

Big Tobacco has abused Black lives for far too long. The FDA can help by ending the scourge of menthol.

OPINION: The tobacco industry is gaslighting Black Americans, exploiting Black trauma and spreading misinformation on the proposed menthol cigarette ban.

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Over 400 years ago, the tobacco industry helped fuel the trans-Atlantic slave trade, stealing Black families — men, women and children — from their homelands and trafficking them to the Americas to grow and harvest the highly profitable crop — without payment for building this nation's wealth and worse, with no regard for their lives. Today, slavery is an evil relic of our past that haunts the present as Big Tobacco continues to abuse Black bodies and discard Black lives.

For more than six decades, Big Tobacco has appropriated our culture, spent millions of dollars to study the lived experiences of Black Americans and bombarded our communities (<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/what-we-do/industry-watch/menthol-report>) with marketing for menthol cigarettes. Contrary to popular opinion, menthol cigarettes are not an inherently “Black thing.” While we have invented many products and technologies that have never been attributed to our people, menthol cigarettes are not one of them. Instead, through targeted advertising, sponsored events, free samples and retail promotions, the tobacco industry has dealt this poison with the explicit intent of maintaining a loyal consumer base and, just like any savvy drug dealer, hooking each generation.



Also Read:
[Menthol cigarette companies historically targeted Black communities, researchers say](https://thegrio.com/2022/04/30/menthol-companies-targeted-black-communities/) (<https://thegrio.com/2022/04/30/menthol-companies-targeted-black-communities/>).

The decades-long campaign has worked. Today, 85% of Black smokers (<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-commits-evidence-based-actions-aimed-saving-lives-and-preventing-future-generations-smokers>) use menthol cigarettes. In the 1950s, just 10% did. This marketing has been pervasive, yet it's only one of the deceitful tactics in Big Tobacco's playbook.

As a tobacco researcher and chair of the Department of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, I know all too well how the tobacco industry works. Wielding its billions of dollars with no regard for the human cost, the industry has repeatedly infiltrated Black communities (<https://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/Tobacco-Industry-Targeting.pdf>), providing much-needed financial support to Black civil rights organizations, educational institutions, labor and trade unions, the Black press and many more. Make no mistake: The industry and its allies are not trying to uplift Black communities. Instead, they are a modern Trojan Horse, a nefarious and damning presence harming our health and killing our loved ones.

Today, there is hope on the horizon, though it comes after years of waiting for deliverance. In 2009, the Food and Drug Administration banned the sale of flavored cigarettes with one intolerable exception: menthol. Nearly 15 years later, the agency can finally right this wrong through its proposed ban on menthol cigarettes (<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-proposes-rules-prohibiting-menthol-cigarettes-and-flavored-cigars-prevent-youth-initiation>) and flavored cigars. The health benefits of eliminating these products would be enormous, putting an end to decades of deceitful marketing and decreasing the stark health inequities Black Americans face. The FDA must end the scourge of menthol cigarettes and their devastating impact on our health.

Studies estimate that prohibiting menthol cigarettes would save up to 650,000 lives over the next 40 years, including more than 250,000 Black lives (<https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2022/06/12/tobaccocontrol-2022-057298>). In addition, the Council on Foreign Relations (<https://www.cfr.org/article/how-new-tobacco-control-laws-could-help-close-racial-gap-us-cancer>) determined that the FDA's plan would close the gap in lung cancer death rates between Black Americans and other racialized and ethnic groups within just five years. Personally, I cannot recall any policy with such immense benefits and positive impact on our communities. The FDA can make them real by quickly issuing and implementing final regulations. According to CNN (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/01/health/fda-menthol-regulation/index.html#:~:text=Audio%20Live%20TV-,FDA%20says%20it%20will%20finalize%20ban,tobacco%20products%20in%20coming%20mo>) the FDA will finalize the rules for a ban "in the coming months."

Unsurprisingly, Big Tobacco is fighting this move with every racist tool in its arsenal. It has funded Black lobbyists and consultants (<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-04-25/inside-big-tobaccos-strategy-to-stoke-fear-among-black-smokers-facing-menthol-bans>) to oppose laws prohibiting menthol cigarettes and stoke fears about criminalization. It has offered \$250,000 to a prominent Black pastor and civil rights organizer to spew its illegitimate talking points (<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2022/08/25/detroit-pastor-says-he-offered-250-k-oppose-menthol-cigarette-ban/7866711001/>). It has preyed upon very real Black fears and exploited Black trauma by gaslighting us and spreading misinformation that eliminating menthol cigarettes will lead to an increase in police abuse of Black people.

Such fearmongering ignores the fact that the FDA's plan won't apply to individuals but to manufacturers and retailers of menthol cigarettes. It also ignores the fact that law enforcement repeatedly and disproportionately targets Black people — sometimes with deadly consequences — regardless of what we're doing. Data show that police will harass our people under any false pretenses: walking while Black, riding a bicycle while Black, grocery shopping while Black. None of us is immune to the rampant racial profiling in the United States. Countless times, I too have been profiled

in various spaces and places for simply existing while Black. The fact is that eliminating menthol cigarettes is not going to exacerbate a problem that has always existed, particularly when the ban is not focused on individuals.



Also Read:
[FDA issues plan to ban menthol in cigarettes, cigars](https://thegrio.com/2022/04/28/fda-issues-plan-to-ban-menthol-in-cigarettes-cigars/)
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Police harassment and brutality can be deadly. But so is the impact of menthol cigarettes. Black smokers are far more likely than any other racialized group to die (<https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/health-equity/african-american/health-burden.html#:~:text=African%20American%20people%20are%20more%20likely%20to%20die%20from%20smoking,Non%2DHispanic%2C%20White>) from tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease and stroke. They're also more likely to attempt to quit smoking and less likely to be successful.

The reason is clear: Menthol cools and numbs the throat, which masks the harshness of tobacco smoke. It makes it easier for adults to continue and youth to start smoking. Because of predatory marketing, Black youth use menthol cigarettes at higher rates. A 2015 survey. (<https://assets.tobaccofreekids.org/factsheets/0390.pdf>) found that while about 20% of smokers ages 12-17 overall preferred the heavily marketed menthol brand Newport cigarettes, that preference was nearly 70% for Black youth. Research shows that menthol cigarettes are also more addictive and harder to quit across all ages. The industry knows and exploits this fact to increase its profits at the expense of Black health and wealth.

Menthol cigarettes are a major reason why tobacco use remains the No. 1 cause of preventable death among Black Americans, claiming 45,000 Black lives every year. If we're serious about saving Black lives, eliminating menthol cigarettes is a good place to start.

Centuries ago, our ancestors were stolen from our homelands and sold on the auction block to harvest tobacco in the fields. Today, we must ask ourselves: How much longer will we tolerate the tobacco industry profiting off our Black fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and our children's lives?

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