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Survey: Marin youth exposure to alcohol, tobacco ads rising



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Marin youths are being increasingly bombarded with store advertisements for unhealthy products such as alcohol, tobacco and vaping devices, according to a new survey by a public health campaign.

The statewide survey, conducted by the Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community collaborative, included 182 stores in Marin County. It found that the number of storefront ads for unhealthy products rose from 46% in 2016 to 67% in 2019.

Stores near schools followed the trend, increasing their storefront ads for these products from 48% in 2016 to 68% in 2019, according to survey organizers.

The survey found that 33% of Marin stores have tobacco product marketing near candy, toys or in areas lower than 3 feet, which are considered “kid-friendly” zones. By contrast, only 52% of these stores sold fresh fruits and vegetables.

“The findings show that while we have made some progress in combatting tobacco, our community’s youth are still surrounded by unhealthy choices and messages in the retail environment,” said Kathleen Koblick, public health director for the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services.

“Stores play an important role in people’s health because they influence the choices we make,” Koblick said. “A better balance of options within our stores is what we need to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

The [survey](#) is part of a statewide effort to assess the availability of unhealthy products on store shelves. Nearly 8,000 randomly-selected licensed tobacco retailers were examined in all 58 counties.

The survey is led by public health officials assisted by local groups in tobacco and alcohol use prevention, sexually transmitted disease prevention and nutrition. The survey is published every two years.

There have been increased efforts placed on youth vaping prevention following a wave of death and injuries linked to the products across the country.

Vapes, or e-cigarettes, are battery-powered devices that produce an aerosol that is inhaled by the user.

Manufacturers have promoted them as less harmful than cigarettes and useful in quitting cigarettes. But the relative discreetness of the products, and the range of flavors, have made them a popular choice for youngsters

Since the vaping epidemic surfaced, there have been 2,801 reported cases of vaping-related lung damage across the United States. In California, four deaths and 210 hospitalizations have been linked to the products, according to state health officials.

The survey found that 61.6% of Marin stores sold vaping products, 66% sold little cigars/cigarillos and 67% sold chewing tobacco. Flavored tobacco products, including vapes, cigars and chew, were available at 81% of stores.

Jasmine Gerraty of the Smoke-Free Marin Coalition noted that the survey was conducted in 2019, and, since then, all Marin jurisdictions but Mill Valley have approved bans on flavored tobacco products, including those for e-cigarettes.

“The whole goal is to make stores provide healthier options,” Gerraty said of the survey. “Hopefully, this data will shine light on some of the issues that are going on in Marin County retailing.”

Gerraty said the focus ahead will be encouraging more local policies that limit how much storefront advertising is allowed.

One major problem product marketed to youth has been what are called alcopops, sugary alcoholic beverages that appeal to young people, said Michael Scippa, public affairs director of Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael nonprofit that has led an “alcopop-free zone” campaign in Marin.

Of the stores surveyed, 70% sold alcopops.

“Youth exposure to alcohol ads contributes to underage consumption,” Scippa said. “The more alcohol ads kids see, the sooner they start drinking, and the greater the chance they will drink to excess and get into trouble.”

Bruce Lee Livingston, executive director and CEO of the nonprofit, said, “We’re very grateful to see the survey, but just shocked by the sheer volume of unhealthy advertising reaching the eyeballs of Marin youth.”

Livingston said the San Rafael Alcohol and Drug Coalition, staffed by Alcohol Justice, will be conducting more detailed survey of every alcohol licensee in San Rafael over the next month. He said the survey will produce suggested policies for store owners and the City Council to better protect vulnerable young people.

At Colonial Liquors in Kentfield, store owner Zee Damani said he doesn’t advertise for any tobacco products.

“I have beer signs, that’s it,” he said. “I offer tobacco for sale, but there’s no need for signs.”

Commenting on youth substance-use prevention, Damani said, “That’s why we check IDs.”