

Tobacco marketers targeting teens near schools

Joe Camel may be long gone, but that doesn't mean tobacco marketers have abandoned their efforts to get young people hooked on smoking.

A new Canadian study reports that tobacco marketers have found a way around tobacco advertising restrictions, reaching teens by marketing in retail shops located near high schools. The findings, published in the Canadian Journal of Public Health, suggest the strategy is working.

“At the time of the study, we found that, compared to retail stores near schools with low smoking prevalence, stores near schools with high smoking prevalence had significantly lower prices per cigarette, more in-store promotions and fewer government-sponsored health warnings,” said University of Alberta researcher and study co-author Candace Nykiforuk.

The tobacco marketing activity that takes place in stores—known as point-of-purchase (PoP) marketing—is a sophisticated strategy designed to counter positive public health initiatives such as tax increases on tobacco, policies restricting cigarette advertising, and anti-smoking legislation, says Nykiforuk. U.S.-based studies have estimated that three out of four adolescents visit retail shops at least once a week, which makes the retail store a powerful venue where teens can be exposed routinely to PoP marketing.

Nykiforuk was part of a team of researchers that looked at tobacco PoP activities in more than 400 retail stores located in 81 randomly selected school neighbourhoods across Canada, and just over 22,000 students in grades 10-11 were surveyed in the study. The majority of retailers located within the school neighbourhoods sold tobacco products, and approximately half of these retailers exhibited tobacco PoP promotional activities. Only a few stores had government-sponsored health warning signs.

Schools with a smoking prevalence greater than 20.6 per cent had more neighbourhood stores with in-store tobacco promotions and access to lower prices on cigarettes. “We also observed that schools with a lower smoking prevalence had more stores in the neighbourhood that posted government health warning signs about smoking,” said Nykiforuk.

The researchers say the strength of this study is in highlighting the relationship between increased PoP activities in retail stores in the school neighbourhood and school smoking prevalence. “This suggests that PoP activities contribute to an environment that promotes student smoking,” the study concludes.

However, Nykiforuk, a professor in the University of Alberta's School of Public Health, sees many possibilities to counter the tobacco industry's marketing tactics. “At the time of this study, there were few regulations on PoP in Canada. Since then, several provinces and territories have adopted or are planning to adopt legislation to regulate PoP. This is a great start, but we can do more.

“Schools should be encouraged to work with retailers in their area to address the posting of health warnings in stores and to support reduced access to tobacco. Legislators should think about stronger regulations that eliminate PoP advertising or prohibit the sale of tobacco in school neighbourhoods. And future research should consider the presence of school programs and policies that could influence smoking prevalence, as well as community variables.”

Source: University of Alberta

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