



WHERE DO YOUTH SMOKERS GET THEIR CIGARETTES?

According to the 2024 Monitoring the Future Survey, about one out of every three (32.4%) eighth graders and over two-fifths (41.4%) of tenth graders say cigarettes are easy for them to get.¹ Where and how youth smokers get their cigarettes, however, can vary considerably from state to state or city to city, depending on factors such as whether the jurisdiction strictly enforces the laws prohibiting tobacco sales to minors.

Some youth smokers buy the cigarettes they smoke, either directly from retailers or other kids, or by giving money to others to buy for them. Others get their cigarettes for free from social sources, and still others obtain their cigarettes by shoplifting or stealing.

Nationwide, older youth smokers are more likely to buy their cigarettes directly than younger smokers, who are more likely to get their cigarettes from others or by stealing.² Some of this difference is because kids who look older typically find it easier to buy cigarettes than younger kids; but another powerful factor is that older youth smokers are more likely to be regular smokers, and regular smokers are much more likely to purchase their own cigarettes than kids who smoke less frequently or are only "experimenting."³ Not surprisingly, older or regular youth smokers who buy their own cigarettes also supply them to kids who do not purchase their own but instead rely on getting them from others.⁴

Direct Purchases of Cigarettes

While tremendous progress has been made in reducing youth access to cigarettes, research shows that many underage youth are still able to purchase cigarettes. According to the 2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), 17.1% of current youth smokers reported directly purchasing cigarettes from a gas station or convenience store and 7.0% reported directly purchasing cigarettes from a vape shop or tobacco shop.⁵ Data from previous Youth Risk Behavior Surveys (YRBS) and other independent studies show that older teens and youth of any age who are daily smokers are more likely to buy their cigarettes from stores than younger teens and non-daily smokers.⁶

Social Sources of Cigarettes

Youth smokers also identify social sources, such as friends and classmates, as a common source of cigarettes. According to the 2021 NYTS, 18.4% of current youth smokers reported getting cigarettes from a friend and 17.5% reported getting them from a family member.⁷ Some youth also report buying cigarettes from a social source. According to the 2021 NYTS, 14.7% of current youth smokers reported buying cigarettes from a friend, family member, or other person.⁸

Making it More Costly or Difficult For Kids to Buy Cigarettes Reduces Youth Smoking

Numerous research studies have found that making obtaining cigarettes as inconvenient, difficult and expensive as possible for kids reduces both the number of kids who try or regularly smoke cigarettes and the number of cigarettes consumed by kids who continue to smoke. On December 20, 2019, President Trump signed legislation to amend the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, and raise the federal minimum age of sale of tobacco products from 18 to 21 years, effective immediately. While raising the tobacco sale age to 21 is a significant milestone, age restrictions alone are insufficient to reduce youth access.

Because youth purchases are a source of cigarettes smoked by kids, increasing cigarette prices and minimizing the number of retailers willing to illegally sell cigarettes to kids will reduce youth smoking.⁹ While these measures directly affect youth who buy their own cigarettes, they also reduce the number of kids who buy cigarettes and supply them to other kids for free. Price hikes may also make it less likely that parents and other adults will give cigarettes to kids, will be careless about leaving their cigarettes where kids can easily take them, or won't notice when some of their cigarettes are missing.

In contrast to retail enforcement efforts, voluntary tobacco industry programs to reduce illegal retailer sales to kids have not been found to reduce youth sales effectively.¹⁰ Likewise, although the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act prohibits vending machine cigarette sales except for in adult-only facilities, older children and youth who appear older may still be able to obtain cigarettes from these self-service machines.¹¹

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, December 27, 2024

More information is available at

http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/facts_issues/fact_sheets/toll/tobacco_kids/ and
http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/facts_issues/fact_sheets/policies/prevention_us_state/save_lives_money/.

