Sources of tobacco for youths in communities with strong enforcement of youth access laws

Joseph R DiFranza, Mardia Coleman

Abstract

Aim—To determine how youths obtain tobacco in communities with strong enforcement of tobacco sales laws.

Setting—Ten communities in Massachusetts with merchant compliance rates at or above 90%.

Methods—Paper surveys and focus group discussions with 68 adolescent smokers.

Results—Parents and friends are the primary sources of tobacco for new smokers. When stealing from parents can no longer satisfy the need for cigarettes, young adolescents ask strangers to buy them tobacco. For high school age smokers, teenage store clerks are a major source. Teenage clerks sell to other teenagers, steal tobacco, and help their friends steal from their employers. Friends who are 18 years of age or over are a second major source for older adolescents. Parents often purchase tobacco for older adolescents.

Conclusion—Recommended actions include raising the minimum age for the purchase of tobacco to 21 years, and prohibiting individuals less than 21 years of age from selling tobacco.

Keywords: youth; youth access laws

Research has identified a variety of mechanisms by which youths obtain tobacco.

Methods

SETTING

Ten Massachusetts communities were identified as having achieved compliance rates of 90% or greater during enforcement inspections by local officials using underage decoys. The communities, all suburbs and small cities, had adopted many restrictions on self-service displays and vending machines. The sale of tobacco to anyone under 18 years of age was illegal, but the possession of tobacco was not.

RESULTS

The subjects were smokers, ages 12–19 years, recruited by school personnel. One group was recruited from a population involved in a longitudinal study of tobacco use.

PROCEDURE

The study was approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Informed consent was obtained. A series of 10 focus groups were conducted with four to eight participants. Subjects were promised confidentiality and received lunch and a $25 stipend for their participation. Before the discussion, subjects completed a questionnaire concerning their sources of tobacco. The authors moderated the sessions. Tape recordings were made and transcribed, but the identity of individual subjects could not be determined from the tapes. During the sessions, the authors took notes which were discussed after the subjects left. The discussion questions were adapted over time to explore emerging themes. Examples of starter questions include: “The health department in this community thinks it is just about impossible for kids under 18 to buy tobacco in this town. Are they right?”, “When the health department wants to see if a store will sell to kids, they hire a kid who has never smoked to try to buy cigarettes . . . do you think you could do better at buying tobacco than these kids?”

DATA ANALYSIS

The notes and transcripts were reviewed for common themes. The surveys were analysed for frequency distributions. Student’s t test was used for the comparison of means. A probability value of p < 0.05 was used as a test of significance.

RESULTS

SURVEYS

Sixty eight subjects participated, and 68% were female. The mean age was 16 years. No other demographic information was collected. The mean age for the first puff on a cigarette was
11.7 years (n = 66). Youths who had stolen tobacco from a parent reported a mean age for the first theft (11.3 years), one year earlier than youths who had never stolen tobacco from a parent (12.3 years, n = 66, p = 0.05).

All subjects had smoked cigarettes—88% were daily smokers, 82% had smoked a cigar, and 29% had used smokeless tobacco. The subjects smoked a mean of 86 cigarettes per week with a range from 1–220. Table 1 ranks sources of tobacco according to whether youths had ever acquired tobacco from each source. Two ranks the same sources according to how frequently youths reported obtaining tobacco from each source. Table 1 ranks sources of tobacco according to how frequently youths reported obtaining tobacco from each source. Table 2 ranks the same sources according to whether youths had ever acquired tobacco from each source.

### Table 1: Ranking of sources of tobacco according to whether youths had ever acquired tobacco from each source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends gave them</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave someone over 18 money to buy them</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bought it in a store*</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave money to a stranger to buy for me</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave money to someone under 18 to buy for me</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got it from brother or sister</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stole from parent</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stole from a vending machine*</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parent gave it to me*</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave someone over 18 money to buy for them</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes only youths under 18 years of age (n = 55).

### Table 2: Ranking of sources of tobacco according to how frequently youths reported obtaining tobacco from each source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often have you gotten cigarettes from each of these sources? (n=68)</th>
<th>Source Mean†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*0 = never, 1 = hardly ever, 2 = sometimes, 3 = most of the time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave someone over 18 money to buy them</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bought it in a store*</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave it to a friend</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got it from a vending machine*</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stole from parent</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relative gave it to me*</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave someone over 18 money to buy them for me</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends gave them</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is commonplace for youths to forgo lunch and use lunch money supplied by parents to buy cigarettes.

