

# Examination of the Relationship Between Community Support and Tobacco Control Activities as a Part of Youth Empowerment Programs

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Through the American Legacy Foundation's Statewide Youth Movement Against Tobacco Use (SYMATU), programs aimed at empowering youths to take action against tobacco use were funded. It is believed that the activities these groups undertake result in changes at the community level. This article examines the relationships between community support of tobacco control and the number and types of tobacco control-related activities these local youth groups conduct. Regression analyses examine the influence that different levels and sources of community support have on the quantity and focus of a group's activities. The influences of community support are briefly explored to understand if certain group characteristics have an impact on the quantity or sources of support for tobacco control. A deeper understanding of the importance and impact of community support will help groups understand the need for building community support networks and how these networks can assist them with implementation of program activities.

**Keywords:** *community support; tobacco control; youth empowerment; youth group activities*

In September 2000, the American Legacy Foundation (Legacy) awarded a combination of planning and program grants to 17 state health departments to foster youth-led tobacco control initiatives. The Statewide Youth Movement Against Tobacco Use (SYMATU) initiative aims to engage youths in community action against tobacco use, to build state and local youth coalitions, and to foster meaningful youth-led tobacco prevention activities. To evaluate these initiatives, a conceptual framework for youth empowerment was developed and was used as a guide in creating standardized cross-site measures.<sup>1</sup> This article explores the relationship between two midlevel outcomes identified in this framework: community support and local activities conducted by these youth groups to promote community change in tobacco use.

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Group activities are the mechanism through which groups interact and affect the communities they serve. This article presents findings from a multidimensional approach to a group's activities that examine the total number of activities a group is involved in, as well as the tobacco control focus of those activities (i.e., education or policy change). Together, they provide a better understanding of how these groups are working to affect tobacco use in their communities and the specific dimension of tobacco control in which this impact is being sought.

## BACKGROUND

For nearly two decades, collaborative partnerships have been a popular public health promotion strategy at the community level.<sup>2</sup> The National Cancer Institute–funded Community Intervention Trial for Smoking Cessation (COMMIT) and the American Stop Smoking Intervention Study for Cancer Prevention (Project ASSIST) are exemplars of previous community-based tobacco control initiatives using this collaborative approach. A more recent community organizing strategy is the youth empowerment approach, whereby youths serve as the catalyst for local antitobacco programming and activities. These youths also collaborate with adults in the community who provide resources as well as guidance and support for youth-driven activities.

Through the interpersonal and interactional components of the empowerment process as proposed by Zimmerman,<sup>3</sup> youths build their capacity to plan, make decisions, and take action toward meeting the desired outcome.<sup>1</sup> Adults from the community provide support instrumental to accomplishing their goals. According to McLeroy et al.,<sup>4</sup> change cannot occur without the support of the community's mediating and power structures, which are generally controlled by adults. The presence of community support structures for local youth-based antitobacco groups therefore is believed to be important if a group is to be successful in changing community perceptions or behaviors.

These groups initiate community change through the implementation of activities, generally aimed at either educating others or changing community tobacco control policies. To understand the role and influence of a group's activities, the literature has generally focused on both the number and type of activities in which a group engages. Both aspects are measurable, intermediate effects of partnerships.<sup>5,6</sup> Florin et al.<sup>5</sup> analyzed the scope of the proposed activities in the 3-year plans of 35 alcohol and other drug abuse (AOD) community task forces. Most of the activities proposed by these task forces were individual-level information and awareness followed by task force capacity-building and maintenance activities (e.g., grant writing, volunteer recruitment). Organizational and community-level activities to influence policy, regulatory, and system changes to support AOD prevention were the least proposed (< 5%). In a study of 63 community cancer control coalitions analyzing activity at stages of development, the median number of educational and awareness activities was 10, and having a paid coordinator was the best predictor of whether the coalition implemented activities.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of a community's capacity to conduct public health programs or address public health issues also must be considered when examining any public health initiative. Norton et al.<sup>7</sup> describe community capacity as "a set of dynamic community traits, resources, and associational patterns that can be brought to bear for community building and community health improvement" (p. 205). Goodman et al.<sup>8</sup> further describe 10 dimensions of community capacity, including participation and leadership of citizens, skills and resources, social and interorganizational networks, sense of community, under-

standing of community history, community power and values, and critical reflection. Each of these dimensions has an influence on program development and implementation.

