

# Small shops, heavy advertisers less likely to ID for tobacco

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Young people are less likely to be carded for cigarettes in certain types of shops, particularly in those that heavily advertise tobacco, a new study has found.

When researchers who were 20 and 21 visited a variety of shops in a city on the verge of implementing a law prohibiting sales to people younger than 21, more than 60 percent of cashiers didn't ask them for identification, found the study, which appears online in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

And these [young adults](#) slipped by without an age check most often when they visited small stores, tobacco shops and shops plastered with tobacco ads.

"Our findings suggest that certain types of stores—tobacco shops, convenience stores and those with a lot of tobacco advertising—are more likely to sell tobacco to a [young person](#) without checking his or her ID," said Megan Roberts, an assistant professor of [health](#) behavior and [health promotion](#) at Ohio State, and a member of the university's Comprehensive Cancer Center.

"One implication of this finding is that enforcement may benefit from targeted outreach and monitoring at these locations."

The study included fieldworker visits to a randomly sampled list of 103 tobacco retailers in the summer of 2017. The visits were made in Columbus, Ohio, where enforcement of a new Tobacco 21 law had not yet begun.

The plan was to get a baseline idea of how young adults on the edge of the cutoff age were being carded in the city, information that could potentially drive future enforcement decisions, said Niru Murali, who participated in the study as part of her undergraduate work in Ohio State's College of Public Health.

Though the frequency of carding found in the study was low—and disappointing from a public health standpoint—it aligned with previous

research, she said.

The most interesting new information found in this study was that certain retailers were less likely to ask for ID, Murali said.

More than 64 percent of grocery stores checked IDs, compared with about 34 percent of convenience stores and tobacco shops. Bars, restaurants and alcohol stores were even less likely to card the fieldworkers: only 29 percent requested ID.

"In addition to variation by type of [store](#), we saw that those that heavily advertised were less likely to card us. It makes sense, if you think about it, that people who are plastering their windows with tobacco ads probably are trying to make a lot of money off those products and may be more likely to look the other way when selling to a young adult," Murali said.

Retailers are supposed to card anyone who looks younger than 30 under the Columbus Tobacco 21 law. The idea behind the city's law, and others like it, is to decrease the long-term health toll that tobacco takes by preventing [young people](#) from starting to smoke. Previous research has shown that those who start by the age of 18 are almost twice as likely to become lifelong smokers when compared to individuals who start after they turn 21.

Murali said strategic enforcement is important, and it may be helpful for those enforcing the laws to be sensitive to the fact that they present a financial hit, particularly for [small business owners](#).

"From a public health standpoint, we're trying to stop people from smoking initiation that has an effect on the rest of their life. But from the business perspective, tobacco is a huge source of income for them," she said.

"I think it's going to be really important to work on this during enforcement—how do you make this an easier pill to swallow for folks who are losing income?"

Added Roberts, "Having a minimum legal sales age for tobacco is important for reducing youth access to tobacco. Not only does it prevent young people from purchasing tobacco for themselves, but it prevents them from buying [tobacco](#) and distributing it to other, often younger, peers."

**More information:** Nirupama Muralidharan et al, Tobacco Advertising and ID Checks in Columbus, Ohio, in Advance of Tobacco 21, *American Journal of Health Promotion* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0890117119850751](#)

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