

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

February 2025

The dangers of tobacco have been clear since the mid-1960s. Starting then, adult smoking rates in the United States decreased, but as [cigarette prices dropped](#) in the 1990s, adult smoking rates plateaued and youth smoking rates increased.

Up against the addictive nature of nicotine, deeply-embedded social and cultural norms, and the powerful and well-resourced tobacco industry, traditional public health tactics aimed at curbing tobacco use were falling short. [The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#) was founded in 1996 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to advance the field of tobacco cessation.

Field Catalyst Role 1

Diagnosing and assessing the core problem and the full landscape of actors devoted to it

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids was created to focus on reducing tobacco use among youth, which was a politically palatable entry point to the broader issue of tobacco cessation. The organization brought a specific focus on tobacco use among youth to its partnerships with local, state, and national organizations – like the American Cancer Society and American Heart Association.

It has helped build the evidence base around multiple interconnected issues – including the risks and toll of smoking, public opinion about issues like smoke-free restaurants, proven policy solutions, and cultural

FIELD

Tobacco cessation

YEARS OF OPERATION

1996 - present

APPROXIMATE ANNUAL EXPENSES

[\\$16M - \\$50M](#) (2024 USD)

KEY IMPACT

Contributed to an [84% decrease in youth smoking](#) and a [45% decrease in adult smoking](#) in the United States since 1996

narratives that shape tobacco use – and translated complex academic research into easily-understandable formats.

Field Catalyst Role 2

Advocating and shining a spotlight

Since its founding, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids has served as a public educator, policy influencer, and strategic communicator. Early on, it positioned itself as a watchdog of the tobacco industry while its communications campaigns and media advising generated public support for tobacco control.

This case study was developed collaboratively by Student Experience Research Network and The Bridgespan Group, drawing on The Bridgespan Group's [research](#) on the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the roles and assets of field catalysts, and publicly available materials from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#). It is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial No Derivatives 4.0 International License](#).

For example, it elevated stories from former smokers and emphasized nonsmokers' right to breathe air free from secondhand smoke.

The organization partnered with policy and legal actors including state attorneys general, members of Congress, White House advisors, and funders to generate support for comprehensive legislation. Eventually, collective efforts resulted in significant policy wins. [In 2006](#), after the organization's first ten years, 15 states had well-funded tobacco cessation programs (up from three in 1996) and 14 states had smoke-free laws (up from one in 1996). In 2009, bipartisan legislation gave the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority to regulate tobacco products and marketing, which the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids had [worked toward](#) since its founding.

Field Catalyst Role 3

Connecting and organizing actors around a shared goal

The organization has provided infrastructure and resources for thousands of community- and state-level advocacy and education efforts. It equips activists with research and best practices, for example by fostering youth organizing and developing guidance about which types of advocacy messages are most effective.

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids has engaged civic organizations and religious communities as allies. It also collaborated with tobacco farmers, underscoring [common ground between tobacco control efforts and farmers](#) - who did not share in the tobacco industry's massive profits - and supporting policies that included financial and technical assistance for farmers to transition to growing other crops.

Field Catalyst Role 4

Filling critical gaps in collective effort

Given the central role of policy in tobacco cessation, the organization has an independent but closely affiliated partner called the Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund. Operating under a different tax code, the Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund has more flexibility to lobby and educate the public about specific candidates and elections. It helped advance field priorities like raising taxes on tobacco products, restricting predatory marketing, placing graphic health warnings on packaging, and expanding public health insurance coverage for cessation treatments.