Within these dimensions, there is a need for collaborative partnerships to secure outside support to accomplish the desired community change.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, support at various levels may influence what the youth groups can accomplish as measured by the number and type of tobacco control activities implemented by the groups. In this context, the support provided by the key groups of individuals (e.g., school and elected officials) instrumental to the formation and functioning of these youth groups is termed *community support*.

This article examines the relationships between levels and type of perceived community support, and the number and types of tobacco control–related activities a local SYMATU group conducts to promote community change. We aim to gain a better understanding of whether the source of community support has an impact on the number and types of activities a group conducts and how group characteristics may affect the perceived level of community support for tobacco control.

## METHOD

### Sample

Data were collected from a convenience sample of adult coordinators of local SYMATU youth groups in 17 SYMATU states. State health department staff members provided contact information for the local group coordinators that should be included in the sample for their state. Due to the differing program structures used by each state, criteria for inclusion varied but always included groups that received some form of direct or indirect funding from this SYMATU initiative. The adult coordinators served as the representatives for each youth group, providing overall information on the characteristics of the group and their role within the group.

### Data Collection Procedures

Each identified local adult coordinator was provided mail packages of the instrument; detailed instructions for administration; and a stamped, self-addressed envelope and was instructed to complete the survey at a convenient time. In return for their participation, adult coordinators received a \$25 gift certificate that could be used to purchase supplies or food for the members of their group. Coordinators represented programs in each of the SYMATU states; however, due to the varied nature of these groups and their coordinators, there is no reliable way to describe or characterize coordinators who did not participate.

### *Instrument Development*

Holden et al.<sup>1</sup> describe the conceptual framework for youth empowerment that was used to guide development of operational measures. Using principles described by DeVellis,<sup>9</sup> the initial Youth Group Adult Coordinator Survey (YGACS) was drafted to collect standardized data elements from all adult coordinators in each of the SYMATU programs. Items used from the YGACS for this analysis are described below.

Table 1. Sources of Community Support

Source of Support	Type of Support Provided	Mean Scale Score <sup>a</sup>
School officials	Enforcing the current school regulations on use of tobacco products on school grounds	5.2
	Strengthening the regulations covering use of tobacco products on school grounds	
Elected officials	Enforcing youth access laws	3.5
	Regulating tobacco use in public places	
	Increasing taxes on tobacco products	
	Funding and promoting cessation opportunities	
Other adults	Restricting advertisement of tobacco products	3.6
	Enforcing youth access laws	
	Regulating tobacco use in public places	
Youths in community	Funding and promoting cessation opportunities	3.3
	Enforcing youth access laws	
	Regulating tobacco use in public places	

a. Possible range of responses was from 0 to 8.

### *Community Support*

For the purposes of this article, community support is defined as the perceived support for tobacco issues and policies provided by several key groups of individuals. A panel of experts was convened by Legacy to develop an overarching conceptual framework for youth empowerment and identified four main sources of support:<sup>1</sup> elected officials, school officials, and other adults and youths in the community who are not involved with the group. Each of these sources is believed to play an important role in how tobacco control was conducted in these communities and the success of the local youth groups.

In the YGACS, coordinators were asked to rate the support of each group on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*very weak*) to 5 (*very strong*) with a midpoint of *moderate* (see Table 1). A response option of “don’t know” was not provided as coordinators were asked to respond to questions to the best of their abilities. Items associated with each source of community support were combined into separate summative scales. Because each of the scales contained different numbers of items, they were rescaled to have a theoretical range of 0 to 8.

### *Group Activities*

Group activities are the mechanism through which groups interact and affect the communities they serve. For the purposes of these analyses, two aspects of group activities were examined: the number of group activities and the focus of those activities.

