

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this consumer research was to explore perceptions of tobacco use among 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade youth in Sarasota County, Florida. The research was conducted by Sarasota County researchers (youth and adult) and researchers at the University of South Florida Prevention Research Center.

Specific objectives of the research were to identify:

- the factors that motivate Sarasota youth to use tobacco;
- the factors that deter use of tobacco among Sarasota youth;
- effective information channels and spokespersons for preventing tobacco use among Sarasota youth; and
- effective strategies for preventing tobacco use among Sarasota youth.

The study was conducted in three phases. Phases I and II were conducted among 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade youth. The first phase was qualitative research followed by a more standardized survey research phase. In phase I, 206 youth participated in 22 focus groups and 112 individual interviews. The youth were interviewed by eleven Sarasota youth who had been trained to conduct both focus groups and individual interviews.

The second phase of the study focused on using the qualitative research results and literature to develop, pilot, and implement a standardized survey of youth in grades 6 to 10. All public middle and high schools participated in the survey. Among the 13 private schools invited to participate, 9 declined. Of the remaining four, one participated with the other three expressing interest to participate in the future. A total of 113 classes, comprised of 2,407 students were surveyed.

Phase III consisted of qualitative research (focus groups and interviews) with Sarasota County parents of middle and high school youth. Forty-seven parents participated in 6 focus groups and 12 individual interviews. Recruitment of parents provided to be difficult. This phase focused primarily on alcohol use; however, some important themes emerged that cut across youth and risk behaviors (e.g., communication, supervision).

## Smoking Initiation

Approximately 50% (1001) of the total survey respondents (2,407) reported having ever tried cigarette smoking. Smoking initiation rates varied by grade level, grades earned in school, family structure, employment, involvement in sports activities and level of depression.

***Perceived benefits of smoking initiation*** included coping with problems and the ability to refuse the offer of cigarettes.

***Perceived costs of smoking initiation*** included unpleasant taste of smoking and mother's disappointment. Other costs included uncool, financial costs, addiction, health problems, and punishment.

Social influences included both peer influence and parental inference.

Gaining access to tobacco (cigarettes) appears to be relatively easy for youth in Sarasota County.

Trustworthy spokespersons for providing information about risks of smoking varied widely among grade levels. Sixth graders noted a DARE officer/Resource officer and school counselor, number one and two, respectively. Seventh graders ranked a celebrity and older kids, number one and two, respectively, whereas, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders said that "other kids my age who smoke" would be their first choice. Older brother and sisters and other relatives (not parents or older siblings) were information sources ranked in the top ten by students in all grades.

Youth suggested a wide range of interventions they believe to be effective in preventing smoking initiation in Sarasota County.

## Recent Smokers

Of the 1001 youth who have initiated smoking, the majority (634 or 64%) report that they **did not** smoke during the month before they completed the survey. Recent smoker rates varied by grade level and reported race.

***Perceived benefits of recent smoking*** included coping with problems.

***Perceived costs of recent smoking*** included mother's disappointment, getting caught and tastes bad.

Trustworthy spokespersons for providing information about risks of smoking varied widely among grade levels. Sixth graders noted a DARE officer/Resource officer and other relative (not parents or older siblings), number one and two, respectively. Seventh graders ranked older kids and a DARE officer/Resource officer, number one and two, respectively. Tenth graders said that “other kids my age who smoke” would be their first choice, whereas, 9<sup>th</sup> graders surprisingly indicated “your doctor” as their first choice. Friends were information sources ranked in the top ten by students in all grades.