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Young Blacks Link Tobacco Use to Marijuana

By JANE GROSS

YONKERS, N.Y., April 21 — In the search to explain the spike in smoking among black teen-agers, a range of theories has evolved, from the proliferation of tobacco advertising in minority communities to the stress of adolescence to the identification with entertainment idols who appear with cigarettes dangling from their lips.

Teen-agers themselves, and some experts who have studied adolescent smoking, add another, less predictable explanation to the mix of factors: the decision to take up smoking because of a belief that cigarettes prolong the heady rush of marijuana.

"It makes the high go higher," said Marquette, a 16-year-old student at Saunders Trades and Technical High School here who, like other students, spoke about her marijuana use on the condition that only her first name be used.

At Washington Preparatory High School in South-Central Los Angeles, Tifanni, also 16, said she took up cigarettes two months ago because, "If the marijuana goes down and you get a cigarette, it will go up again."

Black teen-agers like Marquette and Tifanni are not unusual, according to interviews with dozens of adolescents around the country and various national surveys. These surveys show that blacks begin smoking cigarettes later than white teen-agers, but start using marijuana earlier, a difference that experts say they cannot explain.

The surveys also show a sharp rise in both cigarette and marijuana use among teen-agers in recent years, evident among all races but most pronounced among blacks. White teen-agers still smoke cigarettes at twice the rate of blacks, but the gap is narrowing, signaling the end of low smoking rates among black youths that had been considered a public health success story.

It is not clear how much of the increase in smoking among black teen-agers is due to the use of cigarettes with marijuana, and experts say advertising has been the main factor. But the marijuana-tobacco combination is notable because it is the reverse of the more common progression from cigarette and alcohol use to illegal drugs.

Many black teen-agers said in interviews that they were drawn to cigarettes by friends who told them that nicotine would enhance their high from marijuana, which has

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