

Companies keep selling harmful products – but history shows consumers can win in the end
Jonathan D. Quick and Eszter Rimanyi, *The Conversation*, September 30th, 2024

When people think of epidemics, they might think they're caused only by viruses or other germs. But as public health experts, we know that's just part of the story. Commerce can cause epidemics, too. That's why our team coined the phrase in a recent study because you can't solve a problem without naming it.

5 Market-driven epidemics follow a familiar script. First, companies start selling an appealing, often addictive product. As more and more people start using it, the health harms become clearer. Yet even as evidence of damage grows and deaths pile up, sales continue to rise as companies resist efforts by health authorities, consumer groups and others to control them.

10 We see this pattern with many products today, including social media platforms, firearms, sugar-sweetened beverages, ultra-processed foods, opioids, nicotine products, infant formula and alcohol. Collectively, their harm contributes to more than 1 million deaths in the U.S. each year.

15 In our study, we asked two critical questions: Is it possible to combat such epidemics by changing the consumption patterns of millions of people? And if so, what does it take? We found the answers by looking at decades of efforts to reduce unhealthy consumption of three products: cigarettes, sugar and prescription opioids.

20 In each case, Americans kept consuming more and more of these products, even in the face of growing health concerns, until a tipping point was reached. That was followed by steady declines in consumption. The immediate cause for each tipping point varied considerably. For cigarettes, it was the trusted, authoritative voice of the U.S. Surgeon General unequivocally declaring in 1964 that smoking causes cancer. And for prescription opioids, in 2011, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared an opioid epidemic, signaling to doctors that they were overprescribing, and to the drug industry that it was acting irresponsibly.

25 The 1964 report on smoking came after a decade of confusion that the industry had sown to distract the public from the scientific consensus about the harms of tobacco. The report offered conclusive authority that changed the narrative. Smoking went from being viewed as a widely accepted social custom to a deadly habit almost overnight. Today, just 1 in 9 American adults smoke, down from nearly half of all adults in 1954.

While there are no easy solutions for today's market-based epidemics, we can learn from history about steps that can be effective in reducing the consumption of harmful products.

30 Changing attitudes on smoking show that an authoritative governmental voice can still be immensely useful to combat corporate resistance and the spread of corporate mis- and disinformation. And from opioids, we can learn that applying pressure to those who make decisions about consumption, who are not always the consumers themselves, can be immensely powerful in bending patterns of use.

35 Despite the progress made in such cases, the U.S. continues to face ongoing and emerging epidemics of unhealthy products. For example, while smoking has dramatically declined, the shift to vaping and other nicotine delivery products is creating new challenges, especially among teenagers.

40 But our research shows that these problems can be solved – that it is in fact possible to change millions of Americans' behavior. This is very good news. It means sound evidence and public health action can turn the tide on some of the world's biggest health challenges, potentially saving millions of lives and billions of dollars in health-care costs.