

Teens still smoking despite cigarette sales ban, UK study shows

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Young people still have access to cigarettes, despite changes to tobacco sales.

Researchers at the University of Liverpool have found that banning under-18s from buying cigarettes has had little impact on young people's access to tobacco and large numbers buy cigarettes via strangers.

The study, in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh, found a widespread acceptance of underage sales in some communities and significant numbers of [young people](#) waiting outside shops and asking strangers to buy [cigarettes](#) for them.

Dr. Jude Robinson, Senior Lecturer in Health Sciences at the University, said: “The most striking finding has been the reported importance of proxy sales, compared to previous UK studies which have indicated that young people tend to get their cigarettes via family and friends. These are similar to the findings of studies in the US where proxy sales are one of the most common sources of cigarettes for young people in areas with

high enforcement of age of sale laws.”

The increase in age of sale in the UK from 16 to 18 in 2007 reduced the number of sales to under 18s, with 39% of under-18s surveyed in England reporting that it was more difficult to buy cigarettes from shops in 2008, compared to 24% in 2006. However, while these findings indicate that the change in the law has affected young people’s purchasing behavior, research indicates a significant number are still able to access cigarettes.

Researchers recruited 85 young people from secondary schools and youth groups in Birmingham – half of whom were smokers – and used focus groups to provide insights into shared cultural norms around smoking and access to tobacco. Most did not try to buy from supermarkets as they were generally asked for proof of age – instead they would buy from smaller, local shops where they were less likely to be asked for identification.

Several participants talked of an apparent complicity between themselves and shop assistants when buying cigarettes illegally; for example being asked to wait in the shop until other customers had left or being asked to make the transaction behind the counter to disguise it.

A number of participants said they did not try to buy directly from shops as they believed they would be unsuccessful but generally waited outside to ask people to buy cigarettes for them. They described how they would approach most people going into a shop apart from smartly dressed people, older people and women, but generally targeted the under-25s. Participants reported that ‘proxy purchasers’ would often ‘keep the change’ or keep a cigarette in return.

Dr. Robinson added: “Many participants saw proxy purchasing as a rational approach which was socially sanctioned and accepted by many

other smokers, particularly young adults. As hanging out with friends is a major pass-time, this is easily fitted into their social activities and indeed for some, provides a focus for their activities.

“The prevalence of proxy purchasing raises the question of whether legislation is needed to ban it. In 2011 proxy purchases will be illegal in Scotland. However, anecdotal evidence from other countries suggests such legislation may be difficult to enforce and it remains questionable whether banning proxy sales will significantly impact on youth access to [tobacco](#).”

More information: The research, funded by the Central England Trading Standards Authority and the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies, is published in *Addiction*.

Provided by University of Liverpool

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