



Youth Access Policies

While many components of a comprehensive tobacco control program attempt to reduce youth demand for tobacco products, effective youth access policies focus on reducing the supply of tobacco to children.

Age Restrictions: The World Health Organization recommends a minimum legal purchase age of 18 for tobacco products. Currently, the legal age for purchase around the world varies between 14 (in Colombia) and 19 (in several U.S. states), while some countries have yet to establish such restrictions.¹

Licensing Provisions: Effective laws preventing tobacco sales to children should have a retailer licensing component. The granting of licenses should be contingent upon obeying youth access laws, and retailers that violate these laws should be fined and/or have their licenses revoked.

Enforcement Provisions: Unless adequately enforced, retailer licensing laws will have little or no impact on sales to minors. A capable government agency should be designated as being primarily responsible for enforcing the law. Making sales to minors a civil, rather than criminal offense, and allowing inspectors to issue tickets for violation of youth access laws simplifies the administration of the law and does not burden the court system. Funding for such a system can come from retailer licensing fees and fines paid by violators.²

Requiring Proof of Age and Banning Uncontrolled Access: Merchants should be required to demand proof of age by any customer who could possibly be underage. Furthermore, transactions that do not involve face-to-face interaction should be prohibited. These include:

- *Vending machine sales* in any area where young people have access to the machines.
- *Mail order sales*, including internet sales.
- *Self-service and countertop displays* that allow customers access to cigarettes without showing proof of age.

Compliance Checks: Successful youth access programs have combined merchant education with compliance checks. These have often involved minors conducting unannounced test tobacco purchases in retail outlets under the guidance of the designated enforcement agency. If an illegal sale is made, a fine and/or a suspension/revocation of the store's license can result. The threat of continued enforcement and its consequences gives the vendor an economic incentive to obey the law. Such test purchases need to be repeated often for maximum effectiveness.³

Eliminating "Kiddie Packs" and Single-Stick Sales: So-called "kiddie packs" (small packages containing less than 20 cigarettes) are particularly attractive to young smokers, as they are inexpensive and easy to conceal. An Australian study found that such packs are much more popular among 14-15-year-old smokers than among adult smokers.⁴ Because of this appeal, banning the sale of small cigarette packs is an important step in reducing children's access to tobacco. Also, in many countries, cigarettes are sold individually by street vendors and others. This defeats the purpose of warning labels and lowers the cost of smoking for young people. Such sales should be prohibited.

Conclusion

While youth access policies alone will not solve the problem of underage tobacco use, they are an essential part of a comprehensive tobacco control policy. Aside from their effects on sales to and use by minors, when strictly enforced they send a clear message to children and adults about the hazards of tobacco use. Conversely, minimum-age laws that are not enforced convey the message that the laws are not to be taken seriously, undermining efforts in schools and communities to educate youth about the serious health hazards of tobacco.



Resources on the World Wide Web

U.S. Food & Drug Administration,
*Regulations Restricting the Sale and
Distribution of Cigarettes and
Smokeless Tobacco to Protect
Children and Adolescents* (1996)
[http://www.fda.gov/opacom/
campaigns/tobacco/execrule.html](http://www.fda.gov/opacom/campaigns/tobacco/execrule.html)

International Union Against Cancer,
"Youth and Tobacco," Tobacco Control
Fact Sheet No. 11, 1996
[http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/
fact_sheets/11fact.htm](http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact_sheets/11fact.htm)

Singapore's Youth Access Law (1998)
[http://www.ash.or.th/news/
asiannews/SingaporeLicense.htm](http://www.ash.or.th/news/asiannews/SingaporeLicense.htm)

¹Ruth Roemer, *Legislative Action to Combat the World Tobacco Epidemic*, 2nd. ed. (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1993).

²Barbara Lynch and Richard Bonnie, eds. *Growing Up Tobacco Free: Preventing Nicotine Addiction in Children and Youths* (Washington: Institute of Medicine, 1994).

³Joseph DiFranza et al., "Reducing Youth Access to Tobacco," *Tobacco Control*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1992; Joseph DiFranza et al., "A Model for the Efficient and Effective Enforcement of Tobacco Sales Laws," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 88, 1998.

⁴DH Wilson et al., "15s: They Fit in Everywhere – Especially in the School Bag: A Survey of Purchases of Packets of 15 Cigarettes by 14 and 15 Year Olds in South Australia," Supplement to *Community Health Studies*, Vol. XI, No. 1, 1987.