### Shoulder Tapping

When cigarettes stolen from home are no longer sufficient to satisfy young smokers, but they are still too young to buy in stores, it is commonplace for them to loiter in front of stores asking strangers to buy for them. This is commonly viewed as an act of desperation.

“I hate that, when you ask someone to buy you cigarettes and people come up to you like, ‘my grandfather died of that’. I hate that.”

Some subjects indicated that finding a cooperative stranger was easy, while others found it quite difficult. Youths learned which types of people would be more likely to buy for them, described as smokers, young men, and shabbily dressed individuals. In more than one community, the local homeless person would make a purchase in exchange for a few cigarettes out of the pack. It was not uncommon in affluent communities for strangers to buy youths cigarettes for free.

“I’ve had people like go into the store and I’ll ask them before they go in. They’ll say no. They’ll come back out and throw me a pack of cigarettes, and not even ask me for the money.”

Most of the 18 year old subjects in our study indicated that they would buy for younger kids. However, some indicated that they would not buy for kids who were under 14.

### Commercial Sources

In some communities, high school aged youths relied upon parents and friends who were 18 years of age to buy them tobacco because it was just too difficult for them to buy themselves.

“Buying them yourself is kind of a last resort.”
In other communities, all of the high school aged subjects had friends who worked in stores or gas stations and had no difficulty buying tobacco. This appears to be the primary commercial source of tobacco in most of the communities studied. Knowing someone who worked in a store appeared to be the crucial factor distinguishing towns where youths could buy easily from those where they could not.

Moderator: “Do you all know somebody who works in a store in town?”
Subjects: “Yeah.”
“Is it like kids who work there, they’ll like give them to you.”
“If you know someone who works at a gas station they’ll usually sell to you if nobody’s around.”

Some youths who had worked as clerks indicated that they would sell to anyone, whether they knew them or not.

“I used to work there. People would just come in with IDs and they would be fake and they would use these IDs and I would just give it to them. You could tell they would be fake, though.”

Subjects in many communities described a standard scam. If the boss is present, or if there is a surveillance camera, the clerk will ask for proof of age (ID). The underage buyer will then hand the clerk something that resembles an ID. The clerk will pretend to check the ID and return it to his friend. The sale will then be completed.

“A lot of times if I know someone, they’ll be like, ‘you’re gonna have to bring an ID’. I’m like, ‘yeah, all right, whatever’, because, you know, they’ve got cameras there. So I just bring like, a library card and be, like, ‘here you go’. ‘All right, cool’, you know.”

Subject: “Yeah, but if you know the person there, they’ll be just like, show me some kind of ID for the cameras.”
Moderator: “And then what do you do?”
Subject: “Flash them a school ID. My license. A non-smoking card.”
Moderator: “So, they ask but they don’t really look at it?”
Subject: “Right... just for the cameras.”
A non-smoking card entitles youths to discounts at participating businesses for pledging to remain non-smokers.

Shoplifting
Youths reported that shoplifting was much easier before local laws restricted self-service displays.

“There were these two stores near my house and I would ask for a Slushie. They would turn around to get it and I would snatch a pack of cigarettes. This was around (age) 12. Me and my brothers and sisters would do that all the time.”

In the absence of self-service displays, the theft of tobacco by youths typically involves the clerk as the perpetrator or accomplice.

Store employee: “I took a carton once and sold them to people.”
“You just got to know the people there. You just got to know the people there.”

Youths advised against asking for cigarettes because they knew them or not.

“People that like work at a big store, like Stop & Shop, or something, they’ll just run this scam. Someone like, I don’t know, like f_ or someone will show up and say, give me six cartons of cigarettes. They’ll go over there and get six cartons and put them in a bag and say, ‘50 cents please,’ and they’ll just screw out of the store with six cartons, you know.”
Discussion

Further efforts to reduce youth access to tobacco will require tighter controls on the sale of tobacco, as well as interventions to discourage parents from undermining the intent of youth access laws.

Among our subjects, parents and other older relatives were the primary source of tobacco during the initiation of smoking. This may help to explain why parental smoking is a strong risk factor for the uptake of smoking by adolescents. Youth who stole tobacco from a friend started smoking on average one year earlier than their peers. It is possible that the children of smokers then became the catalyst for smoking among their peers. It is especially disheartening to realize how many parents undermine the intention of youth access laws by buying tobacco for their teens or their friends. Parents must know that when they buy tobacco for their children’s friends but not their own child, the tobacco will be shared with their own child. This suggests that, for some, there are some feelings of guilt associated with more directly facilitating their child’s addiction. The role of parents as suppliers of tobacco might best be addressed through mass media campaigns shaming this practice as bad parenting. More effective interventions are needed to convince smoking parents, and adults in general, that it is always inappropriate to provide tobacco to minors.