*Number of Group Activities.* To gain a better understanding of the youth groups’ activities, coordinators were asked to provide the number of times their group had engaged in each of 14 categories of activities during the last year:

- Distribution of tobacco control educational materials, such as at a health fair,
- Youth group–sponsored educational presentation about such issues as tobacco risks, tobacco control policy options, or cessation programs,

- Youth group–sponsored promotional event designed to raise awareness of tobacco control issues and/or the youth group’s mission or activities through media, performances, or other activities,
- Recruiting of new members,
- Participation in community events sponsored and coordinated by other community organizations, such as American Cancer Society Relay for Life,
- Coordination of a community event whose purpose is, at least in part, to publicize the negative impacts of tobacco use,
- Youth group–sponsored survey to investigate knowledge and attitudes about tobacco risks, tobacco control policy,
- Persuasive education or advocacy activities, such as presentations to regulatory or policy-making bodies to influence decision making on tobacco control policy,
- Entertainment or social events, such as smoke-free bowling or dance,
- Training of existing members at workshops or conferences,
- Compliance checks to test tobacco retailer compliance with advertising or sales regulations,
- Media activities, including the creation of TV and radio public service announcements or an antitobacco coloring book for elementary school children,
- Conferences or summits that bring together youths from multiple groups for training and education as well as socializing, and
- Tobacco victim remembrance ceremony where victims of smoking-related diseases are remembered.

Definitions of each category as well as examples of specific activities were provided to respondents to ensure that groups interpreted the categories consistently. An additive scale was created that summed the total number of activities reported in each of the 14 response categories. This variable was used as the overall number of group activities reported.

*Focus of Tobacco Control Activities.* In a separate survey item from the one discussed above, coordinators were asked to provide the number of activities that addressed each of nine tobacco control issues or objectives addressing two main foci: those that focus on policy change and those that focus on changing individual knowledge and awareness of tobacco control issues (see Table 2). An additive scale was created that summed the total number of activities reported for policy-related activities and for educational activities. This process was followed to examine differences between those groups that have a more traditional public health focus of educating others about the health risks of tobacco use, compared with those that are adopting broader approaches of focusing on changing tobacco control policies.

#### *Control Variables*

Certain other group-level variables are also believed to have an impact on the types of activities a group conducts. The budget available to a group will likely have an impact on the number and comprehensiveness of activities a group can conduct because funds are often needed for things such as materials and transportation for members. Coordinator characteristics may also have an impact on the group and its activities in that we know that some states were able to fund each group with a full-time coordinator, whereas others had part-time coordinators who may or may not be paid for their time. Coordinators also vary in their experience working with youths and in the area of tobacco control. The number of members may also have an impact on the activities a group is involved in because a group with only two members does not have the human resources to organize and implement as

Table 2. Focus of Group Tobacco Control Activities

Activity Focus	Policy/ Education	Mean Number of Activities	% of Groups That Report Doing Any of These Activities
Tobacco use prevention messages disseminated to youths	Education	8.7	81.5
Tobacco use prevention messages disseminated to adults	Education	3.0	56.2
General awareness education	Education	8.4	78.7
Education messages about tobacco company's marketing practices	Education	6.4	64.1
Cessation information disseminated	Education	2.5	42.0
<i>Mean number of educational activities = 28.9</i>			
Limit on youth access to tobacco	Policy	4.1	59.1
Advertisements of restrictions on tobacco	Policy	3.6	48.4
Smoking in public places	Policy	2.9	59.8
Increase of tobacco taxes	Policy	0.5	17.8
<i>Mean number of policy activities = 11.1</i>			

many activities as a group with large membership. Because members of these groups are students, they are often dependent on parents for various types of assistance during their involvement. Coordinators were asked to rate how many parents provide assistance to their children as members of the group. This was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*all*) on general support for their child's participation in the group, facilitation of children's participation (e.g., offer rides to meetings and or events), volunteer for group activities (e.g., chaperone outings), or donate money or goods to the group. Finally, external influences, such as the existence of a local tobacco control coalition, may also have an impact on a group's activities in that it may receive more support or it may be encouraged that its activities coincide with the activities of the coalition. For the purposes of these analyses, these characteristics are used to describe these groups and where appropriate are treated as control variables.

