winning youth diabetes prevention communication campaign model (The Bigger Picture) that harnesses spoken-word messages in school-based and social media presentations. The campaign supports minority adolescent and young adult artists to create content that aligns with values held closely by youth—values likely to resonate and affect change, such as defiance against authority, inclusion, and social justice. This campaign can be leveraged to prevent obesity, which is a cancer risk factor. Then, the authors propose concrete ways that The Bigger Picture’s pedagogical model could be adapted for broader cancer prevention messaging for youth of color and youth stakeholders regarding tobacco-related cancers, skin cancers, and human papillomavirus–related cancers. The goal is to demonstrate how a youth-generated and youth-targeted prevention campaign can: (1) reframe conversations about cancer prevention, (2) increase awareness that cancer prevention is about social justice and health equity, and (3) catalyze action to change social norms and confront the social and environmental drivers of cancer disparities.

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communication campaign (The Bigger Picture [TBP]) that harnesses racial and ethnic minority youth-generated, spoken-word performance through school-based and social media presentations (www.thebiggerpicture.org). TBP brings together youth artistic expression with public health to tap into deeply held adolescent values of social justice and defiance to motivate individual and communal behavior and policy change. The authors will then consider strategies for adapting and amplifying the TBP model to achieve prevention messaging for minority youth stakeholders in cancers with extant racial and ethnic disparities—cancers in which exposure and behaviors developed and solidified in adolescence and young adulthood determine future cancer risk. Focusing this adaptation for obesity-related cancers, tobacco-related cancers, skin cancers, and human papillomavirus (HPV)–related cancers, the authors argue that minority youth-generated and youth-targeted prevention messaging campaigns can: (1) reframe conversations about cancer and cancer prevention, (2) activate youth around marketing campaigns to reinforce alcohol and tobacco co-use, and built alliances with the alcohol industry to oppose policies that would limit such promotions. Tobacco marketing also exploits minority and vulnerable groups; campaigns encourage use among groups such as racial/ethnic minorities, poor women, rural males, and young people. There is a critical and ongoing need to counteract predatory tobacco marketing.

### Skin Cancers
Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are the most common forms of skin cancer, with more than 5 million cases diagnosed in the U.S. each year. The majority of skin cancers are associated with exposure to ultraviolet radiation, inadequate sunscreen, and other sun protective behavior. In addition, indoor tanning is linked to all major types of skin cancer, including melanoma and basal cell carcinoma. Adolescents and young adults are a priority population for skin cancer prevention efforts. Skin cancer is the third most common cancer among U.S. young adults, and much of a person’s lifetime ultraviolet exposure occurs during childhood and adolescence. Tanning before age 35 years is associated with a 75% increased risk of melanoma. Although skin cancers are most commonly found in white non-Hispanics, racial and ethnic disparities in survival rate from skin cancer are striking. Blacks have significantly worse survival rates from melanoma, and late-stage diagnoses are much more prevalent among minority patients. Contributing factors include differences in risk perception and disparities in education. African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to perceive themselves as at lower risk of developing skin cancer and most education efforts have focused on whites.

### Human Papillomavirus—related Cancers
HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the U.S., with an estimate of more than 7 million individuals aged 15–24 years being infected. HPV prevalence in U.S. women is highest among individuals aged 20–24 years, at 35.8%. A higher prevalence in the U.S. compared with all other racial and ethnic groups, which has been underestimated previously. Disparities in HPV vaccination rates mirror disparities in cervical cancer incidence and mortality.
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