Non-linear progress toward meaningful change

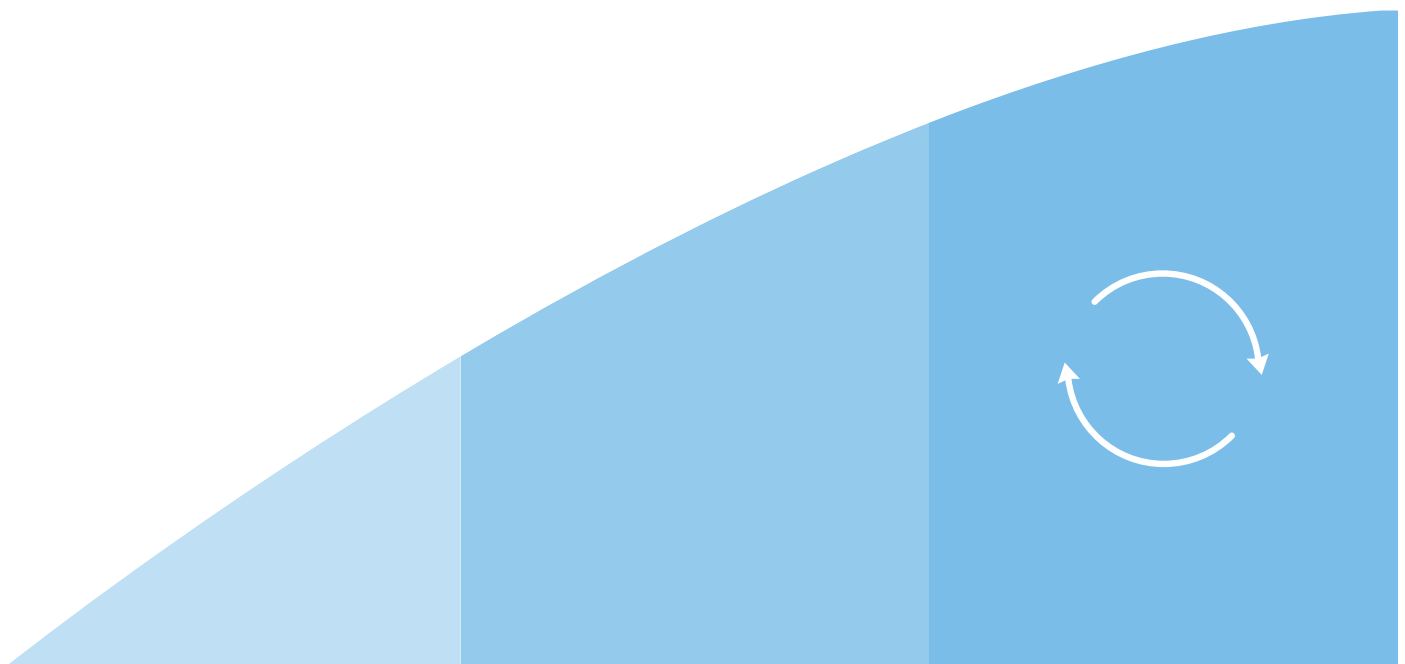
The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids demonstrates that the pathway to population-level change may not be straightforward, and in its earlier stages, may not conform to [typical impact measurement approaches](#). The organization had to continually refine its work as it sought to dismantle decades-old mental models around smoking and as it responded to legal and political challenges and new threats from the tobacco industry.

The organization, and the tobacco cessation field as a whole, faced various setbacks. For example, the landmark [bill](#) that established FDA regulation of tobacco was signed into law after multiple failed attempts to pass similar legislation. Like [other major turning points in policy](#), this win required a persistent, incremental approach sustained by long-term philanthropic funding.

In 2006, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids expanded to work not only in the United States but around the world, and continues its efforts today, with initiatives to ban flavored e-cigarettes and counter the tobacco industry's targeting of Black Americans. The organization [reports](#) an 84% decrease in youth smoking and a 45% decrease in adult smoking since 1996.

Realizing a long-term vision

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids persisted through early challenges, supported by the funders that founded the organization. The field's patient groundwork ultimately brought about widespread change.



Policy research highlights potential pathways to reduce tobacco use. Successes in places like the United Kingdom, France, and Australia indicate that tobacco control is possible.

In the United States, policy wins in one state pave the way for neighboring states to make similar shifts. State-level wins add up and generate federal attention.

Policies and social norms create a positive feedback loop as tobacco control becomes normalized. The field has well-established infrastructure, collaboration, and knowledge to support its continued response to evolving threats and challenges.