### Analysis

Analyses of the survey data were conducted in several stages. A few groups that were found to report outliers or irregularities (e.g., the same number of activities for every category) on several variables were excluded from analysis. These regression models were estimated to determine the extent to which each source of community support and other independent variables were associated with the number of all tobacco activities, as well as those that were education related or policy related.

## RESULTS

### Sample Characteristics

A total of 281 coordinators, representing as many groups, from 17 states are included in this sample. Response rates among adult coordinators of youth groups ranged from

33.3% in New Hampshire to 100% in California, Maryland, New Jersey, and Utah, for an overall group coordinator response rate of 68.6%.

Based on an examination of the data for outliers and invalid cases and a corresponding sensitivity analysis, eight groups were dropped. These cases were dropped for one or more of the following reasons: There was extreme high values (e.g., coordinator who reported spending more than 10 hours with his or her group every day of the month), or there were suspicious patterns of data (e.g., a group that reported engaging in 50 of every activity listed). The final study sample included 66.8% of the eligible SYMATU groups.

### Coordinator Characteristics

All respondents served in an adult coordinator role whose purpose was to provide guidance and supervision to each of the local youth groups. Depending on the state program, these coordinators were sometimes volunteers ( $n = 80$ , 28.6%) but were more often paid for their involvement ( $n = 200$ , 71.4%). Coordinators reported working with their group an average of 39.6 hours per month.

Coordinators indicated that they had been the coordinator of their groups for an average of slightly more than 2 years ( $M = 2.1$  years). They also reported that their experience with tobacco control issues in general was approximately 3.5 years ( $M = 3.5$  years) but that they had been involved in youth programs in general for much longer ( $M = 8.6$  years).

### Group Characteristics

Group coordinators reported a mean membership of 56.9 members with a range of only 4 members to 800 members. More than two-thirds (61.6%) of the coordinators participating in the survey reported that they consider their group to be a nonschool-based or community-based group, and 38.4% reported that they are in some way associated with, or housed within, a school. Similarly, slightly more than half of the participating coordinators (54.5%) reported that their activities are mainly focused on creating change within one or more cities or towns or an entire county, whereas 42.3% reported that their focus is on creating change in a smaller area, namely, a school, a school district, or areas around a school.

The greatest number of group coordinators (42.2%) indicated that although they are active year-round, they are most active during the school year. Slightly fewer (35.4%) indicated that they are fully active year-round, and 22.4% indicated that they are active only during the school year.

The length of time a group has been active in a community ranged from 1 month to more than 35 years. Groups that had been active for longer periods of time were most often preexisting groups that worked on tobacco control as well as other youth issues, such as a Girl Scout troop. The majority of coordinators (56.3%) reported that their group only works on tobacco control issues, whereas the remaining 43.7% reported working on tobacco as well as other public health issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence prevention, and HIV/STD/pregnancy prevention. A comparison of how long groups have been active shows that "tobacco-only" groups have been active for about half as long as those groups that are involved in tobacco as well as other public health issues (2.3 years versus 4.8 years, respectively).

Funding available to a group is likely to have a significant impact on both the number and types of activities in which a group can engage. Participating groups varied significantly in the amount of funding available for program activities. The greatest number of

groups (27.7%) reported an annual operating budget of between \$1,100 and \$5,000. Slightly more than 12% reported not having any operating budget, and slightly more than 7% reported having a budget of more than \$50,000.

### Community Support

Most coordinators indicated that there was some level of community support from schools, elected officials, other adults, or other youths in their community. Table 1 presents standardized mean scores for each source of support. The mean perceived support provided by school officials was significantly greater than support provided by all other sources (elected officials,  $t = 11.3, p < .01$ ; other adults,  $t = 10.76, p < .01$ ; and other youths not involved in the group,  $t = 12.5, p < .01$ ). Analyses also indicated that the perceived support provided by youths in the community was significantly lower than the perceived support provided by all elected officials ( $t = 2.4, p < .02$ ) and other adults ( $t = 2.9, p < .01$ ).

