



## Editorial

## Retail Outlets and Point-of-Sale Marketing of Alternative Tobacco Products: Another Threat to Tobacco Control



The increase in alternative tobacco product use among youth is offsetting declines in cigarette use. Although past month cigarette use declined between 2011 and 2018 among high school students, past month use of any tobacco product rose over the same interval [1]. Most of the overall increase was attributable to the surge in the past month electronic cigarette (e-cigarette) use, which rose from 1.5% in 2011 to 20.8% in 2018 [1]. Among high school students who were current tobacco users, 38% frequently (i.e., used on  $\geq 20$  of the past 30 days) used smokeless tobacco, 28% used e-cigarettes, 23% used cigarettes, 16% used cigars, and 16% used hookah in 2018 [1]. The tobacco industry is succeeding in promoting alternative tobacco products to youth, despite decades of tobacco control efforts.

As other forms of marketing, such as television advertising, became highly regulated, the tobacco industry began investing heavily in point-of-sale and retail marketing strategies [2]. In 2017, major tobacco companies spent more than 484.8 million dollars on retail and point-of-sale advertising for smokeless tobacco products [3]. This included advertisements posted at the point-of-sale, retail discounts and promotional allowances, sampling, coupons, and bonus items with purchase [3]. These expenditures accounted for 67% of smokeless tobacco advertising expenses in 2017 [3].

Evidence suggests that retail marketing is particularly effective among youth [4]. Retail discounts and promotions are an integral part of point-of-sale tobacco marketing tactics. Discounts on tobacco products limit the impact of tobacco taxes and make tobacco more available to price-sensitive customers. Tobacco retailers are often more concentrated and may have lower prices in neighborhoods with a lot of young, low-income, or minority residents [5–7]. Tobacco products are sold in many venues (e.g., convenience stores, supermarkets, off-premise liquor stores, some pharmacies, tobacco shops, and newsstands), with approximately 400,000 retailers in the contiguous U.S. [8]. Almost 87% of high school students report exposure to tobacco advertisements in stores [9]. Past research suggests that youth who visited convenience, liquor, or small grocery stores at least twice per month had higher odds of initiating smoking that those who visited them less frequently [10]. Similarly, stores that were frequented by youth had almost three times more marketing materials for the leading cigarette brands [11]. Prior research also

suggests that adolescents who were exposed to point-of-sale advertising for cigars and smokeless tobacco were more likely to be curious about these products [12]. Frequency of exposure to point-of-sale marketing has been associated with tobacco use [13]. The pervasiveness of tobacco retailers contributes to the perception that tobacco product use is normal and acceptable.

Requiring a license to sell alternative tobacco products has the potential to reduce the number of tobacco retailers [14], which may impact adolescent use of these products. Using the implementation of Pennsylvania's 2016 e-cigarette licensure law as a natural experiment, a study reported that e-cigarette licensing policy was significantly negatively associated with e-cigarette use [15]. Other studies have equally shown that strong local tobacco retail licensing regulations may reduce rates of adolescent tobacco products use [16,17]. Overall, jurisdictions with a more stringent tobacco licensing regulations may reduce the quantity and density of retail tobacco locations [14] and improve the well-being of the population, including adolescent tobacco use.

In their recent study, Magid et al. [18] draw attention to the importance of the proximity and density of tobacco product retailers on alternative tobacco product use. Their results illustrate that those who live in neighborhoods with greater retailer density are more likely to initiate the use of alternative tobacco products [18]. These findings are largely consistent with the extant literature. A prior study reported associations between tobacco retail location and e-cigarette use in some U.S. counties [19]. Other findings indicate that e-cigarette retailer density around schools is positively associated with e-cigarette use [20]. However, a study from Canada found no significant association between e-cigarette retailer proximity and density and the likelihood of using e-cigarettes [21]. Although much of the existing evidence relies on cross-sectional data, Magid et al. [18] employ a longitudinal study design that allows for the assessment of initiation, in addition to current or ever use. Their work also extends prior studies by including a more comprehensive list of tobacco products used by youth (i.e., e-cigarettes, chewing or dipping tobacco or moist snuff, cigars, cigarillo or little cigars, and hookah). These findings are timely and notable because they illuminate an environmental factor that is contributing to the changing tobacco landscape.

---

**See Related Article on p.423**

Current tobacco control efforts cannot neglect alternative tobacco products. As cigarette use declines among youth, alternative tobacco products could become the new standard. The regulatory environment for these emerging products could benefit from evidence-based tobacco control strategies (e.g., excise taxes, smoke-free policies, and licensure requirements, addressing the availability of cheaper products through minimum price and pack size, cessation-related programs, and education campaigns). Furthermore, the alternative tobacco product industry presence in the retail environment is of vital importance. If left unchecked, the tobacco industry will continue to find new customers among our nation's youth. Some potential strategies for reducing point-of-sale tobacco marketing to youth include stricter advertising restrictions, limiting the location and density of tobacco retailers through licensure for all products, point-of-sale display restrictions, and prohibiting coupons and other discounts [22]. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for tobacco control, and practical approaches may vary by product. However, as tobacco companies introduce new products aimed at hooking up adolescents and young adults, strong regulatory approaches that are responsive to the changing tobacco landscape are needed.

