

Underage Tobacco Purchases Related to Community and Store Characteristics

A recent study finds that underage-looking buyers attempting to purchase tobacco were more likely to be successful if the clerk asks their age. Also, clerks were more likely to request an ID if tobacco outlets in the community were required to be licensed and if age-of-sale signs were visible. The study, carried out by the Prevention Research Center at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, California, was conducted in 50 mid-sized California communities. Surveys were conducted by four confederate buyers (two men and two women), who were over 18 years of age, but judged to appear younger by an independent panel. Purchase attempts were made at 997 tobacco outlets in the 50 communities. Just over 14% of the sampled outlets sold to the confederate buyers without asking for identification in violation of tobacco sales laws.

The finding suggests that retailers who ask about age may sell cigarettes to youth who state they are over 18 years old without requesting proof of age. Interventions with retailers should emphasize the importance of requiring clerks to request proof of age regardless of whether the person states that he or she is over 18 years old. Procedures to verify that clerks consistently check IDs (e.g., ‘mystery shoppers’ or reward and reminder programs) may be critically important if such policies are to be effective. The importance of store policies is further highlighted by our results showing that visible age-of-sale signs were associated with an increased likelihood that the clerk requested proof of age.

The findings also suggest that youth access to cigarettes from commercial sources is easier in some communities than in others. Youth in communities with higher educational levels, greater percentage of minors, or greater percentage of African–Americans may have easier access to cigarettes from retail stores. It is possible that retailers in such communities might have more trust that minors will not try to purchase cigarettes illegally, are less concerned with youth smoking in their communities, or believe it is less likely they will be the target of a compliance check. This result supports the importance of enforcing laws that prohibit selling tobacco to minors in all communities.

The likelihood that a retailer will ask for proof of age is greater in communities with local tobacco retailer licensing. Strong licensing policies usually include a fee set to fund enforcement of laws related to tobacco sales to minor, a provision that a violation of existing local, state or federal tobacco regulation results in a suspended or revoked license, and financial disincentives through increased fines and penalties. The results suggest that requiring a license to sell tobacco may help reduce youth access to cigarettes through commercial sources.

Primary study author Sharon Lipperman-Kreda stated, “This study enhances our understanding of the associations between outlet and community characteristics and youth access to tobacco through commercial sources. This information can help policymakers to identify and target at-risk communities and outlets to decrease youth access to tobacco.”

The full paper:

Contextual and community factors associated with youth access to cigarettes through commercial sources, Sharon Lipperman-Kreda, Joel W Grube, and Karen B Friend.
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