### Number of Tobacco Control Activities

Group coordinators reported a mean of 32.5 individual activities in the past year. The following group activities were reported by the majority of adult coordinators: training of youth group members and leaders (87.3%), youth group-sponsored educational presentations (83.6%), and distribution of tobacco control educational materials (82.2%). By contrast, a much smaller number of adult coordinators reported that their groups conducted persuasive education or advocacy (38.1%), compliance checks of convenience stores (31.7%), community improvement event coordination (35.9%), or activities to remember those who were victims of tobacco use (17.8%).

When activities were grouped according to an education versus policy focus, the adult coordinators reported conducting a much greater number of activities aimed at educating others ( $M = 28.9$  activities in past year) than activities aimed to promote tobacco control policies ( $M = 11.1$  activities in past year). The most common educational activities reported by coordinators included dissemination of tobacco use prevention messages to youths ( $M = 8.7$  activities per year) and general tobacco control awareness education ( $M = 8.4$  activities per year). When policy issues were addressed, they most commonly included limiting youth access to tobacco ( $M = 4.1$  activities per year) and advertising restrictions on tobacco ( $M = 3.6$  activities per year). Least frequently, youth groups are working to affect increasing taxes on tobacco products ( $M = 0.5$  activities per year).

## REGRESSION ANALYSIS RESULTS

Results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. Estimates of unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors for the four community support variables and other independent variables are reported for the total number of group activities (Model 1) and then for separate counts of educational (Model 2) and policy-related (Model 3) activities. None of the community support variables were related to the total number of group activities at conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ), although there was a marginally significant positive relationship for the strength of school support ( $b = .12, p = .06$ ). Other variables associated with total group activities were total number of group members ( $b = .17, p < .05$ ), having a paid adult coordinator

Table 3. Community Support and Group Characteristics Regressed on Total Number of Activities, Number of Educational Activities, and Number of Policy-Related Activities

Independent Variable	Regression Model 1 Total Number of Activities		Regression Model 2 Number of Educational Activities		Regression Model 3 Number of Policy Activities	
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>
School support	.14	1.03	.08	1.35	-.03	0.68
Elected official support	-.03	0.60	-.00	0.82	.03	0.41
Other adult support	.09	1.11	-.09	1.48	-.15	0.74
Other youth support	.05	1.22	.09	1.64	.22	0.82**
Presence of adult tobacco control coalition	-.02	4.45	-.03	5.95	-.01	2.99
Total annual budget	.09	0.00	.18	0.00*	.24	0.00***
Time group has been in existence	.03	0.04	-.01	0.05	.04	0.03
Hours worked by coordinator	.19	0.05*	.15	0.07	.07	0.03
Number of active youth members	.17	0.02*	.09	0.03	-.02	0.01
Support by parents	.07	0.64	.11	0.86	-.01	0.43
Focus of group (tobacco specific or work on other issues as well)	.04	4.14	.04	5.55	.04	2.78
Location of group (school or community)	-.13	4.37	-.07	5.80	-.03	2.91
Paid adult coordinator position	.16	4.67*	.05	6.21	-.04	3.11
<i>F</i> value	5.16**		2.86**		2.13*	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.21		.11		.07	

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .001.

( $b = .16, p < .01$ ), and the number of hours the adult coordinator devoted to group supervision ( $b = .19, p < .05$ ). None of the community support variables were associated with number of educational activities conducted by the group. Among other variables, only the size of the group's annual budget was positively related to the number of educational activities ( $b = .18, p < .05$ ). Support by other youths outside of the group was significantly related to the number of policy-related activities ( $b = .22, p < 0.01$ ) as was the group's annual budget ( $b = .24, p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This article examines the characteristics of the youth groups involved in Legacy's SYMATU and explores the relationships between community support and the number and focus of activities being conducted by these groups. Overall, it was found that coordinators did not believe that tobacco control issues received a high level of support from any specified entity in their community. Schools were believed to be providing the greatest support, which is perhaps not surprising because many of these groups are either located in the schools or are working to create change within and around schools.