Asking strangers to buy tobacco appears almost universal at the junior high school level. Consistent with our data, a survey of California adults revealed that those who were most likely to be asked to purchase tobacco for a minor were those who were smokers, young (18–19 years), and with a low income. In a “shoulder tapping” experiment, 32% of 1285 adult strangers agreed to buy tobacco for underaged youths, and several provided youths with cigarettes at their own expense, as was reported by our subjects. The problem of adults buying tobacco for minors might be addressed through community education or through signs posted at the entrances of retail establishments stating the penalty for purchasing tobacco for a minor.

By the high school years, most underage smokers have friends who work in stores. High school age clerks represent the major factor contributing to illegal sales in most of the communities studied. A few clerks sell indiscriminately to minors, and facilitate or participate in theft. Our results are consistent with previous studies identifying shoplifting as a source of tobacco, but we are the first to report the complicity of underage clerks in this activity.

When it comes to purchasing tobacco, many subjects thought experience is important and used a variety of tested tactics to improve their odds. These include lying about their age or their ID, using their own or a borrowed ID, dangling car keys, dressing to appear older, sending the oldest appearing youth in for a group, and acting confident. Youth’s learn from one another where they can buy tobacco and they use the same store repeatedly. Some
store clerks recognise neighbourhood youths and will sell to them if they think they will not be caught. Stores owned by recent immigrants are universally recognised as an easy place to buy. The ideal situation for an illegal sale is at a self-service gas station where there are no security cameras and a young male is working in the booth at night.

Standard compliance checks seriously underestimate the difficulty minors have in purchasing tobacco in their own communities. While youths employed by local health departments were turned down over 90% of the time during compliance checks, the youths living in these communities reported being turned down on average between “hardly ever” and “sometimes.” In contrast to standard research methodology, youths do not make random attempts to purchase tobacco. They know which stores sell to minors. When in a strange town, they target their attempts based upon factors that increase the likelihood of a sale. Compliance surveys always use youths who are strangers to store personnel. By contrast, underage smokers indicate that knowing the clerk is the most important factor predicting success.

Protocols for compliance checks conducted for enforcement purposes should mimic the behaviour of underage smokers as closely as possible. A first step would be to use actual smokers for this purpose and to allow them to show an ID with an underage birth date. Inspection protocols that exclude the use of IDs are too artificial; one quarter of our subjects had used an invalid ID to purchase tobacco.22

In the booth at night.

(3) Fines for illegal sales should be issued to the clerk in addition to the store owner. In many instances, illegal sales are made by store clerks who are intentionally violating their employer’s policies and training instructions.

When making hiring decisions, store managers should be aware that teenagers and young men show the greatest predilection for making illegal sales, even with appropriate training.22 24

Illegal sales are most likely to occur while the boss is away, but they also occur in their presence as teenage clerks pretend to check their friend’s ID. Secret shopper programmes conducted while the manager is out of the store might help to identify problem employees. Employing older neighbourhood youths as secret shoppers might be most effective.

In interpreting this study, it is crucial to remember that the subjects in this study do not represent a random sample of youths from their communities. These are the youths who have been able to secure a source of tobacco despite strong enforcement by local officials. To the degree that strict enforcement of tobacco sales laws decreases tobacco use among youths, the subjects in this study would represent only those youths who proved immune to this intervention. Bias might have been introduced by the fact that our subjects were known by school personnel to be smokers. This suggests that they may have been less concerned about getting caught than other youths. Youth who are secretive about their tobacco use may have been excluded by the recruitment method used. Nevertheless, our data are very much consistent with previous studies.1–4 6–8 11
“Lateral Thinking” Pioneer Edward de Bono’s gift to public health...

“Cigarettes pin-pointed by UK scientist”

Household pins may be able to cut the damage done to people’s lungs by cigarette smoking, says the Daily Mail. A Cambridge scientist has found that if pin holes are put into a cigarette about half an inch from the butt, the smoke becomes appreciably diluted with air. With three pin holes, harmful deposits of tar fall off by as much as 53 per cent. Forty habitual smokers experimented with the pin hole cigarettes to see whether they were smokeable. After three weeks 26 per cent of the smokers said cigarettes with three holes were not much different, 71 per cent said they were different but acceptable and 3 per cent said they were not worth smoking. Dr Edward de Bono, of the Dept of Investigated [sic] Medicine at Cambridge, thinks the test on the 40 smokers shows that cigarette smoking is very much a habit and not a matter of taste, the newspaper said. “The pin hole may be a good way of getting people to accept weaker cigarettes or really e...