

## When Is a Cigar Not a Cigar? African American Youths' Understanding of "Cigar" Use

A study published in 1999 found considerable variability in students' understanding of whether specific behaviors constituted "having sex."<sup>1</sup> In the uproar that followed, at least one point emerged clearly: it is important to understand precisely what common words mean to the people using them. We found evidence that similar issues may be present in research on tobacco use patterns among African American youths.

In 1999, 6 focus groups<sup>2</sup> were conducted in California with 50 consenting African American youths (aged 14–18 years) recruited at schools and community centers in 2 San Francisco-area cities. The purpose of the groups was to explore patterns and understandings of cigar use.

Participants were paid \$20 for their time. Both tobacco users and nonusers were included. Short prediscussion and postdiscussion questionnaires included items on demographic characteristics and cigar use. The 2-hour groups were audiotaped, and transcriptions were analyzed through an iterative process facilitated by qualitative data management software. Findings reported here were identified

across all groups (see Table 1 for information about the participants).

The word *cigar* encompasses several types and sizes of smokable noncigarette tobacco products, their common factor being a nonpaper, tobacco leaf or tobacco-containing outer wrapper.<sup>3</sup> In this study, we found that focus groups described 3 distinct ways of referring to cigars. First, larger, premium-type products were defined as "cigars" but were rarely used by the participants, who associated them with older or wealthier people (or both). "People . . . that have more money usually smoke cigars," said one youth, to general agreement.

Second, a class of inexpensive thinner cigars marketed heavily to African Americans was typically referred to only by individual brand names (e.g., "Black and Mild"). Black and Mild, a cigar product youths said they generally purchased singly for about 75 cents, was the most frequently mentioned product. However, these products were not necessarily viewed as "cigars." One participant said, "When I hear *cigar*, I think of old people, with them big ones. . . . I don't think of Black and Milds."

"Blunts," a third term, described inexpensive, typically thicker cigars used exclusively for smoking marijuana. In this practice, the filler tobacco is discarded, replaced with marijuana, and smoked by inhaling deeply. All groups agreed that smoking blunts was com-

mon practice among African American marijuana users, stating that most youths used blunts every time they smoked marijuana.<sup>4</sup> Smoking a Black and Mild after smoking a blunt was believed to "boost" the high from marijuana or decrease sleepiness.

Findings from the prediscussion and postdiscussion questionnaires also suggested confusion as to what exactly is meant by the word *cigar*. On the prediscussion questionnaire, 16 young people (32% of participants) reported that they had ever smoked a cigar; this number increased to 22 (44%) on the postdiscussion questionnaire. While this increase may have been due to other group-related factors, it suggests that some youths may have recognized during the discussion that a tobacco product they had known only by brand name or as a blunt could be considered a cigar.

It has been shown that African American students are significantly more likely to smoke cigars than White students (prevalence rates of 8.8% vs 4.9%),<sup>5</sup> and the percentage of African American male youths who indicate that they are frequent users (50 or more cigars per year) is reportedly higher than that of White or Hispanic male youths or that of female youths.<sup>6</sup> Our findings suggest that if some youths do not regard certain products as "cigars," prevalence rates in this group could be underestimated.

These findings serve as a reminder to researchers and public health educators of the need to seek, understand, and employ definitions used by targeted groups to ensure that their findings are as accurate as possible. Such understanding is essential for development of culturally appropriate strategies to reduce tobacco use among all populations. □

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**TABLE 1—Focus Group Participant Characteristics: San Francisco Area, 1999**

	Sample (n = 50)
Mean age, y (range)	16 (14–18)
Sex, no.	
Female	21
Male	29
Ever tried any tobacco product, no.	
Yes	28
No	22
Ever smoked a cigar (affirmative responses), no.	
Prediscussion questionnaire	16
Postdiscussion questionnaire	22

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## Contributors

V. Yeger and C. Pearson collected and analyzed data, contributed to drafting the report, and suggested revisions. R. E. Malone conceived and designed the study, analyzed the data, interpreted the results, and wrote the report.

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