The lowest levels of support came from youths who are not involved in the group. By using a youth empowerment framework, where youth are in charge of the direction and management of these groups, it was hoped that these groups would appeal to those not typically considered "involved" youths and perhaps those who may be most at risk for tobacco use. Our results also indicate that if youths outside of the group are supportive of these groups, then the activities conducted by these groups tend to be more policy focused. With such perceived low levels of support from youths outside of the group, extra work may be needed to attract youths to these groups and to the issue of tobacco control. Groups may want to reexamine their activities to make them more appealing to other youths, even if they do not become involved in the groups.

Examination of group activities shows that groups are involved in an average of 33 activities each year. The type of activities varies greatly, with most groups reporting such activities as educational presentations, distribution of educational materials, and recruiting and training events. Understandably, these activities require less planning and coordination. Activities such as persuasive education, including ones that focus on advocacy, and youth group surveys of teen smoking or smoking policies were less common across groups and were conducted less frequently.

Results of regression analysis found minimal association between the level of group activities and group characteristics. An increased number of activities was associated with having a paid adult coordinator and with the amount of time the coordinator devoted to group supervision. By paying coordinators, and having them commit more time to the group and its activities, it appears that groups are more active in getting their messages out to the communities they serve. Findings also show that as the number of members increases, so do the number of activities.

This research has several limitations that warrant discussion. A clear limitation of these data is that they are a result of a limited cross-sectional design, and not a longitudinal study. Utilization of a longitudinal study would provide insight into the extent to which activities or group characteristics lead to external community support or support leads to certain group characteristics and the implementation of either policy- or education-focused activities.

Another limitation is that these data were collected from one adult working with these SYMATU groups. Support is therefore based on one individual's perception of community support for certain tobacco control policy issues. There is also value in measuring the level of support perceived by the youth members themselves. If these groups are youth led as originally designed, this perception may be more meaningful than that felt by the adult coordinator.

Utilization of count data, namely, the number of activities a group conducts, may be somewhat biasing in that a group that conducts a larger number of less complex activities (e.g., participating in health fairs) appears to be more active than a group that plans fewer more complex activities (e.g., training sessions or county summit).

Our findings indicate that groups are engaged in a wide variety of activities intended to address tobacco control issues in their community. Many of these activities focus on dissemination of traditional public health educational messages, and fewer activities are aimed at changing key tobacco control policies. Examination of community support for tobacco control issues and policies shows that support is overall fairly low, with school officials providing the greatest amount of support and youths outside of these groups providing the least support. Future work will need to focus on further understanding the relationship between the sources of community support and the types of activities a group engages in and the directionality of the relationship.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Recently, some public health researchers have begun to emphasize the need for creating a change in tobacco-related policies, such as taxes on tobacco products and banning smoking in public places. It is believed that these strategies along with education are more effective in reducing tobacco use than traditional public health education campaigns that seek to simply educate youths about the risks of tobacco use.<sup>4,10,11</sup> In this study, youth groups reported conducting a greater number of activities aimed at educating others about tobacco control issues and fewer activities aimed at actually changing tobacco control policies. Although activities such as health fairs and festivals are perhaps an effective way to develop group recognition among youths and community members, there is a need to balance these activities with those that address tobacco control policies if community change is a group goal.

Examination of community support in relation to activities indicates that the greater the perception of youth support for tobacco control, the more policy-related activities a group is involved in. It is possible that in communities where there is greater support for tobacco control, groups in these areas are seeking out new, more innovative methods of tobacco control (i.e., trying to change tobacco-related policies). There is a need to implement activities in the community that will attract and appeal to a variety of youths, including those most at risk for tobacco use. As more youths support the group's efforts, then members can focus more on creating policy-level changes within their community. Although policy-level activities were also influenced by the group's total annual budget, many believe these are the types of interventions that will have the greatest impact on tobacco control within communities.

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