

Young Adult Tobacco Purchase Survey Summary

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Introduction

The County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Tobacco Control Resource Program (TCRP) receives grant funding from the California Tobacco Control Program (CTCP) to implement activities aimed at reducing tobacco use and exposure among residents. One objective of this grant focuses on reducing youth access to tobacco products in the unincorporated area of San Diego County through implementation of Tobacco Retail Licensing (TRL) policies. The unincorporated area accounts for 84% (3,570 square miles) of the total land area of San Diego County. Figure 1 (right) shows the County with shaded unincorporated communities and the land area of the 18 cities in gray. Much of the unincorporated area is open space, undeveloped, or agricultural areas, and accounts for only 15.6% of the County's population.

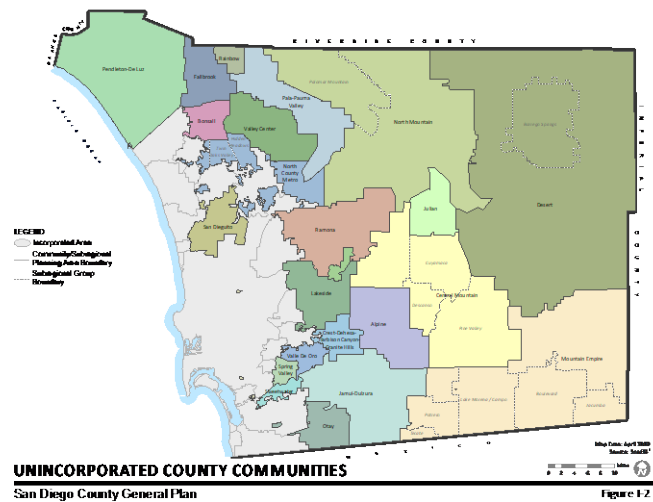


Figure 1. Unincorporated County Communities

(Source: Figure1-2 from San Diego County General Plan)

The Young Adult Tobacco Purchase Survey (YATPS) was designed to help determine the scope of the problem of underage tobacco sales. During a YATPS, young adults attempt to purchase tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, from a sample of retailers in a designated area. Results can be used to inform policymakers, provide feedback to businesses, and develop interventions for the community.

Methods

TCRP collaborated with contractors from Community, Action, Service, and Advocacy for safe and healthy neighborhoods (CASA); Social Advocates for Youth San Diego (SAY); and Vista Community Clinic (VCC); to conduct the YATPS. The San Diego State University Institute for Public Health (SDSU-IPH), the evaluation contractor, trained data collectors, analyzed the data, and reported the results.

Process

Retailer Selection

A July 2019 listing of 302 licensed tobacco retailers in the unincorporated area of the county was provided to TCRP by the Sheriff's Department (originating from the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration). Business names that contained the terms *club*, *golf*, *bar*, *hookah*, or *lounge* were excluded, leaving 277 retailers. A sample of the final list consisting of 161 stores was randomly selected to provide a subset of retailers for the survey. Of these, 25% were assigned traditional tobacco (e.g., combustible cigarettes and cigarillos) as the product for the attempted purchase; the remaining 75% were assigned e-cigarette as the product for the attempted purchase.

Investigation

Young adult volunteer investigators (18-19 years old) and volunteer supervisors were recruited by the three TCRP-contracted organizations: VCC, SAY, and CASA. To ensure a consistent process for all participating organizations, training materials were adapted from existing materials created by CTCP and the contracted organizations. All volunteers were trained by SDSU-IPH or County staff prior to data collection. The trainings included information on the extent of underage tobacco use and proposed solutions to the problem, goals of the YATPS, the Flash ID protocol recommended by CTCP, and how to document the purchase attempts, including an emphasis on the collection of information such as retailer type and presence of STAKE Act signage near registers. Trainees also role-played various scenarios to practice the selected protocol. IPH facilitated three trainings for 41 volunteers (21 young adult investigators and 20 supervisors) between February 11 and 15, 2020.

Store assignments and suggested routes were provided to the young adult investigators and supervisors by County staff. Volunteers conducted all YATPS visits between February 15 and 25, 2020. All purchase attempts occurred between 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM. Each store location was visited by at least one young adult volunteer and one supervisor. If the young adult volunteer felt comfortable, they would proceed to enter the store and attempt to purchase the assigned product (traditional tobacco or e-cigarette). When the assigned product was unavailable, the young adult investigators were instructed to attempt any tobacco purchase. If asked about age or ID, investigators were instructed to not lie about their age and to flash their ID card (driver's license, passport card, or military ID) to the clerk. If at any time the young adult investigators experienced discomfort, they were instructed to leave the store and return to their supervisor waiting in the car. Purchased products were logged by the supervisor and delivered to the County for analysis and stored for future trainings. Data were recorded on a one-page form (Appendix A) and entered in MS Excel. Excel files were forwarded to SDSU-IPH by County evaluation staff for analysis.