¹ University of Michigan, 2024 Monitoring the Future Study, *Trends in Availability of Drugs as Perceived by 8th Graders*, <https://monitoringthefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/trends-in-availability-8-grade.pdf>, University of Michigan, 2024 Monitoring the Future Study, *Trends in Availability of Drugs as Perceived by 10th Graders*, <https://monitoringthefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/trends-in-availability-10-grade.pdf>.

² Lenk, KM, et al., "Do Sources of Cigarettes Among Adolescents Vary by Age Over Time?" *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 23:137-143, 2014. See also, Johnston, LD, et al., "Methods, Locations, and Ease of Cigarette Access for American Youth, 1997-2002," *Am J Prev Med*, 27(4):267-276, 2004; CDC, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, United States, 2013," *MMWR* 63(No. 4), June 23, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>; CDC, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 1999, CDC Surveillance Summaries," *MMWR* 49(SS-5), July 9, 2000.

³ Lenk, KM, et al., "Do Sources of Cigarettes Among Adolescents Vary by Age Over Time?" *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 23:137-143, 2014. See also, Johnston, LD, et al., "Methods, Locations, and Ease of Cigarette Access for American Youth, 1997-2002," *Am J Prev Med*, 27(4):267-276, 2004; Robinson, LA, et al., "Changes in Adolescents' Sources of Cigarettes," *Jnl of Adolescent Health*, 39:861-867, 2006.

⁴ Lenk, KM, et al., "Do Sources of Cigarettes Among Adolescents Vary by Age Over Time?" *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 23:137-143, 2014. See also, Robinson, LA, et al., "Changes in Adolescents' Sources of Cigarettes," *Jnl of Adolescent Health*, 39:861-867, 2006.

⁵ Gentzke, A. et al., "Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students – National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021," *MMWR* 71(5): 1-29, March 11, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/ss/pdfs/ss7105a1-H.pdf>.

⁶ Lenk, KM, et al., "Do Sources of Cigarettes Among Adolescents Vary by Age Over Time?" *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 23:137-143, 2014. See also, Johnston, LD, et al., "Methods, Locations, and Ease of Cigarette Access for American Youth, 1997-2002," *Am J Prev Med*, 27(4):267-276, 2004; CDC, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, United States, 2013," *MMWR* 63(No. 4), June 23, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>; CDC, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 1999, CDC Surveillance Summaries," *MMWR* 49(SS-5), July 9, 2000.

⁷ Gentzke, A. et al., "Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students – National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021," *MMWR* 71(5): 1-29, March 11, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/ss/pdfs/ss7105a1-H.pdf>.

⁸ Gentzke, A. et al., "Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students – National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021," *MMWR* 71(5): 1-29, March 11, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/ss/pdfs/ss7105a1-H.pdf>.

⁹ See related Campaign fact sheets "Raising Cigarette Taxes Reduces Smoking, Especially Among Kids (and the Cigarette Companies Know It)," <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0146.pdf> and "Enforcing Laws Prohibiting Cigarette Sales to Kids Reduces Youth Smoking," <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0049.pdf>.

¹⁰ DiFranza, JR, et al., "Youth Access to Tobacco: the Effects of Age, Gender, and 'It's the Law' Programs," *American Journal of Public Health* 86(2):221-24, February 1996. See also, Campaign fact sheet "Cigarette Company Youth Access Initiatives: Fake and Ineffective," <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0285.pdf>.

¹¹ See, e.g., Forster, JL, et al., "Availability of Cigarettes to Underage Youth in Three Communities," *Preventive Medicine* 21(3):320-28, May 1992; Kolpien, KA & Lippert, MT, "Compliance with Wisconsin Statute 134.66 Regulating Cigarette Vending Machines, Wood County, Wisc., 1993-95," *Wisconsin Medical Journal* 94(11): 621-24, November 1995; Forster, JL, et al., "Locking Devices on Cigarette Vending Machines: Evaluation of a City Ordinance," *Am J of Public Health*, 82(9):1217-19, September 1992.