

Cigarette Use Has Collapsed, So Media Scares People About Vaping Instead



By Alex Berezow — November 9, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

The CDC released a [report](#) [2] on Thursday that should cause widespread celebration: The prevalence of cigarette smoking among adults (14%) is at an all-time low since the federal government began tracking such data in 1965.

That's not just extremely good news. This is a huge public health triumph and should make major headlines, just like it did on [CNN](#) [3]. But other media outlets, like the [Washington Post](#) [4] and [New York Times](#) [5], decided to downplay or ignore it and scare people about vaping, instead.

If It Bleeds, It Leads

A cynical truth of journalism is, "If it bleeds, it leads," which is why the front pages of newspapers are full of natural disasters, homicides, and scandals. Bad news sells, while good news doesn't. [Violent crime is down](#) [6] all over the country (and indeed much of the world), but you wouldn't know it by reading or watching the news.

This pervasive, insidious form of media bias also does a huge disservice to public health. How so? Because when major health triumphs are ignored, the public tends to obsess over the dangers of much smaller risks. And that's exactly what has happened in regard to cigarettes and vaping.

Let's examine the [Washington Post](#) [4] story. To its credit, the story notes that cigarette use is at an all time low -- but this headline-worthy story is buried 18 paragraphs down. Instead, the article focuses on the increase in vaping among teenagers.

Yes, that is problematic. Yes, the FDA is right to crack down on it. But statements like this are flat-out false:

"Research indicates many -e-cigarette users are likely to become addicted to nicotine and some will probably end up on regular cigarettes..."

No. Nobody seriously believes that marijuana is a gateway to hard drugs, so why would the "gateway hypothesis" be true for e-cigarettes? Answer: It's not likely to be true, and evidence for a gateway is [incredibly flimsy](#) [7]. Indeed, this worry is [more hype than hazard](#) [8].

Hype Has Consequences

In an ideal world, adults and kids don't engage in harmful behavior. But we don't live in that kind of world. Teenagers experiment with things, even though we tell them not to. I [wrote](#) [9] about that previously:

Of all the different things that teenagers could try -- from hard drugs to unprotected sex -- nicotine is rather harmless by comparison. It's not all that different from caffeine. If I had a teenager and the most rebellious act he or she did was vaping, I'd be a happy parent. Context and perspective matter.

[Smoking is a pediatric disease](#) [10] because most smokers began as teenagers. If society overreacts to the relatively minor health threat posed by e-cigarettes and other vaping devices, we risk pushing experimentally-minded teens toward actual cigarettes. [In Europe, more kids are starting to smoke](#) [11]. Is that what we want to see here?

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Links

[1] <https://www.storyblocks.com/stock-image/serious-senior-man-standing-on-balcony-and-smoking-a-cigarette-hoibdoduzwj3o3j5dj>

[2] <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6744a2.htm>

[3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/08/health/cigarette-tobacco-use-study/index.html>

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/fda-plans-to-impose-severe-restrictions-on-e-cigarettes/2018/11/08/91253cf2-e3a1-11e8-8f5f-a55347f48762_story.html?utm_term=.d6e56bf846b7

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/health/vaping-ecigarettes-fda.html>

[6] <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-12/pssst-crime-may-be-near-an-all-time-low>

[7] https://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2018/01/06/why_vaping_isnt_a_gateway_to_smoking.html

[8] <https://theconversation.com/vaping-as-a-gateway-to-smoking-is-still-more-hype-than-hazard-47399>

[9] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/07/28/when-english-major-becomes-health-editor-13239>

[10] https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/youth_data/tobacco_use/index.htm

[11] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/09/13/more-european-kids-are-smoking-if-only-there-was-alternative-13403>