

Public call for tougher restrictions on buying tobacco in Britain

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People in Britain strongly support restricting the sale of tobacco near schools and raising the legal age of sale to 21, finds a new UCL-led study.

In collaboration with The University of Edinburgh and Cardiff University, the research, published in *Tobacco Control*, examined data from the Cancer Research UK and SPECTRUM-funded Smoking Toolkit Study, which has surveyed approximately 1,700 adults each month from England since 2006, and 2,200 adults each month from England, Scotland and Wales, since 2020.

The researchers examined data from September 2021, which asked participants about their views on potential policies targeting the availability of tobacco and cigarettes.

The results indicated that most of those surveyed supported retailers having their license revoked if they sold tobacco products to those under-age (89.6%) and for restrictions on the sale of cigarettes and tobacco near schools (69.9%).

Meanwhile, half (49.2%) thought that the legal age of sale for cigarettes and tobacco should be raised to 21, compared with just under a third who were opposed to the idea (30.7%).

Participants were also in favor of reducing the number of retailers selling tobacco in neighborhoods that already had a high density of tobacco retailers—with almost half (46.5%) showing their support, compared with less than a quarter (23.3%) who disagreed.

Lead author Dr. Loren Kock (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health) says that their "findings indicate that policies to restrict tobacco retail near schools, and for tobacco retailer licenses would receive strong majority support from the British public if legislated."

"Raising the age of sale to 21 and reducing the number of tobacco retailers also received greater support than opposition."

"However, a substantial proportion of respondents report having no opinion either way on these policies, suggesting there is potential to grow public support through clearer communication on the evidence and benefits of these policies."

"Moreover, support for tobacco availability policy may grow, and opposition diminish, if policies are demonstrated to be effective, and as future generations grow up without cigarettes."

There are around 6.9 million adult cigarette smokers in the UK, who spend approximately £15.6 billion a year on legal and illicit tobacco.

Currently the law prohibits the sale of tobacco products to those under the age of 18. And previous studies have shown that a ban on the sale of tobacco products near schools could stop children from taking up the habit.

In 2019, the UK Government set an objective for England to be smokefree by 2030, meaning only 5% of the population would smoke by then. However, a recent report by Dr. Javed Khan OBE, highlighted that particularly [poorer areas](#) may struggle to reach this target unless the rate of decline of people who smoke is accelerated by 40%.

Niamh Shortt, Personal Chair of Health Geographies, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, says that "across the UK nations targets have been set to radically reduce the proportion of people that smoke over the next decade."

"This new research shows that the public strongly support the introduction of new measures needed to meet these ambitious targets, including reducing the local availability of [tobacco products](#)."

"Having wide scale [public support](#) to introduce restrictions on the sales

of tobacco should embolden the UK and devolved governments to introduce new policies restricting access to tobacco, particularly amongst children, and ensure future generations are tobacco free."

Study limitations

The use of cross-sectional observational data and potentially unmeasured covariates limits the ability to infer causality between included variables (namely sociodemographic and smoking and quitting characteristics) and support for policies. The sample sizes for the sub-group analyses in Scotland and Wales analyses may also be underpowered.

Data on support for tobacco availability were collected during one survey wave, and if further data were collected the results may change.

More information: Loren Kock et al, Assessing the profile of support for potential tobacco control policies targeting availability in Great Britain: a cross-sectional population survey, *Tobacco Control* (2022).
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