Analysis

Data were received in MS Excel files and imported into SPSS for analysis. Summary statistics are reported here; totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Results

Young adult investigators surveyed 142 of the 161 selected retailers. Surveys were not completed at 19 retailers for a variety of reasons, including: 21+ sign posted, meaning anyone under the age of 21 could not enter (n=9); couldn't locate retailer (n=4); tobacco products not sold (n=3); volunteer knew individuals working (n=2); and location was unsafe (n=1). As previously mentioned, each retailer was randomly assigned a type of product for the purchase attempt: 121 retailers were assigned e-cigarettes and 40 retailers were assigned combustible tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes or cigarillos). (Table 1)

Table 1. Data collection summary by contractor

Organization	Stores assigned	Surveys conducted	Assigned Product	
			Tobacco	E-cigarette
Community, Action, Service, and Advocacy for safe & healthy neighborhoods (CASA)	71	66	19	52
Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) San Diego	40	37	8	32
Vista Community Clinic (VCC)	50	39	13	37
Total	161	142	40	121

When the assigned product was unavailable, investigators were free to choose a different product. Occasionally the investigators failed to record whether e-cigarettes or combustible tobacco products were initially requested. Where sales were made, the type of product was cross-checked and corrected as needed. At stores with sales, there were four instances where investigators chose a different product than the one assigned.

Store Characteristics

Table 2. Retailer categories visited (n=142)

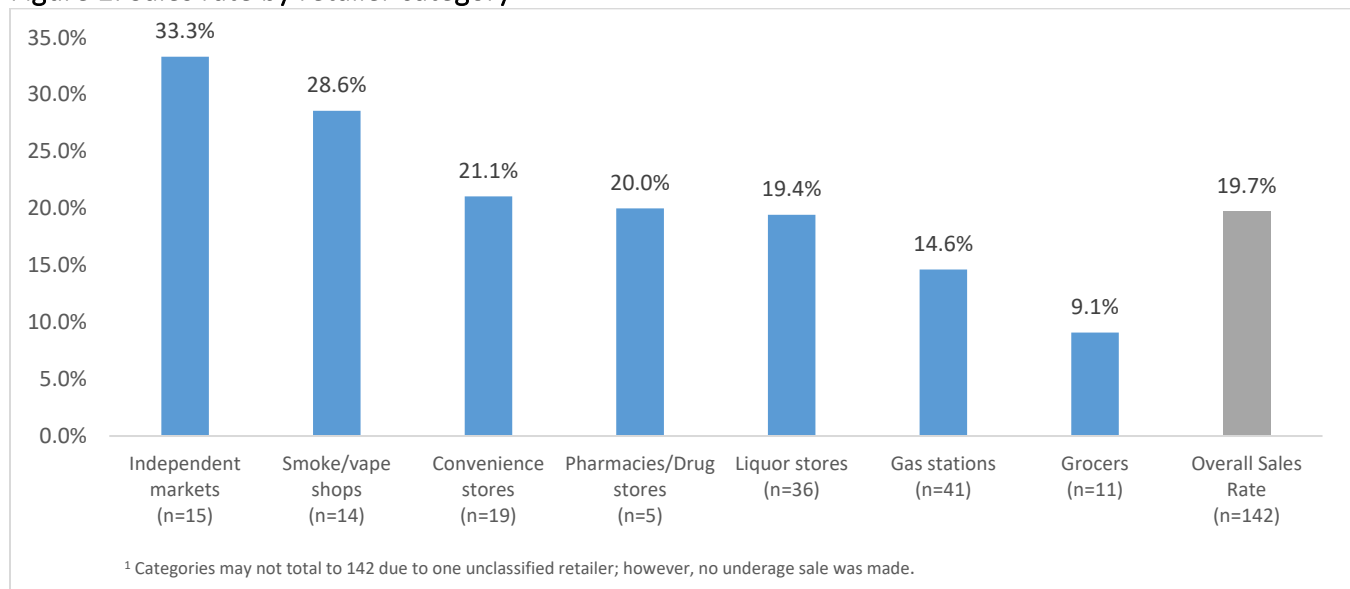
Type of store	n (%)
Gas stations (with and without convenience stores)	41 (29%)
Liquor store	36 (25%)
Convenience stores (without gas pumps)	19 (13%)
Independent markets	15 (11%)
Smoke/vape shop	14 (10%)
Grocers	11 (8%)
Pharmacies/Drug stores	5 (4%)
Resort	1 (1%)

Investigators were asked to record the retailer type and results are shown in Table 2. Gas stations (with and without convenience stores) were the most common type of retailer visited (29%), followed by liquor stores (25%), convenience stores (without gas pumps, 13%), independent markets (11%), and smoke/vape shops (10%). There were few grocers (8%) and pharmacies/drug stores (4%), and one resort was represented.

The overall sales rate among the 142 retailers was 19.7%. Figure 2 shows that among retailer categories, independent markets had the highest

sales rate (33%), followed by smoke/vape shops (29%). The sales rate at convenience stores and pharmacies/drug stores was lower at 21% and 20% respectively. Liquor stores, gas stations, and grocers all had sales rates under 20%. One retail outlet at a resort remained uncategorized (although they did not sell the product to the investigator).

