

Young Black Voices Expose Predatory Tobacco Industry Tactics in New truth® Campaign

As tobacco-related death in the Black community continues to rise amid aggressive tobacco marketing, campaign encourages Black youth and young adults to spark conversation and demand change

Washington, D.C. (Oct. 19 2020) – At a time when the deep-seated structural and social inequities facing Black Americans are being brought to the forefront, the tobacco industry continues its aggressive, decades-long tactics of targeting its deadly products to Black communities. This business-as-usual approach is even more problematic as the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting Black Americans—including those who smoke or vape.¹

In a calling to eradicate Big Tobacco’s systemic racism, [truth](#)—the proven-effective, nationally recognized youth smoking, vaping and nicotine prevention effort from Truth Initiative—partnered with Black community members and activists to launch its latest campaign [Read Between the Lies](#). Led and promoted by Black voices, the campaign will run across broadcast, digital and social networks. Central to the campaign are videos featuring Black voices reading and reacting to actual quotes from tobacco industry executives revealing the deliberate and exploitive ways they target the Black community. The videos are directed by young black filmmaker [Rodney Lucas](#), known for creating meaningful and inspiring videos through the lens of Black voices.

Among the activists featured in the campaign is [Lincoln Mondy](#), who documented the systemic racism that results in higher menthol tobacco use in Black communities in his film, [Black Lives / Black Lungs](#). “I turned my anger into action, and I hope that my documentary and campaigns like this continue to encourage others to go out and do something,” said Mondy. “That kind of spiral effect I think will start the drumbeat of what needs to happen in this country in framing smoking and vaping as a social justice issue.”

The campaign comes at a time when African Americans have higher death rates from tobacco-related causes compared to other racial and ethnic groups – with more than 39,000 dying from tobacco-related cancers each year. Nearly 90% of Black smokers use menthol cigarettes, which are easier to smoke and harder to quit, thanks to the decades-long, aggressive marketing tactics employed by menthol cigarette makers. These include placing more advertising in predominantly black neighborhoods and in publications that are popular with Black audiences, as well as supporting events like jazz and hip-hop festivals.

Further, in 2019, 17.7% of African American high school students and 8.6% of African American middle school students currently used e-cigarettes. Accordingly to recent data, young people who have ever used e-cigarettes are 5 times more likely to test positive for COVID-19 compared to those who do not use tobacco products, and dual users of cigarettes and e-cigarettes were nearly 7 times more likely to

¹ “New Evidence on Substance Use Disorders and COVID-19 Susceptibility”, *National Institute on Drugs*, October 5, 2020.
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/10/new-evidence-substance-use-disorders-covid-19-susceptibility>

test positive.² This is especially concerning, as Black individuals are becoming sick from COVID-19 at three times the rate of Whites and are twice as likely to die from the disease than Whites.³

To help broaden awareness and engage young Black voices to inspire change, **truth** is providing a toolkit that enables participants to share their stories about exploitation by the tobacco industry utilizing the hashtag #ReadBetweenTheLies. **truth** is also partnering with TikTok and Instagram influencers [Taylor Cassidy](#), [Johnathan Wilson](#), [Joshua Joseph](#), [Makell Taylor](#) and [Gondre Smith](#), who will engage their followers to create a duet via TikTok to help spread the word. That effort launches on Thursday, October 15th.

“It’s time to expose Big Tobacco for capitalizing off of Black communities,” said Taylor Cassidy. “If using my platform can bring awareness to the tobacco industry’s hidden agenda, #ReadBetweenTheLies lets me encourage people to stand up against it.”

The campaign invites viewers to go [online](#) to learn more about health disparities in the Black community, Big Tobacco’s history of targeting Black Americans and learn about ways to take positive action and support Black creators. Content includes interviews with Director Rodney Lucas, visual artist and social justice movement supporter Victoria Casanova, and director/activist Lincoln Mondy.

Read Between the Lies builds on prior **truth** campaign efforts which call out the industry’s racial profiling tactics.

- **truth** exposed Big Tobacco’s history of strategically and aggressively targeting Black communities with menthol cigarettes through its “[Making Menthol Black](#)” campaign.
- The [2017 #STOPPROFILING campaign](#) underscores that tobacco use is more than a public health issue, it’s a social justice issue, by detailing the placement and prevalence of tobacco advertising in Black communities.
- In 2018, more than 50 **truth** activists from across the country rallied outside of the Walgreens shareholders meeting to push the pharmacy chain to stop selling tobacco products, including all menthol flavored products.
- Truth Initiative has long called for a nationwide comprehensive ban on all menthol tobacco products – [which 117 jurisdictions in the U.S. currently have](#) – and continues to conduct research and policy analysis to inform and advance these efforts.
- Since 2015, the Truth Initiative Tobacco/Vape-Free College Program has awarded more than \$2.4 million in funding to nearly 200 colleges, universities and college systems to enact strong tobacco/vape-free policies. The grant program seeks to serve community colleges, minority-serving institutions including HBCU’s and women’s colleges. To date, these programs are now protecting over a million students, faculty and employees each year.

For more information about **truth**, please visit, thetruth.com.

² Gaiha, S. M., Cheng, J., & Halpern-Felsher, B. (2020). Association Between Youth Smoking, Electronic Cigarette Use, and Coronavirus Disease 2019. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.002>

³ “State of Black America Unmasked 2020”, *National Urban League*, <http://sobadev.iamempowered.com/sites/soba.iamempowered.com/files/NUL-SOBA-2020-ES-web.pdf>

About Truth Initiative®

Truth Initiative is a national public health organization dedicated to a future where tobacco and nicotine addiction are things of the past. We are inspiring lives free from smoking, vaping and nicotine through our rigorous scientific research and policy studies, our proven-effective and nationally-recognized **truth**® youth public education campaign, our community and youth engagement programs supporting populations at high risk of using tobacco products, and our innovations to end nicotine addiction by helping people quit. Our 20 years of lifesaving work has helped drive down the youth smoking rate from 23% in 2000 to a historic low of 3.7% in 2019 by preventing millions of young people from becoming smokers. We are equally committed to achieving the same results in ending the youth e-cigarette epidemic. Formerly known as the American Legacy Foundation, Truth Initiative was established and funded through the landmark 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, the largest civil litigation settlement in U.S. history, which resulted in tobacco companies paying states and territories compensation for tobacco-related diseases and losses to local economies. Truth Initiative is also contributing to ending the opioid misuse epidemic by sharing our expertise in youth and young adult education and prevention. To learn more, visit truthinitiative.org.

###