

## COMMENTARY

Teen vaping is down during the pandemic. Here's how to keep it that way.



Youth from the Advocates for Change Today group pose near a “Escape the Vape” billboard in City Heights.

(Courtesy: Advocates for Change Today )

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NOV. 25, 2020 2:43 PM

Are smoking and vaping linked to the COVID-19 pandemic? [Yes!](#) Not only does COVID-19 attack victims’ respiratory systems, which are likely to be damaged by tobacco use, but vaping and smoking are often social behaviors, done with others, often while sharing vaping and smoking devices in group settings. Having close contact and sharing items that go into the mouth increase the likelihood of spreading the coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

The Central and North Central tobacco prevention teams at SAY San Diego and youth advocates shared a few stories about this important public health issue affecting us all, including information about a wonderful youth group standing up to Big Tobacco.

Locally, we have a youth e-cigarette (vape) epidemic. Forty-one percent of local high school students who took the 2019 San Diego Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported using an electronic device this year.

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**Commentary: We must stop the the youth tobacco epidemic fueled by candy-flavored products**

**Nov. 25, 2020**

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**Jess Nuñez: I don't defend using cigarettes or tobacco. I defend the individual freedom to use them.**

**Nov. 25, 2020**



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**Jeannie Huang: I'm a doctor in San Diego. Smoking and vaping put youth at risk for COVID-19.**

**Nov. 25, 2020**

Young people and their families are particularly at risk in this pandemic. We have heard parents expressing concern about their teens' behavior regarding social gatherings: from a 14-year-old sneaking out all night to gather with friends to a 17-year-old having an asthma attack after vaping. The risk is real, it is high, and it is not only applicable to teens. A 29-year-old and his friends gathered to vape and smoke THC in a garage only to find out later he tested positive for COVID-19. He experienced one of the most difficult chapters in his young life.

Personal stories like these are alarming and open eyes to a grim reality: Sheltering at home is giving youth and young adults more opportunities to vape and smoke at a time when the COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are spiking again. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that [fewer teenagers](#) are vaping during the pandemic, down from 5.4 million in 2019 to 3.6 million in 2020. Will the pandemic erase the progress in reducing vaping among teens?

No other generation has ever had to figure out such widespread distance learning. Setting up a space to work and dealing with family distractions creates stress and anxiety, and we have heard

from students who vape more often during the quarantine. They're stressed from not seeing friends and about keeping up on their schoolwork. Also talking to parents about vaping is challenging. There is a fear of disappointing them or being reprimanded instead of being helped.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that we must be creative in the solutions to the problems that we face. It is no surprise that the tobacco industry has been heavily targeting youth and young adults in our communities with flavored tobacco and vape. Before the pandemic, we had a national outbreak of e-cigarette/vaping-associated lung injuries.

Fortunately, there are youth in San Diego who are taking a lead role to creatively tackle this pressing issue head-on. In City Heights, the Advocates for Change Today (ACT), a youth leadership group with SAY San Diego, has developed a campaign called "Escape the Vape." The campaign empowers teens to resist the e-cigarette industry marketing vape as a hip, healthy alternative to smoking tobacco. The campaign offers opportunities for community education, advocacy and organizing.

Attention-grabbing billboard advertisements were a focal point of the campaign. ACT members designed ads to visually communicate the dangers of vaping. In addition, the campaign uses posters, peer-to-peer discussions and parent presentations to spread the word. ACT co-chair Chris Acolt says the "Escape the Vape" campaign marks "a step closer to reducing the percentage of teens using vaping products."

What can San Diegans do to make a positive change? To start, we are living at a time when public officials cannot afford to compartmentalize the risk factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the correlation with the e-cigarette youth epidemic. San Diegans need to act and call their city representatives to request an immediate ban on flavored tobacco products. Enough green passes to tobacco industries to expand its reach, earning profits off and spreading deadly addictions.

To help cope with stress without nicotine, go to [smokefree.gov](https://smokefree.gov). If you are a teen and want to quit, click on the [SmokeFreeTeen](#) tab.

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