Figure 2. Sales rate by retailer category¹



For each retailer, investigators were asked to record details of their purchase attempt. Several of these details, shown in Table 3, were related to the attempt itself and one was related to the environment in the retail store. STAKE Act signs were posted near the registers, as required by law, at 61% of retailers where no sale was made and at 54% of retailers where an underage sale was made. Larger differences were observed in sales by whether the clerk asked the investigator’s age (38% of no-sales and 4% of underage sales) and for ID (81% of no-sales and 48% of underage sales). Driver’s licenses were shown in 86% of attempts and passport booklets or cards were shown in 14% of attempts when an ID was requested.

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Table 3. Retailer observations and purchase attempt characteristics by whether an underage sale was made (n=142)^{1,2}

Survey Item	No Sale		Underage Sale		All Attempts	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
STAKE Act sign posted near register						
Yes	69	61%	15	54%	84	59%
No	45	40%	13	46%	58	41%
Clerk asked investigator's age²						
Yes	43	38%	1	4%	44	31%
No	71	62%	27	96%	98	69%
Clerk asked investigator to show ID						
Yes	92	81%	13	48%	105	75%
No	22	19%	14	52%	36	26%

¹ Sample sizes vary due to missing data

² The Flash ID protocol called for investigators to tell the truth if asked for their age

Discussion

The initiation of tobacco use in youth and early adulthood is a longstanding problem and has been identified as a major factor in long-term adult tobacco use. Tobacco 21, which has been in effect in California since June 2016, and nationwide through a federal law since December 2019, was designed to reduce young adult tobacco use by raising the purchase age from 18 to 21. Though this law affected sales to young adults, there are still retailers who are not fully compliant and continue to sell to underage individuals. During the recent YATPS, 18 and 19-year-old volunteer investigators conducted surveys at 142 retailers in unincorporated San Diego County. Of the stores surveyed, 19.7%, approximately 1 in 5, sold tobacco products to the underage investigators. Higher than average sales rates were observed at independent markets (33.3%) and smoke/vape shops (28.6%). Additionally, low compliance with STAKE Act signage requirements was observed, with fewer than 60% of surveyed stores displaying STAKE Act signs. These results illustrate compliance issues with state and federal laws among retailers in the unincorporated area of San Diego County and provide evidence to guide continued efforts in Tobacco Retail Licensing (TRL). Such a policy would formalize education and compliance efforts in the unincorporated areas, resulting in reduced youth access to tobacco products. TRL policies have been implemented successfully across California and result in reductions in underage tobacco sales after policy

adoption. Once in place, attention should be paid to retailer categories with higher than average sales rate, including independent markets and smoke/vape shops, though typically, TRL policies include escalating consequences for retailers with repeated year-to-year sales during compliance checks.

Slowing tobacco use initiation in youth through reduced access to tobacco products is an important goal of San Diego's TCRP program and will improve the health of all San Diegans, supporting the *Live Well San Diego* vision of a healthy, safe, and thriving community.

Limitations

Results from this survey in the unincorporated area of San Diego County should be interpreted with caution. Results from surveys using the Flash ID protocol are not comparable to statewide compliance surveys that use other protocols. In addition, investigators were able to ask for traditional tobacco products in cases where e-cigarettes or vaping devices were unavailable, though these data were not uniformly recorded. For successful sales, it was possible to know when the assigned product differed from the attempted product, though there was insufficient data to indicate if this happened at retail stores where sales did not occur.

Appendix A – Young Adult Tobacco Purchase Survey Data Collection Form



YOUNG ADULT TOBACCO PURCHASE SURVEY DATA COLLECTION FORM

Store ID: «Route_ID_»
 Contracted Organization: «Contracted_Org»

Product: «Product_Ask»

Survey Date _____ / _____ / _____	Store Name «Store_Name»
Survey Time _____ am / pm	Address «Street_Address»
Supervisor ID _____	City «City» Zip Code: «Zip»
Investigator ID _____	

1. Type of Store (choose only one!):

- Gas station (only) [1]
- Convenience (w/gas) [2]
- Convenience (w/o gas) [3]
- Independent market [4]
- Supermarket [5]
- Liquor [6]
- Discount [7]
- Drug / Pharmacy [8]
- Deli / Meat / Produce [9]
- Other [10] _____

2. Were you able to conduct survey?

- Yes [1] No (Go to 2a) [0]
- 2a. Reason:** Closed [1] Couldn't find [2] No tobacco [3] Unsafe [4]

3. Was a STAKE Act sign posted near the register?

- Yes [1] No [0]



4. When you tried to buy a tobacco or e-cigarette/electronic vaping device product, did the clerk ask for your age?

- Yes (Go to 4a) [1] No (Go to 5) [0]

4a. Did you say you were 21?

- Yes [1] No [0]

5. When you tried to buy a tobacco or e-cigarette/electronic vaping device product, were you asked to show your ID?

- Yes [1] No [0]

6. Was a sale made?

- Yes (Go to 6a) [1] No (Go to 7) [0]

6a. Which type of product did you purchase?

- Tobacco [1] E-cigarette/electronic vaping device [2]

6b. What was the price of the product purchased? \$ _____

6c. What brand did you purchase?

7. Did anything about the store visit surprise you? Any additional comments?