Sunday Azagba, Ph.D.  
Lauren Manzione, M.P.H.  
*Department of Family & Preventive Medicine*  
*University of Utah*  
*Salt Lake City, Utah*

## References

- [1] Gentzke AS. Vital signs: Tobacco product use among middle and high school students — United States, 2011–2018. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2019;68:157–64.
- [2] Master settlement agreement. 1998. Available at: <https://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/master-settlement-agreement.pdf>. Accessed December 19, 2019.
- [3] Federal Trade Commission. Federal Trade Commission Smokeless Tobacco Report for 2017. 2019. Available at: [https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/reports/federal-trade-commission-cigarette-report-2017-federal-trade-commission-smokeless-tobacco-report/ftc\\_smokeless\\_tobacco\\_report\\_2017.pdf](https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/reports/federal-trade-commission-cigarette-report-2017-federal-trade-commission-smokeless-tobacco-report/ftc_smokeless_tobacco_report_2017.pdf). Accessed December 20, 2019.
- [4] National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (US) Office on Smoking and Health. The tobacco industry's influences on the use of tobacco among youth. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US); 2012. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK99238/>. Accessed December 20, 2019.
- [5] Loomis BR, Kim AE, Goetz JL, Juster HR. Density of tobacco retailers and its association with sociodemographic characteristics of communities across New York. *Public Health* 2013;127:333–8.
- [6] Lee JGL, Sun DL, Schleicher NM, et al. Inequalities in tobacco outlet density by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, 2012, USA: Results from the ASPiRE study. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2017;71:487–92.
- [7] Cantrell J, Kreslake JM, Ganz O, et al. Marketing little cigars and cigarillos: Advertising, price, and associations with neighborhood demographics. *Am J Public Health* 2013;103:1902–9.
- [8] Point-of-Sale report to the nation - the tobacco retail & policy landscape 2012–2014. Saint Paul, MN: Public Health Law Center; 2014. Available at: <https://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/resources/point-of-sale-report-nation-tobacco-retail-policy-landscape-2012-2014-2014>. Accessed December 20, 2019.
- [9] Dube SR, Arrazola RA, Lee J, et al. Pro-tobacco influences and susceptibility to smoking cigarettes among middle and high school students—United States, 2011. *J Adolesc Health* 2013;52:S45–51.
- [10] Henriksen L, Schleicher NC, Feighery EC, Fortmann SP. A longitudinal study of exposure to retail cigarette advertising and smoking initiation. *Pediatrics* 2010;126:232–8.
- [11] Henriksen L, Feighery EC, Schleicher NC, et al. Reaching youth at the point of sale: Cigarette marketing is more prevalent in stores where adolescents shop frequently. *Tob Control* 2004;13:315–8.
- [12] Portnoy DB, Wu CC, Tworek C, et al. Youth curiosity about cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and cigars: Prevalence and associations with advertising. *Am J Prev Med* 2014;47:S76–86.
- [13] Robertson L, Cameron C, McGee R, et al. Point-of-sale tobacco promotion and youth smoking: A meta-analysis. *Tob Control* 2016;25:e83–9.
- [14] Myers AE, Hall MG, Isgett LF, Ribisl KM. A comparison of three policy approaches for tobacco retailer reduction. *Prev Med* 2015;74:67–73.
- [15] Azagba S, Shan L, Latham K. E-cigarette retail licensing policy and e-cigarette use among adolescents. *J Adolesc Health* 2020;66:123–5.
- [16] Luke DA, Hammond RA, Combs T, et al. Tobacco town: Computational modeling of policy options to reduce tobacco retailer density. *Am J Public Health* 2017;107:740–6.
- [17] Astor RL, Urman R, Barrington-Trimis JL, et al. Tobacco retail licensing and youth product use. *Pediatrics* 2019;143. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3536>.
- [18] Abdel Magid HS, Halpern-Felsher B, Ling PM, et al. Tobacco retail density and initiation of alternative tobacco product use among teens. *J Adolesc Health* 2020;66:423–30.
- [19] Pérez A, Chien L-C, Harrell MB, et al. Geospatial associations between tobacco retail outlets and current use of cigarettes and e-cigarettes among youths in Texas. *J Biom Biostat* 2017;8. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2155-6180.1000375>.
- [20] Giovenco DP, Casseus M, Duncan DT, et al. Association between electronic cigarette marketing near schools and e-cigarette use among youth. *J Adolesc Health* 2016;59:627–34.
- [21] Cole AG, Aleyan S, Leatherdale ST. Exploring the association between e-cigarette retailer proximity and density to schools and youth e-cigarette use. *Prev Med Rep* 2019;15:100912.
- [22] Truth Initiative. The truth about tobacco industry retail practices. Available at: [https://truthinitiative.org/sites/default/files/media/files/2019/03/Point-of-Sale-2017\\_0.pdf](https://truthinitiative.org/sites/default/files/media/files/2019/03/Point-of-Sale-2017_0.pdf). Accessed December 20, 2019.