



Assessing Tongan attitudes and beliefs about smoking to reduce tobacco use in the community

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ABSTRACT

Up to an estimated 12,000 Tongans live in San Mateo County, California. Observational evidence led community leaders to question whether a high smoking rate among local Tongans may be among the major health risks for the community. The San Mateo County Health System and local non-profit Taulama for Tongans set out to systematically assess the smoking rate among the population with the hope of gaining insights that would lead to an intervention to limit smoking as a health risk factor. A 46-question survey was developed to assess tobacco use, exposure to secondhand smoke, and community perceptions of tobacco use. The survey was translated into Tongan and distributed by community members through church and social networks.

In total, 194 surveys were completed by adult Tongans. Thirty-two percent of respondents reported smoking, as compared to an 11% overall County smoking rate, with a high number of respondents also reporting that their friends and family members smoke. Survey results showed high community comprehension of the harms of tobacco use, certain cultural limits on smoking, as well as strong community support for smoke-free policies. The process also highlighted some limitations of surveying a population who may be less familiar with survey research. These data were paired with cultural understandings to develop a preliminary social marketing campaign for the Tongan community. A smoke-free event policy campaign and development of a culturally-appropriate educational material serve as the first steps in combating the effects of tobacco among the Tongan community in San Mateo County.



OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY

The Kingdom of Tonga consists of approximately 172 islands in the Southwest Pacific. The people of Tonga are mostly of Polynesian descent, similarly to Hawaiians, Samoans, Fijians, Maori, and Tahitians. The total population of the Kingdom of Tonga is 101,169 people, with a similarly sized number of Tongans (about an additional 100,000) estimated to live throughout the world. The language of the community is Tongan. The desire for more opportunities for self and children led many Tongans to search out work. From the 1960s onward, many relocated to other parts of the world including the United States.

San Mateo County benefits from a diverse population, including a large population of Tongans and several other Pacific Islander communities. The estimated number of Tongans in San Mateo County is between 4,000 and 12,000. Since US Census data does not collect specific Asian/Pacific Islander information, it is difficult to estimate the Tongan population with certainty. Many local Tongans are engaged in manual labor, including lawn care and work at the San Francisco International Airport (actually located in San Mateo County).

Local data show that 57% of Tongans living in San Mateo County are foreign-born. Average household size among those identifying as Tongans is 6 people, considerably larger than the average household size of 2.74 person for the entire County. 87% of local Tongans report speaking the Tongan language at home. A considerable educational gap exists between all San Mateo County residents and the Tongan population, with only 6% of Tongans holding at least a Bachelor degree compared to 24% of the entire community.



SURVEY DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Observational evidence showed that the Tongan community may not have benefited from local tobacco control efforts at the same level as other communities. With a hypothesis that local Tongans smoke cigarettes at higher levels than the general population and a concern for special issues to consider when addressing tobacco use in this community, the decision was made to develop an assessment survey in partnership with a local Tongan health organization. The survey developed included 46 questions, including many on smoking attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

The survey was designed based on best practice questions used in tobacco control, modified as needed in consultation with the Tongan community and local program evaluator. The survey additionally focused on gathering information about perceptions of smoke-free environments for the purpose of determining the feasibility of smoke-free policies at community events. The survey was translated into Tongan and distributed widely with the help of a survey recorder. In total, 194 surveys were completed by Tongan adults. The survey was distributed through networks where the community congregates- specifically in church and at community events.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Analysis of survey results yielded a variety of findings which are being used to shape interventions in the Tongan community. The results showed high use and high secondhand smoke exposure, but also a strong understanding of the harms of tobacco smoke and some positive attitudes and behaviors that may be seen as protective factors.

HIGH RATE OF TOBACCO USE IN THE TONGAN COMMUNITY

- The major finding of the survey is that 32% of Tongan adults reported being current smokers. This compares to a much lower County smoking rate of only 10.9%.
- Consistent with a high rate of self-reported tobacco use, 52% of Tongan respondents report that they live with a smoker.

POTENTIAL POINTS OF INTERVENTION FOR SMOKERS

- Although tobacco use appears to be pervasive, only 14% of respondents who stated they smoke indicate that they smoke inside their home (respect for family leads to protective outdoor smoking).
- Smokers considerably underreported the cost of purchasing cigarettes per week/month/year as compared to their reported frequency of use.
- 64% of smokers report their doctor has advised them to quit before (community leaders conclude that many do not have regular medical care and are thus not being advised to quit).
- Among Tongan smokers identified, 67% indicate that they would like to quit smoking.

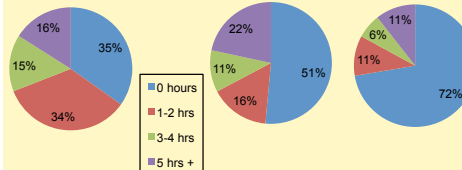
HIGH LOCAL KNOWLEDGE OF HEALTH IMPACTS OF TOBACCO

- 86% of Tongan respondents reported that smoking is harmful and the same percentage could identify cancer as an outcome of long-term smoking.

CONSIDERABLE SECONDHAND SMOKE EXPOSURE

- Many respondents reported considerable exposure to secondhand smoke at home, at work, and among friends.
- How often each day are you around...

...friends who smoke? ...family who smoke? ...co-workers who smoke?



STRONG SUPPORT FOR SMOKE-FREE TONGAN EVENTS

- 62% of respondents state they had been bothered by secondhand smoke at a Tongan event in the past.
- 73% would be supportive of a smoke-free Tongan National Day or other community event.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the results of the surveys, it was decided that an educational material should be developed that addressed potential points of intervention for tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure. The material was to be designed using culturally relevant language, information that directly relates to survey findings, and that is appealing enough so members of the community will pick it up and give it to a loved one.

The developed material:

- Addresses the costs of smoking as well as a key message of quitting not for oneself but for family and community.
- Relates that smoking rates are very high in the Tongan community and asks members to take action.
- Focuses on the benefits of quitting- including the money saved and the immediate repair that your body undertakes.
- Refers smokers who are interested in quitting to available cessation services.
- Intentionally limits the amount of text based on feedback from the community that a material which is text-heavy will not be read.



SMOKE-FREE POLICIES

Because the survey data showed very strong public support, Taulama for Tongans was able to successfully advocate for implementation of 6 local smoke-free event policies. During these church and community events, announcements were made designating smoking areas off the premises, and staff distributed the new educational material to the community. Signs designated that the events were proudly now smoke-free. Written policies were developed and signed by community leaders, indicating that the community events would remain smoke-free in perpetuity.

If continued education and awareness campaigns draw interest among Tongan smokers, it is our goal to develop Tongan smoking cessation classes and support groups.