

Tobacco 21: Know the Facts

Most adult smokers start smoking before the age of 21

A recent report from the Surgeon General found that almost 90% of smokers in the United States started before the age of 21. Individuals who begin smoking at a young age are far more likely to become addicted, and therefore have more difficulty quitting. Thus, if young people abstain from smoking, the chances of them ever starting are very slim.

Just 2% of tobacco sales help produce 90% of new smokers

According to a 2011 National Health Interview Survey, the daily cigarette consumption of individuals aged 18 to 20 is lower compared to those aged 21 and older (8.6 per day vs. 12.5 per day). Cigarette sales to those under 21 account for only about 2.12% of total sales; but because 90% of smokers start by the age of 21, these are the sales that help lead to 9 out of every 10 new smokers. Thus, the impact on store owners will be minimal and it will only affect a very small percentage of their overall tobacco sales.

A majority of 18 to 20 year olds illegally purchase cigarettes for their younger peers

About 59% of 18 and 19 year olds have been asked by someone younger to buy cigarettes for them. High school students are less likely to know 21 year olds within their social circle and therefore there are far less opportunities to access cigarettes from older buyers.

There is proven success of this strategy

In 2005, Needham, Massachusetts implemented the law to raise the tobacco sales age to 21. They were the first town in the country to do so, and 4 years after the legislation was implemented smoking in Needham high school decreased by 47%. In 2006, before the legislation was fully enforced, Needham had a 13% smoking rate compared to a 15% in neighboring communities. In 2010, the youth smoking rate in Needham decreased to 6.7%, while the surrounding communities rate only decreased to 12.4%.

What about the small convenience stores in town? Won't they go out of business?

The same fear was instilled in restaurant and bar owners when smoking was banned in these vicinities. However, the ban has not caused these local businesses to lose or go out of business. Furthermore, CVS and Target have already stopped selling all tobacco products, causing there to be more tobacco business for local convenience stores. As well, when Needham increased the sales age to 21, not a single convenience store in the town went out of business.

Tobacco Companies market their products to kids

The 2014 Surgeon General Report states that the tobacco industry continues to position itself to sustain its sales by recruiting youth and young adults. Tobacco products, such as cigars and cigarillos, can now be sold as a single 'dose' and are available in fruit, candy and alcohol flavors, which are most desirable among youth. These flavored tobacco products are considered starter products for young individuals to help establish smoking habits that can develop to long term addiction.

“Today’s teenager is tomorrow’s potential regular customer, and the overwhelming majority of smokers first begin to smoke while still in their teens...The smoking patterns of teenagers are particularly important to Philip Morris.” – Philip Morris

Winickoff JP, Hartman L, Chen ML, Gottlieb M, Nabi-Burza E, DiFranza JR. Minimal Retail Impact of Raising Tobacco Sales Age to 21. American Journal of Public Health. 2014.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “The Health Consequences of Smoking-50 Years of Progress: A report of the Surgeon General.” Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2014.